

## Red House Dispute 1974

PRICELESS TUDOR documents are to be pillaged from a Christchurch museum and taken deep into Hampshire to prevent them falling into Dorset hands when the town changes counties in April 1974. This is the result, if not the intention, of a decision by Hampshire County Council's museums department.

More than 5,000 Tudor and later property deeds are housed at the Red House Museum, Christchurch, and will be seen by Hampshire's county archivist, Miss M. E. Cash on Tuesday, 20 March. The town's historians believe she has been told to implement an internal switch that will remove the documents from a room at the Red House and place them with the minimum of ceremony or attention in a disused church at Winchester.

Allen White, author of several local studies, is the spokesman of Christchurch's amateur historians who keenly examine their treasure-house of material. In an exclusive interview with this magazine, he warned:

"In the opinion of many local people the Hampshire museum service is taking this opportunity to grab everything of value which they are legally entitled to. They took over the Red House Museum from a trust about four years ago and in law they could presumably take the lot and merely leave the building."

The collection was established by Herbert Druitt who spent his life collecting legacies from older members of a prosperous family. The fortunes of his relatives enabled him to indulge a lifelong passion in collecting everything old. Druitts, the town's solicitors, had amassed vast quantities of deeds for all the High Street houses in Christchurch. These, in law, had to be produced each time a property changed hands.

Late in Victorian times there was legislation to remove the requirement to produce deeds older than 15 years. Most solicitors made a huge bonfire of boxes of redundant documents but Druitts kept theirs and like most of the firm's other property they came into the hands of young Herbert.

One of the many buildings left to Herbert by his relatives was the old Christchurch workhouse in Quay Road. He filled it with relics and in about 1924 opened it as a private museum with himself as its self-styled curator. In 1942, when Druitt died aged 62, the museum was left in trust and the trustees continued to run it as one of the finest local museums in the British Isles until four years ago.

By then the money had run out, takings from visitors were insufficient to keep the museum open, and outside aid became essential. The trustees were forced to hand the Red House to the museums section of Hampshire County Council.

Curator John Lavender, the backbone of the place for 25 years, was now only allowed to spend one day a week at the museum. This meant that the valuable collection was left in the care of one custodian, locked in the pay office, who could do nothing to look after the priceless exhibits upstairs. Allen White has now heard talk that the museum is no longer a suitable place for anything of value because it is a fire risk. He is sure the documents are to be removed:

"Once they arrive in Winchester they will go down in the vaults and I will not have the time or the money to study them any longer. You have to spend hours on them to extract information. It is my life's work.

"But from a national point of view these deeds have no importance. They are about our town and are the basis for every local study on Christchurch.

"It is as if the Public Record Office had compelled Winchester to part with all its county documents and send them to London. Many people in Christchurch had arranged to bequeath their private collections to the Red House and have now changed their minds. Some are even going to give them to me instead."

The head of Hampshire's museum service is Miss M. MacFarlane and the county archivist is Miss M. E. Cash. "Woman's lib has got to the top in the museums field," Mr. White said. We asked Miss Cash for the official view on the Red House and its future in Dorset.

"I am not able to give you a complete story," she admitted. "All I can say is that everything that belongs to the museum will go on belonging to it. All the objects will stay."

We then put it to her that the museum also had a collection of papers: "Documents are another matter and I cannot give an under-taking on these. They are not the things that would be put on display. They are meant to be used and to be read. The ownership stays the same and all things given to the museum are still the property of the trustees, but they might be prepared to lend things to other museums."

Would it be a loan if the museum were deprived of them permanently? "I cannot tell you anything about it at all."

Or are you saying that the documents do not really belong to the museum? "Some of them do."

That answer implies some of them do not? "You might say that some of them do and some of them don't."

John Lavender, the curator of the Red House, was not available for comment as the museums department had sent him off to work elsewhere for the day.