

Spilsill Court History of a local manor

The word "Spilsill" originates from "Speldgisella". This word has a variety of meanings, two of which have significant relevance. From the old English, "Spel" means a splinter, and "Gisella" means a collection of buildings. Thus Wallenburg in "The place names of Kent" says that the name probably means "Buildings made or covered with chips, splinters of wood.

The second interpretation of the word "Spilsill - which is surely just an abbreviation of "Speldgisella"- is yet more feasible. From the Old English, "sol" or "syle" means a muddy pool. Old German derivations, "spel" or "spil" means a divide, split, fork or cleft. Therefore as "Spelmonden" means the swine pasture by the split stream, so "Spilsill" means the divided pools or ponds. This latter meaning is probably the more likely.

Hasted says that the name of the house comes from the family first owning Spilsill, but it seems probable that the de Speldselles took their name from the house or site, rather than vice-versa. Although the spelling of the house has suffered many corruptions, the majority of spellings through the ages have been of the phonetic "Spilsill".

Situated to the East of the church, on top of a hill, in the village of Staplehurst, the house combines a degree of detachment and isolation with a commanding view of the neighbouring countryside.

The earliest reference yet discovered is in a Wealden Charter of 8 MAD. This is of particular interest since neither Staplehurst nor Spilsill is mentioned in the Domesday Book. On the map of Kent in 1611 "Spilshill is given a separate mention from Staplehurst. John Harris in his "History of Kent" of 1719 calls the house "Spilsill Court, and it appears that by the time of the ownership of Mr George Thomson (1617) the house was called Spilsill Court.

The Original house was built in 1286 and the first owners were the de Speldselle family, they were still living here in 1335 in the Cranebroke Hundred Thomas de speldselle was fined 6d for not turning up at court.!!

Before the end Edward II's reign, Spilsill had passed to the Stangraves of Eatonbridge where they were major landowners. Robert de Stangrave had been keeper of Tonbridge Castle and had been knighted by Edward 1 for taking Caerlaverock in Scotland. Spilsill next passed to the Mainey family around the date of 1377, they came from Biddenden. Details of the early Mainey owners have not yet been discovered, but between 1571-77 Spilsill belonged to Walter Mainey who became Sheriff of Kent in the thirteenth year of the reign of Elizabeth I. When he died in 1577 he left Spilsill to his second wife, Anne. One of his four sons was, however, to die in childhood, possibly in one of the three surrounding ponds, for in the Staplehurst register there is this entry: "Aprilis 14 1582 was buried Walter mayny a boy that was drowned sonn of widowe mayne".

Mr John Sharpye bought Spilsill from Walter Mainey's eldest son in 1613. The Sharpye family are mentioned as clothiers in the Index of Wills and Administration at Canterbury..

When the ponds were cleaned out at the beginning of the century, remains of utensils used in the flax industry were discovered. Thus the reason for the ponds being paved with flagstone is evident - it was done to stop the flax from being soiled by mud in the manufacturing process.

Spilsill then passed from John Sharpye's son to Mr George Thomson the husband of Frances Sharpye. From 1617 - 1680 the descendents of the Thomson's occupied Spilsill.

In 1680 Nicholas Toke of Maidstone bought the house. In 1693 Sir Nicholas toke became sheriff of Kent, From thence the house went by marriage to William Usbourne, husband of Constance Toke (daughter of Nicholas). The Usbournes were a tanning family whose centre of production was at Maidstone.

In the reign of Elizabeth I, two people, Usbourne and Urquhart set out from Canterbury to visit Calvin in Geneva. On their return the sect of the Particular Baptists was formed in Kent. On the north side of Spilsill, where the small sitting room now stands, a chapel was built for the sect. This chapel had the reputation of being one of the first to be built in Kent. To help villagers cross the fields to the chapel a line of stepping stones was laid down, the direction of which is still marked by Chapel Lane.

From 1780 - 90 Nicholas Toke Usbourne occupied Spilsill. He was the son of William and Constance Usbourne. He preferred, however to live at Loddenden and gave up Spilsill when the family fortunes were low.

The fortunes of Spilsill suffered an eclipse during the 19th century. Owned by a succession of farmers, the house deteriorated physically and in stature. In 1906 Mr Sneyd Kinnersley, from Staffordshire bought the house, which had become the size of a cottage. He did much in his fourteen years as owner to restore Spilsill. He discovered the Hall chimney piece, which had been bricked up. The oak panelling was bought from the Bell Inn for the Hall. This panelling is of Tudor and Stuart period, as shown by the roses and arches on the top of the panels. The Porch was built from timbers bought from a house in the village called Aydhurst.

In 1920 Miss Christina Knowles bought Spilsill and continued the process of improvement. The gardens were re-organised in contemporary Elizabethan style - pleached alleys of hornbeam, Shrubberies, a rock garden and knot garden in the shape of the Fleur de lys, were laid out. Miss Knowles built a shrine in remembrance of her mother at the bottom of the rose garden. The present owner had the chapel consecrated in 1986 to St Francis and has added a stained glass window and a plaque in memory of her parents.

In order to give employment to the men of Staplehurst during the depression Miss Knowles converted the flax mill/Tithe Barn into a theatre. A performance was given when Arthur Mee was in the village, looking out for his section on Kent in his "Kings England" series :

"Here it was that we came upon a lovely new chapter in an ancient house, for one of the old houses, Spilsill Court, was presenting with great pride of pageantry the story of its wonderful past".

In 1966 Spilsill was bought by Mr and Mrs C.G.Marshall as somewhere to bring up their seven children and for the last 43 years much time and work has been spent on the garden. Changes have been made, but the basic structure of Christina Knowles's lay out has not been altered, with the exception of the two long herbaceous borders on the front lawn, children, grandchildren and even great grandchildren need some where to run and play ball games!

The House has not been left untouched. The interior has been renovated and redecorated. Many of the rooms built onto the back of the house by Miss Knowles were pulled down, to leave the original part of the house visible.

There is always work to be done not only to the house and its surroundings, but also in the field of research. However it is difficult to do justice to a house of such ancient character as Spilsill, what ever is done or written about it.