

Mabledon - An Unseen Treasure

By Maxwell Macfarlane

Southborough Society News

Part 1, 2, 3 – Summer 2008, Autumn 2008, Winter 2008/2009

(Reference: Moule, Mohan & Pownall. 1975 - *"The Story of Mabledon 1805-1975"*)

When I offered to speak about Mabledon to a meeting of the Society, I had never been through the front door nor even wandered in the gardens, so my small knowledge of it was based on what I had read or could see peeping through the surrounding trees. It is a feature of Mabledon that, although it is so close to the main road, it cannot really be seen at all, even in winter, until you approach it along the drive or trespass across the fields on its southern side, which is why I call it "an unseen treasure".

However, on 7th September 2007, the present owner, Mr Hari Saraff, kindly opened part of the house, and the grounds, to a few lucky visitors, of whom I was one. I had my camera with me and was able to take a few rather poor photographs.

Mabledon Park, or Mabledon as it was sometimes written in the early years, did not exist before 1805. In that year, Mr James Burton (a Scot, originally called Halliburton), who was already a well-known and successful speculative property developer in London and elsewhere, bought the estate for £6,250 and built himself a small country house on a hill, Quarry Hill, south of Tonbridge, overlooking the Medway Valley.

The stone of which the house was built was quarried on the site and, being mainly of Tunbridge Wells sandstone, had the property of hardening on being exposed, making it very durable. According to Paul Amsinck, writing in 1810, some materials used had been brought from Penshurst Place, part of which had been pulled down and sold off, so adding an air of antiquity to parts of the new building.

A considerable improvement to the turnpike road from Tonbridge to Tunbridge Wells was made soon after the house was built. Originally, it rose steeply and then ran close to the house, so James Burton arranged (largely at his own expense) to have a new road cut through the hill, so easing the gradient. Although it was ostensibly a public-spirited act, it also brought advantage to Burton himself, as he made sure that the new road ran further away from the house than had the old one. So everyone benefitted.

As first built, Mabledon was not particularly large by the standards of the time, as may be judged from the front door. But, after James Burton had sold the house in 1828 to a John Deacon, of William's Deacon's Bank in London, the latter commissioned Decimus Burton, the tenth child of James Burton and already at 29 an established architect, to design a new wing for Mabledon. As Decimus had spent his formative years in the house, he would have known it very well and may even have already had ideas about how it may be improved. The wing he developed is now in the centre of the east front and he also added slim round towers at the south-west and northeast corners.

In 1830, Decimus Burton was extremely busy, but was given yet another commission by John Deacon, who was a devout Christian of Low Church persuasion. At that time, Southborough had no church and Anglicans had to travel to Bidborough or Tonbridge to worship. Being Lord of the Manor, John Deacon arranged for him to build a church on Southborough Common, and the Church of St Peter was consecrated on 25th August 1830.

John Deacon I died in 1851, aged 79 years, leaving a widow, two sons and up to nine daughters. He left Mabledon to his elder son, John II.

In 1870, Decimus Burton, by now an old man, was again commissioned to enlarge the house. The east front was further extended to include a square tower, with additional work on the west or rear side of the building.

The top of the square tower bears a Bible text: "The Name of the Lord is a strong Tower, the Righteous Runneth into it and is Safe". There is also a sundial. At the same time, a number of scripture passages were inscribed or painted in different parts of the interior, though probably few, if any, remain. Some of these would have been on the mantle above fireplaces, and Mr Saraff recently revealed that, when he took over Mabledon in 1992, only one of 57 original fireplaces remained. So, in 1870, Mabledon reached its final form.

The secrets of domestic life at Mabledon in the 19th Century have not yet been revealed, so a little detective work has been applied to the only source available - the Census Returns. In 1841, 1851, 1861 and 1881, the Deacon family was not present, presumably being in London, and only between 7-9 household and estate servants were listed in those years, looking after the house and grounds.

However, in 1871, the picture was quite different. John Deacon II, his wife and three children were in residence (John, the only son, was aged 11, and his two sisters were older) and the following servants were listed: Two governesses; a butler; a coachman; two footmen; two grooms; a cook/housekeeper and ten footservants. Of these, none was from Southborough, and only one was from Kent. Presumably, the majority were from the London home and travelled back and forth whenever the family did.

John Deacon II died in 1901, leaving Mabledon to his only son, John Francis William Deacon (known as Frank). Neither he nor his sisters married, and both his sisters predeceased him.

Frank Deacon added a suite of rooms to the west of the original house to provide a hunting lodge (the oak room) with bedrooms above. Records from that time indicate that the staff then included two footmen, and ten or more ladies' maids, parlour maids and laundry maids. Outside, there were ten gardeners, thirteen to fourteen men on the Home Farm, four gamekeepers, as well as carpenters and others, totalling in all about forty-five staff.

The home Farm and the immediate estate totalled some 300 acres, but there were also another seven farms and the area, as a whole, was about 2,000 acres, stretching in Southborough as far as Pennington Road, including the Hand & Sceptre Hotel. Fosse Bank (School) belonged to the Deacons in case of marriage, as was the former Ormonde Lodge (where Meadows School now stands).

The conservatory beyond the library was a great feature of Mabledon. It contained many beautiful and exotic plants, and was generally admired by visitors when the grounds were thrown open for the benefit of the parish church of St Peter. The large camellia bushes carefully trained along the walls still grow there (I think!). Against the north wall of the large kitchen garden, below the woods, were extensive greenhouses in which were grown all kinds of citrus fruits, including pineapples, tangerines and grapefruit. Peaches, grapes, bananas, melons and mushrooms were also grown, as were bedding plants and cut flowers for the house.

Frank Deacon's usual routine was to go up to William Deacon's Bank in London on four days a week, with periodic visits to the headquarters at Manchester, as the Bank was strongest in the North. The family travelled to Tonbridge station by horse-drawn carriages even as late as 1930. A horse bus or brake, seating eight people each side, took members of the household to church at St Peter's on Sundays, where they had their own pews.

The family would go up to visit their London home, in Putney, after Christmas and again after Easter. They would then stay at Mabledon until August. After August Bank Holiday they would go to Chamonix for a month, returning via a stopover in Paris to Mabledon in time for the Partridge Season. Game shooting is said to be the only pleasure Frank Deacon got from the estate. He entered at agricultural shows, and was well-pleased if he won any prizes, but was not particularly concerned about whether his estate made a profit. His money came from the Bank.

The Deacon family were evangelical laymen. John Deacon I was treasurer of the Church Pastoral Aid Society from its foundation in 1836, as was John Deacon II after him and later Frank Deacon until his death - a continuity lasting 105 years. Indeed, Frank Deacon became President of the Society in 1917. It was therefore no great surprise when Frank Deacon left Mabledon in his will to the Society for the benefit of Home Mission Work "as a home of rest for clergy and laymen and laywomen engaged in the work of such Church Societies as my Trustees may consider to be Evangelical; and as a Conference House and meeting place for the use of such Societies", together with a generous endowment.

Unfortunately, on the outbreak of the Second World War, the grounds and much of the house were quickly requisitioned by the War Office. Officers were quartered in the house and 50 Nissen huts were erected in the fields to the south of the house for other ranks. Frank Deacon was left with no more than a flat over the library and oak room; he arranged to lease a house on Bidborough Ridge to get away from the place but died just before the contract could be signed, aged 81, in February 1941.

The Army was in complete occupation for seven years. General (later Field Marshall) Montgomery officially opened the place as an officers' training depot. Little is known of what really went on at Mabledon during the War, for security reasons, but it is reported that at different times up until D-Day (6 June 1944) it was used by New Zealanders, a Scottish battalion and the Loyal (North Lancashire) Regiment. During the last year of the War in Europe, it held Italian ex-prisoners of war, and lastly it served as a rehabilitation centre for returned British prisoners of war from the Far East.

Next it was used by the Ministry of Health as a psychiatric hospital for Polish Soldiers and refugees under the direction of a Dr Bram, the Swiss-Polish superintendent. At the same time, the house and grounds which the Army had left in a thoroughly dilapidated state were considerably restored. New prefabricated huts were erected for an occupational therapy unit, which were to prove useful to a later occupant.

Meanwhile, as soon as the War was over, the trustees of Mr Frank Deacon's estate opened negotiations for the release of the property. At first, little encouragement was given. In 1950, the Ministry of Health even declared their intention of making a compulsory purchase if the Trustees would not agree to sell, or at least to grant a long extension of their lease. The Trustees offered ten years, with an option to re-consider after five years. The Ministry finally replied that they would leave at the end of 1954. In fact, because of the difficulties in finding alternative premises for the hospital in Dartford, it was not until mid-1955 that Mabledon was finally left.

In retrospect, the delay was advantageous to the Church Pastoral Aid Society. Mabledon could not have been used for the purpose intended by Frank Deacon until some time after the War, and the longer delay brought financial gain. A requisition rental of £750 per annum was paid to the Trustees for 14 years, together with £5,000 compensation for damage - large sums in those days - and Frank Deacon's endowment lay virtually untouched.

The estimate for the restoration of the house and its adaptation for use as a conference centre was nearly £18,000. The two larger reception rooms were fitted out as conference lounges, and the library became the main dining room. The octagonal 'withdrawing room', at the base of the southeast tower, was turned into an unusual but attractive chapel. A new central heating system was installed throughout. Upstairs, the bedrooms were adapted to take 40 guests, and self-contained flats were created for the warden and for two retired clergy and their wives.

When the builders had finished inside, Revd Mark Russell, the first Warden, tackled the task of going through all the furniture, furnishings, pictures etc that had been in store for 16 years. Everything possible was put back to its original use or adapted for some other purpose. Not easy was the task of unpacking the library and arranging the thousands of books, dating mainly from the early 19th Century, on the impressive shelves which surrounded the dining room on three sides (and still do).

Meanwhile, two men, Mr Dawes and Mr Bachelor, whom the Trustees had already employed for many years in the grounds, were tackling the even more daunting task of restoring the lawns and gardens to order and beauty once again. Many tons of concrete foundations of Army buildings also had to be removed.

The official opening of Mabledon in its new form took place on 19th December 1956, and Mr Frank Deacon's vision for the future of Mabledon was fully realized.

In 1969, after the increasing traffic through Tonbridge had become intolerable, a continuation of the Sevenoaks bypass was created to swing west and south of Tonbridge, providing a two-level intersection with the road to Tunbridge Wells on Quarry Hill. Mabledon lost its two lodges, a wide strip of its wooded frontage, three-quarters of its lower drive and much of its lower woodland - some 30 acres in all, but there was fair compensation for the land taken, and the Trustees were able to replace the picturesque but inconvenient lodges with two attractive, modern staff houses.

By 1989, Mabledon was no longer required by the CPAS and was put up for sale through Knight Frank Rutley, estate agents. It stood empty for about three years until it was bought in 1992 by the Saraff family trust.

*Electronic text of "**Mabledon - An Unseen Treasure**"
katharinamahler@royaltunbridgewells.org – February 2009*

www.mabledon.co.uk