

THE STORY OF EMMBROOK HOUSE

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The first reference that has been found to Emmbrook house occurs in 21st October 1779, in a Marriage Settlement between Elizabeth Norman, of Henley on Thames, and William Gainsford Peach. The property at this time belonged to Samuel Norman, Elizabeth's father and Frances his wife, and was being handed to the couple as part of the terms of marriage. The property contained only about six acres of land, and also an "orchard garden, Bowling green and canal". This canal is still in existence, and is crossed on the footpath from Oxford Rd to the Morrisons supermarket in Woosehill. The house itself was described as "Mansion House", suggesting that it was of substantial character, a fact which is corroborated by a map of 1790 surveyed by Thomas Pride and Philip Luckombe. In this "Map of Reading and the Country adjacent", "Embroke House" is one of only 5 properties in Wokingham to be labelled by name, the other being Holt House, Tan House, Frog Hall and Luckley House. Since these maps were produced on a commercial basis, in the hope that wealthy estate owners would buy the map which depicted their estate, it is reasonable to assume that the Emmbrook House Estate was added with such a motive in mind, thus suggesting that it was already of some size and importance.

The marriage was not to last for long- In 1785 William Gainsford Peach died, leaving all his property, including the Emmbrook Estate, to his brother, Nathaniel Peach. His will dated 28th December 1784, states that this will should "be carried into Execution with all possible regard to [his] dear wife Elizabeth", and appears to have left her well provided for. However just 3 years later in 1788, Nathaniel Peach also died, leaving his property in trust for his young child, also called Nathaniel William Peach. Neither of the Peach brothers actually resided at Emmbrook House- William lived at Overton in Wiltshire and Nathaniel at Rodborough in Gloucestershire. During this period it was probably let to local tenants. In 1799 a land tax bill for the 34 acres of land including Emmbrook House was paid by Josiah Barnard Esq, the "trustee for the heirs of the late Nathaniel Peach Esq", for the sum of five pounds and ten shillings for "*a messuage or farmhouse with the outbuildings, appurtenances and about 34 acres of land*".

The property remained in trust to the younger Nathaniel Peach until 1808. One possible reason for it being sold in 1808 is that Nathaniel might have reached his maturity in this year- he was certainly very young when his father died 20 years earlier. Whatever the reason, in 1808 "one messuage, two barns, two stables, two gardens, two orchards, 20 acres of land, 10 acres of meadows [and] 30 acres of pasture" were sold by Nathaniel William Peach, Thomas Horton Howlett and Elizabeth his wife (nee Norman, ex Mrs William Gainsford Peach) to Major General John Leveson Gower of Bill Hill. By purchasing this entire estate, Leveson Gower acquired some land that bordered onto his own existing land. The rest of the estate including

Emmbrook House was of little interest to him. So, one year later, 23 acres and 35 perches of this estate was sold again to the sisters Catherine and Elizabeth Wise of Chiswick for the sum of £2461.

The sisters Catherine and Elizabeth Wise (or White as she became on her marriage), feature large in the history of Wokingham. Their father and grandfather, both named Edward Wise had both been town clerks in Wokingham, in 1776 and 1735 respectively. Her mother was born Margaret Bradley, daughter of Abel Bradley, another local family. The sisters already owned property in Wokingham, including Shute End and were for some year's major local landowners. In 1810 Elizabeth Wise married Charles Henry White the nephew of the Selbourne Naturalist the Reverend Gilbert White. There were two children — Catherine Mary, born in 1812, and Charles Henry, born in 1814. At which juncture the land owned by the sisters was divided between them. Catherine Wise became sole owner of Emmbrook House, then described as “ stable, coach house, barn and other buildings and garden groundcontaining altogether about 25 acres ...[The] said lands belonging to Emmbrook House are now in the tenure or Occupation of said John Roberts at the annual rent of fifty six pounds..

Catherine Wise remained the owner of Emmbrook House for the next 26 years. In 1817 the Parliamentary Enclosure awards extended to her lands to include several pieces of common land around its periphery, including “Bradleys Pond”, on the junction of Oxford Road (then known as “Back Lane”), and Reading Road. In total, Miss Wise was awarded nine acres of common land to add to the Emmbrook Estate, increasing it from 28 acres 2 rods and 30 perches to 37 acres 2 rods and 29 perches. The extent of the Emmbrook Estate appears to have remained constant from then until about 1883.

In 1836 Catherine Wise came to sell the property to John Walter, the owner of The Times newspaper and occupant of Bearwood Estate. This simple manoeuvre proved to be unexpectedly difficult, owing to some lax legal handling some years earlier. Ever since the land had been left in trust for Elizabeth Peach, as agreed in her Marriage Settlement of 1779, it had been necessary to have a trustee assigned to the property, purely as a formality to conform to the original terms of the settlement. When Major General Leveson Gower, who had then, in the interim, taken up a permanent residence in Nancy, France, and omitted to sign over the trusteeship to anyone else. Thus Catherine Wise was unable to sell the property as the trustee was no able to be contacted. A lengthy Chancery case ensued, in which statements were made by the local solicitors John Roberts, and eventually an agreement was reached which allowed the sale to John Walter to proceed.

Emmbrook House remained as part of the Bearwood Estate until the entire estate was sold off in 1911. From 1839 the house was occupied by James Langley at a yearly rent of £84. In 1841 he was served an eviction notice for non- payment of rent, but it seems likely that the eviction was not carried out, since in the Tithe Map produced some time later, James Langley is still given

as occupier of the "Homestead" and the surrounding woods, arable land, meadow and pasture. During the Walter ownership the house appears to have been entirely rebuilt- its shape as shown on the intricately and beautifully produced Bearwood Estate maps shows no resemblance to its shape on earlier maps. The description of the house given on the sale of the estate in 1911 also suggests a "modern" building: "the Residence stands well back from the road, is Brick built and Tiled, and is approached by a Carriage Drive, protected by a four- Roomed Entrance Lodge". The house contained a "Hall, Dining Room, Drawing Room...Veranda, Cloakroom with a Lavatory Basin ... Kitchen with Modern Range, Scullery etc and Outbuildings". It also had seven bedrooms, bathroom and W.C and Company Water laid on. Its gardens contained a "Croquet Lawn, Rose Border and Side Lawn and Flower Beds". There was also a huge range of outbuildings, including barns, stables, coach house and "Hog House", and an estimated rental value of £100.

From 1911 onwards little has been documented about the house. In 1935 it was bought by the Francis family, whose son Dick Francis recalled, in his book "The Sport of Queens", living there for some years while his family ran it as a riding stables. Around the period 1965-1967 the Kirbys were resident at Emmbrook House. And probably in the early 1960s the house was demolished to make way for "Brookside". Some traces still survive of the estate – the original "Carriage Drive" is now the broad footpath from Rotherfield Avenue to Brookside; the canal first mentioned in 1779 has now become the main channel of the Emm in the open space behind Morrisons; the old tree lines in this area show the original field boundaries of the estate. Perhaps residents of Brookside, digging in their gardens, unearth the odd remainder of the houses that have occupied the same spot through the centuries.