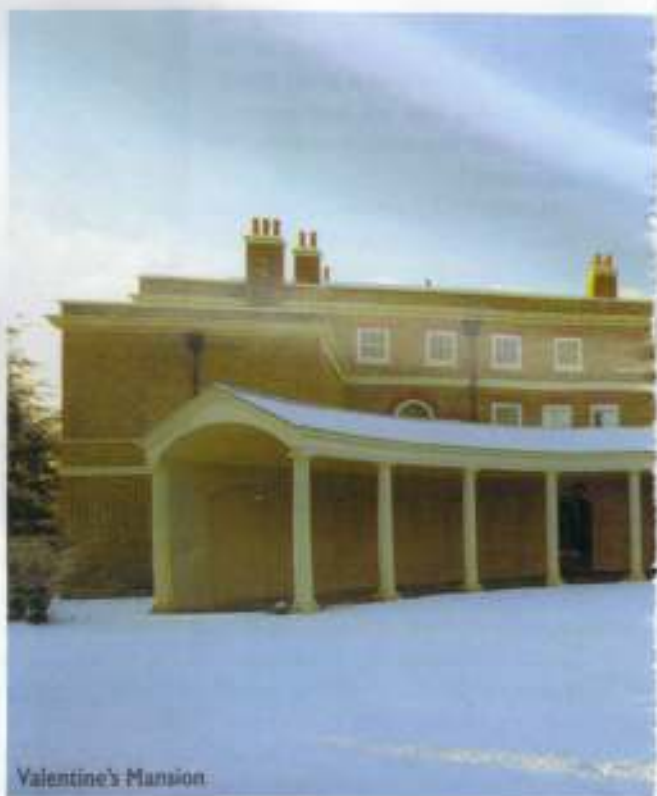


Mansion house

Valentine's Mansion has a fascinating history and is one of the county's richest pieces of heritage.

By Piers Ford



Valentine's Mansion



PLAN
of an Estate called
VALENTINES,
situate near Ilford,
ESSEX.
The Seat of
Charles Thomas Ashurst Esq
1794 - 1860
purchased property from
1838.



The plan for Valentine's Mansion, built within the eponymous park

A municipal park isn't the most hospitable place on a cold, frankly foul, March afternoon. But tucked away in south-west Essex where the boundary with Greater London has long since been smudged out of existence, Valentine's Park in Ilford is doing its best to anticipate spring.

The neat borders with their gaudy winter blooms of primula and daffodils are beautifully tended. The dormant roses are severely pruned, their beds snug under a mulch of manure. Apart from the occasional dog walker bent into the gusty wind, the population is conspicuously non-human: magpies, noisy Canada geese and busy squirrels. Above, with clockwork regularity, jets make their descent into City Airport and there is a constant, steady roar of traffic on the A12, a reminder that this lung of suburbia is just minutes from the London to East Anglia corridor.

But push on into the heart of the park, away from the boating pond and the children's playground and something intriguing appears through the trees: a large house emerges from a haze of cherry

blossom. This is Valentine's Mansion, the forgotten Georgian jewel of the London Borough of Redbridge, overlooked now by the substantial villas of leafy Ilford Garden Suburb but still keeping a brooding, aristocratic watch across the vestiges of its walled, ornamental gardens and the tarmac avenues stretching into the distance.

Little by little, the house is waking up, stirred by the realisation of local inhabitants that all this time they've had an architectural treasure on their doorstep. A delightful, constantly evolving home for a succession of mainly City merchant families for its first 200 years, Valentine's Mansion entered public service in the 20th century and, increasingly dilapidated, fulfilled various local authority roles until it was finally vacated in 1993.

Ironically, while these years of benign neglect gradually engulfed many of the internal features in a rising tide of institutional paraphernalia – a leitmotif of harsh strip lighting runs across every ceiling in the building – they also acted as a preservative at a time when many of the country's stately homes were crumbling away or being



demolished. They also add immeasurably to the house's rich history.

In many ways, since it was completed in around 1697, Valentine's Mansion has had an organic existence; each new owner has made their mark on the place without ever radically altering the core of the building. As a result, there is a comfortable lack of formality about many of the rooms, with additions, patches and repairs reflecting the age in which they were made.

The house was built for Elizabeth Tillotson, widow of the Archbishop of Canterbury and the owner of the Valentine estate, by her son-in-law James Chadwick. It was a handsome but modest dwelling fit for a landed lady and contained notable features, including a paved entrance hall with a splendid carved stone fireplace, some fine wooden panelling (still virtually intact throughout the Georgian part of the house) and, according to Lysons' *Environs of London*, carving by Grinling Gibbons (a tantalising prospect, yet to be verified by internal archaeology).

Mrs Tillotson, alas, had little time to enjoy her new home. When she died in 1702 it was sold to George Finch, the son of a successful and respected merchant, who with his wife Constance raised his young family there and bequeathed it to his eldest son William. In 1724 the mansion was sold to Robert Surman, a former Deputy Cashier to the ill-fated South Sea Company who survived the bursting of the "bubble" with sufficient financial clout to maintain the house for almost 30 years.



This Venetian window of Regency stained glass dominates the main stairwell

Valentine's Mansion was built for Elizabeth Tillotson, widow of the Archbishop of Canterbury and completed in 1697. In the First World War Belgian refugees were entertained in this mansion; it has been offices for the Public Health Authority and the building even served as a potato seed store during the Second World War. Only recently have the local inhabitants realised that they had this architectural gem on their doorstep





Valentine's Mansion has Grade II listed status



Inside, the house awaits treatment. The interior remains substantially the same as the last time it was occupied as a dwelling in 1807. Original features include original box cornices, shutters, ceiling roses and delicately etched stained glass

Charles Raymond, an East India Company captain and future High Sheriff of Essex, purchased Valentine's Mansion in 1754 and was responsible for alterations which significantly altered the house's external appearance. It was refaced in yellow stock brick with soft red brick around the windows – probably in 1769, the date which adorns the family crest on the rainwater heads above the drainpipes – and possibly extended to the west elevation to create the main house we see today. On Raymond's death in 1788, the house was sold to one Donald Cameron who is said to have owned Hogarth's famous *Southwark Fair*, which now hangs a long way from Ilford in the Cincinnati Art Museum.

Cameron died in 1797 and ownership passed to Robert Wilkes and then Charles Welstead who bought the estate in 1808. He shifted the main entrance from the south side of the house (replacing it with a first floor balcony) to the north where he built an sheltered carriageway supported by Doric columns (*a porte cochère*). To the east he added a conservatory and on the west side he converted the original Georgian orangery into domestic offices: a dairy and the kitchen.

For almost an entire century Valentine's Mansion then entered its most prolonged and settled period of family ownership. In 1838 it was bought by Charles Holcombe, who lived there with his wife Margaret and niece, 14 year old Sarah Oakes. Sarah later married a lawyer, Clement Ingleby and in 1860, they returned to Valentine's *en famille* to be with the widowed Charles. Sarah inherited the house in 1870 and embarked on a later life of philanthropy until her death in 1906 while her husband, eschewing the legal profession, became a noted

Shakespearian scholar and received a doctorate from Cambridge University. They added a two-storey extension to the north-east side to supplement the house's bedroom capacity.

In 1899, Mrs Ingleby sold 47 acres of the estate to Ilford Urban District Council for use as a public park. When the council bought the remaining parkland in 1912, its future as a municipal facility was assured. The house, which came as an additional part of the package, presented the local authority with a conundrum. What exactly do you do with a fine stately home comprising many rooms of pleasing proportions, servants quarters, significant architectural features and decorations but with nothing obvious to offer the Borough by way of useful facilities?

The council's response was to do very little apart from utilising the house on an ad hoc basis for a whole variety of purposes, each of which added its own *frisson* to the house's history.

"Belgian refugees were entertained in this mansion by the residents of Ilford from November 1914 till April 1919", informs a plaque above the fireplace in the entrance hall. Between 1925 and 1965, it became "temporary" offices for the Public Health Authority, accounting for the apparently arbitrary installation of functional sanitary ware throughout the upper floors of the building, not to mention the traces of random partitions evident across the panelling and the stuccoed ceilings. Many local people remember visits to the house, not because of childhood tales of ghosts and hauntings but because of its long association with inoculations, stethoscopes and the prodings and pokings of a life in the firm hands of the medical profession.

Parts of the mansion were requisitioned from time to time. During the Second World War it served as a seed potato store. Later, it provided changing accommodation for the park's tennis courts. In 1965, it became the headquarters of the newly formed London Borough of Redbridge's housing service, which occupied it until 1993. Since then, the house has been used occasionally for courses and special events but has, for the most part, stood empty.

By the late 1990s, however, renewed local interest in the building was gathering pace. Ilford is not a corner of Essex over-blessed with buildings of historical interest and for that reason alone Valentine's Mansion's Grade II listed status marks it out as a cultural focal point for the area. In 1999, Redbridge Council agreed to lease the house to the specially-formed Valentine's Mansion Steering Group, tasked with developing a business plan for the development of the house as a fully-fledged facility for the entire community.

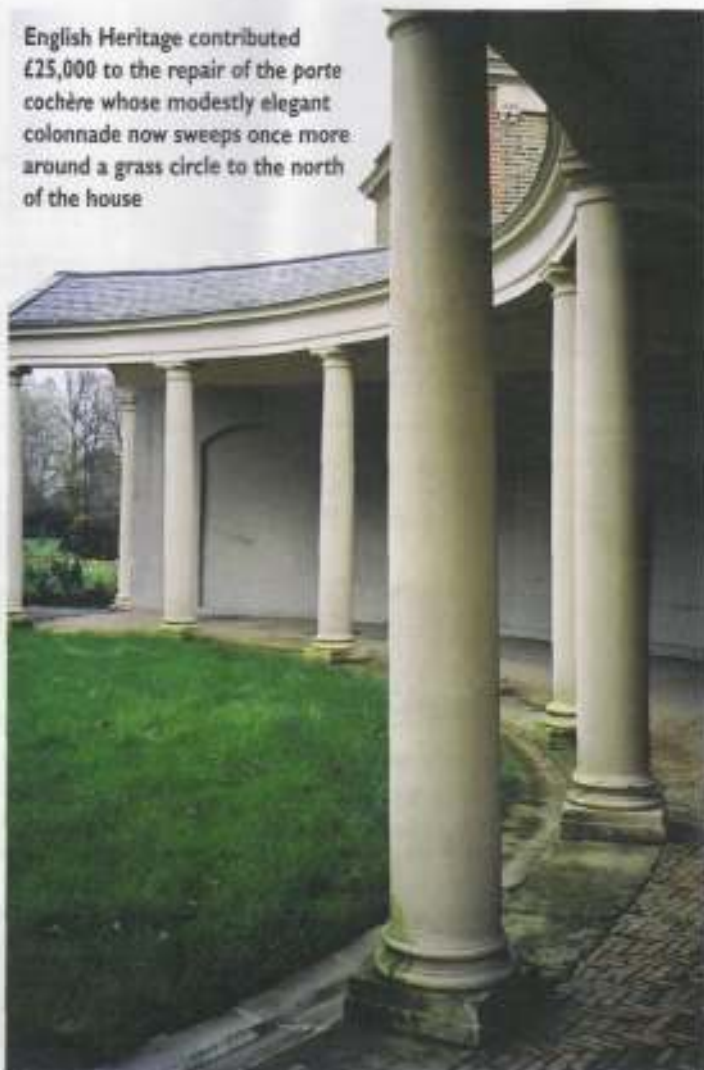
This plan was drawn up over the next two years. It includes a combination of commercial and subsidised uses, from restaurant, conference and wedding facilities to adult education and local activity groups, and residential accommodation on the top floor. In 2000, the plan was presented to a public meeting and the Friends of Valentine's Mansion was established as a conduit for local enthusiasm for the house's preservation and a new phase in its useful life. The plan is now the subject of an application to the Heritage Lottery Fund for London. The result of the application is expected shortly.

Meanwhile, the council was galvanised into a restoration programme. In 2000, the red brick exterior of the building was renovated to magnificent effect at a cost of £310,000, its repointed façade now positively gleaming across the park even on the dullest of days. The *porte cochère* roof was replaced and the ugly iron fire escape torn down. The balcony above the former entrance to the house was restored using paint analysis to establish that it had originally been a surprisingly bright green in colour.

English Heritage contributed £25,000 to the repair of the *porte cochère* whose modestly elegant colonnade now sweeps once more around a grass circle to the north of the house, focusing attention on a sundial restored with the help of a grant from the Heritage of London Trust.

Now, the inside of the house awaits the same treatment. Which brings us back to a cold March afternoon and a rare chance to steal through the rooms of a mansion which, despite first impressions, remains substantially the same as the last time it was occupied as a dwelling in 1807. Some of the shutters are

English Heritage contributed £25,000 to the repair of the *porte cochère* whose modestly elegant colonnade now sweeps once more around a grass circle to the north of the house



half-open, suggesting watchful eyes.

Just as at Christmas 2001, when the Friends held a traditional evening of seasonal entertainment and the windows shot beams of festive light across the park and the evocative sound of merry making echoed through the resting trees, it doesn't take much imagination to conjure the house back into active life.

At first, all the eye can really take in is the endless miles of fluorescent tubes, the hideous scars of ducting and electrical wiring, unalluring expanses of scrubby heavy duty carpet tiles and sticky linoleum and everywhere, acres of clogged institutional paint.

Then the haze begins to clear. What seems like irreparable damage is really only superficial. All around, original features peer out from beneath the remnants of 20th century civic business.

All windows on the ground floors have their own pair of shutters, all intact. The hinge and fastening details vary, reflecting repairs made over the many years of the house's domestic occupancy. The glass cases lining the walls of the dining room are, like much of the pan-

elling, charmingly asymmetrical and must have looked magnificent when filled with the Ingleby's fine china.

Each room contains a nod in the direction of true quality: a late 18th century mantelpiece, original box cornices, ceiling roses from which twinkling chandeliers must once have hung and elegant coving. The main stairwell is dominated by a bold, arched Venetian window of Regency stained glass.

Upstairs, the door leading onto the balcony contains more delicately etched stained glass. The handsome rooms, none of them over-large, lead from one to the other, creating a corridor effect. In the north-east corner of the house, the view from the bedroom across the park must be very similar to that enjoyed by Mrs Ingleby, although the trees are much larger now.

Behind a piece of plaster-skimmed hessian, restorers have discovered traces of artisans including the signature of James Walker, "paper hanger", from 1809. In the flag-floored kitchen, the 19th century range still looms imposingly. And the recent discovery of an underground passage – purpose so far unknown – has added a dash of mystery to the mansion's credentials.

Upstairs in the old drawing room, a motto above the fireplace recalls the occupancy of the scholarly Clement Ingleby: *Non immemor beneficii*. Translated as "Be mindful of service", it now has a new sense of urgency about it. The loving and careful restoration of Valentine's Mansion into a resource to be enjoyed and treasured by the entire community will provide a unique service indeed in this forgotten corner of Essex. □