

How Hill - Time Piece of the Broads



In the north-eastern part of the Norfolk Broads, on a low rise overlooking the River Ant, stands a large, thatched Edwardian house. It is the focal point of an area of marshes, reed, sedge and woodland which has become the main field study centre of Broadland.

But it began life differently, built by a man named Edward Boardman who, with his father, ran a prominent Norwich architectural practice around the turn of the last century. He would later become a JP and mayor of Norwich.

Holidaying on the Broads in 1901, he and his wife discovered How Hill almost by accident when the boat, a pleasure wherry, which they had booked didn't turn up and they were offered instead a smaller trading wherry converted for summer cruising. Because it was smaller, it was able to pass under Ludham bridge on the River Ant and thus take them past How Hill where Edward, being in the business and knowing a good development site when he saw one, immediately saw this one as the ideal spot for their holiday home. He bought the land, (he eventually assembled an estate of 872 acres), and in 1905, he replaced an existing house with the present imposing structure. But even then, the house belonged almost to a past era, for the nature of Broadland itself was about to change.

Broadland's marshes had long been cropped for 'marsh hay', a nutritious blend of marsh flora which was in big demand as animal fodder at a time when the economy was largely driven by horse power. Since the advent of the railways, tons of the stuff had been sent by train to London in particular to feed the cab and bus horses of the capital. How Hill produced its share with two drainage mills draining the land to keep it as croppable pasture rather than reed marsh

The change in Broadland came with the internal combustion engine, for by the beginning of the Great War, the horseless carriage was the thing and the market for marsh hay, already much diminished, would shortly vanish. The marshes, untended and no longer mowed or drained, gradually reverted to reed and carr (flooded woodland), a process accelerated by the floods of 1912 which damaged sluices, pumps and bridges.



Even so, motor transport was then allowing Edward to live at How Hill and commute to Norwich and at the end of the war, it became the family home. He and his wife had five children, one of whom became an Olympic rower and another an Olympic yachtsman. The latter, Christopher, took the 6 metre yacht 'Lalage', of which he was part owner, to Hitler's 1936 Olympics. The boat didn't win any races but after disqualification of a Swiss boat, she was awarded the gold, a result which Christopher later described as 'farcical'. Much the same could be said of 'gold' medal itself which, when shown to a jeweller in England, turned out to be mostly base metal.

Christopher himself didn't bother to visit Berlin for the grandiose ceremonies but a crew member who did received an oak sapling from Hitler. It was planted at How Hill on September 20th, 1936 and is now a substantial tree.

How Hill by then was a centre of great social activity with shooting parties involving many eminent people. In January 1951, King George VI came for a coot shoot. But these days, cameras and binoculars are the weapons and many duck have been ringed on the estate, some of them travelling as far as Murmansk in north-western Russia although some have got no farther than the outer reaches of How Hill.



When Edward Boardman died in 1950, his wife stayed on in the house with two of her sons until her death in 1960 but the estate was eventually sold at auction to the County Council whose education committee played their cards very close to their chest until they had renovated the interior and renewed the thatch. Then, in 1968, they opened How Hill as a residential education centre. The renowned naturalist, E A (Ted) Ellis performed the opening ceremony and planted a Sequoiadendron giganteum which was then three feet high but now towers over its surroundings.

The County Council subsequently sold the estate to the Broads Authority who, for a while, considered relocating their offices there, but the house was sold to Norwich Union. The How Hill Trust was formed in 1984 and has run the centre since then.

These days, How Hill is a study centre with 365 acres of reed, marsh, woodland and a small broad, together with a marshman's cottage and three restored drainage mills. Most of the estate is an officially designated nature reserve. The How Hill Trust holds a lease on the house from Norwich Union while the Broads Authority has leased part of the estate to the Trust and has entered into an access agreement on the remainder.

The main role of the Trust now is to provide residential field courses for schoolchildren and young people. They meet Eric Edwards the marshman and try their hand at thatching and other crafts. The most popular field studies activities are dyke-dipping, woodland ecology, nature trails, expeditions to the reed beds and windmills and the rivers trip to Barton Broad.

But the centre is also ideal for conference and training activities for adults in any field of interest. It makes a prestigious setting for presentations such as product launches and seminars. A full range of catering is available. The Trust also offers its own programme of popular holiday courses for the general public, all with an environmental theme.

And the house of course is close to the raw materials - sedge and good Norfolk reed - it needs to sustain its thatch. The main body of the thatch, renewed in 1966, is still good for another few years but at the end of 1999, the ridge was renewed with sedge cut just a few hundred yards from the house. Not many houses can say that their thatch was grown in the garden.



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