

Foots Cray



Foots Cray Meadows lie back from Foots Cray Village behind the Parish Church of All Saints. Once the grounds of a country seat, today they are a public park.

The Foots Cray estate dates back to Elizabethan times when it was owned by Sir Francis Walsingham. Sir Francis (1532-90) was Secretary of State (1573- 90) to Elizabeth I. The estate remained in the Walsingham family until the end of the 17th century. In 1683 a map shows Joseph Lem in possession of an Elizabethan E-type house situated by the river behind the church. The estate was sold by Lem's son to George Smyth, whose heir conveyed it to William Skinner in 1747, who in turn parted with it, at a profit to William Boothby in 1751. A year later in 1752 Boothby transferred his holding to Bouchier Cleeve for the sum of £5,450.

Bouchier Cleeve

Bouchier Cleeve (he gained his strange christian name from his mothers family name of Bouchier) was born in 1715, the tenth son of Alexander Cleeve pewterer of Cornhill. Cleeve in his turn was a pewterer and a writer on finance; he published in 1756 "A scheme for preventing a further increase of the national debt and reducing the same".

Cleeve pulled down the original house standing further south near the River Cray and built the new Foots Cray Place in the style of a famous villa between Venice and Vicenza designed by Andrea Palladio two centuries earlier.

The architect is said to have been Isaac Ware and work was completed by 1754.

The house was described a few years later thus: "..... built by Bouchier (sic) Cleeve Esq after a design of Palladio of the Ionic order, and is peculiarly elegant. The original design had four porticoes, three of which are filled up to gain more room. The hall is octagonal, and has a gallery, ornamented with busts leading to the bed-chambers. It is enlightened from the top and is very beautiful. The edifice is built of stone, but the offices which are on each side at some distances, are of brick....."

The disposition of the rooms within the home appears to be very convenient, and the several apartments are elegantly finished and well furnished. The gallery, which extends to the whole length of the north front of the house, is a very grand room, and was formerly decorated with a good collection of pictures by the most eminent masters....."

Cleeve collected paintings by Rembrandt, Reubens, Van Dyke, Canaletto and Hans Holbein. Visitors were invited to admire the house and its contents. In addition Cleeve laid out the grounds and arranged for water to be diverted from the Cray to run through a canal and a cascade in front of the house. Cleeve did not long survive the building of the house, which came into the possession of Sir George Yonge upon his marriage with Cleeve's daughter Ann in 1767.

Sir George sold the house on 14 April 1772 to Benjamin Harenc for £14,500. At this time the estate consisted of a villa, including a brewhouse, laundry and wash house and a large stable for twelve horses and four carriages designed by Inigo Jones. There was a kitchen garden, with a hot house, greenhouse and ice house and various farm buildings.

Benjamin Harenc

The Harenc family came to England as Huguenot refugees and little is known about them until they took up residence in Foots Cray. In 1777 Benjamin Harenc was appointed High Sheriff of Kent. He enlarged the estate, which passed on his death to his son, also called Benjamin. This son became a well known local benefactor and was a founder of both the Bromley Savings Bank and also the Foots Cray National School. Nevertheless in 1821 he sold the estate to Nicholas Vansittart for £28,056-16s-0d.

Nicholas Vansittart, Lord Bexley

Nicholas Vansittart was born on 29 April 1766 the youngest son of Henry Vansittart, sometime Governor of Bengal. Vansittart was a delicate child and his mother decided that rather than Eton he should be educated privately at Greenwich. In 1784 he attended Christ Church, Oxford and was called to the bar in 1792.

In 1796 he entered Parliament for Hastings and was to hold many offices and seats. In 1812 he was appointed as Chancellor of the Exchequer in the administration which was formed by the Earl of Liverpool after the assassination of Spencer Perceval. In 1823 Vansittart was elevated to the Peerage as Baron Bexley and was appointed Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster.

Vansittart was married to the Honourable Catherine Isabella Eden but she was to live for only a further four years. Vansittart continued to live at Foots Cray Place with his sister Sophia and two nieces keeping a staff of three men and six women servants in the house and four men in the stables.

He was a noted local benefactor and with Henry Berens of Sidcup Place and Lord Sydney of Frognal he endowed St John's Church, Sidcup. Lord Bexley died on 8 February 1851 and was buried in the parish church at Beckenham.

The property was left to his son Captain Robert Arnold Vansittart and it remained in the possession of the family for many years although often leased by them. In 1876 Sir John Pender KGMG JP MP took a lease on the building. Sir John, a pioneer of the Atlantic submarine cable, died at Foots Cray and was buried in the churchyard.

Lord Waring of Foots Cray

Towards the end of the century the house was sold to Mr S J Waring later Lord Waring. A pioneer in household furnishing and decoration he was Chairman of the well known firm of Waring and Gillow Ltd. During the Great War he organised factories for the production of aeroplanes and other equipment and for this work was given a baronetcy in 1919 and a peerage three years later when he became Baron Waring of Foots Cray Place.

He was a supporter of the Scout Movement and County Commissioner for Kent and held gatherings at Foots Cray Place, one of which was attended by the chief Scout Lord Baden Powell. His name is perpetuated in Waring Park, his gift to the people of Sidcup, which was opened in 1931. He died on 9 January 1940 aged 80 years old.

From 1939 to 1945 the Royal Naval Training establishment HMS Worcester occupied the house and in 1946 the Kent Education Committee bought Foots Cray Place intending to use the house as a museum.

However on the night of 18 October 1949 the house caught fire. The Kentish Times for 21 October 1949 reported:

"For more than three hours firemen from eight stations fought the blaze, which had taken a firm grip of the building before being noticed, and which was fanned to great severity by a strong wind. When they brought it under control the mansion was a charred shell of stone and brick only the basement having escaped the havoc to any considerable extent."

The building was so badly damaged that it had to be demolished. The land passed from the County Council to the London Borough of Bexley in 1965 and is administered by the Leisure Services Department.

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