



A TREASURED HISTORY

ETTINGTON PARK  
HOTEL  
STRATFORD-UPON-AVON, WARWICKSHIRE

## EARLY ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT

Ettington Park is a spectacular neo-Gothic mansion situated six miles from Stratford-upon-Avon in the picturesque Stour Valley.

Behind the impressive mid-Victorian Gothic exterior of the house we see today lies a very complex building and family history of the Shirleys. They are one of Warwickshire's oldest families whose lineage, by uninterrupted male descent, can be traced back over a thousand years to the Domesday Book of 1086 and beyond.

Archaeological evidence also indicates that the site has been a centre of human habitation for at least 2,000 years. Roman coins, brass ornaments and large quantities of pottery have been unearthed and it is quite possible that a Roman villa existed on the site. The fact that the great Roman road, the Fosse Way, passes through the neighbouring village of Halford also makes it very probable.

The name Ettington, originally spelt Eatendon and later Eatington is derived from the old English or Anglo-Saxon words, "Ea" meaning water and "Don" meaning ascending ground or meadow. The name itself gives us a very precise description of the site as "ascending ground or meadow near a river." E.P. Shirley is responsible for the present day spelling of Ettington.



At the time of the Norman conquest and according to the Domesday Book the manor of Netheror Lower Eatendon consisted of a church, a mill, 1,700 acres of land and the village adjacent to the manor house. The manor was held by Saswalo or Sewallis, a Saxon Thane of Henry de Feriers, his Norman overlord. The Shirley family are descended from Sewallis, their earliest recorded ancestor and confirms the family's Anglo-Saxon origins.

The church mentioned in the Domesday record was founded and endowed by Sewallis and dedicated to the Holy Trinity. His son Henry extended the foundation by the addition of a chantry and chapel dedicated to St. Nicholas. The chapel served as the family mausoleum. The church was rebuilt at the end of the 12th century in the Norman style and incorporated the remains of the earlier Saxon church.

## A RICH HISTORY

Ettington manor has gone through many alterations and extensions over the centuries. In 1641 Sir Charles Shirley carried out extensive repairs which most likely resulted in the old manor house being largely demolished and replaced by a new smaller house rebuilt from the salvaged materials. In 1740 George Shirley, an army officer, made a series of alterations and additions to the house which included a new entrance hall - now the library. He redecorated the dining room which originally was the hall of the old house and also had a stable block built nearby. In 1767 he added a new great drawing room with its elaborate rococo ceiling and a bedroom over it.

In 1795, another George, Shirley, a member of Parliament for Warwickshire, "inclosed" the estate by Act of Parliament. The village was demolished and the inhabitants removed to a new site, two miles away at Upper Ettington, where a new church and village was built. The mill was demolished and the church dating from 1198 partially demolished, leaving only the tower, the walls of the nave and the south transept chapel containing the family mausoleum. The bells and furnishings from the church were transferred to the new church at Upper Ettington. The remains of the old village cross and village graves can still be seen today.

In 1820 the entrance hall was gothicised and converted into a library. Overhead a new storey was added. A new chimney piece was installed in the library, a copy of one at Windsor Castle, and surmounted by a gothic stain-glass window retrieved from a redundant chapel near Chipping Campden. At the same time a new conservatory was built.

In 1858, Evelyn Philip Shirley, "finding the property in much need of repair", decided to carry out a major rebuilding programme. He opted for the services of John Pritchard the Llandaff diocesan architect. Pritchard regarded himself as a "true disciple of Pugin". The work lasted from 1858 to 1862 and involved taking down the external walls and rebuilding around the core or interior of the old house.

The house was completed with the heightening of the roofline and the addition of tall chimneys and contrasting round and square turrets. A long gallery was built on the second floor and features a carved star window based on a 15th century Venetian design. The gallery staircase in the square tower is made from teak and acacia wood grown on the estate. A carved Saracen's head forms the end-piece of the banister rails.

The entrance hall was also enhanced by the building of a new glass vaulted cloistered conservatory of a classic 13th century French design, as well as a vaulted carriage-porch leading into the cloister from outside.

The dining room, now the Oak Room, was also remodelled to a design by Prichard. Wood panelling by Charles Steinz of London was used extensively and was inlaid with the coats of arms of the many families into which the Shirleys have married over the centuries.

A private domestic chapel, also designed by Prichard, was built adjoining the dining room after 1865. This has painted glass windows depicting the parable of the Publican and the Pharisee. On the side windows are the coats of arms of eight of E.P. Shirley's closest friends, with the motto: "True happiness consists not in the multitude of friends, but in their worth and choice".

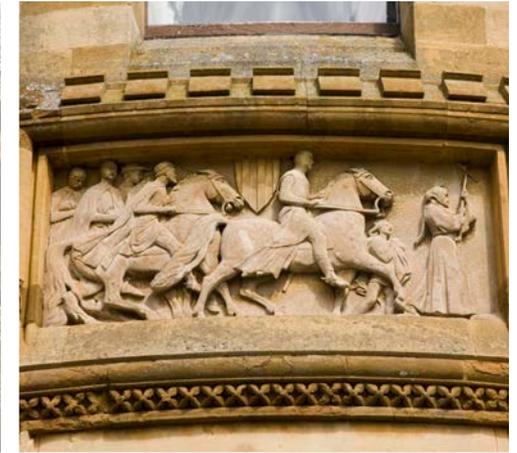
A brass plate on the wall reads as follows: "In the eight hundredth year from the Norman conquest of England, when Saswalo the Saxon was lord of Eatendone, his descendant, Evelyn Philip Shirley, built this chapel for the

praise and worship of Almighty God, in whose sight a thousand years are but yesterday." Unfortunately, the chapel was severely damaged by fire in 1979 and the decorative wall paintings lost. On the exterior of the chapel are two verses from the 145th psalm on a band around the building.

Outside in the newly landscaped gardens the 17th century summer loggia was purchased nearby from the demolished Coleshill Hall and re-positioned in the gardens with adjoining glass houses (the glass houses are sadly no longer with us).

The overall result of Prichard's design and work was a magnificent building which is perhaps the best example we have today of the French and Italian Gothic style of architecture promoted by John Ruskin and skilfully adapted by Prichard for domestic purposes. The striking visual impact of the building on the eye was achieved by the use of layers of contrasting stone -yellow limestone from Gloucestershire, ironstone from Edge Hill, blue lias from Wilmcote and white lias quarried locally.

In keeping with the antiquarian interests of E.P. Shirley the house was further



embellished with scores of statues and carved stone friezes by Edmund Clarke of Llandaff according to the designs of the well-known sculptor H. H Armstead. The stone friezes are placed over the windows and illustrate important events in the family's history. It can be truly said that the walls of Ettington Park tell a story of outstanding architectural and historical interest.

The neo-Elizabethan oak mantle-piece installed in the entrance hall, now the reception area, was carved by Wilcox of Warwick in 1857. It features two shields bearing the ancient and modern coat of arms of the family. The three carved figures represent Faith, Hope and Charity. Incorporated into the design are two secret panels.

The Shirley family motto "Loyal je Suis" is carved over the window-heads in reception. Note the shamrock design incorporated into the family motto. This is indicative of the fact that the family motto comes from the Irish side of the family. The Shirleys acquired their Irish estates at Lough Fea, Co. Monaghan in 1600 when Henry Shirley married Lady Dorothy, the daughter and co-heiress of Robert Devereaux, Second

Earl of Essex and favourite of Queen Elizabeth 1. The marble pillars framing the windows in Reception came from Lough Fea. The Irish estates have accounted for the bulk of the wealth that financed the expansion and rebuilding of Ettington throughout the 19th Century.

E.P. Shirley died in 1882 and his son Sewallis was the last member of the family to live at Ettington. For most of the 20th century and indeed to the present day, the family have resided in Ireland. After his death in 1912, the house was leased to private individuals, at first to Mr. Robert Guinness and then to Constance, Duchess of Westminster.

In 1935 it became a nursing home and during the Second World War a prisoner of war camp for Italian prisoners. For a brief period Ettington Park was the venue for a night club/ disco. Unfortunately, in 1979 a fire severely damaged the house. It remained locked up and left to deteriorate for three years. However, in 1983 the house and forty acres of land were leased to the Isis Hotel Company and after a multimillion-pound restoration programme Ettington Park opened as a luxury hotel.





## A POLITICAL AND SOCIAL HISTORY OF THE SHIRLEY FAMILY

The Shirleys of Lower Eatendon Manor, later Ettington, are the only family in England whose lineage, by uninterrupted male descent, can be traced back over a thousand years to the Domesday Book of 1086 and beyond. They are also a prominent Anglo-Irish family who acquired their estates at Lough Fea, Co. Monaghan in 1600 during the reign of Queen Elizabeth 1. The family is renowned for its military prowess and has played a major role over the centuries in many of the important events of English history.

Today it is managed and operated by Hand Picked Hotels, a company that specialises in the running of unique country house hotels. The Shirley family are regular visitors to the hotel.

The quiet opulence and beautiful surroundings of Ettington Park offers visitors the opportunity to relax and indulge themselves while experiencing a very unique piece of English cultural heritage and history.

The earliest historical reference to the family appears in the Domesday Book of 1086. The record states that "Saswalo (Swallis) holds of Henry de Feriers seventeen hides (1,700 acres) in Etendone. The arable employs twelve ploughs, four are in the demesne (Home Farm), and there are ten bondmen (slaves), there are thirty-two villeins (freemen), with a priest, twenty-five borders (cottagers), one soldier and two thanes. They have sixteen ploughs, a mill pays eighteen shillings, and there are thirty acres of meadow." The reference to a priest indicates the presence of a church. This was founded and endowed by Saswalo and dedicated to the Holy Trinity.

Around 1200 Sewallis's grandson, Sir James changed the family name to "de Shirley" after another manor in Darbyshire. The Normanisation of the family name was an astute political manoeuvre on his part. After all, following the Battle of Hastings in 1066 and the conquest of England, it was obvious that the Normans were here to stay and if you cannot defeat them you might as well join them and become an integral part of the new political and social order.

During the reign of Henry III Sir Sewallis de Eatendon served in the Crusades.

In 1278, Sir Ralph inherited the estate and restored the manor house that had fallen into a state of disrepair. Sir Ralph also had the distinction of being elected the First Knight of the Shire, returned for the county of Warwickshire, to Edward I's "model" Parliament that met at Westminster in 1294.

Saswalo or Sewallis had two sons, Henry and Fulcher. Henry had no issue and Fulcher's eldest son Henry, somewhat surprisingly, sold his birthright to his younger brother Sewallis. Ironically, it is from Henry that the now extinct house of Ireton was descended. It was during the Civil War period in later history that the Iretons were staunch Cromwellians, while the Shirleys were Royalists.



He also served King Edward I, also known as Longshanks, in a military capacity in his conquest of Wales and Scotland and which ended in the defeat and deaths of the Welsh prince Llewelyn, his brother David and the Scottish leader William Wallace, better known to us as Braveheart. He received his knighthood at the famous Battle of Falkirk 1290, "where he did wonders and astonishment, to the admiration of the beholders." Sir Ralph was rewarded for his military services by being appointed the King's administrator for the midland counties of England. He died in 1327 and his tomb can be seen in the south transept chapel where he lies with his wife Margaret de Waldershef. Their effigies are now well worn and eroded by the centuries.

Sir Ralph was succeeded by his son, Sir Thomas Shirley. Around 1340 Sir Thomas fought in the Holy Land against the Saracens. He killed a Saracen commander in combat. A Saracen head is incorporated into the family crest to commemorate the event and it is also depicted in the sculptured panel above the eastern bay window. Sir Thomas was pardoned under the great seal of Edward III for causing the death of his neighbour, John Wareyne of Loxley, in a dispute. He died in 1363 and was succeeded by his son, Sir Hugh Shirley.

Sir Hugh was killed in the Battle of Shrewsbury on the 20th July 1403, fighting for King Henry IV. He was one of four knights who dressed in the king's royal armour to create confusion on the battlefield and was slain by the king's foe, Henry Percy, a fearless knight nicknamed Hotspur. The encounter is immortalised by Shakespeare in his play "Henry IV".

However, in the play Shakespeare uses dramatic licence and he has Sir Hugh killed instead by Douglas.

Quote: *King Henry: "Hold up thy head, vile Scot, or thou art like never to hold it up again! The spirits of valiant Shirley, Stafford and Blunt are in my arms."*

Records show that Sir Hugh celebrated the feast of Easter at Ettington a few months prior to the Battle.

Sir Hugh's son, Ralph, also distinguished himself in 1415 fighting for King Henry V at the siege of Harfleur in the war against the French. At the Battle of Agincourt, he was a principal commander and had a personal retinue of seven men at arms and twenty-three archers. In this battle a hugely superior French army was defeated with a loss of 7,000 knights and gentlemen and 120 great lords. English losses did not exceed 1,500 men, thanks to the use of the longbow.

In 1487, Sir Hugh's grandson, Sir Ralph Shirley was dubbed knight for his valour on the battlefield of Stoke in 1487 by the first Tudor King, Henry VII. After the Battle of Bosworth in 1485 and the defeat of Richard III, the Battle of Stoke consolidated Henry's position by defeating the Yorkist pretender, Lambert Simnel. Henry married Elizabeth of York thereby uniting the houses of Lancaster and York and bringing to an end the War of the Roses. The white and red roses were united to give us the symbolic Tudor rose we are familiar with today. Sir Ralph, married the heiress of the ancient family of Staunton of Staunton Harold, Leicester and the Leicestershire estates became the principal residence of the elder line of the family. It is also from this marriage that the Earl Ferrers of today came.

In 1541, Sir Francis Shirley leased Ettington Manor to the Underhill family for a term of 100 years. A notable friend of the Underhills was William Shakespeare. It

was from the Underhills that Shakespeare purchased the Great House in New Place, Stratford-upon-Avon for £60 and it was the house where he died on his 52nd birthday on the 22nd April 1616. His home was later bought by a clergyman, Francis Gastrell. The numbers of visitors calling on him to view the house annoyed him and in 1759 he had the house demolished. He also cut down the famous mulberry tree planted by Shakespeare in the garden. The citizens of Stratford-upon-Avon were outraged.

Shakespeare was part of the social scene at Ettington and probably hunted there with the Underhills. He would have been well aware of the Shirley family's history and their connections with the Battles of Shrewsbury and Agincourt and which later featured largely in two of his plays. In the south transept chapel there is an epitaph to Anthony Underhill who died in 1587 and which is ascribed to Shakespeare. It was originally painted on a wooden tablet which, unfortunately, is now lost.

When the Underhills left Ettington in 1641 after the expiry of the lease, some members of the family participated in the early colonisation of New England. A plaque placed in the church tower by the Anglo-American Society commemorates the event.

In 1616, Henry Shirley, also married Lady Dorothy, the daughter and co-heiress of Robert Devereaux, Second Earl of Essex and favourite of Queen Elizabeth I. Robert led a disastrous military expedition to Ireland in 1599 to try and subdue the Irish chief, Hugh O' Neill. He arrived in Dublin with an army of 16,000 foot and 1,300 horse. By the time he marched north to confront O' Neill, some three months later, the Lord Lieutenant's army had dwindled

to a force of 4,000 men. This was due to sickness, dissipation of his forces and losses in military skirmishes in the South. To the great annoyance of Queen Elizabeth he negotiated a truce with Hugh O' Neill. Recalled in anger by the queen, Essex left Ireland to meet his death by the headman's axe on February 25th, 1600. The marriage of Henry to his daughter Lady Dorothy acquired his Irish estates at Lough Fea, Co. Monaghan, for the Shirleys.

Around the same time from 1599 to 1603, three Shirley brothers, sons of Sir Thomas Shirley of Winston, in Sussex, a younger branch of the family, made a very important contribution to the defence of Persia against the Turks. The two younger brothers, Sir Anthony and Sir Robert, led the Persian army against the Turks and successfully defeated them. They were also instrumental in instructing the Persian army in the use of artillery. In 1603, Sir Anthony led a successful Persian naval assault on the Turks in the Island of Zea. Shah Abbas, King of Persia, appointed Sir Robert his ambassador to the court of King James I. He died in 1628 and is buried in the Church of St. Maria Della Scala in Rome.

In 1641 Sir Charles Shirley took possession of Ettington after the departure of the Underhills and returned to the house just prior to the Civil War. The Shirleys had remained Catholic and were staunch loyalists as is evident by their family motto "Loyal Je Suis". Sir Robert Shirley was committed to the Tower of London by Cromwell for plotting the restoration of the monarchy. He died there in 1656 and according to rumour was poisoned on Cromwell's instructions.

After the restoration of the Monarchy in 1660, Sir James Shirley was appointed Court Dramatist to Charles II. Subsequently, Robert Shirley was created Lord Ferrers of Chartley in 1677 and during the reign of Queen Anne, Viscount Tamworth and Earl Ferrers.

In 1678 William Croft, the celebrated composer of English cathedral music, was born and christened at Ettington. His father William Croft, had acquired a short lease of the manor from Sir Robert. His hymn to the tune "Ettington" is still to be found in the English Hymnal today.

Sir Robert, the First Earl Ferrers, married Elizabeth Washington, who was the daughter and heiress of Laurence Washington of Garesdon, Wiltshire, grandson of Robert Washington of Northampton, from whom the first president of the United States is descended.

Robert has also got the distinction of having gained a place in the "Guinness Book of Records" for having fathered 57 children. He had 17 by his first wife, 10 by his second, Selina, daughter of George Finch of the City of London and another 30 illegitimate children.

When Sir Robert died in 1717 he divided the estates between the eldest son of the first marriage and the eldest son of the second marriage. The Staunton-Harold estates in

Leicestershire were left to the eldest son of his first wife and Ettington and the Irish estates to the eldest son of his second wife. As a result, he alienated the Ettington Branch of the family from the older line of the family based at Staunton-Harold.

Every great family has its black sheep and for the Shirleys this was Lawrence, the

Fourth Earl. He was found guilty of having killed his estate steward, Mr. Johnson, "in a paroxysm of rage". Lawrence apparently had an ungovernable temper that at times amounted to insanity. He was hanged at Tyburn in 1760 and was the last English nobleman to be hanged for a felony. According to some accounts he was hanged with a silk rope in deference to his rank. The trial and execution of the Earl marks a milestone in legal history. It clearly demonstrated that nobody, irrespective of rank, was above the law.

During the Crimean War 1854 -56, General Horatio Shirley, a colonel of the 88th Connaught Rangers was "Line Officer" overseeing the guns and the Rangers at the siege of Sevastopol against the Russians. At the Battle of Alma his life was saved by his prayer book which he always carried with him. A bullet lodged in the centre of it. After his return from the Crimea the book was exhibited in the family museum at Ettington.

In 1820 Evelyn Shirley left his mark on Ettington when he rebuilt the library in the Gothic style. Despite his ultra conservative opinions he was a model landlord, particularly on his Irish estates, where he showed great concern for the welfare of his tenants.

However, it was Philip Evelyn Shirley who was responsible for the magnificent neo-Gothic building we have today. He appointed John Prichard of Llandaff to carry out a complete rebuilding and improvement programme. This lasted from 1858 to 1862.

In August 1859, workman dismantling an outer wall overlooking the garden made an unusual discovery. They found a live toad in a cavity within the wall. They were mystified by their find as there appeared

to be no access from the outside, or any way air could penetrate through to the cavity from the outside. It was concluded that the toad must have gained access to the cavity during previous building work that had taken place in 1740 and was

somehow unnoticed and accidentally sealed in. This of course meant that the toad had somehow survived being sealed into the wall and had lived in a state of suspended animation, or hibernation for 119 years! The workmen kept the toad in a large glass bottle. It refused all food and survived for another three months before eventually dying. The incident was commemorated at the time by a carving of the toad in a stone. The carved stone was then placed in the new outer wall close to the spot where he was found. Is the toad of Ettington the original toad in the hole?

E.P. Shirley died in 1882 and his son Sewallis, who founded the Kennel Club of Great Britain, was the last member of the family to live at Ettington. For most of the 20th

century and to the present day the family have resided mainly in Ireland at Lough Fea.

After the death of Sewallis in 1912 the house was leased to private individuals, at first to Mr Robert Guinness and then Constance, Duchess of Westminster. The portrait in the Great Drawing Room is of Adelaide Maria, known as "Dodo" to her friends and family. She was the daughter of Richard Samuel Guinness, M.P. for Deepwell, County Dublin. She married Edward Cecil Guinness, First Earl of Iveagh in 1873. He was the grandson of Arthur Guinness, founder of the Guinness Brewery. The portrait was painted in 1885 in Dublin and cost 800 guineas.

In 1983 the house and forty acres of land were leased to the Isis Hotel Company and after a multimillion-pound restoration programme Ettington Park opened as a luxury hotel. Today Ettington Park is owned and operated by Hand Picked Hotels, and its guests create the next chapter of a fascinating history.





**Ettington Park Hotel**

Alderminster, Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire CV37 8BU

01789 450123

[ettingtonpark@handpicked.co.uk](mailto:ettingtonpark@handpicked.co.uk)

[handpickedhotels.co.uk/ettingtonpark](http://handpickedhotels.co.uk/ettingtonpark)

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