5.1 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In 1711 Browne Willis (1682-1760), a founding member of the Society of Antiquaries and Lord of the Manors of Bletchley, Water Eton and Fenny Stratford, built a new house (see fig. 5.2.1) in the heart of the ancient Bletchley Park estate, which had been acquired by his grandfather. This house was called Water Hall, after a demolished medieval manor house which probably stood south of the church. Browne Willis lived at Water Hall until the death of his wife, when he moved to his other residence, nearby Whaddon Hall.

Water Hall was leased out for a short time in the mid-to-late 1750s, then occupied by Browne Willis' daughter-in-law until 1767. In 1780, when the house was unsuccessfully put up for sale, it was described as 'a complete modern mansion house called Water Hall now in the occupation of Robert Lowndes Esq. being a pleasant situation with every convenient and well adapted Offices for a family with gardens Pleasure Ground &c'. Also mentioned in 1780 was a 'good house and convenient out Offices' occupied by a dairy farmer, John Wood.

In 1793 Browne Willis' descendant, John Fleming, succeeded in selling the house to Thomas Harrison (d.1809). A document of 1806 recorded that Water Hall 'has been lately pulled down by its present owner, Mr Harrison'. The pavilions, however, may have survived for some time, as in 1828 it was said that 'out-houses yet remain in a state of abandonment'; as late as 1865 they were faintly delineated on an estate map. The ponds and gardens also survived in 1828, but had not been well maintained.

The Harrison family lived at Old Wolverton and leased Bletchley Park as a farm. From c.1820 until the mid-1860s the farm was run by the Lucas family, who probably continued to use the farmhouse and dairy buildings mentioned in 1780. These were probably the buildings described in sales particulars for an auction of the estate which took place in June 1865, when the principal lot was purchased by Spencer Richard Harrison, a descendant of Thomas Harrison, who had taken over the running of the estate in 1858 although he continued to live at Wolverton. Very similar sales particulars were produced for an auction in 1871, when Harrison failed to find a buyer for the estate.
Harrison eventually sold the estate in 1877, and the history of the next six years is somewhat confused. Some secondary accounts state that the new owner was a Mr Coleman, 'who built the first part of the present Mansion', then sold it to Samuel Lipscomb Seckham (1827-1901), who 'did more work in enlarging the house'. By other accounts, Seckham was the purchaser in 1877 and 'made some enlargements' to the old farmhouse. Without further documentary research it is impossible to uncover what really happened to Bletchley Park between 1877 and 1883, when it was purchased by Herbert Leon (see below). Although some sources state that Leon converted 'an old farm building' into 'a manor', the 1:2500 Ordnance Survey map of 1881 makes it clear that a new gentleman's residence had already been erected by that date.

From the information currently at hand, the most likely person to have initiated the construction of the mansion is Seckham. He had been Oxford City Architect and Surveyor and was associated, in 1853, with Park Town, the first suburban development to be carried out in North Oxford. His favoured style at that time was Italianate, but he later adopted High Victorian trends. In later years he became involved in the brewing industry in Northampton. Seckham is known to have taken out a mortgage for £7,000 in 1878, and may have used this money on the construction of the house. The possibility, however, that the work was initiated by Mr Coleman, or even by Spencer Richard Harrison, should not be completely discounted.

The Census of 1881 reveals that the house was occupied by Alfred Collier, Seckham's farm bailiff, while Seckham himself was at Hanch Hall at Longden in Staffordshire, where he maintained a household of nine servants to look after his large family. Seckham had a large stock of livestock at Bletchley Park, much of which was sold in 1882-83 (including his bull, Blanche Wild Eyes II), and according to the Census of 1881 the farm employed 14 labourers and three boys. Despite Seckham's absence when the Census was taken, his obituary in the Northampton Herald implied that he had lived at Bletchley Park. This is borne out by several mentions in local newspapers. In particular, in October 1880 it was reported that Seckham complained at the Newport Pagnell Petty Sessions about smoke from an engine shed. This smoke extended across the Park to the house, where Seckham maintained he had lived for three years. It had blackened the leaves of a lime avenue planted in the previous year, also blackening Seckham's sheep, while his men 'appeared like railwaymen'. Perhaps it was the proximity of the railway, with its attendant nuisances, that persuaded Seckham to sell up and move to Beacon Place near Lichfield. His architect for work at his next home, Whittington Old Hall,
again near Lichfield, was M.H. Holding of Northampton. It is conceivable that Holding had helped Seckham to design the house at Bletchley Park.

Herbert Samuel Leon (1850-1926) bought the estate from Seckham in spring 1883. Leon was a wealthy stockbroker who had a daughter and a son by his first wife Esther Julia, who died in 1875. His second marriage to Fanny Hyam produced two more children. Though of Jewish extraction (the family name was originally Isaacs), Leon dissociated himself from faith of any kind, embracing the Rationalist movement. He sat on Buckinghamshire County Council and involved himself in local council affairs. He was elected the Liberal Member of Parliament for Buckinghamshire North in 1891, but lost his seat in 1895. He unsuccessfully tried to re-enter Parliament in 1906 for the Handsworth division of Staffordshire. In 1911 he was created baronet, in recognition of his work as a financier. Leon was clearly a man who required a splendid house, where he could entertain powerful contacts.

The date ‘1883’ and monogram ‘HSL’ over the main entrance of the house suggest that Leon undertook the extension of Seckham's house immediately, establishing it as a country house at the heart of a model estate (see section 4). The work must have been largely completed by the end of 1884, by which time Leon and his wife were in residence and were involved in local society. Although Swinfen Harris is known to have designed buildings in the stable yard, the identity of the architect who enlarged the mansion is not known. Further extensions were added around the turn of the century, possibly in connection with planning approval granted by Fenny Stratford Urban District Council in 1906. Few alterations appear to have been made, however, between the death of Sir Herbert in 1926, and the death of Lady Fanny in 1937. The heir to the baronetcy, George Edward Leon, did not want to live at Bletchley Park and put the estate up for auction. The sales particulars for the 1937 auction are the most informative documents relating to this period in the history of the house and estate.

Much of the estate, including the house, was bought by Hubert Faulkner, a local builder and speculator. He divided some of the land into plots for housing development and appears to have intended to demolish the mansion itself. At that time Victorian and Edwardian architecture was considered ugly and old-fashioned, and attitudes to the Bletchley Park mansion were clearly coloured by contemporary aesthetics. It is thought that Faulkner stripped out several of the more portable fixtures and fittings. Before his scheme could be realised, however, Admiral Hugh Sinclair decided that Bletchley Park would be a perfect location for GC&CS and
elements of MI6 in the event of war. Not waiting for the government to provide funding, Sinclair bought Bletchley Park with his own money. Shortly afterwards, Sinclair staged a rehearsal deployment of code-breakers and MI6 sections at Bletchley Park, under Capt. Ridley RN, in the guise of a shooting party. They were to return for the duration in August 1939.

During the war the Bletchley Park mansion, known as 'Main Building', continued to be occupied by GC&CS. The only substantial addition made in this period was a telephone exchange annex, since demolished. After the war the General Post Office/British Telecom (GPO/BT) used the house as offices. It is currently occupied by the administrative offices of the Bletchley Park Trust, which was set up in 1991.

The mansion was listed, grade II, in 1990.