

WHAT WE WOULD HAVE SEEN.....

if we had been able to visit High Down House on 28th June.

High Down, although a little way from Hitchin, has strong connections with the town. What we see today is very much the Jacobean house built for Thomas Dowcra. The Dowcras were important local landowners involved with Putteridgebury and Pirton as well as High Down; there is a monument to Edward Dowcra (died 1610) in St Mary's Church Hitchin while Henry Dowcra of Pirton was fined for being in the company of Royalists in 1649. Sir Thomas Dowcra (died 1527) was Grand Prior of the Order of the Knights of St John of Jerusalem; a sculpted stone bearing his name, coat of arms and the date 1504 is reused in an external wall at the house.

High Down House, built in its current form between 1600 and 1613, is constructed from a combination of rendered chalk blocs, plastered brickwork, stone sills, tiled roofs and timbered bargeboard gabling; in 1903 Little Guide author Herbert Tomkins remarked on its attractive 'twisted chimneys and mullioned windows'. Despite modification and modernisation over the decades the internal layout survives very little altered, while the outside too is almost unchanged. The immediate surroundings of the house include adjacent courtyard buildings and attractive gardens. An extensive and painstaking restoration was undertaken between 2009 and 2012. The house has commanding views

sitting, as its name suggests, on an edge of the Chiltern Hills – the sweeping panorama takes in the Bedfordshire plain towards Sandy, Baldock and even (almost) Cambridge.



**High Down House not long before the most recent restoration
(S Bradford-Best)**



The HHS High Down visit in 2019 (HHS Collection)

house and at the challenges and rewards of the most recent and much that we will be able to rearrange another visit for 2021.

The house was bought by the Radcliffe family of Hitchin Priory in 1727. High Down was then briefly, in the 1770s, considered, first, as a possible replacement site for the Priory itself when John Radcliffe commissioned architect Robert Adam to design a wholly new and palatial dwelling and, second, as a possible recipient of an Adam extension. Drawings for both these abortive schemes survive in Sir John Soane's Museum in London, and a piece of built legacy is the Adam style wing that was subsequently added to Hitchin Priory. High Down escaped radical change and remained in Radcliffe family ownership until 2005.

The Society has visited High Down a number of times over the years, including in 2019 when the current owners - Tim and Charlotte Dye - treated us to a fascinating look at both the history of the comprehensive restoration. We hope very