

West Heath House, No.115 Woolwich Road, Erith

The present West Heath House was probably built in 1878 on the site of an earlier building of the same name.

The rateable value of the property jumps between May and November of that year from £140 to £225, while the value assigned to adjacent properties remains constant. This is a fair indication that some considerable change took place at that time. Ordnance survey maps of 1865 and 1897 show different houses on the site at the two dates, though the second one is not noticeably larger than the former, and may stand on the same foundations.

The First West Heath House

We do not know for certain who built the first house or when it was built. But by putting together what pieces of evidence there are, we can infer with some confidence that it was built by General Sir Samuel Hulse between 1799 and 1806.

It was not there in 1799 when the survey for the first edition of the Ordnance Survey map of Kent was done, for it is not shown on the draft sheet (of which there is a copy at Hall Place), nor is it on the map published in 1801. But it must have been built by 1806, since Samuel Hulse was fined in that year for an encroachment of about an acre on the common near his house on West Heath and this must have been West Heath House itself because:

- a) There was no other suitable house there,
- b) The Inclosure Award of 1815 corroborates this view, and
- c) A directory of Kent (Pigot's) in 1834 states definitely that Hulse lived at West Heath House.

Accepting that this evidence establishes Hulse as the builder and 1800-1806 as the date, we can now look at the general development of the estate of which West Heath House was the centre. Samuel Hulse inherited some property in Erith from an uncle, Richard Hulse, whose death was reported at the manor court in 1806. This property was described as consisting of a house, malt house and three pieces of land totalling 11 acres at Bedonwell. It is plainly not on West Heath and its exact location at Bedonwell is not clear. By 1843, when the

Tithe Map and Apportionment were drawn up, the West Heath House Estate, which extended by then over more than 50 acres, included a small farm which could easily be the one in question. This farm and its fields, etc., have plot numbers 369, 396 and 397 on the tithe map and occupy roughly the area covered today by Osborne Road, Upper Grove Road and Dryhill Road.

If this farm corresponds to the original 11 acre holding bought by Richard Hulse and left by him to his nephew, we may assume that Samuel Hulse added to his possessions by buying the land to the north of it and then built West Heath House, encroaching at the same time on the heath to the extent of an acre of extra ground. Hence the fine imposed on him in 1806.

Later on in 1815, the Inclosure Commissioner appointed by Act of Parliament, allotted to him a 5 acre piece of land on the west side of his house and also diverted round this piece of land the road from Bedonwell, which formerly ran by the side of the house. This explains why Bedonwell Road today has a dogleg bend before it joins Woolwich Road. Before 1815 it ran almost due north a little to the east of modern Westergate Road. Samuel Hulse died in 1837 at the age of 90. He had a distinguished military career and held various appointments to members of the royal family. He attained the rank of Field Marshall and was Governor of Chelsea Hospital.

By 1843 the owner of the West Heath Estate was James Renshaw, churchwarden of St. John's, Erith in 1844. Bagshaw's directory published in 1847 describes the house as "a handsome residence, which has been greatly improved by the present proprietor.... It is the seat and property of James Renshaw, Esq." The house remained in the ownership of the Renshaws for many years. By 1870 it was let to the Reverend Philip Power, who lived there until 1878.

The Second West Heath House

The Renshaws seem to have demolished and rebuilt the house when their tenant, Mr Power, left in 1878 but the rate books do not name an occupier of the new house. Perhaps no tenant could be found and the new house proved an expensive disaster. At any rate the Renshaws sold it in 1882 and within a few years its extensive grounds were cut up into plots on which large detached houses with names like Preston Lea, Yeatton, and Dar-al-Saleem were built for sale. The enterprising

man who did this, one Seth Smith, retained West Heath House for himself but eventually moved away and let the house to Sir Tom Callender, of the cable making company. He had some alterations and additions made in 1913. When he left in the early 1920's, the house was divided into flats.

The road to Woolwich from Lessness Heath (Upper Belvedere) ascends some 50 feet from the crossing of Heron Hill and Albert Road to reach a height of 230 feet at the junction with Bedonwell Road. The distance is just under half a mile and as it climbs upward the road curves to follow the edge of the escarpment which forms the southern edge of Abbey Wood. On the other side of the road just past the escarpment, at benchmark 217 feet, stands a strange collection of buildings, known locally as West Heath House. The buildings are of different styles. We know that this is so because between May and November 1878 the rateable value of the property rose from £410 to £225pa while the value of the surrounding houses remained constant. The ordnance maps of 1865 and 1897 show different outlines for the house albeit that the second was no larger than the first, which indicates probable use of the same foundations.

It is supposed that the first house was built for a General Sir Samuel Hulse around the turn of the 18th Century. It was not shown on the first edition of the Ordnance Survey Map of Kent printed in 1799 nor on a map dated 1801 but in 1806 General Hulse was fined for encroachment of about an acre of common land near his house on West Heath. How did Sir Samuel acquire the land upon which to have his house built? It appears that he inherited a house, malt house and three pieces of land, totalling 11 acres at Bedonwell when his uncle Richard Hulse of Baldwin, Dartford died in 1806. This land and messuage are believed to roughly occupy an area covered by Osborne, Upper Grove and Dry Hill Roads and we may assume that Samuel added to this nucleus by purchasing the land to the north of it. He lost no time in building West Heath House, encroaching at the same time on the common land to the extent of an acre, hence the fine imposed in 1806. By 1815 the common land of Lessness Heath was being enclosed by Act of Parliament and the commissioner allocated a five acre parcel of West Heath to Sir Samuel Hulse on the west side of his property and authorised a diversion of the road from Bedonwell to skirt around it. This explains the dogleg in Bedonwell Road before it joins Woolwich Road. Before 1815 it ran almost due north a little to

the east of modern Westergate Road. The land is very stony with gravel a couple of feet below the surface of the poor topsoil.

General Hulse became a Field Marshall and was at one time aide-de-camp to the Prince Regent, who is said to have visited West Heath before becoming King George IV. Hulse was also a Governor of the Royal Hospital at Chelsea and a Knight of the Royal Guelphic Order. Following the death of the Field Marshall, in 1837 at the grand age of 90, the West Heath Estate was sold to the Rev. George Preston who died almost immediately and a codicil to his will of October 1839 directs that his recently bought house at Bedonwell, called West Heath, together with farm buildings and 100 acres, should be his left to Emma, his wife. George Preston had previously devised leasehold of the Bridge House in Bexley High Street, next to the mill.

James Renshaw Esq., of Connaught Square, Middlesex bought the house and estate in 1842. He became churchwarden of St. John's Church Erith in 1844 and Bagshaw's directory, published in 1847 describes the house as, "a handsome residence, which has been greatly improved by the present proprietor. It is the seat of James Renshaw Esq." Renshaw died in 1859 having previously sold off various parcels of the land which the Inclosure Commissioner had granted to Samuel Hulse and in 1870 his widow leased the house to the Rev. Philip B Power who lived there until 1878.

The Renshaws then demolished the 72-year-old property and had a new house built on the same site in 1878. The rate books do not name an occupant so perhaps no tenant could be found and the venture may have been an expensive disaster. Four years later, in 1882, the Renshaws sold the entire property to one Seth Smith who retained the house for himself and then proceeded to sell off the rest as plots on which large detached houses were built for sale. When Seth Smith eventually moved away West Heath House was let to Sir Tom Callender, founder of the local cable company. He made some alterations and additions in 1913 leaving the house much as we see it today but when he left in the early 1920s it was converted into self-contained flats and so it has remained.