

**Excerpts from Conservation Statement for Amcott House,
for Bassetlaw Museum Service
PLB Consulting Ltd and Ian Brockleback, Feb 2006 (5351/JR & AP)**

A Brief History of Amcott House

The first house possibly stood on the plot of Amcott House in the early 17th century, although evidence for this is scarce based on building fabric found in the 1980s restorations¹. The first documentary evidence for a house here dates to the 18th century, when the Wharton family lived here². At this time, Amcott House would have been conveniently situated on the South Eastern edge of the town, with open countryside to the east and the Common to the south, but within minutes walk from the market square.

Around 1780, the house was largely demolished and rebuilt in the present brick and slate style that survives today. The then owner, Wharton Emerson, an important local citizen and MP for Retford, renamed himself Wharton Amcotts in honour of his marriage to Ann Maria Amcotts. His house, which was initially known as Retford House, also became known as Amcott House. The Amcotts had been an important local dynasty since the time of Edward II.



One of the existing plaster ceilings from the 18th century. © Matt Ling Photography

Their family seat was at Kettlethorpe in Lincolnshire, also owning estates in Hackthorn, Lincolnshire, and the village of Amcotts in the Isle of Axholme, north of Retford.

After the death of Lady Amcott in 1801, Amcott House was sold, and its description highlights the character of the house. The building contained dining room, drawing room, breakfast room, store room, butler's pantry, house keeper's room and servants hall with 'an exceeding good kitchen', scullery,

¹ BMS (n d 1)

² BMS (n d 1)

cellars, brew house, wash house, laundry and 'very good chambers' within a 'genteel neighbourhood'³.

Records indicate that the house was later owned successively by a Mr Affleck, a Mrs Mason, a Mr Gorton and a Mr Hannan, although no details other than their names are known. The Doncaster Gazette provides an indication of the status of the house and the development of Retford when it was put up for sale again in February 1821, calling it: 'A Commodious Dwelling House... the Premises altogether form a desirable residence for a Gentleman of Fortune'⁴. Furthermore, the advert mentions the additional benefits of wash house, laundry, dairy, brew house, cheese room, coach house for three carriages, stables for six horses, granaries and apartments, yards, gardens and paddocks planted with fruit trees and walled all around. The house also had two pews in the Church, indicating its status as the former residence of the Wharton Amcotts.

The House was purchased in 1831 by William Fisher. Mr Fisher was a Retford grocer, hop grower, property and income tax commissioner, and became Alderman of the Borough and Mayor on two occasions (1850 and 1860).

After Mr Fisher's death in 1871, William Unsworth and Samuel Baker bought the house. They were soda and aerated water manufacturers, ale and porter merchants, postmasters, wedding and funeral carriage proprietors, furniture removers and owners of the Turk's Head Inn. Mr Unsworth built Amcott Villa in part of the kitchen gardens of the house. They later leased the house to Mr Alfred Pegler, industrialist and founder of Northern Rubber Works at Thrumpton Lane, Retford, who lived there until his death in 1900, after which his widow remained there until she died in 1904. It was Mr Pegler who added the extension to the original landing on the eastern side of the house to accommodate a modern bathroom and water closet.

³ The Nottingham Journal (24/01/1801)

⁴ The Doncaster Gazette (09/02/1821)



Stephen Pegler in Amcott House, 1917.

The Pegler's son, Mr Stephen Pegler, purchased the property after his mother's death. He became county and borough magistrate, councillor and alderman of Retford Town Council, and mayor on three occasions.

A keen naturalist, amateur artist and early colour photographer, he amassed impressive private collections of a variety of subjects, of which only the photographs survive in the current museum collections. The Retford Times bears witness to the contents of Amcott House during Stephen Pegler's residence listing glass, pictures, grand pianos, silver and bronze ware, carpets, pictures and various insect collections – and most unusually '*seventeenth century Kuang-Tung Stonewear grotesque animals*'⁵ for sale.

After Stephen Pegler's death in the 1930s, the house was purchased by the former East Retford Rural District Council for use as their council offices. In 1938 the wall between the dining room and drawing room was removed to create the Council Chamber for East Retford Rural District Council. In 1956 the Victorian conservatory Mr Pegler had built was demolished to allow a sitting room and kitchen to be constructed for the resident caretaker.

At the outset of World War II, an air-raid shelter was constructed between Amcott House and the Central Garage to the west. This was subsequently developed into further office accommodation and later converted into Retford TIC.

In 1940, the range of outbuildings belonging to Amcott House were replaced by a two-storey seven-bayed slate roofed building (No 42 Grove Street) to provide additional office space and workshop accommodation for Nottinghamshire County Council Weights and Measures Department.

Since the 1970s, Amcott House had been earmarked as a potential site for a new community museum. When the Department of Health and Social Security

⁵ The Retford Times (15/10/1937)

vacated their premises at Amcott House on 30 August 1985, preparations started to accommodate the collections. The Bassetlaw Museum officially opened in December 1986.

In 1994, the former caretaker's flat was converted into the Percy Laws Memorial Art Gallery. Percy Laws was a respected local figure, who served in Palestine in the First World War before working on Grove Street for Edgar Welchman's photographic business. In the 1930's he expanded into original works of art and picture restoration and opened Retford's first art shop. He was founding member of both the Retford Art Society and the Worksop Society of Artists. The new gallery was funded by the Percy Laws Memorial Fund in his memory following his wishes to provide a public exhibition space for local artists to exhibit their work. Furthermore, in 1995 the Museum's small retail area was opened to attract tourism revenue.

The Museum is constantly expanding and searching for new space to display, store and conserve its growing collections⁶. In the late 1990s, the then curator developed plans for a substantial extension that would have included education area of flexible space, a secure purpose built area to display Retford's historically important Civic collection (one of the most important for a town of Retford's size in the country⁷) and a large gallery for the interpretation of the history and development of Bassetlaw. Catering and a new display relating to the Pilgrim Fathers were also planned. These plans, however, were never realised due to the concern such large-scale development would have on the fabric and character of the historic building.

The Gardens and Grounds of Amcott House

The gardens at Amcott House once extended into open, undeveloped Commons before the town industrialised, grew and became an important communications point. The 'Carrs and Commons' of Retford were originally the property of William de'Anne, Lord of Noraisfee of Greenley who held them until 1319 when he granted them to the men of Rettforde as common pasture⁸. This land was of little value as it was marshy, being close to the river and possibly connected to the local sewer⁹. Stroud (2001) notes that it was not until 1845 that East Retford's common land was enclosed, and the fact that some of it had been developed for the Chesterfield canal and accompanying

⁶ Dolby M J (16/04/1997)

⁷ Dolby M J (16/04/1997)

⁸ Piercy J S (1928) *The Carrs and Commons*

⁹ Piercy J S (1928) *The Carrs and Commons*

wharves in the eighteenth century meant that later development was able to expand into this area.

When Amcott House was re-built in the late 18th century, it included a range of outbuildings grouped around a courtyard. These were utilitarian structures, adapted and remodelled to suit the needs of the owners of Amcott House, like the stables which by 1937 had been converted into a heated garage for two cars. The structured provided the important ancillary buildings necessary for the family lifestyle including a kitchen range. The complex of outbuildings was demolished when East Retford Rural DC acquired the site in 1937, in order to build a new office block. Only the cobbled courtyard still survives.



Picture of the yard at Amcott House in 1894. By S. Pegler

In 1801, the garden spanned around two acres, to the rear of cottages along Beardsall's Row to the west and Spa Lane to the south. A high brick wall circumscribed the private leisure grounds with dedicated access to Spa Lane via a doorway. In 1872 the orchard and gardens are recorded in the sale package for Amcott House along with a coachman's cottage and paddock as part of the '*family mansion*'¹⁰ following the death of William Fisher.



Dorothy Pegler at Amcott House, 1899, with conservatory in the background. Photo by S. Pegler.

¹⁰ The Retford Times (02/12/1872)

The following residents, the Peglers kept an extensive lawn behind the house, which was surrounded by a bed of shrubs and trees with a rustic summerhouse on the corner by the boundary with Spa Lane (see photo). Alfred Pegler also built a conservatory that would have extended into the grounds from the house. Decorative features such as a sundial, a balustered column and a lily pond created *'truly an oasis close to the centre of the town'*¹¹. The garden had pear trees and an ancient flowering honeysuckle over the gardener's potting shed. The map of the area in 1885 shows the extent and planting scheme designed by or for the Peglers.

By 1937 the gardens had diminished in size to one and three-quarter acres, because the old kitchen garden had become the Central Garage, and Amcott Villa and its gardens had taken the NW corner of this space, built by Mr Unsworth in the 19th century. Several trees survive from the Pegler period, including a mulberry tree, tulip tree and copper beech. Care has been taken to try and maintain the garden as a Victorian style green garden¹².



Amcott House garden, 1896. Photo by Stephen Pegler.

Until 1942 there was a garden in front of Amcott House extending to four feet from the pavement edge. A dwarf wall topped by iron railings marked the boundary and mature holly trees overhung the pavement. The railings were taken for the war effort and the pavement was widened into the space that is now used for parking.

¹¹ BMS (n d 1)

¹² Anon (n d 6) *Draft Conservation Statement*



Amcott House. OS Map 1885

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