

**CHENIES MANOR HOUSE,  
nr. AMERSHAM, BUCKS.**

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Principal Home of  
Alistair and Elizabeth Macleod Matthews  
and family

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*Historical and architectural description*

## HISTORY AND ARCHITECTURE

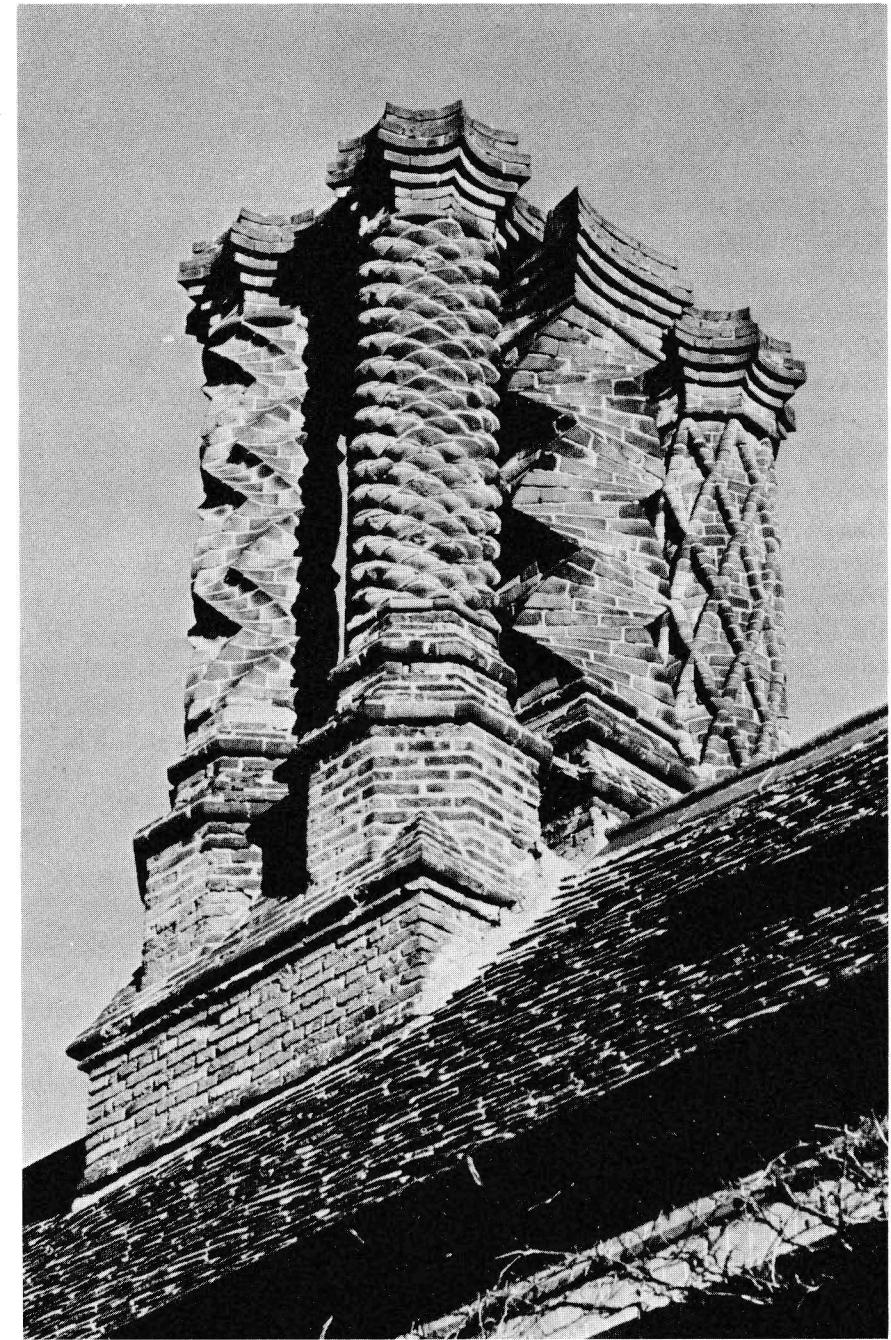
The village of Chenies is approximately equidistant (4½ miles) from Amersham, Chesham and Rickmansworth, lying some 200 feet above the River Chess, which is a chalk stream noted for its trout fishing, and, formerly, for powering numerous water mills. The Saxon settlement was called Isenhampstead ("Iron-homestead"), the reason for this derivation being possibly the presence in the valley of some small chalybeate springs. The parish is not, however, identifiable from the Domesday survey and nothing is known of the Saxon inhabitants.



The "Manor" (i.e. the manorial property and rights) was apportioned to Normans after the Conquest, and by 1180 was owned by the Cheyne family. Except for a period of 63 years in the 13th Century when it reverted to the Crown, this family (with which the present lady of the house is distantly connected) remained in possession for some 350 years, when it passed by inheritance to the wife of John Russell, 1st Earl of Bedford. The present (13th) Duke of Bedford is directly descended from John. It remained the property of his family for more than a further 400 years, until the present owners acquired it.

The earliest architectural remains are those of a 13th Century stone crypt, which at the moment is in very poor condition and not safe for the public. Although it is a scheduled Ancient Monument, unfortunately no grant has been available from either Local or Central Government to assist in its repair, but it is hoped to carry out some repairs with the aid of local societies. This crypt is conjectured to be the cellars of the early house of the Cheynes. It was superseded by a brick manor house, built about 1460, by the Cheyne of that day (Sir John, also of Drayton Beauchamp, where he is buried). The central portion of the present house, with the tower, remains from that period. A brick, dug from a nearby field, (still known as "Claypits") is typical of that period, thin, and laid with blue diaper patterns at some points. Southwards, this building, which is of modified 'T' shape, with a battlemented tower in the angle, is joined by a narrow portion to the very substantial South Wing, known as the "new buildings". These appear to have been added between 1523 and 1526 by the 1st Earl of Bedford, to improve the accommodation available for his guests. At this time also, fireplaces were incorporated in the older buildings, as well as in the additions, and nearly all the flues were furnished with ornamental chimneys, 22 of which survive. It is known that the workmen who built those also built the stacks on various extensions at Hampton Court, which Henry VIII was enlarging about the same time. Those at Chenies are among the best of their period.

Chenies Manor House as thus extended comprised two courts, the outer being bounded by walls (now partly Hedges) and the Parish Church, the inner surrounded on 3 sides by the house. The



North Wing, containing mainly domestic offices such as a salt-beef house, a bolting-house (for bran), porters' lodges, etc. fell into decay about 1750, so that the inner courtyard now has the house on two sides and walls on the others. Most of the windows were replaced, copying the originals, in the early 19th Century, when the present small orangery and stable-block were also built. A detached building in the gardens, west of the orangery, now ruinous, was also built c. 1526 to serve as a childrens' nursery.

The first, second and third Earls of Bedford made Chenies their principal home. The first several times entertained King Henry VIII and his Court there, particularly in 1534 (with Anne Boleyn and the infant Elizabeth) and in 1542. In the latter visit the King was accompanied by Kathryn Howard, who was carrying on an affair with one of the King's attendants, Thomas Culpepper. It culminated in her adultery, Chenies being one of the places where this took place. The King was suffering during this visit from an ulcerated leg; the sepulchral footsteps of a lame man have been heard sometimes on the staircase and in the gallery approaching the bedroom in which Kathryn was possibly lodged, and are said to be those of the King.

The 1st Earl of Bedford died in 1556 and the widow constructed a chapel for his remains adjoining the Parish Church, in which his descendants continue to be buried to this day. His son Francis, the 2nd Earl, was a strong protestant, and a devoted adherent of Elizabeth I. The latter frequently visited Chenies Manor to which she was attached. During her visits, many interesting and historic acts of state were done by her and the courtiers, including Leicester and Cecil, who accompanied her. On one visit, the latter was accommodated in the nursery, "for your quieter lodging", a reference hard to explain without knowledge that the nurseries were in a detached building (see above).

The 3rd Earl of Bedford succeeded in 1585, at the age of 12. He is best known for his part in Essex' plot against Queen Elizabeth, in 1602 (for which he was ordered to stay within three miles of Chenies) and for having married Lucy Harrington, whose father is remembered as the inventor of the water-closet. She was a supporter of the arts, and often entertained at Chenies leading poets of the day - Ben Johnson, Drayton, Daniel, etc. *Midsummer Night's Dream*

was written for her marriage.

The 4th Earl resided mainly at Chiswick, but visited Chenies where much local activity was centred prior to the outbreak of the Civil War. The patriot Hampden was a close friend and near neighbour and when war broke out, it was a detachment of Hampden's regiment that was quartered in the house. A skirmish took place there in the autumn of 1642, in which John Hampden's son was killed.

The last member of the Russell family left Chenies as a residence in 1710, and since then the place has been preserved as a relic of the past. The present family is the first since the 17th Century to live in the house as a whole. It was first opened regularly to the public in 1976.

Other external features of antiquarian interest are, a mediaeval well, 180 ft deep, and 10 ft in diameter, covered about 1800 by an octagonal well-house containing a horse-driven pump; many items of interest have been recovered from this well. Also, ancient brick tunnels lead from beneath the house and gardens into a neighbouring wood, reputedly used for escape. The present gardens were formerly known as the "little gardens"; the "great garden" was north of the house and is now occupied by an orchard, and kitchen garden, and by farm buildings, the latter erected in 1864. Note also the large Chinese "weeping" ash, planted about 1770; and "Queen Elizabeth's Oak", in the small park south of the house; it is about 1000 years old.

## THE INTERIOR

The guided tour of the interior leads from the *entrance hall* (collection of Staffordshire blue and white and delft ware) into the *dining room*, modernised in early 19th century and containing contemporary furniture, plate and glass. The *white drawing room* is then shown, with antique Persian carpets, and a Louis XVI suite. The 17th century-style teakwood cabinet, containing old china, was brought from India. The *stone parlour* is next entered (step down). It is believed to have been the hall of the 15th century house, at that time open to the rafters with a central hearth. The furniture is

mainly 17th century oak; note a collection of Staffordshire cow creamers, and the Mirzapur carpets in the French taste. We then ascend a staircase through a small lobby, hung with framed samplers (1660 - 1830) and early hand-made lace. At the stair head, we enter the *North Bedroom*, with a four post bed, and wallpaper designed by the sister of William Morris, c. 1875. Note the so-called "Cock-fighting" chair (c.1850), on which a man could lounge facing backwards. We pass across the head of the main spiral staircase (note the unique handrail of cut brick) into the *Blue Bedroom*, with "Chippendale" bed and other 18th century furniture and rugs.

From this point, the *Armoury*, a primitive long gallery on the top storey is sometimes visited by way of the *upper gallery*. The Armoury is 144 feet in length, and was used as a barrack room in the Civil War. It formerly communicated with the ground by an exterior staircase.

The main tour continues through the *old gallery* or "ante room", to *Queen Elizabeth's room*, an oak-floored parlour in which it is presumed she mainly held court during her visits. Note the 16th century tapestries and chairs contemporary with the house, and other, 17th century furniture; also the large stone fireplace with fireback dated 1502.

The *Pink Bedroom* is next shown; adjoining is a small closet, possibly used for devotional purposes; and beneath it, reached by a (modern) trapdoor a large hiding place (about 10ft x 4ft x 4ft high) with its own concealed ventilator, conceivably intended for concealing a minister of religion.

We then pass through the *green bedroom*, containing a four-post bed with early American patchwork quilts, and a spinning wheel, into the *Library*. From this, opens a closet containing an original Tudor Privy, which discharged through an opening in the south wall at ground level. The next room is a State bedroom, possibly where Queen Elizabeth I slept, now a *Billiards room*, with unusual Victorian wallpaper; it contains a small souvenir stall. The tour proceeds by way of the *muniment room*, where old maps and drawings of the locality are displayed, into a bedroom containing a collection of dolls ranging from the late 18th to the 20th century, some being family heirlooms.

We retrace our steps and descend by a stone staircase (steep) to

the Long Room, a former hall, where refreshments are obtainable. Adjoining it to the west and visible through a doorway is a room believed to have been originally that of the domestic chaplains to the Russells. One of the latter was Miles Coverdale, the early translator of the Bible into English, who was Chaplain from 1547 - 1551. The guided tour of the interior occupies up to 40 minutes.

## GENERAL

In conclusion, one or two random facts may be of interest. The Manor of Isenhampstead (Cheyne) was forfeited to the Crown in 1285; and the King, (Edward I) used Chenies as a hunting-box. The record of one of his visits (in 1296) indicates that he brought a *camel* with him; and also describes the boiling and distribution to the villagers, on Easter Day, of 430 eggs. This is said to be the first recorded reference to Easter eggs in English history.

The young oak standing in the little park was presented to us by the Woburn Estate as an eventual replacement for Queen Elizabeth's oak. It is a scion from an acorn taken from the branch on which the last Abbot of Woburn was hanged by the Commissioners of Henry VIII.

In 1538, the 1st Earl of Bedford was seriously ill with malaria at the Manor. His wife essayed to treat him with quinine, the first recorded use of that specific in England.

In 1830, the "Long Room" in which teas are served, was set aside by the orders of the Duke of Bedford, for use as a Parish Room, and Chenies had no other hall available until 1962, when the present school hall was built. The Long Room is still sometimes used for communal purposes - for example, in recent years, for Church services (when the Parish Church was under major repair), for Parish meetings and parties, and is hired for wedding receptions.