

THE VALE MASCAL BATH HOUSE

By JOHN E. L. CAIGER

VALE MASCAL is a Georgian mansion at North Cray, Bexley, built by Thomas Tash in about 1746 on land belonging to Sir John Barker, the owner of Mount Mascall, a larger house which stood near by. Although it is a rather modest-sized house the grounds adjoining it are quite extensive and have the River Cray flowing through them. Of the eighteenth-century estate of 30 or more acres only 5 acres remain, but these are kept in beautiful order by the present owners. It is quite apparent that these grounds were originally designed by a professional landscape gardener who followed the then popular form of layout introduced first by William Kent and later by Capability Brown,¹ with sheets and cascades of water, small islands and meandering walks. Great emphasis has been made of the River Cray throughout the garden planning and the view from the main front of the house, i.e. the rear of the house as it stands today, is probably very little altered from that of the eighteenth century. It is difficult to state with certainty when the gardens were laid out, but it was probably sometime between 1760 and 1775 as they were regarded by visiting topographers to the district as being quite remarkable. Hasted, writing in 1778, states:² 'The River Cray takes its course northward on the eastern side of the parish, and having passed the gardens of North Cray Place, Woollet Hall, and Vale Mascall, at which last it forms a beautiful cascade, it flows on to Bexley.' The Rev. Henry Hunter who visited the district in the 1790s wrote in his *History of London and its Environs*:³ 'Vale Mascall (*sic*) is of inferior magnitude but no less interesting and agreeable. At this spot the River Cray exhibits a picture of a cascade, which is greatly admired, and well deserves to be for its extraordinary beauty.' C. Greenwood⁴ writing a little later in 1838 describes Vale Mascall in these words: 'The house is modern, and has a handsome appearance. From the principal front is seen a brilliant cascade, formed by the whole body of the Cray, which in the foreground expands into a lake where the trout play in abundance. In the centre of the lake is a small sylvan island, which might be fancifully compared to Calypso's fairy tale.'

¹ Dorothy Stroud, *Capability Brown*.

² *History of Kent*, i (1778), 157.

³ Part I (1796), 185.

⁴ *An Epitome of County History, Kent*, Vol. I.

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The Andrews, Dury and Herbert's map of 1769 shows an extraordinary complex of loops and channels in the River Cray within the grounds of Vale Mascal. Although the map is of small scale the surveyors show a dotted driveway which ends on the opposite side of the house to that shown on later maps. There are formal pathways round a pond (later to become the *Spring* in Springplace, a house built at a later date on Vale Mascal land) and pathways leading to the river which suggest that at least two of the water novelties devised by the gardener in charge were in existence at the time the surveyors visited the estate. As the odd bends depicted on the map cannot be altogether reconciled with the river as shown on later maps it must be assumed that the work on the estate was in fact taking place at the time of the survey by Andrews, Dury and Herbert, i.e. in about 1766.

The grounds extended from Woollet Hall, North Cray, to within a quarter of a mile of the Bexley Mill and along this length of waterway many improvements were added to the river. These included at least three weirs and the cascade which formed the centre-piece of the attractions in these gardens. There is evidence, too,⁵ that a water-wheel was installed to pump water from the Cray to some form of water device; it may well have been associated in some manner with the cascade. Towards the north-east end of the estate there was a substantially-built boat-house (now pulled down but shown on the 1838 Tithe Award and 1860 O.S. maps) and also landing-steps leading up from the river. This latter feature was recently rediscovered when weed clearance work was undertaken along the river bank. The water inlet over which the boat-house stood is to be seen near by. Amongst these remnants of a former age there still stands the building which is the main subject of this paper, a sturdily-built and picturesque bath house. This bath house is extremely interesting, for its erection and hydraulic arrangements must have been envisaged at the same time as the River Cray was undergoing its transformation. It stands in remarkably good condition on the bank of the strip of river which flows through the garden of 112, North Cray Road, Bexley, the home of Mr. and Mrs. Allen. The ground on which the bath house was built has changed ownership several times since the beginning of the nineteenth century and these details are worth recording. Sometime before 1838 the north-east portion of the Vale Mascal land was sold and the Tithe Award map shows the bath house quite detached from the estate in a small meadow of less than two acres, owned by a Thomas Lowe. Several small dwellings are also shown on other plots that had once been part of the estate. The boat-house was situated on a plot described in the Apportionment as *garden let to Mrs. Ely*. Mrs. Ely was one of the

⁵ N. Grant, Esq.

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first occupants of a house which after much subsequent alteration was to become known as Springplace. During the latter half of the nineteenth century the Rev. P. R. Egerton, who was the owner of Vale Mascal at that time, bought back the bath house and its surrounding meadow so that it was once again absorbed into the estate. On his death in 1911, *Bath Meadow* as it was called, again changed ownership and it became the property of the Haslett family who lived at Springfields. They in turn sold it to Robert Cooper of Springplace, who is believed to have carried out some restoration to the bath house.

It was during the latter part of the nineteenth century that the extravagant stories were circulated concerning the possible purpose of the bath and its 'Roman' origin. Two of these fanciful myths were that St. Paulinus baptized converts to Christianity there and that in later times it was a convenient stopping place for pilgrims to wash themselves in before continuing their journey. One story which is still current today is that it was used as a baptistry by Charles Wesley on two occasions when he was preaching in Bexley. There are two entries in the parish records⁶ for March 1742, which refer to Charles Wesley baptizing by immersion. These references and the fact that the bath house has a distinctly ecclesiastical appearance seem to be the basis for the circulation of this story.

In 1935 the house called Springplace⁷ was demolished and it was replaced by several modern houses. Today the bath house stands in the grounds of one of them and the site of the ornamental pond, landing-steps and boat-house is in the garden of another further along the road.

GENERAL NOTES CONCERNING BATHS AND BATH HOUSES

The custom of building simple outdoor baths has been established in England since the early part of the seventeenth century. These baths were often nothing more than a brickwork cistern recessed into the ground and supplied with running water from a natural spring. At this early period they were always sited in the garden where a source of running water could usually be found. In John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*⁸ the following passage occurs "Then", said he (the Interpreter) to the damsel that first opened to them, "take them and have them into the garden to the bath and there wash them and make them clean from the soil which they have gathered from travelling."

The well-known 'Roman bath' at number 5, Strand Lane, W.C.2, probably dates from about Bunyan's time when communal bathing for cleanliness rather than medical purposes was more commonplace.

⁶ Baptismal Register, St. Mary's, Bexley.

⁷ Known for a time as Spring Lawn.

⁸ Part II.

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This bath is fed by a spring and the water is reputed to be at a constant temperature of 36° F. Originally, it was built in the grounds of Arundel House, the property of the Earls of Arundel but later it was in fairly regular use by the public throughout the nineteenth century. William Weddell, the collector, is reputed to have died from a sudden internal chill after bathing there in April, 1792. Another victim of the dangerous effects of cold water was Sir Michael Hicks 'who entered his bath so frequently during the hot summer of 1612, that it brought on a burning ague from which he died'.⁹

From these simple spring-fed baths there developed in the middle of the eighteenth century the elaborate buildings often designed by the leading landscape gardeners and architects of the period. At Corsham Court, Wilts., there is a splendid bath house in the park built from plans drawn by Capability Brown. It was later embellished with crocketed pinnacles by John Nash and Humphry Repton.¹⁰ Another fine example built in the 1760s exists at Arnos Court, Brislington. Bath houses were usually sited in some secluded corner of the garden at a discreet distance from the mansion and always convenient to a water supply. Springs, lakes and rivers were all utilized for the purpose of filling the bath. They were intended only as a cold plunge and were seldom large enough to swim more than a few strokes in. The natural coldness of the water can well be imagined from the fact that most of the larger bath houses incorporated within them a fireplace to warm the bather after his immersion in the cold water. The bath was primarily used by young men hot and fatigued from hunting and other athletic pursuits. Older men would use them too, on advice from their medical practitioners. The plunge bath was highly recommended by several leading doctors of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Notable amongst these was Dr. Oliver of Bath who extolled the virtues of cold water bathing.¹¹

Architectural and gardening books of the eighteenth century often give designs and instructions as to how these baths should be constructed. Isaac Ware¹² describes them thus: 'In some retired part of the garden there may burst at once upon the eye a temple . . . its depth will give room for useful purposes, and in the centre may be a noble bath. The building will allow a hall before it; and a recess behind for dressing and undressing. The building most exposed to show may very naturally and very well bear the addition of an irregular rustick at the corners, and at the principal part in front . . .' The design he has illustrated shows a conventional type of building for the

⁹ *Shell Gardens Book* (1964).

¹⁰ Paul Edwards, *English Garden Ornament* (1965), 135.

¹¹ Walter Ison, *The Georgian Buildings of Bristol*.

¹² *Complete Body of Architecture*, Ch. XIII, 647 (1756).

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period, constructed in brickwork and 22 ft. square. It has a hall in front of the bath and a recess behind it. Not all architects favoured such formal designs and the use of customary building materials. William Wrighte, a contemporary of Isaac Ware, published in 1767 a book entitled *Grotesque Architecture or Rural Amusement*; in which he has designed a diverse number of garden buildings which include baths, hermitages, cascades and grottos. The engraved drawings and their accompanying specifications show that these forms of garden architecture were sometimes quite whimsical in their ornamentation. The specification lists some odd materials such as curious shells, coral, flint pebbles, ores, papier mâché and frosted work; it also directs that the floors might be paved with 'sheeps' marrow-bones placed upright, or any other pretty Device intermixed with them'.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century the practice of taking cold plunges declined and by the nineteenth century bath houses were falling into disuse, although as late as 1818 designs were still being published.¹³ Apart from the Vale Mascall bath house, there were formerly at least three others in the Bexley district. One stood on land known as Cold Bath Wood and is shown on the 1860, 25-in. O.S. plan. This was the property of the Lewin family who lived at a mansion called The Hollies. The bath received its water from a small brook known as the Wyncham Stream (N.G.R. TQ45417360). The same O.S. plan shows another bath house beside the River Shuttle on land which belonged to Blendon Hall (N.G.R. TQ47837379). Both of the bath houses have since been destroyed but in the grounds of Lamorbey Park, Sidcup, there are the rather dilapidated remains of yet another eighteenth-century bath house. This stands on ground beside the high waterfall where the upper lake flows into the lower one.¹⁴ The situation was chosen well, for water was supplied by gravity from the upper lake whilst the waste water from the bath was readily discharged via a sluice to the lower level lake. It is a small unpretentious building constructed in brick with a ridge vault and stone steps leading down to the rectangular plunge bath. Until recently, the lead supply pipe from the upper lake was still in position on an inside wall whilst the opposite wall still bears a recess into which the waste sluice once fitted (N.G.R. TQ46787322).

NOTES ON THE GARDEN ARRANGEMENTS AT VALE MASCAL

The Tithe Award map shows that several weirs were built across the river, it also shows the principal cascade which was so much admired by the eighteenth-century topographers. The cartographer has drawn a

¹³ J. C. Loudon, *Encyclopaedia of Gardening* (1827).

¹⁴ Incorrectly shown as 'Icehouse' on O.S. plan.

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large stylized waterfall on the map indicating its position, whereas the weirs are drawn with a more gentle fall of water. A recent visit to the garden of Vale Mascas showed that the cascade has been almost demolished, only the lower courses of its brickwork footings remain visible beneath the water. The cascade was probably deliberately destroyed many years ago when the flow of the Cray was greatly diminished by the building of housing estates and also by increased pumping along its catchment areas by the Water Authority.

In addition to the main course of the river there are to be noted several artificial waterways which had to be cut before the weirs could be built. These channels served to divert the main stream away from the river-bed area where bricklaying on the weirs was in progress. Sometimes in this class of work, the channels were filled in when the task was completed, but at Vale Mascas some were allowed to remain open to add their effect to the general water scene. The existing arrangements show that the Vale Mascas bath could be filled or alternatively completely drained for cleaning purposes. Its position was a favourable one with regard to privacy but it must have presented its designer with a problem. This difficulty arose from the necessity to obtain a supply from and also drain the bath water back into the River Cray, which has only a slight gradient along this part of its course. Ideally, a bath house is supplied with water lying at a high level and the waste water is discharged to a lower level. Clearly, these conditions did not exist by the river when the building of the bath house was contemplated. The problem was overcome, however, by cutting an almost level channel or leat to supply the bath house from a distant position behind a weir where water was available several feet above the level of the proposed bath floor. The bath house was constructed across this leat and about 150 ft. downstream from the weir. (For details see inset on plan.) The outfall or waste culvert from the bath was laid with a slight fall from the bath to the River Cray. By these arrangements the rather exacting water requirements of the bath house were fulfilled. A sluice gate was formerly provided at the weir end of the leat to regulate the flow of water into the bath house, whilst an internal sluice gate operating against the outfall pipe of the bath completed the necessary hydraulic controls. By suitably adjusting these two independent sluices the bath could be filled to its maximum depth of 4 ft. or completely drained when required.

DESCRIPTION OF THE BATH HOUSE

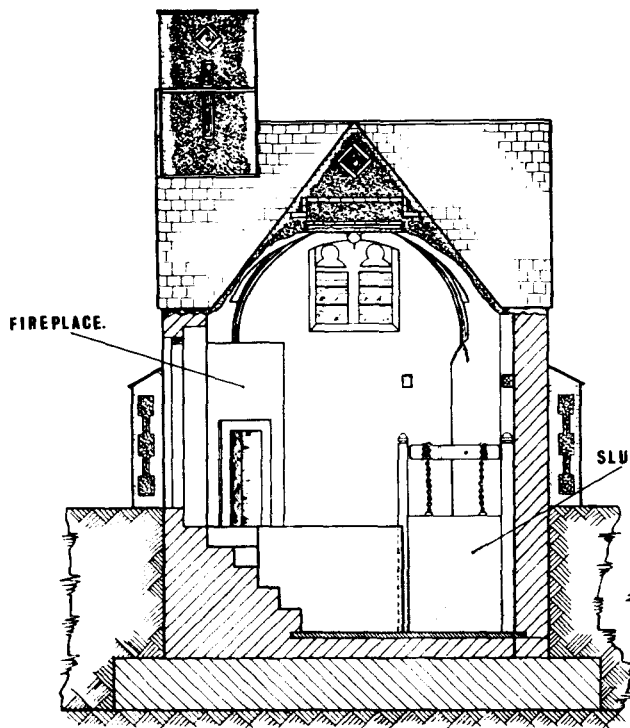
Externally the bath house has been designed to resemble a small chapel complete with sham tower, buttressed walls and Gothic windows. (See plan and sections.) The building is sturdily constructed of 13½-in.



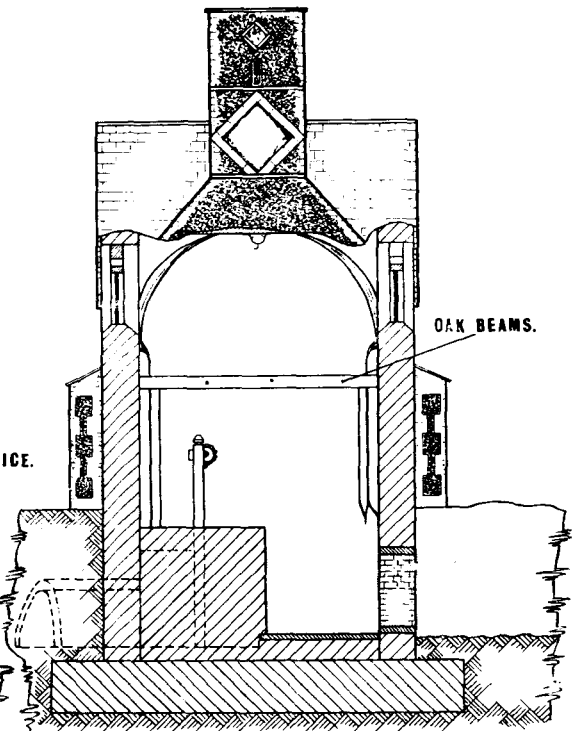
The Vale Maschal bath house, showing small blocked windows
of rubbed brick.



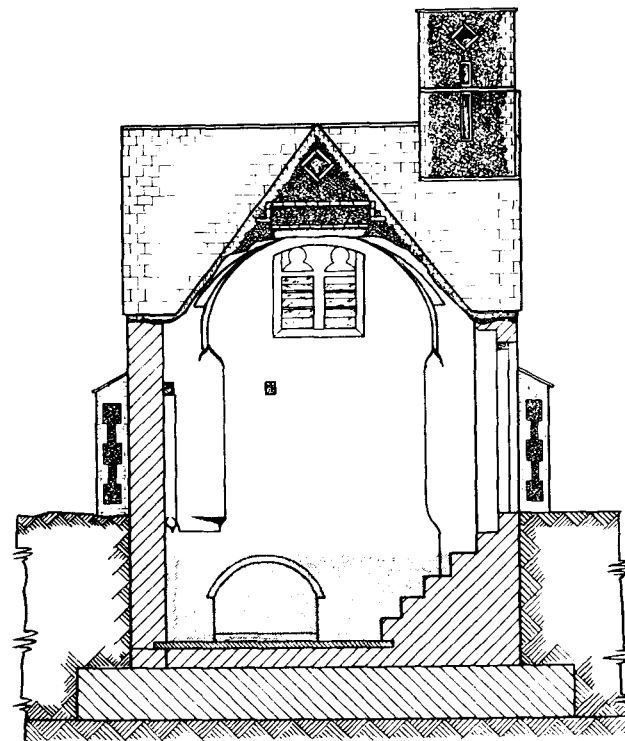
The Vale Maschal bath house, showing Gothic-style glazed windows.



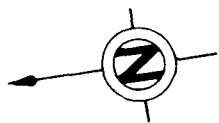
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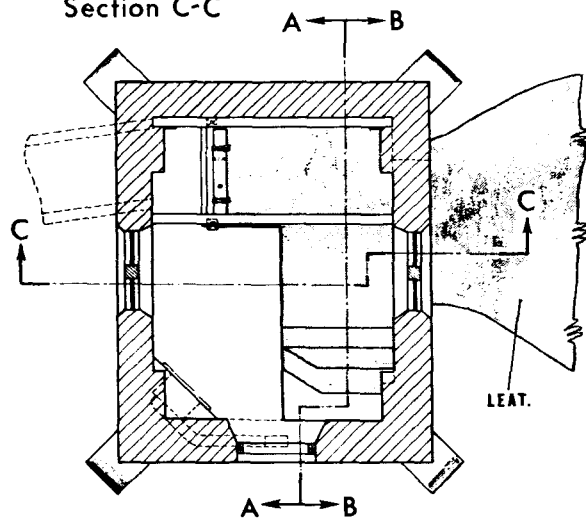
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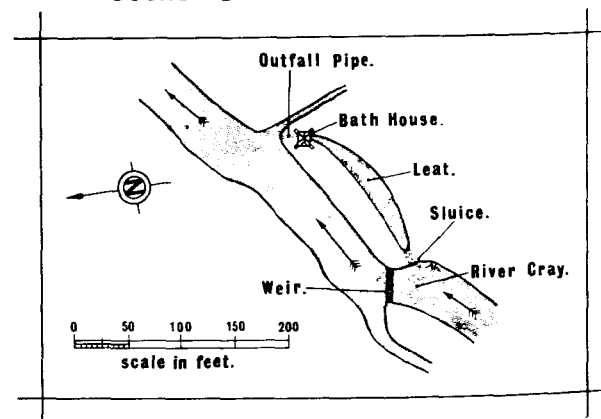
Section B-B



THE BATH HOUSE,
NORTH CRAY ROAD, BEXLEY.



PLAN.



SURVEYED & DRAWN, J. E. L. CAIGER, 1967.

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brickwork on three walls whilst the west wall is 18 in. thick. This latter wall supports much of the additional load imposed by the tower; it also encases the flue leading from the fireplace inside the bath house. Although of brick construction the external walls are flint faced to a depth of $4\frac{1}{2}$ in. The buttresses, too, are flint patterned between the quoins. Small blocked windows of rubbed brick (see Plate I), so typical of the period, are inserted into all four walls. Two Gothic-style glazed windows are set high up, to ensure privacy for the bather, on the north and south elevations. (See Plate II.) On the east wall, a blind window similar to those on the north and south sides is flint filled. Above all three windows are neat brick label mouldings. The square brick tower is ornamented on all sides with narrow brickwork slots and lozenge decoration, doubtless to convey the impression of a belfry. Flint facing has been applied to the tower in the same manner as to the walls. Set into the lower portion of the west side of the tower and above the doorway is another larger lozenge-shaped panel. In two of the corners are the remains of faint numerals, once gilded. These probably record the date when the Rev. Egerton, a former owner of the bath house, restored it sometime in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The bath house is entered on the west side through a doorway which formerly had a fine heavy oak door. Unhappily, this door was removed and taken to Frank's Hall, Farningham, by a former owner of Springplace in 1935 and the present door is only a makeshift one of deal. Inside the bath house the floor is set some 9 in. below the door sill. The cold plunge bath is on the right-hand side and the bather entered the water down the steps. River water from the leat flows into the building through an arch set low down on the south wall. The sluice gate against the outfall pipe is a replacement one fitted about 25 years ago by a local builder. Above the sluice are two horizontal oak beams which span the building some 5 ft. above the floor, they are probably original. The exact purpose of these beams has been the subject of much fanciful conjecture by visitors to the bath house in the past. A close inspection of the beams and the bath brickwork beneath them was made by the writer and their function was soon determined. There are small holes for bolts in the beams which align vertically with deep recesses in the sides and bottom of the bath. It is quite apparent that these beams had served to support two upright members from the original sluice gate and these uprights were formerly bolted to the horizontal beams. The present sluice gate was erected 2 ft. nearer to the north wall than the earlier one, the rotted upright timbers and battens of which were removed a quarter of a century ago. Unfortunately, the floor of the bath was obscured by quantities of river mud and it was not possible to determine if it was tiled or brick lined when the building was visited in March 1967. In

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the left-hand corner of the bath house, nearest to the doorway, there is a small fireplace for warming the bather after the chilling coldness of the water. The flue from this fireplace is led up into its chimney, which is the mock tower described earlier. Above the bath there is a good brick, level ridge vault, the springing of which is supported by prominent abutments corbelled out on the inside walls in $4\frac{1}{2}$ -in. brick-work. The vault is plastered and in good condition and the inside walls are rendered in sand mortar and quite plain, in sharp contrast to the rather ornate exterior.

It is interesting to speculate on the identity of the eighteenth-century gardening expert responsible for the complicated water and garden arrangements in the grounds of Vale Mascal. As it seems fairly certain that the work was done between 1760 and 1775 it is tempting to attribute the layout to Capability Brown or one of his assistants. In 1761/62 he designed Danson Park, Bexleyheath, with its great dam and impressive lake for Alderman John Boyd.¹⁵ He also built the curious building known as the Chapel House, a small cottage in the form of a church and steeple and intended as a pleasing addition to the view from the mansion. The Vale Mascal bath house, also built in an ecclesiastical style, made a picturesque addition to the scenery along the main drive from gateway to house. In 1782 Capability Brown laid out the gardens of North Cray Place¹⁶ which at that time was the next large estate westward from Vale Mascal along the course of the River Cray. The famous five-arch bridge is placed over a cascade and the bridge itself is decorated with flint insets in much the same manner as the decorative flintwork on the bath house. There are several other tenuous links which connect Capability Brown with North Cray and Bexley but they are mostly based on speculation and at present cannot be verified from documentary sources.

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¹⁵ Dorothy Stroud, *Capability Brown*.

¹⁶ *Idem*.