

## Plumpton House, Whepstead.

Plumpton House,(or Plumton Hall as it is also recorded) and the former Plumpton Estate lie in the heavily wooded area to the south-west of the village. This account is not a full history, but rather a collection of extracts from some of the more easily available records. The story before 1884 draws heavily on the recorded memories of Sara Bevan who lived at Plumpton from 1856-91, and which can be found in Canon Bird's unpublished folder of information about the church and the village. Whilst there is no reason to doubt Sara Bevan's memories, especially those within her own direct experience, her story of the Hammond family, her predecessors at Plumpton, is probably second hand. Much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century information is taken from Robin Drayton's memories recorded in 2010 for Whepstead History Society. Robin's uncle Harold Drayton owned Plumpton and lived there for over 20 years after the death of John Austen in 1942.

### The Early Years.

For about 500 years from 1040 much of Whepstead including Plumpton belonged to the Abbey at Bury St Edmunds. Plumpton was a dairy and orchard farm in Abbot Samson's time (12<sup>th</sup> c). For about 250 years after the dissolution of the monasteries around 1540, Whepstead including Plumpton was part of the estates of various eminent landowners who were not particularly associated with the village. Some records of this period refer to Plumpton as "formerly Chandlers Farmhouse". Robin Drayton adds some interesting detail about these early years. "The middle part of Plumpton Hall is quite an old timber framed house, and my understanding is that it was a sort of retreat for the monks of the Abbey. The stream that runs in front of Plumpton Hall is the river Lark whose source is in Plumpton Wood by the hall. The stream is widened in front of the hall as a stew pond for fish for the monks... Outside Stone Cross is a large stone with some indentation in the top, though I haven't been able to find any actual cross markings. It may have been a marker to the entrance to Plumpton for the monks who walked from Bury. The indentations could have contained holy water."

### The 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

In 1795 Sir Francis Thomas Hammond bought Plumpton House and, soon afterwards, the surrounding lands. He was the first Equerry and Clerk Marshall of the Royal Stables of the Prince Regent. In 1793 he had married Louisa, the beautiful and witty daughter of Admiral Sir Richard King. He spent much of his time in the Royal Household where he was influenced by the rage for all things French which prevailed during the Napoleonic era. Up to this time Plumpton had been an ordinary timbered, oak floored farmhouse. Sir Thomas (as he was generally known) employed a French architect to redesign it in the style of a chateau. The house was altered and renovated between 1800 and 1807. According to Sara Bevan, writing in 1884, "six of the rooms in three storeys of the old house were cleverly added to, so as to give the outward appearance of unity of design". An artistic drawing of this redesigned Plumpton is to be found in Gage's History of Suffolk p.394. This was also the decade when about 50 new houses were built in the village and when Revd. Image undertook major restoration of the village church. Whether Sir Thomas and his wife played any part in village life is not recorded.

Sadly what had begun with so much promise was to be marred by a family tragedy in 1824. After 15 years of marriage their only child, Georgina, was born, sponsored at her baptism by the Prince Regent. She was doted on by her parents, and her father wrote that she was "endued with every grace of body, every virtue of heart and every talent of mind". In 1824 against Sir Thomas' wishes, his wife Louisa took this cherished daughter by sea to visit relatives in Scotland where she became ill and died age 16yrs, and was buried at Duppton Castle. Sir Thomas refused ever to see his wife again. He died age 87 in 1850 and his wife in 1854. Neither is buried in Whepstead, but an elaborate plaque in Sir Thomas' memory can be found in the chancel. After his daughter's death, Sir Thomas spent some months each year at Plumpton, where he trimmed a living oak into a Corinthian pillar in her memory, and also cherished a young oak tree she had planted. He would not allow a

twig to be cut from the many trees he planted, and Sara Bevan relates that "before his death the house was quite overgrown and hidden, and had become so damp that during his visits he retired to an upstairs room, spending much of his time reading in a pulpit to protect him from the damp and draughts".

After Sir Thomas died, the house was not inhabited for several years, except partially by a tenant farmer. In 1856 it was purchased in an almost ruinous condition by William Robert Bevan, a member of a local banking family, who had been living at Sudbury since his marriage in 1839 to a distant relative, Sara Rawlinson, also from a banking family who came from Fakenham, Norfolk. Mr Bevan renewed the roof and walls and made substantial repairs throughout, but without altering it except to dispense with some external ornamentation. The 1861 census lists the family as follows:- Wm. R. Bevan, 49, farmer of 115 acres J.P., M.A. Cambridge, banker, born Norfolk.

His wife Sara, 45, born Middlesex.

Children:- Abram 14, Gascoigne 11, Eustace 9, Harriet 13, Emeline 10, Cecilia 7, Caroline 6, Beatrice 4. Cecilia and Caroline were born at Sudbury, Beatrice at Whepstead. Also in the household were a tutor, a German governess, a nurse, a cook, 2 housemaids, a kitchen maid and a nursemaid.

Sara Bevan, who had been heavily involved in philanthropic, educational and religious work whilst at Sudbury, found Whepstead a very neglected parish. The plaque erected in the nave of Whepstead church in 1891 after the Bevans' death, and their photograph still in the vestry over 100 years later, bear witness to their impact on village life. Sara's funeral report records how "she was the love of the villagers where she lived and on the closest terms of intimacy until the day of her death." Her cortege was followed by the Plumpton Estate workers and the coffin carried up Church Hill, where the roadsides were covered with branches of trees. William Bevan was a well known magistrate, serving on most West Suffolk Benches. He was chairman of the Thingoe bench for many years. A large number of people, including several clergy, came from far and wide to both funerals. It is interesting that at a time when the gentry regularly occupied the front pews with their servants behind them, William Bevan and his family chose to sit at the back of the church. The Bury Past & Present website includes several photos of Plumpton House, probably taken in the 1870's, including one of the Bevan family playing croquet on the front lawn.

#### The 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

After the Bevans' death in 1890, for a few years the Plumpton Estate belonged to Henry Thornhill, although it appears he did not live at Plumpton. The 1901 census lists a retired army officer and his family, presumably tenants. In 1906 Henry Thornhill added to his estate the Waste Farm in Rede Rd which he bought from the Sparke Charity. (Since the early 1700's the income from Waste Farm had been used to fund the school in Old School Road, now named Cromwell's Cottage.)

In 1908 the Plumpton Estate was bought by John Soame Austen, who was to play an important part in the life of the church and the wider village community until his death in 1942. He had married in 1899 and he and his wife are first listed at Plumpton in the 1911 census, along with a butler, chauffeur, cook, housemaid and parlourmaid. Mr Austen came from a Norfolk family who moved to Sussex when he was a boy. He was the eldest son of an ironmonger, and after being a student at Cambridge became a solicitor, a company director and a leading figure in the City of London. He was a keen sportsman, a great country lover and an authority on birds. Like William Bevan, he was a senior magistrate on the Thingoe bench. His obituary in 1942 described him as totally unostentatious, and a devout, generous and practical churchman. In the early years of World War One, he and the Rector organised the enlistment of men in Whepstead, among them a number of his own employees from the Plumpton estate, some of whom were to lose their lives. After the war when most villages were erecting war memorials, Mr Austen was instrumental in 1919 in providing the premises for a Club House (The Black Horse in Rede Road, now Leaf House) for the young people of Whepstead as a memorial to the 13 who died. He saw it as providing "a centre for village life which is what Whepstead sadly lacks". The club rules stated that limited beer was permitted but no gambling and that women were to be admitted on one or two evenings a week. Village dances were held there. This club survived for about 40 years, and was also the

headquarters of the village cricket club. It was largely through John Austen's support and encouragement that Whepstead cricket was so successful between the wars. The general wellbeing of the villagers was always his concern and the cricket team played their matches on the ground which he provided and maintained in front of Plumpton House.

From 1925-35 Mr & Mrs Austen joined with Canon Bird in a major restoration of St Petronilla's Church, doing some of the work themselves. The carving on the vestry door is Mr Austen's work, and he arranged woodcarving classes so that the villagers could share his skills. The carved panels on the pulpit, said to come from Plumpton House, and two stained glass windows were presented by Mr. & Mrs Austen. At the rededication of the church Canon Bird paid tribute to the "generosity of one anonymous family".

In the "Whepstead Millennium Tapestry and Village History" published in 2000, a number of residents recorded their memories of Plumpton in the 1930's. Stanley Durrant recalls that the villagers were given a meal at Plumpton by Mr Austen to mark the 1935 Silver Jubilee, and Stanley Carter tells of "big fetes and flower shows every summer". Mollie Hardy who was in service as a kitchen maid for three or four years until WW2 writes-"Mr Austen was a barrister. The family had six or seven staff. I got paid £4 a month and we had two half days off a week. My uniform was a blue dress and a white cap and apron. The family lived in their London house during the week, and in the holidays they brought down their cook, chauffeur, butler and two housemaids from there. At Plumpton Hall there were six gardens and a cricket field for the local team."

The Austens had no children, and on their death Plumpton passed to Mr Harold Drayton. Mr & Mrs Drayton continued to take an interest in the village and the church and in 1958 presented the church with a new organ in memory of John Austen. Robin Drayton takes up the story. "When Jack Austen acquired Plumpton he built extensively on two wings, one now called Oak House, the other the north wing. He also built the lodges on either end of the drive, Ark Cottages and quite a few houses within Plumpton Hall itself, all of which are now separately owned. He was involved in the City with a company called British Electron Traction which owned several bus and transport companies throughout the world. My uncle (Harold Drayton) born about 1900 worked for him, initially as an office boy. He told me that after WW1 which wiped out a whole generation you could get on quickly if you were bright and showed initiative. He built up a business empire based on Jack Austen's company, and as Jack didn't have any children he took him under his wing. As a boy my uncle came to Plumpton a lot. Jack Austen had a very large wood panelled library of English classics which my uncle read and educated himself. When Jack Austen died he left Plumpton including the farmland and woods around it to my uncle. My uncle diversified the company away from its transport and railway roots and invested in commercial television through Associated Rediffusion, in British Lion Films and in the theatre. He helped Bernard Miles set up the Mermaid Theatre (which opened in 1959) and supported Peter Scott when he started Slimbridge (Wetland Centre). Both came to Plumpton a lot. Angus Ogilvie worked for my uncle and also came regularly, which is how Princess Alexandra came to open the new community centre (in 1969). They were great friends of my uncle. After my uncle and aunt died the estate was broken up. My brother and I decided to keep some of the land and farmed in partnership for about 15 years." Robin also draws attention to the 200 acres of ancient woodland in Whepstead, mainly around Plumpton, which according to Dr Oliver Rackham of Cambridge University date back to the 12<sup>th</sup> c and contain a lot of plants rarely seen elsewhere. Emily Rose recalls the regular summer garden fetes and flower shows in the 1950's, and that Harold Drayton invited film star Anna Neagle to open the annual fete on several occasions. In the 1960's there was also an Old Folks Club run by Mrs Drayton.

Harold Drayton died in 1966 and his wife in 1971. The Plumpton Estate was then broken up, and much of it bought by the Jump family. Later in the 1990's the house itself, whilst keeping its external integrity was divided into three separately owned dwellings, namely the original house, what were the servants' quarters to the north, and the new wing to the south. Some of the stables, cottages and lodges were similarly renovated and sold off.

For over a hundred years Plumpton and its owners ,as well as being the largest employer, made a substantial contribution to the social life of the village and its church. Since the 1960's , the Community Centre has become a more centrally based focus for the social life of this scattered village.

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