

## Then and Now 4 - Marble Hill House, Twickenham



*Top Picture - Marble Hill House by Richard Wilson 1775  
© Historic England*

*Richard Wilson (1714 to 1782) was born in Wales, son of a vicar. He was one of the first British landscape artists who painted landscapes in their own right, rather than as a background for rich and powerful land owners. He worked in Italy from 1750 to 1757 at the same time as Italian landscape painter Canaletto, was painting in London. In 1768 he helped found the Royal Academy, which went to display the paintings of many famous artists and still run exhibitions in Piccadilly today.*

Look at both pictures and find these comparative details:

## **Wilson Painting - 1770**

1: The house in this painting is Marble Hill House in Twickenham, looking north across the River Thames from near Ham House. Marble Hill House was built as a house in the country, to the south-west of London, between 1724 and 1729 for Henrietta Howard the Countess of Suffolk, who had links to King George II. It was designed by Roger Morris (architect) with influence by Henry Herbert, who later became the Earl of Pembroke. Lord Herbert had been to Italy on the “Grand Tour”, which was a popular way in the 18<sup>th</sup> century of finishing the formal education of aristocratic and rich young men in the classic Greek, Roman and Renaissance style in Italy. Lord Herbert encouraged Morris to design Marble Hill House to be similar to that of Villa Cornaro in Piombino Dese, Italy designed by Andrea Palladio in 1553. It often features lots of white marble, symmetrical lines and a very large square entrance hall. It gave rise to a style of architecture called Palladian, which became popular in Great Britain in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, especially around London and the Thames Valley.

2: You should notice that although Marble Hill House is a very grand house it can only be glimpsed through the trees. Many portraits of this time would have been commissioned by owners and would have featured the owner posing in front of their grand house. Perhaps they were showing off or more likely they wanted to show everyone how rich and powerful they were. Henrietta Howard, as Countess Suffolk, had become Lady of the Bedchamber in 1714 in Hanover, Germany to the wife of the future King of England, George II. Although she was recognised as a Royal Mistress to King George II, she would have been rich in her right and could afford to have the house built but she does not appear in the painting. So it would seem unlikely that she would have paid Richard Wilson to paint the picture. Wilson may not have been commissioned to paint the picture by a client but painted it anyway and hoped that someone might buy it if they liked it. He was one of the first British landscape painters who worked in this way by painting views for the sake of it. There are several famous paintings of this bend of the River Thames, including one by JM Turner, but most were painted from up on Richmond Hill, about half a mile away.



*Henrietta Howard by Charles Jervas, painted in 1724 (Public Domain)*

3: The scene of the Thames includes two men standing by a tree, perhaps they were fishing? There is also a sailing boat, was this a leisure boat or was it carrying in cargo? It is sailing downstream so it could have been heading for central London. The path in the foreground is the towing path which were built next to rivers and canals from about 1700 to allow horses to tow long boats loaded with cargo and goods. Canals were too narrow to sail or tack across and there were no motors in boats then, just horse power. The painting looks as though this spot was out in the countryside, which at that time it was.

## **Photograph - 2015**

1: The modern photo replicates the view, as closely as possible, from the same spot Richard Wilson painted his view, 245 years before. Remarkably it is still looks very similar today with only the extra boats moored on the River Thames in the modern view. We can still glimpse Marble Hill House through the trees on the opposite bank of the river.

2: Marble Hill House now sits in a public park, Marble Hill Park. The house, owned by English Heritage, is open to the public. There are several Palladian style houses still standing today, including Chiswick House and the Lord Mayor's Mansion House in the City of London.

3: You can still see sailing and rowing boats on this stretch of water, especially at weekends. The towpath, shown in the 1770 painting on the southern bank, is still there today and much used by walkers and cyclists. The location of the painting and the photo are shown on the map. What is remarkable is that, although the photo still gives the appearance of being in the countryside, Twickenham now has lots of houses and is a London suburb. It is no longer in the countryside. Just behind the photographer is Ham House, which is even older than Marble Hill House.

