

History of The Towers

Research into the manor court book of Beeding has shown that before 1750 the land that The Towers now stands on, up to the road opposite the "Rising Sun" (formerly 'The Star') was in the ownership of a Mr. Bartlett. It consisted of a dwelling and two acres held of the Lord of the Manor of Beeding, Lord Edgecumbe. The land to the east, to Hyde Street, and Manor Road, was probably held by John Backshell of "New House" (now "Valerie Manor"). Described as a "Walled garden", a 1733 map by J. Mason calls the area "The Land of Snelling", from Sele Priory to Beeding Court. A private census taken by Dr. Bloxam, c1870-c1890, states that a Mr. George Smith was in residence at "Whealers" in 1872, probably the former house on the site where The Towers now stands.

Factually, the early history of The Towers is far from clear. The Sisters who live there tell a story passed from generation to generation, but obviously embellished with some imagination. It is said that a rich widow once lived in the former residence. On her death, she left all her money and possessions to her coachman. Inspired by his new found wealth, the coachman had visions of grandeur and decided to build a castle-like house on the land left to him. For this purpose he enlisted the help of Mr. George Smith, an architect of renown, who towards the end of the nineteenth century was involved in restoration work of the Brighton Pavilion. However, the coachman's vision was not realised before his fortune was exhausted. It is said that a sum of £24,000. had already been expended, a vast amount in those days. So the coachman cut his losses, and sold the half-completed building to George Smith who finished the construction in a more economical way. Indeed, the actual building would lend some credibility to this story as only half of it is built to resemble a castle. A local historian feels that Jasper Wheeler, from whom the land was conveyed in 1871 to George Smith, must have been the coachman referred to. However, the only coachman referred to in Dr. Bloxam's census was a Henry Marshall who died in 1871, and, apparently, nowhere is it recorded that a woman owned the site before Jasper Wheeler. So The Towers' early history is veiled in mystery.

The original building was completed in 1883. It has been described as a "monument to Victorian extravagance" and was known in Beeding village as "Smith's Folly". It sported four towers originally, one of them relatively small, and the three higher towers battlemented, the tallest being eighty feet high. The outside walls of the building were of Sussex brick, with cement rendering, and the inside walls were built of old Sussex brick, with flint work, bound together with lime mortar. There were fourteen bedrooms, five reception rooms with carved ceilings, and a large conservatory. The pine panelling in the hall led to a beautifully carved pine staircase, lit by a Gothic stained-glass window. Eventually the 80ft tower was considered unsafe and in 1911 it was lowered; the crenellated turrets were replaced by more weather-proof, black-tiled, conical roofs. Behind the battlemented parapet a third storey was added on the flat asphalted roof, giving The Towers, more or less, the appearance it bears today.

Before 1903 a succession of owners inhabited the building. At first, Mr. Smith and his family lived there. Photographs taken in the conservatory show the celebration of the 21st birthday of Mr. Smith's daughter, a grand occasion when Crox, the firework makers, staged a fireworks display. In fact, some

years ago, the Sisters received a visit from two elderly Canadian ladies, who had promised their mother that before they died they would visit the house their grandfather had built and see where she had celebrated her 21st birthday!

Other ancient photographs actually show a scaffolded Towers being built, with the former residence in the foreground. Others show a retinue of servants and grounds men, and a tennis court on the upper lawn.

The Towers was made into a hunting lodge by Arthur Payne who leased the property from a Walter Keymer in 1897. At about this time, the anti-clerical laws of France were having devastating effects on Religious Orders there, who were being forced to shut down schools and leave the country. The Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament was no exception. This Congregation of Sisters had been founded in 1715 by a French missionary priest, Fr. Peter Vigne, to educate the young. It had survived the French Revolution, two Sisters being saved from the guillotine by Robespierre's own death, it is said. When its good work was once again imperilled by anti-clerical legislation, Mrs. Maling Wynch, a great friend of the then Superior General, Sister Ste. Emerentienne, and a sister-in-law of Arthur Payne, invited some of the homeless Sisters to establish a school at The Towers which, at the time, she was renting.

On the 10th October 1903, the first five pupils, four from St. Maur and one from Montrouge, Paris, arrived at Bramber station. They were escorted by two Sisters. Five other Sisters, accompanied by the Chaplain, Father Marcellin, of the Assumptionists, had arrived the previous week to make ready the house. The first Superior was Sister Ste. Merry, who later left for the mission in Brazil, also founded in 1903. One of those little girls, Madeleine France, eventually entered the Order, and became Sr. M. Noel. She tells the story of their arrival: "It was a winter evening, quite dark, and the only lights in the streets were two little lanterns carried by the Sisters who had come to meet us at Bramber Station. At that time, there were no gas lights in the road; the village was very small, and there were no passers-by except a few farm workers, taking cattle to the fields. As we entered the drive leading to the house, we fancied we saw ghosts lurking on the crenellated towers. The following day we explored our home - too grand for us - Gobelins tapestries on the walls, stags' heads on the main staircase, with portraits of the Payne family below. In the hall there were tubs of green plants. The Sisters admired the carved wood of the ceilings, and the conservatory alongside the building, whose glass roof was hidden by passion-flowers and all kinds of rare plants and flowers which scented the air." The following weeks were spent installing a large classroom, a dormitory, a refectory, and a chapel. Many of the Sisters' possessions in France followed them by boat and rail: furniture, linen, even beds arrived at Steyning station.

So the school began in a very small way; lady boarders were also accepted to help finance the house. Sr. Marie Noel speaks of various noble visitors: Princess Ouroussoff from Russia, Princess Charlotte of Monaco, whose father Prince Louis, on visiting her, went fishing in the River Adur, and returned laden with fish which he took to Sr. Genevieve in the kitchen, telling her to fry them for the Sisters. (Sr. Marie Noel, herself, died at The Towers in 1974)

Mrs. Elizabeth Maling Wynch eventually purchased The Towers in 1908, and whilst keeping a certain financial independence, owing to her various commitments, Mrs. Wynch, herself, became a Sister of the Blessed Sacrament, taking the name of Sister Mary Agnes. It was in this way that the property of The

Towers came into the possession of the Sisters. Sister Mary Agnes bequeathed The Towers to the Mother General of the Congregation in 1917.

The storms of history, of course, have not passed The Towers by. During the Second World War, as much as possible, it was school life as usual, but there were added duties and excitements. The Sisters took it in turns to do stirrup-pump duty at night, and watched for fires from the parapets. The ladies' dining-room was transformed into a miniature forest as parts of trees, like pit-props, supported the ceiling, and the room was transformed into a Junior dormitory. The Juniors would wash upstairs and then descend carrying gas-masks and suit-cases, to sleep; Seniors had their beds in the front main hall. Sele Court (now the Junior School) was taken over first by the 3rd Canadian Division of the Regina Rifle Regiment, until March 1944, and then by the 15th Scottish Division who departed just before D-Day. The Sisters told of how the Canadians would pour into the chapel for Sunday Masses and sing with all their hearts and souls. Many were feared lost at the D-Day landings.

In October 1940 a bomb was dropped opposite The Towers and exploded in the Alfrey's duck-pond. The Sisters told the children not to worry, but they were all asleep! A local villager relates that the residents of Sele Gardens awoke in the morning to find their houses covered in a thick layer of mud! The lower floor of The Towers priest's house was stacked high with provisions for the area against an imminent invasion. But, mercifully, it never came, and peace finally reigned again in Beeding valley.

Over the years, there have been many additions and alterations to The Towers. A chapel was built in 1929. After the Second World War the Sisters purchased Sele Court an adjoining property. The dividing wall was knocked down and the building converted to a Junior School. In 1950 a gymnasium was built, and over this, in the 1960's a laboratory, and a Home-Economics room. A beautiful new Library was made from two rooms on the first floor. In 1966 a Lecture-theatre was also completed, together with three common-rooms for the pupils and bedrooms for the Sisters. An indoor swimming-pool was built, in the field, in 1972. Four coats of paint were removed from the staircase in 1983; the Sisters undertook this labour of love themselves. Two mobile buildings were added in the 1990's providing 3 more classrooms, and an extra laboratory which also serves as a Craft, Design and Technology room. Two former bedrooms have been transformed into a large computer-room. A nursery was added to the Junior School in 1993.

Exteriorly, the parapets have been renovated; one of the towers has been completely re-rendered, and the black-slatted conical roofs, a nightmare to repair, have been replaced by copper. The fourth small tower disappeared in building work in the 1960's.

Despite these many changes The Towers has remained a small school. Founded with 5 little French girls, it has never numbered more than 260 pupils with approximately 100 boarders at the very most. But great things come in small parcels, and National League Tables reveal The Towers to be among the best schools in West Sussex. A recent Inspector's Report spoke of the splendid examination results. It said that the school's ethos was quite unique and that the standard of Technology in a girls' school was surprising. Its musical and dramatic achievements are also noteworthy, having staged 20 musicals of West End standard over the last 20 years. On the sports field some of its teams are second to none.

Our Centenary brings more changes; there is a project to replace the swimming pool enclosure; for the first time in its long history, The Towers will have a lay head. In September 2003, Mrs Carole Baker will replace Sister Mary Andrew as Headmistress of The Towers. Sister will remain at The Towers as Principal, in an advisory capacity. And so we take our place firmly in a new century and march towards a second centenary!

In the school's "Vision Statement" it is said "Christ in the Eucharist, in the Word, and in Each Other is at the centre of our School Community." For 100 years. The Towers has endeavoured to be a centre of Christ's love, and His presence, in a very special way, in the Eucharist. A Roman Catholic school, it welcomes children of all faiths and none, striving to build a loving environment where each individual is equally valued, seeking to live up to the school motto "Semper Fidelis" For 100 years the Sisters have made The Towers a centre of prayer and tried to instil into young hearts the love of God, preparing young people to take their place in adult life, to be a force for good in the world, and if possible, to change it for the better. It is to be hoped that those first brave Sisters and pupils looking down on The Towers now, will feel that it was all worth while.

Perhaps the last words should be left to some of the past-pupils and their parents:

"When the recession hit, we were told by our bank manager that our daughter's education was a luxury we couldn't afford - so we sold our house, and then our car, because we could do without them, but could not do without The Towers! It is a very special place...."

"Our gratitude to a lovely school which has cared for and taught our precious daughters, and their dear friends - they have had a truly wonderful start in life."

"Thank you all for being there for me for helping me to grow up and become more mature; for teaching me to take responsibility and how to laugh at myself. I love you all very much -you will always remain in my heart."

"As I face new challenges, the motto "Semper Fidelis" will never be forgotten. I hope that it will give me the strength to excel in whatever I choose to do."

Sister M.Andrew – writing in 2003

Acknowledgements: Keith Nethercote Bryant - "The Villager"

You can read a full account of the Towers History in Sister Mary Andrew's book "The Towers Convent...The first hundred years or so." This can be purchased by clicking [here](#).

