

JOSEPH PITT, LANDOWNER

Joseph Pitt was one of the speculators in land who developed Cheltenham in the early 19th century. He gave his name to the Pittville Spa and estate. Pitt never lived in Cheltenham. He began life as a solicitor in Cirencester, and as he prospered he bought land, till he was able to set himself up as a country gentleman. Besides the estate which he bought in Cheltenham in 1800, Pitt owned property in many parts of south Gloucestershire and north Wiltshire.

Pitt bought his first estate in 1791 at Minety, then in Gloucestershire, but now in Wiltshire. In partnership with Robert and William Croome, cheesefactors of Cirencester, he bought the manor of Minety from Lord Rivers for £21,000. The three partners became joint lords of the manor, though by 1801 Pitt was sole lord. The estate was managed by a steward, sometimes George Bevir, who later bought Pitt's solicitor's practice in Cirencester, and sometimes Joseph Mullings, who was Pitt's own solicitor. The steward had to collect rents and hold the manorial courts. The court rolls show that a court baron and court halimot was held each year for the registration of land transfers. Once there was a court leet and view of frankpledge, which appointed a constable, tithingmen, haywards and a bailiff, and made rules about the impounding of stray animals; this happened shortly after the inclosure award had been made. Occasionally Pitt himself presided at the court baron.

There were many small freeholders and copyholders in the village; over 50 people received allotments when the land was inclosed. The copyholders paid rent to Pitt as lord of the manor, as did those who held land by fee farm or lease or at quitrent; but these rents were very small, usually two or three shillings a year, and altogether Pitt received only about £7 a year from them. He also received heriots and reliefs when copyhold tenures were transferred. About a third of the copyholders farmed their own land, a third let it out, and a third did both. Pitt's land was both freehold and copyhold, and he let it to tenants normally on a yearly basis. It comprised a block of about 160 acres already enclosed, and some 60 acres in the open fields.

As soon as he acquired the manor of Minety Pitt began to consult about inclosing the open fields. Besides being a proprietor himself, he was also solicitor for the other proprietors, and banker to the commissioners. A notice of the intention to seek an Inclosure Act was put on the church door in 1791, but was torn down. Perhaps the move was unpopular, for it was not until 1811 that the Act was passed. The petition for it had to be signed by the proprietors of the greater part of the land, and Pitt and his clerk made many journeys to get their consents. About six refused. All these facts emerge from a detailed account of Pitt's expenses as solicitor. There were complications, and Pitt had discussions with one of the commissioners, Robert Wright Hall of Gloucester, about additional clauses to be inserted in the Bill. George White, M.P. sponsored the Bill in the House of Commons. Pitt travelled to London, where he spent 12 days to see the Bill

through the committee of the House, and his costs came to 37 guineas for coach travel and another £60 for coffee house expenses. He had to be in London another 12 days when the Bill went through the House of Lords.

When the Act was at last passed it named Robert Wright Hall and John Edmonds of Whelford in Gloucestershire as commissioners. Pitt attended them at their first meeting at the Fleece Inn, Cirencester, in 1811. There they received claims from the proprietors, and went on to have a survey made and a map. The commissioners completed the inclosure award in 1813. It included provisions about brooks and ditches; probably these were the complications discussed when the Bill was being prepared for Parliament. The countryside at Minety is flat, and crossed by many streams, which form the headwaters of the river Thames. Samuel Rudder wrote in his New History of Gloucestershire in 1779, "Should business or curiosity lead a stranger into this country, I advise him to make his visit in the summer, least he be either drowned, or stifled in the mire; for here the Swillbrook overflows its banks, and fills the road (through which travellers must pass) with water from three to eight feet in depth, and notwithstanding some have lost their lives, and many others are endangered every year, there is no order taken to carry off the water nor to raise the road; so insensible from habit are these people to inconvenience and danger." A number of accounts for making hedges and ditches survive among the documents; and the traveller today will note the deep ditches at either side of the roads. The cost of this work was more than £250. The other expenses included a fee of £220 paid to George White, and Pitt's charges for his work as solicitor, which come to about £600. The total was just over £1,100, and was shared among the proprietors by a rate made in proportion to their assessment for the land tax. The proprietors were asked to pay their rate to the bank of Pitt and Croome at Cirencester.

Pitt received allotments of 52 acres for his rights as lord of the manor, and another 64 acres for his land in the open fields. He also received about 30 acres for land in the open fields which he bought from four or five other proprietors. His share in the rate to cover the cost of inclosure came to about £600, the same as he had charged for his expenses as solicitor. A valuation for the poor rate of 1814 (which is difficult to compare with other documents because it lists Pitt's lands differently) indicates the increase in value brought by inclosure, since it values 168 acres already inclosed at £244 and 115 acres of allotments in the common at £100. The work of inclosure went on very slowly, and was still incomplete when Pitt died in 1842.

During his period of ownership Pitt enlarged his estate at Minety, but not greatly. When the tithe apportionment was made in 1839, Pitt owned 370 acres let to six tenants. After he died, and his property was advertised for sale, his estate at Minety was described as 396 acres of freehold and copyhold land. It comprised a farm (Pitt's original inclosed land) let to a yearly tenant for £220 a year; another farm (mainly inclosure allotments) let for £201 a year; a small holding

let for £14 8s 0d a year; and undivided sixth part of certain lands let for £4 a year; and the reversion in fee of a farm held on lease for one life at 2s 6d a year. These rents, together with £7 0s 1d paid by the copyholders, came to £456 10s 7d. a year. The estate passed to Pitt's mortgages for £12,820.

In 1807 Pitt acquired an estate at the neighbouring village of Eastcourt, mainly in the parish of Crudwell, and partly in that of Hankerton. Whereas Minety was an investment, Eastcourt became Pitt's home and country seat for the rest of his life. The estate there had belonged to Giles Earle. His family sprang from a Bristol sea captain who settled there about 1650, and some of them had been M.Ps. for Malmesbury. Giles Earle went to live at the estate in Yorkshire brought him by his wife. Pitt bought from him about 650 acres of land, both freehold and leasehold. He paid £24,860 for the freehold and £3,120 for the leasehold. With the estate went the title of lord of the manor of Cloteley cum Hankerton.

Eastcourt House was mentioned by John Britton in the volume on Wiltshire in The Beauties of England published in 1814. He called it a respectable old mansion. The house, which is still there, had been built by its first Earle owner in the 17th century. One of the Earles added a new dining room, staircase and kitchen in 1776. After Pitt died a description and inventory were made. These gave an impression of old fashioned 18th century elegance. The dining room contained two mahogany tables and 18 mahogany chairs. The drawing room was furnished with 12 elbow chairs and a large sofa to correspond. Pitt was said by Edith Humphris in her book, At Cheltenham Spa, to have been an amateur of art who collected pictures. But there is no mention of any in the inventory. The library, with only two bookcases, does not seem to indicate an owner of scholarly tastes. A gentleman's business room seems more appropriate to Pitt. The house moreover was the centre of a working farm, for its cellar was equipped for brewing (there were 200 gallons of ale and 80 gallons of table beer in stock), and adjoining the house was a farmyard with pigsties.

Some of the land Pitt bought at Eastcourt was still uninclosed. As at Minety he set about organising inclosure. An award was made for Hankerton in 1809. Though an Inclosure Act for Crudwell was passed in 1816, the award was not made till 1841. Eight people received allotments, Pitt being assigned 329 acres, together with 55 acres held on lease.

Pitt enlarged his estate at Eastcourt, as may be seen from the land tax assessments, and by comparing a map made of Giles Earle's estate in 1805 with one made for Pitt in 1839. On the latter were displayed the arms of the Pitt family to which belonged the two prime ministers, though it is doubtful whether Joseph Pitt was related to them. The tithe apportionments for Crudwell and Hankerton of 1840 and 1841 show that Pitt owned about 1,225 acres, by then all freehold land. This land was divided into five large farms and seven smaller holdings, besides which were 17 cottages. Rentals of 1841 and 1842 show these tenants paying altogether about £2,250 a year to Pitt. When the Eastcourt estate passed to Pitt's mortgages it was valued at £19,000.

A country estate was not the peak of Pitt's ambition. In 1812 he sold his solicitor's practice to George Bevir for £10,000 and entered Parliament as member for Cricklade. Pitt owned many houses in the borough, enabling him to influence voters. He also controlled the election of the members for Malmesbury, and for a time influenced elections at Wootton Bassett. However Pitt's parliamentary interests must be the subject of another essay. Pitt owned other land in Gloucestershire and Wiltshire, though Minety and Eastcourt were his chief estates. His varied ventures did not prosper, for he died in 1842 owing debts of about £150,000. The interest on these debts was estimated to cost about £6,000 a year, while the income from land investments came to only £4,000 a year. The reason for this sad state of affairs was probably that Pittville had not flourished so well as Pitt had hoped. All his property was mortgaged. One of the principal mortgagees was Joseph Mullings, and in the course of a long chancery case it was to him, and not to Joseph Pitt's family, that the Minety and Eastcourt estates passed.

Russell Howes

#### SOURCES

(Listed in each section, as far as possible, in the order to which they are referred.)

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