

## Coombe House – History

That there has been a building on this site since ancient times seems reasonably evident, but the nature of the early building is not clear. Coombe, or Combe, is mentioned in a deed of 1249<sup>i</sup>. In what is now a basement room there are two massive stone pieces of a medieval fireplace<sup>ii</sup>. It has been suggested that the current basement level may have been the principal floor. Various stories claim that the ‘original’ building was damaged by fire or damp and was partially ruined as a consequence.

Around the house are some extensive tunnels that are reported to stretch north and east from the site of the house. One suggestion was that they were connected to the tunnels in Dean St Crediton which are supposed to connect to the church. It seems more likely that the tunnels were something to do with the water supply at Coombe. In 2001 a medieval bressummer was identified over a culvert just below the house. There used to be some sort of pump house near the road above Coombe with sleepers over the top. An engineer, who worked for K J Stoneman, was remembered many years ago talking of going down this pit to carry out some repairs on a pump. Whether this connected to any of the tunnels is not clear. Chris Morriss, whose parents lived at Middlecombe from 1950 to the 1980s, studied geology at university and came back around c1960 and having developed an interest in potholing asked permission of the then landowner, Mr Palmer, to investigate the tunnels. Two of them accessed the tunnels but at what point is not recorded. He reckoned that they were able to progress a couple of hundred metres before finding their path blocked. He described it as a narrow tunnel interspersed with a number of shafts. It had been cut through hard red sandstone. It is believed that the end of a tunnel had been visible from the cellars. <sup>iii</sup>

The earliest documentary record of anyone living at Coombe is recorded in the Church Rates between 1653 and 1679 showing that William Snell, at Coombe, was the ratepayer. Major TW Venn in his work “History of Crediton” claims that the Sillifant family acquired the property from the Snells as a result of marriage. This is Venn’s rather romantic appraisal of their arrival.

***“About 1641 a Sullivan, or perhaps a whole family of them driven out of Ireland by the rebellion, when 5,000 Protestants are said to have been massacred, came to rest at Buttisford (Buttisfar) Coleford. One of them engaged the affections of a Widow Snell of Coombe (adjoining farm) so that she became Dame Sullivan, or rather Sillifant. The story is that the local people forced the dialectical “Sillifant” name upon the couple.”***

Venn's reference to “Widow Snell” has since proved incorrect. The Lysons brothers in their *Magna Britannia*<sup>iv</sup> stated that the Sillifant family had acquired Coombe c 1677 following a Sillifant marriage with a member of the Snell family, who were then in residence. This information had been gathered from the Rev William Bagnall, curate in charge of Colebrooke. No Sillifant marriages occur in the registers around this period, however a license was granted in February 1681/1682 by the Bishop of Exeter for a marriage between a “THOMAM SYLAVANT” of Colebrooke and “ELIZABETH SNELL”. There is little doubt that it was this union that brought the Sillifants to Coombe.

It now seems that Elizabeth was the daughter of William. Timothy Sillifant makes his first appearance as church ratepayer in 1687. This was the first itemised account since 1679 so it was unclear when Timothy became the taxpayer. The Hearth Tax of 1662 shows that Coombe had only one hearth at that time. The house was relatively modest – raising up a new principal floor over the original ground floor by inserting brick vaulting into the stone walls to raise the level. The 17C building was principally built of cob and is likely to have been thatched. The cob walls remain and have been incorporated in subsequent development.

According to Devon Historians Polwhele and Lysons Timothy Sillifant's grandson William was responsible for the building of Coombe House, however he died in 1795. He may well have had built the early Georgian extension which paralleled the existing cob building but his will with a final codicil of Nov 1794 that itemised some of the contents of rooms appear to show that at that time he was living in a 3 or 4 bedroom house. All William's 7 children predeceased him, (the eldest being only eleven), as did his wife, so he was succeeded by his nephew John (1765-1844), who would seem to have been responsible for the later Georgian rebuilding, probably prior to his marriage in 1797 to Mary Ann Prideaux of North Tawton. A new East wing was added, the south front embellished and made symmetrical with the addition of a new room to the SE corner and a small west wing built.

The daybooks of a Georgian builder, Mr Prawl, in the Crediton area<sup>v</sup> show that Mr Prawl's firm was working in the 1790s some about 3 miles from Crediton, at Cume (sic) and Knoll(sic). Parts of Knowle at that time was also owned by the Sillifants. These daybooks were part of a quantity of Berry and Vincent material dating from about 1790. Mr Prawl's daughter married a Mr Berry who took over the business on the death of his father in law in the 1820s. Mr Berry joined with Vincent later and Berry and Vincent remained in operation until recently. However it seems unlikely Mr Prawl was the principal contractor as the daybooks indicate that the *“work carried out was somewhat specialised and did not amount to complete buildings. It ranged from stonemasonry, cob (rammed earth) wall building and paving to roof slating and tiling, plastering and colour washing. Most of it was heavy work and as such it roughly conformed with one part of the threefold division of labour to be found later among nineteenth century country builders. This comprised the trades of mason, carpenter and plumber-glazier-decorator (Rose 1952). Only Prawl's decorating activities were slightly at odds in this respect<sup>vi</sup>.”*

An image from around 1850 captures the house during John's son's lifetime (another John Sillifant (1798-1868)).

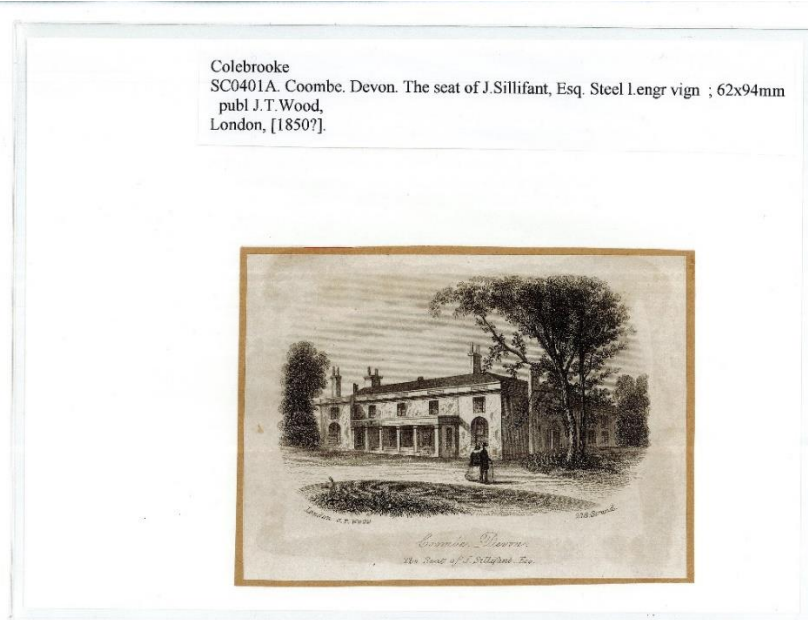


Figure 1 Coombe House 1850

John (junior) had five sons, the eldest being John Woolcombe Sillifant (1823-1869), who succeeded him, as well as Henry, Francis, Charles and George. Francis became a surgeon lieutenant in the Indian

army, married late in life and had no family. Charles became vicar of Weare Giffard and went on to have 12 children including three sons. All three sons died in their early twenties unmarried. John and Henry both travelled and found their way to Western Australia where both married Australian brides and became involved in the newly formed West Australian Company land settlement schemes. Henry died at the age of 46. John W spent some time as a magistrate at Freemantle during the 1850s but continued to travel to and from India in connection with Australind, and it was during one of these trips that his son and heir Arthur Onslow was born at sea in 1851. Another son Harry was born in WA in 1854. He finally returned to Devon c1858 but sadly his wife died in 1859. Meanwhile his youngest brother George had also made his way to Australia and had settled in South Australia where he married a vicar's daughter and became the father of twins a boy and a girl John and Mary.

Arthur Onslow Sillifant (1851 – 1922) inherited the estate at Coombe after the early death of his father and when he was 18. Young Arthur inherited a house that he would probably have considered gloomy and dated. When his grandfather had inherited the estate the main part of the house was only some 40 years old and the published engraving suggests that John jnr was proud of his family seat. The short period that John W owned the house argues against modernisation so the 18 year old Arthur, now an orphan, inherits a large estate and a house that reflects the taste of his grandfather or even great grandfather. His geographically closest relatives were his uncle and family in Weare Giffard. In 1873 Arthur purchased a commission in the Royal North Devon Hussars however a military life isn't for him and he resigns his commission 2 years later. Thus it seems likely that at some stage between 1875 and 1886 he modernised the family home. (the 1886 OS map shows the modernised foot print).

The influences on Arthur's redesign of the house are difficult to determine. It might be fanciful but there is a possibility that part of the genesis for the remodelling of the South front could have been from Calcutta.



*The photograph of the Town Hall [Calcutta] 1865*



*Figure 2 Great Eastern Hotel Calcutta 1870*

Arthur spent the first 8 or 9 years of his life in Perth WA which, at the time, was a hick frontier town without much built history. His family then travelled to England, which would have involved a voyage to Calcutta and then a change to a ship that took them via the Cape or the Red Sea to England. In either case a stay in Calcutta would have been necessary. As the returning heir to a Devon estate John W, and his family, would have taken rooms in one of Calcutta's best hotels – could this, Arthur's first exposure to a life of elegance and luxury, have stayed with him and influenced his design decision? After small provincial Perth it must have been a shock. The Great Eastern Hotel was newly built and the sort of establishment his father might have chosen and a 9 year old Arthur might have remembered later when he came to redesign his family seat.

It seems probable that Arthur dealt directly with a builder (Berry & Vincent perhaps) and left them to interpret his wishes. As a consequence some of the outcomes are compromised. The modernisations were quite extensive. He built a large billiard room on the western end of the front

of the house. Building this required the relocation of the Georgian kitchen (the billiard room blocked the basement windows and the south facing windows of the west wing). He altered the south front by building double storey bay windows instead of the Georgian [portico] and introducing pilasters and a second level of columns. He raised the ceiling heights of the 2 principal rooms and eliminated chimney breasts. He added a service porch to the East wing and introduced back stairs so that servants could be separated from him and his guests. It is probable that he changed the main stair and he certainly replaced the fireplaces in the principal rooms.

Having done all this he embraced travel and seems to have spent some years wandering the British Colonies before He married his 1<sup>st</sup> cousin, Gertrude Emma Sillifant, daughter of the Rev Charles W Sillifant, of Wear Gifford. The couple's marriage is recorded at the British Consulate in Cannes, France in 1880. At some point the house was let out – Iver Macpherson was living at Coombe House in 1891<sup>vii</sup>. By the date of the 1901 census Arthur and Gertrude were living at Stockwell Manor Silverton where they had apparently been for a few years. They then moved on to Culm Leigh in Stoke Canon by the time of the 1911 census. They had no children. In 1919 Arthur sold part of the Coombe Estate, then about 2,060 acres, including properties in the parishes of Colebrooke, Claunaborough, Bow, & Crediton<sup>viii</sup>. He died 29 July 1922, in Poole, Dorset<sup>ix</sup>.

The house and remaining estate were inherited by his closest living male relative – his uncle George's son John who lived in Adelaide. John came to live at Coombe in 1923 but, obviously life as a country squire didn't suit so in 1924 the estate and house was offered for sale. The house remained unsold until 1928 when, in the agent's particulars it was described as "*A very fine Country Residence*" with, on the Ground floor "*Hall, Drawing Room, Dining Room, Library, Billiard Room, School Room, Gun and Strong Rooms*" with, on the 1<sup>st</sup> floor "*8 Principal Bed and Dressing Rooms, Bath Room, Lavatory*" and on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor "*3 Nurseries, 2 Box Rooms and Attics*". The Domestic offices were "*all on the Ground Floor and consist of Servants' Hall, Kitchen, China Pantry, Back Kitchen, Dairy, Scullery, Larder, etc.*"<sup>x</sup>

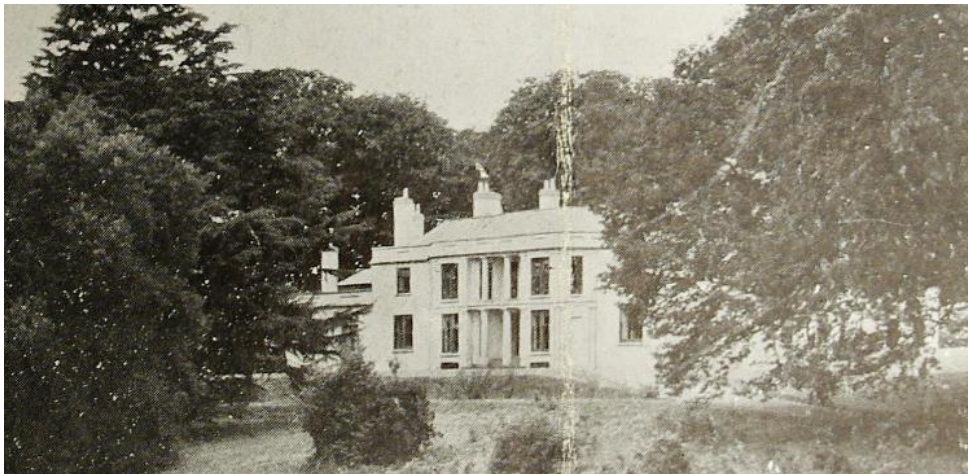


Figure 3 Coombe 1928

The rump estate of ~120 acres and the house, lodge and coach houses and stables was purchased by Mr & Mrs C Ford who owned the property until 1946. In the early stages, at least, money seems to have been tight for the Ford's – on Friday 7th March 1930 this advertisement appeared "TO LET, now

or Lady-day, an 8-ROOM HOUSE; every convenience; tennis court, garage. Rent £50 year. Close to main road, 2 miles from Crediton. —Apply, C. Ford, Coombe House”<sup>xi</sup> and the next year they were offering the lodge house to let for £30 per year<sup>xii</sup>. This cash flow difficulty suggests that the Ford’s were unlikely to have engaged in many significant changes to the property. Changes that may have dated from the Ford’s tenure was the creation of a domestic kitchen to the LHS of the main stair and the creation of a bathroom in the ground floor of the east wing by cutting off 1/3 part of the NE room.

In 1946 the estate was purchased by Mr A. F. Colville-Hyde who lived at Coombe until 1951. At the time of the 1951 sale the house was described as “A Dignified Country Residence of Charm” with a “Pillared Portico, Vestibule, Lounge Hall *“having a fine oak staircase..to the First Floor”*, Lounge, Dining Room, Study and Billiards Room with *“Domestic Apartments”* of Store Room, Larder, China Pantry, Servants’ Hall, Staff Bathroom, Old Kitchen; *“Airy and Bright”* Kitchen with Cellarage below while the particulars list 6 bedrooms and a large room *“capable of affording a further bedroom”* plus the East Wing *“easily divided from the main house”* with Entrance Porch, Hall, Sitting Room, Dining Room, WC, Dairy, Kitchen and Larder with a separate staircase to 4 bedrooms<sup>xiii</sup>.



Figure 3 Coombe 1951

It is believed that the Estate was purchased by an investor who was primarily interested in the mature trees in the grounds and the avenue. These were felled and the estate sold to Mr & Mrs Palmer who lived at Coombe and farmed the estate until the mid 1960s when they moved into the lodge house and used Coombe to store agricultural produce including grain in the living room<sup>xiv</sup>.



*Figure 4 Coombe May 1968*

In 1970 the house and 5 acres were sold to a group of investors to operate as a hotel which involved considerable modifications to the house including subdivision of the larger bedrooms, installation of some ensuite facilities, a commercial kitchen in the back kitchen, public lavatories in place of the 1950 kitchen just to the west of the main stair, a new back door opening and, possibly, a moving of the main staircase to facilitate the new back door, a bar in the basement, and conversion of several secondary rooms on the ground floor into disabled bedrooms. While operating as a hotel it has been suggested that one operator raised funds for some repairs by selling off a fireplace from one of the principal rooms<sup>xv</sup>. During this time the turret stair, noted in the 1965 listing, was removed and the rooms converted into clearers rooms and a new outside laundry built – possibly replacing the old diary. By 2000 death watch beetle and deterioration of the roofs in general led to the closure and sale of the hotel. The house was acquired by “Harmony in Devon” and underwent a comprehensive refit to allow the opening of a residential therapy centre in 2002. This involved substantial reconfiguration of the public areas to incorporate dining, therapy, kitchen and scullery and additional bedrooms in a secure facility. Some years later the business was sold and it became, variously, a facility for autistic children, a secure facility for young women who had been sectioned under the Mental Health Act and latterly fell under the Schools Division of the Priory Group. It was put up for sale in 2017, having been empty for 2 years.



Figure 4 Coombe 2017

---

<sup>i</sup> Colebrooke History By Neville Enderson (<http://www.colebrooke.org/colebrooke-history.pdf>)

<sup>ii</sup> Allen van der Steen, Architect

<sup>iii</sup> Neville Enderson (by email)

<sup>iv</sup> General history: Gentry', Magna Britannia: volume 6: Devonshire (1822), pp. CXXXII-CLX

<sup>v</sup> Devon Record Office (DRO) 1937B A1-7 1937B A8 1937B A9-12 1937B A13-15 1937B F1

<sup>vi</sup> Genesis of a General Contractor: a Georgian Vernacular Builder Transformed by Christopher Powell 1999

<sup>vii</sup> Monday 16 February 1891 Exeter and Plymouth Gazette

<sup>viii</sup> Friday 15 August 1919 Western Times

<sup>ix</sup> shareholders register of the Great Western Railway Co

<sup>x</sup> J Hannaford Son & Southcombes Ltd North Devon Record Office B703/57

<sup>xi</sup> Exeter and Plymouth Gazette

<sup>xii</sup> Friday 24 April 1931 Western Times

<sup>xiii</sup> Rickeard, Green & Michelmores Auction brochure 4<sup>th</sup> May 1951 Devon Record Centre

<sup>xiv</sup> David Pennington

<sup>xv</sup> David Collins