



Brighton and Beyond

A History of the Cowley Family

Tales of Woodingdean House

The following article was written by Douglas d'Enno for the Argus in December 2003 and is reproduced here with his kind permission.

In mid-October 1965, the "Brighton and Hove Gazette" reported, with an accompanying photograph, that "The Grange", just off Ovingdean Road, was being demolished to make way for bungalows. This development became our present-day Ovingdean Close.

"The Grange" had for most of its existence been known as "Woodendean House", later "Woodingdean House".

The "Grange" element was introduced by the owner of the property during the second world war, one T H Sargeant - better known as Max Miller. He christened the house "WOODLAND Grange", possibly to dissociate it from the nearby suburb and its earlier ramshackle development. He spent little time in it, preferring to let the place.

One prominent occupant for a time during the war years was Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia, whose country had been invaded by Italian troops in 1935. It was liberated by the British in 1941 and Selassie returned there in triumph.

The house certainly existed a century before the war, since it was plainly marked on the 1839 Tithe Map, esconced among trees. "Woodendean" does, after all, mean a "wooded valley".

Not far off were farm cottages, also dating from before 1839 ("Woodingcote", "Woodingcote Cottage" and "Gable End"). These buildings, which survive today near the corner of Ovingdean Road and Falmer Road, were part of Woodendean/Woodingdean Farm existed from before 1714 until about 1979. The farmlands stood to the north of today's Meadow Vale and extended over roughly 440 acres. On them was to be built a large part of the present-day suburb of Woodingdean.

In her book, "Rottingdean - The Village", Laurian d'Harcourt mentions Sir Thomas Lennard (1762-1857), MP for South Essex, who was created a baronet in 1801. He leased and altered Gothic House overlooking The Green by building a tower block behind it. His son of the same name "... built himself a mansion further up the valley, which he called Woodingdean House. Here he bred Arab horses and lived like a workman."

The grounds were "treated ... as an open air zoo, with monkeys running wild in the trees, and bladders of lard and raw meat hanging from branches for his exotic birds to feed on. None of the farm labourers were allowed to use a stick or goad to urge on the team of oxen."

From 1841 there was a series of other occupants. Forty years on, the mansion was occupied by a widow, Ellen Macnaghten, with her numerous nieces, grand-nieces and servants. She was related to Elliot Macnaghten, a former Chairman of the East India Company, who owned and was living in Ovingdean House / Hall.

Curiously, the Lennard family again came to occupy Woodingdean House after many years, for a second Thomas lived there, with his wife, two young children, a nurse and two servants, from 1888 until 1893.

One servant employed there was the mother of renowned local author and folk-singer, Bob Copper. In his classic study of village life, "Early to Rise" (1976), he recalled:

" ... serving as kitchen-maid, parlourmaid and house-maid, and changing households whenever a chance of advancement offered itself, she worked in various parts of London, then went down to Ongar in Essex and finally, on the staff of Sir Thomas Leonard, she came to Woodingdean House, a mere mile away from the home of the lusty young carter who was eventually to become her spouse, and where she was to spend practically all the rest of her life."

That location was Northgate Cottages on the Falmer Road, Rottingdean.

In 1919, Woodingdean House was purchased by William Arthur Cowley, after whom Cowley Drive is named. He and his family stayed for 10 years.

The Cowleys ran the nearby Ovingdean Grange Farm for nearly 60 years. William's father, Henry, had held the lease of the Grange and its lands from around 1877 until 1893, when William took over. Alderman Cowley, as he became, was a prominent public figure, actively involved in village affairs and in local matters over an area ranging from Brighton to Newhaven.

Two of his grand-daughters, Edna Curtis and Dulcia Carnaghan, have fond memories of the rambling old house. Edna has lived since 1927 in "Woodside", a property on the Falmer Road not far from where Woodingdean House stood. Her family lived in the mansion for more than a year while they were waiting for "Woodside" to be built. She recalls -

"The garden in front of the house was a mass of daffodils every spring. The nuns from St Mary's Convent nearby used to come and pick some each year. There were stables - six boxes, I remember - although we kept no horses and only used the boxes for storage.

Near the main house on the north side was a small cottage. In the garden was a windpump in the form of wheel for water management. The part below ground later became a rubbish chute. At one point there was even an old bedstead down it. On the south side was a large conservatory, always adorned with flowers.

There was a very big cellar, which was well-stocked and which housed the boiler and generator, for my grandfather had his own electricity supply long before the rest of the village. The accommodation was on three floors. The ground floor rooms included the butler's pantry, with a long larder off it with marble shelves, where food kept surprisingly well for a long time. Mrs Gander, my grandparents' housekeeper, had her room on this floor.

On the first floor were the family's bedrooms, and on the second, dating from the Lennard days, was a ballroom! This was soon converted by grandpa into a spacious flat, into which moved my Uncle Arthur and Aunt Margaret. He had been in business in Canada but had decided to come back. They had their own metal staircase at the back which made the flat independent.

Grandpa had Woodingdean Farm, which was his own, and Ovingdean Farm, which he rented."

Dulcia Carnaghan (née Filkins), now of Standean, lived from 1919 to 1945 with her family at Ovingdean Grange, which her grandparents had occupied prior to moving to Woodingdean House. She and her cousin Edna were always visiting each other at their respective houses. She recalls:

"Woodingdean House was a lovely old place, really beautiful. It was such a happy age - we had wonderful childhoods."

When the Cowleys left Woodingdean House in 1929, they moved to nearby "Woodingcote." They had sold to the enormously wealthy Violet Annie Van der Elst, the ardent campaigner against capital punishment, who paid £3,700 for the house and outbuildings.

Edna remembers Mrs Van der Elst well:

"I liked her husband but she was rather peculiar. When she came to tea at "Woodingcote" her bag was always stuffed with banknotes, which she always managed to spill onto the floor – probably to impress us.

She had seven Alsatians and they were always worrying our poultry. My father had a row with her about it one day. It got rather heated and her husband came striding across the field and carried her home under his arm!"

Max Miller and his wife sold in 1945 to a company director from Shoreham, a Mr. Vanderborght. He died in 1962 having sold part of his grounds for a housing development. Three years later, his executors sold the rest of the land and the house was pulled down – a sad end for such an imposing and fondly-remembered residence with so many fascinating associations.

Douglas d'Enno

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