

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - April 2015

Culham Court

The April meeting of the Wargrave Local History Society was an illustrated presentation on Culham Court by Dr Phillada Ballard, who has made a special study of the property and its owners.

Dr Ballard began by outlining the early history of the estate. It was part of the manor of Wargrave, which before the Norman Conquest had belonged to the Crown, and then from the late 12th century to the Bishops of Winchester. The first mention of the manor of Culham was in the 13th century, when it was described as part of the manor of Wargrave. In 1552, the manor was sold to Henry Neville, and after another period in the ownership of the Bishop of Winchester, reverted to the Neville family again. The manor and estate of Culham then passed to the Lovelace family of Hurley, who had also bought the manor and estate of Remenham, so they then had an extensive land holding across 3 parishes - although like previous owners, they did not live at Culham. A 'Rent Roll of Kilham' (an alternative spelling for Culham) dated 1664 recorded that most of the Kilham Court estate was held by a Richard Soutlate for £160 per year. The Lovelaces, in turn, sold the estate to Richard Stevens in 1679, who did use Culham as a residence. He was a London lawyer, and Culham became his country retreat. A painting by Jan Siberechts of 'the Thames Valley with Henley in the distance' painted in 1697 showed the estate (although not the house) as it was in the time of the Stevens family - with large areas of enclosed pasture land down to the Thames. An inventory of the house interior compiled in 1738 gave an idea of the magnificent interior of the house at that time - for example the Atlas bedchamber with hangings of crimson silk with gold flowers, and lined with white silk damask. By the time of John Rocque's map of Berkshire, in 1761, the estate was some 900 acres, including the Home Farm, Lower Culham Farm, Middle Culham Farm, and Upper Culham Farm - the latter being south of the main Henley road.

By the mid 18th century, the Stevens family were in financial difficulty, and so the estate was sold in 1760, to another London lawyer - Richard Michell. He started to restore the old manor house - but due to a careless workman, the house caught fire and burnt down. He therefore set about building a new (the present) house, on a site further from the main road, and with good views across the Thames. The house - still unfinished - was described by Mrs Lybbe Powys (sister of the then vicar of Fawley, on the opposite bank of the river) in 1771, when she wrote that 'my brother took us to Mr Michell's new house, which makes so pretty an object from his own place. The house was not finished, stands in a paddock rises from the river on a fine knoll commanding a view which must charm every eye'. The architect of the new mansion is not certain - later sales catalogues say Sir Christopher Wren, but he had died in 1723. It is a 4 storey building, with a basement partly set into the hillside. There were 3 reception rooms, and a total of 15 bedrooms (those on the top floor being for the servants). A new stable block was also built. There were 2 new entrance drives to the mansion - one from Hurley and the other from Aston, crossing Aston Lane by a wooden bridge. The estate also included an 'old house in Chinese style' at Rose Hill which Mrs Lybbe Powys described as a 'sweet summer tea drinking place'.

Richard died in 1789, and his property passed to his 2 daughters - Charlotte, who married Frederick West in 1792, and Louisa, who married Philip Lybbe Powys - each daughter living with her husband at Culham for a while. Their neighbours included the Freemans at Fawley Court, General Conway at Park Place, the Lockwoods at Hambledon and the Vansittarts at Bisham, and other 'social events' included Lord Barrymore's masque balls at Wargrave. Charlotte died in 1795, and Frederick West then married Maria Myddleton of Chirk Castle. The highlight of their time at Culham was a visit in November 1804 by

George III. Mrs Lybbe Powys's account of the occasion recorded that the King was careful to wipe his feet on entering -and on being told not to mind, the King replied that he was 'not going to carry dirt into any man's house'. On Frederick West's death in 1852, the estate passed to his daughter, Charlotte. However, financial concerns led her to sell the estate to William Vidler and Henry Micklem - who both lived locally - for £54200, with the proviso that Charlotte could live the rest of her life at the house.

From 1869 until 1948, the estate was mainly owned by people who did not live there, but let the property to tenants. Several attempts were made to sell the estate a 'domain surrounded by gentlemen's estates on all sides', and it was suggested that it would 'offer opportunities' if split into smaller lots for development - of 'gentlemen's residences each with 10 acres'. Eventually, it was sold in 1884 to Wadham Neston Diggle. It was sold again, in 1895, to W F D Smith, 2nd Viscount Hambleden. He never lived at Culham, but the view of it from his residence at Greenlands in Hambleden led to him putting covenants on the land to prevent it being split for building plots.



CULHAM COURT.

During this time, the house and 23 acres of land was let to Henry Barber, who had been a solicitor in Birmingham and also had income from property in the city. His tenancy included shooting and fishing rights over the whole estate, and he became Master of the South Oxfordshire Hunt. His wife, Martha, had artistic interests, and was keen on the work of a Belgian painter, Nestor Cambier. Martha presented her husband with a portrait of herself on his birthday - 18 in all, so there was a picture of her hanging in

each room in the house! She also arranged for many improvements to the gardens- a large rock garden and topiary in the shape of chess pieces along the terraces. When Lady Barber (as she had become) died in 1933 (her husband pre-deceased her) their £1 million was used to endow the Barber Institute of Fine Art at Birmingham University.

During the war, the house was used to accommodate evacuee children, and then was offered again for sale in 1947, but again did not sell. However, Viscount Hambleden died in 1948, and the Remenham and Culham estates were then sold to Nathan Duce, who soon resold parts of it, Culham Court and the grounds close to the house being sold in 1949 to the merchant banker Michael Behrens. They converted one of the reception rooms into a kitchen, as the Behrens family did not use the lower ground floor. The gardens were reconfigured again, this time in classical style by Raymond Erith. Michael Behrens was keen on collecting art, and visitors to the house during their occupancy included Hugh Casson and Edward Ardizzone - who did many sketches of the property. In 1997 the property was again put up for sale - Lot 1 being Culham Court, Lot 2 Middle Culham Farm and Lower Culham Farm, and Lot 3 the stables. The Nicoll family bought all 3 lots, and then set about a major refurbishment of the house, including bringing the basement back into use, and restoring the 18th century stable block. The Nicolls family did not own it for long, though, as they received 'an offer they could not refuse', and so the estate was sold again in 2006.

The next meeting will be on Tuesday May 12th, when Sheila Viner, who is actively involved in the Mills Archive Trust, will tell us about Water Mills on the Thames and Loddon. This will be followed by the Society's events as part of the Wargrave Village Festival. On Sunday, June 14th there will be a conducted local history walk around Mill Green, Church Street and the High Street, starting at 2.30pm, whilst in the Woodclyffe Hall at 7.30 pm on Wednesday June 17th, well known antiques expert Thomas Plant - familiar to many from several television series - will give an insight into his work as an antiques and collectables valuer and auctioneer. Tickets for both of these events will be available on Festival Ticket Sales day, Saturday 25th April, or afterwards, - subject to availability - by contacting the Society.