

SAWBRIDGEWORTH HISTORY.

ROWLAND ALSTON. 1782 – 1865.

Lord of the Manor of Sayesbury (Sawbridgeworth).

Rowland Alston was descended from a line of Baronets, of Odell. The first Baronet was Thomas Alston (1609 – 1678), the title being created for him 13 June 1642. The 6th and last Baronet was Sir Rowland Alston who died and was buried at the village of Odell in Bedfordshire in 1791. The title then becoming extinct. The Alston family were very wealthy landowners with estates across Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire, and as we shall see, even in Jamaica.

In 1623 (some records erroneously give 1633), the estate of Odell Castle in Bedfordshire was purchased by the Alston family. Odell Castle was at that time and had been for over a hundred years, in a ruinous state and had to be rebuilt. The subsequent house utilising a part of the original keep.



Odell Castle in about 1920

The Castle was largely destroyed by fire 19 February 1931 but was subsequently sold at auction and there is now a private residential house on the site again.

It is likely that at the same time as the purchase of Odell Castle, the Alston family also acquired the nearby property and estate of Harrold Hall. This large house dated back to c1210 but was rebuilt 1608 – 1610. It was finally demolished in what has been described as ‘an act of vandalism’ in 1961. Both Odell Castle and neighbouring Harrold Hall were to become the ‘ancestral homes’ of the Alston family. However, it is known that the family also owned/leased properties in the fashionable districts of London. For example, on 8 June 1778 Rowland’s parents were married at St. Marylebone Church in Westminster. Furthermore, in 1784, a ‘Rowland Alstone’ is recorded in a tax assessment for Poland Street, Piccadilly.



Harrold Hall in about 1930

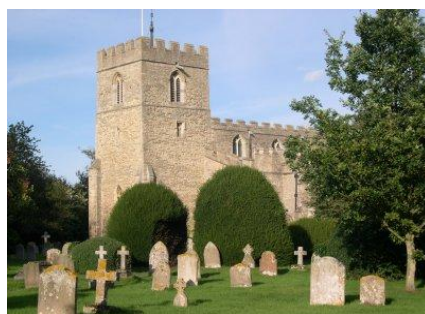
Rowland Alston was born 7 June 1782. His parents being Captain Thomas Alston (1758 - 1823) and Elizabeth Raynsford (1755 – 1840?). Rowland's father Thomas was the illegitimate son of Sir Rowland Alston (1724 – 1774) and his 'housekeeper'. This may explain why 'our' Rowland was not born on the family's estates.

Rowland was one of twelve children, he had five brothers and six sisters and he was the second eldest (he had an older brother). At the time of Rowland's birth, his parents were not living at the traditional family estates of Odell Castle and Harrold Hall, but had seemingly leased another house at Preston near Hitchin, Hertfordshire. This house may have been Temple Dinsley, but that is uncertain. The birth records of Rowland's siblings indicate that his parents lived at Preston from 1781 until 1790, before returning to Odell.



Temple Dinsley circa 1750

On 14 November 1782, Rowland Alston was baptised at All Saint's Church, Kempston.



All Saint's church, Kempston

Rowland's early life and schooling is not recorded, but on 14 July 1803, Rowland was given (purchased) a Commission as a Cornet with the local Bedford Militia Yeomanry (cavalry).

In 1807 during the Napoleonic Wars, Rowland joined an expedition to Denmark. He served as an Ensign with the 3rd Regiment of Foot Guards under Lord Cathcart and was involved in the Second Battle of Copenhagen. This was a successful attempt to neutralise the considerable Danish fleet with a pre-emptive strike before they could join the French. In reality it was a Naval blockade with an associated land siege.

The siege was relatively short, lasting from 16 August until 5 September. One of those senior officer's present was the future Duke of Wellington.

The main action was a bombardment of Copenhagen itself which lasted from 2 – 5 September. During this bombardment, as well as cannons, over 300 Congreve rockets were fired which set fire to and destroyed over 1,000 buildings. Casualties included 195 civilian deaths with 768 wounded. British casualties for the entire operation were minimal.



Copenhagen burning on the night 4 – 5 September 1807

On 26 May 1810, Rowland married Rose Milles (1782 – 1824) at St. Marylebone church in Westminster. It is through this marriage that Rowland Alston's connection to Sawbridgeworth comes about. Rose Milles was the heiress and owner of Pishiobury House. This meant that through his marriage, Rowland had now acquired the Pishiobury Estate. Furthermore, as will be discussed later, Rose Milles was the owner of a plantation in Jamaica, and Rowland Alston acquired this also.



St. Marylebone, Westminster

Rose Milles was born 24 May 1782 and was baptised 5 July that year, again at St. Marylebone in Westminster. Sadly, she died 19 February 1824 at the age of just 41 at Pishiobury House. Her obituary in the 'Times' newspaper of 23 February stated that she died after a 'few hours of severe suffering'. She was presumably buried at Great St. Mary's, but the record of her burial is lost.

Although now the owner of Pishiobury House, Rowland Alston preferred to live at his London residence, keeping Pishiobury as his country retreat. Rowland and Rose were to have 7 children, all but one being born in London. Similarly, all but one being baptised at St. Marylebone in Westminster.

The children of Rowland and Rose were:

Rowland Gardiner (1812 – 1882). Born 13 March 1812 London. Baptised 14 April 1812 St. Marylebone.

William Vere (1816 – 1892). Born 3 July 1816 London. Baptised 1 March 1817 Great St. Mary's Sawbridgeworth.

Charles Jeremiah Walter (1817 – 1818). Born 4 July 1817 London. Baptised 15 August 1817 St. Marylebone.

Rose (1818 – 1887). Born 7 April 1818 Ramsgate Kent. (Presumably Rose Milles was unwell and it was thought the sea air would be good for her). Baptised 30 May 1819 St. Marylebone.

Harriot (1819 – 1877). Born 30 June 1819 London. Baptised 15 July 1820 St. Marylebone.

(Sir) **Francis Beilby** (1820 – 1905). Born 29 November 1820 London. Baptised 6 December 1820 St. Marylebone **and** 9 September 1821 at Great St. Mary's Sawbridgeworth.

Caroline (1822 – 1907). Born 14 February 1822 London. Baptised 13 March 1822 St. Marylebone **and** 26 September 1824 Great St. Mary's Sawbridgeworth.

It is odd but true. Francis and Caroline were both baptised twice!

Exactly where in London Rowland and his wife lived is not known for certain. However, Westminster Tax and Rates records show that from at least 1833 until about 1860, Rowland lived at 48 Harley Street where he also had a stable and a coach house. Furthermore, there is a record of a court case at the Old Bailey from 1820 regarding two men charged with theft to the value of 10 shillings from a property owned by Rowland Alston in Harley Street (Rowland himself gave statements that they were innocent, and they were found not guilty). Also, Rowland is named in a mortgage agreement dated 3 July 1818, again as living in Harley Street. These indicate that Rowland was resident at 48 Harley Street at the earlier dates. This property is still extant. It is a large 5 storey Georgian townhouse with a basement and is now an exclusive private Skin Clinic.

Extant surviving letters and correspondence held at the British Library show that Rowland Alston was on friendly terms with Philip Yorke, 3rd Earl of Hardwick. Philip Yorke being then the Lord of the Manor of Sayesbury (Sawbridgeworth). By now Rowland already had a local connection to

Sawbridgeworth through Pishiobury House. It therefore comes as no surprise to find that upon the demise of Philip Yorke in 1823, Rowland Alston acquired the Lordship for himself. Rowland was Lord of the Manor of Sayesbury (Sawbridgeworth) from 1823 until 1851 when he sold the title to John Hodgson. At the time of Rowland's tenure as Lord of the Manor, he is recorded in the 1838 Tithe Award for Sawbridgeworth as owning no less than 441 different properties and parcels of land. Many of these were of little value, but clearly Rowland was at that time a major local landowner.



Pishiobury House circa 1800

As previously stated, Rowland's wife Rose Milles was also the owner of a sugar plantation in Jamaica. Therefore, upon his marriage Rowland acquired this also.

The plantation in question was the Georgia Estate situated at St. Thomas-in-the-East, Surrey, Jamaica. This was in the Blue Mountain Division to the South East of the island. This plantation had existed since at least 1730 and was inherited by Rose Milles through her maternal uncle Edward Prattle of Kingston Jamaica, who left the estate in his will of 1735 to her mother Rose Gardiner. It is recorded in the Jamaica Almanac that in 1816, this plantation had 98 slaves working on it. The same publication for 1824 recorded 108 slaves. Female slaves outnumbered male slaves on the estate (presumably because they were cheaper). The exact ratio of female to male slaves on this estate varied, but was often two to one. The plantation was recorded as producing sugar and rum. Sugar and rum were both commodities in demand. Accordingly, slaves also became 'commodities in demand'. Slave prices in Jamaica in 1797 show that a male slave would fetch £140 and a female £60. A batch of 54 mixed slaves was sold for £5,100, a price equivalent to over £500,000 today. Clearly a considerable sum of money was needed and powerful people were involved.

Upon the abolition of slavery, the British Government gave compensation to all slave owners. Accordingly, on 1 February 1836 an award of £2,505 4s 11d was made Rose Milles for the 122 slaves then at the Georgia Estate. Rose had clearly died by then, so this was amended on 29 August to make Rowland Alston the beneficiary.

Without slaves the plantations could not be run effectively. In a letter to Britain, one manager, Charles Scott bemoaned that production had ceased across the island, and that there was a 'general cessation of labour due to demand for higher than affordable wages and the agitation by Baptist ministers'.



A 'romantic' view of a plantation close to the Georgia Estate

In the General Election of 1832, Rowland Alston stood for Hertford as a candidate to be an MP. Rowland put himself forward as an 'advanced reformer' and Anti-Slavery Society candidate but was narrowly defeated.

Rowland appears to have been a complex character. He supported the abolition of slavery, but was himself a slave owner. In his defence at the time he explained that he had come into his slaves 'by marriage'. He further stated that he would be happy to emancipate them 'the instant provision was made to ensure them employment and food'. This statement clearly shows that many absentee plantation owners with slaves were divorced from reality and completely ignorant of the true situation. They had never been to the West Indies and they honestly believed their slaves were being treated reasonably well.

However, in August 1835 Rowland Alston was elected unopposed as an MP for Hertfordshire.

As an MP Rowland maintained his complex character. He generally supported the Whig government, but often opposed them also.

He campaigned to abolish flogging in the Army and wanted to put Lord Cardigan on trial for his brutal treatment of his troops.

He opposed slavery and the forced 'apprenticeships' for freed slaves.

He supported the Corn Laws, the repeal of the Malt Tax, the workhouse regimes, and the reduction of sugar import duties.

In 1841, Rowland lost his seat in Parliament. This was probably due to his failure to gain support in the Commons. By his following of inconsistent policies, he had managed to alienate both sides of the house.

As reported in the Ipswich Journal of 23 September, in 1837, as an MP, Rowland was involved in a curious incident which may have saved the life of the then Prime Minister, Sir Robert Peel. Extant letters show that Rowland had been on friendly terms with the family of George 2nd Marquess Townshend and his heir Lord Townshend. Therefore, when the Prime Minister felt insulted by a close relative Captain John Townshend RN and demanded satisfaction in the form of a duel, Rowland was asked to be John Townshend's second. Thankfully, Rowland persuaded John Townshend to issue an apology, which was accepted. Bearing in mind that John Townshend was a skilled shot, the outcome could have been interesting!

As was commonplace with the landed gentry of the day, Rowland Alston was very fond of horse racing. Accordingly, in partnership with another major local landowner Sir Henry Ward, Rowland arranged and organised Sawbridgeworth's only official horse race held under National Hunt rules. This race took place on 26 January 1841 with the horses racing from Gilston Park to Alston Oak House. There were 2 actual races and some of Rowland's friends from London were among the notable persons present.



Sir Henry George Ward GCMG MP

Also, as was commonplace then, Rowland Alston was an active Freemason being inducted into the 'Craft' 7 August 1832 at Bishop's Stortford Lodge. In 1836, Rowland became the Provincial Grand Master for Essex. He attended Lodges at Colchester and London.

On 21 November 1865, Rowland passed away at his then place of residence, 52 Belgrave Road, Pimlico (then in Middlesex). He was buried on 25 November 1865 at Brompton Cemetery, London. It is interesting that in 1905 his last surviving son, Francis Beilby was also buried at Brompton Cemetery upon his own death.

Inside the parish church of Great St. Mary's in Sawbridgeworth, located on the South wall, is a brass plaque which reads, 'In loving memory of Rowland Alston Esq of Pishiobury Herts. Served as Ensign 3rd Regiment of Foot Guards in expedition to Copenhagen 1807. MP for this County 1835. Deputy Lieutenant for Herts, Essex, Bedfordshire and Justice of the Peace for Herts and Essex. Chairman of Quarter Sessions and in Masonry, Provincial Grand Master for Essex. b. 7 June 1782 d. 21 Nov 1865. Also of Rose, his wife, eldest daughter of Jeremiah Milles of Pishiobury. A loving mother and true friend she lived her life as in God's sight for the happiness and welfare of her family and the people of this place. b. May 24 1782 d. 19 Feb 1824.

Erected by their two surviving children Francis Beilby Alston K.C.M.G and Caroline Hesketh Case.'

There is no date given for the erection of this plaque, but it must logically have been after 1892.



Rowland Alston MP 1782 - 1865

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