

Cecil Lodge

by Clive Clark

In 1939, when I first came to Abbots Langley as a child, Cecil Lodge was in limbo. The house stood in ruins and the grounds open to whoever cared to walk in them. Yet among the neglect and ruin there was an air of past splendour. To the front only the dome-topped gate-posts remained and the gravelled front drive was sprouting weeds. The kitchen-garden, summer-house, ornamental pond, the distant ice-house, were all still in evidence despite being overgrown, as were the sloping lawns and the 'ha-ha', to the rear of the house. Towering above all were the great majestic Cedars of Lebanon, with giant descending arms, still standing proudly, like two thoroughbreds amid a herd of nondescripts. It was a scene of peace and solitude which I often enjoyed.

Even as a child I remember wondering what better times the house had seen and it seemed curious to me that very few local people knew anything much about it. Over the years since and during my research of the parish I have kept a lookout for clues to its past. Now, from Ordnance Survey Maps, St Lawrence parish magazine, Census and Land Tax returns, directories and county newspapers - I have pieced together the outline of the Lodge's story.

The central part of the house was built around 1770, in approximately 11 acres of land, as a summer villa - probably for leasing to Londoners, because the improvement of the London road through Hunton Bridge after 1762 by the Sparrows Herne Turnpike Trust brought the Lodge to within three and a half hours' coach travel of the capital.

It was probably commissioned by a favourite aunt of Lord Cranborne, because in 1773 she presented it to him as a wedding present. He lived there until 1786, when his father died and he succeeded to the title at Hatfield and subsequently moved there. This could explain the name *Cecil Lodge*.

From 1786 to 1827 the Lodge was leased by the Cecils to a series of titled and independent persons, who mostly lived there for short periods. In 1827 it was sold to James Muir, a retired parliamentary solicitor of Scottish origin who, with his daughters Katherine and Eleanor, lived there for the next thirty years.

Katherine was instrumental in building the Girls' National School in the village (opened in 1844); it was possibly she or Eleanor who had the Model Cottages built at Trowley Bottom in 1856.

Their father invested his money for them by adding wings to enlarge the Lodge and also bought the farm next door, known then as *Thorns* which he turned into his 'home farm', renaming it *Mansion House Farm*. In 1864 it was bought by William Henry Smith II (son of the founder bookseller and commercial wizard in his own right) who, having retired from commerce, was already M.P. for Westminster. During his eight years in residence he installed gas-lighting and spent a great deal of money beautifying the grounds and gardens with all kinds of new and exotic foreign flowers and shrubs. He was also an active Manager of the village schools. But when the Metropolitan Asylum for Chronic Imbeciles was built close to the boundary of his land in 1869/70, he felt his privacy

invaded. He complained of tramps and workmen breaking his fences to get to the *Compasses*, and so he eventually moved.

In 1873, William Jones Loyd, the banker who had bought Langleybury Mansion in 1858 and Parsonage Farm in 1865, bought up Cecil Lodge. For the next 23 years it was again leased out to a succession of prosperous people, many of them London business men.

One such business man was Howard Gilliat, friend of Vicar Hodgson, who in 1866 played a crucial part in solving the problem of supplying the village with clean, piped water. Investing his money in the new Abbots Langley Waterworks Company, he helped to provide the capital sum needed to defray the cost of installing the pipes and pumping machinery - leaving the villagers with only the burden of annual running costs, payable by water rate. It was thus with his permission and that of his landlord that the Lodge's water-tower was employed at first to create the head of water needed for it to gravitate through the pipes to all the cottages. It was later replaced by a larger tank on the other side of Love Lane.

In 1896, E H Loyd sold the Lodge to Mr R D Cleasby for £12,000; he and his wife lived at the Lodge until 1919. In their time, the Lodge participated in the scheme for summer Social Evenings, whereby villagers were allowed into the gardens and grounds of the large homes, to enjoy the flowers. Refreshments were provided and music was played by the boys of the St Pancras Orphanage Schools Band. After her husband died, Mrs Cleasby raised funds for the church by taking and selling some of the earliest photographs of it, and presenting a Chancel Carpet and other gifts.

In 1914, she played a key role in setting up the Abbots Langley & Leverstock Green Nursing Association and allowed the Lodge grounds to be used as a parade ground for troops training during the 1914-18 war. It was also in those same grounds that Princess Louise reviewed the Kensington Regiment in 1914.

The next tenant or owner of the Lodge was Mr A J Wall and his family. But by early 1930s he had left, probably selling the estate to a housing developer. By fire or demolition, the house was soon rendered a shell; but only two houses were ever built, facing Love lane and the new reservoir.

It was just after that when I arrived in the village. During the Second World War the ruined estate was often played in by the London evacuees; I believe it was also used by the local Home Guard for exercises. In 1947, 174 of the trees in the grounds - including the great Cedars - were felled to make way for 'council houses'. The remains of the Lodge were quickly swept away, and replaced with 168 houses of Summerhouse Way and Tibbs Hill Road. *Cecil Lodge Corner* is all that remains now.

During the 'Railway Age', the entrance to the village was Gallows Hill Lane. How ironic then, as Cecil Lodge fell on hard times, that the buses from Watford should have helped preserve its name by making the turn near its former gateway, the 'new' entrance to the village. ■

• *Bygone Snippet*

What is a Ha-ha?

It's a sunken fence bounding a garden.