

## THE STORY OF KING'S ACRE

King's Acre was first occupied two weeks before Christmas 1966. The whole of the ground floor was still bare cement screed, there was a gaping hole in the outside wall where the boiler was being installed and, apart from a small electric boiling ring there were no cooking facilities. Such was our introduction to modern luxury living.

The primary cause of all the chaos was that, some two months earlier the builders had gone bankrupt owing large sums of money to various people, not least of whom were the various sub contractors responsible for our heating electrical fittings and flooring. From end September until the date of occupation life was one busy round of re-negotiating sub contracts, chasing suppliers and negotiating with the liquidators to ensure, from our point of view at least, we didn't pay twice for work already done and we didn't pay at all for work not done.

Looking back now, sitting in a warm comfortable house and looking at a nicely maturing garden those early days of anxiety, chaos, discomfort and sheer hard work seem a millenium away. But they were very real at the time and this is being written in the hope that it may advise, encourage, warn and even amuse those rash enough to consider having their own house built.

So, because it seems as good a place as any, let's start at the beginning, tell you where King's Acre is, how it came by its name and something of the history of the land on which it stands.

King's Acre is a house in the village of Cuddesdon which is about six miles east of Oxford and a mile south of the main A40 route to London.

Cuddesdon's principal claim to fame is its theological college, founded in the mid 19 century by Bishop Wilberforce since when it has probably produced more Archbishops of Canterbury than any other college in the world. Michael Ramsay was a student here so was

An appointment as principal of the college is a virtual certain stepping stone towards a mitre within a few years.

The future of the college is now in some doubt. It is a relatively small institution. At its peak, in , it had about pupils and now has . The economic pressures for rationalisation are no respecters of the cloth and there are two other theological colleges of similar size and similarly close to the centre of Oxford at and Oxford itself, although according to one Swedish guide book now deservedly out of print, "a small industrial town, which also has a university" can offer some tradition and expertise in the teaching of theology and other subjects and this alone must affect the subjects in which the theological colleges find it necessary to offer instruction.

It is therefore possible that within the next ten years one of the focal points of the village will have disappeared and the sight of heavily cloaked students streaming from the church back to their college breakfast on a winter's morning will remain only a memory to the commuters of Cuddesdon.

But even if the college disappears the spiritual oversight of the village should remain in good hands, for opposite to the college is the Bishop's House - significantly no longer the Bishop's Palace - in the former grounds of which King's Acre stands.

The Bishop of Oxford has not always lived in Cuddesdon. Indeed, in ecclesiastical terms he is a relative newcomer, the first one to do so being Bishop Bancroft (1632-41). However, the first palace had a very short life because in 1644 as a somewhat drastic precaution to prevent falling into the hands of Cromwell's men it was, in the then current euphemism "scorched" by one Col. William Legge.

For 30 years or so the palace seems to have been virtually derelict but in 1679 the redoubtable Bishop Fell undertook complete restoration. Bishop Fell was also Dean of Christ Church College and it was from him that Thomas Brown, threatened with expulsion from the college, gained pardon by his free translation from the Latin of Martial's 32nd Epigram as -

"I do not love thee Doctor Fell  
 The reason why I cannot tell  
 I only know, and this full well  
 I do not love thee Doctor Fell."

In 1845 Bishop Wilberforce, who founded the college, described the Palace as an 'old H shaped, rambling sort of country gentleman's house' and he enlarged it and built the Chapel which John Betjeman at least is determined to preserve.

Wilberforce's enlarged palace remained the official residence of the Bishop of Oxford until 1937 and after two other occupiers the house suffered the same fate as the original one. In 1949, two hundred and seventy years after Bishop Fell had restored the ravages of the Civil War the palace burned down again. It was demolished and the new, modern and inconvenient Bishop's House was built in 1953.

The first occupant was Bishop Carpenter - who retired in 1972 - and it is primarily due to him that King's Acre came into being at all.

For many years the villagers had been free to walk and to play in that part of the grounds of the Bishop's House known as the wood which was criss crossed with footpaths and tracks. The entrance drive to the original Bishop's house was at the corner of Parkside, roughly where the electricity sub station now stands. Entering there a footpath turned left, and skirted the perimeter of the wood. Then you had an option. You could take the right hand path which brought you exactly along the line of the front fence of King's Acre, or you could continue along the original path which curved round and followed the rear boundary of King's Acre and traces of which you can still see. A little further into the grounds of the Palace the paths joined again to lead you to the north porch of the parish church and round to the west door and the lych gate. With typical perversity the only entrance to the church is now on the south side.

Bishop Carpenter however felt that the village was slowly dying and needed some new blood in it, a view with which the Church Commissioners apparently concurred, for two schemes were developed. The first for a group of bungalows to the south east of the church, now known as Church Close, and the other for the nine acres of woodland to the north of the Bishop's house through which the original drive way and footpaths I have already described once ran.

Inevitably the new road was called Bishop's Wood. The land remains the property of the Church Commissioners whose responsibility it became to develop it. Their first tasks were to prepare the scheme, to separate the land from the Palace by a stout concrete and oak fence, to lay the road and to engage a contractor. But this story takes a long time to tell and so far you know only how the road got its name, but not the house.

Like most new developments, the completion of which looks like being protracted, the house had to have a name for identification purposes, since no one could advise on what the number should be or was likely to be. About a year after we moved in we did in fact receive a formal communication from the post office saying that the address was number 4, Bishopswood, by a curious and possibly unique coincidence the same as the original site number. The wisdom of choosing a name rather than a number was however demonstrated some months later when the last house to be completed, at the top right hand corner of the road, looking from King's Acre put up a sign which read 'Number One'.

As there are only nine houses in the road it was fairly obvious that something was amiss. We could only be number 4 if the houses were numbered anti-clockwise from the top left hand corner. We could have been number 5 if 'Number One' were indeed No. 1, or we could perhaps have been number 8 if the odd numbers went down one side and the evens down the other - but if we were number 4 the other house couldn't be number one and vice versa.

There was much shaking of heads and discussion and correspondence with the

Post Office on the part of all the neighbours who not unreasonably wanted to know where they did live in the eyes of the Post Office if not in the eyes of God and eventually the matter was sorted out. After some weeks of glory and confusion as number 5 we reverted to number 4, but the name board King's Acre remained intact throughout all the confusion and letters and bills continued to arrive much as before.

I once had a house in Dorking which had three different numbers in as many years, but that is another story. Why did we call this house King's Acre?

The Acre part is fairly obvious. It describes the size of the plot. But the King part has only the most tenuous connection with Royalty. So far as is known Alfred burnt no cakes here even though the Danes once annexed Cuddesdon Mill from Abingdon Abbey, neither did King Charles hide in any of the oak trees although Oxford was a Royalist stronghold. The tenuous connection can in fact be seen in a stained glass window in Christ Church Cathedral.

Christ Church, the college that is, was the creation of Cardinal Wolsey and was to surpass in magnificence any other college. A score of monasteries were conveniently suppressed, with the blessing of the Pope, in order to finance the project and in 1525 building commenced. Before it was finished Henry VIII had fallen out not only with the Pope but with Wolsey as well. What was to have been Cardinal College was re-founded as King Henry VIII college, but in 1545 the Cathedral, formerly at Osney, was united with the college and became "The Cathedral Church of Christ in Oxford".

If you walk up the main aisle of the cathedral on the right hand side, just after the transept you will see a stained glass window which is a memorial to Bishop King, the first Bishop of Oxford.

What more fitting we felt, that a house built on the Bishop's land should commemorate the first Bishop. So that is the origin of the name. Cuddesdon goes back much further in history than its Churches or colleges. Our neighbours regularly find Roman pottery and oyster shells in their garden. But we were content to try to link the past with the present through the Church just as down the village street past the Post Office is the house called Wesley Cottage where once for a brief period in Cuddesdon history an outpost of non-conformity stood in this Anglican stronghold.