

Danson House

Danson Mansion is a Grade I listed building and stands in 200 acres of parkland in the care of Bexley Council.

The early history of the Danson area mirrors very closely the changing fortunes of the Manor of Bexley in which it was situated. The earliest written reference to the Danson estates is in an Archbishop's survey of 1284AD when seven tenants of the Archbishop are described as holding seventeen acres of land at "Densynton". Henry VIII acquired the Manor of Bexley from the Church and it remained in Royal hands until James I, in need of finance, sold the Manor to John Spielman. Eventually William Camden bought it on 1 March 1622 and four days later granted Bexley Manor to Oxford University to fund a Chair in History there. In 1695 the Danson estate was sold, with vacant possession, as a gentleman's seat and for the first time Danson had an owner-occupier.

John Styleman

John Styleman was born in 1652 and joined the East India Company as a young man, spending thirty years of his life in Java and India. Whilst abroad he prospered and on his return at the end of the 17th century he became a Director of the Company and was the owner of £2,000 worth of Company Stock. In 1697, whilst in the Indies, his brother Francis and a London Merchant, Alphonso Rodrigues, acquired for him the estate of Danson and twelve acres of marshland at Plumstead from Mrs Mary Stevens the only daughter of John Adye of Gray's Inn who had come into possession of the property in the mid-17th century.

The nature of the house at this time is uncertain but it is possible that Styleman began to develop it as a country seat. In 1717, however, his second wife Arabella died at Danson and a few years later he left the estate. In 1723 he let it for ninety nine years to Colonel John Selwyn MP of Matson, Gloucestershire. During his time at Danson Selwyn much improved and enlarged the estate and by his death in 1751 the estate included an icehouse, canals, fishponds and an ornamental Chinese house. The Mansion was said to have four principal living rooms, hall, five bedrooms, nursery, kitchen, brewhouse and servants' quarters.

In 1734 Styleman died and his will provided for the revenue from the lease of the estate to support his fifth wife Mary and then at her death half was to go to his nieces and half to build almshouses in Bexley for the poor. On 10 July 1753 Selwyn's widow sub-let the property to John Boyd and later on 28 May 1759 Boyd took over the lease from her and purchased the extra land bought by Selwyn. Thus began the creation of the large Danson estate by John Boyd.

John Boyd

John Boyd was the son of Augustus Boyd of Lewisham who owned sugar plantations in the West Indian island of St Christopher. Sugar was a profitable commodity at this time and John Boyd's income from his inherited estates and his Directorship of the East India Company made him a man of means.

Boyd was married by 1753 and he and his wife Mary had a young family. They lived in a newly built town house near St James Palace. Boyd's desire for a country estate led him to Danson; by 1759 he had the lease and bought the last of the freehold from the descendants of Styleman. He still, however, had to pay £100 a year under the lease of 1723 to the Charity set up under Styleman's will. In 1761 he offered a permanent annuity of £100 in exchange for the charity's half of the freehold. An Act of Parliament was necessary to accomplish this and the "Styleman Act" was passed in 1762. John Boyd was now the owner of the whole estate and over the next forty years he enlarged it to an area of 600 acres.

To design his new house Boyd approached the architect of his London home, Robert Taylor. Taylor was born in 1714, the son of a London stonemason. He began his career as a sculptor and carried out commissions for several prominent buildings including a memorial in Westminster Abbey and the pediment of the Lord Mayor's Mansion House. In the early 1750's Taylor gave up sculpture for architecture. He became Architect to the Bank of England and designed many important houses. He was knighted in 1782 and died in 1788.

The new villa, to be called Danson Hill, was built on rising ground to the north of the old house. Taylor designed the house in the Palladian style but took care to design it as a convenient and elegant family house. Work had begun by 1763. John Boyd's wife fell ill and travelled

to Bath for treatment; this failed and she died leaving Boyd with five young children. He remarried in August 1766 and it was with his new wife, Catherine, that he took up residence in Danson Hill around 1768.

Edward Hasted in his "History and Topographical Survey of Kent" 1797 described the Mansion as "...a most elegant mansion of Portland stone, the inside of which is decorated in a superb and magnificent taste,...Behind the house, at a proper distance, is a most magnificent sheet of water so contrived as to seem a beautiful serpentine river, flowing through the grounds. It was designed and with much difficulty formed and secured by a noted Capability Brown, who likewise laid out the adjoining grounds, which are well clothed and with many thriving plantations of different kinds of trees."

Nearly 200 years later John Newman in "West Kent and the Weald" described Danson as "A crystalline villa built c.1759-62 for Alderman Boyd by Sir Robert Taylor, and set in a park landscaped by Capability Brown...It has five windows on each side, but is not a square, so although the centre three are in a canted bay on the south front, the former looks spacious, the latter taut. The entrance is on the north side, up a grand flight of steps to a balcony..."

By 1773 most of the work had been completed. Internal decorations, ceilings, chimneypieces and cornices had been designed by William, later Sir William, Chambers who was to become friends with Boyd. The fashionable artists of the day including Charles PAVILLO, Richard Wilson and Corbould executed murals and paintings for Boyd including, in about 1776, an oil painting of Boyd's family outside Danson possibly by Wilson. This painting now hangs in the Great Hall, Hall Place. In the eighteenth century it was fashionable to own Greek or Roman antiques and thus the Danson Vase, a Roman work of the second century AD was acquired by Boyd. This is now in the Orangery at Kensington Gardens.

The grounds were landscaped, probably to the design of Lancelot 'Capability' Brown, including the laying of a winding gravel path and the planting of cedars, chestnuts, poplars, beech, birch, oak and ash. A dam was built across the Danson Stream and in time the foundations of the old building were covered by a lake. To improve the view from the house a small cottage was adapted complete with spire, which enhanced the skyline. This became known as the Chapel House and can still be seen near the roundabout at Blendon.

In 1755 John Boyd was created a Baronet. He had three children by his second wife; James, Sarah and Catherine. His eldest daughter Elizabeth married his business partner John Trevanion and moved to Windsor. His eldest son John left Oxford, flirted with a political career and then settled down with his wife Margaret to the life of a rich young couple. As Sir John Boyd grew older he visited London less often and immersed himself in the life of the local community. He served on a St Mary's Vestry committee for the rebuilding of the workhouse in Bexley. Boyd died in January 1800 and was buried in the family vault at St Mary's Church, Lewisham. He left the estate to his son John, the second Baronet.

Later Owners

In 1807 the second Sir John Boyd sold the estate to John Johnston for £50,000. Johnston was a retired Captain of the 62nd Regiment of Foot and a Freeman of the City of London. Johnston lived in the house until his death in 1829. He, with his family, was active in parish affairs, particularly the building of the Chapel of Ease in Oaklands Road, the predecessor of Christ Church, Bexleyheath. His son Hugh built Little Danson in 1828.

The next owner-occupier of the Mansion was Alfred Bean, who bought Danson in 1862. Bean was also active in the area. He was Chairman of the Bexleyheath Railway project to link Bexleyheath and Welling to London and Dartford. He provided a temporary mission church in Welling and a school to relieve the overcrowding in Foster's School. On his death in 1890 his family remained to continue his works. His son Alfred took his father's place as Chairman of the Bexleyheath Railway project and another son Lionel gave generously to the Bexley Cottage Hospital. By Alfred's will the outlying parts of the estate were sold for housing. In 1921 Mrs Bean died and the estate was sold to the Bexley Urban District Council for £16,000 and in 1925 was opened as a public park by Princess Mary.

Land was reserved for a football pitch, tennis courts, bowling green and athletics. The Morris Wheeler Gates were declared open in 1929 and the Open Air Swimming Pool in 1936. In 1964 the Boathouse and Cafe were opened. The Park is extensively used by local people and the house has been beautifully restored by English Heritage. For

information on the current management arrangements of the house
please see www.bexley.gov.uk/services/visitor-attractions/danson-house.

The **History of Danson** by Mrs Ruth Hutcherson is for sale at Bexley
Local Studies and Archive Centre price £1.50.