

## EARLS FERRER AND STAUNTON HAROLD

The Ferrers family roots go back to Norsemen from Orkney and Ireland who eventually conquered Normandy in 871AD and are also linked with those of William the Conqueror.

The family name was initially Ferrieres. A Norman name deriving from 'ferrum' (iron) because for centuries, the family owned large ironworks in France. One of the great French Baronial Families, the Ferrers were allied to the then Duke William of Normandy. Henry de Ferrer came with him to England in 1066, bringing a large contingent of his own Ferrieres' soldiers. These were important in the subjugation of the Saxons after King Harold was killed in the Battle of Hastings.

Now, as King William I (the Conqueror) of England, he kept most of the royal manors that belonged to King Edward the Confessor as well as those of the Lords of Mercia.

Most of the rest of the England and Wales was given to four of William's followers (the four great baronial families). One of these was Henry de Ferrers. Henry received 201 grants of land making the Ferrers, one of the richest families in England and Wales. 114 of these manors were in Derbyshire. The descendants of Henry de Ferrers were created Earls of Derby.

The first six Earls were the most powerful but the Earldom and all the Ferrer's estates were lost, when the 6th Earl, Robert de Ferrers of Derby, sided with the Barons, and lost against Henry III (1207-1272). The Ferrers family now had a lower status.

There are many connections between the de Ferrers' descendants and English Royalty. These include Henry II, King John Lackland (Magna Carta), and William de Ferrers 3rd Earl of Derby who fought with King Richard I (Lionheart) and died at Acre in 1289 in the Crusades.

The Groby branch of the Ferrers family owned Baddlesly Clinton Manor in Warwickshire for 510 years. It is described by the present owners (National Trust since 1980) as the finest example of moated manor house in the British Isles.

### **Staunton Harold**

Another beautiful Manor House is Staunton Harold. In 1066, Henry de Ferrers was given land at Staunton by William the Conqueror. Henry, then leased it to Harold, a Saxon from Nottinghamshire. Harold moved here and adopted the name Staunton. The name 'staunton' comes from 'stoney town'. Of course most of the land around here is coal, clay, sandstone and limestone. Henry gave some land to Alan de Lecha whose son Harold became Lord of the Manor of Staunton. By the early 12th Century three families were associated with Staunton. The de Ferrers, de Lechas and Sewalus. The latter are interesting because they had retained old Saxon names like Sewalus, Fulcher, Matilda, Ralph and Eldred. This is unusual because very soon after the Norman Conquest, most of the old Anglo-Saxon and Mercian names (Æthelred, Egbert, Æthelstan, etc.) were lost and French names became de rigueur. The Sewalus took the name Shirley around 1240. They too provided knights who fought valiantly in the Crusades earning the right to the Saracen's Head as part of their Coat of Arms.

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The first Manor House at Staunton was built by Sir William de Staunton in 1324. When Sir Ralph Shirley married Margaret de Staunton (heiress to the Staunton family estates) in 1423, it became the Shirley family home.

Between 1306 to 1336 Sir William de Staunton worked coal and ironstone seams to the west of Staunton Harold.

George Shirley purchased a baronetcy from James I for a cheap £1095, in 1611. (So buying titles is not a 20th century thing.) King James was raising money to civilise and colonise Ulster. A symbol of this subjugation is believed to be a red hand. A red hand is present in the Shirley crest.

Sir Robert Shirley was George's grandson. As a committed royalist and therefore at opposed to Cromwell in the civil war, he built a Catholic church (1653) next to the Staunton Harold house. When he refused to provide an army on Cromwell's order, he was jailed in the Tower –his seventh incarceration, and died there in 1656 aged 28. After his death, King Charles II sent a letter of condolence to Robert's widow and promised to restore the Shirley lands and titles.

Robert's death prevented the fulfilment of his plans for Staunton Harold. His second son also called Robert continued the work, adding a large wing. The house we see today was built by the 5th Earl Ferrers in the 1700's. It contains parts of two earlier houses. There are many representations of horseshoes on walls, tombs, gates and doors. These hark back to the pre-10th century Ferreires' ironworks.

The chapel still remains as it was, and is now owned by the National Trust. Within it are some of the Shirley monuments, a wonderful painted ceiling and a beautiful wrought iron chancel screen.

Over the church door an inscription reads:

*“In the year 1653 when all things sacred were throughout the nation either demolished or profaned, Sir Robert Shirley, Baronet founded this church; whose singular praise it is to have done the best things in the worst times and hoped them in the most calamitous. The righteous shall be had in everlasting remembrance.”*

A later Sir Robert Shirley was the grandson and heir of Dorothy, the third Earl's sister. This Robert Shirley was created Baron Ferrers in 1677 and 1st Earl Ferrers and Viscount Tamworth in 1711. After this, the Ferrers title was adopted by the Shirley family.

### Staunton Harold Estate Today

A beautiful house of 83 rooms set in 2000 acres, this house is once again, in part, a family home. It has conference and wedding reception facilities. Tea rooms provide refreshments after a pleasant walk through any of seven routes.

The Ferrers arts and crafts centre is in the converted stable block and contains 17 different trades. 400 acres of wood are managed, selling logs and timber. The 17th Century church, owned by the National Trust, and the Nurseries are nearby.

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In the late 18th and early 19th Centuries, the Ferrer's coal interests extended into Newbold with the lease of land to the Collieries, and the involvement of this Ferrer family with the development of tramways and the extension of the Coleorton Railway.

The lavish lifestyles of such landed gentry, came to an end with the 10th Earl (1847-1942). He spent hugely, building the Orangery, Brewery and Ale Cellars. A true gentleman, he died in near financial ruin.

In WW2 the Hall was used, and to their shame, severely abused by the British Army. It was used as a barracks and then as an Italian POW camp. It was in such a state that the family could not live in it and, receiving insufficient compensation, were forced to sell. The 12th Earl Ferrers died in October 1954 the day before the sale auction. Eventually, it was purchased and became a disabled people's home. In 1981 the Ryder Cheshire Mission established themselves there. The disabled people were moved to better, purpose-built premises, in the grounds.

Upon this sale, in 1954 the 13th Earl moved away to Ditchingham Hall In East Anglia. He died in November 2012 and was succeeded by his son Robert William Saswalo Shirley, now 14th Earl Ferrers.

### Staunton Harold Estate

In NW Leicestershire, lies a beautiful area of wooded hills with several outstanding historical and scenic features. Staunton Harold Estate, located in a green valley with two lakes, includes: the house, church, estate cottages and stables. The stables have been converted and are now known as the Ferrers Centre of Arts and Crafts, which comprise of craft shops, workshops, galleries and tearooms.



William the Conqueror gave the land to Henry de Ferraris, who then leased it to Harold, a Saxon from Nottinghamshire. Harold moved here and adopted the name Staunton, meaning stony settlement. In 1423 the estate was passed by marriage to the Shirley's, a distinguished Derbyshire family.

The present house is of about 1770, but includes parts of two earlier houses. The church appears to be 15th century, but was actually built in 1653 during the Commonwealth and is unique. Over the door can be read:

“In the year 1653 when all things sacred were throughout the nation either demolished or profaned, Sir Robert Shirley, Baronet founded this church; whose singular praise it is to have done the best things in the worst times and hoped them in the most calamitous. The righteous shall be had in everlasting remembrance.” Inside are the Shirley monuments, the magnificent wrought iron chancel screen and the painted ceiling.

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The Shirley family parcelled up and sold the estate in 1954.

The house was saved from demolition by Group Captain Lord Cheshire V.C to become one of his homes for the incurably sick, then, later become a Sue Ryder home. Now the house is the private residence of the Blunt family. More information on the history of the estate can be found in the Staunton Harold Visitor Guide available from the Ferrers Gallery in the Ferrers Centre. All three walks begin from the Ferrers car park and head to the front of the house and the Golden Gate. Stout shoes or boots are advised.

