

THE RESTORATION OF BYFLEET MANOR

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Now people from across the world recognise it as the Dower House in Downton Abbey – the home of Dame Maggie Smith's character - but back in 1946 'Dowager Violet' would not have been amused by the state of her 'home' which appears to have been on the brink of being lost forever.

The house had been owned since 1891 by Mrs Margaret Rutson who in the early part of the 20th century commissioned the architect Edward Warren to renovate the house and add two wings on either side of the old house. But in 1920 Mrs Rutson inherited Nunnington Hall in Yorkshire (which she donated to the National Trust in 1952), retaining Byfleet Manor until just before the Second World War.

During the war the house was requisitioned by the military and no doubt suffered slightly from that experience, but from contemporary reports it seems that after the army moved out, vandals moved in, so that by the Spring of 1946 there was serious concern locally about the state of the property.

According to one report 'practically all the windows round the house have been shattered, with window frames broken as well in some cases, and a circular skylight over the staircase has also been knocked out, so that the rain comes straight through to the stairs'. The woodwork on the stairs had been defaced, doors had been ripped from their hinges, holes knocked through walls and ceilings and some wooden panelling removed.

A meeting was called between representatives from Woking Council, Surrey County Council, the Government's Chief Inspector of Historic Buildings and the owner of the property, with the local historian Leonard Stevens attending on behalf of the Surrey Archaeological Society.

There had been calls for the building to be declared an 'ancient monument' instead of just 'a building of historic interest' – the difference being that whilst the latter meant that the local council had the authority to request the owner to maintain the property (with the discretion of providing some funds to help), the former required the government to take responsibility and ensure it was maintained, providing money for the upkeep if necessary. Not surprisingly whilst the local councils might have preferred it



Before the Second World War the Manor House at Byfleet was cared for by Mrs Margaret Rutson.



to be declared a scheduled ancient monument the man from the Ministry was not so keen, and the fate of the building hung in the balance.

In November 1946 things seemed to go from bad to worse. The council reported that the owner, Mr R.W.H. Marris, intended to preserve the gates and wall around the front garden but 'he did not regard it as an economical proposition to preserve the building intact'- although he was prepared to consider 'presenting the internal panelling and staircase and other items worthy of preservation to the Local Authority for safe custody'! Remarkably it seems that the council were inclined to agree with him and even suggested that a list be made up of what could be salvaged and the

owner to 'indicate which items he was prepared to donate'!

In the end, however, a new owner came forward who wanted to preserve the whole house (not just the garden walls). Mr R.D. Thompson appears to have started work almost immediately as in February 1947 he put an application to the Building Licensing Committee of Woking Council for permission to carry out 'first aid repairs' to the 'casements, window frame, doors and roof' at a cost not exceeding £65. He later sought a licence to convert the 'squash racquet court' into a separate dwelling in March 1947 at a cost of £1,250 (J Poulton Ltd being the builders). No doubt much more money was needed to put the whole house in

Mrs Rutson commissioned the architect Edward Warren to restore the property and add the two wings on either side of the old house.

order, but if only £65 was required for 'first aid', one does wonder just how enthusiastic Mr Marris was on seeing the property repaired rather than redeveloped – and how complicit Woking Council (and others) were in sanctioning such vandalism.

Over the following years and decades Mr Thompson (and his successors) lovingly restored the property to its former glory – so that both 'Dowager Violet', and the rest of us, can still enjoy seeing one of Byfleet's most treasured buildings.



Fortunately the destruction of the old house did not materialise and a succession of sympathetic owners restored it to its former glory.