

THE HAUNTING OF HINTON AMPNER

By

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The recent acquisition of Hinton Ampner House by the National Trust through the generosity of the late Lord Sherbome is an important addition to the visitor's enjoyment of Hampshire. Locally it means even more because Ralph Dutton, as his lordship was known to all around as a loyal employer of local men and, as house and garden have been altered and re-designed twice in the last sixty years, this has meant a lot to the district.

To quote Martin Drury, the Trust's Historic Buildings Secretary: "The importance of Hinton Ampner is that it is the creation in the first half of the twentieth century of a squire, who was in the eighteenth century tradition with a deep appreciation of English architecture, decorative arts and gardens". In truth, it is well worth having and seeing.

No doubt the Trust will produce their own brochure about the property for the benefit of visitors, but anyone interested in the locality must read ('A Hampshire Manor' by Ralph Dutton published by Batsford in 1968. This charming book in which a man who had lived there all his life, shows how he lovingly restored the Manor House and gardens to something which it had never been before - the prime example of an English manor.

So what am I doing? This magazine sets out to tell the people of the Alresford District about their past and present - Dutton has brought the story of the property up to date in his book, but I had to ask myself what did the Georgians and early Victorians think of Hinton Ampner? I guessed that some sort of answer would have been made by that persistent rambler in the district, John Duthy, and, sure enough, he has a good story to tell about the property in his 'Sketches of Hampshire' of 1839, reprinted by Laurence Oxley in 1972.

So taking Duthy as my source and Dutton as my corrective, I have tried to tell Alresford a good local story without spoiling a visitor's enjoyment of the real book 'A Hampshire Manor' which tells the sad fact that since the XVIth century the successive families of Stewkeley, Stawell, Legge and Dutton have passed the property to another owner through the lack of a boy to carry on the family possession of the house. At least the National Trust won't suffer from that handicap.

It was late in the XVIIIth century that Henry Stawell built the house which, as Ralph Dutton says 'formed the nucleus of the building' of which he writes. It is the early Tudor house of the Stewkeleys, fallen into such disrepair as only fit for pulling down, which provides the district with its ghost story, though that house no longer exists. It was some 70 yards to the north of the present building.

A Mr. and Mrs. Ricketts from London had rented the house in 1765 as a suitable place in which to bring up their three children and arrived with their eight servants. From the very beginning of their tenancy they suffered disturbance at night, but it was not until 1770 when Mr. Ricketts had left to do business in Jamaica that his wife found the nightly manifestation intolerable. Fortunately for the lady, her brother, Captain Jervis, RN (later to become Admiral Lord St. Vincent) had just docked at Portsmouth. Hearing the alarming stories of his sister, he decided to spend a few nights in the house at watch with a friend, Mr. Luttrell. One can imagine the gallant young sailor refusing to have any truck with ghost stories and assuring the lady that they would catch the disturber of her peace. But the nightly noises continued; they caught no-one and had to agree to the existence of something queer.

John Duthy now takes up the tale and writing comparatively soon after the happenings, he is able to quote the whispered versions of the old inhabitants of the neighbourhood. According to them, Jervis decided to return to the house without the knowledge of anyone and spend the night alert and on watch. Sure enough "he heard the approach of the usual noises and pounced on the ghost trailing a heavy weight and clanking chains". It is something of an anti-climax to learn that the ghost was a female domestic servant who was instantly dismissed without any record remaining of her name.

But Mrs. Ricketts had had enough. She surrendered her lease and went to live at Wolvesley. Lady Stawell married again and the house fell into such a dilapidated state that in 1793 the then Lord Stawell decided to pull it down and rebuild on the present site of the house. Dutton records that a small skull, said to be that of a monkey, was found in a box under the floor but Duthy goes the whole hog and writes of private passages and stairs within the thickness of the walls.

So now the National Trust has the property and a nosey Parker like myself tries to offer a possible solution to the mystery. You will remember that the Ricketts brought their own eight servants from London. These would be folk from distant parts and viewed with suspicion by the locals, who up till then had provided the service to the household. Say one of them had found the secret passages when they were in Service. Say they passed on their knowledge to their own young. Say Bramdean thought this could provide a useful way to frighten away the interlopers and get their old jobs back. By 1770 they had achieved this, for Dutton says 'the servants were all changed from those who came from London in 1765'. But the object having been achieved, the temptation to continue meddling was too great and the opportunity too easy for the locals who were back in the house. The haunting continued but out of pure devilment. The life of a domestic servant in those days was a dull, weary chore. What a chance for a strong minded girl to establish her supremacy over the more fortunate members of the household.

Well, she had her fun and I've had mine. Yours is waiting for you if you'll walk round this beautiful garden and remember that it was created with love by a Hampshire man - Ralph Dutton.

AUTHORITIES:

1. Sketches of Hampshire John Duthy 1839 Reprinted by L. Qxley 1972.
2. A Hampshire Manor. Ralph Dutton 1968 Batsford.
3. The National Trust, who have prepared a free brochure for visitors, and whose representative. Miss Margaret Davidson, was of prime help to the writer in checking and correcting the first draft.

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