

A more in depth look at the origins of Swiss Cottage

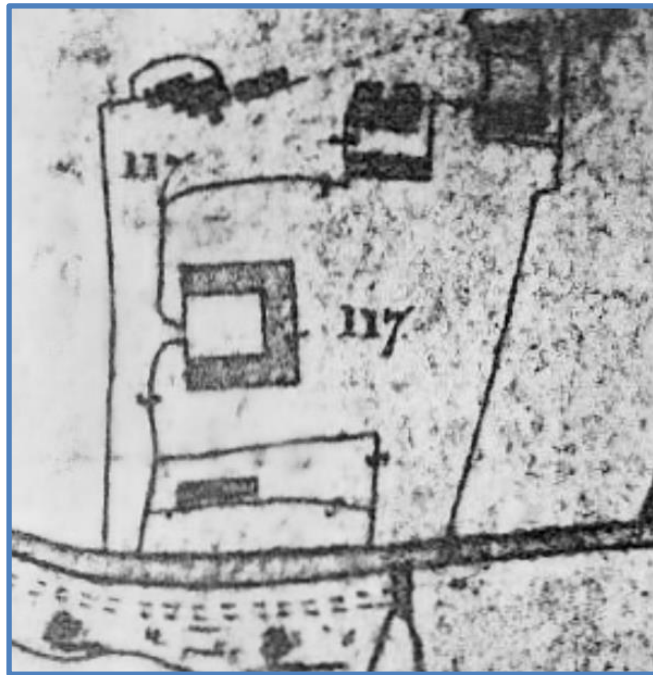
By Neil B. Maw

Swiss Cottage is something of an enigma. Its location, close to the main road that was historically the main route to Oxford; close to the old Beckett Stable block and close to the old estate sawpit. It seems a peculiar spot to place what would appear to be a novelty cottage. Why it was built there and by whom has not yet been established, but the popular attribution is that Lord Barrington had it built circa 1850 as a replica of a chalet in which he and his wife stayed on their honeymoon in Switzerland. More research would be needed.

It is possible to confirm that the property must have been built before 1865 by the extract clip below. This is from an estate map produced in that year, clearly showing a cottage of the shape that we see today. The Register for the map confirmed that 422 is the Stables, 423 an Orchard, 424 the Timber Yard and 425 a Cottage and Garden; all owned and occupied by Lord Barrington.



The Tithe Map of Shrivenham from 1844, shown by the extract clip below, confirmed that the cottage was not there at that time. Therefore, the range for its construction is clear, sometime between 1844 and 1865.



There are two possible 'Lords' who could fit in with the chalet in Switzerland story. George Lord Viscount Barrington (5th) died in 1829, leaving his eldest son, William Keppel to inherit the title. William had married Jane Liddell in April 1823. In her memoirs, their daughter Augusta Barrington, described that after their wedding in London, the couple posted in their open carriage all the way to Shrivenham. They left a few days later to go to their house in Brook Street, Grosvenor Square, London. It is very likely that had they travelled to Switzerland for a honeymoon, Augusta would have mentioned it. Their eldest son George inherited the title in 1867 at the death of his father. He had married Isabella Morrill at London in February 1846. Augusta stated in her memoirs that they spent their first year of married life at Beckett. They then lived for several years in Europe, returning to Beckett in the summer months. When George became the 7th Viscount in 1867, they made Beckett their permanent home. From the information above, we know that by that time, the property known as Swiss Cottage today, was already built.

From the above evidence, it would seem that the attribution of either Viscounts 6th or 7th building a replica of a honeymoon residence is most unlikely. Furthermore, there is strong evidence that the name, Swiss Cottage, was not affixed to the property until much later. The

census' of 1901 and 1911, contain references to many named cottages in Shrivenham and Watchfield, but the name Swiss Cottage does not appear. The earliest reference to it comes from the North Wilts Herald newspaper dated 21st June 1935, when, *'Mr Hal Michael Rickard-Bell, an Author, of Swiss Cottage, Shrivenham, was granted a divorce.'*

So, what reason could there be for building the cottage where it is and why in the particular style of a Swiss chalet? Research carried out recently may be able to explain the first question of location. For many centuries Lime was a necessity in the trades of building and agriculture. It was a basic constituent for mortar (cement), outside wall covering, plaster and soil improvement, and many other applications. When fresh out of the kiln it is known as *'Quick lime'* which is very corrosive and was used to dispose of diseased animal carcasses and other *'cleaning'* applications. The process of producing it involved the heating up of Limestone which is made up of fossilised sea creatures from millions of years previous. The temperatures necessary within the kiln need to be in the region of 900 – 1100 °C. Once watered down, the powdered lime becomes known as *'Slaked Lime'* and can be used for many applications.

As well as putting the Beckett Estate back into good, profitable order, the newly appointed Steward, George Merryweather was also to prepare the way for the building of a new Mansion House at Beckett. The old house was generally in a poor state of repair and allowed to run down during the period it had been in Trust. He understood that such a project would require a huge amount of mortar and bricks and was quick to notice that on the estate there were good natural resources of Limestone and Clay. However, what he didn't know until approximately 1817, was the new Mansion House would not be built until 1829. In a letter to Lord Barrington dated 21st November 1815, he described the location of his new Lime Kiln, *"On entering the gate out of the Faringdon road to the timber yard, the view is intercepted by the return of an high hedge beyond the new Stables. Not many yards beyond this hedge on the right of the road is a recessed place in an angle formed by the road and the breast of the stone quarry. In this recess the Lime Kiln is built and also a Lime House."* A study of the map extract from the Beckett Estate of 1815 below, makes it clear that he is describing exactly where Swiss Cottage stands today. (See SHS N1547 for more information).



It is not known at the moment for how long the Lime Kiln was used, but we know it was still in operation in 1830 when the new Beckett House was under construction. Discovered in miscellaneous papers within the Barrington Collection at the British Library, was an, '*Account of Hands employed at and for Beckett House, July 1830.*' (Br Lib ADD MS 73756). Here it is noted that the Lime Burners were Mr Ackrell and Hands – four. There were also seven men working at the quarry face next to the Lime Kiln. By the middle of the century we can only speculate that it was coming to the end of its useful life. The Kiln and the Lime House would have stood on a large, flat platform, just as the cottage does today. The kiln was a big structure; George Merryweather described that the circumference of the roof was 54 feet (16 metres). A large portion of it would have been built of brick in order to survive the high temperatures it was required to operate at. In one of his registers held at the County Archive in Reading (D/EX52/E1), Merryweather said of his Lime house, '*this Warehouse which is contiguous to the Kiln will hold 5000 Bushels of Lime.*' It was a substantial building.



An attempt to draw what the kiln looked like with a cross section

Again, we can only speculate, that at the end of the life of the Lime Kiln, William Kepple Lord Viscount Barrington, either commissioned the building of the cottage or authorised somebody else to do so, in the fashion of a Swiss type chalet. The clearance of the kiln and the store house would have left a solid platform on which to build and it is quite likely that some of the bricks may have been used in the walls of the cottage.

The cottage was sold in 1935 just before the main body of Beckett Park was sold to the Ministry of Defence in 1937. (North Wilts Herald 30th Aug 1935). For more information on the Lime Kiln, please see SHS N1547.