

Chatteris House

The story was - according to Mr. Seward - a certain gentleman of means built the house for his wife in the early 19th century. She was not impressed and refused to live there. Whether it was the house or the fens I do not know, however the house was unloved.

We moved from March to Chatteris at the beginning of 1959 as my father, Leslie Morton had been offered the job of Manager for the newly opened Ford Agricultural centre to be based in Chatteris House, recently acquired by Gravens, the Ford Motor Co. of Ely. Mr. Graven had been 'asked' to extend his business interests!

The house was being converted into flats with a tractor showroom fronting the road. In the grounds to the rear there would be a large workshop for repairing and maintaining tractors and other agricultural implements, a row of garages on the left, hard standing for the business and flat owners' cars, plus a small garden for us and clothes lines for the flats.

The property had been bought from the Chatteris auctioneers, Swards, as I was told. They had built a house to the left and ran their business from there.

As I remember, the land used to build the new house had once been part of Chatteris House. Another part of its land became the Bowling Club.

There were five entry doors. The most impressive was the west one with steps leading up to a portico supporting a small balcony and an iconic front door - teak on the outside and inlaid mahogany on the inside. At the rear, eastern side, steps led up to a lesser door, an entry from the garden to the ground floor (this became the entry to our flat).

Doors on the north and south sides entered the semi-basement - the north having stone steps like the main staircase, and the south originally just to the basement (wooden stairs to the ground floor were added later) . A further door on the east corner had steps down from the garden into a large kitchen.

When we moved in, the alterations were still on-going, so I could roam the whole house. In the basement there was a large (empty) kitchen which had a wonderful old dresser which was retained after the room became part entrance/reception/employees area. Across the passage was a small room with a spit for roasting meats. Further along were several other rooms - butlers' pantry, wine cellar etc. The new office was at the back at the far end as there was another entry door there. Outside this door was a toilet and, a little later, a fire escape.

Wooden stairs outside the office led up to our flat on the ground floor, with a heavy door at the top. (These had been put in by the previous owner). There were two blocked-up doors on either side at the top of the stairs which had opened onto a corridor, now gone. The main reception rooms, one either side of the entrance hall, were lofty and large with ornate plaster-work and central ceiling roses.

To the rear of these was another similar room which became two bedrooms and a bathroom, overlooking the garden. On the north side was an L-shaped room which had had a servants' stairs in it - presumably going up from the basement to the top of the house. I never quite worked them out, much of it having gone . The rest of the room was thought to have been a gun room. It had an enormous safe in the alcove to the left of the fireplace. The steel door was hidden behind cladding when this became our lounge-diner. The smaller part of this room was partitioned off and became our kitchen. The staircase mentioned above was made into a cupboard and the treads of the stairs were shelving for the pantry!

Once the front rooms, hall and main staircase had been partitioned off from our flat, the real work began. Six flats were made - three on the first floor and three up in the attics on the second floor. Access was via the north door at the side (basement level) and up to the main stairs, which are - I hope - still there, they are impressive stonework. The room over the balcony seen atop the front entrance was octagonal and I think it had been a library. It now became a lounge, so retained. I never did go into the flats so I'm not sure how they were configured. I do know a few rooms were made out of the top floor right room as it was enormous. Someone said it had been the nursery. It would have made a good dormitory. Along the hallway on the first floor the far door had painted panelling of angel heads which were carefully retained - sparing them the indignity of being painted Fordson blue, which nearly everything else seemed to be! My mother was extremely upset at times during the alterations particularly when she saw carved marble fire surrounds passing the kitchen window as they were thrown out of the upper rooms and smashed into pieces at the back of the house.

As for the main reception rooms, they were made into one large showroom - walls being knocked down and windows removed and made into two showroom-style windows. In order to get the tractors into this area a ramp was built from the front forecourt, over the basement and up to the ground floor. The floor itself was covered in hardboard and varnished. I hope this protected the old floorboards underneath. Getting two tractors into this space required some skilful driving, as you can imagine. You can see from the modern photos where the alterations were from the colour of the new bricks.



At the back the workshop was built, a wide driveway made to it and to the row of ten garages, built a little later. More hard standing was for parking vehicles waiting to be worked on and for the flats' cars. An inspection ramp was built next to the garages.

The flats were rented to service men and their families stationed at RAF Wyton. All in all they seemed a pretty nice bunch!

And that's how it was. My sister held her wedding reception in the showroom - minus the tractors - in 1962. The site was closed in the '70s and sold to another enterprise. The flats were kept and added to when more were developed in the basement.



Two photos by H.G. Tuckett from my sister's wedding in 1962, showing the setting and mahogany interior of the main door.





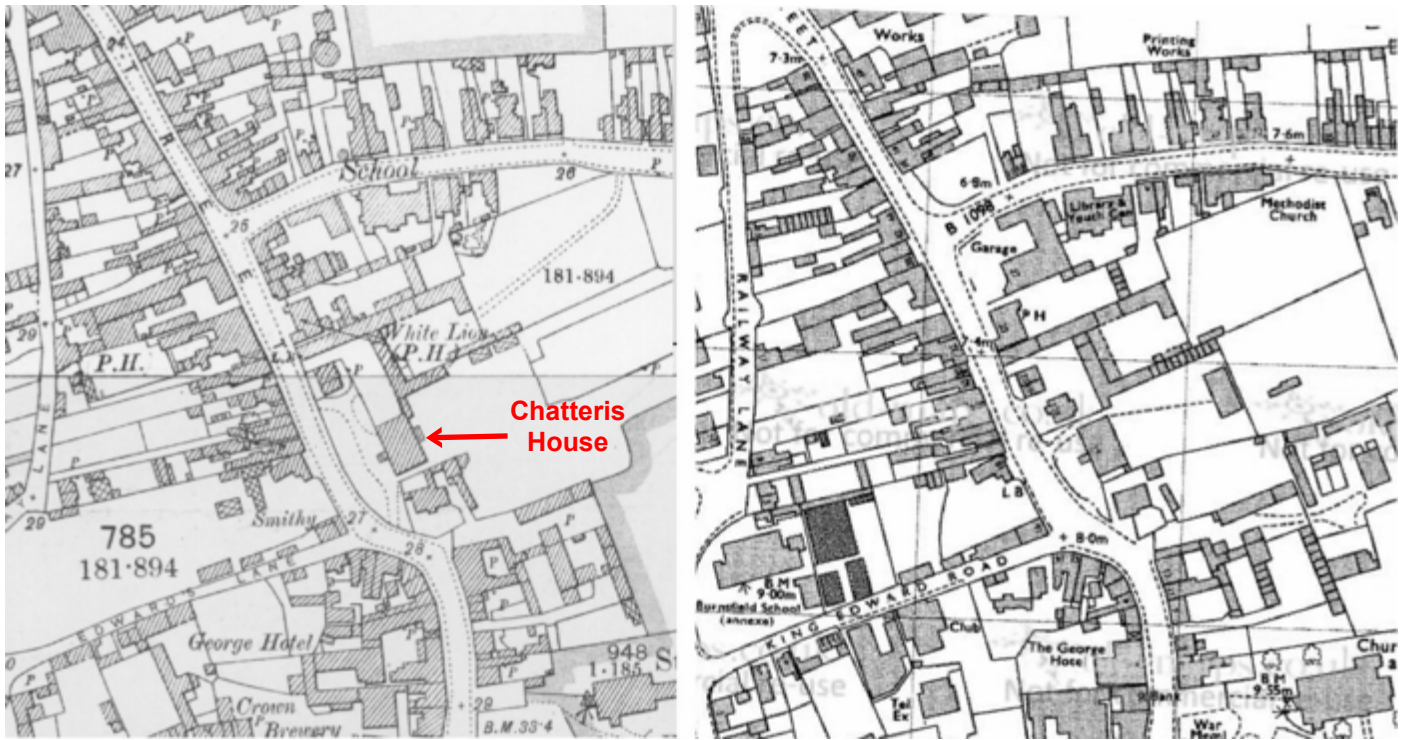
Family photos from the early 1970s. Obviously, we didn't take them to illustrate features of Chatteris House, but you can see from the one on the left the way the rear yard was filled with tractors, as well as the garages beyond. The one below gives a glimpse of the basement entrance below our flat and the driveway to the north of the house.





From these two pictures in combination, you can get a good idea of the entire rear layout - from inspection ramp and garages on the left to workshop at the back.





1902 and 1972 OS maps from the National Library of Scotland website. It is interesting to see what a broad, imposing frontage Chatteris House must have had before it was encroached upon by other buildings.

Pat Hobbs, September 2017