

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - June 2014

Visit to Bentley Priory and Battle of Britain

The first records of the then 400 acre estate date from over 900 years ago, when it was the site of an Augustinian Priory. The name Bentley, however, has much earlier origins, being a corruption of "Bent" - a kind of coarse or bent grass, and "leah" -land cleared for farming, and it is believed that the early Priory got its income from leasing the land to farmers. The monks also provided a hospitality station, then being about one day's ride from London. At the dissolution of the monasteries, Bentley Priory and other properties were given to Thomas Cranmer - who promptly gave it back to the King in exchange for lands at Wimbledon. The lands then changed hands a number of times - often seemingly given to someone who did not really want it - until in 1766 the Crown sold it to James Duberley. He was a military outfitter, providing for higher officers and minor royalty, and is thought to have removed all traces of the old Priory, which was probably to the south end of the estate. Duberley built a new and imposing square block style of house higher on the hill - maybe as indication that he was no mere tradesman - and this became the first part of the present structure. Being high up, there are splendid views across north London to Harrow on the Hill and beyond to the North Downs.

In 1788, James Duberley sold the house to an aristocrat - John James Hamilton, Marquess of Abercorn, who employed Sir John Soane to enlarge the house, and in the process make the main entrance on the other side, so that visitors did not spoil the vista from the hilltop. Following a fire in 1979, an original Soane designed ceiling was discovered, and restored, and more recently the décor has been matched to the colours Soane used. Soane also installed a new staircase "fit for a Marquess". It is recorded that many notable people of the day visited Bentley Priory - statesmen such as Pitt and Wellington, poets such as Wordsworth and Sir Walter Scott, Lady Emma Hamilton, etc. In due course, the house passed to the Marquess' 7 year old son, and a guardian - his uncle, the Earl of Aberdeen, was appointed. The latter moved in and married the boy's mother, so also becoming his step-father! The family owned property in England, Scotland and Ireland, and in the 1870s moved to their Irish estate, Barons Court, never to return.

Bentley Priory was then leased to the Crown, and became a royal palace, for Queen Adelaide, where she lived for the last year of her life, dying there in December 1849. It was little used then until bought in 1863 by Sir John Kelk, the Victorian engineer who designed the Albert Memorial. Kelk added the clock tower to the house, and the grade 2 listed gardens. Sir John also only had the property for about 20 years, it being sold to Frederick Gordon, proprietor of several hotels. His plan was to convert Bentley Priory to a hotel, adding a block for bedrooms. He also bought nearby Stanmore Park, and had a railway built from Harrow to Stanmore, to make it easier for visitors to reach the hotel. For some reason, the venture was not a success, the hotel became bankrupt, and the Gordon family moved in to live there until the 1900s - despite the hotel business failing, Gordon's personal wealth when he died in 1904 was £2.5 million.

The next occupier of the building was a girls' school for daughters of the gentry, housing 70 boarders. The 1920s financial depression led to school closing in 1924. It was offered for sale, but the agents failed to find a buyer for the complete estate. About 90 acres was sold to Middlesex County Council as a public park, around 240 acres were sold for housing development, and the remaining 40 acres- including the Bentley Priory mansion, were bought for £25,000 by the Air Ministry in 1926. It was to be used as the headquarters of one of the RAF Commands – originally the Inland Area Command, and from 1936 it became the Fighter Command Headquarters. The first Commanding Officer was Hugh Dowding – then considered relatively old at 54 to hold a military post.

Dowding did not agree with Stanley Baldwin, the Prime Minister, that 'the bomber will always get through'. He developed what became known as the Dowding System, integrating the work of the Royal Observer Corps, radar, accurate plotting of raids, and the control of aircraft by radio. The centre of this control network was at Bentley Priory, the house having been adapted before war was declared in 1939 to create a Filter Room and an Operations Room - for the communications and command functions of the Dowding System. This proved to be crucial in the Battle of Britain in 1940, enabling controllers to react to incoming raids before they reached their targets - the RAF did not have enough aircraft to keep patrols always in the air, and had to respond where and when the need arose. Dowding's system at Bentley Priory allowed that to happen, coordinating all the component parts to best advantage.

After the war, Bentley Priory became an administration centre, until it closed as an RAF site in 2008. A large part of the estate is now being developed for housing, but the Bentley Priory Battle of Britain Trust was established to preserve as much as possible of the site's history. The museum, which was formally opened in September 2013 by the Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cornwall, occupies the ground floor of the mansion, and includes displays relating to "The One" (Hugh Dowding), "The Few" (the fighter plane pilots - with many personal displays of photographs, medals and flying log books), and "The Many" (ladies in the Filter and Operations Rooms who handled the communications and plotted the position of both raiding and defending planes. Other exhibits include a special presentation about the vital part Hugh Dowding played in the Battle of Britain, shown in his former office, whilst in the hallway outside is a 15 feet long and 5 ft wide panel of Nottingham lace that commemorates the air defence of London - complete with Churchill's remark that "Never was so much owed by so many to so few".

The visit also gave the party time to explore the lovely gardens and views, before afternoon tea in the museum café, or the terrace outside. More about the museum is at www.bentleypriory.org/



Main approach to Bentley Priory with two WWII fighters



One of the spitfires with WLHS members approaching



Stained glass window in the entrance hall, created in the late 20th century to show the links between the house, the aircraft, and the aircrew involved in the Battle of Britain



History Society members looking at exhibits in the Abercorn Room, there are fighter squadron badges on the wall on the left, and a portrait of King George VI on the wall to the right



Model of the original layout of the Operations Room



A reconstruction of the filter room, where reports of incoming aircraft were plotted and defending fighters were targeted.



The Italianate gardens, seen from the Abercorn Room, and looking towards Harrow and beyond.



The south frontage of the mansion, with the clock tower added in the 1860s by Sir John Kelk on the left, and the original part (with the lower roof line) to its right

Following the summer break, the next meeting will be on Tuesday, September 9th, when well-known local historian Joan Dils returns to tell us about Tudor and Stuart Feasts, using contemporary accounts to reveal something of life in Berkshire at that time, and then on Tuesday, October 14th, Barbara Askew will recount the work involved in the Windsor Fire Restoration, following the 1992 disaster.