

St Anne's Woods History

For hundreds of years both villagers and pilgrims had walked through Nightingale Valley and the woods to a holy shrine and to a ferry across the River Avon.

But in 1884, Bristol solicitor James Sinnott bought the St Anne's estate and installed locks on the gates at each end of the woods.

Not only did this exclude the villagers but meant that Charlie Bishop, who worked at the Bristol Wagon Works in Lawrence Hill, had to walk an extra three miles to work.

This had been a right of way since medieval times and it wasn't long before battle between the lawyer and the Footpath Preservation Society was joined.

Committee members did what they could – removing padlocks and chains and defiantly walking through the woods – in the hope that Sinnott would bring legal proceedings against them.

But the canny solicitor would not be drawn and ignored the trespass.

And so, after 12 months, the protestors decided to help Bishop reinstate the ferry crossing with a new boat.

At last Sinnott made his move, obtaining a High Court injunction against the use of the ferry by the footpath society.

A long legal battle ensued with near 200 witnesses being called as to the ancient usage of the paths and ferry.

Sinnott, who had sought damages of £1,000, lost his fight and the footpaths have remained open to this day.

The ferry, which finally closed in the 1950s, was replaced by a footbridge.

St Anne's had once been famous – a sacred and revered site visited by both humble pilgrims and royalty.

What drew them here was a holy well and its associated 12th-century chapel built by the De la Warr family, the local Lords of the Manor.

This long-vanished building – the St Anne's Board Mills later covered the site – measured 56 feet by 18 feet.

Each year, in a spectacular procession, the Bristol Fraternity (Guilds) of Cordwainers and Weavers would walk here from the city carrying two gigantic candles – 40 feet long and a foot square.

These cost a staggering £5 each – a quarter of the Mayor of Bristol's annual salary – and burned for 12 months before a statue of St Anne, Christ's grandmother.

Anne is the patron saint of harbours, ports and sailors and, as well as candles, the chapel was filled with many costly models of ships and silver, ship-shaped, incense burners.

Renowned for its healing power, the nearby well was said to be good for rheumatism, weak eyes and purifying the blood.

King Henry VII came here after the Battle of Bosworth and the Duke of Buckingham, who lived at Thornbury castle, drank the waters here before being arrested for treason and losing his head.

Some of the coins, or tokens, thrown into the well by pilgrims were discovered when it was excavated in 1880.

But the shrine's reputation suffered badly after the radical 16th-century preacher, Hugh Latimer, condemned lavish pilgrimages and costly ornamentation as superstitious nonsense. After King Henry VIII had closed the monasteries, the chapel and its contents, which had been cared for by the monks of Keynsham abbey, were looted and the building allowed to decay.

It's been suggested, however, that the king had a more emotive reason for closing the shrine.

His mother, Elizabeth of York, had travelled to St Anne's in 1486 to pray that her as yet unborn child should reign well and long.

But Henry's elder brother, Arthur, died in 1502 when he was just 21.

With the ending of the pilgrimages, the well was used to water sheep and to wash the floors of neighbouring cottages.

And in the 17th century, a pottery – the first to produce Bristol earthenware – was built in the chapel ruins.

In late Victorian times, as I have said, a celebrated court case over public access through the woods was won by campaigners.

Finally, in 1922, both woods and well were given to the citizens of Bristol by the owner, James Sinnott, and two years later the annual pilgrimage was revived.

I understand the deeds of the property show that it was sold by James Sinnott, Edward Stockley Sinnott & George Stanley Sinnott to St Anne's Board Mill Company in 1923 and the Company sold it to private occupiers in 1982.

The Sinnott family, James, his wife Mary Ann and their sons were living on a farm at Higham Hill, Walthamstow in 1851. Between 1851 and 1861, George, the eldest son, aged 29, arrived at Langton Court in Brislington where he was joined by his parents and three younger brothers, Henry, James and Edward

The marriage of James, third son of James and Mary Ann to Emily, 2nd daughter of Mr William Vowles of Totterdown was announced on June 9, 1866 in the *Bristol Mercury*. He was a solicitor and appears to be the same person who, with his two sons sold the Woodside Road property in 1923.

By 1871, George Sinnott, now 38, a bachelor and still residing at Langton Court had acquired a considerable estate of 300 acres. The older Sinnotts still lived with him, as did brother Edward, along with a number of live in servants and others who had cottages on the estate. Edward Sinnott advertised a thoroughbred gelding for sale on July 18, 1874.

In 1881, George Sinnott, aged 48, was at "the Farm House, Langton Court", still single, he had retained the 300 acres and employed 20 labourers. The rest of the family were no longer there.

Until 1883, it appears that James Sinnott had leased the Langton Court property from Mr Gore-Langton, the Lord of the Manor, but it seems from newspaper reports (see *Bristol Mercury* 30.6.1888 & 18.6.1890) that he had subsequently purchased the property. This is confirmed by a letter of May 14, 1883 in *Bristol Mercury* from "Civis" who deplores "the closing of St Anne's Wood, Brislington" which was then to be sold at auction and stating that "all pleasure seekers like myself can do is lament." The property included St Anne's Woods, (and therefore the Chapel ruins) as indicated in a Court case which took place between James Sinnott and the Bristol Footpaths Society in 1890. (For details of this matter see Bristol Record Office Pamphlet 4728 : St Anne's Chapel, St Anne's Ferry & paths through St Anne's Woods" and similarly BRO P StLB/PM/1 – 1891 "Account of Footpath Dispute".)

It is interesting to see the array of witnesses called to court (*Bristol Mercury* 25.6.1890), among them Alfred Henry Brown of Brislington's famous Brown family who was visiting from Australia. (So beloved was our parish to these emigrants that they named their property in Australia, "Brislington"). Anne Williams, aged 85, of Unity Street, Bristol, a Roman Catholic, first knew of St Anne's when she was 18, and recalled a pilgrimage to the Chapel ruins when she was 25. A Mr Joseph Cool, "a decrepit old man,

aged 98 or 99" recalled using the Ferry in old times.

On September 8, 1886, George Sinnott married Catherine Septima Roberts, the daughter Joseph Roberts of the Shrubbery, Paxford, Worcestershire (announced in Worcester Journal 18.9.86) On February 20, 1888, a letter in Bristol Mercury refers to land near Netham Lock. In 1891 the couple are living at Langton Court Farm House, Wick Lane, aged 59 and 46, respectively. George Sinnott died aged 61 in the September Quarter of 1892. No doubt his will would give further information.

It does seem from the above that at the time of the arrival of the Sinnott family, the site was part of the Langton Court Estate.

However, in 1657, (ref DD\BR\tb/1 – Somerset R.O.) a house called St Anne's House, formerly St Anne's Chapel was conveyed by Rowland Lacy to George White, draper and John Willoughby, merchant, both of Bristol. I am intrigued by the turning up of the name John Willoughby as the

Willoughby family of Brislington were Roman Catholics. In the early 19th century they sold land in Brislington to Dr Edward Fox of lunatic asylum fame. It seems likely to me that John Willoughby is a possible link and should be investigated further.

The Lacys were Lords of the Manor prior to the Langtons at the time of the Reformation when they would have come by the Chapel lands. Prior to this I believe it was la Warre property, particularly as the la Warres fought on the Lancastrian side in the Wars of the Roses and apparently invited their Lord and King Henry VII to come to their local shrine.

The object of the dig was to try to find objects which might prove that the St Anne's Shrine was nearby what is now Woodside Road. Unfortunately no such artefacts were recovered.