

Survival and Conservation

The stories of two Medieval Gems, the Manors of Great Chalfield and Chavenage

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There are, today, many fine old manor houses in rural England, which somehow have survived the ravages of time and the infrastructure requirements related to an expanding population.

In recent years, BACAS has visited a number of building complexes in various states of dilapidation. Farleigh Hungerford Castle (visited in 2008) became a ruin, not as a result of the Civil War but because, after the demise of the Hungerford family in the early 18th Century, the fittings and building stone had been sold to build or embellish other properties in the neighbourhood. The town of Trelech (see Janet Enoch's article in this publication) was even lost to view below the ground! I have endeavoured, here, to tell the stories, as I understand them, of two beautiful manors, visited by the Society in the past two years, which not only survived but are thriving today. There are some striking similarities in their chequered histories.

Great Chalfield Manor, near Melksham

Visited by the Society in 2008; see *Figure 1*

The Domesday Book mentions a Saxon Mill and cottages. The leat from the brook to the mill was Saxon, straight and nine hundred metres long. It now feeds the partial moat of the manor. The grounds incorporated a strong spring, which later supplied water to several of the villages around, and which must have been essential for settlement from very early times. William I granted the land to the de Percy family who built the original house and lived there for over two hundred years until 1354, when Sir Harry de Percy died. Part of the present gatehouse and the nave of the tiny chapel, (now a parish church) date from this period. A hundred years of neglect followed, but in about 1467 Thomas Tropnell made good his claim to the estate, and started to build his manor there, quite possibly on the foundations of the dilapidated former building.

Tropnell's new manor was built in the perfect symmetry of a medieval manor, with two wings at either end of a large baronial hall. Originally there was also an inner courtyard with a South Wing. Beyond, can be seen the remains of a circular structure, usually considered to have been a dove cot. However, when visiting Trelech this year, members of BACAS were shown the newly excavated foundations of a manor of very similar design and age as Great Chalfield. The stone circle there, may have been the base of a fortified tower; to some of us it was similar to the Chalfield 'dove cot', now a flower bed.

The Roundheads occupied the house for a short time during the Civil War. It housed about two hundred men and a hundred horses. The surrounding area was entirely in Royalist hands, with five Royalist Garrisons within a radius of six miles. Inevitably the Manor was besieged for a few days, when the Royalists '*lay about Great Chalfield*'. Although the garrison certainly strengthened the building's defences, much damage was done. Of the original medieval glass, only two small panes survive. They depict two charming little birds holding a scroll on which is written '*Love God, drede shame, desire worship and kepe thy name*'.

The next important chapter of the manor began in the late 18th Century. Grace Neale had inherited the house and in 1795, she married Harry Burrard who added the name of Neale to his own. Later he became Sir Harry Burrard Neale, First Lord of the Admiralty, and MP for Lymington. The South Wing had disappeared by 1800 and although they never lived in the Manor, it would seem that Sir Harry intended to restore it. Firstly he commissioned John Buckler to do six water-colour paintings of the house, including the Great Hall. Secondly, Pugin's student, Thomas Walker was commissioned to draw and record many of the architectural details of the house. Soon after, in 1840, Sir Harry died leaving the house to be altered disastrously by the tenant. From this point on, the Manor might have slowly disappeared. The tenant farmers became the occupants and proceeded to convert the Manor into a farmhouse. The Great Hall was made into a two-storey house, with several rooms. The screen was removed, the marvellous bosses on the ceiling beams knocked off and much damage occurred.



Figure 1
Great Chalfield Manor
near Melksham the
Society visited
the manor in 2008.

Enter Robert Fuller. By the end of the 19th Century, much of the East Wing had disappeared. G.P. Fuller, Robert's father, had bought the house in 1878 and had rented it out. Robert loved the place and bought it from his father. Between 1905 and 1911, he undertook the restoration of the Manor, with the help of the architect, Harold Brakspear. For this exacting task, he had the records of Thomas Walker and John Buckler – a mass of information to reference. Restoration was based on the evidence of the drawings. Everything that needed replacing was copied faithfully from the original. The South Wing, however, could not be replaced as it had disappeared by the beginning of the 18th Century, and there was no pictorial evidence of it.

Robert Fuller and his wife Mabel filled the house with wonderful antiques which they had bought over the years. The National Trust acquired the house, with its contents, in 1943 and it is understood that they were particularly interested in it for several reasons. Firstly, there are three unique original stone masks in the hall. Secondly, the fireplace at the side of the hall provides a very early example of a chimney extending the full height of the house, externally. At that time, most halls had a centrally placed fire, whose smoke ascended through the rafters. Thirdly it was unusual in the 15th Century for a manor to have a private parlour. Normally the area to the west of the hall would have been assigned to the kitchens. In this family room, hidden behind panelling for over three hundred years, there is a wall painting, a portrait thought to be of Thomas Tropnell. If that is so, it is the first portrait of a commoner MP in the country. Finally, on display and of great historical importance, is Tropnell's 'cartulary', a book detailing the many properties that Tropnell owned in Wiltshire.

Great Chalfield is a much loved home, still lived in and cherished by the family who, with great sensitivity and considerable personal expense, restored it to its former appearance.

Chavenage Manor, near Tetbury.

Visited by the Society in 2009; see Figure 2

The origins of Chavenage Manor also lie in the distant Saxon past. Princess Goda, the sister of Edward the Confessor, is the earliest recorded owner of the estate, and in the early ninth Century Chavenage Green was the meeting place of the Hundred Court. After the Norman Conquest, the estate was administered by Augustinian monks. By the late 14th Century, some buildings had been erected at Chavenage, and parts of the present house are thought to date from this period.

After the Dissolution of the Monasteries, the Manor and its estate became Crown Property, and was granted first to Thomas Seymour, and later to Sir Walter Denys of Dyrham. However, in 1564 it was sold to Edward Stephens of Eastington, the first of a long line of the Stephens family to live in the house. One hundred years after Thomas Tropnell had rebuilt Great Chalfield, Edward Stephens gutted much of his medieval building, and by 1576 had added two wings and a porch to create a manor in



Figure 2
Chavenage Manor,
near Tetbury. The Society
visited here in 2009.

the classic Elizabethan style. In the Hall there are two very large medieval windows. Much of the glass had been procured from the redundant religious buildings in the area.

During the Civil War, Nathaniel Stephens '*raised a regiment of horse*', and supported the Parliamentarians. Both Cromwell and his son-in-law, General Ireton, (a relation of the Stephens family) were frequent guests. Two of the bedrooms are named as 'Cromwell's Room', and 'Ireton's Room'. The walls of these rooms are entirely lined with a patchwork of period tapestries, which blend together and must have provided good insulation. There are also some interesting artefacts from the Civil War. Nathaniel was reluctantly persuaded to sign the Death Warrant for King Charles' execution. This led to the story that his body appeared to be carried away by a ghostly headless coachman, who was in the guise of the executed King.

The Stephens family continued to live at Chavenage until the middle of the 19th Century, and thus were the owners for 350 years. The house was then rented out from 1868-1890. At this point the Lowsley-Williams family appeared in the story of the Manor. George, whose full name was George Williams Lowsley Hoole-Lowsley-Williams, bought the Manor in 1891, preferring it to a nearby estate that he had inherited. By 1903, George had made part of the manor into a ballroom with a sprung floor and service rooms, later converted into the family's apartments. He died in 1937 and the property passed to his eldest son Colonel John Savile Lowsley-Williams, who never married, but lived there with his mother and two sisters. During World War I, Chavenage became a centre for the ANZACS and in 1917 two aerodromes were constructed on Lowsley-Williams land, the location being an 'open house' for the airmen. In 1940 General Brian Horrocks had his H.Q. at Chavenage after the evacuation from Dunkirk. The Manor played its part in World War II, providing an Officer's Mess and a NAFFI plus Barber's Shop. Part of a Battalion was housed (in tents) in its grounds.

Colonel John became extremely ill and gave the estate to his nephew David. At the time, it was the requirement that any heir must be of married status in order to avoid death duties. David was expected shortly to become engaged to Rona, but as the Colonel was believed to be dying, arrangements had to be accelerated. In a whirlwind affair of less than two weeks, they got engaged and married. Three days later Sir John died, and the future of the house was secured. Today, the organisation of the guided tours and catering for visiting parties remains very much a family affair.

In the 20th Century many manors have been converted into complexes such as schools, care homes, business premises etc. However, it would seem that over the past one hundred years, the families entrusted with the survival of these two manorial gems have immersed themselves in the conservation of their homes, so that now, in the 21st Century, countless visitors are able to enjoy both their beauty and the stories that they tell.