

SIR ALBERT RICHARDSON IN WENDOVER: A MICROCOSM OF AN ARCHITECTURAL CAREER

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Sir Albert Richardson's work in Wendover reflects every stage of his career, including the frustrations that he had to endure from the onward march of modernism after World War II, an aspect clearly brought out in Dr Toplis's account.

Introduction

When Sir Albert Richardson¹ was awarded the Royal Gold Medal for Architecture in 1947, his brilliant architectural career had probably reached its highest point. Even by 1954 when he was elected the first architect to be President of the Royal Academy since Lutyens in 1938, architectural fashion had moved away from the academic classicism which he vociferously propounded, towards the modern styles stemming from the work of Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright.² By the time of his death in February 1964 he seemed a completely out-moded figure standing against the full flood of the modern movement, and his passing was only accorded a few lines in *The Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects*,³ with much space being devoted to the 1964 Royal Gold Medallist, Edwin Maxwell Fry, Gropius's⁴ former partner and an associate of Le Corbusier.

Today with architectural ideas moving away from the rigid dogma of Le Corbusier, the quality of Richardson's work is again appreciated and understood. He was almost fanatical in his devotion to the works of art produced in Georgian England, particularly its architecture. He wrote several books on the subject and delivered many entertaining and scholarly lectures, particularly as Professor of Architecture at University College London between 1919 and 1946. He was a Londoner by birth and most of his buildings are in the Home Counties,

particularly Bedfordshire, where he lived after 1919.⁵ Unfortunately Buckinghamshire has few examples of his work, but there is a series of building projects in Wendover, which span the greater part of his career and provide tangible illustrations of his achievements as well as his final frustration in the face of the modern movement.

The Hale

Richardson's first contact with Wendover probably occurred in 1902, when, at the age of twenty-two, he was working for the well-known ecclesiastical architect Leonard Stokes,⁶ who was building a large house called Hill End⁷ (now Coombe Court and Coombe House) for Sir Lawson Walton MP,⁸ on the slopes below Coombe Hill.

After five more years as an assistant, Richardson decided to set up in practice and entered into partnership with a friend, Charles Lovat Gill. The firm prospered, but it was not until 1916 that Richardson received his first commission to design a large country house.⁹ This was in the American Colonial style for General Sir Bruce Hamilton¹⁰ at Sunningdale. Hamilton had just been given command of the Home Army and had heard about Richardson from his sister, a well-known society hostess, Lady Allandale. However he did not stay long in his new mansion, but relinquished his command in 1918 and moved to Wendover to breed race-horses, where he would be close to another

sister, Mrs Neame of Drayton Beauchamp Manor.¹¹

Hamilton purchased The Hale, the Colet's former seat,¹² and its surrounding estate, from Lord Rothschild. The house is a seventeenth-century timber-framed structure, with an imposing eighteenth-century stucco front,¹³ about one mile east of Wendover at the head of a valley. Hamilton commissioned Richardson to enlarge and improve the old house to accommodate himself and his housekeeper, Miss Annie Compton. Work started in late 1918 with a small single-storey bathroom to link Miss Compton's accommodation at the south end to the main part of the house. Over the following ten years he reorganized the interior of the house,¹⁴ converted a barn at the north end into a fine drawing room with an open timber roof (Plate I),¹⁵ and an outbuilding at the south end into an extension of Miss Compton's accommodation. He also added a short two-storied corridor to the rear of the house. The two extensions almost doubled the length of the frontage of the house, which Richardson made even more imposing by stuccoing the new work to match the existing, raising the front walls of the lower link blocks and decorating these walls with low-relief sculptured oval plaques over doors with decorative timber fanlights.

Richardson had started on The Hale immediately after being demobilised from the RFC, in which he had served between 1916 and 1918. He visited Wendover several times before he found that another attractive old house was available for renting. This was The Red House in Aylesbury Road, which has a purple brick Georgian frontage, with a fine off-centre Doric doorcase. As with The Hale there is an older building behind the facade.¹⁶ He brought his wife and nine-year-old daughter to see it, but when 'they asked to see over the place, the maid told them it had been let some time and they could not see over it. This was blank disappointment' and they returned home 'utterly crushed'.¹⁷ Soon afterwards they were able to buy the splendid Avenue House in the centre of Ampthill, which Richardson had admired for some time.¹⁸

The House in the Field

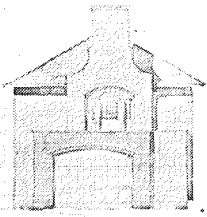
In 1929 Richardson started work on a new house in the same road as The Hale, but some half mile closer to Wendover. This was for Sir Stanley Reed,¹⁹ who had lived at nearby Halefield since his retirement as Editor of *The Times of India* in 1923.²⁰ Clearly Reed knew Hamilton, as not only were they neighbours, but both men were active supporters of the Conservative Party, and Reed became MP for Aylesbury in 1938. Presumably he saw and approved of the work that Richardson had carried out for Hamilton. The site was in a field adjacent to Halefield and he called the house, appropriately enough, The House in the Field (now Mulberry Hill).

Unlike the Sunningdale house, Reed's house was in the plain English Georgian style of *circa* 1750, for which Richardson was acquiring a considerable reputation; an example, as Pevsner said in 1960, 'of the quiet neo-Georgian then in vogue among the well-to-do and not-too-enterprising',²¹ relying, for its architectural effect, on the quality of craftsmanship, details and proportions, rather than ornament. It is a large house with a five-bay central block, with side wings, giving a total length of over one hundred feet, two main storeys, a partial attic and a small basement. Richardson fully exploited the excellent site with its superb south-facing views, with an elegant square entrance hall on the north side and south-facing reception rooms flanked by loggias overlooking the valley. This is one of the few occasions that he was commissioned to provide a layout for the grounds,²⁷ although he had designed Hamilton's garden at Sunningdale.

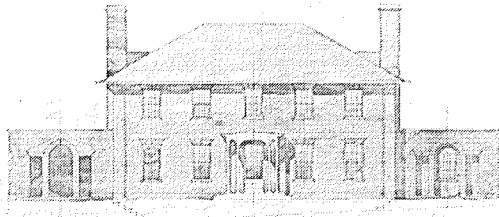
H. J. & A. Wright of Great Missenden built Reed's house in Chesham multicoloured facing bricks and roofed it with hand-made clay tiles. Whiteside & Co. supplied the special brass door furniture designed by Richardson with drop-handles.²³ Although *The Builder*, in April 1930, said that the house was 'nearing completion', it seems that it was some time before Reed was able to move in. Richardson had intended that there should be two enclosed courtyards either side of the entrance, one around the kitchen

HOUSE AT WENDOVER
for MRS. A. COMPTON

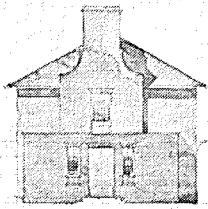
SCALE ONE INCH EQUALS SEVEN FEET



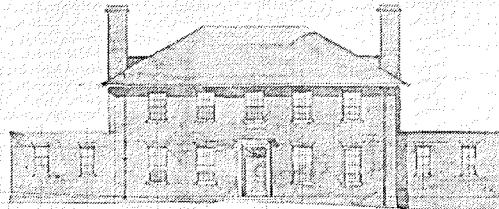
SIDE ELEVATION



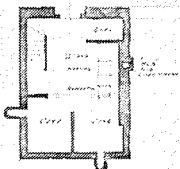
REAR ELEVATION



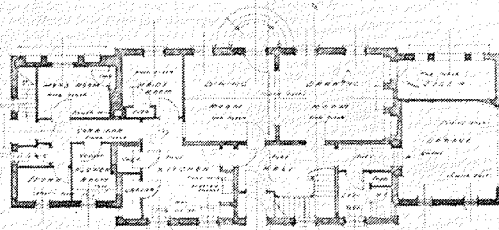
SIDE ELEVATION



FRONT ELEVATION



BREAKFAST PLAN

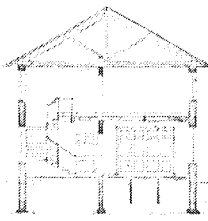


GROUND FLOOR



SCREEN DOOR DETAIL

SCREEN DOOR DETAIL



CROSS SECTION



SECOND FLOOR

Plate I. House at Wendover for Miss Compton, 1936 (by kind permission of Mr Simon Houfe).

wing and the other concealing the garage doors. These courtyards were never built and later on Reed commissioned the Wendover architect, Ernest Theakston,²⁴ to build a new block at the east end to accommodate his chauffeur.²⁵

Homelands

Hamilton died on 6 July 1936. The funeral at Wendover Church was attended by Richardson and his wife,²⁶ and he was buried in the churchyard under a big convex stone slab, inscribed with fine Roman lettering.²⁷ The simple dignity of the memorial and the quality of the craftsmanship suggest Richardson's work at its best. The General left £77,586; the bulk of which was to be held in trust. He requested his trustees 'to consider the comfort' of Miss Compton and to arrange for her to have an annuity of £450. He also bequeathed her three acres of land, with a seventy-yard frontage on to the road to Wendover, approximately mid-way between The Hale and The House in the Field.²⁸

Miss Compton stayed on at The Hale for a few months, but immediately commissioned Richardson to design her a house for the newly acquired site. His first sketches, now in the Bedfordshire County Record Office at Bedford, show a tall box-like building, suggesting a small Colonial style villa with an elevated entrance.²⁹ This apparently was not acceptable, so Richardson turned to his familiar English Georgian sources, using, this time, a slightly later style than that used for Reed's house (Plate II).

It is, in many respects, a more modest version of the earlier house. Although it is eighty feet long and has accommodation for living-in servants, it has no attic and only single storey wings on either side of the main five-bay block. Richardson grouped the chimneys into two stacks at either end of the main block, forming arched features on the end elevations. He also provided a delicate semicircular porch in the centre of the garden front. Wrights again were the builders,³⁰ using Chesham facings and Westmorland slates on the roof. The same excellent standard of craftsmanship prevailed, but it is even more effective in this mature and

sophisticated design. Richardson again provided a layout for the garden.

Miss Compton was only to have a few years in which to enjoy Homelands, as she called her new house (now Chiltern Hill House), as she died on 15 February 1941 at the age of 62.³¹ She left £6,283, and in her will, made a few weeks before her death, she bequeathed money for the maintenance of Hamilton's grave, for the purchase of a bible and lectern for Wendover Church in memory of Hamilton, and £3,000 for the erection of a public hall in Wendover as a memorial to Hamilton, saying she believed that 'he was much respected in the town and he was so true and just in all his dealings with such a beautiful character'. She then stipulated that 'Professor Richardson to design the said public hall'.³²

Wendover Town Hall

Wendover Parish Council were only told of Miss Compton's bequest on 3 November 1941, when it was accepted with an expression of thanks to her executor. However, after some discussion it decided against an amendment 'to draw up plans so that the scheme could be proceeded with at once'³³ but resolved to defer its consideration for six months. No doubt this seemed to be the only practical course with wartime building controls in force, but it seems strange that Richardson was not approached at this stage as Miss Compton had probably told him of her intention that he should design the hall. He was certainly well aware of the problems of building at that time and would have been able to guide the Council towards achieving their aims. In fact this was only the first of many delays which ultimately made it impossible properly to implement her will.

It was August 1943 before the bequest was remitted to the Official Trustee for investment. By this time, some two-and-a-half years after Miss Compton's death, it had dwindled to £2,694 through death duties and administration charges.³⁴

Several sites were considered for the new hall, including one in Dobbins Lane, but by the end of 1943 the Parish Council had settled on



Sketch of the proposed conversion of a barn into a drawing room for General Sir Bruce Hamilton, at The Hale, Wendover, July 1918 (by kind permission of Mr Simon Houfe).

Plate II. Sketch of the proposed conversion of a barn into a drawing room for General Sir Bruce Hamilton, at The Hale, Wendover, July 1918 (by kind permission of Mr Simon Houfe).

the site of the existing prefabricated village hall at Bryants Acre in Aylesbury Road. A vigorous fund-raising campaign was launched to supplement the bequest. Fêtes, dances, plays, the profits of Elizabeth Holland's *Old Wendover* and National Savings Weeks raised an additional £1,425 by the end of the war.³⁵

In October 1945 the project changed radically when the Parish Council proposed to purchase additional land so that a war memorial garden, children's playgrounds and playing fields could be included,³⁶ and four months later a Parish Meeting was held to explain the proposals. These were received with enthusiasm and, forgetting about Richardson, the Meeting resolved to employ an architect to prepare a complete scheme. It was pointed out that government grants were available for such schemes through the County Council. A committee was elected to handle the scheme which in turn appointed a sub-committee to deal with certain aspects such as planning and fund-raising.³⁷ The Planning sub-committee then wrote to the Royal Institute of British Architects asking for a list of architects who had had experience in designing community centres. Fortunately this list, when it arrived, included Richardson, so the committee on 16 April 1946, perhaps now remembering Miss Compton's stipulation, were able to make amends by recommending 'the appointment of Professor Richardson to carry out the Wendover plan'.³⁸ Four members of the committee were appointed to meet Richardson but there is no record of the meeting taking place.³⁹ It was realized that the committee was not a properly constituted committee of the Parish Council and this could have thrown the legality of Richardson's appointment into doubt. Certainly Richardson was no longer being consulted, and a year later, in March 1947, it was F. A. C. Maunder,⁴⁰ the County Architect, who agreed to produce a report and plan for the scheme.⁴¹

Again progress was very slow and it was not until February 1949 that the committee was properly reconstituted and received Maunder's scheme. This covered nine acres and included a secondary school, with the layout of the playing

fields alone costing £1,200.⁴² Clearly this grand scheme required the government grant, but by May 1950 economy measures were throwing its possibility into doubt. The final blow came in April 1951, when the Ministry of Education formally rejected the proposal.⁴³

After this time-consuming diversion, lasting some five years, during which building costs had steadily risen, the Parish Council was now back in the position of having to provide a new village hall with even less effective resources. Various sites were again discussed and again the Bryants Acre site was chosen as there would be room for a football pitch there.⁴⁴ Surprisingly enough, once more Richardson was forgotten and another architect was approached, before it occurred to the Council to make contact with him again.⁴⁵ A delegation went to Ampthill early in 1953 where he showed it the new village hall that he was building there and which it felt 'with modifications would be suitable for Wendover'. The committee then drew up a schedule of requirements, including a hall measuring forty by eighty feet, an infant welfare room and a committee room.⁴⁶ All this was sent to Richardson and on 9 February 1953 it was reported that he would be meeting the committee 'very shortly'. In fact he arrived at Wendover with such short notice that he was obliged to return on 23 April to be able to meet the full committee.⁴⁷

Richardson produced a design for a long building adjacent to the existing hall, parallel to Aylesbury Road with the main entrance at the north end. It contained 320 seats with thirty more on a gallery over the entrance foyer. The back-stage accommodation included a committee room over the dressing rooms and a high-level walkway around the stage. At the rear a small projecting kitchen was to be the link with a future clinic. The building was set thirty feet back from the road, towards which it would have a symmetrical elevation dominated by six very tall windows. Blank walls at either end of the elevation contained small round-headed doors, and the whole building was covered by a low pitched copper roof. The main entrance, at the north end, was through a projecting bay with a balcony over. Behind the balcony the

rear of the hall was lit by a characteristic Richardson triple window with a big Adam-style fanlight over.⁴⁸

The committee wanted to complete the building during that year, 1953, to commemorate the Coronation, but Richardson explained that because of the length of time that the preparation and building work would take, it would be impossible to complete the hall before 1955.⁴⁹

However, the main problem was cost. Miss Compton's legacy had now increased in value to £3,604, and the fund-raising ventures had produced a total of £3,137, but Richardson's estimate for the hall was £21,822, including the clinic. If the clinic and the two-storied entrance were omitted, he said that the cost could be reduced to £16,000.⁵⁰ At a committee meeting on 20 July 1953, it was suggested that a charitable trust should be formed to raise the extra money.⁵¹ Wrights of Great Missenden were asked for an estimate, and when at the next meeting on 16th November they replied with a quotation of £25,000, the committee felt that it would be 'impossible to approve such a costly scheme' and agreed to ask Richardson to produce a design with fewer seats and costing no more than £15,000.⁵²

There are several drawings at Bedford, made by Richardson early in 1954, which show modified versions of the scheme, but a set of five drawings headed 'Wendover Town Hall' and dated September and October 1954, appear to be the finally agreed design. Plate III shows a hall with 268 seats, no basement or upper floors, and flat roofed projections at either end containing the entrance foyer and the dressing rooms. At the rear there was another flat-roofed projection containing a kitchen and the clinic. The building was to be sited seventy feet back from the road, with a car park in front. One of the sketches shows the site of the pld hall laid out as a memorial garden. Wrights made another estimate of the building costs and negotiations were started with the Lord of the manor to obtain the additional land required.⁵⁴

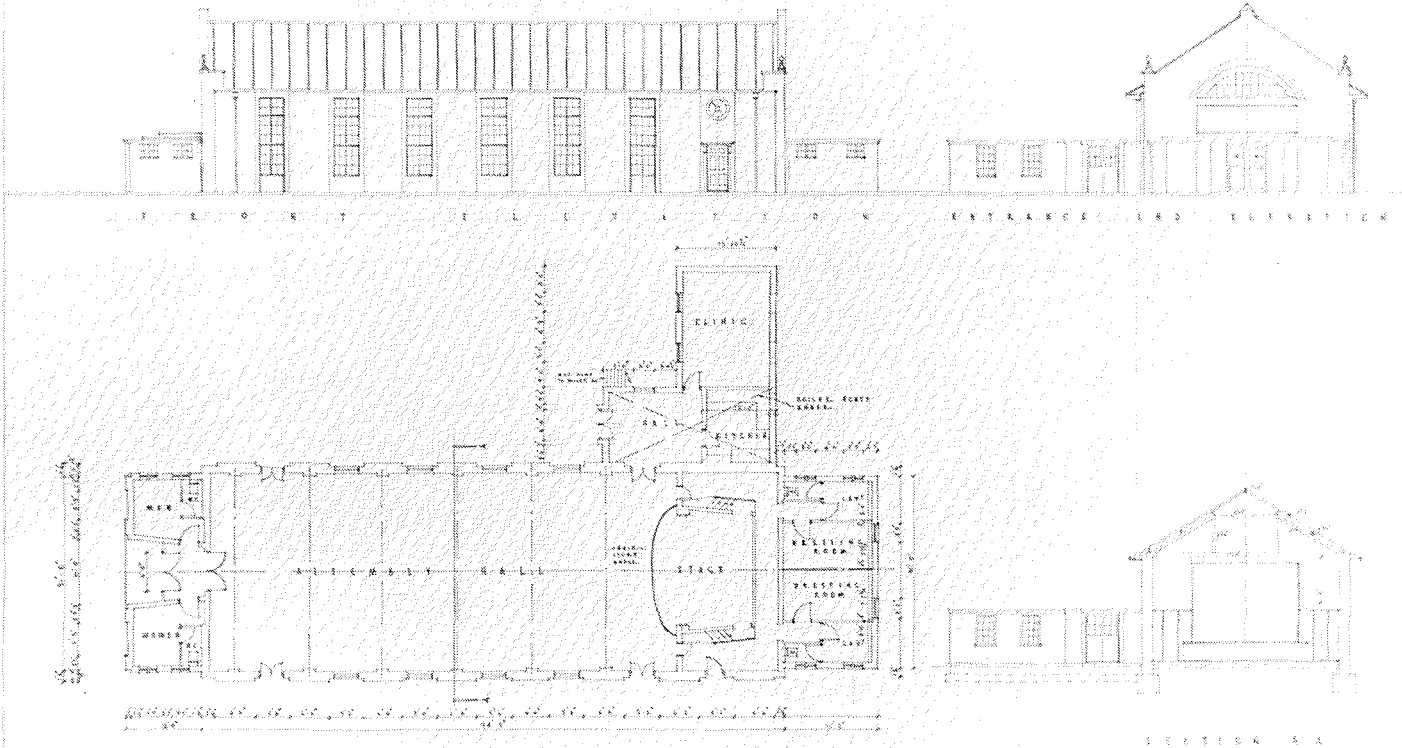
Wendover Memorial Hall

In February 1955, just when it seemed the project was at last to go ahead, the County Education Officer told members of the committee 'of the accelerated scheme for the building of new schools which included a modern secondary school at Wendover, which it is hoped to start next year'. He explained that the school hall would have 300 seats and could be used by the public, with any extra rooms required receiving a two-thirds grant from the Education Committee. It would be heated and maintained by the school. The Parish Council would have to let the County know if it wanted to become involved in this proposal within three months. The new County Architect, F. B. Pooley,⁵⁵ would design the building; 'no doubt he would be willing to collaborate with Professor Richardson if the latter was willing'.⁵⁶

In the next few weeks unusually rapid decisions were taken which led to the ultimate form of the hall today. In March 1955 the County Education Officer said that the County Architect would need to know the Parish Council's requirements by April, as the school was scheduled for completion by the end of 1956, and a week later some members of the committee met Pooley to explain their needs to him. On 28 March 1955 he submitted plans which, it appears, had a separate hall on its ultimate site 'near the top of Wharf Road'. It had room for 350 seats and would cost £15,000 to build.⁵⁷ He presented a model of the design to the committee on 15 April. After it had been examined, 'and various observations discussed, Mr. Pooley withdrew with the warm thanks of the Committee for the rapid manner in which the Committee's ideas had been incorporated into the model'.⁵⁸ The whole scheme was explained at a public meeting on 20 April 1955, but it took until 12 December before the committee knew that the Ministry of Education were to make a grant of £10,000, and the scheme could proceed.⁵⁹

The committee now had to tell the President of the Royal Academy, as Richardson had become,⁶⁰ that it no longer required his services. It recommended that:

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Plate III. The final design for Wendover Public Hall, August 1954 (by kind permission of Mr Simon Houfe).

he be [*sic*] explained the position and expressing the opinion that he would probably not be willing to be associated with this Scheme, thanking him most warmly for his services and requesting him to submit his charges.⁶¹

Pooley completed sufficient drawings by spring 1956 to invite tenders, and the contract was won by Holloway Brothers of London with a tender of £14,994. The Wendover Memorial Hall, as it was now called,⁶² would be built simultaneously with the secondary school on land owned by the County Council.⁶³ The grant had to be supplemented by other money, and in spite of the fifteen-year long fund-raising campaign, Miss Compton's bequest, now worth £3,107, was, apart from the grant, still the largest contribution towards the cost of the building.⁶⁴

The new hall was eventually completed in January 1957, and it was a strange twist that at the first meeting to be held there, on 7 January, the Finance Committee of the Parish Council approved the payment of £350 to Richardson for abortive work on his rejected hall design.⁶⁵

It was not surprising that the Richardson-Pooley partnership did not materialize, as the two architects had completely different approaches to their work. Pooley was an energetic and ambitious young architect who had come to Buckinghamshire from the City Architect's office in Coventry, where he had been involved in reconstructing that city into a showplace of modern architecture and town planning. His predecessor, Maunder,⁶⁶ was a classical scholar and, under him, the County Council office had produced some buildings, such as Tatling End Police Station⁶⁷ and police houses in Wendover, which showed an affinity to Richardson's ideas.

But with Pooley as County Architect, the output became uncompromisingly modern, in line with official architecture throughout the country. The Wendover Memorial Hall was a typical innovative modern design with timber portal frames, which were considered to be light, cheap and elegant, forming the hall roof structure.

For thirty years Wendover has enjoyed the fruits of Miss Compton's desire to provide a permanent and useful memorial to her excellent employer, as it seems obvious that without her bequest, the hall could not have been built. But it also seems likely that had Richardson been allowed to design the hall, as she stipulated in her will, he would have ensured that the main purpose of her bequest, to provide a memorial to Hamilton, was implemented.

It seems that a change in architectural fashion, as much as anything else, frustrated the desire of Miss Compton to provide a memorial to Sir Bruce Hamilton. Perhaps as fashions change again, the loss of a Richardson building may also be regretted.

Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to Mr Simon Houfe for extensive information about Sir Albert Richardson and for permission to inspect and reproduce his drawings in the Bedfordshire County Record Office. I would also like to thank the owners of the Richardson houses in Wendover, Mrs Sarah Hood, Mr Norman Best and Mr and Mrs Gordon Adam for allowing me to inspect their houses. I owe a particular debt of gratitude to Wendover Parish Council and the Clerk, Mrs Jane Parrott, for allowing me to use and quote from the Council's Minute Books.

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