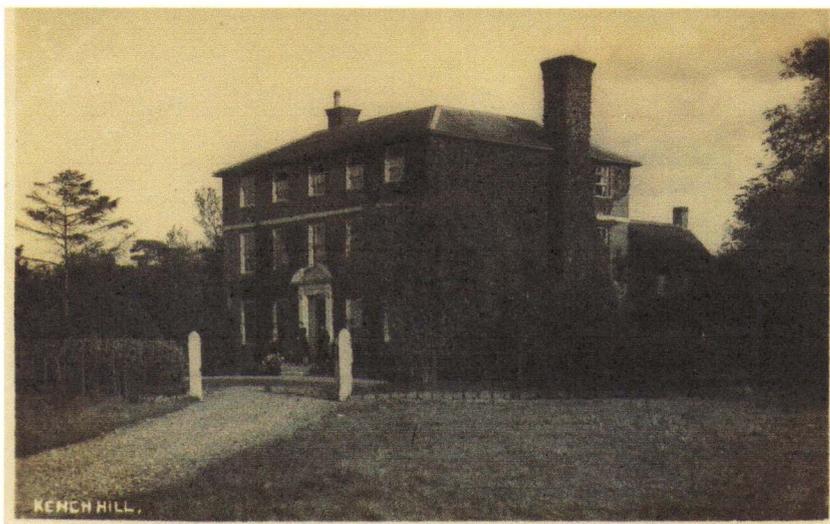
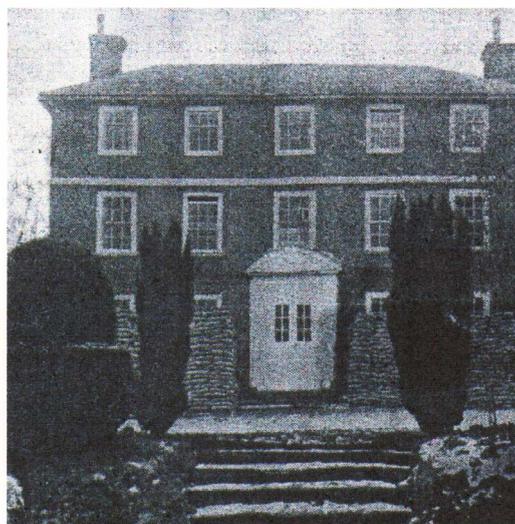




## KENCH HILL



Drive and Front Entrance to Kench Hill c1916



Kench Hill Nursing Home in 1940  
with sandbags around the building

Kench Hill (TQ 906323) is situated at Leigh Green on the B2080 road out of Tenterden towards Appledore and can be found by taking the little lane by the entrance to the house called Tassels.

There has been a house or farm at the Kench Hill site for centuries. During the reign of Henry VIII, Sir Edward Guldeford (or Guilford) bought Kench Hill in 1529. He was Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports and a descendant of the Pittlesden family. In 1538, Sir Edward's daughter Jane married John Dudley (-1553) and they inherited the house, probably as a wedding present. Soon after the marriage, the house at Kench Hill became the property of Henry VIII. It is thought that John Dudley gave it to Henry as a gift. Henry had many houses and palaces already, so he did not live at Kench Hill but visited Tenterden on 28 August 1537. Dudley was made Earl of Warwick in 1547 and then in 1551 was made Earl Marshal and Duke of Northumberland. He was knighted for his bravery in battle and became Sir John Dudley. He was so useful to his country that Henry VIII made him President of Wales. He sought to consolidate his position by the marriage of his son Guildford to Lady Jane Grey on 21 May 1553, but his plan to make himself the power behind the throne collapsed with the accession of Mary and on 22 August 1553 he was executed for high treason at the Tower of London. His fifth son, Robert (1532-1588), became Earl of Leicester and was the favourite of Elizabeth I.

King Henry VIII granted his crown estates in Tenterden to local Royalists and Kench Hill was granted to Thomas Argal. The Argal family owned the estates for over a hundred years before it was bought by Sir Peter Richard (1647), William Smawell (1651) and Robert Clarkson (1680). John Mantell of Tenterden bought Kench Hill in 1687 and the family owned the property for almost 150 years. His family supported the Cavaliers in the Civil War and he became rich by farming Romney Marsh sheep. He was Mayor of Tenterden on three occasions and shortly before his death in 1702 he made an endowment to the Tenterden Grammar School of £200. During the first half of the 18th century the house was pulled down and the present house was constructed about 1765. In appearance it was a twin of Homewood which was built about the same time. Initially the house had only two storeys but between 1800 and 1900 many changes took place. An extra floor was added, the roof altered, and a new kitchen and storage rooms built on. Windows were changed or bricked up to minimise the effect of the Window Tax which was in operation at the time. Thomas Weston married Catherine, the great-niece of Reginald Mantell, John's son, and took over ownership of Kench Hill in 1789. After Thomas died in 1827 Catherine with her two daughters and five servants continued to live there until 1855. There were several owners and tenants up to the First World War when the house became derelict. James Easton owned the property in 1877 and at that time purchased extra land from James Brignall for £1,518 and this made Kench Hill a very large estate.

In 1919 Mr and Mrs Campbell paid £7,500 to buy Kench Hill, having returned from diplomatic service in China. After renovating the house, they lived there with their 6 children, 2 servants and 2 dogs. Charles

Campbell was a brilliant, brave Irishman who made exciting journeys across Mongolia and Korea, discovering new plants and animals and writing books about his expeditions. Fluent in several Chinese languages, he had been friendly with Lord Kitchener and Lord Jellicoe, the Admiral of the British Fleet. Mary Hayley Bell, a boarding school friend of one of the daughters, used to come and visit during the school holidays whilst her family remained in China. She later became a famous playwright, the wife of Sir John Mills, the famous actor and mother of Hayley Mills, the actress. The bankrupt Campbells sold it in 1930 to Colonel Walter Neale for £3,900. The price had probably dropped because the estate was becoming smaller, Britain was in a deep recession and it probably only included the house and immediate land. Colonel Neale had been in the Indian Army and another owner who had also been in the Indian Army was Major Wickham who paid £4,500 in 1934.

In 1938 the Allnot Holding Company bought Kench Hill for £6,500. It was opened as a nursing home by two women partners, Mrs F Milton and Miss V Love, who had earlier been together at Little Fowlers, Hawkhurst. Although her partner later went to Australia, Mrs Florence Milton continued as matron until her retirement to Folkestone in 1962. It became a place where women came to have their babies. Many people living in or near Tenterden were born there. Sir David Frost, the television presenter, was born at Kench Hill in April 1939. His father was the Rev Paradine Frost who at the time was the Methodist Minister in Tenterden. The operating theatre was on the first floor and the present library was the maternity room where up to six mothers stayed for two weeks after they gave birth. Babies were kept in the nursery and were not allowed to sleep with their mothers. New mothers were strictly forbidden from wandering around the house where elderly patients lived. Minor operations to remove tonsils and adenoids were also carried out. Mrs Milton lived in a flat at the back of the house.

During the Second World War it was the only nursing home in the district to be used as an emergency hospital. The number of beds was increased from 24 to 40 and about 800 operations were carried out there. At that time it dealt with maternity cases from as far as Dungeness and Dover. Casualties from the bombing of agricultural hostels at Appledore and Benenden were also sent there. During the Battle of Britain in 1940 a Spitfire was shot down in Kench Hill garden. The people of Kench Hill collected £200 for a replacement Spitfire by donating one old penny every time they heard the air-raid siren. In 1942 ownership of Kench Hill passed to St Mary's Bay Holiday Camp Ltd. On one evening towards the end of the war every pane of glass in the building was shattered when a 'doodlebug' landed nearby. Glass was everywhere and part of the roof was stripped off but not a single patient was hurt. ARP (Air Raid Precaution), VAD (Voluntary Aid Detachment) and other volunteers did marvellous work in clearing up the mess and the nursing home was operating as usual two days later. Kench Hill was sand bagged during the war and the crazy-paving paths were laid by prisoners of war who were sent to work on the farms. Just as today, Kench Hill prided itself on its healthy home-cooked meals using vegetables grown in the garden. For many years it gained many prizes at the Tenterden Horticultural Society shows due to the skill of Mr Bob Bell who was gardener for around 25 years.

The nursing home continued after the war and in 1962 Kench Hill Nursing Home Ltd paid £15,197 to buy the property. The nursing home was now taking National Health Service maternity cases as well as private nursing cases. In all, around 5000 babies were born at Kench Hill before it closed as a nursing home in 1974. The directors of the firm decided that following a costing review and a further review of staffing availability they could not run it in the way it was being run.

One of the many famous people treated at Kench Hill was the author H E Bates who wrote 'The Darling Buds of May'. One lady who spent her last years there was Miss Marjorie Horatia (Kitty) Johnson who was great-great granddaughter of Admiral Horatio Nelson and died in 1974 aged 84. Her great grandfather, Philip Ward, vicar of St Mildred's Church, Tenterden (1830-1859) married Horatia Nelson, the daughter of Admiral Nelson and Emma Hamilton. The Ward's daughter Horatia, one of ten children, was Marjorie's grandmother. She grew up to be clever and beautiful, marrying a London solicitor William Johnson in 1858. Marjorie Johnson was well known at St Mildred's Church where she and Miss Evelyn A Mace, her cousin and companion, were keepers of the church magazines and ensured that the guide books were well produced and well stocked.

ILEA (Inner London Education Authority) purchased Kench Hill for £52,000 in 1975 for it to be used by secondary school pupils from Hackney. It cost another £50,000 to convert the house from a nursing home to a field study centre. Shoreditch School was the first school to visit in 1977. Kench Hill became the property of Hackney in 1990 and in 2008 it became a charity, ensuring its future as a place of caring and learning for many more generations.

References: Tenterden – The First Thousand Years: Hugh Roberts, 1995  
[www.kenchhill.co.uk](http://www.kenchhill.co.uk)

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