

Harlaxton Manor



By Bethan Cann

On my drive home from work today through the luscious Lincolnshire countryside, I spotted Harlaxton Manor standing tall in the rolling fields. I'd almost forgotten it existed,

hidden away behind giant iron gates, but it always fascinated me as a child. Whenever we'd drive toward Belvoir or Melton, I'd imagine the royalty that must live in such a magnificent place. I'll admit, even now it reminds me of the castle from Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*.

It was easy to fall down a rabbit hole when researching more about this Victorian country house. There are centuries of history so close to home. In 1822, Gregory Gregory (originally Gregory Williams) inherited Harlaxton Manor, but it was in dire need of care. Two architects were commissioned by him to build the mansion, drawing from influences Gregory had gained from travelling around England and Europe. Gregory's passion lay with acquiring architectural elements including paintings and furniture. After two decades of building and artistic interior design, Gregory moved into Harlaxton Manor where he resided until his death in 1854, just three years after renovations were complete!

As Gregory had no children, the Manor was passed through distant relatives over the next seven decades, before entrepreneur Violet Van der

Elst bought it in 1937. Van der Elst came to fortune from developing the first brushless shaving cream, something a lot of us still use today. She was also renowned for her campaigns against capital punishment.

Van der Elst renamed Harlaxton Manor, Grantham Castle, which I think is much more regal and matches its incredible architectural character. Unfortunately, the businesswoman lost almost all of her fortune, including the Manor, a short time later.

In the years that followed, Harlaxton Manor was used as the officer's mess for RAF Harlaxton during World War II, housed the 1st Airbourne Division of the British Army, before becoming a novitiate to train members of the church.

Today, and how it is best known, the house is owned by the University of Evansville. Harlaxton Manor was first used as a college in 1965 by Stanford University, interestingly making it the first American university in the UK.

Although primarily used as a college, Harlaxton Manor has also been a popular filming location, most recently used in the adaptation of *The Secret Garden* (2020), starring Dame Judy Dench. This is no surprise if we look at the grandeur both inside and out in the gardens of the house, noting the French style terraces and Italian garden blooming with flowers.

Occasionally, the Manor hosts an open house. The next one is in August, which there are tickets available for. So, after years of speculation of what lies behind the magnificent walls of this Victorian country house, I may finally make a trip to indulge in its rich history further.