

DID WREN DESIGN TERRACE HOUSE, BATTERSEA?

THE STORY OF A NOTION

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Since 1930 many writers have categorically assigned Terrace House (now called Old Battersea House) to Wren. No contemporary documentary evidence is known to exist, and the notion is so recent that it can scarcely be called a tradition. The present article traces the history of the notion, assembles the evidence that has been adduced in support, and presents the *opinions of responsible experts whose judgements are entitled to respect.*

Terrace House is generally presumed to have been built in 1699—the date engraved on the sun-dial on the south front, which appears to be an integral feature of the building. Though there is no documentary evidence in support of their statements, a number of writers since 1894 have claimed with varying degrees of confidence that the house was commissioned by Sir Walter St. John, the 3rd Baronet (1622–1708). Sir Walter was head of the Wiltshire branch of the St. John family and Lord of the Manor of Battersea. He resided in the Battersea Manor House, about a quarter of a mile down-stream from Terrace House, and established in the parish a school that still exists. He was the grandfather of Henry St. John, 1st Viscount Bolingbroke (1678–1751).

It would not be surprising if topographical writers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—particularly those who were dealing with a big subject such as London or Surrey—omitted to mention an individual house, even though it were pleasantly sited and attractively designed. But if such a building were known, or believed, to have been designed by Wren, such an omission would indeed be surprising. Yet eight classic surveys,¹ ranging in date from 1789 to 1911, do not mention the house.

Late in 1839 Dr. J. P. Kay obtained the use of the premises for the Training Institution for Schoolmasters that he and his colleague E. C. Tufnell conducted for the four years 1840–3. (At the end of 1843 the Institution was transferred to the National Society, and continued, under the name St. John's College, for some eighty years). Consequently at least twelve works² mention the Institution, but none of them names Wren.

More surprising still is the absence of any mention of Wren from publications relating particularly to the building. Seven examples are available.

(i) In 1810 the unexpired portion of a ninety-nine-year lease granted in 1774 came on to the market. The auctioneer, ably supported by his printer, waxed eloquent about this 'spacious and comfortable leasehold family mansion . . . most delightfully situate fronting the River Thames . . . ; containing numerous airy cheerful bedchambers & dressing rooms, drawing room, eating room . . . double coach house, stall stabling for seven horses . . .'³ but with no mention of Wren. If there ever had been a Wren tradition it was dead by 1810.

(ii) Kay's Training College is the subject of three voluminous reports, totalling 223 pages—two by Kay and Tufnell (1841, 1843) and one by the Rev. John Allen, M.A., H.M.I. (1843). The only significant reference to the building⁴ is of the briefest. Kay described it—rather inaccurately, for Terrace House was never a manor-house—as 'a spacious manor-house close to the Thames, surrounded by a garden of five acres.' There is no hint of Wren. (A news-

paper paragraph about the Normal School at Battersea, obviously written with inside knowledge, dated 24 June 1843, and preserved at the Minet Library, Lambeth, devotes some forty words to the premises but does not mention Wren).

(iii) By the end of the century St. John's College was in a strongly established position, with many generations of loyal Old Battersea men holding important appointments in education, the Church, and elsewhere. In 1894 some of them decided to form a Freemason's Lodge, with the name 'The Sir Walter St. John Lodge'. (Not that Sir Walter or any member of the St. John family had ever had anything to do with St. John's College. Its name was derived from St. John the Baptist, to whom its chapel was dedicated). In their letter of application to Freemasons' Hall explaining their choice of name they gave a very garbled account of Battersea local history, but did not mention Wren.

(iv) A few years later (1906) Thomas Adkins, a vice-president and former general secretary of the Battersea Club, wrote the history of the College with piety and enthusiasm. Numerous students from all generations and members of staff were consulted, and the building provided the theme for a lyrical passage: '... one of the finest existing specimens of the domestic architecture of the period. Many have been the fine ladies and courtly gentlemen, the statesmen, the poets, the scholars of a bygone age, who have wandered in this garden, entered this spacious hall, climbed that noble staircase or enjoyed the hospitality of these stately rooms' (p. 43). And so on and so forth—the perfect setting for the superlative phrase about the master-architect. But the mention of Wren is simply not there.

(v) In 1873 William Taylor had become Head Master of Sir Walter St. John's School nearby, and a few years later Master of Method in the College. (From its beginnings in 1840 the College had used Sir Walter's School as a practising school). In March 1903 Taylor contributed to *The Gazette* of his Old Boys' Association an article on the School and its history, in the course of which he mentioned 'the fine old house which forms the original part of the Training College', but he did not mention Wren.

(vi) Some twenty years later William Taylor's son, J. G. Taylor, published *Our Lady of Batersey*. He had come to Battersea in 1873 at the age of fifteen months, had attended Sir Walter's School, had been trained in St. John's College, and had succeeded his father in 1907 as Head Master of Sir Walter St. John's. Between them the Taylors—William and John George—had known the College intimately for half a century and had had ample opportunity to learn its traditions. *Our Lady of Batersey* refers to Terrace House in two places. On p. 283 it is 'the old mansion erected on the river-side by Sir Walter St. John in 1699' and on p. 86 it is 'the fine old riverside mansion of brick . . . formerly known as Terrace House'. (Taylor mentions the 'persistent tradition' that it was built by Sir Walter St. John, but that is another story). But there is no mention of Wren.

(vii) In 1925 the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments published its West London Report, describing the house simply as 'a good example of its period' (p. 7).

The next year—1926—saw the beginning of the ascription to Wren. On 13 April *The Times* published a letter from Mr. John Beresford about a plan of some property in St. James' Park surveyed by Sir Christopher Wren in 1677. (The plan was made in connection with an important marriage settlement, for which Sir Walter St. John, being appropriately related to each of the contracting parties, was named as the first of four trustees).⁵ A quarter of a century earlier Wren's plan had been reproduced and discussed in the first annual report of the London Topographical Society, but its conceivable relevance to Terrace House had apparently not been noticed.

Three months after the appearance of Mr. Beresford's letter, Dr. Taylor issued Addenda to *Our Lady Batersey*, mentioned the letter, and added, 'It is an interesting speculation whether Wren designed Terrace House at Battersea'. The line of reasoning apparently was: (i) Wren had had this connection with Sir Walter in 1677; (ii) since 1894 people had been supposing, though without documentary evidence, that Sir Walter had had the house built; therefore (iii) Sir Walter might have commissioned Wren to design it in 1699. This, the first known association of Wren's name with Terrace House, is dated July 1926, and remained buried for two-and-a-half years in the Addenda to Taylor's work.

Late in 1928 the freeholders of the College property (the S.P.C.K.) announced that the whole estate was for sale, and public concern about the future of the Principal's house soon expressed itself. *The Times* published a paragraph and two letters (16, 18, 19 January, 1929) with no mention of Wren.

A week later Dr. Taylor contributed a two-column article to *The Battersea Borough News* (25 January 1929). He reviewed the grounds for supposing—in the admitted absence of contemporary documentary evidence—that Sir Walter St. John had commissioned the building; he recalled the fact that Wren had surveyed No. 10 Downing Street 'for Sir Walter' (present writer's italics); observed that the house 'may well have been designed by this great architect, and it has many features in common with his contemporary work at Chelsea Hospital'; and ended with the question, 'What do the architectural experts say to this suggestion?'

Early in 1930 the Battersea Borough Council resolved to buy the freehold, clear the whole site, and erect flats. The threat to Terrace House was critical. No serious attempt to secure the opinions of 'the architectural experts' on the ascription to Wren seems to have been made, but the Borough Council's decision to clear the site led to a public discussion in the course of which the growth of the notion can be most interestingly traced. A writer in the *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* declared his confidence that the purchasers would do their public duty by 'a very characteristic house in the grand manner of Wren'.⁶ For *The Times* (25.4.1930) the house was 'in the Wren style'; for *The Daily Telegraph* (29.4.1930) it was 'said to be the work of Wren'. *The City Press* joined in (29.4.1930) with rather fuller detail and a very damaging admission; the house was 'reputed to be a Wren house, and certainly in the Wren style, although so far every attempt to connect it with the great architect has failed'. According to the Earl Spencer, Lord of the Manor of Battersea, in a letter to *Country Life* (12.7.1930) the house 'is attributed to Sir Christopher Wren'.

Meanwhile (May 1930) a public appeal had been prepared. In it the house was described as 'a typical and beautiful example of the buildings designed by Sir Christopher Wren, to whom it is attributed'. Ten gentlemen, including Percy Lovell, F.S.A., Secretary, London Society; G. K. Menzies, Secretary, Royal Society of Arts; Philip Norman, F.S.A., Chairman, London Survey Committee; and A. R. Powys, Secretary, Society for Protection of Ancient Buildings, associated themselves with the appeal, but their declaration did not commit them to the attribution to Wren. All they said was, 'The undersigned are in sympathy with the efforts which are being made to preserve this interesting building, and earnestly trust they will be successful'.

The London County Council, the Royal Society of Arts, the London Survey Committee, the R.I.B.A., the London Society, the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, and other bodies were all active in the matter. Their expressions were equally forthright in urging the preservation of the house and equally non-committal on the attribution to Wren.

For instance, in a letter to the Town Clerk (22.5.1930) the First Commissioner of the then Office of Works urged, with the support of the Ancient Monuments Board of England, 'that every effort should be made to ensure the preservation of this house as a fine example of late 17th century work'. The ten-signatory memorial was presented to the Minister of Health by Col. Sir Kenyon Vaughan-Morgan, O.B.E., M.P. for East Fulham, with his cordial support on 24 June, 1930. (Sir Kenyon and his family had long had close connections with Battersea).

Several months later *The Manchester Guardian* joined in (2.10.1930) with the words 'this charming old house with its fine staircase and wood panelling—which many think was designed by Christopher Wren'. (The reader will note, however, that though the attributors are now 'many' they are still anonymous). In lighter vein a wit had added to the gaiety of nations—and the headaches of historians, for the source has so far eluded discovery—by the comment, 'We hear there is a Wren building in Battersea. We hope no one will disturb the dear little bird'.⁷

But when in November the decision of the Minister of Health to make an order for its preservation became known, the house 'was designed by Wren' (*The Times*, 11, 25, and 27 November) and 'is a Wren building' (*The Times* 23.12.1930). Dr. Taylor's interesting speculation' of July 1926 is by the end of 1930 a four-times-repeated categorical affirmative with the authority of *The Times*, but without the support of any named 'architectural experts'.

Late in November 1930 the Battersea Borough Council sent a deputation to the Minister of Health urging him to reverse his decision. The Minister refused. In December, when the future of Terrace House had thus been secured, the Rev. Dr. G. H. Dix, Principal of the College of S. Mark and S. John, Chelsea, and former Principal of St. John's College, Battersea, introduced Mr. and Mrs. C. G. Stirling to the Borough Council as possible occupiers of the house. An agreement—which is still (1964) in force—was reached by which, *inter alia*, they became tenants for life, and the house was officially re-named Old Battersea House.

Within the next year or so the history of the house was publicly discussed in three places—by Dr. J. G. Taylor in *The Sir Walter St. John's Magazine* for March 1931, by a correspondent in *The Times* (30.12.1931), and by Mrs. Stirling in *Country Life* (7.5.1932). All three writers mentioned in some detail the possibility that Wren was the architect. Their supporting evidence may be assembled and summarized as follows:

- (1) The elevation resembles that of Chelsea Hospital;
- (2) Internal details resemble Wren's work;
- (3) The staircase has been confidently compared with a staircase in the north range of Kensington Palace;
- (4) Sir Walter had employed Wren elsewhere on at least one occasion;
- (5) The sundial bears the same motto as appears on the sundial that Wren presented to All Souls College, Oxford.

The first three evidences would justify such a comment as that made by the Historical Monuments' Commission and quoted above—'a good example of its period'—but little more. Professor Geoffrey Webb pointed out⁸ that Inigo Jones had initiated, in the middle of the seventeenth century, a movement to encourage brick building in London, and that Pratt and Wren himself (e.g. at Chelsea) worked in, and helped to establish, a fine tradition. The appropriate comment seems therefore to be that the architect of Terrace House—whoever he may have been—was working within that well-established tradition.

The fourth evidence has already been mentioned, but a few comments may here be added. According to the correspondent of *The Times* (30.12.1931), 'it is also said that Wren advised St. John in [sic] some buildings on his Wiltshire estates,' and according to Mrs. Stirling in *Country Life* (7.5.1932), 'It is likely that Sir Walter would employ one architect rather than two different men in the same year'. But the correspondent adduced no evidence of Wren's hearsay connection with St. John estates in Wiltshire, and no other known writer has even remotely hinted at such connection. Mrs. Stirling evidently confused 1677 and 1699.

Wren's plan of 10 April 1677 has recently been acquired by the British Museum (see note 5) and has been discussed by Mr. P. D. A. Harvey.⁹ *Inter alia* Mr. Harvey says, 'It is not an architect's working plan; only the ground floor is shown, and although a scale is given there are no exact measurements on the plan itself . . . clearly the plan . . . was drawn to illustrate and accompany the original letters patent, which probably do not survive'. What Wren did in 1677 is therefore quite clear: he certified, signed, and dated

'A Mapp of the Grounds & Buildings thereon being part of St. James Parke granted by his Majty to Sr Walter St. John & others: . . .'

He signed it in his official capacity as Surveyor General of the Royal Works. The drawing was made in the course of his routine work as a royal official, as evidence of the identity of the property and its relation to adjoining properties. It is by no means certain that Wren and St. John ever met personally on this business. To describe Sir Walter as having 'employed,' or 'been advised by', Wren is therefore not in accordance with the evidence of the 'Mapp', for Wren was serving his royal master—not the Trustees.

It is true that 'Pereunt et imputantur' appears on both the sundial at All Souls, Oxford, and that at Battersea. The All Souls College accounts for 1658 include a payment of £54 for a sundial, and there is a very plausible surmise that Wren had designed it. Wren, who had been a Fellow and the Bursar of All Souls, was at the time more of a mathematician and a scientist than an architect, and the design contrived to show not only the hours, halves, and quarters, but even the minutes. The ingenuity of the device is the main ground of the surmise. But the device is not repeated at Battersea; the extreme plainness of the Battersea design contrasts most strongly with the ornate elaboration of the Oxford design; and the Battersea dial is dated 1699. With all deference, little significance can be attached to the recurrence of Martial's words after an interval of over forty years.

The correspondent of *The Times* (30.12.1931) concluded that 'if Old Battersea House cannot yet definitely be assigned to Wren, there is at least nothing improbable in the ascription'. Later references to the subject have, however, generally been as categorical as those of *The Times* in November 1930, though the Wren Society persevered with its monumental series of twenty volumes (1924-43) with no mention of Battersea or Sir Walter. E. V. Lucas, for instance, mentioned 'this beautiful English residence, built by Sir Christopher Wren in 1699' in a paragraph that contains three clear errors of fact (*The Sunday Times*, 21 May 1933); and Arthur Mee maintained the theme with his own variation of date in the statement, 'The house was built by Wren in 1700'.¹⁰ And all the time Dr. Taylor's pertinent question of 1929—'What do the architectural experts say to this suggestion?'—has remained unanswered.

Four gentlemen have now expressed their unwillingness to accept the ascription to Wren on the basis of the existing evidence, and have consented to the publication of their names and opinions. Sir John Summerson, Curator of Sir John Soane's Museum, has pointed out that 'a house built in Wren's time very readily becomes "a Wren House" just as a house built

100 years later becomes "an Adam House", and a vague typological classification becomes an attribution in no time at all'. Professor Geoffrey Webb, formerly Secretary to the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, entirely agreed when he wrote, 'I think you would be quite safe in saying that the evidence of Wren's connection is very slight, and that the attribution is an example of a tendency often found in architectural history to attribute any good quality work to the greatest contemporary name'. The comment of Dr. F. H. W. Sheppard, General Editor of the L.C.C. *Survey of London*, seized on the absence of documentary evidence and the recentness of the tradition—'Were I in your place I should be very sceptical indeed of any ascription of a building to Wren unless it was supported either by documentary evidence or by a very long tradition'. The judgement of Mr. John Harris, of the Drawings Collection, Royal Institute of British Architects, was very forthright. 'I think you can accept without doubt that Wren had absolutely nothing to do with Old Battersea House'.

In one respect the evidence of the late Walter H. Godfrey is most significant, for he had directed the restoration of Terrace House in 1931 for Mr. and Mrs. Stirling. Yet in his rewritten and enlarged *History of Architecture in and around London*, 1962, p. 176, he listed the buildings of Wren's period in two groups—buildings 'attributed to Wren' and 'other buildings'—and Old Battersea House is in his second group.

If on the evidence of the 1677 'Mapp', the coincidence of the sundial motto, and certain stylistic resemblances the reader still inclines to believe that Sir Walter St. John commissioned Wren to design the house for him, there remains the difficulty that there is no documentary evidence in support of the notion that Sir Walter had anything to do with the building of the house. But that is another story.¹¹

NOTES

- 1 Camden—*Britannia*, enlarged by Gough, 1789. Lysons—*Environs*, 1791, 1811. Hughson—*London* (Circuit of London), vol. V, 1808. Manning and Bray—*Surrey*, vol. III, 1814. Phillips—*Morning Walk from London to Kew*, 1817. (The descriptions of Battersea had appeared in *The Monthly Magazine* in August 1814). Lewis—*Topographical Dictionary*, 1831. Besant—*South London*, 1899. Godfrey—*History of Architecture in London*, 1911.
- 2 Brayley, Britton, and Brayley—*Surrey*, 1841–8, 1850. Walford—*Old and New London*, vol. VI, c. 1875. H. S. Simmonds—*All About Battersea*, 1879, 1882. *The Royal River*, pub. Cassell, 1885. H. B. Wheatley—*London Past and Present*, 1891. E. Hammond—*Bygone Battersea*, 1897. W. W. Hutchings—*London Town, Past and Present*, 1909. Walter Besant—*London South of the Thames*, 1912. *Victoria County History, Surrey*, vol. IV, 1912. Sherwood Ramsey—*Historic Battersea*, 1913. Ethel A. Woolmer—*The Story of Battersea as told to Children*, 1924. R. C. Hist. Mons.—*West London*, 1925. (The V.C.H. and Ramsey confuse Terrace House with the Battersea Manor House. Hammond alone associates Sir Walter St. John with Terrace House). The foregoing lists could easily be considerably extended.
- 3 House of Lords Record Office—Shaw-Lefevre MS., Sale particulars 1810. Quoted by permission of the Clerk of the Records.
- 4 *Minutes of the Committee of Council on Education . . .*, London, Printed by William Clowes and Sons, 1844. First Report by Kay and Tufnell, January 1, 1841, p. 198.
- 5 B. M. Egerton MS. 3765.
- 6 Vol. LXXVIII, 4 April 1930, p. 559.
- 7 Mrs. Stirling (in *The Merry Wives of Battersea*, p. 218) ascribes this to *Punch*, but neither the Librarian of that journal nor the present writer has yet succeeded in locating the comment.
- 8 Geoffrey Webb, *Wren*, London, Duckworth, 1937, p. 94.
- 9 *The British Museum Quarterly*, vol. XXV, Number 3–4, pp. 66–69 and pl. XXVII.
- 10 *London, The King's England*, 1937, p. 785.
- 11 For a history of the house see Smallwood, F. T., *The Story of Terrace House, Battersea* in *The Surrey Archaeological Collections*, vol. LXIV, 1967, pp. 91–112.

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