

Fitzharris

MANOR ESTATE

The provision of housing for a large influx of personnel was an important feature of the planning for the new postwar Atomic Energy Research Establishment on the former RAF airfield at Harwell. An estate of 140 houses for scientific staff had very high priority

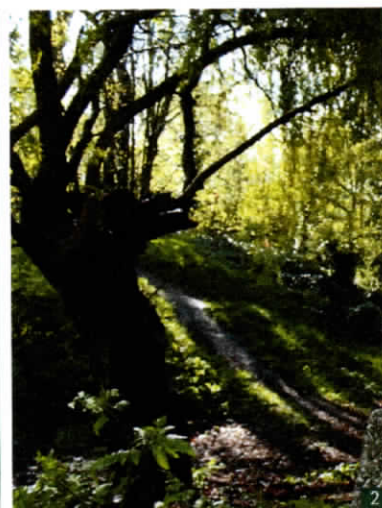


The Director, Dr John Cockcroft, visited sites outside Oxford and chose Sugworth Farm near Kennington, but development on this scale in the Oxford Green Belt was ruled out. Two sites in Abingdon were proposed by the Ministry of Town and Country Planning, and by April 1946 there was agreement on the site at Fitzharris Manor, on the northern edge of the town centre between the Stert stream and Bath Street.

So began the first of the many large-scale post-war housing developments that were to change the face of Abingdon. Fitzharris Manor was becoming vacant after wartime occupation by an evacuated school. The Ministry of Supply used war-time powers to requisition the house and its immediate grounds, but negotiations to purchase the property from AW Hedges were to drag on for several years. The eventual purchase price for the house and 28 acres of land was £7,000. The Ministry of Works managed the building project. Work began immediately on the layout of the estate and the adaptation of

house designs that had been used elsewhere for services married quarters. The aim was to build 70 semi-detached 4-bedroom houses (estimated cost £2000 each) and 70 semi-detached 3-bedroom houses (estimated cost £1500 each) to a high standard and with minimum delay, despite the severe post-war shortage of building materials. The building contract was placed in November 1946. The first batch of houses was to be completed in August 1947 and the remainder by July 1948.

Fitzharris House was of considerable local historical interest owing to its connections with the Abbey, the Borough and various important local families. Abingdon Abbey had assigned the land to several generations of Norman knights providing feudal military service to the king, and later reclaimed it from a knight called Fitzhenry or Fitzharry. The Abbey farmed it directly for a while, and then leased the house and its extensive farmlands to a succession of tenants. After the Dissolution of the Abbey the estate passed to the new Borough, and the leases continued.



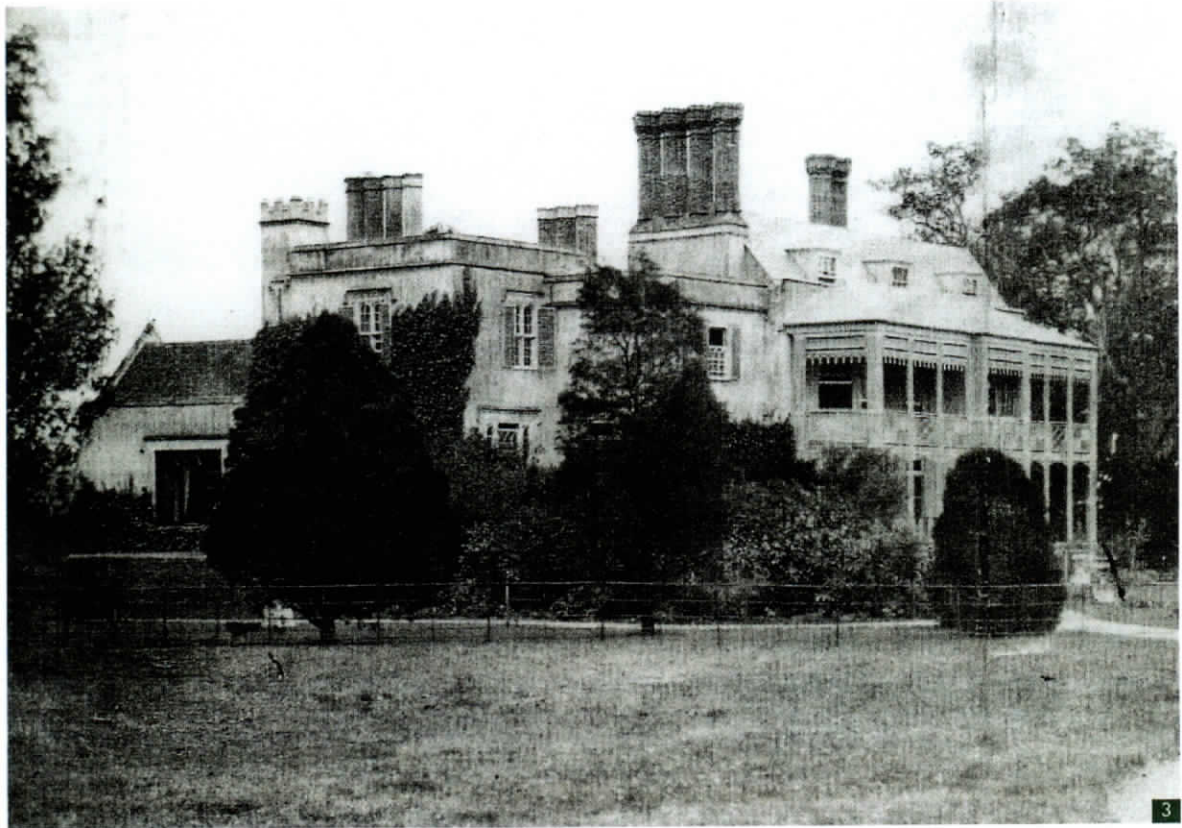
Thomas Graham inherited the lease in 1862, purchased the freehold from the Borough and put the property up for sale. Portions of the extensive farmland were sold separately as potential building land at this and subsequent sales, until only the house with its pleasure grounds and paddocks remained. The last owner-occupier, General Corkran, died tragically in 1939 and the property was purchased by AG Hedges, probably with the intention of reselling it as building land.

There had been a Tudor rebuilding in stone (possibly recovered from the demolition of the abbey) by a Tesdale in the mid-16th century, two principal rooms were panelled by a Bostock later in the century and in the early 19th century it was substantially remodelled by a Bowles. The Ancient Monuments Board, part of the Ministry of Works, advised that the house was not an architectural gem, although Tudor features had survived in the ground floor and Gothick Revival features in an added wing. Fitzharris was on a list of houses meriting Listed Building status, but this protection could not actually be granted to property owned by the Government.

The funds allocated for the building project made no provision for restoration of Fitzharris house, which was beginning to show the effects of war-time neglect.

1 Fitzharris Estate

2 Fitzharris Castle Mound



The cost of weatherproofing the house was estimated at £6000, but the Treasury ruled that it would not be proper for the Ministry of Supply to spend even this. The Ministry of Works was prepared to take over responsibility for maintenance if a revenue-generating use could be found for the house. Various possibilities were considered, and the Borough favoured the idea of moving the local offices of several Government departments from historic domestic premises in the town to Fitzharris.

However, the accommodation was unattractive, it would cost £20,000 to make good the results of neglect

and vandalism and to redecorate throughout, and it would need additional work to provide fire-escapes, strengthened floors etc. Finally, the Ministries of Works and Supply were driven to the conclusion that the only solution was to demolish Fitzharris completely.

The 'Friends of Abingdon' opposed this strongly, but seem to have been kept in the dark about the official negotiations. Questions were asked in Parliament and a vigorous correspondence appeared in *The Times*, but to no avail. The house was demolished in 1953, and the site grassed over, but the bases of some walls were buried, and have

been detected recently by geophysical survey. The former stables and coach-house still exist, together with two bridges over the Stert and large stretches of the stone boundary wall separating the estate from the town.

The mound and moat of a small strong-point constructed by the Norman knights have survived, and are protected by Scheduled Ancient Monument status.

Dick Barnes Sources: mainly Ministry of Works documents at The National Archives, Kew

3 Fitzharris Manor

4 Remains of the Manor



Source: Cameos of Abingdon, published by Abingdon Town Council 2006