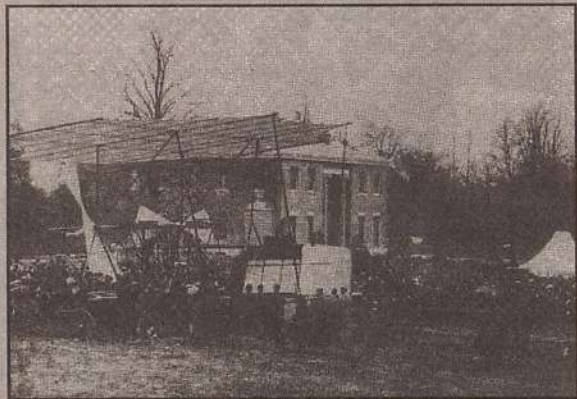


Birthplace of flight to be restored

Baldwyn's Mansion on the site of the old Bexley Hospital, in Dartford, has seen some varied guests over the years, the most famous of whom was, perhaps, an American inventor who rented the house to work on his first flying machine. Reporter **RICHARD SIMCOX** looked around the rotting building, now being restored ...



● UP AND AWAY: Testing the flying machine

★ **HIRAM Stevens Maxim** is perhaps best known for his work building and developing automatic guns. But it is his vision which is, arguably, the most impressive quality. And nowhere is his vision better illustrated than in his attempts to construct a flying machine, which he did during a stay at Baldwyn's Park. He demonstrated his early aircraft to such dignitaries as the Prince of Wales, who later became King Edward VII, and HG Wells in the summer of 1894 after renting the mansion and 40 acres of land in 1889. After propelling the steam-powered craft along a specially-built half-mile track, Maxim wrote: "The machine was liberated and floated in the air, giving those on board the sensation of being in a boat." The "flight", almost a decade before the Wright brothers' famous lift off, earned him a place in aviation history.

TWO decades of neglect are about to come to an end at Baldwyn's Mansion – the imposing Regency structure which was gutted by fire will be given a complete makeover after years of laying empty.

The building was rented by inventor Hiram Maxim at the end of the 19th Century and was taken over in 1895 to house asylum patients at Bexley Hospital.

Restorer Barry Morgan, tasked with turning the rotting shell into luxury flats, described the neglect of the grade-II listed building as "institutional vandalism".

Little remains of the main staircase but Mr Morgan is confident he can restore the house to its former glory. His restoration firm has already made casts of original plaster mouldings and cornices for the lobby area.

"It is a very exciting and challenging project to work on," he said.

"We're replacing the windows to their original design and returning the entrance hall to its former Regency glory."

And the restorers work has been made doubly difficult by the fact that there are no photographs of the interior of the building. Archive pictures, however, do exist of the outside of the mansion and these are being used to try to replicate the original design.

"Although severely damaged, there is enough remaining of some key original features to be able to replace them," says Mr Morgan.

The building will also be developed to include modern loft-style apartments and the cost of creating these will run "well into seven figures".



● QUITE SOME TASK: The building work begins

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In all, 14 flats will be built – to the untrained eye this seems an almost impossible task.

But Mr Morgan, who lives in a converted barn in Horton Kirby, explained: "We are doing the restoration in two sections. The front part of the building dates from the 1820s and the rear was added towards the end of the 19th Century, so we will work along those lines."

The company will also replace an existing flat, concrete roof, which was leaking, with one which has four sloping sides. It is hoped this will be more in-keeping with the time.

The last time Baldwyn's Mansion was used to provide accommodation was in the early 1980s when Oxleas NHS Trust housed occupational therapy nursing staff there.

The construction, not expected to be finished until next year, will mean the historic home is taken off the at risk register for listed buildings.

Once completed, the flats are likely to fetch upwards of £200,000.



● GUTTED: The fire damage is extensive

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