



Gerbestone Manor
Wellington, Somerset

Gerbestone Manor

IN 1924 WE BOUGHT GERBESTONE. It was indeed an adventure, but one which has proved invaluable to us and all our family, and although my husband, Lloyd Howard Fox, had lived all his life in the area of Wellington, Somerset, he had never explored the narrow lane leading down to this farm house, for it was then just a farm house, much of which was in ruins. It stood in the middle of an orchard with chicken-houses and wash-houses in its courtyard and except for the mullion windows and the porch on its eastern front, at first glance it had little to link its old stone walls with its architectural interest or the history of the families that had lived here. This farm was for sale, so as we were looking for somewhere to live away from the railway we explored Gerbestone Manor and immediately fell in love with it, its position looking up at the Blackdown Hills and its peaceful charm. The chance of restoring it appealed to us immediately, so two days later, with the help of Lloyd's father, we bought it and realised how very lucky we were. We then set to work to restore it with the help of our architect – Hubert Lidbetter.

The history of any old house is linked with the lives of the people that lived in it, and the periods of changing history of the realm. My hobby is a collection of period costumes, mostly inherited family ones, and although they did not belong to the families living at Gerbestone, they illustrate the periods of the 12th to the 20th Century.

The structure of the house itself altered through the centuries, changing with the times and with the people who lived there. The original house was built by Sir John de Gerebert. The earliest mention of the family who gave the house its name is in 1235 when a Knight named Gerebert de Wellington owned or occupied property in the neighbourhood. It is more than probable that the Gereberts came from Gerberay in Normandy as Henry III and his wife, sister of Louis of France, had encouraged many of their French friends to settle in the country. This supposition may be strengthened by the fact that the field nearest to the house is known as Frances Meadow.

It would seem that the family had influence in the right quarter, for in 1235 they obtained an ordinance from Bishop Joceline accepting the hay on the property, from the endowment of the Vicar of Wellington. In the earliest Court Roll of the Manor of Wellington (dated 1277) John de Gerebert is mentioned as a Juror, while in 1300 and 1301 he was High Sheriff of Somerset and was again reappointed in 1303 and 1304.

It is almost certain that a part of the present house was built by this John de Gerebert in the 12th Century. This would have consisted of the present hall and carried up to the roof-tree with a room opening out at each end: above two bedrooms on the south side and a large 'Solar' at the north end, each end of the house being served by separate circular staircases composed of solid oak treads, one of which is still in use and originally went up in the corner of the main hall to the 'Solar'. The main hall originally had a small gallery on the south side where the ladies could look down on the knights feasting at a long table below. This was reached by the other circular staircase from what is now the drawing room and then the kitchen. The kitchen had a large baker's oven built into the thickness of the wall which is still there at the side of the open fireplace. At this period there was no connection upstairs between the south wing and north wing of the house.

In 1333 the family was granted a licence for an oratory in their house at Gerbestone by Ralph de Salopia, Bishop of Shrewsbury, an indication that by that date the house was a reasonable size. The following year John and his wife Agnes settled one messuage, the Mill and lands, on John de Moleton, who sold the Manor in 1365 to Sir Henry Percehay of Kyton in Holcombe Rogus, whose son William, dying in 1390, left the property to his cousin William Francis, then living at Combe Florey. Members of the family seem to have occupied the house for many years; later it was leased in the early part of the 16th Century to Richard Buckland of Martock, and later to John Perry whose will dated 1581 left to his wife 'all such wenscott bordes bedsteads and hangings within my house at Gerbestone, together with all farm stock and the lease of the farm and barton made to him by John Francis'.

In the Elizabethan period the standard of life was slowly improving, and during the middle Tudor period, with a marked advance under Elizabeth, straw pallets and wooden logs for mattresses and bolsters gave way for greater comfort. Wooden platters were changed for pewter, though forks had not yet come in and if knife and spoon did not avail, fingers were the most useful. So it was in this period that the hall was considerably altered, and as well as the ceiling, chimneys in the walls

replaced the open hearth in the middle of the room. It is interesting to read 'now have we many chimineys and yet our tenderlings complain of rheumatism and catarrhs, then had we none but rarer does and our heades never ached.' The smoke of those days was sufficient to harden the timber so it was far better medicine to keep the good man and his family.

John Francis' son Nicholas, married a daughter of Sir William Courtney of Powderham and their son, Sir William Francis, was killed at Clyst St. Mary during the rebellion, leaving a son John who married a daughter of John Wyndham of Orchard Wyndham, near Williton. This property still belongs to the Wyndham family. In 1612 their son, Thomas Francis, moved into Gerbestone on the death of his tenant, having that year married Suzanna, daughter of George Luttrell of Dunster Castle. They were married at Dunster on the 29th June 1612 and had a family of fourteen children.

Perhaps they were left to carry on their peaceful way of country life but their link with the Luttrells and the Pophams would leave one to believe a Royalist sympathy.

The illustration of the small boy reminds one of that famous picture of a Roundhead Judge trying to catch out

a small Cavalier boy 'When did you last see your father'? It is surprising that until 1800, and then only for a short period, all children were small replicas of their fathers and mothers. Little boys in doublet and hose and tricorne hats and little girls in silks and satins. Generation after generation grew up to the only custom they had ever known, that of dressing their offspring as they themselves were dressed, small boys wearing swords even before they wore breeches.

Suzanna Francis, widow of Thomas Francis, was living at Gerbeston in West Buckland during the Civil Wars. She had strong influences on both sides because her eldest son John, who died in 1646, had married Katherine, daughter of Sir Francis Popham, a son of the Lord Chief Justice, whose mansion in Wellington was razed to the ground in the Civil Wars. Of his two daughters and co-heirs, one married Sir William Bassett of Claverton, a Cavalier family, and the other Edmund Prideaux of Ford Abbey, grandson of Cromwell's Attorney General, and it was through this latter marriage that her descendants owned Ford Abbey until 1847, when it was sold after the death of John Francis Gwyn.

Was it like that other Somerset Manor where the two brothers were on opposing sides and the house divided,



Tudor Costume

but the sisters-in-law with no animosity towards each other said 'Good morning' through a little glass window?

The additions made by Thomas Francis in 1610 consisted of extensions of each wing, allowing the kitchen to be moved from the south side of the house to the west end of the north wing and giving his large family four additional rooms. This involved the provision of two additional staircases to gain access to the new rooms on the first floor. Again there was no connection upstairs. One of these staircases has been preserved and now goes up from the present Smoking Room to the Nursery. We know little of the families that lived at Gerbestone during the Georgian period but the illustration of the dress shown, woven by the Spitalfield Weavers who were immigrants fleeing from the persecutions in Holland to settle just outside London, suggests a more peaceful time and illustrates a period of great elegance.

Gerbestone seems to have had no particular alterations during this time when the house was fully occupied by the descendants of Suzanna and Thomas Francis, but lately it was probably used as a Dower House. In 1693 Nicholas Frauncies and his son William raised mortgages on the house and then sold it to John Elwell of Exeter. Sir John Elwell left it to his only daughter Selina



Georgian, Elizabethan, & Stuart Costumes

Mary who married Felton Lionel Harvey, son of the first Earl of Bristol. They had two sons, the eldest of whom was A.D.C to the Duke of Wellington at Waterloo; Gerbestone passed to his second son whose descendant owned it until it was sold to William Temlett Marke in 1894, from whom we bought it 30 years later. During part of the Elwell period they let the house to tenant farmers and the north wing was allowed to fall into disrepair.

The alterations in 1924 included a single storey extension for larders, a new central staircase and the removal of a Victorian staircase put into the Hall and a passage behind the Hall giving communication between the two wings. The house is built of local flint, some 'squared' with Ham Hill stone mullions. Except for the very large beam over what is now the drawing room fireplace, which is chestnut or elm, practically all the timber used in the house was well seasoned oak.

Repairs involved the removal of all the damp and verminous plaster from walls and ceilings, (it was verminous I presume, because the chickens were kept, in what is now the Nursery): the removal of modern grates to open up the fine open fireplaces of the XVth Century, and of whitewash and lath and plaster from the panelling and beams.

While many of the mullioned windows had to be renewed, the oak timbers, except in the vaulted ceiling of the 'Solar', had resisted the ravages of the death watch beetle and the damp much better than might have been expected. There were practically no alterations to the eastern front.

Outbuildings in medieval times were an important part of the life of the Manor House Community. The large thatched barn has a pigeon loft at the west end overlooking the pond, where pigeons and their eggs were used for food. This is now a squash court and its outside lean-to with a lovely cobbled stone floor, was used as a washroom for children during the 1939 war and is now a delightful setting for our family dinner parties at times of anniversary celebrations. The water wheel turned by the water from the Mill race is still in use. This was mentioned in 1334. It has big grinding stones for giving flour for the community. Above it there is a long barn with the longest cruck roof in Somerset. The stables with a cob wall were to the left of the entrance gate, but alas, they have fallen down. Up the little lane there were two thatched cottages for farm workers; these had low ceilings and brick ovens but unfortunately during the modern planning regulations they could not be restored. Opposite them was the pound for any straying animals.

The Present

Since 1925 Gerbestone has been first and foremost a family home. Our third child, Mary, was six weeks old when we moved in and the builders still at work, and three years later Penelope was born there. We have tried, too, to share this small part of England's heritage with others, - friends and organisations, - opening it for charity in many events in which Women's Institutes have played a major role. Scouts and Youth Clubs enjoy swimming in the pool; children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren enjoy its beauties and rural setting of farm and woodland. During the war we had 60 evacuees, 30 at a time, when the old barn, was turned into a children's camp, the youngest children sharing the nursery with our family. The farm too played a major role when our lovely horses had given way to the tractor which never stopped as it ploughed the furrows and harvested the corn. Peacetime once more and Gerbestone's inherited treasures have been turned into a museum never, we hope, losing its family atmosphere as it welcomes family parties, and the occasions of weddings, birthdays, and anniversaries of our Golden and Diamond Weddings.

Christmas in this old-world setting and atmosphere plays an important part in our family gatherings, when we

collect our own huge bunches of mistletoe, holly and teasles with which to decorate, and welcome Father Christmas coming down the 15th Century chimneys to the open fireplace.

The annual Children's Plays were performed in the long gallery on the second floor of the south side of the house and reached by the circular stairs from the present smoking room. The Play which stands out as an historical one was that pretending that the Duke of Monmouth took refuge at Gerbestone and was hidden while the house was searched. This was performed by two generations of children.

This old house too, has been an ideal place in which to welcome visitors from other countries - America, France, Germany, India, and a party from a Dutch Cheshire Home village, and others. The World Ploughing Match was held at a nearby farm, when we invited these ploughmen from many countries to an evening party and entertained them with a show of period costumes followed by an inspiring speech from Mrs. Farquharson - World President of the Association of Countrywomen of the World. On another occasion we had eight visitors from Turkey who stayed for a week, learning something of the English way of life and the beauty of our countryside. All have taken back to their

own countries something of Gerbestone's charms and England's heritage.

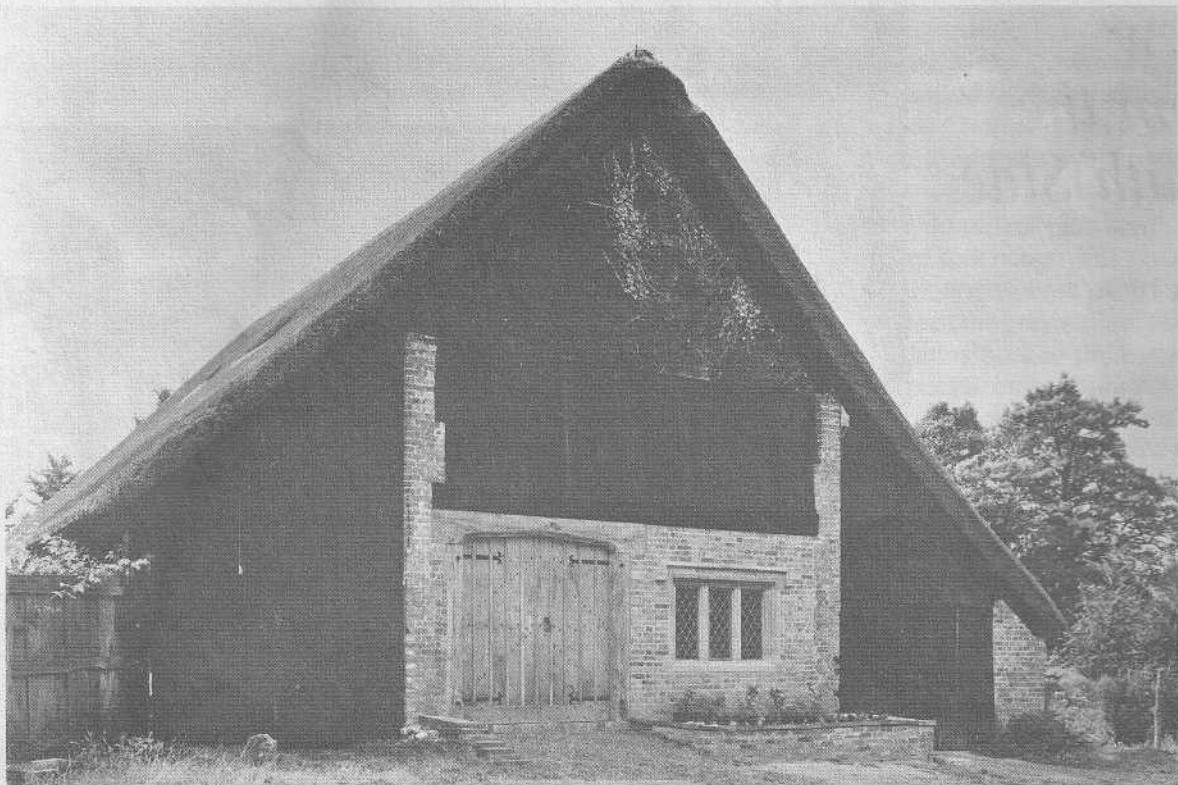
Perhaps the articles I wrote in the *Guardian's* Country Diary tells the picture we tried to create of linking the past with the present. when Choristers from Cathedrals and Cambridge College Chapels gave a recital of madrigals in our garden.

They sang Elizabethan Madrigal part songs, negro spirituals and a group of folk songs. The setting lent charm and just the right atmosphere of the past, as men and boys stood against the grey walls of the house and mullion windows dating back to the Elizabethan period. when country people enjoyed making music together and England was renowned for her songs. Many times the old house must have echoed to such songs, but probably not by a choir of trained sensitive musicians as we listened to that evening. The delicate Passion flower growing up the wall, the Golden Trumpets of the Begonia Radicans climbing to the roof and the perfume of mauve and pink Stocks along the border, while away in the distance behind the audience, woods merged into the surrounding hills. All this gave a richness to the scene which enhanced the beauty of the rare and exquisite scene.

In another Diary I wrote:- 'It is still so quiet in the evening sunlight, only the buzz of the bee or the gentle

*View
from the
South Side*





The Barn

twitter of a bird as it flits from twig to twig in the branches of the old apple tree.' Perhaps it feels so quiet just in contrast, for last night the old house echoed to the music played for 300 dancers, who gaily tripped to the old country dances on our lawn. It was a delightful occasion organised by the Women's Institute, one of their many and varied activities to foster the well being of country people. Here members and their families, boys and girls, responded to the callers, the pulsating beating of the drum, the thrilling tunes of the accordion, played with such verve that everyone's toes were a'dancing. The old courtyard and mullion windows set the scene; how often had they looked on gatherings such as this in earlier days, when Morris Dancers visited these little Manor Houses, when work was forgotten for a while and villagers came at the call of their 'Pipers piping, their drummers thundering, their stumpies dancing, their bellies jingling'. The very names describe such scenes and stir the imagination.

In 1978, the Diamond Jubilee of our Wedding, I wrote in the introduction to my Country Diaries, which were written for the *Guardian* 15 years ago:-

Is it possible that the way of life has changed so much in those 15 years, and nowhere more than on the farm and the countryside? We should not have thought of harvesting the winter oats in Pexton's Wood till they

had stood in the stooks for three Church bells (three Sundays) and now the great big Red Combine swoops over the fields in a few hours, cutting, threshing, all in one. Did we really go round the foray cutting one track with the scythe and tying each bundle with twisted straw to make room for the first round of the Binder? Did we really gather each sheaf of corn in our arms and stand them up in stooks? It was so much more fun and so beautiful to look across the harvest fields. Can it be the same 12 acre field where we picked the mushrooms and now the traffic roars through on the motorway, or the little lane where we picked blackberries and primroses, now an interchange? The countryside and the villages are a heritage of our land, our England, may we do all in our power to preserve it as the hand of time sweeps on.

Gerbestone Manor in 1894

