

Hursley House

Since 100BC, the site of IBM's Hursley development lab has variously been an Iron Age hill fort, a castle, a hunting lodge, a hospital, aircraft workshops and the largest software development lab in Europe. It has been occupied by the likes of Oliver Cromwell's son and churchman, academic and author John Keble, after whom Keble College, Oxford, was named. Its illustrious history continued when IBM moved there in 1958. IBM Hursley quickly became a hotbed of innovation and today has 3,000 employees on site, including more than 1,400 software developers.

By David Key



YOU DO NOT HAVE TO DIG VERY DEEP TO UNCOVER THE richness of Hursley's history. Remains of an Iron Age hill fort are thought to date the first settlement to 100BC, while there are suggestions of a Roman settlement in 100AD. With subsequent Saxon settlements, Merdon Castle was built by Bishop Henry de Blois at Hursley in 1138.

Hursley was surrendered to Edward VI in 1552 and returned to the Bishop of Winchester by Mary Tudor in 1555. Richard Cromwell lived there in 1649, becoming Lord Protector in 1658 (the title of Lord Protector was held by his father, Oliver Cromwell, from 1653 to 1658).

After the Cromwells moved out in 1718, Hursley was owned by a series of wealthy families. Late in 1902, George Alexander Cooper bought Hursley Park from J.W. Baxendale and almost immediately began an extensive program of building and redecorating Hursley House.

Fabulously wealthy, Cooper's wife having inherited a fortune from her uncle "Chicago" Smith, money was no object. By 1905, the solid but conservative Georgian house had been transformed into a stunning example of Edwardian splendor. As visitors stepped through the front door, with its ornate iron lock, they were faced with a beautifully carved and ornate 17th-century screen and paneling that had once graced Winchester College Chapel but now lined the main hall and east and west corridors leading from it.

Off the east corridor, Lady Cooper's boudoir was decorated with a carved



French fireplace and English paneling from a Jacobean house in Yorkshire. The new electric switches were hidden within the carved oak acorn decoration, and the doors were fastened with ornamented bronze locks with the handle in the form of a spaniel.

The adjacent L-shaped drawing room was decorated in Palladian style, painted white with lavish gilt ornamentation. The doors to the ballroom were mirrored with monographed brass handles, a feature on many of the rooms in the house.

In the ballroom, the walls were lined with Louis XV boiseries that served to frame the magnificent Beauvais tapestries. Around the room, the windows could be hidden by closing the full-length mirrored and gilt oak shutters.

At the opposite end of the house, the morning room looked out across the south lawn with an almost uninterrupted view across southern Hampshire. The room, decorated in Adams's style with wedgwood plaques, also repeated the use of mirrored doors and monographed brass door locks used in the drawing room.



However, times were changing, and the great house was destined to be more than a showpiece home. During the first World War, the house's top floor was used as a hospital; during World War II, it was requisitioned by Lord Beaverbrook to house Vickers Aviation, which had been bombed out of its previous workshops in Southampton in 1940.

The iconic spitfire fighter, designed by R.J. Mitchell and first flown in 1936, saw its development continued at Hursley. But by 1957, the British

aircraft industry was contracting, and Vickers vacated the Hursley site.

The IBM Years

The history of IBM's Hursley lab all started with the establishment of IBM's first British laboratory in London in 1957. The facility was soon running out of space, and as Vickers had moved out of the Hursley site, IBM's scouts saw its potential and moved in on December 1, 1958.

IBM, like its predecessors, used the house for both office and technical design work, with dressing

rooms becoming drawing offices and bedrooms becoming offices. Today, Hursley House forms the heart of IBM's modern Hursley Park Development Laboratory. IBM's design work is carried out in the purpose-built offices alongside the house. The upper floors of the house, where once the Heathcote and Cooper families and their servants lived, are used for offices, while the rooms on the ground floor are used as meeting rooms by IBM's UK Executive Briefing Centre.



The Centre is where the Executive Briefing Team plans and executes professionally facilitated events for IBM Clients and Sales teams. The day's agenda is tailored to the Client's specific business requirements in this unique and stately environment. The co-location of the Hursley House and the lab allows the client access to IBM's development executives, top product architects and subject matter experts.

The house itself is not open to the general public; however, in

the basement, the IBM Hursley Museum collection fills many of the rooms. The museum was originally set up by Hursley IBM employee Len Peach more than 20 years ago in response to a one-off request for an open day. From that start, the museum has grown in an *ad hoc* manner, and today the collection comprises thousands of photographs, hundreds of video tapes, numerous trophies and miscellaneous promotional items. The museum is not currently open

to the general public, though visits by organized groups are frequently arranged. While on site, all guests are escorted, and sensitive areas are protected by a key card access control system.

Within the house, every effort has been made to balance the needs of a modern workplace with the historic importance of the building. A good example of this can be seen in the doors that flank the main hall, providing access to the east and west corridors. Originally made c.1905

by H.H. Martyn of Cheltenham as part of the modifications to the 17th-century paneling from Winchester College's Chapel, these doors feature the finest pierced oak panels. In order for them to remain *in situ* while still fulfilling the need for fire safety, a fireproof panel was inserted into each door.

Similarly, the need for adequate fire precautions means that safety panels, smoke detectors, extinguishers and exit signs do feature throughout the building but rarely



intrude upon it. There is access to both the basement and ground floors without stairs, and an original lift provides access to the first and attic floors.

Wherever possible, original features have been retained and, with the help of organizations like English Heritage, restored. For example, IBM has recently completed the restoration of the porte cochère, which was featured in the Hampshire Buildings Preservation Trust's magazine, and the stable's clock tower, which was restored last year.

Inside, restoration work has returned many of the rooms to their original form, though they lack the fine furniture and ornaments. However, not all of the original material remains. In the 1940s, the owners removed several doors, and the majority of the paneling was covered with protecting boards.

Today, most of the paneling is gone. The panels that once belonging to Winchester College have been returned to grace their new hall, and the Louis XV panels in the ballroom

are covered by protective boards, leaving only the shutters visible.

Fortunately, in most instances, the original doors and their fittings have been retained. For example, in the ballroom, despite the main paneling being concealed, the original 18th-century French gilt oak mirrored shutters remain in place, and the gilt doors from the ballroom to the drawing room are in storage until a more complete restoration can be undertaken.

In the many of the other rooms, despite their current business use to showcase technology as part of IBM's Executive Business Centre, the splendor and ornamentation is still plain to see. The spaniels still stand guard in Lady Cooper's boudoir, while the brass fittings and door furniture still recall their illustrious past. **116**

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