

Ven House



A Brief Summary

This glorious early-Georgian mansion, built for a rich London lawyer who bankrupted himself in the process, stands in gently rolling countryside near Milborne Port. Grand without being uncomfortably large and formal without being chilly, it was designed by the West Country-based architect Nathaniel Ireson of Wincanton and closely resembles Buckingham House, one of the great lost houses of London. Yet while Buckingham House was later extended out of all recognition to form Buckingham Palace, Ven has come down through the centuries to reach us almost completely unscathed. The country-house historian Henry Avray Tipping ranked it with Chatsworth and Belton in ‘representing the ideal of a country house’.

It was commissioned by James Medlycott, who bought the estate in 1698 and had by 1725 accumulated enough money to rebuild the house in the latest style, with seven bays of soft-red brick framed by Corinthian pilasters and Ham-stone dressings. Medlycott had Somerset connections, but perhaps the real appeal of Milborne Port was that it was a rotten borough. By a quirk of history, this village of just 50-odd voters had two MPs, enabling wealthy candidates to buy their way into Parliament. This is exactly what Medlycott did, three times in a row.

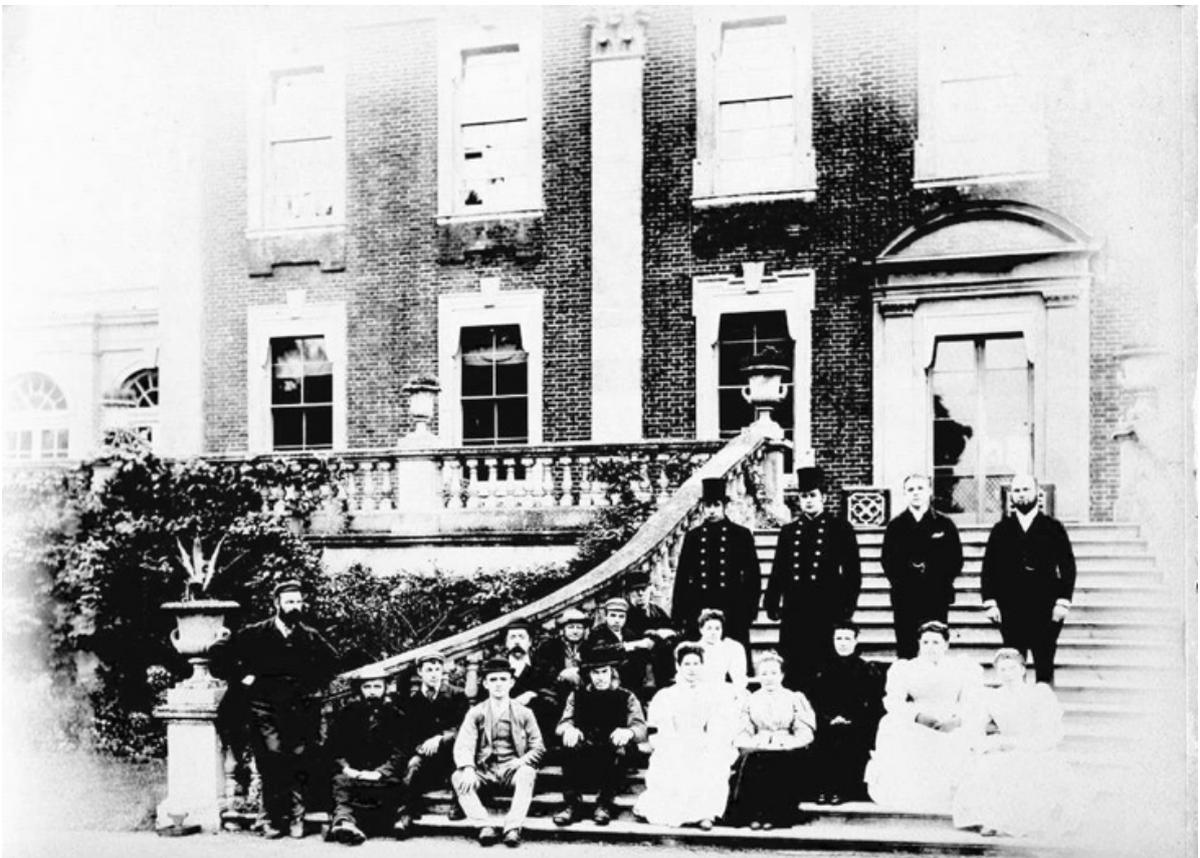
Unfortunately for him, in 1731 he was declared bankrupt and he died shortly afterwards. However, his son Thomas managed to retain Ven. A hundred years on, Sir William Coles Medlycott employed Decimus Burton to reconfigure the house, removing the grand south staircase to create a new drawing room and adding an orangery and conservatory to the west, but otherwise respecting much

of the original work. The twentieth century was less kind to the Medlycotts, who parted with much of the estate after the First World War and the house and grounds in 1957.

In its position as the 'big house' of Milborne Port, especially whist owned and occupied by the Medlycott family, Ven House has played an important part in the life of the local people; Ven hosted various local events such as flower shows (photograph from 1913), fetes (photographs from the 1950s), fancy-dress parades (photograph from the 1950s), and national celebrations (for example the Coronation in 1952) and of course it was an important employer (photographs from 1880s and around 1900).









The letters from Thomas Medlycott (1697-1763) to his agent in Milborne Port, Edward Hallett, reveal a fascinating picture of life at Ven in the late 1730s into the 1740s; we learn of domestic scandals as well as plans for the gardens and for the breeding of chickens, the most dominant topic being his desperate pleas to Hallett to make sure that his tenants paid their rents, no doubt in order that Medlycott could continue to fund his extravagant lifestyle at home and in the capital! Given his father's bankruptcy, it is understandable that he worried so much about staying afloat; however, it is not easy to have that much sympathy for a man who owned or rented a number of houses in the most fashionable parts of London and who had the expensive tastes associated with his position as an MP and a Georgian man-about-town!

In Harry H. Brown's 'Give 'em a dip' (1941), we learn of a report from the Sherborne Journal, 28th September 1837 following the completion of the wings: 'On Thursday evening last, nearly one hundred tradesmen and artisans engaged in enlarging Ven Mansion, the seat of Sir W C Medlycott, Baronet, partook of an excellent supper at the Kings' Head Inn... given them by the worthy Baronet... The evening was spent in a very agreeable manner, and it gives us pleasure to offer our testimony to the respectable conduct of the different persons employed (many of whom are strangers), not only at the convivial board, but in their general transactions with our own townsmen.'

More Historical and Architectural Detail

Ven, or Fenn, existed as a hamlet in the mid 13th century and by the 16th century, the manor belonged to the Carent family, who sold it to Sir Edward Carteret in 1679. When Sir Edward died about 1683, his son, Sir Charles Carteret first mortgaged the property to Thomas Medlycott and subsequently sold it to Thomas' brother, James Medlycott, the son of a lawyer and politician, and grandson of a City of London dyer.

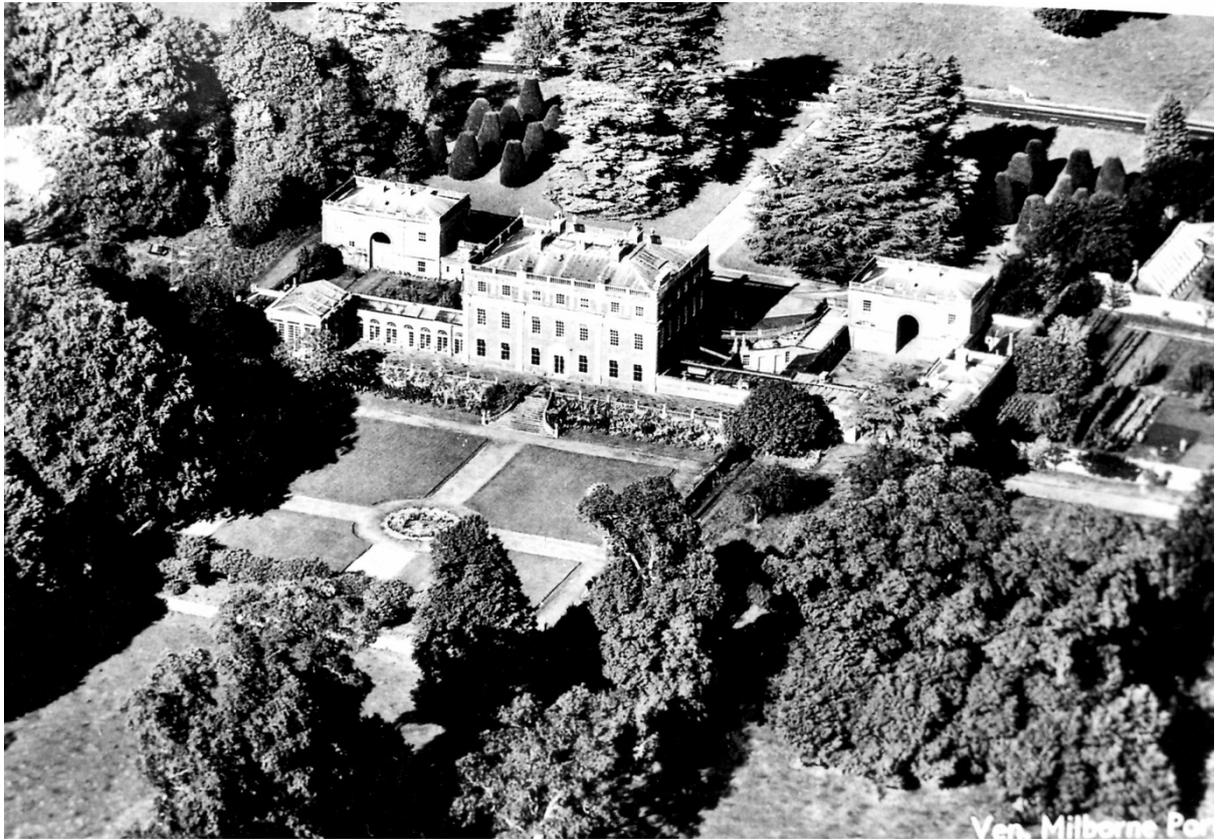
James Medlycott commissioned Nathaniel Ireson of Wincanton to build a new house at Ven in the early 1720s. Richard Grange was commissioned to lay out formal gardens and woodland walks; this work is recorded on a series of plans which show a formal approach from the north and a terrace and steps leading to a walled lawn and parterre to the south of the House. A plan of 1739 shows a walled kitchen garden beyond the stable court to the east of the house, while to the west was an elaborate scheme of walks, serpentine paths, statues, pavilions, and a canal. It is unclear however whether the gardens to the west of the House were ever fully realised in the form shown by Grange.

During the late 18th and early 19th century, the formal gardens were removed, leaving only the walled enclosure to the south of the house, the kitchen garden, and other vestiges. 19th century views show the house standing among lawns and shrubberies.

In 1835, Decimus Burton produced a scheme for remodelling the house which included the construction of a conservatory to the south-west of the original house, together with a new service court to the east. During the 19th century, the park was extended to the south-west, and axial avenues were planted, perhaps replacing early 18th century features.

Ven descended through the Medlycott family throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. Between 1918 and 1925, much of the estate was sold and from the early 20th century, the house was let to a succession of tenants. Sir Hubert Mervyn Medlycott sold Ven in 1957 and the house passed through several hands in the second half of the 20th century. In the 1990s, new formal gardens were laid out within the surviving framework of the early 18th century gardens, while further alterations were made to the house and service quarters. Ven remains in private ownership.

The photograph below of the south side of the house shows Ven from before World War Two.



Willingdon College

(photographs and some text by kind permission of Richard Duckworth)

During WW2, Ven served as a boarding school for boys evacuated from Willingdon College in Sussex.** 'It was a boys' boarding school with accommodation for 100 pupils, one or two of whom were local boys.

Somerset

SCHOOLS—ENGLAND



WILLINGDON COLLEGE
VEN, MILBORNE PORTE, SOMERSET.

(Incorporating Cliftonville School, Margate College, and Southdown College, Eastbourne.)

WILLINGDON is a residential Boys' College providing a complete education for boys from 6 to 18 years of age.

In the Senior School pupils are prepared for the Royal Navy, Royal Air Force, Cambridge School Certificate, Higher School Certificate, as well as for commercial and professional careers, under a staff of Honours Graduates.

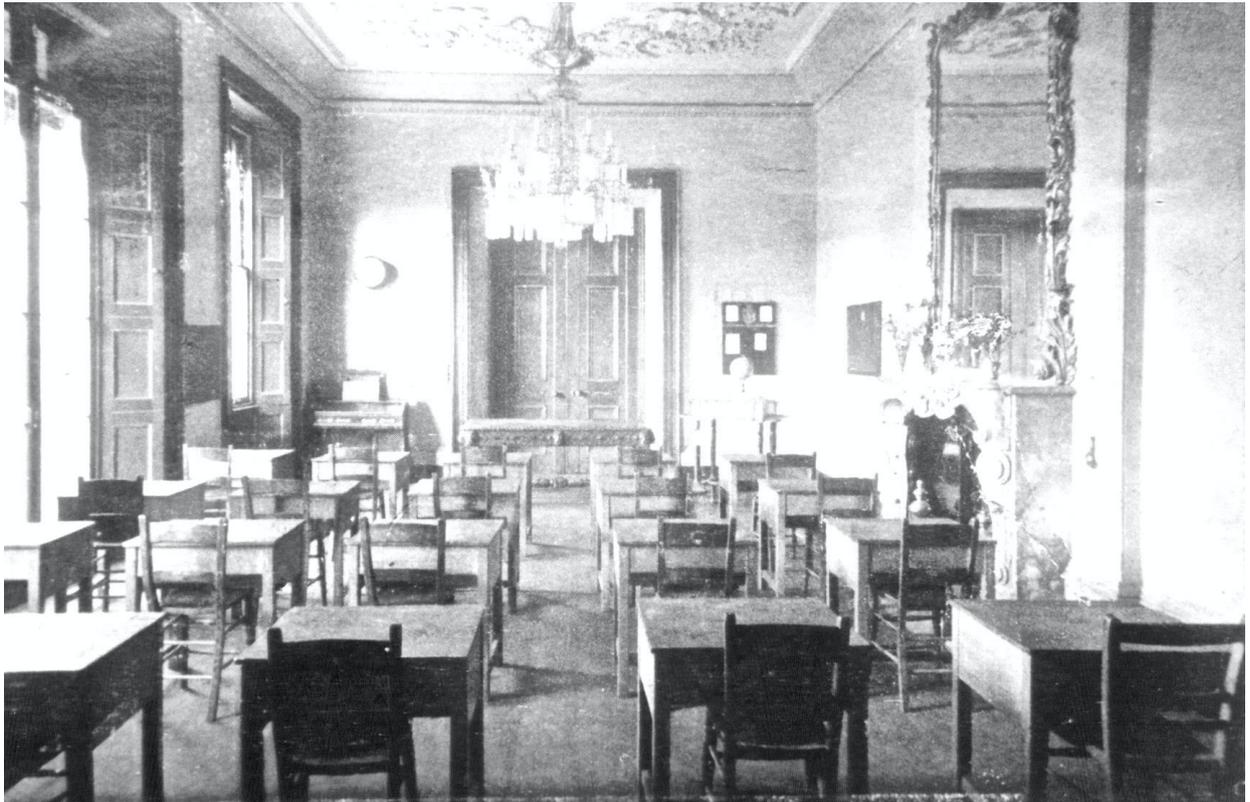
The Junior School is staffed by experienced and qualified teachers. The Kindergarten is modern and well-equipped, the little boys having their own dormitories, play rooms, gardens, and playgrounds. Hobbies include Wolf Cubs, Model Club, Meccano, Hornby, Stamp Club, etc.

Extensive grounds surround the College, providing facilities for Football, Cricket, Swimming, Gardening, Nature Study, Sketching, Photography, etc. Senior School activities include Round Table Club, Debating, Musical and Dramatic Societies, Chess, Model Aircraft, Philately, etc., and a well organised Scout Troop.

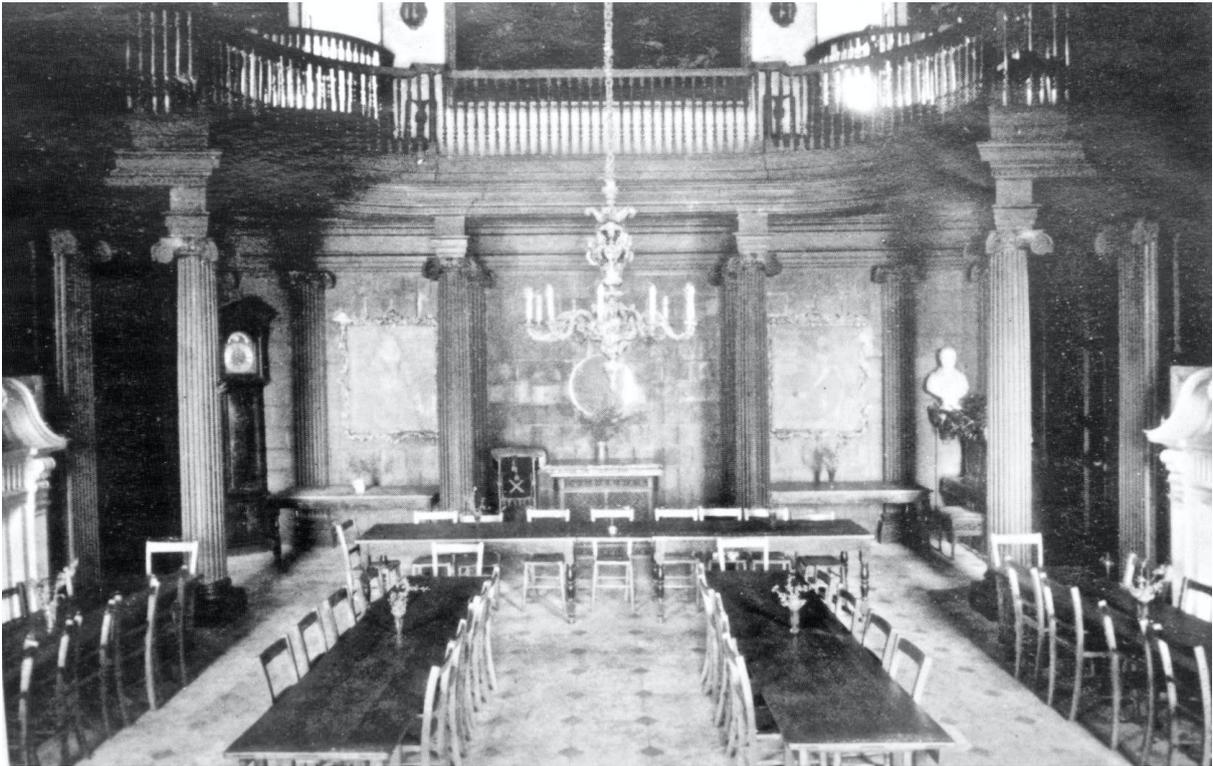
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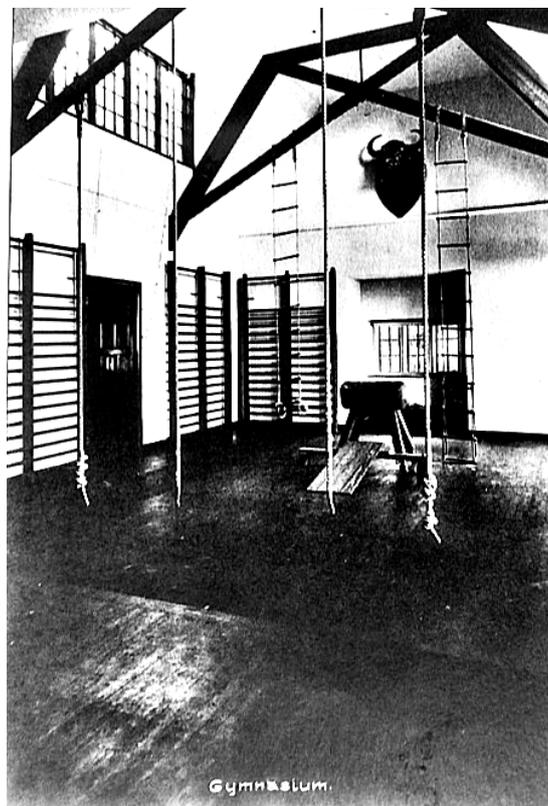
The splendid interior was turned into classrooms:



The main entrance hall was used as the dining room:



Physical education and hobbies were well catered for as this picture of the gymnasium shows (and see the trophy on the wall!):



Many popular pastimes were enjoyed, such as building model aircraft and battleships, photography, woodwork and gardening. Enough was going in to keep the boys busy and take their minds off the war... The war-time safety of the pupils was ensured by air-raid shelters in the large underground fireproof vaults which accommodated 150 people. Many of the fine rooms at Ven House were used as classrooms, the school being divided into junior and senior sections. The fees were 25 guineas per term for boys aged 6-9, 30 guineas for boys aged 10-13 and 35 guineas for boys over the age of 13. Private piano lessons were given by Mr Sinclair Barrows, the local church organist, at a cost of £2 12s 6d per term. It was hoped that after passing their School Certificates, the boys would go on to take the Higher School Certificate and then enter from college direct to university.' (*Pocket Images: Sherborne & Milborne Port* by Richard Brewer and Richard Duckworth)

There follow four quite different accounts from two pupils who attended the college:

The entrance to Ven House had two phoenix on the gates; I believe we adopted the phoenix for our college badge. We were evacuated from Eastbourne during the Second World War, as a Molotov cocktail bomb burnt down the building. We were sheltering in a dug out in the school grounds. Virtually overnight a convoy of charabancs took us to Milborne Port and Ven House. Opposite Ven House was a hill we called Babylon. We used to semaphore from the roof of Ven House to the top of the hill in our school Scout movement. A stream ran throughout the grounds, also under the veranda leading to the gardens and lily pond where we assembled each day for roll call. There was an orangery at the end of the veranda. The grounds had a vast collection of trees and shrubs imported by Sir Hubert Medlycott, the owner of Ven House. Mr Cottingham was our principal, till he stepped down for a Welsh ex-army officer who took over. Rugby was introduced to replace football, which did not go down too well with us, but we accepted it. On the Sunday march to church (having lined up for the penny we were given for the collection), we ran the gauntlet of the village boys, but the girls were much more receptive. We had turns to pump the church organ, and I believe my name was scratched on the pump woodwork. Cross country runs were a regular thing. I remember collecting Cordite from outside an army camp. The secret panels, large oil paintings and crystal chandeliers were magnificent but not treated too well by us; I believe many of us got prisms from them. I believe that during the war, large buildings such as Lord Willingdon's Ven House had the choice of either the army or a school to occupy them. I don't believe they fancied tanks ripping up their gardens and chose a school instead. We didn't have a swimming pool at Ven House, so we undertook a project to dig one out in the grounds where the stream opened out. I do not believe we ever finished it. The stream ran throughout the village, I believe that

a glove manufacturing business tipped its waste into the stream, making the water rather dark. I believe that in 1945 we returned to Cliftonville in Margate where we originally started from. (Patrick Lee, 2012)

I attended Willingdon College in Milborne Port in 1944 at the age of 4 years, accompanied and protected by my elder brother. I think I was the youngest in the school. Ven House made a big impression on me, particularly the numerous old portraits hanging on the walls and the central staircase. I seem to remember that our dining room was in a very large conservatory at the back of the building. Our dormitory was small and situated on the upper floor. I recall the lily pond and several statuettes, in need of repair, situated in the grounds. I recall being 'beaten' with a gym shoe for arriving late for breakfast. The Headmaster at the time was a Captain Thomas. As part of a D-Day celebration, the whole school paraded into the village to join celebrations there. I remember at half term my parents came to visit and stayed in the 'Kings Head' pub, in Milborne Port. At the age of 6 I left Willingdon College, unable to read or write but able to sing several songs in French and recite Grace in Latin and with treasured memories. (A Lynn)

My parents evacuated me to Ven House around 1941. I was 11 years old. My memories of the school are many. The brook that ran under Ven House entrance and the dares to go through it, the poor food, playing football on the pitch with the cow patties. I remember the dog fights of our Spitfires in the Battle of Britain. It was so long ago, but I do have fond and, sometimes, pretty rotten memories of it. (Harry Brown, 2012)

About 1940, at 9 years old, my private school, Willingdon College, was evacuated from Eastbourne to Ven House. It was a most magnificent building, built in the 1700s and pretty unsuitable for a boys' school. I remember fine carved doors and fireplaces, an impressive enormous entrance hall with ceiling paintings which we used as a Dining Hall, beautiful glass chandeliers, the arms of one of which I broke while fooling about, with dire consequences. During the early years many of us slept in basement dormitories which had buzzing machines supposedly to introduce ozone into the air. There was a fine terrace at the back which was weeded as a punishment. A river with a small pool which was great in the summer. There was also a path to a small entrance on to the main road where we had liaisons with the village girls; this led to violent threats from the village boys and some jeering when we marched to church on Sundays. In 1945 the school moved back to Kent. Although I was unhappy to be away from my family during termtime, I have fond memories of Ven House as a building. (Mike Grizaard 2009)

Willingdon  College
FOUNDED 1874
Milborne Porte
Somerset

Principal :

L. J. COTTINGHAM, F.C.I.S., F.F.T.COM., F.C.I.

Vice-Principal :

J. RUSSELL ORR, O.B.E., M.A.,(OXON).

Assisted by a Staff of University Graduates.

Two Qualified Matrons.

Willingdon
College

Fees

Boys from 6 to 9 years	....	....	....	....	....	25 gns. per Term
Boys from 10 to 13 years	....	....	....	....	....	30 gns. per Term
Boy over 13 years	....	....	....	....	....	35 gns. per Term

A special allowance is made in the fees charged for two or more members of the same family, also for the sons of Clergymen, Officers in H.M. Forces or of Old Boys of the College.

Music Private Lessons in Pianoforte are given by Mr. Sinclair Barrows, A.R.C.M. the fee being £2 12s. 6d. per Term.

Parents can take out an Insurance Policy against Sickness or Accident at a moderate premium, payable each term with the College fees. Further particulars may be obtained from the Principal.

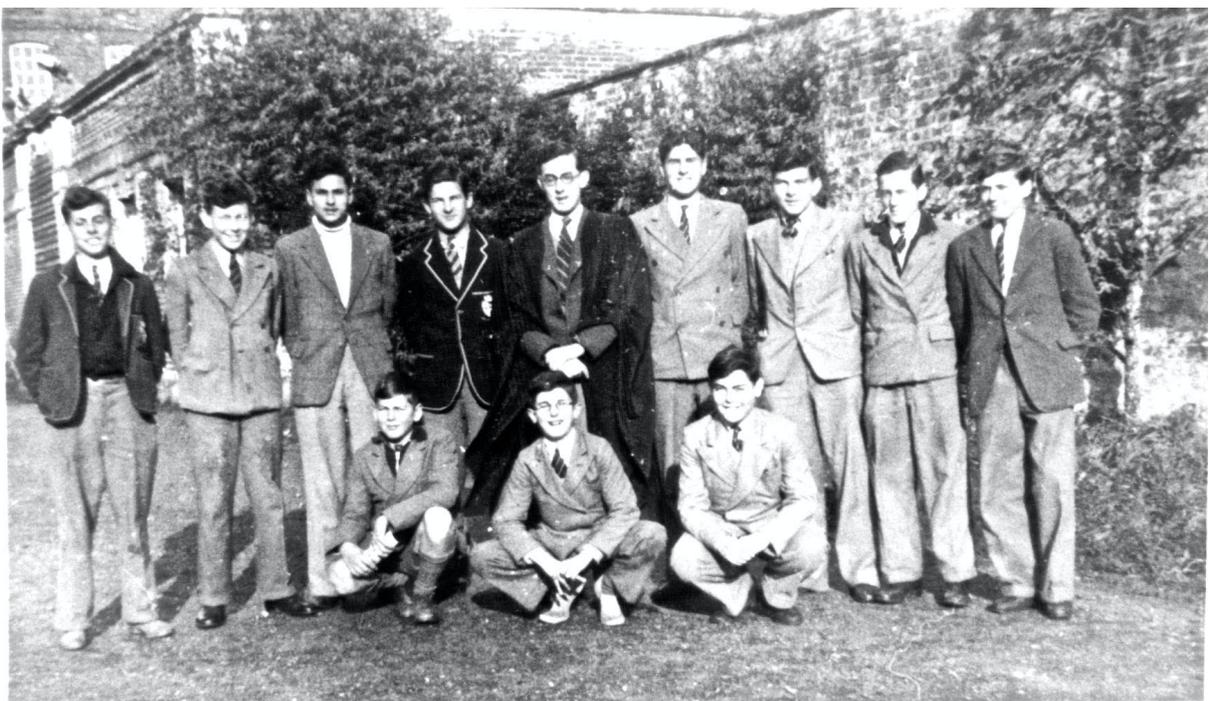
Pocket Money 6d. per week is issued to each boy and entered on the termly account.
1/- per week is issued to prefects.

Any other spending money should be sent through the Principal for payment into the boy's Bank account, from which it is issued as required.

This photograph shows a visit of the younger boys to St John's Church:



These older boys were photographed in the garden to the south-west of Ven:



Even more architectural and design detail

Ven House is situated just outside the centre of Milborne Port. The site is divided into two unequal areas by the A30, London Road, which passes from north-west to south-east about 80m north-east of the house. The site, which is comprised of 6 hectares of formal gardens and pleasure grounds, and about 70 hectares of parkland, is enclosed by a variety of fences and hedges and to the west adjoins domestic properties in Milborne Port. To the south-west, the site adjoins a minor road leading south from Milborne Port to Goathill, while the south-east boundary is formed by London Road; elsewhere, the site adjoins agricultural land. The site is generally level, rising gently towards its south-west and north-east boundaries.

Ven House is approached from London Road to the north-east and the entrance is marked by a pair of 18th century wrought-iron gates supported by a pair of rusticated Ham stone piers which are in turn flanked by stone balustrades terminating in cut and squared stone sweeps (all listed grade I). From the entrance, a drive leads south-west between areas of level lawn to reach a gravelled carriage turn beneath the north-east facade of the house. The stable and service court (listed grade I), rebuilt by Decimus Burton in 1823, is situated to the south-east of the house and is entered through an arch set in a two-storey pavilion. The court was altered in the late 20th century. A service drive providing access to the kitchen garden leads southwest from London Road at a point south-east of the principal entrance. A further entrance, marked by an early 19th century lodge, leads into the site from Brook Street to the west of the house.

The principal entrance was constructed in around 1823 when the present London Road was formed, cutting through the early 18th century formal approach (seen below before the loss of most of these trees.) The early 19th century entrance may make use of elements of the early 18th century entrance which was situated on a road which ran through the park north-east of the house linking East Street and the Old Road. This road survived to be shown on the Tithe map (1839) but had been removed by the late 19th century. Richard Grange's plan shows that the early 18th century entrance comprised a pair of gates and piers flanked by pedestrian gates and concave quadrant walls surmounted by railings. The entrance led to a drive aligned on the north-east facade of the House, which extended between lawns surrounding simple geometrical ponds or planting beds. The lawns were enclosed to north-west and south-east by straight avenues which extended north-east to *clar-voies** overlooking the road. The drive entered a walled forecourt north-east of the House through further gates supported by rusticated stone piers; these may correspond to those at the present principal entrance. Grange's plan indicates that the forecourt was laid out with an elliptical carriage turn enclosing a lawn.

The approximate line of the early 18th century approach is marked in the park north-east of London Road by a late 19th century avenue.

Ven House (listed grade I) stands on an artificially raised terrace towards the centre of the site. The building is constructed in red brick with Ham stone dressings and ornaments under a hipped slate roof which is concealed by parapets. The house is rectangular on plan with curved wings extending north-east and north-west to a pair of two-storey rectangular pavilions (listed grade I). A further two-storey corridor (listed grade I) extends south-west to connect the house with a conservatory (early 19th century, listed grade I) built of brick, Ham stone, and glass. The principal block comprises three storeys rising from a rusticated basement, while the entrance and garden facades to the north-east and south-west are articulated by giant pilasters rising through two storeys. The pilasters support a stone cornice and panelled pilasters which separate the attic windows. The balustraded parapet supports a series of terracotta urns. The south-east and north-west facades are of more plain design. An early 19th century service and stable court (listed grade I) is situated to the south-east of the house.

Formal gardens are situated to the north-east and south-west of the house, with further areas of more informal pleasure grounds to the north-west and south-east.

To the north-east of the house, the drive is flanked by areas of lawn planted with mature specimen cedars. An avenue of clipped yews extends north-east on the axis of the entrance to the stable court.

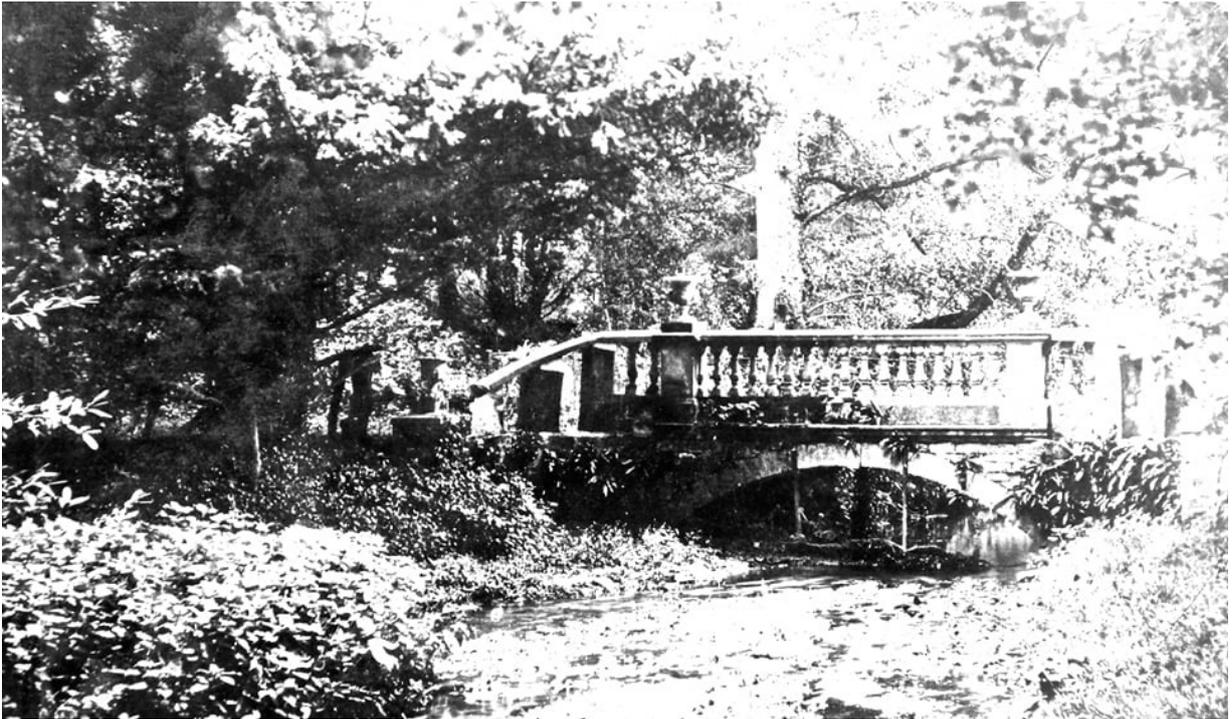
A stone-flagged terrace (listed grade I) extends the full width of the south-west façade of the House, overlooking an enclosed lawn. The terrace is enclosed to the south-west by a low stone balustrade. To the south-east the terrace is terminated by broad flights of stone steps which descend to the pleasure grounds, while to the north-west it adjoins Burton's early 19th century conservatory. A further broad flight of stone steps of sweeping design descends on the central axis of the house to the lower lawn, which is enclosed to north-west and south-west by early 18th century brick walls (listed grade II). The walls are broken by a series of ashlar piers, while the south-east wall contains a gateway flanked by piers surmounted by ball finials. Stone steps descend at the southern end of each wall to the pleasure grounds. To the south-west, the lawn is enclosed by a raised grass walk enclosed on its north-east side by a late 20th century stone balustrade. A centrally placed flight of stone steps descends from this walk to the level of the lawn, replacing, at the lower level, a 19th century curved stone bench seat (listed grade II) which is shown in late 19th century

photographs. Similarly, mop-headed Portugal laurels on the raised walk shown in early 20th century photographs have been removed.

The enclosed lawn has a central circular pool containing a carved figure of Neptune, and a central gravelled walk extending from the terrace to the raised walk. The gravel walk is flanked by panels of lawn planted with topiary yew obelisks, and low yew-hedged enclosures. The lawn was laid out in its present form in the late 20th century. Late 19th century and early 20th century photographs show a much simpler arrangement with cruciform walks converging at the central pool, which at that time contained a 19th century two-tier stone fountain. Richard Grange's plan (1739) shows the south garden laid out with ramped boundary walks and a symmetrical arrangement of lawns containing serpentine flower beds flanking a central canal extending from north-east to south-west.

To the west of the House is an area of informal pleasure ground comprising lawns, shrubberies, and mature trees, through which a serpentine stream flows from south-east to north-west. This replaces a complex baroque scheme shown by Grange (1739), with a wilderness with serpentine walks and groves to the north of the house and a formal canal extending north-west from the house; the present serpentine pool is the remnant of this feature. The formal gardens, if ever fully completed, were removed by the time the Tithe map was surveyed in 1839.

A further area of informal woodland pleasure ground is situated to the south-east of the house. A walk extends south-east from a gate leading from the south-west walled garden to the boundary of the pleasure grounds. The axis of this walk is projected further south-east by an avenue in the park. The walk is adjoined to the north-east by a stream which flows through the pleasure grounds from south-east to north-west before entering a culvert passing beneath the south terrace and re-emerging in serpentine pool in the western pleasure grounds. At the southern corner of the kitchen garden the stream is crossed by a stone double bridge (listed grade II). Probably of 18th century construction, the bridge is L-shaped on plan and has two arches, the larger forming the entrance to the culvert. The area to the east of the house appears as an approximately square enclosure on Grange's plan (1739) but is not otherwise delineated.



The park is situated principally to the north-east of the house, beyond London Road, with a further area extending south-west from the house.



The north park rises gently towards its northern and eastern boundaries, where it is enclosed by a belt of mixed plantation. The park remains principally as pasture, with scattered specimen trees. An avenue extends north-east through the park to

East Hill on the axis of the north-east façade of the house. With the exception of this avenue, which is first shown on the OS map of 1887, the north park is shown on the Tithe map (1839) much as it survives today, with the boundary planting and scattered clumps of trees shown on the rising ground northeast of the house.

The south park also rises gently towards the south-west boundary. This area is in mixed agricultural use, with an avenue extending the south-west axis of the house and garden leading to the Goathill road. It is unclear when the south park was first enclosed, but it appears to have reached its full extent in the late 19th century.

The kitchen garden is situated about 50m south-east of the house, immediately south-east of the service court. The garden is approximately rectangular on plan and is enclosed to the north, south, and west by red-brick walls about 4m high (listed grade II). To the east, the garden is enclosed by a lower rubble-stone wall (listed grade II). Gateways in the centre of the north and south walls are closed by wrought-iron gates supported by brick piers surmounted by stone ball finials. A similar elaborate wrought-iron gate in the centre of the east wall is supported by ashlar piers surmounted by urn finials (piers and gates all listed grade II). The kitchen garden remains in cultivation.

A summerhouse, said to be constructed from elements of the demolished house at Bowood, Wiltshire, was constructed in the kitchen garden in the late 20th century. A further, approximately triangular walled enclosure is situated to the north of the kitchen garden and is similarly enclosed by red-brick walls (listed grade II). This area has traditionally been used as a nursery garden.

The kitchen garden was constructed in the early 18th century as part of Grange's scheme for the gardens. It is recorded on the Tithe map (1839), but the nursery garden to the north is not marked; this is first shown on the 1887 OS map.

Ven is registered under the Historic Buildings and Ancient Monuments Act 1953 within the Register of Historic Parks and Gardens by Historic England for its special historic interest.

* A French term meaning literally 'clear way' and signifying an opening in an enclosure allowing one to see beyond it.

**<https://blog.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/2019/08/27/requisitioning-of-country-houses-in-the-second-world-war-evacuated-schools-in-wartime/>

Nathalie Hetherington
January 2022