



THE
GEORGIAN
GROUP

Margaret Wills, ‘George Bowes’ “Little House”’, *The Georgian Group Journal*, Vol. VI, 1996, pp. 97–101

GEORGE BOWES' 'LITTLE HOUSE'

by Margaret Wills

George Bowes (1701 - 1760) was a rich coal-owner, with an the estate at Gibside, in the north-west corner of County Durham. He was returned to Parliament in 1727 and, once established there, he began to lay out his grounds with small buildings as focal points on the nineteen Gibside walks.¹ One such structure, only some 135 yards from Gibside House, was his 'Little House' or lavatory.

The upper floor of the building was dismantled in the nineteenth century, but its measurements can be taken from a plan of the gardens, made by John Dobson (1787 - 1865) in 1814.² Dobson gave the outline of a proposed formal garden to the west of Gibside House. He also sketched in a bastion at the end of a terrace walk to the north of the house, and the relative position of the Little House. This plan was used in 1989 to locate the remains of the building, where it lay hidden among rosebay willow herb over six feet high, entangled with brambles and saplings. Its use was confirmed by excavation of the cess pool in 1992; it was found to be eight feet deep, and pieces of pottery and shards of chamber pots were discovered on the floor.³

The building consisted of two floors, one above ground with the cess pit below it, let into the bank north-west of Gibside House. The upper storey of the building measured approximately 13 feet by 15 feet 4 inches. There were apses on the longer sides of the building to the north and south. The bank made drainage from the cess pool on the lower storey easier; part of the cess pool still remains, with four drains from the now vanished upper storey still in place (Fig. 1). A stone-lined alcove exists on the west wall of the cess pool with a paved floor sloping slightly

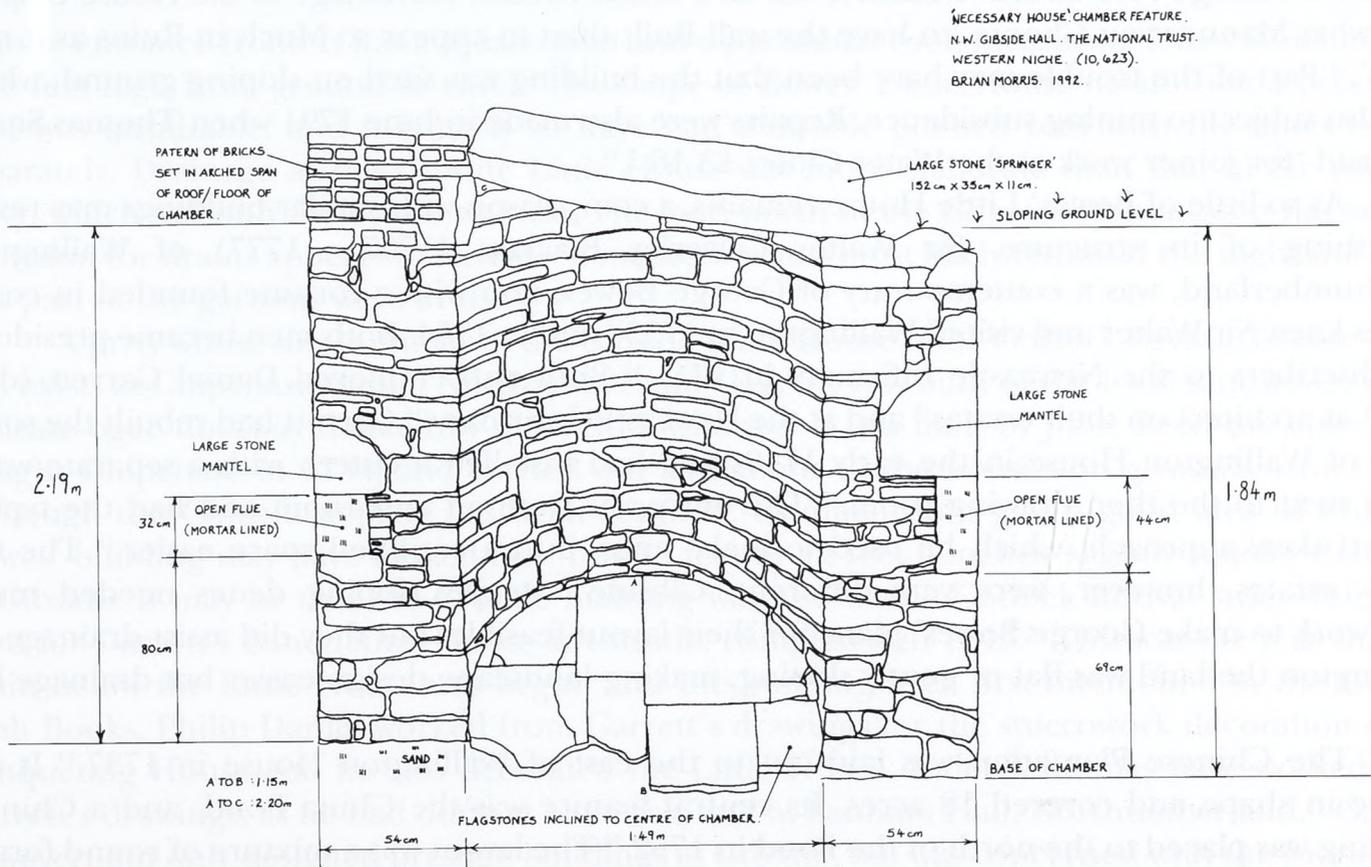


Fig. 1. Cesspool, Necessary House, Gibside, Co. Durham. Brian Morris.

towards an unpaved central area. There is similar provision on the north wall. It is presumed that there were lavatories on the floor above these niches and that there was provision for drainage from the vents at each corner.

The building can be dated from the Gibside Cash Books in Durham Record Office. In August 1745 labourers 'were leading limestones to the drain below the Little House'⁴ and work continued into 1748.⁵ On August 2nd 1746 Joseph Palliser, an estate joiner, was 'roofing the Little House', and the following October he was 'Wainscoting and hanging the Door at the New Little House in the wood'. At the beginning of November Thomas Brocket was paid 'for casting sheet Lead for covering the Little House soder &c.' The same month they 'were flagging the way to Little House' and then painting the Little House door and windows. Tar was also bought for the 'new spoots'. In July 1747 they were 'laying the new Little House floor' and a year later Joseph Palliser was putting finishing touches to the structure. In October 1748 the stuccatore Philip Daniel was completing the plasterwork. His involvement suggests that the building had a decorative finish and was not merely utilitarian.⁶

From the construction of the cess pool it is not possible to tell if the building contained water closets or not. In September 1746 James Watson, mason, was 'dressing Stones for Pillars designed for the Water Closet but afterwards used in the Bottle house...' Also in December 1747 'a piece of white marble [was] made ready for the Water Closet'.⁷ Bowes liked to be in the lead with new ideas and he might have preferred to install water closets. But the drains in the nearby Parlour Bank were a recurring problem. The labourers worked on them three times between August and November 1746.⁸ Later the Little House was the subject of a letter from William Newton (1730 - 1798), sent from Newcastle on December 10th 1759. At that time Newton was in partnership with his father Robert Newton, and had yet to make his name as an architect.⁹ Newton wrote to Bowes 'I have Order'd the Bricklayers to begin with the Little House, the Situation I hope will be Agreeable to you' and advised Bowes 'to build the wall between the Gardin & Passage'. He added 'I think it will be a Much Greater Advantage to the House Dispose of it what Manner you Choose, to have the wall Built than to appear so Much in Ruins as it now Does'.¹⁰ Part of the trouble may have been that the building was sited on sloping ground, which was also subject to mining subsidence. Repairs were also made in June 1791 when Thomas Smyth was paid 'for joiner work at the Water Closet £3 16'.¹¹

As so little of Bowes' Little House remains, a comparison with similar buildings may reveal something of its structure. Sir Walter Calverley Blackett (1707 - 1777) of Wallington, Northumberland, was a contemporary of George Bowes, also with a fortune founded in coal.¹² Bowes knew Sir Walter and visited Wallington in 1753¹³ and in 1754. Both men became presidents of subscribers to the Newcastle Infirmary in 1751.¹⁴ Both also employed Daniel Garrett (died 1753) as architect on their estates¹⁵ and at the Newcastle Infirmary.¹⁶ Garrett had rebuilt the south front of Wallington House in the early 1740s and had installed a cistern with a separate water closet next to the then drawing room.¹⁷ The entry was from an ante-room and had the typical Garrett skew approach, which he used to make entry into a confined space easier.¹⁸ The two men's estates, however, were very different. Gibside's steeply sloping denes needed much earthwork to make George Bowes' plans for their layout feasible, but they did assist drainage. At Wallington the land was flat or gently sloping, making landscape design easier but drainage less easy.

The Chinese Plantation was laid out to the east of Wallington House in 1737.¹⁹ It was square in shape and covered 18 acres. Its central feature was the China Pond, and a Chinese Building was placed to the north of the Pond in 1752.²⁰ The layout was a mixture of round formal lawns, straight walks and serpentine paths. To the north of the plantation was a straight grass walk some 44 yards wide known as Sir Walter's Bowling Green. A sinuous path led from this to a building nearby known as Sir Walter's privy.²¹ The privy (Fig. 2) is of brick with stone quoins and

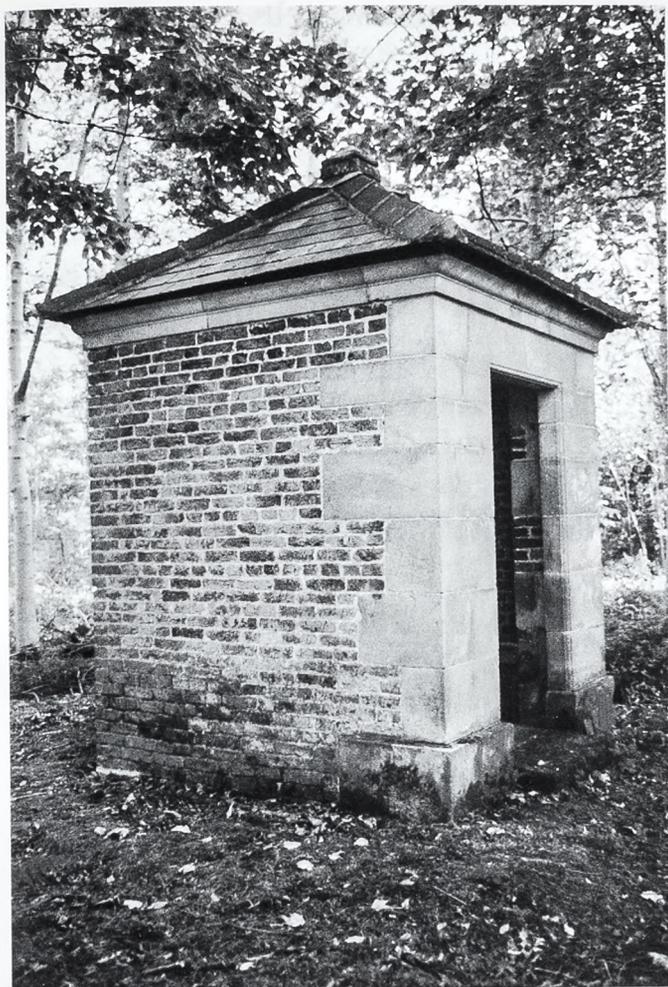


Fig. 2. "Sir Walter's Privy", Wallington Hall, Northumberland. *Alec Wills*.



Fig. 3. The Gothic Revival 3-holer privy at Chipchase Castle. *Alec Wills*.

a stone entrance front. It has a square plan and a pyramidal roof, measuring 7 feet 6 inches wide by 8 feet high from ground to eaves. The shape of Bowes' Little House meant that a pyramidal roof was unsuitable, and it is likely to have had a double pitched roof with the apses roofed separately. Drainage at the Gibside Little House was more elaborate than that in Sir Walter's privy, which was only for occasional use. The land north of the Chinese Plantation is flat and no provision for drains appears to have been made. Servants most likely removed the night soil when this part of the gardens were in use.

A privy whose size is similar to the Gibside Little House is the Gothic Revival 3-holer which still exists at Chipchase Castle, Northumberland (Fig. 3). It is built of the local sandstone, with a delicate ogee doorway flanked by quatrefoil windows. It was built by John Reed the elder, who bought Chipchase in 1734, and carried out alterations to the house and grounds soon after.²² Although the Chipchase privy has been restored, its dimensions give a good idea of what the Bowes' building may have looked like. It is 13 feet by 12 feet 6 inches, slightly smaller than that at Gibside. It may be that the Gibside building was also in the Gothic Revival style, which was used for Garrett's Banqueting House at Gibside, completed in 1745.²³ This was the year that the drain below the Little House was begun and the building itself first mentioned in the Gibside Cash Books. Philip Daniel worked from Garrett's drawings for the stuccowork decoration of the Banqueting House and he also decorated the Little House. Indeed, he may have worked from Garrett's drawings, as he had done at Nunwick, and at Fenham Hall, Northumberland.²⁴ Garrett, however, not only designed prestige buildings at Gibside, but was concerned with the foundation of the kitchen building in 1743²⁵ and designed the laundry in the following year.²⁶ He may have designed Bowes' Little House, and in the Gothic style.

A new water supply for the Gibside estate was planned in 1822 when the surveyor, Thomas

Walker, suggested that hard water should be brought to the house from two wells on a steep slope below the New Coach Road.²⁷ These wells provided drinking water, while the Octagon Pond supplied soft water for household purposes. It also meant that George Bowes' Little House would eventually be superseded when a more advanced flushing system and the use of siphons to prevent noxious smells would allow the lavatory to be sited indoors. In 1854, when his great-grandson, John Bowes, owned the estate, orders were given to the agent William Thompson for its destruction: 'The little building to the west of the house had better be taken down at once with great care & the stones and other materials which might be serviceable for a new lodge (which Mr. Hutt will probably someday build)'.²⁸ William Hutt was John Bowes' father-in-law, and he and his wife, the Countess of Strathmore, were glad to use Gibside as their country home.²⁹ New lodges were built to form an impressive entry to an extended drive leading to Gibside House, but it is not known if stones from the Little House were used. It does seem likely however, that John Bowes' suggestion was acted upon, and that today the stones form part of the two lodges which once made the grand entry to the Gibside estate.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the help of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Torday of Chipchase Castle, and the National Trust at Gibside and Wallington. I am grateful to Richard Hewlings for information about Fenham Hall from the Blackett-Ord MSS. I would also like to thank the Earl of Strathmore and Kinghorne for permission to study and quote from the Strathmore Archive at Durham Record Office, while the staff at Durham Record Office have been most helpful over many years. The Northumberland Record Office staff have also been helpful in the preparation of this article. I would like to thank Brian Morris for providing the archaeological drawing.

REFERENCES

Abbreviations: DRO = Durham, Durham Record Office, Strathmore Archive

NRO = Newcastle, Northumberland Record Office

1. DRO D/St/P6/1/3, 'A Plan of Marley Hill, Gibside and Hollingside Estates. Survey'd and Finish'd in the Year 1767, by James Stephenson.' The cartouche mentions the 19 Gibside walks. Parts of this plan have deteriorated and fallen away, and the ink in the cartouche faded. A copy (DRO D/St/P6/1/2) made at a later date, is complete, though not so skilfully delineated.
2. DRO D/St/P6/2/8
3. Cambo, National Trust, Northumbria Regional Office, Brian Morris, Unpublished Archaeological Site Record, 1992, report and 3 drawings.
4. DRO D/St/E5/5/5 (Cash Book August 30 1745)
5. DRO D/St/E5/5/6 (Cash Book, entries for the building of the Little House from July to December 1746)
6. Richard Hewlings informs me that Daniel worked at Duncombe in 1732-3 [Giles Worsley, 'Duncombe Park, Yorkshire - I', *Country Life*, CLXXXIV, May 24 1990, 119], Nunwick, c. 1745 - 52 [Peter Leach, 'A Pioneer of Rococo Decoration', *Country Life* CLVI, September 19 1974, 769] and Fenham [NRO, 324/E12, Blackett-Ord (Whitfield) MSS, *Fenham Journal No. 1*, 126, 129, 132, 142, 153, 159 and 161]; his plasterwork at the two last houses at least was ornamental.
7. DRO D/St/E15/5/71, (Journal, 31 December 1747, 338)
8. DRO D/St/E5/5/6, (Cash Book, 16 August 1746, 29 September 1746 and 10 November 1746)
9. Howard Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects 1600-1840*, 3rd ed., New Haven and London, 1995, 701.
10. DRO D/St/C1/3/31
11. Thomas Smyth was a joiner who worked for at least two years on the Gibside Estate according to the Gibside Cash Books.
12. Richard Welford, *Men of Mark 'Twixt Tyne and Tweed*, I, London, 1895, 310-316
13. DRO D/St/15/5/99, *Mrs Bowes Account of Cash*, August 4 1753, 'Gave Sr. Walter Blacketts Servts. at Wallington staying there two days £5. 15. 6'
14. Margaret Wills, 'One of its kind. The Newcastle Infirmary', *Country Life*, CLXXXV, October 10 1991, 124.
15. John Cornforth, 'Wallington, Northumberland - I', *Country Life*, CXLVII, April 16 1971, 856-858; Margaret Wills, *Gibside and the Bowes Family*, Newcastle upon Tyne, 1995, 26-33.
16. Wills, '...Newcastle Infirmary', *cit.*, 124.
17. Cornforth, *op. cit.*, 856, fig. 7, plan of Wallington House, probably by Garrett.
18. Wills, *Gibside and the Bowes Family*, *cit.*, 27, fig. 6, Plan of Banqueting House, showing skew entrances to small closets.
19. National Trust, *Wallington Gardens*, 1975, 15.

20. *Idem.*, p. 15.
21. NRO, ZWN/A4, Field Book entitled 'Plan of Wallington and Farms belonging Trevelyan, 1777', 34.
22. Gordon Nares, 'Chipchase Castle, Northumberland - II' *Country Life*, CXIX, June 21 1956, 1362; Paul Torday of Chipchase Castle observes that John Reed the elder's device of an acorn is carved in high relief above the door of the privy.
23. Wills, *Gibside and the Bowes Family*, *cit.*, 26 - 33.
24. For Nunwick see Leach, *loc. cit.*. For Fenham see NRO, Blackett-Ord (Whitfield) MSS, *Cash Book Dec 1742-June 1753*, 46 contra, 'By Fenham New Building, pd Mr Garret [*sic*] for drawing Plans £10 10 0.'; NRO 324/E12, Blackett-Ord (Whitfield) MSS, *Fenham Journal No. 1*, *loc. cit.*.
25. DRO D/St/C2/3/47 (9), Letter from Garrett to Mr Stephenson, agent at Gibside, 7 May 1743
26. DRO D/St/P6/2/2, 'Mr Garrett's plan of the new laundry'
27. DRO D/St/P6/2/9, 'Plan of the Lead Pipes to convey Water to the House at Gibside, Surveyed by Thomas Walker, 1822.'
28. DRO D/St/E5/3/21 (1)
29. Charles E. Hardy, *John Bowes and the Bowes Museum*, Bishop Auckland, 1970, 47.