

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - October 2019

Caversham Court Gardens

The Wargrave Local History Society's October meeting was a presentation by Linda Humphrey-Evans on Caversham Court Gardens. Linda described the gardens as "Caversham's best kept secret", even though it has been included in English Heritage's list of the historic parks of interest in England since 1987. It is situated on the north bank of the River Thames, just to the west of Caversham Bridge, with an entrance through large wooden gates set into the flint wall at the bottom of St Peter's Hill. The site is now a public open space owned by Reading Borough Council, and refurbished with the aid of a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund. To qualify for that, it had to be shown that it was an historic site. It also had to be something that would be supported by, cared for, and available to, the local people and the formation of the Friends of Caversham Court Gardens was one way in which this community involvement was shown. For more information about and pictures of the Gardens, visit their site at <http://home.fccg.org.uk/>

The site has had relatively few owners in the last thousand years, and its history is well documented. In Saxon times it belonged to Earl Godwinson, but by the Domesday Survey of 1086, William the Conqueror had given the property to Walter Gifford, 1st Earl of Buckingham. Walter also had extensive lands at Long Crendon, in Buckinghamshire, and did not need the Caversham site, so gave it to the Augustine Notley Abbey. As a result, a Norman church and rectory were built on the land. For about 300 years, therefore, it was the home to a priest, but in due course, it was thought better to have a tenant for the property, who was then required to provide a capable and suitable priest for the church. Amongst the tenants was William Marshal, a knight at the court of King John, who became Lord of the Manor of Caversham.

When Henry VIII caused the dissolution of the monasteries. In the 1530s, he gave the Caversham site to Kings College at Oxford (renamed by Henry, having previously been called Wolsey's College, and now known as Christ Church College), and the college archives contain many documents relating to the Caversham site.

The Civil War saw many encounters between the Parliamentarians and Royalists in the area, and the river crossing at Caversham was a place that both armies sought to control. The war over, the country was then afflicted in 1666 by the Great Plague. A wealthy London jeweller, Thomas Loveday, was looking to move his family out of London to a healthier location, He came to live at Caversham. He had 3 wives in succession, and of his 10 children, only 2 survived into adulthood. The house, in Tudor style, was known as The Old Rectory, although also often referred to as the 'striped house'. It belonged to Christ Church College, and in due course, Thomas' son John succeeded him as the tenant. Several generations of Lovedays occupied the Old Rectory, for a total of 134 years, but in 1799 the house was sold (Christ Church still owning the lease).

The new occupants were the family of William Blackall Simonds, of the well-known Reading brewer and banker. The Simonds family were also to remain for a long time. They loved the property, and had the house remodelled, in the Victorian pseudo Gothic style. William Blackall Simonds' son William succeeded him, and then Henry John Simonds moved in in 1866. He was a lawyer, was a friend of Gladstone, became Mayor of Reading, and hosted the Reading Regatta. He also changed the name of the house to The Rectory and bought the lease from Christ Church College in 1881. In turn, the house was inherited by Henry Caversham Simonds in 1896 - but the funds began to run out, and so the house was leased to several other occupant, including Lady Mosley. She was a kind and generous lady, who hosted

outings for wounded soldiers, and helped provide for the needy.

Eventually, in 1919, the Simonds sold it to an Armenian jute trader from Calcutta - Thaddeus Arathoon, and he decided to change the name to Caversham Court.

By the 1930s, the estate and house fell into poor condition. The Caversham Court Company was formed to make it into a club, but that did not succeed either, and so the Borough of Reading offered to purchase it, for £3450. There was a suggestion that this may have been in connection with plans at that time to build a new river bridge and road there. For a while, the house was used as a home for people suffering from various diseases, but there was no money available for its upkeep. It became derelict, and the house was in a dangerous state, so for safety reasons was demolished, and the grounds became a public park. During World War 2, part of the land was used for the 'Dig for Victory' campaign, whilst the kitchen garden was to become allotments.

Post-war, the gardens remained a popular place to visit, and various events and entertainments were held there, but the financial constraints of the late 20th century meant that the gardens were no longer maintained as they had been in earlier times.

It was an historically interesting site, as recognised by English Heritage. Although the houses themselves were no longer standing, the stables became Grade 2 listed. Archaeological work established that there were Tudor beer and 19th century wine cellars, as well as establishing the footprint of the houses. A project was therefore instigated to restore the grounds and the surviving buildings, including a 17th century gazebo. Red bricks have been set into the ground to show where the walls of the Tudor house had been, whilst stones similarly indicate where the later pseudo Gothic ones had stood. Alongside the steps that lead from one level to another stand two pillars each topped by a stone griffin - the pillars include stones with cat-like faces, which may have come from Reading Abbey. To one side of the steps, the area has been planted in Tudor style, with herbs and similar plants, whilst on the other side the beds contain plants favoured in Victorian gardens. The work, partly funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, was done under the guidance of the head gardener - some of the workforce being provided by Reading Jail, and the restored park was re-opened in 2009. Apart from lawns, trees and formal flower beds, there is a crinkle-crinkle wall, a mulberry courtyard, and a bank of lavender where box plants have been added to show the layout of old walls there.

The area is laid out to be accessible to those in wheelchairs as well as those on foot. The work of maintaining the grounds is the responsibility of the head gardener, who is assisted by the Friends and other volunteers, and the resulting displays were successful in the 2018 Britain in Bloom competition. The gardens host a variety of events during the year, as well as providing for school visits. A tea room is run in aid of local charities during the summer, whilst guided tours - either historic or sensory - are available on the first Sunday of the month.

The Society's latest publication - [A Brief History of Wargrave](#), outlining aspects of village history, illustrated with over 40 photographs from the Society archive, is now available at Society meetings, or at Newberry's in Twyford.

The next meeting will be on Tuesday November 12th when Diana Coulter and Brian O'Callaghan will explore Sonning Through the History of ten of its Buildings, whilst on Tuesday December 10th the Society will hold its Christmas Party.