

Danesfield - from pre-history to the RAF



The small plateau at Danesfield has had a strategic importance to man from the very earliest times up to the Second World War.

Archaeology has shown that Neolithic men were active here some 5000 years ago. It's not surprising that they chose this place to live because to the south-east there is a 100 foot chalk cliff with a majestic view over the Thames valley sweeping through the Chiltern hills. From there they could get an early warning of potential enemies travelling up or down the Thames or coming across it, so the site had great strategic importance.



The bank of the Iron Age hill fort

This was also recognised by Iron-Age men, who built a hill fort on this spot about 2,500 years ago. They used the cliff as one side. On the north and east they built a double bank or vallum with a ditch beyond. They also built one on the west, which is no longer discernable, as it has been built over in modern times. The fort now has protection as a scheduled Ancient Monument.

In ancient and medieval times England was the subject of several invasions. Inevitably, they used rivers such the Thames as their easiest means of advance. The Romans came in the first century AD. No doubt they recognized the strategic importance of this site as they built a villa and farm at Hambleton, only a few miles distant.

They were followed by the Anglo-Saxons in the 5th and 6th centuries. We know they were here because they founded the village adjacent to this site and gave it the name, Medmenham (pronounced 'Mednum'). Danesfield is part of the parish and manor of Medmenham.

Then in the 8th century marauding Vikings or Danes came paddling up the Thames to pillage and loot. Local villagers have long retained the belief that the Danes camped in this hillfort and it was always known to them as 'Danes Ditches'. When the Normans invaded in 1066, they soon recorded what they had conquered in Domesday Book. Medmenham is listed as having 18 householders plus four slaves (about 100 people including women and children), woodland for 50 pigs and fishing for 1000 eels. As Medmenham was taxable for 10 hides, about twice the average for a manor of this size, it was evidently still regarded as a valuable place.

On the other side of the river is the village of Hurley, where Richard Lovelace built a stately home in the 16th century. He had made his fortune as a pirate, plundering Spanish ships in the West Indies. In the early 17th century, Medmenham was owned by Sir Miles Hobart, who was also member of Parliament for this area. When he died in 1634 nobody could find a will, so Sir Richard Lovelace, as he had then become, recalled his buccaneering past, took possession and looted the property, which included a farm on this hill-fort. It was some years before the rightful co-heirs could reclaim their inheritances.

The houses

By 1665 house and farm on this site had the name Medlicotts, and the owner was a Member of Parliament. After that it was owned by a succession of MPs. It was rebuilt in a more elaborate style about 1750 and given the name Danesfield for

the first time, mainly because of the name the locals had for it, 'Danes Ditches'. The Scott family rebuilt the house again about 1790 in Georgian style. Their descendant in the 19th century was a man named Charles Robert Scott-Murray, who became MP for Buckinghamshire and later a devout Catholic. He added a chapel to the house at Danesfield where Cardinal Wiseman was once received. The house and chapel then occupied a position about 70 yards behind the present one.

Scott Murray also built a school in the village, staffed by nuns from the Sisterhood of St Paul. Both new buildings were designed by Augustus Welby Pugin, who also designed St Peter's Roman Catholic church in Marlow and played a prominent part in the design of the Houses of Parliament. After Scott Murray's death in 1882, the chapel and school were demolished, but one of the nuns still walks. She never speaks, but can often be seen, wearing a grey pall and hood, carrying a lamp to make her way through the trees in the dark between the former site of the chapel and the school, where she mysteriously disappears. She is known locally as the Grey Lady.

The park and house were later bought by Robert Hudson, whose father made his millions from soap. He rebuilt the house again about 1901 in a mixture of Tudor and Italian Renaissance style, as you see it now. He used the grounds to breed varieties of cattle and shire horses.

The house and grounds passed through several other hands until the Second World War, when the Colet Court school was evacuated here from London.

Photo Intelligence and Interpretation

Fortunately it was requisitioned in 1941 for use as a Photo Intelligence and Interpretation Unit. This was staffed mainly by the Royal Air Force, but also by academics, such as experts in geology and geography.

From 1944 it was also staffed increasingly by American and Canadian military personnel. Winston Churchill visited it several times, partly for briefings, but also because his daughter, Sarah, worked here for a time.

It is said that aerial photographs were taken of every part of occupied Europe every fortnight. Those were studied and compared with previous photos to spot any changes that might indicate a likely target for bombing. They discovered many important sites, but the most notable was their discovery of the V2 rocket base at Peenemünde in 1943. It was not totally destroyed because it was mainly built underground, but production was put back several months, which was most important in the closing months of the war. Production of V2 rockets was set back, saving the lives of many thousands of people.

Some 17,000 people worked here and in the surrounding area and the whole plateau was covered in temporary buildings, parade grounds and sports facilities etc. At the same time,

Danesfield was said to have the most luxurious officers' mess in all the British services. The RAF left in 1977, after which the house became the headquarters of Carnation Milk, while the grounds were used as a Military Police Training School until 1994. Since then, the house and gardens have been returned to their former glory as the romantic and picturesque Danesfield Hotel and Spa.

Text by Tony Reeve