

🌿 Finnmere House 🌿

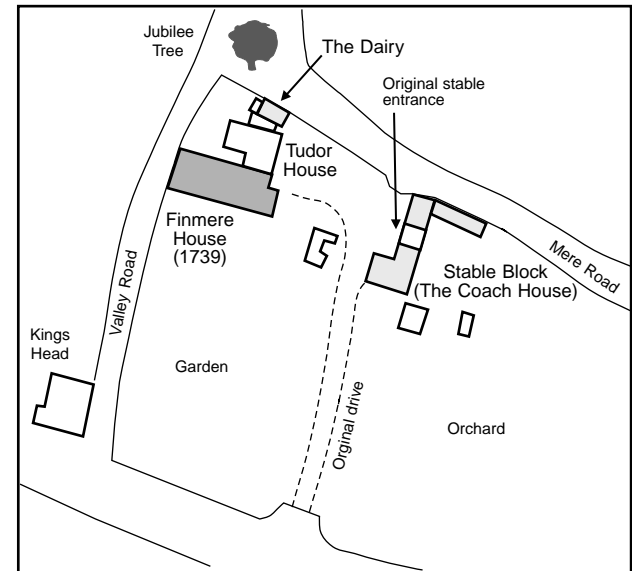
Oxfordshire still has a rich stock of fine country houses, although many outstanding examples have fallen into decay and social changes over the years have brought about major changes in the function and use of others. Finnmere House, now a listed building, is one of Finnmere's main links with the past, and its history provides a classic example of the roller-coaster fortunes of a great house over the centuries.

Origins

The Manor of Finnmere was royal property for much of the Middle Ages, and Henry VIII granted Finnmere to four of his queens: to Catherine of Aragon in 1509, to Jane Seymour in 1536, to Anne of Cleves in 1540, and to Catherine Howard in 1541. The name Finnmere House dates from the latter part of the seventeenth century, when Elizabeth and Dorothy Waller, two daughters of a London barrister, Sergeant Thomas Waller, married and settled in Finnmere. Sergeant Waller's estate, approximately a fifth of the medieval Manor of Finnmere, was divided among his three daughters. Elizabeth married Francis Bacon and settled in what had been known as the Manor House, or Court House and became Bacon's House. Dorothy married a barrister, John James of Felstead, Essex, and the newly-weds came to live in the village itself, in the Tudor building which was part of Waller's estate. From that time, to distinguish between the two grand houses in the area, the first has been referred to as Bacon's House and the second as Finnmere House.

There are no surviving records to show what the building was like when John and Dorothy took up residence. It is clear that, although it must have been a substantial dwelling, it was a great deal less imposing than Finnmere House today. It probably included the oak-framed Tudor structure referred to now as the Dairy, of which a part still stands in good condition on the south side of Mere Road, and the larger stone building facing east at right angles to it, with its inglenook fireplace, stone flags, oak beams and mullioned windows. This stone house is now known as the Tudor House and it is probable that John and Dorothy James made the first structural additions to this part of the house.

Dorothy James died in 1712; her husband died six years later. Both were buried in Finnmere church, as was their son Hogan. But Hogan's early death in 1725 at the age of thirty-two meant that his share of the Manor passed to his aunt Frances, who was the last in line of this branch of the James family. On her death in 1739, the bulk of the inheritance fell to Nathaniel Bacon, but Finnmere House was sold off separately, and a major period of its development began.



Site of Finnmere House



The Tudor House in the early years of the twentieth century, with the Dairy on the right

The Manor was a source of income rather than a potential place of residence for Henry's wives. It would seem that the occasional reported appearance of Anne Boleyn in the grounds of Finmere House, with her head tucked underneath her arm, must await verification. While stories of phantoms in and around the building abound, Anne has no known connection with the village and is not a prime candidate for a ghostly appearance. Myth and a modicum of fact have become interwoven with the passage of time. In 1971, George Barnes teased John Simpson of the BBC with a similar story.

GB: [Finmere House is] supposed to have been the home at some time of one of Henry VIII's wives, Jane Seymour. The room that she was supposed to occupy, I was doing a little job for the owner then, in the room. It was a bright hot day. I got my jacket off, all at once it came over cold, and I had to put my jacket on. And I passed a remark about it to Mrs Symes-Thompson, the owner, and she laughed and said probably it was Jane Seymour's ghost.

JS: Is it renowned for being haunted?

GB: Well, they do say it was haunted, but Mrs Symes-Thompson told me she'd never seen nor heard anything, and she'd live there for a good many year.

JS: Do you believe in ghosts?

GB: No, that I don't. No.

John Pollard

The purchaser was John Pollard of Leckhampstead, a former Sheriff of Buckinghamshire, who immediately set about a major modernisation project. This involved the construction of a south-facing extension, attached at right angles to the existing Tudor House, which brought the building up to the proportions and standards expected of an eighteenth-century gentleman's residence. The new south wing boasted a handsome brick facade in the style of Queen Anne (country architects were often conservative), and the rainwater heads still bear his crest—a grazing stag—and the date 1739.

Pollard's new wing, with its seven bays and its entrance doorway with Tuscan pilasters and a pediment, still stands and has inherited the name Finmere House. It is likely that at this time, or soon after, a stable block was added. This outbuilding has been a private residence since the late 1970s and is now known as the Coach House. The construction of the south wing changed the orientation of the building. The oldest part had looked north towards the village centre. The main part of the house now faced south and, later in the century, a driveway was laid to provide access to the new turnpike road built in 1744 to link Banbury and Buckingham. The house had in a sense turned its back on the historical centre of the village.

Land-tax assessments demonstrate that throughout the eighteenth century the Pollards were the only family of standing in Finmere, although after the death of John Pollard in 1761 and his wife two years later the family chose not to live in the village, and let the house to a succession of tenants.



Pollard's rainwater heads

The Clark Brothers

The best known tenants are the brothers Dr Charles and Dr James Clark, who took up residence after 1830. James, an Edinburgh-trained doctor, by no means turned his back on the village and devoted himself to his rented house and to village affairs. He cared for and enhanced the gardens of Finmere House and set to work determinedly to improve sanitary conditions for the villagers. Unhealthy and evil-smelling cesspools at the doors of the cottages were removed, and James oversaw the covering of the open brook that ran along Fulwell Road. He shared the Victorian passion for mechanical devices and, with the aid of the village carpenter William Bayliss, constructed a windmill for pumping water and other ingenious contrivances in the grounds of Finmere House. In 1858–59, he was responsible for the repair and improvement of the clock in St Michael's, adding a minute hand and new escapement. Apart from the aid of a £7 grant voted by the Vestry, he met the costs of its removal and replacement in the south wall of the tower from his own pocket.

James Clark died in 1869, his brother Charles four years later, and both are buried in the crypt, in recent years badly overgrown, at Barton Hartshorn. Charles's widow Elizabeth then briefly occupied the house before the Symes-Thompson family purchased the freehold in 1898.



Finmere House, about 1855



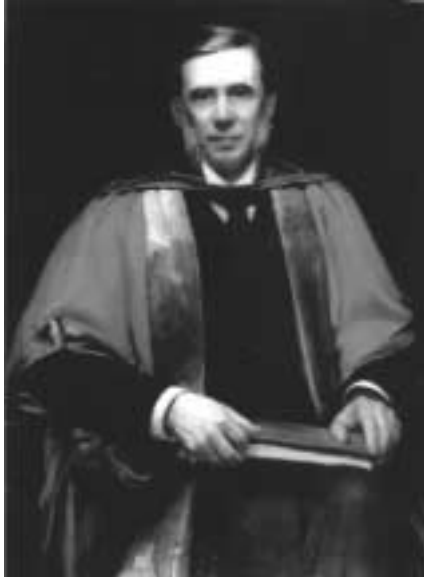
Elizabeth, James and Charles Clark

These pictures were painted in Vienna and are photographed hanging in Water Stratford House. Elizabeth was wife of Charles Clark.



Dr James Clark

The Symes-Thompsons



Edmund Symes-Thompson



The staff pictured at Number 33 Cavendish Square

Edmund Symes-Thompson, of Cavendish Square, was a prominent London physician and academic. No doubt impressed by the improved sanitary conditions achieved by his predecessor in the village, he regarded Finmere as a healthy place and bought the house in 1898 as a country residence. He was in the habit of bringing his wife Elizabeth (Lilla) and his entire London staff of twelve with him to Finmere during the summer, and was responsible for the construction in 1902 of the last major extension to the house. This was the Edwardian billiard room, with additional bedrooms above, added to the west end of Pollard's south wing and now known, curiously, as the music room. This addition extended the house to the boundary of Valley Road, and completed the external configuration of Finmere House as we know it today.

The house remained the property of the Symes-Thompson family throughout the first half of the twentieth century, although their time was initially divided between London and Finmere. Edmund's son Henry Edmund (Harry) Symes-Thompson married Caroline Tacon, and like his father practised medicine in London, where he became a consultant to the Brompton hospital. In those days it was usual for families to base themselves in London for the season (particularly if they had young marriageable daughters), and Finmere house was often let to friends, patients, and on more than occasion to the royal family. In the 1890s The Prince of Wales (later Edward VII) used the house for week-end parties, at times riotous affairs of which valuable Symes-Thompson crystal suffered the consequences. During the tenancy of the Count Rodolph Fane de Salis and his wife Edith in the twenties and thirties, the Prince of Wales (later Edward VIII) and the Dukes of Kent and Gloucester all came to visit and spent leisure time in Finmere with their families.

The second World War claimed the life of Harry Symes-Thompson's son (Richard) Edmund in a London air raid of 1941, and soon afterwards the family, concerned for the safety of the two surviving children, came to live permanently in Finmere. Before and after the death of her husband in 1952 Caroline Symes-Thompson was a prominent figure in the local community. She founded and managed the finances of Finmere Sports Club, providing the field and the equipment for both the cricket and the football team. A licentiate of the Royal College of Music, she was a regular attender at and honorary organist of Finmere Parish Church, and became very much a central figure in village life, loved and respected for her concern for local people and local matters. But the end of hostilities in 1945 was to bring with it a difficult period of social change and adaptation. Domestic servants were becoming a rare breed, and the upkeep of the house and extensive grounds proved increasingly impossible to manage. Parts of the grounds, including

the land on which the new village school was built, were sold off. In 1959 Caroline Symes-Thompson finally decided to leave Finmere House, but not the village. She moved with her son George to Finmere Cottage in Mere Road, where she continued to be cared for by Ena Davies, who had served the family with such dedication during happier days at Finmere House. She died in 1967, aged eighty four, and had been organist at St. Michael's Church for over twenty seven years.

The Flowers

These events brought about the last great resurgence in the fortunes of Finmere House. Jean and Jack Flower owned Fleuront, a flourishing London antique business based in Brompton Road and specialising in fine eighteenth-century French and English furniture. They fell in love with the old house and bought it, leaving their home in Hampstead to live in Finmere, bringing their business with them. A hectic period of restoration, including the installation of central heating and new domestic arrangements, brought the house into line with post-war living. The Flowers, needing a new main staircase, constructed the hall that now joins the eighteenth-century wing to the older Tudor part of the building. The Red Hall, nineteen feet high, with its elegant balustraded staircase and crystal chandelier, has proved to be the major contribution to the style and form of Finmere House during the twentieth century. The stable block, which had fallen into severe disrepair, was repaired and used as a workshop and furniture repository, and the garden was tended, restored and replanted in traditional style.

Jean and Jack Flower became very much a part of village life in the relatively short period that they spent in the village. Those who were children at the school still speak warmly of their generosity and hospitality. All Finmere schoolchildren were invited to a party at Christmas time, in the stone-flagged sitting room with its open fire in the original Tudor building and is still the source of happy memories for many villagers. This late surge in the fortunes of Finmere House was not to last. Jack Flower died suddenly in 1968, and Jean left Finmere for Woburn and then Cheltenham.

After the Flowers

The house passed through a quick succession of owners and in the late 1970s, house and grounds were divided into three plots, known as Finmere House, the Tudor House, and the Coach House. While the latter two have been well cared for and substantially restored, the eighteenth-century wing, now Finmere House, has been allowed to fall into serious decay by its London owner.

In recent years, Finmere House has been left unoccupied. Despite internal damage from burst pipes, particularly to the ceiling of the Red Hall,



Jean and Jack Flower in the 1960s



Finmere House in winter, early 1960s

Jon Harris, now resident of San Jose, California, recalls Finmere House during the 1960s.

There used to be a great big barn owl in the stable block, we used to dare each other to go up the ladder to the loft area to see it! The Flowers who occupied Finmere house used to buy all the children at the school a Christmas gift, we would all go over to the house for mince pies and a presentation of a paper mache boar's head to the Flowers.



Village children enjoying a swimming lesson at Finmere House in the 1960s

the structure remains sound and a local gardener is now maintaining the grounds. The architectural details of the 1739 facade are in a very poor state and the rate of decay has notably increased in the past few years. Without urgent action, there may soon be little of interest from John Pollard's handsome extension worth preserving into the twenty-first century.



Finmere House at the end of the Millennium