

Pollards Wood House, its history and occupants.

Because we have no primary evidence from its title deeds for the first appearance of the house or its subsequent history, we must rely primarily upon evidence from the records of Amersham Rural District Council held at the Centre for Bucks Studies in Aylesbury. These include the valuation records which start in April 1904 and have six monthly supplementary updates of changes, the records of the buildings committee, and those of the district surveyor. Supplementing these local records are the records from The Inland Revenue valuation of all property in the country. Carried out in this area in 1912/13.

Other useful records have been Kelly's Directory, the ten yearly population census of 1911 and earlier years. And of course much hunting on the internet.

Before we consider Pollards Wood House we must first consider the immediate historical background prior to the land being purchased for the house.

The auction sale of the Vache estate took place on 21 July 1902. This did not include the 193 acres of Pollardswood which was in separate ownership and not part of the Vache. The Vache estate was sold in 21 lots. Some of these abutted onto Pollardswood included Harewood Downs farm. All was sold at the sale. Archibald Grove only bought lots 1 and 2, two 13 acre plots of land for building development. These were on Cokes lane. Harewood Downs farm was purchased by a Henry Smith. According to the Harewood Downs Golf Club book "Early Years" it was not until 1904 that Grove put forward the idea of a golf course and started buying its land.

Meanwhile CW Raffety had bought out his brother J Raffety Vezey in 1903 and so became sole owner of Pollardswood gradually sold it in pieces from 1904 to various people. Including T A Allan and Archibald Grove.

Turning now specifically to Pollards Wood House and the Inland Revenue valuation record sheet for the house and estate of 45 acres dated 19 Dec 1912 this shows the property being owned by T A Allan. (See parcel027.jpg)

A number of sales are recorded as having occurred on-
16 April 1904, 21 July 1904, 4 March 1905, 10 May 1906, 20 March 1907, and 7 March 1908.
These all are noted as having a combined value of £4465.

On 1 April 1909 T A Allan leased the property to D L Thomson for 3 years.

It also refers to "auction particulars". This is when the house was put up for auction in 1912.

If we now look at the Local valuation records we see that on the original valuation for April 1904 the whole 194 acres of Pollards wood is still shown as owned by J Raffety Vezey. There is no change recorded in October 1904 but in March 1905 it shows that J Raffety Vezey retains 79 acres of Pollards wood whilst Archibald Grove now owned 88 acres and T A Allan owned 27 acres. By March 1906 a new house had been erected on these 27 acres. By November 1906 T A Allan had acquired a further 18 acres to bring the extent up to 45 acres. It appears likely by calculating the from the details recorded that some came from Vezey and some from Grove but one would need to see the deeds to be sure. Part of these transactions also seems have included some land exchange but I think this was small in amount.

A look at the records of the buildings committee show that approval was given for a residence for T A Allan at the 28 Feb 1905 meeting. This clearly means the house was not built by Archibald Grove contrary to popular opinion. Grove was however granted approval for two houses, one granted just a few months earlier than Allan's and one just later. These are certainly Little Pollards and Pollards Park. The story that Pollards Woods House was for Groves children appears to be another myth.

Thomas Alexander Allan (his full name is given in the Land Register Title document) is a mystery man. I have spent considerable time in trying to find any reference to him. Since he obviously had

money he may be connected to the Allan Shipping company family of Glasgow or alternative to the Thomas Allan and Sons Iron founders of Tees side and Glasgow. In any case he only lived in the house for a short period, leasing it out for 3 years in April 1909 to David Lionel Thomson who was a stockbroker. At the end of the three year lease period he put the house up for auction on 10 May 1912 but it was bought in at £12000. Two copies of the auction particulars, which contain many photos of the exterior and interior of the house at this time, are at Centre for Bucks Studies. (I have photos.) One copy has contemporary annotations. They also describe and delineate the building restrictions agreed between Allan and Grove.

After the failed auction, the house was sold privately to Sir William Corry. (Report in The Times of 1st Jan. 1913 page 13.)

Sir William Corry was son of Sir James Corry founder of the Star Line shipping Co and was its chairman when he lived at Pollards Wood. He later became a director of Cunard and died in 1926.

From a later amendment (in red) to the Inland Revenue valuation sheet Sir William Corry sold the property on 1st Feb. 1918 for £10,000 to "Outram". This is presumably F D Outram who was a trustee of the estate of Colonel Granville Smith (source probate) and whose widow Lady Blanche Smith is shown on the Kelly's Directory of 1920 as being resident at Pollards Wood House. She died in Sept. 1922. It is possible that the trustees retained ownership until she died whereupon it was sold.

The Times reports on 1st May 1923 that Pollards Wood House has been purchased by Major H Stanley M Baird previously of Keppoch, Cardross, Dumbartonshire. He appears in both the 1924 and 1928 editions of Kelly's directory. He bought the main house but possibly only some of the land. Some being sold as part of a number of related transactions around this time which eventually led to the developments of Doggets Wood Lane area. The current Land Registry Title document on page 6 refers to a conveyance dated 3rd Dec. 1923 between 1) F L F Lowndes, 2) Bailey and others (trustees), 3) Rust and Ratcliffe, could imply that Rust and Ratcliffe bought the entire estate but immediately sold main house to Baird retaining remainder for development.

However I have a photocopy (original source unknown) of a the cover sheet and the second schedule only of the conveyance by Royal Cancer Hospital to Amersham International of Pollards Wood House 22 Jan. 1985. This refers to a conveyance of 26th March 1924 between 1) P J Bailey and others, and 2) H M S Baird. This implies that Baird did buy the House from the trustees of Colonel Smith's estate.

We now come to when Bertram Mills bought the estate. I can find no date for this although it must have been in 1930 or 31 as he is shown as resident on the 1931 edition of Kelly's Directory.

There are many stories about the Mills circus being there before and during the war but it seems improbable that this went on after the estate was sold in 1941. (See separate biography of Bertram Mills by B Curson. See also White, I. 1993 "History of Little Chalfont".)

Bertram Mills died in April 1938 but the estate remained with his executors until 21st November 1941,

The house and 57 acres were purchased by The Royal Cancer Hospital, presumably as a means of some diversification out of central London.

I have been unable to establish what was done there during the war but it seems to have remained with the hospital and not been passed on to another dept. (It was definitely not the SOE, they were at Pollards Park and Pollardswood Grange.)

After the war and with the formation of the NHS the various roles of the Royal Cancer Hospital came under scrutiny. It had three prime activities, as a clinical hospital, an education role in teaching medical staff and doctors, and extensive research activities including what was referred to as an outstation at Pollards Wood. Various Ministries and other bodies wanted to get their fingers into these and so in 1954 The Royal Cancer Hospital became the Royal Marsden Hospital, its teaching activities were now under the University of London and a new quango, the Institute for Cancer Research was formed to hold all research activities including Pollards Wood. Since 1948

Pollards Wood had been used as “a field station for animal breeding”. Substantial additional animal houses were built in 1963. (Source TNA Medical research Council Papers FD 1/548 and 549.) The Institute for Cancer Research closed it in spring 1984. During this long period many temporary and ancillary buildings had been added to the house. It was put up for sale for £1million according to the Bucks Advertiser at the time and was purchased by Amersham International on 22 January 1985 who continued to use it as Laboratories.

Amersham International sold their Diagnostic Testing business to Kodak in 1990 who in turn sold it to Johnson and Johnson in 1994 who then became the occupant, and presumably the owner of Pollards Wood House. A planning application for a major updating of the post-war buildings on the site was submitted in November 1996 but before this could be implemented Johnson and Johnson had a restructure and moved out. Somehow the property came back to Nycomed Amersham plc, as Amersham International Ltd had by then become.

In October 2003 that company was taken over by GE and has become the world wide HQ of GE Healthcare. There has been continual development on the site including a complete demolition and rebuild of the interior of the original house retaining only its exterior appearance.

All of the above has been derived only from records available in the public domain and there is plenty of opportunity for misinterpretation. The biggest area of uncertainty is in the period of 1902 to 1905 which any set of deeds or Abstracts of Title that could be found would clarify enormously to the benefit not only to the history of Pollards Wood House but to the history of the whole area.

John Dodd 1/3/2015.

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Appendix.

Although there had been legislation from before the second half of the 19th century requiring local authorities to have building control bylaws and a surveyor, this was primarily aimed at improving the health and standard of living and the availability of housing for the urban working class. In rural areas such as Chalfont St Giles there was great reluctance to use the complex standard urban model set of bylaws, the local authority could and did use their own bylaws or even opt out completely.

The 1894 Local Government Act enacted the formation of civil parishes in place of the previous vestry parishes and formation of Rural District councils including Amersham RDC which took over the role of the Local Boards of Health. This brought about greater stringency in the application of building control laws.

There was much continual controversy about what the bylaws for rural areas should include. In 1901, 1903 and 1905 the Local Authority Board, the central government department overseeing local authorities, issue a number of different versions of Rural model bylaws which rural authorities were pushed to adopt although they were still not mandatory.

The Public Health (Amendment Act) 1907. Introduced stricter control by RDCs on application of the latest bylaws.

Housing and Town Planning Act 1909. Introduce more centralised control and extra duties on local authorities.

National mandatory byelaws did not come into being until 1964

Source: A History of Building Control in England and Wales 1840-1990. By, A. J. Ley. RICS 2000

The Amersham RDC did not have a building committee prior to June 1904.

New buildings were occasionally mentioned in the minutes of the main council but only to the extent that a "water certificate" had been issued to say that a satisfactory supply of water was available.

They probably had a surveyor but his records from before 1915 do not survive.

They clearly had continual problems with enforcement and with houses being built without formal approval as they issued a public notice as late as 1914 saying it was mandatory to have plans approved prior to work commencing!

JD 21/12/2013