



Howe Dell

The story of a house

Saxon times

The manor of Hatfield was an ancient demesne owned the Saxon kings until it was given by King Edgar to the monastery of St Ethelred of Ely. It was then known as Hethfeld.

Domesday

Hetfelle features in the Domesday records as having 40 hides and being held by the Abbot of Ely. A priest with 18 villanes and 18 bordars have there 20 ploughs....12 cottagers and 6 bondmen 4 mills of 47 shillings and 4 pence...Meadow for 10 ploughs.....pasture for cattle and Pannage for 2,000 hogs and for custom of wood and pasture ten shillings. The whole value is and was 25 pounds.

In the Domesday Book of 1086 there is evidence of a parson living where the school now lies. The land around the school would have been farmland and some of it Glebeland to provide support for the rector.

Bishop's Hatfield

The abbots of the Monastery of Ely continued to hold this manor until Ely became a Bishopric by King Henry I in 1108. This explains the name - Bishop's Hatfield.

Tudor times

In 1500 John Taillard became Rector at Hatfield. As the son of poor parents he had been presented at court as a curiosity being one of triplets. Because of this the king paid for his education.

While he had the living of Hatfield he played an active role at Court:

- 1504 ambassador to Burgundy
- 1520 chaplain to Henry VIII accompanying him to France to the Field of the Cloth of Gold
- 1525 Ambassador to France
- 1527 Presents Order of the Garter to the French King
- acted as one of the commissioners who tried the validity of the marriage of Henry VIII and Katherine of Aragon.

The picture of the Tudor dragon and royal lion, which can be found high in the attic, are believed to date from this time.

In 1534 the estimate for substantial repairs was £90. Since the Rectory itself was only valued at £37 at the time it is not clear whether the work was ever actually completed. The building at that time would have been timber framed with a hall with “an high or open roof” but was “contrived for the most part in two storeys”.

In 1539 Thomas Goodrick, bishop of Ely, gave the demesne and living to Henry VIII in exchange for land in Cambridge and Norfolk. After Ann Boleyn had been beheaded, Henry VIII sent their 4 year old daughter Elizabeth away from the Court to live at the Old Palace of Hatfield. Her nurse wrote to the king asking for money to buy adequate clothing for the little girl. Elizabeth persuaded her brother, Edward VI, to give the Palace to her “for her own”. So she spent much of her early life in Hatfield and was in residence when, at the death of her elder sister, Mary Tudor, she became queen.

In 1560 the Rector, Henry Bagwell leased the rectory and tithes to Fulk Onslow who had the present vicarage rebuilt next to St Etheldreda’s Church. His rent was used by the rector to pay a curate. It was common in those days for the rector to spend time away from his parish and install a locum.

17th Century

In 1606-7 an immensely detailed survey of “all possessions belonging to the Rectory of Kings Hatfield” was made for the Bishop of Lincoln. It is clear from this that the parsonage house formed one face of the two courtyards of farm buildings, barns, and coach houses and so on which made up the rectory. This large collection of buildings, including five huge thatched Tithe barns of five bays each, must have looked like a great farmstead, and was set in an orchard in the middle of the extensive fields of the Glebe.

It was this imposing dwelling in its delightful setting that Robert Cecil, first Earl of Salisbury, rented while having Hatfield House built so that he could oversee the works. He was able to see its walls being raised as he looked across the Glebe and the Open Field. A way was constructed straight across the Glebe from the Rectory Gate to French Horn Lane just by the reed pond for better access. The rectory was made more comfortable for him and his household and an inventory has been found for this period, which shows the wealth of the Cecil family, deemed to be the wealthiest family in England. Unfortunately we believe that he died before he could move in to the new house.

The Cecil family continued to rent the house from the Rector until the late 1600s. They did not always have a member of the family in residence but worked it as a farm, had a brew house built and used the ponds to supply fish.

18th Century

The living was in the gift of the Earl of Salisbury at this time and 6 members of the Cecil family became Rector of Hatfield and lived in the parsonage.

During this time the stable block was built and the old Tudor timber frame was covered in panelling and plaster in the main reception rooms on the ground floor. The elaborate hexagonal coats of arms in the ceiling of what is now the assembly hall date from this period when members of the Cecil family held the living.

19th Century

Rev Faithfull was ordained to the curacy of Hatfield in 1812 and first lived close by the church in the vicarage. Around about 1814 the family moved to the Parsonage as Howe Dell was then known. From his daughter, Cecilia, we learn much about the life of the house and the people who visited it.

Cecilia describes the house as needing repairs and alterations needing an outlay of several thousand pounds. There was an open court with rooms and passages around it. The money was spent to make the open court into a hall with skylight and staircase. The back part of the house was pulled down and a new dining room was built with two bedrooms and a dressing room over it. It is believed that the barge boards on the gables date from his time.

The following are extracts from Cecilia's journal:

"My mother was called in from the garden one day by an old butler who said: 'I have shown someone into the drawing room who asked to see master, but I felt doubtful from his appearance what he might be , so I have taken away the silver ink stand.' My mother in spite of the dusty appearance of the individual, who had travelled down outside a coach from London and carried his great coat under his arm, felt, the moment he spoke, that she was conversing with a gentleman. He proved to be a noble man who wished to place a son under her care."

"Father woke with a single knock at his bedroom door at 6 am with the words "Six o'clock, sir". From half six to half eight for years my father was in the schoolroom – in later life with more advanced tutors, he spent much of the time in his study. Eight thirty prayers and breakfast – often between nine and ten a class of national school boys or a sick person visited in the town. At twelve his quick step would be heard in the hall, walking with his hat on, to the butler's pantry, where a glass of sherry and a biscuit stood ready for him. Eating the latter he proceeded to the stable and mounted his horse, the coachman remarking "Master always says thank you Moore when I settle his tails, but Mr the music master never says thank you when I bring out his gig."

"From twelve to four or five, my father spent the time in his parish. While dressing for dinner at five or five thirty he often had a class in the room adjoining his dressing room. Dinner was quickly despatched and the evenings given to reading or writing, always expecting music from his children."

From 1854 until 1888, the Hon William Whitworth Chetwynd Talbot a second cousin of the Marquis of Salisbury occupied the rectory. His extravagance and lifestyle put the rectory in sequestration for the benefit of his creditors. Cousins the County Historian left a private impression of this incumbent. "The last time I saw him he was leaving the tap-room of the Salisbury Arms, smoking a short clay pipe. No stranger would have imagined that he was the Hon. William Talbot, Rector of the Parish, for he bore no mark of his vocation or even of respectability about him; and when he spoke, his profession would be still further doubted."

20th Century

From 1888 until 1916, however, Lord William Gascoigne-Cecil, son of the 3rd Marquis affectionately known as Lord Bill endeared himself to the whole parish by his sincerity and unassuming manner. The third Marquis built a new rectory for his son – the building that is currently St Audrey's home. He eventually moved away from the parish when he became Bishop of Exeter.

Archdeacon Gibbs moved into Howe Dell in 1911 when he bought the property from the Church. He was responsible for further improvements to the building. He installed a new porch, a fine Edwardian staircase and landing. The previous staircase was re-used in the stable block. During the course of this work a heavy oak beam, with the date 1412 cut into it, was removed and sawn into planks and used to make the present front door. Archdeacon Gibbs' son remembers it as a happy family home.

In 1947 it was bought by Hertfordshire County Council and became a secondary school from 1948-54 under the headship of W M Duane. The name Howe Dell was taken from the nearby woods which are now known as Stream Woods. It became a Primary school in 1955 and the first head was Gordon MacKay, followed by Miss Matthews who remained head until 1988. It continues to be one to this day.

The school is due to leave the Old Rectory in the spring of 2007.