



THE
GEORGIAN
GROUP

Michael Readhead, 'The Gothic House at
Richmond-Upon-Thames', *The Georgian
Group Journal*, Vol. XVIII, 2010, pp. 129-136

THE GOTHIC HOUSE AT RICHMOND-UPON-THAMES

MICHAEL READHEAD

The Gothic House at Richmond was demolished in 1938, and was virtually forgotten until the recent discovery of some photographs and a set of sales particulars of 1799. These show that it contained a series of remarkable interiors, some features of which can also be found at the near-contemporary Houghton Lodge in Hampshire. This article investigates the links between the two houses, both of which were owned in the 1790s by, and possibly built for, the widow of a London lawyer.

Houghton Lodge (Fig. 1) has long been recognised as one of the best surviving examples of a late-eighteenth century *cottage orné*. Beautifully situated by the River Test about a mile below Stockbridge, Hampshire, it was the subject of two articles by Christopher Hussey published in *Country Life* in April 1951.¹ Here he speculated on the circumstances that had led to the building of a house that he described as both original and consistently excellent, though tantalisingly undocumented. He was aware that the owner of the property in 1800 was a Mrs Bernard, and quoted an advertisement of 1801,



Fig. 1. Houghton Lodge. *Sophie Busk*.



Fig. 2. The river front of The Gothic House shortly before its demolition in 1938.
London Borough of Richmond upon Thames Local Studies Collection.

in which the house was described as a ‘singularly beautiful freehold cottage, finished in the highest style of Gothic architecture’ and ‘completely adapted for the reception of a family of distinction’.² Since then other documents have emerged which throw light on Mrs Bernard, though not, sadly, on the name of the architect or the precise date of the house.³ It is now also clear that she was the owner of another, now almost completely forgotten, house, the Gothic House by the Thames at Richmond.

Mrs Bernard was the widow of Maurice Bernard, who died in 1791. He was born in 1733 in Salisbury to parents who were the heirs to several generations of successful commerce and property acquisition.⁴ In 1750 he entered Lincoln’s Inn, and he subsequently

practised as a Chancery barrister.⁵ His father, John Bernard, was a Salisbury apothecary, from whom he inherited property in that city and in Devizes.⁶ From his uncle James Bernard, a London attorney, he also received a share (and eventually all) of a Tudor mansion called Boleyn Castle or Green Street House at East Ham (then in Essex), now the site of the Boleyn Ground, home of West Ham United football club.⁷ Through his mother, Mary, he was also heir to much of the property of the Greene family of Salisbury, whose wealth derived from a brewing concern on what is now the New Canal.⁸ In 1650 his great-grandfather Maurice Greene had purchased a 500-acre estate at North Houghton, which included a house by the Test called Denecourt, or Nap House,

which would later be rebuilt as Houghton Lodge.⁹ This estate had rights over Houghton Down, where the Stockbridge Races were run annually from 1740, and in 1777 the *Hampshire Chronicle* recorded that these were held ‘by kind permission of Maurice Bernard Esq’.

In 1761 Maurice Bernard married Bridget, eldest daughter of Simon Gordon, a chemist in Newgate Street in the City of London, who was on the livery of the Goldsmiths’ Company for over 40 years from 1740.¹⁰ Mr Gordon’s wife Margaret was the only daughter of Edward Mann of Chelsea, uncle of Horace Walpole’s correspondent Sir Horace Mann.¹¹ From 1768 Maurice and Bridget Bernard lived in a house in Norfolk Street off the Strand, and in 1782 they moved to No.12 Lincoln’s Inn Fields, the freehold of which Bernard bought in 1785.¹² This was sold to John Soane in 1792, and is now part of Sir John Soane’s Museum.

While practising as a lawyer, Maurice Bernard occasionally lent money to builders on small-scale developments in London. In 1766 and 1767 he lent

£1,000 to William Southall, who was building three houses near the Brompton Road on land leased from Sir Thomas and Lady Dyer.¹³ Through his involvement in financing speculative building projects he also came into contact with the young John Nash, perhaps during the building of Stone Buildings at Lincoln’s Inn, built in 1774–80 to the designs of Sir Robert Taylor, in whose office Nash was an assistant until 1775.¹⁴ In early 1778 Bernard lent £1000 to Nash for two houses on land leased from Sir John Rushout at the corner of Bloomsbury Square and Great Russell Street, his first important project; the Adam brothers also took an interest in the speculation, supplying the bricks and, with the Reverend Liardet, the stucco.¹⁵ But the houses failed to sell, and Nash went bankrupt and retreated to Carmarthen, not returning to the capital until the later 1790s.

In 1791, the year of her husband’s death, Mrs Bernard took the lease of a riverside site in the Petersham Road, Richmond, on a small copyhold estate belonging to the Croftes family of West



Fig. 3. The Gothic House from Petersham Road.
London Borough of Richmond upon Thames Local Studies Collection.



Fig. 4. The entrance passage at The Gothic House.
London Borough of Richmond upon Thames
Local Studies Collection.



Fig. 5. The Gothic House, staircase hall.
London Borough of Richmond upon Thames
Local Studies Collection.

Harling, Norfolk.¹⁶ This was prime villa territory, attracting both members of the aristocracy and wealthy Londoners in search of second homes within easy reach of the metropolis;¹⁷ the adjacent house, Midhurst, was leased to Horace Walpole's friend the Hon. Juliana Howe. The Gothic House¹⁸ may have been completed by June 1792, when Soane went to Richmond to sign the documents for the sale of No.12 Lincoln's Inn Fields.¹⁹ Described as a villa in 1799,²⁰ it was built of brick and stucco, with a crenellated roofline. The main front (Fig. 2) faced the river, its curved central portion flanked by two canted bays; the windows in the central portion were pointed, those in the side bays rounded, with Gothic quatrefoils above, and there was an iron balcony and veranda on the first floor of the central portion. To the left (north) was a three-storeyed wing.²¹

The house was entered from the Petersham Road through a Gothic screen between two crenellated wings (Fig. 3). From here a passageway led dramatically down to an elaborate ogee-topped doorway (Fig. 4),²² beyond which was a Staircase Hall, with two cantilevered flights leading to a landing supported on fluted Doric columns (Fig. 5). The three principal rooms faced the river and were finished, according to sales particulars of 1799, at 'immense Expence (*sic*)'; unfortunately no illustrations survive. They were reached from the landing and arranged in enfilade along the river-front. The Dining Room, to the left, had 'fluted Pillars, and rich Frieze and Ornaments' – described later as a Wedgwood-pattern frieze in relief on a blue ground – and an external staircase leading down to the lawn and riverside shrubbery. In the centre was a

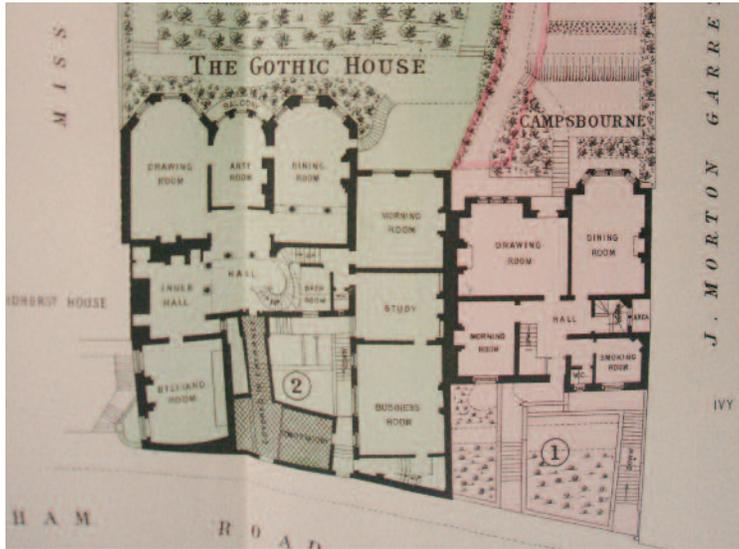


Fig. 6. Ground plan of The Gothic House.

London Borough of Richmond upon Thames Local Studies Collection.

Dressing Room (or anteroom), ‘elegantly finished and papered, with Patras [paterae?], Tablets and Etruscan borders’, and ‘Windows to the Floor, ornamented with variegated Glass, Looking Glass Shutter Pannels, Reed Mouldings, silver’d Ribbons’. Beyond was the Drawing Room, ‘superbly finished with carved and gilt Oak Leaf Mouldings . . . and a pair of beautiful French panell’d Mahogany Doors’²³ and more windows of variegated glass, this time with ‘highly finished transparent tablets’. All three rooms also had marble chimneypieces, that in the Drawing Room ornamented with ormolu. The main bedroom was above the Dressing Room, and there were other bedrooms in the north wing. The kitchen and other offices were in the basement, and were reached via steps from a secondary door on the Petersham Road.

After 1799 the house continued to be leased at regular 21-year intervals. The most notable occupant was Mme de Stael, who stayed there with her daughter Albertine for six weeks in the summer of 1813;²⁴ later lessees included Miss Elizabeth Budd, who ran a school for ‘young ladies of high respectability’.

It appears to have been divided into three *c.* 1912, and in 1938 it was demolished, along with Midhurst next door, by the local council, allegedly to widen the riverside pathway.²⁵ But the doors, chimneypiece, Gothic ironwork fire grate, dados, dado rails and other features from the Drawing Room, were bought by Basil Ionides, and were later incorporated into the China Room at Buxted Park, Sussex (now a hotel), where they can still be seen (Fig. 6?).²⁶

It is tempting to speculate that the architect of The Gothic House might also have designed Houghton Lodge. Both houses were symmetrically planned, and both had curious, rather exotic, internal detailing, notably exaggerated Gothic features such as ogee arches and trefoils (Fig. 7), windows with inventive glazing patterns (Fig. 8), mirrors with bevelled glass plates framed in strips of blue glass – the ‘variegated glass’ mentioned in The Gothic House sales particulars – and internal mouldings in the form of reeded ribs, those at The Gothic House tied with ‘silver’d ribbons’. Such ribs can still be seen in the spectacular circular Music



Fig. 7. The Little Drawing Room from the staircase hall at Houghton Lodge. *Busk Family Archive*.

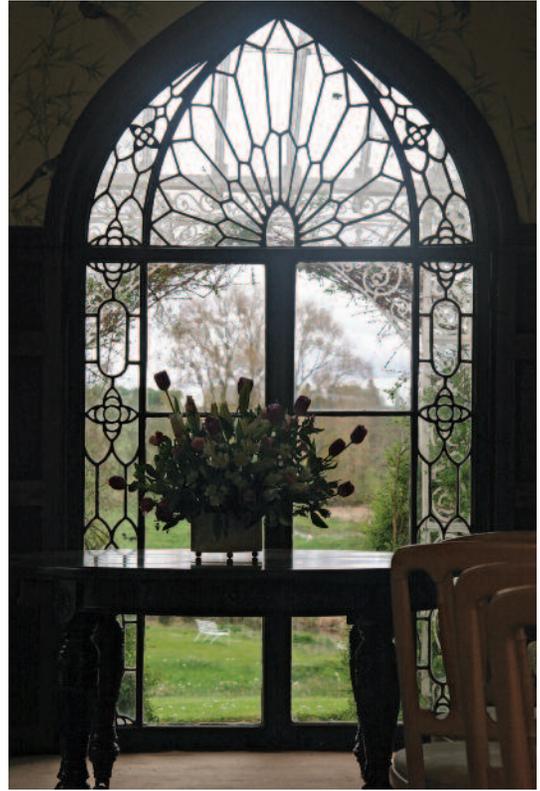


Fig. 8. Ornamental glazing at Houghton Lodge. *Busk Family Archive*.

Room at Houghton, with its ‘sky’ ceiling recalling that in the Saloon on the east front of the Brighton Pavilion (Fig. 9). But who was the architect? In his *Country Life* articles on Houghton, Hussey suggested that he was someone ‘of distinction, who was, however, working outside his usual style, showing that he could handle the picturesque and the Gothic as well as anyone when he set himself to it’.²⁷ None of the attributions he suggested – to John Nash, to Henry Holland – is entirely convincing, though we now know that Maurice Bernard had lent money to Nash. Another possible candidate, first mooted by Gervase Jackson-Stops in a report on Houghton Lodge in 1979, is John Plaw²⁸. Some of the designs in his *Ferme Ornée* (1795) were for

moderately-sized houses like Houghton, and some were for patrons in Hampshire.²⁹ Plaw moved from London to Southampton in about 1795, and his local contacts and stylistic versatility may have commended him to Mrs Bernard both there and, conceivably, though perhaps earlier, at Richmond.

At Houghton and Richmond the Bernards’ architect, or architects, created two of the most original, and most captivating, Gothic buildings of the late-eighteenth century. In its most ambitious form, as at the contemporary Fonthill Abbey, Gothic sought to instil in the visitor a feeling of the Sublime, quite different from the reaction which the designer of Houghton Lodge and The Gothic House was seeking to evoke. His aim, and presumably that of



Fig. 9. The circular Music Room at Houghton Lodge.
Michael Tozer.

his patron, was to delight and surprise, and to harmonise the house with its surroundings. Both houses were in some respects old-fashioned, with symmetrical plans and Gothic features such as ogee-headed doors and windows, battlements and quatrefoils, that recalled the work of William Kent, rather than the more ‘archaeological’ approach adopted by Wyatt and some of his contemporaries. Yet these features were combined with novel motifs not usually associated with Gothic buildings, and they introduced an unexpected note of fantasy and sophistication. The two houses thus represent an early example of the use of an eclectic mixture of different styles in one building, something which was to become much more common in the Victorian era.

NOTES

- 1 Christopher Hussey, ‘Houghton Lodge’, *Country Life*, 20, 27 April 1951, pp. 1190–3, 1280–3.
- 2 *The Times*, 17 January 1801.
- 3 From c.1777 until his death in 1791 Maurice Bernard was the owner of the whole of the Houghton estate. In 1791, following an agreement with his only sister Mary, Mrs Bernard was confirmed as the sole owner: Sir John Soane’s Museum (hereafter SM) Archives, Deeds 12 and 13; LIF/Bundle 3. In 1786 Maurice Bernard was the first named of the three substantial landowners involved in the enclosure of the common fields of North Houghton, and the only one to live in the village: Hampshire Record Office, Winchester (hereafter HRO), W/H3/24.
- 4 Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre, Chippenham, Registers of St Thomas’ Church, Salisbury.
- 5 *Records of Lincoln’s Inn: Admissions*, I, p. 847.
- 6 National Archives (hereafter NA), PROB 11/811, /847.
- 7 W.R.Powell (ed.), *Victoria County History of Essex*, VI, pp. 12–13. James Bernard, an attorney and antiquary, had previously negotiated the sale of a large estate on Jersey called La Hague, inherited through his grandmother Mrs Sarah Bernard (nee de Carteret): Ralph Mollet, *The History of the Manors of La Hague and Blanc Esperon* (Jersey, 1948), pp. 1–25.
- 8 NA, PROB 11/727, /942.
- 9 HRO, 44M66/F2; NA, C9/24/78 (Greene v Croke Kt, 1661). A fishing map of 1776 (HRO, 15M50/706) includes a small picture of Nap House.
- 10 Guildhall Library, London (hereafter GL), Register of St Bride’s Fleet Street; Goldsmiths’ Company, Freedom Book. Simon Gordon came from Dumfriesshire and was educated at Edinburgh University. The family lived in a house in Gutter Lane, near Goldsmiths’ Hall, which they let when they moved to Bath around 1771: GL, Goldsmiths’ Company livery list, MS 08592.
- 11 J.H. Chapman (ed.), *The Register of Marriages of St George’s, Hanover Square*, (London 1886). Edward Mann is mentioned in W.L. Lewis (ed.), *Horace Walpole’s Correspondence* (Yale, 1964), XXIV, pp 168, 173, 199–200, 202.
- 12 Law List, various dates; SM, Archives, Deeds 12 and 13; LIF/Bundle 3.
- 13 NA, C12/2355/4 (Bernard v Dyer, 1768); F.H.W.Sheppard (ed.), *Survey of London*, XLI South Kensington (London 1983), pp. 26–27. The site is now part of Ovington Square.

- 14 Howard Colvin, *Biographical Dictionary of British Architects* (New Haven & London, 2008), p. 1025.
- 15 NA, C12/142/27 (Bernard v Adam, 1785).
- 16 The former lessee was Lake Young, a London glass merchant: Geoffrey Wills, *English Looking Glasses* (London 1965), p. 158.
- 17 M. Batey and D. Lambert, *The English Garden Tour* (London, 1990), pp. 146–151.
- 18 Surrey History Centre, Woking (hereafter SHC), 2801/Box 1.
- 19 SM, Journal 2, p. 216.
- 20 SHC, 236/2/1.
- 21 William Bernard Cooke included an engraving of the exterior on the title page of his *The Beauties of Richmond* (c.1838), and it also features in *A Panorama of the Thames from London to Richmond*, published by Samuel Leigh c.1829. There is also a photograph of a watercolour of the house from the opposite bank by Gonsalvo Carelli, dated 1847, at the Richmond Local Studies library (hereafter RLS).
- 22 See Roger White, ‘Batty Langley’s Influence’ in *A Gothick Symposium*, Victoria and Albert Museum (London, 1983), note 28, illustration 7; B. and T. Langley, *Gothic Architecture Improved* (London 1747), Eighth Frontispiece, Pl. XXIV.
- 23 Christopher Hussey, ‘Buxted Park’, *Country Life*, 18 August 1950, pp 521–522. Hussey notes that the lattice on the doors, the dado and the soffits of arched niches was mahogany on plain mahogany, that the door frames and entablatures of the niches were enriched with very thin carved oak-leaf appliqués, and that the dado rail was of carved oak. Only the doors were left unpainted at Buxted.
- 24 The National Library of Scotland, The John Murray Archive, MS 42560, contains letters from Mme de Stael at The Gothic House to John Murray.
- 25 RLS, File on The Gothic House.
- 26 Christopher Hussey, ‘Buxted Park’, *loc. cit.* It may be that the chimneypiece now at Buxted, which appears to have no ormolu decoration, came from one of the other rooms.
- 27 Hussey, *Country Life*, 27 April 1951, p. 1283.
- 28 Gervase Jackson-Stops, ‘Houghton Lodge, Stockbridge’ (typescript report, 1979, in the possession of the present owners).
- 29 Notably his ‘Villa in the Cottage Style . . . in the style of Mr Drummond’s fishing-lodge on the River Avon near Ringwood’ (Pl. 20): Geoffrey Tyack, ‘From Practice to Printed Page’, *Country Life*, 4 February 2009, pp. 56–9. Plaw emigrated to Canada in 1807.