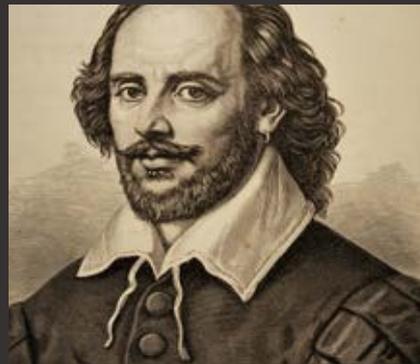




THE HISTORY OF
The Billesley Manor Hotel



HISTORY

From the time of the Norman Conquest the manor house at Billesley was one of a number of Midland properties belonging to the increasingly influential Trussell family. In 1327 Sir William Trussell was among those Parliamentarians who deposed King Edward II, going on to serve his son, the warrior King Edward III as soldier and diplomat. Billesley at that time consisted of a wooden manor house and nearby village, but in the middle of the fourteenth century the Black Death decimated the village, leaving just the manor occupied and a church. Foundations of the medieval village of Billesley can still be discerned in the fields to the east of the hotel.

After fighting on the losing side in various English battles the Trussells' had fallen on hard times, and by the sixteenth century the house was in serious need of repair. In 1588 Thomas Trussell, head of the family, was sentenced to death for highway robbery in Kent. He was fortunate to escape execution but his estate was forfeited to Queen Elizabeth I.

The manor house remained property of the Crown until it was sold, ending up eventually in the hands of Robert Lee, a wealthy London merchant and alderman. In 1603, the year in which Elizabeth's cousin, James I was crowned King, Lee was made Lord Mayor of London and knighted by King James. (James created more knights than any other English monarch as knighthood was a useful source of income). We know that Sir Robert was a wealthy man because he left Billesley Manor to his younger son, also Sir Robert Lee, while his older son got the London mansion.

The new owner of Billesley rebuilt the house in stone, a considerable statement of wealth in the early seventeenth-

century. We know that the work started around 1605 but not when it was completed. What is now known as the South Range, overlooking the circular lake, became the front of the house with a low sandstone porch at the main entrance to Billesley. This led through to an inner courtyard past a kitchen on its left-hand side (now the hotel bar) and panelled living rooms on its right (now the Stuart Dining Room). London craftsmen were employed to create the Jacobean panelling using local oak.

The fact that the porch is noticeably not in the centre of the building suggests that Sir Robert incorporated the original entrance into his new façade as he extended the manor west (seventeenth-century façades were usually symmetrical). There is no doubt that the Billesley Manor of the Trussell family had not been as wide as it is today. It was not as tall either. In fact a painting dated 1830 shows just two gables pushing up into the roof, one at each end. The middle two gables (including one over the porch) did not exist until the twentieth century.

THE DOLPHIN LOCKS

Near the Shakespeare Suite (Room 4), on the door to the Sir William Trussell Suite (Room 5) and on one of the doors leading off the Minstrels' Gallery there are fine seventeenth-century locks carved "à jour". This means that their dolphin motifs have been created by incising an upper layer of metal in the same way that Flemish and German armour was given its decoration.

As a near relation of Alderman Robert Lee, Sir Henry Lee was Queen Elizabeth's keeper of armouries at the Tower of London, it has been suggested that he obtained these locks from German armourers known to have been employed at the Tower. Sir Henry then either gave or sold them to young Sir Robert when Billesley was being rebuilt.



THE SHAKESPEARE SUITE

The Shakespeare Suite (Room 4) on the first floor of the seventeenth-century house, was given its name after Billesley was turned into a hotel. Today it is the most spacious of the bedrooms by dint of having been connected to an adjoining room.

What is historically true – and remarkable – is the hidden crawl space above the oak-panelled fireplace. It has a small central slit through which anyone hiding could observe what is going on in the bedroom. This has traditionally been described as a “priest hole” although none of Billesley’s owners were known to be Roman Catholic and so the need to hide a

priest here during the time of religious strife in England is unlikely. A more probable explanation is that the fireplace cavity was simply a place to store valuables, something of particular use during the English Civil War (1642-49).

Although the panelling in this suite is of English oak, its decorations – pilasters, brackets and oval “jewels” – are carved in walnut and pear. Walnut was particularly rare and expensive in seventeenth-century England so there is good reason to believe that this was Sir Robert’s own bedroom.



The porch originally jutted out from the house like a separate structure. Sir Robert had it built in red sandstone brought from outside Warwickshire. The same stone was used for the mullioned windows while the rest of the South Range was constructed in cheaper local stone.

In 1689 the Lee family sold Billesley to Bernard Whalley, Esq of Warwickshire and his wife Lucy. Squire Whalley is best remembered now for rebuilding the manor’s church in 1692 where his family is commemorated (look for the metal plaque to Lucy, “Daughter of John Baldwin”) and also in some bedroom panelling (now believed to be in the Stuart Restaurant) where the initials BW and the date 1698 were carved by the squire’s son, also Bernard Whalley.

Young Bernard sold the house in 1721 to Thomas Sherlock, a prominent London clergyman who went on to be Bishop of Salisbury and who treated Billesley as an investment. Bishop Sherlock was a school friend of Britain’s first prime Minister, Robert Walpole whose interests he served in the House of Lords. He also published prodigiously on the religious controversies of the day, making the case that miracles did occur. At the beginning of the nineteenth-century Billesley Manor was bought from Bishop Sherlock’s descendants by the Mills family (also commemorated in the church) but it then went through some sad times. At one point the main building was even split into two so that a tenant farmer could rent rooms from the owner. The extensive Jacobean panelling installed by the Lee family was removed from much of the

downstairs after it fell out of fashion. By 1906, when the manor was bought by Algernon Henry Charles Hanbury-Tracy, son of 4th Baron Sudeley, it was in need of substantial renovation. This was fortuitous because Lord Sudeley’s son was in need of a country seat at the time. His father, a distinguished Liberal politician, had been forced by substantial debts to sell the family home, Toddington Manor in 1893.

Hanbury-Tracy called in the fashionable architect Detmar Jellings Blow who had been a pupil of John Ruskin. Together the two men reconceived Billesley, building a new east wing at right angles to the main block and rerouting the drive away from the Jacobean porch to a second, new sandstone porch that is now the hotel entrance.

Blow – whose grandson Detmar went on to marry the fashion icon Isabella Blow – specialised in restoring and enlarging historic homes for the English aristocracy. (Curiously, in 1900 he had been the man entrusted with repairing Stonehenge when a three-stoned trillith fell over.) At Billesley he reintroduced oak panelling to the downstairs rooms by removing it from many of the bedrooms, which is why, in the Sir William Trussell Suite (Room 5) only the fireplace retains its original panelling. It is also why Bernard Whalley’s initials, originally carved in his bedchamber, are now to be found in the Stuart Restaurant.

Blow remodelled the South Range façade to create four equidistant gables, including one over the hitherto protruding sandstone porch. A topiary garden of yew

was created within the eleven acres that surround the manor house.

In 1912 Hanbury-Tracy sold Billesley to H.B.Tate, younger son of Sir Henry Tate, the sugar merchant who founded the Tate Gallery. Tate Junior created a substantial new staircase with a first-floor minstrel's gallery at the point where the old house and Hanbury-Tracy's east wing intersect (an area now called the Great Hall). He also excavated what was believed to be an ancient barrow in the grounds only to discover it was the eighteenth-century burial chamber of a much loved Billesley horse.

CHURCH OF ALL SAINTS BILLESLEY

There are records for a church attached to Billesley Manor dating back to the eleventh century. Rumour has it that William Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway in this small church in 1582. Certainly his granddaughter, Elizabeth Nash, was married here in 1646. The parish was always small and by 1649 had shrunk back to just one building, Billesley Manor.

Despite some ancient foundations, the church we see today dates substantially from 1692 when Squire Whalley rebuilt it in a faux-Norman style and turned the old south-facing medieval porch into a vestry with a fireplace. He also built a new west door that faced towards the manor along a short avenue of lime trees. It is a sign of the neglect that the church suffered in Victorian times that no money was found to rip out the box pews. In the eighteenth century each would have been rented by a local family.

In the nineteenth-century the Mills family prevailed on Rev Francis Fortesque to accept the living of Billesley. This meant

that every Sunday this wealthy clergyman (owner of Alveston Manor in Stratford upon Avon) would drive six miles with his family for the morning service at 11 o'clock. Afterwards the rector followed the usual English tradition of giving his servants the rest of the day off once they had laid a cold lunch for him in the heated vestry. He would then take a post prandial nap in the family pew while his children played in the churchyard until it was time for evening prayers at 3pm.

The church has a gallery (over the west door) that would have originally housed a rustic orchestra of the kind that Thomas Hardy mentions in his Wessex novels. Later it served as pews for the servants from Billesley Manor with the one boxed-off pew being reserved for the butler.

The church was declared redundant in 1978 and handed over to the Churches Conservation Trust. It is still in need of repair, but can be used these days for weddings by special licence or for blessings.



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