

= Althorp =

Althorp (/ ˈɒl.tʰɔːp / or / ˈɒl.tʰɜːp /) is a Grade I listed stately home , estate and small civil parish in Daventry District , Northamptonshire , England of about 13 000 acres (5 300 ha) . By road it is about 6 miles (9 .7 km) northwest of the county town of Northampton and about 75 miles (121 km) northwest of central London . It has been held by the prominent aristocratic Spencer family for more than 500 years , and has been owned by Charles Spencer , 9th Earl Spencer since 1992 . It was also the home of his sister , Lady Diana Spencer later Princess of Wales , before her marriage to Charles , Prince of Wales .

Althorp is mentioned as a small hamlet in the Domesday Book as " Olletorp " , and by 1377 it had become a village with a population of more than fifty people . By 1505 there were no longer any tenants living there , and in 1508 , John Spencer purchased Althorp estate with the funds generated from his family 's sheep @-@ rearing business . Althorp became one of the prominent stately homes in England . The mansion dates to 1688 , replacing an earlier house that was once visited by Charles I. The Spencer family amassed an extensive art collection and other valuable household items . During the 18th century , the house became a major cultural hub in England , and parties were regularly held , attracting many prominent members of Great Britain 's ruling class . George John , 2nd Earl Spencer , who owned Althorp between 1783 and his death in 1834 , developed one of the largest private libraries in Europe at the house , which grew to over 100 000 books by the 1830s . After falling on hard times , John Spencer , 5th Earl Spencer , known as the Red Earl , in 1892 sold much of the collection to Enriqueta Rylands , who was building the University of Manchester Library . Many of Althorp 's furnishings were sold off during the twentieth century , and between 1975 and 1992 alone approximately 20 % of the contents were auctioned .

The house at Althorp was a " classically beautiful " red brick Tudor building , but its appearance was radically altered , starting in 1788 , when the architect Henry Holland was commissioned to make extensive changes . Mathematical tiles were added to the exterior , encasing the brick , and four Corinthian pilasters were added to the front . The grand hall entrance to the house , Wootton Hall , was cited by Sir Nikolaus Pevsner as " the noblest Georgian room in the county " . The Great Dining Room in the east wing extension of the house was added in 1877 to designs by John Macvicar Anderson , its walls hung with faded , red damask silk . Numerous fireplaces and furnishings were brought to Althorp from Spencer House in London during the Blitz for safekeeping and still remain . The Picture Gallery stretches for 115 feet (35 m) on the first floor of the west wing , and is one of the best remaining examples of the original Tudor oak woodwork and ambiance in the mansion . It has an extensive collection of portraits , including Anthony van Dyck 's War and Peace , a John de Critz portrait of James I , a Mary Beale portrait of Charles II , and many others . Some £ 2 million was spent on redecorating the house in the 1980s , during which time most of the religious paintings of Althorp were sold off .

In total , the grounds of Althorp estate contain 28 listed buildings and structures , including nine planting stones . The former falconry , now a Grade I listed building , was built in 1613 . Gardener 's House is listed as a Grade II * listed building in its own right , as are the Grade II listed West and East Lodges . The mustard @-@ yellow Grade II listed Stable Block , designed by architect Roger Morris with a Palladian influence , was ordered by Charles , Fifth Earl of Sutherland in the early 1730s . The French landscape architect André Le Nôtre was commissioned to lay out the park and grounds in the 1660s , and further alterations were made during the late 18th century under Henry Holland . Following the death of Diana , Princess of Wales in 1997 , she was interred on a small island in the middle of the ornamental Round Oval lake . A Doric @-@ style temple with Diana 's name inscribed on top , situated across from the lake , is a tourist attraction during July and August when the house and estate are open to the public , although the exhibition centre , situated in the old stable block , closed permanently in 2013 .

= = Etymology = =

A manor existed at Althorp in medieval times . It was referred to in the Domesday Book as "

Olletorp " , meaning Olla 's Thorp , believed to refer to a medieval lord named Olla . Thorp is a word of Scandinavian origin , which would have been pronounced as " throop " or " thrupp " , and in Danish probably meant " daughter 's settlement " . In the 13th and 15th centuries it was recorded as " Holtropp " and " Aldrop " , although when the estate was bought by John Spencer in 1508 it began being referred to as " Oldthorpe " .

The name today is properly pronounced as " Awltrupp " , which is not officially recognised on paper and by the media . The current owner , Charles Spencer , noted that none of his family refer to it as Althorp , and that his father insisted on pronouncing it " Awl @-@ trupp " . When he assumed ownership in 1992 , the BBC Pronunciation Department contacted him and the current " Althorp " was agreed upon .

= = History = =

= = = Early history = = =

A hamlet named Althorp existed here in medieval times , believed to have been situated on the southwest side of the park , east of West Lodge . It was first mentioned in the Domesday Book as having a population of ten at the time , and being part of the parish of Brington . It was officially designated as an " extra parochial district " for centuries under the New Bottle Grove Hundred of Brington , but by 1874 it was being cited as an independent civil parish . 21 residents were documented in 1327 , and in 1377 fifty people were reported to have paid Poll Tax over the age of 14 . During the 15th century the population of the village diminished , and in 1505 there were no longer any tenants living there . By 1577 most of the land was converted into four substantial sheep pastures .

In 1469 John Spencer 's uncle ? also named John Spencer ? had become feoffee (feudal lord) of Wormleighton in Warwickshire and a tenant at Althorp in Northamptonshire in 1486 . The family 's administration of their Northamptonshire and Warwickshire estates gained them admiration and a following throughout England , and their sheep @-@ rearing business earned large profits . After beginning construction of Wormleighton Manor the previous year with some 60 relatives , John Spencer bought Althorp in 1508 for £ 800 from the Catesby family . At the time Spencer was also lord of the manors of Fenny Compton , Stoneton , Nobottle , Great Brington , Little Brington , Harlestone , Glassthorpe , Flore , Wicken , Wyke Hamon , Upper Boddington , Lower Boddington and Hinton , and owned numerous other properties . The park took some four years to establish , with 300 acres of grassland , 100 acres of woodland and 40 acres of water .

When John Spencer died in 1522 , he passed the estate to his youngest son , Sir William Spencer , High Sheriff of Northamptonshire , who held it until his death in 1532 . Only a boy at the time of William 's death , his son John Spencer inherited Althorp and held it until his death in 1586 , when he passed it to his son , also John , who died in 1600 . John 's son , Robert , was created the 1st Baron Spencer of Wormleighton on 21 July 1603 . King Charles I is documented to have visited Althorp during his reign . The drawing room was built and the main hall enlarged for the occasion , with £ 1 @, @ 300 spent on the banquet , an exorbitant sum for the period . Upon Robert Spencer 's death in 1627 Althorp devolved to William Spencer , 2nd Baron Spencer of Wormleighton who held it until his death in 1636 . William 's eldest son , Henry Spencer , 1st Earl of Sunderland , known as The Lord Spencer between 1636 and June 1643 , fought in the Battle of Edgehill in 1642 and was rewarded for his services on 8 June 1643 when the title of Earl of Sunderland was bestowed upon him , although the title cost him £ 3 @, @ 000 . He then fought in the Siege of Gloucester in August 1643 and the First Battle of Newbury on 20 September 1643 , where he was killed , aged 23 , by a cannonball .

Following Henry 's death , the estate passed to his eldest son Robert Spencer , 2nd Earl of Sunderland , just two years of age at the time . Cosimo III visited Althorp in 1669 , documenting it in his Travels of Cosmo III . Grand Duke of Tuscany , through England , in 1669 . Robert built the current house in 1688 and made a series of changes to Althorp park . However , Robert 's bad

temper and his reputation as a ruthless advocate of absolute monarchy made him numerous enemies , and he was forced to leave the country and flee to the Netherlands the same year . He later underwent a political rehabilitation , becoming Lord Chamberlain of the Household in April 1697 and Lord Justice for a short period before retiring from public life in December of that year , after which he lived a secluded life at Althorp until his death in 1702 . Robert passed Althorp to his son , Charles Spencer , 3rd Earl of Sunderland , who held it for twenty years . Described by John Evelyn as " a youth of extraordinary hopes , " Charles inherited his father 's passion for intrigue and repellent manners , and from his early years he had a great love of books , spending his leisure and his wealth in expanding the library at Althorp . Charles 's second marriage to Anne Churchill , daughter of John Churchill , 1st Duke of Marlborough and Sarah Churchill , Duchess of Marlborough in 1700 was an important alliance for the Spencers and for his descendants ; through it he was introduced to political life , and later the dukedom of Marlborough came to the Spencers . In 1722 he was implicated in what became known as the Atterbury Plot , to restore the House of Stuart , and his death was one of the factors which brought the Plot to light . Althorp was then occupied by his son Robert Spencer , 4th Earl of Sunderland , who died childless in 1729 . As a result , his brother , Charles , became 5th Earl of Sunderland , and subsequently 3rd Duke of Marlborough after the death of his aunt , Henrietta Godolphin (née Churchill) , 2nd Duchess of Marlborough . Charles later led the naval descent on the French coastal port of St Malo during the Seven Years ' War , after passing Althorp to the 3rd Earl 's son , John Spencer , in January 1733 . John Spencer , along with Charles and Thomas Coram , William Hogarth and others , was involved in the charter of the Foundling Hospital . Upon his death in 1746 , John passed his estates to his son John , only 12 years of age at the time , beneficiary to the greatest inheritance in the kingdom at the time with an income of almost £ 30 @, @ 000 a year .

= = = Social and cultural hub = = =

John served as Member of Parliament for Warwick from 1756 to 1761 . He was renowned for his heavy spending on his political pursuits and campaigns , " indulging in the fiercely competitive and heinously expensive business of fighting elections to Parliament ? which effectively meant bribing people to vote for his candidate rather than that of another magnate " . He spent £ 120 @, @ 000 in one campaign alone and spent heavily on his estates , building Spencer House in London . He also wore expensive fashionable attire such as " diamond @-@ buckled shoes " . Althorp frequently hosted parties attended by the political and cultural elite , and it became known as a place of indulgence and festivities . At dinners and picnics in the gardens , John hired musicians to play French horns and organised unusual spectacles to entertain guests , such as a " Hooray Henry Olympics " , as Charles Spencer calls it , with a donkey race for Lord Fordwick , dance competitions offering a guinea as the first prize , and sack races with the first prize of 30 shillings . The Christmas of 1755 was a grand affair . John celebrated his 21st birthday with a ball at the house on 20 December during which he secretly married 18 @-@ year @-@ old Margaret Georgiana Poyntz ; the couple did not inform anyone for several days . Around 5 @, @ 000 guests were invited to a celebration party organised by the Spencers in a shed on the village green in the nearby village of Brington , consuming some 11 @, @ 000 pints of beer . Althorp was " buzzing with activity " , and France 's top chefs were brought to Althorp to cater for the family and their guests during the week . He was created Baron Spencer of Althorp and Viscount Spencer by George III on 3 April 1761 , and on 1 November 1765 , he was given the title Viscount Althorp and made the first Earl Spencer . He was also High Steward of St Albans in 1772 and Mayor of St Albans in 1779 . John 's daughter , Georgiana Cavendish , Duchess of Devonshire , was also known for her liberal spending , and although she became one of Britain 's most prominent socialites in the late 18th century , with many political and literary connections , she suffered from a gambling addiction and had an eating disorder .

John 's son George John , 2nd Earl Spencer inherited Althorp after his father 's death in 1783 . He served as Whig MP for Northampton from 1780 to 1782 and for Surrey from 1782 to 1783 before accepting the title of 2nd Earl Spencer . He was later Home Secretary from 1806 to 1807 under Lord

Grenville in the Ministry of All the Talents . Extremely interested in literary pursuits , he developed one of the largest private libraries in Europe at Althorp . He was the instigator and first President of the Roxburghe Club (an exclusive bibliophilic club) , founded in 1812 , President of the Royal Institution from 1813 to 1827 , and Commissioner of the Public Records in 1831 , among other literary pursuits . In later life , his collecting habit had become an obsession , and he attempted to collect every volume ever published in Britain . Such was his desire to obtain as complete a collection as possible , that when Napoleon instigated the secularisation of religious houses in south Germany , Spencer used the local British agent and Benedictine monk , Alexander Horn to acquire many of their rare books and manuscripts . Althorp became a major cultural hub of England during his time ; at one Christmas , the actor David Garrick , the historian Edward Gibbon , the playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan and the painter Joshua Reynolds , among other artistic figures. attended a party there together . However , George John 's spending became problematic for the Spencers , especially as at the time they were feeling the impact of the agricultural depressions brought on by the Napoleonic Wars . By the time of his death in 1834 he had amassed a debt of £ 500 @, @ 000 , which he passed onto his son , John Spencer , 3rd Earl Spencer .

The 3rd Earl became an active statesman , serving as Chancellor of the Exchequer under Lord Grey and Lord Melbourne from 1830 to 1834 . Along with Lord John Russell , he led the fight to pass the Reform Bill of 1832 , making more than twenty speeches , and is generally considered the architect of its victory . Despite his debts , in respect for his father , John managed to retain the massive book collection , and also continue to run the other Spencer houses at Wimbledon and Spencer House in London , as well as his farm in Wiseton and shooting retreat in Norfolk . He achieved this mainly by far less extravagant living , spending much of the year at Wiseton where the running costs were £ 1 @, @ 200 compared with the £ 5 @, @ 000 needed to run Althorp and pay the staff of 40 in the house . As a result , Althorp was largely abandoned during the late 1830s and early 1840s . John also leased out his lands and gardens and sold land in Buckinghamshire and Bedfordshire , repaying all the debt by the time of his death in 1845 , and beginning to run his properties at a profit . His son Frederick Spencer , 4th Earl Spencer , who owned Althorp from 1845 until his death in 1857 , also retained the collection .

John Spencer , 5th Earl Spencer , known as the Red Earl , inherited Althorp in 1857 . He served as a Liberal Party politician and was a close friend of British prime minister William Gladstone , who he served under in all four of his cabinets . Although politically successful , John fell into hard times financially and was forced to eventually sell much of the enormous library collection in 1892 to Enriqueta Rylands , who was building the University of Manchester Library . After dying childless in 1910 , John passed Althorp to his half brother , Charles Spencer , 6th Earl Spencer , who served as Lord Chamberlain from 1905 to 1912 in the Liberal administrations headed by Sir Henry Campbell @- @ Bannerman and H. H. Asquith .

= = = Modern history = = =

Times became more difficult for the Spencers by the late 19th century , and many of their assets had to be sold off . Albert Spencer , 7th Earl Spencer inherited the estate after his father Charles ' death in 1922 . Albert became a well @- @ known art connoisseur and was a trustee of the Wallace Collection , chairman of the Royal School of Needlework , a Fellow of both the Society of Antiquaries of London and the Royal Society of Arts , and from 1961 until 1969 he was Chair of the Advisory Council of the Victoria and Albert Museum . Despite his keen interest in art , he began selling off paintings and other items to pay off debts . In the 1930s he was forced to sell off a small but immaculate Hans Holbein portrait of Henry VIII (now at the Thyssen @- @ Bornemisza Museum , Madrid) for £ 10 @, @ 000 to finance his son 's education . Although a large sum at the time , by 1998 it was reputed to be worth around £ 50 million . Unlike many country houses in Britain during the Second World War which were occupied by the military and converted into hospitals , training camps and barracks , Althorp house remained untouched , thanks to Albert who saw to it that they used the stables instead . A Wellington bomber crashed near the ice house during the war , killing all of its crew . Due to Spencer House being in a dangerous location in London during the Blitz ,

many of the pieces of furniture and items of the house were brought to Althorp for safekeeping , including numerous fireplaces and doors with curled " S " doorknobs , a signature of the Spencer family dating to the 18th century .

The estate was first opened to the public in 1953 by Albert , to mitigate against taxation , and Althorp had its own railway station called Althorp Park on the Northampton Loop Line until 1960 . After his death in 1975 , Albert passed Althorp to his son Edward John , 8th Earl Spencer , who had served as Equerry to King George VI (1950 ? 52) and to Queen Elizabeth II (1952 ? 54) . Edward was a wine connoisseur and had an extensive wine cellar at Althorp . He made his own wine and attracted fellow connoisseurs from around the world to Althorp , although he did not sell much of it . During Edward 's ownership of Althorp approximately 20 % of the furnishings of Althorp were sold off . The divestment included eleven Van Dykes and nearly every religious painting in the collection , as well as estate housing , and drew severe public criticism , including from the heir .

Edward left the estate to his son , the current owner Charles Spencer , 9th Earl Spencer , after his death in 1992 . As a teenager , Charles served as a tour guide at the house and acquired a deep knowledge of Althorp . At the time he inherited the estate it was losing some £ 400 @,@ 000 annually , and the staff of 14 had to be significantly reduced . Charles ' older sister was Diana , Princess of Wales , who grew up with him at Althorp .

Since the 1990s Charles Spencer has done much to increase the revenue earned by the estate to keep it running . The annual Althorp Literary Festival was founded in 2003 . The heir apparent is Charles ' son Louis Frederick John Spencer (born 1994) . Charles has expressed concerns about the future of the estate and whether Louis might be forced to sell it . In 2005 Charles endorsed a furniture collection of replicas from the house , known as the Althorp Living History Collection .

In 2009 a major restoration of the roof , stonework and the mathematical tiles that clad the building was undertaken . Approximately £ 10 million was spent on repairing the roof alone . In 2010 an auction of over 700 items from Althorp 's attics and cellars , as well as a Rubens and other notable works , achieved £ 21 million .

= = Architecture and collections = =

Althorp house is described as standing in a low situation , " approached by a handsome avenue , beautifully shaded with trees " . The house was originally a " classically beautiful " red brick Tudor building , and a Johannes Vorstermans painting dated to 1677 shows a smaller red house at Althorp and Holdenby House in the distance to the far right . Cosmo III noted that the interior of Althorp house was strongly influenced by Italian architecture , and remarked that it " may be said to be the best planned , and best arranged country seat in the kingdom ; for though there may be many which surpass it in size , none are superior to it in symmetrical elegance " . The current building dates to 1688 . Diarist John Evelyn described it that year : " The house , or rather palace , at Althorpe is a noble uniform pile in form of a half H , built of brick and freestone ' a la moderne ' ; the hall is well , the staircase excellent ; the rooms of state , galleries , offices , and furniture , such as may become a great prince . It is situate in the midst of a garden , exquisitely planned and kept and all this in a park walled in with hewn stone , planted with rows and walks of trees , canals and fishponds and stored with game . " Its appearance was radically altered in the 18th century when the architect Henry Holland was commissioned to make extensive changes starting in 1788 . Mathematical tiles were added to the exterior , brought from Ipswich , encasing the old red brick , and four Corinthian pilasters , made from Roche Abbey stone in Yorkshire , were added to the front . The stone used to make the pilasters was reportedly intended by Christopher Wren to be used in the construction of St Paul 's Cathedral . Sash windows with glazing bars and " moulded stone heads and surrounds " were added .

= = = Interior = = =

The interior of the house is generally considered its strongest asset as the Spencer family has assembled an impressive collection of portrait art , including several pieces painted by the Flemish

master Anthony van Dyck , and countless valuable pieces of porcelain and furniture . One of the rooms in the estate is called the Queen Mary bedroom , which was used by Queen Mary and George V during their visit to the estate in 1913 . Some £ 2 million was spent on redecorating the house in the 1980s by Raine , Countess Spencer , in a style described by Charles Spencer as having ' the wedding cake vulgarity of a five @-@ star hotel in Monaco ' . This work has been reversed , and the interior returned to its original grand but understated appearance .

= = = = Ground floor = = = =

= = = = Wootton Hall and Saloon = = = =

Wootton Hall is the grand hall entrance on the central south side of Althorp house . " Perfectly proportioned " with a two @-@ storey high ceiling , it was cited by Sir Nikolaus Pevsner as " the noblest Georgian room in the county " . It takes its name from the painter John Wootton who was commissioned by the family in 1733 to paint a number of massive paintings in his Marylebone studio to reflect the family 's love of equestrian pursuits , particularly fox hunting . At the time , Wootton was considered to be the finest painter of horses in the country . The paintings still hang on the walls . The hall has a substantial collection of artefacts collected over the years . Aside from the hall porter 's chair , there is a dozen or so lavish @-@ looking hall chairs , one of which is a sedan chair , rediscovered in the Stable Block in 1911 , which had once been in Spencer House .

A prominent feature of the Wootton Hall is its pair of Italian black and Beschia marble blackamoor torchères , originally given to the First Duke of Marlborough as a present from General Charles Churchill . In exceptionally good condition , they stand either side of the door into the Saloon . These were discovered in the silt of the River Tiber and are depictions of slaves who once served in a Roman household . Several flags stand above them , including the White Ensign . The ceiling is intricately made , featuring flowers in the plaster , each one different , the work of Colen Campbell in the early 18th century . The black and white check marble floor is also a distinguishing feature of the room , but through most of its history this floor would have been left plain as horses and carriages would enter the hall inside . In the mid 19th century Frederick , the 4th Earl , had laid down brown and blue tiles , replaced by the marble floor which was added by his son Robert in around 1910 . The floor gives significant depth to the hall and provides fine acoustics , so much that Diana would once practice her tap dancing in the hall as a teenager .

Beyond the Wootton Hall is the Saloon , which was converted from an inner courtyard and roofed in 1650 by Dorothy Spencer , Countess of Sunderland . The Saloon was the first room at Althorp to have electricity installed , and it contains an imposing oak staircase , added in the 1660s . Cosmo III noted Althorp 's " spacious staircase of the wood of the walnut tree , stained , constructed with great magnificence ; this staircase , dividing itself into two equal branches , leads to the grand saloon , from which is the passage into the chambers , all of them regularly disposed after the Italian manner , to which country the Earl was indented for a model of the design . " Historically , the staircase was painted white . It is described as being " surprisingly shallow and delightfully uneven ? a physical manifestation of the long history of the house " .

= = = = Sitting and drawing rooms = = = =

The South Drawing Room is at the front of the house on the West Wing . In earlier times the room had served as a dining room , despite it being about as far from the kitchen as possible . This section of the house was largely remodelled under Henry Holland , but it retains its Georgian elegance today , " gilded to within an inch of its life " , with walls painted in a duck egg blue colour with forest green drapery and peach @-@ patterned sofas . A large mirror with an exquisite gold frame stands between the two windows . The fireplace was added by the Chelsea stonemason Lancelot Edward Wood in 1802 , and the ceiling by master builder Benjamin Broadbent of Leicester in 1865 . The ceiling in the Yellow Drawing Room , also known as the Rubens Room because of its

four Rubens paintings , is also attributed to Broadbent . There are numerous paintings on the walls , including fifteen Joshua Reynolds portraits and a miniature portrait in one of the alcoves of Admiral Lord Nelson , an associate of George John , Second Earl Spencer . Although Higgerson , the night watchman , guarded the place from 8 pm to 8 am , in 1954 one of the lesser valuable paintings in the South Drawing Room was stolen in the night .

The Grandmother 's Sitting Room is situated at the front of the eastern wing . It is noted for its deep blue hand @-@ painted frescoes and formal furniture , and was the favourite room of Charles and Diana 's grandmother , Cynthia Spencer , Countess Spencer . Nearby was the Muniment Room in which the Spencer family records were kept , described as a " musty apartment " which contained over 500 years of history , from medieval household accounts to letters from Jacobean and accounts of Victorian house parties . The room was a favourite haunt of Spencer 's grandfather , Albert Spencer , who would spend thousands of hours in it perusing over the family history . So guarded was he of the collection that when Winston Churchill once spent time in the room looking for information on his ancestor , John Churchill , 1st Duke of Marlborough (1650 ? 1722) , Albert immediately doused out his cigar in fear of creating a fire . The records were sold to the British Library in the 1980s , leaving the room empty , before it was converted to what is known as the " Steward 's Room Flat " . This part of the house once had an extensive collection of 1830s bull paintings by Richard Ansdell .

The Sutherland Room lies at the rear east wing of the house and was once the bedroom of the Earl of Althorp in the first few centuries of the house when it was fashionable for the occupants to sleep on the ground floor and guests to sleep on the first floor . This was still the case during the Holland restoration , and as a result the room was ignored , so it retains many of the earlier mouldings not seen in many other parts of the house . It contains two fireplaces made by John Vardy and James Stuart which were originally situated in Spencer House , and the room has the original 17th @-@ century cornice . The paintings in the room were selected by the current owner Charles Spencer to honour John , Third Earl Spencer and his passion for foxhunting . After it ceased usage as a bedroom , on special occasions the room would be full of life ; on Christmas Day the room would be " transformed into a Christmas fairyland , with clockwork Santas , snowmen and angels all spinning and chiming in the candlelight " . The children would have their places marked by a small cake with their names written on it in icing .

The Marlborough Room , which contains the Great Parlour , is named after Sarah Churchill , Duchess of Marlborough , and is situated next to the Sunderland Room and at left angles to the Library . The Marlborough Room served as an " uncomfortable " drawing room until the 1990s when a Victorian rosewood dining table accommodating for up to 42 people was added , with ' squiggle @-@ back ' chairs attributed to George Seddon in 1800 . The new room was created after alterations were made to the large drawing room by the 6th Earl Spencer in 1911 , including the removal of a dividing partition from the old billiard room . Part of the restoration work attributed to the 7th Earl Spencer after 1957 includes a replacement of two Victorian chimney pieces in the Marlborough Room with those from Spencer House , one which was crafted by Peter Scheemakers . Portraits by Thomas Gainsborough , Joshua Reynolds , and George Romney , mostly of family members , adorn the walls , and accessions from the Spencer House are placed throughout .

= = = = = Dining rooms = = = = =

The Great Dining Room is situated in the east wing extension of the house and was added in 1877 under J. MacVicar Anderson during the time of the Red Earl . The room was inspired by the ballroom of Buckingham Palace , with walls hung with faded , red damask silk . The Spencers ate their regular meals in the Tapestry Dining Room , an inner room of the east side to the east of the Wooton Hall . Aside from the two fine vividly constructed tapestries , one of gypsies and one of farming , the room is fairly bleak in design compared to other rooms in the house ; the dining table is relatively small , with a drab grey floor and open brick fireplace dated in large letters to 1683 . The " sombre " oak panelling originally came from the family 's other property of Wormleighton Manor in Warwickshire . Charles Spencer recalled that three generations of Spencers would eat their lunch

together and that dining conditions were " silent , apart from the noises of my grandfather eating with great gusto , a napkin tucked in around his neck , hanging down over his popping @-@ out tummy , and it was all very sad and tense " .

= = = = = Library = = = = =

The ceiling of the original library at Althorp collapsed in 1773 , and at the same time a new floor was put down in the Picture Gallery . Ionic columns and an Adam style ceiling were added . George John 's fascination in literature began at a young age and there is a Reynolds portrait in the house of him at Trinity College , Cambridge holding a book . By his later life , George John 's collecting habit had become something of an obsession and he attempted to collect every volume ever published in Britain .

The books were kept in five apartments in Althorp in the west wing , which , combined , formed the " Long Library " with books from the floor to the ceiling along much of its approximately 200 by 20 feet (61 @. @ 0 m × 6 @. @ 1 m) length . He not only collected British works but imported Greek and Latin classics , and in 1790 , he acquired the collection of Count Charles de Revicksky , paying an initial £ 1000 , and then £ 500 annually until the count 's death , only three years later . George often paid great fees for rare books , including a woodcut of St Christopher dated to 1423 , believed at that time to be the oldest work in ink with a date on it , the Papal Indulgence Letters of 1452 , the Mazarin Bible of 1455 , the Mentz Psalter of 1457 , and some of the earliest works from the printing presses of Augsburg and Nuremberg such as Bonaventurae and Comestiorum Vitiorum . In 1812 , George John was involved in an intense bidding war with his cousin , The Duke of Marlborough , for a copy of Boccaccio 's The Decameron of 1471 , one of only three known copies . Marlborough won the auction with a bid of £ 2 @, @ 260 ? an amount described by Charles Spencer as " ludicrous " for that time ? but he later sold it to George for £ 750 .

In 1802 , George hired Reverend Thomas Frognall Dibdin as an official librarian to look after the collection and the library contains his many catalogues entitled Aedes Althorpianæ , documenting the books of the library . The collection became so enormous that the massive library became inadequate to hold the contents , and books began being stored along the long picture gallery on the first floor above it . By the time of George John 's death in 1834 , he had amassed one of the largest private collections in Europe of some 110 @, @ 000 volumes . Alcoves were added to the ends of the library during the Holland restoration , creating extra room for the growing collection .

= = = = = Billiard Room = = = = =

The Billiard Room is situated between the South Drawing Room and the library , and overlooks the Deer Park . Once known as the " Rubens Room " , the room was once described by Charles Spencer as a " dead space ; desperately uncomfortable furniture , and Ruben 's imposing portraits of several unattractive Habsburgs , against a tightly patterned silver silk , making it anything but welcoming " . The room has now been " brought to life " with numerous horse and sporting paintings and portraits , including a dramatic portrait of Elisabeth , Empress of Austria hunting , and a full @-@ sized billiard table moved from the stables in the 1990s . The chimney piece of the room was made by Derval under Holland , and the room also contains an 1893 bronze sculpture of Forager , the Red Earl 's favourite foxhound . The Broadbent ceiling is dated to 1865 .

= = = = = China Museum and porcelain = = = = =

The old " Painter 's Passage " , parallel to the South Drawing Room was renovated after the Second World War when glass cases were installed along its length to showcase the Spencer crockery , with a range of porcelain including Meissen , Sèvres , Kangxi , Chelsea and Derby pieces . Charles Spencer remarked that his grandfather Albert was trying to say , " This part of Althorp will never be lived in again ; so we may as well use it to show off the treasures in an orderly way " . Today , most of the collection has been moved to the China Museum which lies on the east side of

the house , between the Sutherland Room and the Great Dining Room , and the passage now contains a series of busts and paintings in its place , including a self @-@ portrait of Sofonisba Anguisciola , and portraits of the dramatist Molière and the actor David Garrick . Charles Spencer highlights a pair of late 17th century blue and white tulipieres , special vases to hold tulips which were fashionable at the time , as his favourite in the museum .

The Garden Lobby of Althorp also contains a number of pieces of porcelain from reputable European manufacturers , but also several rare Oriental pieces . Of note in the Garden Lobby aside from its many plates is a Sèvres tobacco jar with double strap handles , believed to be painted by Louis Jean Thévenet in 1765 , two Chelsea vases decorated with putti which metaphorically represent the four seasons , which the Red Earl had bought as a gift for his wife Charlotte , an extremely finely carved Meissen flower bowl with hundreds of tiny gilded blooms which dates to around 1745 , a Meissen card box , and a blue and gold cherubic Meissen chocolate set @-@ for @-@ one which was believed to have been made for Marie Antoinette in 1781 as a present celebrating the birth of her son Dauphin .

= = = = First floor = = = =

= = = = = The Picture Gallery and chapel = = = = =

The Picture Gallery stretches for 115 feet (35 m) on the first floor of the west wing , 21 feet (6 @.@ 4 m) wide and 19 feet (5 @.@ 8 m) high . The room is one of the best remaining examples of the original Tudor woodwork and ambiance in the mansion , featuring oak panelling along its length . During the renovation of the 18th century the oak panelling in the gallery was covered with white paint , and it was not until 1904 that it was restored to its former glory , the restoration funded by the sale of a Rubens painting in the housekeeper 's room . Due to its length , during Tudor times the ladies of the mansion used the gallery for exercise on rainy days to avoid dragging their long skirts and dresses through the mud in the grounds . It was also used as a dining hall , and in 1695 the county nobility and gentry all met together and dined in the gallery to pay their respects to William III .

The gallery has an extensive collection of about 60 portraits , including Van Dyck 's War and Peace , a John de Critz portrait of James I , a Frans Pourbus the Younger aristocratic portrait of Claude Lorraine , Duc de Chevreuse , a Mary Beale portrait of Charles II and others of him by court artist Sir Peter Lely , and portraits of George Digby , Second Earl of Bristol and William , First Duke of Bedford . Visiting the gallery in 1748 , the Marchioness Grey described the gallery in a letter to a friend : " Indeed there is a gracefulness and life in the figures beyond what I ever saw , they are quite animated and a strength of colouring that strikes you from one end of that gallery to the other . It is so beautiful that a picture which hangs by it is hurt by its situation . " Horace Walpole once wrote : " Althorp has several very fine pictures by the best Italian hands , and a gallery of all one 's acquaintances by Vandyke and Lely . In the gallery I found myself quite at home ; and surprised the housekeeper by my familiarity with the portraits . " The portraits in the Picture Gallery are set in extravagant baroque gilded frames , designed by Robert Spencer , the Second Earl , which feature as " cartouche at the top and a stylised mask at the bottom , with a moulded inner edge , which softens the line between frame and painting " . Robert Spencer was so protective of War and Peace , once the most valuable item in Althorp , that he had the nearest tall window in the gallery converted into a door with hinges , so in case of a fire it could safely be lifted outside . There is also a small hidden door between War and Peace and " The Windsor Beauties " cut into the oak which leads to a staircase and the Pink Suite , a guest bedroom . Margaret Douglas @-@ Home , sister of Robert Spencer , lived at Althorp from 1910 , and the gallery was a favourite of hers . During the renovation of the 1980s , the old @-@ fashioned celestial and terrestrial globes dating to the George II period were moved from the gallery back to the library .

The chapel on the upper floor became a store room in the early 1980s for pieces being sold off . The stained glass window of the chapel , with the Spencer crest , dates to 1588 , and was brought

to Althorp from Wormleighton . The organ on the other hand is far more recent , acquired from the parish of Meriden in the 1990s . A number of earlier occupants of Althorp , particularly George John and Frederick , were devout Christians and would preach in the chapel , and Robert , 6th Earl Spencer would hold a daily service here . It is still used for family christenings , and for services at Christmas , Easter and Harvest Thanksgiving .

= = = = = Bedrooms = = = = =

The Oak Bedroom is at the rear of the house , on the western side between King William Bedroom and the Great Room . The marriage of the first Earl Spencer and Margaret Georgiana took place in secret here on 20 December 1755 , during a ball which was taking place at Althorp to celebrate John 's 21st birthday . Georgiana later recalled , " We both behaved very well , spoke distinctly and loudly but I trembled so much I could hardly stand " . As of 1998 it was furnished with deep red wall paper , rug and chairs , with oak floors , bed and chairs . There are several portraits on the wall , one of them very large above the fireplace . The Spencer " S " features on the blue velvet bed cover , and above the king @-@ sized bed and by the fireplace .

The room to the east of the Oak Bedroom is known as The Great Room . The room was established in the mid 17th century as part of a reception suite , and was used by George John , the Second Earl for important political conferences during his period as First Lord of the Admiralty and Home Secretary . The Great Room , predominantly red and gold in design like many of the first floor rooms , contains a table and chairs with a large gilded mirror with three urns in front of it . The long mirror , designed by James Stuart , who was noted for his Athenian designs , features a tableaux at the top with the Spencer coat of arms and the pulling of chariots by cherubs , representing the love between John and Georgiana . The Great Room contains an extensive collection of miniature portraits , including a very rare Lucas de Heere portrait of Lady Jane Grey as a teenage girl at her family residence in Bradgate , Leicestershire . The Portrait of Isaak Abrahamsz . Massa is mentioned in the 1822 Bibliotheca Spenceriana as hanging in one of the bedrooms at Althorp . It was sold in 1924 to art merchant Joseph Duveen , who sold it the following year to Canadian businessman Frank P. Wood .

The Princess of Wales Bedroom is named after the wife of the future King Edward VII , Alexandra , Princess of Wales , who stayed at Althorp in 1863 on a visit to see the Red Earl . Although the fabric of the four @-@ poster bed was designed in 1911 , the room is largely Georgian , with deep red walls and furnishings , and contains a notable portrait of a young princess by the Spanish court painter , Bartolomé Esteban Murillo . The Queen Mary Bedroom is named after Mary , the wife of King George V , who visited Althorp in 1913 . It contains a bed with an extremely tall structure , dated to the 18th century , draped in pea green taffet . Of particular note in the Queen Mary Bedroom are two chairs covered with needlework created by Albert , who was once the chairman of the Royal School of Needlework .

The upper floor also contains the India Silk Bedroom and the Ante Room , which measures 23 ft 4 inches by 32 ft 6 inches . Formerly known as the Patchwork Bedroom , the Ante Room was established by Charlotte , Countess Spencer and her sister during the Victorian period , and today forms part of a suite of state chambers .

= = = Outer buildings = = =

In total , Althorp estate contains 28 listed buildings and structures , of which nine are planting stones , dotted around the park . Two are Grade I listed , including the main house ; two are Grade II * listed , including the Stable Block and Gardener 's House , Althorp , and the remainder have a Grade II designation , mainly garden screens , gates and gateways aside from the planting stones .

The mustard @-@ yellow Grade II * listed Stable Block , designed by architect Roger Morris with a Palladian influence , was ordered by Charles , Fifth Earl of Sutherland in the early 1730s . It replaced an earlier building which had long been in disrepair and could hold 30 to 40 horses . Morris designed the building with a clear Tuscan architectural design , drawing upon earlier inspiration from

his stables at Inigo Jones 's St Paul 's Church in Covent Garden . A fountain was installed in the courtyard to provide the horse 's troughs with water . Several rooms were built within the stable block , including hot and cold baths for riders after hunting , a veterinarian 's room with medicines for horses , and what was once a smoking room . It was converted into an exhibition centre for Princess Diana between 1998 and 2013 .

The Grade I listed Falconry was built in 1613 using the same local ironstone as the stables and is of similar Palladian appearance , featuring a " gabled roof with ashlar parapets , kneelers and obelisks " . It is a two storey structure , but a single storey red @-@ brick extension was added in the 19th century . The hall of the falconry contains 2 arcaded openings with keystones , and to the left of the hall is a fireplace with Delft tiles , dated to the 19th century . Over the centuries at various times it has been the home of the park warden , the gamekeeper , and the kennelman who looked after the hounds , hosting puppy shows in the 20th century . Both the Stable Block and Falconry became listed buildings in November 1954 . Nearby was the Lavender Cottage with a thatched roof and a wendy house which the Althorp children would play in , but was accidentally burned down by the son of the chauffeur of Albert , and never rebuilt .

The Fifth Earl also built the Grade II * listed Gardener 's House at the back of the park , in a similar Palladian style . The head gardener of Althorp resided at the villa in the 18th century . Princess Diana had been intent on living in the house following her separation from Prince Charles , but due to security concerns it was considered unfeasible . Of particular note is its Victorian three @-@ quarter life @-@ sized marble sculpture , The Shipwrecked Mariner , depicting a sailor reaching desperately from a raft . Charles Spencer has since moved it from the main portico of Gardener 's House to the main house .

Both of the North and South West Lodges of Althorp date to around 1730 under Roger Morris and are both built from lias ashlar with slate roofs . The North and South East Lodges date to around 1810 and are built from limestone ashlar with slate roofs . All four buildings became Grade II listed buildings in November 1954 . The Grade II listed Dairy Cottage , to the northwest of the lake , dates to the late 18th century under Henry Holland , and was listed in December 1986 . It is a two storey building with an attic and hipped roof . It has a 19th @-@ century central door and a surrounding porch " flanked by casements under flat arch heads " .

= = Grounds = =

The estate of Althorp covers an area of at least 13 @,@ 000 acres (50 km²) , and not only includes the house grounds but areas of woodland , cottages , farms , and surrounding hamlets . The soil in the area is of a rich , dark coloured loam , and the estate is situated mainly on Jurassic Clay between 85 metres (279 ft) and 125 metres (410 ft) above sea level , with the highest area lying in the southeast of Althorp on Northampton Sand . Within the grounds , there are earthworks of the lost village of Althorp on which the estate was built . To the southwest of the house is High Wood , with the Dog Pond to the east of this . Bircham Spinney is immediately to east , to the south of the pond . Hopyard Spinney lies in the north @-@ east corner of the estate bordering the A428 , and Sir John 's Wood marks the northwest corner . Sir John 's Wood is named after John Spencer was responsible for the planting of a number of woods on the grounds in the latter half of the 16th century . One tablet mentions he planted one of the woods in 1567 @-@ 8 and Sir John 's Wood in 1589 at a time when lords of manors around Britain grew increasingly anxious of their security following the Spanish Armada and planted woodlands around their properties . Between 1567 and 1901 at least seven stone date tablets were erected in the park commemorating the planting of trees . In the north and north @-@ eastern part of Althorp is marshy ground which is natural feeding ground for herons , a prized delicacy historically at the house . They were harvested by the gamekeeper usually from early March , after being fattened up by meal and bullock 's liver . In 1842 one hundred nests were recorded at the estate but this had fallen to ten by 1889 . The herons were moved to a pond about two miles away in 1993 and are no longer produced for domestic consumption at Althorp . Northampton Golf Club , established in July 1893 , is situated immediately to the southeast of Althorp .

Robert Spencer hired the French landscape architect André Le Nôtre to lay out the park and grounds in the 1660s . A map by Kip which appeared in *Britannia Illustrata* (1709) showed the result of the changes , depicting the house with a wide rectangular courtyard on the main south front , a formal walled garden structured by rectangular @-@ shaped flower @-@ beds and lawns to the east , and tree @-@ lined avenues to the north and south . During the renovation under Holland in the 18th century , the lake was drained in the Deer Park , which the First Earl had used as a playground with full @-@ sized Venetian gondolas , and remaining traces of the old moat were eradicated . From 1860 onwards the architect William Milford Teulon (1823 ? 1900) updated the gardens at Althorp , and further additions and changes were made in the 1990s under Dan Pearson when the Diana memorial was established and many trees planted . After Teulon 's additions , the Spencers began growing its own fruit and vegetables and flowers . In 1901 a variety of sweet pea , now known " Spencer type " , with " flowers of exceptional size and of an exquisite shade of pink " , was cultivated at Althorp by Silas Cole , the chief gardener to the Fifth Earl Spencer , and exhibited at horticultural shows .

= = = Diana grave , memorial , and exhibition = = =

Diana , Princess of Wales was interred on a small island in the middle of the ornamental Round Oval lake , which was created by Teulon in 1868 . The island was decided as the best place to lay her to rest because the water would , according to Spencer , " act as a buffer against the interventions of the insane and ghoulish , the thick mud presenting a further line of defence . We all agreed that , with its beauty and tranquillity , this was the place for Diana to be " . Her burial place is marked with a white memorial plinth and urn .

A Doric @-@ style temple with Diana 's name inscribed on top is situated across from the lake , as a place where visitors can lay down their floral tributes to the princess . It contains a black silhouette of her in the middle , set in white marble , evocative of the Henry Holland 's material preference , with a tablet on either side . One tablet displays a quote from Diana about her love of charitable work , and the other holds Charles Spencer 's concluding tribute given at her funeral in Westminster Abbey .

Following the death of Diana on 31 August 1997 and the subsequent decision to create a memorial and open the house and estate to the public , the garden designer Dan Pearson was commissioned to update the park and gardens , to accommodate for visitors . A series of 36 oak trees was planted along the access road , symbolic of the years of Diana 's life . Thousands of plants were planted , including 100 white rambling roses on the island and 1000 white water lilies , donated by Stowe School , in the water around it .

The estate stable block was converted into a public exhibition devoted to the memory of Diana , and open between 1998 and 2013 , It was designed by Rasshied Ali Din , who had to seek approval from English Heritage due to it being a Grade II listed building . Din said of the result , " You have a contrast of the modern and the new with the old and the established , which is basically a metaphor for Diana . She was a very modern woman within an established environment . " He created six rooms out of the former carriage houses and stabling areas , and the old tea room was transformed into a restaurant , and toilets installed for visitors .

The first room was called " Spencer Women " , placing Diana in context to the women of her family , with paintings and jewellery of Sarah , Duchess of Marlborough , and portraits of Georgiana Spencer etc . The next room contained four minutes of edited video footage of Diana as a child to show to the world that she did not simply come into being in 1980 when she became the girlfriend of Prince Charles . It featured footage of Diana at her christening , her first winter , her first birthday , her first steps , and footage displaying her affection for animals , swimming , and leaving for boarding school . The room also contained her tuck @-@ box , toy typewriter , ballet shoes , and a childhood photo album .

A third room documented the Royal Wedding and its " glamour and excitement " , with a display of the David Emanuel wedding dress she wore on 29 July 1981 . A fourth room documented her extensive charitable and humanitarian work through video footage edited by Tim Ashton , and a fifth

, known as the " Tribute Room " , was an " evocation of those doom @-@ laden days between Diana 's death and burial , when the public were reduced to shocked silence in their attempt to digest the death of a much @-@ loved icon " .

The sixth room was the Exhibition , which was a celebration of her life , and contained large glass cases at the sides with dummies of Diana wearing her notable suits and dresses , with the occasions documented on cards on the floor in front of them . A great glass case at the end underneath a stylish black and white photograph contained a selected few hundred of the thousands of condolence books the Spencer received from around the world , designed to give a " final sense of scale to the impact of Diana 's life and of her death " . A sleek , silk @-@ bound copy of the incendiary address that her brother Charles delivered at Diana 's funeral was available for £ 25 .

The estate and house are open to the public during the summer months (1 July to 30 August) , although the exhibition centre in the stable block was closed in August 2013 . It was believed to be due to concern about the commercial exploitation of Diana 's name , and the desire to " squash the cult of Diana " . The items on display have been packed up , with the intention to give them to her sons William and Harry . All profits made were donated to the Diana , Princess of Wales Memorial Fund , which closed in 2012 .

= = Haunting = =

Although the current owner Charles Spencer professes to have never witnessed a ghost at Althorp or anywhere else , over the years numerous ghostly sightings have been reported in the mansion . In the mid 19th century the Dean of Lincoln was invited to stay at the property by Fredrick , 4th Earl Spencer . He complained the following morning that during the night a figure dressed as a groom (believed to be the ghost of the deceased servant of the 3rd Earl) had entered his room holding candles and checking that they were snuffed out around the bed . Margaret Douglas @-@ Home professed to being aware of the ghost of girl with grey slippers in the gallery .

= Æthelred of Mercia =

Æthelred (/ ?æ??lr?d / ; died after 704) was King of Mercia from 675 until 704 . He was the son of Penda of Mercia and came to the throne in 675 , when his brother , Wulfhere of Mercia , died . Within a year of his accession he invaded Kent , where his armies destroyed the city of Rochester . In 679 he defeated his brother @-@ in @-@ law , Ecgfrith of Northumbria , at the Battle of the Trent : the battle was a major setback for the Northumbrians , and effectively ended their military involvement in English affairs south of the Humber . It also permanently returned the kingdom of Lindsey to Mercia 's possession . However , Æthelred was unable to re @-@ establish his predecessors ' domination of southern Britain .

He was known as a pious and devout Christian king , and he made many grants of land to the church . It was during his reign that Theodore , the Archbishop of Canterbury , reorganized the church 's diocesan structure , creating several new sees in Mercia and Northumbria . Æthelred befriended Bishop Wilfrid of York when Wilfrid was expelled from his see in Northumbria ; Æthelred made Wilfrid Bishop of the Middle Angles during his exile and supported him at the synod of Austerfield in about 702 , when Wilfrid argued his case for the return of the ecclesiastical lands he had been deprived of in Northumbria .

Æthelred 's wife , Osthryth , was a daughter of King Oswiu , one of the dominant 7th @-@ century Northumbrian kings . Osthryth was murdered in unknown circumstances in 697 , and in 704 Æthelred abdicated , leaving the throne to Wulfhere 's son Coenred . Æthelred became a monk at Bardney , a monastery which he had founded with his wife , and was buried there . Ceolred , who was Æthelred 's son (though apparently not by Osthryth) , became king after Coenred ; it is also possible that Æthelred had another son named Ceolwald who was briefly king before Ceolred .

= = Mercia in the seventh century = =

By the 7th century , England was almost entirely divided into kingdoms ruled by the Anglo @-@ Saxons who had come to Britain two hundred years before . The kingdom of Mercia occupied what is now the English midlands . The origin of the kingdom is not recorded , but royal genealogies preserved in the Anglo @-@ Saxon Chronicle and the Anglian collection agree that the royal houses were descended from a founder named Icel ; the Mercian royal house is hence known as the Iclingas . The earliest Mercian king about whom definite historical information has survived is Penda of Mercia , Æthelred 's father . The larger neighbouring kingdoms included Northumbria to the north , recently united from its constituent kingdoms of Bernicia and Deira , East Anglia to the east , and Wessex , the kingdom of the West Saxons , to the south .

According to Ecclesiastical History of the English People , a history of the English church written by the 8th @-@ century monk Bede , there were seven early Anglo @-@ Saxon rulers who held imperium , or overlordship , over the other kingdoms . The fifth of these was Edwin of Northumbria , who was killed at the battle of Hatfield Chase by a combined force including Cadwallon , a British king of Gwynedd , and Penda . After Edwin 's death , Northumbria briefly fell apart into its two subkingdoms of Bernicia and Deira . Within a year Oswald , Edwin 's nephew , killed Cadwallon and reunited the kingdoms , subsequently re @-@ establishing Northumbrian hegemony over the south of England . In 642 Penda killed Oswald at the battle of Maserfield , and Northumbria was again divided . Oswald 's son Oswiu succeeded to the throne of Bernicia , and Osric 's son Oswine to Deira , the southern of the two kingdoms .

In 655 , Oswiu defeated and killed Penda at the Battle of the Winwaed . Oswiu installed Peada , a son of Penda , as king of southern Mercia and ruled the northern half himself ; after Peada was murdered in 656 Oswiu took direct control of all of Mercia . A coup in 658 threw off Northumbrian overlordship and established Wulfhere as king . By the early 670s , Wulfhere had become the most powerful king in southern Britain , with an effective hegemony over all the Anglo @-@ Saxon kingdoms except for Northumbria .

The main source for this period is Bede 's History , completed in about 731 . Despite its focus on the history of the church , this work also provides valuable information about the early Anglo @-@ Saxon kingdoms . For Wessex and Kent , Bede had informants who supplied him with details of the church 's history in each province , but he appears to have had no such contact in Mercia , about which he is less well @-@ informed . A further source for this period is the Anglo @-@ Saxon Chronicle , compiled at the end of the 9th century in Wessex . The Chronicle 's anonymous scribe appears to have incorporated much information recorded in earlier periods .

= = Ancestry and early reign = =

Æthelred was the son of Penda of Mercia . Penda 's queen , Cynewise , is named by Bede , who does not mention her children ; no other wives of Penda are known and so it is likely but not certain that she was Æthelred 's mother . The Anglo @-@ Saxon Chronicle gives Penda 's age as fifty in 626 , and credits him with a thirty @-@ year reign , but this would put Penda at eighty years old at the time of his death , which is generally thought unlikely as two of his sons (Wulfhere and Æthelred) were young when he was killed . At least as likely is that Penda was fifty years old at his death , rather than at his accession . Æthelred 's date of birth is unknown , but Bede describes Wulfhere as a youth at the time of his accession in 658 , so it is likely he and Æthelred were in their middle teens at that time . The early sources do not say whether Æthelred was older or younger than Wulfhere .

Nothing is known of Æthelred 's childhood . He had another brother , Peada , and two sisters , Cyneburh and Cyneswith ; it is also possible that Merewalh , king of the Magonsæte , was Æthelred 's brother .

In 674 , according to Stephen of Ripon , Wulfhere " stirred up all the southern nations against [Northumbria] " , but he was defeated by Oswiu 's son Ecgrith who forced him to surrender Lindsey , and to pay tribute . Wulfhere survived the defeat , but died in 675 , possibly of disease , and Æthelred became king .

The first recorded act of Æthelred 's reign is in 676 , when his armies ravaged Kent , destroying

Rochester , the seat of the bishops of West Kent . The reason for his attack is not recorded , but he may have wished to prevent King Hlothhere of Kent from regaining control of Surrey , which had been recently brought into the Mercian orbit by Wulfhere . It may also be that Æthelred wished for revenge for the murder of the sons of Eormenred of Kent ; the murders had been instigated by Ecgberht of Kent , Hlothhere 's brother , and it is possible that Æthelred was the uncle of the murdered princes . A third suggestion is that the kings of Essex solicited the invasion , in response to recent Kentish attempts to gain dominance over the East Saxons . Regardless of the reason , Hlothhere was likely then forced to accept Æthelred 's overlordship . The damage to the see of Rochester was so great that the incumbent bishop , Putta , retired from his diocese ; his appointed successor , Cwichhelm , also gave up the see " because of its poverty " .

Early in Æthelred 's reign , Theodore , the Archbishop of Canterbury , began a substantial reorganization of the church in Mercia . In 675 he removed Winfred from his position as Bishop of Lichfield , and over the next four years he divided the vast Mercian see into the five dioceses of Leicester , Lichfield , Worcester , Dorchester and Hereford . Æthelred was a devout king , " more famed for his pious disposition than his skill in war " , and he made several gifts of land to the expanding church , including grants at Tetbury , Long Newton , and Somerford Keynes . There is also a tradition that Æthelred was associated with the founding of Abingdon Abbey , in southern Oxfordshire .

= = Relations with Northumbria = =

Mercia had been in conflict with Northumbria since at least 633 , when Penda of Mercia defeated and killed Edwin of Northumbria at the Battle of Hatfield Chase . However , there were diplomatic marriages between the two kingdoms : Æthelred 's sister Cyneburh married Alhfrith , a son of Oswiu of Northumbria , and both Æthelred and his brother Peada married daughters of Oswiu . Cyneburh 's marriage to Alhfrith took place in the early 650s , and Peada 's marriage , to Ealhflæd , followed shortly afterwards ; Æthelred 's marriage , to Osthryth , is of unknown date but must have occurred before 679 , since Bede mentions it in describing the Battle of the Trent , which took place that year .

Bede does not mention the cause of the battle , simply saying that it occurred in the ninth year of Ecgrith 's reign . He is more informative on the outcome . Ælfwine , the young subking of Deira , was killed ; Ælfwine was brother to Osthryth and Ecgrith , and was well liked in both Mercia and Northumbria since Æthelred 's marriage to Osthryth . According to Bede , his death threatened to cause further strife between the two kingdoms , but Theodore , the Archbishop of Canterbury , intervened :

Theodore , the beloved of God , enlisting God 's help , smothered the flames of this awful peril by his wholesome advice . As a result , peace was restored between the kings and peoples , and in lieu of further bloodshed the customary compensation was paid to King Ecgrith for his brother 's death .

Æthelred took possession of Lindsey again after the battle ; the change in control this time was lasting , and Lindsey remained part of Mercia until the Viking invasion of the 9th century remade the map of England . Conflict between Northumbria and Mercia did not completely cease after this date : Scottish annals record that Æthelbald , an 8th @-@ century Mercian king , ravaged Northumbrian territory in 740 while King Eadberht of Northumbria was absent fighting the Picts . However , the Battle of the Trent effectively ended Northumbrian involvement in southern Britain .

A conflict between Bishop Wilfrid of York and the church and secular establishment led to Wilfrid 's expulsion from Northumbria and the division of his vast diocese , and Æthelred sided with Ecgrith against Wilfrid . After Ecgrith 's death in 685 , Archbishop Theodore arranged a reconciliation between Wilfrid and Aldfrith , Ecgrith 's successor , but in 692 Aldfrith and Wilfrid fell out and Wilfrid went into exile in Mercia . Æthelred now supported Wilfrid , making him bishop of the Middle Angles , and defending him at the Council of Austerfield in about 702 , when Wilfrid argued his case before an assembly of bishops led by Archbishop Berhtwald of Canterbury . Æthelred 's support for Wilfrid embroiled him in dispute with both Canterbury and Northumbria , and it is not clear what his motive was , though it may be relevant that some of Wilfrid 's monasteries were in Mercian territory .

= = The southern kingdoms = =

Two charters of 681 show Æthelred granting land near Tetbury , on what is now the border between Gloucestershire and Wiltshire . This may indicate that Æthelred was able to extend Mercian influence further into the territory of the West Saxons , as Wulfhere had done before him . The West Saxons managed a significant military resurgence under Cædwalla , king of Wessex from about 685 to 688 , but when Cædwalla departed for Rome on pilgrimage there may have been internal strife before Ine , his successor , took the throne . Cædwalla had successfully conquered the kingdoms of Sussex and Kent , and his abdication may have contributed to the unsettled history of the southeast over the next few years . In Kent , Oswine emerged as king , though only in eastern Kent ; the western half of the kingdom was ruled by Swæfheard , son of Sæbbi , the king of Essex . It is possible that Æthelred provided support to both Swæfheard and Oswine ; for each king a charter survives in which Æthelred confirms land grants they made in Kent , and Æthelred 's invasion of Kent in 676 indicates his opposition to the traditional Kentish royal house . A charter of Swæfheard 's dated 691 is also of interest as it indicates that Æthelred had invaded Kent ; it has been suggested that Æthelred intended to place Wilfrid in the Archbishop 's seat at Canterbury , but if so he was unsuccessful . Alternatively , Æthelred may have needed assistance in Kent from the East Saxons who may have been independent of Mercia for a decade or more by that time . The East Saxons did return to the Mercian orbit over the next few years : a charter of Æthelred 's , dated between 693 and 704 , shows him granting land to Wealdhere , the bishop of London , and in 704 Æthelred consented to a grant made by Swæfheard . The latter charter also appears to show that a comes , or local official , was put in place by the Mercians to protect their interests .

Despite this evidence of Mercian involvement in the southeast there is very little indication that Æthelred had expansionist ambitions to the south . The increasing strength of the West Saxons under Cædwalla and Ine would have limited Mercian opportunities in that direction . The Northumbrians were no longer a distraction ; they had been contained north of the Humber since the Battle of the Trent , and became even less of a threat after their disastrous defeat in 685 at the hands of the Picts . A possible explanation is that Æthelred was preoccupied with war with the Welsh . It was also at this time that the Hwicce came more definitely into the Mercian orbit . The last Hwiccean ruler to take the title of king was Oshere , who died in 685 ; but from the mid @-@ 670s he sought Æthelred 's consent for his grants , and Æthelred regarded him as a subking . Further evidence of Æthelred 's involvement among the Hwicce comes from a charter in which he grants land for a minster in Gloucestershire , in Hwiccean territory ; the charter is generally thought to be a fabrication , but it appears to be based on an authentic earlier source .

= = Abdication and final years = =

Osthryth was murdered in 697 , for reasons unknown ; according to Bede the murderers were " her own people , the Mercian chieftains " . Bede records that Peada 's death , forty years earlier , stemmed from " the treachery , it is said , of his own wife " ; Peada 's wife was Ealhflæd , Osthryth 's sister . Hence Osthryth 's murder may have been in revenge for Peada 's assassination , though it has also been interpreted more directly as a sign of continuing hostility between Northumbria and Mercia . Osthryth was buried at Bardney in Lindsey , the monastery where , at her urging , the relics of her uncle , Oswald of Northumbria , were kept and revered , though evidence of resistance at Bardney to the cult of Oswald is also indicative of the poor relations between the two kingdoms .

In 704 , Æthelred abdicated to become a monk and abbot at Bardney , leaving the kingship to his nephew Coenred . Seventh century Mercian rulers often patronised religious establishments outside the Mercian heartlands , perhaps as a way of gaining support in outlying provinces . Æthelred 's and Osthryth 's interest in Bardney is consistent with this pattern . The encouragement of the cult of royal saints in areas beyond the central Mercian lands also seems to have been a deliberate policy , and both Æthelred and Osthryth were later revered as saints at Bardney . It appears that Æthelred continued to have influence in the kingdom after his abdication : a passage in Stephen of Ripon 's

Life of Wilfrid shows Æthelred summoning Coenred to him and advising him to make peace with Wilfrid . The date of Æthelred 's death is not recorded ; though it is known that he was buried at Bardney .

Æthelred had at least one son , Ceolred . According to the thirteenth @-@ century Chronicon Abbatiae de Evesham , Ceolred was not the son of Osthryth , although it does not name Ceolred 's mother , and in the view of the historian Ann Williams this may mean that Æthelred remarried after Osthryth 's death . However , Susan Kelly states that Osthryth was " most likely (though not certainly) " Ceolred 's mother . Ceolred succeeded to the throne in 709 , after Coenred abdicated in 709 to go to Rome on pilgrimage . One version of the regnal lists for Mercia shows a king named Ceolwald reigning after Ceolred , and it is possible that Ceolwald , if he existed , was also a son of Æthelred 's .