

Bachelor's Mead – Horton



Bachelor's Mead is the oldest house in Horton and has been situated in the heart of this quiet village since the 1300s, when Edward III was King of England. Originally a one storey medieval house with a central fire, the house has been extended and renovated over the last 650 years to create a comfortable family home. Bachelor's Mead has retained many original features, including timber crucks dated to 1350, segments of wattle and daub, timber fireplace, and a large double storey living room that was formerly used as a school room.

Medieval farmers

Bachelor's Mead has changed a number of times since it was first constructed in the 14th century, but the early medieval structure can still be seen in the central part of the house. Originally a three bay open hall where the fire was placed in the middle of the room with the smoke escaping through the thatch. Sadly, very little information is available for the earliest period of the house, but at this time Horton was part of the manor of Bishops Cannings and was in the hands of the Bishop of Sarum. Horton has primarily been an agricultural village throughout history and early occupants of the house were likely to have been farmers and labourers.

Bachelor's Mead during the reign of Elizabeth I

It has been possible to trace the ownership of Bachelor's Mead back to the late 16th century when documents record it in the ownership of John Unwyn in the 40th year of the reign of Elizabeth I, 1598. It is possible the property can be traced back further, to the 1580s and before, when it may have been attached to land held by Michael Ernle, Baronet and High Sheriff of Wiltshire, but these links are unclear.

The Unwyn family were prominent landowners in the area and also acquired land in other parts of the country. John Unwyn passed the property to his son, Symon, who in turn passed it to his son, John. It appears that this John was a prominent Royalist during the Civil War and was later forced to forfeit his lands to the Commonwealth. However, by 1651 records show John Unwyn sold the copyhold property, specifically recorded as 'Batherlors' and containing one acre and one ground or close of meadow, to Symon Ruddle.

The Ruddle family

The Ruddle family have been connected to Bishops Cannings from the late 16th century when John and Elizabeth Ruddle moved from Southbroom in the 1590s. By 1653, further documentary evidence held in the Wiltshire archives confirms that the house was occupied by George Ruddle, believed to be the nephew of Symon Ruddle. It is significant to note that the documents not only specify the owner (more usual) but they also record the occupants of the house at this time.

An architectural survey reveals that by this period an upper floor with a bedroom would have been fitted, along with the insertion of the first chimney. It is possible that these extensions took place in the 1600s when the Ruddle family purchased Bachelor's. The house was also heightened to create a full two storeys, but it appears that this may have happened gradually with various types of brick in-fill and re-use of timbers.



The Cooke family

By the 1690s, the house was in the hands of Simon Ruddle, son of Symon Ruddle, and again documents specify the occupant of the house was Bridget Ruddle, Simon's widowed mother. However, by 1702, deeds reveal that Simon Ruddle sold 'Bathelers' to Michael Cooke. A later document then reveals that Richard Cooke purchased the property from his father Michael and on Richard's death in 1739 it passed to his children, Michael, Anne and Jane. The house and surrounding land continued to pass to members of the Cooke family, with marriages linking the property to members of the Sloper and Pike families. However, by 1770 the descendents of Richard Cooke sold 'Batchelor's' to George Willy, Esq., lord of the manor of Bishops Cannings. George Willy passed away in 1762 and Bachelors passed to Prince Sutton, Esq., husband of George's sister, Mary.

Georgian owners and occupants

By the late 18th century more documents and surveys reveal that after Prince Sutton passed away in 1779, his estates passed to his son, James Sutton Esq. Land tax records from 1780 confirm the house was owned by James Sutton Esq. and for the first time since the Ruddle family we see the house was occupied by James Hitchcock. By 1783 the occupant of the house had changed to William Skeate, who continued in the house until 1800 when it became the home of his son, James Skeate.

Cookes Homestead House

James Sutton died in 1801 and Bachelor's passed to Thomas Grimston Bucknall Estcourt, MP for the University of Oxford and husband of James's daughter, Eleanor. A survey of the late James Sutton's estates, taken in 1805, clearly identified the property recorded as 'Old Property – James Sutton Esq. Cooke's or Batchelors' and the house was recorded as 'Cookes Homestead House' referring to the former ownership of Batchelor's Mead by the Cooke family. The ownership of 'Batchelors' continued to be Thomas G.B. Estcourt, while the Skeate family continued to occupy the house, passing to John Skeate in 1816 and then to 'Mrs Skeate' in 1817. But, by 1818 Bachelor's Mead had become the home of William Brown, and by the 1820s the occupant was Thomas Brown. It is understood that during the early 1800s, Thomas Brown became a significant landowner in Horton and Bishops Cannings and it is thought he sub-let the house during this time. He was later recorded with extensive landholdings and living at the larger Horton House nearby.

Thomas Henry Sutton Bucknall Estcourt

By the 1830s, the house and land was owned by Thomas Henry Sutton Bucknall Estcourt, son of Thomas G.B. Estcourt. Thomas H.S.B. Estcourt was MP for Devizes and in 1839 he gained a royal license, in compliance with the will of his father-in-law, Admiral Frank Sotheron, to change his name to Sotheron. The tithe records in 1841 confirm that by the end of the 1830s the owner of the property was Thomas H.S.B Sotheron and the house was occupied by Thomas Bishop.

The 1851 census gives further details of the occupants of the house, with Thomas Bishop recorded as 74 years old and 'pauper agricultural labourer'. He was in the house with his 25 year old son, Simon and Simon's wife, 24 year old Diana. In 1858, further change came to Bachelor's Mead when 'Thomas H.S. Sotheron Estcourt' sold the 'manors of Cannings and Bishops Cannings and Estates at Bishops Cannings Horton Bourton and Easton' to 'The Queen's most excellent majesty'. The conveyance clearly identifies the house and neighbouring 'Bachelors Orchard' were sold and from September 1858 were part of the Crown estate.

The School House

When the 1861 census was taken, Thomas had passed away and Simon was head of the house, however, he had re-married widowed Mary Miller. It is uncertain what happened to Diana Bishop, but it appears she died in childbirth. Simon was in the house with his wife Mary and four step-children, John, Hannah, Mary, and William, along with his own daughter, Sarah. All five children were under the age of 11.

One other key piece of information found in the 1861 census was the reference to Mary Bishop as 'School Mistress'. Combined with a further reference in the Victoria County History of Wiltshire that "there was a school in Horton in 1859 when it was said that '20 children are taught by a dame in a cottage'". Very few other details have been retained regarding the school, except that the house is often remembered as 'the old school house'. During this period, the house was also extended further when the large front room with double height room and large lead-light window was added for the sole use as a school room. It is unclear when this may have happened, but architectural evidence and the occupation of new wife, Mary, in the late 1850s seems to suggest this early Victorian period.

Simon and Mary Bishop

The 1871 census records Simon Bishop as the head of the house, 46 years old and a labourer, along with Mary, 41 years old and still with the occupation of school mistress. However, only two of their children were still in the house; John Miller who was recorded as a shepherd and Hannah Miller a general servant. There was also a visitor, two year old Rose Bennett living in the house at this time. By the time of the 1881 census the Bishop's were still at Bachelor's Mead, with Simon recorded as a gardener, but Mary was no longer recorded as a school mistress. John Miller was still in the house, along with another daughter, Mary, a 'nurse out of employ'. Mary Bishop's father, 83 year old Simon Morley, a 'Greenwich Pensioner' was also in the house at this time.

The Old School House

Simon and Mary Bishop continued at Bachelor's Mead throughout the late 19th century, with the 1901 census showing Simon, aged 77, an agricultural labourer, along with Mary, 71 years old and Mary's unmarried son, John Miller, aged 51 and still working as a shepherd. However, by the time of the 1910 Inland Revenue valuation and the 1911 census, the house had become the home of Frederick Ethelbert Hughes, a 33 year old 'cowman on farm' with his wife Winifred, 23 years old, and their three year old daughter, Gladys Ellen May. Significantly, the 1911 census is also the first record to name the house – The Old School Cottage. The valuation survey records the house was in 'poor repair' and simply 'brick & thatch [with] living room, wash house, pantry, 3 bedrooms...in addition is a schoolroom used as a meeting room'.

By the 1930s, Bachelor's Mead, known as 'The Old School House', had become the home of the Grant family. A full survey of the Bishops Cannings Estate in 1936 gives full details of the house at this time in great need of repair and restoration. The occupants were Herbert Grant, a thatcher, his wife Emily and their four children. The Grant family continued at the house for many years, until the early 1970s when the house was taken by Jim and Yvonne Michelmore.

Architectural restoration

It was at this time that an architectural survey was undertaken and the Michelmore family spent time and attention to restore and renovate the historic home. Fortunately, many of the historic features have been retained, including the timber crucks, along with further interior timber beams and fireplace. Although alterations have been made, such as the removal of a tie-beam and additional supports added, the survival of the timber crucks from the time when Edward III was on the throne and The Black Death was sweeping across the country, is rather a special feature of this large comfortable family home.

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Section of interior crucks dated to 1350