

Old Mistral, Cobham: a 16th century warrener's house identified

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A recent study of one of Cobham's smaller historic houses has shown how surviving documentary evidence can be linked with a detailed survey of the structure made by the Domestic Buildings Research Group (DBRG) to give a reasonably comprehensive history of a representative Surrey dwelling dating from the late 16th century. Additionally, it has also been possible to identify both the house and surrounding area with a rabbit warren established by the Evelyn family in the 17th century.

Old Mistral (TQ 135 613) is a listed Grade II timber framed house (fig 1) with substantial, but sensitive, additions made in about 1925 by the architects G Blair Imrie and T G Angell.¹ Some further restoration was carried out when the property was damaged by a flying bomb which exploded nearby during the Second World War. It lies to the north-east of Cobham in what was an isolated spot adjoining Oxshott Heath (formerly called Cobham Heath) where the highest part of the parish reaches 225 feet.

Old Mistral is now almost surrounded by residential development and serviced by a new road called the Ridings which links Sandy Lane to Fairmile Park Road. The western boundary of the property adjoins the grounds of Reeds School, and, to the east, Oxshott Heath is only a short distance away (fig 2). Despite its position in a newly developed residential area, the cottage is hidden from the road by trees and hedging. Its seclusion has caused it to be rather overlooked in the past unlike some of Cobham's more prominent and central old houses. Indeed, its importance as an example of local vernacular architecture was not fully realised until it was recently recorded by DBRG. Old Mistral is a new name for the house and, for many years, it was called The Old Cottage. Evidence is now available to prove that the cottage is the dwelling known in the 17th and 18th centuries as the Warren House.

The first edition of the OS 6-inch map (1867-9) shows an area of land to the south of Old Mistral called The Warren. Adjoining the western boundary of the Warren, on the 200 foot contour, is a small area called The Mount. A house called Warren House was built here when Fairmile Park Road was developed in the late 19th century. That Warren House has since been demolished and the site redeveloped.

Rocque's 1762 Surrey map² shows a building which can be identified as Old Mistral and near it the caption 'Warren House'. However, this is misleading as the caption clearly refers to another much larger property, to the west of Old Mistral, on the site of the present Fairmile Court. Greenwood's Surrey map,³ under the heading of 'Warren Farm' refers to 'Fairmile Farm'. This was a substantial property worthy of identification on Rocque's map. In the early 19th century, this estate was owned by Lord Somerville, the noted agriculturalist, and when auctioned in 1821 it comprised some 383 acres which included the site of Reeds School but not Old Mistral.⁴ Fairmile Farm appears to have been demolished in the middle of the last century and replaced by the present Fairmile Court.

Diana Gunasena of Wandsworth Historical Society has located a map of 1742 with the Evelyn papers at Christchurch, Oxford, which shows both Old Mistral and the surrounding area (fig 3).⁵ Additionally, there exists in Croydon Public Library, a map of 1618 by the eminent cartographer Nicholas Lane.⁶ This last map was commissioned by Richard Evelyn, father of the diarist John Evelyn, and shows the estate of Oxdownes, or Stokesheath Farm, near Claygate. It is the oldest known plan of any part of Cobham and is therefore of particular importance. On this plan the site of Reeds School is shown as 'Newlands' and the 1742 map shows the place where the public footpath from Fairmile Park Road to Oxshott Heath now crosses The Ridings as 'Newlands Stile'. 'Newlands' probably refers to land broken in from heath.⁷



Fig 1. Old Mistral, Cobham. Drawing made in 1984

At the time of the 1618 survey 'the highway leading from Knepp Corner to the Stert' ran along the eastern boundary of the Warren (fig 4). Knepp Corner adjoined Littleheath and is now known as Knipp Hill and the Stert was the common where the modern Sandy Lane runs through Oxshott Heath. The present Copsem Lane and Warren Lane link between Esher and Oxshott did not then exist and what was a 'highway' in 1618 is now a narrow, rutted bridle track.

Both the 1618 and the 1742 maps show a building called 'the Warren House' and by comparison of these maps with those of the later ordnance survey it is clear that this is the building now called Old Mistral. Both the early plans are so accurate that if reduced to scale and placed on an OS map, the surviving features correspond perfectly. The 1742 map shows the actual extent of the warren at that time and includes a feature marked as 'The Double Banck' running along part of the boundary of Newlands. This was probably a specially constructed bank providing a secure boundary to the warren and a part of it can still be traced within the grounds of Reeds School.

The warren referred to here was undoubtedly for keeping rabbits. It has long been thought that rabbits had been introduced into this country by the Normans soon after the Conquest. However, it is now suggested that they were introduced much earlier, possibly before the Roman invasion of Britain.⁸ The earliest documented rabbit warren in Surrey is the royal coneygarth established by Henry III at Guildford Park and which existed in 1235.⁹ The warrens were large enclosures in which the rabbits were kept to provide a valuable source of both meat and of fur 'when fashion demanded fur-lined and edged cloaks and dresses'.¹⁰ They were enclosed by long perimeter banks of earth, grass sods, or by stone walls which were usually capped with wooden palings, furze, blackthorn or reed. The sandy nature of the soil in parts of Cobham and Oxshott provided excellent sites for the keeping of rabbits and other local warrens are known to have existed at Painshill, Heywood and Cobham Court. Another warren existed in Oxshott in about 1777 on a sixteen acre site near the present Warren Lane.¹¹ This appears on the 1st edition OS map as 'Oxshott Warren'.

Each warren was in the charge of a warrener who was often the lessee of the landowner paying a high annual rent in carcasses or money. He lived in a warren lodge or house which was often a tall building from which he could view the whole warren and from which he hung the carcasses, nets,

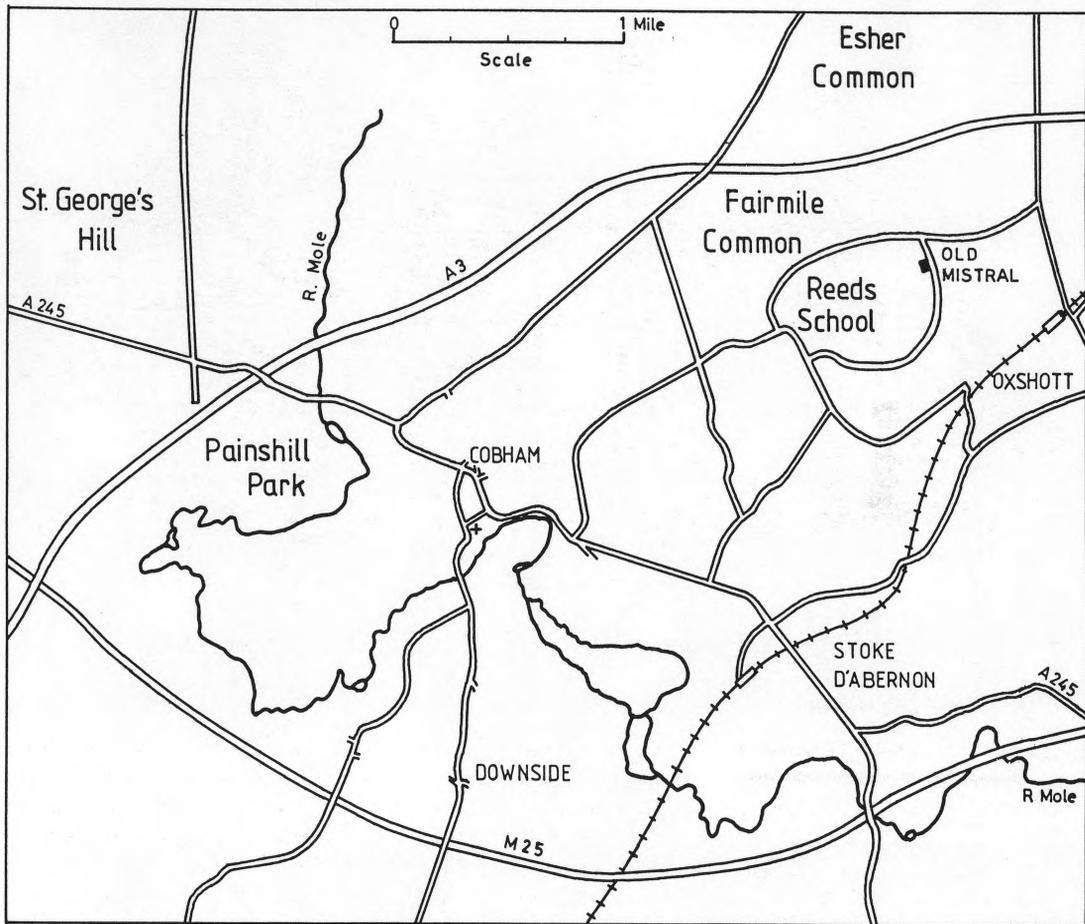


Fig 2. Old Mistral, Cobham. Location map

traps and other paraphernalia of the warren. No evidence of a tower has been found near Old Mistral but the area of high ground called The Mount, referred to earlier, would have provided an ideal site for such a tower or viewing platform.

An excellent, pioneering account of a rabbit warren has been provided by A M and Ruth M Tittensor. In this it is stated that the number of rabbits kept were two to eight per acre with one male for every four to six females. 'The rabbits were encouraged by planting gorse or furze, juniper, bramble and other prickly shrubs for food and shelter. Suitable breeding conditions were provided by breeding hutches or clappers, or by building superterranean hummocks and banks known as pillow mounds.'¹²

The earliest documentary evidence traced so far which specifically refers to a Warren House in this area is a Counterpart Lease for 21 years dated 20 February 1649 by George Evelyn of Wotton to William Phillips husbandman of Cobham of 'the Warren House at Stoaks Heath, Cobham late in the tenure of Anthony Wren. Also a messuage called Warren Croft adjoining Stoakes Heath with warren and game in Farnhurst (bracken-covered) Hill and Roundhurst Hill in Stoakes Heath'.¹³ It seems likely that this was the same Anthony Wren who was one of Gerrard Winstanley's 'Diggers' on St George's Hill and later at Little Heath, Cobham.¹⁴ The late George Greenwood considered that 'the Diggers were not poor men in the modern social sense, but rather, younger sons taken by the sheer logic of Winstanley's ideas: indeed, early Fabians'.¹⁵ If this is the

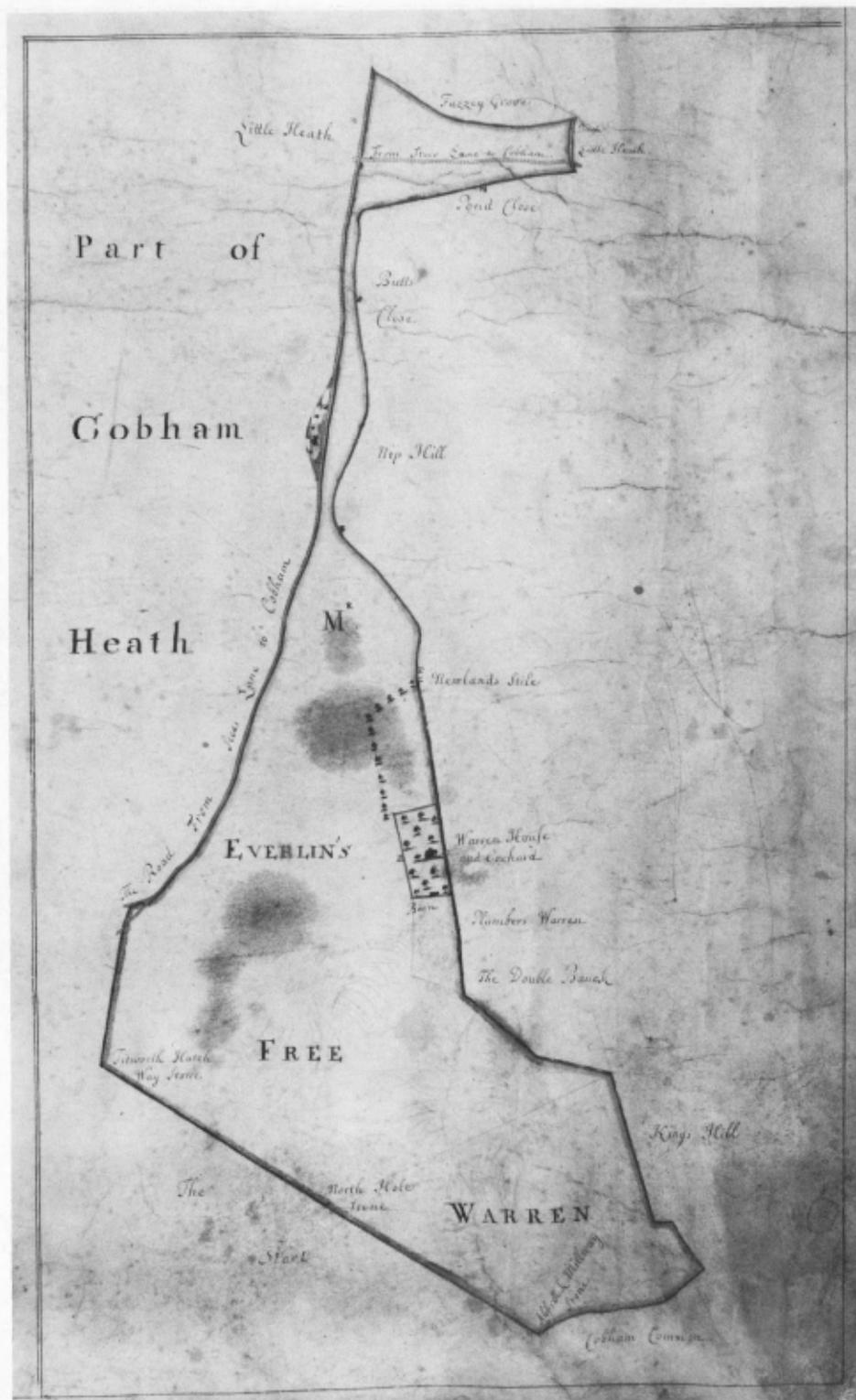


Fig 3. Old Mistral, Cobham. Extract from map of 1742 showing 'Mr Everlin's Free Warren' (reproduced by permission of the Evelyn Trustees)

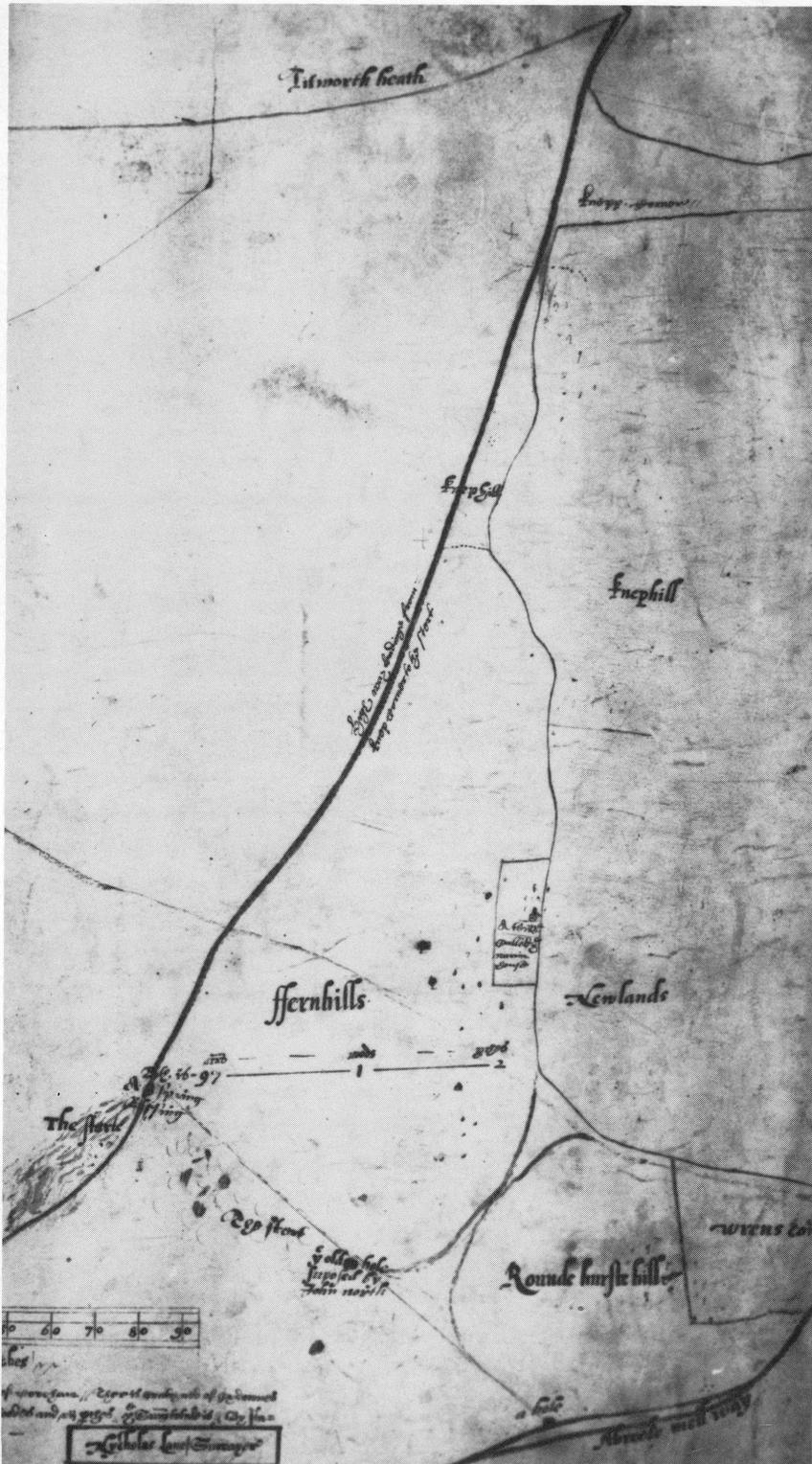


Fig 4. Old Mistral, Cobham. Map of Oxdownes by Nicholas Lane dated 1618 (detail). 'A tenement called the Warren House' is shown between Fernhill and Newlands.



Fig 5. Old Mistral, Cobham. Mrs Ayling (right) and Mrs Ragge (left) at home. In 1881 The Warren was occupied by David Ragge an agricultural labourer aged 42, together with his wife and four children. The other half of the cottage appears to have been occupied by William Stevens, a gamekeeper, and, presumably, the Aylings took over his tenancy. (Late 19th century photograph reproduced by permission of Messrs Munday, solicitors)

same Anthony Wren, then Old Mistral is the only surviving dwelling that has yet been positively identified with any of the Diggers.

George Evelyn had acquired the Oxdownes estate in 1579 from Thomas and Isabella Brockhole. The property consisted of 'three messuages, three tofts (sites of messuages with rights of common), three barns, three gardens, two orchards, eighty acres of land, two acres of meadow, twenty acres of pasture, one hundred acres of woods, and two hundred acres of brush and heath, with appurtenances in the parishes of Cobham, Esher and Thames Ditton'. The consideration was £200.¹⁶ Much of this land fell within the manor of Esher-Wateville, later known as Milbourne although it was mostly in the parish of Cobham. In 1549 and again about 1552–3 a Thomas Brockhole was a sidesman at Cobham Church. In 1572 Thomas Brockholes acquired the manor of Milbourne from William Fawkner, selling it in the following year to Richard Hatton.¹⁷

Joan Harding's original report on Old Mistral for the DBRG described it as a 'three bay timberframed end smoke bay house (which) retains the original hearth framing. This hearth was in the early 17th century lined with brick, and another bay was added behind. Old Mistral was built in the later 16th century with characteristics of that period – a half hipped roof, with three queen struts up to the collar. There are jowl posts, square panels with corner straight tension bracing and curved steps stops to the chamfers.'¹⁸ A further examination of the property now shows that all four bays are of the same period and that original roof was not half hipped. Joan Harding considers that the straight tension braces and wind braces indicate a 'date near 1600' and that the house 'is of superior quality. Much of the timber is chestnut.'

It seems probable that Old Mistral was one of the properties acquired by George Evelyn from the Brockholes in 1579. On 26 December 1671, another George Evelyn leased 'Warrenhouse and Warrencroft' to William Philips of Cobham¹⁹ and on 18 January 1687/8 a further lease for 21 years was granted by George Evelyn and John and Katherine Evelyn to Thomas Plummer of Cobham.²⁰ The 1742 map notates 'Plumbers Warren' immediately under 'Warren House and Orchard'. A warrener's house would have required suitable outbuildings for what the Tittensors called 'the paraphernalia of the warren'. The fourth bay behind the chimney may have been used for this purpose.

On 29 April 1727 a lease of 21 years of both 'Warrenhouse and Warrencroft' was granted by Susanna Draper of Fareham, Hants, and William Draper of Adgcomb (now known as Addiscomb) to John Kummins of Cobham and George Kummins his son. This deed is of particular interest as it contains a precise covenant that John and George will 'at their own proper costs and charges pull down or cause to be pulled down the chimney now belonging to the said message so far as the Tying or Roof at least and as shall be necessary and erect and build or cause to be repaired or built by able workmen a Substantial good chimney with Brick and good well beat mortar at the East end of the Message with an Oven in the said chimney and likewise shall cause to be sett up and built with brick panells the full breadth of a Brick and with good sound timber proportionately to form the Frame for the said pannells according to the Customary Way of Framing the Carpenters Work thereof the whole side of the first storey of the Front of the said Message and New Underpin or amend the Underpinning quite Round the said house with good Brick Stone Mortar one Brick and a half thick and one foot and a half deep below the ground and one foot and a half high above the Ground And likewise amend glaze and Repair or cause to be glazed amended and repaired all and every part of the said Message or Tenement with such sufficient and Substantial Reparations as may endure the whole Terme'. The rent was to be £6 per year. In addition to the repairs to the house John and George Kummins 'shall and will leave a Stock of Conies in the Warren of the full value of Ten Pounds . . . after the Rate of Twelve pence a coney' or £10 in lieu.²¹

Presumably the present chimney which was inserted into the smoke bay of the house dates from this time. Joan Harding states that 'it is seldom that the framing remains for the smoke bay hearth, as here. The hearth beam is pegged into timber lintels on each side. The hearth is central to the room, with on one side the entrance lobby, and on the other stair up. The brick lining to the hearth is a later addition. Beside the hearth the timber cill remains, set on stones. The shallow groove (in the cill) was for springing in the studs of the wattle and daub sides.' The roof space of the Old Mistral provides access to the original smoke bay which is clearly identified by the soot deposits on the plaster of the internal faces. The position of the former bread oven can be clearly seen inside the inglenook hearth and is probably the oven built under the terms of the 1727 lease. The timber framing the house is completely filled with a variety of brick nogging, replacing the original wattle and daub infill and, again, perhaps this was the work stipulated in the 1727 lease although the instructions there were for underpinning of only up to one and a half feet above ground.

Another indication of the quality of Old Mistral is the evidence that the hearth room window once extended out a little creating an oriel.

On 15 July 1796 a farm and rabbit warren at Stokesheath in the parishes of Cobham and Thames Ditton was conveyed by Joseph Cookson of Margaret Street, Cavendish Square, to the Rt Hon John Lord Delaval, Baron Delaval, of Delaval, Northumberland. This deed specifically referred to 'all that message or tenement and orchard called the Warren House together with the farm, yard, and one acre of inclosed land near to the last mentioned premises in the parish of Cobham, and also all that unenclosed free rabbit warren containing together by estimation 77 acres in Cobham which said last mentioned message or land warren and premises now or late were in the occupation of John Collins'.²²

Lord Delaval owned Milbourne House in Esher and Lord Tyrconnel of Claremont married his daughter Sarah. Stokesheath subsequently passed into the hands of the Crown as part of the Claremont Estate but Warren House and the rabbit warren were especially excluded from the sale since they had been sold in 1818 by Charles R Ellis to the Commissioners of His Majesty's Woods and Forests.²³ However, a plan attached to the 1821 Sale Particulars of Fairmile Farm shows the

area of Warren House as being in 'Prince Cobourg's Woods'. Prince Cobourg was Prince (later King) Leopold who had lived at Claremont with his wife Princess Charlotte, only daughter of the Prince Regent, later George IV. In 1882, when Queen Victoria settled the Claremont estate on her son, another Prince Leopold, and his newly wedded wife, the property included 132 acres of The Warren House Plantation 'with the spring of water rising therein'. The plan accompanying the 1882 deed identifies this as the same area of land on the 1742 plan of the Warren save for an area in the south next to Little Heath, but including a further piece on the north side of Sandy Lane running up to the Portsmouth road and including Middle Pond which was fed by a nearby spring and which then supplied water for the Claremont estate.

The piece of land next to Little Heath, forming the 'foot' of the Warren on the 1742 plan, was sold by the Crown to John Earley Cook of Knowle Hill, Cobham, in 1868 to be incorporated into his adjoining brickfields.

The occupancy of Old Mistral during the 19th century is not clear. Photographs taken in the late 19th century (fig 5) show the building as two cottages which it remained until the restoration and enlargement in 1925.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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