

The Castle End of Cambridge

By
Enid Porter

To the disappointment of many of our overseas visitors, no castle—not even the picturesque ruins of one—can now be seen in Castle End, the district of Cambridge which lies between Northampton Street and the top of Castle Hill.

It was in 1086, when William the Conqueror made Cambridge the base for his campaign against Hereward, that the first castle was built, with a wooden Keep on the mound beside the present Shire Hall. But long before this, the area had been inhabited. Excavations have revealed evidence of a pre-Roman occupation extending over 15 acres to the east of Castle Street, although this settlement was abandoned when the Romans came and, in their turn laid out a new enclosure on the south-west corner

of Castle Hill. In the second century A.D. they built a new Roman town, fortifying it with a great ditch and a wall. That the area was inhabited in Anglo-Saxon times is proved by Saxon gravestones found, in 1810, within the castle precincts, and by later discoveries.

Under Edward I, from 1283 onwards, the Norman castle was rebuilt. A Great Hall was erected, a tower was built on the mound, a Great Gate and portcullis and a new East Tower, with a look-out down Bridge Street, were also constructed. The Barbican, completed in 1288, was built on the west side of the present Castle Street which runs on the line of the old castle moat. By Elizabeth I's reign, this moat was spanned by a great arch of stone

which connected the Gatehouse with the outer bank, the Barbican and the old road to Huntingdon which then ran beside St. Peter's Church and Shelly Row.

In 1585, the Castle was reported to be in ruins, and as Emmanuel College was in need of building material, the stone from Edward I's Great Hall and other buildings were sold to the College, the money being used for the repair of the Castle walls. A survey made in 1606 revealed that the Gatehouse was still being used as a prison and gaoler's house, but that nearly all the rest of the Castle, save for a jury house and the Shire House, had been demolished. The stone had gone to Sawston Hall, Emmanuel College, Magdalene College, Great St. Mary's Church and other Cambridge buildings.

During the Civil War, the Castle was fortified with new earthworks—still to be seen near the Rex Cinema—and a small garrison was housed in what remained of the buildings. Cromwell is reputed to have stayed in the old house, known as Cromwell's House until it was demolished in the 1870's, which stood opposite Shelly Row on the site of part of the present Storey's almshouses.

From the Restoration onwards, the remains of the Castle fell more and more into disrepair until, in 1842, the last fragment—the old Gatehouse—was destroyed. It had served as a prison until a new one was built, in 1802, within the old Castle precincts, to replace it. This gaol remained in use until 1916 and was finally demolished in 1929. On the site of the old Gatehouse the Assize Courts were built in 1842. Many people can remember the building—it was not pulled down until 1954—with its porticoed front surmounted by stone figures representing Law, Justice, Mercy and Punishment. The present Shire Hall was begun in 1931, since when additions have been made to it.

Today, two churches—St. Peter's and St. Giles'—stand in Castle End. Once there was a third—All Saints' by the Castle—at the corner of Mount Pleasant and Castle Street. The people of this parish suffered greatly in the plague called the Black Death, and the survivors were absorbed into St. Peter's parish. The church, left unused, fell into ruins and there is no evidence to show what kind of building it was. Recent excavations on the site failed to turn up any bones of people buried in the



The Folk Museum, Castle Street, of which the author is the curator, used to be the White Horse Inn, as this old photograph indicates.

former churchyard, but a 16th century witness, giving evidence to the Attorney General, spoke of bones and skulls he had seen lying above ground, while in 1950, a very old lady recalled seeing, as a child, some skulls dug up when the ground was being prepared for the Phoenix Nurseries.

St. Peter's Church, now, consists only of the west part of the nave and the west tower of the once larger church built, tradition says, on the site of a Roman temple. The original church had, by 1781, become so dilapidated that much of it was pulled down, some of the materials being used to restore the part that remains today.

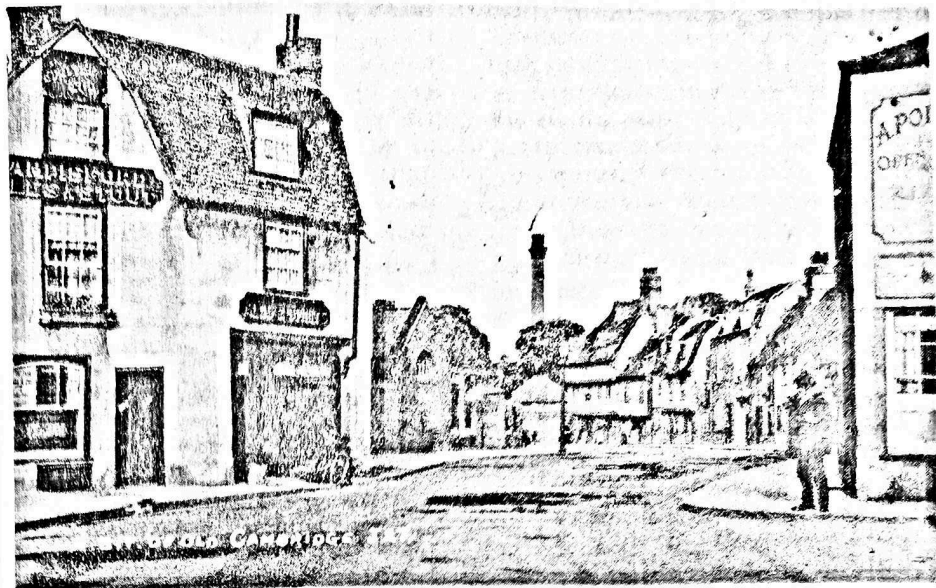
St. Giles' Church, nearby, was erected in 1875, a little to the north of the earlier church begun in 1092 and enlarged in the 13th century. In the 19th century an annexe was built on the north side of the original church, with seats rising as in an amphitheatre. A "hideous excrescence", a Cambridge guide book of 1868 called this annexe: "should it ever be rebuilt which, however desirable, seems at present hopeless, we trust that the older portions will be carefully and reverently preserved."

The chancel arch of the original building was, in fact, re-set in the new church of 1875, between the south chapel and the south aisle. The old church was not entirely demolished until the new one was erected so, for a time, the two buildings stood side by side.

Castle End was popularly known as The Borough—the burh or fortified place—and anyone born within its boundaries was called a Borough Boy, a name not yet forgotten by older Cambridge people. A public house called the Borough Boy stood at 19 Northampton Street until 1912.

The area was among the least prosperous districts of Cambridge and had the reputation of being a very rough one, inhabited by drunkards and prostitutes. Gloucester Street, in particular, with its little houses, now demolished, erected by the Cambridge Improved Industrial Dwellings Society, was shunned by "respectable" citizens as being a haunt of vice!

Public houses certainly abounded in Castle End. In the last century there were no fewer than eleven in Castle Street, of which only three remain today. In Northampton Street, in addition to the Merton Arms and the Rose and Crown,



Northampton Street, showing the Spotted Cow public house on the left. The house on the right was the Borough Boy.

which still exist, there were the Spotted Cow, the Borough Boy and the Bell. Bell Lane, indeed, was one of the street's former names.

Earlier still it had been known as Merton Hall Lane, because it led to Merton Hall. This house, originally known as the Stone House, was built in c. 1200 by Hervey Dunning who, in 1207, became the earliest known Mayor of Cambridge. In 1271, the property was conveyed to Merton College, Oxford, who remained the owners until 13 years ago, when it was purchased by St. John's College, Cambridge.

The oldest house in Cambridge

The north wing of the Hall, added in the 16th and 17th centuries, is now a postgraduate hostel, while the original Stone House has been restored for use as a college theatre. In the 16th century, this house acquired the name of the School of Pythagoras, by which it is still known, in the course of the many disputes as to whether Oxford or Cambridge University was the older. A Chancellor of Cambridge University had earlier claimed that Anaxogoras had taught in Cambridge; this claim was repeated in the 16th century when, it seems, the more familiar name of Pythagoras was substituted for Anaxogoras and given to this, the oldest house in Cambridge.

Castle End was a closely-knit little community in the past, its working class inhabitants, for the most part, crowded into what were all too often insanitary houses in airless courts and yards. Many such yards led off Castle Street—John's Place, Comet Yard, Leonard's Yard, Worboy's Yard among them. Off Northampton Street, on the south side, were Briggs' Court and Gentle's Yard, while opposite, eight houses were tucked away in the yard of the Spotted Cow, and nine in Collin's Court behind Collin's timber yard which, until 1910, occupied the corner of Castle Street and the then much narrower Northampton Street.

But the largest and most crowded court was Kettle's Yard, a huddle of 26 little houses stretching from Honey Hill to the backs of Nos. 4 to 8 Castle Street, and approached both from Northampton Street, and from Castle Street by way of the path beside St. Peter's Church.

Most of Kettle's Yard was condemned and pulled down before the 1939 war and was left derelict; the last remaining houses were occupied until the mid 1950's. Two of the largest were left to be converted, later, into the house known now as Kettle's Yard, while the Honey Hill flats and the green space before them lie on part of the remainder of the site of the old yard.

Some idea of the appalling housing conditions that once existed in Castle End can be gained from the report made by the Corporation's Sanitary Committee in 1880. Nos. 44 and 45

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Northampton Street had, it was stated, "been condemned as unfit for habitation, while Kettle's Yard is a fever den and the whole soil is saturated with fever germs. At No. 4 the closet is inside the house and is probably the source of contagion."

Some twenty years later, in 1902, a housing committee found that out of 81 Cambridge people who were living three or more to one room, 38 belonged to St. Giles' parish. In the same parish, in two-roomed houses, there were 66 cases of three or more people sharing a bedroom, and 15 cases of six or more people sleeping in one room. No fewer than 47 houses had no yard at all, while 40 households had to share their neighbour's lavatory.

Until the mid 19th century, many Castle End residents relied for their water supply on the pump in the wall of St. Giles' church, a practice condemned by the Town Surveyor in 1852 when he expressed concern that it was necessary to "use water for domestic or any other purposes after it had filtered through the corpses of our ancestors."

Many Castle End men, in winter especially, were often faced with periods of unemployment. At such

times, they would gather at the corner of Castle Street and Magdalene Street and wait to be picked up by employers needing casual labour. Often a few days' pay had to be given in advance, so that the tools which had been pawned to provide the wherewithal to buy food, could be redeemed. Many of the men's wives worked as laundresses, washing undergraduates' linen at home and spreading it to dry, in fine weather, on the "Green Hills", as the grassy banks in Mount Pleasant were popularly known.

Improved housing for the poor

Efforts were made to alleviate the bad housing and the poverty. In the 1880's and 1890's, cottages were erected by the Improved Industrial Dwellings Society to be let at low rent, while in 1883, the Workmen's Institute and Mission Hall was opened on Pound Hill, site of the old pound for straying cattle. The Hall

was run by members of the Emmanuel Congregational Church in Trumpington Street with the help of undergraduates, among them Owen Seaman, later to become editor of **Punch**. In addition to religious services, classes were arranged, clubs were formed and, in bad winters, a soup kitchen was opened. Social work was also carried out by the Methodists, whose first chapel was built in St. Peter's Street in 1823.

Until comparatively recently, Castle End, especially in the Shelly Row, Haymarket Road—where once the hay market was held—and Mount Pleasant area, retained an air of being "a village in a town." With the closure and demolition of many shops and houses in Castle Street and Shelly Row, however, and the changes in Northampton Street, the character of the neighbourhood has changed. Now, a redevelopment of the area is planned. New blocks of flats, shops and so on will be erected, and, in time, apart from the old houses in Northampton Street, the old White Horse Inn, now the Folk Museum, St. Peter's Church and Merton Hall, little will remain of what is now left of the ancient Borough.

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