

# A Brief History of Wiston House

Wiston Manor appears in the Domesday Book, the register of English possessions made by William the Conqueror in 1086, twenty years after he won the Battle of Hastings. The manor was held by William de Braose who had been granted a large area of the county of Sussex as a reward for his services. The house remained with the de Braose family until the early 15th Century, when John de Braose died in 1426. The Estate passed to his great-nephew, Ralph Sherley, one of whose descendants, Sir Thomas Sherley, built Wiston House. The work was begun in 1573 and the resulting house was much larger than it is today.

It was built around a paved court, and behind the mullioned windows and crow-stepped gables lay some magnificent rooms - in particular the splendid Great Hall with its double hammer-beam roof, which still remains. The east courtyard, outside the present main entrance door, was enclosed by a range of buildings, including a gatehouse, until these were demolished in the 1740s. The House also stretched further westwards.

The Sherley family found themselves in financial difficulties soon after the start of the building of Wiston House. In 1586 Queen Elizabeth I had appointed Sir Thomas as Treasurer-at-War during the Dutch Revolt in the Netherlands. However, he mishandled the funds that passed through his hands; speculation and fraudulent misuse of the money eventually led to the Estate being sequestrated by the Crown in 1602, though Sir Thomas continued to live at Wiston until his death in 1612.



During the English Civil War in the mid-17th Century, Wiston House was occupied during 1643 -45 first by forces loyal to King Charles I, then by parliamentary soldiers. The Estate was sequestrated by Parliament before being purchased very cheaply in 1649 by Sir John Fagge, a young parliamentary commander from east Sussex. Robert Fagge, his grandson, died in 1740, leaving a sister Elizabeth as heiress to the Estate. She married Sir Charles Goring, a neighbouring landowner, in 1743. The crests from their Coats of Arms, the Goring lion and the Fagge ostrich, are visible in the Minstrel's Gallery in the Great Hall. The House has been owned by the Goring family ever since.

Sir Charles began to alter the Elizabethan house soon after his marriage, reducing it in size, demolishing the outer buildings of the eastern courtyard, including the original gatehouse. Fortunately a decision was made to retain the double hammer-beam roof and the windows of the Great Hall. However, this was the period of Gothic revival architecture and the chimneypiece and wall embrasures in the Great Hall were made. The fine Rococo plasterwork decoration to the walls of the Great Hall, also date from this period.

The 19th Century was another period of enthusiasm for reconstructing historic houses. Wiston House was remodeled in the 1830s by a fashionable architect, Edward Blore. He proposed to demolish the Tudor structure, leaving the Great Hall as a 'picturesque ruin' in the Park, and build an entirely new house on another site. Fortunately he had to be content with altering and largely rebuilding the south wing of the House, and adding a ballroom to the north (now the Conference Room) on the site of Sir Thomas Sherley's 'brown parlour'. The panelling from the latter room now graces the Common Room at the House.

The House continued to be occupied by the Goring family until 1926. It was then privately leased until the Second World War, when it was used as the Canadian Army HQ before the invasion of Normandy. From this period dates a mural of young lady, 'Jane', a popular wartime cartoon character from the Daily Mirror newspaper. She is concealed behind an older portrait in the Library. (There is a photograph of the mural of 'Jane' in the bar). After the War, the House became a girls' school, and in 1951 Wilton Park took over the lease.

### ST. MARY'S CHURCH



This typical English manor church stands beside the House, but serves the whole parish of Wiston. It is an ancient foundation, also mentioned in the Domesday Book. However, it underwent radical restoration in 1862 and little is left of the earlier structure, though the nave walls may be Norman. There is a short historical survey just inside the entrance, on the west wall near the font. The late-12th Century font is not on its original stand. The colourful Coats of Arms in the east and west windows are medieval, all that remains of the original glass. The church has always been the burial place of the owners of Wiston House. Amongst its monuments, those in the south aisle, formerly a chapel to St. Mary, are most notable, especially the fine memorial brass to Sir John de Braose, dated 1426. The remains of what would have been a substantial funerary monument to Sir Thomas Sherley, his wife Anne and their twelve children are placed on the windowsill there. It is likely that the monument was smashed during the Civil War activity on the estate in the mid 1640s. The black marble memorial tablet was removed during the 1862 renovations. An interesting monument in the north wall of this south aisle depicts a recumbent child. It has been suggested that it may commemorate an infant son of Sir John de Braose, whose early death brought about the inheritance of Wiston by the Sherley family.

### CHANCTONBURY RING

To the south-west of the House, on a spur of the South Downs, stand the remains of a famous group of trees, a former landmark for many miles around, known as Chanctonbury Ring. The trees were planted by Charles Goring, the sixteen year old son of Charles and Elizabeth Goring, in 1760. He lived to the age of 86, long enough to see his beech trees attain their full maturity, when he wrote a poem about them. The ring itself is a circular prehistoric earthwork, a hilltop enclosure, dating from c.800-600 B.C. It surrounds the remains of two Romano-Celtic temples. Recent excavations revealed large quantities of pigs' teeth and bones in the main part of one of the temples. Considered alongside the contemporary small bronze representations of wild boars found in Sussex (one was discovered on the Estate) these finds are suggestive of ritual offerings possibly connected with a local pig cult. The boar was regarded as a symbol of strength and fertility.

On 16th October 1987, south-east England suffered its worst storm in almost 300 years. The trees on Chanctonbury Ring were decimated, but after the archaeological excavation, young beeches were planted there by the Goring family and will be growing to maturity for future generations to enjoy.