

Building the 'New' Beckett House

There had been talk among the Barrington family for some time about building a new Mansion at Beckett to replace the older house. This had been partially demolished by damage it had received during the English Civil Wars of the 17th century. We have confirmation of this from George Barrington the 7th Viscount, who in his history of Beckett House written in August 1882, states, "*The old house was then standing, and I perfectly well remember it. Half of this house had been burnt down in the Civil Wars.*" The water colour painting shown in this listing confirm it was a huge building and enough of it survived to be habitable for close on another two centuries. William Barrington, (2nd Viscount), was very fond of Beckett and admitted himself that he probably spent far too much money on the gardens and house of his estate, but it gave him much pleasure. Had the house been so much damaged that it presented a grotesque image then it is very likely that he would have done something about it. Without firm documentary evidence, it can only be surmised that the damage was limited to a small area that could easily have been sealed off.

The death of William Barrington in 1793 brought about a stagnant period for the Beckett Estate that lasted for twenty one years. He had no children himself so had to turn to his younger brother's children for heirs. That brother was Major General John Barrington who died in 1764, still fairly young in his 40's. The first two of his children were William and Richard, who bore no resemblance to the character of their distinguished father. Their behaviour is explained in a separate chapter; suffice it to say that they could not be trusted to administer the Barrington Estate. Their Uncle, Lord William Viscount Barrington, felt compelled to place the whole estate into a Trust on the event of his death, and asked that it should remain so until a suitable heir would be apparent. The Trust was overseen by his brothers; Admiral Samuel Barrington, Shute Barrington the Bishop of Durham, and Lawyer, Daines Barrington.

The third and fourth Viscounts, William and Richard, bore no children that could inherit, so upon the death of Richard in 1814, the Trustees looked to the third son of John Barrington. George was of a completely different character to his two elder brothers. He

was ordained as a Priest in December 1791 at Durham Cathedral by his uncle, Shute Barrington the Bishop of Durham, and appointed to the Rectory of Sedgefield nearby. He was 53 years of age when he acceded to the title of Lord George Viscount (5th) Barrington, with full powers over the family estate.

Being based in Sedgefield with considerable responsibilities George could not suddenly leave for Beckett, neither did he want to. Over the trust period there had been various caretakers looking after the day-to-day running of the estate, friends such as the Price family who in turn appointed a part-time Steward, Mr Davis. But it was far from ideal and the estate slowly began to deteriorate with farms becoming dilapidated, houses and cottages out of repair, rents over-due. On a recommendation from a friend, George Barrington appointed his own Steward called George Merryweather. Little is known at the moment about this remarkable man, but the study of his letters that survive from the years 1815 – 1818, show that he was clearly well educated and intelligent. (*Please see a separate listing in this Catalogue on George Merryweather and his letters*).

George Merryweather officially arrived to take up his position as Steward of the Beckett Estate in April 1815. He was paid handsomely the sum of £300 per annum. He wasted no time in immersing himself into the affairs of the estate and began to make his mark instantly. His brief from Lord Barrington was not only to bring the estate back to efficient order but also to prepare for the building of a new Mansion House to replace the old one. The Bishop of Durham, Shute Barrington, also had fond memories of growing up at Beckett, and had spoken to his nephew George of making the funds available to build a new house. Throughout 1815 and 1816, George Merryweather referred to the new house preparations and it is possible to sense the growing frustration at the lack of progress. No indication has been discovered yet among the Barrington papers as to what caused the delay, but by 1818, there was no further mention of the new house.

Upon the death of the Bishop of Durham on 25th March 1826, his Will provided a fresh impetus to the building of the mansion. He bequeathed that £10,000 should immediately be made available to his nephew George to commence the work. But his Will was very complicated in that the Bishop was an immensely wealthy man and had huge amounts of

money tied up in Trusts and Shares; therefore the process of completing the Will to Probate was a long one.

Unfortunately, Lord George Viscount Barrington died during a visit to Rome on 4th March 1829, aged 68. It fell to his son William Keppel to complete the building of the new house. As well as the £10,000 the Bishop had bequeathed in his Will to commence the new house, a further £20,000 was also allocated to the completion of it. The Bishop's Will also stated that the new house should be built, "*according to the plan for the same delivered to him by Mr Atkinson, an architect, and approved by him.*" This part of the Bishop's desire was not to come to fruition.

Lord William Keppel Viscount (6th) Barrington wasted no time in commencing the building of the new Mansion House. However, the plans he had in his possession were not favourably looked upon either by himself, his family or friends. Upon a visit to Beckett to see the old house and the plans, a friend of the Viscount was quoted as saying, "*Throw them both into the water and that will get rid of two damned ugly things at once.*"* It was to his wife's brother, the Hon. Thomas Liddell that the new Viscount turned for help. He described him as, "*A man of singularly good taste, who at once saw that, with caution, a sound deal might be made of the place. Mr Liddell has great natural abilities as an Architect, and kindly undertook to design plans for the erection of an Elizabethan House.*"* A quote from a relatively local building company was requested, and Richard Pace & Son of Lechlade was contacted. It was this company that had built the new Vicarage in Shrivenham in 1805 for the Rev. Edward Berens. The quote was made out in detail and alluded to the erection of the house, but most of the interior detail would be carried out by the respective specialists of their field.* (To see a copy of the quote please go back to the Listing and click the link [HERE](#)). (*Br Lib MS 73757)

In a letter written by family friend James Pringle of London, dated 1st September 1829, he stated that, "*Mr Richardson will leave town (London) tomorrow morning and will arrive at Faringdon about 5 o'clock.*"* And from a letter written by the proprietor of the company Francis, White and Francis, dated 11th September 1829, makes clear who he is, "*The delivery of 4 Casks of Roman Cement will be delivered by direction of Mr John Richardson, Clerk*

of the Works to Your Lordship."* Work began the following month when a young George Barrington, aged 5 years and 8 months, laid the first stone duly dated.* And so began the erection of the new Beckett House in Elizabethan style, designed by Thomas Liddell and assisted by James Clapham and John Streat. The main contractor was Robert Pace & Son, the Head Plasterer was Mr Bass and the Head Carpenter was Mr Burchall.* (* *Br Lib MS 73757*).

This note was found among the papers labelled as Misc loose accounts (*Br Lib MS 73756*)

Account of Hands Employed at and for Beckett House - July 1830

Masons	Mr Knapp & Men	20
	Slaters	3
Labourers & Boys		27
Bath Masons	Mr Clapham & Men	15
	Labourers	6
Carpenters	Mr Street & Men	23
	Mr Haines & Men	6
	Mr Pace & Men	6
	Robert Sly	1
Sawyers, Tanners & Partners		4
Brick Makers	Mr Palmer & Hands	27
Plumbers	Mr Luker & Hands	3
Lime Burners	Mr Ackrell & Hands	4
Quarry men at Lime Stone		7
	Carters	7
	Plaisters	1
	Labourers	<u>11</u>
		171

Bath stone and slate quarrys

Smiths Founders and Boatmen about 50 more

The construction of the main body of the house consisted of normal building bricks, but these were made on the estate. One of the legacies of the George Merryweather, Steward of the estate from 1815 to 1820, was the construction of a Brick Kiln and the knowledge of manufacture. Using clay extracted within the grounds of the estate, approximately one million, high quality bricks were made. These formed the skeleton of the house. The outside walls were then covered with quality stone from Bath that were delivered by barge via the Wilts and Berks Canal, to a wharf located on the estate.

Whilst waiting for the new house to be built, William Barrington and his family occupied the large house adjacent to the Church, known today as Shrivenham House. By 1833 the rooms on the Western side of the house were sufficiently ready to be occupied and the Barringtons moved in, but it was not until around 1850 that the house was truly complete.