

## DANSON PARK, BEXLEY

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Danson Park is a particularly perfect example of the Georgian villa, aesthetically significant in itself and important, too, as a relatively rare survivor of the many such buildings which sprang up around the capital in the eighteenth century. It was taken into public ownership by the local borough in 1924, since when, as is so often the case, the surrounding park has been lovingly tended – perhaps over-tended – while the condition of the house itself has progressively deteriorated. The fate of this Grade 1 listed building has long been a cause for concern to national amenity societies and to the Historic Buildings Division of the Greater London Council. Recent proposals for its restoration and conversion to office use have provided a useful opportunity to examine the structure and elucidate its building history.

The preamble to the building of the present house at Danson begins in 1695, when the estate was sold to John Styleman, a retired East India merchant. In 1723, Styleman leased the property to John Selwyn, M.P. for Gloucester and a former aide-de-camp to the first Duke of Marlborough, and Selwyn continued in occupation after Styleman's death in 1734. By his will of two years earlier Styleman left his widow Mary the income from the estate for life. At her death half the value of the estate was to be put in trust for the building and maintenance of almshouses for twelve poor families of Bexley. Mary Styleman died in 1750, and the almshouses in Bexley High Street were completed in 1755. In 1751, John Selwyn died, too, and the lease passed to his widow, also, confusingly, called Mary.<sup>1</sup> Two years later a repairing lease for twenty-one years was

<sup>1</sup> Information on this part of the estate's history is taken from Ruth Hutcherson, *The History of Danson* (published by the author, 1979).



(Photo: Bodleian Library, Oxford)  
Danson Park: The Chinese Pavilion.

taken by John Boyd; he, however, was already in occupation of the premises, while Mary Selwyn was described in the lease as resident in the parish of St. George, Hanover Square.<sup>2</sup>

The old manor house of Danson which Boyd leased stood in the bottom of the valley to the south of the present house, close to the eastern boundary of the estate. The public road from Danson to Blendon along that eastern boundary originally ran so close to the house that between 1737 and 1745 John Selwyn bought up land from various neighbours so that the road could be moved further away. This proposal was put into effect *c.* 1746 and is recorded by a contemporary map.<sup>3</sup> No view of the old house appears to exist, but the layout of the immediate environs is shown in the plan accompanying the 1753 lease and by another in the Reverend Joseph Spence's papers.<sup>4</sup> The house itself seems to have been surrounded by walled gardens, while to the west the Danson Stream was

<sup>2</sup> Bexley Local History Library (Hall Place), Danson deeds D67.

<sup>3</sup> Bexley Local History Library, E15.

<sup>4</sup> Bexley Local History Library, P6.11. (original in Yale University Library).

dammed to create a long formal canal.<sup>5</sup> Further west again were two lakes separated by a small island, on which stood a Chinese pavilion reached by bridges with Chinese Chippendale handrails<sup>6</sup> (Plate I). Elsewhere in the grounds a temple and a tea house are marked.<sup>7</sup>

John Boyd was a prominent City merchant<sup>8</sup> and a director of the East India Company. In 1775, he was created a baronet. At the time of his second marriage in 1766 Mrs. Delany wrote of him, 'besides his having at least £9,000 a year, he is an excellent man . . .' In 1759, he purchased the freehold of the Danson property from Mary Styleman, and it was presumably at this stage that he decided that the existing house would not do for a man of his taste and means. He set about expanding the relatively small estate acquired in 1753 by buying up adjoining properties and pulling down the cottages and farm buildings which stood on them.<sup>9</sup> But his wish to demolish the old house and build afresh was hampered by the charitable strings attached to the estate by Styleman's will. In 1762, Boyd got round this with a private Act of Parliament<sup>10</sup> and an undertaking to pay an annuity of £100 to Styleman's almshouses. The Act expressed Boyd's intention to pull down the old house (converting the materials to his own use) and to spend at least £2,500 on a new house and out-offices. This he was to do within five years of 24th June, 1762; but since he was clearly anxious to proceed, work presumably began almost immediately.

For his architect Boyd chose Robert Taylor.<sup>11</sup> Taylor had his own strong connections with the City in general and the East India Company in particular, becoming Surveyor to the Bank of England in 1764 and designing houses for a number of Boyd's fellow directors.<sup>12</sup> As a young man he carved the pedimental sculpture for

<sup>5</sup> This feature is shown as early as 1684 on a plan of the estate which has now disappeared. It is reproduced in a booklet on the history of the estate published in 1925.

<sup>6</sup> There is a drawing of the pavilion in the Bodleian Library (Gough Maps 13 fol. 28). The plan in the Reverend Joseph Spence's papers has another Chinese House pencilled in on the hillside to the north.

<sup>7</sup> An Ice House Field is mentioned in the 1753 lease.

<sup>8</sup> Not, however, as has been stated elsewhere, an alderman.

<sup>9</sup> Boyd's petition to Parliament in 1762 refers to these additional lands as 'contiguous to and intermixed with divers parts of the lands so devised' by Styleman's will.

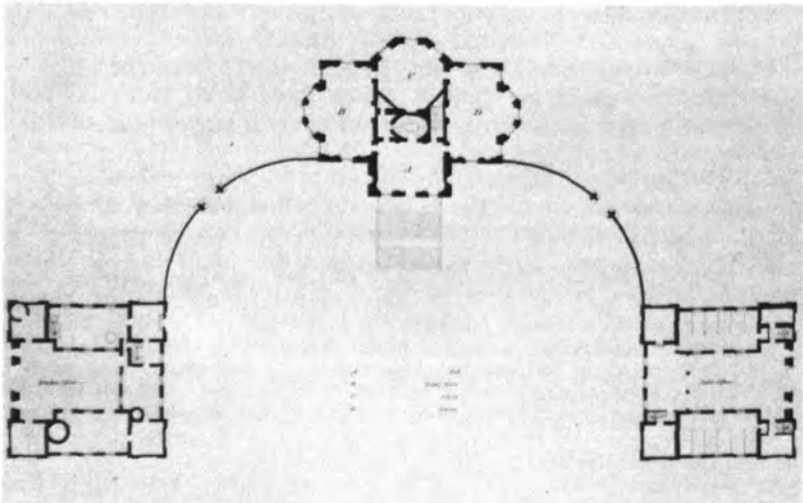
<sup>10</sup> 2 George III No. 85.

<sup>11</sup> He is named on Malton's view of the house, published by Taylor's son Michael Angelo in 1790, and by *The Kentish Traveller's Companion* of 1776 (pp. 19-20).

<sup>12</sup> See Marcus Binney, 'Sir Robert Taylor's Grafton Street', *Country Life*, 12th November 1981.



*(Photo: Ashmolean Museum, Oxford)*  
Danson Park, Bexley, in 1790. Thomas Malton's View of the House from the North-west.



*(Photo: Ashmolean Museum, Oxford)*  
Plan of the principal Floor in 1790.

the new Mansion House, and when he was knighted in 1782 it was not on account of his services to architecture but his election as Sheriff of London.

Taylor's special contribution to eighteenth-century architecture was the compact, ingeniously planned, astylar villa which could serve not just as a suburban summer residence but as the principal all-year seat of men such as Boyd. Like his other villas at Harleyford (Bucks.), Chute (Wilts.), and Barlaston (Staffs.), Danson is a tall house (Plate II). The main floor, approached externally by a grand flight of steps, is raised up not only on a basement but on a concealed sub-basement as well. In addition, there were formerly detached service blocks to either side, connected to the house by quadrant walls (Plate III). The result was a villa with only four main reception rooms and limited bedroom accommodation, but comparatively copious service areas. Several early writers mention departures from the original plan made while building was in progress, and Hasted<sup>13</sup> specifically identifies these departures with the addition of wings. Since the house was thereby provided with two kitchens, one of two storeys in the basement of the house itself and another in the eastern of the detached wings, this may well be so. Boyd presumably decided that on so spacious a site there was no need to have everything crammed into so tight a compass, and he may also have been influenced by the growth of his family after his remarriage in 1766. The additions can be dated to before 1782, when *The Ambulator* referred to the existence of 'handsome wings', but the projections shown on Andrews, Dury and Herbert's *Map of Kent* of 1769 may also be schematic representations of them<sup>14</sup> (Plate IV).

In design, the exterior of Danson Hill (as Boyd called his new house) (Plate V) is closely related to the Taylor villas already mentioned and particularly to Chute Lodge (Plate VI). It is astylar – i.e. there is no applied classical order – and it relies for effect on the

<sup>13</sup> Edward Hasted, *History of Kent*, 2nd Edn. (1797–1801), ii, 172–3. See also *The Kentish Traveller's Companion*, *loc. cit.*, and E.W. Brayley, *Beauties of England and Wales* (1808), vol. 7, part 1, 556–7.

<sup>14</sup> A plan for landscaping the park (Bexley Local History Library E18), which probably dates from the mid-1760s, shows the house standing alone and stables concealed in trees by the eastern entrance to the estate. The wings are shown by Corbould's engraving of 1786 and Malton's of 1790, by an undated painting now at Erith Public Library, and by the 1799 3''/1 mile Ordnance Survey map. They were actually quadrangular, with quartets of square two-storey pavilions connected by single-storey ranges. Foundations were apparently uncovered during the laying of a gas main in 1969.



(Photo: Greater London Council)

The old and new Houses at Danson Park, from Andrews, Dury and Herbert's *Map of Kent* (1769).

*(Photo: Country Life)*

Danson Park from the North-west.

articulation of plain and rusticated surfaces. Canted bays were a favourite device of Taylor's in this respect. That on the south front of Danson rises the full height of the house (Plate VII). Those to either side originally rose only as far as the main floor, as at Harleyford, Chute, and Barlaston, and were finished, like Chute (Plate VIII), with lean-to roofs. Their subsequent raising in the nineteenth century to provide extra bathrooms interferes considerably with the overall articulation of Taylor's design. Another unfortunate later alteration is the dead-white render which covers the original ashlar facing and obliterates Taylor's mouldings. Together with the disappearance of the wings and the raising of the bays, it gives the house a cold, monolithic quality that was not intended. The roofs have projecting eaves, which is what one finds at Chute and also at Taylor's best-known villa, Asgill House at Richmond. However, evidence which can be seen only up in the roof itself suggests that the original intention may have been to have



*(Photo: Greater London Council)*  
Chute Lodge, Wilts., from the North-west.



*(Photo: Country Life)*  
Danson Park from the South-east.



the roof set back behind a parapet, as at Harleyford and Barlaston.<sup>15</sup>

The plan of Danson is very similar to that of Chute. On the main floor the entrance hall, dining room, saloon, and library are disposed around a central domed oval stairwell (Plate IX). On the bedroom floor this opens out, via a ring of Ionic columns, into a spacious landing. This arrangement is identical in every respect with that at Chute, except that the graceful scrolled ironwork of the Danson stair-rail is replaced there with simple iron stanchions. Alongside the main stair, but out of sight in its own narrow compartment, is a servants' stair which formerly rose from the sub-basement to emerge on the main landing. It is inconceivable that the present arrangement, which would involve servants popping up through a trap door onto the main landing, could be original, and it must once have resembled that at Harleyford, where the servants' stair runs up alongside the main stair to emerge on the landing surrounded by a simple railing.<sup>16</sup> As it passes through the principal floor the secondary stair at Danson is lit by borrowed light via a glazed roundel in the wall separating it from the main stairwell.

The entrance hall is stone-paved, and its walls have a spare Palladian arrangement of niches, raised tablets, circular recesses, and enriched doorcases. Such components can be found in other Taylor villas,<sup>17</sup> and in general it is striking how, both externally and internally in these buildings, he manipulated a basic vocabulary of motifs to varying effect. The octagonal saloon (Plate X) which occupies the centre of the garden front here has a pretty ceiling

<sup>15</sup> The evidence is that the external structural walls of brick are carried up within the roof for about two feet, and that holes have had to be cut through them for the main joists of the roof to rest in, a seemingly pointless exercise unless the present structure of the roof is an afterthought. Coincidentally, Corbould's view of the house from the south, published in 1786, appears to show the roof set back behind a parapet; but as it also shows the west and east canted bays rising to their present height contrary to the evidence of Malton's (in other respects very accurate) engraving of four years later, this must be put down to artist's licence. In general terms, the change in roof type is consistent with the stylistic development of Taylor's villas. Harleyford of 1755 and Barlaston of 1756–58 have their roofs set back behind parapets; the later villas – Asgill House of c. 1760–65, Danson of 1762 onwards, Chute of the same decade, and Sharpham House, Devon of 1770 – have overhanging eaves.

<sup>16</sup> The secondary stair at Chute has been removed, but its compartment remains.

<sup>17</sup> E.g., very similar niches and tablets in the oval staircase hall at Sharpham. Circular recesses occur in the near-identical libraries at Chute, Harleyford, and Barlaston; those at Danson are odd because of their semi-spherical form, which makes them appear as if they were cut out of the wall with a giant ice-cream scoop.



(Photo: Greater London Council)  
Chute Lodge, Wilts., from the South-west.

virtually identical with that in the octagonal saloon at Chute.<sup>18</sup> The walls in this room have, not the pilasters and niches of Chute, but rectangular panels with raised frames. These look at first sight to be nineteenth-century but, as something similar was recorded in 1820 in the octagonal drawing room of Boyd's town house at 33 Upper Brook Street,<sup>19</sup> they might possibly be original.

The principal decorative features in the library to the right of the entrance hall are the roundels over the doors, with fine classical reliefs of dancing women within wreaths of oak leaves; their

<sup>18</sup> And therefore by Taylor and not, as John Harris has suggested, by Chambers. It also closely resembles that in the octagonal saloon at Mount Clare, Roehampton, another villa almost certainly by Taylor.

<sup>19</sup> *Survey of London*, XL plate 57c.



(Photo: Greater London Council)  
Danson Park: The Staircase.

presence is probably explained by the fact that this room apparently once doubled as a music room. The contemporary chamber organ formerly here has been removed to Hall Place. The dining room which mirrors the library on the other side of the house has set into the walls painted panels with classical scenes of high quality. These have been attributed to an obscure French artist, Charles Pavillon,<sup>20</sup> but it is not clear on what evidence.

<sup>20</sup> Ruth Hutcherson, *op. cit.*, 27, following a booklet on the house published in 1925 to commemorate its opening to the public. The late Edward Croft-Murray accepted the attribution. So far, however, no signature has been found on the panels, which are at present undergoing restoration.



(Photo: Greater London Council)  
Danson Park: The Saloon Ceiling.

Danson was not the only house owned by Boyd and designed by Taylor. Boyd had town houses successively at 33 Upper Brook Street and 7 Grafton Street, both designed by Taylor.<sup>21</sup> Yet, oddly, it seems that Taylor was superseded by Sir William Chambers at Danson some time in the late 1760s, before the interiors were quite complete. Chambers, who on the evidence of their correspondence was a personal friend of Boyd, certainly supplied designs for the

<sup>21</sup> For 33 Upper Brook Street see *Survey of London* XL, 212, plate 57, and fig. 49. 7 Grafton Street was altered out of recognition in the nineteenth century. See Marcus Binney, *loc. cit.*

main entrance door, which should be compared with examples at Somerset House,<sup>22</sup> for the dining room chimney-piece, for which there is a drawing in the Metropolitan Museum in New York,<sup>23</sup> and for the saloon chimney-piece, which is identical with one designed for Marlborough House.<sup>25</sup> The library chimney-piece is probably his, too, though a drawing in the Soane Museum for ornament 'over Mr. Boyd's doors'<sup>26</sup> cannot be identified with anything now visible at Danson, and may equally well be for one of the town houses.

Certain features of the internal layout of the house remain puzzling. One of these is the narrow space between the stairwell and dining-room, which corresponds with the servants' stair on the other side. On the plan published by Michael Angelo Taylor in 1790 it is shown with an entrance from the hall, as now, but without an exit to the saloon. Evidently the saloon could be reached from the hall only by passing through the dining room or library, so that this must have been some unexplained service area. Equally unexplained is the presence in it now of a classical relief, obviously contemporary with the house, of a woman with covered face having her feet bathed by a girl. That it has no business here would be clear even if it were not partly jammed behind a cornice, but its original position remains a mystery.

The original layout of the bedroom floor also remains something of a mystery.<sup>26</sup> The servants' stair, as has been seen, emerges on the main landing, and access to the servants' bedrooms in the roof is by a stair which runs up between the landing and the principal bedroom. The partition walls in this area show signs of disturbance, however, and the principal bedroom has to be reached over an awkward step. The room itself is not octagonal, though situated over the octagonal saloon, and its slightly unsatisfactory shape may indicate that at some point it has been reduced in size to allow the stair to the roof to be run up in its space. At Harleyford and Barlaston the corresponding stair runs up between the two bed-

<sup>22</sup> Those in the entrance arch from the Strand.

<sup>23</sup> John Harris, *Sir William Chambers* (1970), plate 184.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, plate 186.

<sup>25</sup> 42/3<sup>a</sup>

<sup>26</sup> *The Kentish Traveller's Companion* (1776) commented, 'from the diminutive size of the windows of the [bedroom] storey it should seem that the architect did not imagine the sleeping in airy chambers might contribute to the health of the family who might inhabit this mansion. Upon this momentous point our forefathers judged differently; however, such is the *ton* of building in the present age, and therefore it must be right.'



(Photo: British Library)

Danson Park: The Chapel House in 1768.

rooms over the library, that is, at right angles to its lower sections,<sup>27</sup> but whether this was the arrangement here is impossible to say, since no records survive of the original bedroom floor plan or of the building's history under its nineteenth-century owners.

As well as his contributions to the house itself, Chambers also supplied, *gratis*, designs for a little Doric temple and a wooden bridge in the park. They were solicited, according to Boyd's correspondence with Chambers, in June 1770, and Boyd reported the temple finished in May 1773. Of the bridge, Chambers wrote, 'it is a thought of Palladio's, and provided you have it framed by a skilful carpenter will do very well and look very handsome'. It was in fact copied from a model in Palladio's *Quattro Libri* Book III, and Chambers had designed one earlier for Kew Gardens.<sup>28</sup>

At the time that Chambers was designing these items it is likely that the re-landscaping of the park was already under way. The 1769

<sup>27</sup> The stair to the roof space at Chute has unfortunately vanished without trace.

<sup>28</sup> John Harris, *op. cit.*, 203.



(Photo: Greater London Council)  
Danson Park: The Stables.

*Map of Kent* shows both old and new houses, together with the old garden layout, as does a more detailed plan entitled 'The Great Lawn &c about Mr. Boyd's New House at Danson'. The latter, unfortunately undated, occurs among the papers of the Reverend Joseph Spence,<sup>29</sup> whose hobby was landscape gardening, and is accompanied by comprehensive observations and suggestions on the landscaping of the estate. From his reference to 'Mr. Richmond's Plan', it is evident that Spence was directing his remarks at a scheme already drawn up by someone else, and it may well be this scheme which survives today in the collection at Hall Place, Bexley.<sup>30</sup> Unsigned and undated, but titled 'A Plan for the Alterations pro-

<sup>29</sup> Yale University Library.

<sup>30</sup> E18. The reference to 'John Boyd Esq' means that it is not later than 1775.

posed at Danson in Kent, the Seat of John Boyd Esq<sup>r</sup>, this proposes a layout similar in overall design but differing from that which was actually carried out in much the ways that Spence suggested it should. 'Mr. Richmond' is presumably the person referred to by Horace Walpole as a 'scholar of Brown', although there is no mention of him in Capability Brown's account book and virtually nothing is known of him.<sup>32</sup> The old mansion and its gardens were submerged under an extensive new lake and a great deal of planting was done. In examining the lake, said *The Kentish Traveller's Companion* as early as 1776, the visitor 'will not fail to pay a compliment to Mr. Brown's superior skill in forming and securing so large a piece of water'. The inference to be drawn from this may be that a plan procured in the first instance from Richmond was submitted to the critical scrutiny of Spence and found wanting, and that in the event the project was handed over to the ubiquitous Brown.

All the ornamental buildings of Boyd's park have now gone, including Chamber's bridge and temple<sup>33</sup> and a delightful thatched Gothick cottage ornée.<sup>34</sup> What does survive, cut off from the park by the A2 but once visible from the house, is a cottage dressed up as a Gothick chapel; this is probably not by Chambers, since it appears in its present form (covered in pink plaster rather than the current drab pebble-dash) in a drawing of 1768.<sup>35</sup>

Boyd died in 1800. His son John, the second baronet, sold the estate in 1807, but not before he had pulled down the Taylor wings and built a new stable block in a plantation north-west of the house.<sup>36</sup> That stable block still exists (Plate XII), and its conservative appearance for such a date may have something to do with re-use of materials from the demolished wings, although this is far from certain. The purchaser of the estate in 1807 was John Johnstone. After his death in 1828 his family remained there until 1862, when it was sold to Alfred Bean. On the death of Bean's widow in 1921 the property was auctioned, and in 1924 the house and a much-reduced park were purchased by Bexley Urban District Council. None of the nineteenth-century owners seem to have been remarkable outside their locality, nor have they left any papers which would throw further light on the history of house or estate.

<sup>31</sup> Notably in the shape of the lake and the positioning of plantations.

<sup>32</sup> Dorothy Stroud, *Capability Brown* (1975), 207.

<sup>33</sup> The temple was saved from total vandalism by being removed to St. Paul's Waldenbury, Herts., in 1961.

<sup>34</sup> Demolished after 1948.

<sup>35</sup> British Museum Add. MS 32, 353 fol. 247.

<sup>36</sup> E.W. Brayley, *op. cit.*