

NEW COURT

The Site...

...was formerly occupied by a house, built in the early 18th century, belonging to Susanna Hone, a widow, who lived in or rented out the property until her death in 1869.

The archway beside the house is a mystery. It bears no resemblance to that building, so was perhaps either the driveway to another house, earlier demolished, which lay behind this one, or a carriage entrance to Cromwell House.

The earliest large-scale Ordnance Survey map holds no clues, although it shows a yew walk, the remains of which still exist, suggesting that there had been something here which we have yet to discover.



The Buyer

On Mrs. Hone's death, her property was sold to Frederic William Berger, who had for some years rented Court Garden House. Berger had been an executive with the firm of Bergers Paint, a dye and paint works established in east London in 1760. On the death of his wife, he seems to have decided on a smaller establishment, purchased the Hone property and employed the architect Robert William Edis to build him a new house.

Sadly Frederic Berger did not long enjoy his new home, dying within a year of its completion.

The Architect

Sir Robert William Edis, F.R.I.B.A. was a Victorian architect who became a member of the Aesthetic Movement, specialising in the Queen Anne and Domestic Revival styles. He made his name by building or extending big country houses, many of which have since been demolished. The Grand Central Hotel in the Marylebone Road is one of the best surviving examples of his work. Another was the now demolished ballroom at Sandringham House.

New Court, designed in the mid 1870s, was a relatively early commission. Edis usually followed the old practise of employing and overseeing his own builders to erect his designs, but in this case seems only to have supplied the plans.

In 1922 he was knighted; not, in spite of having been President of R.I.B.A., for his architectural skills, but for having been one of the founders of the Artists' Rifles. This accounts for Spy's cheeky cartoon and sardonic caption.



Architecture Militant

The Design

New Court is a good example of Edis's favourite styles. The stable block and coachman's cottage, fronting the High Street, and the domestic wing at right angles to the main house, are Domestic Revival; simple red-brick buildings with tile-hanging and casement windows. The main wing of the house, with its diapered brickwork, half-timbering and bay windows, is Queen Anne Revival. We have a published plan for the stable block, but the house plans are lost.



The stable block has been listed Grade 2 since 1974. When we recently supplied Historic England with the plans and the architect's name, they were happy to add a rider attributing the main house to Edis, too. R.I.B.A. are also satisfied that this is his work, as they know of several other buildings which he omitted from his "definitive" list of works on the grounds that he did not personally oversee their construction.

A Victorian haven

The house was put up for sale soon after Frederic Berger's death. The next two owners remained for only a short time, but in 1883 New Court acquired a long-term owner.

It was purchased for Jane Ward, the widow of a local solicitor who had, for many years, lived at Brampton House. Together with her son, George Rolls Ward, she occupied the house for the next quarter-century. Their peaceful existence was disturbed briefly in the first year by an audacious burglary of the shop next door through their property and later, more happily, by the annual river outing of Bucks County Cricket Club, of which George was a founder member, invariably followed by a tea at New Court. He died, a J.P and respected member of the community, in 1907, followed a few months later by his 94 year-old mother.



NEWCOURT, MARLOW. RESIDENCE OF G. R. WARD, J.P.

New Owners

After the death of the Wards, New Court was bought by Jack Langley, a colourful Marlow figure, born in Dean Street, who, in spite of being a bookie, also served on the Urban District Council and became a respected citizen. In 1911 he rented the house for three years to Lucy Forrest, the widow of a land agent. Robert Forrest was a Scot who had spent most of his adult life in St. Fagans, near Cardiff. After his death, his second wife moved to Marlow to be nearer to her own family in the London area. Later she purchased the property.

From the beginning her daughter Nesta, then twenty, was a force in Marlow. By 1912 she had collected a group of girls and was running the first Guide unit in the town.

War Work

Service No.	WAIN	POSTED DEC 1918	4. 11. 19.
Christian Name	Nesta Sylvia Forrest (Miss, Mrs. Donston)		
Present Address	New Court Marlow		
Certificate No.		Age when engaged	24
Date of Engagement	24. 4. 15.	Rank	Private
Date of Termination	26. 5. 18.	Rank	Private
Previous engagements under Joint War Committee, if any, and where	P.T.O.		
Honours awarded	2 Scarlet Efficiency stripes		
Character	26. 5. 14.		

On 1st November, 1914 Nesta's younger brother Robert was posted missing on the Messines Ridge. The following year she became a V.A.D., beginning a life-long connection with the Red Cross. She was sent to Reading War Hospital where she remained, earning two Efficiency Stripes and, on one occasion, being mentioned in despatches, until her marriage in early 1918.

Reading had more war hospitals than any other city except London. At a time when the wounded could be moved most gently by rail, Reading was the quickest and easiest journey from the capital. Most temporary hospitals were identified by name, so Nesta is likely to have been nursing at War Hospital No. 1, more usually the Royal Berkshire.

First Marriage

Nesta Forrest married William Donston Wain at St. George's, Hanover Square on 4th April, 1918. William Wain, who had been brought up on the Lincolnshire coast, had joined the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve. He became a pilot, but spent most of the war as a munitions officer. At his

death, his address was given as No. 1 School of Bomb Dropping and Navigation, Stonehenge, Salisbury.

In November 1918 Wain was one of the unlucky few who, instead of being demobbed, was sent to the Baltic to help the White Russians against the Bolsheviks. There, at the end of the next year, he met with some kind of accident and died on 1st February, 1920 in a Berlin hospital. He is buried in Marlow cemetery, next to the grave which Nesta shares with her second husband.



Copyright, F. N. Birchall, from the F.N.B. Series of Artists.
Flight Sub-Lieut. W. D. Wain, K.N.A.S., who has recently
qualified at the G.W. School.

...and then

By the end of the year Nesta was in India. On 20th December she married William Duncan Forbes Liston in Columbo. Nesta and Forbes Liston were related by marriage and had a first cousin in common. That young woman, Anita Forrest, had lived with the Liston family in London since the beginning of the century.

In 1909 Forbes, then aged nineteen, had joined the Indian Army. The 38th King George's Own Central India Horse, to which he was later attached as a lieutenant, were sent in 1914 to the Western Front, where they were used, throughout the war, chiefly as pioneers and relief troops. In the possibly considerable spare time which these light duties would have allowed him, Forbes too had learned to fly. Towards the end of the war he had taken an honorary commission with the R.A.F., but resigned after the Armistice and in 1919 returned to India. He was on the Indian Army Reserve of Officers, but it seems that the army had no vacancy for him, so he joined the Imperial Indian Police.

Between the Wars

At some time before her death in March 1924, Lucy Forrest had had a wing added to New Court: a large, pleasant room with French doors opening onto the front lawn and a long attic overhead. We do not know who designed or built this, but both brickwork and joinery are comparable to other work done at the time by Y. J. Lovell, whose yard and joinery shop were a few doors down the High Street. Later the room was wood-panelled and shelved to the ceiling as a library.



When Lucy Forrest died the Listons were not living in England, but in 1926 their name appeared for the first time in the local telephone directory. After the death of his father, a wholesale provision merchant, in the next year, Forbes Liston was able to live on his own means as a country gentleman. During this period the Listons enjoyed at least two holidays, one a long cruise to the West Indies, the second a short trip to Canada.

Below Stairs

Mary Jane Edmonds, later wife of the Listons' gardener, was at this time a live-in housemaid at New Court. She has left us this account of her daily life.

"My day at New Court started at 6 am with the front step. The hall, front stairs, the cloakroom and sitting room – all before 8 am. Then I took morning tea up to Mr and Mrs Liston for 7.30 am. I also had to get a can of hot water for Mr Liston to shave.

"Breakfast was at 8 am. While they were having breakfast, I had to make the beds. I then had to start cleaning the upstairs, which comprised of a dressing room, three bedrooms, two

bathrooms and toilets, and the landings. That took me to lunch-time and if we had guests I had to help the parlour-maid.

“We had two hours off duty from 2 pm to 4 pm each day. One half-day off per week, and a Sunday half-day off per fortnight, with two hours off on the other Sunday morning.”

The staff comprised a cook-housekeeper, parlour-maid, house-maid, kitchen-maid, two full-time gardeners and another part-time.

“Mr Forbes Liston was Mrs Nesta Liston’s second husband. He served in both World Wars. He fell out of an aeroplane and broke his lower jaw. He also hurt his leg and had a limp.”

A New War...

Between the wars Nesta had not neglected Marlow. By 1939 she had become a Justice of the Peace, the first woman to sit on Marlow Urban District Council and was deeply involved in the local organisation of the Red Cross.

The first change which the war brought was domestic. Old Mrs. Liston and the Listons’ cousin, Anita Forrest, abandoned their house in the Finchley Road and came to live at New Court. Annie Liston died in 1941, but Anita remained at New Court for the duration, and lived in Marlow for the rest of her life.

In November 1939 Forbes Liston rejoined the R.A.F. as a pilot officer in the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve. The next year he was promoted flying officer, a position which he held until his resignation in February 1945.

...and a New Peace



After the war, the Listons’ peaceful existence resumed. Although they had no family, there were children on the premises. The photograph above, taken in 1950, shows Peter, the son of Mary and Frank Edmonds with Isobel and Catherine, the housekeeper’s daughters, among the crocuses on the front lawn.

In 1932, when the Primitive Methodists joined forces with the Wesleyans, Nesta Liston had bought their chapel and given it to the Urban District Council for use as a public hall. As such, it housed the library centre, the mother and baby clinic and all kinds of amateur entertainments. When it was passed to the newly formed Community Association, they decided that this generosity should be publicly acknowledged and renamed the chapel Liston Hall.

In 1963 Nesta’s unflagging public service was recognised when she was awarded the M.B.E.

The end of an era

In early 1970, at the age of 80, Forbes Liston died. In the autumn his wife followed him. In death, as she had been in life, Nesta was generous to Marlow. She left a will which stated:

“I DEVISE my property known as New Court Marlow aforesaid to Marlow Urban District Council absolutely but I express it as my wish that the Council should set aside a substantial part of the property as a public open space or garden for the enjoyment of the people of Marlow and that the Council should maintain it as such.”



A new lease of life



The Urban District Council were delighted with their gift, and opened the garden to the public almost immediately. They were, however, dismayed to learn that the Inland Revenue required them to pay about £90,000 in death duties. The problem was solved by the sale of the stable block and land behind which had held the greenhouses to a commercial developer, who converted the existing buildings and built new shops to create Liston Court.

The house was converted into seven bed-sitters for the elderly, and was soon augmented by fourteen new units built on the old kitchen garden, fronting onto Cromwell Gardens. When Wycombe District Council took over the site, they built a larger group of flats behind and connected to the main house.

Another new beginning

In 2011 the District Council passed responsibility for its social housing to Red Kite, a trust set up for the purpose. They decided that New Court House and the older block of flats could not be brought up to 21st century standards, and offered them for sale.

The most pressing problem created was the footpath to the High Street and Liston Road from Cromwell Gardens. Because it crossed council land it had never been adopted, so ran the risk of being closed. It is at present, with a large number of witness affidavits to its use, with the County Council Rights of Way team awaiting a decision as to its adoption.

The conversion of the properties on Cromwell Gardens, one bedroom flats for sale on the open market, is almost complete. The main house awaits development.

The grounds remain a problem. There are thirty-six yew trees on or associated with this site. A few have grown from seedlings, but most are part of a yew walk and garden which was planted here more than two hundred years ago. We can judge their age from the girth of the trees, but unfortunately we cannot discover who owned the site or planted them. It is possible that much more of the land once belonged to Cromwell House, in the days when it was called simply The Great House. However, there is also evidence that before 1735 this area had contained two houses, by then demolished, with an entrance archway and lodge on the High Street.

These trees, not all in good condition, are now divided between three owners; Wycombe District Council, Lennox Estates and Red Kite Housing. We have applied, without success, to Historic England to have them listed. They remain vulnerable.

