



FAIRFIELD

The known history of the manor begins in the reign of Henry II, when it was granted to an ancestor of the present owner, and it has been in the same family ever since. The name of the house has always been Fairfield, but the surname of the owners has changed because of inheritance by women – *Russell, Vernai, Palmer, Acland, Acland-Hood*. There are many family memorials in Stogursey Church, the oldest being that of *William de Vernai* who died in 1333.

The present house has a medieval west wing with the remains of a carved 15th century roof; the rest is Elizabethan, except for part of the back which is 18th century.

There is said to have been an ancient village of Fairfield to the east of the present house. A field there is called *Martinsland*, and a member of the family called *Martin* is known to have built a house in that area in the 12th century.

Not much is known of the earliest buildings, but there is some documentary evidence about them, and about early family history. In 1288 a chapel was built and an endowment given for a chaplain. This endowment was, in 1562, “unjustly seized by the vicars of Stokecourci and Kilton”

William de Vernai, who married *Margaret Russell* in 1264, fought in Scotland for Edward I, and died in 1300, probably of his wounds. Their grandson *Ralph* and his younger son *John* both fought in France, the latter with the Black Prince.

John Vernai returned after ten years in France, having made provision for his "faithful and well-beloved companion" and their two children in Bordeaux, and settled down at Fairfield. His son, also *John*, was summoned to appear before the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1442 for shouting at the prior in English during a service in Stogursey Church. Later he retired to live in the priory and his tomb in the church has a fine stone effigy.

In 1472 *William Vernai* (or *Verney*) was granted a licence to build a wall and seven round towers about his mansion house at Fairfield, and to enclose land for a (deer) park. The bases of three towers were still there in 1733, and parts of the foundations were revealed by excavation in 2009.

Robert Verney (1484-1547) "built a fair gatehouse of hewn stone, a fair chapple and 4 chambers with a new buttery in so much that a fairer dwelling was not in these parts". Later *Robert* was imprisoned and fined by Henry VIII for not changing his religion, and the house became dilapidated.

In 1557 *Robert's* great-grand-daughter *Elizabeth* inherited Fairfield when only a few days old. She was named after Princess Elizabeth, who was her godmother. In 1571 (aged 14) she married *William*, son of her guardian *Sir Thomas Palmer*. The house was repaired and extended, incorporating part of the medieval building, and the date 1589 carved above the door.

[Dorney Court, near Windsor, is still lived in by members of the Palmer family, and Parnham House, in Sussex, is said to have been built by the Palmers to look like Fairfield]

Elizabeth Verney and *William Palmer's* son, *Thomas*, sailed with Drake and Hawkins and commanded a ship at the taking of Cadiz. His eldest son, William, "being a person of great learning, chose always to live in London", and so was fined £1000 by the Star Chamber in the reign of Charles I "as having been disobedient to the King's command requiring all persons of estate to reside and keep hospitality at their country houses".

The second son, *Colonel Peregrine Palmer* (1605-84), fought for the King in every battle of the Civil War, and so had to take temporary refuge in Flanders. His daughter *Elizabeth* married *Sir John Wroth* of Petherton Park, and Fairfield was later inherited by their *Acland* descendants

Colonel Peregrine's grandson, *Thomas Palmer* FRS MP (1683-1735) wrote a history of Fairfield and other places in Somerset using documents some of which have since disappeared, and this is invaluable for information about the earlier period. The Saxon Alfred Jewel, found on the *Wroths'* land at North Petherton, was given by *Thomas Palmer* to the university of Oxford and is displayed in the Ashmolean Museum. One of his younger brothers died of smallpox in 1706 while a pupil at Wells Cathedral School. The boy's memorial can be seen in the Cathedral, as can those of several of his sisters.

In 1762 Fairfield was inherited by *Arthur Acland* and his wife, *Elizabeth Oxenham*, both great-great-grand-children of *Peregrine Palmer*, followed in 1771 by their son *Sir John Palmer Acland*. He added the parapet and made superficial alterations to both the outside and inside of the house so as to give a more Georgian appearance. He also pulled down part of the medieval western end and built on kitchen quarters and a passage at the back. In addition the road was moved (by Act of Parliament), and a winding drive was made. A pond and formal gardens became a park with a ha-ha, and clumps of trees were planted.

Sir Peregrine Palmer Acland (1789-1871), son of *Sir John*, was particularly fond of Fairfield and the surrounding district. He built Stogursey School as a thank offering for the recovery of his daughter from tuberculosis, and was the first Chairman of the West Somerset Railway. *Sir Peregrine's Walk* in the garden is called after him

Sir Peregrine and his wife, *Fanny Leader*, had three children, of whom two died young. In 1849 their only surviving child, Isabel, married *Sir Alexander Hood MP*, whose grandfather, *Captain Alexander Hood*, sailed round the world with *Captain Cook* on the *Resolution* in 1772 at the age of 14, and was killed in action in 1798. The Hood Monument on the Polden Hills, near *Captain Alexander's* home at Wootton House, Butleigh Wootton, was built in memory of his brother, *Admiral Sir Samuel Hood*. The first *Hoods* to go to sea were their cousins *Samuel* (1724-1816), later *Viscount Hood*, and his brother *Alexander*, later *Viscount Bridport*, sons of the Vicar of Butleigh. Both served in the Navy with great distinction, rising to be admirals, and helped their younger relations to follow them.

Isabel and *Alexander Acland-Hood* had nine children. Their eldest son, *Sir Alexander Acland-Hood* (1853-1917) served in the Grenadier Guards, was MP for West Somerset from 1892 to 1911 and then became *Lord St Audries* (named after a nearby family estate). He and his wife, *The Hon Mildred De Moleyns*, had four children - *Audrey, Maud, Peregrine* and *John*. On his father's death *Peregrine* (1893-1971) inherited the title, while serving in the Somerset Light Infantry in Burma, and settled at Fairfield. He and his brother and sisters maintained the family tradition of public service in Somerset and beyond. *John* (1906-1964), became a barrister and married *Dr Phyllis Hallett*. They lived at Wootton House with their three daughters, *Elizabeth, Mary* and *Sylvia*. *Elizabeth* now lives at Fairfield.

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..*Elizabeth Acland Hood Gass* (2002, 2010) Drawing by *Tony Haskell*

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