

HISTORY OF HURSLEY

A talk by Dave Key, 20th March 2014

When HADs worked at Hursley Park in the summer of 2012, we were hosted by Dave Key. We were impressed by Dave's knowledge and immediately thought about getting him to give a talk on Hursley's history. This finally happened on 20th March. Dave is a local man and is an employee of IBM, current occupants of the Hursley Estate.

Hursley is part of the manor of Merdon, which is located on an Iron Age hill fort. Much later, in 643 AD, the manor of "Meretune" was granted to the Bishop of Winchester. The site later became a deer park which was ditched and fenced and contained a hunting lodge - the enclosure survives to this day. In 1138 a castle was built at Merdon by Bishop Henry of Blois but this had a very short lifetime as Henry II ordered it to be "slighted" in 1155.

After the Reformation, the Merdon estate was granted to Sir Philip Hoby and he built a house, located on the lawn behind the current mansion, which has completely disappeared. However, in dry summers you can see the footprint of the building on the grass, although it does not seem to fit the surviving illustrations.

Eventually the estate passed to Dorothy Major, wife of Richard Cromwell, Lord Protector, the successor to his father, Oliver Cromwell. Richard had all his lands taken away at the Restoration but was able to use Hursley as it was held by his wife. Richard was exiled in 1660, leaving Dorothy behind. When Dorothy died in 1675, Richard's son, Oliver, returned to claim the estate and a long dispute over ownership ensued. Eventually the Cromwells gained the estate and Richard was able to return. After Richard's death, his daughters sold the estate to William Heathcote (1718).

In 1721, William had the Tudor mansion dismantled and a new house in the "Queen Anne" style (even though it was past her time) built nearby. This forms the core of the present building. The landscaped gardens, laid out by Stephen Switzer survive mostly intact to this day.

In 1888 the estate was sold, furnished, to Joseph Baxendale. The house was photographed by Country Life in 1902 and from that we can get a very good idea of how it had looked in the 19th Century. In the same year the house was sold to George Cooper and it underwent a major rebuild with new wings added and a lavish refurbishment. Country Life revisited in 1905 and photographed the updated house.

In 1914 Sir George offered the estate to the military. A massive camp was established, including a 350-bed military hospital. After the war, the house returned to the family and the walled garden was redesigned with help from Gertrude Jekyll in 1925.



The estate was requisitioned in World War 2, when the design and production of Vickers Supermarine, including the Spitfire, was moved from bombed Southampton. A lot of ancillary buildings were constructed for their use. In 1943 the site was again turned over to the army and "D-Day Camps" were established, although Supermarine remained until 1956.

Following Supermarine's withdrawal, the house and gardens were left in a dilapidated state and the Cooper family did not have the resources for restoration work. In 1958, IBM took over and Hursley became the site of a great deal of modern computer development, including colour monitors and cash points. IBM's involvement continues to this day.

Thanks for the talk Dave – it was well worth the wait!