

LORD RANELAGH'S HOUSE IN CHELSEA

An Unrecorded Work by Sir Christopher Wren

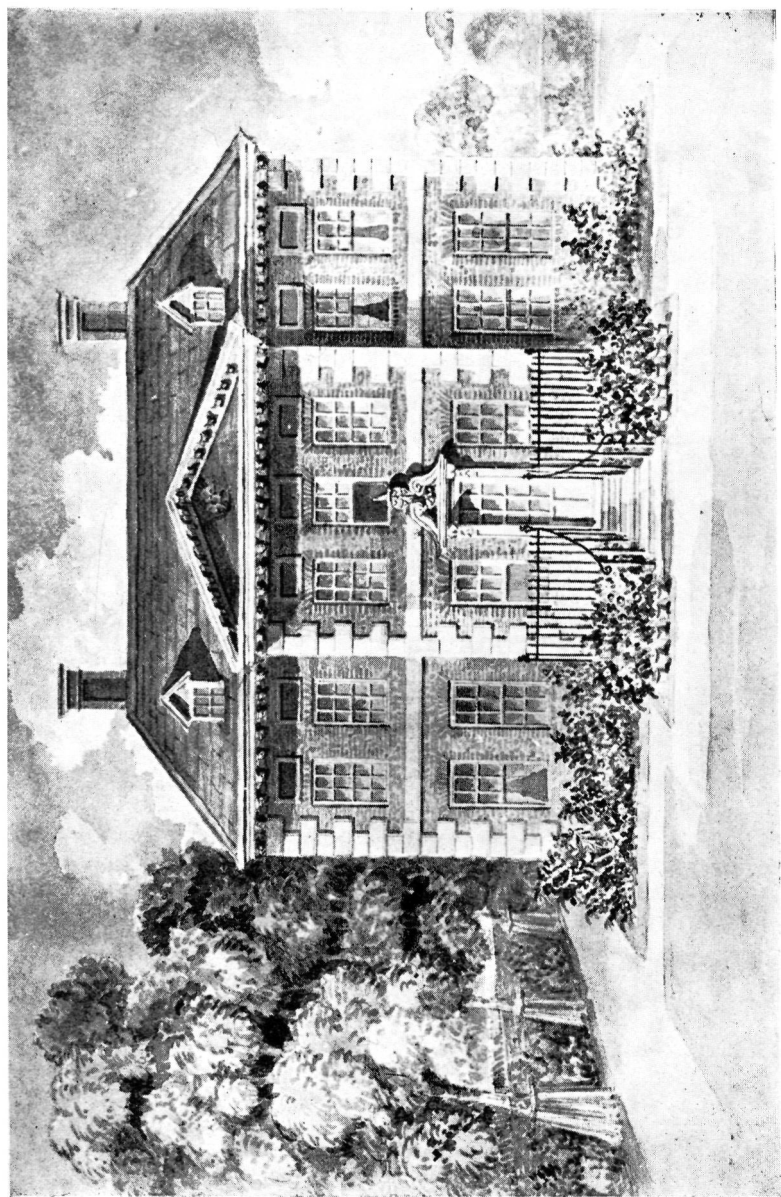
BY

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SINCE there were no protests at the demolition of the Earl of Ranelagh's house in Chelsea over a century ago, it might be supposed that the building was devoid of any remarkable features, yet there can be little doubt that the building was designed by Sir Christopher Wren, and indeed constituted an interesting example of his domestic architecture. Moreover the mansion, which stood in the gardens on the east side of the Royal Hospital still bearing Lord Ranelagh's name, had an unusual history.

Though his maternal uncle Robert Boyle, the famous scientist, lived at Little Chelsea, Lord Ranelagh was not associated with the locality until the end of 1685, when upon his being appointed Paymaster-General he thereby became *ex-officio* Treasurer of the Royal Hospital, then still in course of construction. By virtue of his office he was provided with a residence in the Tilt Yard at Whitehall, but as this consisted only of two office rooms with chimneys and a closet next St. James's Park, and a lodging room without a chimney, it is not surprising that he should have chosen to take over an apartment in the Hospital that had been intended for his deputy. These lodgings were only large enough for "a small family," and quite unsuitable as permanent quarters for the Paymaster, so about 1688 work was started on a small but attractive house for him on the east side of the



SOUTH-WEST VIEW OF RANELAGH HOUSE.

N.B.—This has been reproduced in the current volume of the Wren Society, Vol. 12 (1935).

Hospital. This building was completed before March, 1691, when Queen Mary honoured the Paymaster by dining with him there, and 14 years later was described by John Bowack, the Writing Master of Westminster School, as being

“not large but very Convenient, and may well be call'd a Cabinet. It stands a good distance from the Thames, near the Middle of his Gardens. In finishing the whole his Lordship has spar'd neither Labour nor Cost; the very Greenhouses and Stables (adorn'd with Festoons, Urns, etc.) have an Air of Grandeur not to be seen in many Princes Pallaces.”

Eighteenth-century prints and drawings show that Ranelagh House, as it came to be called, bore a strong resemblance to the Hospital buildings, and was obviously designed to harmonize with them. It consisted of two storeys and an attic with dormer windows, and had stone quoins, a stone string course between the windows of the ground and first floors, and a bold eaves cornice of wood. The principal, or south-west elevation, overlooking the south terrace of the Hospital, had a frontage of sixty feet. The advanced centre, which was pedimented, had as its main feature a doorway approached by a handsome flight of stone steps with an iron handrail.

Internally the house was equally fine, “all the rooms,” according to an anonymous writer's account of 1691, “being wainscotted with Norway oak, and all the chimneys adorned with carving as in the council-chamber in Chelsea College.” The staircase was painted by Henry Cooke, who in 1688-90 was associated with Verrio in completing the mural painting in the Great Hall of the Hospital. Lord Ranelagh subsequently filled his house with a wonderful collection of pictures by well-known artists; some account of which, apparently transcribed from the sale catalogue, was given in 1731 by George Vertue. The latter attributed the carving in the house to Grinling Gibbons, but it seems almost certain that some of it had been done by William Emmett, one of the two carvers employed by Wren

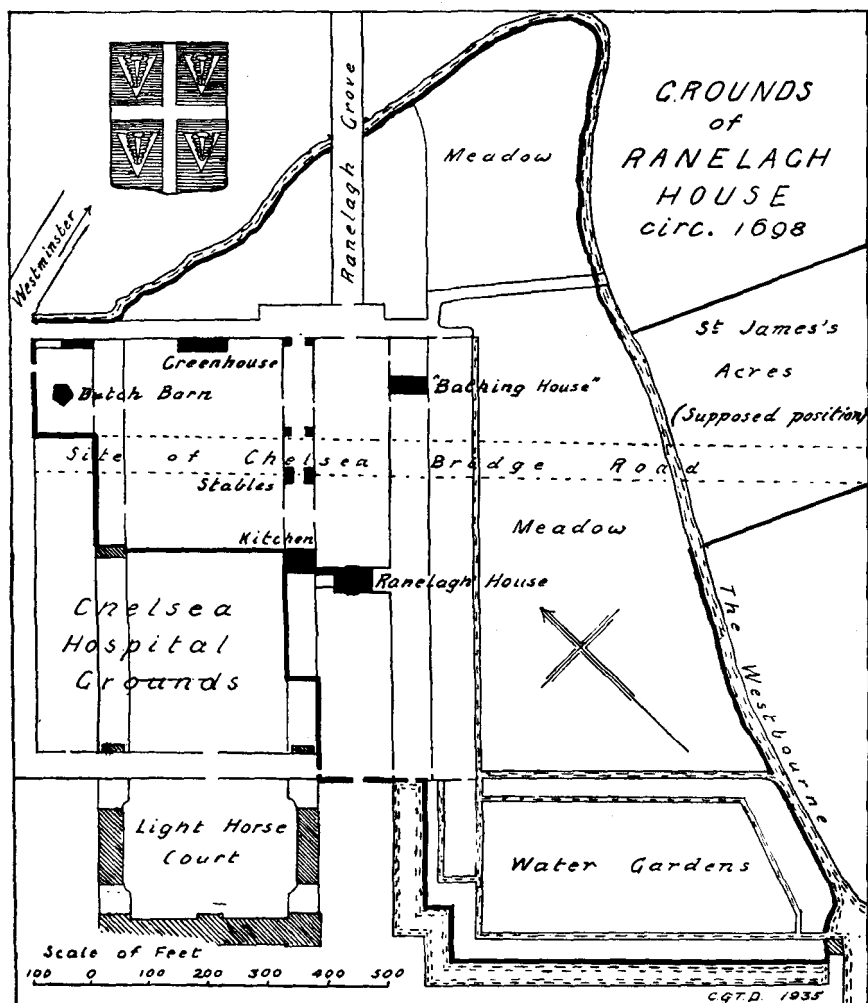
at Chelsea Hospital. Thus an abstract of the Chelsea Works Accounts submitted to the Treasury shows that £150 was paid to Emmett for work done in 1688-89, exclusive of what is still preserved in the Hospital or can be otherwise accounted for; and there are strong grounds for presuming that the carvings in question were for Ranelagh House.

Lord Ranelagh always maintained that his house in Chelsea had been built at his expense, but this is not borne out by the evidence. In the first place it was not until April, 1690, when the building was nearing completion, that the site was leased to the Paymaster, and it is scarcely likely that he would have sunk his own money in building on land that might never have become his own property. Again, the expenditure on the Hospital was abnormally heavy during 1688-89; and an analysis of the abstracts supplied to the Treasury of the payments to individual contractors shows that about £10,000 cannot be accounted for except on the supposition that it was applied in building an official residence for the Treasurer of the Hospital. The Works Accounts which would have settled this point are unfortunately missing, but a draft account for the period 1692-1702, that has been accidentally preserved, indicates that many of the outbuildings at Ranelagh House were either built or altered by contractors working at the Hospital, and the cost included in the expenditure of that institution.

The missing works accounts are known to have been certified by Wren, so if, as seems certain, Ranelagh House was built at the public expense, he must have been the architect. Some hitherto unidentified drawings in the Wren Society's collection answer in many respects to the description given above, and Mr. Arthur Bolton is of the opinion that they represent a projected design that was subsequently modified, and belong to an early phase of Wren's architectural career.¹

The means by which Lord Ranelagh gained possession

of this fine house have been ascertained from the Land Revenue and Treasury Warrant Books in the Public



Office, where also will be found the accounts relating to Chelsea Hospital which have been referred to above. The Paymaster first obtained a 61 year lease of the

house and about $7\frac{1}{2}$ acres of land in 1690, on the grounds that he had

“for these 4 years past had ye care of Overseeing and building of Chelsea Hospitall, & never having rec^d any profit for ye same,” and also because he had planted an orchard there at his own charge. Three years later he secured the lease of a further 15 acres of Hospital land, or, with his previous holding, about one-third of the property belonging to that Institution. In 1696, when he married for the second time and desired to make a settlement in his family, he had the effrontery to approach William III, stating

“That y^r Pet^r hath been foole enough to lay out and expend upon the said Landes more money then would have bought the inheritance of them att the Rate of 300: yeares purchase. And the said Landes, by the Improvem^{ts} he hath made thereon, are besides a great and a constant yearely charge to him. Y^r Pet^r therefore humbly prayes your Ma^{tie} To grant him the inheritance of the said landes under the Rent of 5^l a yeare.”

The property in question comprised the greater part of the site of Chelsea Barracks and the present Ranelagh Gardens, besides a portion of the grounds between the Hospital buildings and the Thames. Its alienation was obviously most detrimental to the interests of the institution of which Lord Ranelagh by virtue of his office should have been the principal guardian, but that consideration did not deter him. A 99 year lease did not satisfy his greed, and the following year, adroitly changing his ground, he submitted a fresh petition to the King, claiming that he was

“a great Sufferer by the late warr in Ireland, having lost near Twelve Thousand poundes of his Rents, and his Castles of Roscommon and Athlone being utterly ruined and destroyed. His mansion house, alsoe, in Dublin being pulled downe in order to make use of the Timbers for the Building a Masse House there.”

He therefore asked for

“Five hundred poundes a yeare out of the forfeitures remaining undisposed in the Countyes of East Meath and West Meath and in the Province of Connaught, And . . . the Inheritance of his

house att Chelsea with the three and Twenty Acres thereunto belonging already granted to him for Ninety Nine Yeares. . . .”

This request was “respite till His Majesty’s return” from abroad, but eventually produced the desired result. Besides the Chelsea Hospital property, Lord Ranelagh was also granted five acres of Crown land which though situated in the adjoining Manor of Ebury appears to have formed part of the Bailiwick of St. James. The Paymaster spent much money, whether his own is not so certain, in developing his gardens, which were beautified by a number of interesting detached buildings. They were a “Dutch barn,” a five-sided structure; a large Greenhouse that afterwards became known as King William’s Dining Room, perhaps because the King was entertained there on his visit in 1700; a “Bathing house,” a precursor of the modern swimming-pool; an “avery of birds”; and a summerhouse with a ceiling decorated by “a curious painter,” “Mons Berchett,” who was one of five competitors for painting the cupola at St. Paul’s. The gardens were undoubtedly very fine, and attracted the favourable notice of a travelled German visitor, von Uffenbach, in 1710.

Lord Ranelagh was called upon to justify his administration of the army finances in 1702, and after a protracted enquiry was charged with peculation. Although “a bold man and very happy in Jests and Repartees,” who had “often turned the humour of the House of Commons when they have designed to have been very severe,” he did not succeed in placating them on this occasion and was expelled from the House. He spent the remaining years of his life in unravelling the tangled skein of his accounts and writing begging letters to his friends and prominent officials, while, to use his own expression, he laboured “with a great many debts upon my back.” Upon his death in 1712, Ranelagh House passed to his daughter, Lady Catherine Jones, who had the honour of entertaining George I there on the 22nd August, 1715; an occasion rendered memorable by

Handel playing his Water Music for the first time. Lady Catherine died in 1740, but ten years previously her estate had been vested in Trustees charged with its sale to satisfy debts due from its late owner to the Crown.

The property was sold in ten lots in 1733. Ranelagh House was bought for £3200 by a speculative builder who, some years later, in association with Lacey, David Garrick's co-patentee of Drury Lane Theatre, built the famous "Rotundo or Musick Theater" in the garden. When opened as a place of entertainment in 1742, the old house became merely the entrance-lobby to the Rotunda, with which it was shortly afterwards connected by a corridor. The later history of the Gardens has been related by W. Wroth and Beresford Chancellor, but it may be mentioned here that in 1805, two years after the last entertainment had been given, orders were issued for the demolition of both these buildings. The site was subsequently repurchased for the Royal Hospital, and now forms part of the grounds. Not a trace remains of Ranelagh House—indeed some elm trees are growing on the site—and so completely has it been forgotten that its position is incorrectly marked upon the large scale map of the Ordnance Survey.

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Ground plot of Chelsea Hospital, engraved by John Sturt, circ. 1691-94
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Water colour drawing of Ranelagh House (circ. 1800).

Various eighteenth-century prints of Ranelagh House and Gardens.

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NOTE.

1. These drawings, a plan and elevation, are reproduced in the Wren Society's volume XII (1935).