

COWSLEY HOUSE

This article was first written some years ago after Vince Mills told me he had once lived at Cowsley House and knew it well. Sadly Vince passed away early this year, but his memories endure. Peter Cholerton, 2020.

If you have lived in Derby for many years, you will almost certainly have heard of Cowsley Road, but do you remember Cowsley House, the old farmhouse which once stood some 400 yards to the north of Nottingham Road, a short distance outside the old Chaddesden parish boundary? In this article Peter Cholerton and Vince Mills recall something of the history of one of Derby's forgotten buildings.

A few years ago Vince and I were discussing the fate of some of the old houses of the neighbourhood and our talk chanced to stray down Nottingham Road as far as Cornwall Road and Cowsley Road. When Vince mentioned that he had not only family connections to Cowsley House but also photographs of it as well, we thought that some account of this little bit of old Derby might interest a wider audience.

Today many of us are familiar with Nottingham Road as it makes its way out of Derby towards Chaddesden, but had we been making the same journey early in the reign of Queen Victoria, say around 1840, the view before us would have been radically different. To begin with there was no Racecourse, just an area of open ground called the New Pastures. Continuing on in the direction of Chaddesden a handful of properties were scattered along the right-hand side of the road but there were virtually none to the left. A few yards past Chequers Lane the main road was firmly barred at Cowsley Field Gate, a toll-gate which ensured that travellers had to pay the appropriate fee to the toll-keeper who lived in the adjacent purpose-built cottage. Beyond that, a walk of a minute or two would bring us to the foot of Chaddesden Hill – not yet called Cemetery Hill – but before we began our ascent you would see on the left-hand side a long track stretching away into the distance, and looking a little more closely you might perhaps be able to pick out the chimneys and roof of a solitary building – this was Cowsley House, sometimes also known as Cowsley Field House.

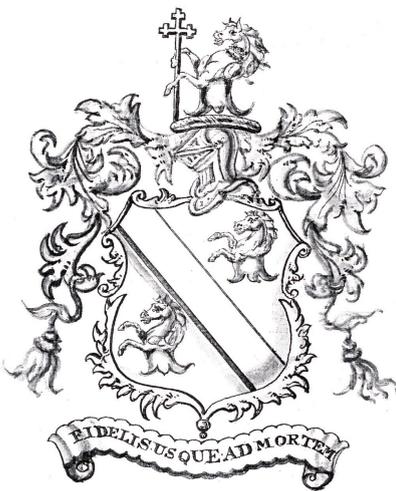


The front (south) elevation of Cowsley House as seen from the long drive leading up to the property from Nottingham Road, c.1925.

Although not recorded in Domesday Book, Cowsley is an ancient name, for in the Wolley Charters kept in the British Library is a deed dating back to the time of King Henry III (1216-1272), in which one William de Ashover of Derby granted a lease to William Caym of Derby, of two acres of arable land in the town, of which half an acre lay 'super Collisleye' (on Cowsley) abutting onto the fields of Chaddesden. Thanks to this early document we may infer that the origin of the name 'Cowsley' owes nothing to bovine farm animals but was actually derived from the personal name 'Colle.' Indeed, the ancient Darley Abbey Cartulary has several references to an individual called Colle and his family dating to the years around 1240. As a place name Cowsley therefore means 'Colle's clearing' and since the land between the Derwent and Erewash rivers once formed part of a forest in mediaeval times, the name probably commemorates the man who first cleared an area of ground hereabouts in order to grow arable crops.

What may well be an early reference to Cowsley House occurs in a *Derby Mercury* advertisement of 1816, when a house and three fields of land totalling nearly fourteen acres was available to let at Cowsley. An almost identical advertisement in the same newspaper seven years later now informed interested parties that 'The Buildings have been put into good repair.' For much of Queen Victoria's reign Cowsley was associated with the Pountain family, and we encounter them in 1841, when the farmhouse at Cowsley Field occupied by Mr. Thomas Pountain was for sale by auction together with fifteen acres of land, including Great and Little Cowsley Closes, Pond Close and Road Close. The auctioneers expounded upon the desirability of its situation thus: 'This Property is beautifully situated upon a high and dry elevation, overlooking the town of Derby, within 500 yards of the Derby and Nottingham Turnpike Road, from which it is approached ... and from its contiguity to the Corporation property there is little or no probability of being approached by buildings of any kind.' The auction was evidently unsuccessful for early in 1842 the house and its land was back on the market again – this time for sale by private treaty.

The Pountains continued to live at Cowsley after the 1842 sale, though whether this was as tenants or owners is unclear. Mr. Pountain was a busy man – for many years he was a wine-merchant connected with the Derby firm of Cox, Pountain and Bowring, as well as a farmer, churchwarden at the newly-built St. Paul's Church on Chester Green and a popular Conservative representative for Derwent Ward on Derby Council; indeed in 1860 he thanked those voters who had just re-elected him to serve a third term.

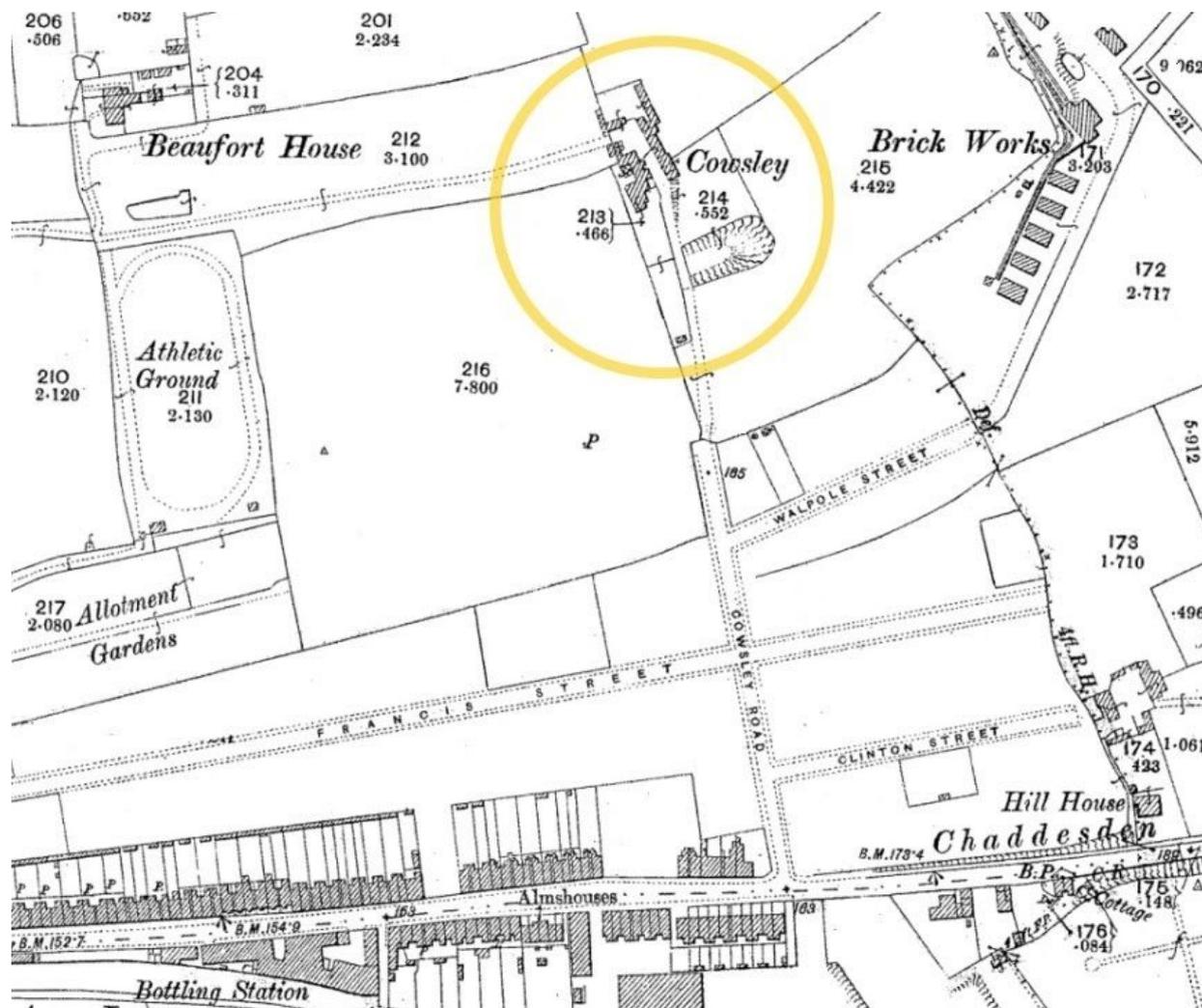


When Thomas Pountain died at 'Cowsley Field House' in 1867, aged 70, his son, John T. Pountain, a captain in the Royal Sherwood Foresters, continued to reside at the family home, which he now called Cowsley House. Interestingly, the 1871 census shows that William Cox, who was Pountain's coachman, did not live-in at Cowsley House, but occupied Old Toll Bar House a short distance away on Nottingham Road. John T. Pountain was subsequently promoted to major and, like his father, served as churchwarden at St. Paul's Church, Chester Green, but in the summer of 1879 he left Cowsley to take up residence at Barrow on Trent Hall. His coat of arms is pictured here, the heraldic description being as follows: *Azure a bend between two demi-horses erased argent. Crest: a demi-horse erased argent supporting a cross crosslet fitchée or gorged with a collar dovetailed azure.* The Latin motto may be translated as 'Faithful unto Death'.

Seemingly the major retained an interest in the area of his childhood home for he and other wealthy local men such as Sir Henry Wilmot and Frederick Girardot, both of Chaddesden, were shareholders in the Cowsley Freehold Land Society, which in 1884 was selling numerous individual building plots (at 6s 6d per square yard) on its estate of some fifteen acres fronting Nottingham Road and extending over the southern reaches of Cowsley Road.

Major Pountain's influence in this development scheme is plain to see, for in the map accompanying the prospectus, three new roads are marked out as Thomas, Frances and Barrow Streets. Thomas Street (named after the major's father) eventually became Walpole Street; Frances Street (after his mother) was later changed to the masculine form of the name and is now Francis Street; and lastly Barrow Street (named from the village in which the major then resided) became Clinton Street!

Cowsley House itself was to let again in 1879, this time with nineteen acres of ground, and over the next quarter of a century was to be occupied by a succession of families – including those of William Aulton, a veterinary surgeon, in 1881, and then Michael Evans, a young architect, in 1891. Major Pountain died at Teignmouth in 1889, aged 47, but was laid to rest in Nottingham Road Cemetery not far from his old family home. In 1897 Cowsley House and its land was offered for sale once more, the names of its fields corresponding with those quoted over half a century previously at the time of the 1841 auction. The large-scale Ordnance Survey map of 1901 shows Cowsley House now almost equidistant from Beaufort House to the west and the brick-works (supplied by coal from the Derby Kilburn Colliery Company's tramway) to the east, while houses and businesses were expanding along Nottingham Road to the south. In 1901 Howard Brayshaw, a corn-merchant's manager, and his family were living at the property, but they soon moved on. Significantly for the future of Cowsley House, the late Victorian censuses also note the presence of George Bates, his wife Jane, their two daughters Frances and Catherine, and two sons Daniel and Stephen, who were all then living in a small cottage not very far away, variously called Beaufort Cottage or Cowsley Gardens. The Bates family clearly had their eye on the much larger Cowsley House, recognising that it would make an ideal place from which to run a small farm and market-garden business, and in the early years of the twentieth century they managed to acquire the property and its land.



Cowsley House as featured on the 1901 Ordnance Survey map. Note Beaufort House to the west and the Brick Works to the east.

Daniel Bates subsequently emigrated to Canada, but Catherine married Arthur Kerry whilst Stephen married Caroline Vincent, and together the brother and sister and their families formed the firm of Bates and Kerry, market-gardeners.



Catherine Kerry and her niece Kate Bates, photographed at Cowsley House, c.1915.

In due course, Stephen Bates wanted to arrange a mortgage on Cowsley House but for a while he and his wife had to content themselves with living in temporary accommodation in the form of an old railway carriage set up in an adjacent field. Stephen and Caroline Bates had five daughters, Susan, Sarah, Jane (Vince's mother), Kate and Frances Ethel, but no sons.

All the girls had their own tasks to do about the farm and Vince recalls his mother telling him that when she got home from school, she had to cut up mangolds for the cows by turning the antiquated rotary chopper – no easy job for a young girl. Working the land at Cowsley was very labour-intensive, and one of Vince's treasured photographs shows his grandfather, Stephen Bates, hard at work in a field to the east of Cowsley House sometime around 1935, and it is fascinating to think this is very probably the same area of ground mentioned some 700 years previously as being 'on Cowsley and abutting onto the fields of Chaddesden.'



Stephen Bates hard at work in a field with Cowsley House in the background, late 1930s. Note the varying roof-lines of the house, suggesting alterations and additions at various periods throughout its history.

Stephen Bates was a practical man and when faced with the pressing need for some new farm-buildings at Cowsley he simply decided to build them himself; family tradition records that as he was so busy about the farm in daytime, he often went out in the evenings to work on the new buildings by candle-light!

Vince was born at Cowsley House in the 1930s and still remembers some of its interior features such as the stone-slabbed floor of the hallway and the cooking-range in the massive kitchen. Beyond the kitchen lay the 'bell-room' where a past occupant of Cowsley House had installed a series of spring-mounted bells, connected by a complicated array of wires and pulleys to bell-pulls in each room, in order to summon his servants. The six bedrooms in the house were reached by means of two separate staircases – a wide, grand staircase at the front of the property and a narrower one at the back, which ascended from the bell-room. The old house had its own water supply in the form of a well and there was also a cellar.

Vince memorably recalled his Aunt Kate telling him stories about a ghost which haunted the front bedroom of Cowsley House (i.e. the one facing Nottingham Road). The apparition was seemingly that of a man wearing some sort of peaked cap, but who this spectre was and why it frequented the old place no-one seemed to know.

On one never to be forgotten day in the 1930s, Stephen Bates found two official-looking letters on his doormat. Opening the first he found formal confirmation that his mortgage on Cowsley House was at last paid up and he was now the owner of his little farm. Delight, however, turned to despair when he ripped open the second envelope only to find a letter from the Council advising him that they intended to compulsorily purchase his land for additional housing. The future viability of Cowsley House as the setting for a market-garden business was now compromised and, bit by bit, its fields gave way to more and more new houses.



Stephen Bates pictured standing outside the former cowsheds at Cowsley House sometime in the 1940s.

Before long the Bates and Kerry families were being asked why they didn't start selling basic household goods for the expanding local population, so they eventually decided to open up a small shop in the conservatory adjoining the kitchen. Their new venture, Cowsley Stores, became such a success that they had a bigger shop built out of a former cowshed at the back of the premises, facing the recently-built Dorset Street.

The first photograph on the next page allows us a glimpse through the shop window of Cowsley Stores, where a variety of canned goods are on display. Note the advertisement for Fairy Soap proclaiming 'The work soap that's made with olive oil'. Those posing for the photographer are, from left to right: Catherine Kerry, Stephen Bates, Ethel Bates and Caroline Bates. The buildings in the background to the left of this picture also feature in some of the other photographs.



The back of Cowsley House showing part of the 'Cowsley Stores' shop-front, c.1940.



Caroline Bates pictured outside Cowsley House in the 1950s.

With the passage of time Vince's grandparents died, so his aunt Ethel and her husband Dennis took over the shop. By now Cowsley House had lost all its land, and in the early 1960s it seemed as if the Council was determined to add further insult to injury when they renamed the length of Cowsley Road running from Nottingham Road up to the old house as Cornwall Road instead. Sub-divided into flats, Cowsley House lingered on into the late 1970s, but as its condition deteriorated it was badly damaged by vandals and eventually demolished. Today its approximate site is occupied by the Derwent View Care Home on Dorset Street.