

BISTERNE 1958

Journeying through Bisterne, the traveller would find it very difficult to believe that between the boundary signposts there is a community life as active as any in the neighbourhood.

The houses are scattered and the village hall—centre of several thriving organisations—would be passed unnoticed for it is half hidden by a picturesque cottage, once the home of the village schoolmistress when the hall was a school. The small church, too, is almost hidden by tall trees. But one sight which the observant traveller could not fail to see is Bisterne House, standing in a framework of trees a little distance from the road.

Built about 1515, this is one of the oldest manor houses in the district and was the mediaeval home of the Bettishornes and Berkeleys.



The west front of Bisterne House. On the parapet above the doors are plaster effigies of the two mastiffs which helped Sir Maurice Berkeley to defeat the Burley dragon. C.T. Photos

Now the home of Col. J. D. Mills and his son, Major J. M. Mills, it was bought in 1792 by Col. Mills's great-grandfather. The house was rebuilt in Tudor times, probably by Sir John and Lady Brereton. It was considerably altered by Richard Compton between 1648 and 1652, and again after it had been bought from John Compton by William Mills in 1792.

When the last purchase was made it was apparently the first time that the property had changed hands by purchase and, by coincidence, Mr. Mills was himself descended in the female line from the same branch of the Berkeley family through whom Bisterne had passed by inheritance to the

Comptons in 1522.

The Berkeleys had acquired Bisterne through the marriage of Sir John Berkeley to Elizabeth, daughter and heiress of Sir John de Bettishorne, who died in 1399 and whose forebears seem to have held the manor of Bisterne since at least the 12th century.

Son of Sir John Berkeley was Maurice Berkeley about whom a legend is recorded in the margin of a pedigree of the Berkeley family that is known to have been drawn up before 1618.

LEGEND.

The legend is that a "devouring dragon" lived near Burley Beacon in the New Forest and did "much mischief upon man and cattell and could not be destroyed".

Sir Maurice armed himself and encountered the dragon and at length overcame and killed it but died himself soon after.

The identity of the "devouring dragon" is not known, but the scene of the fight is commemorated by two pastures named Dragon Fields and is recorded in stained glass in a window at Sopley Parish Church.

A dragon standing before a burning beacon became the family crest and this appears above one of the two doorways on the west front of Bisterne House. On the parapet above the doors are plaster effigies of the

two mastiffs which helped Sir Maurice defeat his adversary. These were afterwards destroyed in case they should become dangerous through having been bitten by a dragon.

Sir Maurice, who died in 1459, was succeeded by his son, also Sir Maurice on whose death in 1474 Bisterne came to his son, Sir William who had his estates sequestrated by Richard III. He regained them after the battle of Bosworth in 1485, but he died in the same year.

Bisterne then devolved upon his sister, Katherine, who married Sir John Brereton, and after her death in 1522 it went to their daughter, Werburga, who had married Sir William Compton, of Compton Wyngates, Warwickshire.

Seven generations of the Compton family owned Bisterne between 1522 and 1742 when, at the death of Henry Compton's widow, Elianor, Bisterne was left to her nephew, Henry Willis, on condition that he took the name and arms of Compton.

This Henry (Willis) Compton's younger son, John, succeeded his brother Henry in 1787 and sold Bisterne to William Mills five years later.

LIKELY TO LAST GENERATIONS.

In a letter to his father-in-law shortly after he had bought Bisterne, William Mills described the house as "likely to last for generations, being as strong tho' not so elegant a structure as I have ever seen".

William Mills was succeeded by his son John, who died in 1871 and was followed by his eldest son, also John, on whose death in 1899 Bisterne went to his younger brother, the Rev. Cecil Mills. Mr. Mills reigned at Bisterne until 1905, when he was followed by his son, Col. J. D. Mills, who represented the New Forest and Christchurch constituency at Westminster from 1932 to 1945.

Col. Mills still plays a prominent part in the affairs of the County and takes an active interest in the various village organisations.

Mrs. Mills is the only daughter of the late Somerville Pinkney Tuck, Judge of the International Court of Appeals, from whose family a number of interesting pieces of American furniture have come to Bisterne. Among them a late 18th century mahogany secretaire which once belonged to Benjamin Stoddart, the first secretary to the American Navy.

Bisterne was made over to Maj. J. M. Mills in 1954. A number of alterations have been made to the house since then and during these alterations a cunningly concealed priest's hole was discovered beneath the floor of a room in the east front.

The alterations, carried out to the design of Mr. Claud Phillimore, have been concerned with the removal of a Victorian service and nursery wing that was built out on the east side, the re-organisation of the kitchens and offices and the decoration of some of the bedrooms and bathrooms.

These have made the house much easier to run under present day conditions.

Bisterne House has been altered by successive generations over some four centuries according to the taste of the day, but it has not lost its essential characteristics or its attraction as a home.

The church at Bisterne, dedicated to St. Paul, was built in 1843 as a chapel of ease. It is now part of the Ringwood parish and curate-in-charge is the Rev. A. O. N. Lee.

A feature of the church is the reredos which is a huge painting, believed to be Italian, of the Lord's Supper. Mr. Lee told me that ancient records indicate that there was a chapel somewhere in the grounds of Bisterne House, the foundations of which are probably still somewhere beneath the shrubbery.

The village hall, which was a school up to 12 years ago, is now the headquarters of most of the village organisations and is run by a special committee drawn up of representatives from the organisations. Mr. W. J. Wiseman is chairman, his wife treasurer, and Mrs. I. Harrison is secretary.

SPORTS CLUB.

Bisterne Sports Club is a big attraction to many people in the surrounding district. Originally, football and cricket clubs were run separately but it was eventually decided to merge the two to avoid competition for funds and to combine efforts on the ground and pavilion.

During the war the ground was taken over and ploughed up by the War Agricultural Committee, and was in the same condition when returned to the club after the war. The committee tried every possible course to get the agricultural authorities to restore the field to its original condition but without success.

Members of the club had to re-seed the field themselves after it had been levelled free of charge by M.E.X.E.

The pavilion, previously a wooden building, was also damaged during the war and this had to be rebuilt with concrete blocks at the club's expense. The thatched roof was retained.

PURCHASED TRACTOR.

Last year the club purchased a set of gang mowers and a tractor, costing about £170, and the next target is the re-roofing of the pavilion with tiles.

The club has a membership of about 50. President is Col. Mills, Mr. John Dacombe is chairman and also secretary of the cricket section, the Rev. A. O. N. Lee is treasurer and Miss Joan Haines is the first woman secretary in the club's history. Secretary of the football section is Mr. C. F. Hughes, a past chairman and general secretary.

Headquarters of the Sports Club is at Bisterne Men's Club, formed during the First World War in a converted cowshed. Col. Mills is also president of this club and secretary is Mr. George Spicer.

A flourishing Bisterne and District Young Farmers' Club meets at the village hall, where about 25 members enjoy educational talks, film shows and social events. In the recent Y.F.C. public speaking competition at Winchester the club's senior team reached the final. Club leaders are Mr. and Mrs. J. Wiseman, secretary is Miss Carol Hoffman, and treasurer is Mr. Cyril Crabb.

A big attraction during the summer months is the flower show. This has been running annually for about 10 years and usually attracts about 400 entries. This year's show is arranged for the last Saturday in August. Leading the show's hard-working committee are Col. Mills president, Mr. J. Wiseman, chairman, Mrs. C. Hughes, secretary, and Mr. I. Harrison, treasurer. Formed in 1946, the Women's Institute is gradually increasing its numbers. Meetings are held monthly at the village hall where members can interest themselves in several subjects including singing, drama and rug making.

First president of the Institute was Mrs. Barrow and holding this position now is Miss W. Hallett, Mrs. I. Stanley is secretary and Mrs. W. Ballard looks after the finances.

VILLAGE FARMS.

The two farms in the village, both part of the Bisterne estate, are worked by Mr. Ernest Farwell, of Upper Bisterne, and Mr. F. T. Crabb, of Lower Bisterne.

Mr. Farwell has been farming his area—320 acres—for 20 years. His herd of 65 Fresian cows, mostly pedigree stock, is the champion herd of the South Avon and Stour Agricultural Society.

He has about 80 "followers"-young stock which will eventually join the herd. Milked on the 12 hour system, the herd yields an average of about 180 gallons a day. Mr. Crabb, whose father took over the 315 acre farm in 1922, has about 38 Fresians with about 60 "followers" and a herd of 60 Wessex Saddleback pigs. His 21-year-old son, Anthony has also a herd of about 60 pedigree large white pigs. The stock has blood from some of the leading herds in the country, including Mr. H. A. Turner's Hales Farm herd, Essex, where a boar was sold recently for one thousand guineas. Mr. J. F. Wright's Solihull herd Warwickshire, and Mr. E. Geary's Hightown herd, Ringwood.

Bisterne has no local "pub" but there is believed to have been one on a site near the church, now occupied by two cottages called Dragon Cottages.

OLD STABLES.

On the opposite side of the road are some old stables which, it is said, were used for the mail coach relief horses. A public house called the "Green Dragon" is marked on the map of the area dated 1790.