

Sarratt Local History Society talk. 18 November at Sarratt School 'The Story of Commonwood' by Stephen Morrill

No one driving out of the woods on a stormy day or a moonlit night and suddenly confronting Commonwood House for the first time, can have failed to feel disturbed, curious, and mystified at the sight of this rambling house-frontage, like a maquette made from a crazy mixture of architectural styles and periods, dropped, without a boundary, at the side of the common. The mystery was solved for the packed audience who attended Stephen Morrill's talk. It was not so much a story of a historical house, but more a history of the eccentricity of the house's owner and designer: a story only possible in the days before modern planning laws.

Originally farmland, the working farmhouse had been gentrified by about 1900 to become a modest but elegant family house with pretty Georgian style windows, gables and a verandah. This unpretentious building was leased by one David Allen, a printer from London and subsequently bought by him in 1905. His money came from bill-poster sites, theatre bill printing, lithograph printing and finally from a buy-out of his premises by the Government Stationary Office. He was wealthy but it was his striking-looking wife, the former actress Miss Cissy Graham, who knew 'how to spend it.' And the engrandishment of Commonwood became her dream, her aim and her life.

Between about 1906 and the end of the First World War she had borne three sons, been widowed, and had provided Commonwood with no less than 10 varied ornate 'Jacobean' style gables, 8 oriel windows, 45 lattice windows, a variety of 'Tudor chymneys', a castellated roof pediment, a ballroom, a Great Hall, a library and even a squash court based on a monastery building in Amalfi! All of these architectural 'flights of fancy' were sourced, designed and built for her by her advisor and 'friend' Mr. T. Downer of Red Lion Farm, Sarratt, a highly competent and imaginative craftsman.

The sons were as eccentric as their mother and the family were reputed to have friendships with the Fascists, including Mosley. By the time the Second World War broke out the house was being used by City Bankers, a war-vital electrical design company and British Army Officers. Its eccentric past crept back when having been sold off, it was re-invented after the War as a 'club' for American Officers that locals say was actually more of a 'strip club' than the more conventional kind.

Nearly destroyed by a major fire in 1952 it was eventually rescued in about 1958 and converted into the apartments that are now both desirable and thoroughly respectable. Oddly, though, the building has never been listed!

Stephen Morrill, faced with virtually no formal written accounts of the house, has done a masterly job of researching and documenting the story of Commonwood. He also managed to have his audience in fits of laughter when they were not simply enthralled with his account of this unique building and its origins.

Angela Colman