

To the manor born ... 500 years on

Ashbury Manor, five miles west of Swindon, is an estate agent's dream.

Its history, character, features and setting beneath the chalky brow of the Berkshire Downs with views across part of the Vale of White Horse just invite a needless flattery.

But for members of the Spence family just the word "home" says everything about the attractive Manor House, now 500 years old.

That the house is in such fine shape for the celebration of its anniversary is largely due to Robert Spence and his family. They carried out a massive renovation programme after buying the Manor House and the farm in 1956 from the Craven Estate, owners for more than 300 years.

A family party last week-end celebrated the 500th anniversary and tomorrow the grounds will be open - but not the house - for a garden fete.

The present Lord of the Manor, American John Alexander from Washington, will be in England for the celebrations.

The history:

A Saxon Charter of 947 created the Manor but over the years the spelling has changed with two former spellings having been Ayssebury or Esseburia as in the Abingdon Chronicles in 777 when Offa, king of Mercia drove the West Saxons back this far.

Around the time of the Domesday Book the Manor was listed as 40 hides, half being managed and valued at £12. By the 13th century it comprised 667 acres of arable land and 129 acres of meadows.

Gifted to the Benedictine Order at Glastonbury by King Edmund in 943, with St Dunstan as Lord of the Manor until 957, it remained in their possession for about 600 years until the disso-



Jim Spence, steward at Ashbury Manor.

JACK LOFTIN examines the history of a 500-year-old manor house near Swindon.

lution of the Monasteries when Lord of the Manor Richard Whiting was martyred.

The present Manor house was built in 1488 as an ecclesiastically-linked dwelling by John Selwood, who probably brought building tradesmen from Somerset.

The western end was probably the residence of the dignitary of the time. Its splendid 40ft by 20ft hall and deep ornate frieze, now a feature of the principal bedroom, contrast with the plainer eastern section.

This was the hostel accommodation

for the students making their way between Oxford and Glastonbury, with the Manor at Kingston St Michael near Chippenham, also belonging to Glastonbury, as the next stop on the westward journey to Somerset.

Ashbury Manor was bought in 1626 by William Craven, rich son of a Lord Mayor of London and servant and friend of Elizabeth of Bohemia of Ashdown House associations, who was created Earl of Craven by Charles II.

The Craven family, once owners of vast tracts of land and property in west Berkshire, were landlords to Mr Robert

Spence when he became a tenant farmer in 1927. In 1956 he bought the house and the farm and began the thorough renovation of a fine building on which the Craven Estate had been reluctant to spend on repairs and maintenance.

The roof was stripped, the remarkably well preserved timbers were treated and stone tiles, transported from an old barn being demolished at Lechlade, were cleaned, graded for size and fixed for what was probably the fifth roof on the house.

When lath and plaster was removed from some interior walls some beautiful panelling was uncovered, and in bedrooms huge open log-burning stone fireplaces were revealed.

Both the panelling and the fire-places have been retained as features along with massive beams, ornate carvings and windows.

Although central heating, a bathroom, and a modern kitchen in a northern extension built many years ago, provide some creature comforts for the Spence family, the Manor still retains its basic character and form.

Some of the most charming drawings of Ashbury Manor were the work of Mr William Spence, who was in shipping at Newcastle on Tyne. It was his son Robert who began the family connection in 1927. Now his grandson, Jim, - youngest of the three Spence boys following their father as farmers - lives at the Manor and his son is about to follow him as a farm student.

Although to the Manor born, Jim Spence knows that it will be the manner in which they continue their stewardship of part of the nation's heritage by which the Spences will be judged.

"It's our home, we love it," says Jim.

• To get to the Manor from Swindon, take the A419 to the Common Head roundabout, then follow the B4507.