

# THE BATTERSEA MANOR HOUSE

BY

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THE story of the Battersea Manor House cannot be adequately told. A few details are mentioned in wills of 1630, 1645, and 1708; a map, several prints, and some descriptions in very general terms are available from the eighteenth century; in the 1770's two-thirds of the main building and most of the extensive range of outbuildings were demolished. Thereafter wild surmise gained currency as fact. But in 1912 the *Victoria County History of Surrey*, Vol. IV, published two photographs, and when, some ten years later, the remaining portion was about to be demolished further photographs were reproduced in *Surrey Archaeological Collections* xxxiv ((1921)), *The Sphere* (17 Apr., 1922), *The Architects' Journal* (10 May, 1922), and *Our Lady of Batersey* (1925),<sup>1</sup> Plate 16A. But apparently an invaluable survey of the surviving east wing made by W. L. B. Leech in 1914 and preserved in the archives of the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments<sup>2</sup> has not been used by Battersea's topographers. Very recently discoveries about the St John mansion at Lydiard Tregoze, Wiltshire, have thrown light on the general character of the Battersea building. It is therefore now possible to present a fuller – although admittedly far from complete – account of the house than has hitherto been available.

During the last years of its existence the house was commonly called Bolingbroke House. The name was not happily chosen. Henry St John, Viscount Bolingbroke, owned the house from 1742 and occupied it from 1744 till his death in 1751. Thereupon the property devolved upon his nephew of the half-blood, Frederick, Second Viscount Bolingbroke and Third Viscount St John, a youth of seventeen. The new owner was assessed for poor-rate till 1754, but whether he resided there cannot be said. (He did not marry until 1756.) From 1755, however, Francis Crump was assessed, and presumably occupied the property, and in 1763 Frederick sold it to the head of the Spencers – a first cousin of his wife Diana. By the longest possible reckoning, therefore, the house belonged to 'Bolingbrokes' for twenty-one years of a history that seems to have run for about five centuries, and, as far as evidence goes, was occupied by one of them for no more than the seven years 1744-51. Obviously the fact of the matter provides the best name – the Battersea Manor House.

The date at which the leading man of the village first had a residence corresponding to his status can only be surmised. But as early as 1303 there was a property old enough to need repair, for in that year John Coleman, reeve, steward, or bailiff of Battersea, rendered to the Abbey

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<sup>1</sup> Taylor, J. G., *Our Lady of Batersey* (1925).

<sup>2</sup> R.C.H.M., West London, B'sea Mon. 2.

of Westminster an account, in Latin, of his receipts and payments from Monday, the morrow of St Hilary (i.e. from 14 January) to Wednesday before the Feast of St John the Baptist (i.e. to 19 June).<sup>3</sup> His expenses included wages and materials for repairing the roofs of the *aula* (the residence), the hay barn, and the cowhouse. Presumably the *aula* disappeared when the later manor house was built, but it is not inconceivable that the other structures were incorporated in the later outbuildings.

The later house and its grounds shared with the church and the churchyard the comparatively small area of high ground that faces the Thames on the inside of the bend of Battersea Reach. Apart from a small westward addition when the present church was built 1775-7, the churchyard and the adjoining slipway down to the river preserve the medieval situation. To these, doubtless the most important three features of the village, the High Street led from the town-field gate by the present Prince's Head through the triangular 'Square'. The house stood a little distance from the north-eastern boundary of the churchyard, with outbuildings along the north-eastern and south-eastern boundaries of the churchyard opening on to a large service yard. What might be called the Home Park stretched downstream along the river bank to the ferry, which plied where Battersea Bridge now stands. The landward boundary ran along the present Westbridge Road and Hyde Lane, with the main gateway to the house and grounds opposite to the present Lammas Hall. Such at least were the main features at the time of which we have fullest information, namely the middle of the eighteenth century.

It is probable that the residence of the leading personality continued to be on the site of the *aula* of 1303 even after substantial or complete rebuilding. The main portion of this later building – the one for which there are evidences – had a ground plan in the form of a capital H, the cross-bar of the H being rather wide in proportion to the two uprights and running parallel with the line of the river. Such a plan is usual in a late-medieval manor house; it was, for instance, the plan of the manor house at Lydiard Tregoze before the remodelling of *circa* 1740-3; and certain conclusions may reasonably be drawn. The hall occupied the cross-bar of the H and may have risen originally from ground level to the roof. The eastern upright – the east wing, which survived with modifications until the 1920's – provided retiring accommodation, probably on two floors, for members of the family. ('Solar' wing is the technical term.) Its side windows commanded views down-stream across the home park to London, and it presumably had its own stairs near to a door opening out on the grounds. The western upright accommodated the service wing with kitchen, larder, pantry, etc. on the ground floor and a passage – 'screens passage' – separating it from the hall. There was probably a door – the main entrance – at the south end of this passage, approached by the main drive from the gateway already mentioned, and another at the north end opening on to the river front and the terrace.

The stages by which the typical, late-medieval manor house (1400-50) thus described was changed into the building for which there is documentary evidence cannot be traced with complete exactness. In 1604-5

<sup>3</sup> P.R.O. SC6/1010/21.

Sir Oliver St John – later Viscount Grandison – was described in contracted Latin, which may be here extended, as holding *unam domum mansionalem pulchram et magnam* – a large and handsome dwellinghouse.<sup>4</sup> Probably the biggest single change was the horizontal division of the hall into two main floors with attics, as appears in the eighteenth-century prints – unless, as seems improbable, this was an original feature of the building. Viscount Grandison's will, made in 1630,<sup>5</sup> left to his widow the use of

all the stuffe and furniture in all the roomes . . . from the doore that divideth these roomes from the Hall Eastward.

Evidently the rooms concerned were in the solar wing, and presumably the hall was still not divided horizontally. The will also mentions

my great Dyning Chamber and the withdrawing roome within that Chamber . . . my little Dyning Chamber . . . my lower Parlor . . . the Staire case . . . the lower Chamber and the roome within that Chamber.

Doubtless some of these apartments and the staircase were in the solar wing, but that wing – which was the main subject of Leech's survey – was scarcely large enough to have included all the rooms mentioned. Firm identification is, however, possible for 'the roome wainscotted with Cedar'. The room occupied the full width of the north-west end of the solar wing. Two windows in the north-west wall looked out on to the river, the fire-place was in the north-east wall, the door at the south-west corner was at the end of the main ground-floor corridor. The ceiling was plain. The panelling – 'mostly of cedar but restored at an early date with other woods'<sup>6</sup> – covered all sides. The horizontal zig-zags – the most characteristic feature of the design – were divided by pilasters (except along the south-west side), with half-pilasters at the angles. It seems unlikely that Grandison, who had been the occupier of the house since 1593, would have undertaken structural changes before he bought the property in 1627. In addition, therefore, to stylistic considerations, this feature – the most frequently mentioned room in the building – may safely be attributed to 1627-30. There is no evidence of book-shelves – unless the restorations of an early date replaced book-shelves by paneling; hence the room cannot have housed

all my books as I have Callindered them in a booke Alphabetically after every letter subscribed with my hand.

Three rooms on the first floor had ceilings

enriched with strapwork ornaments, the design being arranged around an oval central panel in the room next the staircase, a circular ditto in the next room, and a square panel in the room above the Cedar Room.<sup>7</sup>

On stylistic grounds these embellishments may be regarded as contemporary with the cedar panelling.

Doubtless a staircase was an original feature of the solar wing, but the stairs that survived into the present century were of late-seventeenth-

<sup>4</sup> P.R.O. Exchequer Land Rev. Misc. Book 198, f. 77, 2 Jas. 1.

<sup>5</sup> P.C.C. St John 1.

<sup>6</sup> Leech, whom see for details of pilasters, etc.

<sup>7</sup> Leech.

century design, probably commissioned by Sir Walter St John. The simplest presumption is that they occupied the site of the original stairs. A total of twenty steps was divided 10, 4, 6, by two square half-landings; the steps were about 5 ft 6 in. wide with twisted balusters and moulded handrail; the balusters and handrail were continued along two sections of first-floor landing; the heavy newels were square; against the wall was dado panelling with small pilasters at each ramp. Corridors and other rooms in the solar wing were also panelled, but the work cannot be dated.

The eighteenth-century prints show a westward extension, evidently of a residential nature, from the north end of the service wing. Its roof-ridge was rather lower than that of the main building; it was on two main floors with attics; whether each floor had two windows facing the river or three is not clear; according to the Crace map of *circa* 1760 it was large enough to have had three on each floor. Fairly obviously it was an addition to the late-medieval manor house, but there is no evidence of its date or of its use. The subject tempts to speculation. From 1648 Sir Walter St John's brother Henry and his family shared the house with Sir Walter's family. Was this a more or less self-contained portion for Henry's little household? From 1656 Sir Walter had a resident chaplain, a bachelor. Did this little wing serve as his accommodation? Dame Johanna St John's will (7 March, 1703/4) mentioned three times what she described as 'my own House'. The house cannot be identified elsewhere, and the problem is aggravated by the fact that Sir Walter was living when she made the will. Could this pleasantly situated, rather secluded extension have been Lady St John's private quarters? Sir Walter's son William (1668-1706/7) and his wife Frances (born Compton), a childless couple, clearly resided in the Battersea Manor House – or, at any rate, in Battersea. This addition might have suited them very well.

Quite apart from the untenability of the recent notion that Terrace House (Old Battersea House) was the St John dower house<sup>8</sup> and that Dame Johanna died there, her will's references to her 'own house' present a difficulty.<sup>9</sup> At the time she was seventy-three, Sir Walter approaching eighty-two. Does the mention of her 'own house' mean that Darby and Joan were living in separate establishments, we know not how far apart? Her will was made

with the concent & good liking of my said Deare Husband testified by his being a wittnes to the presents

After expressing her wishes about her funeral, she added  
howsoever I leave that to the descretion of Sr Walter . . .

Near the end she wrote – 'she wrote' is strictly correct, for the whole document is in her own handwriting, with an unsigned, unwitnessed codicil, and also various obliterations and interlineations that had to be authenticated by her grandson before probate was granted –

I desire if Sr Walter St John outlive me his old servants may be continued about him & that he may not be removed to Liddiard London or any other place from Battersea wher he has lived so long least it hasten his Death.

<sup>8</sup> See present writer, *Surrey A.C.*, LXIV (1967), 91-112.

<sup>9</sup> P.C.C. Gee 40.

These expressions counter any suggestion that there was any rift within the lute of their conjugal affection.

If, as is the present writer's opinion, Lady St John's 'own house' mentioned in her will was merely her own little suite of rooms in the Manor House, whether the westward extension or not, we have a few additional details about that house. She mentions only four apartments – which does not fit the score of rooms at Old Battersea House – her dining room, her 'chamber' (i.e. her bedroom), her 'closet' (i.e. her dressing room), and – most revealing of all – a sitting room. She calls this the 'guilt Leather Rome'. At that period gilded or painted leather was being imported from Spain and used as wall-hangings. In the same room were 'Chiny things' and 'the Thea Table'. Evidently the old lady kept up with the Joneses.

From the main gateway opposite the present Lammas Hall the entrance drive<sup>10</sup> ran for its first hundred yards or so between the kitchen garden on the left and the orchard on the right. Both were apparently screened by a wall or a hedge. The drive then widened out considerably; on the left, again adequately screened, was an extensive service yard; on the right a formal garden of exactly the same design as existed at Lydiard Tregoze *circa* 1700. Along the terrace by the river front was a line of trees, and opposite the middle of the main building a small landing stage with steps gave direct access to the river. The prints show no evidence of a boat-house, but there were numerous little docks and wharves not far upstream above the church. Doubtless a private gateway gave direct access from the west end of the terrace to the churchyard.

Two long ranges of service buildings and one short one stood along the western boundaries of the Manor House grounds, and doubtless included the 'Brewhouses, Bakehouses, Stables, barnes, Outhouses, and other Edifices, or buildings' mentioned in the will of Sir John St John, Baronet (3 July, 1645), which also mentions fish-ponds and a dovecote.<sup>11</sup> (Dovecotes helped to provide fresh meat in the winter.) On one occasion Lady St John arranged for a ferret to be sent up from Wiltshire; and certainly there was a rabbit warren in the home park.<sup>12</sup> The references to

Corne Hay Straw Coales Wood horses Cattle Poultry Coaches Chariotts Harnesses Carts Carryages and Implements of Husbandry and Stock without Doores

in Sir Walter's will (8 March, 1705/6)<sup>13</sup> provide obvious details of the necessities of the situation. The position of these outbuildings in relation to the main building is strikingly similar to that at Lydiard Tregoze, but one must not jump to conclusions. Both buildings were at least a century and a half old before any St John came to Battersea.

In the spring of 1742 Sir Walter's eldest son, Henry, First Viscount St John (cr. 1716), died. Certainly for the seven and a half years from March 1710 to September 1717 Sir William Humphreys, Baronet, Lord Mayor of London 1714-15, had been the rated occupier of the Manor

<sup>10</sup> B.M. Crace xv1/71.

<sup>11</sup> P.C.C. Essex 135.

<sup>12</sup> Taylor, J. G., *Our Lady of Batersey* (1925), 82, 316.

<sup>13</sup> P.C.C. Barrett 190.

House, but even while Lord St John was the rated occupier he seems to have spent most of his time at his West End residence in Albemarle Street. Evidences of the presence of St Johns in Battersea during this period are rare. Moreover, the fabric seems to have been neglected, for when Lord St John's eldest son Henry, former Viscount Bolingbroke, succeeded to the family estates and forthwith lent the Manor House to his friend Hugh, Earl of Marchmont, he described it as 'an old and decayed habitation'.<sup>14</sup> (Certainly it was about three centuries old, but various changes and embellishments had been made by about 1700, and the decay must have been the result of recent neglect.) After he himself had settled in Battersea in the summer of 1744 his wife's correspondence contained such expressions as

nos vieilles murailles ruinées . . .  
ces miserables reparations; ce qu'on raccommode d'un coste dans nostre  
vieux manoir tombe de l'autre . . .  
nous nous sommes occupés l'année passée a boucher nos fenestres contre le  
vent Nous ferons la meme chose de nos portes . . .  
nous sommes occupé a boucher les trous de nostre vielle habitation, pour la  
rendre moins froid cet hiver.<sup>15</sup>

Detailed information about the house during the twenty years after Bolingbroke's death in 1751 is very scanty; but in the 1770's all the premises except the east wing and a section of the service buildings immediately to the east of the church were demolished. What had been the east façade of the solar wing now had to be regarded as the main front. The exterior was stuccoed, making recognition of earlier details difficult; a circular bay was added to a ground-floor window; a columned portico was added to what had now become the front door; two heavy projecting chimneys and other details are difficult to reconcile with the eighteenth-century prints; and internally the premises were adapted for use as offices. The disappearance of most of the building gave free run to the late-eighteenth-century fiction that the house had had forty – even fifty – rooms on a floor. (Sir Walter had been assessed for tax on twenty-three hearths, which agrees fairly closely with the evidence of the chimneys and windows in the prints.) Such was the situation at the time of Leech's survey.

When the last portions of the Manor House were demolished in the 1920's, to make way for an extension of the flour mill, the cedar panelling and one of the strapwork ceilings went to Philadelphia. (The fate of the other two ceilings is unknown.) The oak staircase was also preserved, and Aldwick Place, near Bognor, the new home of Mr and Mrs Rowland Rank, was built round it. Here, as Mrs Rank writes, its

panels and two wide half-landings, and easy treads, and great width [were]  
a delightful and unusual feature of our new home

as is abundantly proved by a surviving photograph. In 1947 the house was sold, and at a later date it stood unoccupied for a long time, during which the balusters were broken by hooligans and disappeared without trace. In 1962 the house was demolished, but Mrs Rank obtained the

<sup>14</sup> *Marchmont Papers*, II, (1831), 288.

<sup>15</sup> *Letters of Lady Bolingbroke to . . . Countess of Denbigh* (Historical Manuscripts Commission, 1911), 116-9 *passim*.

remains of the staircase from the demolition contractor, and they are now stored at her home near Chichester. Perhaps there still is a future for them.

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