

Trimstone – a history fragment, including a murder!

I hope you will enjoy this little excerpt of the history of Trimstone, a unique hamlet in this little corner of North Devon.

Our journey at Trimstone might begin with the Vikings over there in Normandy. However, it is almost certain that Trimstone was one of the eleven Saxon 'villein holdings' of the manor of Bradwell almost a thousand years ago, when William the Conqueror made his sister's son, Baron Ralph de Limesy (born 1040 in Alost, Limesy, Seine-Maritime, Rouen, Normandy and died in Hertford Priory in 1093), his tenant-in-chief there. He married the daughter of Edgar Atheling (the Athelings fabled to have had a palace in Atherington, near Barnstaple and with connections to King Athelstan, c893-939, first king of all the English and grandson of Alfred the Great who had also fought-off the Danish invaders from an unnamed fortified North Devon sea port, which could have been Appledore, which has names such as 'Hoddastone' to help the tale).

There has been a settlement here from well before the Normans (the 'Northmen's') arrival and their subduing the Saxons in 1066 but yes, Trimstone is mentioned in the Domesday Book. Edric the Saxon held it and there were five smallholders and eleven villagers before the Conquest. Of course, who were the early settlers really, as I have suspicions that even then, the Norsemen, or Picts had been all down the coast here, especially as their remnants have been located in Orkney where the oldest remains in Europe have been found (3000BC)!

We hope that as you come down our narrow lane from the A361 (or from Willingcott) you can imagine that you are going back in history, into a place which has been lived-in and worked-on for well over 1,000 years and we hope we are suitable present stewards too. This track would pre-date any construction and your imagination can create this lovely little settlement, well protected from the north winds by the hills behind it and the strong Westerlies and So'westerlies likewise and even now, a truly tranquil place to come, stay and rest. Despite the main road and its 'Barum' (local name for Barnstaple) mile-stone still sitting at the junction on the A361 and being only a third of a mile away, it doesn't seem like that and traffic noise is non-existent for the vast majority of the time.

You can wander around the swimming pool area and see the original twelve-meter diameter water wheel in place with its leat which fed it from the quarry pond on the higher side of the road. It can still rotate and one day it will be a project... all the workings are still in place in the Mill Room in the hallway to the Pool. Have a wander around the south facing gardens and envisage the 'Ha-ha' constructed no doubt in the 1700s when the idea came across from formal French gardens and a way of creating an infinity view from one's abode whilst restraining the livestock in the fields below. Go into the front door and through into the lounge and bar area, the oldest part of the original house and with its inglenook fireplace and bread oven. You can see the original servants' bells on the wall too – repositioned from their original site.

The water supply came/comes from 'higher up' and we found one of the original hollowed-out tree-trunks which would have been used for this purpose, traditionally elm. One day we shall have that on display too.

It is suspected that the oldest buildings are between 3-400 years old but could actually have some much earlier origins. We shall keep digging! The quarry opposite was the site for the stone for the

property, farm buildings and later the farm-workers' cottages up the lane. The garden wall to the Lane is probably amongst some of the oldest parts of the construction too, featuring traditional local methods.

There is plenty of naturally available water (too much sometimes but we're still on our own purified supply, with a small South West Water top-up when that runs low and which comes all the way from Dean Cross three-quarters of a mile away, where the meter sits!).

We are at the head of a valley with a good defensive position, plenty of stone nearby (and white quartz to ward-off the demons!) and lush, fertile, well-draining pasture around us. The property is south facing, protected by the surrounding hills from the worst of the prevailing winds and enjoying a lovely natural vista down the valley as well, one that is free for guests and the envy of many. They mined tin and silver (probably) at nearby Spreacombe (only two miles away) and Combe Martin, suspected to be well before the Romans too. Other local minerals included silver-lead, arsenic, tungsten, manganese, arsenic and zinc.

I suspect we had some of those unconquered Celts 'round these yer parts'.... and it is suggested that it is true that it was our own forbears - Miltons (Myltons/Meltons de Meltons) who went off to help found the Americas in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as well (the Roanoak Island Project makes fascinating reading incidentally, especially for those keen to prove that it was North Devonians and not Plymouthians who founded the earliest settlements on the East Coast!). Our Milton forbears can be traced back to those times in North Devon – we haven't travelled far! So it's now fun that our American friends can come and stay in an Hotel run by distant relatives of some of the earliest American settlers. The Roanoak settlement connection actually 'worked' and we have proven by DNA that Richard Melton/Milton went out on 'The Supply' which left three weeks after the Mayflower and arrived at Barclay Virginia and his descendants still live in North Carolina! He was a near relative of the famous John Milton who wrote 'Paradise Lost' amongst other works.

The name

However, back to what we do know! "Trimstone", the corner stone or the keystone/'trim' stone? Well, probably not in this instance. It's fun being the only one in the world and this helps tremendously when googling the word for Hotel or Restaurant information, let alone destination details but actually we suggest it is named after the Trempestone Family who appear to have lived here – chicken and egg style, were they named because of the place they lived – perhaps the siting of a large stone or a meeting place where animals may have been traded or traversed some natural boundaries.

The beginnings of a tributary of the river Caen run through the property too, as a small fresh stream originating further up towards Ilfracombe. There's nothing more likely than Norman influences there, as well as 'vers La Tour' for Velator in Braunton ('Brantone' in the Domesday Book with its fabled named church for St Brannock built on the River Caen with its own history and legends).

Studies say that the ancient syllables might point to the first use of an important British institution – the stile that ramblers use to traverse a hedge or wall. The earliest written records (1238) suggest a Thirteenth Century word – Trempelstan (see, it's different from the murdered fellow!). This is where the romantics find their way – the antique English word for stone is 'stan' and 'trempel' appears to

have meant 'to tread' (as in 'trample' and 'tramp'). The hamlet may have been named in the seventh century or possibly after the arrival of the Normans in the eleventh, the tramping stone, or the stone you tread upon. Was this the useful rock which men from the early ages used to jump over a wall into a pen where they kept their animals – it's all a bit fanciful that one!

What about 'trempe' – to temper or soak is the French translation and it may be as simple as that in view of the water we have here sometimes! Aah for 'Google Translate' and the new research tool this provides us now! Certainly, there are parts which are always 'soaking wet' all year round too.

It's funny what you find when you're not looking though. I collect old Devon books and was fortunate to acquire an 1822 history of Devon and it listed the manors with a question mark by one which had not been located - 'Trisme' which the received wisdom suggests may have been Trimstone. So perhaps Trimstone was a manor after all!

Translation of Great Domesday Book Folio 113v

DEVONSHIRE

for 1 virgate of land. There is land for 5 ploughs. In demesne are 2 ploughs, with 1 slave; and 6 villans and 3 bordars with 3 ploughs. There are 2 acres of meadow and 40 acres of pasture. Formerly 10s. ; now it is worth 20s.

XXXI. THE LAND OF RALPH DE LIMESY

RALPH de Limesy holds **EAST DOWN** from the king. Eadric held it TRE, and it paid geld for 5 virgates of land. There is land for 12 ploughs. In demesne is 1 plough, and 10 slaves; and 14 villans and 6 bordars with 10 ploughs. There are 20 acres of pasture and 20 acres of scrubland. Formerly, as now, worth 4l. The same Ralph holds **BRADWELL**. Eadric held it TRE, and it paid geld for 1 hide. There is land for 10 ploughs. In demesne are 2 ploughs, and 8 slaves; and 11 villans and 5 bordars with 4 ploughs. There are 23 acres of meadow and 50 acres of pasture. Formerly 4l ; now it is worth 3l.

Ralph himself holds **ROADWAY**. Eadric held it TRE, and it paid geld for 1 virgate of land. There is land for 2 ploughs. There are 2 villans, and 10 acres of scrubland. It is worth 30d.

Ælfric holds **MORTEHOE** from Ralph. Eadric held it TRE, and it paid geld for half a hide. There is land for 3 ploughs. There are 2 ploughs, with 1 slave and 2 villans. Formerly, as now, worth 10s.

Bradwell Manor – over Trimstone

In 1303, Bradwell was held by Augustinus de Pyn and in 1316 it passed to Baldwinus Flemmyg. Personal names on tax rolls from 1332 and 1524 give no clues to the hamlet's name but in 1564 Richard Eyre transferred certain properties including Trimstone. Eyre became Ayre and there are still many of them around!

In 1332, there were twenty-five tax-payers in Bradwell (probably more than there are now....!) so the manor was quite prosperous. After The Black Death, the old feudal land system changed and taxes were levied on parishes and by then, it was £4.16/8.

In 1428, the tenant was Johannes Yeo and yes, there are still Yeos around today and I know a John!

Ghosts and ghoulies?

So what do else we know? We do know that in the “Crown Pleas” of 1238 (see the Devon and Cornwall Record Society, volume 28) that Walter Russel and his son Richard killed Roger de Trempestone and fled. They were in the Bradwell Titheing ‘which was in mercy’ and so they were ‘exacted and outlawed’. Later it is testified that they were outlawed at the suit of Adam de Morthow (Mortehoe, near Woolacombe).

‘They were in Bradwell tithing, which is in mercy and he had chattels worth five shillings, that titheing, etc. Trimstone titheing is in mercy for not arresting these criminals.’

“Eyres” were periodic visitations by royal justices for hearing when the King’s Peace had been broken and a felony committed. Trimstone would have been a titheing’ or hamlet of ten households in the Domesday Book. The Crown Pleas mentioned the manor of Bradwell and Trimstone, both of which were ‘blamed’ for not arresting Walter Russel and his son. The Lord of the Manor had the responsibility of policing his patch so I wonder why he didn’t act.

One day we’ll find out more about this crime, the miscreants and the victim but for now, is Roger the ghost who some say they have seen in some of the earlier parts of the property – or is that just some marketing romance added by owners over the years? We haven’t sensed any premonitions here ourselves though sometimes things do go ‘wrong’ all at the same time and someone gets the blame – perhaps it’s all ‘Roger’s fault’.... A chamber-maid suggests she sensed an apparition on one of the beds and one of our recent guests said there was lots of creaking from overhead and wondered if it was floorboards or footfall – but all that is above the room now is a roof space..... Some of the occurrences are eerie..... but most visitors feel the Place is tranquil and really relaxing, helping to give them just the break they wanted and we assure you of a warm welcome to refresh your spirits let alone any old ones! Of course it may be ‘nature’ too – we are blessed with quite an abundance of natural life and we do our best to sustain and encourage that.

The Property

Well, Trimstone Manor Country House Hotel ‘started’ as a yeoman farmer’s abode and related farm buildings (and the cottages opposite and up the road were farm workers’ homes) and parts of the centre of the building go back at least three to four hundred years but with parts likely to be much older in origin

The occupant was quite wealthy in that he afforded ‘three hearths’ . That said, it seems clear that the house was built on a much older site, it being the logical place to have your settlement.

There aren’t too many original features of note still (though we did reposition the servants’ bells when we undertook substantial improvement works in 2007/8) and the Hotel was created in 1976 and then extended in 1986 by amalgamating a cottage at the western end of the main property and an extension to the east as well, which now houses the owners’ accommodation.

The shippen, granary and other farm buildings were converted to holiday accommodation and the original owners’ accommodation (some without planning permission as things seemed easier ‘back then’ although all now secured formally of course!). We do have the original water wheel fed by the leat from our mill pond across the Lane.

'Ha-ha!'

As mentioned, we realised recently that Trimstone had its own 'Ha Ha!' Have you ever heard of such a thing? Typically it was where the garden was broken into two levels and the lower level would be for the cattle or whatever but the idea was to give an uninterrupted view down over the landscape stretching away into the distance, as we enjoy.

Capability Brown enjoyed manufacturing them as well so it stamps a formal date on our garden of the early 1700s perhaps. It suggests that the archaic French name 'haha' intimates that you meet an unexpected obstacle without realising and thus 'Ha-ha'! Though don't go hurting yourself! We have steps to the lower garden but even in the 1920s there was simply a form of wooden ladder down to that level!

People's names

We have touched upon Richard Eyre from 1564 before and on 2 March 1669, Robert Isaac sold "Trimstone" to Thomas Crascomb, a yeoman farmer from Braunton, for £30.

It was tenanted by Thomas Estaway and then Susan Blaney. Susan's sons had a tenancy as well – they were called James and David Wyot of Marwood – no doubt the Family of Barnstaple's Town Clerk who recorded that Town's history at about the same time. 'Wyatts' are still farming nearby.

In 1669, the Hearth Tax return showed that she had those three hearths. In theory, it was better to have as few as possible as the least tax would be paid but of course, if you wanted to reflect your wealth and stature, what better than to be able to afford three hearths when 'everyone else' only had the one.... Robert Isaac, in one of the West Down manor houses and who sold Trimstone in 1669, had nine hearths...! The introduction to the Returns says: "a three hearth house had 6-8 rooms and people with more than that were almost certain to be yeomen or extremely prosperous craftsmen". In the same return, poor John Estaway only had the one and was he a relative of Thomas or John, lately of Trimstone?

Rolling forwards, owners of land at Trimstone in 1780 were John Peake, Peter Coats, Richard Chugg (we assume from the tax assessed, being in the main House), James Parminter, John Coats and Robert Chugg. Names that appeared include Snow and Brimley and Mary Cloug owned a parcel, rented to John Chugg, in 1820.

1822

In 1822, the Rolle Estate had a significant sum of Estate Duty to find and the well-known inheriting Clinton, Hall and Fortescue families were forced to sell significant land interests, through its own Act of Parliament. These tenanted properties included the Manor at Bradwell and comprising the best part of 1200 acres stretching up to Willingcott, Buttercombe and Trimstone as well. Well-known local names such as Avery, Challacombe, Chugg, Symons and Heddon were included in the tenants' list at the time. Back prior to this in 1802, the Trimstone tenants were called Wilkinson – I wonder if any relative of Reverend Wilkinson noted in 1832?

Trimstone was mentioned specifically in this Act, with some delightful sounding small parcels of land named, no doubt, after previous tenants. These were seventy-eight small fields allocated into parcels named:- Parminters, Kellys, Moores, Peakes, Chuggs and Hancocks. One day it would be good to trace which were which! This came to about 220 acres and for which an aggregate rent of about £6.75 was payable every year! This was six small-holdings, so quite small amounts of ground for each tenant but of course, some of them may have had other ground elsewhere too. There was also a forty-eight acre wood – which we assume is the one stretching down to Bradwell from Trimstone even now. George Langdon ended-up as the purchaser of the majority of the ground around Trimstone. Remember too the average size of a farm was much smaller than now as well.

In the 1841 census, there was an amazing number of people living at Trimstone and working the land. Counting all the children too, there were forty-seven – far more than now! The names then included:- Williams, Snow, Howard (perhaps the same farming ones connected to my mother's Family and in Georgeham, four miles away and where I was raised, it's a small world), Coats, Beer, Langdon, Kift, Parkin, Cocking, Ley, Hocombe, Crudge, Gerrard, Burgess and Bray. By 1851, Verney, Pile, Walter, Yeo, Tucker and Watby had arrived and in 1871, Russell, Pugsley and Geen were here and in 1881, Worth, Street, Seldon, Anderton, Greenwood, Phillips, Jones, Arscott, Copp, Brace, Deakins, Manning and Mock. In the 1901 census, the population had fallen to thirty-one and new names were Denham, Parkhouse, Compton, Greenslade, Joslin, Clarke and Hodge. I am sorry to list all these names but do so for the local readers who may well begin to recognise some of their relatives – or descendants of these names still living in the vicinity!

Starting with William, the Langdon family who popped-up in the 1841 census farmed at Trimstone for probably the longest consecutive period since the Eyres. William was succeeded by George who was then succeeded by his son William, seeing the farm increase to 330 acres by 1861 and employing four men and two boys. All of this then was bought by Edward Anderton, who came to live here and in 1910 and he had 379 acres altogether, the largest farm in the local area at the time.

The 'Trimstone Estate' was sold by the Langdons (who had acquired it from William Yeo it seems) at auction in the 1870s using well-known local firm Messrs Sanders and Son (now absorbed into the present Messrs Phillips, Smith and Dunn). It was described as a "highly valuable and attractive freehold residence and agricultural property known as Trimstone and lying on a lovely position on the southern slope including a charming old fashioned house containing Hall, three sitting rooms, billiard room, nine bedrooms, bathroom, complete offices, acetylene gas and water by gravitation, stables and garage with terrace, tennis lawn, etc". It had a "productive kitchen garden, a pair of cottages, extensive farm buildings and valuable pasture lands. This took place at the Kings Arms in Georgeham

at “three o’clock on August 19th”. Mr Edward Anderton, a successful printer from London we understand from his relatives who have visited us recently, was the fortunate purchaser.

Mr Anderton resided there for some years and died on 22 October 1923 and his three daughters, as executrixes, sold Trimstone by auction using Hampton & Sons, London. His one and only son, Lieutenant Edward Anderton of the Censor’s Department of the East African Force, died at Tanga, in East Africa on 30 November 1918 and no doubt either of wounds or Spanish ‘flu, after the war ended (he was ex Charterhouse School and Magdalen College, Oxford University). The Property was described then as a “highly valuable and attractive freehold residential and agricultural property known as Trimstone and lying most compactly in a lovely position on a Southern slope and including a charming old-fashioned house containing Hall, three sitting rooms, billiard room, nine bedrooms, bathroom, complete offices, acetylene gas and water by gravitation, stabling and garage, attractive pleasure grounds with terrace, tennis lawn, etc”. It had a “productive kitchen garden, a pair of cottages, extensive farm buildings for a large head of cattle, corn mill with waterpower with highly valuable pasture lands of about 139 acres.

The conveyance was signed by the beneficiaries of his estate, it seems, on 29 September that year when William Dudley (Dullam?) Pugsley of Arlington bought it for the sum of £8,995. This comprised 156 acres, 37 perches, two ‘messuages’ or cottages with the gardens and premises and lastly the House itself containing one rood and five perches.

The buyer agreed to pay the ‘chancery rent’ too – a princely sum of £5 every year to the “Dissenting Minister” at Braunton. – we’re back to St Brannock’s again. Mr Pugsley used Lloyds Bank for a £6,000 mortgage and Mr Anderton had used National and Provincial Bank. We have an original of the sales’ particulars now, with some charming photographs and showing the ladder to the lower lawn!

Estate Agency was doing well with its descriptions, even then. “The District is notably bracing and healthy, whilst the Scenery of incomparable beauty to be found along this stretch of the North Devon Coast is too famous to need description.”

The last large sale was when the Pugsleys sold the House and 126 acres and since that date, small parcels of land were sold-off by subsequent owners. The Bigge Family lived in the property as a family home up till Dougie and Mary Turner bought the place in 1976 and created the beginnings of the Hotel from it. Remember that after the Second World War the average farmstead was only about 200 acres, so it was still of some comparative size locally.

Up-to-date

We acquired Trimstone and forty-four acres from the Balfours in 2007 who purchased it from the Turners in 1998, with partners who subsequently they bought-out. The property was ‘tired’ and we planned to move quickly and over the years gradually and systematically repair, maintain and improve it. However, we’ve had our own bad experiences involving family, fraud, criminal damage, defending against a no-win-no-fee defamation suit (which was just ‘dropped’) and then a six year civil claim over the building problems, alopecia universalis, inability to move so unable to sell our house and in a falling market, heart bypass surgery brought about by the stresses and strains.... and I fought a parliamentary campaign too! The consolation is that we’ve improved things far quicker but we never planned to

lose all trade by closing fifteen months, restarting from scratch in the depths of the recession in February 2009. And then, Covid19 with all of its trials yet which gave the Hotel and Cottages the busiest ever summer we'd had. One day there may be a book of its own and ghosts to bury.....

Then in November 2017 we added what had been the Council picnic area – Devon County Council had had enough of abuse of the site so we felt it wise to buy the extra three-and-a-half acres to protect its use. One day we shall try to develop it and have a covenant to share the spoils, if any, with the Council.

However, here's to the future, making history for the right reasons and happy holidays and dining for our visitors – and for us, as we are just guardians upon this walk of history for those following in our footsteps – however long in the future that might be. We shall be here a while – and we've planted hundreds of extra trees and shrubs including a few indigenous flowering varieties and one or two more exotic to enhance the parkland feel – including an endangered Woolemi Pine, only discovered in South Australia in 1994 and then with only 100 adult specimens in the world. We're keen to protect the heritage and enhance Trimstone - it's a place which deserves and demands to be used and if we can build on the attractive gardens that would be good too. And of course, we have the poultry collection and now some peafowl and emus for guests to enjoy.

In 2017 we even had a fire. It reminded us it could happen to anyone and anywhere so all of us need to be vigilant; occasionally something can just happen, regardless of the precautions which you may have made beforehand. Of course, it is nothing like some of the awful fires about which we have seen in the media.

The cause of our fire was a capacitor in the water pump so the water in the pump, the connecting pipes and also the plastic water pipes in the ceiling which melted under the heat would have suppressed the fire. It could have been a disaster...

Our insurance companies, Hiscox and NFU, were excellent in relation to recognising the liability. It was very much a chicken-and-egg process – we couldn't do one thing before another and so it went on. The deep cleaning of all the acrid smoke damage was the worst thing and when that was achieved and so well, we could start to think about replacing the destroyed Pool Plant equipment and the construction works. We were pleased to ensure the Pool and associated rooms were ready for the School holidays – but that was a push!

It is stressful, regardless – dealing with the removal of all the stored contents and seeing much going into three giant skips as most of the soft furnishings were ruined beyond economic repair and that was a shame and somewhat traumatic too as there is so much related work that spews from it all. However, it is still sad to see some items which we have had for years and which would have continued fulfilling a useful purpose for many more simply sitting upon a pile in the skip.

Still, as I have said before, it could have been so much worse. We had a very good fire alarm system and had installed sensors in places which even the Fire Regulations and inspectors didn't demand and thank goodness we went beyond the basic call of duty there.

Through the other side and with some clean space, it has allowed us to look at the area created and to see what a good use for it would be, now that we don't have the same things to store any more... And on top of that, the replacement wiring and so on is now up to the latest specifications so even better going forwards and with a new lease of life, even if insurers are now demanding full electrical certification for more and more commercial policies – and all adding costs even if most of that is in meeting the latest regulations 'just introduced' and however safe something was the day before.

The Manor to which it has become accustomed.

Is there evidence of the property being a Manor House? Certainly it has been referred to as 'Trimstone Manor' since it became a Hotel and way back in the early twentieth Century, the owner was referred to as "Squire" but was that just endearingly and without substance? It wasn't one of the four manors and came under Bradwell , just down the valley, which then became the parish of West Down – the others being Aylescott, Stowford and West Down itself. Certainly in 1910, Edward Anderton was the most important landowner in West Down with 379 acres and so yes, Squire!

We hope you've enjoyed your tour through the pages of time, bringing you all up to date with Trimstone Manor and Tyme Restaurant. We hope we shall be good custodians for the next occupants, however many years before they take the reins and in the meantime, we shall try our hardest to ensure it is a good place for people to come to stay and indeed just to seek refreshment in our Restaurant so they can enjoy the House, the gardens and grounds. Our cream teas or High Teas on the lawns are fabled after all, too! If you'd like to savour some of what we're trying to offer and its history too, we'd love to have you come and share with us! If you know any extra history, we'd be glad to correct any inaccuracies and add some more!

Our very best wishes

Philip and Helen Milton and staff www.trimstone.co.uk



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