

Bridge Hill House, formerly a home of the Zborowski family.

Count Eliot was killed when his Mercedes hit a wall during the La Turbie Hill Climb near Nice on 1st April 1903. One story said he had been unnerved by a fortune-teller's premonition. Another stated that a cufflink had jammed the hand throttle open. Some believed Louis was wearing them when he was killed.

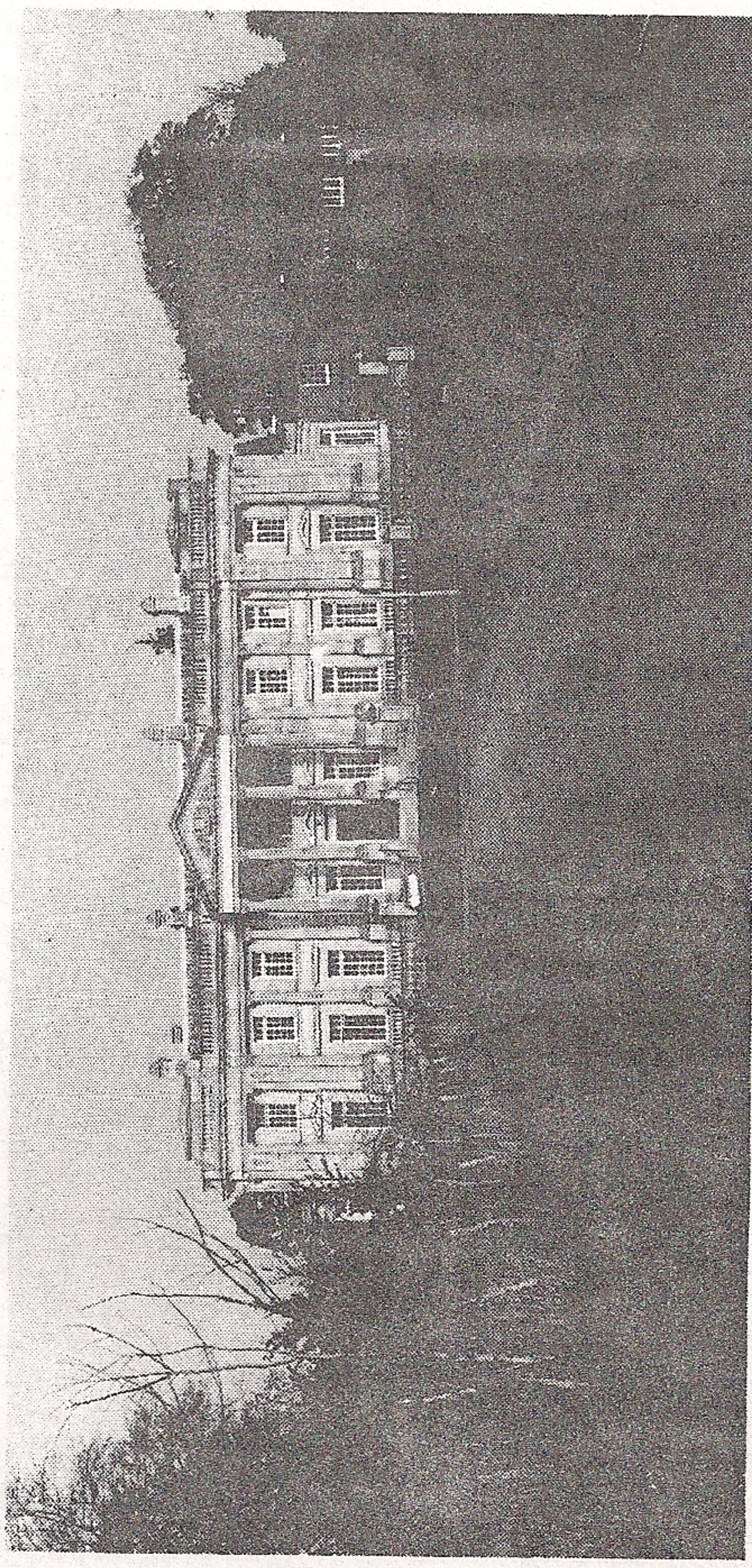
Bridge Hill House, some four miles from Canterbury, was the home of the widowed Countess and her son. He attended Price's School, Broadstairs, before entering Eton in summer 1908. He had a flair for languages and artistic talent. The latter was suppressed as too effeminate. His position in Form Three was described as low for a boy of thirteen. He left Eton after about one year.

The Countess befriended the wife of William Gay, owner of nearby Higham House. She set her heart on buying the property. Built in 1768, it stood in 22 acres of landscaped gardens. It had a 50-foot lily pond, tennis court and rose garden. There were forty bedrooms, ballroom and cocktail lounge. The Countess sadly died of influenza as finishing touches to her dream house were nearing completion in 1911.

At sixteen the young Count was heir to a fortune of £11 million. He already showed signs of remarkable inborn mechanical ability and a love of speed. He rode motor-cycles with abandon through the estate and surrounding countryside. He turned to cars, exhibiting all the driving skills his father had possessed.

He established large workshops at Higham, directed by William Martin, whose brother Len was chief mechanic. A fleet of over thirty cars was maintained, including examples of most of the famous makes of the time such as Mercedes, Hispano-Suiza, Bugatti, Ballot and Salmson.

Construction began on a series of aero-engined monsters, the famous 'Chitty-Chitty-Bang-Bangs', nicknamed on account of the noise made starting up. Louis obtained Maybach engines of the type which had powered German Gotha



Highland Court, originally Higham, home of Count Louis Zborowski and birthplace of the great 'Chitty' cars.

bombers and Zeppelins from the War Disposals Board. The first was fitted into a Mercedes chassis, with lightweight body built by Bligh Brothers, a famous Canterbury firm in which the Count had a large financial interest. They had an excellent reputation, having exported carriages worldwide since 1812, including, it is said, some without wheels to Russia for use as sledges.

Chitty 1 made a sensational first appearance at Brooklands on Easter Monday, 28th March 1921, winning the first race at an average speed of 100.75 m.p.h. She was driven regularly from Bridge on Bligh Brothers trade-plates, with 'Shuggar' Cooper, Clive Gallop (chief engineer), and other racing friends to 'take the cement'. They wore large loud-check caps specially imported from Palm Beach. Seven hundredweight of sand was carried in the back to even up weight distribution. Chitty was started with an aeroplane half-axle threaded over the starting handle. The 23-litre engine was pulled over by many willing hands while the magneto was wound — an extraordinary sight for the locals. Bridge landlords were said to have removed their best glassware when the car was idling nearby!

Louis married Violet Ethel Leicester, well known actress and Gaiety Girl. The social scene at Higham was exciting, with legendary parties. The cream of society were invited, including film stars, novelists, artists and musicians. Mr C.F. Hogben of Bridge well remembers those days. His brother Leslie worked at Higham and married a cook. The large staff included about eight gardeners. Zborowski's return after race meetings was always an event. Local boys would wait excitedly for their hero's arrival. He took the corners in the drive so rapidly that the ballast which covered it was thrown in to the fields. It had to be periodically collected in barrows. An annual ball for village tradesmen was held. Wines and spirits arrived by the lorryload and huge cleaning-up operations were required.