

Hotham Park House – two families and a mystery

Introduction

We all know what is now Hotham Park House and that it was built in the 18th century as part of Sir Richard Hotham's dream of a genteel resort to rival Brighton. The house was built using Bognor rock, local bricks and faced with stucco (a cement-based plaster). The clocktower and a chapel were added in the 1790s and an early illustration shows a grand building not unlike an Italian villa with a double row of arches, a veranda and balcony called appropriately Chapel House. However Sir Richard had somewhat overstretched himself and when he died in 1799 his nephew inherited not a brick or acre of Bognor.

Various owners followed with the house being renamed Bersted Lodge along the way. If you would like details, the Bognor Museum sells a booklet called *The House in the Park A History of Hotham Park House* by Helen Bowles which refers to a book by David Allam and Ron Iden that is available second hand on line.

The Fletcher family

One important owner was John Ballett Fletcher who owned land in Lincolnshire and Sussex including Mundham, Hunston and Pagham. It is not clear where his fortune came from but he does not appear to have an aristocratic lineage. In 1835 he bought the Manor of Aldwick and the title Lord of the Manor. In 1857 he bought Bersted Lodge as a home for his wife Sarah and three young sons William, John and Edward. The chapel was demolished but the clocktower remained and is a feature of the house today. Sadly the father died just 6 years after the move when eldest son William was only 11 and Sarah was left to bring up the boys on her own. Edward died at the age of 17 in 1876 and the brother John Charles Ballett Fletcher went into the church and became vicar of North Mundham. It was left to William to carry on the Fletcher line.

The following extracts, in italics, are taken from www.bognorregistrails.co.uk to save me reinventing the wheel:

William Fletcher is an important figure in the history of Bognor Regis. His influence came from being a major benefactor to the town during his life but he also left the town with the wonderful gardens that we know as Hotham Park, where he lived for over 40 years in what we call today Hotham Park House.

William Holland Ballett Fletcher was born on October 29, 1852, in Broadwater, West Sussex ... His mother managed the estate for a number of years after her husband's death. With the guidance of his mother, he went on to St John's College in Cambridge from where, in 1875, he obtained his BA and an MA in 1879.

During his period at Cambridge he met and in 1875 married his wife Agnes Caroline Nicholls. William and Agnes lived in Worthing, where they had two children, John in 1879 and Edward, in 1881 who sadly died before his first birthday. John died in the First World War.

During his time at Worthing he was elected to West Sussex County Council in 1893 and between 1894 and 1896 he became the Mayor of Worthing. He was also elected to the Bench of the Justice of the Peace for West Sussex.

William Fletcher inherited the title of Lord of the Manor of Aldwick as well as the estate from his father in 1899, [the year his mother died and, moving into the house, he renamed it Aldwick Manor: note by SL]...



Aldwick Manor 1909

Note by SL from the booklet: WHB Fletcher held too many offices to mention. He was the last squire of South Bersted, Aldwick and Mundham, taking his duties very seriously. It is said that he was anti motorcars and when he attended committees in Chichester he would walk – and most of the way he was walking on his own land! However, it is also said that his speeches were insufferably long and boring and that he didn't like his servants to speak to him, just to listen... At the turn of the century the family entertained extensively. However, after the death of son John in 1915, the pair ceased entertaining and became more and more reclusive, preferring to spend time in the beautiful grounds of their house; he loved to feed his goldfish in his huge pond where the boating lake is today and she tended her collection of reptiles.

Agnes died in 1939 at the age of 84 and within 2 years William also died, aged 89, ending the Fletcher association with Hotham Park House as we know it today, which had lasted over eighty years. Their deaths ended the private ownership of the house and park we know today. Following William Fletcher's death, the house was requisitioned during the war and later was leased to the Ministry of Pensions. [Unfortunately it was during this time that boxes and boxes of estate papers were destroyed.SL] Having no surviving heirs, William made over the residue of his estate to be shared between three hospitals, The Royal Sussex County Hospital Brighton, Worthing Hospital and the Royal West Sussex Hospital Chichester, leaving no money for a permanent memorial stone.

To return briefly to **son John**, you may be interested to know:

William and Agnes's son, John, attended the same college as his father and grandfather at St John's in Cambridge where he obtained his MA before becoming a barrister in 1902. He practised both as a defence and prosecuting lawyer at the Old Bailey. John was a keen photographer and travelled widely across East and West Sussex, mainly by bicycle,

photographing towns and villages, leaving a legacy of over 1500 photos taken between 1896 and 1914. Examples can be seen at <https://www.sussexpictures.co.uk/west-sussex-record-office/john-fletcher-collection-wanderings-sussex/>

In 1914 John joined the armed forces as World War 1 commenced and he became a Lieutenant of the 7th Battalion of the London Regiment. Sadly, he was killed on May 13th 1915, just two months after joining the front line and is buried in the town cemetery of Bethune in France.

So ends the story of the Fletcher family and we now descend the stairs at Aldwick Manor to find the cook:

Martha Claydon

Martha was of lowly birth. Her father, Robert, came from Sketchworth in Cambridgeshire to work as a lime burner at the chalk pits at Amberley. They lived at Orchard Cottage, Church Street, Amberley, a village which you may know abounds with workers' thatched cottages that are today 'des res' but must have offered very cramped, cold, damp and basic conditions a century or two ago. Two of Robert's brothers, Jesse and George also moved to the village and this can confuse the search for the family in old records. A Claydon relative researching his family tree informs me that records often record Claydons or Clayton(s) and that cousins often had similar forenames. However, we know that Martha was a twin with her sister Annie Jane (not to be confused with her cousin Jane Annie) and that they were born in 1868. Census records tell us that the twins had 7 siblings:

Emily b.1870, Arthur b.1873, Henry b.1874, Florence b.1877, Frank b.1879, Maud Alice b.1882, and Lily b.1885.

The village was small, work was not abundant and many young girls went into service. In 1901 we find Martha, still single, working as the cook at Aldwick Manor. Her age is recorded as 30 (did she round down her age or did the person who filled in the form?) and it is the first reference to her that I can find since she left home. We know that she was not employed by William Fletcher's mother in 1891 when the house was called Bersted Lodge because the census of that year lists Ruth Barton aged 40 as the cook domestic nor was she with William Fletcher's family in Worthing that same year as Sarah Patenall aged 32 was the cook. However, Martha is still employed at the house in 1911.

So what was life like for Martha the cook at that time? Before the Great War, the Fletchers entertained extensively. Visitors included the Duke of Richmond, Lord Talbot MP and the Bishop of Chichester. Not only did William Fletcher dislike motor transport but he shunned all modern conveniences. The house had not moved on since Victorian times. Tap water was 'distrusted', there was no electricity, cooking would have been on a coal fired range and we can only guess at how food was stored. You may recall an icehouse near to Edward Bryant School, some distance from the house but at that time within the grounds. Was food still kept there or was there a cold store nearer to the house? According to Gerard Young in an article in 1976 '*...the steel fire-grates shone like silver. Swiss lace and blue and silver brocade curtained the windows. Dinner was eaten in the glow of 12-branched candelabra and every Sunday each servant was given a basket of fruit.*'

My interest in Martha Claydon is that in 1913 she purchased a piece of land in upcoming Barnham on the south side of Yapton Road that had until that time been a brick field supplying bricks for the local housebuilding boom. The land had been owned by Ebenezer Marshall of Church Lane whose sons Harry and Sydney were major employers locally in the nursery business. Son Harry who lived at Sunnyside, Yapton Road, inherited the land as part of his share of his father's estate. He immediately sold the land for £60 to Martha Claydon who gave her address as her parents' house in Amberley and by the end of the Great War she had had built, by local builder William Dart, two pairs of cottages to be let. In design they were workers' cottages, three bedrooms, with a fireplace in every room, two rooms downstairs plus a scullery at the rear, no electricity or sanitation, gardens open to their neighbours, but with the new gas that had arrived that same year and high ceilings in the Edwardian style.



Flints, Willow Cottage and 1 and 2 Dunora, Yapton Road, bought by TH Beck & Son in 1946 with a view to house nursery workers

How had a lowly cook domestic been able to afford such a venture? I asked this very question of the staff at Bognor Museum some years ago and was told that Martha was single, she had no family to support, she had a wage, and her bed and board were provided. Her employer was known to be generous and fair. Having produced lavish dinners for notable guests and at times of celebration such as Christmas and Easter, she may have been rewarded for her efforts by more than a basket of fruit.

It is likely that by the time she was in her forties (not as young in those days as it is today), she was thinking of her retirement and how she would be able to support herself. Martha and her twin sister Annie lived for a time in one of the cottages in the 1920s (according to the electoral register); they would have been in their 50s by then. In 1932 the properties were transferred into their joint names. They later moved to Crescent Road, Bognor Regis where they lived until their deaths in 1954 and 1955. They had sold the cottages in 1946 with sitting tenants for £2200 to TH Beck and his son who were expanding their nursery across the road where they had incorporated Harry Marshall's business into their own at Sunnyside and Highfield.

Of course you may be aware that Allan and I live in one of the houses. When we bought it the surveyor said that it was in good condition for its age – but no one seemed to know what age that was! So that set me on the path to search out the history of the house and I have met past occupants and past neighbours of 'the twins'.

And so to the mystery. Sylvia Endacott kindly sent me a photograph of the servants at Aldwick Manor taken around 1910. Martha Claydon must be in the photograph but which one?



What do you think? My only clue is that a neighbour in Crescent Road told me that Martha and Annie were always known as 'the twins' and that they were small, as you would expect twins to be. So over to you, I'd love to know what you think...

Post script: So what happened to all the Claydons of Amberley? Well, it amazes me that large families die out. Of course the females would have married and changed their name but the only person of the name Claydon remaining was Frank, Martha's younger brother. He remained single and was known by my friend in Amberley as 'old man Claydon'. He worked a smallholding, at one time growing strawberries, at 'Four Views'. He is long gone but his modest house fronts the Amberley/Storrington road close to the 40mph sign. The land has of course been developed for housing.

Sandra Lowton slowton@btopenworld.com
January 2021