

## THE PEEK FAMILY OF ROUSDON

Sir Henry William Peek (1825-1898) was the founder of the Rousdon Estate. He came from a very humble background and so when he became a very successful business man he felt the need to help others. He gave generous donations to hospitals, schools, churches and disaster relief. He preferred to give these donations in secret. He became an MP and one year later he decided to buy Rousdon – a decayed village with a dilapidated church. This caused great excitement in the village as hopefully it would bring prosperity and work to neighbouring towns and villages. He purchased the estate for £11,500 and set about rebuilding the church and school as he felt passionate about education. As well as a primary school he set up a secondary school.

The Peek Baronetcy was created on 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1874 for Henry Peek who was by now a successful importer of tea, spices and other groceries. He decided to build a mansion in Rousdon which when completed in 1878 had a reputed cost of £250,000 ( £13 million in today's money). Sir Henry took an interest in the land and cared for all those who worked for him. Hot dinners were served to the children in the school for one penny per day. They were taught how to grow their own vegetables and it was the first school in Devon to teach cookery. In 1881 he started a Sunday school after which Sir Henry would hand out extra-large hot buns to the children. This became known as "Bun Sunday".

With the collapse of the East India Company in 1833 the Peek family became the leading tea merchants in the country. Arthur Brook of Brook Bond fame worked for them. In 1853 Sir Henry's daughter Hanna married George Freen and the company began making and exporting biscuits – Peek Freen & Co. They introduced the Garibaldi biscuit and later the first cream sandwich biscuit – the bourbon. The Company later amalgamated with Huntley and Palmers.

In 1884 a proposed land holding company was set up to protect open spaces. Octavia Hill was with Sir Henry when the name National Trust was suggested and she was the founder of the trust we know today.

In 1888 Sir Henry installed a vast collection of 376 stuffed birds in a special museum in the main house. Some of these are now in the British Museum. When he died in 1898 he was greatly mourned by his family and also by "his people"

The second Baron was Henry's only son, Cuthbert (1855-1901). He created an observatory at the Manor House as he had a great interest in astronomy and meteorology. He was one of the backers behind Stanley's African expedition. He allowed the railway to cross his land as long as a station was built there. The specially built trains had the ability to climb steep gradients and they became known as "Lyme Billies". He died of a brain tumour aged 46 and the title passed to Wilfred who became the 3<sup>rd</sup> Baron of Rousdon.

Sir Wilfred set about buying Combpyne, the neighbouring parish to Rousdon. The first motor car to come to Rousdon was driven by his friend, General Sir Robert Baden-Powell and it encouraged Sir Wilfred to buy a Fiat in which he travelled a great deal. He was a very fast driver and was fined £10 for driving in a dangerous manner.

Sir Wilfred raised a battalion of the Devon Regiment for World War I but 13 of his men died. The Manor House became a Red Cross Hospital. After the war he struggled to get over the loss of those he encouraged to form the Regiment so he stayed away from Rousdon more and more. A memorial to those who died can be seen in the Church. In 1923 Sir Wilfred having lost interest in Rousdon preferred travelling and whilst in India big game hunting he was badly mauled and nearly killed by a panther. He bought a tea plantation and built a house there which he called Rousdon Mullai. He now only visited Rousdon for the Hunt Ball.

After his death in 1927 the young Sir Francis inherited the title of 4<sup>th</sup> Baronet of Rousdon. He and his mother were living in London and rarely visited and never lived in Rousdon. The house continued to be used for charity events.

Sir Francis was a lieutenant in the Irish Guards in World War II and was mentioned in dispatches. He became Aide-de-Camp to the Governor of the Bahamas. In 1938 he sold the Rousdon Estate at auction to All Hallows School in Honiton and the Peek connection with Rousdon came to an end.