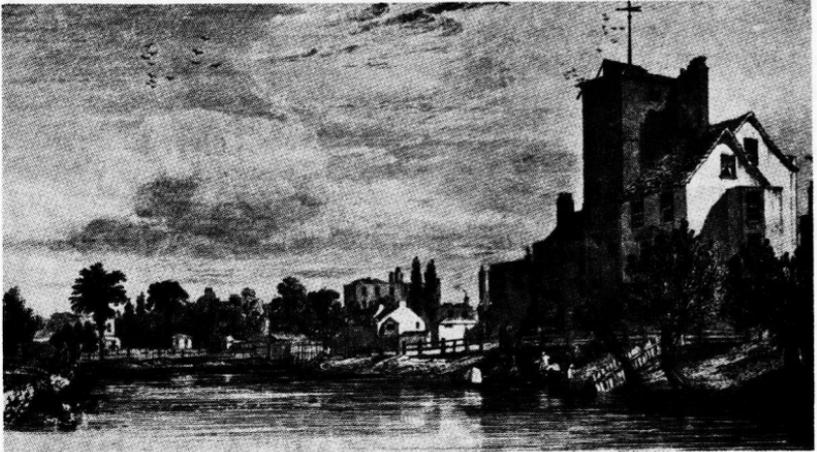


CANONBURY TOWER, ISLINGTON, LONDON, N.1

By P. J. Broomhall

Canonbury was a manor before the Norman Conquest. Passing from Saxon to Norman ownership, it finally became part of the vast estates of the de Berners family. In 1253 Ralph de Berners made a grant of the lands, rents and appurtenances in Iseldone to the Prior and Canons of the Priory of St. Bartholomew in Smithfield. The area thus became known as the Canon's Burgh.



Canonbury Tower, 1827

It was one of the Priors, William Bolton, who built Canonbury House during his term of office between 1509 and 1532. Prior Bolton's rebus, an arrow (bolt) through a barrel (tun) can still be seen on a doorway at No. 6 Canonbury Place and on the external wall of one of the octagonal garden houses or gazebos now incorporated into a Victorian house known as 4 Alwyne Villas.

Bolton died in 1532, a few years before the Dissolution of the Monasteries, and it was his successor, Prior Fuller who surrendered the Priory and its lands to the Crown in 1539. Henry VIII bestowed the Manor of Canonbury on Thomas Cromwell.

After the latter's execution the King provided the divorced Anne of Cleves with an annuity of £20 per annum, of which came "de Manerio nostro de Canberye in comitate nostro Middlesexiae". In 1547 the Manor was granted by Edward VI to John Dudley, later Duke of Northumberland, who was executed in 1553 for his abortive attempt to place Lady Jane Grey on the throne. In 1557 it was granted to Lord Wentworth, who in 1570 sold it to one John Spencer for £2,000. John Spencer was a clothworker from Suffolk and was popularly known as "Rich Spencer". He became an Alderman of the City of London, Sheriff in 1583 and finally as Sir John Spencer, Knight and Baronet, Lord Mayor of London in 1593. Canonbury House at this time stood in open fields, the nearest houses of London being nearly 2 miles away.

Sir John Spencer had an only daughter Elizabeth, who was heiress to his vast fortunes, and the story goes that she was courted by Lord Compton, who lived at Mocking Hall, Tottenham, nearby, but her father objected to the match and confined her in Canonbury Tower. After more than a year of separation the young Lord, disguised as a baker, drove in a baker's cart over the fields to Islington and Elizabeth escaped in a baker's basket to freedom and marriage. Sir John disowned his daughter, but in 1601, after Lady Compton had given birth to a son, Queen Elizabeth herself was able to effect a reconciliation by approaching Sir John Spencer with the request that "with her he would stand sponsor to the first off-spring of a young couple, happy in their love, but discarded by their father". His astonishment was only matched by his delight on discovering that the child was his own grandson, to whom the vast fortune eventually went, together with the Canonbury Estate. Lord Compton was created Earl of Northampton in 1618. Canonbury Tower and Canonbury House has remained the property of the family ever since, though the present Marquess of Northampton sold large sections of the outlying portions of the Canonbury Estate after the Second World War.

The Comptons lived in the house until about 1605. Sir Francis Bacon took a lease in 1616 and held it for nine years. During the eighteenth century the Rt. Honourable Arthur Onslow, Speaker of the House of Commons, was the tenant for some time. James Boswell notes in his journal on Sunday, 26 June

1763, that he walked out to Islington to Canonbury House and took tea with Dr Oliver Goldsmith. In the nineteenth century Washington Irving, romantically hoping to be inspired by Goldsmith's muse, rented his room at Canonbury Tower; while Charles Lamb, when he lived in Islington, loved to visit the Tower, "never weary of toiling up the steep winding stairs and peeping into its sly corners and cupboards".

In 1907 the fifth Marquess of Northampton, in spite of dire threats from local residents, removed the ivy that covered the whole structure. It is of interest to note that one trunk of ivy was 9" thick and that the growth had made holes as much as 3 feet square in the brickwork. Very considerable repairs had to be carried out. A further restoration was carried out by the late Agent to the Northampton Estate in 1952 and the property is now occupied as the headquarters of the Tavistock Repertory Company, which company has adapted the adjacent King Edward's Hall, built by the fifth Marquess, as the Tower Theatre.

Canonbury Tower itself is 66 feet high and about 17 feet square. The walls vary in thickness from 4 feet to 2 feet 6 inches and are built in brick. The Tower contains only a staircase which rises round a central well, now a column of cupboards, in a series of short easy flights punctuated by quarter landings, running almost the entire height of the building. From the top of the Tower, as might be anticipated from Canonbury's high position, a magnificent view is obtained southwards to St. Paul's Cathedral and the river. It is curious that the Tower, unless it was a survival of the keep tradition, was built apparently for no other reason than to command a prospect. Prior Bolton must have been one of the first people to appreciate landscape.

To the south and to the west of the Tower are timber-framed additions with brick infilling covered in stucco, containing a large number of rooms, approached at different levels from the central staircase. These rooms were originally lighted by casement windows with oak mullions and transomes, replaced in the eighteenth century by sash windows. One of the original oak casements was found buried in the south wall and had been stuccoed over at some period during its history.

In the south extension to the Tower the staircase gives access to two remarkably fine and well preserved rooms, respectively

known as the Spencer Room on the first floor and the Compton Room on the second floor. The Spencer Room is simply panelled in oak, the doors, windows and the corners demarcated by fluted pilasters with capitals of ionic character. The panelling is surmounted by a frieze of boldly treated foliage. The chimney piece has an overmantle of two enriched panels framed by pilasters which culminate in human busts. The Compton Room, though slightly smaller than the Spencer Room, is much more richly treated. The panelling is more elaborate and the pilasters, with plinths carved with human masks and capitals of Corinthian type, are covered with strap work. The door to the staircase in the Tower has a cresting of strapwork. The frieze has a pattern of shells with masks on a console-like bracket above each pilaster. In one corner of the room Sir John Spencer's arms appear in the frieze. They occur also above the chimney piece which has an overmantel with two panels, each containing a carving of a female figure.

A possible comment on the tenure of Sir Francis Bacon (then Attorney General) in the early part of the seventeenth century is the inscription painted on the wall of the top room of the Tower. It dates apparently from the reign of Charles I and takes the form of a list of the sovereigns of England in very much abbreviated and anglicised Latin which can be wrought, with an effort, into hexameters. Between Elizabeth and James there is a capital letter followed by a chipping out of the plaster so that the following few letters are completely obliterated. Until recently this capital letter was believed to be an F and was of considerable interest to those who support the theory of Francis Bacon's right to the throne. After cleaning the inscription Mrs Baker was able to show it to be a capital E so that those who thought that it was a secret reference to Francis Bacon are disappointed. The fact that the list of names is composed in ill-scanning hexameters enables one to guess the damaged word between "Succedit" and "Jacobus" and also suggests how the third line may have ended

Elizabetha Soro Succedit E (amque)
Jacobus
Subsequitor Charolus Oui Longo
Tempo (re vivat or regnet)

The translation would run 'Elizabeth her sister succeeded (Mary) James (succeeded) her. Charles follows and long may he live or reign.' The cleaning of the inscription, while disappointing to those who support the Baconian theory, seems to indicate that the word in question was not Francis but Eamque.

The 1952 restoration was carried out when serious outbreaks of dry rot and age-old damage by death watch beetle were discovered in various parts of the Tower. The feet and junctions of many of the main oak posts were found to have been almost entirely eaten away by death watch beetle. The bottom five feet of one post originally 10" \times 10" had been reduced to 3" \times 2". A reinforced concrete lintel was introduced, and specially made iron bands and straps were provided to secure the joints of old oak timbers which, after treatment, were considered sufficiently satisfactory to remain. It took about a year to complete the treatment and restoration which has proved effective, at least up to the present.

Canonbury Tower and the adjacent Canonbury House, which also has interesting plastered ceilings, one carrying the date 1599, were inherited by the Marquess of Northampton's son and heir, Earl Compton, on his coming of age in 1968. Lord Compton, however, has settled the Estate on his heirs of the Title, and the present Trustees are continuing to maintain the family tradition of a personal interest in Canonbury and the preservation of this interesting historical monument for the benefit of future generations.