

## NETTESWELL HOUSE AND BETHNAL GREEN

By C. M. WEEKLEY  
(Bethnal Green Museum)

The interest awakened by an ancient house, surviving in a populous area, is due partly to amazing changes in its surroundings wrought by progressive building and other developments. Such a relic may also be significant architecturally, but if, as in the case of Netteswell House, it once boasted a notable occupant, the dumb charm of mere antiquity becomes unimportant by comparison with the recorded voice of history.

The history of Netteswell House begins in the Tudor period when Bethnal Green was a hamlet, fashionable as a place of residence for City magnates. On the north side of the Green stood St. George's Chapel (with a house attached to it), probably one of those chapels-of-ease which were needed either because the church of a spreading parish had become over-crowded or too distant for the old and infirm.

A clue to the early history of Netteswell House was furnished by Richard Newcourt's diocesan history of London, *Repertorium Ecclesiasticum*, published in 1708. According to Newcourt, "this Chapel and a Messuage built under one Roof, with a garden," were leased for ninety-nine years by Edmund Bonner, Bishop of London, to Sir Ralph Warren and his wife in 1547, "they paying the said Bishop and his successors IVd. a year". Even allowing for immense differences in the value of money four centuries ago, fourpence a year suggests that Warren rented a property which was in ruins and built himself a new house on the site. A tablet on the front of Netteswell House states that it was erected in 1553 and restored in 1705 and in 1862. Remains of Warren's country residence, which would have stood among fields and farms on the City's outskirts, appear in the large cellar's brick and timber construction. The very name Netteswell smacks of farming. It means neats' well, commemorating a cattle pond close to the house which was marked on a map of Bethnal Green issued as late as 1838.

Sir Ralph Warren, a leading member of the Mercers' Company, was a close friend and neighbour in Bethnal Green of his fellow mercer, Sir Richard Gresham, whose son, Sir Thomas Gresham, founded the Royal Exchange. Lord Mayor in 1536 and 1544, Warren had been one of six City aldermen invited to the baptism of Elizabeth I at Greenwich Palace in 1533. He had also had financial dealings with the Crown. The *State Papers* afford a glimpse of such transactions in a letter of 10th May

1546 to the Privy Council from Stephen Vaughan, Henry VIII's agent in the Netherlands: "This day dined with me Sir Ralph Warren, Sir Richard Gresham and Sir John Gresham [brother of Sir Richard] who thought that if the King wished any money of the merchants of Andwerp [sic] order should be given therein, for it was even now too late to get any great sum."\*

In our day Warren is chiefly interesting as Cromwell's great-grandfather. Warren's daughter Joan, by his second marriage, became the wife of Sir Henry Cromwell, whose father, Sir Richard Williams, was a nephew of Thomas Cromwell, Henry VIII's minister, and had assumed his uncle's surname. Robert Cromwell, a younger son of the marriage between Joan Warren and Sir Henry Cromwell, became Oliver's father.

During the following century Bethnal Green kept its rural landscape and its attraction as a residential area for well-to-do Londoners. Pepys deposited his diary and his valuables there when the Fire threatened his official residence adjoining the Navy Office: "About four o'clock in the morning, my Lady Batten sent me a cart to carry away all my money, and plate, and best things, to Sir W. Rider's at Bednal Green. Which I did, riding myself in my night-gowne in the cart". When his own home was no longer endangered, Pepys returned for his diary to Bethnal House, Sir William Rider's country mansion on the east side of the Green: "Thence to Bednall Green by coach, my brother with me, saw all well there, and fetched away my journall-book to enter for five days past, and then back to the office . . ." Rider was Deputy Master of Trinity House, of which Pepys became an Elder Brother.

Even as late as 1795 when the Rev. Daniel Lysons published his *Environs of London*, parts of Bethnal Green remained agricultural: "There are now about 190 acres of arable, about 160 of grass land, and about 140 occupied by market gardeners . . ."

The earlier wave of building to sweep over Bethnal Green consisted of cottages and gardens occupied by Spitalfields silkweavers. After the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, many Huguenots from the silk-weaving regions of Lyons and Tours fled to England. A large colony of these refugee weavers settled in Spitalfields, near Bishopsgate, the City's north-eastern exit, but they gradually spread into neighbouring areas, including Bethnal Green, where their cottages and carefully-tended gardens must have presented an idyllic picture, in harmony with their exquisite craft which was a cottage industry. But the decay of the

\**State Papers, Henry VIII, General Series (S.P. 1) 218, fo. 42.*

weavers' earlier prosperity eventually transformed the face of Bethnal Green, which almost became a byword for squalid poverty. The high tide of 19th century building flooded the area with small houses, erected in long, dreary rows. The Green, an oasis in a sordid desert, has survived because it had been held since the seventeenth century by a charitable trust known as "The Poor's Land". Bethnal Green Museum, a branch of the Victoria and Albert Museum since 1872, was built on part of "the Poor's Land", the remainder of which became public gardens, thus preserving one of the village greens that once lay on the City's outskirts. On the east side of the Green stand two late seventeenth century houses which have, like Netteswell House, beheld a succession of startling changes since cattle grazed on "the Poor's Land" and drank at the neats' well.

The present Netteswell House is mainly Queen Anne, its front mellow with brick ranging in colour from a bluish plum to a dull vermilion. Alterations in 1862, especially those to the interior, where the ceilings of first and second floor rooms were raised, left many eighteenth century features intact. The upper staircase to the attic landing dates from somewhere around 1700 and the four attic doors are interesting specimens of eighteenth century battened construction. Two arched recesses in the dining room are said to be remains of entrances from the house into St. George's Chapel. Gascoyne's map of 1703 shows "S. Georges Chappell" and it may finally have been demolished when Netteswell House was rebuilt round about 1700.

There remains a quite ample garden, considering how close it lies to the heart of the City, with a cherry tree and a vine, which is secluded from the street by very high walls. When I first occupied the house, as an official residence, during the summer of 1947, the contrast between my daughter picking cherries and the trains on the adjacent viaduct was striking enough. Modernity had closed in on Netteswell House, but Bethnal Green's rural past had not quite disappeared.