

# The Garden of England

## Kent, Yesterday and Today

Philip Sidney, 2nd Viscount De L'Isle, MBE DL

When commemorating the founding of Jamestown, the first English settlement in what is now the United States, a comparative examination of English and American history and culture is appropriate. Through more than the English language, Virginia and the southeastern English county of Kent have long been connected. Some of the first Jamestown settlers came from Kent. Among the first English families in Virginia were the Kentish Culpeppers, Sandys, Sidneys, and Wyatts. Their descendants in Virginia and England share agricultural, maritime, and building traditions. Most important, the people of Kent and Virginia share the desire to preserve the past and create a bright future.

### HISTORICAL NOTES

The county's history, like that of the rest of England, is quite different from the history of Virginia. "Kent" is the oldest recorded place name in the British Isles. Written records in Kent date to the first invasion of the Romans in 54 B.C.E. The Romans stormed inland to what is now Canterbury, overrunning the indigenous Britons to establish a city. Saint Augustine brought Christianity to Kent's shores in 597 C.E., and in the twelfth century, stonemasons built the magnificent Canterbury Cathedral on the foundations of a much older church. By the fourteenth century, Canterbury was a center of trade and pilgrimage, which Geoffrey Chaucer memorialized in *The Canterbury Tales*. Today, visitors see archaeological



The gardens of the Penshurst estate.

Photo courtesy Penshurst Place

evidence of the Romans and the Saxons in the cellars of buildings used for modern commerce.

By 1607, when the histories of Kent and Virginia intersected for the first time, Kent was thriving due to its proximity to the English capital, London. Pocahontas (known as Rebecca Rolfe after her marriage to John Rolfe) visited London in 1616. Unfortunately, she fell ill on her way back to Virginia in 1617 and was brought ashore at Gravesend, Kent, where she died and was buried at the local parish church of St. George. In the summer of 2006, Virginia tribal representatives visited St. George's Church to take part in a ceremony in her honor.



(Above) A stone carver works in the restoration shop of Canterbury Cathedral. Photo courtesy Canterbury Cathedral

(Right) Fishing boats docked in Whitstable Harbor. The buildings in the background were once used as fisherman's huts. Photo courtesy [www.visitkent.co.uk](http://www.visitkent.co.uk)



From 1642 to 1648, the English fought a civil war that pitted royal rule against parliament. In Kent, Royalist uprisings took place, with fighting in the streets of Maidstone, the county seat. Many Royalists (or Cavaliers) immigrated to Virginia for political and religious freedom. Between 1637 and 1662, including the war years, royal gardener John Tradescant, born in Meopham, Kent, made his own history by travelling three times to Virginia to collect plant species, some of which still grace English gardens.

Several English warships that sailed during the American Revolutionary War and the War of 1812 were built at the Royal Chatham Dockyard in Kent, which was established in the mid-sixteenth century. They included the *Raisonnable*, which in 1779 took part in an assault on Hampton Roads, Virginia, and the HMS *Guerriere*, which the USS *Constitution* destroyed during the War of 1812. Because it so affected daily life in Kent and killed so many of its citizens, World War II is fresh in people's memories. In 1940, the Battle of Britain was fought in the skies over Kent. Throughout the war, Winston Churchill, whose mother was from New York City, lived at Chartwell, Kent.

#### A BRIEF SKETCH OF KENTISH TRADITIONS

Kent has been known as the "Garden of England" for over 400 years, since the day King Henry VIII ate a particularly satisfying bowl of Kentish cherries. Despite the fact that, today, Kent is the largest

county in England with many industrial complexes and a thriving high-tech industry, its sobriquet is still very visible in the fruit orchards, produce farms, and hop gardens that cover the landscape. Sheep and cows still graze over much of the countryside, and in the summer and fall, the greengrocers' and farmers' markets of Kent abound with local apples, strawberries, pears, ciders, juices, jams, chutneys, cheeses, lamb, and wines.

Kent has 350 miles of coastline, and local fish—including the famous Dover sole and Whitstable oyster—top menus throughout the United Kingdom. The Historic Chatham Dockyard, now a popular tourist attraction, still houses traditional rope and flag makers. Sheerness and Dover are points of departure for international shipping and ferry travel, and the Medway and Thames rivers figure prominently in Kent's history and traditions.

Whether restoring Canterbury Cathedral or adapting oast houses (built to dry hops) into bed-and-breakfasts or apartment complexes, master builders and their apprentices are busy year-round. The Museum of Kent Life near Maidstone and the Kent Hop Farm in Paddock Wood preserve and interpret historic constructions, such as clay-peg roofs, oast houses, and huts used by seasonal hop pickers. There are more castles in Kent than in any other county in England. They include Leeds Castle built in 1119, which was home to the Culpeppers and Fairfaxes.





## HISTORIC ESTATES: LINKING PAST AND PRESENT

One important tradition that links Kent's past and present is the maintenance of historic houses and landed estates, many of which date to medieval times. In 1341, a rich London wool merchant built Penshurst Place, the home of the author of this essay, which is located on the Weald of Kent, near Royal Tunbridge Wells. Subsequent owners, including King Henry VIII, extended it in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Henry's son, King Edward VI, gave the house to Sir William Sidney, an ancestor of the current owner, in 1552. The estate covers 2,500 acres of farm and woodland and an eleven-acre, formal, walled garden designed in 1346. In order to maintain the estate, the current owners decided several years ago to rent out parts of the house and grounds for craft fairs, official receptions, and private functions. The family still lives in the private apartments, but the staterooms, including Barons Hall, and the restored gardens are open to visitors. Today, running and restoring the estate for the public is a two-generation family affair.

## THE FUTURE OF KENT TRADITIONS

Kent's rich history and culture inform the county's development. The land still yields traditional crops and now nourishes new plants that can be harnessed for fuel, furniture, and medicine. Immigration and travel have created a multicultural society, one linked to the world. Kent, like Virginia, faces the future by blending its proud traditions with twenty-first-century opportunities.

*Viscount De L'Isle (Philip) grew up at Penshurst Place, the Sidney family home since 1552, where he now lives with his wife Viscountess De L'Isle (Isobel). He served in the Grenadier Guards and was awarded the MBE in 1977. He retired as a Major in 1979. From 1983–1985, he was chairman of Kent CLA. From 1992–1999, he was Honorary Colonel of the 5th Bn PWRR. Philip was appointed a Deputy Lieutenant of Kent in 1994, becoming Vice Lord Lieutenant in 2002. A Trustee of Canterbury Cathedral Trust since 1992 and Chairman in 2007, he and Isobel have managed the family Estate for over twenty-five years.*

Oast houses, used to dry hops before brewing, are on the grounds of The Hop Farm in Kent. Photo courtesy [www.visitkent.co.uk](http://www.visitkent.co.uk)

## A PERSONAL CONNECTION BETWEEN KENT AND VIRGINIA

### Amanda Cottrell

My ancestors sailed to Virginia in 1608, settled in the Rappahannock region, and grew cotton and tobacco. They held a number of prominent positions in the state: the last one to live in the United States was my great uncle, General Wendell C. Neville (1870–1930), who was commander of the U.S. Marine Corps and once appeared on the cover of *Time Magazine*. My ancestors had good relations with the Rappahannock Indians, so it was a delight and a great honor to welcome Chief Anne Richardson to Kent in July 2006.

I am currently the patron of Produced in Kent, an organization that promotes fresh, local food. Because I love to cook, I find myself turning to some of the recipes that I loved when I visited Virginia as a child. The following recipe goes well with seasonal fruit, including the bounteous apples, pears, peaches, and strawberries available in Kentish farmers' markets and greengrocers' shops. My Virginia grandmother's sticky gingerbread reminds us that a blend of English and Virginia cultures is "always in season."

### AMANDA CARDWELL NEVILLE'S STICKY GINGERBREAD

#### Ingredients

- 4 oz. black treacle or molasses
- 4 oz. golden syrup or golden corn syrup
- ½ lb. butter (2 sticks/4 oz. cut up)
- ½ lb. soft brown sugar (approx. 1 cup)
- 12 oz. all-purpose flour
- Pinch to one teaspoon salt
- 2 level tablespoons ground ginger
- 3 level teaspoons ground cinnamon
- 2 large eggs
- ½ pint of milk (1 cup)
- 2 level teaspoons bicarbonate of soda  
or baking soda
- Cooking oil
- Greaseproof parchment paper

#### Directions

Grease a 7½ by 11½-inch baking pan well. Cut parchment paper to fit the base of the baking pan, and grease the paper. In a heavy saucepan, stir together the black treacle or molasses, golden syrup or golden corn syrup, butter, and brown sugar. Melt slowly over medium heat, stirring all the time. Remove the saucepan from the heat. Sift the flour, ginger, cinnamon, and salt into the mix in the saucepan. Beat the eggs and stir them slowly into the mix. Heat the milk and whisk in the baking soda. Stir the milk and soda until the soda dissolves. Add them to the saucepan and fold all of the ingredients together. Pour the folded mix into the baking pan. Cook for one hour at 300 degrees Fahrenheit.