

Memories of Marlow Place in the 1950s and 1960s by Anthony W. Jackson

I chanced upon the Marlow Society website today, and learned much about what was for fifteen years my home. Thank-you for that! Unsurprisingly, there are a fair few recollections which seem to differ from your account. I'll set some of them out below, in the hope that they may be helpful.

I think it was 1950 when we moved there. The house was in quite a poor state internally, there were still posters exhorting people not to become "The weak link in the chain", and to remember that "Careless talk costs lives".

We began by moving into the second floor, (which surrounds the upper part of the main sitting room, making a kitchen on the side which faced north. The single main staircase was still there, (your account of its replacement during WW2 is incorrect).

Very sadly the staircase was later replaced with an ugly concrete one, and the space formerly occupied by the original stairwell was floored over with glass bricks, allowing light to enter from an attic roof-window, I think. The concrete stair was required for fire-protection, as I recall. The space which the staircase had occupied became a bathroom on the main floor, a dining-room on the floor we first moved to, and a sort of sociable upper hall in the attic above.

Something which seems to have been forgotten is the lovely sunken garden on the East side of the house, with a stone pillar at its centre bearing a sun-dial on top. I rather think the sunken garden, below its sloping banks, was divided up into a simplified Union Jack pattern, with little box hedges defining all its borders.

The South-side façade had lost its steps a fair while before we moved there. The big gates were found in a scrapyard somewhere. As I recall the opening which they were set in was not altered, they just were the right size. I understood that the original gates had been sacrificed, like so many others, to the need for iron during the war. I don't recall the wooden door, which I think must have gone, together with its surrounding brickwork, before I arrived there.

At what we treated as the 'back' – the north side – there were two Bay trees, in classic lollipop shapes, alongside the lowest steps. One died, around 1968, the other the next year. No sign of injury – it was held that the Bay trees had simply come the end of their natural lives.

There was an outdoor lavatory in the South East corner of the garden, which I think had provision for three people to use it simultaneously – three holes and no partitions!

We found a big pile of oyster shells near where the tennis court was later installed.

Two enormous plane trees presided over the remains of the gardens, with beaten lead 'lids' fastened over the stumps of large branches which had been sawn off I supposed. There was a Weeping Ash between them and the house, near a corner of the sunken garden. There was a Box tree near the South wall to the East of the gates, and a couple of Yew trees opposite the North steps.

What you call the saloon, the double-height principal reception-room, had a wooden floor. The room connected to it by double doors had a marble floor, and in all my time it was the Dining Room. The handsome brass 18th-century chandelier my mother found in an auction. That in the high-ceilinged saloon was also found at auction, but is clearly a good deal later. With so many bulbs it required a lot of attention to replace failures in those days!

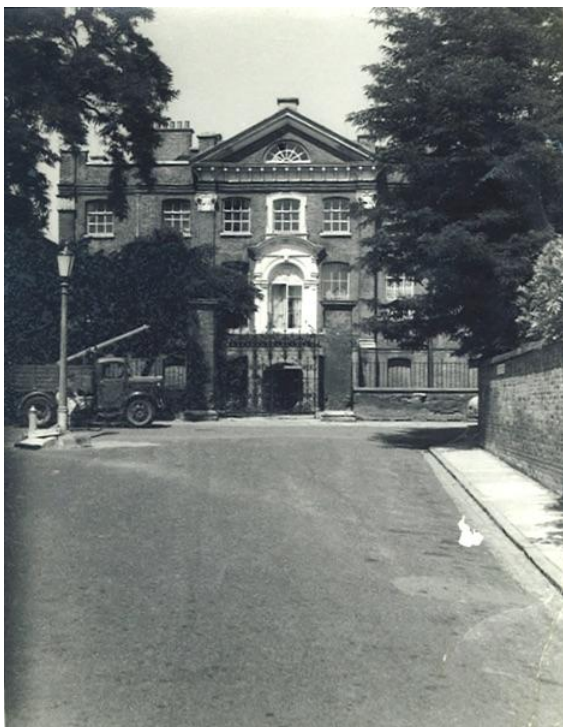
The “Big sitting room”, as we called it, was a surprisingly pleasant place to spend time in. People seemed to gather and talk in little knots, far enough apart for this to be practical, but near enough for someone to ask a question of someone nearby, but not too nearby. The “Small sitting room” situated beyond its South East corner, was much more intimate, and served as a little library where one might take tea with a visiting friend or two.

The big cellar contained the enormous oil boiler which heated the house, and in its South wall there was (probably still is) a bricked-up doorway, with an arched top. There was much speculation about secret tunnels and derring-do, but I’m afraid we never opened it!

There was, of course, a lot of speculation about the house’s history, most of it a good deal less probable than your account. The house was described as a ‘Shooting Box’, supposedly built for one of the Hanoverian kings, who went dotty in his later years, and was kept there out of harm's way in his dotage.

Many of the rooms had the remains of a servant-calling-bell system. Little bell-cranks with wires hanging from them in corners of rooms, and in one case a surviving plump bell-pull. The system appeared to lead to a bell still fastened to the outside of the west wall. It was explained to me by a visitor that King George was especially fond of some particular cake, and that a Royal baker had to be ready to bring one of these to wherever the bell had been rung from!

Here is a photo from about 1960, showing the house from St. Peter Street to the south.





This one is from the east, showing tennis court to the left (south) and new garage beyond the pool. Previously there was a garage behind the point from which this photo was taken – it was, by the time of the photo, housing what proved to be an indispensable oil-fired heating boiler for the pool!

I see that the box-trees were in fact aligned with the half-way height of the steps, and two giant planes had a fair-sized fir for company. You can just make out the central stone stand for the sundial in the sunken garden. I don't recall what the four ball-shaped trees were at the corners of the sunken garden, Laurel, perhaps?

In the background is the first of two Rover 2000 cars my parents simultaneously owned. Thus this photo cannot have been taken before 1963, more likely 1964 or 5. The second such car was a 2000TC, which came out in late 1966, so presumably this photo was taken between these two dates.

Anthony W. Jackson – September 2023