

LITTLECOTE FACT SHEET

To the west of Hungerford is land previously belonging to Littlecote House. This splendid Tudor manor house was a Parliamentary stronghold during the Civil War, and still contains part of a fine collection of Cromwellian armour, much of which was removed to the Royal Armouries Museum at Leeds.

The present mansion stands on the site of an earlier 13th century medieval house inhabited by the de Calstone family of Calne, Wiltshire from around 1290. When William Darrell married Elizabeth de Calstone in 1415, he inherited the 13th century house.



Littlecote House

The present Tudor manor house (above) was mainly built between 1490 and 1520 by Sir George Darrell. It is probably the earliest brick house in Wiltshire (the south front, including the Great Hall, was completed in 1592).

It may have been from Littlecote that Henry VIII, in 1535, courted Jane Seymour who was a descendant of Sir George Darrell. Jane Seymour's father Sir John Seymour lived at Wolfhall near Burbage, he was the son of John Seymour and Elizabeth Darrell, daughter of Sir George Darrell.

Jane Seymour became Henry VIII's third wife when they married on 30 May 1536, soon after Anne Boleyn was beheaded. Jane's romance with King Henry is recorded in one of the stained glass roundels high in a window in the Great Hall, where Henry and Jane's initials are wired in a lover's knot, over which is a little Cupid's head.

After the death of Henry VIII in 1547, Sir George Darrell was able to purchase the Manor of Chilton Foliat and Littlecote, but he died soon afterwards in 1549. He was succeeded at Littlecote by his son William, often referred to as "Wild Darrell".

The last of the Darrell owners is connected with several scandals and the house's resident ghost story. William Darrell's father had left the house to his mistress Mary Danyell, but Darrell was able to recover it when he came of age in 1560. He spent lavishly, left his debts unpaid, and went to law with most of his neighbours, acquiring enemies in the process. He sold or pawned all the family plate as a result of his mode of living. He was involved in a scandalous affair with Lady Ann Hungerford, his neighbour at Hungerford Park; when Sir Walter Hungerford sued for divorce, she was acquitted, and Sir Walter sent to prison.

Some years later, Mother Barnes, a midwife from Great Shefford, recalled being brought blind-folded in 1575 to the childbed of a lady, with a gentleman standing by who commanded her to save the life of the mother, but who (as soon as the child was born) threw it into the fire. Mother Barnes did not name or indicated either Darrell or Littlecote, but his enemies quickly ascribed the murder to him. He was brought before the Commissioners at Newbury, and he and his servants were charged with murder. He fled to Court, owing the Earl of Pembroke £3,000. Darrell's financial troubles increased, and he mortgaged Littlecote, first to Sir Thomas Bromley, and then to Sir John Popham, the Attorney General, who is said to have saved him from prosecution.

It is said that he lived very luxuriously whilst at Court, having fish, game and venison sent to him every day from the Littlecote estate. He remained in Court until 1st October 1589. He died of a riding accident (some say because he saw the ghost of a child) and he is buried at St. Lawrence Church, Hungerford.

Sir John Popham had been Speaker of the House of Commons from 1580 to 1583, and Attorney General from 1 June 1581 to 1592. He presided over the trial of Mary, Queen of Scots in 1587, sentencing her to death. On 2 June 1592, whilst owner of Littlecote, he was appointed Lord Chief Justice of England, a post he held until June 1607. During this time he presided over the trials of Sir Walter Raleigh (1603) and the conspirators of the Gunpowder Plot, including Guy Fawkes (1606). He sentenced Fawkes to death.

The Popham and Leybourn-Popham family were to remain Lords of the Manor of Chilton Foliat, thus owning the Littlecote Estate and the Bear in Hungerford, for over 300 years

During the English Civil War, Littlecote was a stronghold of the Parliamentarian Army. Colonel Alexander Popham was an opponent of King Charles I and his garrison at Littlecote wore buff coats. However, Colonel Popham appeared to have changed his allegiance by 1659 when he supported General Monk in the restoration of Charles II and was elected a member of the Council of State which took upon itself the administration of the Government up to the Restoration.

He received a Royal pardon for his involvement in the war and subsequently entertained Charles II to “a costlie dinner” when he visited Littlecote on the 21st September 1663.

In 1688, William of Orange, on his way from Torbay to London to claim the throne of England, stayed at Littlecote at the time of his meeting with the Commissioners of King James II at The Bear in Hungerford.

Royal visitors: -

1520	King Henry VIII
1601	Queen Elizabeth I
1603	King James I and Princess Anne of Denmark
1613	Queen Ann of Denmark
1663	The Duke of York (later James II)
1663	Charles II and Queen Katherine of Braganza
1668	William, Prince of Orange
1923	Princess Marie Louise
1940	King George VI
1941	The Duke of Gloucester
1941	King George VI and Queen Elizabeth

The Popham's and their descendants the Leyborne Popham's owned Littlecote until 1929 when it was let to a series of tenants including: -

Vernon James Watney, wealthy brewer and antiquarian.
Leopold and Heinrich Hirsch, both bankers.
Gerald Lee Bevan, stockbroker

In 1922 the house was tenanted by Sir Ernest Salter Wills (the well known tobacco and cigarette manufacturer) Sir Ernest purchased Littlecote from Hugh Leyborne-Popham in 1929.

During the Second World War the US 101st Airborne Division requisitioned the house and its grounds and became home to the regimental staff, regimental headquarters company of the 1st Battalion, 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment. (There is an exhibition about the 101st Airborne Division in the house).

Since the Second World War:

Sir Ernest Wills died in 1958 and the estate was inherited by his younger son Major George Seton Wills who opened the house to public viewing. George passed Littlecote to his son David Seton Wills on his 21st birthday in 1960.

In 1985 Littlecote was sold to Peter de Savary. Littlecote was closed to the public between 1991-1993 and re-opened as a “theme park”. Warner Hotel Group acquired the house and estate and now operate it as a large country house hotel (202 rooms in 2011).

http://www.hungerfordvirtualmuseum.co.uk/Places/Great_Estates/Littlecote