



The History of Kench Hill

The Early Years



The first Kench Hill house may have looked like this

There has been a house or farm at Kench Hill site for centuries. By 1500 AD a farmer called Thomas Trueman owned a farm here. He would have farmed animals, especially sheep, and grown crops on his land.

During the reign of King Henry VIII, **Sir Edward Guldeford** (or Guilford) bought Kench Hill in 1529. He was a very important man - Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports and a descendant of the Pittlesden family.

The Cinque Ports are 5 coastal towns in Kent and Sussex, such as Dover, where the crossing to France

is narrowest. It was originally formed for military and trade purposes.

In 1538 Sir Edward's daughter Jane married John Dudley and they inherited the house, probably as a wedding present. **John Dudley** was Earl of Warwick and Duke of Northumberland. He was a brave, skilful and courageous soldier and sailor. Eventually he was knighted for his bravery in battle and became Sir John Dudley. He was so useful to his country that King Henry VIII made him president of Wales. For a while John was rich and famous, but then he became greedy. John was found guilty of treason and executed at the Tower of London.



The Guldeford family Crest



Soon after John Dudley married Jane Guldeford the house at Kench Hill became the property of **King Henry VIII (pictured left)**. It is thought that John Dudley gave it to Henry as a gift. Henry had many houses and palaces already, so he didn't live at Kench Hill but he did visit Tenterden on August 28th 1537. One of the Dudley sons married Lady Jane Grey, another was Earl of Leicester, the favourite of Elizabeth 1st.

Owners and Tenants

King Henry VIII granted his crown estates in Tenterden to local Royalists, and Kench Hill was granted to **Thomas Argal**. The Argal family owned Kench Hill and other estates in the area eg Morghew, between 1542 and 1647. They did not live in the house themselves so tenants George and Edward Fielippe paid rent to the Argals to live and farm at Kench Hill. Often when a tenant died, his son would live in the house and farm the land. The Argal's son Thomas, then his brother Richard, owned the farm after their father.

In 1647 Sir Peter Richard bought Kench Hill and let it to tenant Jo Reading. In 1651 William Smawell owned Kench Hill and sold it to Robert Clarkson from London in 1680.

John Mantell of Tenterden bought Kench Hill in 1687. He became rich by farming Romney Marsh sheep. He gave a gift of £200 towards a school in Tenterden. His family supported the Cavaliers in the civil war in England against the Roundheads.

John Mantell's family and its descendants owned the Kench Hill estate for almost 150 years.



Romney Marsh sheep

A New House at Kench Hill

During the first half of the 18th century, the old house was pulled down and the building which we know now as Kench Hill house was constructed about 1760. At first the house had only two storeys. You can see the original beams in the second floor bedrooms. The back extension was added later. The present staff room was then the kitchen.

The people who lived at Kench Hill were rich and had servants. The servants may have slept in the attic bedrooms. There is a belfry on the roof which had a bell which was rung to tell the workers in the fields when it was meal time.

Thomas Weston

Thomas Weston married Catherine, the great-niece of Reginald Mantell and took over ownership of Kench Hill in 1789. After Thomas died in 1827 Catherine, her two daughters and five servants continued to live in the big house until 1855.



Kench Hill House

Seven members of the Hachison family also lived on the estate as tenants and paid rent to the owner. They worked the farm and lived in the coach house. In 1843 the tenant was Thomas Ade-White, who paid rent of £455 per year for *"Mansion House, Coach House, Barn Cottage and two outhouses, garden, orchard yards, parcels of arable, meadow pasture, hop, marsh and woodland in the Parish of Tenterden and Ebony."*

The Evans Family and Tenants

In 1856 **Brooke Evans** from Edgbaston owed Kench Hill. He had a tenant named James Cook who was followed by another tenant, Henry Dunn. In 1865 ownership passed to Alfred Smith Evans and Douglas Evans. James Cook returned as tenant in 1867.

Hackney and the Hop Industry



Oast House

James Cook was a farmer and hop grower. The hop industry in Kent was very important at this time. For this reason there are lots of oast houses in Kent. Many families from Hackney would have made the journey to Kent to earn money picking hops each summerr. Maybe some stayed at Kench Hill. Kench Hill was much larger then and had many fields of pasture, woodland and farmland.

Changes to the House

Between 1800 and 1900 many changes took place. An extra floor was added, the roof was altered, and new kitchen and storage rooms built on. Windows were changed or bricked up. At the time people paid tax according to the number of windows in the house. Lots of people bricked up windows to avoid paying the tax. In 1874 James Easton owned Kench Hill and in 1877 purchased extra land, making Kench Hill a very large estate. The extra land was bought from James Brignall for £1,518.

When James Easton died the estate was looked after by trustees who were members of his family. In 1888 a tenant called Stringer Weston lived there.



Hop Pickers



The lily pond and garden (c. 1930)

Water for the house was pumped and filtered from the lily pond each day up until 1930's. During a drought there was no water at all and the residents would have to move away temporarily.

The Twentieth Century – Global visitors

The 1902 census tells us that the **Milne family** were tenants of Mrs Easton. They remained in the house when it was later sold to Isabella Marshall. William and Emily Milne were English, but their 3 daughters, Fay then aged 16, Vera, 12 and Ruth, 8, had all been born in America and so were American citizens. They lived in the house with 5 servants:



Emily Milne, 1911

- Jessie Coles, 30 years, Governess Spinster. Born in Kent
- Agnes Keetle, 33 years, Sewing Maid Widow. Born in Suffolk
- Annie Bury, 26 years. Cook, Spinster Born in Surrey
- Mary Evans. 24 years, Parlourmaid Spinster. Born in Berkshire
- Amy Kermack, 14 years, Housemaid Born in Tenterden. Kent



Ruth and Vera Milne

Isabella sold the house to John Bracebridge in 1909 and he sold it to Isabella Maud in 1915. Isabella had a tenant called George Homewood. The house was empty and became derelict during the First World War (1914-18).

In 1919 **Mr and Mrs Campbell** paid £7,500 to buy Kench Hill and lived here with their 6 children, 2 servants and 2 dogs, after returning from diplomatic service in China and renovating the house. 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. He was fluent in several Chinese languages.

He was good friends with Lord Kitchener and Lord Jellicoe, the Admiral of the British fleet. The youngest daughter, Osu (b. 1918), is still living in France. Her nephew visited the Centre and told us some recollections of his mother Betty. 'Lighting was with acetylene gas. They owned at least 1 car. In holidays, a friend from boarding-school who visited whilst her family remained in China, was Mary Hayley Bell who later became a playwright and married Sir John Mills, the famous actor and father of Hayley Mills, actress. The young Mary enjoyed riding ponies across the fields and all the children liked visiting the Kench Hill Woods'.

The estate included many farms, a windmill and over 800 acres of land. The bankrupt Campbells sold it in 1930 to Colonel Walter Neale for £3,900. The farm was becoming smaller at the time which is probably why the price dropped to include only the cost of the house and immediate grounds.



A Pony and Trap

Colonel Neale was in the Indian Army. He was a gentleman farmer who probably had a car. Cars were still quite rare and most people travelled by pony and trap or walked. The coach house was for keeping horses and carriages on the ground floor whilst the coachman lived upstairs.

Another owner who had been in the Indian Army was **Major Wickham** who paid £4,500 for Kench Hill in 1934.

Kench Hill Becomes a Hospital

In 1938 the Allnot Holding Company bought Kench Hill for £6,500. Kench Hill became a nursing home where women came to have their babies. **Florence Milton** was the Matron. Many people living in or near Tenterden were born here. Sir David Frost, television presenter, was one of the first babies born in April 1939. The operating theatre was on the first floor. The present library was the maternity room where up to 6 mothers stayed for 2 weeks after they gave birth. Babies were kept in the nursery (now Room 3) and were not allowed to sleep with their mothers. New mums were strictly forbidden from wandering around the house where elderly private patients lived.



The library as a maternity room

Minor operations to remove tonsils and adenoids were also carried out. Florence lived in a flat at the back of the house, where the office is now situated. Florence's nursing sister was Violet Jackson. In 1948 she planted an oak tree in the garden to celebrate 500 years of history at Kench Hill. Just as today, Kench Hill prided itself on its healthy home-cooked meals using vegetables grown in the garden.

Second World War (1939-1945)

Kench Hill was used as an emergency hospital during WW2. It had 40 beds and dealt with air-raid casualties and also continued to deliver babies. In 1942 ownership passed to St. Mary's Bay Holiday Camp Ltd., although Kench Hill still remained as a hospital.

The crazy-paving paths were laid by prisoners of war who were sent to work on the farms. It is made from a local stone, Bethersden marble.

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, which was often 10 or 12 times a day.



Spitfires



Kench Hill sandbagged during the war

Towards the end of the war a flying bomb exploded near Kench Hill and caused extensive damage by ripping off the roof and shattering the windows. Luckily no one was hurt, and the damage was repaired after the war.

A Nursing Home continues after the War

In all 5,000 babies were born at Kench Hill. Many famous people were treated here including H. E. Bates, who wrote *The Darling Buds Of May*. In 1962 Kench Hill Nursing Home Ltd paid £15,197 to buy the property, becoming an NHS hospital.

One lady who spent her last years here was Marjorie Horatia Johnson, great-great-granddaughter of the nation's hero Admiral Horatio Nelson, whose fleet destroyed Napoleon's navy at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805. Marjorie died here in 1974, aged 84.

Her great-grandfather, Philip Ward, vicar of St Mildred's Church, Tenterden 1830-1858, had married Horatia Nelson, the beloved daughter of Admiral Nelson and Lady Emma Hamilton. But as an illegitimate child she did not inherit his wealth and the Ward family were poor. They had 10 children, many dying at a young age, but Marjorie's grandmother (also called Horatia) grew up to be clever and beautiful, marrying a London solicitor, William Johnson, in 1858. One of her best friends, Miss Weston, lived at Kench Hill at that time.



Admiral Horatio Nelson

Hackney Children come to Kench Hill

ILEA (Inner London Education Authority) paid £52,000 for Kench Hill in 1975 for the use of secondary school pupils from Hackney. It cost another £50,000 to convert the house from a nursing home to a field study centre. In 1977 Shoreditch School was the first to visit. Owen John was appointed Head of Centre and lived in the Coach House until his retirement in 2004. Sandi Bain is the current Head of Centre.

Kench Hill became the property of Hackney in 1990. In 2008 it became a charity, ensuring its future as a place of caring and learning for many more generations.



Thank you to the friends and relatives of the Milne, Campbell and Jackson families who helped compile this history and kindly sent us archives.

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