



St ANN'S HILL

When Sir John Bohun inherited in 1273, he moved away from Ford and built a new house, sited across the river from the Hill, and named it Codrey: Norman-French for the hazel grove in which it stood. Later this became the magnificent Tudor mansion of Cowdray.

In 1316 the old St Ann's Hill house was vandalised. In an attempted law suit the new owner, Sir John's grandson, claimed that the main building, Geldwin's hall, was worth £50 and the furnishings of its two principal rooms were valued at £62 and £12. A separate kitchen was put at £6 13s 4d and a granary contained corn worth £2 8s 4d.

The damage was never paid for and no-one accepted responsibility. The Bohuns may have exaggerated the extent of the destruction and, judging from the finds of 14th century pottery, the hall continued in use, not by them but leased out, perhaps to their steward. The site was abandoned by the 15th century and all traces gradually disappeared.

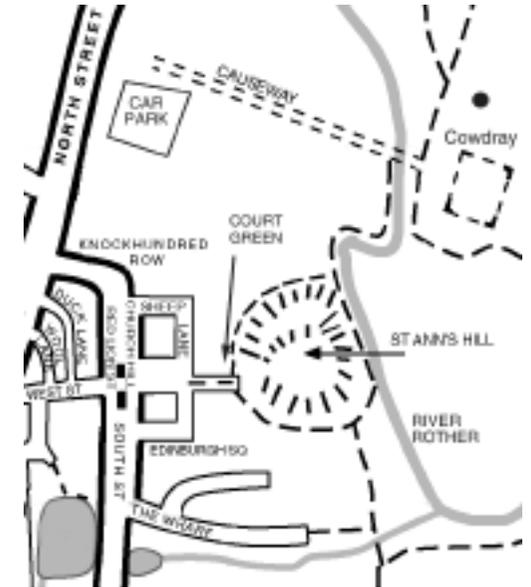
THE RUINS

For centuries no-one knew about the structures on the Hill. In 1913 they were investigated, together with other historic buildings that formed part of the estates purchased by the first Lord Cowdray. His expert, Sir William St John Hope, examined the Cowdray Ruins, Easebourne Priory and St Ann's Hill, interpreting the sites and putting them into context.

Hope was more interested in Cowdray, and the deserted Hill was hastily dug over by an unskilled workforce. He decided to build-up above ground level the wall lines that were discovered. This is what we see today. In 1994 a series of key-hole archaeological searches found further evidence which, unlike that of 1913, was fully reported.

At the southern end of the site is a defended entrance, perhaps the remains of a gatehouse. Next to it is the chapel with its chancel inset from the nave. The large building was Geldwin's hall with two rooms on each of two floors. The exposed foundations are those of the undercroft; above it was sleeping/living accommodation, reached by a wooden stairway. On the north-east of the summit are the relatively light foundations of timber-framed structures, identified by Hope as the kitchen. Enclosing all the buildings was a curtain wall.

There is much that we still do not know about St Ann's Hill. It remains a place of mystery, steeped in legend.



St Ann's Hill is a scheduled Ancient Monument lying to the east of Midhurst's Market Square. Walk to it along the riverbank from Cowdray or via a lane from the Old Town. Human activity there probably dates back at least two millennia, even before the Romans came to Britain. In the Dark Ages, pre-Christianity, local people probably worshipped the sun god on the hill and had some form of temple there. In time this became a tiny Christian chapel, used by folk in the embryo town. But in the mid-1100s it was rebuilt as the domestic chapel of a new Norman house of the lord of the manor.

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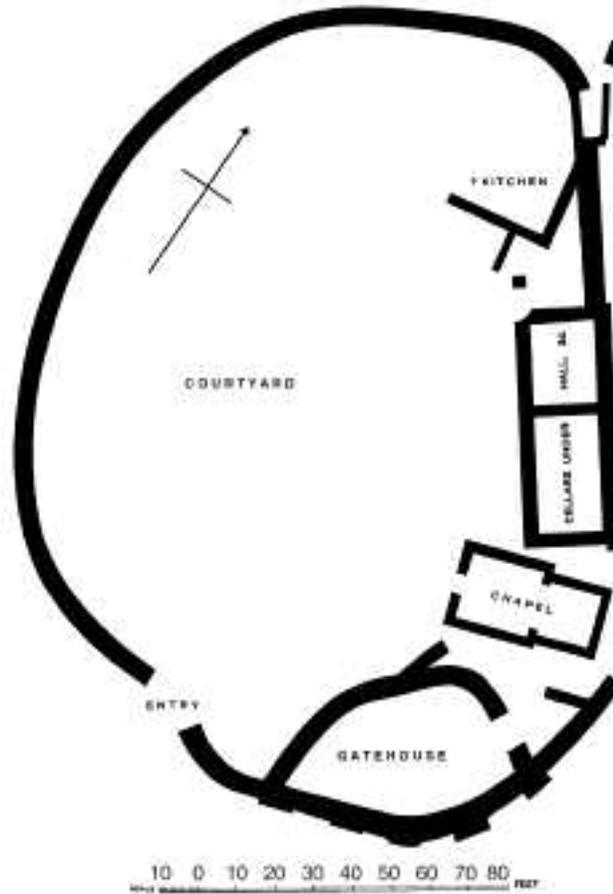
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THE EARLY HISTORY

The pagan site at Midhurst was known as Tan Hill. There are several of these in England and they are believed to have been where the pagan festival of Beltane was celebrated on 1st May by lighting fires in honour of Belenus (or Bel) the god of the sun and of fire. The ancient Celtic word 'tan' means 'fire': Bel's tan hill or Bel's fire hill. When England was Christianised, the missionaries tried to make a smooth transition from the old beliefs so as to persuade simple peasants. The Christian chapel on Tan Hill was dedicated to St Ann. In local parlance, Tan Hill became St Ann's Hill, and today nearby houses carry the name.

The pagan Tan Hill was probably approached by a long, straight processional way, known to us as West Street. Over the centuries new buildings have created curves in its route that were not there originally.

The land to the north of St Ann's Hill (now impenetrably overgrown) is known as Court Green. From Saxon to Mediaeval times, it was the three-weekly meeting place of the law court of the local Hundred, an administrative district extending from Half Way bridge to Trotton bridge, owing allegiance to the Earl of Arundel. Most of present Midhurst was part of Easebourne in early Medieval times. The original Midhurst, now the Old Town, was then an independent Hundred with its own lord of the manor.



A NORMAN CASTLE?

It has been said that there was a Norman castle on St Ann's Hill, but there is no evidence to support this. There was little opposition to the Conquest in 1066 and therefore no reason to build a defensive castle against a non-existent Saxon enemy. The ruins on the hill (as explained) are those of a manor house built when England was at peace following the civil war known as The Anarchy that had ended by 1154.

THE BOHUNS

In about 1106 the manors of Midhurst and Easebourne came into the possession of Savaric fitzCana, who already had estates south of Arundel. He and his successor (his eldest son Ralph) lived in their manor house at Ford, not at Midhurst. When Ralph died in 1159 the lands were divided between his two brothers. Savaric II got the Arundel properties; Geldwin, the Midhurst.

Needing a home in an area where his family had not previously lived, Geldwin built a house for himself on St Ann's Hill. When he and his brother died in 1187, the estates were reunited under Geldwin's son Frank who chose to live at Ford.

Geldwin's descendants began to call themselves De Bohun (later Bohun), taking their name from their homelands in Normandy. They were related to the Earls of Hereford and by a series of judicious marriages gained property elsewhere in England and Ireland, acquired a baronetcy and a seat in parliament and became minor nobility.

Geldwin's thirty years was the only time that the family made its home on St Ann's Hill. Records show that the property became a dower house, given for their lifetimes to the widows of successive lords of the manor.