

140 Years of “The Holmes”



2019 marks the 140 anniversary of the building of the Holmes in 1879 as can be seen from the date over the main door. Although the Holmes has had a long association with the University and has been part of Churchill Hall since 1956, it had a rich and varied history before that date.

To understand the building of the Holmes, we need to go back to 1869 when the land on which the Holmes, and the main part of Churchill stands, was put up for sale. This was due to the Stoke House estate being broken up and sold. Stoke House (now the main part of Trinity Theological College) was built in 1669 by Sir Robert Cann (Bart) who had been Mayor and MP for Bristol in the 1660s. The estate remained in the hands of the Cann family until offered for sale in 1867-69, in separate lots. The sales was for lots for the building of “superior private residences”.

A large part of the estate was purchased by William Edward George, who built the Holmes in 1879. Mr George and his executors owned the house until 1921, leasing it to a number of tenants. Who were as follows:-

- To 1884 T.G. Matthews;
- Second W. Mills Baker, an early supporter of the University College Bristol (Bristol did not become a University to 1909), and the father of Hiatt C. Baker, a future Pro-Chancellor of the University and after who Hiatt Baker Hall is named. He remained at the Holmes to 1892;

- The next occupant was Alfred Capper Pass another supporter of the University College, who owned a Bristol smelting company and in whose memory the Alfred Capper Pass Chair of Chemistry at the University was endowed;
- Finally Herbert Middleton Baker (a nephew of W. Mills Baker, and cousin of Hiatt Baker), who bought the freehold in 1921 and lived there with his family until his death in 1943 when the Holmes was sold to the University. During this time he added the East and West wings.

It was during Herbert Middleton Baker's that the gardens remembered by many students, including the croquet lawns were laid out (most of this Garden was reconfigured when the University Botanic Gardens took over the grounds in 2005).

Although the University purchased the house in 1943/4 they did not get to use the building at first, it became the official residence of a number of a number of senior American Commanders, including Generals Collins, Hodge, Dever, Patton and most notable General (of the Army) Omar Bradley. It was here Gen Bradley commander of the US 1st Army, and later 12th Army Group, planned the D-Day assault on Normandy. In his autobiography "A Soldier's Story" he refers to the Holmes twice.

Firstly "V Corps had requisitioned a residence for me beyond the Bristol Downs, a billet spacious enough to house my key staff officers and aides."

Secondly "It was 7.15 when I went down to breakfast at my quarters in Bristol on the morning of June 3rd. We had loitered late over dinner the night before, our last evening together in England. Today we were to board Admiral Kite's flagship for the invasion. D-Day had been set for June 5th*, and the warm summer sun that poured through the leaded glass windows of the Holmes cheered us ..." (*D-Day was postponed to 6th June due to the weather.)

To mark these events an act of remembrance was held in the Holmes in June 1948, when the then American Military Attaché, unveiled a framed statement from General (later President) Eisenhower which read "It was here General Bradley spent the months during which he organized the First United States Army for the momentous assault against the Normandy beaches."



With the acquisition of the Holmes the University acquired the services of its butler Mr. Henry Caine, (who helped the Military Medal from WW1). He was to become a legend, serving as Churchill Halls Steward until his retirement in 1982, four days short of his 85th birthday.

Following the war Holmes, it became part of Wills Hall opening as "O" House in the autumn of 1946 with 32 students as residence.

It then transferred to Churchill on its opening in the autumn of 1956.

The next major changes came in 1979 when as a result of then new legislation a new fire alarm system, fire escapes, fire doors and the metal spiral staircase through the middle of the upper floors were installed.

Fortunately the Holmes escaped sale by the University of the other two out houses, Claverton and Waltham, in 1984. The next significant event was the University Botanic Gardens taking over the grounds and a number of the Ground floor rooms in 2005.



Finally the Holmes, together with the rest of Churchill Hall benefited from an extensive refurbishment programme over a number of summer vacations up to and including 2016.