



Westbury House

Westbury House (now Westbury Library) is one of the town's most prominent Grade II listed buildings. It was built 1799/1800. In a deed of 1800 it is described as newly built by William Open, a brick burner. The land was owned by John Matravers, a prominent 19th century merchant and banker, who gave a small plot of land as a burial ground to the Quakers about 1800. This is just outside the SW corner of the churchyard, at the back of Pinniger Finch's solicitors in Church Street. Graves have recently been uncovered there and work is ongoing to `restore` them. John Matravers also owned Angel Mill, built around 1806, on land adjoining Westbury House.

Most of Westbury's prominent houses are Georgian: built in the late 18th and 19th century. The town was developing fast as a woollen manufacturing centre and the mill owners and managers needed somewhere suitable to live, but close enough for them to keep an eye on the business. The houses, often built of brick, a typical building material in Westbury, were fine enough to show the owner's wealth, without being too ostentatious. In Edward Street, as well as Westbury House, there were the (now) Garden House and Fontainville which was demolished in 1961 and its land used for the High Street development.

Westbury House is a three-storey brick building with a slate roof. The front windows (originally the back windows) on the first and second floors are sash windows with small panes - this may be the only Georgian feature left as the house was extensively updated in the mid-19th century. The front and rear porches were added and the ground floor windows (originally the back of the house) were changed to casements with patterned tops. The back of the house now was originally the front - this was extended and a large extension was built to the north. This has arched windows with leaded stained glass. At one time it joined the building now known as `Glovers Court` - originally a glove factory. The owner of the factory lived in Westbury House. Photographs from the late 1920s show that Westbury House had a conservatory on its south side. Before All Saints Crescent and Laverton Court were built the gardens of Westbury House would have been extensive, and must have shielded the residents from some of the noise from nearby Angel Mill.

The changes were probably made by Abraham Laverton - to make the house a suitable residence for himself and his sister, Charlotte. The additions are very similar in style to the Laverton Institute, which was built by Abraham Laverton in 1873. In the back porch (originally the front entrance), right above the door, there is a carved pelican. According to legend, pelicans feed their young with blood and flesh from their own breast and therefore the pelican is used as a symbol of charity. Abraham Laverton, a philanthropist, adopted the pelican as his own mark.

Westbury library was in the Town Hall in the Market Place from 1947 - 1970. The premises were cramped and opening hours were restricted (Tuesday, Thursday and Friday 10:30am-1pm, 2-5pm, 6-8pm, and Saturday 10:30am-12:30pm). Wiltshire Council bought Westbury House from John Graham Parsons (plus adjoining land at 33 Church Street) in 1968 for £14,000. The council then spent £6,000 on converting it for use as a new library, which opened on 19 March 1970.

The conversion focused on the minimum necessary to meet the needs of a library: space for display, space for storage and space for staff to work when dealing with the public and in the `back office`. Some doors/walls were removed to open up the ground floor space, but many of the features of Abraham Laverton`s house still survive. It may not be ideal for a modern library, but a major part of Westbury`s heritage has been preserved.

Most visitors come through the original back door and into the hall, which is dominated by a wide oak staircase with a heavily decorated dado panel. The decoration is made of Lincrusta - a mixture of linseed oil and wood paste on paper, which hardens over time. It was first marketed in 1877 as `linoleum for walls` and became a very popular Victorian decoration.

First on the right is the children`s section- this has light oak panelling and would have originally been the study. Second on the right is the fiction section - once the drawing room. This has a decorative moulded ceiling and cornice and deep skirting boards. To the left of the hall, the non-fiction and computer area - once the dining room -also has moulded cornice. All the windows are wooded and some of the sash windows retain their decorative finger lifts. The windows in the librarian`s working space to the left of the hall have patterned stained glass panes at the top.

Large windows light the staircase to the first floor. Most of the rooms there have retained their original size, though changes have been made to accommodate offices. The rooms have heavy panelled doors and moulded cornices, though less ornate than those on the ground floor.

The central staircase continues up to the second floor, where rooms are used for storage only. A remarkable feature is that the stairwell is lit not only by the large windows but also by a central dome. This is almost invisible from outside and even inside the house it is not noticeable until you get to the stairs to the second floor.

The extension to the north of the house contains what would have been the `domestic offices` in Abraham Laverton`s day and has a second, much smaller staircase. The most decorative windows are in this part of the house - unusual as this area would not have been used by `the family`. One hopes that the Westbury House servants appreciated them!

Outside, the extensive gardens are sadly long gone. The conservatory, demolished as part of the library conversion, is marked only by a rendered portion of the south wall, facing what is now the Soisy-sur-Seine Garden. There are several trees in the library grounds that would have been there in Laverton`s day - the holm oak (at the back of the house) and fir trees in particular. The steps near the oak give an idea of the landscaping of the garden space. Close to what is now the back wall of the library grounds there are the remains of an air raid shelter - this was filled in when the library moved in.

Who lived in Westbury House

Little is recorded about the early years of Westbury House, but it is clear that from the beginning it was very much a `working house`. Its residents were not gentry, but they were important in the town. They were self-made men who probably relished living in the bustle and noise of the industry from which their wealth was derived.

Benjamin Overbury

Benjamin lived here in 1806, when it was newly built, so more than likely the first residents. Overbury

©Wiltshire OPC Project/2019/Rachel Stroud

was a clothier from Sedbury in the Forest of Dean. In 1806 he was in his early 30's, building his career with the brothers John and William Matravers. All three were Quakers. John died in 1814 and was buried in the Quakers graveyard. Benjamin entered into partnership with William Matravers as Matravers & Overbury in 1818. The partnership was operating Angel Mill at the time. Bitham Mill was operated by a different company, Crosby & White - not real rivals as Thomas White married into the Matravers family. By 1833 both mills were operated by Matravers & Overbury. In 1833/4 Benjamin was also running Boyer's Mill in Westbury Leigh.

There was a downturn in trade in England in the 1840s and many businesses failed. One of them was Matravers & Overbury, in 1847. Four years later, according to the 1851 census Benjamin, described as a 'retired clothier' aged 77, was still living in Westbury with his wife, one daughter and one servant. The family was in Edward Street, but had moved to a smaller house.

John Crosby

John Crosby was another Westbury clothier. He operated Bitham Mill from 1774 in a partnership which became Crosby & White. After his death in 1820 Westbury House was described in a local paper as '8 sleeping rooms, drawing room and parlour each 16.5' x 13.5', built within the last twenty years, late residence of John Crosby deceased'.

William Matravers

By 1830 William Matravers lived at Westbury House and there was a school on the upper floor. In a lease of 1858 the school is described as an adjoining building. The 1841 census shows a school in Edward Street: it had a school mistress, 3 pupil-teachers and 8 pupils aged from 7 to 15. Both William and his brother, John, were very interested in education and funded many local schools, so it is a mark of respect that Westbury now has Matravers School.

James Wilson

James is known to have lived in Fontainville, he also lived in Westbury House - he is down as its in 1859.

James is best known as the founder of the newspaper *The Economist* in 1843, but his career started in the cloth trade. He was a Quaker and the son of a Scottish textile manufacturer. He and his brother William bought Bitham Mill in 1852 from the failed Matravers & Overbury. This was an investment, not a 'hands-on' operation, and they sold it to Abraham Laverton in 1856.

James Wilson was MP for Westbury 1847-57. At that time MPs were not expected to live in their constituencies, but James obviously felt an affinity with Westbury. According to the 1851 census, he had a townhouse in Mayfair -but as his daughter was born in Westbury, he obviously lived in the town. In 1855 James moved out of Westbury, with his family of 6 daughters, and set up home in the Claverton Manor, near Bath. That house is now the American Museum.

Abraham Laverton

Abraham Laverton is a supreme example of the Victorian self-made man. The ninth child of a Trowbridge weaver, he somehow raised enough money to buy Angel Mill in 1850 (he was 31) and Bitham Mill in 1856. For a few years he also owned Boyer's Mill in Westbury Leigh. The company that he founded, A, Laverton & Co, lasted until 1969. Abraham made a considerable fortune but he did not parade his wealth or keep it to himself: he became Westbury's greatest benefactor. In addition to numerous gifts to schools and churches, he bestowed upon the town the Laverton Institute (for the education and self-improvement of the people of Westbury) and Prospect Square (for workers that he considered had been unfairly evicted for voting for him in the 1868 election). He also planned and funded the swimming pool in Church Street, which was built after his death.

Abraham Laverton became a Justice of the Peace in 1859 and was MP for Westbury 1874-1890. In the 1851 census, Abraham is shown as living in Church Street with his sister Charlotte. The major

alterations to Westbury House were made before the Lavertons moved in.

The gardens would have been landscaped at the same time and the main entrance was moved to the back so that the approach was through the gardens rather than direct from Edward Street. The gardens must have been beautifully kept, as the Lavertons employed more than one gardener. Against fierce competition, their head gardener won first prizes at a flower show at Rood Ashton House in 1877 for geraniums, fruit collection, grapes, peaches, melons, kidney potatoes and marrows, as well as second prizes in other categories. Not a bad haul for a garden in the centre of town!

Abraham never married and lived with Charlotte, his sister, most of his adult life.

William Henry Laverton

Abraham's heir was his nephew, William Henry Laverton, who worked for him and carried on the business of A. Laverton & Co after his retirement. William completed the building of the swimming pool and was prominent in local affairs. Like his uncle, William was a Justice of the Peace. A. Laverton & Co continued as a successful business and was a major employer in the town.

In the 1871 census, William, aged 25, was living in Church Street, with his wife and baby daughter. In 1881, he was living in Boyer's House in Westbury Leigh.

By 1882 William and his family were living at Westbury House - Mrs. Laverton was advertising for a cook! Two children were born to William and his wife at Westbury House.

In 1888 William bought Leighton House, where he lived in some style. He had a large family: he was married three times and had at least seven children. By 1921 most of his wealth had been spent on the Leighton estate and Leighton House was sold to become a school, Victoria College. The Lavertons moved to a more modest property at Wellhead. William died in 1935, aged 90.

Captain Henry Leycester Aylmer

Captain Aylmer was the son of Thomas Brabazon Aylmer, a distinguished Victorian landscape painter. Captain Aylmer joined the 16th Lancers and served in Africa in the 1870s. In 1884, in his mid-30s, he took a post with the Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry Cavalry and lived with his wife, Edmuntina, at Corsley House.

About September 1888 Captain and Mrs. Aylmer moved to Westbury House. It was probably just a 12-month lease, for in September 1889 they sold their furniture and carriage and moved to a fashionable part of Cheltenham favoured by army officers.

John Salter Hoare

John was another self-made clothier. He was born in Exeter, the son of a tailor. By 1881, when he married, John was living in London and working as a manufacturer's agent. This must have enabled him to make contacts within the Wiltshire cloth industry. In 1884 he was living in Church Street.

In the 1891 census, John and his extensive family (wife, seven children, sister, four servants) are living in Westbury House. John was described as a woollen manufacturer. He was partner in A Laverton & Co and retired from the company in 1914. John became a Justice of the Peace.

The children gradually moved away, but John and his wife continued to live at Westbury House until 1921, when they moved to Boscombe. Mrs. Hoare spent a lot of time in the later years advertising for housemaids! She may have been very demanding, but 'the servant problem' was common in the years after WWI. John died at Boscombe in 1937 but was buried at Westbury.

The 1911 census required the householder to state the number of rooms in the property. Westbury House had a remarkable 22 rooms - which would have included bathrooms and toilet.

John Thomas Parsons

John and his brother Frank were builders from Dilton Marsh. It was a successful partnership and they owned several freehold properties between them.

In the 1911 census, John was living with his family at Rozelle (now 8 Station Road), a house that he built himself. John was aged 40 and his wife, Daisy, was 30. They had two children: a son, John, aged 5, and a 3 year old daughter.

By 1927 John had prospered and moved to Westbury House, and he had become a Justice of the Peace. His building contracting business was established as John Thomas Parsons & Son, in Station Road - the business is still going today. His brother Frank was working out of Dilton Marsh. Timesheets for J.T. Parsons & Son Ltd have recently been found in a time capsule behind the foundation stone (laid 1930) of the Westbury Hospital building in Hospital Road.

John died in 1928 but his wife, Daisy, continued to live at Westbury House. By 1935 Daisy had become a Justice of the Peace.

John's son, John Graham Parsons, had learnt to fly in 1930 and joined the RAF reserve in 1939. He was registered as living in Westbury House with his mother. John Graham joined his squadron as a navigator in March 1940 and took part in the Battle of Britain.

After WWII the business of J. T. Parsons & Son Ltd. expanded and a Salisbury office was opened. The company was responsible for many building projects in Wiltshire and Somerset, including the development of Westbury High Street in the late 1960s/early 1970s.