

A brief (personal) 'fill-in' note on Milton Heath House

My husband, Tony Tantram, went to work for Mactaggart & Evans in 1953, at the Sondes Place Research Institute (SPRI). This was a Scientific Research Consultancy with contracts mainly for government departments. [Tony worked there on Fuel Cells for the Ministry of Fuel and Power]. About this time it was being taken over by Steel Brothers, but Mactaggart continued as MD(?) for a little while.

When M & E acquired Sondes Place for their laboratories from J J Cartier, Milton Heath House was included as an obligatory part of the sale. After the war Milton Heath had become partly derelict, I believe it sustained damage from a stray bomb, leaving some of it open to the elements which facilitated the entry of Dry Rot.

Employees at Sondes Place found the local housing situation very difficult and canvassed the management to convert Milton Heath House into flats at reasonable rents.

The Company's Social Club was already using most of the big reception rooms, and further ground floor (and basement) space was in use as laboratories and offices by Peterlite Products, another Steel Brothers Company, which also ran a pilot plant project for making 'Perspex' type plastics in the adjoining old stable outbuildings. The company agreed to do the basics of conversion, leaving the prospective tenants to do the decorating and a little more besides. Six flats were designed and the building made good. Apparently some gigantic fruitbodies of the Dry Rot fungus were discovered during the building work, and hopefully treated successfully! One small flat was still possible on the ground floor, three were constructed on the first floor, and two from the servants quarters on the second floor.

We were offered 'Flat 2' about a year after tenancies began, so thankfully moved into a first floor flat where the original tenants had done most of the hard work. All we needed to do was decorate a large sitting room that had once been the Housekeepers. [Our flat can be seen in your photograph 'South Aspect 1921' It occupied all the 'thinner width' section of the house on the left of the picture, with the largest double-windowed gable our sitting room].

The House had once boasted a tennis court, but alas, a period when it hosted Mactaggart's chickens had thoroughly destroyed its surface, and allowed the weeds to flourish. Again the management were persuaded to finance the professional, this time the final part, of an all-weather surfaced tennis court after we, the residents and other staff members interested, had spent considerable time and effort in digging and carting away to get back to undisturbed, still usable, foundation materials. It was good to have an accessible tennis court on the doorstep, and we all often played until really poor light made line judgements very problematical. SPRI obviously also fielded a cricket team, with the pitch on the right hand side of the (then) drive to the house.

We left late in 1962, by which time the Fuel Cell work had resulted in the formation of a separate company, based initially at the BP site at Sunbury.

Gradually the laboratory and workshop activities were wound down, and Steel Brothers used Sondes Place as their HQ and Milton Heath as accommodation as per your account.

The Which? testing contract was set up in the Fifties, not long after the Consumers Association was founded. Again the work, and some of the staff involved moved to specific CA premises (in Herts.?).

Ray Tantram 21st. June 2007