

## Introduction

The pages that follow open a window onto the long and rich history behind **John Dower House** and **Latheram House**, two recently-completed suites of apartments in the middle of Cheltenham.

The site they now occupy – originally answering directly to the lord of the manor - played a central role in the life of the town. Over the centuries, it was home to a succession of important buildings, some now barely remembered. This account, prepared for residents and all others with an interest in Cheltenham's past, sets out how the site has evolved over the years, bringing to life some of the forgotten scenes, and introducing you on the way to some of the key players in the John Dower and Latheram story.

## Prehistory

Archaeological investigations ahead of the construction of Latheram House found traces of many previous eras, including pieces of worked flint and small quantities of Roman-era pottery. While the finds may not have been spectacular in themselves, they were all consistent with the evidence from other nearby excavated sites, and help to show that a riverside settlement in what later became Cheltenham has existed for a very long time. The Romans left the scene around 400 AD, but this isn't the place to dwell on the various peoples and conquerors who succeeded them, so this account now skips smartly forward by a good 1,000 years...

## The Court House

From medieval times until the early 1700s, the principal building on the John Dower House/Latheram House site was Cheltenham's **Court House**. We have no physical description of the building, but we can reasonably assume that it was a timber-framed structure, like most other buildings in the town, and of a fair size. For countless years, this was where regular meetings of the manor court were held, presided over by the lord of the manor's steward. Here he heard civil lawsuits for matters such as trespass and debt. The steward also oversaw property transactions, the licensing of brewers, butchers and bakers, the seasonal regulation of the common field system, and the imposition of fines for breaches of local orders. The building was thus central to local life, and here would come the tithingmen from all parts of the parish, to pay their dues and report on local issues. Official court business would have been conducted in the appointed room or rooms in the courthouse, while from Tudor times at least, the rest of the building was probably used as a private residence by a succession of tenants. These tenants leased from the lord of the manor – who in turn was a tenant of the crown, Cheltenham manor having been a royal possession since before Domesday.

References to the building before the Tudor period mainly concern fairly minor repairs, and are too fragmentary to draw a coherent picture, so let us start in 1556, when we know that the Court House was let for 12 years to Edmund Bendlowe, a local man. Bendlowe may have renewed at the end of his lease, in 1568, but by 1574 there had been a change of tenant: on 10 January 1575, the manorial record shows that the then lord of the manor, Richard Lygon,

*'... granted to Thomas Hygges all that tenement, house and building commonly called 'le Courte Howse' lying in Cheltenham, also a close adjoining the same tenement, a close of arable land and meadow and pasture called Medefurlonge, and*

*a parcel of meadow or pasture called Laverham lying in Cheltenham, to hold from Michaelmas last for a term of 40 years; rendering to the lord 23s 4d yearly at the two yearly days in equal portions.'*

Hygges (or Higgs as we would now spell his name) agreed to keep the tenement and hedges in sufficient repair.

A 40-year lease should have carried this tenancy up to 1615, but by 1604 Higgs had probably disposed of the remainder of his term on the Court House, along with most of the other demesne land of the manor, to Thomas Gough. Thomas was in turn succeeded as lessee by Richard Gough, no doubt a relation. In 1628, the crown sold off the whole of the manor of Cheltenham to John Dutton of Sherborne.

Most of Cheltenham's manorial lands were to remain under the Dutton family for over 200 years, managed through the copyhold system, under which any lease or sale of land had to be registered at a manor court, with a fee payable to the lord, and a copy of the transaction issued to the new tenant or owner. But a number of central properties, all on demesne land, continued to be held on long leases by existing sub-tenants on fixed rents. This had the effect of restricting the rental income Dutton could get from them, so to get any useful return on his purchase, he often chose to sell the demesne properties off when the leases fell in. One such opportunity arose in 1634, and in this year John Dutton sold the court house and the meadows, now ex-demesne properties, to Ludovic Packer, of a well-established local family, for £260. Technically the grant was still subject to an over-riding 99-year crown lease on the whole manor, probably commencing in September 1616, but the practical impact of this faded over time, becoming minimal after the Civil War.

Among the properties passing to Packer were *'that messuage or tenement with its appurtenances, situated and being in Cheltenham called or known by the name of the Courthouse, and the Courthouse close, gardens, orchards and backsides thereto belonging'*, and a meadow or pasture ground called *'Laverham or Laveram'*. It's very unlikely that Packer himself ever occupied the property, but whoever did live there would have had to abide by a special condition.

Dutton was careful to include a clause in the grant to Packer, reserving to himself and his successors as lord of the manor *'the liberty to keep sessions of Court leets, Courts of the clerk of the market, or any other Court for the Liberty, Manor and Hundred of Cheltenham in the usual room or rooms of the aforesaid Court House at such times as have been accustomed'*, with freedom of access for himself, his court officials, his tenants, and all those involved in

local law-suits heard by the manor court. Similar stipulations had been in place for many years – the first is recorded in 1529.

Packer probably moved quickly to make certain changes: in 1635 the Court House close was said to have been recently converted into a garden that stretched as far as the churchyard, and which also contained a small orchard. In 1640, the property featured in a settlement drawn up in anticipation of the marriage of Ludovic's son Edward Packer to Elizabeth Selwin.

### The civil war and after

The stipulation reserving the court room(s) for Dutton is not seen again in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century deeds, and records show that by 1654, manor courts were now being held upstairs in a new market house in the High Street. So it's a reasonable assumption that the Court House ceased to be the venue for official business during the disturbances of the Civil War period – it is known that some of the court records got lost or destroyed at this time.

In 1665, properties including the Court House were vested in Ludovic's grandson, also Ludovic, who the following year granted to Richard Wills, a prosperous Cheltenham carpenter, and his wife Elizabeth, what then remained of the 99-year lease. Richard Wills died in 1686, leaving the Court House to his widow for her lifetime, and to his sons thereafter.

The property remained in the Wills family until 1706, when Richard Wills' oldest son, also Richard (a maltster), sold the remaining term to Andrew Green of Ledbury. At this date the holding still comprised *'the Court House, and all that close of land on the south side thereof called the Court House Close, and all the orchards, gardens and courtyards and backsides to the said messuage, which lie together and extend from the Churchyard in the North, and ground called Church Meadow and land beyond on the East, and a little lane on the West'*. The little lane was what became today's St George's Place.

By this point, the 99-year lease – if still of any practical effect - was approaching its expiry date of 1715, and there would have been little reason for Green or his successors as tenants to invest much in the long-term upkeep of any buildings. Just one year later, in 1716, came the discovery of Cheltenham's mineral waters, issuing from a spring on Bayshill. This marked the start of a new era which would place little value on run-down medieval structures. The 1706 sale of the lease to Green is currently the last known reference to the old Court House. The inference is that when a newcomer, one Lady Frances Stapleton, bought the site in about 1741, there was nothing there she thought worth preserving.

## Lady Stapleton and the Great House

Lady Stapleton was a wealthy woman. Twice widowed, not only was she the heiress to Caribbean estates in her own right, but both her husbands had been successful West Indian planters. An astute manager of her inheritance, she was a product of her times, and the fact that her fortune came largely from sugar, grown on plantations worked by slaves, does not diminish her importance in the life of the town.

### Her family background

Frances was the third daughter of Colonel Sir James Russell, owner of large plantations on Nevis, and she may well have been born on that small Caribbean island. It is hardly surprising that she married within the same social milieu, and in fact her first husband, Sir William Stapleton, was also her first cousin. They married in London in 1697. He was the son of an early Governor-General of the Leeward Islands, who had successfully accumulated sugar plantations along the island chain, on Montserrat, Antigua, St Kitts and Nevis – as well as a baronetcy. Two sons were born in quick succession, but in 1699 Sir William died, and Frances (now Lady Frances, and equally often referred to as Dame Frances) sailed for England soon after, accompanied by the two boys. In 1711 she married a second time, again to a member of the Leeward Islands planter aristocracy – General Walter Hamilton, a widower, with plantations on St Kitts and Nevis. On his appointment as Governor-General there in 1716, Frances (who never took his surname) went out with him to the Caribbean, though she returned to England two years later. Walter died in 1722, at no great age, bequeathing to Dame Frances his Buckinghamshire estates, at Stoke Poges and nearby Wexham.

As her first marriage was in 1697, we can estimate (there are no records) that Dame Frances was probably born in the 1670s, so she would have been between 60 and 70 years of age when she arrived in Cheltenham. She had quit the West Indies, apparently for good, in 1718, and appeared settled at Stoke Poges, in the Elizabethan manor house she had inherited from General Hamilton. Consistent with her social position, it was her habit to visit the fashionable resorts of the day. The first evidence of this is in 1723, when ‘Lady Stapleton’ is recorded as contributing a guinea towards the founding of a General Hospital in Bath (it finally opened in 1742, and is still operating today, as the Royal National Hospital for Rheumatic Diseases).

Dame Frances’ two sons were by now Sir William Stapleton MP, the fourth baronet (born 1698), and Col. James Russell Stapleton (born 1699). The latter was recently widowed: his wife Penelope had died in 1739, having borne him six daughters. Both brothers shared their

mother's interest in spas: they are both listed in 1740 as subscribers for copies of a comprehensive analysis of English mineral waters completed in that year by Dr Thomas Short.

Sadly, the older son, Sir William, who since 1727 had been an MP for Oxfordshire (Greys Court, near Henley-on-Thames, had come to him as his wife's dowry), would never see his copy of the book: he died at Bath on 12 January 1740. This was well outside the main summer visitor season, and given William's reputation as a rake, perhaps he had been taking a longer curative stay there.<sup>1</sup> The following month, Dame Frances' country seat at Stoke Poges was advertised to let, indicating some change was afoot. We have to assume firstly that soon after this, either Dame Frances or her son James (or both) had been enticed by reports of the extensive improvements at Cheltenham launched in 1738 by Captain Henry Skillicorne, and that secondly, they had been favourably impressed by what they saw of the new spa facilities there. Skillicorne had brought an entrepreneurial flair that had been in short supply since the mineral waters were first discovered in 1716: he set about creating a proper 'visitor experience', with new tree-lined walks, polite entertainments, and even the town's first coffee outlet. It also seems at least possible that because Bath was where Sir William had died, the surviving Stapletons had a further incentive to seek their diversions elsewhere.

Despite being operated with enslaved labour, the income from the several Stapleton estates in the West Indies was not dependable; some plantations were not on the best land, and all were inherently hard to manage from a distance. For drought and other reasons, the 1730s had been a difficult decade for planters. The Stapletons may thus have hoped that taking an early stake in the up-and-coming Cheltenham market would be profitable, as well as providing a congenial change of scene.

## Investing in Cheltenham

By the summer of 1741, and possibly sooner, family decisions had been taken to invest in Cheltenham. On 11 September, James Stapleton, acting on his mother's behalf and using her

---

<sup>1</sup> A former tutor described him as a 'rake' during the 1727 election campaign and ten years later rumours circulated on Nevis that he was contemplating selling his slaves to pay off outstanding gambling debts. On several occasions Stapleton was forced to borrow considerable sums from his mother and still owed her £2,640 when she died. ... Despite his family's long and close links with the island, he appeared uncertain about what to expect from his Nevis investment and seemed genuinely shocked by the rapid fluctuations in the sugar trade. ... His disappointment persisted until his death in January 1740. In a final letter to his attorneys written from Cheltenham the previous summer, Stapleton highlighted the frustrations his West Indian venture had brought him. '[M]y affairs abroad have met with very unfortunate accidents for many years past,' he lamented, 'insomuch that I have had very little returns from them.' (Mason, Bull. John Ryland Lib)

money, was registered as the buyer of several copyhold properties and lands in the town; another half-acre site was added in October. Though not all the documents survive, it seems very likely that the Court House site (freehold) and some adjacent properties (copyhold) nearer the churchyard were acquired at around the same time, collectively forming a significant portfolio of land between the old town centre and Skillicorne's mineral well, which lay at Bayshill, half a mile to the south. The extent of this investment all points to a firm commitment by the Stapletons to make Cheltenham their base, and by mid-October 1741, Dame Frances was sufficiently clear about her arrangements to draw up a will (the document survives, but sadly in too poor a condition to be read).

No documentary link has yet been found between Dame Frances and Henry Skillicorne, but it is highly likely that the entrepreneurial captain would have taken every care to greet her ladyship personally on her visits to the well. The two of them would surely have had discussions before the land purchases took place. Certainly, their paths will have crossed frequently once she had taken up residence in Cheltenham, for Dame Frances' new house was just over the way from Skillicorne's own home, both properties abutting what would one day become St George's Place.

With these purchases completed, whatever may have remained of the medieval Court House was soon cleared, and a new brick building, much larger than any dwelling previously seen in Cheltenham, was laid out, perhaps in the winter of 1741/2, and substantially completed in 1742. Its appearance, viewed across the meadow from the south, as seen below on the Robins fan, would have been very striking, its red brick bulk dominating the view, and dwarfing such of the more modest structures in the High Street as could be glimpsed in the gap between it and the parish church.

### Lady Stapleton's new house



*Image courtesy of Cheltenham Borough Council and The Cheltenham Trust*

The earliest images to show any useful detail are sketches and watercolours by local artist Thomas Robins, done in the 1740s when the building was very new. Two show the view from the south, and in both cases the house forms only one element of a larger scene. The illustration above is from a painted fan now in the Wilson. It may be the earliest depiction, perhaps showing the intended finished form of a building still under construction, since it shows a symmetrical eastern (right-hand) wing that does not appear in other renderings and seemingly was never built.

We don't know who Lady Stapleton engaged as her architect for this substantial project; he must have come from elsewhere as none in that profession is recorded in Cheltenham in this era. It has been suggested that the combination of baroque and Palladian motifs in the façade is evidence for one of the Bristol mason-architects having been responsible, as this was a hallmark of their style over much of the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, but there can be no certainty about this. A Bristol connection could have arisen through Henry Skillicorne's contacts there.

*[South aspect] It was built largely of brick, apart from a three-sided bay projecting from the central block, made more striking because built of, or at least faced with, stone. Similar stonework is used for the lower ground floor of the same block, which has a hipped roof with a stone balustrade or cornice. The central block also has stone quoins. Set back slightly are wings to east and west, seemingly with blank windows on the sections nearest the centre (staircases or services behind?). The wings have roofs of a lesser pitch, and appear almost as deep as they are wide. Four tall brick chimney stacks on the main block, and two smaller ones on each wing. Young trees are planted to the east, appearing to fill most of the space between the house and a path leading from the corner of the churchyard to a small gate (and thence onwards to the well). A later plan suggests that the projection of the central block was less than is shown on the fan.*

The north front is less often depicted, but appears clearly in this careful preparatory sketch by Robins for a later painting. The west wing is prominent, matching the footprint on a 19<sup>th</sup> century plan, while the east wing is vestigial – two half-built stubs of wall, enclosing nothing. There is an imposing portico at the front door, later described as Doric. Access on foot is via a rather serpentine path (perhaps owing more to the artist's imagination than reality), and the carriage entrance is from the east, indicating that coming from the High Street, the house would be approached via what is now St George's Place.



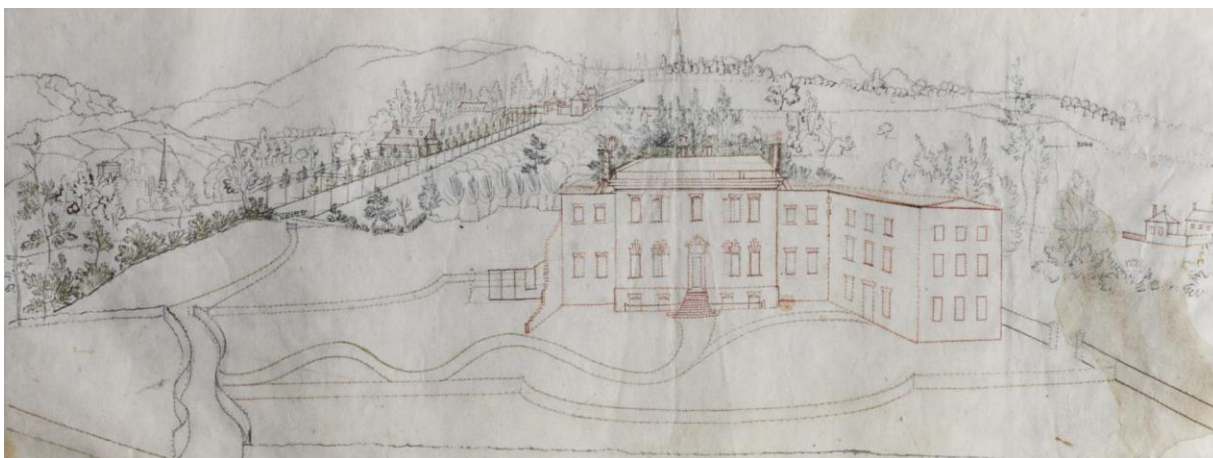
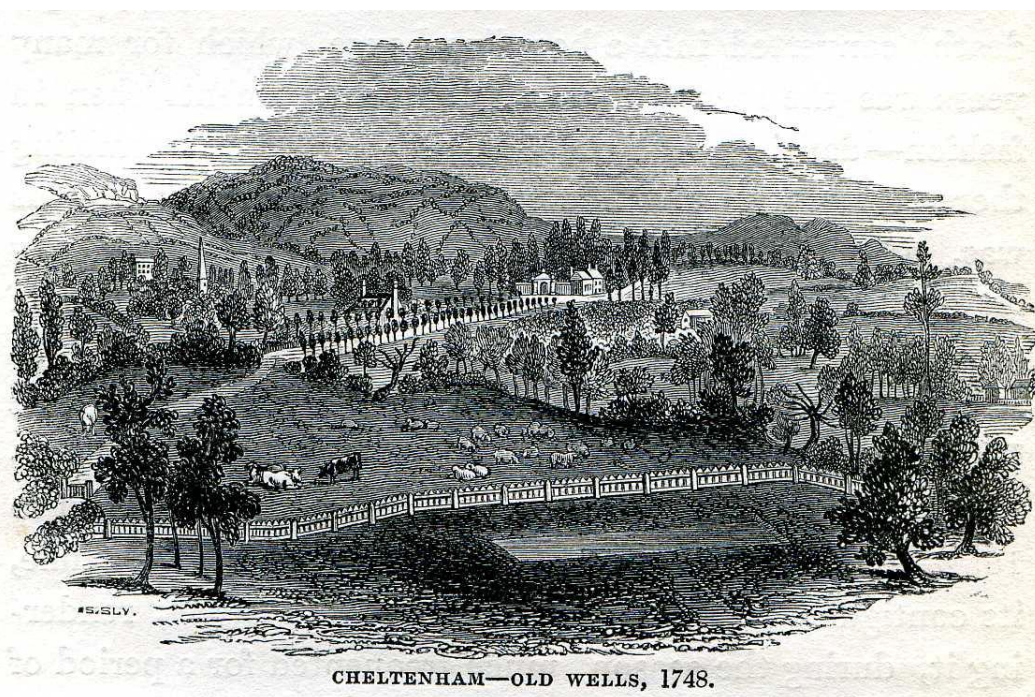


Image © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

The finished version of this view (in private hands) shows a grand carriage in front of the house, hitched to a team of six white horses. Numerous fashionable figures stroll along the paths. A brick wall, interrupted only by the two stone-capped brick piers of a gateway, whose white gate stands open ready for the carriage's departure, separates the house from St George's Place. Meanwhile the foreground, apparently subdivided into neat kitchen garden plots, is separated from the drive by a white painted fence, which is bowed to accommodate the turning circle. There was nothing remotely like this anywhere else in Cheltenham, and the ensemble was clearly intended to impress. In later times the forecourt and garden to the north side of the house would be severely reduced, to allow the formation of Clarence Street.



*A View of Cheltenham in its Past and Present State, by H. Davies, 1843, engraved by S. Sly. Image courtesy of Jill Waller and Sue Rowbotham*

A further view, this time looking south from the house itself, perhaps from an upper window, is also dated to 1748. Attributed traditionally to a Lady Somerset, the work is in fact more likely to be once again by Robins, the distant view in the upper half having a very strong resemblance to that in the preliminary sketch noted above. Besides more white fencing of the type seen earlier, this view provides the only evidence of a pond -- presumably ornamental -- in the Great House grounds.

On 2 December 1742, the church authorities in Gloucester issued a licence granting Dame Frances' request for two pews in Cheltenham parish church, on the grounds that '*she is owner and possessor of a large new erected messuage or tenement in the said parish and that she hath not any convenient seat or seat places in the church belonging to the same*'. A vestry meeting had earlier agreed that '*the fourth and fifth seats west from the belfry stairs on the north side of the south isle of the said church containing eight feet and nine inches in length and six feet and six inches in breadth might be appropriated to the said Dame Frances Stapleton*' so that '*she and her family and the future owners and occupiers of the said messuage may sitt stand kneel hear and attend Divine Service and sermons without interruption*'. We can't be certain that the house was yet habitable in its entirety, but the language of this licence clearly implies that by this date Lady Stapleton was in residence, with a solid commitment to Cheltenham now and for the future.

On 11 August 1743, the London *Morning Post* ran a letter commenting bullishly on the crowds now being attracted to the mineral waters of Cheltenham. Indeed, it picked out Lady Stapleton as one of the large number of 'the quality' attending the Cheltenham wells that season. There is reason to believe that the Robins fan was painted at this time, naming 'Lady Stapleton's House' and 'Lady Stapleton's Dogkenel', and depicting genteel folk strolling by the well, the trees lining Skillicorne's new walks being still little more than saplings.

If 1743 had started well, it did not continue thus. Within days of the *Morning Post* piece, on 15 August came the unexpected news of the death of Dame Frances' only surviving son, Col James Russell Stapleton, 'at Chiltenham Wells'. We do not know the cause. He was only in his early forties, and besides the immediate shock of bereavement for his mother, there was the major problem of who now should be entrusted with her estates, at home and overseas, after her own death. Burial Date: 29 August 1743. [Rotherfield Greys Oxon Burial Register]

Within a couple of months, by mid-October 1743, Dame Frances had taken stock of her affairs. James's will had been proved on 7 October, and she was now ready to draft a new will of her own, to reflect the changed circumstances she now found herself in. In this will, she describes herself unequivocally as 'of Cheltenham', though later in the document she still mentions her property in Buckinghamshire and her rented town house in London. Of her six

grandchildren, the one chosen to inherit the Cheltenham properties was Catherine, daughter of her late son James. Catherine, being but 9 or 10 years old, would not come into the properties until she was of full age, but something about her had clearly impressed her grandmother. Dame Frances' judgment of character was to be proved sound. It may be noted that in this will, her Cheltenham house is described as 'now building' and not yet furnished.

Given that it was to be a very large dwelling, seemingly designed from the outset to accommodate family groups, it is perfectly possible to read this as meaning 'not yet completely finished but partly habitable', but whatever its precise state, the evidence is that at this point, Dame Frances saw herself as a resident of the town.

**Verbatim extract from her will:**

*Item. I give and devise unto my granddaughter Catherine Stapleton the daughter of my said son James Russell Stapleton and to her heirs and assigns for ever, all that my messuage or tenement now in building with the appurtenances scituate and being in Cheltenham aforesaid and all my lands and hereditaments in the parish of Cheltenham aforesaid, part of which premises is freehold and part customary holden of the Mannor of Cheltenham aforesaid which I have lately surrendered to the use of my will, and part whereof was purchased in my own name and part in the name of my said son James Russell Stapleton, but with my moneys and in trust for me.*

*Therefore I direct that the heir and heirs of my said son James Russell Stapleton shall convey and surrender into and to the use of my same granddaughter Catherine Stapleton her heirs and assigns at her and their request and expense all and singular the said premises in the parish of Cheltenham aforesaid for perfecting and compleating her and their Title therein and thereto; and to compensate my said granddaughter in case of neglect or refusal I appoint that the person or persons so neglecting or refusing to convey and surrender as aforesaid shall forfeit and be excluded from all benefit and advantage under this my will. And in the room and stead of such person and persons I substitute and appoint my same granddaughter to whom I give all benefit and advantage hereby intended such refusing person or persons.*

*And in case my said last mentioned messuage or tenement shall be furnished by me at the time of my death, then and in such case I give and bequeath unto my same granddaughter Catherine Stapleton all the household goods and furniture which shall be in the same messuage or tenement at the time of my death.*

*And it is my will and I do hereby direct and appoint that in case the said last messuage or tenement shall not be finished at the time of my death that then my executors and the survivors of them and his executors or administrators shall and may out of my residuary*

*personal estate as soon as may be after my decease finish the same messuage or tenement and also furnish the same for the benefit of my same granddaughter.*

**Item**, *I give and bequeath unto my same granddaughter Catherine Stapleton all that my messuage or tenement with the appurtenances scituate and being in Grosvenor Street in the parish of St George Hanover Square in the county of Middlesex for all the remainder of the term I have in the same messuage or tenement.*

**And** *to her my same granddaughter I give and bequeath all my jewels whatsoever.*



*Image © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.*

The visual evidence from most of the early depictions of the house is that in fact it was never completed – only a few rather two-dimensional elements of an eastern wing can be seen. This section of a preliminary drawing by Robins for a 1748 prospect of the town shows the same vestigial eastern wall as is visible in the north side view

(above), and tends to confirm that, while the symmetry depicted on the fan may have been the intended aim, it was never achieved in reality. Had the eastern wing gone ahead, its style and dimensions would surely have matched those of the western wing.

We can reasonably suppose that any such curtailment of the original plan finds its explanation in Dame Frances' situation after James's death. The loss of her second son, who with his military background was perhaps more closely involved than she was both in the practicalities of the building project, and in looking after the other parts of her Cheltenham estate, must have led to a change of heart about where her own future lay. It was not after all to be in lively Cheltenham, and indeed there is no further record of her taking the mineral waters anywhere. She spent her few remaining years in quiet retirement at her seat at Stoke Poges, and in January 1746, she succumbed to smallpox.

### **After Lady Stapleton**

As best we can tell, Dame Frances did not intend her new mansion to be a lodging-house, at least while she was in it; it may have been designed more to be suitable for herself firstly, then family (some or all of James and his wife; William's widow; the six grandchildren), and

then perhaps her particular society friends, variously accommodated in a very large building. The details of its internal layout aren't clear, but in its later years, there were at least 28 rooms (some seven reception and 20-odd bedrooms) with fireplaces, and over 20 other rooms.

Nevertheless, it was certainly capable of becoming a rental property, and in the spring after Dame Frances' presumed retreat to Buckinghamshire, the house, here called 'Cheltenham Hall', was advertised in a London paper. The *Daily Advertiser* of 7 April 1744 announced:

*'To be Lett in Apartments: At Cheltenham in Gloucestershire, during the Season, A Large new-built Brick House, belonging to Lady Stapleton, known by the name of Cheltenham-Hall, pleasantly situated near the Town, the Church, and the Wells, viz. four Assembly-Rooms on the Ground Floor, by Subscription, each Subscriber paying Six Shillings to the said Assembly-Rooms during the Season; the best Lodging Rooms at Ten Shillings per Week each with Linnen, and Eight Shillings per Week without Linnen; the next best Rooms at Six Shillings per Week without Linnen, the Servants Rooms at Five Shillings per Week each without Linnen, and the Offices at Three Shillings per Week each.*

*Enquire of Mr. or Mrs. Hughes, at the Cheltenham-Spaw, who has the letting of the said Lodgings.'*

As just noted, whatever Lady Stapleton's plans may have been for her own use of the house, clearly it was so arranged internally as to be capable of being run as superior lodgings – a commodity then in extremely short supply in Cheltenham - suitable for visitors of substance with their retinues of servants. Such 'assembly rooms' as the Hugheses offered were where polite society could gather for conversation, refreshments, cards and the like, access being by subscription, and not restricted to occupants of the Great House. The 1744 advertisement also shows the close association between the house and the spa: Thomas Hughes had since 1741 been employed by Henry Skillicorne to manage the original well (and by 1743 he was advertising himself as 'Master of the Wells'), and he would have thus been in an ideal position to broker lets of some of the best lodgings in town.

Some flavour of the establishment, at the social heart of the spa town, comes in a letter penned in August 1748 by a young lady just back from a visit to Cheltenham during the summer season. Miss Betty Martin of Overbury, near Tewkesbury, writing to her cousin in Bristol, reports:

*'We returned from Cheltenham Thursday last; we spent our three weeks there very pleasantly, and I assure you wish'd very much for your company, the place was never known so full, & my Mama was so lucky to meet with many of her particular*

*acquaintance: we had balls twice a week, & the company met all the other evenings at Lady Stapleton's rooms.'*

Betty Martin's letter suggests that the name Cheltenham Hall had not stuck; it does not appear in any Cheltenham records.

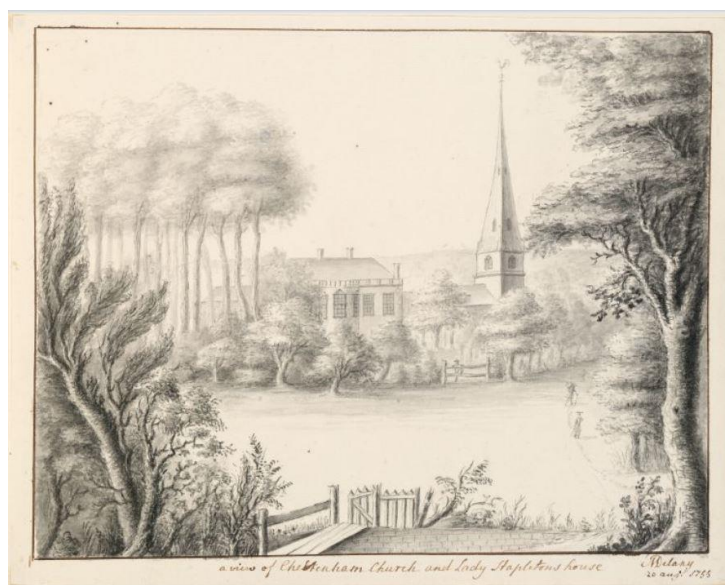


*Image courtesy of Cheltenham Borough Council and The Cheltenham Trust*

By chance, as well as this letter, there are two depictions of the house dated to the same year, 1748. They are once again both by Thomas Robins, and the more finished view ('The West Prospect of the Spaw and Town of Cheltenham' – detail here) again shows the prominent red brick of the south façade, with a somewhat indeterminate structure at the east end. The

trees occupying the gap between that and the house and the church appear to have grown since the time of the fan painting, and may be the 'grove' at the beginning of the Well Walk, referred to in some documents.

Mary Delany, a talented artist and society lady who valued the Cheltenham waters and visited the town more than once, drew this sketch of her lodging in August 1755. The viewpoint is from the little footbridge that led across the Chelt and up to the well. It shows that the grove by the east end of the house – which she titles 'Lady Stapleton's House' – had matured further since Robins recorded the view. The tall trees to the west of the house don't obviously correspond to anything in the earlier view.



*Photo © National Gallery of Ireland (NGI 2722.578)*

On 9 August, the day after Mrs Delany arrived, she wrote to a relative in north Gloucestershire, saying 'We have got a charming lodging and a room at your service, if you

will make us a visit, at Mrs Hughes's near the well. I begin with one glass tomorrow morning.' The sketch is dated 20 August 1755, by which time Mrs Delany had completed nearly two weeks in Cheltenham – a typical stay for those taking a course of the waters.

In 1757, Thomas Hughes and his wife gave up the running of the house, seemingly to concentrate on the spa itself. They handed over to William Pope, Cheltenham-born and not quite 40 years old. Pope, originally a vintner, already had a decade of experience managing the town's most prominent coffee-house, so was well-equipped to take on a further hospitality role. An announcement in a London paper, the *General Evening Post* of 14 May 1757, ran:

*Cheltenham, Gloucestershire.*

*Whereas the late Lady Stapleton's House, which was kept for lodgings and Assemblies by Mr. Hughes, is now kept by William Pope of the Coffee-House; All Gentlemen and Ladies that are pleased to favour him with their Company as Lodgers, or at his Assembly Rooms, shall meet with good Accommodation, and their Favours will be thankfully acknowledged,*

*By their humble Servant, WILLIAM POPE.*

Under Pope's management, not only was the established range of lodgings and facilities continued, but more ambitious entertainment was also offered. Cheltenham's Victorian historian John Goding recorded (p268):

*The celebrity of the waters attracted many persons of note, and amusements began to be established. The first notice that we have been able to trace of a public concert having been given was in the year 1757, as appears by the following advertisement in the Gloucester Journal of July 26th, of that date: —*

*"For the benefit of Mr. George, at Mr. Pope's Great House in Cheltenham, on Wednesday the 10th August next will be performed a concert of Vocal and Instrumental Musick, and a Solo of Signor Degiardino's will be performed, on the violin, by a gentleman. Performers from Bath, Bristol, and other places. After the concert will be a Ball for the Ladies gratis. Tickets may be had of Mr. Hughes, at the Well, and at Mr. Pope's Coffee House."*

This incidentally is the first firm record of the name 'Great House', though it may of course have been in use before then. It is a far from uncommon term, but for anyone like Lady Stapleton who had West Indies connections, there could well have been an echo of its traditional usage for the main house on a plantation. By 1760, the house was in the hands of a new lessee, Mrs Elizabeth Field, and it seems that as her tenure progressed, the name Great House became the usual form, with few if any references to 'Lady Stapleton's house' seen after 1760.

**CHELTENHAM SPAW, May 10, 1760.**  
*This is to acquaint the PUBLIC,*  
**T**HAT the great House near the Wells,  
(commonly call'd Lady Stapleton's House) now in the  
Management of Mr. and Mrs. Field, is genteely and commodiously  
fitted up for the Reception of Families, or single Persons, where  
they may be Boarded as well as Lodged.  
They propose also a PUBLIC ORDINARY, where Things will be  
served up in the neatest Manner, and on the easiest Terms.  
There is likewise an elegant COFFEE-ROOM, where Gentlemen  
may Breakfast, and have the Use of all the public News-Papers.  
Every Thing will be so conducted, that whatever is us'd they  
will endeavour shall be the best of its Kind; and they humbly hope  
to give Satisfaction to all who will be pleas'd to favour them with  
their Company.  
N B The Assembly will be continued there as usual.

As this announcement in the *Whitehall Evening Post* makes clear, under its new management the daily 'assembly' of fashionable visitors would continue as usual. Besides the board and lodging of some of these visitors, the Great House now

offers further attractions, a 'public ordinary' -- a fixed-price complete meal -- and a coffee room, where gentlemen could take their breakfast, and rustle through the papers. There is no explanation of what ladies did for their breakfast, or reading matter. As Goding records (pp261-2), in 1763 the Great House had an annual rental value of £60 (higher even than the Plough, the town's largest coaching inn), meaning that as its tenant, Mrs Field was due to pay 15s to the parish authorities for poor relief.

Probably married to one John Field in Cheltenham in 1752 (her maiden name was Hayes), nothing else is known of Elizabeth's origins; neither she nor her husband appear to have been born in the town. Whatever her background, she was clearly able to run the Great House successfully for an extended period, and later claimed '20 years residence' there. This residence probably took the form of a succession of leases for terms of years. The property was advertised to let in 1771, but this may simply have been a legal formality, as there is no evidence of a break in Elizabeth Field's occupancy.

*Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette, 23 May 1771*

#### GLOUCESTERSHIRE.

To be LETT, at Cheltenham, a modern well-built Brick HOUSE, neatly furnished, consisting of three good Parlours, eight Lodging-Rooms, four light Closets, four Garrets, two Kitchens, three large Cellars, with all convenient Offices: The back part of the House opens and looks into a fine Meadow leading to the Spa, from whence it is but a little distant.

*N.B.* The above House, or any Part of it, to be let by the Week, Month, or Year, on reasonable Terms; or Unfurnished, if taken for seven or more years.

Enquire of Mr. John Ailway, in Cheltenham.

Only three 'parlours' (rather than the earlier four 'assembly rooms') are offered – it's possible one was already taken, or perhaps occupied by Elizabeth Field herself.



Two years after this advertisement, and in good time for the 1773 season, Mrs Field inserted her own announcement in the *Bath Chronicle* of 8 April, showing that she was now also running the Wells themselves:

CHELTENHAM SPAW.

Mrs. FIELD begs Leave to make her humble and most grateful Acknowledgements for the many Favours she has received from the Nobility and Gentry, who have done her the Honour to lodge in her House; and as she has lately taken the WELLS for a Term of Years, and continues to keep the same House for accommodating the Nobility and Gentry with Lodgings, she humbly hopes for the Continuance of their Favours, which she will make it her constant Care and Attention to deserve.

The Nobility and Gentry, Physicians, Apothecaries, Warehouse-keepers, and others, may be constantly supplied with Mineral Waters, fresh from the Spring, and also with the Salts extracted from the Waters, at the usual Prices, by Mrs. FIELD, at the great House near the Wells, at Cheltenham, and by her only.

In 1779, she announced an expansion of her Assembly Room (perhaps by removing an internal wall?). This was accompanied with the customary humble expression of hope that clients would continue to patronise her business:

GREAT-HOUSE, CHELTENHAM SPA

MRS. FIELD humbly begs leave to acquaint the nobility and gentry resorting to Cheltenham, that in order to render her Assembly-Room more commodious and agreeable, she has considerably enlarged and improved it. The kind support she has met with, during 20 years residence at the Great House, demands her sincere and grateful thanks, which she most respectfully offers; at the same time, humbly solicits the future favours of the Nobility and Gentry, as her utmost endeavours to merit them will be the constant object of her attention.

N.B. Genteel Lodgings – The Balls as usual.

*[Bath Chronicle, 18 Mar 1779]*

Mrs Field would have been pleased to welcome the spirited Georgiana, duchess of Devonshire, who reportedly stayed at the Great House on at least one of the many visits she made to Cheltenham in the 1780s. The prevailing tone of the establishment at this time – seemingly little changed since Betty Martin's day – is given in a 1781 guide to the town, which describes the Great House as 'let out in commodious lodgings for the company'. It continues: 'Its vicinity to the Long Room and Well renders it a convenient resort for cards, dancing, tea drinking and other parties, who meet here every evening in the week during the season, Mondays excepted, and make a subscription for Mrs. Field, the possessor.'

Sadly, Elizabeth Field's long tenure of the Great House was not destined to end well. There was a serious incident in late September 1783, when one William Turner, a young man from Heston in Middlesex, entered the house and rifled her bureau, stealing a £25 bank draft, a

£20 note, and four £10 notes. After testimony from Elizabeth and three of her employees, as well as from two innkeepers, Turner was convicted at Gloucester Assizes, and sentenced to hang. Despite appeals for clemency, he was executed on 16 April 1784. It is surely no coincidence that Elizabeth Field died at almost the same time, being buried in Cheltenham on 18 April. Is it too fanciful to think that the stress of the burglary, and its aftermath, led to her decline? In the burial register, she is described simply as the wife of Mr John Field (of whom we learn nothing more).

With Elizabeth's death, four decades of the Great House's service as exclusive lodgings for the 'nobility and gentry' appear to have come to an abrupt end. The break in tenancy gave Lady Stapleton's successors (principally her granddaughter Catherine) the occasion to reconsider their various holdings in Cheltenham, and several disposals took place in 1785; there is no mention of any Cheltenham properties in Catherine's very extensive will (she died in 1815). Had they been able to foresee the transformation in Cheltenham's fortunes soon to be brought about by the momentous visit of George III in the summer of 1788, the Stapleton heirs might have acted differently.

### From the Georgian to the Regency era

Of these disposals, the one of most interest here is the sale of the Great House. On 19 February 1785 it passed out of the Stapleton family, the freehold having been bought from Catherine by an apothecary and surgeon, Richard Hooper. Hooper was a Cheltenham man, possibly from a yeoman family, and born about 1728. In his earlier career, he was generally described as an apothecary, but by 1786 he is usually dubbed 'surgeon'. Since at least 1770, he had been party to a number of property transactions both in the town and in the surrounding fields. It seems very likely that he bought the Great House principally as an investment (along with the house, he also acquired most of the Stapleton copyhold lands nearby), and while he does appear to have occupied part of it for his family and presumably his consulting room, other sections continued to be let out to visitors, as is confirmed by its listing with an L (for lodgings) in Cheltenham's very first street directory, published in 1800.

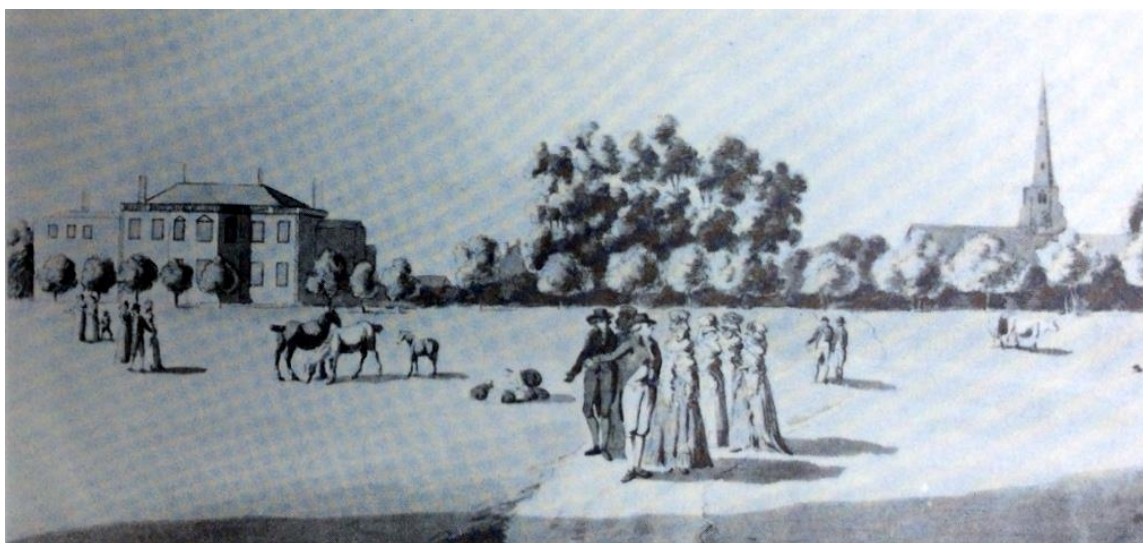
One of these visitors, who coincided with the royal visit of 1788, was William Baker of Bayfordbury, Herts. A wealthy man in his 40s, he had already served three times as an MP. In Cheltenham with some of his large family, on 6 August he wrote to his wife Sophia, who with others of their children was due to join him shortly:

*'... if it had not been for an intolerable Croud in the Streets of the Place attending a Fair, I should have supposed Cheltenham (notwithstanding Royalty) to be the quietest & most airey place in the World, for nothing can exceed the Lodging I am in, in both those respects.*

*It stands entirely out of the Town, on which however it looks from the Front, & on the church, a very pretty building, with the interval of one Field. This is to the North – The Rooms to the South, look entirely over the Fields which lye between the Town & Falconberg House, and over the Walk leading to the Wells in an Oblique View, but at much distance as not to be incommoded with the Company, but commanding them at a reasonable distance, as a pleasing object. ... The Inclosed Scetch [which does not survive] will give you some idea of the Disposition of our apartments – which are all on one Floor, that is up one pair of stairs. The Stair Case an extraordinarily good one, & belong entirely to ourselves.'*

The rooms are then described as '... a Commodious papered Room, abt. 18 by 15 to be used as a Sitting Room', with four bedrooms, a kitchen, and two rooms for servants. 'The other wing is occupied by another family, and the ground floor by a third.'

From this description, it appears the first floor was arranged as at least two sets of apartments. It is also evidence that at this time (confirmed by the Peter Le Cave sketch below, also of 1788) there was still no other building between the north front of the house and the church, the space as previously being filled with trees of various types.



*Image courtesy of Cheltenham Borough Council and The Cheltenham Trust*

After the visit of George III, St George's Place became something of a Harley Street, with several medical men established there, including the celebrated Dr Jenner, so Hooper would probably have been connected with that milieu.

Among those staying at the Great House in 1802, probably for the season, was Catherine Gordon, the mother of the poet Byron, then aged 15 and at Harrow. She had been at Bath in 1801, and later in 1802 moved on to Brighton.

It was in July 1802 that Richard Hooper died, being noted briefly in the paper as 'formerly an eminent apothecary'. His widow Ann died less than a year later, in April 1803. On her death, Richard's estate was to pass to their four children in equal shares, but it was assessed at under £600, probably suggesting there had been mortgages outstanding on his properties, including the Great House.

The Hooper children (two sons and two daughters) moved quite quickly to place the Great House on the market, and the *Gloucester Journal* of 1 August 1803 gave a very full description, noting several features not mentioned in earlier references:

*TO BE SOLD BY AUCTION, some time in the month of August next, (of which notice will be given in this Paper unless in the meantime disposed of by Private Contract).*

*All that extensive and commodious MANSION or DWELLING-HOUSE, known by the name the Great House, situate the fashionable town of Cheltenham; consisting of six elegant Dining and Drawing Rooms, twelve best Bed Chambers, eight Servant's Lodging Rooms, two Halls, four large Kitchens, two Pantries, two large Wine Vaults, capable of containing 100 Pipes of Wine, two Pumps of excellent Water, Brewing and Wash-house, two four-stall'd Stables, two Coach-houses, Granaries, Hay-lofts and other useful Offices, the whole in complete repair.*

*A good Kitchen Garden lies at a convenient distance from the House, well planted with choice Fruit Trees; and adjoining the Mansion, are about three Acres of excellent Pasture Land, part of which might be let on Building Leases, without prejudice thereto.*

*There is on the Premises a large Fish Pond, well stocked with Tench and Carp, and in Cheltenham Church are two commodious Pews.*

*The above Premises are most eligibly and delightfully situated in the direct road to the Wells, commanding very beautiful and interesting views of the surrounding country, and have for many years attracted the notice, and been the desirable residence of numerous illustrious visitants, and are well adapted for a Nobleman or Gentleman's Family, or might converted into an Hotel and Boarding-house, which could not fail of producing many substantial advantages to a Purchaser.*

*Possession of the above Premises may be had at Christmas next.*

*Further Particulars may be known, on application to Mr. Vizard, Gray's Inn, London, or Mr. Pruen, Solicitor, Cheltenham.*

*Cheltenham, July 19<sup>th</sup>, 1803*

It's difficult to be sure, but it appears from this advertisement that the house may have been enlarged since its previous description, in 1771; also, that perhaps it had not recently been used as seasonal lodgings.

August was almost over, and the promised auction had not happened. Potential bidders were informed in the *Gloucester Journal* of 29 August that the sale of the Great

House had been postponed to September, with further particulars to appear in the paper's next issue, but none ever came.

The probable explanation is that the house remained with at least two of the Hooper children. The *London Courier and Evening Gazette* of 15 February 1804, in an item datelined Cheltenham two days previously, reported with some relish:

*An event has lately taken place here, which has been the topic of conversation in almost every circle, and which has interested in a more or less degree the feelings of all the residents.*

*A family arrived in great style, in a carriage with four horses, and two outriders, about the month of September last. They took lodgings at the Great House, formerly the mansion of Sir R. Stapleton, but now kept by two sisters of the name Hooper, who derive a comfortable subsistence from accommodating persons of the first rank or fortune who visit Cheltenham. The family alluded to, consisted of a gentleman, his wife, and three servants. After residing a short time at this fashionable watering-place, the gentleman, getting acquainted in the usual way with the Librarians, and the Master of the Ceremonies, found an easy access into the first circles, and was known among the great by the name of Mr. R———. Elegant in person, and gentlemanly in his manners; and his lady, likewise, possessing the requisites of a well-bred woman, their society was universally courted.*

*Mr. R. had his dinner parties, and Mrs. R. had her routs. The family, of course, became known among the haut ton, who frequented this place. They were visited, and of course invited to many private card parties, to petit-soupers, and among many others, to the Rev. Dr. Bailey's and Lord Torrington's. About a month since many inquiries were made by different persons (strangers who had lately arrived), which excited a suspicion that Mr. R. was not what he represented himself to be; and this suspicion has, to all appearance, been realised, by the sudden flight of the party on the night of the 5<sup>th</sup> instant, leaving behind them their coach and horses.*

*Previous to their departure they gave orders to the coachman to proceed to London with them with all possible dispatch early on the ensuing day. The circumstances of this affair being made known, Mr. Hinks, the owner of the Plough Hotel, in whose stables the carriage and horses were kept, seized the whole as they were setting out, as an indemnification for one hundred and forty pounds, due to him by the party. On further enquiry it appeared that almost every tradesman in the place had differed in a more or less degree. Among the number, the Miss Hoopers, for lodging, £50; Mr. Jones, a tradesman, £90; Messrs. Smith and Gyde, grocers, £50; besides many other persons for smaller sums. When the affair became generally known, the most diligent search was made to trace the route of Mr. R. and he was two days after arrested at Oxford, and safely lodged in the County Gaol.*

The reference to 'Sir R. Stapleton' cannot be reconciled with any known member of the family, and it appears to be simply in error for Dame Frances. The defrauded 'Miss Hoopers' must have been Richard's daughters Ann (born 1772), and Hannah (born 1773). Assuming they had begun their enterprise only the previous autumn, after the auction sale was shelved in September 1803, this event must have been quite a blow to them. However, they may well

have continued to keep the Great House as a lodging-house, though probably without further dramatic incidents worth being picked up by the London papers.



1806 Cheltenham Inclosure Award map,  
image courtesy of Gloucestershire  
Archives ref. D855/E9

While the enclosure map indicates that Richard Hooper (or his estate) held the freehold of the site in 1803, not long after that, much of the former Stapleton lands appear to have been held jointly by Francis Welles and Theodore Gwinnett, both of them prominent in property dealings in the town. An arrangement of May 1808 placed the Great House in the hands of Gwinnett alone. A solicitor and broker, he held numerous offices, being one of the first Town Commissioners, appointed under a 1786 Act of Parliament. From 1800, Gwinnett was steward to the lord of the manor. He did not however reside at the Great House.

Interestingly, the next people to manage the property as a business were also two sisters, the enterprising Phillis and Frances Mary Kyan, born in Wexford, Ireland, in 1782 and 1785 respectively. They already ran a similar establishment in Bath, aimed at the better class of visitor. They advertised as follows in the *Bath Chronicle* of 19 May 1808:

Miss KYANS' BOARDING-HOUSE,  
CHELTENHAM

*MISS KYANS' (of Milsom-street, Bath) have the honour of acquainting their Friends and the Public, that they have taken the House occupied last summer by his Royal Highness the Duke of Gloucester, which they intend to open as a BOARDING-HOUSE on Monday May the 9<sup>th</sup>, for the reception of a select number of Ladies and Gentlemen. – To render the society more agreeable, references are requested.*

42, Milsom-Street, Bath, May 6, 1808

The announcement implies that before the Kyan sisters' arrival as managers, the house had been let privately. The royal visitor was more properly titled Prince William, Duke of Gloucester and Edinburgh. The nephew and son-in-law of George III, he had inherited the title in 1805, his father having been a very regular visitor to Cheltenham. His own stay, for a month in July and August 1817, coincided with one by the Prince of Wales. He also visited the town on other occasions, though this is the only time he is known to have stayed at the Great House.

That it was indeed the Great House is proved by a similar advertisement to the following, also at the start of the season. It is noticeable that only one Miss Kyan (later shown to be Phillis) is mentioned:

CHELTENHAM  
MISS KYAN'S BOARDING HOUSE

Was opened on Monday, the First of May, for the reception of a select number of Ladies and Gentlemen. For Particulars apply to Miss Kyan, at the Great House, near the Crescent; or at 42 Milson Street, Bath.

N.B. References are requested.

*Cheltenham Chronicle, 4 May 1809*

In Mid-June 1809, a Mr Read announced in the *Chronicle* that he had 'removed his stock of wine from the Great House to his new vaults' at 1 St James's Square. There is no further information about this, but it seems more likely that he had had an arrangement with Miss Kyan simply to store goods at the Great House, rather than selling them from there.

On 1 October 1809, in anticipation of Phillis' marriage to one John Broome, which took place in Cheltenham towards the end of the following November, the Kyan sisters dissolved their business partnership. This left the business in the hands of the younger sister Frances Mary, who took to the local paper to inform 'her friends and the public' that she had taken the Great House, which had 'undergone a complete repair since last Summer', and would be opening for the new season on 10 April 1810. She hoped for that 'support and encouragement, hitherto experienced by her Sister, as it shall be her study to deserve it.' (*Chronicle*, 12 April)

Unfortunately, Frances Mary appears to have quickly got into debt (had the 'complete repair' been too ambitious?) and the 1810 season did not progress well for her. On 29 October she was committed to the King's Bench debtors prison in London, not being discharged until the middle of the next year. The claims against her had amounted to over £200. (While she disappears from the Cheltenham story at this point, she was later able to resume her lodging business in Bath, dying there in 1820.)

Miss Kyan's misfortune was another's opportunity, and it was not long at all before the Great House had another manager, James Fisher. Fisher's tenure was to be a success, though more for him than the Great House, for the older building was to become somewhat eclipsed by newer premises he built next door. Fisher, then just 30, appears to have come from a Cirencester family, though little else is known of his earlier life.

His first advertisement, in the *Chronicle* of 29 November 1810, strikes a positive note:

GREAT HOUSE

(Late Miss Kyan's, adjoining the Crescent)

CHELTENHAM

JAMES FISHER begs leave to inform the Nobility and Gentry resorting to Cheltenham, and his Friends in general, that he has taken the above House, which he has fitted up in a style of superior Comfort and Convenience, for the purpose of

A BOARDING & LODGING HOUSE

And that he is determined to conduct it in such a manner and upon such Terms as, he flatters himself, will give entire satisfaction to those who may honour him with their Countenance and Support.--The House, as is well-known is peculiarly calculated for the purpose- the Bed-rooms are unusually spacious, lofty, and airy-- and the situation, both in regard to the Town and Wells, certainly inferior to none.

J.F. would be happy to accommodate a SMALL SELECT PARTY during the Winter.  
Nov. 8, 1810

Winter lodgers duly appeared, and some idea of the size of events the house could host comes in late February 1811, when the *Chronicle* reported that the Hon. John Dutton (of the family that still held the manor of Cheltenham) had given an 'elegant dinner' for his friends at his lodgings in the Great House: the company consisted of about 70 persons.

The full sequence of ownership of the freehold of the Great House after Catherine Stapleton's disposals of 1785, and the deaths of the Hoopers, some of whose properties were certainly mortgaged, is not clear, but, as noted above, at some point in the first decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century it had come into the hands of Theodore Gwinnett. Despite enjoying local esteem, in 1811 Gwinnett ran into spectacular financial difficulties, owing some £50,000, and was declared bankrupt in August of that year. On the instructions of his creditors, his large portfolio of properties, almost all in Cheltenham, was auctioned off in stages. The Great House went up for sale in October, the announcement reading in part:

*... All that Capital MANSION HOUSE, called THE GREAT HOUSE, in the occupation of Mr Fisher, now used and in high reputation as a Boarding and Lodging House, but lately rendered more valuable by being Licensed as a Public House ... the Garden belonging to it is of a suitable size, and Walled in, the approach to the House is good, and its immediate Driving-way very commodious and extensive ... The Rooms are spacious and lofty, the Offices commodious and complete, and the Cellars arched, dry and well arranged ... not only calculated for a Boarding-House and Inn, upon an extensive scale, but equally eligible for the residence of a Nobleman or Gentleman of Fortune. The Right of a Seat in the North Gallery of the Church ... included.'*

(Cheltenham Chronicle, 17 Oct 1811)

It appears the buyer was Francis Welles of Prestbury, who prior to Gwinnett's bankruptcy had been in partnership with him. The terms of the purchase are obscure (various complicated arrangements were made by Gwinnett's associates to mitigate the effects of his



collapse), but they left Fisher's tenancy undisturbed, and he was able to get a new lease of the Great House from Welles on 1 June 1814. In the same month, the nation celebrated peace with France, and Fisher marked the occasion by arranging 'an elegant and tasteful display of light in every part of the mansion, its situation giving it considerable novelty'.

But at the same time James Fisher was laying plans for a significant expansion of his operations – a brand new hotel on another part of the Great House grounds. Two centuries later, this new venture, starting life as Fisher's Hotel, and soon after becoming the Clarence Hotel, is now John Dower House, of which more below.

Francis Welles died in February 1816, and the Great House freehold passed firstly to his brother Thomas Welles, subject to a mortgage, and eventually to William Lawrence (1783-1867). Lawrence came from a Cirencester family - his father was a surgeon there - but his own distinguished medical career was in London (he became surgeon to Queen Victoria and was made a baronet). How he came to own the site is unclear, but there were certainly strong personal connections between Cheltenham and Cirencester (James Fisher was originally from there, and one of the developer Joseph Pitt's key partners was the Cirencester solicitor Richard Mullings), and it may have been recommended to him as an investment by such a figure. While William Lawrence may have been the titular owner, it is likely that any practical management of the property devolved to his brother Charles (1794-1881) who trained in the law and remained in Cirencester as a land agent, going on to help found the Royal Agricultural College.

## Decline and fall

The success of the new hotel, first under James Fisher and then under Richard Liddell, appears to have pushed the Great House very much into second place. The name Great House was dropped in about 1828, the establishment becoming now the **Clarence Boarding House**. In 1829, it was claimed, somewhat bravely, that under Liddell's 'superintendence', it retained 'all its celebrity'.

In April 1831, verses appeared in the *Chronicle's* 'Poets' Corner' marking the retirement from the Clarence Boarding House of a long-serving, though unnamed, 'Boots':

LINES ON THE DEPARTURE OF THE "PRINCE OF BOOTS"

FROM THE CLARENCE BOARDING HOUSE.

*NOW gone is our prince, now departed our glory,  
The light of our boots, so unsullied in fame;  
Now gone is our prince, and the page of our story.  
The brightest and blackest, is gone with his name.*

*For twenty one years he has faithfully striven  
To keep our feet spotless, our habits unstained;  
So shining and bright, like the sun in high heaven,  
Is the course he has run, is the name he has gained.*

*We mourn—while we view his departure with sorrow.  
We see his sun setting with grief and with pain;  
We also well know that our boots on the morrow  
Will shine not so bright—nay, may ne'er shine again.*

*In the hall he stood mournful, before his leave taking  
We watched his endeavour to speak his farewell;  
But fruitless it proved, for his heart was fast breaking.  
And the tear which then dropped, the first leak from its well.*

*Without pomp or splendour was his abdication;  
No crown had our prince save the crown of his head,  
But silver it was; and the tears in succession  
Far brighter than diamonds a brilliant ray shed.*

*He stood the centre, we gathered around him.  
Inclosed in a halo of boots and kind hearts;  
We drank to the blacking, we "Prince of Boots" crown'd him,  
The soul (sole) which sustains which such polish imparts.*

*And thus went our prince, thus departed our glory,  
The light of our boots, unsullied fame;  
And thus went our prince, and the page of our story.  
The brightest, the blackest, is gone with his name.*

If this veteran Boots was leaving after 21 years, he must first have picked up his brushes and blacking when James Fisher took over in 1810; was his retirement part of a general exodus of the old guard? The 'Old Clarence' apparently survived as a boarding house for a few years more, though attracting no notice in the press. It probably ceased operating in the late 1830s, entering a terminal decline after Richard Liddell transferred to the newly-opened Queen's Hotel, looking down the Promenade. There is a suggestion that the brewery tap (in effect a small pub) at the western end of the former Great House was still a going concern, but apart from that the whole site was largely uninhabited from 1839 onwards; Liddell was certainly selling off all the Clarence Hotel furniture and fittings in February 1839. Although still standing, Lady Stapleton's Great House had thus not quite achieved its century before falling out of use.

Over the following decade, many attempts were made to dispose of the whole site latterly occupied by Liddell. In May 1839 the Cirencester solicitor Charles Lawrence (brother of William) placed an advertisement in a London paper offering to sell the whole freehold estate -‘first-rate hotel, and boarding house adjoining’ – or to let it from next mid-summer day. Among the extensive particulars listed, he noted the boarding house’s four public dining rooms and drawing rooms, 11 private sitting rooms, 38 best bedrooms, and 10 servants’ bedrooms. The advertisement went on to mention the imminent expansion of rail services to Cheltenham, and the prospect of increased demand for visitor accommodation (*Morning Chronicle*, 11 May 1839).

This attempt met no success, and Lawrence’s next step was to engage the established London-based auctioneers, Foster and Sons, to promote the sale more professionally. The auction, to be held on 27 Jan 1840, was first advertised in the *Morning Chronicle* of 9 December, and repeated in several London papers over the following weeks. The properties were described in essentially the same terms as in May, with an additional note that ‘two-thirds of the purchase money may remain on mortgage’, though the source of this mortgage is not clarified. One advantage of using a professional firm like Fosters was that full sales particulars and terms and conditions were printed, along with a properly-surveyed plan, a copy of which survives. These documents provide the fullest indication of the extent of the former Great House in its latter days.

[Insert image – section of plan]

The auction duly went ahead, and press notices in February indicated that a sale had been achieved, with a hammer price of £7,900 for the whole estate. However, for unknown reasons the arrangement fell through, and Charles Lawrence was once more advertising (using the same words) the following May, seemingly having made no progress in the intervening year. (*Sun*, 11 May 1840)

Lawrence’s advertising had already alluded to the hotel and boarding house’s potential in the light of railway developments, and speculation in this vein continued, particularly as ‘the neighbourhood ... has assumed the appearance of a neglected and unweeded garden’. (*Examiner*, August 1840). A more specific rumour claimed that the Birmingham and Gloucester Railway had purchased the Clarence Hotel, for conversion into a goods depot, and first ‘abiding place’ for passengers, with a branch from the main line station at Lansdown, which was generally seen to be ‘too far from the High Street’. (*Cheltenham Journal*, 10 August 1840).

Versions of this idea continued to be aired in letters to the paper, eg in March 1841. Meanwhile, Charles Lawrence ran his advertisement (the wording still unchanged) in the

London papers yet another time, on 20 January 1841. There is no sign that it met with any better response.

Railway rumours persisted, boosted by the news in March 1843 that Isambard Kingdom Brunel himself had visited to inspect the neighbourhood of St George's Place to fix on the best site for a terminus, though it was by now being recognised that on cost grounds, St James's Square was a more likely location for a 'town centre' terminus, as it indeed became. There was still hope (in editorialists' minds, at least) that the new station's arrival would allow the hotel and boarding house to be 'again opened and in full activity'.

Six years elapsed before in March 1849 Mr Lawrence tried again, this time using a different tactic and advertising only locally. He focused on the former Great House alone, explicitly suggesting possible new uses for the boarding house:

CHELTENHAM  
The Spacious Freehold Premises  
ADJOINING THE "CLARENCE HOTEL"

And formerly occupied with it as a Boarding House, and the DWELLING HOUSE adjoining, will be offered for SALE by AUCTION in the month of June next, unless previously disposed of by Private Contract.

These commodious Buildings are well adapted as respects plan and situation, for Public Offices, Chambers for the purpose of Business, Schools, &c. &c.

Any application to treat by Private Contract to be made to Messrs. Lawrence, Cirencester.

Cheltenham Journal, 26 March 1849

Once again there was no success.

The last vestiges of activity on the Great House/Clarence Boarding House site are seen in the early 1850s. The Clarence Tap was still functioning until about 1850. While in 1851 the brewing and retail had probably ceased, the premises were occupied by Thomas Hooper, a cooper, with a small family and six lodgers, three of them soldiers.

Even though the Boarding House had long stopped taking guests, the 1851 census showed that some part of it was still home to one family - Joseph Sheppard, a plasterer, and his wife and five children.

The final chapters began in 1852, when one last attempt was made to sell the building off either as it stood, for public or business use, or for demolition and replacement by new housing. Lawrence's 1849 advertisement was expanded, and it appears he had taken an

architect's advice about possible redevelopment; it appeared in the *Cheltenham Examiner* of 14 July 1852:

The Clarence Boarding House, CHELTENHAM.

TO BE SOLD BY PRIVATE CONTRACT, the large Building heretofore known as the "CLARENCE BOARDING HOUSE", with the LAND in front of the same, comprising 185 feet of frontage to Bedford Buildings, from 70 to 80 feet depth, and the DWELLING HOUSE heretofore occupied by Mr. LIDDELL, occupying 90 feet of frontage to St. George's Place.

The Buildings as they stand, are well adapted from their situation for Public Offices on the Ground Floor, and Chambers for Business purposes on the Upper Floor; or, if the existing buildings were removed, the site will be found sufficient for the erection of Nine Dwelling Houses, for which the present Buildings would provide a considerable portion of the requisite materials.

For further particulars and to treat for the purchase, apply to Messrs. PAUL, Architects, Cheltenham; or to Messrs. LAWRENCE, Cirencester.

Clearly no viable interest was expressed, and in March 1853, the premises were put up for auction. In editorial comment, the *Chronicle* of 24 March noted that the old Clarence Boarding House, with its appurtenant premises, had for the last ten or twelve years 'been falling into a state of hopeless decay'. It was to be pulled down, the demolished materials sold off, and the ground cleared 'for the erection of buildings of a different character and more suited to the altered wants of the town'. All this confirms it had not only been out of use, but well out of fashion too.

The sale, to start on 30 March, was to be organised in two lots, firstly the house and outbuildings, and secondly the Tap and Stabling. A summary of the expected materials, which were to be taken down and removed at the expense of purchasers, included 'Large Quantities of Bricks, Stone, Timber, Joiner's Work, Slates, Lead and Iron Work ; also Oak Flooring and a Massive Oak Staircase, in good condition; a Stone Portico of the Doric Order, and the Plant of a Small Brewery.' (*Examiner*, 13 March 1853).

This time the auction was more successful. On 13 April, the *Examiner* (whose office was just down the road) reported that 'The parties who purchased the materials of the Old Clarence are busily employed in dismantling the building, and within a very few weeks the whole will be removed.' The demolition was not without incident – in mid-May, a man named Richard Sisum fell through one of the floors, requiring hospital treatment for serious injuries to his feet and legs. But once the structures had been dismantled and the materials presumably sorted, a further auction was decided on to complete the disposal. The 750 lots would be 'cleared off' in the course of a two-day sale, conducted by auctioneer George Sweeting, on 2 and 3 June.

Some idea of the construction quality of the former Great House can be inferred from the main list of lots:

200,000 Bricks; 1,100 Feet of Forest paving; 1,000 Feet of freestone paving; 200 Feet of cornices and blocking; large Forest landers, steps, and bordering; 400 feet of ashlar and 50 yards of block walling; 100 rustic quoins; ton of old lead; 1,000 feet of red joists, 9 x 2<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>; 3,500 feet of rafters, tie beams and principals; 20 large oak girders; 10 oak beams, 12 x 12; 6,000 feet of flooring boards; 2,000 feet of partitioning; 3,000 Feet of oak sleepers; 50 sashes and frames; 60 panel doors and jambs; 50 sets of architraves; 40 grates and chimneypieces; 600 fire bricks; 900 Broseley squares, 4,000 feet of scantling; 2 tons of old iron; a quantity of iron railing and sash weights.

Also: a large stone portico, a massive fine old oak staircase, 'suitable for a large Mansion or Public Building', several flights of stairs, sheet zinc, slate, lath, and firewood in abundance, together with an excellent brewing plant, consisting of a 200-gallon copper furnace, with brass cock, doors and bars, two large oak mash tubs, capable of mashing sixty bushels, underback, two long coolers and stillion, an excellent malt mill, a factory or dinner bell, and numerous other effects.

*(Chronicle, 26 May 1853)*

Not everything was cleared at this first auction, so Mr Sweeting organised a 'second and concluding sale' on 8 and 9 September. While little of the stone mentioned in the first sale was left, 100,000 bricks still remained, as well as quantities of timber and the 'fine old oak staircase'. (*Examiner*, 31 August 1853)

Meanwhile, the 'Old Clarence Tap' was sold to a different buyer, and was demolished separately, the materials being put up for auction on 1 August (*Chronicle*, 28 July 1853).

Within weeks of the site being cleared, new uses were being found. Equestrian performances took place there for two days in early October 1853, the attractions including some 'ceiling-walking' by A Ginnett, of a family involved in circus entertainment since Napoleonic times. A month later Cooke's Circus ('this famous equestrian establishment') rode into town, offering two performances daily on the ground formerly occupied by the Clarence Boarding House (*Chronicle*, 3 Nov 1853). A travelling menagerie and another circus used the site in 1855.

The empty lot continued to play host to similar travelling entertainments until in August 1859 the northern section was chosen as the location of a temporary church, needed while repairs and other changes to the parish church of St Mary's were being considered, and disputed. A corrugated iron temporary structure had been erected by 1 November that year.

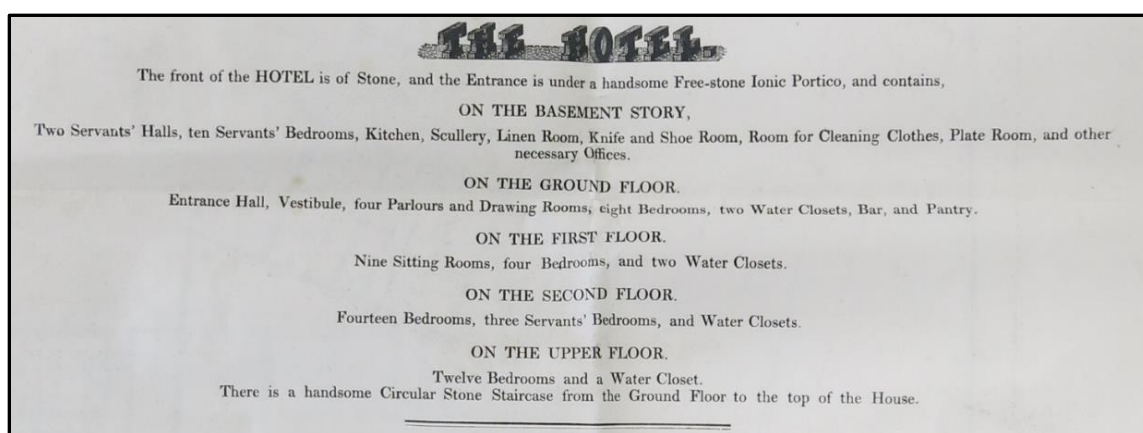
Proposals to enlarge the parish church sufficiently to accommodate 2,000 sittings were eventually abandoned. It was decided instead to build a large new church, using the plot occupied by the temporary building (with the addition of more land offered by James Agg-Gardner). This was to be the present St Matthew's; after lengthy fund-raising, the foundation stone was laid in January 1877, and the church was consecrated in April 1879.

At this point, nearly 140 years after Dame Frances Stapleton's fine new house had come into being, all visible trace of it was expunged.

## Fisher's/Liddell's/Clarence Hotel

While the best view from the Great House was to the south, in the direction of the original well, the other notable development on the site, Fisher's Hotel, faced east. It looked onto what is now named Crescent Place, though the route was earlier simply part of the walk leading from the churchyard up to the well at Bayshill. The future **John Dower House** was very definitely designed and built as a hotel or boarding house, most probably by the person whose name is first associated with it, James Fisher. As we saw above, Fisher had been running the Great House since 1810.

He must soon have started thinking about expanding or modernising his visitor accommodation, for in June 1814 he took a lease (presumably a building lease) on the eastern side of the site – fronting directly onto Well Walk. The first new structures appear to have been stables and coach-houses, described as 'lately erected' in a deed of August 1815, along with other outbuildings (perhaps nearer the Great House) used as a public tap-room and baths. Work on the main building probably followed soon after; the new establishment was certainly in operation by 1820, when it is marked on a map as **Fisher's Boarding House and Livery Stables** – the stables most likely being accessed from St George's Place, at the rear. The following particulars date from the late 1830s, but probably still give a good idea of the original internal arrangement of Fisher's establishment:



*Sale particulars of the Clarence Hotel & Boarding House, image courtesy of Gloucestershire Archives ref. D1388/SL/3/68*

By 1821, it was being referred to as **Fisher's Hotel**, the label 'boarding house' having been relegated to the older building next door. The manager now was no longer James Fisher, but a new lessee, Richard Liddell, an energetic man in his early thirties who had come to the town from Oxford, where he was in charge of provisioning at the Queen's College. He had married the previous year, to the daughter of an Oxford fishmonger. Fisher meanwhile had moved half a mile south, to concentrate on even more ambitious property developments beyond Montpellier, on the former Suffolk Estate.



The most notable early guest at Fisher's Hotel was Adelaide, Duchess of Clarence, consort of the future William IV, who chose to stay there in mid-1827.

*Cheltenham Journal*, 30 July:

*Expected arrival of Her Royal Highness the Duchess of Clarence at Cheltenham. Our inhabitants and friends will rejoice at hearing that it is Her Royal Highness the DUCHESS of CLARENCE's intention to arrive in this town to-morrow, Tuesday, on her way to Bath, whither she is proceeding, we believe, towards Portsmouth, to meet her Royal Consort. Mr. Liddell, the proprietor of Fisher's Hotel, has already received orders to prepare accommodation for the illustrious visitor and suite. She is not expected to arrive till towards evening, but dinner has been ordered for her at seven o'clock; so our loyal inhabitants will have an opportunity of receiving this distinguished personage in a manner becoming her rank, and the exalted station she is one day likely to fill in this country.*

The stay was all too brief, but Liddell spared no effort for the occasion, giving the *Journal* an opportunity to run a follow-up piece on 2 August:

*Liddell's Hotel, which had been selected for her Royal Highness, was fitted up in the most tasteful and pleasing manner. Jessop's Nursery Garden was racked for the most rare and beautiful exotica, which were placed in the halls, staircases, &c., in such luxuriant profusion, to give it the appearance of one the fairy palaces of romance, rather than an English Hotel. A smaller arch was also fixed in front of the portico.*

This royal patronage was a real coup for Richard Liddell, who lost little time in writing to the Duke of Clarence for permission to adopt the more impressive name of **Royal Clarence Hotel**. This was granted just a few weeks later, as reported in the *Journal* of 10 September 1827:

**We feel extremely gratified in announcing, that Her Royal Highness the Duchess of Clarence has kindly remembered her reception in Cheltenham, and her sense of the attention shewn to her by our townsman, Mr. Liddell, in graciously obtaining the consent of her illustrious Consort, to direct that Col. Cooper should transmit the following letter to Mr. L.**

**" Royal Crescent, Bath, September 5. 1827.**

**" SIR,—I am commanded by His Royal Highness the Duke of Clarence, to inform you, that you have His Royal Highness's permission for henceforward calling your Hotel, THE ROYAL CLARENCE HOTEL, if you think proper so to do.**

**" I remain, Sir, your's, &c.**

**" J. H. COOPER."**

**" To Mr. LIDDELL, Cheltenham."**

Marking the same visit, the street to the north became Clarence Street, as it is today. The royal coat of arms now seen above the doorway of John Dower House was installed in early 1828, proudly emphasising the rebranding. *'The arms of his Royal Highness the Duke of Clarence, carved in stone, have been placed over the portico in front of Liddell's Hotel, in*

*honour of the recent visit of his Royal Highness's illustrious consort to Cheltenham.'*  
(*Journal*, 11 February)

The coat of arms was carved by George Lewis, a promising local sculptor who had learned his craft under his father in Gloucester. George had set up business in the High Street only the year before, aged just 21, so might have counted himself lucky to get this prestigious commission. He made sure to include 'Patronized by the Royal Family' in his later advertising. (His name can still be seen on the back of the coat of arms.)

After the first couple of years, the word Royal seems to have been dropped from the hotel's name, though Liddell ensured that the royal connection was not forgotten when in 1830 the town marked the accession of William IV - he distributed a hogshead of strong beer to the 'vast concourse' in procession past the hotel. At the coronation in 1831, the portico was specially lit up and decorated: as the local paper noted, 'The Clarence Arms were displayed to great advantage'.

In 1836, Liddell's lease was coming to an end. Rather like James Fisher before him, he was ambitious. His sights were set on becoming manager of the big new hotel then being planned at the head of the Promenade. After Victoria's accession to the throne in 1837, the new venture was promptly named the Queen's Hotel, formally opening in 1838, with Liddell in charge.

It's evident that Liddell's whole business focus was on his new venture, with little sentiment expended on the old. His opening announcements for the Queen's Hotel, in July 1838, show that he had 'carefully removed' the considerable contents of the Clarence's wine cellars, and taken his long-established head cook with him. In the spring of 1839 he sold off all the Clarence Hotel furniture and fittings:

TO SOLD BY AUCTION, by Mr. WILLIAMS,

On TUESDAY, WEDNESDAY, THURSDAY, FRIDAY, the 12<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, and 15<sup>th</sup> days of March, 1839, commencing each day at Twelve o'clock precisely,

THE FURNITURE of the CLARENCE HOTEL, the property of Mr. RICHARD LIDDELL, of the Queen's Hotel; comprising upwards of 50 carved mahogany, japanned, and stained four-post, tent, and canopy bedsteads, with rich damask, moreen, chintz, and dimity furnitures; hair, wool, and flock mattresses; feather beds, bolsters, and pillows; bedding; 70 Brussels and Kidderminster carpets, some of large dimensions, suitable for large dining and drawing rooms; hearth rugs to match, 75 sets of window curtains, in drab, green, crimson, and scarlet damask and moreen; rich chintz ditto ; 25 mahogany, oak, and japanned chests of drawers; 20 sets mahogany and stained chairs; eight Grecian sofas and couches ; mahogany cellaret sideboards; chimney, mirror, and swing glasses; library chairs; upwards of 80 mahogany and japanned dining, card, Pembroke, dressing, wash, and night tables; 20 mahogany bed steps and bidets; eight hall chairs; 300 yds of Brussels stair carpeting; 20 dozens of brass rods; excellent patent meat hastener and three-wheel jack; two large copper baths; cistern; copper furnaces; 60 seasoned casks, from 20 to 120 gallons, nearly new; pocket of hops; spirit machine, casks, and labelled bottles; fenders and fireirons; copper stew pans; kitchen requisites; fine oil paintings; and numerous other articles.

And so the establishment created by Fisher and nurtured by Liddell effectively ceased to be, barely 25 years after it came into being. Confusingly, references to a Clarence Hotel are still to be found in the local press from 1842 onwards, but they relate to a quite separate establishment on the other side of Clarence Street, a few doors east of Well Walk. Managed initially by one Robert Leader, it catered for commercial travellers, with a dining room that was popular with masonic lodges and other associations.

Ideas for a new use for the building vacated by Liddell were soon being floated – in late 1838, it was proposed as suitable for a new proprietary school, a ‘Cheltenham College’ (*Chronicle*, 29 Nov 1838) - but for nearly two decades nothing came of these suggestions.

The building has not been identified in the 1841 census so was perhaps uninhabited at that point, but the Clarence Hotel does appear by this name in the 1851 census, when it was occupied by just two people - a servant named Elizabeth Hookham, and her daughter. The unnamed head of the household (perhaps someone charged with keeping an eye on the otherwise empty building?) was absent on census night.

At last in 1856 a viable proposal was put forward to convert the former hotel for town uses – the lower apartments as barracks for the police, the next floor for ‘public offices’, and above these a room for a Town Hall, ‘as at Brighton’. The architect Andrew Paul, who had earlier made proposals for replacing the old boarding house, and was perhaps acting in concert with Lawrence, calculated that £5,000 or £6,000 would secure the required site. (*Chronicle*, 7 Oct 1856). While the Gloucestershire Constabulary had been founded in 1839, it was not until a new Police Act came into effect in 1856 that county authorities started to pay closer attention to the proper housing of their forces.

Thus it was that in January 1857 the county’s magistrates agreed to the purchase of the Old Clarence Hotel, to become the headquarters of the County Constabulary. The *Cheltenham Journal* (10 January 1857) characterised it as ‘a spacious building which, to the regret of our townsmen, has been unoccupied for years, its grim walls and broken windows presenting anything but a pleasing appearance to the passer by’. It continued: ‘No doubt some of our townsmen may regret that advantage was not taken of the opportunity to purchase the property for an Institution of a different character; but all must agree that the conversion of so large and conspicuous an edifice to the uses proposed is far better than allowing it to continue for another long series of years in an unoccupied and dilapidated condition.’

The building and garden ground adjoining had been offered to the county for £2,000, and the County Surveyor estimated that the necessary alterations to make it suitable for police use would cost another £1,000. The purchase was brokered by Andrew Paul, on behalf of the vendor Lawrence, who was surely pleased to achieve a sale at last. The county's purchase included an area to the rear of the hotel, sufficient for 'a yard in which to muster the entire force on any occasion of emergency', with an entrance out into Bedford Buildings, but did not include frontage formerly occupied by the Clarence Boarding House, and abutting upon Bedford Buildings and St George's Place. The local paper understood that Mr. Lawrence had 'reserved' this frontage for the erection of shops and other business premises (*Looker-On*, 10 January 1857).

Conversion works were under way in September 1857, designed to provide accommodation for the Deputy Chief Constable and his family, a superintendent, two sergeants, and a constable, with their wives and families, as well as thirty-nine other officers. The constabulary moved in the following year. In October 1858 a new magistrates' office was formally inaugurated on the 'first floor front' of the old hotel – described as a 'palatial apartment' in comparison with the previous petty sessions room under the town clock in the High Street (*Looker-On*, 16 October 1858).

Remarkably, given the rapidly changing fortunes of its first decades, the former Clarence Hotel was now to enjoy over a century of stability: once converted, it remained home to Cheltenham's central police station until 1970, when the police moved to new purpose-built headquarters premises in Lansdown Road.

After refurbishment, in 1974 the vacated building became the headquarters of the **Countryside Commission**, who named it **John Dower House**, after John Dower (1900-47), the leading pioneer of national parks in England and Wales. The Countryside Commission was followed by the **Countryside Agency** (1999-2006).

### The western part of the site

Perhaps not long after the temporary church was built, the rest of the St George's Place side of the site also underwent a number of changes, unconnected with the establishing of the police station.

Ownership of the land at this point is unclear, but maps of the 1880s show a largely unbuilt area, and a number of smaller structures, possibly small businesses, occupying about half the street frontage. A marked change came in the late 1890s, when Barnby Bendall & Co, a thriving removals and storage business based in St James's Square, sought additional premises nearby. Seeing the potential of the largely vacant site, the firm acquired the land. Plans for a substantial range of new buildings were tabled in 1896. Construction soon began, and by 1899 the new facilities were in use, boasting state-of-the-art equipment for moving goods around the multi-storey warehouse.

The same firm operated from the site until the last member of the Bendall family retired without heir, the removal and storage business being sold in 1976 as a going concern to Cantay Ltd, a regional firm.

The warehouse was renamed Cantay House. In the 1980s and 90s it was divided into self-storage units, with some entertainment and retail businesses on the ground floor. On its acquisition in about 2009 by Formal Investments, a Cheltenham-based private investment and asset management company, it was further renamed Formal House, undergoing major refurbishment around 2018 to become contemporary urban office space with a new glass fronted extension and landscaped courtyard. This gained a Civic Award in 2019, and is now home to number of small businesses. Formal Investments were early backers (from 2014) of plans for the redevelopment of John Dower House and what was termed South Court – behind Formal House.

## The name Latheram

**Latheram House** takes its name from an ancient meadow or pasture ground which once lay on the west side of what is now St George's Place. The name is first recorded in 1373, as **Laverham**, probably made up of the Old English elements *laefer* 'rush, reed' and *hamm* 'meadow'. The meadow's exact extent is uncertain, but today's St George's Place probably represents its eastern edge, and it would have run down to the river Chelt from about the line of the present Clarence Street. St George's Place follows the line of an old footpath down to a crossing point: in 1654 local inhabitants were ordered to '*lay a sufficient footbridge leading from Cheltenham to Gloucester in a place called Laverham, with a line to hold by*' or face a 40s fine.

The spelling **Latheram**, with *th* rather than *v*, is first seen in 1560, but the old form persisted, and there was never complete agreement on the right version. A lawsuit of 1613 noted that the meadow had '*since time out of mind*' been known '*as much by the name of Laverham, as by Laverum*', and incidentally stated its extent as 10 acres. It was not until 1806 that the spelling **Latherham** is recorded.

Until the John Dower House development, the only later use of the old meadow's name was for a private house in St George's Place. Until relatively recently it carried the words **Laverham House** over the door, but is now simply 77 St George's Place - midway between the Bayshill Inn and St George's Terrace. In the 1851 census, the Laverham name was still applied to this house, and to several cottages nearby, as well as to the Jessop's Nursery area, towards where Waitrose now is.