

BRICKENDONBURY

CONFERENCE CENTRE

Our Great Estate

The Brickendonbury estate has a long and colourful history. Little is known about it until Saxon times (approx. 500 AD), when the hill site was claimed by the Saxon, Brica. The word don means hill - the bury was added in medieval times and indicates the site of a manor house: hence Brickendonbury, a fortified manor house standing on Brica's hill. It is probable that Brica's land extended from the River Lea to the north, where he would have been able to build a mill, back to uncleared land to the south which would have provided timber for construction and fuel, together with game. Perhaps Brica merely claimed an earlier site, although the only evidence for this is the 'Brickendonbury Hoard', consisting of some 430 Roman coins dug up from the moat in 1893 when the gardens were being renovated. All the coins date from the same period, which may indicate that there was a Roman settlement on the site two thousand years ago. An L-shaped part of the moat still exists on the south and west sides of the mansion. It was probably a dry moat until the construction of the present mansion.



By 1016 the estate was held by the Canons of what was to become Waltham Abbey, and this was subsequently recognized in 1062 by Edward the Confessor and also by Harold II shortly before the Norman Conquest (1066). The activities of the inhabitants around this time are recorded in the Domesday survey (1086), giving a glimpse of 11th century rural life centring on working the land, either for arable crops or as pasture for cattle. Later still, Henry II confirmed the manor of Brickendon to the Abbey as part of his expiation for the murder of Thomas á Becket. By granting certain privileges concerning taxation and the non-forfeiture of criminals, the Liberty of Brickendon was established. This ancient name is still used; on local maps Brickendon Liberty describes the area surrounding the present TARRC site.

At the dissolution of the monasteries (1536?) during the reign of Henry VIII the estate passed first to Thomas Knighton of Little Bradbury in 1542 and subsequently to Edmond Allen who, in 1588, sold it to Stephen Soame or Soames and his son William, of Suffolk, for the sum of £1000. Over the next three centuries the estate changed hands many times and a succession of owners and tenants came and went.

In 1682, Edward Clarke purchased the estate from the Soames' family. Clarke was a successful merchant, who moved to London from Leicestershire at a time when the city was recovering from the dual devastations of plague and fire. He was knighted in 1689, became Master of the Merchant Taylor's Company from 1690-91 and eventually Lord Mayor of London in 1696. A vivid portrait depicts a powerful businessman. His importance in terms of Brickendonbury is that he was probably responsible for the first, and what has remained the most imposing, part of the mansion.

Sir Edward died in 1703 and the estate passed via his son to his granddaughter Jane Morgan. She in turn left it to her daughter, also called Jane, who had married Charles Gould, the Judge Advocate General and Judge Martial of H.M. Forces. Charles Gould changed his name to Morgan upon his wife's inheritance. As befits such an eminent man, his picture was painted by the leading portrait painter of the time - Gainsborough - leaving a permanent record of this imposing figure. The Morgan family appear to have been responsible for many of the extensions to the mansion. They also laid out the fine avenue of trees which connects the mansion with Hertford, known as Morgan's Walk. The last Morgan to have lived at Brickendonbury was George Gould Morgan who died there in 1845.

For the next 40 years or so the estate appears to have been leased or let to a series of tenants, the most notable of whom was Russell Ellice, who died at Brickendonbury in 1873. Ellice was Chairman of the East India Company in 1853 and a Director from 1831 until his death; his position in this company provides a first link between the estate and South East Asia.

By the 1870s the Morgans had clearly lost interest in the estate and disposed of it in a series of sales between 1878 and 1883. Not only did the estate shrink in size during this period and no longer extend to the whole Liberty, but it also lost its Lordship, which was sold at this time.

A Nottingham lace merchant, Charles Grey Hill, then purchased the estate, but died before taking up residence. In 1893 George Pearson acquired the mansion, with an estate extending to over 1000 acres, for £30,000; it seems likely that by this time both the house and the estate had fallen into poor condition. Both George and his son Sir Edward were associated with the major civil engineering contractors S. Pearson & Sons, who built the Great Northern and City underground railway. This line forms the City end of the present railway line from Moorgate to Hertford North; the line from Hertford cuts across land which used to form the western side of the estate. The media company Pearson plc, publisher of the Financial Times, is a direct descendent of the original Pearson civil engineering company.

On George Pearson's death in 1902 the estate passed to Sir Edward, a civil engineer who was also a Justice of the Peace of Hertfordshire and High Sheriff for the County in 1909. He was Mayor of Hertford for three years and donated the War Memorial to the town. While living at Brickendonbury, Sir Edward did a considerable amount of work on scientific farming, which involved soil analysis (by the famous Dr Augustus Voelcker & Sons) and intensive cultivation of arable crops, as well as breeding a fine stud of Shire horses and first-class herds of Dairy Shorthorn and Devon cattle. The cattle provided dairy products for the house and estate via a dairy, built in 1900 to a design based on the dairy at the Queen's residence in Sandringham. Later the estate lodges, cottages and much of the Home Farm were redeveloped with a part of the farm subsequently forming the site for the laboratories - an appropriate conversion given Sir Edward's leaning to scientifically based farming.

The Pearsons were also responsible for extending the mansion, rebuilding the west end of the south front, adding an extra storey and, in 1919, a Jacobean style banqueting hall, which now serves as the conference room. The gardens were redeveloped to include, at the end of the moat, an artificial rock garden made from a special type of concrete known as Pulhamite and developed by Pulham and Son who described themselves as "Garden Craftsmen". They were based in Oxford Street, London and held the Royal Warrant as gardeners to King Edward VII and King George V. The Pearson's gardener, R. Smith, was one of the foremost fruit growers in the country at the time, and a feature in *Gardeners' Magazine* in 1909 describes Brickendonbury as enjoying 'considerable fame for the extent, beauty, and high keeping of its gardens'.



After her husband's death in 1925, Lady Pearson, who herself survived until 1973, moved from Brickendonbury and the mansion was eventually used by Stratton Park School, a private preparatory school for about fifty boys which relocated from Great Brickhill in Buckinghamshire. Two reminders of this function remain. The conference room, which then served as a gymnasium, has hooks for ropes, and there is a swimming pool in the grounds, which has been renovated and is used during the summer by the Research Centre's staff. In the late 1930s Mrs Pearson finally sold the estate with the new owner being Mr Ernest Gocher a businessman from Roydon. However he was unable to take up residence because the property was requisitioned by the Government following the outbreak of war in 1939. It has even been written

that Mrs Pearson personally made sure the Government were aware that Brickendonbury was available and empty!

Throughout the Second World War (1939-45), Brickendonbury was used by the Special Operations Executive, European Theatre of War, and became Station 17, specializing in training agents and resistance workers in industrial sabotage. Vital operations such as the daring raid to destroy the Norwegian heavy water plant (part of Germany's nuclear bomb programme) and the bombing of the Renault engineering plant in France were launched from the estate. A television documentary *The Secret War* showed archive film of parts of the estate being used for rehearsing such raids and a reminder of these activities was found during building work in 1973, when unexploded hand grenades and live mortar shells were discovered in the drained moat!



After the war, Brickendonbury took on a peaceful role once more. The mansion was used by the Highways Department of the County Council and as offices for the local branches of the National Agricultural Advisory Service and the War Agricultural Executive. During this time the grounds were neglected and government beige was applied liberally on all internal walls. Immediately before being rescued by the Association in 1971, it was used as the setting for a children's television series *Catweazle*.

Today, Brickendonbury's role as home to a research laboratory and promotion centre has seen the estate revived to a thriving condition.

The mansion, both inside and out, has been restored to provide elegant working accommodation, and the grounds are now well cared for. The purpose-built laboratories, mill room, housing the practical work of the Research Centre, are in part concealed behind the facade of the Pearson's model farm, which still retains the family motto, just as appropriate for the endeavours of a large rubber research laboratory as it was for the Pearsons - 'Do it with thy Might'.