

Priors Mesne



Front and side views of the house 2011

Anyone that has been on the top road from our village in the direction of Bream cannot have failed to have looked to the right and beheld a simply magnificent view across rolling countryside and towards the River Severn and then beyond into the distance to the Cotswolds. Certainly wonderful to any countryside enthusiast or artist looking for inspiration.

The whole estate is now known as Priors Mesne (1) (in the past as Priors Lodge and Bream Lodge) and the fine house and estate has a fascinating history.

The large detached house is Grade II listed and is primarily of 18th C construction with extensive modifications later in that century. Interestingly the interior has an early 17th C open square stairwell with plain stringing, twisted balusters and a heavy handrail. It has many 18th and 19th C shutters and in the dining room is a large stone-checked fireplace with a very deep oak bressummer (or load bearing beam). The outside is rendered but the central section at the back is of exposed rubble.

Although the house is remarkably fine and the location glorious it is the people that inhabited such grand estates that bring the timeline alive.

Digging into the archives the earliest reference I can find is of a will made by a Mr John Barrow of Bream Lodge, Dean dated 10th April 1716 and later a reference by a certain Reverend Thomas Rudge (2) who mentions Bream Lodge as a 'large and handsome house lately belonging to Mr Lawrence Barrow who died in 1773'. The estate was then vested in John Matthews Esq. of Newnham.

Dr Henry Cook

The next significant owner was a Dr Henry Cook (1832-1927) formerly a Surgeon General in the Indian medical service. Apart from the latter he had an intensive passion for geology and geography and in particular was greatly influenced by the books of William Robinson, the influential Victorian gardener. He was determined to create the garden of his dreams in the English countryside and by 1888 had purchased Priors Mesne. He published anonymously a book entitled *A Gloucestershire Wild Garden* in 1903.



Courtesy Averil Kear

He cleared large areas and set about introducing many exotic plants and countryside lovers will now know who to blame for the introduction from North America of the infamous Japanese knotweed (*Polygonum cookii*) to this country! Other plants included bamboo, Chinese aralias, castor oil plants, gunneras, canna lilies, angel trumpets, tobaccos, azaleas, buddleias, japonica, hydrangea and magnolias. There were many visitors to Priors Mesne and many were impressed by 'features of exceptional interest'.

In 1904 Cook sold the estate to a Dr. Robert Leamon Bowles, a respected physician, who wrote many medical books and travelled widely. As with the former owner he had a keen interest in gardening and brought back from his travels many foreign plants and trees. The Bowles family put the Mesne on the market in 1934 and the tropical garden featured in the sale particulars.

GLOUCESTERSHIRE.

Between the Severn and the Wye : about three-and-a-half miles from Lydney, eight from Chepstow and 22 from Gloucester.

B RUTON, KNOWLES & CO. will SELL by AUCTION, at Gloucester, on June 2nd, 1934, in one lot (unless previously Sold by Private Contract),
PRIORS MESNE, AYLBURTON.



A compact RESIDENTIAL ESTATE, delightfully placed on the slopes of the hills in a district of great natural beauty, between the rivers Severn and Wye. It comprises a picturesque Country Residence, containing hall, three reception rooms, billiard room, seven bedrooms, four servants' bedrooms, bathroom and usual offices ; with electric light and excellent water supply, situated in a well-sheltered and secluded position, about 500ft. above sea level, with charming views, across well-wooded country, of the River Severn and Berkeley Vale beyond ; also stabling, garage with man's rooms over, small set of farmbuildings, gardener's cottage ; matured terraced grounds with tennis lawn, and enclosures of pasture-

land and woodland, in one wood being a delightful Tropical Garden with three pools. The Estate possesses much individual charm, and extends to about 113 ACRES.

VACANT POSSESSION ON COMPLETION.

Particulars of Messrs. LEE & PEMBERTONS, Solicitors, 44, Lincoln's Inn Fields, London, W.C. 2 ; or of the Auctioneers, Gloucester.

Sale advertisement for Priors Mesne House
Courtesy Gloucestershire Archives

The Assam Garden

Several owners followed Robert but the next significant event at the Mesne was as the setting for the film *The Assam Garden* in 1985.

The film was made by Moving Picture Company, distributed by Contemporary Films Ltd and written by Elisabeth Bond. The film stars Deborah Kerr as a recent widow (Mrs Graham) who discovers that her late husband's garden has been selected for consideration as a 'Great British Garden'. She then devotes her days to tending the garden in hope of getting it selected for this accolade. Whilst gardening she develops a close friendship with her neighbour and in gardening together she finds a joy and warmth in life. Unfortunately her neighbour returns to her native India and just when she may be getting a prestigious gardening award she learns that her husband left debts behind and she may be forced to sell her house and her beloved garden. This touching drama chronicles a friendship but ends on a depressing note with her standing alone in the garden calling aloud to her late husband not to leave her alone.

Although the film received 3.5 out of 5 in 45 reviews and is a rather plodding sombre film probably more suited to



Madhur Jaffrey and Deborah Kerr on location

the stage it undoubtedly scores from Deborah Kerr's clear acting ability and the reviews at the time commented '*Deborah Kerr's quiet performance strikes exactly the right balance between tenacity and vulnerability*'.



View from Priors Mesne House, showing the formal garden, 2011

Courtesy Averil Kear

The Mesne is now in private hands and the gardens are sometimes open under the NGS Gardens Scheme.

Notes

I am grateful for Averil Kear's kind permission to include photos from her excellent article in the *The New Regard* (No. 27, 2013), the journal of the Forest of Dean Local History Society.

- (1) Mesne 'intermediate' (as of a Mesne Lord (pronounced *men*) Any lords that held land under the king on this hierarchical ladder were deemed 'Mesne Lords.'
- (2) *History of the County of Gloucester* (1803) by the Rev.Thomas Rudge B.D.