

THE CARTERS AND LAMBERTS OF TELHAM COURT, AND SIR FRANCIS RONALDS

Telham Court occupies an impressive position to the south of Battle, with a view across the sunken Powdermill Lane to the Abbey and beyond it the town. It is now owned by a commercial organisation but for a while it was not just a farm on the estates of the Abbey Websters but a country house in its own right.

The Quarry Hill farm emerges from Webster ownership in the mid-nineteenth century when the family fell on hard times. They were compelled to sell the Abbey itself to the future duke of Cleveland, but before then they had sold the Quarry Hill area. This was no small estate: it ran the length of Battle Hill and Hastings Road from the railway to Telham Lane, and included Loose, Telham and Downbarn farms; north of Hastings Road its lands stretched almost to Marley Lane. In the 1871 census it was recorded as having 553 acres and employing 15 men and 16 boys.

The buyer was Samuel Carter (1805-78), a native of Coventry. He had qualified as a solicitor with his uncle at Birmingham at just the right time, for the firm was engaged as solicitors to the new London and Birmingham Railway in 1831 and then to other railways too. He moved to London in 1850 and retired ten years later. He bought Quarry Hill and rebuilt the house in 1857 but he also had property in Kenilworth and Coventry (for which he was briefly MP in 1868). He sold the Battle estate in 1875, moving back to the Midlands. He died in January 1878 at his house close to Sussex Square in Bayswater. His widow Maria died there two years later.

Carter was not just a business man. He was a committed Unitarian and had considerable interest in art and literature. He married Maria Concordia Ronalds of Highbury at Chiswick in 1833, and they had four children. Maria was the sister of Francis, later Sir Francis Ronalds, the meteorologist and inventor whose account is given further below.

The Carter family had no further connection with Battle. Maria's niece Julia, who looked after her uncle Francis Ronalds, left Battle after his death in 1873. Samuel and Maria's children all did well. Their eldest son Alexander became a barrister but did not practise and died at Kenilworth in the same year as his father. John was also a barrister, marrying at Lichfield in 1876 and becoming well-known for his books, particularly on electoral malpractice; the pair had no children. Jane married the barrister John Martineau Fletcher at Battle in 1868. They had five children, all born in Surrey.

The second son, Hugh, became a well-known portrait-painter. His portrait of his uncle Francis Ronalds is in the National Portrait Gallery and is shown later in this account. The DNB refers to his exhibiting at the Royal Academy between 1859 and 1902, and at the Royal Institute of Painters in Water Colours. It states that he created mainly subject paintings, and that his work shows delicate colouring and subtle delineation of character. Hugh married Maria Bottomley in Kensington in 1866 and they had several children, all in London.

The next occupants of Telham Court were the Lambert family. Originally from Gloucester, Thomas Lambert made considerable money from his engineering business, making "hydraulic and gas engineers, patentees and manufacturers of high pressure valve cocks, closets, pumps, sluice valves, wrought iron tubes and fillings" at his works in Lambeth and Walsall.ⁱ This allowed his sons a good education and an even better inheritance. One of them was Edward Tiley Lambert (1844-1908), who bought the Telham Court estate from Samuel Carter. He married Jane McLaren of Fife in 1877 and had two sons. The elder was Henry McLaren Lambert (born 1879), who might have been expected to inherit the estate. He joined the local volunteersⁱⁱ and then became a professional soldier, serving as an officer in the second South African war of 1899-1902, being then posted to India where he was an ADC to three successive viceroys and being promoted Captain. After 1908 he spent most of his time in East Africa, where he must have mixed with the cream of the colonials of Kenya described in many places, for example (mainly in a later war) by James Fox in *White mischief*.

Lambert returned to the colours in 1914 but did not survive long. He was killed in the Second Battle of Ypres in May 1915. His name is on the Battle memorials and on that of the Muthaiga Country Club at Nairobi. This club was opened on New Year's Eve 1913, so he must have been a very early member.

A memorial service for him was held at St Mary's in July 1915. His estate was later in the year valued at £26085; this can at best have included only an estimate of the value of his art collection, which went under the hammer at Christie's two years later and appears to have done rather well.ⁱⁱⁱ Lambert was unmarried.

Telham Court did not long remain in the Lambert family. Reginald (1881-1968) was for a short time a gentleman cricketer for Sussex and also served in the war; he sold it in 1928, but by that time the property was down to little more than 120 acres thanks to earlier disposals, for example for housing along the Hastings Road. Reginald and his wife Evelyn Dick Cunyngham moved to Wiltshire. He died at Shaftesbury in Dorset early in 1968. The house was used as Glengorse Preparatory School for some years and is now owned by the Holmes Property Group. There were three sisters. One died young, but the other two married the same man, one after the other: Sir John Gilmour, a baronet and a prominent Scottish Conservative politician.

Various mentions have been made above to Sir Francis Ronalds. He has not quite vanished from history or from the fame that he deserves. He is best known, among his other achievements, as a pioneer of the electric telegraph, for which he produced a working example in 1816. He lived his last few years at St Mary's Villas, Battle, cared for by his niece Julia, and died there on 8 August 1873; he is buried in Battle cemetery. His original connection with Battle was through the marriage of his sister Maria to Samuel Carter.

Ronalds's family was based in Brentford, Middlesex, with its first known male moving there from Moidart in Invernessshire by 1754 and living as a nurseryman. He was the grandfather of Sir Francis, who was born on 21 February 1788. The records show Francis's father as a London merchant, which is a term needing much elaboration to determine his social position. Another report states that he was a cheesemonger. Francis was born in Middlesex on 21 February 1788.

It is probably not now well-known just how revolutionary the electric telegraph was. It allowed people to communicate almost instantly across any distance and in all weathers, in codes easily translatable into written languages. Before then the only such method was by semaphore signalling, a laborious, line-of-sight system relying on each signaller being able clearly to see the next one in line; this was the process by which urgent messages were sent between London and Portsmouth, for example, during the Napoleonic wars. It was, however, preferable to the earlier use of simple beacons, which would indicate only that there was some form of emergency. The heliograph, which made use of sunlight signals from mirrors, appeared only in the 1820s. The telegraph was the marvel of the age. In 1845, for example, a suspected murderer caught the train at Slough but was noticed; by the time that he arrived at Paddington the police were waiting for him.

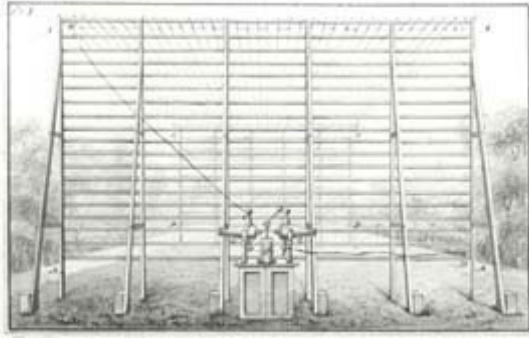
By the early nineteenth century electricity was beginning to be understood. The existence of positive and negative charges was known – the basis of all subsequent developments – and there were copper/zinc batteries. But its practical use was barely exploited. Faraday did not produce an electric motor until 1821; circuitry was not understood until rather later.

Ronalds was therefore a very early exponent. He created his telegraph in 1816, when he was 28. It was crude but it worked.

He built in his back garden at Upper Mall, Hammersmith, two frames to accommodate eight miles of wire for his new invention of an electrostatic telegraph based on synchronously revolving discs. For the past three or four years, encouraged by the octogenarian Swiss meteorologist, Jean Andre De Luc, Ronalds had been enthusiastically experimenting with electrostatic clockwork devices.

After sending messages along his wires on the frame, he developed another version in which the wires were enclosed in glass tubes buried in the ground. At each end of the line a clockwork mechanism turned synchronously revolving discs with letters on them. A frictional electricity machine kept the wire continuously charged, while at each end two pith balls hung from the wire on silk threads, and since they were similarly charged from the wire they stayed apart.

When someone desired to send a message he earthed the wire at his end at the moment when the dial indicated the desired letter. At the receiving end the pith balls would fall together when earthed and the recipient noted the letter showing on his dial at that moment. The system was slow and depended on the two dials staying in step, but Ronalds demonstrated that it would work over 150 metres of wire.



[In his day his house was Kelmscott House. It is now 26 Upper Mall and carries a blue plaque to his memory.]

Being convinced of the potential usefulness of his telegraph, he asked the Admiralty for support. It was the wrong moment. The Napoleonic wars had just ended, and it is likely that the Admiralty could see no way in which a wire-based model could communicate with ships though it might replace the semaphore system on land. There were some who thought that, with the war ended, *telegraphs of any kind are now wholly unnecessary*. (One is put in mind of those senior officers who a century later associated tanks with the peculiar conditions of trench warfare and believed that the future, like the past, belonged to the horse.) Another man is reported to have seen the device in action, however, and was inspired by it. He was the young Charles Wheatstone, who developed the first generally workable and affordable model twenty years after Ronalds's first demonstration.



Portrait of Sir Francis Ronalds about 1870, by Hugh Carter his nephew .

There is no doubt that this was the first electric telegraph, though barely workable by later standards and lacking any sensible code by which messages could be transferred. It predated work by Ampère, Gauss and others by a considerable margin.

Ronalds's interests were much wider than telegraphy. He collected a large library of books and pamphlets on scientific and technological subjects, which he later presented to the Institution of Electrical Engineers. He was a notable student of meteorology, and in 1843 became the first honorary director and superintendent of the Kew Observatory. He was elected FRS in 1844.

Ronalds retired in 1852, with a pension of £75 per annum, and it was only after much effort by his supporters that in 1870 he was knighted for his telegraphy work. By then he was in Battle, to which he had come to be close to his sister Maria at Telham Court. Ronalds never married, and in his last years was cared for by his niece Julia Christiana. She achieved a small fame by being one of the 499 people who signed the 1866 petition to Parliament in favour of the women's franchise. She died at Bedford on 5 January 1921, having seen the partial achievement of the petition after 54 years, leaving under £3000. Francis too had left under £3000, and had therefore not been a man of great wealth.

ⁱ Post Office Directory for London, 1882

ⁱⁱ His appointment as Second Lieutenant (Extra Supernumerary) in the 1st Cinque Ports Battalion of the Royal Sussex Regiment is given in the London Gazette on 3 May 1899.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hastings Observer, 21 April 1917.