



Royston's Royal Palace

James I discovers Royston

James I came to the throne following the death of Elizabeth I in 1602. He had to travel down from Edinburgh to London. Robert Cecil, Chief Secretary, set out to meet him at York but on April 15th, three weeks after the death of Elizabeth, he had reached only as far as Royston, detained by 'fat horses failing him'.

Meanwhile, the King was leaving Hinchinbroke escorted by the High Sheriff of Huntingdon, with a team of seventy horses. Just north of Royston, the Sheriff handed over his royal charge to Sir Edward Denny, the High Sheriff of Hertfordshire with a 'goodly company of proper men, being in number seven score suitably apparelled and mounted on horses with red saddles'.

James I was then escorted to the Priory House at Royston and there worthily entertained by the owner, Robert Chester, who was knighted shortly after at Whitehall. On the next day, April 30th, the King travelled to Standon where he was met by the Bishop of London and a 'seemly company of gentlemen in tawny coats and chains of gold'.

His Majesty was apparently very impressed with the Royston locality and the surrounding heathland because, soon after arriving in London, he turned his attention back to Royston and his favourite pastime of hunting. This time he was seeking a country house for himself.

A Royal Residence is found

Initially, he 'rented' the Priory House for a while before finally settling upon two old inns a short distance north of the Royston Cross – 'The 'Greyhound' and 'The Cock'. These premises with their courtyards were secured by the King for conversion to a hunting lodge, with additional land to the rear purchased from Sir Robert Chester. The two inns were joined together and clad in brick due to the King's great fear of fire. However, for the purchase money and the year's rent for the Priory House, Sir Robert had to wait until the following reign of Charles I!

Originally, the intention had been to have a small house to serve as a convenient base for his leisure activities, but as his expeditions away from court became longer than were agreeable to his ministers, the necessity arose for transacting affairs of state and this required an ever-increasing demand for accommodation for his Court.

The Royston area was convenient in many ways. It was within comparatively easy reach of His Majesty's other properties at Newmarket and Theobalds, north of London, but it was chiefly for the pleasures of the chase that Royston scored most highly. The King esteemed it 'beyond all others for ye hunting of ye hare, and ye hares here are more stout and ye sents lay better than in other places'.

The appointment of Royal hunting staff

Steps were then taken to acquire hunting staff together with orders for the preservation of game. In 1603, Sir Martin Hume, Master of Harriers, was appointed at a salary of £200 per annum with the use of four horses and one footman. There were three principal huntsmen who received £3 per month and the sum of £66 13s 4d for the keeping of twenty couple of hounds. Every species of game was to be strictly preserved within a radius of fourteen miles. Within this area, the open fields were retained for hares, rabbits, partridges, dotterel, bustards and plovers, not forgetting all kinds of water fowl in the marshes and ponds.

As early as April 1604, within twelve months of the King's succession, a Richard Westley was granted the appointment of Keeper of the game near Royston, for life and, in May, Henry Halfhide was appointed Keeper of the King's game, of hawking of partridges, herons etc about Royston. For the better preservation of game, a vermynter (or vermin catcher) was appointed, his duties being to 'destroy all foxes, badgers, wild cats, otters, hedgehogs and other noisome vermin and all crows, rooks, choughs, kites, buzzards, cormorants, ospreys, ravnes and other ravenous fowl'.

When the King could not hunt, there was the Royal Cock-Pit for entertainment, presided over by the King's Cockmaster, George Colmer.

The King out-stays his welcome

Before the King had been long at his favourite resort, some significant incidents occurred, reflecting at once the character of King James, the temper of the times and the local burdens of an obnoxious system of purveyorship which the presence of His Majesty imposed on the neighbourhood.

Supplicants became determined to be heard, even if they had to catch His Majesty on the hunting field. In consequence of this, a group of about twenty-eight Puritans presented to the King, as he was hunting, a petition. The King took in ill part this disorderly proceeding. He commanded them to depart and depute ten of their wisest men to declare their grievances.

Others, taking warning from this, resorted to an ingenious plan which, if it did not help their cause, caused much merriment to the courtiers. The story is told in a letter from Edmund Lancelles to the Earl of Shrewsbury, dated 4 December 1604:

"A pretty jest is spoken that happened in Royston. There was one of the King's special hounds, called Jowler, missing one day. The King, much displeased that he was wanted, notwithstanding, went a-hunting. The next day, when they were in the field, Jowler came in with the rest of the hounds. The King was told of him and was very glad. Looking at him, he spied a paper about his neck and in the paper was written, 'Good Mr Jowler, we pray you speak to the King (for he hears you every day and doth he not us) that it will please his Majesty to go back to London, for else the country will be undone. All our provision is spent already and we are not able to entertain him any longer'."

Sadly for the good men of Royston, it was taken as a jest and, far from taking the hint, His Majesty, immediately after the Christmas festivities in London, hurried off back to Royston again of which a letter states:

"The King went to Royston two days after Twelfth-tide, where and thereabout he hath continued ever since, and finds such felicity in that hunting life that he hath written to the Council that it is the only means to maintain his health, which being the health and welfare of us all, he desires

them to take the charge and burden of affairs, and foresee that he be not interrupted with too much business.”

At the end of October 1605, the King was at Royston when an anonymous letter was sent to Lord Mounteagle which led to the discovery of the Gunpowder Plot. By this time, the King's Court had monopolized all the best houses in town and, according to tradition, Lord Mounteagle occupied Whitehall at the top of the High Street, the corner building next to Sun Hill leading to the Heath. This building has long since been converted into smaller houses but the area is still known as Whitehall.

In the present day, Sun Hill has had more recent claim to fame as ‘Sun Hill Police Station’ in the popular twice-weekly crime programme ‘The Bill’ on ITV. The creator of the programme was at the time a Royston resident. [This series returned to our screens in autumn 2017].

The end of King James' time at Royston

The last time King James I was at Royston was during January and February 1625. The new King, Charles I, on coming to the throne, did much more than is commonly supposed to keep up and visit the old Court House in Royston, the home of his boyhood. He also maintained the Keepers of Game and increased the stock of game in the area. Whilst this was going on, Sir Robert Chester became increasingly aggravated about the original debts that were still unpaid from the time of King James' arrival in Royston. He had to petition King Charles for settlement and finally, in 1626, the King directed the ‘Treasury of the Exchequer’ to pay the money.

The Royal property continued to flourish for a further twenty years until after the turmoil of the Civil War and the death of King Charles, when Parliament ordered a survey to be made with a view to the sale of the lands and possession of the late King. The chief part of the Royal palace at Royston was then disposed of to pay the original creditors, the purchase money being put at £517 10s.

The Palace and grounds have changed hands several times over the years, but early in the 19th century, the house and grounds was sold by auction. By the end of 1866, all properties in Royston owned by the Crown had been sold off.

Peter Baker, Icknield Way News Autumn 2008

His references were: 'A History of Royston' (1906) by Alfred Kingston

Verbal communication with Tom Doig, historian, Nuthampstead

An Update

In the mid-1990s, the former Royal Palace was in a derelict state but was purchased and lovingly restored by Mr & Mrs Peter Franks who lived in it for twenty years. It was then put on the market again so that the Franks could down-size to a smaller property that needed restoration.

Further information including illustrations is available at

<http://www.hertfordshirelife.co.uk/homes-gardens/property-market/property-where-kings-hunted-1-396871>