

# Chartwell Before Churchill

## The London Foundling Hospital and the origins of the Foundling Hospital at Westerham

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In Bloomsbury a Foundling Hospital, for communal home, had been established by Royal Charter in 1739. Twenty years later so many abandoned children were being looked after that more accommodation was urgently required.

Deciding that the country would be healthier for the children than London in June 1758 the General Court of Governors sent two representatives to look for a suitable site in the Westerham area on which to establish further premises. They sought a large old house with enough land to be laid out as a farm. They found just such a property, known as Wellstreet Farm, on the estate of Mr Thomas Ellison. The property is located two miles south of Westerham in Kent.

Their report described the property as "A Capital Messuage (the main house), six rooms on a floor, with convenient barns, stables, coach house, granary and other outhouses, gardens and orchards, and about 160 acres of land, whereof about 30 acres are meadow and pasture, upwards of 90 acres arable and 30 acres wood and furze, all within a hedge, well watered, with good fish ponds". There

were also two other houses, one with a very good orchard, the other with a barn and three acres of arable land, and a cottage, then let to a tenant.

The Governors gave their approval and in 1760 Wellstreet was leased from Mr Ellison initially for 21 years. Staff and servants were recruited and employed both for the house and to run the farm as a going concern. Accommodation was prepared for 24 children.

Wellstreet went well and in 1764 one of the barns was converted into living quarters for another 90 children. By 1784 this had grown to three wards for boys, three for girls, a sick ward and a



Chartwell House © Alan Sencicle

separate room for mentally disabled children, in all a total of 208 beds for children.

Babies accepted by the Hospital were sent to wet-nurses in the country then returned when between three to five years old. The majority spent nine or ten years here before being moved to the main Hospital in London to continue their modest education. They would then be apprenticed to a trade or put into domestic service. Some boys were sent to join the army or navy. It was very rare that a child might be reunited with its family.

An inspector appointed by the Hospital's local committee kept an eye on the children's welfare. The first was Miss Pratt, a local lady who was experienced in supervising the network of rural wet-nurses.

The children were given only an elementary education at the hospital: one book used was entitled *An Introduction to Spelling*. There were separate playgrounds for the boys and girls. Much of the children's time was spent doing manual work. The girls spun flax on a spinning-wheel, knitted worsted cloth and quilting, made stockings, shirts, petticoats, mittens, gloves and linen bags, and did various kinds of needlework for ladies of the district. These items would be sold locally. The boys would be set to picking oakum (unravelling old ropes, the fibres or oakum were then sent to be reused mainly for caulking the seams on wooden ships). This was an arduous unpleasant task that was commonly given to convicts in the prisons. The boys were hired out to local farmers to clear stones or couch-grass from the fields. Another of their

tasks was to prepare hams and fitches of bacon from the farm for sale locally.

The children would have to help on the farm and work in the gardens, though most of the farm work was carried out by paid adult labour. The farm produced hops, wheat, oats, barley and turnips. They also raised sheep and some cattle. There were fishponds, vegetable plots, two lime kilns and woodlands providing timber. The orchards included a press so that cider could be made.

As well as supplying most of the needs of the house the Wellstreet farm sold its surplus produce at the local market. As quite substantial sums of money were sent at intervals to the main Hospital in London it seems that the farm must have been a financial success.

It is not clear how long the London Foundling Hospital retained its branch at Wellstreet. It was still shown as *Foundling House* on an Ordnance Survey map of 1818-19. By 1836 the Hospital must have closed as in that year the estate was put up for sale under the will of a Mr Benjamin Fletcher. The new owners were a family called Drinkwater-Bethune, who leased the land to tenant farmers. In 1848 they sold it on to the Campbell-Colquhoun family who named the house and estate Chartwell.

*Much of this information can be found in the Hospital records at the London Metropolitan Archives.*

### **The Churchill Years**

In 1922 the estate was bought from the Campbell-Colquhoun family by Winston Churchill and his wife Clementine. Chartwell derives its name

from the well to the north of the house called Chart Well. Chart being an Old English word for rough ground. The highest point of the estate is about 650 feet above sea level, and the house commands a spectacular view across the Weald of Kent. This was an important factor in persuading Churchill to buy a house of no great architectural merit.

Between 1922 and 1924 they employed architect Philip Tilden who extended the house and carried out extensive renovations, simplifying and modernising the home. As well as allowing more light into the house through large casement windows he worked in the gently vernacular architecture style that stripped back many historic details but retained the multiple gables with stepped gable ends. The windows were laid out in strips set in expanses of warm pink brick hung with climbers. Tilden's work completely transformed the house. When completed Chartwell then became the Churchill's principal home.

The house has also been described as an example of Victorian architecture at its least attractive with a ponderous red brick country mansion of tile-hung gables and poky oriel windows.

The immediate grounds which fall away behind the house, were shaped into overlapping rectilinear terraces and garden plats, laid out in lawn and mixed herbaceous gardens linked by steps descending to lakes that Churchill created by a series of small dams. There is the water garden where he fed his fish, Lady Churchill's Rose garden and the Golden Rose Walk, a Golden Wedding anniversary gift from their children. The garden areas provided

inspiration for Churchill's paintings, many of which are on display in the house's garden studio.

In 1938, for financial reasons, Churchill offered Chartwell for sale. It was advertised as containing 5 reception rooms, 19 bed and dressing rooms, 8 bathrooms, set in 80 acres with three cottages on the estate and a heated and floodlit swimming pool. He withdrew the offer after industrialist Sir Henry Strakosch took over his share portfolio (which had suffered heavy losses on Wall Street) for three years and to pay off heavy debts.

During the Second World War the house was mostly unused. Its relatively exposed position so near to German occupied France meant it was vulnerable to a German airstrike or raid.

Churchill had been knighted in 1943 but by 1946 it became clear that he could no longer afford to run the property. A consortium of wealthy friends and businessmen organized by Lord Camrose purchased the estate. They arranged that for payment of a nominal rent both Sir Winston and Lady Churchill would have the right to live there until they both died: at this point the property was to be presented to the National Trust. Sir Winston died in 1965 and in 1966 Clementine decided to present Chartwell immediately to the National Trust. It was only then that it opened to the public.

The house is preserved as when Churchill owned it. Rooms are decorated with the original furniture, memorabilia, gifts, books, honours and medals. The house is Grade I listed for historical reasons and the gardens are listed Grade II.