

**VERNACULAR BUILDINGS RESEARCH
HENLEY ARCHAEOLOGICAL & HISTORICAL GROUP**

Parish/County: Henley-on-Thames
Street and House name:

Owner/Contact: E.& N.Jackson

**‘Countess Gardens’, 88 Bell Street
86 in separate ownership – for Sale**

Recorder: Ruth Gibson

Date: 12.5.06

Listing grade and entry text: Grade II*

C18 Silver grey brick with red quoins and window dressings. Plain string course at 1st floor level, moulded string at 2nd floor level. Cornice evidently removed and plastered string in replacement. Old, tiled roof concealed by parapet. 3 storeys, 6 windows with segmental arches and external panelled shutters to ground floor windows. Arched entrance door with fanlight. Wood door surround of square fluted engaged columns supporting architrave and bracketed cornice and pediment with Doric frieze. Round arched door with simple radial fanlight to door on south side of No. 86.



West front of ‘Countess Gardens’, No. 88 Bell Street.
The simple fan light doorway on the right is the former service entrance, now No. 86.

Discussion on dating evidence: This is a house built to impress with all the features considered important in the 18th century, i.e., the grand Palladian door case, the (almost) symmetrical façade with tall windows, decreasing in height towards the top, separated by projecting string courses. The by then unfashionable roof was hidden behind a parapet. The use of red, rubbed bricks above the windows and burnt, vitrified blue bricks between them, both used to put extra emphasis on this fashionable building material.

The tall wall panelling of entire rooms, which includes the chimney breasts, and the two-panel doors went out of fashion in the later 18th century in London. These are still seen in the upper floors here, whilst in the ground floor principal rooms there are six-panel doors. The ramped handrail seems to have been perfected in the mid-18th century, but more dated examples are needed to confirm this.

A mid-18th century date seems likely. Pevsner’s building date of 1740 may well be correct, but the building date could easily have been a couple of decades later. – Roof timbers have been

dendro dated to 1611 and do not relate to the building date of the present house but appear to have been re-used.

No 86 had been the service end with its own separate service entrance, although the door opening with only a semi-circular arch without any kind of door hood gives it a 19th century feel. The brick work and its reveal on the left-hand side and rubbed brick arch shows some signs of disturbance with disturbed brickwork in the right-hand reveal. Alterations to this service doorway, which might have been wider originally, could have been carried out, when the house was subdivided.

Known History: The name Countess Gardens refers to the land behind the Bell Street frontage, which is the probable site of the Royal Manor of Henley, later amalgamated with the manor of Fillets (now Phyllis Ct.). The building was in the ownership of the Mackenzies of Fawley Ct. in 1926 and the tenant was J.S. Wilkinson, private resident (Street Directories).

Map ref., date of 1st map, type of plot: On first 1878 OS, shown as a wide, double fronted building with long rear extension on the south side, what is now No. 86, but none of these rear extensions remain.

Plan form/position in street: Double fronted house with slightly off-centre door between the 5 ground floor windows. It is of double pile plan. The southern part of the house (3 windows and a narrow door - the former service door - now form No. 86). No 88 comprises the entrance hall and a reception room on the left (north side), the staircase in the rear bay and a room to both sides of the stairs. No. 86 owns the other front rooms on all floors and a long, quite wide corridor to the rear.

Height (no of storeys): 3 storeys

Walling type and materials: Brick, red with silver-grey burnt headers and stretchers.

(give brick sizes, bond, colour; timber frame type; render or stucco; stone types and finishes) Flemish bond, header bond between windows; blue bricks are used between the windows; rubbed orange/red gauged bricks are used for the window arches.

Roof shape and structure: The roof structure is hidden at the front behind a tall brick parapet. From the rear two low pitched roofs with hips at each end can be seen.

Roof covering: Old clay tiles

Chimneys: Two central brick stacks serving both Nos 86 and 88 and two side wall stacks with 3 flues each.

Special features:

(string course, cornice, parapet, pilasters etc) String courses to each floor, the second floor one is made of moulded bricks, a third, now rendered string course may replace a former cornice below the parapet.

Windows in front elevation: Sash windows with glazing bars, sash boxes are recessed in line with the stipulations of the 1709 London Building Act. The ground floor windows are the tallest and have external security shutters with the exception of the window next to the service door, where there was simply no room for shutters. They have 9 glazed panels in the upper sash and 6

in the lower. The first-floor windows have 6 over 6 panels, whilst the attic ones have 4 over 2 panels. The finely rubbed brick arches are a particularly attractive feature of this building.

Front Doors: The slightly off-centre front door is reached via 2 stone steps below the third window from the left (north). The door case consists of engaged, fluted pilasters of the Doric order with a frieze and pediment. The fan light is located in a semi-circular moulded arch with key stone. The door consists of 6 raised panels. – This is: ‘The orthodox Palladian temple-front door case, first used in the 1720s, which became the standard pattern for the remainder of the Georgian period’ (from *The Georgian Group Guides, No.3 Doors*).

A simple, four-panel timber door (a modern replacement?) under a segmental arch, with fan light, gives access to what is now No. 86. This would have been the side door to a passageway leading to the rear service area of the building. The brickwork around the door shows some disturbance on the right-hand side and could have been wider originally. The way the 3 ground floor windows are arranged very close together, upsetting the symmetry of the front elevation somewhat, seems to show that a doorway in this position was put in at the time of construction, providing access to the rear of the building for services. A bell pull survives in fragmented form attached to the wall above the right-hand side of the door.

Rear windows: modern, as the house was extended and altered at the back.

Doors and openings at the back: French window in north rear room. Central doorway from corridor into the garden. Modern conservatory (2006) behind the kitchen (on the south side of the central corridor)

Internal evidence at No 88

Cellar: Access to the cellar is via a two-panel door below the main staircase. Brick steps with timber nosing. A long corridor leads to a modest cellar at the front of the house. This was very likely used for coal delivery for the many FP in the house. (Check for signs of an opening at plinth level or in the pavement)

Ground Floor: Wide entrance hall, two reception rooms at either side (the right hand one is now blocked and forms part of No. 86). An archway, with capitals and a key stone separates the front from the rear hallway. Panelling up to dado height

The left-hand front room retains good panelling, but is not complete. Fireplace probably Victorian.

Stairs: (location and type)

The staircase is located in the rear bay in the central corridor. It is very impressive and without the most impressive interior feature.

It is of the dogleg with landing type; open string with scroll carved decorated brackets and barley twist balusters – set very far apart, one per tread only, so that it has been necessary to insert simple stick balusters between the original ones for safety reasons (information by the owner,2005). The handrail is of the ‘toad back type, very much in use from 1691 (first

introduced at Kensington Palace) and throughout the first half of the 18th century and possibly later. The rails are ramped over the newel posts creating a very elegant whole. (The earliest dated example for this ‘ramped’ handrail I can find is 1752, but this is not conclusive dating evidence, as there may well be earlier examples). The wall side also has half rails and half newel posts attached to it, which enhances the whole impression of the staircase.



Stair case at first floor landing; details of two types of balusters (right above); toad-back hand rail ramped over newel post halved into the stair wall (right below)

First Floor: The first-floor main front room retains its full panelling. This consists of a lower, shorter panel to dado height and a taller, upper panel ending in a moulded cornice. The same panelling division is seen in the single and double doors (now a wardrobe, originally probably an access between back and front rooms) and the panels above the fireplace. Unfortunately, the 18th century F.P. does not survive. Both doors have H/L-hinges, showing that they retain their original 18th century fixings.

Second Floor: An eighteenth century fireplace surround with entablature and cornice exists in a back bedroom. The cast iron grate is probably a later replacement, as most of the cast iron grates in the house are of 19th century date with their splayed sides and lining of fire brick, (NB this needs checking, also for register plates – all mid-19th features)

Internal Evidence at No. 86 (For Sale)

Ground Floor: Behind the four-panel door with fan light runs a long, wide corridor to the back of the house. This has simple vertical plank panelling up to dado height on its right hand (south) side. This contrasts sharply with the rectangular panelling of the main entrance hall and shows that this was the service entrance. A later staircase has been inserted, probably when the house was divided, very likely replacing an earlier 'back stair'.

The front room retains its full panelling. This includes the now blocked six-panel door to the main entrance hall at No. 88 and the two-panel jib door to the right of the FP, which must once have led to the room behind, now the kitchen of No. 88. The access arrangement indicates that this may have been the dining room of the original house. The jib door has a curious arrangement of three narrow curved shelves set into its upper section, probably intended to distract the casual observer into believing that this was a corner cupboard. The door from the corridor of No 86 is a modern insertion, originally there not being any reason why this important room should be accessed from the service corridor.

The rear part contains the modern kitchen and conservatory. No original features survive, as most of the rear wall has been removed.

First and Second Floors: No panelling but some early two-panel doors and FPs survive. Each floor has 3 rooms, two of which have been converted into bathrooms. The FPs in the back bedrooms are of exactly the same type as that in No. 86 with elaborate moulded cornice and surround and cast-iron inset. The large first floor front room also has a FP of a very simple design with timber mantle shelf and an original wooden loft ladder attached to the wall in a cupboard to the right of the F.P. This kind of ladder is usually found in stables giving access to the hay loft, but a rather unusual feature in a house. This as well as the unadorned FP and location on the top floor of the house indicate that the room was used for staff accommodation but may also have been a nursery.

Apart from the spacious front rooms in No. 86, seen on all 3 levels, the remaining accommodation consists of small bedrooms and a great deal of space is used up by the long corridor, which was clearly devoted to providing the services for the main house and probably nursery accommodation above. The long rear extensions, the uses of which we can only guess at and shown on the 1878 map, would have been accessed directly from this service entrance and corridor.

Roof Structure over 86 and 88: The roof forms three low ridges, tucked behind the brick parapet, ending in hips. The structure consists of common rafters, single purlins, supported by irregular struts. There are timber plank lined valley gutters with evidence of flat laid bricks below. No signs now visible of lead lining.

The entire roof structure has now been protected by a modern flat roof above it. There is evidence of second-hand timbers being used in the original roof construction, but matching carpenters' marks also exist. Some rafters have been dated to 1611 (see below dendro report)



Views of roof structure.

View of rear hip

Valley with rafter sprockets overlaid with planks.

Pegged and marked rafters.

NB. Attached to this report is a ground plan taken from the Knight Frank sales brochure for No. 86, to which I have added in sketch form the ground floor rooms of No. 88, to indicate the plan form of the entire ground floor, showing a spacious double fronted house with wide entrance hall, principal staircase and separate service entry.

Postscript: In November 2008 dendro dating of the roof timbers was carried out by Dan Miles (VAG Journal Vo. 40 2009, p 129). The result was: **Felling date: Spring 1611, reused rafters.** The VAG entry reads: *This is one of the town's grandest early-eighteenth-century houses, located at the northern entrance to the town. It takes its name from the large grounds behind it, which are associated with the former royal manor and named after the early 14th C Countess of Cornwall. It is built of silver-grey bricks, has red gauged window arches, tall sash windows, an elegant door case, and a parapet which hides the hipped roof. Much of the interior is fully panelled and has an elegant, open-string staircase with a variation of turned balusters and toads-back hand rail; both typical for the early part of the 18th C. (Linda Hall, *Period House, Fixtures and Fittings*) The roof is divided into three low ridges ending in hips. The low quality of the timbers used for the pegged common rafters, single purlins and irregular struts is surprising in a house of this status; the date of 1611 shows that second-hand timbers were used for its construction with the builder saving on those parts not intended to impress.*