

Sidcup Place



Sidcup Place c.1930

Sidcup Place does not seem to have received its present name until 1844 but tradition says that it was built in 1743 and this is probably correct. It is believed that an 'officer of engineers' built the first part in the shape of a 'star fort with angle bastions' and parts of 3 of these bastions - less than eight feet wide - may still be seen (one of them is still complete). Their position is responsible for the peculiar shape of the older (south-west) part of the house, both inside and outside.

The name of the earliest owner is not yet known but in 1780 the property was owned by Stephen Remnant and was occupied by Tyron Cotton. After that, the list of owners and occupiers is virtually complete.

Living in a 'star fort' must have had its problems - light, and the size and shape of the rooms, for instance - and it would not be surprising if additions and alterations were soon made: the first of these would have been to the west ('back') or north (the colonnaded wing, which contains some old kitchens). Stephen Remnant owned Sidcup Place until 1822 when it was sold to Henry Berens, and the property remained in the Berens family hands for the next 97 years. Again, Henry no doubt made additions and alterations when he took over: certainly the house filled approximately the outlines of its present site by 1844, though there were subsequent rebuildings - notably those of 1853 when Henry Beren's nephew, Henry Hulse Berens, had taken over ownership. It is to him that we surely owe the interior staircase - the fort probably had spiral stairs - and certainly the room behind it, together with the exterior on that side. Later members of the Berens family were responsible for the tower, and also for building 'Red Lodge' in the same style; all this probably in the 1890's, by which time the house was probably being rented to tenants, a practice which ceased in 1903.

After this date it stood empty for some time but was then leased to Sidcup Hall College (an amalgamation of two local schools) from 1907. Sidcup Hall remained until 1916, when the establishment moved to Bickley Hall. The property was again empty but in 1917 Rev J W Blencowe (who had served as Field Chaplain in Gallipoli and was later buried alive in France) was appointed as Chaplain to the newly-opened Queen Mary's hospital. Plans to develop part of the 'estate' in 1915 having come to nothing, he was able to buy a rather dilapidated Sidcup Place in 1919 and having partially renovated it, opened it as a boarding preparatory school for boys. The Sidcup Hall headmaster (Mr Farnfield) had built a gymnasium and some classrooms and Mr Blencowe continued this

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policy, adding a chapel (removed in 1933), a new dining hall (later part of the Council Chamber), and more dormitories, etc. The school was a very happy one - tennis, golf, cricket, soccer and rucker were among the activities as well as debating and optional gardening but by the 1930s the school was in danger of losing its valuable seclusion and Mr Blencowe decided to remove it to East Grinstead. He accordingly sold the property (25 acres) to a building developer in 1933. However, this was the time when the former Sidcup Urban District Council and its neighbour at Chislehurst were planning to amalgamate. They accordingly acted speedily, obtained a loan and persuaded the builder to re-sell to the combined Council. After some Council discussions on future use, the grounds were opened to the public on Whit-Saturday 19 May, 1934, while the house was used as headquarters for the combined Chislehurst and Sidcup Urban District Council. The Council met in the old gymnasium at first, but by demolishing an internal wall between the 'old' dining room (later used as dormitory) and the newer dining hall (built in 1924) one large room was created and was then used as the Council Chamber.

The various rooms have had many uses in their times but the Members' Room was Mr Blencowe's drawing room after his marriage and is little altered from 1743 and 1853; next to it (Headmaster's Study - now the General Office) is even less altered from 1743 - the front door was probably in the telephone alcove. The rooms over this part are again very early and used to contain a powder closet, (for powdering wigs). The Chairman's Room - previously the Headmaster's dining room - is of the 1853 re-building, as was the first part of the Council Chamber next door; these rooms had the Blue Dormitory and the Red one over them. Outside, the former stable-block may be seen; it used to have a belfry but this was destroyed by fire in 1928 when the premises were used as Common Room and bedrooms for the masters. The third side of the yard used to be flanked by the chapel but this was removed to East Grinstead in 1933 and is still in use there.

In the grounds, an earlier Ice-House was near the house at the junction of the two drives, while a later one was underneath the corner of the present playground. A drive used to run through the grounds towards Foots Cray and a small bridge over a stream may still be discovered - about 130 years old - near the new Queen Mary's Hospital boiler house. Otherwise, apart from tennis courts where the orchard used to be, the inner parts of the grounds remain little altered - not least the dry ditch or 'ha-ha', which kept animals away from the house but allowed the occupants an unobstructed view across the Cray Valley.

Prepared by Bexley Local Studies Centre
July 1997

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