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CAMILLA COTTAGE, WESTHUMBLE

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When Fanny Burney married the penniless General d'Arblay in 1793 she was encouraged by her friend William Lock to hope that her pension of £100 a year "might do it as it does for many a curate". He offered as well a spot in his Park near Dorking where they might build a cottage and practice rural economy. Thus in August 1793 she wrote to her father:

"We have not yet begun our Maisonette in Norbury Park: M. d'Arblay is his own Architect, & all his plans – which, literally, cannot be less than 100, from the time he first undertook drawing them – prove too expensive. He makes all possible retrenchments, but he cannot relinquish the little commodious particularities which make him desire to be his own Constructor; and these, our hum-drum surveyor, who is affronted at being directed, assure him double the cost. How the matter will terminate I know not –."

The "surveyor" was Samuel Ockley, a local carpenter, later to build the cottage, but time was to pass before the dream became reality. In the meantime they rented a house in Bookham which saw the birth of a son in 1794. Finally in 1796 the successful publication of the third Burney novel, "Camilla", provided capital for the venture:

"We have therefore resumed our original plan, & are going immediately to build a little Cottage for ourselves. We shall make it as small & as cheap as will accord with its being warm & comfortable." [October 1796 to her father.]

The site was no longer in Lock's Park but on the edge of his estate:

"– in the valley, between Mr. Locke's park & Dorking, & where Land is so scarce, that there is not another possessor within many Miles who would part, upon any terms, with half an Acre." [October 1796 to her father.]

Clearly an understanding had also been reached with the builder, Ockley:

"Our new House is stopt short in actual building from the shortness of the Days, &c – but the Master Surveyor has still much to settle there, & 3 workmen to aid preparing the Ground for agricultural purposes. The Foundation is laid, & on the 1st of March, the little dwelling will begin to be run up." [November 1796 to her sister, Susan Phillips.]

It seems probable that the cottage was timber-framed:

"Our building is to be resumed the 1st of March. It will then soon be done, as it is only of lath and plaister, & the Roof & wood work are already prepared." [December 1796 to her father.]

"Our Cottage is now running up a legs bravely, as they say in Norfolk, . . ." [April 1797 to her sister, Esther.]

“Our Cottage is now in the act of being rough cast.” [July 1797 to her father.]

There would have been a considerable choice of domestic fixtures and fittings on the market, the performance of fireplaces and kitchen ranges was the subject of a great deal of experimental work and the theories of Count Rumford on chimney design were beginning to come into print:

“My Builder intends working hard at the Encyclopedias when at Chelsea we hope, also Ct Rumfords new treatise for Cottages & Cabbages will be printed before the building goes on.” [December 1796 to her father.]

“M. D’arblay is much gratified that you are an enthusiast for Count Rumford, whom he studies night and day. Our few chimneys in our little cottage are all of his construction, and the tiny laundry is so also, with alterations which we flatter ourselves will be improvements by M.D’arblay himself: for in studying both the Count’s works and his own convenience *con amore* he thinks he has still ameliorated the new oeconomy. Passionately fond of every species of architecture, however humble, he has given his whole mind to the business, in the progress of our lillipution home, and I own I think most prosperously.” [November 1797 to a friend, Mrs Waddington.]

The General was having problems which perhaps would not be unfamiliar today:

“. . . I will not write today about the cottage – which has been causing me some anxious moments and I have many complaints about Mr Ockley in that respect . . .” [August 1797 to Susan Phillips]

Finally, in mid October 1797, the move was achieved:

“Our first Week was devoted to unpacking, & exulting in our completed plan. To have no one thing at hand – nothing to eat – nowhere to sit – all were trifles – rather, I think, amusing than incommodious. – The house looked so clean – the distribution of the rooms & closets is so convenient, the prospect every where around us is so gay, & so lovely, & the Park of dear Norbury is so close at hand, that we hardly know how to require any thing else for existence than the enjoyment of our own situation.” [December 1797 to Susan Phillips.]

In a letter to Susan Phillips, written at the time of the move, the General drew the plans of the cottage (Fig. 2) and added the notes:

“Plan of our country cottage which one might call ‘d’Arblay’s Folly’. You will see that we have left all the doors open to give you the freedom of the house – which because everything is newly built appears twice as large as it is so that I know very well we shall be accused of being the two most extravagant people in the world.” [October 1797 to Susan Phillips – free translation.]

Since there is a scale of feet the plans have been re-drawn here for clarity and the notes freely translated. Four of the windows are marked for blocking up and this is explained to sister Susan:

“The new threefold assessment of taxes has terrified us rather seriously: . . . We have, this very Morning, decided upon parting with 4 of our new windows. A great abatement of agremens to ourselves, & of ornament to our appearance; & a still greater sacrifice to l’amour propre of my Architect, –”

It is most fortunate that, in addition to the plans, there are two outside views of the cottage in its original state, probably both were drawn by the General (Fig. 1). These show a very utilitarian exterior and it must be assumed that the General's contribution to design would have been entirely in the internal arrangements and the fixtures and fittings. The rest would have been dictated by cost and the builder's own knowledge of what was needed for constructional purposes. There were, of course, "extras":

"In being his own and sole surveyor, so many contrivances and alterations have occurred to him in the course of the building, and so many mistakes to rectify from inexperience, that I own I look forward with some tribulation to the sum total of the affair." [November/December 1797 to a friend, Mrs Waddington.]

The d'Arblays were faced with meeting their builder's claims for payment against the gloomy economic background of the 1790's:

"How peculiarly unlucky for us that we shall be forced to sell out at this low price of stock, to pay our workmen! They will have finished in about 2 Days and alas what hope between this and then?" [September 1797 to her father.]

"For ourselves, we watch the opening of the 3 p^r Cents with inexpressible anxiety, as we must then sell out to finish all our building accounts. We have wholly set aside all plans of fitting up the house, & are determined to try at introducing the new system of oeconomy, suitable to the times, of bare walls." [January 1798 to her sister, Esther.]

The rural interlude in their own cottage was brief for the d'Arblays. In 1802 Madam d'Arblay was faced with finding a tenant so that she could join her husband, then back in France. Later, following the death of Lock in 1810, their title to the piece of land was questioned and the inheritance planned for their son was lost. New owners over the next 100 years carried out many enlargements and improvements but there is a strong tradition that parts of

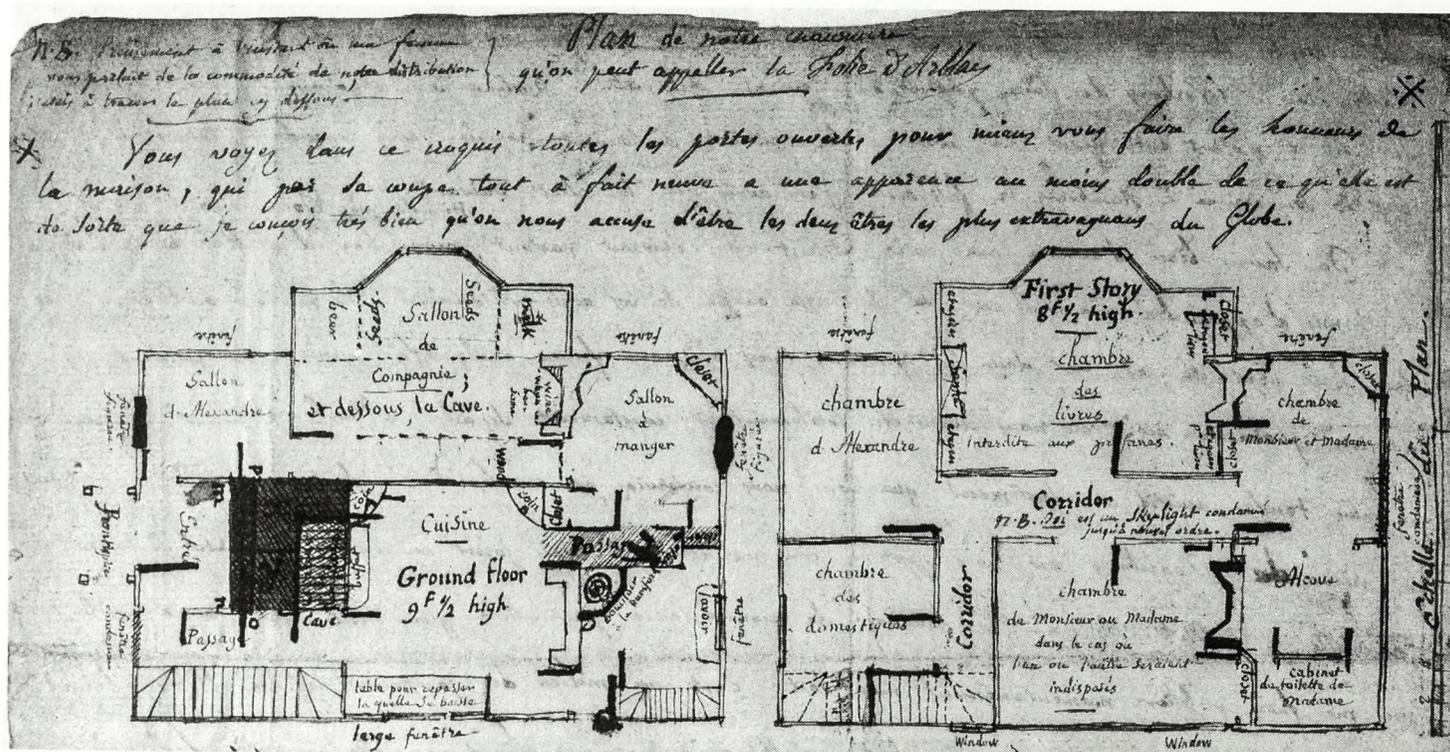


Fig. 1. Part of General d'Arblay's letter of October 16, 1797 to Susan Phillips showing the plans of the new cottage (Berg Collection, N.Y. Public Library).

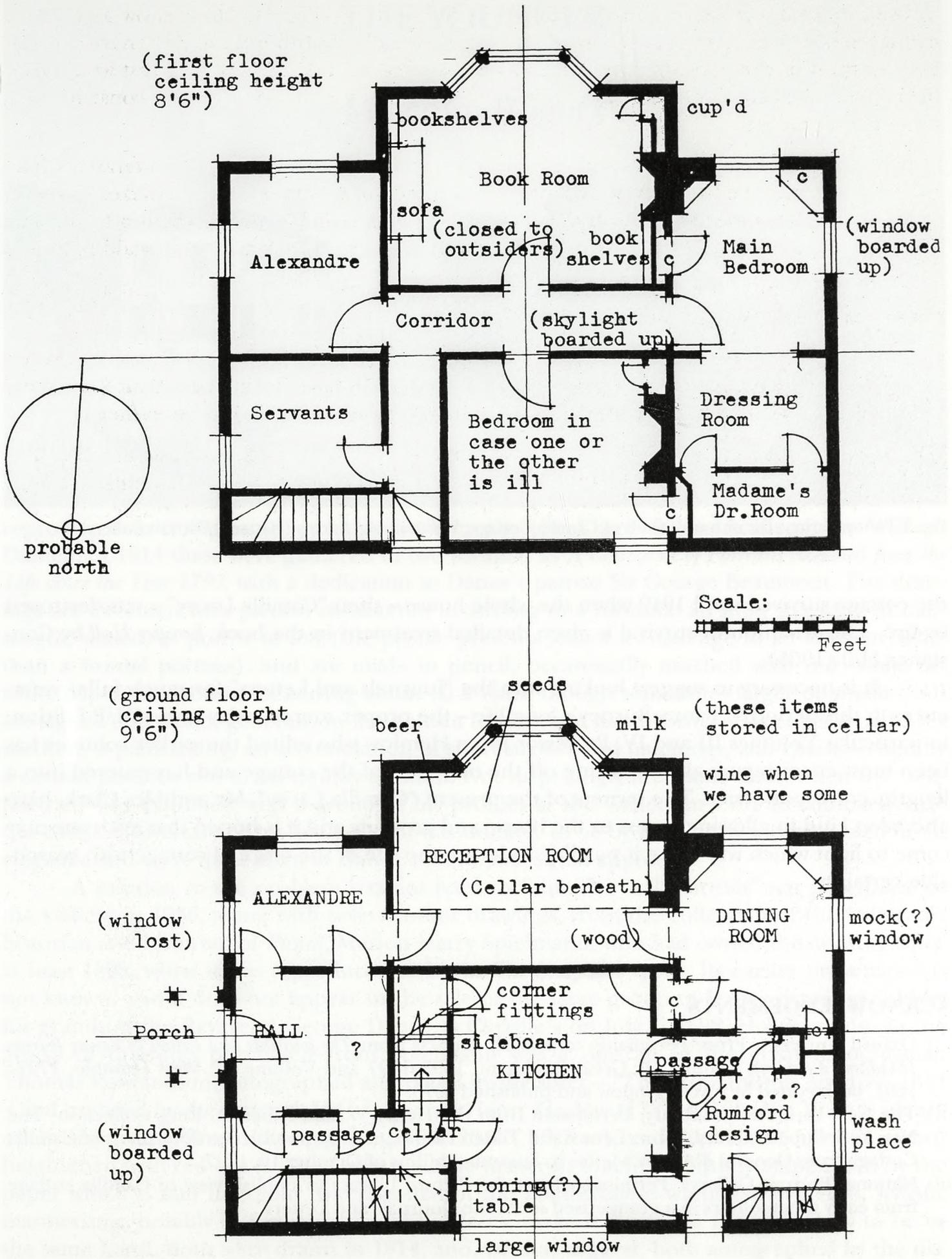


Fig. 2. Ground and first floor plans of Camilla cottage re-drawn from Gen. d'Arbly's sketch plan and with his notes freely translated.



Fig. 3. Fanny Burney, the entrance front of Camilla Cottage, Westhumble, Surrey (National Portrait Gallery).

the cottage survived until 1919 when the whole house – then “Camilla Lacey” – was destroyed by fire. This tradition of survival is given detailed treatment in the book *Juniper Hall* by Constance Hill (1905).

It is necessary to suggest looking into the “Journals and Letters” for much fuller references to this period of Fanny Burney’s long life – the proper source today is the OUP Edition, in particular Volumes III and IV. Professor Joyce Hemlow who edited the earlier volumes has been most encouraging about dusting off the old plans of the cottage and has entered into a lengthy correspondence. The owners of the present “Camilla Lacey”, Mr and Mrs Clark, have also been kind in allowing access to the house and grounds and it is hoped that evidence may come to light which will make it possible to locate the site of the original cottage with reasonable certainty.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- i) Oxford University Press: Permission to publish extracts from *The Journals and Letters of Fanny Burney (Madame d’Arblay)*, Volume III: Great Bookham, 1793–1797 and Volume IV: West Humble, 1797–1801, both edited by Joyce Hemlow and published 1973.
- ii) The New York Public Library: Permission from the Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations to publish the floor plans of Camilla Cottage from General d’Arblay’s letter to Susanna Phillips of October 16, 1797.
- iii) National Portrait Gallery: Permission from the Picture Library to publish view of Camilla cottage from early watercolours in a grangerised set of the “Journals and Letters”.