

Introduction

I have named this booklet “A history” rather than “The history” as it is mainly an account of the occupation by the Wates family, from 1928 to 1978, of the house called Rowhill Grange, in Wilmington, Kent. I have however been able to include such information about the earlier period as has been possible to glean from the old deeds retained by the family. I have only carried out a limited amount of additional research.

The structure is not entirely chronological so, to save the reader who only wants an overview from reading through the whole booklet, I set out here a brief history.

I like to think that the name Rowhill comes from the row of hills which stand out when viewed from various vantage points in the neighbourhood. In particular the wooded hills can be seen from the Queen Elizabeth Bridge when crossing the Thames from Essex. However, apparently it is derived from the Old English rüh hyll, meaning rough hill. It appears in various old documents as Ruehille, Rowehulle, and Roughull. Rowhill Wood seems to have been a distinct wood, maybe for several centuries, forming part of various large estates in the area.

It was not until the end of the 1870s that any development took place. An entrepreneur then bought it, split it up into substantial lots, constructed the road now known as Rowhill Road and sold off the lots. One of the lots was purchased in 1885 by John and Alice Alexander, who, at the same time, bought farming land fronting what is now Top Dartford Road. They then built the house on the site of, and incorporating part of, an old woodman’s cottage, cleared part of the wood to lay out the gardens and construct the main entrance drive to Rowhill Road and erected a lodge at the entrance. They would also have constructed what was then a back entrance driveway to Top Dartford Road and presumably also the pair of semi-detached cottages on that driveway.

At some stage they must have added the western extension, but otherwise little in the house or garden changed for the next 100 years. Mr Alexander died in 1915 and sometime after that Mrs Alexander retired to the south of France and

the property was let. In 1926 the house, including the drive to Top Dartford Road, was bought by Mr and Mrs George Collins, who had rented it from 1924. He was a silversmith in the City of London and later a Sheriff of the City. They only owned it for a short period, sold off the lodge and plots along Rowhill Road where the bungalows now are, and in 1928 sold the main house and gardens to Mr G Leslie Wates

Mr Wates was a successful solicitor with practices in Woolwich and the City of London. He and his wife and four children had been living in Eltham. They created a wonderful family home at the house which was enjoyed not only by the children and later their grandchildren but by many other friends and relatives.

Largely to guard against possible development of adjacent land, Mr Wates bought it up when opportunities arose and the price was reasonable. By the 1940s the estate, of about 45 acres, comprised a large part of Rowhill Woods, including the orchards of the Little Mount with the house Rowhill Mount, the Great Mount with the cottage there and Woodlands (later Pax Wood). He also acquired the field between the house and Top Dartford Road, being part of what the Alexanders had originally owned. To make full use of the land, as a hobby and without ever making a profit, it was farmed – pigs, chickens, fruit, vegetables and corn.

Mr Wates died in 1958 and his obituary, published in 'The Times', is reproduced in Appendix I. Mrs Wates continued to live there until 1976 and the estate was broken up and sold, shortly after her death in 1978. The house and gardens were bought by Mr and Mrs Michael Feasey who later converted it into the hotel and restaurant.

Mrs Lucy W. Wates, my grandmother, wrote a biography of her husband. As Rowhill Grange and the life and activities there formed a very important part of his life, the biography naturally includes much about it and its history. There was therefore little point in my rewriting it and extracts from her book form the central part of this history. Copies of that book are still available for sale. I have supplemented her account with box insertions and footnotes, and have added chapters with information obtained from the deeds, the farm accounts and correspondence.

The hotel, as it is now, will be known to many guests, so I have attempted to describe the house and gardens as they were in former times, to preserve these memories.

In order to give some idea of monetary values I have included in square brackets the equivalent amount in 2010. This is after allowing for inflation although this does not necessarily give a true comparison.

I have referred to my grandparents by either their first or surnames as appropriate in the context. I have generally used first names only for other members of the family, who are also so referred to in the extracts from my grandmother's book, and who can be identified from the family tree in appendix III

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