

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - July 2026

Visit to Hinton Ampner

July is the time when members of Wargrave Local History Society make a visit to a place of historic interest, and this year the location was Hinton Ampner, between Winchester and Petersfield in Hampshire. It was a sunny warm - but not over-hot - day to enjoy not only the house, but also the surrounding gardens, which are now in the care of the National Trust. The first part of the estate to be opened to the public was the gardens, which is why the road signs to the property say Hinton Ampner Gardens rather than mention the house.

The first known document that mentions Hinton Ampner is the Domesday Survey of 1086, which records the land as being 8 hides (a hide was land sufficient to support one family) and the existence of a church. The Hinton part of the placename is usually associated with it being a high place, whilst Ampner refers to an almoner, who was a church official who distributed charitable funds to the poor. The estate belonged to the church of St Swithun at Winchester, which later became Winchester cathedral. The Lord of the Manor for Hinton Ampner was therefore the Bishop of Winchester, who at times also held the Manor of Wargrave. In the case of the Hinton Ampner estate, it was leased to a tenant - probably from as early as the 13th century.



Some of the Society's members about to start the guided tour of the Hinton Ampner gardens.

The first house on the estate was built in Tudor times - probably in the 1540s, and later in the century (maybe as early as 1570) it was occupied by Thomas Stewkley, who took on the lease of the estate in 1597. That 21-bedroom house was replaced by a small Georgian hunting lodge, built in 1793, the Stewkley family having moved to spend most of their time living at Sherborne in Gloucestershire. The family returned to Hinton in the Victorian era, passing by marriage to the Dutton family. In 1897 they set about a programme of alterations to the hunting lodge, which created the basis of the present house. This Victorian house included 4 toilets - but the one for female servants on the upper floor was above the water level for the house, whilst that in the basement for male servants was below the level of the drains!



The present day Hinton Ampner house

On the death of John Dutton in 1935, the estate passed to his son, Ralph. The latter thought of the house as a "Gothic Victorian pile", and so set about returning it to a Georgian style, collecting appropriate furniture and fittings. The work was nearly completed when war broke out in 1939, and the house was taken over by Portsmouth Grammar School for Girls until the end of the war. Ralph continued to add to his collections, but this was (almost) all lost in a disastrous fire in April 1960. The timber of the roof and floors and the house contents were destroyed - although the fire brigade had turned out, the lack of sufficient water (the nearest fire hydrant being about a mile away) meant they could do little. The basic brick structure remained, and so for the second time Ralph set

about rearranging the house, lowering the roof profile, restoring the spacious Georgian style rooms, and again collecting suitable period furniture and ornaments - sales to satisfy Death Duties at that time meaning that a lot of suitable items were being offered for sale. Some of Ralph's collection are actually older than the house itself. It is the house and contents in this form that passed to the National Trust when Ralph died in 1985.

The society's visit began with a tour of the gardens, with National Trust volunteer Amena as our guide. She not only knew about the gardens and the site's history, but also the shaded spots to tell us about them! The gardens were restored in the early 2000s to how Ralph Dutton had known them, and have a staff of 4 gardeners assisted by about 40 volunteers to look after them. The area of the kitchen garden was thought to have been in use since the time of the Domesday survey, and became a walled garden at the time of the Victorian alterations to the site. The flowers grown there are used for display in the house, with other plants providing food for the on-site cafe (housed in what had been the stable block of the Tudor house). Many of the fruit trees also date from the Victorian era, some of the apple trees being of specifically old local Hampshire varieties.

From there it was not far to the orchard - the site of the old Tudor house. This had faced to the north, towards the village of Cheriton. During the English Civil War, the Battle of Cheriton had taken place in March 1644. Those in the house had seen the defeat of the Royalist army by the Parliamentarians - a difficult situation for the Stewkleys to witness, as they were supporters of Charles I. After the battle, the Stewkleys had to forfeit the estate, which was restored to them when Charles II came to the throne. The level piece of ground close by was believed to have been a bowling green.

Close to here, the path leads by the village church, which belongs to the Diocese of Winchester, rather than the Hinton Ampner estate. The present 13th century building stands on the site of an earlier Saxon one, with a few features remaining from that period. It was altered by the early Victorians, who had blocked up the family vault - only discovered when Ralph Dutton arranged for a heating system to be installed in 1969. Once the work had been completed, the vault was re-sealed, to help preserve its contents. Ralph Dutton also arranged for the two colourful stained-glass windows to be created, which were installed at the east end in 1970.



Walking around the east end could be seen the old entrance past workers' cottages. Mrs Dutton had the present main entrance to the site created in about 1910, so that she and her visitors did not have to pass the villagers' homes on their way to and fro. Our walk then took us past the lily pond (*below, left*) onto the terrace on the south side of the mansion itself, with views across the estate (*below, right*) to the Hampshire countryside beyond.



The gardens had been planned by Ralph Dutton, who had taken advice not only from his head gardener, but from other specialists such as horticulturist Harold Hillier. Ralph chose trees to create different features at different times of the year in his garden - and to screen out his neighbours! He also thought ahead as to the effect his planting would have, some of the trees and shrubs being unlikely to reach their maturity in his lifetime. Some other features were laid out to create special effects - such as a sundial at one end of the Long Walk and a statue of Diana at the other. Standing by the sundial, the statue appears to be on the ground, but in reality it is on a plinth, to compensate for the way the land slopes towards it. Sadly, some of the trees - centuries old in some cases - have been lost over time, due to ash die back, blight or virus attacks.



Society members in a shaded spot on the south side of Hinton Ampner house, hearing from our guide about how Ralph Dutton planned his gardens.

After the guided gardens tour, the group then visited the interior of the house, a recreation following the 1960 fire of the Georgian style (and at one time thought to be of 'no historic value'). The ground floor rooms are airy and uncluttered - such as the large drawing room (*below left*) and dining room (*below right*).



Between these two rooms is a library, where the devastating fire had begun, destroying almost everything in the room. Apart from the irreparable fireplace, the reconstruction is as close as possible to the pre-fire one. Ralph built up a new collection of books which now fill the shelves.

Near the dining room behind the staircase is the pantry (*left*). Ralph did not like the Victorian stairs, so took the opportunity to have a Georgian style one - something he would like to have done in 1935. It is lit from above (*right*) by this lamp.





Up the stairs are the bedrooms (the further set of stairs up to an attic not being replaced after the fire). Most of the bedrooms have windows facing across the gardens and estate that could be seen from the south terrace. Ralph Dutton's own bedroom (*left*) is the bay windowed room above the dining room, and has its own *en suite* bathroom. Next to it, the south bedroom is above the library and study, and was the main guest bedroom, which also has *en suite* facilities, whilst there are three further guest bedrooms at the eastern end of this floor of the house.

After the estate passed into the hands of the National Trust, the house was tenanted for several years. The occupier then made several changes, such as to the decor in some of the bedrooms. In time, the Trust hopes to restore these to how Ralph designed them, and to make more of the rooms in the house available to visitors.

For more information about the society, visit the website at www.wargravehistory.org.uk
