

MEMORIES OF THE OLD EYNSHAM VICARAGE



The Rev Peter Ridley recalls eight happy years as the last incumbent to live in St Leonard's House. This image JC Buckler, 1824, © Bodleian Library. Below, work in progress 2014

My wife (Sally) and I with our seven children lived in Queen Anne style in Mill Street from April 1977 to November 1984. My widowed mother was able to live in the flat to the right of the main house, over the garage. We knocked open the little access passage so that I could bring her a morning cup of tea and she could be in daily contact with all the family. Sally's mother also came to live in Eynsham and was of immense help in the care of the garden. Others who lodged with us were the present Bishop of Buckingham (Alan Wilson) when he was serving his first curacy with me, and Caroline Cayzer when she first came to Eynsham.



The "Queen Anne style" was not quite what it would have been in the house's younger days at the beginning of the eighteenth century. The Churchwardens had decorated it for us, and most things that needed to work did so when loving care and attention were applied. Things had been much worse when Stuart Blanch (later Bishop of Liverpool and then Archbishop of York) and his wife Brenda and their family arrived in the 1950s. One of the first things that happened for them was that the bathroom fell out into the adjacent (at that time) fire station. More of their experiences in the house can be found in *Stuart Blanch: a life* by Dick Williams, SPCK 2001 (in which book unfortunately the great Eynsham name of Pimm is spelt Pym). The flat and garage were built to replace the bits that had fallen off; and Stuart arranged for the Eynsham Baptist minister, Richard Hamper, and his wife to live there.



an elegant semi-circular drive

In our day, the driveway was entered by one of a pair of gateways rather than the single central one that replaced them after the Vicarage was sold off. So an elegant semi-circle led to the twelve steps leading up to the front door. The Eynsham Morris would gather there on (I think) May bank holiday morning. A little stone-built room, the 'Brownie Room', at the north gate was sometimes used for children's church activities.



Brownie Room © Rupert Boulting

A lofty elm stood near where the flat adjoined the furniture warehouse that had replaced the fire station; but as soon as we arrived, Dutch elm disease took its toll, and the tree was skilfully felled across the front drive and lawn. Accomplished woodworker and former Churchwarden Stanley Green made some beautiful pieces from its timber. To the left of the main steps was an elderly mulberry tree – and woe betide car drivers who left their vehicles beneath it when purple staining fruit was in season and likely to descend on their paintwork!



the tree was skilfully felled

More steps led up to the kitchen to the left of the house. A frequent visitor, who lumbered her way up them, seeking titbits from our own dog's provisions, was Charles and Pam Caine's grossly obese black labrador (Sophie?) on her morning free-range perambulation of the village. To enter the rear garden one passed under a reconstructed ogee archway from Eynsham Abbey (now, I think, removed to the church). At one stage we realised that the topmost stone was simply resting, unattached, on top! Other carved stonework was also there.



ogee archway © Terry Woodman

The rear garden was mainly grass with substantial vegetable and flower beds, bounded by Conduit Lane, the furniture warehouse, and at the back a brick wall separating us from the then brand new clinic (built on land that until the 1970s was part of the Vicarage glebe). A very rare feather-leaved beech tree (with conservation order still, I hope, in place) overhung the garden on the Conduit Lane side. It was a good garden for children and for the occasional garden party or church fête.



from Conduit Lane © Peter Emery

The house is Queen Anne (1704) at the front, but 19th century (1810) at the rear. It was fun to climb up through the attic to clear autumn leaves or winter snow from the area between the two roofs. There was a fine view across the housetops to the church. A doorway beneath the main front steps gave access to the semi-basement – not a part of the house for visitors! It was a series of tumbledown rooms. A huge timber beam, purporting to hold up my study above, rested on a central wall, and was not attached to the outside wall at one end.



a fine view across the housetops

An antique, enormous, "Robin Hood" boiler (actually redundant) occupied another of the front basement rooms. In the rear spaces were a brick bread oven (to be lovingly mended by one of our young sons) and brewing apparatus, and also the sealed well. My wife had to take down a dangerous lath and plaster ceiling, which had come unkeyed. As she did so she was bombarded by a mass of empty walnut shells, presumably a squirrel's left-overs. Amongst the dust and bits and pieces the church young people met on a Sunday evening; and, at other times, ours played table tennis.

Lead water pipes came through the basement. When we first arrived, the only threaded tap that my wife could find for a hose to water her plants was there, with no drain underneath it.

Afterwards, the tap wouldn't turn off. Sally was desperately holding the hose to the leaking tap, and I had no idea where the stopcock was (if there was one). Whilst I sought help from the fire brigade up Mill Street (unmanned at the first attempt), Sally strove to staunch the flow and eventually called in the help of dear old Bevan Pimm, our next-door neighbour, who did his best with his plumber's wrench, but the lead pipework was twisting out of shape. Eventually a fireman arrived and found the stopcock in the drive.

A flight of steps led up from the semi-basement into the above-ground-level hallway. On those stairs (it was said) one of my predecessors (one of the two Bricknells) lost his life by running down them and hitting his head on the woodwork above. This was told us by Gwen Whitlock and Joyce Morris, who were the Vicarage maids when they were girls and lived in the tiny attic rooms at the top of the house. They used to ride their bikes in the basement. The house was said to be haunted. All we encountered was a mysterious clapping, when all the children were asleep. We never saw the lady with her flower basket on the landing.



a tiny attic room

Entering the narrow hallway from the front door at the top of the main steps, one could turn left into the kitchen or right into my study. To the rear was a fine sitting room to the left and a smaller room (which gave access to the flat) to the right, with a small cloakroom in between. Stairs in the hallway led up to a semi-landing with two further short flights of steps leading to four bedrooms and a bathroom – no en suite, you understand! The family existed with only one bathroom, so there were queues, especially when six of the youngsters became teenagers. Then tiny stairs led on up to the two attic rooms and the roof. The rooms had pleasing paned Georgian style windows and even more pleasing wooden shutters. It was a good house to live in – but sometimes grimly cold in an Oxfordshire winter.

By modern standards the house would not have pleased many people, and perhaps the diocese was right to let it go. But for us it was ideal – and not only as a home for a fairly large family but also for church use. Considerable numbers of mums and toddlers could roam the house and the Sunday School happened there. The Parochial Church Council met in the sitting room, leaving space elsewhere for the family. Maybe it was a bit grand for a humble parson; but it was in the middle of the village, close to the church, and it was known and loved as the house that had been the Vicarage during three centuries. I have often wondered whether (had the church and village not at that time been engaged in the costly restoration of the fabric of St Leonard's Church) it might have been possible to have set up a local trust to conserve the house as the continuing Vicarage without the diocese having to bear any instant or ongoing financial burden.

May our old home now have a viable and useful future – and may those who come to live there be happy not only in their present dwelling but also in their awareness of the bygone days of a great house that was always at the very heart of the life of church and village.



Primary School Parade 2007