

Viscountess Charlotte Barrington's Legacy to Shrivenham By Vivien Moss

Before attempting to write about Charlotte Barrington's great legacy to the village in the form of the eight houses for disabled servicemen returning from the Great War and the attractive Memorial Hall I thought it would be useful to know more about her life and personality and why she felt moved to provide these buildings. Very little was known about her apart from the fact that she was second wife of the 9th Viscount, Walter Bulkeley Barrington whom she married in January 1905.

Charlotte's family history shows that her great-Grandfather was the Earl of Courtown. Her maternal Grandfather, Sir John Fox Burgoyne, was made Field Marshal and also Constable of the Tower of London. These appointments led to his being offered a grace and favour apartment in Hampton Court Palace. After her Grandfather's death the honour was conferred on his two daughters and Charlotte moved with them into the Palace at the age of 16. She remembers the friendly atmosphere generated by the community of the forty-five families who lived in the apartments and shared the gardens and grounds. In her autobiography "*Through Eighty Years 1855 – 1935*" she writes that she became very much aware of the pomp and pageantry of Tudor and Stuart times and very appreciative of the great beauty of the Palace and in particular of the Great Hall. She had a "*wonderfully happy girlhood*" here where "*punctuality was the essence of our home life.*" After early rising followed by breakfast and family prayers, the morning was spent in work and reading. The afternoons in Hampton Court Palace were more relaxed and usually ended in musical activities or tea and games with some of the residents from the other forty five apartments. She writes that every Sunday she taught at the Palace Church School. In addition to all this she enjoyed a very active social life together with all the privileges of her wealthy background. With maturity this included visits and stays in friends' houses with tennis, then just coming into fashion, croquet parties, visits to the theatre, the Opera House, boating parties, balls and dances. Country House visits brought her into contact with even more interesting people. Confident and charming she found home politics and international questions greatly appealing. For example so obsessed with the subject of Tariff Reforms proposed by Mr Chamberlain, the renowned Liberal politician with a reforming record, she was asked to attend a country house party where the MP was a guest.

In her well-connected and wealthy circle of friends and acquaintances she met the man who was to be her first husband. This was John Arden Birch whose family owned Rickmansworth Park in Hertfordshire. His land-owning family had accumulated wealth since the beginning of the 19th century for his father was both a banker and a merchant and later became Governor of the Bank of England. They were married on a bitterly cold day on the 23rd February 1881 in the chapel of Hampton Court Palace. Charlotte's circle of friends and acquaintances widened even more to include bankers, politicians, academics and celebrities in art and literature, publishers, politicians, academics and occasionally foreign royalty. There were lively discussions on public affairs and national interests. She talks of dining at the Savoy and the Berkeley hotels; she writes of meeting at Rickmansworth "*Mr W.S. Gilbert, also living in the vicinity, added to the charm of society there by the wit and brilliancy*

of his conversational powers.” The Birches were regularly meeting leading personages in London society and Charlotte’s interest in art, literature and politics deepened. In addition to a wide circle of friends and acquaintances among the wealthy and well-connected the Birches also had an inner circle of close friends. They loved to entertain and were well known for their croquet parties

The Birches had five children but sadly the last few years of their marriage were overshadowed by John’s terminal illness. He died in 1895. At the time the youngest child was eight years old. Charlotte writes: *“Like other women placed in a similar position, my great wish was to make up as far as possible to my children for the severe handicap they had experienced in losing their father at so early an age.”* Charlotte took great pains to prepare her three sons for success in life and it was her firm belief that to learn German or French, ideally both, at a young age would stand them in good stead. She recognised that they were very bright and ardently desired to find for her sons professions and careers in life commensurate with their abilities and tastes. She wanted the best for them both at home and abroad. Her first quest following her husband’s death was to find suitable prep schools for the two of her sons. The Eton masters were extremely helpful and soon the two boys were settled there. Her second son had a health problem and was sent to another prep school. In 1899 this son’s health problem prompted her to make her first enjoyable visit to South Africa to be with her cousin whose husband was in the Diplomatic Service in Pretoria. In addition to trying to find a family to place her son for his education there were also business considerations necessitating further visits over the next two years. During this time Charlotte also visited many cities and towns in Germany and France. She was driven by considerations of finding the best family homes and schools for her sons to become fluent in German and French. The same cannot be applied to her daughters for they are scarcely mentioned. Her enquiring mind took an active interest in the political situation in South Africa during the second phase of the Boer War. It was not widely known or talked about in England at that time.

After she was widowed Charlotte moved into her mother’s apartment in Hampton Court Palace for several months. About this time she developed another aspect to her life which she says gave her satisfaction. She undertook some social work involving weekly visits to the men’s ward in a London hospital. Filled with trepidation at first, she came to realise that the men looked forward to these visits and this had a huge impact on her. Charlotte, interested in people as always, came to understand the problems and pain of the less fortunate. She writes that of all her social activities this is what appealed to her the most. It made her appreciate good health and home comforts as never before and how insignificant were her little worries compared with the suffering and hard lot of those she visited in hospital. She appreciated *“the fine characters and many excellent qualities of the working classes.”*

It was while living at her mother’s apartment at Hampton Court Palace as a widow, that Walter Bulkeley, Lord Barrington, made regular and frequent visits. These culminated in their marriage on the 1st of January 1905. Charlotte writes that *“from the first moment of my introduction to Beckett I shared in the great appreciation and affection my husband always evinced for the old family home.”* She was warmly welcomed by many members of the family who appeared to be connected to every

family one could name. Viscount Barrington's seven children were either married or out in the world but they knew that even with Charlotte's much younger five children Beckett House would always welcome them. Charlotte, by this time Lady Barrington, described "*what an excellent stepfather Walter Barrington made in the new role he then assumed. His very human outlook on life, his loving disposition, his great sympathy with young people, his simple faith and high-minded integrity, made him one of the pleasantest and best companions for my boys, and his devotion to cricket and Eton was another bond of union between them.*"

The happy couple did not take up residence at Beckett for almost two years because it was then leased out to the inventor of the torpedo, Robert Whitehead until his death at Beckett in November 1904. The Barringtons also had houses in Eaton Square, London and in Bournemouth where they spent time. After Robert Whitehead's death they then embarked on a programme of some alterations made to the house. This included re-decorating and the installation of an early electrical system. Having done this Beckett House was leased out again and it was 1910 or 1911 before they took up permanent residence and continued the famed hospitality for which Beckett had always long been known. Lord Barrington with his enthusiasm for cricket and concern for village life was well known, respected and liked. He regularly opened the extensive grounds for functions such as the Forrester's Fete each year to which an invitation was extended to the Railway workers and their families in Swindon. Two or three hundred men, with their wives and children would arrive early in the afternoon and arrange for the last train to be stopped at Shrivenham to take them home at 10 pm. This became known as the "Railway Fete" with races, competitions, games of every kind and extra punts were hired for the boys to use on the lake. The day finished with a cold supper and Charlotte comments on what fun it was and in how tidy a state the grounds were left. In addition to the "*dinners of eleven courses*" for friends, the local gentry and the hunting society, the Barringtons did not forget the farmers and tenants. Summer garden parties gave Lord and Lady Barrington the opportunity to get in touch with every inhabitant and it would have been then that they learned of any problems where they might help. Even though at this time in the years 1911 to 1913 they made three pleasurable visits to Egypt together with a varied social life, the Barringtons still kept in touch with Shrivenham. The more Charlotte saw of the village when she visited some of the two-roomed cottages and saw the monotony and drudgery of village life with low wages, long working hours and few social activities the more determined she became to revive village life. Her vision was to provide a Welfare Institute, or as we know it a Village Hall, with the means to house various clubs and associations. The Welfare Institute was to be the centre of all village life set in the midst of a recreation ground. At the same time she was aware of the drift of families from the village of Shrivenham to the new town of Swindon where wages were higher and there were many more facilities for leisure and education.

At this time the village of Shrivenham, population 600, was a small agricultural settlement with cottages and houses situated along the High Street and around the Church. There was no piped water or electricity and each cottage had its own well. Most dwellings had a fair sized garden and the inhabitants grew their own fruit and vegetables and often had a pig at the bottom of the garden. There was no transport in the village until the first bus came along in 1912 and usually people walked everywhere. Only the village Doctor had his own transport and that was a pony and

trap. The many farms provided employment for some of the inhabitants. To a lesser extent Beckett House provided work both in the House and on the estate. The Railway town of New Swindon was enticing land workers into the railway network where wages were much greater and facilities in the town for families much appreciated. Life was hard if the father of a family fell ill or could not work because of injury. It would be another 40 years before the National Insurance Act and the National Health Service came into being. The Barringtons owned most of the land in the village and as they had always done in the past wholeheartedly and happily embraced the concept of "noblesse oblige." The estate Accounts show entries where the Barringtons had provided food or fuel or clothes for those villagers who had fallen on unfortunate times. Whenever they were at Beckett Charlotte would visit Shrivenham dwellings and became aware of the deplorable conditions existing in the early years of the twentieth century. She writes: "*low wages, long hours of work, and few compensating advantages in leisure hours. If the men had their cricket and football clubs and games of billiards, for the women there was no distraction from the monotonous round of household duties, and the hard struggle to make both ends meet on a then totally inadequate income, while the young people, with no playing fields, and little in the way of healthy exercises and games were dependent on the half-yearly school treat, walks in dusty lanes, and games, perforce in the village street, as their share of social life.*" This observation was followed by action to revolutionise rural social life. She emphasised the importance of a Village Institute in the heart of the village set in the midst of a recreation ground. This would be the centre of village life both for recreation and for classes, Girl Guides, the Women's Institute and the Boy Scouts. To think was to act and in 1913 Charlotte's ideas were embodied. She rented a house in Shrivenham where a Social Worker she engaged ran classes for young people both for amusement and instruction. She found an excellent Scoutmaster for the older boys and the Girl Guides were formed as well. In addition the Women's Institute was introduced, sewing classes took place and there were Social Evenings for the girls. I happened to come across an account written by a local inhabitant about 1930 describing her life as the wife of an agricultural labourer. In this account she describes how "*the Women's Institute Movement has been one of the greatest helps to the agricultural worker, as crafts and work have been learned, and many a home beautified and helped along the road of life.*" She was meeting other women, she was away from her home for a couple of hours but most importantly she was being introduced to sewing skills which enabled her to make her home more attractive. Is this not what we do today with exchanging ideas and offers of help?

At the same time as this Charlotte was busy organising fund-raising schemes in London among her many friends to whom she spoke so enthusiastically of her vision. Her friends were supportive and approved of what she was doing, particularly her friends in the theatrical world and the money started to come to help her buy a 12 acre ploughed field which would become the Recreation Ground where the Institute would stand.

However, the Great War put a sudden stop to these activities which had already begun to bear fruit. Charlotte writes that "*three scholarships were procured in 1913 – one for a girl who gave exceptional promise of becoming an artist of no mean pretension.*" This girl later became a very successful artist in London. The Social Worker went on to a more important occupation while the Scoutmaster, a veteran of the Boer War re-joined his old regiment and went to the Front. Wives had to take on

the husband's duties on the farms. During the War Charlotte became aware of the terrible war injuries that had disabled some of the men returning to Shrivenham. Although she had established funds for the Welfare Institute her focus moved from that to include building homes for married disabled ex-servicemen with 30 to 40 per cent of disability. Her vision was now much more ambitious and became known as the Shrivenham Settlement which she hoped would be a blueprint for other villages to copy. The aim now was to provide homes in the village and suitable occupations for disabled ex-servicemen in order to keep them in the village with their families instead of sending them away to a distant settlement many miles away as had been the case in the Boer War. Her campaign to raise funds from her friends and contacts in London who shared her enthusiasm for this project increased. She appreciated the donation of £2,000 by the Red Cross at the beginning of this project. Her theatrical friends continued to be very supportive. In addition there were a number of Bridge parties, parties and Bazaars. Lord Barrington supported the Shrivenham Settlement and was just as keen to buy the 12 acre field around which the eight houses would be built. He himself later paid for the cost of constructing two of the eight houses.

However, it was not until 1916 that they were able to take possession of the 12 acre field that the War Office authorities had requisitioned from Sandhill Farm. Then the building of the cottages took priority and great care was taken to provide homes that fitted in with the prevailing old-world character of Shrivenham. Charlotte devoted much time to planning the layout of the Recreation Ground, originally a ploughed field, and the houses themselves. She describes them as "*semi-detached (each containing living room, parlour, three bedrooms, bathroom, larder and scullery) with good gardens and workshops attached and placed round a Recreation Ground, forming as it were the background of the large space allocated for recreation and sports.*" Charlotte aimed to provide the means by which a disabled man would be able to earn a living to support himself and his family. The Welfare Institute "*on one side facing the main village street, and on the other overlooking the Sports Ground.*" The records of the architect and builders are not available but it is clear that Lady Barrington was heavily involved in all the details of the plans. She doubted the wisdom of having a parlour in each house but when the occupants moved in she saw the value of a second room for studying or playing an instrument.

In the last two years of the War the London Association Committee was formed of which Charlotte was the Chairman. In those years three houses were built and let to ex-servicemen discharged from war-time convalescent homes. The following years saw the completion of the remaining homes. The trades of the disabled men were carefully selected so that they did not conflict with any of the existing businesses in Shrivenham. The trades included a boot-maker, a saddler, a bricklayer and a bicycle maker, and repairer. One house was occupied by a man who, although disabled, was able to maintain the Recreation Ground. Another house was let to a Lifeguardsman who was appointed Overseer of Shrivenham and adjacent parishes while his wife took care of the village haberdashery shop. Yet another house was occupied by a man who had lost one arm during the hostilities. This man, Mr Claridge was fitted with an artificial limb and later engaged to be the caretaker of the new Hall – a task he performed admirably. Many years later his descendants who still live in the village discovered after he died that he had been awarded the Military Medal. Mr Claridge had never mentioned this to anyone in his life. Charlotte's friends in the theatre world still continued to give generously and helped provide part of the funding for the

Memorial Hall. Three of the houses on the Recreation Ground were named Bouchier, Robey and Cliff after the well known actors. The others were called: Stanley, Small, Purbrick, Craven and Barrington. From Kelly's Directory 1925 we see the houses were first let to Mr Schofield, a draper, Mr Claridge, Mr Ford, who took care of the Recreation Ground, Mr Collins, a cycle dealer, Mr Topping, a saddler, Mr Tucker, a shoemaker and to the former Life Guard without a trade but who worked well in Administration. The rents for these properties were deliberately kept very low as a mark of respect for what the occupants had suffered during the Great War.

As we have seen Charlotte was heavily involved with all aspects of the planning and design of the new houses in the recreation Ground. No detail was too insignificant for her. It was exactly the same with the Welfare Institute, known as the Memorial Hall. She wished it to fit in with the architectural character of the village and to complement the new houses. It was to be one of the most attractive features in the village. However, like many major projects it was not achieved without a few problems. She expressed her ideas and thoughts to several architects, none of whom, she said, did not quite meet her wishes. She was determined to design the building herself. However, the architect eventually chosen failed to satisfy her and at a stage when half the building was erected Lady Barrington dismissed him and Messrs. Romaine Walker and Jenkins took over the plans and sketches. I cannot help thinking that she could not have been the easiest person to work for. I've recently discovered how difficult the Composer, Verdi, was. And look at his tremendous success. Charlotte pays tribute to their architectural skills when she says "*they were indebted to Mr Romaine Walker for the lovely ceiling of oak beams, the picturesque porch over the main entrance, and for so ably carrying out and probably improving on my ideas.*" Later in "*Through Eighty Years*" she mentions one or two problems they had to cope with. It seems that initially the foundations had been laid out of the true line in 1921. A well-respected and competent cabinet maker, Mr Rees Kent who lived in one of the cottages opposite Elm Tree House, had bitterly opposed the Shrivenham settlement on the grounds that it was unnecessary. It may also have been that he strongly objected to the demolition of a charming cottage that stood in the way of the proposed new Hall. He had complained to the Parish Council and written to the MP. The Parish Council were in favour of the venture and this pacified him somewhat. He announced that when the foundations were laid he would withdraw his opposition. Curiously, he died two weeks after the foundations were laid.

Meanwhile Lady Barrington's determination to continue fund-raising to complete her vision continued unabated among her friends and acquaintances in London and the funds raised from very lucrative Bridge Tournaments enabled the Memorial Hall to be successfully completed in the early 1920s. Princess Beatrice, the youngest child of Queen Victoria, was one of Lady Barrington's friends and with Queen Mary took an active interest in the progress of the building of the eight homes and the Memorial Hall. It would appear that Princess Beatrice performed the opening ceremony as a favour to her friend since there is no record at Buckingham Palace of this event. The Swindon Advertiser of 25 July 1925 reported the opening ceremony of the Hall by Princess Beatrice and described it thus:

"The main building is 60 feet long by 40 feet wide. It has an exterior of grey stone with an old-fashioned tiled roof and the windows are arranged in the mediaeval style. The building is of ample proportion, being both long and lofty. The main entrance is

reached by a wicker gate and thence a path of old stone. The central oaken door, which shows some fine carving, gives access to the large hall in which the ceremony was performed. A striking feature of the central hall is the open roofing. This has been carried out on the hammer beam principle of identical pattern to that of Westminster Abbey roofing, and which is admittedly the best available. Oak-tongued grooved flooring provides another noticeable feature and that of the large raised platform being of the same fine material. The hall itself is roomy and well ventilated, and despite its spaciousness, gives an impression of cosiness and comfort. Among other of the many rooms are those set apart for the use of the entertainers, the kitchen and refreshment rooms, while there are several pantries and other conveniences. The long gallery, which at once attracts attention, is approached by a flight of fire-proof stone stairs. The heating is central and there is electric lighting. Among other interesting features of the Institute is the loggia, which gives access to a central sweep of sward. Each of the many windows bears the old-fashioned lead lights and these lend a picturesque air to the very attractive building.”

When the Memorial Hall was first built it was on the edge of the village. The population in 1931 was only 661. Today the hall is at the heart of the village and the population is now in the region of 4,500 and still growing. Lady Barrington’s vision of providing the Hall and the eight houses for disabled ex-servicemen has been her lasting legacy. In her own words “*the establishment of a Village Hall was not only a building devoted to utilitarian objects but a symbol of the corporate life and manifold interests of the rural population.*” It was and has been a great boon for Shrivenham. She achieved her aim of improving the quality of village life and at the same time helped stem the drift from the land to the town.

It may surprise you to learn that Charlotte held no brief for Women’s suffrage; she firmly believed that the village girls should learn how to cook, sew and know how to budget. These subjects should be part of every girl’s education and would prevent immature girls leaving home at an early age for the drudgery of a general servant.

As soon as the Hall was completed classes for drill and gymnasium exercises for boys were held weekly by Toc H members, Girl Guides and Boy Scouts met each week and the Women’s Institute moved from Beckett Lodge for their monthly meetings. In the larger hall there were Dances, Whist Drives, Badminton and Film shows. The Recreation Ground saw regular games of cricket matches encouraged by Lord Barrington who participated for as long as he was able. There was even more satisfaction when the Committee for the Hunt Ball Committee asked to use the Hall for its annual Ball. Shrivenham was developing its own social hub and villagers were staying in Shrivenham instead of seeking pastures new.
