

EAST COURT, EAST GRINSTEAD

Owners and occupiers

East Court came into being in 1769 when the house was built by John Cranston, a London lawyer who had been Assistant Warden of Sackville College from 1767 to 1769. He was married to Catherine Green, whose family owned the nearby farm known as Estcot's, and it was on their land that East Court was built and the estate developed.

The 1840 tithe map shows that by then the East Court estate covered 132 acres (53.5 hectares), added to which the Cranstons owned two farms which gave them another 50 acres (20.2 ha).

In 1863 John Cranston's descendants let East Court to the Rev Charles Walter Payne Crawfurd who lived

there with his family until the early 1900s. In 1906 the Cranston trustees sold the property to Ernest Cooper, an accountant from Limpsfield in Surrey who refurbished and extended the house as well as playing an important part in developing the grounds.

At the time of Ernest Cooper's death in 1926, the estate consisted of over 500 acres (202.5 ha) which included several farms. Subsequently the whole estate was bought by Frederick Woodgates, a developer, who sold off parts of the farmland for housing. Later owners of East Court included Capt Frederick Card and Godfrey H J Williams.

During WW II East Court was requisitioned by the Army but in September 1945 a local merchant banker and philanthropist, Alfred Wagg, through his Manor Charitable Trust, bought East Court with its 120 acres (48.6 ha) for £16,700, intending it to become a permanent memorial to the people of East Grinstead who had lost their lives during the war. Shortly afterwards he sold the house at East Court and five surrounding acres (2 ha) for £6,576 to the East Grinstead Urban District Council. And then, in 1949, Alfred Wagg conveyed the East Court estate to East Grinstead War Memorial Limited, an organisation set

up specifically to oversee the running of the estate for the benefit of the local community

Some of the land to the north and north-west of the house was sold in 1960 to Sussex County Council. The ambulance station was built on the north side and a new police station, police houses, and magistrates' court to the north-west. Since 1974, when East

Grinstead UDC became East Grinstead Town Council and needed less space, part of the house itself has been let out to various local groups. The former magistrates' court is now also used by the community as is the Meridian Hall, created by the conversion of the southern stable complex in 1986.

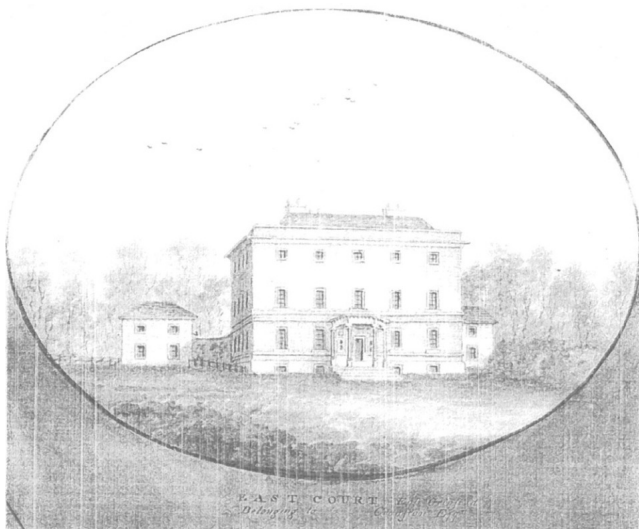


East Court, with view of the middle terrace, 1953

Development of the gardens

With the arrival of Ernest Cooper in 1906, the internal layout of the house was altered and the main entrance was relocated from the east to the west side. Here stable blocks at right angles to the house created an entrance forecourt which was flanked by high, clipped yew hedges. In front of the house there was a turning circle with a central circular lawn and sundial. The whole area has since been paved over and pedestrianised.

It seems that the relocation of the entrance from east to west gave Ernest Cooper the opportunity to lay out new gardens. A watercolour by James Lambert, dating to about 1784, shows no evidence of formal gardens on the east side of the house: in the style of the day, the parkland continued up to the house with some shrubberies. Nor is there any evidence of pleasure grounds in two photographs which date to 1900. Therefore it must be assumed that it was Cooper who created the new terraces and pleasure grounds on the east front. Three wide terraces were linked by brick steps and laid to lawn, the lower two terraces boasting flower beds, rustic pergolas, a bowling green (1926 Sales Particulars) and mature cedar trees.



Watercolour by James Lambert, c 1784, showing east façade of East Court

The upper and middle terraces are still extant, albeit with a much simplified flower border remaining on the middle terrace. In 1977, to commemorate the Queen's Silver Jubilee, a plaque was placed on the upper terrace marking the Greenwich Meridian Line which runs through East Court's grounds. An open-air theatre was also built at the end of the middle terrace.

Besides the terraces, Ernest Cooper seems to have been responsible for the creation of a rose garden on the south side of the house. The garden has now vanished, as has much of the high clipped hedge which surrounded it, but the eastern stretch remains, incorporating large wrought-iron gates which at some point were transferred from the King George playing fields in East Grinstead. The area is now a paved courtyard in which there is a small statue of a woman and child and a sundial.

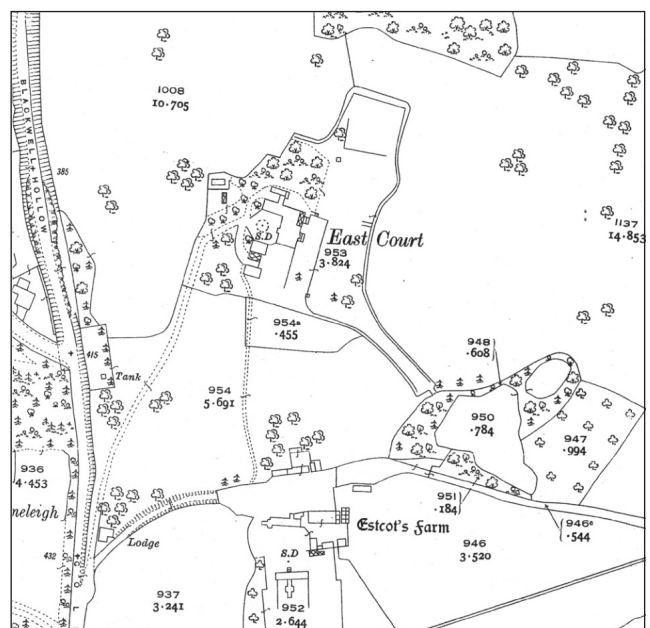
South of the rose garden was a large rockery and to the south of that another area of garden extending to about 0.5 acre (0.2 ha) which is marked on the 1931 and 1936 OS maps. It is still possible to see some remnants of the rockery, while the small southern garden is now a lawned area, with shrubs and small trees, and it is here that the Garden of Remembrance is to be found. It consists of a semi-circular raised brick terrace edged with rose beds and has views across the parkland. It was constructed in 1950 to commemorate those residents of East Grinstead who lost their lives during WW II.

On the south-east corner of the terraces there is a grass path which slopes down towards the lake. On either side there are yew hedges which were in existence in 1926, and so the path, which was once crazy-paved, may well have been another of Ernest Cooper's introductions. It leads to a flight of steps, now fenced off, beyond which is the lake which is shown on the 1840 tithe map with an island in the north-east portion. From the 1873 OS map one can see that the island had disappeared and the north-east portion had become

separated from the main lake resulting in the formation of a second pond. By the 1930s the smaller pond had become a swimming pool and it was later converted into a model boating lake and then a paddling pool. It has since been drained and is now a skateboard area. The lake itself is in a neglected state, its banks overgrown. The boathouses have disappeared.

Park and woodland

Besides its gardens East Court has the parkland already mentioned and some important woodland. The 1840 tithe map shows that the parkland originally encircled the house. However, by the time of the 1873 OS map the western area had become separated from the eastern section. Today the former is mainly laid to lawn interspersed with trees, but there are new access roads and parking areas to cater for the various civic buildings built since the 1960s.



Extract from the Ordnance Survey 4th Edition 1931, 25" to the mile (not to scale) showing East Court

To the east of the eastern parkland are the East Court War Memorial playing fields. The eastern part of the estate is also the site of Ashplats Wood which, with its central area of ancient woodland, is recognised as a Site of Nature Conservation Importance.

In 2002 a landscape design scheme was drawn up for the East Court estate with a view to applying for finance from bodies including the National Lottery Fund, but this initiative has not advanced any further.

However, the area around the house, together with the framework of Ernest Cooper's gardens, the lake and parkland, has been designated a Conservation Area.

Hilary May

This report is an abridged version of an in-depth research project conducted by Hilary and published in January 2007. The report lists all the source material; a copy can be seen at the West Sussex Record Office.