

Sutton House Society Newsletter

June 2007



For all interested in the past, present and future of Sutton House

Twenty years ago today!

At Sutton House, this year, we are celebrating not one but two significant anniversaries: the 500th anniversary of the birth of Rafe Sadleir of course, but also twenty years of the Sutton House Society. The Society, originally called the 'Save Sutton House Campaign', was formed in March 1987 to oppose the plans by the National Trust to convert the house into flats for sale.

The first shot across the bows of H.M.S. National Trust came earlier however on 4th April 1986 when Mike Gray wrote in a letter to the Hackney Gazette:

Having recently had the opportunity of looking around the early 16th century mansion in Homerton High Road — Sutton House — it makes me feel very sad to see the neglected state of the once beautiful interior which includes rare examples of early panelled rooms...

The importance of the house, the oldest domestic building in Hackney, and the risk it runs, at present, from vandalism and neglect, make its restoration and protection a priority... I do hope that future generations will not have cause to regret the loss of Sutton House as a public resource. This will sadly be the case if it is converted into

expensive private flats! The people of Hackney deserve the right of access to one of their greatest treasures.

This letter, on the face of it, didn't attract much attention, but about a year later on 13th February 1987 a second salvo from Mike appeared in the Hackney Gazette: "This unique vestige of the medieval village of Hackney [should be saved] for all the people of Hackney and beyond — not just for a few rich enough to purchase the no doubt very expensive flats." It drew an immediate response. The following extracts from the diary of Mike Gray continue the story.

3rd March 1987 There was a letter in the *Hackney Gazette* from someone called Julie Lafferty supporting my 'campaign' for Sutton House. She said the Borough Council should be opposing this privatisation of the heritage of the people of Hackney. When I got home this evening she had dropped round a leaflet and petition which she has prepared headed, 'Save Sutton House Campaign'. It seems very good. I have been writing a letter for the Hackney Archive newsletter, the *Terrier*, on the same subject. I'm quite pleased with it so far.

5th March I phoned Julie Lafferty last night and arranged a meeting here [16B Clapton Passage] with a view to start the 'Save Sutton House Campaign'.

9th March This afternoon I had a very interesting meeting with Julie Lafferty, who turned out to be a very attractive and

energetic young lady, and her husband / boyfriend (?) a tall reddish-haired and bearded Scotsman with a powerful presence and a strong Glasgow accent, called Cam Matheson. Julie used to work at Sutton House when the technician's union A.S.T.M.S. had their headquarters there. The Save Sutton House Campaign is now launched. What have I let myself in for?

15th March The second meeting of the S.S.H.C. this afternoon: Julie, Cam and another lady from Sutton Square, a history teacher called Kate Dyer. We walked down to the house and generally nosed around. Pleased to say that the house seems to be well boarded up now !

16th March I spoke to someone called Mike Gillman at Chesham House this morning. He said that English Heritage supported the Avanti / National Trust scheme to turn Sutton House into private flats. [Later English Heritage, in fact, changed their attitude and Victor Belcher a Hackney resident and senior officer of the London Division of English Heritage, arranged for a detailed historical structural survey of the house which formed the basis for the recently published monograph on the history of the house.]

22nd March In the evening I had a meeting with Julie and Kate. Cam was also there and Ian Rowe, a Hackney Councillor of an ultra-left persuasion. Ian is going to introduce our delegation to the Planning Committee on the 31st, when we shall be calling for the council to throw out any planning application that the developers might put forward.

23rd March ... Later in the Oasis Wine Bar I chatted to Liz McGovern [of Hackney Committee Against Racism] about the prospects for Sutton House. She suggested that wedding receptions and other functions could serve an important community need. Then I bumped into Jane Straker who had just returned from a Hackney Society meeting. Sutton House came up but she said that Pat Hammill [the secretary] seemed to be uncommitted.

25th March Kate came round to top and tail letters to resident and community groups about the Campaign.

28th March ... and went for a walk over Hackney Marshes. Bright but cold and windy with a sharp biting rain later. While walking I hatched a scheme to link the 'Beating the Bounds' ceremony with Sutton House by setting up a sponsored boundary post somewhere along the eastern boundary. [It was not until 1992 that we actually erected a post made from ancient oak, from Sutton House, in the old Middlesex Filter Beds, which had become a nature reserve in the Lee Valley Park. The post was blessed by the late Rev. Bill Hurdman, Rector of St. John-at-Hackney and a member of the Local Committee at Sutton House.]

29th March Another night in which I go to bed scheming and dreaming about the future of Sutton House — after the meeting here at 8.00pm when Ian Rowe, Sid Austin, Jane, Liz, Julie, Pat Hammill (now committed!) Kate and myself prepared our plans for the deputation to the planning committee next Tuesday. We collected a page of signatures for the petition at the Chesham Arms in Mehetabel Road near Sutton House.

31st March I spoke in the Council Chamber tonight. It's the first time that I have been there. It was actually a meeting of the full council. I have never spoken in such a grand place before. The acoustics and gravitas of the place combined to give a sense of occasion. Strangely I was aware of what seemed the strong, detached sound of my voice. The response from several councillors was encouraging. There is no doubt that if we save Sutton House from development into private flats it will be an important achievement and one that I would be very proud to be associated with.

4th April Meeting at Kate and Alistair's in Sutton Square. Ken Jacobs (Hackney postman and local historian) and Mary Horwood of Thames Television were there. We went round to Sutton House and Ken found the back door open, rather disturbingly. The house is in a terrible state

but I was more impressed than ever with the great character of the place whether the panelling is there or not. [The National Trust had dismantled all the panelling after the theft of the linen fold panelling which fortunately was later recovered.]

6th May [A meeting had been arranged with the planning department of Hackney Council in Shoreditch at 11am.] At the meeting were nine representatives of the National Trust including Julian Prideaux (the national land agent) and Robin Mills (the Thames and Chilterns regional director) — quite a phalanx! Avanti Architects and the would-be developer Martin Village made their case very well I thought. I could do little more than express my unhappiness at the prospect of losing the unity of the house. Julie however was very good and effective emphasising the importance of the house for local people. In the end I felt our position had won some respect and both Martin Village and Julian Prideaux were apparently keen for a compromise which would leave the historic core of the panelled rooms in the East Wing in community use. Perhaps that is the most we can hope for! But we would have to form a trust and raise some £200,000.

7th May A meeting [in Clapton Passage] Cam, Julie and Kate argued strongly that we should continue campaigning for a full victory. It was pointed out that we didn't need to form a trust: we already had one, it was called the National Trust. It should be persuaded to restore the house and open it to the public!

In July Mike received a phone call from the secretary of Dame Jennifer Jenkins, Chairman of the National Trust, saying that Dame Jennifer was visiting Sutton House the following day to see for herself what all the fuss was about, and would he like to meet her? He did of course and took a day off work to do so. In her book From Acorn to Oak Tree (1994), Dame Jennifer wrote:

When Angus Stirling [Director General of the Trust] and I went to look at the plans on site in July 1987, we found the

developer (Martin Village) and also Mike Gray (the leader of the campaign), who explained his ideas of how the house might be used. We were persuaded that this alternative should be seriously examined, for to divide this sizable, but by no means vast, house into self contained units would have destroyed its historic character and would have made regular public access difficult.

It was decided that the 'Save Sutton House' group should be asked to present precise proposals and that an archaeological survey should be commissioned. From that time the Trust and Mike Gray worked closely together to bring about the restoration of the house for educational and community uses. When the house was finally opened in February 1994, it offered a new resource for the deprived East End borough.

Campaigning and research continued throughout 1987 culminating in an open day on 13th December which turned out to be a turning point in the campaign. The National Trust and the Campaign worked together to clean the house and as far as possible to make it safe and presentable to the public. An estimated 800 people turned up! The occasion was only slightly marred by an accident to one of the volunteers helping to prepare the house. Her name was Fiona Reynolds and she broke a little finger! Fiona is of course now the Director General of the National Trust.

Further reading:

PATRICK WRIGHT: *A Journey Through Ruins* (Radius, 1991)

JENNIFER JENKINS and PATRICK JAMES: *From Acorn to Oak Tree* (Macmillan, 1994)

VICTOR BELCHER, RICHARD BOND, MIKE GRAY and ANDY WITTRICK: *Sutton House — a Tudor Courtier's House in Hackney* (English Heritage, 2004)

Sir Rafe Sadleir of Sutton House

In 1507 a healthy boy was born to Henry Sadleir and his wife in Warwickshire. That boy Rafe grew up to become one of the most important courtiers and statesmen in the reigns of Henry VIII, Edward VI and Elizabeth I. At his death, eighty years later, he was considered to be one of the richest commoners in the country. Rafe was also the man who built Sutton House, Hackney. This year is the 500th anniversary of his birth and at Sutton House we, the Sutton House Society and the National Trust, are commemorating the event with a weekend of activities on 23rd and 24th June and descendants of Rafe Sadleir from all over the world are coming to Hackney to help us celebrate the occasion.

Henry Sadleir was steward to an important landowner in Warwickshire, Sir Edward Belknap, who was Henry VIII's chief butler responsible for maintaining the royal wine cellars. When plans were formulated for the legendary Field of Cloth of Gold in 1520, the grand tournament and meeting of Henry with Francis I of France in Calais, Sadleir assisted Belknap in the administration. His particular role was the acquisition of the vast quantity of "canvas and buckram" needed to make the royal tents and temporary palace. Shortly afterwards, in 1521, Belknap died and Henry Sadleir had to make new arrangements for himself and his family. He decided to purchase a house in Hackney, then a salubrious village to the north east of London, popular with noblemen and wealthy merchants. Henry wrote to his friend Thomas Cromwell. "Syr, I shoyd your mastreshyp howe I have boughte a howse in Haceney — I trust I my wife and our childryn shall injoye the saied howse with the appurtenances to godly plesure."

It is not known precisely where this house was but Hackney landowner Sir John Heron, treasurer to the King's chamber, to whom Sadleir had to submit his accounts, held property close to St Augustine's

Church and in the light of the future building site of Sutton House it seems reasonable to suggest that the house that Henry bought was that which, in later documents, was described as "formerly a brew house" or inn.

In the meantime young Rafe was being brought up and educated, probably from the age of seven, in the household of Thomas Cromwell in London. He wrote later that he was "nourished... and admired" by Cromwell from the "yeres of discredyt". By the age of nineteen he was already employed by Cromwell as his secretary and, "by meanes whereof he did many thinges touchinge matters of state and by that meanes he in continuance of time was knowne to King Harry."

In the life and career of Rafe Sadleir 1535 was a key year as well as in the history of Sutton House. At the relatively early age of twenty-eight Sadleir was awarded the important administrative post, shared with Thomas Cromwell, of Keeper of the Treasury of the Chancery known as the Hanaper. This was life tenure and carried with it the substantial emolument of a major office. It was also the year that his first surviving son, Thomas, was baptised in Hackney Church, Cromwell being the godfather, and also the year in which his first family house was built, known then as the "bryk place".

The evidence for the building date is derived from two sources. Tree ring analysis has shown that some of the key timbers in the house were felled in 1534 and sixteenth-century building techniques required working with green rather than weathered oak. We also know that a large house known as the King's Place in nearby Clapton had been granted by the King to Cromwell and in 1535 he was rebuilding it using a hundred oaks floated down the River Lea from Henry VIII's lands in Enfield. It seems more than likely that some of the trees found their way to Rafe Sadleir's new building site. In a deed of sale of 1550 to John Machell, master of the Clothworkers' Company, it is described as a

“capitall messuage or tenement with the appurtenances of old tyme called a Brewhouse and afterwards a dwelling house... and nowe called the bryk place.”

As is implied by its name the house was built in brick, a relatively novel material at that time except for the grandest of houses like Hampton Court. It was a compact H-plan building of three storeys. It made a bold show of status with elaborate patterning in burnt brick diapering which is still visible despite extensive re-fronting of the house in the eighteenth century.

“In the summer of 1535, the King embarked on one of the most important progresses of his reign [to the West Country]... not just an elaborate hunting jaunt, but a public relations exercise... promoting the recent religious reforms.” Accompanying the King and Anne Boleyn was a vast escort of courtiers and servants. Included in the party were Thomas Cromwell, Rafe Sadleir and the famous Flemish court painter Holbein.

Hans Holbein the Younger (1497–1543) was appointed court painter to the King and his work was in great demand by merchants and courtiers in and around the City. He painted Henry and Cromwell and many of the men close to them. Several portraits however have never been identified and none in the past have been attributed to Sadleir. However, I suggested that one portrait known as An Unidentified Man may in fact be Rafe as it was painted in 1535 and the man’s age is given as twenty-eight, which was Rafe’s age in that year. There is also a noticeable resemblance between the portrait and the face of the recumbent figure in his memorial in Standon Church, Hertfordshire.

Dr David Starkey’s response to this proposal was interesting and worth quoting:

Mike Gray’s suggested identification [of the portrait] with Ralph Sadleir is a new one on me. But the days do fit — and perhaps more than you realise. For not only was Sadleir twenty-eight in 1535 but 1535 was also the year that straddled

his service to Cromwell and the King. Indeed there is an interesting possibility that the portrait was painted on the royal progress of 1535. Henry was accompanied by both his new Queen, Anne Bolyne, and his minister, Thomas Cromwell. In Cromwell’s train was his secretary and confidential assistant Sadleir... the host of the royal couple on the 23rd to 26th was Sir Nicholas Poyntz of Iron Acton, Gloucestershire. Poyntz commemorated the visit by commissioning his portrait from Holbein... The details of dress, in particular the upturned collar, and the trim of the moustache and beard, are very similar to the (possible) Sadleir portrait. My guess is that they were done at the same time by the royal painter who accompanied the court on a progress that would bring not only the Reformation to the localities, but the Renaissance as well. It is a lovely seemingly convincing story.

At the recent Holbein exhibition at Tate Britain the drawing and a portrait in oils based on the drawing of An Unidentified Man 1535 were hung side by side. Dr Susan Foister, curator of the exhibition, wrote in the catalogue that it has been “plausibly suggested the sitter might be Sir Ralph Sadleir”.

Rafe Sadleir went on to become the King’s ambassador to Scotland where he saw Mary (later Queen of Scots) as a baby. He won glory at the battle of Pinkie in Scotland, became one of the advisors to Edward VI and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster in Elizabeth’s reign. His most onerous task as an old man was to be the custodian of Mary when she was in prison awaiting trial. He described her as “this most wicked and filthy woman”, but nevertheless still took her on falconry expeditions to the great displeasure of Elizabeth.

Sadleir's link with the village of Hackney ceased in 1550 when he sold the "bryk place", which we now call Sutton House and settled his family in Standon, Hertfordshire. A prize-winning book, *Sutton House, A Tudor Courtier's House in Hackney*, records the history of Sadleir, his house in Hackney and the vicissitudes of its occupation over the subsequent 470 years.

[reprinted from an article by MIKE GRAY in the *London Topographical Society Newsletter*, April 2007]

Autumn outing

Julia Lafferty is inviting the members of the Sutton House Society to join the Friends of the Clapton Cinematograph for a visit to the Phoenix Cinema. This will take place on the morning of Friday 7th September 2007. The cinema, which is located at 52 High Road, East Finchley N2, was built in 1910 and is believed to be one of the oldest purpose-built cinemas in Great Britain. Behind its modern foyer lies an historic auditorium with unique art-deco features. Since 1985 it has been run as a cinema on behalf of the people of North London by a community trust.

We are hoping to be able to combine the visit with a trip to a local museum.

If you would like to come on the visit, please contact Julia at 32 Ickburgh Road, London E5 8AD or by email on saveourcinema@hotmail.co.uk or telephone on 020 8806 2441.


The Sadleir Quincentenary Weekend 23rd/24th June: a success story!

When booking opened for tickets for events taking place over the weekend we did not expect to be oversubscribed within a couple of months. That has meant that some

members have been left hopefully waiting for returned tickets. We are delighted that around 30 members of the world-wide family of Sadleir/Sadler are joining us for the celebrations and welcome to the Society several who have joined us.

Don't forget that the house is open to the general public over the weekend for guided tours and other free events like a performance in honour of Sir Rafe by children from Rushmore School Clapton, at 3.00pm on Saturday. Sunday is a family free entry day with activities arranged by the National Trust.

St.-John-at-Hackney Summer Fete



join us at the
St John at Hackney
SUMMER FETE
7th July, 11 until 4

Opened by Meg Hillier MP
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STEEL BAND
50s ROCK AND ROLL AT 12
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BOUNCY CASTLE and things for kids
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Find out about the history of your church

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Rafe Sadleir and the first legal divorce

Thomas, Archbishop of Canterbury; Nicholas, Bishop of Worcester; and George, Bishop of Chichester were commissioned to enquire into and settle the matter of the

marriage of Ralph Sadleir and Helen his consort. This was their agreed statement.

Seventeen years past Matthew Barr, born at Sevenoaks Kent, married at Dunmow, Essex Ellen Mitchell, daughter of John Mitchell of Dunmow and within about two years, two daughters were born to them, and the said Matthew, who had lived riotously consuming his time in unlawful gains, suddenly departed from her and never sent her knowledge of his state. He wandered from town to town for three years and then dwelt at Cardiff in Wales for one year after that he departed to Ireland for half a year, meanwhile the said Ellen, in great poverty, laboured virtuously for her living for one year, at Dunmow, till one of her friends saying that the said Matthew was dead, advised her to be a nun and she was brought to Clerkenwell nunnery, where she was in service and favour of the Prioress then being a woman of gravity and wisdom to whom she declared her pitiful case.

The prioress showed her that the state of religion was not meant for young persons meet to procreate children and live abroad in the world, but for aged people, and would no wise consent to her being a nun, alleging that she might marry some honest man.

To make sure first of her husband's life or death she procured friends in London, whose business took them to fairs in most parts of the realm, to enquire for him and went herself to Sevenoke, where his brethren, Richard Barr and Peter Barr and other kinsfolk dwelt and there she tarried a year. Then failing to hear of her husband she returned to the nunnery; and there a man of Sarum affirmed that her husband was dead.

The prioress then referred her to the service of the Lord Cromwell, in whose family and service Sir Ralph Sadleir then was, who, being a man desirous to lead a life acceptable to God, and, perceiving her honesty desired to marry her; and after a long suit, she not concealing any part of her state from him, he married her about four years after the departure of Matthew and

more than eleven years ago. She has lived as an honest wife to him, ordered his house wisely, and borne him nine children, seven of whom namely Thomas, Edward, Henry, Anne, Mary, Jane and Dorothy are living.

Within two years after her marriage with Sadleir, and diverse times afterwards the said Matthew was in London, but never disclosed that he was her husband until four years ago, when he says he declared it to John Michell, of London, who is now dead. He also declared it to one Griffith, the King's servant, dwelling at the 'Bell and Saracen's Head' in Fenchurch Street., who had expressed surprise at seeing him, having been told of his death. And he declared for the third time, within this twelve months, when apprehended and brought to the Lord Chancellor's house, where as Sadleir was occupied upon the northern Borders, he has since been held for examination.

Now, as the said Matthew was married to the said Ellen, her marriage with Sadleir is invalid and their children bastards. Yet as this second marriage was manifestly due to the evil behaviour of the said Matthew, and Sadleir made it with a pure conscience, thinking Matthew dead, it is enacted that his children aforesaid named shall be reputed legitimate and if any divorce shall be made between the said Ellen and Matthew, she shall be reputed a woman sole, as if her marriage with him had never been.

The divorce was subsequently approved by an act of parliament with Sadleir, hurriedly recalled from the north, in attendance.

Rafe Sadleir and Mary Queen of Scots

Rafe Sadleir was given, at the age of 77, the unwelcome task of being the custodian of Mary Queen of Scots while she was imprisoned in Tutbury Castle Staffordshire. on 22nd March 1584 he wrote to William Cecil, Secretary to Queen Elizabeth.

Sir, whereas by your letters of the 3rd of March I understand that Her Majesty is informed of the liberty that is permitted unto this Queen of Scotland here to go abroad a hawking six or seven miles from this castle. If it were true in all parts as it is informed, as I will not deny that part which is true, yet if it be not otherwise taken then I meant well in the doing, I am sure it cannot be interpreted to be any great offence.

The truth is that when I came hither, finding this country commodious and good for the sport which I have always delighted in, I sent home for my hawks and falconers, wherewith to pass this miserable life which I lead here; and when they came hither I took the commodity of them, sometimes here abroad, not far from this castle; whereof this Queen hearing, earnestly entreated me that she might go abroad with me to see my hawks fly, a pastime indeed which she hath singular delight in: and I, thinking that it could not be ill-taken, assented unto her desire, and so hath she been abroad with me two or three times hawking upon the rivers here, sometime a mile, sometime two miles, but not past three miles when she was furthest from this castle.

And for her guard, when she was abroad, though I left the soldiers at home with their halberds and harquebus, because they be footmen and cannot well toil on foot the ways here being foul and deep, yet had I always forty or fifty of mine own servants and others on horseback, and some with pistols, which I knew to be a sufficient guard against any attempt that can be made by any man here upon the sudden, for her escape, whereof, I assure you, I see no manner cause of fear so long as this country remaineth in such quietness as it is now.

But if it were otherwise, and that any such force might be used or attempted in that behalf, as I think her well-wishers would desire, it is not twenty or thirty soldiers with their halberds and harquebus, nor the small power that I have here, nor yet the strength of this castle, which God knoweth is very weak, that could defend us.

And therefore, Sir, I have used my simple discretion in granting this Queen this liberty, the rather for that she thinketh herself by means of such comfortable words and messages, as of late she received from Her Majesty to stand now in better terms, and to be in better grace with her Majesty than she had been hitherto, wherein I thought I did well; but since it is not so well taken, I would to God some other had the charge, that would use it with more discretion than I can;

For I assure you I am so weary of it, that if it were not more for that I would do nothing that would offend Her Majesty then for fear of any punishment I would come home and yield myself to be a prisoner in the Tower all the days of my life, rather than I would attend any longer here upon this charge. And if I had known when I came from home, I should have tarried here so long contrary to all promises made unto me, I would have refused as others do and have yielded to any punishment, rather than I would have accepted this charge; for any greater punishment cannot be ministered unto me than to force me to remain here in this sort, being more good now in mine old and later days, to rest at home to prepare myself to leave and go out of the miseries and afflictions whereunto we are subject in this life and to seek the everlasting quietness of the life to come, which the Lord almighty grant unto us when it shall be His good pleasure! And if it might light on me tomorrow, I would think myself most happy for I assure you I am weary of this life.

However Sadleir's burdens continued to trouble him. He was one of the judges appointed to try Mary for treason and may have been a witness to her beheading. However, within a few months of her death he also died but with his head firmly on his shoulders at Standon Lordship. His magnificent memorial can still be seen in Standon Church, Hertfordshire.