

It may be key to mystery of Abbotswood

Echo staff reporter

C.T. 1959

IT is a small bedroom, no larger than a box-room. But there is nothing small about the fireplace. It is enormous and magnificent, the sort that would not be out of place in a baronial hall.

Mr. and Mrs. Arnold Croot, who have found the fireplace hidden behind a far less imposing early-Victorian specimen, believe it holds the key to the origin of their mysterious and intriguing ancient 12-roomed house, Abbotswood, at Stour-way, Christchurch.

Almost certainly Abbotswood dates back to the early part of the 15th Century, making it the oldest inhabited house in Christchurch — older, it may seem surprising, than the many historical buildings in the immediate vicinity of the Priory Church. The only earlier house in the area is the famous ruined Constable's House by Convent Walk, which is of Norman origin.

But some distance as it is from the Priory. Mr. Croot, a quantity surveyor whose professional knowledge and interest in building's has found plenty of outlet in his own home, feels sure the fireplace links Abbotswood with the church.

THE CLUE

The clue is its stone pillars whose fluted shape is similar in style to that of pillars in the Priory. And the stone itself, too warm a colour to resemble the grey of Purbeck, is from Caen in France, whence he thinks, stone used in parts of the Priory came. These particular pieces probably had a defect and were rejects from the Priory.

The story Mr. Croot has built up about his unusual home where he has lived at Abbotswood for 25 years, is that it started life as a farmhouse on the estates of the monastery that existed at Christchurch prior to the Dissolution.

Indeed it was used as a farmhouse under the ownership of the Earl of Malmesbury and known as Grove Farm until the 1920's, and at one time possessed 400 acres extending almost to Bargates. To this day that part of Christchurch is known as Grove Farm Estate.

The fireplace which also features a beamed arch of fluted shape like the pillars is in the original Tudor part of the house and bears little trace of ever being used, which points to the likelihood of it being erected shortly before the Dissolution in 1539 and afterwards being bricked in.

But there seems no answer to how such a fireplace came to be in such a small upstairs room.

PRIEST'S HOLE?

Behind the fireplace, and in the space beneath the arched ceiling over what is now a staircase, Mr. Croot thinks there might have been a priest's hole. This part of the country is known to have been a haven for Roman Catholic priests during the religious persecutions of the 16th Century, and the house would have made a good hiding place.

Like the Priory itself, the house possesses a remarkable mixture of architectural styles. Added to the original Tudor is an impressive Elizabethan portion containing Mr. and Mrs. Croot's handsome dining room in which a larger recessed fireplace than the one upstairs has been uncovered—after removing two other fireplaces.

This fireplace is undoubtedly Elizabethan because of a herring-bone pattern peculiar to that period to be found in the brick-work at the back. To one side is a niche presumably used for storing salt and tinder in the dry.

Yet another fireplace of great age and equally massive proportions, with an ancient bread oven let into its side, has been uncovered in what is now the hall.

Then the house boasts a charming Georgian wing, its two rooms, one up and one down, with their panelled walls, shuttered windows and period fireplaces, in a perfect state of preservation.

In the two acres of wooded garden that surround the house stands a mud wall that has survived as long as the house. It formed part of a barn—until the barn suddenly collapsed much to the amazement but

fortunately not to the injury of the cows and chickens inside it, during a heavy air-raid over the district in the last war.

The collapse revealed a date inscribed by the builder's finger in an old construction joint—1531.

Excavations in the garden during construction of a swimming pool a year or so ago revealed a quantity of oyster shells which Mr. Croot thinks are Roman, pieces of pottery from a burial urn he believes to be Bronze age, and slate shingles which he knows are of a type found only in Normandy and are bound to date from the 12th Century.

Skirting the garden in a stately row are a number of lofty elm trees, each 250-300 years old. Other elms were once to be seen near the River Stour and Mr. Croot's belief is that they formed an avenue marking a road down to the river where an old ford existed.

If only the bricks and timbers of Abbotswood could talk what tales they would have to tell.



Mr. And Mrs. Croot



Abbotswood House

