



Yew Tree House – Kemsing

Yew Tree House, situated along the high street in Kemsing, has been part of village life for around 350 years. Built during the late 17th century it is believed to have been the home of the Allan family for much of its early history, operating as the village shop and tailors throughout the 19th century and perhaps before. By the 20th century Yew Tree House had become 'Yew Tree Stores' operating as the butchers, confectioners and general grocers. The village of Kemsing has a number of historical connections; Anne of Cleves owned the manor during the 16th century; it was home to Saint Edith and was also where the first English Women's Institute began in 1915.

Early Kemsing village

Kemsing is located at the foot of the North Downs and there has been a settlement in the area since Roman times. However, the main focal point for the village and the reason for the choice of early settlement is the spring, which provided the water to the famous well. St Edith's well was named in honour of Saint Edith, daughter of King Edgar, who was born in Kemsing in 961, later became Abbess of Wilton Abbey and was canonised after an early death. The water well formerly sat within the grounds of the convent, where St Edith was born and due to this connection was thought to hold healing properties.

Historical characters in Kemsing

Kemsing also boasts a number of other notable connections with early English history. It was the site of a castle built by King Stephen in the 12th century and in the 16th century the manor was owned by Anne of Cleves, fourth wife of Henry VIII. The manor eventually passed to Richard Sackville, Duke of Dorset of Knole House in Sevenoaks during the 1620s.

17th century Yew Tree House

Yew Tree House was named after the two yew trees that formerly grew in the front garden. Early records for the village of Kemsing do not give clear details of exactly when the house was built but it is believed to have been completed by the 1660s, as at the time of the hearth tax (between 1662 and 1689) it was recorded with five hearths. Research by local historian Victor Bowden shows that at this time Yew Tree House was most likely the home of John Allan.

The Allan family tailors

It does not appear that the house belonged to the Manor of Kemsing but is believed to have been in the ownership of the Allan family from an early stage. The tithe map and apportionment records from the 1830s show a descendant of John, Robert Allan was the owner and occupier of Yew Tree House during this time. The 1841 census clearly shows that the house was home to Robert Allan with the recorded profession of 'tailor'. He was in the house with his wife, Ann and seven children, aged between four and twenty years old.

Tailors, shopkeepers and grocers

Yew Tree House was very much a central point in the village, not only as the local tailors but also, as the 1847 Kent directory shows, the local shop, with Robert Allan recorded as 'shopkeeper'. Robert Allan remained at Yew Tree House until he passed away during the 1850s and his wife Ann continued as 'grocer'. His son-in-law, George Kipps, who married his eldest daughter, Sarah followed in the profession as tailor, but it was Robert's second son, David who continued the business at Yew Tree House.

David Allan – master tailor

The 1871 census shows David Allan, aged 40, master tailor living in the house with his now widowed sister, Sarah, who was keeping house for her brother. Also in the house were Sarah's three children, Annie, Colin and Mary. Sarah Kipps died during the 1890s when she was in her seventies but David Allan remained at Yew Tree House until the early years of the 20th century. The 1901 census and the 1905 Kent Directory still record David Allan as working as a tailor. He passed away in 1908 at the age of 77.

New owner – William Wood

It was at this time that there was some change in the ownership of the house. The house was sold to a Mr. William Wood, a retired civil servant from the Admiralty. Wood was formerly from nearby Seal but during the late 19th century had been living comfortably in Putney on the outskirts of London.



The Martin Family

The 1910 valuation survey shows William Wood as the owner but the house was occupied by Louis Martin and his family. The survey shows the “house and garden with wood lodge and wash house” and that Louis Martin was paying six shillings a week plus rates. The house was described as a “weather boarded and tiled double fronted house, with one room used as a shop, in moderate order considering age”. The market value of the house and land was £205.

An early photograph shows how the house appeared in the early 20th century, with the weather boarded exterior but the bay windows had not yet been added. It is also possible to just make out one of the old yew trees in the front garden at this time (around 1918).

Yew Tree Stores – Family Grocers

The 1911 census shows us that Louis Martin was working from the house as a butcher with his wife Emily. The couple had four sons, Cecil, Percy, Arthur and Reginald. Also in the house at this time was Louis’ brother, John, a ‘journeyman butcher’ and one servant, Ellen Hodges. It was during this time that the house became known as Yew Tree Stores and continued to be a vital part of the village community and along with being a butcher, Yew Tree Stores was also a general grocers. By the 1930s the parish magazine shows the shop was advertised as “*E. J. [Emily Jane] Martin and Sons, Family Grocers and Provision Merchants. Greengrocers. Wall’s Ice Cream...Families waited on daily.*” The 1934 Kent Directory lists the shop as ‘Martin & Son, confectioners’ and it was also known as ‘Martin’s Stores’ for some time.

Another photograph of Kemsing village shows Yew Tree House during the 1930s showing the new oriel bow windows and what appears to be a number of advertisements on the outside of the house.

Post war changes

After World War II the electoral register shows that the house had become the home of Louis and Emily’s son, Percy Martin and his wife Beatrice. However, by 1955 Yew Tree Stores was taken over by Basil Heath and Frank Preece, who only stayed until the early 1960s, when it was sold to Kenneth and Eileen Eke. It was at this time that the Ekes converted the shop into a family home as well as restoring a number of historic features in the house.

Architectural features

Architecturally the house has been altered many times over the last few hundred years. The interior exposed wooden beams give some idea of the appearance of the early house but the exterior has had many additions. The front of the house shows three different types of windows, the first floor with 18th century sash windows, the ground floor with oriel bow windows and above the door a unique lead light window, believed to be made with Dutch glass. The exterior weather boarding was removed to expose the timber framing during the 1960s and 70s, at which time an extension was added to the rear and an inglenook fireplace was uncovered.