



Our 2005/6 season is almost at its end and what an eventful one it has been. As well as a good variety of talks during the winter, all well attended, we have celebrated in fine style our 50th anniversary. In November a lunch was held at Little Silver Hotel when 73 members and guests were present; what a wonderful occasion. The Committee appreciate the support from the members for making it an event suitable to the anniversary. A book covering life in 20th Century Tenterden has also been produced and issued to those members who requested a copy.

Alec Laurence

THE HERONDEN HALL WHELANS

For most people living in Tenterden today, the one item of the Heronden Hall estate of which they will be aware is the heavily damaged gatehouse on the corner of the Smallhythe Road. This building was constructed in 1847 on the orders of William Whelan, when he arranged for the previous house to be replaced by a new mansion. Whelan was one of the three landowners who in early Victorian times owned between them all the land to the west of the Smallhythe Road, roughly in line with the area designated in the ancient charter conferred by King Edgar in 968AD. The other two were William Croughton of Heronden and Virgil Pomfret of Morghew. One common factor in their family histories was that they were all descended from male members who had married ladies from the Curteis family, which had been the owners of the same area in the previous century and before. Both Croughton and Pomfret were keen supporters of St Mildred's Church and the latter had entered into local politics, being the Mayor of the Borough many times over a span of 30 years. But William Whelan appears to have shunned public life, and his history, as communicated to me by one of his descendants, may explain the difference. One day in 2003, I received a telephone call from an obviously elderly and sick gentleman identifying himself as Andrew Whelan from Bexhill, who sought answers to queries relating to Tenterden, St Mildred's and Heronden Hall. Imagine my surprise when after I had replied to his request, and after a few weeks had gone by, I received a double-sided cassette detailing the Whelan family history and its influence on Heronden Hall. On the cassette he explained his inability to write a letter or type one because of his ill-health, and he hoped the alternative would be of interest!!

By his own admission, his account of the Whelan history was based on some family papers, past reminiscences of older members and a certain amount of assumption. Obviously there were instances of contradiction or vagueness but, all in all, his story was fascinating. The Whelans originated from County Kildare, in what is now Eire, but in past centuries had been governed by the English. Particularly harsh times were encountered by the local Irish population during Elizabeth I's reign and also in the Cromwellian period. And, even as late as 1798, an uprising by the Irish had been severely suppressed just before Napoleon's abortive attack on the coast of Southern Ireland. One exceptionally vicious effect on life resulted from the Poyning's Act, brought in during Elizabeth I's reign, whereby

- no Irish person was allowed an education either at home or abroad (particularly France)
- the Irish were not allowed to own any property above the value of £5
- if an Englishman coveted anything owned by an Irishman, he had only to give £5 and it automatically became his property
- no Irishman could hold a commission in the Army or the militia; they could only be ordinary soldiers.

The Act was enforced strictly until its repeal in 1829.

But despite all this adversity William Whelan in the early 19th Century, as the eldest brother of the family, decided to become a barrister; it is assumed he managed to achieve an education in either France or Spain. This is one instance of vagueness in the account, as he must have been a member of a family of means, unlike the majority of Irishmen of that period. William decided to come to England and he must have prospered quickly as he lived in London, at times in Montague Street (off Russell Square) or nearby Gower Street, and also had property in Hampton Court Gardens. It is thought he came to live in the Tenterden area because of a mutual friendship with the Vicar of Northiam and James Winsor, who probably helped Whelan in the purchase of two houses in the town. The first one was the Cedars, also in the Smallhythe Road, a fine residence as it still is to this day. When the time was opportune, he was able to buy the second property that the previous old black and white house stood on. In 1847 he arranged for that building to be demolished, and in its place, the present Heronden Hall was constructed, together with stabling and other out-buildings. Prior to this work being carried out, the old house had shared an access road with Heronden, but Whelan wanted an entrance of his own, hence the building of the gatehouse much nearer to the High street. Andrew Whelan is of the opinion that the gateway originally had very heavy metal railings.

William Whelan was married to Catherine, the daughter of J R Planché, a novelist, dramatist, composer, and more appropriately, Red Rouge, i.e. the Somerset Herald (See Footnote 1 for full, and more correct, history of Planché's life). It is thought that Planché was responsible for most of the heraldry, which may be seen in and around Heronden Hall. This included the Whelan coat-of-arms on the gatehouse, namely a shield with two bull heads, a chevron and 5 martlets, with a crest of a rampant stag with a trefoil in its mouth. It was in some ways similar to the Curteis coat-of-arms which consisted of a sheep with two bull heads, a chevron and a third bull's head, plus a crest of a horse entwined in 5 trees.

Whelan unfortunately did not live long enough to enjoy his new mansion to the full. The 1851 Census shows Heronden Hall occupied by a few servants only, being responsible for the safety and upkeep of the premises. Presumably the family had moved back to London by that time, as William died in Russell Square in 1852, a painful death arising from a boil inside his nose, probably cancerous. But Catherine must have returned to Heronden Hall as she is shown in the 1861 Census as living there with her son William Curteis Whelan (See Footnote 2). There is a Whelan tomb in St Mildred's Churchyard wherein, I am informed, both William and Catherine are buried, together with William Curteis Whelan, grandson Hugh Curteis Whelan and J R Planché. So by the end of the century, Tenterden no longer had a Whelan family in residence. However there is a large stained glass window display over the double West doors of the church, in commemoration of William and Catherine, erected there at the behest of William Curteis Whelan, their son.

Footnotes

1. JAMES ROBINSON PLANCHÉ (1796-1880)
British dramatist and antiquary. Born in London of Huguenot ancestry, February 27, 1796, he achieved some success at the age of 22 with a burlesque, *Amoroso, King of Little Britain*, produced at Drury Lane. Later he wrote, translated or adapted for the stage over 150 pieces, largely burlesques. He wrote the libretto for Carl Weber's *Oberon*. In 1854 he was made *Rouge Croix*, and *Somerset Herald* in 1866. Among his works as an heraldic scholar are *History of British Costumes*, 1834; *The Pursuivant of Arms*, 1852; *The Conqueror and His Companions*, 1874; *Cyclopaedia of Costume*, 1876-79. He died May 30, 1880.
2. The *Kentish Express* of August 2, 1873 reports a day out for Mrs Whelan's servants and their friends – a trip to Bodiam Castle – thereby confirming the family's living in Tenterden after William Whelan's death.