

VIEW *from*



*Longleat estate has been home to
the Thynne family since the 16th
century. Its beautiful grounds
have survived the changes made by
successive generations and offer the
visitor a host of surprises. Words
and photographs by Jane Gifford*

HEAVEN

The view from Heaven's Gate, Longleat, at dawn. The rolling parkland designed by "Capability" Brown is revealed as the frost melts and the mist recedes.



This page: the First Marquess of Bath planted more than one million trees at Longleat. Now mature, they are the estate's crowning glory.



Above: a winter sunset seen through the branches of a beech tree at Heaven's Gate.



Above: the façade of Longleat House is reflected perfectly in one of the lakes at dawn.

Expect the unexpected when visiting Longleat estate or dipping into the fortunes of the Thynne family who have lived here since the 16th century.

John Thynne, the son of a Shropshire farmer, began work as a £4-a-year kitchen clerk. Determined to make his mark on the world, he became one of the richest and most successful men of his time, twice surviving imprisonment in the Tower of London. He transformed a small, run-down monastic holding of 60 acres into an autonomous and lucrative estate 100 times that size, and

played host to Queen Elizabeth I in his most enduring achievement, Longleat House.

Lying on the border between Somerset and Wiltshire, Longleat House stands in a broad valley embraced on all sides by rolling downs and extensive woods. The main drive from Longleat runs to the village of Horningstam, around half a mile away. The smooth curves of the land are dotted with the remains of ancient burial grounds and the site of a Roman temple. An air of mystery pervades the area, especially in the frosted calm of winter.

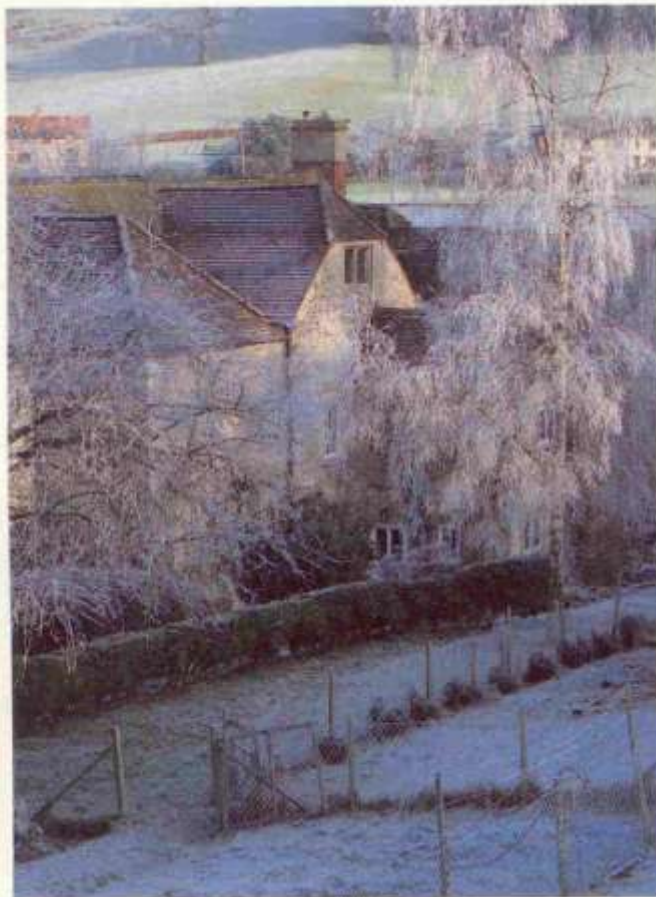
Around 450 years ago, a modest priory stood here beside a mill stream – the “leat” that lent

its name to both the priory and the present house. A few monks tended 60 acres of marshy land that included an orchard, a rabbit warren and the mill house. At just 25 years of age, John Thynne bought all this for £53.

He became obsessed with the idea of settling prosperously at Longleat and spent the next 20 years renovating the priory and turning it into his family home, only to see it completely destroyed by fire in 1567. It is a mark of the man's almost supernatural determination that on New Year's Day 1568 construction work began amid the ruins. By the end of his life most of the exterior of the house we see today



Above: fallen autumn leaves dusted with frost. Below: the 400-year-old Manor House at Horningsham has been used as a court and school.



had been built. John Thynne's tyrannical pursuit of master-craftsmanship, efficiency and perfection have left us with one of the most perfect examples of High Elizabethan architecture in England today.

When John Thynne first bought the land at Longleat, the Vernon family were among his most powerful neighbours. The tower of their late-medieval church, dedicated to St John the Baptist in 1154, has survived to this day in Horningsham village.

Longleat Park has undergone radical changes in response to the priorities of successive generations of Thynnes. Rough moorland, scrub and ancient wood have become clipped formal gardens, orangeries and regimented plantations. Streams have become rivers, then lakes. The best view of the park is from Heaven's Gate, a clearing in the beech trees on the ridge to the east of the house, which looks across the estate towards the Mendips. From Heaven's Gate, facing the setting sun, you can appreciate the lasting contribution of the First Marquess of Bath – a descendant of John Thynne – who died in 1796. He invited Lancelot Brown to landscape the park. "Capability" Brown's sweeping grass-scapes and hillocks crowned with trees have an exhilarating openness and freedom. It was Brown who gave the millstream the semblance of a broad river, which in turn was



Above: the church of St John the Baptist at Horningsham. Below: a young, frosted oak in "Capability" Brown's open parkland.

made to resemble a series of lakes. He also turned the common on the south eastern edge of the park into a boating lake. The First Marquess of Bath was also passionately interested in forestry. During his lifetime he planted more than one million trees, particularly oaks, beeches and pines around the estate. They have now reached maturity. Glowing gold in autumn, silvered in winter and full of bluebell-carpeted glades in spring, they are Longleat's crowning glory.

It is in winter that the "river" really comes into its own. In clear weather mists rise at dusk, slowly dissolving the house and grounds and completely filling the valley. At dawn it gradually recedes to reveal perfect reflections of the house and grounds.

Humphrey Repton added the finishing touches to Brown's inspiration, including the construction of a small island in the lake nearest to the house. This now boasts the novel addition of a family of gorillas, part of Longleat's safari park. Even when accustomed to the idea that today the grounds contain an exotic selection of free-roaming "beasties", the emergence of a whiskered sea lion from



beneath the surface of the lake still comes as an eccentric surprise.

The plans of Henry Frederick Thynne, the Sixth Marquess of Bath, to open Longleat House to the public in April 1949 were greeted with astonishment. The safari park met with open-mouthed horror and derision. Both have proved to be inspired successes and neither are out of keeping with family tradition. The First Viscount Weymouth, who died in 1714, kept an elephant and a bear to lift his family's spirits. The Second Viscount

numbered an eagle, two vultures and some wolves amongst his menagerie. The Second Marquess of Bath hired a hermit to live in a specially built cave beneath Heaven's Gate. He also kept his park gates open, encouraging locals to picnic in the grounds, eventually even opening his house to the public once a week, free of charge! The Fourth Marquess kept kangaroos in the pheasantry and even John Thynne, the hard-nosed founder of the Longleat dynasty, had eight dozen seagulls brought on to the estate from the Bristol Channel.

The present Lord Bath, Alexander George, is building a leisure centre

complete with palm trees and waterfalls, all housed under a gigantic glass dome. Predictably, his critics have been outraged. But the site has been well chosen. Deep in the heart of a pine forest and invisible from the road, it should not spoil the magic of the grounds. ■

Longleat, near Warminster, Wiltshire BA12 7NW, (0985) 844400. Opening times for house, grounds and safari park vary, so please telephone before starting your journey.