

THE COOMBE ESTATE

History

Coombe, said to derive from the Welsh Cwm, a wooded valley, seems to imply that Coombe covered at one time a much larger area than at present; but, of the many "Coombes" throughout the country, none is more interesting in historical association and geographical situation than Coombe, Kingston. It has all the attractions of a place in the country, with a nearness to London invaluable for busy professional and business people.

In William the Conqueror's Domesday Book the lands are listed as being held by "Humphrey of Chamberlain", but there is no record of how it came into his possession. In 1320 the daughters of William de Nevill bestowed the lands on their husbands, and the ridge became known as Coombe Nevill.

In search of a good water supply for Hampton Court, which was being built, Cardinal Wolsey looked to the springs of Coombe. His engineers succeeded with the difficult feat of piping the water through Kingston and across the Thames into the new palace. The water from the springs was collected in various catchpits, and fed through culverts with a double set of lead pipes laid about 8 ft below the surface and taken some three and a half miles to Hampton Court, with a fall from a highest point of about 160 feet. Until as late as 1896 the Coombe springs were the main water supply to the Palace.

Meanwhile Coombe and its manor passed from hand to hand. Edward VI, in his short reign of six years from 1547-1553, gave it to his uncle, the Duke of Somerset; and when the Duke fell from favour the land reverted to the Crown until presented to Sir William Cecil by Queen Elizabeth I in 1562. Sir William passed it on to his friend Sir Thomas Vincent, and in 1602 Coombe was honoured by a visit from the Queen herself. Possession and enjoyment of the lands by the aristocracy continued and in 1814 the Earl of Liverpool entertained in the new manor the Prince Regent, the Emperor of Russia and the King of Prussia.

In 1828, Coombe was a property of the Duke of Cambridge. The times were changing and during the Victorian age, newly rich industrialists arrived, looking for pleasant residential areas in which to build their impressive new homes. Amongst them was the Galsworthy family; and it was at Coombe that the famous novelist John Galsworthy passed the earliest years of his life. Many years later, in his famous novel, "The Forsyte Saga", he placed the Forsyte House of the book on the actual site of his father's house, Coombe Warren. But before this happened, the

novelist's father had built two more houses at Coombe - Coombe Ridge and Coombe Croft. Coombe Warren was not a particularly beautiful building, with its echoes of Gothic architecture applied to a structure that was all Victorian solidity and pride, but impressive in its own right as a symbol of a new age.

Coombe Warren became the property of the Marquis of Ripon when its name was changed to Coombe Court, it was enlarged and altered in the fashion of the Edwardian era. Both King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra were guests at this house.

In 1865, Hugh Hammersley built Warren House, a very important property still in use today.

The First World War brought inevitable changes and these would not leave Coombe unscathed. Many of our servicemen found brief periods of respite and recuperation at Coombe, and it is interesting to note that Field Marshal Earl Haig was at one time captain of the Coombe Wood Golf course. In the years that followed the end of the 1914/18 War, Coombe was still a favoured spot. Queen Mary often went picnicking there and the Duke of Windsor, then Prince of Wales, won his first golf competition on the Coombe Hill course. But times were changing again and the open spaces themselves were threatened.

Between the wars

For many years prior to 1930, the Coombe Estate, owners of the two golf courses and all the lands around them, had sold plots for building at fairly high prices on the understanding that the two golf courses would remain as they then were, that is 200 acres of open spaces. The two courses are Coombe Wood and Coombe Hill.

In 1931, there appeared a printed notice in various parts of Coombe, which indicated that both golf courses were to be sold for building purposes. Coombe Wood was to have about 100 houses and Coombe Hill a much larger number. A small committee was set up to solve this problem. Having success in securing the lands, the committee had to decide the best way to ensure, for all time, that the lands should remain as open spaces. It was decided to make every effort to deal with this by Act of Parliament. This they succeeded in doing and the 1933 Act was passed. This was an act to:

"authorise the acquisition and management of the Urban District Council of the Maldens and Coombe of certain lands now used as golf courses to make special provision with regard to the repair of certain private roads and the recovery of an improvement rate from the occupiers of buildings

in the neighbourhood to confer further powers on the Council in relation to the improvement health and local government of the district and for other purposes". (28th July 1933)

The private roads named in the Act were as follows: - George Road, Warren Road, Renfrew Road, Stoke Road, Warren Cutting, Brook Gardens, the road leading to Coombe Hill club house and certain others including any future connecting roads. The cost of maintaining these roads and footpaths is borne by what is called "**the Coombe rate**" which is levied on all premises on the Estate, generally according to their frontage.

Coombe today

In the last 40 years there have been many changes in local ownership and residents. Some of the grand houses are now used as schools and conference centres. Of the great houses built by the father of John Galsworthy, two remain. Both have become preparatory schools: Coombe Ridge is now Holy Cross School for girls and the other, Coombe Croft, is now Rokeby School for boys. Between these houses stood the great "Coombe Court", which the novelist described in the "Forsyte Saga", the grounds of which today are taken up by houses on a new road called The Drive. A third educational establishment is now located in George Road - Marymount International school, opposite which is "Four Acres" a good example of a half timbered house in traditional style, built by Commander Holbrook VC who won his distinction in the 1914/18 War. "Four Acres" is owned by Unilever and is used as a conference centre.

A house called "Telegraph Cottage" in Warren Road housed General Eisenhower during the last War for a period, but when it was found that Coombe was a "decoy" area and suffered heavy bomb damage, the famous war leader wisely moved elsewhere. Since then, this house has gone and been replaced by executive homes. Warren House in Warren Road, was owned by ICI as a conference centre from 1954 until the latter part of the 1990s, when it was sold to private buyers who continue employing it for management conferences.

In 1988 ICI sold 10 acres of the land of Warren house to Octagon, the property developers, who built 37 luxury apartments on that site. The residents have the advantage of very large gardens containing a complete Japanese watergarden considered to be the oldest Japanese garden in existence today in the British Isles. These gardens are open to the public twice a year.