



*A Brief History of Kneesworth House
and its Occupants*

It should be explained that what follows is not an academic work, properly researched and verified, but is simply an unconnected series of accounts, put into a simple context which I hope will be informative.

Some of these accounts are from people with an interest or involvement in local history. Others have been taken direct from those who had past personal experience of the house or its occupants and, as such, may reflect their own views which might not always be borne out by the historical perspective.

I am however grateful to all of these contributors, for allowing me to “cherry pick” from their knowledge and from their memories.

In a very few cases I have slightly amended such accounts so as to avoid the risk of causing offence or embarrassment to anyone living or dead!

*Robin Scott
25/10/2007*

Inevitably the history of any house is entwined with the history of those who have lived and worked in it. The current Kneesworth House has had as varied a usage in its' short life as its' creator could ever have imagined.

It seems that Kneesworth became a "gentlemanly seat" in the middle of the 16th Century, when a William Bolnest erected a nine roomed red brick house. The Victoria County History also says that a Thomas Bolnest bought land in Kneesworth and came to live in the house his father (presumably William) had built at Kneesworth.

In about 1597 the house was sold to Geoffrey Nightingale. In her book "Archaeology of South West Cambridgeshire", Alison Taylor tells us that Geoffrey had been the lawyer and steward of the Chamberlains manor which was situated next to Ermine Street at North Farm, Kneesworth (a fragmentary moated site is all now remaining of that house). Apparently he was "regarded with great and justifiable suspicion by his former clients" [presumably we can infer from this that, as the estate manager, he may have allowed it to become bankrupt simply so that he could buy it up cheaply!].

Geoffrey then moved the estate centre to Kneesworth Hall, which he substantially rebuilt. He died in 1664, and a monument over the rood staircase at Bassingbourn's Church of St Peter & St Paul is dedicated to him. In 1717 a later occupant and descendant, Sir Edward Nightingale, gave the church a collection of old theological books which include churchwardens accounts from 1498 to 1534 telling much about village life at that time.

The Nightingale family remained at the house for over 200 years, during which time they acquired most of the parish. Local belief is that they were related to the founder of modern nursing Florence Nightingale, but this may just be folklore.

In 1839 however the house was in the possession of a John Bendyshe, whose family came from Barrington and were local gentry - Magistrates, Justices of the Peace etc.

By 1851 it had passed to Mr Biscoe Hill Wortham who lived there until his death in 1895. His trustees retained the estate up to 1901 when it was purchased by the Honourable Sidney Holland, who was a "gentleman banker" from Knutsford in Cheshire. He may have found that the close proximity of London with the regular local railway service was ideal for combining country life with his business commitments.

Mr Holland had the old house demolished, and the well known buildings historian Nikolaus Pevsner tells us that Mr Holland enlisted the help of architect Robert Plumbe "or whoever designed for him". The result was a handsome Georgian style house, standing practically on the same spot as the old building, with accommodation which included 28 bedrooms and 7 bathrooms, as well as stabling and garages.

In addition to his banking commitments Mr Holland was Chairman of the London Hospital, a task which he undertook with great verve and commitment; indeed so great was his talent for fund raising and collecting donations on behalf of his beloved hospital that he acquired - doubtless from his moneyed victims - the rueful title "Prince of Beggars". He was responsible for the rebuilding and modernising of the London Hospital, at a time before the funding provided by the National Health Service we know today, and he later received a knighthood for his good works. His subsequent title was that of Lord Knutsford - his wife however (the daughter of the Earl of Ashburnham, a Sussex based family) was already a Lady in her own right, as Lady Mary Ashburnham. Two daughters completed the family. The younger was Rachel, who on marrying became Lady Manners. The elder daughter, Lucy, had been engaged but like so many young women her fiancé was killed in the Great War. She never married and remained living at Kneesworth until after the Second World War - during which she was an auxiliary nurse - when she moved to Berkshire. She was the last member of the family to occupy the house.

During the period of the family's occupancy Kneesworth House became a focal point for the villages of Bassingbourn and Kneesworth. Not only were a number of local people employed there on one basis or another - in 1926 there were some 29 staff in all - but the informal patronage of Lord Knutsford became a byword locally. He was much loved by all who came into contact with him and despite his position he treated rich and poor with equal courtesy and kindness. He did much to improve conditions in the village and could always be relied upon to support a worthy cause. From arranging that a district nurse should be employed in the village (and subsidising her salary and expenses, which his family continued until the formation of the National Health Service) to providing a new water pump or buying plimsolls for all the school children, he was at the centre of village life and was also a keen member of the village cricket team. Lord Knutsford also on one occasion paid for a local child to go to the London Hospital for a much needed operation which could not be provided locally.

Evelyn Lawrence (local author of the book about Bassingbourn and Kneesworth life "Knee Deep in Buttercups") recalled that, when his Lordship was travelling in his car to or from the railway station, it was his habit to offer a lift to any villager going the same way. One day when Evelyn was a young girl, she had returned by train from school. As she walked towards the station exit the chauffeur pulled up Lord Knutsford's car, and his Lordship smilingly offered her a lift. She was so overcome that she took the offered seat for the drive home whilst his Lordship politely passed the time of day with her. She had forgotten however that she had left the bicycle she normally used for these journeys parked at the station! The next day her grumbling father had to take her to the station in his pony and trap to catch the morning train.

Another local person with many memories of these times was Mrs Olive Jarman, who - as Olive Strudwick - was lady's maid to Miss Lucy for eight years from 1926 at the grand salary of £40 a year plus her keep. When Lady Knutsford (who was rather more autocratic than her husband in her dealings with staff and locals) lost the latest in a long line of her own maids, Olive was prevailed upon to also take on this role "temporarily". Such was her fear of the mistress that she recalls how, when first fastening the hooks and eyes of Lady Knutsford's bodice, her hands shook so much that

she left half of them undone.

When after some time Olive decided that the responsibility of the work was not matched by the wages, she made enquiry about a job elsewhere; however Miss Lucy got to hear of this on the house grapevine and offered Olive a princely increase of £4 a year, which settled the matter. When finally a new lady's maid arrived for Lady Knutsford, all the extra work that Olive had done merited a final "bonus" payment of £5.

On one occasion when his Lordship was between butlers, Olive acted as his valet. Unused to caring for gentlemen's clothing, she not only laid out his plus fours for a day's shooting on the estate, but also pressed a knife edge crease into the front of them. Not quite the done thing! Lord Knutsford and Miss Lucy collapsed with tears of laughter, and Olive's embarrassment was compounded when Lord Knutsford, with his usual good manners, insisted on wearing them nonetheless.

Olive also recalls the visits to the house of a young relative, Peter Scott (later Sir Peter Scott the famous ornithologist) whose father Sir Robert Falcon Scott had perished in his journey to the Pole. As a result of his father's death Peter was in the guardianship of Lord Knutsford, with whose family he stayed for long periods during the school holidays. On one occasion when Peter was out climbing trees in the grounds he tore the only pair of trousers he had brought with him. Olive secretly mended them for him, and as a thank-you he painted her a small picture to which he added an inscription. Olive kept it until passing it on to her daughter who lives in the USA.

Another local employee was Mr Charlie Hayden, born at Mill Lane in Bassingbourn where his father was the miller. Charlie had come to know the House through School treats which were often held there. One such occasion reported in the local paper in 1911 saw 230 children arriving, with a bouquet of white and pink carnations (from Pigg's florists of Royston, who only ceased trading some ninety years later) being presented to her Ladyship by Head Girl Nellie Howes. The children were able to indulge in various amusements such as boating, pole tennis, swings, see-saws and pony rides, and then after a good tea the Bassingbourn Brass Band added to the liveliness of the proceedings. On their leaving Lady Holland handed each child a packet of sweets and a bun, and she and her husband received three-times-three cheers followed by a singing of the National Anthem.

As a young man Charlie Hayden applied for a gardener's job at the House and, after an interview with the Scottish Head Gardener Mr Cole, was taken on to join nine other gardeners and outside staff. His duties however seem to have been wide ranging as he also had to ring a bell at 7.00pm to call all the family who might be outside to come in for dinner.

At that time the family also had a London House for the "season". Whilst there her Ladyship insisted on having their own vegetables sent up from Kneesworth House, and another groundsman Dick Walker carried these by cart to Royston station to be taken up on the train. The House also sent eggs to market for sale, and many pheasants were kept on the estate for private shoots with his Lordship's friends. There could however be a problem even in those days with security. On one occasion when the family was staying in London, the House was broken into by burglars who cut a large hole in one of the side doors and crept through. Some fur coats were stolen but the culprits

were never caught.

Charlie recalled that Lord and Lady Knutsford had one peculiarity as regards rail travel; when both bound for the same destination, they insisted on travelling at different times in case of accident! What would they make of the dangers of road travel nowadays? Charlie particularly remembered the friendliness, informality and good manners of the whole family. During a visit by Lady Rachel and her family, her husband strongly reprimanded his sons for walking past Charlie and not acknowledging him. Lady Knutsford - who could usually be so stiff and starchy in comparison with her husband - would herself take out glasses of lemonade to the gardeners on a hot day and would often stay for a long chat, and Lord Knutsford occasionally took Charlie away from his work to go boating with him on the old lake. Lord Knutsford would always cycle to church on Sundays, and would courteously acknowledge all whom he met. On special occasions he would also send for church decoration a cart full of the red geraniums that were his favourite flowers.

Sadly in 1931 Lord Knutsford took his last journey to the church. Having been taken suddenly ill and admitted to his own London Hospital, he died within a short time. At his graveside Lady Knutsford threw on to his coffin a single red geranium from the flower bed in front of the house. (the same flowers still grow there now). His gravestone in Bassingbourn churchyard tells us that "his joy was to help all in distress and to bring happiness into the lives of others", but at his funeral no wreath was laid on his coffin and no word was said in his praise, for that was his wish. Iron gates leading to the private cemetery there, where he lies with his wife, came from Kneesworth House.

During the Second World War the house, in common with so many others, was taken over for military use, although some staff were retained to keep the grounds tidy. In the era following the war however the heyday of the large Country Houses was virtually at an end. When Lady Knutsford died in 1947 and Miss Lucy decided to live elsewhere, Kneesworth House's existence as a family home came to an end. And so the "Big House" was advertised for sale - the estate at that time extending to some 200 acres with 9 cottages and the Mill House.

Eventually sold into the public ownership of the Cambridgeshire Education Authority, the new use of the house could not have been in starker contrast with its previous existence as the Authority decided this would be an ideal setting for a boys reformatory school, apparently caring mainly for those who had quite high IQ. So it was that the house and grounds became home to a group of rather lively youngsters. Few major changes were made to the buildings over this period but inevitably both house and, to a greater extent, grounds were deteriorating with the passing years. A number of visits have since occurred from time-to-time, by ex residents from the reformatory days. Many of these visitors appear to have been subsequently successful in their lives, and have commented fondly on their recollections of the time they spent in the House. The following is an extract of an account received in 2002 from one "old boy" of the school, to whom I am most grateful for the fascinating insight he provides:

"Between 1949 and about 1985 Kneesworth House was an experiment in Community Living. It was a collaborative effort between the Home Office and certain members of faculty of Cambridge University. Unfortunately the project was never sanctioned by Cambridge, probably due to the risk to its reputation should the project fail.

The idea seemed to be to provide a vehicle for the reformation of exceptionally gifted juveniles. The children brought into the project were all products of broken homes and it seems that the common denominator was father absenteeism. As the project evolved the basic criteria for entry into the school became having an IQ of at least two standard deviations above the norm (genius level). Unfortunately the staff was unable to mitigate the effects of an emotionally impoverished home environment and most of the kids went on to commit social misdemeanours after their release. Interestingly however, as all psychosis diminishes with age it would appear that as the children reached maturity their attitudes and values shifted. Most of my cohort went on to college and /or university or established themselves in other socially productive avenues.

An interesting book was written on the topic of Kneesworth House – as it existed for about 35 years – entitled “Bright Delinquents” by Robert Brooks (a former teacher at Kneesworth).

Perhaps this information will help you understand why so many former “inmates” make the pilgrimage from their various parts of the country to see the old place they once called home. Unlike most classmates we all came from different towns and lost contact, quite rapidly, over the years. For many Kneesworth House is the centre of our youth, we spent several years there”.

In time however came changes in the accepted wisdom regarding the way that such young people should be cared for and accommodated, and the school eventually closed. The house remained empty until 1985 when it was one of a number of such establishments viewed by the (then) AMI Healthcare Group (later General Healthcare Group Ltd) as a possible base for their expanding psychiatric hospital interests. There was naturally a degree of unease amongst some local residents regarding such a usage and the Company went to considerable lengths to explain what was intended and to provide as much reassurance as possible about their intentions. After full consultation the hospital received its' formal registration as a Mental Nursing Home from the Cambridgeshire Health Authority, and it opened in September 1985.

At this time only the main building was in use, as a self-contained ward, but immediately there commenced a period of rapid development on the site. In 1987/8 two further wards (Wortham and Nightingale, named after previous occupants of the site) were erected - one over the spot where Lord Knutsford had once installed his own squash court, which he had built longer than the usual court so he could continue playing this game which he loved into his old age. A swimming pool was also added.

Local involvement with the hospital was strengthened by the formation - at the hospital's invitation - of a Village Liaison Committee. This includes members from the local community who are willing to act as a vehicle for the passage of information between hospital and village. Members of the Committee have taken an interest in the patients and established a tradition of sending them birthday cards. Wherever possible the hospital developed links with local traders, and there has

always been a healthy number of local people employed in one way or another by the hospital. A number of the hospital patients also became familiar faces in the area, although the hospital has never set out to be a long-stay facility and naturally there have been many changes in the client group over the years.

Many further changes have now taken place on the site. In 1990 a new purpose-built unit on the South side of the grounds was opened, named Holland House in commemoration of Lord Knutsford's family name. The three wards which comprise the unit were named after old local Roman roads - Ashwell and Ermine, and also the old Iceni road Ickniel, and together offer a wide range of services to their patient groups. This allowed the old House to be itself refurbished and it is now used mainly as an administration and training centre.

A further change on the site was an organisational one, with the removal to the hospital from London of the Company's Psychiatric Head office, becoming a separate entity within the GHG Group, with the name "Partnerships in Care Ltd" and further consolidating the hospital's status within the Company. Then in 2005 came the sale of "Partnerships in Care" by the General Healthcare Group, to the Investment Company "Cinven", who had been a previous owner of GHG.

The Holland House unit was also extended in early 1998 by a major redevelopment providing two new wards Clopton and Wimpole [both names relating to nearby "disappeared" villages, although the latter was in fact only moved by the occupants of Wimpole Hall so that their view would not be interrupted!] with numerous additional treatment facilities, and the upgrading of the three existing wards in the unit, thus allowing the ward sizes to be considerably reduced with resultant benefit to patients and staff.

The Company continues to develop its services across the country, with units in various parts of the U.K. being responsible to the Head Office which, in 2007, moved from its long established base at Kneesworth House to new offices in Borehamwood.

The hospital was very pleased that family links were able to be re-established, through informal visits during 1991 by both of Lord Knutsford's grandsons who had spent some time there in boyhood. They were impressed with the care that had been taken in the maintenance and renovation of the building and grounds, although sad to see some of the changes that had inevitably taken place since their boyhood. They described the old lily pond, situated where the tennis courts now stand, and also the old walled kitchen garden - virtually disappeared by the time of the hospital's occupancy - and the haha which used to front the flower beds on the approach to the house.

In 1996 the hospital was also pleased to receive a visit from an Australian lady who was one of six sisters with the family name Wortham. Having traced her ancestry back to various Wortham families in local villages, and thence back to Biscoe Hill Wortham who lived in the previous house on the site, she was following up her local family history during a visit to England. She was particularly delighted to find that her ancestor's connection with the estate is commemorated in the name of the Rehabilitation unit at the hospital.

As an established part of the community Kneesworth House now has many links with local groups and activities, and has always been willing to help these wherever possible. In turn the hospital is well aware of the support that it has always received from local individuals and organisations. It might not be too far-fetched, therefore, to see some historical thread joining the old paternalistic approach of benefactors such as Lord Knutsford and the support that he in turn received from the villagers, with the present-day relationship based on mutual help and trust. Long may it be so.

When one bears in mind the life's work of Lord Knutsford, as the "Prince of Beggars" who did so much to raise vital funds for the London Hospital, one cannot but conjecture how surprised and pleased he might be to see his own much-loved house itself used as a hospital. Also strangely apposite is the Latin inscription that he chose to place over the portico of the building to guide him in his daily works, and which is still visible over the building that now acts as a centre for the care and treatment of those suffering from mental disorder. It reads, in loose translation, "After the darkness comes the light".