

ST MARY'S CROFT



Introduction

St Mary's Croft is the area now occupied by St Mary's Farm, Garden, Villas and Terrace. It is a quiet and desirable part of Battle, close to the station and the town and almost completely



protected from the traffic of Hastings Road. Originally part of the Abbey estate, its history falls into three definable stages: from the beginning to 1832, the mid and late nineteenth

5-8 St Mary's Villas, Spring 2019. The extension to 5 is not original. From Keith Foord.

century, and what happened in the twentieth century. Some of its architecture, particularly in St

Mary's Villas, is not only distinctive for the Battle area but is also worthy of preservation. Stephen Gray, a resident, has written: "The architecture of the villas is a *bijou* version of what Osbert Lancaster christened *Kensington Italianate*".

The history of the ownership of the Croft, its development and its residents is inevitably complicated, and this account necessarily leaves some gaps, particularly for the early years.

The early years (to 1832)

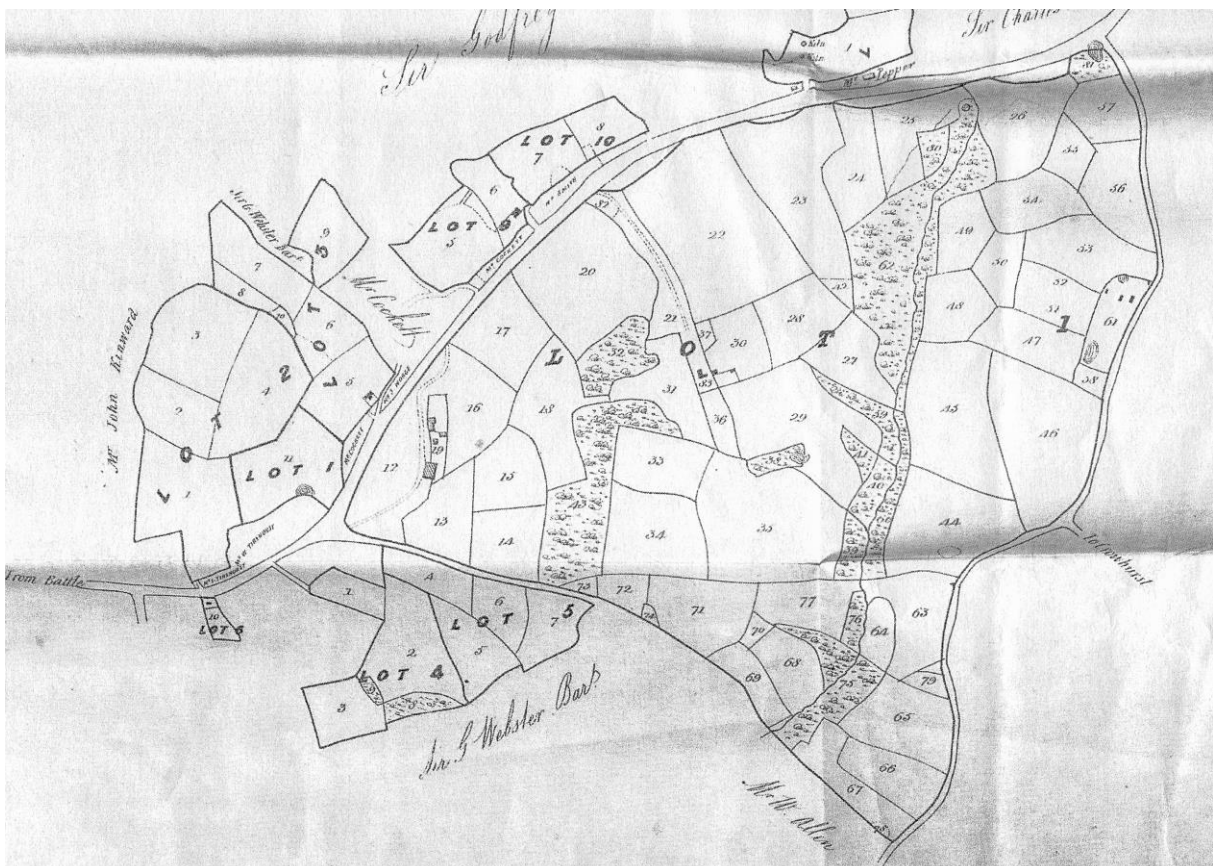
The twelve acres of the 'Land of the church of St Mary' is mentioned in the Chronicle of Battle Abbey written sometime after 1155, but certainly in the 12th century. Perhaps as early as the thirteenth century the Croft appears to have belonged to St Mary's Church – which would explain its name – and it was occupied by Gilbert Hercroft at a point between 1250 and 1277. The croft was probably the 18.5 acres of glebe land referred to in a nineteenth-century history of Battle. Another reference makes it possible that in the early fourteenth century Robert de Heuton owned part of it. A gift to the Church by the Abbey was presumably to secure it an income. One researcher states that it was church land in 1367, but at least in 1467 it was run by the Abbey almoner.^{1 2}

On the dissolution of the Abbey in 1537 it passed with the rest of the estate to Sir Anthony Browne, whose family became the Viscounts Montague, and in 1721 to the Webster family. There are some references to it during this period: transfers of what would now be leases for

cottages are recorded for 29 October 1690, 2 January 1702, 31 October 1744, and 28 September 1767, all from owners of the Abbey estate.³

In June 1761, in an action unusual for the Abbey owners, it went as freehold to George Worge, along with the Rose Green estate on the other side of Hastings Road and considerable acreage to the south. Worge was from Eastbourne, a barrister from a well-off Sussex family whose father had come to Battle and who was steward of the Abbey estate. His brother was a well-known and highly-regarded major-general. Worge married well, to one of the daughters of John Collier of Hastings, who left him the enormous sum of £2000 in his will. Collier virtually ran Hastings and his daughters married well, one of them to General the Hon. James Murray, who built Beauport House.

Understandably the Worge estate was very large, adjoining Beauport Park to the south and (with very minor breaks) taking in most of the land adjoining Hastings Road and Telham Lane. It included the fine house called Starrs Green House or Rose Green, which survived until about 1860 when new owners built their more modern property at what became known as Telham Court. These lands had been obtained in the early and mid-eighteenth century and were to stay with the family until most of them were sold in 1832. Even then a very small part (the house looking northward at Starrs Green) remained with a member of the family until later in that century.



Most of the Worge estate, when put up for sale late in 1832. 'North' is at the bottom left. At the far left, the road going down (as we see it) is Powdermill Lane; the next junction is between what is now Glengorse Drive and the Hastings Road. Rose Green can be clearly seen on what is now Glengorse. The south/north road on the right leads from Telham Lane to Powdermill Lane. As so often, the names of the purchasers in 1832 are not known. On the main map, from the top, the scripts read Sir Godfrey Webster Bart, Sir Charles Lamb, Sir G Webster Bart, Mr Cockett, Mr John Kenward, Mr J Worge, Mr Cockett, Mr W Ticehurst, Mr T Ticehurst, Sir G Webster Bart, Mr W Allen. From ESRO ACC 2300/108.

Worge and his wife had no children, and the nearest relative was a nephew, Thomas Jenner, who lived in Middlesex. Both Worges died in 1765 and the estate descended to Jenner, (who was required to change his name to Worge). He died at Battle in 1801, leaving his property to a nephew George Worge, who lived at Turnham Green in Middlesex then at Lambeth in Surrey. Then or later it was subject to various conditions, notably but not only the payment of annuities to George's wife Hannah from whom he was separated before his death in 1818. But by then, in 1813, the fifth Webster baronet had bought it back, only to renege on the conditions and be faced with a Chancery action resulting in his surrender of the property to the Worge family trustees in 1822.⁴ In the meantime tenancies continued.

Early maps show the line of cottages ascending the hill, which were also part of the Croft and in one form or another still stand. There was also a large house at the Battle Hill end of what was to become St Mary's Villas, pictured by Turner in about 1810, which may have been artistic licence: it does not appear on the map of 1832 but there is such an image on the 1852 map; the house no longer stands. By 1810 and the time of the 1813 Ordnance Survey map few of the cottages still stood: the area was largely uninhabited, though a very few structures are represented there.

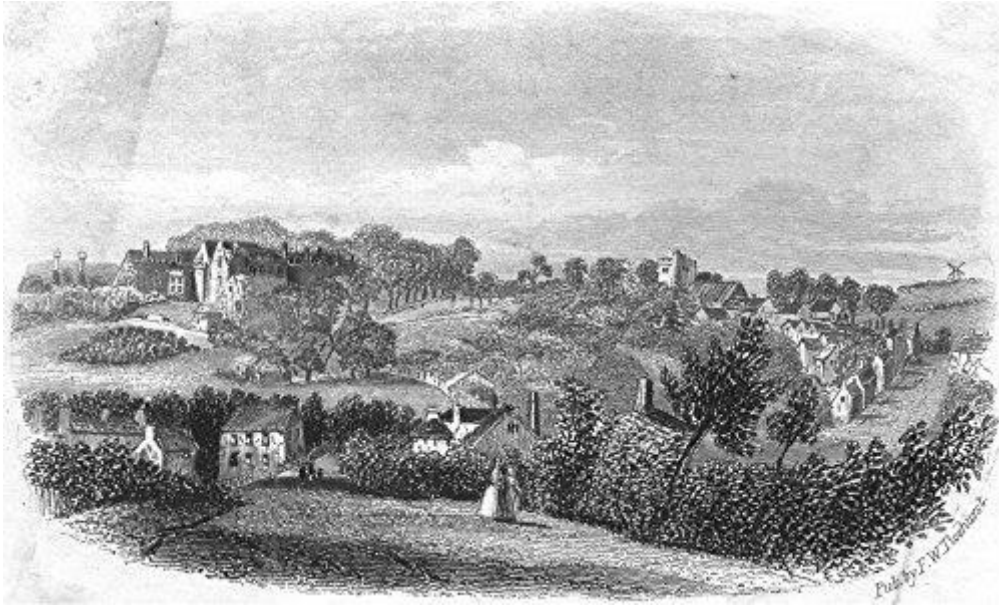
Little is known of the properties away from the Villas and the Terrace to its south. The style of St Mary's Farm and St Mary's Gardens suggests the early nineteenth century, and notwithstanding the 1832 plan both may be shown by marks on the 1813 Ordnance Survey map, surveyed in 1806. Both still stand.

The sale of the Worge estate in 1832 was on the order of George's remarried widow Hannah Maudslay. Not all was sold at once, for she continued to receive an income from it. This residual land was the Rose Green part (lot 1 on the map). Dame Charlotte Webster, widow of the fifth baronet, finally recovered it for the family in 1840 at the price of £12000⁵ but when necessity came to rule it was sold to Samuel Carter in 1855, who lived briefly at Rose Green house. He would at once build the much larger Telham Court, then known as Quarry Hill House, and demolish Rose Green.

The nineteenth century (1832-92)

The nineteenth century history of the Croft is dominated by one man – Frederic Ellman – with the collaboration of his brothers-in-law Hugh and John Ingram. Ellman was the established solicitor practising from and living at 1-2 Upper Lake, Heringtons' Battle office; he had married Catherine Ingram. Their business relationship cannot now be determined but it certainly existed. There are many references to the Ingrams family in property dealings and maintenance in the Ellman family papers,⁶ including their involvement in the attempts to move Ellman's offices to a rebuilt 23 Upper Lake, an attempt cut short by Ellman's death in January 1870. (The continuation of the south side of Upper Lake was then reclaimed by the Duke of Cleveland, demolished and rebuilt in its present style as Cleveland House.) The Ingrams were a well-off family from Steyning.

The sale particulars of 1871 give provenance for some origins of ownership before the sale after the end of the Worge estate. Given that the document was drawn up by the firm then known as Ellman, Raper and Ellman one can have some confidence in its accuracy. It is clear that the process had begun at least by 1839 when Ellman bought lot 14 (still undeveloped in



An impression of the Croft area, either imaginatively or before the railway works began. The large building near the bottom left was the Methodist Church. At the right is Lower Lake leading up to St Mary's church.
<https://www.amazon.com/SUSSEX-Battle-Abbey-Villas-antique/dp/B008D2NJ28>

1871) and what was to become St Mary's Terrace, except the western-most property; these were from John Kenward and Serena Baker. In 1840 he bought lots 1, 41 and 42 on the north side of the Croft, with what was to become 1-8 St Mary's Villas; these were from the Ticehurst family. In the same year he bought (again from John Kenward and Serena Baker) what were to become 9, 10, 11 and 12 St Mary's Villas, with the land beyond them later to be outlined for development (presumably as Villa numbers 13 to 16) on the sales plan. The purchase also included lots 35 to 39, which the plan shows as wooded and open land and which remained undeveloped for another century or more. Last, in 1842 he bought the plot at the western end of the Terrace and what would become the northern terrace of Clive Villas from various owners. As recorded above, one Worge property was left – the house and garden belonging to the former doctor John Worge, at Starrs Green.

Where Ellman found the money for all this is not known. He did have generous support from his father, a landowner of Landport in Lewes, and it is probable that the Ingrams were involved. Given that he married in as late as 1842 the latter possibility is less attractive. When he died in 1870 he left only £7000, which is hardly consistent with property on this scale, from which one might infer a debt burden and a need to sell to others.

With the railway having arrived, it was as early as 1852 that Ellman had plans drawn up for building the Villas, by George Taylor Cloutt of Hawkhurst. Cloutt was already known in Battle because the local board of health had engaged him to oversee the new sewerage system then in progress. He was a land agent, surveyor and auctioneer born in about 1819, but he died aged only 33 in 1855. The actual architect's name is unknown. The houses may have been built from plans widely published in magazines, such as *The Builder*.

St Mary's Villas

The first houses to be built in the Villas were auctioned in May 1854, with the others following shortly; the first appears to have been 1-2, but that was not Ellman's. By 1859⁷ all the present houses had been built except 11-12. Further plans were drawn up in 1862,

resulting in the building of 11-12. These dates may of course be contested. One Villas resident suggests that Tilden Smith (of the gentry) lived there in 1851, which is too early but might refer to the yet-to-be failed banker (c1799-1870), who already had large houses at Vine Hall and Great Sanders. While no firm evidence can be found that Smith was there in 1851, by 1858 a Mr T Smith owned a plot in the Croft that is now 11-12 St Mary's Villas. This cannot be the banker's son, also Tilden, who died in 1852, but determining who was who in that family is no easy business, and of course it might not be Tilden at all. More convincingly the same resident says that the Rev Herbert Clementi-Smith (1836-1905), a distinguished cleric, lived at 10 St Mary's Villas in 1867. He was curate of Battle in 1864-67 and was later a chaplain overseas, first at Seville and then at Biarritz. (A brother was the well-regarded colonial governor Sir Cecil.) Less comfortably there is the memory of Charles West Roberts, who arrived at 5 St Mary's Villas in 1861 and by the end of the year had killed his wife there with laudanum and an excessive amount of brandy. The verdict of accidental death must have surprised many people. He left Battle almost at once.

St Mary's Terrace

Ellman was not responsible for the first buildings in the Terrace (now 6-8): the land for them had been bought by John Towner. The 1861 census records him living there with his wife and family; his age is given as 52 and his occupation as builder (he lived to 1887). These early properties survive as the only ones with three visible storeys. Over the next few years the tall Terrace was completed by Ellman at its eastern end by adding a matching house. The 1861 census reports nine households in residence, among them Towner, his wife and four children. Their status is very different from that of the Villa residents: apart from Towner there were seven agricultural labourers, a cordwainer whose wife was a glover, and a laundress. The smaller eastern (now 1-4) and western (9-11) houses were added at a much later date.

St Mary's Garden and Farm

Neither property is given specific mention in the censuses. The survey of September 1860, which supported the 1875 tithe map, conflicts with the 1861 census data in a number of respects and is difficult to follow. The 1852 plan (below) shows the cottage, owned by Henry Beney and occupied by Mary Beney. It also shows what appears to be the farm, owned by Ellman but occupied by William Denyer.

The end of Frederic Ellman

Ellman's will left all his property and assets to his wife Catherine. The executors were the Rev Edward Boys Ellman, his brother, the Rev Hugh Ingram and Captain Robert Bethune Ingram. The particulars of the sale that followed his death covered all of St Mary's Croft except a large piece of land adjoining the railway (still undeveloped today) and a rather smaller plot at the southern corner of St Mary's Villas and Battle Hill. By that time numbers 1 to 12 St Mary's Villas and numbers 5 to 8 St Mary's Terrace had been built; there was no other modern development. Indeed, except for the terraces facing Battle Hill this remained the case until after the Second World War.⁸

The purchase of the various plots in 1871 is not recorded in the family papers, except that lots 15-19, on Battle Hill between the Terrace and the Villas, were bought by Gideon Noakes

of the tanning family (indeed, they were immediately opposite the tanyard), and he shortly built Clive Villas on the site. 6-8 St Marys Terrace were built at much the same time as the Villas, with Ellman adding 5 a little later. The others are later still.



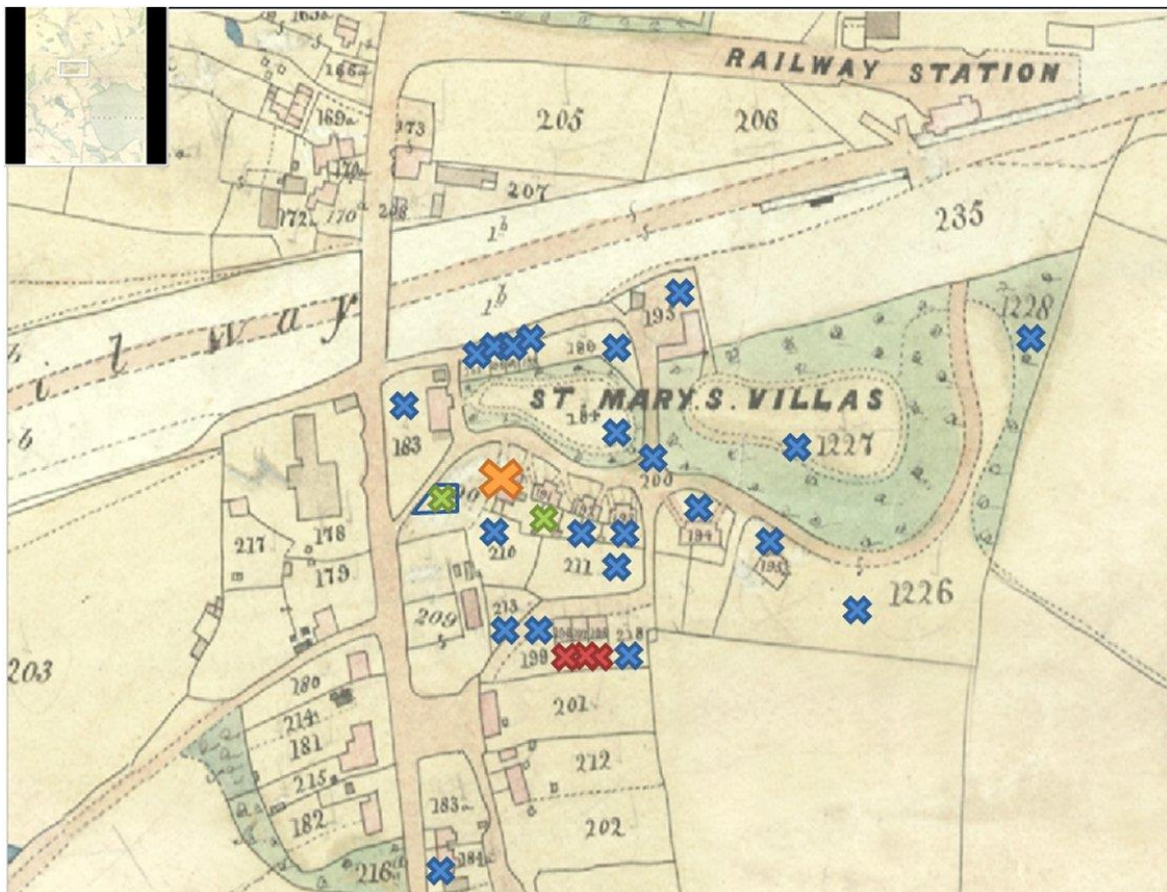
The plan (supplied by Stephen Gray) has 1-8 St Mary's Villas under construction (presumably), with 9-10 planned. The farm is shown as a cottage, represented almost horizontally at the top right.

The first occupants of the Villas were, as one would expect, among the better-off of the town. In 1861 the heads of household were two clergymen, a solicitor, a land proprietor, a clerk of works, a retired shoemaker, a fundholder, a schoolmistress whose resident father was the inspector of police, a civil engineer and, perhaps surprisingly, a sawyer. Indeed, a covenant still applies that prevents any work being actually done on the premises except by doctors and lawyers. By 1871 the heads of household were rather similar. They were a retired electrical engineer and astronomer (Sir Francis Ronalds, inventor of the first electric telegraph); the same schoolmistress and her father, with teachers; a retired farmer; a railway goods clerk; a coal, coke and lime merchant; a nurseryman; an organist; a laundress; a banker's clerk; an attorney's clerk, and someone living off dividends. Among their residents were two labourers, a tanner, another schoolmistress, a nurse, a vocalist and two women living off annuities. This census now included 11/12. This class-based pattern was not to be fully maintained over the years but was still predominantly in evidence in the 1939 register.

(It may be noted that the 1871 enumerator was probably a little confused in the order of the properties and between the Terrace and the Villas.)

The apportionments understandably changed over the years, and some work has been done on the basis of the tithe map of 1858. Tithe maps are not necessarily up to date, often drawing on past information (rather as the 1813 Ordinance Survey map drew on the survey made seven years earlier) nevertheless the map gives a fairly clear statement of who owned what lands in the Croft at or about that time.

The occupants of the Terrace were almost always workmen and their families.

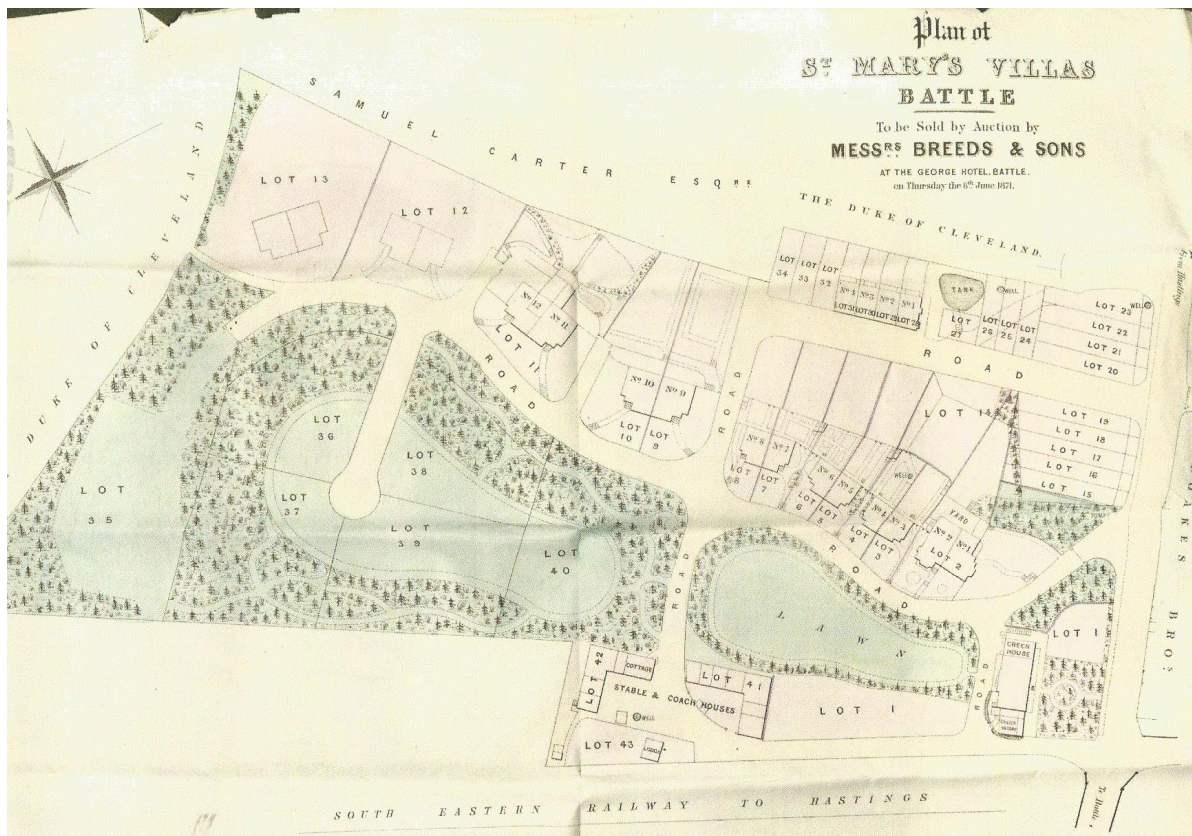


Apportionments from tithe map of 1858. Blue crosses are Ellman's property; green crosses Ellman's later property, originally a Mr Tree's; Orange is the estate of Mr Tree; Red is John Towner's three large terraced dwellings (nos. 6, 7, 8). It appears Ellman did not then own 1 and 2 St Mary's Villas. [Additions by Keith Foord.]

Modern times

On Catherine Ellman's death in 1892 her properties were sold; details of the buyers are not available.

The next map, below, shows the position at the sale of Mrs Ellman's properties in 1892. Whatever the earlier ownerships, the Ellman properties are extensive and greater than before. The map clearly shows what in the 1854 advertisements for sale were described as the pleasure grounds. This area was used primarily for the pleasure of the residents, but on occasions celebrations of a wider nature were held there. The site is now occupied by modern housing.



Judging by the 1937 Ordnance Survey map, no further housing development had by then taken place since the 1892 sale; all the considerable development now evident is post-WW2. The original housing of the Ellman era remains externally largely unchanged, though since 2009, in true modern developers' style, numbers 11 and 12 have been stripped of all the external decorative features that they once possessed.

The Terrace is externally largely unchanged, as are the smaller terraces along Battle Hill. The Gardens house remains. The farm survived as a dairy farm into the twentieth century, where it appears in the 1911 census but by 1939 a coal merchant rather than a farmer lived there.

George Kiloh
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- See also*
- D3 Education
 - E4 Housing
 - G4 Solicitors
 - K2.1 Sir Francis Ronalds
 - O1.6 Rose Green
 - O1.12 The Ronalds-Carter family in 19th century Battle

The author wishes to acknowledge the considerable assistance given by Stephen Gray and Justin Lay, of St Mary's Villas, and Keith Foord. Census and family data are from ancestry.co.uk

¹ See David and Barbara Martin with Christopher Whittick: *Building Battle town* (domtom publishing, 2015).

² T Thorpe: Descriptive catalogue of the original Charters of Battle Abbey, 1835

³ ESRO refs BAT 321, 324, 328, 329

⁴ Documents at the East Sussex Records Office (BAT 446, 447).

⁵ Roy Pryce: *Battle Abbey and the Websters* (Roy Pryce, 2005)

⁶ ESRO ACC/2300/173/5

⁷ 1875 tithe map, clearly out of date.

⁸ Old Ordnance Survey map, Godfrey edition 2005.

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