



A History of Betteshanger House and Park

By Lord Northbourne (5th Baron)

Introduction

My great great grandfather; the first Lord Northbourne, bought the Betteshanger Estate in 1832. He employed the well-known country house architect George Devey in 1856 to remodel the main building. Earlier in 1853, he commissioned architect Anthony Salvinal to rebuild the church which had fallen into disrepair. At about the turn of the century, additions were made to the North West end of the house by my great grandfather. When my grandfather died in 1932, my father and mother decided not to live at Betteshanger. They let the house to a new preparatory school and I was one of the first five pupils when it opened in 1934. By the time I left, the numbers had grown to about thirty-five and the school was flourishing. For many decades Betteshanger has echoed with the laughter of children. I hope that it will continue to win their hearts, so that generation after generation may look back on their school days with gratitude and affection.

*If I should die, think only this of me: That there's some corner of a foreign field.
That is for ever England...*

- Rupert Brooke, 1915

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So begins one of the most enigmatic poems from the Great War, "The Soldier" by Rupert Brooke. Composed over Christmas and New Year, 1914/15 by Brooke, it is thought by many that he drew his inspiration from his time at Betteshanger in September and October of 1914. Brooke, a Sub-Lieutenant in charge of 15th Platoon, 'D' Company, Anson (8th) Battalion, 2nd R.N Brigade, first joined the Battalion at Betteshanger on September 27, 1914. Conditions at the camp on Lord Northbourne's estate were basic, but the officers were permitted a bath at the Rectory in between kit inspections, route marches, boxing, football and drill.

On October 4, the Brigade received their orders and marched to Dover, accompanied by Lord Northbourne, the 2nd Baron, Walter Henry James, where they embarked for Dunkirk. Marching to Antwerp in Belgium, Brooke's baptism of fire came in the short, but violent defence of Fort 7, before a general withdrawal was ordered and Brooke found himself briefly back at Betteshanger on October 18, 1914.

The manor and seat of Betteshanger (formerly Betshanger or Betteshangre), was amongst those lands granted to Hugo de Port for assisting John de Fienes in the defence of Dover Castle

in the late 11th/early 12th centuries. Through marriage and inheritances the manor came into the hands of the Boys family in the early 17th century, before passing to the Morrice family in the early years of the 18th century. In 1829, Frederick Edward Morrice commissioned the renowned English domestic architect and garden designer, Robert Lugar, to build a bay windowed, barge boarded villa at Betteshanger. Lugar was responsible for the architectural Gothic revival and his work is associated with some of the most distinguished and beautiful mansions, castles, cottages and parks in England and Scotland.

In 1850, Morrice sold the 180 acre estate to Sir Walter James, 2nd Baronet of Betteshanger who, following his spell as High Sheriff of Kent in 1855, engaged the architect George Devey to remodel the house and grounds in 1856.

Betteshanger was Devey's first major commission and it created his reputation for originating the 'Old English' country style house. Devey's clever design was calculated to give the appearance of a house that had gradually grown and been added to over the centuries. Tall chimney stacks and a wing in the Elizabethan style blended with 17th century styled Dutch Gables, whilst a tower with uneven stonework hinted at medieval origins.

In 1884, Sir Walter, a close friend of the Liberal Prime Minister William Gladstone, was raised to the peerage as Baron Northbourne, a hereditary title. Work continued on Betteshanger House, the garden and terraces being laid out as well as improvements to the church and rectory, but in 1886 George Devey died followed by Sir Walter in 1893.

His son, the 2nd Baron, continued the work of remodelling and between 1893-9 the house was further modified along with the Stable Court.

With the 2nd Baron's death in 1923, the title and estate passed on to the 3rd Baron, Walter John James, who only survived his father by nine years. The title then passed to Walter Ernest Christopher James, his son, and a new era dawned for the estate.

The 4th Baron was an accomplished rower, representing the losing Oxford Eight in both the 1920 and 1921 Boat Races, as well as rowing in the Silver Medal winning Leander Eights for Great Britain at the 1920 Olympic Games in Antwerp.

James studied Agricultural Science at Oxford and is generally accepted to be the progenitor of "Organic Farming", the term being coined in his celebrated book "Look to the Land", published in 1940. It was a response to what he dubbed 'chemical farming', and from the outset he presented these as two mutually incompatible, and contesting, agricultural methodologies.

In 1933 James decided to lease out the house and its environs as a small, Progressive Preparatory School. Starting out with just five pupils, Betteshanger School encouraged an

intimate family environment, instilling in each child a love of learning and an enthusiasm for finding out about the world around them.

One of the School's earliest pupils was the artist John Craxton, son of Harold Craxton, pianist, musicologist and professor at the Royal Academy of Music. He thrived at Betteshanger under the art tuition of Elsie Barling, later referring to her as "an inspired teacher". Along with other pupils' work, Craxton first exhibited at Bloomsbury Gallery in 1933 to national press acclaim.

Through the following decades, the Northbourne family stayed in close touch with the school, even as far as serving on the Board of Governors and the school prospered, becoming a Limited Company in November 1954. In April 1980 the school merged with the nearby Tormore School in Deal to become Northbourne Park School.

The 4th Baron died shortly after, in 1982, his son Christopher George Walter James became the 5th Baron. He maintained close links to the school and along with the School's Bursar and Maintenance Team they forged a sympathetic understanding with the planning authorities allowing Northbourne Park to evolve whilst maintaining its Grade II Listed status: No doubt George Devey would have approved!

Sadly in 2019, the 5th Baron passed away. His eldest son, Charles, has taken up the mantle of maintaining a strong link between the Northbourne family and the school.



NORTHBOURNE PARK SCHOOL

northbournepark.com

Betteshanger, Deal, Kent CT14 0NW

+44 (0)1304 611215 · office@northbournepark.com