

SIR ASHTON LEVER

Ashton Lever of Alkrington (1729-1788) was born on the 5th March 1729 of Sir Darcy Lever and Lady Darcy Lever of Alkrington. He was baptized at Middleton Church. Sir Darcy died in 1742 when Ashton was just 13 and at that time Ashton inherited everything. A few years earlier he had had a severe attack of small pox, a disease that may have caused the death of other brothers and sisters and caused his disfigurement.

Ashton was educated at Manchester, at Corpus Christus College, and Oxford where he matriculated at age 19.



*Portrait of Ashton about age six by William Hogarth
Before he had small pox.*

After he left college Ashton devoted himself to forming a collection of live birds, and accumulated an aviary of about four

thousand, sparing no trouble in procuring them. He is said to have frequently ridden from London to Alkington with cages full of birds that he held at arm's length while he rode at full gallop, stopping to change hands when he got tired.

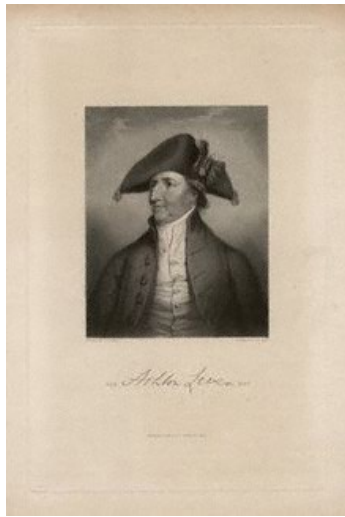
The zeal with which he collected birds did not, however, prevent him from keeping and hunting a pack of beagles, and being generally a thorough all-round sportsman. He appears to have kind of a wonderful gift for training animals, and is said to have had five or six hunters so well under command that they would fetch and carry, open and shut doors, and also do other tricks at his orders. They carried him however so well to hounds that he was generally in the first flight. His pointers were likewise so well trained that he frequently had fifteen in one field all pointing or backing at the same time. Lever's predilection for horse racing led him to be active in re-establishing the Manchester Races at Kersal Moor in 1761. ¹



This Lever crest is similar but not identical to the one on the family tree.

Lacking the firm hand of a father in his youth, Ashton was somewhat of a wastrel, such that his courtship of Mary Assheton, the eldest daughter and heiress of Sir Ralph Assheton of Middleton came to nothing when her father refused consent to their marriage. There is a romantic story about Sir Ashton Lever's passion for Lady Mary Assheton. They would arrange secret meetings together under the pretext of following the hunt. When Lady Mary's father discovered the existence of his daughter's love affair he was determined to stop it, and imprisoned her in his own home and grounds at Middleton Hall. The legend goes that Sir Ashton was so determined to see her that he built Alkrington Cottage overlooking the grounds where she was to walk. The name of Alkrington Cottage appears on one of the grave slabs now forming the pavement of the Lever Chapel. The story has an unhappy ending, however, for Lady Mary was compelled to wed the man of her father's choice, Sir Harbord.

Sir Ashton never recovered from his disappointment. However at age 35, in 1764 he married at Prestwich Church, Frances, the 18-year-old daughter of James Bayley Esq. of Manchester. Through this marriage he became a relative - although quite a distant one - of Robert Clive of India. This marriage also linked him with the Mosley family, Lords of the manor of Manchester, and to the Rosbotham family, one member of which was an eminent historian and antiquarian.



Ashton was born into landed gentry - a family of local wealth and power. He came into considerable inheritance, his properties in Manchester would be bringing in a handsome sum in rents and the lands in and around Alkington, which were in the main farms and farm lands, would supplement the Manchester income, to make Ashton quite a rich young man.

It was in Ashton's lifetime that coal mining was developed. He prospected for coal on his Alkington estate, and found several seams of inferior quality and had established Alkington Coal Pits by June 1772. They were closed in 1841.

Ashton also became the owner of Alkington Hall, ² then a new building which had been erected by his father during the latter's term of office as High Sheriff.

Both Ashton and his father lived in an age of 'amateur scholars'. Darcy was interested in scientific studies and Ashton followed his example but confined his interest to natural history.

This interest and Ashton's obsession with collecting led eventually to his famous museum. The museum however, did not preclude an involvement in public life. In 1766 he became a Justice of the Peace for the Salford Division, he served on the Grand Jury at the Lancaster Assizes in 1766 and again in 1786, and in 1771 he served his term as High Sheriff of the county. ⁴ He was also a Freemason of the Unanimity Lodge at Manchester.

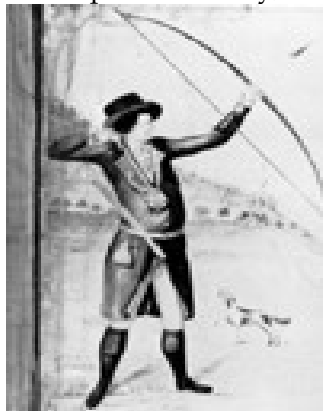
“A Poetical Epistle to Sir Ashton Lever” by the poet, Percival Stockdale - 1774

Stockdale's poem has many verses to Lever. These two are reasonably readable.

A Strange, unfashionable modern muse,
Who, with charmed eye the works of nature views;
Still fond to walk in her eternal road,
And still despising perishable more;
No flatterer of the great, nor of the vain,
To Lever wakes her tributary Strain.

Yet ,generous LEVER! In our leaden days;
All thy reward may prove, the poet's praise!
For, thy magnificent, and varied store.
Which gives to science views unknown before;
Which more unfolds the world's harmonious plan,
The mind eternal, and the mind of man
(It's master in some inauspicious hour,
Meanly by wealth deserted, and by power)
Like Houghton's works of art, may go
To find a patroness in Russian snow;
May be received (since taste is, here, no more)
With genial ardour on a frozen shoar.

Ashton was the friend and confidant of many of the intellectual circles in Manchester and was a member of the Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society. In London in the 1780's he founded the Toxophilite Society, an archery club.⁵



Sir Ashton became the first President of the Toxophilite Society, a position he held until his death. His interest in archery is clearly shown in Fanny Burney's description of him written in December 1782.⁶

When the museum moved to London in October 1774 the Hall would have reverted to domestic use. Sir Ashton returned there to permanent residence in 1787. But he died February 1st, 1788 of a chill a few weeks before his fifty-ninth birthday. Other records indicate that he poisoned himself.

Ashton's funeral was at Prestwich Church where he had been baptized and married. The funeral was on February 7th and he was interred in the family chapel. A large retinue of friends attended his funeral and fifteen carriages attended his remains to the grave.

The Hall was left to his widow Dame Frances, where she lived until her death in 1802.

The estate passed to a nephew John Lever, and this branch of the family retained the Hall until 1845. The hall and estate were sold at that point to the Lees brothers of Clarksfield, Oldham, for £57,550.

A copy of the will, among my Memorabilia, written in 1787 has some interesting items. The first is that he willed his brother, Reverend John Lever “one shilling and no more” !

He left money to his sister, Dorothy and to his nieces, Dorothy and Mary, two daughters of the above, John. He left specified amount to his nephew, John, again son of the above brother and following that John was to receive the “residue” of his estate after the death of Ashton’s wife, Frances who was liberally supported during her lifetime.

Footnotes

1. Kersal Moor - Horse races at this site in the spring were the great event of the year when the area was turned into a giant fairground for several days. Here also were nude male races held, allowing females to study the male form before choosing a mate!
2. See chapter on Alkrington Hall
3. See chapter on the Leverian Museum
4. See chapter - Memorabilia
5. See chapter on the Toxophilite Society
6. Again see chapter on the Leverian Museum