



Lost Houses of Dulwich - Carlton House, Herne Hill

By Sharon O'Connor, 2020

Built in 1819 and demolished less than a century later, Carlton House was a huge Georgian villa on the Dulwich side of Herne Hill, where Casino Avenue and Danecroft Road stand now.

Its first residents were Elhanan Bicknell (1788-1861) and his family, and the house was known simply as 'Herne Hill'. Bicknell, a partner in the leading whale oil merchants Langton & Bicknell, was the Charles Saatchi of his day. The Athenaeum named him one of the top four collectors of contemporary British art of his day and his collection included Turner, Gainsborough and Landseer. His house was always open to artists and connoisseurs including John Ruskin, who lived just across the road; Brian Green has covered the story of the Herne Hill art set in his article on Stephen Poyntz Denning (Journal Winter 2014). Bicknell lived here with the second, third and fourth of his wives. The Bicknell sons who grew up at the house included Henry Sanford, art collector and son-in-law of the artist David Roberts; Herman, a surgeon, traveller and Orientalist; Sidney, a soldier and writer; and Clarence, a botanist, archaeologist and artist.

The house itself was impressive. Clarence Bicknell's biographer, Valerie Lester, described it as having 'the air of a prosperous Late Regency matron: imposing, bosomy, pale and stucco-fronted'. Less than five miles from London yet surrounded by the rural splendour of woods and meadows, the villas on Herne Hill were huge and those atop the hill commanded views for miles around.

Royal Academicians and men of note were royally entertained at dinner parties of around two dozen guests, including Turner, whom Bicknell had talent-spotted before even Ruskin, buying his paintings while he was still unknown. The old drawing room in the centre of the house had walls lined with mahogany (to keep out the damp) and then covered with white and gold rococo panelling. It was then used to display watercolours but instead of framing the paintings, Bicknell set them into the wall panels; he even used Turner's Rivers of France to decorate the door panels. In another drawing room were hung other Turner masterpieces including Giudecca, La Donna della Salute and San Giorgio which Bicknell bought from the Royal Academy in 1841 for 250 guineas. In 2006 it sold for over £20 million, a record for a British painting.

Carlton House effectively functioned as a gallery with open house for artists, family and friends to view the paintings and Bicknell's other collections of books, musical instruments, telescopes and microscopes.

When his next-door neighbour, a very cantankerous man named Prior died in 1851, Bicknell bought his property and added it to his, extending the house and adding a large conservatory, creating more space for his ever-growing art collection. Five years later he added a billiard room.

In 1858, when his former partner, Mr Langton, died, Bicknell bought his meadows and part of his gardens, bringing Carlton House's grounds to around twelve acres. By then he had also bought most of the houses along Herne Hill, owning almost everything on both sides of the road from Red Post Hill to St Paul's church. Not that there were many houses at that time: Sidney wrote that 'from the veranda at Herne Hill, as far as the Norwood range of hills bounding the horizon, dense woods and meadow foreground filled the view, no houses were visible, and it was constantly a matter of surprise to the artist visitors, that London should be only 5 miles instead of 100 distant'.

Bicknell died in 1861 and the house was sold two years later, leaving an estate of around £500,000. His house and grounds together with two smaller residences sold for over £14,000. Sidney was scathing about the next resident of the house: 'Mr Nicholson pulled down the centre of the house ... and rebuilt it in the worst taste, christening it Carlton House'.

Edward Chambers Nicholson (1827-1890), was a chemist and dye manufacturer. He was born in Lincoln and after the death of his mother was sent to live with an aunt in Uxbridge where he went to school. In 1845, aged eighteen, he enrolled as one of the first students at the Royal College of Chemistry on Oxford St and after five years there, two as a research assistant, he left to investigate the chemistry of ironmaking in South Wales. Following a move to Aberdare in Scotland, he contracted typhoid fever, forcing a return to London. In 1853 he married Louisa Stephens and, with two fellow college students, he set up Simpson, Maule and Nicholson, a chemical manufacturing company based in Walworth. Nicholson led their research and development work and it was said that 'in him was united the genius of the manufacturer and the habits of a scientific investigator'. One of his most important discoveries was a method of making magenta dye and in 1862 the firm produced the world-famous 'Nicholson's blue' dye, named after him.

By 1865 the firm were the largest producers of coal tar colours in Britain. They outgrew the original premises in Walworth and moved to the purpose-built Atlas Dye Works at Hackney Wick. A number of other companies began using his magenta dye process so Nicholson decided to sue. Unfortunately, his patents were badly drafted and after three years of long and costly litigation a House of Lords judgement declared they were invalid. Others could then go ahead with magenta dye manufacture and the resulting competition brought about a 95% collapse in dye prices. Nicholson however, was still a very rich man and in 1868, aged only 41 he retired from the business. He never lost his interest in chemistry though, he continued to subscribe to periodicals and journals, acted as Steward at Imperial College dinners and continued his research work, registering new patents up until 1870.

Nicholson died at Carlton House in 1890, leaving an estate of £146,000. The house was sold at this stage: the 1890 Solicitors' Journal advertised Carlton House together with Frankfurt Villa and Horns Lodge. However, Nicholson's wife Louisa and son John both continued to live there until Louisa died in 1898 after a long and painful illness. The contents of the house were then sold by Messrs Broad & Wiltshire and included two pianos, three Chubb safes, 200 iron hurdles, three cows and a calf.

In 1901 Sir Henry George Smallman (1854-1923) moved into the house with his large family. Smallman was the son of Hammelton Luff and Henry Gowlett Smallman, publican and large-scale builder in Wandsworth, Brixton Hill and East Dulwich who also built the Gowlett Arms in Gowlett Road.

In 1880, Smallman, then a solicitor had married Louisa, eldest daughter of Richard Strong, JP, governor of Dulwich College and MP for Camberwell North. They had six sons and three daughters. Like so many in Dulwich, Smallman was very much involved in the City of London's administration. He was an alderman from 1898-1906 and a sheriff in 1905 He was knighted in 1906.

Henry and Louisa lived at Carlton House with all nine of their children and to look after them they had a butler and cook (a husband and wife team), a nurse, four maids and a groom. One son, Henry Richard George Strong Smallman, known as Harry, qualified as an architect and surveyor in 1904, and designed the Electric Cinema in Epsom and the Gaiety Cinema in Poplar. He was also responsible for the redesign of many London pubs. In 1905 the Smallmans moved to Beckenham,

Dulwich and Herne Hill had become less fashionable as increasing public transport meant that the area changed from being a rural wealthy retreat, marked as 'upper middle and upper classes, wealthy' on English social reformer Charles Booth's 'poverty map', to a middle-class enclave. Large houses were demolished to make way for residential roads and Carlton House was no exception. However, the Dulwich Estate's qualitative control meant that incoming residents were still described as 'comfortable or well-to-do', though Booth says they were not 'natural churchgoers' and spent their Saturdays bicycling, playing tennis and 'indulging in music and dancing'. On Sundays 'they rose after midday and strolled in Brockwell Park'. In 1903 an auction was held to sell off Carlton House's building materials 'to clear the site for new roads'.

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