

Wadhurst History Society

Summary of a talk given by Marilyn Greatorex on 9th May 2013, on “Standen and Life in a Victorian Household”

Standen was built for the Beale family at the end of the 19th Century. Mr Beale, a London solicitor with railway interests, had decided to have a house in the country that he could use for his family and pursue his interests in riding and shooting, but wanting to be within an hour of London. He found three farms near East Grinstead and recruited Philip Webb as the architect, with a brief to incorporate what was possible from the farm buildings and to build the new house of Standen.

Work began in October 1892 and the family's first weekend there was in August 1894 when the children's ages ranged from 9 to 24. Their own families would follow. Mr Beale retired in 1905 and died seven years later. It was a lovely environment for children, hide and seek in the lovely garden, story telling alongside creative activities, a large rocking horse, Dobbin, that is still there, and a specially created little room upstairs for one of them that gave all sorts of opportunities for mischief. There was also a strong interest in embroidery and books everywhere.

Similar care was shown to the servants, in the design of their rooms, their Christmas traditions and even continuing to pay them when they were away in the Great War, half pay initially and then a quarter as the war dragged on. The rules themselves were simple, handwritten on a piece of a paper. There were 14 indoor servants and 28 outside. Work began at 5.30am for the scullery maid, relaying the fires and stoves, finishing by cleaning the copper for the following day at 11.30pm.

The family was very much part of the local community, giving a great loan to the WI for a new building, being commissioner for the Red Cross and the Guides and helping at the local hospital and serving in the Great War, during which time the house welcomed Belgian refugees and recuperating officers.

Marilyn explained each room, the billiard room where the men repaired after breakfast to write letters and read newspapers while the housework was done elsewhere, or after dinner with their cigars; the central hall: the drawing room to which the ladies retired; the toilets (gentlemen's downstairs); the 21 bedrooms; the bathrooms, just 2 as they preferred to get to the warmth of the bedrooms as quickly as possible; the conservatory and the lovely garden. An anecdote accompanied each room, such as the children's diversion of the Nanny while they disposed of unwanted artichoke soup.

Philip Webb had designed each room and its furnishings with great care. He included central heating and electricity. Its cost was £18,062, but he died in penury in 1915.

David James expressed the thanks of the society for a most fascinating evening.