

# **CHESTERFIELD AND DISTRICT CIVIC SOCIETY**

## **THE FUTURE OF TAPTON HOUSE**

### **1      Introductory**

This paper has been prepared by the Civic Society's chairman, with considerable help from Philip Cousins, a committee member, and has been approved by the whole committee as a statement of its views on what should happen to Tapton House, the late eighteenth-century mansion on the north-eastern outskirts of Chesterfield, which is listed grade II\* (rather than grade II), apparently on the strength of either the fine interiors or its association with George Stephenson, the railway engineer. Tapton House remained a private residence until shortly after the First World War and in 1931 became a senior (later secondary) school, which closed in 1991. It was afterwards occupied by Chesterfield College but has been empty for some years. The Tapton estate has been the property of Chesterfield Borough Council and its predecessor since c.1925. The council is currently seeking to dispose of the mansion, probably on a long lease, and has indicated that it is open to suggestions as to the future use of the building.

Our view is that plans for the future of the property can only be properly devised if informed by an accurate account of the history of the estate and of Tapton House, which the annexe to this paper seeks to provide.

### **2      Possible future uses for Tapton House**

Since Chesterfield College vacated Tapton House, the Borough Council has been trying to find a new occupier for the property, for which it has no use itself. There has never been any suggestion of seeking to demolish either the mansion or the school buildings, which have been carefully maintained and kept secure. The council's efforts to lease the property have been unsuccessful, despite the engagement of a leading firm of estate agents.

During this period the council appears to have thought principally in terms of letting the buildings on a relatively short lease as offices. Other suggestions which have been made, but not followed up by those who have made them, include conversion into a hotel or flats, or for the buildings to become an independent

secondary school. More recently, the council has indicated that it might consider granting a long lease (say 150, 250 or 500 years), which would give the leaseholder greater freedom of action but enable the council to keep some control over the property. It has also been suggested in recent months, apparently for the first time, that the mansion itself might be restored to private residential use.

### ***A red herring***

Public discussion of the possible 'sale' of Tapton House (in fact the granting of a long lease, not the disposal of the freehold) has provoked a reaction in some quarters locally among those who wish to see the buildings remain in public (or 'community') use. The suggestion has been made that the Tapton estate was given to Chesterfield Corporation by C.P. Markham to be used 'by the people of Chesterfield' and that it cannot, for this reason, pass into private hands. We understand that this view is mistaken, that Markham's wish was an expression of opinion, not a condition of his gift, and that there are no covenants forming part of the Borough Council's title to the estate which limits the authority's power to sell the mansion and former school buildings for any purpose which it considers appropriate. Nothing will be achieved by those campaigning for the use of Tapton House by the 'community' by bogus appeals to history not securely based on the evidence of the deed by which Markham conveyed the estate to the local authority.

It is worth stressing that part of the park surrounding the mansion has been open to the public since soon after Markham made his gift and the remainder has been used as a public golf course for the same period. The golf course is crossed by a bridleway which enables the public to walk through it. As far as we know, the Borough Council has no plans to restrict or remove public access to either the park or the golf course. Conversely, the mansion has never been 'open to the public' (except possibly briefly as a museum) or used by 'the community'; it has been occupied by a school and a further education college. Claims that it should 'remain in community use' are therefore ill-founded.

### ***A Grade II\* listed building***

The scope for altering the fabric of the building (as opposed to its use) is tightly circumscribed by its status as a Grade II\* listed building. This protects not

merely the exterior (which on its own would probably only merit Grade II listing) but also the interiors, which are evidently deemed to be of national importance. We can therefore be grateful to Wilcockson & Cutts for not suggesting alterations in 1931 (long before 'listed buildings' came into being) that would have damaged the interiors of the best rooms of the mansion, and for the careful stewardship of Derbyshire County Council after 1944 and most recently Chesterfield College as occupiers. It remains unclear whether the mansion secured grade II\* status because of the interiors or because excessive weight was placed on the connection with George Stephenson (as has tended to be the case locally). It should be noted that he merely lived at Tapton (as lessee) for the last ten years of his life.

### ***Apartments or a hotel?***

We believe that the grade II\* listing would make it difficult successfully to convert the mansion into either a hotel or flats. The house could be divided vertically into two large three-storey apartments using the two existing staircases, but would be difficult to divide laterally into three self-contained apartments, much less six much smaller units. However carefully the alterations needed were designed, they would almost certainly not be acceptable to Historic England, since they would involve closing off original corridors through the house and otherwise altering the use of the space.

A hotel conversion might seem simpler, but would such a venture be commercially viable? Chesterfield is not itself a major holiday destination, and Tapton is probably too far from the Peak District to be attractive to those who had the resources to stay in what would presumably be quite an expensive boutique hotel. The school buildings of 1931 could be used as additional accommodation, but what demand would there be for such a large number of ground-floor bedrooms? They are not particularly attractive as function rooms.

As is obvious from the plans of the interior, the layout of both the mansion and school buildings makes them wholly unsuitable for conversion into either a retirement home or a nursing home.

### ***Corporate headquarters or a school?***

It is possible that a long lease might make Tapton House more attractive as a

corporate headquarters or an independent school. But even then, there remain commercial objections. The mansion would make an impressive corporate headquarters, but one which was easily accessible only by car, which cannot (within strict limits) be altered structurally, and which lacks modern IT and other facilities. Offices of similar size are available in the Chesterfield–Sheffield area which have none of these drawbacks. The site as a whole would be expensive to maintain (as we understand Chesterfield College discovered) and the buildings are inconveniently laid out, with a poor gross-to-net ratio. Only a company which put show well above substance is likely to be interested.

At first sight, an independent secondary school might seem an admirable solution. But ironically, alterations by Chesterfield College make the buildings less suitable for such a use than they were before, and these would have to be reversed. A new assembly hall, dining room and lavatories would be needed, the IT facilities would need updating, as would provision for teaching art, craft and design. Sports facilities are currently non-existent. No-one could simply walk in and open a school as though nothing had changed since 1991. It is true that an independent secondary school would fill a gap in local provision, and that Chesterfield now supports a successful private prep school. It is also arguable that the standard of non-fee-paying, non-denominational academic secondary education in Chesterfield is now so poor that an independent day school would have a good chance of success. But the fact remains that no-one appears willing to test that possibility. Just because the buildings once accommodated a well-regarded local authority school does not mean that an independent school would be equally popular. It appears that parents who are aware of the shortcomings of secondary education in Chesterfield, and have the resources to take appropriate action, are happy to send their children to Birkdale, Sheffield Girls' High, Mount St Mary or elsewhere, despite the daily travelling involved. They are not pressing for the establishment of an independent day school closer to home, which would face strong competition in the immediate sub-region.

### ***Community use?***

In recent weeks there has been discussion locally about the desirability of Tapton House being given over to 'community use', although exactly what use remains ill-defined. The problem with schemes of this sort is revenue funding. The



National Lottery Heritage Fund might make a capital grant towards the cost of converting the buildings (although some matching funding would have to be raised) but none of the uses so far suggested would produce anything like enough income to cover revenue costs, which neither the NLHF nor other potential benefactors would meet.

In the case of one particular use which has been suggested (a museum or heritage centre) the buildings are demonstrably unsuitable. In any case Chesterfield already has a museum, which regrettably does not receive as much support from the public as it deserves. Moving some or all of its collections to a less accessible location outside the town centre is unlikely to do much for visitor numbers, even if such a move could be funded.

There appears to be an unspoken belief on the part of supporters of 'community use' that this could be achieved by a voluntary body in association with the Borough Council, which would meet part of the cost, or lease the buildings on a peppercorn rent. But this ignores the fact that the council urgently needs to reduce its expenditure on Tapton House by disposing of it, and is not in a position to fund either capital improvements or the running costs of a 'community centre'. There are already places in the borough which offer facilities of the same sort, provided by voluntary organisations, churches and chapels, and the two third-tier local authorities which serve Brimington and Staveley. The Borough Council itself maintains two large venues in the town centre, the Pomegranate and the Winding Wheel, both of which require a subsidy from the taxpayer. Would there be sufficient demand to support more of the same, even if it could be funded? We suspect not.

### ***Return to a private residence?***

Given the obvious drawbacks to any of the other uses which have been suggested, the lack of interest shown over several years by prospective tenants with such uses in mind, and the impracticality of suggestions for 'community use', we believe that a strong case can be made for the restoration of the mansion as a private residence, as it was for most of the time between the 1790s and 1920s.

This would involve relatively few alterations to the fabric, none of which need

incur the displeasure of Historic England<sup>1</sup>. The three principal reception rooms on the ground floor could easily revert to their original use. It might be desirable to install a modern kitchen next to the dining room, using the room described as a 'library' in the Markhams' time, rather than reinstate the original kitchen, which is at the opposite end of the house. The larger room on the other side of the corridor leading from back entrance could become a utility/laundry room, and the original kitchen, with two store rooms off it, would make a good-sized home office or 'family room'.

On the first floor the dividing walls between some of the original bedrooms which were removed in 1931 could be reinstated to create en-suite bathrooms and the other smaller rooms could also be made into bathrooms. It would be possible to create four or five decent-sized bedrooms, each with its own bathroom, while the rooms at the northern end of this floor could be made into a guest suite with two bedrooms and a bathroom. The second floor might be best converted into two flats, one reached by the each of the two staircases, which could accommodate either staff or semi-independent family members. The fact that this floor is served by a lift could make an apartment there attractive for an older relative.

It might be objected that a house on these lines would be too large for modern use and that anyone with the resources to create a home on such a scale would prefer to buy a country house in an entirely rural location, not one with a set of school buildings attached, or surrounded by a public park, golf course, car-park and innovation centre. We do not consider these objections insuperable, and in any case Tapton House might appeal to a buyer who wanted the space it offers but could not afford a 'real' country house. It is also conveniently close to the centre of Chesterfield, the railway station and the M1.

Anyone living at the house would need a reasonable amount of garden to provide privacy and security, but probably not too much, given the cost of maintenance. There is already a walled front garden on the west side, within which lies a scheduled monument believed to be a medieval homestead mound.<sup>2</sup> On the south side the natural boundary would be the driveway separating the gardens from

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<sup>1</sup> See the Annexe below for the floor plans made at the time the mansion passed to Chesterfield Corporation for the rooms referred to in this and the next paragraph.

<sup>2</sup> See Annexe.

the golf course, which appears to be have been built when Tapton House became a school.<sup>1</sup> A boundary on this line, however, would remove public access to a number of memorial trees and seats installed between the driveway and the house. A better solution might be to create a boundary along the slight change in slope which occurs closer to the house. On the east, the western boundary of the Peace Garden could be extended north to the existing garden boundary wall, leaving public access to the Peace Garden unimpeded. If made from hedges, rather than a fence or wall, both this boundary and the one proposed on the south could be removed if circumstances changed. The hedges would obviously affect the setting of the mansion but not necessarily either adversely or permanently, and so there is a reasonable prospect that Historic England would agree to the changes. On the north, assuming the car-park is to remain, it would be possible to devise a narrow 'back yard' for the house, but no more.

### ***Still scope for community use?***

It is possible, but unlikely (unless they wished to run quite a large business from home), that someone buying the mansion as a private residence would also want the range of school buildings to the east. Because of the nature of the junction between the two it would be possible to separate them at both ground- and first-floor level simply by blocking existing doors.<sup>2</sup> It would also, of course, be possible to separate them by demolishing a portion of the school buildings next to the mansion, or to demolish them completely and add the site to the garden at the back of the house.

The school buildings are listed, but only because they are physically attached to a listed building; they would not merit listing in their own right. Their partial or total demolition would affect the setting of a listed building and would therefore need the approval of Historic England, but it could be argued that their demolition would not adversely affect the setting, which is the crucial criterion. Although not in bad condition, they are of no architectural merit or historical significance. If the Borough Council does decide to invite offers for the mansion as a private house, the chance of success might be enhanced if the property was offered with the benefit of listed

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<sup>1</sup> It is not shown on OS map 1:2500, Derb. XXV.3 (1898).

<sup>2</sup> See the Annexe for a description of these buildings and their date of construction.

building consent to demolish the school buildings

A more constructive approach would be to try to retain some or all of the school buildings for 'community use', as long as a use could be found that would be financially viable. The eight principal rooms in this block (excluding corridors, store-rooms, lavatories etc.) offer some 350 sq.m. of accommodation (about 3,800 sq. ft) on the ground floor, and a further 60 sq.m. (650 sq. ft) on the first floor. There are three entrances from the car-park into the ground floor, apart from the one which also provides access to the mansion. There is the drawback that midway along the corridor leading from the latter entrance to the former assembly hall is a small flight of steps, which separates the sanitary accommodation from the rooms on the higher level, but presumably additional lavatories could be installed at that level. It is perhaps also unfortunate that the two largest spaces created in 1931, the assembly hall and the dining hall, have each been divided into two smaller rooms, although the largest of the four has an area of 105 sq.m. (1100 sq. ft). The dividing walls could no doubt be removed, which would re-establish two rooms of about 160 and 61 sq.m. (1700 and 650 sq. ft) respectively.

It is not for the Civic Society to suggest how the school rooms could be put to 'community use', but a building as large as this, with car-parking immediately adjoining, should have some potential. In addition, the conversion of this space for community use seems to us a much more achievable objective than trying to adapt a Grade II\* listed mansion for the same purpose. Nonetheless, a source of revenue funding remains elusive.

Overall, therefore, for the reasons set out here, and supported by the historical evidence in the Annexe, the considered view of the Civic Society committee is that the best way of ensuring the future of the mansion at Tapton House is for it to be sold on a long lease for restoration as a private residence; that efforts should be made to secure the school buildings for community use, if a viable scheme can be devised; and that if this proves impossible, the buildings should probably be demolished to improve the setting of the mansion.

**ANNEXE**  
**A SHORT HISTORY OF THE TAPTON HOUSE ESTATE**  
**AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MANSION AND GROUNDS**

**1 The Tapton House estate**

The mansion later known as Tapton House was probably built c.1794, although it is difficult to establish an exact date.<sup>1</sup> It stands on the top of a hill commanding good views to the west over the Rother valley and beyond. The present house had no immediate predecessor, but in the front garden there is a much degraded circular mound, possibly once surrounded by a moat, which has traditionally been said to mark the site of medieval homestead.<sup>2</sup> The use of the name Castle Field c.1503 for one of the medieval open fields of Tapton, in which there was a Castle Furlong,<sup>3</sup> and the names Castle Hill in 1468 and Tapton Castle at various dates between 1502 and 1610<sup>4</sup> appears to support this idea. Alternatively, it could be a mound on which stood the windmill from which Windmill Hill (as the site of Tapton House was known before the mansion was built) took its name. It could of course have served both functions at different dates. If it is the site of a medieval capital messuage it seems to be impossible to establish to which of the manorial estates which had land in the township it belonged.

The mound has been a scheduled monument since 1952. It is said to have a diameter at the base of 36m., a level top measuring 20 by 25m. and a maximum height on its south-western side of 2m., although it is today heavily overgrown and it would be difficult to confirm these dimensions on the ground (rather than take them from a large-scale Victorian Ordnance Survey map).<sup>5</sup> Much of the Historic England listing text either relates to castle mottes in general or (where it refers specifically to

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<sup>1</sup> This section is based on text prepared for an account of Tapton township to be published at a later date by the Derbyshire Victoria County History Trust. Abbreviations in the footnotes follow the conventions of the History.

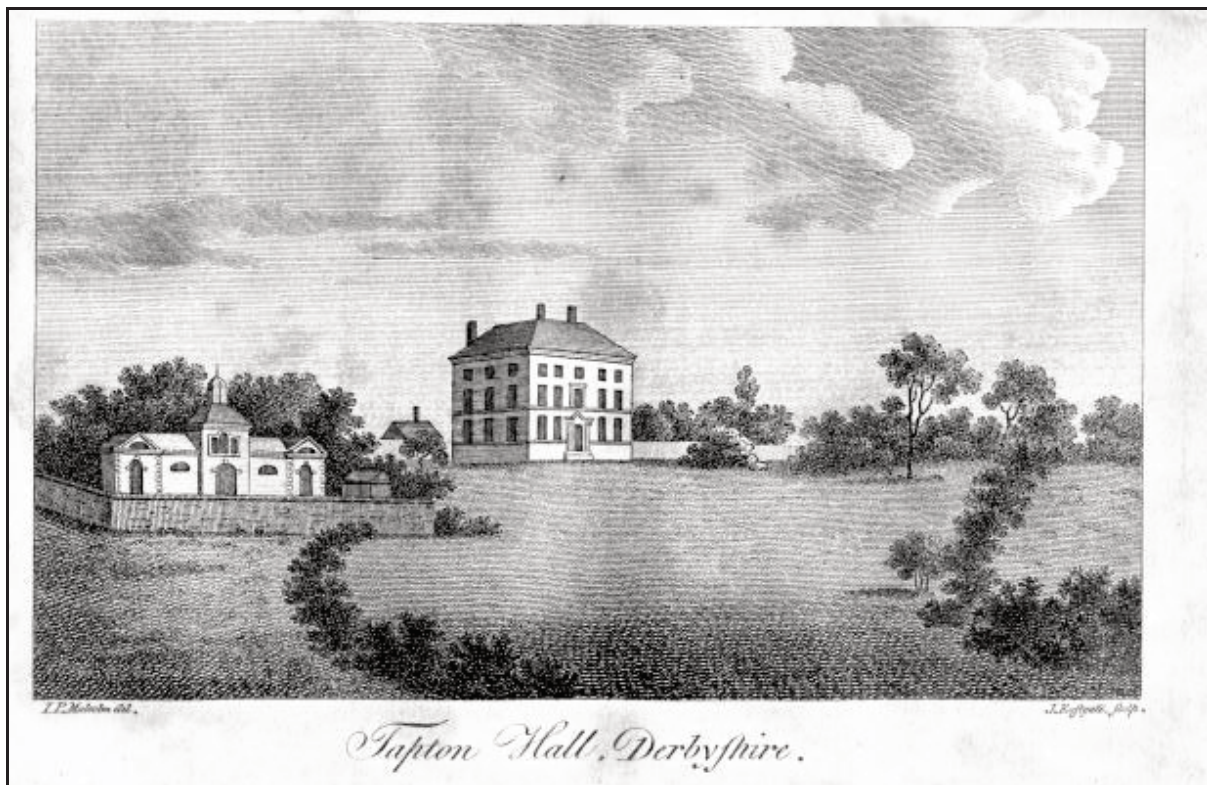
<sup>2</sup> *VCH Derby.*, II, 375.

<sup>3</sup> Notts. Archives, DD/FJ/9/1/1.

<sup>4</sup> *PN Derby.*, 312.

<sup>5</sup> OS map 1:2500, Derby. XXV.3 (1898 edn) shows a structure with approximately these dimensions, which may be the source of the figures in the listing text.





An engraving of Tapton House from a drawing by J.P. Malcolm, said to date from c.1811, before the mansion was extended to its present size and when the main front faced south, not west. The stables to the south-west of the house have entirely disappeared. (Courtesy Brimington and Tapton Local History Group)

Tapton) is either purely speculative or undoubtedly mistaken. In particular there is no evidence to connect a chronicle reference of 1266 to a 'castrum de Chestrefelde'<sup>1</sup> with the mound at Tapton. There appears in fact to be no reason to regard as it as castle motte or to search for a bailey supposed to have surrounded it.

The present mansion was built by Isaac Wilkinson (1749–1831), a Chesterfield lead merchant and banker.<sup>2</sup> Isaac was the son and heir of Richard Wilkinson, who died in 1781, and from this date his son began to buy land at Tapton from Lord John Murray and others.<sup>3</sup> In 1794 Wilkinson received another inheritance from an uncle, which may have enabled him to build the mansion at Tapton.<sup>4</sup> He

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<sup>1</sup> Historic England, list entry no. 1011210.

<sup>2</sup> L. Thompson, *A History of Tapton House* (Author, 2000), 5.

<sup>3</sup> Thompson, *Tapton House*, 7.

<sup>4</sup> Thompson, *Tapton House*, 7.



Tapton House from the south-east, showing the mansion after it was extended c.1811. The french window on the left has replaced the original main entrance, and the house previously extended back only as far as the downpipe to the immediate left of the present back door, where a straight join and slight rebate in the brickwork are visible.

was described as ‘late of Chesterfield and now of Tapton House’ in 1801,<sup>1</sup> suggesting that he had only recently moved. He made more purchases of land in the township from several vendors between 1799 and 1806.<sup>2</sup> In 1808 Wilkinson’s mother Hannah died, which may have further increased his resources.<sup>3</sup> At some date, apparently after 1811, Wilkinson considerably enlarged the mansion.<sup>4</sup>

In 1791 Isaac Wilkinson married Ann Golightly of Southampton.<sup>5</sup> The couple had no children and in 1817 they became the guardians of George Yeldham Ricketts (1810–88), following the death of his father Tristram Ricketts of Madras, a distant relative of Ann’s.<sup>6</sup> When Isaac died in 1831 he left most of his estate,

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<sup>1</sup> DRO, D37 M/T 965–966; other deeds of 1801 also describes him as Isaac Wilkinson of Tapton (Sheffield Archives, Ce R/331–332; DRO, Bag/13/3/89).

<sup>2</sup> Thompson, *Tapton House*, 7.

<sup>3</sup> Thompson, *Tapton House*, 9.

<sup>4</sup> Below, section 3.

<sup>5</sup> Thompson, *Tapton House*, 7.

<sup>6</sup> Thompson, *Tapton House*, 20; TNA, PROB 11/1792, ff. 201v.–203v.



including Tapton, to George when he attained the age of 24, on condition that he take the name and arms of Wilkinson.<sup>1</sup>

In December 1837, within a couple of years of coming into his inheritance, George Wilkinson offered the mansion and up to 100 acres of 'park-like ground' at Tapton to let.<sup>2</sup> The advertisement described the house as 'elegantly furnished by Gillow' but in June 1838 the contents was put up for sale.<sup>3</sup> The house and grounds were let for ten years from 1838 at £280 a year to the engineer George Stephenson (1781–1848), who was then living at Alton Grange, near Ashby de la Zouch (Leics.).<sup>4</sup> He had taken up residence at Tapton by August 1839.<sup>5</sup> When he moved to Chesterfield Stephenson was engaged in building the North Midland Railway, which skirted the western edge of the Tapton estate, and had recently established a coal and iron company at Clay Cross.<sup>6</sup> The mansion appears to have been known as both The Hill and Tapton House in this period.<sup>7</sup>

Stephenson died at Tapton in 1848 and was buried at Holy Trinity church on Newbold Road.<sup>8</sup> In 1850 Mary Pocock and Grace Walker, formerly of Frome (Som.), opened a girls' boarding school at the house and the following year Robert Stephenson (1803–59) let the house and grounds to them at £60 a year.<sup>9</sup> This under-lease was made without Wilkinson's consent and a dispute ensued between him, Stephenson and the proprietors of the school.<sup>10</sup> As a result, in 1865 Miss

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<sup>1</sup> Thompson, *Tapton House*, 20.

<sup>2</sup> Thompson, *Tapton House*, 26, quoting *Derb. Chronicle*, 9 Dec. 1837.

<sup>3</sup> *N. Derb. Chronicle*, 12 May 1838.

<sup>4</sup> Institution of Mechanical Engineers, IMS 154, 155; Thompson, *Tapton House*, 46.

<sup>5</sup> Inst. Mech. Eng., IMS 132/7.

<sup>6</sup> *Oxford DNB*; S.D. Chapman, *The Clay Cross Company 1837–1987* (1987).

<sup>7</sup> Sanderson, *Map*, and the tithe map both use the former name; *Bagshaw's Dir. Derb.* (1846), 615, and *White's Dir. Derb.* (1857), 717, as well as docs. at the Inst. Mech. Eng. relating to the property, use the latter name.

<sup>8</sup> Thompson, *Tapton House*, 33.

<sup>9</sup> Inst. Mech. Eng., IMS 183; below, social hist.

<sup>10</sup> Thompson, *Tapton House*, 96.

Pocock and Miss Walker closed the school and surrendered their lease.<sup>1</sup>

In 1865 and again in 1867 Wilkinson attempted unsuccessfully to sell the freehold of the Tapton estate, which was heavily encumbered with mortgages.<sup>2</sup> The house was unoccupied in 1871<sup>3</sup> and the following year the estate was purchased by Charles Markham (1823–88), the chairman and managing director of the Staveley Coal & Iron Company.<sup>4</sup> Markham and his family moved into Tapton House on New Year's Day 1873 from their previous home, Brimington Hall. The mansion is said to have been unoccupied for some time and to have fallen into considerable disrepair.<sup>5</sup>

In 1862 Markham married Rosa, the fourth daughter of Sir Joseph Paxton (1801–65), with whom he had three sons (Charles Paxton, Arthur (later Sir Arthur Markham 1st Bt), who died in 1916, and Ernest, who died aged 20 in 1888), and two daughters.<sup>6</sup> The younger daughter was Violet Rosa Markham (1872–1959), who became prominent in public life both locally and nationally.<sup>7</sup> In 1881 Charles and Rosa Markham were living at Tapton House with Violet, a governess and seven indoor servants. A farm bailiff and outdoor servants were living nearby.<sup>8</sup> A generation later, in 1911 Mrs Markham, then a widow aged 70, and Violet, who was 38 and unmarried, were enumerated at Tapton House, together with 13 indoor servants to look after a house with 31 principal rooms.<sup>9</sup> A coachman, gardener and chauffeur lived out.<sup>10</sup>

The Tapton House estate comprised 85 acres at the time of Markham's

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<sup>1</sup> Inst. Mech. Eng., IMS 186/3; Thompson, *Tapton House*, 96–7.

<sup>2</sup> Thompson, *Tapton House*, 20, 25, 33–5, 84; Warws. RO, CR 611/378/1–2.

<sup>3</sup> TNA, RG 10/3612, f. 108.

<sup>4</sup> See generally S.D. Chapman, *Stanton and Staveley: a business history* (1981).

<sup>5</sup> V. Markham, *Return Passage: the autobiography of Violet R. Markham C.H.* (1953), 8–9.

<sup>6</sup> Markham, *Return Passage*, 6, 18, 86; Thompson, *Tapton House*, ch. 7.

<sup>7</sup> *Oxford DNB*; H. Jones (ed.), *Duty and Citizenship: the correspondence and political papers of Violet Markham, 1896–1953* (1994).

<sup>8</sup> TNA, RG 11/3434, ff. 26v., 27v. The family were either abroad or enumerated elsewhere in 1891 and 1901, when the house was in the care of servants (TNA, RG 12/2763, ff. 30v.–31; RG 13/3243, f. 27, where the address has been altered in error from Tapton House to Tapton Grove).

<sup>9</sup> TNA, RG 14/21103, no. 17.

<sup>10</sup> TNA, RG 14/21103, nos. 15, 16, 18.

purchase, to which Rosa Markham later added 24a. A home farm was let with 31a. and the rest, including extensive gardens and a park fringed by woodland, was kept in hand.<sup>1</sup> In 1907 Mrs Markham was the owner and occupier of the mansion and garden at Tapton (5a.), 52a. of park and woods, and another 2¼a. of land; the estate also included houses occupied by her coachman and gardener and two other cottages. She also owned Sidlings farm, containing just under 46a., bought from the manorial estate in 1895.<sup>2</sup>

Mrs Markham died in 1912,<sup>3</sup> when the estate passed to her elder surviving son C.P. Markham (1866–1926). It remained the Derbyshire home of his sister Violet until 1919, when differences between them, aggravated by the death of their brother, Sir Arthur Markham Bt, three years earlier, made it difficult for Miss Markham to stay in the house. Thereafter she kept a flat in Chesterfield at the Settlement on Church Lane, which she had founded in 1902, and made her main home in Gower Street, with a country residence in Kent.<sup>4</sup> In 1915 Miss Markham married James Carruthers (who died in 1936) but continued to use her maiden name in public life.<sup>5</sup>

In 1925 C.P. Markham, approaching the end of his life with no son to succeed, offered the estate to Chesterfield Corporation and expressed the hope that it would be used ‘as a Museum or Institute or in other ways for the benefit of the inhabitants of Chesterfield’. Markham described the offer as a ‘gift’, although he was paid £5,000 to recompense him for building Paxton Road. The estate then extended to about 200 acres, bounded by the railway on the west, Crow Lane on the south, Balmoak Lane on the north and Pettyclose Lane and Green Lane on the east. Tapton House and grounds (about 11a.) were by this date owned by the Staveley Company, which had bought the property from Markham in 1922 for £1,200,<sup>6</sup> and Murray House, which was included in the gift, was occupied by the company’s

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<sup>1</sup> Markham, *Return Passage*, 9–10, 25

<sup>2</sup> DRO, D5006/4/1.

<sup>3</sup> Markham, *Return Passage*, 24.

<sup>4</sup> Markham, *Return Passage*, 26, 65–6, 171.

<sup>5</sup> Markham, *Return Passage*, 144–5, 182.

<sup>6</sup> DRO, D3808/1/2/10, 31 Jan. 1922; CBC Deeds.

managing director. A small area at the northern end of the estate was retained for house-building and developed as Paxton Road.<sup>1</sup> The difference between the acreage stated on this occasion and the figures given by Miss Markham in 1953 can be explained by the purchase of Murray House and Sidlings farm, which between them had about 100a. of land.

The corporation initially sought to use the mansion as a museum but in January 1931 abandoned this project and instead resolved to adapt and extend the buildings to become a coeducational selective central senior school, which opened later that year. The grounds became a public park and golf course, as they remain today. Under the 1944 Education Act Tapton House school was transferred to the Derbyshire education committee, although the borough council retained the freehold of the property. The school closed in 1991 and three years later the premises were reopened as the Tapton House campus of Chesterfield College, offering a range of advanced courses, including degree schemes of Sheffield Hallam University. The college vacated the premises c.2015, which have since remained empty.

## **2 Tapton House**

Tapton House is a three-storey building in brick with a hipped slate roof. It was added to the statutory list in 1968 and the current description in the listing text, which is brief by modern standards, appears to date from then. It does not explicitly state (as is Historic England's current practice) why the house merits grade II\* (rather than grade II) protection.<sup>2</sup>

The best starting point for an attempt to reconstruct the development of the house is an engraving made from a drawing by J.P. Malcolm, said to date from 1811,<sup>3</sup> which shows a house five bays wide and three bays deep, standing on a plinth which rises to the level of the ground-floor window sills. The main entrance is the middle of the south front and is entered from steps. This is presumably the house which Isaac Wilkinson first built.

At some later date during Wilkinson's period of ownership, possibly c.1811

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<sup>1</sup> Corporation minutes, 1924–5, nos. 1075, 1088; *Derb. Times*, 31 Jan., 7 Feb. 1925; DRO, D3808/1/2/11, 27 Jan. 1925; Thompson, *Tapton House*, 144–6.

<sup>2</sup> Historic England list no. 1088335.

<sup>3</sup> Markham, *Return Passage*, 8.

when he appears to have had an inheritance,<sup>1</sup> the house was considerably extended to the north and its axis turned through 90 degrees, with a new entrance created on the much extended west front. Here a pedimented entrance bay was built, flanked by four bays of new building to the left and the three original bays to the right. The entrance bay stands slightly forward of the rest of the building and contains a three-part stone doorway with columns, sidelights and pediment; on the first floor there is a triple window with a stone balustrade, wooden mullions and Corinthian pilasters; and on the second floor a smaller, simpler triple window. The house as extended was eight bays wide and five bays deep. On the south front the original entrance was rebuilt as a three-part window framed in stone with pilasters and cornice. The extension was carefully designed and executed to match the original work, and the only obvious clue that the house consists of two phases is a straight joint and rebate running the full height of the building immediately to the left of the back door on the east front (parallel with an adjoining (and later) downpipe).

As part of the rebuilding the ground level around the house seems to have been raised, since only the top of the stone plinth can now be seen, far less than is shown on Malcolm's drawing.

The bricks from which both phases of the mansion are built were presumably made locally, although not necessarily on site. They are very well made, with a smooth finish and consistent colour. The bricks are also exceptionally well laid, in narrow beds of what is presumably lime mortar. There is a marked contrast between the brickwork of the original mansion and that of the later outbuildings to the rear, which appears crude by comparison, the bricks the run-of-the-mill dark red product typical of the yards which grew up on the north Derbyshire coalfield in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Given their similarity, the two phases of building were presumably designed by the same architect, who has never been identified. Speculative attributions (including the one in the statutory list) based on the appearance of the mansion are without merit.

### ***Ground floor***

As originally built, on the ground floor the house had two principal reception

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<sup>1</sup> See above.

rooms, one on either side of an entrance hall served by the main doorway in the centre of the south front.<sup>1</sup> The hall was described as a morning room when the house was acquired by Chesterfield corporation and became the headmaster's room when it was occupied as a school. Both the hall and the two reception rooms retain some fine panelling. Some of this work is understood to date from when the house was built (or extended), the rest, carefully executed in closely matching style, was installed during the Markhams' time.<sup>2</sup> During that period the room to the west of the original hall was a dining room and that to the east was called a 'Salon'. Since the latter room retains two pillars near its northern end, it was almost certainly originally the dining room and the room opposite the drawing room.

Behind the entrance hall lies an inner hall, from which a fine turning staircase rises to the first and second floors and is lit by an oval window in the roof. This room and the staircase may be part of the original house or part of the rebuilding of c.1811. There may have been two smaller rooms behind the dining room and drawing room, on either side of the inner hall, one of which may have been the kitchen (unless the service rooms were in the basement) and the other may have been a small parlour. No rooms are visible behind the two main reception rooms on Malcolm's drawing, although there may have been a wing at the rear hidden from view. This is suggested by a chimney stack visible in the drawing, apparently in the centre of the rear elevation.

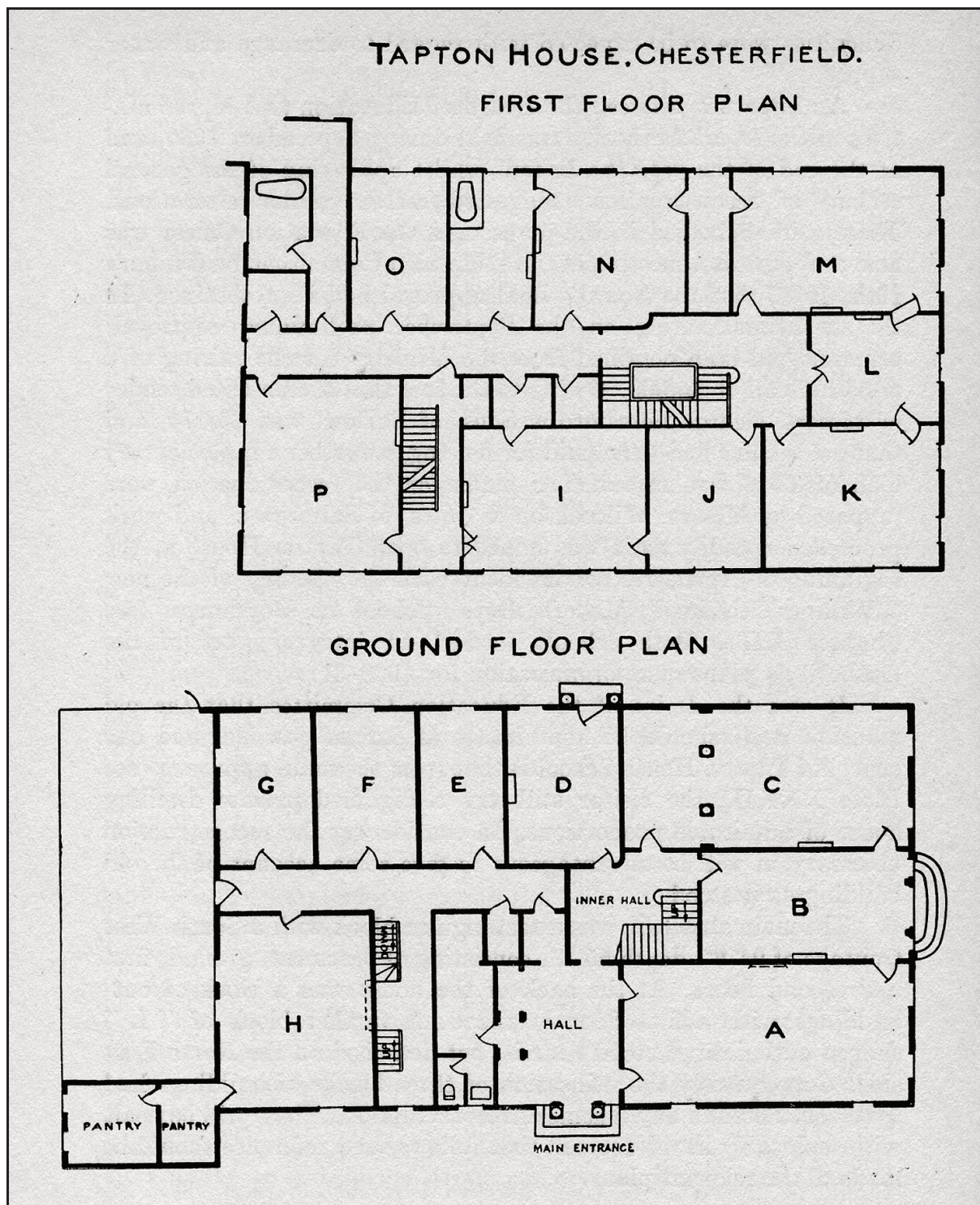
When the house was extended and remodelled, its axis was turned through 90 degrees to face west. A new main entrance was built on the extended west front, slightly off-centre, with four bays to the north and the three bays of the original house to the south. From the new entrance hall two doors led into the (modern) dining room on the south, another served a cloakroom on the north, and at the back one door led to the staircase hall and another to a service corridor which ran north through the centre of the house to a door in the north front. The room behind what appears to be the original dining room became (at least in the Markhams' time and possibly before), a library, from which a french door gave access to the back garden.

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<sup>1</sup> Except as indicated, the following description is based on one prepared, presumably by Wilcockson & Cutts as the architects of the conversion, about the time the property became a school, as printed in *Chesterfield Education: a record of four years experiment and reconstruction* (Chesterfield Corporation, 1932), 218–24.

<sup>2</sup> Thompson, *Tapton House*, 102; Markham, *Return Passage*, 9.





Floor plans made about the time Tapton House passed to Chesterfield Corporation (from *Chesterfield Education*, 220). Key: A: Dining Room; B: Morning Room; C: Salon; D: Library; E: Scullery; F: Servants' Hall; G: Butler's Pantry; H: Kitchen. The first-floor rooms lettered I-P were all described as bedrooms.

The other main consequence of the extension of the house was to create, on the ground floor, a range of service rooms served by a central corridor. On the eastern side of the corridor there were three rooms, used in the 1920s (and



presumably before) as a scullery, servants' hall and butler's pantry. On the western side there was a large kitchen and the remainder of the space was occupied by a secondary corridor, from which a service staircase rose to the first and second floors. This corridor backed onto the cloakroom and lavatory which led off the entrance hall.

The rebuilding did not greatly extend the family accommodation on the ground floor but gave the house a more modern and convenient layout of service rooms, which (as was conventional in nineteenth-century houses of this status) were almost completely separated from those used by the family.

A small single-storey extension leading off the kitchen at the north-west corner of the ground floor housed two pantries. This extension appears to have been added by Charles Markham soon after he bought the house.<sup>1</sup> The brickwork appears to be similar to that of the outbuildings to the east of the mansion, which must also date from the Markhams' time.<sup>2</sup>

### ***First floor***

On the first floor the house presumably originally had five rooms opening off the landing, one of which may have been a rudimentary bathroom and the other four family bedrooms. As extended, there were eight principal rooms on the first floor and one bathroom. Some of these were interconnecting and so may have been used as dressing rooms or sitting rooms, rather than bedrooms. Those in the newer portion of the house were served from a central corridor, matching that on the ground floor. The corridor also gave access to the bathroom and so these rooms must have been used by the family, rather than servants. At the northern end of the corridor a passage ran through to the first floor of the two-storey outbuilding which adjoined the north-eastern corner of the house.<sup>3</sup> There was a second bathroom off this passage, which may have been for the servants.

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<sup>1</sup> It is not shown on a plan made when Stephenson took the house in 1838 but is marked on the OS 1:2500 map (1883 edn), surveyed in 1876.

<sup>2</sup> See below for the outbuildings.

<sup>3</sup> See below.

## ***Second floor***

The layout of the top floor of the house, which was served by both the main and secondary staircases, was similar to that of the first floor, although the ceilings were lower. When first built, the rooms opening off the main staircase were probably servants' bedrooms. After the house was extended, a central corridor served rooms on either side, which would no doubt have been a combination of servants' bedrooms, nurseries and schoolrooms, depending on the number and ages of children in the family. Some of these rooms retain today attractive early nineteenth-century cast-iron fireplaces which look very similar to those made by the Griffin Foundry of Ebenezer Smith & Co. in Brampton.<sup>1</sup> They were almost certainly made locally.

## ***Outbuildings***

The engraving of c.1811 shows a detached stable block to the south-west of the house, surrounded by a wall. The building was five bays wide, the central bay rising to a first floor and surmounted by a cupola or clocktower. All trace of this building has disappeared, although judging by Malcolm's drawing the buildings may have stood on the site of the later home farm.

The extensive outbuildings and kitchen gardens, including a large area of glasshouses, to the north and east of the house, shown on late nineteenth-century Ordnance Survey maps,<sup>2</sup> must date from Charles Markham's period of ownership, since earlier tenants are unlikely to have made such large additions. Markham is said to have had few interests outside business, apart from his garden, where he cultivated peaches and grapes,<sup>3</sup> presumably in the glasshouses. There was an icehouse to the north-west of the house.<sup>4</sup>

When the Tapton estate passed to Chesterfield Corporation, there were two blocks of outbuildings to the north-east of the mansion. One was attached to the house at its north-eastern corner and was partly of two storeys and partly of one

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<sup>1</sup> For which see illustrations in P.M. Robinson, *The Smiths of Chesterfield* (Chesterfield, 1957).

<sup>2</sup> OS map 1:2500, Derb. XXV.3 (1898).

<sup>3</sup> Markham, *Return Passage*, 6.

<sup>4</sup> Thompson, *Tapton House*, 95.

storey. It had an entrance on the ground floor from the scullery and a second connection, as we have noted, at first-floor level. The rooms on the ground floor were used by the Markhams as a game larder, fuel store, laundry and coach-house; on the first floor there were three bedrooms for servants, probably including the coachman. To the east of this block stood a second, detached one-storey L-shaped outbuilding, which contained a stable, loose box, harness room and carriage house. Both buildings are of rather poor quality brick, quite possibly made at one of the yards owned by the Staveley Company, with slate roofs. They are shown in the form in which they existed up to the date at which Tapton House became a local authority school on the Ordnance Survey 1:2500 map of 1898.<sup>1</sup>

To the north-east of the block of stables etc. extensive kitchen gardens were laid out. The site of these is partly enclosed by a stone wall which (judging by how worn the masonry is) appears to date from the Wilkinsons' time, implying that there were gardens here from the time the house was built. On the other hand, the layout which existed in the late nineteenth century was probably the work of Charles Markham after 1873.

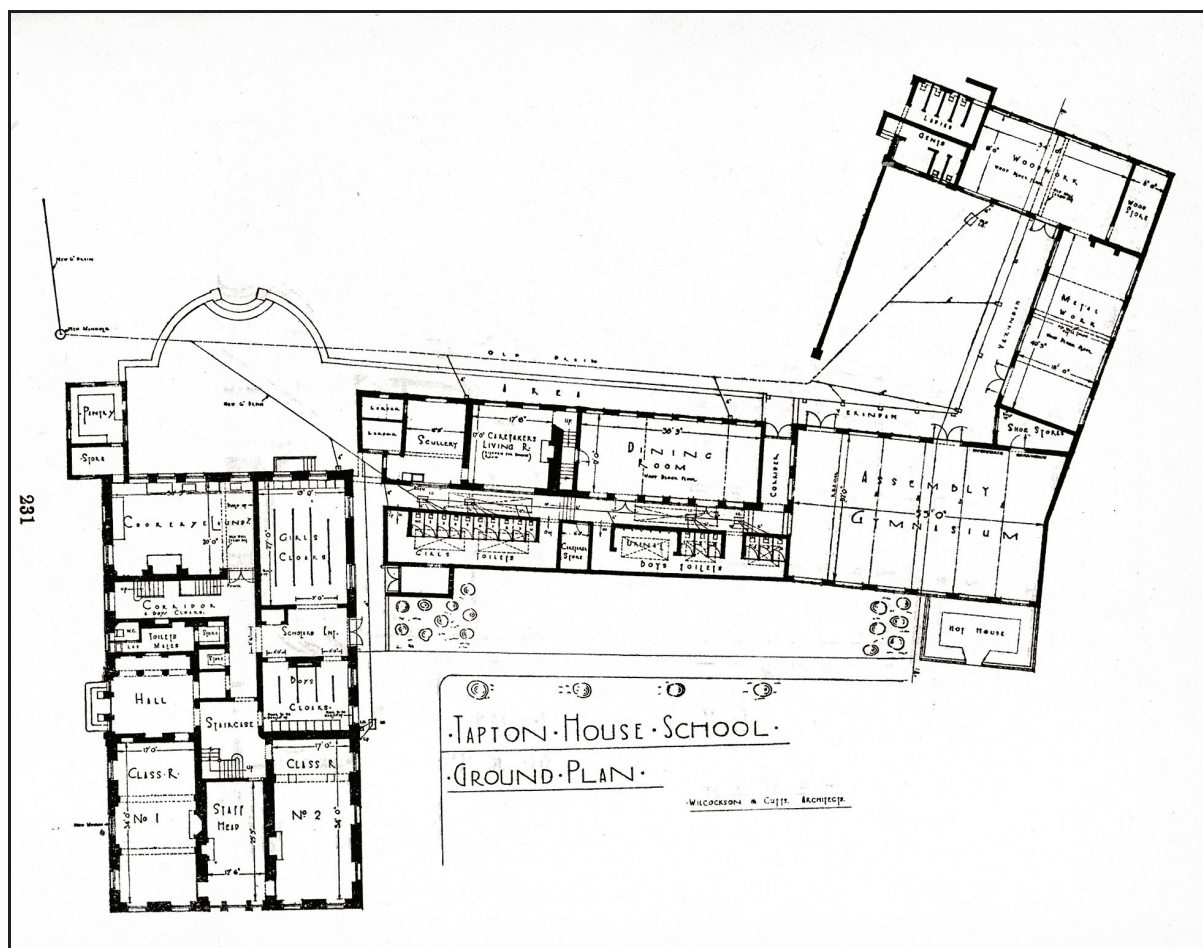
### **3 Conversion to a school**

After Chesterfield corporation acquired the Tapton estate, the park was opened to the public, for whom lavatories were installed at the far end of the detached block of outbuildings. The mansion was briefly used as a museum (or intended to be used – it remains unclear whether a museum ever opened to the public) before being transferred to the borough education committee for reconstruction as a central senior school.<sup>2</sup> The work was executed in 1931 to the design of Wilcockson & Cutts of Chesterfield, who were retained by the education committee for all the building work connected with the wholesale reorganisation of education in the borough between 1928 and 1932, following the recommendations of the Hadow Report (1926). The conversion of Tapton House was by far the most important commission the firm received as part of this programme, although it was also responsible for the conversion of two smaller houses of about the same period

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<sup>1</sup> OS map 1:2500, Derb. XXV.3 (1898).

<sup>2</sup> This section is based on *Chesterfield Education*, 218–24, part of a chapter on the creation of Tapton House central selective senior school, which was officially opened in June 1931.



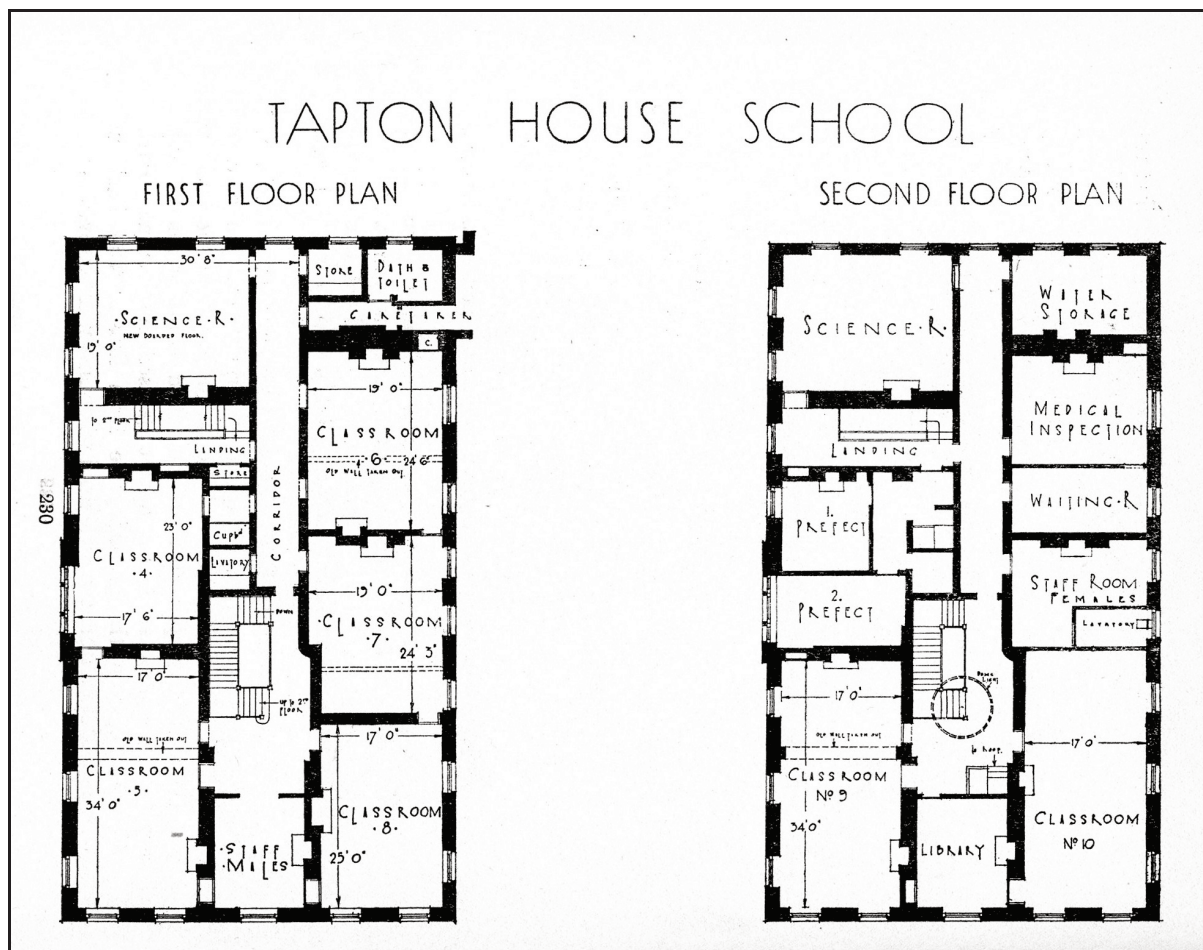
The ground floor of the mansion and the new school buildings created in 1931 (*Chesterfield Education*, 231).

elsewhere in the borough, Highfield Hall and Hasland Hall, into a junior school and senior school respectively.<sup>1</sup>

The work on the mansion itself was very restrained and preserved untouched the fine interiors and proportions of the best rooms at the southern end of the house, as well as the entrance hall and staircase. In the service half of the ground floor, north of the main corridor, the scullery was made into a 'scholars' entrance', and the servants' hall and butler's pantry were thrown together to make a girls' cloakroom. The room to the south of the scullery, previously used as a library, became a boys' cloakroom. The kitchen on the south side of the corridor was extended into the adjoining corridor to create a domestic science classroom.

<sup>1</sup> *Chesterfield Education* provides a fully illustrated account of the changes throughout the borough and the lavish production of the book demonstrates the understandable pride of the education committee in its achievements in the teeth of the worst years of the Great Depression. The borough was the first Part III authority in England to reorganise its schools on the lines recommended by the Hadow Report.





The use of the rooms on the first and second floors of the mansion when first opened as a school (*Chesterfield Education*, 230).

On the first floor, some of the rooms were combined to make larger classrooms, the room over the morning room became a staffroom for male teachers, and what appears to have been the servants' bathroom was incorporated into accommodation for a resident caretaker created from the two-storey outbuilding at the north-eastern corner of the mansion. The other bathroom was removed.

On the second floor there was a similar reorganisation of space (made easier by the fact that some of the internal walls were merely stud partitions) to create two more classrooms, a science room, a medical room, a small library, a staffroom for women teachers, and two rooms for prefects (one for boys, the other for girls).

Changes to the outbuildings were more radical. The two-storey block attached to the north-east corner of the mansion, as we have noted, became accommodation (on two floors) for the caretaker, and the single-storey continuation to the east was made into a dining room, with a corridor flanking its eastern end leading to a doorway on the north side of the building. On the south side, the whole

of this building was widened by the addition of a single-storey range extending the entire length of the original structure, through which a central corridor ran from the corner of the mansion to the new entrance at the north-east corner of the former outbuilding. On the south side of this corridor the new building provided sanitary accommodation for pupils.

The L-shaped single-storey detached outbuilding further to the east, apart from the portion already used for public lavatories, was converted into woodwork and metalwork rooms by the removal of partition walls. This block was then connected to the one attached to the mansion by the building of a large assembly hall (also used as a gym), which completely filled the space between the two. Access to the hall was from the east end of the long corridor which has already been described. There were also french doors on the north side of the hall opening onto a verandah which ran alongside both the hall and the metalwork room, off which there were entrances to both workshops.

Apart from the assembly hall, all the 'new' buildings erected in 1931 were in fact created from the outbuildings erected by the Markhams. In appearance, they are similar to those designed by Wilcockson & Cutts at other schools in the borough that were built or rebuilt around the same time. They include such characteristic features as large windows and open verandahs, intended to let in as much light and air as possible, but they were not built from scratch. Nor are they in any way connected with the mansion as first built, or as extended probably about twenty years later.

Either in 1931 or later the former home farm to the south-west of the mansion was demolished and the site used to create a car-park for the school, which remains in use today.

#### **4 Tapton House as an annexe to Chesterfield College**

After Tapton House School closed in 1991 the buildings were occupied until c.2015 by Chesterfield College. They were upgraded but not greatly altered during this period, apart from the installation of a passenger lift near the service staircase, whose shaft used part of the former cloakroom off the entrance hall; the division of the dining room and assembly hall into smaller rooms; and the remodelling of the cloakrooms and lavatories. The integrity of the interiors of the best rooms on the

ground floor, including the entrance hall and main staircase, was carefully preserved, as was the external appearance of both the original mansion and the later school buildings, although the open verandah serving the assembly hall and craft rooms was glazed in.

## **5 Gardens and grounds**

When the estate passed to Chesterfield Corporation the grounds in front of the mansion to the west and immediately to the south-east were planted with trees and shrubs, with walks laid out through them. The early medieval homestead site formed part of the front garden.<sup>1</sup> At the back of the house there were lawns (including one probably used for tennis or croquet), flowerbeds and gravelled paths. Further to the east, at the end of the formal gardens, there was a 'Wilderness' of shrubs and trees. Most or all of this layout (and planting) appears to date from the Markhams' time (1873–1925), although the older park landscape (including the portion now used as a golf course, in which there are three fishponds of indeterminate date) was probably created for Isaac Wilkinson.

During the period in which the Markhams owned Tapton House a private family burial ground was created near the fishponds, which survives and has in recent years been restored with the help of the family.<sup>2</sup>

The main features of the gardens and park were retained by the local authority after 1925, although the small home farm to the south of the mansion was demolished and the site (at least in later years) used as a car-park for the school.<sup>3</sup> In 1947 a walled Peace Garden was laid out in the grounds of the house as a war memorial.<sup>4</sup>

In 1997 a large new building, the Tapton Innovation Centre, was erected by the Borough Council on the site of the kitchen gardens, which had previously served as the main nursery for the authority's parks department. A year earlier a labyrinth designed by Jim Buchanan and reputed to be the largest of its type in the world,

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<sup>1</sup> Thompson, *Tapton House*, 95.

<sup>2</sup> Inf. from Mr A.J. Hallam, who was instrumental in securing the renovation.

<sup>3</sup> The farm is shown on OS map 1:2500, Derb. XXV.3 (1898).

<sup>4</sup> *Derb. Times*, 8 Aug. 1947.



measuring some 50 yards in diameter with earth banks 4 ft high, was laid out in the park immediately to the north-west of the house.<sup>1</sup>

September 2021

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<sup>1</sup> Thompson, *Tapton House*, 4.