

Some notes on the history of "Maresfield Park"

Several Residents have asked me recently if I can tell them anything about the earlier history of the "Park" - how it came to be what it is today, bygone owners like Frances Lady Shelley of the Diaries or Prince Munster-, the age and purpose of the older existing buildings and so forth. This information is nowhere available in any convenient or coherent form, and most of what does survive is inaccessible and very out of date. I have therefore put together these summary notes in the hope they may be useful to others who may like to investigate further.

Recent history. The built-up area now generally called the "Park", along the main, middle and north drives and their offshoots, has been available for development only since 1926 (and most of the development has come only since 1950). This resulted from the breaking up and sale of the large private property formerly owned by the Shelley family, the principal landowners in the district.

In 1898 this had come by inheritance to Prince Munster, who was a German national; on the outbreak of war in 1914 it was therefore sequestered by the Crown, and after military occupation during the war it was expropriated, broken up and sold 1924-6.

Before 1914, "Maresfield Park" generally meant the family mansion itself (the full Maresfield Park House being used only in local histories and guide-books) , rather than the private park in which it stood and from which it took its name. It was simply the name of the property as a whole, and the exact meaning depended on context.

Earlier owners. Maresfield Park evolved during the 18th century, when it belonged to a local branch of the Newnham family. The first owner might perhaps have been John (I) Newnham, who played the leading part in the struggles which led to the Settlement of Ashdown Forest in 1693 (see Garth Christian, *Ashdown Forest* (1967), pp. 26-7); he is recorded as having owned the inn at Nutley ("and other land elsewhere"), and it is still the Shelley Arms today¹. The earliest certain owner however is William Newnham "of The Cross", who was active at the close of the 17th century, and could chronologically be son of John (I).

"The Cross" was the original name of the mansion itself, derived presumably from some crossing of the local tracks or byways now represented by the modern drives. It began as a tiny house (the present "Tower Cottage" at the Manor House, without its much later Tower), and William Newnham himself built and lived in a larger one in the village north of the Church, on the site of the present - Lodge. This was called "The Strethouse" (the "strete" being the Hartfield road). Much later it became "Maresfield Place" - probably in 1814 - to match "Maresfield Park" itself. But there was no room there to expand further, so "The Cross" became the mansion as it grew progressively larger through the generations of owners.

The present built-up area is the eastern side of the park as it was by at latest 1814. William Newnham presumably already owned at least the land between his two. houses, along the present main drive. Eventually the park extended north to Horney Common and south to the Piltown road (hence the name of the modern Parklands Estate); but the western side remained open farmland and woods, and is still so today

In 1769 John (II) Newnham, perhaps William's grandson, married his daughter Wilhelmina to the heir of Sir John Shelley, 4th baronet, of Michelgrove near Worthing. She died 1772 bearing her second and only surviving son John.

In 1814 her brother John (III) Newnham died without legitimate heirs, and her son, now Sir John Shelley, 6th baronet, inherited "The Cross" and changed its name to "Maresfield Park". He had been obliged to sell Michelgrove about 1800 to pay his gaming and racing debts, so he now settled here.

¹ i.e. May 1971

In 1807 he had married Frances Winckley, as lady Shelley the diarist of Regency life and society. She spent £70,000 - say a round million in today's terms - on improving the property.

In 1840 Sir John and Frances resigned the property to their eldest son John Villiers and retired to Lonsdale House, Fulham, where he died 1852. In 1868 Frances built Maresfield Lodge, Cowes, and died there (in the presence of Queen Victoria) 1873.

Sir John Villiers Shelley married Louisa Johnes Knight- in 1832, and with her fortune they greatly enlarged the property (not the park as such), buying up half the neighbourhood. He was Liberal M.P. for Westminster. He died 1867, leaving an only daughter Blanche as heiress to the property; the title passed to his brother Frederick, grandfather of the present baronet.

Blanche Shelley married Hervey Charles Pechell in 1874. They had no children, and did not reside at Maresfield, which was managed by her mother till her death in 1895. Both Pechells died in 1898, leaving the property to their friend (then Count) Münster.

Alexander, Prince and Count Münster von Derneburg, had been German Ambassador to Great Britain, and had married Muriel Hay, daughter of the Earl of Kinnoull; they had two sons Frederick and Paul. (Count was his hereditary title, Prince a personal one conferred by the German Emperor in 1900; hence indifferent use of either). On inheriting Maresfield they settled here, apparently intending to make it their permanent home; but the outbreak of war meant in effect the end of the old "Maresfield Park". He returned to Germany in 1914, and died 1927.

3. The Maresfield Park mansion itself stood in what are now the grounds of the Manor House. It came to be a large rambling house, the earliest parts built about 1680-1700 but most of it in the 18th and early 19th centuries. The famous library built for Frances Shelley by Benjamin Wyatt about 1816 was 60 feet long, and wide and high in proportion; and this was only the ground floor of a huge new wing looming over everything earlier, much higher than the present Clock Tower. The present surviving buildings include the original 1680-1700 fabric, a wing of perhaps 1750-60 - both of these extensively modernised - and the Clock Tower, added by Prince Munster about 1900. Everything else standing in 1914 was demolished and cleared during the 1920s, its former site being now open lawn planted with trees and shrubs.

The only reliable record of what the lost buildings looked like is a single photograph, taken by Mr. Towner in 1914. This shows that the sketches made in 1839: published in Lady Shelley's Diaries, are extremely inaccurate, at least that at Vol.II p.220. In this the whole northern half of the house, built perhaps about 1720-30 in the "Dutch" style, is simply omitted - presumably because the artist thought it uncouth and ugly - and replaced with a small dainty "cottage" end resembling nothing in the photograph whatever. Details of front door porch and chimneys are glaringly wrong; and a 2-storey window-bay is also omitted and replaced by plain windows, though it is still inconsistently shown, from a different and more "romantic" viewpoint, in the other sketch. This, showing the library front invisible in the photograph, is probably more accurate in principle, but its awkward enormous proportions are toned down and altered, and the whole thing probably much "prettyfied." The present large copper beech tree is shown in its youth, romantically bent double in a most unlikely way.

Prince Munster also built an immense new stable block and an electrical power-house as outliers of the mansion, which survive in principle. The former has been partially demolished, and the remainder converted as Southern Cottage and its two neighbours; the latter became the core of Dalveen.

The Dairy House (originally the "home farm") can be dated in principle by the grave of its tenant John Smith, who died 1798 aged 79? To at least the mid-18th century. Its original buildings were perhaps contemporary with the 1720-30 "second house" which displeased the artist of 1839.

The main entrance Lodge at the village was built about 1847-50, when the old Strethouse (now Maresfield Place) was demolished on the death of its last tenant William Day.

The modern Flitterbanks Farm probably occupies one of the oldest continuously lived-on sites in Maresfield, standing on that of mediaeval ones far older than the creation of the 18th-century "park". It stands right on the line of the Roman road; this had already passed out of memory by the middle ages, but the site would be chosen (as often) for its "hard standing" and availability of road-metal for building-rubble. The name Flitterbanks seems to mean "the shallow-ploughed bank", i.e. the "agger" of the Roman road itself. The timbers of its present long cowshed were brought from the old "Powder Mills" (gunpowder factory), down by the "lake" (restored hammer-pond) beyond Park Farm south of the village, when those were done away with after an explosion in 1854.

The Old Gardens and Orchard were those supplying fruit and produce to the mansion, with glasshouses and service cottages. There was also a lodge to the north drive at Lampool Corner, demolished and replaced with a bungalow quite recently; and another at the Horney Common entrance, opposite the present Country Stores.

Apart from all these and a few scattered farm and service cottages, there were no other buildings in the park in 1914. It was never a fully ornamental park, with herds of deer and so forth, but a "working" one, largely farmland apart from the immediate ornamental gardens and paddocks of the mansion.

(Note: "Park Farm" south of the village has nothing to do with "Maresfield Park" and is, like Flitterbanks, far older in principle. In 1620 it was "The Park", the home of the Rootes family; ultimately its ancestor was probably the demesne farm of the Norman manor of "Mesewelle" in Domesday Book. It was only "demoted" when bought up about 1850 by Sir J.V. Shelley.)

4. **Before 1830** the turnpike road from East Grinstead to Lewes ran through the western side of the park, leaving its present A.22 line at Horney Common and running south, then south-east, to reach Maresfield village at the bend in the Piltdown road west of the Church. It therefore passed close by the mansion itself: the main front gate, with iron railings, lay directly behind the present Dendrons garage, only 70-80 yards from the then front door, and the road ran right in front of the new library windows, possibly only 50 yards away and at most again 70. (The present main drive being then only the back way to the Strethouse in the village.)

Lady Shelley's account of the Duke of Wellington's triumphal visit in 1819 must be read in the light of this. The road was packed with people all the way to Nutley; they took the horses from his carriage at Horney Common and dragged him the last mile "up and down hill" (rather down, up and down again). When they reached the gates, the people there jumped over the park railings and ran down the lawn (now the Dendrons wood) to meet him in front of the house.

The great cedar of Lebanon tree now stands exactly on the spot where the carriage must have finally stopped, and the Duke stepped out to be cheered by the crowd. The tradition that he personally planted it was already official by Prince Munster's time, but Lady Shelley's account makes clear that he at least did not do so on this visit. He-often came again privately in later years, but usually in mid-winter, hardly a propitious season for planting memorial trees; and the planting would lose its point unless done immediately after the triumphal reception. This was in early October, and Lady Shelley (i.e. her gardeners) probably planted it as soon as a specimen could be obtained, to mark the exact spot where the Duke's foot first touched Maresfield soil. But in any case it is "the Duke of Wellington's cedar" now.

The Shelleys were planning to turn the road out of the park in 1818, counting on winning the Derby to finance it; but they lost, and the scheme had to be shelved. They did win it in 1824, with Cedric, and by the end of 1825 the scheme was definitely in hand (probably getting the necessary Act of Parliament). The road was finally turned between 1826 and 1830, to its present line from Horney

Common to Lampool, and then united with the realigned Hartfield road down the "straight half mile" to Maresfield.

The tithe map of 1840 shows the Stretthouse still standing on what is now the Church car park, with stables and outbuildings where the Lodge now is. The present "main drive" (then still a back way in) runs straight across the present Rectory and Chestnuts to reach the new north-bound road there. (Note that Shelley Cottages opposite the Parade are dated 1846 with monogram J(ohn) V(illiers) S(helley).) However, modern out-of-date maps still make clear that the realigning of the E. end of the drive (avenued with pines instead of limes as further in) when the lodge was built after 1847, must have followed a footpath representing immemorial rights of way to Flitterbanks and Lampool. The section of these running across the former Dairy House meadow from the bend in the drive is now wholly built-over and forgotten; but one can still trace in outline how the plan of the 18th-century "park" was superimposed on the different layout of the earlier mediaeval "manor", with its demesne house at Park Farm and outlying farms to north and east. (The present-day "Manor House" has no right at all in principle to its post-1926 name!).

The front way in between 1830 and about 1850 was still evidently at Horney Common, but there seems to have been one also at Batts Farm; at any rate it must have been this way that Queen Victoria came in when she paid a visit to Maresfield Park, perhaps from Brighton about 1845, since in commemoration they planted the long avenue of oaks from Batts up to the Wilderness woods (newly planted in the 1840s), which now runs forlornly through fields and firing-ranges from nowhere to nowhere.

P.B.S. Andrews,

11 May, 1971•

The Manor House, Maresfield Park