

A visit to the Porch House

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Written by Mr Walter Chitty, of Pewsey (with extracts from The Gentleman's Magazine for 1738 and Rev A. C. Smith's notes)

"The old Porch House at Potterne stands in about the centre of the village. Nobody knows its age, but it must be several hundred years old, and comparing it with the known age of some other houses in the county, it would be probably be nearer five hundred than four hundred years.

It has seen a variety of inhabitants, and answered a variety of purposes. Obscure as the date of erection, though we have some reason for the suggestion that it was originally built as a Church House, various ecclesiastics of note, including a bishop, having resided in the village. In later days it was a brewery, then a bakehouse, after that a barrack (so says the Rev. A. C. Smith), then a public house, called either the "Pack Horse" or the "White Horse". After that it was divided into a number of tenements, and it was going rapidly to ruin. One of the most interesting rooms was formerly inhabited by a shoemaker !

But an artist arrived on the scene in the person of George Richmond, Esq, R.A., D.C.L., [*sic* 1809 - 1896]. His aesthetic and antiquarian tastes were so appealed to by the beauty of the building, that, to save it from further ruin, he not only purchased it, but at once set to work to restore it. Some of the old inhabitants of Potterne spoke of an old door which was once to be seen, but it had gone, nobody knew whither. it is a custom amongst some of the cottagers in Wiltshire to covet all kinds of odd pieces of wood for their pigsties. "Please, zur, if you doant want thic thur piece of hood (wood), would you gie it to I for my pigsty?" has been frequently addressed to me. So the artist had the pigsties examined, and at Potterne Wick, about a mile off, a pig was found lying on this ancient door. The pig had to find another bed, the door was cleaned, bees-waxed, and what not, and restored to its original place.

A curious place is this Porch House. Holes there were, quite innocent of glass, but nevertheless called windows, and these formerly had shutters. in some of these Mr Richmond has had glass put in. There is some very old glass in one part, bought, as I was told , from Salisbury, whence it was dug up; in all probability some of the veritable glass from Salisbury Cathedral, which was ruthlessly thrown away by the architect Wyatt, when he *restored* (?) the magnificent Cathedral at Salisbury about a hundred years ago -"when George the Third was King".

One of the most remarkable things about the Porch House is the immense quantity of oak about the place. but oak was about as plentiful then as it is scarce now, the valley of Crook-wood, situate almost immediately to the south-west of the village, being, according to Aubrey, "once full of study oaks". Indeed, at an earlier period, the whole county, save the uplifted downs, was covered with trees, and roads were bad, so our ancestors, built their houses with the material nearest at hand. When one considers the number of years it takes for an oak to come to perfection from the tiny acorn, and the age of the house in question, it brings us to the time of King Alfred as the ultimate origin of these time-hued timbers, when those acorns were planted, or perhaps planted themselves. the walls are constructed of massive beams of oak, with the plaster between them. The beams were cut out with a hatchet, and never touched with a saw or plane; no such tools existed. Considering only hatchets were used, the wood is very fairly smooth, and shows that our ancestors took great pains with their work, and were skilful with the tools they possessed. The roof was also made in the same way of these massive beams. It the house is taken

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care of, it will probably stand as it has already stood. It was in consequence of so much wood being used in the construction of houses that there was an old law commanding all persons to keep a vessel of water always in front of their houses, in case of fire. Where the floors were originally only the bare ground, Mr Richmond has had a mosaic pavement put in.

As is usual when old houses are restored, there were some interesting finds. According to the Rev. A. C. Smith these were as follows:- "Of *coins*, many halfpence of the Georges, two of William and Mary, one of George and Caroline, and one of Washington. Three tradesmen's tokens, one of them German; one Roman coin of Constantine, cast at Treves; and, best of all, in a mortice-hole of the northern wing, three golden *écus* of France, wrapped in a portion of fine linen. Two of these are of Louis XI, the other of Charles VIII, of France. They appear to have been placed in the hole for security, and then it seems they dropped down out of reach. In the roof were found one or two leathen articles, a coin of George I, and a tiler's measure; while the great chimney yielded up a portion of a carved stone, and a fowl, prepared without doubt for dinner, but somehow forgotten, and left a mummy".

The Garden is also very interesting, and reminds one of former days.

The worthy proprietor has gathered together many ancient articles of furniture quite in keeping with the rest of the building. Amongst other curious articles are an old walking stick and a chain, both made by an old man who formerly lived in the parish, and who acted as bellows blower at the church for about fifty years. Mr Richmond goes down most years in the summer, and spends some time at the old Porch House. Any person who visits Potterne (which is two miles from Devizes) is at liberty to visit the old Porch House.

Notes:

- i Published by Wiltshire Notes and Queries Journal, June 1894 (with extracts from The Gentleman's Magazine for 1738).
- ii A short account on the Porch House, as read before the Society at the Annual Meeting, at Devizes, September, 1874 by Rev A.C. Smith entitled "On the Old Porch House at Potterne" can be found at http://www.tonygraham.co.uk/house_repair/PorchHouse.pdf