

Title: Stansted Estate – A Historical Jigsaw

Author: Ted Herrington

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Summary: This article attempts to place chronological order to the piecemeal development of buildings, woodlands and lands that have developed at Stansted over hundreds of years.

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Stansted House and Estate

Stansted House and Estate are situated in the far west of Sussex adjoining the Hampshire border. The first house began as a hunting lodge in the 11th century. A successor was built on the present site in 1686 for Richard Lumley. This house burnt down in 1900, and was rebuilt on the exact footprint of the previous building in 1903. It was purchased by Vere Ponsonby, 9th earl of Bessborough, in 1924. The current house is surrounded by earlier grounds, including walled gardens and a chapel constructed from the remains of the medieval house.

*We go back on Stansted many, many years. My grandmother
was the housekeeper at Stansted in 1890-something ...
until she married and when I first remember it
was little more than a feudal estate.
Robin Hall*

Stansted House, park and grounds are open to the public. The complex contains a variety of attractions to suit most tastes, including a garden centre, miniature railway, maze, sawmill and, of course, a tea room. My particular interest is derived from walking over the estate's public and permissive footpath network over the last forty-odd years, coupled with my general interests in history and the countryside.

Through the *Secrets of the High Woods* project I have come to realise that the estate is a patchwork of buildings, woodlands and agricultural lands that has developed piecemeal over hundreds of years. What you see today at Stansted is like a giant jigsaw puzzle, with some pieces much older than others, and some of the really old pieces covered up entirely by newer ones! It's quite a challenging job to place these jigsaw pieces in chronological order. But I have always liked puzzles!

The earl of Bessborough's book *Enchanted Forest* set out the basic history and evolution of the area from the Norman Conquest onwards. Starting from the vast estate of the Fitzalan earls of Arundel, the estate shrank to its present size following the sale of the whole estate in 1911 (WSRO SP 1251) and the disposal of the peripheral areas by a further auction in 1913 (WSRO SP 2694).

Some unsold lots, especially building plots around Westbourne, were disposed of after the auction.



Stansted House and Park stands in 1700 acres of parkland and forest near Rowlands Castle. It is open to the public. (1)

Now that intriguing title *Enchanted Forest* refers to the transfer of wild beasts from Goodwood and East Dean to Stansted in 1581. I found this corroborated in the ‘Survey and

Evaluation of 1785’ of Stansted for Richard Barwell, which refers to the menagerie in the schedule and accompanying map.

It shows a crescent of buildings to the north of the current Lumley Seat with an approximate diameter of fifty metres (145 feet). (Lumley Seat was a former Ionic temple built in 1766–70 by Lord Halifax. It was damaged by fire in WWII and later converted to a private house).



A plan of Stansted Park dated 1777. Note the extensive tree cover in the Park, and the location of the main house, middle-right. (2)

This crescent of buildings is also referred to in the sales particulars for the disposal of the estate on 21 May 1805 (WSRO SP 1256). No later mention has been found in the archives to date and no obvious trace shows up

on the LiDAR. It may well lie, rather sadly, under a later hard tennis court.

Menageries were a popular feature on the estates of the wealthy over a long period of time as something to show off to other landowners and visitors. For the animals involved the situation was not always good, as ignorance of diet and suitable living conditions often led to fairly short periods in captivity.

The demise of this particular example could well have been due to changing fashion. Although drawings and etchings of other notable structures, such as Lumley Seat and Racton Tower (a tower-like folly built in 1772), exist, research to date has not produced a picture of this crescentic complex.

Nearby Rosamond's Hill, crowned by a second possible temple, is shown on an evaluation map of the estate of 1784 and also on the 1805 sale particulars, drawn up for a Mr Weller, who was due to sell the estate at Garraways Coffee House (London) in May 1805. Here it is mentioned as 'Rosamond's Cottage – a fl tower called the Gazebo'.

No later references have been discovered, but the location is still referred to as Rosamund's Hill on current maps. Its location over subsequent years has varied between woods and pasture. Another fascinating question raised by this particular enquiry is the identity of Rosamond! Trawling through lists of the estate owners and their families has not yielded a wife, daughter or even a mistress with this name. The elusive Rosamond lies in waiting for future researchers.

Three tithe maps include the estate. The Racton map of 1839 shows an area of brickworks and potteries to the north of the existing brick-ponds and south-west of the current Pond Cottage. Shown on the same map are also hop gardens that are now an area of open farmland.

This is one of numerous sites currently adjacent to woodland where land use has varied over the years. Inspections of a series of maps over the last 400 years show that, while the core areas of forest have remained constant, adjacent areas have had a variety of uses. These changes probably reflect differing economic needs in the main, but in some cases, such as gardens, they possibly relate to changing fashions.

Charles Dixon purchased the Stansted Estate in 1826 and lived there until he died in 1855 at the age of 84. He became well known as a benefactor in the area, having made his fortune in the port wine trade.

Many of the cottages on the estate date from his ownership, built to provide better housing for workers and also to create employment in the area.

As a true Victorian philanthropist he planted orchards in the estate grounds to provide jobs for local people. Traces of these are still evident. In nearby Rowlands Castle he also constructed alms houses for 'six decayed merchants retired from trades'. These continued in use right up until the 1930s. They were demolished in 1971 and the land redeveloped for houses.

One of his jobs was to pick up the morning mail from the post office, collect the paper from the newsagent and cycle up to Stansted, which was two miles through the woods, and give the mail and the papers to the butler, pick up any mail to come back for posting and cycle back again.

When Dad was in hospital just before he died, I got that job ... I was fourteen at that time ...

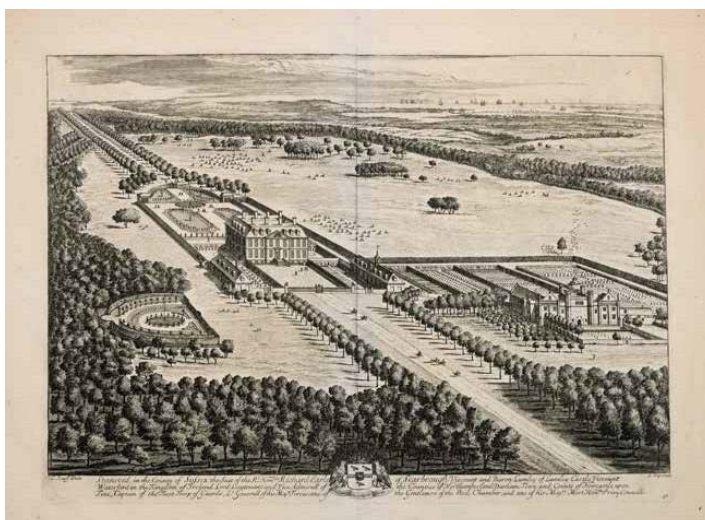
I thought 'I know, I'll go early and then I can get back early'.

So ... I went down and picked up the papers and the mail, cycled up to Stansted, went down to the butler and gave him the mail and he said 'Oh you're early', and I said 'Yes, well I'm in a hurry', and he said 'Well I don't think Her Ladyship has finished writing her letters yet', so I said 'Well I'm in a hurry', and he said 'Oh dear, would you like me to ask Her Ladyship to hurry up?', and I said 'Yes please'.

Connie Hayman

To the south of Aldsworth Pond on the Westbourne tithe map of 1840 is marked an area of osier beds – small coppiced willows which supplied long shoots for basketry; it is currently still woodland.

I tended to think of basket-making being very much a Somerset trade, but in times of slower transport local basket-works were probably more common. Even within my lifetime baskets were woven in nearby Waterlooville, by a company under the name of Osmond and Osmond.



This view of 1727 shows Stansted House approached from the west but through a formal, walled forecourt. (3)

The LiDAR survey and the Secrets of the High Woods project have provided me with the stimulus to look into the area in much greater detail and greatly increased my knowledge. I have enjoyed finding out about some of these historical jigsaw pieces.

These small bits of disconnected information gradually contribute to a bigger historical picture. I continue to walk the estate's footpaths, now furnished with a greater understanding. I am really looking forward to more archival research into the Stansted Estate and other areas of West Sussex. I have the Secrets of the High Woods to thank for that.

Reference:

1. SDNPA/A.Purkiss
2. Map of Stansted Park in Stoughton, 1777; WSRO, Add Ms 2860
3. Kip engraving of Stansted; WSRO, PD 1203/1 and 2