

OAKLANDS AND THE COMBE FAMILY



Oaklands is one of those houses that have no great history. It stands close to the site of the farmhouse that preceded it, and existed only as Hole Farm until about 1830 when Hercules Sharpe commissioned Decimus Burton to build a new house. The site was once occupied by a Roman iron bloomery.¹

The Sharpe family had been living at Domons by Northiam, but they were of north-country origin. Originally of County Durham, they were by no means poor, but they were helped by an inheritance from one Brass Crosby (1725-1793). Crosby was himself a Durham man from Stockton on Tees, and as a lawyer he saw greater opportunities in London than in the local courts. He did well, being elected to the City Council in 1758; seven years later he was an alderman and three years after that an MP, then in 1770 Lord Mayor. He was a radical, stopping the press-ganging of men into the Navy (at least in the City) and effectively securing the publication of parliamentary debates, something forbidden until then. He was an important ally of John Wilkes (1725-98), the famous radical of the century who was expelled from the Commons and championed free speech, in particular the reporting of parliamentary business. Crosby's father had been named Hercules, and it was presumably in tribute to him that Sharpe was given his name.

Hercules Sharpe married Anne Mary Brabazon, of an old Anglo-Irish family based at Swinford in County Mayo and related to the earls of Meath. Their son Hercules Brabazon Sharpe inherited the Irish properties on condition that he changed his surname – which explains the slightly odd name of the artist Hercules Brabazon Brabazon. In 1858 he inherited Oaklands as well, which was useful because income from the Irish properties must have been seriously reduced in and after the famine.



He leased Oaklands to his brother-in-law Boyce Harvey Combe, who had married his sister Anne Sarah. The Combes merit notice of their own: a landed family that provided members of Parliament and a Lord Mayor of London, and whose name was to live on in Combe's brewery in Longacre, Covent Garden, a name

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(though thanks to mergers no longer a brewery) that survived until 1958. They were distinguished in a number of ways and played a prominent part in local affairs.

The founder of what became a remarkable dynasty was Harvey Christian Combe, born at Andover in 1752, died at his country house at Cobham in Surrey in 1818.

In 1780 he married his cousin Alice Christian Tree, daughter of one Boyce Tree, and inherited a business from him (it also explains the slightly unusual Christian name of Boyce in later generations). Combe was the son of a country lawyer. He became of alderman of the City in 1790 and Lord Mayor in 1799, by which time he had been elected as an MP for the City. He remained an MP until 1817, always taking the radical side in politics and naming one of his sons Charles James Fox Combe after the Whig leader.² At the turn of the century he bought the large Woodyard Brewery in Castle Street, Long Acre, which dated from 1740, and this act must have greatly increased his wealth. He bought Cobham Park in Surrey in 1806 for the enormous sum of £30,000, a large estate still owned by his descendants (apart from the rebuilt mansion). In due course the brewery became a company, Combe Delafield and Co, of which his brother in law James Delafield was a major shareholder. It was the largest brewery in London when it was sold to Watney and Co in 1898, and promptly closed. The combined business bore the name of Watney Combe Reid and Co until another takeover in 1958. (Reid was a second brewery absorbed in 1898.)

Harvey and Alice had three sons. Harvey Tree, born in 1784, took over the brewery and Cobham Park. Boyce was born in 1785 and died in 1864. James (that is, Charles James Fox) was in service in India and sired a family of some military distinction; Henry became a medical practitioner.

Boyce married Caroline Bowen Jones (1793-1881) in Montgomeryshire in 1815, bringing a Welsh touch to the family that would appear in later Christian names. His son Boyce Harvey (1816-97) in 1850 married Anne Sarah Sharpe, the daughter of Hercules Sharpe, owner of Oaklands in Sedlescombe parish. The younger Boyce is described in the 1881 census as a justice of the peace with 300 acres and employing eight men and three boys; he also became Captain of the Battle Rifle Volunteers. They had several children, the eldest son being Harvey Trewythan Brabazon, born at Florence, and their daughter Mary Catherine. There were two more sons, one of whom died in infancy. Harvey Trewythan was destined effectively to be the last Combe of Oaklands, being left the property by his uncle Brabazon in 1906 and dying in 1923.

In 1891 he was at Oaklands with Boyce and Anne and what are now their three children plus a daughter-in-law and a son-in-law. William was unmarried but Harvey had married (Florence) Amy Lambert, a Dubliner; and Mary Catherine had married the baron Charles von Roemer who, despite his name, had been born at Lambeth. At the outbreak of war in 1914 the *von* Roemer family promptly changed its name to *de* Roemer, and Charles and Mary's son enlisted early, being in France by 19 August. Their family seat was Lime Park at Herstmonceux, and the younger Charles creeps into the records as the promoter of electricity in that village.

As so often the family fell on hard times after the First World War; conditions had changed, and large country houses were now a liability. There was no male heir to the estate. Harvey Trewythan's only son, Boyce Anthony, had been commissioned as a lieutenant in the Royal Fusiliers; he was to die in November 1914 in the first battle of Ypres (he has no known grave and is commemorated on the Menin Gate).

In 1926 Harvey's widow sold the family collection of Brabazon's paintings but for small if not derisory sums. They sold them all at once: three sales in just over two years, and 3200 works. Prices were as low as £1 per drawing; they would do much better now. Oakfield may have gone the all-too-common way of country estates after 1918 but at least it was not demolished. It was sold after Harvey's death and is now part of the Pestalozzi Children's Village. The Combe family survives, partly in Australia.

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See also

Artists: Hercules Brabazon Brabazon L1.1

¹ http://www.pestalozzi.org.uk/article.php/194/pestalozzis_roman_history_revealed

² See R Thorne (ed): The history of Parliament: the House of Commons (1986).