

MARBLE HILL HOUSE

By Ashley Barker

(This introduction to Marble Hill House was given by the author at the Annual General Meeting of the Ancient Monuments Society in June, 1975 but not published. It gives me much pleasure to make good the omission. — Ed.)

Ladies and Gentlemen, it is a great pleasure to welcome you to Marble Hill!

A year or two ago the Greater London Council devised a new poster with the object of making this extremely agreeable house more widely known to the general public. For this purpose a view of the villa seen across its park was matched with the legend "This house was built for Henrietta Howard, Countess of Suffolk, mistress of George II". You are probably familiar with it. Now copy writers are as much victims of their times as are architects and their clients. The racey suggestion of immorality and royal "goings-on" in an eighteenth century court setting is an advertising line as characteristic of the 1970's as the architecture of Marble Hill itself is expressive of the 1720's. What seems to ring less true is any discernable relationship between that image of the first owner which we are invited by the poster to conjure up for ourselves and the serene and ordered quality of the house which you have just entered. Far from a vision of extravagance and licence which might tempt the imaginations of our contemporary public, you see about you restraint, balance and harmony, touched with even a degree of frugality.

Those of you who look to see the spirit of the owner as well as the taste of the time in a building may wonder whether the poster is misleading to us and unfair to Henrietta Howard. You have come here this evening to see her house and the house will speak directly to you of all the Palladian virtues, you will not be misled there and I would like to leave you free to make your own exploration as soon as possible; but first I would like to say just a word about the circumstances of the building of Marble Hill so that you may judge just a little more clearly how far it does convey the personality of the Countess, who certainly seems to have shown the greatest devotion to it; such devotion that a search for the missing relationship should be well justified.

Henrietta Howard was born about 1688, daughter of Sir Henry Hobart, at Blickling Hall in Norfolk. Little is known of her early family life with her six sisters and one brother but I find the association with the very different architecture of that wonderful Norfolk house an emotive element in the Marble Hill story. However, Blickling was to be her home for all too short a time. When Henrietta was about ten her father died from wounds received in a duel and her mother survived him by only three years. Lady Hobart was a grand-daughter of Sir John Maynard



Marble Hill House: (above) in August, 1960 before restoration and (below) the south front after restoration in 1966. (All photographs which accompany this article are reproduced by courtesy of Greater London Council).

the famous judge who, in the course of his very long life, was married four times. After his death his fourth wife, left widowed, had married Henry Howard, fifth Earl of Suffolk and it appears likely that it was with this couple that the orphaned Henrietta went to live, either at Gunnersbury or at Audley End. At all events at the age of seventeen or thereabouts she married Charles Howard their youngest son, then a captain in the Dragoons. The marriage, which took place on 2nd March 1706, was to prove disastrous.

Lord Chesterfield afterwards said of the Howards that they "married for love and hated each other for the rest of their lives". The life that began in the privileged surroundings of great houses was dramatically changed for the worse. For six or seven years the Howards lived in penury always avoiding Charles's creditors, his commission in the Regiment of Dragoons having been sold for ready money. In January, 1707, Henrietta's only child, Henry, was born, but their lives must have been made the more wretched by a law-suit brought by Charles Howard with the object of getting his wife's interest in her great-grandfather's estate into his own hands, a case which was to drag on for six and a half years while the fortune to which it related grew less.

After living under the assumed name of Smith in order to avoid detection and in circumstances which appear to have caused Henrietta general humiliation she twice persuaded her husband to consider leaving the country. Stories are told of how she once raised the money for the journey, only for it to be spent by her profligate Charles, and then tried to raise further funds by selling her hair for which she was offered 18 guineas; her spouse claiming that he "thought it was more than it was worth". Difficult as it may be to assess the rights and wrongs of matrimonial disharmony at a distance of two centuries it seems impossible to feel other than pity for Henrietta in the situation in which she found herself at that time.

Eventually, about the end of 1713, on the proceeds of the sale of ". . . little trifles in pawn" together with half a year's income from Henrietta's remaining resources, the Howards left England for Hanover.

Horace Walpole tells in his *Reminiscences* that ". . . the young couple saw no step more prudent than to resort to Hanover to endeavour to ingratiate themselves with the future Sovereign of England". Certainly Henrietta seems to have made herself, in Walpole's words, "extremely acceptable" to Princess Sophia. Within months however, the Princess was to die and her death was followed less than two months later by the death of Queen Anne back in England.

Thus, less than a year after setting out, in September 1714, the Howards appear to have returned to England in the train of

George I. At the new court Charles Howard was made groom of the bedchamber of the King, Henrietta a woman of the bedchamber to the Princess of Wales, but in spite of the material improvement in their fortunes, there was no corresponding improvement to their marital affairs. Indeed the quarrel between the King and the Prince of Wales which took place in 1717 deepened the division between them, and when Prince George and Princess Caroline were required to leave St. James's Palace Henrietta Howard determined to accompany her mistress. This was her husband's opportunity to announce that he would no longer consider her to be his wife and to order her to remove her possessions from the apartment which they had shared at St. James's.

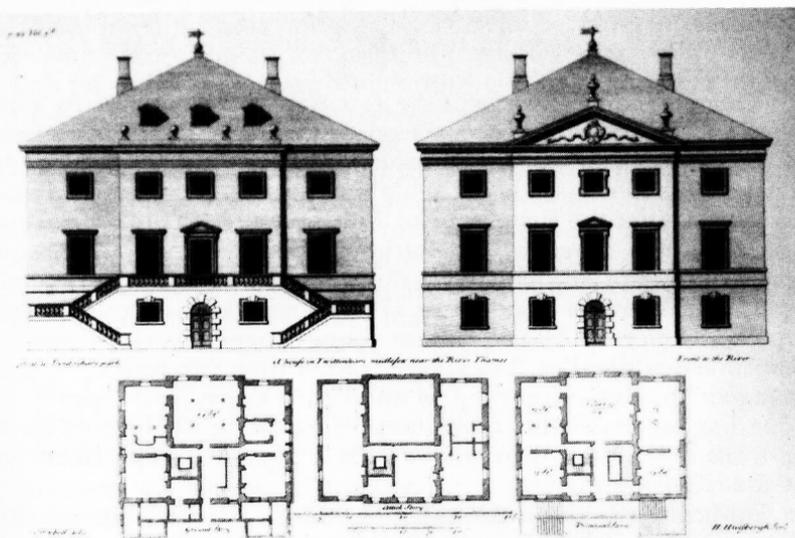
Between 1718 and 1727 Henrietta Howard lived with the Prince's household at Leicester House or at Richmond Old Park during the summer and it was during this time that her closer attachments with the Prince were formed, His Royal Highness transferring his affections from Mary Bellenden, one of Princess Caroline's maids of honour and a friend of Mrs. Howard, who married Colonel John Campbell in 1720.

At this time Lord Hervey, a close friend of Princess Caroline and not always amongst the most charitable in his opinions, had the following revealing words to say of Henrietta while relating that the Prince spent three or four hours every evening in her lodgings: "Good sense, good breeding and good nature were qualities which even her enemies could not deny her; . . . She was civil to everybody, friendly to many, and unjust to none: but had to do with a man who seemed to look upon a mistress rather as a necessary appurtenance to his grandeur as a prince than an addition to his pleasures as a man".

The Princess appears to have accepted the situation in very much the same light, acknowledging that the Prince ". . . must have some woman for the world to believe he lay with . . ." and finding Henrietta a more or less acceptable personage for the role.

In 1723 the Prince made a settlement on Mrs. Howard ". . . to the End Intent and Purpose That some Provision and Way of Liveing may be made for the said Henrietta Howard with which . . . Charles Howard shall not have any thing to do or intermeddle". The settlement consisted of £11,500 worth of stock — mostly in the South Sea Company — a substantial amount of jewellery and the furniture in her apartments at Leicester Square and at Richmond. About the time of this settlement the thought of building a house of her own must have been forming in Henrietta Howard's mind, even though the constant attendance at Court which was demanded of her would clearly make it impossible for her to occupy such a house. John Gay the poet seems to have come

across a design for a house left lying in her apartments at Richmond; she wrote to him in July, 1723 asking that he should not mention ". . . the Plan which you found in my Room. There's a necessity, yet, to keep that whole affair secret, tho' (I think I may tell you) it's almost entirely finished to my satisfaction". In March the next year, Lord Ilay, one of the trustees of the royal settlement began to buy land here at Twickenham acting on Mrs. Howard's behalf and in the course of several deals over the space of some months he assembled a plot of 25 acres between Richmond Road and the River, the land which was to become the park you see from those windows.



Designs for Marble Hill House from *Vitruvius Britannicus*.

The site which had been chosen by Mrs. Howard, her Trustees and advisers was in a most fashionable area, one which all those influenced by the new Palladian taste must have seen as the English equivalent to the banks of the Brenta and was an area in which friends in the Court circle already had houses and property. James Johnson, the Secretary of State for Scotland, had built a house (later Orleans House) just next door in 1710, Alexander Pope was a mile upstream, busy since 1716 with his gardens and grotto, Lord Ilay himself had acquired Whitton Place where he was to build his own Palladian villa and Lord Burlington was not far away at Chiswick.

As soon as the scheme to build was fixed upon Henrietta Howard seems to have been at the centre of a swarm of friends and advisers so full of taste and enthusiasm in architecture and

gardening that it is difficult or impossible to be certain of the extent of each one's influence. The Earl of Peterborough and Alexander Pope both pressed advice on garden layout, the latter saying in correspondence in September, 1724 that he was neglecting his writing to spend more time on Marble Hill. Mrs. Howard and Pope visited the site together with Charles Bridgeman, the royal landscape gardener, and in September that year, Bridgeman was writing to Pope apologizing that he had been busy since their visit but that he had begun on the plan which he would not leave ". . . till 'tis finished which I hope will be about tomorrow Noon".

While all this was going on Lord Ilay had engaged Roger Morris to work on the villa itself and as early as June, 1724 had paid him £200 on account towards "Building the naked Carcass of a house".

There remains, however, the fascinating problem as to who provided the design. My predecessor at County Hall, W.A. Eden, addressed himself to this problem at some length and his conclusion after a study of a highly confusing tangle of possibilities was that the first draft for Marble Hill exists in a drawing now at Wilton House which, although unsigned, he attributed firmly to Colen Campbell — at that time the Prince's own architect. Campbell was engaged in 1724 on works of alteration and repair at Leicester House, where young Roger Morris — still at that time described as "bricklayer" rather than "architect" — was engaged "for Repairing the Old and laying down New Pipes . . ." Eden has suggested that this Campbell drawing might even have been the one found by John Gay in Mrs. Howards's apartment in July, 1723.

However, the problem does not end there, for while all the parts of the puzzle appear to fit convincingly at this point, no further connection with Campbell appears and both Walpole and Swift attribute the design to Lord Herbert, 9th Earl of Pembroke, another member of the Prince of Wales's circle with a passion for building which earned him the label of the 'Architect' Earl. There seems good reason to believe that he was indeed closely involved with the execution of Marble Hill. He had been a friend of Mrs. Howard since he was appointed gentleman of the bed-chamber to the Prince of Wales in 1714 and they remained so until his death in 1749/50.

Eden's arguments seem convincing, that the design, which was subsequently developed with changes in detail rather than in substance, was determined by Colen Campbell, but that he later withdrew from the supervision of the work, with Lord Herbert taking over as the arbiter of taste. No reasons can be advanced with any certainty although Eden offers lines for speculation. Roger Morris was presumably here the executant/builder,

although later, supported by the patronage of the Duke of Argyll and Lord Ilay, he would style himself 'architect'.

It is also significant that preserved with the Marble Hall design at Wilton is a drawing for (or a design based on) Lord Herbert's house in Whitehall, also completed about 1724. In this case Campbell's design, although without the executed attic, was drawn by Roger Morris who has signed it as draughtsman.

When a version of the Marble Hill design appeared in Volume III of Campbell's *Vitruvius Britannicus* in 1725 no architect's name was given for what is described as the New House at Twittenham; Campbell claiming the draughtsmanship.

The close relationship of all involved in this Royal circle of Palladian enthusiasts not only adds to the personal interest of the detective-story which the design of the house presents but underlines for us the firm place which this building occupies in the very centre of the Palladian revival of the 1720's.

The progress of the building work was not particularly speedy. Records of payments made to Roger Morris — most of them by Lord Herbert — show that the house was not completed until 1729. About 1727 there seems to have been a pause in the progress. This was the year in which the Prince became George II. In verses which Swift wrote as a Dialogue between two houses at that time Marble Hill was made to say:

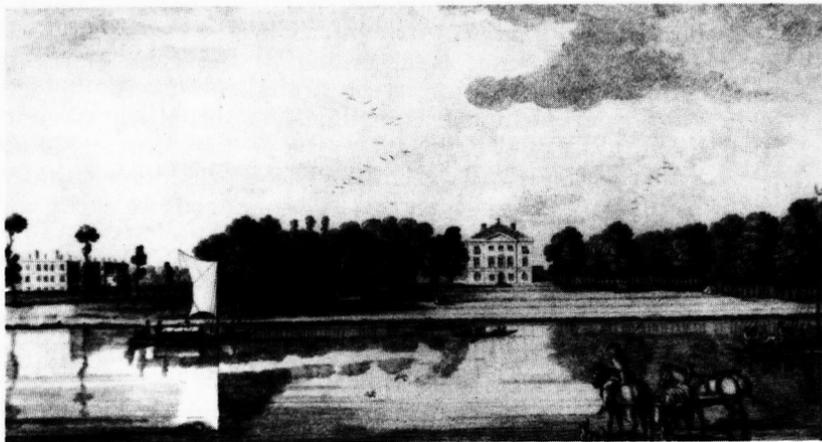
"My House was built but for a Show
My Lady's empty Pockets know:
And now she will not have a Shilling
To raise the Stairs, or build the Cieling"

However, on George II's accession to the throne he increased Henrietta Howard's allowance to £3,000 a year; £1,200 of this was paid as an allowance to Charles Howard for the lifetime of his brother the eighth Earl of Suffolk and in February 1728 Charles Howard agreed to a formal agreement of separation.

The building receipts from Roger Morris were after this made directly to Mrs. Howard herself.

In 1731 Edward Howard, the eighth earl died. Not only was Henrietta relieved of the annual payment to her former husband but the Earl left his personal property to the Duke of Argyll and the Earl of Ilay to hold in trust for his "welbeloved sister in law Henrietta Howard". Henrietta, who was allowed through the deed of separation to keep her husband's name, became Countess of Suffolk and as a peeress she accepted the post of Mistress of the Robes. At this time she wrote to Gay "everey thing as yet promises more happiness for the latter part of my life than I have yet had a prospect of . . . I shall now often visit Marble Hill my time is become very much my own; and I shall see it without the dread of being obliged to sell it".

An increasingly unsatisfactory relationship with the King was soon to be over too. In November, 1734, the Countess left her lodgings at St. James's Palace for the last time and went to live with her brother. Within the year she had married George Berkeley and the couple took lease of a newly built house in Savile Row where Lord Herbert and Roger Morris were both concerned with the completion and survey.



Marble Hill from the river in 1749, taken from a print by Heckell and Mason.

In the following years the Countess must have had all the pleasure in Marble Hill that she had hoped for.

The park and gardens by the river were tended by five gardeners in the summer and three in winter; fruit and dairy produce went from Marble Hill to supply Savile Row and the Countess and her new husband divided their time between their two houses. All the delights and pleasurable routines of life in the villa seem to have occurred as we might imagine them. The ice-house was stocked, the orange trees were tended in their tubs and visitors were entertained as well as a young nephew and niece who were constant members of the household.

When George Berkeley died in Bath in 1746 a year after her own son, the 10th Earl of Suffolk, Henrietta continued to live at Marble Hill, even enlarging the park and making some minor alterations to the house. These alterations were in 1750—51 and were supervised by Matthew Brettingham who had worked at Blickling and was probably recommended to Henrietta by her brother.

By this time Horace Walpole had taken up residence upstream at Strawberry Hill and was a frequent visitor here. Writing in 1765 when the Countess was approaching eighty and

suffering from increasing deafness, Walpole said of her "she has all her senses as perfect as ever; is clean, genteel, upright; and has her eyes, teeth and memory, in wonderful conversation, especially the last, which, unlike the aged, is as minutely retentive of what happened two years ago, as of the events of her youth". Walpole was her admiring friend to the end of her life and had been to see her the evening before she died here at Marble Hill in July, 1767.

I promise to free you quickly to spend your visit enjoying the house. Those of you whose interest in the history of the place is engaged by evidence about you, will find much more detail in the monograph written by Marie Draper and W.A. Eden. At least you will already realize that, far from visiting a royal love-nest, you are in a house where life was from the first as orderly as its architecture suggests!

I shall not detain you with the later history of the house, not even with a further royal connection of a sort when for a few months in 1795/96 Lady Suffolk's great niece let the house to Mrs. Fitzherbert. You may like to know, however, just how the building came into the hands of the London County Council at the beginning of the present century. For the period from 1825 to 1879 Marble Hill was the home of General Jonathan Peel, surveyor general of Ordnance, a member of Parliament and some time Secretary of State for the War Department. It was presumably he who enlarged the windows of the south front — since restored — and built the present stable block. The General's widow lived on in the house until 1887. Her collection of silver, French clocks, porcelain and pictures was sold at Christie's in July that year, but the house, failing to sell, stood empty for over a decade. In an article in *Country Life* in 1900 it was stated "The garden and grounds are a very tangle, as the house has stood untenanted since the stable clock stopped one morning at half-past nine fourteen years ago".

At the time of that article the estate had become the property of William Cunard and his sons, who intended to develop the park as a housing speculation. The following summer, with builders plant on site and roads and sewers being laid out, public feeling ran high against such plans.

A meeting was held at County Hall in Spring Gardens where members of other interested authorities and preservation societies all came together to urge action. In the resulting negotiations the Cunards agreed to suspend their building work on immediate payment of £3,500 and then to sell the property for £70,000 — of which the L.C.C. paid £36,000, Surrey County Council and Richmond Corporation £10,000 each, Twickenham £6,000 and an anonymous donor £5,000. Middlesex County Council and a number of private contributions made up the balance.



The Great Room at Marble Hill after restoration.

In May, 1903 the park was opened to the public by the London County Council.

As recently as the mid 1960's the Council restored the house to the condition in which you see it today. Marble Hill has never been greatly changed and the restoration, apart from making good the results of neglect through the war years, was mainly concerned with putting back the windows of the south front to their original form and with the internal decoration.

To any of you who may be concerned at the thought of restoration to an ideal historical form, rather than that philosophy of simple repair set out in the manifesto of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, I would suggest that when the essential quality of a building lies in the considered balance and harmony of proportion as we see it here in this 'text-book' Palladian villa, then no later mutilation should be allowed to stand to mar that quality. If we have been unfair to Lady Suffolk in our poster, I hope we may have redeemed ourselves in putting to rights the house which she loved so much.