



WOOLVERSTONE HALL Suffolk

A Brief History



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WOOLVERSTONE HALL

THE BACKGROUND TO THE BUILDING OF THE HOUSE:

Woolverstone Hall was built in 1776 for William Berners, a property developer from London who had gradually been acquiring extensive landholdings on the Shotley peninsula.

After viewing the interior, the house can be appreciated from a different perspective by walking down the grounds towards the river. Unlike many 18th Century houses of greater repute, Woolverstone Hall is as attractive from the back as the front.

Initially, Berners rented the then Woolverstone estate, including a Tudor manor house on the site of the present stable block. When he was able to purchase the estate in 1773, it was no doubt with the idea that he could now build a fashionable gentleman's country residence in a prime situation.

The site of Berners house is, of course, typical of the 18th Century interest in the landscape and appreciation of beautiful views and vistas. The back of the house overlooks the River Orwell at a picturesque curve and from the sides of the house there are views both down and up stream (much more attractive in the 18th Century!) towards the outskirts of Ipswich.

Berners engaged as his architect John Johnson, a Leicestershire man, self taught and typical of the middle ranking 18th Century designer, who could provide a building in the fashion and taste of the time. Johnson had already worked on designs for houses in London (Cavendish Street, Harley Street and Grosvenor Square) including some in Charles Street on land developed by Berners, and these share internal details with Woolverstone Hall. Johnson was responsible for the interior as well as the exterior decorations.

Woolverstone Hall is the best of Johnson's surviving country houses and is therefore of some architectural importance. In 1782, Johnson became County Surveyor for Essex and although not an 18th Century 'name' such as Robert Adam, he should not be regarded as insignificant.

THE DESIGN OF THE HOUSE:

Johnson's design is classically Palladian, consisting of a central block comprising the main living areas, flanked by two smaller wings containing the domestic offices; kitchen, larders, laundry, brewhouse and so on which made the typical English country house a self-sufficient community. The wings are connected to the central block by elegant corridors (the interiors of these do not match, and is curved while the other is straight, due to later developments).

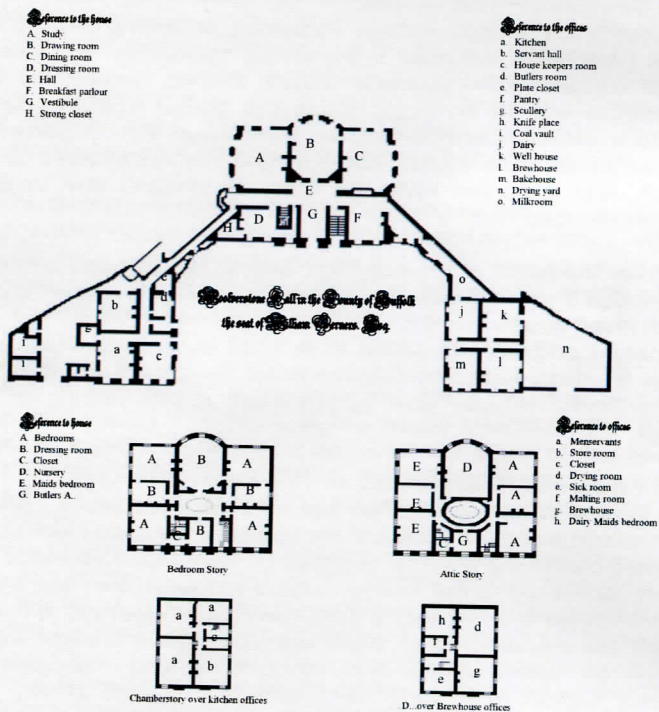
It is now the home of Ipswich High School for Girls and although very much a school it has not lost sight of its origins and remains a much loved house.

Johnson's original was added to in 1823 by Thomas Hopper. A range of rooms was built onto the corridors, facing the river, including a conservatory. Hopper also added external decorations to the wings.

THE FRONT OF THE HOUSE:

The front of Woolverstone Hall has classical decorations - pillars, decorations along the portico in the centre of the main block and a lozenge containing a figure of Diana (a motif repeated inside the house as well as in the fountain statue in the garden) and vases (one of which is a chimney!). There are also interesting sphinxes above the windows. All of these are made of an artificial stone, known as Coade stone after its inventor and manufacturer, Eleanor Coade. The stone was made of a mixture of clay and other ingredients and then fired at very high temperatures producing an extremely resilient and hard-wearing product which could be used in moulds to make architectural features much more cheaply than in natural stone,

Plans of the main house and offices



THE INTERIOR OF THE HOUSE

The plans on the previous page show the original uses of the various rooms.

THE VESTIBULE AND THE ENTRANCE HALL

The aim of the entrance to the house was to impress the visitor with the wealth, taste and status of the owner, and Woolverstone Hall would certainly have achieved this. The colour scheme is based on the original decoration. The figures in stucco in the corners of the vestibule are typical of Johnson's designs. The alcoves now containing Victorian stoves (no doubt necessary to keep winter chills at bay) would originally have held classical statues.

The main staircase is therefore somewhat hidden away, though it is attractive in its own way with its delicately curving handrail. The honeysuckle motif is another of Johnson's trademarks, which appears in other houses which he designed. The actual metal pieces were mass-produced.

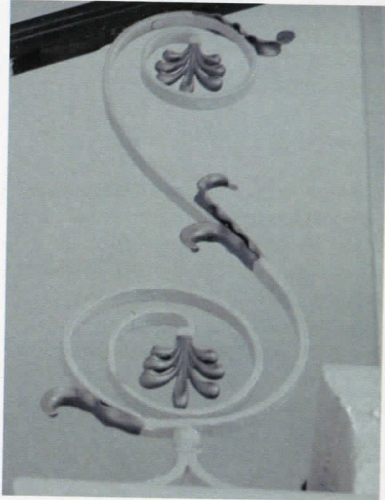
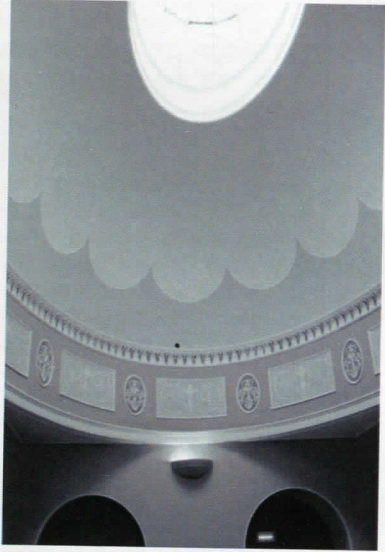
THE STUDY (Now Leggett Room)

This was re-modelled in 1823 by Hopper and the magnificent ceiling is probably part of the re-decoration. The fireplace may have been designed by Johnson or Hopper.

THE DRAWING ROOM (Now Reception)

This room has a wonderful vista down to the River Orwell (an even better effect can be achieved if the front door, reception door and French windows are all open, allowing a view from the entrance right through the house to the statue of Diana). However, like the dining room which opens off it, the drawing room sacrificed comfort to fashion, for it only gets the morning sun and can be grey and chilly as the day wears on.

The ceiling was designed by Johnson and again contains the classical draped figures which were one of his trademarks. The fireplace is a replica of that designed by Johnson, of white marble with Siena inlay.



Some of the detailed work done by Johnson

THE BREAKFAST PARLOUR (now bistro)

This room is rather plainer than the others, probably because it would be used for breakfast, rather than more formal meals of the day.

THE ORANGERY (now dining area)

This is part of Hopper's additions and was heated by hot water pipes. In Victorian times it contained large stone urns and potted palms. Soft fruit for the house was grown in the walled gardens further away from the house.

THE STAIRS

A comment that is frequently expressed by visitors to Woolverstone Hall is disappointment that there is no grand staircase. This is not some eccentric aberration on the part of William Berners or Johnson, but is a strict adherence to the Palladian style. Palladio held that stairs were purely functional and therefore should be discreetly placed away from the main public rooms - the entrance hall was considered to be far more important.

THE SERVANTS' STAIRS

On the other side of the entrance hall, behind a solid door, are the servants' stairs. These are steep and solid and one can only imagine the hard work required of a large number of servants carrying water for washing and coal for the fires in the bedrooms above. In Edwardian times a full house party required the housemaids to start work at 6 a.m.

THE FIRST FLOOR

The first floor of Woolverstone Hall has two striking features, the landing and the main bedroom (now the Elliston Room)

THE LANDING

The landing makes an immediate impact because of its decorated and multi-coloured dome. Johnson frequently featured domes in his designs. The rather garish colour scheme seems incredible to modern eyes, but in the 18th century a love of beautiful classically proportioned buildings was combined with clashing colours sometimes of surprising brightness. The colour scheme at Woolverstone Hall is based on the original paintwork. It is worth noting that what seems strident in daylight is considerably more mellow and subtle in the candlelight which was, of course, the only available artificial light in 1776.

THE MAIN BEDROOM (Elliston room):

Like the drawing room below, this room has a bow window looking down the river - French visitors to the house in the 1780's rated this view the only significant thing about the house! The ceiling was designed by Johnson and features motifs associated with Diana the Huntress (the bow and arrows). The fireplace, which is hand painted, is 'Pompeian' and repeats some of the motifs from the ceiling. A portrait of Lady Foot (nee Elliston), an old girl and benefactor of the school hangs over the fireplace.

Further information:

In 1783 William Berners died and was succeeded by his son Charles. His son, another Charles, commissioned Thomas Hopper in 1823 to make extensions and alterations to the hall.

The Obelisk was built in 1793 in memory of William Berners at a cost of £2000. The 96ft column with access to the top, which was surmounted by a globe and rays, was designed by Robert Mylne and it was built by Tovell, an Ipswich mason. It was accidentally burnt down on 2nd July 1943. The damage was so extensive the obelisk was demolished by high explosive on 23rd July 1943.

In 1937 the Nuffield Trust for Oxford University, purchased the 6000-acre estate for £185,000. The Hall was empty from the October until the War Office took it over in late 1939 for army use. First the Bedfordshire & Hertfordshire Regiment occupied it, then the Liverpool Scottish in 1940, followed by various units of the Royal Artillery and the Royal Engineers. In October 1942 the Hall and part of the park were taken over by the Admiralty and commissioned as H.M.S Woolverstone until March 1946 with around 1,000 personnel. On 5 June 1944 40 fully loaded landing craft left the Cat House for their long journey to the Normandy beaches. Prior to the D-Day landing H.M.S Woolverstone put together dummy landing craft to deceive the Germans that an attack would be on Calais; even the Wrens, who operated a signal and coding section of H.M.S. Woolverstone had not any idea that the dummy craft were not real.

In 1946/7 the London County Council leased the Hall and 56 acres and for the following year used the property to re-house the London Nautical School.

In 1959 the Nautical School became Woolverstone Hall Boys Boarding School, initially as an experiment. It was during this time new classrooms and accommodation blocks were erected to the west of the house. Most commentators disparage them. But Pevsner gives them a hearty pat on the back, perhaps because they were nominally designed by Sir Leslie Martin, the L.C.C. architect who was in charge of the 1951 Festival of Britain constructions on the Thames South Bank. In 1988 the Inner London Education Authority announced the closure of the school and it closed on 31st August 1990.

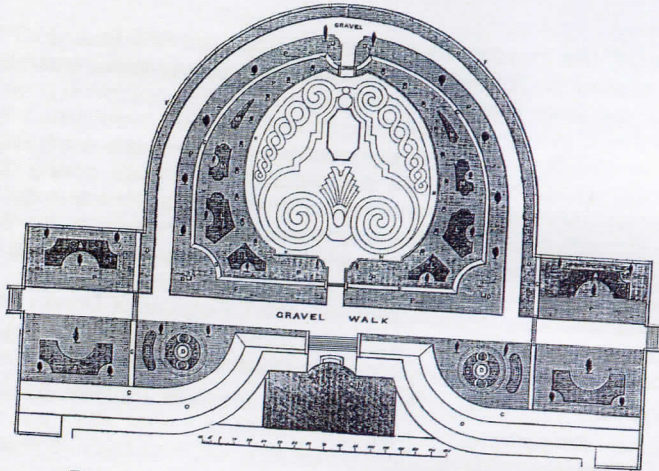


Boys using the war time
Nissen huts for class-
rooms

Ipswich High School was opened in the Assembly Rooms in Northgate Street on 30th April 1878 with 43 pupils. The first Headmistress Miss Sophie Youngman was in post for 21 years and the school flourished and expanded under her excellent leadership. She was succeeded by Miss Kennett and in 1905 the Council of the Trust purchased a large private house and grounds in Westerfield Road. The move provided a more modern type of classroom, science laboratories and a playing field. The School continued to expand and Woodview House was purchased in 1913. Such was the success of the School and the demands of the modern curriculum that the decision was taken in 1992 to rehouse the school at Woolverstone Hall.

Woolverstone Hall became a Grade I listed building on 22 February 1955.

The gardens



Plan from *The Gardeners Chronicle and Agricultural Gazette*. February 16th 1867

The gardens were a feature. John Berners was responsible for their creation between 1850 and 1856. He employed the famous garden designer William Nesfield. The June 29th, 1905 issue of *The Journal Of Horticulture and Home Farmer* contains a long article including several plans and a full description, indeed also eulogies. "The park which surrounds the house seems unlimited. So far as one can view, it stretches out and away far and wide in every direction: a most undulating, finely timbered, typical English Country park of 6000 acres, with deer park and cattle and sheep to add to the charm of domesticity and a home life.....". Bamboos were planted upon the cool shaded banks, which were simply overwhelmed by rhododendrons. There was a fine parterre outside the terrace of the mansion; and goodness knows what else." I have never seen a happier combination of Box embroidery, flowering plants, gravel and grass than in the gardens at Woolverstone. It is perfect of its kind". The kitchen garden was about four acres in extent, there were fruit trees on the walls; vines were treated with an annual dressing of night soil from the earth closets and produced grapes "very fine in bunch, berry, colour and quality" There was a fine fernery down by the cliff: and so on.

Very little remains of these gardens just the statue of Diana, the gravel paths two rose beds and the ha-has are still visible today.



Monkey Park



Deerpark Lodge



Holbrook Lodge



The Dairies



Corners

Freston Tower

A selection of other buildings once owned by the Berners estate.





The Stables and Water Tower



Nelson Avenue