From stately home to ARTS CENTRE

THE HISTORY OF SOUTH HILL PARK

Curated by Alison Boyd and Outi Remes

South Hill Park mansion is a Grade II listed building of special architectural interest. It is surrounded by landscaped gardens and parkland with two lakes and areas of woodland.

This leaflet is designed to be read alongside the History of South Hill Park exhibition to be found on the first floor of the mansion.

Figure numbers in the text refer to the numbering of images in the exhibition.

Over the years a successive number of owners, including nobility, a prime minister, the BBC and now an arts centre, have all made their mark on the building. These links with the past are particularly important in the context of a new town where any connection with history is at a premium.[1]

SOUTH HILL PARK · shp · ARTS CENTRE

EARLY YEARS

The area of South Hill Park was originally part of Windsor Forest. This was a mixture of heath and woodland over which the Crown had rights of timber and deer pasturage.

In the mid-seventeenth century it was, probably, illegally enclosed. This must have been after 1607 as the survey map of Windsor Forest by John Norden (figure 1) does not show any enclosure or building at South Hill although the name appears below that of Gallmoar Pond. However, a title deed of 1683 regarding the leasing of 'the mansion house known by the name of South Hill' to William Samrooth by Ann Bagley, indicates that enclosure and some building had taken place by this time.[2]

By 1750 the house was owned by Brice Fisher who had renamed it Fisher's Lodge. He wanted to enlarge the estate, and a map, accompanying his new lease granting permission to enlarge, shows a house in the centre of his landholding. The house was a rectangular building with two wings on the south front with the entrance drive to the north. Although the map was made in 1759 permission to enlarge had been applied for in 1750 and granted in 1753. Other map evidence of the estate also exists which shows the estate largely as it appeared on this map. It was shown in a map of Easthampstead parish of 1757 by Joseph Ballard and figure 2 shows part of John Rocque's *Topographical Survey of the County of Berkshire*, which was published in 1761 but surveyed in the 1750s.[3] William Watts, who owned the South Hill Park in 1760, had been a senior officer of the Bengal government. He also wished to enlarge the estate and in return for permission to take in a further thirty acres he provided for the poor of the parish. Although it has previously been thought that he built the original house this is disproved by the existence of the earlier maps showing the outline of the house. However, he did remodel the existing house as a classical villa and it is likely that he moved the farm buildings further away from the house. The earliest known view of South Hill Park, although dated to 1819, shows the house largely as rebuilt by Watts with the entrance front at the north side of the house and with a long pool in the foreground (figure 3).[4]

Exhibition figure 2 (detail)

Detail from John Rocque's *Topographical Survey of the County of Berkshire* (1761).

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Timeline

Pre-1600s	Land part of Windsor Forest, mixture of heath and woodland
1600s	Land enclosed (probably illegally)
1683	Title deed naming 'South Hill' mansion
1750	House owned by Brice Fisher and renamed 'Fisher's Lodge'
1760	William Watts owns the house and remodels it as a classical villa
1819	Earliest known view of South Hill Park, appears largely as rebuilt by Watts

UNDER THE OWNERSHIP OF GEORGE CANNING AND SIR WILLIAM HAYTER

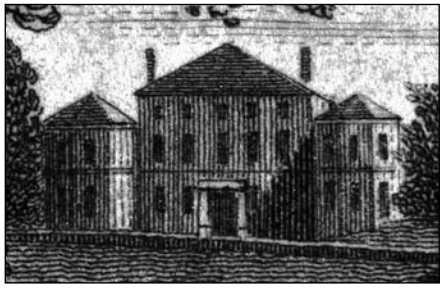
George Canning (1770–1827) owned the estate in 1801. He was a conservative politician who holds the record as the shortest serving Prime Minister of this country, serving only 119 days.

Earlier in his political career, on 21 September 1809, when he was Foreign Secretary, he had taken part in a duel with the War Minister after disagreements over the deployment of troops during the Napoleonic wars. This incident led both men to resign their posts.[5]

In 1801 Canning commissioned Sir John Soane to design alterations to the house. The plans, for which he was charged £9 12s 6d, are interesting as they show not only what was proposed (figure 4) but also what was in existence at the time (figure 5). The plans were for minor alterations to the library and the hall, the construction of a conservatory on the south elevation overlooking the garden and adjustments to the service quarters. The plan of the existing house shows that the ground floor central three-storey block had Mr and Mrs Canning's private rooms, a hall and billiard room, whilst the east two-storey wing had three sided bays on both front and rear elevations with a drawing room and breakfast room, whilst the east two-storey wing had three sided bays on both front and rear elevations with a drawing room and breakfast room and the west two-storey wing had the eating room and the library. An extensive two-storey service wing was located to the west.[6]

During the first half of the nineteenth century the estate was owned by the Earl of Limerick who enlarged it from 148 to 346 acres and began to develop the pleasure grounds to the south of the house.[7] However, in 1853 the estate was sold to Sir William Goodenough Hayter (1792–1878). He was a liberal politician and barrister, who was created a baronet in 1858 following his retirement. A remodelling of the house, which may have been the result of a fire, is dated to 1853. Figure 6 shows the building shortly afterwards. The earlier eastern half of the house was demolished, a water tower added on the front elevation and there was new building beyond the west projecting bay.[8]

During December 1878 Sir William became depressed and on 26 December was found drowned in one of the lakes at South Hill Park. He was succeeded by his only son, Arthur Divett Hayter (1835–1917), also a liberal politician, who was created Baron Haversham in 1906.[9] It was Arthur Hayter who would remodel the house into what we largely see today.



Exhibition figure 3 (detail)

An engraving of South Hill Park, 1819.

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Exhibition figure 6

South Hill Park from *The Seats and Mansions of Berkshire* by Beard and Company (1866).

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THE TEMPLE MOORE YEARS

The noted architect Temple Moore (1856–1920) was commissioned to remodel the house in 1891 and the hard landscaping near the house in 1893 (figures 8–11).

Moore was primarily seen as a church architect and in his church commissions he mostly designed in the prevailing Gothic Revival style but at South Hill Park he included some Baroque details.[10] This would have been more in keeping with the prevailing domestic style of the time which was a revival of late seventeenth century styles and used features from the work of Sir Christopher Wren.[11] There is some mystery as to why Sir Arthur would have commissioned a 'relatively untried architect' for this type of work. However, it may be that his work was known to the family as Moore was responsible for painting and paper hanging for Sir Arthur at his London house in Grosvenor Square in 1890.[12] Despite his reputation as a church architect he did carry out over 70 other commissions. Although many of these were for buildings associated with the church, such as schools and church halls, it also included some domestic work, such as that at South Hill Park, which was his largest domestic commission of the 1890s.[13] Previously he had worked largely on his own but these larger commissions led to him using John Lofting as his surveyor and Charles Longley of Crawley, Sussex, as his builder.[14]

Work was begun in early 1891 and was largely completed by November 1892 at a cost of £17,700. The east wing of the house was kept and a major extension was made westwards. It was of red brick with stone dressing throughout. The approach was from the north, with the main entrance offset towards the east under a four-storey tower. The main display was on the south side overlooking open parkland. Here the facade was slightly asymmetrical. The main features were an open arcade of single and coupled Tuscan columns on the ground floor with shallow oriels above. Later, in 1897, Moore added a conservatory front and in 1898 a billiard room bay. In 1893 Moore began, what is believed to be, his only garden work. This comprised a terrace on the garden side and a two-flight staircase ascending out of the flower garden on the east side with a niche beneath.[15]

The table below outlines the costs of building works and the builders involved.[16]

Year	Work	Cost	Builder	Architect
1891–2	Major alterations	£17,700	Charles Longley and Sons of Crawley	Temple Moore
1893–4	Garden work	£1,500	Unknown	Temple Moore
1897	Conservatory front	£250	May of Bracknell	Temple Moore
1898	Billiard room bay	£350	May of Bracknell	Temple Moore

Exhibition figure 9 (detail)

The dining room (now the Cinema).

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Exhibition figure 11 (detail)

The library (now the Recital Room).

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TWENTIETH CENTURY

During the First World War South Hill Park was used as a war work collection centre and people from surrounding villages brought woollen garments to be taken to France.[17]

Sir Arthur died in 1917 and his widow continued to live in the house until she died in 1929. The estate then passed to her nephew, Major Rickman. He was the last private owner of the house and unfortunately shot himself in the gun cupboard in 1940. Since then the house has been put to a wide variety of uses.

In 1940, during the Second World War, the Royal Sea Bathing Hospital from Margate was evacuated here, moving back in 1945. The Royal Sea Bathing Hospital had been founded in 1791 by Dr John Coakley Lettsom, who also founded the Medical Society of London in 1773.

As a Quaker he had a strong social conscience and was concerned about the welfare of the poor. Using funds supplied by the Prince Regent Dr Lettsom set up the Royal Sea Bathing Hospital in Margate using sea water to cure the poor of tuberculosis. Initially, the sea water treatment was restricted to the summer months, but sea water baths were later installed inside so treatment could continue during the winter. It was during the twentieth century that the hospital extended its treatments to include orthopaedics.[18] When the hospital returned to Margate it remained open until the mid-1990s and is now a development of luxury flats.[19]

Interestingly, this was the next use of South Hill Park. The mansion and 800 acres were sold in 1946 by Hunton and Son of Bracknell for £25,050 to a New Zealander, Joseph Horn, to be converted into high class residential flats.[20] He had already converted an estate in Ascot before the Second World War and wanted to repeat the process. Without altering the exterior the interior was converted into a number of different sized, self-contained flats. Some of the larger original rooms were used as communal spaces with the original hall a reception room; there was also a spacious lounge, a library and a restaurant. The plans for the conversion were made in close cooperation with the Town Planning Association of Berkshire and an article in Ideal Home of 1948 was full of praise for the work that had been carried out (figures 12–13).[21]

However, it appears that this venture was not entirely successful as an auction was held on 23 October 1951 selling off the contents of the house (figure 14). This included furniture, such as 'a set of ten blue and silver painted Trafalgar dining chairs', and ornamental items, such as 'a Dresden figure of Atlas supporting the world'.[22] This was followed by the purchase of South Hill Park by the BBC in 1952 from South Hill Park Estates which was the company run by Joseph Horn who had converted the house into flats.[23]

South Hill Park then became part of a group of properties to provide services in the event of a national emergency. Its function was to operate as the European Services section of the BBC and for this reason plans were drawn up for a control room, four studios and recording areas in the house. There were also plans for new buildings in the grounds close to

Exhibition figure 12 (detail)

Luxury flat conversion communal space in what is now the Atrium.

Ideal Home (1948) May, p 45. Collection.

Exhibition figure 13 (detail)

Bedroom of the luxury flat conversion featured in *Ideal Home* magazine.

Ideal Home (1948) May, p 46. Collection.

the main building. These were to provide additional offices and accommodation for the, approximately, 1000 staff who would be working on the site.[24] The buildings were to be built to minimum austerity standards following the Ministry of Work's 'Butterfly type' plan.[25] However, by August 1958 the property was empty of all BBC property and it was eventually purchased on 19 December 1962 by the Bracknell Development Corporation as it was included in the extension of the designated New Town area.[26]

The site was let to Ferranti in 1965 who used it as offices and laboratories until early 1972.[27] It was also used for a short time as the headquarters for Ferranti Helicopters Ltd who provided a shuttle service from major airports to other parts of the country for executives.[28] Ferranti had been established in 1882 when Sebastian Ziani de Ferranti (1864–1930) set it up to manufacture the alternator, invented by himself and Lord Kelvin. The company specialized in the application of new technology to solve problems and from 1948 were leaders in the computer industry. Ferranti had initially opened a research facility in Bracknell in 1963 and developed the first European microprocessor (F-100L) in the town, eventually going into receivership in 1993.[29]

ARTS CENTRE

Bracknell had been designated a New Town in 1949 and Bracknell Development Corporation had begun an investigation into proposals for an arts centre in the town in 1969. South Hill Park, which had been acquired by Bracknell Development Corporation in 1962 under powers delegated by the New Towns Commission, was one of the sites under consideration for the arts centre. It was selected in 1970 and Peter Stark was appointed its first director in the Autumn of 1972.[30] A 125-year lease was then granted to South Hill Park Trust who converted the house into an arts centre.[31]

As the building was arranged over three floors and had nearly 60 rooms conversion was a complicated process. It was divided into two phases. Phase 1 was making the building fit for public use and Phase 2 involved converting the 'safe shell' into a functioning centre. It opened in October 1973 with a range of courses and activities whilst conversion work was still being carried out. Despite dry rot, the national energy crisis and the three-day week all causing delays to the project the terrace bar was opened in June 1974 and by the beginning of 1975 all the general facilities were open (figures 15–17).[32]

Installation of Michael Anderson's paintings in the mid 1980s. These can be seen in the Wilde Theatre Foyer and outside the Dance Studio.

Timeline	Notable events
WWI	Used as a war work collection centre.
WW2	Royal Sea Bathing Hospital from Margate evacuated to the mansion.
1946	Estate sold and developed into luxury flats as featured in *Ideal Home* magazine.
1952	South Hill Park purchased by the BBC to provide services in an emergency.
1962	Purchased by the Bracknell Development Corporation, let to Ferranti in 1965.
1970–72	Selected for development as an arts centre. First director appointed in 1972.

WILDE THEATRE, BRACKNELL GALLERY AND DANCE STUDIO

Although a theatre was first proposed when South Hill Park became an arts centre it did not become a reality until the construction of The Wilde Theatre 1982–4 (figure 18). The design brief was to be able to cater for small and large events, formal and informal. The architect was Axel Burrough of the architectural practice Lewitt Bernstein, who, with the theatre consultant Iain Mackintosh, designed the theatre on the principal of a courtyard theatre as used in Shakespeare's time. Funding was provided by a partnership of the local community and businesses and to keep costs down there was never any intention to build in the existing style of South Hill Park, but it was finished in red bricks similar to those in the main house.[33]

Building work began in November 1982 with the first sod moved by John Amis and Sir Henry Lushington (whose ancestor was an owner of South Hill Park).[34] The foundation stone, with a £1 coin, was laid by Sir Michael Tippett on 23 April 1983 (figure 19). At the ceremony there was the European premier of Sir Michael's *The Wolf Trapp Fanfare* played by musicians on the scaffolding. This was followed by St George's day celebrations.[35]

In March 1984, 400 people attended a testing of the acoustics, during which they were exposed to a variety of noises to test levels of absorption in all parts of the auditorium. The theatre was officially opened by Princess Anne on 15 May 1984 (figure 20) which due to the local association with Oscar Wilde was named after him with the first performance being *The Importance of Being Earnest* (figure 21). An exhibition entitled *Rediscovering the Courtyard: The architectural evolution of the Wilde Theatre* was held in the main gallery from March to May 1984 to coincide with the opening of the theatre.[37]

Following the success of the theatre the council gave the go-ahead for Phase II of the works in 1988 and 1989. These consisted of a new art gallery, dance studio, bar extension and additional dressing room, rehearsal and storage space. The Bracknell Gallery opened in 1991, offering a busy programme of contemporary fine art and craft exhibitions with many internationally acknowledged artists.[38]

Rehearsals at the Wilde Theatre.

The Wilde Theatre being built (1982–84).

SOUTH HILL PARK TODAY

In 2002 South Hill Park was transformed thanks to successfully applying for £3 million from the Arts Council of England National Lottery Board combined with £1 million from Bracknell Forest Council.

These funds allowed the Mansion spaces to re-develop and focus on artistic activity. A new Atrium bar was opened, allowing food and drink to be served alongside art and music performances. The John Nike Suite opened in 2004, allowing digital media to be fully explored.

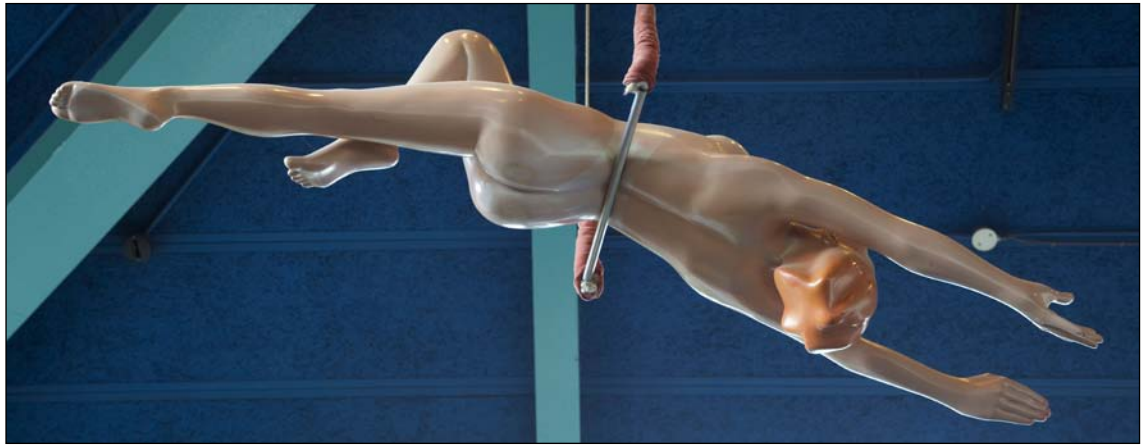
Clay Creations children's course – Ceramics Studio.

Meanwhile artist Martin Donlin created several artworks for the building, which can be seen in the Tall Hall and the Courtyard ceiling.

In June 2008 a second award from Heritage Lottery Funding was given to design improvements to the park. This was followed by a bid of £3.6 million to transform the exterior setting. Work is beginning on the restoration of the historic grounds. The works will include restoration of stonework and metalwork, repaving the terrace and restoring the Italian garden and fountain, tree management and planting, new pathways and signage. There will be great emphasis on and attention to the site's sensitivity and biodiversity.

After its long and intriguing history, South Hill Park has become a prominent centre for arts within the South East region and beyond. The park's reputation has grown over the years, ensuring it is known as a hub of artistic significance. As a registered charity South Hill Park offers its guests 3,000 artistic, musical and theatrical events a year, featuring a range of personalities from internationally renowned to emerging new talents. South Hill Park also offers artistic residencies in silversmithing, printmaking, ceramics and live art, and the residents contribute for the running of over 2000 courses alongside 250 varied workshops. South Hill Park visitors can learn anything from salsa dancing to youth drama and from printmaking to digital animation. All this attracts an average 250,000 visitors a year to the park, and ensures many lifelong patrons.

Korean band *Dulsori* at the 2009 *Big Day Out* summer festival held at South Hill Park.



Balance by Anthony Donaldson (1979/81) hanging outside the Wilde Bar above the foyer.

Photograph by Paul Highnam

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Footnotes:

1 South Hill Park Grounds: Conservation Management Plan Summary, (2005), p.8.
2 Ballard, P. (2002), *South Hill Park, Bracknell, Berkshire, History of the Landscape*, Bracknell Forest Borough Council, p.5.
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10 Brandwood, G. K. (1997), *Temple Moore: An Architect of the Late Gothic Revival*, Paul Watkins, p.162.
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24 E55/11/1, BBC Written Archives, Caversham.
25 E55/11/1, BBC Written Archives, Caversham; E56/28/1, BBC Written Archives, Caversham.
26 R35/1, 118/1, BBC Written Archives, Caversham; R35/1, 118/2, BBC Written Archives, Caversham; Bracknell Forest Borough Council, e-mail; Hutchison, *op. cit.*, p.10.
27 Report of the Leisure Committee, 10 January 1988, p.1.
28 Museum of Science and Industry, e-mail.
29 Museum of Science and Industry website: ww.mosi.org.uk; Bracknell Forest Borough Council website:www.bfheritage.org.uk.
30 Report of the Leisure Committee, 10 January 1988, p. 1; Hutchison, op. cit., p.9.
31 Report of the Leisure Committee, 10 January 1988, p.1.
32 Hutchison, *op. cit.*, p.13.
33 *Bracknell News*, 21 January 1982; Bracknell News, 30 September 1982.
34 *Bracknell News*, 17 May 1984.
35 *Bracknell News*, 28 April 1983.
36 *Bracknell News*, 17 May 1984.
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38 Report of the Leisure Committee, 10 January 1988, p.1–2.

Front cover image: An engraving of South Hill Park, 1819 (detail).

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Councillor Graham Ellis, The Town Mayor, and his wife Janet Ellis, with the Canadian artist Ed Pien, 2010.

Photograph by Sarah Jane Wilson.

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