

History of Down Hall

Down Hall was one of ten ancient medieval manors in the Parish of Hatfield, later known as Hatfield Broad Oak, which at the time of the Norman conquest, was already a well-established Saxon settlement. Popular for hunting in the neighbouring forest, the royal estate came to be known as Hatfield Regis, or King's Hatfield, partly to distinguish it from Hatfield Peverel, also in Essex. At one time a royal estate of Harold II, Hatfield fell into the possession of William the Conqueror after the battle of Hastings in 1066.

At around nearly 9,000 acres (14 sq miles) Hatfield Regis was one of the largest parishes in Essex that at the time of the reign of Edward the Confessor (1042-1066), was already referred to as an ancient demesne - a demesne being all the land retained and managed by a lord of the manor under the feudal system for his own use and occupation or support. We know from records that at this time, Hatfield was formerly divided into four quarters: Town Quarter, Wood Row Quarter, Hatfield Heath Quarter, and Broomsend Quarter, across which these ten manors would have been sited.

In the Norman French of ancient deeds, Down Hall is referred to as La Donne, and remarkably from surviving Anglo Saxon records, we find mention of it as Dunhall. During the reign of the Confessor, it belonged to Ulwin, Thegn of Edmund Ætheling. A Thegn was a person ranking between an Earl and an ordinary freeman, holding land of the king or a lord in return for services; and Edmund Ætheling was a member of the royal House of Wessex and the nephew of Edward the Confessor. We know nothing more of Ulwin and that Dunall, or La Donne, was forfeit to William the Conqueror after the Norman conquest.

As the English language evolved in the Middle Ages from Old English to Middle English, the spelling of names changed also. The name Down has undergone many spelling variations, including Down, Downe, Donne, Doune, Dun and many more. Doune Hall itself is derived from the Anglo Saxon Dunhall - 'dun' referring to a hill, hill pasture or a piece of land partly surrounded by a stream, and Hall - referring to a residence or dwelling-house with a large, open room in which the social and public affairs of the household are conducted.

Immediately following the Norman Conquest, all land in England was claimed by King William as his title by allodial right - allodial right being absolute ownership of all land that is independent of any superior landlord. This was the commencement of what is referred to today as Crown land. The king made grants of very large tracts of land under various forms of feudal tenure from his demesne, generally in the form of feudal baronies. King William gave the manor of Hatfield Regis to Aubrey De Vere, and, along with 14 more manors and lordships, included in the grant the manor of Down Hall. De Vere was tenant-in-chief in England to him and his family is descended from Charlemagne the Great. He was William the Conqueror's brother-in-law and led the right flank of the Norman army at the Battle of Hastings in 1066.

In 1086, the Domesday Book lists him "Aubrey the chamberlain" and "Aubrey the queen's chamberlain" as well as Aubrey de Vere. In June 1133, King Henry I awarded his son, Aubrey de Vere II, 1st Earl of Oxford, and his heirs, the office of master chamberlain. In c1135, he built a Benedictine monastery next to the small parish church in Hatfield. The priory was a daughter house of the Breton monastery of St. Melanius in Rennes, and was dedicated to "God, St Mary, and St. Melanius Redonensis".

Mention of Down Hall after Domesday and through the 12th and 13th centuries is hard to come by as a lot of the De Vere family records were destroyed in the 17th century, but we do find it in chronicles of the late 13th century. Downhall (formerly Doune) bridge, which spans Pincey brook on the road from Hatfield Heath to Matching, was a well-known landmark by 1274. The brook then, as it does now, forms the Northern boundary of the Down Hall Estate and the road to Matching, then, and as it does now, forms part of the Eastern boundary. The upkeep of the bridge was the responsibility of Down (Doune) Hall manor; thereafter Hatfield priory, and later, other manorial lords up to 1650 but they all often defaulted.

Hatfield priory had by the 13th century acquired a considerable estate in the parish and it's during this period we meet Robert Taper, an important figure in the history of Down Hall. He is the first person we can name as having been in possession of the manor in the early 1300s, if not earlier. Interesting to note though is that Taper had licence on 12 May, 1323, to grant lands and rent in Hatfield to the prior and convent. A person could not grant a licence to himself nor to himself jointly with another. It must be granted by an owner of the property who is different from the licensee, as Taper was in this case. Research would indicate Down Hall was still in the possession of the De Vere family and that it was leased out for farming.

It was this grant from Taper that included Down Hall, or Dunhall as it was referred to in church records, sometimes Dounehall, and it comprised 4 messuages - a messuage being a dwelling-house with buildings and land attached for the use of the household - 90 acres of land, 10 acres of meadow, 3 acres of pasture and 10 shillings rent. He granted this tenement so that they should find a chaplain to celebrate divine service daily in their church for his soul. However, on 20 September, 1325, he released them from this obligation, as they had undertaken that during his lifetime, a special prayer should be said daily at mass for the soul of Millicent, his late wife, and afterwards for the souls of both, and that their anniversaries should be duly kept. Along with Downhall, Taper, who was one of the priory's main benefactors, also gave the estate's mill of la Doune to the priory. The priory's grange, or barn, of la Doune was mentioned in church records in 1330.

Mills were a vital part of the medieval economy. At the beginning of the 13th century, it has been estimated that there were between 10,000 and 15,000 mills in England. They were also a key part of the income of a manorial lord. Lords were able to compel their tenants to use their mills, paying for the right to do so.

We do not know precisely how or when Down Hall was leased to Robert Taper or indeed whether it was the result of his marriage to Millicent, widow of well-to-do Adam de Longo, another prominent landowner in the area. We know from records though that he and his wife were acquiring substantial land holdings across Hatfield during the latter part of the 13th century. From these records we can ascertain that Adam De Longo was deceased in 1290 and can surmise that Robert Taper married his widow, Millicent at around this time. These early records often refer to messuages and meadows being deeded to the couple and whilst we have found no direct reference of their association with Down Hall (Dounehall or Dunhall) during this period, it may well be that they were already in possession of the manor and adding to its income with all the land they were acquiring.

In one record of 1295, Robert Taper and his wife Millicent, are granted a messuage in Hatfield Regis, and via a separate grant, 5.5 acres of arable land and 1-acre of meadow for 16s annual rent. This was from the Bruce family. The surname Bruce comes from the French de Brus or de Bruis, derived from the lands now called Brix in Normandy, France. They held tracts of land across the country, and in particular in Writtle and Hatfield Broad Oak.

These lands were from a grant made by Henry III in 1238 to Isabel de Brus. She was the daughter of David, Earl of Huntingdon (brother of Malcolm IV and William I of Scotland) and Matilda, the daughter of the Earl of Chester. Isabel's brother John inherited the title of Earl of Chester from his uncle. When John died in 1237 the earldom reverted to the Crown, and today is one of the titles of the Prince of Wales. In compensation Henry III granted the lands to his sisters and heiresses, one of whom was Isabel, wife of Robert de Brus, 4th Lord of Annandale and the great-grandparents of Robert the Bruce, king of Scotland. Hatfield Regis descended in the Bruce family until 1306, when Robert Bruce, Earl of Carrick, 6th Lord of Annandale, became king of Scotland. He was crowned on 25 March and as a result, all his English lands were attainted or forfeited to the Crown.

Though it is not known whether Taper was personally involved in commerce, it does seem the likeliest way his large surplus capital was built. The form of his surname, although never rendered as 'le Taper', suggests an occupation - possibly as a candle maker or indeed a role in the cloth industry. His wealth is indicated not only by his real estate - much of it acquired after, though not apparently as a direct result of his marriage to the Millicent, widow of Adam de Longo Ponte - but by his expenditure on renovations, enlargement, and beautification of the priory church.

The conventual church was built, or rebuilt, in the first part of the fourteenth century, mostly at his expense. In 1317 he made an agreement to pay £30 to Thomas Page, carpenter of Newport, for the construction of twenty-eight stalls to complete the choir, with a proper entrance at the west end and everything to match six stalls which had lately been made. Page was to prepare the stalls at his own house and bring them to be carved and polished at the church, and while he was working there, he was to receive food and drink from the monastery. The money was to be paid to him in instalments as required, and the work was to be completed by Easter, 1319. We don't find mention of Down Hall after 1330 but in church records of 1540 there is mention of the messuage of Dunhall with 100 acres of land; this of course being the time of the Dissolution of the Monasteries.

The Dissolution of the Monasteries was the set of administrative and legal processes between 1536 and 1541 by which Henry VIII disbanded monasteries, priories, convents and friaries in England, Wales and Ireland; appropriated their income, disposed of their assets, and provided for their former personnel with pensions. Although the policy was originally envisaged as increasing the regular income of the Crown, much former monastic property was sold off to fund Henry's military campaigns in the 1540s.

The monasteries were a reminder of the power of the Catholic Church. It was also true that the monasteries were the wealthiest institutions in the country, and Henry's lifestyle, along with his wars, had led to a lack of money. Monasteries owned over a quarter of all the cultivated land in England. By destroying the monastic system Henry could acquire all its wealth and property whilst removing its Papist influence.

This led to the Act of Suppression in 1536 whereby small monasteries with an income of less than £200 a year were closed and their buildings, land and money taken by the Crown. The Second Suppression Act of 1539 allowed the dissolution of the larger monasteries and religious houses. By 1540 monasteries were being dismantled at a rate of fifty a month.

The priory at Hatfield was dissolved in 1536 and at the time only the prior and four monks lived there, though they had thirty servants to attend to their needs. The tithes and patronage, and this included Down Hall, were granted to Barking Abbey and the nuns there were called on by the king to take over the dissolved house together the churches of Hatfield.

With the dissolution, Henry VIII released the flood gates of economic and social change. The overwhelming majority of the monastic estates passed from the hands of the king and into the hands of a vast cross section of England's population including courtiers and royal officials, lawyers and merchants, and members of the country gentry. Thus, it now became possible for enterprising merchants to expand their businesses in towns where monastic properties had blocked such expansion.

It now became far easier for merchants and lawyers to buy estates in the countryside and gradually be absorbed into the gentry. It now became likely that the former managers of monastic lands could purchase those lands and it was now far more certain that entrepreneurs of all ranks and stations would risk their fortunes in the pursuit of wealth. These purchasers however were predominantly leading nobles, local magnates and gentry with no discernible tendency in terms of conservative or reformed religion, other than a determination to maintain and extend their family's position and local status.

The landed property of the former monasteries included large numbers of manorial estates, each carrying the right and duty to hold a court for tenants and others. Acquiring such feudal rights was regarded as essential to establish a family in the status and dignity of the late medieval gentry. For a long period, freehold manorial estates had been very rare in the market and families of all kinds seized on the opportunity now offered to entrench their position in the social scale.

Sometimes monastic lands were bought in partnerships. On June 8th 1540, William Berners and Walter Farre, both civil servants, and William Glascock, a land owner from Essex, bought a lot of miscellaneous land, that included the manor of Down Hall as well as the manor of Minchins in Great Dunmow, for £630 8s 6d. On the June 28th 1540, Berners and Farre received license to transfer ownership of Down Hall and Minchins to Glascock.

William Glascock was born in Dunmow in 1495 to William Glascock and Joane Tendring. The Glascock family were already then part of the local landowning gentry and William senior's wife Joane descended from the wealthy and titled Tendring family of Tendring Hall in Stoke-on-Nayland, also in Essex and 39 miles from Down Hall. The Tendring family also had familial ties to the powerful Howard family. Thomas Howard, 2nd Duke of Norfolk was born at Tendring Hall in 1443.

The elevation of the Glascock family is shown by the marriage in 1540 of William II to Philippa Wiseman, daughter of Sir John Wiseman of Great Canfield; Great Canfield being a village and civil parish in the same district as Down Hall. He received the honour of knighthood from King Henry VIII at the battle of Spurs. The Battle of the Spurs took place on 16 August 1513. It formed a part of the War of the League of Cambrai during the ongoing Italian Wars. Henry VIII and Maximilian I, Holy Roman Emperor, were besieging the town of Th rouanne in Artois. The Battle was not a planned, set-piece battle, but a spontaneous pursuit by the English of French cavalry surprised in an attempt to resupply the town, intending to throw sides of bacon to waiting members of the hungry garrison. This battle was called the battle of Spurs, because the French used their spurs to escape i.e., they spurred their horses and fled the field, rather than engage the English and use their swords.

Sir John descended from an ancient, armigerous family of Essex landed gentry; armigerous meaning being entitled to have a coat of arms, and acquired great wealth as auditor of the exchequer to Henry VIII. He was assisted to this position by favour of Sir Richard Rich that he was likely to have enjoyed as a kinsman of William Glascock who was in the employ of Sir Richard Rich.

Sir Richard Rich, 1st Baron Rich, gained notoriety as a political fixer during the reign of Henry VIII, working initially with his Chief Minister, Sir Thomas Cromwell. He became Lord Chancellor under Edward VI and served under Queen Mary and then Queen Elizabeth. He was born in the city of London in about 1497. In 1516, he entered the Middle Temple as a lawyer, before becoming an MP in 1527. He worked in a number of legal roles, and in 1533 was knighted and became Solicitor-General to Henry VIII.

Sir Richard worked with Thomas Cromwell on the Dissolution of the Monasteries. In 1536, he became the first Chancellor of the Court of Augmentations, set up to dispose of monastic revenues, and in doing so, he acquired a large fortune; his share of the spoils including over 100 manors in Essex. Records show that that William Glascock was working as a civil servant for Sir Richard Rich during this period.

We know that because of his association with Sir Richard, William and his family had risen in such prosperity as to be accorded the entitlement of a coat of arms. This was awarded to him by Queen Elizabeth I in 1571. William died on 27th Nov 1579 and was succeeded by his son and heir Richard Glascock. We know the extent of the land he inherited from his father as he was required to present a valuation of all his estates to Sir William Cecil, Lord Burghley, Lord Treasurer, Master of the Court of Wards and Liveries on behalf of the Queen.

Richard was to present this valuation so that the Queen, *'should not be deceived but have perfect knowledge and understanding of the manors and their yearly value, and agree to have an auditor appointed by the queen to give a true valuation, and if any manor from which Glascock receives any money is discovered and not been declared then he shall pay double the yearly value of the said manor as a fine'*. The properties included:

Manor of Abbess Haule [Hall], Abbess Roding and Caldcote in Leaden Roding with advowson of Abbess Roding, held of the Queen, Down Hall, Hatfield Broad Oak, Manor of Mynchons [Minchins], Great Dunmow, parcel of meadow called Brode [Broad] Mead, Newlands, Frydayes and Ballards, Little Canfield, Parkecrofte, VeeseLand at Great Dunmow, Advowson of Little Canfield, Hales, Little Canfield and Dunmow and meadow near Gallows Bridge, Great Canfield, with land called Le Strowde, Great Dunmow, Darbies, Great Dunmow, Moles Croft, Great Dunmow, Palescrofte, Manor of Thremhall, alias Thremhall Priory [Takeley] recently held by the Prior of Thremhall and two parcels of meadow in Stansted Mountfitchett recently held by Edward, Earl of Oxford, land in the parish of St Mary Matfelon outside Aldersgate, (Adler Street, Whitechapel), London, tenement near the cemetery of St Mary Matfellon and some meadow called Lathams in Stratford at Bowe.

The valuation was signed and sealed by William Cecil, Lord Burghley 16th May 1580.

Richard Glascock was born in 1553 at Down Hall. The family were most likely here as Minchins, in Great Dunmow, which was William's principal residence, was being rebuilt at around this time. We know he also had Down Hall remodelled as later records refer to it of being in the 'Tudor' style. This quite possibly could have been in preparation of Richard's then forthcoming nuptials to Elizabeth Greswold (nee Bourne).

Elizabeth was born in 1553 to William and Margaret Bourne of Bilsdens Manor in Bobbingworth that is 5 miles from Down Hall. William Bourne purchased the estate in 1546 from Sir Richard Rich which is how the Glascock and Bourne families became acquainted in the first instance. Elizabeth had married before in 1570 to a Humphrey Griswold but he died at 21 years of age in 1571. She was then betrothed to Richard Glascock and they married at Bilsdens in 1574 before taking up residence at Down Hall.

They had three children; Richard II, their first-born son and heir, was born at Down Hall in 1585. Richard I died at Down Hall in 1617, leaving his wife Elizabeth, who did not remarry, to administer the family estates until Richard came of age. In 1609, Richard II married Elizabeth Bowles in Wallington which is 20 miles from Down Hall in the neighbouring county of Hertfordshire. Elizabeth was the daughter of the wealthy and important Thomas Bowles Esq who had served as High Sheriff of the county. As well as his very large estate in Wallington, he also possessed considerable lands across the Hertfordshire and Essex borders. Richard II and Elizabeth had one daughter, Elizabeth II, born at Down Hall around 1615 and who became sole heir to the family estates.

Richard II died at Down Hall in early 1624 and we see from his will that he drew up on 23 February, 1623 that he left provision for his wife as well as wardship of his daughter:

Richard Glascock of Down Hall, Hatfield Broad Oak, gentleman, leaving all copyhold property in Matching to his wife Elizabeth, two thirds of his property called Hales, Little Canfield, in trust for his daughter Elizabeth, remaining term of his lease of the impropriate rectory of Matching; wardship of his daughter and heir Elizabeth is bequeathed to his wife Elizabeth.

Wardship of minor heirs was a royal prerogative that entitled the king to all the revenues of the deceased's estate, excluding those lands, generally one third of the estate, allocated to his widow as dower, until the heir reached his majority of 21, or 14 if a female.

Richard II's wife Elizabeth I remarried in 1624 to Richard Bugge of Moor Hall that is in the neighbouring parish of Harlow. Records dated 27 November, 1624 show that wardship had been officially recognised by:

Grant of wardship of Elizabeth Glascock to Richard Bugge of Harlow Esq and Elizabeth his wife, mother of Elizabeth Glascock the ward consideration: £50 with valuation of the lands to which Elizabeth Glascock is heir comprising Down Hall, Hatfield Broad Oak and Matching with 120 acres of land and a windmill; Blockes, Matching and Sheering; and Hales, Little Canfield.

From a land survey of 15 May, 1627, we see that Elizabeth is still in her minority. This survey, like that we have seen previously for Richard Glascock in 1579, was that:

Richard Bugges and Elizabeth his wife, formerly Glascock, mother of Elizabeth Glascock, ward, agree to a survey of the lands and protecting the Crown's investment in the lands held in the wardship of Elizabeth Glascock.

Property: Third part of Down Hall, Hatfield Broad Oak, with 120 acres of meadow and pasture in Hatfield Broad Oak and Matching and one windmill, annual value £10, with the exception of wood and mineral rights which are reserved to the Crown.

With a grant of wardship, duties would embrace protection of both the child's person and property whilst they were in their minority. In practice the guardians would take custody of the child and receive the profit from their land. If the child were a boy this would continue until he reached the age of twenty-one; if a girl, until she was fourteen or when the girl married during or after puberty. This is the onset of motherhood that subsequently marks her achievement of adult status.

We have little else information on Elizabeth II but do have a record dated 1st December, 1630, showing that she is now married to John Ballett Esq., and residing at Down Hall. This was a quittance receipt; a quittance being a release or discharge from a debt or obligation:

from John Ballett and his wife Elizabeth nee Glascock, for lands which his wife was heir of her father Richard Glascock, paid to the Court of Wards and Liveries.

John and Elizabeth had two children that we know of; Richard, who was born at Down Hall c1635 and John II, born at Down Hall c1640. Parish records show that Elizabeth died at Down Hall in 1649 and that Richard succeeded his father John on his death in 1673. From records dated 7th December, 1681, we see that Richard has mortgaged Down Hall to Thomas Velley, gentleman, of Middle Temple, London. These records state that the *Property can be redeemed by Richard Ballett if he pays Thomas Velley £2,120 pounds in a series of agreed repayments.* We can only surmise what sort of speculating or ventures he was involved in but it certainly did include expanding the Down Hall estate. Whether the original sum was paid back, or indeed Richard was in need of more money, he mortgaged the estate, again with Thomas Velley, on 16th May, 1684, for the same amount and with the same repayment terms.

Detail on the Ballett family is very scarce but it would appear that sometime toward the end of the 17th century, Richard has passed away, and without issue, the estate has passed to John, the second son. We do see from records that John leased the Down Hall estate to Richard Hutton, gentleman, of Lincolns Inn, on 15th October 1716. The estate then comprised:

Down Hall, Hatfield Broad Oak, with 43 acres of pasture called The Leys, 44 acres of arable land, 9 acres of meadow, The Greens (10 acres), Hop ground (9 acres), Down Hall Wood (23 acres), windmill; Blocks, Matching and Sheering with Chapple Croft (3 acres), Barn Croft or Blocks Ley (5 acres), Long Croft (3 acres), Sheering Mead (5 acres), Great Shalls (6 acres), Little Shalls (6 acres), The Pightle (1 acre).

We hear nothing more of John Ballett until 9th June, 1720, where we have record of him selling Down Hall to Mathew Prior for £2,800. The entire estate at the time consisted of:

Downe Hall, Hatfield Broad Oak with The Leys (34 acres of arable), Stockwells (9 acres of hop garden and other lands), Down Hall Wood (23 acres), 44 acres of arable land comprising Habbidyne (16 acres), Brickell Field (9 acres), Little Brickell Field (6 acres), The Hill fields (19 acres), Bramble Croft (4 acres), Callowes Mead (2 acres), Round Mead (1 acre), Long Mead (5 acres), Little Brickell Mead (3 acres), 9 acres of meadow, The Greens (10 acres), a windmill situate near The Leys, all in Hatfield Broad Oak and Matching; toft where the house called Blocks used to stand, Chapel Croft (3 acres), Moor Croft (5 acres), Kitching Croft (3 acres), Barn Croft or Blocks Ley (5 acres), Long Croft (3 acres), Sheering Mead (5 acres), Great Shalls (6 acres), Little Shalls (6 acres), The Pightle (1 acre), all in Matching and Sheering.

Matthew Prior (1664 - 1771) was a British poet, prominent not only as a literary figure but also as a member of Great Britain's diplomatic service. His correspondence is significant to 17th and 18th century studies in the fields of history and political science as well as literature.

After having filled many public employments with ability during his life, this celebrated genius found himself at the age of fifty-three in danger of poverty but his friends procured a subscription for his poems. This amounted to four thousand guineas and Lord Edward Harley, son of the 1st Earl of Oxford, who was an intimate friend, added an equal sum for him to purchase Down Hall which the poet was to enjoy during the remainder of his life and Harley after his decease.

There is amongst Prior's published poems a ballad called "Down Hall", giving an amusing description of his journey from London with his friend John Morley when he first went to see his new estate. John Morley, 1656-1732, also known as Merchant Morley, was an agent and land jobber. He was born in Halstead, in Essex and was originally a butcher. However, he rose through sheer business capacity to become one of the largest land jobbers, or agents, for the disposing of land, in the country. He became the business agent for the Harley family, hence his accompanying Prior on his visit to Down Hall.

From the ballad we read that when Matthew Prior first saw Down Hall, he described it as a ruined white shed; untiled, unglazed and more like a barn. Whilst Morley raved that it was, 'fit for a squire, a justice of peace, or a knight of our shire', Prior lamented that was built of plaster and lath, not brick or stone, to which Morley replied, 'I show'd you Down-Hall, did you look for Versailles'. None-the-less, Prior settled quickly into his role of Lord of the Manor and planned a new house on a site a little to the west, with better views. He commissioned James Gibbs to design the house and Charles Bridgeman to replan the gardens.

James Gibbs (1682-1754) was one of the most influential architects in 18th-century England. Born in Scotland, he trained as an architect in Rome and practised mainly in England. He is an important figure whose work spanned the transition between English Baroque architecture and a Georgian architecture heavily influenced by Andrea Palladio.

Charles Bridgeman (1690-1738) was an innovative pioneer of the naturalistic landscape style known as *jardin anglais*. His innovations in English landscape architecture have been somewhat eclipsed by the work of his more famous successor Lancelot "Capability" Brown. Bridgeman redesigned the gardens of a string of wealthy nobles before his tenure as royal gardener for Queen Anne and Prince George of Denmark, tending and remodelling the grounds of Windsor Castle, Kensington Palace, Hampton Court as well as St James's Park and Hyde Park.

Letters to Edward Harley show Prior's delight in being the squire and making improvements to his estate. Planting to Bridgeman's designs was in progress before the end of 1720, but building of the spectacular Palladian villa Gibbs had designed had not been started by the time of Prior's death in 1721. He died of tuberculosis whilst staying with Edward Harley at Wimpole Hall. Harley, who often stayed at Down Hall, continued to employ Bridgeman in the gardens until 1726. Something of the outline of Bridgeman's work can still be seen in the woods north-west of the present house.

Edward Harley, 2nd Earl of Oxford and Earl Mortimer (1689-1741) was the only son of Robert Harley, one of the most powerful politicians in the country and Queen Anne's tory chief minister. Unlike his father he was no politician, but he was an aesthete, a bibliophile, a dedicated collector and patron of the arts. In 1713 he married Henrietta Cavendish-Holles, daughter of the Duke of Newcastle, and the wealthiest heiress in Britain. His collections were extensive and extravagant as he passionately sourced the rarest and most beautiful things. He was also surrounded by the finest thinkers and the finest things.

Besides magnificent silver, curios, paintings, and other works of art, he collected English miniature portraits and rapidly added to the library started by his father. By the end of his life in 1741 Edward Harley had amassed the largest private library in Britain. His wealth gradually dwindled, yet Harley continued to add to his collections, often driving up the price of objects in his lust for ownership. In this obsessive collecting, Harley bankrupted himself, having spent much of his wife's fortune of some £500,000, and was forced to sell Down Hall, as well as his family home of Wimpole Hall, along with his collections, to pay his debts. Interesting to note that many of London's now famous streets take their name from the Harley family and their connections: Harley Street, Oxford Street, Wigmore Street and Wimpole Street.

In 1741, Down Hall was bought by William Selwin, a successful skinner merchant in the City of London. He was born in London in 1685 and whilst his earlier years are rather obscure, we know from records dated 1737 that he was living in Farringdon. He had campaigned for the position of Alderman of the City of London for the Farringdon ward. He is cited as a gentleman and a skinner of London. As a skinner merchant, he organized the manufacture of furs, retailed skins and furs in London, and served London and the provinces as a wholesale distributor of skins of foreign origin. Whilst he was not successful in his bid to become Alderman, he was rewarded with the position of Receiver General of Land Tax for the City of London, Westminster and the County of Middlesex.

He married Alice Barnes on 14th May 1713 at St Martin-in-the-Fields in London and settled down to married life in Farringdon. They had six children; three sons and three daughters with one of the sons and one of the daughters dying at an early age. He had acquired a considerable fortune in his profession as a merchant skinner for he paid nearly £3,000 for Down Hall. He settled into the country life of a squire and extended the estate by buying swathes of neighbouring land. He was pre-deceased by his wife and eldest son so when William died in 1768, Down Hall and its neighbouring properties descended to his eldest surviving son Charles Selwin Esq, then a banker in Paris.

Charles took down Prior's dwelling and rebuilt Down Hall in a handsome, substantial manner albeit in a plain classical style. The total transformation of Down Hall was completed in 1777 though some original Tudor fireplace mantels and door surrounds from Prior's dwelling were retained and which can still be found today at the current Down Hall.

Charles Selwin died at Down Hall in 1794 and was succeeded by his brother Thomas as heir to the family estates. We have very little information on Thomas; his date of birth or death, but know that as the last of the male Selwin line, he had left a codicil in his will that the Down Hall estate was to pass down to the next male heir on condition they took the name of Selwin. On Thomas' death, his sister Jane inherited Down Hall. Jane had married John Caygill, the son of the wealthiest merchant in Halifax, and moved to the Caygill family estate of The Shay. They had one daughter Jane, aka Jenny, who was born in 1744. When her father John died in 1787, she became heir to the Caygill family estate as well as Down Hall.

Jenny Selwin married Sir James Ibbetson, 2nd Baronet, in 1768 and moved to the family estate of Denton in Yorkshire. The families would have been known to each other as Jane's grandfather, William Selwin, and Sir James' grandfather, Ebenezer Ibbetson, were both successful and wealthy merchants working together in the cloth industry in London; William in fur and Ebenezer in silk. Both laid the foundations to their respective family's fortunes. The Ibbetson Baronetcy and hereditary title was accorded to Ebenezer's son Henry, Sir James' father, by King George II for his support in raising, financing and dressing a corps of 100 men during the Jacobite rebellion of 1745.

Sir James and Lady Jane Ibbetson, had three sons; Henry Carr, Charles and John Thomas. As the eldest son, Henry Carr would inherit the Ibbetson estates and Charles would be heir to Down Hall and the Selwin estates. Jane Caygill died in 1806 and Down Hall passed to her daughter Lady Jane. Henry Carr Ibbetson succeeded to the Baronetcy and the Denton estate in Yorkshire on the death of his father 1787. On Sir James' death, his widow, Jane, Lady Ibbetson moved from Denton to Down Hall where she lived for the remainder of her life, during which she made changes to the house and grounds.

We have a contemporary description of Down Hall at the time of Jane's residence as follows:

Jane Lady Ibbetson, widow of Sir James Ibbetson, Bart., who very greatly improved both the house and grounds by the taste she displayed in the alterations then made. It is pleasantly situated on a rising ground in a fine park, watered by a clear winding stream and having on one side a hanging wood. It commands a beautiful, though not extensive prospect. It may be considered an elegant mansion. At the entrance is a handsome hall, having its sides of equal dimension. Upon the right is the dining-room in which is a fine painting of John in the Wilderness. On the left of the hall is the drawing-room adorned with pictures by celebrated masters; viz Rubens, Gaspar, Poussin, Vandervelt etc. In the library are portraits of Sir James Ibbetson, Bart., and his Lady; William Selwin Esq.; John Caygill, Esq., of Halifax, and Mrs Caygill, who were the parents of Jane Lady Ibbetson; there is also a small painting of the head of Jesus. In the Hall is the favourite chair of Mathew Prior, of oak.

Jane, Lady Ibbetson died at Down Hall in 1816 upon which her second son Charles inherited Down Hall. As per the conditions of his maternal great uncle Thomas' will, he took the name Selwin, as granted by royal license on 18 Feb 1817. Charles married in 1812 to Charlotte Elizabeth Stoughton, daughter of the very wealthy land owner Thomas Stoughton of Ballyhorgan, Co. Kerry, Ireland. They had three children; Laura, Charles Henry and Frederick James. When his older brother Sir Henry Carr Ibbetson, 3rd Baronet, died in 1825, Charles acceded to the Baronetcy and the Denton estate in Yorkshire. He reverted to the Ibbetson family name and his sons would now inherit through the Ibbetson line. As a result, Jane, Lady Ibbetson's third son John Thomas, inherited Down Hall. He also took the name Selwin, as per his great uncle's will, which was granted by royal license on 5th Aug 1825.

On 8th September in the same year, he married Isabella, daughter of General John Leveson Gower, of Bill Hill in Berkshire. They had one son and heir, Henry John, who was born in 1826. Sir Charles Ibbetson, 4th Baronet, died in 1839 and his son Charles Henry acceded to the title as 5th Baronet. Charles Henry was childless when he died in 1861 and so the Baronetcy and the Ibbetson estates passed to Sir John Thomas Selwin, now 6th Baronet.

When Sir John died at Down Hall on 20th March, 1869, his son, Henry John, acceded to the title as 7th Baronet and resumed by Royal licence the original family surname of Ibbetson in addition to that of Selwin. Sir Henry John Selwin-Ibbetson, became a Conservative MP and represented Essex West from 1868 to 1885 and Epping from 1885 to 1892. He served under Benjamin Disraeli first as Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department between 1874 and 1878 and then as Financial Secretary to the Treasury between 1878 and 1880. In 1879 he declined to become Governor of New South Wales. As a legislator, his name is best remembered in connection with the Act which gave Epping Forest to the public. On his retirement from the House of Commons in 1892 he was raised to the peerage as Baron Rookwood of Rookwood Hall and Down Hall.

Lord Rookwood derived his title from Rookwood Hall that is situated in the Parish of Abbess Roding and 4 miles from Down Hall. Charles Selwin bought Rookwood Hall in 1817 which then became part of the large Selwin estates which were all administered from Down Hall. Rookwood Hall was one of the many manor's given to Aubrey De Vere by William the Conqueror after the Battle of Hastings in 1066 and thereafter held by his ancestors the Earl's of Oxford. The house, thought to be the work of John Browne, who was lord of the manor in the second quarter of the 16th century, played host to Elizabeth I in 1578 who held a Privy Council there.

Lord Rookwood possessed a considerable amount of landed property, said to be some 4,000 acres, as well as coal mines in Durham and Yorkshire and a large amount of house property in Halifax. His Down Hall estate however, though in a good wheat growing district and nearest of all to the best market in the world, was unproductive of income, and Lord Rookwood is credited with the remark that a landed estate should mean either an income or a kingdom. To reflect the importance of Down Hall as being the administrative heart of his kingdom, in 1871, he commissioned Frederick Pepys Cockerell to replace the existing mansion with a sumptuous new one in the Italianate style.

Cockerell was an English architect, active in the mid to late 19th century, whose work was influenced by French and Italian architecture. He regarded sculptural detail as an important element in architecture. Cockerell became a notable architect of country houses from the 1860s onwards but gained particular attention for his building of Down Hall. This is of chief architectural interest, and rather revolutionary at the time, for the house being constructed of poured and shuttered concrete, a method used predominantly for commercial buildings rather than domestic dwellings. The construction process was also more suited to Essex with its ready supply of gravel and cement.

At the time of completion in 1873, Down Hall was a particularly striking example of the best concrete work of the period. Cockerell had employed the services of Charles Drake who in 1868, patented his Concrete Building Apparatus. This was the use of flanged plates of iron, enamelled or glazed on the side facing the wall, and slotted wrought-iron vertical channels that enabled continuous vertical casting of a concrete wall, exactly the same principle as modern slip-form concrete construction today. This use of shuttering to create thin concrete walls was by no means new in 1870, but Drake's achievement was to introduce the concept into "polite" architecture. Using his new "patent concrete builder", Drake constructed several grand houses for wealthy clients though the best example of his work is Down Hall.

As unproductive as his Essex farms were, Lord Rookwood devoted assiduous care to their improvement as well as to the welfare of his tenants. He was a typical country gentleman, combining the pursuits, the business and pleasure of a good landlord and a zealous agriculturalist. Whilst he married three times, he was childless at the time of his death in January 1901 whereupon the Peerage and Baronetcy became extinct. Down Hall, along with the Denton and Selwin estates, was inherited by his nephew Captain Horace Walter Calverley.

Horace Calverley was the second of three sons born to Edmund Calverley and Isabella Mary Selwin, Lord Rookwood's sister. He was born in 1862 at Oulton Hall, the Calverley family seat situated just outside Leeds in West Yorkshire and which today is a country house hotel. Horace's older brother John was heir to Oulton Hall, as well as the Denton and Selwin estates whilst his uncle Lord Rookwood had no male heir, and accordingly styled himself John Selwin Calverley. He had married Sybil Disraeli, the niece of Benjamin Disraeli who was British Prime Minister from 1874 to 1880. He was well known in yachting circles, winning numerous prizes on his yacht 'brunhilde' and represented Great Britain at the 1900 Summer Olympics in Le Havre, France, where he took the silver medal in the 20+ ton. He died later that year in 1900 at the young age of 45, and having no male issue, all the entailed estates, including Down Hall, duly passed to his younger brother Horace.

In 1891, Horace married Louisa Mary Henniker and divided his time between his house in Chesham Place, London and Oulton Hall. After Lord Rookwood's death however, Horace chose to reside at Down Hall and thereafter rarely spent any time at Oulton Hall, leaving it in the charge of a caretaker. He settled into life as a country gentleman and whilst he made no alterations to the house, he and his wife did redesign the gardens. We see from records dated between 1902 and 1905 that they had entered into correspondence with Alfred Parsons for advice and designs on the layout of new gardens in the immediate vicinity of house. Parsons was an established landscape painter of the late 19th century who, in 1899, embarked on a career as a professional landscape designer and who became a judge at the Chelsea flower show.

We do have a glimpse into the life of Louisa Calverley as per her profile in Grace's Guide to British Industrial History - dated 1904 and listed under Motorists:

CALVERLEY, Mrs., 18, Chesham Place, London, S.W.; Down Hall, Harlow, Essex. Car: 20-h.p. de Dietrich. Has driven many thousands of miles. Hobbies: Hunting, travelling. Furthers motoring for usefulness to herself and pleasure to her friends. Thinks most of a lady's pleasure while in her car depends upon having an expert chauffeur. Thinks cars should have a canopy and a glass screen in the winter. Club: Ladies' Automobile.

We find little other information on the Calverley's at Down Hall in the intervening years from 1905 but do know that at the start of World War 1, Down Hall became an Auxiliary hospital. At the outbreak of the First World War, the British Red Cross and the Order of St John of Jerusalem combined to form the Joint War Committee. They pooled their resources under the protection of the red cross emblem. As the Red Cross had secured buildings, equipment and staff, the organisation was able to set up temporary hospitals as soon as wounded men began to arrive from abroad. The buildings varied widely, ranging from town halls and schools to large and small private houses, both in the country and in cities. The most suitable ones were established as auxiliary hospitals.

There were two Red Cross Auxiliary Hospitals in Harlow; the first opening in 1914 on Church Gate Street with a secondary hospital opening at Down Hall under the supervision of Mrs Louisa Calverley who was made Commandant in 1915. The Hospital was fitted out and received 9 English and 4 Belgian soldiers as its first batch of wounded on 21 November 1914 and continued to receive wounded soldiers throughout the war. In August 1916, an Australian Soldier, Private Charles Henry Slade, aged 30, died at Down Hall from chest wounds and was buried with full military honours at Harlow Parish Church. In February 1919 the Hospital was closed and Down Hall was returned to a family home.

In 1920, we see from records that Horace has started selling off his land holdings, in particular all the major estates attached to Down Hall. Significantly, in 1925, he appears not to have wanted, or indeed needed, to hang on to the original family house of Oulton Hall with the large expenses for its upkeep, and sold it. It may be that Horace was in failing health and was putting all his affairs in order.

Horace and Louisa had one child, a daughter, Joyce Eden Calverley who was born in 1912. That same year, his younger and surviving brother Osbert, moved with his family to Canada, settling near Toronto to start a new life. This was quite significant as without a son, Horace knew that on his death, the conditions of previous family wills meant all the estates would pass to his younger brother who really had no need of them as he was now living abroad. The only estate Horace did retain was Down Hall. He died on September 22, 1929 at the age of 67 and at this stage, Down Hall enters a new chapter in its history.

From the little information that we have, we can surmise that Down Hall was sold in late 1930, possibly early 1931, and re-enters the annals of history in 1932 as Downham school, an upmarket and fashionable boarding school for girls. We cannot ascertain who bought Down Hall but from the alumnae we know of, the owners were obviously very well connected to the upper echelons of society.

They employed the services of Mrs Eleanor Louisa Houison-Craufurd, née Dalrymple-Hay, who was Principal of Downham School from 1932 - 1950. Eleanor, born in 1876, was the daughter of James Francis Dalrymple-Hay and Ellen Douglas Johnston-Stewart. She married Brigadier General John Archibald Houison-Craufurd of Craufordland, son of Colonel John Reginald Howison Craufurd of Craufurdland Castle and Mary Dundas Hamilton. From her own upbringing, we see how suited she was to the position in setting a curriculum where the role was less on academics and more on shaping character, with an emphasis on neatness, good taste and self-control. The aim, rather politely, was to make the girls all the more eligible for marriage whereas in fact they were taught that their goal was to marry well.

We have the recollections of one former pupil describing her time at the school as emerging from her so-called education at Downham, a 'horsey and fashionable girls' school in Essex', where learning was frowned on and snobbery was all. At Downham, your social standing depended on a subtle signifier: the postmark on the envelopes that lay waiting for you on the hall table sent by boyfriends at high-ranking public schools. So, if your letters were stamped Eton, Winchester or - at a pinch - Harrow, you were alright. Any lower down the order and you took a hit. We can see from the alumnae listed below just how well some of these girls fared after Downham.

Pamela Harriman

Pamela Harriman, who was once described as the greatest courtesan of the century, was born Pamela Beryl Digby on March 20, 1920 into a gilded but straitened life in Dorset. Her father was the 11th Baron Digby and her mother was the daughter of the 2nd Baron Aberdare. She grew up at her family's 1,500-acre estate at Minterne Magna in Dorset with all the trappings of privilege: a 50-room mansion and 22 servants, along with plenty of horses and hounds.

She was educated at home by governesses and at the age of 15, her mother actively promoted time away at school as a way of getting to know girls from London and furthering Pamela's skills at housekeeping, a rather homely term for running a large household. A one- or two-year stint at a boarding school was part of an English aristocratic girl's upbringing and with some two dozen private schools for girls in England in the 1930s, Lady Digby chose Downham for Pamela.

From her memoirs, Downham is described as a draughty old manor that offered a more regimented life than Minterne. The girls slept four to a room and wore a uniform of grey-green skirt and blazer, white shirt and blue tie. Life was neither spartan nor terribly comfortable. The baths were warm but heating was minimal and the girls accustomed themselves to feeling cold all the time. Mornings were given over to basic lessons in maths, languages and English plus a small amount of science. In the afternoons, the girls played tennis and other games, rode horses, took lessons in ballroom dancing, drawing and painting and domestic science courses such as cooking.

Pamela received a certificate in domestic science at age 16. Her family then sent her to Paris to learn French and to continue her education. Later in life, she would offer increasingly inflated accounts of her education with one biographer exposing her degree from Downham School as little more than a high school Home Economic certificate.

She was 19 when she married Randolph Churchill, son of Winston Churchill. Within months he went off to war and she found herself at the centre of London as a confidante and hostess for her new father-in-law. She called him Papa, and he revelled in her company. For a time, she lived at No. 10 Downing Street, and later at the fashionable Dorchester Hotel. Through Winston Churchill she met Max Beaverbrook, the press baron, who became her mentor; Harry Hopkins, Franklin D. Roosevelt's envoy, who became her friend, and W. Averell Harriman, the lend-lease administrator, who became her lover, and, 30 years later, her third husband. She was appointed Ambassador to France by President Clinton in 1993 and was well regarded as a diplomat. She died in 1997.

Anne Clarissa Eden, Countess of Avon

A fellow pupil of Pamela Harriman's at the time, was Anne Clarissa Eden, Countess of Avon. Born Clarissa Spencer-Churchill in 1920, she was the daughter of Major Jack Spencer-Churchill, the younger brother of Winston Churchill, by his marriage to Lady Gwendoline Bertie, a daughter of the 7th Earl of Abingdon. Her paternal great-grandfather was the 7th Duke of Marlborough, and her maternal great-great-grandfather the 3rd Marquess of Londonderry.

She was educated at Kensington Preparatory School and then at Downham School, that she described as a "fashionable boarding school orientated to horses". She so disliked the school and left early without any formal qualifications. Highly intelligent though, she was largely self-educated by good reading and studied philosophy in Oxford. She was tutored by such luminaries as Isaiah Berlin, A. J. Ayer and Lord David Cecil. Later she worked for Alexander Korda and George Weidenfeld in the worlds of film and publishing.

In 1952 at the age of 32, she married Anthony Eden who was the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom from 1955 to 1957. She became Lady Eden in 1954 when her husband was made a Knight of the Garter, before becoming Countess of Avon in 1961 on her husband being created an earl. Anthony Eden died in 1977 and Lady Eden survives to this day.

Frances Shand Kydd

Frances Shand Kydd was the mother of Diana, Princess of Wales and the maternal grandmother of Prince William, Duke of Cambridge and Prince Harry, Duke of Sussex. She was born Frances Ruth Roche at Park House, on the royal estate at Sandringham, Norfolk, 1936. Her father was Maurice Roche, 4th Baron Fermoy, a friend of King George VI and her mother, Ruth Roche, Baroness Fermoy, was a confidante and lady-in-waiting to Queen Elizabeth, later the Queen Mother.

She was educated at home in the schoolroom of Park House under a governess by the name of Miss Gertrude Allen, who would later teach Frances' own children. When Frances graduated from the schoolroom, she then went to Downham. Frances did exceptionally well, leaving at the age of sixteen as head girl and captain of cricket, netball, lacrosse and tennis. She was a good tennis player and qualified for a national school's tournament however appendicitis side-lined her chance to play at Wimbledon. Her life has been well documented, given the celebrity of Diana, Princess of Wales and she passed away at her home in Scotland in 2004.

We don't have a precise date as to when Downham ceased functioning as a school but it would appear from anecdotal evidence that it was sold in the late 1960s to become, in 1967, a conference centre run by a Mr G Liddell. Whether he himself was the owner and whether the business was under the name Downham, or Down Hall, is completely unknown at this stage. What we do know is, that in 1973, St Ouen Antiques had bought the property and announced an opening in early 1974 at 'Down Hall' with a display of English and Continental period furniture and fine art.

Fourteen years later, in 1986, Downhall is sold again and bought by Veladail Hotels, owners of the estate to this day. Over the ensuing years, they have invested millions of pounds in restoring the house to its former glory as well as sympathetically modernising and updating the property to create the contemporary, country mansion you see today. All the public rooms are named after some of the people contained in the this tome, so when you are walking around the hotel, or indeed the estate, we hope you will imbibe some of the unique and fascinating history of Down Hall that goes back nearly 1,000 years.