

Stanstead Abbots and the Easneye Connection

Ron Davies

Stanstead Abbots in 1866

1866 - Queen Victoria had been on the throne for nearly thirty years, and was destined to reign for another thirty-five years, although no-one knew that at the time. “Long to reign over us”, but not very “happy and glorious,” at least not the former, because in 1861 her beloved husband Albert had died and she was in deep mourning, and was due to remain so for the rest of her long reign.

The country and empire over which she reigned also had its problems, although the upheavals in France and other European countries in 1848, the “Year of Revolutions,” did not affect Britain significantly. On the other hand, the “Young Irelander Rebellion” in Ballingary, South Tipperary, which was put down by the British authorities, had long-term repercussions. It took place during the great Irish Potato Famine of 1845 to 1852, which resulted in about a million deaths from hunger and starvation and a further million emigrants who left their homeland, mainly settling in America. As a consequence of British suppression of Irish aspirations, the Fenian Brotherhood was formed in America in 1858 and in the same year, its counterpart in Ireland, the Irish Republican Brotherhood. Throughout the remainder of Victoria’s reign, and indeed on to the present time, they and their successors were involved in plots, bombings etc. against British interests.

Further afield, the Crimean War of 1853 to 1856 resulted in the deaths of 22,000 British soldiers, around 16,000 of whom died from disease, and the Indian Mutiny of 1857 brought brutal killings of hundreds of British men, women and children involved with the East India Company and similarly brutal reprisals by the British on the Indians. We don’t know if any men from Stanstead Abbots were involved, having taken “the Queen’s Shilling” and serving in the Crimea, or as employees of the East India Company (the East India Company College was founded in Hertford in 1806 and then moved to Hertford Heath in 1809).

News of all these events would have reached Stanstead Abbots, whether or not any local men were involved. This was especially true after 1843 when the Great Eastern Railway company opened the line from Broxbourne (opened in 1840) to Hertford East, with stations at Rye House, St Margarets and Ware. (Bishopsgate station was the original London terminus for the line but was eventually replaced by Liverpool Street.) In 1863 the branch line from St Margarets to Buntingford was inaugurated.

The advent of the railway began a period of growth for the village. Between the censuses of 1851 and 1891, the population for the High Street and two other secondary roads nearly doubled according to research done by local historian, Anne Bridges (now living in the USA). The *Kelly’s Directories* record some growth although not as much as Anne’s research suggests. Possibly the outlying parts of the village did not grow in the same way.

So by 1866, the village was linked to London, and also to local towns like Hertford and Ware, by fast transport (not necessarily affordable by everyone), and so became a desirable place for commuting, especially to the capital. This was probably one of the reasons which prompted the director of the largest brewery in Europe, the Black Eagle Brewery in Spitalfields¹, to move here.

Thomas Fowell Buxton

The director in question, Thomas Fowell Buxton (1821-1908), was a member of a very influential family. His father, also Thomas Fowell Buxton, was a brewery owner, a Member of Parliament, a social reformer, a mission advocate and an anti-slavery campaigner, and was knighted in 1840. His aunts were Elizabeth Fry, the prison reformer (who appears on the English five pound note, as does Sir Thomas) and Louisa Hoare, a well-known writer on education, both of children and their parents (!). His uncle Samuel Gurney, who was also his father-in-law (!) was known as “the Bankers’ Banker” because of his importance in the financial world. His cousin Samuel Gurney, who was also his brother-in-law, was a Member of Parliament and the founder of the The Metropolitan Drinking-Fountain and Cattle Trough Association. His two brothers, Edward North Buxton and Charles Buxton were both MPs. Most of them were well off, “not short of a bob or two”, but they certainly used much of their wealth in philanthropic ventures seeking to improve the lot of others. The majority of them had a deep religious faith, in some cases as Quakers, in others as Anglicans. They were undoubtedly “Victorian do-gooders”, who today are so often pilloried as self-righteous hypocrites seeking to impose their will on others, although there is at present something of an adjustment to this extreme view. The two recent TV series by Ian Hislop on “Ian Hislop’s Age of Do-Gooders” and “When Bankers Were Good.” have gone some way towards redressing the balance.

When Thomas and Rachel Gurney, his cousin, were married in 1845, they lived for the first two years in the Director’s House at 91 Brick Lane, Spitalfields, attached to the Truman, Hanbury and Buxton Black Eagle Brewery, where their first child, a daughter Rachel Louisa, was born in

¹The Black Eagle Brewery was the largest in Europe (and probably in the world) and covered an area of six acres. Founded in 1669 it passed into the hands of the Truman family in 1694. In 1780 the Hanbury family became involved, particularly two brothers, Sampson and Osgood Hanbury. Their sister Anna married Thomas Fowell Buxton of Earls Colne, Essex and in 1808 their son Thomas Fowell Buxton (later Sir) joined his uncles’ firm. He was soon made a partner and given almost sole responsibility in reorganising and running the business, which he did with great energy and ability. “Among other measures of reform, he resolved to remedy the state of gross ignorance which prevailed among the workmen. He dealt with this in a summary method, by calling the men together and threatening to discharge at the end of six weeks everyone who could not read and write. He gave them a schoolmaster and other means of instruction and fixed a day for examination, when he was gratified to find that he had not to send away a single man. He was also very careful to prevent the servants of the firm from working on Sunday.” Industries: Brewing’, *A History of the County of Middlesex: Volume 2:(1911)*, pp. 168-78.

The fame of the firm was widespread. In Charles Dickens’ *David Copperfield* (1850) Mrs Micawber says: “I have long felt the brewing business to be particularly adapted to Mr Micawber. Look at Barclay and Perkins! Look at Truman, Hanbury, and Buxton! It is on that extensive footing that Mr Micawber, I know from my own knowledge of him, is calculated to shine; and the profits, I am told, are e-NOR—mous!”

1846. In 1847, his older brother Sir Edward North Buxton was elected as an MP and moved from Leytonstone into central London. Thomas and Rachel with their young daughter moved into the house vacated by Edward, Leytonstone House, where they lived for the next eighteen years and where the rest of their children were born (They had a total of fourteen, but twins, who were born in 1847 or 1848, died in infancy, and Leonard, born in 1857, died of scarlet fever in 1861.) At that time, Leytonstone was described as “one of the prettiest villages imaginable” but the advent of the railway in 1856, while making it easier for Thomas to get up to town, also heralded the end of a pleasant country existence, as house building accompanied or followed the railway.

By 1866 they made the decision to move from the outskirts of London to rural Hertfordshire. They already knew something of the area, being related to the Hanbury family of Poles Hall, near Ware, and Thomas had attended Mrs Hanbury’s funeral there in October 1863. If Mrs Micawber was right and the profits from the brewery were “e-NOR—mous”, then Thomas would be able to look for a suitable property in a place of his choice. There were a goodly number of large mansions in the area, but probably none was for sale - Poles Hall (which later became a convent and is now Hanbury Manor Hotel), Fanhams Hall, Ware Park, Briggens House, Stansteadbury, Hertingfordbury, Balls Park, Goldings, Brocket Hall, Broxbournebury, among others! In the end he chose, not a house, but a large area of land, in the centre of which he chose to build a house of his own design. He bought 3000 acres of land bordering the eastern edge east of the town of Ware and extending to the village of Stanstead Abbots, with its southern boundary the River Lea and its approximate northern boundary the road from Ware to Wareside.

Details of the various properties, farms, maltings and other pieces of land, including eight small islands in the River Lea (!) are found in the title deeds located in the Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies at County Hall, Hertford. According to the summary attached to the documents they include

“estates centred on the parishes of Ware and Stanstead Abbots, but overlapping into the neighbouring parishes of Great Amwell and Thundridge. The chief properties in Ware were the manor and estate of Mardocks, with Moules Farm, Widbury Hill and Grumballs Farms, Noah's Ark Farm, Newhouse and Hales on the Hills Farms. In the 18th century they were largely in the hands of the Plumer and Hutchinson families, from whence they passed in the 19th century to the Ward, Proctor, Chuck and Wilkinson families: in the 1860's they were purchased by T F Buxton. The Stanstead Abbots' properties consisted mainly in maltings, cottages and small parcels of land, which were purchased in the 18th and 19th centuries by the Hankin family and sold to H C Wilkinson.”

He then commissioned the Quaker architect Alfred Waterhouse to design a mansion for him and his family on Easneye Hill. It turned him from brewery director to landowner and, in a short time, to local magistrate as well. By the time of the 1871 Census, he is already described as “Magistrate, Landowner, Brewer, MA of Cambridge,” and the *Kelly's Directory* for 1890 *in loc.* describes him as lord of the manor of Stanstead Abbots and a major landowner in Stanstead Abbots, Ware and Wareside.

“Easneye” is possibly Anglo-Saxon for “Island of the rivers”, the Lea and the Ash flowing along two sides of the estate. The area bears evidence of very early habitation. There is a tumulus or burial mound in the woods and two flint arrow heads dated around 2000 B.C. were discovered nearby. Archeological soundings on the tumulus discovered that over 500 bodies were buried there; the Buxtons deliberately planted trees on the mound to prevent further excavations and so leave the bodies undisturbed. On the estate there is the site of a Danish fort overlooking the River Lea, and Alfred, king of Wessex, defeated the Danes at the Battle of Widbury Hill nearby in AD 895. He is reputed to have dammed the river at some point, causing the Danish longboats to sink into the mud and forcing the Danes to carry their boats overland to the sea. The River Lea marked the boundary between Wessex to the west and Danelaw to the east.

Alfred Waterhouse was one of the major architects of the Victorian period. Coming originally from Manchester, he moved to London in 1865. In 1859 he had won an open competition for the Manchester Assize Courts. In the 1860s he designed the new Cambridge Union Society building, new buildings at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge and Balliol College, Oxford and Manchester Town Hall. His most famous work was the Natural History Museum in Kensington which was built in the 1870s. It was his design of the Victoria University building in Manchester in red brick which gave the name “red brick universities” to six civic universities founded in the Victorian period which achieved university status before World War II.

The house he designed for Thomas Fowell Buxton was Gothic in style, using red brick and terracotta. Various plans dated 1867 and 1868 are in the Buxton archive. Colin Cunningham & Prudence Waterhouse, *Alfred Waterhouse 1830-1905: Biography of a Practice*, Oxford University Press, 1992 have a number of technical architectural points on the design (pp 97 etc.; the chapter is headed “Residences for the Rising Gentry”). They say: “By all accounts the client for Easneye, Thomas Fowell Buxton, had definite ideas” which Waterhouse incorporated into his final design. They describe the house as: “Large mansion, stables and lodge of patterned brick and terracotta with stepped gables and tile roof” (p 230). The cost is quoted as £32,800 which is the equivalent of £1,840,000 today. He did not need to take out a mortgage (!) but paid outright. (Interestingly, Waterhouse designed Foxhall House, Reading, as his own residence in 1868, and it extremely similar to Easneye. He obviously liked the design!)

Various interesting motifs are present in details of the main house. In the windows of the main hall, there is a series of views representing the day from dawn to dusk. The date “1868” is in the window but it was not ready for the family to move in till the Spring of 1869. Over the fireplace in the hall is the hart or deer, carrying a medallion around its neck with a negro slaveboy, representing Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton’s work in abolishing slavery. (Other branches of the Buxton family have the deer and the shield, but not the slave boy). In some of the windows a beer barrel appears as a motif. There is an interesting feature in the grounds, not designed by Waterhouse but with the same “brewery” theme; a small lake in the River Ash is in the shape of a “B” for Buxton, with beer barrels containing plants at various points in the water.

The lodges and cottages he planned for the workers on the estate were modelled on traditional Hertfordshire lines and provided comfortable, and comparatively spacious, accommodation at a time when rural workers’ cottages were usually small and cramped. The plans that survive are

only those for the mansion, the dairy farm and the front lodge, so possibly a local designer copied Waterhouse's plan in the other buildings (including North Lodge where I lived with my family for four years.)

The family moved into their new home in the Spring of 1869, a year after Ellen, their second daughter, had married Robert Barclay, a banker (They eventually moved into High Leigh, Hoddesdon, where they lived for the rest of their lives.) In May of that year Thomas and his family held a brief dedication service for their new home, led by the Rev D B Hankin, the vicar of Christ Church, Ware.

Stanstead Abbots and Easneye

Some of the detail just given may not interest everyone, but it does allow us to see the scale of the project, the time it took, and to calculate its effect on the village.

Human beings then had the same range of reactions as those we feel today. So, when the news of the purchase by a London brewer of such a large tract of land and his plans to build on it filtered through, there would have been a predictable range of reactions. Most would have been curious, some excited, others sceptical, others again taking a "wait and see" attitude. "What is there in it for us?" would have been in the minds, if not on the lips, of most.

So, how did it affect the village? Was it good or bad?

There must have been a big increase in the amount of **traffic** going through the village. The mansion was built mainly of red brick and so thousands, or even millions, of these would be necessary. When the new parish church was built ten years later, the bricks all came from nearby Roydon, where the Imperial Brick Works was established in the nineteenth century. It employed at least twelve workers and had four kilns for bricks and tiles. It was probably from here that the bricks and tiles for Easneye Mansion were supplied, and also for all the other lodges around the estate and the Dairy Farm. There must have been a constant passage of horse-drawn carts bring the loads of bricks down Cat's Hill, along Roydon Road, Cappell Lane and up the Easneye drive. Supplies of other materials (scaffolding and all the other materials necessary in a major work of construction) may have come from London and other places, many of them arriving at St Margarets Station and then being carted along the High Street before turning into Cappell Lane and up the Easneye drive. Timber would presumably be felled on the estate for use.

The need for a variety of workers with various skills (and with no skills, but strong muscles, like labourers) would have been employed over a period of two years for the mansion, and for the next several years with the other building work necessary on and around the estate. The number of cottages scattered around the estate, some, but not all, bearing the terracotta Buxton plaque, is great, and these would mainly have been built after the mansion was completed.² This all means

²The Dairy Farm and the Front Lodge were completed before the main mansion was started; the School in Roydon Road was built at the same time as the mansion. The following is only a partial list but it shows the amount of work done after the mansion itself was finished. the Reading Room at Watersplace, Halving Cottages, Widbury Hill Farm Cottages; North Lodge, South Lodge, Larch Cottages

that there was an opportunity for **employment** in the village and around about. The specialist tradesmen would have mostly come from elsewhere (although according to the 1851 Census there were at least four bricklayers in the village) but there would certainly have been the need for the muscle men, the general labourers, and these would have probably come from the locality. The 1891 Census records that there were thirty-six such men in the village. Perhaps the increase had come from the Buxton building work, and maybe some of the increase in the local population was also due to the needs of the work, which, as we said, would have continued for some years, at least up to the building of the parish church in 1879-1881 and the parish room in 1883, and maybe beyond.

There may also have been temporary employment at harvest times, when extra hands may have been needed, and this would have continued for several years at least. According to the various censuses, from 1871 onwards, the majority of live-in staff, both in the mansion and outside, came from further afield, but again, there was probably the need for kitchen maids and other servants and workers on the estate continued on and off for the whole time the Buxton family occupied Easneye. The St Andrews school log for that period shows there were frequent absences of children from school to help with the harvesting. The school inspector commented on this! The Buxtons employing child labour and, even worse, getting them to play truant?!!

The need for **accommodation** would have meant an increase of opportunity for locals to let out rooms, and also **trade** for local shops - and for local public houses! Hopefully, it did not mean an increase in **crime**, especially at closing time with “drunk and disorderly” offences!

On the first of these, accommodation, any local men would have gone home every evening, but as such a project required skills not necessarily found locally, several of the craftsmen would have needed accommodation, and this need would have continued for at least the two years that were taken up with the building of the mansion itself and possibly afterwards. The village was the obvious place for them to look.

In the case of local traders benefitting, this may have been a short-term thing. Once the estate was fully operational with the dairy farm supplying eggs, milk, butter, cheese and beef for the Buxton table, the flock of Herefordshire sheep for mutton and lamb, the fields yielding wheat for bread, and the mill at Mardocks to grind it, the estate would have been increasingly self-sufficient. However, when the various workers on the construction project needed to be fed, and in the early days of the family’s life there, they must have relied on local traders. The butcher and the baker and whoever supplied the milk products are likely to have benefitted., as also were the local public houses, who would quench the thirst of weary workmen at the end of a hard day.³ Once Easneye was built and inhabited, the beer for the family and live-in servants would

(by the Meridian bollard on Hollycross Road), Railway Cottages at Watersplace, another pair of cottages east of Watersplace on the edge of the old disused railway line, Railway Cottage on the bridge by Hollycross Road (demolished by rebuilt in imitative style) Chaseway Cottages, 2 Cottages in Cappell Lane next to Wilberforce Cottages, Thele House in Roydon Road, the Parish Room in Roydon Road.

³ It is interesting that not one of the ten public houses in Stanstead Abbots and St Margarets were attached to Truman, Hanbury and Buxton for their supplies! They all were supplied by local breweries, such as Christies of Hoddesdon, McMullans of Hertford, Hawkes & Co of Bishops Stortford

surely have come from Buxton's own brewery in London (the beer cellar, with a chute down which to roll the barrels, was on the north side of the house.) We do not know where he obtained his supplies of wine, but it is likely also to have been London. There was a spacious wine cellar with plenty of space for a large amount of wine to be laid down, and a "butler's wine cellar", not for his personal consumption (!) but for the wine that was ready to be served.

The Buxtons' Interest in the Village

Thomas did not waste any time in getting involved in helping to meet local needs. On February 17, 1869, even before the dedication service for Easneye, he was involved in the opening of an **elementary school** in Stanstead Abbots. The first entry in the school log book records for that date: "School opened by Mr Buxton and friends." The only education in the village before that date was provided by the Baesh Grammar School, founded in 1635. It still existed on an endowment of £20 per annum and was struggling to survive. It closed in 1879. Quite clearly there were plans to open a new elementary school before 1869, but possibly money was a problem. It seems that when Thomas Fowell Buxton bought the 3000 acres of land on which he proposed to build his new mansion, he was approached with a view to helping with the project. He gave a plot of land, hired Alfred Waterhouse to design the building (not up to Waterhouse's usual standard, in my opinion!) and also contributed substantial financial support towards the total cost of £1495; the building was opened a year before Forster's Education Act of 1870 which provided for compulsory, free elementary education.

He also gave substantial help in solving the problem of the location of the **village parish church**. The original parish church, dedicated to St James, was situated well away from the village on the hill by Stanstead Bury. It is possible that the original village had been built on the hill, which gave a commanding view of the countryside around, but the population had moved away down the hill towards the river as a result of the Black Death in the thirteenth century. Although Sir Edward Baesh had built a chapel onto the church in 1577, the church was inconveniently situated for the people of the village.

Thomas Fowell Buxton commissioned Zephaniah King of 3, Victoria Street, London to design a new church, which was built in Cappell Lane, much more convenient for the village - and for the Buxtons themselves! King designed a very fine building in the perpendicular style; from the outside it might easily have been mistaken for a much older, medieval building. The inside, with its hammer-beam roof and other medieval details is finely designed, although its comparative newness is betrayed by the use of red brick rather than stone (Medieval builders may have used brick for the interior, but it would have been covered with plaster, not left exposed as here).⁴ Thomas gave the land "on a slight eminence about eleven feet above the roadway...on the site of Mr Biggs' Old Barn" and paid the major part of the cost for its design and erection; it was

and Benskins of Watford. I have not been able to find a list of Truman's pubs; they were probably focussed in London and some Midland towns.

⁴ It is believed locally that Alfred Waterhouse was the architect for the church but this is not so. The book by Cunningham & Waterhouse (see above) which seeks to list every one of his commissions, including several churches, makes no mention of this one. The contemporary accounts make it clear that it was Zephaniah King who designed it; he also gave the communion table.

consecrated on December 29, 1881 as St Andrew's church, and officially replaced the church of St James as the parish church on May 7, 1882. A drinking fountain and dog trough were incorporated on one of the fence pillars, with water coming from one of the several springs behind the church.

There was some opposition in the village to the new church; there were those who resented the Buxtons coming in and changing things, suggesting that it was to suit their own convenience, rather than that of the villagers, that the new building was being erected. On the other hand, perhaps some of the critics were put out that the excuse they may have used for not attending church regularly i.e. distance, was no longer valid!

In 1883, Thomas Fowell Buxton paid for the building of the **parish room** next door to the school in Roydon Road. It was used every day during the week to house the "British Workman," a village club which had been opened in 1876, and of which he was the President. A newspaper report of 1878 described him as a man "who is ever ready to assist in the promotion of what will tend to the comfort and happiness of the people living near him." The club opened at 5.30 a.m. till 10.00 p.m. every weekday and supplied hot tea and coffee to its members, which in cold mornings before work was "an incalculable benefit". Membership cost 6d per month for which the refreshments were free, but the general public could also buy tea, coffee etc. A warm, comfortable atmosphere was provided and a small library was available, with opportunities to read newspapers, magazines and books. Occasional lectures were provided with magic lantern shows, and occasionally religious talks.

The "British Workman" movement had started in the north of England in the 1860s, possibly in Leeds, with the aim of establishing alcohol-free public houses for working men. The idea soon spread and numerous British Workman pubs, temperance hotels, tea/coffee houses and clubs were opened throughout the country. It is curious, at first sight, that the director of the largest brewery in the country should support such a venture! However, responsible brewers were concerned about drunkenness and the abuse of alcohol, especially with gin and other spirits. Charles Buxton, MP, Thomas's younger brother who was also a partner in the brewery, wrote an article in 1855 (reissued in 1864) entitled *How to Stop Drunkenness*, in which he argued for various restrictions to be placed on the sale of alcoholic beverages, especially gin. He quoted figures to show that, while gin was often up to 50% proof, porter, the favourite drink of workmen in London, was on average only 4% proof. It was also highly nutritional. The Wine and Beerhouse Act of 1869 introduced strict control regarding licensing and restrictions regulating gaming, drunkenness, prostitution and undesirable conduct on licensed premises, enforceable by prosecution or more effectively by the landlord under threat of forfeiting his licence. So Thomas was not being inconsistent in his active support of the local club.

A year later, he paid for **another drinking fountain**, this time with a horse/cattle trough attached, outside the parish room, with water again supplied from springs on the hill behind. The horses who had pulled the carts with the masses of bricks and tiles from Roydon back in the late 1860s, would have appreciated it earlier!

Although an Anglican, Thomas was not narrowly denominational. **The Countess of Huntingdon's Connection Chapel** in Stanstead Abbots was only a stone's throw from St

Andrew's, and might have been seen as competition to the parish church. However, when in 1901, the chapel needed to expand its premises, Thomas gave a parcel of land without charge for them to build the schoolroom and enlarge the vestry/classroom.

Apparently, **regular daily prayers** were held in the main hall of the mansion, which estate workers were urged to attend. This not only included prayers for the nation and the world but also for any local, personal needs, so the Buxton concern for village folk was undoubtedly real and personal.

Thomas was not the only member of the family with an interest in the people of the village. **Ethel**, his youngest daughter, at the age of thirteen was already handling the distribution of various magazines to eighty local subscribers; the periodicals included *The Church Missionary Gleaner*, *Illustrated Missionary News*, *Cottager and Artizan* and *Friendly Visitor*. She had a handbill printed which indicated that she was willing to get complete yearly sets bound and also to supply back numbers for those who wished: "Subscribers who wish their numbers bound up should send them to her with their own names clearly written on the parcel, before Sunday, Dec. 16th. She will be at the School on Friday, Dec. 14th, from 4 to 5 o'clock with a supply of back numbers for those subscribers whose 12 numbers are not complete."

In May 1878 she organised an Essay Society and three months later a Drawing Society, for both of which she had rules printed! Presumably she intended to encourage local talent but there are two letters in her scrapbook, one from London and the other from Clitheroe, asking for copies of the rules. The Rules are worth reprinting:

ESSAY SOCIETY. RULES. I. Members are requested to put name or initials at the End of their Essays and leave space for Votes. II. The Essays will leave Easneye on the 2nd of January, March, May, July, September and November. Essays arriving later than the 2nd of those months will be considered as not written, and the sender will be fined 2d. III. Members are requested to send clear, neatly written Essays. All quotations made in the Essays must be marked as such, and authority give. REMARKS. 1.- Votes will be given by the Members to the Essays. *1st Vote* to the one they consider best, and *2nd Vote* to the next. 2.- A Prize will be awarded at the end of the year to the Member having the greatest number of Votes. 3.- An entrance fee of 6d. to be paid by each Member on joining the Society, and a fine of 2d. for not writing. Members are requested to write on "Sermon or Essay" paper.

The Rules for the Drawing Society are similar, and are signed Secretary - ETHEL M. BUXTON, Easneye, Ware.

A formidable young lady!

Thomas's interest was not only in the religious and moral welfare of the village. In 1901 he was president of the **local cricket club** (we don't know if he ever joined them on the pitch!). In 1987 the club celebrated its 250th anniversary and the leaflet produced to mark the occasion gives something of its history. Of Thomas it says: "[he] was a philanthropist at heart whose contribution to the welfare of the village was colossal; not least in the construction of St Andrew's Church at his own expense in 1882. Certainly without his finances the (cricket) club

may have had nowhere to play ... as he caused the cricket pitch at Easneye to be maintained in good condition” At that time the club had no permanent pitch of its own, so Thomas allowed them to use a pitch at Easneye, which he ensured was always properly mowed.

Also in 1901, Thursday, 29th August, the 18th Show of the Stanstead Abbots, St. Margarets & Wareside **Cottage Garden Society** was held at Easneye. There was a band in attendance at the Show and the highest prizes attainable for the top three awards were 5 shillings, 2s. 6d. and 1s.6d., with many lower amounts in some categories. Entry fees ranged from 3d. up to one shilling and probably covered the prize monies paid out. Thomas was president. He obviously had an interest in such local events as garden parties!

All this is not intended to be a panegyric for Thomas Fowell Buxton, but rather to show his genuine and real interest in the people of the village. In fact, this was only a part of his interest and involvement in a wide variety of good causes and activities in Britain and overseas. Anyone interested can find more detail in a paper I wrote in 2007, “The Buxtons of Easneye: An Evangelical Victorian Family and their Successors” on the All Nations website <http://www.allnations.ac.uk/>

In 1905, Thomas and his wife Rachel intended to make a gift of four bells to St Andrews church, in gratitude to God for sixty years of marriage. However, she died about a month before their anniversary. Thomas and one of his sons Geoffrey eventually made the gift, in her memory.

Three years later, Thomas died aged 86. The obituary in *The Times* (January 29, 1908) gave a long list of his Christian activities and added: “and his house and woods were liberally opened for philanthropic purposes.” It concludes: “Mr Buxton leaves four sons and five daughters, 43 grandchildren and 17 great-grandchildren.” His estate at his death was valued at £390,496, which is equivalent to around £25,000,000 today!

His eldest son, **John Henry Buxton**, who had been living with his family in Hunsdon Bury, moved back to Easneye when his father died. He may already have been involved in the life of the estate before, because the official website of the Greenwich Meridian says that in 1903, John Henry Buxton, the owner of Easneye, had planted a row of poplar trees on the estate along the line of the Meridian. Only three of these remain, the great October Storm of 1987 having uprooted a number of them; one of the survivors is just off of Hollycross Road near Larch Cottages, where there is also a meridian bollard.

We do not know anything about his involvement with the village and its life, but we do know that **his wife, Emma Maria**, known as Minnie, who died in October 1924, was widely known for her ministry of “doing good”. According to the *Herts Mercury* for Nov 1, 1924, which quotes from the tributes paid at the funeral, “She endeared herself by her gentle influence, sympathy and ever-ready help, not only to her immediate relations and friends, but to all whose sorrows and difficulties came to her notice. Like her great-grandmother, Elizabeth Fry, it was her delight to visit the sick and needy, giving practical help as well as comforting words.” Presumably it was those whom she knew in the village whom she visited, helped and encouraged.

Her husband outlived her for another ten years, until his death in 1934. The year before he died, he had ordered the building of the four **Wilberforce Cottages** at the bottom of the main drive, for retired workers from the estate.

Other local connections

In 1912, one of John Henry's daughters, Margaret, married the Rev Edward McClintock, who at the time was the **curate at St Andrews Church**. He spent time in various parishes, and also as a chaplain in the Great War and as a representative of the Church Missionary Society in the dioceses of Oxford and Coventry. They eventually retired to Stanstead Abbots, living in a house near the bottom of the Easneye drive. He died in 1961 and his wife followed him in 1974.

The last Buxton to actually live at Easneye was **Henry Fowell Buxton**, who moved in together with his wife Katharine and their unmarried son Joseph in 1934. Sadly, after only a few years, Katharine became increasingly unwell and was eventually permanently hospitalised in a nursing home until her death in 1945. We do not know of any regular contacts he had with the village, although we do know that in March 1947, when the village was flooded, he ordered the estate tractor to be used to rescue families trapped by the floods and take them to the parish hall.

In 1940, Easneye, together with Widbury House, was requisitioned as a nursery for children evacuated from London. By 1943, there were a total of fifty-three babies and twenty-four nurses. Possibly there may have been a number of other staff who came from the village, especially cooks and kitchen staff. Henry lived in a couple of rooms on the ground floor while the rest of the large house was used to care for the children. He employed a butler, a cook and a maid, possibly all from the village.

Henry died in 1949, and his son **John Fowell Buxton** inherited Easneye but did not live in it. At some point he moved into Morley Hall, Wareside. The L.C.C. continued to use the mansion as a children's home until 1963, when it was closed.

A hundred years later - a new chapter

In 1964, nearly a century after Thomas Fowell Buxton first bought Easneye estate, a new chapter began in the life of the mansion at the top of the hill, and with its connections with Stanstead Abbots. The house, which had been a family home and then a children's nursery, was invaded - not by St Trinian's girls (as is well known, the first St Trinian's film was made at Easneye in 1954) - but by the staff and students of a bible college transferred from Taplow near Maidenhead in Berkshire. It was a very quiet invasion (Bob Hunt and I were part of it!). Perhaps it was more a "change of use"! Five staff members and their families, together with thirty-five men students (only two of whom were married) moved in, and began or continued their studies.

From the very beginning, attempts were made to reach out to local churches and communities, so that the college students and staff might be involved in their life. A special tutor was appointed to make such contacts and very soon the students were involved in the life and work

of churches in Stanstead Abbots, Ware, Hertford, Hoddesdon and Harlow. When Bob Hunt, who was a student when the college first moved to Easneye, returned as a tutor after time in Africa, he was appointed to supervise and develop these contacts.

Soon after the college moved, local folk were invited to an annual carol service in the hall of the manor and also to an open day held in the grounds. These events were crowded every year by large numbers of people from far and wide. In all of this, there was no attempt to be patronising, as Thomas Fowell Buxton may, from our perspective, seem to have been, but a genuine desire to be known and not regarded from a distance as “them up on the hill”.

Some of the students, especially those with families, who came when the college became a larger, mixed community catering for men and women, singles, married, those with children and those without, lived in the village and became well-known here. A number of members of staff, both past (like Bob Hunt!) and present (like my son), live in the village - and some frequent local hostelrys! Some have become intimately involved in various village activities. Students have also been involved in the annual Riverside Festival.

The college has been here for nearly fifty years (ten years longer than Thomas Fowell Buxton himself) and, hopefully, is a recognised part of local life. Members of the Buxton family also are still interested and involved in village events. Henry Buxton, the current owner of the estate (All Nations only owns the main building and the area immediately surrounding it), gave permission for a field on his property to be used for the Millennium Beacon bonfire.

The Easneye Connection, which began nearly one hundred and fifty years ago, still continues today, and, hopefully, will do so for many years to come.