

WHITEKNIGHTS PARK 1783–1798

Writers often overlook the period of the history of Whiteknights from 1783 to 1798 when the estate was owned by William Byam Martin Senior (1744–1808). The omission is surprising because two prominent landscape features that were created during that time (see below) remained in evidence for more than 150 years, including the first decade of the University's ownership from 1947.

Byam Martin purchased the Whiteknights estate from the Englefield family who had owned it at various periods since early times and for the previous 200 years. Although he was of a wealthy family that had derived its riches from sugar estates established by his grandfather in the Caribbean, his first employment was in Bengal in 1765 in a very junior position as a 'writer' with the East India Company (EIC). A successful career in India followed and enabled him to accumulate a fortune sufficient to support his retirement in 1781, followed by a return to England and the purchase of the Whiteknights estate. It was common practice for such rich families to retire to England to enjoy their new wealth but they became widely envied and disliked. Viewed as the nouveau riche of their day, they were called 'nabobs' (sometimes shortened to 'snobs' or 'nobs'), a term derived from an anglicisation of 'nawabs', a name given by Mughal emperors to their deputies who ran their provinces. The ostracised families sought solidarity by congregating in localities of which Berkshire was such a significant example that it became known as 'the English Hindoostan'. The particular attraction of the Whiteknights estate was its proximity to other already established nabob-owned estates such as Basildon Park, Caversham Park, Englefield House, Maiden Erlegh House, South Hill Park and Swallowfield Park. All had the added advantages of proximity to the Royal Court at Windsor and good access to Westminster for opportunities for government roles and parliamentary seats.

Byam Martin became High Sheriff of Berkshire but the responsibilities did not distract from his aim to improve the estate. To this end, he commissioned Samuel Pepys Cockerell (1753–1827), an eminent architect and Surveyor-General to the EIC, who had been engaged by several other nabobs.



Entrance archway in 1950, prior to collapse.

cover note) remained in place until the 1950s though by then both had severely deteriorated. The bridge was replaced by the now-named Friends Bridge in 1962 but the archway collapsed and was not rebuilt.

In addition, in 1790 Byam Martin commissioned a watercolour of Whiteknights by a well-known landscape artist George Samuel (d 1832). Entitled *View of Whiteknights, Reading, Berkshire* (see overleaf), it is one of the oldest colour representations of the park; today it hangs in the British Embassy in Paris.

After improving the mansion and the grounds, he sold the estate to the Marlborough Family Trustees who leased it to the Marquess of Blandford. His Grace spent lavishly on elaborate developments within the mansion and to the gardens but his profligacy led to bankruptcy (see Heritage Leaflet 3). On his father's death in 1817 the Marquess became the 5th Duke of Marlborough and in 1819 he fled to Blenheim Palace, the family seat. The estate then faced an uncertain future for the next thirty years until Sir Isaac Goldsmid purchased the estate (see Heritage Leaflet 4).



The three-arched stone bridge over the lake.

THE FRIENDS OF THE UNIVERSITY

The Friends of the University of Reading is an association founded in 1927 to foster contact between the University and those interested in its educational goals, history, current activities and future development.

The aim of The Friends is to raise funds through subscriptions and contributions in order to enable the University to undertake initiatives outside its core activities of teaching and research. The University is grateful for the energetic involvement of the members of this association and their financial support.

On the broader front, periodically, the association organises special heritage events which allow the public to see parts of the University that are not generally accessible. Sometimes such events are linked to special anniversaries or to particular national commemorations.

For further details of The Friends, including the annual programme of events, a full list of completed projects and a printable online membership form please visit: <http://thefriends.org.uk>.

COVER

Whiteknights archway in the snow The photograph, taken in the 1880s, shows a view of the late 18th century archway facing west towards the entrance drive from Shinfield Road along the present Chancellor's Way. The structure was not rebuilt after it collapsed on 2 May 1950 (see main text). The building on the left is the late 19th century eponymous Archway Lodge which over the years had a variety of purposes including for accommodating families of estate workers, external tenants (as Archway Cottage), the offices of the University Faculty of Science and currently the University Muslim Centre. Behind the camera lies a similar small late 19th century building which originally served as the lodge to Whiteknights Park House (now named Park House) and now is the home of the University Chaplaincy Centre.

IMAGES

Kindly supplied from collections of, the University of Reading Special Collections. George Samuel's watercolour supplied by Government Art Collection.

SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

Smith, S. and Bott, G. M. C. *One Hundred Years of University Education in Reading: A Pictorial History* (1992) University of Reading.
University Heritage Leaflet 3 – Whiteknights Park 1798–1819 (2017) Friends of the University.
University Heritage Leaflet 4 – Whiteknights Park 1849–1947 (2017) Friends of the University.
Williamson, C. *Nabobs of Berkshire* (2011) Goosecroft Publications.

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Whiteknights Park 1783–1798





WHITEKNIGHTS PARK 1779–1798

Main image *View of Whiteknights, Reading, Berkshire*, a watercolour by George Samuel (see overleaf) commissioned by William Byam Martin in 1790 features the mansion with a family group on a lawn practising archery. The group includes: (r to l) William Byam Martin (blue coat), Major-General H. Yorke (brother-in-law, red coat), Miss Yorke (niece, white dress) and Mrs Charlotte Byam Martin (wife, née Yorke, black dress).

Left An engraving from a drawing by Governor Thomas Pownall made in 1779 for Sir Henry Englefield who sold the estate to William Byam Martin four years later.

Right A later view of the mansion drawn and engraved by William Poole in 1798 for the Marquess of Blandford in the first year of his residence. It shows some of the additions to the previously plain style of the mansion and the new stone bridge over the lake which were part of the improvements made by Byam Martin.

