

250

Years: The following is an Account of the Races on Barham Downs.

On Tuesday Mr Rogers's Horse, Jack of Newbery, won the King's Plate of One Hundred Guineas, beating his Grace the Duke of Kingston's Chesnut Horse, Miner. The Odds at starting went five to one on Miner, and the knowing ones were greatly taken in.

On Wednesday the County Subscription Plate, of fifty Pounds, was won by Mr Zach. Kingsford's Bay Gelding, Wasp (late Mr Rogers's) beating Mr Crofoer's Bay Gelding, Kentish Gelding. The Odds were three to one on either Horse, before starting.

On Thursday the City Subscription Plate, of fifty Pounds, was won by his Grace, the Duke of Kingston's Chesnut Filley, Jasp, beating Mr Siddon's Bay Horse, Tramper, and Mr Settle's Bay Horse, Shrimp; which both run resty.

The Kentish Post, July 26-29, 1758

MEMORIES

1903

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■ The narrow bridge and trees in Bridge High Street looking towards Canterbury



■ Bridge High Street looking up Bridge Hill

Old postcards show narrow bridge and street with trees

FREE of traffic and lined with trees, these postcards show the village of Bridge in a bygone age.

They are owned by 72-year-old Michael Ford, who lived in Bridge between 1935 and 1959.

He found them among his parents' possessions, although he says he is unable to place

the year.

Mr Ford said: "They are definitely from before the Second World War and perhaps from even before 1920.

"It's interesting to note just how different it was back then.

"Obviously, there are no cars in these postcards and you can see in one of the pictures that

there were a lot more trees.

"There were also a lot more shops and the bridge, from the which the village gets its name, was narrower back then."

■ Can you date these pictures? If so, contact us at 9 St George's Place, Canterbury, CT1 1UU, or email kentishgazette@thekmgroup.co.uk



■ Reader Christine Treharne is hoping for information on the people in this wedding photo

Historic homes

The Palladian party house

Higham Park has come alive again and is ready for a fresh round of festivities, writes Fred Redwood

There is something of the high camp diva about Higham Park, near Canterbury in Kent. Aloof, ornate and architecturally grand, this Grade II listed 18th-century mansion, for sale for £7.5 million, has a history riddled with tales of excess and tragedy.

It has bewitched people for centuries. "That was certainly true in my case," says the current owner, Jane Debliek, a property developer in her mid-fifties. "I used to drive past, taking my daughter to school in Canterbury and there was something so incredibly romantic about it that I longed to own it one day."

That day came in 2005 when she swapped life in a three-bedroom apartment in Herne Bay for Higham Park's Palladian style, 24,000 sq ft of internal space and 23 acres of grounds.

It was an acquisition inspired more by blind infatuation than logic. Certainly, her first viewings of the interior — her chance to see the grand



SOPHIE LASLETT

Grand ideas: Jane Debliek, below left, has restored Higham Park to its former glory. "I could see that beneath the dust this was a beautiful house," she says

old house without its stage make-up — would have put off a less determined buyer. “It was a cold and heartless place, giving off the stale after-taste of a long party,” she says. “But I could see that beneath the dust this was a beautiful house and I wanted to bring it alive again.”

The chequered history of Higham Park stretches back to 1320, when a house at this spot was ceded to the de Hefham family by Edward II. In 1534 the house was acquired by Thomas Culpepper, who had an affair with Catherine Howard, wife of Henry VIII, for which they were both executed.

In the late 1700s the Hallett family bought the estate, developing the house’s artistic connections. Gainsborough painted his masterpiece *The Morning Walk* here, depicting the family walking through the summer



A favourite game was to blow up garden statues to impress the guests

garden. Jane Austen and her sister Cassandra visited, as did — it is claimed — Mozart. More riotous days followed with Countess Margaret Zborowski’s acquisition of Higham for £17,500 in 1910. The Countess died only three months later and left the house to her son, Louis, then aged 16, together with £11 million and a con-

siderable amount of real estate in the United States, including seven acres of Manhattan and several blocks on Fifth Avenue. Count Louis did what most teenagers would do in the circumstances — he partied, drove fast cars and made a lot of noise. Young Louis was particularly keen on pyrotechnics: a favourite game was to blow up statues in the garden to impress his many house guests. Indeed, bits of a garden temple that he blew to smithereens were found, it is said, a mile away.

Louis also built one of the country’s first aero-engined cars, which he drove one day at Brooklands when the 12-year-old Ian Fleming was among the crowd. Years later the car was the model for Fleming’s own fictional Chitty Chitty Bang Bang.

Cost of living

● Edward Church, a partner at Strutt and Parker in Canterbury and the agent for Higham, says: “Higham Park is about twenty times the size of a normal house. It follows that it costs twenty times as much to maintain.”

● He estimates the annual running cost of a country house the size of Higham at **£105,000**. The typical breakdown is: gardeners (two full-time or more if part-time), **£25,000**; two housekeeping staff, **£30,000**; oil central heating, electricity and other utilities, **£40,000**; general maintenance, **£10,000**.

● Higham Park is for sale for **£7.5 million**: 01227 451123, struttandparker.com

The Ian Fleming connection continued after Count Louis died at the age of 28, when he hit a tree while racing in the Italian Grand Prix at Monza. The author, by this time in his twenties, was a frequent visitor to the house when it was in the hands of its new owner, Walter Whigham, a merchant banker and a Governor of the Bank of England. He used to travel there from London on the Dover bus — the 007.

During the Second World War, Higham Park was controlled by the War Office. Later, in the 1950s, it became a hospital. By the time Patricia Gibb and Amanda Harris-Deans bought it for £1.5 million in 1995 it had been abandoned for several years and was in a sorry state: windows were nailed up, the roof

leaked and the Portland stone flagstones of the hall were concealed under cement. The pair did a marvellous job of saving the house, but Debliek wanted to add the finishing touches. “I wanted it to be a romantic family home again,” she says. “I wanted it to ring with the sound of friends and parties and laughter.”

Debliek has spent well over £100,000 on carpeting throughout the house, adding curtains, painting the walls and installing a new kitchen. She has added bathrooms for the 14 bedrooms, and she has trawled the county’s auctions rooms and antique sales in search of furniture which would not be dwarfed by the enormous reception rooms.

Now you enter to a wonderful pillared reception hall with magnificent scagliola (marble-effect) columns. The beautiful panelled music room overlooks the rose garden, as does the drawing room with its ornate fireplace and modillion cornice ceiling. The art deco morning room is octagonal-shaped and the dining room is Debliek’s favourite. “We have had 24 sitting around here, with music playing and wine flowing,” she says. “It was unforgettable.”

The grounds are also spectacular. It takes five gardeners to manicure the different areas, including the sunken rose garden, the pergola walk, the secret garden and the Italianate water garden, which is reputed to be the longest lily pond in England.

Yet now, sadly, with the break-up of her relationship with her long-term partner, the house has become too big for Debliek. “I’d love whoever buys it next to really take it back to its former glory days,” she says, “to make Higham Park a party house again.”



Frame game: Gainsborough painted *The Morning Walk* at Higham Park