

History of Roke Manor, Romsey

by Anthony C. Raper (1988)

Roke Manor lies approximately 2¼ miles by road in a north westerly direction from the centre of Romsey, close to the ancient manor of Stanbridge Earls and south of the Old Salisbury Lane. It stands approximately 175 ft above sea level in ornamental parkland and its opportune position, giving views across Hampshire to the Isle of Wight.

Meaning of the name - Roke

There have been many ideas for the meaning of the name Roke, from rook (suggesting a castle or rocky outcrop) - unlikely as Roke Manor stands on gravel, to oak - which would seem to tie in with the heavily wooded area to which the manor forms part. Romsey historian, Mrs Florence Horatia Suckling says that Roke was anciently 'oak' or the 'ville de Oak', with lands that ran down to the River Test.¹

'Oak' was divided from Stanbridge Earls by the road which was probably in the 14th century, the main road from Winchester and Romsey to Salisbury. The word 'ville' in the Saxon language can have one of several meanings - parish, manor or village, all of which suggest a settlement of some description.²

Settlement

The earliest known reference proving the existence of a settlement at Roke comes from the 'Feet of Fines' papers from Southampton in 1256.

40 Henry III, Hilary: William le Paumer and Matilda del Ok. 2 messuages, 4½ acres and 1 perch of land with appurtenances in Rumseye. Assize of morte d'ancester said tenement recognised as right of William and they except 1½ messuages of said land are quit claimed to William and his heirs.

This document is telling us that William le Paumer and Matilda, both of Ok (Roke), own 2 buildings with land attached totalling just over 4½ acres. The Feet of Fines are copies of documents made after disputes over land ownership, these were often used to officially register land ownership.³

Another early reference to Roke appears in the Winchester College Muniments where we find that in 1338 William Bronhighe of Romsey leases 1 acre of land called 'Padacre' in Stanbridge, to John Yunne of 'la Ok' at a rent of 6 shillings yearly for 10 years.⁴

Mrs Suckling tells us that Roke or 'Oak' is first mentioned in the deeds of Stanbridge Earls in 1443, when the Pritfot, or Prutfot family held it.

Peter Pritfot (sic) of the Ville of Oak in the Parish of Romsey in the 21st of Henry the Sixth (1443) gave all his lands in Oak and Stanbridge to William Adam of Oak.

The name Pritfot occurs much earlier in the Stanbridge deeds and so it is possible that Roke or land in Roke was owned by them from a much earlier time. Indeed that must be true for in a Calendar of Inquisition Post Mortem, Hugh de Andele, Earl of Gloucester who died in 1347 left to his daughter Margaret a long list of lands which included 'Oke' and 'Stanbrygge'.⁵

Whilst mentioning Stanbridge Earls, Roke Manor's immediate neighbour due north, it is interesting to note that King Alfred the Great's father, Ethelwulf, died here in 858AD and also that its name is a

¹ Hampshire Memorials vol. III, by Mrs. Florence Horatia Suckling (M.S. and cuttings) Romsey Archives (H.R.O.)

² The Local Historian's Encyclopaedia, by John Richardson; pub. Historical Publications, 1985

³ Feet of Fines South'ton: 40 Henry III - Cope Collection, Southampton University Library.

⁴ Winchester College Muniments vol. 2, doc. 16090

⁵ Hampshire Memorials vol. III, by Mrs. Florence Horatia Suckling (M.S. and cuttings) Romsey Archives (H.R.O.)

'Some Notes on the Manors of Stanbridge Earls in the Parish of Romsey Extra' by Mrs Suckling (article in the Hampshire Field Club Papers and Proceedings, vol. VI, pages 41-64.

Cal of Inquisitions Post Mortem, c. Edw. IH File 87.

corruption from the Saxon, meaning 'stone bridge'. The second part of the name is derived from the fact that the house was once the property of the Marshall family, descended by inheritance to the Earls of Stafford. The present house, parts of which date from 1653, was built by Henry Gollop. Stanbridge Earls was sold in 1702 to John Fifield for the princely sum of £6000.⁶

According to the Victoria County History of Hampshire, Roke Manor formed part of the property of the Dean and Canons of St. George's Chapel, Windsor. New information has since come to light proving this not to be the case and the Roke Manor mentioned in the V.C.H. is confused with a property in the east of Hampshire, near Odiham.⁷

The history of both Roke and Stanbridge Earls look to be inextricably linked as can be seen from a will of 1539 when Alice Bryght, daughter and heir of Thomas Pritfot (late of Roke), granted " ... all her lands, tenements ... at Roke and Stanbridge to William Purgolde of Romsey."⁸

Another will this time of John Bull, a Romsey mercer mentions "... the house I dwell in, and the gross at Roke and the meadow plot next to Gallows Mead", to Agnes Segeweke in the year 1540.⁹

By 1545, Henry VIII's time, Roke is mentioned in a lay subsidy roll, as having six taxpayers living here. The lay subsidy roll lists all the taxpayers in the area who owned goods or land valued at more than £1 per year. These comprised of the wealthier citizens of the area and just 193 are mentioned in the Romsey area.¹⁰

In 1558 in the will of John Kirkeby of Stanbridge Earls, Roke is passed down to his son Thomas:- "... also I bequeath to Thomas Kerkeby my son all that my manors of Stanbridge Earls, Rook, Romsey, Pytt, Michelmersh ..." Roke is later mentioned as passing on to Thomas's son, Gerard and thereafter to his son Thomas (only 1 year old) from whom the manor was seized in 1652.¹¹

The will of Edith Bamard, proved in May 1610 gives to her son, "... Richard Bamard all the building tumber and stores lying at Roke ..."¹²

Little mention is made of Roke Manor after 1650, but it appears to have been bought by the Gollop family, who had just purchased Stanbridge Earls. Romsey local historian, Mrs F.H. Suckling, records that on January 18th, 1709 a deed of conveyance was made to John Fifield of "... a messuage and certain lands of Roke" by Katherine Gollop.¹³

After its purchase in 1709, Roke followed much the same descent as Stanbridge Earls, the manor in 1744, passing upon the death of John Fifield to his nephew, Benjamin. The properties were passed down to Benjamin Fifield's son John, who held the houses until his death in 1796 at Stanbridge,

⁶ Victoria County History of Hampshire - pt. 40, ed. William Page, 1920
Hampshire Scene, by Brian Vesey-Fitzgerald; pub. Methuen, 1940

⁷ Hampshire Memorials vol. III, by Mrs. Florence Horatia Suckling (M.S. and cuttings) Romsey Archives (H.R.O.)

letter from Mrs Grace Holmes - archivist to the Dean & canons of St. George, Windsor to A.C. Raper.

⁸ Records of Romsey Abbey 907-1558AD., by H.G.D. Liveing, comp
'Some Notes on the Manors of Stanbridge Earls in the Parish of Romsey Extra' by Mrs Suckling (article in the Hampshire Field Club Papers and Proceedings, vol. VI, pages 41-64.

⁹ Tudor Wills held at the Hampshire Record Office, Winchester (information taken from transcripts held by the Lower Test Valley Archaeological Study Group).

¹⁰ When the Nuns Ruled Romsey, by Phoebe Berrow; pub. Lower Test Valley Archaeological Study Group, 1978.

¹¹ 'Some Notes on the Manors of Stanbridge Earls in the Parish of Romsey Extra' by Mrs Suckling (article in the Hampshire Field Club Papers and Proceedings, vol. VI, pages 41-64.

Victoria County History of Hampshire - pt. 40, ed. William Page, 1920.

¹² When the Nuns Ruled Romsey, by Phoebe Berrow; pub. Lower Test Valley Archaeological Study Group, 1978.

¹³ Hampshire Memorials vol. III, by Mrs. Florence Horatia Suckling (M.S. and cuttings) Romsey Archives (H.R.O.)

"possessed of Roke and Stanbridge." Stanbridge at that time was described as "greatly out of repair" and the house at Roke was therefore likely to be in a similar condition.¹⁴

During the occupancy of Stanbridge by John Fifield (d. 1796), his brother Job farmed the lands around Roke. Upon his brother's death, Job passed a Deed of Recovery with the help of his nephew William, leaving him with the entire estate. He died at Roke leaving it to his son, Job junior, at the same time, leaving Stanbridge to his daughter Katherine, who later married John Charles Hall of Romsey and they went to live at Stanbridge.¹⁵

Job Fifield junior succeeded his father at Roke in 1840 and set about improving the grounds, renaming it as 'The Park'. His efforts proved extremely costly and shortly before he died in 1858, he had sold the property to Mr Thomas Wingate-Henderson.¹⁶

Mr Henderson, was an Anglo-Indian who during his period of residency, considerably enlarged the house (probably built about 1840) and gave it the look it retains to this day. Mr Henderson added the tower, or cupola and generally increased the size of the house by the addition of the large reception rooms.

A short extract from the Romsey Railway Advertiser dated November 9th, 1857 describes an event.

On arrival of the proprietor of this Manor (Roke) Mr T.W. Henderson, Esq. with his wife at our station on October 28th, our Abbey Church bells gave out a merry peal and continued until home had been reached by the bridal party.

The Henderson coat of arms was placed in the portico and as the Henderson's were childless, Thomas intended to leave the estate to his nephew Col. Clealand, whom he required to change his name to Henderson. The nephew changed his name but somehow fell out of favour with his uncle as shortly before his death, Thomas Henderson altered his will leaving the greater part of Roke Manor to his wife. Thomas was buried in Romsey cemetery in March 1865, aged 60.¹⁷ In a Post Office Directory for Hampshire dated 1867, we find that the house is still occupied by Mrs. Henderson.¹⁸

The house was leased to several people after this date until it was bought by a Mr Taylor for his mother Mrs Knight on whose death it was put up for auction as this sale notice will show from the Romsey Advertiser in 1895:-

Sale of Roke Manor

A well appointed Mansion, 15 bed and dressing rooms. Bathroom. Spacious Entrance Hall. Six Reception Rooms. Domestic Offices. Site of Great Natural Beauty unrivalled. Stabling for eleven horses.

To be Sold, 14th July, 1895.

On the day of the sale the Manor was offered for first bid at £8000 and soon rose to £9000, the hammer falling at £11,000.¹⁹

The estate in 1895 amounted to about 270 acres and was bought by Mr John Derby Allcroft, the youngest son of John Derby Allcroft, D.L., J.P., former M.P. for Worcester. Mr Allcroft had served in the Shropshire Militia and Roke Manor was his retirement home. He was in residence in 1905 when

¹⁴ Hampshire Memorials vol. III, by Mrs. Florence Horatia Suckling (M.S. and cuttings) Romsey Archives (H.R.O.)

Victoria County History of Hampshire - pt. 40, ed. William Page, 1920.

¹⁵ Hampshire Memorials vol. III, by Mrs. Florence Horatia Suckling (M.S. and cuttings) Romsey Archives (H.R.O.)

Victoria County History of Hampshire - pt. 40, ed. William Page, 1920

¹⁶ Hampshire Memorials vol. III, by Mrs. Florence Horatia Suckling (M.S. and cuttings) Romsey Archives (H.R.O.)

Victoria County History of Hampshire - pt. 40, ed. William Page, 1920

¹⁷ Romsey Railway Advertiser, November 9th, 1857

¹⁸ Post Office Directory of Hampshire; pub. Kelly, 1867

¹⁹ Romsey Advertiser, July 14th, 1895

the estate amounted to around 200 acres and was described as being at "an elevation of 150 ft above sea level, commanding views extending to the Isle of Wight".²⁰

It is not known for certain when the house was sold but it would appear by about 1915 to have passed in to the ownership of one William Buckley Gladstone, Esq. and a little later to a Capt. Green-Wilkinson.²¹

In 1935 the estate was sold to the Birmingham based brewery firm of Ansell but around 1950 they fell victim to death duties, after father and son died in quick succession. The estate was sold to a Colonel Hunter-Fell in 1952 and the Plessey Company purchased the house and 22 acres of the estate, early in 1956.

When first opened the Roke Manor Laboratories occupied rooms in the house, with the stables used as a machine workshop, the workshop being necessary in order to handle the classified Electronic Warfare work. The nucleus of the workforce, moved down from the Company's headquarters at Vicarage Lane, Ilford, Essex.

At first there were no library or canteen facilities and in order that the engineers could keep up with current technology, they bought books and magazines purchased with contributions from their salaries. Canteen facilities were introduced after only a few weeks, but it was not until a few years later that formal library arrangements were made.

The Company's expansion of activities in 1958 necessitated more extensive accommodation and in 1959 a substantial single storey office block of offices and laboratories was opened by Dr (later Sir) Robert Cockburn, who was Chief Scientist at the Ministry of Aviation. This building was linked to the house via a covered way, adjoining the old kitchen garden wall. In 1960 a properly furnished library was established and staffed by a full time librarian.

Further expansion took place after the Ptarmigan project was awarded in 1973 and a new two-storey building was begun in order to house the ever increasing management and technical teams. This building (known today as Building 25) was opened in 1975. The Ptarmigan project together with the management team, was eventually transferred to Christchurch in 1981.

Roke Manor was earmarked as the Company's "Software Centre of Excellence" and in 1983 a substantial number of staff were transferred from South Leigh Park House to form new groups. This resulted in the building of yet another two-storey laboratory and office structure, adjacent and connected to Building 25, which was opened by HRH the Duke of Kent in October 1985.²²

Glossary

Appurtenance - belonging to or associated with.

Inquisitions Post Mortem - an inquiry into the possessions, services and succession of a deceased person who held land of the crown.

Messuage - a house, its outbuildings and yard and in some circumstances, the garden as well.

Acknowledgements

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²⁰ Hampshire at the Opening of the Twentieth Century, by W.H. Jacob; pub. W.T. Pike & Co. Ltd., Brighton, 1905

²¹ A Recent History of Hants., Wilts., Dorset, by P. Campion; no date but c. 1915

²² Roke Manor (publication no. 9915), A general description of the work of the Plessey Company at the site; Plessey Electronic Systems Research Ltd., 1985