

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - April 2013

The Duke of Wellington and his Country House at Stratfield Saye

The April meeting of the Wargrave Local History Society was a presentation by Michael Aris and Neville White, about the *Duke of Wellington and his Country House at Stratfield Saye*. More information can be found on the Stratfield Saye website <https://wellington.co.uk/stratfield-saye-house/>

There had been a house at Stratfield Saye since Saxon times, and after the Norman invasion, the lands were given by William I to 3 of the knights who had fought with him - de Saye, Turgis and Mortimer. The three estates were near the Stratfield, or 'straight road' - hence Stratfield Saye, Stratfield Turgis and Stratfield Mortimer.

In due course, the Stratfield Saye estate passed by marriage to the D'Abridgecourt family, and was then acquired by Sir William Pitt, an MP in the early 17th century. In 1630, he set about enlarging the house on the estate. Unusually, the stable block erected at this time is at the front of the house. The house remained in the Pitt family for several generations, passing in 1745 to George Pitt, later the 1st Baron Rivers. He set about developing the estate, which then passed to his son, also George, the 2nd Baron Rivers.

Meanwhile, Arthur Wellesley, born in Dublin in 1769, had become an army officer, and as a result of the very successful campaigns that he led, he was created Duke of Wellington in 1814. Parliament voted to give £600,000 to the 'Great Duke' to buy a suitable house. As he was serving as the British Ambassador to France in Paris at the time, three trustees were appointed to help. In gratitude for his success at the battle of Waterloo in 1815, Parliament then voted a further sum of £100,000 to the Great Duke. The trustees produced a list of 17 'possible' properties - but the Duke did not like any of them - being too remote, or not suitable for his horses, etc.

The architect Benjamin Dean Wyatt was one of the trustees, and found the Stratfield Saye estate. The 2nd Baron Rivers was heavily in debt at the time, and so was willing to sell the property, which suited the Great Duke as it was relatively near to London, (and hence the House of Lords), close to Windsor (where he would meet George IV, William IV and Queen Victoria), was good farming country, and also good for hunting. The idea was to knock down the existing house, and build a 'Waterloo Palace' (equivalent to Blenheim Palace) on a hill across the River Loddon. It was agreed that the Duke would pay an annual rent to the monarch on 18th June each year (the date of the Battle of Waterloo) - the 'rent' being a small tricolour flag.

In 1817, the Great Duke also purchased Apsley House for £45,000, which became his London home, and about the same time also moved to occupy Stratfield Saye with the Duchess and their servants. In 1821 they gave up the idea of a grand palace, however, as the Duke hated grandeur, ostentation and unnecessary expenditure. He set about making Stratfield Saye as comfortable as possible. Much of the time, the Duke lived at Apsley House and his estranged Duchess at Stratfield Saye, although following her death, he would stay more often at Stratfield Saye. All the subsequent Dukes of Wellington have lived at Stratfield Saye - some for shorter and others for longer periods. It is presently occupied by the Marquess Douro, son of the 8th Duke.

Arthur Wellesley's wife was also born in Dublin, as Catherine Pakenham, daughter of Lord Longford. When first he proposed to her in 1796, Lord Longford disapproved, as Arthur was still a soldier of 'no standing' at the time. After his service in India, Arthur proposed again - this time 'through a third party' - and was accepted. It was, unfortunately, a sad mistake, as Kitty was now 34, short sighted, scatter-brained, and unable to manage household accounts. At the marriage in 1806 he is reputed to have said 'By God, she's changed, she's ugly'. At Stratfield Saye, his suite of rooms were on the ground floor at one end of

the house - her's were on the first floor at the other end, about 100 yards away, and they communicated by messages taken by the servants !

The audience was then taken on a photographic tour of the house, the various rooms and their contents. Several of the rooms, such as the Great Hall, had originally had low ceilings when built in 1630, but George Pitt in his 1745 alterations had opened them up. The Hall contains portraits of all of the Dukes of Wellington, and there are also gifts given to the Grand Duke after the Battle of Waterloo by many grateful European nations (not only in the Hall, but elsewhere in the house). Other items came from an auction of Cardinal Fesch's works of art etc in Paris in 181. The gifts include services of Sevres and Meissen china - although as the Great Duke did not like ostentation, he always used a plain white Davenport service. The Hall also includes three Roman mosaics on the floor that came from the Silchester site - then part of the Duke of Wellington's estate.

In order to make the house more comfortable to live in, oil lighting was installed in the 1820s (although not converted to electricity until 1945), and Benjamin Dean Wyatt was told to install a central heating system in 1833 - part of which is still in use. The Great Duke having seen double glazing in Europe, also had this installed at Stratfield Saye. He also had Wyatt install water closets 'en suite' in 9 bedrooms in the house. These were discretely enclosed in the corner of the room - and apparently still work well.

The Duke had many boxes of prints, and so he decided to cover the walls of several of the rooms with these - with one of himself over every entry or exit. This inspired by what George Pitt had done in 1780 for the Gallery - the 'most magnificent room in the house' - when prints of Shakespearean play scenes were used to decorate the walls. The paintings in the Drawing Room had been discovered in 1813 in a baggage train, when Joseph Bonaparte was trying to escape from Spain after the Battle of Vitoria. The soldiers did not think they were of any 'value', and used them to keep the rain off the horses, but on return to England it was found that there were valuable, and from the Spanish Royal Collection. King Ferdinand VII, however, told the Duke that as they had been won by 'honourable means', he 'would not deprive him of the pleasure of them', and 84 of them are in the house (the remainder being at Apsley House).

When Queen Victoria and Prince Albert wished to visit Stratfield Saye in 1845, the Duke tried to persuade her not to come, but in the event decided that 'what cannot be prevented must be borne'. Apparently, Arthur's skills as a host led Victoria to comment that he was a 'better soldier than servant'. Subsequently, however, Prince Albert described the Great Duke as 'the greatest man that England ever knew'. The Great Duke died in 1852 (at one of his other residences, Walmer Castle), and 200,000 people went to the Great Hall of the royal Hospital in Chelsea to pay their respects. When Queen Victoria went, she had to be led away in tears. The funeral was held in St Paul's Cathedral, the coffin being carried on a horse drawn 18 ton funeral carriage designed by Prince Albert. The Great Duke would probably have preferred a much simpler funeral.

The next meeting will be on Tuesday, May 14th we will welcome Leslie Grout' a local historian and Windsor castle 'Blue Badge' guide, to speak about *St George's Chapel, Windsor*. In June, as part of the Wargrave Village Festival, the Society will be staging an *Historic Wargrave Exhibition*, in the Woodclyffe Hall from 10am to 5pm on Saturday June 22nd, whilst on Sunday June 23rd there will be one of the ever popular *Historic Village Walks* at 2.30 pm. For safety reasons, the numbers for this are limited, so please contact the Society for availability of tickets.

The meetings start at 8pm in the Pavilion, on the Recreation Ground. For more information, visit www.wargravehistory.org.uk
