

High House Farm

A farm in South Devon – 400 years of history 1600 – 2000

When travelling between East Prawle and East Portlemouth on route to the beaches or the ferry to Salcombe you will see an old stone farmhouse set behind a high wall. This is High House Farmhouse which was built in the reign of Elizabeth 1 and has survived four centuries to the reign of our present queen, Elizabeth 11. It was there when Cromwell's soldiers passed by on their way to attack the Royalist army at Fort Charles on the Salcombe estuary and when Barbary Pirates raided the South Devon coast. It was the home of three successive rectors of East Portlemouth Church in the 17th century and the Hundred Constable in the 18th. It was there when the first naval battle against Revolutionary France took place off Prawle Point in 1793 and when Napoleon passed by in the channel on HMS Bellerophon on his way to Plymouth and exile in 1815. Later in 19th century High House was the home of farmers who married into the family of shipbuilders who built the famous Salcombe Schooners. The house narrowly escaped demolition in the late 1870s when most of the other houses in East Portlemouth were demolished and three new farmhouses built. It was however just outside the estate of the Duke of Cleveland and therefore survived. This is the story of the house and farm from the 16th century to the 21st.

We bought this property in August 2005 and slowly began to uncover its history. The house is built of local schist rubble stone, with walls about 3 feet thick and a slate roof. Between the house and the road are courtyards contained between the front of the house and a 10ft. wall next to the road (originally this wall enclosed the whole farm yard as a defence against pirate raids). The only interesting features inside the house, visible at this time were the wooden screen separating the hall from the cross- passage and the corbelled stone fireplace in the hall. Most of the original features in the house were hidden behind plaster and concrete blocks.

We next engaged an architect, Paul Bedford, who specialised in historic buildings (He was engaged by the National Trust to advise on the restoration of Agatha Christie's house Greenways on the river Dart.) .Paul suggested that we remove all the modern cement plaster and concrete blocks in the house to reveal the underlying structure in order for him to draw up a work specification.

In January 2006 we started this work with the help of two local men. The most difficult task was removing cement plaster and a water proofing bitumen from some walls to reveal the original stone walls which in some places were built using only earth mortar between the stones. It was during this work that we uncovered the first large stone fireplace with large schist slab lintel and an oak doorframe. We later uncovered 3 more similar fireplaces in bedrooms, one in the west parlour, and another in the kitchen behind a tiled wall in a downstairs bathroom. After we had removed layers of carpet in some rooms we found a blue slate flag floor in the hall and in the cross passage a lime ash floor.

The builder Mark Hamilton moved in during August 2006 with a timescale of 6 months to complete the work. Paul Bedford, the architect had given him a specification of work running to 52 pages and the work actually took 12 months to complete. They uncovered other features including a bread oven, the stone stairs under wooden treads in a turret stairway, a cupboard with a flue to the chimney, used for preparing clotted cream and an alcove in the parlour with a curved back under lath and plaster with the remains of shelving. The wooden shelf above the dining room fireplace has wooden projections, which were used for hanging the roasting spit when not in use. The spit when in use would be turned by hand and later from a clock work spit turner. Above the mantelshelf at High House there is still a hook where the spit turner was hung and 2 holes in the shelf where a rope belt was threaded to drive the spit.

During the renovation, Robert Waterhouse, an archaeologist working for Devon Rural Archives visited us to ask if he could prepare a report on the house. He had the task of making reports on old farmhouses in Devon and there would be no cost to us. You can see from the enclosed plan and report that the centre part of the house was built at the end of the 16th century and most of the remainder during the next 100 years.

Whilst removing old paint from the walls in an upstairs room the builders uncovered several drawings of sailing ships from the 1830s. These drawings were identified by two experts from Salcombe, Malcolm Darch who specialises in construction of accurate models of old sailing ships and Edward Hannaford whose family have been involved in Salcombe sailing vessels for generations. They described them as particularly accurate with regard to the rigging and showing the whole range of craft being built in Salcombe during that period from a sloop to a three mast ship. These were traced by the archaeologist Robert Waterhouse and the drawing of a schooner on the chimney breast has been left on show. This room had outside stairs at some time and thought to have been used by men employed in ship building, sail making etc. as the farmer at that time and his son both named Samuel Thornton had married into ship and sail making families (Evans and Laphorne) based in Salcombe.

Ownership of the western part of the parish by the Duke of Cleveland in the 1870s had dramatic consequences for Rickham, Holset and East Portlemouth. Three new model farms were built in these villages between 1879 and 1890. All the older farmhouses were demolished and the land added to these larger holdings. East Portlemouth village itself suffered most from the Duke's reforms. By 1879 the villagers were very poor, living mostly by fishing with agriculture in a depressed state. From 1870 a series of cold wet summers and grain imports from the United States had caused a slump in agriculture which did not pick up until 1914 when the 1st World War began and imports were difficult.

Instead of supporting his tenants the Duke evicted them all and demolished their farmhouses and buildings. The former tenants were left to fend for themselves many going into the workhouse.

Three farms in the parish were spared because they were owned by Blundells School, not the Duke of Cleveland.

One of these was **High House Farm**, a late Elizabethan building which still stands today only because it was not owned by the Duke. Robert Waterhouse says in his report on High House Farm that it was established after 1540 (a lease in the possession of Blundells School starts in 1562 and mentions a messuage or dwelling house on this farm and called **High House** by 1601.)

High House Farm 400 years of History

I discovered whilst reading a copy of the East Portlemouth Heritage Appraisal that High House Farm had been part of the West Prawle Estate until the end of the 19th century. This Estate was owned by Blundells School, Tiverton, (named after Peter Blundell the founder) until the beginning of the 20th century.

Peter Blundell

Peter was born in 1520 to a poor family living in Tiverton, a town which was noted for its woollen industry. Peter started by helping the carriers who took woollen goods to London for sale of. He spent a lot of his time in London in the trade and became a very rich man.

He bought the Manor of West Prawle consisting of 950 acres as an investment in 1569 for the sum of £791. This consisted of West Prawle, Moor, High House and Walland farms and smaller parcels of land in Charleton, Chivelstone, East Allington, Stokenham and a single house in Kingsbridge.

In 1581 he appears as the joint richest man in Tiverton. In the following year he was assessed at £80 tax in the London parish of St Michael Paternoster. Peter never married and when he died in 1601 he left the considerable fortune of £40,000 (equivalent to about £30,000,000 today).

He left money to the poor in Tiverton and London, legacies to relatives and friends, to various charities in Tiverton and London and particularly money to found a school in Tiverton.

Blundell's School and the West Prawle Estate.

Blundells School was finished in 1604 and the running costs were to be met by the income from the Manor of West Prawle and the trustees made a careful survey of their estate in 1604 resulting in many increases in rent. The whole estate was let to tenants with the exception of West Prawle Wood, which was kept in hand. Blundells School continued to own the whole estate until the end of the 19th century and therefore I contacted the archivist at the school to ask whether they had any records of the tenants at High House Farm during their ownership. He replied with a list of tenants spanning 300 years with dates and lengths of leases from 1564 to 1868. These leases were made between Blundells feoffees (trustees) and the prospective tenants. A Manorial Court was held at

West Prawle once or twice every year. All the tenants were required to attend but the earliest surviving record is from 1785

I have been very grateful to Blundells School for preserving the records of their ownership of the Estate.

. In this year the tenants appeared before George Owens, Gent, the Steward 'to do their suit and service' On this occasion 12 turned up and it was laid down that absent tenants in future would forfeit 1s each. with High House.

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