



Finchden – A Very Short History



Finchden – Front View



Finchden – Back View

Finchden is an ancient Tenterden estate, and presents a number of interesting aspects, not least among which is its twentieth century history. The house is at Leigh Green on the Appledore Road and is hardly noticeable on passing, but this Society has a number of postcards which illustrate it.

The origins are, as so often, lost in the mists of time and one has to remark that speculation is perhaps the principal investigatory tool! Writing in *Archaeologia Cantiana* in 1882, Furley tells us “*On Leigh Green (which also gave the name to a dene) stood Finchden, which I am disposed to think was held by one family for a longer continuous period than any other property in Tenterden; say for more than 400 years. "Dene" appears to have been a suffix to the original name, and afterwards dropt. One of this family, William de Fynchdene, was Chief Justice of the Common Pleas (not King's Bench, as stated by Hasted) in the reign of Edward III.*” Furley is, of course, referring to the fact that it was the Finch family who owned Finchden, and it is not unreasonable for him to speculate that the house and estate took its name from the family. However, I do wonder (we shall never know) whether we may be seeing the reverse. The earliest reference is the one above, so the first estate name we have is in the common local form. We first hear of the “Finch” family in that house around the sixteenth century and one has to wonder whether it was the family which took its name from the place (an occurrence by no means uncommon). All writers assume (not unreasonably but it is an assumption) that William de Fynchdene was of the same family as the subsequent Finches, who, as Hugh Roberts tells us, were not only farmers but heavily involved in the local cloth trade as well. They owned a mill at the bottom of the hill (near “The Dandy”) and it has been speculated (again) that this may have been involved in the fulling of cloth among other functions. It has been said too that Sir Thomas More stayed in the house, and sat under the mulberry tree, which apparently collapsed around the time of the First World War when its supports were removed for aesthetic reasons!! Several members of the Finch family served as Mayor in the seventeenth century, and towards the end of the eighteenth century William Finch served as Town Clerk, not long before the family home of (probably) four and a half centuries, was sold by Richard Finch. Several Finch memorials are to be found in St Mildred’s Church, the most prominent being the stone on the south wall of the sanctuary, recording the “vault beneath” containing family members. Whether this refers to the (now empty) vault beneath the organ has never been clear to me, though I have always felt that the “sedilia” on the same wall have a general appearance of many tomb recesses in chancels. It seems to me unlikely that the sanctuary would have been excavated for a vault as late as the nineteenth century.

It is perhaps appropriate at this point to address the physical structure of the house and I am much indebted to the work of Judith Roberts who studied a large number of Tenterden’s houses during the 1980s. The Leigh Green area was a prosperous part of Tenterden in the 15th to 18th centuries, and Finchden is one of the buildings reflecting that. At its core is a medieval hall house with crown post roof blackened by smoke. The chimney is a later insertion. Additions and alterations were undertaken in the 16th and early 17th centuries, and the house then had a high quality of decorative features. This is probably concordant with the wealth and status of the Finch family and Roberts remarks that “.....with the exception of Hales Place, it is by far the largest and most impressive example of remodelling in the parish.” There were subsequent major additions in

the nineteenth century, including a neo-Gothic "Great Hall" built by Lady Chatterton, who purchased the house in 1860. The farm opposite Finchden bears the name Priory Farmhouse, reflecting the brief occupation of Finchden by Benedictines, for ten years from 1868, when they moved to Canterbury. Indeed, into the early twentieth century, Finchden was usually known as "St Benedict's Priory" later reverting to the ancient name.

Finchden was the centre for what can only be described as a unique (or even uniquely idiosyncratic) "experiment" in the care of the young, for nearly forty years each side of the Second World War. Very familiar to those who lived in Tenterden at the time, but largely unknown (except among those professionally involved in the care of adolescents who "do not fit in"), was the establishment run by George Lyward, who acquired Finchden in 1935. It is an unusual tale. With a leg weakened by polio in childhood, he won a scholarship to Emanuel School, and thereafter taught for several years in sundry schools. Ultimately he won a choral scholarship at St John's College, Cambridge, thereafter returning at first to teaching, then preparing for ordination. He withdrew from taking that step, however, and returned to Emanuel School to teach in the English Department. It was following his own nervous breakdown that he was asked by a psychiatrist to help with some lads in his care. He proved a success, it seems, and in 1930 took on more boys with "problems" at a house in Edenbridge. By 1935 he needed more space, and moved to Finchden which had been vacant for some time.

It would be very inaccurate to describe George Lyward's Finchden as simply an educational establishment, and he might well have cavilled at my use of "experiment" above. The adolescent boys he took on were those with an intractable history of "problems" – those who simply failed to respond to any of the common disciplinary measures, draconian or gentle, and who descended into a spiral of increasing marginalisation. It appears to me that his "method" was to ensure engagement with each and every boy in his own right, whatever the cost in time and patience. There are a number of sources of information about his way with these youngsters, who, it will be understood, were inclined to disruption and evasion, and had unquestionably already, before arriving at Finchden, gone way beyond the resources of family, friends, and authority. He was also supplying respite for the boys – respite from pressures unhelpful to them. I find it remarkable that I have looked at a number of sources, and have come across varying views about the whole matter, but I have not encountered any primary source of information that does not think that what George Lyward was doing actually worked. There were one or two "failures" and one or two boys who vanished from the record, but, within the abilities of each individual boy, they seem to have achieved a decent life. Indeed, I understand that the "old boys" network is healthy, and that there are among them men of some considerable ability in the professions, creative arts, industry and commerce. The "downside" was that, as far as I can determine, George was no businessman. In the early years, funding was often forthcoming from parents of some means who wanted their teenager "sorted out", but more latterly public funding dominated, proving more meagre. That funding came in at all is, I think, a statement of perceived success! Nevertheless, by the time of George's death in 1973, the condition of the building was considered by some to be beyond redemption and its disposal was inevitable.

I could not have said as much about George Lyward without the kindness with which his son John Lyward, and Kath, John's wife, have addressed my queries. The book "Mr Lyward's Answer" by Hamish Hamilton (copies both in the public library and in our Society collection), is one account of the way in which matters were conducted at Finchden, and probably the best known, though I found it rather adulatory in tone. John Lyward (who worked with his father) has himself published his father's autobiographical writings ("George Lyward: His Autobiography" pub. John Lyward 2009) and he has also published privately his own autobiography, which he kindly allowed me to read. I also referred to the Memorial Address for George Lyward, delivered by the late John Prickett (whom I am sure many members of Tenterden & District Local History Society remember well) at St Martin's in the Fields on 26th October 1973. This is on the website at www.finchden.com with other data.

I am also indebted, in compiling this article, to our own Society member, Colin Young, who has himself enquired into the history of Finchden. The work of our former President Hugh Roberts, in "Tenterden: the First Thousand Years" (1995) proved as invaluable as it always does in any pursuit of Tenterden history. The architectural source is in Roberts J. "Tenterden Houses: A Study of the Domestic Buildings of a Kent Parish in a Social and Economic Environment" (1990) and I am grateful to Judith Roberts (now Mrs Shaw) for discussing and enlarging upon this. Those of an enquiring mind will find Furley's comments on Finchden in *Archaeologia Cantiana* vol. 14 (1882) p.49, and most authorities mention Hasted's account.

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