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Country Houses Acquired with Bristol Wealth

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By H.G.M. LEIGHTON

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Introduction

I have spent a lifetime in commerce in contrast with most Presidents of this Society who usually come from an academic or associated background. To me, the acquisition, maintenance and use of wealth is a fascinating subject, but serious wealth is rarely made or retained through speculation but comes from aligning products or services to current needs. There are two Quaker sayings, which are timeless: 'The market may be satisfied with what it is getting but not if aware of what might be available to it' and 'If customers are looked after they will look after the business and the business will look after you'. Business ability and aptitude are not necessarily hereditary and often not so, though it is perhaps easier to create a business than adjust a mature one to changing conditions or, indeed, recognise early enough the need for change.

It is an aspect of the English character to prefer, at least in theory, the country to the town, but in the first instance it was not easy for a businessman to purchase or manage a country property if his assets were tied into his business which required a high proportion of the profits ploughed back as working capital. The acquisition of a country property might involve borrowing or lie with the next generation when wealth was more liquid with the business wound up or sold. There were many different and specific reasons why a country property came to be acquired; some were creatures of their time but the classical concept of *otium cum dignitate* was too often an elusive myth. It is against this background that country houses built or acquired through wealth generated in Bristol are discussed. Rather than attempt to cover the large number of houses acquired with Bristol money, this paper takes four examples each from a different century but all with antiquarian and architectural interest.

The Manor House, Burnett (Fig. 1)

The village of Burnett is some 3 miles south of Keynsham and 8 miles from Bristol. The manor of Burnett was part of the original endowment of Tewkesbury Abbey by Robert FitzHamon. At the Dissolution it was acquired with other properties more distant from Bristol by John Cutte, a substantial merchant in the city, presumably as an investment. He directed he be buried in St. Werburgh's Church but at the time of his death there was an outbreak of the plague in Bristol and thus he was buried at Burnett where he is commemorated by a monumental brass.

Cutte's widow continued to live at the old court house on the site of the present manor house and in due course the estate of some 550 acres passed to her fifth son Nicholas, 'a Spanish merchant' to whom John Whitson was apprenticed. After Nicholas's death his widow who had inherited the



Fig. 1. The Manor House, Burnett: from a watercolour by A.C. Fare, R.W.A.. The 17th-century (Whitson) part is on the north (right hand) side: the 18th-century section to the south of the Georgian doorcase has fenestration re-used from parts of the 17th-century building then demolished.



Fig. 2. Earnshill (copyright: Country Life Picture Library). The central Palladian block attributed to Colen Campbell is flanked by the two massive wings built post-1758.

estate 'called Whitson into the wine cellar and bade him broach the best butte: but truly he broached her and they subsequently married. This story will last so long as Bristol is a city' according to his relation John Aubrey.

Whitson (c.1557–1629) became a leading figure in early 17th-century Bristol. In 1603 he was involved in financing an expedition to North Virginia, later named Massachusetts, and Plymouth where the Pilgrim Fathers landed was originally called Whitson. He held all the major city offices and actively represented it in Parliament. He died from a fall from his horse and with no living issue he left, subject to a life interest to his third wife, the Burnett estate as an endowment to the Red Maids' School in Bristol, which he founded. The estate was retained by the school until the 1950s when the farms and individual houses were sold separately.

Whitson had commenced to rebuild the Manor House but it would seem incomplete at his death. What now exists of Whitson's house is the north wing and front wall of the west wing indicating at that time an 'L'-shaped building. The house was substantially reconstructed in the mid 18th century with a new east front on the line of the east end of the old north wing. The remainder was demolished leaving instead a compact Georgian interior and using mullion windows from the demolished parts to create a uniform façade. Internally, however, the north wing remains very much as Whitson left it with handsome mantelpieces and panelling. There are traces of outbuildings around a courtyard behind the house and a bowling green was to the west on the opposite side of the lane.

The house was let mainly on long leases. The Day family who were the 18th-century tenants carried out the alterations of that date. In the late 19th century it was used for a time as the rectory. A recent owner was editor of an English language newspaper in Bangkok using modern technology for that purpose.

Earnshill (Fig. 2)

The 18th-century example, and the most architecturally distinguished of the houses described, is Earnshill on the Somerset Levels below Curry Rivel. Francis Eyles, M.P. for Devizes and a director of the South Sea Company, appears to have built it in the second decade of the 18th century. After the South Sea Bubble broke in 1720 Eyles and his relations who were deeply involved in the company were prosecuted. Over 50% of his assets were sequestered; he was debarred from ever again holding public office and thus he was in no position to enjoy his new and idyllic Palladian villa. On stylistic grounds, detail and plan, the architect was most probably Colen Campbell, if so one of his earliest surviving houses.

After some difficulty, Eyles's son sold the property in 1758 to Richard Combe (1728–80). The money came from Richard's father Henry Combe (c.1685–1752), a linen draper and shipowner involved in general merchanting. In 1785 Bonner's *Bristol Journal* ranked Henry Combe as 12th amongst 37 Bristol merchants it listed 'who within 50 years had but small beginnings but died rich'. In 1738 he accommodated Frederick, Prince of Wales, and the Princess at his house in Queen Square when they visited Bristol. The next morning the Prince presented him with a gold and diamond snuff box still in the possession of the Combe family and shown held by his son Richard in the great family portrait in the drawing room at Earnshill. Richard Combe also inherited the wealth of his mother, sole heiress of Thomas Chamberlain of Bristol, 'a Virginia merchant'.

Little is known of the extent of Richard's business activities but he was active in the Society of Merchant Venturers and served as Master. He had been called to the Bar and with serious political ambitions may well have acquired Earnshill to establish his position in Somerset and it was conveniently close to Dillington that belonged to Lord North, the leading Tory. He unsuccessfully contested Bristol but after a number of years was eventually elected M.P. for Ilchester in 1774



Fig. 3. Leigh Court: from an illustration in John Rutter, *Delineations of the North-Western Division of the County of Somerset* (1829), showing the entrance façade facing the River Avon. The folly at Paradise Bottom can be seen on the left.



Fig. 4. Oare House (copyright: Country Life Picture Library). The wings added by Clough Williams-Ellis in the 1920s extend on either side of the Georgian house.

and held minor office in Lord North's administration. In 1780 he again contested Bristol against Edmund Burke but died during the election campaign. His widow Anne lived on at Earnshill until her death in 1809. Since then the house and estate have passed through six generations of the Combe family and at the present time Richard T. Combe carefully maintains this lovely house.

The house was built on a virgin site on a slight rise above the river Isle. Its principal rooms form a *piano nobile* above a low ground floor and consist of a drawing room or salon with a high coved ceiling, dining room and an inter-connecting library and study. On the floor above are four bedrooms. Clearly, Francis Eyles did not intend it for permanent occupation but rather as an occasional residence. The interior is dominated by two great matching staircases, each from the ground to the bedroom floor with landings, which might be better described as halls on each level, but the principal floor can also be approached externally through a classical doorcase by curving stairs rising on each side from the forecourt. The interior detail of the house, the carpentry and plasterwork are of the highest quality and, apart from a neo-Georgian re-ordering of the hall of the principal floor and plate glass windows instead of glazing bars, Eyles's house, the central block, is unaltered from the 18th century.

After Richard Combe bought Earnshill he set about adjusting it to permanent accommodation by constructing two long wings at right angles to the centre. That on the west side contains residential accommodation and on the east are offices and stables. These are pleasant Georgian work but not of the distinction of the main house. An estate map dated 1774 shows that the alterations were by then complete. Thomas Paty of Bristol has been suggested as a possible architect but there is no documentary or stylistic evidence to assist in an attribution. The putative Campbell work with its carefully detailed stone corner quoins and stone cornice and the mortar lines between the brickwork scribed along the centre is of much higher quality.

Leigh Court (Fig. 3)

Beyond Beggars Bush Lane on the road from Bristol to Portishead is a handsome Ionic style gateway. This was the principal entrance to Leigh Court built in 1811 by Philip John Miles (1773–1845). This vast mansion in the neo-Grecian style on the flat land below and adjacent to the River Avon is the work of Thomas Hopper, a competent but secondary Regency architect. It is believed that John Bennett, a friend of Miles, who had recently designed and built his own similar but smaller neo-Grecian house, Pyt near Tisbury in Wiltshire, may have helped. Miles moved to Leigh Court from 8 Rodney Place, Clifton, and is reputed to be Bristol's first millionaire. Leigh represents a new rationale for a large country house – business entertaining; the Grange in Hampshire was the contemporary equivalent of the Barings and later in the 19th century Cragside in Northumberland was built for a similar purpose by the Armstrongs, the armaments manufacturers.

Philip Miles inherited from his father sugar plantations in Jamaica and also became involved more generally in the rapidly expanding sugar industry, which led to banking from the resultant trading links. He entered the partnership of Miles' bank in Bristol in 1795 and remained a partner until his death. He was an M.P. between 1828 and 1837 but not continuously. He represented Bristol from 1835 to 1837.

Leigh Court is very grand and a typically dramatic example of Regency design and decoration. One enters from the portico a square hall, which appears to be circular due to the disposition of pillars and a circular ceiling pattern – a typical conceit of the time. The entrance hall opens into the great staircase hall, which fills the middle of the house, and is 40 ft. high and top lit, 50 ft. long and 30 ft. broad. Stairs sweep up either side to a gallery on the first floor articulated by Ionic columns. There are six grand reception rooms opening off the hall, which were filled with pictures collected by Richard Hart-Davis, M.P. for Colchester and later Bristol. Miles bought the collection

for £12,000 in 1814; it included a pair of particularly fine paintings by Claude Lorraine that had been owned by William Beckford of Fonthill. The furnishings were sumptuous and included pieces bought from Fonthill Abbey, a clock said to have belonged to Napoleon and four great vases in the hall, which came from Canons, the seat (now demolished) of the dukes of Chandos in Middlesex. The quality of decoration and detail throughout the house is the most lavish that money could buy; the elaborate brass banisters to the staircases are typical. Humphrey Repton gave advice on the grounds but judged the house ill-sited. Paradise Bottom, a glade leading to a grotto folly and rustic seat with a view down the Avon, is attributed to him.

Much of the art collection was sold in 1884 and 1899 when it fetched approximately half what had been paid for it. Likewise, furniture was sold when the Mileses sold the house in 1915 and some of the furniture then retained has come on the market recently. The house was bought by the Burden Institute for Persons requiring Care and Protection, which was subsumed by the National Health Service, and certain rooms were sadly redecorated in battleship grey. After some vicissitudes it is now a conference and entertainment centre and kept in reasonable condition.

Leigh Court is a product of its time. It illustrates a high point in the fortunes of Bristol, which declined through the middle of the 19th century but in retrospect did not leave the city with the problems of other west coast estuarial ports such as Liverpool or Glasgow.

Oare House (Fig. 4)

The Companies Act 1861 provided a practical form of limited liability company which enabled wealth derived from a business to be separated from its management and by shareholdings split amongst a wide variety of people with different interests or occupations. This was the case of J. S. Fry and Sons. By the early 1900s there was an increasing interest in, and appreciation of, old buildings as opposed to new build and in antique furniture. One of the Frys moved from Cotham in the Redland district of Bristol to Cricket St. Thomas, the great 18th-century house and park near Chard, Somerset, that had belonged to Admiral Hood; his son, Sir Geoffrey Storrs Fry (1888–1960) purchased Oare House near Marlborough. Another member of the family, Claude B. Fry, a past President of this Society, acquired Hannington Hall near Swindon from the north Wiltshire branch of the Codrington family.

The Frys have been described as possibly the wealthiest of all the Bristol families but their background made them less ostentatious than some. Joseph Storrs Fry and Sarah Fry were Quakers who came to Bristol in the 1740s from Sutton Benger in Wiltshire. In 1753 Joseph was admitted a freeman of the city as an apothecary, and by 1759 was manufacturing chocolates from premises in Narrow Wine Street. Two years later he bought out a rival manufacturer, Churchmans, and perfected an easily prepared and nutritious chocolate based drink – Fry's Cocoa. His descendants developed the business over the next hundred years but the invention of the chocolate bar in the later 19th century made them really, not merely rich. Instead of brittle slabs they devised a moulded bar divided into segments, which with a milk content was easily broken into sections and made an ideal snack. It was kept in good condition, for it could easily melt, by a tinfoil wrap and sold in a distinctive blue and white paper sleeve carrying the name *J.S. Fry and Sons* – a successful exercise in branding so that the retailer became but a distributor and the marketing and selling profit accrued to Frys, the manufacturers. They also developed the technique of placing a slice of pale milk chocolate in the bar between two pieces of dark chocolate which again provided an attractive product; lastly, it was possible with a milk-based mix to adjust the chocolate content and thus iron out fluctuations in the price of cocoa bean and maintain an even gross profit.

It is curious that there is a pattern of ability in the female side of the Fry family, which was more uneven amongst the males. By the end of the 1914–18 war there were serious family concerns

that Roderick Fry and his brothers were having difficulties with the business and in 1919 a merger of financial interests was arranged with the Cadburys, another Quaker family, creating the British Cocoa and Chocolate Company and providing Cadbury management for Frys. In the 1960s the Cadburys and Frys fell out at which time the 'Cocoa Company' was the biggest privately owned business in the United Kingdom. Sir Geoffrey Fry ever mindful of the source of his wealth led action by the Fry shareholders to get the company listed on the Stock Exchange.

Sir Geoffrey Fry was a barrister by profession and entered the civil service. He became Private Secretary first to Bonar Law and later to Stanley Baldwin, and acted as secretary and confidante throughout Baldwin's premierships. He married Althea Gardner whose uncle Lord Carnarvon excavated with Howard Carter the tomb of Tutankhamen.

In 1921 Sir Geoffrey bought Oare House, built in 1740 for Henry Deacon, a London wine merchant. The architect is reputedly Thomas Archer; it is red brick, handsome and nicely detailed. In the words of Clough Williams-Ellis, the architect whose help Sir Geoffrey sought, 'modern requirements necessitated an increase in size'. It was in fact doubled by building wings on either side which, together with the garden, is some of Williams-Ellis's best work in a classical and formal idiom, in contrast with the Arts and Crafts type vernacular houses such as Cold Blow at Oare which he also designed, and his mannered and eclectic approach at Portmeirion for which he is best remembered. At Oare House one of the wings contained a new library and drawing room in a restrained neo-Georgian manner and the other, service accommodation. The interior of the central Georgian core was re-ordered from the traditional four square layout to arrangements more suited to the enlarged house. The Frys lived graciously at Oare: it was one of the last bastions of Edwardian country house living. Like all the family they were generous but discreet and anonymous in their generosity. After Lady Fry's death the house was sold as a country residence for the Australian High Commissioner. Latterly, it has been owned by Henry Keswick, the tai-pan of Jardines in Hong Kong. As a millennium exercise he commissioned I. Pei of the Louvre pyramid fame to design a garden house as an eye-catcher at the end of the avenue that backs on to the Wiltshire Downs. This spectacular steel and glass structure is an example of modern architecture that enhances and complements its setting. I think Sir Geoffrey would have approved.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to choose as examples houses that will not be familiar to many and show through them the diversity that exists amongst country houses acquired by Bristol people and the many different motives behind their acquisition. Though the examples were all backed by considerable wealth, that of Bristol was not on the scale of London that led to such places as the Holfords' Westonbirt or of the riches of the English nabobs exemplified by Daylesford built by Warren Hastings or of the political fortune of William Blathwayt that led to the construction of Dyrham. Though it has dealt with mainly larger houses there are many pleasant and unpretentious places spread across the Bristol suburbs and the Gloucestershire and Somerset countryside. There are groups such as that on Frenchay Common on what is now the edge of Bristol and perhaps, surprisingly, Regency villas above Chepstow whose Bristol owners used the river passage with all its uncertainty. Many more can be identified by a Georgian façade set in modest grounds in country villages. They have brought diversity to the countryside, which is the richer for it.

Acknowledgement

Acknowledgement is given to Country Life Picture Library, Kings Reach Tower, London SE1 9LS, for kind permission to reproduce from its archive Figs. 2 and 4.

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