

CHURSTON MANOR

Ancient Seat of Status, Character & Heritage

The name Churston derives from our ancient Saxon forefathers: Cyric-tun, the settlement by the cross, one of England's early associations with the arrival of Christianity. As with most Saxon settlements, the nucleus of the village was the Manor House, chapel or church, and home farm. Here at Churston all three still have a presence, a thousand years further on! These would have been the sturdier buildings, surrounded by flimsier structures of wattle and daub where the freemen, villagers and serfs existed with their families. At the time of the Domesday Book, 1068, the population of the Manor of Cercitona was a mere 70 souls.

During early Norman times the Manor House would have been converted into stone from its original timber and the early stone chapel erected close by. The doorway for the Lord to access the chapel still exists together with the Norman south porch and priest's room above. Here the visiting monk from Totnes could rest his head before continuing his journey on foot to St. Mary's, Brixham, via Monk's Bridge. The people of the village and Manor would never have entered the Lord's Chapel, but gathered round the village cross in sunshine or rain to be given Mass, in Latin, by the same monk.

During the Norman 12th & 13th centuries Churston Court was used as a dower house (the widow of the owner of the Manor being of the Nonant, later Bozun, families of Totnes). In 1303 Alice Bozun, daughter of William, married Hugo de Ferrers of Bere Ferrers, near Plymouth, and Ferrers became an integral part of the name Churston Ferrers. Although Hugo died in 1310 the Manor House became the seat of succeeding Ferrers through the 14th century, a century identified with King Edwards I, II & III and their designs on Scotland & Wales, interrupted by the arrival of the horrific **Black Death** in 1348, followed by the Peasants' Revolt in 1381. Life in Churston Ferrers for all, must literally have 'hung by a thread'!

In 1405 Joan Ferrers, heiress of Churston Ferrers, married Richard Yarde of Bradley Manor within the Parish of Highweek, now a part of Newton Abbot. The name of Yarde had come to Churston and was to remain here for the next 350 years, through the religious turmoil and outward looking Tudor period, on into the conflict of 17th century Civil War. However Bradley Manor was the early focal point of the family, with little attention paid to Churston Court. Ironically, you do not need to look but to listen, as one major addition to the Manor of Churston Ferrers during the 15th century was the installation of four bells in the church tower to honour the name of the family. The chimes of those same four bells together with two later additions is what you still hear today ringing out over the Devon countryside.

Gilbert Yarde, as Lord of the Manor, had however personally resided at Churston Court during the latter years of the century. By his death in 1492 certainly the church and highly likely the Court also, had undergone major reconstruction. This is the period in which the present building began to take on its present identity, not a stately home exactly but one that identified the seat of power over a rural community, so typically common throughout the kingdom at this time. Churston Court now continued as the residence of the Yardes and in 1539 it is highly likely they would have been guests in the church to witness the christening of Humphrey Gilbert of Greenway. He was destined to sail to Newfoundland in 1583 and take possession of the island in the name of his Queen, Elizabeth I. So begin the embryonic ascendancy of the British Empire. Five years later the local folk of Churston Ferrers, together with their Lord & Master, would have had grandstand views from the coastline of the unsuccessful Spanish Armada proceeding up-channel, harried by Sir Francis Drake. Many of the men would have been mustered on Churston Common under the command of Sir John Gilbert of Greenway, ready to repel an invasion should the Spanish have landed. Yarde loyalty to the monarchy continued into the 17th century and King Charles I. Edward Yarde paid dearly for that support, paying several hundred pounds as a fine to the New Commonwealth of Oliver Cromwell.

It was to be a descendant of Edward Yarde, also named Edward, who would experience the most important happening of the 17th century in the area, **the landing of Prince William of Orange** on 5th November 1688. It is not recorded as to whether Edward was present at the time but if so, highly likely that he would have observed, even acknowledged the Prince, as he rode past Churston Court on 6th November at the beginning of his journey to London, to ascend the throne of England. **The Glorious Revolution** was underway!

It was during the late 17th century that the interior of the Court was remodelled, resulting in its present day ground-floor layout and moulded panelling either side of the entrance hall.

During 1763 the three centuries of Yarde family leadership over the Manor of Churston Ferrers finally came to an end, yet the name Yarde was to continue, through marriage. Susanna, only child of Francis Yarde, married 17 year old Francis Buller. Eventually Francis, his son, would take on the name **Yarde Buller**. Judge Buller became the youngest judge on the king's Bench and rose in prominence within the legal profession. Amongst the populace as a whole he would obtain the nickname 'Judge Thumb' in that he directed that a man had the right to beat his wife as long as the stick was no thicker than his thumb! In 1788 status probably determined that Churston Court was no longer of suitable eminence and he purchased nearby Lupton House as his seat. Churston Court now became the residence of the elder son.

Judge Buller died in 1800 and his son became known as Francis Buller Yarde Buller. His son, John, having resided at Churston Court became 1st Baron Lord Churston of Churston Ferrers & Lupton in 1858.

"Sir J.B.Yarde Buller, Bart., is lord of the manor of Churston Ferrers, and his eldest son resides at **Churston Court**, the ancient seat of the Yardes, which has lately been modernised, and has tasteful grounds, approached by a fine avenue of lofty elms." Whites Devon 1850

It is around this period that the estate invested in a new home farm (Churston Court Farm) on the far side of the church. Some of the old farm buildings that had been situated in the present car park area of the hotel were demolished and it was Lady Churston who recognised the shaft of the old village cross buried in a barn wall. It had been taken down and hidden from the Puritans at the end of the Civil War to save it from destruction. Ironically, over time, nobody knew where it had been hidden! Thanks to her it was rescued and eventually used in 2002 in the reconstruction of Churston Ferrer's Christian symbol of origin, our present cross, to be found in the **Garden of Rest** opposite the church.

1st Baron Lord Churston died in 1871 and was succeeded by his son, to become **2nd Baron Lord Churston**. His elder son, also John now took up residence at Churston Court. **DISASTER** - During 1870 the village inn, **The Rising Sun**, was destroyed by a falling tree, never to be reconstructed!

On 2nd September 1890 **the Prince of Wales**, later Edward VII, was brought ashore at Elbury Cove from his yacht **Hildegarde** and greeted by Lord Churston. He was certainly received at either or both Churston Court and Lupton but the facts are not recorded. **The Dowager Lady Churston**, widow of the 2nd Baron Lord Churston, resided at Churston Court following World War 1. Her butler, Arthur, used to drive the pony & trap down to the bathing house to light the fires before returning to the Court to pick up the Dowager.

The daughter of **The 3rd Lord Churston**, Joan Yarde Buller, married Prince Ali Khan in 1936 in Paris, but their marriage did not survive. **The 4th Baron Lord Churston** followed along the line of many of the gentry of the 1920's and married into the London theatrical set through Betty du Pre. She made considerable use of the nearby salt water, heated though, from Elbury, which 'considerably eased her rheumatoid arthritis'.

After nearly 1,000 years the Manor House of Churston Ferrers finally came to the end of its aristocratic identity with its sale from the Churston estate in 1967. A new identity in the world of hospitality was now ushered in. Churston Court, as silent witness, continues as a property of character and service.