

‘A Maudlin and Monstrous Pile’: The Mansion at Bletchley Park, Buckinghamshire

by

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Bletchley Park is renowned for its historic wartime role, but scant attention has been paid to the building itself. Here the author unravels the complicated building history of successive houses on the site and reveals some intriguing former owners. This study will provide a significant contribution to any discussion on the future of the site.

WARTIME AND MODERN PERSPECTIVES

On 1 August 1939, the Government Code & Cypher School (GC&CS) quit its London headquarters for Bletchley Park (Fig. 1) in Buckinghamshire, where it began to prepare for war. The organisation, which had been established after the Great War as a permanent code-monitoring and code-breaking facility, settled into the Mansion, and began the business of recruiting and training staff, amongst them the brilliant mathematician Alan Turing. The subsequent story of the ‘BP’ code-breakers and their role in the Second World War – particularly the breaking of the German Enigma code and the development of the Colossus computer – has become the stuff of legend over the past thirty years, through a series of books, films and television programmes. Today, the public can visit the site and see the timber huts and concrete-frame blocks, erected between 1939 and 1944, where most of this crucial intelligence work took place.

The Mansion (Fig. 2), now stripped of its wartime character and used as offices and a conference venue, has never played a starring role in this narrative. Its Victorian style was decidedly out of favour in the middle of the twentieth century, and so it was dismissed by wartime members of staff as an eyesore.¹ One recruit, the American architect Landis Gores condemned it as:

... a maudlin and monstrous pile probably unsurpassed, though not for lack of competition, in the architectural gaucherie of the mid-Victorian era... hopelessly vulgarised by extensive porches and solaria as well as by batteries of tall casements in intermittent profusion... altogether inchoate, unfocused and incomprehensible, not to say indigestible.²

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Fig. 1

Aerial photograph of Bletchley Park, taken in 2003, showing the Mansion, the church and the Second World War huts and blocks. Much of the nineteenth-century planting has survived
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Whilst acknowledging the rehabilitation that much Victorian architecture has undergone in the national consciousness since the 1960s, some former code-breakers have found it impossible to revise their wartime assessment of the building. In 1980, Peter Calvocoressi wrote that: 'even from the more generous or quizzical standpoint of today it is not a striking example of the taste of its times and inside it was dreadful'.³ In her memoirs, published in 1990, the BP recruit Irene Young denounced the Mansion as 'irretrievably ugly', describing its style as 'Jacobean and lavatory-gothic'.⁴ As a result of this persistent view, the history of the Mansion and its pre-war owners has been neglected, and often misreported. As if exemplifying this attitude – though no doubt other factors came into play – Chicheley Hall stood in for the Mansion in the popular 2001 movie, *Enigma*.



Fig. 2

The east façade of Bletchley Park Mansion, 2003

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At first glance, the house resembles so many other overblown Victorian villas, of a type that can still be found the length and breadth of England. While this is undoubtedly the chief reason for its omission from the first edition of Nikolaus Pevsner's *Buckinghamshire* in 1960, it is easy to imagine Pevsner concurring with the opinion of Landis Gores. But as it was built in several phases, by two successive but very different owners, the Mansion at Bletchley Park is perhaps more exuberant and eclectic than many comparable houses. Intensely varied in form, in style, and in materials, it presents an impressive array of projecting bays, crenellated parapets, shaped gables and tall chimney stacks, executed in a manner that is predominately – but not exclusively – ‘Old English’, a Tudor-Jacobean mix of red brick, pale ashlar, mock timber framing and tile hanging. It is easy to understand how a mind that embraced the clean and uncluttered lines of Modernist architecture might have been overwhelmed, even repulsed, by this elaboration in the 1940s.⁵ And perhaps the verdict shared by Landis Gores and his fellow recruits was reinforced by that instinct of each generation to disparage the fashions of its fathers. Ultimately, whether we agree with the code-breakers or not, understanding their opinion – seeing the Mansion through their eyes – contributes to our understanding of the atmosphere that prevailed at wartime Bletchley Park. The more restrained Georgian architecture of Chicheley Hall, the Mansion's movie stand-in, would have provided a very different backdrop, and generated quite different feelings, for the members of Special Operations Executive (SOE) who worked there in the 1940s.

Inevitably, the Mansion is seen afresh at the start of the twenty-first century. Although not *avant garde*, and certainly not canonically beautiful, it can nevertheless be appreciated as a typical and extremely interesting product of its period and place, reflecting the taste and ambition of the prosperous Victorians who created it. It is, moreover, a building with a surprisingly complex architectural history, with interleaving phases which are poorly documented and not at all easy to disentangle without resort to the sort of methodical fabric analysis that is usually reserved for much older buildings.

THE HISTORIC ESTATE

Bletchley Park is thought to have originated as a small medieval deer park, probably with a manor house or lodge at its heart. There are numerous reasons for this assumption: not least the very name of the estate; its location on the edge of the former Royal Forest of Whaddon Chase; its distinctively curved boundary; the proximity of the parish church of St Mary, and evidence for a moated keeper's lodge and fishponds.⁶ But of the house or lodge that must have belonged to the park, there is no recognisable sign today.

By the thirteenth century the owners of the estate, the de Greys of Wilton, lived in a house called Waterhall, at nearby Water Eaton. Waterhall was abandoned in the mid-sixteenth century, when the family built Whaddon Hall. Around the same time, the park at Bletchley was dismantled and the land reverted to agricultural use. Then, in 1603, Thomas Grey was attainted for treason; his lands were confiscated and eventually handed over to King James I's favourite, George Villiers, who later became First Duke of Buckingham. In 1675, the Second Duke sold part of the estate, including Bletchley Park, to the celebrated physician Dr Thomas Willis (1621-76). Together with James Selby of Wavedon Manor, Willis's son Thomas (1658-99) bought Whaddon Hall from the Duke's trustees in 1698 and planned to demolish it for its building materials.⁷ Thomas's share of Whaddon Hall, together with Bletchley Park, was inherited by his son, Browne Willis (1682-1760), who came of age in 1703.

BROWNE WILLIS'S WATER HALL

Browne Willis is known to historians as a rather eccentric antiquarian who published studies of cathedrals and was instrumental in the revival of the Society of Antiquaries in 1717.⁸ To the disapproval of his numerous children, much of his wealth was spent pursuing his antiquarian studies and undertaking building works. Returning to Buckinghamshire from Oxford in 1704, following the deaths of his parents, he lived at the rectory in Milton Keynes for three years. During this time, he initiated extensive repairs to the churches of Bletchley⁹ and Little Brickhill. After his marriage in 1707, he began to build a new house at Bletchley, called Water Hall, and at the same time he renovated Whaddon Hall as his principal residence, buying out Selby's share of the property in 1710.¹⁰ In later years he built St Martin's, Fenny Stratford (Edward Wing, 1724-30) in a gothic style, and funded repairs to a number of other churches in the county, such as Bow Brickhill and Buckingham.

Browne Willis's new house at Bletchley Park was given the name Water Hall in memory of the Grey's house at Water Eaton. Most of our information about this building, which was demolished shortly after 1806, comes from Rev. William Cole,¹¹ the Cambridge



Fig. 3
Archaeological survey of the landscape around Bletchley Park Mansion,
showing the position of Water Hall, 2003

© English Heritage, by Nathalie Barrett, Louise Barker and Moraig Brown

antiquary, who was rector of the parish from 1753 to 1767, living next door to Water Hall. He claimed that Browne Willis built Water Hall at a cost of £6,000 to please his wife, Catherine Eliot (died 1724), who had a fortune of between £6,000 and £8,000.¹² It therefore seems likely that Water Hall was begun soon after Browne Willis's marriage; it was completed in 1711. The sum expended certainly implies a large and impressive house; it can be compared with the total cost of £6,585 10s 2d spent on the nearby house of Winslow Hall, by William Lowndes, around 1700.¹³ According to Cole, Browne Willis never lived in Water Hall,¹⁴ but as Willis signed several documents there in the 1720s and 1730s,¹⁵ he may have divided his time between his two houses.

The exact position of this lost house can be determined from map evidence and landscape survey (with only slight earthwork scarps and linear parchmarks showing to the naked eye), to the south-east of the present-day Mansion (Fig. 3).¹⁶ If Willis had built this house at a slightly later date, he might have opted for a Gothic style, in keeping with his personal inclinations. Instead, it comprised a symmetrical central block connected to smaller pavilions by quadrant-shaped screen walls. The pavilions probably contained the kitchen and other services, such as a laundry, a dairy or a brewhouse, while the stables

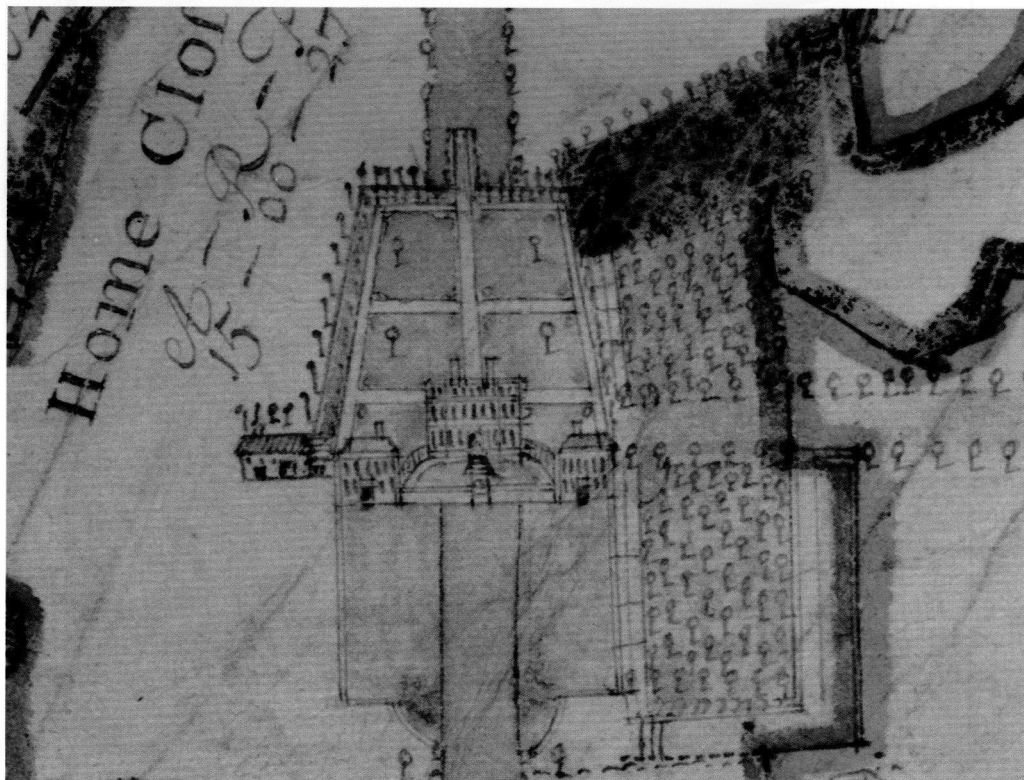


Fig. 4

A view of Water Hall on a map by Benjamin Cole, dated 1718
Courtesy of the Centre for Buckinghamshire Studies, Ma299/1



Fig. 5

A watercolour of Water Hall, painted *c.*1806, just before its demolition

© Sir Philip Duncombe

may have occupied a single-storey outbuilding that stood to the north-west. Around the house, Willis created formal geometric gardens with lawns, bosquets (groves), terraces and a pond (possibly formed from an earlier fishpond). Beyond a ha-ha, the landscaped park was traversed by four avenues of limes and elms. These avenues or ridings were set at right angles, converging on the south-facing house.

Only two representations of Browne Willis's house are known: a perspective view on a map commissioned from Benjamin Cole in 1718 (Fig. 4),¹⁷ and an undated watercolour of *c.*1806 in a private collection (Fig. 5).¹⁸ Although there are some discrepancies between these two visual sources, they indicate that Water Hall was a three-storey building of either seven or nine bays, approached through a walled semi-circular forecourt, and with a broad flight of steps ascending to a central doorway. The building had a continuous solid parapet that hid the roof, but not the four main chimney stacks, whose positions suggest the existence of hips. In the watercolour, the façade is divided into a rigid grid by four pilasters and three plat bands, an effect that must have been enhanced by the contrast between the red brick of the walls and the pale ashlar of the dressings. The tall windows seem to have contained sashes, though this is not conclusive, and the door was part-glazed over three raised-and-fielded panels, with a quatrefoil taking the place of a fanlight above. The flanking pavilions were each two storeys high and five bays wide, with a central entrance. While the map depicts these with hipped roofs, the watercolour shows double-pitched roofs; it is possible that they were re-roofed between 1718 and *c.*1806.

This type of house, comprising a square block connected to service pavilions by quadrants, was still relatively novel in the first decade of the eighteenth century, although its antecedents can be traced back to the mid-seventeenth century, with buildings such as Stoke Bruerne in Northamptonshire (attributed to Inigo Jones, *c.*1635).¹⁹ More recent refinements on this form of house, which may have served as prototypes for Browne Willis and his architect, were Buckingham House in London (attributed to William Winde, 1702-5) and, more locally, Wotton House in Buckinghamshire (for Richard Grenville, completed 1704) and Cottesbrooke Hall in Northamptonshire (attributed variously to William Smith, Henry Jones and Henry Bell, for Sir John Langham, 1702-10).²⁰ A related house, without pavilions but otherwise very like Cottesbrooke Hall, was Hinwick House in Bedfordshire (variously attributed to John Hunt, Henry Bell, Henry Jones, William Smith or even to Richard Orlebar, the owner, 1709-13).²¹ This last house was begun two years after Water Hall, and could not have influenced it. There appear to have been no family connections between Browne Willis and the owners of any of these comparable houses, but they are all sufficiently close to Bletchley for him to have known them, and perhaps even visited them.

Water Hall seems to have emulated the fashionable combination of red brick and light-coloured ashlar found at Wotton House and Cottesbrooke Hall, a bicoloured effect replicated in stone at Hinwick House. The proportions, including the use of strings or plat bands, are most similar to Hinwick. The chimney stacks are disposed in a manner so like Cottesbrooke that similarities in plan-form seem likely. If the depictions of Browne Willis's house are to be believed, however, the more overtly classical elements of these comparable houses were eliminated at Water Hall. Here there were no classical frontispieces, no pediments and no balustrades; indeed, the quatrefoil over the doorway is suggestive of aesthetic leanings in a quite different direction.²² It smacks of 'Gothick'.

The architect of Water Hall is not documented, but the Bletchley Church accounts record that in 1704 a Mr Edwards was paid for 'divers draughts of the Church in order to alter it, viz. drawings for an altar piece and screen etc'.²³ This has been identified as Edward Edwards of Northampton,²⁴ a little known architect who, together with Henry Bell, had been involved in the rebuilding of Northampton after a fire in 1675, including buildings such as All Saints' Church and the Sessions House. In 1677 Edwards and Bell were described as 'experienced Surveyors', and so if this was the same man, Edwards would have been coming to the end of his career when he worked at Bletchley. However, the possibility that Edwards contributed to the design of Water Hall must be taken seriously. Cottesbrooke Hall and Hinwick House, mentioned above, have been attributed to Edwards's colleague Henry Bell, whose main work was the Customs House in his native town of King's Lynn. They have also been attributed to Henry Jones, a carpenter from Lamport, yet another man who was engaged in the post-fire rebuilding of Northampton.²⁵ At the very least, Water Hall can be associated with this particular architectural milieu.

A Mrs Markham rented Water Hall for six or seven years in the 1750s,²⁶ but in 1760 the widow of Browne Willis's eldest son Thomas (1710-56), Frances Robinson of Cransley, took possession of the estate. She sold Whaddon Hall to Mr Selby, and occupied Water Hall until her death in 1767. It passed to her son John ('Jack') (1743-1802), who

had adopted the name Fleming after inheriting the Stoneham estate in Hampshire in 1766.²⁷ Fleming did not live at Water Hall, and shortly after his mother's death the house was let to a Colonel Sabin.²⁸ In 1780, Fleming attempted – unsuccessfully – to sell the house. It was described as 'a complete modern mansion house called Water Hall now in the occupation of Robert Lowndes Esq. being a pleasant situation with every convenient and well adapted Offices for a family with gardens Pleasure Ground &c'.²⁹ Also for sale was a 'good house and convenient out Offices' occupied by a dairy farmer, John Wood. The Lowndes connection is interesting, as Browne Willis's principal residence, Whaddon Hall, had passed from the Selby family into the hands of William Lowndes of Winslow Hall in the 1760s.³⁰ Robert Lowndes was probably the brother of Richard Lowndes the MP, John Willis's former guardian.³¹

In 1793 Fleming succeeded in selling both house and farm to Thomas Harrison (died 1809) of Old Wolverton,³² and in 1806 it was recorded that Water Hall 'has been lately pulled down by its present owner, Mr Harrison'.³³ There is no evidence of the fate of the fixtures and fittings, some of which may have found their way into local buildings. Today all that survives of Browne Willis's property are landscape features, the remnants of terraces and groves. However, throughout the first half of the nineteenth century the pavilions stood 'in a state of abandonment'; garden features and avenues remained distinguishable, though poorly maintained;³⁴ the outlying dairy farm, leased to a family named Lucas, continued to operate, and the stables associated with the house were used as a farm building. According to some, the structure of the Lucas's farmhouse was incorporated in the present-day mansion. However, map regression shows that it probably stood in an area which is now lawn, to the south of the wartime building known as Hut 4.

When the estate was put up for auction in June 1865, the principal lot was purchased by Spencer Richard Harrison, a descendant of Thomas Harrison, who had run the estate since the death of his father in 1858, whilst continuing to live at Wolverton.³⁵ At a second auction in June 1871, Harrison failed to find a buyer.³⁶ Eventually, in December 1877, he succeeded in selling the estate.³⁷ Almost immediately the new owner initiated the construction of what was to become Bletchley Park Mansion.

SAMUEL L. SECKHAM'S 'GOTHIC MANSION'

Accounts of what happened at Bletchley Park in the late 1870s are extremely confused. Following some authorities, Harrison sold the estate in 1877 to a Mr Coleman, 'who built the first part of the present Mansion', then sold it to Samuel Lipscomb Seckham (1827–1901), who 'did more work in enlarging the house'.³⁸ According to others, Seckham was the purchaser in 1877 and 'made some enlargements to the original farmhouse'.³⁹ It has also been claimed that Herbert S. Leon, who bought the house from Seckham in 1883, converted 'an old farm building' into 'a manor'.⁴⁰ This last theory can be discounted immediately, as the Ordnance Survey map of 1881 shows that the old farmhouse had already been demolished and a new house erected on a site to its north. Furthermore, when Seckham put the estate up for sale in August 1881, it was described as a landed property with a 'Gothic mansion in course of construction, suitable for the establishment of a nobleman or gentleman'.⁴¹

Seckham is the most likely candidate as the builder of the Mansion, for a number of reasons. First of all, Mr Coleman remains a shadowy figure, if indeed he ever existed, and secondly, Seckham had the ideal background and experience for this undertaking. As Oxford City Surveyor he was associated (as both speculator and architect), in 1853-5, with Park Town, the first suburban development to be carried out in North Oxford, and a few years later, he designed the Oxford Corn Exchange (1861-2).⁴² At first adhering to the Italianate style, around 1860 he began to experiment with High Victorian trends. Around 1864 he moved to London, and although little is known of his business activities there, it is clear that he quickly amassed a fortune. He must have acquired Bletchley Park in 1877. He is known to have taken out a mortgage for £7,000 in 1878, and may have used this money on the construction of the house between 1878 and 1881. As well as erecting the house, Seckham created new gardens, re-landscaped the park, and planted a new avenue which led from the house to the nearby railway station, which was screened by trees. He also established a new farmstead (Home Farm) at the north end of the estate, some distance from the house.

The Census of 1881 reveals that the only occupant of Bletchley Park was Alfred Collier, Seckham's farm bailiff, while Seckham himself lived at Hanch Hall at Longden in Staffordshire, a house he had rented since 1873.⁴³ Seckham kept a large stock of cattle at Bletchley Park, much of which was sold in 1882-3 (including his bull, Blanche Wild Eyes II), and according to the Census the farm employed fourteen labourers and three boys. Despite Seckham's residence at Hanch Hall, his obituary in the *Northampton Herald* implies that he occupied Bletchley Park at some point.⁴⁴ This is borne out by several passing mentions in local newspapers. In particular, in October 1880 it was reported that Seckham complained at the Newport Pagnell Petty Sessions about smoke from an engine shed by the railway line. This smoke drifted across the Park to the house, where Seckham maintained he had lived for three years. It had blackened the leaves of a lime avenue planted in the previous year, also blackening Seckham's sheep, while his men 'appeared like railwaymen'.⁴⁵

From 1883, Seckham's 'Gothic mansion' was engulfed by his successor's additions (Fig. 6), and in the absence of surviving floor plans from this period it is a struggle to retrieve its original form. The 1881 map (Fig. 7) shows a U-shaped house with three ranges: a north range with an irregular plan; a short east range, and a long, rectangular south range. Analysis of the fabric of the present building proves, however, that there was also a west range, and that the house was arranged around a narrow light well rather than a yard open to the west. Investigation also shows that Seckham must have erected the billiard room at the west end of the south range which, again, is absent from the map. Clearly, the house had not quite been completed when the map was surveyed in 1880. This concurs with the advertisement of August 1881 (see above), stating that the house was still 'in course of construction'.

Only a general idea can be gleaned of how this short-lived house functioned. The east and west ranges probably contained family rooms, while the best reception rooms lay within the south range. The north range was the service wing, with a cellar, service rooms that must have included a dairy, wash-house, kitchen, housekeeper's room and servants' hall, and an attic containing servants' bedrooms.

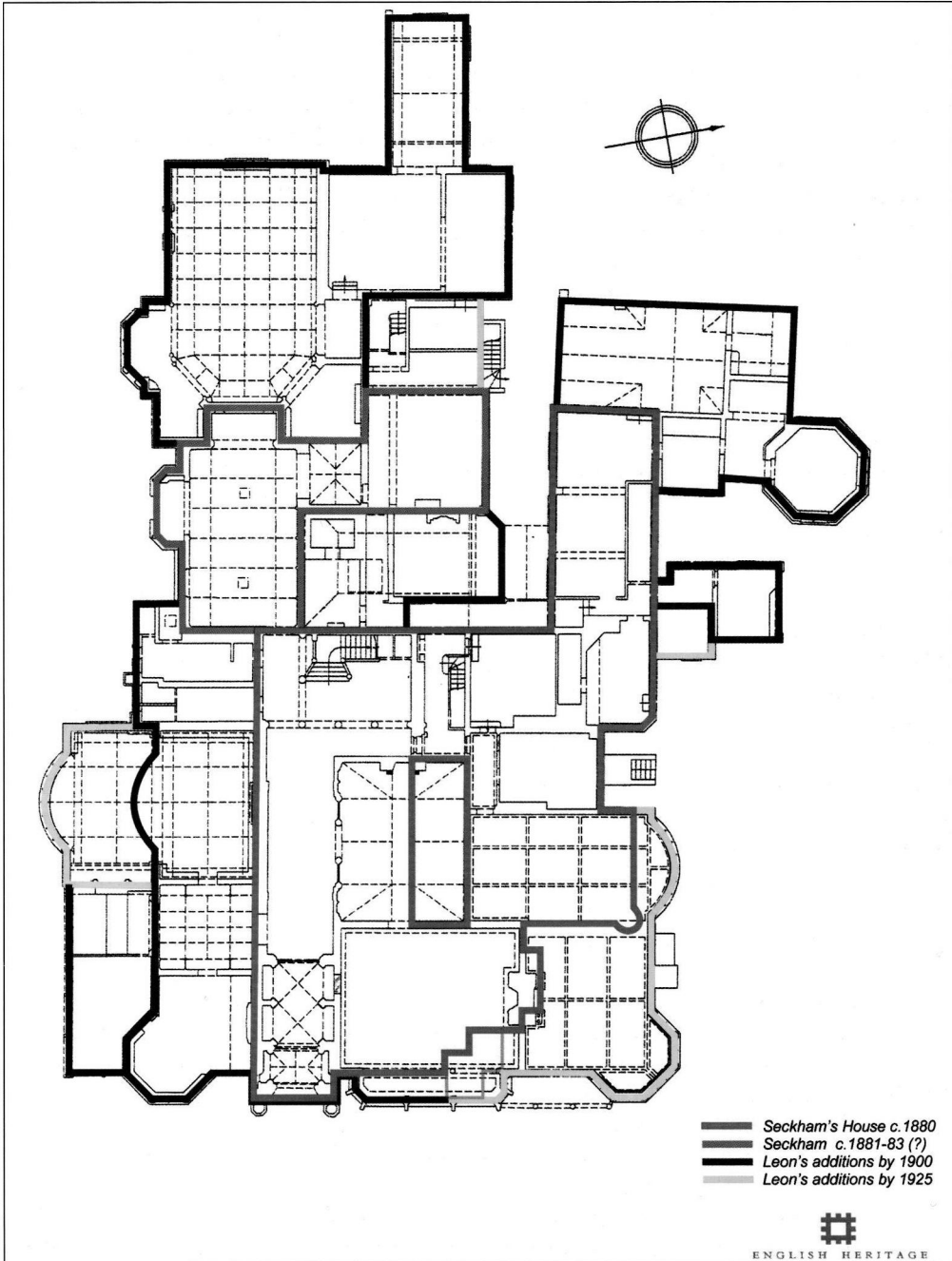


Fig. 6
Phase plan of Bletchley Park Mansion
© English Heritage, George Wilson

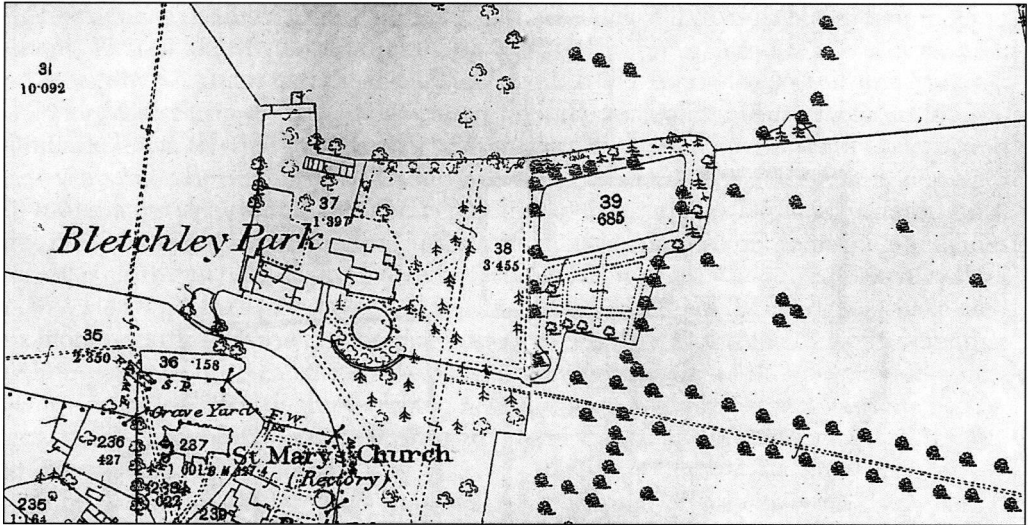


Fig. 7 (above)
1:2500 OS map of Bletchley
Park, published 1881,
showing Seckham's house
largely, but not entirely,
completed



Fig. 8 (left)
Typical Seckham brickwork
and windows surviving
on the north elevation of
the Mansion, with Leon's
Dining Room addition of
c.1906 on the far left
© English Heritage. NMR,
DP003682.jpeg

The architectural vocabulary chosen by Seckham is unostentatious, even suburban in character, reflecting his experience as an architect and surveyor in Oxford. This was a practical family house, not the property of a man who wanted to make a tremendous show of his wealth, or to entertain important guests. The best-preserved parts of his house, the north and west ranges, are of two and a half and two storeys respectively. Externally, both display brickwork (Fig. 8) that is highly characteristic, even diagnostic, of this primary phase of the building.⁴⁶ The bricks are laid in English bond, with bands of pale orange headers alternating with bands of darker orange stretchers, rather than the chequer pattern which is common to this part of Buckinghamshire. Adding to the polychrome effect, the pointing is black and the windows have chamfered blue brick sills. Other diagnostic features include the glazing, and the treatment of the roofs. Some of Seckham's windows survived the later upgrading of the property: those of good (but not best) rooms have transom lights set with coloured glass in a simple geometric pattern, above single-pane casements, while those of servants' bedrooms comprise casements with large square panes of glass and thin horizontal glazing bars. Seckham's gables have wooden bargeboards, decorated with small roundels within squares, and his thin cornices are carved with a cyma recta and hollow. The double-pitched roofs are covered in ungraded Welsh slate with decorative red terracotta ridge tiles (later ones being plain). All of this makes it possible to distinguish Seckham's work from that of his successor.

Rising over the west range, and marking the west side of the light well in the centre of the house, is a square water tower which can be attributed to Seckham although it is not on the 1881 map. The brickwork of this tower is not obviously striped, except on one face, but it incorporates decorative diaper work in blue brick, a material used for window sills throughout Seckham's building. The windows have segmental heads with alternate black and red headers, and the glazing is of the type used for servants' rooms in the north range. Archive photographs of *c.*1900 (Fig. 9) show that this tower originally had a high pyramidal roof with louvered gablet vents. It would have added a strong accent to the roofline of Seckham's house, lending it some Gothic grandeur, but in the early twentieth century the roof was taken down and replaced by a crenellated parapet.

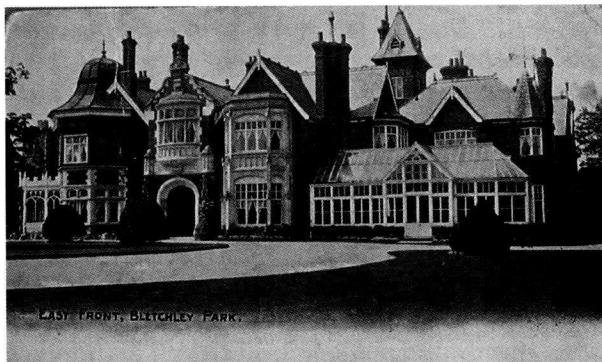


Fig. 9

The east front of Bletchley Park photographed around 1900, showing Seckham's water tower with its original roof, and the large glasshouse
© Bletchley Park Trust

Photographs (compare Figs 2 and 9) also reveal that the ragged north-east corner of Seckham's house survived relatively unaltered into the early twentieth century. A two-storey hip-roofed block occupied the east end of the north range. Lying conveniently

close to the kitchen, this could have contained a dining room on the ground floor and a large bedroom above. This bedroom was lit by a large segmental-headed window under a half-timbered and rough-cast gable. A polygonal turret with a conical roof carrying a weathervane defined the north-east corner of the block, and there appears to have been a substantial stack on the north wall. This corner of the house was completely remodelled around 1906.

The short east range would have contained family rooms, overlooking two diagonally-set paths that met on the line of the eighteenth-century north-south avenue. Photographs show that the north wall of this range incorporated a very tall chimney stack behind which there projected a gabled bay, within which was a hip-roofed canted bay window. All of this was remodelled in the early twentieth century. The 1881 map shows the outline of what may have been a basement area, and a small L-shaped structure which wrapped around the tall stack. Although not shown as such, this may have been a conservatory or garden room, possibly a predecessor of a larger glasshouse erected here in the 1880s.

Unexpectedly, the centre of Seckham's east range, immediately south of the putative conservatory, survives, with an added two-storey bay window. The striped brickwork typical of Seckham's house can be seen to either side of this bay window. The gable is half-timbered, with the distinctive type of bargeboards that are used in the north and west ranges, and the slate roof has decorative terracotta ridge tiles. In the early twentieth century an identical bay was built to the north, evidently reusing bargeboards and ridge tiles to ensure a match. Intriguingly, the 1881 map suggests that a porch projected from the south end of Seckham's east front, in exactly the same position as the present porch, which was not built until 1883.

Seckham's most important rooms would have occupied the south range, overlooking a turning circle for carriages. The south façade was later masked by other rooms, and its original appearance is not documented. However, it probably had half-timbered gables of the type used on the east front. The 1881 map shows that a path or veranda, with solid walls to east and west, ran across the south front for its full length. The location of the main entrance is indicated by a path opening out from the turning circle, offset to the east of the central point of the façade. This position is now occupied by an entrance to a lobby ('garden hall') which separates the morning room from the library; its jambs clearly revealing the thickness of Seckham's south wall. Brickwork to the right of this entrance was exposed during maintenance work in 2003: it is not laid neatly, in a recognisable bond, has unusually thick white mortar courses, and retains patches of heavy waterproof plaster. It seems likely, therefore, that the wall to the back of the veranda was rendered. The main entrance hall and staircase of Seckham's house must have lain beyond this.

The billiard room does not show on the map but surviving patches of striped Seckham-style brickwork show that it was added by him, undoubtedly between 1880 and 1883, as a virtually freestanding, single-storey structure. It just clipped the west wall of the south range, providing sufficient width for a single communicating doorway. A room on its north side, perhaps originally an estate office, but later used as a servants' hall, was erected as part of the same scheme. When the billiard room was later heightened, during the construction of the west wing, it is likely that the decorative ridge tiles, and

the louvered ventilator that straddles the ridge, were reused from its original roof.

Internally, due to the far-reaching alterations undertaken by Seckham's successor, little of the original layout can be retrieved in the south and east ranges. However, several features in the more lowly north range are of his period. Those include windows and doorways with wooden architraves with cyma recta and quadrant mouldings, and two five-panel doors. Staircases with simple turned balusters survive on the north and south sides of the tower, at the juncture of the service rooms and the 'good' rooms, where there is a change in floor level. That on the south side of the tower leads from the ground floor to the first floor, while that on the north gives access to attic bedrooms and the tower room. Four servants' bedrooms in the north and west ranges have modest corner fireplaces with decorative tiled surrounds. Internally, the roof structure of Seckham's house is easily recognisable, as the planking between the rafters and the slates is set diagonally, while that belonging to the later additions is set horizontally.

HERBERT S. LEON'S MANSION

Seckham owned Bletchley Park for only six years, giving rise to the possibility that he built the Mansion as a speculative venture, rather than as his own family home. However, it is likely that he quickly tired of it, perhaps because of the proximity of the railway and its attendant nuisances, or perhaps because of a desire to settle permanently in Staffordshire. For whatever reason, in 1881 he bought Beacon Place near Lichfield and in spring 1883 sold Bletchley Park to Herbert Samuel Leon (1850-1926).⁴⁷

Leon clearly found Seckham's house too modest for his needs, and began to enlarge and aggrandise it, converting a relatively unpretentious gentleman's residence into an opulent country house. Leon was a wealthy stockbroker with a daughter and a son by his first wife, Esther Julia, who had died in 1875. His second marriage to Fanny Hyam produced two more children. Though of Jewish extraction (the family name was originally Isaacs), Leon dissociated himself from faith of any kind, embracing the Rationalist movement and acting as Chairman of the Rationalist Press Association. He sat on Buckinghamshire County Council and involved himself in local council affairs. He was elected the Liberal Member of Parliament for Buckinghamshire North in 1891, but lost his seat in 1895. In 1911 he was created baronet, in recognition of his longstanding position as adviser on international finance and the American market in which his firm, Leon Brothers, specialised. Leon was clearly a man who required a splendid house, where he could entertain powerful contacts, such as the Prime Minister David Lloyd George.

It is difficult to work out the chronology of Leon's work at Bletchley Park: once again, given the absence of documentary evidence, one must rely on maps and photographs, and an examination of the building itself. The date '1883' and monogram 'HSL' over the main entrance of the house suggest that Leon began to extend Seckham's house immediately. Indeed, this work must have been largely complete by the end of 1884, when Leon and his wife were in residence and engaging with local society. The identity of the architect who enlarged the Mansion in 1883-4 is not recorded, although Edward Swinfen Harris is said to have designed new buildings in the stable yard.⁴⁸

The work of 1883-4 (Fig. 10) re-orientated the house and must have entailed the removal of many relatively new internal features. Most significantly, Leon moved the

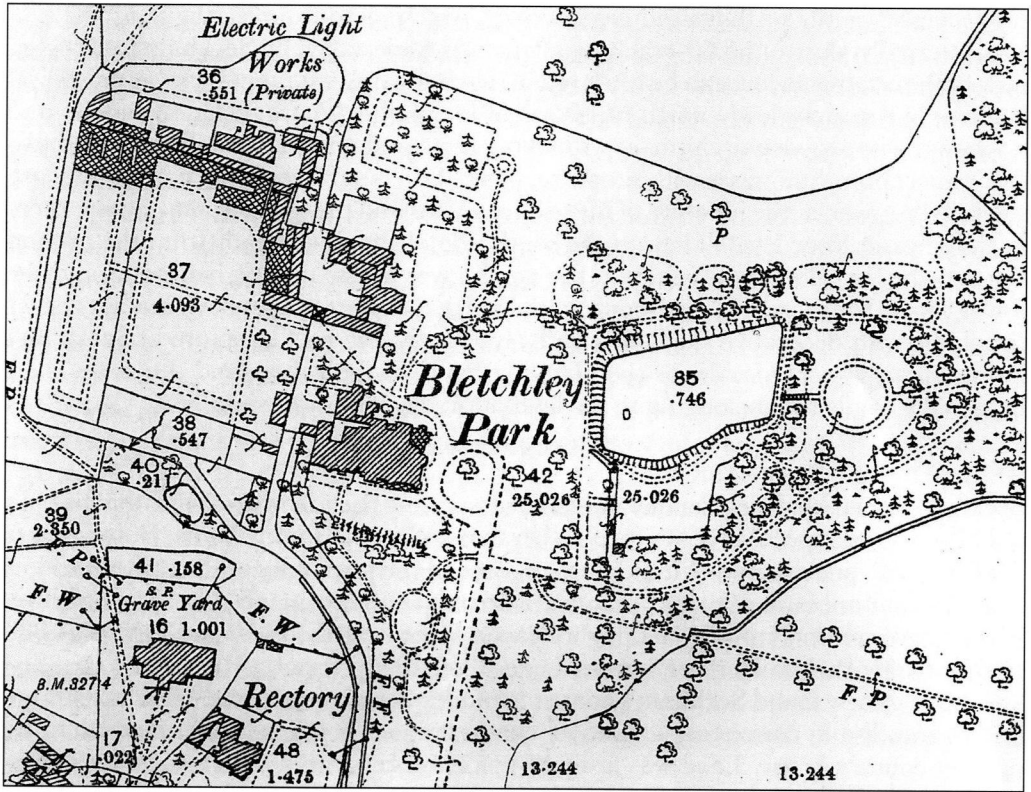


Fig. 10 (above)
1:2500 OS map of Bletchley Park, published 1900, showing the first phase of Leon's additions



Fig. 11 (left)
The south front and Rose Garden of Bletchley Park Mansion from *The Gardeners' Chronicle* 1914, fig. 114

main entrance and carriage sweep from the south to the east front and created a new staircase hall within the west end of Seckham's south range. A new morning room, a gothic-style loggia (later glazed to become a conservatory) and a library were erected against the old south front, replacing the veranda and masking the earlier façade (Fig. 11). The new first-floor rooms on the south-east corner, including the corner 'turret', contained Lady Fanny Leon's suite. Seckham's billiard room was retained, but engulfed by a substantial new south-west wing with servants' rooms on its north side, and the ballroom, with a nursery and guest rooms above, on the south side. A luggage lift served the guest rooms. The north (service) range was considerably enlarged to the west and north, with a new octagonal dairy or still room. The wash-house was replaced by an off-site laundry, built on nearby Church Green Road.

As completed around 1884, Leon's house was a confection in terms of both style and materials. Some unity was attained through the continuous use of the same basic building materials: red brick and Welsh slate with terracotta ridge tiles. But the brick was now laid in Flemish bond, rather than the striped English bond of Seckham's period, and the ridge tiles were plain. With the use of red brick and slate, the resemblance between Seckham's and Leon's work stops, showing that the two men had very different taste. Leon deployed copious pale ashlar dressings with carved mouldings and other detailing, for door and window surrounds, mullions and transoms, quoins and parapets. Mock timber framing and tile hanging also made appearances. On the south and east fronts, almost every bay received some distinguishing elaboration. The south-east corner was given special attention, being wrapped by a squat polygonal turret crowned by a copper-covered cupola with swept eaves.

In commissioning the design for the main façades, Leon may have stipulated that the building look as though it had grown organically, with bays added and remodelled at different times throughout its history. In particular, the treatment of the south-east corner, where a mock-timber-framed gable collides clumsily yet deliberately with the cupola of a turret, is strongly suggestive of such an intention. The absence of any stylistic uniformity may have stemmed from a similar notion, or may simply have reflected Leon's lack of commitment to a single aesthetic approach, preferring instead to draw on different traditions to achieve the lavish result that he desired.

Further extensions were made in a similar spirit by Leon in the early twentieth century, perhaps around 1906, when planning permission was granted for some unidentified work.⁴⁹ The library was extended to the south, and a conservatory on the north-west corner of the house was replaced by a drawing room, dining room and bedroom extension. A new porch or veranda of three arcaded bays was added to give independent access to the dining room. The extension to the library appears on a photograph published in 1914, providing a *terminus ante quem* for this work.⁵⁰ This phase can be identified not just by photographic evidence, but by its distinctive dark red brickwork, laid in English bond, and by its stone crenellations.

Much survives of Leon's interiors, both from *c.*1883 and *c.*1906, despite decades of office usage. In 1980, former BP code-breaker Peter Calvocoressi remembered: 'a lot of heavy wooden panelling enlivened here and there by Alhambresque (Leicester Square, not Granada, Andalusia) decorative fancies'.⁵¹ These interiors are just as flamboyant

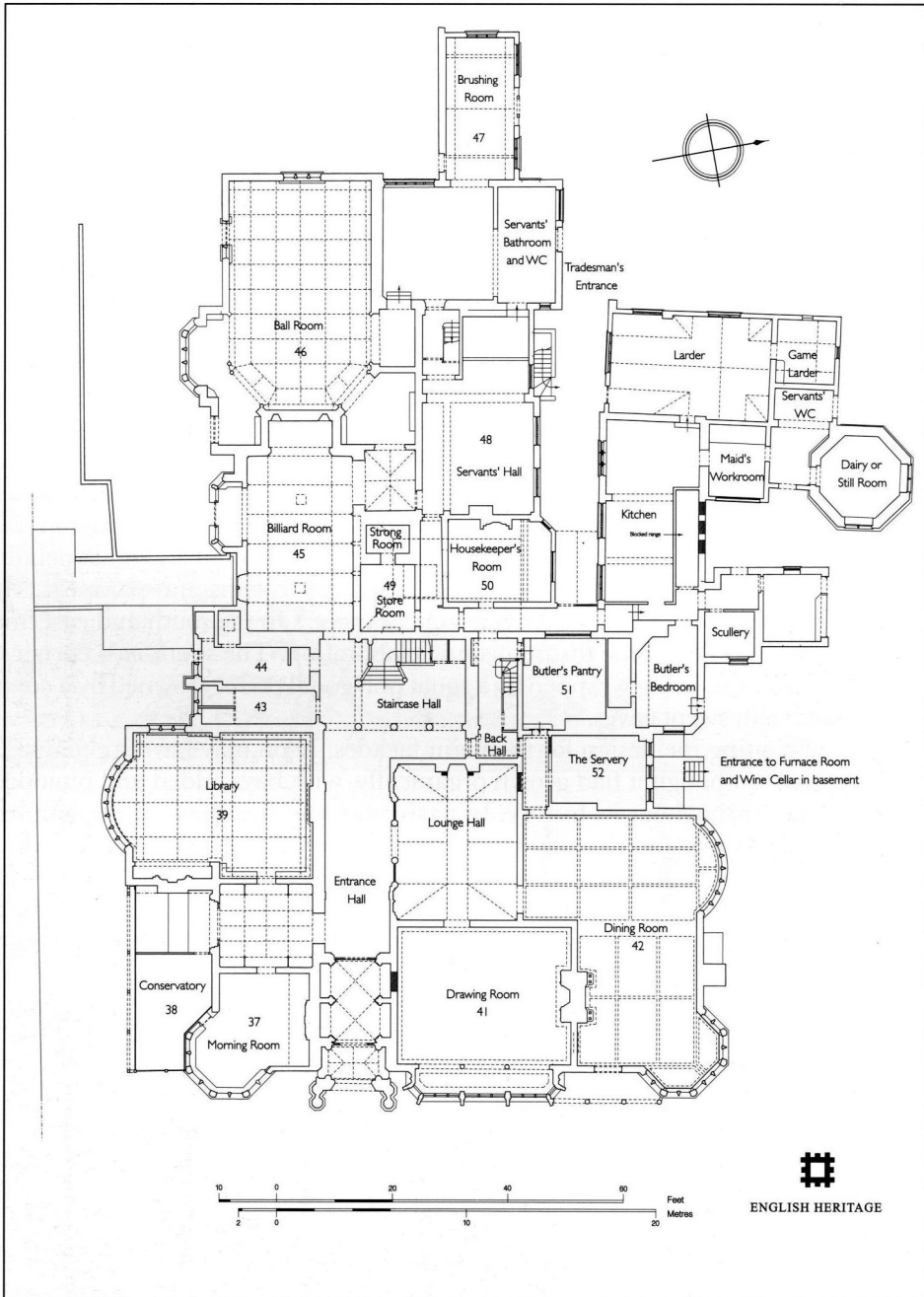


Fig. 12
Ground-floor plan of Bletchley Park Mansion
© English Heritage. NMR, by Imogen Grundon and George Wilson

and eclectic as the exterior of Leon's house, with many features drawing on the chunky, monumental version of the Gothic Revival that entered the mainstream of English architecture in the 1870s and 1880s. This sits alongside elements that can only be described as Neo-Jacobean or Baronial, and others that utterly elude classification.

Upon entering the house through the vaulted Gothic-style inner porch (Fig. 12), one passes through a dark entrance passage with panelled walls and ceiling. To the right, a three-bay arcade with polygonal columns of grey marble opens into the lounge hall (Fig. 13), with its elaborate stone and marble chimneypiece and painted glass roof. This fills Seckham's open light well. Lying ahead is a spacious stair hall (Fig. 14), defined by pink marble columns.⁵² The timber staircase, with elaborately carved newels and an openwork balustrade, is lit by a large mullion-and-transom window which, unfortunately, has lost its original glass. Over this is one of the numerous decorative plaster ceilings found throughout the house. These have different designs, ranging from the elaborate foliate panels set into a framework of timber ribs in the coved ceiling of the ballroom (c.1883, Fig. 15), to the relatively simple geometric patterns of ribs in the drawing room and library (c.1906). Perhaps Leon's taste had simplified in the intervening years.



Fig. 13

The Mansion, Bletchley Park, looking into the Lounge Hall
© English Heritage. NMR, AA044337, photograph by Patricia Payne



Fig. 14

The Mansion, Bletchley Park, the Main Staircase

© English Heritage. NMR, AA044338, photograph by Patricia Payne

The billiard room (Fig. 16) was inherited from Seckham, but it was surely Leon who added a series of solid arched trusses, with corresponding responds and matching panelling, all in pine, underneath its ceiled collar. From a plain, functional space, the room came to resemble a medieval great hall. Beyond this, the ballroom was larger and more ornate, with a coved ceiling and oak linen-fold panelling. Back on the south front, the principal room was the dining room (Fig. 17), greatly enlarged around 1906, with substantial mahogany columns superseding the weight-bearing function of the original south wall. These were removed in 1937 (see below), but similar columns of the same date survive in the window bays of the adjoining drawing room. While the drawing room received a new fireplace *c.*1906, the Jacobean-style oak chimneypiece in the dining room may have been reused. Many other original features such as panelling, fireplaces and doors (of varying status, suitable to the rooms they occupy), survive throughout the house. The greatest losses have been to the bathrooms and service rooms, most of which were stripped of their fittings during the Second World War.

Leon did much to improve the grounds around the house, planting hundreds of trees, creating a large kitchen garden, a new rose garden, rockeries, lawns, a maze, grottoes

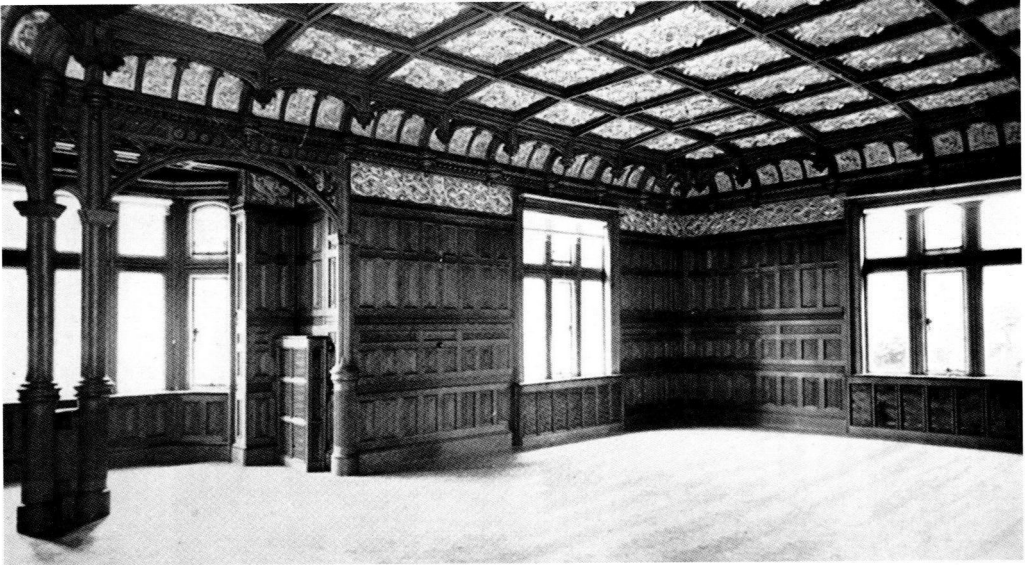


Fig. 15

The Mansion, Bletchley Park, Ballroom from 1937 Sale Particulars

© Bletchley Park Trust



Fig. 16

The Mansion, Bletchley Park, Billiard Room

© Crown Copyright. NMR, BB93/26938, photograph by Dank Silva



Fig. 17

The Mansion, Bletchley Park, Dining Room from 1937 Sale Particulars

© *Bletchley Park Trust*

and sinuous woodland paths.⁵³ He enlarged the pond, which could now be referred to as a 'lake' and featured an island. Before the war, the pleasure gardens were open to the public on August Bank Holiday. Although the maze, rose garden and kitchen gardens have been lost, along with most of the parkland, Leon's planting still provides the backdrop for the Mansion and the wartime structures on the site.

AFTER LEON

Sir Herbert Leon died in 1926, and Lady Leon in 1937. The heir to the baronetcy, George Edward Leon, did not want to live at Bletchley Park and put the estate up for auction. Much of the property, including the house, was bought by Hubert Faulkner, a builder and speculator who lived locally, at Staple Hall. He created a new road called Wilton Avenue on the line of the south avenue, divided some of the land into plots for housing development, and intended to demolish the Mansion itself. He is said to have stripped out several of the more portable fixtures and fittings, including two pairs of mahogany columns from the dining room, several fireplaces, bathroom fittings and the luggage lift in the guest wing.

Before Faulkner's scheme could be finalised, Admiral Hugh Sinclair (known as 'C', Chief of the Secret Intelligence Service, or SIS) decided that Bletchley Park – with its strategic position on the railway line between Oxford and Cambridge, as well as its proximity to the Defence Teleprinter Network repeater station at Fenny Stratford – would offer a perfect location for GC&CS and SIS in the event of war. Not waiting for the government to provide funding, in May 1938 Sinclair bought Bletchley Park (the house, with fifty-eight acres of land) with his own money. Shortly afterwards, in September 1938, he staged a rehearsal deployment of code-breakers and MI6 sections at Bletchley Park, under Captain Ridley RN, in the guise of a shooting party. They were to return for the duration on 1 August 1939.

In the course of the war, the surrounding estate was transformed with the erection of huts and blocks, but the Mansion changed little. Most of the rooms were used as offices, lecture rooms, teleprinter rooms or mess rooms. At the beginning of the war, the water tower housed a small, cramped radio room, partitioned off from the tanks. The aerial ran across the roof to a tall cedar tree thirty yards from the east front of the house, then to an elm tree close to the lake, and back to the Mansion roof to complete the loop.⁵⁴ Before long this aerial was dismantled and BP depended on Y-stations (secret listening stations) for the reception of messages. There is a rumour that Churchill stayed overnight in one of the attic rooms so that he could remain in touch through the radio room in the tower. Like so many other rumours concerning Bletchley Park, this cannot be substantiated.

A list of personnel in the Mansion, with corresponding room numbers, survives from December 1940.⁵⁵ However, this simply offers a snapshot of how the house was used at a single moment. Few rooms retained the same occupants for long, and as the use of the available space changed, new partitions were built (for example, over the dining room) and existing walls were removed (for example, over the ballroom). Most of these alterations were minor and reversible. The occupants of the offices included the senior staff, such as the Director, Commander Edward Travis, whose secretariat used the bedroom suite in the east range throughout most of the war. Until the building of Hut 9, the Administrative Section under Captain Bradshaw occupied much of the ground floor, including the bitterly cold loggia. Other sections based in the Mansion are too numerous to mention, but they included SIS (which returned to London in 1942), the Home Guard and the Local Defence Office. Documents reveal the (possibly fleeting) existence of certain rooms such as a photographic room (documented in 1942), and a first-aid post and showers (again, documented in 1942), but their exact locations cannot be established.⁵⁶

The first rooms to be used for teleprinters were the billiard room, the ballroom and 'room 5'. It was probably in 1940 that a new teleprinter room (since demolished) was built on the south side of the billiard room, entered through the bay window. In February 1941, a gap between Hut 4 and the teleprinter room was bridged, and a hatch added, so that operators could pass teleprints through to the Naval Section.⁵⁷ A telephone exchange (demolished) and a new toilet block were added in November 1941.

In 1939 Admiral Sinclair brought a top London chef to cook for the code-breakers and meals were served by waitresses at long tables in the dining room,⁵⁸ just outside was

a NAAFI kiosk. Before long, two mess rooms evolved, the principal dining room and the directors' dining room, the latter with its own kitchen, positioned to the rear of the house, today known as the NAAFI canteen. When a purpose-built canteen opened on Wilton Avenue in 1943, the principal dining room in the Mansion closed and the kitchen was converted into a decontamination centre.

The main part of GCHQ moved out shortly after the war, retaining some buildings at Bletchley Park for training purposes. The Mansion was handed over to the General Post Office (GPO), later British Telecom (BT), which reversed some wartime alterations. Panelling was put back in the entrance hall, for example, and shelving fitted in the library. BT maintained the house as practical office space, making only minor alterations to the building. It moved out in 1993. The house is now occupied by the administrative offices of the Bletchley Park Trust, which was set up in 1991.

CONCLUSION

The history of Bletchley Park is inextricably tied up with the personalities of its very different owners: the antiquary Browne Willis, who built a stylistically restrained but highly fashionable house in the early eighteenth century; the speculative developer and entrepreneur Samuel Seckham, who erected a new Gothic mansion in a workaday style in 1877-83, and the Jewish financier Herbert Leon who, in 1883-4, transformed Seckham's house into the ornate country house we see today. While each of these men made a great impact on the property, their efforts did not always endure. Today, Browne Willis's work consists merely of earthworks, while Seckham's contribution was all but obliterated by Leon, and overlooked in subsequent historical accounts of Bletchley Park. On the other hand, Leon's character, taste and ambition are still strongly represented by the Mansion, which stands resolutely at the heart of the Park.

Recent interest in the Mansion at Bletchley Park has been stimulated not by its connection with its historic owners, but by its wartime use, an association that ensured its status as a listed building, at grade 2, in 1990. It is debatable, however, whether the interior of the Mansion has the power to evoke the experience of the code-breakers, something better understood by visiting the huts and blocks on the site. Its rooms are still redolent of their Victorian and Edwardian heyday, of the lavish parties hosted by the Leons. Nevertheless, the Mansion has become one of the most enduring visual symbols of wartime Bletchley Park, indelibly etched into the memories of those who worked on the site, even those who considered it a 'maudlin and monstrous pile'.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This article derives from a study of Bletchley Park undertaken by English Heritage in 2003-4. I am especially indebted to the work of Imogen Grundon and Nathalie Barrett, who took lead roles in investigating the site, but must also thank my colleagues Richard Hewlings, Linda Monckton, Paul Pattison, Pete Smith and Andrew Williams for their insights. George Wilson drew the phase plan of the house, and Philip Sinton adapted the archaeological survey for publication. Finally, I am grateful to the Bletchley Park Trust for giving us unfettered access to the building.

NOTES

CBS = Centre for Buckinghamshire Studies

TNA = The National Archives

1. Marion Hill, *Bletchley Park People Churchill's 'Geese that Never Cackled'*, Sparkford, 2004, 28.
2. R. Winks, *Cloak and Gown: Scholars in America's Secret War*, London, 1987, 271-2.
3. Peter Calvocoressi, *Top Secret Ultra*, 1980, 1.
4. Irene Young, *Enigma Variations. Love War & Bletchley Park*, Edinburgh, 1990, 79.
5. Working with Philip Johnson after the war, Landis Gores assisted on a number of buildings inspired by Mies van der Röhe, such as the Rockefeller Townhouse, 242 East 52nd Street, New York (1949-50). Working alone from 1951, he continued to work in a Modernist style, for example with the house he designed for himself at New Canaan, Connecticut.
6. For a discussion of this see: L. Monckton *et al*, 'Bletchley Park', Building Report Series No. B/010/2004, English Heritage, 2004, 48 ff.
7. Edward Legg, *Early History of Bletchley Park 1235-1937*, Bletchley Park Trust Historic Guides No. 1, 1999, 10.
8. For the life and character of Browne Willis see: Nicholas Doggett, 'Willis, Browne (1682-1760)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 2004 (www.oxforddnb.com); John Nichols, *Literary Anecdotes of the Eighteenth Century*, London, 1814, 217; J. G. Jenkins, *The Dragon of Whaddon*, High Wycombe, 1953.
9. For the work on Bletchley Church see Jenkins 1953, 56-61.
10. Jenkins 1953, 10.
11. Francis Griffin Stokes (ed.), *The Bletchley Diary of the Rev. William Cole, 1765-67*, London, 1931.
12. Jenkins 1953, 16, note 2.
13. *The Wren Society*, XVII, 54-75. I am grateful to Pete Smith for making this point.
14. *Victoria County History: Buckinghamshire*, 4, London, 1927, 275; Legg 1999, 11.
15. Centre for Buckinghamshire Studies (CBS) PR75A/3/1; D/BASM/9/6.
16. See Monckton *et al* 2004, 61-7. Legg 1999, 11, thought that the house 'stood at right angles to the present building, with its foundations probably under A block'.
17. CBS Ma 299/1 and 2.
18. This watercolour is in the collection of Sir Philip Duncombe, former Chairman of the Bletchley Park Trust. It has been trimmed and pasted into a volume of Lysons *Magna Britannia Buckinghamshire*, together with a number of other watercolours of local buildings in the same style and format, many of which are signed J. Buckler and dated 1806.
19. Other high profile examples include Burley-on-the-Hill (1696-1700; John Lumley).
20. John Heward and Robert Taylor, *The Country Houses of Northamptonshire*, RCHME, 1996, 40 and 141-5; James Lees-Milne, *English Country Houses: Baroque 1685-1715*, Woodbridge, 1986 (first published 1970), 122-3; 296; Andor Gomme, *Smith of Warwick*, Stamford, 2000, 201.
21. Lees-Milne 1986, 136; Gomme 2000, 177.
22. A view of Old Whaddon Hall, prior to its rebuilding in 1822, shows that this building had quatrefoils in the gables. The Gothick front was presumably built by Browne Willis.
23. W. Bradbrooke, 'The Reparation of Bletchley Church in 1710', *Records of Buckinghamshire*, xii, 1927-33, 248; Jenkins 1953, 235. This date is misquoted as c.1709 in Howard Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects 1600-1840*, 3rd edition, 1995, 334.
24. Colvin 1995, 334.
25. For this attribution see: Lees-Milne 1970. See also H. M. Colvin and L. M. Wodehouse, 'Henry Bell of King's Lynn', *Architectural History*, 4, 1961, 41-62.
26. Stokes 1931, 320 and 331.
27. Stokes 1931, 168-170.
28. Stokes 1931, 304.
29. Legg 1999, 12.
30. Whaddon Hall, rebuilt in 1822, was to become an important outstation of Bletchley Park during the Second World War.

31. Stokes 1931, 84.
32. Legg 1999, 12.
33. Lysons and Lysons, *Magna Britannia Buckinghamshire*, London, 1813, 512.
34. Legg 1999, 13.
35. Legg 1999, 14; Sales Particulars 1865: CBS D/GA/5/5.
36. Sales Particulars 1871: CBS D/WIG/2/6/7.
37. Advertisements for sale of stock and farming implements belonging to Spencer Richard Harrison ('who has sold the estate'), *Croydon's Weekly Standard*, 5 and 12 May 1877.
38. Ted Enever, *Britain's Best Kept Secret Ultra's Base at Bletchley Park*, Sparkford, 3rd edition, 1999 (2002 reprint), 41; Low n.d., 6; *In Search of the Lyons* 1991, n.p.
39. Legg 1999, 15.
40. This probably originated with an account in the *North Bucks Times & County Observer*, 24 June 1911. It was repeated several times, for example in the obituary of Lady Leon, *Bletchley & District Gazette*, 23 January 1937.
41. *The Times*, 20 August 1881, 16.
42. Peter Howell, 'Samuel Lipscomb Seckham', *Oxoniensia*, 41, 1976, 337-47; see also Tanis Hinchcliffe, *North Oxford*, New York and London, 1992.
43. Seckham's wife came from the West Midlands.
44. Howell 1976, 338, citing *Northampton Herald*, 8 February 1901.
45. *Fenny Stratford Weekly Times*, 14 October 1880.
46. The recurrence of this style of brickwork on the south range of the stable yard indicates that this part of the stable complex was also built by Seckham.
47. The architect he appointed to work at his next home, Whittington Old Hall, again near Lichfield, was M. H. Holding of Northampton. It is conceivable that Holding had helped Seckham to design the house at Bletchley Park.
48. DCMS list description, NGR: SP8637733929.
49. Minutes of Fenny Stratford UDC (CBS DC/14/1/3).
50. *The Gardeners' Chronicle*, 31 October 1914, 290.
51. Calvocoressi 1980, 1.
52. It is difficult to make sense of the 1883 work without presuming the creation of the present lounge hall and stair hall. However, the memoirs of a local resident maintain that the marble for the staircase was delivered in 1915 (Mrs Perkins' Memoirs, Bletchley Park Archive).
53. See articles in *The Gardeners' Chronicle*, 1893, 1900 and 1914.
54. Enever 2002, 22.
55. TNA HW 14/9.
56. TNA HW 14/62.
57. TNA HW 3/135.
58. M. Smith, *Station X: The Codebreakers of Bletchley Park*, London, 1998, 5.

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