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The Diary of a Nobody

by Sue Hitchcock

When we moved here only five and a half years ago, we looked nowhere else but here, in Old Town. We knew Eastbourne well from the time we lived in Seaford and when we had to move here to be close to our daughter, it had to be here. In Seaford we had lived in a part called “Chyngton” a name derived from the Roman name for the tribe who lived there, the Cynetes. The history is important to us, for me mainly from an upbringing with the Bible pre-eminent, my husband having become obsessed with the Greeks and Romans at the tender age of ten.

Mostly in Eastbourne the Old Town is regarded as the poor area, but it is not poor in history. Eight hundred years before the Duke of Devonshire squandered his wealth in building a dignified version of the Prince Regent’s Brighton extravagance, there was a village here called “Bourne”. It wasn’t so much a name as a description of the sparkling spring which emerged here filtered through the chalk downs making a pond at Motcombe, (Moat valley). It would have always been a village for that reason alone. The stream then flowed down to the sea along Southfield Road, known at that time as “Watery Lane”, along Terminus Road and out at Seahouses, where a small fishing community lived.

The oldest buildings still in use were built by the Normans soon after the conquest, the beautiful St Mary’s church where the changes are rung on its six bells every Sunday and possibly more important, the Lamb, an inn where ale was brewed from the spring water, providing the only safe drink available in those pre tea and coffee days. Soon after a Greyfriars monastery was established a little up the hill facing the Lamb. Friars were allowed quite a volume of ale in their daily quota, as they worked outside mainly.

Evidence of the monastery is hard to find, because King Henry the eighth gave it away, as a grand house after his dissolution of all the monasteries. It was known as "The Greys", hence the spelling of our road, Greys Road, without the apostrophe you might have expected. The terrace houses built in the early nineteenth century are rather mean, now two bedroomed where the third was sacrificed for an indoor bathroom, but at the end nearest to the monastery, stones can be found in the front walls which must have come from it. Several have square holes, where door posts would have been set and in Vicarage Road there are a few with the curve of an arch. A nursing home now sits on the site and maybe there would be little remaining, but the cheerful men who followed St Francis make this a good place.

Subsequent history would be equally interesting but little is written about it. The farms must have produced lamb and barley for the ale and it would have been a popular place to live until the French Revolution made people fearful of an invasion. Was the Duke of Devonshire's development just as a leisure resort or did he want to make it more attractive to military families whose men might have to fight? Old Town then had hospital facilities and a huge graveyard on the slopes of Upperton. Ominous, but we escaped Napoleon's incursion. Old Town is now populated by interesting but somewhat impoverished people, which I suppose is what we are.