

Hextable House – Blue Plaque Unveiling

Good morning everyone and welcome to the unveiling of the Village's second Blue Plaque. It is lovely to see so many family, friends, dignitaries and members of the local community here.

I am delighted that with the support of both Hextable Heritage Society and Hextable Parish Council, I have been able to sponsor this plaque and to dedicate it to my late wife, Sharon.

Sharon was chairman of Hextable Heritage Society for a number of years, taking over the reins from Audrey Rainer, after her many years of service to the Society and indeed the community. Sharon was passionate about the Village and its history, carrying out a great deal of research both for her own interest but also for the many outside researchers that she met to show them our archives.

I feel that dedicating this plaque to commemorate the site of Hextable House to Sharon is a fitting tribute to her and one that she would have been immensely proud of.

So why have we decided to erect a Blue Plaque here?

From documents dating from the late 15th century, Roger Rothel is the first named owner of the Manor of Hextable, although there may well have been a house on the site as early as the 13th century.

In 1526 Hextable House was sold to George Killingworth. At this stage, the building was most probably a timber-framed construction with plaster infill panels, as was typical of Tudor architecture.

Later in the 16th century the timber house was replaced with a brick mansion. It was around this time that The Avenue of Limes was also planted, forming an impressive approach to the mansion.

In 1733 the property passed to Charles Egerton, who made his fortune as a haberdasher in Fleet Street. He was responsible for extending the manor house and building an adjacent farmhouse in 1756.

Jumping forward to 1864, the arrival of the railway at Swanley Junction provided ready access to London. Acres of land around Swanley and Hextable were soon covered with greenhouses, growing more specialised crops for the lucrative markets in the capital.

The last incarnation of Hextable House began in 1889 when it was sold to Arthur Harper Bond. He had always had an interest in agriculture and, under him, it became the headquarters for The Horticultural College and Produce Company, and as such was probably the first horticultural college in the world. It soon became the venue for another world first when it accepted its first female applicants in 1891, the first step to becoming an all-female establishment in 1902.

Swanley Horticultural College, as it had become known, went on to produce a number of amazing women horticulturalists including: the world's first female professional landscape architect, the world's first female landscape gardener and a National President of the Royal Horticultural Society. Possibly the first female to hold that post.

On the night of 1st March 1944, four bombs were dropped in the college grounds, causing considerable damage to the House, which was being used as offices and dormitory accommodation. As a result, one student was killed and another badly injured. The ruins of Hextable House were demolished in 1946. The only college building still standing is the 1926 Botany Laboratory, now doubling as the Heritage Centre and the Parish Council Office.

Finally, it gives my daughter, Katie, and me the greatest of pleasure to unveil this plaque to commemorate the site of Hextable House and to dedicate it to my late wife and former chairman of Hextable Heritage Society, Sharon.