

The Richmond's ball.

From 1814 until 17th april 1818 the duke of Richmond and his family lived in a mansion in a street near the Blanchisserie de la Fontaine.¹ This laundry derived its name from a fountain at the crossing of the Longue rue Neuve and the rue de la Blanchisserie. The mansion itself was a part of the establishments of Jean Simons.² Situated at the Blanchisserie de la Fontaine, his possessions extended in the area between the rue du Marais in the east (with the possessions of the family of Dumonceau and mr. Simons), in the north by the ramparts of Brussels, in the west by the common entrance and possessions of Mr.Volxem (and later a street which was initially called the rue de Volxem and later rue des Cendres), and finally on the south side by the brewery and facilities of Mr.van Ginderachter, the establishments of Mr. Van Opstal, Le Roi and Matthys, as well as by the rue de la Blanchisserie. The mansion itself was established at the rue de la Blanchisserie nr.23

In 1815, part of the complex was a fairly large complex which was formed by the residence for the caretaker, a stable and a coach-house.

On entering from the rue de la Blanchisserie, there was a door to the residence of the caretaker. On top of this door was a window on the first floor. In the west wall of the building there were three windows on the first and four on the second floor, while the north wall had two doors and six windows below, three windows on the first and one on the second floor. The east wall had three windows below, a porte d'escalier and two windows on the first floor. Here there was also a pump.

Opposite this building was a wooden wash-house which was covered with tiles. Right next to this building were several trees.

In the west side of the complex there was a gate to the mansion itself. This mansion dated from the 18th century and was an elegant, but simple building, covered with slate. In front and in the rear of it was a courtyard and a garden, which were partly surrounded by high hedges and which were planted with different kind of fruit-trees, flowers and plants.

In 1815 the house contained six rooms, a hall and a staircase. There were two floors, an attic and a large basement. On the exterior there was a large and blue-stone stairs; under these stairs was a door which led to the kitchen and this kitchen had four barred windows. On top of this stairs was the main entrance of the house which was flanked by large shutters.

In the middle of the front of the building a stone stairs led to a double door, which was flanked by two windows on each side. On the first floor there was a door in the middle which led to a small balcony which was also flanked by two windows on each side. On the second floor there were five (lower) windows.

On the west-side of the building there was a storage and a workshop which was built of stone and of which a part was covered with straw and another with tiles. Its south side had a large double door, a smaller door and four barred windows below. In the first floor were eight windows and in the attic there was only one window. Its west-side was formed by a wooden balcony on wooden stakes, in which a wooden stairs led to the first floor. North of this building was an annex constructed on wooden stakes as well, and which was covered with tiles.³

According to a sketch made by William Pitt Lennox the house had a ballroom to the left of the main entrance and which could be reached by an ante-room. This ballroom was not designed as a ballroom: in fact it was the store and workshop which had been transformed by the Richmonds in 1814 into a playroom for the children and into a ballroom in june 1815. It was in this room that the actual ball on the night of the 15th of June 1815 took place.

Georgiana Lennox, later lady De Ros, and third daughter of the duke of Richmond, describes the situation in her diary as: "My mother's now famous ball took place in a large room on the ground-floor, on the left of the entrance, connected with the rest of the house by an ante-room. It

had been used by the coach-builder, from whom the house was hired, to put carriages in, but it was papered before we came there; and I recollect the paper - a trellis pattern with roses. My sisters used the room as a schoolroom, and we used to play battledore and shuttlecock there on a wet day." ⁴

Between 1827 and 1835 the west-wing of the building was demolished for the construction of the rue des Cendres and of the building for the sisters of Saint Augustin. ⁵

Due to this change, the old ball-room was partly demolished and the rest of it split into two smaller rooms and a staircase, and with this the whole interior of the house changed accordingly. ⁶ The Rue des Cendres was now a new street which ran west of the house. This street separated the house from the old wash-house.

In this situation one could take a tour around the complex by passing through the boulevard, the rue du Marais, the rue de la Blanchisserie and de rue des Cendres, without seeing the old house and garden, as these were hidden by the buildings on the streets.

The old mansion has survived but was ultimately completely absorbed by the institute and finally the whole complex was demolished in the second half of the seventies of the 20th century, and to be replaced by a new one, which still exists today. ⁷

A fundamental research on the actual place of the old ball-room has been done by a lawyer called P.Duvivier, and it is his theory which I have essentially followed. ⁸ His theory is also being taken over by W.Aerts and Th.Fleischman. ⁹ Aerts and Fleischman even published a plan (drawn by Aerts) of the complex based on a cadastral-plan of sablon dated 1821. ¹⁰

Another investigation where the actual ball-room had taken place was carried out in 1888 by William Fraser, an ex-captain of the 1st regiment of Life Guards.

For his research he used several sources, one of them were the recollections of Lady De Ros. In fact, by then in 1888 (she was 93 years old) she told Fraser that the ball "was held in a long narrow room, that had at one time been a coachmaker's depôt and was used occasionally by her sisters and herself as a playroom." Further she had informed him that it was held "not in the Duke of Richmond's house, but in a coachmaker's depôt, a low-roofed room at the rear of the house, the street being named rue de la Blanchisserie". ¹¹

In another statement, Lady De Ros wrote to Fraser on April 9, 1884: "The ball given by my mother the Duchess of Richmond, 15 June 1815, took place in the Rue de la Blanchisserie, where we lived, in the lower part of the town of Bruxelles. There was no park attached to it, but a moderate-sized garden. The house had belonged to a coachmaker, and the warehouse in which he kept his carriages was converted into a long narrow room, in which the ball took place." ¹²

Though having this information of Lady De Ros, Fraser came to another conclusion about the situation. In 1888, the old ball-room was no longer in existence in the shape it had in 1815.

However, Fraser believed a part of the brewery at the rue de la Blanchisserie nr.40 and 42 to have been the ball-room. The room involved was a long space on the first floor of the brewery and which was owned by M.van Ginderachter. It was 36 meters long and 16 meters wide, had windows and a number of wooden pillars. It could have held at least 400 people. In 1815 it had been rented by Jean Simons.

This last fact induced Fraser to believe that this was the place where the famous ball had taken place. ¹³

However, Fraser, though lauded by some, was criticised by the son of Lady De Ros for not taking into account three important features of the room, mentioned by his mother. ¹⁴

First of all its size; Fraser claimed it to be much larger than she did but Fraser rejected this idea on the basis of the impression one has of a room filled with people or not.

Secondly, its position on the first floor, while lady De Ros clearly states that it was on ground floor. Fraser then gave a complicated construction showing that the level of the rue de la

Blanchisserie was lower than that of the rue des Cendres. By using the few outside steps of the building at the rue de la Blanchisserie nr.40 as well as the twelve steps in the building itself leading to the ball-room gave the precise level of the yard. From this, an easy access to the ballroom no doubt would have existed.

Further, according to Lady De Ros the room was at the rear of the house, and this depends how one orientates the facade of the mansion, both of them having main entrances. In this, Fraser is very unclear stating on the hand that the mansion was facing towards the boulevard (putting his ball-room to the rear of the house) , and on the other he puts the principal front of the house towards the west (putting his ball-room to the side).¹⁵

William Lennox, brother of Lady De Ros, and twice cited by Fraser, also confirmed in 1879 that the ball had taken place “in a room adjacent to his father’s house” and that “the house no longer existed but that in any case the ball had not taken place at the residence of the duchess, but in some sort of an old barn at the back or behind.”¹⁶

The rear as meant by Lady De Ros should probably be interpreted as the house having the front towards the large garden and the boulevard.

Following the investigation of 1868 of lady De Ros, the family believed the room had completely gone, which was not the case.

Also according to Duvivier, the building meant by Fraser to have been the ball-room didn’t exist in 1815. In addition, Fraser wasn’t aware of the transformations of the mansion which caused it to be very difficult to locate the old complex of Simons.¹⁷ Apart from that, in his theory Fraser says “the probabilities are that the supper-room and other apartments necessary for a ball were in the mansion itself, with which there was communication.”¹⁸ This is highly improbable, and this presumes the building was not connected to the house, while ball-room was adjacent to it.¹⁹

While following the theory of Duvivier, one mystery remains and that is the one of the actual size of the ball-room. Drawn to scale, the sketch of W.Aerts of the house and its immediate surroundings, suggests that the original ball-room was about 6 meters long and 3 meters wide and this can never of course be a realistic size for a ball-room, even taking into account the words of Lady De Ros. Apart from that, being a depository for carriages, this is too small. Therefore, I feel that, originally, the room must have extended further into the westwing which was adjacent to the mansion.

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¹ Cf.Fonds Duvivier. Ce que devint l'hotel de la rue de la Blanchisserie. In: LMB. Archieffonds Franse periode Vol.III Box 25 I.3 Chapter 5

² Jean Simons died in 1822 at 82 years of age. He was not a coach-builder as is sometimes supposed.

³ Cf.Fonds Duvivier. Ce que devint l'hotel de la rue de la Blanchisserie. In: LMB. Archieffonds Franse periode Vol.III Box 25 I.3 Chapter 5 p.53-57

4. Personal recollections of the great duke of Wellington. In: A sketch of the life of Georgiana, lady De Ros door J.R.Swinton. London 1893 p.122-123 Her account relative to the ball was also published in the Murray's Magazine of January 1889. She visited the site in 1868 but her investigation was all but thorough and she's was told the room no longer existed.

W.Aerts and Th.Fleischman also give a description of the complex as it was in 1814 and in 1827, when it was sold. Cf. Fleischman, Th. and W.Aerts. Bruxelles pendant la bataille de Waterloo p.234-237

5. Documents in the fonds Duvivier. The religious institute is called the Institut Saint-Jean et Sainte-Elisabeth. Cf. Fleischman, Th. and W.Aerts. Bruxelles pendant la bataille de Waterloo p.236

According to Fleischman the furniture of the ballroom (a table, two sofas, eight chairs and a harp) would have been in the possession of a family called De Briey, but there is no proof for that. In 1934 the furniture would have been transferred by count Renaud de Briey to the Musées Royaux du Cinquantenaire in Brussels.

In Le Journal of 1946 there was an advertisement for the public sale in the Hôtel des Ventes Gabriel in Brussels (on 26th and 27th of September of that year) of some bronzes for a fireplace and coming from the house of the duke of Richmond in 1815. Cf. Fleischman, Th. and W.Aerts. Bruxelles pendant la bataille de Waterloo p.238

6. Cf. photographs in the documentation of the municipal archive of the city of Brussels (1903). This is confirmed by a visit by Lady J.Peel (a sister of Lady De Ros) at the house, with her husband, on May the 19th 1835. She noted that the ball-room had been changed into several rooms and a staircase. Cf. Madan, B. Spencer and Waterloo: The letters of Spencer Madan. 1814-1816 p.

This account is also published by the Times on 23rd of September 1897. Also in: Fonds Duvivier in the LMB.

The changes in the ball-room can also be seen in a plan of the building made for a public sale of the building in 1849. Cf. Fleischman, Th. and W.Aerts. Bruxelles pendant la bataille de Waterloo. Bruxelles. 1956. p. ..

7. Cf. photographs published by:

Van Neck, L. Waterloo illustré p.35

Brocklebank, B. Home of the Waterloo ball p.1711

Photographs in the documentation of the municipal archives of the city of Brussels (1903).

8.The detailed results of this study can be found in the Fonds Duvivier. Cf.Fonds Duvivier. Ce que devint l'hôtel de la rue de la Blanchisserie. In: LMB. Archieffonds Franse periode Vol.III Box 25 I.3

9.Also in: Brocklebank, B. Home of the Waterloo ball p.1711

Madan, B. Spencer and Waterloo etc.

Bas, F.de. Prins Frederik en zijn tijd.Schiedam.1884-1914.Vol.III, 2 p.1175.

10.In this plan the numbers mean:

1.The ramparts and the boulevard according to the plan of Dupuis (1777)

2.The site of the house in 1814, rented by the duke, and of the old ball-room.

3.The place of the complex of Van Ginderachter (see below); this is being shown anonymously in the plan of 1821.

4.The entrances towards the complex of Simons (arrows) according to a plan of 1827.

5.The ground-plan of the planned rue des Cendres and the contemporary front-side of the boulevard.

¹¹ Fraser, W. Words on Wellington etc. p.217, 228

¹² Fraser, W. Words on Wellington p.255-256

13. Fraser, W. Words on Wellington p.229

¹⁴ Fraser, W. Words on Wellington p.249

¹⁵ Fraser, W. Words on Wellington p.244-245

¹⁶ Fraser, W. Words on Wellington p.252 These quotes come from conversations with Sir A.Rollit and the Rev.Teignmouth Shore. By the way, Fraser states that the word "or" must have been an error in print, which I feel it is not.

17.Fonds Duvivier, LMB.

¹⁸ Fraser, W. Words on Wellington p.253

¹⁹ Another legend tells us the ball would have been held at the hôtel d'Angleterre, rue de la Madeleine. Cf.Galesloot, L. Le duc de Wellington à Bruxelles 1814-1821 p.301
Upon which facts this theory is based remain unclear.