

Marlow Place - the towns most flamboyant house



Marlow Place

HISTORY

The first recorded owners of the land on which Marlow Place stands were the Farmer family. It was later purchased by the Borlase family, and eventually passed to Alice Borlase, third grand-daughter and co-heiress of William Borlase, founder of the school which still exists in West Street. Alice married John Wallop, the great-grandson of the regicide Robert Wallop. It was thought until recently that their third son, John Wallop 1st earl of Portsmouth, built Marlow Place.

The discovery on-line of the will of Alice Borlase, by then Alicia, Lady Wallop, has thrown this into doubt. In 1721 she

was recorded in a court case as 'of Great Marlow' and later left her "Capital Mansion" in Great Marlow to her debt-ridden son-in-law, Henry Herbert and Ashburton Frowde, an early civil servant who seems to have been a friend. They were both bequeathed money in shares to finance the upkeep of the property, and the suspicion must be that the legacy was intended to help with Henry's money problems. The plan failed because Alicia died in 1744 at the age of eighty-six, having outlived both her legatees. Neither had any surviving close relatives, so Marlow Place was probably sold off immediately by a group of distant Frowde relatives and the creditors of Henry Herbert. This would explain the house's lack of early documentation.

In 1720 Alicia's son John had employed Thomas Archer to rebuild Hurstbourne Park, at that time the Wallop family home in Hampshire, as a grand Palladian mansion. It appears that Archer then designed this High Baroque house in Marlow for Alicia Wallop, where one of the ground floor bricks has the date 1730 inscribed by a mason.

Rumours have persisted that George II and his son Frederick, Prince of Wales, were in the habit of visiting the house.



George, Prince of Wales in 1716

There are intriguing links between the Wallops and the Hanoverian royal family. Alicia's daughter Mary was for many years lady-in-waiting to Princess Anne, a daughter of George II. Her son John was a prominent Whig politician, therefore of the Prince of Wales's party, and only a few years younger than the Prince.



By 1762 the Land Tax records show that the house was owned by a person not resident in the area. It was later acquired by the Clayton family, possibly in 1772, when the complete household furnishings of Marlow Place were sold off. An extract from the Reading Mercury in that year, advertising the house to let, informs us that the previous

tenant was Admiral Forbes. He was a naval hero who had become a high-ranking official at the Admiralty. In the early 1790s the house, together with much other property in the town, was sold to Thomas Williams of Temple House. The Williams family owned, and rented out, Marlow Place until 1921.

The senior branch of the Royal Military College was established in High Wycombe in 1799, and the junior branch at 'Remnantz' in West Street in 1802. For the next ten years, Marlow Place was used as a boarding house for the junior cadets, who are said to have sent semaphore signals from its roof to fellow cadets in Remnantz. Uniform buttons marked "R. Mil. Coll. Junior Dept." have been found in the garden. In 1811, when the college moved to Sandhurst, the house was re-let.



Some of the tenants are known: Rev. Thomas Gwynn (1869), Lady Rushout (1883), William Powley (1895). William Niven F.S.A, J.P. was the tenant from 1903 – 1921, when he purchased the house. He died in the next year, but his widow lived there until 1924, when the property was purchased by J H Watts J.P. After the death of his widow in the early 1930s the house stood empty for some years. At one point there was even talk of demolishing it in favour of a new cinema.

Eventually, only the stable block was knocked down, and the house survived with the cinema a few yards to the west.

During WWII, it was a 'shadow' factory, then a girls 'finishing' school in the 1950s and 60s. At present it has yet another use, as a suite of offices.

A TOUR OF THE HOUSE

Marlow Place is one of Marlow's two Grade I listed structures, the other being Marlow Bridge. It was designed by the architect Thomas Archer (1668 – 1743) who had studied in Rome. He held positions at court under both Queen Anne and George I, and was very much favoured by the Whig aristocracy. His work includes part of Chatsworth House and the service pavilions and colonnade at Cliveden. It appears that Marlow Place was designed as an 18th century dower house – a residence for one person, her guests and a retinue of servants. The rooms on the main floor are very grand, and eminently suitable for entertaining, whereas those on the other floors are much smaller.

The house has five storeys: a brick-floored deep basement which originally housed the coal store, wine cellar and food storage, ground floor kitchen and service quarters, the main reception rooms on the piano nobile, a bedroom floor, and a huge cruciform attic whose only windows are the four semi-circular lights in the centre of each pediment. It is seven bays wide and six bays deep; almost square in cross-section. Each side has four large pilasters supporting an architrave which runs right round the house, the brickwork of these being particularly fine. The central pairs of pilasters are

surmounted by a cornice and pediment in stone. These pilasters originally had large stone vases above them.



The third floor contains a suite of lofty rooms, originally reached by flights of steps to two imposing entrances. On the north front a flight of tapering stone steps leads to a large reception room between the two main bedrooms. On the south front a pair of stairways led to a balcony entrance to the main saloon. A set of double doors links these two rooms. The saloon contains a marble floor and elegant plasterwork on both walls and ceiling. To the east of it is the dining-room, and to the west a parlour. The main rooms, except for the saloon, are wood-panelled from chair rail to cornice, some with re-used oak, but most of new Baltic pine. All the windows have shutters and window seats. It is possible that the reused panelling came from an older Borlase home which had previously stood on the same site. It is not possible now to say which was the principal entrance, although when it was built, the driveway to the house ran from the High Street, approximately where Institute Road is now. This Victorian photograph shows the drive coming in from the north, but dividing and running round both sides of the house. To the right, behind the trees, was the stable block, with its own cobbled entrance, still visible, from the High Street.



The eight fourth-storey rooms are smaller, probably designed for family guests and servants. One, containing two full-length glass-fronted armoires with original plasterwork pediments, has south and west facing windows, making it a warm and welcoming sun-trap. A fireplace with a later grate contains tiles showing pictures of children's games from the early part of the 19th century. This is known as the nursery, but the satyr's heads in the plasterwork suggest that its original use is more likely to have been as a boudoir. There were two winding staircases, referred to, for obvious reasons, as 'snail stairs', going from basement to roof, on either side of the reception room. These relatively flimsy wooden staircases were replaced during the Second World War by more durable concrete ones, and were sadly never returned to the house.

An attic storey with steeply sloping ceilings and exposed rafters is squeezed in under the roof,



Many alterations have been made to the house over the years. The south front balcony was covered by a Victorian conservatory, later removed. The flights of steps on the south side were removed in about 1970. Chimney pieces were added to the main rooms in about 1770, with a particularly elegant one in the saloon, which was later known as the drawing-room. The stone vases which capped the pilasters have vanished. The site was originally completely surrounded on the south by a 10-foot-high brick wall with, for many years, only an inset wooden door. During the 20th century, part of this wall was lowered and the door replaced with the splendid wrought iron gates (Grade II listed) which are still in place. The stables on the west side, which were not in the same style as the house, were removed in 1937 and an Odeon cinema built there, later renamed the Regal. This, in its turn, was demolished in the 1970s and replaced by Regal House, a block of offices. Large parts of the garden, which had included a tennis court in Victorian times, were sold for housing, and the remainder has been converted to a car park.

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Based on a pamphlet written by Hazel Malpass for the occasion when the Marlow Society were able to open Marlow Place for Heritage Open Day, with later additions by Janet Smith.

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