

High Street House and John Thorpe

High Street House, Bexley is an eighteenth century building of some architectural merit.

Newman regards it as the best of the works of the period in the area.

(1) It is listed in grade II by Historic England. The local authority's town planning division speaks of it as a "major townscape building on a prominent site"(2) Two hundred years ago Hasted picked it out for mention as one of the principal houses in the parish of Bexley, along with Hall Place, Danson, Lamorbey Park, and other more obviously striking buildings. (3)

Hasted's account of the history of High Street House begins with the earlier building which belonged to Goldwells, a branch of the family of that name at Great Chart. From them it passed to the Austens of Hall Place. On Sir Robert Austen's death in 1666, his widow went to live at High Street House. It remained with the family until the death of her grandson in 1750, when it was sold to John Thorpe, who rebuilt it in 1761. The house as it stands is substantially the house that Thorpe built, although its present owners believe that some parts of it show signs of being earlier in date than 1761.

There are a few references by earlier writers to the Goldwell family and their house. Philipott (4) wrote in 1659 of a house that was even then an old one, which was "the seat of an ancient family, called in deeds Lamienby, alias Sparrow...the last of which name was Thomas Lamienby". Now we know from Thomas Lamienby's will that he died in 1513, so there is no doubt of the great antiquity of High Street House as a site of successive buildings. Thomas Lamienby's daughter, Agnes, married James Goldwell, and thus, High Street House became Goldwell property. Her father had evidently been anxious about her future and for his will he had directed that she should be guided by the advice of five of his friends that she should not marry a courtier. One hopes that he would have been content with her eventual choice. John Harris (5) seems to have no first-hand knowledge of High Street House; his account reads like a mere summary of Philipott.

John Thorpe (1715-1792), one of the greatest of Kentish antiquaries, was the son of a Rochester physician who devoted his leisure to the history of the diocese of Rochester. On his death in 1750 his son

undertook to edit and publish a number of transcripts made from him from the registers and ancient deeds and muniments of the cathedral and other repositories. This resulted in the appearance in 1769 of the first of John Thorpe's great works, the *Registrum Roffense*, in which are preserved the fruits of his father's many years of research. Twenty years later, in 1788, he published his second major work, his *Custumale Roffense*, a transcription of a manuscript in the archives of the Cathedral at Rochester, to which he added further information on the institutions whose records had been subject of the *Registrum*.

Thorpe produced these books while living in Bexley. Having bought High Street House from the Austens, he rebuilt it and lived there until after his first wife's death in 1789, when he moved to Chippenham, in Wiltshire, where he died in 1792 at the age of 77. In addition to his major works, he wrote articles for the *Gentlemen's Magazine* and accounts of several antiquities of Kent, published in *Nichols' Bibliotheca Topographica Britannica* (1790). One of his daughters, Catherine, provided him with drawings of some of the buildings he described. These were used for illustrations in his published works. They include two elevations of the old parsonage house at Bexley, demolished in 1776, of which otherwise nothing would be known.

Historians and archaeologists still value Thorpe's writings and Bexley should be proud both of its association with him and of the fine house he built there.

- (1) J. Newman, **West Kent & the Weald**, Penguin, 1969, p.151
- (2) London Borough of Bexley, Old Bexley Conservation Area, Engineer & Surveyors dept. 1973
- (3) E. Hasted, **History of Kent**, 2 ed. 1797, vol.2, p.167
- (4) Philipott, **Villare Cantianum**, 1776 ed., p.65
- (5) John Harris, **History of Kent** 1719, p.40