

## ALTHORP - Where It All Began

Althorp House, situated in a large park and agricultural estate 120 kilometers northwest of London, is the 500-year-old ancestral home of Charles, Ninth Earl Spencer.

Architecturally, Althorp has an understated simplicity that belies the riches within, but which appropriately reflects the down-to-earth practicality of the 20 generations of Spencers who have lived there. The way in which the buildings nestle into their country surroundings testifies to the family's strong attachment to the land.

The complex of buildings includes the more than hundred-room main mansion, containing a splendid collection of historic paintings, as well as rare furnishings, silverware, and ceramics. Nearby is the Stable Block, elegantly designed in the classical style of the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, where as many as 100 horses could be accommodated at one time. The stables were renovated in 1998 to house the *Diana: A Celebration* exhibition. A short walk from the house is the Round Oval, the name given to the lake now famous for its island where Diana, Princess of Wales, is buried. Overlooking the lake is the former summerhouse known as the "Temple", now dedicated as a memorial to "the people's princess." Other notable buildings on the estate include the Stuart-dynasty Falconry and the 18<sup>th</sup> century Garden House, whose size and elegance reflect the importance its head gardener once enjoyed at Althorp.

There were Spencers at Althorp before Columbus landed in the Americas. The family of farmers had already come to prominence in the Midlands county of Warwickshire, when in 1486, John Spencer became a tenant at Althorp in neighboring Northamptonshire. His nephew, another John, later purchased and consolidated the family's various holdings - he paid £800 for Althorp - was knighted, and thus laid the foundation of the family fortune. The home Sir John Spencer erected in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century provides the shape for the current house, and within its walls there remain traces of its architectural lineage.

As with all great families, the Spencer fortunes have waxed and waned as each generation has negotiated the challenges of political, social, and economic change. The family has produced its share of statesmen, courtiers, and memorable characters. In 1603, the fabulously rich Sir Robert Spencer earned a barony from James I, in part as thanks for staging a magnificent masque for Queen Anne to mark her stay at Althorp. The second baron Spencer built a racecourse there. In the later 17<sup>th</sup> century, Robert Spencer, Earl of Sunderland, became one of the most powerful politicians in the land, but also came to be widely hated for his scheming ways. A later master of Althorp had the dubious distinction of reputedly introducing barbed wire to England. Another was such a dandy and spendthrift that he eventually had to abandon Althorp because he could no

longer afford to maintain it. Fifty years ago, the current Earl's grandfather, the scholarly seventh Earl, answered the problem of a crippling tax burden by opening Althorp's gates to the public, albeit reluctantly.

Succeeding generations of Spencers have made alterations and additions to the house to satisfy their needs and interests. Courtyards have been covered, new wings and out buildings added.

At one point, the original exterior red brick was refaced with the stone tiles seen today. The interior also underwent continuous change as it became filled with treasures and family portraits commissioned from such great artists as Joshua Reynolds, John Singer Sargeant, and Thomas Gainsborough.

The repairs and refurbishment undertaken by the current Earl, since inheriting the estate in 1992, have restored Althorp to an elegance that places it among the first rank of aristocratic country seats. The decision was made in 1997 to make the Island the final resting place of the Earl's sister, Diana, in order to protect the family church and local community from the influx of visitors that peaks in the summer months, when as many as 2,500 people per day may visit.

The Althorp that visitors see today reflects a continuous evolution. Althorp is, after all, neither a museum nor a mausoleum, but very much a family home and working estate.