**Rothley and Baron Macaulay** by Terry Sheppard

The room that heard the first cry in 1800 of the fledgling Macaulay is on the south east corner of the first floor of today’s Rothley Court Hotel. Back in October 1800 the then Rothley Temple was well into its third century of being the manorial seat of the Babingtons. When the dust was settling after the dissolution of the monasteries in 1565, a Babington sitting tenant bought up the manor and Soke[[1]](#footnote-1) of Rothley, and set about extending the hall and chapel of the Templar and Hospitaller domain into a comfortable rural mansion. In 1800 the Lord of the Manor was the eighth generation Babington, another Thomas, born in 1758.

The new buildings extended southwards from the old hall and chapel, and extensive use of oak paneling was the predominant decorative feature. Today the room where Macaulay was born is named after him, and is kept as a small intimate conference room by the hotel, ever atmospheric with those same oak panels.

Macaulay’s birth in that room was part of the careful forethought of Thomas Babington’s wife, Jean, neé Macaulay. Jean’s brother Zachary, immensely active in London on the campaign to abolish the slave trade, was invited to bring his wife Selina to Rothley’s clean air for the confinement. It was in a way a return home for both of them, as it had been their honeymoon suite a year earlier. Even more so for Zachary, who was coming back to the warm embrace of Thomas and Jean, the pair who had spectacularly rescued him from his great mental trauma. Returning from five years of having had to earn a living as an overseer on a Jamaican sugar plantation, and with both parents dead, Thomas and Jean took him in. The Zachary who emerged from their gentle ministrations and their introduction to the Clapham circle of evangelical Christians was of a new sound mind, and with a clear sense of the likely future pattern of his life’s work.

So it was in October 1800, in the little chapel at the Temple, that Zachary and Selina presented their first-born for Baptism. They gave him the name Thomas Babington Macaulay, after their good and gracious mentor, who was also given the task of Godparent. Zachary and Selina would thereafter refer to him as Tom, and in other circles he was often simply TBM. Such was the eventual acclaim and distinction that would accrue to this Tom that modern online search engines invariably bring up TBM when his uncle Thomas Babington is the search term.

Rothley Temple would be a place of haven to which TBM would often retreat during the summers of the first part of his adult life. TBM’s uncle Sir George Otto Trevelyan, in his *Life & Letters of Lord Macaulay*, records that Babington and Jean ‘kept open house for their nieces and nephews throughout the summer and autumn’. TBM was even awarded his own space at the Temple, nestling in a study at the base of the old tower between the chapel and the hall, with a doorway into the corner of the dining room. He used the room above as his bedchamber. Trevelyan writes atmospherically about the liveliness of the company at the Temple, and had a charming way of summarizing ‘the gentle air’ of the house. It was as if ‘the whole interior presented of having been put to rights at the date of the Armada and left alone ever since’.

Trevelyan goes on to recall that TBM’s ‘favourite walk was a mile of field road and lane which leads from the house to a lodge on the highway; and his favourite point on that walk is a slight acclivity from which the traveler from Leicester catches his first sight of Rothley Temple’. Brookfield Farm, the Temple’s creation in the wake of Rothley’s 1782 Act of Enclosure, and which contains the remains of that route and acclivity, is now vanishing under the developer’s machinations. But in a gesture to the past and to present day sensibilities, the developer is pledged to reinstate much of Babington’s 1819 carriage route and the acclivity as a public ‘Lord Macaulay’s Walk’ for a new generation to be reminded of our very own Baron Macaulay of Rothley. May his name, reputation and achievements continue to be recognized with the staging at the Rothley Court of such eminent academic seminars as have been given here by Professors Catherine Hall in 2011 and Sir Chris Bayly in 2013.

1. the right in Anglo-Saxon and early English law to hold court and administer justice with the franchise to receive certain fees or fines arising from it **:** jurisdiction over a territory or over people [↑](#footnote-ref-1)