

The History of Court Garden and Higginson Park



The people of Marlow bought both Higginson Park and Court Garden house in 1926 as a result of public subscription. No other event has so enhanced the town or benefited its people, so the 80th anniversary of the occasion seems worth celebrating, particularly as several people who attended the opening in 1926 were still active and live in Marlow.

THE HISTORY

Court Garden was originally part of the Manor of Marlow, and was just pleasure gardens. There was no house there. After the Norman Conquest in 1066, the Manor was given by William the Conqueror to his wife Matilda. She rented it out, with the payment being a basket of eels every 6 months.

By the mid C16, the estate had been acquired by the Paget family. Lord Paget was a powerful statesman, and an advisor to the Tudors: Henry VIII, Edward VI, Mary I and Elizabeth I. The estate then included Court Garden and land up to, and beyond, the present Henley Rd, including Gyldernscroft (then called The Croft).

In 1758 the estate was sold by the Earl of Uxbridge (a Paget) to Dr William Battie, a wealthy and eminent London physician specialising in mental disorders, who built the present house. He designed it himself, but famously forgot to include a staircase between the floors – hence the separate stair tower added on one side! It is said that the tern 'batty', meaning someone not in their right mind, is derived from him. After he died in 1776, his daughter sold the property to Richard davenport – who tried to divert the route of Pound Lane further away from the front of the house. (Nimbyism is not new!)

By 1925, Marlow residents had long used the grounds of Court Garden as an unofficial park with the consent of its owner. So they were most concerned when the last private owner, Mr Griffin, died and the entire Court Garden estate came up for sale. It seemed likely that the land would be bought by developers and broken up into plots for houses.

Mr L. J. Smith (or LJS, as he was generally known) devised a counter plot early in 1926. He persuaded a group of local gentry and prominent businessmen to form a committee to launch an appeal to buy the estate as a permanent park for the

town. He also had the brilliant idea of linking the appeal with the 100th birthday of the town's most distinguished and loved resident, General Sir George Higginson, who lived at Gyldernscroft - the house on the Henley Rd which had been in his family since Elizabethan times. The estate would be handed over to the General, who would then donate it to the town.

The price being asked for the whole estate was initially £10,000, a huge sum of money in those days when it was possible to bring up a large family on less than £2 a week. Nevertheless, undaunted, LJS and the committee set to work. By this time, it was early May, and General Sir George's birthday was in mid-July, so they had only a little over two months to raise the necessary funds. It was thought impracticable to buy the whole estate, but just to obtain the lots that included the house and its immediate grounds. This reduced the cost to £5,400, still a considerable sum (equivalent to about £1.2 million today).

The heirs of Mr Griffin agreed to delay the sale of this part of the property and generously donated £1,400. (It was later agreed that the cost would be £5,000 and the donation £1,000.)

THE APPEAL

An appeal was launched, called 'The Sir George Higginson's Birthday Centenary Fund' and letters were sent to local gentry, national figures and the press. The letters and notes that were received in response make remarkable reading. It is clear that General Sir George was greatly admired and

respected by those in all walks of life. There were about 600 donations, 400 of which were between one penny and 13s.6d (about 62p), presumably from Marlow's less wealthy citizens, but other donations came from all over the country, for as much as 300 guineas.

Some people replied that they were unable to give anything because of personal circumstances and one or two disapproved of the scheme altogether.

This appeal cut across other appeals that had been made to commemorate the General's 100th birthday. One by 'personal friends' raised £300 and officers of the Grenadier Guards raised £120. General Sir George, always generous to his beloved Marlow, decided to donate the proceeds of these other funds to the Centenary Fund, and so the purchase went ahead in May 1926 by the payment of a 10% deposit.

The committee had to accept personal responsibility for financing the deal and LJS, according to his wife, "became quite ill with anxiety". In fact by December 1926, £950 of the purchase price was still outstanding, so a further appeal was made to those who had already given. It was not until 1932 that the Centenary Fund was finally wound up.

THE PRESENTATION

The Committee decided that the presentation of Court Garden and its park to General Sir George should be a splendid occasion - and indeed it was. The whole town was 'en fete' with the streets lined with Marlovians. Contributors were invited to the park to witness the ceremony and others were

able to buy seats at 3s.5d. each.

The presentation party, led by Canon Graves, the chairman of the appeal committee, walked through the park to the house through a guard of honour of local Girl Guides. Members of many other organizations in the town also attended or were represented. The Brigade of Guards are said to have presented the splendid gates on the corner of Pound Lane and The Causeway.



The actual presentation of the deeds to the General was made by H.R.H. Princess Mary, the Princess Royal, accompanied by her husband, Viscount Lascelles. (General Sir George was godfather to their son.)

AND AFTERWARDS ...

Part of the original plan was that, once purchased, the house and grounds would become the responsibility of Marlow Urban District Council. But the Council proved remarkably reluctant, possibly fearing maintenance costs. Therefore the Higginson Park Society was formed in September 1928 to make the house and park "available for the use, recreation or enjoyment . . . of the public". A mortgage was taken out to pay for the cost of creating a bowling green and tennis courts in the former walled vegetable gardens.

In 1933, the house was leased to MUDC for use as council offices and in 1955 the Council at last took over as trustees. The Higginson Park Society could be wound up. Reorganization of local authorities in 1972 meant that Wycombe District Council replaced MUDC as trustees.

The Higginson Park Trust's objective today is "the provision and maintenance for the benefit of the inhabitants of the District of Wycombe with particular regard for the inhabitants of the town of Marlow of a public park, ornamental gardens and recreation ground with such facilities of physical exercise, training, lectures, classes and other forms of recreation and leisure-time occupation in the interests of social welfare with the object of improving the condition of life for the said inhabitants as the Trustees shall, from time to time think fit".

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