

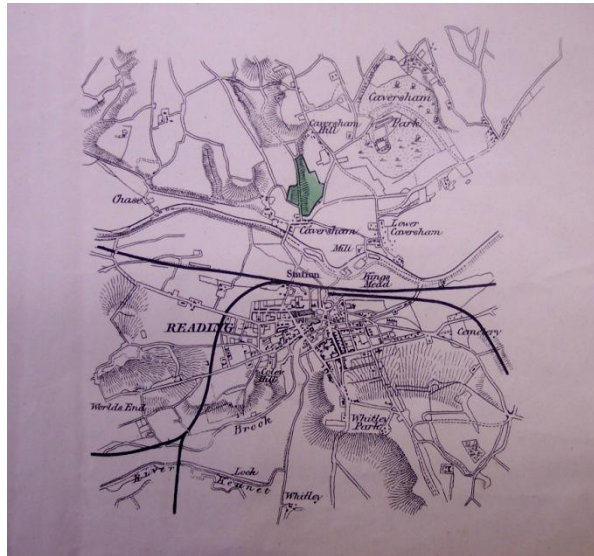
## The Story behind Balmore House

In 1844 Henry Robinson, a 37-year-old civil engineer, married Isabella Hamilton Walker, a 31-year-old widow, a first marriage for him and a second for her. They settled in London where Henry's business was in building steam ships and sugar-cane mills. Isabella could have been financially independent of her husband because her father had settled money on her in a way which avoided it automatically becoming Henry's money under the married woman's property law. At his suggestion, soon after the marriage, she gave Henry signed blank cheques to her account, thus in effect transferring the money to him. He paid the bills and she was not short of money but it says much about the relationship between them, even at this early stage.

In 1844 Isabella began to suffer depression. She also began to keep a diary. Soon after this they moved to Edinburgh where she became friendly with Edward Lane and his wife Mary, daughter of Lady Drysdale. The two families became quite close. In 1852 business problems took the Robinsons back to London but they did not lose touch with the Lanes. Isabella met them again during a series of visits to friends when they were staying in the same house. In 1852 Henry bought Ripon Lodge in west Reading, for easy rail travel to London and the relationship between the families was close enough for Edward and Mary to leave their sons with the Robinsons and their boys while they went abroad.

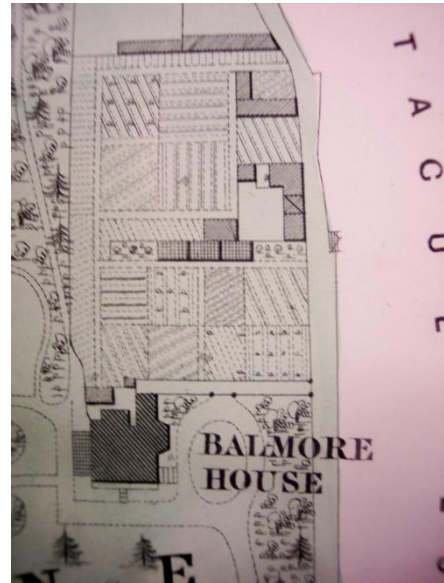
About this time Edward Lane opened a residential water-care (hydropathy) centre in Surrey – a fashionable practice that attracted Charles Darwin to it as a guest. Isabella too was a resident and wrote about her visits in her diary.

Henry, on the move again, bought a 25-acre plot of land on high ground with extensive views in Caversham. It extended from the top of Prospect Street, continuing up Peppard Road, down to what is now Hemdean Road and beyond it to the other side, taking in present-day Balmore Walk .

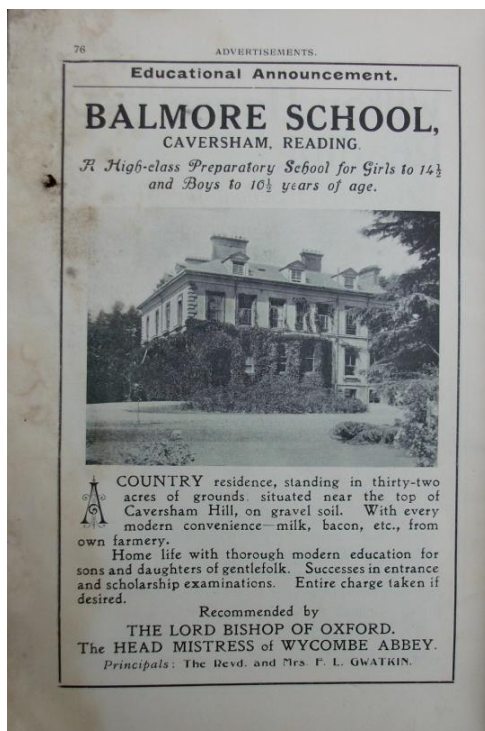


The house that Henry had built on the site at the top of the hill was in an Italianate style, and named Balmore House. It was set on a bed of concrete on top of chalk, its walls were double thickness and a ventilation shaft was connected to all the rooms. It was abundantly supplied with spring water and there was a liquid-manure tank. There is no evidence of its designer or builder but, as a civil engineer with extensive business connections, Henry was not dependent on local sources.

On the ground floor were: entrance hall, three reception rooms, boudoir, study, pantry etc. Above that were four bedrooms, two dressing rooms and a bathroom, with another four bedrooms and a store room on a second floor. A servants' hall, kitchen and domestic offices were in the basement. Outside were coach house and stables, cowsheds and other offices. A carriage driveway led to a turning circle at the front of the house. Building was to be completed in June 1855 but there were delays and Henry and Isabella went to France in November 1855 while decorations were finished, although not until Henry had finished the planting [of the garden]. The couple were on poor terms by this stage of their marriage but she could not divorce him without exceptional cause. After their return from France to Balmore House, Isabella became ill and delirious, saying things that made Henry suspicious about her behaviour. He took her diary from a locked desk and read it.



The legislators were at this time examining access to divorce for middle-class men, for whom it had been prohibitively expensive, and in 1858 a new Court of Divorce and Matrimonial Causes was opened. Henry's case against Isabella was only the eleventh to be held and the nature of the evidence in the diary, discussed in open court, was a cause of great public interest. All the evidence and the outcome of the case are in Kate Summerscale's latest book, *Mrs Robinson's Disgrace: the private diary of a Victorian lady* published by Bloomsbury in 2012.



It will not spoil the story to say that Henry put Balmore House on the market for sale by auction in London on 26 June 1861 by local agents Haslam and Buckland. The kitchen garden to the right of the house looking from the front was fully established and laid out in formal plots with paths between and was fully enclosed by high walls. There were orchards of fruit trees below the house and kitchen garden. The decorations of the bedrooms on the second floor (attic bedrooms for servants) were still not completed.

It would seem that the property did not sell in 1861 (or was purchased for resale) because it was again on the market for auction in London 26 September 1865 with Messrs Drivers & Co. There are two sets of particulars for this sale and it is not possible to say in which order they were prepared. In one set it was to be offered first as one lot and then as three if it did not sell. The first lot was the house, garden

Balmore House around 1920

and orchards with much of Balmore Walk and the other two were between Prospect Street and Hemdean Road and on the far side of that road. Other landowners whose properties bounded these plots (and whose styles of address show their social standing) were Messrs Simonds, Mr Knighton, Mrs Stevens, Mr Coldicutt, M Blandy Esq and George Montague Esq. The second set of particulars describes 58 acres in seven lots. Lot 5 was the 25 acres with Henry Robinson's house, lot 1 was four cottages and a farm homestead, lots 2, 3, 4 and 6 were parts of Hem Dean between one and four acres each to be sold for development. Lot 7 was 24 acres of prime freehold land whose location is not clear.

The house still stands, very little changed on the outside, in Balmore Drive.

