



News and events

- The **archaeological survey** of Rectory Meadow was delayed in the autumn because the survey team's magnetometer was broken. It has now been fixed and hopefully the geophysics survey will take place in the spring (fingers crossed!).
- **Next meeting: Wednesday 16 March.** Next month's talk will be given by Ken Griffin and titled '*Gallows Hill and Hertfordshire Executions*'. Ken had agreed to give this talk in March 2020 so we are very pleased that he is able to visit us this year.

Wheathampstead House



Wheathampstead House in the mid-20th century

Wheathampstead House, which stands at the junction of Lamer Lane and Codicote Road by the roundabout, has a chequered history. The Dury and Andrews map of 1766 shows the site as a field with a few small buildings and gardens. Mumford's 'Plan of the Manor of Wheathampstead' showing the land and property owned by the Abbey of Westminster in 1799 also marks a field with small buildings.

The first evidence of a more substantial building appears on the 1822 Ordnance Survey (OS) map. This is confirmed by the 1840 tithe map and index which lists the property as owned by John Dorrington (who owned Delaport and many acres of farmland) and occupied by the Reverend Douton, curate of St Helen's. He had been the 'Proprietor of Boarding School for Gentlemen' here since at least 1826 so a new and more substantial house must have been built sometime between 1799 and 1826. The tithe map shows a house occupying three sides of a square, open towards Lamer Lane and describes it as 'house, garden and paddock'.

When John Dorrington died, his estate was sold at auction in 1867 to the Reverend John Olive, rector of Ayot St Lawrence. Reverend Douton's school must have closed by this time since the sales particulars describe the house as a 'Small

family residence' with five bedrooms and seven acres of 'lawn, gardens, pleasure grounds and paddock, partly surrounded by a shrubbery walk' and with 'superior hunting stables'.

John Olive was a wealthy man whose daughter Mary had married Viscount Kilcourse, later to become 9th Earl Cavan, in 1863. He died in 1874. The 1879 OS map shows that the original house had been replaced by a much larger house with 13 bedrooms, plus servants' quarters. It is not clear whether this work was done before or after John Olive died and his daughter inherited.

Kilcourse was a keen gardener and over the next 20 years developed the gardens. He also built the screen wall and imposing gateway on Codicote Road (now listed Grade II) having moved the road further south. The 1898 OS map shows a half-acre lake with island, a rose garden, rock garden, croquet lawn, and a large building which probably housed an indoor tennis court. More extensive changes to the gardens were made by the 10th Earl after he inherited in 1900.

These were the glory years of Wheathampstead House. Croquet and tennis tournaments were held there, the Hertfordshire Hunt met regularly, and 'high society' from London held parties and musical evenings, as well as enjoying the Fishery nearby in Lower Luton Road.

In 1924, the 10th Earl Cavan sold the house to local builder Fenwick Owen and Henry George a farmer from Kimpton as a 'delightful small mansion' with 'charming grounds', stabling, and a range of heated glasshouses. It was sold on in 1928 to A.J. Murphy who later made the house the head office of his business, Murphy Chemical Ltd. Acquired by developers in 1983, it stood empty and neglected for some years until largely demolished and converted into 23,000 square feet of offices, retaining the northern facade. Polaroid UK Ltd moved in in 1995. The house was bought by St Albans High School for Girls in 2002 who opened it as their Prep School in 2003.