



# A house with a history

Royalty and prime ministers may have stayed at Leadenham House but it is still a family home and at the heart of village life

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*Opposite: Leadenham House*

*Below: Mrs Reeve with her pet dogs*



In the late 1370s, Pilgrims on their way to visit the shrine of St Hugh at Lincoln, would have been delighted to reach Leadenham, for it was here that they would find a hospice, run by the prioress and nuns of the abbey of Heveninges, hence 'Nun's Close', the still green field in the heart of the village.

Leadenham, situated half way between Grantham and Lincoln, was an ideal place in which to establish the hospice. The village is mentioned in the Domesday survey of 1086 and by then already had its own church. It is an extremely attractive, mainly stone-built Lincolnshire village. The stone used in the village is the very attractive honey-coloured limestone – the colour arising from the iron in the stone – iron mining used to be big business on the Lincoln cliff. The village still has the Old Rectory, the Manor House, Field House, Leadenham Old Hall and a Georgian vernacular coaching inn, the George Hotel, where present-day 'pilgrims' may obtain refreshment and accommodation. The Old Rectory was, in fact, the home of John Dee, the Chancellor of Queen Elizabeth I. Leadenham is also the setting for Leadenham House, the home of Mr and Mrs Peter Reeve.

Leadenham House has marvellous views, particularly to the west, from the main front, overlooking the Vale of Trent. On a clear day two Cathedral roofs can be seen – Lincoln Cathedral and Southwell Minster in Nottinghamshire. The house is surrounded by parkland and a mainly arable 3,000-acre estate. Sheep graze in the park, a reminder of the days when rich wool merchants passed through Leadenham on their way to sell their fleeces at Lincoln market.

The Leadenham House of today was built for Mr. Reeve's ancestor, William Reeve, between 1790 and 1796. William Reeve was the son of William and Jane (née Key) Reeve of Melton Mowbray, and Jane was the sister of John Key, who lived in the earlier Leadenham House, built in 1570 on the same site. John died without issue, and the property passed to his sister on his death. William and Jane, however,

were too old to want to move, and their son, William was deputed to come to Leadenham. He married Millicent Mary King, of the Hall at Ashby-de-la-Launde, and had a new house built. The builder of the house was Christopher Staveley of Melton Mowbray in Leicestershire. Staveley is also mentioned in the estate accounts book as a surveyor. His design was basically square, with the centre bay being slightly recessed. By the 1820s, new additions and alterations had been made by the renowned architect, Lewis Vulliamy of the equally renowned clock-making family. He had added a new south wing and a canted porch as the house had been 'turned round', and now faced the full blast of the prevailing wind. The gardens were originally on the northern side of the house, but by placing them on the western side, a much better view was obtained.

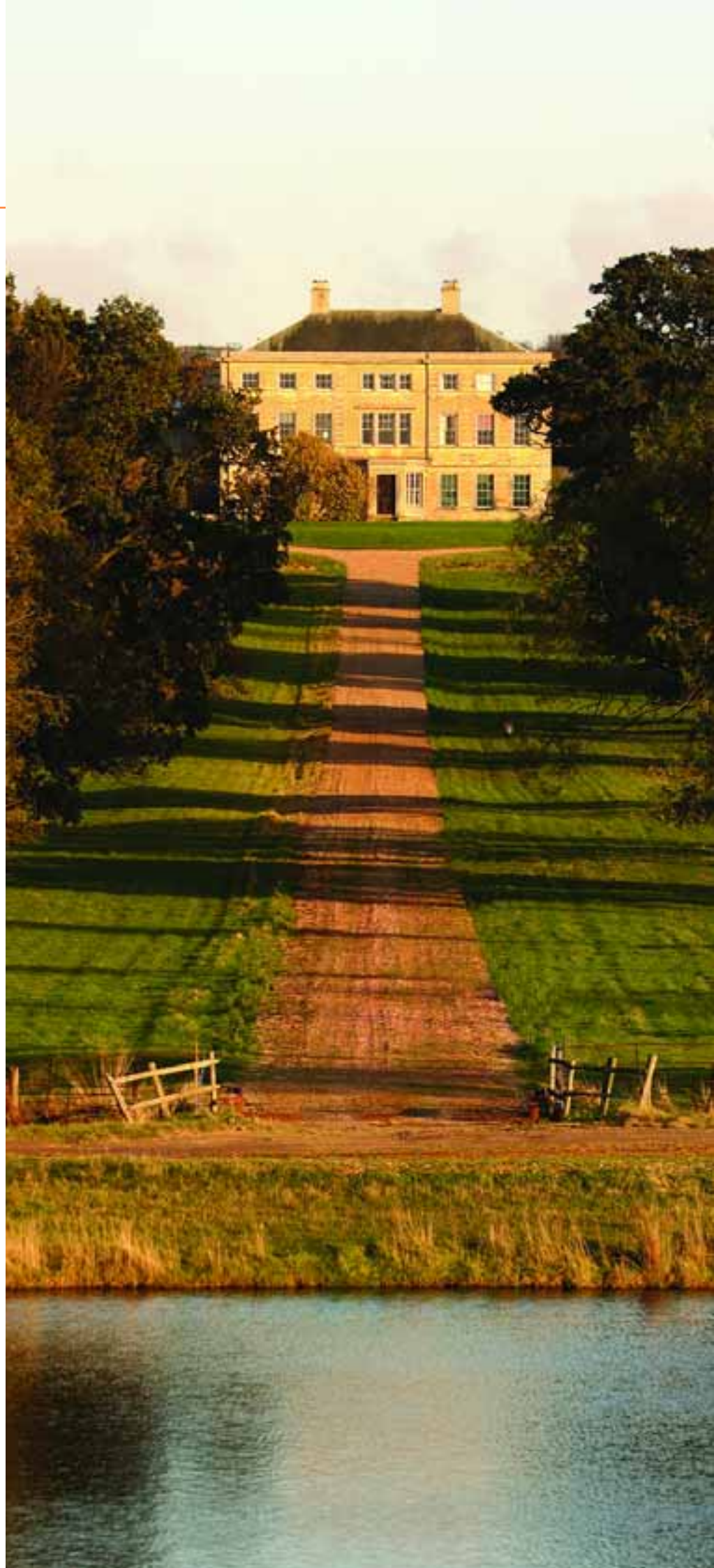
Leadenham House is still very much at the centre of village life. In July and August of 2005, Mr and Mrs Reeve opened their gardens to the public in aid of the Lincolnshire Old Churches Trust. The village fête was held here, a hog roast and harp recital raised funds for the church, and a dinner-dance aided the Kenyan school in which all the Reeve children taught during their gap years. These events prove that they are continuing the public-spirited attitude, which has characterised the Reeve family. You have only to visit the church of Saint Swithun, and notice the monuments and windows dedicated to the Reeves, to realise how well respected they have been over the 200 years that they have been in occupancy. Not only are there memorials to various members of the family – such as the lych gate at the entrance to the church, erected in memory of Colonel John Reeve, but there are also records of their generosity to the poor. Colonel William Henry Reeve's charity of twelve pounds a year was distributed in coal; General Reeve's charity bequest was divided between the six poorest women in the village, at one time, loaves of bread were given out at the Maundy Thursday church service, and even today, Reeve charities still exist. In

1932, the Court Rolls for Leadenham, which had been lost for over 200 years, were recovered. These established that Captain John Sherard Reeve was Lord of the Manor of Leadenham – a title that Mr Peter Reeve still holds, along with that of Patron of the Living.

Mr and Mrs Reeve have built a ‘reflecting pool’ in the grounds, exactly situated to catch a mirror image of the church of St Swithun. It is hoped that a new gateway will eventually lead from the garden to the foot of the church tower, subject to planning consents.

The impressive roofline of Leadenham House can be seen from the church grounds and from Rectory Lane. The observer notices at once the six fishtail chimney pots and a mass of more conventional chimneys. Particularly eye-catching is an unusual tower of wooden construction. The chimneys were originally those of the kitchen and the tower was a bell tower, the bell summoning the servants to their meals, etc. There are mellow stone walls surrounding the estate. One entrance is in Rectory Lane and another in the nearby Gospel Lane. This sounds appropriate, but is actually a corruption of Goosepool Lane, as the farm track led down to the village goose pool, where everyone used to keep their geese. This latter entrance takes you under an archway dating from 1900. When visitors came by train, rather than by horse and carriage, (Leadenham used to have a station on the Grantham to Lincoln line) this was the entrance they would have used, as it was the nearest one to the station. The arch bears the Reeve coat of Arms and the initials of J S Reeve, Mr Reeve’s grandfather. This arch and its iron gates were given to him as a wedding present. Entering under the arch, you can see the stables designed and built by E J Willson in 1833. Willson was also responsible for the stables at Blankney Hall, and examples of his work can be seen all over the county – most famously in Lincoln Cathedral and in St. James’ Church, Louth. Leadenham Hunt Kennels, also built by Willson, still exist in a field, some way from the house. They are best seen on the eastern side of the A607, leaving Leadenham in the direction of Grantham.

Following the winding drive round to Vulliamy’s porch, you can see two of the few remaining old mulberry trees in Lincolnshire. Originally there were three in the grounds, but Peter remembers that when a boy, when the third tree died, he had secretly to take it away at night, to avoid upsetting his mother – who failed to notice it had gone for several days! Mulberry trees live a long time, and these





were probably planted as part of an orchard before the 1790s, when the house was turned round. History tells that the workmen building the new house could take the fruit from one tree only, leaving the rest for the family.

The porch, which protects the house from the elements, leads the visitor into the hall, which is elegance itself. In front of you is a very striking cantilevered stone staircase, designed by John Adam.

Entering the morning room, it is fascinating to realise you are standing on the site of the kitchens of the original house. Unusually, on the walls, you can see rice paper panels, discovered by the architect, Detmar Blow, in an antique shop in 1904. They are Japanese, and their designs have symbolic meanings. Bluebirds, for instance, represent love, the stork longevity and the flowers each have their own meaning, as do the colours. The cornices are painted green, a favourite colour of the late Mrs Reeve who was brought up in London where the fashion was to paint everything green.

The present dining room is a room full of memories for Mr Reeve. When he was a child, this room was a billiard room and he well remembers how he used to play this game in here with his father while standing on a box. His father, another William Reeve, was an enterprising and talented gentleman. He was quite a collector of billiard tables, using the mahogany to construct furniture; he also designed a pond and was somewhat of a practical engineer, making the bronze fountain for the pond, himself. This pond can be found on the grand terrace, which was constructed using spoil from the new railway cutting of 1864. Many of the family portraits hang in the dining room and the present huge central table came from Mrs. Reeve's parent's home. Mr and Mrs Reeve have four children; William, James, Caroline and Eleanor, and one of the alcoves contains examples of ceramic work by Ellie, the youngest daughter, a striking example of which is an oriental temple.

A portrait of Philip Fox-Reeve dominates the Library. He was the present Mr Reeve's great-uncle and the family likeness can still be seen. The library walls are decorated in a rich terracotta colour. In here is a photograph of Mr. Reeve's grandfather, High Sheriff of Lincolnshire, arriving at Lincoln Castle in his carriage - which is now in the Museum of Lincolnshire Life. Also of interest is a miniature of two small boys showing the first William Reeve with his brother. It is in a gold frame and contained in a wooden case carved by Ray Ruthven, who was an estate carpenter for over forty years at Leadenham.

What was once a vast dining room is now used for committee and charity meetings. In its time, it has also been a bedroom, when Mr Reeve's parents could no longer cope with the twenty-eight steps of the stairs to the first floor. Portraits of the first William Reeve of Leadenham and his wife are to be found here, where they can keep an eye on their descendants. Set in the walls, behind a wooden shutter, is the 'potty cupboard' which still holds a chamber pot - most useful for the gentlemen after the ladies had retired from the meal when they could drink their wine and port late into the night without leaving the room, and had to be helped or carried upstairs by footmen.

The kitchen at Leadenham House has been moved three times. The present kitchen has been a brew house and a boiler house as well as a kitchen. When a brew house, mugs of ale used to be made available to travellers and visitors to the house, an old-fashioned version of the inevitable cups of tea and coffee that are offered now. Until comparatively recent times, it was not advisable to drink the water and ale (or cider) was a healthier alternative. Mr and Mrs Reeve told the story of 'Boozy' a terrier, whose portrait is in the corridor leading into the dining room. Apparently Boozy, a ratter that lived in the cellars, led a very sybaritic and relaxed life, lying underneath the bungs of the beer barrels and getting his



refreshment by catching the drips. When he died, he was found lying there, flat on his back, legs in the air, and, presumably with a smile on his face, and his gravestone in the garden bears the inscription 'Boozy, found accidentally poisoned in 1900', probably from a surfeit of alcohol!

Portraits of animals, particularly horses, can be found all over Leadenham House, continuing to this day with pictures of Mrs Henrietta Reeve's two pug dogs, 'Waffle' and 'Jack', appearing on cushions. These were a present from Ellieto Mrs. Reeve on her birthday and were hand-painted by Patricia Scott; an artist whose work is much sought after in Kenya.

Returning to the staircase, its shallow steps lead you to the landing, where the windows look out over the grounds. Mr and Mrs Reeve have given these windows even more appeal by adding cylindrical white pillars as internal mullions. Looking up, you can see a most elaborate plaster ceiling, picked out in shades of Imperial Chinese yellow and green.

It is interesting to see that all the principal bedrooms, which lead off the landing, contain four-poster beds. The first bedroom has a blue four-poster, with blue damask curtains made by the current owners from curtains originally hanging in the hall. In this bedroom, is a cream evening dress that belonged to Mr Reeve's mother. There is an interesting story behind the portrait of his mother wearing this dress. It was painted by Barraclough in 1938, and the painter asked the late Mrs Reeve if he could put it in the Royal Academy Exhibition of that year. She agreed, not realising that the Academy might want to keep it in the exhibition for longer than she intended. Luckily, all's well that ends well, and she managed to reclaim the portrait after a year or two and it still remains in Leadenham House.

The 'King's Room' is so-called because Edward VII slept in this room when he visited Leadenham House - apparently he used to go hunting with the present Mr. Reeve's grandfather. It is decorated in duck-egg blue and white and contains a chair, which once belonged to William Pitt the Younger. Mr Reeve explained to me that this was left over from the days when gentlemen paying visits to other houses often took their own furniture with them.

Another bedroom contains a portrait of Mr Reeve's Aunt Susan, who lived at Well Hall, at Well, near Alford. This was mostly an eighteenth century house with a wonderful park and a chain of lakes. This magnificent house has now been converted into a school. Some of Susan Reeve's clothing, which she wore for the portrait, is also displayed on the bed - evoking that

part of the twentieth century in which she lived.

Leadenham House had a high horticultural reputation throughout England, and it was to the kitchen gardens that the gardeners of Chatsworth House came when they wanted advice on the cultivation of soft fruit. Nowadays, the kitchen gardens no longer exist, but the estate is still beautifully kept - which is a great credit to Mr and Mrs Reeve and Peter Marples, their right-hand man.

In the rose garden there are some very appropriately named varieties of double English roses. There are 'The Reeve', a dusky pink, 'The Squire', a gorgeous rich crimson and one, which shares its name with Leadenham's church - 'St Swithun', a medium pink. They were all obtained from David Austin, the prize-winning Shropshire rose grower and from June onwards, they provide a magnificent display of colour around the new reflecting pool.

A piece of Leadenham is in the new Lincoln Museum, The Collection. In the centre of the Archaeology Section a Roman corn oven is displayed and this important relic of Lincolnshire history was found in the middle of Mr. Reeve's Estate.

Looking down hill from the house, the eye is drawn through an avenue of alternating oak and ash trees to a new lake, and towards what looks like hills and fields. This is somewhat of a trompe l'oeil, as the hill is really an embankment that hides the Leadenham by-pass from the house.

Many famous people have visited Leadenham House throughout its history, in addition to Edward VII and William Pitt; two other Prime Ministers have stayed here - Sir Alec Douglas-Home and Terence O'Neill, Prime Minister of Northern Ireland in the 1960s. It was at Leadenham railway station, which had a very long and quiet siding, that Queen Victoria's royal train used to stop overnight on her way to Scotland. Also, in the Second World War, the royal train stopped at Leadenham for the Royal Family to visit nearby RAF establishments at Cranwell and Waddington.

The Reeves' four children are continuing the family traditions. Firstly, of charity, as all have worked in a school in Kenya which they still support, and secondly all have opted to take history degrees (or in Ellie's case, classics) at their respective universities - not surprisingly, having been brought up in such a historic environment. But today, new traditions are beginning; immediately following the competition to choose a flag for Lincolnshire, Mr and Mrs Reeve acquired one for Leadenham - an example to the rest of the county.

*Opposite top to bottom: The entrance hall; The morning room; The dining room; One of the bedrooms.*

*Below top to bottom: Boozy the dog; The first-floor landing*

