

Worting House and it's Owners

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The Basingstoke neighbourhood, which can lay claims to be "Southern Dukeries" in this respect, is particularly fortunate owing to the generosity with which owners of such houses have allowed them to be seen in connection with the Nursing Association, and by local societies, learned or unlearned, but always very appreciative.

The central block of the house was built in the reign of George I (1714 - 1727) by whom is as yet unknown. It replaced a former Worting House which was probably not on the same site.

There was a tendency during the 18th century for manor houses to withdraw from the precincts of villages so as to enjoy the amenity of a completely surrounding park. This was done either by building a new house on a new site, as at Tylney and Hoddington, or by the more drastic alternative of moving the village, together with the church, as at Stratfield Saye and Dogmersfield. While at Greywell Hill a former farmhouse was adopted and adapted later to be considerably enlarged.

None of the farm buildings attached to Worting House appear to be older than Hanoverian. The earlier house is expressly mentioned in Victoria County History as having been leased in 1615 by William True and Ann, his wife, to Francis and William Saunders. A James True had been concerned with buying a moiety of the lordship of the manor in Worting in 1571 and disposing of it in 1576.

The wings of Worting House, late 18th century in character, were probably added by John Edwards, whose memorial with that of his first wife Mary, is placed on the wall of the north aisle of the parish church. She died after the birth of their son George in 1788 and was buried there. The register reveals that he soon married again, his second wife's Christian name was Mercy and a large second family started to appear.

Worting House was sold in 1797 to Squire Lovelace Bigg-Wither, of Manydown House. His ancestors had held the lordship of the manor since the beginning of the 17th century.

The house was let to John Clarke, who had married Anne, daughter of Carew Mildmay of Shawford near Winchester. She was younger sister of the celebrated Jane, Lady St John-Mildmay of Dogmersfield who was praised by Cobbett in the Rural Rides for having caused the oaks to be planted on the commons at Hartley Row.

During the Clarke's tenancy there occurred the outstanding known event in the place's history although nobody had the slightest reason to suspect it at the time or for very long afterwards.

This was the visit of Jane Austen, probably one of many unrecorded, paid on the evening of Thursday December 20 1798 and mentioned by her in a letter dated December 24 to her sister Cassandra. In it she described a ball of the Basingstoke Assembly for which the authoress to be, than in her dancing days, was staying at Manydown with her friend Catherine Bigg - one of Squire Bigg-Wither's seven daughters.

She wrote, "I spent my time very quietly and pleasantly with Catherine. Miss Blachford (a cousin of the Biggs, also a guest in the house) is agreeable enough. I do not want people to be very agreeable as it saves me the trouble of liking them a great deal. I found only Catherine and her when I got to Manydown on Thursday. We dined together and went together to Worting to seek the protection of Mrs Clarke (chaperones being necessary in those days) with whom Lady Mildmay, her eldest son (afterwards Sir Henry St John Mildmay, fourth baronet), and a Mr and Mrs Hoare..... Our ball was very thin, but by no means unpleasant.....There were twenty dances, and I danced them all, and without any fatigue.....My black cap was openly admired by Mrs Lefroy, and I secretly imagine by everybody else in the room."

The weather was very cold. Miss Constance Hill has visualised the scene in her 'Jane Austen, Her Homes and Her Friends', of the party returned to Manydown in the family coach in the early hours of the morning. A little more information emerges from the letters about the Clarke family. It is hinted that Mr Clarke was an admirer of the poet William Cowper.

On another occasion at Ashe Parke we learn that Mrs Bramston (Mrs Wither Bramston of Oakley Hall) talked a great deal of nonsense which Mr Bramston and Mr Clarke seemed equally to enjoy " There was a whist and a casino table and six outsiders."

The Clarkes were at another of the Assembly Balls, on October 28 1800, when there was also present "The Portsmouths, Dorchesters, Boltons, Portals" besides Jane Austen's immediate circle. Her partners on that occasion were Stephen Terry, the hunting celebrity and diarist of Dummer, T Chute (the Rev Thomas Chute who later succeeded to the Vyne) James Digweed of Steventon Manor and since there was a shortage of men Catherine Bigg for several dances.

During the evening she was asked by Mr William John Chute of the Vyne, the founder of the Vine Hunt, to give a message to her brother Edward Knight of Chawton thanking him for some help in connection with the Hunt.

Thus emerges the social history of the countryside on the eve of the "Age of Elegance".

Outwardly the house appears much the same as Jane Austen must have known it. It is approached from the coach turnpike road by two drives flanking a small park, admirably planted with fine specimen trees - evergreen oaks, sweet chestnuts, beeches, sycamores, elms, etc. now grown to maturity.

The front is flanked on either side by typical Regency shrubbery through which the drive curves - and it has a lawn running down to the park being separated therefrom by a brick "ha-ha". A fine copper beech now growing here was probably planted later.

The house itself consists of the plain red-brick George I central block with the windows of the three floors surmounted by a white painted cornice and brick parapet. It is not impossible that the pillard porch, approached by a flight of steps, and the stone-jambed "Palladian" window above it were added when the wings were built in order to give the centre greater importance.

The wings are also in red brick with stone facings. They are bolder in design than the original central block and contain the pattern of the wooden cornice which is repeated, though not so high. The wings, with the Palladian motif again in evidence on the main floor, are surmounted by wide segment-shaped windows inserted for architectural show rather than for the convenience of the floor above.

These wings would seem to have been added, as with the extension of manydown at about the same time, for entertaining purposes - the east wing providing a ballroom and the west adding to the domestic quarters.

Perhaps John Edward's increasing family had something to do with it. In any event it was to prove very convenient for the Clarkes.

It is amusing to note that the Rectory followed suit with a bay thrown out of the east front. Possibly added by Squire Bigg-Wither for another of his daughters, Elizabeth, when he appointed her husband, the Rev William Heathcote, to the living. They were the parents of the well-known Victorian Hampshire figure, Sir William Heathcote, Bart., of Hursley. He was actually born in this charming little rectory.

Inside Worting House most of the original character has disappeared with Victorian alterations and redecoration. However the pleasant original wide early Georgian arch remains in the front hall leading to the staircase.

It would be pleasant to think that it was in the ballroom that Mrs Clarke received her party for the Assembly. This must have been a beautiful room with fine windows. It still retains the original elaborate cornice again reminiscent of Manydown.

The same staircase problem was presented by the ceiling of the new room being much higher than those of the older rooms - but it is not solved here as triumphantly as at Manydown.

The imposing marble fireplace, with interesting grate possibly of gunmetal, is difficult to date but is certainly before 1830.

The coachhouse and stables, in the same style as the wings, were added to the farm buildings. There is a large walled kitchen garden at some distance from the house. The whole property now amounts to some 55 acres surrounded by a belt of trees.

It was sold in 1813 by Lovelace Bigg-Wither's only surviving son and heir, Harris, whose chief title to fame was his brief engagement, lasting little more than twelve hours, to Jane Austen. He is supposed to have proposed and been accepted in the gun-room at Manydown on the evening of December 2, 1802. But in a great state of agitation the authoress returned hurriedly early next morning to Steventon Rectory, where she had been staying with her brother James (his father's successor) after having broken off the engagement.

The purchaser was Lord Spencer Chichester, second son of the first marquis of Donegall, father of the first Lord Chichester and great-great-grandfather of the present (Fourth) Lord Templemore.

The history of the Wither family states that he held some appointment in the household of George IV either as Prince of Wales when staying in Hampshire or later as Regent. In common with others who came into close contact with that personage he seems to have been led into extravagances so that Worting House was seized by his creditors. It is not clear if this took place before or after his death in 1819.

The house was then sold to Anna Maria, Lady Jones, widow of Sir William Jones, the Orientalist. She was also the eldest daughter of Bishop Jonathan Shipley, of St Asaph's, who was a churchman of great ability and might have made primate had he not opposed George III about American Independence.

Lady Jones's husband was also a remarkable man. Dying at the early age of 47 years his achievements in so short a time are almost bewildering.

By the time he left Oxford, in addition to being a thorough classical scholar, he had learnt French, Italian, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Arabic and Persian, "improved his knowledge of Hebrew and gained some acquaintance of Chinese". After writing some standard works in French and English and a Persian grammar he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society and took to law. A political career was snuffed by the uncompromising attitude he also took up about American Independence in connection with which he may well his future father-in-law. They were also both members of the Literary Club of which Doctor Johnson was the presiding genius.

Instead he was appointed to the long coveted post of judge of the high court of Calcutta which enabled him to marry and sail with his wife to India in 1783. There then ensued ten years of intense "literary and juristical" output. His agile mind branched out in all directions inquiring into Hindyu(sic) music and chess and the local botany and zoology. He was the first English scholar to master Sanskrit and was the friend of successive Governor Generals including Warren Hastings, Lord Cornwallis and his eventual biographer Lord Teignmouth.

Lady Jones, when at Worting must have had many memories to fall back upon with all this intellectual activity and the glories of Calcutta in the time of the Nabobs. Actually her health was worn out and she had to leave him for England in 1793. He was never able to follow her dying in India the following year.

She subsequently helped Lord Teignmouth publish a collective edition of her husband's works. Perhaps the ballroom at Worting was in her day used as a library. A catalogue of the books would make interesting reading.

It has not yet been discovered if she predeceased her brother, Dean Shipley of St Asaph's who died in 1826. He had been concerned with her husband in a celebrated law suit for the seditious libel in consequence of a tract which roused the wrath of the local Tory committee in Flint.

Jane Austen mentions twice in her letters a "Mr Shipley" a friend of her sailor brother Charles possibly one of the Dean's five sons. He evidently used to appear in the Basingstoke neighbourhood and may have been the cause of Lady Jones buying the house.

Worting next appears in the possession of her niece, the Dean's eldest daughter Penelope who had married in 1814 Pelham Warren a distinguished London doctor with a very considerable practice. He was the ninth son of Dr Richard Warren who had been George III's physician at the time of his first madness. Dr Pelham Warren died at Worting House in 1835.

An interesting contrast is provided by the cross in the style of "19th century romanticism" erected to his memory in Worting churchyard and since used as a family memorial with the William and Adelaide urn-plaque, also to him, in the north aisle of the church executed by Ternouth of Pimlico.

Mrs Warren survived her husband thirty years and was succeeded at Worting in 1865 by their eldest son. Major Richard Pelham Warren, JP who had joined the regiment of his grandfather's old county, the Royal Flint Rifles. He added Scrapps farm to the property in 1866. He died in 1897 but it is possible that his brother and successor Maj-Gen Sir Arthur Frederick Warren KCB came to live at Worting House before that date as he purchased the advowson of Worting rectory in 1892 from the Bigg-Wither family, who have held it since the beginning of the 17th century and appointed many members of heir family to the living. Maj-Gen Warren had retired from the army in 1890 after a distinguished career serving in the Crimea, the Indian Mutiny and the Ashanti expedition. He died at Worting in 1913 at the age of 83.

The house was sold in 1948 by his daughter Mrs Warren-Codrington (widow of Col HO Warren-Codrington CB) to the late Mr H Thornton of Basingstoke to whose executors it now belongs. The farm is at present farmed by Mr Thornton's son-in-law to whom the writer is indebted for kindly showing him round the old house, now empty and threatened.

For the last 150 years Worting has house or been intimately associated with people well-known in their own day in the church, the peerage, the royal service, the law, the army, the bench, medicine, fox-hunting and literature, the pillars of 19th century society. It has taken its place in the life of its parish and the local social scene. Today, in common with many other big houses too awkward and too expensive to maintain, it faces destruction.

Note: The writer wishes to acknowledge the help of Mr A Farmer and the organist and verger of Worting Church, in the absence of the Rector; also Col and Mrs Bates for opportunities in the past of seeing Manydown. Apart from a hasty glance at the parish registers all the above information has been obtained from memorials in the churchyard and church and from printed sources. (here was a note here that information on documents or portraits relating to the property and its owners or in connection with the Clarke family should write to the County Archivist, Hampshire Record Office, The Castle, Winchester.) The extract from Jane Austen's letter is quoted from Dr R Chapman's edition of the letters with his permission.

FROM HANTS AND BERKS GAZETTE, FRIDAY 8 SEPTEMBER 1950

IT IS understood that the Executors of the late Mr H Thornton intended to develop the property, removing the house, cutting down the trees and developing it as a housing estate. This was in contravention of the listed nature of the house and, of course, the Tree Preservation Order applying.

Mr GK Burness of Cadogan Square, London bought the house from the Executors and did a considerable amount of refurbishment and repair bringing it into good condition for use as a country retreat.

In 1954 the firm of Burness, Corlett & Partners, of which Mr Burness was a partner and director, decided to move their headquarters from Bishop's gate in the City of London to the country and buy the property from Mr Burness. The price paid was a round £25,000 for the house, grounds, park and carpets and, in the middle 1954, Burness, Corlett & Partners moved into the house.

Burness, Corlett & Partners were and are professional naval architects & marine consultants and the move was avant-garde for a marine firm. It was thought by many to be problematical in view of the centre of gravity of shipping in Britain being in the City of London. In fact this proved not to be the case. The offices were proved to be well suited to the purpose and afforded space and elegant surroundings which were both helpful to the work of the firm and congenial to the staff.

The ballroom was converted to a large drawing office with a suspended false lighted ceiling, the dining room became the board room and most of the bedrooms became offices. A canteen was established in the west wing which was also occupied by the managing director of BCP until 1958 by which time the Coach House had been converted to a modern house.

Mr Burness had farmed the home farm mainly as a pig farm and this activity was continued by BCP using a manager for some years. A modern piggery was built to the west of the farm drive and the original curving drive up from Church Lane was opened up and properly surfaced to connect the large gravel turning bay in front of Worting House properly.

The Coach House had been stripped to a bare shell, a fine brick arch over the coach entrance was retained but bricked in with Georgian brick in a recessed form. The hall was formed from this area with a large and very attractive winding staircase. The managing director, Dr ECB Corlett, and his family occupied this house from 1958 until 1976.

Around 1970 a considerable single storey extension to the offices was built behind the main building in between the wings at the back on the north side.

A large car park was built down near the the Church Lane entrance, thus relieving pressure on the area in front of Worting House which had become very congested. A "bund" was built on the edge of this car park between the park and the rest of the property. The whole area was planted extensively with daffodils forming a remarkable sight in Spring.

The farming activities ceased in the early 1970s and the park and agricultural land was let out to local farmers for grazing. A further "bund" was built to the south of the buildings and planted extensively with trees, etc to shield the property from the rest of Worting Park and from the road.

In 1976 the headquarters of the firm moved to the Isle of man although Worting House remained the main production centre of BCP.

Over the years 1982 - 85 extensive repairs, refurbishment and modernisation has taken place. The building has been repointed, most of the windows have had faulty woodwork replaced, all roofs have either been stripped or thoroughly repaired, all lead flashing on the roofs of both Worting House and the Coach House has been renewed and the building is now in first class structural and decorative condition. It is probable that it has not been in good a physical condition for well over 100 years.

The original farm lodge at the bottom of the farm drive to the west was demolished in a road widening exercise. The planning permission for this was used to sell about half an acre of land on which a modern house has been built in accordance with the architectural standards of the property and is screened by trees.

Up the east side of the farm drive was a fine avenue of Elm trees all of which succumbed to Dutch Elm disease and had to be cut down and destroyed. In their place a new tree belt was planted this consisting of conifers and beech trees and oak.