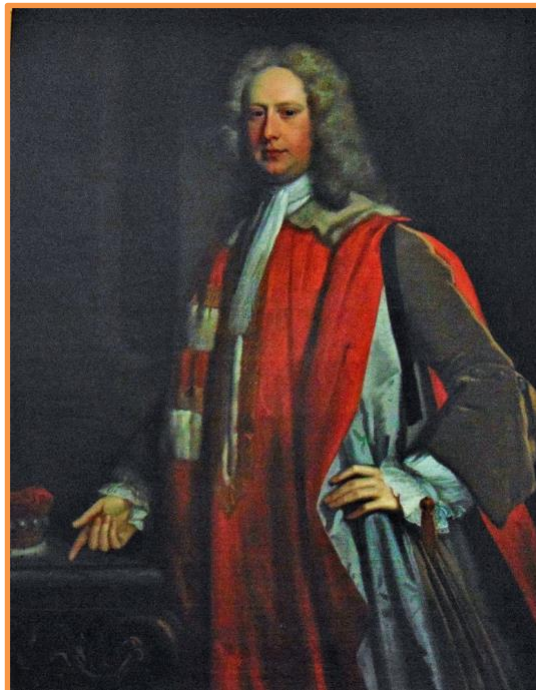


## The old Beckett House

When John Shute inherited Beckett from John Wildman (jnr) in 1710, we don't know whether he came to live there immediately. As an MP it's likely that he would have continued to stay in London. Wildman's Will makes no mention of his wife whom we assume had died previous to the date of the Will in 1707. However, when he did move in to begin what would become the Barrington dynasty, we have no description of the house he would inhabit.



A fine oil painting of John Shute Viscount Barrington (1<sup>st</sup>). Photo courtesy of Antony Alderson

The nearest we have is from a document dated 1722 within Berkshire County Archive Ref: (E/EEL/35/17)

*'The Capital messuage Becket being a very large house situated on a dry soil containing 23 rooms, besides closets, 8 garrets, vaults, cellars, and offices of all kinds, as pastry, bakehouse, bolting house, brewhouse, washhouse, laundry, still house, apple loft, dairy etc with all convenient outhouses, as stables, a large and handsome barn, etc with the several courts, gardens and orchards, large dovecote, large fish pond of an acre, summerhouse being a cubed 24 feet built by Inigo Jones. The*

*gardens containing 15 or 16 acres of ground most of it a kindly fruit, full sand. About 8 or 9 of the said acres being enclosed with a stone wall of 5775 feet or 350 poles, well planted with all kinds of fruit of the best sort. The fruit noted for its kindly taste. Grapes never fail in any year.*

*NB. Several parts of the garden and ground lying next the house have surprising echoes. 320 poles make a mile.'*

The description above would suggest the house being of a more compact nature rather than a long, range type of building as depicted in the picture below. This watercolour is marked as, 'copied by Mary Elizabeth Barrington, Beckett October 1856.' She was the Niece of William Keppel Barrington the 6<sup>th</sup> Viscount. Unfortunately, we do not know when the original was painted. The second picture below, although bearing the date of 1812, is also a copy of another picture. The note on it states that it's based on a rude sketch belonging to Lord Barrington, so we can accurately state that the view of the house must be pre-1793 the year William Barrington the 2<sup>nd</sup> Viscount, died. Both views are with the artist located in the south looking north. The watercolour also depicts the pigeon house that we know was still operational in 1818. The other shows the Fishing House.



Photo courtesy of Antony Alderson's book of Barrington Memoirs

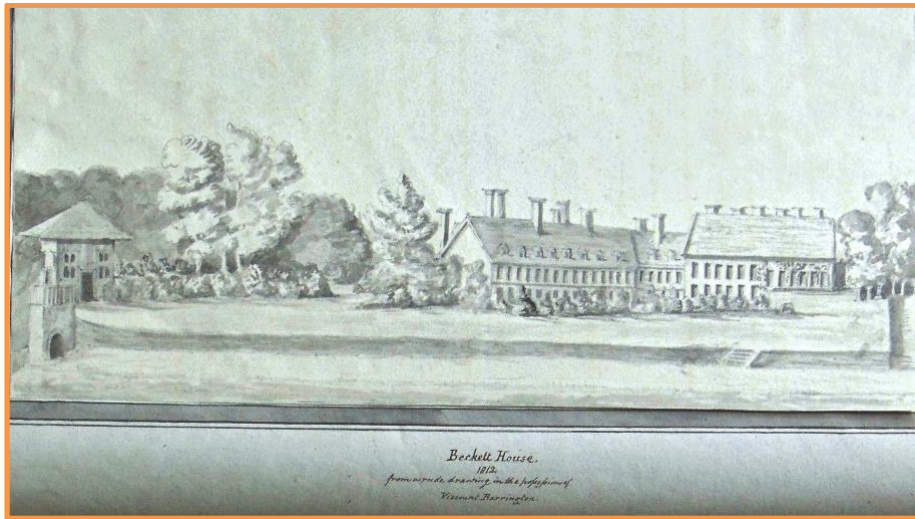
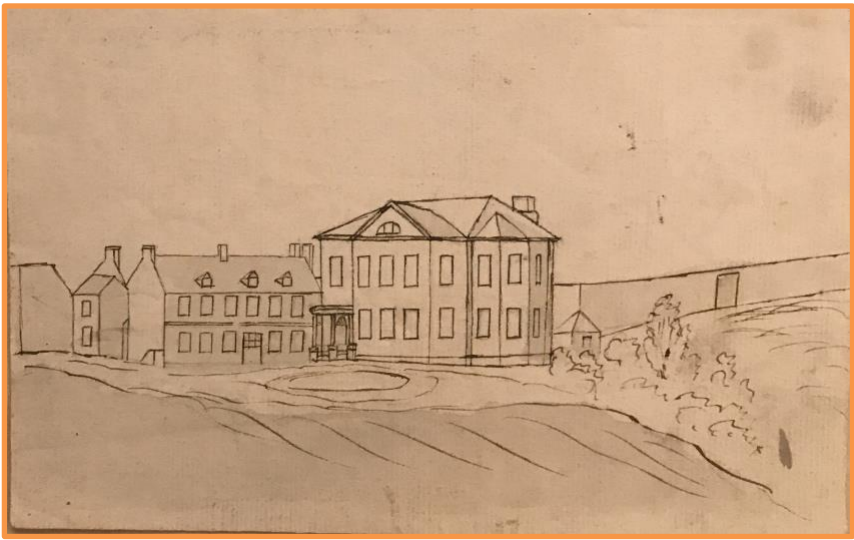


Photo courtesy of Antony Alderson's book of Barrington Memoirs

The third picture below was discovered in the Barrington Collection documents in the British Library (ADD MS 73759). The sketch is not dated nor is there any clue as to the artist. It is quite a crude sketch but closer examination makes it possible that it is a depiction of the occupied part of Beckett House in the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century. Examination of an inventory and valuation commissioned in 1754 by William Barrington (2<sup>nd</sup> Viscount), also ties up well with the sketch below (See SHS Cat No N1514). The formal entrance to the house was from the north and is shown below by a section cut and expanded from the Beckett Estate Map of 1815.





A section from the Beckett Estate Map of 1815 from the Shrivenham Heritage Society Archive. The red dot is the house entrance and the blue square the Fishing House.

If this interpretation is accurate then it strongly suggests that the long-range part of the building as shown in the first two sketches above may not have been used for a considerable period. The Estate Steward, George Merryweather, began to dismantle what he called the ancient part of the house almost immediately on his arrival in 1815.

Sanderson Miller of Radway is described by some historians as a Gentleman Architect. He was born in 1716 and died in 1780. Most of his important work was carried out during his younger years and we are fortunate that he kept detailed diaries of his activities up to 1756. There was also published in 1910 a compilation of the letters sent to Sanderson Miller called, '*An Eighteenth-Century Correspondence*,' edited by Lilian Dickins and Mary Stanton, in which several of William Barrington's letters are listed. This book is available to read and study online at the Internet Archive.

William Barrington (2<sup>nd</sup> Viscount) clearly had something in mind with regard to his house at Beckett. In 1754 he commissioned an inventory and valuation of the buildings, household goods, furniture and plate that he owned there. (*BL ADD MS 73763*) However, he may have done that simply for insurance purposes. But just over a year later, Sanderson Miller records that



he visited Beckett in order to draw up plans for new rooms for Lord Barrington. As yet we have no evidence that any alterations or additions were carried out at that time.

In June 1766, William Barrington wrote to Miller from his home in London, *"I shall be at Beckett all next week and I most cordially wish it may be convenient and agreeable for you to meet me there. Besides the pleasure I always have in seeing you I am really in great want of your assistance. My Stables will be finished by the Autumn but they cannot be well finished without you, and I have a new plan to communicate with relation to my House."*



A section from the Beckett Estate Map of 1815 from the Shrivvenham Heritage Society Archive showing the layout of the 'New Stables' built in 1766

The Stables to which William Barrington alludes are the ones that were located outside of the Park area, just off the main road on the edge of the present Golf Course. What is left of the Stable Block itself has been converted into houses. But to what does he allude with his comments about his house? On his way to Beckett in September 1766, he wrote to Sanderson Miller, *"I am very thankful for your kind intentions of coming to Beckett, where you will be always received with the utmost cordiality and pleasure. My brother Daines I expect to find there tomorrow."* He continued, *"My Works go on according to the admirable Plan settled by you, but not as fast as*

*I could wish, however my new rooms and passages are fitting up and I expect to have full use of them next summer."*



Part of the original stable block remain as private houses centre of picture. Photo by Neil B. Maw

We also learn from the same source that Sanderson Miller designed a new door for Beckett House when Barrington writes, *"Many thanks, my dear friend, for your Packett which contains everything I want relative to the door ... I shall never see any man enter this door with more real pleasure than the ingenious worthy architect who has kindly furnished me with a plan of it."*

From this we are able to update our understanding of the Beckett Estate. The original stable block was very close to the old house and was in a poor state of repair. William Barrington decided to build a more modern and larger block and we now know that he did this in 1766. Even in 1815, George Merryweather the estate Steward was referring to them as the, 'New Stables.' We also know now that he made alterations to Beckett House, or rather a part of it, using the designs drawn up for him by Sanderson Miller. It is likely at this date that William also built the *"the old Lord's Terrace"* that crossed the narrowing in the ornamental lake. (See photo below.)



The old house was completely demolished in 1829 when the erection of the new house was started.

## The new Beckett House

Upon the death of the Bishop of Durham on 25<sup>th</sup> 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 as he 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 (5<sup>th</sup>) died during a visit to Rome on 4<sup>th</sup> 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 for 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 (6<sup>th</sup>) Barrington wasted no time in commencing the building of the new Mansion House. However, the plans he had in his possession created by William Atkinson 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.*" (Lord George Barrington (7<sup>th</sup>) History of Beckett House 1882). 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 to Listing No N376 in the SHS Catalogue)





The Foundation Stone of  
1829

In a letter written by family friend James Pringle of London, dated 1<sup>st</sup> 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 11<sup>th</sup> 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 Richard Pace & Son, the Head Plasterer was Mr Bass and the Head Carpenter was Mr James Burchall.\* (\* Br Lib MS 73757).



The Western elevation of the new,  
Elizabethan style, Beckett House

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

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 southern edge of the estate.

Whilst waiting for the new house to be built, Lord William Barrington and his family occupied the large house adjacent to St Andrew's Church, known today as Shrivenham House. The Dowager Lady Elizabeth Barrington who normally lived there, graciously agreed to move out by renting the nearby Watchfield House.



Watchfield House circa 1815 - Probably by Ann Dixon.  
Courtesy of David Ferrand, Derbyshire.

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.

