

Belvedere

The origins of the Belvedere estate date back to the mid seventeenth century.

Thomas Cawstin, a wheelwright of Welling, who owned property in Bexley as well as Erith, bought two fields in 1654 called Great and Little Brights and two houses next to one of them, near the road "from the marshes to Lessness Heath" in a place known as Blinks Hill.

The fields had belonged to the Earl of Northampton, whose family the Comptons, were Lords of the Manor of Erith; the houses were bought from the Turners, another prominent family in Erith. It is interesting to find on two of the documents relating to the former purchase the signature of Henry Shelbery, a citizen and scrivener of London, who was described in the manor court rolls as 'Mayor' of Erith.

By 1689 one of the two houses had been demolished and the other was occupied by Richard Turner, who in that year bought it and Great and Little Brights from the Cawstins for £160. He subsequently let this property to one Richard Ducy, the tenant in 1705 when Turner died, leaving it to his youngest son, William. A later tenant, Charles King, was followed in 1729 by John Bonnell, a London merchant, who in that year took a long lease of the house and land.

Bonnell improved it and furnished it lavishly but apparently overreached himself and so had to sell his lease after only eight years to his mortgagee. One of his mortgage deeds contains a list of furniture in the house in 1735. It also indicates the number of rooms. On the ground floor there were a hall with a porch, a parlour, a withdrawing room, and a kitchen and offices; upstairs there were four bedrooms, a dressing room, and a closet. There were also some garrets in the roof. It was not a large house - at any rate by comparison with the Belvedere House that was to follow it later. But it was attractively furnished with walnut or mahogany tables and chairs, a spinet by Keene, rich curtains, and 22 paintings, 65 prints, and many other works of art.

Among the prints was a set of Hogarth's Harlot's Progress. Bonnell must have been one of the original subscribers to this series, which

was published in 1733, less than two years before the date of this inventory. Bonnell's mortgagee was Thomas Hayley, of Bedford Row in London. By 1737 Bonnell owed him well over £500 and in December of that year he paid Bonnell nearly £300 more than the mortgage debt for the outstanding 41 years of the lease. He also paid the Turners £600 for the freehold. Considering that Richard Turner had bought the property for £160 in 1689, we must infer that vast improvements had been made to it or that more land was involved.

Hayley promptly pulled the house down and built another, not on the same site but at a little distance from it, to take advantage of the magnificent view over the Thames that the rising ground afforded. There is an old print which shows this house to have been not unlike the later Belvedere House in style, although considerably smaller.

Hayley did not keep it for long. In 1743 the estate passed to Lord Baltimore for £2,050 after some complex transactions. Baltimore added some adjacent properties to his holding and converted a barn and cottage into a coach house and stable. After his death in 1751 the heiress conveyed his estate to Sampson Gideon, a financier of great wealth who had raised money for the government at the time of the Jacobite Rebellion of 1745. Gideon paid £5,250, a price which included the purchase of some of the chattels and effects. It is tempting to speculate that at least some of Bonnell's furniture and works of art had been transferred to the new house and were among those acquired by Gideon in 1752.

Gideon lost no time in adding to the amenities of his new estate. In the October of that year he was charged at the local manor court for enclosing land taken out of the highway and common and for taking turf from the common. The antiquarian and historian Hasted states that Gideon greatly improved the property but gives no details of the alterations. Gideon died in 1762 and his son immediately engaged James Stuart, a fashionable architect, to rebuild the house on a much bigger scale. Stuart demolished the house that Hayley had built, preserving only the so-called "Gold Room", which according to one account was not an original part of the earlier house but an elaborate annexe erected by Lord Baltimore to receive George II. Photographs show that, in general lay-out and proportions, this annexe followed the villa-type design seen in other local houses such as Danson Park and the former Footscray Place.

Stuart had visited Greece and his nickname "Athenian" Stuart arose from his part in the production of an influential work on the antiquities of Athens. However there was little that was Grecian about his new house. It was described by Walford and Thorne in such terms as "a fine example of the classic Italian in vogue at the time of its erection", and this unenthusiastic assessment was echoed more bluntly by an anonymous observer who called it a "large brick mansion of unprepossessing exterior". Greenwood spoke of its "handsome stone portico supported by six fine columns in the Ionic style", but he and others seem to have been disappointed in the house while going into raptures about its elevated position from which it commanded extensive views over the Thames. Prints and photographs show it as an imposing but dull building. It contained a valuable collection of paintings. The name 'Belvedere' was given to this house; it occurs first in a document dated 1765.

Sampson Gideon's son, who engaged Stuart to rebuild the house, had been made a baronet in 1759, while still a boy at school. (The honour was really for his father but the government felt it politically unwise to give it to a Jew.) From a baronetcy he was advanced in 1789 to a barony, taking the title of Baron Eardley of Spalding.

Lord Eardley promoted a bill in Parliament to enclose the Commons of Erith. As a result he obtained 32 acres of land on Lessness Heath when the Act came into effect in 1815. After his death the estate passed to Lord Say and Sele, a Whig politician who had married Eardley's daughter, Maria. He died in 1844 followed by his bachelor son in 1847.

The house then passed to Sir Culling Eardley, son of Lord Eardley's second daughter, Charlotte. To his admirers, Sir Culling was "a religious philanthropist", to his opponents "a manufacturer of Protestant fireworks". He campaigned fearlessly for freedom of religion and established both an Anglican Church (All Saints, Belvedere) and a Baptist Chapel (Nuxley Road) on his estate. The building of the Crossness Sewage Works caused him to abandon Belvedere House and develop the surrounding land as a suburb, linked to London by the North Kent Railway. On his death in 1864, the estate was broken up and the house sold to the Shipwrecked Mariners' Society as a seamen's home. It was finally pulled down in 1959.