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THE ROUND HOUSE, HAVERING-ATTE-BOWER

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In the village of Havering-atte-Bower, on the north-eastern edge of Greater London, is an elegant oval stuccoed villa called The Round House which dates from the last decade of the 18th century. In the 19th century locals called it the 'tea-canister' — an apt name because the shallow-pitched roof with its very wide eaves looks very much like a lid, capping the tall body of the house.

In its original condition the Round House provided all the conveniences of a country seat in miniature: a house with comfortable accommodation set on a slight rise in the ground with a fine prospect north and south, detached stabling for a carriage and a pair of horses and, in place of a home farm, a small dairy with a Classical frontispiece. Unlike the grander and more expensive country houses, villas were within reach of anyone with moderate financial resources, and the popularity of the type in the late Georgian period is shown by the very large number of architectural books dealing with the subject which were published in the forty years after 1780. Charles Middleton's *Country Villas* of 1795 gives a summary of the villa idea:

'Villas may be considered under three different descriptions — first as the occasional and temporary retreats of the nobility and persons of fortune from what may be called their town residence and must, of course, be in the vicinity of the metropolis — Secondly as the country houses of wealthy citizens and persons in official stations which also cannot be far removed from the capital: and thirdly the smaller kind of provincial edifices, considered either as hunting seats or the habitations of country gentlemen of moderate fortune. Elegance, compactness and convenience are the characteristics of such buildings, either separate or combined . . .'

The Round House falls into Middleton's second category. The plan is oval, with the entrance on one of the longer sides. Most villas are small buildings of no more than two storeys, but here are three full storeys, giving the building a more imposing appearance than was usual. The height is balanced by the shallow-pitched conical roof whose eaves project almost three feet beyond the wall face, casting a strong shadow over the heads of the attic windows. The exterior is divided into four unequal 'sides' by pairs of astylar giant pilasters, which give the building some architectural consequence. The longer sides are three windows wide, but the shorter sides or ends which boast the best views across the Thames and over the South Essex countryside, have a single large window on each floor with balconies at first floor level. The house stands on a grassy podium, apparently isolated without wings or excrescences.

Inside the house the inconveniences which might be expected from an oval plan are overcome. An elegant central stair gives access to all the upper rooms. The stair compartment lies across the shorter axis of the house and as a result the main rooms on either side are of generous width, not at all the long narrow segments one might expect. The service accommodation is wholly in the basement and encircled by a covered passageway pierced by top-lights. This passage preserves the kitchen and pantries from damp and its grassed-over roof forms the podium on which the house appears to stand.

This exquisite example of the Georgian suburban villa was built in 1793/4 for a long-forgotten dilettante named William Sheldon, the son of a City merchant who had acquired Goosehays Manor near Romford in the mid-18th century. Neither the father nor the son ever occupied Goosehays, or indeed left London; the elder Sheldon lived at 27 Southampton Street,



Fig. 1. The Round House, Havering-atte-Bower, before restoration.

off the Strand, the younger became a bencher of Gray's Inn. He was deeply involved in the Italian Opera controversy which divided London Society in the 1790s and earned admiration as the principal mediator between the two factions. This was the more remarkable because he was personally committed to one side, having formed a partnership with R.B. O'Reilly in 1791 and leased the Pantheon in Oxford Street for four years to stage Italian opera. The scheme proved a disaster; most performances lost money, O'Reilly fled the country to escape his creditors and in 1792 the Pantheon was gutted by fire. Sheldon was successfully sued by James Wyatt and by the craftsmen he had employed to refurbish the Pantheon for opera use. In the court hearings Sheldon was described by Wyatt as a man of fortune who was always at the Pantheon directing the workmen, and there is other evidence that Sheldon had a personal interest in architecture. His name appears as a subscriber both to John Plaw's *Rural Architecture* of 1784 and James Lewis's *Original Designs in Architecture* of 1797.

One of the buildings illustrated in *Rural Architecture* is Belle Isle, a small circular country house of Pantheon form which stands on an island in Lake Windermere and which Plaw had designed in 1774. Round or oval houses are not common in England. Besides Belle Isle there is the Earl-Bishop of Derry's rotunda at Ickworth in Suffolk built in 1794, though this was intended more as a gallery than a house with the living rooms in the wings. There is also the polygonal A La Ronde in Devon, designed for themselves by the Misses Parminter and built in 1795, but most other examples are much smaller and, on the whole, less architecturally interesting. In mainland Europe there is the bizarre Désert de Retz near Chambourcy built in the form of a shattered column, there is also a straight copy of Belle Isle on the shore of Lake Geneva, but round houses are decidedly exceptional.

The parallels between Belle Isle and the Havering Round House are close, although one is circular on plan and one is oval. Both have all the service rooms in a concealed basement, so that the houses appear to sit directly on the ground; both have a central section with the top-lit main stair flanked by the principal rooms. It is tempting to ascribe the Round House to John

Plaw. Obviously Sheldon was familiar with the Belle Isle design and may have adapted it himself to serve his purpose, but the house at Havering is a skilful and homogenous design and does not seem like the work of an amateur. Plaw was living in London until 1795, and it is clear that he had a continuing interest in centrally planned buildings. His church of St Mary, Paddington Green, finished in 1791, is a brick cube, and after he emigrated to Canada he designed the circular market house at Charlottetown Nova Scotia, built in 1823 after his death. Unfortunately, there is no documentary proof that Sheldon knew Plaw, or employed him, only the circumstantial connection of Sheldon's subscription to *Rural Architecture*. The Italian Opera affair must have brought Sheldon into contact with other architects, notably Soane who made a design for an opera house in Leicester Square, but Plaw seems the most likely candidate.

Sheldon never lived in his new villa. Perhaps because of the debts he incurred over the Pantheon he immediately let the building to Edward Howe, a local landowner, and ultimately sold the freehold in 1807. In 1830 the house passed to the Barnes family, who retained it until after the last war, when it came into the hands of the Heaps, the present owners, who have employed Julian Harrap to repair and restore the building.

During the last two centuries the interior has inevitably undergone some alterations, none of which has affected the basic character of the house. At some time, probably in the 1820s, the ground floor south room was decorated with one of Zuber & Cie's panoramic wallpapers (Les Jardins Francaises — current between 1821 and 1836). There are also some fire-surrounds and plaster cornices of the 1870s. In the recent restoration some partitioning was removed from the main rooms, and the wall-paper carefully removed for conservation. The exterior has for the present lost the tented canopies which graced some main windows, but otherwise it is very much in its original state.