



The History of the Estate of Milton Hill

The name of Milton is of Saxon origin and has been recorded in several forms, Middeltune (10th – 13th Centuries), Middleton and Midleton (13th – 15th Centuries) and Mayton (15th – 18th Centuries). The name indicates that it was in the middle of a group of settlements.

The village of Milton is situated 4 miles south - west of Abingdon. The road running through the village, linking Abingdon to Newbury and forming it's main streets, was originally an ancient park primeway, i.e. a hollow way along which carts would not pass. Carts had to be taken along another track via Steventon, on higher ground near Milton Heights. There are records of the path having been marked by stones, which were removed during the Civil War. In addition to these marking stones there are a number of Sarsens (large boulders carried by glacial action) around the village, most notably the stocks stone.

The more recent hamlet of Milton Hill is bounded to the north - east by Sutton Courtenay and to the north – west by Drayton. Milton Hill House is on higher ground approximately 2 miles from the village of Milton and towards Milton Heights. It stands on the land originally known at one time as Heath Farm which was part of Milton Manor.

Milton has changed considerably during the last century. The opening of an ordinance depot at Didcot by the RAF, later under the control of the Army, brought more traffic to the area and more people. The extensive depot closed in 1964, and the site formed part of the massive Didcot Power Station development, which has so dramatically changed the landscape. The rural landscape has been transformed, not least with the shift away from sheep farming to create fruit farms at Milton Heights and the growth of cereal crops.

Milton Park Trading Estate, situated off the Oxford to Newbury road, was opened in 1971, again part of the land occupied by the old ordinance depot. The population of the area had dropped by 5,000 when the depot closed, but people began to move back again after the opening of the trading estate. The estate has attracted service and distribution industries and by 1979 there were more than 150 businesses based there. An additional 100,000 sq. ft of Warehouse space was made available in the early 1980's to meet demand. The success of the estate has been as a result of the communication in the area and it being within easy reach of Oxford, London, Reading and Birmingham. Companies represented on the estate included Hobbs shoes, SMEG, UPS Bookpoint and Research Machines.

Milton Hill through the Ages

956

The Manor at Milton Hill was first recorded in 956. This was when King Edward of Wessex granted the land at Middeltune of 15 hides (1,200 acres) for the creation of a Manor to his thane (an Anglo Saxon term denoting someone who had served the King or a superior in the Military service), by the name of Alfwyn. This constituted the Manor of Milton, which includes Milton Hill. Alfwyn later conveyed the land by deed to the Abbey of Abingdon.

1086

The area stands on rich agricultural land, which provided good crops and was ideal for cultivation. It is clear that by the time of the Norman invasion in 1066 there was already a well established agricultural community in the area, and farming well organised and well established. The Domesday book records that the estate had over 50 acres of meadow, land for 26 ploughs and two mills, one of which belonged to the Manor. The total value was £24 5s 0d. The other mill which stood on the River Ginge continued to operate well in to the 20th Century and had been the property of the Bradfield family for over 250 years. It was demolished in the last century.

The people of Milton were dependant upon agriculture to maintain a livelihood. Sheep rearing was the most important activity, hence the dedication of the Parish Church to St Blaise the Wool Combs. There was also an annual village feast and festivity call "tad".

1538

The Manor of Milton was one of the first possessions of the Abbey of Abingdon, providing wealth and income in the form of rents and tithes. The Manor was administered by a lay bailiff who lived in a small dwelling house. The revenue obtained from renting the farmland went to the Abbey. The Manor remained in the possession of the Abbey up until the 16th Century, when during the dissolution, the Monastery was dissolved and its land reverted to the crown on 2nd February 1538, becoming the property of Henry VIII.

1546

The purchaser of Milton Manor in 1546 was a London goldsmith called Thomas Calton. He lived in the old bailiffs house, which became the dower house (demolished during the 18th Century). Thomas Carlton's family held the property for another 175 years with the Manor being settled on various family members: 1637 Richard and Margaret Westley; 1709 Paul Carlton married the daughter of Vice Admiral Benbow. They mortgaged the house to William Benbow and Benjamin Fuller; 1746 the spinsters Martha, Catherine and Mary Carlton sold it to Isaac Barrett (who was probably acting for John Briant Barrett).

During these times Milton Hill's distinguished visitors included Peter the Great, Emperor of Russia and King William III.

1576

The Milton Hill part of the Manor, then known as Heath Farm, was sold to Sir George Coldbrooke.

1776

Sir Coldbrooke sold Heath Farm to John Bowles, Town Clerk of Abingdon from 1765 to 1780, who enclosed the park. John Bowles, with his brothers, carried on a Stationers and Engravers business in Cheapside, London which was noted for maps and prints by famous engravers.

1796

John Bowles died, leaving the property at Milton Hill to his son Thomas, who enclosed 70 acres of land to form a park and construct Milton Hill House as we know it today. Here, he and his wife Hester brought up their six sons and five daughters. As with so many houses there are no records as to the architect and it is possible that the design of the house was left up to the builder, a common practice at the time. The house is asymmetrical, and has some unusual features such as the portico adjacent to the bay window at the garden side of the house, and the porte-cochere, which is not big enough to accommodate a wheeled vehicle. The house was designed as a family mansion in an attractive and picturesque rural setting.

1837

John Samuel Bowles inherited the estates on the death of his father, Thomas. He employed Gilbert Scott, Architect to the Royal Courts of Justice to make many alterations to the house, including the rebuilding of the south front to include the library. The overmantel in the library was made from two or more Flemish chest dating from 1630 and the doors are decorated with carvings reputed to be the work of Grinling Gibbons.

The room on the north front was first the dining room and then the billiard room.

Originally three rather small rooms - the drawing room on the south front and the second dining room have ceilings beautifully painted with wreaths of flowers and medallions by an Italian Artist.

1884

Thomas John Bowles inherited the estates on the death of his father, John Samuel.

1905

The Bowles family sold the house to Sir Fredrick Pinizzi Preston.

1912

Milton Hill has been extensively modernised during it's lifetime to suit the requirements of new owners and new users. There was certainly some alterations carried out during the 19th Century, but most of the work followed the sale of the house to Sir Mortimer Singer in 1912.

Sir Mortimer was an incredibly wealthy American of the Singer Sewing Machine family, who had taken up British Citizenship in 1900. Milton Hill House was one of a number of houses that he owned in England. It was a house he used for entertaining and leisure, and his extended family often stayed at Milton Hill, engaging themselves in riding and hunting. Singer himself was an enthusiastic and accomplished horseman, who enjoyed the sport and company that Milton Hill offered. The Drawing Room and it's bay window (now divided into the Beech and Beechnut) and the Library, both overlooked the attractive grounds, forming the focal point for Singer and his guests to gather.

Under his ownership there were many transformations, the most dramatic of which was the addition of the paneled hallway and gallery, and the creation of numerous bathrooms. The paneled hallway is light and airy, due to the glass roof which provides plenty of natural light. The hall is spectacular, but it has to be admitted that the proportions of the gallery are a little "squat" and unusual. It appears that one major fault with the original house was it's lack of bathrooms, and the number of en-suite facilities provided. A gentleman's cloakroom was added on the ground floor, off the main hall by the front door. This contains the original relief tiles and Edwardian fittings. Most of the other small bathrooms now provide office space.

The most striking alterations was the addition of the third floor rooms, which expanded upwards into the eaves of the roof. This is most visible from the front of the house, as the narrow strip windows are clearly visible underneath the eaves. It is likely that these rooms were used predominantly for storage and staff.

The oak paneled library, with its Flemish carved centerpiece depicting religious scenes was the grandest and most serious room. The fireplace is dominated by the carved panels. The edges of the panels have carved cherubs at regular intervals. The carvings dated from 1630 and probably came from 2 more chests.

Outdoors there was a bowling green and plenty of opportunity for sporting activity. Another of Singers alterations was the construction of a bowling alley, in the corridor adjacent to the house and the sunken garden. Both of these features were constructed just prior to the break out of war in 1914. The additional red brick wings are in a style fashionable at the time, having colonnades and arches along their length. One of the wings was an Italian room with a series of decorative murals along its length to complement the sunken garden with its fountain to cool the air. There was also a small aviary.

Other buildings surrounding the house were the white cottage, which was a home for the senior staff and the stable block. There were also numerous glasshouses and kennels for hunting hounds. The kennels were in existence under the ownership of Sir Fredrick Pinnizzi Preston, who owned the house from 1905 – 1912. At that time there was a pack of harriers, used for hunting hares.

1914 – 1918

During World War 1, Sir Mortimer Singer turned the house into a military hospital. The soldiers received treatment for their wounds and were able to take full advantage of the peaceful rural setting whilst treated.

1938

Following the last war, Milton Hill House was sold to the Anglo-American oil company, now known as Esso Petroleum Company and eventually it became their residential training centre. It continued as such until 1964. Initially used as a staff training centre, the company expanded the site building a series of research facilities. Their site, adjoining Milton Hill forms one of only two R&D facilities for the company, the other being in the USA.

1970's

Milton Hill House was purchased by W H Smith LTD to be used as its own residential training college. The staff department moved from the London Head Office; Strand House; and joined the training department to form the staff training division.

1974

The "Bedroom Block", used to accommodate residential course members, was opened.

1978

The Garden Wing Conference Centre, built to provide additional conference and syndicate rooms, was opened. So "in-keeping" was the design with the original house that they received an award.

1989

The new Garden House, set in the grounds of the Manor, was opened in October 1989 to house the company's welfare, head office and pension trust department.

1996

Milton Hill House was acquired by the Woman's Royal Voluntary Service. Initial Style Conferences LTD leased the property to run as a residential training centre.

1998

Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II visited Milton Hill in her capacity as Patron of the WRVS to celebrate their 60th anniversary. She planted a mulberry tree near to the French Gardens and 3000 WRVS members came from all over the UK to see her.

The training rooms and offices on the first and second floors of the manor house are restored to their original use as bedrooms. Additional rooms were also added to the accommodation block so that in total there are now 113 bedrooms.