

SOCKNERSH MANOR



Socknersh is barely known. It is off the beaten track towards the northern end of the parish of Brightling. No public road passes it except at a distance, but there is a narrow lane from a minor road to the north. It is a listed building (grade II) and in 2016 was on the market with a guide price of more the £5 million. Socknersh is a remarkable building. Its listing description is:



Early C17 timber-framed building of irregular plan, restored and enlarged. Two storeys. Four windows. Red brick infilling of herring-bone and geometrical patterns. Tiled roof. Casement windows. Two doorways with gabled hoods supported on carved male figures known by local tradition as “the baby eaters”. The interior has contemporary panelling and an overmantel.

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Pevsner published his account in 1965:

Timber-framed, with the most happy-go-lucky brick-nogging. Two doorway pediments are supported by man-brackets, one holding a child, and two in chains. They may originally have supported an oversailing bressumer^a. Early C17. The house in its architecture and its setting is the perfect Christmas card subject.

A more recent survey states that the house was originally two houses, each with its own front door but internally linked. The 1921 restoration removed two staircases and built a new Jacobean-style one, and noted many alterations, all in a style in good keeping with the older existing parts.

The estate has been through many hands, and for most of the last century it has frequently come on to the market. It owes its origins to the St Leger family that came over in 1066 and were close associates of the new king. They prospered but necessarily led a risky life, as did all noble families of the later middle ages: which king to support and which to oppose? More than a century after the Conquest one owner did fall out with his king and was executed. Not long after that, the junior, Socknersh, branch of the family adopted the estate’s name for their own.

The history of ownership is inevitably complicated, sometimes confusing and incomplete. In 1294 it was described as a messuage and garden, with 50 acres of arable land, 100 of heath

^a bressumer = beam in a timber-framed building to support the, usually projecting, superstructure.

and pasture, eight of meadow and much of wood. The size of the property has varied considerably over the centuries.

At this point the owner was one Will de Etchingam. The Ashburnham family are reported as being concerned with the estate, though at this point there is no further information on this. From at least 1439 the estate was held by Simon Bate but after his death in the middle of the century his heirs shared the property with the brothers William and John Covert. Will's portion passed to his son John, then in 1503 to John's cousin Richard. Richard sold his part of his property to John Collins in 1529. Bate Interest remained until it was sold to the Ashburnhams in or before 1517, and they kept it until the end of that century.

Collins was an ironmaster of Burwash, and clearly was interested in the potential of the estate for iron production. St Bartholomew's church there records:

a cast-iron sepulchral slab of especial interest. Before it was placed [on a wall] it lay on the floor, marking the last resting place of John Collins, a member of the family of the ironmaster of that name... Of 14th century origin it is said to be the oldest existing example of a Sussex cast-iron grave slab.

The date quoted is clearly incorrect because cast iron was not available in the fourteenth century. It is much more likely to commemorate the John Collins above who founded the iron furnace at Socknersh in about 1529, which lasted until about 1675. Remnants of the furnace may still be seen. The 1:25000 Ordnance Survey map clearly shows Furnace Wood, Pond Bay and ponds. The venture was clearly associated with the Socknersh stream.

Collins died in 1537, and was succeeded by his son Alexander, who died in 1551. His son, also Alexander, did not last long, dying in 1560. There is then a gap in the records but it is known that the second Alexander's brother Thomas was there before 1578; he was to die in 1612. His widow was bequeathed the property, and she died in 1618 when it passed to their son, also Thomas. It was the second Thomas who built Socknersh, largely in the form that one may see it today, in about 1620. He made his name by being a fierce Puritan before and during the Commonwealth and a champion of Protestant ascendancy in Ireland. In 1667 his son, also Thomas, took over, and the line lasted to 1753.

The Collinses were clearly a most successful family, for in 1752 it was clear that they owned the manors of Socknersh and Hollingrove at Brightling and Shadwell at Buxted, along with farms at Brightling (Fittlehurst), Burwash (Houndhurst), Cold Harbour (Salehurst/Brightling), Mayfield and Northiam. They also had land elsewhere in Sussex and in Kent. They are commemorated in Brightling parish church. But they had ceased to live at Socknersh after 1724, when the property was let to tenants as a farm. At some point the eastern end of the house was demolished. The days of the great country house were facing an end.

The property was bequeathed to the last Collins's cousin George Luxford of Wartling, who died in 1759. His nephew by marriage then succeeded to ownership, which lasted in various family hands until 1800. The last tenant, John Holloway, bought the freehold of the estate early in the next century and lived there. The name Holloway cannot be found at Brightling in the Sussex Family History Group records (and he appears as a freeholder for the manor in the 1837 register), but *Halloway* can be, there and in later censuses. There are references in the Pess to Holloway in 1828 and Halloway in 1832, and Holloway again on the electoral

register of 1837, so one might reasonably deduce that this is the same family. They were farmers, and appear in the 1841 and 1851 censuses as living at Socknersh farm; John Hallaway died in 1855.

There must have been difficulty in selling the estate because notices of sale appeared in the press in 1855 and 1857, with Hallaway's trustees not selling the farm stock until as late as 1859. The buyers (for £9050, with a mortgage provided by Hayley Burrell of Catsfield) were Henry Capel Lofft of Suffolk and his sister Laura Capel Trevelyan of Wallington in Northumberland. Lofft died in 1873 and his interest passed to his son Robert Emlyn Lofft; two years later Laura passed her rights to Mary Whittred Capel Lofft, her niece. She was the only heir because a more senior branch of the family had all died by drowning in an accident on Lake Geneva. When Robert died in 1900 she became the only heir. She is recorded as being at Socknersh Manor in the 1901 census. She owned three farms in Sussex, yielding, it was said, little income.

In the meantime only tenants had lived there. In 1861 it was John Bound, a farmer, and in 1871 Job Cook, a farmer with 240 acres, employing seven men. (As the 1855 and 1857 sale particulars were for 388/389 acres, some may have been sold before Bound's arrival.)

The censuses of 1881 and 1891 show only agricultural labourers living in the manor. It is clear that Cook (Cooke in the press) sold up in 1879 and moved to Guestling. He was succeeded by A H Wood, for only three years; in 1883 there is a reference to the late James Rochester of Socknersh farm (but he had died in 1869) and in 1902 to John Braye.

In 1907 the unmarried Mary Lofft sold the property to Alfred Leonard Lawley, a civil engineer who was to spend much of his later life in what was then Portuguese East Africa (now Mozambique). He restored the name of manor and when he sold the manor house part of the estate in 1920 he retained lands to its west for another ten years. In the 1911 census Lawley is described as aged 50, in occupation of Socknersh with his wife, two visitors and five servants; in the same house, listed as a separate dwelling, is Thomas Hoade Woods, an estate agent. When Lawley sold the estate the sale particulars described it in part as a

VALUABLE FREEHOLD HISTORICAL MANORIAL AGRICULTURAL and SPORTING ESTATE containing original carved Tudor chimney pieces and oak panelled rooms, together with cottages, ample buildings and land in all about 317 acres.

The buyer was Florence Temple Cross, born Florence Griswold at New York in 1867. She had married a medic and army officer Horatio Robert Odo Cross, who had died in 1915. They were clearly wealthy people: in 1911 they are recorded as living at 96 Eaton Square with their small family and eleven servants, and when she died at 20 Curzon Street she left a little under £170,000, equalling some £10M in income or wealth in 2018.

Florence Cross was the most important person in the later history of Socknersh. By 1920 the manor had become very run down. A magazine article of 1904 had noted this but said that it was not beyond the art of the restorer. It remarked favourably not only on the porch but on its fireplaces and its wooden panelling.

Although a small addition had been made at the north-west corner the various owners had not been able to afford, or had not cared, to restore this very distinguished building to a presentable appearance. Indeed, had Florence Cross not bought it very probably it would have been demolished, as was the fate of many country houses in the twentieth century, irrespective of their aesthetic or historical value.

Her architect was E H Burgess, though she was active in proposing changes to the plan first agreed. The plan enlarged the hall and added a servants' quarter and a swimming pool. Outside the house she does not seem to have been very active except for opening her garden to visitors on one day each year in the 1930s, for apart from that her only newspaper report is her unsuccessful objection to the Hastings Corporation Bill of 1937, which sought alterations to the Socknersh stream to supply the proposed Darwell reservoir. She died later in the year.

Since then Socknersh has been through several hands. Florence Cross's son Graham Griswold Odo Cross (1898-1963) took over but sold the property, probably in 1938, to Cecil Ward Mason. Mason was still the owner in the mid-1950s, despite the occupants of the Rye workhouse having been sent there in 1941 when their own property was requisitioned for military use (they presumably returned in 1945). The next occupant was James Lilley, of the shoe firm of Lilley and Skinner, who bought it in 1957 when the auctioneer's advertisement stated that it was 'undoubtedly one of the most perfect properties of its size and kind in the Home Counties'.

It was next sold in 1973, when it had some 1016 acres, and again in 1984, for £800,000. This sale attracted some publicity because the new owners were the singers Tom Jones and Engelbert Humperdinck, who used it for weekend parties until apparently they fell out with each other and in turn sold it to Russell Beswick, who put it back on the market in 2014, for £5M. The property then included 56 acres, including restored gardens. It must have one of the most attractive settings in Sussex but it did not sell. In 2017 lottery winners bought it for £4M.



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