

Blomefield's Birthplace

BY

THE LATE FRED JOHNSON

[Two hundred years ago the Rev. Francis Blomefield was issuing, part by part and printed by his own printing press, his History of the County of Norfolk. The passage of time has not lessened the debt that we owe to that remarkable man, and any new matter about his personal history should be of interest to Norfolk archæologists. My late colleague, Fred Johnson, in 1929 made some researches into the historian's birthplace and recorded the result in a letter to another colleague (Mrs. Ivo Hood). This letter was not designed for publication, nor does it entirely lend itself to that purpose. I have therefore with very slight modifications converted it into a memorandum, and in this form submit it for publication.

B. COZENS-HARDY.]

In 1848, Wilton Rix wrote a valuable paper on Blomefield in our Transactions (Vol. II, p. 201). He was a lawyer and a very careful man. He made a sketch (reproduced in the paper) of the house which he believed to be the birthplace. He may have had evidence that I have not seen, and he may not have had evidence that I have seen, but he seems to have satisfied himself.

In 1925 Prince Frederick Duleep Singh, the Rev. Edmund Farrer, Mr. Rye and Mr. Beecheno decided to go and have a look for it. Eventually they found a house somewhat answering to Rix's sketch, but very much altered, but they came to the conclusion it was the house Rix saw.

In 1929 I was asked to talk about Blomefield at our Fersfield meeting and I resolved to go to see the house myself. Mr. R. F. E. Ferrier (the President) took me over and we looked at many houses, but none seemed to answer. On returning home I found that we had not looked at some in a remote corner of the village and so a friend took me and Beecheno over again and we found there a house, which in our view was almost certainly the house that Rix saw.

Meanwhile I had written to Mr. Farrer and he sent me notes from his diary of 1925 which seemed to confirm the house. I therefore got Mr. Cozens-Hardy to take me over a third time with Mr. Ernest Kent to take photos. We then all came to the conclusion that it was Rix's house all right but much altered. Now I have been investigating and I find that this house is not in Fersfield, but in Bressingham, although of the adjoining fields some are in one parish and some in the other. The tithe maps (1838 and 1841 respectively) and the Ordnance large map confirm this.

Blomefield says in his own pedigree that he was born in Fersfield. He repeats this in a memo in the Register in his own writing. Furthermore his baptism is entered in the Fersfield Register. This set me thinking and I came to the conclusion that the house that Rix sketched was not the birth house. I give only a short summary of what I found out.

Several fields near the house in question were at the dates of the tithe maps the property of the Masons, who took the name of Blomefield and were descended from Blomefield's daughter. But the house itself was not their property, as it belonged to a Mr. Potter. I think Rix may have found out the old Blomefield land and concluded that the house belonged also, a natural supposition as it is about the only house near the land. Now Blomefield would never have said in his pedigree, in the parish register, and in the Caius College admission register that he was born in Fersfield, if he had been born in that house in Bressingham.

But the strongest piece of evidence is this: In the Martin-Frere MSS. left to the Norwich Public Library by Walter Rye is a page or two of notes on the church at Fersfield by Tom Martin, and also some notes by Blomefield himself about things in the church. Among them he says: "On the S. side of the chancel is the rectory pew and next to it one for the rectory servants—on the N. side of the chancel is the pew belonging to my house". He also says his great-grandfather was buried under the altar with his two wives and in his octavo volume he gives several family inscriptions, some in the chancel. I believe the Blomefields had two distinct estates, one of their own down near Wilney Green in the south part of the parish, which he speaks of at p. 93 of vol. 1, and the other I fancy was long leasehold from the Norfolk or Rochford family and was the present Fersfield Hall. If the Blomefields lived there as the principal people of the place, they would have a seat in the chancel and some might be buried there too. Unhappily the Hall was all rebuilt about 1870-5, but it may be on the old foundations and if the present plan answers to Rix's sketch it is just possible that he drew the Hall, though I think that it is almost certain that he did not, as the place he drew was, as he says, in a remote part of the village, which the place we saw was, whereas the Hall is next to the church. The Hall was Muskett property about 1840 and has been recently sold by the owner, a Mr. Alston, and is now I hear made into cottages. Mr. Farrer is so convinced by what I wrote to him that he says he is positive Rix's house is not the birthplace and that I am right.