

The History of Luckley School Main House

Research by Mr Tim South, Father of three Luckleyans

The Luckley Manor Estate, together with East Court and West Court of Finchampstead and Bearwood of Barkham, were major landowners in the mid eighteenth century. The Bearwood Estate was the largest and comprised 5,000 acres. Various events contrived the sale of these estates; the agricultural depression of 1870 – 1914, introduction of Acts of Settlement in 1882 and 1890, death duties in 1894, the Liberal Reforms of 1906 – 1914 and the socio-economic uncertainty in Europe leading to WWI. Circumstantial evidence suggests Luckley is built on the site of the original Manor House, although my understanding is this was positioned nearer to Ludgrove School and was lost to fire in the late 1890s.

Early in the twentieth century 28 acres on the western fringes of the original estate were acquired by Edward Dillon Mansfield of Lambrook School in Bracknell, also a local magistrate. He was the Headmaster at Lambrook between 1883 and 1904 and was considered an important person in the field of education – well beyond that of his stewardship of the school. He was also a respected academic; his book 'A Primer of Greek Grammar Syntax' written in 1880 is still in print today.

The house was built in 1907 by local builder J. B. Seward and designed by the architect Ernest Newton.



Newton was well known for sympathetic construction in harmony with prevailing landscapes.

The stable, now known as Garden House, predates Luckley but no attempt was made to obscure the building and certainly not to create a complementary facade as was common at the time. The Gatehouse also predating still exists. Now privately owned it was unlikely to have been put into service during Luckley's time as a

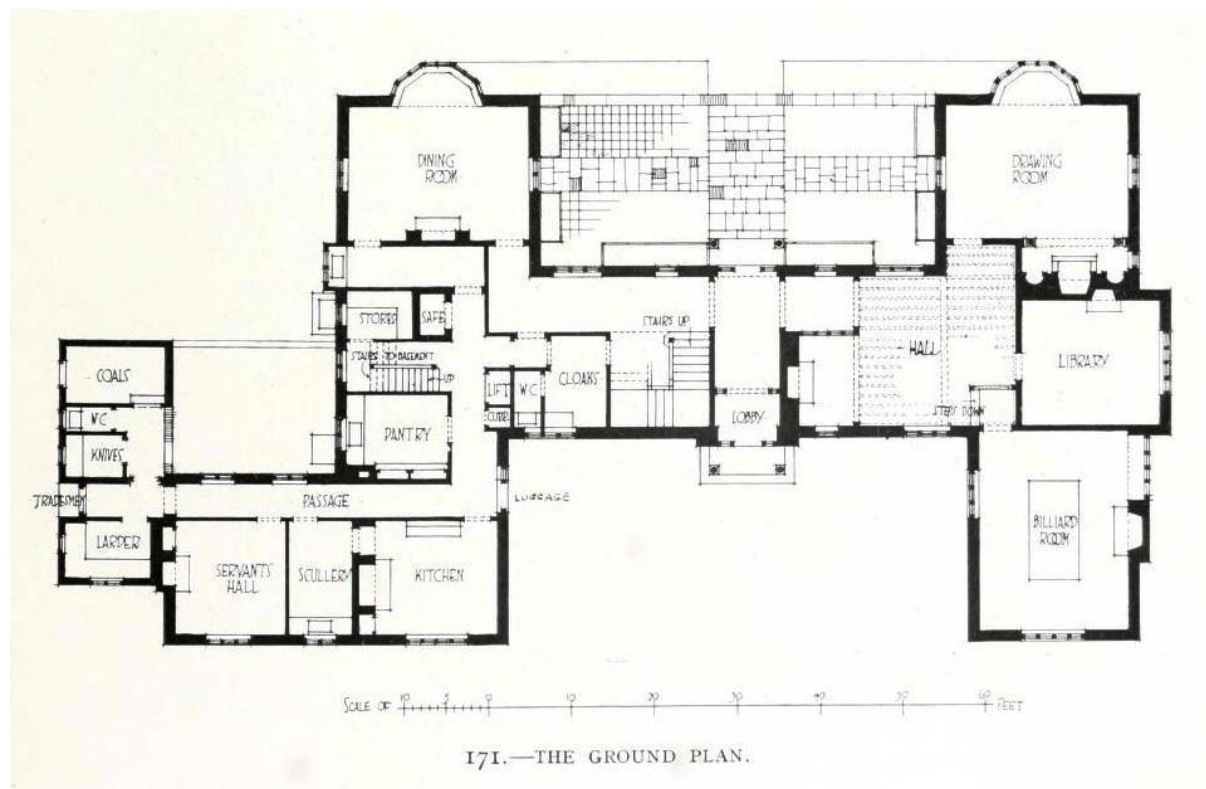
domestic residence. The house was probably accessed from a driveway off Luckley Road or Luckley Wood rather than via the Gatehouse.

Privacy for the Mansfield family was afforded by woodland surrounding all aspects. The house has projecting wings connected by a narrower centrepiece, thus forming an "H" design, common in Newton's designs. Between both wings red quarry stones were laid flanked with rougher flags and interplanted with rock plants allowing morning or afternoon sun to be enjoyed.

There is no evidence of wider planting schemes or outhouses and green houses supporting such cultivation. Surprising, since from the mid Victorian era, gardens played an important role in supplying year round fruit, vegetables and exotics for the table. Viewed from the new Drop off Zone the two wings are of different size, the left hand wing being larger to accommodate kitchen and domestic offices.

On the reverse elevation symmetry is restored and both wings appear to be the same size. This elevation, with the visually appealing half domed bay windows is more likely the original main entrance. Kitchen and tradesmen's entrance would therefore be to the rear and side of the house with prevailing wind conveying cooking odour and noise away from the main reception rooms to the left. This arrangement seems to be similar to the design of other notable Newton builds of the time, with kitchens and offices set back from the main form of the house.

The central chimney stack is off centre; this is dictated by the position of the main hall staircase. Windows are Crittalls with leaded light infill, roof tiles are Kentish Pegs and Chichester Bricks used on exterior elevations.



Main House Floor Plan

The service corridor between the kitchen and dining room allowed staff between both rooms without coming into contact with family or guests. This was a Victorian practice, and common to Newton houses, by the Edwardian period, with fewer staff needed or indeed available, it had largely disappeared. Similarly the door by the kitchen allowed luggage to be taken to guest rooms via the staff stairs without interrupting the family in the parlour or reception rooms.

Entering the house, domestic offices and dining room (now staff common room) are in the east wing. This was common practice allowing food to be conveyed quickly between kitchen and dining room. Following a meal the family would retire to the drawing room allowing staff to clear the dining room.

For the period, Newton has been generous with staff accommodation, including a staff hall with fireplace, kitchen, scullery, pantry, larder, knife room and even an internal coal store. The kitchen, now the Bursary Department, included a cast iron range supplied by Callas and Sons and May of Reading. The range has a central fire flanked by ovens all fired by coal with hot plates above. Flues and dampers controlled heat distribution and would need daily cleaning and relighting.

Tradesmen would access the house via a side entrance near the larder and this is how we now enter the house from the modern school extension.

The pantry, with little direct light therefore keeping the temperature low, had cold stone or marble work surfaces and would principally be used to store dairy and meat produce whilst the larder stored dry goods.

The West wing included a drawing room, a library and a billiard room (now the Head's office) which was set down by three or four steps to increase ceiling height and limit damage by celebratory cue waving. This room now has a suspended floor, below which, I suspect, a fine teak block floor similar to the hall and parlour will be found.

Dropping the floor down allowed the first floor symmetry to be maintained rather than introduce additional landing steps. Connecting both wings is a vestibule with parlour and grand fireplace with oak panelling and screen.

In the parlour ceiling beams two sets of initials, "ADW" and "WAAW" and the date 1907 are carved, craftsmen of their time no doubt. All main rooms have fireplaces supplemented by central heating.

Unusually the staircase has lattice rather than balustrades supporting banister rails. Architectural Editor of Country Life, Sir Lawrence Weaver, notes in 1922 the vestibule between dining room and reception rooms "serves the pleasant function of a professional path for English hospitality". Off the vestibule are two entrances both with porticos supported by Ionic Columns.



167.—EAST CORRIDOR, LOOKING TOWARDS HALL.

Weaver's notes are from his book, *Small Country Houses of Today*, published in 1922. The photograph above shows the parlour viewed from the Drawing Room. Common practise of the day was to "dress" the room with furniture deemed appropriate and relevant by the author. In this case the Mansfield's furniture has been used since other photographers of the time depict a similar layout. Upstairs there are three main bedroom suites two of which have dressing rooms.

There are two further bedrooms for guests and two bathrooms. Above the domestic offices are three smaller staff bedrooms and a bathroom which are accessed by side stairs. All bedrooms had open fires. Original plans made accommodation for a lift; I could not get access to see if still in situ. Since Mansfield's children were grown up there was no need for a nursery.

Other than cornicing in the Drawing Room, no longer visible, and two triple arched and over mantled fireplaces in the drawing room and parlour decorative detail is modest. Possibly the budget was limited – cornicing and ornate ceiling roses could add 5% to overall build costs which Weaver estimated came in at around 7½d (old money!) per cubic foot.

Another reviewer, Thomas Raffles Davison, notes in his book 'Modern Homes' in 1909 of "the pleasing simplicity of internal design but that few features are worthy of artistic reproduction". Other than external elevations he sketches just the Drawing Room fireplace with attendant lady (Mrs Mansfield?) reading and an upstairs fireplace. Note how the columns either side of the fireplace alcove echo those

supporting both porticos. You can also see the similarity between parlour over mantel and the drawing room mantel in the sketch below.



Drawing Room

Mansfield retired from Lambrook School in 1904 and by the time WWI commenced was nearly 70 years old. Whilst Luckley had accommodation for, and need of staff, they would be increasingly hard to come by. Nearby, in 1914, Miss Bertha Drake and Miss Ivy Barratt founded a school and dedicated their lives to the education of children. I surmise but it is highly likely they and Mansfield knew of each other through their academic work.

As the Mansfield family struggled to run Luckley, Drake would have been looking for new larger premises to house her burgeoning school. The house was sold in 1918 and Luckley School was formed with Mansfield retiring to nearby Finchampstead. One of Drake's original Luckley pupils, June Mercer, came from a family well acquainted with the Mansfield's.

Attic dormitories were added around 1922 with gabled windows in the roofline and in time Grange House on Finchampstead Road provided overflow dining and dormitory accommodation. One pupil of the early 1930's remembered walking between school and Grange House in "crocodile" fashion, often escorted by Bertha Drake wearing one of various fur wraps she was partial to.

The original telephone number for the school was Wokingham 175, still the last three digits. Drake was well loved, profoundly deaf in later years and fond of using an ear trumpet to varying degree of success.

Architect Ernest Newton died in 1922 and two years later Mansfield passed away. Bertha Drake continued to live and work at the school until her death in 1959. She is buried, along with her sister Rosa, at All Saints Church in the centre of Wokingham.

Whilst researching the school archive I came across a number of letters, dated 1959, from a foster mother living in Twyford. She thanks the school for arranging afternoon games and tea for children less fortunate than the Luckley pupils. The writers name was Elsie Smith, a very good friend of my mother, and a welcome guest at our wedding many years later. I knew the archives would be fruitful....

Tim South