

Childhood Memories and Reflections of Kibworth House 1942 - 1945

by John Moynan

I went to live at Kibworth House, Kibworth Harcourt, in 1942 when my mother was engaged to work there as cook for Mr William Evans and his wife Mrs Nora May Evans.

There were three of us children but my mother was only allowed to have two of us live with her in the house. My elder brother went to live with our grandmother in the village of Kilby. He would though very often be with us at weekends. I was eight and a half at the time and my younger brother would have been five.



Kibworth House: early 20th century

On our preliminary visit to the house (76 Leicester Road) we were seen by Mr and Mrs Evans in their living room. The semi-circular staircase rising from the large central hall impressed me but I was told that it was not for our use. The access to our two bedrooms and bathroom was via a more mundane back stairs. We had the run of the larger grounds but the rules were that we were not to go into those parts of the garden observable from rooms occupied by Mr and Mrs Evans. Little children

were not to be seen and not be heard. We kept strictly to these limits when they were at home but were more adventurous, without our mother's knowledge, when the Evans' were out tending to their businesses, which was most week days.

Our trespass was given away on the day that there was a fall of snow of the sort ideal for rolling into big snow balls. The damning evidence was there when they arrived home. They were not very pleased, nor was the gardener who was given the task of rolling those several objects to the bottom of the lawn and out of sight over the ha-ha wall.

School

We were enrolled into the local schools, my young brother to the Infants' in Paget Street (now a day nursery, next to the library). I went to Miss Gardner's class in the Junior School in Station Street, the building that is now a doctors' surgery. It must have been the paper shortage of the times that had us using slates and slate

pencils. This made it easy for me to rub out my many mistakes but not so easy to avoid upsetting teacher by making squeaking noises with pencil on the slate.

Another sign of the war was that we all had to carry gas masks with us at all times. Checks were carried out routinely during our first year or so at the school but the inspection was gradually relaxed. This was just as well for us because the cardboard carrying box with its string to go over

one's shoulder was of limited durability and my mother never did get round to making us anything more sturdy, the likes of which most other children had.

National saving was heavily encouraged: fill a card with thirty special sixpenny stamps from the post office and one would get a fifteen shilling saving certificate that held the promise of being worth something like seventeen shillings and six pence if one didn't cash it in for a number of years. Another war effort scheme was that on

Old Money

Six old pence = 2½ new pence

Fifteen shillings = 75p

Seventeen shillings & sixpence = 87½p

one occasion we were encouraged, because of the paper shortage, to collect people's unwanted reading books. The reward for doing this was that one would be given a military rank in accordance with the number of books collected. I was quite enthusiastic, my mother read a lot and there seemed to be a lot of spare books around at Kibworth House. I wasn't allowed to take books that didn't belong to us and the few that my mother was willing to give up didn't even get me the rank of corporal. In contrast one of the lads in the top form took up the challenge with go-getting enterprise. He equipped himself with a truck and must have gone to every house in Beauchamp and perhaps Harcourt. Such was his haul that he earned himself a high ranking commission, something like Field Marshal.

Yet another sign of the war at school was the posters warning of unexploded bombs, with pictures of the objects to avoid. Look as we might we never did find any, nor did we have much luck at coming across dead shrapnel.

From Miss Gardner's class I went on to a class run by the headmaster Mr Charles Mansell (known to us as 'Wag'). I can't remember much about it beyond that one of the hymns we used to sing "Glorious Things of Thee are Spoken" was, I much later found out, ironically, to the tune of the German national anthem. From there it was to Mrs Tumman's class. She wasn't unkind but I

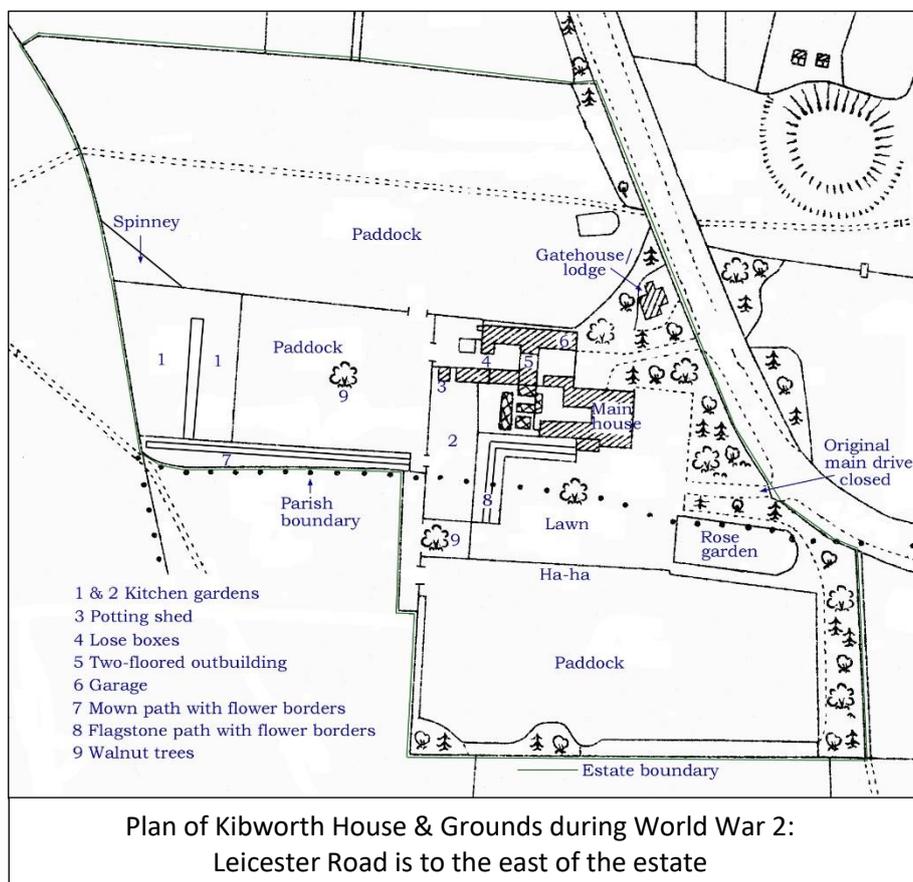
found her rather severe and daunting; it didn't help that I was behind in most subjects. Most of my classroom days were spent in a state of apprehension and longing for freedom, rather than ones of receptive learning. My young brother by this time had moved up to the Junior School and was in the next classroom to us, divided only by a wooden folding screen. Perhaps the only lasting thing that I learnt in class that year was the tune and words of a song that they sang "Here we sit like birds in the wilderness".

We didn't play ball games nor was there organised sport of any sort. The school didn't have playing fields, the most we got was PT in the playground. The only apparatus was a long rope used for group skipping. Two of the most robust of us would be appointed to take opposite ends of the heavy rope and swing it in such a way that we could skip. Several of us at a time would be obliged to take our turn at skipping. This required a degree of synchronisation that seemed to be lacking in most of us. Much to the frustration of the supervising teacher.

Food

All basic food items, except for bread, were on ration, with allowances that look impossibly small in today's era of excess. Kibworth House however seemed to do quite well for itself. Our ration books with all but our personal points were handed over to be deposited with the high class grocery store in Leicester who supplied the Evans' household.

I have good cause to believe that the rationed goods that arrived was of a greater quantity than the sum allowance of the five ration books. For example there would be a one pound slab of butter each week, six ounces more than the two ounce ration each for five persons. Their roast meat joints must have been of some size judging by the amount of dripping that they produced. I remember this in particular because Mr and Mrs Evans had the crusts cut from their bread: these I would dip into the still liquid dripping, when my mother's back was turned, they were delicious.



was in one of the buildings at the High Street end of School Lane. It was off ration food, three courses could be had for something like nine pence. Mother was pretty dismissive of the fare but for folk less privileged food-wise than we at Kibworth House and folk away from home it, and its like around the country, they were no doubt a welcome amenity.

We humans weren't the only beings that lived well at the house. The kitchen and its store room was mouse infested. They were never to be seen in the light but if one opened the door in the dark and switched on the light about a dozen or more would be seen to scatter in all

Fish, fowl and game dishes went to their table far more often I am sure than the average family would have been able to afford or obtain.

We had our main meal at mid-day, the Evans' ate in the evening, but we shared much the same food. I remember for instance biting on lead shot when eating some sort of game bird. I never remember feeling hungry. Another benefit, particularly for my mother was that Mr and Mrs Evans drank China tea which was strangely off ration leaving their allocation for our use. I sampled the China tea, it was taken without milk or sugar: I thought that it was horrible. I can't remember how often they entertained guests for dinner but when they did there would have been someone come in from the village to wait table and help with the washing up. No domestic dish washing machines in those days! The cooking was done on a gas stove although there was a large solid fuel cooking range not used during the war; it was an indicator of less harsh times.

As I have said we didn't go short of food so it wasn't need that took us on one occasion to the British Restaurant in Kibworth Beauchamp. It

directions. If we let Tinker the Labrador dog in first he could often grab one. The Evans' must have been aware of the situation but nothing was ever done about it. How we all remained disease free I don't know. Strangely there seemed to be no evidence of mice in any other part of the house.

As well as sometimes help in the kitchen, there were two or three ladies who came in from the village to do house work. Likewise there were three men, all of whom must have been over call up age, who came in to tend the gardens, bring in coal for the open fires and tend to the solid fuel boiler. One of them would have fed the pig that was housed in one of the war time redundant empty lose boxes. The boiler provided domestic hot water, I remember nothing about central heating but I am sure that it must have been installed though possibly not in use. We had an open fire in our living room. I never remember feeling cold except perhaps when, to preserve the coal, a supply of peat was delivered for us to burn. It proved to be barley combustable and had a low heat to smoke ratio.

The Evans' Household

Mr and Mrs Evans as far as I was aware didn't socialise with either of their immediate neighbours who lived in The Gables and The Lodge or particularly any others of the village gentry. They were not overtly religious nor did they seem to be involved in village social life. That is my recollection but then I was only a child beyond the baize door.

Mr Evans had a footwear manufacturing business in Leicester to which he drove each working day [William Evans (Leicester) Ltd, Boot and Shoe Manufacturer, with premises in Brunswick Street, and Crane/Lichfield Streets]. Knowing this I was rather bewildered when he brought leather home and then took it down the road to the saddler to have shoes made for himself.

Mrs Evans was involved with Red Cross work. I think that she had some sort of senior administrative role that took her away from the house for the duration of most work days. She was certainly active in raising money for the cause. I remember raffles, a garden party on the lawn and that on one afternoon a week a group of ladies would meet in the drawing room, involved in some sort of sewing activity for the charity. Another event, that was most likely a money raiser, was a variety concert show held one evening in the lounge of the house. An invited fee-paying audience? Voluntary artists? They came from I know not where. Surprisingly I was allowed to attend for the first half, with strict instructions as to my behaviour. I remember there being an article and photo in one of the Leicester newspaper in recognition of Mrs Evans' work.

Mr Evans who was probably in his mid-sixties seemed to be an old man to me. He was a kindly and generous gent who would occasionally knock on our living room door, when we opened it he would thrust his arm into the room and drop a hand full of coppers on to the floor. He would then retreat without uttering a word. Even more generously he bought me a brand new bicycle. It was purchased locally from a shop on the corner

Extracts from the Market Harborough

Advertiser & Midland Mail:

11/9/1942 A garden fete was held on Saturday 5 September in the grounds of Kibworth House, kindly lent by Mr & Mrs W Evans (organiser) in aid of the Prisoners of War Fund and the British Red Cross; Kibworth Silver Band played and there were numerous side shows; a whist drive was held in the house in the evening, followed at the Village Hall by a dance; total raised was £258.

4/6/1943 A garden fete was held last Saturday at Kibworth House by kind permission of Mr & Mrs W Evans in aid of the Red Cross; the Kibworth Silver Band was in attendance, plus numerous side shows, including a baby show; there was an afternoon concert by Mr Ernest Elliott and his marionettes; later a whist drive on the lawn and a dance in the evening at the Village Hall; over £200 was raised.

22/12/1944 Mrs W Evans of Kibworth House had taken an empty shop in Kibworth from 20 November to 11 December to sell donated articles from Kibworth residents and raised £572 for the Red Cross. Over the years, Mrs Evans has raised £11,000 for the Red Cross.

of High Street and Smeeton Road. I was allowed to take it away with me when we moved away shortly afterwards.

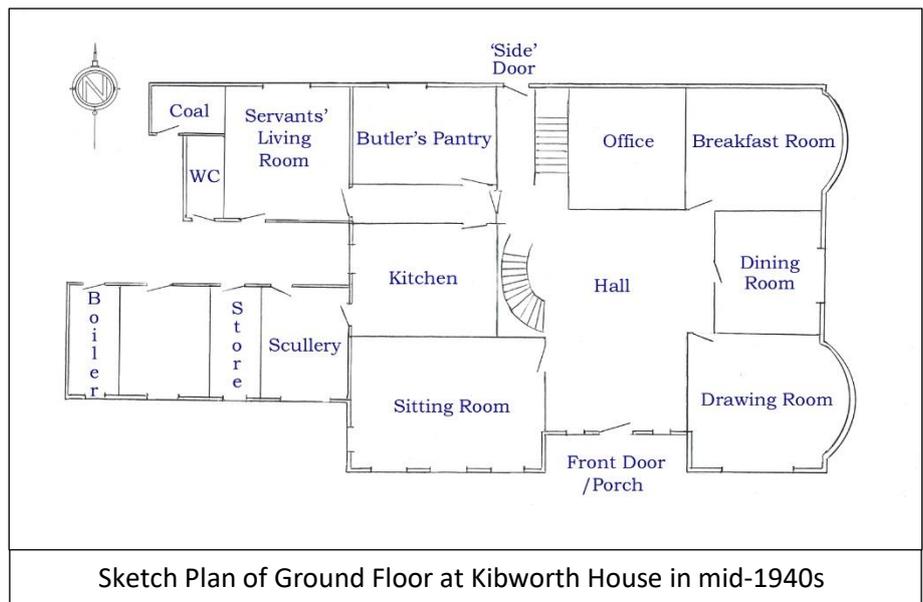
Mrs Evans was younger than her husband, perhaps in her mid-fifties. She was more aloof, no handfuls of pennies from her. I think that she was more comfortable when we lads were out of sight and could not be heard. She never interfered with our lives, was industrious in the cause of her charity but I suspect well conscious of her level in the social strata.

I have no evidence to believe other than that they were good and reasonable folk to work for.

An occasional visitor, for a few days at a time, was a lady referred to as Mrs Seymour. She was the widow of Mr and Mrs Evans' only child, William Seymour Evans, who had died as the result of a hunting accident some time in the late 1930s. I remember that a bedroom called the green room used to be prepared for her visits. I never saw

Mrs Seymour in anything other than civilian clothes but wouldn't be surprised if she wasn't serving in some branch of the military.

We weren't always the only occupants of the servants' residential quarters. On four occasions, other live-in staff were engaged. This meant that we all had to move into one bedroom. Quite what their duties were beyond wait table and help in the kitchen I don't know.



One lady whose presence I resented, claimed to have served royalty in a nursery capacity. She certainly demonstrated experience of having had to deal with privileged obnoxious children. I drew a picture of a face with a large hooked nose, put her name to it and pinned it to our living room door. Whatever she felt when she saw it she calmly disguised, taking the wind out of my sails by thanking me and declaring it a lovely picture!

There was a couple who seemed to be of a shifty disposition who didn't stay for long. I think that only the lady was in paid employment with the Evans' and they wanted living accommodation where both were being paid. The man was of call-up age and was very keen to show everyone his honourable discharge papers from the armed forces.

There was another couple where only the wife was employed. That was because the husband was an RAF pilot based at Harborough Airfield. "TTFN" ('Ta-Ta For Now') I remember hearing him say as he rode off to 'work' on his bike. He had been awarded a military service decoration which he showed to me. I remember it shining in its satin/silk lined snap lid case. I didn't want to give him it back. I seem to remember it being a medal, making it most likely to have been the DFM that was awarded to NCOs; the DFC was awarded to commissioned ranks for deeds of like

valour. They also weren't with us for long. I am not sure why, was it a posting or was something kept from me?

Mr and Mrs Evans had connections with Blakeney in Norfolk, they may even have owned property there, though I have no recollection of them visiting the place. I think that they must have been in communication with the area because they engaged two young ladies from Blakeney to work at Kibworth House. I found it hard at first to understand all that they were saying. They used to go out on their evenings off, possibly to the village dances. Silk stockings being beyond their means, they would paint their legs the appropriate colour and finish the job with a black line, representing the stocking seam, down the back of their legs. I think that those girls might still have been at Kibworth when we left.

Other evidence of their connections with Blakeney was the gent from there who was invited to stay for a week or so. He had been the skipper of the sailing boat that they owned. It was however the servants' quarters for him. He was once or twice invited to eat with his hosts, but generally he would join them in their living room after their meal. He gave us lads half a crown each before he left. I seem to remember squandering it on packets of cheap foreign postage stamps and sets of transfers.



Part of Garden at Kibworth House

Newspapers

The wartime newspapers were of hardly more than one folded sheet. The nationals very often carried little maps of the front line with speculative arrows showing the thrust of the allied advances. I followed these with great interest never doubting but that “we” would win the war.

I know that the Daily Express, a broad sheet at that time, came into the house. It was probably purchased by my mother. More serious material was taken by the Evans’ folk - The Times or The Telegraph. They also had The Field and Punch magazines. All of this material found its way down to the servants’ quarters. I can still remember some of the illustrated jokes in the Punch magazine and their long running series of amusing adverts for Symington’s soups. There was also the local Leicester paper, that I remember at one time carrying alarming news items over a number of days, telling of an escaped German prisoner of war. He was reported to be at large in the Kibworth area. The golf club hut was broken into, food and water was the most likely motive, since a pot of jam was the only missing item. He was caught fairly soon, found hiding in a haystack not very far away from us. Children were then allowed out on their own again.

Leisure Times

In those days the golf course with its club house was on land to the north of the road going to

Wistow. Some of the older lads earned money by carrying the players’ golf bags for them.

My mother had Wednesday afternoons off. She would sometimes use these to visit Market Harborough or Leicester. Most often it was to Harborough and when not at school we would go with her to visit her sister or more usually we would go to the cinema. The timing of the films was such that the early showing of the main feature had always started by the time that we arrived so that we would see the end of the film first and if it was liked the beginning later. Thus it was that I saw Lassie (a famous Collie dog at the time) joyfully reunited with her owner before seeing how she went astray. There was a direct early afternoon Midland Red bus service to Harborough. The last return was from outside the front of what is now the Edinburgh Woollen Mill shop in the square; it went a long way round serving the Langtons.

If the last bus was missed it was home by rail. Passenger trains were often of 12 to 14 coaches. This was too long for the platform at Kibworth. So it was that the engine driver needed to stop to allow passengers in the forward carriages to get off and then move the train along so that those to the rear could alight on to the platform. On one occasion this didn't happen for us and we went on to Leicester. There was no train back stopping at Kibworth that night so it was a taxi home. Two young Kibworth ladies who had also been at the rear end of the train shared the taxi with us but not the considerable fare. They didn't have the cash they said and promised to pay later but I don't think they ever did.

Those very long passenger trains were often hauled by two engines. Double headers as they were called. My elder brother and I would take their numbers when we train spotted from the Warwick Road bridge. We recorded the numbers of all of the engines that we saw but it was those with names (‘namers’) that we were really there for. There would be eager anticipation as an express passenger train approached so often followed by the disappointment of the engine being one that we had seen many times before.

Other memories associated with the railways were the posters on the station walls, 'Is your Journey really necessary?', 'Dig for Victory', 'Careless talk cost lives', 'Walls have ears', 'Think before you speak', 'Make do and mend'. Another recollection is of the railway coaches parked in the sidings to the north side of the Wistow Road bridge. They were put there as part of the policy of dispersing spare rolling stock away from built up areas that were likely to come under air attack. Not that I understood that at the time.

With no cinema or television and not all of us with a radio in the home, anything that promised entertainment was seized upon. Thus it was that several of us lads were in the audience of an event billed as The Brains Trust. It took place in the chapel on the right hand side of the road going out towards Leicester. It was a parochial copy of the BBC programme of the same name, whereby a team of savants would give consideration to questions from the audience. Far too dry and humourless to hold our attention, it wasn't long before we were in trouble for chatting amongst ourselves. We weren't evicted but we took the first opportunity that we had to leave, unimpressed.

More to our liking was the travelling fair that set up in the area of the recreation field on the Smeeton Road. It was an attraction that took us to that part of Beauchamp beyond the school. A locality that we rarely ventured into. So uneventful must things have been for us that just watching some of it being erected and dismantled was enough to draw us to the site.

News of forthcoming events in Kibworth would most often come to me by word of mouth. The parents of the lads I mixed with must have been closer to the happenings of village life than we non-natives and somewhat isolated in a big house. There were certainly not the means of communication that we have today. Very few homes had telephones. Kibworth House was of course connected but even they had only one hand set and that was in their office. Their number was Kibworth Two Four. Always as I remember expressed that way, not twenty-four.

It would be interesting to know just how many numbers there were on the Kibworth exchange at that time.

I went about with the Harcourt village lads: there were no more than four or five of us who attended the school in Beauchamp. One or two of those lads moved on to the school at Church Langton, during this time - none to Kibworth Grammar School. War games were played with homemade wooden guns: we would stalk each other in the local spinneys. We used to rove as far as the Burton Brook in the fields bounded by the Wistow Road and the A6 Leicester Road. No thought of keeping to footpaths but we were careful not to cause damage.

Parents of some of us worked on the land for the farmer whose fields we were in. In the spring the quest was for birds' eggs. It shames me now to tell that we took eggs and even worse we would remove them all from the nest. We wanted one each for our individual collections. Some nests were safe because of their inaccessibility. This included the martins who had nests in burrows high up in the near vertical walls of the sand pit that was in the area now occupied by the houses and gardens of 1 to 7 School Walk.

Military Activity

There was a fair amount of military air activity. Any aircraft were of interest but most memorable were the several occasions when on summer evenings large flights of four-engined aircraft were seen heading in a general southerly direction. I suppose that I knew what they about but at that time had no real appreciation of the enormity of what I was witnessing. The planes would have had full fuel and bomb loads and been setting out on missions over hostile enemy territory. The aircraft didn't have pressurised cabins nor were they heated. The air crew operated under those conditions on round trips that could be of fourteen hours or more - if they were fortunate enough to make it back at all.

Mrs Evans was heard to express diminished respect for the airmen when it came to her knowledge that many of them set out on their bombing missions in a less than sober state. A bit harsh this coming from a senior member of a household that didn't exactly practise abstinence. Table wine went with some of their meals and soda siphons were indicative of the consumption of spirits. Their hall of an evening held a not unpleasant opulent aroma of cigar smoke and whisky.

Convoys of American troop carrying lorries frequently passed our gate on the A6. We would wave to them and call out 'Have you got any gum chum?' A cry that didn't always go unheeded for we were occasionally rewarded by having not only chewing gum but also packets of sweets and biscuits thrown out to us. There was an instance when a convoy had come to a standstill and words were exchanged with the guys in the back of one of the wagons. We were soliciting for chewing gum while they enquired of our non-existing female elder siblings "Have you got a sister mister?" Evidence of the passing GIs were the numerous discarded empty cigarette packets: Chesterfield, Lucky Strike, and Camel brands in shiny paper packs. Quite unlike the more rigid two part packets of the British brands that we collected examples of.

My mother gave notice of wanting to leave when the war ended. My father was returning from war service overseas and we needed to find a family home to be all together.

The war years were stringent times and I am sure that Kibworth House had seen grander days. When for instance there would have been hunters in the lose boxes, rather than a pig, and I would suspect a more lavish going on altogether. Nevertheless the Evans' maintained the house and its grounds to a high standard. I have nostalgic memories of mown lawns, flagged paths with herbaceous flower borders, the rose garden with its clipped box hedges, grape vines under glass, walnut trees, a productive kitchen garden and a general air of affluence.

I was recently shown some photos of Kibworth House, taken in 1955 shortly before it was knocked down. It saddened me to see the unkempt and run down state that it had been allowed to fall into.

October 2016



Kibworth House prior to demolition 1955

Previous Owners/Residents of Kibworth House‡:

- Henry & Alice Farquhar & family, visitors & servants (1871 census)
- Arthur N & Mary Cochrane, & servants (1881 census)
- James S & Lucie Dickinson & family, & servants (1891 census)
- John & Cordelia S Steward, & servants (1901 census)
- James S & Lucy Dickinson, & servants (1911 census)
- William & Nora May Evans, & servants (1939 register)

‡ Kibworth House was built in the late Georgian period [*Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological & Historical Society, volume 32 (1956) page 95*]

James Sherwin Dickinson, solicitor by profession, during his time at Kibworth House, gradually unified the estate by purchasing parcels of land around the house owned or previously owned by others. These included James Eckersley, Henry Garratt, Samuel Hollins, John Leach, Arthur Cochrane, the Duchess of Hamilton, & Joseph Horton. Merton College (Oxford) owned the large paddock field immediately to the north of Kibworth House but sold it to Mr Dickinson in 1904. Kibworth House and grounds were sold to the Evans' in May 1923.