

The History of Sunningdale Park

[Sunningdale Park](#) (SP) is an historic house and grounds situated between [Sunningdale](#) and [Sunninghill](#) in the district of Windsor and Maidenhead. The following notes - and they are more notes than historical record - seek to highlight the key events, people and changes through the passage of time. There is some emphasis on the gardens as these are registered under the Historic Buildings and Ancient Monuments Act 1953 within the Register of Historic Parks and Gardens by English Heritage for their special historic interest.

Early History

The area now occupied by SP was marshy heathland and with only poor flint it is not surprising that there are few signs of early occupation. There were some Bronze age barrows nearby such as was at Ascot before the race course was built. Here is a quick synopsis of the area before the first house was built.

- C2: The [Devil's Highway](#) was a Roman road running from London to Calleva (Silchester); this is to the SE of the site running just NW of the current A30.
- C7: **Sunna's Valley** named after Saxon chief, [Sunna](#). The name Sunningdale is first seen in an Anglo Saxon Charter.
- C11: Domesday Survey in 1086, Sunninghill formed part of the valuable Manor of Cookham, known as Cochela, in the Berkshire hundred of Beynhurst which was held by Edward the Confessor.
- C12: **Broomhall Nunnery**, or more properly the [Broomhall Priory](#) Church of Margaret of Antioch, was founded around 1200. It was a daughter house to Chertsey Abbey. Cattle was kept on the land.
- 1521: Broomhall Nunnery was dissolved by the Bishop of Salisbury and much of the land was gifted by the Crown to St John's College, Cambridge.
- C17-18: **Highwaymen** such as William Davis (the [Golden, later Jolly, Farmer](#)), Claude Duval, Captain Snow and Parson Darby operated in the area.
- C18: **Chalybeate spa at the Wells Inn** (latterly a Moroccan Restaurant). Since the discovery of the health-giving spring there, it was one of *the* places to be seen among the Society People and led to some building large houses nearby. As well as springs, which contributed to the marshy ground, two streams ran from a great lake west of Coworth, the shallows of which probably dried up in summer, one of these has completely disappeared with the gradual drying up of the greater portion of the lake, although it must have been of some importance, as evidenced by finding of the remains of a landing stage some fifty years ago in the gardens of St. Bruno, and the traces showing the width of its former bed. This stream probably led down through what is now the Rise, through SP, and most likely all that now remains is the small stream running down the grounds of Dale Lodge.
- 1784: The new **fast mail coach** from London to Bagshot with an armed guard.

First occupation and the Stuarts

- **1786-7**: House reputedly built by [James Wyatt](#), almost certainly for **James William Stuart** (1750-1842), gentleman farmer, but no definitive records survive. His father was James Steuart of Ealing (and his father in turn was Admiral James Steuart). The father died 10/08/1786 and left his fortune to James William, and sizeable sums to his two daughters and youngest son, Charles Augustus. James William's sister, Harriet, is buried with him in Old Windsor.
- **Gardens**: again no records survive but they were designed in the later style of Capability Brown (d. 1783). This was 'an ideal picture of nature. Not wild, but tastefully improved'.

Alexander Pope called it: "Nature to advantage dress'd". The walled garden and Bothy date from this period.

- **Garden Designer?:** contenders include Richard Woods, who certainly understood farming, but this is not his style and he did less in his later years, Thomas White but he was mostly in Yorkshire and, in the 1780s, Scotland. More likely is [William Emes](#) who had worked with Wyatt at Heaton Park and, in 1783 and 1784, at Badger in Shropshire and Chippenham Park respectively. Emes had had built three pools separated by cascades at Badgers, a lot like SP. He did work at Fairford Park, Glos in 1786 and Errdig but this would not have fully occupied him. Most of his early work was in the midlands and the north, but later he did come south, even moving to Hampshire in 1789, so it is possible. Another contender is [John Webb](#) who studied under Emes and was his foreman before working on his own. But it is just as likely to be a lesser known, unrecorded figure, perhaps even the head gardener.
- 1799: Rev Charles Augustus Steuart becomes curate at Sunninghill on 1/9/1799 with a stipend of £40, aged about 22 and recently qualified at University College, Oxford.
- 1801: Letter to the [Annals of Potatoes on Wasteland](#) from James William Steuart of Sunningdale House telling of growing potatoes the previous year on heathland and how it was better where soldiers had camped the year before that.
- 1817: **Enclosures map** shows the [land owned by James William Steuart](#) to be larger than the current grounds, but one part (possibly the orchard and what are now Park Lodge cottages) is shown as being owned by Samuel Webb.
- **1842:** [James William Steuart](#) dies in Brussels and leaves SP to his much younger brother, Charles. The [Rev Charles Augustus Steuart](#) (1777-1859) who had risen through the ranks of the clergy to be Rector at Edmonthorp, Leicestershire in 1804 and Ewhurst, Surrey in 1840. He resigned from the church in 1842 to move to SP with his wife (Mary Elizabeth de Clancy Barclay) and their son [James Henry Augustus Steuart](#) (1834-1895). The 1851 census shows 11 house staff at SP plus James's tutor, Thomas Brocklebank. Little is known about the garden at this time but James does go on to become a renowned botanist. His herbarium on the loW where he later lived was also supported by his wife (Hon. Kathleen Eleanor Henrietta O'Grady, 3rd daughter of the 2nd Viscount Guillamore m. 1855 at St George's in Hanover Square which was endowed with £5,000 Irish pounds by his great great grandfather the Admiral in 1726 as executor of his uncle's will).

The Crosley & Mackenzie era

- **1859:** Charles Steuart dies (25/5/1859) aged 83. His wife was now at 15 Berkley Sq, London. SP is bought by **Sir Charles Decimus Crosley** (1820-1882). He was a JP and gained the Freedom of the City of London in 1834. He was previously at Denmark Rd, Lambeth. His London apartment in Sun Court, Cornhill was at the centre of infamous [Cornhill jewelry robbery](#) in 1865. Sir Charles's wife is Helen (Ford or Wright?) born around 1820. They had one daughter, Louisa, born 1847. [Sir Charles dies](#) in Eastbourne 12/10/1882 and is described as late of SP. His estate was worth £107k.
- **1882/3:** [Sir James Thompson Mackenzie](#) (1818-1890) buys SP. The self-made Scottish millionaire lives at the Glenmuick Estate which he bought in 1869 but uses SP as a southern base. The house was modernised but details are not known. Glenmuick is next to Balmoral and he becomes friendly with Bertie, Prince of Wales, later to be Edward VII and lends him money. In 1887 Bertie writes to Mackenzie asking to use SP during Ascot week. In 1888 the Royal procession starts from SP. Mackenzie becomes a baronet on 21/3/1890 just before he dies on 12/8/1890 in Brighton. He married his wife, Mary Russell on 27/3/1849 and had 4 children: Alice, (Sir) Allan, Randolph and Claud. There is a

painting of him by Carlo Pellegrini (1872) in the National Portrait Gallery. He sold SP in August 1890 days before his death.

The Joiceys

- **1890:** [Major William James Joicey](#) (1838-1912), [coal baron](#) and High Sheriff of Durham, sells Urpeth Lodge in Chester-le-Street and buys SP. His wife was Mary Ann Clark (m. 1868). Son was James John Joicey (1831-1932); he became an entomologist and later lived at The Hill, Witley. Interestingly the Major's nephew, James, was a friend of the Prince of Wales.
- Gardener: **Frederick J. Thorne. Known particularly for his work with orchids**, including *Miltonia Joiceyana* (a chance discovery, bought as another orchid from Protheroe & Morris in 1893) and RHS prize winner *Anguloa clowesii* in 1894. He also grew Chrysanthemums and many other flowers from Cyclamen to Cannas along with much fruit and veg in the glass houses and walled garden.
- **Gardens:** the Joiceys commissioned [James Pulham](#) (the second) to remodel the gardens. (Note: Pulham had been commissioned by Edward Prince of Wales in 1868 to remodel Sandringham). The work started immediately in 1890 but the rockery was probably not completed until 1899 under the direction of James Pulham the 3rd. The glasshouses are early, possibly from the time of the original house. The summerhouse is by Pulham, the other summerhouse no longer exists. The Joiceys are also responsible for many of the red brick arts and crafts style buildings around the site including North and South Lodges.
- **House:** [paintings](#) by Leigh Mulhall Kilpen show the house and the lake. It can also be seen in the Journal of Horticulture and Cottage Gardener article from 1899 and The Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News June 11th 1910 for the Ranleigh Archery Club. The house was substantially re-modelled but we don't know in what way. Many of the farm buildings originate from the Joicey era along with the Coach House.
- Later years: Major Joicey had a stroke in 1910 and died at SP 23/1/1912. He had not taken an active role in the mining business for several years and latterly took to drink. His wife Mary was the flower lover, very much the lady victorian gardener, and was known as very kindly. Some locals still call Rise Road 'Joicey's Hill'. Mary built 12 miners' cottages in memory of her husband. Mary moved to their London home in Lennox Gardens in the 1920s and SP was neglected. Artwork from SP was auctioned off at Christies on 6/12/1929.

The Cunliffe-Owens

- **1930:** [Sir Hugo von Reitzenstein Cunliffe-Owen](#) (1870-1947) bought the estate and commissioned W.E. Lord to remodel the house inside and out. This was completed in 1931. Compare the current building with old photos: similar at first glance but bigger.
- **1931:** The **gardens were first opened to the public under the [National Gardens Scheme](#)** and continued to open up to and including 1939.
- It has been alleged that he secretly married Constance Ann Bernadine Rhodes in 1900 and divorced her in 1909, a secret he took to the grave. He then married Helen Elizabeth Oliver in 1918. They had two sons and two daughters. Helen died in 1934, aged 37, and the following year Cunliffe-Owen remarried, to Mauricia Martha Shaw of California, 25 years his junior. They were legally separated in 1946 and she received \$400k. Shortly before his death he took up with Marjorie Daw, a dancer, who changed her name to Cunliffe-Owen cutting Mauricia out of his \$3m estate. His eldest son, Sub-Lieutenant Hugo Leslie Cunliffe-Owen, was killed serving aboard HMS Indomitable on 12 August 1942, aged 21. His second son, Dudley Herbert, succeeded him in the baronetcy and at Cunliffe-Owen Aircraft Ltd. Cunliffe-Owen was a prominent supporter of Thoroughbred

horse racing. He won the Epsom Derby with his horse [Felstead](#) in 1928, although the best horse he owned was probably the filly [Rockfel](#). He was Chairman of British American Tobacco from 1923-45. His eldest daughter, Philippa Helen Toller, visited one of the SP garden openings (around 1998) and told stories about living in the house.

- 1946: Jewel robbery: Marjorie had £40k of jewels stolen
- 1947: following Sir Hugo's death SP, with 110 acres, was sold to the state (in lieu of death duties). His estate was valued at £1.35m.

The Government Years

- **1950:** The [Civil Defence Staff College](#) opened 23/1/1950 with 30 students on a one month course. Some 1 week courses followed. In 1952 Home Secretary, David Maxwell, opened the Civil Defence Tactical School (15/12/1952) specialising in the problems of Atomic war.
- 1968-9: The Civil Defence College closed and SP briefly became the Treasury College though few courses took place.
- **1970:** The [Civil Service College](#) was opened by Edward Heath on 26/6/1970. The College inherited 15 gardeners who looked after the grounds.
- 1973: Northcote House was the location of the signing of the [Sunningdale Agreement](#) setting up power sharing and the Northern Ireland Assembly.
- 1980: Following the Iranian Embassy siege the hostages were taken to SP for debriefing.
- 1992: 1st June 1992 the gardens were once again open under the NGS
- 1994: ANC officials trained in readiness for government in South Africa.
- 2000: The sundial by Northcote was put up and a new garden by the restaurant (Pepys building) was constructed.
- 2002: A Public Private Partnership is set up with Initial Style (later De Vere) to invest in and develop the SP site. The modernisation of buildings was accompanied by modern planting around the offices and training rooms.
- 2006: The [National School of Government](#) is formed. It closed on 31/3/2012. The Cabinet Office, which owned the site, allowed the contract with De Vere to continue but in 2015 they instituted the process of selling the site. The main house and gardens were for sale as one plot and the modern buildings, suitable for development, as another plot. In the meantime it became the temporary base for the Police Training College and remained a commercial training, conference and wedding venue.
- 2017: The whole site was eventually sold as one plot to [Audley Homes](#). Their plan is to create a retirement village. Limited occupation of the site continues through 2017-18 whilst plans and permissions are sought.

Graham O'Connell

June 2018

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Return to BK...this and that

<https://bkthisandthat.org.uk/potted-history-of-sunninghill-and-ascot/>

Selected Links

<https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1001667>

<http://www.parksandgardens.org/places-and-people/site/4264?preview=1>

<https://pulham.rocks/2011/08/01/sunningdale-park/>

<https://sunningdaleparkdevelopment.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Exhibition-Boards-28.06.2017-.pdf>

Trees & Plants

Here are a few of the trees and plants that are worthy of note in the gardens or which have played their part in the history of SP.

Trees:

- **Spanish Chestnut** (*Castanea sativa*) is about 500 years old, circa 1520, Henry VIII era
- Sequoia, Giant Redwoods, brought to UK from America by William Lobb in 1853. Later called **Wellingtonia gigantea**. Probably planted between 1860-90 (Mackenzie era?)
- There are many notable Acers, especially the one in the rockery, which date from the 1890s.
- The Pine near the lake has a burl at the base, probably from an early infection, compare it with its counterpart a few feet away.
- Also near the lake is an old oak, probably from the original 1780s garden, a large white flowering Cherry, *Acer palmatum platanoides* crimson king, planted in the 1990s, and a couple of Robinia (by the Jenny Topham memorial garden).
- The southern european black mulberry tree down by the summerhouse was lost in 2014. A new mulberry was planted further up the slope towards the house near the site of the second summerhouse.

Rhododendrons and Azaleas:

- **Waterers** at Knaphill and Bagshot (now the base for Crocus) started to popularise Rhododendrons in the early 19th century including those collected by Joseph Hooker at Sikkim.
- Standish & Noble introduced hybrids in the 1850s but many early hybrids were based on *Ponticum* so were often very large. *Ponticum* was often used to line driveways as at SP. S&N also specialised in roses and may have supplied those in the round rose garden at the front of Northcote House, SP. These were replaced in the 1970s and later they too were removed.
- Other rhododendron hybrids came later eg Pink Pearl from Waterers in 1897. **Gomer Waterer** is the pale pink one near Northcote House. SP was planted at about the same time as the famous Leonardslee Gardens, near Horsham, and with some similarities in style. (Leonardslee is currently being renovated but is due to re-open in 2019).
- **Ghent Azaleas** include Nancy Waterer (yellow) near the lake.

Orchids:

- Fred Thorne, head gardener at SP, won an RHS award of merit in 1884 with an *Anguloa clowesii*.
- **Miltonia jockeyana** - an orchid was bought from J. O'Brien at Protheroe and Morris in 1893 as *Miltonia clowesii* from South America but was then discovered to be a new, more floriferous cross (*Clowesii* x *Candida*). It was originally named *jockeyana* after Mrs Joicey. It is now called *Miltonia lamarckiana*.