

# THE CHAPEL-BARN OF ST. STEPHEN, BURES and the de Vere Monuments

BY ROBERT INNES-SMITH

Photos by Richard Burn of Sudbury

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*The head of St. Edmund, from a painted glass window formerly in the Abbot's Palace at Bury and now at Moyses Hall.*

IN THE HEART of Suffolk on Christmas Day, 855, Edmund, a tall, handsome, flaxen-haired youth was crowned King of the East Angles in succession to his cousin, the pious King Offa. Offa had been on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land (it turned out to be his last journey) and on the way he diverted his route to pass through that part of Saxony where his cousin Alcmund was living under the protection of Charlemagne. Here he met Alcmund's son Edmund and was so struck with the young man's demeanour and piety that he resolved that this man would succeed him and by the ancient custom of tanistry gave the youth a ring and named him heir.

Offa never reached home. After his sojourn in Palestine he died on the way back. His courtiers hastened at once to Saxony and urged Edmund to travel to East Anglia and take up the throne. This

he did, but he became king only after many obstacles had been overcome and with the help of the saintly Bishop Humbert.

The rest of Edmund's story is well known. His defence of the country against the pagan Danes, his stalwart stand for the Christian faith and his many pious acts, his final hideous martyrdom at the hands of the marauders—these are the bones of history. Around Edmund a great *cultus* grew so that the final resting place of his body at Bury St. Edmunds made that town one of the three great religious shrines of England.

Father Mackinlay, in his delightful, if dogmatic, biography of Edmund, states that the King was crowned and anointed at Sudbury, though all other authorities and local traditions agree on Bures as the place. Why should such a strong tradition prevail around a seemingly

unimportant field, without foundation? Why, in 1218, did no less a person than Archbishop Langton, of Canterbury, in person consecrate the tiny manorial chapel which stands to this day on the very place where the Coronation is said to have taken place? These are arguments which it would be impossible to go into here.

The fact remains that a lovely little building with thatched roof and lancet windows is witness to this belief. This chapel fell into disuse at the Reformation and became a barn. The local people call it Chapel Barn and indeed, part of it is still used for this purpose.

Miss Badcock, of Fysh House, Bures, dedicated herself in the 1920s to restoring the little chapel to its former glory. Miss Badcock's sister, Mary Probert, was the original model for 'Alice' who Sir John Tenniel drew to illustrate Lewis Carroll's immortal books. With the help of her brother-in-law Colonel W. G. Carwardine Probert, of Bevilla, Bures, the work was eventually completed and the chapel rededicated. Both Colonel and Mrs. Probert and Miss Badcock chose the chapel as their final resting place.

At the Dissolution, the Priory of Earls Colne nearby also fell into disuse, and, being founded by the de Veres, was returned to the 15th Earl of Oxford by Henry VIII. Some 50 years later, however, the extravagant 17th Earl sold the Priory estates, the manor and the remains of the priory church containing the



*St. Stephen's Chapel, Bures, consecrated in 1219 and erected on the traditional site of the Coronation of King Edmund.*



*Robert de Vere, 5th Earl of Oxford, died 1296, Master Chamberlain of England and Chamberlain in fee to Queen Eleanor.*

monuments of his ancestors to the family of Roger Harlackenden, his Steward and Master of Horse. The estate passed by descent through the Holgates and Carwardines to the Proberts. Through the Harlackendens' descent from the Waldegraves of Bures, the family has links with the neighbourhood going back some six centuries.

When Colonel Probert's family eventually sold the Priory just before the last war, they retained the Lordship of the Manor, which has thus changed hands only once since the Conquest, and even then the Harlackendens were connected with the de Veres by marriage.

The family also excluded from the sale the few surviving effigies of the Earls of Oxford and transferred them to the restored St. Stephen's Chapel where they can be seen today. They are of the 5th Earl of Oxford, the 8th Earl and the 11th Earl and his Countess. On the breastplates of the latter two earls can be seen clearly the mullet of the de Veres. In one corner are the broken remains of a carved coffin lid with the legs of a knight. This is of Alberic de Vere, who died in 1141 and was the first Great Chamberlain of England, father of the 1st Earl and son of the Conqueror's companion who founded the Priory.

These then are the only sad remnants of what was once possibly the most complete set of monumental effigies set up to any English family.

They serve to remind us of the fleetingness of life and that great families, like great nations and empires, crumble to oblivion. The words of Thomas Gray, writing of 'The boast of heraldry' and 'the pomp of power' come to mind:

*Can storied urn or animated bust  
Back to its mansion call the fleeting  
breath?  
Can Honour's voice provoke the silent  
dust?  
Or flattery soothe the dull cold ear of  
death?*

CENTRE: *Sir Thomas de Vere, 8th Earl of Oxford, died 1371—a distinguished soldier.*

RIGHT: *Sir Richard de Vere, 11th Earl of Oxford, K.G. (died 1412) and his wife Alice, daughter of Sir Richard Serjeaux. The consecration mark on the Chapel wall is clearly visible.*





# THE EARLS OF OXFORD

By Robert Innes-Smith

Reprinted from 'East Anglia Life'



PHOTOS BY COURTESY OF THE ROYAL COMMISSION OF HISTORICAL MONUMENTS

*The great Norman keep at Hedingham is almost all that remains of the great castle of the de Veres. It was built in 1140 and can be seen for miles around.*

THE DE VERE family is the classic example of an English noble house. They sprang from a companion of the Conqueror, they owned vast estates, they held one of the great hereditary offices of State and the earldom of Oxford and they provided generations of soldiers and statesmen—the longest and most illustrious line of nobles that England has seen' wrote Macaulay. And yet not one achieved true greatness—there was no Wellington among them, no Warwick the Kingmaker, no Strafford. It is true that one of the earls was a king's favourite and became a duke, another was present at the Field of the Cloth of Gold and the 17th Earl of Oxford is thought by some to have written part of the works of Shakespeare, but in the main they were simply ornamental at Court and worthy provincial administrators at home.

Alberic de Vere, the first on record, was a Norman to whom William I gave manors in Essex, Suffolk, Cambridgeshire and Middlesex. The Middlesex estate was called Cheniston, now Kensington, where smart London streets have stood for nearly two centuries. The family is still commemorated by de Vere Gardens and the de Vere Hotel.

Alberic made his principal seat at Hedingham in Essex and founded a priory at Colne where he and most of his successors were buried. It was afterwards known as Earls Colne and a later member of the family was to rebuild the Parish Church there. It stands to this day with the star or mullet of the de Veres on the tower. Several churches in East Anglia bear this star and it is a sign that the de Veres built them. As we shall see, the

Priory itself was destroyed at the Reformation.

Alberic de Vere had six sons, the second of whom, also Alberic, succeeded him. Henry I made him Master Chamberlain, an hereditary office, and transformed his father's rude castle into a massive fortress which must have been impregnable. Today, the keep alone survives—the largest and best of its kind in Europe.

Alberic's son Aubrey (the Anglicised version of Alberic) was created first of a long line of Earls of Oxford by the Empress Matilda in 1142. During the tussle for the Throne when Stephen usurped her position, it was to Hedingham she fled to gain the protection of her trusty noble.

In Hatfield Broad Oak Church lies the mutilated but still magnificent effigy of Robert de Vere, 3rd Earl of Oxford. He was one of the barons who forced King John to sign the Magna Carta and was excommunicated along with the others by Pope Innocent III for his part in the affair. His son, the 4th Earl, married the daughter of Sayer de Quincey, another of the Magna Carta barons.

During the Hundred Years' War the English produced a number of men remarkable for their bravery and chivalry, since this was, after all, the tail end of the Age of Chivalry. Among these latter day Hectors was John de Vere, 7th Earl of Oxford. One of the heroes of Crecy and a scourge of the Scots, he was truly a magnificent soldier of high renown. He was one of Edward III's most famous captains and commanded the archers at Poitiers. He died in 1359 at the Siege of Rouen at the age of 48.

Some 12 years after the earl's death, his grandson succeeded at the age of 10. When only 16, Edward III, then an old man, made him a Knight of the Garter at Windsor, perhaps in recognition of his chivalrous grandsire. This young man, Robert de Vere the 9th Earl, was a contemporary of Prince Richard, who was soon to succeed Edward as Richard II. The young Earl became a firm favourite of Richard who created him Duke of Ireland and Marquess of Dublin—the first man in England to bear the latter rank of the peerage.

Because of the many royal favours conferred on the Duke, he became unpopular with the nobles who plotted against him and caused him eventually to be banished and attainted for treason. All his property was declared forfeit as also was his earldom and the office of Master Chamberlain, or as it had become known, Lord Great Chamberlain. The Duke died abroad in extreme poverty and when the King heard of it he ordered the corpse to be brought home and buried in the family vault at Earls Colne. Richard himself was a mourner as the cortège approached the Priory.

The dukedom and marquessate would in any case have become extinct but the earldom of Oxford was restored by Richard to the Duke's aged uncle Aubrey who therefore became 10th Earl. But he was too infirm to carry out the duties of Lord Great Chamberlain, so the honour was granted for life to another. The office was eventually restored to the 11th Earl, together with everything which had formerly been sequestered.

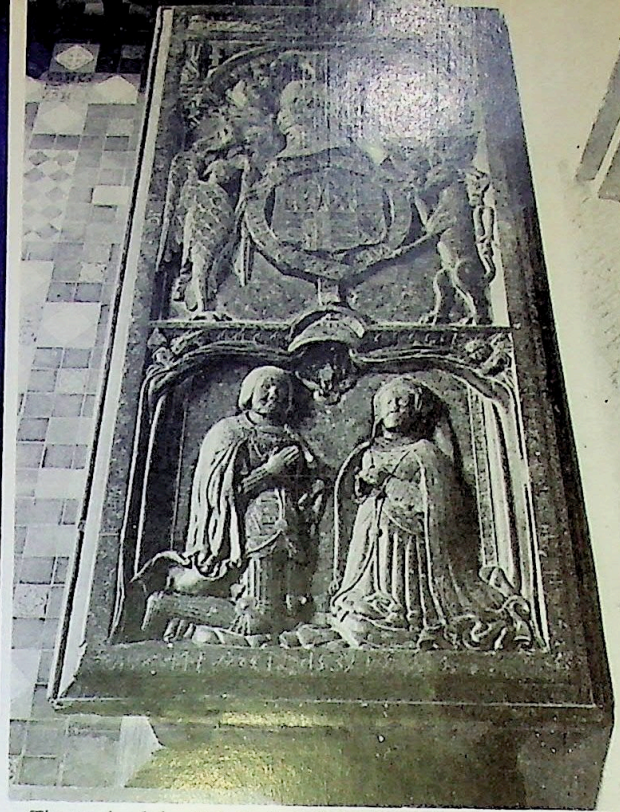
During the reign of Edward IV, the





NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY

*Henry de Vere, 18th Earl of Oxford, the last de Vere to own Hedingham.*



*The tomb of the 15th Earl of Oxford and his Countess, in black marble, which can be seen in the church at Castle Hedingham.*

12th Earl and his son Aubrey were beheaded on Tower Hill for their vigorous support of the Lancastrians and lost their estates, and once again the earldom was extinguished by Act of Attainder. The second son, John, however, was fully restored to all his family's possessions at the succession of Henry VII, and was the first Knight of the Garter created by the Tudors.

John de Vere, the restored 13th Earl of Oxford K.G., was a man of great wealth who lived in tremendous style. Henry VII, after having been lavishly entertained at Hedingham, fined his host an enormous sum of money for contravening one of his laws relating to the number of retainers a man might have in livery. Much could be written about the 13th Earl whom some consider the most distinguished member of the family.

The writer prefers the 17th Earl, the very embodiment of a Renaissance prince.

*The effigy of Robert de Vere, 3rd Earl of Oxford, in Hatfield Broad Oak Church. He was one of the Magna Carta barons.*

He had a command in the fleet which defeated the Armada, was a popular courtier of Queen Elizabeth I, famed for his courtly and chivalrous conduct, wrote sonnets after the manner of his time, dabbled in drama and was one of the great wits of the day—an altogether splendid person and a worthy ornament to the Elizabethan age. It was this nobleman to whom the works of Shakespeare are sometimes ascribed, but here again a book could be written on the subject. The greatest historian of the age of Elizabeth I, the late E. M. Tison, fittingly spent the last years of her life at Hedingham Castle where she completed her *magnum opus*, 'Elizabethan England: being the History of this Country in relation to all Foreign Princes' in some 14 large volumes. She died at the castle in 1961.

With the 18th Earl, Hedingham passed out of the family after 550 years and with

the 20th, the earldom became extinct and with it the male line of the de Veres. The Earl's daughter married the 1st Duke of St. Albans, illegitimate son of Charles II, and the present Duke is the lineal representor of the de Vere family.

At the Reformation all the religious houses founded by the family were dissolved including Earls Colne. No trace of this now remains. Most of the fine monuments to the de Veres likewise disappeared, though a few survived and are now housed at St. Stephen's Chapel, at Bures in Suffolk.

One of the churches built by the Earls of Oxford is the village church of Castle Hedingham—one of the finest in Essex. Beneath the chancel is a vault where some of the earls lie, but the only visible monument is the unusual tomb chest to the 15th Earl of Oxford and his Countess. It is magnificently heraldic and shows the nobleman and his wife both kneeling below a huge shield of arms surrounded by the Garter.

When Aubrey de Vere 20th and last Earl of Oxford and Hereditary Lord Great Chamberlain of England died in 1702 he was described, again to quote Macaulay, as 'The noblest subject in England, and indeed . . . in Europe'. It is strange that there were no long-lived male branches to this vigorous and splendid tree. The de Veres simply died out, and as Chief Justice Crew said, are 'entombed in the urns and sepulchres of mortality'.

Their lasting and most tangible memorial today is the massive keep which stands out above Castle Hedingham village and can be seen for many miles around the pleasant Essex countryside over which they once ruled.

