

The Historic Buildings of Mere

Woodlands Manor



Woodlands Manor is situated about a mile south of St. Michael's Church. It is a small, mediaeval manor house which has not been added to or altered structurally and so remains true to its original state. Elyard in 'Old Wiltshire Homes' of 1894 describes the building as 'one of the quaintest old world dwellings in Wiltshire and indeed one that can hardly be matched elsewhere'.

The Chapel built on an upper floor. Was consecrated over 600 years ago and was in use for private worship until the early 16th Century. At that time, in addition to entry from the interior of the building, a stone external staircase provided access for tenants of the estate without the necessity of entering the house. The doorway in the north wall of the chapel remains but the stairs were removed when they no longer served a purpose. At the same time windows and an outer door were inserted in the wall of the room below the chapel so that this could be used for household purposes. Previously this room had been an undercroft for the chapel and, as it was the only piece of consecrated ground, presumably was a burial place for the family.

The chapel and the room below were built before 1370 and it has been described as 'One of the most complete specimens of a domestic chapel of the Middle Ages that it is possible to find'. The large East window in the Perpendicular style, the Decorated and square-headed North windows, fine barrel roof, heavy oak door with elaborate metalwork and the piscine in the South wall all remain as evidence of the skill of their builders.

The Hall is 35 feet high and was with the gallery, screens passage, south porch and the room above were built about the same time as the chapel if not a few years later. The rooms of the East of the building were added circa 1440.

It is known that at least one and probably more houses occupied this site and the 3 sections of the present house could very well have been built as a result of the older buildings falling into disrepair and being demolished. Or it may be that lack of funds resulted in the building being contracted in parts as and when finances allowed.

The well is 65 feet deep in depth and is lined with stone which has been estimated as being of early Middle Ages and maybe even earlier. The well was drained in 1921 and all items found at the bottom other than a few Jacobean spoons have been lost or sold off to private collections.

The stone roof tiles were removed in 1888 due to the walls of the building bowing under the weight. Thanks to the Wiltshire Archaeological Society, Mr. C. E. Ponting (author and architect) and the Reverend E. G. Wyld the vicar at Mere the building at this time was saved from mass reconstruction with plans to remove much of the architectural features which would have destroyed the historic value of the property.

A modern restoration of the house was carried out after the First World War by the Reverend F. Meyrick -Jones. When the Great Hall was opened up as it had been divided in several smaller rooms on two floors during the 1700's it was possible to see the original design. There was evidence of the panelled doors used for centuries to connect the upper rooms slotted into niches on the great beam supporting the front of the gallery proving that it was for the purpose of a balustrade that they were originally carved.

With the removal of a small Victorian fireplace at the West end of the Hall, a mediaeval hearth measuring 9 feet wide, 5 feet high and 3 feet deep was found beneath the plaster. It was subsequently sold in 1929 to Leeds Castle in Kent for a large amount of money which was used to complete much of the remaining renovations. In the room below the Chapel a fine fireplace and ceiling which were built into the room about 1580 still remain. The plaster ceiling depicts the head of Queen Elizabeth I as a repetitive motif and above the fireplace are to be found the arms of the Dodington Family.

Thomas Dodington came from his home in the Quantock Hills to Marry Jane Guphey. Jane was the only child of John Guphey and the Woodland estate came as Jane's dowry in 1360. The Dodingtons, during their stay of 300 years, achieved little eminence and apart from one recorded fine were apparently law-abiding. Their sympathies were clearly Royalist in the Civil War. One of the family, Sir Francis Dodington, though not normally resident at Woodlands, campaigned actively with a squadron of cavalry in this part of the country and became notorious for his duplicity. After a brief siege of Woodhouse, a small fortified building close to Longleat, he offered the Parliamentarian garrison their lives if they put down their arms and marched out. The offer was accepted but the unarmed men were then seized and hanged from trees, beneath which the mound covering their bodies can still be seen today.

In 1655 Colonel Penruddock persuaded a number of gentlemen in this part of Wiltshire to rebel against Cromwell but the attempt was ill-planned and a complete failure. Penruddock and Hugh Grove of Zeals were executed and other conspirators imprisoned. The part played by Stephen Dodington of Woodlands is not recorded but his close friend Mr. Willoughby of Knoyle was charged and escaped conviction only 'on account of his advanced years'. It was not a period of history when either 'youth' or 'old age' was normally believed to excuse wrongful acts so other factors may have had an influence - perhaps a transfer of money to Parliamentary funds but this is only presumption. It may have been the cost of helping to finance the rising or trying to avoid prosecution thereafter

that affected the finances of the Dodingtons at this time. Certainly they started to mortgage their lands and disposed of the whole estate during the next fifty years.

During the 18th Century Woodlands became the property of the Meyricks and again by dowry. Pierce Meyrick married Lucy Pitt, a cousin of William Pitt, Earl of Chatham, to whom Woodlands and other property had been bequeathed by her brother Ridgeway. The story of their adolescent love and its consequence is well-known. At the age of just thirteen, Lucy and a young relative were staying at the house of their guardian, Lady Cholmondeley, 1 Park Lane. Late one afternoon they were hurrying back to the house after overstaying their allotted time for walking in Hyde Park and were both fearful of the anticipated punishment. Pierce Meyrick and a fellow scholar at Westminster School, who were friends of the girls and of similar age, chanced to walk beside them and hearing of their alarm, suggested that all four of them should run away and marry.

With a minimum of secret preparation the two couples took a coach for Dover the same evening and were married the following day. However the trail apparently was not difficult to follow, for Lady Cholmondeley and servants rapidly pursued them to Dover and dragged them off a ship which was about to sail for France. The children were forcibly parted and sent back to school but a few years later were allowed to marry again with due ceremony. Probably because all four children were connected with prominent families the matter was raised in Parliament and shortly afterwards an Act was passed making marriage of young people illegal without parental consent. Until as late as 1929 it was still legal for young people of 14 (male) and 12 (female) to be allowed to marry with parental consent. Current law is for both sexes to need parental consent if under 18 in England and Wales and both need to be aged 16.

The fact that the medieval structure of Woodlands still stands firmly and in perfect repair is a tribute to the tradesmen of the locality of Mere who built the property and to those inhabitants who have cared and nurtured it for centuries. At the time of the commencement of building Edward III was King of England, Geoffrey Chaucer had just started to write. England was still recovering from the Black Death so the house was built with no windows in the west end just in case the wind should blow the plague in that direction since men believed that is from where it came originally. As well as all this John Ball was teaching and warning that the class system of domineering inherited wealth and privilege was coming to an end and these murmurings were just heading into Wiltshire. The future of Woodlands is assured unless Government and man change their attitude to preserving ancient and unique parts of the English heritage.



Postcard of Woodlands Manor, Mere