

Admiral Sir John Norris and the Norris Period

National Maritime Museum

The best-known members of the Norris family are the Admiral Sir John Norris and his grandson John Norris III.

The first John Norris bought Hemsted in 1718 from the Guldeford family when they came to grief and sold the estate by an Act of Parliament, and the third John Norris lost it in 1780 to Hallet Hodges.

Born in 1660, Admiral Sir John Norris had entered the Navy when he was only 9 or 10 years old and had earned the nickname "Foul-weather Jack" for his skill in navigating the most tempestuous seas. Marrying a 17-year-old widow, Elizabeth, daughter of Lord Aylmer in 1699, he had a large family by the time they moved from London to Hemsted in 1718.

From 1709 he was appointed to command a squadron despatched to the Baltic, and in 1715 suppressed the Swedish privateers who had disturbed the British commerce. He sailed with a strong squadron in 1735 to protect the Portuguese against the Spaniards.

When the French attempted an invasion of Great Britain in 1744, Sir John Norris was given the command of 29 ships to oppose the foe. "The French armament entered The Channel and anchored off Dungeness, but upon the appearance of the British Fleet rounding the Foreland, the enemy retreated"¹. The French force was ill equipped, the Admiral was nervous, his mind dwelt on all the misfortunes which might possibly happen and the weather was bad. M. de Roquefeuil came up almost as far as the Downs, where he learnt that Sir John Norris was there and retreated.

Whilst on his travels the Admiral brought home seeds from Scandinavia from which the conifers on Hemsted Estate were grown; he planted the silver fir (*Picea abies*) avenue opposite Staplehurst Lodge. Norris was the first owner to introduce exotic plants on to the Estate, undoubtedly shipped home from his journeys abroad. Admiral Sir John Norris retired to enjoy a few years at Hemsted before his death on June 22 1749 aged 89 years.

The eldest son of the Admiral, also called John, was born in 1702. He became the Captain of Deal Castle where he lived until his father's death when he inherited Hemsted. He was MP for Rye between 1727-1733, resigning, it is thought, over the Excise Bill in 1733. He married Judith Western in 1728 and had a son, John who died in infancy, a daughter, Elizabeth, and another son, John.

This John Norris, grandson of the Admiral was educated at Queen's Cambridge and later in Belgium. He succeeded his father as Captain of Deal Castle and was also MP for Rye between 1761-1774. In 1766 he married Kitty Fisher at St George's, Hanover Square. Though of humble origin, Kitty Fisher became a well-known courtesan famous for her beauty, wit and daring horsemanship. She sat for a number of portraits (now in the National Portrait Gallery) and was the subject of several satires and rhymes:

All that we can know of her

Is this ---- she was a milliner.
Her parentage so low and mean
Is hardly to be trac'd, I ween;
Say, has she wit ----or has she sense?
No! nothing but impertinence."
(Kitty's Stream, 1759)

Lucy Locket lost her pocket
Kitty Fisher found it,
Not a penny was there in it
But a ribbon round it".

Lucy Locket, whose fame is conjoined with hers, was a barmaid at the Cock, in Fleet Street; she discarded one of her lovers when she had run through all his money. Kitty Fisher, as the rhyme delicately hints, thought it enough that he was attractive in appearance. It is true that Kitty Fisher stuck firmly to the rule that her fee was a hundred guineas, but this was less from purely mercenary reasons than from commercial principle. Once, when the Duke of York gave her only a £50 note, having no more on him, she ate it on her bread and butter for breakfast.²

Kitty Fisher only lived for four months as Mrs Norris as she died in Bath from smallpox. She is buried in the Norris crypt in Benenden Village Church.

John Norris went on to marry Katherine Lynch in 1771 (some accounts say for the third time, Kitty being his second wife and Sarah who died in 1761 being the first). John Norris had a number of debts and parts of the Hemsted Estate were mortgaged or sold off. His mother and sister still lived at the house, but after the death of his mother, Judith, the whole Hemsted estate was mortgaged and then sold in a final endeavour to settle his debts. Consequently Thomas Hallet Hodges bought the house relatively cheaply in 1780.

¹ Haslewood, Rev. Francis, The Parish of Benenden, Kent, Ipswich, 1889

² Archenholtz, J.W. von, A Picture of London, London, 1797