

History of the Estate

0118 9 74 75 76

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Easthampstead Park is a Victorian mansion on the edge of Wokingham and Bracknell in the English county of Berkshire. The house is a Grade II listed building “of historic and architectural interest, in Jacobean style with curved gables, pierced stone parapet and stone frontispiece of naive classicism”.*

The estate originally extended to 5,000 acres (20km²) and has been used for many purposes over the centuries, including a park reserved for royal hunting, part of a large private estate, a refuge during the war, a teacher training college, a nuclear bunker and a comprehensive school!

Easthampstead Park is now primarily used as a conference centre, hosting various meetings, events and team-building, as well as wedding receptions and civil marriage ceremonies.

* Description for listed status with the Department for the Environment



The History of Easthampstead Park, Wokingham

Royal Hunting Lodge (635 – 1600)

Records of Easthampstead Park date back to at least the 7th century, when King Cynegils of Wessex had a home here. In 635AD, the new ruler of Northumbria, King Oswald, travelled south to Easthampstead and persuaded Cynegils to accept Christianity.

Later, the Domesday book of 1066 records the village as “Lacenestede”, meaning ‘Slow Stream Homestead’. At the time, the Manor was held by Westminster Abbey and was assessed at “5 hides worth 50s”. In the 13th century Richard, Abbot of Westminster (1223-36) granted the manor to the Prior of Hurley for an annual rent of 100s, with further records of activity at the manor in 1276 and 1285.

Following the Domesday record, the name seems to have adjusted to “Yethamstead”, meaning ‘Gate Homestead’ – referring to its location as the Gate into Windsor Forest.

In 1329, Gilbert de Ellesfield exchanged his estates in Wiltshire with the king for the manor of Easthampstead but only 3 years later he was removed by Sir William Trussel and the manor reverted back to the Crown and remained in the king's hands.

A Royal Hunting Lodge was built at “Easthampsted Parke” in 1350 for King Edward III, a sub-division of the larger “Easthamsted Walke”. This Lodge was situated south of the current mansion on what is now the golf course. There are records of visits to the Lodge by Edward III's descendants including Richard II, Henry VI and Richard III – with many orders and decrees issued here.

In 1501, King Henry VII used the Royal Lodge at Easthampstead Park to arrange the marriage of his eldest son Arthur to the King of Spain's daughter, Catalina de Aragón (Catherine of Aragon). Arthur had been writing numerous letters over the past two years to his bride-to-be, although at this stage they had never met. It was from the Lodge that Henry VII and Arthur rode out to meet Catherine in person for the first time at

either Finchampstead Ridges, around 4 miles away or Dogmersfield, Hampshire. Spanish etiquette would not allow the Prince to see his bride unveiled at first, but this was apparently overcome as they danced together in the evening. Only ten days later the young couple were married in St. Paul's Cathedral – he was a mere 15 years old, whilst she was barely nine months older.

Arthur's younger brother, Henry VIII, first saw the face of Catherine at Easthampstead Park whilst dancing with her on the same evening, and following Arthur's tragic death after only 6 months of marriage, was betrothed to his older brother's widow – he was around 12 years old at the time. At the age of just 17, Henry married Catherine on 11th June 1509 and was crowned as King less than two weeks later. Unfortunately Catherine failed to produce a male heir for the King, and in the summer of 1531 Catherine returned (or was banished) to Easthampstead Park when a messenger from the King confirmed their divorce.

In 1548, Sir John Mason became keeper of Easthampstead Walk, before King James I enlarged and improved the park at a cost of £250 (around £50,000 today).

Norden's map of Windsor Forest, produced in 1607, shows that Easthampstead Walk



14th century belt buckle found on the estate

The Trumbull Manuscripts

The Trumbull inheritance included 380 volumes of manuscripts that had been collected by Sir William Trumbull (3rd) during his travels. This archive featured letters by Stuart kings, Phillip II of Spain, Marie de Medici (Queen consort of France), Sir Francis Bacon, and the poets: John Donne, John Dryden, Elijah Fenton, Alexander Pope and Georg Rudolf Weckherlin.

In the summer of 1989, the archive was sent to Sotheby's in London to be auctioned, with an estimate of £2.5million. However, on the eve of the November sale a deal was done with the Inland Revenue, the auction was cancelled and the British Library took possession of the papers.

1st Marquis of Downshire

Away from Easthampstead Park, in 1573 a Knight under the Earl of Essex, Sir Moyses Hill, arrived in Ireland and in 1611 gained possession of the village of Cromlyn, later

renamed to Hillsborough – “Hill's Borough”. His son, Wills Hill, was created Earl of Hillsborough in 1751 and Viscount Kilwarlin in 1752. He was a politician and served as Secretary of State for the Colonies from 1768 to 1772 – a critical period leading to the American Revolution. During this time in 1771, the future founding father, Benjamin Franklin, spent five days in Hillsborough as the guest of Wills Hill – Franklin's autobiography shows that they did not establish a good rapport. In 1753, Wills Hill had a son, Arthur, and in 1789 Wills Hill became the 1st Marquis of Downshire.

2nd Marquis of Downshire

Back at Easthampstead Park, Mary Trumbull and Martin Sandys had their only child, Mary Sandys (1764-1836). In 1786 she married Arthur Hill, who became the 2nd Marquis of Downshire upon his father's death in 1793, whilst Mary became the Marchioness of Downshire.



Marquis of Downshire (1760-1860)

3rd Marquis of Downshire

Arthur Blundell Sandys Trumbull Hill (1788-1845) became the 3rd Marquis of Downshire on the death of his father in 1801. He was educated at Eton and Christ Church in Oxford, and in 1811 married Mary Windsor, who bore him a son a year later. In 1831 he was made a Knight of the Order of St. Patrick. He is known to have been a hugely popular man – with 3,800 people attending his 21st birthday celebrations.

4th Marquis of Downshire

Arthur Wills Blundell Sandys Trumbull Windsor Hill (1812-1868), like his father, was made a Knight of the Order of St. Patrick in 1859. During these years, the Downshire family owned land throughout the country – particularly in Ireland where their estates extended to over 115,000 acres (465km²). He was known as the “Big Marquis” and gave £20,000 (over £1m) during the Irish famine for the relief of the poor, as well as establishing several buildings for the poor in the Easthampstead area.

In 1860, the fourth Marquis demolished the old house, leaving only a stable block that is to be seen as the low white building on the golf course. The present mansion was completed around 1864. At about the same time as the present mansion was erected, the Marchioness provided for the rebuilding of Easthampstead Parish Church (St. Michael's), where there are memorials to the Trumbull and Downshire families and also to the poet, Fenton.

5th Marquis of Downshire

Arthur Wills Blundell Trumbull Sandys Roden Hill (1844-1874)

6th Marquis of Downshire

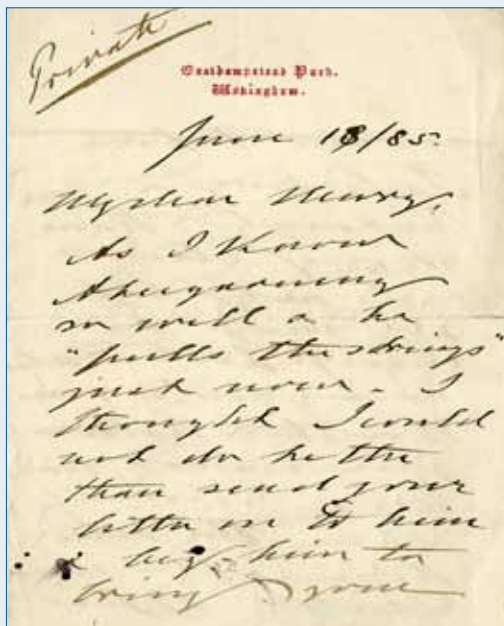
Arthur Wills John Wellington Trumbull Blundell Hill (1871-1918)

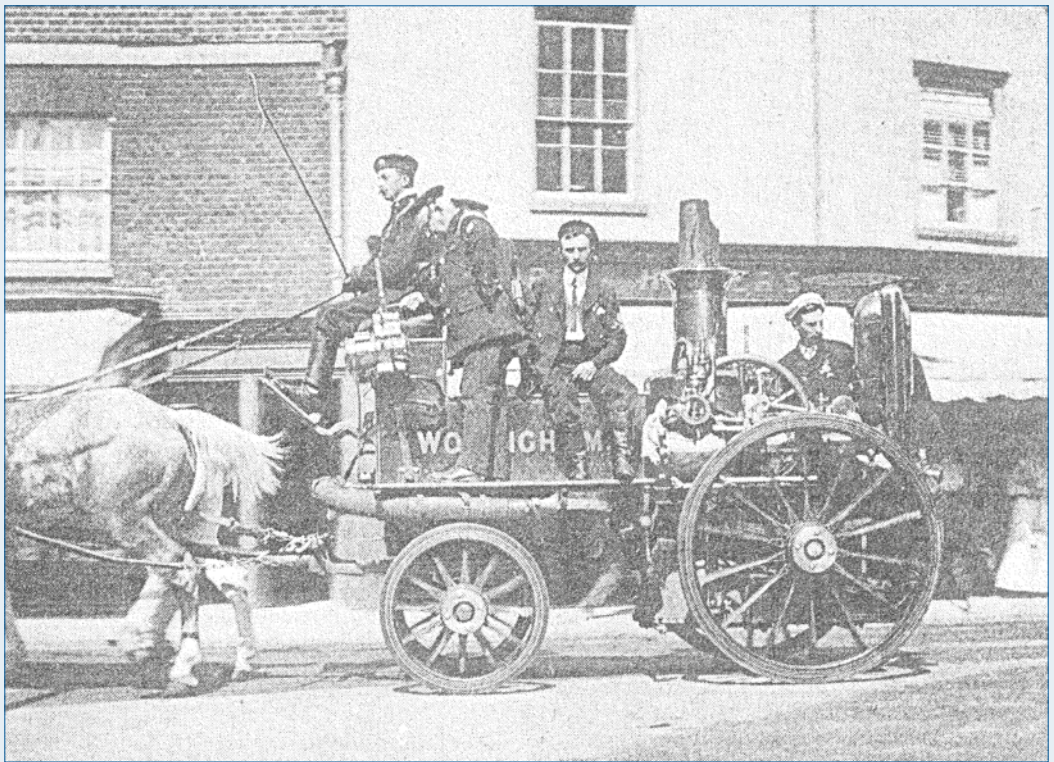
Following the death of the 5th Marquis in 1874, Easthampstead Park was used by Royalty on at least two recorded occasions, with Queen

Victoria's son Edward and his wife (who were the Prince and Princess of Wales at the time) staying in the current mansion for Ascot week in both 1877 and 1885. During these visits, the main ballroom (now known as the Downshire Room) was used for dancing and entertaining of the Prince's guests. Whilst staying in June 1885, the Prince wrote a letter consisting of three pages. In part the letter states:

“Private. My dear Henry. As I know Abergavenny so well as he ‘pulls the strings’ just now. I thought I would not do better than send your letter on to him and beg him to bring your name before Salisbury... you must not lose a moment when the new admiralty comes into office – as his government is bound to be of short duration, you will have to ‘make hay whilst the sun shines’... “

The future King was right in his prediction; the Marquis of Salisbury became the Prime Minister the month after this letter was written, but remained in office only seven months. Prince Edward would later become King Edward VII.





6th Marquis of Downshire (driving) - circa 1910

Whilst the Downshire family were very active in Ireland, the 6th Marquis lived principally on the estate, until his death in 1918. These were the great days of Easthampstead Park, especially during Royal Ascot week each year. The sixth Marquis and his wife lived a life of high society – in 1896 Lady Downshire is recorded attending a wedding in Belgrave Square, London, “looking very stately in black velvet and diamonds”, whilst in 1898 the Marquis and his wife are recorded as attending a ball at the United States embassy in London with many dignitaries. It was around this time that a menagerie was established near the Orangery Room, including monkeys and a brown bear!

In early 1902, quite a scandal was created when the Marquis started divorce proceedings after it is believed that his first wife (Katherine Hare) cheated on him. Their divorce was granted in April 1902, when the New York

Times reported “Lord Downshire testified to the stormy scenes which had occurred between himself and his wife. A pathetic letter, written by the Marchioness, was read in court. In it she appealed to the Marquis, for the sake of the past, to speak one word of farewell and say he would try to forgive her, adding that they need never meet again. The Marquis ignored the appeal.” It is particularly evident that his wife had been having an affair, as she remarried only a few months later in November 1902.

April 1903 – In Dublin, the Marquis was in court once again, this time charged with “having negligently mismanaged his motor car, with the result that Elizabeth Magee, a widow aged sixty-five, was knocked down and seriously injured”. The article continues, “Evidence was given that the car was at the time travelling at the rate of six miles per hour only, that the Marquis sounded the horn several times in

warning, and that everything was done to prevent the accident". Unfortunately it appears that Mrs Magee died from her injuries, however it was deemed to have been an "unfortunate accident" and the Marquis was released.

December 1903 – the Marquis was in court for a third time, this time as the victim of a con artist. An article in the New York Times went with the title "The Innocent Marquis: Lord Downshire's Surprising Business Inexperience". The article went on to describe how the Marquis had been swindled by a man named Arthur Sebright into signing two bills of exchange, each for £5,750 (a total equivalent to over £650,000 today). Mr Sebright was found guilty and sentenced to 18 months "hard labour".

In May 1907, the sixth Marquis remarried Evelyn Foster, who became Lady Downshire.

7th Marquis of Downshire

Arthur Wills Percy Wellington Blundell Trumbull Hill (1894-1989)

Around the turn of the century, a scullery maid fell into boiling water in the laundry room (now the Stables conference room). She was carried to another room where she died – can you imagine a patient being moved in such circumstances today?

The great days of Easthampstead Park continued through the first half of the 20th century, including a miniature steam railway in the grounds around 1928 – and the Marquis even donated the first motor ambulance to the town of Bracknell. The railway included a miniature replica of the famous "Royal Scot" steam train - it was later moved to a south coast resort before being sold and transported to America. It has recently been discovered to have returned to the Royal Victoria Railway museum in Hampshire.

During the World War II, the Marquis moved out to allow up to 600 boys from St. Pauls in Hammersmith to use it as their school. The boys were billeted in Crowthorne with great assistance from the Women's Institute, and used Wellington College for their laboratories



Lady Downshire (Evelyn Foster) with her dogs - circa 1927



Fire takes hold of the mansion in May 1947

Second World War (1939-1945)

and playing fields. One of the tutors, Mr Tyson, estimated that he cycled 18,000 miles to and from Easthampstead Park during the war years.

A Mr Trewinnard was a St. Pauls boy and was on air raid patrol duty when a German JU88 bomber came in along the main drive, circled round, ran again and released a salvo of bombs above the main house – thankfully they ended up falling harmlessly onto what is now the golf course.

After the War - Fire!

After the war, the park and manor was acquired by Mr E G Elcock, a company director from Bracknell – with an insurance valuation of £150,000 (nearly £4m today).

A fire started in the early evening of 24th May

1947 in one of the second floor rooms. It was discovered by the secretary, Miss Upton, who was about to start playing tennis with her sister at the time. They had keys to the mansion and attempted to fight the fire, but quickly realised the hopelessness of the task. Wokingham fire service were on the scene at 8.10pm – only 8 minutes after the call was put in. The roof was well alight and they immediately set to work to couple their hoses to the two fire hydrants – to only discover that the 50,000 gallon water tank they were connected to was empty! A message was sent to the inspector of the Mid-Wessex Water Company in accordance with Fire Flash Orders (carried over from the Second World War). An instruction was subsequently flashed on the screen at the Ritz cinema in Wokingham, where Mr E J Ewington was watching the show, telling him to go to Easthampstead Park Manor immediately. He arrived within 10 minutes and



Removing historic works of art during the fire



The boys of St Pauls school at Easthampstead Park during the war years

was able to open the “wash-out” which made a considerable supply of water available. The fire was eventually brought under control in the early hours of Saturday morning after around 5 hours ablaze. Amazingly, the stained glass window was found to be undamaged.

In late 1947 Easthampstead Park was bought under a compulsory purchase order by Berkshire County Council for £20,000 – despite the top floor being badly damaged (around £0.5million at today's valuation). The mansion was converted to become the Easthampstead Park College - a female teacher training college. In the 1960's, a “radical” plan was proposed to make the mansion into the University of Bracknell - although this never materialised.

During the 1960's the mansion was extended and the cellar was converted under authority from the Secretary of State to become an emergency nuclear bunker for Berkshire.

In 1968, the room now known as the Stables conference room was converted into a chapel for the college. It used to be three rooms, but they knocked down walls, levelled the floor and covered it with cement. Money for the project was raised in a variety of ways by students including carol singing, concerts, a garden fete and jumble sales – raising a sum of £892 to pay for the works (around £10,000 today). At the same time, Easthampstead Park College was amalgamated with Bulmershe College to form the Berkshire College of Education.

In August 1972, the college was closed and was converted into a combined adult residential college and a local comprehensive school - a unique combination.

The centre ran in this mode for 10 years until policy dictated that the adult residential centre achieve a break-even financial status. This gradually developed into a fully operational conference centre alongside the school, which

After the War (1947 onwards)



The Stained Glass Window at Easthampstead Park, showing the Downshire family Coats of Arms

The Stained Glass Window

eventually moved to new premises in 1994. Space occupied by the school was taken over by Berkshire's Education Centre until 1998, when the County Council was split into unitary authorities.

The park, now reduced to 60 acres, has a rich variety of trees and abundant wild birds and animals. Inside the mansion, rooms are named after the Downshire, Trumbull, Sandys and Hill families, or to commemorate various associations with the College of Education.

Easthampstead Park is now primarily used as a conference centre hosting various meetings, events and team-building activities, as well as wedding receptions and civil marriage ceremonies. Further information is available from our website: www.eastpark.co.uk

The centre is now owned and managed by Bracknell Forest Council.



6th Marquis of Downshire



Easthampstead Park, 1935