

Cheyney Court - the Hall and Warden's House

The Hundred Courts of Hampshire

by DENIS HAGGARD

WHEN the English (The "Anglo-Saxons") first came into Britain, in A.D. 477, they brought with them their system of the Hundred and the Hide, and we have kept them ever since, through close on fifteen hundred years.

The Manor (which came with the Normans who frequented the Confessor's court) was supposed to represent so many hides, or holdings of land, and these manors were grouped in the hundreds. Every hundred had its Hundred Court or Court Leet; some of these meeting places were in the old "rings" or "camps," some on bridges; and some were in court houses specially built for the purpose.

Of these old court houses Hampshire possesses two notable examples; one the Court House at East Meon, which was the Court Leet for the Hundred of East Meon; the other was Cheyney Court in the Close at Winchester Cathedral. This has been the Court Leet for Fawley Hundred, and included what was called The Soke; the Bishop's own separate manor.

Both these court houses, therefore, were episcopal creations, and that at East Meon stands on the site of an earlier court, perhaps the Bishop's Palace, which had been occupied by Stigand at the time of the Conquest. The Hundreds of East Meon was an immensely important one, being reckoned in Domesday

at sixty-four ploughs (that represents five hundred plough-oxen) and six mills. Stigand had been active—perhaps had actually been present—at the time of the Battle of Hastings, in Harold's interest which made a good excuse for William of Normandy to seize one of the richest farming districts in Hampshire, and this he proceeded to do.

Luckily, seventy years after, King Stephen possessed a powerful brother, Henry de Blois, who was also bishop of Winchester; and although he had some trouble in asserting his right to rule England, he had power enough to hand back East Meon to the bishopric of Winchester in 1137; thereby pleasing his brother. From then till the Commonwealth it remained part of the bishop's land; and the present court house was erected by William of Wykeham, some time after 1366.

It was Henry de Blois who presented the wonderful black marble font which is East Meon's great treasure. Wykeham also left valuables to the parish church and, as he took specially stringent measures against poachers here, must have been interested in the deer park which existed at Meon right through the Middle Ages.

In 1461 Edward IV was on a progress through Hampshire and was in the neighbourhood of East Meon, whereupon the

natives "in grete multitude and nombre" petitioned him for a redress of their grievances in connection with the customary services of the manor. Moreover they seized the sacred person of the bishop, William of Wayneflete, and held him hostage in his own court house. As the bishop had been a close friend of Henry VI, and was therefore a Lancastrian, the peasants probably thought the Yorkist King would take their side. In this, however, they were mistaken as Edward made them release Wayneflete at once. The petition was, by his orders, tried in the House of Lords, the ringleaders meanwhile being held in prison. As a result the petition was dismissed and the grievances therefore remained to smoulder in the peasants' hearts.

The court house came into the ownership of Queen Elizabeth I who leased it for eighty-one years from the bishop, presumably for the sake of the hunting. It was later sold by the Commonwealth under the terms of The Root & Branch Act, but returned to the bishop at the Restoration; and it remained part of the Bishop of Winchester's appanage until 1852.

It is a wonderful example of the richest period of mediaeval architecture, and the hall has a sweep of line and beauty of composition that suggest Yvelde and West-

minster Hall; while the chamber above it is an exceptional feature of any fourteenth century house. I am indebted to Mr. Arthur D. Gill for permission to see his fine old house.

There was also a wing running down to the road; this is now the front passage and hall of the present house; while, fronting the road, stood a gatehouse with three living-rooms overhead. At the other side there was a wing running out into the present sunk garden. When Mr. Moreley Horder was repairing the house in 1927 he found a beautiful heraldic frieze among the foundations, and this he placed in the hall to make a mantelpiece.

He considered the hall had been much larger, but this must be conjectural. Eight corbel-heads remain, but in a very battered condition, owing to the hall having been used as a dwelling-house and byre combined since 1648. Seven of these heads are those of bishops, but one represents a king. As now restored the hall is a magnificent sight; the noble timber roof being the original, with stains of soot still clinging to the beams, where the old open fire stood in the centre of the hall beneath them.

The "King John Room," to which one ascends by an ancient oak staircase, is very fine and has a large stone fireplace. It is hard to guess to what purpose it, and the little room which opens off it, were put, as it is not a solar, as is usually the case in the later mediaeval houses. Perhaps the bishop's steward used it when the manorial courts were in session, so as to leave the great hall

to tenants and clerks. It is rare to find such a splendid room anywhere, but in the great seignorial mansions, like Knole and Penshurst.

Cheyney Court, which stands in the south-west corner of The Close, at Winchester, of which the great gate adjoins, represents an even more interesting survival than East Meon Court House. While it was the Hundred Court for Fawley Hundred it was also the manorial court for The Soke. This Soc, or Soke, which was the special appanage of the bishops of Winchester, included the purlieu of the City on the south and east sides: and the inhabitants were ruled with different, and more lenient laws, than those of the City.

They had their own bailiff and law officers; they had criminal jurisdiction over malefactors, and their own stocks. The prison was at one time in Wolvesey Castle, the bishop's fortress for many years, and now the episcopal palace. Queen Elizabeth I confirmed the bishop in these rights, and these continued to be strictly separate until 1835.

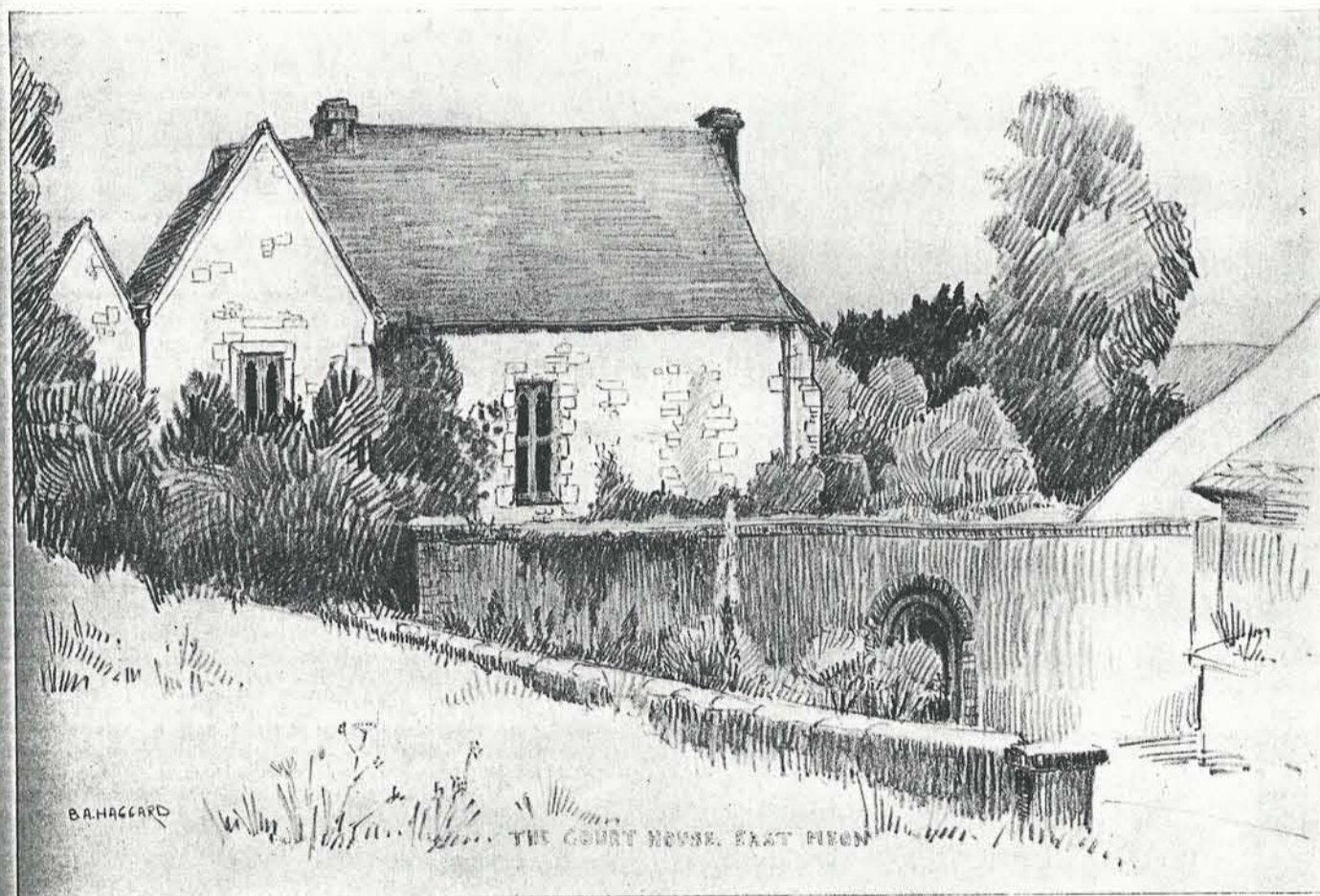
When St. Giles fair-time drew near, that is towards the 12th September, the bailiff attended by his officers repaired to the boundary between The Soke and The City; and there, to the sound of trumpets; he proclaimed the right of his master the bishop to take over the control of the whole City of Winchester for the sixteen days during which the fair lasted. Not only did these rights apply to the City of Winchester, but to the

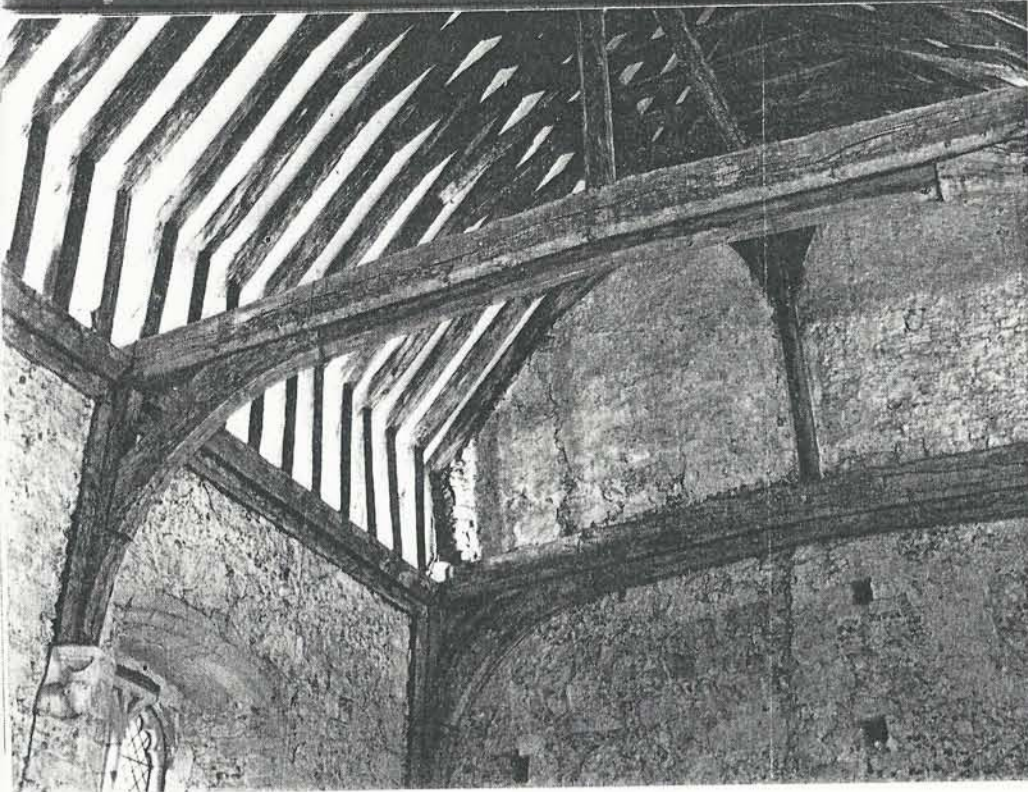
countryside round also, to the extent of seven leagues (twenty-one miles). The law officers of the city then yielded up the keys, and walked away gloomily to their homes, reduced to the status of private citizens.

Meanwhile the bailiff of The Soke opened his court, not in Cheyney Court, which was used in normal times, but in the "Court of Pavilion" on St. Giles' Hill itself. Here for sixteen days the safety of the city, Soke and fairground were all alike upheld. Fires were controlled, guards patrolled the roads and the honesty of the Stall-holders ensured by the constable.

Cheyney Court itself; the name is said to be derived from *chene*, the French word for an oak; is a lovely old timbered house, beloved of artists, which stands against the city wall. It is the happy possessor of one of the most magnificent wisterias I have ever seen and, together with the old stone archway of the Close, gives one a wonderful feeling of artistic perfection. It is now the residence of the Vice-Dean of Winchester (Canon R. B. Lloyd) who kindly permitted me to inspect it. Its size is explained by the fact that Fawley Hundred was always a very large one. At one time it extended from Alresford right down to the coast, and at the time of Domesday Book it consisted of the parishes of Alresford, Kilmeston, Twyford, Owslebury, Easton, Bishopstoke, Chilcombe and Avington.

It has been used as a dwelling-house since 1639; and this has involved such radical and destructive modifications to the original





Roof of the hall in the Court House at East Meon

structure that it is virtually impossible to determine in which part of the building the hall itself was situated. It seems likely, however, that the present dining-room takes up part of the space in which the hall stood;

the oldest and most interesting of the upstairs rooms is directly above it. Incidentally people who have occupied this room have complained of a mysterious and disquieting presence, of which they were

conscious at times.

In recent alterations an interesting expanse of old ashlar has been exposed in a small chamber which stands in the thickness of the wall (which was, it will be recalled, the city wall). This appears to have been one of those narrow recesses which, together with an arrow-slit, afforded shelter for an archer, or arbalestier, in old fortifications. On the upper floor is a small room which, local tradition maintains, was "the whipping room", but there is no foundation for this fable!

Next the canon's residence is a narrow, high building, situated between the city wall and the gate of the Close. This is occupied by the Warden. It is much less spoilt than the Court and thus affords a most interesting example of how the cathedral officers originally adapted the old buildings for domestic purposes. There are one or two very small rooms upstairs in each of these houses which would appear to have been the cells in which the malefactors awaiting trial would have been accommodated. There is a parallel case in the West Gate of Winchester (also once a prison) and, of course, one instantly recalls the dreaded "leads" in which Casanova was incarcerated by The Inquisition in Venice. In all respects Hampshire, which is singularly fortunate in its old buildings, is nowhere better served than by its two ancient Hundred Courts.



A row of lovely old-world cottages, sufficiently picturesque to stop the visitor in his tracks: but it all stops at the roof ridge. Thatch gives way to slate, and we descend by way of evidence of modern plumbing to small, paved, 1965 utility-style yards. The houses with the split personalities are at Freefolk.



Faces for the world