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# THE AFTER-LIFE OF WANSTEAD

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Each year thousands of visitors to Cambridge follow the long, originally Roman, road from the railway station to the city centre. The most striking building on that road, and for many their first Cambridge snapshot, is Dunn and Hanson's Roman Catholic church of 1887. Georgians will notice immediately before it an early-19th century grey brick house whose plain exterior is enlivened by a magnificent Corinthian doorcase, and the more alert may spot the nameplate 'Wanstead House'<sup>1</sup> (Fig. 1). The building, which is now divided up as offices, houses the largest known collection of surviving fragments from the interior of Colen Campbell's Wanstead.<sup>2</sup>

William Wesley Pole, a nephew of the duke of Wellington, married Catherine Tylney Long, the heiress to Wanstead House in Essex, in 1812.<sup>3</sup> By the early 1820s his extravagant lifestyle had brought on a financial crisis and in May 1823 Wanstead was advertised for sale for its materials.<sup>4</sup> The list of them is mouth watering: a magnificent staircase with iron balustrade, panelling, chimney pieces, a painted ceiling on canvas, quantities of ashlar including the portico and pediment, many tons of lead, plain and moulded timber and two pairs of folding iron gates. The entire building, which was reputed to have cost £360,000, fetched only £10,000<sup>5</sup> as a single lot and the purchasers were a group of relatively unknown Norwich tradesmen: Stannard, Athow, de Carle, Wright and Coleman.<sup>6</sup> Stannard was presumably Joseph senior, a builder whose son of the same name worked with him and also practised as an architect.<sup>7</sup> Up to that time most of their business was in and around Norwich, but in March 1824 they signed the contract to build the new court at King's College, Cambridge, which was designed by William Wilkins.<sup>8</sup> John Athow was a stonemason who executed a number of church monuments.<sup>9</sup> De Carle was probably John, one of an extensive family of stonemasons with businesses in Norwich and Bury St Edmunds, who had worked on several of Soane's East Anglian buildings and for Wilkins at Downing College and Haileybury.<sup>10</sup> Athow and de Carle had also been the masons for the building of Wilkin's new gaol in Norwich in 1820, where a Stannard was the joinery contractor.<sup>11</sup> Wright and Coleman are less easy to identify – the only building tradesmen of that name in Norwich were bricklayers.<sup>12</sup> The purchasers began to recoup their investment immediately by selling two marble chimneypieces for three hundred guineas before they left the saleroom.<sup>13</sup> The conditions of sale required them to clear the site by Ladyday 1825<sup>14</sup> and demolition was rapid, ending with a thirty-day sale of the recovered materials which began on 7th June 1824.<sup>15</sup>

Apart from the outside doorcase the



Fig. 1. Front door, Wanstead House, Cambridge.  
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Fig. 2. Interior, Wanstead House, Cambridge.  
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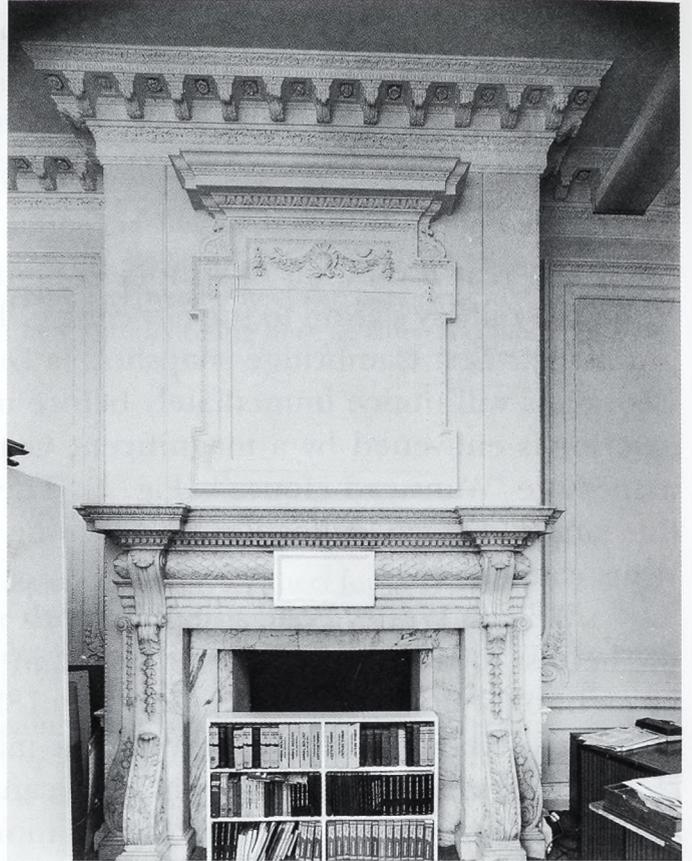


Fig. 3. Interior, Wanstead House, Cambridge.  
A. P. Baggs



Fig. 4. Stair, Wanstead House, Cambridge.  
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principal survivals at Wanstead House in Cambridge are two fully-panelled rooms (Figs. 2 and 3), one of which has a white marble chimneypiece, and the wrought iron staircase (Fig. 4). The building is now well maintained, but in the past gilding could be seen where many layers of paint on the ironwork of the stair were chipped. The house was the subject of a forced sale in 1826, which must have been almost as soon as it was finished, when its owner, and presumably builder, Richard Woods, a carpenter and builder, became bankrupt.<sup>16</sup> Woods had been appointed clerk of works for the building of the west range of Wilkins' Downing College in August 1818<sup>17</sup> and he appears still to have been working there when he undertook work at Queens in 1823<sup>18</sup>. Little more is known about him, but the list of the contents of the house in a subsequent sale suggest a man of taste and perhaps pretensions. He owned a table by Alexander Hope, a small collection of paintings, and a library which included Britton's *Cathedrals*, Ackerman's *Westminster Abbey*, Wood's *Ruins of Palmyra* and Adam's *Palace of Diocletian*.<sup>19</sup> At what point he acquired the Wanstead fittings is not known, but that he did is not surprising given his

architectural interest. There may also have been a Norwich connection, for he had amongst his pictures James Stark's *Bishop's Bridge, Norwich*, presumably the painting which had been exhibited in Norwich in 1812 and at the British Institution in 1818 and is now known only from the engraving in Stark's *Rivers and Scenery of Norfolk and Suffolk* (1827-34).<sup>20</sup> William Wilkins, who lived round the corner from Wanstead House, in Lensfield Road, was born into a family of Norwich builders and Woods must have known at least Stannard and de Carle of the Wanstead purchasers from their work in Cambridge.

Apart from an obelisk at Loughton in Essex<sup>21</sup> and two fireplaces at Chillingham Castle in Northumberland<sup>22</sup> nothing is known about the present location of other Wanstead salvage. Building was in progress at King's and at Downing in 1824 and it is tempting to speculate that some was reused there although much more probably went into the rapidly-expanding east end of London.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to Richard Hewlings for many helpful comments on early drafts of this note and to Norma Watt, of Norwich Castle Museum, for a fruitless search for the present whereabouts of Stark's painting of Bishop's Bridge.

#### NOTES

1. The house was identified by that name in *The Cambridge Directory for 1866*.
2. The rather sparse evidence for the interior was reviewed by Fiske Kimball in *Country Life*, Dec. 2, 1933.
3. V.C.H., *Essex*, VI, 1973, 324.
4. *Cambridge Chronicle*, 18 Apr. 1823.
5. *The Times*, 14 May 1823; bidding started at £1000, rose by thousands to £8000 and then by hundreds.
6. Charles Mackie, *Norfolk Annals*, Norwich, 1901, 221, quoting from the *Norfolk Chronicle* for 12 May 1823.
7. Howard Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects*, New Haven and London, 1995, 915.
8. Allan Doig, *The Architectural Drawings Collection of King's College, Cambridge*, Amersham, 1979, 42.
9. S.J. Wearing, *Norfolk Church Monuments*, Ipswich, 1952, *passim*.
10. Rupert Gunnis, *Dictionary of British Sculptors 1660-1851*, London, 1953, 125; R.W. Liscombe, *William Wilkins* Cambridge, 1980, 50, 234.
11. Liscombe, *op. cit.*, 238.
12. Piggot's *National Commercial Directory*, 1830, under 'Norwich'; White's *Directory of Norfolk*, Sheffield, 1836, 182.
13. Mackie, *loc. cit.*
14. *The Times*, 14 May 1823.
15. *Cambridge Chronicle*, 28 May and 4 June 1824.
16. *Cambridge Chronicle*, 1 Sept. 1826, where the house is described as 'newly-built'.
17. Stanley French, *The History of Downing College, Cambridge*, Cambridge, 1978, 104.
18. R. Willis and J.W. Clark, *The Architectural History of the University of Cambridge*, Cambridge, 1886, II, 20.
19. *Cambridge Chronicle*, 10 Nov. 1826.
20. Miklos Rajnai, *The Norwich Society of Artists 1805-1833*, Norwich, 1976, 87.
21. V.C.H., *Essex*, IV, 1956, 111.
22. Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England – Northumberland*, Harmondsworth, 1957, 125-6. The architects who worked at Chillingham at that date were Richard Cross of Newcastle and Sir Jeffry Wyattville [Colvin, *op. cit.*, 281, 1133].