

BONNINGTONS

A BRIEF HISTORY

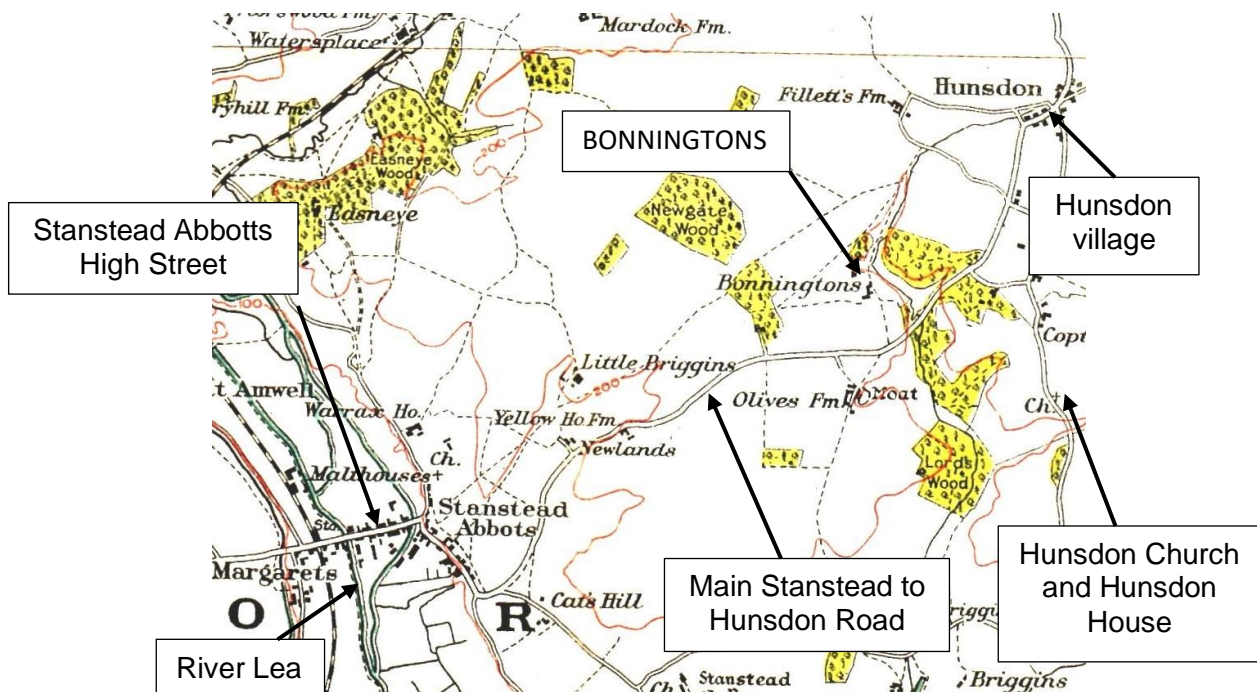
1600 to 1900

By

Stuart Moye

Bonningtons is a country house located on the edge of the parish of Stanstead Abbots with some of its grounds in the adjacent parish of Hunsdon. The main house is some two miles to the north-east of the main village settlement of Stanstead Abbots located in the valley of the Lea Valley some 18 miles north of London. Bonningtons and its grounds and historic farmland estate are located on the East Hertfordshire uplands or tableland on reasonably fertile soils. Then main house is a grade II listed building at the end of a quarter mile long drive leading off from the main Stanstead Abbots to Hunsdon road. Its geographical closeness to the village of Hunsdon has seen it more closely associated with Hunsdon than the more distant village of Stanstead Abbots. This has led its various occupants and owners over the years to play an important part in the life of the community in Hunsdon.

BONNINGTONS LOCATION MAP



A small glimpse into the early history of the Bonningtons estate was afforded by a minor archaeological survey carried out in 2002. Pottery fragments were found in the top soil dating from the C13th / C14th through to the C19th. These finds were considered indicative of the manuring of arable fields over many centuries. This suggests that the area of Bonningtons has been a farm for perhaps 7 centuries or longer. Some fragmentary Roman pottery finds in the top soil were not considered sufficient to suggest the location was a farm in Roman times. The Roman finds were instead thought likely to be debris fragments spread with manure from the known important Roman site to the south in the vicinity of Olives Farm.

The date that the house at Bonningtons became a large important gentleman's country house has been mentioned by some writers as occurring in 1687. This perhaps came about as a record exists that states a small house or perhaps a farmhouse was enlarged in that year. There is however another record that states that Bonningtons dates from 1620. Thus, implying the extension of the house of 1687 was in fact an enlargement of an existing significant country residence. Physical evidence still in existence is a set of gates, pillars and a 3m high garden wall to the north of the house, also grade II listed. These have a professionally indicated build date of C16th to C17th which points to walled gardens existing to the north of the house, possibly dating from the early 1600s. This earlier date is supported independently by a pen and ink drawing, tentatively professionally dated to about 1670. It shows a large country House [a single rectangular building with hipped roof], importantly with an extension, surrounded by mature formal gardens, vegetable plots and orchards. A long pond with artificially straight banks is shown to the north of the orchard area beyond and is most likely to have been a fish pond. This pond remains today but is one of two, the most westerly smaller pond not being visible in the C17th drawing.

Pen and ink drawing of Bonningtons late C17th



. The drawing was undoubtedly commissioned for the owner Ralph Byde Esq. whose coat of arms appears at the bottom. This picture is a rare early view depicting a country house of those times. Ralph was a brother of Sir Thomas Byde of Ware Park and by profession a lawyer. It was Ralph Byde who is recorded as extending the existing building in 1687. The appearance in the drawing of the main building with an extension and the maturity of the formal gardens tends to strongly support the earlier 1620 date for the creation of a significant country house at Bonningtons. It also suggests the pen and ink drawing dates perhaps from not long after Ralph Byde's 1687 extension, rather than the 1670 date originally attributed to it.

In the pen and ink image the view is looking eastwards across the site of the house and its immediate surroundings. At the bottom centre of the picture, partly obscured by the Byde family crest, is what appears to be the start of the long arcade of trees seen on later maps. A doorway is just visible in the garden wall beyond giving access to the avenue of trees from the formal gardens close to the house. On later maps the long avenue of trees stretched westwards from the house and seems to have been in the tradition of a tree lined walk rather than an entrance drive from the public road to the house. To the north of the main house are areas of fruit trees and other crops within walled areas. Nearer the main house there appears to be a kitchen garden with extensive vegetable plots. To the east of the main house are outbuildings and to the south of the main block was a circular drive. This provided the convenience of a one-way system for the horse drawn conveyances bringing visitors to the main front entrance. All together this adds up to an impressive country home with supporting gardens, orchards, outbuildings set in an agricultural estate.

By 1725 John Byde lived at Bonningtons and is recorded as adding a large new block at the corner of the main original building close to the 1687 extension. In addition, some aspects of the formal south front main entrance of the house are thought to be dated to the 1725 changes by John Byde. An old entrance to the west with decoration now obscured is thought to be associated with the 1725 changes by architectural experts. The probable post 1687 pen and ink drawing does show a west facing doorway leading to a formal garden. Perhaps the decoration to the west entrance was associated with enhancing the entrance and exit to the formal gardens and the avenue of trees beyond. John Byde does appear to have made considerable changes to the house and grounds during his tenure. Albeit somewhat masked by changes over the subsequent centuries. John Byde was still living at Bonningtons at the time of his death in 1758.

On John's death Bonningtons passed to Thomas Plummer Byde the great grandson and heir to Sir Thomas Plummer Byde. The younger Thomas continued to reside at Ware Park and there does not appear to have been much in the way of recorded major changes at Bonningtons. The most important event that occurred affecting Bonningtons happened in 1779 when Thomas Plummer Byde Esq was declared bankrupt.

It appears that to many Thomas had seemed to be a very affable man and as a banker someone to be trusted. Much of the details of the financial mess he left behind were not made public knowledge. However, a private letter dated 13th November 1778 from Sir William Baker of Bayfordbury to a family member gives a glimpse of how many local people had been affected. He begins by writing

"By the extravagance and knavery of my neighbour Mr Byde our whole county and particularly this district is involved in the utmost confusion and distress".

The letter goes on to explain how many local gentlemen farmers had invested in the River Lea Navigation Scheme of the mid 1760s and due mostly to Mr Byde's mismanagement there was a yearly loss of £2,800 per year.

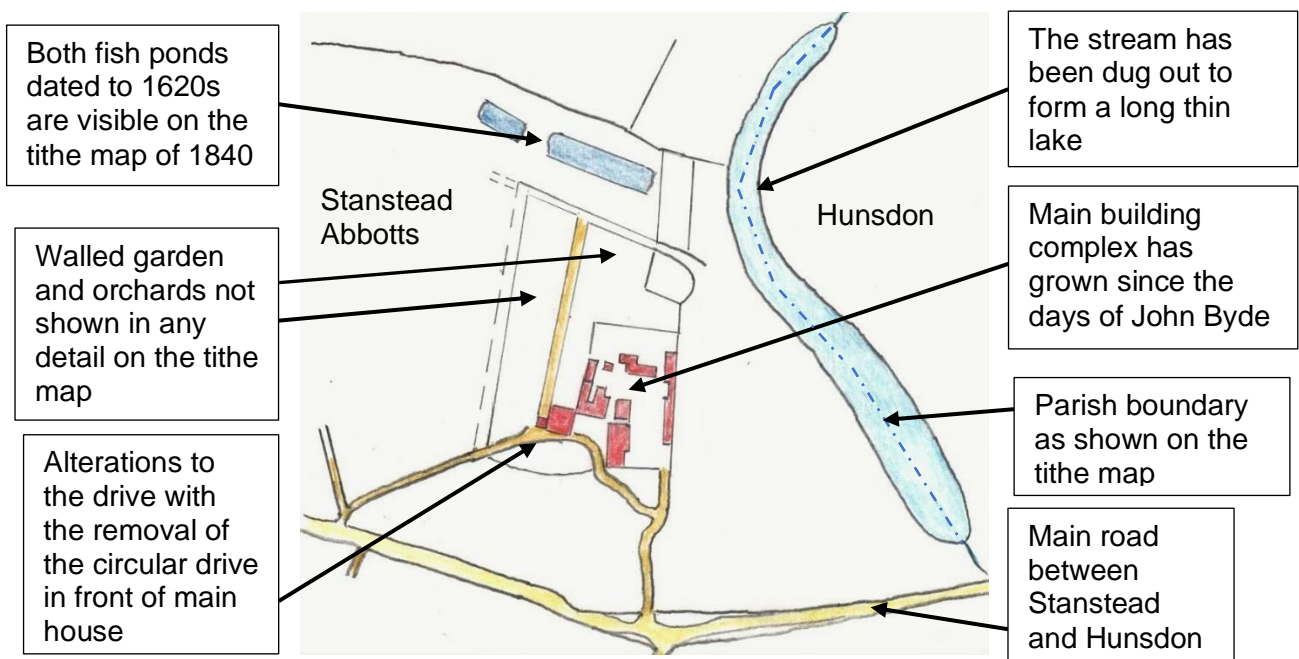
{The scheme had been expected, with the newly introduced tons per mile tolls, to break even in about 1785. Due to these early financial difficulties and even with raised tolls it was well into the new century before the debts were paid off}.

This part of Williams letter concludes by describing Byde as *"an impudent and wicked man"*. Mr Byde himself was to flee abroad to avoid his creditors. His sons being left to deal with the problems he had created. Thomas died in Naples in much reduced financial circumstances in 1789. Following the bankruptcy, the sale of property and land in Hunsdon, London and elsewhere stretched out well into the early 1780s. Bonningtons came up for sale during this process and was bought by Nicolson Calvert of Hunsdon House, a home which he had previously inherited in 1759.

Nicolson Calvert had owned Bonningtons for just under 10 years when he died in 1793 without any children his properties passing to his brother Felix Calvert. Felix's son Nicolson who had married in 1789 subsequently moved into Bonningtons with his wife when his father moved out and into Hunsdon House in 1793. This arrangement was not to last long as Felix was to shoot himself dead in a London Coffee House in 1802. His son Nicolson inherited his father's properties and land moving with his wife into Hunsdon House. They were to set about an extensive rebuilding of their new home between 1803 and 1811. Bonningtons meanwhile was being rented out to a Mr Roberts.

During Nicolson's ownership Bonningtons was to see considerable alterations and improvements which seem to have been done once the changes at Hunsdon House had been completed and very likely after Edmund Calvert moved into Bonningtons. The changes included additional extensions to the house as well as considerable changes to the area around the house. By 1840 when Edmund Calvert was in residence at Bonningtons, although the estate was still owned by his older brother Felix, the house had acquired another extension to the rear. Also, a billiards room was added to the western wall of the early house, joined to it by a single storey pavilion link. A considerable number of additional outbuildings had been built in the working area close to the house, a sign of investment in the agricultural income potential of the estate.

Sketch map of Bonningtons in 1840



Map based on the tithe map of 1840

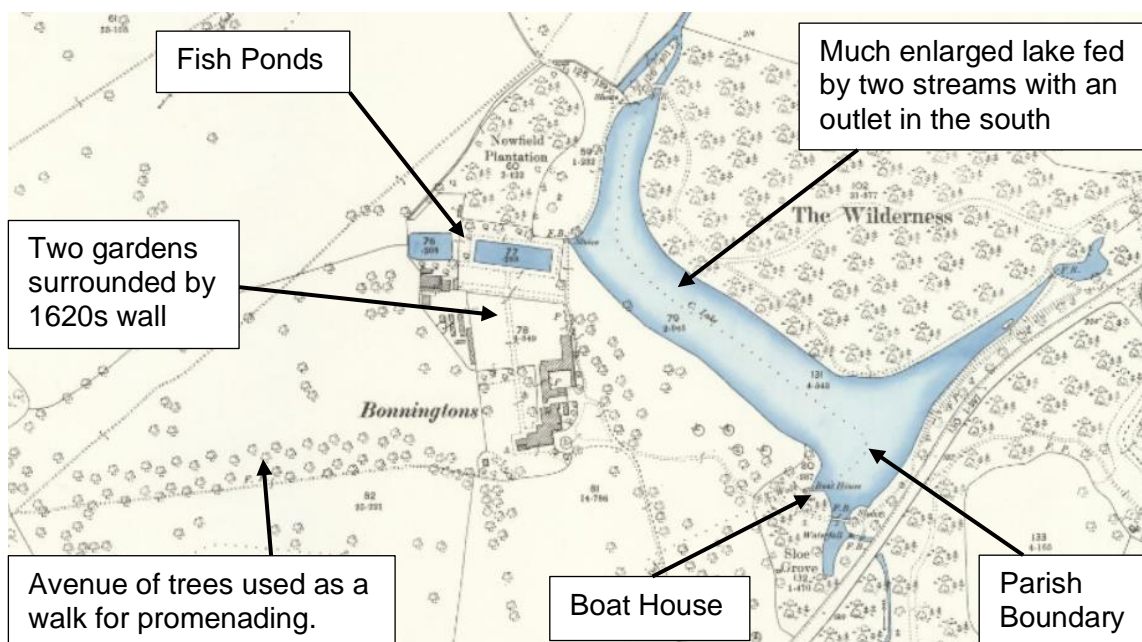
A long avenue of fairly mature trees stretched westwards from the house and continued to be used in the tradition of a tree lined walk. An extension to the avenue of trees closest to the house had replaced part of the old formal gardens that had existed a hundred and forty years or so previously. The grounds around the house had taken on a more landscaped parkland appearance which had become the preferred country house style of the times. As part of this new parkland approach a long thin lake had been dug, along the line of a stream, to the east of the main house. This was a small lake forming just a narrow strip of water compared to the wider lake that exists today. Essentially this early lake represented an inexpensive widening of the existing stream. By 1840 the Calverts could enjoy a landscaped park around the main house of some merit with a rather grand mature avenue of trees to the west and an attractive lake to the east.

It is stated in several sources that it was the Calverts that dug out the large lake that exists today. This must therefore have been excavated after 1840 but before the late 1850s when the Calverts began to consider selling Bonningtons. Nicolson died in 1841 and his eldest son Felix being a serving senior officer in the army meant the second son Edmund Calvert took centre stage in Hunsdon. Overall, the estate in the mid-1850s comprised about 100 acres of well wooded parkland in addition to the surrounding farmland.

Major General Felix Calvert retired in 1854 and was to die just 3 years later in March 1857. This was followed very shortly after by the death of his younger brother the Rev Nicolson Calvert the Rector of Hunsdon. This meant that the 2nd oldest brother Edmund was the sole heir to the Calverts property and lands in Hunsdon. The Calverts were experiencing some financial difficulties at the time and much needed to be done to rectify the situation. In 1858 Edmund set about selling off all of the Calvert properties in Hunsdon. This brought to an end the Calvert's long association with Hunsdon over which time they had been very much a dominant force in the parish and beyond. They were responsible for making considerable changes to the road system in Hunsdon Parish and moving people from scattered rural locations into the centre of the village. Bonningtons became the property of James Sidney Walker, he resided at Bonningtons between 1859 and 1863.

Salisbury Baxendale purchased Bonningtons and took up residence there in 1863 with his wife Edith. He was a barrister and a printer but had retired from his London printing firm in 1862. He also bought other properties in Hunsdon including Hunsdonbury which he was to sell on in 1889 to John Henry Buxton who lived at Hunsdon with his wife until 1908. He was then to move to Easneye following the death of his father Thomas Fowell Buxton. Bonningtons was described in 1894 as the seat of Salisbury Baxendale Esq MA JP; the house being old and substantial.

Bonningtons as it was in 1893

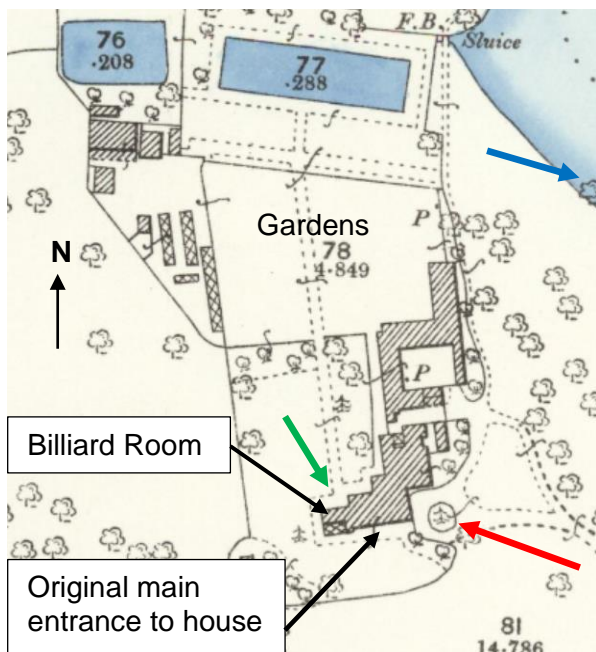


It was noted as standing in a well-timbered park of about 100 acres with a fine lake. The avenue of trees to the west of the house was mentioned as a notable feature of some grandeur. By the mid-1890s Salisbury Baxendale had added an extension to the main house and other new buildings close by. The lake to the east of the house had been greatly enlarged by the Calverts and was now grand enough to warrant the provision of a boathouse, located near the southern end of the lake. For the year 1883-4 Salisbury Baxendale was elected as the High Sherriff of Hertfordshire, a measure of the esteem in which he was held. Salisbury Baxendale sold Bonningtons in 1902 and moved away from the area and died just five years later. Bonningtons moved forward into the C20th with a new owner; Archibald Herbert James Esq.

There appears to be a few photographs of Bonningtons House to be found. This postcard gives a view of the main house and adjacent buildings from the south east. The postcard is thought to date from the C20th, during the time when Archibald Herbert James Esq. was in residence.



The oldest part of the building is the hipped roof building to the left and dates from 1620. The picture shows the main entrance to the house on the eastern side of the original part of the house. Map evidence shows that the main entrance was moved to the eastern side of the building between 1840 and 1873. It is known that other main changes to the house also date from the times the Calverts were in residence and thus would have been completed by the mid-1850s. The two side by side buildings to the right of it are the extensions shown on the old pen and ink drawing to be found on page two above. These two buildings are recorded as being Ralph Byde's extensions to the original house dating from 1687. Considerable later extensions can be glimpsed beyond those two buildings. The earlier main entrance to the house was positioned on the south wall of the original building hidden by the trees to the left of the picture.



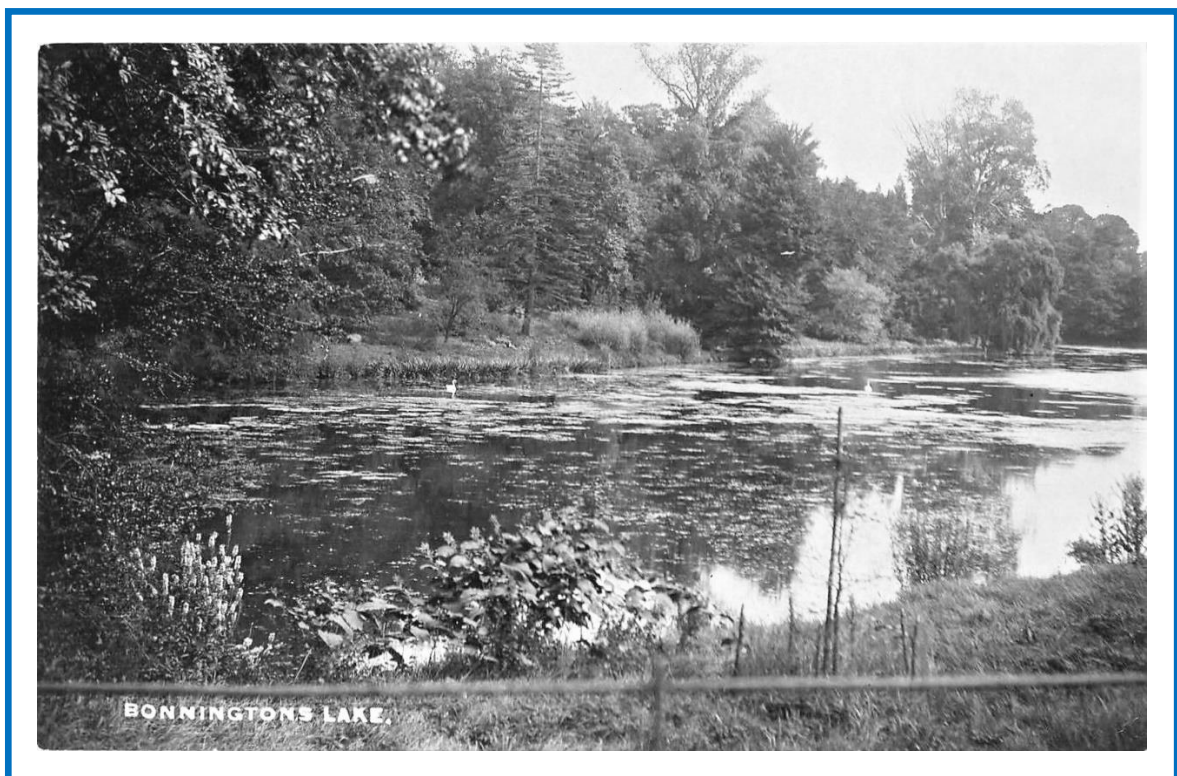
The map shows the main house and its immediate surroundings as developed by 1896. However, the main house and its extensions as shown in the postcard above are thought to have been completed by the mid-1850s before Salisbury Baxendale moved into Bonningtons. The change in the position of the main entrance to the house is thought to have coincided with the building of an entrance lodge where the more easterly drive made a junction with the Stanstead to Hunsdon Road. The easterly drive could well have been used earlier as a separate entrance for trades people and the estate workers. The westerly drive used originally, by visitors to the main house, went out of use sometime between 1840 and 1873.

The arrows on the map indicates the direction from which the camera captured the images shown on this and the following page. Colour of arrows matches the colour of the frame for the relevant picture

The following photographs seems to be from the same postcard range as the similarly titled pictures in this article. This view from the NW shows the original hipped roof main block flanked by later additions.



This view illustrates the rather attractive Queen Anne architecture of the original house of about 1620, shown in the centre of the picture. The block to the right is the billiards room, built between 1815 and 1840 joined to the main house by a single storey link. Beyond the billiards room can be glimpsed a rather ornate conservatory facing south. The building to the left of the original house is John Byde's extension of 1725. The lawn in the foreground had, in the 1600s, been the location of ornate formal gardens.



This view shows the large lake at Bonningtons as it is thought to have appeared in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The lake was excavated between 1840 and the mid 1850s when the house and grounds were owned by General Felix Calvert but occupied by his younger brother Edmund.

Chronology of Bonningtons Owners and Occupiers

Dates	Owner	Occupier	Notes
1620			Origins of Bonningtons House as a country residence of a gentleman farmer.
1687	Ralph Bye [Byshe]		Ralph recorded as enlarging the house Ralph was a lawyer and a brother of Sir Thomas Bye of Ware Park
1725	John Bye		Added a large new block to Bonningtons
1726	John Bye	John Bye	Mentioned in legal doc.as living at Bonningtons and Peter Calvert resident at Nine Ashes.
1758	John Bye		John Bye died
1766	<i>Thomas Plummer Bye</i>		<i>Living at Ware Park</i>
1779	<i>Thomas Plummer Bye</i>		<i>A decree of Chancery concerning the estate and effects of Thomas Plummer Bye a Bankrupt He died in Naples in 1789 in poor circumstances.</i>
1781-3	Nicolson Calvert		Thought to have purchased Bonningtons as part of the sale of properties following Bye's bankruptcy
1788	<i>Nicolson Calvert</i>	<i>Felix Calvert</i>	<i>Nine Ashes acquired by Nicolson Calvert Nicolson already owned Hunsdon House and the Manor that went with it.</i>
1793	Felix Calvert	Nicolson [<i>Felix's son</i>]	Nicolson Calvert dies properties pass to his brother Felix Calvert. His son Felix moved from Bonningtons to Hunsdon House. His son Nicolson moved into Bonningtons.
1802	Felix Calvert		Felix Dies
1803	Nicolson Calvert	Mr Roberts	Nicolson moves to Hunsdon House Bonningtons let to a Mr Roberts
1840	Felix Calvert	Edmund Calvert	Tythe award information
1841	Felix Calvert		Nicolson Calvert Dies Felix Calvert son of Nicolson inherits Edmund the heir apparent to the estate lived at Bonningtons at this time
1856	Edmund Calvert		Felix Calvert dies and his brother Edmund inherits Bonningtons and other properties
1858			Rev Nicolson Calvert dies and Edmund Inherits the remaining family properties
1859	<i>Edmund Calvert</i>	<i>Edmund Calvert</i>	<i>Edmund sold all the Hunsdon properties [Estate jointly purchased by Charles Phelps and James Sydney Walker and then divided]</i>
	<i>James Sidney Walker</i>	<i>James S. Walker</i>	<i>James Sidney Walker received Bonningtons</i>
1863	Salisbury Baxendale	Salisbury Baxendale	Bought Bonningtons and lived there.
1860s			Baxendale acquired other Hunsdon properties.
1895	Salisbury Baxendale	Salisbury Baxendale	In residence at Bonningtons [Kelly's Directory]
1889			<i>Salisbury Baxendale sells Hunsdonbury to John Henry Buxton</i>
1902	Archibald Herbert James	Archibald H James	Sale of Bonningtons and estate
1908	Archibald Herbert James	Archibald H James	Record of Mr James living at Bonningtons.
1939			Sale of Bonningtons and estate following the death of Archibald James.

Stuart Moye March 2023