



History of Highdown House

Highdown House – the early years

The present house was built at Highdown around 1820 and was owned at some time in the 19th century by the Lyons family. In 1909 the house and surrounding grounds were bought by Major, later Sir Frederick Stern and his wife.

Sir Frederick Stern (O.B.E., M.C., F.L.S., V.M.H.) was a man of many interests, born on 18 April 1884, in Knightsbridge to a wealthy family of merchant bankers, the son of James Julius Stern and Lucie Stern-Biedermann and the brother of Henry Julius Joseph Stern, Elsa Stern, Violet Stern and Sir Albert Gerald Stern. He studied at Eton College, and at Christ Church in Oxford. Ten years after buying Highdown House in 1919, he married Sybil, daughter of Sir Arthur Lucas, a portrait painter and they lived here for the remainder of his life.



Sir Frederick Stern

Before the First World War Sir Frederick devoted his time partly to big game hunting in Africa, many trophies used to hang in his library, and partly to riding as an amateur jockey in steeplechases.

Stern joined the Second Company of the London Yeomanry and served during the First World War. He was Group Commander of the West Sussex Home Guard. He was active in Gallipoli and Palestine and received the Military Cross in 1917. He eventually attained the rank of colonel. He was present at the Paris Peace Conference, 1919, where he supported the British prime minister David Lloyd George as private secretary.

Although he had begun to create his garden at Highdown as early as 1909, it was not until he married that he settled down with Lady Stern to create together one of the famous gardens of its time, from the uncompromising surrounds of a Sussex Chalk Pit.



Lady Stern

The gardens were created during a period when many expeditions were going out to China and the Himalayan regions collecting rare and beautiful plants. Many of the original plants from their early collections can still be seen in the gardens today, particularly plants collected by Reginald Farrer and Ernest Henry Wilson.

In 1914 he contributed financially to a plant collecting expedition by Farrer and William Purdom to Yunnan and Gansu in China. He cultivated some of the novelties collected in Yunnan and Gansu here at Highdown.

Other plant hunters sent new plants to Stern and he acquired an extensive collection. Over the years Stern introduced many new plants to the garden and created new hybrids of Berberis, Eremurus, Hellebore, Magnolia, roses and snowdrops, among which are Magnolia 'Highdownensis', rambler roses 'Coral', 'Wedding Day', and 'Rosa Highdownensis'. He is also the author that first described the snowdrop *Galanthus Rizehensis* within his book 'Snowdrops and Snowflakes' and worked with illustrator Lilian Snelling on his works, 'A Study of the Genus Paeonia'.

Lilian Snelling was awarded the Victoria Medal of Honour by the Royal Horticultural Society in 1941, was chairman of the John Innes Horticultural Institute from 1947 to 1961, vice-president of the Royal Horticultural Society in 1962 and vice-president and treasurer of the Linnean Society from 1941 to 1958.

Unsurprisingly Stern was knighted in 1956 for his services to horticulture.



Lilian Snelling's works 'A Study of the Genus Paeonia' and 'A Study of the Allium Bulgaricum'

Several plant species have been named in his honour, such as *Buddleja sterniana*, *Cotoneaster sternianus*, *Helleborus sternii* and *Paeonia sterniana*.

On Sir Frederick's death in 1967, aged 83, Lady Stern maintained the gardens for a further year and then, in accordance with her husband's wishes, she gave them with the house to Worthing Borough Council who since the mid 1970s have restored and managed the gardens to the Sterns' original design including the propagation of their original stock. In 1980 the Council sold the freehold of the house and its immediate surroundings to the Chapman Group who ran it as a conference centre and club.

Highdown House – the party years

During the 1990's Highdown House became a renowned night club called 'Sterns'.

Although Sterns had played such music before and was a forerunner in the underground party scene, the most famous club nights were started in 1991 by a promoter named In-ter-dance run by the late Mensa. Such was the club nights' reputation that it was credited by a number of artists on their record sleeves and was one of the best known rave/hardcore clubs in Europe, regularly visited by clubbers from all over the UK.

It boasted 4 separate rooms with DJs playing breakbeat hardcore, jungle music, techno, progressive house, hard house and UK garage.



In-ter-dance promoter



Sterns night club

The main room was called the "Underground", complete with signs in the style of the London Underground logo. It was located at the lowest level of the building partially embedded in the hillside in a large 'concrete bunker'. It boasted a massive 30 kW sound system, incredibly powerful for the space. On the second set of steps the bass was so intense it was difficult to carry out a conversation with someone adjacent to you and for them to hear you without speaking right into your ear.

On busy nights it was common for condensation generated from heat and sweat to collect on the ceiling and drip down onto the clubbers towards the end of the night. 'Sterns Rain'.

Other rooms included the Garage room. This had car hub caps on the walls and the DJ's decks were located in the front end of a VW Beetle which had been chopped in half. It also had a chill out room and small cinema located on the first floor where ambient music was played. The club had an outdoor section with a tea room and seating. There was also the "Top Floor" just after the main entrance where there was another DJ playing and a bar area.

After the club closed down, it re-opened as The Mansion House nightclub until 1998 when it was closed again and turned into Highdown Towers, a hotel, carvery restaurant and a bar with a children's play area quite a transformation!

The Highdown – present day

For the later part of its life the building has welcomed diners and residents within its walls. Many celebrated their weddings here and thousands of visitors to the beautiful gardens have enjoyed a pot of tea in the popular tea rooms.

We are thrilled to have been given the opportunity to give the place a new lease of life and have hugely enjoyed restoring each room. We like to think the Sterns would much prefer the calmer existence that has befallen the building now. Long may we continue to offer rest and sustenance to future visitors to the wonderful legacy that they have left us within their glorious gardens.