

## Asgill House

Of the several notable houses in Richmond which were built on the site of Henry VIII's royal palace in Richmond, Asgill House is perhaps the most original in design. It is also among the last villas of importance to be erected on the banks of the Thames.



Some writers think that the design of the house was partly influenced by the pre-existing foundations of one of the octagonal turrets in the west corner of the former palace. No tower, however, is shown at this point in the drawings of the palace or in mentioned in the Parliamentary survey of Richmond.

Asgill House was built on the site of the old palace brewhouse. In 1711 Richard Hill, who lived at Trumpeters' House exchanged some land – including the brewhouse – with Colonel Cholmondeley. The colonel sold the brewhouse and grounds to Richard and Edward Fitzwater in 1733 then sold them back to his son – 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl of Cholmondeley - in 1734. The Earl mortgaged the brewhouse in 1746 to John Rice, and Benjamin Smith was the tenant from 1748 to 1752. Moses Hart bought it in 1756 from 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl of Cholmondeley and John Rice. Hart's daughter Rachel and her husband, Michael Adolphus lived in it as tenants and when Hart died later that year, he left the property to them. The Adolphuses almost immediately sold the property to Sir Charles Asgill.

Sir Charles Asgill (d. 1788), for whom the house was built, had risen through the ranks from a collecting clerk to become a highly successful banker. He held office as Lord Mayor of London in 1757-8 and in 1761 was created a baronet. His son – also named Charles – was involved in a dramatic incident during the American War of Independence. He had joined the command of Marquis Cornwallis and was taken prisoner at the siege of Yorktown, Virginia. In May 1782 George Washington ordered that, as a reprisal for the death of an American officer, one of the English captains should be executed and the lot fell on Charles. Fortunately, through the intervention of Washington's ally, Louis XVI of France, his life was saved. (Lady Asgill had appealed to the French Prime Minister who had informed the King of Charles's plight).

Asgill House was one of the first major projects of the architect Sir Robert Taylor (1714-88). Following the profession of his father, he had trained as a mason and sculptor. Though as a sculptor he received some important commissions – such as that of carving the pediment on the Mansion House in the City of London – he failed to achieve artistic success and decided to take up architecture. Through his diligence and his keen business sense he eventually became one of the most prosperous and prolific architects of his time and in 1769 succeeded Sir William Chambers as Architect of the King's Works. Prior to his work on Asgill House, Taylor had been engaged by Sir Charles to design his London banking house at no. 70 Lombard Street (built c.1756). The date of the building of Asgill House is put at around 1760. It is the smallest of all the villas that Taylor designed. The rooms are grouped on three sides of the vaulted entrance hall and staircase – the latter being ingeniously planned to save as much room space as possible. The ground and first floors both have a central octagonal room flanked by two oblong rooms. Andrea Casali – an

Italian artist working in England between c.1741-66 – provided mural decorations. Asgill's lease was extended in 1785 for another 50 years.

During the time Sir Charles resided at Asgill House – until his death – the villa was called Richmond Place. After his death in 1788, the house became the property of James Whitshed Keene (c.1731-1822, a Member of Parliament and a former surveyor-general of the works. A print dated 1814 (a) describes it as "the residence of Whitshed Keene." He appears to have left by 1820 (b) and was succeeded, briefly, by a Mr. Osbaldston and then by Mrs. Palmer in 1822 (c) - when the name was changed to Riverside Villa - who died in 1832. The house later passed to a General Carpenter who was rated for the property in 1838.

In the early years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Asgill House was described as:-

"...situated at a small distance from the river on a raised ascent; the lawn behind it, which is, in a great measure, open to the view, rises gradually to its termination, while the verdant surface is broken with beautiful trees and well imagined plantations; so that the whole offers to the eye a very highly decorated piece of garden scenery." (d)

The next owner, who appears in the local directories from 1838-67, was Benjamin Cohen, Justice of the Peace and Deputy Lieutenant of the county of Surrey. He married the niece of Sir Moses Montifiore, who presented the couple with an elaborate marble fireplace which was installed in Asgill House (the fireplace was smashed beyond repair by vandals during the period when the house was unoccupied in the 1960s). Cohen made some extensive additions and alterations to the building at the cost of between £2 and £3,000. He may also have been responsible for the raising of the side roofs, which took place sometime between 1832 and 1841 (e). (The roof has only recently been restored to its original appearance).

Cohen was followed in 1868 by John Philip Trew, who is entered in the directories from that year until 1880. **The Richmond and Twickenham Times Almanack and Directory** for 1881 lists Asgill House, but gives no name for the occupier. The next owner was James Bracebridge Hilditch (b. 1843) – son of the "Richmond painter" George Hilditch (1803-57) – who lived there from 1882 till his death in 1920 (f). James Hilditch was extremely active in local affairs. He was a member of the Richmond Vestry from 1884, a Justice of the Peace from 1893 and in 1899 was elected Mayor of Richmond. He did everything in his power to safeguard the town's amenities and played a leading part in getting the Richmond footbridge, lock and weir built between 1890-1894. He took a great deal of interest in local charities and was a trustee of Michel's Almshouses, treasurer of the Royal Hospital and was much involved in the moves which resulted in the building of Christ Church, Kew Road.

After the death of Hilditch in 1920, his widow continued to live at Asgill House, at least up to 1939. No entry for the house appears in the local directory for 1940. By May 1945, Mr. Henry Ward had become joint occupier with Mr. H. Stirling Webb. Ward, who occupied the house until 1966 (g), represented the fifth generation of a family long resident in Richmond. His ancestor, Samuel Ward (b.1732) had come to Richmond as a young man and had taken rooms at no.11 The Green. In 1760 he had married Ann Collins, heiress daughter of the owners of no. 12.

After 1966, Asgill House remained on the market for about two years until the lease was bought from the Crown Commissioners by the present owner Mr. Fred Hauptfuhrer. Mr Hauptfuhrer has been responsible for the present restoration with the aid of the architect Donald Insall. This painstaking operation was begun in May 1969 (h) and has involved the lowering of the roof and the removal of the Victorian entrance and kitchen wing. The work was completed in November 1970. Taylor's villa will now, therefore, be realised in its original 18<sup>th</sup> century design.

### References

- a Owen, S. Villa at Richmond: residence of Whitshed Keene, Esq. [print]
- b Keene's name appears in Richmond rate books from 1790-1810  
No rate books held for 1811-19  
No entry in 1820 rate book
- c Evans, J. Richmond and its vicinity. 1824. [gives Mrs Palmer as its owner]  
Harding, J.D. Asgill House, Richmond, the villa of Mrs Palmer. 1831.[print]  
Harding, J.D. .. Riverside Villa, formerly call Asgill House, seat of the late; Mrs Palmer. 1832. [print]
- d The Thames... the engravings executed by William Bernard Cooke from original drawings by Samuel Owen, Esq. Vol. 2. 1811
- e Brayley, E. W. A topographical history of Surrey. Vol. 3. 1850  
On Harding print dated 1832 (above) roof is not shown as raised.  
Cooke, W.B. Richmond, taken near Asgill House – the seat of Benjamin Cohen, Esq. 1841. [roof is shown as raised]
- f Local directories
- g Local directories 1948-1966 (none held for 1941-47);  
Electoral registers from May 1945 – 1966 (none held for 1941-44)
- h Richmond and Twickenham Times 16<sup>th</sup> May 1969

**Further reading**

- Binney, Marcus "The Villas of Sir Robert Taylor." in **Country Life** July 6<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> 1967
- Cloake, John **The Palaces and park of Richmond and Kew. Volume II: Richmond Lodge and the Kew palaces.** 1996
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- Local History Notes: Richmond Palace**  
**Local History Notes: Trumpeters' House, Richmond**  
**Local History Notes: Cholmondeley Walk, Richmond**
- Moses, John "Asgill House- a very Palladian design?" in **Richmond History**, No. 20, 1999, pp. 2-8

More information on Asgill House is available from the Local Studies Collection.