

19th century, was Panshanger. In mediaeval times it consisted of two estates—Blakemere and Panshanger. By 1540 both were owned by the wife of Edward Courtenay, Marquess of Exeter, beheaded for treason and his estates forfeited to the Crown. By the 1720's it had passed to the Cowper family, the second Earl, William Clavering-Cowper, employing Capability Brown to improve the then flat parkland.

On the south-western side of the present Park the first Earl Cowper had built a picturesque brick house of classical design and filled it with art treasures. He named his new house Cole Green Park. So much had the previous earls spent on treasures for the house, that by 1801 the building was in poor repair and the fifth Earl was advised by Humphrey Repton to demolish it. Only an avenue of trees now indicates the site.

Repton and his son drew up plans for a new house on a fresh site; not until the Earl's marriage in April 1806 were the first bricks laid (and made on site). A new architect, William Atkins, was placed in charge. The fine, Gothic-style house he built, visited by Queen Victoria in July 1841, was partly burned in 1855. It remained with the Cowper family until 1913 when the last Countess Cowper, Katrine Cecilia (a much admired beauty in her time) died without issue. By marriage it then passed to the wife of William Henry Grenfell, KG, MP, first Baron Desborough of Taplow (1855-1945). Like Lady Cowper, his wife Ethel ('Ettie') Ann Priscilla (d. 1952) had many admirers. Lord Desborough, a fine athlete and sportsman, was President of the London Olympic Games in 1908, Chairman of a Royal Commission on the Police, an administrator, reformer, noted farmer, writer, traveller and, according to President Taft, the man who typified the English gentleman. They were much loved by those who knew and worked for them, and considerate to their house and estate staff.

After Lady Desborough's death the great house was put up for auction, and the building and 89 acres of land sold to Mr R. Ashton for £17,750. The contents, which included some fine china, books and pictures, were sold separately. The house was demolished soon afterwards, whilst the park remains the property of a sand and gravel company.

Brocket Park was another major property which eventually came to the Cowper family by marriage. Of the Tudor house nothing remains except some bricks in part of the Park wall near Lemsford village. Probably built by Edward Brockett of Wheathampstead, it remained in that family for about 130 years. The last Sir John Brockett died in 1598, and had mustered men to combat the Spanish invasion.

From the Reade and Winnington families the house was bought in 1746 by Sir Matthew Lamb, who then demolished the old building. The present house was designed by James Paine (1716-89) in about 1751 and completed in about 1775, along with Paine's now famous bridge and waterfall at the end of the lake.

Succeeding owners included the extrovert and naive Peniston Lamb, MP, first Viscount Melbourne whose wild parties and extravagant habits attracted the young Prince of Wales and his circle. However, it was Lady Melbourne who received most of the Prince's attentions.

When Peniston died in 1828 the house passed to his second son, William Lamb and his wife Lady Caroline (Ponsonby). Whilst Lamb became more involved in politics, his wife's infatuation with the poet Lord Byron eventually led to her mental breakdown when the latter died in 1828. In 1834 Lord Melbourne became Prime Minister, a post he retained until his death in 1848 at Bocket Hall. In July 1841 Queen Victoria visited him at Bocket, when another guest was Melbourne's brother-in-law and the next owner, Henry John Temple, third Viscount Palmerston.

Palmerston inherited Bocket through his wife after the death of Melbourne's brother, Lord Beauvale who died in 1850. Before Palmerston died in 1865 he was twice Prime

Minister, once in 1855 and again from 1859-65, and a great favourite of the Queen. Following Lady Palmerston's death four years later the house came to the Cowper family, she being Emily Cowper, widow of the fifth Earl before marrying a second time. It remained in the Cowper family until sold in 1922.

As the seventh Earl Cowper preferred Panshanger, Bocket was let to a number of distinguished tenants, including John Laird Mair, Lord Lawrence, Governor General of India 1863-69; Hon Frederick Cowper, brother of the seventh Earl; Lord and Lady Mountstephen (q.v.) and Admiral of the Fleet Sir Walter Talbot Kerr.

When Lord Kerr (husband of Lady Annabel Cowper, sister of the seventh Earl) left for Melbourne Hall in 1923 it was not long before the estate was bought by Sir Charles Alexander Nall-Cain, who became the first Baron Bocket in 1933 and in whose family it still remains.

Welwyn boasts a number of fine houses of which Lockleys is the most interesting. The present house dates from 1717 and was built by Edmund Searle, remaining little altered until 1912 and again in 1959. It has a fine front facade and main staircase, and since the departure of Sir Evelyn and Lady de la Rue in 1925 has twice been a school. In 1936 it was bought by the Welwyn Garden City Company along with its associated estate in Welwyn, including the White Hart PH. It was acquired by Sherrardswood School, its present owners, in 1954. Undoubtedly its most remembered owner within living memory was 'Squire' George Edward Dering (1831-1911), inventor of genius, eccentric and apparent recluse, who lead a double life as George Dale of Hove, where he lived, unknown to most, with his wife and daughter. They, in turn, apparently had no knowledge of his 'other life' at Lockleys where he retained a small staff. In about 1855 Dering met Blondin, famous tight rope walker, who visited the 'Squire' at Lockleys, where the two practised Blondin's art. Dering's only memory now is the fine house near Lockley's which bears his name, built by the late Walter J. Adams of Welwyn.

To the north of Welwyn stands Danesbury Park, which began life as St John Lodge in about 1778, and was named after Mrs Mary St John (née Schuyler). It then passed to General (later Sir) Cornelius Cuyler who enlarged the estate considerably by enclosure. His son sold it to William Blake, a banker, in 1824 when it was auctioned. Blake largely rebuilt it and renamed it Danesbury. It remained in the Blake's possession until 1919, being badly burned a year later. It is now a geriatric hospital.

Other notable houses in or near Welwyn include the Frythe, a large, Gothic-style house rebuilt in 1846 by William Wilshire, MP, in whose family it had remained since the 14th century, and until some thirty years ago. During the last war it was used by Special Operations Executive for a time and later became known as Station Nine, where work on midget submarines and other specialist equipment was executed. In 1946 I.C.I. bought it for research laboratories and named it 'Akers Research Laboratories' in 1955 after Sir William Akers, CBE, Research Director of the Company. It is now owned by Unilever Ltd.

Near the Frythe stands 'Sherrards', built about 1860 for the Priestley family, who sold it to William Henry Wills, best known as Charles Dickens' working Editor from 1845-68. Wills died following a fall from a horse on 1 September 1880. In about 1883 it came to R. D. Balfour, stockbroker and amateur cricketer (q.v.), who died there in 1915. The house is now owned by the Spastics Society as a Training Centre.

At Ayot St Peter stand Ayot Place, originally a farmhouse built in 1615 with some good timber framing and brickwork, and Ayot Bury, a late 18th century house, mostly added to in 1913. From 1937-71 it was the home of the late Basil, Lord Sanderson of Ayot. Not far away stands the old Rectory, designed by J. L. Pearson and built in 1866.