

Furnishings and decor at Highbury 1880-1914

In the period when Highbury was the Chamberlain's family home the furnishings and decor were of high quality and complimented the rich architectural detailing of the interiors.

Joseph Chamberlain was a widower when he moved into Highbury in 1880, and it was he who decided on the decor and furnishings, probably in conjunction with the architect, John Henry Chamberlain. Whilst furniture and paintings were brought from his previous house of Southbourne in Edgbaston, new furniture was needed for this larger house. When Chamberlain married Mary Endicott in 1888 she found everything to her taste, and initially made few changes but gradually in certain rooms she rearranged the furniture, got rid of some pieces and added others. The most radical change was in her bedroom which was furnished with a suite of furniture the gift of her parents. In her boudoir the decor was completely changed in 1896 and she had added furniture that she had brought from the United States.

Joseph Chamberlain's Library

The elaborately carved oak bookcases designed by the architect J. H. Chamberlain were originally made for Southbourne but were reinstalled at Highbury, supplemented by additional bays. The shelves held 'books of reference on every subject: history, biography, poetry and general literature, English and French.' The adjustable shelves had leather dust falls (flaps covering the gap between the books and the shelves above). The furniture was a large partner's desk placed in front of the white marble fireplace, a side table and a writing table with a reading lamp and which was 'generally covered with Parliamentary and official papers.' There was a study chair and six further chairs covered in red morocco leather stamped with the Chamberlain family crest of a lion's head above a key. Chamberlain often convened meetings in his library and the guests would use these chairs.



Joseph Chamberlain's Library, courtesy of Cadbury Research Library: Special Collections, University of Birmingham, C9/20 Photograph [1888]

On the desk there was a blotting pad with a brocade cover; a pencil case; a paper knife, a cigar box, a pen with which the Treaty of Washington was signed in February 15 1888 together with a silver cigarette case inscribed to 'JC Xmas 1888, let us smoke the pipe of peace, Yours WV Harcourt'. On the mantelpiece there were photographs of William Gladstone and other politicians, together with a Dutch silver casket, a gift of William Endicott, Mary Chamberlain's brother, and an inlaid Japanese ivory tobacco jar a gift of Mrs Chamberlain, together with two Chinese vases and a Wedgwood basalt vase.

The niches in the fireplace over-mantel held small items of oriental porcelain and there were porcelain plates and vases above the bookcases. An oriental rug with a formal pattern of roses harmonised with the marquetry ceiling with its regular panels of leaves of horse chestnut and ivy.

The adjoining **Secretary's room** (now toilets) was lined from floor to ceiling with book shelves. The books included 220 volumes of The Parliamentary Debates, 110 volumes of Hansard's Parliamentary Debates, Reports of Royal Commissions, 55 vols of State Intelligence and wooden letter files.

The **corridor** displayed many of the presentation addresses made to Chamberlain from political associations.

Main Hall

The top lit hall at the centre of the house was mainly used as an informal sitting room but the furniture could be removed to the gallery landing to create space for receptions and dances.



Main Hall at Highbury, courtesy of Cadbury Research Library: Special Collections, University of Birmingham, C/20 Photograph [1888]

The original furnishings were a large circular banquette with a central pedestal holding a green majolica vase planted with a palm, four oak framed settees upholstered in tapestry and placed at the sides of the room and, in the centre, three button backed armchairs, a writing table and three oak chairs and an oak and inlaid ebony hall table with an under shelf. The oak wall bookcases held specimens of Joseph Chamberlain's collection of oriental and European porcelain and two tall Japanese vases were placed in the staircase recess. On the floor there were three oriental rugs in the centre and inlaid flooring around the edges but this was subsequently covered by further rugs.

The banquette was removed by Mary in 1895 and the furniture rearranged and added to. The central space was replaced by a four sided arrangement of a settee and several easy chairs, with the palm on a stand in the centre. There were further easy chairs and low tables by the fireplace together with two screens. A walnut portfolio stand by the staircase held two volumes of photographs including views of New South Wales presented by the Premier in 1897. The ornaments on the writing table included a bronze figure of Bacchus and a silver inkstand and a paper cutter made from a branch of a pear tree planted at Endicott Hall, USA in 1830. Near the stairs there was a 'Burmese' dinner gong, a stuffed flamingo and the American flag.

Dining Room

The dining room had terracotta coloured walls and was distinguished by several oil paintings and a suite of dining furniture of pollarded oak with ebony inlay. This was made by William Barfield of Leicester who was responsible for the decorative woodwork throughout the house, and may have been designed by J. H. Chamberlain. The table with ten leaves could be extended to 21 feet and had a matching set of 24 dining chairs upholstered in green leather. An eight foot sideboard with mirrored back filled the recess. Two side tables, a dinner wagon and a coal purdonium completed the suite. Other furniture included two Cromwell easy chairs upholstered in green leather and a matching lady's chair, two footstools and three card tables.

In this room were displayed the best of Joseph chamberlain's oil paintings. William James Muller's 'Street Scene in Cairo' of 1839 hung here until it was presented by Joseph Chamberlain to the Art Gallery in 1885. Above the fireplace was Marcus Stone's 'Venice' and on either side was Emile Nevy's 'A Japanese Child' in coloured chalks and 'A Memlook Bey, Egypt' of 1868 by John Frederick Lewis. There was also Albert Gos's 'Lake and Mountain Scene' and H.Schlesinger's 'Neuf heures du Matin' together with portraits of Joseph Chamberlain's parents, Joseph and Caroline Chamberlain, and a portrait of Lord Randolph Churchill.

The sideboard had a display of plate including a silver trowel from the laying of the foundation stone of the Council House by Chamberlain in 1873, a silver salver presented to Joseph Chamberlain by the workmen of Nettlefold and Chamberlain on his retirement in 1874, a silver cup presented by Lord Randolph Churchill, and a silver salver presented to Joseph Chamberlain's grandfather by the Cordwainers' Company of London.

The Drawing Room

The drawing room had a rich ceiling treatment of green painted motifs and inlaid panels of satinwood and walnut in quatrefoils outlined in ebonised wood. The room was described in 1881 as 'furnished in princely style'. The several pieces of ebonised furniture and the walls hung in green silk brocade harmonised with the ceiling. Prominent in the room was a six foot high ebonised mahogany cabinet inlaid with ivory with centre and side plate glass mirror panels and a centre cupboard with Wedgwood medallions. Another cabinet was three feet high and also of ebonised wood with ivory inlay and had amorini and arabesque decorations. A third cabinet was Japanese with bonze ornamentation. The eastern theme continued with the over-mantel mirror above the fireplace which had ten niche china shelves ornamented with flowers and foliage. There was a Japanese carved ebonized table with a glazed earthenware tile top of bird and flower ornaments and a gallery under shelf. Chamberlain had purchased the table in Paris at the French Exhibition of 1878. Other purchases from the Exhibition were two pieces of china, one a Japanese Satsuma ware vase and the other a Ginori ware plate with an arabesque design from Italy.



Highbury Drawing Room, courtesy of Cadbury Research Library: Special Collections, University of Birmingham, C9/20 Photograph [1888]

There was a suite of an inlaid secretaire, six chairs and an occasional table. Further occasional tables were of ebonised wood as were the settees and chairs. These were upholstered in silk damask or floral silk tapestry. The furniture was re-arranged by Mary Chamberlain so as to form several informal groupings of chairs and tables and, because of the large numbers who were entertained at

Highbury, a banquette was added to the bay window. There was a Steinway piano with an ebonised inlaid ivory case by a leading cabinet maker, James Plucknett of Warwick with a matching piano stool and music canterbury.



The Highbury Drawing Room from *The Man and the City, a Souvenir of Mr Chamberlain's connection with the Midland City* [1906]

The paintings in the drawing room were watercolours including several by David Cox and A V Copley Fielding together with Samuel Prout's 'Zwinger Palace, Dresden' and James Holland's 'Doge's Palace'. To control the light levels in this south facing room the windows had ruched silk blinds and silk curtains.

The Boudoir

The original decor of the boudoir had walls hung in 'delicate coloured tapestry with a frieze with figures in the antique style' and the furniture was the piano and Canterbury subsequently moved to the drawing room. After Chamberlain married Mary Endicott in 1888 the room ceased to be the sitting room of his eldest daughter, Beatrice, and became Mary's boudoir. She rearranged the furniture in 1891 so her writing table was by the window. She also had two cabinets in ebonised wood in one of which was displayed 22 Sevres dessert plates. There was a bookcase and two screens, one of red silk and the other, added in 1891, of Spanish leather. The seats were ladies' chairs upholstered in needlework. In contrast to this furniture there was a New England rocking chair Mary had brought from America and, in front of the fireplace, a polar bear skin rug a gift of Mary's mother in 1891. The ornaments included silver framed photographs of Mary's friends.

The decor designed by the architect, J H Chamberlain, was not to Mary's taste and in 1896 she made significant changes to the room. The walls were covered in yellow silk wallpaper which Mary ordered in Paris and this hung above white wood panelling in 'a lovely old Italian design' made in London. The classical theme was continued with Adam style plasterwork on the ceiling and cornice and the

doors were decorated in gesso work in the same style. The fireplace was replaced by one with yellow marble and her new carpet was, 'the grey green colour of the bark of an apple tree.' Her Christmas present from Austen in 1903 was a gilt Italian footstool in green and flowered brocade 'beautiful addition to my own chairs and just the thing in style and wonderful for my room.'

The Breakfast Room

This room had an informal decor of embossed green wallpaper and green paintwork with a frieze and cornice of flying swallows in 'the Japanese style'. The furniture was of light unstained oak. Like the other principal rooms the floor was of inlaid wood and there was an oriental carpet in the centre. The fireplace had a carved oak panel of the aquatic arrowhead plant. Around the walls were hung ten watercolours by Thomas Collier.

Gallery landing

The landing which ran round the four sides of the upper part of the hall functioned as a library and picture gallery and was richly decorated with an anaglypta wallpaper of golden pomegranates above which were two hand painted friezes with a design of leaves. The Celtic pattern of the metal railings was echoed in the motifs of the five light stained glass window at the eastern end of the hall. The metal down lighter was of brass in a gothic design. Elaborately carved half height book cases lined two of the walls. The pictures included oils by C T Burt, H A Moore and Colin Hunter. John Singer Sargent's 1891 portrait of Joseph Chamberlain and John Everett's portrait of Mary Chamberlain of 1891, which originally hung in the drawing room, but had been move to the landing by 1899. There was no permanent furniture on the landing but the hall furniture was placed here when the hall was used for receptions or dances.

There were fourteen bedrooms including dressing rooms and a day and night nursery. The rooms occasionally open to the public include:

Mary Chamberlain's bedroom

Among Mary Chamberlain's wedding presents when she married Joseph Chamberlain as his third wife in 1888 was a suite of bedroom furniture, the gift of her parents. This was of bird's eye maple. It did not include wardrobes. These were made for Mary Chamberlain shortly after her arrival at Highbury. The three wardrobes were in Louis Seize style in white and gold with a matching over mantel mirror. The bedroom walls were hung with old rose silk which was also used for the curtains. In 1890 there were new light fittings shaped like pink and blue lilies and a satin bedspread bought by Joseph Chamberlain during their tour of Egypt.

Beatrice Chamberlain's sitting room

The walls had blue wallpaper and the curtains were of blue velvet. Chippendale style chairs and a Madame Recamier settee were upholstered in figured velvet. By the fireplace there was a Japanese screen.

The south bedroom

This room had a suite of furniture of burr walnut including a half tester bedstead with cretonne hangings, a winged wardrobe, two dressing tables, a washstand, a chest of drawers, two pedestal side tables. The lined curtains were of cretonne.

The Satinwood bedroom

This room had a suite of furniture of satinwood including a half tester bedstead with chintz floral pattern hangings, a satinwood wardrobe with inlaid tulip and Wedgwood medallions, a matching pair of toilet tables, a matching pair of bedside pedestal cupboards, a towel rail and writing desk.