

More Hall - A House of Mysteries

by Michael Lloyd

Fig 1: More Hall from the south-west, as shown in a painting of 1893.



More Hall Convent owns a water-colour painting dated 1893 depicting the old house viewed from the south-west. In this painting (Fig 1), one sees what an onlooker would have seen in 1620, when it appears that building work on the house finished, not restarting again for more than 350 years.

In the early 16th century, a family by the name of Fowler moved from an estate close to London to Stonehouse Manor, near Stroud in Gloucestershire, and the head of the Fowler family took on the title 'Lord of the Manor'.

The story goes that King Henry VIII had taken a fancy to the Fowlers' London estate and proposed that they do a swap for Stonehouse Manor, which Henry owned. The family, who were wealthy clothiers, decided that it might be prudent to go along with Henry's suggestion.

A younger branch of the Fowler family came into possession at that time of 'Morralls', as More Hall was then known. Other variations of the name used over the years are 'Moor Hall' and 'Morralle'.

There is actual evidence that a farm homestead and buildings stood on the pre-

sent site of More Hall as early as 1449. It is not known what was the status of the then occupier, but since the mesne was held of Stonehouse Manor, it seems likely that the farmer may have been a copy (lease) holder and that later the tenancy fell vacant and the property reverted to the Lord of the Manor of Stonehouse. This would have made possible the gift of the estate to Edward Fowler in 1550.

It appears that the south wing of More Hall was completed before the end of that century. Standing in the courtyard facing the grand front door, one sees inside the portal another door set in the wall of the south wing. In the lintel of this door is inscribed the date 1582 making it likely that this was the original main door into the house.

In that same year, Edward Fowler died and his 12 year-old son, Anselm, inherited the house and estate. It is apparent that Anselm continued to extend the mansion over the years, but nothing seems to have been added to the main house between 1620 and 1984.

One wonders whether earlier buildings were demolished and replaced by the north wing and central part of the house which one sees today.

A number of features, including the grand front door, have been dated to exactly 1620 by the eminent local historian, Lionel Walrond.

Above the portal is a stone tablet bearing the Latin inscription 'Benedictus qui venit in nomine domini' (Fig 2). In a photograph taken prior to 1900, this stone can be seen but no inscription is visible.

It is likely that the stone tablet was commissioned around 1910 by Fr. Sharpe, who took up residence at More Hall in the early 1900s and founded an order based on the teachings of St Benedictine. The well-known Benedictus canticle begins with the same Latin words that are carved in the stone

above the door, which translated into English, say: "Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord".

In 1620, aged 50, Anselm Fowler had become a widower and it seemed likely that his daughter Elizabeth would inherit More Hall. However, a year or two later, Anselm remarried and his wife bore him a son who was also named Anselm. He inherited the house in around 1640, became married and had two sons, Henry and William.

In the latter years of the 17th century, the Fowler family became involved in the religious and political disputes of the time, being staunchly Royalist and strong supporters of James II, a fervent Roman Catholic and the last Stuart king to rule both England and Scotland. It is understood that Henry and William joined James's entourage whenever he visited the west country.

When, in 1688, James II fled to France following the invited "invasion" of William of Orange, the two brothers refused to swear allegiance to the Crown. The result was heavy fines and the recording of their names on a list of "known papists" which the Bishop of Gloucester had been charged with compiling for the "revolution" government.

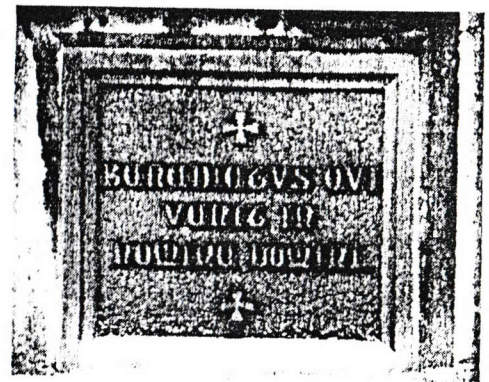


Fig 2: Latin inscription above the grand front door quotes the opening words of the Benedictus.

Rather surprisingly, they were not listed as recusants (Roman Catholics who refused to attend the services of the Church of England) and there is no evidence that they abstained from worship according to the Anglican Book of Common Prayer.

Henry Fowler outlived his brother William by a few years, dying in 1708 still a bachelor. The property was bequeathed to his brother's widow, Ann, on the condition that it remained in trust for her two daughters, Henry's nieces.

However, when Ann Fowler died in 1742, her daughters had already become married and it appears that they did not take up residence in More Hall.

From that date until approximately 1880, the history of the house and its various occupants is shrouded in mystery.

In the final years of the 19th century, we know that the owner of the house was a Mr R B Martin, who lived with his family at Humphreys End House and farmed most of the land leading down to the then hamlet of Cainscross.

More Hall had become very dilapidated and was sold in this condition in 1901 to Mrs Frances Isobel Seddon, whose husband was the vicar of Painswick. At that time, two of Mr Martin's farmworkers were living in the north and south wings of the house.

A wealthy woman in her own right (her family were the makers of the original Worcestershire Sauce), Mrs Seddon set about restoring the mansion and gardens and for a brief period it became St Marks Home for Boys. When this orphanage moved to London in 1906, More Hall welcomed a new occupant - Father Charles Henry Sharpe.

A High Church Anglican and noted scholar, Father Sharpe's two main spiritual aims were to preach the Holy Gospel locally and to revive the monastic system within the Church of England (Editor's note: The monastic system is characterised principal-

ly by one or more persons living in religious or contemplative seclusion and leading an ascetic or celibate life).

In his first aim, Fr. Sharpe is known to have been highly successful, but in his second he made little headway. This is due probably to the attitude of the Anglican hierarchy, which was decidedly unsympathetic to his cause, and also to the intervention of the Great War in 1914.

Mrs Seddon had given More Hall to Fr. Sharpe in 1912, whereupon he established his own small monastic house, calling his "order" the Evangelist Brothers of the Common Life. The community observed the Rule of St Benedict and the hours of the Benedictine monastic order.

A dovecote, situated a few yards to the west of the main house, was converted into a chapel in a most dignified style and the little monastery was open to anyone who wanted to retreat for a short time for quiet meditation and prayer.

One regular visitor to More Hall was Monsignor Ronald Knox who was originally an Anglican but later became a Roman Catholic. He is best known for his translation of the New Testament which became known as "the Knox version".

For a few years, a publication called the More Hall Magazine was produced. This appeared until the community was largely dissolved, brought about principally by the unsettling influence and call to arms of young men to fight in the Great War.

Fr. Sharpe had cause at this time to enlist the support of the notable High Church peer, Lord Halifax, the father of the Viceroy of India, Lord Irwin, who later succeeded to his father's title, becoming a distinguished Foreign Secretary, serving in both the Chamberlain and Churchill governments.

The older Lord Halifax became involved with More Hall when, in 1913, the Anglican Benedictine community on Caldy Island in west Wales, "went over" to Rome, settling

Fig 3: Bell cast by the Spitalfields Bell Foundry for the bell tower above More Hall's chapel.

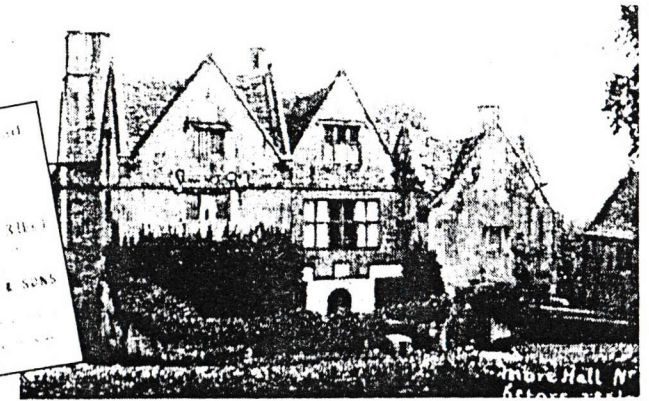
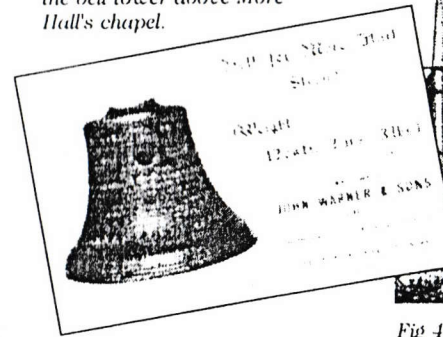


Fig 4: More Hall pictured "before restoration", showing the chapel (to the right) separate from the main house.

soon afterwards at Prinknash, near Cranham, between Stroud and Cheltenham.

The head of the Welsh order, Abbot Carlyle, was on friendly terms with Fr. Sharpe and, with the backing of Lord Halifax, attempted to bring to More Hall those monks who wished to remain Anglican. By joining the existing community, it was hoped that the influx would bring about a permanent and flourishing Anglican monastery at More Hall.

However, the plans came to nothing and, in 1917, Fr. Sharpe himself became a Roman Catholic. Although he never took Roman priestly orders, he was given minor orders by Bishop Burton of Clifton and was allowed to continue calling himself Fr. Sharpe.

More Hall remained as a place of prayer and quiet retreat with Fr. Sharpe continuing to preach locally, becoming known throughout the area as a gifted orator.

One day in early 1932, the Abbot and a few monks from Prinknash visited More Hall and Fr Sharpe made the suggestion that he bequeath to them the house, chapel and gardens.

Because the Prinknash community was

developing ambitious plans for a large Byzantine-style monastery to replace the Grange in which they then lived, it had no need for another house. However, the Abbot asked Fr. Sharpe if he would leave them his magnificent library instead.

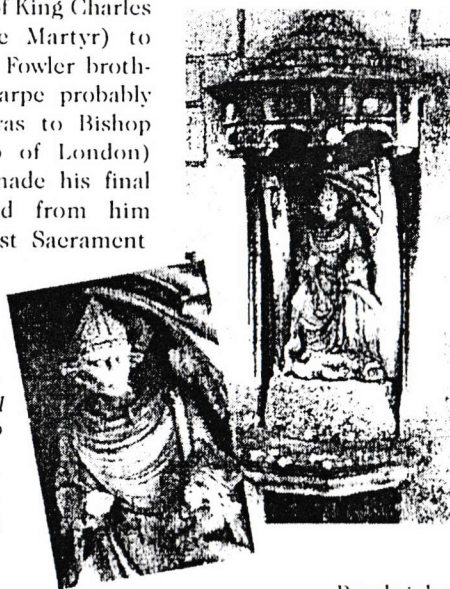
The actual response to this request is unknown because, that night, Fr. Sharpe suffered a stroke from which he never recovered, dying 10 days later. Neither the More Hall estate nor the library went to Prinknash but to a French nursing order known as the Sisters of the Temple which ran a nursing home at Clifton, Bristol, to which Fr. Sharpe had been taken following his stroke.

Among the many valuable books left to the Sisters of the Temple was an early edition of Migne's Patrologia.

At the time of Fr. Sharpe's death, the little chapel was complete with a small bell tower (see bell, fig 3), but was not joined to the main house (Fig 4). This event took place around 1960 when the annexe was built. It remains uncertain exactly when the dovecote was converted to a chapel, although the bell is stamped with the date 1915.

A most interesting feature of the chapel is a peculiar effigy of uncertain age set on a pedestal on a niche in the north-west wall (Figs 5 and 5a). There is no inscription to tell us the name of the mitre-wearing bishop nor the owner of the crowned head cradled on his lap.

The writer believes that the bishop could be William Juxon and, therefore, the head has to be that of King Charles I (Charles the Martyr) to which cult the Fowler brothers and Fr Sharpe probably belonged. It was to Bishop Juxon (Bishop of London) that Charles made his final confession and from him received his last Sacrament



Figs 5/5a: Effigy set into the chapel wall is believed to show William Juxon, Bishop of London, with the head of Charles I.

of the Eucharist prior to his execution on 30 January 1649.

The writer will be pleased to hear from any reader with a different notion of the identity of the effigy or any knowledge of when it was placed in the chapel wall and by whom.

With regard to the dovecote which later became the chapel, it was always assumed that it was built at the same time as the house. There is written evidence to show that its lower floor functioned as a kitchen sometime prior to 1840.

The arrival in 1932 of the Blue Nuns - as the French order was and still is known - saw More Hall converted into a convent follow-

ing a year of internal building work to provide rooms for the nuns and a small number of "ladies of means".

The latter were looked after in some comfort and style, highlighted by a rule which allowed each lady resident to maintain a "private table" upon which she had all her own china and silver and where she could entertain relatives and friends.

The convent was also used as a retreat by private individuals and by Catholic clergy and laypersons of intellect who could visit for quiet periods of study, prayer, meditation and even recreation ... walking and the like.

The fine house, with its terrace, lawns, kitchen garden, flower borders and watereress pool fed by its own spring, must have been a veritable 'Garden of Eden' to its visitors.

They would have enjoyed the peaceful location set behind a wall beside a narrow country lane with footpaths beyond leading up to

Randwick woods, the village post office and shop. Yet modern amenities and communications, in the shape of Stroud and its main-line railway station, were barely three miles distant.

It is little wonder that Ronald Knox came regularly to stay, as well as his biographer, the eminent writer, Evelyn Waugh, author of *Brideshead Revisited*. There is a possibility that a part of the Knox translation was done at More Hall.

Mrs Seddon, who by the 1930s had become a widow, also visited regularly until her death.

The Edwardian-style "upstairs, downstairs" traditions of More Hall were maintained long after 1945 when fundamental

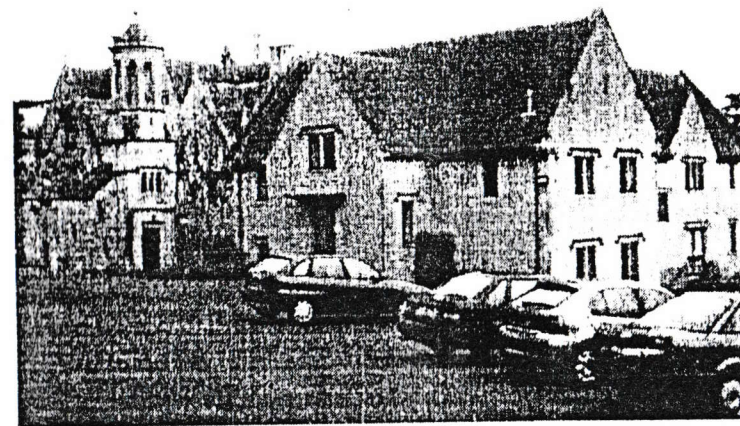


Fig 6: More Hall today showing the new wing which was added in 1984.

changes began to be seen in Britain's class-based social structure.

The Blue Nuns eventually departed More Hall in August 1968 to be replaced in the convent by the Sisters of Our Lady of Grace and Compassion who essentially were not nursing sisters but more a highly-dedicated group of carers.

Founded in 1959 by a Miss Mary Garson and her friends, the order bought or were given houses in which they cared for the elderly and infirm until such time as professional medical attention was necessary, provided by a hospital or specialist nursing home.

Following their original formation, the sisters had been advised by the Catholic Bishop of Southwark to become a religious congregation. This advice was followed with Mother Mary Garson becoming superior-general and the order choosing to follow the rule of St Benedict.

Some of the sisters decided to train as nurses and one of the first results was the addition of a modern nursing unit to the Holy Cross Priory in Sussex, staffed by a

qualified matron and nurses, all members of the order.

All of the homes owned by the Sisters of Our Lady of Grace and Compassion were dedicated to providing care for the retired elderly, usually female, but sometimes male, often retired clergy. This policy applied also at More Hall and the house started to leave its highly-structured ways behind and to enter the modern era.

Care was available to anyone of any denunciation - and even none - and the Rev Niall Morrison, vicar of Randwick, came once a month to deliver Anglican Communion within the chapel.

In 1984, work began on an extension to the house and the chapel was also enlarged. Bishop Mervyn Alexander of Clifton re-consecrated the chapel and HRH Princess Michael of Kent officially opened the new wing to the main house in early 1985 (Fig 6).

Today, Mother Mary Garson's sisters run homes and staff hospital units in countries around the world including Kenya, Sri Lanka and India.