



Birtley House painted c 1900

A Brief History of Birtley House



Early Days

Birtley House has been owned by the Whalley family since 1945. It lies one mile south of the centre of the village of Bramley on the old turnpike road from Guildford to Arundel (at one time known as Cannons Road after the family who kept the toll house, but now the A281). 'Birtley' was originally 'Berkeley' (from the Old English 'beorc leah' - a clearing in the birch wood). Records of the Birtley estate go back to the 12th century when a rent of 10s was granted from the tenement of William of 'Berkele in Bromlegh' to the Priory of Amesbury by Ralph de Fay the lord of the Manor of Bramley, which was one of the largest manors between London and the coast, extending from Shalford to the Sussex border.

In 1231 Birtley was held by a Henry Polsted. The Polsted family were still around in Surrey in the 16th century when Richard Polsted married Elizabeth the daughter of Sir William More of Loseley. After Richard's death Elizabeth married first Sir John Wolley (no connection that we know of!) and then Brian Annesley. Birtley is recorded as being held by a Brian Annesley in 1604 (by which time the name had changed to 'Burtley'). This was probably Sir Brian Annesley - a gentleman pensioner of Elizabeth 1st - who was challenged by his elder daughters who tried to have him declared insane so that they could claim his estates (mostly in Kent). His youngest daughter, Cordell, (Cordelia?) defended him in court and the 'cause célèbre' was part of William Shakespeare's inspiration for 'King Lear'.

17th, 18th & 19th Centuries

THE STREET FAMILY

In Kenneth Whistler Street's book 'Annals of the Street Family of Birtley', published privately in 1941, he records that Birtley was bought by a Lawrence Street, who came from Worcestershire in the reign of James II (1685-1689), at which time it was a farm of around 800 acres. However, since there are other records from the early 18th century of the property belonging to the Duke of Montagu and his sister Lady Harvey, it may be that the Streets initially rented the property.



**Ralph, 1st Duke of
Montagu by Closterman**

Lawrence was the second son of George and Mary Street of Worcester. George's cousin John Street, was awarded a pension for shooting Catesby when he resisted arrest for his part in the Gunpowder plot. George who was Mayor of Worcester in 1635, died in 1643. His wife died the following year leaving two sons not yet 21. The elder son, Thomas, had a distinguished career. He went to Lincoln College, Oxford, and was a barrister in the Inner Temple in 1653. He was the Member of Parliament



Sir Thomas Street 1688

for Worcester for over 20 years from 1659 to 1681, in which year he was made a Judge of the Exchequer Bench and knighted. His portrait was painted in 1688 and a print is shown on this page.

Sir Thomas was married twice and had two daughters. He died in 1695 and in 1763 his grandson, Edward Combe, erected a memorial to him in Worcester Cathedral. The younger son, Lawrence, was born in 1626 and probably came to Surrey soon after his parents died. There were Streets living in Shalford so he may have come to live with a member of his family. He did not leave such a public record as his brother but presumably had a similar education. He married in 1646 or 1647 and had at least three sons; Thomas, born c.1648, Laurence, and John, born 1651. His son Laurence who was living in Shalford in 1711 had two granddaughters who married local landowners;

Joanna married Robert Austen, and Elizabeth a Mr Stovill. Joanna and Robert were childless, and after Joanna's death in 1769 her heirs were her nephews Robert and Henry, the sons of Elizabeth. They adopted the surname Austen and Robert's grandson, also Robert, adopted the additional surname of Godwin. His son, Henry Haversham Godwin-Austen was the discoverer of K2 in the Himalayas in the 1860's. John Street, the third son of Lawrence Street who came from Worcester, lived in

Guildford and also had at least one notable descendant. His three times great grandson was the architect George Edmund Street, who designed the Law Courts in the Strand, and built a house for himself in Holmbury St. Mary.

To go back to Lawrence, if he did live at Birtley Farm (as it was then) it was not for long as he died in 1696. He was succeeded by his eldest son, Thomas, who was of Bramley Parish, and married Anne Chitty of Hascombe; she died in 1734. Thomas's will of 1735 refers to his brothers-in-law William and John Chitty; they were perhaps the children, or more probably grandchildren of Joseph Chitty, the Bramley blacksmith who issued a token in 1666; tokens were issued at various periods by local tradesmen due to the lack of small nationally issued coins.

In 1755 John Street, son or grandson of Thomas, purchased Bramley Foundry, perhaps the one which had been Joseph Chitty's. John's daughter-in-law would later sell the land to Charles Smith where the foundry and brewery were established in Bramley High Street (currently the car showroom and art shop). The foundry continued in existence until the 1950s and some of the original Birtley Lodge steel diamond pane windows (removed in 2001), made in this foundry in the 19th century, are still kept here though some have been donated to the Brooking Collection in Cranleigh.

In 1757 the road from Guildford to Arundel was turnpiked, which probably resulted in more use of the road past Birtley. By 1811 another development was under consideration, but it was not one that found favour with the then owner of Birtley. This was the proposal to build a canal to connect the rivers Wey and Arun. Paul Vine in his history of the canal, "London's lost route to the sea", records that John Smallpiece, the Guildford solicitor, who was later to be clerk to the Wey & Arun

Canal Company, included in his accounts "Attending Mr John Street; conferring with him to induce his father to withdraw his opposition... 6/8d."



The turnpike road looking south at Birtley Green

Presumably the younger John succeeded as the canal was eventually built through part of their land and opened in 1816. John would soon be involved in major changes in his life. The British penal colony of New South Wales had been

founded in Australia in 1788 but immigration of free settlers only became possible from 1820 and John took immediate advantage of this. It was necessary to obtain permission and, if of sufficient standing and likely to make a success of such a venture, to obtain recommendations for grants of land. In the Public Record Office (Kew) there is a letter recommending "Mr John Street of Birtley near Guildford, a well educated and well informed man of pleasing manners, and whom I have known for 20 years. His principal object is to grow fine wool, which has answered there (i.e. Australia) very well. Much will of course depend on his success in obtaining prime land, for the capital he will take out will not exceed £1,000." The writer of this letter was Thomas Henty, one of only six breeders of Merino sheep in England at the time.

John's application was successful and in July 1821 he received a letter from Lord Bathurst, the Principal Secretary of State for the Colonies, requesting the Governor of New South Wales to give him a grant of land and other indulgences usually shown to settlers.

John, who at 40 was still unmarried, left England on the 5th November 1821 on board the brig

"Thalia", which reached Sydney on 27th April 1822 - almost 6 months. He spent more than a year looking for suitable land but eventually wrote on the 21st July 1823 to the Colonial Secretary "I have the honour to acquaint you that the means I intend to lay out in the cultivation of land in this colony will enable me to take twenty men permanently off the stores." The reply he received from the Governor granted him 2,000 acres of land and ordered "... six convict servants to be assigned to you, who, with yourself, will be victualled from the King's Stores for six months from the date of your taking possession of the said land."

As well as establishing himself as a sheep farmer - he had brought Merino sheep with him from England - John was also courting a young bride, Maria Rendell. She too had travelled from England on the "Thalia" at the same time as John, but had stayed in Hobart for a year before moving to Sydney. They had corresponded and could now meet but she was torn between marrying John and returning to England. Eventually, in August 1824, she agreed to marry and they were wed in



Booroola Merino

April 1825, three years after their arrival in Australia.

Their married home was a large stone cottage standing on a knoll in the bend of the river with glorious views and a large kitchen where the 25 assigned servants he had by 1836 would have eaten. John and Maria had 7 children and appear to have had a happy life until Maria died in 1841.

Back in England, before John left his father had died in January 1821 and Birtley had been left to the only son of his father's second marriage, Henry Street. Henry was only 16 and would not come into the property until the death of his mother, Elizabeth, 27 years later. The three sons from his father's first marriage were passed over, probably as a result of the divorce, though possibly some financial provision had been made for them earlier. Family relations appear to have been amiable however. In April 1836 a family friend, James Henty, wrote from his home in Tasmania about his recent trip to England. In view of the travelling times involved this was probably in the summer or autumn of 1835.

"I embarked on the Chichester "Duke of Richmond" [a coach which ran daily from Chichester to Guildford] and landed at the White Hart, Guildford where, all smiles, Miss Bourne welcomed me as usual.

I posted instanter half way down the street and called on Mr Sparkes who, after deluging me with cherry brandy etc., ordered his gig and his groom and sent me down in gentlemanlike style to Birtley, where I was as much at home as I was 15 years before. The only difference apparent to me was that instead of a house full of people, Henry and his Lady without encumbrance (as the saying goes) were the only occupants.

Alterations, no doubt improvements, have been made. It was however Birtley still, and to me, one of the dearest spots I ever visited. - To beat, with one pointer, the Deans, The Brook and Westland (these are farms or holdings), to kill our brace or two of pheasants, one or two partridges, to dine with William and his wife, Mr and Mrs Sparkes, the old Lady, Frances, Jane and Ellen with Bob French from Littlehampton, was as much a matter of course with me, as if I had never rounded the globe, or ventured my own dear self on blue water. A round of similar engagements completely re-installed me and at the end of a week, under an unconditional promise to come again, I was compelled to proceed to Horsham, where Henry, always the best of friends, kindly took me in his gig.

If ever you return to that part of little England you will find great, very great, alterations of every kind, and I will venture to say, judging from myself, notwithstanding all the kindness, all the hospitality which you will receive, you will wish yourself back among the ever brown trees of Australia, and the extensive uplands of Bathurst plains, so much does habit reconcile us to things we have been so long accustomed to."

The family members James Henty dined with were Henry and his first wife, Barbara Campbell - they were soon to separate and she died not long after; Henry's sister Ann, who had married John Sparkes of Woodhill, Shamley Green; Henry's half-brother William, his mother Elizabeth, and three of his sisters.

The youngest sister, Ellen, wrote frequently to her half-brother in Australia and

commented in one letter of 1840 "I would send this in one of the new stamp penny envelopes, only, as everyone allows, they are very vulgar, so I shall not use one." Sending her letter in the ordinary way cost Ellen 2/6d.

In the 1841 census Birtley Farm was occupied by Henry Sparkes, (brother of the above-mentioned William who was a banker), with his wife Maria, their young daughter and four servants. Henry Street had perhaps moved out when his marriage ended. Henry Sparkes was still the occupier when the Tithe Assessment was made in 1843, but by the time of the 1851 census, Henry Street was in occupation again together with his second wife, Ruth, a niece and young nephew, and four servants. Henry and Ruth had one son, Henry William, born in 1845, who must have been away from home. Henry's mother Elizabeth had died in 1848 so Henry now had full control of the estate.

Holy Trinity Church in Bramley had been a daughter church of Shalford but finally became a separate parish in 1847. This was followed by the development of parish buildings, including the school and cemetery for which, in 1849, Henry Street sold



Hand coloured print of Birtley in the Street family era

land for £600.

In the tithe map of 1843 Birtley House appears as a moderate, compact manor house with a farmyard and out-buildings clustered round its north-east aspect at the end of a drive which corresponds to the line of the current main entrance. Birtley Farm

(now redeveloped) was built prior to 1860 (some of the buildings have been dated to the 17th century) and most of the original farm buildings around the main house were demolished to make way for the Coach House and a stable yard.

By 1871 the gardens to the south-west had been extended and a vine house and a conservatory added. The vine house still exists and is used for Orchids and seedling growing,

but the conservatory was demolished in the 1960s to make way for the construction of the West Wing as accommodation for Dick and June Whalley's four children.



The main drive and Lodge in the 19th century



The Vine House today



The Coach House in the 1940s

The Street family lived the quiet life of country gentlemen at Birtley for two hundred years without achieving any great distinction - though one, John, did marry Edward Lear's sister in 1822. Their son Charles later emigrated to New Zealand and named his house in Auckland "Birtley" preserving a memory of the family home; the property is now a public park.

There was one occasion when the quiet life at Birtley was disrupted. The daughter of the then Shere & Albury rector (her name was Lucy Duncomb) married another John Street in 1780 aged only 18. By the age of 26 she had had 5 children (the eldest of whom was the one who married Miss Lear) but must have had her head turned by the life of a squire's wife - or maybe she began to feel neglected - for she started a flagrant affair with a married man from Bramley. He would visit her in her bedroom (probably now our Wisteria Apartment) when John was away on business but John's valet betrayed her to his master and they were caught on an assignation in Farmer Elliot's field (the Elliots still farm at Grafham) and Lucy was made to hand over her keys and never allowed back to Birtley, despite several attempts at a reconciliation with her husband. She blamed her mother-in-law for blackening her name but she seems to have been very reckless and not very good at judging people, as her lover instantly deserted her too!



Early 20th century photo of Birtley House

19th and Early 20th Centuries

THE CUBITT FAMILY

Birtley, despite providing a comfortable 'seat' was never very highly regarded as farmland and by the 1870s was so heavily encumbered with charges and annuities (the Streets perhaps living somewhat beyond their means) that it was sold in 1879 to Henry Cubitt MP, later Lord Ashcombe, who was acquisitively buying property in the area. It was initially the family dower house but the family did not remain in residence for very long.

Lord Ashcombe was the son of Thomas Cubitt who had built the family fortunes. Thomas was born in 1788 and worked as a carpenter, setting up in business when he



Birtley Parkland - early 1900s

came of age, and soon became the first man to organise a team to do building in all its branches (previously the employer had to take on all the trades individually). In the year of Waterloo, Thomas built the London Institution in Finsbury Circus, but he was mostly engaged on houses. Large parts of London were built by him, including Belgrave Square and he also built the front of Buckingham Palace and was highly regarded by Queen Victoria and Prince Albert.

The family also acquired the Denbies estate (sold in 1984 to the current owner who created the vineyard) and were founders and benefactors of St Catherine's School in Bramley.

Camilla,
Duchess of
Cornwall's
mother was a
daughter of
Lord Ashcombe.

Lord
Ashcombe's
family owned
Birtley House
until the end of
the war in 1945,
though it was
let or leased for
much of this
time. During
the Nineteenth
Century, the
main house was
substantially
altered and
extended and
the Lodge was
built. The estate
also expanded
to 1200 acres
with ten farms,
four substantial
houses, fifteen
cottages and
extended from
the western end
of Gate Street
right to the
east of Shamley
Green and from
the Cranleigh
Road in the south
to Hurst Hill and Birtley Road in the north.



Tennis Court & Lodge in 1920s or 1930s

The occupant of Birtley House itself in 1906 was a widow, Mrs Barton whose late husband had contracted a young man as head gardener. The young man was Fred Streeter, later head gardener at Petworth for 40 years and well known as the first

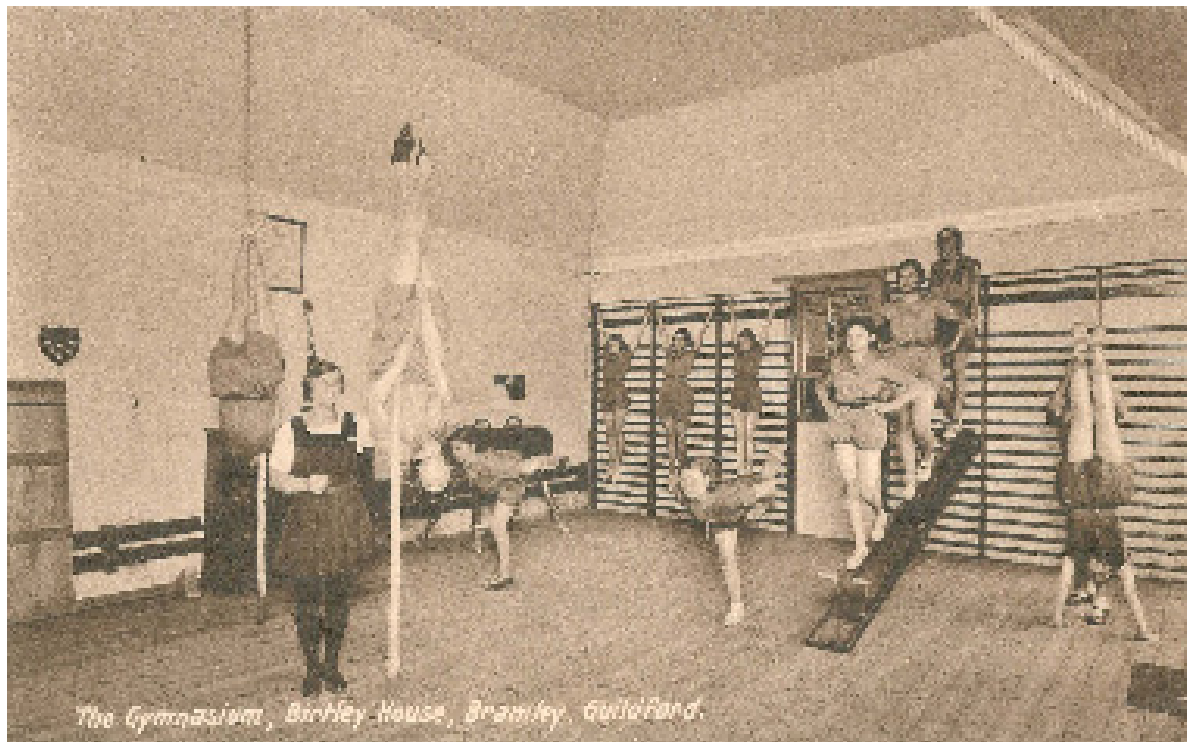
‘media personality gardener’. He developed the Birtley gardens, laying out much of their present general structure, probably with some advice from his friend Gertrude Jekyll who had been brought up in Bramley and was a regular visitor, though Birtley is not recorded as having any formal input from her.



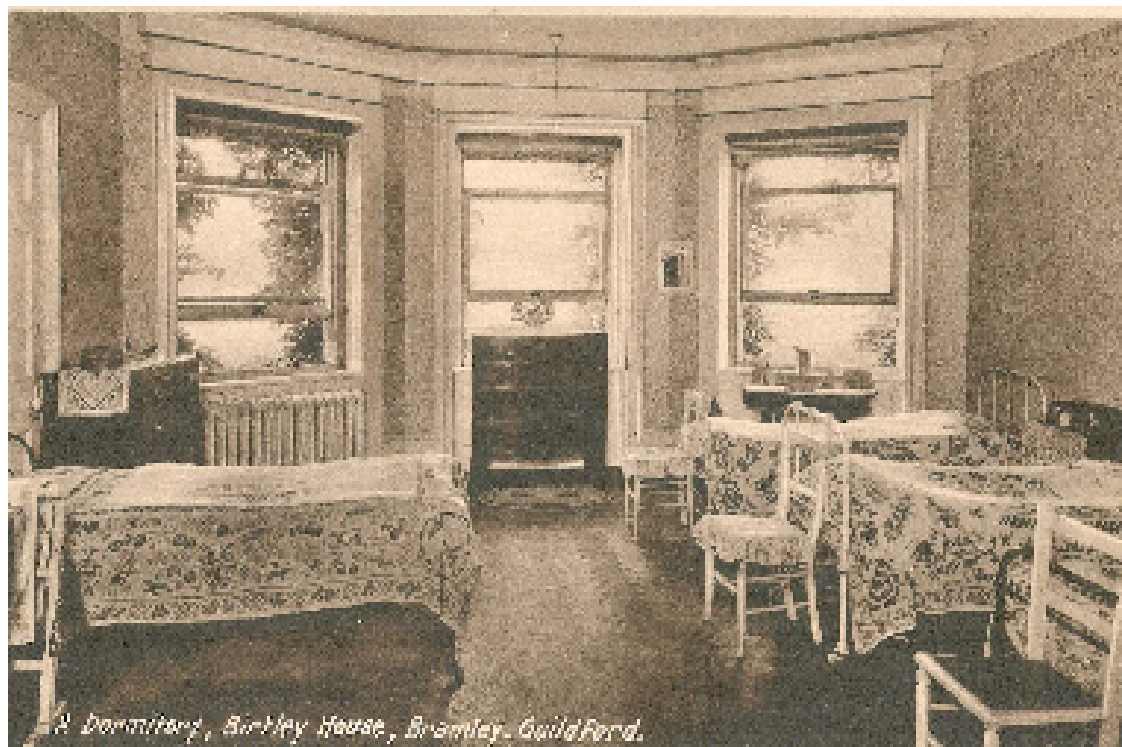
The Rose Garden in the 1930s

When Mrs Barton died, Fred went on to work for her son in Hampshire and Birtley House had a succession of occupants, culminating in the establishment of a girls' school in the 1930s and an evacuated firm of electrical engineers during the Second World War.

We know very little about the School except that it was not large, but several connections emerged over the years. One Head Girl went on to be the wife of Derek Hudson who was a correspondent with the Times Literary Supplement for many years and a well-known biographer of 19th Century literary figures. Derek was quite surprised to find out the connection when he moved in to Birtley at the end of his career. Another former resident, Miss Ireland, recognised herself as the gym mistress in the picture on the next page!



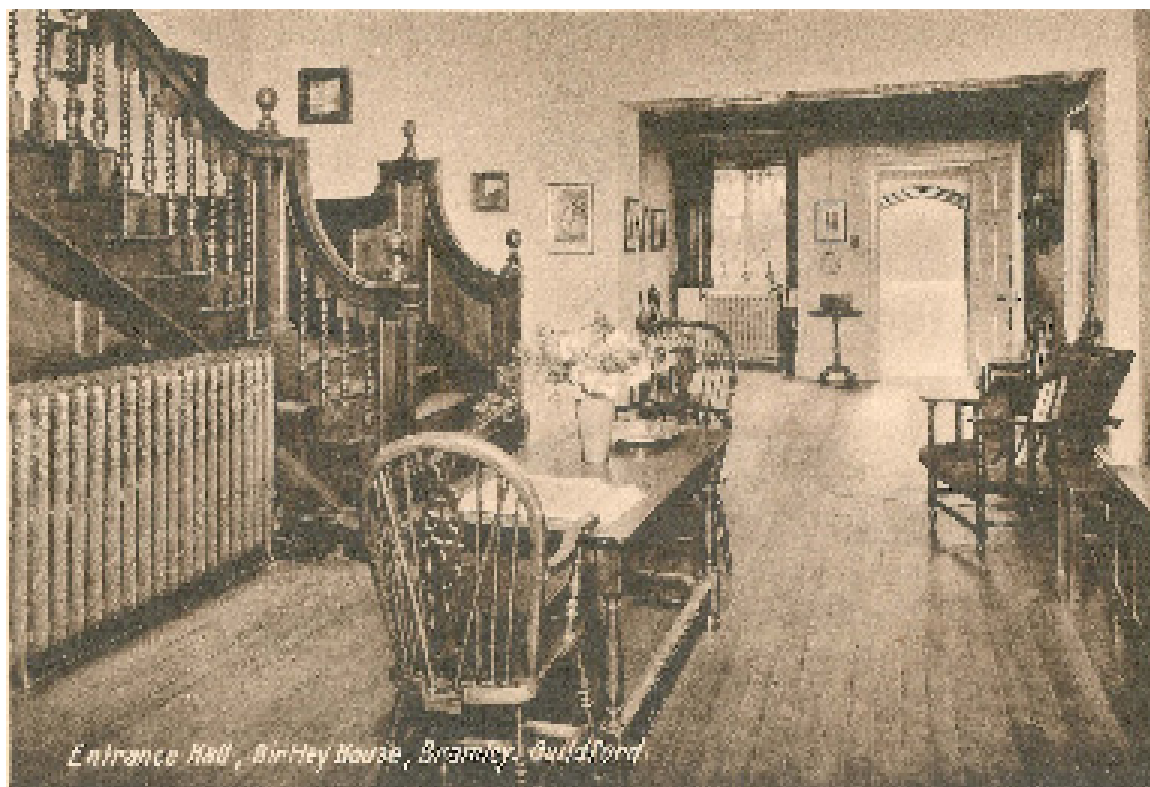
**The Girls' school gym in the coach garage -
now replaced by the Mews**



**A dormitory in the 1930s girls school - now the
Wisteria Apartment**



A classroom - now part of the Terrace Apartment



The old entrance hall

The estate was offered for sale at the end of the War in 37 lots and the Sale Particulars make most interesting reading.

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on WEDNESDAY, 20th JUNE, 1945

at 2.15 p.m.

Notifiers: Messrs. ANSTEY & THOMPSON, 46, Queen Street, Exeter. Telephone 54231/2

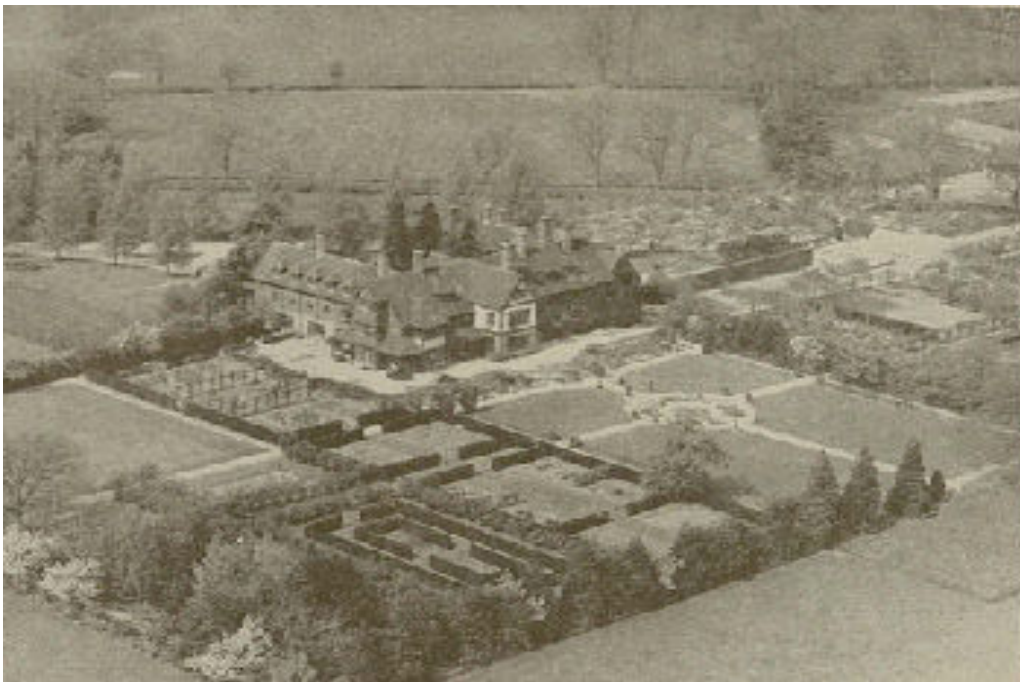
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1945 sale particulars

1945 to the Present Day

THE DRIVER / WHALLEY FAMILY



Eyhurst Court in 1939

Birtley House with 48 acres was bought by Eyhurst Court Ltd., a nursing home company run by Dr Lloyd Driver, his wife Joan Winifred Driver and various members of their family – initially Joan (Dodo) Wardle and Tony Hadden (children of Mrs Driver's previous marriage) and their only daughter together, June Whalley. The Home had been located

at Loxwood House (now known as Loxwood Hall) just over the county border in Sussex during the war years, but was, originally, a convalescent home, which had been running since the mid 1920s in various locations but had been set up as a Company and first Registered in 1932/3 as Eyhurst Court at Sutton in Surrey. There Dr Driver specialised in mental health patients for a time, though this was ceased after moving to Birtley. Always a family business, the earliest brochure records 4 members of the family as Directors. Although these changed over the years as the family grew and moved away, new generations have come on to the Board and there are still 4 family Directors today.



**Joan, Lloyd and June Driver
in 1938**

After moving the Home to Birtley in 1945, the main house here was altered internally to provide, initially, accommodation for just 16 patients. The early days were not without problems and some of the staff even found themselves sleeping in the passages whilst legal efforts were being made to evict a former gardener to the estate who was refusing to move from the staff flat above the coach garages.

When Mrs Driver died a few years later, most of the running of the business devolved to the Driver's youngest daughter, June, and her husband, Dick Whalley. After Dr Driver's death they gradually expanded the number of patients with the reacquisition of the Coach House Annexe (it had been sold to a Mr & Mrs Sayers who made their greatest impression on our lives with a couple of large Alsatians called Shandy & Bracken). The conversion of the Coach House into an annexe started in the early 1960s and the first-floor link to the main building was completed in 1989. Subsequent conversion of the nurses' accommodation (which had originally been a garage and flat) on the north-east corner of the courtyard brought the number of rooms up to 42.

Life at Birtley in the '50s and '60s was rather less demanding than it is today. The Home was, of course, much smaller but the business was also less encumbered with regulation and red tape. Although it provided full nursing care (most of the nursing staff were qualified nurses) there was much less opportunity (and demand) for social activities. It was difficult to persuade residents to use a sitting room let alone come to the dining room - though the gardens, one of the glories of Birtley, were always popular. Many of the residents had their own private doctors and Dr Hilary Cobb from the Dapdune Surgery in Guildford and Dr Noel Harwood-Yarred from The Square practice in Godalming were among the most frequent visitors and became close friends of the family over many years. Noel continued practising until he was well into his nineties and eventually came into Birtley during his final illness still with a patient here on his books!



Dick and June Whalley

June was always rather private and preferred staying at Birtley with an annual foray to Scotland on holiday and regular visits to London. Dick was more outgoing and took an active role in the Parish and in local politics for a time. He also was a keen



The gardens in the late 1940s

supporter of the University of Surrey when it was first established and chaired one of the fund-raising groups with the Friends of the University.

As a child, Simon had wonderful freedom to play in the gardens and grounds and

developed a strong feeling for nature and the wild animals, birds, insects and plants that still characterise the estate. Hours spent with the garden team also produced a strong interest in gardening. Best of all were several 'honorary aunties' among the residents who would spend hours telling him children's stories in the old summerhouse (still 60 years later in its same position at the eastern end of the main lawn though much repaired and renewed).

**June Whalley with
Simon & Nigel
c 1950**



Birtley Parkland & Grounds

There were many more trees in the garden and park in the '50s and '60s – storms and honey fungus having claimed numerous arboreal victims over the years. The gardens were highly productive and Birtley was at times almost self-sufficient in vegetables, fruit and eggs! Indeed Birtley eggs and tomatoes were frequently sold in local stores.

Over the years the grounds have been used for many purposes. Dick Whalley started a mushroom farm behind the main house in large Nissen huts in the 1940s though, sadly, a then incurable disease wiped out the mushrooms. For many years some of the huts remained as store rooms until they were replaced first with chicken houses and subsequently with hatcheries for the pheasant farm run successfully by Nigel Whalley until the 1987 storm which ruined all the pens and allowed most of the stock to escape.



Birtley House & Grounds 2015

The parkland has been used for sheep (though it is rather too wet in places to be ideal) and for hay crops and now gets used for events which bring the community in to enjoy the glorious surroundings with events such as the Sculpture Garden, Rural Plant Fair and The Surrey Hills Woodfair.

The lake was first dug over 40 years ago (the family voted to forgo an annual holiday to pay for it!) and then dredged and extended in 2001. It has always been stocked with trout and the family let out day and season tickets for fly-fishing. Currently there is an emphasis on Brown Trout which seem to be doing well and there are some very large fish present!

The woodland has some ancient boundary banks and ditches indicating that there was woodland here for several hundred years and possible links to the ancient Wealden woods (the official Weald boundary is half-way up the hill north of Birtley). Birtley Estates, along with maintaining the grounds, hosts many local groups involved with a variety of produce, such as cider-making, pork rearing, log & charcoal production as well as pole-lathe & beekeeping courses and trout fishing.

The woods are full of wildlife with deer, foxes and badgers and smaller, unusual, mammals such as dormice and water shrews. Birds are very prolific with nesting buzzards, sparrow hawks and tawny and little owls as well as a wealth of smaller birds. There have been regular sightings of Ravens, Red Kites and Barn Owls.

Charcoal is produced in the woodland which is then sold via Reception and the Farm Shop when it's open during the Summer.



In the woods, there is also a workshop, built by Mervyn Mewis , where students of many ages and abilities are able to find out about the relevance of historic woodland management and the impact on the land and the related wildlife, providing a seamless and on-going supply of timber for use in traditional woodwork.



The gardens are constantly being updated and recently, new paths have been installed to allow ready access for wheelchairs - one down to the old stone seat, allowing views across the pond and one to the summerhouse. Ongoing projects are always in the pipe-line, which include a new stumpery under the oak tree, a board walk around the pond and improvements to the gates and levelling the uneven paths through the orchard.



Dick and June had four children, Simon, Nigel, Francis and Debbie. June Whalley died in 1976 but Dick carried on managing the business until his death in 1999 aged 82. Simon has continued in the business with the support of his wife Caroline and their sons Francis and Timothy all of whom are Directors and actively manage the day-to-day conduct of the business (pictured above).

The 'family home' atmosphere has always been a key factor in the popularity of Birtley with residents and their own families and new generations are now moving in who remember parents or even grandparents in the Home!

With the development of the Mews (eight close-care flats) on the site of the old garages and several new rooms and Care Apartments (known collectively as 'The West Wing') bringing the Nursing Home numbers up to 47, this once small glade in the Surrey birch woods is busier than at any time in its history - and yet, somehow, despite all the activity, the peaceful atmosphere of a family country house continues; perhaps because only three families have owned it in the last three hundred years!



The Rare Plant Fair is held on the Front Lawn



The WoodFair is held annually in the Parkland



A view from the gardens to the parkland



Birtley House today



Birtley

House

Birtley House, Bramley, Guildford, Surrey GU5 0LB
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