

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - April 2021

Prospect Park Mansion - Katie Amos

The Wargrave Local History Society embarked on its 2021-22 programme of talks in April, again making use of the internet Zoom system. The presentation was given by Reading Library's local history specialist, Katie Amos, on Prospect Park Mansion in west Reading – “The history of the Mansion House and its families”.



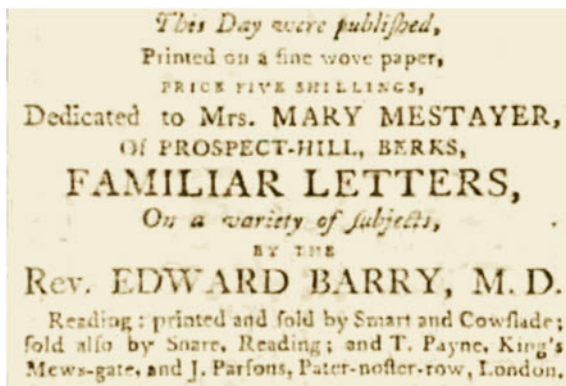
Katie had been born nearby, and so had a special interest in the area. Her thorough research covered both the house and grounds, and its occupants for over 300 years. The house is Grade 2 listed, whilst the present park is about 43 acres – although originally somewhat larger. Apart from the house itself, there had been various outbuildings, including a stable block, a coach house, glass houses, etc. There had been lodges – those on Tilehurst Road and Honey End Lane have disappeared, but one survives near the present-day Parkside hotel. Although now known as The Mansion House, it was previously known as Prospect Hill House or as

Katie then traced the history of the people who owned or occupied the property, starting at a period before the house was built. The first were Benjamin Child and Frances Kendrick. He was a lawyer, and she of the family who lived at Calcot Park. They had met at a society wedding, and seemingly liked the look of each other – but nothing happened, somewhat to Frances's disappointment. She decided to engineer a meeting, and sent an unsigned note inviting Benjamin to meet at a specific time and place. He arrived, to find a masked lady, who challenged him to

a duel, saying “fight me or marry me”. She refused to remove the mask, but he decided that marriage was the better option. They made their way to be married – at St Mary's in Wargrave – in 1706. Returning to her house, she disappeared, and Benjamin wondered what he had let himself in for, - but then she reappeared as an attractive young lady! (the event being the basis of the ballad “A Berkshire Lady”). They lived at Calcot Park, and had six children – all girls. Benjamin had also become High Sherriff of Berkshire at about this time. Sadly, Frances died just 15 years later, and in due course Benjamin decided to sell most of the Calcot Park estate, retaining the Prospect Park portion, where he moved into the house there – the forerunner of the present Mansion House.



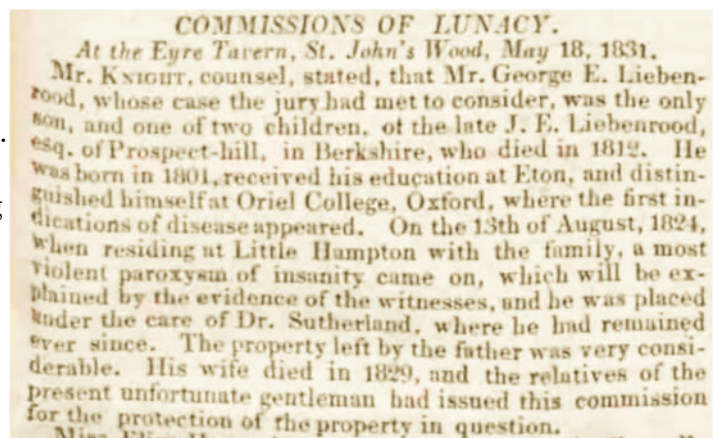
After Benjamin died, the Park was inherited by his grandson, James Hill, in 1767. However, James died soon afterwards, but his widow, Elizabeth, lived there, with their daughter, also Elizabeth Goldwyre Hill. When Elizabeth remarried, her second husband also lived at Prospect Hill House - with their 7 daughters. In due course, the property was inherited by Elizabeth Goldwyre Hill, as sole heiress of James Hill, but following her marriage in 1790 to Charles Blagrove, the house was put up for sale.



The property did not sell, but the next known occupier was a Mrs Mary Mestayer, who took a lease on it in 1792. A book dedication published in 1794 still shows her as 'of Prospect Hill, Berkshire'.

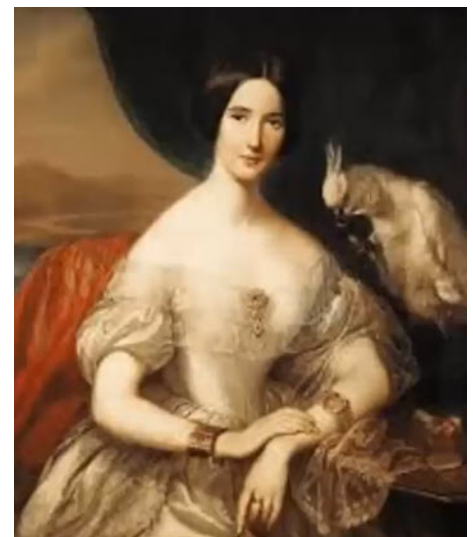
By 1797, another family name becomes associated with Prospect Hill House – Liebenrood. His uncle, John George Liebenrood had come from Saxony, married Ann Allen and lived at Purley. He left his property to his great nephew, John Engelberts Ziegenbein, who changed his surname to Liebenrood as a condition of the inheritance, which enabled him to buy Prospect Hill House. In 1800, John employed an architect, James Wright Sanderson, to alter and extend the house into the form it is now.

John had married Lucy Hancock in 1795, and they had 3 children – Lucy, George, and John – the latter dying in infancy. The property was to pass to the surviving children, and then the grandchildren, if any. This plan, however, did not work out as intended. George started to exhibit strange behaviour – running out of the house with no clothes on, or thinking he was royalty, and so a Commission of Lunacy was convened in 1831, as the family were concerned at what might happen. His sister Lucy was also committed for lunacy – both then being cared for, separately, by doctors at St John’s Wood in London.



The house then enters a lengthy period when it was rented out. From 1829 – 30 this was General Christopher Chowne. He moved in with his new wife, but it was not a happy time for them as she had a still born. Next was William Stephens, from a local banking family from near Aldermaston. He later became Mayor of Reading and then High Sheriff. Sadly, both he and his wife died within a few days of each other. In 1856

The next person to rent the house was the wealthy Angela Burdett Coutts, (said to be the richest woman in the country after Queen Victoria) with her companion Hannah Brown. They only lived there for 6 months (possibly as a place for Hannah to grieve following the death of her husband). Even so, during that time, Angela proposed marriage to the Duke of Wellington. He was much older than her, but kindly turned her down!). Angela wanted to extend the lease, but was beaten by Matthew Higgins, who lived there for about 2 years. Yet another banker followed him, William Bradbury with his wife and children, who stayed until 1880. Some of his estate workers had clubbed together to buy one of the cattle for their Christmas dinner. William told them he could not accept that – he gave it to them, and also gave a large quantity of beef to others of his workforce, and the poor of Tilehurst.



186 Prospect Hill House	Charles Bennett	1864	1864	1864	1864
186 Prospect Hill House	Oliver A. Bennett	1865	1865	1865	1865
186 Prospect Hill House	William L. Bennett	1866	1866	1866	1866
186 Prospect Hill House	William L. Bennett	1867	1867	1867	1867
186 Prospect Hill House	Charles A. Bennett	1868	1868	1868	1868
186 Prospect Hill House	William L. Bennett	1869	1869	1869	1869
186 Prospect Hill House	Charles A. Bennett	1870	1870	1870	1870
186 Prospect Hill House	William L. Bennett	1871	1871	1871	1871
186 Prospect Hill House	Charles A. Bennett	1872	1872	1872	1872
186 Prospect Hill House	William L. Bennett	1873	1873	1873	1873
186 Prospect Hill House	Charles A. Bennett	1874	1874	1874	1874
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186 Prospect Hill House	Charles A. Bennett	1876	1876	1876	1876
186 Prospect Hill House	William L. Bennett	1877	1877	1877	1877
186 Prospect Hill House	Charles A. Bennett	1878	1878	1878	1878
186 Prospect Hill House	William L. Bennett	1879	1879	1879	1879
186 Prospect Hill House	Charles A. Bennett	1880	1880	1880	1880

In the early 1880s, the house accommodated a school. That had been in nearby Parkside Road, but when those premises went up in flames, made use of Prospect Hill House whilst their original school was rebuilt. There were strict rules on what the pupils were allowed to do – or not do!

Members of the Liebenrood family still owned Prospect Hill House, offered it for sale several times towards the end of the 19th century, without success.



In 1901 it was bought by Joseph Fidler, who had a business as a seedsman. He then offered it to Reading Council 'for the public benefit', in much the way the Palmer family had provided Palmer Park to the east of Reading. The council decided that they were unlikely to get a similar opportunity again, so bought it for £14,000. Its uses changed over time, being used for agricultural shows, part for an infectious disease's hospital. etc. In WW1, the house was taken over by the Board of Guardians, to re-house elderly from the Battle Hospital site, when that was required to treat injured men from the military, whilst in WW2 the National Fire Service made use of it. It then fell into a poor state of repair, especially after 3 arson attacks, but has subsequently been restored and made into a restaurant, with the surrounding ground a public open space.

Katie told a fascinating story and has written a small book *The Mansion House - Its History and its Occupants* published by the Scallop Shell Press that includes even more.

