

A HISTORY OF PARK GATE AND ITS ENVIRONS

by Rosemary Pugh

EARLY HISTORY TO 1800

The ancient Wick Estate, on which Park Gate now stands, stood on a part of the coastal region of Brighton and Hove distinguished by the presence of a spring, nearby surrounded by a small area of woodland. The early maps – for example, Saunders' Map of Brighton of 1834 – would seem to indicate that this was virtually a unique feature in the locality e.g. The *Victoria County History* entry says 'The Chalybeate is situated north of Brunswick Square on the declivity of the hill and is covered with almost the only group of trees in the district'.

The estate itself was part of the manor of Preston and covered about 250 acres, and the boundaries were roughly the coast road to the south, the Hove/Brighton parish boundary to the east. St. John's Road to the west and Old Shoreham Road to the North. The name Wick is thought to mean a farm and referred to an outlying area of the Manor. It has also been suggested that it could mean a village, but it would appear that it was always been farmland prior to modern development.

When the Domesday land redistribution took place in 1086 the Wick Estate came under the Manor of Preston, which was granted to the Bishops of Chichester, though the Domesday Book gives very little positive information. One of the first freeholders of the estate, probably early in the 13th century, was the de Pierpoint family and it is believed they had a manor house here; it has been suggested that this could have been sited on the present Park Gate site.

It is mentioned in 1280 that one of this family, Simon de Pierpoint, was regarded by his villeins (serfs) as being extremely oppressive. A confrontation between him and one, Hildebrand Reynberd, about his refusal to be Simon's reeve led Hildebrand to bring with him 52 men to set fire to Simon's house at 'Herwick' (one of the names the Wick was known by). In the 15th century it was called Upwick but by this time the Pierpoint family had vanished from the written record. The cause of their sudden disappearance appears to be unknown. Apart from this incident, life on the Wick Estate seems to have passed peacefully enough, apart from some indications that local residents had a tendency to indulge in wrecking and piracy, which was certainly not unusual then and for a long time after in coastal areas.

In 1585 the Wick Estate came into the hands of the Shirley family of Wiston, near Steyning, and by 1627, through marriage, it passed to Anthony Stapley. By judicious marriages the Stapleys were becoming one of the more important families of the county. Anthony achieved fame by being one of the regicides of Charles I; fortunately for him, he died in 1655 – well before the Restoration, and his Royalist wife had conveniently died before the Civil War began. She was Anne Goring, daughter of Sir George Goring of Danny, a very strong Royalist as was the rest of the family.

Anthony's son, John was also a Royalist but was described as a 'feeble Royalist plotter, courtier, spendthrift and placeman dying broken in estate'. His career in Parliament did not last long, and he returned to the country and died in 1701 in debt and without heirs and his baronetcy lapsed. He had by that time sold Wick to John Lilly of Gray's Inn. Lilly possibly bought it simply as an investment since he sold it within six months for £1,600 to John Scutt, a brewer of Brighthelmstone, who appears to have been a very successful businessman

Scutt died in 1725, and the property passed to his second son, John Scutt who, on his marriage to Thomasin Ayres, was described as a mariner, as were his son and nephew, both called Benjamin. Nevertheless they held on to the estate, and by this time were rising in social status in the county. By this time local men such as the Scutts were beginning to have sufficient funds to replace the country gentry as purchasers of substantial properties. Benjamin's son, Thomas was only eight when his father died in 1794 and when he came into his inheritance he was described as a gentleman. He later became a banker and with a builder, Richard West, ran a brick-making business at Wick Farm from 1778 until 1790.

The fuel for the brickmaking was provided by the considerable amount of furze growing nearby on Furze Hill. Hitherto, houses had generally been built with flint cobbles from the beach but by this time the building industry was expanding rapidly as Brighton became a watering place for the wealthy and bricks were needed for the homes they required. It is believed that some of the brick works were situated on the western side of what would become Somerhill Road, where the schools now stand, as well as in other places nearby: for example, where Brunswick Square was later laid out. When the brickworks were abandoned the land was simply levelled off, which could explain the sudden dip in the ground just in front of the school and at other places nearby. All this would seem to indicate that Thomas Scutt was very involved in the early building of Brighton.

How successful Scutt was in his business is debatable – at one point Wick Farm was mortgaged though that does not appear to have stopped him building Wick House, the large house that stood on the exact site of Park Gate's rear block, though it is uncertain whether he ever lived in it. We also know that in 1783 there were barns, stables and a farmhouse, meadows, pasture heath and furze on the estate; an ordinance survey map from a century later shows that the farm buildings stood on the west side of Furze Hill, just to the south of where Park Gate now stands.

When Scutt died in 1794, both Wick House and Wick Farm – including the brick works – were left to his son, also named Thomas, and his wife was given an annuity from the proceeds of the farm. Wick House was mostly let thereafter: in 1796 it was leased to Sir Godfrey Vassall of Battle Abbey, though not the chalybeate spring or the buildings belonging to Wick Farm.

Thomas Scutt junior was a clerk in Holy Orders and a Fellow of New College, Oxford. In 1802 he married Ann Sergison, though the marriage was unhappy and they soon separated. She died in 1806 and the next year he married Mary White. It would seem likely that he was not particularly interested in keeping the estate intact, which is not surprising considering the rapid expansion of Brighton and Hove at this time and the good money that could be made from the sale of the land. It is suggested that the naming of Waterloo Street might indicate the timing of when these changes began. In 1825 the boundary of the land to the west owned by the Stanford family was defined.

There was little to attract visitors to the area until it was realised that a pond nearby might have attributes other than just being a water hole for sheep. A general belief existed that the properties of the water were beneficial for the fertility of the sheep and, as far as humans were concerned, it was considered to be very good for stomach problems. The Pump House was built about 1800, and Wick House was let to tenants who wished to take the waters of the Chalybeate Spa.

Sicklemore's History of Brighton (1815) says of Wick Manor: 'This manor, the property of Rev. T. Scutt to whom the Chalybeate also belongs, is situated near the spring upon a rising ground, enclosed and surrounded by a lawn, garden shrubbery, etc., and commanding a pleasing variety of sea and land views. The walk from Church Down to this charming situation, is much frequented during the summer months as well as those who can feel a gratification in the contemplation of the picturesque and rurally cultivated beauties of nature'. It would seem that the brick works were well hidden by the wooded area surrounding the Chalybeate Spa, though those who painted it – including Constable – may have employed artistic licence in so depicting it. In fact it was said, well into the nineteenth century that this area around the Chalybeate was unique in that it was the only wooded area in Hove, a feature that can be seen on Saunders' map of 1834. To some extent this is still true, though the water supply from the spring has largely dried up.

In the early part of the 19th century the Spa continued to be very popular and over the century other attractions were added. In 1825 the Reverend Thomas Scutt redesigned the Pump House, adding a colonnade, and sold off 24 acres of the south-west part of the Wick Estate to Thomas Read Kemp: this became the Brunswick Estate. Housing development in Kemp Town would seem to be the inspiration for this. Musgrave in his 'Life in Brighton says of this area: 'The site was a dreary expanse used as a brickyard, covered with heaps of ashes, rotten rubbish, and ruinous sheds and the 'mephitic vapours' given off by the brick-kiln gave great annoyance to the people living by.' Those living near Wick Farm no doubt would have had the same reaction. Even so it does not seem to have prevented Wick House being let to the nobility. Wick Farm was still being used for pasture and arable land.

By 1830 the rest of the estate – about 216 acres – was sold to the financier and philanthropist, Sir Isaac Lyon Goldsmid, and was thereafter frequently referred to as the Goldsmid Estate. His intention was to sell much of it off for building and a considerable number of roads were built. Even so he kept control of many of the properties, much of it in the region of Furze Hill and St. Ann's Well Gardens. The gardens of the estate were sold to the Hove Corporation so that they could be kept for public use, something which has been much appreciated by Hove residents ever since. At this time Goldsmid moved into Wick Lodge which was situated just outside the southern border of the modern park. When the last lease finally expired he commissioned a new house which became Wick Hall. That was the house designed by Decimus Burton, and was regarded as one of his finest buildings; the gardens were also believed to be most attractive, with fine views of the sea. Burton also planned a rustic village at Furze Hill which was never realised, though a number of large houses were built there, all with extensive gardens that would have fitted Burton's ideal.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE WICK ESTATE IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Until about 1825 Wick Farm extended from the coastline northward and consisted of about 250 acres of meadow, pasture, wood and furze and heath, All the farm buildings as shown in the 1877 Ordnance Survey were to be found to the west of Furze Hill. According to James Gray the farmhouse, which was very large, was one of the oldest houses in Hove. It had been in the Scutt family for five generations and was probably built by the Thomas Scutt (1746–1794). It is likely that parts of Park Gate and Furze Croft were built on the site.

Wick Farm itself continued to be run by tenant farmers throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. In the 1841 Census it was held by John Chatfield, who came from Steyning and was born about 1776. At this stage he appeared to have had no family but there were three women living

in the house, listed as servants. In Wick Cottage, Stephen Leliott lived with his wife Maria and another labourer, John Bowden. No other workers appear to be living on the farm. The next tenant that we know of was Daniel Philpot, who describes himself in the 1851 Census a bailiff rather than a farmer, though in nearby Wick Cottage was an agricultural labourer and his family. By 1861 the tenant was William Nicholson who is listed as a farmer,; so was his successor in the 1871 census, John Watson. By 1891, the very large house seen on the 1877 ordnance survey map seems to have been inhabited by a rather wealthier occupant, one William Palmer, listed by Potter in his 'History of Hove' to be one of the notable inhabitants. Prior to his arrival he had lived at Gaston Farm in Slindon in West Sussex and described himself as a horse dealer and at Wick Farm a contractor. Brighton Directories describe him as a horse dealer, and there were stables on the farm. He had five young children and his household servants included a governess; several labourers lived in one of the farm buildings. By the time of the 1901 census it would appear that William Palmer, still listed as a horse dealer, had moved with his wife, five children and governess to nearby 65 Lansdowne Street. It may be that the very large farmhouse was already in a state of disrepair, as nobody appeared to be living there.

Unfortunately, there seem to be no pictures of the farmhouse except a photo which shows it in a very sorry state shortly before it was demolished. There is a mention of a painting, apparently now lost, by a Mr. J. C. Doland in the *Brighton Guardian* of 11th December, 1867 which would appear to have been of Wick Farm. However the paper did describe it: 'The sketch is taken from the neighbourhood of Brighton, the land belonging to Baron Goldsmid, and now farmed by Mr. Watson. The foreground represents a half-ploughed field, while in the distance may be seen the rising Downs. To the left is a small copse, and to the right a small stunted hedge. A team of three horses attached to a plough forms the chief subject of the painting. The scene is taken at noon; the animals have been stopped for a time in their labours, and are intent on the contents of their nosebags, while the men are resting under the hedge enjoying their mid-day meal. A peasant girl is seen approaching, bearing the essential accompaniment of their repast in the shape of a can of – we suppose – good English beer. Thus the painting is appropriately entitled 'Twelve o'clock'.' There are still those who have memories of the house though these only go back to the 1930s when it was in a very dilapidated state, and it was said to have fallen down completely during a storm.

As can be seen by the maps of 1795 and 1825 there were a few paths running through this area, which were probably used mainly as sheep walks. There was one such path running roughly where Somerhill Road is now, but on a diagonal course veering east. It was called Haystacks Road and went up as far as the present Nizells Avenue. The 1879 Goldsmid Estate Act controlled development and land use, and required approval for any buildings or change of use from those granted in the original covenants. Near Wick Hall plots were sold singly or as doubles. Goldsmid had the roads made up but the residents had to pay for their maintenance and make their own footpaths. It was in 1849 that Baron de Goldsmid signed an agreement to have a road built costing £82.10s which would be built more or less on an existing path beginning at the top of Brunswick Place and swing round to the north-east to the top of the hill; this, the present Furze Hill, was the first of the streets laid out in this area.

Kelly's Brighton and Hove Directory of 1845 lists Goldsmid as living at Wick Hall, which had been completed in 1840, though it was not mentioned in the 1841 Census. It stood to the east of the much older Wick House which, just to make matters complicated, was also known as Wick Hill or Furze Hill. In 1841 this was lived in by the Rev. Thomas Rooper and his family. The only other residence on what was to become Furze Hill was Wick Lodge, which was

occupied by John Watson and his family. There were however, two lodges occupied by gardeners to the two houses and their families and a few other small buildings, including a mill. One, known as Swiss Cottage, lay somewhere in what is now St. Ann's Well Gardens.

From the 1851 Census, it was evident that the Furze Hill area was increasing in popularity, with eight households being listed. Nearly all belonged to professional families, none of whom were born in Brighton, and nor were their servants. This trend would continue, and many would be people returning from various parts of the British empire. One building, however, was inhabited by a coal merchant, William Watts and his wife, Elizabeth two sons, four daughters and a nephew and one servant. Elizabeth was listed as a laundress with 45 employees; her two elder daughters were also laundresses, and one son was a coal merchant's assistant, and the nephew a carpenter's apprentice. Close by lived Thomas Parker and his wife, both involved in the laundry; it seems from later advertisements that Thomas ran the business, which was still in business until the 1960s. Presumably most of the neighbourhood made use of their services as none of the servants listed in the census were specifically involved in that kind of work. There is also a comment in the census returns about houses being built nearby – for example, the 19 houses under construction in York Road.

From then on the census returns indicate steady expansion, though not so much in the Furze Hill area as in the nearby streets. Decimus Burton would still have his dream of country villas and gardens and St Ann's Well Gardens, then known as the Chalybeate, in the middle. By the mid-century the Pump House had been built, surrounded by trees and gardens, and it must have been a very desirable area in which to live, as evidenced by the increasing number of returning ex-pats who chose to settle here. A number of the houses became schools, the best known of which was 'Wick', a boys prep school housed in Wick House. This was demolished in 1935 and shortly afterwards a block of flats, Furze Croft, was built on part of the estate. Wick Hall on the opposite side of Lansdowne Road, was built at around the same time, in 1936.

Wavertree House and Wick Lodge are two of the older 19th century houses still in existence, and both are being well used. Wick Lodge ceased to be a family home about 1900 when it became a girl's school known as St. Michael's Hall, which it remained until it became a boy's prep school in 1934 (Claremont School). A complete change was made in 1947 when it was taken over as a convent for the poor Servants of the Mother of God, and was used as an orphanage. By 1983 ideas about child care had changed; that use ceased and the nuns eventually left. For its time it was occupied by squatters until finally in 2007 it became the Bodhisattva Mahayana Buddhist Centre, which it remains. One of its most attractive improvements is the remaking of the gardens, with their scent of exotic herbs.

Wavertree House on the corner of Somerhill Road and Lansdowne Road also has had a remarkable transformation. It was originally built in 1892 for Dr. John Uthoff, a doctor with somewhat radical views on health care. It was a very impressive house, with an imposing entrance hall and staircase set against a large leaded window, and with a large garden developed by the doctor that still exists. In 1934 it was bought by the Royal National Institute for the Blind. In the 1990s a very large expansion scheme was begun to allow for more residents. Most of the old building still stands and it remains a much loved local landmark.

It was in March 1895 that plans for Somerhill Road were approved by the Hove Commissioners and on the 1899 ordnance survey map the name Somerhill Road is mentioned for the first time: it was named after the Goldsmid family home, Somerhill House, in Kent. At that stage, the road would appear only to exist up to about where Park Gate now stands and

apparently nothing more was done until 1903. The original Haystacks Lane track then still existed.

A 1913 directory mentions Wick Farm Cottage and Wick Stable in Somerhill Road. On the other side of the road was Somerhill Lodge, then a house then occupied by a Major Carey Borrer. The houses on the right-hand side between Lansdowne Road and Park Gate were all built in the 1920s on land which was part of Wick Farm, and some of the farm buildings were pulled down to do this. Around this time it is believed that it had become a dairy farm. The land opposite had become allotments. Furze Croft and Wick Hall were built in the 1930s and the 1938 ordnance survey map shows that very few of the farm buildings left standing, including the large farm house, though most of them had been shown on the 1931 map. It would appear that when this happened it was left as waste land for many years; a photo shows that it was used as an unofficial car-park.

In 1936 there was a conveyance of land between Sir Osmond d'Avigdor-Goldsmid and others and Hove Land and Investment Company. It gave the purchasers permission to demolish 'the dwellinghouse known as Wick House' (presumably the large house which appears on earlier maps) although it would appear that there was not much left to pull down. This document also mentions a conveyance dated 21 September, 1909 when land to the north of Wick Farm was being sold by the Goldsmid family to the Hove Borough Council to become St. Ann's Well Gardens, and there was a covenant which said: 'the vendor will not erect or permit to suffer to be erected on the land or any part thereof abutting the said land hereby conveyed any building or erection whatever except detached or semi-detached dwellinghouses outbuildings with or without stables or garages and division walls in connection therewith. Each of which dwellinghouses with the outbuildings stables or garages in connection therewith shall be of the value exclusive of the site of One thousand pounds at the least.'

It would appear that the use of this land was intended to continue to be for the use of housing, though permission was now given for the building of private residential flats, which were not to exceed 70 feet in height. However, it would not be too long before the threat of war meant that new housing was no longer a priority.

In December 1947 permission for approval for the proposed layout was given by East Sussex County Council to Furzecroft Estates Ltd. This was for 'the completion of building development comprising a total of 259 residential flats, Somerhill Road adjoining St. Ann's Well Gardens'. Perhaps it is fortunate this high-density development was never built!

There is much more to tell about this area of Hove, the story of the houses that were once here, how the flats were built, St. Ann's Well Gardens, and the church of St. Thomas, which is now used by the Coptic community, the Somerhill Road schools and much else.

THE STORY OF PARK GATE

It was in February 1955 that permission was given by East Sussex County Council to Eric Lyons to submit detailed plans for a proposed development that was 'comparable with the existing development in the neighbourhood.' Full permission for this development was granted in June 1958.

Park Gate was to become an early part of a movement towards a very new idea of community housing, and is certainly a unique block of flats in Brighton and Hove.

There is a very strong emphasis on the words ‘community’ and ‘landscape’ in an urban setting. Lyons, with his associated company SPAN, completely rethought how homes should work

‘Span thought about a community first and the buildings second. They used the placing of the buildings to shape the communal space. In Span you park your car and you walk through part of the estate to your own home. You have to talk to each other. The interaction is arranged through the landscape. It’s landscape first and landscape last.’ (Jan Woudstra).

There was an emphasis on family accommodation, with either two or three bedrooms, not something very often found in blocks of flats, and there were (and still are) open green areas which give adults a place to meet and children to play. Even the stores at Park Gate were labelled ‘Perambulator stores’ on the original plans.

Another architect, Ivor Cunningham, became heavily involved at a very early stage. He was particularly enthusiastic about landscaping in urban living and communal developments, where it was allowed to ‘flow’ around the buildings. Lyons and Cunningham began with gardens and arranged the buildings to enclose ‘the common gardens in a single total landscape concept.’ In a brochure for the Eric Lyons Memorial Fund, Cunningham said:

‘As a modern architect and industrial designer, Eric wanted to put modern architecture within the financial and intellectual reach of the middle range of household buyers, and he did this through Span Developments Limited against all the worldly wisdom of housing experts. The creation of space within and without the dwelling fascinated him. His response to landscape was urban and he saw landscape design as an extension of architecture by other means and as a necessary component of urbanism.’

In the case of Park Gate the very ancient idea of houses being built around a central courtyard has been revived. It is, of course, an idea very common in Mediterranean countries and other ancient civilisations around the world. Lyons’ immediate inspiration, though, came from closer to home, from the tradition of houses around a village green and some of the ancient universities’ colleges with their central courtyards. In Park Gate, the courtyard arrangement adds great charm – as does its location next door to an exceedingly attractive public park, St. Ann’s Well Gardens.

The small site of Park Gate, when compared with many other SPAN projects, meant that landscaping had to be done on a rather more limited scale. The emphasis is on the central courtyard, though there are extra areas at the front and back available to all the residents. The blocks were built on four floors and were the first of Lyons’ flats to have lifts. The fact that each block has only four storeys means that the gardens are not overwhelmed, and nor are the residents.

In many respects the SPAN design philosophy was ahead of its time. As far as possible the extensive use of concrete was avoided and, in the case of Park Gate, tile hanging was used between the bands of windows. This, of course, has always been common in the Sussex Weald.

Another SPAN philosophy was that ‘the dominance of the car was challenged by not dictating the layout in favour of the car’, and at Park Gate the garage area is to some extent screened off from the residential blocks.

Although Eric Lyons had families in mind for his designs, for many years the residents of Park Gate were almost entirely retired people. Not until the mid-1980s did children begin to make an appearance, and it was not until the early 1990s that the first Park Gate baby was born. Now the residents are a mixture of all age groups, which was the original intention. Within the flats much has changed, as is inevitable in a rapidly changing society. However, the gardens and communal areas have, generally speaking, changed very little, and some original features and planting has been restored.

Community management was always important as far as Lyons was concerned. Regarding the gardens, he took his ideas from the way in which the London squares and the crescents and circles of Bath were managed by the residents. He believed that there were financial and practical advantages to shared responsibilities and that 'communal management would create an identity of place and give residents a sense of pride in their development'. The Residents' Association at Park Gate remains active in the management, maintenance and improvement of the flats and their gardens.

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