

CLISSOLD HOUSE, STOKE NEWINGTON

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SUMMARY

Clissold House is a late 18th-century villa set in about 50 acres of parkland in the Borough of Hackney. The usual attribution of the building is that it was designed by Joseph Woods for his uncle Jonathan Hoare in the early 1790's (VCH 1985; Pevsner 1952). Joseph Woods was, however, only born in 1776, suggesting that either the date of the building or the identity of the designer must be incorrect.

Rees Bolter Architects carried out repair works to the house during 1996–7 and this paper summarises recent documentary research carried out by Jon Bolter of that practice in an attempt to clarify the issue.

The discussion of the authorship of the design is preceded by a brief description of the house and those characteristics which might be considered unique or unusual, together with an account of Jonathan Hoare himself.

THE HOUSE

Clissold House (Fig 1) lies to the north of Stoke Newington Church Street on the outside of one of the many loops of the New River as it winds its way from Ware to Islington. It is a five bay house of three storeys; attached are two storey wings with semicircular bays. The house is quite plain and is constructed of stock brickwork with a sparing use of Portland stone dressings. The roofs are all flat and were originally covered in copper; the staircase to roof level suggests that the roof was intended to be used as a promenade. The severity of the building is relieved by the stone balustrade around the perimeter of the main roof, by the unusual pediments set within the prominent chimney stacks and by the colonnade on the entrance front.

The grounds were entered at the gatehouse on Church Street,¹ revealing the house in a three quarter view. The driveway approaches the house along the bank of the New River and then sweeps dramatically up in front of the house to allow entry at the middle floor level. The lowest storey is set at ground level, perhaps to avoid excavating basements in close proximity to the New River, and the arrangement of lower wings and approach ramp around the main body of the house serve to anchor the house visually to its surroundings. The entrance colonnade also serves to conceal the asymmetry of the main entrance.

Internally, the floors are linked by a toplit circular stairway, placed towards one end of the main block and leading at each level to central corridors. The original layout of the house has not yet been fully determined and a reconstructed plan based on the most recent evidence is illustrated in Fig 3. Recent works have revealed the existence of a toplit service stair within the north wing linking the two lowest levels and suggesting that the servants' rooms were confined to the northern half of the lowest floor and the adjacent external vaults, leaving the remainder of the building, including the internal vaulted spaces of the lowest floor, for the family. Additional service buildings and kitchen gardens appear to have been positioned to the north of the house.

Although a great deal of the internal fabric, particularly plasterwork and other decorative finishes, has been lost, through a combination of successive alterations and a fire in the 1950's which resulted in the loss of the main roof, much of the joinery and carpentry remains and is able



Fig 1. Clissold House from the south west, photographed in about 1876. The carriageway sweeps up to allow guests to enter the house on the middle floor level (courtesy Hackney Archives Department)

to provide a valuable record of high quality construction of the late 18th-century. The floor and roof structures are of massive construction, using substantial sections of timber to form complex structures (see Fig 4). The walls too are substantial and the quality of workmanship in hidden areas² confirms that this was constructed as a building of quality. Work in the north wing has revealed that the roof was insulated with a layer of rye straw approximately 3" deep immediately underneath the roof boarding. The sweeping handrail to the main staircase is constructed of laminates of oak, each approximately 6mm across, glued together and arranged to follow the sweeping lines of the stair.³

During the recent work, the stones of the colonnade balustrade were found to be inscribed with masons marks as shown on Fig 5. These marks seem to be intended to identify the maker rather than to locate the stone.

The house and grounds were purchased by the Metropolitan Board of Works in 1887 (VCH

1985) in order to provide a public park, which opened in 1889. The house ceased to be used as a single family house at that time and has been altered on many occasions since. Throughout its life as a public building it has housed the park cafe; in recent years it has provided accommodation for park staff and changing facilities for nearby sports pitches.

THE HOARE FAMILY

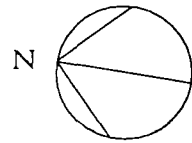
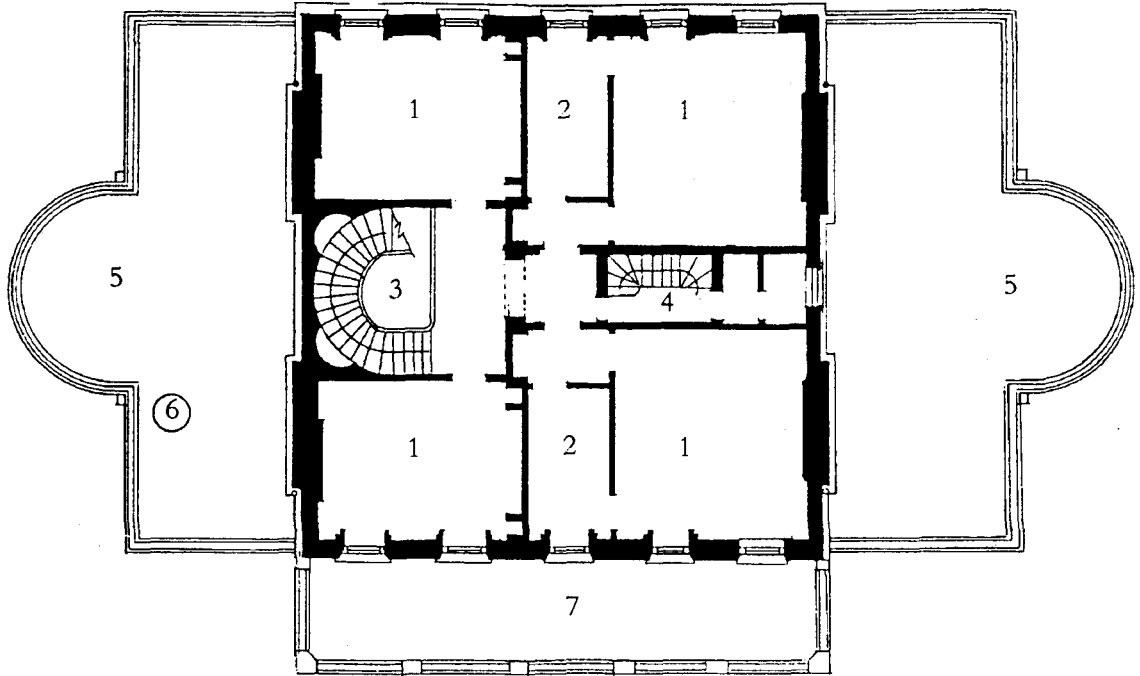
The Hoares were prominent Quakers; Stoke Newington was, in the late 18th century, well known for its Dissenting residents. The Hoares moved to London from Cork in the early 18th century and were part of the Hoare banking family; other branches of the family included the Hoares of Stourhead and Luscombe Castle. Samuel Hoare the elder (1716–96) became wealthy through international trade and was a partner in Gurnell Hoare. In 1744 he married



Fig 2. The house and grounds in about 1870 (courtesy of Alan Godfrey Maps) **Key:** A) Clissold House; B) New River; C) entrance lodge; D) stables; E) Paradise Row; F) St Mary's Old Church; G) lakes formed from brick excavations

Grizell Gurnell⁴ and by her had seven children. The eldest son, Joseph, died at the age of 24, leaving Samuel Hoare the younger (1751–1825)

to become head of the family. Samuel became a partner in the banking firm of Hoare, Barnett & Co.



FIRST FLOOR PLAN

Fig 3. Suggested original layout of the house based on evidence exposed during recent works

a) FIRST FLOOR PLAN b) GROUND FLOOR PLAN c) BASEMENT (LOWER GROUND FLOOR) PLAN

Key: 1) bedroom; 2) dressing room; 3) main stair with glazed lantern over; 4) stair to flat roof; 5) copper flat roofs to wings; 6) circular lantern over service stair; 7) flat roof over colonnade; 8) main entrance; 9) entrance hall; 10) service stair; 11) principal room; 12) eating room; 13) principal room (library?); 14) study? (note restricted access); 15) ante room; 16) vaulted corridor; 17) secondary entrance; 18) service entrance; 19) kitchens; 20) service rooms; 21) vaulted wine cellar; 22) bedrooms?; 23) vaults below entrance ramp

Jonathan Hoare (1752–1819), the third son, was, in many ways, the black sheep of the family. He went into his father’s business, being in partnership with his cousin John Harman, of whom more later. In 1783 he married Sarah, daughter of Thomas Beswick; they had one daughter, Sarah, who died in 1805 at the age of 19.⁵ Samuel the Younger’s daughter Sarah wrote of him (Pryor, 1911):

Though engaged in the excellent business which was once my grandfathers he spent far beyond his income and was engaged in transactions which a parent with so high a sense of honour would have regarded with the highest disapprobation.

His circumstances were made known to his family not long after this period, and proved the greatest vexation my father ever knew. Many thousands were given by him

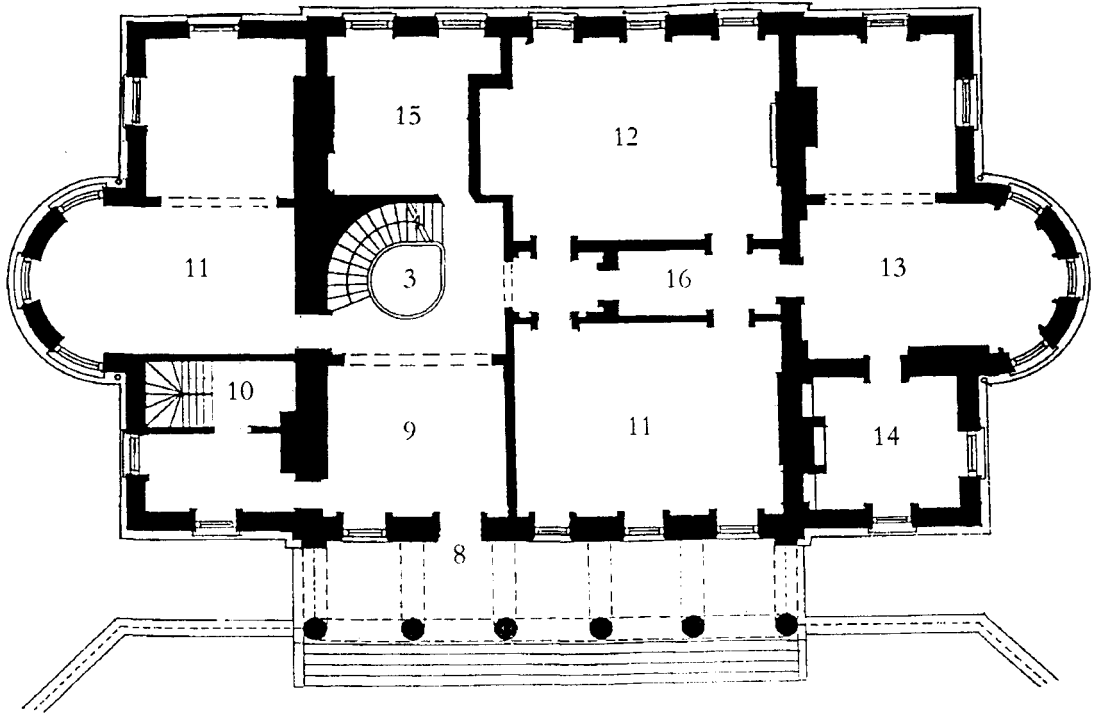
to pay my uncle’s debts, who unmindful of all this assistance, continually deceived him and made promises which he broke when it suited his own convenience.

Though my uncle was conscious of the uneasiness he gave, and lived in a state of half-intoxication, friendly intercourse was not entirely stopped between the two families. No quarrel ever took place between the brothers.

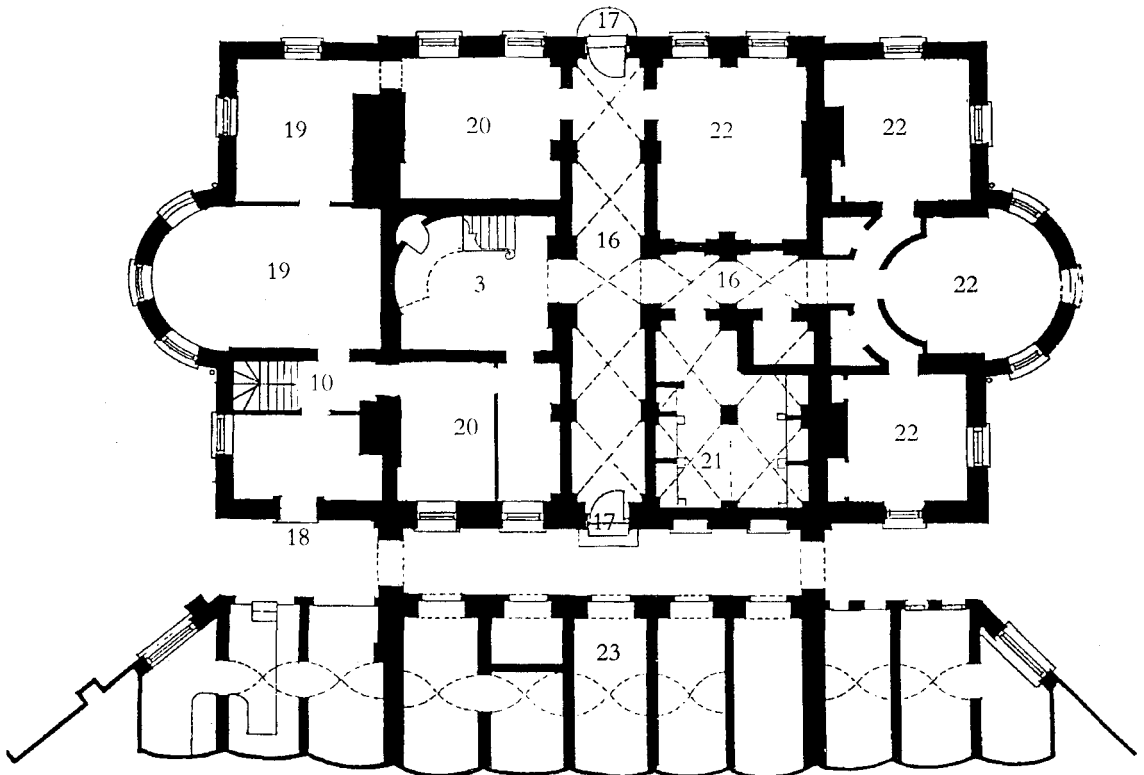
Speaking of her grandfather’s death in 1796 Sarah Hoare notes:

There was one among us who could have shed no heartfelt tear but whose improvidence made even the death of such a father an unspeakable relief. I mean my uncle Jonathan whose affairs were extremely perplexed.

In Viscount Templewood’s account of the family (Templewood 1949, 56), Jonathan is described as having been a zealous Quaker at an early age but . . .



GROUND FLOOR PLAN



BASEMENT (LOWER GROUND FLOOR) PLAN

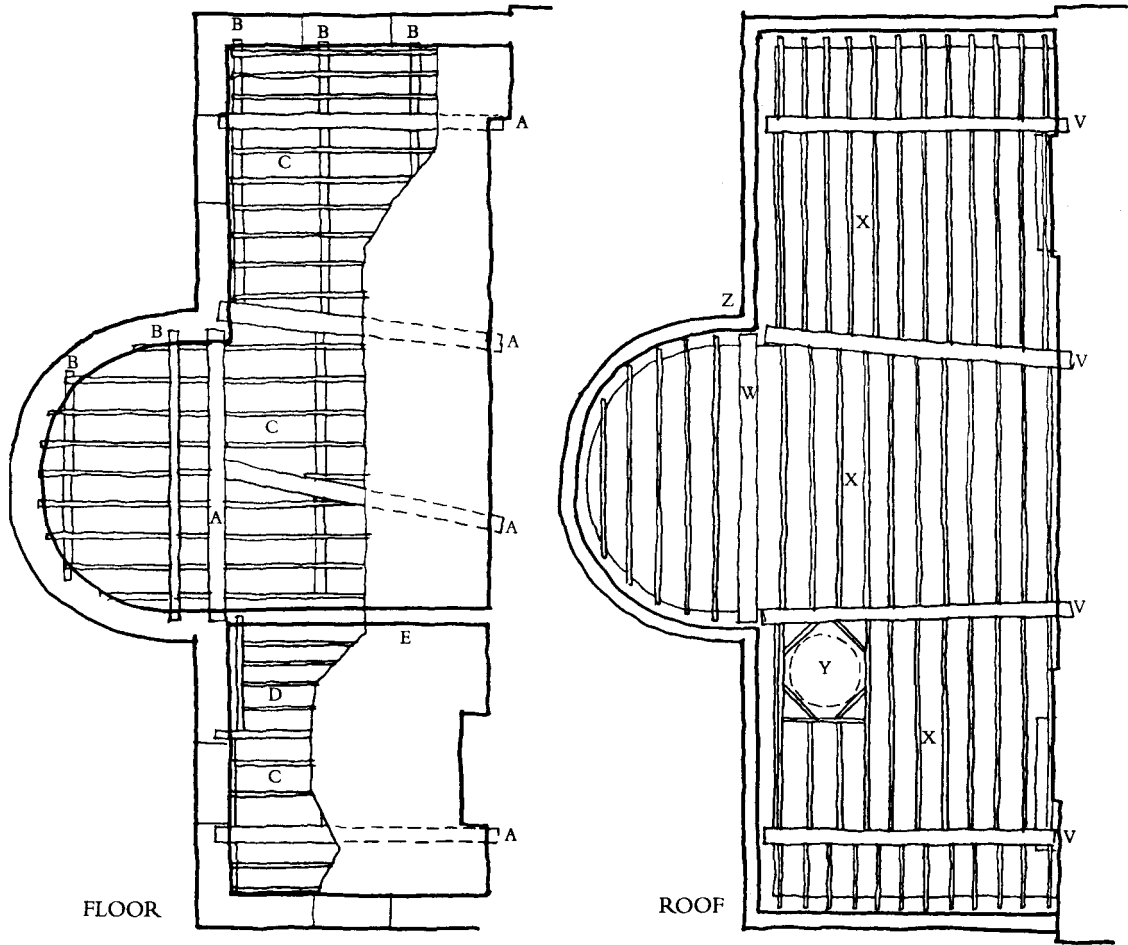


Fig 4. North wing ground floor and roof structures

a) FLOOR (not all exposed during works) **Key:** A) primary beam (typically 10" × 12"). Angled to avoid bearing on flues or hearths; B) secondary beam (typically 9" × 5"); C) separate floor joists (4.5" × 2.5") and ceiling joists (3" × 2"); D) early 19th-century infill flooring where service stair removed; E) brick supporting wall

b) ROOF **Key:** V) primary beam (typically 10" × 10"); W) this 'primary' beam carries no secondary load; it may perhaps have been intended for overall structural stability; X) roof joists (typically 10" × 2.5") above ceiling joists (4.5" × 2.5"). Rye straw insulation between roof joists; Y) roof structure trimmed for circular rooflight over service stair; Z) stone parapet to north wing

the young fanatic's fervour soon cooled and going to the other extreme he embarked on a career of wild extravagance, became a friend of the Prince Regent and bought himself 50 acres in Stoke Newington where he built Clissold House, a large mansion in the Classical style. Thereafter the prodigal brother went the way of the prodigal son and was soon so utterly ruined that 'he was reduced to soliciting orders for milk and butter'.

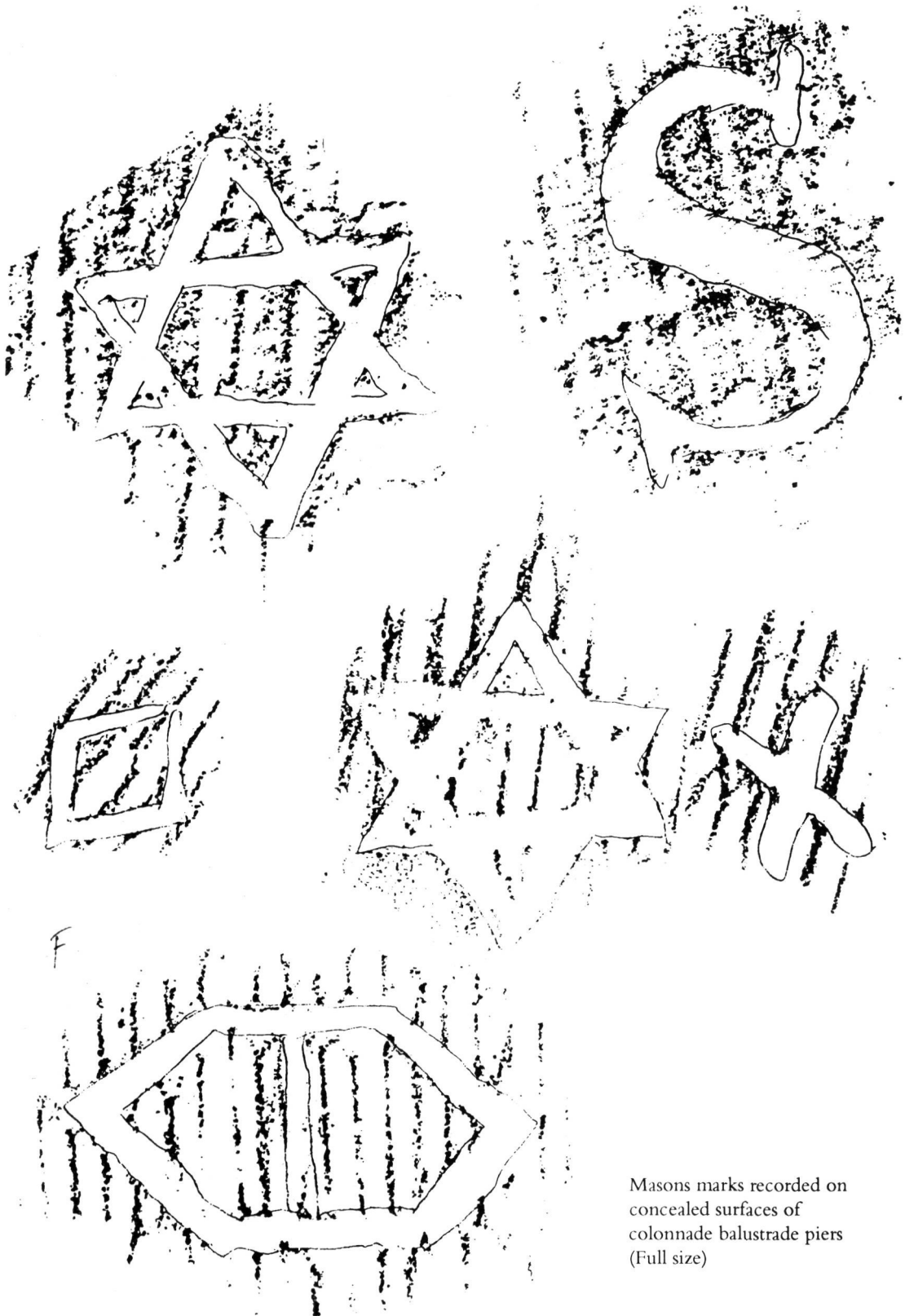
Relationships were clearly strained between Jonathan and other members of his family but were not broken off. In her diaries⁶ Margaret Wood, his eldest sister, refers to their taking carriage trips into Hertfordshire together. Jonathan died after a lingering illness in August 1819.⁷

Margaret (1748–1821) married Joseph Woods, a wealthy woollen draper. They had four children, their second son being Joseph Woods the architect.

Another cousin of both the Stoke Newington Hoares and of John Harman was Mary Gurnell. In 1772 she married the architect George Dance the Younger.

DATE OF CONSTRUCTION

As this is a key factor in the attribution of the building, it is considered first. The date is usually



Masons marks recorded on concealed surfaces of colonnade balustrade piers (Full size)

Fig 5. Masons' marks to the colonnade stonework recorded during recent works

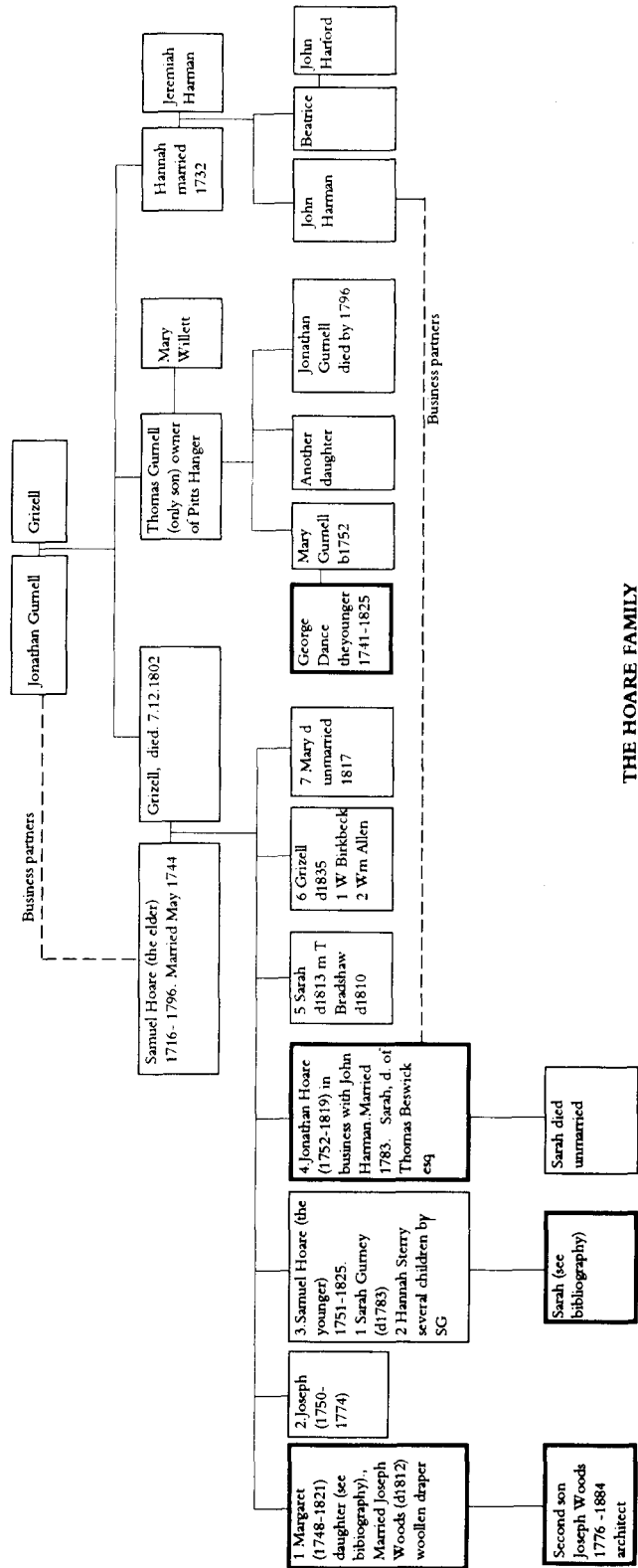


Fig 6. The Hoare family tree

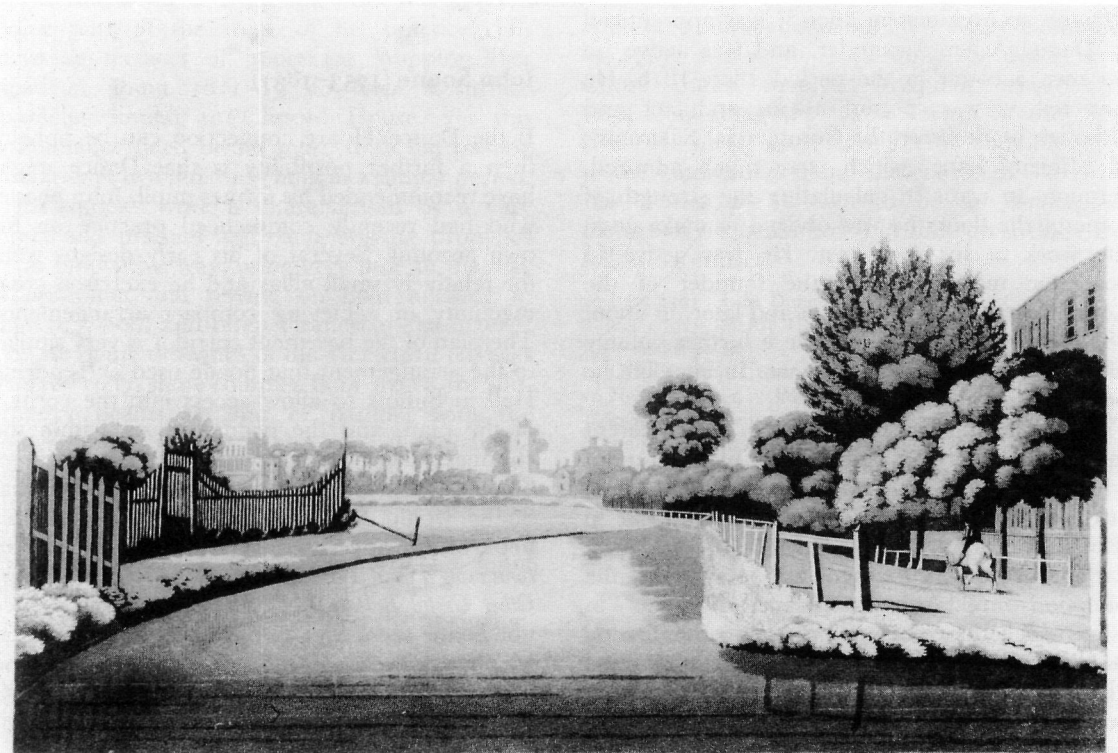
determined by the engraving by Ellis of Stoke Newington published on 1 January 1793 (Fig 7). Although it is possible that the engraving shows a partly completed building, the depiction is undoubtedly of the present house.

This date is generally reinforced rather than contradicted by further documentary evidence. Jonathan Hoare obtained leases of the land on which the house stands in 1789 together with a licence to demolish the buildings then standing on the land.⁸ He is said to have been in financial difficulty by 1796 (Pryor, 1911) and mortgaged the property to Robert Pryor in 1798.⁹ Pryor's executors foreclosed in 1799¹⁰ and in 1800 sold the lease to Thomas Gudgeon. It therefore seems entirely likely that the dated engraving is correct and that construction was carried out in about 1790–92. A stone standing by the New River, said to have been part of the former gatehouse (Pryor, 1949, editor's note), bears the date 1790.

WHO DESIGNED CLISSOLD HOUSE?

Clissold House was designed in a very severe Greek style. The design incorporates many quite original ideas although few are entirely successful in execution. These include the entrance sweep, the double symmetry, ingenious internal planning, flat copper roofs throughout, and 'pediments' applied to chimney stacks.

The house appears to have been conceived from the outside; this has then compromised the layout of the interior, particularly in arranging access to the corner rooms of the wings. The asymmetry of the original entrance (required because of the small size of the main part of the house) is concealed by the colonnade but the arrangement of the larger rooms behind the semicircular bays does not seem well resolved. In addition, although the massing of the building and the proportions of the elevations appear to



STOKE NEWINGTON.

Fig 7. Engraving by Ellis of the view from Paradise Bridge, published on 1 January 1793. Old St Mary's church is straight ahead and Clissold House may be seen towards the left of the picture (courtesy of Hackney Archives Department)

have been carefully considered from the principal viewpoint on the approach road, these are much less successful when carried round to the east elevation, where there is no approach ramp or colonnade, and the resulting elevation seems rather unresolved.

The house is, however, carefully detailed and very substantially constructed and even incorporates novel ideas, such as the rye straw roof insulation. It might therefore be considered that this is the work of a relatively young architect, working in a fashionable style, but not afraid to try new ideas, and yet sufficiently experienced to have sound grasp of constructional matters.

Joseph Woods (1776–1864)

Joseph Woods was born on 24 August 1776 and so was only fourteen years of age in 1790. He had been a sickly child and was sent to learn the trade of a merchant in Dover in 1792¹¹ in order to benefit from the sea bathing. He decided to become an architect in 1802,¹² was apprenticed to Daniel Asher Alexander, and was active on his own account in the period 1806–1816. He was not very successful as an architect and although he designed the Commercial Salerooms in Mincing Lane, which were much admired, through an error in calculating the strength of some of the floors he was obliged to make good the work at his own cost. He was active in academic matters, being the founder of the London Architectural Society and later, in about 1814, being invited to compile a further volume of Stuart's *Antiquities of Athens*. In later life he became a notable botanist.

All of the above is referred to in four different mid 19th-century accounts of his life,¹³ none of which refer to Clissold House. The first attributions of the building to Woods appear to date from about 1890 (Giltspur, 1893; Beck c.1890). Woods published an essay 'On the Situations and Accompaniments of Villas' in 1807 which does not refer directly or indirectly to Clissold House. His mother's diaries do note his decision to 'start a second apprenticeship ... and ... struggle to get forward in the architectural line of business',¹⁴ and they record concern for his health in his youth, but they make no mention of so remarkable an event as having designed a house for his uncle at such an early age.

It seems inconceivable that a boy of fourteen can have designed the house, particularly one

who was singularly unsuccessful in his later architectural work.

George Dance the Younger (1741–1825)

George Dance the Younger had a long and successful career as an architect. There are family connections between Dance and the Hoares and it is tempting to make a link between the two. Dance did develop a stripped Neo-Classical style but Clissold House appears even more severe than his other known work.

His marriage to Mary Gurnell in 1772 took place at St George's, Bloomsbury and, because the event did not take place at a Meeting of Friends, was the cause of Mary Gurnell being disowned by her family (Stroud, 1971). It might be considered that the likelihood of family connections having provided Jonathan Hoare with his architect are lessened by this rift and also by the apparently strained relations between Jonathan Hoare and his own family.

John Soane (1753–1837)

If the Dance/Hoare connection can be upheld, then a further possibility is that Dance might have recommended his former pupil, John Soane, who had recently commenced practice on his own account. Several of his early designs were for relatively small villas and he exercised great ingenuity in achieving compact arrangements. The plan of the basement corridor is very similar to the arrangement that Soane used at Tendring Hall in Suffolk to allow access into the corners of the plan, and the pediments set within the chimney stacks are certainly devices typical of Soane, but it might have been expected that Soane would have included the design in his book of self advertisement *Sketches in Architecture, containing Plans and Elevations of Cottages, Villas and Other Useful Buildings* of 1793 and neither Dance nor Soane seem ever to have proposed a plan in which a curved bay sat at one end of the long side of a rectangular room.

Daniel Asher Alexander (1768–1846)

The reasons for Woods being apprenticed to Alexander are not stated. There is no documented link between Alexander and Clissold House but

there are a number of circumstantial pieces of evidence.

Alexander was apprenticed to Samuel Robinson, where he learned much of dock, warehouse and engineering works. It is possible that Alexander and Hoare may have met through an involvement with warehousing for foreign trade. He commenced practice on his own account in about 1790 and his early works include a house at Highbury Hill for Dr William Saunders. This was demolished in 1936 but surviving photographs show a rather severe five bay elevation with a projecting semicircular bay on the rear. He designed Mote House for the Earl of Romsey in Maidstone in about 1793. This is extremely severe, makes use of projecting curved bays, double symmetry and a single storey Ionic colonnade. The house is large and there would have been no need for the intricate planning evident at Clissold House.

His later works include warehouses at London Dock (including the Skin Floor), prisons, lighthouses and bridges. Domestic work was never a major part of the work of his practice. His surviving terraces of houses at Wapping Pier Head of about 1811-13 do have a surface character similar to Clissold House, yet this resemblance need be no more than the passing similarity of two buildings built at a similar period.

Alexander's work is characterised by a very direct and original approach, solving problems in an innovative way, using very little in the way of ornament and relying on bold massing to achieve a bold and often Piranesian character.¹⁵ The surviving drawings of the Pier Head terraces (Harris, 1967) show complex floor structures with primary beams set out of parallel with the adjacent walls in exactly the same way that the north wing floor and roof structures of Clissold House follow the need to bear on the most suitable points. Again this is an interesting and common characteristic that need be no more than the practice of the times.

Alexander's obituary¹⁶ included the following:

His engagements were with a generation that has almost passed away. The late earls of Egremont, Camden, Romney, Radnor and Folkestone were his patrons and many of the commercial aristocracy who were prominent at the beginning of the present century might be enumerated as his friends and supporters; but we should have to mention, perhaps, some names who, owing to the changes incident to a trading community, have long since sunk below the commercial horizon and who would now scarcely be remembered.

Jonathan Hoare could certainly have been included in this last description. On the basis of the descriptions of his character, it is perhaps most likely that his choice of architect would have been influenced by the circle of friends that he would most have wished to impress. It is also noted that Dr Saunders was in 1807 appointed as physician to the Prince Regent,¹⁷ and may have been included in that circle of friends at an earlier date.

Robert Mylne (1733-1811)

Robert Mylne is a major figure in the development of architecture in the late 18th century, whose work has been overshadowed by his contemporaries, Robert Adam and William Chambers. Practising as both architect and engineer, his extensive practice included a great deal of domestic work, much involving the construction of villas on the periphery of London for wealthy merchants. In addition he was appointed Surveyor to the New River Company in 1767, a post he held until his death, and whose duties involved frequent travel and inspection along the whole length of the New river. He surely must have been a familiar figure to the landowners along the course of the river. His diaries are known to be an incomplete picture of his activities¹⁸ but they do include the following entries:¹⁹

- 29 June 1791 L M Duncan. Mr Hoare.
- 8 July 1791 At Mr Hoare's, Newⁿ: Set out the sides of River at his place.
- 22 October 1791 Examined Mr Hoare's part of the River.
- 16 November 1791 Went to Mr Hoare's
- 5 April 1794 Went to Mr Hoare's ponds etc and on bridges in the road, wastes, and Highbury bank.
- 31 July 1794 5-5-0 received from Mr Hoare by the hands of Mr Dowdily for Plans to his Deeds.
- 19 July 1798 With Mr Hoare - examined roof and rainwater pipes of his house, and also the course of the drains and stink traps.

These entries seem likely to relate to Jonathan Hoare rather than other members of the Stoke Newington Hoares. They may only be the result of works to the New River itself, although the 1794 payment of five guineas suggests the existence of some wider relationship between the two parties.

In addition there are a series of further entries in the period 1798-1802 for surveys and advice for Mr Hoare but it seems likely that these will have been for Henry Hoare of Hoare's bank in

Fleet Street. The entry of 1798 above may well be linked to this latter series but, in view of the apparently perpetual problems with the rainwater pipes, it is very tempting to link it to Clissold House.

Mylne was not a young man when this house was designed, but he had been a friend of Piranesi in Rome; they remained correspondents for many years (Richardson, 1955). Amongst his other offices was that of Surveyor to St Paul's Cathedral and amongst his designs for villas is that of Addington Lodge in Surrey (1773–9); this too is approached from a three quarter view, has lower wings pinning the house to the landscape and has markedly different front and rear elevations.

John Summerson (1983) wrote of Mylne that 'it might be proper to class him ... as a man primarily of an engineering bent, whose capacities as an artist were sound but limited', a description that suits Alexander as well as it suits Mylne. Like Alexander his buildings are characterised by the absence of decoration and, like Alexander, none of his surviving works seem to exhibit sufficient of the characteristics of Clissold House to prove authorship on the basis of style alone.

The unknown designer

In the absence of direct evidence, there must always remain the possibility that the house was designed by yet another hand, possibly with advice or guidance from Dance, Alexander, Mylne or another member of Hoare's circle of friends. The extent to which the builder may have made influential decisions on constructional matters is also a matter of speculation.

CONCLUSION

The current evidence suggests that Joseph Woods was clearly not the architect of Clissold House; that Clissold House could not have been designed without the involvement of a designer familiar with the leading architecture of the day and with the imagination to develop a number of original ideas in a single building; that neither Dance nor Soane were the architects; that either Alexander or Mylne could well have designed Clissold House, the balance perhaps favouring Alexander the younger man.

Without more definite and documented links, the identification of the designer remains speculative.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks are due to all who gave help and advice, particularly the staff and archivists of the Greater London Record Office, Hackney Borough Archive and the Society of Friends; Gina Douglas of the Linnean Society of London; Mary Lynch; Alan Baxter & Associates, structural engineers for the works at Clissold House.

NOTES

¹ Now Stoke Newington Church Street.

² As an example, the timber floor of the lowest storey is suspended over a void 3 feet deep; the 9" sleeper walls are pierced by ventilation openings with semicircular arches.

³ Although not unique, this appears to be quite rare. The only other example I have been able to trace is Wren's stair inside the SW tower of St Paul's Cathedral.

⁴ The Gurnells were another prominent Quaker family. Grizell was the daughter of Jonathan Gurnell, with whom Samuel Hoare was in business.

⁵ Woods 18 August 1805.

⁶ Woods 1802.

⁷ Woods 15 August 1819.

⁸ Hackney Local History Library; Marcham Digest.

⁹ Hackney Local History Library; Marcham Digest 2/12/1799.

¹⁰ Hackney Local History Library; Marcham Digest 2/12/1799.

¹¹ Woods 18 July 1792.

¹² Woods 17 February 1802.

¹³ Transactions of the RIBA xv 1863–4; Proceedings of the Linnean Society v8 1865 xxxii–xli; *Builder* Jan 23 1864; M A Lower *The Worthies of Sussex* 1865 pp 312–4.

¹⁴ Woods 17 February 1802.

¹⁵ Although Harris places the timing of this influence as possibly subsequent to his introduction to the work of Piranesi by Robert Mylne from about 1800. (Harris, 1967).

¹⁶ *Gentleman's Magazine* Aug 1846 210–213.

¹⁷ *Dictionary of National Biography*.

¹⁸ Compare for instance the diary entries (British Architectural Library; Mylne family papers) with Lindsay and Cosh 1973.

¹⁹ British Architectural Library; Mylne family papers 13/3 and 14/1. See also Richardson 1955.

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