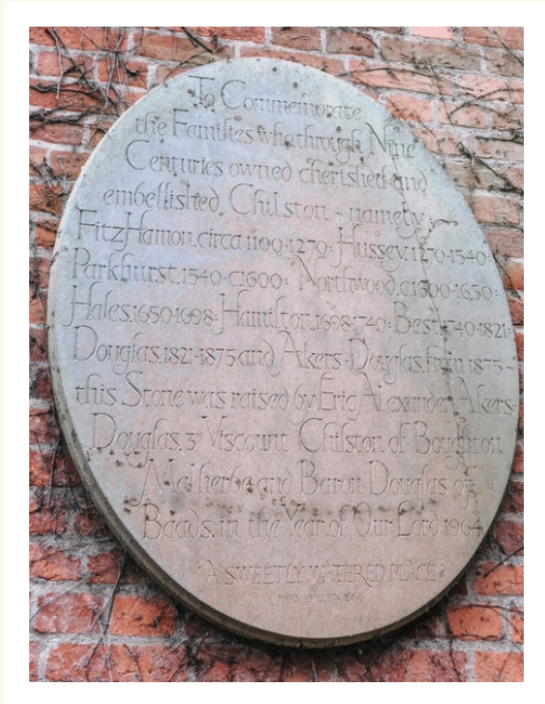


CHILSTON PARK
HOTEL
LENHAM, KENT

Our Heritage



Origins



“A sweetly watered place”
John Evelyn, 1666

So wrote John Evelyn, the Restoration diarist, during a visit to Chilston Park in the 1660s. The writer was staying with his cousin Edward Hales, and evidently much appreciated his brief stay in the heart of Kent, far from the plague-ravaged capital.

The Origins of Chilston Park go back at least to 1100 when ‘Childeston’ was owned by the Fitzhamon Lords of Leeds Castle. Childeston means ‘dwelling of the younger son’, which suggests that these lands were originally subject to the old Kentish custom of gavelkind, whereby, estates were shared equally between all surviving sons.

The house, in its present form, is primarily due to the work of the forebears of the 3rd Viscount Chilston in the 19th century.

A 1719 engraving in Harris’ “History of Kent” shows that the walls date from the early 16th century, when it belonged to the House or Hussey family. The inner face of the side walls of the house are of late 15th century diapered brick, and the mounting block in the stable yard is constructed from a 16th century chimney piece, bearing the Hussey coat of arms. It has also been said by some authorities that Chilston was partly built from the ruins of Colbridge Castle.

Between 1270 and 1545, the house was almost certainly built around an inner quadrangle, a feature that was to survive until the end of the 19th century. There is evidence concerning this period, which throws light on a nearby house that was later linked with Chilston. Royton Manor, owned in 1545 by Robert Attwater, boasted a fine set of early Renaissance carved panels in its chapel, which were installed in Chilston’s staircase hall many years later.

A Rich History

In 1650, Mr. Edward Hales brought the house. Upon his death, his three daughters inherited the property. It was then sold in 1698 to the Honourable Mrs. Elizabeth Hamilton, daughter of Lord Culpepper of Hollingbourne Manor. Its new owner was succeeded by her third son, William, in 1709.

William Hamilton courted and married his cousin Margaret Culpepper, who rewarded him with the gift of a son, John. John Hamilton, High Sheriff, in 1719, enclosed the rolling acres of grassland surrounding the manor and remodelled the front door and porch, leaving it looking much the same as it does today.

The next owner was Thomas Best, Member of Parliament for Rochester, and a member of a well known Kentish family. During the Best's occupation between 1736 and 1819, much rebuilding was carried out. Inside, the rooms on the east side were remodelled to accommodate a staircase hall of Chinese Chippendale inspiration, and outside, the grounds were transformed into a picturesque parkland, complete with its own "natural" lake.

The Best's drained the canal east of the house, but left the pond to the south west of the garden. A sundial in the grounds bears the Best family's coat of arms and gives quaint bearings to such far-flung locations as Peking.



George Douglas

In 1821, the property passed to George Douglas, the eldest son of Alexander Douglas of Baads, Midlothian, and an event which marked the start of a family connection which was to last until the sale of the house in 1983. The Douglas's were related to the Akers family of Lancashire, who were involved in the Caribbean sugar trade in the 17th and 18th century.

The head of the Akers family bore the unusual Christian name of Aretas, a name which was to travel through seven generations. Aretas I married Jean Douglas, George's aunt, in 1752, and in 1795 Aretas II wed the daughter of the Reverend James Ramsay, a keen abolitionist, and rector of Teston.

A portrait of Aretas II had been loaned by Lord Chilston to Martin and Judith Miller, and can still be seen in the Star Room within the manor house to this date.

George Douglas, a bachelor, had an adopted daughter named Margaret Brazier, who in 1830 married one of George's relations, James Stoddart Douglas. He inherited the estate upon George's death in 1836 and in 1873 the Baads estate in Midlothian was left to him. After the death of his wife, Stoddart Douglas married Sarah Jenkin, whose portrait can be seen in the former morning room next to the orangery.

During her years at the Kentish house, Sarah had a swimming bath built in the woodlands near the south lake. All that remains of her pool, set in a leafy glade, is a trickle of water amongst traces of brickwork.



Remains of the swimming bath

In 1858, James Stoddart Douglas left Chilston to a distant, but geographically close, relative, Aretas Akers V. He was then living in the

converted remains of a Benedictine abbey at West Malling in Kent. Aretas V, an Eton and Christchurch educated man, who became the 1st Viscount of Chilston, was the son of Reverend Aretas Akers IV, Rector of Malling between 1824-1856. In the same year as he inherited the house and estate, Aretas also inherited the Scottish property of Baads in Midlothian. He went on to marry Adeline Austen Smith and took her back to his Kentish home. Within a few years, the ancient rooms rang to the sound of children's laughter as they brought the old house to life.

Upon inheriting Baads, Aretas V adopted the surname of his great grandmother Jean, to whom he owed his fortune. For 30 years Akers-Douglas represented the St Augustine's division of Kent in Parliament, eventually becoming Home Secretary in 1902. Portraits of him at Chilston show a young man with auburn hair and side-whiskers, and later, the corpulent, frock-coated politician he became.

Great changes were taking place in the house at this time. The east staircase was dismantled, and the two drawing rooms turned into one long room, with columns where the dividing wall once stood now known as our Culpepers restaurant at Chilston Park. The courtyard in the well of the house was enclosed with a glass roof and a magnificent oak staircase was installed in the newly-created room.

Early Renaissance panels were salvaged from the disused chapel in nearby Royton Manor, which was by this time part of the Chilston estate, and placed in the staircase hall. The carved panels depict the Kings of Judah and the Emblems of the Passion, and are thought to have been installed in the Royton between 1520 and 1540.

Soon the walls of the main hall were covered with ancestral portraits and hunting scenes and one of Chilston's most handsome features to date was complete by 1914.

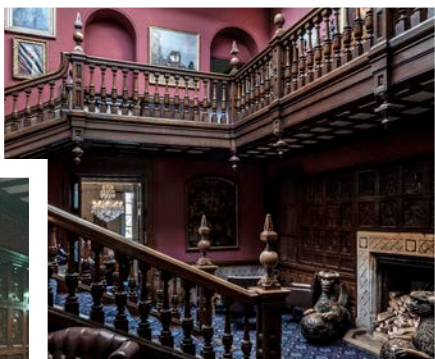
The next step was an extension westwards, bringing the north front of the house up to the stable drive. The extra rooms created were used as bedrooms and a fine dining room. A striking feature of this room was the highly decorative lincrusta ceiling, made from a mixture similar to papier-mâché.

Akers-Douglas lived at Chilston from 1875 to 1926. As an MP, much of his time was taken up with Commons business, increasingly so when he became Chief Whip to Prime Ministers Salisbury and Balfour. His political career is well documented in a book written by his grandson, the 3rd Viscount, titled "Chief Whip" and published in 1961.

In spite of his frequent absences from his Kentish home, Akers-Douglas was a good and conscientious landlord. In 1883, the estate totalled 3,753 acres, and had a gross annual value of £4,937.

As first Commissioner of Works, Akers-Douglas was responsible for handling the funeral arrangements for Queen Victoria, and the Coronation of King Edward VII. He received a peerage in the Coronation Honours of King George V in 1911 and became Viscount Chilston of Boughton Malherbe and Baron Douglas of Baads.

All six of his children married, with the elder son, Aretas VI, entering the foreign office and Diplomatic Service. The younger boy, George Akers-Douglas, pursued a career in the army and later in the City. George married Doris Christopherson in 1909, and produced two sons and a daughter. The present and 4th Viscount is the son of Ian Akers Douglas, who was the elder son of Lt. Colonel George and Doris.



The Staircase Hall

During these years, their sons Bob and Eric, spent much of their time on the Kentish estate, using their former schoolroom on the south side as a general living room while their parents were away. A shadow of sadness crept over Chilston in 1940 when Bob Akers-Douglas died in a road accident in France.

Shortly before the tragic accident, Bob married Marcai Brace, a second marriage for both of them. Their life together was brief, but what it lacked in length it made up for in happiness. Bob's distraught widow did not long survive him, and both are buried at Boughton Malherbe. So it was the younger of the two brothers, Eric, at this time unmarried and in the RAF, who became heir to his father. Lord Chilston was a familiar and popular figure to the local people, often spotted cycling the lanes of Lenham during the petrol-rationed days of the Second World War. He died in 1947, leaving those who knew him with the memory of his wit, courtesy and wisdom.

His son Eric, now the 3rd Viscount, was working in the Foreign Office when he inherited Chilston Park. At the end of the war he had been sent to Germany and Austria to select and collect German records, and later worked with Professor Arnold Toynbee on a pre-war survey, contributing a chapter of re-armament.



Exterior



Aerial view

This undoubtedly whetted his appetite for further literary endeavours, for following his marriage to Marion Howard in 1955, he settled down to write "Chief Whip", a book tracing the political career of his grandfather, Aretas V. This was followed by a biography of W.H. Smith, the newsagent who made a great political career and became 1st Viscount Hambleden. But one passion eclipsed all others, his love for his home. He rarely left Chilston during the 35 years he lived there, apart from an annual spring holiday in Madiera with his wife.

The couple spent much of their time and energy working on their beloved garden. Their rose garden was a splendid example of the colour and variety, and was much admired. An aviary of brilliantly coloured foreign birds was introduced, and visiting ducks and geese were frequent, and welcome visitors to the lake.

During the 1950s, the house underwent a major change. The Victorian wing, built in the 1880s was demolished, so returning Chilston's exterior appearance to the 18th century.

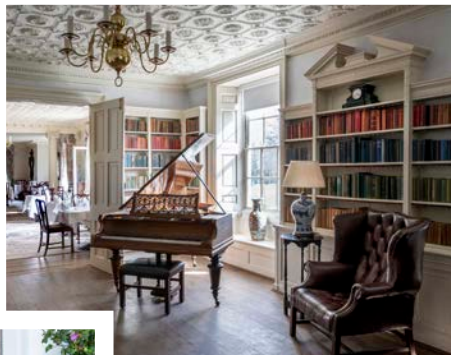
Early Renaissance panels

Becoming a country house hotel

The property remained in the Chilston family until the death of the 3rd Viscount in 1982. Two years later it was bought by Martin and Judith Miller, the well known antiques authorities and authors of Miller's antiques guide who, while keeping its period atmosphere, ran it as a comfortable first-class country house hotel and conference centre. Below are some pictures found in storage from when the millers owned the property:

Now under the ownership of Hand Picked Hotels, a group of 21 individually styled country house hotels and island resorts across the UK and Channel Islands, Chilston Park remains the epitome of the classic English country house. An extension to the old house was completed in 1997, adding a further 15 contemporary bedrooms, and 2 meeting rooms and also hosts our reception area.

This history of Chilston Park has been long and varied, and is sure to continue to capture the admiration of visitors and guests alike for many years to come.



Chilston's Past Owners

13th Century - Fitzhamon Lords of Leeds Castle

16th Century - Hoese or Hussey family. Their possession of Chilston spanned from around 1270 to 1545 when Henry Hussey sold the property

1650 - Edward Hales

1698 - Hon. Mrs. Elizabeth Hamilton, daughter of John, Lord Culpepper of Hollingbourne Manor

1709 - William Hamilton, 3-d son of Elizabeth

1719 - John Hamilton, High Sheriff of Kent and son of William

1736 to 1819 - Thomas Best, MP for Rochester

1821 - George Douglas of Baads, Midlothian

1875 - Aretas Akers of Malling Abbey, later 1st Viscount Chilston

1911 - Viscount Chilston of Boughton Malherbe

1926 - Aretas VI (Viscount Chilston)

1947 - Eric Alexander (youngest son of Viscount Chilston). Owned by Chilston Family but un-lived in from 1964 to 1982

1984 - Judith and Martin Miller

1988 - The Orangery as we know it was built

2001 - Hand Picked Hotels

2019 - Hand Picked erected the Gazebo opposite the orangery

2021 - Hand Picked Hotels celebrate their 20th Birthday



Elizabeth Bett's Diary

Scullery maid from 1938 -1942

Chilston Park

My Fascinating Island

From the moment I opened the large gate, the sort that you stand on and swing to and fro, I was fascinated. A very long drive with meadow and trees, very quiet and peaceful.

Through another large gate. In front of the lake was a large grey stone house, partly covered with reddish green ivy. Up to the side door to ring the bell with a strong iron pull. Edith the housekeeper opened the door and I was introduced to staff, then up the back stairs to my own little bedroom. One white bed, white chair in front of the window which overlooked the courtyard, a white dressing table and wardrobe.

Outside the back door I discovered a wonderful engine which generated the electricity. The whole place was self-contained, laundry, large building for carpentry and woodwork.

Past the back door was a large pond where ducks and swans swam. One family of ducklings would waddle in the back door all in line and wait at the kitchen door for crumbs etc.

Sometimes the swans needed to be on the front lake and old Steadman, as he was known, would grab hold of the beak and fold the wings under his arm and carry them along. There was a boat hut near the lake and when the 4th Battalion SLI were stationed under canvas in the park it was used when they had an exercise on the lake. On the bank by the lake I often stood and listened to the bugler playing "light out" or "last post". The CO used the servants' hall as his office.



*Employees at Chilston Park in the 1930s
Elizabeth Betts bottom row second in from the right*

I met my Husband at Chilston Park, his part of the unit were camped up past the side door to the back of the house. You see there was so much going on. While the troops were there Montgomery FM came and inspected them, all looking so smart and all their vehicles sparkling clean lined up along the side of the back drive. Afterwards, Monty and his aides took refreshments at the White Horse Inn.

The milk girl delivered milk and cream on her bicycle and often a second delivery of cream in the evening. Mr Cooper was the gamekeeper who brought in rabbits, pheasants, partridge, pigeons etc. The carpenter was Douglas, never knew his surname. Mr Foreman and his wife lived in the cottage outside the first gate, and of course brought in fresh vegetables every day, fruit from the wonderful gardens and there was always some for the servants. Mr Patterson the chauffeur lived in the house opposite the back door with his wife and small daughter.

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Must not forget "Pilot" the large block carthorse. Once I had saved enough to purchase a bike, Edith the housekeeper, a lovely lady who was strict but very fair and kind, warned me that in the Spring when Pilot was first let out after being in the stable all winter he tended to be very frisky and would chase a cycle along the drive, Edith's words "Elizabeth, do not forget off to open the gate, just jump over the top" I only had to do it once, with my bike on the other side and Pilot looking over the gate laughing. He thought it was great fun. Most of the girls were local girls and I do not think it was quite the same for them. To me everything was so interesting, people, animals machinery, I could forget the hours of work, I was tiny and 14 years old and it was wonderful and I have held /bat wonder all my life. After I left Chilston Park to join the RAF as a IYIAAF in 1942 I visited Chilston and Edith each leave and after I married in 1945. My Husband and I visited Edith in her cottage whenever possible and go to Chilston.

There is more to come, to talk or write of the house itself, such a beautiful place, if the family were away for the day, because Edith knew I was genuinely interested, would take me through the front of the house to see wonderful things. The family crest on everything. Pictures, portraits done by Lady Chilston. There was one of His Lordship in his study, so life like you expected it to speak. One of Mr Eric they're surviving son in his RAF uniform, who in later life lived in the Dower House.

Lord and Lady Chilston has two chow dogs, Mischa and Tania

While the family were on holiday in Scotland, we would all work together and spring clean the place from top to bottom. Carpets strung up between trees and beaten. Get together in the kitchen for meals. Miss Cope, lady's maid knew, like Edith, how I loved the place and would take me to the upstairs and along the front landing, the Blue Room, the Chintz Room, the Pink Room etc. and stand at the door of her Ladyships room and dressing room. The Chilstons were fine people, kind and helpful. Her Ladyship was interested in what we liked and when she knew I loved music, especially classical, she loaned me her portable gramophone to play my few records on.



Chilston Park in the 1930s

For a contribution to the war effort we would all go in to the front hall and sit around a large table and knit scarves, balaclavas, socks in khaki and air force blue. Lady Chilston would read chapters from an Agatha Christie mystery and hand round chocolates half way through. Another thoughtful act was being able to attend the annual village dance and if there was a musical at the cinema in Maidstone (Deanna Durbin) we were able to go together, they were good people.



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