

The Rookery - a gift Marlow did not want

By Tony Reeve



The old joke described anyone who had eight bedrooms but only two bathrooms and a WC as “filthy rich”. This could apply to the owners of The Rookery, which was a house and gardens that occupied about 5.3 acres behind the cottages in Chapel Street, Marlow, until 1964.

It was a large, attractive house, mainly in mock-Dutch style. When auctioned in 1911, it was described as a delightful old-world property consisting of a lounge hall, a spacious drawing room, a dining -room, a library, a strong room, a butler's pantry, a housemaids' pantry, a kitchen, a servants' WC and good cellars. It had six main bedrooms but only two bathrooms, two further bedrooms with a WC, plus a five-room annex. The Atkinson family owned the house for for most of the nineteenth century.

William James Atkinson (1777-1849) was a gentleman farmer who was an active property developer from before 1800, owning a lot of land, mainly in Marlow, including over 6 acres in Marefield and properties in The City of London. Curiously, his name appears in Marlow's burial register twice for unfortunate reasons: first in 1822. when John Ball was killed by a fall from one of Atkinson's elm trees: and again in 1836, when an unknown travelling man was found hanged in one of Atkinson's shrubberies.

Atkinson acquired many of the houses on the north side of Chapel Street and strips of land in the area behind, so that he was able to cultivate that land in a more efficient manner. in one unit enclosed from the open field, although theoretically it was still subject to Marlow's feudal "course and custom of husbandry".

A map of 1834 shows the square piece of land bounded by the modern streets of Dean Street. Chapel Street. Herons Place (then Aases Lane) and Wethered Road, although the last named was then only a footpath. Trinity Lane (then Gun Lane) was already running diagonally across a corner of the field from the junction of Dean Street and Chapel Street, separating the northwest corner. The names of owners or occupiers of a few strips of land are shown. For example. running NNE to SSW is a strip of land marked as 'Church land'. This is a strong indication that the land had formerly been worked as part of Marlow's Upper Common Field, under the feudal system of agriculture. The Church preserved ownership of its strips. although the land was leased to William James Atkinson from 1801. On either side of the

Church Land strip, the owner or occupier is shown as 'Mr Atkinson'. In the bottom right hand corner. five or more buildings are grouped. like a farm. It is possible that one of these buildings later formed the nucleus of The Rookery house.

William James died in 1849, Benjamin Atkinson (1802-1867) inherited the estate, which included Marlow Bottom Farm and Handy Cross Farm, as well as other properties in Marlow and London. In the 18'h and early 19'h centuries, newly-rich people wanted to live in large comfortable houses, within easy reach of London, looking out on to a large landscaped park, with specimen trees, surrounded by high brick walls. So after mid-century, Benjamin converted his father's farm off Chapel Street into such a house, demolishing the old farm buildings, extending the house, and converting the arable strips into a park with a surrounding wall that can still be seen. It was one of many to be found in Marlow.

Meantime, a few farm buildings were rebuilt on the opposite side of Herons Place (then Aases Lane) on part of what later became Town Close and Star Meadow. There were also two tall trees and a pond on that side of Herons Place, in which were 20 to 25 nests of rooks. So The Rookery was adopted as the name for the house, the estate and the farm.

Early photographs of the front of the house show that the original brick walls were built up with stepped balustrades in the Flemish style. very similar to those found at Bisham Abbey.

The initials of Benjamin Atkinson can be seen in a monogram over The Rookery stables on the corner of Chapel Street and Herons Place. These were faced in mock-medieval brick and flint before 1867 to include two four-room cottages for the use of staff, as well as stabling for four horses. a large coach house, harness room and two lofts over.

After Benjamin's death on 6 January 1867, his wife Eliza (1826- 1900) continued to run the estate. Her initials still appear in a monogram over Rookery Lodge in Chapel Street and a gate through a wall. linking the lodge to the cottages of the stable block. The lodge was brick-built in a similar style and includes three bedrooms. bathroom. sitting room, kitchen and scullery, for the use of staff.

In 1875 she also acquired seven of the cottages in Chapel Street from the Sir William Borlase Charity, although she promptly resold the end three.

Benjamin and Eliza Atkinson had no children, so. when Eliza died in 1900. under the terms of his will the property passed to their nephew. Harry James Norton Layton, who was a merchant in the City and a member of the Grocers' Company. He already had two addresses in London so did not live at The Rookery, but rented it out. (One of the tenants, a Mr Champion, is known in Marlow for having presented two carved and gilded oak hymn notice boards to the parish church.) However H J N Layton also died in 1903, aged 74.

By 1908. the estate was in the hands of Mr Layton (presumably the son of H J N Layton) and Elizabeth Atkins. The entire property was then sold to Edward Jarmon Blake,

who put it up for auction at The Crown hotel on 24 July 1911. At this time, the Lodge was known as 'Rose Villa', which remained the property of the Laytons. The property was sold again in November 1919 by George S J Cubitt and Llewellyn Shone to Captain Arnold H B Wright. He made many alterations to Rookery House, including the construction of a single- storey extension at the front, with a new doorway, framed by classical pillars.

Captain Wright had served in the Connaught Rangers and Northumberland Fusiliers in India, so the interior of the house was decorated with heavy Victorian wallpapers, dark coloured furniture and carpets with many Indian ornaments.

In the early 20th century, the park or gardens had an entrance for carriages from Herons Place along a carriageway that led to the front of the house (about 50 yards behind the Lodge and parallel to it) and back round an oval lawn. Another wide path, flanked by lawns, led straight from the back of the house into the park and a leisure area that included a croquet lawn and tennis courts. Other pathways circled inside the brick walls, separated from them by fruit trees and floral beds about 10 ft wide. There was also a vegetable garden and a substantial greenhouse. hidden away behind trees, to provide fresh produce for the family. This included an area heated by a coal boiler to grow grapes and exotic plants. There were ponds and hundreds of trees in the grounds, under which many thousand naturalized daffodils and tulips made a wonderful show in the Spring.

After Captain Wright's death in the 1960s, his family was faced by a quandary. Either they could spend a considerable amount to repair and maintain the house or they could gain a substantial sum by selling it. In the event, they probably had no option as a large inheritance tax must have been levied on the estate. So when Mrs Jessie Wright also died, her executors first auctioned all the contents and then sold part of the estate as a housing site on 19 June 1962. This included Star Meadow, which had been acquired in 1920, and a separate building on the corner of Star Meadow, opposite the stables, amounting to a total acreage of 11.5 acres. It did not include the house, stables and part of the gardens, as part of the deal was that these should be made over to the local authority. Money was left to the head gardener, Alexander Jackson, so that he could buy Rookery Lodge.

The back half of the gardens was later covered with 42 houses as Rookery Court, while Star Meadow was built over as Green Verges, Spring Gardens and other names at about the same time, adding some 100 houses to Marlow's stock. The local authority discussed several different uses for The Rookery house and what remained of the gardens, including a community centre and a leisure centre with a swimming pool, such as that later built at Court Gardens. However, The Rookery house was pulled down in February 1964. Only Rookery Lodge, the two cottages and Rookery stables remain, now privately occupied or used for storage. The local authority maintains the site of the former house and the front part of the gardens as Wrightlands Park. There are still several specimen trees in the park, although the rooks have long since gone.

There is one unresolved mystery about the site. It is believed that Chapel Street is named after a chapel that existed somewhere near here in medieval times. Sheahan stated in 1862 that 'it does not appear unlikely that The Rookery garden was the site of this ancient chapel'. One wonders whether one of the farm buildings, pulled down by Benjamin Atkinson, or the original farmhouse, was adapted from the chapel. Perhaps this is why Sheahan described it as 'an ancient genteel house' only twelve years after it was built. Another possibility is that the chapel was located on the small separate site where the rooks had been, on the opposite corner of Herons Place, facing on to Chapel Street. This might be the reason why it had passed down as a separate property. It was stated in 1962 that it had been in the possession of the Wright family for upwards of 30 years. This could be resolved only by an archaeological investigation.

Acknowledgements and Sources:

I am indebted to Mrs Pauline Slater, who in 2006 gave me photocopies of photographs of the house and park and also of the 1911 and 1962 sale catalogues relating to The Rookery, which she had collected some years before from Mr Sidney Worrall. He had lived in Rookery Lodge and had been a gardener for the Wright family before the property was sold. I am also indebted to Mr Alastair Worrall (the grandson of Alexander Jackson the head gardener), who provided many photographs and information about the 20th century house, its owners and Rookery Lodge. My thanks are also due to John Evans for loan of the 1834 map and to Patricia Burstall for

details of the Atkinson monumental inscription in All Saints churchyard.

Centre for Bucks Studies in Aylesbury, ref D 129, 42 bundles of documents, mainly deeds. relating to the Atkinson Estate.

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Published by the Marlow Society, Local History Group.
Registered Charity No. 262803, March 2008