

The Plantagenet Watch Tower at Faulstone House



A rare, possibly unique, Plantagenet watch tower (see picture opposite) can be found in the garden of a delightful old farmhouse in the village of Bishopstone near Salisbury, Wiltshire.

The farmhouse - Faulstone House - was held by a family called the Bayntons or Bentons during the 14th century. At this time the Norman fortress was giving way to the fortified manor house, and it is certain that the Lord of Faulstone sought to improve his property by using plunder gained in the wars with France.

Lawlessness was rife during the reign of Richard II, and many landowners found it necessary to fortify their houses. Private fortifications were illegal, but even in those days there were ways and means of sidestepping the laws of the land. The most popular was to apply to the King for permission to castellate an existing manor house and this is undoubtedly what happened at Faulstone.

There were two towers originally, with a connecting wall, and these, along with a moat and drawbridge, formed the manor's defences. The remaining tower -its partner was demolished about 1650 - is made of alternate layers of stone and flint. Inside it is pigeonholed, and is described on Ordnance Survey maps as a 'pigeon house'.

On the outside there are several windows, but one of these cannot be seen from inside. This is because there is an inner wall with a narrow passageway between it and the outer wall. This was possibly a hiding place built in case the defences were overrun. Tradition also has it that there is also a secret tunnel leading from the tower to a field some distance away. This would seem to be substantiated by the fact that large slabs of stone have been discovered under what is now the lawn. Indeed a previous occupier of the house says that one night he heard a rumbling noise which he believes was the tunnel caving in.

The house has had a varied and colourful history. During the Civil War it was occupied by Parliamentary troops, and the Coat of Arms of the family who lived there at the time - The Vaughan's - can be seen in the North Transept of Bishopstone Church. It is thought that Faulstone was the hub of the district around 1645 after Sir George Vaughan's stock and estate was seized by the Wiltshire Committee because he had fought for Charles I. It is said that the troops were paid there before moving to Longford Castle.

An entry in the Faulstone Day Book dated the 8th December, 1645, throws some light on the harshness of the times when it states that "William Clark of Bishopstone hath appeared before us and has been fined 40 shillings for speaking threatening words." This would seem to be an inordinately large fine - the 2013 equivalent being in the region of £2666 for using threatening words or behaviour. Times must have been pretty hard in those days.

(Article originally published in 1969 by Richard Capstick)

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