

Historical society learns details about Eaton Hall



Kelly Mathews recently offered some facts about Eaton Hall near King City to members of the Caledon East and District Historical Society.

By Bill Rea

There's a lot of interesting history tied up in Eaton Hall near King City, and much of it is not well known.

Kelly Mathews tried to address that recently when she spoke to the Caledon East and District Historical Society.

Mathews is the author of *Eaton Hall: Pride of King Township*. The hall is on the King Campus of Seneca College, and she is the manager of community recreation, camps and the outdoor education centre at the campus.

Mathews said she started her job at Seneca in 2012. "I fell in love with it," she declared.

History seems to run in Mathews' family. Famed author Farley Mowat and former Ontario premier Sir Oliver Mowat both occupy spots in her family tree.

The talk included a quiz about the hall, and Mathews warned her audience not to worry if they weren't able to get many of the answers correct. She said she's given the same quiz to members of the King Township Historical Society, and the best anyone there did was nine out of 24.

Mathews said she's doing research on her own for a couple of years, and there have been times when that's been a complicated task. She said she found she could ask a question of five different people and get five different answers. At first, she said she was inclined to pick the answer she liked the most, but soon got interested in finding the truth. She was also able to get access to documents involving the hall.

"No one in my presence ever called it a house," she said. "It's a castle."

The hall was closed to the public in 2012. Mathews said the ice storm of December 2013 took a toll, as pipes froze and burst inside. Yet they were able to get the hall ready for Doors Open in September.

The Seneca campus takes up parts of Lots 11, 12, 13 and 14, Concession 3, in King, with most of it on the west side of Dufferin Street. Eaton Hall is on the north side of Lake Seneca, a body of water which has been known by a number of names over the years, including Lady Eaton Lake, Eaton Lake, Ferguson Lake, Lake Au-Large, Lake Jonda and Heart Lake.

The story of the hall starts around 1901, when Florence McCrea, "a small farm girl," married John Craig Eaton, the youngest son of Timothy Eaton, who was the founder of the famed department store chain. John Craig was knighted in 1917, making his wife Lady Eaton.

Before her marriage, she had been a student nurse, who first worked at Toronto General Hospital, then got a job at a private hospital. Her future husband was there with an undisclosed illness. "He fell in love with the little farm girl," she said.

Mathews said Lady Eaton died in 1970, and at the time, there were 45 buildings on the property, some of them dating to the time before the Eatons acquired the land. The Eatons sold the land to Seneca in 1971. Mathews said there were 20 buildings on the property at the time. She added about 350 acres of the site have been leased to a local farmer.

"He gets to reap the benefits and we don't have weeds," she observed.

Seneca bought the property for \$1.5 million. The college actually had a budget of \$2 million, but it kept back \$500,000 to finance needed renovations.

She had four grandchildren who might have been interested in the property. But Mathews said they were young and rich, and not really interested in their grandmother's house in the country.

Neither Timothy Eaton or his son, who died in 1922, ever saw Eaton Hall. It was the brain child of Lady Eaton. Work on the hall started in 1938, and she was a 60-year-old grandmother when she moved in.

Sir John Craig had built a large house in Toronto named Ardworld, but Lady Eaton had it destroyed some time after his death.

Mathews said the reason given was there was no market for such a house, that had a conservatory at the rear that was as big as a football field. But she also said there were rumours, which she couldn't verify, that there was some infidelity that had gone on.

In the 1940s, the Royal Canadian Navy took over the hall to run a convalescent facility. Lady Eaton was a widow, and she didn't need a 78-room house, especially one that cost about \$20,000 per month to operate. They started moving in in July 1944, housing about 100 people at first, but by Christmas 1945, there was only a skeleton staff there.

?Their need for that facility just wasn't as big as they thought it was going to be,? Mathews observed.

Lady Eaton tried to make a connection between the family and Eton College in England. Mathews said it was part of her desire to be part of the upper elite.

There was some success in that regard, as she said at least three members of the Royal Family have visited the Hall, including Princess Alice in 1959, Princess Anne and her then husband Mark Phillips in 1974, and Princess Margaret in 1988.

The building went in a place which at the time was known as Eversley, which Mathews said no longer exists.

?The hamlet's considered a ghost hamlet,? she commented.

The Eaton Farm and Estate consisted of 700 acres. Many people believe the whole property was bought from Sir Henry Pellatt, the man who built Toronto's Casa Loma, who owned lands to the west. But Mathews said the land was purchased in parcels from five different owners. The first plot was bought from a family named Ferguson. In time, Pellatt sold 400 acres to the Eatons.

Mathews explained that around 1919 and 1920, Sir John Craig and his wife were looking for land to a country estate, which was expected to land gentry at the time. Pellatt owned about 1,000 acres and he encouraged the Eatons to buy land in King because it was in good supply.

When Seneca took over the property, a promise was made to honour the Eaton legacy, and that continues to this day. Portraits still hang in the hall of Sir John Craig and Lady Eaton, ?the only mistress of that castle.?

Lady Eaton purchased St. Andrew's of Eversley Presbyterian Church in 1960, handing it over to the York and Pioneer Historical Society in 1967. It was designated a King Township Heritage Building in 1984.

Mathews also pointed out that Lady Eaton was responsible for planting or organizing the planting of more than 150,000 trees on the property.

?She had tree plantings over almost every single weekend over decades,? she observed.

Eaton Hall consists of six storeys. The servants' quarters were on the fifth floor (below the attic). Mathews explained that was because heat rises, it was thought that area wouldn't be as comfortable for family or guests, so that's where the help went.

She also said there were 248 ash trays in the hall. There was also a movie theatre, but contrary to rumour, there was not a bowling alley. There were originally 15 fireplaces, but now only 10 remain

As well, Mathews said it was the first residential house in King Township to have an elevator.

There are many who believe the hall is haunted. But Mathews said she has been there at all hours, and has never seen any indication of that.

?I'm ready, but not scared,? she said.