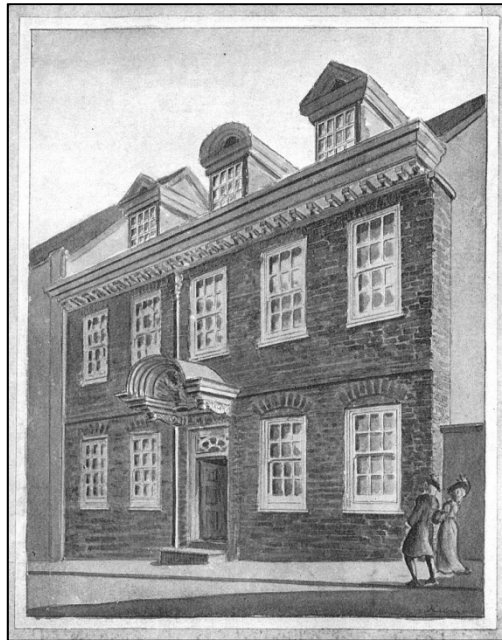


# The Landmark Trust

## CAWSEY HOUSE History Album



**Researched and written by Clayre Percy, 1998**

**Re-presented 2013**

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## KEY FACTS

<b>Built:</b>	<b>1701 for Giles Cawsey, architect unknown</b>
<b>Bought by the Landmark Trust:</b>	<b>February 1989</b>
<b>Repaired</b>	<b>1994-1998</b>
<b>Furnished</b>	<b>March 1998</b>
<b>Architects:</b>	<b>Philip Jebb (died 1995) Allan Konya of Studio Ark, Reading</b>
<b>Quantity Surveyors:</b>	<b>Adrian Stenning of Bare Leaning &amp; Bare, Bath</b>
<b>Main Contractors:</b>	<b>The Landmark Trust's own workforce including plasterers</b>
<b>Foreman:</b>	<b>Philip Ford</b>
<b>Joinery:</b>	<b>The Landmark rust's own workforce</b>
<b>Joinery (rear windows kitchen table &amp; units):</b>	<b>Richard Barnett</b>
<b>Leadwork:</b>	<b>Peter West, Buckland Tower</b>
<b>Metalwork:</b>	<b>Sam Wheeler Limited, Bridgewater</b>
<b>Glass repair:</b>	<b>Mrs Jane Lawrence</b>
<b>Roof Slating:</b>	<b>Dave Maggs, Reading</b>
<b>Electrical:</b>	<b>D. Kent, Torrington</b>
<b>Heating &amp; Plumbing:</b>	<b>Chris Flay, Bridgewater</b>

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**Cawsey House in 1998, newly restored as a Landmark.**

## Summary

This fine merchant's house, with its elaborately decorated shell hood over the door, appears in nearly every book on Great Torrington and most books on the building of Devon. It served as offices or a club since the 19th century, but it was once a private house, and one that its builder could be proud of. We know the name of this builder because he did not own the property, but rather leased it from the ancient Town Lands Charity. His name was Giles Cawsey and he was Town Clerk of Torrington from 1698 until his death in 1712. He bought the lease in 1700 and soon started work on a new house: a rainwater head on the front bears his initials, with those of his wife Margaret and the date, 1701.

A renewal of the lease in 1712 records that it was a plot 'on which is now built a very good dwelling house.' The Cawseys were an extensive North Devon family, many of them living in the prosperous port of Bideford. Giles Cawsey was probably a merchant as well as Town Clerk and chose to build his house in the very latest fashion. Similar houses had been built in the 1690s in Bridgeland Street, Bideford, with fronts that anticipate the symmetry of the 18th century.

In these houses, for the first time, prosperous merchants were no longer living over the shop: the ground floor rooms were rather for private family use. Earlier town houses tended to be long and thin, with a yard at the side. In the 1690s they began instead to show their faces to the street, with a central door and rooms on either side. In the Bideford houses, the stair was still tucked away behind one of the front rooms and the main parlour tended to be on the first floor. At Cawsey House, for the first time in this area, the stairs are in the centre. The ground floor room on the left as you enter was clearly the most important in the house.

It is tempting to think that the fine plasterwork in this room and on the door hood was the work of the Abbot family of Frithelstock, near Torrington, one of whom was probably responsible for richly decorated ceilings in John Davie's house, Bideford, now the Royal Hotel, although there is no firm evidence to prove this. To include a group of musical instruments in the design or trophies of war as on the door hood was again a mark of the latest fashion. (We had just finished restoring the plasterwork in the door hood when it was struck by a lorry. The work was re-done and has so far survived intact since!)

Cawsey House remained the home of Giles Cawsey's descendants until the late 19th century. One of them, John Soley (great grandson of Giles' daughter Margaret) was seven times Mayor of Torrington between 1827 and 1865. After his death, however, his home became the Liberal Club.

In the 1920s and still owned by the Town Lands Charity, the house was subdivided for a variety of uses, which continued through the 20th century. In the 1980s, Cawsey House provided space for many groups, including a Masonic Lodge, the Red Cross, the Girl Guides and the Torrington Town Lands Charity

itself. While it was thus performing a useful function in the town, the architectural character of the building was not being seen to its best advantage. With the existing tenancies coming to an end over the next few years, the Town Lands Charity felt that it was time to reconsider the future.

At about this same time, the Landmark Trust had completed the restoration of the Library and Orangery at Stevenstone, near Torrington. These are of similar date to Cawsey House, and after extensive repairs, were being enjoyed by a succession of people for holidays, providing an income for their future maintenance. The Town Lands Charity suggested that the Landmark Trust might be interested in their building as well. While it was not actually at risk, the Landmark Trust felt that Cawsey House was a very rare survival, widely regarded by local historians as one of the most important town-houses in Devon, both for its fine plasterwork and also because it is surprisingly unaltered inside. Here, in fact, was an opportunity to recover the domestic character of a building whose only future, otherwise, was as an office. In the words of the Trust's founder, Sir John Smith, it would then 'give people the experience, once common but now almost unknown, of quite a grand house, with a garden, in the street of a country town.' As 28 South Street, Cawsey House was bought by the Landmark Trust in 1989, but no work could be carried out until the last of the tenants had moved out in 1990. We named it Cawsey House in 2013 to perpetuate the name of the proud family that built it.

## **RESTORATION**

Cawsey House presents a brick face to the world - unusually constructed of two skins of bricks with the void filled with rubble. Behind this it is in fact a timber framed house. On plan the house is an odd shape, obviously built to fit an existing site, and nothing is quite square. A cobble passageway has been discovered running under the house, showing that an earlier building must have existed. A well, with a vaulted stone top, was discovered outside the back loo.

To everyone's excitement, the original balustrade of the stairs was found inside what looked like a modern partition. The scheme to restore the house was drawn up by the architect, Philip Jebb, who had worked for Landmark on many other buildings. Work got under way in 1993, mainly using our own in-house craftsmen. Sadly, Philip Jebb died in 1995, but the work continued under his successor, Alan Konya. A new kitchen was provided in the plainest room, behind the original parlour, which is now the dining room. The remaining rooms provide two sitting rooms, one overlooking the garden, away from the busy street. On the first floor, apart from restoring the original dimensions of the upper hall, the main work was to reinstate the two rooms at the front (made into one in the 1920s) using evidence on the floors for the line of the partition walls and making a bathroom in the closet between.

## Introduction

Cawsey House is a rare survival: quite a grand house with a garden in the street of a country town. Since it was built in 1701 by Giles Cawsey, Town Clerk of Torrington, whose initials with those of his wife Margaret are on the rainwater head on the front of the house, it has been altered surprisingly little and it has, in addition, some quite outstanding plasterwork.

When the Landmark Trust first became aware of it in 1986 it was no longer a private house but had six institutional tenants including a .22 rifle range - and its future looked uncertain.

In February 1989 the Landmark Trust bought the freehold from the Great Torrington Town Lands, Alms Lands and Pools Charities. We had no wish to disturb the tenants and made no attempt to do so, but one by one they found premises that suited their needs better and they left.

By 1992 the house was empty and from then on it was gradually repaired. First the low grade 20th century accretions and alterations were removed and in 1994 the Landmark Trust's own team of skilled craftsmen moved in and repaired it to a standard as high - perhaps sometimes higher than that of 1701. It is now once again a fine family house.

Philip Jebb was our architect but tragically he did not see the work completed. He died in 1995 and you will find a memorial to him in the house.

## The History of the Building

The land on which Cawsey House was built belonged to the Great Torrington Town Lands, Alms Lands and Poors Charities which owns the freehold of much of the town. Who the benefactor was that gave Torrington the Town Land is not known. The early records are lost, only starting from 1601.

Before 1701 there was, according to the records, a 'tenement, courtlage and garden' on the present site. During the Landmark restoration cobbles and a cobbled gutter were discovered under the floor of the front hall and on the sitting room side there were the remains of a sole plate. The cobbles and gutter indicate an open passageway, probably with an arch over it, running from the street into the 'courtlage' at the back of the building; while the sole plate was the base of a previous timber framed house.

The cellar in the present kitchen may give a clue as to the lay out of the old building: it is oddly sited in relation to the present plan with the stairs emerging in front of a partition wall and is perhaps a survival from the earlier house, though the bricks used in the partitioning for wine bottles are 18th Century. The note in the town records of 1701, saying 'there is now built a very good dwelling house' seems to indicate that what was there before was humble.

The 'burgage plot' on which the earlier house and the present one were built ran, not at right angles to the road as you would expect, but on the skew, so that Cawsey House and all the rooms in it are diamond shaped - even to the back stairs newel post: if you look at that its top is diamond shaped too.

In 1701 Cawsey House had a thoroughly modern plan. While earlier merchants' houses were usually long and thin with a yard on one side, in the 1690s houses started to show their faces to the street with a central door and rooms on either side. Houses with symmetrical fronts had already been built in Bridgeland Street,



Bideford but the stair was still tucked away behind one of the front rooms, and the main parlour tended to be on the first floor. Cawsey House was ahead of its time in having stairs leading out of a central hall and its most important room on the ground floor. Its rooms are higher than you would expect in a provincial house of its date.

Its structure, on the other hand, belongs to an older tradition. It is a timber-framed house with a brick front. Interestingly, the brick front is not built in the conventional way, with two brick faces and header bricks tying the wall together at regular intervals. The bricks are used like stone: two skins with a rubble in-fill, and the headers irregular and built into the rubble.

The joists run parallel to the front of the house in the manner of a timber frame house. In the attic you can see cruck beams used in the construction of the roof.

But it is because of its plasterwork that Cawsey House features in nearly every book on Devon houses. In the 17th and 18th centuries decorative plasterwork was fashionable in Devon, much of it executed by the Abbott family of Frithelstock. Although there is no record of their working at Cawsey House, Frithelstock is only four miles from Torrington and it seems unlikely that the commission would have gone to anyone else. The trophy of weapons in the shell hood over the front door and the musical instruments in the dining room were both popular subjects in 1700, and make it clear that the plasterwork is contemporary with the house. Giles Cawsey, who built the house, had relations in Bideford where high quality plasterwork was being made and which has survived in John Davies's House built in 1688 and now part of the Royal Hotel.

Fashionable though it was, Cawsey House was not as solidly built as you would expect from a house that set out to be quite grand. Exploratory work carried out for the Landmark Trust by Richard Barnett before repairs began showed that in some ways perhaps because its tenure was not freehold but only on a lease for

three lives - it had been built on the cheap. For instance in the dining room high quality timber was used, but in the front room opposite instead of getting more top quality wood the left-overs were used and have not lasted so well. Also the doors do not have normal door frames: they are hung directly onto oak posts which are part of the timber structure of the house. This means that the plaster stands proud of what appears to be the door frame; and that which appears to be the architrave has no moulding on its inside edge. The mouldings are thin strips of wood superimposed, not part of the frame.

In 1824 John Sloley took over the lease and it was perhaps then that various alterations were made. It was probably true then as it is now that people change things when they move into a house. Anyway, about then the windows were altered from casements with mullions to sash. That they were once casement is proved by the shutters in the best bedroom. The shutters are divided in two, and the division comes, not where the sashes meet but above, to suit the mullions. In the second best bedroom the shutters must have been re-made and the division comes where you would expect. In the dining room the oldest (1701) shutters have been used to line the recesses into which newer c.1800 shutters fit.

In the dining room the original chimney piece was removed and replaced with a slightly smaller one of Ashburton marble; there are small gaps in the panelling showing the size of the old chimney piece and hearth. You can see, too, that the panel above the fireplace has been altered from being horizontal and probably containing a mirror - a common arrangement when the house was built in 1701 - to its present square shape. It was perhaps when the fireplace was altered that the chair rail and the mouldings beneath it all round the room, were altered. They are not original. The panelling on the west wall of the dining room has dropped considerably, because the sole plate was rotten.

The dining room floor was unusual: it was a 'floating floor' , that is to say it was not fixed to the joists beneath, but each plank, made thicker than usual, was pegged sideways to the plank on each side so that no fixings could be seen.

The back sitting room is a puzzle: it has such an ornate chimney piece and overmantel and yet at one time, if not originally, it was the kitchen or anyway a service room with a service stair running straight out of it. A kitchen with a grand fireplace is not unknown in Devonshire, there is one in 13 Bridgeland Street, Bideford, a humbler house than Cawsey House, built in 1692-4, while several late 17th century merchant houses on The Strand, Topsham have similar service stairs. But the staircase at Cawsey House had a door where the stairs went through the ceiling, which, though now improved, was peculiarly low and awkward. Sir John is of the opinion that this uncomfortable lack of headroom at the top of the stairs points to this staircase not being part of the original plan of the house. He thinks that when it was built in 1701 there was no first flight of service stairs, that everyone used the main staircase up to the first floor and from the first to the second floor they used the staircase, which there undoubtedly was, in the lobby between the two main bedrooms. Sometime during the 18th century the first flight was built and shortly afterwards the second flight was moved to where it is now.

To complicate things even further, the overmantel has fixings that point to its being originally in a panelled room. There is no sign of panelling in the back sitting room and it is highly unlikely that there ever was any, so presumably the overmantel was moved, perhaps from another room in the house, or possibly from another house altogether. We do not know what the brackets on the overmantel carried. Were they perhaps for fishing rods? The Torridge was a good fishing river. The pulley that protrudes through the painted panel would have carried a chain to control a damper in the flue.

On the first floor, the best bedroom, with the good plasterwork, has an odd blank panel on its east accommodate a tester bed.

Beneath cement on the floor of the fireplace tiles were discovered with a fleur de lys and 'J E' inscribed on them. The initials stand for John Elsworthy, the Torrington potter who made them: either John Elsworthy I who died in 1704 or John Elsworthy II who was either a son or a nephew and who was married in 1705. They would have been made in Torrington, but probably not in the Castle Hill pottery which was worked by a different family. The tiles were finished with galena (lead ore) glaze, which made them golden brown, or sometimes darker, depending on the conditions of the kiln.

### **20th Century Alterations**

Alterations were made to the ground floor when the house became a club. A lavatory and two billiard rooms, one beyond the other, were built out into the garden at the back. They needed direct access from the house, so a door was made in the south east corner of the kitchen, and the window was moved.

The room with the huge chimney piece became the caretaker's living room and a new kitchen was built on at the back. A door was knocked through to the right of the window and the window was moved.

Sometime after 1920, when the whole of the first floor was let to the Freemasons, there were more changes. All the partitions between the front rooms - two rooms and a lobby in between were swept away to make a big meeting room.

The wooden framing that was on the west wall of what is now the east bedroom, was saved and replaced on the west wall of the meeting room. An organ was installed and seating from a disused cinema.

The position of the second flight of the main staircase was altered, so that it ran into what is now the small back bedroom, but which was then the Mason's receiving room, with a cloakroom and W. C. off it. The existing second flight including the balustrade was boxed in so that, as you looked at it from the landing there was a deep ledge at waist height (for drinks, plates, etc.) with a glazed screen above it. The landing became a bar/dining-room leading, through a wide arched opening to a dining-room/kitchen, both now bedrooms. (See the before plan and photographs).

In 1933-4 a large range was removed from the kitchen - presumably the room with the overmantel, which had become the caretaker's sitting room and a small grate was put in instead. The caretaker was allowed to install electric light in his private quarters. Urgent work was done on a leaking gutter that was damaging the plaster ceilings.

## The Landmark Trust Repairs

### THE OUTSIDE

In July 1989, soon after it became a Landmark property, Philip Jebb, the Landmark Trust's architect for Cawsey House, visited the house and wrote to Sir John Smith answering queries that he had put to him after visiting the house a few days before:

All of the sashes in the front elevation seem to date from the late 18th Century or early 19th Century (perhaps the stylish fireplace in 'Office' [the dining room] gives the date of this re-do). Original glazing bars would undoubtedly have been much thicker, probably 1 3/4", but present sashes are in reasonable order and have good crown glass.

The main eaves cornice has lost its uppermost cyma recta but otherwise seems in reasonable order.

I agree about the roofs to the dormers [Sir John had said they did not look right to him] but I think that all that is wrong is that the two outer dormers with pitched roofs have been covered by slates and should have lead roofs. Also the windows have been, and would better be, leaded lights.

Certainly we should clean off the old paint from the plaster tympanum over the front door and indeed all of the rest of the (remarkable) plasterwork. There is a method of doing this now without scratching the plaster while getting off the paint.

Of the visible roofs the external slopes (North and West) are covered with Delabole slates and the inner slopes with what looked like asbestos slates. It looks from the ground as though the Delabole slates need relaying and perhaps we should lay new on the inner slopes?

On that first visit, Philip Jebb and Sir John picked up most of what needed to be done to the outside. The windows were repaired but left as sash windows.

The cornice was repaired, and the top element or cyma recta, which had been replaced by a red board was re-made.

All three dormers had to be rebuilt and roofed with lead, and the architraves were re-made. The leaded lights were replaced with wooden casements.

The whole roof was re-slatted with Delabole slates, using as many as possible of the original ones.

The gutters and the rainwater head on the front of the house were repaired and the lettering was re-gilded. There is a new rainwater pipe and head on the gabled back wall; it was cast in lead on site.

The plasterwork over the front door was carefully cleaned.

The front door was stripped and repaired. On 1 May 1995 Philip Ford the foreman reported that the original brass knocker, stolen twelve years before, had been returned by a gentleman who maintained that after a night of revelry he had removed the knocker for safe-keeping so that it would not be stolen by someone else!

The west gable on the car park side was repaired.

The chimney flues were re-lined.

The outside work was completed when, in September 1997, a lorry crashed into the front of the house. The plasterwork was not damaged but the canopy over the front door had moved. Scaffolding had to go up again. Moulds were made of the plasterwork, so that it could be mended if it was damaged when the canopy was being moved back. This fortunately did not happen.



The dormers were remade and given lead roofs



Another view of the dormers





**The top mouldings of the cornice had been replaced by a red board**



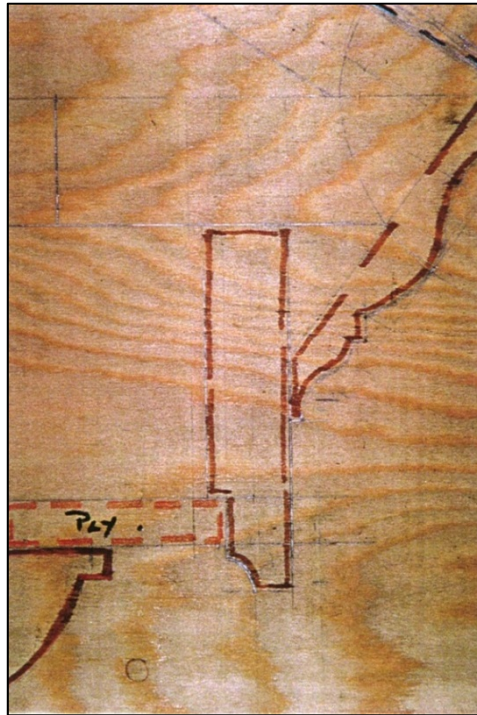
**Rebuilding the cornice moulding**



**The back of the house as found – the downpipes have been replaced and the sheds removed**



**Work in progress at the back**



**Setting out the top cornice**



**The downpipe at the front of the house needed repair**



**A drainwater hopper: beneath the red paint there was gilding, then the original grey to which it has returned**



**The hopper in the workshop under repair**



**View from the stairs towards the Castle Hill Hotel before restoration**



**The two billiard rooms, later Girl Guides meeting rooms, now demolished**

## THE INSIDE

The first question that had to be decided was how to use the rooms. The present arrangement of kitchen and dining room was chosen partly because people perhaps spend more time looking at the ceiling in a dining room than in a sitting room.

Comparing the present plan of the house with the "before" plan is probably the best way to understand what has been done to return the house to its pre-institutional shape.

On site the first stage was to 'unpick' the house – carefully to remove the low grade 20th century accretions and alterations. Throughout 1992 this work was carried out by Richard Barnett a skilled joiner and carver who had already worked for us at Stevenstone Library. In 1994 Philip Ford our foreman who had worked for us on several west country Landmarks, moved in with his team.

The front stairs were put back as they were before. It was an exciting moment when we discovered that the original balustrade, bannisters and hand rail were still in position behind the hardboard casing.

An examination of the floor in the Freemason's meeting room showed where the original partitions ran and they were replaced. It seems that the partitions had helped to tie in the brick front of the house and since their removal it had moved outwards. Steel stays are now in place within the partitions to hold the front in. Mortices and other parts of a staircase going up to the attic were found under the floorboards in the lobby, now the front bathroom. The staircase had been moved to where it is now above the back sitting room early in the house's history. This bathroom being narrow, we had to find a WC which was as short as possible from front to back. The one we chose is "as supplied to H.M. Prisons".

### **The Plasterwork**

All the plasterwork was repaired on site, without outside specialists, which is unusual nowadays. Latex moulds were made from sound material and the plaster that was cast in them pieced in where it was missing. The larger sections of run plasterwork were remade on the workbench, using a traditional "horse" to guide a mould for cornice and radiused work. Visitors will be puzzled to spot the repairs though a clue is that the original work was all applied when wet, and some of the vegetation has drooped slightly.

### **The Floors**

The front hall had a cement scree floor which was replaced with Portland stone paving. It was when the cement was being dug up that the old cobbled pathway appeared. The kitchen also had a scree floor, replaced with large quarry tiles. Upstairs most of the floor boards had to be replaced. The new flooring came from a wooden railway bridge of 1864 from Birkenhead. Any sound boards were laid in the south east bedroom above the kitchen.

### **The Windows**

Richard Barnett made new windows for the two back rooms whose openings had been changed when doors were knocked through beside them in the early 1900s.

All the windows were repaired and cast lead was used for the sash window weights because cast iron was not heavy enough for the job. They make a dull thud when the window is opened or shut rather than the clanging noise sometimes made by cast iron. The old glass was retained wherever possible. In the front bathroom where there is a good example of acid-etched obscure glass with an intricate lozenge pattern two broken panes were copied by Mrs Jane Lawrence, who lives in Torrington and are almost indistinguishable from the old ones. The shutters were repaired, or in some cases re-made.

## **Doors**

Philip Jebb, when he first looked round Cawsey House, remarked that the house was 'extraordinarily bereft of doors'. The few original ones have been copied by Philip Ford's work team. The original hinges, which are of an attractive and unusual design have been copied by Sam Wheeler of Bridgewater and are now on all the doors. The front door was repaired. It was given facings, which also strengthen it, and false panels.

The two doors between the front door and the stairs, one a swing door and the other glass, were removed. A door with a glass panel leading to the back sitting room was replaced.

## **Fireplaces**

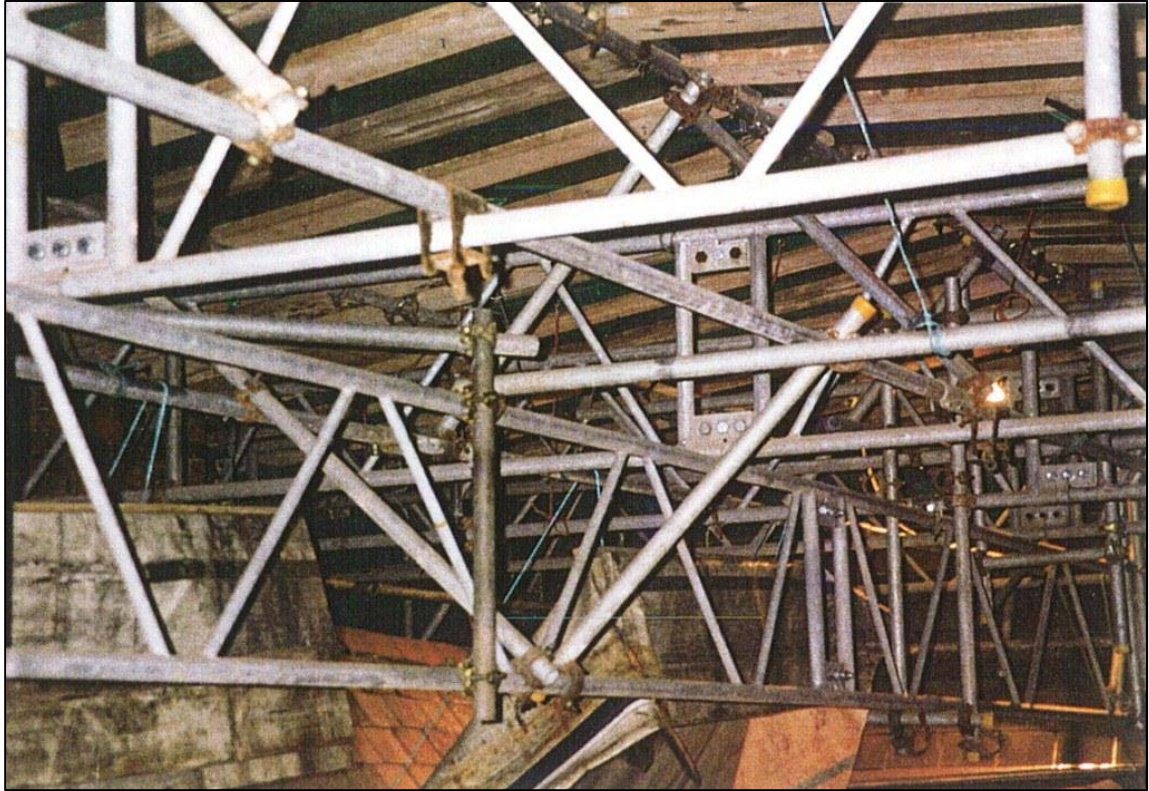
A large kitchen fireplace was found behind boarding in the present kitchen backing onto the fireplace in the dining room. This was interesting because it meant that the present kitchen was probably the kitchen when the house was first built.

## **The Attic**

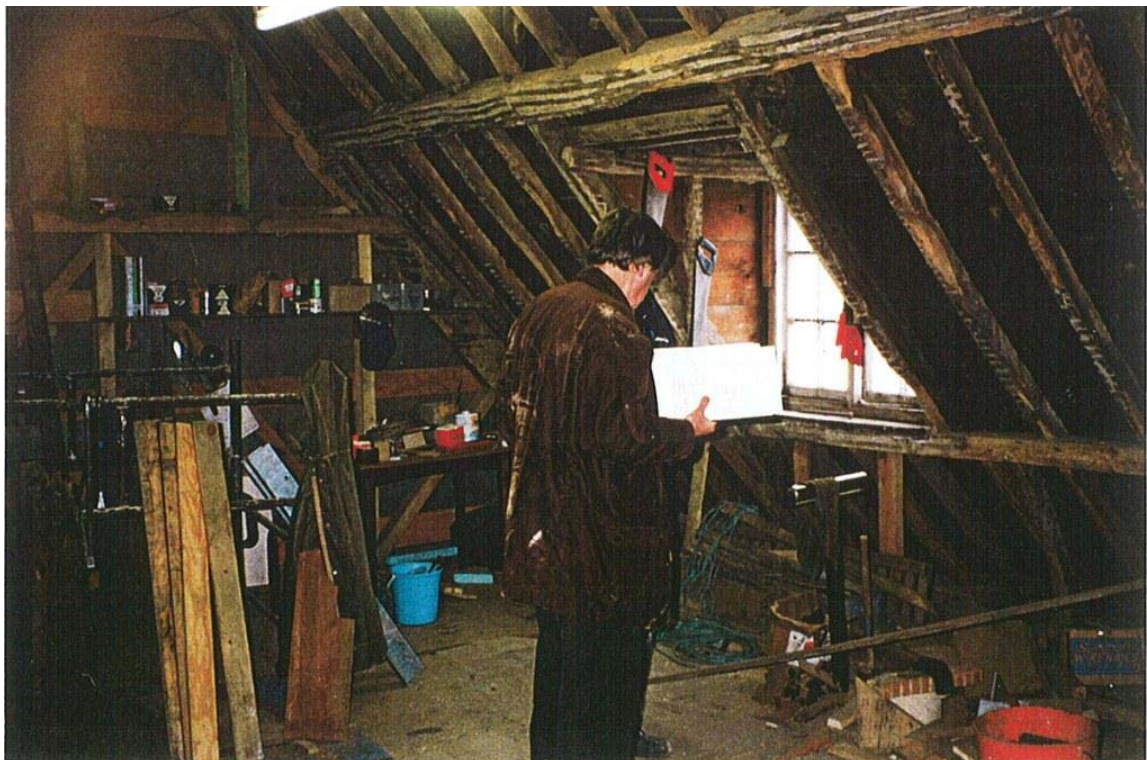
The partitions had gone when the Landmark Trust moved in and the attic has been left as an open space. The marine plywood on the floor is structural and helps to hold up the first floor ceiling.

The picture over the fireplace in the south sitting room is a copy of *A View of Tawstock Hall, Devon* (English School, c. 1740) with Barnstaple on the River Taw in the distance. The Elizabethan mansion was built by William Bouchier, 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Bath (1557-1623). Following a fire in 1787 the South front was rebuilt in the Gothic style and the West front was later altered in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Particularly interesting is the formal garden probably laid out by Lady Rachel Fane, widow of the last Earl of Bath, after 1660 but based on an Elizabethan plan. The Church is St. Peter's with Bishops Tawton on the right.





**The temporary roof**



**The north west corner of the attic was used as a workshop whilst the roof was rebuilt**



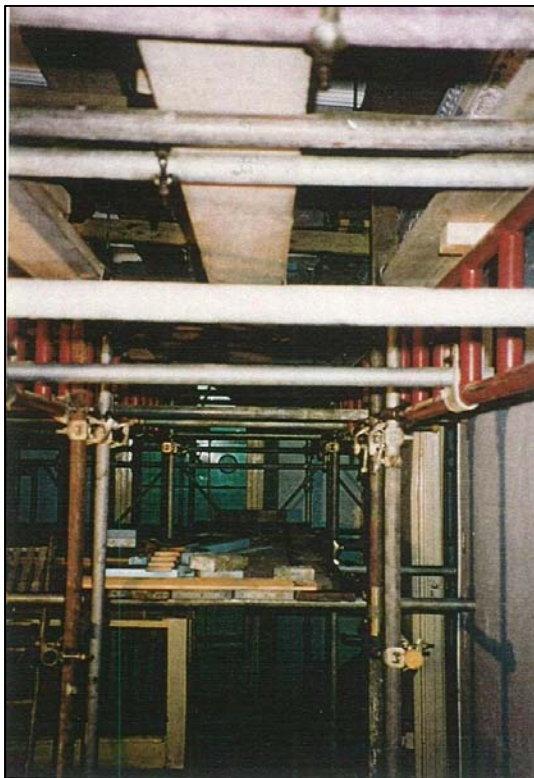
The centre gutter – note the cruck beams



Working on the ceiling over the landing



**The plasterwork on the landing ceiling was in a bad state**



**Shoring up the landing**



The Freemasons' meeting room



The ceiling in the north east bedroom being repaired



Plasterwork was remade on the workbench



Radius work



**A kitchen fireplace was found in the present kitchen on the north wall**



**Relining the dining room wall**



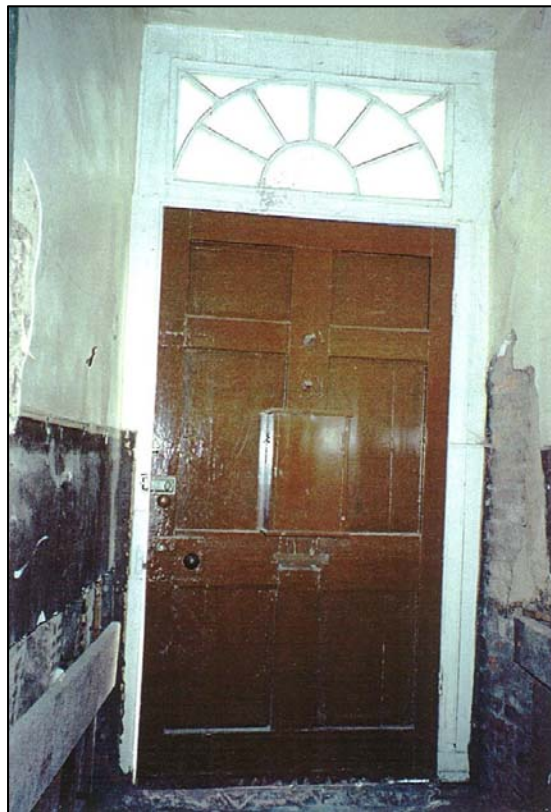
**The main staircase with the additional flight put in by the Freemasons**



**The cellar under the kitchen floor**



The fireplace in the south sitting room



The front door as it was



## The Garden

When the Landmark Trust took over Cawsey House the garden was almost entirely filled with buildings and sheds put up as they were needed in the last fifty years. There were two ex-billiard rooms, a rifle range and club room and two W. C. s. The ex-billiard rooms were used as workshops while the restoration was in progress but now all have been removed.

The garden's levels were adjusted so that instead of sloping up from the garden door there is a flat paved sitting out area.

When the buildings were being demolished a well was discovered a few yards from the garden door, under a brick arch which must have been built to protect it when the billiard rooms were built on. With the changing of the levels the well-head is higher than ground level so bricks have been laid sloping up to it and for safety it has a cast iron cover.

Most of the garden walls were rebuilt. The smaller walled garden is on the site of Sleep's outside clothing workshop, which went out of business soon after the Landmark Trust took over Cawsey House.

Several pieces of old pottery were dug up and sent to the archaeological department at Exeter Museum. They were identified as 17th century coarseware, most likely from the pottery kilns of Torrington itself. Some decorated *sgraffito* ware probably came from the recently discovered Castle Hill kiln near Cawsey House. Two sherds came from France.



**The well being discovered beneath an arch under the cloakroom when it was demolished**



**Philip Ford, John Weeks and Austen Short in the garden in September 1977**

## The Inhabitants of Cawsey House

The Torrington Town Lands Charity which owned much of the property in Torrington leased its land on "lives", a practice common in the West Country, the lease being for the life of the tenant and for the lives of one or two nominees, usually a wife, sons or daughters, rather than for a fixed period of time. Because of this, although we do not know what the house on the Cawsey House site looked like before the present house was built, we do know who owned it. The lease book begins in 1614 and the owner was Richard Green, he was followed in 1629 by John Tooker, vintner, then John Clarke, then William Gribble who sold his lease to Giles Cawsey.

Giles Cawsey, who became Town Clerk of Torrington in 1698, leased a 'tenement, courtlage, and garden valued at £6' from the Town Lands in 1700 and in 1701 he built himself a house, Cawsey House on the site. His initials and those of his wife, Margaret are on the rainwater head on the front of the house. The Cawseys were a prolific north Devon family some of whom were merchants in the prosperous port of Bideford. When Giles Cawsey died in 1712 his wife Margaret took on the tenancy till her death in 1728.

From 1728 the names of the tenants change - Belton, Crealock, Sloley - but because of the "life" system of tenancy and the details in the tenancy records we know that the new names were sons-in-law and the house in fact never went out of the family for more than 200 years.

Thomas Belton, who was tenant from 1728-71, was married to Giles Cawsey's daughter, Margaret; he was Town Clerk for fifty two years, from 1712-1768, having taken over his father-in-law.

The Rev. John Sloley rector of High Bickington, married Margaret Crealock, Thomas Belton's granddaughter. Their son John Sloley gent, took over the lease

in 1824. He must have been one of the leading members of the Torrington establishment. He was manager of the National Provincial Bank, now the National Westminster, a trustee of the North Devon Building Society when it was founded in 1850 and Mayor of Torrington seven times between 1827 and 1865. There is a certificate amongst the town records saying that before John Sloley took office in 1827 he received Holy Communion and signed his name witnessed by two vicars, in accordance with the Test Act - the Act that barred Catholics from office. He must have been one of the last people to sign: soon afterwards it was abolished. He died in 1866 and left Cawsey House to his three daughters: Catherine and Fanny, who died unmarried in 1893 and 1901 and a married daughter Amelia Macartney who survived them.

In 1912 Amelia sold the south end of the neighbour Mr. Mackenzie Grieve, the owner of the house which later became the Castle Hill Hotel. Amelia was the last of Giles Cawsey's descendants to own the house. She died in 1913.

It seems to have been at about this time that Cawsey House was used as the Liberal Club.

After the 1914-18 war it became the Ex-Servicemen's Club. The present dining room was the ex-servicemen's reading room; it had guns, relics perhaps of the first world war, hanging on the walls. The two billiard rooms built out at the back were extremely popular particularly on Saturday nights.

In 1920 the house was subdivided and the Torridge Freemasons' Lodge took the first floor, with their tabernacle made out of the front rooms as we have seen.

From 1935-1948 Austen Short, who now lives in Bideford, was brought up at Cawsey House. His father was caretaker there and also part-time registrar for the town. They lived in the back sitting room where there was a gas fire with a sofa in front of it and a desk in the window. The kitchen (now removed) was

through a door at the back of the room; beyond the kitchen was the W.C. reached by going out of the back kitchen door and into the garden. Austen's sister died when she was eleven and when she was very ill she was brought down into the sitting room for warmth. The Short parents slept in the north west attic, Austen in the north east one. He can remember lying in bed and listening to the Masons singing hymns in the room below. He was not allowed to enter their part of the house and only once saw the tabernacle which was very richly coloured and impressive. At the bottom of the front stairs was a glass case containing stuffed badgers.

Johnnie Weekes, who still lives in Torrington, spent much of his time at Cawsey House playing with Austen who is his cousin. He can remember ceremonially hanging their teddy bear over the back stairs. They also buried their dog when it died in the garden and dug it up after a month to see what had happened to it - not a success.

When war began in 1939 the present dining room became the Food Office where ration books were distributed and the front sitting room became the Civil Defence Office. After the war the dining room became the office for the Torrington Town Lands; the Red Cross took over the front sitting room and the room behind it, where they made a kitchenette.

The Girl Guides used the old billiard rooms for their meetings as did the Torrington Youth Club.

A .22 Rifle Club had its range along the west garden wall and the caretaker's kitchen became the club room.



**John Weeks (left), whose parents lived at Cawsey House and Austen Short**

## Next Door Neighbours

At the end of the garden, to the south of Cawsey House is Castle Hill House. It is a late Georgian house which belonged to the Furse family, who were squires of Halsdon, further up the river Torridge. During the last half of the 19th century it was let to William Evan Price who was married to a cousin of the Furses, Anne Elizabeth Palmer. In 1897 Charles Willington Furse, Archdeacon of Westminster and squire of Halsdon made Castle Hill House over to his second son, Captain William Furse. The Archdeacon was the brother of the poet, William Cory; both were called Johnson originally but had changed their names on inheriting. The Archdeacon's third son was Charles Furse the painter. Captain William Furse, later Lieutenant General Sir William Furse and a distinguished soldier, sold Castle Hill House in 1905.

Between 1905 and 1964 the property changed hands four times. Mrs Mackenzie Grieve, who owned the house from 1910-1921, enlarged the garden by buying part of the Cawsey House garden from Mrs. Macartney in 1912.

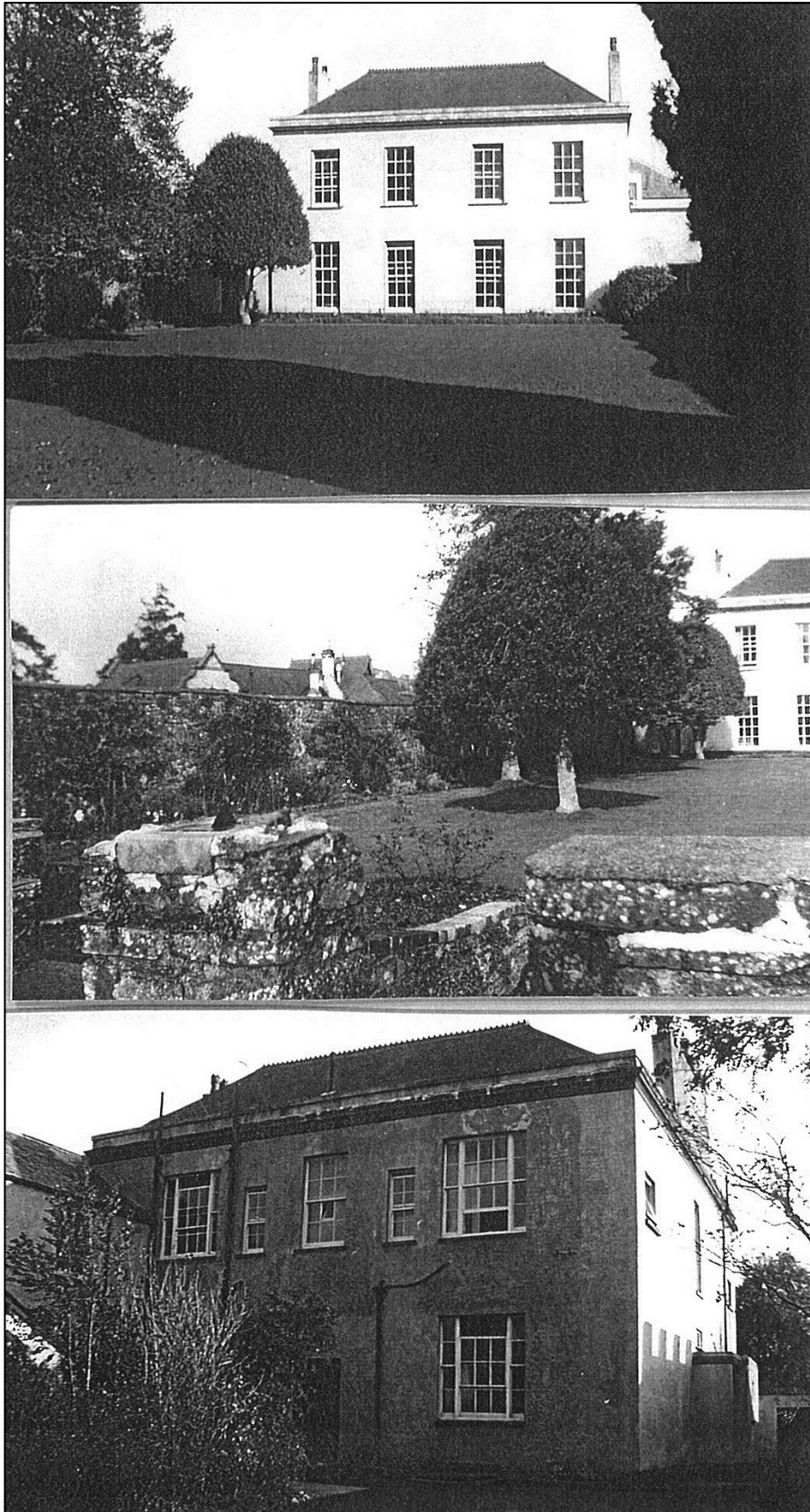
In 1950 the Brachi family moved in. Mr. Brachi had retired from his job in London and a daughter who was living in Taunton in 1994 had pleasant memories of their life in Torrington. In 1965 the Brachis sold and the next owners were granted planning permission to change the house into an hotel.

After 1965 Castle Hill House - now Castle Hill Hotel - had a series of owners and tenants until the last owners failed and the Landmark Trust bought it from the receivers 1993. In December 1997 it was let on a long lease to The Great Torrington Development Trust, which trades as Genesis Ltd.

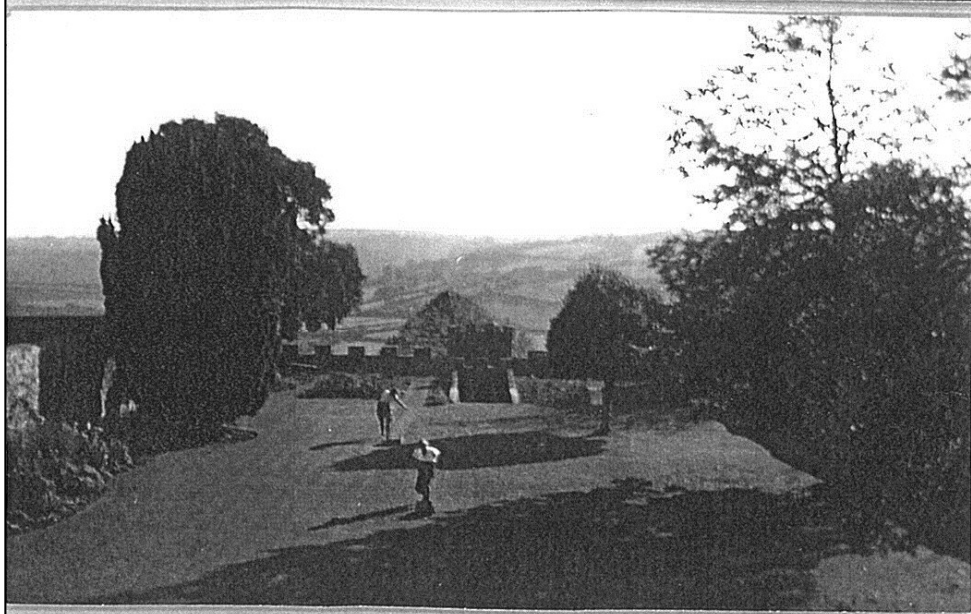
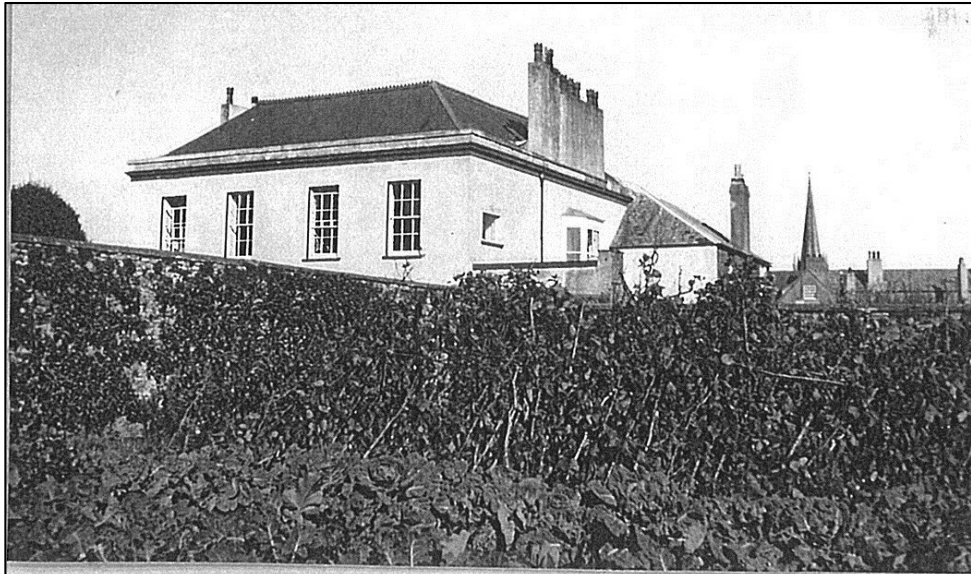
Next to Cawsey House on the east side is a house which was partially burned down in 1876 when its owner was J.S.Farleigh. He was mayor at the time and some of the town regalia was lost in the fire.

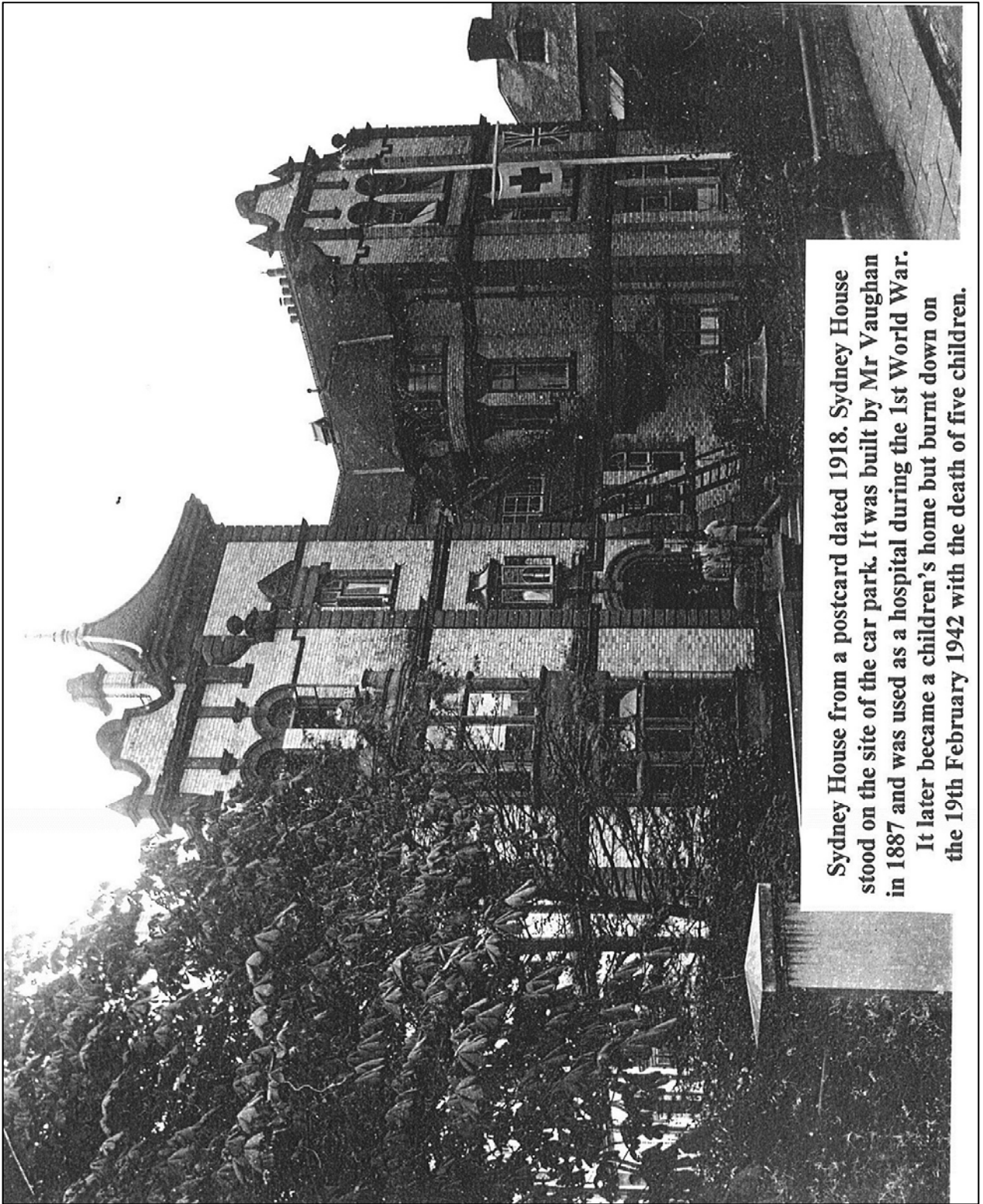
On the west side, where the public car park is now, was Enderley House built by William Vaughan owner of the glove factory. Enderley was re-named Sydney House and became a school for delicate children run by Devon County Council. It burned down in 1942 and five boys lost their lives in the fire.



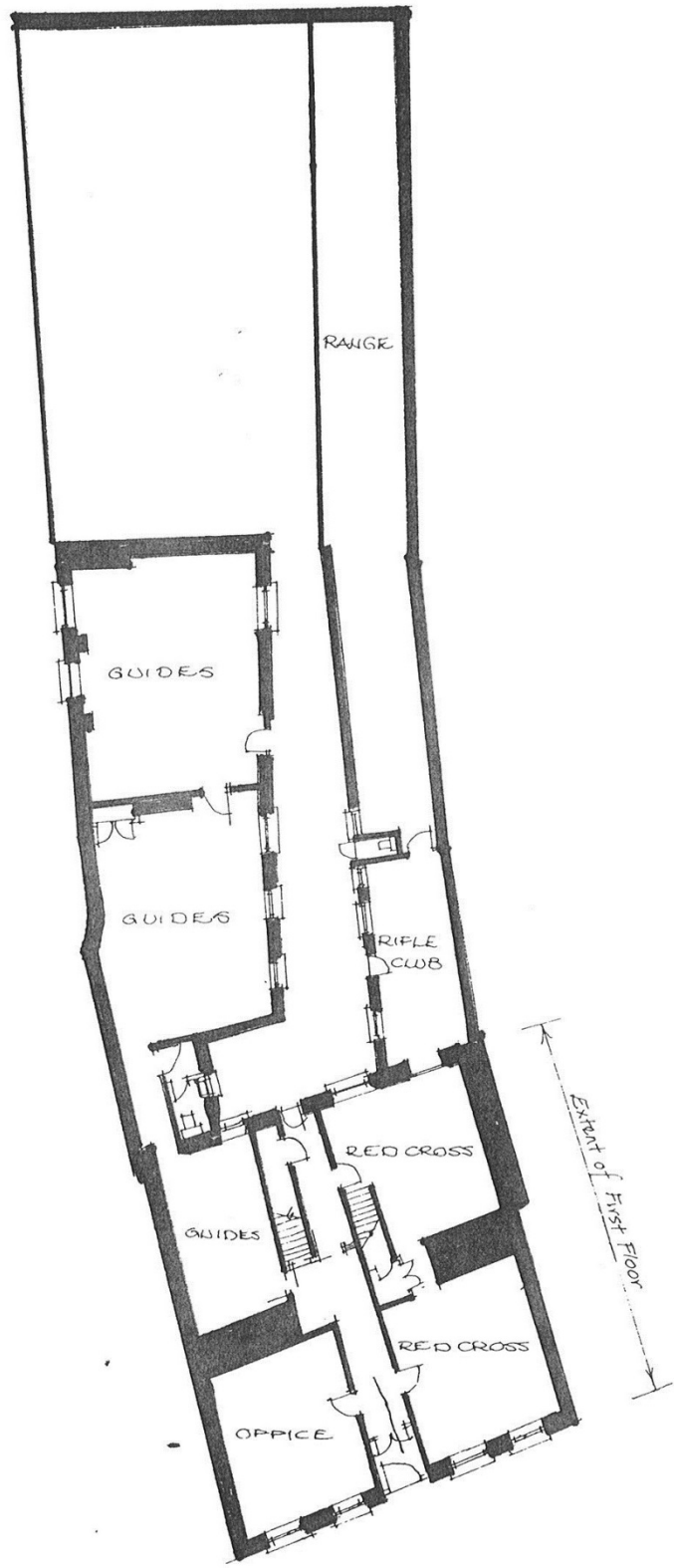


Photographs of Castle Hill taken between 1950-64

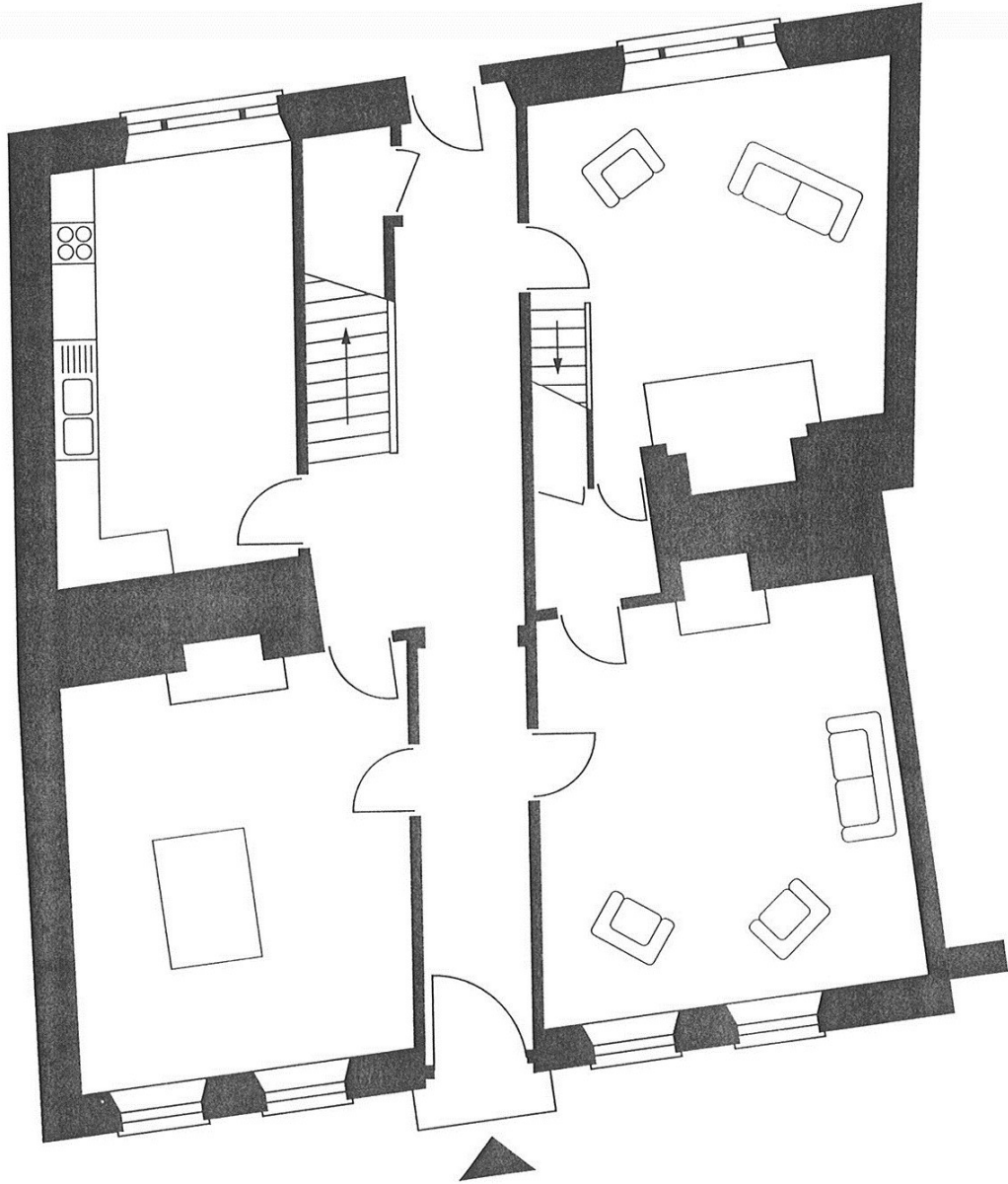




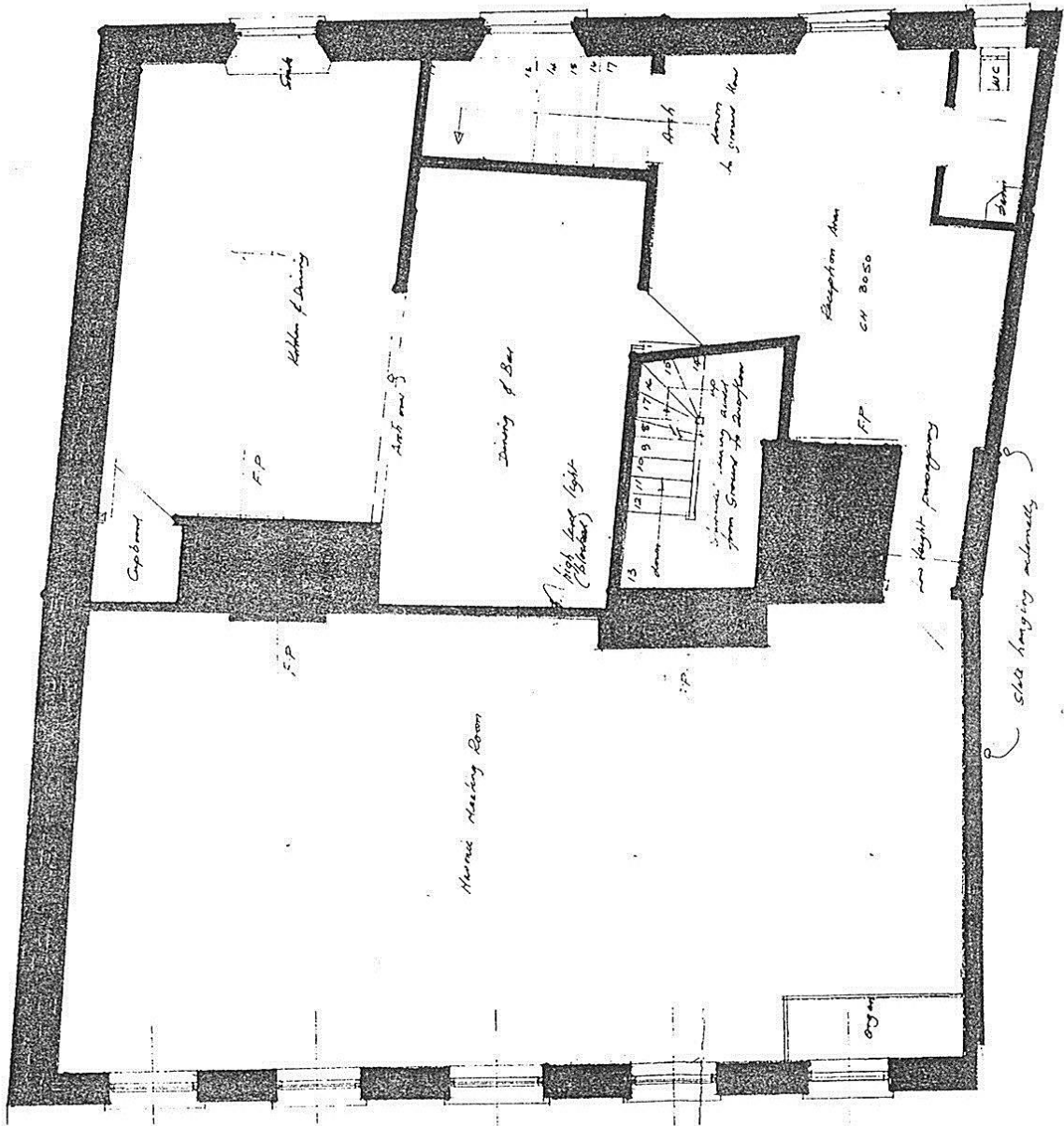
Sydney House from a postcard dated 1918. Sydney House stood on the site of the car park. It was built by Mr Vaughan in 1887 and was used as a hospital during the 1st World War. It later became a children's home but burnt down on the 19th February 1942 with the death of five children.



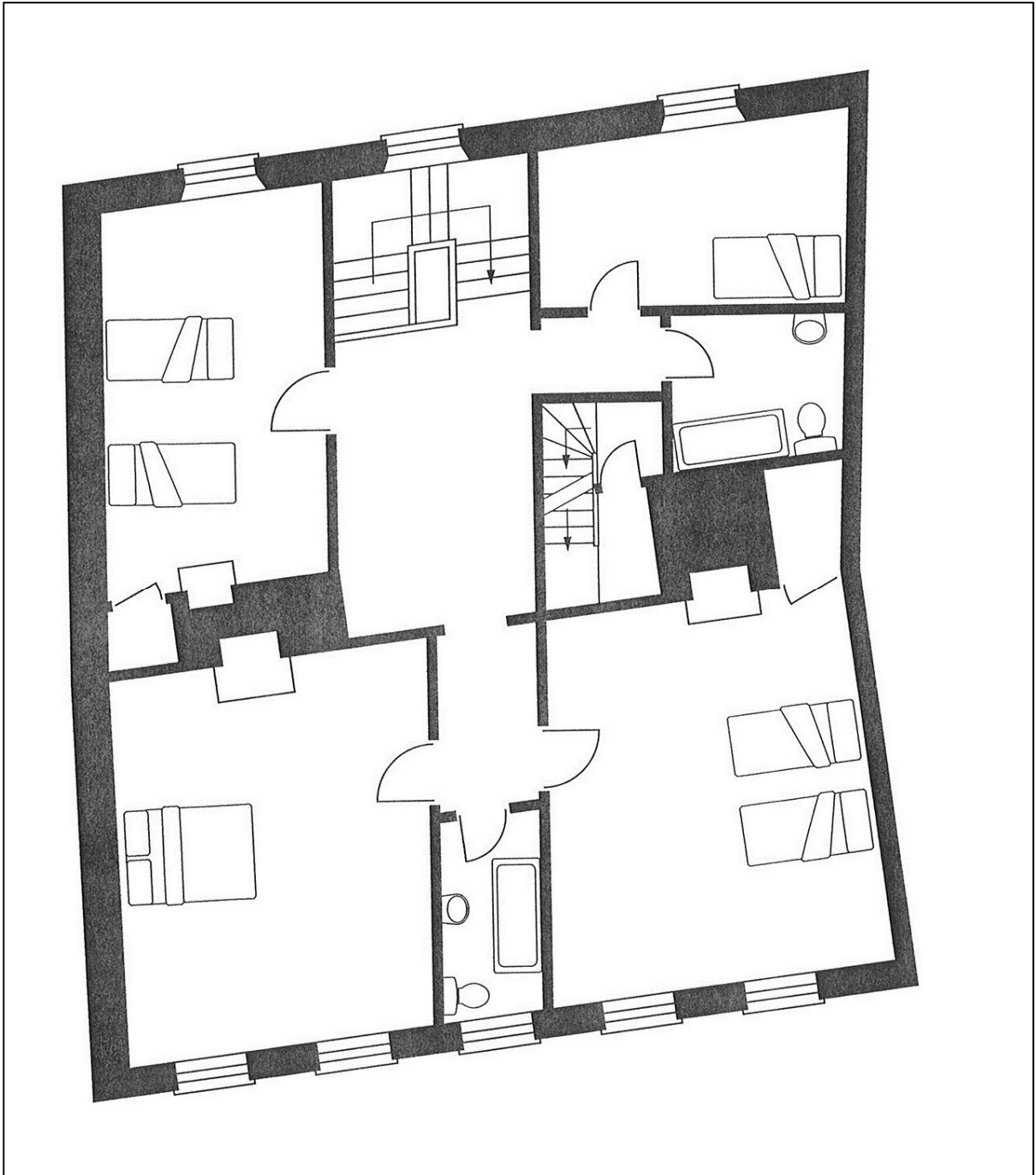
Ground floor plan - before



**Ground floor plan – after**



First floor plan – before



First floor plan - after

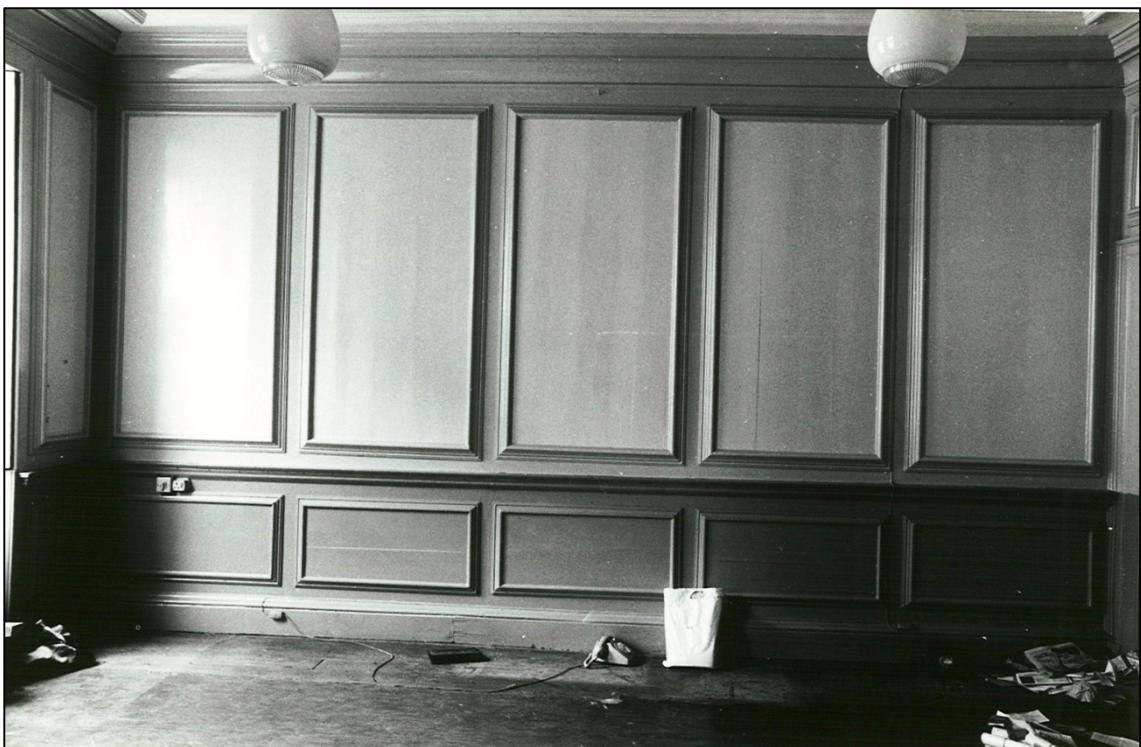


**The entrance hall**





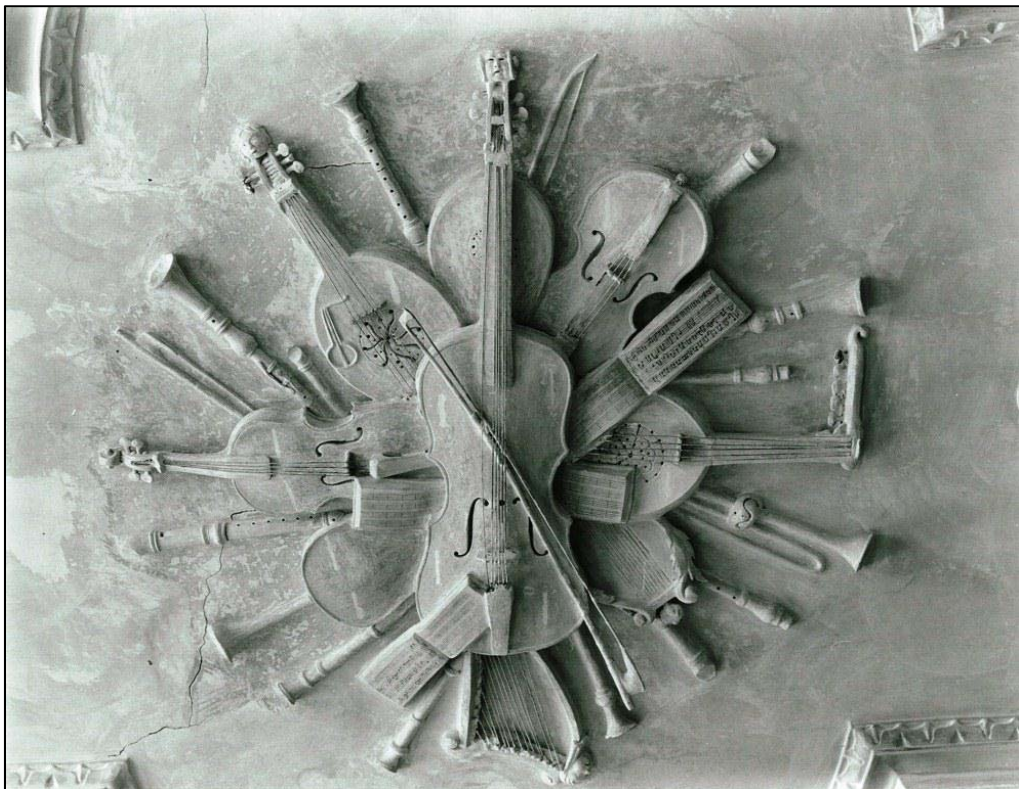
The office of the Torrington Town Lands Charity – now the dining room



The dining room



The fireplace in the present dining room



The dining room ceiling



The front sitting room as used by the Red Cross



**The back sitting room and stairs**



**The Red Cross kitchenette. The position of the window has been changed.**

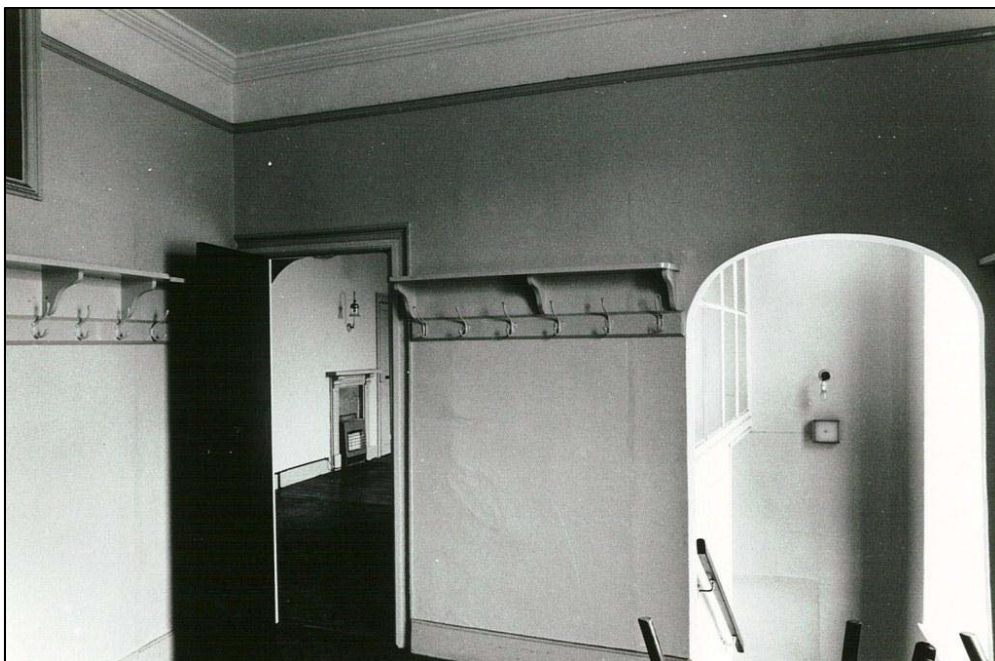


**The old billiard room – now demolished**





**The first flight of the main stairs. The stair well is boarded up on the left and the original handrail can be seen behind the new one.**



**The top of the stairs into the Freemasons' reception room – now the south west bedroom**



**The first floor landing and south east bedroom. The broom is leaning against the boxed in top of the main stairs. The landing was used as a bar and the bedroom as their dining room.**





The landing looking north



The Freemasons' meeting room





The Freemasons' meeting room



## Brief History of Great Torrington

During the Middle Ages Torrington was an important market town, rivalling Barnstaple and Bideford and rich in endowments. In about 1200 a benefactor, possibly William Fitz Robert, Baron of Torrington, gave the town several hundred acres of wasteland that lay around it. Eight centuries later this endowment is still enjoyed - not least by visitors to Cawsey House. The steep bank to the south that you can reach through the public car park and that goes down to the river is called Castle Hill Common and is a part of Torrington's Common Land. Facing south and untouched by pesticides it is a breeding place for rare butterflies.

From the top of the bank you can see Taddyport bridge, built in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and beside it the Magdalene Chapel. Attached to the Chapel was a leper hospital. The lepers were self-supporting and you can see two narrow fields which were part of the medieval strip lay-out of their farm.

In 1538 John Leland visited Torrington and described it in his *Itinerary*:

Torrington is a great large town and stondith on the brow of a hille and hath 3 fair streates in it and a good market everyweke, and ons a year apon S.Michal's day the best fayr in al those quarters.

In the toune is but one paroch chirch. Dr. Chaumbre is persone thereof.

The most parte lyveth there by making of cloth.

There is a mair and the toune is priviligid with libertees.

The ryver Torege rennith under the rootes of the hille, on the which the toune stondith on, and upon Torege at Torrington be 2 bridgges of stone, one caulled the south brid of 3 arches of stone, and another half a mile lower caulled the west bridge, the which is the greater of the 2 and by this weste bridge, the way lyeth to Hertland that is XII miles of.

A little above the south bridge stode a fair castelle apon the brou of the hille hangginge over Torege ripe [river bank] of the which at this present time nothing remaineth standing but a neglect chapelle.

Torrington continued to prosper until the Civil War; then for one evening on 16<sup>th</sup> February 1646, it was the scene of terrible drama, when one of the last battles of the First Civil War was fought out on its streets.<sup>1</sup> On the same evening the church blew up (probably accidentally) with even more loss of life.

While Barnstaple and Bideford with most of north Devon supported Oliver Cromwell, the inhabitants of Torrington were mainly Royalist. In 1642, at the outbreak of the war, Torrington was attacked by parliamentarians from Barnstaple, but succeeded in driving them off with only a few casualties. From then on there was intermittent skirmishing. An entry in the parish register for July 1643 says that Thomas Monk, a royalist cousin of the Cromwellian general, George Monk, was shot dead in South Street by one of his own troopers on account of a muddle about a password.

In August 1645 the Royalist General Goring, who commanded Charles I's western army, marched into Torrington from Barnstaple, billeting his 3-4000 men on the town. The town's population was only 2500 and Goring's army was much hated. Its lack of discipline was notorious. General Goring himself stayed at Stevenstone House, which he had commandeered from its Cromwellian owner, Sir Samuel Rolle.

In January 1646 the command of the western army was transferred from General Goring to Lord Hopton. After an unsuccessful campaign in Cornwall the Royalist army moved east and on 10 February Hopton arrived at Torrington. Meanwhile Sir Thomas Fairfax marched north from Exeter to meet him. Lord Hopton barricaded the entrances to the town, especially the west end, with earth works, tree trunks, farm implements and turnpikes.

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<sup>1</sup> The very last battle of the First English Civil War was at Stow on the Wold in Gloucestershire on 21 March 1646.

His 5000 men were billeted on the town, 20 to a house, 3 or 4 to a bed. His Headquarters was the Black Horse Inn. Neither side had any artillery but they had muskets and Lord Hopton used the church as a magazine for his gunpowder. But January 1646 was wet and he had a problem keeping the wicks dry that were used for firing the powder. An order went out for ovens to be lit in South Street and the wicks were baked.

On 16 February Fairfax marched towards Torrington and at 5pm he reached Stevenstone where he held a council of war and decided to attack. The battle raged at the barricades until 9pm when Fairfax's army broke into the town. His cavalry charged down East Street. Lord Hopton's horse was killed under him and the Royalists fled down South Street and Mill Street to the Taddipport bridge. Fortunately for them the bridge was unguarded and most of the army escaped.

During the battle Fairfax put about a hundred of his prisoners into St. Michael's Church where the gunpowder was stored. As the battle ended the powder was fired - probably by mistake and blew up killing all the prisoners and their guards and destroying the Church.

Fairfax's army left the town on 24 February. Torrington was one of the last battles of the First Civil War. Its story is told in detail in *The Forgotten Battle Torrington 1646* by John Wardman which is in the Landmark bookcase.

Since 1970, there has been a town bonfire, and in 1996 on the 350th anniversary of the Battle of Torrington the Torrington Cavaliers built a full scale wooden model of St Michael's church and set fire to it. (The bonfire has now become a five-yearly town tradition, with ever more elaborate structures being set ablaze on the August Bank Holiday weekend in aid of charities.)

After the Civil War the cloth trade continued to flourish. In 1750 Torrington was described by Eman Bowen in his *Map of Devonshire Hundreds* as a rich and populous place full of merchants who carry on a good trade with Ireland and other places."

At the beginning of the 19th century agriculture was booming and the Lord Rolle of the day built a canal so that barges could bring limestone from the mouth of the Torridge to the Torrington lime kilns. The lime was then used as a fertiliser. The canal started at Annery where the Torridge stopped being navigable, three miles north west of Torrington and ended at Healand a mile east of Rosemoor, and two miles south of Stevenstone , Lord Rolle's house. At Beal, half way between Torrington and Annery, it crossed the Torridge on an aquaduct built in 1824. It passed through Castle Hill Common on the line of the footpath that is nearest the river.

The canal had a comparatively short life. In 1870 the railway came to Torrington, the canal no longer paid and was filled in to make a road. It was a toll road, the toll-house is still to be seen by the bridge on the Bideford road.

But by 1820 cloth had nearly ceased to be made and in 1850 only one of the five mills was working. Glove-making, however, that had started in 1775, was doing well. The Glove Factory, looking like a gothic chapel is in White's Lane just north of Cawsey House. Its owner Mr.Vaughan lived in the house next door to Cawsey House.

During the early 19th century Torrington's social life was dominated by relations of Sir Joshua Reynolds. His sister Mary Palmer lived at Palmer House, still the best house in the town, and Sir Joshua used to stay with her there. He brought Dr. Johnson to tea one day and the Doctor beat his record by eating more than 13 pancakes at one sitting.

Sir Joshua's niece, Betsy Deane lived in an early 18<sup>th</sup> century house later Castle Hill Nursing Home. According to her great nephew her syllabub parties were the talk of Torrington, her house blazed with candles and green tea was prodigally dispensed.

Betsy Deane's great nephew was William Johnson, (1823-1892) who changed his name to Cory and who was a master at Eton, an inspiring teacher and a poet. He was brought up at 42 South Street, on the same side of the street as Cawsey House, the other side of the car park. He wrote the Eton Boating Song and the famous lines:

They told me Heraclitus, they told me you were dead,  
They brought me bitter news to hear and bitter tears to shed.  
I wept as I remembere'd how often you and I  
Had tired the sun with talking and sent him down the sky.

And now that thou art lying, my dear old Car ian guest,  
A handful of grey ashes, long, long ago at rest,  
Still are thy pleasant voices, thy nightingales, awake,  
For Death, he taketh all away, but them he cannot take.

A less well known poem commemorates his revisiting his old home, 42 South Street: 'I gaze from my grandfather's terraced wall'.

Another distinguished Torringtonian is Thomas Fowler, self- taught mathematician who invented the thermosiphon in 1828.

W.Keble Martin, the flower painter, whose *Concise British Flora* was a famous best seller, was vicar of Torrington for ten years 1934 -1943.

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## **Acknowledgements**

This Album is the continuation of work started by Charlotte Haslam, the Landmark Trust's historian, who died in 1997.

Information on the house was given by Sir John Smith, Philip Ford and Richard Barnett.

Information on the owners of the house was researched by Susan Scrutton of the Great Torrington History Society.

We should also like to thank: Historic Buildings Consultants, Archaeology and Ethnography at John R.L.Thorp of Keystone, Mr John Allan, Curator of the Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter and Dr.Alison Grant.

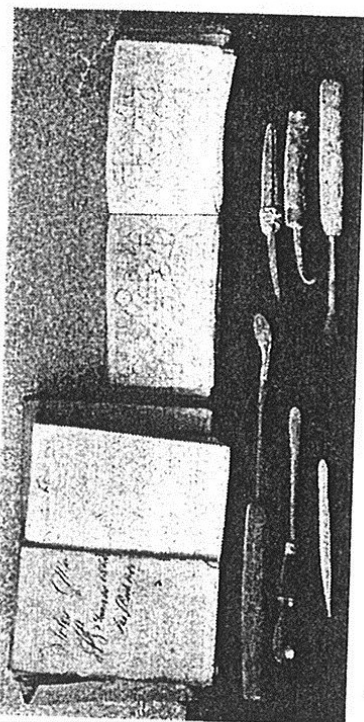
## **Photographs**

Colour photographs are by Richard Barnett and Philip Ford, black and white by Richard Hayman.



The dining room as drawn by John Bucknall of Caroe & Partners





### *The Frithelstock Book* by Cecil and Kathleen French

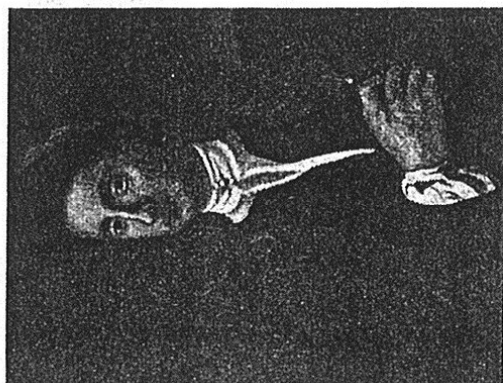
*After months of patient inquiry the authors succeeded in tracking down the unique pocket book shown on the right above with six plasterer's tools of the times. It was found to be in the possession of a direct descendant of the Abbotts of Frithelstock, who had it in safe custody in a box under the bed. Compiled over a period of 150 years by this one Devon family, the manual contains close on 300 pages of patterns of ceilings and overmantels, including drawings of flowers, animals and mottoes. They might be executed in plaster, wood or stone. None of the wooden moulds which were used to run the ribs and impress the designs in plaster has survived. With the tools the ribs were mitred at the inter-sections, decorative motifs were undercut and minute facial details were added to the figures. Little is known of the Abbotts and the whole background of the pattern book is relatively unexplored as yet, but the authors have made a close study of stylistic similarities and other evidence.*

**T**HE sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, like the age in which we are now living, witnessed tremendous changes for the better in the lives of all classes in the English countryside; and the social revolution spread even to remote Devon, isolated behind its barrier of steep hills. No longer were the first Elizabethans content to spend their days in the dark, draughty, dirty halls of their forbears, where smoke from the hearth

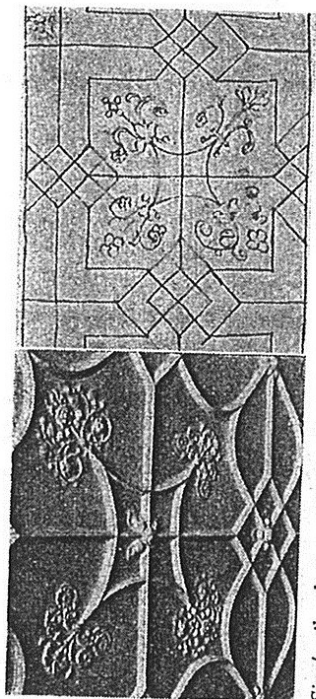
blackened the oak-beamed roof and fleas hopped on the rush-strewn floor. In the houses of the wealthy, carpets were introduced to cover the floors, and finely worked tapestries the walls; but the lavishly enriched ceilings of moulded plaster which now transformed the blackened beams were not the perquisite of any one class. They were to be found in quite humble cottages as well as in sumptuous mansions.

In a county with a long coast-line on north and south it is only to be expected that new fashions would arrive at and spread from the chief ports: Barnstaple and Bideford, Exeter, and Totnes-cum-Dartmouth. Stylistic evidence from ceilings and overmantels shows similar motifs recurring within a twenty-mile radius of each of these centres and seldom repeated in the other two areas. After the wear and tear of three centuries, however, the wealth of plasterwork still remaining in the county makes it evident that foreigners, Italians and Flemings, could never have arrived in sufficient numbers to claim credit for it all. Apart from executing isolated commissions for noblemen, such as that for Sir John Thynne at Longleat, Wiltshire, in 1547, they merely imparted their skill to local men who were both willing and able to carry on the tradition.

It is rarely one's fortune to discover the working manual of a village craftsman, and the book of designs of the Abbott family is a unique survival. Studied in conjunction with the numerous ceilings and overmantels which still exist in the area, it provides a valuable and illuminating link between the conception of a design in the artist's mind, its acceptance by the client and its final execution by the craftsman. It was evidently the custom for a master to leave his working manual at the homes of intending clients to peruse at their leisure. They picked out



*John Abbott of Frithelstock (1639-1727)*



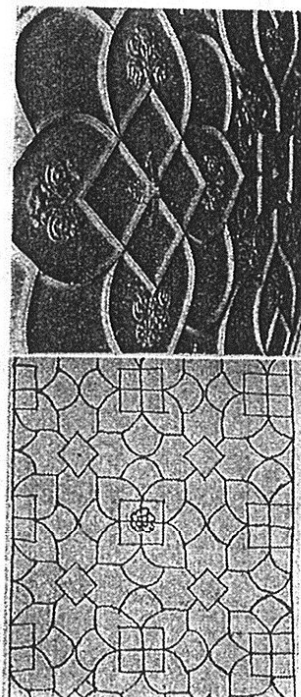
*Single-rib plaster ceiling with typical geometrical layout of intersecting squares and segments of circles at 7 The Close, Exeter, and the book design*

from several different pages the patterns which were later incorporated in the finished work. There is thus a close analogy between the method of choosing a ceiling or overmantel design in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and that of selecting wallpaper patterns with their friezes in the twentieth.

The Abbott family cannot be numbered among the most ancient in Devon, for the first Abbott, William by name, appears on the scene only in the time of Henry VIII. This monarch's wholesale appropriation and redistribution of ecclesiastical landed property gave many an aspiring family the opportunity for which it was waiting. William Abbott's faithful service as the King's Sergeant of the Cellar was rewarded in 1539 by the grant of the dissolved Abbey of Hartland, which brought him an assured income of more than £300 a year, sufficient to enable him to rear his large family in comparative comfort.

The priory at Frithelstock, some fifteen miles from Hartland, was always an appurtenance of the Abbey. Hence it is not surprising to find a younger branch of the Abbott family settled in that parish by the middle of the sixteenth century. Here the family would be in close contact with the comings and goings of men of affairs and the influx of ideas and fashions to the busy port of Bideford about four miles away. On the quayside they would meet visiting foreign craftsmen, some of whom were doubtless afterwards engaged, and at the same time be introduced to the pattern and emblem books so popular on the Continent at the time. An innocent entry in the Frithelstock book records that in 1633 James Barozzi's 'Five Orders of Architecture', translated by Joseph Moxon, was consulted.

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*Another design from the book and a fine single-rib moulded ceiling with unusually large floral sprays at Dunsmoor Farm, Silberton*

The evidence supplied by the signatures on the flyleaf of the Abbotts' book and the changing styles of the designs which follow make it abundantly clear that it was compiled over a period of at least 150 years, being built up gradually through a succession of radical changes in interior decorative taste. During this period and since, the book was handed down as a treasured possession from father to son. The dates 1665 and 1662 on the flyleaves, in addition to that of 1633 in the body of the book, strengthen this assumption.

The manual would appear to have been started by John Abbott the Elder (c. 1565-1635), probably a great-grandson of William the Cellarer. He married twice and was the father of a large family. John Abbott, the famous plasterer, whose portrait in oils wearing the still extant linen shirt hangs today in his descendant's house at 'Culley', Westward Ho!, was his grandson. Born in 1639, he lived to the ripe old age of 87. He drew on the traditional fount of designs built up by his grandfather in the numerous ceilings and overmantels which provide stylistic evidence of his school. He also worked in the new classical idiom inspired by Inigo Jones and introduced at the Restoration in 1660. The Abbott manual contains the design both for the royal arms of Charles II dated 1662 and executed with minor modifications in the parish church of Frithelstock in 1677, and also for the ceiling in the Long Room of the Exeter Custom House (1681). Documentary evidence of these is supplied by the Frithelstock parish registers and the 'Account of the Key' (quay) at Exeter. John Abbott was paid £13 6s 8d for the work at Frithelstock and £35 for that at Exeter.

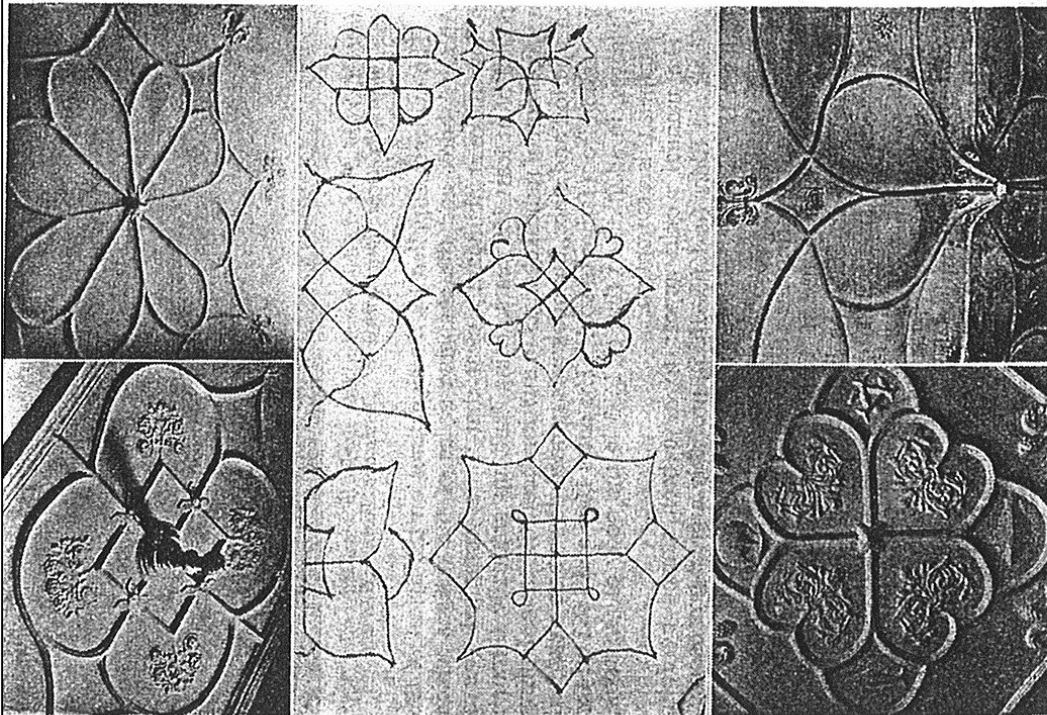
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It is highly likely that this John Abbott drew the birds, beasts and fishes which form another section of the manual from a bestiary, as well as from nature. His versatile mind conceived the mottoes too. In 1665, the date on the front flyleaf, when he was twenty-five years of age, he penned his signature below those of his forbears to show that the book had passed to him. This gave a tremendous fillip to an already promising career. He was then living in the neighbouring parish of Langtree, for which church he also executed a royal arms. His father Richard, as a younger son of a large family, had apparently moved there in the 1640s and remained till his death in 1663.

As the eldest son, John was evidently anxious to move back to Frithelstock. He bought Culleigh from John Cade in 1679 and soon afterwards was serving as warden of the parish church. He was now in the prime of life and at the height of his prestige. Perhaps this was an incentive to take a wife to share his responsibilities, for marry he did. His eldest son, also John, was born in 1680. By the time the book passed to him on the death of his father in 1727 there remained only a few blank pages to be filled. The painted texts and a few half-finished rococo pencil sketches are all that can safely be attributed to him.

The extent of the debt owed to this gifted North Devon family of skilled craftsmen becomes even more apparent when their designs are considered in detail. These were emulated by lesser men not only in the Bideford area but throughout the county. The designs for ceilings in the Abbotts' book consist, in the main, of repetitive geometrical patterns for execution as single, double or enriched moulded ribs, either straight or curved. At their intersections a vast repertoire of angle sprays was drawn upon to complete the design and enhance the effect.

The design from the manual reproduced on p. 664 and the variation executed at 7 The Close, Exeter, are typical examples of the simple yet dignified taste of the period. It is capable of covering any area and was chosen frequently. The ceiling at Dunsmoor, Silvertown, displays what might almost be termed a hackneyed pattern of squares set anglewise within a quatrefoil; yet the angle sprays show unusual interest and point to the work of a versatile craftsman. The leaves covering the mitres of the ribs at the centre of the design and the flowing natural lines of coiling grape vines, fruit and foliage all reveal the hand of a master. Although the debt owed to the sophisticated work



A page from the book and four ceilings incorporating similar features. Above (l.), single ribs and angle sprays at Clysthayes Manor, Silvertown (c. 1620); (r.), early C17th geometrical pattern of the Barnstaple school at West Kerscott Farm, Symybridge. Below (l.), early C17th design at Treasbeare, Honiton Clyst, ancestral home of the Yarde family; (r.), drawing-room ceiling at Bowingsleigh, a South Devon mansion near Kingsbridge

of Italian Renaissance masters, such as Barozzi of Vignola, is obvious, he loved to portray the birds, animals and vegetation of the countryside around him.

For smaller ceilings the book provides a choice of symmetrical designs, centred sometimes on a square, like those at Clysthayes, near Silverton, and at Treasbare, near Honiton Clyst. At other



Above: overmantel at Mowlish, near Kenton, dated 1620. Centre: two designs from the book. Below: early 17th overmantel, displaying the Grenville arms, in the gas showrooms at Bideford; the Puritanical figure holding the cartouches is a rare feature

times the principle of flower petals is used, as in the drawing-room ceiling at Bowringsleigh, a South Devon mansion near Kingsbridge. The flowing design of slender ribs radiating from a central boss or pendant is typical of the late sixteenth century and doubtless provided inspiration for the Abbots. The early seventeenth century geometrical ceiling of the Barnstaple school at West Kerscott Farm, Swymbridge, also shows a strong similarity to a design in the book. Petals, squares, ogees, segments of circles — what a bewildering variety of designs might be built up from them! It would not be surprising if the client left the final decision to the craftsman himself.

How much more difficult it must have been for him to choose the overmantel, that cynosure of all eyes, to complete the picture of warmth and hospitality presented by the vast open hearth! Probably few of the large chimney pieces customary in the homes of the gentry at that period would have lacked a fitting ornament in the shape of a rich rectangle of plasterwork. The basis of the great majority which survive — an astonishing number — is a central coat of arms or biblical scene. Allegorical pictures exist but are rare. Around the centre piece is a frame of strapwork ornamented for the most part with small rosettes and bunches of fruit or human and lion heads. The variations on this theme in the book of designs seem endless, and the plaster overmantels which still remain invariably follow this basic pattern. Not a single one, however, follows a design in its entirety: a supporting figure perhaps is taken from one sketch, some other feature from another.

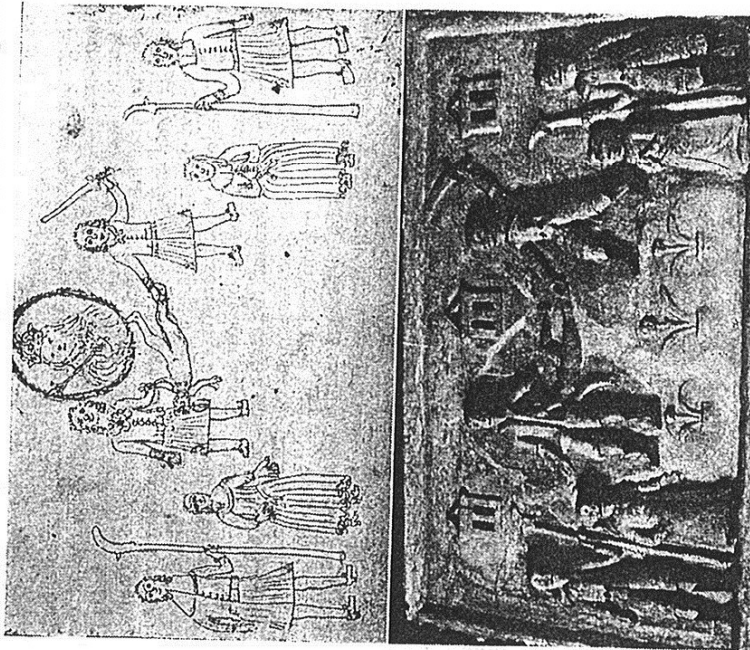
The illustration of the overmantel in what are now gas showrooms at Bideford, unusual though it is in its dual presentation, shows well the characteristic use of the coiling bands of strapwork, the human head projecting in the centre above each coat of arms, Tudor roses and bunches of fruit. These can all be seen in the half design taken from the book.

Another design shows a choice of central cartouches. The foliations of the border in the central small design are adopted in the square frame of the coat of arms at Mowlish, a farm house near Kenton, Exeter. Here, too, are human heads with haloes of curls and typical flower paterae. Identical vertical coils of strapwork can clearly be seen in John Abbott's drawing.

The comparison of his sketches with two overmantels, one representing the Judgement of Solomon at Stafford Barton, Dolton, and another portraying the Seasons at Dean Head,

Goodleigh, provides food for thought. The former has naïve charm, but the latter possesses fine workmanship and considerably more finesse as regards the human face. It is hardly conceivable that they were done by the same hand. Yet curiously enough the building in the background of the design has much more affinity with the finished work at Stafford Barton than with the castle shown in the Seasons.

John Abbott not only worked from the traditional designs bequeathed to him but also initiated his own in the latest post-

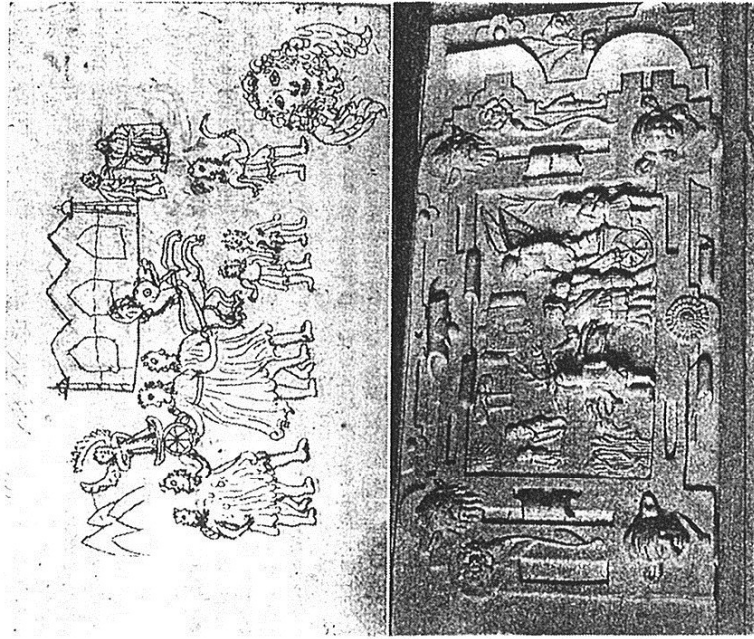


*The Judgement of Solomon panel at Stafford Barton, Dolton, executed by lesser craftsmen from the Abbott design*

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Restoration fashion. The Exeter Custom House ceiling, executed in 1681, is sketched in outline in his manual but follows his unusual decorative scheme in part only, his clients evidently preferring the more conventional motifs popularised by the great Grinling Gibbons.

Enough has now been said to show the close link which existed between pattern and plasterwork not only in its heyday, the early seventeenth century, but also throughout the 150 years during which the book was being compiled.



*The Seasons overmantel at Dean Head, Goodleigh, whose refined workmanship may be attributed to John Abbott himself*

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*THOMAS FOWLER*

*of  
Great Torrington  
North Devon*

Thomas Fowler was born in 1777 in Great Torrington of humble parentage, his father being a cooper. Very little is known about his early life but from an account written by his son, Hugh Fowler, it quickly becomes evident that Thomas was an exceptional young man.

“He (Thomas) received the barest rudiments of education- not more, certainly, than the three R’s- at a small school here. He was apprenticed at an early age (about 13 or 14 I think) to a fellmonger. It was at this time that his taste for mathematical study began to develop itself..... No one could have been more entirely self taught than he was. Mathematicians in those days were very scarce in this part of Devonshire, and probably elsewhere, even in the great centres of education.....

Few people, if any, of this town or neighbourhood knew, or if they knew, cared, that there was in their midst “a wondrous boy” who, absolutely self taught, after a hard day’s work among sheepskins he would spend half the night poring over his mathematics, until he had gone as far as to master Saunderson’s Fluxions, the name by which the method of the differential calculus as far as it was then known, was designated.

There was no one alas! to take him by the hand, and help him to carry on his studies at Cambridge, where alone such talent as he undoubtedly possessed could either have been fully developed or adequately rewarded, so he was left, without help or sympathy to his solitary studies. “

Hugh Fowler also tells us, ” His (Thomas’s) whole life was spent in Torrington. He established himself as a printer and bookseller (his printing-machine, by the way, he made with his own hands on a plan of his own invention):...”

At the same time as designing and building a printing press and making a modest living as a printer and bookseller, Fowler was working on another idea which came to fruition in 1828 when he patented his Thermosiphon, the precursor to the modern central heating system. The system is described in a pamphlet written by Fowler which he dedicates to John Sloley Esq. of Great Torrington who adopted the principle in his vinery.

This invention was very favourably reviewed in the Gardeners Magazine of 1829.

“Mr Fowler has had the good fortune to hit on the idea that water may be heated and made to circulate through a siphon, as well as through horizontal pipes, or by force through pipes in any direction; provided always, that the height of the siphon be not greater than to be counter-balanced by the pressure of the atmosphere; say not greater than 30ft. Any person might have discovered the same thing by reflection, or in answer to the question asked; but we are not aware that the idea has occurred, either to the original inventor of the hot-water system, Bonnemain; to its first introducers into England, Bolton and Watt; to its subsequent introducer, Chabbannes; to Count Rumford; and to its reinventors, or English inventors, Atkinson and Bacon; or to any of the numerous engineers now occupied in applying this mode of heating. “

Working independently in North Devon, Thomas Fowler made his discovery ahead of some of the most respected inventors of his generation. The applications he anticipated for the Thermosiphon ranged from heating hot houses, greenhouses and conservatories; forcing vegetables; heating fluids for dyeing, hat making and washing, indeed any purpose where a temperature below that of boiling water is required; heating a hot plate for copper plate printers; and last but not least, replacing the water in the tube with oil and using the Thermosiphon in houses for heating rooms, baths, washing water and any other purpose where water at boiling point is required.

Unfortunately the invention was soon pirated in all directions. The only remedy was costly legal proceedings but even if he had had the means to conduct them, success would have been doubtful.

In his daily life in Great Torrington Thomas Fowler, in addition to his printing and book selling activities, had started as a clerk and then become sole manager and partner of the only bank in town, Messrs Loveband & Co. During the 1830's Fowler also became treasurer of the Poor Law Union and embarked upon the course that would lead to his next, and possibly most currently significant, invention.

Calculating payments across the parishes was a long and tedious business and one that he applied his considerable mathematical ability to simplifying. The subsequent result was 'Fowler's Tables for facilitating Arithmetical Calculations, intended for calculating the proportionate charges on the parishes in Poor Law Unions; and useful also for various other purposes'. Printed by T Fowler in 1838. The Chairman of the Board of Guardians, Lord Clinton, and the auditor of the Union accounts, C.W. Johnson Esq, persuaded Fowler to publish this wonderful, "abridgement of the Calculator's labours".

The basis of the abridgement was Fowler's discovery that, "any number might be produced by a combination of the powers of 2 or 3" . The first section of the booklet is the Binary Table, or a table of indices of the power of the number 2 from 1 to 130048. The second section is the Ternary table, or a table of the indices of the power of the number 3 from 1 to 3985807. The tables themselves were a major breakthrough but in his introduction Fowler refers to the special properties he had discovered relating to these numbers.

He said no more at this point but was obviously referring to early work on his wooden calculating machine that no lesser person than Professor Airy, the then Astronomer Royal, was to promote on his behalf to a gathering of the Society for the Advancement of Science in 1840:

“Mr Airy gave an account of Mr Fowlers new Calculating Machine. The origin of this machine was to facilitate the guardians of a poor-law district in Devonshire in calculating the proportions in which the several divisions were to be assessed. The chief peculiarity of the machine was, that instead of our common decimal notation of numbers, in it ternary notation was used; the digits becoming not tenfold but threefold more valuable as they were placed to the left..... In the machine levers were contrived to bring forward the digits 1 or  $\bar{1}$  as they were required in the process of calculation.”

In a letter to Professor Airy Thomas Fowler describes his machine:

“This machine was constructed entirely with my own hands (Principally in wood) with the utmost regard to economy and merely to put my ideas of this mode of calculation in to some form of Action; It is about 6 feet long, one foot deep and three feet wide. In Brass and Iron it might be constructed so as not to occupy a space much larger than a good portable writing desk and with powers such as I have described.’

There was considerable interest in his machine at the highest level as Fowler was invited to demonstrate it to a group at Kings College London. Thomas Fowler writes:

I had the honour in May 1840 to submit the machine to the inspection of many Learned Men in London among whom were the Marquis of Northampton, Mr Babbage, W.F. Baily and A de Morgan Esq with many other Noblemen and Gentlemen, Fellows of the Royal Society etc.....”

Hugh Fowler remembers this event:

“The machine was for some time exhibited in the museum of King’s College, London. I remember myself working it there in the presence of several scientific men, who expressed satisfaction with the rapidity and accuracy with which I brought out long sums in multiplication and division as far as ten figures by ten figures.”

The presence of Babbage at this meeting was significant. Known as the ‘the father of computing’ for the ideas he began to promote in 1822 with his Difference Engine, Babbage was just 16 years ahead of Fowler and his calculating machine. Unfortunately the fact that the technology didn’t exist to actually build Babbage’s Difference and Analytical Engines meant that, in some people’s eyes, he became associated with failure. Certainly his inability to produce tangible results effectively prevented Thomas Fowler from gaining the funds he required to develop his calculating machine.



Hugh Fowler reports that:

“The government of the day refused even to look at my father’s machine, on the express ground that they had spent such large sums, with no satisfactory result, on Babbage’s ‘calculating engine’ as he termed it.....It is sad to think of the weary days and nights, of the labour of hand and brain, bestowed on this arduous work, the result of which, from adverse circumstances, was loss of money, loss of health, and final disappointment. If the machine could have been constructed in metal, as he so much wished, it might be in use even to this day, the mechanism, unlike that of Babbage, being so simple and yet so effective.”

On Thomas Fowler’s death in 1843 the wooden pieces were returned to Hugh Fowler from Kings College in, “so fragmentary a condition that they cannot again be put together.” Regretfully no plans, drawings or detailed descriptions of the machine have yet been found.

There is no doubt that Thomas Fowler was a mathematical visionary. He writes:

“I am fully aware of the tendency to overrate one’s own inventions and to attach undue importance to subjects that preoccupy the mind but I venture to say and hope to be fully appreciated by a Gentleman of your scientific achievements, (Airy) that I am often astonished at the beautiful aspect of a calculation entirely mechanical. I often reflect that had the Ternary instead of the binary Notation been adopted in the Infancy of Society, machines something like the present would long ere this have been common, as the transition from mental to mechanical calculation would have been so very obvious and simple”.

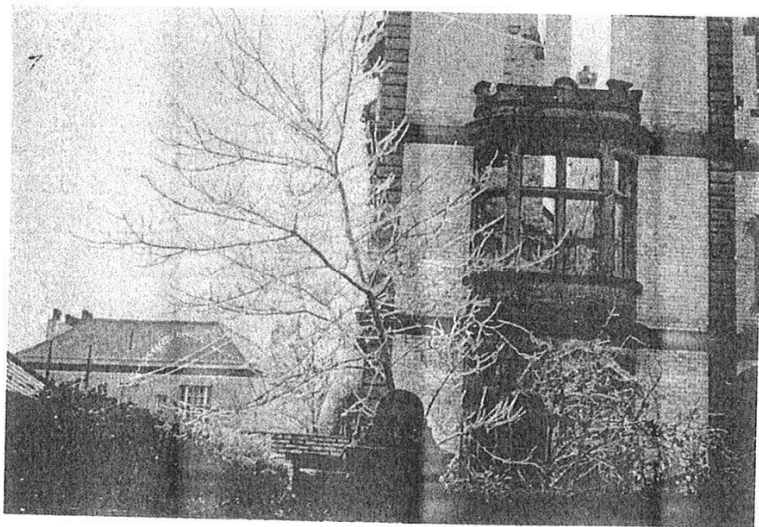
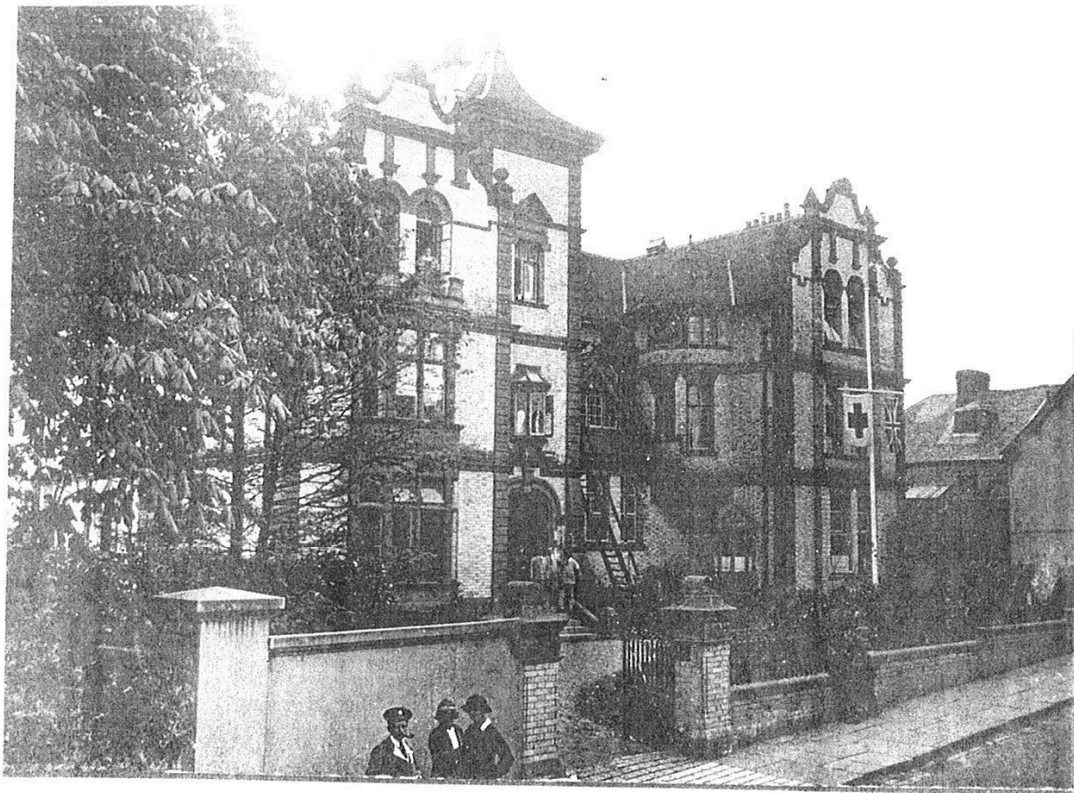
These comments were made in May 1841.

In 1997, on their Internet Web site, Rank Xerox make reference to Thomas Fowlers calculating machine as having a direct relevance to their current research. There is a theoretical limit as to how small you can make an electronic computer. This limit can be overcome using nano-technology. The option of operating mechanically not electronically, albeit at a molecular level, is called Rod Logic and relates directly to Fowler’s ideas.

Thomas Fowler rose from cooper’s son to banker and along the way changed the world we live in. The extraordinary inventiveness of this man suggests that he no doubt produced many other ideas that at present we are unaware of. Had he come from a wealthy family he would probably have been a household name, a figure of great national importance. As it is, the importance of his contribution has largely gone unrecognised, most notably in Great Torrington. I would suggest that, with the Genesis project, we have the opportunity to give Thomas Fowler the recognition he undoubtedly deserves.

Pamela Vass

With thanks to John McKay for his extensive contributions



FIRE AT SYDNEY HOUSE  
 FEB. 19.42 1942 5685

The Sydney House site is now the entrance to the car park

**GUARD OF HONOUR AT FUNERAL**

Uniformed members of the Torrington N.F.S. acted as bearers at the funeral of Tom Shute, aged 6, of 2, Greenwood House, Brockley, London, one of the five child victims of the disastrous fire at Sydney House, Torrington, on Thursday, which took place at Torrington yesterday (Monday).

Members of the Borough Police and Special Constabulary, formed a Guard of Honour. The Vicar of Torrington (the Rev. W. Keble Martin) officiated.

The chief mourner was Mr. C. T. Shute, father.

Among others attending were: the Mayor and Mayoress of Torrington (Mr. and Mrs. B. G. Lampard-Vachell), Dr. J. R. Harper (Barnstaple), Mr. B. Binding (representing the Ministry of Health), Capt. Phillips (Salvation Army), Mr. F. R. Hodge (hon. secretary Torrington Cottage Hospital), Messrs. C. Eadyvean and G. Copp (representing First Aid Party, A.R.P.), Column Officer A. S. Bowden (Barnstaple N.F.S.). The following members of the Borough Special Constabulary, under Area Officer Col. Graham, were present: Messrs. J. Jenkins, W. Bowden, A. Hey, C. Dabworthy, J. Clarke, E. Rooks, C. Heywood, H. Rowcliffe, A. J. Heaman, S. Chapple, S. Luxton, A. E. Muncy, R. Hodge, R. Long, Sergeants F. G. Davies and W. Eastmond. Police Sgt. Squires and Police Constables Trigger and Bickford represented the Borough Police.

Section Leader J. H. Holwill was in charge of the bearer party which consisted of Firemen W. E. Kelly, F. M. and H. H. Beer, W. Brainton, E. Easterbrook and W. Harris.

Floral tributes included from Mum and Dad, Rose and Mary; Torrington Borough Police; evacuees at Corner House.—Mr. T. A. Coombe, Torrington, carried out the funeral arrangements.

It is understood the funerals of the other four victims will take place at their respective homes.