



SOMERHILL HISTORY

The land on which Somerhill stands was originally part of the Manor of South Frith. By the mid 16th century this had reverted to the Crown. Queen Elizabeth I gave this land to Frances, only daughter of her Secretary of State and Spymaster, Sir Francis Walsingham, who died in 1590. (Sir Francis uncovered the famous Babbington Plot in 1587, which implicated Mary, Queen of Scots.) Frances was married three times: first, to Sir Philip Sidney, of nearby Penshurst, the famous soldier, poet and courtier, who died young in 1586. She then married the young, ambitious Earl of Essex, who paid with his life for his unpopularity with the ageing Queen Elizabeth. (He was executed on Tower Hill in 1601 after an unsuccessful military expedition in Ireland.) Frances' third marriage was to Richard Burgh, Earl Clanrickard. In the early years of King James I's reign they built the present house. Rainwater heads initialled RCF (for Richard and Frances Clanrickard) on the front of the house bear the dates 1611 and 1613. A first draft of a plan in the Sir John Soane Museum suggests that John Thorpe was the architect. (Thorpe designed houses for a number of families in England around that time.)

Although Somerhill is clearly Jacobean in style – like the huge house of the Sackvilles at nearby Knole, Sevenoaks – the design of Somerhill follows architectural rules fashionably derived from Andrea di Pietro, alias Palladio, in his famous classical renaissance villa at Vicenza, near Venice. Thus for its time, 1611, – the same year as the famous King James Bible was published – the house was one of the most innovative in the country. One of the most remarkable survivals at Somerhill is the complete set of original ornamented lead rainwater heads and rain pipes. The rainwater heads are at their most elaborate on the front of the mansion, some dating from 1611 or 1613 and many include the initials of Robert and Francis Clanrickard.

There could well have been a small house on or near the site of the present mansion. (Closer study of the now derelict 16th century walled garden, and of the foundations and cellars might give more clues). Certainly Richard and Frances chose a site with commanding vistas and natural dignity. Tunbridge Wells, of course, did not then exist (the Chalybeate Spring was first seen by Lord North in 1609). Tonbridge was then a huge parish (the largest in Kent) stretching from the foot of the Greensand (Sevenoaks) Ridge to the Sussex border.

The Clanrickard's son Ulick took up arms for Charles I and after the Royalist defeat at Naseby in 1645, Somerhill was sequestered by Parliament and Ulick forced into exile. Parliament voted the Estate to John Bradshaw(e) who had presided over the Court which condemned Charles I to death in 1649. (His is the first signature on the famous death warrant.) Ulick sought to reclaim the house in a deal with Cromwell in 1653 in exchange for estates forfeited as part of the infamous Cromwellian Settlement in Ireland.

Eventually, with the Restoration of Charles II, the Estate was returned to its rightful owner, Ulick's only daughter, the eccentric Lady Muskerry. Soon after that, the new Tunbridge Wells became fashionable with London nobility. Before adequate lodgings were developed around the Pantiles, Somerhill, like certain other nearby big houses, hosted many gentry visiting the Wells to socialise and to take the waters. Lady Muskerry, a notable hostess, often it seems, took to wearing a cushion under her dress to make believe that she was pregnant.

The ghost of a lady in white is believed by some to appear around the Julian staircase on the north eastern side of the Victorian wing.

Lady Muskerry's second marriage was to John Viscount Purbeck. His son inherited the estate but wasted his inheritance in gambling and riotous living such that he had to sell the house in 1698 to pay off his debts. The estate eventually came into the possession of the Woodgate family: their name is remembered in nearby Woodgate Way, which skirts south Tonbridge. A portrait of one William Woodgate remains in the Library.

One famous visitor to Somerhill in the mid 18th century was Horace Walpole. On the 5th August 1752, and full of the romantic spirit, Walpole wrote to his friend, Richard Beatty ..." we climbed up a hill to see Summer Hill ... it stands high, commands a vast landscape, beautifully wooded and has quantities of large old trees to shelter itself..."

Sixty years later, in 1811, J M W Turner painted the same scene, apparently for the Woodgate family. His viewpoint was the lakeside looking up through the trees towards the house on the ridge. The honey-coloured stonework is bathed in warm, soft evening light. The Woodgates were hit hard by the agricultural depression at the end of the Napoleonic Wars and sold in 1816. (The victorious Duke of Wellington declined to buy Somerhill dissatisfied with its fox hunting). James Alexander, the new owner, obtained Turner's painting: later it was sold and ended up in the National Gallery of Scotland! The painting is probably the most exquisite example of Turner's transformation of the tradition of the topographical house portrait.

In 1849, Somerhill estate (which once covered 6,500 acres – 2600 ha) was bought by Sir Isaac Lyon Goldsmid, Bt., a rich City banker. He passed the house to his second son Frederick in 1859 and then it went to Frederick's elder son (Sir) Julian in 1866. Julian's brave attempt at providing a male heir – he had 8 daughters – eventually resulted in a virtual doubling of the house's living accommodation. Building work begun in 1879 (according to dated rainwater heads) and was completed as the (new) Stable Court –with clock tower – in Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee year, 1897. The old (Jacobean) stable court became servants rooms and domestic offices. The terraces and lawns were added at this stage and the estate took on much of its present appearance. Today, the house is the

second largest in Kent, after Knole, covering about 2½ acres (1 hectare) and with around 270 rooms.

In due course, the property then passed to Sir Osmond D'Avigdor Goldsmid since his grandmother had been a daughter of Sir Isaac. Sir Osmond died in 1940 and was succeeded by his elder son (Sir) Henry.

During the family's residence at Somerhill, there was some lavish entertaining (Sir Henry's wife, Lady Rosemary, once likened the place to a hotel, except the guests never paid!). Occasionally guests included royalty, and stories abound about the time spent at the house by David Niven, Enoch Powell, Sir Hugh Casson, Sir John Betjeman and others. Sir Hugh, a good family friend, designed the small changing pavilion by the swimming pool.

In the closing years of the family's residence, a much-loved daughter, Sarah, was drowned off the South Coast. Marc Chagall, the famous artist, known to the family, was commissioned to design stunning new memorial windows in nearby Tudeley Church. There is also a commemorative stone in the gardens beyond Yardley Court School's war memorial lychgate.

On Sir Henry's death in 1976, Somerhill passed to his sole surviving daughter, Chloe - now Chloe Teacher - who lives at Hadlow Place Farm with her family. Lady Rosemary died in 1997.

During the early years of the Goldsmids, the main Jacobean house was extensively repaired, altered and refurbished. The upstairs Salon - which originally had a barrel ceiling - was given a flat Jacobean style ceiling and a suite of maids and nursery rooms inserted above. The room was also extensively re-panelled. The Entrance Hall below was similarly much re-panelled and the ornate Italian plaster ceiling renovated. The Jacobean style chimneypiece in the adjoining room was retained (its features being in reverse of those also seen on a fine chimneypiece at Knole). This chimneypiece of polychrome marble probably dates from circa 1878 although subsequent visitors to the house have said that it was brought over in the 1930's from Italy. The Library, running 30 metres (93 feet) - the full length of the south wing and reputedly the second longest room in Kent, after the Gallery at Knole, was also refurbished.

During the summer months of 1912 there is a mention of an Army Camp being held (in bell tents) in the grounds and in World War II Somerhill was known as POW Camp No. 40. The Army occupied the land from 1940 until 1945. In 1948 homeless squatters occupied parts of the area, and the Army Colonel in charge "locked the squatters in" apparently assisted by old barbed wire. In 1949 the local council had discussions regarding the land, and mention is made of there being at least 40 huts of varying sizes.

The house, after latter years of gentle neglect, was sold, with the gardens and parkland in 1980. Thereafter the property changed hands three times in eight years, during which neglect, decay, storm damage and vandalism took a large toll. The first new owner in an act of ignorance bordering on vandalism removed

the carved wooden hall screen and over-stained large areas of panelling in the Entrance Hall and upstairs Salon.

What we see already restored today is little short of a miracle. From 1989-91, the house was extensively repaired and restored (at great cost, but eventually with some help from English Heritage, as the house is Grade I). Incidentally, some 12 miles of cables were used in the re-wiring.

The main contractors were Durtnells of Brasted, near Sevenoaks – the oldest building firm in Britain. In 1991, as work drew to a close, the family firm celebrated its 400th anniversary with a big party at Somerhill – one of a number of local houses which the firm very likely helped to build in the first place!

Today, the estate covers 152 acres (60 ha). There are three schools on site, comprising a “one-stop” independent school campus, overseen by The Schools at Somerhill Charitable Trust. Restoration and development needs for the schools use have to continue to be kept in careful balance: much discussion is required with conservation experts and bureaucracy inevitably encountered, but the building has proved remarkably suited to its new role. The huge neo-Jacobean Victorian wing has many rooms adapted as classrooms. These are occupied by Yardley Court School, which celebrated its centenary in 1998, and by Somerhill Pre-Prep. The Old Stable Court contains offices and the main mansion houses Derwent Lodge School. Derwent Lodge was founded by the Hon Helen Gully in 1952 and takes its name from the house in Tunbridge Wells where the school was located until it moved to Somerhill in 1993.

The rooms on the top floor beneath the restored roof of the mansion house the CDT, Computer, Art Room and classrooms having opened in September 1998 .

The former Grain Store has been sensitively restored as classrooms for Yardley Court School and some of the old Stables are preserved and are now used as a maintenance workshop.

The central span between Old Stable Courtyard and Stable Courtyard was reinstated towards the end of 2000 ready for occupation in the January term 2001. This work under the watchful eye of English Heritage and Tunbridge Wells Planning Department was carried out at a cost of approximately £720,000. This building now provides purpose built accommodation for the Pre-Prep, classrooms for the senior schools and administrative offices.

The Schools at Somerhill now thrive with over 600 pupils: yet this fine historic building was nearly lost beyond repair during the 1980's through crude speculation, bureaucratic wrangling and lack of proper recognition of its heritage and potential. What we see now points up the opportunities for restoring and re-using very large historic houses and their grounds. Many hopes, prayers, team work and sheer hard slog have produced what we see now.

The formal gardens are, with the approval of English Heritage, based on a low maintenance plan, the formal rose garden at the front of the house being the only one retained. It is said that the coffin in the Rose Garden is from Tonbridge Priory which was no longer used after 1530. When the coffins were dug up to make way for the railway it is believed that James Alexander, owner of Somerhill at the time, liked it and acquired it for the garden.

In 2000, planning permission was obtained for a scheme that enabled Somerhill to build a multi-purpose hall on the top sports' terrace. Such a facility greatly enhances the educational opportunities available to each child. The total project costing £1.4 million was completed in the summer term 2002. A further addition to the facilities was the completion of the synthetic grass pitch in 2003.

The lake bridge at the southern end of the estate which was listed by Tunbridge Wells Borough Council in 1998 as a Monument at Risk was in May 2004 refurbished at a cost of over £170,000 with a grant from the Borough Council of £32,000. It is from this lake that Turner painted Somerhill.

In April 2006 permission was granted to build a dining room and indoor swimming pool in the walled garden. The enabling work to the actual wall of the walled garden commenced in the spring of 2007 with the main project commencing in the summer. The school moved into the purpose built dining hall in October 2008 and the pool in January 2009.

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