



## Oral History Interview with Charlotte Duthie

Recorded by Andy Hales 16/04/2019

**00.01. Charlotte:** In 1913 my great grandmother Eleanor Peel and her husband William Peel were looking for somewhere to buy in the countryside and they looked extensively around the South Coast and beyond, actually: it has always been a mystery as to how they actually found the spot at Leydene where they actually bought the land they did. We think there's a possibility that the vicar of East Meon at the time, who was a Reverend Crawley<sup>1</sup>, was a friend of theirs and they might have found the area attractive by visiting them – we're not quite sure but we think that might be the connection. Anyway, they found the land at Leydene, 10,000 to 12,000 acres, and Eleanor Peel, who was very very rich as a result of her father making linoleum, bought the land in 1912/13 and ...

**Andy:** Her father was the 5<sup>th</sup> richest person in the world?

**Charlotte:** He was: at the height of his wealth he was the 5<sup>th</sup> richest man in the world.

**Andy:** Good God ...

**Charlotte:** He imported the cork from Portugal; he had his own fleet of ships and he brought it up the river in Lancaster and it was turned into linoleum which was *the* thing then, every single house had linoleum floors: he couldn't produce enough. He was making more and more money. He had two daughters, Eleanor & Maude; unfortunately Maude died when she was 30, unmarried.



Lord Ashton

But anyway, Eleanor & William drew up the plans for this house at Leydene: it was to be, in the end, the largest house built for private use; there hasn't been as large a house as that since she built Leydene.

**Andy:** Good God ... the equivalent of a Russian oligarch today?

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<sup>1</sup> Actually, the vicar was Rev Thomas Heywood Masters. Rev Arthur Stafford Crawley took over in 1922. Masters was an outstanding vicar: he commissioned Ninian Comper to refurbish the interior of All Saints, he served in France throughout WWI, first as an ambulance driver then as an army chaplain.



*Lady Peel on site during construction*

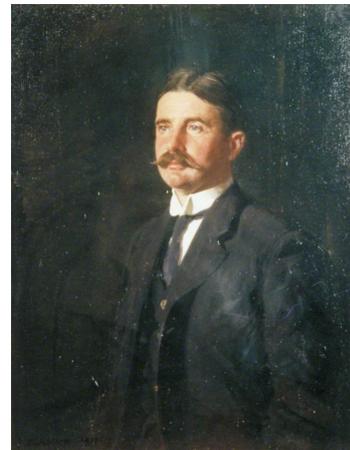


**House and Porch**  
June 1923

**03.04** **Charlotte:** Yes: a huge project and of course it has these wonderful views over the Solent and down the Meon Valley. And in those days (and I even remember it when it didn't have all the trees which are now there and which do obscure quite a lot of the Solent view and the Meon Valley view) ... and it was an extraordinary sight [site?]. They moved down to Coombe Cross while they were doing the planning. Willy Peel was at that time forging a political career so he wasn't often in the area and he left most of the planning to Eleanor.



*Leydene House photographed in 2014*



*William Robert Wellesley Peel*

**Andy:** And the war intervened?

**Charlotte:** Unfortunately the war came and all the men who were going to work on the house went off to war, so the building stopped. It re-started again in 1918 and was finished in 1925 which is when they moved in there.

**Andy:** So they were in Coombe Cross for the rest of the time?

**04.30** **Charlotte:** They were at Coombe Cross the rest of the time. My grandmother and her brother grew up there. Anyway, that was all fine, they lived there. There were apocryphal stories about Eleanor Peel which everyone knows, I don't know if you want to know about them? How she sued the council when it snowed? They invited some guests down for the weekend and it snowed, and the guests couldn't leave; Eleanor Peel was so furious because she

wanted to get rid of them that she eventually sued the council for not clearing the snow. She was ...

**Andy:** A piece of work?

**Charlotte:** There are lots of stories about her, I don't know whether they were true or not – Michael knows some of them as well – there are stories about her which are told by different people so some of them are true – but she was an unusual eccentric. Anyway, she unfortunately only lived in the. Hosue for another 12 years because when the second World War the Navy requisitioned ...

5.47

**Andy:** And Willy died in '38?



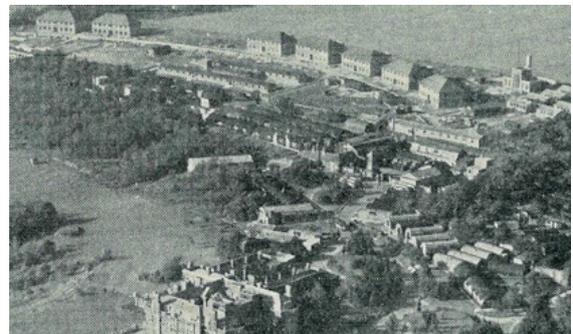
*Lord Peel at the King David Hotel*

**Charlotte:** Willy died in '38 having done the Peel Commission, which was the commission, very very interesting: he was sent to Israel to try and sort the situation out there, because obviously the Jews had been granted their homeland there and the Arabs weren't best pleased. He recommended partition of the country on boundaries that people think would have worked but unfortunately the government didn't really like the idea of partition so it wasn't passed through the House of Commons but lots of people say it was the last chance for peace in the area, but he died soon after it finished that, in 1938, and

then the Navy requisitioned the house in 1940 and Eleanor reluctantly moved out ...

**06.48 Andy:** And they wanted it for signals purposes ...

**Charlotte:** The signals station Mercury, and they wanted a signals station, and an enormous amounts of Nissan huts and extra buildings were put up around the house to accommodate the Navy. I don't know much about that strategic, location but it was, as you say, a most amazing site, location, because you can see the sea from there, you can see the Solent, the Isle of Wight ...



*Leydene House as HMS Mercury*

**Andy:** I imagine, communications in those days, line of sight was quite important.

**Charlotte:** Absolutely. It wouldn't just have been a ... but anyway, an enormous amount of building work, temporary building work, that was set up all over the grounds, the kitchen garden and all that kind of thing ... And poor Eleanor had to move out! Anyway, at the end of the war, she was hoping to come back again but unfortunately the Navy felt that Mercury had to continue, they needed the signals station and they worked out that to move it all was going to be incredibly expensive, buying a new site and everything, and they decided that they wanted to stay at Leydene, so they compulsorily purchased the house and 120 acres off

Eleanor in 1946 or 7 for £60,000... *(both laugh)* but anyway ... she was so reluctant about it, she didn't want to give it up, but she did love fishing and she moved to Scotland. So Mercury stayed at Leydene.

**08.44 Andy:** And some of the local farms ...

**Charlotte:** 12,000 acres: she died in 1949, 12,00 acres were sold off at a good price to tenant farmers who had them, like the Whites and the Atkinsons and people like that. The Whites, I think, got most of it<sup>2</sup>.

**09.11 Andy:** And then there was the controversy because your father and uncle and aunt didn't ..... Eleanor didn't leave a will, is that right?

**Charlotte:** Yes, she died intestate, without making a will, but my grandmother, Doris Peel, her daughter, did get two farms from the estate, one of which was Garston, one of which was Glinton farm, I think it was called, above Hambledon, between here and Hambledon, we're not sure how she got them off the estate – I think she had to buy them in the end but at quite a good price because, obviously, she was the daughter, but that was in 1954, that she got the two farms, one was Garston, that my father got, and my uncle, his twin brother, got the other farm.

**Andy:** That's Brian Blacker and then David Blacker.

**Charlotte:** Yes, Brian, my father, got Garston Farm which was I think about 360 acres, all the way underneath Hen Wood. The Tosdevines were there when we were there, it came in front of Hen Wood, behind Hen Wood, behind Garston as it is now, up towards Bereleigh and all that bit as far as the eye can see. It was a lovely, lovely farm.

**Andy:** What did he grow?

**10.44 Charlotte:** It was, it is, lovely beautiful farm land, as you know. It was quite intensively farmed when my father took it over, in 1954; he employed 7 men on a basic wage of £4. 15s a week, he had a herd of 70 Ayrshire cows which were milked by hand in the dairy – everyone knows the dairy which was along the road there – lunch was at 12.30; Brian shepherded a flock of sheep, sleeping with the ewes when they were about to give birth; he grew oats, wheat, barley, potatoes, mangolds & sugar beet which was harvested and loaded onto trailers and driven to West Meon station where it was forked into railway carriages and taken to the nearest beet factory at Tavistock. He also had pigs, well, anyway .. my parents didn't have anywhere to live – they lived in one of the cottages along ...

**11.48 Andy:** Along from Garston ...



*Brian Blacker photographed in 2016*



*Garston Dairy, photographed in 1960. The new farmhouse built by Brian Blacker is above it.*

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<sup>2</sup> Dymoke White, who rented Oxenbourne House, bought 10,000 acres of land in East Meon parish, and subsequently arranged for the Atkinsons to buy the lease of Lower and South Farms.

**Charlotte:** ... along from Garston, while they built a fairly modern-looking house by all accounts, where Garston Farm House is now. I think it's called Garston House now, where the Davenports live. They moved into that in 1957 and then they had three children born in Garston House and one had been born in the cottage up the road where they lived while they were waiting for the house to be built. Then I think the very intensive farming became less intensive. We kept the herd, the cows were milked, I remember, the dairy herd, we had them right up till the end, and I remember the milking by hand but I also remember a new dairy being installed: it was always breaking down. These things were put on the udders but, you know, 'it's not working!'. So a lot of teething problems when they mechanised the milking. And then every day the milk was collected, when we first were there, in large steel churns put on a bench outside, a large bench outside the dairy and they were picked up by ... I don't know who it was: I know. And then I think all that intensive farming was turned into wheat so it became a wheat and barley – wheat and barley were grown mainly – and I remember playing in those fields and light aircraft sprayed rather nasty chemicals as we played ... and they went so close to the ground, we had to almost take cover! So it became mainly wheat and barley and then the dairy herd, and then my father was given another farm by his mother over at Steep Marsh, Coldhayes, so we all moved house when I was ten, so it was in 1967, but my father continued farming Garston as well as the Steep Marsh farm for quite a few years after that until he sold it to, I think, Bill's father, Bill Tyrwhitt Drake's father, Bereleigh Estate.

**Ends 16.33**