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BAYHALL, PEMBURY.

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BEFORE the hand of time has swept out of existence all traces of this old mansion, it may be of interest to put on record a few items of information connected with the place. The following notes are taken from letters and papers in the possession of a descendant of the family to which Bayhall belonged from about 1630 to 1790.

Of the history of the Manor before 1630 it will be sufficient to say here that for some time it belonged to the Colepeper family but was forfeited to the Crown. Subsequently the property passed through several hands, until early in the seventeenth century it was purchased from Sackville, Earl of Dorset, by Richard Amherst, Esq., Sergeant-at-Law, described in the will written by his own hand in 1630 as "of Lewes in the County of Sussex." The reason for his purchase of Bayhall is perhaps explained by a clause in this will: "I give unto the poor of the parish of Pembury in Kent, where I was born, forty shillings." The writer of these notes has a portrait of Richard in wig and gown; also a companion portrait showing a handsome man with strongly marked features of great character, presumably his son Richard.

This son rebuilt Bayhall. An ancient pedigree begins—"Richard Amherst—pulled down great part of the house and rebuilt the front in Oliver's time."

It is said that Richard was a favourite of Royal interests but that he carried himself with so much prudence and address as to have been enabled, whilst under the necessity of concealing himself, to proceed for some years with this building which he completed about the year 1664.

Richard's sons died without issue and his daughter, Elizabeth, inherited Bayhall. She married Sir Henry Selby,

Kt., of Ightham Mote. Possibly it was at this time that the needlework worked by Dame Dorothy Selby and her portrait came to Bayhall. These descended to the present owner through Mary Johnson, who is mentioned later.

Elizabeth and Henry's son—Charles—who took the name of Selby-Amherst, married Lady Stroud and died without issue. He left Bayhall to his sister's son.

This sister, Dorothy, had married John Browne of Nantwich, Cheshire. Charles Selby-Amherst appears to have allowed his sister Dorothy, her husband, John Browne, and their children to live at Bayhall. A letter dated 1719 from Bayhall to "Mr Browne, Collector of His Majesty's Duty on Salt in Nantwich" runs: "I thank God we are very happily placed here and my Bro. is extreamly kind to us and has given us a Spot of Land to make us a hop-ground and I have several men at work upon it to make it ready to plant sets and everything ready. My Bro. being in London—he has not been here above two or three days this month which makes this place a little mellancholly—Charles invites you all to Bayhall."

From various letters we find that John Browne was not a very satisfactory person. That Dorothy's marriage to him was not approved of is shown by this extract from the will of her father: "I, Sir Henry Selby of Bayhall give and bequeath to my deare and beloved Son Charles Selby-Amherst all that it is in my power to give and dispose of . . . As for my daughter Dorothy Brown (she having married without my consent, knowledge or aprobation) I give her only five pounds for mourning."

Dorothy's son, Charles, married Elizabeth Mittell, of the Moat, East Hoathly, Sussex. He lived at Bayhall and his widow after him till her death in 1790. A memorial tablet to them is to be found in the chancel of Frant Church. Having no children, she left the Bayhall property to Thomas Streatfield who shortly afterwards sold it. Most of the furniture, pictures, etc., she left to her niece and adopted daughter, Mary Johnson, who had lived with her at Bayhall. Mention is made in Mrs. Browne's will of—"The easy Chair

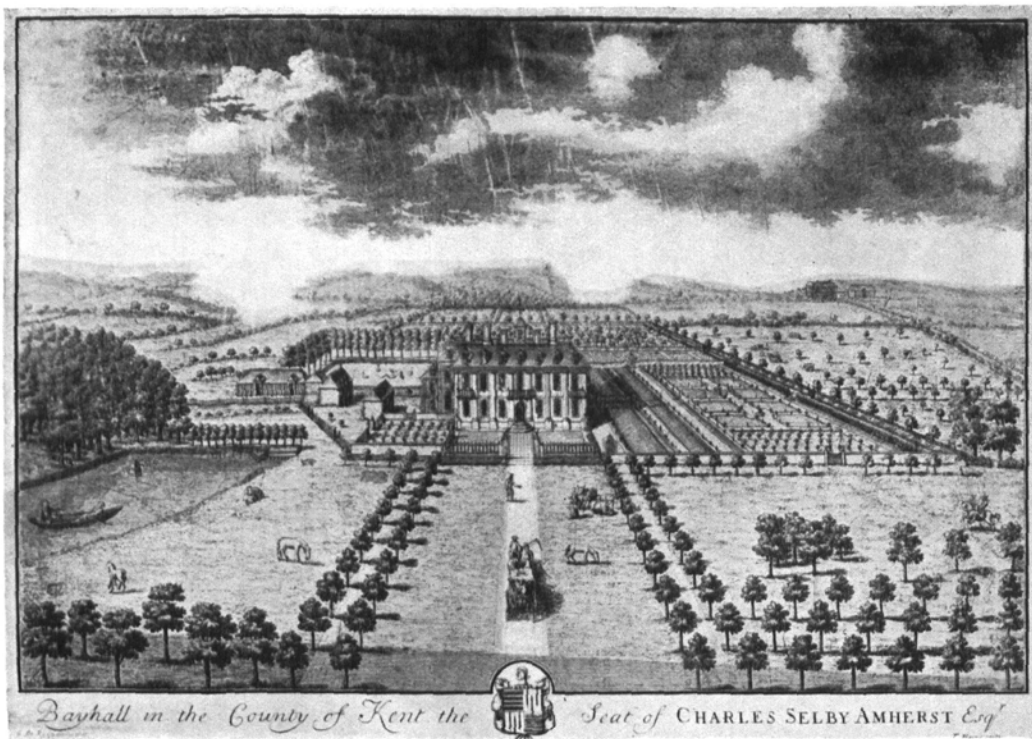


Photo. H. H. Camburn, Tunbridge Wells.

North Front. From an Early XVIII. Century Engraving.



Back of the House in 1908, from the South-East.



Remains of the North Front in 1908.

in my own Lodging room and the bed whereon I usually lie—the pewter inkstand, the Cabinet and all the other furniture in my Lodging room.” This furniture, cabinet, pewter inkstand, etc. are still in the possession of the writers.

“An Estimate of Bayhall,” not dated but presumably made at the death of Mrs. Elizabeth Browne, 1790, describes the place thus: “The Manor and Mansion House of Great Bayhall, being a very large and commodious house of about 16 rooms of a floor with a gallery of 90 feet in length with stabling for 14 horses, barns, Brewhouse, Malthouse, Granary, Dog Kennells, Hay Barns and all sorts of conveniences and all in very good repair, several of the outhouses being new built. With Hanging Gardens, Wilderness and Kitchen Grounds.” In the “Particulars of Sale,” 1790, the place is thus described: “A Substantial Ancient Stone-built Mansion with stabling and offices of every description for the purposes of the Mansion as well as the Farm.” The property was billed to be sold by auction “By order of the Devises of Mrs Elizabeth Browne dec. by Mr Christie at his Great Room in Pall Mall—in one Lot.”

After the sale the house began to fall into disrepair; details are not known to the writers, but about forty years ago part of the Mansion had been turned into a dwelling for farm labourers. At that time there was a fine old mantelpiece in one of the rooms. The place was thought to be haunted. “Lights and clanking of chains” were seen and heard, and a lady was “seen to rise” from the great fishpond. Now the only claim to fame in the locality for what was once a fine old Mansion is the name “The Haunted House.”

By the early years of this century the house was uninhabited and rapidly falling down. In 1908 part of the north front was standing with its upper story and roof—this would be the portion rebuilt by Richard Amherst in “Oliver’s time.” A more strongly built tower-like part on the south east side was in tolerable repair except that the roof had fallen in. This, no doubt, was part of the original house to which the seventeenth century rebuilding was grafted.

A visit paid in the autumn of 1928 showed a great change. All the roof and upper floors of the front have gone, leaving only the lower front walls which form a stone screen behind which are piles of debris. The older portion in the south-east corner still stands in much the same condition as twenty years ago, its tall chimney forming a striking feature, but all the floors have fallen in. Traces of moulding can still be seen round the lower room, and the openings of many fireplaces in the walls of what were once the upper rooms.

A tradition that an underground passage exists is borne out by the fact that the information of such a passage was volunteered by a small boy who was playing in the ruins.

The terraces of the "hanging gardens" can be traced in the meadow beyond the moat on the west.

The writers have a large oil painting, dating from the early eighteenth century and showing Bayhall as a fine mansion, surrounded by its "hanging gardens," fishponds, ornamental walks and farm buildings. Also in possession of the writers there is a copper plate from which engravings have been struck and which gives a very similar view of Bayhall. This engraving is entitled "Bayhall in the County of Kent, the seat of Charles Selby-Amherst Esq^r." It is interesting to note that the farms and buildings shown on the south side of the garden are still in existence and can easily be recognised as they are very little changed.