

## Postern Heath - Tonbridge



Postern Heath has been situated in the open fields outside of Tonbridge for over 300 years. The Grade II listed home features a 17th century timber interior, including a fine Stuart staircase, with an early 18th century Queen Anne facade. The land was originally part of the parks to Tonbridge Castle and former landowners including the Sir Ralph Vane, 6th Baron Bergavenny, Sir Peter Vanlore, and Thomas Weller, who lived at Tonbridge Castle, and is believed to have been responsible for the building of Postern Heath.

### **Tonbridge Castle Park**

Postern Heath was originally part of the park lands attached to Tonbridge Castle, first built as a motte-and-bailey by Richard Fitzgilbert after the Battle of Hastings in the 11th century. By the 16th century, Tonbridge Castle and lands were in the hands of the Stafford family. A survey of the estate, taken in 1521, when owned by Edward Stafford, Duke of Buckingham, is the first clear evidence to show Postern as part of extensive parkland of Tonbridge Castle.

### **Tudor Postern - Sir Ralph Vane**

By 1542, Sir Ralph Vane was appointed 'Keeper of the Postern or Inner Park of Tonbridge Castle at a salary of 2d a day'. Vane was a supporter of the Duke of Somerset during the minority of Edward VI, and enjoyed favour from Somerset and the King, gaining lands and estates. However, his support for Somerset backfired in the intrigues of the Tudor Court and in 1551 he was charged with conspiring to murder the Duke of Northumberland. He was executed on Tower Hill in February 1552. By 1553, Queen Mary I granted Postern Park to Henry Nevill, 6th Baron Bergavenny (whose daughter ended up marrying Sir Thomas Vane, ultimately bringing the lands back to the Vane family). However, back in the open fields of Postern, it was 'disparked' in 1574 and land began to be leased for the first time.

### **Sir Peter Vanlore and the Earl of Sterline**

By the 17th century, the manor of Tonbridge, and with it Postern Park, had passed to Sir Peter Vanlore, and in 1676 it was divided amongst his daughters, including Susan, wife of Sir Robert Croke. The following year, Sir Robert and Dame Susan sold part of Postern Park to William Eldridge. At this time, the deeds refer to a 'piece of land Postern Heath in occupation of Thomas Weller gent and owned by the Earl of Sterline'. However, no earlier documents reveal the details of this earlier division to the Earl of Sterline, but it may have been a section of the estate that passed to one of Sir Peter Vanlore's daughters.

### **Land divisions and Thomas Weller**

A further deed refers to the 'conveyance on mortgage of barns, lands etc, part of late disparked park called the Posterne [sic] Park, 140 acres...now in occupation of Thomas Weller, gent and late in occupation of John Wickens". The document goes on to describe further plots of land all related to a lease to Thomas Weller dated 7 Nov 1679. Thomas Weller was not only leasing lands and property in Postern, but he also acquired extensive property in Tonbridge, most significantly Tonbridge Castle. Weller was a lawyer, but was most prominently involved in an uprising during the Civil War. He was a parliamentarian and in 1643 was involved in a skirmish outside of Tonbridge.

### **Building Postern Heath**

The documents and deeds from the 17th century do not clearly mention a house, cottage or building as part of Postern Heath at that time and a construction date of the house has proven difficult to establish. Architectural evidence and the process of land division during the mid 17th century suggest it was in the mid to late 17th century that the first 'Postern Heath' house was built. Records from the National Buildings Record also suggest that Thomas Weller, who leased Postern Heath in 1679, built the house during the 1680s. However, a survey taken in the 1960s states the original part of the house was built in the 16th century. The central oak staircase has also been dated to around 1680. A full architectural survey is likely to be the only way to verify the exact details of the first construction. But, despite the discrepancies in dating the original construction, the symmetrical brick facade with sash windows, along with extensions to the rear of the house have firmly been established in the early 1700s.

### **Eldridge and Weller in Postern Park**

Back to the historic documents, the transfer of land during the late 17th and early 18th century continues to be unclear, with references to a number of purchases and leases during the 1680s and 1690s in which few buildings are clearly identified. William Eldridge, who had first purchased part of the estate from Sir Robert Crooke in 1677, slowly acquired further property in Postern Park, but local historian, Mr. Dumbrook explained in a report in 1955 that descendants of the Weller family still owned Postern Heath in 1752.

### **John Eldridge and Postern Heath**

John Eldridge, descendent of William Eldridge, is recorded as purchasing further land in Postern in 1728 and he left a portion of the estate to his sons, William and John. It appears that John Eldridge the younger inherited the land and property of Postern Heath in 1759, although at this time the specific boundaries are still unclear.

### **James Eldridge West**

Land tax records from 1780 show that large parts of the former Postern Park were owned by James Eldridge West, although a section, including Postern House, had also passed to William Mugridge, son of William Eldridge. The confusion between the names of the homes and the occupation of the different farm buildings continues into the 19th century, as the land tax records show all the houses in one list, making it difficult to be clear of the occupants of each house. The tithe survey, taken in 1836, shows the entire estate owned by James Eldridge West, although again identifying each house is difficult. Having said this, it appears that Postern Heath, under the name of Postern Farm was home to John Chalfield and his family.

### **John Chalfield - farmer**

The census in 1841 confirms the occupation of John Chalfield at Postern Farm, showing 70 year old John as a farmer, with his wife Mary, also aged 70, along with their unmarried daughter, 30 year old Ann. The Chalfield's had one live-in female servant, along with four farm hands. At the time of the 1851 census, John and Mary Chalfield were still in the house, both 80 years old and farming 240 acres, with the help of six men and six boys. However, also in the house were their daughter and son-in-law, Ann and John; visitor, Mary Chalfield; and two servants.

### **Mr Waite's Farm**

The next census, in 1861, records the house as 'Mr Waite's Farm' and was the home of William Waite and his family. He was 21 years old and recorded as 'Farmer 250 acres, employing 7 men and 2 boys'. He was in the house with his sisters, 18 year old Mary Anne and Winnie, only three years old. It is worth noting that at Postern Park Farm, down the road, was William's mother, widowed, Frances Waite, along with a further six children, including two year old Emily.

William Waite was still at Postern Heath in 1871, but by 1881 the house had become the home of 24 year old James A. Waite, another son of Frances Waite. In fact, Frances was now living with James, along with his sister, 29 year old Elizabeth and two live-in servants. The 1891 census shows Postern Heath continued to be the home of James Waite, now married to Felicia, and in the house with his sister, Elizabeth and three visitors and one general servant. At the turn of the 20th century, Postern Heath was still the home of James and Felicia Waite, but now with two children, nine year old John and seven year old Margaret. Also in the house were three servants, a governess, cook and a groom.

### **Edwardian Postern Heath**

By the time of the 1911 census, James A. Waite had moved to Postern Park Farm, where his mother had formerly lived and Postern Heath had become the home of a young farmer, Harold Arthur Reeves. He was recorded in the house with no servants, but a boarder, Edward Rhodes, whose occupation was recorded as 'stock exchange, London'.



**“The Most Attractive Georgian Farmhouse”**

In 1913, great change came to Postern with the sale of the entire estate. This gave tenant farmers an opportunity to purchase the land they farmed and this included Harold Reeves, who had leased the farm since 1909. The sales particulars from October 1913 describe Postern Heath Farm as ‘The Most Attractive Georgian Farmhouse...well situated on rising ground, with Tennis Lawn in front’. At this time the water supply was from a well and a key feature, ‘the telephone is installed’. Mr Reeves bought the farm and continued there until around 1934 when it passed to his son, Pat Reeves. Pat Reeves followed after his father and continued at Postern Heath for many years, until he passed away in around 1958-59. Pat’s widow then sold the farm on to John Waite of Postern Park, bringing the Waite family back to Postern Heath since James Waite left in 1909.

**Heinz and the 20th century**

However, John Waite did not hold on to Postern Heath for long, as he soon sold it to Mrs Heinz, wife of Jack Heinz of the world-famous Heinz Company. Mrs Heinz was the first to begin modernising some elements of the house, but by 1965, the house had sold once again and it became the home of John Farrington, a retired mining engineer from Nigeria. Farrington also did not stay long, as by 1969 he had sold the house to John G. Phillimore, who had already been living in the neighbouring Postern House since 1952. Mr Phillimore continued to make improvements to transform the house into a comfortable family home. However, he continued to live at Postern House while he rented Postern Heath, and by 1988, the house had once again been sold.

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**Postern Heath**

<http://www.chestertonhumberts.com/details.dtx?propertyid=DBA3E7DB-7F54-43E5-BB4B-22C5CCA6C085>