

In this house...

A SUFFERING WOMAN WROTE HYMNS OF COMFORT

WHO has not, at some time or another, set foot across the threshold of a house and been immediately struck by a great sense of peace and tranquility.

And when this does happen, how often is it accompanied by the feeling—an extra-sensory perception, perhaps—that in the past some gentle soul of immense goodwill and piety, and grace, has lived there.

This is certainly the feeling one gets when entering Grandfathers, a picturesque cottage in Rookery-lane, Broughton, where once lived Anne Steele, the most prolific woman hymn writer of her time.

Anne Steele was born in this charming house and spent the first 50 years of her life there, removing, after her father's death, to nearby Broughton House, with its spacious park, terraces and gardens.

Timber

It was in this house, and in this park, where Anne Steele meditated and composed many of the 144 hymns she wrote; and the 34 psalms, in verse, besides about 30 short poems of a religious nature.

Born in May, 1717, Anne was the daughter of William Steele, pastor of Broughton Baptist Church (the oldest in the Southern Baptist Union, being founded in 1653) for 40 years, and a great niece of Henry Steele, who preceded him as preacher at the same church for a further 40 years.

Both were timber merchants of some substance and suppliers to the Royal Navy at Portsmouth Dockyard. They were men of great wealth and carried out their duties at Broughton voluntarily, besides endowing the

parish considerably and bestowing benefits on local charities.

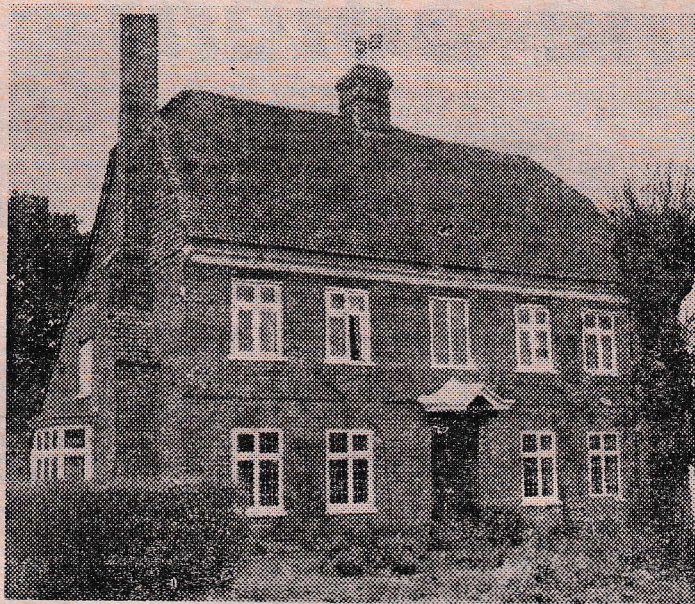
First publication of the hymns of Anne Steele was made in 1757, and subsequently they were widely sung in both Britain and America. Although Anne herself seldom journeyed beyond her native village, her words were to become a source of inspiration to

practising Christians all over the world.

The quiet life she lived—and the ill-health she endured—may well have given Anne's hymns the soothing, sweet, and sometimes pensive tone for which they became renowned.

Throughout much of her work—running like a golden thread—is a theme of the life to come; a firm belief in her Maker and eternal life. Frequently wracked with physical pain and discomfort, which was accentuated by a hip injury when she was in her twenties, she spent many hours in meditation.

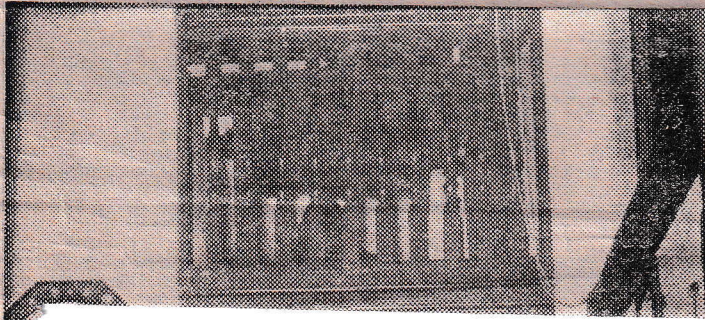
Towards the twilight of her life her works indicate that she longed to be relieved of this mortal coil, and a chronicler of the time records that she accepted death willingly when it



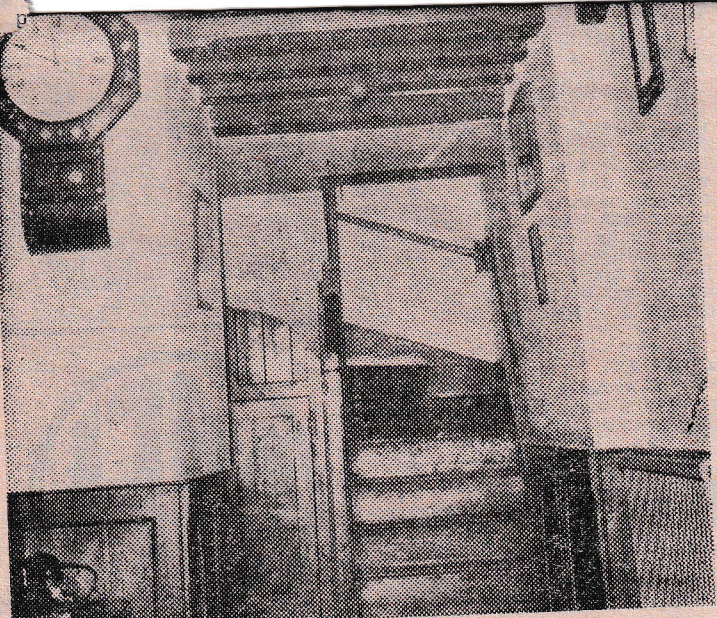
Anne Steele's home bears the unusual name of Grandfathers.

finally came at the age of 61, in November, 1773.

Of her dying moments, John Sheppard, in a Memoir preface to one of her hymnals, wrote: "When the hour came, she welcomed its arrival, and though her feeble body was excruciated with pain, her mind was perfectly serene . . . She took the most affectionate leave of weeping friends around her, and at length the happy moment of her dismission arriving, she closed her eyes, and with these animating words on her dying lips, 'I know that my Redeemer liveth,' gently fell asleep in Jesus."



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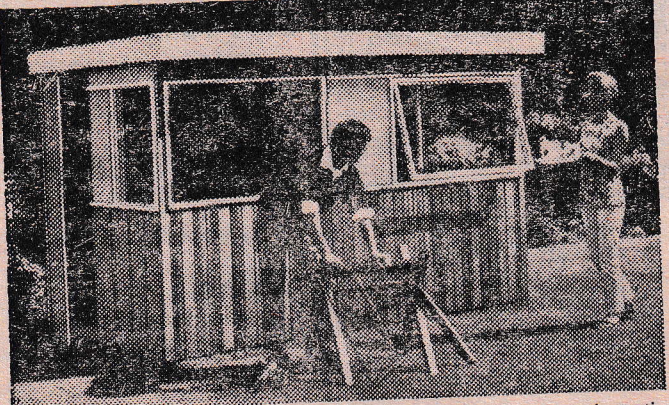
The hall and staircase at Grandfathers.

BATH'S

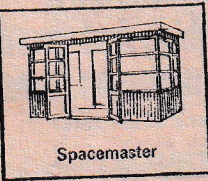
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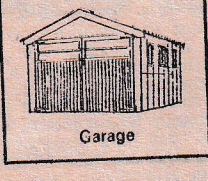
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Greenhouse



Garage

Tragedy
In addition to the pain and suffering of illness, Anne Steele knew one great tragedy in her life. The day before she was due to be married to a Ringwood man, in 1737 at the age of 20, her fiancé was drowned while bathing in the river near his home. She remained a spinster for the rest of her life.

Anne wrote all her works under the pen-name of "Theodosia"—an appropriate choice meaning "The gift of God."

There were at least three publications of her writings, but all the profits from their sales went to support religious and charitable work. After her death the dues were bequeathed to the Baptist College at Bristol.

Her tombstone is to be seen in Broughton churchyard, commanding a fine view of the park terraces she had loved so much—a view perhaps that had once prompted her to begin a poem entitled "Rural Meditations" with the words "What soft delight the peaceful bosom warms."

Epitaph

She is laid to rest with her father, mother and step-mother (her father's second wife), and her epitaph is again singularly appropriate to her character and beliefs:—

*"Silent the lyre and dumb the
tuneful tongue
That sung on earth her
great Redeemer's praise;
"But now in Heaven she joins
the angelic song
"In more harmonious, more
exalted lays."*

Grandfathers today is still occupied by a relative of the Steele family. Its owner, Mrs. Bompas, is the widow of Mr. Cecil Henry Bompas, whose grandmother with a Steele and whose father, Judge Bompas, was a frequent visitor to Broughton and would often preach in the Baptist Church while retreating in the country from his work at the Law Courts.

Portraits of the Steele family, including Anne's sisters, Mary and Martha, hang in the drawing room at Grandfathers, and in the unique hall, which is overlooked by an ornate bannister. In the hall, too, stands an old oak chest which, family legend has it, was the very chest in which one ancestor escaped from France during the Huguenot persecutions.

As I left this house, I remarked to Mrs. Bompas on the atmosphere of quiet happiness that I had sensed there. She replied "I think Anne Steele left something of herself here."

That "something" may well have been the tranquility of that gentle soul; of a person who was at all times at one with the world and her Maker—an aura, which is at the same time comforting yet invigorating to all who experience it.

H.W.E.

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