

# The First Monmouth House in Lawrence Street

*As Oscar-winning film *The Favourite* reawakens interest in the late-Stuart era, Angela Lownie looks at the legacy of another royal courtier*

Anne Scott, Duchess of Buccleuch and Monmouth, survived and flourished in the often perilous late 17th century royal court. She emerged unscathed from the so-called Monmouth Rebellion, the attempt to overthrow King James II by her first husband. He was executed but, unusually for anyone so closely connected to treason, she retained her titles, her fortune and her social standing. Indeed, her influence spanned a turn of century and dynasty: she remained a court favourite not only during the reigns of James's daughters, Queens Mary and Anne, but well into the Hanoverian era.



*The first Monmouth House in 1833, a watercolour by Elizabeth Gulston (Kensington and Chelsea Archives)*

Born in 1651, she was 12 when she married the Duke of Monmouth, the illegitimate son of King Charles II. It was the vast Buccleuch inheritance in Scotland that gave her a title in her own right. The couple were to have six children, only two of whom survived. The Duchess had no sway over her headstrong, reckless

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husband and was powerless to stop him plunging into the perilous seas of repeated conspiracies. Consequently, after the 1685 Rebellion, she managed to retain the favour of James II: she was exonerated of any involvement and her inheritance protected.

Today's Monmouth House at 24 Lawrence Street takes its name from the four houses which formerly closed off the street at the north, now part of Upper Cheyne Row. Built in 1704, they were collectively known as Monmouth House after the Duchess's residency there from 1715 until her death in 1732. The two central houses were larger than the rest and faced down Lawrence Street, with a passage between them to the garden, hidden behind a pair of pedimented doors. The Duchess initially took the centre portion on the east, three years later adding the adjoining one at right angles to make one house.

A patron of the drama and literature of her day, the Duchess employed John Gay – the future writer of the *Beggar's Opera* and creator of Captain Macheath (who, two centuries later, would become Mack the Knife). She could be pompous. She would order a canopy to be erected in her room; sitting beneath it she would receive her friends with much ceremonial, while her attendants stood around in attitudes of respectful deference. Amongst her visitors was Princess Caroline of Ansbach, later the consort of George II, who was entertained in 1716. On that occasion the parish bell-ringers were paid six shillings to herald the Princess's arrival in Lawrence Street.

The Duchess also spent her time in Scotland, where she oversaw the rebuilding of Dalkeith Castle. According to one source, she refused to cede her title and estates to her sons, declaring she would prefer to be 'a man in my own family'.

In 1750, the writer Tobias Smollett moved into the western central part of Monmouth House. With him was the wife he had met and married in the West Indies and their three-year-old daughter, Elizabeth. There, he wrote his novels as well as *A Complete History of England*. Smollett's circle included Oliver Goldsmith and Dr Samuel Johnson. Despite his own chronic money troubles, Smollett was unfailingly generous to 'unfortunate brothers of the quill', whom he would dine at Lawrence Street on Sundays with roast beef and Yorkshire pudding, port, punch and beer. The Smolletts' stay in Chelsea ended when their daughter died of tuberculosis in 1762.

While Smollett was living in the central portion, the westernmost part of Monmouth House was rented in 1751 to Nicholas Sprimont, the manager of the

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*The Duchess of Monmouth*



*Nicholas Sprimont with his wife and sister-in-law  
c.1760*

Chelsea Porcelain Manufactory which had been established along the north-western side of Lawrence Street from about 1745. The china was made from a secret composition, and the production involved complicated moulding, firing and glazing, which made Chelsea porcelain among the most famous and highly prized. The Duchess's former house was later let to Sprimont, which he used as a showroom for the porcelain.

Various parts of Monmouth House became schools in the early nineteenth century. In 1820, the property fell into Chancery because there were a series of disputes regarding the rightful owner. The four houses remained unoccupied and by 1832 were in a ruinous condition. Taking advantage of the litigation, one of the claimants ousted the caretaker installed by the Court of Chancery and – according to contemporary press articles – forcibly ‘deprived two of the houses of their fair proportions, and carried off the materials by cart-loads, until only the bare walls were left’.

Eventually the derelict houses were ordered to be removed. The two on the eastern side were demolished first, in 1835, followed by the others a year or two later.

The present Monmouth House was so named in the 1920s. In fact, it is an older house than its namesake, having been built in about 1690. It too has had a chequered past: its first wealthy residents contrasting sharply with the occupiers in the late 19th century, when it was combined with the house next door as a

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sixpence-a-night dosshouse. Such establishments were notorious for their overcrowding and 99 lodgers were recorded there in 1891, including the aptly-named Samuel Rook, whose occupation was listed as 'thief'. The imperious old Duchess of Monmouth would not have put up with neighbours such as these...

This quiet Chelsea street has certainly had a rich and varied history – and that is looking at just two of its houses.

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