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The Common Kitchen

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“The Common Kitchen”

By S. J. A. EVANS *and* S. M. EWARD

NUMBER Three, Millers Green, stands at the north eastern end of the so-called Green within the College at Gloucester. It faces north, and at its eastern end is attached to Little Cloister House; on the west it abuts on Number Four. All three houses in medieval times formed part of the domestic offices of the Benedictine Abbey of St Peter of Gloucester. On the Dissolution of the Monastery in 1540 the conventual buildings had to be adapted to house a different kind of community, no longer that of celibates, but of married and family men. This involved the dividing up of the two-bay halls, standing upon their undercrofts, into smaller rooms, and ceiling off the high timber roofs to conserve heat. Almost all the houses in the College have been altered in this way again and again in each succeeding century since the Dissolution. The Chapter has never been rich enough to destroy the old and to build anew.¹

Number Three is no exception. It was adapted for family use early in the 17th century, as its fine plaster ceiling bears witness; it was given panelled rooms and an enchanting mahogany staircase in the 18th; and provided with amenities in the 19th. It is a house with a history.

It first appears in the post-dissolution records as “The Common Kitchen”. When the monastery was dissolved in 1540, the King’s Commissioners replaced the monks with a Collegiate Body, retaining fourteen of the monks in the new foundation. But in the following year the King decreed that Gloucestershire should be cut out of the old diocese of Worcester, and that the seat of the new bishopric should be established in the erstwhile Abbey Church of St Peter, which thus became in 1541 a Cathedral Church.

The Cathedral Chapter was to be presided over by Prior Jennings of the Augustinian house of St Oswald in Gloucester, who thus became its first Dean. He ruled over a body of six Prebendaries, of whom three were ex-monks of the Abbey, six Minor Canons, and a full complement of organist, lay clerks and choristers with the appropriate number of servants. The new statutes provided

¹ A new house was built at Christ Church, Canterbury, after the Dissolution for the use of a Prebendary; the only instance of new building at this time that we have been able to identify.

“ That they who live together, and praise God together in the Choir, may also eat together and praise God together at table, we ordain and will, that as well the minor canons and officers in the choir as the teachers of the grammar scholars, and all other inferior officers of our church, and the children who learn to sing, shall feed together in the common hall, if it may be conveniently done”.

King Henry VIII also ordered

“ That the Dean do make choice of, and admit as butler or manciple, an industrious man, who at seasonable hours, shall supply with bread and drink those who eat at the common table. Lastly the Dean shall chose a cook and an under-cook who shall diligently provide the meat and drink for the table of those who eat together.”

The Common Hall here referred to must have been the Monks' Refectory, though the evidence available seems to pose a question. The award in the Augmentation Office book estimates the lead on the roof of the “ffrayter” at “XLV ffoder”, but adds:—

nota, the house burned and moste part of the leade consumed, so that there was fouden in and upon therthe but XXVi foders 8s iiij^d.²

There seems to be no change in the handwriting, and no other sign that the note was written at a later date, and this might lead to the supposition that the Refectory was ruined and that the common table was held elsewhere. Against this, however, is a passage in the account of the Visitation of Bishop Ravis in 1605, in which the Bishop “made a protestation . . . that if Mr Deane and the Prebendaries will acknowledge that the olde hall wherein the Peticannons sometimes dieted do apertaine to the Bishopricke” he would be prepared to repair it. In his reply Mr Prebendary Leo spoke of the ill condition of the building “dowtinge that if it shoulde fall it wolde impayre the cloisters and some part of Mr Wrench's house.” Elias Wrench, who was appointed Master of the College School in 1588, became prebendary of the second stall in the Cathedral in 1598, and Rudge's *History and Antiquities of Gloucester* (1811) states that “within the Little Cloisters is a house belonging to the Prebendary of the second stall.”³ The “Ffrayter” stood exactly between the north walk of the great cloister and the back of the house of the second stall, and must have been the “olde hall in which the Peticannons sometimes dieted.” Though much dilapidated, it was still standing in 1605.

It is difficult to be sure how long the common table for the petty canons and other inferior officers continued. In 1576 the College Cook excused himself from appearing at the Bishop's Visitation on

² P.R.O., Augmentation Office Book 494, p. 100.

³ Now called Little Cloister House.

the ground that he was preparing a meal, but by 1605 regular meals were evidently no longer served there, presumably because the peticanons were by now married men who preferred to dine at home with their families. Earlier still, before 1576, there had evidently been some slackness in the kitchen department, for it was deposed in 1548, at Bishop Wakeman's Visitation, that the Common Butler no longer performed his office but that his wife did so for him.

In the event neither the Bishop nor the Dean and Chapter did anything to save the Common Hall, and when it had gone there was no need for the kitchen which had served it; accordingly in 1612 the first lease of "Culina communis" appears, let to Simon Wrench, a son of Elias, at two shillings rent a year.

The building called the Common Kitchen is fully described in the lease as

" that olde house usually called the Common Kitchen set lying and being within the precincts of the said Cathedral Church with a certain outlet or little court thereunto belonging but adjoining the schoolmasters and ushers houses, which kitchen butteth on the east side upon part of the prebend's house of the aforesaid Elias Wrench and a narrow passage leading to the garden of the said Elias Wrenche on the south side."

The Common Kitchen therefore must have been on the site of the house which is now known as Number Three Millers Green. The question has been asked whether this building, though undoubtedly to be identified with the kitchen used in post-reformation times to serve the Common Table, was in fact the great Kitchen which provided for the Refectory of the monks,⁴ or whether it was in origin one of the many other kitchens which cooked for the separate establishments of the major obedientiaries.⁵ An examination of the Benedictine plan for comparable monasteries of the Order shows that the great kitchen at Ely and Rochester (for instance) stood at the south west corner of the Refectory.⁶ At Gloucester, where the domestic buildings stood to the north of the church, as also at Christ Church, Canterbury, the great kitchen was correspondingly situated to the north west of the Frater, in the position where Number Three now stands.

Number Three Millers Green thus became for the first time a dwelling house in 1612. It is somewhat surprising to notice that Simon Wrench, its tenant, was then only 4 years old so that his father Prebendary Elias Wrench must have taken out the lease in

⁴ The "Rough Notebook" now deposited in the Gloucestershire Records Office D936/A22 refers to it as "the Old Kitchen" in 1612.

⁵ Camden Soc., *Miscellany Vol. xvii*, p. 54.

⁶ T. D. Atkinson, *Monastic Buildings of Ely* (plans) and W. St. J. Hope, *Cathedral Church of St. Andrew, Rochester* (1900).

his son's name. It is not clear why there was any necessity for him to do this, though his motive is plain. He was then a man with a growing family, six sons and two daughters, and required more accommodation; in his rebuilding of the Common Kitchen he included a passage at first floor level, now blocked up, through which there was access from his Prebendal house (now called Little Cloister House) into Three Millers Green.

It seems unlikely that Mr. Wrench intended Number Three to be the nursery for Simon and his brothers and sisters, for in the extensive alterations required it must have been he who constructed the panelled room on the first floor of the house with its fine plaster ceiling. Among the decorative motifs with which its compartments are enriched is the figure of an imprint still used on the title page of books published by the Cambridge University Press, where it is surrounded by the motto "Hinc Lucem et Pocula Sacra". This imprint was first used in 1600, in the time of John Legate who became University Printer in 1588. The ceiling can be dated in the early years of the 17th century, certainly between the first lease of the house in 1612 and the death of Elias, who was a Trinity man, in 1633.

The site of the "Old ffrayter" or Common Hall now has to be accounted for. Neither the Prebendal House nor the Common Kitchen had any garden or space on their southern side while the hall was standing. When it had been demolished Prebendary Wrench "made a garden on ye sellar arch, only by usurpation". This garden was a matter of controversy in 1680, when the Dean and Chapter leased the Common Kitchen—alias 3 Millers Green—to the Reverend Dr Parsons, Chancellor of the diocese, and included the western end of the garden, on which there had recently been built a little stable and wash-house, for which he was to pay one guinea to the Prebendary of the Second Stall as rent. The Prebendary of the Second Stall at this time was Dr Abraham Gregory who was not prepared to allow his right over the garden to be invaded without protest. His version of the affair is recorded in his own hand in the Register of Leases. He vindicated his right to the whole of the garden, including the land on which the new buildings had been erected, but was eirenic enough to allow Dr Parsons to remain his tenant. What emerges from Dr Gregory's outpouring is that when Prebendary Wrench took a lease of Number Three it was

so far from having any backside on ye south part of his house called Ye Old Kitchen, but yt his prebendall ground came to ye very walls and windows thereof; yt the door was made in ye time of ye late wars, wn ye ground in controversy was bought of ye yn Parliament and joyned on ye said house and ye stable and wash house built.

Dr Gregory tells us that "all ye ground challenged by Dr Parsons was heretofore ye common hall and ye common sellar". We now know, therefore that the Monks' Refectory had the Cellarer's office at its western end, and its undercroft, "the sellar arch", for storage beneath.

An article on the Common Kitchen would not be complete without some reference to the Cooks. Chapter XXVIII of the Statutes of King Henry VIII provides in detail for the "Common Table of the Officers". There is to be an Upper Table, at which the Precentor is to preside, and with him the head schoolmaster, the minor canons and the master of the choristers are to dine. At the Lower Table the deacon, the six lay clerks, the sub-deacon and the under school master are to dine, and below them "In the third rank let the singing boys of the choir sit". When all these had dined, it was the servants turn, and the sub sacrist, the manciple, the door-keeper, the cook and the censor were able to sit down.⁷ Dinner time in the old refectory was a bustling scene, and the cooks in the Common Kitchen must have had plenty to do—at any rate as long as the Common Table lasted. Then, though the cooks themselves disappeared they did not disappear from the Treasurer's accounts. Thirty years later in 1634-5 Mr Doctor Leo as Treasurer recorded that he paid "coqui et subcoqui" £9.6.8 for their stipend. The names of the Cook and Undercook were George and Thomas Taylor; but they did no cooking and Thomas was in fact a clothier. The explanation is that the inferior servants were appointed by patent, usually for life. The system was a kind of hang-over from the hereditary serjeanties of medieval days; it gave the servant and the master some security, though it raised problems of its own. When a statutory office was no longer needed, it was customary for the Chapter to sell the patent to anyone who would purchase it as an investment. John Taylor had purchased the patent of the undercook's place and then had another grant of the patent drawn up in favour of his two sons, John (also called George) and Thomas, meaning thus to give them a reversionary interest. Unfortunately, we are told, "by the neglect or error of the then Chapter Clerk a joint patent *in possession* (our italics) was made to both the sons". The Chapter would have liked to dissolve both patents and to have applied the stipend "to the bettering and the increase of the stipends (which are very mean) of the Quire within the Church". But they were warned by their legal adviser that neither could the patent be dissolved nor the stipend converted.

⁷ The 17th century oak table now in the Chapter House may well have been one of the Common Hall tables.

They ended by issuing a new patent to Thomas Taylor, who subsequently shared the income with his brother as sinecure cooks.

This was all very well when the office granted by the patent was obsolete; but things were very different when the patent holder had to perform the duties of the office himself or find a deputy to do so. In 1629 Simon Wrench, who was then at Corpus Christi College, Oxford, and William his brother, asked the Chapter for leave to sell their patent of one of the Porters' places. They had a deputy, William Mason, who was performing the duties of this important office. The Chapter fearing that if the patent were sold the purchaser might appoint a deputy who was not nearly so efficient as Mason, refused leave. In the same year Berkeley, another of the impecunious tribe of Wrench, asked to be allowed to sell his patent of the sub-sacrist's office and received the same answer. The sale of patents, had become an abuse and was not ended until in 1669 Bishop William Nicholson, at his Visitation of the Dean and Chapter, decreed that the patent of the Cook's and other offices should not be granted again, and that no office should be served by deputy.

The Wrench family, one or other of them, continued as tenants of the Common Kitchen, presumably until the Chapter was ejected by the Parliament in the early years of the Great Rebellion. For a brief time in 1630 John Merroe, one of the lay singing-men, appears to have become a sub-tenant of Simon Wrench. Merroe also inhabited a dwelling in Babylon, a congeries of tenements which occupied some part of the Monks' Infirmary. Here he was accustomed to "teach the children to play upon the viols".

On the death of Elias Wrench in 1633, a lease of the Common Kitchen was granted to his widow, Mary Wrench, who must have held it until the Chapter Estates were sequestered. Early in the Civil War the Chapter's affairs appear to have been in some confusion. Dean Brough, who was presented to the Deanery by King Charles I while at Oxford in 1643, could not obtain installation; nor could Dr Thomas Washbourn, appointed to a Prebend in the same year. The final sequestration, however, did not take place until 7th November 1645, and the House of Commons allotted £300 out of the estates for a Preacher in 1646.⁸ Mr James Forbes, a Presbyterian Minister was appointed.⁹ The Deanery was not leased to Thomas Pury, Alderman of the City and Member of Parliament, until 1648.¹⁰

⁸ *Commons Journals*, iv, p. 334.

⁹ James Forbes, on being turned out in 1660, founded a private chapel in Eastgate Street where he was eventually buried. On the demolition of the chapel in 1965, the Dean and Chapter allowed his remains to be re-interred in the Cloister.

¹⁰ S. Rudder, *New History of Gloucestershire* (1779), p. 161.

A survey of the College properties was carried out in 1649, now known as "Oliver's Survey" and in this the dwelling house "usually called the Common Kitchen" is demised to Mr George Wall. Though presumably he was a Parliamentarian, he continued his tenancy after the Restoration, and was so far a supporter of episcopacy that in 1662 there was entered in the Dean and Chapter's accounts

For entertaining the Bp. at Mr. Wall's house for all particulers as by Bill.
Oct. 20. £3-7s.-2d.,

probably refreshment for the Bishop at a Visitation of the Dean and Chapter. His son, George Wall, junior, was the tenant in 1671, and had sub-let the house to Abraham Gregory, of whom we have already heard, and who was at that time usher of the College School. His successor in the Common Kitchen was Dr Richard Parsons, Chancellor of the diocese of Gloucester, referred to above, who may have written his history of Gloucestershire in this house. The work was never published and his MS is still in the Bodleian Library, but Sir Robert Atkyns made considerable use of it for his *Ancient and present state of Gloucestershire* published in 1712. These were learned days in this corner of the College, for Parsons' neighbour, in what is now No. 4, was Maurice Wheeler, the celebrated headmaster of the College School. Perhaps we owe to the Chancellor's cultivated taste the pretty mahogany staircase with its twisted balusters and ramped and panelled dado which still adorns the Common Kitchen.

The Parsons' family, Mary his widow and Jane his daughter, continued to live in the house after the Chancellor's death in 1711. Thereafter it was let to Barbara Catchmay, and its origin had been forgotten, for it was no longer described in the lease as the Common Kitchen. Fortunately it still bears the marks of its long history.