

John Thomas of Bristol and the Kennet and Avon Canal

THE following is an extract from a newspaper respecting John Thomas, who died at his residence, Prior Park, Bath, 3 iii., 1827, aged seventy-five.

“Saturday, at Prior Park, which he purchased about sixteen years ago, in the seventy-fifth year of his age, John Thomas, Esq., one of the Society of Friends.

“He commenced business as a grocer in this city, and afterwards established a wholesale house in the same line in partnership with his sons. He was endowed with eminent talents for mechanics and engineering, which were called into action in 1793, when the public mind was excited to speculation in canals. He took a great interest in that projected to unite the cities of London and Bristol, by connecting the rivers Kennet and Avon, and was one of the earliest members of the Committee of Management. The expenditure having, as might be expected from a concern of such magnitude, exceeded the original estimate, this great work languished in its execution. At the express desire of the Managing Committee, Mr. Thomas undertook the superintendance of it at a salary of £750 for all his time, labour and expenses. The amount of his salary is here mentioned because it has been idly believed that part of his large fortune was accumulated in the management of that concern. His unimpeachable integrity obtained and secured the confidence of the various interests with which he had to contend and his strong practical sense and unwearied attention directed the execution and effected the completion of this, perhaps, the best constructed canal in Europe. After he had resigned the superintendance; he gave his disinterested attention to the conduct and management of the affairs of the company to almost the last moments of his life, but in the midst of active pursuits of this and other kinds

the preparation for another state of existence was not forgotten. So long as the great bestower of health was graciously pleased to grant him the possession of it, so long were his useful talents exerted in the promotion of public charities and a large portion of his ample means employed in acts of private benevolence. His opinions and advice were generally sought for and his attendance on public business at a period of life when other men retire from it was useful in a religious and moral view, for it is pleasing and instructive to see strong abilities preserved by temperance and exercise to advanced age, and employed with disinterestedness. His morals were pure and exemplary and his religion practical, regular and unobtrusive. He mixed in general society more than is common for those of his persuasion and brought into it the most urbane and simple manners, never abstaining from the participation of cheerful and enlivening conversation. He was patient in hearing and slow in reply, and although this might be partly owing to the early discipline of his Society, yet the clearness of expression and soundness of argument which marked his observations were peculiarly his own. He was indulgent to the religious opinions of others and without relinquishing the general views and habits of Friends he felt far from a bigoted attachment to them. He possessed the adventitious ornaments of a fine expressive countenance a well proportioned and rather athletic form and a general appearance which almost always made a favourable impression. This excellent man was the father of a numerous family, all of whom stood around his death bed attentive to his latest comforts and partaking his dying advice and benediction. To them it must afford a melancholy pleasure to be assured that their sorrows are shared in various degrees by many friends and acquaintances, and that feelings of regret for his loss extend to every one to whom their departed friend's name was known and by whom his character could be properly appreciated.

Some notes respecting the life of John Thomas, and of his ancestry may here be given, culled from a

pamphlet written about fifty years ago by J. F. Nicholls, Bristol City Librarian, and lent to us by Edward Gregory, of Bristol.

In Besse's *Sufferings of the Quakers* we are introduced to Edward and Katherine Evans,¹ apparently resident in Radnorshire, who, for declining to take the Oath of Allegiance, were cast into prison in November, 1662. Edward Evans, "being an infirm man and unable to bear the Filth and Dampness of the Place, laid down his Life, the unwholesome Confinement there having hastned his death." His wife was continued a prisoner for five years. Their youngest daughter was Priscilla, who is said to have been "a fair Latin scholar and for a while in the service of the Countess Conway."² Priscilla married Robert Thomas, who was not a Friend, but "a sober man." Their home was near Welshpool. They had five sons, the second being John, born 1690. This son came into the employ of Thomas Oliver, who was a farmer and Minister among Friends and emigrated to America.³ Later, John was shepherd to Charles Lloyd, of Dolobran, and about 1704 he transferred his services to Edward Lloyd, a wine-merchant of Bristol. In 1706, he assisted Abraham Darby⁴ and other Friends in an iron and brass founders' business. After many failures and disappointments Darby and his man succeeded in producing round metal pots, such as had previously been made only in Holland and for which Darby took out a patent in 1707.

In 1709, Darby began work at Coalbrookdale and Thomas co-operated. The former died in 1717 and the

¹ Librarian Nicholls is not correct in his surmise that Katherine Evans was the Friend of that name who went to Malta. The latter was the wife of *John* Evans, of Englishbatch, Somerset, and died in 1692.

² For Anne, Viscountess Conway, see vols. iv., vi., xiv., and esp. vii.

³ "Thomas Oliver, 'our old friend,' unmarried; dated 12 mo. 25, 1723, from Mo. Mtg. at Dolobran, Wales. He 'hath Removed himself into your parts Sometime agoe.' Received 4 mo. 26, 1724."

MYERS, *Quaker Arrivals in Philadelphia*, 1902.

⁴ There were three of the name Abraham Darby in succession—1677-1717, 1711-1763, 1750-1791, for whom see *D.N.B.*

latter, having married Grace Zeane in Bristol in 1714, remained to assist the widow and family, refusing attractive offers of employment. He died in 1760.

Samuel, son of John and Grace, settled at Keynsham as a wire-drawer and married Esther Derrick in 1746. Their son, John, born in 1752 commenced business as a grocer on the Somerset side of Bristol Bridge, the business being still carried on under the name of John Thomas, Sons and Company. In 1776, John Thomas married Elizabeth Ovens, of Bristol and they had ten children. It is said that Elizabeth Thomas "used to ask the farmers' wives some times when there were many customers in the shop on Bristol Bridge to step upstairs and have some refreshment and sometimes offered to lend them a pair of dry stockings to put on in lieu of their wet ones when the weather happened to be inclement."⁵

But the chief interest of John Thomas's life was the promotion of waterways for the facilitation of traffic. He was concerned in the Somersetshire Coal Canal and especially in the proposed Kennet and Avon Canal designed to connect Bath, Devizes, Hungerford, Newbury, and Reading with London, as recorded in the obituary notice above printed.

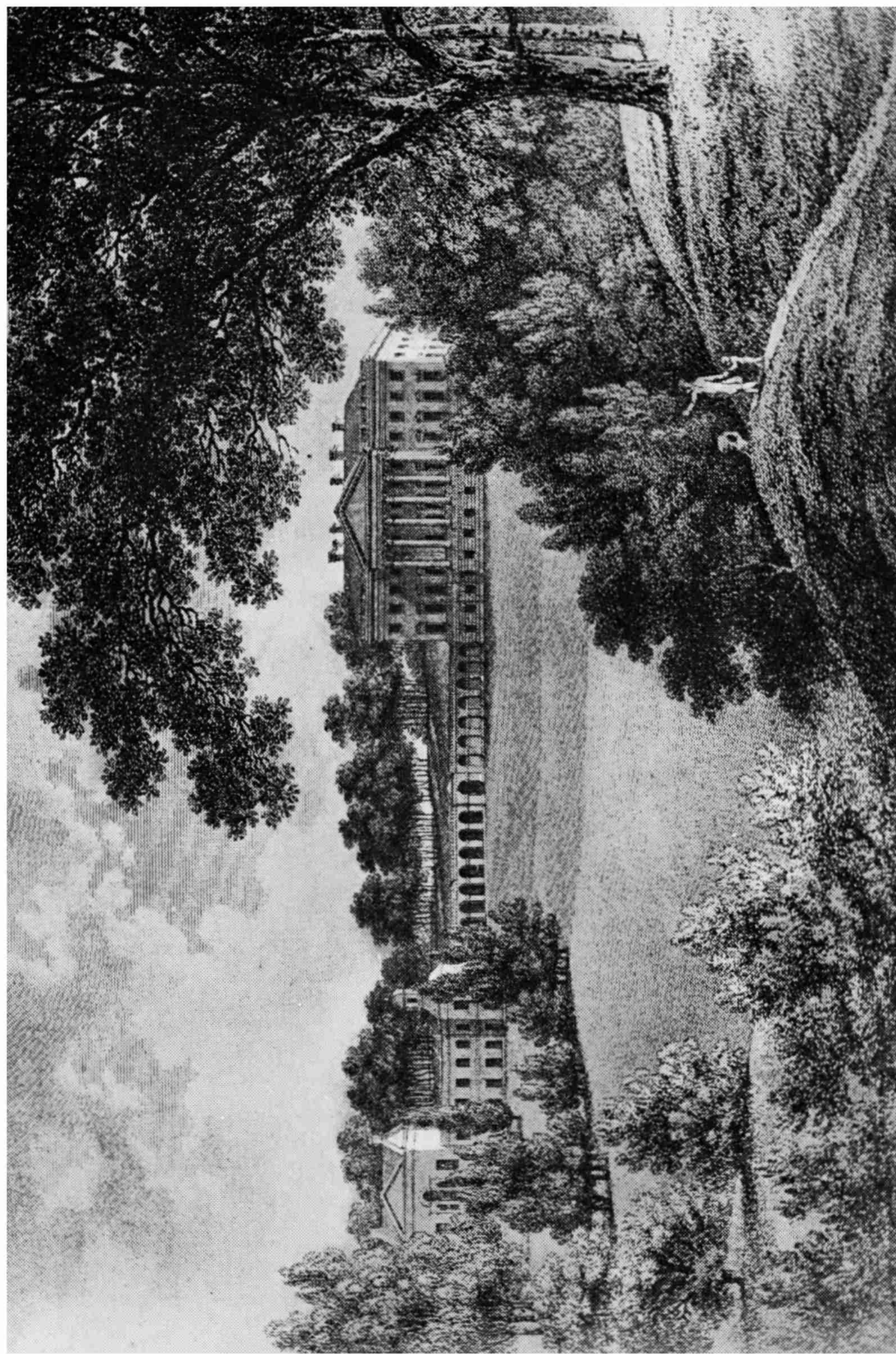
In 1812, John Thomas retired from active participation in business, and bought Prior Park,⁶ near Bath. Here he died, 3 iii., 1827, aged seventy-five. His widow died at Barrow, Somerset, in 1834.

The fifth son of John and Elizabeth Thomas was George, born 1791. He was educated at the Friends' school at Burford, Oxon, under Thomas Huntley,⁷ and married Elizabeth Greer of Co. Tyrone in 1831. He died, *s. p.*, in 1869—the noted Bristol Quaker philanthropist.

⁵ Information from Edward Gregory, 1920.

⁶ Prior Park went out of the Thomas family soon after the demise of John Thomas, and into the hands of the Roman Catholics. In 1836, the contents of the house were destroyed by fire. It was rebuilt and is now again used as a R.C. College.

⁷ Thomas Huntley (1733-1813) lived at Burford through life. He commenced a school at the age of eighteen and conducted it for over fifty years. He was clerk of London Y.M. in 1792, and a Minister many years.



PRIOR PARK, NEAR BATH
From an engraving in D., dated 1785.