

STAGENHOE PARK, HERTFORDSHIRE

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The visitor to Stagenhoe will be attracted by the peaceful solitude of its setting in the rolling Hertfordshire countryside. The mansion house now stands in splendid isolation while the parkland which once surrounded it is given over to farming.

Stagenhoe was first recorded in the Domesday Book of 1086 when the area was known by its Old English name 'Stagnehou' meaning the 'spur of land where stags lived'. The last Anglo-Saxon owner was Thorbern, a loyal subject of King Edward the Confessor but when William of Normandy conquered England he gave Stagenhoe to one of his followers, Ranulf brother of Ilger.

The hamlet of Stagenhoe grew up not far from the old Roman road which ran from St Albans through Whitwell to Hitchin. It is intriguing to note that from the evidence of local place-names Walden (St Paul's Walden and King's Walden are adjacent parishes) means 'valley of the Britons'. Perhaps the inhabitants of the settlement were descendants of Iron Age people who lived in this part of the Chilterns before Roman times.

Always a small community, only eight families lived here in Norman times and through plague and climatic changes, its decline was inevitable. There was no church but for centuries Stagenhoe was linked by a lane across Church Field Common to All Saint's Church at St Paul's Walden. Now the site of the original hamlet is lost among the fields and woodland.

In 1315, Thomas de Verdune had here 'a capital messuage with a garden, 180 acres of arable, 2 acres of meadow land and 10 acres of woodland'. No doubt the medieval owners used it as a hunting lodge as the great Hitch Wood lay to the north. About two centuries later Thomas Pilkington, a great Lancashire magnate, held Stagenhoe manor but he was killed when fighting for Richard III and all his lands were confiscated by Henry Tudor. Henry VII then granted Stagenhoe to Thomas, Earl of Derby, but through lack of heirs it again reverted to the Crown. In 1582 Queen Elizabeth disposed of the estate to William Godfrey or Cowper and it was he who thirteen years later sold Stagenhoe to Richard Hale of King's Walden for £1,650.

The Hales, an old Hertfordshire family, were linked with Stagenhoe during the whole of the seventeenth century. When William a son of Richard Hale married Rose, the daughter of Sir George Bond, Stagenhoe was given to her for her lifetime. William and Rose Hale had a large family and it was John their seventh son who inherited Stagenhoe and rebuilt the old manor house in about 1650. Although the Hales had much property at King's Walden and elsewhere some members of the family lived at Stagenhoe. John Hale was knighted in 1660 and became Sheriff of Hertfordshire three years later - therefore his new mansion befitted his status.

Rose, his only daughter, inherited Stagenhoe and after she married Sir John Austin of Hall Place in Kent, her husband commissioned the artist Drapentier to engrave a view of Stagenhoe which was used by Sir Henry Chauncey when he published 'The Historical Antiquities of Hertfordshire' in 1700. The drawing is of a two-storied mansion with seven bays and a basement standing in parkland. The front has a two-storied porch while dormer windows and eight tall chimney pots can be seen at roof level. The stylized plan shows walled yards and gardens with rows of rectangular flower or vegetable beds. There are avenues of trees and one

large tree has a seat built around its trunk. A gardener pushes a wheelbarrow and another man holds a long-handled tool. Double gates lead to the parkland while in the foreground a hunting party is in full pursuit of a stag. Time stands still in this delightful seventeenth century drawing.

When Sir John and Lady Austin died their son Sir Robert sold Stagenhoe to Robert Heysham of London in 1703 and the new owner and his descendants owned the estate for about 130 years.

The eighteenth century saw many changes, for Heysham was a wealthy London merchant and Member of Parliament. As his son had no heirs, a kinsman inherited the property on condition that he took the family name, consequently Giles Thornton-Heysham became the new squire.

According to tradition he ordered the house to be extensively restored but when almost completed in 1737 workmen accidentally caused a fire which burnt down the building. Within three years the old mansion had been rebuilt in the new Palladian style and enlarged to eleven bays. The depth was almost double that of the seventeenth century house erected by John Hale. The only trace of this earlier building can be seen in the cellars where deep niches or wall cupboards are evidence of the previous house.

Giles Thornton-Heysham and his son Robert continued the policy of enlarging the estate and by the end of the 18th century their lands lay not only in St Paul's Walden and King's Walden but also in Bendish nearby.

Unfortunately, the family was by this time in financial straits so the property was mortgaged and the owners moved away. Tenants were put in and some of these included Thomas Whetham between 1760 and 1790, the Carbonnel family who were port wine merchants in the early part of the 19th century and, a few years later, Lord Egmont whose butler died there in 1813. Finally the Heysham connection with Stagenhoe ended and in 1839 Baron Feversham of Duncombe Park, Yorkshire bought the estate for £25,500 from the trustees. Whether he ever stayed at the house is not known but in 1841 only four servants were in residence.

Two years later the property again changed hands for £29,500 and the new owner was Henry Rogers of Norfolk. The Rogers and their sons enjoyed all the advantages of living on a large estate in Victorian times. They kept their own dog kennels and hunted on weekdays while on Sundays they attended St Paul's Walden Church where they sat in their box pew accompanied by their servants.

Squire Rogers improved Stagenhoe Park with new carriage ways and lodge gates. A large ornamental lake was created with small islands, a fountain, waterfall and stew ponds for fish, the soil excavated from the lake being used to build up the terrace in front of the house. It must have been about this time that the main entrance to the house was moved to its present position. Rebuilding of lodge houses, farm buildings and additions to the mansion was undertaken - the bricks and tiles being supplied from the estate kilns.

In the garden one small cast-iron gate leading to the ha-ha can be identified as being made by Barnards, the ornamental iron work specialists of Norwich. The large double gates, known as the Stag Gates leading into the walled garden may have also come from Norfolk. Perhaps it is not a coincidence that Henry Rogers came from the same county and it can be assumed that he patronised a firm whose work he knew.

A broad-stepped terrace led down outside the walled garden to woodland through which a path led to St Paul's Walden Church. On the north side of the walled garden there were two cottages

for the use of servants who did not live in the big house. In the area known as Hare Dell an ice house was built in the field to the right of the present white double gate.

On the drive leading towards Whitwell an iron bridge carried the road over the stream which fed the lake. Part of this drive was known as the Lime Avenue but it appears from earlier maps that both this Avenue and the Chestnut Avenue through the Old Park as well as the walled garden were in existence before the 19th century. The new driveway to the Hitchin road, which visitors now use, was constructed during this period.

An engraving of 1852 shows the house with a balastraded roof and a conservatory at one end. By this time Stagenhoe had been the seat of Henry Rogers for almost ten years. The household included Mr and Mrs Rogers, three of their sons and eleven servants who consisted of two grooms, a housekeeper, lady's maid, two housemaids, a cook, kitchen maid and dairymaid. Their coachman lived at Stagenhoe Lodge with his wife and family. The head gardener was at the Garden Lodge with his wife and four small children while the butler occupied the other Garden Lodge.

Henry Rogers also became a J.P. for Hertfordshire and probably he performed some of his duties at Stagenhoe Park for the room on the left of the entrance hall was known for many years as the Magistrates Room. After Mr Rogers was widowed he continued to live at the Mansion with his barrister son but on his death the son moved back to Norfolk.

In 1869 the estate was bought by James, 14th Earl of Caithness for the sum of £37,700. He was to be the most aristocratic of all the occupants of Stagenhoe. His first wife died in Scotland not long after but he brought his two teenage children to live with him at Stagenhoe. The Earl, his son George and daughter Fanny Georgina had fifteen servants living in together with a governess for Lady Fanny.

The Earl undertook a comprehensive rebuilding programme which not only included the repair of farmhouses on the estate but also alterations to the house. He employed Jeeves a Hitchin builder to enlarge the house. The middle bays were heightened to three storeys and the Earl's coat-of-arms and motto "Commit Thy Work to God" added to the pediment above the windows. Various gate posts around the garden were decorated with stags and it was no doubt during the Earl's occupation that the coronets were added.

While on holiday abroad in 1872 the Earl married the Duchesse de Pomar who was the widow of a Spanish general and of good family. During her stay at Stagenhoe the Countess became well-known for her interest in spiritualism. According to tradition she held seances to which she invited small groups of people from Whitwell. Later, she wrote a book on the subject entitled 'The Mystery of the Ages'.

Before coming to live at Stagenhoe the Earl had been a Lord-in-Waiting to Queen Victoria. The Queen became well acquainted with his enthusiasms and was known to have commented that the Earl "has much to say for himself as he knows so much". He had arranged for her to see a demonstration in Windsor Park of Thomas Rickett's steam car. Two years later in 1860 he drove a similar machine from Inverness to his castle at Barrogill (now the Castle of Mey). The Earl's epic journey, on which he was accompanied by his wife and a friend as passengers and with Thomas Rickett as stoker, was reported in the Scottish press. Unfortunately, the passing of the Red Flag Act in 1865 prevented any further experimentation by the Earl and he turned to other scientific interests which he continued at Stagenhoe.

About eight years after his second marriage in 1881, the Earl planned a lengthy tour of the U.S.A. with his son and daughter. Unexpectedly he was taken ill on the Atlantic steamer and died in a Fifth Avenue hotel in New York. Litigation followed over his English estates and after three years of legal wrangling, half went to his daughter and half to an Australian relative.

During this period the house was let furnished first to Lord Templemore and then to Sir Arthur Sullivan the famous composer. He would have enjoyed his stay at Stagenhoe as when the house was auctioned in 1893, he put in a bid but his offer was too low and the estate went to William Bailey-Hawkins.

The new owner spent considerable sums of money on the property and in 1910 when a gardening journalist visited Stagenhoe he wrote about the gardens in great detail. He described the kitchen garden protected by high walls with a variety of fruit trees such as peaches, nectarines, figs, apricots, plums and cherries. There was a large pool planted round with flowers and shrubs and spanned by a creeper-clad bridge. The whole of this area was encircled with rambling roses trained over poles and connecting chains. A pergola made from oak cut on the estate led to the north and south of the pool. Altogether twelve varieties of roses grew in this part of the walled garden.

The vegetable garden was laid out lower down. Here they grew prize celery, onions and peas while many other vegetables were grown for the household. There were three vineries for grapes and an orchid house while other greenhouses were used for an extensive variety of tender plants. No less than forty flower beds were cut out in the lawn at the front of the house and these contained a wide selection of bedding plants. Garden statues gazed in silent wonderment at the profusion of flowers.

Partly shaded by an ancient Cedar of Lebanon- the old cast iron conservatory now used as an extra drawing room was also decorated with flowers. Great hanging baskets hung from the roof and bougainvilleas climbed among the iron supports. The five broad stone steps leading down the old walk past the Stag Gates had four large ornamental stone vases at each flight, making twenty vases in all each filled with summer bedding plants. At the end of this walk the wilderness garden was bounded on the tower side by an old pleached alley of lime trees. The head gardener, Mr W. Munt, was preplanning this wild area of tall trees, laurels and rhododendrons by thinning out and adding flowering shrubs, ferns and spring flowers. Nearby was a rosery of some antiquity with high thick hedges of nearby ancient rambling roses. Inside the hedges were beds of modern roses and four large standards of Crimson Rambler making the air fragrant with perfume.

By 1910 the lake had become the home for many wild British water plants which had long been left undisturbed. The ancient chestnut avenue leading towards the medieval St Albans Highway used by pilgrims was considered to be well over two hundred years old. All these features combining past and present created a garden which was considered almost unsurpassed in Hertfordshire at that time.

During the time Mr Bailey-Hawkins lived at Stagenhoe he also built White Lodge on the King's Walden road and several other cottages. He was an enthusiastic cricket player and had a pavilion and a cricket ground laid out near the house. Here he entertained his friends and neighbours including the Bowes-Lyon family who lived on the adjoining estate. When he died in 1922 the estate was partly broken up and those fields on the King's Walden side were sold to Major J.F. Harrison.

Sir Henry Whitehead the new owner, kept the remainder of the estate which he maintained with lavish expenditure. The old staircase was removed and the new one installed in the present position. As a result of the alterations which took place during the early part of this century very few of the original fittings or decorations remain in the house. Fortunately the ambitious plan to raze the mansion and replace it with one designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens came to nought. However the architect, Oswald P. Milne, was employed to design for cottages for the estate workmen together with Messrs Starkie Gardner, a well-known specialist wrought-ironwork firm. The same architect was also engaged in designing a Keeper's cottage on the Sandringham Estate for HM King George V as well as cottages on the Chequers Estate for Lord Lee just before he handed Chequers over to be the home of Prime Ministers.

On the death of her husband, Lady Whitehead in 1931 ordered the property to be sold. The detailed sale catalogue included 80 acres of woodland, Stagenhoe Bottom Farm, Home Farm, various cottages, water cress beds, the lake with a boathouse, a power station for the house and the cricket field.

The Dewar family who took over the property was probably the last to run Stagenhoe as a large estate and its subsequent history is of recent memory. During the last war the house became a maternity home, then a preparatory school for boys who must have revelled in their surroundings. When the lease ran out the school closed and the new owner unfortunately destroyed much of the estate by selling off trees, garden ornaments, wall panelling and other moveable items. His stay was brief but the gardens fell into disuse and many of its features have disappeared for ever. The house endures and the history of Stagenhoe since 1969 has been the history of the Sue Ryder Home. That is another story, a story of hope for the future of its occupants who truly live up to the motto 'Commit Thy Work to God',