

BRYMPTON D'EVERCY

(PLATE II)

BY J. D. GRAY

Nearly every country house has some quality about it, whether of architecture, historical associations or scenery, that makes it notable. Brympton has all these harmonising together so perfectly that the overall impression cannot be surpassed.

In attempting to trace the history of the house from its beginnings there have been many difficulties. There is little documentation, and what there is, is often conflicting. Accurate dating is virtually impossible as architectural styles persisted in Somerset for a considerable time after being superseded elsewhere. What follows is the result of consulting available sources,¹ conversations with experts on the architecture of the period, and some original ideas for which no apology is made.

Although mention is made of Brympton in the Exeter Domesday, this account will start in the year 1220 — before any of the surviving walls were built. In that year the surrounding land was bought by Thomas D'Evercy whose principal estates were, at that time, in the Isle of Wight. Thomas D'Evercy was in the retinue of the Earl of Devon and this probably accounts for his move to the West Country. The home which the D'Evercys built was the detached building adjacent to the church, which, to the present day, remains an excellent example of a small medieval residence (i)². The house consisted originally of a hall occupying the western half, with a bedroom and solar above the kitchens to the east. The ground floor had no direct communication with the first floor, to which the only access was by way of the turret staircase on the outside. The south side of the building was evidently the back and the remains of three garderobe recesses — two on the first floor and one on the ground floor — can be clearly seen. There were originally two doors to the ground floor; one still exists at the east end beside the turret, whilst the position of the other can be plainly seen alongside the present west door. The other visible sign of the D'Evercys' tenure is the North Chapel of the church which was built by Sir Peter D'Evercy — the last male of the line — at the beginning of the fourteenth century. The effigy of a knight which is in this chapel is said to be that of Sir Peter.

Sir Peter D'Evercy died in 1325 and, although his widow lived at Brympton until her death, the ownership of the estate is rather obscure for the next hundred years. A family named de Glamorgan succeeded the D'Evercys, and they in turn were followed by Wynfords who had interminable disputes over the titles. Eventually in 1430 a member of the family obtained sufficiently clear possession to enable the property to be sold to John Stourton, who also owned the neigh-

¹ Principally: Dr. G. F. Sydenham, *The History of the Sydenham Family* (1928); J. Batten, *Historical Notes on Parts of South Somerset* (1894); Christopher Hussey's articles on Brympton which appeared in *Country Life* in 1927.

² See Fig. 1.

bouring manor of Preston Plucknett. The buildings which John Stourton bought were in all probability just as the D'Evercys had left them.

John Stourton never lived at Brympton but bought it as a dower for his daughter Joan, and it was settled on her when she married John Sydenham, another large landowner in the county, in 1434. For almost three hundred years the Sydenhams lived at Brympton and it was this family who were mainly responsible for the appearance of the house as it is today.

The first stage of the Sydenham building was most probably the erection of a new manor running in the direction of, although somewhat behind, the present south front (ii). This house extended for some way to the east and then bent round to the north on the site of the present kitchens to form an L-shaped building. The only remaining part of this house is the south-west corner (the present masters' common room) and close examination reveals traces of Perpendicular windows facing both to the south and to the west. The size and elegance of these windows suggest that this was the Great Hall of the first Sydenham house. These improvements were completed before the death of John Sydenham in 1464. He was succeeded by an infant son, John II, who lived on at Brympton with his mother.

John II, when he came of age, inherited not only Brympton from his mother but also considerable property throughout Somerset from his father. He does not appear to have spent much of his life at Brympton, preferring to live at Combe Sydenham, which was to become in later years the main seat of the family. He did, however, add the splendid Tudor front which forms the north end of the present west facade (the building with the Henry VIII Coat of Arms standing nearest the clock tower). This was probably added to a then existing range of buildings which straggled along the north side of the present kitchen courtyard. The residence would thus have been made into a symmetrical U shape with a courtyard facing west on the ground now covered by the front hall (iii). This Tudor block consisted of three storeys and its original entrance was by way of what was then an outside door from the present front hall. From the ground floor another door, now blocked up, led to the turret stairway and the floors above. The tunnel which today runs through the ground floor of this wing is not contemporary with the building and there are remains of a window on its north side which at present is blocked off to form the raised garden. This would have been a window in John II's Tudor wing which would have been blocked up and the tunnel built, when the gardens were redesigned in the eighteenth century.

In 1534 John II made Brympton over to his son, John III, reserving only for himself 'the nether parlour and two chambers above'—undoubtedly this Tudor wing which he had added.

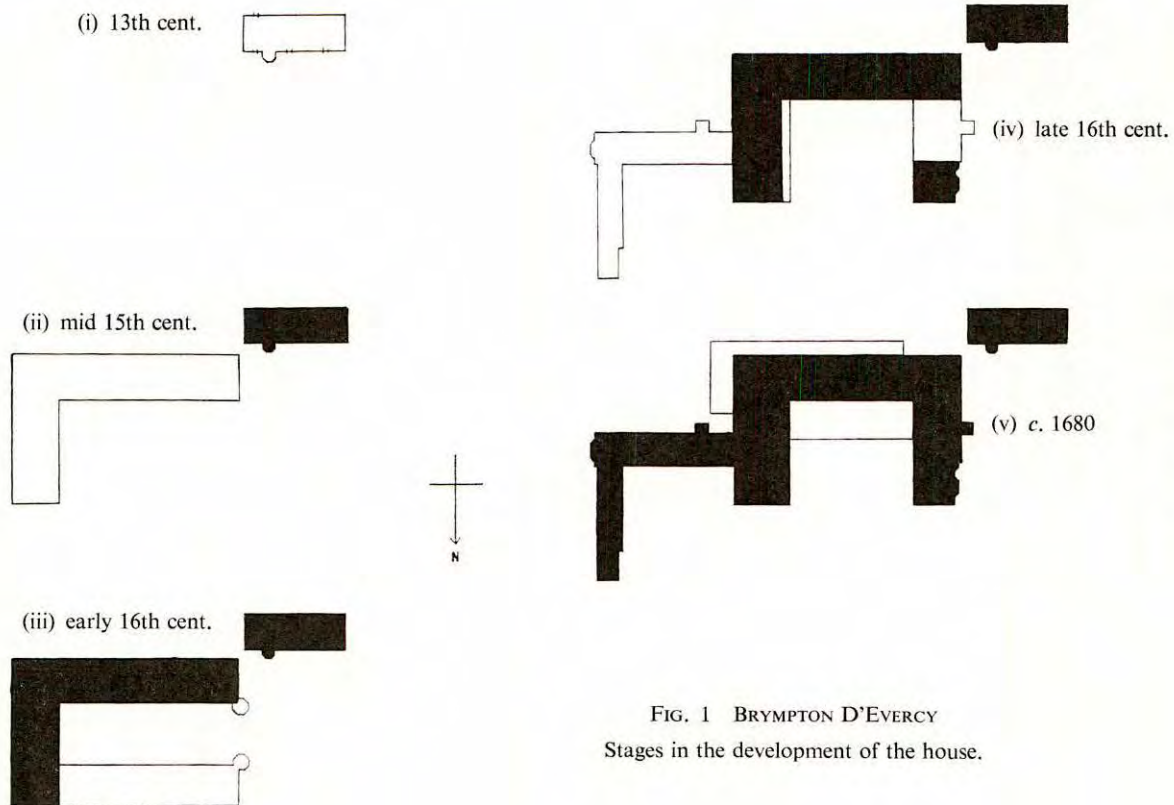


FIG. 1 BRYMPTON D'EVERCY
Stages in the development of the house.

John III was knighted in 1548 and returned to Parliament in 1554. He became, on the death of his father in 1543, the greatest landowner in the county. To the lands which he inherited he added Orchard Wyndham which he made his chief seat. When he died in 1557 he attempted to provide for all his numerous children by leaving them at least one of his many estates. This magnanimous gesture, fortunate though it was for the younger children, was eventually to cripple the main line of the family who inherited Brympton where John III was buried.

John III's eldest son, John IV, was knighted in 1574 and his contribution to the building is the hall which connects the south-west corner with his grandfather's Tudor wing. He probably also removed some older farm buildings to the north of the kitchen courtyard to provide an access from the north instead of the west. John IV built the hall as a continuation of the south-west wing with the result that it now projects slightly in front of, and partially masks, the Tudor turret in which a new door was opened to give direct access to the hall. The original porch had, as is shown in an engraving by Kipp, a single storey with a pediment, and may well have been used, subsequently, to build the lower portion of the present clock tower. When John V succeeded in 1583 he built the kitchen wing — a massive affair with a barrel roof. This new kitchen wing, together with the range of buildings to the east which may have been constructed even earlier, gave to the house the now easily discernible Elizabethan 'E' shape (iv).

John V died in 1625 and although his son, John VI, only survived him for one year, it was long enough for him to have had the splendid heraldic tomb in the church erected to the memory of his father. At the same time, the original manor house was once again needed as a residence — probably for John V's widow — and had to be redecorated. The Jacobean ceiling in the present museum dates from this period, and, although the fireplace is older, it was probably moved from the main house at the same time. How long it was lived in is not known but apparently it was not for very long as Francis Fane found it being used as a stable seventy years later.

John VII was only five years old when he inherited Brympton from his father and as well as Brympton he succeeded to large estates in Yorkshire when he came of age. When he did come of age he promptly mortgaged Brympton for £50,000 which he had managed to spend while still a minor — not a very difficult thing to do in Charles I's reign. He died in 1643 and was succeeded by his son, John Posthumous.

It was John Posthumous—John VIII—who had the magnificent south front built (v). This has been variously attributed to Inigo Jones, but as he died when John VIII was only ten years old it seems most unlikely that he supervised the work. Two possibilities emerge—either John VII had the plans drawn up during his own life-time and

did not have the money available to have them executed, or else John VIII employed a local designer who had worked for Inigo Jones, perhaps at Wilton Park which was completed in 1654, or at Hinton St. George.

To build this new front John VIII demolished all but the west end of the early Sydenham south front and built his new front running eastwards from it; at the same time the south-west corner was given classical windows and the Tudor window to the west was blocked up. It is most likely that a magnolia tree, which died in 1963, was planted at this time to mask the new stone-work. Despite the fact that the new wing projected considerably in front of the original house, it was still not deep enough, so a new back was added thus reducing considerably the size of the courtyard. The existing wall which divides the main rooms from the staircase hall was, in fact, the back wall of the original manor as the stone work is obviously far too old and thick for it to be contemporary with the new facade. The main argument against Inigo Jones having designed this wing is that there is no obvious centre. Examination, however, of the eastern end indicates that it was intended to carry on for at least one, and possibly three, more bays.

The main building work was probably finished, although the inside decorations were incomplete when the Duke of Monmouth spent the night at Brympton during his popularity tour of the West of England in 1680. He does not appear to have impressed Sir John with his cause and certainly did not have his support at the battle of Sedgemoor five years later.

Sir John Posthumous died in 1696 and was succeeded by his son Philip — an extraordinary character. He lived in some style for a while, but, after being disappointed in love, he became somewhat eccentric, drinking freely and giving away much of his fortune. He tried to sell Brympton for £20,000 as early as 1697 and eventually in 1722 it passed into the hand of Thomas Penny, the Receiver-General for Somerset, for £15,492 10s.

Thomas Penny of Keyford near Yeovil only owned Brympton for eight years and may not, in fact, have ever lived in it. Alterations which were made during these years have, however, been attributed to him. The first of these is the Gothic porch which replaced the one built by John V. The old porch may now form the base of the clock-tower which was built in 1722 and is the fourth oldest outside clock in working order in England. He also, presumably to make the building more efficient as stables, changed the position of two of the doors in the D'Evercy Manor House.

In 1731 Francis Fane, a great-great-grandson of the 1st Earl of Westmorland, bought Brympton from Penny's heirs and the estate has remained with this family down to the present day. Francis Fane never married and was succeeded by his brother Thomas. Both of the brothers were very rich through connections with merchant families

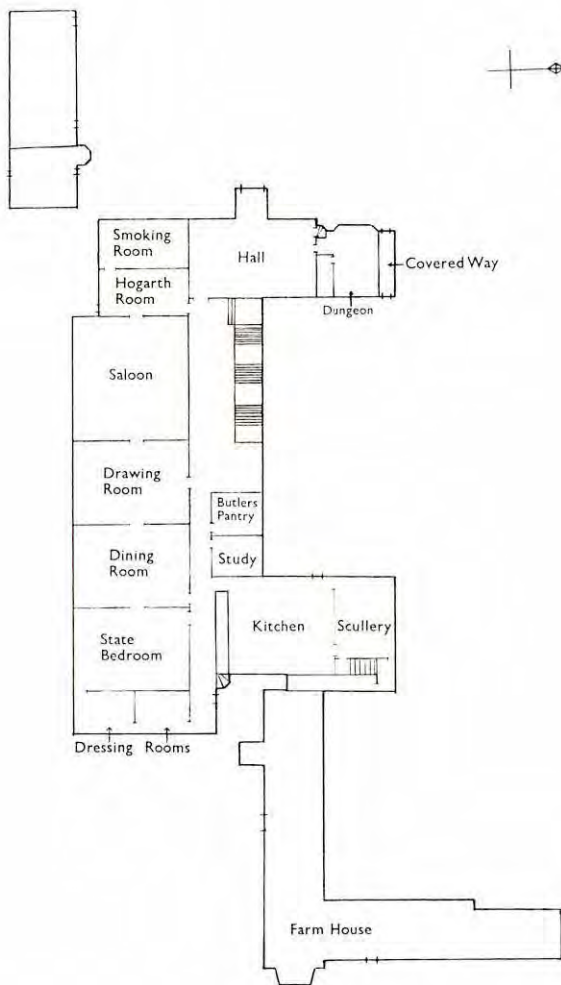


FIG. 2

Brympton, showing the names by which the ground-floor rooms were known before Clare School took over the building.

in Bristol and were well able to afford the gracious style of living which Brympton offered. In 1762 Thomas Fane, after an extraordinary series of deaths, became eighth Earl of Westmorland; he died in 1771 and his widow, the daughter of William Swymmer, a wealthy Bristol merchant, continued to live at Brympton. Thomas Fane's grandson, the tenth Earl, married twice; Brympton was inherited in 1857 by the last surviving child of his second marriage, Lady Georgiana Fane, who does not seem to have been able to afford to maintain the estate properly. When she died in 1874 after a rather chequered life, during which she was for some years the close friend and confidante of the 1st Duke of Wellington, she was succeeded by her nephew Sir Spencer Ponsonby, the youngest son of her half-sister Lady Bessborough. Sir Spencer, who added the name of Fane to his own after coming to Brympton, had to sell the family plate and some paintings to clear the estate of very heavy debts but he managed to put it on a firm financial footing again and spent at least part of each year living in Brympton. When he died in 1915 he was succeeded for only one year by his son, John. When John Ponsonby-Fane died the estate passed into the hands of his son, Richard, who never married and spent most of his life in the Far East. After Richard's death in 1937, the estate was inherited by Nicholas Clive, son of Richard's sister Violet, who had married Captain Edward Archer Clive, second son of General Edward Clive of Perrystone Court, Herefordshire. He added Ponsonby-Fane to his own name and lived on the estate until his death in 1963.

The Clive-Ponsonby-Fanes ceased to live in the main house in 1957 and it was empty for two years before Clare School took possession in 1959.

Since the minor alterations in 1722 there has been little constructional work undertaken and the main improvements made by the Fane family were to the grounds. These were exquisitely laid out and planted with some rare and beautiful shrubs and trees. The terrace was commissioned by Lady Georgiana and the Japanese Garden and the area beyond the lake laid out by the late Mrs. Clive.

When Clare School moved in, these gardens were badly overgrown and the buildings themselves were only equipped with skeleton heating and lighting systems. The school, while having to adapt the buildings to their new use, have tried to be conscious of the history and heritage of which they have become a part, and the house and grounds — externally at least — are being restored slowly to something of their previous splendour.