

A Brief History of “The Convent” in Rearsby.

The Sacred Heart Convent, Rearsby, (known locally as “The Convent”) was originally built for a family named Hollingworth in 1883. It was called Church Leys House and has had a variety of occupants during its existence and this account attempts to track some of its history. It is now in the hands of developers who are carrying out works to convert it into private apartments and also to erect some detached houses within the grounds.

In earlier times the location, being at a high point in the village, was the site of a windmill for many years, although there is very little detail of its exact location and how long it was there. It was used to mill flour and its accessibility to the river Wreake enabled raw materials and products to be transported with ease. There were also water mills at Rearsby and Thrussington. There is one recorded story of a visitor to the windmill making an untimely exit from the mill and being hit on the head by the rotating sail and dying at the scene.

Church Leys House was the brainchild of John Hollingworth who was a very successful Wine Merchant and Entrepreneur in Leicester in the second half of the nineteenth century, carrying on the business founded by his father before him. They were also one of the pioneering manufacturers of bottled soda water which was new and became very popular at the time.

Born in Derbyshire in 1833, in 1861 John lived with his widowed mother Ann in New Walk, Leicester with his sister Ann and brother William and two servants. He married Henrietta White in 1865 and by 1871 they had moved to De Montfort Square and had a daughter Mary 4, a son John 2, and second daughter Ann aged 1. They had two servants and a nursemaid. His mother and sister Ann remained at New Walk.

The company was flourishing and by 1881 John and his family had moved to 67 Thrussington Road, Ratcliffe. By then the family had grown with the addition of another son Edward and a further daughter Henrietta. Also nephew John Jones aged 13 was living with the family and employed in the family business. They had three servants. Mother Ann had died but spinster sister Ann had moved into The Hall, Rearsby with the two long term servants from New Walk.

It was around this time that John procured the extensive site of the old Rearsby Windmill and designed and built Church Leys House. The coat-of-arms of the Hollingsworth family is on the wall at the rear of the house, on the outside of the library. One of the children died, hence the initials lying cross-wise in the family tree. Gargoyles of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert can be seen on the wall outside the kitchen.

The house was described as essentially Arts and Crafts / Domestic Revival in character with a feature staircase and terrazzo floor to the entrance Hall. It is generally red brick with hanging tiles to square half timbered gables and stone string courses, with multi-pitched and gabled plain tiled roofing with terracotta ridge and

finials. It has a combination of two and three storeys with dormers, a tall ridge with gable and side wall chimney stacks. All openings are stone dressed and casement windows are employed throughout. The house is an impressive building and at various stages additions were made. An entrance Lodge was constructed on Station Road with a roadway leading up to the property.

The Hollingworth family contributed to village life and John was Trustee at the Village school. In 1891, the census shows John with wife Henrietta in residence, along with daughters Ann and Maria and son John. Nephew John Jones was listed as a Wine Merchant's Clerk. They employed a cook, a housemaid, a parlourmaid, a groom and a trained nurse. John Wittering was the gardener living in the Lodge with his wife and two daughters.

The house thrived during this period until John died in 1896 (and his sister in the same year). With his son John having pre-deceased him, dying in 1891, his wife Henrietta opted to leave Rearsby and moved back to Middlesex. The distinguished house and gardens were looking for a new owner

After the Hollingsworth era the house and grounds were purchased by Violet Cowley (Countess) and in the 1901 Census it was the largest household in Rearsby with sixteen occupants. Unusually Violet Cowley was head of the household living with her husband Robert Myddelton and one year old Selina. The staff comprised a housekeeper, Felipe Bonnet, who was Swiss, a lady's maid, a cook, a nurse, 2 housemaids, a kitchenmaid, a butler, a valet, a postman, a hall boy, a coachman and a helper. In addition the Lodge was occupied by the gardener and his wife and their daughter Emma Wittering who was a school teacher at the Village School.

I am indebted to Tom Brooks who has researched the life of Violet Cowley and uncovered an intriguing history.

Violet was born at Hope Hall, Bramham, Near Leeds on 7th December 1866, daughter of William Nevill 1st Marquis of Abergavenny and Caroline Vandenberg-Bempde-Johnstone. She was the last of their ten children. Violet was christened in Bardsey church on Feb 2 1867 with her sister Rose. The Nevills' main residence was Eridge Castle near Tunbridge Well in Sussex, where one can assume Violet was brought up. The park had the oldest deer herd in England.

In 1889 Violet married Henry Wellesley 3rd Earl Cowley (1866-1919). Son of William the 2nd Earl. She divorced him in 1897 for his "misconduct". They had one child, Christian, born in 1890 who inherited the title 4th Earl Cowley. The Cowleys were big land owners and lived in Draycot House near Chippenham which was demolished in 1955.

Controversially, after the divorce Violet retained the title Countess Cowley. This was legally challenged by the Earl. In 1901 the notorious case was eventually settled by the House of Lords in her favour.

In July 1898 at the age of 31 she married Robert Edward Myddleton-Biddulph at St Luke's church Chelsea. Violet was living in Park Lane, London at the time. The Myddletons were an aristocratic family and lived at Chirk Castle near Wrexham, now a National Trust property. Their wealth was originally derived from colonialism and so is now controversial.

Violet and Robert settled in Rearsby after the marriage. Robert was an active Army Officer and probably spent some time away from Rearsby. The house was reasonably large, had stabling and was convenient for travel by rail to London. It is reasonable to assume that they were actively involved with the very busy Leicestershire hunting scene and its patrons.

Violet and Robert had three children during their time in Rearsby, Selina born 1899, Rinid born 1902 and Thomas born 1908. Sadly in 1910 Violet died at the age of 43 leaving her 3 small children. The family moved away Rearsby at that time. The 1911 census shows that only the Swiss housekeeper remained in residence.

Violet died in London and was buried at Eridge. Eridge Castle was an impressive Gothic Revival pile (" in bad taste"). However its condition deteriorated and it was demolished and replaced by a more modest residence in 1937. The Nevill family still live there. Hope Hall still stands but is semi-derelict.

There is little to show for the 10 years that the family lived in Rearsby and their involvement with the local community, however, a rose garden at Church Leys House Leys is attributed to Violet Cowley. The grand house with its titled occupant was certainly busy and thriving during her occupancy with a large staff that will have interacted with village life, and it reflected the prosperity of the

At some stage the house and land was purchased by Sir Hugo Meynell Fitzherbert the 6th Baronet of Tissingdon. At the time he was unmarried and living with his unmarried sister Ann and their household at Asfordby in 1911. He had stables added to Church Leys House in 1911 before moving in. He was a serving Army Officer in the Hussars and spent a limited time at the house during his period of occupancy. He got married aged 38 in 1920 and moved away from Rearsby with his new wife to Berkshire. Church Leys House again awaited a new owner.



The next occupant was Bernard Ellis (born 1859) who was a Coal Merchant and continued the business of John Shipley Ellis his father (and also passed it on to his son Colin). Bernard was married to Isobel Clare in 1891. His youngest son died aged 18 in 1917 in active service in the Royal Navy Air Service No1 Squadron at Arras. Bernard purchased the house in 1920 and they resided in it for the rest of his life. Both were greatly involved with the village scene and activities. Two classrooms at the house were used as clinics and the local Girl Guide Group amongst others met at the house. Mrs Ellis did a lot of charitable work in the village. Bernard was also an active member

of the Leicestershire Archeological Society. Isobel died in 1936 and Bernard continued to live at the house until he died in 1943.

The house was sold to a Mr Bradshaw of Birstall. He, however, was apparently a polio victim and for some reason did not live there. It was wartime and times were hard.

The house was vacant for a period of time before the Sisters of St Joseph of Peace purchased it in 1945. Mother Berchmans was then Provincial and Father Horgan was Parish Priest in Birstall and a Rosminian Father. The Rosminian Fathers had settled in Ratcliffe in 1837. The first Mass was celebrated in the library in 1945 and the "Novices" moved into Rearsby from Nottingham in 1946.

The present hall was transformed from two garages in 1950 and became the first chapel. The pillars supporting the roof came from the old church at Ratcliffe College. The Refectory was added about 1960 and the present chapel was completed in 1964.

In accordance with the recommendations of The Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican (1962-1965) which amongst other things considered relations between the Catholic Church and the modern world, the noviciate was transferred from Rearsby to the Sisters' Convent in London. Noviciate being the period of training and preparation that a novice undergoes prior to taking vows in order to discern whether they are called to vowed religious life. In London, the Sisters of St Joseph of Peace could continue their formation in conjunction with Novices from other congregations. A number of Sisters remained in residence at the house.

The front garden outside the central door was replanted in 1980 and the walled vegetable garden was converted to a lawn in 1981. The present cedar-wood green house was erected in the same year. The rose-garden was also replanted in 1981 and the rockery bordering the lawn was added in 1984.

The Blue Cedar tree, alongside the rockery was planted in honour of Sisters' Centenary in 1984. The small Cedar of Lebanon was planted in the lawn opposite the front room window in 1995, in honour of the Sisters being fifty years in Rearsby. The White flowered shrub in the rose-garden, alongside the hedge, was planted there after being used in the celebrations. A time capsule also marking the Millennium is buried under the Blue Cedar tree opposite the middle door entrance.

The convent was used as the headquarters of their congregation in Britain and as a setting for meetings, retreats and days of prayer by various Christian groups. Latterly various village groups met there from time to time. Certainly the village history Society met there at one stage and the Parish Council held its meetings in the library when the Village Hall was being rebuilt. The number of Convent residents dwindled and its suitability for use by the Sisters and their organisation diminished. This led to it being sold not too long ago to developers.

The conker field, which was owned by the Convent, is partially walled and fenced off to separate it from the house so that the villagers could use it as a recreational space.

It was included in the sale but passed on the residents of Rearsby by the developers and remains a very important facility for all to enjoy.

Building activity continues at The Convent which became a locally listed Building in 2004. The works being carried out have maintained the original character and design of the building to ensure that it retains its grandeur and it remains a distinguished and important feature of the village.

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