

The Historic Buildings of Mere

Dean's Orchard

About 1280 Edmund, son of the Earl of Cornwall, granted to the Dean and Chapter of Sarum and to their successors "one garden and small croft with their belongings and also a mill for grinding corn in the ville of Mere Which said croft lie adjacent to the house of the Dean on the south side". This was known as Mere Garden until the 16th century.

In 1626 the Chapter of Salisbury took the Dean to Court to establish Title to Dean's Orchard and Depositions taken from local men - including Simon Crouch (72), John Cleaver (67) and Simon Stayner, at that time, declared that the land had only stumps of decayed apple trees upon it and that a brook or rill ran between the Orchard and the Chantry lands. One such Deposition made by Steven Barnes (88) is of interest:

Dean's Orchard - bounded on the south with the farm ground, on the north with the town and the Parsonage Barn, the which said Barn he conceiveth to have been heretofore a dwellinghouse as well by common report as also for that there remaineth in the inside a sign of a chimney in the east end thereof, and bound on the west with the Chantry House and on the east with a lane leading unto the same farmland - 26th October 1626

The present Dean's Orchard was built in 1708 when the window tax bore heavily upon its first incumbent. It is built of Doulting stone with an occasional Chilmark quoin - probably filched from the Castle. (The green stones seen along the wall between the Churchyard and the old playground are from the same source.)

In 1751 the house was enlarged to include a gracious withdrawing-room with a high ceiling and a wide fireplace. A corridor running the full length of the house was added at a later date and bones found when renewing floorboards in 1969 may indicate that the extension had encroached upon the Churchyard. The effect of these additions is of a house within a house - the original door with letterbox goes unnoticed by many visitors and the windows that once overlooked the Churchyard are now display cases. An addition this century of modern kitchens whilst a joy to the present owner, provide externally an architectural eyesore that should never have been permitted.

For over a century the house was leased to a family from Lincolnshire by the name of Still. Nathaniel Still the senior married Sarah, daughter of Dr. Tatum of Mere; Captain Robert Still of the 3rd Wiltshire Regiment represented Mere in the Local Militia Force established in 1808. Another local family link is with the Andrews of Woodlands Manor, two of their number are buried in the Still vault in the Church. The initials E.A. 1751 carved into the beam connecting the original Dean's Orchard with its addition of that date teases the imagination, particularly as Eleanor was a name several times favoured by the Still family.

It was during their tenure that the Sanctus Bell, now in position I the Church, had a curious adventure. In some manner not recorded it founds its way, at the beginning of the 19th Century, from Layfield House (the Old Rectory) to Dean's Orchard and there it was used for domestic purposes until discovered in 1895 in the corner of a dark coal cellar and re-hung in the bell-cot. In 1969 the Ecclesiastical Commissioners sold the property to John Robert Flanagan a retired surveyor from Lancashire. He was the first chairman of the Mere Historical Society and was Hon. Curator of its museum for three years until his death in 1973. He planted the twelve trees lining the outer driveway to replace the traditional "Twelve Apostles" shown in old photographs of the property. His family remains in residence.