

HITCHIN HISTORICAL SOCIETY

“THE BIGGIN”

by

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WITH ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS TO  
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## **THE BIGGIN AT HITCHIN**

**By Anthony M Foster**

**With acknowledgements to R L Hine & Eric T Moore**

One of the old ladies living in The Biggin Almshouses once told an innocent visitor, "the word Biggin is short for 'Beginning' for this was the first house to be built in Hitchin". But if the good lady was straying far from the truth of the matter, the name Biggin does puzzle visitors to this undoubtedly ancient house. Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary provides little help, for it claims the word to mean "a child's cap or hood: a nightcap: a sergeant's coif".

It is said to be derived from the French word Beguine or a praying woman. However none of these descriptions provides us with a real clue to the origins of the Hitchin Biggin. Hine thought, probably rightly, that it meant a building plain and simple. He based his idea on the fact that one meets so many new biggins, i.e. new buildings, up and down the country, and this very building being referred to in some early documents as the "Priory of New-Biggin".

In 1361 Sir Edward De Kendale, Lord of Hitchin Manor, obtained a licence to grant land on which a new religious house was to be built to support three Canons of the Order of St Gilbert of Sempringham. Two years later a further licence enabled the meagre foundation to acquire the advowson of Orwell Church in Cambridgeshire. In addition, the benefits of a rood of land in the same village and belonging to Sir Edward's mother, Margaret, were given to the Canons. However, it was the endowment of 363 acres of land at Willian and Hitchin in 1372 together with other property and rents that finally secured the new foundation. Nevertheless, the 14th century was not a time of great wealth for the Gilbertine Canons at Hitchin, and it was a hard struggle to make ends meet. In 1402 the Pope came to their aid and empowered the Canons to "choose eight priests, seculars and regulars, to hear the confessions of and to give absolution to those penitents who on the feast of the Annunciation, between the first and second vespers, should visit and give alms for the conservation of the Priory Church".

Little else is known of this, the only English House of the Gilbertine Order. No records have survived. Even the site of the Priory Church of this small foundation has been lost to us. The fortune of Hitchin's Gilbertines slowly declined so that when the last Prior took the oath of Henry VIII's supremacy in 1534 only the piece of land known as 'garden place' remained of the original holdings. Soon afterwards, in 1538, the King's Commissioners took possession of all that remained, and the Gilbertine order was dissolved. For eight years the property remained in the hands of the King and the priory buildings fell into ruin and decay. In 1545 it was purchased for £254.12.9 by John Cocks of Broxbourne together with a mansion in Bancroft surrounded by three acres of land, and eighteen cottages.

Cocks broke up the holding and appears to have sold off the house called 'The Byggyn' to William Croocar, a Hitchin man who bequeathed it to his sons William and Thomas in a will dated 1570. The Croocars sold it in the next decade to Robert Snagge second son of Thomas Snagge of Letchworth Hall. It was Robert Snagge who pulled down the old priory buildings and erected the present building about the end of the 16th century. However the window on the south front is believed to have survived from the 14th century, and so gives rise to the thought that some parts of the old Biggin survived. In room 6, the initial letters W C and I C, with the date 1585 between them, are cut into the panelling over the fireplace and may be those of William Croocar Jnr. and his wife. The panelling is evidently older than the house and may have been used by Robert Snagge when he built or rebuilt the present building. Robert Snagge died in 1606 and he apparently had no heirs and successors. He therefore bequeathed "my manor house and capital messuage called Biggin" to his sister, Anne Dallison, a widow.

The property was still held by the Manor of Hitchin at a rent of two shillings and sixpence. Dame Dallison and her heirs still seem to have enjoyed the occupation of the property for upwards of a quarter of a century but in 1635 we find it in the ownership of Joseph Kempe who founded a school in the building which enjoyed a high reputation in its day. The pupils were not, as in the case of John Mattocks' Free School founded in Tilehouse Street in 1639, confined to the children of the inhabitants of Hitchin, but came from every part of England.

Joseph Kempe died on August 3rd 1654 and left his Biggin Manor House to six of his Hitchin friends in trust for the benefit of "Ten poore auncient or middle aged women" and for the binding of "Fower poor children out of the Parish of Hitchin to be apprentices in some honest occupation". Any surplus funds were to be spent as the Trustees felt fit and, for their trouble, they were to have an annual dinner at a cost of forty shillings.

As for Kempe's scholars, they were taken care of by his son John, a sword cutler by profession, who returned to Hitchin and took over the Biggin School, presumably paying his father's trustees rent for the privilege. The buildings continued to be used as a school well into the 18th century. In 1723 the parish overseers, finding the workhouse at the lower end of Tilehouse Street filled to overflowing, asked leave to convert Snaggs's Elizabethan Mansion into an additional poor house. The Trustees, mindful of their obligation to Joseph Kempe, agreed to rent the building to the parish for a modest sum, and stipulated that Kempe's "Poore auncient or middle aged women" should be employed wherever possible on parish work. The overseers' accounts thence forward are full of the works of Kempe's "widows" as Hine called them. In his *History of Hitchin*, Hine claims that the Biggin served as an overflow workhouse for nearly a century, until in 1812 the Hitchin overseers acquired the Manor House in Bancroft to accommodate the poor. In fact this was not the case. The house may have been used for a time after 1723 as an overflow workhouse, but Kempe's Trustees soon took the building back into their own hands. They provided their ancient and disabled women with not only a pittance of five shillings a quarter but also an almshouse. The Biggin hence forward housed eighteen of Kempe's "widows" until 1960.

From the town's vestry minutes it is quite apparent that The Biggin was not being used as a workhouse, for in December 1783 the Parish agreed to take on the place and to use it as the town's main workhouse. This arrangement never materialized for in July 1785 the committee appointed to consider the Biggin as a poor house reported it as "an improper place for a workhouse, the situation being so low that it is impracticable to convey the soil from the building and also the same is so much out of repair that it is unadvisable for the Parish to be at the expense of putting it into repair". The vestry decided to look for a more eligible building. However, it was not until 1816 that a suitable building was purchased at 30 Bancroft which Hine has again wrongly referred to as the "residence of the Lord of the Manor".

About 1837 the successors to Kempe's "friends" of 1654 handed over their responsibilities to Hitchin Charities, a corporate body appointed under the Charities Acts, which followed the Royal Commission appointed under the chairmanship of Lord Brougham, to administer local charities. Kempe's original "ten poore auncient or middle aged women" had grown to eighteen in 1857 and that year the Hitchin Charity Trustees resolved that in future they should each be paid a shilling a week instead of the sixpence they received hitherto.

Only one woman has been ordered to leave the house and that was in 1877 when a Mrs Cannon was "Found helplessly drunk and had to be carried home by two men, much bruised and knocked about. She admitted having been at the Early Bird public house (now The Albert, Walsworth Road) but denied being tipsy". After this incident the Trustees decided to stop the allowances of those who misconducted themselves, and to appoint one of the inhabitants to lock the Biggin door at 10 o'clock each night and open it again at 6 the next morning. The ladies were also now required to attend divine service at St Mary's. After 1925 visitors had to apply to the Clerk to Hitchin United Charities for the key since there was such jealousy amongst the inhabitants as to its custody.

The ravages of time had by the 20th century begun to play havoc with Snagge's 400 year old "New Biggin". Vandals had stripped all the lead from the roof one night in 1856 leaving the timbers exposed to the weather. For a century or more the building had been creaking in every limb. The Clerk to the Trustees was consistently reporting on 'settlements in the exterior walls', 'rotting timbers' and 'falling tiles'. Some repairs were carried out, the windows made weathertight, leaded lights renewed and the old brick floor downstairs replaced by wood. Despite the constant complaints and petitions by the old ladies, little money was available to do much more than make do and mend. In 1904 all Hitchin's Charities were embraced under a new name, the Hitchin United Charities and a new era began in the administration of The Biggin Almshouses.

In 1960 the Hitchin United Charities undertook a major scheme of reconstruction at The Biggin, in the course of which the interior of the building was brought up to modern standards of habitability, and the whole structure thoroughly renovated and repaired. The number of inmates was now reduced to twelve, each living in a bed sitting room with bathroom and kitchen attached. For those who would study the story of The Biggin in more depth, the chapter dealing with the History of The Biggin to be found in Reginald L Hine's *History of Hitchin, volume 1* is recommended.

Points of Interest:-

1. The south front window
  2. The carved initials room 6
- } See text
3. Painted caricatures and couplets. Now in roof (rather inaccessible). These are said by Hine to have been painted by Robert Snagge. The couplets read as follows:
    - (a) 'Two lawyers thus their clients due uphold till they consume, and their estates are sold'.
    - (b) 'Such apes wee have, that will expose their friends to venture all that they may have their ends'.
    - (c) 'What paynes men take, for wealth what harme they doe and undergoe, that they may wealthy grow'.
    - (d) 'Oh! greife and shame to be now pluckt and torne, by those who were of mine own body borne'.
    - (e) 'In things abroad be ye a wary man at home I'll be as thrifty as I can'.

Whoever did write these verses has evidently suffered at the hands of his fellow men!

4. Inlaid and painted panel door with curious hinges to a cupboard in room 2.
5. The name 'Samuel Beldam, 1746' carved in the panelling of room 5. In days gone by one of the old ladies used to mumble a verse about Samuel Beldam.

'Here rots the body of Samuel Beldam,  
 who regarded the poor but helped them seldom,  
 a curse on the niggardly, piggardly souls  
 that never put pennies in beggarmen's bowls'.

Evidently poor Samuel was something of a miser.

6. Carved timbers taken from the original Priory. Central courtyard next door to room 6.
7. Originally a pump stood in the central courtyard to serve all 'Kempe's Widows'. It was removed in 1960 when the building was modernised.