

A History of Bitham Hall



Sarah Richardson

Before Bitham Hall

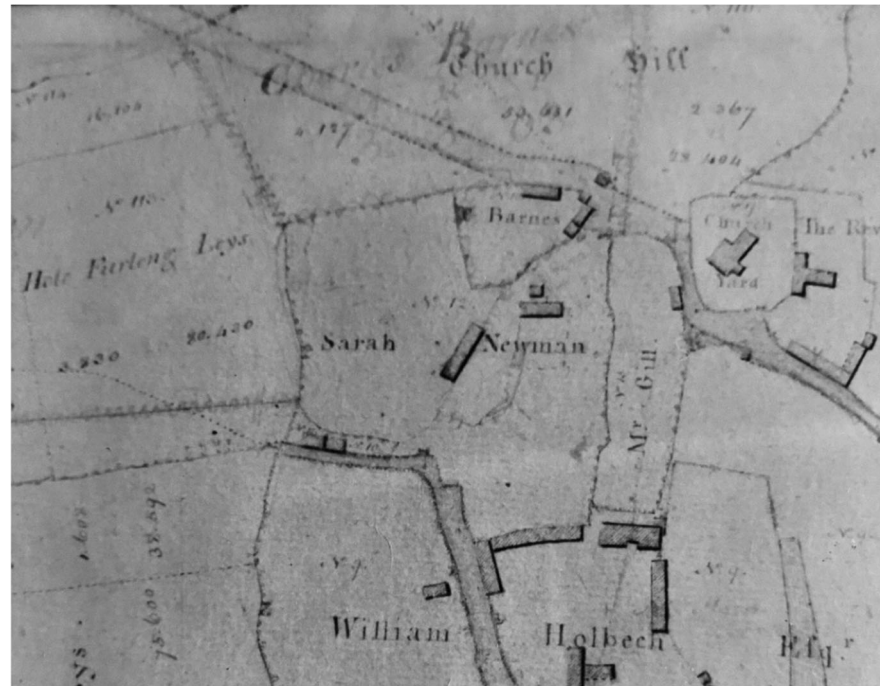
Although Avon Dassett first appears in the historical record in the Domesday Book, it is likely there were prior Roman and Saxon settlements. The village was relatively wealthy by 1086 with 28 heads of households and rated at £10. In comparison, Stratford-on-Avon had 29 heads and was rated at £11. The landscape still bears evidence of the ridge and furrow strip farming that took place in the fields and meadows around the village.

Tax records which exist from the thirteenth century, demonstrate that the village was dominated by several wealthy landowners. From 1551-1744 the title of Lord of the Manor rested with the influential Woodward family. They sold it to the Holbech family of Farnborough, who still retain it. The other major landowner was the church and according to the 1781 Land Tax return, the Reverend Gill paid duty of over £14 on the church lands.

Avon Dassett was enclosed in 1780 which consolidated much of the landownership and transferred the Common Land to the Avon Dassett charities. It is from the enclosure map that we first get documentary details of buildings on the Bitham Hall site. At the time of Enclosure the land was the property of Sarah Newman. From the 1781 Land Tax return (opposite), we can see she was the fourth most substantial landowner in the parish. Field names are also given and to the left of the buildings we see the origins of the name Bitham House or Hall, as the pasture is called Bitham Hole Furlong Leys.

1781 Land Tax return for the parish of Avon Dassett. The document lists the following landowners and their tax payments:

Landowner	Tax Payment
Mr. Holbech, Esq.	17-2-10
Mr. Gill	14-6-9
Mr. Hill	6-17-8
Robert Gardner	5-0-8
John Crism	4-5-11
Martha Downson	1-19-0
James Haycock	0-4-0
John Hitchcocks	7-4-3
Robert Green	17-9-7
Rizziah fincham	0-4-6
John Beckins	4-6-0
Sarah Newman	7-19-10
Charles Barnes	0-7-1
Charles Taylor	0-8-6
John Smith	0-4-0
Wm. Cooper	0-2-3
Church lands by the Rev. Mr. Gill	91-3-4



Enclosure Map of Avon Dassett, 1786

The map depicts a building on the site of the later Hall, and of a similar shape (without the two wings) which means that it could have been adapted rather than constructed from scratch.

Joseph Knight—Architect of Bitham Hall

Joseph Knight was born on 7 September 1778 in Brindle, Lancashire and as a child attended St Joseph's Catholic Church. There had been a Catholic mission in the village since the late seventeenth century. In his obituaries, Joseph's story is presented as a rags to riches rise from a poor servant boy to a member of the landed gentry. We know little about his early years but he was not the only member of the family to achieve fame and recognition. His nephew, William, also born in Lancashire, was educated at Lisbon and became the first Catholic priest in Hartlepool from 1834 until his death in 1874. He was an accomplished musician and composed a mass performed in churches all over Europe.

born 31 Aug in Walton St James Marry
Sep 8 Joseph Knight son of Joseph and Ellen born of Mrs
in Brindle St Henry Knight Clara Wadiker
Dau of John and Catharine

Baptism record of Joseph Knight, 1778 at Brindle, Lancashire

In 1820, Joseph married Mary Powell Lorymer the only daughter of John, of Perth-hir House in Monmouthshire, a significant centre of Catholic recusancy after the Reformation. Mary, was educated at an Augustinian convent in Bruges. During the French Revolution she was forced to flee with the nuns, first to Holland and then to Winchester, where she completed her education. Joseph and Mary had no children of their own.

The Knights were prolific benefactors and their philanthropy funded the building of St Mary's Church in Cadogan Square, Chelsea, schools for the poor in Chelsea and Brindle in Lancashire as well as St Joseph's Church, Presbytery and Convent in Avon Dassett. The school at Brindle survives as a parish hall and still has the inscription: 'Erected by Mr. Joseph Knight, of Chelsea, for the benefit of the Brindle congregation, and as a token of respect for his native place, A.D. 1831.'

Bishop William Poynter, the vicar apostolic of London, granted permission for the Knights to have an oratory in their house on the King's Road in Chelsea where private masses could be conducted.





The Original Altar at Bitham Hall

One of the first actions taken by Joseph Knight once Bitham Hall was completed was to seek similar permission from the Bishop of Birmingham, to hold private masses in a personal chapel.

An altar, designed by the Reverend W. Tandy of Banbury, was installed in the house, and he consecrated the altar, and held the first mass on 10 May 1852. The Catholic newspaper, *The Tablet*, gave a vivid description of the new altar:

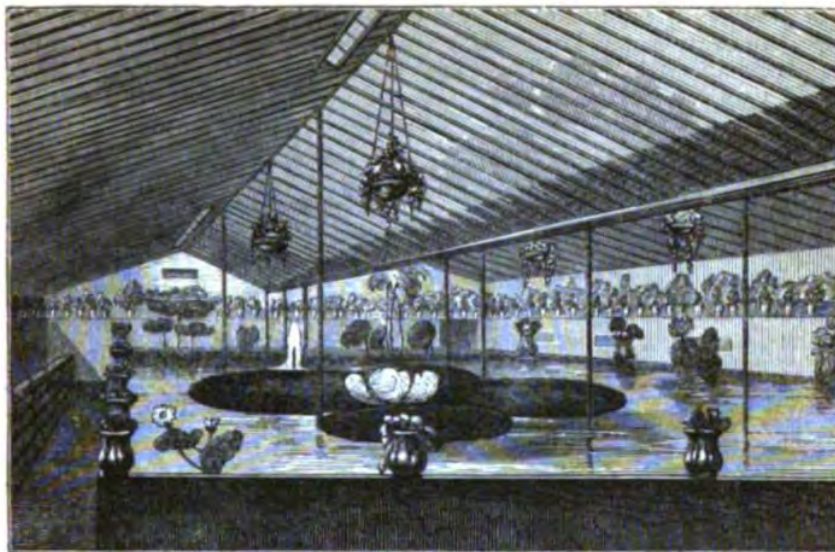
‘In four compartments are figures of Our Blessed Lady, St. Joseph, St. Helen and St. Aloysius, with appropriate petitions to each, and other versicles, emblems and monograms, painted in glowing colours on the folding doors which shut it all up from view. The altar furniture, vestments etc. are all extremely beautiful and reflect the highest credit upon the good taste of the patrons of the mission.’

The Exotic Nursery

At some point in his teens, Joseph moved south and became a gardener at Woburn, the residence of Francis Russell, the fifth Duke of Bedford who was a keen agriculturalist. He then moved to Munden House in Watford to become head gardener for the merchant and slave trader, George Hibbert. Hibbert was a keen botanist and plant collector, particularly interested in species from Australia and South Africa. In 1798 he financed a five-year trip to the Cape for the collector, James Niven who found five new species of proteaceae.

Knight was the first person successfully to propagate the plants for Hibbert, and in 1809 was caught up in a scandal that shocked the botanical world. He was encouraged to write a short paper, *On the cultivation of the plants belonging to the natural order of Protease* which he dedicated to Hibbert. Most of the pamphlet though consisted of descriptions and new taxa for the species written by a controversial horticulturalist, Robert Salisbury. This was not Salisbury's original work. He had attended a lecture at the Linnean Society by Robert Brown, and plagiarized his research, beating Brown into print by a year. Botanists and collectors were outraged, ostracizing Salisbury for the rest of his career.

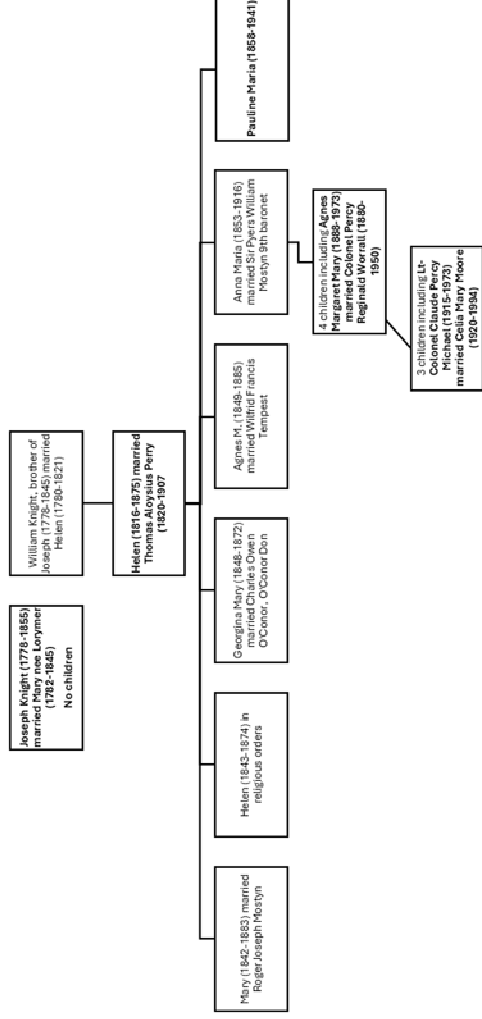
Luckily, Knight largely escaped the opprobrium emanating from his involvement in the scandal. He was a member of the Royal Horticultural Society and a founder member of the Horticultural Society of London. In 1808 he left Hibbert's employment and was wealthy enough to purchase a substantial plot of land on the King's Road in Chelsea to establish his own Exotic Nursery, cultivating and selling plants and trees from the Southern Hemisphere. When Hibbert retired in 1827 he donated his substantial collection to Knight's nursery. In 1848, Knight was joined in business by his nephew-in-law, Thomas Aloysius Perry, and the two purchased a further site at Battersea to cultivate hardy plants and trees. A guide to the gardens of London which accompanied the Great Exhibition of 1851 gives vivid descriptions of the nursery which, it stated, built new plant houses almost annually. Among the highlights they mention rhododendrons, water lilies, jasmine and azaleas.



INTERIOR VIEW OF THE AQUARIUM.

An aquarium was built especially to accommodate the *Victoria Regia* water lily which had been propagated successfully at Chatsworth by Joseph Paxton. Exotic trees could also be purchased from the nursery including autumn flowering laburnum and sourwood trees.

When Joseph retired to Avon Dassett he planted the parkland with a large number of exotic trees. He also used the skills he had learned in building hot houses to construct a majestic glasshouse (see photograph on the front cover). A tree survey undertaken by Coach House residents, Graham and Sandra Rice in 1999, and lodged with the Tree Register of the British Isles, recorded a number of special varieties. An English oak was one of the largest recorded in Warwickshire, a Japanese pagoda tree, the fourth largest in Britain, a maritime pine the eleventh largest on record and a silver lime the twelfth largest. Other important trees on the estate include a number of early monkey puzzles, hornbeams, Japanese cedars and giant redwoods. The plan on the back cover shows the original landscaping of the grounds and many features survive today.



Knight-Perry-Worrall Family Tree

(Focuses on ownership of Bitham Hall, in bold)

Bitham Hall

After the death of his wife Mary, Joseph made his nephew-in-law, Thomas Aloysius Perry, a partner in the Exotic Nursery in Chelsea, but he was already looking towards retirement and purchased a substantial plot of land in Avon Dassett. The village was probably chosen because of Perry's family links with the area (he was born in Banbury). There are few details of the construction of the hall except that it is the only Italianate villa in Warwickshire and is said to be inspired by family visits to Tuscany. The house first appears in the records in 1852 when the new altar was installed. The newspaper reports that when Knight first came to the village he distributed to the poor, irrespective of faith, a shilling each, amounting to £15 in total. His niece, Helen who was married to Thomas Perry, is also recorded as giving birth to a daughter (Anna Maria) at Bitham House in 1853.

St. Joseph's Roman Catholic Church

Along with the house, Joseph also financed the building of a church at the end of the drive with an attached presbytery, school, convent and orphanage. Described as built in the Gothic Revival style, the architect was Thomas Meyer of London. The church was consecrated by Bishop Ullathorne on 3 and 4 July 1855 and Joseph died just sixteen days later, aged 77. Twelve stained glass windows by John Hardman of Birmingham were installed at the opening, with a further one in memory of Joseph Knight, a year later.



Helen (née Knight) and Thomas Perry

Helen was born in Brindle, Lancashire like her uncle Joseph, and had a sister and two brothers. One of her brothers, Thomas, emigrated to New Zealand and died at Akaroa in 1845. She probably met Thomas through her uncle and aunt and he became partner in Joseph's firm. She had six daughters and two sons who died in infancy. Thomas planted six yew trees on the front lawn of Bitham Hall cut into pyramid shapes, one for each of his daughters (see p. 18). Helen died at Bitham Hall in 1874 at the age of 58.

Thomas was the son of a brass founder and inherited the Bitham Hall estate from Joseph Knight having married Joseph's niece and heiress, Helen in 1840. He was a leading member of the Warwickshire gentry, a magistrate and Deputy Lieutenant of the county. He was a philanthropist and established an orphanage in Avon Dassett as well as donating land and buildings to the village including the Reading Room.



Four of Thomas and Helen's daughters were married into some of the leading Catholic families in the country. Mary and Anna Maria married cousins of the Mostyn family who were landowners at Talacre in Llanasa, Flintshire in Wales. Anna's husband, Pyers was the 9th baronet. Their estate consisted of a castellated mansion with 40 rooms, a private chapel and Home Farm, 150 cottages, 64 small holdings, licensed houses, 23 farms, numerous lead mines, and the Point of Ayr Colliery comprising over 4,000 acres. Georgina and Agnes were married on the same day in April 1868, at St. Joseph's in Avon Dassett. Agnes married Wilfrid Tempest of Ackworth Grange in Yorkshire, a long-established recusant family. Georgina married Charles O'Connor Don MP of Clonalis House, Castlerea, County Roscommon.



Georgina died at the age of 24 from TB having herself given birth to twins two years before. Agnes also died young, aged 35.

The two remaining daughters were unmarried. Helen took

holy orders and died in 1874, the same year as her mother, Helen. The youngest daughter, Pauline, remained at home to take care of her widowed father, as was customary in the nineteenth century.

Pauline became the owner of Bitham Hall on the death of her father in 1907. She was known as a formidable and independent woman. Before the outbreak of World War I she is recorded as attending meetings of the Conservative and Unionist Women's Franchise Association which campaigned for women to obtain the vote. The organization was led by Marie Willoughby de Broke of nearby Compton Verney. On the outbreak of war, she wrote a letter to *The Times* suggesting that ladies should give up their revolvers to railway signal men to arm them in case of invasion by the Germans.



Terry Hadley, the daughter of Pauline's chauffeur remembered her as a lovely lady and a good employer but noted that she did not have the money to keep up the estate in the way it had been run in her father's day.

Bitham Hall—Heart of the Community

Bitham Hall has always played a large part in the community of Avon Dassett. The Perry's were considered good employers and would open the grounds for the villagers for celebrations such as coronations and jubilees, as well as for weddings and funerals of servants and tenants. The photograph shows the wedding party for Harry and Mildred Sealey (Pauline Perry's chauffeur and parlour maid) in May 1915. Bitham Hall acted as the venue for the wedding reception and the tables were decorated with double white cherry blossom from the garden. Both of the Sealey children also had their wedding receptions at Bitham Hall.



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garden. Both of the Sealey children also had their wedding receptions at Bitham Hall.

Terry Hadland remembers the processions held every year for Corpus Christi. The Blessed Sacrament containing the Eucharist would be processed from the church up Bitham drive to the lawn, where an altar had been erected under a large cedar tree. Young girls would strew flowers in its path.

There were also annual fetes (see opposite the advert for the 1939 fete held days before World War II was declared). Terry remembers, "There were races, like the sack race and potato races and all sorts of stalls, and dancing on the lawn." She presided over the white elephant stall and the fete raised money for electric lighting to be installed in St. Joseph's.

BITHAM HALL, AVON DASSETT.
A FETE
SATURDAY, AUGUST 19th
To be opened at 3 p.m.

FUN FAIR
BOWLING FOR FIG
Football Competition
Knocking the Topper
Darts Prize £1
Hoopla Grammes Clothes Line
Fishing Guessing Competition
Newmarket Push Penny

STALLS—
Fancy Provision
Books (2nd hand) Tobacco and Sweets
Jumble Sale Teas and Buffet

DISPLAY OF DANCING by the
BETTINA CAREY SCHOOL.
DANCING ON THE LAWN till 10 p.m.
Admission 6d. School children 3d.
Proceeds for lighting repairs of St. Joseph's
Church, Avon Dassett.

Bitham Hall Residents, 1861-1939

Bitham Hall first appears in the census records in 1851, confirming the Knight and Perry families probably moved in sometime in 1852.

<p>1861 Thomas A. Perry, Landed Proprietor and Fund holder Helen Perry, Landed Proprietor Mary Perry Helen Perry Georgina Mary Perry Agnes M Perry Anna Maria Perry Pauline Maria Perry Elizabeth Fagan, Cook and House-keeper Ann Bobbett, Ladies Maid Ann Milne, Housemaid Sarah Gunn Under Housemaid Mary A. Woods Nursemaid Amy Mew Servant Kitchen Maid Caroline Woods, Assistant James Milne, Butler Thomas Hawtin, Footman</p>	<p>1871 Thomas A Perry, Magistrate and Landowner Helen Perry Helen Perry Pauline M. T. Perry Ann Bobbett, Ladies Maid Catherine Lindsey, Cook Agnes E. Hughes, Upper Housemaid Mary Frear, Under Housemaid Margaret Jones, Kitchen Maid Thomas Curley, Footman</p>
<p>1881 Pauline Mary Perry Anna M. Mostyn Piers W. Mostyn Arthur Thomas, Footman Julia Fryer, Ladies Maid Catherine Phillips, Upper Housemaid Annie Maggs, Under Housemaid Mary Peake, Under Cook</p>	<p>1891 Thomas A. Perry, Living on own means Pauline M. Perry, Living on own means Agnes Richards, Cook Frederick Young, Butler Mary Myatt, Kitchen Maid Catherine Phillips, Housemaid Sophia Powis, Ladies maid</p>

It appears Pauline rented out the property after her father's death. Hubert Beaumont who was living there in 1911 had been a radical Liberal MP from 1906-10.

<p>1901 Thomas A. Perry, Living on own means Pauline M. Perry Ethel Tempest Cuthbert Riddell, Living on own means Ethel M. Cunningham, Hospital Nurse Ethel Carver, Hospital Nurse Jane A. Wake, Cook Isabelle Williams, Housemaid Agnes Hobbs, Ladies Maid John Barter, Butler Hannah South, Kitchen Maid</p>	<p>1911 Hubert George Beaumont Elisa Beaumont Jasper R. Murphy, Stockbroker Edmund George Cottrell, Private Secretary William James, Footman Ernest Lund, Valet Edmund Cook, Footman William Crawford, Groom Susanna Atkins, Housekeeper Katharina Rosser, Ladies Maid Annie Mary Farrell, Housemaid Violet Lacey, Kitchen Maid Harriet Herbert, Housemaid Alice Mary Bloxham, Housemaid Lily Wright, Scullery Maid</p>
<p>1921 Pauline M. T. Perry Agnes Hobbs, Ladies Maid Alice Bloxham, House/Parlour Maid May Cottrell, Kitchen Maid</p>	<p>1939 Pauline M. T. Perry, Incapacitated Agnes M. Worrall, Unpaid domestic duties Helen T. F. Worrall, Unpaid domestic duties Mary E. F. Hobson, Paid domestic and ARP Southam Lucy F. Booth, Paid domestic Agnes M. J. F. Houlding, Paid domestic Francis J. F. Cooper, Paid domestic</p>

The Worrall Family

In the 1930s, the Worralls came to live at Bitham Hall (it also appears it was at this point that the name changed from Bitham House to Bitham Hall). Agnes Worrall was Pauline's heiress and to avoid death duties, the estate had been made over to her. When her husband retired from the army, they moved to Avon Dassett. They had six children. The eldest, William, bought Avon Carrow after the war but committed suicide in 1954. The second son, Claude, was in the army. There were two daughters. Mary, the eldest, was a nun and during the war her order was evacuated to Bitham Hall. Helen, worked in London and joined the WRAF during the war. The youngest children were twin sons, Pyers (known as Peter) and Tony. Pyers died in an aircraft accident during the war. Tony had a number of encounters with the law, including driving whilst drunk, which on one occasion led to an accident which killed the heir to the Holbechs of Farnborough Hall, and bankruptcy for which he was jailed.

Pauline Perry died in 1941 and was buried in the church built by her uncle and in which she had been the first person to be baptized. Her devoted servants including her maid, Agnes Hobbs, gardener, Hubert Herbert and chauffeur, Harry Sealey were among the chief mourners.

Agnes Worrall is second from the right in this 1957 photo showing an emergency feeding exercise at Bitham Hall by the Avon Dassett Civil Defence Corps





Bitham Hall in the 1940s showing the vegetable gardens on the left

Agnes lived at Bitham Hall until her death in 1973. Her husband, Percy died in 1950 and her son, Claude, and his wife, Celia moved in to support her. Celia's mother, Dorothy Feilding-Moore had been a celebrated nurse and ambulance driver in World War I, the first woman to be awarded the military medal. Claude and Celia had six children. The fortunes of the family, after the death of Thomas Perry had declined and the Bitham Hall estate was offered for sale at various points in the twentieth century. A *Country Life* advert in 1931, described it as a 'compact residential estate of 90 acres'. However, the family still owned a substantial amount of property in the village. In evidence to a planning enquiry in 1970, Claude stated that he owned 23 of the 32 cottages in Avon Dassett. He also objected to the building of the M40 motorway, which he said would divide his 450 acre farm. On his death, in 1973, he left an estate of more than £250,000.



Celia Worrall's wedding portrait, 1940

A New Chapter for Bitham Hall

In the 1980s, Celia decided to make permanent changes to Bitham Hall which would lead to the severing of the family's relationship with the property. In March 1984, a planning application was submitted to Stratford District Council to demolish the rear wing of the Hall and to convert the remainder of the building to seven dwelling units with garages. A year later, in May 1985, the apartments (now numbering six) were offered for sale for prices ranging from £47,500 to £67,500.

Also in 1985, an application was made for the conversion of the Coach House into a detached dwelling.

A year earlier, in October 1984, Celia auctioned the contents of the hall, amounting to 1,500 lots, many associated with Joseph Knight and Thomas Perry. The highest prices paid were for furniture that the family had purchased from the 1861 Paris Exhibition. For example, an eighteenth-century Dutch floral and bird marquetry bombe and bureau cabinet, which had been exhibited in Paris, sold for £5,700. A nineteenth-century Italian chandelier raised £3,250 and a pair of tub shaped chairs fetched £2,000. Some of the furniture was purchased by Birmingham City Council and now resides in the coffered-ceiling drawing room at Highbury, Joseph Chamberlain's former residence.

Celia continued to live in one of the ground floor apartments, until her death in 1994.

BITHAM HALL — AVON DASSETT
Warwickshire/Oxfordshire Borders



SPECIAL OPEN DAY SATURDAY
2.30 p.m. - 4 p.m.

SUPERBLY SITUATED LUXURY APARTMENTS

Imaginatively converted from this fine period country house set in about 5 acres of attractive gardens with distant views, on the edge of the Cotswolds, featuring:

- ★ Spacious accommodation
- ★ Luxury oak fitted kitchens
- ★ Gas central heating
- ★ Quality bathroom suites
- ★ Most apartments have 2 bedrooms and 2 bathrooms
- ★ Double garages
- ★ Many fine period features

Prices from
£47,500-£67,500

Apply Stratford Office (0789) 294444

New Residents of Bitham Hall

The Worrall family initially retained ownership of three of the six apartments. Celia resided in Flat 1 and Flats 4 and 5 were rented. Flat 4 was rented to the couple renovating the Coach House, and subsequently sold. On Celia's death in 1994, Flats 1 and 5 were bequeathed to her sons, Michael and Peter. Both sons lived at Bitham Hall for a short period. Peter sold his flat to Sally Crompton and Tony Nixon in 2002. Michael sold Flat 1 to his sister, Susan Lewis, who rented it out for a period before selling to Ken Ward in 2008.

In 2004, the residents of Bitham Hall who owned the flats on a leasehold tenure, applied successfully to Charles and Michael Worrall to purchase the freehold. A limited company, Bitham Hall Limited, was established to manage the property, with all flat owners becoming directors. This, and the sale of Flat 1, signified the formal end of the Knight-Perry-Worrall families' association with Bitham Hall.

Bitham Hall in the late nineteenth century showing the six yew trees planted by Thomas Perry to celebrate his six daughters



The three earliest flat owners were Sir Kenneth Hayr who purchased Flat 2, Frank and Jean Allen, who acquired Flat 6 and Charles and Peggy Hayward-Wale who bought Flat 3.



Ken Hayr was born in Whangāri, New Zealand in 1935 and joined the New Zealand Airforce before relocating to the UK, graduating from RAF College Cranwell in 1957. He played a key role in both the Falklands and Gulf Wars.

On retirement, he split his time between Bitham Hall and New Zealand, where he was Chair of the Aviation Heritage Trust Board. He was killed at the Biggin Hill air display in 2001 when a De Havilland Vampire he was piloting crashed.

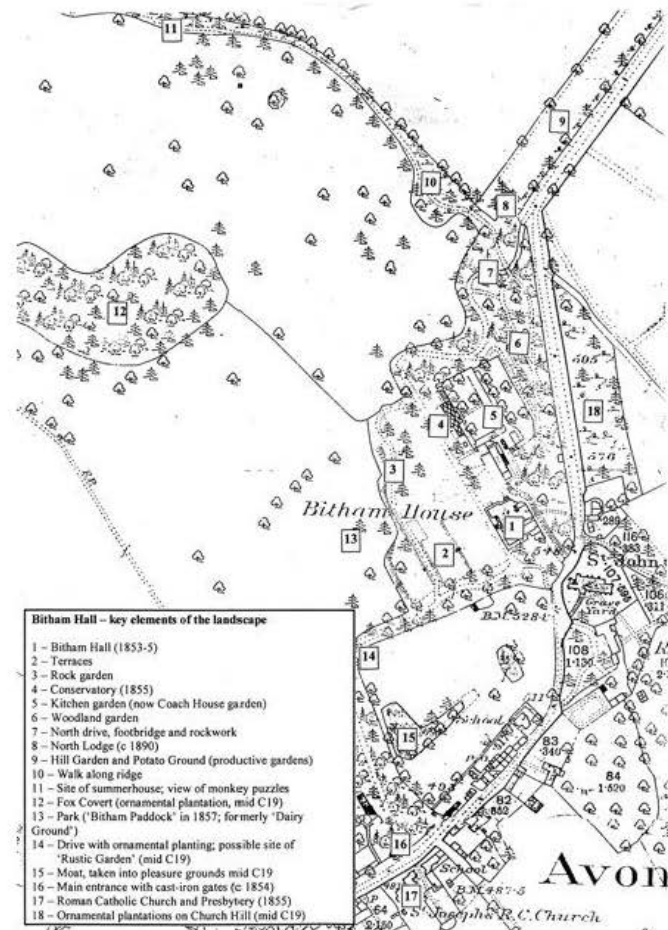
Frank and Jean Allen were well known stud farmers from the nearby village of Ettington. Charles Hayward-Wale had been a manufacturer from Coventry but unfortunately died shortly after buying the flat at Bitham Hall.

In 2023, Gina Fairfax, owner of Flat 1 purchased c. 30 acres of parkland which had formed part of the Bitham Hall estate, thus safeguarding it from future development.

Bitham Hall is a unique estate in Warwickshire—the culmination of the dreams of a poor Catholic boy from Lancashire, Joseph Knight.



The driveway from Bitham Hall to Top Lodge, pictured in the 1930s



Bitham Hall – key elements of the landscape

- 1 – Bitham Hall (1853-5)
- 2 – Terraces
- 3 – Rock garden
- 4 – Conservatory (1855)
- 5 – Kitchen garden (now Coach House garden)
- 6 – Woodland garden
- 7 – North drive, footbridge and rockwork
- 8 – North Lodge (c 1890)
- 9 – Hill Garden and Potato Ground (productive gardens)
- 10 – Walk along ridge
- 11 – Site of summerhouse; view of monkey puzzles
- 12 – Fox Covert (ornamental plantation, mid C19)
- 13 – Park ('Bitham Paddock' in 1857; formerly 'Dairy Ground')
- 14 – Drive with ornamental planting; possible site of 'Rustic Garden' (mid C19)
- 15 – Moat, taken into pleasure grounds mid C19
- 16 – Main entrance with cast-iron gates (c 1854)
- 17 – Roman Catholic Church and Presbytery (1855)
- 18 – Ornamental plantations on Church Hill (mid C19)

This plan of Bitham Hall demonstrates some of the key elements of the landscaping