

Lesbury House (and some of its residents).

The first formal recording concerning the property is that a local businessman, William Hay, in 1812 was leasing Lesbury House from the Duke of Northumberland. During the last years of the previous century William Hay, through a fortuitous marriage and a win, in today's terms, of £65000 in the 'national lottery', built up a series of businesses in Alnmouth. Twenty seven years earlier, in 1785 he had expanded his business empire by taking over, with the mill, 'a house with stables in Lesbury.' We know that in 1791 William sold his house in Alnmouth and it is speculated that, by incorporating some of the existing building as a rear wing, he had Lesbury House built. Historic England in its current listing of the property describes the house, at this time, as being 'built around 1800 and incorporating an earlier eighteenth century rear wing'. The building listed consisted of much of the property which we see today with a southern frontage of five bays and a centrally located front door. An 1812 site plan shows a 'substantial house' with an extension to the north and a range of smaller buildings adjoining its eastern side. Principal access was through the current drive. The plan also shows two contiguous ranges of buildings just to the north of the entrance where the cottages now stand. The uneven wall to the north of the property facing Main Street can be seen to be part of a further four of the original buildings (cottages or outbuildings).



There was a secondary (or service) entrance to the house just to the west of these cottages. Further to the west along Main Street, a smaller building which earlier occupied the site of a recently restored cottage was the toll booth for the turnpike road between Hexham and Alnmouth. The tolls collected from those such as individuals and horse-drawn wagons and carriages crossing the bridge paid for the maintenance of the road. The road was busy with goods transported to and from the port of Alnmouth. At this time the road through Foxton provided the only route capable of such traffic to the harbour. Although the rerouting of the River Aln at Alnmouth, by storm in 1806, meant that trade from this port was diminished there was still substantial traffic passing the entrance to the house.

The manager of the neighbouring mill is reported to have initially lived in the new house but must have been given adjoining accommodation when Hay family members moved in. The manager is reported as living in the property which is now the Coach Inn in the 1850s.

Sadly in 1816, both William and his son, the heir apparent, died within months of each other and William's daughter Mary took over the substantial business empire, the lease of Lesbury House and, in today's money, a multi-million pound estate. In 1803 Mary, at the age of thirty, had married an Edinburgh based surgeon, John Herdman. John and his new wife, supported by a financial settlement from his father-in-law, moved to London where he built up a significant professional reputation and practice crowned by his role as personal physician to the Duke of Sussex. At that time the wealth of a wife was controlled by her husband and Mary's inheritance enabled John to give up medicine and pursue his ambition to be a priest: 'the only true way to health lay in religious practice'.

On moving to Lesbury House after William Hay's son's death, the Herdmans not only inherited the substantial estate but also assumed responsibility for Hay's son's four illegitimate children and two widowed sisters-in-law. In 1827 Mary died and rumours circulated that John's abusive treatment had contributed to her death. This led John Herdman to take the assumed source of the rumours, the curate of Lesbury, to court accused of slander. The case was resolved by arbitration in London but this affair must have been a symptom of a rift between John and a portion of the local community. His reputation must have not been too sullied though as in 1832 he is recorded attending, as a 'gentleman', a dinner in Alnwick to celebrate the passing of the Reform Act by the government of Earl Grey (from Howick). This Act of Parliament gave certain categories of male citizens such as Herdman 'the vote' for the first time and replaced a previous corrupt and unfair system.

John and his wife were childless and his preferred heir was his wife's illegitimate niece, Anne. Anne moved into Lesbury House after Mary's death and in 1839 obtained respectability (illegitimacy was a considerable stigma in Victorian times) by marrying a naval officer, Captain John Forster of Alnwick. The marriage gave Captain Forster financial security but he died of wounds that he obtained in military service just two years after his marriage.



John Herdman's Mausoleum In Lesbury Church cemetery

John Herdman died aged 78 and his remains were interred in a substantial mausoleum at the rear of St Mary's Church in Lesbury. Anne inherited his significant fortune. Although she wished to keep her guardian's collections and libraries intact in Lesbury, the Duke of Northumberland unusually refused to renew the lease on Lesbury House and within months the house's contents alongside holdings in Longhoughton and Alnmouth were sold by auction.

John's death in 1842 occurred in the same year the railway came to Lesbury and the house became more accessible to those outside the immediate area, The railway also meant that the turnpike road adjoining the house became less important and busy. The turnpike became even quieter still when, in 1864, the Duchess Bridge was built across the River Aln. With associated road improvements that replaced a track and a ford, this new route between Hipsburn and Alnmouth meant that both traders and railway passengers could avoid the longer road through Foxton.

The lease of Lesbury House was taken over by Edward Thaw from Alnwick (in 1845 he was vice chairman of the town council) whose sense of security must have felt threatened, when in 1844, he was burgled. The thieves were selective, stealing a great deal of silver and a locked writing desk! There must be speculation that the contents of the writing desk were important to someone. One of the thieves also took a liking to a hat and a pair of 'strong shoes'. Edward offered a reward of £20 in addition to the £10 offered by the 'Lesbury Association for the Presentation of Felons'. There is no record of the burglars being caught.

In the following few years there were a series of relatively short tenancies: John Watson who died in 1853: Adam Atkinson originally from Lorbottle Hall, Whitingham, who died in 1857 (whose widow lost her inheritance through the bankruptcy of her bank) and John Craster from the local Craster dynasty whose wife gave birth to a daughter, Mary, in the house in 1861 but who sadly died 'young'.

At this time Northumberland was at the heart of the industrial revolution. The railways had opened up the rural parts of the County for professionals and industrialists such as William Armstrong of Craggside to build or lease country houses and yet have easy access to their offices and factories in the towns and cities. The next occupant of Lesbury House was Major Browne who according to the 1851 census also had a house in Newcastle as well as other County properties

Major Browne, a wealthy landowner, had been elected as the first Chief Constable of Northumberland. Before the creation of county forces, crime detection was the responsibility of local towns and parishes and hence patchy in quality. Better communications also enabled felons to travel more widely so county wide solutions were required. The original county police forces were poorly resourced and relied on military discipline to maintain authority - hence the appointment of an army Major. The force which covered all of the county (except Newcastle, Tynemouth and Berwick) initially consisted of 15 superintendents, 4 mounted constables and 40 policemen. Mounted constables were a national innovation of Major Browne's, prompted by the fact that on his appointment he was given a horse, in the same way that today's executives would be given a company car.

The Major retired from his post as Chief Constable in 1869 and devoted much of his life to his love of hunting. Being a very rich man he was able not only to purchase the existing Alnwick and Coquetdale Foxhounds but also to augment the pack with additional purchases from Ireland and the south of England. As an indication of the size of the pack in 1870 two hundred and fifty horsemen attended a meet at Lesbury House.

Major Browne had extended the house, updated many of the outbuildings and cottages and built enclosed and extensive stabling at the rear to accommodate his horses. The grooms and other staff were housed in the cottages in the Square just to the north of the house. It is reported in 1874 that there were two deaths from scarlet fever in one of these cottages supposedly caused by the family's close proximity to their pigs and their 'deposits'. In order to avoid the fever spreading, residents were urged to wash hands, change clothes daily and keep their houses well aired! It was fortunate that the Duke of Northumberland had, in 1860, installed piped water accessible from stand pipes (or pants) such as the one located in the gardens just to the north of Lesbury House.

His ability to hunt was curtailed in 1875, when at the age 62, Major Browne fell off his horse while hunting at Chillingham and broke his leg. He later moved to Doxford Hall where he died at the age of 81.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Lesbury House was the home of a Newcastle solicitor, Thomas Gibson. The occupants of the house at this time were considered to have 'a responsibility', as the most eminent family in the village, to support local charities and events. Mr. Gibson and his wife are reported by the local press to have performed this role in supporting the school and other good causes.



Lesbury House in the early 1900s

The early years of the twentieth century were characterised by wars. Henry Hall Scott from Hipsburn Farmhouse formed a yeomanry to recruit volunteers to fight in the Boer War in South Africa. Fourteen volunteers from Lesbury including the son of Mr Gibson signed up. Lieutenant Gibson was wounded and returned from South Africa to Lesbury House where he was feted by a crowd of villagers, some of whom unharnessed the horse and pulled his coach to his home where they and the other villagers were entertained.

On the death of Thomas Gibson in 1911, the house was occupied by Brigadier General James Riddell who moved to Lesbury having, at the age of 51, married Margaret, the daughter of the recently knighted Sir Henry Hall Scott from Hipsburn. The Brigadier had had a distinguished military career including serving in the Boer War. This was his second marriage but it was short since as Commander of the 148th Infantry Brigade, James Riddell was killed early in the First World War at the Battle of Ypres. His Brigade had been transported to the front in London buses and had only been in position for a week before they had to face the enemy. In the battle attempting to force the enemy back, he was killed instantly by a bullet to the head. There were also 2000 other casualties, many of whom were local men. Although the battle failed to make the enemy retreat it allowed the British forces to hold the line.

The house was, from 1930, subsequently occupied by another military man, Lieutenant Colonel Robson. In his first year of occupancy a 16 year old maid, Jane Clark, slipped into the river whilst picking snowdrops and drowned.

The house had always been leased from its owner, the Duke of Northumberland. In 1939, for financial reasons, the Duke closed up Alnwick Castle and as owner took up residency in Lesbury House. The Northumberland Estate had had to pay, in short succession from 1930, two lots of death duties amounting to over a million pounds and because of the impending war had lost

£69000 per year in coal royalties. Only eight of the hundred servants required in Alnwick were retained to look after the Duke and his family in the twenty room Lesbury House.

After the war Alnwick Castle was reopened and Lesbury House, known locally as the Dower House, became the Northumberland home of Helen, Dowager Duchess of Northumberland. From 1937 to 1964 the Duchess was Mistress of the Robes, the most senior female courtier, to Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother. During her residency the Duchess opened the grounds of the house not only for the annual village fete but also for garden parties in order to raise money for such causes as the church and the village hall. Robert and Edith Smith, who at this time lived in Church Cottages in the village, worked for the Duchess. Robert was a gardener and Edith worked in the kitchens. Their daughter and her family now live in Hipsburn. The Princess Royal of the time, the daughter of King George Vth, stayed at the house in 1950 whilst undertaking a royal visit to Tyneside. The Duchess made the news in 1963, when on her way to a Claridges banquet in London her car was stopped and she was 'coshed' and robbed of jewellery valued, at that time, at £41,000. She died in 1965.

After her death, her sons, Lord Richard Percy and Lord Geoffrey Percy lived in the house. Lord Geoffrey had a separate flat and the main part of the house was lived in by Lord Richard, his wife and two sons. Lord Richard, a younger son of the 8th Duke of Northumberland, had served in the army in the second world war. He was noted as an 'efficient but unconventional officer who is remembered as playing the organ in the church of every village his battalion liberated and keeping a Hardy's fishing rod in his armoured car'. He had an international reputation as a zoologist and was a zoology lecturer at Newcastle University for 35 years. Prompted by his keen interest in fish, his research interests and academic publications focussed on salmon, trout and, in particular, lampreys. He conducted much of his research using the laboratory, aquarium and dark room that he had installed in the house. Lord Richard died at home in 1989.

A year earlier, in 1988 Lesbury House was awarded Grade II listing by Historic England. As well as describing the form and building materials of the house the listing also identifies the following interior features: a sitting room with original cornice with egg-and-dart acanthus ornament; dog leg stair with stick balusters, moulded and ramped handrail, moulded newel and shaped tread ends; two eighteenth century segmented arched chamfered fireplaces in the former kitchen and carved stone Adam fireplaces from Alnwick Castle in the sitting room, library and drawing room.

The current owners have made extensive changes and upgrades to the stables, adjoining cottages and outbuildings to create, in addition to their home in the house, an up-market holiday complex. They have also planted nineteen hundred trees on an adjoining field to support local wildlife with a hope of attracting red squirrels and other species.

Lesbury House has reflected the changes in society over the last two centuries. Originally leased by a wealthy businessman, for over a hundred years the house was occupied by professionals with inherited wealth, army officers from aristocratic families or the aristocracy themselves. These were the gentry of the village who were generally respected as the local residents' superiors. Today, it is now owned by another businessman and philanthropist who obtained some local publicity when he invited his friend, the pop star, Ronan Keating, to be best man at his wedding and reception in the grounds of the house.

Reference and thanks:

Dr Adrian Osler for his major contributions to the details of the house's original site plan and stories concerning William Hay and John Herdman
Around Alnmouth: The Lesbury Township by John Yearnshire: an invaluable source of much of the information from the book's newspaper cuttings.
The History and Development of Lesbury and Alnmouth by J.C. Hickes.
The Story of Alnmouth by Gladys and Fred Bettes.
Bailiffgate Museum for information concerning John Herdman and Brigadier General Riddell.
Historic England: <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1041792>
newspapers.com.
Gill Bland for the photograph of the mausoleum and support.
The family of Richard and Edith Smith

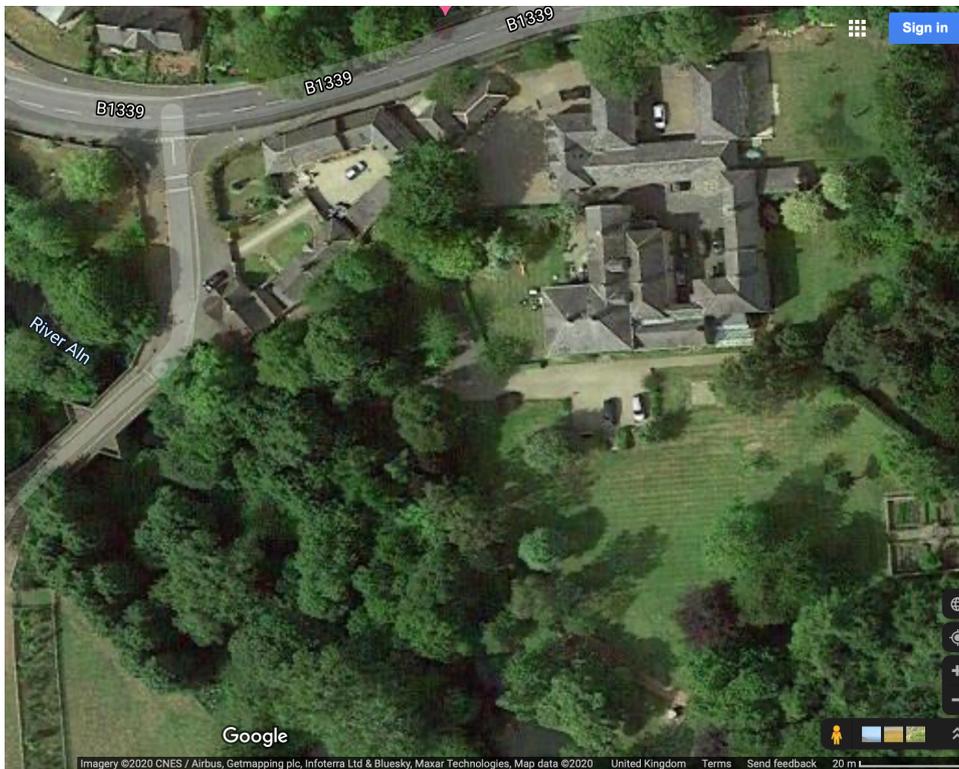
Further information on:

John Herdman at <https://history.rcplondon.ac.uk/inspiring-physicians/john-herdman>

Sir Henry Scott's Northumberland Hussars at

<https://bailiffgatecollections.co.uk/world-war-1/northumberland-hussars/>

Lord Richard Percy at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lord_Richard_Percy#cite_note-20



The House and Grounds from the air.