

Allan Howard gave a talk “Rise and Fall of the English Stately Home as typified by Kings Bromley Manor”.

Samuel Newton b. 1621 came from S. Wingfield Derbyshire where his family were farmers. He went to Barbados where he made a vast amount of money out of sugar plantation slavery. In 1679 he bought Kings Bromley parish from the Agard family as a means of investing his wealth and establishing his family in society. That the latter worked is shown by the fact that his son John married a daughter of Sir Thomas Vernon of Sudbury. John's son, another Samuel (2), built Kings Bromley Hall in the 1740s. The fourth Newton lord of the manor, John (2) now owner of three Barbados plantations married Catherine Seymour daughter of Lord Seymour, thus putting the Newtons at the high end of the British gentry.

John(2) died without issue and his vast wealth passed to his sisters who also had no children and John and Thomas Lane inherited in 1789. Whereas the Newtons were not particularly concerned with the income from the land of Kings Bromley, the Lanes consolidated and enclosed their land (thereby stopping the grazing rights of the commoners) – a more efficient way of farming. This was necessary to them as income from their sugar plantations was about to drop significantly; firstly, during the Napoleonic wars sugar prices dropped as the French discovered how to produce sugar from beet, then in 1807 the slave trade in the British Empire was abolished. Also, after 1815 food prices dropped, so estates dependant on income from agriculture suffered.

More shocks were to come. In 1832 the first Reform Act was passed. Before this the new Industrial cities like Manchester and Birmingham had no MPs, it was possible for rich men to buy a seat in parliament and only 1 in 8 adult males had the vote. The act got rid of ‘rotten boroughs’ and increased the franchise to 1 in 5. This was seen by many Tories at the time, including the Lanes, as the thin end of the wedge which would destroy the hegemony of their class. In 1833 slavery itself was abolished in the British Empire and while the Lanes received hefty compensation from the government for the loss of their ‘property’ (John Newton Lane received £4746 1s 10d for 224 Seawells slaves), from now on the Lanes would have to rely on their English property for their income. This became increasingly difficult. In 1846 the Corn Laws, which had kept home grown food prices artificially high through the imposition of tariffs on imports, were abolished. Grain from America and Eastern Europe could now be transported cheaply on the newly developed train and shipping networks. Meat from S. America, Australia and New Zealand could be carried by refrigerated ships. John Newton Lane's tenants were finding it difficult to pay their rent.

Other means of getting money were needed. J N Lane had boreholes sunk and although coal was found, the geology under the parish made it unsuitable for mining. His son, John Henry Bagot Lane, found another way – he married an heiress, Susan Ann Vincent, who owned another mansion, Lily Hill in Bracknell, where the family mainly lived, apart from summer visits to Kings Bromley. While JHB Lane did try to increase his income from Kings Bromley, mainly by diversifying to dairy production (he started the first creamery at Bromley Hayes), he led an extravagant lifestyle (for example he was a member of four London clubs). Meanwhile democracy was developing. Successive reform bills in 1867 and 1884 meant that 4 in 5 men over 21 could now vote. When JHB Lane died in 1886, his successor JHHV Lane had to retrench and sold Lily Hill, the family moving to Kings Bromley.

The effect of the extension of the franchise was seen in Lloyd George's ‘Peoples Budget’ of 1909. This created for the first time a state pension and limited social security. It was rejected by the House of Lords. This was mainly because these measures were to be paid for by taxing the rich through land taxes, wealth taxes and inheritance taxes, and the Lords was full of rich landowning aristocrats. The PM Asquith and Chancellor Lloyd George called an election on the ‘who rules Britain’ platform and their coalition of Liberal, Labour and Irish Nationalists got a (small) increased majority. The Commons passed the budget again and the Lords rejected it again. This was a constitutional crisis not seen since the Civil War. The new King George V apparently became involved in trying to convert the intransigent Lords and Asquith threatened to create 600 new Liberal peers. The Lords eventually caved in and subsequent bills removed their ability to reject budgets and eventually they could only delay legislation.

After the second world agricultural prices dropped further. Only very large landowners or those with other sources of income could now survive and one by one country estates were sold off. JHHV Lane died in 1917 of the Spanish flu leaving a successor who was only 12. The Lanes left the village in the 1920s and the land was sold off, predominantly to the sitting tenants. No buyer could be found for the manor and it was knocked down in 1928.

All that remains from the 4 generations of Newtons and 4 generations of Lanes is the park boundary wall, the water tower (now incorporated into a private house) and some memorials in All Saints Church. The almshouses were built by JN Lane using money given by a relative, the Village Hall was built by public subscription, the Richard Crosse school was moved brick by brick from inside the park by the Lanes who did not want it there. Sic transit gloria mundi.