

T. G. J. del.

EAGLE HOUSE, WIMBLEDON. View from Garden.

from 151.

EAGLE HOUSE, WIMBLEDON.

BY

T. G. JACKSON, M.A., F.S.A.

THE interest attaching to the house now known by the name of Eagle House at Wimbledon, independently of such architectural character as it still retains, arises from the fact that it is a well-preserved example of the private residence of a London merchant in the reign of James I. Leland speaks of the number of citizens who had houses round about London, and no doubt every village or town within ten miles of Cheapside had, as early as the time of Elizabeth, several country houses, with their gardens, orchards, and paddocks of a few acres in extent, to which well-to-do tradesmen or merchants retired from the noise and dust of London, when their business could spare them. Very few examples, however, are left of the older houses; less numerous to begin with, they may perhaps have been removed to make way for those of the reigns of the later Stuarts and the Georges, in which the neighbourhood of London still abounds. Many of these 18th century houses still remain at Wimbledon, though their number is, I am sorry to say, rapidly diminishing; each as it falls vacant having its charming old-fashioned garden sliced up into narrow plots and divided by roads and streets, while the old house itself is regarded by the speculative builder as an encumbrance, which would not repay the trouble of adaptation to a reduced acreage, and which he levels with the ground as soon as he can. There is, however, no other house of the kind remaining at Wimbledon of the date of this, nor indeed, do I know of any one near London which has retained so completely the character of a Jacobean mansion of the smaller kind, and on this ground I venture to hope that the Surrey Archaeological Society will not regret their decision to pay it a visit.

Eagle House, to give it its modern name,—for I cannot find that it had any name in its earlier days,—was built at the beginning of the reign of James I by one Robert Bell, citizen and merchant of London, a member of the Girdlers' Company, and at a later period alderman's deputy of Lyme Street. It is not mentioned what branch of commerce he followed, but his business, whatever it may have been, was large enough to enable him to take his brother-in-law John Potter into partnership, and to require foreign correspondents and agents, for his widow, by her will dated 1646, bequeaths £200 to "*Thomas Fletcher of Amsterdam, merchant, who was my dearly beloved husband's factor there.*" His wealth must have been considerable, for besides his property here in Wimbledon and the profits of his business, he died possessed of houses and tenements in Leadenhall Street, in the parish of St. Peter, Cornhill. It appears, further, that he was a man of gentle birth and good connections. His father and his grandfather, both Robert Bells, had lived at Wimbledon before him, as appears by the Herald's Visitation of 163 $\frac{3}{4}$, where his arms are recorded—Azure, an eagle displayed argent, in chief three fleurs-de-lys or. His mother was Elizabeth, daughter of a Mr. Walter, of Thynden or Finedon in Northamptonshire. The Walters were a family of some distinction; one of whom, William Walter, came to Wimbledon to settle on the estate of his wife Katherine, the heiress of Humphrey Lewston, who brought him "*a convenient seate and portion of inheritance in this toune,*" as is recorded on the handsome monument which you have seen this afternoon in the parish church. It was at this "convenient seate" of the Lewstons and Walters, in all probability, that Robert Bell the elder met his future wife Elizabeth, who, from the concurrence of dates and the fact that both of them came from the same family at Thynden, may reasonably be supposed to have been William Walter's sister. Another branch of the Walters settled at Ludlow, where may be seen the tomb of Edmond Walter, who I imagine was another brother of Elizabeth Bell, and who was "*Chief Justice of three shiers in South*

Wales, and one of His Majesties Council in the Marches of Wales." He died in 1592, leaving several sons, of whom the second, Sir John Walter, became in 1625 Chief Baron of the Exchequer, and lies interred under a splendid monument at Wolvercote near Oxford. Of the family of William Walter of Wimbledon, who died in 1581, I have been able to find no further record except that of the baptisms of two of his grandchildren, in 1581 and 1584, which are recorded in the parish registers. But there appears to have been considerable intimacy between the Bells and the family of the Chief Baron, who are often mentioned in the old deeds in my possession, and several of whom received legacies under the wills of Robert Bell the younger and his widow.¹

Robert Bell, whom I have called the younger, who built this house, was born as appears by the parish register in 1564 and baptized on the 29th of June. The register records the baptism of two elder brothers in 1556 and 1560, so that Robert had the advantage of the custom of the manor of Wimbledon, by which on the death of the copyholder the youngest son was the customary heir. It is possible that in this way he succeeded to the copyhold site on which this house was built, and where perhaps an older house of the Bells was then standing. Of this, however, I have no information; nor have I been fortunate enough to discover the exact date of the building of the present house. The first mention of it occurs, according to Manning and Bray's *History of Surrey*, in the year 1607. They say, "*The survey of the manor in 1607 mentions a fair new house belonging to Mr. Bell, the initials of whose name appear in several places on the front of the house. The house is still in being, and was lately used as an academy by the Rev.*

¹ Sir John Walter had land at Wimbledon, for in 1621 he sold a copyhold plot of one acre to Robert Bell. An interesting account of Sir John Walter, with anecdotes, is given in Fuller's *Worthies of Shropshire*. His son, Sir William Walter, had his principal seat at Sarsden, in Oxfordshire. A view of "*The Seat of Sir John Walter, Baronet, at Sarsden*," will be found in Kennett's *Parochial Antiquities*, p. 683, ed. 1695.

Thomas Lancaster. On the ceiling of one of the rooms are the following arms in stucco:—

- “1. *In chief three fleur-de-lys, in base an eagle displayed.*
 “2. *The same impaling 1st and 4th, a lion rampant double queued, 2nd and 3rd two fishes hauriant.*
 “3. *1st and 4th two fishes hauriant, 2nd and 3rd the lion rampant double queued.*

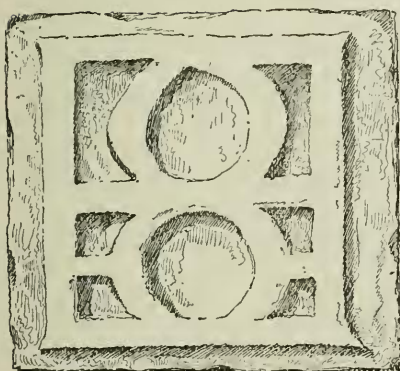
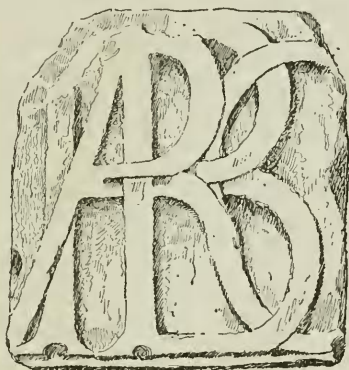
The colours are not distinguished.”

By the kindness of Mr. Plaskett, the present steward of the manor, I have been able to see this survey, and find that the date is not 1607 as Manning and Bray have it, but 1617. All therefore that we can say with certainty of the date of the house is that it was standing in 1617, and from other evidence I believe it was built before 1613.

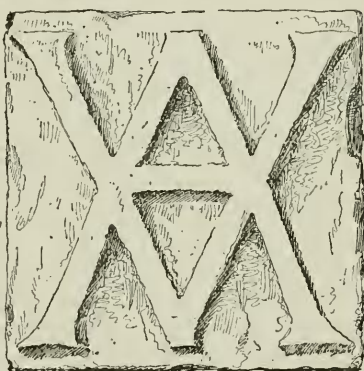
The brief description of it by Manning and Bray still holds good; the arms are still on the ceiling of the large room on the first floor, now used as a library; the first coat being that of Robert Bell, agreeing with the record of the Herald's visitation; the third coat, that nearest the garden end of the room, that of his wife Alice, daughter of Ralph Colston of Essex, the arms being those of Colston of Essex quartered with Maloryc of Walton in Leicestershire; and the second coat, in the centre of the ceiling, being that of Bell impaling Colston.¹ The initials which Manning and Bray saw on the front of the house, in several places, disappeared under the coat of stucco with which a subsequent owner covered the handsome red brick and ashlar of the outside walls; but when the back of the house was partly restored, in

¹ It is curious that in the third escutcheon both coats are shown incorrectly. The arms borne by Edward Colston, the great benefactor to the city of Bristol, who died in 1721, are two barbels hauriant with an anchor between them (vide Barrett's *Bristol*). Messrs. Nicholls and Taylor, in their *History of Bristol*, suggest that Edward Colston was descended from a branch of the Essex family, but it appears that there were Colstons at Bristol as far back as 1345. The arms of Colston of Essex, are given in Guillim's *Heraldry*, chapter xxxiii, and can be traced back to the time of Edward III.

1887, the stucco was removed from the two lower storeys, and exposed some little square stones spaced at regular intervals in the frieze of the entablature that marks the second floor level, and on two of these may still be seen, though much defaced by the plasterers who hacked the stone to obtain key for their stucco work, the cyphers of Robert Bell and Alice his wife. More recently, in



7½ in. 7½ in.



taking up some paving in the stable-yard, another such stone was found laid face downward, with a still more elaborate cypher of R. B. for Robert Bell, interlaced with A. C. for Alice Colston. If the rest of the stucco were removed, as I hope some day it may be, I have no doubt we should find many other similar stones, and most likely on one or more of them the date of the building of the house.

The excellence of Robert Bell's building is testified by its perfect condition at the present day. The walls are of solid brickwork, those outside varying from 2 feet 3 inches thick in the basement to 18 inches in the attics, while the two party-walls that divide it from front to back and contain the flues and chimney-stacks average 3 feet in thickness. There are three gables to the front, the middle one slightly in advance, with an oriel window over the entrance, and in the two side spaces each a bay window from the ground to the second floor. The back is similar, except that the middle bay window ran up from the ground instead of being cut short as an oriel, and that the middle space recedes instead of projecting. The sides of the house have each two gables, making in all ten gables, of the picturesquely broken profile characteristic of Jacobean architecture. As was to be expected in a county where stone is not found, and in an age when land transport was enormously expensive, stone was used very economically. The coigns and the lower windows are of Caen stone, but all the mullions, window-frames, and transoms of the upper storeys are of oak, inserted in brick reveals, with a simple moulding worked on the brickwork round the opening. Of these oak windows none are left in the front of the house, but elsewhere they remain more or less perfect, though often mutilated to receive sashes. The allowance of windows was so liberal as to remind one of the old rhyme about a more celebrated mansion—

“Hardwick Hall,
More window than wall.”

It is no wonder that many of them have been closed with lath and plaster, and however much one may have wished to reopen them as part of the original design, it would have been very difficult, had one done so, to find places for the furniture. The architect has been not less liberal in the matter of height from floor to floor, and for this we may give him unqualified thanks, for instead of the usual low-pitched rooms of Jacobean houses he has given us rooms of 12 and 13 feet high. None of the

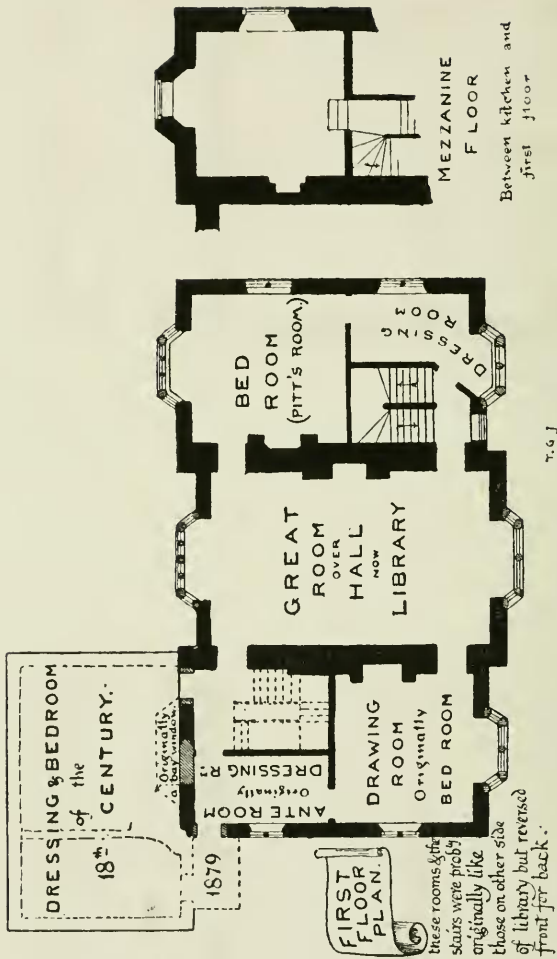
interior walls of the rooms, so far as I have been able to observe, are plastered; the bare brickwork, when not covered with wainscotting, having been no doubt hung with saye or dornix, or some other woven stuff, of which inventories of old houses of this date make frequent mention. In other respects the house was evidently handsomely finished within. As late as 1763 it appears by an old inventory that the principal rooms were wainscotted, and had high chimney-pieces up to the ceiling. There still remains a small piece of the original oak wainscotting, exactly like that in the coeval College halls at Oxford, and in the hall you may have noticed several pieces of old oak of Jacobean carved work, put together over the fireplace, which have evidently belonged to at least two separate chimney-pieces.

Fortunately, though the panelling and chimney pieces have all but disappeared, there remain four rather remarkable plaster ceilings which date from the building of the house, and are still perfectly preserved. They seem to me unusually good specimens of this kind of work, both as regards design and execution, and I would recommend them to the attention of any of my brother-architects who may be here to-day. The finest is that of the large room now used as a library, which measures 31 feet by nearly 20, and contains the arms above referred to of Mr. Bell and his wife. The design consists of ribs forming geometrical figures penetrated by a flowing strap ornament, and arranged so as to give three centre-pieces in which are the three coats of arms placed upon cartouches. A plainer ceiling of a very pleasing design remains in the room, now a bedroom, which opens from the library at the garden end. Both these ceilings are similar in treatment and have none but highly conventionalized ornament. The smaller room, now the drawing-room, opening from the library in the front of the house, has a very elaborate ceiling with an ornament on the ribs of flowers and leaves of a more naturalesque character; and a very good ceiling in the front parlour on the ground floor, under the drawing-room, has the ribs ornamented with bands of foliage and

fruit. These two ceilings seem to be by a different hand to that which made the former two, although in the lower ceiling the same strap ornament appears which is found in the library; but I have no doubt that, though perhaps by different workmen, they are all of one date and all of native workmanship. I mention this because of the vulgar error which attributes all unusual decoration such as this, as a matter of course, to Italian or other foreign workmen.¹

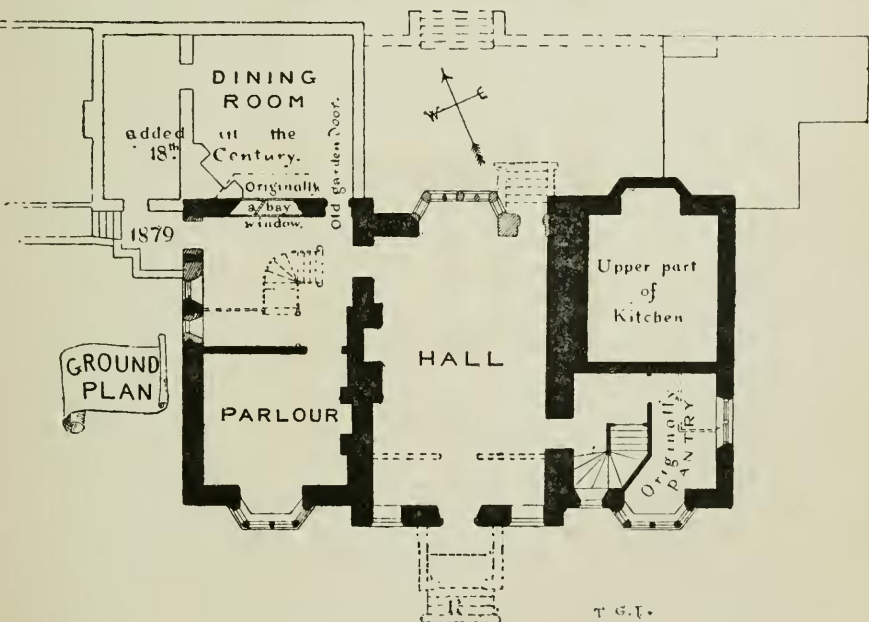
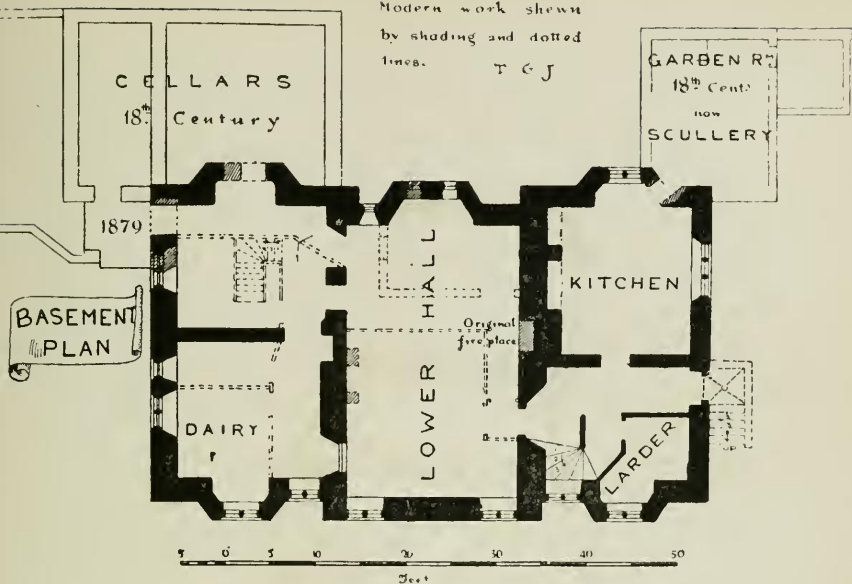
The plan of the original house was extremely simple; on each of the three lower floors there was one large room in the middle, from front to back, with light at each end, and rooms and a staircase on both sides of it. In the basement, which has the floor only sunk a few feet below the ground, is a lower hall in the middle between the kitchen on one side and the dairy and larder and other offices on the other. On the ground floor was the hall in the middle, where the family dined, with the front entrance at one end and a bay window to the garden at the other; and on the first floor was another large room, the present library, running through from front to back, which from the splendour of its ceiling was evidently intended for the common use of the family and their friends. Above, partly in the roof, are several good rooms for bedrooms. There is a staircase on each side of the house, the back staircase being still the original one, constructed with framing of great oak beams in post-and-pan work, like the staircases in an Oxford college, and with treads of elm. The best staircase on the other side has unfortunately disappeared and been replaced by an inferior one of deal, dating from the last century, when the block of building containing the present dining room was added, and one of the bay windows had to be removed and the staircase

¹ The fine plaster ceilings of the Library and Combination Room at St. John's College, Cambridge, which date from 1600, are very like these, and they are certainly by an English workman, whose name is preserved in the College Accounts:—"Payde also vnto Cobbe for frettishinge the gallerie and the great chamber, 30^{li}." (Willis and Clark's *Cambridge*, Vol. II, p. 260.)



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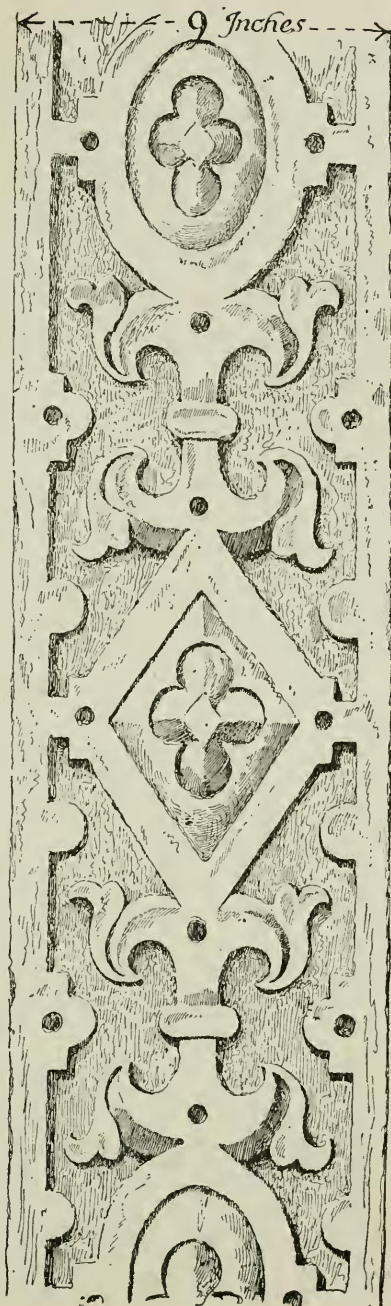
N.B. Original work Black.
Modern work shown
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lines. T & J



altered to make way for it. The original staircase must have been handsome if we may judge from the old newel post which still remains, doing service as a horizontal beam to carry the modern stairs, and which is decorated rather richly with a sunk Jacobean ornament.

This, with the addition of some outbuildings of which obscure traces remain among later constructions, was the original house built by Mr. Bell. To complete the picture of a citizen's country house of the period, we must inquire how much land went with it, and of this the old deeds and Court rolls afford pretty exact details.

A house like this, in the time of James I, situated in the country, would have had attached to it a considerable landed estate; but here at Wimbledon, even at that time, it is plain that it was only a suburban residence with a few fields belonging to it. By the survey of 1617 it appears that Robert Bell then held in all about 42 acres of the Lord of the Manor, but



they were scattered about the manor, some being at Shepherd's-hatch Gate, a good three-quarters of a mile away, and some in Callow Hill Shott, in the common field which lay between the Ridgeway and the Warpell Road. Attached to the house he seems to have had only three acres of copyhold, which he had put together by buying out some smaller tenants of the manor, pulling down their cottages and throwing the land together, and also a small piece of freehold next his kitchen garden. At the time of his death these three acres had grown to a yard land or 15 acres,¹ which so far as I can make out included the ground south-east of the house, with the frontage to Church Street, the house and garden and the paddock behind, and some acres on the north and north-west, now enclosed in the grounds of Wimbledon House. On this and other holdings, amounting in all to 23 acres, he raised £2,040 by mortgage,² from his relative Sir John Walter, then Attorney-General to Charles, Prince of Wales, a sum equal in value to about £10,000 of our money, which he probably required to build the house and complete his purchases. The cost of building the house at modern prices, without the additions afterwards made to it, would be about £6,000.

In 16 $\frac{3}{4}$ ² Robert Bell died at the age of 76. By his will made shortly before his death, after a few legacies, principally to servants, especially to those who had "*taken paynes with me in my sickness,*" he leaves the bulk of his property to his wife. There are also a few small legacies to his sister Katherine Potter and her children, and it is a curious illustration of the state of female education at that time, in the rank of life to

¹ This included the freehold plot. The copyhold land was less than 15 acres. This is confirmed by the Court roll admitting Sir Richard Betenson, Knt., in 1647 on his purchase of the estate, "*unde accidit domino de relevio nil quia non est virgat-terr.*" The virgate or yard-land varied in extent in different manors, sometimes reaching to 30 acres or more. Kennett, in his *Parochial Antiquities*, notices that it was only 15 acres at Wimbledon, in Surrey, which Mr. Plaskett tells me is correct.

² The mortgage was paid off before Robert Bell's death.

which Robert Bell belonged, that his sister and her three daughters were unable to write, and had to put their mark to the deeds to which their signature was necessary.

The widow Mrs. Bell seems at once to have let the house to a Mr. Berington, and to have returned to her native county of Essex, where she died at Colchester in 1647, directing her property to be sold, and desiring to be buried at Wimbledon by the side of her husband.

The property was bought in 1647 by Sir Richard Betenson, Knt., of Layer de la Hay in Essex,¹ who had another place at Willy in this county, and also owned property in Kent. Of him I have nothing to relate, except that he was made a baronet in 1666 by Charles II. The family became extinct in the male line by the death of another Sir Richard, the fifth baronet, in 1786. There has come in my possession, among some old letters belonging to the Lambarde family of Kent, the following, which seems by the character of the handwriting to have been addressed to the last of the Betensons, who, if we may judge him by his friends, was a lover of good company.

“Mr Dawes to Sir Richard sends Compt^s—begs Pardon for not meeting him at the Bedford according to Appointment—Did not Dine ’till Five & in such Company as push’d the Bottle about marvellously quick, that about 7 o’Clock His Humble Serv^t was very unfit for S^t James’s.

“Sunday. Warwick Court

“To S^r Richard Bettenson—

“Queen’s Square.”

In 1658 Sir Richard settled his Wimbledon property on his son Richard, upon his marriage with Albinia, daughter of Sir Christopher Wray and grand-daughter through her mother of Sir Edward Cecil, Viscount Wimbledon, who had gained his laurels in the Low Countries with “the fighting Veres,” and whose tomb you have seen in the parish church this afternoon.

Richard Betenson died before his father;² and his son

¹ Bartlett’s *History of Wimbledon*.

² In 1677. Buried in Wimbledon Church, in the Cecil Chapel, where he has an epitaph. (Bartlett, p. 77.) His father Sir Richard died 1679, and was buried at Chislehurst. (Bartlett, p. 144.)

Sir Edward Betenson, described as of Seadbury in the parish of Chislehurst, Kent, sold the Wimbledon property in 1700 to Richard Ivatt, Alderman of London, who enfranchised the copyhold part in 1705.¹ It remained in this family for three generations, and it must have been during their time that the house was done up according to the taste of the time, with the present door-cases, window linings and chimney-pieces, and also enlarged by the block of building containing the dining-room and best bedroom. This, though differing in style and partly hiding the old house, is a very good piece of domestic work of early Georgian architecture, fitted with rather fine chimney-pieces, and the dining room handsomely panelled up to the ceiling with oak. The Ivatts evidently took great pride in this room, for when the house was let in 1763 to a Mr. George Bond, it was expressly stipulated in the lease that he "*shall not nor will . . . do any injury to the wainscot of the parlour near and looking into the garden of the said hereby demised premises now wainscotted with oak.*" Attached to the lease is an inventory giving every piece of fixed furniture and every bar and bolt in the house, from which it appears that some of the rooms at that time still retained their carved mantel-pieces up to the ceiling, and that a good many of them were still panelled. The rent paid for the house and gardens and 15 acres of land, and also the "Rose and Crown" public-house, then yielding a rent of £20 : 8s. a year, was £116 : 8s.

Three years afterwards, in 1766, George Bond bought the whole² for £2,500, subject to Mrs. Ivatt's life interest which she commuted for £160 a year.

The house seems to have been frequently let; as each

¹ Alderman Ivatt settled the house on his son Murthwaite Ivatt, on his marriage with Martha, daughter of Richard Savage, Esq., of Dorsetshire, and Mary, daughter of Mr. Alderman Bowes. Mrs. Savage and Mrs. Martha Ivatt are buried under an altar-tomb in the churchyard at Wimbledon—*v.* their epitaphs: "Mrs. Ivatts died in 1770, aged 80. Relict of Murthwaite Ivatt, Esq., late of this parish." The house was again settled on William, son of Murthwait and Martha Ivatt, on his marriage in 1747 to Henrietta Halled.

² From the widow of William Ivatt, grandson of the alderman.

owner died his widow probably found it necessary to economise, and was glad to find a tenant. About 1758 it was occupied by William Lord Viscount Duncannon;¹ at another time by a Marquis of Bath; then by Sir William Draper, a soldier of distinction who is chiefly remembered as one of those who came under the lash of Junius; and in 1787 we find the Right Hon. William Grenville living here, the relative and colleague of Pitt. Wimbledon was at that time a favourite resort of public men; Pitt was often here, and tradition has given the name of Pitt's room to a bedroom in this house looking into the garden and opening into the library. Wilberforce was living till 1786 close by in a house still standing on the southern edge of the Common, and here he must often have sounded Grenville on his great Abolition Scheme which he was just then maturing, and about which he seems always to have suspected Grenville of lukewarmness. Wilberforce's house, where Pitt so constantly sought relaxation and society is, alas! now offered for sale, and unless somebody will rescue it will no doubt share the fate of so many of the charming old houses, its neighbours, which have been pulled down to make way for streets of villas.

Grenville was the last private resident here. He probably left the house on his election to the Speakership in 1789, and in the same year the house and 17 acres were sold for £2,300 to Mr. Thomas Lancaster, who made it a school, which it continued to be till about four years ago. Lancaster probably let a great part of the land for building purposes, if one may judge by the name Lancaster Place which has been given to a little street that runs by the east side of the garden. He was a friend of Lord Nelson who was then living at Merton and often visited this house. Mr. Brackenbury, who was so long resident in Wimbledon, tells me he has talked with an old man who was at school here with Mr. Lancaster, and who remembers being brought with some of his schoolfellows into the front room downstairs, which was then the drawing-room, and seeing Nelson

¹ He became 2nd Earl of Bessborough in 1758.

and Lady Hamilton sitting on the sofa; the boys recited their pieces before these distinguished visitors, and were rewarded with a half-holiday.

Nelson House School, as it then came to be called, was afterwards kept by a Mr. Stoughton, who built a large drawing-room at the back which I have pulled down, and then successively by Messrs. Stoughton and Mayer, Messrs. Mayer and Brackenbury, and finally by the Rev. Dr. Huntingford, my immediate predecessor in ownership. It is to Doctor Huntingford that it owes its present name; he had previously a school at Eagle House, Hammersmith, and when he brought it here he brought with it not only the name but also the eagle which now surmounts the middle gable of the front.

Considering that there has been a school here for nearly a century, it is somewhat wonderful that the house has been so extremely well preserved. In the course of time it had been somewhat smothered by modern additions, run up to meet the requirements of a large boys' school; but the house itself had been very little touched, and all that was necessary in order to fit it once more to the purposes of a private residence was to remove the school buildings and let the original building reappear. Almost the only piece of new building I had to do was the middle bay window facing the garden, which had been destroyed to make way for Mr. Stoughton's drawing-room. Considering that all the best rooms upstairs had been boys' dormitories, it used to be a constant surprise to me that the plaster enrichments of the ceilings had escaped the destructive propensities natural to British youth, who generally regard anything unusual as a proper object for a catapult or a "cock-shy;" but I ceased to wonder, when a friend who was here one day said: "*I was at school in this house, and I slept in this room, but I am quite sure I never saw this ceiling till to-day.*"