

Sandbach History Society
Report of the February 2023 meeting
Graham Dodd

The History of Crewe Hall was the subject of a talk given by Graham Dodd, trustee at Nantwich Museum, at a meeting of Sandbach History Society. He said that the presentation was developed from research carried out by the late Ray Gladden who had worked at the hall from 1929 to 1984.

Mr Dodd said that the manor of Crewe dates to Celtic/Saxon times and had various names relating to a fish weir, trap or dam. In 1066, Hugh de Avranches, 1st Earl of Chester, gave the manor to Richard Vernon but the Saxon lord, Osmer, retained the tenancy. It consisted of 1½ acres of meadowland and woodland measuring about 3 miles by 1½ miles and valued at 5 shillings.

In about 1200 the first manor house was constructed, the land being part of that of the Praer family of Barthomley. It passed by marriage to the Foulehursts in 1319 and was occupied by them for the next 200 years. After two other owners it was acquired by Ranulph Crewe in 1609.

Ranulph was born in Nantwich in 1558, the son of a successful tanner. He was educated at Nantwich Grammar School and Shrewsbury School and followed a career in law and politics. In 1614 he became MP for Cheshire and was elected Speaker of the House of Commons and in 1615 he commenced building a hall at Crewe. He was created Lord Chief Justice by King James I but in 1626 was removed by Charles I for his refusal to endorse a loan without the consent of parliament. In his enforced retirement he seems to have divided his time between his house in London and the Crewe estate.

A few years after the completion of the hall in 1636, civil war broke out. The Crewe family were Parliamentarians and the hall was used as a garrison. In December 1643 the Royalists laid siege and the Parliamentarians were forced to surrender. It wasn't until February 1644 that the hall was re-taken and Sir Thomas Fairfax requisitioned the hall as a garrison with 400 troops.

Mr Dodd described the Jacobean hall as it was in 1650: a square building with central courtyard, tall chimneys and pavilions on each corner which looked like fortifications. There was a small lake and a pigeon cote.

Ranulph Crewe died in 1646 and was interred in the Crewe chapel at Barthomley. The male line died out in 1684 and the hall passed to the Offley family when Sir Ranulph's great-granddaughter, Anne Crewe, married John Offley of Madeley Old Manor, Staffordshire. The marriage brought land and mineral wealth, and doubled the wealth of the Crewe family overnight, said Mr Dodd. Their eldest son, John, took the name Crewe.

Anne Crewe's great-grandson, also John Crewe, inherited in 1763 and was created 1st Lord Crewe. In 1768 he became MP for Cheshire. He married Frances Greville, a famous beauty and hostess, and Crewe Hall gained a reputation for lavish hospitality with prominent figures of the day being entertained there.

But, in the 18th century, the hall was beginning to fall into disrepair. When work was carried out by John Francis, around 1780, it included the addition of a service wing and improvements to the interiors. Humphrey Repton was commissioned to construct a new lake and to create approach drives to the hall.

John, 2nd Lord Crewe, was the black sheep of the family, said Mr Dodd. He was a gambler and scandalised the family by contracting a bigamous marriage. He was cut out of the estate which went to his sister Elizabeth. She was, apparently, a very effective manager and in 1828 the estate holding was about 8,000 acres across Cheshire.

In 1837, at the age of 25, Hungerford, 3rd Lord Crewe, inherited Crewe Hall. He engaged the architect George Latham, of Nantwich, to carry out some improvements including the installation of warm air heating. In the same year he also employed architect Edward Blore to undertake more extensive alterations which included covering-in the courtyard to create a central hall and upgrading the Jacobean decoration. Extensive landscape gardening was carried out by William Andrews Nesfield.

The family had links with Barthomley church from earliest times but it became regarded as too remote and Hungerford had St Michael's church, Crewe Green, built to a design by George Gilbert Scott in 1857/58. He also financed the building of Crewe Green School, the architect being Thomas Bower of Nantwich.

The Grand Junction railway arrived in the area in 1837 with a line linking Birmingham and Warrington. Hungerford welcomed the railway in principle but refused to sell any land for the permanent way and was in denial about the development of the nearby town, said Mr Dodd.

Disaster struck in 1866 when a fire started in the long gallery. It gutted most of the entertaining rooms – only the dining room was spared – but, critically, the shell of the building remained intact. Most of the valuables, including paintings, were saved. The work of restoration was given to EM Barry, son of Sir Charles Barry, the architect of the Palace of Westminster. The contractors were Cubitt and Co. who engaged leading artists and craftsmen of the time to carry out the specialist work such as Clayton and Bell for the stained glass and James Maby for the strapwork ceilings. The damaged rooms were refurbished but the restoration was extensive and included the addition of a tower to accommodate a water storage tank and even a private gas works to provide a “purer gas-light”. A new north-west wing was constructed; the roof of the central hall was raised and the floor paved with a pattern of coloured marbles; new fireplaces were installed; and outside there were new terraces, driveways and ornamental gates. The restoration was far more elaborate than the original plans and the budget was well over-

run. When the hall was reopened in 1870 the total expenditure amounted to about £150,000 (equivalent to about £15M).

Hungerford Crewe never married and on his death in 1894 his nephew Robert inherited. In 1895, the Crewe title was revived for him as an earldom and he later became the Marquess of Crewe. He carried out some improvements to the hall including the installation of electric lighting. Robert was a Liberal politician and statesman and Crewe Hall continued as a venue for fine living and entertaining. In 1913 there was a three-day royal visit by King George V and the Queen who visited Crewe Works and the Potteries and were entertained by Foden's band.

The Crewe's left the hall in 1922. Cheshire County Council considered using the hall as their headquarters but eventually settled on a new building at Chester. In 1936 the building was acquired by the Duchy of Lancaster. Crewe Town Council considered developing an airport at Crewe and in 1937 they bought 343 acres of the estate but the plan was abandoned at the outbreak of war.

At the start of WW2 the hall was taken over by the War Department where it was used as a troop training camp and later a repatriation camp for Dunkirk troops. In 1942 it became a US army camp and in 1943, until the end of the war, it housed a prisoner of war camp for high-ranking German officers who had their own orchestra, choir and theatre as well as various sports facilities, said Mr Dodd.

After the war, in 1947, the hall was leased to Calmic who were later taken over by The Wellcome Foundation. They carried out a major renovation in 1974. The hall was sold in 1998 and today the Grade I listed Jacobean mansion is a successful hotel, restaurant and health club.

A booklet, "The Crewes of Crewe Hall" by Ray Gladdon, is available from Nantwich Museum www.nantwichmuseum.org.uk

John Higgins