



Cobham Hall Heritage Trust is  
Charity No. 292332

# Friends News

J U N E 2 0 2 2

Join Us for a Guided Tour of the Grounds of Cobham Hall

## SUMMER STROLL

Thursday, 14th July at 6pm

£7 per ticket

Complimentary drinks included

Contact Cobham Hall direct



### Inside

The Mystery  
of Stangate  
Creek

Pages 2 & 3

1920s  
Gardener  
Loyal Johnson  
Page 4

Quick guide to our Programme of Events to be held at Cobham Hall by  
The Friends of Cobham Hall Heritage Trust during 2022:

(More details to be sent in due course)

Talks & Supper: Friday, 30 September, Friday, 21 October & Friday, 25 November

Festive Evening with Supper & Cameo Opera: Friday, 16 December

### NOT YET A MEMBER OF FRIENDS? Join Today

ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP Easter 2022 - Easter 2023

£10 per person: Cheques to be made payable to Cobham Hall Heritage Trust

By post to Mr Brian Jelley, Treasurer, The Friends of Cobham Hall Heritage Trust, Abergwaun, Stack Lane, Hartley, Kent DA3 8BL with the attached information:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Tel \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_ Email \_\_\_\_\_

Please send me a Gift Aid Declaration (if applicable and if you have not previously signed one). Yes or No

To Renew your  
Membership by  
post, or to join  
our organisation,  
please complete  
the Annual Mem-  
bership form

# The Mystery of Stangate Creek

by Malcolm Mason

*Stangate Creek, for those who have not heard of it, lies on the south side of the River Medway, to the west of Chetney Marshes and follows a southerly course from its mouth opposite the Isle of Grain. If you have an Ordnance Survey map handy, it can be found at grid reference TQ875705.*

For most of my professional life I had cause on a daily basis to consult some part of OS sheet 172 and later, following Ordnance Survey revision, OS sheet 178. Occasionally my gaze would fall upon a landscape feature on the east side of the creek which was marked by the Ordnance Survey as Chetney Hill. It took the form of a roughly circular parcel of land, of no great extent, cut off from the Chetney peninsula but for a causeway providing access, by a tidal inlet of Stangate Creek. It certainly did not look like a natural feature of this remote marshland or the site of an early fortification. What could this strange feature be?

The answer came when quite by chance a conservation architect colleague happened to ask me if I would be interested in a copy of an article he had come across which had been prepared some years ago from official government records. What had mystified me for so long turned out to be the abandoned site of a major national project of the late 18th century. The scheme involved considerable expenditure by the government and called upon the talents of some of the country's foremost architects and engineers, including one who at the time was also working for the Earl of Darnley at Cobham. Its intended purpose was to protect the country from plague brought from overseas and to increase the competitive edge of the country as a trading nation.

Until the second half of the 17th century the Dutch were the greatest commercial and maritime state in the world. They particularly enjoyed an advantage over the British in the cotton and silk trade with the Levant because of our strict quarantine laws which required British ships coming from plague ridden ports of the Levant to quarantine in the lazarettos at Malta, Venice, Messina, Leghorn, Genoa or Marseilles. That sometimes involved a delay of some months.

The British Government therefore resolved that a lazaretto should be established somewhere in the Thames Estuary where there could be a brief period of quarantine. There were medical doubts as to the efficacy of quarantine in cases of the plague, but it was nevertheless decided to proceed with the project.

However, progress was very slow. Although the idea was first put forward in 1743, it was not until 1759 that Chetney Hill was suggested as a possible site. It took another 12 years for plans to be prepared and another 8 years before an Act was passed enabling the Crown to acquire the site. Incredibly, the

purchase dragged on through the 1780s and 1790s, negotiations apparently be complicated by the attitude of the local landowner, a Mr Wildman.

In 1793 and 1795 the renowned architect John Soane (architect of the Bank of England, etc.) acting as architect to the Turkey Company produced the following series of alternative designs:-

- i. a rectangle fenced in by a canal
- ii. a hexagon surrounded by a circular boundary wall
- iii. a double quadrangle with continuous colonnades
- iv. a utility version - sheds on both sides of the creek

None were accepted and it took until 1800 before a decision was taken to start building. The design of the lazaretto was essentially based upon two criteria: isolation and ventilation. This was to be achieved by the provision of warehouses constructed entirely of timber above foundation level. The buildings were designed by the architect James Wyatt who about this time had been carrying out extensive alterations to Cobham Hall for the 3rd and subsequently the 4th Earl of Darnley. The canal, dock and boundary wall were by the celebrated civil engineer John Rennie who was also responsible during his career for the design and construction of several bridges across the Thames in London, some major canals and the construction of dockyards at Chatham and Sheerness.

With hindsight one wonders why the site was chosen at all. It was in a marshy, inhospitable area being surrounded by small creeks and pools of stagnant water. The construction techniques of the 20th and 21st centuries were not available for development of the site in those days and its location presented transport difficulties, to say nothing of the problems which arose from the lack of fresh water during construction. At the time one doctor advised that he considered it "the most unhealthy spot in England".

Unfortunately work went badly from the start. The site presented Rennie with considerable construction difficulties because it was so muddy. Many labourers died from violent fever and replacements could not be found. It may be difficult for us to understand, but in those days mosquitoes were a serious threat to health for those working in these marshes and the stagnant water.

To add to Rennie's problems with the site, a record high tide in October 1807 smashed the canal banks and flooded the unfinished dock. It also became apparent that a further 8 acres would be required to facilitate construction of a boundary wall. According to Rennie's notes, acrimonious negotiations with Mr Wildman, the landowner, led to a further delay of 3 years.

As if matters could not get worse, the principal contractor fell ill, a sub-contractor went bankrupt and Rennie met with a severe accident.

What of Mr Wyatt, the architect? Well, things were not going too well for him. He had awarded his brother Samuel the carpentry contract and another relation the contract for tinned copper. His methods of payment differed from normal practice, his methods of accounting were said to be disturbingly inaccurate, bills were mislaid and payments misdated. After 10 years work Wyatt's account alone stood at £111,697 5s 5d, so the total expenditure on the project must have been a very considerable sum in the early 1800s.

Construction, although still incomplete, stopped in 1815 because all parties had lost faith in the value of the project. Those buildings which had been completed were never used and were pulled down. Despite the expenditure of vast sums of money and the employment of leading professionals of the day, the whole scheme turned out to be an ill-conceived, drawn out expensive disaster. If at any time you have thought that politicians have acted irresponsibly in spending your taxes, it would seem that it has perhaps not been without precedent!

Amendments to the quarantine laws in 1825 and 1847 enabled quarantine requirements to be met by the use of 'Floating Lazarets' moored in Stangate Creek. These were of 'men of war' with houses built upon them like an ark. The quarantine

laws were finally abolished by the Public Health Acts of 1875 and 1896.

On a warm, sunny summer day, Stangate Creek can be a pleasant place to visit by boat at high tide. It can also be reached by a public footpath alongside the Swale from the Kingsferry Bridge to the site of the lazaretto, or a shorter route from Raspberry Hill near Bedlams Bottom.

Apart from the fascinating form of the aborted lazaretto project, its slightly raised elevation in the landscape, which I suspect may be the result of soil deposited during excavation of the canal and an isolated farm building, there is little to distinguish it now from the surrounding marshes.

It was visited by JMW Turner in c.1823-4 when he produced a watercolour showing in the distance hulks which were probably the Royal Navy vessels converted for quarantine purposes.

Stangate Creek was also the place where the brave Assistant Surgeon, Sidney Bernard lost his life on the ill-fated HMS Eclair and was buried nearby on Burntwick Island.

..... But that is another tale - which will be told in the next Friends newsletter .....

*The Creek as depicted  
by Turner in the 1820s*

**Stangate Creek on  
the River Medway  
by  
JMW Turner**

*This watercolour was  
part of his Rivers of  
England series*



# Underwhelming Review for Cobham Hall!!

## 1928 Visitor to Cobham Hall wasn't too impressed!

American landscape architect Loyal Robert Johnson embarked on a tour of British gardens (sometimes by bicycle) to see for himself the great gardens of Britain.

He chronicled his Kent visits to Groombridge, Penshurst, Igtham Mote, Ivy Hatch, Knole Park and Homestall Place among others. However, as you will see here, he didn't have too much to say about Cobham Hall!

(But it should be said that gardens everywhere were in a steady state of decline following WWI and the labour shortages which had arisen.)

The Leather Bottle gets a good review. And it sounds as though the local militia provided an amusing distraction!

This (rather faint) entry from Loyal's diary relates his visit to Cobham in summer 1928.

We had dinner at the little village of Cobham after we had seen Cobham Hall. We ate at the Leather Bottle a quaint little old place made famous by Dickens and his Pickwick Papers.

159  
We watched some of the Royal troops work out while we ate. It looked funny to see those at the back of a column go marching along pushing cycles. What ever they can use a cycle for while drilling I don't know, but evidently they're an all around handy piece of equipment.

We didn't see a lot at Cobham Hall for they do little in way of keeping up gardens except for mowing lawns and clipping hedges, and they allow no pictures to be taken at all. The oldest portion of the house is 1584 and has since been added to to make it in the form of an H-N. South of the house is a fine fountain and pool whose water level is about 3' above the walk about it. Also there's a fine wrought iron well head. Lord Darnley owns the place and Mr. Cuckney is the gardener.

### Easier to read transcript of the above ....

We had dinner at the little village of Cobham after we had seen Cobham Hall. We ate at the Leather Bottle a quaint little old place made famous by Dickens and his Pickwick Papers.

We watched some of the Royal troops work out while we ate. It looked funny to see those at the back of a column go marching along pushing cycles. What ever they can use a cycle for when drilling I don't know, but evidently they're an all round handy piece of equipment.

We didn't see a lot at Cobham Hall for they do little in way of keeping up gardens except for mowing lawns and clipping hedges, and they allow no pictures to be taken at all.

The oldest portion of the house is 1584 and has since been added to to make it in the form of an H. South of the House is a fine fountain and pool whose water level is about 3 feet above the walk about it. Also there's a fine wrought iron well head. Lord Darnley owns the place and Mr Cuckney is the gardener.