

Castleton's Squire– Robert How Ashton Junior

Robert How Ashton Senior was born in Manchester in 1798. He lived at Cryer House in Castleton with his wife Catherine (born 1809) and, in due course, his son, also Robert, and his daughters Hannah and Mary.

The elder Robert was a lead smelter and farmer with 300 acres. In 1823 he bought shares in Pindale Mine, eventually owning 23 out of 24 shares. In 1860 he bought a disused mill at Brough for smelting red, grey and white lead. Robert Senior died in 1862. He had been much respected and it is said that at his funeral lead miners from Castleton and Bradwell almost filled the church yard; every house in the village had its blinds drawn; the Union Jack was at half mast on the church tower and the bells were muffled.

Robert How Ashton Junior, later to be known affectionately as “Squire Ashton”, was born on 19 January 1837. He was educated at Wesley College in Sheffield. In 1866 he married Thomasine, daughter of the solicitor Joseph Hall, who lived at Castleton Hall (now the Youth Hostel). Robert and his wife lived at Peveril House and later at Losehill Hall.

Following in his father's footsteps, the young Robert How Ashton had many interests in mining ventures as well as owning lead–smelting establishments at Marsh Farm, Hope, at Brough, near Bradwell and Pindale, just outside Castleton.

In 1870, Squire Ashton was appointed as a Magistrate and served for over 50 years on the Chapel–en–le Frith Board. In 1889, he became the first County Councillor for the Castleton district. He served for over 20 years as a Liberal but following the enactment of the third Home Rule (for Ireland) Bill introduced by the Liberal Government in 1914, he changed allegiance and became a Unionist. Robert Ashton was made an Alderman in 1901. He was also a Church Warden and taught in the Sunday School for 25 years.

Around 1880, he built the Young Men's Institute (on Back Street) which later became the Social Centre and Doctors' surgery. It is now privately owned by a manufacturing business. The Institute was deliberately built to look like a house so that it could be easily converted in the future.

Robert How Ashton was a wealthy man who owned large tracts of land in and around the Hope Valley. He wanted a house and estate that reflected this so he built Losehill Hall. The How Ashton estate covered an area of over 1,500 acres, including, in addition to the house and parkland, twenty-four farms and smallholdings, pasture and arable lands, a corn mill, and a plantation.

Losehill Hall, on the eastern edge of Castleton Village, was completed in 1882 and has (still) the most wonderful setting with extensive views across the fields to Castleton, Peveril Castle, Mam Tor and to Squire Ashton's mining interests above the village. As well as grand entertainment rooms, kitchen, butler's pantry, gun room and a Servants' Hall there were 9 bedrooms, a billiard room, stables, kitchen garden, orchard, glass house and tennis courts. The house was surrounded by flower gardens, a dell and wooded parkland. The Hall's lodge house, unaltered externally, is on the left of the main Castleton to Hope road.

Squire Ashton was a kind employer and was very fond of one of his staff Ellen "Nellie" Wainwright who worked at Losehill Hall from 1912 to 1922. After Thomasine's death in 1914, Nellie acted as companion, secretary and nurse. In 1917 he gave Nellie a watch as a mark of his gratitude for her kindness during his illness. He wrote "If she had been my own daughter she could not have studied my comfort and welfare more than she has done during the last three years...". Nellie married in 1920 but stayed at Losehill Hall until Squire Ashton's death.

Robert and Thomasine had no children and after Robert's death, aged 85, in 1922, the entire estate was sold by auction and the proceeds shared between nephews and nieces. The Hall was purchased by Colonel William and Mrs Helena Chadburn. It was subsequently bought by Co-operative Youth Centres Ltd. In 1961 the house and parkland was acquired by the Peak District National Park Authority and is now their Study Centre.

Robert How Ashton Senior, Catherine, Squire Ashton and Thomasine are interred in the family vault near the main gate of St. Edmund's Church, Castleton.