

THE HISTORY OF GREAT FOSTERS



The Porch

(Country Life 1922)

Within Egham, Great Fosters is by far the finest relic of antiquity of the parish and is considered as ranking fifth within the county of Surrey as a specimen of domestic architecture being only surpassed by Sutton, Loseley, Ham and Beddington.

During the Middle Ages, the immediate vicinity of Great Fosters was known as the manor of Imworth and there is evidence that the de Imworth Family lived here in 1224. More than one seventeenth century record describes it as "Imworths alias Fosters" The earliest mention of the site as Fosters is in the court rolls of Thorpe dated 1521. Describing boundaries on the Egham side of the parish, it refers to "lands on the west called Fosters".

In the survey conducted at the behest of King Edward VI, Hugh Warham was in possession of the "tenement, formerly Adam de Foster's". Hugh Warham was knighted in 1523 and married a co-heiress to the Brocas family. He was the youngest brother of Archbishop Wareham and a monument to his memory lies in Croydon Parish Church. Sir Hugh Wareham's son, William, knighted in 1553 on the coronation of Mary, was in possession of the estate by 1555. We can safely assume, he was not of the reformed faith and it is considered that he was responsible for the building of the core of the present house, then known as Fosters. We can speculate the original Manor of Imworth therefore was on the site of Fosters and was enclosed by the Saxon moat, which dates around 500 AD and still surrounds Great Fosters

Unfortunately, it would appear that William fell into money problems with a debt owing to Jasper Palmer, a Goldsmith or moneylender who acquired a controlling interest in Sir William's property. To recoup the money, Jasper Palmer sold the estate to a John Ailworth who later sold it in 1565, presumably at great profit to Thomas Bowtell.

Intrigue was not to finish there, as Thomas Bowtell's son Jeremy seems to have been denied his inheritance by a certain Edward Owen, a freeman of the Broderer's Company of London, who married Jeremy Bowtell's sister. He appears to have been a very avaricious, devious and unpleasant brother-in-law, for, not content with gaining possession of his wife's inheritance, he succeeded in terrifying both Jeremy and his mother in law out of theirs. He gained complete control of the property, which encompassed a large area surrounding Great Fosters and then proceeded to divide it.

The ownership of the house is apparent, although who inhabited the house, its purpose and tenancy are somewhat unsure and inconclusive; however there is much evidence of Royal residence, usage or patronage. It is documented that Henry VIII used the house as a hunting lodge, he sent his daughter Elizabeth here and that she used the house herself as a hunting lodge. In confirmation of this, above the main porch there is an original royal crest of Queen Elizabeth I with the date 1598, which indicates that this property had serious royal connections. This is compounded with the ornate ceiling decorations, particularly in The Anne Boleyn Room, encompassing royal ensignia, Anne Boleyn's personal crests. In The Drawing Room, (now The Tapestry Room there are devices of The Earl of Northumberland in the shape of the Percy's silver boar, collared and chained and the crown key and scimitar would indicate connections with Henry Percy, 9th Earl of Northumberland, nick-named The Wizard Earl because of his keen interest in alchemy and astrology.



After the division of the estate, the manor of Imworth/Fosters was sold to Joseph Wright who sold it on to Sir John Denham, the judge in 1604. At this stage, the house was greatly remodelled and became the house it is today.

References to Sir John Thynne, an Ancestor of the Marquis of Bath, are made on the family tree at Longleat recording his death in 1608 and giving his residence as Great Fosters. However, there are no local records to that effect; perhaps he was a tenant or guest at the house at that time.

Mary Watson became the owner of Fosters; she married Sir Anthony Mayne, knighted by James 1 at Basing in 1609. From the appearance of the Tudor rose and crown with his initials, Mayne was undoubtedly part of the royal household. He too, had his misfortune, having "contributed" to a forced loan to Charles 1st in 1625.

How the next owner, Sir John Doderidge, a judge, came to Great Fosters, is not clear, except that there was a professional association with Sir John Denham. As a practising lawyer, he worked amongst others, for Sir Walter Raleigh before becoming Solicitor General to King James 1 and being raised to the King's Bench.

Fuller wrote of Doderidge in his "Worthies" - "It is difficult to say whether Sir John was better artist, divine, devil or canon lawyer". He was nicknamed "The Sleeping Judge" because he always considered his cases with his eyes shut.

It is opined that the sundial in the garden, was obtained by Sir John, who was one of the first members of The Society of Antiquaries and who took great interest in Heraldry and Astronomy. Although other historians theorise that it may have been a donation by Sir Francis Drake, as well as its similarity to another at Westwood, Bradford on Avon, suggests that it may well have been created by Nicholas Stone, the elder.

The Armillary at the head of the rare oak stairwell is also considered to have been placed there by Sir John and the central sphere in the original Drawing Room (now The Tapestry Room) although the dated plasterworks state 1602, which evidently does not support this theory.

Sir John Doderidge died at Fosters on 13th September 1628, his will implies that Fosters had already been passed to his wife Dorothy as she lived there for some years after. In his will, there are three excerpts of interest, "to his beloved wife" he left the furniture and plate "in the house or tenement called forsters". He left £5.00 to the poor of Egham and to Trinity College Cambridge, "to which society I have been much beholden, two greate gloabes which are in the Gallery in my house of forsters". Dame Anne lived there until 1631.

Great Fosters was then owned by Thomas Bennett, who is responsible for the building of the stables around 1635. Over the central pediment may still be seen "B.T.M." Thomas and Mary Bennett. However his ownership was short lived and Great Fosters was sold to Robert Foster, Sergeant at Law. He was knighted in 1640. Sir Robert followed the king on his retreat to Oxford leaving his wife, five children and twelve servants at Egham. The house was frequently used and visited by Parliamentary soldiers in search of billets and plunder for which she received no payment, only further dues. She was eventually forced to leave Egham for London. After the King's death, Sir Robert returned to Great Fosters with his wife in 1649. At the Restoration, Sir Robert came into his own again and was made Chief Justice of the King's Bench on 21st October 1660. He did not, however, live long enough to enjoy his new dignity and died at "great fosters on 4th October 1663. Again, philanthropically, he willed £5.00 to the poor of Egham, £2.00 to the poor of Thorpe and £10.00 to his "old servant, Will Born".

The house had previously been settled upon his heir Thomas, the second son who was born in 1617, the first son, Robert having died in the first year of his life. Although knighted, Thomas' life was uneventful, he had two daughters and two sons and died in 1685. Thomas, the second son, married a Margaret Warren who had his daughter – Margaret. However, both his two sons predeceased him, leaving no male issue. A wrangle ensued but resulted in Margaret having the right to live at Great Fosters for her lifetime but that it would revert to the two daughters on her death. The two sisters sold the reversion rights to Edward Woodward for £1,944.00. He had the poorer deal, since Margaret was a difficult tenant and spent next to nothing on the house, giving him all the trouble she could during her tenure. Despite court actions against Margaret for neglect of the house, Edward Woodward never was to be resident of his seat, Margaret outliving him and her own daughter. Margaret however sublet the property to Sir Charles Orby, who again cared little for its condition. For his services to the Stuarts in exile, he was created a Baronet in 1715. Both Charles and his brother Thomas were Jacobites and after the rising in 1715, Great Fosters was searched for horses and arms. The brothers were described as “Papists and nonjurors, and disloyal and disaffected persons aiding and abetting in ye said rebellion.” Sir Charles died in 1716 and Thomas died in 1723 approximately the same time as Margaret Foster.

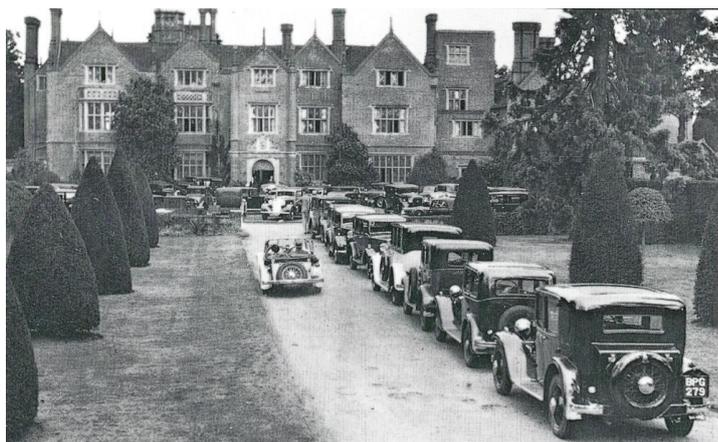
Edward Woodward's widow came to Great Fosters on the demise of Margaret, she was the daughter of the family Knight of Chawton and was simply known as Madam Knight. She remarried a few years after her husband's death and her husband, Bulstrode Peachey also took the name Knight. As a childless widow, Madam Knight died in 1736, her husband pre-deceasing her in 1734.

Great Fosters then passed to a distant cousin Thomas Brodnax, alias May, alias Knight, whose son sold it to Richard Brown in 1786. He remained here until 1818 when it was sold to a Dr Furnivall.

Dr Furnivall had two other partners, one of whom was Sir John Chapman, one of the 300 founder members of The Royal College of Surgeons. Prior to the formation of this college, surgeons belonged to the Guild of Barbers and Surgeons. Sir John was one of “the modern thinkers”, who believed that mental illness was not solely related to physical illness. No doubt his methods of treatment for mental illness were therefore quite revolutionary. Great Fosters thus became a lunatic asylum and despite this radical thinking he was described in local documentation as “Doctor to the Poor” in Windsor. It is believed, although not confirmed by Windsor Castle records, that Great Fosters was where King George III was housed when he was being treated for his insanity. Sir John's knighthood was bestowed on him for his “Services to the Crown” and later Sir John became Mayor of Windsor. He retired in 1846.

On Dr Furnivall's death, his children sold Great Fosters to Colonel Halkett, a Baron of the Kingdom of Hanover who expended large quantities of money on its repair. His wife Baroness Halkett was the Lady in Waiting to Queen Alexandra. When Colonel Halkett died in 1880 The Baroness inherited the property, but a protracted sale of the house from 1902 to 1910 to the Earl of Dudley allowed the building to lapse once more into neglect and it was unoccupied for some years.

The second major refurbishment took place under the Hon Gerald Samuel Montagu, the younger brother of the second Lord Swaythling, who bought Great Fosters in 1918. The Hon Gerald Montagu became involved in the post-war boom of poultry production and traded as The Black Lake Poultry Farm with the telegraphic address “Eggs Egham”. It was promoted as Britain's most up-to-date poultry farm and specialist breeder of white leghorns and white wyandottes. To add to the menagerie, Clumber spaniels were also bred by a Mr Cope at Great Fosters and included some prominent winners including Crufts Breed Champions. It was at this stage that the architect W H Romaine-Walker was commissioned to adapt the house into the building, which largely survives today.



Romaine-Walker started his practice in the 1880s, specialising in country houses and the restoration and elaboration of parish churches, though perhaps he is best known for his work on the Tate Gallery in the 1930s. He was renowned not only for his neo-Elizabethan pastiche architecture, but also for his contemporary garden designs. By the time he was commissioned at Great Fosters in 1918, his experience with restoration and pastiche Elizabethan design was extensive.



Sir Harold Sutcliffe bought Great Fosters in 1930 and with careful restoration and additions; this noble house became a hotel. In 1931, the then resident director, Major W F Jefferys was quoted as complaining that the Dining Room was totally inadequate to deal with the number of customers. Thus, at a cost of £4000.00, the Elizabethan Tithe Barn was re-erected at Great Fosters having been moved from Ewell Manor.

Great Fosters gained a reputation as a premier country hotel which was reinforced in May 1931 when Queen Mary visited and subsequently when on 19th June, the Ascot Ball was held at the hotel in the presence of the Prince of Wales and the Duke and Duchess of York.

It is interesting to note that the Sutcliffe family have owned the hotel for longer than any other family in its history. However, after almost 90 years of ownership, the hotel was acquired by Alexander Hotels, co-owned by Peter and his wife Deborah Hinchcliffe in 2018. Their now five-strong portfolio also includes two hotels in Surrey: the four-red-AA-star, 22-bedroom Langshott Manor and four-AA-star, 44-bedroom Barnett Hill. as well as the five-AA-star, 58-bedroom Alexander House in West Sussex, and the four-AA-star, 38-bedroom Rowhill Grange hotel in Kent.

ARCHITECTURAL AND FURNISHING DETAILS

The Main Entrance and Exteriors

The porch has the arms of Queen Elizabeth I above it and the date 1598. As a rough guide, the house may be divided into three stages of development, with the central core being built no later than 1550. After this, Tudor brickwork, of which this part is built, gave place to slightly larger bricks. These larger bricks are used in both the porch and the left and right parts of the building. This larger brickwork suggests building works were undertaken around 1600.

It is felt that the earlier building was most likely to be a symmetrical shaped Elizabethan house. The earliest lead rainwater head is dated 1597. Another head bears the date 1609 and the initials A.M. and a Tudor Rose (A.M. = Sir Antony Mayne). The Elizabethan brick pinnacles to the chimneys, of which there are no fewer than nine designs, were made unsafe during the war, due to bomb blast and were taken down. Their accurate replacement, working from photographs won Great Fosters an award in the 1970's. All the windows at Great Fosters are of the same type – stone mullions and transoms with lead lights.

Within the walls of the house to the right of the garden door, on the main elevation are three niches, it is believed that these were created as a convenient place to hold tankards during games of bowls when a bowling green was located in this section of the grounds.

The Moat

One surmises that the U shaped moat, which is most certainly of Saxon origin and has been dated 500AD, was that which surrounded Imworth Manor or Fosters/Foresters on three sides. The House formed the fourth side affording protection to the enclosure to the stock and chattels of the manor from nocturnal marauders.

The Main Hall

On entering the hall, one is obliged to pass through a stout oak door with a wicket which allows only one person to enter at a time. The bolts and hinges of this door are of very early ironwork. Of note is the Jacobean wood chimney piece, circa 1620, with delicately carved cartouches in the two centre panels and the plastered panelling, which is again of the 17th century. Just inside the main door is a plaque, which stated that this was the Great Hall to the house and as such would have acted as the Dining Hall. The ceiling with its ornate plasterwork has the patina of time; the extraordinary colour is purely being the result of log fires over many years.

The Anne Boleyn Room

The room to the left of the Front Hall, the Anne Boleyn Room has a most remarkable and original example of a 1600's ceiling. Although simple in form, it is beautifully decorated with the emblems of Queen Anne Boleyn. The principal badges are the Anne Boleyn's falcon in the claw in which was placed the royal sceptre when she became Queen, the Tudor rose, the lion passant and fleur de lys represent her Royal marriage and French origin and the arched crown is appropriate to the Tudor Kings and Queens. It is thought that its decoration was an opportunity for recording some long forgotten connection between Anne Boleyn and Great Fosters. The stone fireplace is also unique and fascinating and certainly was installed at the same time as the ceiling. A small room leading off The Anne Boleyn was the original chapel to the house and from here there once was a secret staircase to The Tapestry Room and Nursery above. It is reputed that the fine walnut veneer doors were constructed from walnut trees grown within the ground of the house.

The Staircase and Tower

The tower with the magnificent and rare oak well staircase again dates around 1600. This is one of the first examples where the newel posts were separate. Earlier than this, the practice was for the newel to be continuous through the building to support the staircase. Being separate, the newels could thus be decorated with finials at their apexes. The handrail shows the development from the Elizabethan grasp rail, which a man could clutch firmly and the flat or bevelled rails of later periods. The plaque at the head of the stairs points to a connection with Henry Percy, Earl of Northumberland already mentioned within the history.



The Oakwell Staircase to the Tower.

A narrow spiral staircase continues from the second floor to the roof of the tower decorated with a lead cupola and visible from the front of the hotel.



The Tapestry Room

Originally, The Tapestry Room was the Drawing Room to the house. The armillary sphere, and the silver boar, collared and chained, the crowned key and the scimitar all indicate connections with the Percy Family. There is a remarkable Jacobean carved wooden chimneypiece splendidly carved with the figures of Ratio, Veritas and Victoria and an even more remarkable carved chalk or firestone mantel depicting the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Each scene is separated from its neighbour by a tree. The first image is of Adam praying and going to sleep amongst the wild beasts. The second shows Eve emerging from Adam's side. The third shows the serpents twisting away from an angel. The last shows Adam ploughing the yoke of his former friends and Eve with Abel are surrounded by animals, which are now servile.

The walls are hung with early 17th century Flemish tapestries.

Italian and other Historic Rooms

Italian contains wonderful gilt furniture and a pair of painted and carved Quattrocento Doors. The walls are covers in damask. Panel II has spectacular panelling and a four-poster bed. Queen Anne has wonderful walnut doors and window boards are similar to those in Anne Boleyn. The Nursery has low but beautifully decorated ceilings.



Tithe Barn



The Barn with its minstrels' gallery, dated 1390 was painstakingly dismantled from its original site at Ewell Manor, Malden, Surrey and resurrected at Great Fosters in the 1930s at a cost then of £4,000.00. In its life as a Tithe Barn, it was used to store the produce due from the parish as way of a tax, to pay for the support of the church or parish priest. Tithe means a tenth part.

The Gardens

Framed on three sides by a Saxon moat, the formal gardens of Great Fosters are both extensive and exceptional. They were originally designed by W H Romaine Walker and Gilbert Jenkins and are among the finest Arts and Crafts gardens in Europe. Designed to reflect the intricate beauty of a Persian rug, the knot garden is embellished with fragrant beds of flowers and herbs bordered by manicured hedges and topiary. At the heart of it all is the Drake sundial, which belongs to the immediate family of Sir Francis Drake and is believed to date back to 1585. Traversing the moat is the wisteria clad Japanese Bridge, which leads to the circular rose gardens, complete with a sunken lily pond.

The Archery Pavilion, first built in the 1920s was fully restored in 1998. As part of the restoration of the gardens, a bridge at the end of the moat was replaced by an oak moat seat in 1999.

Wander further in this magnificent fifty-acre estate and you'll discover a vast lake, a grand lawn leading to an avenue of lime trees and a magnificent grassed amphitheatre. Within the gardens in outdoor swimming pool, built in the 1930s. The wonderfully eccentric bathing boxes are now a listed feature.