

## South Hill Park over six centuries

South Hill (Park) has a long history. The Estate stands in an area of acid heath and woodland and lies in the ancient manor of Easthampstead which existed before Domesday Book (1086) when pigs and cattle were both listed. At that time, and until the dissolution of the Monasteries in the 1530s, the Manor belonged to Westminster Abbey. The earliest known reference to South Hill as an estate is in a lease of 1455 where the land and rent are defined as 'lands (which) lie at Southille for 7 years for a red rose at Midsummer Day'. The estate lay within Windsor Forest, hunting forest for the kings and queens of England to the 17th century.

By 1680 the Park was leased by the Lord of the Manor, William Trumbull of Easthampstead Park, to Ann Bagley. It was then known as South Hill. About 1683 the lease transferred to William Samnoth of Northamptonshire when it included arable meadows or pasture grounds. A mansion was built.<sup>1</sup>

After an interval where no records have been found, the current chain of occupation began in c1752 when the Estate was bought by Brice Fisher. He was employed by the South Sea Company dealing in cotton between Calcutta and Manchester, a lucrative business until he was caught taking raw cotton to England where it was woven. He then would wet this and stretch it so obtaining more than there should be on sale back in Calcutta! He lost his job and, about the same time moved away from South Hill, selling to William Watts whom he will have known in Calcutta. Fisher had renamed the house Fisher's Lodge.

William Watts had spent all his working life with the East India Company (EIC) in and around Calcutta and had married there to an Anglo English woman twice widowed by her mid-twenties. Watts had so successfully worked with the local Nawab and with Robert Clive, his senior in the EIC, that he could retire a rich man and buy both South Hill Park (SHP), where he built a house, or possibly converted Fisher's, and a house in Hanover Square. The Berkshire house name reverted from Fisher's Lodge to South Hill Park. In 1762 he acquired more land from Fisher and, the following year bought a further 30 acres of the surrounding common land. In repayment for the common land he built new almshouses near the church. Watts sadly only

---

<sup>1</sup> All information so far comes from records held by the Berkshire Record Office.

enjoyed a few years of retirement, dying in 1768. His widow returned to Calcutta to become the life and soul of the British community.<sup>2</sup>

The next two owners also had close ties with the EIC. Henry Bouverie worked for the company though details are elusive. He owned SHP 1768-1787; Sir Stephen Lushington was a member of the company board in London and several times its Chairman. He had possession from 1787 to 1801.

Next came George Canning, then Foreign Secretary in Pitt's government. Pitt (the younger) lived in Binfield and he and Canning were close friends. Canning commissioned Sir John Soane to redesign the interior of the house including an Orangery, for which 'good large orange trees' were obtained from Lisbon after some harassing of the British Envoy. Soane's design also included moving the main entrance from the south to the north side as at present. Canning needed a break from politics and successfully worked his 200 acre SHP farm with cattle and sheep, and grew wheat, barley and hay. On the south side he also developed a 'beautiful arboretum, or shrubbery, flowering and feathery, quite down to the water in front of it'.

There are few changes recorded in the 50 years or so after Canning left in 1806, by either Earl of Limerick or, later, Sir James Matheson. In 1853 William Goodenough Hayter MP bought the Estate from Sir James to start a chain of family ownership through until the last member sold in 1946. Mr. Hayter, who was not created a baronet until 1858, undertook a major reconstruction of the mansion creating an asymmetrical white rendered building with two storeys in its east part but only one storey to most of the west.

Sadly, on Boxing Day 1878 Sir William was found drowned, probably in the third lake in the Park. This lake ran around the west end of the mansion and is clearly shown on maps of 1871. There was a sluice at the north end of South Lake carrying the water under a path to the lake a few feet away. By 1891 this third lake has disappeared and water was ducted between the North and South Lakes. North Lake then extended much nearer the house to run through the arches now set low in the east end of the car park. The North Lake arches were (re)built in Temple Moore's work in 1893. There is no evidence as to why the lake was drained but I wonder if it was a reaction to Sir William's sad death. The water now flows under the main car park to the west.

---

<sup>2</sup> All information on Brice Fisher and William Watts is from *The Men who ruled India*, Philip Mason, Pan Books 1987 or *The Honourable company. History of the English East India Company* John Key, Harper Collins, 1991.

On his death Sir William was succeeded first by his widow and then, on her death in 1889, by his son Arthur Divett Hayter. Little is known of the management of the grounds until 1893 when Sir Arthur commissioned Temple Moore to redesign them. Temple Moore had already, from 1890, undertaken major changes to the mansion possibly following a fire. The major rooms were refitted: the dining room (now the cinema), a small sitting room (Haversham Room), and others. Most significantly, a library was added over the conservatory creating what is now the Recital Room. The grounds design can now be seen again as it was restored in 2011 when the terrace and adjacent garden were restored to Temple Moore's design. This recent work also saw the planting of many new trees. For more detail see below.

On Sir Arthur's death in 1917 his wife inherited the estate and, on her death in 1929, their nephew, Major Graham Rickman became the owner. Major Rickman died in 1940 by shooting himself and the Estate passed to a relative who allowed the evacuation of the Royal Sea Bathing Hospital from Margate to SHP. Many soldiers wounded in World War II also recuperated and were rehabilitated here.

An unsuccessful conversion to flats followed and, on the liquidation of the Management Company, the Estate was purchased by the BBC. Mercifully their plans to build barrack-like accommodation on the north grass were never carried out. Some rooms were fitted as studios in the event of an escalation of the Cold War when the European Service would have been transferred from Bush House. In fact it was only ever used for storage.

By 1958 the Bracknell Development Corporation (BDC) was already planning the New Town and the Estate was purchased from the BBC, seemingly at a commercial valuation, not a compulsory purchase. While decisions were being made as to its long term use the site was leased to Ferranti for seven years. The mansion was used both for drawing offices and workshops and helicopters and other vehicles would come in order that parts manufactured on site could be fitted. The gardener since the middle 1940s, Mr. Bates, continued to maintain the lawns and flowers to a high standard and was abhorred by the use of the grass as a helipad. Parts of the Estate through this period were also leased for grazing, some arable use and a large pig farm.

The Ferranti lease expired in 1972 by which time the BDC had chosen SHP as the home of its planned Arts Centre and, after much further interior modification, this opened in late 1973. Most events took place in the mansion and, from 1984, in the Wilde Theatre and, a few years later, the Bracknell Gallery and Dance Studio; early on many remember the weekend classical, jazz and pop festivals with parking and camping on the north side and events taking place on the south lawn. One day events continued most summers

plus plays in the Italian Garden, the Upper Italian Garden, or the amphitheater built in the woods to the east of South Lake.

The Park grounds have been restored to their original glory thanks to a £2.3 million grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Big Lottery fund. Bracknell Forest Council bid for the funding in 2008, working jointly with Bracknell Town Council and SHP Trust. Over the course of four years the Park was vastly improved for the benefit of the public and wildlife. Restored original features include a Yew Walk and Italian Garden. The total cost of this ambitious project amounts to £4.4 million which pays for works on-site and then ten years of on-going maintenance. The restored Park was opened in 2011 by the Earl of Wessex.

What the future holds is unknown but we will hopefully continue to see the development of both the Arts Centre and the SHP Grounds.<sup>3</sup>

*Diane Collins*  
*May 2015.*

---

<sup>3</sup> Remaining information comes from personal records; Berkshire Records Office; the BBC written archives; various websites.