



THE
GEORGIAN
GROUP

Frances Harris, “The Best Workmen of All
Sorts” The Building of Wimbledon House,
1730–1742’, *The Georgian Group Journal*,
Vol. II, 1992, pp. 87–90

“THE BEST WORKMEN OF ALL SORTS” THE BUILDING OF WIMBLEDON HOUSE, 1730-1742

Frances Harris

If the first Duchess of Marlborough had not been a woman of inexhaustible energy with a lifelong passion for building, her decision, taken at the age of 70 and with four houses already at her disposal, to construct a new Palladian mansion on her suburban estate at Wimbledon would have been a curious one.¹ But in spite of her age she had kept very much abreast of architectural fashion. Lord Burlington had already given her advice on her largest and most recent projects at Blenheim, and in the autumn of 1726 she became acquainted with Lord Herbert as well. When she declared that the latter's assistance would be very useful to her at Blenheim and elsewhere, she was probably already beginning to look ahead to her new project at Wimbledon.²

She had acquired this estate in 1723, after its confiscation from Sir Theodore Janssen, one of the directors of the South Sea Company. He had demolished the Tudor mansion on the site, and the South Sea crisis had come upon him before he had time to build another in its place; but the great terrace, with its wide views over the Surrey downs, remained as an inviting site for a new house. Sarah wanted to build for her own convenience (Wimbledon was within an hour's drive of London, closer than her favourite lodge at Windsor), but chiefly in the long term as a fitting endowment for her principal heirs. In 1729, when considering how to divide up her estates among her three Spencer grandsons in her will, she decided that Wimbledon must go after all to the eldest, because it would be “a fine seat, & not proper for a younger brother”.³

By the summer of 1730 she had started to build to a plan of Herbert's devising, with his usual associate, Roger Morris, supervising the execution on site; but it was a plan which reflected Sarah's determination that fashionable “Italian” notions must take second place to plainness, convenience and comfort, and that her own taste must always be the guiding principle.⁴ “Gimmeny Gommenys”, as she termed any kind of modish ornamentation, were to have no place. In fact she had always been suspicious of architects (“their rules does not allways agree with my fancy”), and the woman who had once unceremoniously sacked Sir Christopher Wren and gone on to quarrel spectacularly with Vanbrugh did not take long to become disenchanted with the Palladians. “I know of none that are not mad or ridiculous”, she told her granddaughter as the building progressed, “and I really believe that anybody that has sense with the best workmen of all sorts could make a better house without an architect, than any has been built these many years”.⁵

Evidence of payments from her current account in the Bank of England ledgers enables us to follow the progress of Wimbledon, to correct the dates (1732-33) which are usually given for the building, and to identify the principal officials and workmen involved.⁶ Since Roger Morris had much business elsewhere, the day to day supervision fell to John Desborough, previously employed by Sarah in this capacity during the last stages of building Blenheim.⁷ Payments totalling £2,500 were made to him between July and October 1730. Progress was good and in September Sarah visited the works and distributed guineas liberally amongst the workmen.⁸

The house, despite its appearance in the only surviving illustration published in

Vitruvius Britannicus (Fig. 1), was not built of stone, but of a variety of pale-coloured brick called "greystock", with stone dressings to the windows and chimneys. The Duchess much preferred brick to stone, because the latter could not be repaired or altered, "without almost pulling down the house", and as the house went up she regretted even the dressings of stone.⁹ The master mason and bricklayer, to whom regular payments were made throughout the summers of 1731 and 1732, were John Devall and William Waterman. By this time Desborough had left the works (there are no payments to him after 1730), and his place was taken by another official, William Kilpin, who reported to Sarah in December 1731 that as far as the house was concerned, "all the Works in Hand are very near Completed and they have been cleaning down the Fronts and have struck great part of the Scaffolds".¹⁰

By this time she had reached the end of her patience with her architects and at the end of March 1732 she parted company with them altogether, after complaining that Morris had ordered works "not only without my ever having seen a plan of them, but after I had positively said that they shou'd not be done"; she was referring in particular to his "whimsicall" designs for the attic story and the bridge at the north entrance to the house.¹¹ Her readiness to find fault was probably increased by Morris's association with her grandson, Charles Spencer, 5th Earl of Sunderland, of whose alterations at Althorp she heartily disapproved. Sunderland, she claimed in a further startling accusation, had even gone so far as to save his architect "not long since from being hang'd for that infamous Crime which I cannot name". The reference can only be to sodomy, and whether the gossip were true or not, it indicates that Morris may have had some other reason than a desire to improve his architectural knowledge for his temporary absence from England at this time.¹²

The finishing of Wimbledon therefore proceeded after Sarah's own heart, with no architect to mediate between herself and her workmen. Kilpin was paid a salary for his attendance as clerk of the works, while her favourite master builder, Francis Smith of Warwick, was called in to make contracts and measure as required. Between 1732 and 1734 regular payments were made to the master-plasterer, George Worrall,¹³ and to the joiner, James Guest, and it was the Duchess's strict instructions that their plastering and wainscoting should be carried out with the best materials, but with no painting, gilding or carving. Such painting as she permitted was carried out by William Pickering. In June 1734 Charles Scriven was paid £165 18s 0d for glazier's work; in July Thomas Phillips¹⁴ received a further £1,000 for carpentry and joinery; and February 1735 there was a payment of £230 11s 0d to Jos. Patterson for smith's work. In May 1732 the first payment (of £500) was made to Charles Bridgeman for laying out the gardens. By the time of his death in 1738 he had received £2,353, although the work left incomplete was to lead to much wrangling between Sarah and his widow.¹⁵

By the summer of 1735 the house was ready for furnishing, an occupation which Sarah always enjoyed and particularly so in this case since she saw herself as "making it pretty" for her favourite granddaughter, Diana, Duchess of Bedford, to whom she now intended to bequeath it. In March the wood carver, John Boson,¹⁶ was paid £73 for picture frames; in June there is a payment of £116 7s 0d for upholstery; and in September another £131 for gilt leather hangings. In November Benjamin Goodison was paid £329 8s 0d for cabinet-maker's work, and finally in March 1736 a Mr Goodchild received £61 4s 0d for "Holland Drapes". Sadly Diana died in September 1735, and so never saw the house completely finished.

Perhaps for this reason, although she had spent a total of £70,000 at Wimbledon, Sarah for some time afterwards refused to live there, claiming that it was too damp and

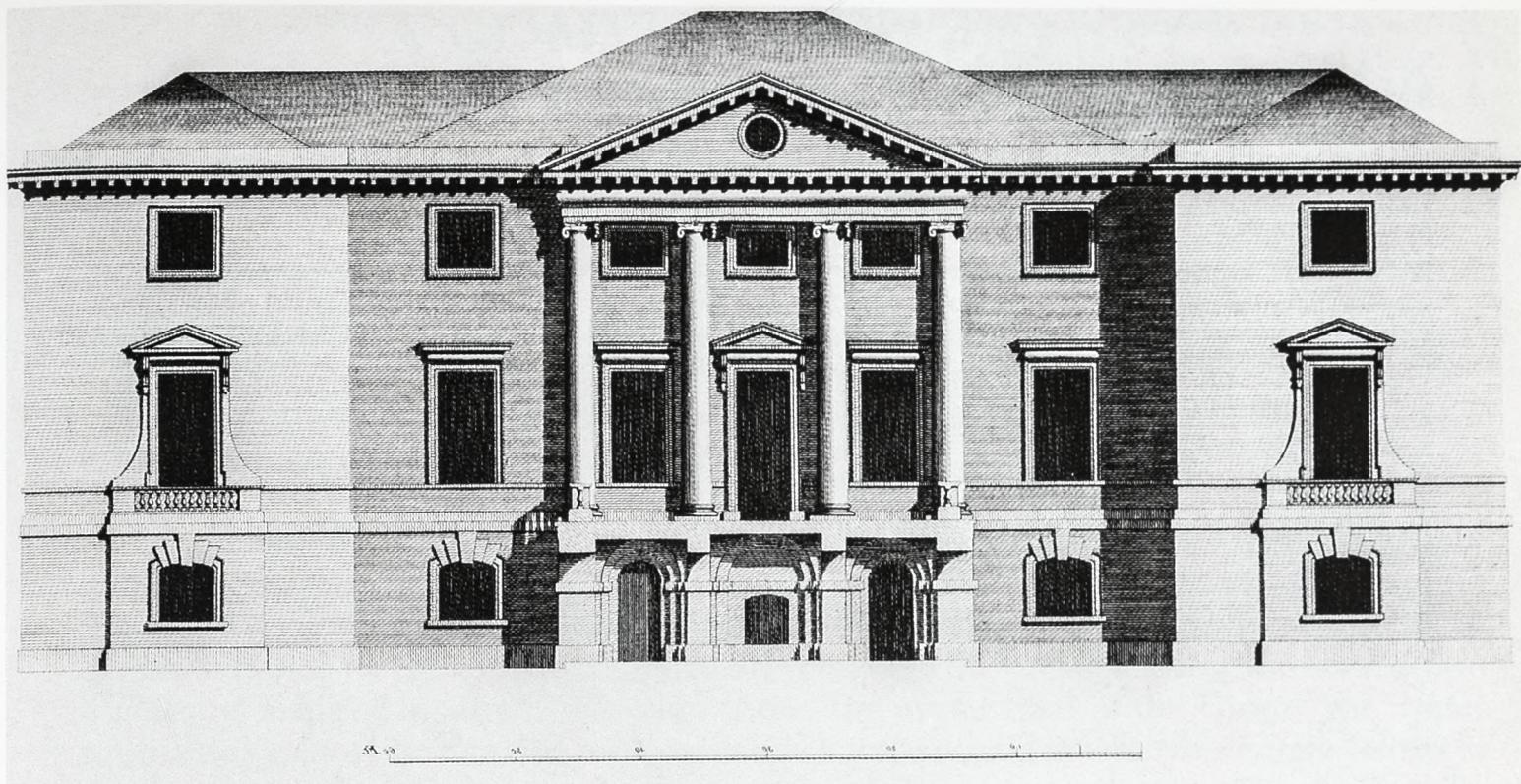


Fig. 1. The principal front of Wimbledon House from *Vitruvius Britannicus V* (1771).

unhealthy, “and consequently I have thrown away a vast sum of money upon it to little purpose”.¹⁷ But later she had a change of heart and for three years between 1739 and 1741 she spent her summers there. The result was a series of modifications, this time carried out by Henry Flitcroft. In the spring of 1739 she paid him £1,202 12s 0d (although this included work at Marlborough House, and at a town house which she had bought for her grandson John Spencer in Grosvenor Street). In December 1742 he was paid a further £2,000 “for business at Wimbledon”.

Externally the house never looked satisfactory, since Flitcroft could do nothing to rectify the main fault. The Duchess’s original instruction (probably on account of her increasing disability in old age) that the principal floor should be accessible without a flight of steps had left Herbert and Morris no alternative but to put the whole building “in a saucer”, with the result that it always looked (in Sarah’s phrase) as if it were “making a Curtsy”.¹⁸ But internally, in her grandson’s opinion at least, her personal control over her workmen had produced a more pleasing result than the Palladians could have achieved if left to their own devices. In 1736 he paid it a visit and reported that he had been “so surpriz’d with the Beauty of Wimbledon that I can’t help troubleing you, only to confess, that besides the situation, I think the inside infinitely handsomer than any Gimmany Gommony Ld Burlington has at Chiswick”.¹⁹

NOTES

1. I have given a fuller account of her in my biography, *A Passion for Government: the Life of Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough*, Oxford, 1991.
2. British Library (hereafter BL) Add. MS 61437, f. 24: Godolphin to Sarah, September 16, 1726.
3. BL Add. MS 38056, f. 24: Sarah to Sir Thomas Pengelly, June 5, 1729.
4. Marie P.G. Draper, “When Marlborough’s Duchess Built”, *Country Life*, August 2, 1962, 248-49.
5. *Letters of a Grandmother*, ed. Gladys Scott Thomson, 1942, 52: to Diana, Duchess of Bedford, July 21, 1732.
6. Account of Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough in Bank of England Record Office, Private Drawing Office Ledgers no. 84, 91, 98, 105, 112, 119, 133, 147, for 1729-1742.

7. David Green, *Blenheim Palace*, 1951, 148, 266-67.
8. *Read's Weekly Journal*, September 5, 1730.
9. Sarah Markham, *John Loveday of Caversham*, 1984, 209; *Letters of a Grandmother*, 112: to Diana, Duchess of Bedford, April 19, 1734.
10. BL Add. MS 61477, f. 32: Kilpin to Sarah, December 24, 1731.
11. Laurence Whistler. *The Imagination of Vanbrugh and his Fellow Artists*, 1954, 173-74: Sarah to Herbert, March 29, 1732.
12. BL Add. MS 51386, f. 16: Sarah to Henry Fox, November 30, 1732. Morris's continental journey is said to have taken place between June 1731 and November 1732 (Howard Colvin, *Biographical Dictionary of British Architects*, 1978, 560), but cannot have occupied the whole period since in March 1732 (see previous note), Sarah had a personal interview with him.
13. Fl. 1724-1761; see Geoffrey Beard, *Georgian Craftsmen*, 1968, 172.
14. C.1689-1736; see Beard, 180.
15. Frances Harris, "Charles Bridgeman at Blenheim?", *Garden History*, XIII, 1985, 1-3.
16. Fl. 1729-1743; see Beard, 174.
17. *Memoirs of Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough*, ed. W. King, 1930, 315.
18. Draper, 249-50.
19. BL Add. MS 61446, f. 136: Charles, 3rd Duke of Marlborough to Sarah, October 9, 1735.