

## "THE HISTORY AND RESTORATION OF WALLETT'S COURT"

A talk by Lea Oakley - Reported by Merril Lilley

**L**ea Oakley, one of the present owners of Wallett's Court, situated at Westcliffe near St Margaret's-at-Cliffe, gave the second talk at the January meeting. She told us how she and her family had bought the property in 1975 and slowly and painstakingly restored it, little by little, to its present splendid state with hotel, restaurant and health spa.

There is mention of the site in the Domesday Book, where it is called 'The Manor of Westcliffe'. In 1627 it was a farmhouse and many of its original features date back to this period.

When the Oakleys took over the property in 1975 they faced a mammoth task. They paid £21,000 for a building in a very run-down state which needed everything doing to it. Lea told us how her husband looked at it and said, "Anybody who buys this must be

mad!" Nevertheless, they bought it in October 1975.

They were both working so the first stage of the restoration could only be done at weekends with help from all the family. It was an exhausting but exciting time. Some weekends earned a special title, associated with what was found then. There was the 'staircase weekend' which brought to light the old 1627 staircase, which had been hidden behind a lath and plaster wall and continued, to everyone's amazement, right up to the loft. Discoveries took place almost every week. The

'wall paintings weekend' was followed by the 'clay pipes weekend'. It was thought that the pipes had survived from the ostler's room above.

As the months went by, working in cold weather with no heating, they gradually removed all the 'rubbish' and got down to



Wallett's Court 1627 Doorway



Staircase 1627



Wall Painting



Eleanor of Castille

original features, such as the old beams and the ingle-nook fireplace. They worked on one room at a time, each taking about five months. Paint had to be removed from the beams; a long process. The carved posts, of great interest, had to be treated with care as they had the date, 1627, carved into the wood. Woodworm and dry rot had to be treated, and finally, for the new roof a mortgage was necessary.

Lea gave up her teaching job and worked full time at the house. More items were found as they worked; signs on the brick work, toys, pictures and coins.

In 1977 they held a grand party and in 1978 Lea started to offer 'Bed and Breakfast', first with two rooms for six weeks and then gradually building up. In 1978 Walleth's Court was awarded its plaque for a Historic Building of Kent. Lea's husband left his job as a chef in London to run the restaurant and the hotel went from strength to strength. Today it has 17 rooms, a restaurant with 60 table settings and a spa with a swimming pool.

As Lea taught history she became fascinated with the history of her new home and she gave us a brief summary. The Church of St. Peter's, across the road, dates from 1200 and was visited by Eleanor of Castille. Might she have stayed a Walleth's Court, wondered Lea? Was there a house there on the site when the church was built? Some of the detail on one of the posts in the house is not in keeping with 1627 and shows detail of Eleanor, but this could have been obtained from her tomb and then carved into the post. Lea researched Eleanor in depth and told us of some of her life as she followed her husband, Edward I, around the country.

In the Tudor period there was a connection with Katherine Parr when she was married to her first husband, of the de Burgh family. There seems to have been a connection with Walleth's Court but she did not stay there.

One of the first mentions of the property was found in an old will, of

one Thomas Gibbon. Letters carved on the porch show TDG (Thomas and Dorothy Gibbon) 1627. The letter G is reversed. A stone in the church has graves of the Gibbons. Edward Gibbon, historian who wrote *Decline and Fall* was a descendant.

Between 1804-06 Walleth's Court was visited by William Pitt when he was Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports. In the nineteenth century the house was tenanted by William Banks, descendant of Joseph Banks, the botanist, who sailed with Cook. In more recent times many well-known celebrities have stayed at Walleth's.

This was all so interesting we wanted to know more and, certainly, to visit the house to see for ourselves the results of the Oakleys' restoration. Many thanks to Lea Oakley for her excellent talk.



*Walleth's Court 1978*



*Walleth's Court 1987*