

The Worthing Society

Conserving, Preserving
and

Safeguarding our Heritage

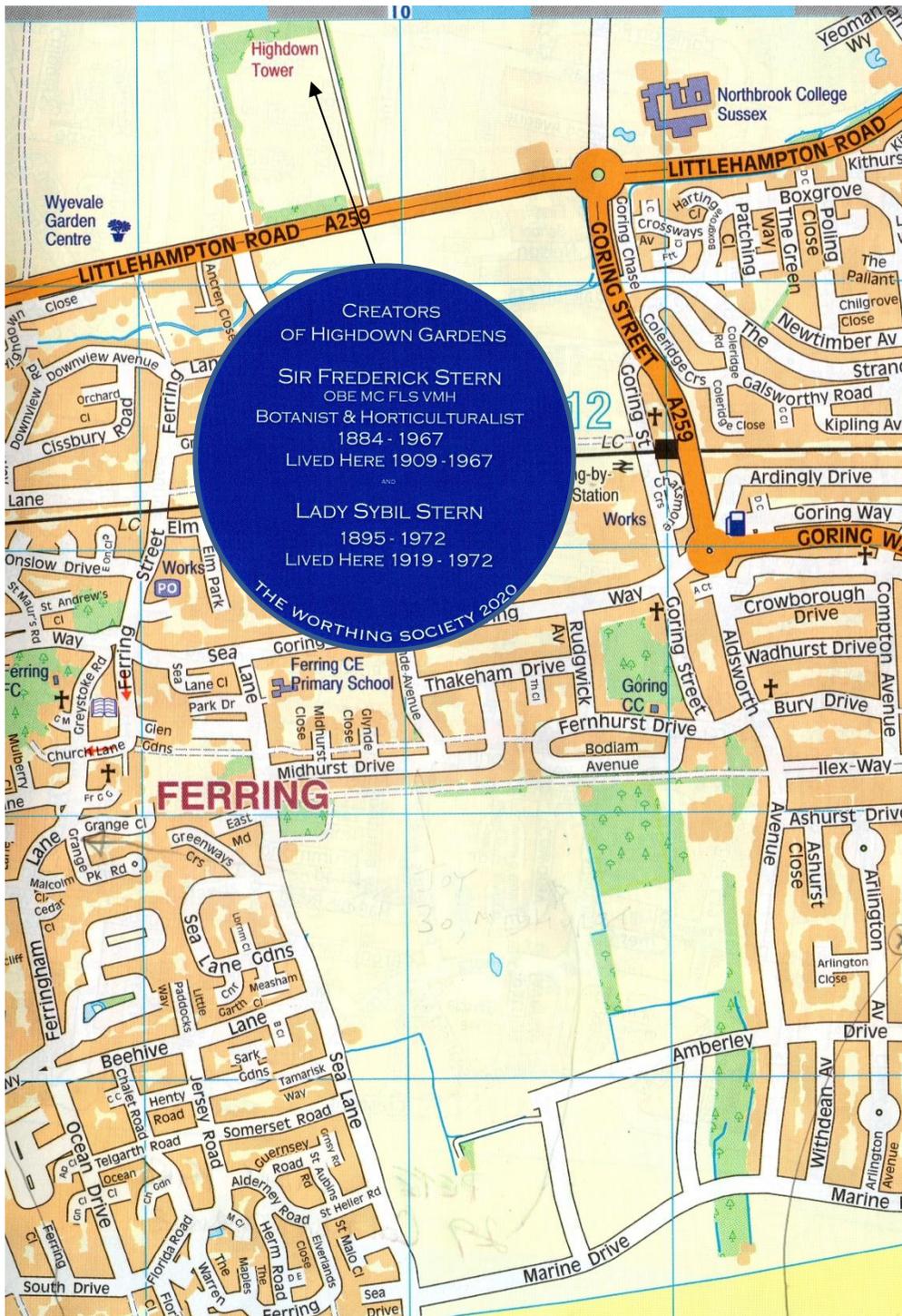
Heritage Leaflet No: 12

Sir Frederick and Lady Stern



This is one of a series of leaflets being produced by the Worthing Society to accompany the plaques erected throughout the Town to commemorate notable people, buildings, and events in the town's history. For more information about the Society and its activities go to our Web Site at:

www.worthingsociety.org.uk



SIR FREDERICK AND LADY STERN

Frederick Stern was born into a wealthy banking family, originating in Germany. He attended Eton and Christ Church, Oxford. In his youth he earned a reputation as a big game hunter and a successful amateur jockey. During the First World War he served with the London Yeomanry (Westminster Dragoons) and saw action in Gallipoli and Palestine. He was twice mentioned in despatches and received the Military Cross in 1917. He rose to the rank of colonel. In the Second World War he commanded the Worthing Home Guard and went on to be Group Commander of the West Sussex Home Guard. Stern was a lifelong Liberal and once harboured aspirations to stand as a parliamentary candidate.

In 1909 Frederick Stern bought Highdown Tower and the surrounding grounds and in 1919 he married Sybil Lucas who was the daughter of the portrait painter, Sir Arthur Lucas and together they shared a mutual passion to create the gardens at Highdown.

Initially Stern had planned to build a tennis court in the disused chalk quarry on his land and thought it would be a pleasant idea to surround the steep banks with flowering plants and it was not until he married that he settled down with his wife to create together one of the most famous gardens of its time out



of the uncompromising surrounds of a Sussex Chalk Pit. Leading horticulturalists of the day told him that he would never be able to grow anything of beauty on chalk. However, undaunted, Stern called in such specialist collectors as Reginald Farrer and Ernest Wilson, who sent him specimens from around the world, chiefly China and the Himalayas, many of which were able to thrive in the alkaline chalk soil at Highdown. Stern also benefitted from his dedicated team of gardeners, led from 1912–1948 by his head gardener, James Buckman. When Buckman was forced to retire after losing his leg in an accident, his role was taken over by John Bassindale, who remained head gardener for another thirty years.

Stern was awarded the Victoria Medal of Honour by the Royal Horticultural Society in 1941, was chairman of the John Innes Horticultural Institute from 1947 to 1961, vice-president of the Royal Horticultural Society in 1962 and vice-president and treasurer of the Linnean Society from 1941 to 1958. Unsurprisingly he was knighted in 1956 for his services to horticulture. In the 1930s he had entertained royalty at Highdown, including The Prince of Wales (later Edward VIII) and his mother, Queen Mary who, in 1937, planted a Chinese Hornbeam in the gardens.

After Sir Frederick's death in 1967, aged 83, Lady Sybil bequeathed the gardens to Worthing Council for the enjoyment of local people and visitors in perpetuity.

