

The Ollands Estate

The area in Reepham that we know as Ollands Park and the adjoining area of Moor House Close (bounded by New Road) was formerly the Ollands Estate, this was an area of nearly 19 acres of parkland, gardens and lawns overlooked by a mansion originally called The Ollands.

The mansion was built in the Elizabethan style by William Bircham Esquire in 1832 and at some substantial cost. The interior was adorned with superb oak carvings and was decorated and finished in an expensive manner which offered a high degree of refinement and taste for a moderately sized establishment. It was built with the main rooms facing to the southeast and during the early years the grounds were developed so that eventually the house stood surrounded by park-like lawns adorned with ornamental timber and enclosed by plantations of trees and shrubs.

The house consisted of the following rooms:

In the basement there were a number of arched ale and wine cellars.

The ground floor had an entrance hall with inner glazed doors, a vestibule with doors leading into the garden, a drawing and dining rooms, study, back hall, housekeeper's room, butler's pantry, kitchen, cook's pantry and scullery. The main rooms were fitted with carved oak mantelpieces and all floors were paved with stone.

The first floor was approached by a broad oak staircase which was lighted by a large, fine stained glass window. There was a central boudoir, eight sleeping and dressing rooms and a bathroom (fitted with a bath and water closet).

There was a second floor with four large bedrooms and a open landing.

Outside there was a rear courtyard with a servants' hall, knife and coal houses, larder, large bin and a force pump which filled the cistern at the top of the house.

A house of this size had to have its own transport and this was accommodated with stabling situated around a paved courtyard; it comprised a double coach house, a stable with four stalls, another stable with three stalls and a box, all with lofts above, a harness room, a second smaller coach house and a range of outhouses. Nearby was a coachman's house built in the same style as the house.

In the years after the house was built the gardens were developed and after a few years it was surrounded by flower gardens, a rosary, walled fruit garden, outside vegetable and fruit gardens and an orchard, supported by tool and fruit houses.

A large conservatory was built near the house, also there was a double vinery (70-foot long) complete with hot pipes and a heating room, mushroom house, melon yard, various pits, potting houses and a large soft-water tank.

William Bircham lived in the property until the estate and various other areas of land that he owned in Reepham were sold at auction in July 1883. The house would have become available for possession by the new owner at Michaelmas that year but there is doubt that William Bircham moved out after the sale. Kelly's Directory of 1885 lists the occupants of the house as William and Henry Bircham (his son).

The next owners were Mr and Mrs Kendrew who lived there from about 1890 onwards. In 1914 Alexander Kendrew died and although the house was still owned by Mrs Kendrew until her death in 1920, she did not live here during the Great War.



John Alexander and Mary Kendrew

In 1916 the house is recorded as being unoccupied but records also show that it functioned as a officers' mess for certain periods during these dark years.

In the early 1920s, Mr Edward Phillip Oppenheim lived here and it was known as "Reepham House". Although now generally forgotten, E P Oppenheim was during this period a famous novelist who wrote about 150 books, mainly travel, in addition to many newspaper and magazine articles in this country and the USA. To avoid paying certain taxes he moved to the French Riviera in 1925 and his daughter and her husband, Mr and Mrs Ryder Smith, continued to live here until 1928.

Certain local opinions in Reepham have expressed, in recent years, that the house was lived in during the 1920s by the more famous novelist, Henry Rider Haggard. This is now clearly accepted as being untrue although there are a number of comparable points that led to the apparent acceptance of this error of memory.

They were both writing novels at the same time and were famous during the 1920s; both lived in Norfolk (Rider Haggard at Ditchingham) and they both abbreviated their Christian name to the first letter.

Edward Oppenheim's daughter and son-in-law, Mr and Mrs Ryder Smith, lived at The Ollands and the similarity of names (with Rider Haggard) probably, more than anything else, fostered this mistake.

It is highly likely that the two authors were socially acquainted and more than likely that Rider Haggard visited Ollands House but he never actually lived there.

A few years of Mr Oppenheim's occupancy are still well remembered today by some of Reepham's residents. When Mr Oppenheim moved in, he brought with him his own butler and a chauffeur, recalls Wesley Piercy. The butler was a Mr London and he lived in the house (now known as Echo Lodge) which was originally built as the coachman's house.

The chauffeur, Mr Mair, lived in one of the pair of cottages in Norwich Road, opposite St Mary's School. The other cottage was occupied by a gardener, Jimmy Smith, and his wife Polly. Jimmy may have been a gardener but he also had a reputation as a Reepham character and one who was partial to more than the odd half a pint of beer, much to the chagrin of Polly who was always trying to alter his ways to those of a more temperate nature.

The large field known as Mill Hill and now covered by the Moorhouse Close estate was part of The Ollands' grounds. It had been let by the Kendrews to a local farmer for use as arable land but Mr Oppenheim stopped the letting and laid it down to grass. Two or three local boys living in the New Road area went as a deputation and called on Mr Oppenheim to ask his permission for them to be allowed to play on the field. This was kindly granted on condition that they stayed out of the plantation areas. A splendid field on which to play football or cricket after school was gained and at weekends; the Band of Hope football team played their home matches there.

On the fifth of November each year, on this field Mr Oppenheim provided a great firework display which was supervised by the butler and other members of the staff. There were enormous rockets and other fireworks far bigger and better than those that could be bought locally that enthralled the watching crowds, particularly the youngsters who were given sparklers to hold in their hands.

The fireworks stopped after Mr Oppenheim moved but use of the field continued until the property was sold, the kindness offered was greatly appreciated and no-one ever abused the condition concerning entry to the plantations.

When the house was sold to Mr Harmer, he immediately banned everyone from the field and used it for exercising his two riding horses.

Marjorie Gibbs recalled the occasions that she met Mr Oppenheim: "The first time, he came into the shop (the firm of Edward Gibbs and Son, Ironmonger and Seed Merchants of Reepham which closed in 1967), he was wearing flannel trousers, a

blazer and a straw boater and walked about smoking a cigar; quite a personality and looked most elegant.

“He was a writer of mystery and detective novels and in those days, he was widely read, he was probably as popular then as Agatha Christie is today.

“There was a flourishing choral society in Reepham in the early 1920s and the twenty or so members would go carol singing at Christmastime. The first night we visited the large houses in the district having first acquainted them that we would be calling. On the second night we concentrated on various houses in Reepham finishing up at The Ollands. I well remember one Christmas, I think it was 1923, we were ushered into the large entrance hall by the butler, Mr London. We were greeted by Mr and Mrs Ryder Smith who asked us to sing to them. We were then regaled with hot sausage rolls and mince pies together with liquid refreshments. I can well remember Mr Ryder Smith offering me a choice of whiskey, port, sherry or coffee, I very modestly chose the latter only to be admonished afterwards by my friends for not taking anything stronger whilst I had the chance.

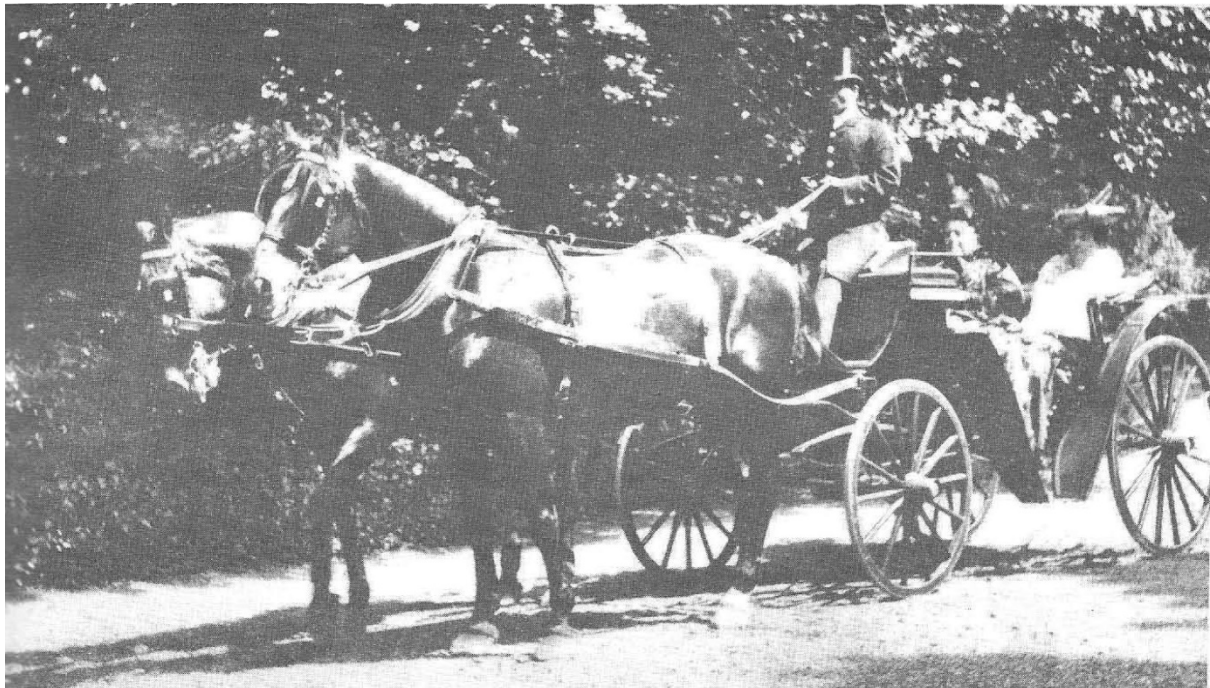
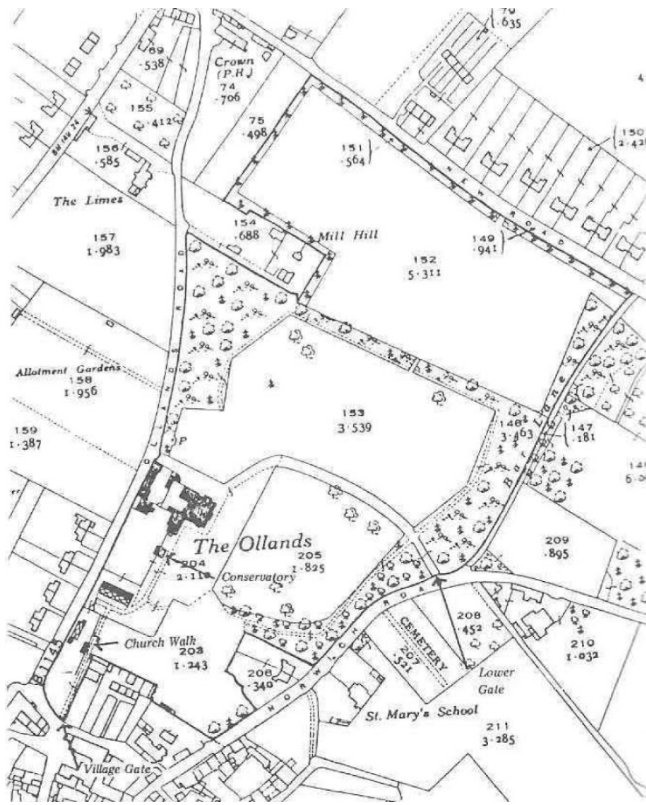
“At about 9.30 pm Mr and Mrs Openheim – the parents of Mrs Ryder Smith – came out from dinner (both in evening dress and he with the inevitable cigar) and they chatted with each of us; this was the second time I met Mr Oppenheim.”

The ownership passed to Mr and Mrs T C Harmer (the Norwich clothing manufacturer) who lived there until 1950 when it was bought and lived in by Mr and Mrs F J Irwin until the late 1960s.

After the Irwins left, the house remained empty. It became prone to vandals and its glory, particularly the gardens, began to fade. There was a demand at this time for residential building land and this large, accessible area in the middle of Reepham was easy prey to the planners and developers. In the early 1970s the house was demolished and grandiose plans for an estate of large, detached houses was commenced. A few houses were built before the developers fell into financial difficulties and for some time the area of half-constructed houses and piles of unused building materials gave the place a blighted air. The work was eventually resumed by other contractors, and happily by the early 1980s the work was completed and the grounds of this former splendid mansion were allowed to settle to their new use.

Many people in Reepham remember The Ollands with fondness and there are still some who can remember the house in its heyday with its formal gardens, conservatory and paths wandering through the large number of mature trees. Very little remains today: Echo Lodge in Ollands Road, a few of the large trees are still there to remind us of the former grandeur and some of the road names will continue the memory of former residents of the house, notably Bircham Road and Irwin Close.

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THE OLLANDS, HACKFORD-NEXT-REEPHAM.



