

Jan 1940

Topics of the Week

Barnwood House and Woodchester Park

The sale of the extensive Woodchester Park estate to the Trustees of Barnwood House Hospital is an interesting development. As is generally known Barnwood House is a registered hospital for nervous and mental disorders, intended for the reception of patients from the upper and middle classes and mainly supported by the payment of inmates. It is available for 160 patients. This long-established institution should not be confused with the County Mental Hospital which is also situated in Barnwood. It is interesting to note in passing, that the Manor House, of Barnwood, now in the possession of the Barnwood House Trustees, and utilised for voluntary lady patients, was the birthplace, in 1802, of Professor Sir Charles Whetstone, F.R.S, the inventor of the stereoscope, who in association with Sir William Fothergill Cooke brought the electric telegraph into general use as a means of communication, the first wires being erected on the London and Blackwall railway in 1838.

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A Beautiful Environment

It will be recalled that the "Stroud News," in announcing the purchase of Gatcombe, Minchinhampton (the property and residence of Lieut.-Col. H. G. Ricardo, D.S.O.) by Lord Lee, of Fareham, said that there had been a possibility that the Barnwood House Trustees would have acquired it. Owing to the sale of the Barnwood House estate to the County Council it was necessary for the Trustees to find fresh quarters for the Hospital, and although the War has suspended building to a great extent, plans for the future had to be completed without undue delay. In the Woodchester Park estate the Trustees have acquired not only an isolated site for the projected new Hospital but a very beautiful environment for the patients of the institution.

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Arundel's. It was afterwards purchased of the Huntleys by Sir Robert Ducie (Lord Mayor of London in 1631). Sir Robert had several sons, who all died without issue, whereby Elizabeth, his daughter, became his heir, from whom this manor descended, like Tortworth, down to Thomas lord Ducie, who (in 1779) is the present lord of it.

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To-day and 160 Years ago

Woodchester Park, perhaps for the first time in its long history, has been opened to the general public on certain bank holidays and other days during the past two years. It is unlikely that this privilege can be granted when the new Hospital is in full occupation. Those inhabitants and visitors who took advantage of its "open days" will agree that the historian Rudder's description of the Park, written some 160 years ago, is not inapplicable to-day :

"Lord Ducie has a seat in this parish, with an extensive park, and very fine fishponds. It is his lordship's usual country residence; but it cannot be seen at the same time as the village, as it stands two miles west-ward from it, in a very narrow valley, amongst large and lofty beechwoods, and may be justly admired as a place of rural retirement."

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Royal Visitors

The association of the Ducie family with Woodchester Park (in their time known as Spring Park) is well-known, although 90 years have passed since the second Earl Ducie sold the estate and went to reside at his other Gloucestershire seat of Tortworth Park. It was during their residence that Frederick, Prince of Wales (in 1750) and his son George III. (in 1778) paid their oft-recorded visits to Woodchester and were entertained at Spring Park. The Ducie's old home disappeared many years ago, and on its site stands the unfinished mansion which Mr. William Leigh, the founder of the Dominican Priory, proposed to build. Woodchester Park, in being put to institutional uses, will go the way of many other noblemen's seats in recent years, the number of which will be greatly augmented in the near future.

From Domesday Book

It is most probably from this Park that Woodchester obtained its name, says the historian Rudder. With its evidence of Roman occupation Woodchester can claim to be the most historically interesting village in Mid-Gloucestershire. In Roman times Woodchester Park, with its woods and swamps, must have been explored by those adventurous Roman occupiers of the famous Villa. Domesday Book records the historic names connected with the Manor of Woodchester before the Conquest, and later, in the reign of Edward I., the Maltravers were in possession and remained so until "the reign of King Richard the Second, when Elianor, sister and heiress of Henry Maltravers, being married to John Arundel, second son of Richard, Earl of Arundel, carried this manor and other estates into the name and family of the earls of Arundel . . . in which family they continued for many generations."

Lords of the Manor

There was, undoubtedly, a residence within Woodchester Park during these centuries, and it was probably the seat of the lords of the manor. Rudder continues his account of its owners up to the time of the Ducies :

"The manor of Woodchester was granted to George Huntley and John Huntley 6 Eliz. and it is mentioned . . ."