

SHAMLEY GREEN HISTORY SOCIETY NOTES, NO.2 - THE MALT HOUSE, Michael Harding

The brown colouring of the Malt House photograph is an example of what is called a “sepia print”, commonly used 1900-1938. The photographer is knowledgeable, shrewd and skilled. He has centred-up on the house as his focal point including the chimney protrusions; but taken full advantage of the pond water in front of it to show good reflections of the house and trees.

Victorian antiquarians has already featured drawings of the subject of this photograph as a type exemplar in the same way that later artists have painted it. The tilt of the old Tudor gable on the right upper floor gives it such special character and the timber framework with its original bracing is a good example of its type. The use of local Hyde sandstone for the exterior walls of the gable wing on the left, which was built on two centuries later, helps it to blend in well.



This photograph shows the Malt House exactly as I remember it as a young boy in the 1930s and 40s. A two pound jam jar with a string handle and a short cane with a net bag on one end were the ideal pieces of equipment for pond dipping. The Malt House pond was shallow but nutrient rich. Frogs, toads, newts, water boatmen, damsel flies and sticklebacks were residents. Collecting frog spawn or any of the above was one of the more interesting things to do in the early days of WWII. Of the four ponds on the Green it was the best for pond dipping and the safest as long as you did not attempt to drink the water!

During the 1930s-40s Sooty Elliott and his wife lived in the single storey slate roofed Victorian extension to the right. He was the disabled chimneysweep who rode his adapted bicycle using his good leg, whilst balancing his rods and brush heads on his shoulders and bowler hatted head. Under the vine trellis at the side he would cut hair at weekends when he had no commissions to attend a wedding as a good luck symbol. His greatest pleasures were playing the piccolo and drinking his potent home brewed wine.

During the whole of the war the rest of the Malt House complex including Mellow House at the rear were tenanted by families evacuated from London's badly blitzed East End. They lacked almost all

internal facilities except for a single cold tap supply to each of the kitchen areas. Small wooden privy sheds were discretely located to the rear in the gardens. As far as I am aware they relied mainly on candles and paraffin lamps but may have had a few rooms fitted with electric lights which could only be used if all windows were blacked out by thick blinds or curtains. An outside light emitting a red light apparently did not count!

Post war in 1946-7 the houses were vacated, condemned as unfit for human habitation and put up for auction for demolition. At the last moment a developer stepped in purchasing the site at a knockdown price but then needing to carry out a massive refurbishment at great expense. Mr and Mrs Rooper downsized from Reel Hall and moved into the Malt House. Jack and Muriel Derry began their ownership of Mellow House as their much loved family home, hidden behind the structure of the Malt House, visible in the photograph.

Installation of mains drainage saw the ponds disappear and the ground in front was levelled up and planted with trees.

As to the precise date I cannot be so certain but my guess would be early 1920s. From the quality of reflections we know it was a calm day and some of the trees appear to be beginning to shed leaves so perhaps it was Autumn. My guess as to the photographer is that he was a professional who lived at Reigate. He travelled widely, Surrey villages and towns featured heavily in his vast collection. His name was Francis Frith. The Francis Frith website quotes a date of 1906. Interestingly the site shows exactly the same photograph except there is washing on the line in the left of the picture!

