The History of Bank Grove

(Updated from the original written by Evelyn Pritchard, local historian died 1992.)

Bank Grove began as a small farm with a house, barn and yard and two pieces of land in the 1700's.

In 1797, the farmhouse was pulled down and one of the most famous houses in Surrey was built by John Nash for General Henry St John, son of 2nd Viscount St John and MP for Wootton Bassett. It was a villa, compact and classical, said to be relatively small, with "only 14 bedrooms", and one reception room, much on the lines of Llanerchaeron, a John Nash house in Wales that was designed in the same decade.

Its real claim to fame was the 16 acres of gardens, occupying the rectangle bounded by the river on one side from the so-called "Half-mile tree" (also known as "One tree") to Bank Lane, and on the other side by the Kingston/Richmond Road. The entrance lodge and gates were on this road, on the corner of what is now Montague Place, Albany Park Road.

The gardens were originally landscaped by Humphry Repton, while a 100ft conservatory was attached to the house. "The Beauties of Surrey", published by William Keane in 1849, provides a detailed description of the grounds, with a collection of internationally famous azaleas, rhododendrons, and other exotics, with elaborate walks, rose gardens, peach house, two vineries and a temple overlooking the Thames.

In 1821 the estate was purchased by Sir John Delves Broughton, 7th Baronet, of Doddington Hall, Cheshire, for £1,000.

In 1830-1840 he was stout, dressed in the fashion of coaching days and had a splendid coach and four with four liveried grooms. It was one of the sights of the town when he drove on Sundays to All Saints in Kingston, with silver harness on the horses. His pew was a long front seat near the pulpit. Alterations to the church necessitated setting it back three or four feet. When he found out, he forbade the churchwardens to touch it, locked it up, and it remained unused until his death. He never visited All Saints again. Instead, he drove to Hampton Wick. He always paused to give money to the inmates of the debtors prison, then on the Bentalls site.

He was the uncle of Rhoda Broughton, the Victorian novelist.

The 11th Baronet, Sir Henry John Delves Broughton (known as Jock Delves Broughton) was one of his descendants. He settled in Kenya in 1940 and was accused of the murder of Lord Erroll (Josslyn Victor Hay, 22nd Earl of Erroll), but pronounced not guilty. He came back to England, subsequently committing suicide in the Aldephi Hotel. ("White Mischief" by James Fox).

On the 7th Baronet's death in 1847, the estate was purchased by William Byam Martin, known as Squire Martin for the opulence of his lifestyle. He drove out each day in a coach drawn by four greys, attended by postilions in blue and silver liveries. He took great pride in the gardens, filling greenhouses with rare exotics.

Martin died in 1870, when the estate was purchased by Charles James Freake (1814–1884), made a Baronet in 1882. He had made his fortune in the building boom in Kensington, with his main residence at Fulwell Lodge, Twickenham, where he had built the original town hall and other estates.

A friend of the Royal Family, he and his wife hosted magnificent social events at Bank Grove. These were seldom reported in the newspapers, for the Freakes this would be vulgar. However, one event in July 1871 did get into the Surrey Comet. It was a fête in aid of funds for the National

Orphans Home, Ham Common, of which Charles and his wife were keen supporters, he serving on the Management Committee, while his wife joined the Ladies Committee. He offered £2,000 to the Home, on the condition that others would contribute a matching £2,000. The money raised was used to build an additional wing on the Home, completed in 1872. This building is now South Lodge, Ham Common, converted into flats but virtually unchanged externally.

At the fête, Queen Victoria's newly married daughter H. R. H. Princess Louise made her first public appearance following her marriage to the Marquis of Lorne. She came to present "Lady Peek's prizes" to old girls of the Home who had gone into domestic service, and had testimonials from their employers as to what good, reliable servants they were. The Bishop of Winchester and his wife were present, W. E. Gladstone with his daughters, and 500 other distinguished guests.

When Sir Charles died in 1884, 14 acres of the estate were split into lots and sold as building plots. In 1885 some of these lots were sold by auction, gentlemen being supplied with luncheon from a marquee erected in the grounds. The house with the remaining two acres survived until 1909, after opening in 1890 as a high-class members' establishment, The Albany Club. In 1909 it was destroyed in a fire.

Beginning as Bank Farm, the property was known at various periods as Point Pleasant and Bank Grove. It has been replaced by Grosvenor Gardens, Albany Park Road and The Albany. Much of the original boundary wall survives on the Lower Ham Road, together with the splendid cedars which shaded the Royal guests at Lady Freake's garden parties.