



Claremont Fan Court School

A brief history

The estate

The first house on the Claremont estate was built in 1708 by Sir John Vanbrugh, the Restoration playwright and architect of Blenheim and Castle Howard, for his own use. This "very small box", as he described it, stood on the level ground in front of the present mansion. At the same time, he built the stables and the walled gardens, also probably White Cottage, which is now the Sixth Form Centre of the School.

In 1714 he sold the house to the wealthy Whig politician Thomas Pelham-Holles, Earl of Clare, who later became Duke of Newcastle and served twice as prime minister. The Earl commissioned Vanbrugh to add two great wings to the house and to build a fortress-like turret on an adjoining knoll. From this so-called "prospect-house" or Belvedere he and his guests could admire the views of the Surrey countryside as they took refreshments and played hazard, a popular dice game.

In the clear eighteenth-century air, it was apparently possible to see Windsor Castle and St Paul's Cathedral. The Earl of Clare named his country seat Clare-mount, later contracted to Claremont. The two lodges at the Copsem Lane entrance were added at this time.

The gardens went through many interesting stages of development. A plan published in Campbell's Vitruvius Britannicus in 1725 shows a formal arrangement of terraces and geometric parterres, with innumerable trees, all standing in straight and serried rows. The lake much smaller than now, was probably made by Charles Bridgeman, who was responsible for the Round Pond in Kensington Gardens. He also added an amphitheatre to the north west of the lake, a feature which can still be seen. Here the Duke of Newcastle used to attend cock fights and watch his servants playing skittles. The plans show Vanbrugh's walled gardens and the sheet of water by the school gates appears as a formal rectangle with a semi-circular end. Newcastle then called in William Kent whose new concept of gardening had become fashionable. His great contribution to the English scene was the naturalistic style of English landscape gardening of which he was the inventor.

When the Duke of Newcastle died in 1768, his widow sold the estate to Robert Clive. Although the great house was then little more than fifty years old, it was aesthetically and politically out of fashion. So, Clive decided to demolish it and commissioned Lancelot "Capability" Brown and his future son-in-law Henry Holland to build the present Palladian mansion on higher and drier ground.

Capability Brown's mansion

Clive is reputed to have spent over £100,000 on the house and a complete remodelling of the celebrated pleasure grounds. Sadly, Clive never lived here, as he committed suicide in 1774 - the year that the house was finished.

In 1816 Claremont was bought by the nation as a wedding present for George IV's daughter Princess Charlotte and her husband Prince Leopold of Saxe-Coburg. But to the nation's great sorrow Princess Charlotte, who was heir to the throne, died here after giving birth to a stillborn son the following year. Although Leopold retained ownership of Claremont until his death in 1865, he left the house in 1831 when he became the first King of the Belgians.

Queen Victoria was a frequent visitor to Claremont both as a child and later as an adult when Leopold, her doting uncle, lent her the house. She, in turn, lent the house to the exiled French king and queen Louis-Philippe and Marie-Amelie, after the revolution of 1848.

Queen Victoria bought Claremont for her fourth and youngest son Leopold, Duke of Albany, when he married Princess Helen of Waldeck in 1882. The Duke and Duchess of Albany had two children - Alice and Charles. In 1900, the latter became the Duke of Saxe-Coburg and a German citizen.

Claremont should have passed to the Duke of Saxe-Coburg on his mother's death in 1922, but because he had served as a German general in the First World War the British government disallowed the inheritance. Claremont was accordingly confiscated and sold by the Public Trustee to shipping magnate Sir William Corry, director of the Cunard line. Two years after Sir William's death in 1926, it was bought by Eugen Spier, a wealthy German financier.

The school

In 1931, a School for girls from Christian Science families moved into Claremont and adopted its name. During the Second World War, the School was evacuated to Llandrindod Wells in Wales, and Claremont was let to the Hawker Aircraft company, whose design team under the irascible genius Sydney Camm produced the Hawker Tempest fighter.

In 1978 Claremont School amalgamated with Fan Court School in Chertsey to form Claremont Fan Court School, a co-educational establishment. Today the School has some 700 pupils aged between 2½ and 18.

The National Trust acquired a further 50 acres of the Claremont estate in 1949. In 1975, with a grant from the Slater Foundation, it set about restoring the magnificent eighteenth century.

landscape garden. Now Claremont Landscape Garden displays the successive contributions of the great landscape gardeners who worked on it: Sir John Vanbrugh, Charles Bridgeman, William Kent and Capability Brown.

In 1996 the School celebrated the National Trust's centenary by opening a striking feature of the grounds which had not previously been accessible to Landscape Garden visitors: the 281-year-old Belvedere Tower.

For a full history please purchase Phyllis M Cooper's *The Story of Claremont* available directly from Claremont Fan Court School