

Do you remember....

...Seacourt Farm?

No, should I?

Well, it was the last house on the site of a village called Seacourt that thrived here in the Middle Ages. *What's there now?* It's the site of the Seacourt Tower. *Since when?* Since 1966 when the huge futuristic new building opened as a garage.

What did it look like?

This is the best photo I can find – a long, low farmhouse, with stone walls and small windows. The picture is taken in 1962 from the road outside Macdonald's car park. The house second from right is still there, converted to offices. Stephen Howse, who built Elms Parade, later had the farmhouse windows enlarged and added a second front door, which explains why Colin Cambrey remembers it as two cottages. "The Barratts and the Pratleys lived there," he said. There was an orchard along the front, grazed by a bull with a metal plate bound round its



eyes, so it couldn't see the children coming to scrimp the apples. Meriel Walker (then Cooper) remembers the apples. "There was a beautiful orchard there," she told me. "Sergeant Green lived in the Old Police House [over the road]. If he caught you scrumping he'd just say 'If I catch you again I'll have to tell your mother.' He was a proper copper."

The second photo shows a pony in the field where gymkhanas were held. In the background you can make out the old Baptist Church in the Botley Road (now offices), with the row of brick cottages that still stand next to it.

The farmhouse was acquired by the Hartwell group for development as a commercial site in 1963. Martin Palmer of the Wine Shop, told me that his father, who had been head of Abingdon Rural District Council at the time, had not been happy about this. But he felt that the land was required for a road junction, and would have been



compulsorily purchased by the Ministry of Transport if Abingdon RDC had resisted. They tried to keep the farmhouse by putting a clause into the planning permission requiring the developers to turn it into a motel, a move welcomed by the Oxford Preservation Trust who thought this was "a reasonable way of marrying the old and the new." Unfortunately, Hartwells didn't feel bound by this. The following year when people complained that the empty building was being vandalized, their spokesman said he knew the buildings were scheduled but he didn't think they were of any particular value. "We are not doing anything to protect them," he said in an article in the Oxford Mail, "and I don't think they are worth protecting."

There was some opposition to losing one of the few remaining farmhouses in the parish. Jim Chatting takes up the story: "However early one Sunday morning as I was cycling into Oxford on my way to an early Mass I saw the bulldozers knocking down the two farmhouses and so of course the remaining opposition to the plan for development was effectively squashed." The neighbourhood was stunned by the speed with which the farm buildings disappeared.

The city had come to the country with a vengeance. Where the old stone farmhouse had stood, and the orchard, and the field where they held the gymkhana, now stood a thrusting modern building with a radio mast and a spire on top. "What a monstrosity!" said Colin Cambrey. "That was built for Oxford people, it wasn't for us. " But it was the shape of things to come.

It was the first major concession to transport needs that have since quartered Botley, bisected in two directions by major roads. But life goes on, and communities are forgiving. Before long the grandiose garage had been ironically dubbed the 'Botley Cathedral' and its fantastic inappropriateness was seen as a bit of a joke. There was even a rumour that there was a casino somewhere up there under the spire. It has been absorbed now, and appears on the Parish Council's letterhead, alongside St Lawrence's church. I'll close with a picture of the way it looked when it burst onto the Botley scene.

