

The Heygate Family

By Keith Randon

The Heygates Arrive

Monday 30 October 1815 and the whole of Mountsorrel was a-buzz. Throngs of people walked in the streets, there was a carnival air. Horses, coaches, carriages threaded the crowds, because the quality was also there. Down by the Swan the pressure was highest, and almost opposite was the best public house, The Crown. Unless you were favoured, there was no food for sale at the Crown. Those in the big room were all very different. Landed gentry rubbed shoulders with adventurers and agents. Farmers could also be seen, especially those who were marked to be 'going places'. At one raised end were all the needs for an auction: hammer, pulpit, catalogues, clerks and record books. The auctioneer, one of the best in the county was fussing around, tidying details with his staff. 600 acres were to be sold - on this day and the morrow - and the objective was to raise £28,000.

This was needed to clear bills and mortgages of the fourth Earl of Lanesborough. Through his life, Augustus Richard Butler had run up large debts and in this year, he had been persuaded by his son to sign over the estates so that the family was not wholly ruined. Estates outside Leicestershire had already gone by this time. Land in Quorn, Barrow, Rothley, Cossington and Woodhouse Eaves were to go in these next two days.



Figure 1 – A Plan of the Roecliffe Estate from a later sale in 1932

A Charnwood Forest Base

There would be many familiar faces at this sale, but at least one bidder was an outsider. In the room, someone else may have bid for him – however it was arranged, James Heygate was the buyer of the Roecliffe Estate. This was to become the Leicestershire seat for his family. It is not known if there was a house on the site already, but the house as we know it was begun by James Heygate.

James was a younger brother of Thomas Heygate ‘of Husbands Bosworth’, but in Leicester he had already made his mark.

During the last decade of the 18th century, the hosiery business of the Pares and Heygates had made fortunes for both families. On the strength of this, in 1800, James with Thomas Pares, Thomas Paget and John Pares established the bank of Pares & Co.

The Pares family also moved to Charnwood, building Ulverscroft Manor at about the same time. Presumably both having a hosiery business and a successful bank, meant that they would be spending more time in this county and to live near each other meant that communication was simplified.

A Baronet in the Family

The Heygates had a London base and more property, Southend in particular. They held much land there, which was developed by James’s eldest son, William over the following years. Indeed, he built the mile-long pier there in 1830. Being so long, it has its own railway and even now, one of the locomotives is named after him. It is *Sir* William Heygate as a baronetcy was conferred on him in 1831.



Figure 2 - The Sir William Heygate locomotive from Southend Pier

Sir William died in August 1845 at his Leicestershire Seat. Frederick William Heygate, as firstborn inherited the Baronetcy and amongst other things, the Roecliffe Estate.

In 1851, Sir Frederick married Marianne Gage, and by marrying her, acquired a large estate at Bellarena, co. Londonderry. After that time he seems to have spent a lot of time in Ireland when he was not in London. Second son, William Unwin Heygate had continued to live on at Roecliffe buying Maplewell farm in May 1864, rebuilding it as a manor house, and then he sold it in November 1868.

At some time after 1851, ownership of Roecliffe must have been transferred from Sir Frederick to his younger brother, William Unwin and Roecliffe is then held by the second son's line. It seems that change in some way was in the wind in 1864 (see below) and this may be when Sir Frederick transferred ownership of Roecliffe to his brother, William Unwin.

Churchgoing

When they moved to the area, the family chose as their church, Swithland and when in Leicestershire, there they worshipped.

In January 1864, Sir Frederick Heygate, on behalf of the family, approached the Churchwardens with a proposal regarding improvements to the South Aisle. The major item would be a stained glass window. The window was given by all four brothers and commemorated their parents, Sir William and Lady Isabella.

Later, in 1897, with his last remaining brother, Nicholas, dying the year before, second brother William Unwin approached the Churchwardens of Swithland. As his three brothers were now dead he requested permission to put a plain commemorative plaque near the earlier window remembering his generation and this was accepted.

The work was carried out.

In that same year, William Unwin's youngest son, Lieutenant Harry Beaumont Heygate an officer aboard HMS Algerine, died of a gunshot wound whilst offshore near Shanghai. An inquiry produced nothing firm about the matter except no-one else was involved. Perhaps, due to the cause of death being so suspicious Swithland may have refused to have a plaque on the wall commemorating someone who may have committed suicide. Whatever the reason, the plaque can now be seen in Woodhouse Eaves Church.



Figure 3 - Commemorative plaque to Harry Beaumont Heygate at St Paul's

In Swithland Church, the commemorative window is now largely obscured by the organ. On the wall nearest the organ is a brass wall plaque. But what it commemorates cannot readily be seen as it has been painted over with matt black paint. By looking closely it can be discerned that this is the one placed there by William Unwin Heygate in 1897. To have blotted out a memorial to the dead in this way is truly exceptional, if not unique and must be linked in some way with response to the death of Harry Beaumont Heygate.



Figure 4 - Grave of William Unwin Heygate and his wife (By David Morley)

Perhaps it is not surprising that both parents are now buried in Woodhouse Eaves. A grandson, Claud Raymond Heygate, was killed in the Great War at the Battle of the Somme and also has a memorial plaque within the church beneath Harry Beaumont's.



Figure 5 - Memorial to Claud Raymond Heygate at St Paul's



Figure 6 - Claud Raymond Heygate, killed at the Battle of the Somme, July 1916.

Heygates Leave the Area

Over many years Roecliffe was a secluded place to live for the Heygates, but by the early 20th century their need to remain there was becoming less important.

In 1925, Willam Howley Heygate's wife Helen had bought Long Close and being in their 70's they handed the Manor over to their son, Gerald.

It would seem that this may also have been to make it possible to sell the Roecliffe Estate and by 1928 they were in discussions with baronet, Sir Arthur Wheeler of Woodhouse Eaves*. By this time, when negotiations were well advanced, William Heygate was ill and on 21 September he died at Long Close.

After the funeral, Gerald Heygate resumed negotiations and a contract for the whole Roecliffe Estate of near 300 acres was signed sometime early that October. Wheeler must have been conducting negotiations, in parallel, with a purchaser. On 29 October he accepted the offer of £10,000 from the Leicester and County Saturday Hospital for Roecliffe's Manor House and grounds.

It is an irony that when the Heygates had originally purchased the Roecliffe Estate it had helped clear the debts of the Danvers/Butler family. Now, after being transferred from them to a new owner, that man was in financial difficulties. In March 1931, less than 3 years from buying the estate, Wheeler was bankrupt.

The liquidators who held the deeds to the remains of the old Roecliffe Estate, (likely to be Barclays Bank), decided that it should all be sold and on 28 June 1932 having been divided into 24 lots it was put up for auction by Warner Sheppard and Wade. The biggest lot was a farm of over 100 acres, much of which is now Lingdale Golf Course. Despite the land being broken into lots, the whole of it was purchased by J Eastwood Pickard for £7,500.

The Heygates remained at Long Close until 1939, when Gerald volunteered for service. Being drafted to London they closed down the house. Not knowing when he'd return, Gerald took the precaution of bricking-up the wine cellar! It was then taken over and used as a recovery place for wounded soldiers. After the war, the house was shut down, and was only reopened when purchased by the Johnsons in 1948.



Figure 7 – Mr George Johnson at Long Close

***It is not generally known that our village has a Baronetcy named after it. Here is the list so far:**

Baronets of Woodhouse Eaves

- Sir Arthur Wheeler, 1st Baronet (1860–1943) (1920)
- Sir Arthur Frederick Pullman Wheeler, 2nd Baronet (1900–1964)
- Sir John Hieron Wheeler, 3rd Baronet (1905–2005)
- Sir John Frederick Wheeler, 4th Baronet (born 1933)

Sources

Information sources from Leicester Record Office, reference number DE4674.

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