

The Manor House. Austerfield.



Austerfield Manor

House today. Photo by Roger T Vorhauer © 2016

The Manor House was where William Bradford was brought up by his grandfather and uncles. He was born in 1590 and his father William died when young Bradford was just one year old. He lived with his grandfather William, until his grandfather died when he was six. His mother Alice then died when he was seven.

Bradford was baptised in St Helena's church where the original font can be seen today. Heavily influenced by leading Pilgrims Richard Clifton from Babworth and William Brewster from Scrooby, he was a sickly young orphan when they first met, but grew into a passionate religious radical, escaping to Holland with the Brewster family at the age of 18.

After travelling to America, Bradford became the second elected Governor of the Plymouth Colony in Massachusetts in 1621, was a signatory of the historic Mayflower Compact, and bequeathed much of our knowledge about their momentous journey and early years of the Colony in his journal, '*Of Plimoth Plantation*'

Built in the early 1500s the Manor House was the largest farm in the village, with buildings surrounding an open courtyard. Above the stables were the tack room and the coachman's home,

The old village pump, which originally stood opposite Austerfield Study Centre, now stands in this courtyard.

Just outside the house are the remains of an old pig trough, with room for nine pigs.

Sue Allan, distinguished Pilgrim Historian has carried out extensive research and her findings about how the Manor House was nearly lost are recorded below.

The wider Doncaster area has two iconic names linked to American history – Scrooby and Austerfield. Each village can boast a Mayflower Pilgrim's home.

However what is not widely known is how close in the recent past Austerfield came to losing theirs. And how, if not for the swift action of a spinster from Bawtry, Austerfield Manor House - the home of leading Mayflower Pilgrim William Bradford - might have been bull-dozed.

Orphaned at a tender age, William Bradford is thought to have been brought up in the Manor House by his grandfather and uncles. After hearing enigmatic minister Richard Clifton preach, as a mere teenager Bradford had joined the Separatist cause, which eventually led to the voyage of the Mayflower in 1620.

A map in Sheffield Archives, believed to date from 1767, shows the Manor House and its adjoining land but not in the ownership of the Bradford family long after William had left for the New World. However, they did still own property close to the church. According to entries in St Helena's parish registers, soon after this time the Bradfords appear to have moved away from the village.



In the 1890s the Manor House seems to have been in good repair. Victorian Historian, Dr Alexander Mackennal, described the house in detail in his book 'Homes and Haunts of the Pilgrim Fathers', even down to the cellars beneath the kitchen. He said that it was a 'comfortable house now divided into two cottages.' However by the mid 1930's the Manor House was no longer inhabited and appears to have slithered to the depths of a terminal decline. It was then that it was condemned as 'unfit for human habitation' and earmarked for demolition.



Word of its imminent demise reached the ears of the American Ambassador in London, Mr Bingham. In newspapers as far away as the Aberdeen Post, an article was published on May 2nd 1936 reporting that

Bingham was supporting moves to save it. Later on May 26th the Nottingham Post reported that 'efforts are being made to save the Manor House Austerfield, near Bawtry, the birthplace of William Bradford Pilgrim Father. The house has been condemned and Austerfield is eager to prevent its demolition or transfer of it piecemeal to America for re-erection in the States which has been hinted at'. Ideally the local community hoped to preserve the building as 'a show place at Austerfield for all time' However, and despite Mr Bingham's good intentions, financial help seems not have materialized quickly enough. By the following year demolition seemed inevitable.

Like countless Americans before him, in the summer of 1937 American pastor J. Harry Hooper made his own 'pilgrimage' to visit Austerfield Manor. Hooper was in England on a three month exchange with the minister of Park Street Church in Hull.

Having drawn up outside in a borrowed Wolsey and ignoring the 'No Trespass' signs on the gate, Hooper entered the closed field to the side of the house. Tools were strewn about and builders were busy at work.

Peeking through a window, Hooper was surprised to see a young gentlewoman inside wearing a broad-brimmed hat and busily joining in the restoration work. Her name was Ethel Brown Pennington and she lived with her parents in High Field House in Bawtry. Ethel was a product of her times. In the wake of a dreadful war that had seen a huge proportion of the eligible young men of her own generation slaughtered, she, like countless other young women, was doomed to remain unmarried. Nonetheless this was a woman determined to live life to the full.

On seeing Hooper, Pennington came out and after brief introductions were made over a friendly cup of tea, she told him how she came to be at the Manor House.

Ethel's family owned a lot of land close by and had known the building since childhood. Passing the house some three months before, she had seen a foreman and his wrecking crew looking inspecting the building. He then told her that the following week he planned to move his heavy machinery and tools onto the site in readiness to demolish it. Spurred on by urgency, Ethel Pennington immediately approached the owner. By the end of the day the Manor House had been transferred into her possession.

It seemed a pity,' she had told Hooper, 'that the old house had to be destroyed'. Ethel also explained how she had become interested in the Pilgrim Fathers after visiting America a few years before and having been asked so many questions about them. She also explained to Hooper that for the previous two months much restoration work had been done but there was so much more to do. Small outlying buildings had been



taken down as well as later unsightly additions and much rotted out timber had been replaced with new. Although costs kept spiralling upwards, her determination was to permanently halt the building's deterioration and to bring it back to as close as it had been when originally built. Ethel had also planned to convert the existing stable into a caretaker's cottage.

With the onset WW2 hoped for financial support from America did not materialise. With men, money and materials in short supply, work on the house was halted and Ethel Pennington's dream of turning Austerfield Manor into a protected heritage site died. However, during the course of the war thousands of American servicemen came to Austerfield to pay



their respects at William Bradford's former home.

On Friday November 18th, 1949 The Yorkshire Post and Leeds Mercury reported that Austerfield Manor House had been purchased by Lieutenant Colonel W Forrest Bracewell, a native of Ecclesall Bierlow, Sheffield. Bracewell restored the Manor House into a comfortable home and lived there until his death in September 1977 at the age of 76.

However the real saviour of Austerfield Manor House was Ethel Brown Pennington, whose single minded determination and passion had saved the house from destruction. After a lifetime plagued by bouts of ill health, Ethel Brown Pennington died in 1951. She was aged just 50.

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