

## ***THE HISTORY OF DILLINGTON ESTATE***

This is not a detailed history of the Dillington Estate but should rather be referred to as Cameron's historical and family meanderings.

I suppose like all good chronicles one needs to start at the present day. What is the Dillington Estate: it currently consists of approximately 3,000 acres of farmland and woods pretty well within a ring fence in an area which extends mostly to the east of Ilminster: from Eames Mill on the River Isle to Water Street Farm at Seavington ; from Moolham Farm, above Pretwood to the south, to Hurcott Farm just this side of Shepton Beauchamp and from Ilford Bridges Farm down on the River Isle to the outskirts of Dowlish Wake. It currently consists of a Home Farm of over 2000 acres and three let farms along with 140 acres of woodlands. All three of the remaining tenant families are into their third generation and, hopefully, that consistency will be maintained into the future.

In the old days, of course, there would have been many farms of varying sizes and a lot of diversified activities: Millers – seemingly one every mile or so on the River Isle: Eames Mill; Dye Mills (which was just below Cocks Bridge at Ashwell, and according to the maps as late as 1890 used to be a hamlet of some 3 or 4 houses but has now completely disappeared apart from the vague remains of a mill race); there was also a mill at East Dillington, that is I believe, the current Dillington Farms which got its water from the dammed up stream in Longponds which I restored in the 1970s (the pond that is and not the Mill). There was a mill, apparently, on Whitelackington Farm -although how it was driven I do not know. There were also butchers - all with their own piece of land for holding stock. There was The Smithy at Whitelackington which was famous throughout central and south Somerset - the last tenants there were Spinks, father and son. Although I never knew him, I gather the last Spink was a big man in more ways than one, and a gentleman in every sense of the word; truly a gentle giant. The wrought iron gates at the top of the Taunton High street at the entrance to Vivary Park were made by him.

But I am running ahead of myself. Let me start at the beginning if there is one. One of the main things I learned in my forays at Obridge Road, while preparing for this talk, was that really the entity of Dillington Estate as a wholly-owned unit of land is quite recent, however, it is also true to say that lands on a much larger scale were owned with it during its history.

What is recent and seems in this case to be a 18th and 19th Century concept is the ownership of all units of land within a Manor. Before that at Dillington, and I don't believe Dillington is unique, the ownership of a Manor or the main farm within it did not mean that all the land was vested in that one owner. In other words it seemed to be rare for a ring fence to be drawn around a particular

ownership. The Estate with a ring fence around it had to be acquired slowly with a sense of purpose over several generations -but more of that later.

Dillington Estate must start with the Spekes who were living in our house, then called Whitelackington House, at least by the 15th Century. In Henry 7's time they appear to have made a mistake by supporting Perkin Warbeck's rebellion. but also appear to have been forgiven because not long afterwards they were chosen to escort Catherine of Aragon up to London. It was thus that Catherine came to stay at what is now Whitelackington Manor on her way to London from Spain when she came to marry the eldest son of Henry VII, called Arthur. He subsequently died, leaving the throne open for Henry VIII who then married his brother's wife which gave him an excuse later to divorce her. Anyway, the son of the Speke family at that time supposedly married one of Catherine of Aragon's Ladies in Waiting.

It would appear that in 1599 George Speke bought East Dillington from the Bonville family. I do not believe that this was Dillington House but rather Dillington Farm at the current Eaglewood Park. The Bonville family, from Dillington, had had trouble from rioters around their house protesting at the enclosures and subsequent job losses which were prevalent during the time of Elizabeth the first in Somerset. It appeared they then left Somerset for good. At any rate the Speke fathers continued to live at Whitelackington House while the eldest sons usually settled at what was called Dillington Farm.

That particular George Speke died in 1637 and is buried under the nave of Whitelackington Church. His successor joined the Royalist side during the Civil War, was taken at Bridgwater and imprisoned in London. He secured his release on the grounds that he had been forced to join the King's army while still under age but was not entirely believed. He was fined £2,390 (nearly quarter of a million pounds at today's standards) and lived under virtual house arrest in Wells till 1650.

The next historical episode occurred when the Duke of Monmouth, the supposedly illegitimate son of Charles II, did what can best be described as a PR tour of the south-west in 1680 -while Charles was still alive. He stayed at Longleat and then came on to stay with George Speke at Whitelackington. He stayed in the house and accounts recall that he had lunch under the large chestnut tree in Whitelackington Park where he doffed his hat to the large crowd (supposedly some 2,000 people) which had gathered to see him. One hundred yards of palings were destroyed by the excited mob. The Spanish chestnut under which he lunched was a tree planted around the Norman Conquest and had a huge girth of some 25 feet. It eventually fell down on Ash Wednesday 1897 and still remains lying in the field above our house as a memento to this great event. It is of course known as The Monmouth Tree.

Two years after Monmouth's visit the house at Whitelackington was searched in vain for arms. Then when in 1685 Monmouth landed at Lyme Regis, King James immediately sent a troop to Whitelackington to escort the father, George Speke, to London and found him dining with 40 of his friends and waited upon by 40 retainers in a great hall at Whitelackington. Just recently we have rebuilt a hall on the site, I believe, of that old one.

Anyway the Spekes followed their usual disastrous habit of picking the wrong side and John, the eldest son led a troop of horse to join Monmouth along with brother Hugh, while Charles (the 3<sup>rd</sup> son) was at Cambridge University. When the rebellion failed, John and Hugh fled abroad, but Charles (who unfortunately had at one moment shaken Monmouth's hand) was hanged in the market Square of Ilminster. Judge Jefferys claimed "the family owes a life"! Both John and Hugh later made their peace with James and Hugh even went on to be sent by James to spy on William's camp when William and Mary also landed at Lyme in 1689. Hugh immediately informed William why he was there and was later used by William to "help" James to escape to France after his presence in England became an embarrassment. Double spies have their uses!

Anyway, the Speke family were obviously doing well around that time as by 1725 they owned the Manors of Whitelackington, Atherstone, East and West Dillington (West Dillington, I believe, being Dillington House), East and West Dowlish, Cudworth, Ashill, Rowlands, Chillington and parts of the Manor and Advowson of Ilminster and the Hundreds of Abdick and Bulstone.

When Ann Speke, the last and sole surviving heir of the last George Speke, married Lord North, soon to be Prime Minister of England, Great Britain and for a short time the American Colonies, she brought with her some of the above property in her marriage settlement, although the western end of the Estate went to Speke cousins, one William Speke, who as we know eventually settled at Jordans, and from whom Peter Speke is descended.

Marriage settlements were an interesting concept similar to the pre-nuptial agreements of today. Upon marriage, land, property and cash from **both** sides of the family were settled for the next generation as yet unborn (or even conceived) with income going during their lifetimes to the about-to-be-married couple. Trustees were appointed from both sides and Ann Speke on her part had Ann Cornbe of Earnshill (having a woman trustee was very unusual in those days) and Lord North had the Rt Ron Charles Townsend PC who, as many of you will know, was in Walpole's Cabinet and was better known as Turnip Townsend from Norfolk. The two trustees were there to see fair play in the marriage and to ensure the property reached the next generation. As a legal vehicle it occurred for each generation in our family until modern times. At a time when divorce is the biggest reason for the break up of farms I believe it could be relevant to today's farmers.

Continuing with the trend of acquiring property to coordinate a unified Estate, Lord North between 1751 and 1792 -his marriage and his death -acquired Ashwell Farm and also 2 farms at Ashill. And to indicate that estates were not so unified at that stage, it is interesting that he only acquired in 1777 two fields at Binells, right at the heart of what today would be called the Dillington Estate.

An interesting aside here is that Ann Speke would have inherited more land from her uncle, I believe on her mother's side, who owned the Burton Pincet Estate near Curry Rivel. But Lord North, when he was Prime Minister, introduced a cider tax which did not go down well with the then owner and when he died Lord and Lady North were amazed to find that he had left his property to the elder Pitt in recognition of his services to the nation - presumably for being a better Prime Minister than Lord North, and indeed, for opposing Lord North, the introducer of the cider tax. The fact that Pitt's son later introduced income tax must have had the old man turning in his grave.

One of the interesting problems I found in studying the history of the Estate is when and how the ownership of Dillington House became an integral part of the property.

West Dillington (probably Dillington House) was only bought by the Spekes in 1719. We know for a fact that Lord North lived there and that there is an account of a visit by a man named Thomas Beedal. He had an interview with Lord North and then at 5 o'clock went to dine with the head servants and had for dinner: "a dish of fish, a sirloin of beef roasted, a loin of veal with cauliflowers, carrots etc for the first course; and for the second a roast turkey, a hare, pigeon pie, fried oysters, chicken tarts, lator (edible seaweed) etc; drank water for dinner, after dinner drank 4 glasses of port wine". It should be pointed out that port in those days was not the port of today and was only very lightly fortified with brandy to prevent secondary fermentation during travel.

As many of you will know, Lord North is the courtesy title of the eldest son of the Earl of Guilford and when the Prime Minister North died in 1792 his elder son became the Earl of Guilford and seemed to lose all interest in the Somerset Estates, selling them throughout the 1790s. It seemed at this time that Dillington House again got temporarily split from the bulk of what is now Dillington Estate. We know for a fact that the bulk of the Estate was sold by the Trustees of the Earl of Guilford to my ancestor, John Hanning, in 1795 for £83,000. To the best of my ability, and I have to say I have found this very difficult to establish the true value of money, I believe that £83,000 in today's money would amount to about £7.5million.

The Hannings are an interesting lot. The first record we have of the family is a John Hanning buried at Kingstone in 1732 aged 53. Apparently there was a tablet to him there which his great- great grandson had sawn into 2 pieces and used as corbels when he found himself responsible for the repair of the chancel roof in 1860.

That first John Hanning had a son called William who became a tenant of Lord and Lady North in 1762 at Whitelackington Farm, although he also acquired some of his own land at Kingstone from William Speke of Jordans in exchange for William Hanning's reversionary interest in land near Broadway. Whitelackington Farm at that time amounted to 395 acres, much as it did in 1975 when I took it on. That would have been a big farm for those days and in 1762 WH paid a rent of £400 per annum. On my calculations I believe that is today's equivalent of £90 per acre.

Ten years later when that 10-year fixed term tenancy was renewed, the rent was a total of £480 per annum or £110 per acre in today's terms. You must bear in mind that there was no inflation in those days and rents were based, as again today, on agricultural prosperity and the open market. It is interesting to note, that when William Hanning, this William's grandson, became landlord as owner of the Estate and let this farm to one Philip Hext (funny how names don't change round here) in 1808, in the middle of the Napoleonic Wars -possibly the last great agricultural bonanza before the Common Market - the rent for the same farm was £1,000 per annum or around £220 per acre at today's rates. Of course it could be that the Hannings were good at bargaining to get a low rent as tenants and a high rent as landlords.

Anyway, the first William Hanning died in 1775 and he had a son called John who really founded the family fortunes in the usual way ..... by marrying well, although it is true to say he must have also farmed well. He married Suzannah Harvard, daughter of Thomas Harvard of Barrington Court. They were an old family who had been around for at least 100 years and owned property in Barrington, Puckington, Kingsbury Episcopi and Muchelney.

Suzannah was an only daughter and John used his wife's collateral well. Initially, his father-in-law bought the couple Moolham Farm and Pretwood Farm (I suspect this latter is now what is known as Cross Farm) in 1769, and then John himself purchased East Dowlish Farm and was living in Dowlish Manor in 1791. By 1795 his father-in-law having died, he was living in Barrington Court. It was at this point that he bought the Dillington Estate, or a lot of it, by mortgaging Barrington. However, his purchase did not include Dillington House.

I cannot find any record of sale, but it appears that Dillington House and other land must have been sold in the early 1790's by Lord North, or more likely his son, to one John Trent -a plantation owner from Barbados whose marriage settlement included the ownership of 160 slaves all mentioned by name. The plantation had the unfriendly name of "Oven's Mouth". The Trent marriage settlement was dated 1793 and I suspect that it must have been around that time he bought Dillington House and some land which included Eames Mill and also, it seems, the George Inn at Ilminster. Whether Ashwell Farm, being the land between Eames and Dillington was also included I have not yet established.

Anyway, John Trent, of Dillington House and London, died in 1797 and left a will leaving his Somerset property to his wife during her lifetime and then to his

daughter and to his as yet unborn son. He appointed as executors, John and his son William Hanning - presumably because they were his new neighbours and had proved themselves at managing property. When John Trent died, it seems William Hanning moved into Dillington House (presumably as tenant of the Trent will trust) and from then on became known as William Hanning of Dillington House. The income from the Estate to be paid to Mrs Trent seems to have been £250 per annum (£24,000 in today's money) plus school fees, but very much larger sums had to be provided for each Trent child on attaining their majority - the figure of £6,000 each is mentioned, equivalent to roughly £570,000 in today's money. The Trent family had moved to London after the death of John Trent and when John Trent's eldest son attained his majority in 1816 he brought a case against William as executor for not providing enough income for the Trent family from the Estate. I cannot establish the rights or wrongs of this case, but it would seem that an out of Court settlement was arrived at in 1825 when William Hanning paid £48,500 (approx £4.5m in today's money) for all the Trent property at Dillington and was excused further obligations – the discharge document very pointedly stating that the discharge was taking place because the land could not provide the required or designated income for the Trent family, which does not surprise me considering the amounts involved and the relatively small size of the property. The Trent family had obviously been too used to slave labour!

Anyway, in 1825 William Hanning finally owned Dillington House and other properties and immediately he and his son, John Lee Hanning, employed Sir James Pennythorne (Nash's cousin and prize pupil) to redesign the house and park and create it largely as it is now. The Wilderness was planted in the 1840s and the stable-block and arch was in fact not rebuilt until 1874/75.

William Hanning married Harriet Lee from Pinhoe and they had a son, John Lee Hanning, who changed his name to John Lee Lee to inherit property in Devon from his maternal grandfather - which must have immediately been sold, as we have no record of it, to help payoff some of the huge mortgage that had built up with these purchases at Dillington!

Just before we leave William Hanning, it might be of interest to those of *you* who know anything about modern day tenancies to pick up some salient points of a lease of East Dillington Farms in 1808. It contained by estimation 200 acres more or less and was let to Mr John Rowsell (again a familiar name) and his heirs **only**, ie it could not be sublet, for £550 per annum (again, I calculate that at more than £261 per acre in today's money). The let was from 25th March 1808 for the term of 7, 14 or 21 years - determination at the end of either period by either party giving one year's notice. Land Tax, Church and Poor Rates to be paid by William Hanning, and written into the lease was the fact that John Rowsell had to take on apprentices bound over to him by the parish being allowed £5 for each apprentice - in other words local employment and training was important, within the system in those days. The fact that the apprentices hardly got paid anything is only of minor relevance!

William Hanning had to keep in repair all gates and buildings (windows excepted) which sounds very similar to today's agreements.

John Rowsell shall not, during the said term sow and grow more than two crops of corn, grain, pulse, hemp or flax (an interesting list of crops!), or any two of them on the same land without a good and sufficient manorial management according to the rules of good husbandry- viz without first dressing the same with at least 20 hogsheads of good fresh lime or 20 puttloads of good rotten dung, or the folding of sheep at a given rate.

John Rowsell was to cut the hedges in succession but, and this is interesting, "none oftener than once in 7 years, without written permission and 20 days' notice to William Hanning so that the latter may mark such trees, saplings and stemmers as he shall choose to let stand as such". Environmental hedgerow management is not new to the 1990's.

Another interesting fact about William Hanning, I discovered in the records, was that between 1829 and 1831 he invested several hundreds of pounds in an enterprise with a man called Goldsworthy Gurney and Francis Macaroni (I may have misread the handwriting there!), and together they patented an engine for producing steam. They decided at a meeting to trial this steam carriage in a run from London to Bath in 1829- there is no record as to the result of the trial. There is also a draft prospectus amongst this bundle of papers for the invention of a road- cleaning machine.

William Hanning's son, John Lee Lee, of whom we have several photographs, died in 1874. As far as the Estate is concerned he continued the family tradition of mortgaging the land he had in order to continuously consolidate and even enlarge the Estate. For most of his life he seemed to have a mortgage of in excess of £50,000, roughly the equivalent of £4.75m today.

I will run quickly through some of the land purchases of around this time which might be of interest: Beacon Orchard was bought by William Hanning in 1827; in 1824 there is a reference to 2 fields being split by the building of the "new road" to Langport; in 1832 a garden plot in Langport Street (presumably now North St) ..... was merged into the Vicarage garden, earlier a small part of this plot had been sold for the construction of a meeting house - presumably this is St Mary's Hall; in 1830 there was more land purchased at the summit of Beacon Hill; in 1871 Swanmead was purchased in Ilminster along with Paradise Orchard (?); in 1871 land in Hurcott and at Seavington was purchased from Charles Welman; in 1885 Water Street Farm in Seavington came into the Estate; in 1846 Hucklebridge Orchard, Whitelackington, was bought from the Bonning family (butchers, I believe), having been owned by them for over 100 years. Amongst many purchases in this area Kales Farm was bought at this time, houses on Strawberry Bank (main top road through Ilminster), two fields at Ashwell, a field by the White Horse Inn, Knott Oak House, a house called Dods(?) in Ilminster and Penny Elm Close(?) in Ilminster and land at Seavington, Stocklynch, Atherstone etc and also Chinkwell Farm (presumably Chink Spring above Knott Oak Dairy - explain about Estate water supply system which fed Dillington House and even the Shrubbery Hotel and still supplies fourteen dwellings.

As well as continuing the family tradition of having a terrifyingly huge mortgage and no cash, John Lee Lee also maintained another family tradition of marrying property. He married Jessie Vaughan which ensured that their eldest son, Vaughan Hanning Lee was able to inherit two Welsh estates by changing his name to Vaughan Hanning Vaughan-Lee.

There were two Welsh Estates: Llanelay and Rheola, both, I believe, in Glamorgan. They belonged to John Edwards Vaughan and William Vaughan. John Edwards Vaughan (nee Edwards) was a solicitor and cousin and friend of John Nash, the architect, and from him we have some of Nash's possessions, including a portrait of George IV with the plans of Brighton Pavilion on the sofa beside him and a letter from the King to John Nash giving him the picture as a gift. Nash and Edwards-Vaughan went on a grand European tour together and bought silver and furniture on the Continent, some of which we still own. As an interesting tit-bit John Edwards Vaughan went to the Imperial Stables in Versailles in 1816 and found there a large white charger, named Marengo which had carried Napoleon Bonaparte from France to Moscow and back during his campaign. I still have a cutting from that horse's mane in my possession.

John Lee Lee and Jessie's son, Vaughan Hanning Lee, was a good letter writer. In 1844 when aged 8, he wrote to his father:

"My dear Papa, I think you will be glad that all the trees *you* marked in the Wilderness are now cut down, but the walks are not yet finished.

We have had a great deal of rain since you left home and the wind so high that it has blown some of the thatch off Whitelackington Cottage and the rain came through the ceiling. I must tell you that Mr Lethbridge called to see you last week and he much wished to see the grounds, therefore I went with him into the garden and the walks near the house, he said you have made great improvements since he was here last and I was to tell you that he thinks me a very polite little boy and hopes you are quite well.

I hope, my dear Papa, you are now well and enjoying yourself, and with kind love and kisses to dear Mama,  
Believe me your affectionate son,  
Vaughan Hanning Lee

He also fought in the Crimean War and we have a whole book of his letters from there which make very interesting reading. The early letters are full of optimism for the sport of war, but as conditions get worse and he has to take more and more opium for his diarrhea and as his men die off he becomes more disillusioned:

"I may say, without doing Lord Raglan any injustice, that he has completely disorganised the British Army by his indolence and callousness. It is to be hoped you will send us out a better commander or

we are all done for. I hate seeing our best men carried to their graves every day, not from the casualties of war but from disease and cold".

He describes shooting Russians and also the Charge of the Light Brigade in quite a matter of fact manner, ending "so that out of 700 Light Cavalry only about 200 returned, which was bad for the small Cavalry force we have. But I trust we shall soon get some more as we want them dreadfully".

He speaks of home: "I know I wish I was at Dillington now, just getting on my boots to go out shooting, or getting on horseback in order for a gallop after the hounds".

And again: "we begin now to read about fox-hunting which makes me feel the loss of England very much, and now I suppose soon Balls will begin. It is a pity a few young ladies could not come out here and we could get up some first rate balls and dinner parties in Sebastopol ... which would be great fun as some of the Russian officers are very nice fellows". He goes on to describe some of his conversations in French with some of the Russian officer prisoners who he had to escort. "Before we went I gave them a rattling good dinner and we talked and chatted all the way and smoked as if we had been old cronies for years".

He combines this friendliness, and even at times admiration of the Russians, with some quite callous descriptions of his shooting exploits, "I managed to knock over four unfortunate Russians. One I sent to his Long Home in a most promiscuous way, as he was coming down to get water from a well, which was about 500 yards from me, and as he was stooping down to get the water I shot him through his coat tails and sent him headlong into the well. So he was shot and drowned both at once. One thing I know, my mouth was so black with biting cartridges that I could not get it off for 3 or 4 hours. I was pretty comfortable there, except that I could not get at my breakfast and so had nothing but cartridges to eat for at least 18 hours and powder is a very nasty thing to live on".

Both in his tales of war and my Grandfather's diary of the Boer War, one gets the impression of officers maintaining, as far as possible, as normal a social existence as possible within the conditions they found themselves. Vaughan Hanning-Lee describes going down to the Inkerman Valley to take in a little duck shooting or woodcock, but "Just as I was stalking into a couple of splendid ducks, the ill-mannered Roosians sent a volley of grape shot, which unluckily did not hit the ducks but only frightened them away. I saw then that they had discovered me so I retired under cover".

He also has a sense of humour. It seems there was a lot of firing one night and they went out and found a whole lot of dead Russians where no Allied soldiers had been involved.

"Therefore we concluded that two Russian battalions had met in the darkness and had had a little practice before they were led against the English. I should like to encourage the Russian in his practice as I am sure it would be very good for his health and would save us a vast deal of

trouble". And again, he says "I would give anything to be able to transfer myself from my tent here to the library fire at Dillington and set aside all the glory of the expedition, although I have done my share of it" (and indeed he had in the Battle of Inkerman) and I would much rather be cock- shooting at Dillington than Russian-shooting here".

In March 1855, when the War was beginning to draw to a close, he reports: "I am in very good health and enjoying myself as well as can be - hunting and racing. A wonderful thing, the British nation can never do without hunting. Here we have no foxes or hares to hunt so we chase the wily Crimean dog and in doing so the other day I got a jolly hard tumble over a wall".

Earlier, he had reported: "It is now dangerous to go about without your pistol for large wild dogs in the country go about in flocks of about 50 and it is dangerous to meet them".

Vaughan Hanning-Lee was obviously quite a player and got himself into serious trouble, gambling and over-spending his money on drink. It seems his father had to bail him out several times during his stint in the Crimea and he even bounced a cheque which in those days was a prisonable offence and certainly one for which you got cashiered (but he seems to have escaped detection by his superiors). To demonstrate that standards in public life don't change, you might be interested to note that this was the only one of my ancestors who went on to become an MP -for Wells in the 1860s.

In 1860 we have a letter from his very much younger sister, Alice aged 16 written to Vaughan by which time he is now aged 24, but clearly not yet a reformed character:

"My Dearest Vaughan, As I am very ill and may probably never see you again in this world, I should like to write a few lines to you before I die. It would indeed make me wretched to think I should never see you again in that land of pure delight where I trust I am going to be with my Blessed Saviour. Thus my Darling Vaughan, I beseech of you to turn to Him while there is yet time for we none of us know how soon we may be called. I wish to leave you my Bible and hope sincerely you will find in it as much comfort as I have. Will you promise me now to read a chapter in it every morning and evening for there you will indeed find grace and help. I should have liked very much to have seen you once again but God has ordered it otherwise.  
Goodbye, my darling,  
Your ever loving and affectionate sister,  
Alice"

Tuesday January 17th 1860- she died one week later January 24th 1860 aged 16.

Vaughan Hanning-Lee divided his property leaving the Welsh Estates, apart from a small proportion of land at Neath containing a coal mine to his second son, John Edwards Vaughan-Lee who dropped the name Lee on inheriting the Rheola property and reverted back to being Vaughan only. The small Welsh

property at Neath, which remained with the Dillington Estate, contained a coal mine and remained part of the Dillington inheritance until the mine was nationalised just after the Second World War.

I should also report that your Chairman's (Geoffery Morgan) family were, I believe, originally agents on the Vaughan Welsh Estates before coming to Dillington in the second half of the last century. Some of you will remember your Chairman's father, I J Morgan, born in Ilminster, who apart from managing the Dillington Estate for many years was also prominent in local government in Somerset. It always amazed me that the same man could chair the Ilminster Town Council both in the 1930s **and** the 1970s. He was certainly very much part of Dillington and Ilminster.

Vaughan Hanning Vaughan-Lee's eldest son, Arthur Vaughan Hanning Vaughan-Lee, was my grandfather. He fought in the Boer War and kept a diary; his account of the amazing feat of endurance displayed by the British Army in the strategic relief of Ladysmith is very matter-of-fact, but clearly at the time very harrowing for both men and horses. He subsequently went down with typhoid and was hospitalised for the rest of the war. He ended up as Colonel of the Royal Horseguards (The Blues), retiring in 1911. In 1915, aged 53, he married Ursula Pickering and had two daughters the eldest of which was my mother.

My grandmother, Ursula Pickering, is worth mentioning. Firstly, her family descended from the Kings of Mercia including Alfred the Great, and the Kings of Scotland. Her family tree refers to "Duncan (murdered by Macbeth, 1040)".

Furthermore, she was what is known as "a real character". As my grandmother, she quite often wore plus-fours.

"Why do you wear plus-fours, Granny?"

"Well, they have got very useful pockets and you can carry things like hammers in them".

"Why do you need to carry a hammer?"

"Well you never know when you might have to adjust a picture on a wall or something".

She shot and fished all her life - coming out shooting with us, I remember when she was aged 89 or 90. She caught a salmon for 70 successive years until she reached her 90th birthday.

She also enjoyed driving fast cars, and at the age of 87 tried to buy the latest Bristol car which had been brought out at the London Motor Show that year. Being a small company there was a waiting list of several years, but she wrote to the managing director and told him that if she would have to wait the stated 7 years she would be dead, and she managed to get one within a month. I may say she exchanged it for a BMW a year later because it didn't corner fast enough.

As far as Dillington is concerned, she arrived there after her marriage in 1915 at which time there were peacocks in the garden. Peacocks bark and make the most appalling screeching noise especially at dawn, and they had a habit of launching their dawn chorus from the cedar tree outside my grandparents' bedroom window. Not long into the marriage my grandfather was woken at dawn by my grandmother shooting the peacocks from their bedroom window having taken her shotgun to bed with her the night before.

So there you have it, a potted history of the Dillington Estate. I believe Dillington is only one of two or three Estates in Somerset that remains roughly the same size on the same land as it was 100 years ago. All the others have been broken up or reduced in one way or another. I suspect one of the reasons for its survival is that my mother's family have right from the word go had to struggle to survive and have never had any real cash surplus with which to get complacent.

I am afraid I have not got time to tell you about my father's family, the Camerons of Lochiel, whose sometimes bloodthirsty history dates from the 13th Century. The last Ewen Cameron, known as the Great Sir Ewen, Chief of the Clan in the late 17th Century, fought a battle for every year of his life, but died in his bed, aged 92. He seems to be chiefly remembered for a duel to the death he fought with an English officer in a chivalrous attempt to avoid their respective forces having to fight against each other. The duel subsided into a wrestling match and, as they were grappling on the banks of Loch Lochie, the Englishman drew a dagger from his boot, but before he could strike, my ancestor clasped him closely to his chest and killed him by biting a chunk out of his neck. He afterwards stated that it was the tastiest morsel he had ever had!

I never quite understand why he was knighted by the English king as he seemed to spend most of his life killing the King's subjects. He also killed the last wolf in Lochaber, which deed might be about to be reversed by the Scottish environmentalists.

Following a tradition my father also kept a diary during the Second World War of his escape from prison camp in Italy and his travels through the Appenines and eventual recapture hundreds of miles away in Ancona from where he was sent to Germany for the rest of the war.

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*First written February 1998*  
*Updated September 2008*  
*6149 words*