

From Family Home to Open House

Major events in the life of a country house often leave little trace upon the building. The experience of those who have lived through them has to be recovered from diaries, letters, written recollections, and oral testimony. The transitory impact of the Second World War on Parham is recorded in photographs and in the memoirs of Veronica, one of the Pearson children who first knew the house as a family home but who returned during the war and stayed to welcome, with her mother, the first visitors to the house in 1948.

When Clive and Alicia Pearson bought Parham at the end of 1921 their three daughters were little girls. Parham was part of their childhood while their parents were restoring and modernising it and filling it with furniture and pictures. The family spent holidays there, and the girls swam, went camping, and learnt to ride. The two eldest girls, Veronica and Lavinia, both married soldiers within a year of the outbreak of war in September 1939. Lavinia's husband was a prisoner of war for most of the duration and she and their daughter Miranda lived at Parham. Veronica's husband died of wounds in Libya in 1941, and she too stayed at Parham, running the estate office with advice from her father and her cousin Judy Burrell, and working for the Ministry of Food.



During the war the house was reorganised, with the largest furniture and pictures sent into storage and other pieces sold, to make way for 30 evacuee children with two teachers from Peckham in south London. The first evacuees were boys, soon joined by some of their sisters. A Miss Woolley acted as their housekeeper and Veronica added to their wardrobes.



Figure A: Alicia Pearson and her daughters in the 1940s. Left-to-right: Lavinia, Diane, Veronica and Alicia.

Figure B: Evacuee children in the snow at Parham. They enjoyed playing in the park and helped to grow vegetables on their own plots in the walled garden. Evacuation began in September 1939, just before the start of the Second World War and the anticipated bombing of towns and cities. It was the biggest mass movement of people in Britain's history; in total, nearly three million children were transported to the relative safety of homes in the country. Most were separated from their families, but like many, evacuees at Parham enjoyed their new surroundings, some never having visited the countryside before.



Figure C: The brochure produced for the public opening of the house in 1948. The photograph is of the house from the east, rather than the south which is now considered the classic view. It shows the house as the visitor approaching down the drive first sees it, with remains of the 19th-century water tower and the 18th-century stables included in the perspective.

One Christmas all the children received dressing gowns and wore them all day. The children stayed until summer 1942, when they were rehoused in the nearby village of Storrington. Parham was in the middle of the South Downs Training Area as plans for the invasion of Europe took shape, with Canadian soldiers stationed in huts in Parham Park and their headquarters company billeted in the great hall and the western half of the house. Parham was formally handed back to the Pearsons on 30 July 1946.

Veronica's words best tell the story of how the house was transformed after the war. 'I think it must have been early in 1947 when Rupert Gunnis came upon my parents forlornly standing in the newly de-requisitioned, empty and unpleasant-smelling half of the house that . . . had been inhabited by the Army. To the astonishment of my parents, Rupert's reply to their

despairing appeal for advice, was, "You must open the house to the public".' Clive and Alicia took up the idea with enthusiasm, hiring men to repair, wash, and paint the house, and gradually retrieving van loads of pictures and furniture from storage.

'On Saturday 17th July 1948 all was ready as we could make it. We all stood in the Front Hall at 2 p.m. awaiting the first visitors – paralysed with fright. But sixty-one kind visitors came that afternoon – and all went well.' . . . 'My mother . . . eventually became the permanent Guide in the Long Gallery where she sat, safely anonymous, wearing a badge marked "Guide", greatly enjoying answering visitors' questions. Her favourite moments were when total strangers confided to her that they used to stay at Parham a great deal with Mr and Mrs Pearson before the war: she would smile and nod and look suitably impressed.'