Historical thoughts of Slaugham Place by Arthur Shopland 2012

One wonders what sort of community existed in the 11th century when the original church was built. There were no roads, only tracks that would have frequently deviated to avoid parts that had become overworked. The inhabitants living in crude huts made from tree branches and sticks covered in earth and turf. With a human life expectancy of 40 years, they were mainly occupied gathering fuel and food. Yet there must have been some sort of social tolerance to allow a few to concentrate on building with stone and timber.

A very old house that I once helped to dismantle had a substantial oak base plate laid over large, roughly levelled stones, in a trench which was barely down to the sub-soil. From there on, it would have been a timber-framed building with probably a wattle and daub infill and a thatched roof. This type of house, was quite luxurious but difficult to heat with a central fire; therefore brick fireplaces and chimneys were introduced. There became more necessary when fire brigade supported, house insurance policies were available.

Brick infill of timber-framed buildings is much admired when the bricks are laid in “herringbone” fashion. I have come to the conclusion that, because green oak timber was used, it shrank until seasoned. Therefore herringbone brickwork, laid in a weak lime mortar, allows the bricks to slip down and wedge against the sides, keeping the panel from becoming loose.

Bricks were rarely manufactured after the Romans had left a century before, but now brick making would become a growing industry and were even imported from the Netherlands. Bricks were made by pulverising wet clay and earth that had been shaped by throwing into a box mould. Two weeks of drying in the open air would be required before being stacked into a clamp, interspersed with charcoal. The clamp would be covered and sealed with clay and earth to control and retain the heat when the inside was fired. All these skilful operations had to be carried out to perfection to obtain a useful brick.

Charcoal making was an art on its own; with small hardwood logs also being fired in a sealed-in and air-controlled clamp to prevent burning. Charcoal produced the hottest fuel until coal and coke was exploited. Charcoal and brick clamps were set up anywhere convenient. There is evidence of brick making on each side of Handcross Hill.

The area between the North and South Downs, like most of southeast England, was once below sea level. It is then assumed that the earth's crust buckled up and was scraped off by a huge ice-flow. The centre came from the deepest part and although the sandstone shows that this was once still part of the seabed it also contains quantities of ironstone and the ridge can be traced from Hampshire to Hastings. The area between the North and South Downs is called the Weald and the central raised section is the Wealden Heights. The exposed cut off of the downs would have shown the chalk and at the foot of these escarpments there is a layer of sand which will continue to supply a useful building material for many years to come. The later earth and clay that had accumulated in the Weald provided a rich source soil for hardwood forest to become established. This ancient forest has been cleared in areas for building materials and charcoal fuel, and has now balanced into one of the most beautiful of English landscapes. This transformation came about mainly because of the industrial period of iron manufacture; all gone now but with the reminder of the many place names containing, Hammer, Forge, Cinderbank, Furnace etc.

Another frequent suffix to Wealden place names is “Heath”; being an area of heather which, until recently, has all but disappeared. There has been much effort at Chailey to restore the heathland and it is proving difficult. Animals would have once been able to use the unfenced areas and heather was harvested to make a difficult but long-lasting thatching material and also used as a base for corn stacks that were once set up at the side of the field ready for the winter thrashing. The “weedy” birch saplings would have been cut out to make faggots for bakers to fire up large bread ovens before placing the bread to be baked by the latent heat from the oven surround. They were also for igniting brick and charcoal clamps. I believe heathland would sometimes benefit from a controlled “burn-off”.

The Establishment of Slaugham Place

Some 400 years after the church was built, Slaugham would "come alive" when the wealthy Coverts arrived who were attracted by the abundant resources of iron ore and charcoal from the woodlands for iron smelting and forging. They may have originated from France but had properties at Hangleton north of Brighton, Chaldon near Orpington, and Sullington between Washington and Storrington.

At Chaldon there is the ancient manor house of Roger de Covert, one of the earliest-mentioned Covert who is buried in the adjacent church of St. Peter and St. Paul.

At Sullington near the church of St Mary there is possibly the house where Sir William de Covert may have once lived. There is a fine, but damaged, effigy of him laid prone inside the church.

WILLIAM COVERT (b. 1494), whose father was John Covert of Sullington (d. 1494), would have chosen the site at Slaugham to build a substantial house to be known as Slaugham Place next to the stream that continued as the river Ouse. I imagine this to be around 1475. The sale of the Chaldon property may have been useful.

By then, to have a moat around a house would be less popular but there are indications that the original house was moated close to three sides. (As with all properties, I always pose the question "What about the drains?" A safe collection area with a bridge in front of the house extended with a high wall and four imposing towers. Two of the towers remain which, with the fashion at the time, could have been quite tall.

There must have been a substantial work force to do the building and to quarry the stone from just the other side of the river. Quarrymen, masons, bricklayers, and labourers would have been in much demand from other similar projects. Brickwork was beginning to show its usefulness. There would have been enough crushed sandstone for sand, but lime would have come from the chalk of the South Downs. Lime is made in a similar way to charcoal. Chalk or limestone is heated up in a kiln where it changes into quicklime often used to break up soil, but needs to be slaked by the careful introduction of water to turn into hydrated lime suitable for mixing into mortar.

JOHN COVERT (1472-1503) was 22 years old when his father died. Henry, a younger brother, had also died and there may have been another brother, William, who had moved to Hascombe.

John married Isabel Pelham. They had three small daughters when he tragically died nine years later. He also had other properties, one being in Essex. His cousin, Richard, was entrusted to take on the Slaugham Place project.

RICHARD COVERT (b. 1547) may have been a little younger than John; he married Elizabeth Fagger. On his memorial in St. Mary's Church he is depicted with three wives to include Elizabeth Meuyle and Jane Ashburnham. There were no children. There was however another woman (wife), Blanche Vaughan from Twineham, who was much earlier on the scene. Perhaps they were amicably separated. They had two sons and a daughter. One son, John, was M.P. for Shoreham in 1529 and was knighted in 1533, the year that his mother died. She requested to be buried at Twineham!

JOHN COVERT (b. 1558) married Elizabeth Cook and they had two sons, Richard and William. Canon J.H. Cooper, vicar of Cuckfield, wrote in 1904 that John also had eight children by Ann Beard of Cowfold and they were subsequently married at Twineham. John is buried at St. Mary's church, as is his wife, Ann, who survived him by 25 years to 1583.

RICHARD COVERT (b. 1547) first married Ann, daughter of Sir Walter Hendley, and they had seven sons and seven daughters, as depicted on the Richard Covert memorial in St. Mary's Church. Also on the memorial is his second wife, Cecily, daughter of Sir Martin Bowes. He also had a third wife, Mary,

daughter of Sir Nicholas Heron. (Three knighted fathers-in-law!) His youngest daughter, Margery, married neighbouring ironmaster, Ninian Calinor. Richard's first son died when a child, so his second son, Walter, inherited Slaugham Place.

WALTER COVERT (1543-1631) was a longtime Member of Parliament, and inherited his father's grandiose ideas for altering Slaugham Place which entailed filling in the moat except on the south side. (This may have been extended to provide extra infill). The boggy undulating northern area was levelled for approximately 40 metres along the whole 100 metres length of the site, backed up with a long higher terrace and boundary wall. An underground culvert was laid through this area from behind the wall to supply water to the remaining south moat.

The two central towers with arched gateway were dismantled to allow a wider gate and the wall now between the extended terrace was removed to open onto the new garden area. The entrance bridge was dismantled and is now in the footpath over the stream.

A major extension was carried out on the east side of the house which enabled a much larger kitchen to be built with a larger hall and other rooms over two floors, and also the staircase that was later removed to The Star Inn at Lewes.

Emphasis was placed on buildings to have the elevations symmetrical. As the building was extended it was therefore necessary to remove the entire facing wall of the north elevation that enabled the five central Roman-arched garden logia to face the terraces. This is why the central courtyard is not in line with the arches.

A small single story room was built in the corner of the north boundary wall over a cellar that could well have been an icehouse. A second floor was added later in 1800.

Walter then provided for a Covert Chapel to be built against the Chancel of St. Mary's Church. No mean task as it would have been necessary to support the roof of the Chancel so that two floor-to-ceiling arches could be installed. (It is recorded elsewhere that, for a while, the Chapel was not connected to the Chancel, which would have made interrogation more difficult) This enabled the Richard Covert Memorial, for which it is said £10 had previously been paid to his stonemason, Flynton, to be set against the west wall. The solid west wall of the Covert Chapel was dismantled when the church was extended and opened out in 1858 and replaced with a full-sized arched opening that had to be sited further westwards to accept the thrust of the dividing arch between the Chancel and the Nave and a smaller arch was put in between the Covert Chapel and the Chancel.

This is why the Richard Covert Memorial, having lost its wall, is "chucked up against a window". It would have been a very difficult work to carry out this operation and we have to accept that it was delicate situation with no alternative.

Walter had a knighted nephew at Boxley in Kent, who was also called Walter and was known as Sir Walter Covert of Maidstone. King James I asked Walter, now 85, to bail his nephew out of debt, of which Walter was already aware.

When Sir Walter Covert of Slaugham died in 1631 there were no close male relatives. Sir Walter of Maidstone had died a year earlier and his wife, Ann, soon after. It was their son Thomas who became heir but he was not particularly interested because the house showed signs of abandonment. He died aged 25 in 1643. It was his 23-year-old knighted brother, John, who claimed Slaugham Place, and who later married Isobel Liegh.

When John came to see Slaugham Place "There was nobody in the house but two men and one woman and a girle." John and Isobel lost three daughters but Ann the oldest of three more daughters became the sole heiress.

Ann married John Morton in 1671, whom was knighted in the same year. He died in 1696 and Ann survived another 25 years until 1714, and is buried at St. Mary's. She would have had a lonely existence with James born in 1676, the second of four sons and the only one who survived to adulthood, as this huge mansion deteriorated through lack of maintenance.

James married Mercy, about whom nothing seems to be known, not even her surname. Because both their children, James and Mercy, died in infancy and also, when her husband died, Mercy had an appropriate name. All alone she held one fourth part of Slaugham Place once held by the Coverts. In 1729 she married Charles Goodwin who died a short while later and, as a widow again, she sold her share of the property to neighbouring Thomas Sergison in 1735.

The pursuit of iron

In the wood on the north side of Slaugham Mill pond there are indications of mining for iron. This is called Hole Wood and the ground appears to have a series of bomb holes. This is where holes were dug to expose a layer of shale containing ironstone. The depth could be just a few feet or more but they probably widened the base of the dig to obtain as much as they dare before the sides collapsed. When the next hole was dug the spoils were used to fill in the previous hole. There is a similar situation in the recreational wood called The Hawth at Crawley. The shale would be taken to the Furnace Pond, made into a clamp interspersed with charcoal, covered and sealed with clay before firing. To provide the intense heat required to melt the iron it was necessary to force air into the clamp with large leather bellows driven by waterwheels with water released from the pond. There would be no let-up once the operation had started so as to keep the heat going. There were instances where men would “tread the mills” if the supply of water began to fail!

The separated iron would fall to a mass at the bottom or the clamp, the result being called a “sow”. At Slaugham these sows would be taken to Staplefield to be re-melted, drawn off and hammered into useable sections for blacksmiths to fashion products like horse shoes, tyres for wagon wheels, and nails. Elsewhere there was a lucrative, select production of naval iron cannons, a very competitive armaments trade but the Carron ironworks in Scotland cornered the cannon production when they produced their famous lightweight and powerful Carronades.

When the field is ploughed where the river crosses at Staplefield, the soil remains black from the Hammer Hill forge that was once there, owned by the Chaloners from Lindfield. There was also a pond here to provide power. It is said that the sites of old furnaces, forges, and pond bays were cleared and the slag and hardcore used for road making. Some iron slag has been stuck on to the wall of Slaugham church at the doorway to the Old Rectory.

Other contemporaries of Walter Covert and Ninain Chaloner were Roger Gratwick and Edward Caryll and they each contributed £100 for the Armada Defence but later quarrelled, with Gratwick being ostracised. Walter also had an association with Edward Culpepper and Walter Burrell at Furnace Green and Worth, Crawley.

The manufacture of iron was very competitive with ironmasters siding up with or against each other. They even accused one another of stealing the fish from their ponds! The heraldic coats of arms, shown around the garden logia arches at Slaugham Place, depict some sixteen of the families that that were associated by marriage with the Covert family. Their crest of three martlets and fleurs-de-lis was halved with others.

The difficulties of transporting iron using oxen between furnace, forge, and to the coast is evident today where some lanes being in hollows from the erosion on hills with the soil thrown onto the banks. The collapse of the industry came when cheaper foreign imports were delivered by sea, and more so when in 1709 Abraham Darby used coke, derived from coal, to fire a blast furnace to produce iron. This was at Coalbrookdale in Shropshire, where there was an ample supply of fuel and ore. A depression would have set in over The Weald and recovery would have come from agriculture where the forest had previously been

cleared.

The eventual closure of Slaugham Place as habitual dwelling

Once the heavy large Horsham stone roofing tiles became displaced, water would soon affect the timber products in the roof and parts of most rooms. Fortunately the heavy, elaborately carved, Jacobean staircase was taken and reconstructed in the Star Inn in Lewes where it remains, now part of the Town Hall.

The chimney of the Moat House shows a date of 1742, indicating that when Thomas Sergison came to Slaugham Place in 1735, he immediately built this house with materials from the ruins. The facing stones with tooling marks were from the original house and some are recycled into Walter Covert's extensions and alterations, many having been dismantled from the north elevation. One found its way to Rock Cottage in the village and others can be seen in the mill and nearby buildings.

Some may have been taken for use in Cuckfield Park by Thomas Sergison, but the suggestion that he removed the towers from Slaugham to build into the imposing four-tower gatehouse is unlikely because the tower quoins are of brick and those at Slaugham are stone.

Up on the hill overlooking the ruins, another house was built which was extensively over-built with a fine brick building that took the name of “Slaugham Place” in the late 1800s. In the 1960s, when the estate was divided off, it was made into a restaurant and hotel and the name was changed to Slaugham Manor. Of course this name stuck when taken over by the Sussex Police….

In 1930, Viscountess Wolseley visited Slaugham Place and wrote of the delights of the garden within the ruins, but, even then, was distracted by the noise of main road traffic! She had earlier met Mrs. Charles Sergison, so Slaugham Place had remained with the Sergisons from 1735 up to at least WWI.

The then owner, Mrs. Blundell, and her father, Sir Francis Ashley Corbett, continued to enhance and maintain the garden that included many alpine plants. The extensive rows of yew hedges were trimmed to perfection in straight geometric lines.

The Slaugham Place ruins and the Moat House, recently modernised from the farm bailiff's house, passed to a British government diplomat, Sir Alan Urwick, in 1976, who was unable to fully concentrate on the upkeep and maintenance of the ruins and garden until he retired in 1995. The Irish yews each side of the path to the house were planted in around 1900. By 1985 they had grown so large that it was difficult to walk between them so they were drastically cut back. Unfortunately, the next three summers were dry and some never recovered. Replanting has been tried but the deer have eaten the new delicacies! In fact all the yew hedges had suffered from growing wild but they now receive annual attention.

Because the ruins are historically listed, English Heritage was consulted regarding the condition of the structure. Weeds, climbers, and trees had grown into and expanded within the walls and had to be removed. The instructions were to dismantle only that which was necessary and sympathetically rebuild as before to a condition to last a further 100 years. Attention was needed on top of all the walls and the building. The moat had to be drained to rebuild the stone face work. The top metre of the kitchen chimneybreast was removed and a reinforced concrete beam cast over the top before rebuilding. The site was afterwards safe to allow the visiting public. The cost of the present grass and hedge cutting, together with upkeep of the climbing and rose display gardens are supplemented by hire receipts from functions of marquee wedding receptions held throughout the summer months. I hope that “The Renaissance of Splendour in Decay” quoted in Country Life 1964 by Mark Girouard is now stabilised.