

## The Hollies Halfway Street

**Since the beginning of this century The Hollies has been a children's home.**

The house itself is surrounded by additional buildings put up to increase its capacity as a residential establishment. In earlier times, however, it was a private house with extensive grounds and its owner also had farmland and other property in the village. For example, in 1839 Thomas Lewin was listed in a survey as owning the house and 80 acres of garden and woodland, with a further 200 acres which he leased to farmers and more than 20 houses and cottages.

This paper is based on some documents in the archives at Hall Place and a book entitled *The Lewin Letters*, edited by T. H. Lewin and published in 1909, which contains letters written by the Lewin family between 1756 and 1884 and also some useful information about this family. Use has also been made of the registers of St. Mary's Church, Bexley, of which a transcript is held at Hall Place and of local rate books.

The Lewin's were originally a farming family. They believed that an ancestor of theirs came from Essex during a winter so severe that the Thames was frozen over and he drove his pigs across the ice. **(1)** In the middle of the eighteenth century one of the younger sons went to sea, and in due course became the captain of one of the East India Company's ships. This was a very lucrative position, for as captain he had not only a salary but also the privilege of carrying cargo on his own account. **(2)** It is said that one voyage might be worth as much as £5000 to the master of the vessel, and this would represent many times that amount today. The younger son, Richard Lewin, was wealthy enough by 1728 to buy an estate at Halfway Street for £2800 and to make further purchases of the property in the same area in 1784 and 1786, including the farm that had been rented in 1680 by Anthony Lewin, who may well have been his grandfather. **(3)** He was also able to use his influence to get a good position for his eldest son, Thomas, with the company in India. **(4)**

The estate bought by Richard Lewin at Halfway Street included a house called Marrowbone Hall. The Lewin's changed its name to The Hollies, probably soon after Richard Lewin's death in 1810. It was

described as a long, low house of two storeys, covered with vines and roses surrounded by tall elm trees. Captain Lewin found it too isolated and preferred to live in a cottage on the estate by the main road. (5)

Almost nothing is known about that old house, Marrowbone Hall. It first appears on a map of Kent published in 1769, then on another map of 1778. Richard Lewin bought it from the trustees of Viscount Hinchbrook in 1782 and on his death his son Thomas, after an adventurous career with the East India Company, went on to live there, not without protests from his wife, who objected on various grounds, such as the distance of The Hollies from a market town, the "disagreeable road" it was on and the fact that it was so near to Edward Lewin's house! (Edward was her husband's younger brother.)

Thereafter the family lived at the Hollies until the death of Thomas in 1843, aged 90. Thomas Lewin had a daughter, Harriet, who fell in love with George Grote, of Bromley. She and he had a somewhat chequered romance, but eventually they married without their parents' knowledge. George Grote went on to write a famous book on the history of Greece, and was one of the founders of London University.

After Thomas Lewin died, the family continued to own their estate at Halfway Street, but did not live there. The mansion was pulled down in 1853 and the house that is still there today was built on the site. It was then leased to a Mr. Harry Brown, who lived there for about twenty years, and thereafter to his widow until her death in the late 1880's. Then it was rented by a Mrs. Raymond for a few years, but it stood empty after her departure until in 1898 the Lewins sold it to Sir George Woodman of Mottingham. He in turn sold it the following year to the Guardians of the Poor of the Greenwich Union for use as an orphanage. He retained the surrounding land, amounting to 167 acres, and after his death his trustees sold it to a developer for £35,000 in 1929.

Soon after the Greenwich Guardians acquired the house they built the additional buildings that were to accommodate the orphan children, while The Hollies itself became the administrative building. In 1902, or soon after, the London County Council took it over. At the present time it is under the control of Southwark London Borough.

- (1) The Lewin Letters, vol.1 p. 125. (This work will be abbreviated to L.L.)
- (2) L.L. 1, p. 125
- (3) Hall Place documents C21, 25, 29. Cf. C16
- (4) L.L.1, p.4, 11 p.123.
- (5) L.L.1, p.125