

## CHARTERHOUSE

Charterhouse is a tiny, remote hamlet in the Mendips, 800ft above sea level. The stern little chapel of St Hugh's overlooks the scrub and hummocky ground of the lead mine workings. It was formerly a meeting room for the lead miners and was converted into a church in 1908 by Reverend Menzies Lambrick. It is named after St Hugh of Witham Abbey as they had a cell for the monks there. Inside is a complete contrast to the austere exterior as there is carved white oak and Victorian furnishings. The interior was designed by WD Caroe and is mainly in the Arts and Crafts style.

Charterhouse is now an Ancient Monument of Industrial Landscape and there are high levels of lead, zinc and cadmium. The land has been mined for centuries, probably in Prehistoric times and certainly by the Romans circa 50 AD but most of the mining was done in the nineteenth century, when earlier debris was refined and resmelted to extract further lead. Circular 'buddles' where ore was refined, the condenser flues for smelting, the heaps of glossy black slag and the settling ponds, fringed with reeds and bullrushes can still be seen. There had also been some silver mining in Roman times.

In 1881 there were only 75 people registered as living in Charterhouse in 14 dwellings. The main occupation was farming, 28 people were involved at four farms namely; Lower Farm, Tynings Farm, Kingsdown Farm and Yoxter Farm. There were only two lead miners and their families shown at that time, probably as the mining had begun to tail off in the 1880s. There were 11 servants (domestic and farm), two farm bailiffs, two agricultural labourers and two carpenters. Strangely there were also two milliners living in the Mendip Hills. The other occupations listed were farm steward, housekeeper, charwoman, gamekeeper, general labourer and seamstress. In total 55 people were employed. There were 15 children under the age of 14 presumably taught at the local school (found on an old map) but no mention of a school teacher. According to a more recent map (after 1908) only three farms are shown at Charterhouse and they are Manor Farm, Mendip Farm and Warren Farm.

Of the 75 inhabitants of 1881, 18 had been born in Charterhouse, six in Chewton Mendip, five in Priddy and four in Shipham. A further 21 had been born in surrounding Somerset villages. Surprisingly there were also people from out of the area, seven from Gloucestershire, five from

Buckinghamshire and three from Suffolk and one from Dorset. Others were from as far afield as Nottinghamshire, Cumberland and Scotland.

In 1848 there were 99 inhabitants and by 1901 the number had fallen to 64, due to the decline in the mining industry and the fact that the two mining families had left the area. The lead mining finally stopped in 1883. In 1901 there were still 14 houses plus one uninhabited and there were 33 males and 31 females and of these 22 were children under the age of 14. The majority of the inhabitants were still either farmers or farm labourers raising sheep and cattle. The other occupations were gamekeeper, carter, bricklayer, dairymaid, estate carpenter, charwoman and stableboy. Four were living on their own means and one person was retired. There were six farms listed on the 1901 census and they were Tynings, Lower, Manor, Warren, Kingsdown and Yoxter. There were only four families still living at Charterhouse since 1881 and they were the Thatchers, Lewises, Organs and Stephens.

Charterhouse is in the Mendip Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and the headquarters is based there. There is an activity centre with accommodation, classrooms and offices. It is also a great caving area and in August 2006 a new cave was discovered measuring 2.6km in length - the largest discovery made in the Mendips in more than 50 years.

In 1899 a TB sanatorium was opened at the former Willoughby's Farm at Charterhouse by two doctors, Rowland Thurnham and Neville Gwyn. The full name of the sanatorium was Nordrach-sur-Mendip. It was named Nordrach after the first sanatorium which was established by Dr Otto Walther in the Black Forest and it was the first to promote the open air cures for TB plus a diet of dairy products and fresh fruit and vegetables. The two doctors had themselves been to the Black Forest to be cured of TB. It was an extremely Spartan existence with no heating whatsoever and bedroom windows were kept open at night even in sub zero temperatures and during snowstorms. In the 1940's the sanatorium became an extension of Ham Green Hospital in Bristol and it catered just for female patients. There were 100 beds and these were housed in three wooden buildings. Beryl Thame, who worked at the hospital as a staff nurse between 1948-1950, has written a short account of her memories of working there and she has found some photos that were taken at that time. There is no trace of the wooden chalets but the stone building which was the nurses' house still remains. During the Second World War the Bristol Children's Hospital was evacuated to Nordrach but after the

war it became a TB hospital again, finally closing in 1956. It was reopened for refugees from the Hungarian uprising soon after and it was finally sold into private ownership in 1958, and for a time became a Country Club.

Even though Charterhouse is such a remote place it was actively involved in war work during WWII. In 1940 cairns were built on the open ground to prevent enemy craft from landing and volunteers used to come from Bristol on Sundays to do the work. Mary Small, who lived at Tynings Farm, used to help her mother provide tea for the volunteers and her father used his horse and cart to haul stone for the cairns. Then in 1941 the War Agricultural Committee issued a mandate 'to dig for victory' and so the stones had to be removed so that crops of oats, wheat and potatoes could be grown. Two land girls were posted to Tynings Farm and they together with six farm hands and the Small family were responsible for 800 acres, 1000 sheep, 50 steers, a few pigs and two horses. As Charterhouse was away from the big cities it was thought to be a safe place to store Bristol City regalia and art treasures and these were hidden in the disused lead-smelting flues.

The little school at Charterhouse was founded in 1862 and in 1881 there were just 15 pupils. In 1904 the number had risen to 40 and in the 1930s there were as many as 50 children. It catered for all the children on 'Mendip Top' from the age of 5-14. Many had to walk miles in all types of weather to get there. Mary Small who lived at Tynings Farm sometimes used to get a lift on the milk cart with her grandfather and later she acquired a second-hand bike to ride the two miles to school. Mary's first teacher was Miss Watts who used to cycle from Blagdon - not an easy journey in the winter. Mrs Lukins was the headmistress in the 1930s and she was in charge of 50 children with just one untrained helper Mary Small. Mr Lukins was the gardener at Nordrach and the family which consisted of 11 children lived in a cottage near to the school. Mrs Lukins was known to disappear during the morning to go and prepare dinner for her family, leaving one of her children in charge. The school was very cold and only heated by one small fire and a round stove. The children used to do exercises in the school yard to try and keep warm. In the mid 30s the school became just a primary school so the children aged over 11 went to Blagdon and buses were provided by Messers Stoll or Blagdon Lioness. In 1944 the primary school finally closed and also moved to Bladon. The school building is still there and is now the headquarters for the Mendip Hills AONB and the Charterhouse Centre is built behind it.

Mary Small (now Smith) has written three books on Charterhouse and they are:

My Life at Tynings Farm in the 1930s

Charterhouse School

Life on Tynings Farm in WWII

These three books have only been published privately and so are not available in the library but another book called *The Green Velvet Dress* written by Kathleen Young, is available. This is about Kathleen's life on a Mendip Farm after she had been evacuated to Cheddar from London at the beginning of the WWII. She was a school teacher who had been evacuated with her class and then had met and married a local farmer. She continued to teach at Cheddar school after the war and initially lived at Lower Farm, Charterhouse and then at Wanstead Cottage, Shipham.



**St Hugh's Chapel**



**St Hugh's Chapel**



**Wooden Chalet for TB patients**



**Charterhouse School**





**Nordrach House**

### **Sources of Information**

- 1 Census returns
- 2 Mendip - A New Study by Robin Atthill
- 3 Mendip Country by Jillian Powell and Julia Davey
- 4 Story of a Mendip Lad by LG Pritchard
- 5 Somerset v Hitler by Donald Brown
- 6 Mary Small who lived at Tynings Farm
- 7 Beryl Thame who worked at Nordrach Hospital
- 8 Mr Villis who lived in Charterhouse
- 9 Various articles from The Mendip Times
- 10 The Mendip Society Newsletter
- 11 Coloured photos my own except Nordrach House which is from the internet
- 12 Black and White photo - Beryl Thame

**Jean Birks**