

# Widcombe Manor - The Golden House

Widcombe Manor, Church Street, Widcombe, Bath

Compiled by

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for the *Survey of Old Bath* and the *Widcombe and Lyncombe Local History Society*.



*Widcombe Manor – South front (Courtesy of Elizabeth, Mrs David Holland).*

Widcombe Manor is one of the most famous houses of Bath and of the West Country. In its idyllic setting by the historic church of St Thomas à Becket, it is on a popular route for tourists, and pictures abound of the house and church together.

Legend has claimed that it is the manor house of 'the royal manor of Widcombe'. However the 'manor of Widcombe' is in the Mendips; it belongs to the Duchy of Cornwall and is the property of Prince Charles. The manor of Lyncombe, south of Bath, was run from the site now called Lyncombe Hall, formerly known as Lyncombe Farm.

The story of Widcombe Manor is one of a climb to fame, with a succession of distinguished owners who reflected the social history of Bath at the time.

Its known history begins in 1628. At that time the manor of Lyncombe, also called the manor

of Lyncombe and Widcombe, was owned by Hugh Sexey's Hospital at Bruton, as Hugh Sexey, a Crown official, had bought it 'for ever' from the Crown. In 1628 the trustees granted the site to Robert Fisher, an alderman and sometime mayor of Bath. The property is described as the farm at Widcombe and the tenement by the church.

Robert Fisher seems to have been a market gardener who would have supplied the visitors to the spa who stayed at Bath lodging houses. He owned other pieces of property as well, including Forefield where Prior Park Buildings now stands. He died in 1656 and in 1661 his son Robert left the 'upper tenement' to his nephew Scarborough Chapman, whose mother had been Ann Fisher. Scarborough seems to have been named for Dr Scarborough and was presumably his godson.

Scarborough came from a family which had long been important in Bath. His father Captain

Henry, his uncles, his cousins, his grandfather, great-grandfather and great-great-grandfather, Richard Chapman the clothier, MP, were all in their time mayors. (There is no record that Richard Chapman ever held the site at Widcombe Manor, contrary to what local legend claims. Richard Chapman inherited the Prior Park Road mill from his father Thomas the clothier.)

In 1668 Scarborough married his step-cousin Susanna Swanton and a son Robert was born in 1670. Their daughter Jane was born in 1672 but Susanna died a few days after and Robert also died that year. It seems that it was following this that Scarborough became a Bristol businessman. Here he met an energetic Stuart widow, Anne Brinsden, and he married her in 1678. They were evidently in business together as there is a record of someone apprenticed to both of them. Scarborough is described as a merchant. For a time, 1684-1688, he was on Bristol City Council but retired from it, presumably due to the policies of the Catholic King James II, brother of Charles II, the Merry Monarch.

More than one historical architect has claimed that the basic building at Widcombe Manor is 17<sup>th</sup> century. The distinguished architect, Hugh Crallan, who acted for Jeremy Fry, called it 'Carolingian'. Another architect stated that he could not accept a date later than 1680. It seems therefore that Scarborough built the essential house: 1678 is a possible date and the one that the Survey now favours. 1690, the year of the death of his father Henry, is another possible year. The rustic work in the courtyard in front of the house seems to represent the Sun in Splendour, the logo of Scarborough's father Captain Henry, who used it on his trade tokens and on his inn the Sun.

The site of Widcombe Manor had an estate of 98 acres (37 ha), presumably let out during Scarborough's time (and probably the house was also let at times). In 1690 he inherited property in Bath from Henry. In 1697 he inherited the mill and mill ground which had come to be the property of the Fishers, from his aunt Jane Fisher who had married Francis Swanton as his second wife. She also left property called the house at Bridgend, later the site of the Greyhound Inn, which had 17 acres

with it. By the end of his life Scarborough could be regarded as a prosperous landowner. He registered his right to bear the Chapman arms in 1672 and had the rank of 'gentleman', being typical of the aspiring businessmen of the time.

In 1702, at St Thomas à Becket's, his daughter Jane married Philip Bennet, a member of a landed family. The connection probably arose through Francis Swanton, who knew the Bennets. Scarborough died in 1706 and was buried in the Abbey. It proves that the Bennets did not gain the house immediately. By the marriage settlement of 1678, it was occupied by his second wife, Mrs Anne Chapman, until her death early in 1721 – probably greatly to the annoyance of the Bennets.

The house was settled on Scarborough's male heirs so, contrary to what used to be believed, Jane and her husband never owned it. Jane died in 1722 and Philip in 1723, not 1722 as has been wrongly believed.

In 1721 the house therefore passed to Philip Bennet II. On his father's death he became lord of the manor of Maperton, with a beautiful manor house below Maperton church. It was held in trust until he was 22 in 1726/7. He would also have inherited the manor of South Brewham when his grandfather died in 1725. The owner of three large estates, and lord of the manor of two of them, he was typical of the gentry who were attracted to Bath in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century when the spa with all its attractions had become famous. Philip lived here in the age of Beau Nash, John Wood and Ralph Allen. His sister in fact married Ralph Allen's brother Philip, and Ralph Allen ran his stone tramway through Philip Bennet's mill grounds.

It was Philip Bennet II who remodelled the house and produced the famous building which is known today. Both Connie Smith, the pioneer in studying Widcombe Manor, and Dr Michael Forsyth of Bath University, independently suggested that the new frontage was designed by Nathaniel Ireson of Wincanton: the Bennets had connections with Wincanton – Maperton and South Brewham are nearby. The ornamental frontage shown in the photograph was created and, at the western side, Venetian windows were installed centrally, seen in a drawing by Robins.



*Drawing from the sale particulars of 1839 (Courtesy of Bath Record Office)*

Philip will also have laid out the gardens, in 18<sup>th</sup> century style. Documents suggest that at least 5 acres of orchards and mill grounds were left outside the formal gardens around the house. The hillock called 'the Mount' was erected at the time, also drawn by Robins. A spiral path wound up it; a 19<sup>th</sup> century tenant of the house buried her dog 'Frisky' at the top. There were also ponds, fed by the stream which runs down from the Prior Park site, crossing under lower Church Street, which was also remodelled by Philip Bennet. A Neptune statue came to preside over the two ponds.

In 1728 Philip bought from Ralph Allen the site of what used to be called Manor Farm. It is now known as Widcombe House; however in the 18<sup>th</sup> century Widcombe House was the name of a building on the site of Widcombe Crescent and in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the name of Widcombe Manor. 'Manor Farm' is a more convenient description.

Extra land was added to the purchase in 1730. On the Manor Farm site, Philip built his stables and coach houses. The site included the Garden House at the edge of St Thomas's churchyard. Some say that its design is older than the era of Philip II. There is also a famous dovecot.

Philip married twice, but unfortunately both his wives, Ann Estcourt and Mary Hallam, died young. Memorial plaques to both of them can be seen in the church.

Philip Bennet held a distinguished position. He was Lay Rector of St Thomas's, a Somerset JP and MP for Bath 1741-1747. It is said that he knew Henry Fielding and that letters to him from Fielding once existed though they were lost. Fielding is known to have lodged at Twerton and we have found no evidence that he stayed at Widcombe Manor. Nor is there any contemporary evidence that Sarah Fielding lived in the cottage on Philip's land, once called Yew Cottage but now a house known as Widcombe Lodge, though she may have done.

The sale particulars of 1839 state that on the first floor of Widcombe Manor, then called Widcombe House, there was one long room 50 feet (15m) in length. This would have run right across the house. Robins's early drawing of the original house, evidently copied from somewhere else, shows six windows on the first floor. The Survey suggests that Scarborough had two front rooms, each with three windows, and that when he remodelled the house Philip Bennet made them into one, entered by double

doors facing the central Venetian window at the front.

The sale particulars point out that the 'scene of enchantment' can be viewed from every side. This scene would not at first have included Prior Park, which was not built when Philip inherited the house. One can imagine the marvellous parties he must have held, for instance when he was elected MP. Visitors' carriages would be accommodated on the Manor Farm site. Double doors are mentioned in 1839 on the ground floor, presumably leading from the western drawing rooms into the hall; they could have been thrown open and a dance held, while the long room upstairs was used for cards and conversation. One can picture the scene with the candles lit while the sun sank over the surrounding hills.

The age of Jeremy Fry in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is supposed to have been the great epoch of parties at Widcombe Manor, but one can hazard that Philip's rivalled it.

Philip Bennet left the city, it is said, after 1747. It is said that he sank into a life of dissipation. When he died in 1761, Bennet documents record that there was not enough money to pay his debts and legacies. He left, for instance, an annuity to his housekeeper, Mary Egerton alias Carmichael, but Philip Bennet III refused to pay it, saying that she had had enough already.

Philip III lived at least part of the time at the house, but he died young, at the age of 39, in 1774. Except for Philip Bennet II, who prolonged his life by dissipation, Bennet men tended to die early at that time. They may have had TB or some hereditary wasting disease.

Philip Bennet IV did not live at the house: by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the spa was losing its fame. In 1813 he put a large part of the estate up for sale, advertised in the *Bristol Mercury*. John Hawkes drew a plan matching the different lots to a map which the Survey has published. (It is planned to include it in the monograph mentioned in the conclusion to this pamphlet.)

The estate was purchased by John Thomas, a Bristol businessman and overseer of the building of the Kennet & Avon canal who had bought Prior Park. It has been suggested that the first purchaser was the Bath lawyer Daniel Clutterbuck but he seems to have been an

agent who acted for John Thomas in several other transactions as well.

We then find a Captain Wrench as tenant of the house in 1820 and next as owner. This was typical of Bath at that time. It had lost its importance as a spa but many of the gentry were coming to settle in the beautiful city. John Thomas took advantage of this by selling off parts of the former Bennet estate for development, as population spilled out onto the land south of the old city. Prior Park Buildings and Prior Park Cottages for instance were begun on the Forefield site in 1820.

Hugh Crallan stated that the extra block behind Widcombe Manor was later than Regency but earlier than 1839. This means that it must have been built by the Wrenches. As they were brother and sister, they would each have required a bedroom. They probably used the long front room as a picture gallery, with perhaps a four-poster bed at one end of it. This would have left one more bedroom for the family, at the east end of the house behind the long room.

They would therefore have added the plain block seen at the north-west end of Widcombe Manor. Although it is described as a service block, and presently has a kitchen on the ground floor, the bedrooms were used for the family. The maids would have slept in the attics, and manservants probably in the basement where the butler's bed-sitting room is actually described in the sale particulars of 1927.

After Captain Wrench died, his sister Mary lived on in Widcombe House. Her will, proved in 1838, suggests a prosperous person with a number of contacts. She left bequests to charity and, in a codicil, £100 to someone under sentence of transportation, to be paid on his return to the country.

The sale particulars of 1839 (available at Bath Record Office) are ecstatic about the view and about the beauty of the grounds. The estate belonging to the house then consisted of the mansion itself and the land around it, the mill and its grounds, two cottages once called 'Dog-Kennel', and the Manor Farm site. Part of the rest of the lands had been retained by the Bennets and part by John Thomas.

The property was bought by another retired officer, Major-General William Clapham, with

his wife Ellen Elizabeth, born Ellen Jones-Parry. General Clapham had been a distinguished officer in the service of the Honourable East India Company, in the army at Madras. Legend has it that at the beginning of his career he was at the storming of Seringapatam in 1799, of which a picture was said later to hang in the servants' hall. Seringapatam provides the opening scene in Wilkie Collins' story *The Moonstone*.

General Clapham and his wife lived in style, in the manner described in many Victorian novels, such as those of Mrs Henry Wood. The census of 1851 shows them with a number of servants and with relations living with them and other visitors.

General Clapham died in 1851, the census year. Mrs Clapham continued to live there, visited by her nieces. She was a benefactor to St Thomas's and is said to have saved the church from oblivion by her numerous donations. In 1856 her niece Ellen Georgina Jones-Parry, then living at Widcombe House, married the new incumbent of St Thomas's, the Rev George Tate. They moved into Yew Cottage, which at some time was enlarged and took on the name of Widcombe Lodge.

Mrs Clapham died in 1869. She left Widcombe House to Mrs Tate, so the Tates moved into it. Widcombe Lodge was left to another niece, Mary Gertrude Jones-Parry, who is listed as living with Mrs Clapham in the census of 1861. In due course she moved into Widcombe Lodge. In 1879 she married Charles St Leger Langford and they resided there together.

By 1880 the Rev Tate had been appointed as Vicar of Kippington in Kent and he and his wife lived at Sevenoaks until their return at the end of the century. In their absence Widcombe House was let out. In 1894, 1895 and 1896 Viscount Weymouth is listed there, the heir to the Marquess of Bath, owner of the famous stately home at Longleat. In 1896 he is listed as MP: he was Conservative MP for Frome 1895-1896 and became 5th Marquess of Bath, 8th Baronet Thynne of Kempford and 7th Baronet Thynne of Warminster in April 1896.

Rev Tate died soon after his return, in 1900, and was buried at St Thomas's. His wife died in December 1901. Mrs Langford had the reversion of Widcombe House but remained at

Widcombe Lodge and the mansion continued to be let out. In 1904 it is listed for the first time in the directory as 'Widcombe Manor'. The lion and the urns were added to the roofline about this time. How ancient the Bennet lions on the gate are is not known.

Mrs Langford, by then the owner of both houses, died in 1913. Widcombe Manor was put up for sale in May 1914 but the *Bath Chronicle* recorded that there were no bids. Meanwhile Charles Langford had been granted the right to stay at Widcombe Lodge for his life, and remained there until 1917. After his death Widcombe Lodge became the sole property of Margaret Jones-Parry. She is recorded as living there in 1939 and attending the parish church council. By her father's will allotting his expectations, though he died before realising them, the two houses were separated and have since pursued separate identities. This will left Widcombe House/Manor to her brother James. He actually used the surname Yale because of one of the family's estates but was really another Jones-Parry. It is not usually recognised how long this influential family, with large estates in Wales, actually held the house now called Widcombe Manor. A journalist once wrote of the Rev Tate as owning Widcombe House but it was actually owned by his wife, born Ellen Jones-Parry.

In February 1917 Widcombe Manor was sold to John Roper Wright along with lands which Mrs Clapham had added: the Dell, which had once been Brown's Mill within the site of the old hunting park, plus the land on which Little Orchard now stands, and Ralph Allen's old gatehouse, called the Lodge. (She had also bought 8, 9 and 10 Church Street and bequeathed them along with Widcombe Lodge, with also the piece of ground called the square garden, between Widcombe Lodge and Widcombe Manor.)

John Roper Wright was a leading member of the iron and steel industry. He reflects a phase in British life, the increasing importance of industry. Captain Wrench and General Clapham were retired servicemen, Mrs Clapham belonged to the Jones-Parry family, large landowners. Sir John however had begun his career at 14 articled to the Soho Engineering Works at Preston. By 1874 at the Landore Steelworks, they produced the first

steel ingot using the “Siemens” open-hearth process, revolutionising the production of steel. In the period 1914-1917 he was Controller of Iron and Steel for the Ministry of Munitions of War. He retired in 1917 owing to ill-health and was succeeded in this role by his son Charles Wright.

He is said to have brought from Italy the fountain now in front of the house. It has been described as a late 16<sup>th</sup> century piece but recent thinking suggests that it is 20<sup>th</sup> century, presumably a tribute to Sir John’s interest in metallurgy. It was Horace Vachell (see below) who apparently moved it from the gardens to the front of the house where, unfortunately, it attracted intruders. Perhaps if they had known that it was a 20<sup>th</sup> century piece they would have been less eager to remove souvenirs from it. As the cupids (actually ‘boy-satyrs’) have already been stolen at times and replaced, burglars now only secure a copy of a copy.

After Sir John’s death, Sir Charles Wright put the house up for sale in 1927. Horace Vachell and his brother Arthur bought the mansion, the site of Manor Farm and the two cottages in lower Church Street called Yew Cottages, for £5,500. The other items were sold elsewhere.

Horace Vachell was a best-selling novelist of his time and he too lived in style, entertaining and making Widcombe Manor a centre of fêtes and dinner parties. His wife died early but his daughter Lydie lived with him, with her husband and first cousin Arthur, son of Horace’s brother Guy, and then their daughter Josephine or Jodie. Arthur Vachell died in 1949 by falling from a tree. Various legends are attached to this story. Horace’s own version was that Arthur fell sixty feet while cutting back a poplar but no-one would climb 60 feet up a poplar whether with or without a ladder.

Horace published in 1937 a novel about Widcombe Manor called *The Golden House*. He was renowned for his love of the table and his stock of wine, and wine features largely in the story. The author was not contented with finding out the real history of the house but in a manner typical of the age when even detectives like Lord Peter Wimsey were aristocrats imported a supposed feudal family (who actually lived elsewhere) the Paganels.



*Horace Vachell*

They lose the house but Humphry, the last of the Paganels, longs to retrieve it. He takes a position in a wine merchant’s to earn his living while he dreams about his ancestral home. A wealthy industrialist has bought it, who tries to stir up Bath. His wife and daughter aim to enter society but feel out of place and when the industrialist dies it turns out the house is left to Humphry. The daughter meanwhile has eloped with her brother’s chauffeur. This gave rise to the idea, later on, that Jodie Vachell eloped but she married, perfectly openly, in 1961 an Irish builder or farmer named William Dennis. Their son testified that the marriage had been a very happy one.

Towards the end of his life, it is said, Horace Vachell’s popularity declined as his ideas seemed outdated, and his income declined correspondingly. In 1954 permission was obtained to carry out works on the Manor Farm site and it was converted into a suitable residence for the Vachell family. A later owner, Francis Plumbe, made notes on how the old features were altered. It appears that the Vachells moved into it in 1954 and Horace Vachell died there in January 1955. His daughter Lydie remained there for a time with Jodie. Lydie Vachell died in Ireland in 1982 at the home of Jodie, Mrs Dennis.

Widcombe Manor with Yew Cottages was sold to Jeremy Fry on 29 July 1955. Jeremy Fry was a member of the famous chocolate-making family of Fry’s. His sister Barbara married into

the Robertson family (of Robertson's Jams fame) and lived eventually at Combe Hay and took a keen interest in Bath history and archaeology.

Sir John Roper Wright had built an up-to-date garage and chauffeur's house on the Manor Farm site but this was now separated from Widcombe Manor. Jeremy Fry therefore placed garaging at the rear of Widcombe Manor with Hugh Crallan acting for him. Another change attributed to him was the purchase of a summerhouse from the dismantling of Fairford Park in Gloucester-shire.

The 'swinging sixties' soon arrived and Jeremy Fry lived accordingly. His wife Camilla is reported to have dressed in the alternative style with brightly-coloured clothing in ethnic fashion and many strings of beads. Tales are told of the decoration of the house: a later owner reported a sheet of copper fastened to a wall, presumably to reflect light, and at another time there was talk of a 'leather ceiling'. His taste in colours also seems to have reflected that of the age when tenants in Georgian houses were known to paint them orange and black.

Jeremy Fry was a close friend of Anthony Armstrong-Jones, later Lord Snowdon, and Lord Snowdon and Princess Margaret often visited the house. Older Widcombe residents can still remember the music from parties sweeping over the valley. It is said that the house was packed out on those occasions so that Princess Margaret's lady's maid had to sleep in a boarding house in Widcombe Crescent. Daytime visitors were also frequent and Cecil Beaton is said to have driven miles to 'drop in' at the house. Festival events were also held there.

Legends abound of the house at this time. They have overshadowed Jeremy Fry's real contribution. He was a patron of the arts and is said to have saved Bath's Theatre Royal by

buying and restoring it. Already an engineer, he established 'the Rotork Engineering Company Ltd' at Widcombe Manor in 1957. They developed the company's valve actuator products and with increasing orders the firm soon moved to Brassmill Lane and created subsidiaries in a number of countries. By 2012 its turnover had grown to over £400m. Other engineers such as James Dyson have testified to the encouragement from Jeremy Fry in the development of their careers.

Eventually the house was sold on and by the 1970s the Hon and Mrs Robin Warrender were living there. Robin Warrender was chairman of Bain Dawes plc between 1973 and 1985 and chairman of London Wall Holdings Ltd between 1986 and 1994. After a brief interlude with another owner, the mansion was bought in 1994 by Mr and Mrs Davisson. They carried out an extensive programme of restoration of the house and grounds. The roof was renovated: it is said that a length of timber was donated to the Building of Bath Museum, now the Bath Preservation Trust Collection.

Messrs Nicholas Pearson provided a management plan for the grounds. The restoration of the garden was actually carried out by Andy King of New Leaf. A new pavilion was built by the swimming pool and a tennis court added.

Widcombe is fortunate that this historic house has had owners able to restore it. It seems that the house and grounds are now at their best.

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With thanks to everyone who has assisted in the study of Widcombe Manor over the years.

A monograph of about 23,000 words by Elizabeth Holland will be deposited with Bath Record Office and Bath Central Library in 2012. It is intended to serve as a reference work for those interested in the history of the house.

