

Hall Place

Hall Place is a part-Tudor, part Jacobean, country house on the outskirts of Bexley Village, directly backing on to the A2.

The present house dates back to about 1540 but there is evidence of earlier houses on this site as far back as 1241, when a juror at trials in Canterbury called Robert de Aula (or At-Hall) of Bexley is recorded, and it is probable that a mill stood here even earlier, when the Domesday Book was compiled in 1086. The At-Halls were succeeded in 1368 by the Shelleys, distant relatives of the famous poet Percy Bysshe Shelley. They were tax-farmers for the Lord of the Manor of Bexley, who was in fact the Archbishop of Canterbury, who held it by virtue of a royal grant to a former archbishop more than five centuries earlier.

In 1537 the Shelleys sold the estate to Sir John Champneys, a merchant and former Mayor of London. He built the northern half of the building, using stone from monasteries, which had been closed by King Henry VIII shortly before this time. Stonework from the 13th to the 15th centuries is found in the walls of Hall Place, much of it medieval mouldings. Sir John Champneys died in 1556 and his son, Justinian, altered and enlarged the house, bringing the stone-built part of the structure to its present form. Justinian Champneys was Sheriff of Kent in 1583 and a captain in the forces assembled to repel the expected Spanish invasion in 1588. After his death Hall Place passed to his second son, Richard, who toward the end of his life sold it in 1649 to Robert Austen, a London merchant like his predecessor a century before.

Robert Austen showed considerable political skill. He prospered in the Civil War and bought Hall Place in the year of King Charles I's execution, when the Roundheads' power was at its greatest. He did even better on Charles II's restoration, for he received a baronetcy and was made Sheriff of Kent in 1660. Between 1649 and 1666, the year of his death, he built the southern part of the house, using brick instead of stone, and undertook some modification of the north-west wing. The construction of the moulded plaster ceiling in the main upper room there, which is regarded as one of the best of its period in Kent, may be attributed to him, although it was perhaps not completed in his life-time.

After Sir Robert Austen's death Hall Place remained in the hands of his descendants until 1772, when the seventh and last baronet died childless. The estate then passed to Lord Le Despencer, better known as Sir Francis Dashwood, the notorious rake, whose sister had married Sir Robert Austen's great grandson, the fourth baronet. The Dashwood family owned the estate for the next 150 years, although they seldom lived at Hall Place. From 1800 to 1870 the house was let as a private boarding school for boys, under a succession of headmasters, of whom the most striking was Hadarezer Stone, a prominent figure in the life of the village. About 1870 the then owner, Maitland Dashwood, returned to Hall Place and after restoring it, let it to a series of tenants, including Baron Emile d'Erlanger, a founder of the Channel Tunnel project, and Lord Churston, a distinguished soldier and husband of Denise Orme, who had been a well-known actress in her day. The last of this series of tenants was the Countess of Limerick, who lived here from 1917 until her death in 1943. She quickly established herself as a leading figure in the life of the district and Hall Place was frequently the scene of lavish social occasions, some of which are remembered to this day.

During Lady Limerick's tenancy of the house, her son-in-law, the American financier, James Cox Brady, bought the property from the Dashwood family. In 1935 his trustees sold the house and the 62 acre estate to the Bexley Council for £25,000 subject to the life tenancy of Lady Limerick. However the Council could not make use of the house when she died in 1943, for it was requisitioned and occupied by American troops and, after peace was restored, it stood empty until 1957 when once again it was used as a school, this time as an annexe to the Bexley Technical High School for Girls. Thereafter it was extensively restored and between 1969-1994 was the Headquarters of the Libraries and Museums Service in the London Borough of Bexley. The remainder of the library offices moved out of Hall Place in 1999 and the Local Studies Centre during 2000. Hall Place now houses Bexley Museum and galleries with regular exhibitions.

The House is open to the public. For further details see: <https://www.hallplace.org.uk/>