

History of Walton Hall

Walton is a post-Domesday village, first heard of in 1189 when it was ‘walled, or fenced about’, with the building of the first church on the site. Population seems always to have been low, mainly due to the enclosures rather than the more usual historical reason of plague. Yet there were two manors, Walton Hall and Walton Manor. Both were appointed incumbents to the Church, till, in 1458, this early example of ‘overmanning’ was replaced by alternate appointments.

The Rixbaunds

Walton Hall and Church have been closely associated for centuries as the monuments in the church testify. The first known occupants were the Rixbaunds, around the year 1200. But the story emerges more clearly with the arrival of the Beales in 1622.

The Beales

There is a notable monument to Bartholomew Beale (1583-1660) and his wife Katherine in the chancel of the church, erected in 1674 by his eldest and youngest sons, Henry and Charles. The latter married Mary Cradock who achieved fame as a portrait painter and England’s first professional woman artist: her sitters included Charles II.

The Gilpins

During the seventeenth century the Beales moved to London, later making over the estate to the Gilpins, who were already in possession of the Manor thus uniting the ownership of both estates.

They were of the same family as the notorious highwayman John Gilpin, the subject of the famous poem by William Cowper (1731-1800). Cowper lived for several years at nearby Olney so he may well have heard the Gilpin story at first hand. The Gilpin family owned the Hall from 1690 to 1698 and built the earliest surviving part of the main structure, the brick portion at the back.

An indenture signed in 1691 by John and Richard Gilpin, for the sale of some seventy acres of their estate for the sum of five shillings to Richard and Thomas Newman of London, is housed in the University archives. This document was donated to the University by the Earle family for whom Walton Hall was once the family home.

The Pinfolds

In 1698 the Gilpins sold all their Walton lands and both manors to Sir Thomas Pinfold (1638-1701), a distinguished London lawyer and Chancellor of the diocese of Peterborough. Sir Thomas pulled down most the Hall and went to live in the Manor until his death at the beginning of the eighteenth century.

His monument, which is on the south wall of the nave of the church, is by the sculptor Nollekens; it was completed in 1780. In 1788 the Hall was inherited by Sir Thomas’s nephew, Captain Charles Pinfold.

The succeeding Pinfolds made Walton Hall their home, and the Manor passed into relative insignificance, losing most of its separate manorial status in the process; but the ownership of the properties remained linked until the manor was sold in 1924 and became a stud farm.



Curiously, both properties were briefly re-united once more around 1970-71 when the Open University took the stud farm as its first Print Shop, Design and Photographic Studios, Institute of Educational Technology and Educational Studies offices. Since 1972 it has been part of Hoechst (UK), the chemicals firm.

Captain Charles Pinfold built the front part of the present Hall in 1830 and, on its completion, moved to live there until his death in 1836. At this time the Hall was described as a "spacious and elegant structure of brick, stuccoed, with a fine stone portico at the south front . . . (and) surrounded by upwards of 60 acres of well-wooded grounds. . . ". Behind the Hall were the farm buildings; from here and the surrounding fields the farm workers were called in for their meals by the bell, cast in 1863 by John Warner of London, which hung in the roof of the Hall. The farm buildings have now all disappeared.

The Harleys

The Pinfolds remained at the Hall until 1902. It passed briefly to a Miss Segrave, a relative on the distaff side, and then in 1907, to Dr Vaughan Harley, a distinguished heart specialist of the family that gave its name to the famous London street.

The Earles

After Dr Harley's death in 1923, his widow remained at the Hall until 1932, when her elder daughter Diana married Brigadier Eric Earle who won the DSO at the Battle of Le Cateau on August 26, 1914.

During the latter part of the Second World War, the Hall housed about 40 Wrens who worked at Bletchley Park, the Earles having moved into Walton Lodge Cottage for the duration of their stay. After the Brigadier's death in 1965, the Hall was empty until the Milton Keynes Development Corporation set up their Planning and Architects offices here in 1968, prior to returning to Wavendon Tower in the summer of 1969.

The Open University moved in on September 1 the same year, and on May 18 1970, Earl Mountbatten of Burma unveiled the University's foundation stone which can be seen at the front of the Hall, beside the portico.

On a visit in 1985, Colonel David Earle, one of the Brigadier's four sons who grew up at the Hall, said that he was pleased to see his former home being put to such good use, but that he was sad that St Michael's church, in which his family had worshipped, was no longer used for that purpose.

It had been declared redundant in 1974 when the remnants of Walton parish were united with nearby Wavendon. At this time, the University agreed to take the church over and see to its restoration.

St Michael's Church

A church has existed on this site since at least 1189, but the present structure, a simple aisleless Gothic building in the decorated style, dates from about 1350. The western tower, which was added in 1400, is Perpendicular and contains three bells, rehung in 1638. During the restoration, excavation was carried out by the Milton Keynes Development



Corporation archaeology team. Evidence of the original 1189 church was found at the bottom of the inner wall of the nave.

Among the many finds were fragments of medieval stained glass, circa 1409; original medieval floor tiles, circa 1500 (from the neighbouring Brickhill Kiln circa 1420-1530); traders' tokens of the 1650s (when some restoration work was done by the Beales whose kinsman, Theodore, was Rector here), and part of a twelfth century font.

These artefacts, which are exhibited in the church on special occasions, are in the keeping of the Milton Keynes Archaeology Unit and will be on permanent display, with all the excavated material from the city, in the City Museum.

The church was reopened on November 23, 1978 and is used by the University for concerts, meetings and exhibitions and, from time to time, for its original purpose.

OPEN UNIVERSITY FACT SHEETS

THERE are currently four Fact Sheets in this series which describe various aspects of the Open University:

- Background to the Open University
- New Technology
- Services to Disabled Students
- History of Walton Hall