

# Playford Hall

## The Feltons: Lords of the Manor 1512-1719

The present house is considered to have been built by Anthony Felton c. 1590. His family had come from Shotley in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century when they inherited the manor of Playford through marriage with the Sampsons. By the end of the 1500s they were rising to new heights. The Sampsons had held Playford for three generations having married into the Felbriggas; it was Sir George, whose brass adorns the chancel in Playford church, who built the tower and who initially acquired the parish in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century, it is presumed by purchase.

The Felton line died out in 1719 and ownership and control passed, again through marriage, to the Bristol family of Ickworth. Playford no longer had a resident lord of the manor and, with no further use for the house, it became occupied for the very first time by outsiders. The Playford estate continued to be held in Bristol hands and passed down the generations for 600 hundred years, three times through the female line, until it was sold following the death of the 4<sup>th</sup> Marquis in 1951.

### Sir Anthony Felton, d. 1613

Anthony Felton was the third generation of the family to live in Playford. He was Sheriff of Suffolk in 1597, knighted in 1603 and in the 1590s he married into the nobility, his wife being a daughter of Lord Grey de Groby. He therefore had good reason to build a new and impressive house.<sup>1</sup> The house that he built is a Grade II\* moated Elizabethan mansion the eastern half of which is considered to have been demolished in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup>



**Playford Hall, built by Anthony Felton c. 1590. The contrasting architecture of the south wings, to give a more fashionable appearance, was ordered by his great-grandson Sir Thomas Felton c. 1700. The east wing was demolished c. 1750 when the Hall was ‘reduced to the condition of a farmhouse’**

century for reasons that continue to be debated. Sir Anthony died in 1613 not long after the house was completed; it was his widow Elizabeth who bequeathed to the parish the beautiful standing cup,

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<sup>1</sup> This article draws heavily on items raised during a visit by the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology & History in July 2002 and the notes written up by Edward Martin in Proc. Suffolk Inst. Archaeol., XL, 380-387.



**The Playford Standing Cup of 1619: a link with the Feltons**

a photograph of which features in Munro Cautley's book *Suffolk Churches*.<sup>2</sup>

### **Sir Thomas Felton, 4<sup>th</sup> baronet, d. 1708/9**

The family's rise continued when Sir Anthony's son Henry was created a baronet in 1620 and yet again when his grandson, Sir Thomas, an important courtier who was Comptroller of the Household to Queen Anne and who became MP for Oxford in 1701. He had additionally married into the aristocracy, his wife being Lady Elizabeth Howard, daughter of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl Of Suffolk. As with his great-grandfather Sir Anthony, Sir Thomas too had good reason to make an impression and to this end he made several fashionable changes to the house and grounds that can be dated to around 1700.

He built a colonnade linking the east and west wings, repaired the entrance bridge and rebuilt the south end of both wings so giving the Hall a more fashionable look, adding new large windows with rendered keystones.<sup>3</sup> In around 1708, a year before he died, he diverted the public road to Rushmere that runs to the west of the Hall so as to give greater privacy claiming in his application to the

Crown that it would be 'just as suitable and convenient'.<sup>4</sup> His authority to do so however carried no weight when the legal status of the track was reviewed in 1995.

### **Sir Compton Felton, 5<sup>th</sup> baronet and last of the family**

On Sir Thomas's death, his brother Sir Compton took on the estate but had little interest in it and died without issue at his house in Ipswich in 1719. The Playford property then passed to his niece Elizabeth, daughter of his brother Sir Thomas, [www.gogmsite.net/end\\_of\\_the\\_era\\_-\\_1684\\_to\\_17/ca-1705-lady-thought-to-be-.html](http://www.gogmsite.net/end_of_the_era_-_1684_to_17/ca-1705-lady-thought-to-be-.html) who in 1695 had married John Hervey, 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Bristol. [www.nationaltrustcollections.org.uk/object/851815](http://www.nationaltrustcollections.org.uk/object/851815) Living at Ickworth, they had no use for the house and while Sir Compton's widow most likely continued to live in Ipswich, she retained a life interest in the property.

## **Change and decay: partial demolition c. 1750**

Two years after her husband's death and while in her care, a great storm in August 1721 caused such damage that the 'roof of the house was open in four places', it flattened the colonnade and damaged the bridge.<sup>5</sup> Sir Compton's widow, already 'weary' of the place, appears to have been bought out by the Earl and Countess in or soon after 1723. Repairs were made but, according to

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<sup>2</sup> PSIAH XXII 2, 172-3, will of Lady Elizabeth Felton, 8 July 1639: ..... I give one gilt silver cup standing with a cover and the armes of my late husband upon the same to the said parish to be used at the time of the communion of the Bodie & Blood of our Saviour & not otherwise being bought for that purpose alone.....

<sup>3</sup> Country Life, 24 February 2011.

<sup>4</sup> SROB, HA 507/3/759. It was diverted to the route that is still taken today: up the hill to Playford Corner turning right after the Falcon.

<sup>5</sup> Hervey, S.H.A. (ed.), 1894. *Letter-Books of John Hervey, First Earl of Bristol*, II. Wells, 161-162 no. 621.

Hervey, they were not of high quality. By the 1750s the Hall had deteriorated further causing some to consider this the reason for the partial demolition. As for the timing of the clearance, the Revd. Edward Moor, antiquarian and Rector of Great Bealings for 42 years from 1844 to 1886, recorded that

in July 1847 Mrs Clarkson of Playford Hall informed me that..... she had been told by an aged man in Playford named Hustleton (now dead), that when he was a boy he used to play in the courtyard of the Hall..... the present moat washed three sides of the Hall. Old Hustleton remembers the chapel and its being taken down..... The last occupiers of the Feltons were two maiden ladies, who were succeeded at the Hall by a tenant that was a schoolmaster. After his time it was reduced to its present condition of a farmhouse, and occupied by a Mr Cutting. After him came Thomas Clarkson.<sup>6</sup>

‘Old Hustleton’ was a gardener at the Hall; he was baptised in Playford in March 1738 and buried there in February 1817 suggesting that the partial demolition took place around 1750. The Clarksons came to Playford in 1816 so the conversation must have taken place soon after their arrival. Confirmation of this date comes in a letter from Sir George Biddell Airy who remembered that ‘Old Branson, who lived at the little farm on the Butts Road, spoke of the Hall as he remembered it as the sides of a hollow square’.<sup>7</sup> ‘Old Branson’ was William Branson, born c. 1742 died 1818 and therefore a contemporary of Hustleton.

There is less certainty over the reasons for the demolition. English Heritage maintain that the house was reduced in size after a major fire while others, following John Hervey’s comments, maintain that it was the poor state of the building. There are yet others who maintain that in similar circumstances it was not uncommon to demolish the living quarters rather than the service wing so that their tenants could not enjoy the same style of living as they had once done.

### **The years 1719-c. 1750**

It is not known to what use the house was put between the years of Sir Compton’s death in 1719 and c. 1750 although it is possible that his widow Lady Frances went there to live until her death in 1734. The Revd Moor recorded that the last occupiers of the Feltons were ‘two maiden ladies who were succeeded by a tenant that was a schoolmaster’ and that it was after the schoolmaster’s time that it was reduced to the ‘condition of a farm house’. It has not been possible to identify the two maiden Felton ladies but evidence of a school in Playford at this time has recently come to light in letters from John Buxton (1685-1731) to his son Robert (1710-1751) firstly to him at school in Playford and then to Clare Hall, Cambridge. The Playford letters date from 1723 to 1727 and were sent to the Cross Keys in Ipswich for collection. They were addressed to Robert at ‘Mr D’Oyly’s house in Playford’ though this does not necessarily confirm that his house was the school or that D’Oyly was the master. Additionally, had the school been at Playford Hall it might be considered that the letters would have been addressed as such and yet the D’Oyly family, being a prominent one from Shotesham Hall in Norfolk, are more likely to have lived there than anywhere else.<sup>8</sup> The Hall was available at that time and a school fits with Moor’s account but there is no proof.

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<sup>6</sup> Original in D.E.Davy, ‘Collections for the History of Suffolk’, B.L. Add. MSS 19,077-19,113; transcript printed in a note on Playford in E. Anglian Misc. 1909, 18.

<sup>7</sup> SROI, EG 94/B1/2, in a letter written to his cousin Manfred Biddell, 8<sup>th</sup> February 1882.

<sup>8</sup> Private communication, Alan Mackley, 2004.

The uncertainties concerning the occupation of the house during these years are matched by questions as to who farmed the land. It is most likely that there was little change. There would have been a continued reliance on bailiffs as in the past but with the possible addition of a watching brief from one or more of the other tenants. Sir Compton was in any case absent for the ten of his ownership and it is not known to what extent, if any, his predecessors were involved in the day to day operations of the estate.

## **The Farm Tenants: c. 1750-1867**

While Moor may well have been right about the schoolmaster, he was incorrect about Cutting. Cutting was preceded by William Parmenter, his great uncle but it is not known for how long.

### **William Parmenter (1712-1791), tenant from ?1850s-1791**

On his father's death in 1748 William Parmenter inherited the family farm in Rushmere and in 1759 he married in Playford church. That he married a woman from Barham Hall in Playford church would suggest that he had interests in the parish and that the ceremony was by licence rather than by banns might indicate that he was not then resident in it. It could well be therefore that Parmenter leased the land for many years before he occupied the house but there are no documents to prove it. It is however known that he rented the land in Playford before taking on the Bristol land in Rushmere and of minor interest to learn that while the Rushmere lease included the Falcon public house (with no mention of a maltings), the one at Playford included a double cottage and blacksmith's shop.<sup>9 10</sup> Parmenter was given a 21 year lease in 1786 but this does not mean that he was not already farming the land nor does it indicate whether or not he lived at the Hall.<sup>11</sup> However, when writing his will just three years later in 1789 he describes himself as 'of Playford' and was buried in the chancel of Rushmere church 'by my late father and mother' where the ledger slabs clearly state that he is 'of Playford Hall'.<sup>12</sup>

Parmenter's wife had money which no doubt helped him on his way to become a very rich man. Besides the Playford and Rushmere tenancies<sup>13</sup> he owned the farm that he had inherited from his father as well as other farms in Battisford, Ringshall and Bramford that he had bought himself. He had also purchased additional land in Rushmere as well as property in Needham Market. Dying without issue, he left it all to his two great-nephews, John and Thomas Cutting but the live and dead stock he did not give away.<sup>14</sup>

### **John Cutting (1760-1818), tenant from 1792 to 1815**

Cutting had a very good start in life. Not only did he inherit the 15 year remainder of his great-uncle's lease but his two farms at Battisford and Ringshall as well. His father was from an

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<sup>9</sup> Private possession: letter from Thomas Clarkson to Thomas Cutting's successor at Rushmere, undated.

<sup>10</sup> The Playford blacksmith's shop was reputed to be on the higher side of the lane leading to The Brook just before the stream. Hogger was the blacksmith; the family lived as farm labourers in the village until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>11</sup> SROB HA 558/3/7/22/21. Assignment of a lease, exors of William Parmenter to John Cutting of Playford Hall, 1794.

<sup>12</sup> The four Parmenter slabs were moved from the chancel to the north aisle when the church was extended eastwards beyond the altar in 1968.

<sup>13</sup> SROB HA 507/3/765.

<sup>14</sup> SROI SC 322/1. A four day sale was held at Playford Hall commencing on 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1792. Among the livestock were included 37 cart horses. Parmenter was in a very large way of business.

established and well-to-do family of tenant farmers in Martlesham while his wife, Mary Walford, came from a family of iron founders and doctors who were considerable landowners in many villages to the north and west of Woodbridge. They became Rectors and Patrons of the living in Dallinghoo. In 1807 his lease on Playford Hall Farm was renewed for a further ten years but he was not to see it out. He was declared bankrupt two years before it came to an end and had to forgo the tenancy. The reasons for his downfall have not yet been fully uncovered. Herman Biddell attributed it to ‘high living’ while others including Sir George Biddell Airy claimed that he ‘became entangled with his brother of Woodbridge in contraband excise matters’.<sup>15</sup> Whatever the cause, he was forced out of the farm and was last seen by Playford people occupying a room at the Falcon pub.<sup>16</sup> As a man of some standing in the community he was both Overseer and Churchwarden but his departure from the parish was so sudden and traumatic that he left owing the church £1 10s.<sup>17</sup> He was offered help but declined it and later took a farm at far away Newport Pagnell where he died ‘in sad poverty’ just three years later.<sup>18</sup>

The wider Cutting family at one time owned the Woodbridge tide mill and although it cannot be said with any certainty that John Cutting was involved in the partnership, he is invariably described in all the many notices concerning his bankruptcy as ‘miller, merchant, dealer and chapman’ but never a farmer. His family, listed as ‘coal merchants and farmers’, bought the mill in 1792 and advertised it for sale in 1808. These are years in which Cutting was resident at Playford Hall Farm and the location a place where he could have become involved with customs. His brother too, with



**The Woodbridge Tide Mill: owned by the wider Cutting family 1792-1808. Was Playford’s John Cutting among them?**

whom he got into trouble, is recorded as living in Woodbridge at a time when he was running Lord Bristol’s farm at Rushmere. It is possible that farming took second place to their other interests. It was during these years that improvements to the quay at Woodbridge were made, additional storage added and the mill adopted the appearance that is so familiar today.

John Cutting’s wife bore him 16 children in their 17 years together before dying in childbirth in 1800. Within three years he was married again to a minor ‘with the consent of her mother’, contemporary accounts maintaining that ‘she was an abandoned woman with a violent temper, reputed to have burned by accident or design her husband’s papers on Playford’s history and other parish documents’. In 1813 one of his sons as a 16 year old who had been born at the Hall, was commissioned as an ensign into the 3<sup>rd</sup>

Line Battalion of the King’s German Legion when they were stationed at the Woodbridge Road Barracks in Ipswich.<sup>19</sup> Thomas Cutting served in the Mediterranean Campaign in Sicily and Genoa,

<sup>15</sup> SROI EG 94/B1/2, Playford Parish Council Minute Book, 1948-1971: letter from Sir George Biddell Airy to his cousin Manfred Biddell, 8 February 1882.

<sup>16</sup> SROI SC 322/1. Cuttings farm sale was very small in comparison with that of his uncle: it lasted just the two days and only seven cart horses were among the livestock.

<sup>17</sup> SROI FC 22/E1/1, Playford churchwardens’ accounts.

<sup>18</sup> The Gentleman’s Magazine, November 1818, Vol. 88 Part 2, 473: Obituaries with Anecdotes of Remarkable Persons. October 1. At Newport Pagnell, Bucks., Mr John Cutting. He was formerly of Playford-hall, Suffolk; a person of superior manners and an agriculturalist of no mean repute. Buckinghamshire Record Office, Burial Register.

<sup>19</sup> The National Archives, WO 256/74, Folio 202.

was briefly garrisoned at Gibraltar and was at Waterloo but held in reserve and did not fight.<sup>20</sup> His battalion formed part of the Allied occupation of Paris and was quartered at Passy now in the exclusive 16<sup>th</sup> *arrondissement*.<sup>21</sup> It was then marched to Bremen and disbanded in February 1816. Marrying a German girl, he emigrated to Australia after her death in 1847.<sup>22</sup>

### **Thomas Clarkson (1760-1846), tenant from 1816 to 1846**

The abrupt termination of John Cutting's tenancy provided the opportunity for Thomas Clarkson to step in. Clarkson needed money to fund his anti-slavery work and farming and writing were the best ways for him to raise it. He had previously bought a small farm when ill health took him to the Lake District and on his return to the cause he had rented some land in Ickworth Park from Lord Bristol with whom, being a fellow Johnian and Whig grandee, he was particularly friendly. Bristol (the 5<sup>th</sup> Earl and 1<sup>st</sup> Marquis) was determined that Clarkson should fill the Playford vacancy and gave him



**Thomas Clarkson, a friend of the 1<sup>st</sup> Marquis of Bristol**

a very long lease 'at a very modest rent to express my respect for his character and my sense of his service to the poor Africans'. But despite his generous approach, the handover with Cutting was far from easy and, in exchange for his favourable terms, Clarkson was to pay for many repairs on the house which had been left in a very poor state. The Clarksons made arrangements for their first visit to both house and farm in the summer of 1815 'wishing that Mrs Cutting [the abandoned woman] could be put out of the way'. In the event, to avoid embarrassment, they were shown around the house by Cutting's daughter Mary who was briefly resident in the new cottage at the top of Hill Farm Road. In correspondence with Arthur Biddell, who was acting as go-between, Clarkson wrote despairingly:

One or two Ceilings are coming down. Three or four floors must be new cased, the Roof repaired, the wains coat so old as to be dropping from one or more of the Rooms with age, eight or nine new sash Windows and Window Shutters to be made. The Moat Wall between wind and water to be pinned up with new Bricks and Beach Lime. Two or more of the Buttresses to be rebuilt, a new Sluice. Payne's Cottage, one end of it in Ruins.....<sup>23</sup>

Payne had been Cutting's bailiff but Clarkson had no need of him, wishing to bring his own from Bury St Edmunds.<sup>24</sup> Enlightened employer that he was, Clarkson agonised between giving Payne notice and spending a vast sum of money 'on the house of a man he did not know'. And while he was anxious to find his bailiff accommodation, he did not want 'to board farm servants in the Hall'. Cutting's son had also applied for the position but had to be politely turned away.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid. WO 12/118/72-73, Quarterly Pay Lists, 3<sup>rd</sup> Line Battalion, King's German Legion.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. WO 12/118/74.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. WO 25/754, Officers' Service Record. Thomas Cutting married Louise Schrader in 1825. Four years after she died in 1847, he sailed on the *Dockenuden* from Hamburg to Adelaide. Right up to that time he had been on half pay.

<sup>23</sup> SROI HD 494/172: letter from Thomas Clarkson to Arthur Biddell, 1 September 1815.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 163, 12 July 1815: 'the bailiff looks after all the active operations of Husbandry Haysel, Harvest &c. and very often works himself'. Clarkson dictated rotations, bought and sold cattle and sheep and sold his own corn. '.....between myself and my bailiff there is not a single Department left for any other person'.

Cutting was also proving exceedingly difficult over the price that he wanted for the two year remainder of his lease and, while Clarkson was keen not to take advantage of his situation 'particularly as he is ill', he considered that in increasing his offer from £200 to £300 he had gone far enough. He was prepared to walk away from the farm and return the following year which would in any case have suited him better. He had also offered Cutting an exchange of 80 acres in Ickworth Park but this was ignored. On the more positive side, Arthur Biddell was most obliging in helping as best he could, acting as a sounding board where necessary and giving assistance in farming matters even drilling his turnips for him before he had moved over from Bury.

It is a misconception that Clarkson came to Playford to retire for, although the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act had been passed in 1807, it was to be another 26 years before slavery itself was outlawed in the British Empire. In America, where it continued until brought to an end by the Civil War in 1865, Clarkson had become a father figure. His life was therefore fully occupied with his writing and running the farm. He played no part in village life and neither did he leave any papers thinking that no one would be in the least interested in what he had done.

### **Catherine Clarkson (1773-1856), tenant from 1846 to 1856**

[www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/REbuck.htm](http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/REbuck.htm)

From the time of Clarkson's death in 1846 until her own ten years later, his widow Catherine took over the farm and was described in the 1851 Census as a 'farmer of 340 acres employing 16 men and 6 boys'. She was however no farmer for according to Biddell she 'was supposed to manage the Hall Farm with the assistance of sundry bailiffs..... the delinquencies of more than one in my remembrance made exciting gossip in the village. Her farming usually took the form of a Sunday morning's ride in a bath chair drawn by Sheldrake, her last bailiff'. But economic times were in her favour for, after a long period of very lean years that her husband endured, British agriculture was about to enter its Golden Age and without such good fortune she would not have survived.

The daughter of a prosperous yarn maker at Bury St Edmunds she was, according to Ellen Gibson Wilson, Clarkson's biographer, a vivacious young woman and a gifted conversationalist, popular in West Suffolk ballrooms, prized as much for her wit as for her beauty. Henry Crabb Robinson, a friend from Bury days, a barrister and one of the founders of London University, regarded her as the most eloquent woman he had ever known while Biddell said of her that 'she had a will of her own and a mind powerful enough to have ruled an empire..... An autocrat within and without, her influence in the parish was ever for good'.

But unlike her husband, Catherine did play a small part in village life and on her arrival in the village in 1816 established the Sunday school. It was for about 50 boys and girls who entered at four or five years old and left at about twelve or fourteen. There was no endowment and she appears to have supported it financially herself paying a 'superintendent', who acted under the direction of the Revd Charles Day, at a salary believed to be 50s or £3.<sup>25</sup> A Visitation in 1820 confirms this and that the school is 'under the superintendence of a charitable lady'. She was without doubt the driving force behind the initiative, a pity therefore that when Davy visited in 1824 and confirmed the arrangements, he noted that 'the whole was very dirty and ill kept'.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> SROI HD 436/3, 20: 'Extracts from the books and papers of the parish of Playford and other notes relating to its history', Manfred Biddell, 1883.

<sup>26</sup> SROI J 400/4. D.E.Davy MSS rolls, Carlford & Colneis; B.L. Add. MSS 19086-7.

The Clarksons' only son Thomas II went to Cambridge, became a lawyer and married his first cousin Mary, a daughter of Clarkson's brother John. He was thrown from his gig in London in 1837 when he was 41 and with a lady 'not of good character'. He was killed instantly leaving a five year old son Thomas III. His widow and child then spent the next six years with the Clarksons at Playford Hall until she remarried. Her second husband was the Playford curate Willoughby Dickinson and the couple, together with her young son, moved into the newly built vicarage where they lived for the next twelve years.

### **Thomas Clarkson III (1831-1872), tenant from 1856 to 1867**

On Catherine's death in 1856 her grandson Thomas III, then 24, moved into the Hall and ran the farm with the help of a bailiff, Samuel Cutting, who lived in.<sup>27</sup> Educated at Rugby and Trinity College, Cambridge, like his father before him he was trained in the law. Beyond this he was to lead an unconventional and dissolute life. He married a 'girl from the village', without telling his grandmother, and his arrival at the Hall with his new wife must have caused a sensation. His tenure

there was not to last long. According to Biddell, in a very few years he drank and squandered his inheritance such that the entire contents of the Hall were seized by distraint, the sale most poignantly including the entire 'theological and historical library of 1,400 volumes formed by the late Thomas Clarkson Esq.'<sup>28</sup>. Husband and wife fled to St Helier where he died of a stroke just five years later at the young age of forty one. There was no issue. His body was brought back from Jersey to be buried in the family vault in Playford churchyard but the occasion was without ceremony.<sup>29</sup>



**Thomas Clarkson III (1831-1872).  
A waster whose 'life in manhood  
was a sore trouble to his mother'.**

So ended the Clarkson line and the Bristol's obligations to it. The inside of the house had no doubt been treated with respect during the family's fifty year occupation but the farm in its latter years had certainly not. The Estate took the decision not to re-let the land but to share it out between the other two farms in the parish and at the same time to re-gentrify the Hall with a view to attracting the appropriate sort of tenant.

## **Re-gentrification: 1867-1872**

Refurbishment took many years and was overseen by Richard Phipson who on completion of the work in 1871 became Diocesan Surveyor and was responsible for the rebuilding of the chancel of Playford church the following year.<sup>30</sup> Herman Biddell writing in retirement describes in great detail the changes that were carried out both to the house and to the grounds. The kitchen underwent the greatest upheaval. Biddell writes

<sup>27</sup> In the 1861 Census he is described as a 'Farmer of 349 acres employing 14 men and 6 boys'.

<sup>28</sup> SROI SC 322/2: Early & Absolute Sale of Genuine Household Furniture...at Playford Hall, 25 July 1867.

<sup>29</sup> Ipswich Journal, 28 May 1872: a brief announcement of the death but no details of the funeral which was held two days later.

<sup>30</sup> Work on the Hall was well under way in 1869 when the Directories reported that 'at present undergoing extensive repairs and restoration and now unoccupied'.

A large piece of the south end was cut off to increase the accommodation for the domestics to make compensation for the rooms sacrificed for the new kitchen.....the enormous chimney with the open space required for the cooking range had to be reduced..... so large was it that there was ample space for a most handsome fireplace and not only that but also a good large window to match the one on the right hand side so giving sufficient light to the present dining room....<sup>31</sup>

Outside, the terraces to the west of the house were once the site of the original farm buildings. They are shown on the small-scale Ordnance Survey 'old edition' map of 1838 and on a proposed railway line plan of 1846. They do not appear on the map of 1870 suggesting that they had been removed in the run-up to the restoration of 1871. Biddell gives a graphic description of the view from the kitchen window:

The buildings came almost to the edge of the moat..... and there is the cart-way leading round to the cart stable and waggon lodge. On the other side of this cart-way is the spacious farmyard..... the barn and the stables fill all there is to see..... the massive structure which now represents the coach house, stables and under-groom's residence was once the capacious barn.....

The capacious barn was spared demolition and is contemporary with the Hall but the under-groom's residence attached to it is Victorian and was most likely added at the time of the restoration. On the west side, the barn has a large ornamental doorway, now blocked, of *c.* 1700. This aligns with the earthwork of an east-west roadway in the adjacent field which joins up with the course of the highway to Rushmere that Sir Thomas Felton diverted in 1708 and suggests that at that time entrance to the site was from the west not from the east as it is today. Indeed, as late as the 1830s sketch plans of Playford village continue to give directions to the Hall via Brook Lane rather than by the present approach.

The gardens were further enlarged by taking in an acre and a half of meadow to the west and additionally, some three years later, by an unscheduled expansion to the north where the mill stream had formed the boundary. In the winter of 1874, at some point between the Wash and the Ipswich road, a tree fell across it so damming the water and causing the bank to burst. Reconstruction with the necessary clay would have been an expensive operation and, in any case, the mill was more of a liability than a money earner. The decision was therefore taken not to repair. Instead the former water course was leveled off and incorporated into the grounds and, without its power supply, the mill stopped running.

Improved privacy was also part of the improvements being undertaken and in 1871 application was made to divert the two footpaths that ran close to the Hall.<sup>32</sup> The first ran along the line of the track from Rushmere and was rerouted to the west to become the unused FP 24 that emerges in a style less than a hundred yards inside the Alder Carr Meadows. The second, known as the Millbank, was a far greater loss and hugged the northern side of the mill stream like a tow path high above the river on its other side.<sup>33</sup> Its closure and diversion sixty yards to the north across the Cricket Meadow, with an avenue of trees by way of appeasement, was keenly felt by Herman Biddell:

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<sup>31</sup> SROI, qS Playford 9: H.Biddell, Thomas Clarkson & Playford Hall, 1912.

<sup>32</sup> SROI, FC 22/A1/3: Footpath over Cricket Field, 1871.

<sup>33</sup> SROI 276/242b: SCC papers, 'Proposed alteration of the footpath thro' the meadows at Playford, 1870'.

It was part of a footpath much used by those who walked from Rushmere to Bealings or from Ipswich to Woodbridge. On the south was the mill stream; on the north a steep declivity studded with timber trees about twelve feet down to the Fynn. It is painful to bring to remembrance what the path in its superb beauty was like. The trees which bordered it met over the path. It was a sylvan tunnel and what added to its intense interest was it was made on a slight curve so that from neither end could you see the other. Suffice it to say that there was no piece of rural landscape which would compare with it.

Tellingly he added: the parish made no objection, for the Marquis the parishioners would have suppressed any feelings they might have had.....<sup>34</sup>

## **The New Tenants: 1872-1959**

The Hall was ready to receive new tenants in 1871 but it was 1878 before a lasting arrangement had been agreed; by that time it had been empty for twelve years.

### **The Revd Allen Page Moor (1824-1904), tenant 1872?**

The Revd. (later Canon) Allen Page Moor was the first to reach agreement. The son of a Woodbridge solicitor and a nephew of Major Edward Moor the renowned orientalist of Bealings House, Great Bealings, he was also a first cousin of the Canon Edward Moor who is quoted above. In 1848 he was himself ordained and in the same year appointed Fellow of St Augustine's College in Canterbury in the year that it opened 'for the training of Ministers for the dependencies of the British Empire'. He was sub-warden from 1849 to 1866 and in 1869 applied unsuccessfully for the post of librarian at Windsor Castle. In 1872, while acting as sub-librarian of Canterbury Cathedral, he was appointed Vicar of St Clement near Truro where he remained for the next twenty four years. Twelve months previously he had reached agreement with the Estate to lease the Hall 'for a term of one year from 11 October 1871' and thereafter on a year to year basis at an annual rent of £100 but it would seem that he may never have moved in.<sup>35</sup>

It is odd that, after all the effort and expense of such a large refurbishment, a longer rental could not have been secured and even more bewildering that the Hall remained vacant for another seven years. That it remained empty for so long cannot be attributed to lost paper work as the trade directories of the period either fail to make mention of the Hall in these years or state that it was actually 'unoccupied'.

### **The Crisp Family, tenants from 1878 to 1936**

Frederick Augustus Crisp (1821-1884) took up residence in 1878 having agreed a 21 year lease at the new rent of £120 p.a.<sup>36</sup> He was a retired surgeon from Walworth in Surrey where his eldest brother was a doctor. Both had however been born locally, their descent being from the celebrated family of farmers on the Sandlings in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Their grandfather Thomas Crisp

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<sup>34</sup> Private possession: H. Biddell, 'Playford Hall - as it was and as it is', 1915.

<sup>35</sup> SROB, 429/14. October 11<sup>th</sup>, Old Michaelmas Day, is still used in Suffolk rather than the more usual 29<sup>th</sup> September.

<sup>36</sup> SROB, 429/18.

came from Chillesford and was in the forefront of the development of the Suffolk Punch while their great uncle Thomas II was the famous breeder and exporter of the horse who at one time, at

the height of ‘High Farming‘ between 1850 and his premature death in a hunting accident in 1869, farmed over 4,000 acres at Gedgrave, Chillesford, Butley and Tangham.



**The Crisp family at Playford Hall c. 1895. Their family had been prominent farmers in the Butley area in the 19<sup>th</sup> century**

Both Frederick Crisp and his wife died soon after their arrival at Playford and c. 1884 two of his sons, Frederick Arthur the antiquarian and his brother George Edwin, purchased Little Wenham Hall the Grade I 13<sup>th</sup> century fortified manor house near Colchester. Regarded as one of the most important medieval domestic buildings in

England, they carried out extensive repairs and restorations rescuing it from its decline into farm status after the close of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Frederick Arthur’s branch of the family continues to live there while the two sisters Miss Rosa and Miss Emma, apart from spending six to eight weeks each summer at their other house in Godalming, Surrey, continued to live on at the Hall until their deaths in the 1930s.<sup>37 38</sup> They are buried in the family vault by the north-west corner of the church together with their parents and two brothers. The Crisp Charity, set up by Miss Emma in 1932 in memory of

her sister ‘for the upkeep of services,’ remains a source of income for the church.<sup>39</sup> The Crisps had earlier made one lasting and visible gift to the church. Following Phipson’s rebuilding of the chancel in 1872, the restoration programme continued culminating in the re-roofing of the nave to commemorate Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee in 1897. George Edwin Crisp gave the new nave gable-crosses which were placed on their original medieval bases.<sup>40</sup>



**William Threadkell (d. 1926). The Crisps’ coachman for over 40 years**

## The 1930s Refurbishment

After 58 years in the occupation of one family, the Hall was overdue for another refurbishment but in any case the outside world had moved on. The sum for dilapidations received from Miss Emma Crisp’s estate amounted to seven times the annual rent that Potter the new tenant was being asked to pay. To this the

landlord added a further sum as a contribution towards improvements. Beyond bringing the house up to a decent decorative order, a considerable amount of money was spent on the cottages, the stables and repairs to the greenhouses including the replacement of their heating. Two of the biggest

<sup>37</sup> George Edwin Crisp never lived at Little Wenham; he died unmarried at Playford Hall in 1905 aged 47.

<sup>38</sup> SROI, SC 322/7: sale catalogue, two day sale of surplus furniture, 11<sup>th</sup> & 12<sup>th</sup> March 1936, by direction of exors.of Miss Emma Crisp deceased.

<sup>39</sup> SROI, FC 22/L3/1: Crisp Charity, Declaration of Trust, 10 October 1932.

<sup>40</sup> East Anglian Daily Times, 4 November 1897.

items of expenditure however were the installation of a new central heating and domestic hot water system and the connection of electric light to the house, stable and cottages.<sup>41</sup>

This was the first connection to the mains in the village its wider uptake being interrupted by the outbreak of war. With the exception of The Ridge, which was completed in 1939 and Archway House, the supply went no further than the corner of Hill Farm Road. Henry Bond, who had bought Archway in 1935, had television in the late 1930s but he had to pay for the additional poles himself. It was on Charles Lofts' arrival in the village in October 1946 that Hill House and the cottages were converted; the church followed some two years later.

No doubt in fear of over-running the refurbishment budget, a list of items was drawn up detailing



**Indoor staff 1934 L-R: tweeny, who assisted both cook and housemaid; parlourmaid, who waited at table; housemaid, who cleaned especially reception and bedrooms**

what had been removed from the estimated final figure. One such item was the conversion of the stables to a garage complete with its own heating system, a reminder that the motor car was then a relatively new and cosseted form of transport. It was in 1924, little more than ten years earlier, that Threadkell their coachman for over forty years, had driven the Hall's two ageing ladies to Sunday service in the carriage and pair for the last time. Thereafter he took them by car but he died within two years. Dorothy Bowdren, whose father ran the shop, recalls that the Misses Crisp were the first in the village to have a car and that her father, with the added benefit

of a naval pension, was a close second although he continued to run the pony and cart as well. George Fiske, the farmer at Hill House, and then the vicar, the Revd George Kirkpatrick, soon followed.

### **Major Cyril Charlie Hamilton Potter, O.B.E (1877-1941), tenant from 1936-1941** [http://www.rlymyc.org.uk/Archives/commodores\\_photographs.shtml](http://www.rlymyc.org.uk/Archives/commodores_photographs.shtml)

Renovations took almost two years during which time the Hall was unoccupied. The new tenant, on a 21 year lease, was Major Cyril Potter, formerly of the Hussars and now a London stockbroker. He moved in with his wife and daughter in September 1937, took part in the village Air Raid Precautions of 1938 but by the following year they all appear to have gone.<sup>42</sup> Left behind were six unknown 'residents', most of them women who might well have been servants. As no records were kept during the war years, nothing further is heard of the family until Potter's death in Oxford in 1941 at the age of 64.

Potter is credited as the founder in 1921 of the Royal Lymington Yacht Club on The Solent where he was a leading light and the 'owner of several boats'. He was Commodore from 1922 to 1936 and Admiral from 1934 to 1941 and strangely according to the Club, again from 1946 to 1953. If Potter

<sup>41</sup> SROB, HA 558/3/7/22/22.

<sup>42</sup> SROI, EG 94/B/1, Playford Parish Council Minute Book, 1895-1948; Playford List of Electors, 1939.

did not leave his mark on Playford, he did so at Lymington. On his retirement after thirteen years as Founder Commodore, he presented the Club with a beautiful silver wine-coaster fashioned as a royal sailing galley as well as an endowment for three other races. The Potter Ship Race is still held annually and *Pottership* is the Club magazine.

## The Air Ministry from 1941 to 1945

By contrast, memories of Potter's chauffeur Freddie Bays have long remained with Playford people. He had only recently moved from Beacon Hill in Martlesham *c.* 1937 and, on his boss's death,



Freddie Bays in previous employment at Friston

feared not only for his job but for his accommodation. Events however were quickly to turn in his favour as the Hall was requisitioned by the Air Ministry as an officers' mess and he was asked to become the steward.<sup>43</sup> His situation improved still further for in late 1943 the Americans replaced the RAF and Bays was soon filling his pockets with the generous tips for which they were so famous. He was for example making the then princely sum of one pound for the five minute job of ironing an officer's trousers, this at a time when his contemporaries in the village were earning an agricultural wage of just 60s

for a 48 hr week. And when the Americans' unit was stood down in November 1945 and returned to the States, Martlesham airfield reverted to British control. Bays became the steward at the base until his retirement and with the money that he had accumulated in those two short years he bought one of the new bungalows that had sprung up pre-war in Bell Lane, Kesgrave, something that was quite out of the reach of most working people at the time. Bays was indeed one of the fortunate ones; he had a good war. The Grimsey family from the village used to cook the officers' evening

meals and breakfasts and, while they had wistful memories of the Americans' good humour and warm-heartedness, they recalled with great sadness those occasions when a mission had so obviously gone wrong.



Freddie Bays as steward serving drinks to US airmen at Playford Hall

In September 1939 Martlesham airfield had become part of RAF Fighter Command operating Bristol Blenheim bombers as well as Hurricanes and Spitfires. Among the famous pilots who were based there were Robert Stanford Tuck and Douglas Bader. Ian Smith, the post-war Prime Minister of Rhodesia, was also there for a time. In May 1943 the airfield was assigned to the 356<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group of the USAAF who flew Thunderbolts and Mustangs and operated as escorts for B-17 Flying Fortresses on bombing missions to the Continent. Its most famous single operation was perhaps the bombing

<sup>43</sup> SROB, HA 558/3/7/22/22. Agreement dated 8 January 1944 but almost certainly operative long before then.



**USAAF Officers - and their transport - at Playford Hall, October 1943 to November 1945**

and strafing of the Arnhem area in September 1944.<sup>44</sup>

### **John Hare, later 1<sup>st</sup> Viscount Blakenham, occupier 1945/46**

Unlike many other large country houses, the Hall suffered no major damage during its years of occupation by service personnel and new civilian tenants were able to move in as soon as the Americans had moved out. The first to do so was John Hare the new Member of Parliament for Woodbridge though he was resident perhaps

for weeks rather than months while he was looking for accommodation in the constituency.<sup>45</sup> There was no formal lease. He had been an Alderman of London County Council in the late 1930s and had fought in the war before standing for the Conservative seat in the Labour landslide election of July 1945. He held the seat for 18 years during which time he held several Cabinet posts under Eden, Macmillan and Douglas-Home. In 1963 he was elevated to the peerage as Viscount Blakenham.

### **Felicity Mary Batt (1910-1990), tenant from 1946 to 1959**

The first, indeed the only, real post war tenant was Felicity Batt who shared the house with her mother Cicely Cobbold. Both had recently been widowed: Felicity's husband Lt Robert Wyndham Batt had died in the war in August 1944 while serving with the RAOC while her father Capt Philip Wyndham Cobbold had died at the end of the previous December. The Batt family bought the manor of Gresham in Norfolk in 1620 and they have owned it ever since. Robert Batt was the son of Lt Col Reginald Batt of Gresham Hall who lost two other sons in the Second World War. Philip Cobbold was from the Ipswich brewing family of Cobbold & Co. He was born at Holywells in the town, was twice mayor and at one time lived at Kesgrave Hall but latterly at Tattingstone Park from where his widow and their daughter had just moved.

It was during their time at the Hall in 1954, following the death of the 4<sup>th</sup> Marquis three years earlier, that it was sold by the Estate but they continued as tenants under the new owner Margaret Duff. Following her death in 1956 the house was again put up for sale in April 1959. Cicely Cobbold had died at the end of the previous year; her daughter did not re-marry and died in 1990. Her daughter Belinda married Commander William Fitzherbert, one time Flag Lieutenant to Admiral Lord Mountbatten.

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<sup>44</sup> Kesgrave Hall provided parallel accommodation for officers of the RAF and then of the USAAF 356<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group operating out of RAF Martlesham Heath.

<sup>45</sup> An older brother was a Labour Cabinet Minister under Clement Attlee at the same time.

## The New Owners, 1954-1966

### **Mrs Margaret Duff (1865-1956), owner from 1954 to 1956.**

Margaret Duff lived at Fornham House, Fornham St Martin near Bury St Edmunds, a mansion that has since been converted into a 73 room residential home for the elderly. Born Margaret Crompton Potter, her family were distinguished for its connections with the Manchester textile trade during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Her grandfather Edmond Potter mechanised the family calico printing business and became the largest calico printer in the world. Her father continued in the family line acquiring Rusholme House in Manchester with its 20 acres of park. On his death in 1883 it was demolished and the Whitworth Gallery built in the grounds. Her father's brother Rupert, who was the father of Beatrix Potter (1866-1943) the author and illustrator, left the area to train as a barrister. They lived in South Kensington.

Margaret Duff was the first from outside the family to own the Hall in 600 years and that she did so when she was 89 was almost as remarkable. She never lived in the house and the tenants, Mrs Batt and Mrs Cobbold, stayed on until after her death in 1956. It was put on the market again in 1959<sup>46</sup> Bought therefore as an investment, the house was offered at £8,000 while the previous rental income under the the Estate had been £250 p.a.<sup>47 48</sup>

### **William Traven Aitken (1905-1964), Penelope 'Pempe' Aitken (1910-2005), owners from 1959 to 1966**

The first owners to actually occupy the house were the Aitkens in 1959. They spent considerable sums of money both on the refurbishment of the interior as well on re-roofing suggesting that the dilapidations held back in 1937 specifically for roof repairs were never spent.



**Lady Aitken (1910-2005), a great socialite who entertained many high ranking politicians at the Hall**

William Aitken was a nephew of Lord Beaverbrook, the press baron, Minister of Aircraft Production in Churchill's wartime government and later his Minister of Supply. At the 1950 General Election he had been elected MP for Bury St Edmunds and was knighted in 1963 but died suddenly the following year. His widow Penelope, a leading socialite who entertained many high ranking politicians at the Hall, stayed on for a further two years. She is credited with laying out the magnificent gardens which have been well cared for and extended by the present owners Richard and Tessa Innes. The Aitken's son Jonathan was for 24 years MP for Thanet and became a Cabinet minister. He was convicted of perjury for which he served an 18 month

prison sentence. Their daughter Maria is an English Theatre Director, actress and writer.

<sup>46</sup> EADT, 17 February 1959; SROI SC 322/4, sale catalogue, auction at Great White Horse, 7 April 1959.

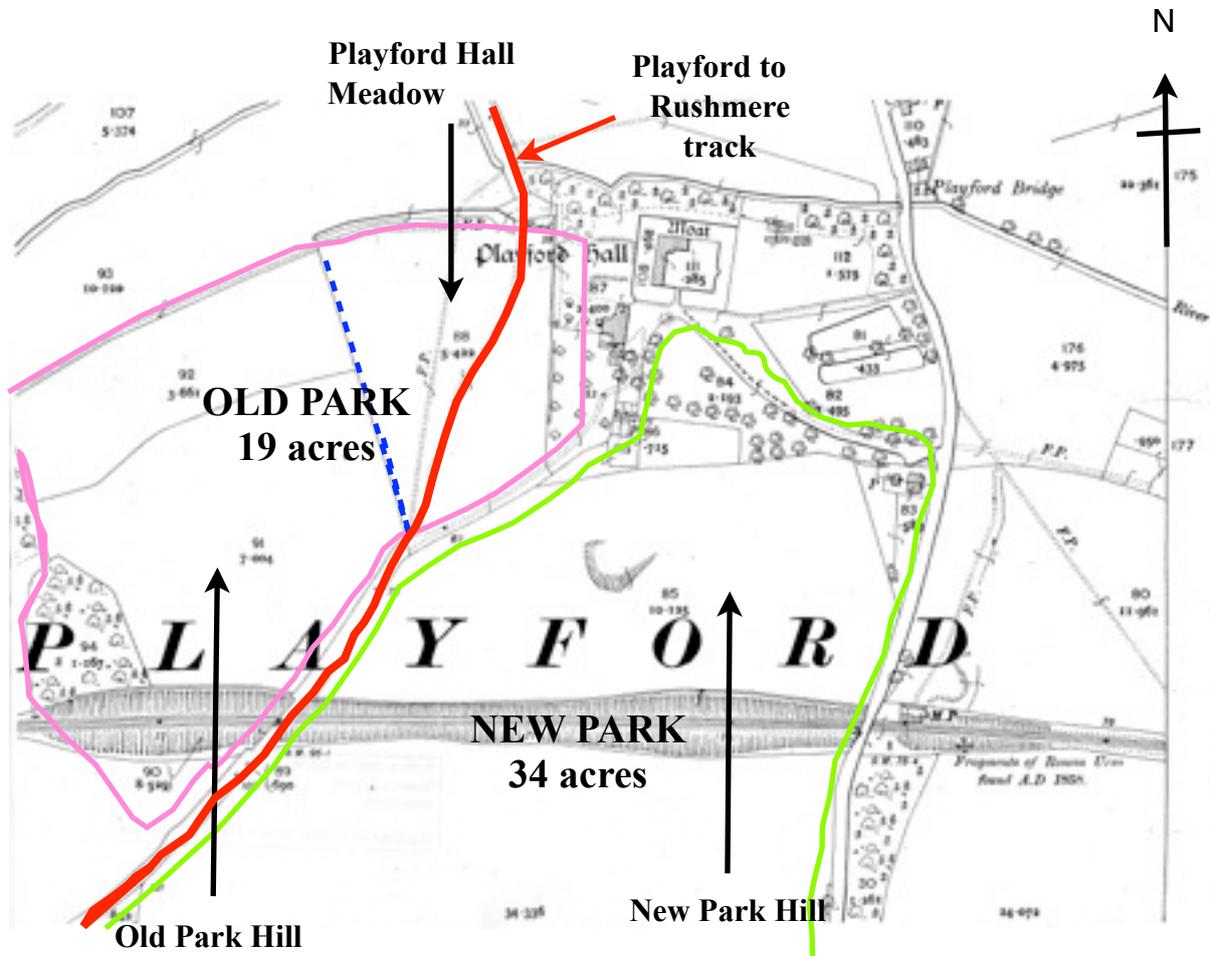
<sup>47</sup> ex inf. Charles Lofts

<sup>48</sup> SROB, HA 558/3/7/22/22.

## The Original House, pre-1590

So far nothing far has been mentioned about the house that existed before Anthony Felton built the present mansion *c.* 1590. Until recently two factors argued strongly that the present house had been erected on a green field site and that the original manor lay elsewhere in the village, perhaps nearer the church. While 19<sup>th</sup> century antiquarians suggested that the present hall may have contained remains of a mansion built by Sir George Felbrigge (Clarke 1830, 363; Hervey 1864, 18), there is nothing now visible that is of that date. A more persuasive argument was that the moat had been laid out with such geometric precision that it was therefore ‘new’ since earlier moats constructed in medieval times were invariably of less regular shape.

More recently however it has been considered ‘unusual’ for farm buildings to appear at the side of a 16<sup>th</sup> century house as on most medieval moated sites access to the house is through a courtyard that is flanked by them. While one possibility might be that the buildings were moved from the south side at the time of Thomas Felton’s re-ordering in the early 1700s, newly uncovered evidence supports the view that the new house was built on the existing site but underwent a 90-degree



The original house looked west on to its 19 acre park: note the subsequent enclosure into the three fields that are there today carried out most likely after Sir Compton’s death in 1719. The new park would have been laid out when the present house was built; the area that it covered to the south of the railway line (opened 1859) was more than double the 10 acres marked on the map as New Park Hill making a total of 34 acres. The two parks existed side by side for perhaps a hundred years.

change in orientation so that it faced south rather than west.

The chance discovery of two forgotten field names in the former grounds of the Hall adds considerable weight to the proposition that the earlier house once stood on the site of the present mansion but that it faced towards the Alder Carr and up the valley of the Fynn. The names had been passed down by word of mouth; they do not appear in any written record.<sup>49</sup>

They came to light in a chance conversation with a tractor driver who had been familiar with them since a boy but when ownership of the fields changed hands in 1959 they fell into disuse and went by other names.<sup>50</sup> Old Park Hill and New Park Hill are the remnants of the two parks that once graced their respective houses: the original home looked on to its park to the west while the newer and grander house looked on to its contemporary and much larger park to the south.

The earliest reference to a park in Playford comes in 1708 when the road to Rushmere was diverted. Sir Thomas Felton's licence of that date states that Wash Lane then led into 'a close or park..... called Playford Park'. Some sixty years later towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, both a park and a former park are recorded in a survey of the Estate: the 'Plow'd Park' of 19 acres is described as arable while 'the Park' of some 34 acres is recorded as still being down to grass. The survey gives no clue as to the location of either park but there is good reason to believe that the smaller 'Plow'd Park' lay to the west as its size fits neatly into the available space between the 'common horseway' to Rushmere and the Alder Carr. By contrast the new park to the south, which Felton would have wished to be bigger and more impressive, had no such restriction in the days before the railway.

For perhaps a hundred years the two parks existed side by side but in 1719 on the death of Sir Compton Felton, the last of the family, ownership of the Playford property passed to Ickworth and the days of local extravagance were over. When the Hall was let out to tenants, much of the smaller park was ploughed up and enclosed so that, instead of entering an impressive park, Wash Lane now led directly (as it does today) into Hall Meadow a seven acre grassland buffer between the house and the new arable.<sup>51</sup> The second park was also fully under cultivation by the time the railway plans were drawn up in 1846, the area then having been divided into three fields each of some ten to fifteen acres. Evidence of such enclosure is seen in John Cutting's lease of 1806 in which he is permitted 'to break up 3 acres, part of a certain meadow called Park Meadow' though he had to return it to grass for the last two years of his tenancy.<sup>52</sup> Enclosure and the coming of the railway dramatically transformed the once open space around the house.

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<sup>49</sup> SROB, HA 558/3/7/22/37: the names may have been on a 1912 schedule of Lux Farm but the first page is missing.

<sup>50</sup> Jim Woods started work on Lux Farm in 1942. His employer George Stennett sold all the land between the river and the railway to Charles Lofts in 1959 soon after he had purchased it from the Estate. It was at this time that the names of the two fields fell out of use.

<sup>51</sup> SROI, 276/242 b, Suffolk County Council Papers, Diversion of Footpath, 1870: Playford Hall Meadow at that time was known as The Rookery Meadow (or The Rookery). It is here depicted with trees from its days as a park; SROB, HA 558/3/7/22/22, in the lease to Major Potter of 1937, it was referred to as Stackyard Meadow - a hangover from the days before 1867 when Playford Hall was a farm.

<sup>52</sup> SROB, HA 507/3/580