The Landmark Trust

THE LIBRARY

History Album

Written by Charlotte Haslam
Updated June 2021

The Landmark Trust Shottesbrooke Maidenhead Berkshire SL6 3SW
Charity registered in England & Wales 243312 *and Scotland* SC039205

Bookings 01628 825925 *Office* 01628 825920 *Facsimile* 01628 825417
Website www.landmarktrust.org.uk

KEY FACTS

Built	**c.1708-20, architect unknown**
Bought by Landmark Trust	**1978**
Architects for restoration	**Philip Jebb**
Builders for restoration	**R. Gist & Son, Stansells of Taunton**
Plasterwork restoration	**Moran & Wheatley**
Eaves cornice	**Richard Barnett**
Garden	**Charlie Ferrett**

Contents

Summary

From the 16th until the 19th century, Stevenstone was the principal seat of the Rolle family, once the largest landowners in Devon. The great house that we now see, lying in ivy-clad ruins, was the third to be built on the site. It is to the second of these, a late 17th-century or early 18th-century remodelling of a Tudor brick house, that The Library and Orangery relate – part of a formal garden layout that was later swept away. We know no definite dates for any of the work, either for the main house or the two pavilions, nor the names of architects or craftsmen concerned.

They may have been commissioned in the 1680s by Sir John Rolle, who inherited in 1647 and was knighted at the Restoration, or perhaps by his grandson and heir Robert soon after he inherited in 1706. Both were architectural patrons – Robert was responsible for the colonnaded Queen Anne's Walk in Barnstaple – and whichever undertook the task probably employed some gifted local mason/architect, who may well have been familiar with the work of William Talman and perhaps Christopher Wren. Architectural details seem to indicate the earlier date, but it would still have been possible to find craftsmen to do work in the 'old-fashioned' manner 20 or 30 years later. Curiously, however, the armorial shields on the façade of The Library are not those of Sir John, nor of Robert nor either of their wives, but those of Robert's brother John and his wife Isabella. It may have been this John Rolle who finished work on The Library, decorated the interior and at the same time built the Orangery.

So had the Library always been used as a library? Probably not: to begin with, the existence of a library as a separate room was not common before the age of the Grand Tour and Palladianism, say from 1720 onwards. But during the restoration it appeared that there had never been a cornice in the upper room, indicating that the walls had always been lined with bookcases, or at least had been so from the time that the interior plaster-work was done. Certainly by 1796 the Library contents appeared in property lists separately from those of the main house. By 1976 the bookcases had all disappeared except for a few fragments of inlaid veneer, and these looked like 18th-century work. So Denys Rolle, third and youngest son of Robert Rolle's brother John, may have been responsible for fitting the building out as a library. Denys inherited unexpectedly in 1779 as the third and youngest son of Robert Rolle's brother John. He was an eccentric man, a naturalist and widely-read educationalist. He twice tried to establish a Utopian colony on 20,000 acres of land in East Florida. When his settlers all deserted or returned home the second time, Rolles turned instead to enslaved Africans for labour on his plantations, building up a large workforce. After Florida was ceded to Spain in 1783, Rolles was given plantations in Exuma, Bahamas in compensation but returned himself to Devon, perhaps finding solace in his library. The Rolles slaves were officially liberated in 1838 a generation later, the compensation from the British government adding further to the Rolle family wealth. Many of the former slaves adopted the surname of Rolle. They took over the Rolle lands on Exuma as their own, running them communally. The lands are owned to this day by descendants of the former slaves, and cannot be sold.

Deny's son John died childless and the estate passed to his nephew Mark, who took the name of Rolle and who rebuilt Stevenstone in 1868-70. The Library was partly rebuilt at the same time: the roof was renewed, the front was rendered and steps were built at the

back to give access to the upper room. The Orangery was reroofed in glass and became a fernery and a new garden was laid out around them.

In 1907 Mark Rolle also died without an heir. In the years that followed the land was sold and most of the great house pulled down, with the remains being occupied by troops during the war. After the war the house was broken up and the lead from the roof sold for scrap, the stables were turned into cottages and more cottages were built on the land. In the late 1940s The Library itself was converted into a house, dividing the upper room and closing in the loggia. The fireplace from the dining room in the main house was put in a ground-floor sitting room. In 1978, with the Orangery, it was put up for sale and the two buildings were bought by the Landmark Trust.

RESTORATION BY THE LANDMARK TRUST

Work on the Orangery began in late 1979, under the direction of the architect Philip Jebb, who had worked on many Landmark restorations. The builders were a local firm, R Gist & Son, with help from Stansells of Taunton. First the front wall had to be shored up, and the glass roof and the collapsing eaves cornice removed. It was decided not to put back the 19th-century iron roof but to reconstruct the slate roof that would have been there originally. A new cornice was made, reusing as many of the existing modillion blocks as possible. The chimney was rebuilt, in stone instead of in brick.

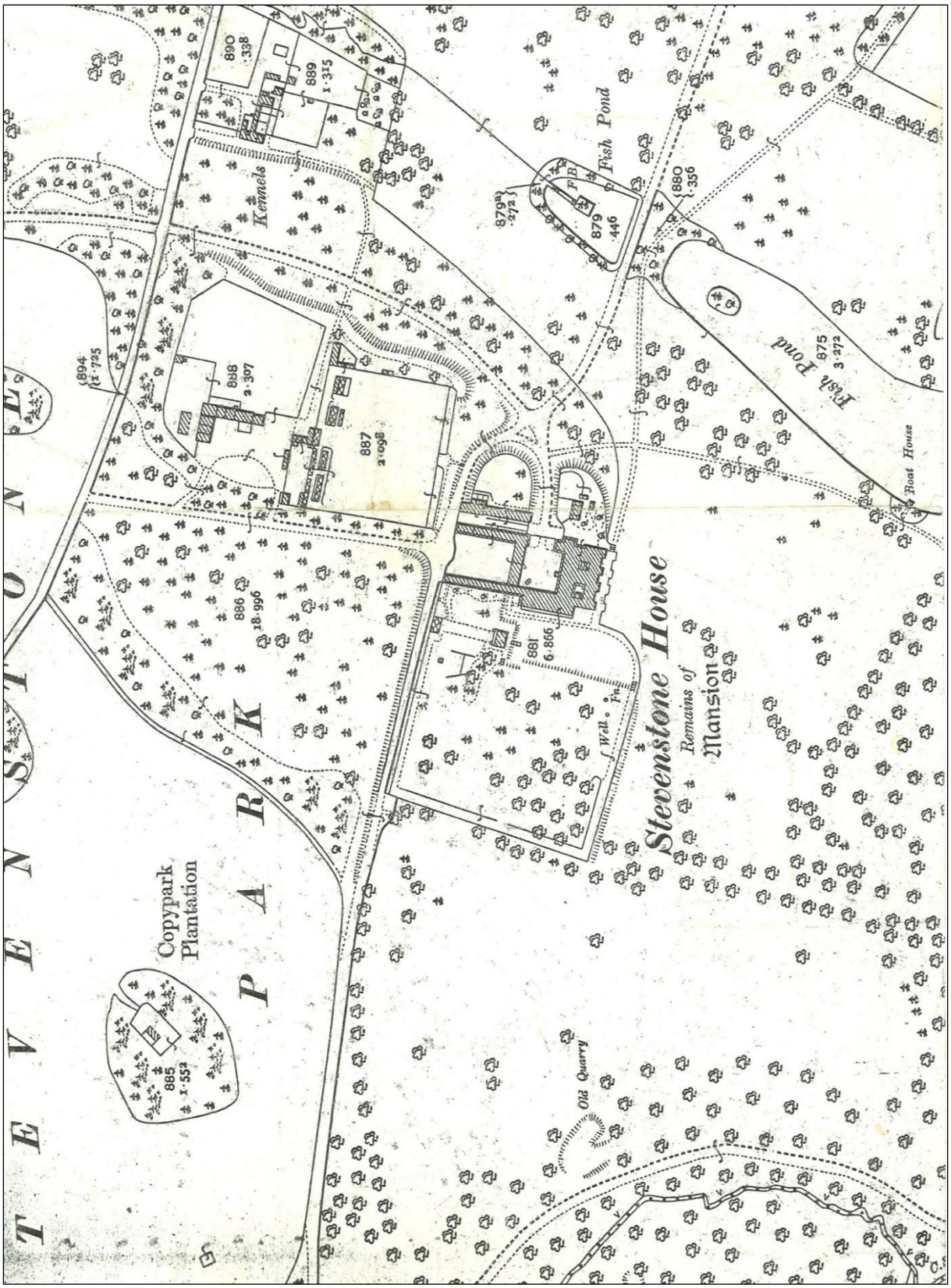
The top of the front wall was collapsing, and was taken down completely as far as the window heads. The brick piers between the windows, which were leaning badly outwards, were eased back to the vertical. A concrete ring beam was then formed to hold the shell in position, after which the top of the wall could be rebuilt and the whole wall repointed. The window frames had to be replaced, but the special draught-excluding sashes were repaired and reused. A new door was made, a copy of the original, and new shutters were made for the windows. Finally the interior was finished as simply as possible, with plain plaster walls topped by a new cornice, and a slate slab floor that came from the ground floor of The Library.

In 1980 work began on The Library. The Victorian roof was dismantled and a temporary protective covering put over the building. The shell of the building was far from sound - when the render was removed, many of the bricks could simply be removed by hand, and the outer brick face had not been properly tied into the inner skin. Much had to be completely rebuilt, and in other places damaged or decayed bricks were cut out and new ones stitched in. The whole front was then repointed. Defective stonework was repaired where possible, or renewed using Bath stone from the Corsham quarry. The steps at the back of the building were replaced with new ones in wood, and the second of the two windows in the north wall was made into a door, to match the other one, which had been altered when the steps were built.

The roof was reconstructed to its original form, with a flat top, using mainly new timber but reusing as many of the existing slates as possible. The glory of the new roof is the cornice. When the Victorian roof was stripped off, a few of the original modillions were found, cut back but still in good condition; much more ornate than the 19th-century ones, they had clearly belonged to a more elaborate cornice altogether. So a splendid new cornice was designed, incorporating copies of these, and was beautifully made by

Richard Barnett, a local carpenter and wood carver. Inside, the ground-floor arches were reopened and a bedroom, bathroom and kitchen fitted behind a new wall. Upstairs, no attempt was made to restore the main room to its original form as a library, since the details of its appearance remain unknown. It was simply restored as a fine room of early 18th-century character, with a new cornice, dado rail and window architraves. A spiral stair was built, its top forming an island bookcase, and a grand fireplace surround from the contemporary dining room in the main house, put into ground floor of The Library some 40 or 50 years before, was moved upstairs to replace the plainer original, which has been used in the Orangery, still in use today as an unheated summer bedroom.

This proved to be one of the longest-lasting restorations ever undertaken by the Landmark Trust, and to bring it to completion was a triumph for the architect and craftsmen concerned. But now it awaits you, to stay here in this remnant of the Rolles' great wealth and prestige, and to enjoy as they did the delights of Stevenstone.



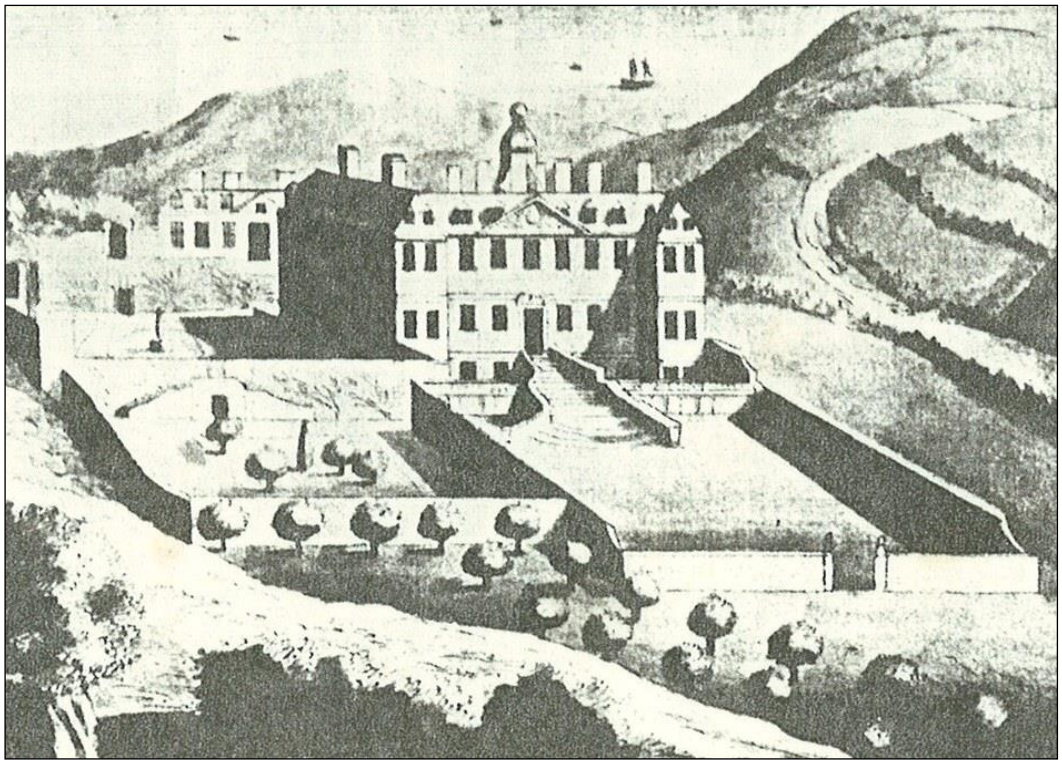
Ordnance survey map of Stevenstone. Surveyed 1884-85, revised 1903-4

History of The Library and Orangery

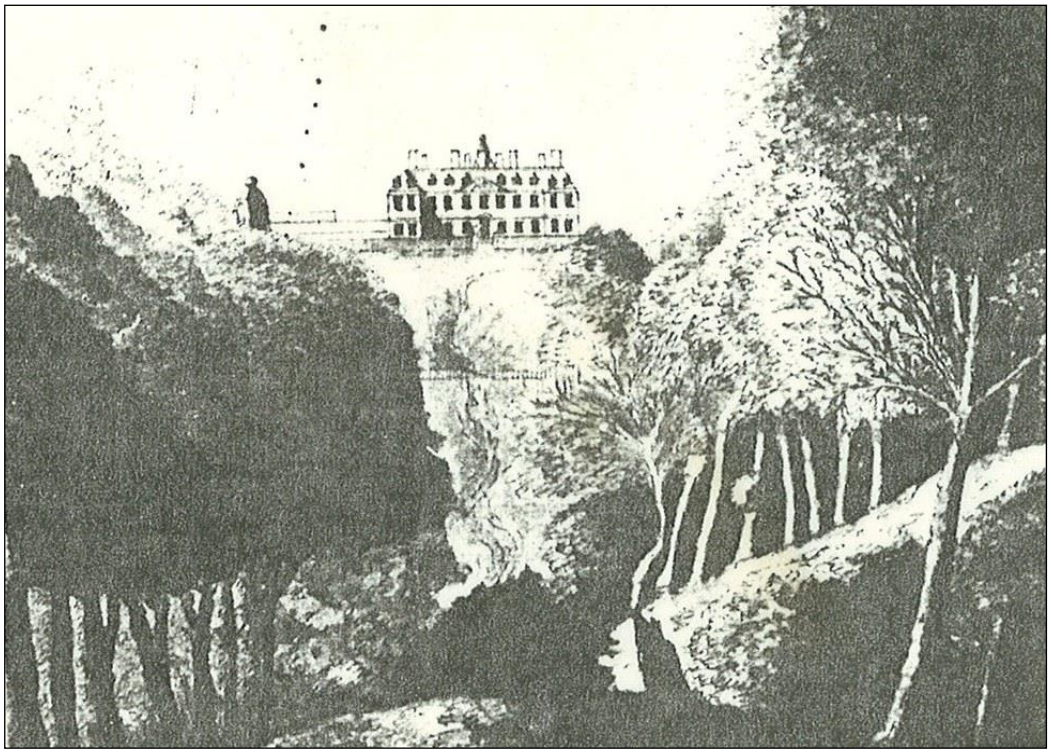
Stevenstone was, from the 16th until the 19th century, the principal seat of the Rolle family, who were once the largest landowners in Devon, but have now entirely died out. The great house which stands in ruins was in fact the third to be built on the site, and inside it fragments of its predecessors still survive, or did so until quite recently.
It is to the second of these, a late 17th-century or early 18th-century remodelling of a Tudor brick house, that The Library and the Orangery relate; part of a formal garden layout which was later swept away. Few documents survive for this period in the Rolle family archive, and the building evidence too is tantalisingly imprecise. There are no definite dates or names for any of the work, either for the main house or the two pavilions; but in both there are tenuous links with architects and craftsmen of greater fame and importance, which provide the background against which this work was carried out, and which might eventually give the clues for the true story.

What seems certain is that Stevenstone in some way fits in with other work that was done in this part of the south-western peninsular in the late 17th century. And the key to this work lies in two great houses that were built after the Restoration using craftsmen from the King's Office of Works. These were Stowe, in North Cornwall, and Great Potheridge, in Devon; the first built for Richard Grenville, Earl of Bath, the second for his cousin General Monck.

Both men were closely involved in the return of Charles II to the throne, and it was in recognition of this that the King lent them his craftsmen. Their work was not to survive: Stowe was demolished completely in the 18th century, and only a fragment of Potheridge remains.



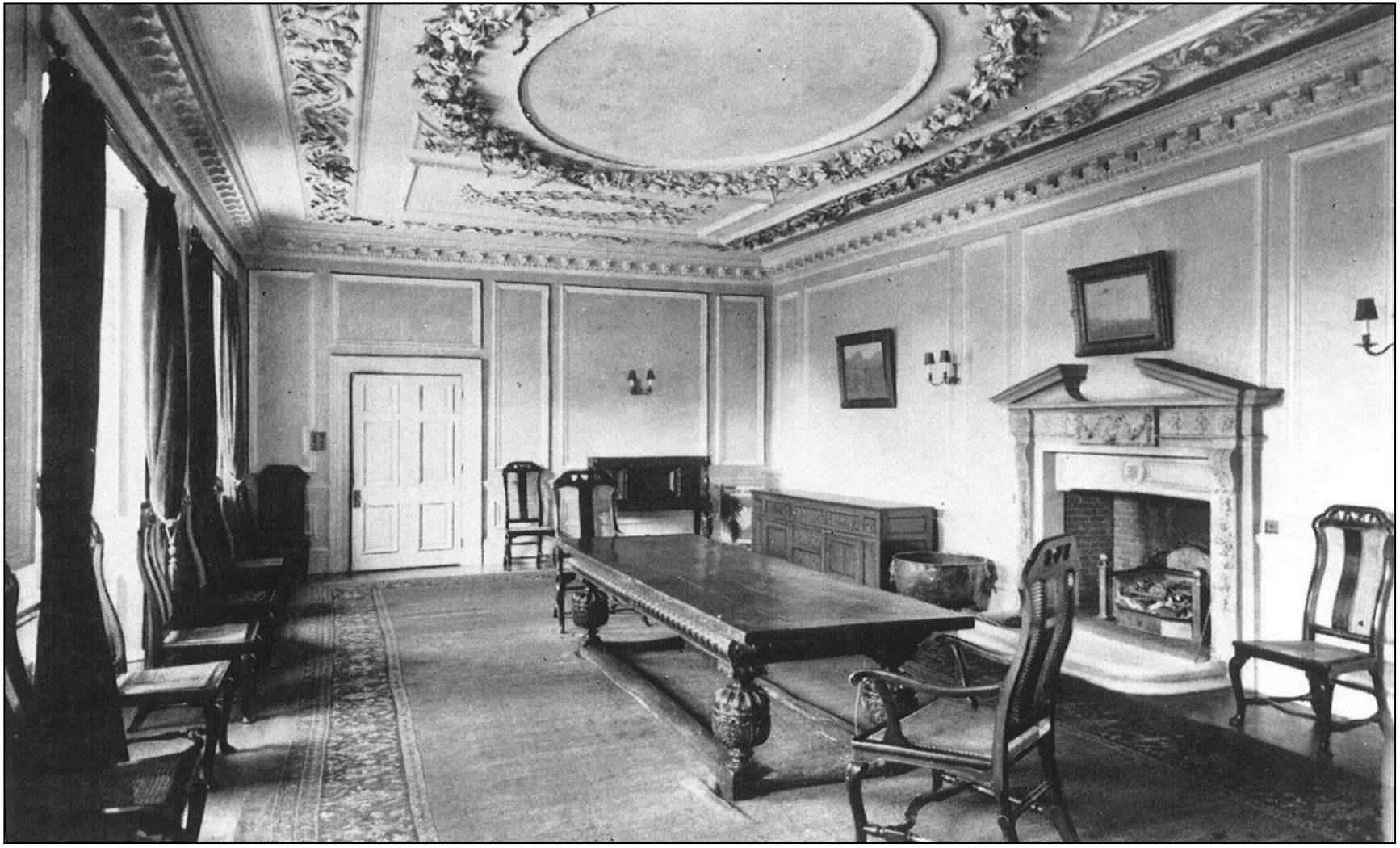
Stowe, in Cornwall, built c.1680 by Richard Grenville, Earl of Bath. It was demolished in 1739.



The main front of Stowe from a distance

But such houses inspired others in the area, and although the most important of these have also gone (Stevenstone being one of them), photographs and echoes of their grandeur in more minor houses tell us what they were like. And one theme they had in common was exceptionally fine plasterwork. While work was going on at Stowe and Potheridge, a cousin of the two courtiers, Arscott Bickford, took the opportunity to modernise his own house at Dunsland using some of the same craftsman, notably a plasterer. The name of Henry Doogood has been suggested for a ceiling there which was sadly lost when the house burned down in 1967. This was of the type which is known as naturalistic, popular between about 1670-1710, after which it fell out of fashion with the arrival of stucco. Instead of using moulds and presses, as with stucco, the plaster was modelled by hand, creating graceful garlands of fruit, flowers and foliage, often with freestanding sprigs, supported by lead wire. Besides the ceiling at Dunsland, created by a Master, there is one example of similar work at Potheridge; we can assume that there was one more at Stowe as well.

The advent of such skill to an area where there was already a strong tradition of plasterwork did not go unappreciated by local craftsmen, such as the Abbott family of Frithelstock in North Devon. Smaller versions of the grander ceilings appeared in houses in Torrington, Barnstaple and Bideford, and in local manor houses. One such was Marhayes in Cornwall, once belonging to the Rolle family, now a farmhouse.



The dining room in the main house at Stevenstone, with its naturalistic plaster ceiling; either the work of Sir John Rolle c.1680, or a late example of its type carried out for his grandson, Robert Rolle c.1708 at the same time as the fireplace (now in The Library) and the panelling.

And Stevenstone too…

As might be expected, Stevenstone did not miss out on this sudden abundance of fruit and flowers, though whether it was among the first, or a late follower, is not clear. A sale catalogue of 1911 describes a dining room and a room above it as having rich plaster ceilings "by Grinling Gibbons" - the traditional author of such works; and there is a photograph of the dining room in the catalogue of a later sale in 1930, showing the ceiling to be fine, indeed, and certainly naturalistic. (It also shows, incidentally, that the fireplace surround now in The Library originally came from that room.)

But for whom was this work commissioned? The obvious candidate would be Sir John Rolle, who inherited in 1647, was knighted at the Restoration in recognition of his support of the Royalist cause, and was thus in a similar, if less exalted, position to his neighbours Grenville and Monck. Added to this was the fact that he had inherited the Rolle estates unexpectedly due to the death of a string of more senior cousins, and that his own home (where he is said to have been working in the fields when he heard the news of his succession) was that same Marhayes, or Marrais, in Cornwall where there is still a ceiling of naturalistic plasterwork. If he employed a skilled plasterer there, it would be likely that he did the same on a larger scale at Stevenstone.

There is some strong evidence against this, however. When Sir John died in 1706, reputedly the wealthiest commoner in England (he had enlarged his already considerable estates by marrying his cousin Florence Rolle, heiress of Bicton in South Devon and where Landmark now cares for The China Tower - between them they had 45 manors in Devon alone), he was succeeded by his grandson Robert. In 1708 an Enabling Act was passed in Parliament allowing Robert to sell some land, partly to pay off debts incurred by his grandfather but also to repay a sum of £8,000 which he had lately spent

'in rebuilding and furnishing the ancient and only seat of the family, which at the time of Sir John Rolle's death was very ruinous, and void of furniture.'
It is hard to believe that work carried out in the 1680s was ruinous twenty years later.

There are two possible answers. Either Robert's statement is true, and all the remodelling of the house was done by him, in 1706-8: and although 1680 is a more likely date for the plasterwork of the dining room ceiling, and would fit in with other buildings in the area, it would still have been possible to find craftsmen, either locally or in London, to do work in this manner in 1708. Or it was a convenient exaggeration to justify expenditure that was desirable but not absolutely necessary; Sir John Rolle had done some work there but Robert wished to improve upon it - and a date of 1708 would certainly be acceptable for the rest of the dining room.

Who Built The Library and Orangery?

The same question - Sir John in the 1680s or Robert in 1708 - must apply to The Library. The interior of The Library, and the Orangery, do look like early 18th-century work, but The Library front is more Carolean in manner. The only scrap of evidence which helps is a reference in some estate accounts of 1705 (before Sir John's death therefore) to men working in 'ye new Garden', which could mean one created at any time during his lifetime. This would have been laid out in a formal manner, with a parterre perhaps, and even a bowling green; and it was quite common in such cases to have a small pavilion, with an open loggia below and a room above, from which the garden could be properly viewed. There is every likelihood that The Library was such a building.

The possibility that Robert built it cannot be ruled out, however. Like his grandfather, he was a courtier, if not a very grand one, and through his mother, Lady Christian Bruce, was related to the Earl of Ailesbury, another favourite of Charles II who used the Office of Works to remodel his house at Tottenham in Savernake Forest. Robert was an architectural patron too; it was he who was responsible for the building of the colonnade in Barnstaple called Queen Anne's Walk, in 1708. This has been attributed by John Harris to William Talman. The work at Stevenstone was going on at about the same time, and the facade of The Library is somewhat evocative of Talman's style. Did Talman therefore design it? There is no evidence to show that he did, and it is hard to believe that an architect of his quality, even late in his career, was wholly responsible for the detail of the facade, some of which is quite incorrect in Classical terms.

The most likely answer as to who designed The Library, whether before or after 1700, is that it was the work of a West Country master mason/architect whose name is as yet unknown. Possibly he had been involved in the work at Stowe and Potheridge; certainly he could have seen buildings of a similar type to The Library elsewhere - there were many such from the 1660s on.

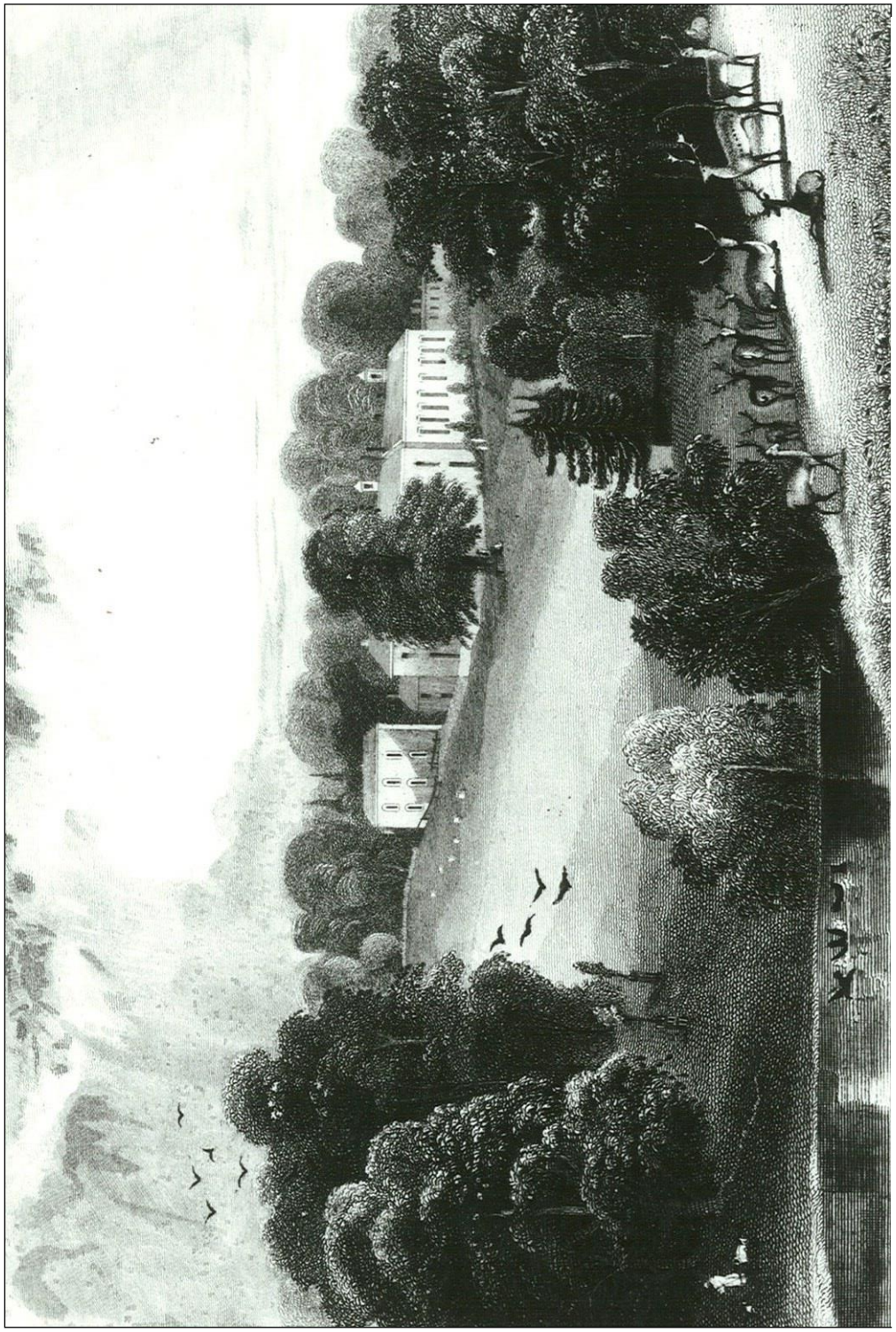
Queen Anne's walk in Barnstaple, erected by Robert Rolfe in 1708 and attributed to William Talman

One of these he copied, slightly imperfectly, for Stevenstone. If the later date is the right one, he could have been advised by Talman. Probably, if the architect of Arscott Bickford's new wing at Dunsland were known, we might be nearer a solution.

There are still some more puzzles about The Library, however. The first of these concerns the armorial shields on the facade. These do not bear the arms of Sir John, or of Robert Rolle, or either of their respective wives, but those of Robert's brother John, who succeeded him, and his wife, Isabella Walter, who was also a cousin on his mother's side. This would be less of a puzzle if we knew when Robert died, but the pedigrees conflict, some saying 1726, others 1710. Robert certainly retired from public life in 1710, when John took on his seat in Parliament as member for Devon; he is heard of no more, so perhaps the earlier date is more likely.

If Robert died in 1710, the most likely reason for the presence of John's coat of arms on the shields is that it was he who finished the work on The Library, decorated the interior, and at the same time built the Orangery, in axis with, but not quite as a pair to the earlier building. It would then be natural for him to put his own signature on the work. Robert did do some work in the main house, possibly incorporating what his grandfather had done before him, but either he did not get as far as the garden (if The Library is 1680 and therefore already in existence) or he had only just begun the buildings there, when he died. In either case The Library was left in need of further work.

The second puzzle is the keystones of the arches themselves, with their carved faces. They are almost identical to those on the front of South Molton Town Hall. Now it is known that when the Town Hall was built in the mid-18th century it incorporated fragments, including these keystones, from Stowe, demolished in 1737 - and so we are back where the story began.



Stevenstone before the rebuilding of 1868-72, from ' The History and Topography of the County of Devon' by the Rev. Thomas Moon, 1832. The detail is not accurate as can be seen from the building of The Library on the left, but this would appear to be a early 18th century remodelling of the Tudor house, with cupolas on the stable ranges behind, an sash windows on the front of the house, largely hidden behind the tree.

of the Office of Works. Another argument that has been suggested is that the stones are from Stowe itself, pushing the date of the building onto c.1740. Or

This could be used as evidence to show that The Library is the same date as Stowe, and that both it and the naturalistic ceilings in the main house were the work of Sir John, or even they could even be from the sister house of Potheridge, which came by inheritance to the Rolles at about the same time. But since John Rolle died in 1730, and his son would have put his own arms on the building if he had been responsible for it, this is very unlikely.

The Use of The Library

The main puzzle is of course whether it has always been a used as a library, and although the possibility cannot be ruled out, as will be seen, the answer is that probably it wasn't, and that to begin with it was simply a garden pavilion or banqueting house. The Library as a separate room of any size, rather than a closet containing bookcases, was anyway not commonly found before the age of the Grand Tour and Palladianism, from 1720 onwards.

The only objection to this is that when the recent restoration was being carried out it was found that there had never been a cornice in the upper room, indicating that the walls had always been lined with bookcases - or had been at least from the time that the interior plasterwork was done.

Setting this aside, at what date is it most likely to have become a library? Certainly it had by 1796 when a valuation of the property lists '*at Stevenstone, Library and Household Furniture ...*'; the two would hardly be mentioned separately unless they were in different buildings. The bookcases had all disappeared by 1978, but some small sections of inlaid veneer remained, and these looked like late 18th-century work.

This would fit in with the family history. The John Rolle who died in 1730 was succeeded by three of his sons in turn. The first, Henry, who was created Lord Rolle, died in 1759; the second, John, who had assumed the surname of Walter, died in 1779. The youngest brother, Denys Rolle, inherited. He lived until 1797 and was an eccentric man, a naturalist and a widely-read educationalist, both idealistic and obstinate. The Devon historian Polwhele records that

> *'he used to converse with several animals on the most familiar terms during his residence in East Florida. I once heard him instance deer in particular, that during his walks through the woods would never discover the slightest symptoms of fear, but often approach him with a generous confidence'.*

In his younger days Denys Rolle had wanted to colonise Florida; he bought a large tract of land in East Florida and with Utopian ideals, twice attempted to settle a number of impoverished Devon farmers and labourers on it, often working alongside them. However, they did not take kindly to the harsh conditions or his management of them, and most of them returned to England as soon as they could. When his settlers all deserted or returned home the second time, Rolles turned instead to enslaved Africans for labour on his plantations, building up a large workforce. When Florida was ceded to Spain in 1783, Rolles was given plantations in Exuma in the Bahamas in compensation but returned himself to Devon, perhaps finding solace in this library. The Rolles slaves were officially liberated in 1838 a generation later, the compensation from the British government adding further to the Rolle family wealth. Many of the former slaves adopted the surname of Rolle. They took over the Rolle lands on Exuma as their own, running them communally. The lands are owned to this day by descendants of the former slaves, and cannot be sold.

So had the Library always been used as a library? Probably not: to begin with, the existence of a library as a separate room was not common before the age of the Grand Tour and Palladianism, say from 1720 onwards. But during the restoration it appeared that there had never been a cornice in the upper room, indicating that the walls had always been lined with bookcases, or at least had been so from the time that the interior plaster-work was done. Certainly by 1796, during Denys Rolle's tenure, the Library contents appeared in property lists separately from those of the main house. By 1976 the bookcases had all disappeared except for a few fragments of inlaid veneer, and these looked like 18th-century work. So given his known bookishness, Denys Rolle may have been responsible for fitting the building out as a library. To put a library in a separate pavilion, with all the attendant problems of damp and access, is an eccentric thing to do; but a man such as Denys Rolle may well have wanted a private retreat away from his household, where no one was allowed to disturb him.

Denys Rolle kept up his habit of taking long walks until the very end of his life, actually dying when he was walking one day from Stevenstone to Hudscott, nearly ten miles away.

But all this is speculation. In the end The Library remains a charming mystery, both as to its building and in its use. It opens up a whole seam of research into a lost generation of Cornish and Devonian buildings, and their links with the wider artistic world; and into the characters of a family who have left surprisingly few personal records, and no direct descendants to speak for them.

The Orangery in 1978, with the collapsing pergola running between it and The Library

Beginnings and Ends

More about Stevenstone and the Rolle family

The first recorded owner of Stevenstone is Michael Sancto Stephano, in the early 13th century. Later in that century it passed to a family called de la Ley who after a generation also called themselves de Stephenstone, and it remained in that family until in the 15th century it passed by marriage to the Grants and then the Moyles. It was one of the Moyles who in c.1524 sold the manor to a rich London lawyer called George Rolle.

George Rolle was one of the Tudor 'new men'; he came from a family of wealthy London merchants, and served as Clerk of the Common Pleas under Henry VIII. He started to buy land in Devon in 1519, at Bampton, which was followed by the purchase of Stevenstone. There he built himself a house and, unusually for the area, it was of brick. Leland described it as *'a right fair house'*, though George Rolle himself more humbly referred to it in a letter as *'my poor house'.* One of the stone-dressed windows of this first house survives in the basement of the Victorian ruin. He also laid out a deer park at Stevenstone, and a *'warren for conies.'*

At the dissolution of the monasteries George Rolle was in a good position to buy up abbey lands, which soon flooded the market and this he did on a large scale, though mostly in North and West Devon. He was also granted in 1545 the townhouse of the Abbot of Buckfastleigh. By his death in 1552 the Rolles were already one of the largest landowning families in Devon.

They soon set about improving on this position. George Rolle had three wives, and is supposed to have had twenty children, but many of these must have died young. It seems to have been the sons of his second wife, Eleanor Dacres of London, who followed him to Devon; and there they and their immediate descendants married into landowning families, both of Devon and the

neighbouring counties. The most profitable marriage of all took place in the early 17th century when Sir Henry Rolle, great-grandson of George, married Anne, second daughter and co-heiress of Sir Thomas Dennys of Holcombe and Bicton in South Devon, whose family, like the Rolles, had amassed huge estates from the break-up of the monasteries in the south and east of the county, of which the Rolles now obtained half.

Part of Anne's share of the inheritance was Bicton, an Elizabethan house which was, with Stevenstone, to become a principal seat of the Rolles, and was indeed sometimes preferred to the 'senior' residence. They rebuilt the house in the mid and late l8th century, and in about 1720-30 laid out formal gardens to designs by Le Notre, the creator of Versailles.

The Fortunate Heir

The heir to the two fortunes, and he appears to have been fortunate in more ways than one, was Denys Rolle. He was singled out by Prince in his *Worthies of Devon* of 1701 as the most distinguished member of his family. He was, *'the darling of his country in his time, adorn'd with all the desirable qualities that make a compleat gentleman. He was, though young, of a ready wit, a generous mind, and a large soul'.*

A sermon was preached in his honour on Christmas Day in 1635 by the *'silver-tong'd Sydenham'* in which he was likened to the Kiss of Charity. Someone else described him as *'a gentleman of wonderful great hope'*, of whom a great future was expected; he was created High Sheriff of Devon in 1636 by the King, in a ceremony *'the glory thereof is not yet forgotten in these parts'.* And all this though, like that other paragon of whom so much was hoped, James I's elder son Prince Henry, he died tragically young; in 1638 he was dead, at the age of 24, leaving a sorrowing wife, an infant son and five daughters. The inscription on the rich, almost Baroque, tomb (possibly by Nicholas Stone) which is now in the Rolle Mausoleum at Bicton, was written by Dr Fuller:

'His earthly part within this tomb doth rest,
Who kept a court of honour in his breast:
Birth, beauty, wit, and wisdom, sate as peers,
'Till death mistook his vertues for his years.
Or else heav'n envied earth so rich a treasure
Wherein too fine the ware, too scant the measure.
His mournful wife, her love to show in part,
This tomb built here, a better in her heart.
Sweet babe! His hopeful heir (heav'n grant this boon)
Live but so well; but oh! die not so soon.'

Sadly this was not to be; the 'sweet babe' died shortly afterwards, and the Rolle estates passed to one cousin, and then in 1647 to a more remote one, John Rolle of Marrais, already mentioned in connection with The Library.

The Bicton estate, however, seems to have been settled on Denys Rolle's daughters, of whom four were later married; how much went to the husbands of the others is not revealed, but certainly the Rolles made sure that the family did not now lose out on the greater part of this inheritance by arranging a marriage between the second daughter, Florence, and the new heir, and settling Bicton and considerable amounts of land on them. Stevenstone and Bicton were thus kept in one ownership.

John Rolle apparently remained on good terms with the Commonwealth Government (it was his predecessor Henry who held Stevenstone briefly against Sir Thomas Fairfax in 1646, who then used it as a base for the capture of Torrington), while at the same time supporting Charles II financially, while in exile. He was rewarded for his prudence with a knighthood in 1660. Little more is known of him, nor of his sons and grandsons, except their rather uncertain links with the building works at Stevenstone.

The younger grandson, John Rolle is supposed to have been offered an earldom by Queen Anne's last ministry, and to have turned it down, but a title was granted to the family in the next generation. Henry, John's eldest son, became Baron Rolle of Stevenstone in 1748. Like his father and uncle, and at least two of his brothers, he had previously sat in the House of Commons; they were all the most determined backbenchers, hardly ever making a speech even, and certainly never holding office. The only other information we have about Henry is that he started the rebuilding of Bicton, and laid out the gardens there; and in his will he left numerous bequests to charities and the poor.

Denys, his youngest brother, as has already been seen in connection with The Library, was a more interesting character. He was a naturalist and an educationalist and also, it can be inferred, a Man of Reason, who knew all about the ideas behind the Enlightenment, and had read the works of Voltaire and the French Philosophes. This did not stop him also being the owner of enslaved people on his plantations in East Florida and then on Exuma in the Bahamas.

The Last of the Rolles

Denys Rolle's son John was strongly conservative, and a follower of Pitt. Rather more is known about him than his forbears, not all of it to his credit, and he bears the added distinction of being the last of his family. He also was an MP, until in 1796 he also was created Baron Rolle (his uncle's title had become extinct on his death with no sons) but unlike previous members of his family he spoke frequently, though not very well. By his extreme views, too, on some of the policies of Charles James Fox he made himself so unpopular with the Whigs that he was chosen as the hero of a long satiric poem, really aimed at the leaders of his party, and called the Rolliad.

In this John Rolle is lampooned in a mock family tree as the degenerate descendant of a robber baron, Rollo, and many puns were made on his name, as in the description of his coat of arms: on a field argent, three French Rolls or,

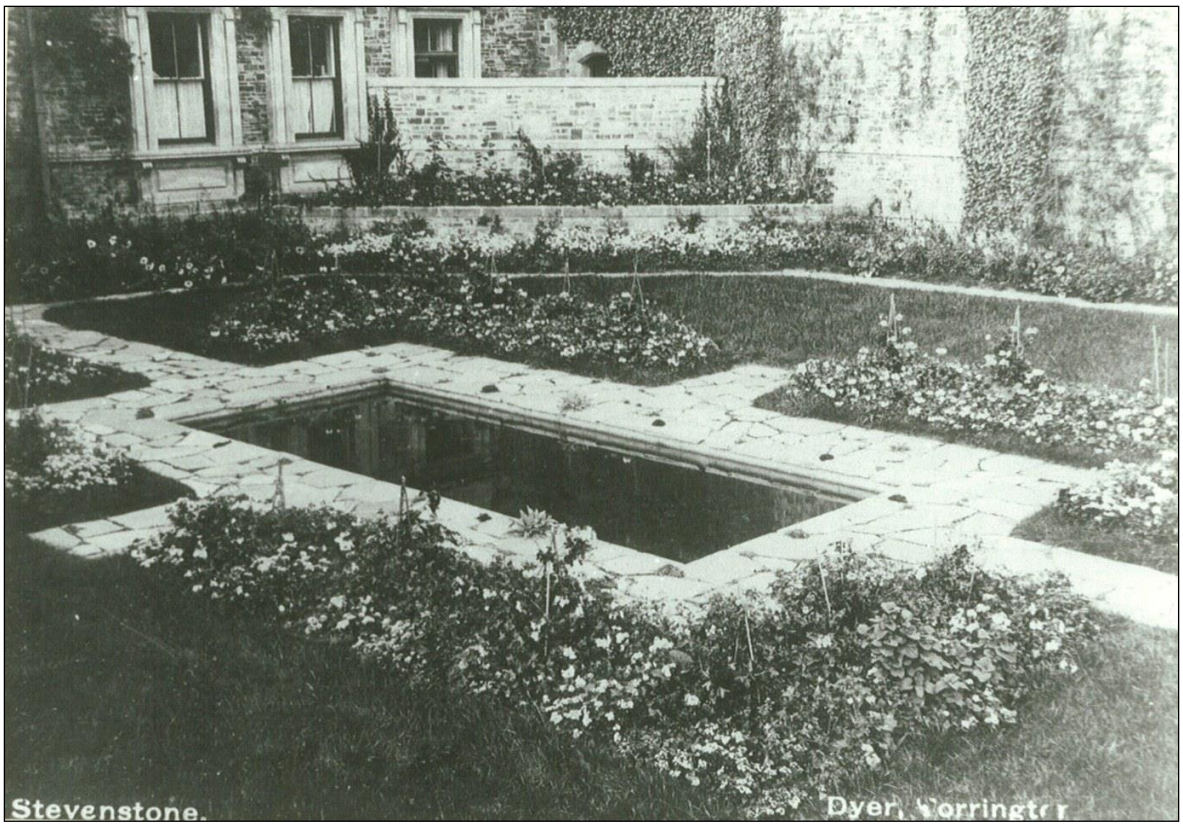
between two rolls of parchment, proper, placed chevron-wise. Crest: a half-length figure of the Master of the Rolls, like a demi-lion rampant, with a roll of parchment between his paws, and the motto 'Jouez bien votre rôle'. The poem opens with the lines '*O'er rolls of parchment antiquarians pore; Thy mind, O Rolle, affords a richer store!*' Lord Rolle retained his conservatism until the end of his life, voting against the 1832 Reform Bill at every stage.

In Devon he was known as a good and generous landlord. He built the Rolle Canal at Torrington to enable lime to be transported more easily to inland areas, for treating the soil and improving its fertility. He carried out the duties of a country gentleman, serving as a magistrate, as Colonel of the local Yeomanry, rebuilding churches and schools. His father had completed the building work at Bicton, but he carried on with the improvements there in the house and garden, building one of the earliest domed greenhouses, and planting an arboretum. Although he was only there occasionally, Stevenstone was also well-maintained and cared for.

A sidelight on his character is given by the story of his connection with the Bahamas. He inherited Denys Rolle's large estates there, on the island of Great Exuma, by then worked by 376 enslaved people - almost twice as many as belonged to any other owner in the islands. When Emancipation came on 1st August 1838, many of them adopted the surname of Rolle - it was customary among many liberated slaves to retain their former master's surname. Lord John Rolle was content to reliquish the Exuma lands to the former workers and, even though there was no formal deed of conveyance to them, they then held and ran them communally. Today, there are still five Lord John Rolle Commonage Estates on Exuma including the village of Rolle Town. Still passed down through descendants of the former slaves, these lands cannot be sold.

A somewhat idealised version of Stevenstone as rebuilt 1868-72

Stevenstone west front



An internal courtyard

Unfortunately, he produced no heir. His first wife, who brought yet more of Devon to the Rolles, was an heiress, Judith Walrond. She died, childless, in 1820 and two years later, at the age of 66 and with obvious purpose, he married a girl of 22, Louisa Trefusis, daughter of Lord Clinton, and a distant cousin. To no avail, however, because although she proved a devoted wife, she did not have any children.

Lord Rolle himself had an extremely active old age; at the age of 89 he was still able to climb the 100ft tower – The China Tower, another Landmark - that his wife had built him for a birthday present (two years earlier he had not done so well, having fallen down some steps at Queen Victoria's coronation). But the fact remained that on his death in 1842 there was no one of the name of Rolle to inherit his huge estates. Moreover it soon turned out that it was not to his own family that Lord Rolle had gone to find an heir, but to that of his young wife. Stevenstone, and Bicton as well, on Lady Rolle's death, were to go to her nephew, the Hon Mark Trefusis, when he came of age. He inherited in 1857 having already, in 1852, taken the name of Rolle in addition to his own.

The Rolle cousins - sons of Lord Rolle's aunts - objected to this, not surprisingly feeling that they had a superior claim to the inheritance. A court case followed but, since the Trefusis family were able to produce evidence of direct descent from the Rolles, the cousins lost. They expressed their feelings in a bitter little rhyme:

Hungry Louisa, forced to wed,
Took stale Rolle Instead of bread,
And not forgetting all her store
Cut out Stevens, cut out Moore.

Lady Rolle, meanwhile, to honour her husband and his now extinct family, had commissioned Pugin to build a Mausoleum at Bicton, of which the centrepiece is a huge Rolle Memorial.

Victorian Stevenstone

It was the Hon Mark Rolle who in 1868-70 employed the firm of Banks and Barry (son of Charles Barry of the Houses of Parliament) to rebuild Stevenstone in what the Building News called *'the Elizabethan blended with the Italian',* and the North Devon Herald *'French-Italian'*. No plans or details of the rebuilding survive, but it seems that the new mansion simply encased the earlier house, many of whose rooms remained intact, and then extended further to the east. Behind, the 18th-century stable and service courtyards also survived, as they do still.

The Library was partly rebuilt at the same time, the date 1870 being found on one of the roof timbers in 1980. The front was rendered, and steps built at the back to give access to the upper room. (The previous method of access is unknown). The loggia was used as a tea pavilion. The Orangery was also re-roofed, in glass, and became a fernery. Around the two buildings a new garden was laid out, with terraces and balustrades, a tennis court below and a pinetum beyond. Between them were a rose garden and a pergola.

Many stories are told of life at Stevenstone under Mark Rolle, of his horses, his shooting parties, the royal visits, the flower shows; and of his improvements to the estate - he rebuilt many cottages, and the church in St. Giles - and his kindness to his tenants and employees. Every year for three months he moved to Bicton, a special train being laid on for the journey.

In 1907 all this came to an end; like his predecessor, Mark Rolle died without sons, and the Rolle estates were made over entirely to the Trefusis family, in the person of Mark Rolle's nephew Lord Clinton. They had no need for further houses; Bicton later became an agricultural college, though still belonging to the Clinton estate, but in 1911 Stevenstone was put up for sale.

Late 19th century interiors of Stevenstone. The portrait in the foreground in the corridor of a man with an intelligent face and the characteristic slight smile of the Enlightenment, dating from about 1775, could well be of Denys Rolle, coloniser of Florida

South front, late 19th century

East, or entrance front

View of The Library 1978, showing the roof put on in 1870.

Recent History of Stevenstone and The Library

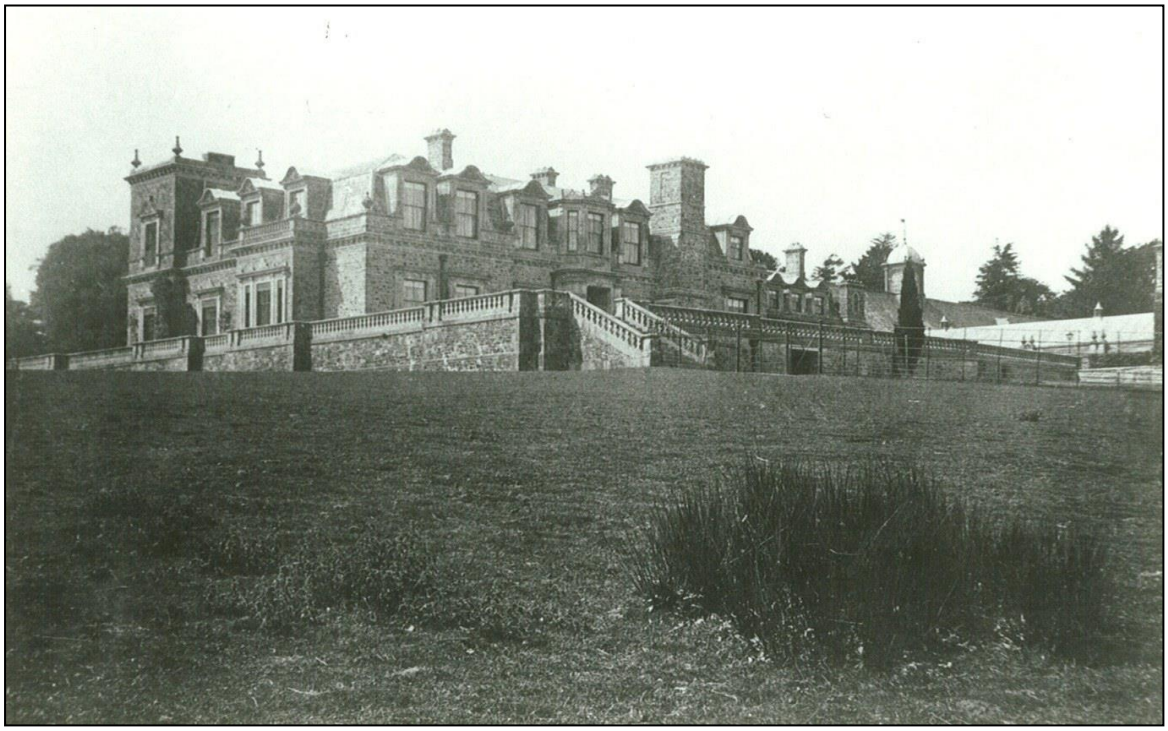
In 1912-13 Stevenstone was bought by a Captain and Mrs Clemson although, according to the title deeds, the real owner was a company called Bartlett and Bayliss. It is possible that this firm had some connection with Mrs Clemson, since it is supposed to have been from her family that the money to buy the house and estate came. Some years later most of the land was sold off, leaving only a couple of farms and the park, amounting to about 650 acres in all.

The Clemsons set about making the house itself more manageable. They demolished half of the main front, retaining the western half which contained all the earlier rooms, and building a new driveway and entrance on the eastern side. The resulting house, somewhat unbalanced to look at, still had 27 bedrooms and dressing rooms.

Captain Clemson was killed in 1915, but his widow stayed on at Stevenstone and after the war married a Colonel James. He was a keen huntsman, and kept on the Stevenstone hounds, for which kennels had been built in the 19th century. The meets at the house are still remembered by local people. In 1930 Colonel James died as well, however, and this time the house was put up for sale. However, it seems that the land was sold, but not the house, which was put up for sale again a year later, but this time with only 17 acres of land. Even the park had been sold separately, to a timber merchant who felled most of the trees, including a yew avenue that had led from the house to the church.

This time, in 1931, the house did find a buyer, in Mr Millman, a local farmer. Since no one seemed to want the house, either to live in or to use as an institution, he decided to break it up, and accordingly it was put up for sale in 600 lots – the plaster ceilings, panelling, doors, fireplaces, floorboards and so on. Halfway through the sale he apparently thought better of it, however, and

subsequently bought back as many of the fittings as he could, and started once again to look for a buyer for the whole house. None came forward, and apart

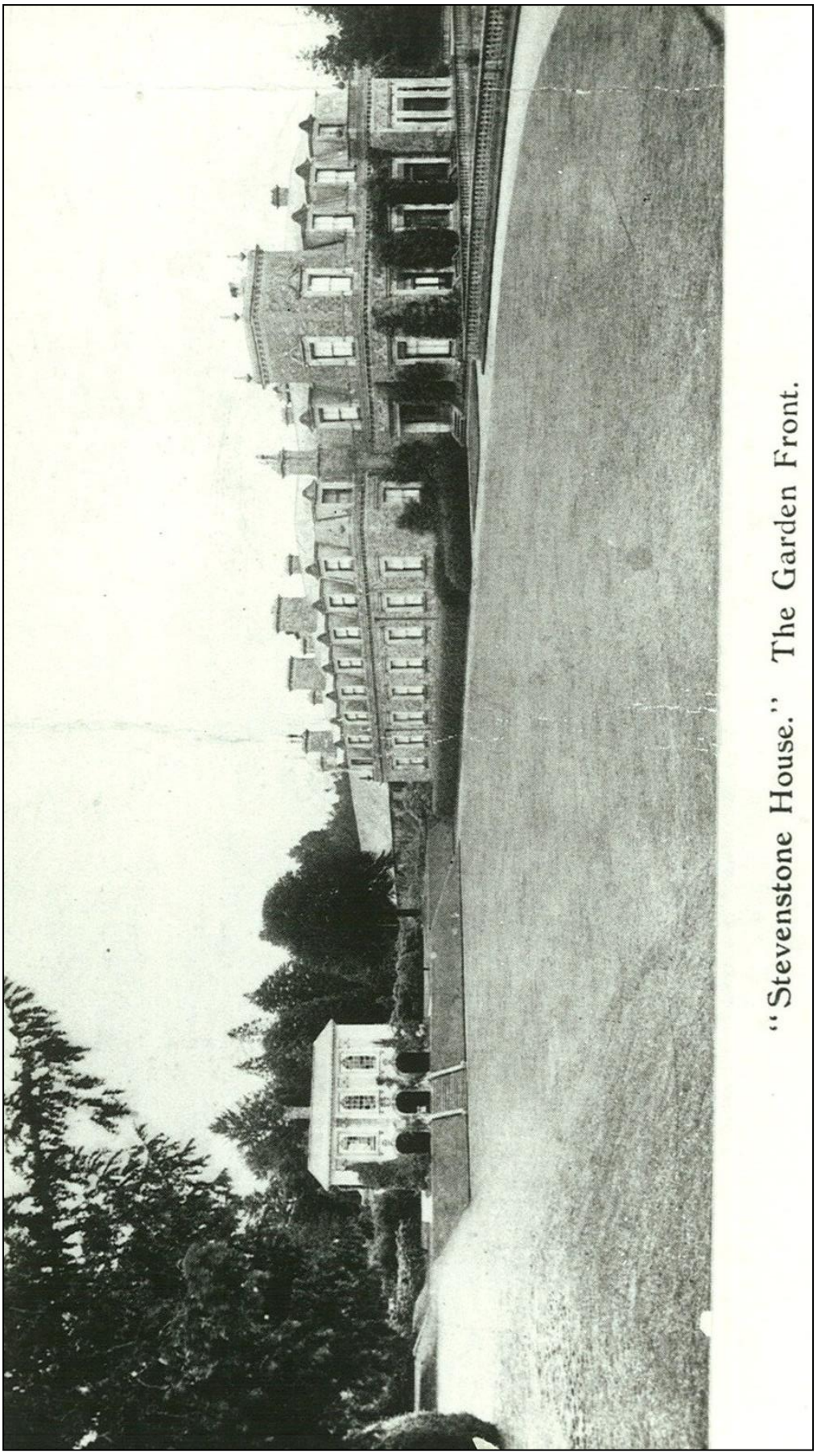


After 1913, showing the new terrace and entrance on the east front

from occupation during the Second World War by troops, the house remained shut up and empty until in 1946 it was sold to a developer. This time the house was broken up, even the lead off the roof being sold for scrap. Many of the building materials were then used to convert the stables into cottages. The rest was left as a ruin.

Over the years more cottages have been built, in the kitchen garden and beyond. The owner of one of these, Mr Parnell, who knew the house when the Jameses still lived there, and remembers having tea in the loggia of The Library after a village cricket match, bought the ruin in about 1970.

The Library and Orangery meanwhile, and the garden around them, having been bought by Mr Millman in 1931, had stayed in his ownership. At some point, probably just after the war, he converted The Library into a house, dividing the upper room and closing in the loggia. The fireplace from the dining room in the main house was put in a sitting room on the ground floor. When he died in 1950 Mr Millman left the property to his daughter Maud, who was probably living there already. She later became Mrs Gill, and it was she who put the buildings up for sale in 1978, when they were bought by the Landmark Trust.



From the 1930 sale catalogue, showing the house after the removal of the eastern half.

1978

The Library, 1978

The back of The Library in 1978 showing the balcony and steps, probably built in 1870

Restoration of The Library and Orangery

When the Landmark Trust bought the buildings at Stevenstone in 1978, the restoration of The Library itself appeared quite straightforward, since it had been lived in until only recently and seemed to be in sound structural condition. It was the Orangery, in some danger of collapse, which was apparently the bigger task. In fact, the reverse turned out to be true; the repair of the Orangery presented few problems and went ahead quite quickly, while The Library soon revealed some quite severe structural faults, and developed into a long and complicated job.

Neither job got underway very quickly, since the permissions that had to be applied for to reverse later alterations to both buildings – particularly their roof structures – gave rise to a debate with the historic buildings authorities as to what actually was their original appearance, and it was some time before plans could be finalised and work started. Meanwhile work had been going on around the two buildings, with the removal of the collapsed pergola that ran between them and the beginning of the clearance of the undergrowth in the sadly decayed arboretum by Charlie Perrett.

Work on the Orangery began at the end of 1979, with the shoring up of the front wall, the removal of the glass roof and of the collapsing eaves cornice. The controversial aspect of the restoration was the decision not to put back the 19th century iron roof supports (the glass itself had been renewed in this century), but to reconstruct what would have been there originally, which was a slate roof. This was both more in keeping with the 18th century character of the building, and would make maintenance a great deal easier in the future. It was covered with Delabole slates, to match The Library.

The south front of the Orangery in 1978

A new cornice was made, with an integral lead gutter, but reusing as many of the existing modillion blocs as possible, although these are probably 19th century.

When the 19th century hypocaust wall was removed from inside the back wall of the Orangery, the original opening for a fireplace was found behind it, with a double flue to spread the heat in the wall. The chimney for this was rebuilt, to the same design as that on The Library, but in stone, which is what the rear wall of the Orangery, and surviving chimney breast, are built of.

The side wall is also of stone, although the east end had been patched in brick after the removal of the Victorian heating furnace. These walls needed only simple repair and repointing, and the end walls were then lime-washed. The brick front wall was another matter, however, and needed a great deal of attention. For a start the top of the wall was collapsing, and had to be taken down completely as far as the window heads. The window heads themselves, of gauged brick, were carefully recorded before removal, so that they could be rebuilt exactly the same. Enough sound bricks remained for three of these, and new copies were made for the remaining two, those on either side of the doorway. Before this however the brick piers between the windows, which were leaning badly outwards, had to be eased back to the vertical. A concrete ring beam was then formed along the front, above the windows and projecting round the sides of the building a short way, to hold it all in position, after which the top of the wall could be rebuilt. The whole wall was repointed. The new bricks came from Lawrences of Bracknell.

The window frames themselves were rotten and had to be replaced, but the sashes were repaired and re-used. These were made in a special way to exclude drafts, with the splayed battens pinned on, rather than going right through. The door however was beyond repair, so a new one was made copying the original. The shutters in the doorway were the only ones to survive, and these were

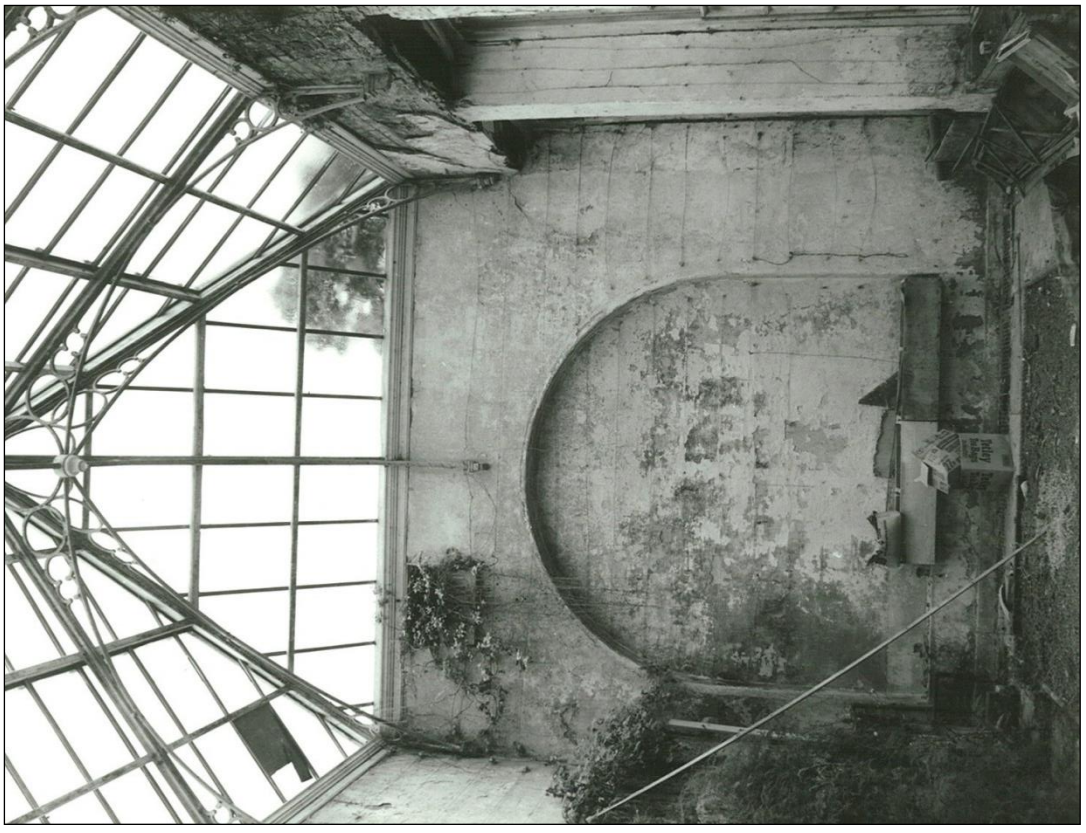
Back wall of the Orangery, 1978

repaired, while new ones were made for the windows. All the carpentry, new as well as old, is in Baltic pine, a timber which was much imported to Barnstaple in the 18th century.

The interior of the Orangery was finished as simply as possible, with plain plaster walls topped by a new cornice, and a slate slab floor which came from the ground floor of The Library. Also from The Library came the fireplace surround. Work on the Orangery was completed in 1981.

In 1980 work had at last begun on The Library. The two main questions concerned here were whether to reconstruct the roof to its original form, with a flat top – for which one truss remained as evidence – rather than leaving the slightly awkward 'hat' put on in 1870, and secondly whether to completely strip the render off the front of the building, to expose the original brickwork, instead of simply repairing it. The arguments for doing both things were so good, and the improvement to the appearance of the buildings would be so great, that in both cases the return to the original was decided on.

Of equal benefit to the building, but more controversial on historical ground since their date and what, if anything, had preceded them was uncertain, was the decision to renew the steps at the back. These were certainly not part of the original building, since the balcony cut across the arched rear opening to the loggia, and were most probably of the same date as the roof, 1870. This being so, and as they were neither very beautiful nor in good condition, there were no very strong arguments for keeping them. In addition the ground level at the back of The Library, from which the steps rose, was rather lower than that at the front of the Orangery. The proposal was to remove these steps and replace them with new ones in wood, after raising the ground by about 2 feet to make a level area between the two buildings. At the same time, the second of the two windows in the north wall of The Library, to the west of the fireplace, was to be made into a door to match the other one, which had been altered when the steps were built.



Inside the Orangery, 1978

Inside the building, on the ground floor, the intention was to restore the impression of an open loggia, while at the same time fitting in some accommodation. The arches were to be reopened, and a new wall built a few feet back, behind which a bedroom, bathroom and kitchen would be fitted.

Upstairs, no attempt was to be made to restore the main room to its original form as a library, since the details of its appearance remain unknown. It would simply be restored as a fine room of early 18th century character; the partitions removed, the ceilings repaired, and with a new cornice, dado rail and window architraves. No evidence was found to say where a staircase had been originally, so a new spiral stair was to be built, its top forming an island bookcase. Besides the alteration to the back window to form a second door to the outside stair, one alteration to the surviving original structure was decided on: the grander fireplace surround from the contemporary dining room in the main house, which had been put in the ground floor sitting room of The Library by Mr Millman, would be moved up to the main room, to replace the plainer original, which would then be used in the Orangery.

The balcony and steps built against the back of The Library, cutting across the original arch of the loggia, which was uncovered in 1980.

It time before work on the interior of the building was reached however. Much needed to be done before that to make the external shell itself sound. First to be dealt with was the front, starting with an investigation behind the render to discover the condition of the brickwork. From the loose patches that were initially taken off this was found to be extremely poor, particularly in the upper half of the building where, the outer brick face not being properly tied into the inner skin and the mortar having decayed, many of the bricks could simply be removed by hand. This was partly because the bricks are slightly wedge-shaped, making it easier for water to penetrate the wall, leading to frost damage.

The rest of the render was then taken off very carefully, after which the outer skin was taken down to about 3 feet above the windowsills; and then rebuilt, using old bricks where possible, but some new ones as well, all bedded in lime mortar and with wire ties inserted to hold the two skins together. In the lower part of the wall, damaged or decayed bricks were cut out and new ones stitched in, again bedded in lime mortar. The whole front was then pointed.

There were a number of problems with the stonework as well. Both the pilasters and the window jambs were pulling away from the wall. These had been tied with iron cramps in the 19th century, but these had rusted, and were causing damage in their turn. These all had to be drilled out – 24 in the pilasters and another 18 in the window jambs – and then replaced with bronze bolts going right through the wall and tying the stone securely to the brick. The holes left by this were then carefully plugged, using old stone left after repairs. Only the minimum of stonework was renewed, but one of the window architraves was too badly cracked to be repaired and one of two sections of pilaster had to be removed, for all of which Bath stone from Corsham was used. As a final detail the carved shields over the loggia arches were given new gunmetal fixings.

The cracking of the window heads was caused by the main roof beams bearing too heavily on the top of the wall. An RSJ was inserted along the front, extending beyond the windows at either end, to take the weight instead. The window lintels were also renewed, in hardwood, and for extra security a concrete ring beam was constructed round the top of the whole building, just below the wall plate and set back behind the brick face.

Once the walls were secure – and as in the Orangery, the rubble stone side walls needed little attention, while the brick back wall needed only a small amount of rebuilding over the windows after new lintels were inserted – work could start on constructing the new roof. The Victorian roof had been dismantled early on, and a temporary roof put over the building to protect it from the weather. Delicate work had been going on meanwhile in the roof space.

When the inserted partitions had been removed on the first floor, the plaster ceiling was found to be very weak. It was immediately propped from below, but the main work of reinforcement would have to be carried out from above. First of all the ceiling joists themselves were renewed. The void above the ceiling was then thoroughly vacuumed so that the condition of the old lathing could be seen; there was a fear that this would prove to be very worm-eaten. In fact only a small amount had to be removed and this mainly to improve the bond between the old plaster and the new to be poured on to strengthen it. The lathing was then soaked in timber preserving fluid. Next fine wire mesh was laid on top of the old plaster, but looping up and over each joist. New plaster of paris was then poured in, to form a bond with the old ceiling, the whole strongly supported on the new joists. In addition to the weakness of the ceiling itself, it was found that one of the main beams supporting it was badly cracked. This had happened a long time ago, and had been repaired in 1870, but the system of timber and iron bracing inserted then was now rotten, and failing to take any of the strain. An RSJ was fixed along the top of the beam, over the length where the crack was, and the two almost separate pieces strapped to it.

The new roof was then built, using mainly new timber, but reusing as many of the existing slates as possible, with new replacements from the Delabole quarry. The flat top was constructed of marine ply, covered with felt and then a layer of lead. At the same time a chimney on the east wall was removed while that on the north was also taken down, but then rebuilt.

The glory of the new roof is of course the cornice. The intention had always been to have a new cornice, but quite a simple one, and to reuse the existing modillion blocks as on the Orangery. But when the Victorian roof was stripped off, a few of the original modillions were found, cut back, but still in good condition. These were much more ornate than the 19th century ones, and had obviously belonged to a much more elaborate cornice altogether. A new cornice, incorporating copies of the original modillions, an egg and dart frieze and the waterleaf motif also found on the entablature above the pilasters was therefore designed, closely based on that of the late 17th century Denham Place in Buckinghamshire. And then by extraordinary good fortune, a craftsman who could carry out this commission was found in the village of St Giles itself. Richard Barnett, carpenter and wood carver, set to work to create the cornice out of 170 feet of yellow pine, with 120 modillions in hardwood. It was made in upper and lower sections, the modillions being fixed on afterwards. The front had to be made in four separate lengths, with a mitred joint at each of the projections over the pilasters.

Richard Barnett working on a section of the new cornice.

With the roof and the front completed (and this was not until 1982, after a second building firm, Stansells of Taunton, had been brought in to do the bigger jobs that Mr Gist, the local builder, couldn't manage on his own) work to the exterior was nearly done. A new window opening had to be made on the ground floor of the west wall, to light the bedroom, and in the east wall a doorway, which had led into a small lean-to shed which had been removed, was partly blocked, and the upper half filled with another window. In the north wall, it was not possible to do very much before the brickwork of the steps and balcony had been removed. Another doorway was then blocked, while the original arch to the ground floor, which was only roughly filled with stone, was opened up, but only to be blocked again, in brick this time, and recessed both externally and internally to show the opening with a window in the upper half to light the bathroom. Both north and east walls were then given a new coat of render, and lime-washed; while the west wall, although there was evidence that it too was once meant to be rendered, was simply lime-washed, since it had apparently been left as bare stone for some considerable time.

The ground level at the back of The Library was to be raised by about 2 feet. Where this came up against the building a vertical slate damp-proof course was inserted, and a retaining wall was built to leave an open well under the steps and balcony at the back. The building of these, in softwood, but with hardwood steps and balcony decking, was one of the last jobs to be carried out however; before then work had all but been completed on the interior of the building.

Inside, all the inserted partitions had been cleared out, both from the ground and first floors, in 1980. The marble fireplace was also taken out from the ground floor and sent to Wells Conservation Centre for repair. Victorian panelling from the main house had been fitted into the main downstairs room as well and this was dismantled and put in store. The staircase, which probably also came from the main house, was taken down and stored too.

A length of cornice for the front of The Library going up in 1982

The modillion blocks being fixed in position

hen work started properly on the interior in 1982 the first thing to be done was to check that the first floor was sound. Beams, with supporting posts, had been inserted by Mr Millman, which implied that it wasn't, but although the main floor beams did in fact need some reinforcing, the exposed beams turned out to be serving no useful structural purpose at all, and so could be safely removed. The floor beams themselves were then strengthened with steel supports at the ends.

The ground floor partitions were put up next, with an external wall forming the back of the loggia. All the rooms had new windows, and window seats. The walls were replastered, and new floors laid down, that in the kitchen being of slate slabs which weren't needed in the Orangery. The hall has Purbeck stone paving, to match the loggia.

Inside the loggia, some of the brickwork had been painted with a very tough oil paint. This was incredibly difficult to get off. All the brickwork as then repointed. At either end of the loggia, cupboards were built to contain special night storage heaters from which heat is ducted up through grills in the floor of The Library itself. The loggia ceiling was also specially insulated to prevent excessive heat loss from above.

Next came all the carpentry. Downstairs, the kitchen dresser and cupboards were made by Richard Barnett. Moving up, the first floor frame had to be made up where the staircase had been removed, and a new opening cut. The new spiral stair was then built, in oak. In The Library itself a new oak floor was laid on top of the existing softwood floor, using boards cut from the same oak tree that had provided the boards for Fox Hall in Charlton, Sussex, and came from the sawmill there. The Library window sashes, like those in the Orangery, could be reused, and so could all the shutters, but the frames had to be removed, and on the inside, new architraves, apron panels and window seats (with heaters underneath) made, as well as dado and skirtings and staircase top, all in oak.

The fireplace surround from the dining room in the main house, put into The Library c.1945, and now in the main room on the first floor. The beams and supports were found to be quite unnecessary.

The stairs and panelling may date form 1870, or more probably from c.1945 when The Library was made into a house, using materials salvaged from the main house. The position of the original stairs is unknown.

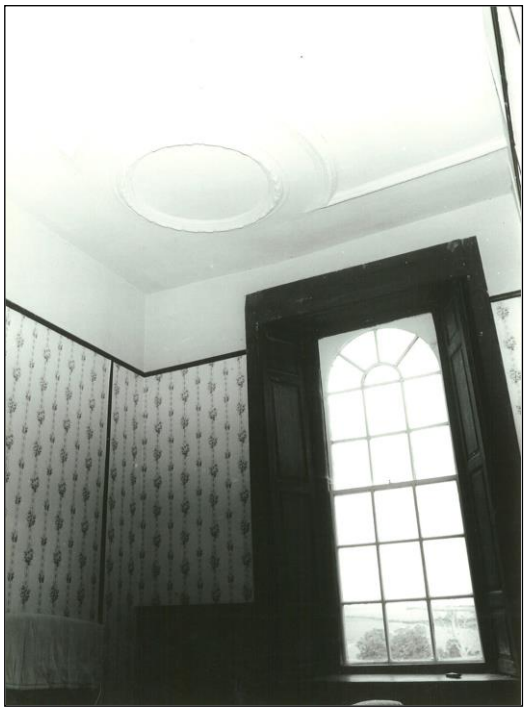
The walls here too were replastered, and a cornice added. The ceiling itself was repaired, some sections of moulding having to be taken away to a specialist firm of plaster workers near Bath, Moran and Wheatley, for more thorough restoration, and some missing bits having to be replaced. Then the fireplace was brought back from repair, and installed. In preparation for this, since it was both larger and heavier than the original, a wider hearth had been made, and brick piers built below to take its weight.

Finally, at the end of 1983, the interior complete except for decoration and furnishing, the inserted windows and doors were removed from the arches of the loggia. At last The Library could be seen as it had been by 18th and 19th century Rolles.

There was still work to do in the grounds, however. The wall along the drive was in need of repair, and at the same time the gateway was made narrower, since cars were not to be driven in. The new piers were exact copies of the old. Charlie Ferret had by then completed his great work of clearance – through there is always plenty to do in the way of maintenance – but there was some new planting still to do. Hedges were to be planted to link the two buildings and create an enclosed area between them, and much new grass was needed where the builders had trampled it. This was all done in the spring of 1984, at which time the job was finally done.

The kitchen on the ground floor of The Library. The gloss paint on the brickwork proved very difficult to remove.

Right: The plaster decoration of the ceiling surround, although damaged by partition walls. It seems that there never was a cornice.



The first floor of The Library, divided into bedrooms and bathroom. The unusual fireplace surround is now in the Orangery.