

## The History of Tilgate Estate



Tilgate Mansion c.1907

Tilgate Park was once home to a sprawling country estate and mansion known as the Tilgate Estate. The earliest recorded reference to the Tilgate Estate itself is as part of Worth Forest which was a Warrenne possession from the Norman Conquest.

One third of the forest, including the Tilgate Estate, belonged to the Lords Bergavenny who owned it until Lord Edward Bergavenny sold it to Sir Walter Covert and Sir Edward Culpepper in 1566. It is recorded that in 1950 Tilgate Estate, managed land as opposed to 'forest', extended to sixty acres.

Tilgate subsequently passed from the Coverts to the Sergissions, who gradually enlarged the estate until it was acquired in 1865 by John Nix. The estate remained in the Nix family (subsequently Ashburner-Nix) until 1939 when the 2185 acres were auctioned in 74 lots.

Many of the very fine specimen trees found in the park today owe their origin to John Ashburner Nix and his brother Charles. They were both well-known amateur horticulturalists who undertook a great deal of planting. The Ashburners were merchants in business in the USA before arriving at Tilgate, and the presence of many American trees, such as the Canadian redwood on the south side of the park, may be explained by this connection.

There are trees however, such as the *suquoiadendron giganteum* (a type of redwood tree), which are even older. Whatever their origins, the trees have certainly survived well despite the derelict conditions into which the estate fell after it was sold.

Early records suggest there was originally a house near the bay of the main lake but this was demolished when the Nix family built the Mansion House on the site which was occupied by the now empty pub. The Mansion House was described as a spacious and substantial country house comprising a great hall 40' x 24' with arches supported by marble pillars, a study, billiards room, sitting room, dining room, drawing room on the ground floor and 8 bedrooms on the first floor. Extensive views of the park could be enjoyed from the house, particularly from the southern end of the great hall.



Right: Inside Tilgate Mansion c.1910

The mansion was approached at the time by two drives, one from Three Bridges Station from the north and one from the Brighton Road (now A23) to the south. The present path leading south from the site where the pub was located follows the direction of this drive. The faint outline of the sweeping circle of the drive can still be

seen beneath the grass by the Canadian redwood tree. This southern drive terminated at three iron gates, the base of which remains today. Though the drive was originally lined with willows, only one remains, that which used to occupy the centre of the roundabout.



Right: Tilgate Lodge located near to Three Bridges Station

Part of the western area of the estate was used for a Canadian Army camp during the Second World War. This is now the Tilgate Forest Recreation Centre run by Crawley Borough Council.

In 1940 the Mansion House was bought by BT Estates Ltd whilst the lakes were bought by Sir Malcolm Campbell who used them for floatation trials for his speed boat called the Bluebird. The Bluebird K4 went on to set the water speed record in 1939 at Coniston Water. The main Tilgate Lake is still sometimes referred to as 'Campbell's Lake' after the man himself.

On the death of Sir Malcolm in December 1948 they passed to his son Donald, who sold them to Colin Campbell. The lakes were purchased in 1952 by a Mr. Baker who sold them to Crawley Urban District Council in 1964.

In 1950, BT Estates Ltd sold the Mansion House to Crawley Development Corporation and by 1964 when Crawley Urban District Council purchased it the house was beyond renovation and was therefore demolished. The original stable block remains but has been converted into flats though the clock tower remains intact. It is thought that during the 1940's and 50's the mansion was used by research workers for F.W Burke and Company who used the nursery as a Horticultural Experimental Station.

Much of the original Tilgate Estate is now covered by the Tilgate and Furnace Green neighbourhoods, which can be seen from the car park looking north.

Following the 1949 New Towns Act, and the designation of Crawley as a new town, about 200 acres of the Tilgate Estate was zoned as public open space. It was purchased in a number of parts by the then Crawley Urban District Council from 1964 onwards.