

The History of Wormsley Estate



Wormsley's history as an Estate dates back to the 12th Century, although it has only changed hands twice since it was bought by the Scrope family in 1574.

An estate and a manor house have existed at Wormsley from as early as the 12th Century. It is known that the estate was owned in 1106 by Abingdon Abbey and formed part of the Abbey's larger Lewknor estate. During the reconstruction of Wormsley House, undertaken by Sir Paul Getty in the mid-1980s, it was discovered that the earliest traceable elements of the house date back to medieval times and so it is likely but not certain that the medieval manor house stood on the same site as the house occupies today.

In the late 14th Century, there was a violent dispute over ownership which resulted in the Brudenell family coming to own the estate, which they did until it was sold to the Scrope family from neighbouring Hambleden in 1574.

Nonetheless, the well-documented history of Wormsley House begins in Tudor times with the construction of the house carried out in the late 1570s by Robert Scrope.

It was Robert Scrope's son Adrian who became the most notorious occupant of Wormsley. Although Robert had been a Puritan and suspected by Charles I of sympathising with the Parliamentary cause, Adrian went a step further and fought on the Parliamentary side in the Civil War. Cromwell appointed him one of the judges in the treason trial of Charles I in 1649 and, hence, as a signatory to the death warrant, Adrian became one of the "Regicides". He paid for this with his life as, following the Restoration, Adrian was tried, condemned to death and executed in the most gruesome fashion in 1660 at Charing Cross.

Following Adrian Scrope's death, Wormsley passed to his son Thomas, who had a son and four daughters. His son, John, remained a bachelor and so, in 1714, settled Wormsley on one of his sisters, Anne.

Anne had married Henry Fane, from the family of the Earls of Westmoreland. So it was that Wormsley came into the Fane family.

Over the 270 years of the Fane family's ownership of Wormsley, the estate's fortunes waxed and waned. For long periods, the estate prospered and was a model of good agricultural and forestry management. Additional parcels of land were added and houses and cottages were built and restored.

Successive generations of Fanes represented Oxfordshire constituencies in Parliament.

Perhaps the highlight of the good times was the Wormsley Tournament, held in 1840, which was a fully-fledged re-enactment (although with tongue-in-cheek) of a medieval tournament and was watched by between five and ten thousand local people.

However, inevitably, there were generations whose stewardship of the place left something to be desired. The estate had to be heavily mortgaged in the mid-nineteenth century to pay off the gambling debts of John Augustus Fane.

The place was indeed unoccupied for over twenty years at the end of the century and it was only in 1908 that Frederick Fane (father of John Copplestone Luther) came back to live at Wormsley.

The last of the Fanes, John, never married and lived a tremendous life of horse-racing and fast cars which led to the inevitable decision that the estate had to be sold.

The Getty Family

The Getty family's tenure began in 1984 with Sir Paul Getty laying plans for a comprehensive restoration of Wormsley – including the many houses, the agricultural enterprise and the woods.

Unspoilt Natural Beauty

Although only 40 miles from Hyde Park Corner, Wormsley thrived once again as a place of extraordinary rural beauty and became the centre of the initiative to re-establish red kites to their previously indigenous habitat in the Chilterns.

The Estate was farmed organically, a large deer park was established and a major programme of woodland re-planting was undertaken.



House & Library

As regards Wormsley House itself, the many additions which had been made to the Tudor core – chief amongst them the addition of the Georgian wing which forms today's facade – had fallen into disrepair. The dilapidation was so serious that the entire house had to be substantially re-built, albeit on the exact footprint of the existing building.

The only significant addition has been the flint Library which was built on to the southern side of the house to house Sir Paul Getty's exceptional collection of old books, manuscripts, bibles, atlases and bindings.



The Walled Garden

The Walled Garden, originally laid out according to Richard Woods' plan in around 1780, was completely renovated and re-planted following a design masterminded by Penelope Hobhouse.



Sport at Wormsley

The shoot, which had always been known to boast some spectacular drives during the Fane era, was kept going by Sir Paul Getty but it was Mark Getty and his brother Tara's investment in the shoot which has now enabled it to become one of the best shoots in the Chilterns, if not the whole of the South East of England.

The famous Wormsley cricket ground was created by Sir Paul Getty, with much help from Brian Johnston and others of Sir Paul's many cricket-loving friends. The first game was held in 1992 and the ground has since played host to games involving most of the game's biggest stars of the last 25 years, including the likes of Brian Lara, Viv Richards and Shane Warne.



However, Mark's vision for Wormsley is that it should become a centre of cultural, as well as sporting, excellence. He embraces a greater degree of public access to the estate, the Library and indeed the family's art collection than was possible in his father's era. As a result, a major new chapter in the life of Wormsley has been opened with the arrival in 2011 of Garsington Opera at Wormsley.

Although Wormsley remains, above all, a place of private and quiet enjoyment for Mark Getty and his family, Mark would like the Estate's beauty and resources to be enjoyed by a wider public as well.