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Badminton

A meeting has been arranged to discuss the formation of a parish Badminton Club. The meeting will be at 8 p.m. on Monday 10th December in the Court House. Anyone who is interested in becoming a member of the club is invited to come along to the meeting and join in the discussion.

A. J. CRUICKSHANK

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COUNTRY HOUSE WHICH WAS ONCE A NUNNERY

The Story of Woodcock Hill

WOODCOCK HILL is probably the least familiar mansion in the district. It is no better known today than it was before the Westfield and Durrants estates were developed barely a quarter of a mile away. High boundary walls and rows of splendid trees prohibit anything more than a fleeting glimpse of the mansion as one walks along Durrants Lane or Shootersway, yet from the windows the views over Berkhamsted Common and the hills beyond Aldbury are magnificent.

Perhaps it was this air of seclusion which encouraged Carmelite nuns to take over the house some twenty years ago. You may remember the tolling of the convent bell. The drawing room became a chapel until the nuns moved to Presteigne in 1951. Since then Woodcock Hill has been owned and shared by three families.

OLD WORLD ATMOSPHERE

The present owners will not, I am sure, mind my saying that the house looks solid rather than beautiful. It is good, plain architectural fare of early Victorian vintage—roomy, high-ceilinged, and built to last many a lifetime. The original design was thrown out of balance by the addition of a massive hall on the west side; this caused the re-siting of a portico with four stone Corinthian columns which was formerly the central feature.

But the lawns and gardens are still superb, the outbuildings surrounding the courtyard have an old world air, and one can understand why the park evoked this fine outburst of house-agent's English: "Grounds full of maturity and a sense of foliage . . . embosomed in a woodland region of richness and splendour . . . the tableland studded with beech clumps, oak, ash and other individual trees, and glorious companies of their multitudinous brethren, with beech woodlands and belts crowning the brows." What a pity this purple patch of 1905 ended with a reference to "a fine old big-headed oak"!

From a manorial survey of 1607 it seems that Woodcock Hill was more widely known as Woodcroft Hill. Rowland Bowlt, William Batchelor, John Briggs and James Harding each held one tenement and a small plot of

land in Woodcroft (or Woodcock) Hill, but we cannot link any of these obviously small tenements with the large house and outbuildings shown on a late 18th century map. However, a sale prospectus of 1840 tells us something about the house which preceded the present mansion.

A PAINTED CEILING

The freehold estate then consisted of "a convenient residence containing ample accommodation for a respectable family," with coachhouse and stabling, farm buildings, garden, orchard, and about 25 acres of pasture land, bounded by Durrants Lane and Bell Lane and stretching rather more than half-way down the hill from Shootersway. "A pew in the church [St. Mary's] belongs to the residence," added the prospectus.

Unfortunately, no prints of the old mansion survive. Through the entrance hall and inner hall one entered the drawing room with painted ceiling, the library and the dining room. Also on the ground floor were the servants' hall, kitchen, scullery, and back staircase to two sleeping rooms for menservants. Three large bedrooms, a dressing room, large nursery and two smaller bedrooms were on the first floor, and the top storey contained three bedrooms for female servants.

FRANKY MOORE'S LANE

A letter signed by Mr. William Brown, surveyor, of Tring, dated December 24, 1840, stated that as agent for Mr. James Field he purchased the estate, including the fixtures and timber, for £2,775.

Within a few years the property was owned by F. J. Moore, who rebuilt the house in 1848. His initials and the date appear on a plaque in the cellar.

Mr. Moore's name is remembered by the older generation, who still call Durrants Lane "Franky Moore's Lane." He played a notable part in local affairs and was chairman of the governors of Berkhamsted School. Some school documents of historical interest are believed to have been lost when part of the house was burnt.

During the Moore regime, when the owner was often called "the squire," Woodcock Hill became one of the great houses of the district, employing a large indoor and outdoor staff. Lodges were

built at the top and bottom of Durrants Lane, and it will be recalled that the upper lodge was the only house seriously damaged by enemy action in the war.

The estate was extended until it comprised 257 acres, occupying the entire area between Bell Lane and Durrants Lane except for small properties at the corner of Bell Lane; the upper two-thirds of the land between Darrs Lane and Bell Lane; a very large acreage east of Durrants Lane from Lagley to Barncroft and extending beyond Shootersway; and meadows and water-cross beds between the main road and canal. Durrants and Westfield occupy part of Mr. Moore's former estate.

OWNERSHIP CHANGES

The Moore regime lasted into the 20th century. The estate, finally held by Mr. A. McNeill Streetfield-Moore, was sold in 1905. It is strange to find a note in the sale prospectus to the effect that the house lent itself to enlargement. There were already thirteen bedrooms and dressing rooms!

Woodcock Hill next became the home of Mr. and Mrs. R. McVitie, of the biscuit firm of McVitie and Price. Later, it was owned by Mr. and Mrs. A. J. White. Part of the house was occupied by evacuated schoolgirls in the second World War; then, for a few years, Woodcock Hill was a nunnery. The priest, Father Owen Dudley, stayed on after the nuns had left, turning a former stable into his private chapel. A well-known novelist, he died about ten years ago.

Since 1951 Woodcock Hill has been owned jointly by the occupants, Mr.

and Mrs. R. G. Folkard, Mr. and Mrs. K. W. Farms, and Mr. and Mrs. J. P. Wiltshire.

Through the kindness of Mr. and Mrs. Folkard I recently had an opportunity of seeing part of the house, outbuildings and grounds, where a 200 yard-long section of Grim's Dyke, the ancient earthwork, is still intact.

200-ft. DEEP WELL

"Extensive underground cellars" was no idle boast in the sale prospectus of 1905. The cellars extend under the greater part of the house, and any youngster with imagination and a zest for adventure must enjoy exploring the corridors. Here, right under the house, is a well 200-ft. deep, with the ancient winding apparatus which requires twenty minutes' hard toil to haul up a large wooden bucket of pure water.

The rooms above are high, wide and handsome, and I mention the views again because they are beautiful in all seasons.

THE OLD COURTYARD

But it is the large, enclosed courtyard on the east side of the mansion which visitors always remember with pleasure. The pleasure may possibly be diminished now that the brewhouse is no longer used, but the huge clock, the old stables, laundry and other buildings, some faced with flint, have almost a cloistered look. It was in fact here where the nuns, not so many years ago, had their cells.

I envy the three families who today enjoy hilltop seclusion in a mansion which has retained its splendid lawns, gardens and park, and lost none of its

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old-world attractiveness. And there is an interesting parallel between present and past. The acreage Squire Moore added has been surrendered, and today the estate is almost exactly the same as that which belonged to the owners of the first of the two mansions called Woodcock Hill.

"BEORCHAM"

(A series of coloured slides of Woodcock Hill will be shown at a Local History Society meeting in the Sessions Hall on Tuesday, 4th Dec., 8.15 p.m.)

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