

## **REMENHAM AND HORACE WALPOLE'S STRAWBERRY HILL HOUSE; UNEXPECTED CONNECTIONS**

On the 9<sup>th</sup> of July 2012, I joined the Remenham WI's visit to Strawberry Hill House, a remarkable 18<sup>th</sup> century 'Gothic fairy castle' on the banks of the Thames at Twickenham. It was an enjoyable and informative trip, expertly organised by Anne Francis.

### **THE HOUSE AND THE MAN**

Following a £9 million pound refurbishment in 2010, the house has been restored to its original architectural flamboyance which we viewed in a 90 minute tour giving us an insight into a vanished world of privilege and decadence. As is generally known, the house was created and occupied by Horace Walpole, 1717—1797, the son of Sir Robert Walpole England's first prime minister. Between 1747 and 1792, Walpole added towers and battlements, fireplaces and gilded ceilings copied from mediaeval and renaissance tombs, vaults and palaces, playing with colour and atmosphere ranging from monastic gloom to the brilliance of a French chateau. With this house he started the Gothic Revival and used it to display his collection of treasures, then one of the finest collections in the country. In addition he was a 'man of letters' with his own printing press, an innovator in style and an arbiter of fashion—an 18<sup>th</sup> century 'celebrity', an 'icon', a 'role model'. He never married.

### **WALPOLE'S REMENHAM FRIENDS**

Walpole had three close friends associated directly and indirectly with Remenham :- General Henry Conway ,1721-1795, of Park Place; Mrs Anne Damer ,Conway's daughter,1748-1828, sculptress; George Selwyn,1719-91, rake and Member of Parliament for Gloucester.

General Conway was Walpole's cousin and they had been friends since their school days at Eton. He too was an avaricious collector and creator of ancient fantasy. He removed the antique sarsen stones from the ruins of Reading Abbey and incorporated them into Conway's Bridge over Happy Valley on the Wargrave Road, a grotesque structure which looks as though it was built by drunken mediaeval trolls. Also, within the private grounds of Park Place, Conway is said to have established a Druidic Temple and a Neolithic stone circle—a mini

Stonehenge wrenched from its 4000 year old resting place in the Channel Islands where he had been Governor.

Mrs Anne Damer was the niece of Walpole who had also been her guardian in the 1750's while her father General Conway was involved in wars in Central Europe and France. When Walpole died in 1797 he left Strawberry Hill to the widowed Mrs Damer, where she lived for several years before setting up her own lavish house and theatrical salon nearby. She resumed her career as a sculptress and carved the heads of the river gods Thamesis [downstream] and Isis [upstream] built into the Remenham-Henley Bridge.

George Selwyn, whose ancestral home was in Matson village in Gloucestershire, led a life of sophisticated indolence with a reputation which has been inflated over the years to include gambling, womanising, necrophilia, attending public executions and belonging to The Hell Fire Club at Medmenham Abbey. He often joined in the Strawberry Hill entertainments. His portrait by Sir Joshua Reynolds hung in the Great Parlour above Walpole's fireplace. The connection with Remenham came about 150 years later in the 1920's when the father of 'our' late Teddy Selwyn, 1921-2009, the Reverend Stephen John Selwyn, 1875-1960, unexpectedly inherited the Selwyn ancestral Matson home in Gloucestershire. Being a rowing man, Stephen John moved to Henley, bought Wilminster House on Remenham Hill, and renamed it Matson House, a name it retained for about 80 years. The access lane to the coach house, stables and kitchen garden became Matson Drive, emerging near The Little Angel pub.

### ***THE SELWYN DYNASTY***

*[Teddy Selwyn's great grandfather was the famous colonial missionary, George Augustus Selwyn, 1809-1878, first Bishop of New Zealand and Melanesia. In 1882 Selwyn College, Cambridge was founded in his memory by Gladstone and others with the hope of producing more missionaries. Teddy's grandfather John Richardson Selwyn, 1844-1898, also a Bishop of Melanesia, became Master of Selwyn College 1893-1898. These Selwyn's were noted for their muscular Anglicanism, being outstanding horsemen, athletes and sailors, qualities necessary for their challenging missionary journeys to the scattered Pacific islands of Melanesia. Previously, when undergraduates at Cambridge, both of them scraped third class degrees and rowed in University Boat races: - 1829, the first one, 1864 and 1866 –Oxford won all three races.]*

**EPILOGUE: DESTRUCTION OF LANDSCAPES—The real cost of 'economic growth'**

The destruction of the Twickenham landscape is an object lesson for Remenham. Over two hundred years ago, the river views from Strawberry Hill House would have rivalled the beauty and tranquillity of Henley Regatta Reach and the sweep of the river as far as Hambleden lock. After about a hundred years of 'economic growth', these views have been obliterated and his house engulfed in the chaos of noisy traffic, close packed houses and ugly commercial and ecclesiastical buildings.

Now with everyone baying for more 'economic growth', and with huge riverside gatherings spreading, is Remenham also doomed to obliteration in spite of the valiant efforts of its friends? Perhaps the parish should adopt Conway's Bridge as the pathetic symbol of the folly of 'The Wrong Thing in The Wrong Place'.

*Jim Bland, Coach House, Matson Drive, Remenham  
and Selwyn College, 1948-1956*