

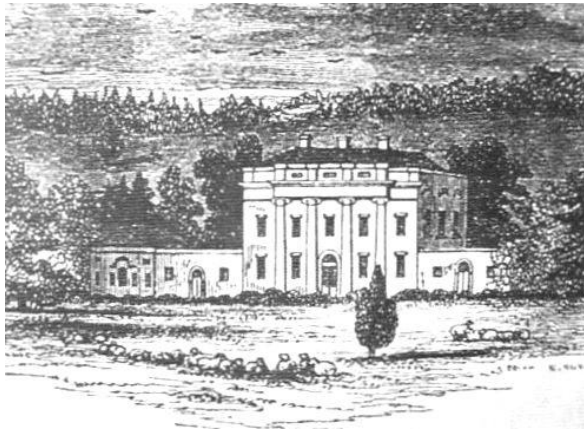
## Coombe Park, Whitchurch

The 125 acre estate of Coombe Park lies to the west of Whitchurch and is approached through entrance gates in Manor Road. The entrance was originally on the High Street, where the curved brick walls and gatekeeper's lodge can still be seen.



Recently purchased by a new owner, the estate contains a grand mansion (*above*), empty for many years, which may now at last be able to recover its lost glory.

In 1792 Samuel Gardiner, a Bristol merchant, bought the manor of Whitchurch and set about building a Palladian-style house, Coombe Lodge (*left*). The grounds around the house were landscaped by Humphrey Repton. Gardiner's friend Francis Sykes had also returned from the East Indies and was building an even grander house on the opposite side of the river at Basildon. Gardiner had rented Hardwick House for several years and become one of the original investors in the toll bridge venture.



Several generations of the Gardiner family owned the estate. One of them, the famous missionary Commander Allen Gardiner, died in Tierra del Fuego in 1851 and has a memorial on the wall in St Mary's Church. Then in 1881 an



industrialist, John Foster, bought the property. He enlarged and remodelled the house (*above*). The name changed from Coombe Lodge to Coombe Park.

The Howard family, enthusiastic racehorse owners and breeders, acquired the estate in 1898 and by 1920 it extended to 670 acres, including the land now known as Beale Park on the south side of the Thames. There was a stud complex, several staff cottages and a boat house.

During World War II the property was used as a rest and recuperation centre for United States Air Force

personnel, while Lillian Howard and her husband Charles continued to live there in a few of the rooms.

Lillian had been given the house in the early 1900s as a wedding present from her father. She and her husband lived in style, with fifty staff including a chauffeur for their Rolls Royce. In 2008 an American



tourist, Doug Cox, searched out the building where his airman father had recuperated during the war and wrote an [account of his visit](#), including photographs of the house in 1945, one of which is shown here.

In the changed economic situation after the war and with the house in a dilapidated state, a large part of it was demolished. Charles Howard had died in 1943 and in 1947 his widow Lillian sold the estate to a publisher, Walter Hutchinson. Then 670 acres in extent, it included the still substantial house in which she remained as a tenant. When he died three years later the house and 169 acre estate were repurchased by the Howards and in 1972 Lillian's great nephew Richard Howard became the owner. Richard chaired the charitable trust running the Child Beale Park, which was started by his great uncle the conservationist and peacock collector Gilbert Beale. (More in the Whitchurch Web news item of 31<sup>st</sup> March 2017.)

In 1982 Martyn Deaner, a successful entrepreneur in the offshore oil industry, became the next owner of the Coombe Park estate. He had developed a diving support vessel and a decompression chamber for which he won Queen's Awards. He renovated and extended the house, adding an indoor swimming pool and an underground garage. During his time a football pitch was created in the grounds and used for training players from Reading Football Club. There was also polo playing. However, business pressures led to a bankruptcy in 1994 and subsequently the estate languished for many years, finally being repossessed in 2016. It was then sold to a London-based property company for



a reported £4.1 million, before appearing on the market in 2017 at a guide price of £10 million.

The agent's particulars describe the main house as consisting of an entrance hall, reception hall, sitting room, study, kitchen, dining room, drawing room,



seven bedrooms, three bathrooms, indoor pool room, games room and cellars. There is an old orangery and greenhouses in the grounds, a walled garden, a disused swimming pool and a complex of former coaching buildings with a courtyard. These include two three-bedroom cottages (Stud Cottage and Clock



Lodge), offices, stables and paddocks. There is also a separate three-bedroom house (Timber Lodge), a pavilion, a dilapidated indoor tennis court and a boathouse with a wet dock, dry dock and small upstairs flat.

The present run-down state of the buildings contrasts with their condition when Timber Lodge was the residence in the late 1980s of the ebullient polo-loving Ambassador of Belize, H E Nunzio D'Angieri. On his [website](#) there are many photos of the estate at that time.

In 2018 the estate was acquired by a new owner, David Pain. Concerns about the many intrusions by so-called 'urban explorers', whose hobby is entering derelict properties to take photos and post them on the internet, then led to a tightening up of security, the appearance of razor wire at the entrance gate and 8-foot-high steel fencing alongside the Hartslock bridleway, part of the Thames Path national trail. A storm of local protests was followed by a retrospective

planning application for the fence, which at the time of writing awaits a decision by South Oxfordshire District Council.

The location of the Coombe Park estate in relation to Manor Road and the Hartslock Bridleway can be seen in Strutt & Parker's plan below.



**Sources:**

- A Village on The Thames*, Rickman Godlee, 1926.
- The Manor Houses of Whitchurch*, Robert Noble (undated pamphlet).
- Relics and Monuments*, Peter Hawley, 2nd edition 2017.
- The Nabobs of Berkshire*, Clive Williams, 2010.
- Coombe Park Particulars*, property agents Strutt & Parker, 2017.
- Victoria County History, Oxfordshire*, Simon Draper, draft June 2019.

**Article by Richard Wingfield, Whitchurch Web News Editor, June 2019.**