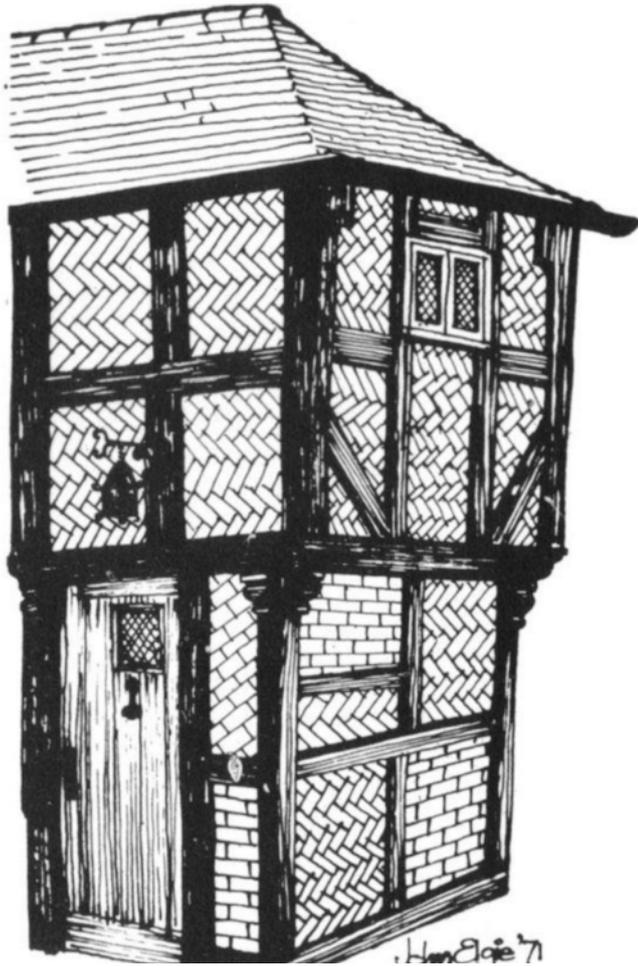


# Le Breton Farm

By H.T. Rogers O.B.E

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In the year 1315, Gilbertus Le Bret La Bruton's "Great Manor by the Waters of Spithead" was in flames and was completely destroyed. It is doubtful if it was ever rebuilt and just where it was situated is unknown but tradition upholds its existence as near Rowner Church.

Walford in his *Historic Sketches* written in 1887 states that early last century some old cottages and ruins near the Church were probably the remains of the Manor House but gives no proof. What is known is that Gilbertus who was under tenant of the Royal Manor had to find new quarters for himself and family and so 'a small house was erected nearer to the sea' than before. This small house is almost certainly Le Breton Farm, in Manor Way, Lee-on-the-Solent, occupied by Alderman & Mrs. R. A. Kirkin, the present Mayor and Mayoress of Gosport, who take a very justifiable pride in its renovation.

Ownership can be traced back over 600 years. Indeed, the house may well have been erected on an even earlier site as remains of flint axes and other domestic implements have been found quite recently in nearby Cheltenham Crescent. There would have been no difficulty over building material.

One of the ancestors of Gilbertus had given land to the Cistercia Monks of Quarr Abbey in the Isle of Wight with permission to land their ships free of toll.

Once again tradition has it that stone from the quarries near Binstead was landed at Monk's Hill, Hillhead, and was used in the building of Winchester Cathedral and Rowner Church. Similar stone can be seen at Le Breton Farm.

CHARTER OF HAMO BRITO DE LEYA TO THE ABBEY OF ST. MARY OF THE STONE QUARRIES : Hamo Brito de Leya sends greetings. Know that I for the salvation of my soul and of Juliana my wife have given and in this my charter have confirmed to the Lord and Abbey of St. Mary of Quarr as a perpetual and pure alms, a certain part of my land of Cherc (Chark) .... And I have also granted that the Monks of Quarr have their ship free of toll and quietly along all that sea-board which belongs either to Cherc or to Leya.



After a gap in history of two hundred years the old house came into the possession of Sir Thomas Wriothesley who was created the First Earl of Southampton by Henry VIII. Wriothesley had come to power under Henry and had enriched himself acquiring numerous abbeys and manors in Hampshire including Quarr and Titchfield. He settled in great state at Titchfield Abbey now better known as Place House.

Although by this time Le Breton was probably little more than a tenant farm, nevertheless as befitted its new owner, many additions and improvements were made. A typical Tudor Porch was added made from ship's timbers and brick set in 'Herringbone' fashion, and a massive chimney constructed with an open fireplace and a bread oven.

It is interesting to note that the Second Earl of Southampton who succeeded to the title at five years of age, became in later years a staunch Catholic and there is in Le Breton Farm an authentic 'Priest Hole' which can be reached by climbing up inside the chimney. The second Earl entertained Queen Elizabeth I at Place House, but was later

lucky to get away with his life for plotting against the throne. He died in 1581 leaving an heir aged eight.

The Third Earl, as a young man became friend and patron to William Shakespeare, who when staying at Titchfield is traditionally credited with having based the plot of 'Romeo and Juliet' on two families who were engaged in a bitter feud. They were the Danvers and the Longs who lived in Wiltshire.

At a meeting in Corsham, Henry Long was stabbed to death by Charles and Henry Danvers, who immediately fled across country to Titchfield to seek the protection of their friend the Earl.

Southampton first hid them at Whitley Lodge near Odiham while he tried to arrange their passage from Bursledon to Calshot Castle and over to France. They were unable to sail owing to foul weather and adverse winds, and returned to Titchfield, where, for a few days they were hidden in a house close by, victuals and drink being sent over from Place House.

It is always tempting to let imagination run riot. Did they hide at Le Breton Farm?.

... So far as we know it was the only other house owned by the Wriothesleys in the locality and it would have been most convenient for Calshot when the weather cleared.

A few months later the Earl of Southampton came of age and entered into his full inheritance. One of his first acts was to give Le Breton Farm to Arthur Broomfield, gentleman. Why, or for what services rendered is not stated.

For several decades Le Breton, Lebriton, or Lee Britten, as it was variously known under different owners, was largely forgotten and sank into obscurity. In a Guide Book published last century, it was dismissed rather loosely and laconically as an 'example of Jacobean architecture built of Isle of Wight stone.'

Older residents in Lee-on-the-Solent can remember when it was a work-a-day farm, with outbuildings, stables and a duck pond abutting on to the road still known as Manor Way. Now after years of deterioration it has been intelligently and lovingly restored although motorists speed by on the main road without even knowing it is there.

There is no hurry. Those old walls which have stood for 600 years look good for several more centuries yet.

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