

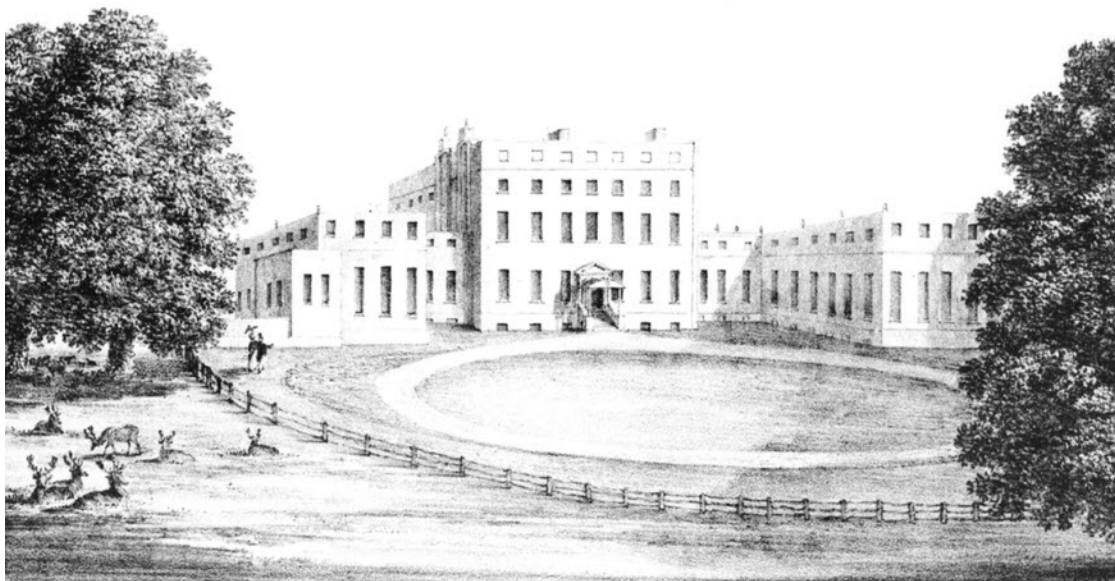
# Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - November 2024

## Hall Place to Berkshire College of Agriculture - Simon Polley and Janet Robertson

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For the Wargrave Local History Society's November meeting Simon Polley and Janet Robertson gave a presentation about Hall Place, at Burchetts Green.



*An early view of the Georgian house*

The site is known to have been occupied from at least the early 13th century - possibly as a deer park. In 1234 it is recorded as "La Halle", when it was owned by John de Hurley. Although it is sometimes shown on old maps, the recording that way is not consistent, but from archaeological excavations carried out in the 1970s, it appears that the house at that time was about twice the size of the present one. The property remained with John de Hurley and his descendants until it passed into the ownership of Hurley Priory in 1372. The next significant date in its history was Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries in 1536, when it passed to the Crown. It is at about this time that the name is changed to The Hall.

For the next century or so, the estate then had a succession of owners, during which time it was mainly used to generate income from farming activity. In 1690, it passed to Jacob Bancks, who was to be its first long term occupant remaining for 35 years. He was originally from Stockholm, but had moved to England in 1681 and become an English citizen. As well as having been the secretary to the Swedish Embassy, he had also served in the Royal Navy.

Jacob set about making a number of changes to the estate, dividing it into 4 sections - north, south, east and west. He also planted avenues of lime trees - one went down either side of the mansion's main driveway, whilst another led northward to a statue of the huntress Diana that Jacob had erected in the grounds. The ornate set of gates (*right*) included Jacob Bancks' monogram, and were retained when the house itself was replaced. Although they remained into the 20th century, only the brick pillars now survive.



Jacob Bancks died in 1724, and 3 years later the estate was then acquired by a family who would have a more 'permanent' ownership of it - except that several of the gentlemen died 'without issue', making the inheritance history more complex.

The first of these was William East. He was a wealthy young barrister, who had previously lived at Kennington, in south London. He decided to demolish the existing Hall Place, and replace it with the current Georgian style brick-built house, which was of 3 storeys. It took 7 years to complete the work, which resulted in a 'standard' relatively austere design for the period, apart from some of the decor in the drawing room. As a sign of his allegiance to William of Orange and Queen Mary, this included scagliola (an imitation marble) reliefs which adorn the wall that portrayed the royal couple - although on the chimney is an image of Queen Mary's mother looking away - said to be because she did not approve of the union. William and Mary are also depicted in 'flights of fancy' on the grand fire place, whilst Queen Caroline is also depicted there. Sadly, William East did not enjoy this for long, as he died 2 years after the house was finished.

He was succeeded by his son - also called William - who was born a few months after his father died. Being so young, he could not at that stage inherit the property, so was sent to school, and the house let. William then went onto the Grand Tour, and following his return, he was created a Baronet in 1766. He was a benevolent landowner, and, in his will and testament left money to provide for the retirement of a poor man and his wife. Originally worth £15 per year, by 1923 this had grown to about £1300.

William died in 1819, and his son, Gilbert East, inherited the property, but he died in 1828, but did not have any offspring for the estate to then pass on to. It therefore passed to a more distant relative, George Clayton, who added the name East to his own. George Clayton East became a baronet in 1838. During his ownership the mansion was restored and enhanced - for example adding a portico to the front entrance (*right*) to enable passengers to alight from their carriages under cover. The ½ mile driveway was also developed - before 1850 it had only gone as far as Hall Place Lane in Burchetts Green, but the improvement led directly to the main road without going through the



village. Sir Gilbert died in 1851, to be succeeded by his son (also called Gilbert), described as a 'bit of a cad'. In 1866, whilst visiting the Isle of Wight one evening he had been 'celebrating with his lady friend', and fell into the water. Although a strong swimmer, he became stuck between a boat and the pier, and tragically drowned. Sadly, just 10 days later, Gilbert's brother Charles also died.

The next in the line of family ownership was Gilbert's son, Gilbert Augustus, who was aged 20. Unlike many of his relations, he did not wish to enter the law profession, but wanted to work the land. Apart from 3,000 acres of the Hall Place site there was another 3,000 acres nearby, and other property that he inherited. In addition to his farming interests, he established an engineering company, Williams and Robinson, who made steam launches. Due to a recession, it was not quite as successful as had been hoped. He had also become Lord of the Manor at Hurley, and - like his ancestors - was also a generous benefactor. He provided the clock on Hurley church tower, supported the work at Knowl Hill church, and provided the land both for the chapel at Warren Row and the school at Burchetts Green. When Sir Gilbert died in 1925, the estate passed to his son, Sir George Clayton East, but he also died just a few months later, and so his 18 year old son Robert inherited the estate.

Robert was not really interested in being Lord of the Manor, but was fascinated by Egyptology, and was also a keen aircraft pilot. He joined the Royal Navy, rising to the rank of lieutenant - but resigned when he reached the age of 21. He met and married Dorothy Durrant, a sculptress who was also a trained pilot. Tragedy struck again in 1932, when Robert died of a sudden illness. He had been in the Hall Place garden, playing with his

pet mongoose which may have been the cause, although a local legend suggests that he had been involved in the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb and it was the 'curse of the tomb' that struck him down. Dorothy decided to continue with her exploration of Egypt. Barely a year later, she also died. An experienced pilot, she had been at Brooklands airfield in Surrey, where she had taken her plane up on the previous day, and in the morning, on both occasions her father riding as a passenger with her and all seemed well. In the afternoon she was going along on the runway at about 50 mph, when something went wrong - seemingly a jammed throttle. Dorothy then jumped out of the cockpit onto the concrete below, the injuries proving fatal. At the inquest, surprise was expressed that as an experienced pilot she had not just reached out of the cockpit to turn off the engine. Robert and Dorothy had only been married 6 months, and had no children, so that was the end of the line of inheritance, but his mother loved the house and tried to keep things going, living there with her 2 daughters until 1939 - Lady Clayton-East providing a party for the village children at Christmas each year until then, and a sports day for adults and children each summer.

With the outbreak of war, the property was requisitioned by the government, but little is known as to what work took place there - except that central heating was installed during that time. After the war, Lady Clayton-East decided to sell the mansion - it was 'not a joyful day' for her, but she was glad that it would be taken over by the Ministry of Agriculture as a 'place of education', and she hoped it would be 'a place of great happiness'. Opening in 1949, it was originally known as the Berkshire Institute of Agriculture, becoming the Berkshire College of Agriculture in 1968.



At first, the mansion house contained the principal's office, the library and dormitories for students. One change made to the house was the removal of the entrance portico (*left*). Over the intervening years, various additional buildings added to the college complex. Initially, the teaching programmes were based on rural subjects, but by the millennium the college had broadened its curriculum to offer a more general range of further education courses, with just 5% being agriculturally based, although new courses incorporating technology and agriculture have been developed as well, whilst student numbers have grown from about 500 in 2000 to nearer 1,600 now, with the college now being part of the Windsor Forest Colleges Group.

After the presentation, Janet and Simon had created a display of pictures from the college archive (*below, left*) for members to view, as well as some artefacts (*below, right*) that had been found on the Hall Place site.



For more information about the society, visit the website at [www.wargravehistory.org.uk](http://www.wargravehistory.org.uk)