



CLAREMONT

A Short History

GUEST EDITION

STATION ROAD · SIDMOUTH · DEVON

Claremont

A Short History

Guest Edition

James Ogilvy Leacock

Station Road, Sidmouth

Claremont — A Short History — Guest Edition

First published 2026

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Independently published

Cover photograph: Claremont, about 1856–64.

Researched and written with the help of Claude, made by Anthropic.

The history of Claremont is still being researched. Everything in these pages is subject to change as new evidence comes to light.

Welcome and Foreword

Dear Guests,

Welcome to Claremont, and thank you for choosing to stay here.

Whatever drew you here, whether family, the sea, the town, or simply the look of the house, you now join a long line of people who have lived beneath this roof. Some of them were rather grand; many were not. Among them were the two daughters of an Earl, who stayed more than thirty years; a colonel who held the Victoria Cross; a baronet; and a retired Portland cement manufacturer and his family, three of whose papers were found beneath the floorboards the best part of a century later. Behind the grander residents, stood the cooks, maids and other servants who kept the house running for them. You will meet a good many of them in these pages.

For much of its life, it seems, Claremont was a house that people came to for a few years at a time, much as they do today; whether they owned it or rented it, the records seldom say. You are, in that sense, very much in the tradition of the place.

Claremont has stood on Station Road for close on two hundred years. It was standing by 1836, when a guide to the town placed it “overlooking the Deer Park” and named its first known resident, a Mr F. Barker, who had already come and gone. In some ways it has changed a great deal since: it lost its thatch for slate; it was written Clare Mont by two census enumerators, and was Hampden Lodge for thirty years, before it was Claremont again; it was offered for sale in 1847; and in 1964, under Mrs Murphy, it became the three homes it is today. In other ways it has hardly changed at all. It is the same house, with the same character and the same essence. And the one photograph of it in period dress, three ladies on the balcony, has kept its secret.

If you liked the look of the house enough to book it, I suspect you will want to know a little more about it. This short history is my answer to that curiosity. It takes the house first, and then its people, and draws throughout on the records themselves. Skim it over breakfast or read it from cover to cover, as you please, and do take it home with you when you leave.

For those who would like more meat on the bones, the full history, *Claremont — Through the Ages*, is available on Amazon.

Do enjoy the house for what it is. It is not perfect by any means; a Grade II listed building asks for a great deal of upkeep. But it is what it is, and it still carries the essence and the soul of the years gone by.

I sincerely hope you enjoy your stay. Thank you.

With best regards,
James Ogilvy Leacock

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Part One — The House



The oldest picture of the house: the print Claremont Villa, Sidmouth, with its roof of thatch. Undated; cleaned from an old photocopy.

When, and by whom

Ask when Claremont was built and you will be given a date, though not always the same one: 1815; 1825; about 1830; c.1837. They cannot all be right.

The parish books, still to be seen at the Devon Heritage Centre, are said to give a William Barrett an uninhabited “New House” from 1827 to 1831, and Claremont among a string of his houses in 1833. The tithe map of 1839 I have seen: it shows Claremont beside the road, opposite Thomas Fish’s Knowle, a cottage orné whose house and grounds he opened to visitors on Mondays, apparently sharing a carriage drive with Mrs Mackie’s, and gives William Barrett as its owner and occupier. You may have noticed that the house has no front door on its south and west sides: the way in, and the main staircase, are by the porch on the north-east.

Mr Barrett is not a simple witness: in March 1836 a William Barrett, “formerly of Sidmouth”, wine merchant and “Lodging House Proprietor”, was among the insolvent debtors. Probably the same man; not proved.

The first witness I can call with confidence is Mogridge’s *Descriptive Sketch of Sidmouth*, a guide whose text dates itself to 1836:

Nearly opposite Knowle, and overlooking the Deer Park, is Claremont, lately the delightful residence of F. Barker, esq; and above it, entering by the same carriage drive, a handsome and well built house, situated on the summit of a beautiful rising ground, the property of Mrs. Mackie.

“Lately.” So by 1836 the house had its name, and its first named resident had already come and gone. Mrs Mackie’s house, the tithe bears out, was almost certainly Sidmount, next door. A house cannot be the late residence of anybody a year before it is built, and so c.1837 will not do.

Claremont was listed, Grade II, on 12 November 1973. The listing calls it “Circa 1830, large stucco villa”, and adds that it is “possibly enlargement of earlier structure as rear wall is of stone rubble and brick.” The house you are sitting in may not be all of one date.

The verdict, then. Claremont was standing by 1836, and had been lived in. We have searched high and low, and the records will not yield an exact year; but everything points the same way, and nothing against it. In all likelihood Claremont was built in 1826 or 1827, perhaps by William Barrett, and it celebrates its bicentenary in 2027. It looks a substantial stucco villa; but above its stone basement, the present owner says, it is lightly built, which you may notice in winter. It was well planned, its best rooms facing south to the sea and west to the Knowle.

The Earl who did not build it

Every house of any age has a story told about it, and Claremont’s is a good one. It was built, they say, by an Earl, for his daughters: in 1815 by one version, in 1825 by another.

The sixth Earl of Buckinghamshire was the Reverend Augustus Edward Hobart, and he came into the title only in 1849. The two daughters who did, in the end, live here, Charlotte Augusta and Louisa Selina, were baptised in Leicestershire in 1833 and 1834. The house is older than his earldom, and very probably older than both of them. As it stands, the story cannot be true.

And yet stories of this kind are rarely made from nothing. I first find the Earl in Sidmouth in August 1850, when a house called Richmond Lodge was advertised for sale as his residence. On census night in 1861 he was there, sixty-seven, a “Clergyman without cure of souls”, with the Countess, five unmarried daughters, Charlotte and Louisa among them, and seven servants. He died in October 1885, and was brought back by rail to the

family vault in Sidmouth churchyard. The following spring two of his daughters came to Claremont.

So the legend is not so much false as mislaid. It has taken the Earl from the house where he lived, set him down in his daughters' later one, and pushed the whole affair back before any of them came. Every piece of it is in the records, except the piece that would make it true.

For sale, 1847

In the summer of 1847 the house was put up for auction by Mr Charles Farrant, at the York Hotel, on Tuesday 10 August. The advertisement is the fullest description of the place I have found:

An elegant Freehold Villa Residence, called "CLAREMONT," with its Coach-house, Stable, Garden, and Pleasure Ground, beautifully situated on an eminence commanding a delightful view, with the ocean in the distance, and within a few minutes walk of the shore.

The Bedford Hotel, on the sea front, was Lot 2. No printing of the advertisement names the seller, and whether the house was sold that day, the record does not say.

From then until 1937 I cannot name a single owner of Claremont: a list of residents is not a title deed.

Thatch, slate, and a fire that may not have been

The oldest picture of the house is the print at the start of this part, *Claremont Villa, Sidmouth*, "Commanding a fine Marine View". It shows the villa thatched, with a balcony over a verandah on pillars. It has not been dated. The photograph on the cover shows a slate roof and a slender iron balcony. So, if the print is faithful and is of this house, the thatch came off somewhere between the two.

There is a story that a fire took it. One account, told without a name, puts a fire “somewhere about 1840”, with some rebuilding and the thatch replaced by slate. A local history, giving no source, says the house was “erected in 1825 but burnt down and restored in 1845”, which is a good deal more. No report of a fire at any Sidmouth house has been found in the county papers of those years, though a small fire might never have been reported at all. And the listing’s older rear wall would suit a house burnt and restored, or a house simply made larger, equally well.

In the old phrase, an open verdict. A change of roof is not, by itself, evidence of a fire; though the present owner, for one, believes in it: Devon kept its thatch, and a house so new would hardly have lost its own without cause.

What it was called

The enumerators of 1861 and 1881 wrote the house “Clare Mont”, in two words, though the printed lists of those years have Claremont. Then, for more than thirty years, it was not Claremont at all. When the Hobart-Hampden sisters came in 1886, the very next monthly list of residents (in machine-read text) gave it as “Hampden Lodge”, which it stayed until they left. By 1921 the old name was back, and it has stayed.

The first original record I have read that puts it in Station Road is the Register of September 1939; when the road was named, I cannot tell you. Of the neighbours, Sidmount, long the home of the Radfords, solicitors, is the most constant. In November 1871 the town’s paper reported a boy caught putting out “the lamp at the entrance to Claremont and Sidmount”. So the two houses shared a way in, and the way was lit. A list of its owners has Sidmount owned jointly after 1868 by eleven people, among them seven Brines and two Clarkes: names from Claremont’s own past.

Three flats

Every census that finds Claremont finds one household in it. In 1964 that changed. Planning permission was sought, first for four flats and then for three, and the deed that bound the new flats together, a large folded document tied with green ribbon, begins with the fact itself:

The Vendor has converted the building known as Claremont situate at Station Road Sidmouth in the County of Devon ... into three self-contained flats

The Vendor was Mrs Hilda Constance Murphy, a widow. She sold the first flat on 22 December 1964, and the other two in 1965.

A typed sheet kept at the house, written for visitors to the garden, tells how the floors were shared out. Flat 1 had been the reception rooms and the butler's pantry, Flat 2 the family bedrooms, and Flat 3, in the attic, the servants' quarters; the old kitchen, scullery, laundry, fuel and wine stores in the basement are now garages. The garden went three ways. The top third, with the stables, coach house and kitchen garden, became Claremont Cottage, and the bottom third, the old pleasure ground, is now "a wilderness of Rhododendrons"; both were sold off from 1965 onwards. The middle third, the flower garden and lawn, stayed with Flat 1. The same sheet records foxes, badgers and muntjac, a breeding colony of Lesser Horseshoe Bats, and "a terrestrial shrimp from the southern hemisphere".

The deed's rules are of their time. The outside was to be painted every fifth September "with the same colours as were last used". And no owner was to play "any piano pianola gramophone wireless loudspeaker or mechanical or other musical instrument of any kind" so as to annoy the others, nor so as to be heard outside "between the hours of 11 p.m. and 9 a.m." I pass that on to you without comment.

Part Two — The People

The missing household

The census household returns run from 1841, and Claremont is not in the first of them. The enumerator goes from Broadway to Sidmount, and between them nothing is called Claremont, nor does he count an empty house where it should stand. Very probably he simply left it out. I cannot prove it. The first household we can see whole is the one found in 1851.

The Gray Clarkes, 1850-1851

On census night, 30 March 1851, the head of the household was William G. Clarke, forty-six, and against his occupation the enumerator wrote "Proprietor of houses & fund holder". His wife Eleanor was twenty-six. There were three children, born in France, at Clifton and at Sidmouth, the youngest six months old, and five servants: the largest staff in any of the house's returns. He had married Eleanor in Paris in 1846; Gray was his middle name.

I owe the rest to a newspaper printed in Lahore, which in 1868 reprinted an obituary of "Br. W. Gray Clarke". He was a Freemason, and no ordinary one. "He subsequently resided at Sidmouth, where he passed the Master's Chair; and afterwards removed to Jersey, where he also took an active part in the Craft." In 1857 he became Grand Secretary of the United Grand Lodge of England, and held the office until he died, in July 1868. That this was our Mr Clarke I take to be very probable. I confess that I had not expected it.

The obituary ends sadly. His wife had died "about six or seven years since in giving birth to twins", and he left seven children, "very inadequately provided for". It does not name the wife, but I know of no other; the young Mrs Clarke of 1851 very probably died not yet forty. I set the one phrase beside the other, and leave it there.

A summer wedding, 1852

For 1852 the directory has two lines at Claremont: “Mrs Dashwood”, and “Mr and Mrs Codrington Parr”. On 17 August that year there was a wedding at Sidmouth. As the *Morning Herald* put it:

On the 17th inst., at Sidmouth, Devon, Codrington Thomas, eldest son of Codrington Parr, Esq., of Stonelands, to Louisa Anne, only daughter of the Rev. H. Dashwood, of Halton, Bucks.

A Parr and a Dashwood married at Sidmouth in the very year the directory puts a Mrs Dashwood and a Mr and Mrs Parr at Claremont: I find it hard to believe in a coincidence of that size. Mrs Dashwood was very probably the bride’s mother. But the notices do not name Claremont, and the directory does not mention a wedding. The joint between the two is mine, not theirs.

The Brines, 1853–1867

In 1853 “Major and Mrs Brine” came. They were Eleanor Clarke’s parents, arriving about two years after their daughter and son-in-law had lived in the house. Did the one lead to the other? I rather suspect it did; but suspecting is not proving.

The Major, James Brine, died at Sidmouth on 9 July 1859; in which house, the record does not say. In 1861 the head of the household was his widow, whose name the enumerator wrote out in full: Gramina Julia Petrina Brine, sixty-three, born at Christiania, in Norway. With her were her son Frederic, a Captain in the Royal Engineers, his wife Susan, and two servants.

Frederic is the member of the family I had not expected to like quite so much. In 1865 the *Sidmouth Journal* reported his return, now a Major, “from China and Japan, after absence for several years”, and an exhibition of the curiosities he had collected. A dinner was given in his honour, and

the reporter did not spare anyone's feelings: "we are bound to say that the affair was dolefully *slow*". The following February Mr Farrant had instructions "from MAJOR FREDERIC BRINE, R.E., of Claremont, Sidmouth", to sell his whole museum. That November he lectured on "Japan and the Japanese" for nearly two hours, and "his racy anecdotes, hard hits at our own and others' peculiarities, and genuine good humour, amused and gratified everybody". It was not, you will notice, dolefully slow.

Mrs Brine died two months later. The other papers say only "at Sidmouth"; the town's own paper says more:

January 20, at Claremont, Sidmouth, in the 69th year of her age,
Gramina, widow of James Brine, Esq., late Major 7th Royal Fusileers.

So she died at home. And I still do not know how a girl born in Christiania came to be called Gramina. It is tempting to guess. I shall resist.

Passing through, 1867-1876

For the next nine years the town's monthly list of residents is nearly all we have. From late 1867 to 1870 it has "Mr., Mrs., and Miss Burnell"; who they were is not known. For most of 1871 it has "Sir S. and Lady Stuart, and family", and for once a census night falls in the middle: Sir Simeon H. Stuart, forty-seven, "Baronet (Landowner)", his wife, born at Cawnpore, a son, a daughter, a sister-in-law, and three servants. Which baronetcy he held, I have not yet found. Then, from 1873 to the summer of 1876, come the Croxtons, first Mrs and then Mr and Mrs. No census caught them and no directory I know of names them. I would rather say so than pretend otherwise.

The Colonel and the Cross, 1876-1886

On 1 August 1876 the list reads "Claremont, Colonel Cafe", and from the next summer "Colonel and Miss Cafe". A directory of 1878 put two letters

after his name: “Col Cafe V.C.”

In 1881 the household was four: William M. Cafe, fifty-five, unmarried, “Colonel, H.M. Indian Forces”; his sister Isabella, also unmarried; and two housemaids, but no cook. The probate calendar of 1906 settles who he was: William Martin Cafe, V.C. The Cross was announced in *The London Gazette* in February 1860, when he was a Captain of the 56th Bengal Native Infantry, for an act of 15 April 1858. In the Gazette’s machine-read text the citation runs:

For bearing away, under a heavy fire, with the assistance of Privates Thompson, Crowie, Spence, and Cook, the body of Lieutenant Willoughby, lying near the ditch of the Fort of Ruhya, and for running to the rescue of Private Spence, who had been severely wounded in the attempt.

You will want to know more of Lieutenant Willoughby, and of the Fort of Ruhya. So should I. The citation gives a name and a place, and nothing more.

By 1883 the lists were calling him General. Why the Cafes left, in the winter of 1885–86, the record does not say. He died in 1906 leaving a widow, so the bachelor of 1881 married; when, I have not found. Of Isabella I can tell you nothing more.

The Ladies of Hampden Lodge, 1886–1919

On 8 April 1886 a newspaper reported that “The Ladies Hobart-Hampden, daughters of the late Earl of Buckinghamshire, have taken Claremont, Sidmouth, for a permanent residence.” “Have taken” will not tell us whether they bought the house or rented it, and I shall not pretend it does.

Charlotte and Louisa stayed more than thirty years, the longest occupation of the house in any record I have found. In 1911 Charlotte filled in the census schedule herself. She listed a cook, a house-parlourmaid and a "Tweenie-maid" of sixteen, and at the foot it is written that all of them "passed the night of Sunday April 2nd 1911 in this dwelling & were alive at midnight". She also counted the rooms. She wrote "Twelve", struck it out, and wrote "Thirteen". It is the first measure of the size of the house in any record I have found, and I rather like her for the correction.

Louisa died on 22 February 1919, in her eighty-fifth year, in a nursing home, by two notices in Sidmouth. The *Western Times* said the town had "lost one of its most distinguished residents".

Charlotte did not stay. By June 1921 she was a boarder at 1 May Terrace, in the house of Frank Skinner, a carpenter. Why an Earl's daughter of nearly eighty-eight should be boarding in a carpenter's house, the record does not say, and I shall not guess. She died on 4 November 1926, in her ninety-fourth year; the paper said that "she was loved and respected by a large circle of friends", and among the mourners were Mr and Mrs Frank Skinner. I draw no conclusion from that. I simply set it down.

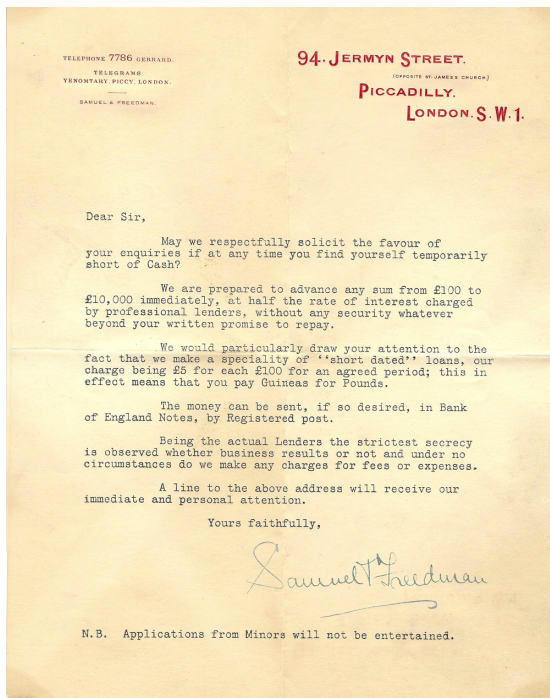
The Watsons, and three papers under the floor

In June 1921 the enumerator wrote "Mr Watson, Claremont, Sidmouth" on the cover of the schedule. The head of the house was Charles Hubback Watson, a retired Portland cement manufacturer, with his wife Caroline, their daughter Maud, two small granddaughters, and two servants. In 1923, "of Claremont", he asked the diocese for a grave space at Chulmleigh, in the north of the county; why there, I have yet to find out. He died in 1934, "of Claremont", and his widow in July 1939. That September the Register found Miss Maud Watson still in the house: at least eighteen years of Watsons.

Whether they owned it is another matter. The deeds are reported to record that in 1937 the house was sold, by Lewis Thomas and Seymour Pope, to a Charles Peter Berthon, who seems to have lived elsewhere. The likeliest reading is that the Watsons did not own Claremont, and that it changed hands with them living in it. It is not proved.

Three small papers from these years have come down to us, and the first is not what one would choose.

It is an envelope, and a letter very probably carried in it. They had slipped between the original floorboards of what is now Flat 2, and lay there for the best part of a century until the present owner lifted the boards to renovate the flat. The envelope is addressed by hand to “C H Watson Esq / Claremont / Sidmouth”, with a three-halfpenny stamp of King George V and a London postmark of 8 June. The year is worn; by the rate of postage, and the Watsons’ arrival, it is very probably 1922 or later.



Found beneath the floorboards of Flat 2: Samuel & Freedman's circular to C. H. Watson, and its envelope.

The letter is from Samuel & Freedman, of 94 Jermyn Street. Their telegraphic address was "YENOMTARY"; read the first five letters backwards, and you will see the joke. It opens:

May we respectfully solicit the favour of your enquiries if at any time you find yourself temporarily short of Cash?

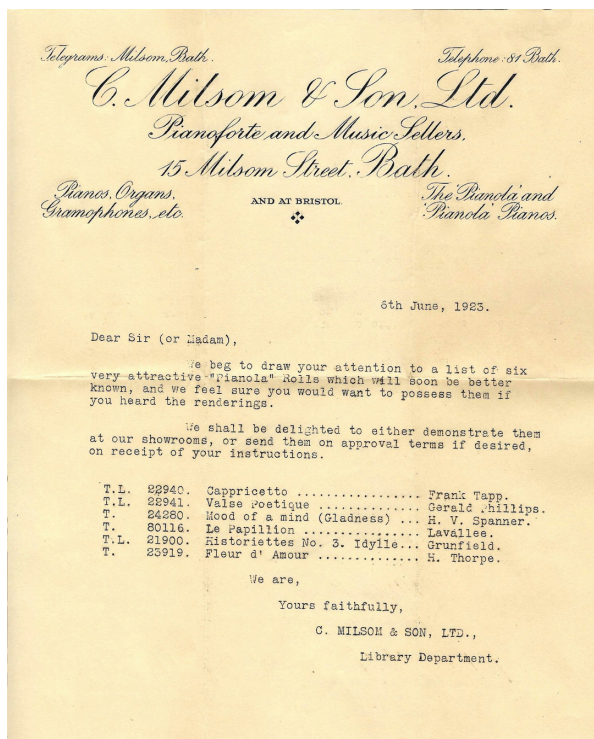
They would advance any sum from £100 to £10,000 “at half the rate of interest charged by professional lenders”, which is a handsome offer from a firm of professional lenders. Their charge was “£5 for each £100 for an agreed period; this in effect means that you pay Guineas for Pounds.” Five pounds in the hundred is one thing for a year and quite another for a month, and the letter does not say which. I suspect that was the point. At the foot is a last line: “N.B. Applications from Minors will not be entertained.”

The minors, at least, were spared: the law of the day, until 1927, protected persons under twenty-one from such circulars, and nobody else. The rule has lasted: the Consumer Credit Act of 1974 still has a section headed, quite simply, “Circulars to minors”; the age is now eighteen, and the post has given way to the telephone and the inbox, but the offer would be recognised by anyone with an email address. Messrs Samuel and Freedman, I suspect, would have felt quite at home.

Did Mr Watson answer? There is nothing to say so. No one, it seems, meant to keep the letter. I am glad the floorboards did.

The same boards gave up a second letter, and this one is dated: “6th June, 1923”. It is from C. Milsom & Son, “Pianoforte and Music Sellers”, of 15 Milsom Street, Bath, in an envelope addressed by hand to “C. Watson Esq.” at Claremont, and it opens “Dear Sir (or Madam)”:

We beg to draw your attention to a list of six very attractive “Pianola” Rolls which will soon be better known, and we feel sure you would want to possess them if you heard the renderings.



*Found with the Samuel & Freedman letter beneath the floorboards of Flat 2:
C. Milsom & Son's circular of 6 June 1923, and its envelope.*

The boards had one more thing to give: a little stapled booklet, the *Bulletin of Music Rolls* of the Aeolian Company, of New Bond Street, for "JUNE, 1923", No. 177. Inside, twice, is the purple stamp of "MILSOM'S, 15

MILSOM STREET, BATH". Same shop, same month: it very probably came from Milsom's with the letter, or soon after.



Also found beneath the floorboards of Flat 2: the Aeolian Company's Bulletin of Music Rolls for June 1923, stamped inside by Milsom's of Bath. Left, the cover; right, the popular dance rolls, all fox-trots, at six shillings each.

It is a catalogue of rolls for the player-piano, and it shows both sides of the drawing room in 1923. On one side is Paderewski, "greatest of living pianists", lately returned "from statecraft to music", playing Chopin, Liszt and his own Nocturne in B flat, at fifteen shillings to twenty-two and sixpence a roll. On hearing the Nocturne played back he exclaimed, "If anybody to-day thinks that the Duo-art Piano is a mere mechanical instrument he should hear it play this record." On the other side is the dance music: fox-trots from six shillings apiece, "Chicago (That Toddling

Town)”, Gershwin’s “Please do it again” and Irving Berlin’s “Some Sunny Day”, and a waltz, “Nellie Kelly I Love You”, from a show at the New Oxford Theatre: “A REAL CATCHY VALSE MELODY.” Milsom’s letter, you will remember, came from their Library Department, and the bulletin warns that some rolls were “not available for the Circulating Library”. One could, it seems, borrow one’s music as one borrowed one’s novels.

Was there a pianola at Claremont? Two circulars about rolls do not prove one, and I shall not say there was. But somebody at Milsom’s thought it worth the postage.

So the floorboards of Flat 2 kept three papers: a moneylender’s offer, a music-seller’s letter, and a catalogue of Chopin and fox-trots. It is a very small window, but a great deal can be seen through it: money, and the want of it; the latest thing from London; and the price of a pleasant evening. Paderewski one night, perhaps, and “Some Sunny Day” the next. And the dates sit close together. The moneylender’s envelope was posted on 8 June, the music-seller’s letter is dated the 6th, and the bulletin is for June 1923. One would like to put all three in the same month. The worn year must stay worn.

After the war

Who lived in the house during the war, the record does not say. In March 1946 Mr Berthon sold to a James Henry Dunford, and in April Mr Dunford sold again, to three ladies named Sheppard. Why so quickly? A James H. Dunford, “Property Developer & Builder”, later owned Sidmount next door with a partner; if he is our man, it was business. A directory of 1949–50 has “The Misses” Sheppard in the house. In 1960 they sold to three Stacys, very probably ladies too, and in 1961 a guide to the town gave Claremont as:

In operation as a Guest House

A later hand has added “Convalescent Home”, and the sheet about the garden says the same, but neither gives a date or a source, and I cannot yet vouch for it. Who kept the guest house, the guide does not say. In 1964 the Stacys sold to Mrs Murphy.

Below stairs

The censuses from 1851 to 1921, and the Register of 1939, name twenty-four servants at Claremont. They give a name and a post, usually an age and a birthplace, and nothing of what they were paid or what they thought. After 1851 there were never more than three, nor fewer than two. Of those whose birthplaces are given, most were born in Devon, three in Sidmouth itself. The youngest were fourteen. And no name appears in two returns: by name, at least, each return found a different set of servants. I have not followed a single one beyond the night on which she was counted. They deserve it as much as anyone in this book.

The ladies on the balcony



Claremont, about 1856–64 by the dress: three ladies on the balcony, and a man in the garden.

Everything else in this booklet rests on a record. This section rests on a photograph, and a photograph does not give its sitters' names. What follows is speculation, and I label it as such.

It is a view of the garden front, with a slate roof and a light iron balcony. On the balcony stand three ladies in dark dresses with very wide skirts, one well apart and two together. The one nearer the centre has a pale head; a white cap, perhaps, or she may simply have moved. In the open doorway is a dark mass that might be someone sitting just inside, or might be furniture. Below, in the garden, a man in light clothes holds a rake or a hoe.

There is no date on it and no photographer's name. By the dress it has been put at about 1856 to 1864, a working estimate, not the opinion of a historian of dress. Those years belong wholly to the Brines, and it has been said that the photograph shows that family. Nobody knows where the story came from; but the costume and the story point the same way.

If it is the Brines, and this is a guess, I should pick the lady with the pale head for Mrs Gramina Brine; a pale cap would suit a lady of sixty or so. The dark-haired lady beside her might be her daughter-in-law Susan, and the lady apart her daughter Eleanor Clarke, home on a visit. All three are in dark dress, and the cap may be a widow's. That looks very like mourning, and if it is mourning for the Major, the photograph was taken after July 1859. But dark is not the same as black: photographs of that time showed reds, browns and greens as dark, and a lady in a good brown silk may look as if she were in mourning and be nothing of the kind.

What is wrong with the guess is plain. Nothing shows these three are mother, daughter and daughter-in-law rather than a lady and two friends; and the faces are too small to recognise, even if we had another likeness to compare. We have none.

It is not a studio portrait; it has the air of a picture taken for the pleasure of it, by someone who seems to have had the run of a private garden. Captain Frederic Brine was an officer of the Royal Engineers, and the Royal Engineers had begun to teach photography in the 1850s. I have found nothing to show that he learned it. But if he did, it would explain neatly why no gentleman of the family is in the picture.

In fairness, the Stuarts of 1871 also had three ladies in the house. But they came seven years after the end of the estimate; if the dress is rightly dated, they are too late. So the Brines are first, and the Stuarts second. The ladies have kept their secret for more than a hundred and fifty years. It would be a poor sort of detective who could not let them keep it a little longer, while she looks for the proof.

What is still not known

- Whether William Barrett built Claremont, and what the parish books of 1827 to 1839 actually say.
- Whether there was ever a fire, and when the thatch gave way to slate.
- Whether the house was sold in 1847, and who owned it at any date between then and 1937.
- Whether any household, from Mr Barker to the Watsons, owned the house or rented it.
- Who the Burnells and the Croxtons were.
- Who lived at Claremont between September 1939 and 1946.
- Who the ladies on the balcony are, and who took the photograph.

The full story, with every source, is in Claremont — Through the Ages, by James Ogilvy Leacock, available on Amazon, ISBN 9798160026183.

CLAREMONT

THE FULL HISTORY

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