

# Harleyford and the Clayton family



*Engraving of Harleyford House c. 1800*

Harleyford was part of the manor of Marlow, which was given by William the Conqueror to his wife Matilda in about 1071. During the next 500 years, the Harleyford estate passed through various hands until 1536 when Tucher Bold built the first manor house there. This was severely damaged by fire in 1580 and soon afterwards was bought by Miles Hobart snr. His son, Miles Hobart jnr. became M.P. for Marlow, but died in 1632 when his carriage lost a wheel and overturned whilst going down Holborn Hill in London (see the splendid memorial in the porch of All Saints Parish Church). In 1632, Sir William Paget acquired the estate and the house, 'newly rebuilt' following depredations during the Civil War, for £380. The next 100 years, saw three more owners, until

William Clayton (?final-1744) bought it in 1736. The estate remained in the hands of the Clayton family for over 200 years, until 1954.



*Sir Robert Clayton*

William Clayton's family fortune came initially from Sir Robert Clayton (1629-1707), the son of a Northamptonshire farmer, who was apprenticed to his uncle in London as a scrivener (secretary or clerk). When the uncle died, he left his fortune (from banking) to Robert who used it to go into politics. Robert, a passionate Whig supporter, was knighted in 1671 and sat as an M.P. for many years, representing either Bletchingley (Surrey) or the City of London. He was also Lord Mayor of London in 1679/80. Because he helped William of Orange to gain the British throne in 1688, he was in great royal favour, helped by the fact that he lent £30,000 to William to pay off his troops, and did not rush to ask for re-

payment! Sir Robert and his wife, an heiress, lived at Marden (Surrey).

They were an extremely wealthy couple, so much so that Sir Robert bought the Hambleden (Bucks) estate and gave it to his brother William (1641-1716), who lived there for 40 years. Sir Robert's only son had died in infancy, so when Sir Robert died in 1707 his fortune was left to his brother William's son, also William Clayton. He was created a baronet in 1732 and purchased the Harleyford estate in 1735. His proud boast was that he could ride from Eastbourne to London, and never be out of sight of land he owned! When he died in 1744, the Harleyford by his younger son, also Sir William (1718-1783). This was the estate was inherited Sir William Clayton who, in 1755, commissioned Robert Taylor to build the Harleyford Manor house we know today, the previous house having been so damaged by another fire that it had to be demolished.



*Sir Robert Taylor*

Sir Robert Taylor (1714-1788) trained initially as a mason, as had his father, and as a sculptor, only turning to architecture in his late thirties. By the time he gained the Harleyford commission in 1755, his first country house, he was one of the most eminent architects of his day. While building Harleyford, he was also involved in building Barlaston Hall (Staffs) for the Wedgwood family. It seems that his supervision at Harleyford may have been somewhat casual, as many of the materials used were second-hand. In 1777 he designed Maidenhead Bridge and in 1780 the Bank of England.

He was well-known as an ascetic, beginning work by 4 a.m. each morning, and never drinking wine. He earned £8,000p.a. (a huge sum in those days), but only spent £800 p.a.!

Harleyford Manor house, Grade 1\* listed, is on level ground quite close to the Thames, raised on a small platform. It is built of red bricks with stone balustrades and a slate roof. Robert Taylor used the fashionable Palladian style with neo-classical and rococo references although the front of the building, facing the river, is asymmetric, with a central curved bow rising from ground level to roof, and a canted (angled) bay to one side. These were revolutionary elements at the time; it was much more usual to have a strictly symmetrical facade with columns and a portico. There are ball finials along the parapet, some of which are now missing. The house appears to have only three storeys, but in fact there are five, the two lower storeys containing the domestic offices

being below ground level. In 1767, Mrs Lybbe Powis, coming over from Hardwick Hall, which lies some miles higher up the Thames, to breakfast with Mr. Clayton, speaks of Harleyford as ‘an elegant brick house, lately built’. She considers the library ‘one of the most pleasing rooms she ever was in’ but finds ‘the entrance, drawing room and apartments above stairs on too concentrated a plan’ and is displeased with the rushes growing in the meadow, which then lay before the dining room windows. What really delights her is the trick whereby the working parts of the house are hidden away. ‘The whole offices so contriv’d in a pit as to be perfectly invisible – a great addition to the look of any place’. Whether or not the servants liked being in a pit was then a matter of no importance!



*Plasterwork in the drawing-room*

A double flight of steps rise to the main door, which leads to a domed central hall and a grand central staircase in a square well. The main rooms radiate from this well, eliminating the need for corridors. There are some splendid plasterwork panels in the dining room, library and drawing room, all of which are on the river side of the house, showing scenes of hunting, fishing, painting, music etc.

On the floor above are two oval rooms, originally bedrooms, with shared dressing rooms. Many of the windows have octagonal glazing panes.

Tradition states that the grounds were laid out by Lancelot ('Capability') Brown, although there are no records to prove (or disprove) this. Certainly, the grounds are extensive and grand, with Brown's signature sweeping lawns and stately trees. In the early 19th century, a notable flower garden lay around the house, also a walled kitchen garden and greenhouses, no doubt used to grow produce for the house.

A chalk quarry in the grounds, which had been used as a source of building material for the house, was converted into a grotto and used for picnics. An ice-house was created by digging out a pit and lining it with bricks. Ice was stored here during the winter, and the insulation ensured that enough ice remained during the summer to use for cold drinks, ice-cream etc. There is also a splendid Grecian temple, now beautifully restored.

A life-size statue of Sir Robert Clayton, in his robes as Lord Mayor of London, dated 1714, stands in the grounds. It was originally set up in the grounds of Christ's Hospital, London to commemorate his benefaction of the new workhouse there. It was moved here c. 1900. A copy of this statue, dated 1867, is also in the grounds.

After Sir William Clayton's death in 1783, he was followed by four more Sir William Claytons, all direct descendants. In

1914 a cousin, Sir Gilbert Augustus Clayton-East inherited, followed by his son and grandson, then by a distant kinsman Sir Harold Clayton, by which time the estate was run-down and debt-ridden. During WW2, the house was used as an adjunct to the RAF Officers Mess at Medmenham. In 1954, the estate was sold to Mr Archie Folley. In the 1980s the house underwent a complete renovation, supervised by English Heritage, and is now used as a headquarters building for international businesses.

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