

The 19th century house, designed by Thomas Hopper

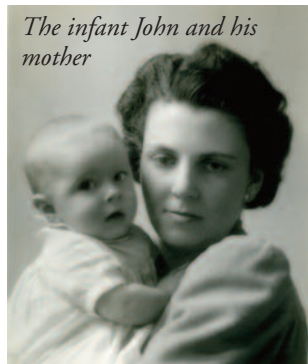
On Saturday I paid a visit to my birth-place, **Danbury Palace** in Essex. You may think that my family were the local Lords of the Manor, but the truth is rather more prosaic.

The origins of Danbury Park (as it has been for most of its existence) are Saxon. Given to Philip de Mandeville by William the Conqueror, it appears in the Domesday Book before passing through many hands over the centuries, including the Saint Clere family (later Sinclair) in the 13th century and the Mildmay and Ffytch families in the 16th–18th centuries.

In 1826 it was bought by John Round who demolished the old house and built the house we see today, designed by Thomas Hopper. In 1845 it became the seat of the Bishop of Rochester – hence a ‘palace’– until the abbey of St Albans became a cathedral and Danbury part of its diocese.

At the beginning of the Second World War in 1939, a busload of expectant mums arrived (unexpectedly, it seems!) at Danbury Palace from the east end of London. The owners, General and Mrs Wigan, kindly put them up in their drawing room. The Palace became a wartime Maternity Hospital, the Wigans living in one wing and the maternity ward in the ballroom – the mothers fed with produce from the gardens and milk from the estate’s herd of Jersey cows.

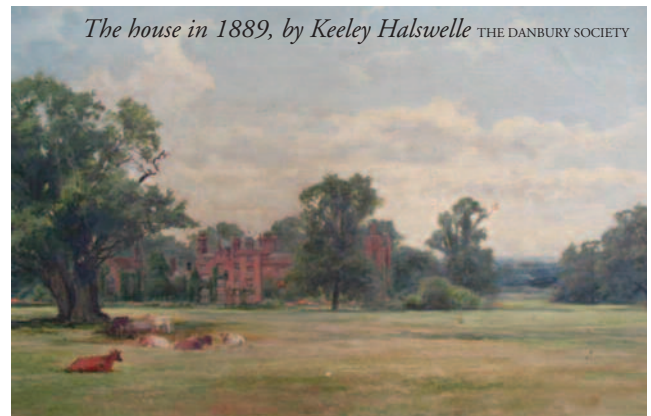
My father, who was a Captain in the Royal Artillery, had



The infant John and his mother

been shuttled around the country with his unit between evacuation from Dunkirk and departure for the Middle East. My mother moved with him, but in the summer of 1941, expectant with me, she was with my widowed paternal grandmother who lived on Danbury Common, which was how I came to be born at Danbury Palace.

The records of births at the Palace have been lost, but Marie Polley, whose sister was secretary to Mrs Wigan, has set up a register of ‘Danbury Palace Babies’, and Saturday was the occasion of the latest reunion at which 44 ‘babies’ were present, amongst them the 2,000th baby (and one of the last) to be born at the Palace, who brought with him the layette presented to his mother by the Queen on the day of his birth!



The house in 1889, by Keeley Halswelle THE DANBURY SOCIETY

Danbury’s Church of St John Baptist, mainly Victorian after the attentions of George Gilbert Scott, has three medieval effigies dating from the end of the 13th century. This one, perhaps of a member of the Sinclair family, has the crossed legs which denote a crusader. Amazingly, although the effigies look like stone, they are carved from oak.



In 1946 the Wigans left the Palace, and it became successively a civil defence training centre, a technical college, a conference centre, a wedding reception venue and part of Anglian University until a new campus made it redundant. Attempts have since been made to convert the house into apartments, but these are in abeyance, and the Palace is gradually but sadly deteriorating.



My photos were taken by squeezing through a gap in the chain-link security fencing, threatened with CCTV and guard dogs.

The medieval deer park which surrounds the house, resplendent with ancient oaks and chestnuts, is happily open to the public.