

Saltford
Manor House



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Saltford Manor House.
The Norman Window.

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(1148)

FOREWORD



"BE PREPARED" of the house, also for his generous help.

To Mr. W. J. Robinson, author of "West Country Manors," we tender our thanks for permission to reprint portions of his articles, and to Miss Margaret Wood, B.A., our gratefulness is due not only for detailed information, but for allowing her photographs to be reproduced.

C. G. EWINS,
HON. SECRETARY,
SALTFORD BOY SCOUTS
GROUP COMMITTEE.

January, 1939.

SALTFORD MANOR HOUSE, or as it has been latterly known, Saltford Manor Farm, is one of those ancient and interesting residences which has fallen from its high estate as an ecclesiastical establishment, and later as the seat of the lords of the Manor. Notwithstanding that only a remnant of its past glory remains, it is still a fine old place, somewhat plain and unattractive in outward appearance, but containing much that is of more than ordinary interest, both in its architecture and interior arrangements.

After the lapse of many centuries its peacefulness has not been materially disturbed, and its ecclesiastical relics and rural simplicity so plainly visible on the north side of the house harmonise in a pleasant manner with the peaceful repose which enwraps the little village church, almost adjoining it.

The village of Saltford, seven miles from Bristol, and five miles from Bath, and in the centre of which the Manor House conspicuously stands, has a reputation for its picturesque and romantic surroundings. Pleasantly placed upon the sunny slope of a hill, the greater portion of the village overlooks the beautiful valley of the Avon. Away to the north the uplands rise in fertile meadows and shadowy woods, and in the distance forming a background, the famous Kelston Tump stands boldly on the horizon. The aspect of the whole landscape, comprising valley, river, meadows and hills, whether it is seen in Spring in all its fresh green foliage, or when clothed in its many tinted Autumn garb, presents a most charming and delightful view.

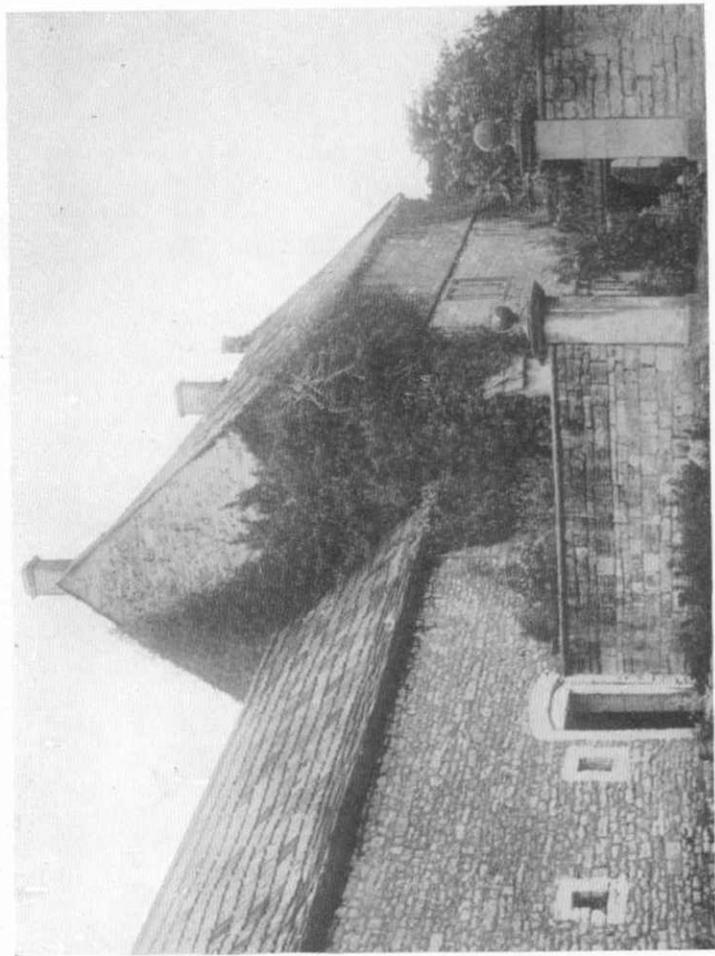
Saltford is supposed by some to have derived its name from the ford which at one time existed in the parish, when the tide which in former days is said to have reached nearly to Bath, was low, whereby persons were enabled to cross the river.

The Manor of Saltford was originally included in the Honour of Gloucester. Robert FitzHamon, who had been granted the Honour of Gloucester by Rufus, had no son to inherit his property, but he left four daughters, two of whom were abbesses. A third was married to the Earl of Bretagne, and the fourth, named Mabel, was wedded to Robert, the natural son of Henry I. Robert was made the first Earl of Gloucester, and held the Honour of Gloucester, which was quite distinct from the Earldom. The Honour of Gloucester brought Robert immense power, and gave him the lordship over a large number of Manors, many of which he granted to inferior lords, to be held of him by service as he, in like manner, held his of his Sovereign.

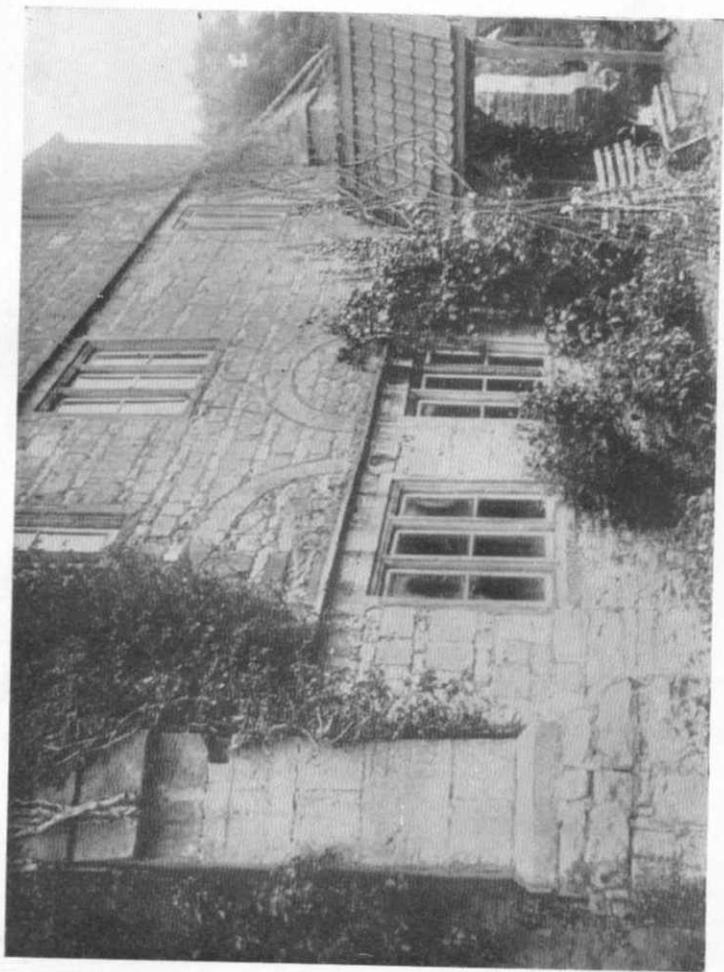
In the reign of Henry III. the Manor was held by a family named Bargouse. They appear to have been in possession during the reign of Edward I., but the Manor subsequently passed into the hands of the Bassits, and from them to the Rodneys.

An old record shows that in the reign of Henry III. Thomas de Baiocis, and Mary, his mother, were certified to hold eight knights' fees in the several parishes of Backwell, Twerton, Saltford, Winford and Stoke, all of which were held in the reign of Edward I. by Jocus de Baiosse, of the Honour of Gloucester. The Rodneys held possession of the manor of Saltford up to the time of Queen Elizabeth, after which it passed to various owners. At the end of the sixteenth century it was the property of the Duke of Chandos. The Manorial rights are now held by Earl Temple and Noel Flower, Esq.

The old Manor House, the most ancient building in the parish, and in the opinion of one of the best authorities, the oldest domestic building in Somerset, displays to the casual observer little of exceptional merit,



Front of Manor House showing on the left the buildings that contained the Leet Court.
Note the Tiles at Lower part of Roof.



South side showing rebuilt face of wall. Note Buttress of 14th or 15th century date.

either in architecture or method of design, when seen from the south side. It must be viewed from other directions for its most beautiful relics of ecclesiastical architecture to be revealed. The probable date of the original building, whatever it may have been, whether monastery or grange, is the 12th century. Miss Margaret Wood, B.A., in her book "Norman Domestic Architecture," says: "it was built c. 1150, and was apparently a first floor hall with a later solar to the East, and a later chapel projecting to the North. The walls are of random rubble in white lias, but the South wall is refaced (or rebuilt) and all the buttresses to the North and South are later, also the roof and buildings projecting to the West." It is supposed to have been associated with the famous Abbey of Keynsham, and it was most likely built about the same time after that Abbey was founded in 1166 by William, Earl of Gloucester, at the dying request of his son. The decoration at Saltford, however, implies an earlier date.

Keynsham Abbey flourished for centuries, and was considerably enriched from time to time until it became a large and important establishment. It surrendered to the King in 1539, and was then classed among the greater monasteries for its annual revenue was over £400. With the overthrow of the Abbey of Keynsham several other religious houses were abolished. Hanham Abbots, where the Abbots of Keynsham spent much of their time during the summer months, and upon which John, the last of the Keynsham Abbots, when he was acquainted with the terms of surrender, pronounced a solemn curse, probably shared its misfortunes with Saltford Monastery. Whatever may have been its position in rank or the number of monks it accommodated, as far as can be ascertained there is no evidence to show.

That those who inhabited Saltford Monastery belonged to the Black Canons as at Keynsham, there is little doubt. Their occupation of the place is indicated by the massive walls, the buttresses, the doorways and the exceptionally fine Norman window, all of which make the old weathered stones not only lasting records of their builders, but also in several instances a tribute to their skill and artistic taste in architecture.

The feature of the building is the elegant Norman window, inserted between two strong buttresses of much later date. The latter were evidently placed in their present and somewhat unsightly position as support for the side of the house. The Norman window, an excellent photograph of which appears on page 1, was discovered in the wall by the father of the present owner some 50 years ago when he removed another large buttress similar to those now existing. The window is a two light of three-shaft type; the hood is carved with double groove and nail-head, and the covering arch with inturned double chevron; the round heads of the lights are bordered with a simple groove, and supported by half shafts, also with incised scallop capitals. Under this window, another, which has long since been walled up, once gave light to a room below.

There are also the remains of a window in the old kitchen under the Court Room, and within the past few weeks one or two other windows have been discovered which have for long been covered up. An illustration of a leaded light found behind a lath and plaster partition appears on page 9. The glass in this window is said to be Elizabethan, and is in a fair state of repair. In a bedroom on the first floor what is thought to be the end wall or gable window was found hidden behind a cupboard. This window has splayed jambs, but contains no glass.



A recent discovery mentioned on page 8. Portions of the plaster which covered this window can be seen. The wall shown is part of the original wall of the Monastery.

At the north eastern side of the house, two buttresses, rising in gradations, add to the ecclesiastical air of the building, and under the eaves of the roof, further to the east, is a ram's head, a symbol of sacrifice, carved in stone. A crouching lion is also visible upon the east gable of the house, but why it should have been placed in so prominent a position does not appear to be known.

On the north-east side of the main building stands the little chapel. Although built probably at the time the house was erected and attached to it, it forms quite a separate little structure. Upon the apex of its gable it carries a cross, and the ancient doorway leading into it can still be seen.

The south-west diagonal buttress may be of the fourteenth or fifteenth century, certainly earlier than the refacing of the south wall. This refacing was probably

part of the work done c. 1637-1645, when the dated fire-places were inserted, but it might be a little earlier, c. 1600.

The interior of the Manor House is quaint and old fashioned. Like most of the old ecclesiastical houses, it was probably granted by Henry VIII. when he abolished the religious establishments throughout the land, to one of his favourites, and it possibly became a private residence somewhere about 1540. Who the first occupiers of the house were is not known, but it is an established fact that a century later the ancient family of Flower were in possession. This family, to whom memorial tablets are set in the nave of the walls of the Parish Church, are connected with the Flowers of Nunney, near Frome, and by marriage with the ancient family of Samborne of Timsbury. A plate of the tablet in the Church is to be found on page 12, and from this it will be seen that the sculptor had some difficulty in carving the details. All went well with the carving until the bottom edge was reached, when complications arose, and to overcome the difficulty the sculptor, realising that the wording must read from right to left instead of the usual way, spelt his words backwards, probably congratulating himself upon his clever contrivance. The Flowers made Saltford their home for many centuries, and from the middle of the seventeenth century until about 60 years ago they occupied the Manor House.

The old Dining Hall, the principal apartment in the house, is a spacious room. Its chief interest lies in its remarkable chimney piece, upon which is the date 1645. Two three-light windows, with filleted-roll-moulded mullions and relieving arches above them, are placed on the south side, and in their deep recesses are wide and comfortable seats. Between the two windows a curious corbel projects under the ceiling.

The Porch is a curious combination of windows, quaint doorways and queer corners. Immediately opposite the main entrance, at the far end of the porch or hall, is a round-headed archway, which is supposed to have formed the original entrance to the kitchen. This is a fine old room, with massive beams stretching across its ceiling. In former times it was the granary.

The staircase, rising at right angles, leads to the bedrooms of antique appearance. Several have large beams carried across their ceilings, and in the beams are a number of hooks made of iron, but whether these hooks appertain to ancient ecclesiastical use or to the more prosaic utility of holding fitches of bacon it is impossible to say. In one of the bedrooms the mantelpiece bears the date 1637 and the initials "L.F." and "A.F."—those of early members of the Flower family. From the passage, or corridor, which is lighted by the old Norman window, there seems to have been some other means of descending to the lower rooms or to some other apartment, judging from a recess in the wall, which appears to have at one time contained an outlet.

In the west bedroom is a doorway, which has long since been blocked, but formerly it led into the Court Room. In this Court Room was held the manorial court or court-leet, as the case might be. At all events the lord of the manor sat in state there, not only to receive his dues, but also in the capacity of a magistrate. In feudal times, when a baron or great lord came into possession of an estate, either by inheritance or grant, he allowed a part to be granted to freemen on certain conditions. The part he reserved for himself formed the demesnes of the Manor, the remainder he granted to his villeins or bondsmen, which they, as a favour, retained at his pleasure. The land that remained after these divisions was usually the very

poorest on the Estate, and over it all the tenants had the right of grazing their cattle, known as "common rights."

Thus arose the Manor, on which two classes of tenants were, viz., freeholders and villeins. For the freeholders one Court was held, called the Court Baron, while that for the villeins was the Customary Court. The service by which the freeholder held his land differed from that by which the villein held his. "Villeinage," according to a writer in the time of Edward I., "is to hold part of the demesne of any lord entrusted to hold at his will by



Memorial Tablet in Saltford Church.

villein services to improve for the advantage of the lord." When the lord held the ancient judicial right of "sack and sock" there was also a Court-leet. Another ancient tenure was that of frankalmoign or free alms. Most of the lands of the Church were held by this tenure. The tenants were not even obliged to do fealty to their lords, because it was considered their prayers more than compensated for their services. Nearly all the monasteries held their lands by this tenure.

Whether it was the Court Baron or Court Leet formerly held at Saltford Manor House it avails but little now. The doors of its Court have long been closed and the voices of its ancient lords have long since been hushed.

The first-floor hall was originally open to the roof, but in the seventeenth century a floor was inserted, making the house a three-storeyed building. The top of a Norman window may be seen in the north wall of the attic, but the opposite wall may be a seventeenth century rebuild at this level.

According to an article published in 1913 in a newspaper, two interesting relics of the past were discovered in the cellar. One was a curiously shaped brass ladle, and the other a rapier, apparently of sixteenth century date. This reference to a cellar raises a problem as to the entrance thereto. Many surmises have been made, also mention of underground passages connecting with certain parts of the parish or adjoining parishes, but there is no evidence at the moment to show whether any or either existed or still exist.

The old house throughout breathes of reminiscences of the past, and if outwardly plain it is nevertheless rich in interest, which would have been immensely added to had records been preserved relating to its foundation and early history.

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