

The Historic Buildings of Mere

Zeals House



Zeals House is a mansion standing in a walled park about a mile from Mere, and was formerly the residence of the Chafyn family. There is an early record of a house and garden being on the present site in 1304, when it was worth half a mark (about 30p today) per annum. Matthew de Clevedon purchased it in 1372 and commenced building a new house in 1380. However by the early 15th century it had already been acquired by the Chafyns. The original Great Hall and North Wing of the present house date from this period with the centre section being added in the 17th century. The final additions, the South Wing and Clock Tower being added in 1869. The house was a centre of Royalist support in the civil war, Hutton recording in *His Highways and Byways in Wiltshire* that Charles II was given refuge here on his flight to the coast, and the bed in which he is said to have slept is still preserved with its original drapes intact. Also in the house is a picture of Hugh Grove of Chissenbury, who was beheaded at Exeter in 1655 together with Colonel Penruddock, by personal order of Cromwell “for their part in declaring Charles II king at South Molton”. William Chafyn was Sherriff of Wiltshire in 1685, and his daughter married John, son of Hugh Grove, their descendants continuing in unbroken possession until 1968.

The story of the house ghost at Zeals is a long standing local legend. A young woman dressed in grey is said to come down the front stairs and walk to the ha-ha abutting the park, thence tot eh woods beyond. She is reputed to be the daughter of the house who eloped with a servant and was never heard of again. However, a stone set in the woods above the lake suggests the “elopement” ended in tragedy, for it records: “A human skeleton was found buried here two feet deep on 22nd February 1876, and was re-interred in Zeals Churchyard.” Another story has it that during the early 1900’s unaccountable shouting were heard coming from the present dining room which used to be the Great Hall.

The last Chafyn-Grove was Miss Julia, who died in 1891, leaving the estate to her cousin Mr. G. Troyte-Bullock, of North Coker. It was she who closed the north gate drive after her runaway carriage knocked down and killed the gate-keepers wife. The well know black dogs which stood paw poised on guard on the gate pillars were removed after vandalism and returned to their former home of Waddon House, Portesham where they stood as white dogs in the earlier part of the 19th century.

During World War II the house was requisitioned by the Army as a billet for the 6th Battalion Grenadier Guards and later the Officer's Mess for the Royal Air Force based at the emergency airfield on St. Martin's Farm which at that time formed part of the estate of Zeals House. Later it became home to a school which had been evacuated from one of the bigger urban towns or cities. The family took repossession of the building in 1956.

Zeals house now belongs to the Phippen family after its purchase in 1968 by Mr. Garnet Phippen. Since then progressive restoration has been underway including the 17th Century Orangery and the 16th Century Dovecot, originally built to house 400 doves and to provide the house with food. The stable blocks are now back in use and the house is alive and prospering as a family home. In 1972 over 10,000 people from all parts of the globe came to watch a Medieval Jousting Tournament held in the grounds which had been recreated by the local craftsmen and residents