



THE "CASTLE INN" AT HURST

A Coffin Room and the Old-time "Wakes"

The "Castle Inn" at Hurst belongs to the Parish Church close to which it stands, has done so from time immemorial, and has not entirely lost its original name of the Church House. Structurally it is largely 15th century. One bedroom, into which a huge chimney breast bulges, had above a free beam until fairly recently what tradition said was a resting-place for coffins, this giving reason for belief that funeral "wakes" at which relatives and friends gathered for an all-night vigil of praying and feasting, used to be common here.

A Church House was highly suitable for "wakes," being, as a rule, a place where "ales" were held on Sundays and feast days, profits going towards the maintenance of the church. Bowls was among games played on these "ales" occasions, which adds interest to the fact that attached to "The Castle" is one of the oldest bowling greens in the country.

Whitsuntide "Wakes"

In face of criticism by the Church itself, because of the wild revelry which developed, "ales" dwindled until only

at Whitsun were they held ; the Reformation put an end to the practice altogether. " Wakes " probably continued for much longer, although from the reign of Edward III only close relatives and friends were permitted to take part, ex-communication threatening others. Hinting at this are doors criss-crossed with iron bandwork at " The Castle's " entrance, and on the landing beside the " coffin-room " both doors being much-bolted. Stairs leading to the landing are unusually wide, doubtless made so for easier manipulation of the coffins.

In 1609 it was stated that the Church House, as it was then, had had its rent and profits devoted by the church-wardens " time out of mind " towards the repair of St. Nicholas Church, which itself dates from the Normans ; who instituted the charity is not known, but the site was formerly within the Manor of Whistley, owned by the Abbot of Abingdon.

By 1747 the building was well established as an inn, probably under the title of " The Bunch of Grapes " which it held up to a century ago, for in that year a visitor wrote that it was " very pleasantly situated and has belonging to it a large and handsome bowling green for the diversion of those gentlemen who please to play." The badge of Hurst Bowling Club, present users of the green, embodies a bunch of grapes. The famous cricketer, Dr. W. G. Grace, trundled a skilful wood here in 1905, when captaining the London County Bowling Club in a return match with a Hurst side ; the present pavilion exhibits framed letters from Grace, arranging the match, and a photograph showing him in action.

Massive Chimney

It is said " The Castle " gained its present name after under-graduates, there during restorations, discovered on a wall

a mural depicting a castle. The inn's finest feature is its main chimney, estimated to comprise more than 25 tons of bricks ; the wide fireplaces have disappeared, but remaining are big ovens. In what used to be a taproom, now the private sitting-room, is the iron door of one oven and an original bacon rack.

The inn's timbering is magnificent, adze-hewn, in perfect condition. What appears to be a 17th century addition overlooks the green ; and old print shows this, and Georgian bowls players. In an upper room is a fine built-in Queen Anne corner cabinet.

Ancient Stable

A yew tree—several are in the churchyard—edges the bowling green, with close beside it an ancient pump once the chief source of supply for surrounding cottages. An early 17th century stable attached to " The Castle " is said to have in the past sheltered the horses of visiting parsons (no vicarage existed at Hurst until 1863) ; as Archbishop Laud, then a bishop, preached here repeatedly in 1625, he may have used this stabling. Not far beyond are William Barker's quaint almshouses founded in 1664.

Mr. and Mrs. Len Rush have had " The Castle " the past eight years and rightly are enormously proud of it. " The inn looks a picture in the summer," he said, " for then we have flower baskets at the front. Interior shots for the film ' Nicholas Nickleby ' were taken inside." Did he or his family mind, I asked, having a " coffin-room " in their home ? " Not in the least ! " he smiled. " Even though we were told when we came here that the chamber is haunted. . . ."

(This picture and article are reproduced by the Courtesy of *The Reading Mercury*. The article was one of their series entitled " The Inns of the ' Mercury ' Country.")