



NAISH HOUSE

FIRE ON CHRISTMAS DAY 1902

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HISTORIC MANSION BURNT

Naish House, which stands on the high ground overlooking Portishead, and may well be described as one of the historic mansions of Somerset, was almost destroyed by fire on Christmas Day. For the last 11 or 12 years the house has been in the occupation of Capt. T. Spencer.

This gentleman is well known throughout the county - first from his association with Mr. Murray Anderdon in the secretaryship of the Somerset County Cricket Club, and secondly, by reason of his connection with the Volunteer movement. Mr. Spencer has conducted a successful preparatory school at Naish House for some years, and it was a fortunate circumstance that his pupils who number between 30 and 40, had left for the holidays. Before they

departed a smell of burning wood had been noticed in two or three of the rooms which go to make up what is known as the north east wing of the house, but careful examination failed to reveal any cause.

Just as the family, consisting of Mr. and Mrs. Spencer and their three children were about to sit down to lunch, one of the maids, going to her bedroom in the tower, found the room full of smoke. An adjoining apartment was also affected in the same way, and Mr. Spencer, upon being informed of the fact, at once realised that a serious fire was on the verge of breaking out. He promptly telephoned to Bristol for assistance from the Police Fire Brigade, only to receive the answer that as his house was outside the boundaries, no help could be rendered. Then he telephoned to Mr. Ascott, Bristol Hotel, Clevedon. who promptly had the alarm of fire raised. That was a few minutes before 2 o'clock, and a response was made which reflects the greatest credit upon the members of the Clevedon Volunteer Brigade. Within a few minutes of the call being received, the manual engine, properly manned, was on the way to Naish House.

Sir Edmund Elton, Bart. was in charge, and with him was Superintendent Reeves. The promptitude with which the Clevedon firemen turned out was all the more commendable because several of them were about to sit down to their Christmas dinner. It was scarcely 2 o'clock when they reached the scene of the fire, and they would have been there even earlier if the roads had been less greasy and less hilly. No time was wasted in getting to work. but though a plentiful supply of water was obtainable, it was evident from the first that the north east angle of the building in which the fire had originated, was doomed. The roof was already off, and the collapse of the burning timbers upon the floor beneath paved the way for its fall as well. Thus in a very short time the whole section of the house was burning like one huge furnace.

The strong westerly wind fanned the fire considerably, but it had the good effect of preventing it spreading to the offices, and what may be called the school apartments; at least, the wind assisted the firemen to prevent the extension of the damage. Their task, however, was an arduous one. As in the case with many mansions, the floors were supported by massive oak beams, let well into the substantial walls, and long after the floors had fallen in and the contents of the rooms had been destroyed the ends of these beams smouldered and rendered it necessary for the brigade to remain on duty throughout the night, because parts of the building which had escaped damage appeared to be frequently in danger.

After summoning the brigade from Clevedon, Mr. Spencer, finding that it was quite beyond his power to check the advance of the fire, did what he could to save his property. He received great assistance from his butler (George Windo) and a number of people residing in the locality, who were attracted by the flames. In this way the contents of the drawing room, dining room and study were taken away to a place of safety, though not before serious damage had been done to many articles. Excellent storage space was found for them in the schoolroom, the gymnasium and the chapel. Still, though good salvage work was accomplished, the loss sustained will represent a large sum. Mr. Spencer is insured with the Hand-in-Hand Company.

The house is the property of Lady Smyth, whose agent, Mr. H.B. Napier, visited the scene of the fire during the day. Mr. and Mrs. Spencer, together with their family became the temporary guest of the rector. The west wing was saved through the efforts of the brigade, assisted by numerous willing volunteers, under the direction of Capt. Spencer, the rector of Wraxall, Mr. Andrew Ford and P.S. Cullen (Portishead) and his men. A quantity of effects was removed safely to the private chapel, and schoolroom; the latter,

though built separately from the house, is attached to it by a covered way. This the brigade disconnected as a precautionary measure.

Had the fire broken out in the darkness the effect must have been most brilliant, for, as it was, the burning building formed a conspicuous object from Portishead and neighbouring parishes, and presented the appearance of a cavernous fiery furnace. Clouds of rolling fine, misty rain continually obscured the house, only a red glow being visible. Long after sunset it created a luminous spectacle. The Clevedon Fire Brigade was kept busy on the scene all the night, and had members on the spot until Sunday morning, when they were withdrawn. The brigade won considerable praise for their timely and well directed efforts to prevent the spread of the flames.

The following interesting particulars of Naish House are given in a "Parochial History of Wraxall" by the Rev. G.S. Master:-

In a position of exceptional beauty upon the western edge of the parish of Wraxall, overlooking, as a watchtower, one of the grandest views in the county, including, besides the rich Gordano valley with its villages of Walton, Weston, Clapton, Portishead and Portbury, the broad sweep of the Bristol Channel, Avonmouth, the range of the Welsh mountains, and the rich woodlands of Gloucestershire to the Cotswold, the Severn, and the Wye, stands Naish House, a mansion of considerable size and importance, deriving its name from a former forgotten owner or occupier, of whom we have evidence in the occurrences of "Johannes Atte Nasch" in the Exchequer Lay Subsidies of 1327-8.

In 1634-5 this property, comprising 60 acres of meadow, was, with the adjoining manor and advowson of Clapton, conveyed to Henry Halswell, in consideration of a marriage

between William Winter, its previous owner, and Bridget, daughter of Robert Halswell.

At this date the house was rebuilt upon the site of an older one, and in 1687 passed to the Kemys family, between whom and the rector there was a tithe dispute in 1696, when it was shown that the house stood in the parish of Wraxall, while its dairy and barn were in that of Clapton. Miss Mary Kemys, by her will in 1701, bequeathed to her sister Anne Kemys,

“All my mansion house of Naish, and lands in Clapton and Wraxall”.

Miss Anne Kemys died in 1706 leaving all her lands to her nephew Sir Charles Kemys, Bart. About 1740 Naish had become the property and residence of Mr. Walter King, whose death in 1792, and that of his wife Mary in 1787, are recorded upon a tablet in the church. Among his tenants was Mr. Philip John Miles, M.P. for Bristol, living here while building Leigh Court, who added to the house a dining room and bedrooms over it.

Then it was purchased by Mr. Jas. Adam Gordon, of Knockespock near Aberdeen, and of Moor Place and Stocks, near Tring, in the county of Herts., the owner of large estates in the adjoining Gordano valley. A man of great culture and ability, he was in early life secretary to his uncle, Mr. Whitbread, M.P. and to Mr. George Canning. He married Emma Katherine, daughter of Admiral Wolley, but by her (who re-married Mr. Richard Bright, M.P. for East Somerset, and died 1890) had no issue.

His heir was his cousin, Sir William Abdy, upon whose death Naish was again sold to Lieut. Colonel Pilgrim, who died there, from whose devisees it passed in 1872 to the late Sir

Greville Smyth, Bart., his widow Lady Smyth being the present owner, it has been occupied by Colonel Lushington (who placed the carved oak mantelpiece in the dining-room, then the entrance hall), Sir Walter Morgan, Chief Justice of Madras, Sir John Strachey, member of H.M. Indian Council, and others, as tenants, and is now in the holding of Mr. Spencer, who has here a school, in an ideal position for little boys.

The house, originally a large square block, with a frontage to the west of three stories of large and heavily framed sash windows, and an entrance in the centre, has very thick walls and has undergone many alterations. The ground-floor rooms are of unusual height; the drawing-room, now divided, occupied the first floor, and was lighted by five windows. Mr. Gordon appended, in the florid Gothic of his day, an entrance tower on the east, and a conservatory on the south, handsomely built of hewn stone, besides various external additions, with a result which is hardly satisfactory. The turret staircase communicating with every storey, furnishes an admirable if unintended fire-escape. The main staircase is of handsome old mahogany. The attics were added by Colonel Pilgrim. There are two large walled kitchen gardens, and some small remains of a building near the house, conjectured, but with small probability to have been a domestic chapel.

Upon a pedestal near the house stands a life-size crowned figure of King John with the Magna Carta at his feet, and a falcon perched on his left wrist feeding from a horn in his right hand. it is said to have been sculptured from Mendip stone by Mr. Gordon's order as a gift to the Corporation of Bristol, by whom it was declined.

Pleasant woods adjoin the house on both sides, while a zig-zag carriage drive carried through the grounds affords

much needed access to the valley beneath, the public approaches to which are long and very steep.

The main interest to the place centres around the two maiden ladies already mentioned, Mary and Anne Kemys, daughters of Sir Charles Kemys, Bart. of Cefn Mabley, who received here "in retreat" the saintly Ken, deprived Bishop of Bath and Wells, whose biographer Anderdon. thus alludes to them –

“One of the happy asylums to which Ken loved to resort as a retirement into the desert out of the noise and hurry of the world, was Naish House, near Portishead, some six miles from Bristol. There two maiden ladies dwelt of the name of Kemys, who revered him for his great piety and charity. He was a sort of ghostly father to them, exercising all the holy charitable offices flowing from the Communion of Saints, and especially in fervent intercession with God on behalf of the poor harassed and afflicted clergy and others. His letters make frequent mention of these good virgins, in whose religious society he spent much of his time, especially in winter and during Lent. He calls the house

“a kind of nunnery where I usually abide in my Lord Weymouth's absence”.

His reason for being there at Christmas was to make a retreat from the festivities of a palace (Longleat) open to all comers of fashion and quality. His friend Dr. Smith, compares him to St. Hierome conversing with the devout ladies of Bethlehem, instructing and confirming their faith, and directing their consciences in the matter of true spiritual life, and influencing their souls with seraphic notions of God and of Christ, and of the other world, especially by the most convincing evidence and demonstration of example.

He speaks of this private seat of the good ladies as having a better pretence to the title of a religious house than those so-called Popish countries, where superstition, opinion of merit, and forced vows take off very much from the pure spirit of devotion, and render their restraint tedious and irksome. But these good ladies are happy under your conduct, and are by an uninterrupted course of piety elevated above all the gaudy pomp and vanities of the world, and enjoy all the comforts and satisfactions and serenity to be wished for and obtained on this side of heaven, in their solitude”.

This is all we can learn of Naish and its inmates. It is to be regretted that Ken did not give a more detailed account of them. in the will of Anne Kemys 1708, she leaves

“To my honoured and respected friend, Dr. Ken, the deprived Bishop of Bath and Wells, £100 which I humbly entreat him to accept as a small token of the great duty and affection which my sister and I bore him”;

and again,

“to my much honoured the late deprived Bishop of Bath and Wells £200 to be distributed by him among the deprived and non jurant clergy: 5s. to as many poor women as I am years old. After legacies are paid, £100 more to Dr. Ken and £100 more among the deprived clergy”.

In the Kemys Chapel, Michaelstone, co. Monmouth, there is this inscription:

Mary, Anne, Kemys, sisters who both chose the better part, wise virgins here repose, Mary first crowned, Anne languished till posses't, Of the same grave, of the same mansion blest.

Mary aged 55 dyed Oct. 5. 1708 Anne aged 57 dyed Dec. 1708, by their friend.

(Ed. For clarity the dates have been entered in full despite this destroying the flow of the 'poetry'!)

There are vestiges of a circular castrum on the brow of a hill opposite Naish House Sir Charles Kemeys, 4th. Bart. M.P. was a nephew of Misses Mary and Anne Kemeys, of Naish House. Sir Charles died unmarried in 1734, and this baronetcy became extinct.

His estates passed to his only surviving sister, Jane Kemeys, who married (1704) Sir John Tynte, Bart. of Halswell, co. Somerset. Lady Tynte was succeeded by her only surviving son, Sir Charles Kemeys-Tynte, 5th. Bart. of Halswell, Somerset and Cefn Mabley, Glamorganshire. He left no male heir and this baronetcy became also extinct. *(Ed. In this para the name is always Kemeys)*