

COWARNE COURT – the final chapter! (*abbreviated copy*)

It was 100 years ago in 1921 that the Bourne family vacated Cowarne Court with the house and estate being sold at auction. It is also 60 years since the building was finally demolished by explosion into the cellars with no remaining trace of the building bought by Colonel Robert Bourne in 1876.

The Bourne occupation was the last chapter in a chequered history of the Cowarne Court estate which had, over many centuries gone from being an important Medieval manor house to the large farmhouse with potential bought by Colonel Bourne. Robert Bourne had, for some time been searching for an alternative to Grafton Manor which he rented from the Earl of Shrewsbury who was reluctant to sanction any alterations needed for a growing family or to sell the property. Cheyney Court at Bishops Frome was seen as a viable alternative but the sale fell through. It was at this time that the Cowarne Court estate came onto the market and the property, then with 3,140 acres was purchased at auction in June 1876 for £70,000. The previous old farmhouse was remodelled by the architect John Cotton and extended to become a handsome house in the Dutch gabled style. This was completed in 1883 when the Colonel, his wife Anna Eliza, and eight children moved in to become the focus of village and social life for almost the next forty years. Ruth, the second eldest daughter was the first to be married in Much Cowarne church to Edward Baily in August 1884. It has been from her Diaries which she wrote as a child of nine in 1874 until her death, aged 87 in February 1953 that we learn of the activities, both upstairs and downstairs not only in the Court and the village but also the relationships of her extended family.

The estate tried hard to be self financing with Colonel Bourne being a benevolent employer and landlord who owned the majority of the property in the village. Finances were always a worry and increased enormously in 1911 as a result of Land Taxes in the Budget, a precursor of the troubles which affected many estates and country houses which later suffered from the monetary and personal effects of the First World War. On the death of Colonel Bourne in 1915 and of Mrs. Bourne in 1917 Gilbert, the eldest son and heir and his wife Connie had plans to alter Cowarne Court and to live there comfortably but, by 1920 the situation had changed considerably as he found that he could not afford to live there decently and his income would not be sufficient to cope with the high wages. Reluctantly, and with much anguish from his sisters the estate was put up for auction. Ruth was most upset to see the sale on a large board outside Hereford station. It was, she said *"Such an awful finale to the Bourne family"*.

The auction was due to take place in March 1921 at the Green Dragon Hotel in Hereford but in early January the family were told that the majority of the estate had been sold privately to a mysterious Captain Usmar who, by the middle of the month had been deemed *"a bounder and a mere speculator"*. He immediately cut up the estate into small holdings and got all the tenants together at Burley Gate Inn where he plied them with champagne and cigars and persuaded them to bid for their own farms and holdings. Twenty five were bought with money loaned to the buyers by Captain Usmar at a high rate of interest. Due to the prior sale of a large portion of the Cowarne Court estate the auctioneers were obliged to amend the Sale Catalogue and accompanying plan. At the time of the auction on March 2nd all that remained for sale was the "Mansion House" and grounds (c.130 acres) and Cowarne Court Home Farm (c.345 acres) plus five other small farms together with cottages and parcels of land (c.1500 acres). The successful bidder for Cowarne Court house and the Home Farm was Farmer Pudge

from Bishops Frome who later demolished the old farm house part of the main building to use the bricks for the construction of his hop kilns.

After the sale the only Bourne family members living locally were the eldest daughter, Beatrice who had moved with her husband Sir Elliott Wood to Holmer Park, then on the outskirts of Hereford and now a health spa! and the youngest daughter Christabel who lived at Hampton Manor. For many years the fabric of Cowarne Court continued to deteriorate with valuable fittings being sold or stolen! The remains of the once handsome building was split into housing for farming families and during the last years was used for the storage of hops. Local children used it as a playground which hastened its final destruction. After passing through several owners who were more interested in the value of the land and forestry it was purchased by an insurance company who, fearing claims for personal injury authorised for the building to be demolished by explosion. This occurred in 1961 with the beautifully carved stonework ending up buried in the cellars. All that now remains across open fields and in great prominence is the Medieval dovecote, once a feature from the windows of the Court and recently restored with a Heritage Lottery grant but with limited access.

For details of both the house and the Bourne family see ***“The Bournes of Cowarne Court as seen through the eyes of Ruth Bourne in her Diaries 1874-1953”*** Published by the Much Cowarne History Group and available from the Community Shop for £7.00 or on-line from lawrencewalness@gmail.com Ruth Bourne’s Diaries in 86 volumes may be consulted at HARC (Herefordshire Archives and Records Centre), Fir Tree Lane, Rotherwas, Hereford Tel .01432 260750 for access details.