

# The Historic Buildings of Mere

## *The Chantry*



**The Chantry, Mere**

*(Photo from British Listed Buildings – BobK 2013)*

In 1424, Henry VI licensed the Dean and Chapter of Salisbury to give the chaplains of the Chantry of The Blessed Virgin Mary about one acre of the Chantry gardens to build houses for occupation by the chaplains of the Chantry. The house was planned and designed for unusual comfort in such a mediaeval structure. The building would have been built in its entirety in one period.

The income of chantries were confiscated by Henry VII's Act of Parliament in 1545 and chantry endowments taken over by the Crown by Edward VI's Act of Parliament of 1546 to be used for the education and relief of the poor. This social welfare remained under the control of the priests however by 1548 the property was granted to Sir John Thynne who in turn sold it to Thomas Chafyn in 1563.

It was this last third of the 16th century that probably the first internal alterations to the property were made to turn it into a domestic property rather than an institutional one. The high ceilings of the original structure gave enough room to create extra floors within the building as seen in the solar and great hall. The chimney added to the great hall during this first refurbishment still remains but the dormer windows added to provide light to the upper floors have since been removed in further renovations. Also still visible from the late 16th century is the wainscoting in the upper storey used to retain hit within the stone structure. The undoubtedly stone spiral staircases of which

there would have been several would also have been removed during this first refurbishment since they would not be required for domestic use, their placement within the original building obvious from the tiny windows on the building facades. Timber staircases were installed to facilitate access to the upper storeys.

A description of the house in 1639 when the property was rented by Mrs. F. Martyn mentioned a great number of rooms including parlour chamber, little parlour, great parlour, cock loft, porches and little buttery. Particular mention is made of a stairway with rails and turned pillars. The middle of the 16th century probably saw the installation of the rectangular windows of the north façade and the large chimney in the kitchen which had probably once been a cellar which also has traces of an internal well. The installation of this chimney would have been a necessity since the small hearth in the pantry/buttery area would never have been large enough to cook on for a very large family.

Through the years the building was used as a house or as a school several times over. These changes back and forth resulted in the addition of partitions and passages being added, windows blocked up and new windows installed. The stone shell became hidden under layers of plaster, timber dados and cast iron fire grates. The timber roof was hidden by bedroom ceilings made of lath and plaster. Only the exterior remained true to the original building. Julia Barnes openly voiced her dislike of the internal layout and said that the house was 'damp and draughty and difficult to run'. William Barnes on the other hand described it as a house of 'basic serenity'.

The serenity of the house was due to its shape and symmetry. The ground floor is a rectangle divided by a midway passage linking front and rear doors to the great hall. The two chimneys with their fire places balance each other exactly as do the floor space of the parlour and kitchen and the great hall and pantry/buttery. Within the hard lines of the rectangular building are many visual surprises. The heights of rooms vary throughout the property and the pantry area is lower than the great hall causing a step. Ceiling heights vary from the low dark screens of the passage to the very high ceiling of the great hall 30 feet from floor to ceiling at its apex. With the opening up of nearly all of the original mediaeval window spaces most of the rooms on the ground floor now benefit from being lit from both north and south aspects, the great hall being the exception although there is evidence of a very large window on the north wall. It may be that this window was blocked up for structural reasons.

Materials used in various restorations included Old Chilmark stone from derelict cottages, ancient timbers some very large indeed, large stone slabs from Tisbury and elm planks from a Gillingham undertaker to name but a few. A local blacksmith was employed to renew all the window frames, forging each one to measure since no two window apertures were of the same size.

The house attracts many visitors:- former pupils, residents, researchers from foreign parts tracing their ancestry, scholars researching William Barnes background and others who appreciate his poetry.

The house has stood for more than 500 years and will for many more with love and conservation by future generations.