

York House, Twickenham

Built in the 17th century (but added to in subsequent centuries), this fine house stands at the eastern end of a drive which is entered at the junction of Richmond Road and Church Street. It was acquired by the Twickenham Borough Council in 1924 and since 1965 it has been the municipal offices of the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames, housing the Mayor's parlour, committee rooms and two public halls. By 1990 most of the council staff had been transferred to the new Civic Centre next door and major restoration and renovation work was carried out in York House.



York House stands well back from the road with gardens to the east and south linked to its riverside garden by an elegant stone bridge. It would seem that the history of such a building should be well-documented. However, this is far from the case, although some progress has been made with the publication of The Borough of Twickenham Local History Society's **Occasional Paper No. 4 York House, Twickenham** in May 1990.

York House occupies part of the site belonging from Tudor times at least, to Yorke Farm, which had an estate of 45 acres with a further 77 acres of common fields in Twickenham, Whitton and Isleworth. The earliest references to the farm are found in documents of the 15th and 16th centuries when it was in the possession of the Yorke family and formed part of the royal manor of Twickenham. Later both Queen Elizabeth and Edward VI granted Yorke Farm to members of their households.

In 1636 it was acquired by Andrew Pitcarne, a groom of the King's Chamber, who paid £400 to Philip Eden and Sir John Heydon. Pitcarne lived there until his death in 1640. His widow Charity inherited the property for her life – she died as Lady Poole in 1653. Moses Glover's map of the Hundred of Isleworth (1635) depicts the site just after Andrew Pitcarne had acquired it, and shows a largish building covered in scaffolding and surrounded by a number of smaller structures, some of which line the roads. Pitcarne also owned the site now known as Orleans House, shown on Glover's map as the residence of Lady Falkland.

Stella Campbell in her article **The Hyde Family and York House, Twickenham** says that one may conclude that Glover's map in fact shows the building of York House as "this would agree in date with the building of York House." This statement has in the past been queried by various authorities – Pevsner's 1951 edition of **Middlesex** and the **Inventory of Historical Monuments in Twickenham** (1937) – but the existence of an early 17th century stairway in the central part of the building supports Campbell's theory. This view is further supported by a 21-year lease of land on 1st February 1637 issued by Andrew Pitcarne for land in Whitton in which he instructs his tenants to pay the rent "at the new dwelling home of said Andrew Pitcarne...called Yorke's Farme, lying in Twickenham."

The Parliamentary Survey dated 16th June 1650 gives a description of the property –

"...all that capital messuage called Yorke farms in Twickenham houses, buildings, structures, granaries, stables, dovecots, gardens, orchards, flower gardens, lands, meadows, pastures...hereditaments of all sorts..."

This was the estate that in 1656 Charles Pitcarne, Andrew's son, assigned to Lancelot Lake and Richard Franklyn "to await the inheritance of the Earl of Manchester." The Earl was resident in Twickenham for two of his children were baptised at the church – his daughter Lucy in 1655 and son Charles in 1656 – and his wife died at Twickenham in 1658. He also paid the church rate in 1659 and 1660. An "Action for recovery" at Syon Court on 24th May in passing notes that the Earl was already in occupation of 'Yorke Farme.'

Edward Montagu, 2nd Earl of Manchester (1602-1671) had succeeded his father as Earl in 1642. He came to Twickenham during a period of retirement. He hailed from Huntingdonshire, the family castle being Kimbolton, and matriculated at Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge in 1618 – the year after Oliver Cromwell went down from the same college. Montagu accompanied Prince Charles (later Charles I) to Spain in 1623 and on his return was made MP for Huntingdon, holding the seat until 1626 when he was created Baron Montagu of Kimbolton and thus raised to the House of Lords. In 1628 Cromwell, also from a Huntingdonshire family, succeeded him as MP for the town. Their lives were finally to come together in 1642 at the Battle of Edgehill when, as members of the Eastern Association, Manchester commanded a regiment of foot and Cromwell a troop of horse. Prior to this, Manchester had established himself as a leader for the popular or puritan party in the House of Lords and, in January 1642, had been charged by the king with high treason – this charge was later dropped.

In 1644 Manchester had Cromwell under his command at the Battle of Marston Moor, but by the October he had lost his heart in the war and was accused by Cromwell of incompetence after his handling of the army at 2nd Battle of Newbury. Manchester resigned from the army in 1645, but as Speaker of the House of Lords he continued to hold a prominent position in Parliament and between January 1647 and March 1648 was joint keeper of the Great Seal with William Lenthall, Speaker of the House of Commons and incidentally an inhabitant of Whitton.

In 1649, having opposed the trial and execution of Charles I (his former travelling companion), Manchester retired from public life. As we have seen, he came to Twickenham about 6 years later with his third wife, Essex, the daughter of Sir Thomas Cheke. Essex died in 1658 and he married Ellinor Wortley in the following year. By this time he was deeply involved in the plans to restore the monarchy and, as the re-appointed Speaker of the House of Lords, he welcomed Charles II on 29th May 1660. In 1661 he was appointed Chancellor of the University of Cambridge for a second time – on this occasion holding the appointment for life; and at the Coronation on 23rd April 1661, his services were recognised when he was asked to carry the Sword of State. In the same year 'his great house he dwelling in' was valued for rateable purposes at £30 in the Twickenham Parish survey.

1661 was also the year when the ownership of Yorke Farme changed. It was conveyed to 'Sir Henry Hyde...Lord Cornbury sonne and heir apparent of the right honourable Edward Earle of Clarendon, Lord Chancellor of England' for £3,500. It was described as –

"all that capitall messuage or dwelling house called Yorke Farme and all those two closes of pasture lying and being there adjoining unto the said capitall messuage conteyning by estimacion six acres of pasture ground..."

The connection of the Lord Chancellor, Lord Clarendon, with York House is perhaps the most tantalising of all the stories connected with it. The house was never in his name, but in that of his son, Lord Cornbury. However, Lord Clarendon was assessed for hearth tax on 37 hearths in Twickenham in 1664 and for 43 in 1666 and the vestry records confirm his claim on Manchester's old pew in the church.

The Lord Chancellor certainly wrote letters from Twickenham (in 1662 and 1666) and during the Great Fire of London in September 1666, his 'goods' were sent from his London house by 'lighters' to Twickenham. Pepys, in his diary for 1667, refers to Twickenham in connection with Clarendon's flight from London. Clarendon bequeathed his 'landes and house at Twitnam' to his second son, Lawrence Hyde, later Earl of Rochester, who sold it in 1689 for £3,000. Why Clarendon's ownership was obscured by the contract being made out in the name of his son is not known, but Stella Campbell suggests that possibly, even in 1661 at the height of his powers, Clarendon was building up his reserves against the sudden and presumably inevitable loss of powers which finally came in 1667. York House after this date was occupied by tenants, but Lawrence Hyde appears to have used it from 1674 until 1692.

Rochester sold the estate to Sir Charles and Lady Tufton. In 1710, Lady Wentworth wrote that –

"for £5,000 one could buy Lady Tufton's house. It is the most convenient house I ever saw, all the offices wonderful good, it was the Queen's grandfather's (Queen Anne's mother was Anne Hyde, first wife of James II), it stands in the middle of a garden."

With the Tufcons begins a 'blank' patch in the history of York House, for although some of the names of the owners and occupiers are recorded, there is a good deal of uncertainty and lack of detailed information about them. James Whitchurch emerges as the owner between 1746 and 1786.

Whitchurch died in 1786 and two years later was succeeded there by Major James Webber, a rather undistinguished if not unsuccessful career soldier. He was followed in 1796 by York House's first notable foreign resident Ludwig, Count von Starhemberg (1762-1833). Starhemberg had a distinguished diplomatic career which began in The Hague in 1792. He came to London as Ambassador from Austria in 1793, acquiring York House three years later. His purchase of the house may have come through his friendship with the Berry sisters, Mary and Agnes, who lived at Little Strawberry Hill. Mary's comment in 1797 that she was "seeing much of the Starhembergs" hardly suggests a newly made or casual acquaintance. He remained in England until 1807 when he was recalled to Vienna (he also succeeded to his father's title of Prince in the same year). Starhemberg returned to this country on 10th May 1809 as Mary Berry recounted :-

"I went to the door [this was in London] to see who it was, and found it was Prince Starhemberg, but so disguised that he could hardly be recognised. He had rather a long black beard below his chin and a blackwig. In this disguise he had crossed Holland, and

had come over in a fishing-boat, which brought him to Aldeborough in Suffolk where he was with us between two and three o'clock in the afternoon. He stayed till four, when he went to see Mr. Canning."

Starhemberg remained for a further two years before again being ordered home. He then retired from diplomatic life for a number of years and seems to have retained York House until 1818, although it was reported empty in 1810. Starhemberg and his wife were an extremely popular pair who seem to have enjoyed the company of their Twickenham neighbours the Misses Berry and Mrs Anne Damer of Strawberry Hill, for Mary reports a number of informal gatherings when all were present. Although those she records seem to have taken place in London, there must have been similar occasions at Twickenham.

Euseby Cleaver, Archbishop of Dublin, took York House as a tenant in 1812. Cleaver was the son of the Rev. William Cleaver of Twyford and brother of William Cleaver, Bishop of St. Asaph who was immortalised by Thomas de Quincey in **Confessions of an English Opium Eater** (1821). Euseby went to Ireland as chaplain to the Marquess of Buckingham. He became Bishop of Cork and Ross in 1789 and was later that year translated to the sees of Ferns and Leighlin. He was a victim of the troubles of 1798 in which he lost a great deal of personal property when his palace was plundered. Eleven years later he was raised to the Archbishopric of Dublin, but declining mental health caused him to retire from Ireland, first to Twickenham in 1812 then later to Tunbridge Wells where he died in 1819. The sale of York House was advertised in **The Times** on 3rd July 1817, where it was described as the residence and property of Prince Starhemberg.

The next resident at York House was a lady who enjoyed considerable fame during her lifetime, but who is rather less known today – Mrs Anne Seymour Damer (1748-1828), the sculptress. She was the daughter of the Hon. Henry Seymour Conway and Caroline, Countess of Ailesbury (daughter of the 5th Duke of Argyle), and the god-daughter of her father's close friend, Horace Walpole. At the age of 5 she took up temporary residence at Strawberry Hill when her parents were posted to Ireland. Anne's friendship with Walpole lasted throughout his life and on his death in 1797 she inherited Strawberry Hill for her lifetime.

Anne married the Hon. John Damer in 1767, the marriage was not a success and they separated 8 years later. In 1776 he shot himself at the Bedford Arms in Covent Garden and from this time Anne began her career as a sculptress in earnest. She took up residence at Strawberry Hill with her mother in 1798. One of her visitors at this time is said to have been Mrs Siddons, whose portrait hangs in the hall at York House, to the left of the Mayor's parlour. In 1803 she lost the companionship of her mother who had died at the age of 83, and with that event went the pleasure in Strawberry Hill, although it was not until 1811 that she finally surrendered it in favour of the next heir, the Countess of Waldegrave. Seven years later, Anne Damer returned to York House, the former residence of her friend Prince Starhemberg. One of her many guests was thought to have been Queen Caroline, the estranged wife of George IV.

Anne's talent was not great, but she was considered an exceptionally gifted amateur in an unusual field. **The Gentleman's Magazine** recorded that she was "as eminent in sculpture as her contemporaries Marian Crosway and Angelica Kauffmann were in Painting." Amongst her works are the heads of 'Thames' and 'Isis' on Henley Bridge. It is doubtful,

however, that the several bas-reliefs mounted into the walls of what was the loggia of York House – they depict dancing putti after the style of Della Robbia – have anything to do with Anne Damer. Anne died in London on 28th May 1828 and York house passed to Sir Alexander Johnston and his wife, Anne's cousin.

Sir Alexander Johnson (1775-1849) was brought up in India where he became fluent in Tamul, Telugu and Hindustani. He was sent back to England and entered Lincoln's Inn. In 1799, after his marriage to Lord William Campbell's daughter, he obtained the post of Advocate-General of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). In 1805 he became Chief Justice there, returned to England where he was knighted by the Prince Regent and in 1811 went back to Ceylon as President of the Council. He was responsible for many reforms and the re-organisation of the government of Ceylon. Throughout his life he was called upon to give the government guidance on the administration of the East India Company and on his return to England in 1819, he helped to establish the Royal Asiatic Society.

The Johnstons made only limited use of York House and on several occasions let it out. Amongst their tenants was the Dowager Duchess of Roxburghe, widow of the 4th Duke who had died in 1804. She married the Hon. John Tollemache on 19th August 1806 and he died at York House on 13th February 1837. She survived her husband by only a year, dying in Richmond. Both of them were outlived by his mother, the formidable Louisa, Countess of Dysart who died at the family home, Ham House in 1840.

A later tenant was William Lowther, Earl of Lonsdale (1757-1844). Lonsdale is reputed to have been an extremely popular figure in Twickenham, possibly because of his advanced views on Sunday observance, for he thought that the common people should not be stopped "from amusing themselves with exercises of the field, Cricket etc." after the hours of divine service. He also objected "to the power of the magistrates to indite a House in which the fiddle should be heard" on a Sunday. He was essentially a simple man who put his family before his political ambitions, much to the fury of his patron Sir James Lowther the 5th Baronet, from whom he inherited the title of Viscount Lowther and a very considerable fortune. He was created Earl of Lonsdale in 1807 and died at York House on 18th March 1844.

York House eventually became the property of the Misses Johnston who sold it in 1864 to the Directors of Coutts Bank, acting as agents for the Duc d'Aumale who acquired it for his nephew the Comte de Paris. Both the Comte and Comtesse de Paris were grandchildren of King Louis Philippe who had resided first at Highshot House and later at Orleans House, which in 1864 was the residence of the Duc d'Aumale. Louis Philippe Albert, Comte de Paris (1838-1894) had married Marie Isabel, Princess of Orleans, Infanta of Spain, the daughter of Antoine, Duc de Montpensier at the Catholic Church in Kingston on 30th May 1864. Sixteen months later their first child, Amelie Louise Helene, the future bride of Carlos I, King of Portugal, was born at York House. In later years she and her son King Manuel were to return to Richmond upon Thames in exile.

Two further children were born to the Comte and Comtesse de Paris at York House, Louis Philippe Robert, Duc d'Orleans (6.2.1869-1926) and Helene Louise Henrietta, Princess of Orleans (13.6.1871-1951). In 1890 Princess Helene became engaged to the Duke of Clarence, but the marriage never took place owing to her father's refusal to allow her to change her religion. The Duke of Clarence later became engaged to Princess Mary of

Teck, but he died shortly after. Princess Mary later married his brother, the Duke of York, the future George V. The Comte de Paris left York House in 1871 and it stood empty until acquired in 1877 by the Right Honourable Mountstuart Elphinstone Grant Duff. The Comte de Paris later returned to the area for six years when he took Sheen House from 1886-1892, during a further period of exile.

The residency of Grant Duff at York House is recorded in the first paper published by The Borough of Twickenham Local History Society **A Victorian Diarist at York House: Sir Mounstuart Elphinstone Grant Duff 1877-1896** (1965). This records the succession of well-known visitors to the house, and also its frequent absence during his many journeys abroad, particularly during his appointment as Governor of Madras from 1881 to 1886. Grant Duff published fourteen volumes of extracts from his diaries, but they contain few references to the house itself – he was more interested in the garden and records the plant and wildlife in some detail. A keen botanist, he was particularly successful in growing orchids and he constructed a special house for them which was opened on 1st November 1889.

In April 1897, Grant Duff sold York House to the Duc d'Orleans, the Louis Philippe Robert who had been born there in 1869. The Duc made many changes to the house before he occupied it and was responsible for the walling up of the Riverside, which did not meet with popular approval. He left England in 1900, but retained the ownership of the house until 1906 when it was acquired by its last private occupier, Sir Ratan J. Tata, the Indian merchant Prince who was knighted in 1916.

A wealthy industrialist and director of many companies, Ratan Tata too was frequently absent from his Twickenham house, but he is still fondly remembered by some of the older inhabitants of the borough who attended the children's parties which he gave there. He is also remembered as the installer of the large Italianate fountain with its flamboyant statuary which dominates the riverside portion of the garden.

After his death in 1918, his widow resided there until 1922. Subsequently in 1924 the property was purchased by Twickenham Urban District Council. In August 1926, Twickenham received its Charter of Incorporation and in November the new borough held its first council meeting in York House. The building was officially opened by the Duke of York (later George VI) on 16th November 1926.

More information on York House and other historic buildings in the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames is available from the Local Studies Collection.