

THE OAKS

Oaks Park was created on land originally owned by the Lamberts, an old established family of farmers and substantial landowners in the Banstead area who could trace their ancestry back many generations.

The last Lambert known to have had a dwelling in the vicinity of The Oaks was Roger Lambert who, in 1584, moved to a house in Woodmansterne village. There is no record or evidence of subsequent occupation at Lamberts Oaks, as the estate was named, until the mid 18th century although the Lamberts continued to own the land. The old Lambert house was almost certainly not at the site of the later Oaks buildings but probably to the west.

Banstead Downs, which extended from Epsom in the west to the outskirts of Croydon to the east, had a history of sporting activities including hunting and racing. There was a revival in its popularity in the early 18th century when the downs became a fashionable spot for city businessmen and the gentry. This popularity extended beyond recreation with the construction of fine houses meeting a desire for a country seat or second residence.

Hunting and racing attracted, it is said, a 'society of gentlemen' known as the Hunters' Club or 'Farmers Hunt' to approach the Lamberts asking to lease Lambert's Oaks and seeking permission to build there. However, according to an eminent historian who was a descendant of the Lamberts, the story is confused with that of an old inn nearby, named after the family.

The Oaks was a modest but stylish four storey Palladian style villa constructed by Robert Taylor in the early 1750s. Taylor constructed a number of villas but recent research points to The Oaks being the earliest and therefore, his remaining stable block is one of his earliest surviving works. Taylor was later knighted and became the country's most successful architect prior to the rise of James and Robert Adam.

The estate, renamed simply The Oaks was initially much smaller than today and was bordered by a ha-ha sunken ditch, the remains of which can be seen a little lower north down the lawn. To the west, the valley of Lambert's Oaks, as described by a Victorian racing historian, overlooked the four and a half mile racecourse that ran from Carshalton to Tattenham Corner prior to the construction of the circular Epsom race track we know today.

The first likely occupier of the villa was Sir Francis Gosling, founder of a banking dynasty and a Lambert family friend. By the end of 1756 a new tenant purchased the lease; an ambitious young army officer - Captain, eventually Lieutenant General, John Burgoyne. In 1765 Burgoyne commissioned Robert Taylor to build a dining/ballroom single storey wing to the east and in all probability the western kitchen wing was also completed at this time.

'Gentleman Johnny' as he was affectionately described by his men was a talented officer, inveterate gambler, playboy, author and M.P. He had a reputation for being pompous and excruciatingly wordy in correspondence but of a kindly nature. History treated him somewhat unfairly after he surrendered his army to the rebel Americans at Saratoga.

Burgoyne was able to lease The Oaks with the help of his school-friend Lord Strange; son and heir to the 11th Earl of Derby whose daughter Lady Charlotte had eloped with Burgoyne some years earlier and caused a rift that eventually was healed with good grace. Lord Strange died of a stroke

and the earldom would eventually pass to the man who leased The Oaks after Burgoyne, Lord Edward Smith Stanley.

Edward Smith Stanley fell in love with Elizabeth, daughter of the Duke and Duchess of Argyll. The announcement of the intended marriage gave rise to the largest and most elaborate social gathering ever seen in England - the great Fête Champêtre at The Oaks, organized and 'conducted' by Burgoyne. Society's elite vied for invitations and on June 9th 1774 Parliament closed down to allow their lordships to attend the celebrations. A great ballroom and dining room were housed in an ornate and lavish temporary pavilion constructed by Robert Adam. A temple portico was fixed to the side of The Oaks east wing and the finest players, musicians and singers performed in the garden for the guests. Burgoyne wrote a classical masque which was adapted by David Garrick for the stage at Drury Lane the following November. In March 1775 Burgoyne departed for America and his appointment with his unfortunate niche in military history on the 7th October 1777.

The Fête Champêtre had captured the nation's imagination but unlike Burgoyne's play 'The Maid of The Oaks' the now 12th Earl of Derby's marriage to Elizabeth Hamilton did not have a happy ending. She desired to run off with a notorious rake, the cricketing Duke of Dorset, with whom she had an affair. Derby refused a divorce, the duke lost interest and Elizabeth was shunned by society until her premature death in 1797.

During his marriage, Derby had commissioned Robert Adam to draw up proposals to enlarge the house further. Some of Adam's proposed schemes were almost Disney like in their castle extravagance but no expansion work was undertaken before Derby, probably filled with anger at his duchess's betrayal, called a halt.

A more modest but still substantial project went ahead years later between the late 1780s and early 1790s during a long platonic courtship with actress Elizabeth Farren. The first phase saw the construction of a turreted section abutting a now taller kitchen wing. The second phase saw a new drawing room added on the east side, in front of Burgoyne's now heightened dining room wing. Derby purchased the estate outright from William Lambert in 1788 including the remainder of the land that now falls within the perimeter walk today. He closed and filled in a road that once bisected the land and ran by the ha-ha and across the hills towards Carshalton.

Derby had thrown himself into his sporting interests. His socialising with like-minded friends had resulted in the creation of the two great classic races at Epsom, The Derby and The Oaks. The former was the result of a coin being tossed to name the race. Had the reverse side of the coin fallen we would have had The Bunbury!

Derby's second marriage to the actress Elizabeth Farren brought him happiness for many years until her death in 1829. Eventually Derby decided to sell his summer home at The Oaks and return permanently to his main seat at Knowsley, Lancashire. He died shortly after the move in October 1834.

The curiously attractive ivy clad hotchpotch of architecture that now made up The Oaks passed into the hands of Sir Charles Edward Grey, former Chief Justice of Calcutta who had enjoyed Derby's hospitality in the past. Described as of a Pickwick appearance, Grey was a studious and serious public servant and MP. He served as Governor in Jamaica in difficult circumstances. His unpopularity, whilst due in some part to events beyond his control, grew rapidly in his six years of office. The island was racked with economic woes and then in 1850 by cholera as well. Grey was

linked to financial scandal and his wife returned to England. She died from illness in London at this time to cap his distress. Eventually he retired to Hyde Park and then Tunbridge Wells.

Late in 1842 The Oaks was sold to Joseph Smith and his brother in law John Jones. They divided the house into two family dwellings and by 1848 when Mrs Jones died, the centre section of the house appears to have been lowered to three floors and castellation of the middle section walls had at last given the house a uniform look. Mr Jones and his daughter then left the house and moved to Wales. Subsequently Joseph Smith returned the house to a one dwelling layout and in the centre section further reduced the number of floors to two and centralised the rear bay, while still retaining the same outer wall height. This provided a much more comfortable room size for bedrooms and all rooms in the areas between the entrance and the east wing. He moved the main staircase into the corridor between the entrance and the dining room, leaving a grand hallway with a gallery at high level serving the entrance to a principal bedroom and access to the west side of the house. During his ownership Joseph Smith also enlarged the farm and developed the conservatory. Joseph Smith died in 1876 having unsuccessfully tried to sell The Oaks three years earlier. He had added much to The Oaks in his thirty-four years ownership although all traces of Sir Robert Taylor's core house had disappeared in the process.

Daniel Aldersey Taylor was the next owner. A land-owner of farming and other properties around the Empire he was best known locally as a Brandy merchant with strong horse racing interests and his own horses. He held large house parties every year at The Oaks to celebrate the Oaks and the Derby. Taylor died in 1884 and his widow Louisa sold the house later that year.

By October 1884 The Oaks had passed to a Mr Higgins, a local land-owner and lace merchant who held the property for just four years before he placed it on the market once more.

The last family owners, Harry Berkeley James and his wife Lucy, moved into The Oaks in November 1888. Harry James was a self made man who had moved to Chile to take up a job as a shipping clerk when he was twenty-one. Harry was industrious and clever. In less than a decade he had a mining business on the Pacific coast exporting phosphates for military and farming markets. As his fortune grew he spent more and more of his time exploring the interior of Chile and cataloguing its bird and insect life. Singlehanded and on donkey back he explored the mountainous region of the central Andes and returned many specimens to the British Museum. During a brief return home in 1880 he met and married Lucy and they returned to Chile where their first two children were born.

Harry, Lucy and their children returned to England in 1886 when Harry decided to 'retire' from the business when he reached forty. On his return he was feted by the ornithological and zoological societies and he continued to fund and organize further explorations in South America. He looked for a suitable estate to settle down where he could be close to his beloved museums and institutions in London and pursue his countryside interests as well. He moved into The Oaks and set about improving the estate with taste and vigour for the large family he and Lucy planned. He rebuilt a grand staircase in the hall and made large scale improvements throughout the estate. He renewed all the chimneys at the house and farm, constructed a large aviary that stood near where the cafe was built and enlarged the conservatory. He built a gas plant and provided bright acetylene lighting throughout the house and outbuildings. He built a new bakehouse at the end of a substantial service wing linked to the main house. All this was just a start to the dynasty he envisaged. The work was undertaken in about three years, during which the last child of The Oaks, Adrian, was born. The dream ended when Harry tragically succumbed to a heart condition in 1892.

Lucy managed the estate until around the start of the First World War. She was active in local politics and served the community in addition as church warden at St Peters in Woodmansterne. Lucy retired to a house in Belgravia and died in March 1926 aged 74.

The Oaks meanwhile had been purchased from Mrs James's agent by the Surrey Joint Poor Law Commission for use as a Home for Women Epileptics. Facilities such as additional baths and fire escapes were added and some substantial internal alterations took place; particularly on the ground floor.

Sadly the greenhouse and great conservatory were demolished. Subsequently the patients were transferred to Effingham and the estate passed into the hands of Carshalton District Council in 1933 with a promise to preserve as much of the estate as was possible for all time! The house echoed to the laughter of children once more in 1937 when it provided a home and temporary refuge for over twenty Basque children, who were refugees from the atrocity of German bombing of Guernica in support of the fascist army of General Franco in the Spanish civil war. The children were moved when the outbreak of WW2 threatened more German air-raids and The Oaks then saw the arrival of the Home Guard and Royal Air force personnel.

Bomb damage and other repairs went untouched by an indifferent Carshalton council after the war and ultimately they chose to follow a path that led to the final stage of demolition early in 1960: An ignominious end to a great, historic treasure.

A full account of the fascinating history of The Oaks, including all the latest research will be published in the coming months, in two volumes, by The Friends of Honeywood Museum. www.friendsofhoneywood.co.uk.

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The Oaks as built in the 1750s

