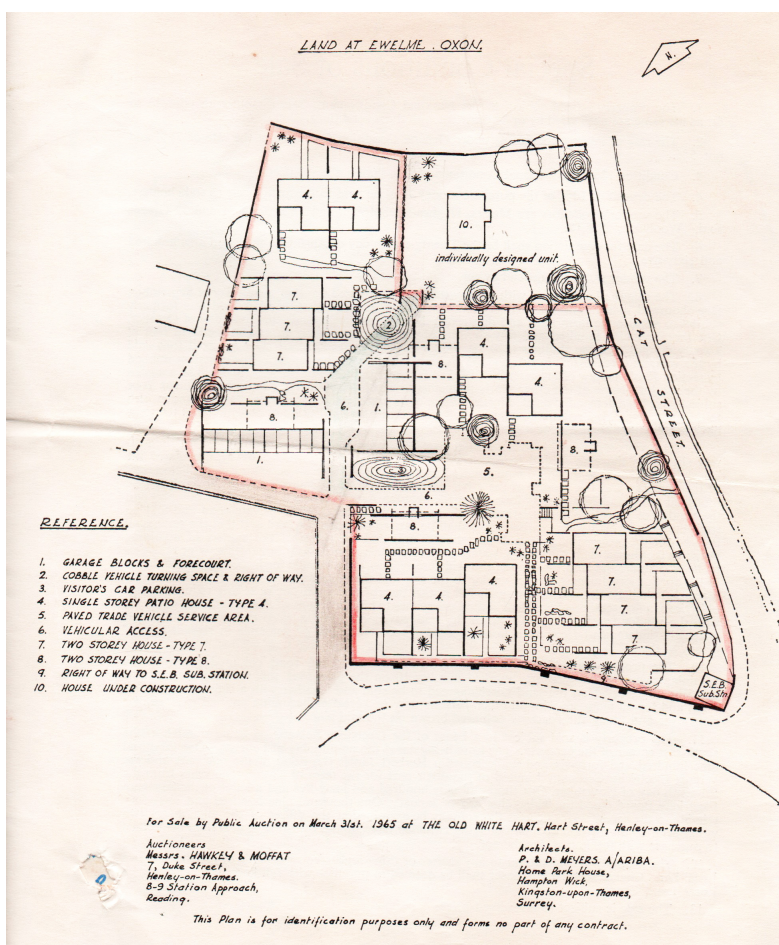


The Building of Chaucer Court

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On the site now called Chaucer Court stood one of the oldest manors in Ewelme, tracing back to the early 13th century. Originally called Wace Court (later known as Westcourt), it was the largest house in Ewelme before the Chaucer's built their manor and had that distinction again after Ewelme 'Palace' was demolished in the early 17th century. Westcourt was demolished in the late 19th century. A Tudor house called The Mount was the last domestic building remaining on the site that had become an overgrown adventure playground for the village children, scattered with derelict farm outbuildings. The Mount was demolished circa 1963 for the modern development we see today.

The Elm Club Scrapbook contains interesting information regarding the development, stating the site was sold for £3,000 by Farmer Orpwood and was originally carved into 7 fairly large plots. Only one was developed by Mr J E Partridge (between 1963-65), existing today and taking its name from The Mount. The remaining land was eventually put up for auction at the Old White Hart Hotel in Henley by Messrs Hawky & Moffat on Wednesday March 31st, 1965, being a Freehold Building site with planning permission for 18 dwelling houses and 17 garages. Described as an attractive freehold of approx. 1½ acres with permission for a *cleverly Planned Layout of Great Merit*. This included 7 single story 'patio houses', the remainder being two storeys, with 7 of one undesignated type and 3 of another. The Architects were P & D Meyers of Kingston upon Thames. It failed to reach the reserve price and was withdrawn. Another plan was submitted for the 12 houses that became Chaucer Court, but it took three companies to complete the entire project. Initial difficulties were encountered with the uneven slopes dotted with hidden perils - a deep well claimed, and half submerged, a JCB type digger!



Brian and Lydia Benson were resident from 1969 when they moved into No. 2 having put down their deposit of £200 in February that year. Lydia's Archive memoir stated they paid £7,500, '*considered extortionate at the time*' but Brian insists it was £7,000 – '*I should know, I wrote the cheque!*' No. 1 had been built some time before as the show house, and was occupied by the Ferrari-Hill family, but the rest of the development was still under way. Brian had an original advertisement from the Ideal Building Corporation, showing the development was first called 'Chaucer's Close' - '*built around a private close*', (although the residents later had the road adopted). When the road signs were erected by the Local Authority, the name had changed to Chaucer Court.



The development was the first large influx of incomers who were fairly affluent by village standards, being mainly middle-class professional commuters who left at 6.30 am and returned at 7.0 pm. The majority of the wives stayed at home. Lydia remembered that Ewelme *'was extremely quiet where everyone knew everyone else [many were inter-related] and the development was resented, with an underlying antagonism that the newcomers would try to impose their ways, or just take - and not put anything back.'* This perception lasted for over 2 years. Consequently, the 'Chaucer Courtiers' formed their own social unit, and Brian remembered – *'every weekend there would be a gathering, as 12 anniversaries, 24 birthdays, plus additional promotions and successes had to be celebrated.'* As most had young families, an elaborate festoon of baby alarm wires would lead to the night's venue!

A breakthrough in community relations came with Mr Vickers of No. 10 taking over the church music. However, Lydia was accepted more readily as she was a teacher at the Icknield School in Watlington and taught some of the villagers' children. The Bensons also employed Joy Best of the 'Old Coach House' as a child minder for their toddler Alan, and Kath Baker became more than a *'lady who obliged'* by taking over the role of housekeeper to two full time working professionals.

The Benson's house was built partly on the footprint of the old Mount cottage, and in 1976 they decided to extend, but the initial excavation work uncovered a floor of Tudor tiles or bricks – likely part of the original building. It was appealing to incorporate the floor into their house, but regretfully they were advised to have it carefully covered over again. This was the last view of the ancient site which has such a significant history and merits a review in a future article.

Ewelme Village Archive