

GREAT SANDERS



Great Sanders is one of the unknown great houses of the Battle area. It stands at the north end of Sedlescombe, to the east of the B2244 (the road ran past the house until the turnpike planners straightened it and left it a little distant).



The existing house appears to be at least in part of Elizabethan origin, its central part timber-framed. Unfortunately the house does not appear in Pevsner's *Buildings of England: Sussex* (1965) and one must hope that a later edition will include it; we would then know more of its architecture. It was much enlarged in the late eighteenth century by Henry Mallory Bishop, born and living at

Great Sanders, 2017

Sedlescombe but a prominent man in Battle, being a solicitor and clerk to the vestry. Interestingly he made use of mathematical tiles, thereby making the timber-framed house look as if it was brick-built.

The lands were part of the Robertsbridge Abbey estate, and on dissolution in 1539 they were granted to Sir Philip Sidney of Penshurst in Kent. He was famously killed in battle in 1586 ("Your need is greater than mine") and it appears that he had already sold the Great Sanders estate to the Bishop family of Sedlescombe because there is a reference to William Bishop being there in 1550.



The landowner in the early nineteenth century was John Bishop. The Bishops were substantial landowners. It is likely that John was a nephew of Henry Mallory Bishop, who died in 1814.

Great Sanders in about 1844 (ESRO)

In 1845 John sold the estate to Tilden Smith, a banker turned farmer who lived at Vine Hall. Smith was then a partner in the Hastings Old Bank and had the resources not only to lease Great Sanders but also to have Vine Hall rebuilt (in 1838). The sales details were of course

precise. Bishop was offering the mansion and 743 acres freehold, in various lots and subject to conditions respecting various tenancies. The house was briefly described as having an entrance hall (19'9" by 14'9") dining and drawing rooms, a library and kitchen and various downstairs offices such as a scullery; there were seven bedrooms on the first floor and five on the second.

But in 1857 Smith's bank went bust. 'Fairly spectacularly' is the phrase used, and the hearings in the Bankruptcy Court showed considerable mismanagement by the partners. Smith was left with enough to continue farming, on Netherfield Road in Battle; he was to die in 1870. His (presumed) grandson Richard, born in New South Wales, also took risks and nearly lost all, but survived to be a very wealthy financier in the UK, particularly in coal.

The bank failure meant that Smith gave up Great Sanders, and after a brief ownership by Felix Champney (see the article on Vine Hall) the new purchaser was the owner of Vine Hall who arrived there in 1860, having bought the property: William Rushton Adamson (1825-1898) of Cannon Street in the City, who promptly renamed Vine Hall *Rushton Park*. Adamson's marriage certificate states that he was a 'merchant', the son of a gentleman of Pluckley in Kent; his wife Fanny was the daughter of a gentleman of Brixton. Adamson was no pauper: at his death he left £122,331. This was very big money in 1898 (at least hundreds of millions in today's values).

The Adamsons had fourteen children. On Adamson's death his widow Fanny (Deacon) sold Vine Hall to Thomas Ashton, later Lord Ashton of Hyde, who extended it but who died in 1933. His widow sold it in 1938 to John Jacoby, who opened a school there in 1939: it is still there. Among its pupils was Ashton's grandson Ralfe Whistler (still prominent in Battle) who remembers being able as a child to show other children where all the places were to hide.

Fanny Adamson continued at Great Sanders, where she died in 1917. She left over £45,000. It was the end of the old days. Two years later the whole property was bought by E H Chambers of Maidstone, who sold the house on to William Mewburn, who was to die at his house in Argyll in May 1932 at the age of 79. He had been a stockbroker and his last previously recorded home was at Hawkwell House at Pembury. When the house was sold to Hastings Corporation in 1932 (for £5650) it was stated that it had a hall lounge, four reception rooms, eleven principal bedrooms, seven servants' bedrooms, four bathrooms, and the usual 'well-planned offices'. With the house went an old-fashioned farm house, a two-kiln oast suitable for conversion, a well-built lodge and a bungalow, 223 acres in all.

The future of the estate had been in some doubt by 1928. Chambers let it be known that he was proposing to sell, and advised Hastings Corporation that there might be sufficient water to dig wells there. Chambers was presumably aware that Hastings was facing a water shortage, not least because its council had been steadily extending its water mains to cover the whole borough, which meant that many more people were drawing on its supplies. It had tried to get an Act in 1926 for a development west of the town but the Bill was rejected. Surveys were not optimistic: their surveyor Professor Boulton of Birmingham University had checked everywhere in the vicinity for supplies, either by way of rivers or wells, and had come up with no good answer as to groundwater. This was not his fault, for he was one of the country's leading experts on geological formations likely to provide deep water, but naturally he was looking underground. Chambers's approach encouraged him to look at the estate, not for wells but for the site for a reservoir.

He and the borough engineer, Sidney Little, were enthusiastic. They estimated that the reservoir would hold some 170 million gallons, assuring a steady daily resource of half a million a day. Moreover the water could flow by gravity down to the Brede pumping works only 1½ miles away.

By late 1927 the Council was promoting a Bill for the new Reservoir. The Hastings Corporation Act was passed in 1928, authorising the Council to proceed and giving it powers of compulsory purchase. In 1929 the Council took possession of the estate (but not the house) under their new powers, although the price of their doing so was contested.

The land had been a prolific producer of fruit, mainly (in 1929) blackcurrants, loganberries, redcurrants, plums and apples, but for reasons not stated even in the local press the 1930 harvest was a disaster ('fiasco' was the word used, which suggests that Hastings Corporation was itself responsible for the failure). Without the house the estate totalled 1033 acres. After the failure of the 1930 harvest it was decided to turn most of the estate over to forest, which would protect the purity of the water supply.

There were protracted negotiations over the house until arbitration finally settled the price of purchase in 1932. The original asking price appears to have been £35,000 plus a sum for tenants' rights; arbitration settled on a total price of £31686.

In 1935 Merrion House preparatory school for boys moved there from Upper Maze Hill, St Leonards. It was there until 1972. The house and its surviving outbuildings are now divided into living accommodation.

Sources

The principal sources are both by G D Coleman: *Cretaceous capers* (2001) and *Great Sanders estate and the Powdermill Reservoir: official reports* (1998).

In addition much use has been made of reports in the Hastings and St Leonards Observer, of various dates, and of Beryl Lucey: *Twenty centuries in Sedlescombe* (Regency Press, 1978).

And thanks to Ian Garner for the recent picture and to Peter Greene for improving the 1844 image of the house.