

History of Bernagh – 16 & 18 Duncombe Street

A little bit about the possible origins of Duncombe Street.

Duncombe Street was formerly the Northern boundary of property called Shyggerland or Sugarland meaning (perhaps) the land inclines or falls downwards, the line of Duncombe Street was probably identical with this steep lane. It was once called Sigdure Lane which became corrupted to Sugar Lane.

In 1822 an “engine house” (fire station) was built at the top of Duncombe Street on the right hand side (previous to this the site was a Quaker graveyard with the last burials around 1750) and at this time Sugar Lane was renamed Duncombe Street.

The Feoffees purchased the site of the old burial ground in 1881 and proposed a new engine house with a library over, £300 to be given to cover costs, with the removal of the old engine house which they considered disfigures the higher end of town. At the same time they submitted plans for the laying out of the Feather Bed Field as a public recreation ground.

Engine house

Further down on the right hand side (going down) is what was previously the Oddfellows Hall. It was purchased in 1892 for £850 from the Oddfellows by the Church authorities and was renamed St Edmunds Hall. In 1896 the basement was fitted out as a gymnasium and bagatelle room and was used as an infants school on Sundays.

In 1914 St Edmunds Hall was rebuilt of brick and stone at a cost of £1000 and would seat 300 people. It was to be used for Church Sunday School and other meetings. (pity we haven't still got it for U3A meetings).

Very little is known about our house prior to the late 19th Century. The houses adjacent to us are numbered 14 and 20 which confirms the information from Local Heritage Resource Centre that at one time it was 2 cottages, number 16 with a back entrance. There is evidence in the attic of the original roof of the cottage number 18 which is over the rear of the building with the newer roof over the front.

The earliest map we have – 1841 – shows our house to be a square building with no evidence of the 2nd cottage, so it has already been altered from 2 cottages to a substantial double fronted Georgian residence.

1841 map and 1881 map

At this time the property was owned by William Lyfe Pearce, if we assume that he also lived in the house - he is in the 1841 census as living in Duncombe Street, however house

numbers are not stated on the earlier censuses and the data was not always collected in a logical manner ie up one side of the street and down the other.

1841 Census

then we can ascertain that in 1841 he was a lieutenant of militia aged 53, living in our house with his wife Sarah Anne 59, Prosser 32 (son?) a clergyman, Sarah Anne 27 (daughter?), Howard Drake, a 16 year old schoolboy and Mary Crimp 19, a servant.

William Lyfe Pearce was born in 1787/88 in Devon and died on 13th March 1854 in Duncombe Street.

He married Sarah Anne Prosser (born 19 January 1782) on 6th June 1808 in Dodbrooke Church. They had 8 sons and a daughter. He was Justice of the Peace of Kellaton. Sarah died on 17th March 1856 and is buried at Dodbrooke – she was 7th generation of Sir Francis Drake. Sarah Anne's parents were Captain George James Prosser and Anne Pollexfen Drake. It was stated in a newspaper of the time "at Kingsbridge in 1822, died Mrs Anne Pollexfen Prosser, widow of Captain Prosser, of the Royal Marines and last surviving child of John Drake, formerly collector of customs at Plymouth, the lineal descendant of Sir Francis Drake and sister to John Savery Drake, with whom the title became extinct, he dying without issue, and from who the last Sir Francis cut off the entail of the property given to his ancestor by Queen Elizabeth for his services and discoveries and gave it to the late Lord Heathfield"

As I mentioned earlier, the back part of the house appears to be much older than the front (part of the original cottage?), the cellar was once the kitchen and there is still evidence of the Range that was once there, the dining room has a bell push for summoning the servants and there is a servants back staircase – narrower and steeper than the main staircase and a servants room with thinner door than the doors in the rest of the house.

There are original fireplaces in the 3 main bedrooms, a marble mantelpiece in the dining room and a wooden Adams style mantelpiece in the study, all of which we have retained.

Fireplaces

I have copies of the Censuses for 1851 – 1891 but it is not possible to be sure which entries are for our house, it becomes clear in 1901 and 1911 as they are labelled "Cottage Hospital".

Excerpt from A letter to the editor of the Kingsbridge Gazette on June 21st 1862

The Greatest Want of All

Of all "the wants of Kingsbridge" set forth of late by yourself and your zealous correspondents, you have, I conceive, overlooked the greatest want of all, namely a sanatorium or hospital, none being nearer than Plymouth, for bodily injuries, difficult operations, and for such diseases as require special treatment, dietary, baths etc.

Places of worship, schools, reading rooms, a Town Hall, a popular Gazette, and improved walks round the Quay, you have already; and the time may not be far distant when you may have a line of healthy convenient dwellings for the labouring classes, a railway station, and even a park. But the town, with its populous district of six miles round, without a sanatorium scarcely deserves the name of "a town".

A sanatorium must surely be regarded as the next want to places of worship of which you have already seven.

(Rest of letter in folder)

It was another 25 years before this was taken seriously and a further 12 years before Kingsbridge got its Hospital

In January 1887 it was suggested that a Cottage Hospital for Kingsbridge and surrounding villages should be established as a local memorial of the Queen's Jubilee. It was also stated that a bequest of £2000 from the late Mr Peak (of biscuit fame), for this express purpose, has been lying idle at a Kingsbridge bank for some years awaiting the accumulation of a similar sum from local benefactors or subscribers, (this was not in fact used owing to opposition from several gentlemen). A meeting of the Jubilee Commemoration Committee in March of that year decided to endeavour to erect a building capable of accommodating 4 beds. Estimated total cost of construction and furnishing will not exceed £1000, expense of maintenance would be fully met by contributions amounting to £150 per annum.

Reverend R H Birks, a former rector of Kingsbridge, bought "Laurel Bank" (earlier name of our house) and gave it to the town as a hospital.

2 pictures of house as a hospital

We must assume that it was at that time that the house was extended to provide 2 wards and a kitchen, bathroom and toilets. There was also a chapel of rest in the garden complete with cedar panelling, an inscription on the wall (" I am He that liveth and was dead. Behold I am alive for evermore, Amen") from Revelations Chapter 1, verse 18 and an inner wrought iron gate (to prevent body snatchers?), we removed the gate and replaced

the corrugated roof with slates, but otherwise it is much the same as when it was in use for the hospital, although it is now full of tools, bikes etc.

Shed and inscription

The hospital was opened on 2nd April 1898 and contained 7 beds and 2 cots (Kelly's Directory 1914) although according to a report about the opening ceremony in Kingsbridge Gazette on 8th April it was stated "*The house known as Laurel Bank, in Duncombe Street has now been secured at an annual rental of £30, which has been very generously guaranteed by Mrs Birks. At present there are four beds in the institution, and this number will be increased if considered necessary and as funds permit.* (rest of article in folder)

The Kingsbridge Gazette stated on July 15th 1898 "*The Kingsbridge Cottage Hospital has only been established a few months, but it has already afforded a good reason for its existence. The whole of the beds and the cot have been fully occupied for some time with patients who could not have been properly treated at their own homes. The care of the sick and suffering is one of the duties which our modern civilisation imposes upon us. It is felt that medical and surgical skill should be provided for those whose circumstances render them unable to pay for them*". It then went on to plead for financial help from the ladies and gentlemen of the town

After less than two years on 26 January 1900 it was closed for 2 months due to lack of money. (not much has changed then!)

In the 1901 Census there were resident: the matron Edith Please (aged 39), Servant, Frances Marsden (aged 28) and patients – Charles Pike (aged 24, groom from East Allington), Mary Kelland (age 4 from Torcross), Ella Pearce (aged 20, domestic housekeeper), Mary Shore (aged 17 Servant), Albert Hannaford (age 29, Builders stone quarryman) and William Grant (age 50, Mailcart Driver).

1901 Census

1905 map

In the 1911 Census the hospital staff had increased to 5 – Matron, 2 nurses, cook and ward housemaid and there were 8 beds.

Kingsbridge Gazette stated on 14 September 1917 "*The hospital has continued its good work in spite of war difficulties. The hospital was closed for some weeks in April and May after the resignation of the matron, but was reopened on May 30th under the charge of Mrs Glanville, who kindly offered her services for a month. Now Miss Shaw, matron of Safed, Galilee Missionary Hospital, has accepted the post until Palestine is reopened for Missionary*

work. 37 patients were treated since the beginning of the year and the balance sheet showed a balance of £56 3s 6d in hand. Expenditure was £447 8s 1d”

In 1918 the Cottage Hospital was extended to 15 beds and 2 cots to cope with an influx of convalescent soldiers from WW1.

Caring for the wounded

Where our garage is now was once the entrance for the horse drawn ambulance with large black double gates fronting the road. There was also a washhouse with well.

Duncombe Street showing hospital sign

The Hospital closed in 1928 and became a private house owned by Dr William Cowper. It was then that it was renamed Bernagh. We have tried to find out the origin of the name, as Dr Cowper had Irish connections we asked some Irish people when we were in Ireland a few years ago and there was some agreement that it could mean “God be with you” or alternatively “archway”.

Dr Cowper lived in the house until his death in 1970, he had his surgery there and by all accounts he was a very good and well loved doctor always willing to see a patient, although his wife (a JP) was much sterner and tried to fend them off if he was too obliging. We think he must also have liked a tipple if the number of whisky bottles left in the cellar was anything to go by!

Mrs Cowper continued living in the house until 1976 when she sold it to us and moved to Sherborne to be nearer her sister. The house was on the market for £25000 but that was just too much for us to afford and so we offered our maximum of £20000, which Mrs Cowper very kindly accepted as she wanted the house to be lived in by a family like hers (3 children).

During WWII the house suffered some damage from nearby bombs, a chimney was blown down (a fact we only realised when we tried to light a fire in the study and the smoke billowed into the room!) and two of the front windows were damaged and had been replaced with large panes of glass – my husband painstakingly rebuilt them with the original sized panes of glass to match the other windows.

Recent pictures of house (2) + Aerial picture of house