

Westgate House and Madame Maes

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A feature of Western Esplanade through a hundred years, a privately provided horse trough has endured to serve as a mute reminder of a vanished aspect of the old waterside scene, linking significant byways of local history and biography in Georgian and Victorian times. Since 1903, this simple stone horse trough has stood by the south-west corner of the old walls, just below the West Gate, opposite Herbert Walker Avenue leading to the New Docks of the 1930s, for which reclamation transformed the scene it serves to recall. No longer directly overlooking the water, it is now separated from the busy flow of traffic by some twenty feet of neatly laid red bricks, indicative of Council respect for this modest memorial, which has been enhanced in status as an officially “listed” Grade II “building of special architectural and historic interest.



The horse trough on Western Esplanade erected in 1903 in memory of Madam Maes and other members of the Marett family who lived at Westgate House. (Photograph by Tom Holden)

Its origin is baldly recorded in the Borough Engineer’s report to the Council’s Works Committee meeting of March 10, 1903: “I have received and application from Messrs Garret & Haysom, on behalf of Miss Maes, asking permission to place a cattle trough on Western Esplanade, on the site of Madame Maes’ house” The committee was pleased to agree, “subject to the trough being erected to the satisfaction of the Borough Engineer.” His involvement was merely technical; Miss Maes provided the trough (which, like others of it’s kind, must have been primarily for the use of horses, not cattle) and was responsible for the inscriptions carved on its sides. The one facing the old town walls carries the words of S T Coleridge:

*“He prayeth best who loveth best
All things both great and small
For the dear God who loveth us
He made and loveth all.”*

The other side announces the dedication “To the loving memory of Madame Maes and the other members of the Marett family whose house stood on this site and was built and occupied by them AD 1700 – 1900.”

In fact, Westgate House, thereby recalled, dated from 1760 and was demolished in 1898, to clear the way for the extension of Western Esplanade, completed in 1900, to give direct access beyond West Gate to the Royal Pier and link it to the West (later central) railway station. Previously, the only approaches to the pier from the Western Shore were, inconveniently, by narrow Cuckoo Lane or through Westgate and Bugle Street. The intervening shoreline below West Quay was occupied by boat yards and the gardens of Westgate House – indeed, partly by the house itself, for it actually straddled the town wall!

The medieval West Quay, small as it was, once served, once served as the main focus of Southampton shipping activity. From there, Henry V's expedition sailed in 1415, *en route* to the battle of Agincourt, and in 1620 the 'Pilgrim Fathers' set out for America. Southampton's maritime trade was then in decline; it's revival in the 18th century centred on the Town Quay (complemented the from the 1840s by development of the Eastern Docks), while the West Quay area was used for small-scale ship and boat building.

Old Corporation deeds preserved in the City Archives Office include many relating to the West Gate and adjoining sites. The Marett connection can be traced back to 1725, when "George Rowcliffe of Southampton, shipwright" took a lease of the old warehouse re-erected in 1634 by the West Gate, together with land beside it. Originally the medieval fish market and cloth hall, this noteworthy timber-framed building, sensitively reconstructed and restored, is today's Tudor Merchants Hall.

Rowcliffe prospered until his death in 1744, after which shipbuilding continued on behalf of his widow (who lived on until 1777) and his daughter Mary (1722 – 1809). Mary married a gentleman from Jersey, Philip Marrett (The family name was variously spelled spelled Maret, Marrett or Marret before Marett became the established form). He died in 1758, aged only 37; his is the first of ten names inscribed on memorial tablets above the family tombs in St Michael's church – in the south chancel, now a vestry and not normally seen by visitors.

As Southampton entered its Spa period, West Quay lost its commercial importance and became an area of fashionable resort. About 1760, the two Marett widows, mother and daughter, contributed to changing the scene by leasing more land and having two earlier small houses, one each side of the old wall, imaginatively developed into a substantial Georgian town mansion.



Old Westgate House in the 1890s from a contemporary photograph. Adjoining the house on the left is the building restored in the 1970s as Tudor Merchants and which is now called Westgate Hall.

The front, facing the water, was of three storeys; at the level of its middle floor, it was joined at the back to a single storey section, looking out to a garden abutting Cuckoo Lane. The house incorporated two of the arches of the arcaded wall, parts of which were knocked down to give access between the front and back of the house and provide an unusual alcove in its drawing room. An entrance lodge was built against the outer wall of the West Gate, which was itself leased in 1782 by Mary's son Charles Marett (1756 – 95).

This medieval gate had lost its original defensive significance long before its portcullis was removed in 1745 as “a nuisance and of no manner of use.” Leases of what was still called “the Pigeon House” were renewed to the Marett family at 14-year intervals throughout the following century. This was the upper part of the West Gate, in residential use from Tudor times until its renovation in 1934–35. While held by the Maretts, it was presumably occupied by some of their servants.

From the 1760s, leases refer to the family's bathing houses and machines. There were still bathing machines on West Quay in the 1820s but the increasingly dirty state of the water afterwards put an end to bathing there and the area was again given over to boat-building, although no longer by the Maretts. The next bearer of the name Charles Marett (1784–1870) built a sea wall along the edge of his waterfront garden and also extended his property at the rear of the house by leasing from 1823 “the void of ground called Spanish Burying Place” – so used in the 18th century for prisoners of war who died in captivity.

This Charles Marett had given up shipbuilding, to become an attorney and have the means to retire early; He was styled “gentleman” in St Michael's parish register of 1825 and “landed proprietor” in the 1851 census schedule. After enjoying more than four decades as a gentleman of leisure, he died in 1870, when his property passed to his son, yet another Charles Marett (1816–98).

He pursued the career of a barrister in London. His eldest sister Frances established herself in a house built for her at Maybush – Crabwood, now used as club premises for the headquarters staff of the of the Ordnance Survey, which acquired it and part of its grounds as a building site in the late 1930s. Charles Marett therefore made the old family house available to his youngest widowed sister, Hannah Winifred, who had married a Frenchman, Joseph Emile Maes of Nantes.

By a nice convention of the time, this Southampton lady was then always known as Madame, not Mrs, Maes. She and her children lived at Westgate House for the last quarter century of its existence. Madame Maes became noted for the gracious hospitality she dispensed in her picturesque home, which was full of fine old furniture, fittings and curios. More were stored in the old ‘guardhouse’ (Tudor Merchants Hall), which had formerly served the Maretts as a ‘banqueting hall’. Among its contents was the family's 18th century sedan chair, which later passed into the hands of Mr W F G Spranger. He put in on display in his private museum in the ‘upper chamber’ of the Norman House, which he had restored in 1890, ahead of renovating the adjoining Tudor House. After he persuaded the Corporation to buy the whole property from him in 1911, he gave this chair as one of the first exhibits of the town museum opened there the following year. (See *The Saving of Tudor House* by the present writer.)

Madame Maes was a popular and well-loved character in late Victorian Southampton, not least in the poorer streets near her home, where she often exercised her generosity and benevolence – even to the extent of giving away some of the clothes she was wearing. She opened up the grounds of Westgate House as a sort of adventure playground for the children of the area and other young party visitors. William Burrough Hill treasured through 80 years his childhood memory of the delights of the old mulberry tree in her garden; later, just before the site was cleared for roadworks, he had retrieved a branch of it.

After Madame Maes died in 1897, the Council carried through the £10,000 road improvement scheme initiated by Sir James Lemon. It bought out the Marett leases on Westgate House and grounds – for which the price of £2,600 was happily settled with the last Charles Marett shortly before his death in 1898. Removal of Stevens' boatyard to the site of the Long Rooms (once the hub of social life in the town's Spa period but by then dilapidated, demolished at the same time as Westgate House) and other land adjustments around the West Quay allowed the line of new road to be cleared and laid out in the autumn of 1898. The completed new

road was available for traffic in April 1900, after its formal opening by the Mayor, Alderman Hussey, who ceremonially broke through the ribbon across it.

Meanwhile, there had been great arguments in the Council about the possible ‘redevelopment’ of parts of the site and grounds of Westgate House. Some members wanted the new road line to allow “500 ft of valuable frontage for good class dwelling houses” – 25 of them, on 99-year leases, with total rateable value of £1,000 – on the east side, backing on to Cuckoo Lane. This scheme, involving destruction of a section of the town walls, aroused much public opposition, which eventually persuaded the Council to decide the surplus Corporation land in the area should “remain as open space for ever”.

The Borough Engineer was then given the task of making good the breach in the wall where Westgate House had stood. Reinstatement was so well done that few people can now be aware that some of the impressive stonework below the West Gate and Tudor Merchants Hall is, in fact, “late Victorian medieval”, dating only from 1899.

Having influentially campaigned against ‘vandalising’ the old walls, the Hampshire Field Club intervened directly to preserve the timber-framed building beside the West Gate. When the Corporation resumed control of it in 1897, its Estates Committee initially resolved not to recommend any expenditure on repairing it because it was too old and dilapidated. Other councillors disagreed and the committee later resolved to spend £50 making the building watertight and secure, but nothing more. Thereupon, the Rev G W Minns, the long-serving vicar of Holy Trinity at Weston from 1879 and editor of the Hampshire Field Club publications for thirty years, undertook the raise £100 for further work “to render the building of use.” In October 1899 the Council accepted his offer and the amount was collected by public appeals. In 1903 Mr Minns, writing his introduction to the *Proceedings of the Hampshire Field Club*, was able to “record with great satisfaction the preservation of the old chamber or guard room adjoining the West Gate” – and also to celebrate the defeat of those who advocated removing the Bargate as an obstruction to traffic.