

## **Nos. 57-59 High Street, Bexley**

**This building is described by Peter Tester as a splendid example of late seventeenth century domestic architecture.**

The date 1676 is marked on one of its bricks and it is likely that at least part of it dates back to then. Unfortunately there are few written records of that period. The only document that might help is too imprecise for more than a reasonable guess. It is a survey of the Manor of Bexley carried out in 1681. It mentions some houses on the north side of Bexley High Street which might be 57-59 and one of these in particular seems to fit the bill better than the others. This one is described in the survey as divided into two, as having a barn, stable and two yards, as being adjacent to 15 acres of land that went with it and as owned by Thomas Causten, who is known as a wheelwright.

These points all tie in with the house we are studying. It was divided into two, as are nos. 57-59; it had two yards and out-buildings suitable for workshops and stores and nos. 57-59 have always been used in connection with village industries; the 15 acres of land correspond with 15 acres shown in that area on a plan dated 1788 in our possession; and no. 57 is known to have been occupied by wheelwrights for at least a century. There is, therefore, a fair probability that the house so described in the 1681 survey is identical with our nos. 57-59.

Thomas Causten, its owner in 1681, was evidently a comparatively wealthy man. He owned considerable amount of property in Erith and Welling, as well as in Bexley itself. He had married Ann, a daughter of John Thornhill or Thorndill, who also owned property in Erith and Bexley and it was through his wife that he had acquired the house now under discussion, for it had formerly belonged to her father. He did not live there himself, but let it to tenants Harvey Jones and Alice Giles.

The former of these two tenants, Harvey Jones, was evidently a farmer; elsewhere in the survey he is said to be the tenant of some of the demesne lands of the manor. In 1681 he was living in his part of the house with Sarah, his second wife, and their two-year-old daughter, Mary. Earlier in that year Sarah had had a son, but he had

died soon after birth. She was to have one other child before she died in 1694. Harvey married again for a third time in 1695 and then lived another eight years, dying in 1703. The other tenant, Alice Giles, was the widow of John Giles, who had died in 1674. Her two sons were grown men in 1681 and probably had their own families. She was apparently a friend of Dame Anne Austen, widow of Sir Robert Austen, of Hall Place, for she received a legacy under the will of Lady Austen. She died in 1702.

There is no source of information about the building after 1681 until 1790, the date of the oldest surviving rate book. From that year we have an almost complete record of both owners and occupiers. The owners did not usually live there and for the most part little is known about them. In 1790 there were two owners of the divided property, John Matten, a maltster, and Mrs. Abigail Bradbridge, widow of a local property owner. By 1808 Matten owned the whole property. He left it to his son William, who died about 1838, leaving £900 to the poor of Bexley. The next owner was Louise Shepherd but we know nothing of her or of her successors. The families who actually lived in the house are of more interest to us. In 1790 both parts of the house were tenanted by Thomas Dann, a builder, and the first of a line of prominent local citizens of that name. By 1807 he was sharing more property in the village by then. Randall probably had no. 57, which was the wheelwright's part of the premises in more recent times, although the division of the property into two was not always made in exactly the same way. He was followed there by William Bray, who in turn was succeeded by William Stone in about 1830. The Stones were there for over 60 years. Other wheelwrights had it after them until the first world war.

Thomas Dann, and his son John after him, occupied no. 59 until the latter's death in 1832. Then a grandson also called Thomas was there until 1847, when he transferred the business to another place in the village and a succession of tenants had no. 59. From 1863 to 1879 the name John Green appears as occupier, followed by that of T.B. Green until 1899. Walter Henry Smith had it for some years in the early part of the twentieth century. The rate books sometimes described this part of the property as a house and garden with office and builder's yards and sometimes as a house and garden with counting house and workshop but there is little doubt that all its occupants were builders, until the most recent use of both it and no. 57 by a firm of estate agents.

**Sources**

Survey of the Manor, Bexley, 1681.

Registers of St. Mary's church, Bexley.

Vestry books and rate books of the parish of Bexley.

Records of Bexley United Charities.

Records of Erith manor court.