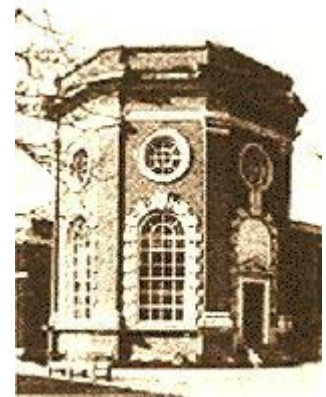


## Orleans House and The Octagon

The riverside residence at Twickenham which was to become known as Orleans House was built in 1710 for James Johnston (1643?-1737) by John James, one of Wren's chief assistants. (James would go on to rebuild Twickenham Parish Church in 1713). The house replaced the former house on that site which Johnston had first obtained on a lease in 1702. It was, in the words of one writer "a typical Wren house with a mansard roof and brick walls, a Portland stone central feature and James's customary masculine and simple detailing."



James Johnstone's father – Archibald Johnstone, Lord Warrison – had been executed in 1663 after being found guilty of high treason in accepting office from Oliver Cromwell and in sitting in the House of Peers after having been the King's Advocate. Johnstone and his family took refuge in Holland where he assisted in William of Orange's invasion of England in 1688 and he was then appointed Joint Secretary of State for Scotland, under William, in 1692. Later, on visits to Hanover, Johnstone managed to make a favourable personal relationship with the future king, George I.

The gardens attached to his Twickenham villa are recorded as being amongst the finest in the country at that time and were particularly rich in vines.

It was to receive Caroline of Ansbach (later Queen Caroline, wife of George II), with whom Johnstone was "a great favourite", that the Octagon Room was added to the house in 1720. For this work, Johnstone employed his fellow Scot, the architect James Gibbs (1682-1754) who would build the new church of St. Martin in the Fields in 1722 and the Radcliffe Library, Oxford in 1737. He was also responsible for the design of the villa at Sudbrook Park, Petersham. His other associations with Twickenham include alterations to Pope's Villa and the remodelling of Cross Deep – the house of the banker Barnaby Backwell.

After Johnstone's death – at Bath in early May 1737 aged 82 – and burial at Twickenham on 11<sup>th</sup> May 1737, the property was purchased by George Morton Pitt (d. 1756), a politician who served as Member of Parliament for Pontefract in Yorkshire. By 1764 it had been acquired by Sir George Pocock (1706-1792) who was created an Admiral in 1761 and was Commander-in-Chief at the capture of Havana in 1762. He was buried in Twickenham Parish Church.

Thereafter, the property seems – from existing records – to have remained in the hands of the Pocock family for much of the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century until at least 1830. After the Admiral's death, his son – also George – occupied the house until 1796 when it was apparently leased (till 1798) to a Mr. Gostling.

The next important resident, who appears to have leased the property from Pocock, was Louis-Philippe, Duc d'Orleans (1773-1850), King of the French from 1830-1848. He came to England during the "Hundred Days" - the period leading up to Napoleon I's defeat at Waterloo in June 1815 – and had left again by 1818. Louis-Philippe's associations with

Twickenham had begun earlier in the century however, for he and his brothers – the Duc de Montpensier and the Comte de Beaujolais – had, in 1800, secured Highshot House on the east side of Twickenham and where he lived until he sailed to Malta in 1808.

From 1827 to 1845, Orleans House was the residence of Alexander Murray (d.1845), Member of Parliament for Kirkcudbright, Scotland 1833-1845. In 1816 he had married Lady Anne Bingham, the daughter of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Lucan. Lord Lucan had commissioned the architect John Buonaretti Papworth (1775-1847) to build his house at Laleham Park and it was Papworth who was subsequently engaged by Murray and his wife to carry out to the vestibule and the Octagon at Orleans House during 1837-9. The vestibule – which formed a link between the Octagon and the main house – was raised and the design of its central pediment was altered. The extent of Papworth's work on the Octagon is not clear, but it seems possible that he added to or restored some of the decoration.

In 1852, about 2 years after the death of Louis-Philippe, his widow, Marie-Amelie de Bourbon-Sicile, Countess of Neuilly (182-1866), purchased Orleans House from the Earl of Kilmorey who had, by June 1846, had become the owner. She did not have the property for long. By May 1855, it had come into the possession of her son, Henri d'Orleans, Duc d'Aumale, fifth son of Louis-Philippe, who held it until March 1877. It was then bought by Sir John Dugdale Astley (1814-1894) who had the idea of creating a luxurious sports and social club there.

This 'Orleans Club' did not after all, turn out to be a complete success and, in 1882, Astley sold the estate to William Cunard, the shipping magnate. Cunard died in 1906 and his widow continued to live in the house for 9 years. The house remained the property of Cunard's executors who, in order to avoid marring the celebrated view from Richmond Hill, (see **Local History Notes: The View from Richmond Hill**), made it a condition of sale that no buildings should be erected on the property other than a boathouse or a greenhouse.

After the First World War Orleans House stood empty for several years. Then on Wednesday 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1926, there was a sale of furniture and fittings at Orleans House. The estate had been sold to the Crane River Sand and Ballast Company who immediately began to demolish the house. There was a rumour that the Octagon was to be taken down and rebuilt somewhere in the locality, but this never happened. Over 200,000 tons of sand and gravel was excavated from the site.

In 1927, the Hon. Mrs Nelly Levy, (daughter of Lord Bearsted), whose first husband, Walter, had died in 1923, purchased what remained of Orleans House which comprised the Octagon and adjacent wings and the extensive stableblock behind. She married the architect Basil Ionides in 1930. When Mrs Ionides acquired the premises, she gave an undertaking to the Twickenham Corporation that she would give them first refusal should she decide to sell the land and the buildings. Subsequently Mrs Ionides purchased Riverside House (adjacent to Orleans House) and she became the joint occupier of both properties. After buying Orleans House, she contributed £2,500 towards the total of £10,000 needed by the Twickenham Corporation to acquire Orleans Gardens.

In 1956, Mrs Ionides announced her intention of bequeathing her riverside properties of Orleans House and Riverside House and her collection of paintings to the local authority

with certain conditions. These were chiefly that Orleans House should be used solely as a public art gallery. She died on 14<sup>th</sup> November 1962, whereupon her unique and valuable bequest passed to Twickenham Borough Council. In 1965, Twickenham was joined with the boroughs of Richmond and Barnes to become the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames. In 1972 the Orleans House Gallery was opened and is the venue for varied exhibitions, including displays of paintings from Ionides collection.

### The Octagon

"It is not the bulk of the fabric, the richness and quality of the materials, the multiplicity of lines, nor the gaudiness of the finishing, that give the grace or beauty and grandeur to the building, but the proportion of the parts to one another and to the whole, whether entirely plain, or enriched with a few ornaments properly disposed."

These guiding principles of all Gibbs's work, set out by the architect himself in his **Book of Architecture** – first published in 1728 – find expression, with superb results, in the design of the Octagon Room which – together with the 2 adjoining wings – is all that now remains of Orleans House.

Gibbs described his building as follows "Thirty feet over and thirty–four feet high, richly adorned by Artari and Bagutti with fret-work and the proper ornaments gilt. It is built with brick and stone."

The Octagon corresponds in style to the pavilions fashionable at that time in German palace gardens. It is built of yellow stone bricks with rubbed vermilion brick pilasters and Portland stone dressings. The parapet was originally surmounted by urns. The three sides facing south all have tall, round-arched windows. On the exterior of the building the architraves of these windows are interrupted regularly by prominent rustication blocks of stone, a larger central one forming the keystone.

The domed interior is richly decorated in the 'Baroque' style. Three of the sides have doors, including those situated to the right and left of the side containing the chimney piece. One side consists simply of an arched recess which contains none of the lively ornamentation which is such a prominent feature of the rest of the room.

The chimney piece has, above the fireplace, a shaped mirror of bevelled planes set beneath a pediment with two reclining plaster figures.

Three busts and three medallions are incorporated into the decoration of the interior. The busts appear in the lunettes which surround the inside of the dome, while the medallions are on the walls. The medallions to the right and left of the chimney piece are, most likely, of Queen Caroline and George II respectively: their likenesses appear in the busts above – the central one seems to be of the King and the other two show the Queen. There is less certainty about the identity of the profile shown in the third medallion, situated above the east doorway – one writer states that it is of a later date (19<sup>th</sup> century) and that it probably represents Louis-Philippe.

The elaborate stucco decoration of the interior was the work of two famous exponents of this particular art – Guiseppe Artari (1697-1769) and Giovanni Bagutti (flourished 1710-?). They were closely associated with Gibbs who called them "the best fret-workers that ever came to England," and they collaborated with him on such buildings as Senate House, Cambridge, the 'Oxford Chapel', London (St. Peter's, Vere Street) and, of course, St. Martin in the Fields.

Orleans House now houses the Orleans House Gallery where the borough's art collection is displayed, while The Octagon Room is available for weddings.

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