

History of Leydene House

By Michael Blakstad



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Introduction

When Leydene House was built, just after the Great War, many country houses were being sold off to pay for death duties and other taxes: it would be a long time before such a sumptuous country house would be built for private individuals. William Robert Wellesley Peel and his wife Eleanor, the Dowager Countess were immensely wealthy; he was the grandson of Sir Robert Peel, the Conservative Prime Minister. The money, however, came from Lady Peel, the daughter of Lord Ashton, a wealthy Lancaster linoleum manufacturer, who had settled £800,000 on his only child when the couple were married in 1898 (£100 million in today's money). They acquired 10,300 acres of land in and around the parish of East Meon¹.

William Peel inherited his father's peerage in 1912 and became Viscount Clanfield: he was a career politician who visited Leydene mainly to host weekend shooting parties of prominent guests. He died in 1937 and in 1941 Leydene House was requisitioned by the Royal Navy to replace the Signals School in Portsmouth which had been bombed: it became H.M.S. Mercury. Following Lady Peel's death in 1953, the rest of the estate was sold off, and in 1993, Leydene House/HMS Mercury was also sold off: the House and stables were divided into apartments, and the naval buildings sold off for development as market housing and as a Sustainability Centre².

This report is mainly a distillation of memoirs and records which have been transcribed and attached as appendices.

A marriage is arranged

In the early 19th century, Sir Robert Peel as Home Secretary had founded the Metropolitan Police Service, subsequently became Leader of the House and finally the Prime Minister who laid down the principles of modern conservatism; he was also the first industrialist to achieve the highest office, and a Lancastrian. His youngest son, Arthur Wellesley, was Speaker of the House and in 1895 became Viscount Peel, the title which passed on his death in 1912 to his son William Peel who continued in the family's political tradition as Under-Secretary of State for War, a member of the Privy Councillor, Secretary of State for India and Chairman of the Peel Commission which recommended the partition of Palestine into Jewish and Arab states³. He died in 1937. A rising politician needed money to fund his endeavours and in 1899, William Peel married Eleanor Williamson, daughter of the first Baron Ashton, a linoleum manufacturer who had dramatically expanded his family's linoleum business: at the height of his prosperity Ashton was the fifth richest man in the world. He settled £800,00 on the bride, around £100 millions in today's money.

¹ Standfield F.G. *A History of East Meon* Phillimore & Co 1984 pp 125 – 130.

² RJD Technology *History of the Leydene Site* 2006

³ Appendix 1: Career of Robert Wellesley Peel



Fig 2 William Robert Wellesley Peel, portrait by William Nicholson.



Fig 3. Lord Peel leaving the King David Hotel during the Peel Commission



Fig 4. Lord Ashton



Fig 5. The Ashton Memorial in Lancaster

Ashton also served as MP for Lancaster; he donated several of Lancaster's public buildings, including the magnificent town hall and, after the death of his second wife, the Ashton Memorial of which the cupola can be glimpsed from the M6 motorway. When he died in 1930 he left no will and the state took 50% of the value of his estate - £10.5 million (£600 millions in today's money)⁴.

Leydene

In the second decade of the 20th century, the Peels decided to build a country house 'regardless of cost'. After a long search across the south of England, they decided on a location at the top of Hyden Hill, at the southern end of the parish of East Meon. It is thought that the vicar of All Saints, the Reverend Thomas Heywood Masters, was a friend of the Peels and influenced the decision⁵. The site had magnificent views over the Solent ten miles to the south and the Meon Valley to the north and was astride the ancient road from Butser to Winchester Hill which predates the Roman invasion and is now the South Downs Way. Their head chauffeur, Lewis Tyrode, recorded their reasons for choosing the site: '*an elevated position giving extensive views, a clear, clean and*

⁴ Ashworth, Sue *Lord Ashworth the Lino King*, Lancaster City Museums 2004

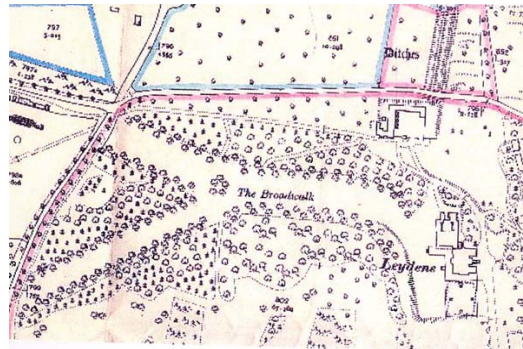
⁵ Appendix 3. Interview with Charlotte Duthie, great granddaughter of the Peels

invigorating air softened by the lower grounds to the west and south, nearness to a large town or city, yet far enough to avoid the noise and smoke and, also, near enough to London to make the journey there and back easily in a day. Cars were then just coming into their own as a means of general transport. The first impression was one of peace: The sloping downland was thick with wild strawberries, a number of grazing sheep and a variety of wild flora and fauna.' We owe to Tyrode much of our information about the Peels, and especially the Dowager Countess⁶.

They bought land from the trustees of Lord Hotham and in the Spring of 1914 an area north of Leydene Bottom was levelled for the foundations of the Main House, designed by Mr Jupp FRIBA of London, in the Spring of 1914. However, the First World War brought a halt to construction, as the labourers, who were all local, were needed for war work.

The Peels had rented Coombe Cross nearby and stayed there until 1925. When work resumed in the summer of 1919 the original plans had to be curtailed slightly as money had depreciated during the war. Appendix 4 is a remarkable photographic record of the construction and the eventual move, in the autumn of 1924, from Coombe Cross to the magnificent new country house.

Lady Peel now commissioned fashionable interior designers the Hooydonk Brothers to complete the design of Leydene House: their outstanding design contribution to Leydene House was the double-spiral staircase in the hall.



Map 1. Pre-war site plan.



Fig 6. Unique snapshot of Lady Peel on site in 1922



Fig 7. The double spiral staircase designed by the Hooydonk Brothers

⁶ Appendix 2: Recollections of Lewis Tyrode

The ground work was done by a large body of artisans and workmen with steam tractors and lorries moving chalk and fetching supplies. The driveways were originally gravel but the prevailing chalk was sticky in wet weather and tarmac was laid by local men



Fig 8. Groundsmen preparing asphalt for the driveway: L to R: Fred Cannings, Len (Tiny) Cannings, nk, Jack Cook, Tom Perkins, Fred Gibbs, nk, nk, Bruce Kille.

Belgian limestone was landed at Littlehampton, brought by train to Havant, and thence by lorry. The bricks were specially made by the Rowlands Brick Works, and the main staircase by a firm in Gosport.



Fig 9. Jeremiah Christmas on left, 'Curly' Searle next to him.

The 100-acres grounds included extensive gardens, tennis courts, a 7-acre vegetable and fruit garden were added: the rose garden was laid out in 1926 in the pattern of Lord Ashton's best-selling linoleum tile of the time.



Fig 10. The rose garden laid out in the style of Lord Ashton's best-selling floor tile.

The country house

The Peels employed 14 gardeners, 3 chauffeurs, a butler, cook, lady's maid, 2 footmen, hall boy, 4 house maids, a kitchen maid and a scullery maid. Lord Peel's political life kept him in London during the week; weekend house parties at Leydene were spectacular and included such eminent figures as Winston Churchill (whom Lady Peel thought *'very rude'*). In season, eminent guests were invited to shooting parties – and on one occasion the timber hunting lodge in Hyden Woods was accidentally burned down by an over-zealous footman. Lady Peel hated London and doesn't seem to have enjoyed entertaining her husband's political guests: on one occasion the local council failed to clear the roads of snow and she billed it for £7 7s 7d, the cost of four extra days' entertaining guests.

For most of the time, she led a life of Spartan simplicity: lunch often consisted of a bowl of soup, served on an outdoor terrace, irrespective of the weather, for she was a fresh air fanatic. She also conducted callisthenics on the terrace, often in the nude, and it is said that any gardener who stole a glance in her direction was instantly dismissed. Conversely, she observed the groundsmen and gardeners through a telescope.

Despite her great wealth, the Countess was frugal to the point of miserliness. She was known to catch a lift from East Meon or Clanfield in a coal lorry and habitually dressed "like a tramp", in ankle-length shabby black clothes. The mother of a son and daughter, she had little liking for children, either her own or other people's: she preferred the company of her pedigree Saddleback pigs. Readers of the Blandings novels might speculate whether P.G.Wodehouse mightn't have used Lady Peel as his model for Lord Emsworth and his sister Lady Constance Keeble, and his love of his prize sow the Empress of Blanding.

Successive purchases of farm and woodland increased the Leydene Estate to over 10,300 acres in East Meon and adjoining parishes, making the Peels the largest landowners since the Bishops of Winchester had been Lords of East Meon manors. When Lord Peel died in 1937, the Countess wore black for the rest of her life: it is said that her clothes became green with age⁷. She spent more and more time at Hendersyde, a 1,600 acre estate on the Tweed in Southern Scotland, where she could indulge her passion for salmon fishing and where she caused controversy by rebuilding the house in the style of Leydene.

HMS Mercury

The Navy's principal Signals School in Portsmouth had been devastated by bombing and an especially heavy raid in March 1941 destroyed most of the Dockyard and with it the Signals training establishments. The experimental, radio and radar sections of the School were then transferred to Haslemere and Witley.

Leydene House had been earmarked for requisitioning since November 1940, initially by the Ministry of Health and subsequently as an accommodation site for the Signal School. In April 1941 the Admiralty appropriated Leydene House and 100 acres of land: Lady Peel reluctantly accepted the arrangement from Scotland, where she remained thereafter. In August it was commissioned as HMS Mercury and 300 ratings were moved in, losing only one day's training. A land mine was dropped on the site during the transfer, breaking the wing of a pheasant but doing no more damage. German aircraft attempted to bomb Leydene throughout the war but it escaped⁸.

Leydene House was used to provide messes for officers and ratings, classrooms and accommodation for WRNS. On the adjacent land, including the kitchen garden, around 100 Nissen huts were added: their ends were bricked in, and temporary buildings became permanent. 50 Ministry of War buildings were also erected: the 'ship's company' rose to 1,200 by 1942. In time, junior messes moved out of the main house which was then used only by officers and administration. King George VI visited in the summer of 1943 and took the salute during a march past. From 1944, many of the temporary buildings were replaced by permanent ones, and further land was

⁷ RJD *Ibid* p47

⁸ RJD *Ibid* p1

requisitioned; a cinema, swimming pool and squash courts were added. In August 1945, Mercury also became a shore Wireless/Telegraphy station and 60 ft wireless masts were erected.

After the War, the Navy considered moving the Signals School back to Portsmouth but there was insufficient accommodation. Instead, 120 acres of land and the house were compulsory purchased from Lady Peel for £60,000 (a derisory sum considering the real value of the building and land). A sports field was bulldozed to the west of the site. Signals training was transferred from Plymouth and new accommodation blocks were built on newly acquired land to the north of the Droxford Road. During the Cold War, HMS Mercury doubled in size and became the largest signals school in the country.

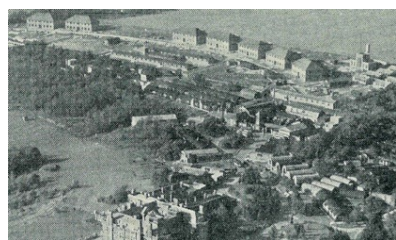


Fig 11. HMS Mercury in 1952, showing accommodation blocks to the south of the Droxford Road.



Fig 12. Ratings in the Mess



Fig 13. Parade outside Leydene House

Leydene Estate

Lady Peel died in 1949. Her granddaughter, Lady Diana Cavendish, related: *“When she died, she left no money to her son and daughter, all to found the charitable Trust, which you mention. However, under Scottish law, you cannot disinherit your children, so my uncle and my mother brought a case to prove that she was domiciled in Scotland, which they won, so some of the money did trickle down to them”*⁹. Four years later the Leydene Estate was sold by auction in 51 lots. 4,000 acres were bought by Sir Dymoke White, the tenant of Oxenbourne House who cashed in his shares in the family firm of Timothy White, the chain of high street chemists which was subsequently taken over by Boots.¹⁰

Lot 12 of the 1953 Leydene sale had comprised the *‘Highly Productive Corn and Dairy Holding LOWER AND SOUTH FARMS 1,178 Acres. This Holding is in a high state of cultivation and has been in the occupation of the present Tenants for a great many years. It includes some of the best Corn Growing land in the district, as well as some high-lying grass Downs, very healthy for Cattle and Sheep Grazing; with a ground field Water Supply, and well fenced.’* Sir Dymoke White made an offer to the ‘present tenants’, George and Joseph Atkinson: *“If you are prepared to make an offer for your land, then put a bid in an envelope.”* They were able to buy both farms. On Sir Dymoke’s death the land passed to his son Lynton White who had worked as an architect before serving as a gunner in World War II. He let 170 acres - Oxenbourne Down, Wascombe Bottom and Hilhampton Down - to Hampshire County Council as a nature reserve; he described it

⁹ Her daughter, Lady Doris Blacker, later purchased two farms for her sons: Glidden near Hambledon for David and Garston in East Meon for Brian. Appendix 3: Interview with Charlotte Duthie and Appendix 5, correspondence with Lady Diana Cavendish

¹⁰ Blakstad, Michael ed: *Farming the Valley*, 2019, p 80.

as: “largely unspoilt natural downland, heavily wooded with yew and thorn scrub, managed by the Hants and IOW Naturalist Trust”.



Fig 14. The Peels' grave in All Saints churchyard

Both Lord and Lady Peel are buried in All Saints churchyard. Her estate of £4 millions was cut by death duties to £1 million and, after modest bequests to her children, was invested in The Dowager Countess Eleanor Peel Trust to benefit ‘old people and needy causes’. It is specifically prohibited from donating to causes ‘primarily devoted to children ... or under the control of local government¹¹’.

Tenants remembered the Peels as good landlords who had commissioned many alterations and repairs on the properties they owned.

Their son Arthur had succeeded to the Viscountcy as the second Earl of Clanfield; he became Lord Lieutenant and an Honorary Freeman of Lancaster. His sister, Lady Doris Blacker, was well known in East Meon and became a County Councillor for 22 years, as well as being a magistrate and involved in charities for the welfare of children. Her twin sons, David and Brian, were both County Councillors, one in West Sussex and the other in Hampshire. Brian lived at Garston Farm in East Meon; he died in 2017. As a footnote to this extraordinary family, the identical twins David and ‘Bloggs’ Blacker were both played in the 2017 movie ‘Breathe’ by Tom Hollander in the moving story of their brother-in-law Robin Cavendish, who had been struck down by polio and whom they helped return home thanks to a home-made mobile artificial lung.

Leydene Park

In the summer of 1991, the Queen and Prince Philip visited HMS Mercury to mark its 50th birthday and it was announced that the Signals School would be closed. In 1993 the navigational training section moved to HMS Dryad and the North Camp demolished and levelled. In 1995, the deserted Medical Block was occupied by the Sustainability Centre¹².



The main house and its garage block were converted to luxury apartments and detached houses (Fig 15, left) with large gardens were built where the Signals School huts and other buildings had stood.

The lands to the south of the Droxford road were handed over to the Defence Land Agency which sold it to Ludshott Estates, who subsequently re-sold it to other developers who submitted a succession of planning applications, including proposals to build a retirement complex, a young offenders’ institute and training establishments; they claimed that the site had previously been used by HM Navy for residential training,

¹¹ Standfield, FG *A history of East Meon* p129, also Diana Cavendish, Appendix 5.

¹² <https://www.sustainability-centre.org>

planning consent was not granted. In the second decade of the 21st century, more executive houses were built there; the first batch was completed a hundred years after construction of Leydene House had started.

Appendix 1. Biography of William Robert Wellesley Peel (Wikipedia)

Background and education

The eldest son of Arthur Wellesley Peel, 1st Viscount Peel and Adelaide Dugdale, Peel was born in London in 1867. His father was the fifth and youngest son of Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel. He was educated at Harrow and Balliol College, Oxford, where he was secretary of the Oxford Union. In 1893 he was called to the bar at the Inner Temple, and practised as a barrister before taking the position of special correspondent for the Daily Telegraph during the Greco-Turkish War of 1897.

Political career

In 1900 Peel was appointed a member of the Royal Commission formed to inquire into the operation of the Port of London. In the same year he began his political career when he was elected to the London County Council. He was a member of the pro-Conservative grouping on the council that became the Municipal Reform Party. He was leader of the Party from 1908 to 1910 and chairman of the county council from 1914 to 1916. He had begun his Parliamentary career when he was elected as Liberal Unionist MP for Manchester South at a by-election. At the next general election in 1906 he stood unsuccessfully at Harrow. He returned to the Commons in 1909, when elected as Conservative MP for Taunton at a by-election. He inherited his father's viscountcy in 1912, and moved to the House of Lords.

Peel was appointed a Deputy Lieutenant of Bedfordshire and lieutenant-colonel of the Bedfordshire Yeomanry in 1912, and on the outbreak of the First World War moved to France with his regiment. Due to ill health he returned to Britain in 1915. In 1918 he received his first government post as Joint Parliamentary Secretary at the Department of National Service. In 1919 he became Under-Secretary of State for War and a member of the Privy Council. Two years later he became Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for Transport.

He entered the cabinet in 1922 as Secretary of State for India as part of the coalition government of David Lloyd-George but continued in the post after the downfall of the Coalition during the premierships of Bonar Law and Baldwin. Baldwin's Government fell in January 1924, but after a brief spell in opposition was returned to power at the 1924 General Election. Peel was appointed First Commissioner of Works in the Conservative administration formed by Stanley Baldwin. In 1928 he briefly returned to the India Office before the Conservatives lost power at 1929 general election. The latter year he was created Viscount Clanfield, of Clanfield in the County of Southampton, and Earl Peel. When a Conservative-dominated National Government was formed after the 1931 election he became Lord Privy Seal. He only held this office for two months, leaving government in November.

In 1932 he was appointed chairman of the Wheat Commission, and in 1934 chaired the Royal Commission on the Common Law. In 1936-1937 Lord Peel was the chairman of the Peel Commission which presented for the first time in its period the British Mandate of Palestine as the solution of partition for the Jewish - Arab conflict in Palestine.

Appendix 2. Recollections of Lewis Tyrode, head chauffeur to the Peels

Interview with F.G.Standfield

'There is one distinction about Leydene House that may be unique. I believe that no larger private house had been built for at least half a century, nor has been built since.

It was in 1913, after a large number of journeys through the South and West of England, that Earl and Countess Peel decided that the site at the top of Hyden Hill promised to be the ideal spot for a house; that it would have the necessary advantages that they required, namely an elevated position giving extensive views, a clear, clean and invigorating air softened by the lower grounds to the west and south, nearness to a large town or city, yet far enough to avoid the noise and smoke and, also, near enough to London to make the journey there and back easily in a day. Cars were then just coming into their own as a means of general transport.

Any first impression was one of complete peace. Where the house now stands were sloping grounds, thick with wild strawberries, a number of grazing sheep and a variety of wild flora and fauna. Among the latter might be seen in numbers, Admirals (butterfly variety) and Wrens (feathered).

The major portion of the estate of 16,000 acres was bought from Lord Hotham. Plans were prepared and in the spring of 1914, work began with direct labour, mostly local; levelling and foundations were well in hand.

Lord and Lady Peel had decided to adapt a farmhouse at Coombe Cross for their use, to watch and supervise the building, but with the advent in August of the First World war, all work ceased on building Leydene House.

It was not until the summer of 1919 that work was recommenced on the site. Plans had to be curtailed slightly as money values had depreciated. The first thing to be done was to shift the cart track which went between the house site and prospective garages, to a line further north. This cart track was on a pre-Roman road running in a straight line from Buster Hill to old Winchester Hill and the Meon Valley.

To resume – work proceeded apace with a large body of artisans and workmen, steam tractors and lorries, moving chalk and fetching supplies. The stone used was Belgian limestone and the two fireplaces in the man hall are of the same material, which took a fine polish. It was landed at Littlehampton, brought by train to Havant, and thence by lorry.

The bricks were specially made by the Rowlands Brick Works, and the main staircase by a firm in Gosport.

In the autumn of 1924, sufficient rooms were completed to enable the owners to move in, but it was early 1925 before one house, garages and cottages were ready.

At first, the approaches were of local gravel, but this in wet weather was much too friendly and stuck to one's boots in quantity. So it was decided to concrete the drives. In the meanwhile, the rose gardens, dry tennis courts and the broad walks to main vegetable and

fruit gardens were added. (It is worth noting that although Lord Peel had been Prime Minister¹³ of Great Britain, it was Lady Peel who brought Leydene House from the fortunes her family had made from selling the new linoleum floor covering. The rose garden is still laid out as it was in 1926, in the design of the most popular selling linoleum tile of the time.)'

From 1927 onwards, the summers saw many brilliant weekend parties; the Commander-in-Chief Portsmouth was a frequent guest. Autumns and winters saw the shooting parties at which lunch was taken in a rustic hut in Hyden Wood. On one occasion, the footmen had been sent down early to make up the fire in the hut, but overdid it, and by the time the guns arrived for lunch, their warmth was the smouldering remains of the hut.

1939 saw the outbreak of the Second World War. That year, a German plane landed a string of 3 HE bombs and one oilcan just to the left going out the gate, which broke the wing of a pheasant. Later a string of incendiaries landed on either side of the house, without touching it.

Later, however, it was apparently learned in Germany that the Royal Navy were about, but the best they could do was a land mine to the East and a few HEs in the woods. As you know, the RN Signals took over in 1941 and decided it was a good place to stay.'

Appendix 3. Interview with Charlotte Duthie, great granddaughter of Lady Peel

Recorded by Andy Hales 16/04/2019

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 Crawley¹⁴, 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 5th richest person in the world?

Charlotte: He was: at the height of his wealth he was the 5th 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

¹³ Not correct. He was Secretary of State for India, First Commissioner of Works, Lord Privy Seal and chairman of the Peel Commission which presented for the first time in its period the British Mandate of Palestine.

¹⁴ 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.

making more and more money. He had two daughters, Eleanor & Maude; unfortunately Maude died when she was 30, unmarried.

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?

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.

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?

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 house for another 12 years because when the second World War the Navy requisitioned ...

Andy: And Willy died in '38?

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 ...

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 ...

Andy: I imagine, communications in those days, line of sight was quite important¹⁵.

Charlotte: Absolutely. It wouldn't just have been a ... but any way, 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.

Appendix 4. Construction of Leydene House, 1921 - 1925

We don't know the origin of this collection of photos of the construction of Leydene from 1921 - 25 (and the removal of furniture from Coombe Cross). The first photograph is probably a rare image of Eleanor, the Dowager Countess. The second may include Lord Peel, standing.



Turnabout on site
August 1922



The after lunch expression
July 1921

¹⁵ Despite its strategic position, HMS Mercury was a signals school and never used as a signals station

History of Leydene House *April 2019*



Corner of study
November 1921



Front door side
November 1921



Lower stone plinth, West Side
November 1921



South side
November 1921



Cutting out the New Road
March 1922



Iron girder in place for centre staircase platform
March 15th 1922

History of Leydene House *April 2019*



**Cutting out the new road
March 1922**



**Entrance to kitchen courtyard
March 1922**



**Gardener's Cottage from Orchard
March 15th 1922**



**Gardener's Cottage
March 1922**



Raising first big Bay Window headstone, Drawing Room SW Corner



**Unloading circular saw
August 1922**

History of Leydene House *April 2019*



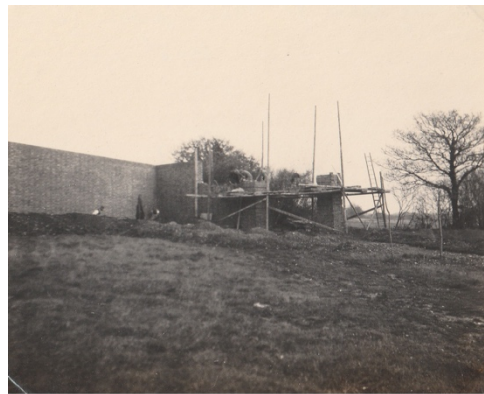
N.E. Angle and Batchelor's Quarters
August 1922



S.E. Angle
August 1922



N.W. Angle showing Bull's Eye Windows under Batchelor's rooms
August 1922



Building piers for Kitchen Garden Main Gate
December 6th 1922

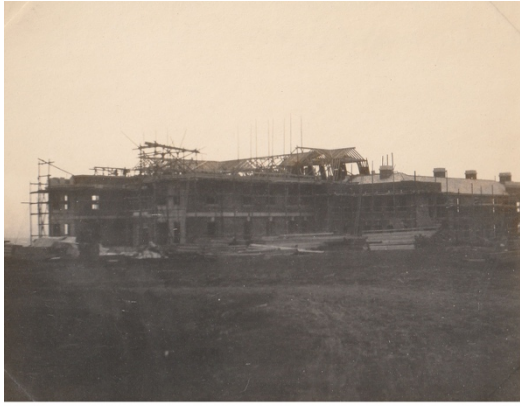


Skeleton of roof from S.E. angle
December 6th 1922



Skeleton of roof, from S.W. corner of tennis courts
December 6th 1922

History of Leydene House *April 2019*



Roof of main building in the skeleton, with Batchelors wing finished
December 6th 1922



Front Door
December 6th 1922



Pond and return wall by Maing Gateway Kitchen Garden
December 6th 1922



Fruit house door, with bothies etc behind
December 6th 1922



Firs, from Bungalow
April 1923



"Darkie" with cart and chase
April 1923



Shooters Hut
April 1923



Bungalow
April 1923

History of Leydene House *April 2019*



Firs, from Drive
April 1923



South and East Fronts
April 1923



S.W. Angle



House and Porch
June 1923



Garden Pond
June 1923



Shifting soil to Rose Garden
June 1923

History of Leydene House *April 2019*



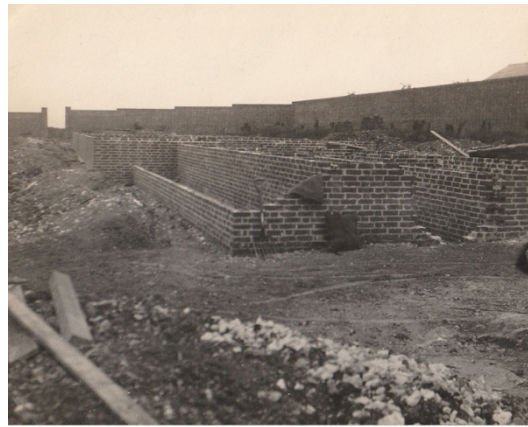
House from New Road
June 1923



House from plantations below
June 1923



House from Hyden Down
June 1923



Foundations of glass houses in Kitchen Garden
June 1923



Furniture struggles at Coombe Cross
October 13th 1924



Furniture struggles at Coombe Cross
October 13th 1924



Front Lodge
July 10th 1925



West side Front Lodge
July 10th 1925



House from Coombe Wood



House from Leydene Bottom



House in distance, from paddocks



House from Garden Gate
down Broad Walk

Appendix 5. Correspondence about Leydene and Garston

between Lady Diana Cavendish, granddaughter of Lord & Lady Peel, and Michael Blakstad.

05/04/2019, Diana Cavendish to Michael Blakstad

Obviously my grandmother, Eleanor, is a very important figure in her own right. Not only is she an extraordinary eccentric, but she injected a great deal of money into the Peel family, whose fortune had been depleted by a series of gamblers. She did not like children, we never met her, and my brother when he was in Scotland, just before she died, called on her, and according to him she wasn't very interested to meet him. By the

way, my grandfather was William Robert Wellesley, always known as Willy. I love all your photos, which are new to me, and I might well come back to you to find out where they came from. Another point you might find interesting, is that Garston Farm, where my brother and sister-in-law lived, the architect was Lionel Esher, my sister-in-law's mother met him in the West Indies and thought he would be a suitable architect, she was rather a snob, and liked the idea of him being a Lord.

09/04/2019, Diana Cavendish to Michael Blakstad

Dear Michael, as far as I can work out, Garston Farm was built for my brother Brian and his wife about 1955. After the estate was sold off, my mother had to buy back two farms, one for Brian and the other for his twin brother David. I think it was called Glidden: he never lived there as there wasn't a decent house.

My grandmother was a very strange and eccentric person. When she died, she left no money to her son and daughter, all to found the charitable Trust, which you mention. However, under Scottish law, you cannot disinherit your children, so my uncle and my mother brought a case to prove that she was domiciled in Scotland, which they won, so some of the money did trickle down to them. Perhaps that is why, when you mention that Mr Justice Barnard decreed certain passages of the will should be omitted, it is referring to my mother and uncle being cut out of the will originally.

Appendix 6. From Freddie Standfield's book

Lord Ashton. In 1885 he gave a breakfast in Lancaster, when 10,000 people sat down to his bacon and eggs, marmalade, butter and tea. Having been elected a Liberal MP in 1886, he retired from parliament in his early 50s, only to be confronted with political attacks alleging he had bought his peerage.

Stung by such hostility during the first 1910 election, he publicly threatened to withdraw from every charity and organisation to which he had hitherto subscribed; a threat carried out to the full when the attacks were repeated at the following year's municipal elections ...

Having quarrelled violently with Lancaster town council, matters were patched up and he generously built a magnificent new town hall. But, prior to its completion, the council annoyed him, and he not only declined to attend the opening ceremony, but ever after refused even to look at the building, drawing his carriage blinds when passing by. Ashton died in 1930 aged 87, leaving the then tremendous fortune of £10,000,000, but no will. So, after the payment of death duties, his only child, Eleanor, became immediately entitled to half the residue of the estate, plus a reversionary interest in the other half, expendant on the death of the widow (his third wife).

Eleanor, born in 1872, was married in 1899 to William Robert Wellesly Peel, grandson of the famous Sir Robert, and son of the first Viscount, Speaker of the House of Commons. Her father's main wedding gift was a settlement of £800,000, probably an ingredient in an 'arranged' marriage rather than a love match.

Lady Peel had previously had dealings with Hooydonk Brothers who, as Decorative Artists, prepared and executed elaborate interior schemes for homes of the 'moneyed classes'. She turned to this firm to design a country mansion, complete with decorations and furnishings, though Hooydonk Brothers called in London architects to prepare

architectural drawings of the shell of the building. ... The house was magnificent, with its huge and lofty entrance hall, backed by a handsome wooden staircase of unique design, and spacious, elegant reception rooms. These rooms, and indeed all other main rooms, had beautifully moulded Georgian style ceilings, and throughout the building the impression was of elegance without vulgarity. Hooydonk Brothers more than justified the fait placed in them by a demanding employer, though Auguste van Hooydonk, on his frequent visits, was invariably faced with luncheon of cold pheasant – not his favourite food – because, according to her ladyship, the pheasants were shot on the estate and she could not afford butchers' prices. Nevertheless, Hooydonk and Eleanor Peel set up a real and lasting friendship'

As for the garden and pleasure grounds, George Cannings worked there for 17 years:

To start with there were 14 gardeners, including a man who looked after and worked the horse used for hauling. A donkey pulled the lawn mower. I was in the kitchen garden nearly all the time, but also carted large quantities of coke from West Meon railway station for greenhouse fuel. The kitchen garden comprised seven acres, plus an orchard and extensive greenhouses, where grapes, peaches, nectarines, tomatoes, cucumbers and potted plants were grown. I was always well treated and content with my 30s a week wage and rent-free cottage and free firewood.

From 1927 onwards, the summers saw brilliant weekend parties, the guests once including Mr Winston Churchill whom Lady Peel subsequently described as 'a very rude man'. In winter, pheasant shooting was organised by the head of three gamekeepers, Harry Dean, tall and heavily built, with rosy cheeks and genial disposition, and invariably dressed in a traditional heavy tweed knickerbocker suit. Beaters included estate employees, other local men and schoolboys. Jack Aburrow vividly recalls such days when, as a boy of 12, and wearing short trousers, he endured painful bramble scratches on his bare legs to earn 5s a day plus bread, cheese and beer for lunch and, if lucky, a rabbit worth 8d to take home at dusk.

As for the lifestyle and characters of the couple who created what is thought to be the last 'purpose-built' English mansion, East Meon people (apart from employees) saw little of Lord Peel. His distinguished political career necessitated having a London home, No 34 Holland Park, W1, where he mostly lived, except for weekends and parliamentary vacations. His personal chauffeur, Clement Allman, until recently farming 190 acres near Leydene, describes him as a considerate employer, though strict about good time-keeping. When his lordship was driven to other parts of the country in his 5.5 litre Daimler, staying overnight in the best hotels, Allman was similarly accommodated, and when in London had his own flat at 34 Holland Park.

A picture emerges of an essentially serious-minded individual, probably too fully occupied with affairs of state to regard Leydene as more than a magnificent 'country retreat'. Certainly he was a keen shot, not only at Leydene bi annually on the Scottish grouse moors near Beaufort Castle, and Allman remembers Peel's regular visits to the shooting grounds of an Inverness gunsmith for a warm-up at clay pigeons to get his eye in before tackling grouse. Yet even shooting parties were apparently a means to an end, affording opportunities for diplomatic entertainment of British and other political personalities.

Lady Peel had inherited from her father an active brain, outstanding financial acumen, a pronounced antipathy towards local authorities and (in old age at least) an urge to benefit certain charitable causes. Puzzling, though, was an extreme reserve almost amounting to pathological shyness. She abhorred London, was a fresh air fanatic, habitually dressed like a tramp in ankle-length shabby black clothes, but found some degree of contentment at Leydene, though preferring the even greater isolation available in Scotland. Mother of a son and daughter, she had no liking for children, her own or other people's.

In 1928 she was at war with the then local authority, Petersfield R.D.C, whom she sued for £7.17.7d, being the 'estimated cost of keeping six visitors for four days in excess of their invitation', through the council's failure to clear snowbound roads.!

For her, life at Leydene tended to be quiet, perhaps lonely. Apart from a friendship with Lady and Miss Du Boulay, here tenants at what was then Upper House, Oxenbourne (now Oxenbourne House), she seemed without local friends. On a typical non-entertaining day, she would appear outside the mansion about mid-morning, carrying a large basket filled with bread and toast. After inspecting the rainfall gauge and weather chart, she invariably met and spoke, often at length, with Tyrode, now the head of three chauffeurs (excluding Allan, his lordship's chauffeur, usually in London). Next came a shorter conversation with the head gardener, who always had 11 or more other gardeners under him. But the climax of the morning was a visit to her herd of pedigree Saddleback pigs, each of which had its own name – the recipients of the bread and toast.¹⁶

Leonard Cannings, cousin of George Cannings and living at Coombe Cross Cottages, was one of the gardeners from about 1922 till 1939, working in the glasshouses, then in the kitchen garden, and also tending pigs.

Her ladyship was very fond of her pigs, and when a sow had to be taken by lorry to be mated with a prize boar, she would travel with it to ensure all went according to plan. I also remember an occasion when I was trimming the grass edges of small circles cut in the lawn where trees and shrubs were planted, when I realised her ladyship, watch in hand, was standing beside me. I must have looked startled, because she said she was timing each trimming circle operation so as to calculate how long it would take to do all the circles. Another peculiar arrangement affecting my job arose when the ground were opened to the public, and we gardeners, having had to put in overtime beforehand, were each paid an extra 5s in cash with the balance of our wage entitlement in kind – tomatoes!

Len Cannings' wife, Edith, employed as a kitchen maid at Leydene from 1926 to 1930, provides a glimpse of life completely in the 'upstairs, downstairs' tradition.

'The cook had her own sitting room, and I think the lady's maid had hers too. In the servants' hall the butler presided over two footmen, four housemaids, and the hall boy, but I and the scullery made were the lowest of the low, and not allowed to use the servants' hall. Our only sitting room was the kitchen. When Lady Peel was alone at Leydene, she often knitted, read and listened to the wireless all at the same time, and frequently had nothing but a bowl of soup for lunch, usually served on an

¹⁶ Straight out of P.G.Wodehouse – the Empress of Blandings, favourite pig of Lord Emsworth!

outdoor verandah, irrespective of the weather. Sometimes I was taken by road to 34 Holland Park for a few days, with a housemaid, a footman and the lady's maid. Mr Tyrode drove an open car, Lady Peel sat in the front seat beside him doing a crossword puzzle, and the rest of us in the back were almost frozen to death. In the four years I was in her employ I cannot remember Lady Peel ever speaking directly to me.'

After buying the estate on which Leydene was built, Eleanor Peel acquired numerous adjacent farms and estates until her land empire comprised over 10,300 acres. Taking a practical interest in its management, she frequently accompanied a partner of her agents, Hewitt and Lee, when matters such as repairs, improvements and rent adjustments necessitated farm inspections. Though habitually striking a hard bargain, and rightly described as 'close with her money', she was a good landlord in the sense that repairs or improvements that were her responsibility were always carried out to a high standard. But contact with tenants on a personal level was, with one exception, virtually non-existent. Indeed, she would go out of her way to avoid casual meetings with everyone, whether they were staff, tenants, or other country fold. The exception was Cecil Kille, tenant of Stoneylands Farm, who supplied dairy produce to Leydene. He was widely regarded as her 'favourite', but his daughter (now Mrs Joan Walther), who as a child rode her pony to the big house with urgent deliveries of cream of whatever was needed at short notice, thinks Lady Peel simply respected her father's hard-working and thrifty character.

Each summer, the Peels and most domestic staff from Leydene and 34 Holland Park headed north for a prolonged stay in Scotland, usually at Beaufort Castle, Inverness-shire. Staff travelled by night train, and on arrival had a day off duty to recover, then worked for 11 weeks without break, occasionally until midnight, until rewarded with another day off before returning to London. The Peels travelled by car, sometimes calling at Lancaster en route, for business conferences relating to the linoleum business. Following Lord Ashton's death, Eleanor satisfied her father's wish and her own business ability by becoming governing director of the company, with her husband as chairman. The business continued to prosper.

In Scotland, when Peel was leading grouse-shooting parties on the moors, Eleanor never joined these expeditions, going salmon fishing instead with Tyrode, whose position in the household was becoming increasingly important. "Officially I was chauffeur, but it might be more correct to describe my job as the buffer between Lady Peel and the social world she didn't care a lot for". So perhaps it was unsurprising that Tyrode, too, became a salmon fisherman, sharing the sport with his employer, and also making a second fishing trip to Scotland with her each spring.

In 1937, Lord Peel died at Leydene, aged 70, and was buried in East Meon churchyard, having shown virtually no interest in local affairs. Two years later, Eleanor bought Hendersyde, a famous 16,000 acre estate in Southern Scotland. Disliking the existing mansion, she promptly pulled it down and built a more modern residence; but, reluctant to miss the Tweed's salmon fishing season during the rebuilding, stayed in a cottage by the river, the home of elderly Mr and Mrs A. Brown, where she *'lived in the most simple fashion, just like any of the village folk'*.

Eleanor, Dowager Countess Peel, died at Hendersyde Park on 9th November 1949, aged 77, survived by her son, the second earl, and her daughter Lady Doris Blacker and, like

her husband, she was buried at East Meon. Her estate, estimated at over four million pounds, was cut by death duties to just under one million, which, after payment of modest legacies and annuities, became a trust fund, the income from which was particularly to benefit 'old people and needy cases where people have fallen on evil days through no fault of their own.' Significantly, her will precluded grants to 'charitable bodies primarily devoted to children, or which are under the control of the central or any local government'. The capital value of the trust fund has since risen to over two million pounds¹⁷ and income for 1982 comfortably exceeded £200,000. Leydene and 100 acres had been bought by the Admiralty in 1949 and in May 1953, the remainder of the estate was sold by auction in 51 lots, many of which were gratefully acquired by sitting tenant farmers. An era had ended.

Lewis Tyrode, the grocer's boy who for 44 years worked as trusted chauffeur, friend and right-hand man, and perhaps knew and understood Lady Peel better than any other living person, was rewarded by his multi-millionaire employer with an annuity of £5 a week. Ethel Loasby, her maid for 20 years, received a legacy of £400 and Mrs H Brown, widow of her boatman, had an annuity of £2 a week. Almost the last word came from the High Court which, in the person of Mr Justice Barnard, decreed that certain passages in the will which would cause 'pain and embarrassment' should be omitted when probate was granted and the will's contents made public.

¹⁷ Written in 1984

Appendix 6 HMS Mercury

From 'A History of the Leydene Site' by Russell Searle of RJD Technology, with whose permission we can use extracts



Pre-1941 the primary Naval Signal School was situated in HM Dockyard Portsmouth, near H.M.S. Victory. In 1938, there had been plans to move the Signal School out of Portsmouth to Stamshaw, its new name would have been HMS Swiftsure. These plans were shelved due to the outbreak of the Second World War (WWII) in September 1939.

The huge increase in numbers of personnel requiring communications training following the outbreak of WWII, and the geographic diversity of the fleet and dockyards, resulted in a host of additional signals training establishments being set up. A list of these Naval signal schools is at Annex B.

Heavy bombing and damage of Dockyard buildings and the surrounding areas, during 1940 and 1941, imposed severe restrictions on communications training. The staff and students of the school were required during the nights to provide fire parties and sentries on the dockyard walls. On 10 March, a very heavy raid caused almost total destruction of the Dockyard and H.M.S. Vernon.

The decision was then made to move training, research and accommodation facilities away from the Portsmouth area.

The Experimental Section had already moved to Lythe Hill House at Haslemere, and King Edward School at Witley. The radio and headquarters sections went to Lythe Hill and radar section to Witley. The reason for this was two-fold. First the rapid

development of technology such as radio, radar and HF/DF had expanded the section and secondly, the bombing had damaged the workshops.

This split of the experimental sections from the training section, lost one of the great advantages of the school, that of enabling the trainers to keep up to date on latest developments and of the researchers to know what the 'users' wanted.

Leydene House and estate, had been earmarked for requisitioning since 4 November 1940, initially by the Ministry of Health, but later as an accommodation site for the Signal School

On 19 April 1941, approval was given by the Admiralty to requisition Leydene house and estate and on 20 April, the Chief Surveyor of Lands made a signal stating possession could taken forthwith.

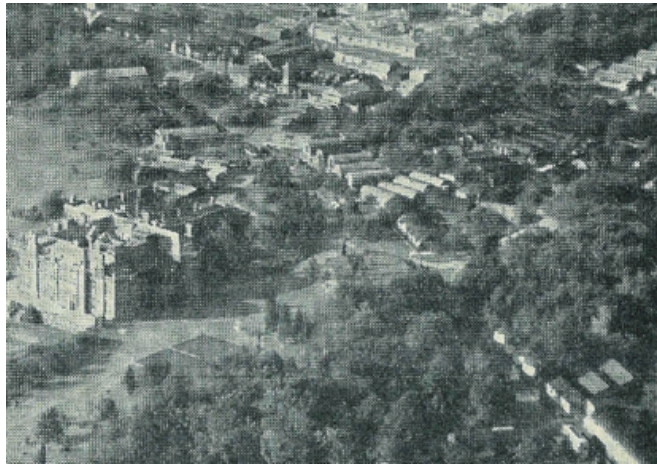
On 22 April, Captain G.H. Warner, who had assumed command of the Signal School the previous day, visited Leydene House, to establish what needed to be done to accommodate the school. Lady Peel reluctantly agreed to the arrangement and remained in her estate in Scotland, letting her agent deal with all the necessary details.

While arrangements were being made for the transfer of the Signal School, a land mine was dropped on the site. However, this was the last hostile act of the Germans against Leydene. Prior to the move to Leydene, working parties arrived to prepare the site for occupation. Tents for accommodation had to be erected and the interior of the house had to be rearranged into classrooms, offices and various messes. The garage complex was converted into five classrooms by bricking up the entrances and providing access between them.

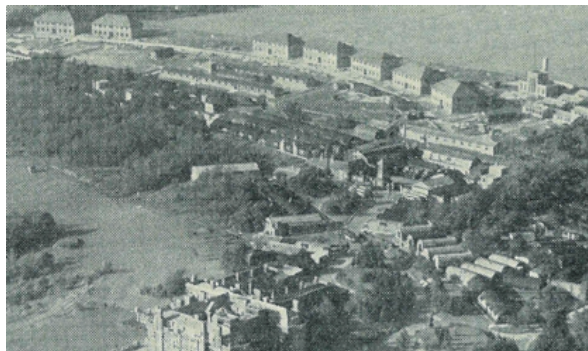
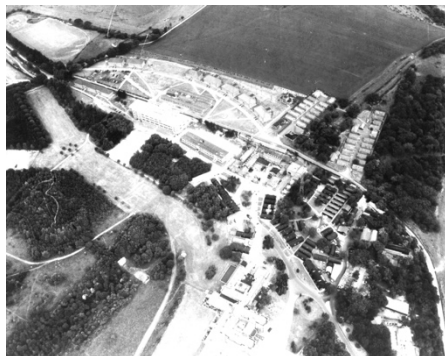
One of the first working parties of junior ratings used the large kitchen as a mess and slung their hammocks between the legs of the big upturned kitchen tables. Arrangements were made for the storage of Lady Peel's furniture and possible employment of her estate staff. Contracts were also awarded for the erection of Nissen huts. Also, duplicate classroom equipment and instructional equipment needed to be found and put in place to reduce lost training time to a minimum.

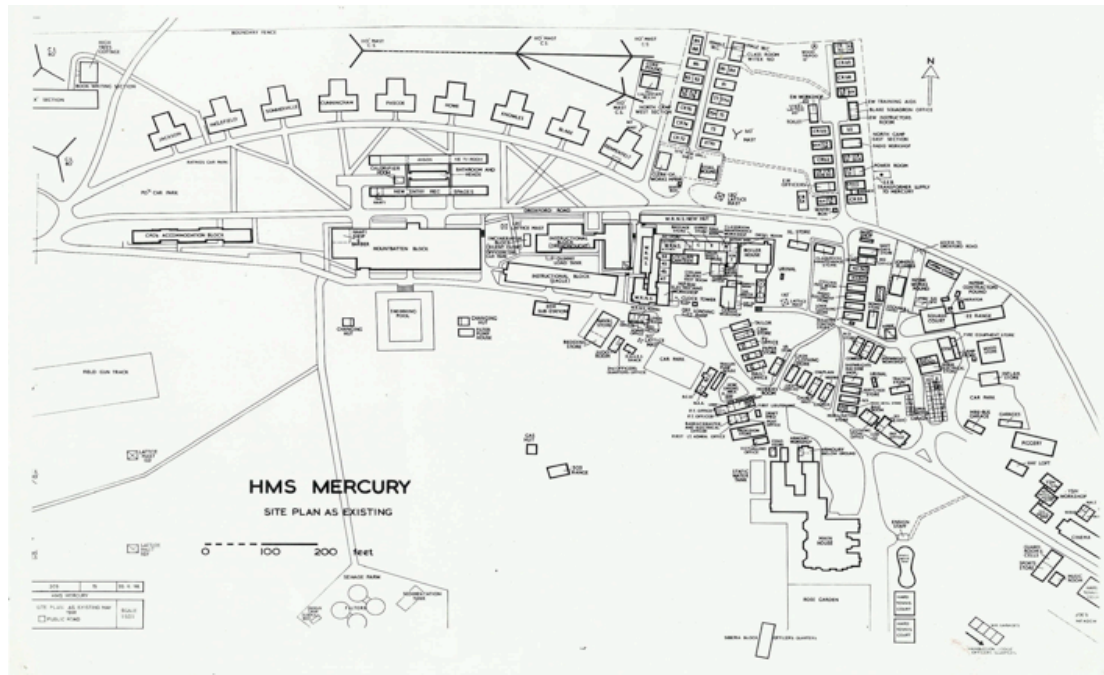
On 16 August 1941, the Leydene site was commissioned as HMS Mercury and the Signal School moved lock stock and barrel to its new environment. Only one training day had been lost.

The first contingent of ratings numbered 300. They were accommodated in bell tents and messed in Leydene House. Until alternative buildings could be constructed, the Main House was used for all purposes; messes, classrooms and domestic usage. During the autumn and winter of 1941, Nissen huts were erected, along the area south of the Droxford Road and became known as West and East Camps, separated by the garages.



The first semi-permanent buildings to be constructed commenced in April 1944 and were the classrooms of North Camp. However, the land was not actually requisitioned until January 1945. These were Ministry of War building (MOWB) style huts and the area was eventually completed in 1947. It comprised of two areas, separated by the ancient Cross Dykes, which was crossed by two footpaths at the north and south ends of the camp. Initially these buildings were used for the training of RNVR officers in W/T and Radio Mechanics. Later, the north eastern part of the camp became home to the 'S' branch and EW sections.





A Wardroom annex was constructed to the south of the Main House and completed on 12 February 1943 at a cost of £861 and became known as Siberia Block. This block was capable of accommodating 19 junior officers in cramped single cabins.

The first amenity building, a large Nissen style structure, was completed along the road from the Main Gate, in July 1943 and was used as a cinema, theatre and assembly hall. The interior was completely refurbished in August 1961, using a generous grant of £2,000 from the Nuffield Trust.

(There is a great deal more information about the development of the Leydene site by the Navy)