



Moneyed Victorians

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The railways have much to answer for. One Surrey transformation came with the completion of the Reading and Tonbridge branch line of the South Eastern Railway. Along its route was the small station at Gomshall which linked Abinger and the area around it to the City of London. It was now possible for the well-to-do Londoner to think in terms of aping established landowners. Estates could be assembled and grand houses built with spacious gardens and elegant views of the Surrey Hills reminiscent in miniature of the "romantic" Highlands of Scotland or the fashionable Lake District.

An important foray into our Surrey Hills was by Edwin Waterhouse. He was the man most responsible for building a hugely successful accountancy firm known until recently as Price Waterhouse. In October 1877 he bought an estate known as Great Inholme which included Cooper's Copse, Bullmoor Farm and a brick and tile works. He instructed his brother-in-law architect, George Redmayne to build a new house from local materials which would reflect the status of the prince of auditors and his growing estate. It was called "Feldemore".

As the years ticked by and Edwin Waterhouse prospered, Redmayne was called on to add more and more extensions to the original building including an imposing hall, drawing room, a splendid library, lots of bedrooms and a billiard room lit by the new-fangled electric light. Live-in staff grew to include two laundry maids, two parlour maids, three housemaids, a cook and a scullery maid.

He bought land in Pasture Wood and constructed a curving drive entered by Tralee Cottage and flanked on one side by magnificent rhododendrons which thrive in our greensand soil. There was a tennis court built and a swimming pool which the locals were allowed to use within strictly defined limits and for a small charge. The grounds were continually being improved and by 1895 their maintenance demanded the services of eleven full time gardeners.

Edwin Waterhouse was not a lone immigrant. Amongst the eminent incomers were the Hon. Frederick Leveson Gower, a relative of the Duke of Sutherland who moved into the house called "Holmbury". Sir William Bowman lived at "Joldwynds", Sir Frederick Mirrielees (head of merchant bank Currie & Co.) owned "Pasture Wood House" and Hensleigh Wedgwood lived at "Hopdene". Colonel Lewin, a distinguished District Officer in India bought "Parkhurst" in 1885, brought it back to life and enlarged it.

Edwin Waterhouse became deeply involved in local affairs. In April 1903 he was elected to the Abinger Parish Council. His son, Nicholas married Audrey Lewin in St James', Abinger, followed by a grand reception at Parkhurst. He took up the case for a better water supply for the area and was instrumental in the formation of the Hurtwood Water Company Limited and became a Director. In spite of his local benevolence, he was not sure he approved of Peaslake. He wrote "Peaslake is rather a nest of suffragettes. I have been told that there are fourteen ladies of very advanced

views, among them Mrs Brackenbury and her two daughters, all of whom were convicted recently of breaking shop windows in London for the purpose of advertising themselves and their cause".

In his memoirs he had little to say about his distinguished and long established neighbours, the Evelyn Family. In the edition edited in 1988 the name Evelyn does not feature once in the index. Perhaps there was little love lost between long established gentry and parvenu accountant. In any case, the growing "Feldemore" looked over Holmbury St Mary and it was here that Edwin Waterhouse devoted most of his energies. He invested time, money and energy into the village partly out of benevolence and partly from self-interest. Employing so many people he felt he should build houses for them or renovate existing ones. He put up a westocked village store with a butcher's shop and a grocers, both recently converted into flats. He paid attention to the infrastructure of the village improving the water supply and drainage. On Fridays his team of gardeners was sent on a round of the village to pick up litter and collect rubbish from pre-determined dropping off points. The round would be completed before Edwin Waterhouse arrived via Gomshall station to inspect the village himself to make sure it was spick and span enough for the eyes of his weekend guests. He even set up the "Hollybush Tavern" as a club for local workers. It now lives up to its designation as a tavern rather than its original function as a teetotal meeting place. Edwin Waterhouse died in 1917 and is buried in a modest grave in St Mary's churchyard, Holmbury St Mary, together with his two wives and most of his children. In 1920 his wife met the cost of a new vestry at St James' Church in memory of her husband and gave a large bronze relief (by Justin Matthieu) of The Crucifixion which can be seen on the west wall of the Lady Chapel. His influence lingers on through an active Trust and Gill Hill, a surviving relative lives and works at Bullmer Farm with a valuable archive of Waterhouse information.

And, of course, the house itself is a major monument to the son of a Quaker broker from Liverpool who prospered mightily. After Edwin Waterhouse's death, his widow ran the house and estate but it was requisitioned by the Army in the Second World War and she lived in a small apartment until she died in 1941. The house was then used to house Admiralty staff from what had been the Greenwich Magnetic Observatory set up on Leith Hill and it was from here that the "pips" were broadcast before the six o'clock news each evening.

Its final incarnation is as Belmont, the popular Preparatory School which migrated from Westcott to Feldemore in 1955. It survived probably the most spectacular and destructive fire in the history of this area when it went up in flames on a freezing evening in February 1991. It was watched by most of Holmbury St Mary and Michael Waterhouse, great grandson of Edwin, who had a flat in the old family home.

The day of the really big private house has gone. Many of those that survive, like Feldemore do so as working buildings. "Holmbury House" has become the Mullard Space Science Laboratory and "Pasture Wood", Beatrice Webb

House. The most historic residence of them all, Wotton House, home of the Evelyn Family since 1579, was, like so many, commandeered by the Army in 1939, and has not been occupied by the family since. It has been used as a training centre for the Fire Service and later Telecom. Plans for it to be developed as a country house hotel have not been carried through.

Abinger Hall fell into disrepair and was demolished in about 1950. Goddards was one of several buildings in the area in which Sir Edwin Lutyens and his large gardening friend, Miss Gertrude Jeykell, had a hand. It was intended to be a rest home for distressed ladies who had fallen on hard times. It is now owned by a trust and open to the public. The prime mover in this project was Mrs Mirrielees, wife of Sir Frederick, an energetic shipowner and builder of the great Gomme department store in Moscow. After Lutyens extended Pasture Wood for the Mirrielees he wrote about them in 1898: "They are a good sort of small sort". (He

complains about the service offered to guests). "You go to dress and find your bag not unpacked and in the morning the maid knocks timidly at one's door leaving cans and boots outside in timid propriety. Such a bore. Mrs M is the daughter of Sir P Currie, and will eventually come in for a million of money, so they say. So it is, say I, worth while to 'cultivate'".

It was a different world.

Abinger & Coldharbour Parish News, July 2000 by Donald Anderson
Acknowledgements - The Memoirs of Edwin Waterhouse, edited by Edgar Jones, published 1988; The Villages of Abinger Common and Wotton, Surrey, compiled by Terence O'Kelly, published 1988; Abinger Harvest (including the Abinger Pageant) by E M Forster, published 1936; Diary of John Evelyn, edited by Austin Dobson, published 1906; Holmbury St Mary, One Hundred Years, by Margaret Bird, published 1979; Beatrice Webb House, Pasture Wood, a descriptive guide by John Parker MP, first published 1953.