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# THE CASTLE OF BONCOEUR AND THE WIZARD OF DURHAM

## Timothy Mowl

**H**igh on a revetment to the north of Bristol rises the shattered profile of Stoke Park, neglected now but nationally famous in the 18th century. The landscape it once commanded is scarred by the M32 motorway which scythes across its former carriage drive. The Duchess Pond which once flattered the contours of a park full of bizarre garden buildings is gone. Stripped of its crow-stepped battlements and arcaded chimneystacks, refaced with grim grey render instead of light cream stucco, its windows are boarded up, the roofs are leaking and the interior plasterwork is being attacked by rot.<sup>1</sup>

The man who created this ambitious castle-house, in a style of “Good King James’s Gothic”, was Norborne Berkeley, 4th Baron Botetourt of the deviously-revived title.<sup>2</sup> He was a bachelor, good natured but also ambitious and impulsive. The architect, advisor and friend, Thomas Wright of Durham, whom he employed to design his house and garden layout, was just such another bachelor eccentric, a man standing outside the mainstream of the mid-18th-century medieval revival. As a result, the house which they raised overlooking the Frome valley was far from being a typical contemporary country house. In part it reflects its owner’s character, his financial exigencies and the pressure of his political career. But it was also shaped and conditioned by the site and by the older house which it

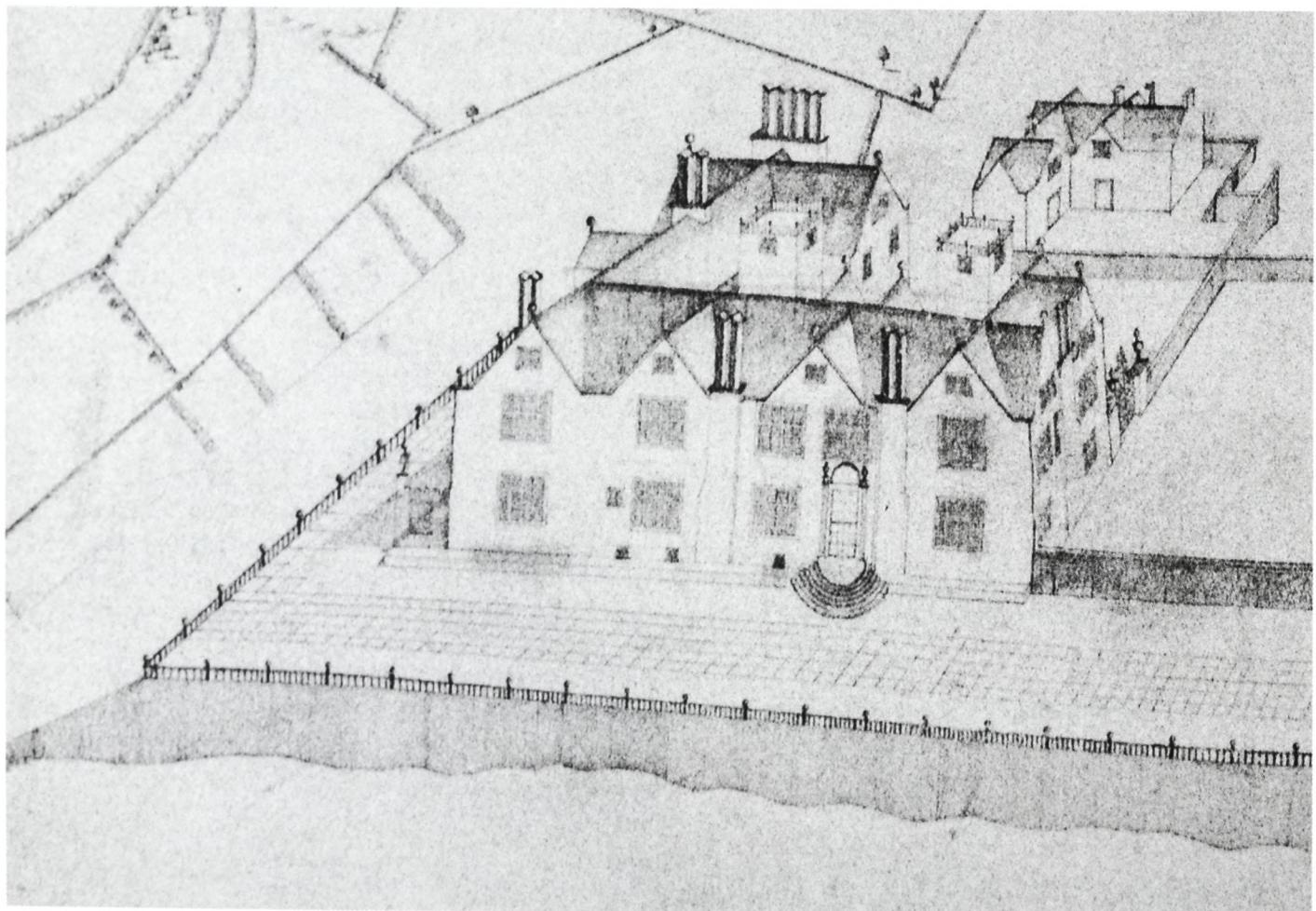


Fig. 1. Detail of a mid-18th-century view of Stoke Park from the east, before alterations (Duke of Beaufort).

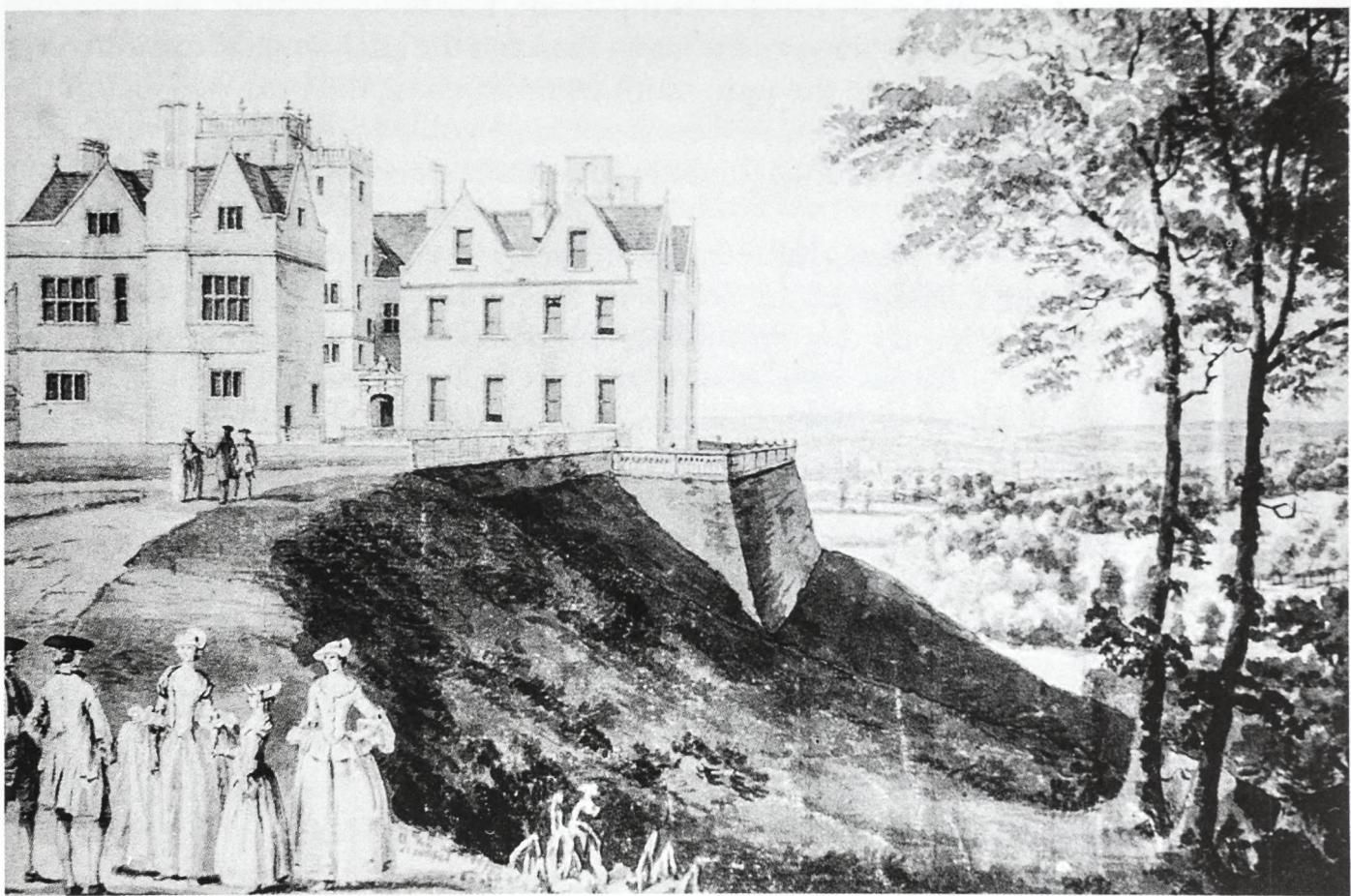


Fig. 2. A mid-18th-century view of Stoke park from the north (Bristol Museum and Art Gallery).

not so much replaced as digested over the two building periods of 1749-53 and 1760-64.

Botetourt's direct ancestor, Sir Richard Berkeley, had completed by 1563 an L-shaped manor house on a disproportionately large and expensive terraced substructure. Some of the foundations, party walls and, more surprisingly, the gabled roofs of this house still survive within the present building. Several early-18th-century illustrations of the Elizabethan structure suggest that the dominant characteristic of the house was its total inadequacy to the fine site (Figs 1 and 2).<sup>3</sup> On the massively engineered podium of truly Roman grandeur, the little Cotswold vernacular house looked lost and faintly absurd. It is easy to see why Thomas Wright would later insist that what survived into the 18th century was merely the fragment of a much greater house that Sir Richard Berkeley had built.<sup>4</sup>

The cost of the Elizabethan substructure may well have consumed some of the funds available for the house itself, but that still cannot excuse the illogicality of its design. Set on the southern edge of the ridge the house comprised south and east ranges, but two tall viewing towers were sited on the inner, west-facing, elevation away from the views and overlooking a courtyard to the rear. The main entrance faced north-east into this "Green Court" which was enclosed by a low wall with a set of imposing ironwork gates between the piers. There was also an outer walled courtyard to the north with another set of gates, piers and railings.<sup>5</sup> To the south and the east a wide terrace bounded by arcaded stone balustrading commanded views of the deer park. The east terrace had at its northern end a small gabled summer house or banqueting pavilion with a loggia. The stables and the service buildings were set below the terrace to the west and connected to the Green Court by steps. Finally, the grand approach to the north of the house was lined by a double avenue of mature trees.

There are two entrances to the house, neither of them placed between the viewing towers. The first was a private doorway into the gabled four-bay eastern wing. This would

have given access to the stairs in the north viewing tower. The main entrance was from the courtyard into a screens passage between the Great Hall and the kitchens in the south wing. A corridor had been added along the ugly south front blocking the best views from the ground floor rooms. The east wing had no corridor but an enfilade of, from the south, the Great Hall and four connecting rooms: the Blue Room, the Green Room, the Red Room and the Velvet Room.

Norborne Berkeley's father, John Symes Berkeley, was an MP for the county and interested in architecture. Although he seems to have done nothing to the house, he commissioned several schemes for rebuilding the Elizabethan banqueting pavilion, including designs from Nicholas Hawksmoor and James Thornhill.<sup>6</sup> Hawksmoor's is a domed structure of five bays with Doric columns and heavy rustication inscribed "For Mr. Berkeley's Terras". Another, inscribed "Banqueting room" for "Mr Barclay" and signed by Thornhill, is a more reserved design with Ionic pilasters, a parapet with urns and an austere dome. Thornhill's design was chosen, but the dome was omitted and a central pediment added to the pilastered facade. The building is now a forlorn wreck: refenestrated, robbed of its pediment and urns and used until recently as a chapel. John Symes also built a new stable block to the north of the banqueting room; this gave onto a formal garden with an oval parterre. Both buildings can be dated to pre-1725 as they are shown on Vascon's survey.

It was John Symes Berkeley who created the economic conditions that made Norborne's extravagances possible. The Berkeleys owned considerable landed estates to the north of Bristol, but Norborne's inherited fortune and annual income came from coal. North Bristol was enjoying an industrial expansion in the early 18th century and John Symes's wise investments in local collieries freed his son from the family's previous dependence on farm rents.

Norborne succeeded his father in 1736 and came of age in 1738. Something of his bachelor status and political ambition is indicated by the marriage of his sister Elizabeth in 1745 to Lord Charles Noel Somerset, soon to become 4th Duke of Beaufort. Unlike the Berkeleys of Berkeley Castle, from whom they were descended, the Stoke Berkeleys were Tories, as were the Beauforts. Their political moment would not arrive until the accession of George III in 1760, with Lord Bute as his minister and Norborne's patron. But from 1741 to 1763, Norborne was one of Gloucestershire's two MPs, active about the rival court of the dowager Princess of Wales and well known to Horace Walpole of Strawberry Hill. Walpole often mentioned Norborne in his letters, always spitefully until the man was dead, at which point he began to assess him quite generously. At no point did Walpole refer to the fact that Norborne was building a castellated house at Stoke in the same years that Walpole was creating his own villa in a more authentic "Abbey Gothick". The lack of generosity is typical.

Norborne Berkeley emerges from Walpole's comments as a generous, impulsive character much liked but not much respected. His most notorious escapade, a Quixotic gesture, occurred in 1758 during the French Wars when, without warning or preparation, he joined a naval raid on St Malo setting out "to conquer France in a dirty shirt and a frock".<sup>7</sup> Lord Lyttelton related the episode disapprovingly to another Goth, Sanderson Miller: "Berkeley's Knight Errantry in going with the young Fellows upon this Expedition is much blamed by the World, and by all his best Friends. Twenty Years ago it might have done him some honour."<sup>8</sup>

Norborne was indeed over 40 at that time, but his pleasure in stimulating male company and adventure are relevant to his warm relations with Thomas Wright, the architect of his new house. Even Walpole had to admit Berkeley's good nature. Nicknamed

Boncoeur, he cheerfully paid out £8,000 as a dowry for a niece and he was celebrated for not allowing, when his horse sank to its middle in an ill-drained tract of Woburn, "that it was anything more than a little damp".<sup>9</sup>

Thomas Wright (1711-86), was a self-taught mathematician, astronomer and architect. He began his architectural career designing gardens and was working in Gloucestershire from 1746 onwards at Badminton for Norborne's brother-in-law, the 4th Duke. The two must have met at Badminton where Norborne was captivated by Wright's lively personality. With characteristic exuberance he plunged into improving his house and his park at nearby Stoke to Wright's direction.

In 1749 the estate Steward, Silas Blandford, had begun to collect materials and in October a foundation stone was laid. All that was achieved in this first building phase of 1749-53 was the improvement of the deplorable south front by the addition of two three-storey, two-bay gabled wings one at each end of the façade, linked by a Jacobean-style loggia of five arches (Fig. 3). Each wing had on its ground floor a canted bay to give views of the park which by that time Wright was completely reshaping. The western of these two wings enlarged the service area of the house and the bedchambers, the eastern wing added on the ground floor a new octagon room for Norborne's entertainments. The Great Hall and screens passage behind this were extensively modernised with pilasters and several of the other rooms of the original house were updated. A further new addition was made at the north-west corner of the south range. Like those on the south façade, this was conservatively 17th-century vernacular in style but lit by Georgian sash windows. This first phase with its conscious evocation of 17th-century Cotswold design suggests that Norborne was still clinging sentimentally to the ancestral home, but a drawing of this period by Wright proves that he was already pressing for a much more dramatic profile of towers above the gables.

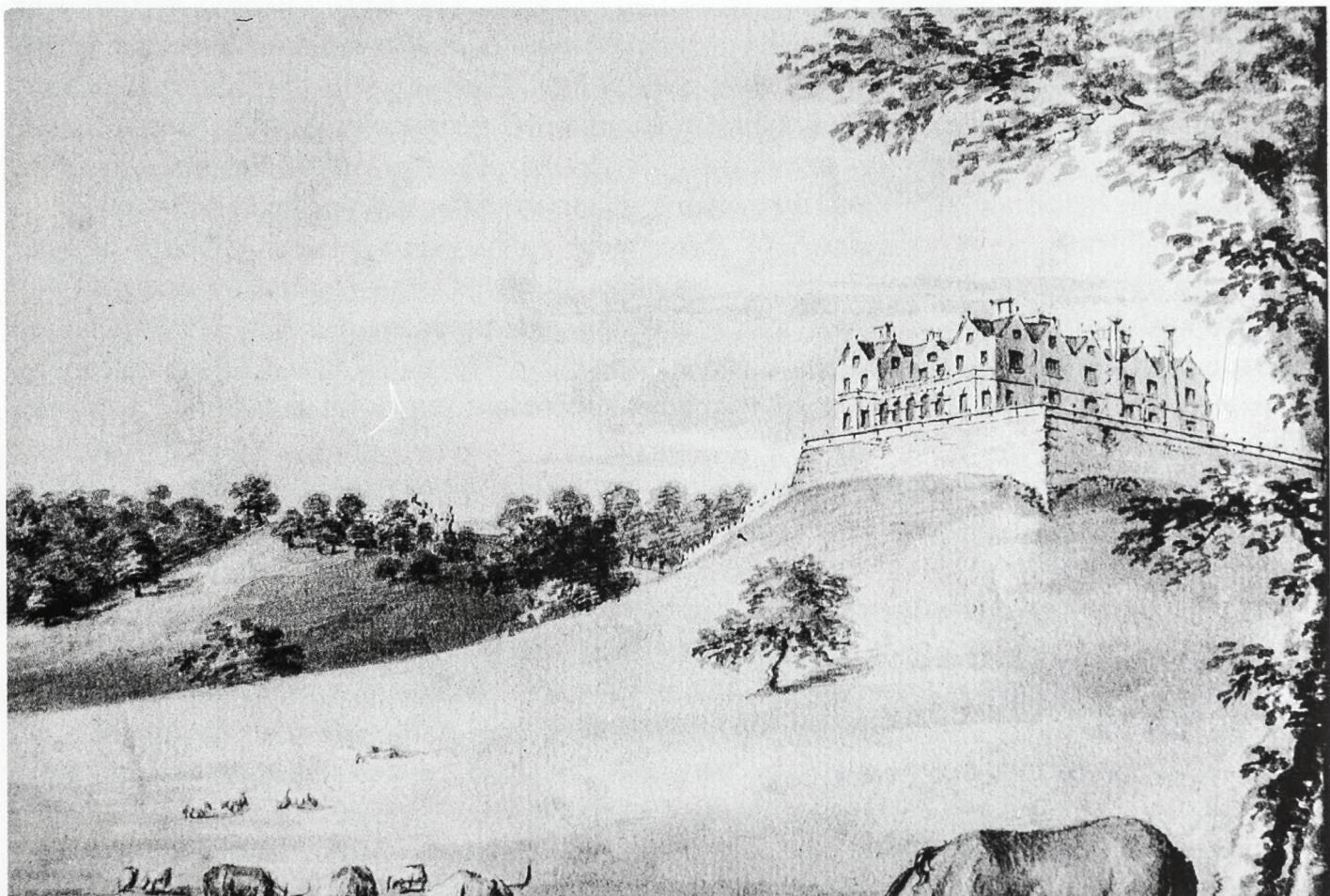


Fig. 3. View of Stoke Park from the south after the initial alterations of 1749-53 (Victoria and Albert Museum).

There is a letter of July 9, 1750 from Geoffrey Barclay, Norborne's godson, which records the happy friendship between the patron and his architect. It also describes the busy building scene of that year at Stoke, with sculptors, plasterers, painters and glaziers mentioned.<sup>10</sup> In fact, 1750 was the year of the masons Mr Sumsion and John Greenaway, when the walls of the new wings on the south front were rising.

Work switched in the new year to the east range, where from March onwards the old mullions were being replaced with sash windows, six to the original four. Emmett the mason and Pitt the carpenter were also very active on outhouses like the brewhouse, tubhouse and slaughter house, and on May 17 Pitt was preparing the Great Hall for the plasterers who were to transform an Elizabethan interior into a modish Classical hall with an entrance arch. This was completed between June and August. The Great Hall was then hung with maps, which suggest the limits to Norborne's "bachelor-pad" notions of decoration. By August 10 Pitt's carpentry and joinery in the Great Hall was itemised and paid for. In the same month work on the south front's octagonal room was proceeding and Pitt was making boxes for the conveyance of Thomas Paty's marble chimneypieces up from Bristol — the dove coloured for the Great Hall and veined for bedchambers and the Octagon Room in the south-east tower — though these had yet to be fitted up.

The next year, 1752, the work was virtually completed. Paty's chimneypieces were installed and by late in the year Thomas Morley had plastered the Octagon Room, the only real addition to the "fine rooms" of the house, and Margaret Mitlings had painted it. In August Paty was paid £91 for carving though he was still being paid for such work as late as March 1755. Thomas Wright had his own "closet" fitted up for his use: an indication of his closeness to his patron. 1753 was the year for putting up pictures, laying sailcloth in the screens passage and fenders in Mr Wright's closet.

There followed an interlude of seven years until 1760. Then, with a Tory on the throne and Norborne's peerage ahead, work began again. This time Thomas Wright was busy elsewhere, so James Paty of that hyperactive Bristol family was put in charge of the building works but not asked to provide his own design. Drawings for the first phase show that Wright had already projected a castle-composite remodelling with three-storey, canted towers at each corner to produce an H-plan house. This baronial scheme was still in favour and the new house, while vastly more imposing than the old, was to have fewer "fine rooms" of entertainment. Only two of these were to be given plaster ceilings of any richness by the plasterer Thomas Stocking. One suspects that generosity and foolish optimism had already taken their toll and that the second building phase of 1760-64 was a desperate gesture made while funds were running low. Hence such economies as the retention of much of the Elizabethan roofs which were hidden behind the crow-stepped battlements.

It was, nevertheless, a major operation. James Paty's estimate and contract of May 17, 1760 proposed the virtual destruction of everything behind the two new south-facing wings of the first building phase. Even the wall between these and above the loggia had to be refenestrated, as had the old east front. The north and west of the house were completely rebuilt producing a double-pile plan on the old fabric with almost identical south and north fronts dramatised by the towers at each corner. Wright agreed to abandon the original idea of another round-arched loggia on the north front, allowing James Paty to build a Gothic arcade instead. Paty had recently designed a similar but more elaborate Gothic feature for the Bath House at Arno's Court on the other side of Bristol.

Work went briskly ahead under James Paty's experienced hand. Norborne was away about the court in London. James West was the new mason. In 1760 Paty was pulling down old buildings and digging foundations. In 1761 West had the new walls up and the new hall

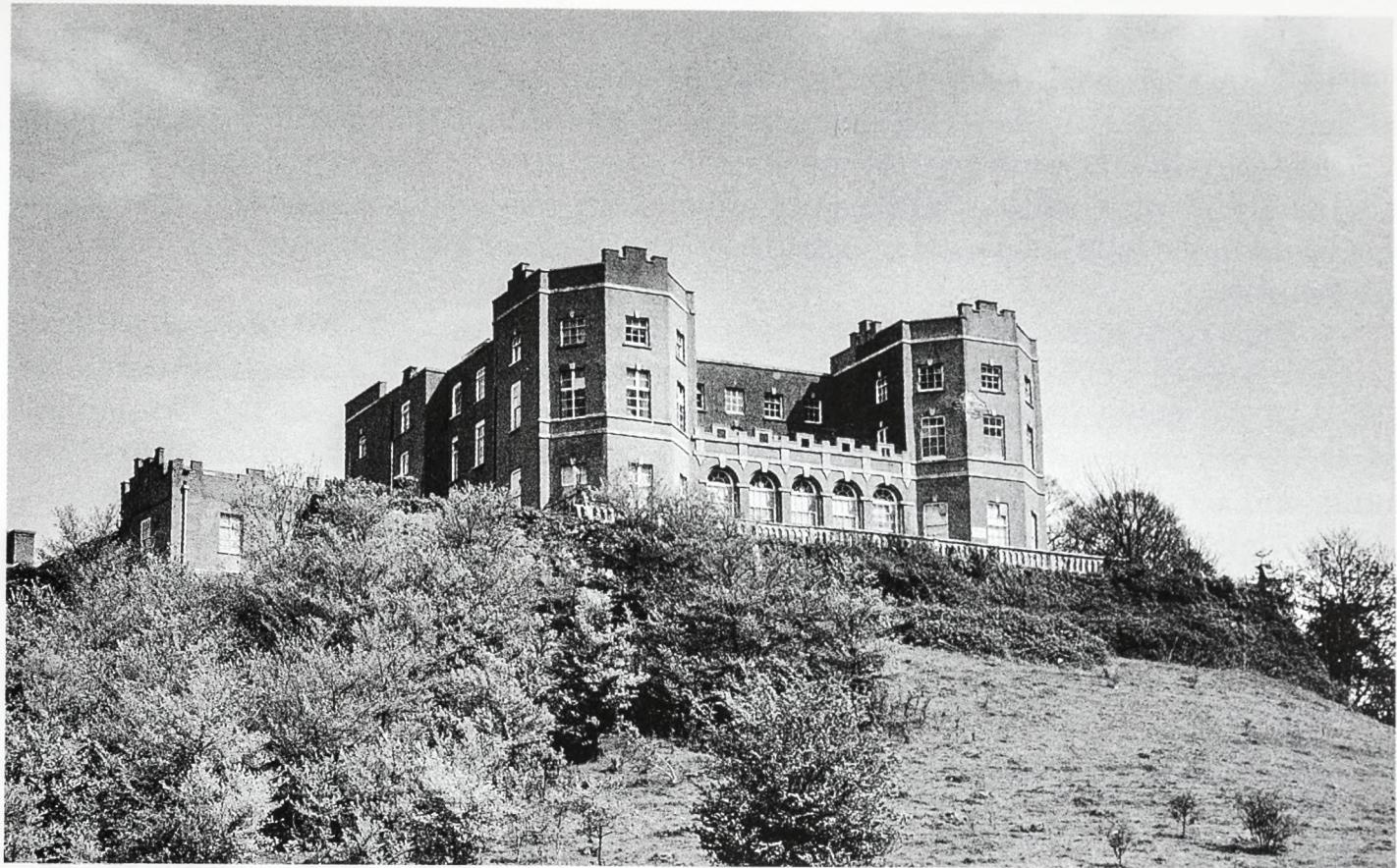


Fig. 4. View of Stoke Park from the west today (Gordon Kelsey).

ready for its staircase. At last the central section of the south front that now lit this new hall was fenestrated, battlements were erected all around the house and the Gothic arcade went up (Fig. 4). 1762 was the year for fitting up. On the east wing two large rooms had taken the place of the original five and the end room with its canted bay received Thomas Stocking's ornamental ceiling with mouldings. The central room of the three on this side was probably given its ceiling at the same time but to a more subdued and conventionally Rococo design. Across the north front was the vestibule, the library and then what appears always to have been the extensive servants' quarters. The Dutch oak stair went into its new hall in 1762. Chimneypieces, by James or Thomas Paty, went first into the drawing room, then in 1763 into the dining room.

It is significant that the second building phase of 1760-64 coincided exactly with the brief flowering of Norborne's ambitions. In 1760 he became a Groom of the Bedchamber to the King and on April 13, 1764, after a prolonged process, he was able to reclaim the Barony of Botetourt, defunct since 1407, by laying claim to a third of the barony. This romantic determination to revive a title of such antiquity, together with his impulsive enthusiasm and reckless expenditure, do much to explain the genesis of Stoke Park, particularly its completion in the second phase, which can be seen as a preparation for his new dignity.

In the summer of 1768 came the collapse of the Warmley Company and with it Norborne's investments in the brass foundry. Walpole described him as "like patience on a monument, smiling at grief. He is totally ruined".<sup>11</sup> But such a nature sometimes rallies friends. An earlier Berkeley had served for 25 years as Governor of Virginia. Lord Hilsborough urged that someone of Norborne's genial temperament might soothe the disaffected colonists, so on July 29, 1768 he kissed hands and set off to revive his fortunes. Bute insisted that he was to have "the plate, equipage, money and appointments of an ambassador".<sup>12</sup> Walpole put in sourly "If his graces do not captivate them he will enrage them to fury; for I take all his douceur to be enamelled on iron."<sup>13</sup>

In the event, the Virginians were delighted by the new Lord's bonhomie as he joined cheerfully in their barbecues. After his untimely death from fever in 1770 even Walpole admitted "his soothing flattering manners had so wrought on the province that his death was bewailed with the most general and affectionate concern".<sup>14</sup> He is still remembered in Virginia where the Governor's Palace at Williamsburg has been painstakingly rebuilt and furnished to recreate his period of occupation as Governor and where there is a statue to his memory.

Back in Bristol, Stoke Park was inherited by the Beauforts and became a dower house to Badminton. Ironically, for the next 100 years, it provided an unsuitable refuge for widowed old ladies. Finally it became a colony for the mentally unstable. Despite the considerable efforts of the Stoke Park Restoration Trust to secure the restoration of the house and access for the public to its major reception rooms, Frenchay Health Authority sold Stoke Park late in 1991 to a Bath-based developer who plans to convert it into a nursing home.

## NOTES

This account of Stoke Park House has been written from archival research into the Stoke estate papers included in the Badminton Muniments at the Gloucester Records Office (GRO D2700) carried out principally by Stewart Harding, David Lambert and assisted by Frank and Cicely Kelf and Mervyn Stanton. Thanks are also due to the Badminton archivist, Margaret Richards and to James Russell for his archaeological work on the estate and his discovery of the James Stewart drawing of Stoke in the Bodleian. A further illustration of the house was found by Charles Hind in the Victoria and Albert Museum. Francis Greenace, Fine Art Curator at the Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery, made his collection's drawing of the house available for study. Nicholas Kingsley has given me the benefit of his considerable knowledge on Gloucestershire country houses. Added to these researches are my own deductions from the topographical views of the house and an analysis of the existing dilapidated fabric.

1. For the recent historical and planning background to Stoke Park see Eileen Harris, "Architect of Rococo Landscapes: Thomas Wright — III" in *Country Life*, September 9, 1971; David Lambert, "Unhealthy Prospect: Stoke Park, Avon" in *Country Life*, May 7, 1987; Stewart Harding and David Lambert, "Saving the Wizard's Landscape" in *Country Life*, April 14, 1988; and by the same two authors, "Thomas Wright at Stoke Park" in *Garden History* 17, no. 1, Spring, 1989, 68-82.
2. For Berkeley's career see Bryan Little, "Norborne Berkeley: Gloucestershire Magnate" in *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 63, no 4, October, 1955, 378-409.
3. There are several visual records: the engraving made by Kip and Knyff between 1700 and 1710 for Sir Robert Atkyns's *Ancient and Present State of Gloucestershire* (published 1712); a pre-1725 estate map and further estate survey drawn by John Vascon in 1725 (both in Gloucester Record Office); a drawing of the north front by James Stewart dated July 25, 1746 (Bodleian Library, MS. Gough. Somerset. 8. fol. 44R); two watercolours of the courtyard and park elevations which can be dated to between 1753 and 1760 (in Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery and the Victoria and Albert Museum respectively); a 1750s painting of Stoke Park in its landscape by John Wotton at Badminton House and further sketches by Wright in the Lennox-Boyd Collection at the V&A.
4. With no evidence beyond his own powerful imagination, Wright devised a ground-floor plan and elevations (the latter since lost) of a house twice the size around a complete courtyard and flanked by two grand terraces. This conjectural ground plan and Wright's other drawings for the house are in the Badminton Muniments. There are further drawings for Stoke in his sketchbook now deposited in the Avery Architectural Library at Columbia University, New York.
5. These gates are now in the church courtyard at Badminton.
6. For these drawings see Howard Colvin, *Catalogue of Architectural Drawings in the Library of Worcester College*, Oxford, 1964.
7. *Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, ed. W. S. Lewis, XXXV, 102.
8. *An Eighteenth-Century Correspondence*, ed Lilian Dickins & Mary Stanton, 1910, 391.
9. *Walpole's Correspondence*, XXXV, 199.
10. The team of builders included William Emmett, stone mason and pavier, Henry Pitt, his son John and Mr Walker, carpenters, Thomas Morley and John Griffin, plasterers, William Cary, glazier,

Thomas Paty, carver in wood and marble, Daniel Arnett for some finer joinery and Margaret Mittings, ceiling painter.

11. *Walpole's Correspondence*, XXXIX, 104.
12. *Ibid.*, XXIII, 44, n.22.
13. *Ibid.*, XXXIX, 104.
14. *Ibid.*, n.5.