Gilbert Keith Chesterton was born in Kensington in 1874, educated at St. Paul’s School and the Slade School of Art where it was found that his primary talents were in the direction of writing. His earliest work was done in the family home and later at the publishers’ offices of Redway and T Fisher Unwin, and in the hurly burly of Fleet Street. It was his marriage to Frances Blogg in 1901 which turned his thoughts to a permanent home where he could continue his writing and find some quiet from the busy life as a journalist.

The early years of marriage were spent in Kensington and Overstrand Mansions at Battersea, and it was from the latter that one day they took a second honeymoon journey to Slough from a station they had reached by chance on a bus labelled ‘Hanwell’. From Slough they walked through the beech woods to Beaconsfield, staying at the White Hart Hotel and decided ‘This is the sort of place where someday we will make our home’. This proved possible in 1909 when they rented Overroads, which had just been built in Grove Road.

Their hopes of having children had by this time faded and they busied themselves with entertaining the children of their friends. Charades and other such games were an excuse for assembling cloaks and hats, bringing swords out of the umbrella stands or sheets from the beds. Despite the disappointment, children played a great part in their life and many local children had drawings done for them, skilfully but hastily drafted and full of humour.

It soon became clear that a house larger than Overroads was needed and the opportunity came in 1912 to purchase the field across the road. It was called Top Meadow and on it was built the studio with at one end a small study, The Green Room. In 1922 they were able to build the living accommodation at Top Meadow and at last to live in their own home. The stage now served as the dining-room and the two attic rooms as bedrooms for the maid and the cook, who also had their own small sitting-room at the front of the house. Shortly before Dorothy Collins joined the household as secretary in 1926 a bow-windowed bedroom was built overlooking the meadow - but also in true Chesterton fashion - the back yard. Most of Chesterton’s writing from 1922 to 1935 was done in The Green Room. GK wanted to build a typical English home - of oak beams and with wrought iron fitments following the pattern at Overroads. There are five small door-knockers in the house. ‘They are there,’ says Chesterton ‘to say that the meeting between one of God’s images and another is a grave and dreadful matter to be begun with thunder.’

The garden was planned by Frances to enable her to get out of the house and for Gilbert to brandish his sword-stick when roaming the garden for
inspiration. A sprig of honeysuckle from Frances’ wedding bouquet was planted and this grew into a huge bush. It is said that the only flower GK knew was the wallflower, but many others are mentioned in his writings, and particularly those we should call wild - the dandelion, the foxglove, the forget-me-not. A fish pond was the focus of the garden and radiating from this, paths of York stone flanked by rose beds. A portion of the plot was left for meadow and here the Chesterton donkey, Trotsky by name, amused the visitors. In the kitchen garden there was room for the cultivation of the Chesterton delicacy - the potato.

There may be an impression that the life of the Chestertons at Top Meadow was one of quite and peace. This was far from the case. By the time GK arrived in Beaconsfield his name was already well-known as a writer. He had been writing reviews on literary and artistic subjects for ten years. He had published 'The Wild Knight and other Poems’, ‘Robert Browning’, ‘The Napoleon of Notting Hill’, ‘Heretics’, ‘Charles Dickens’ and ‘Orthodoxy’. He also wrote essays in magazines and Our Notebook column in the Illustrated London News, as well as the Saturday morning column of the Daily News.

To Top Meadow came many friends and acquaintances from the world of journalism, literature and the arts - George Bernard Shaw, Walter de la Mare, Hilaire Belloc, Maurice Baring (War correspondent and many other roles), the Garvins (Editor of The Observer 1908-1942), Beachcomber of the Daily Express (JB Morton), and also Father John O’Connor, the basis of GK’s fictional detective Father Brown. As the years passed, the Chestertons grew into the local community and the local rector, doctor, and the Players Club became regular visitors. G.K. appeared as Theseus in ‘A Midsummer Night’s Dream’ at Hall Barn and as Doctor Johnson in a local carnival.

The families of many of the houses in Beaconsfield were regular visitors, and we know that the progress of these families provided a good deal of material for Maisie Ward’s biographical volume of 1944. In that book, the barbers of Beaconsfield are given pride of place. Chesterton used John Harding’s barber’s shop in London End. He was loath to talk when others were in the saloon, ‘but if you were alone’ one of the barbers is reported as saying, ‘and were interested in such diverse subjects as war or the history of glass, he’d give you the history right through’. When GK was ill, Mr Springell, also a barber, found him ‘lying in bed like a huge elephant’. He was not embarrassed by his twenty stones in weight, his appearance and humour being the subject of many people’s remembrance of the man - clad in a black cloak walking round the town. This is how he would have wished them to remember him. ‘When I sit by the wayside,’ he said ‘the villagers look and they take me for one of two things - the village idiot or one of Harrods delivery vans.’

The local inns were frequent quarries for GK’s pen; ‘The Flying Inn’ published in 1914 specifically refers to The Saracens Head. From the same period came ‘The Rolling English Road’. The four Ends of Beaconsfield occur in off-the-cuff rhymes, so does Candlemas Pond and the Cricket Club.

The First World War brought a change in Chesterton’s life. In 1915 he suffered a severe illness, after which his brother Cecil went off to the War, leaving Gilbert to edit ‘The New Witness’, a social and political weekly founded
in 1911, to propagate the views of the Distributist League, that the ownership of businesses should be spread as widely as possible among the general populace, rather than being centralized under the control of a few state bureaucrats (socialism) or wealthy private individuals (capitalism). For the remainder of Gilbert’s life this, and its successor GK’s Weekly, took up the major part of his time - according to Frances, at one period, four days a week. Yet, during these last twenty years, he and Frances travelled to the United States twice, to Rome, Jerusalem, Spain and Poland.

The year 1922 marked Gilbert’s reception into the Roman Catholic Church in a building which adjoined the Earl of Beaconsfield public house. The Christian influences in his life go back to boyhood, but his marriage to Frances Blogg, a devoted Anglo-Catholic, brought him into contact with the Christian Social Union, and Henry Scott-Holland, and from that time it is quite clear that Christianity, and particularly Christianity’s answer to the riddle of the universe on its social side, formed the main-spring of Chesterton’s life and thought. The decision of 1922 was not unexpected, and Frances was to follow him four years later. These, the years of G.K. in his fifties, saw the publication of ‘St. Francis of Assisi’, ‘The Everlasting Man’, a biography of Chaucer, many more Father Brown stories, articles for Roman Catholic newspapers and, in 1932, his first radio broadcast for the BBC.

When Gilbert and Frances reached old age, they received great support from Dorothy Collins who not only looked after the secretarial side of Gilbert’s life, but drove them by car in England and abroad. In 1935 their home received its final addition - the study was enlarged, the bay window in which G.K. wrote being incorporated in the new room. Here, says Dorothy, Gilbert was unable to find many of his papers for there were seventeen oak cupboards, several with pigeon holes for orderly filing!

In May 1936 GK spoke at a fete for the opening of the newly-built St. Joseph’s Nursing Home, which had started earlier in a house in the grounds. This was his last public appearance. On 14th June, 1936, ten days after returning from a short holiday in France, and having sung Gilbert and Sullivan on the way home from the coast, Gilbert Chesterton died at Top Meadow. He was buried in the cemetery in Shepherds Lane, the grave being marked by a headstone carved by Eric Gill.