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# THORPE HALL IN CONTEXT

Giles Worsley

Thorpe Hall, on the outskirts of Peterborough, is a remarkable survival, but a much misunderstood one. Nowhere else can one get such a powerful impression of what a mid-17th-century country house was like, rising four-square among its tight pattern of walls and gates. But for much of the second half of this century Thorpe Hall has been a maternity hospital, with its interior detail carefully hidden behind protective boarding. Only now after its restoration and sensitive conversion into a Sue Ryder Home is it generally available for inspection; inspection which suggests that traditional assessments of its architectural significance need re-examination.

"Got this evening to Peterborow, passing by a stately palace of St John's (one deep in ye bloud of our good King) built out of the ruines of the Bishop's palace and cloyster."<sup>1</sup> The diarist John Evelyn's dislike of the Parliamentarian builder of Thorpe Hall, Oliver St John, Chief Justice of the Common Pleas and Commissioner of the Treasury, is clear in his entry for August 30, 1654, but so is his reluctant admiration. Not that Evelyn could have seen more than the carcass of the house as the contract for the windows had only been signed in February,<sup>2</sup> although the structure of the roof must have been in place by July the following year when Sir Justinian Isham sent Thomas Sargenson, the contractor for his works at Lamport Hall, Northamptonshire, to study the ingenious way water was conducted from the roof.<sup>3</sup> A rainwater head of 1656 from the link block probably dates the completion of the building. The architect, as revealed in the contract, was the London surveyor Peter Mills who had earlier built houses on land leased to him in 1642 in Holborn by St John. Although often seen as a decade of only limited architectural interest<sup>4</sup> – an interregnum in architecture as in politics, in which little was built and that in an essentially backward-looking architectural style – the 1650s were years of considerable architectural activity, particularly, but not exclusively, on the part of victorious Parliamentarians.

New building had inevitably ceased with the outbreak of the Civil War, and although fighting largely ended in 1645 little work apart from repairs was done before stability returned after 1649. In Dorset Captain Ryder repaired Cranborne Lodge for the Earl of Salisbury and added a new west wing from 1647. In Wiltshire de Caus's front at Wilton, which had been badly damaged by fire in 1647, was restored from 1648 by John Webb with the advice of Inigo Jones. But from 1649 work seems to have picked up – the new house at Nor-grove Court, Worcestershire, is dated 1649 on a bracket – and the 1650s saw a wave of new country houses. These were accompanied by the restoration of damaged houses such as Belvoir Castle, Leicestershire, rebuilt by John Webb from 1655, and the series of Clifford castles rebuilt by Lady Anne Clifford in Yorkshire and Cumbria. Perhaps surprisingly, the decade also saw the erection or rebuilding of a significant number of new churches. In London St Matthias, Poplar (1654); in Berwick Holy Trinity (1652); in Marlborough St Mary's was given a new south arcade of Tuscan columns in 1653 after it was damaged by fire. Sir Robert Shirley rebuilt Staunton Harold Church, Leicestershire (1653), as a symbolic act of defiance of the regime, but the greatest church builder of them all was Lady Anne Clifford who rebuilt no fewer than seven churches and chapels in Yorkshire and Cumbria.

Inevitably, building was dominated by those on the winning side – particularly in the

first years of the decade when Commonwealth confidence was at its peak following the final subjugation of Ireland and Scotland – and by those who accommodated themselves to the new regime. In Dorset Sir Anthony Ashley-Cooper, who had led the Parliamentary forces in the county, rebuilt St Giles's House from 1651; Edmund Prideaux bought Forde Abbey in 1649, the year he was made Attorney-General, and substantially remodelled it; Sir Walter Erle, whose house at Charborough had been burnt, took his revenge by building a new one partly from material removed from Corfe Castle, owned by the royalist Bankes family and scene of a bitter siege during the war. In Cambridgeshire Chief Justice Oliver St John built Thorpe Hall (1653), and the Secretary of State John Thurloe built Wisbech Castle (1655). In Yorkshire Lord Fairfax, former commander of the parliamentarian armies, rebuilt or completed the rebuilding of Nun Appleton House; Colonel White extended Bishopthorpe Palace, formerly the property of the Archbishop of York, while Sir John Lewis, the East India Company's factor for nine years, profited from the fall of the Earl of Strafford by buying his partially rebuilt Ledston Hall in 1653 and completing the rebuilding. Others who built included Chaloner Chute, subsequently Speaker of the House of Commons, at the Vyne, Hampshire (1654); Sir Henry Blount – who though a royalist during the Civil War sided with the Commonwealth and sat on several of its commissions – at Tyttenhanger, Hertfordshire;<sup>5</sup> Sir John Maynard, sergeant-at-law in 1654 and Protector's sergeant in 1658, at Gunnersbury Park, Middlesex (c.1658); Sir George Pratt at Coleshill House, Berkshire;<sup>6</sup> and Edmund Waller, a commissioner of trade from 1655, at Hall Barn, Buckinghamshire.

There was even the odd royalist like Sir Justinian Isham at Lamport Hall, Northamptonshire (1654); the fourth Earl of Southampton at Southampton (later Bedford) House, Bloomsbury; or the Marquess of Hertford at Amesbury Abbey, Wiltshire, who could afford to build. Other houses built or substantially altered at this date include Moulton Manor and Hall, Yorkshire; Highnam Court, Gloucestershire (c.1658); Welford Hall, Berkshire; Syndale House, Kent; and Yotes Court, Kent.

Surveying these houses it is the sense of continuity despite the hiatus of war and the change of regime that is most striking. As Timothy Mowl and Brian Earnshaw have reminded us, Jones's practice revived with the end of the war despite his great age (he died in 1652 aged 78).<sup>7</sup> He was not alone. His pupil Webb had a successful practice throughout the decade, working for parliamentarian and royalist alike, while men like Peter Mills, Edward Carter and John Jackson who had been practising before the war continued to do so under the Commonwealth. This continuity can also be seen in the type of houses built, the finest of them being Thorpe Hall.

Like most of the other houses built in the 1650s, Thorpe Hall is commonly described as Artisan Mannerist and cited, by A. A. Tait among others, as a conscious 1650s City-based rejection of the courtly work of Inigo Jones.<sup>8</sup> This might seem fair if compared with Jones's strongly Palladian/Scamozzian manner of the 1610s and early 1620s epitomised by the Banqueting House and unexecuted design for the Star Chamber, but these buildings only form one, early, aspect of Jones' work. If the second half of his career is examined, after the long war with France and Spain of 1624 to 1630 which brought a temporary halt to building by Jones, a very different picture emerges.<sup>9</sup>

Setting aside religious works, the most important feature of Jones' career in the 1630s was the development of an astylar domestic architecture. This can be seen most clearly in the design of a house for Sir Peter Killigrew at Blackfriars of about 1630; the houses which flanked St Paul's, Covent Garden (c.1631); the designs for a house and for warehouses for Lord Maltravers at Lothbury in 1638; and a range in the courtyard of Arundel House in the Strand, the home of Maltravers's father the Earl of Arundel, which may also be by Jones.<sup>10</sup>

These buildings have plain facades with a regular grid of windows and doors, generally

of two or two and a half storeys, sometimes above a slightly raised basement, a hipped roof and dormers. Their only decoration comes from the use of quoins, aprons under the windows, plat bands, occasional balconies, architraves, pediments over some doors and windows and a prominent wooden cornice.

Jones was not alone in designing such houses, although there can be no doubt that he initiated the style in England. Forty Hall, Enfield (*c.*1629); Leicester House, London (1631); Chevening House, Kent (*c.*1630); St Clere, Kent (*c.*1633); West Woodhay House, Berkshire (1635) and Aldermaston Court, Berkshire (1636) all demonstrate the same features. These double-pile houses were the advanced style of the 1630s, and this was the style which was revived in the 1650s, sometimes astylar – as at Thorpe Hall, St Giles's House, Wisbech Castle, Yotes Court, Southampton House, and Highnam Court; sometimes pilastered – as Hall Barn, Welford Hall and Syndale House.

Thorpe Hall compares closely with Chevening, but there is another, more surprising, direct parallel, with Jones's design for the Lothbury warehouses (Figs 1 and 2). If one places seven bays of this drawing alongside Thorpe's main elevations the parallel is unmistakable. There are minor differences, but these are no greater than those to be found between Jones's own designs. The east front with its bay windows – which have been shown to be original by D. F. Mackreth's archaeological examination<sup>11</sup> – is less obviously Jonesian, but a parallel for the central staircase bay can be found in a drawing by Jones at Worcester College believed to be for the staircase tower of Sir Peter Killigrew's house.<sup>12</sup>

Can Jones's hand be traced behind that of Mills? We know that Jones directly assisted the designs of lesser architects – such as Nicholas Stone at the Goldsmiths' Hall and first Isaac de Caus and then John Webb at Wilton – even if the results may not have been as pure as we would expect from his hand. The evidence suggests a similar arrangement with Roger Pratt at Coleshill in 1651. We also know from his work at Wilton and probably at Coleshill that Jones was still designing after the Civil War though in his late 70s.

Could something comparable have happened at Thorpe Hall? Mills would certainly have had dealings with Jones in his official role controlling new building in London before the Civil War. The first reference we have to Mills as an architect dates from 1638 when he and a mason called Llewellyn negotiated with Jones over the design of a new church at St Michael-le-Querne. Mills also “design'd & built the great houses in Great Queen Street”, Lincoln's Inn Fields in about 1640. Although these had giant pilasters which are not found on Jones's domestic designs of the 1630s, they otherwise follow Jones's model and were among the first domestic buildings in London to break away from the traditional multi-gabled facade. From Hollar's birds-eye survey of the City of London after the Great Fire we can see that the three-storey brick houses Mills Built in Castle Street, Holborn, for St John in 1642, “in the same uniformitie and beauty” as the adjoining houses, followed a similar basic plan. Both of these schemes must have been discussed and approved by Jones who, keen to improve the quality of London building, must have seen Mills as a sympathetic supporter.

Jones died in June 1652 and the contract for the windows of Thorpe Hall is dated February 1654, but the project would have taken time to prepare and there is no reason why St John should not have started considering building in 1649 once peace was secure. It would have made perfect sense for St John or Mills to consult the leading architect of the day over what was to be an outstandingly impressive house. Nor would Jones have objected to working for St John on ideological grounds as many of his most important patrons were parliamentarians like the Earl of Bedford, his most important non-royal patron of the 1630s who was prominent in his opposition to the King as was the 4th Earl of Pembroke for whom Jones worked at Wilton, while Sir George Pratt was active in supporting the Commonwealth. Indeed Jones had official lodgings among them at Somerset House.<sup>14</sup>



Fig. 1. Peter Mills, the south front of Thorpe Hall, Cambridgeshire, 1654 (Freeland Rees Roberts).

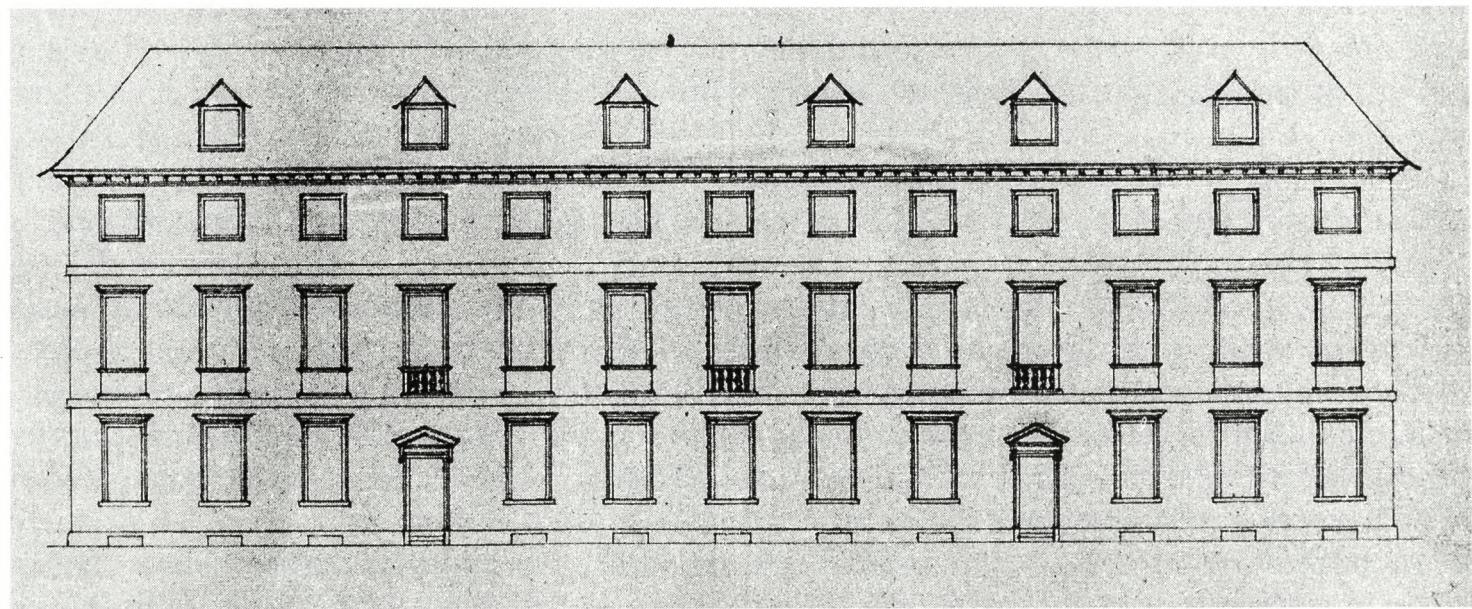


Fig. 2. Inigo Jones, design for a building in Lothbury, City of London, 1638 (Worcester College)

Without documentary confirmation this remains speculation, but Jones's involvement need have been no more than a preliminary discussion of plans and it would certainly explain why Thorpe Hall stands out among Mills's buildings for the rigour of its elevations – neither the houses in Great Queen Street of about 1640, nor the Hitcham Building at Pembroke College, Cambridge, of 1659, nor post-Restoration Cobham Hall, Kent, match it. It might also explain the tension to be found at Thorpe between the restraint of the main elevations and the Dietterlein-inspired detail which is a recurrent feature of the house both inside and out, a feature of which Jones would have been unlikely to have approved. What is certain is that if

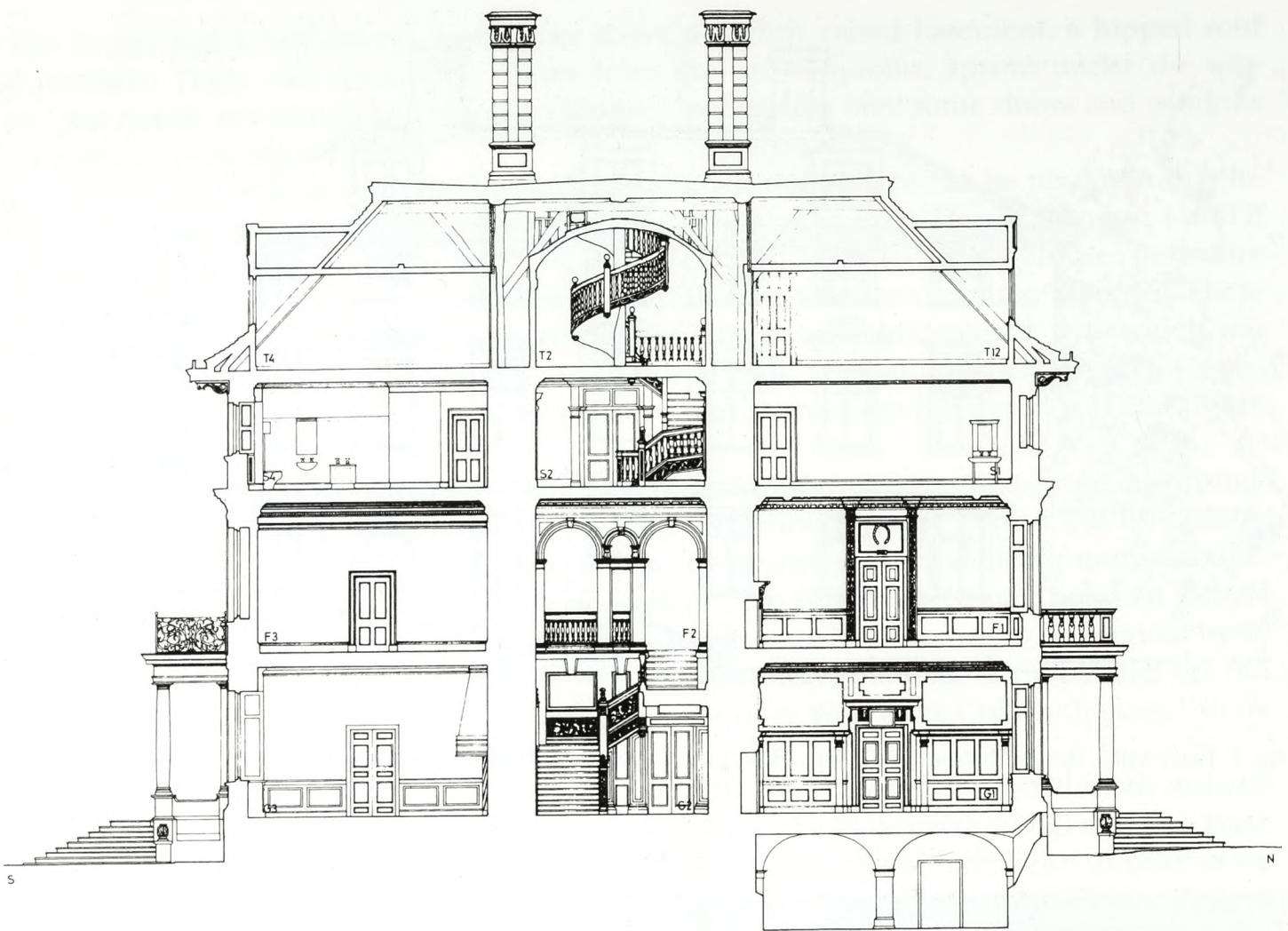


Fig. 3. Cross section through Thorpe Hall (Freeland Rees Roberts).

Mills did not consult Jones then his design shows how thoroughly he had mastered Jones's astylar manner.

The interior of Thorpe Hall is equally skilled. Despite a number of subsequent alterations, the most significant being around 1769 and when William Strong bought the house, by then largely derelict, in 1850, it is possible to suggest how St John planned to use the house, combining a series of different suites of rooms in a tight plan with their hierarchy carefully expressed through external decoration. However, the lack of a contemporary inventory means that we cannot be definite on this point.

After St John's death Thorpe Hall passed to his son and grandson and then to his great-granddaughter who married Sir John Bernard and died in 1793. On her death the estate reverted to the Dean and Chapter of Peterborough who sold it in the early 19th century to the neighbouring Fitzwilliams of Milton. Strong, who acquired the house from them, repaired it with remarkable tact. The screen of columns and pilasters in the hall were removed and reused to form a new entrance hall in the centre of the house. At the same time (according to D. F. Mackreth) the staircase was altered, with arches and a new spur flight into the centre of the house. A more significant loss occurred about 1929 when the panelling in the principal room was removed to Leeds Castle, Kent. Luckily this room had been photographed by *Country Life* and the photographs are reproduced in H. Avray Tipping's *English Homes, Late Stuart* (1929), which remains the best photographic survey of the house.

Thorpe's plan is a triple-pile, a sophisticated variant on the fashionable double-pile, with the central chimneystack wall divided to allow a central space for the staircases (Figs 3

and 4). The house revolves around two axis, one running from the front door to the garden door, the other at right angles to this being the central space occupied by the staircases.

To the left of the first axis, entered originally through a screen of columns, lies the hall (A), lit at the far end by one of the bay windows. Compared with the centrally placed hall at Coleshill (which was to become standard in larger houses after the Restoration) the traditional off-centre hall and screens passage at Thorpe Hall seems old-fashioned, but it had been used by Jones at Sir Peter Killigrew's house.

To the right of the hall lies what was traditionally known as the Servants' Hall (F) which gave access to the kitchens in a detached wing. (There are basements under the north front, but unlike at Coleshill these were not used for cooking.) The quality of the chimneypiece and carved doorcases in this room – coupled with the fact that above it was what was probably the State Bedchamber which is unlikely to have been placed over the notoriously noisy Servants' Hall – makes one wonder whether this was not originally a family room, perhaps a family parlour used for everyday eating.

At the far end of the hall a door gives access to the Principal Staircase (B), and across the Staircase Hall to the ground-floor Great Parlour (C), again lit by a bay window to emphasise its importance. It is this room which has lost its panelling. The fourth corner of the ground floor was given over to a more domestic suite of Ante Room (D) and Little Parlour (E), which presumably formed St John's study, looking out as it does over the backyard and the garden, allowing him to keep an eye on what his servants were up to.

The grandest rooms lie on the first floor which is distinguished externally by architraves and pediments over the windows. The exact arrangement of these rooms is debatable, but they may have been organised as an enfiladed state apartment along the north front, and a pair of family apartments along the south. In this case the Principal Staircase would have led to the Great Chamber over the hall (G), which would have been followed in the state apartment by a Withdrawing Room (H) and State Bedchamber (I). (Sadly, the sense of this last room was lost when Peterborough City Council installed a lift and stairs in it in 1986.) An enfiladed state apartment in a house of this date is most unusual, only becoming common in the 1670s and '80s, and shows the grandeur of St John's aspirations. The obvious comparison is with Wilton.

In the centre of the south front is an ante room (L) approached through a grand double door from the central passage. This may also have served as a banqueting room adjacent to the state apartment. On either side are a bedchamber and closet, although, unusually, the closets lie between the ante room and bedchambers, perhaps because the east bedchamber (J) has one of the bay windows on its end wall. This room, with its importance emphasised by the bay window and direct access to the Principal Staircase, was probably St John's own chamber. A family staircase which ran from the ground to the third floor at the west end of the house would have served this pair of apartments. It was subsequently moved by Strong. Further extensive accommodation lay on the second floor, with pairs of suites and closets, and in the attic.

The decoration of Thorpe Hall matches the quality of the architecture and the planning, but derives from a number of different sources which has led to questions about its dating. There can be no doubt, however, about the sophistication with which these sources are used, with the same elements repeatedly appearing outside and inside the house and in different media, whether stone, plaster, wood or paint. One of the fascinating results of the recent restoration has been the discovery that much more painted decoration survives than had been realised, carefully matching carved decoration. More is probably still covered by later paint.

At first sight the dominant element at Thorpe is the extensive use of motifs taken from

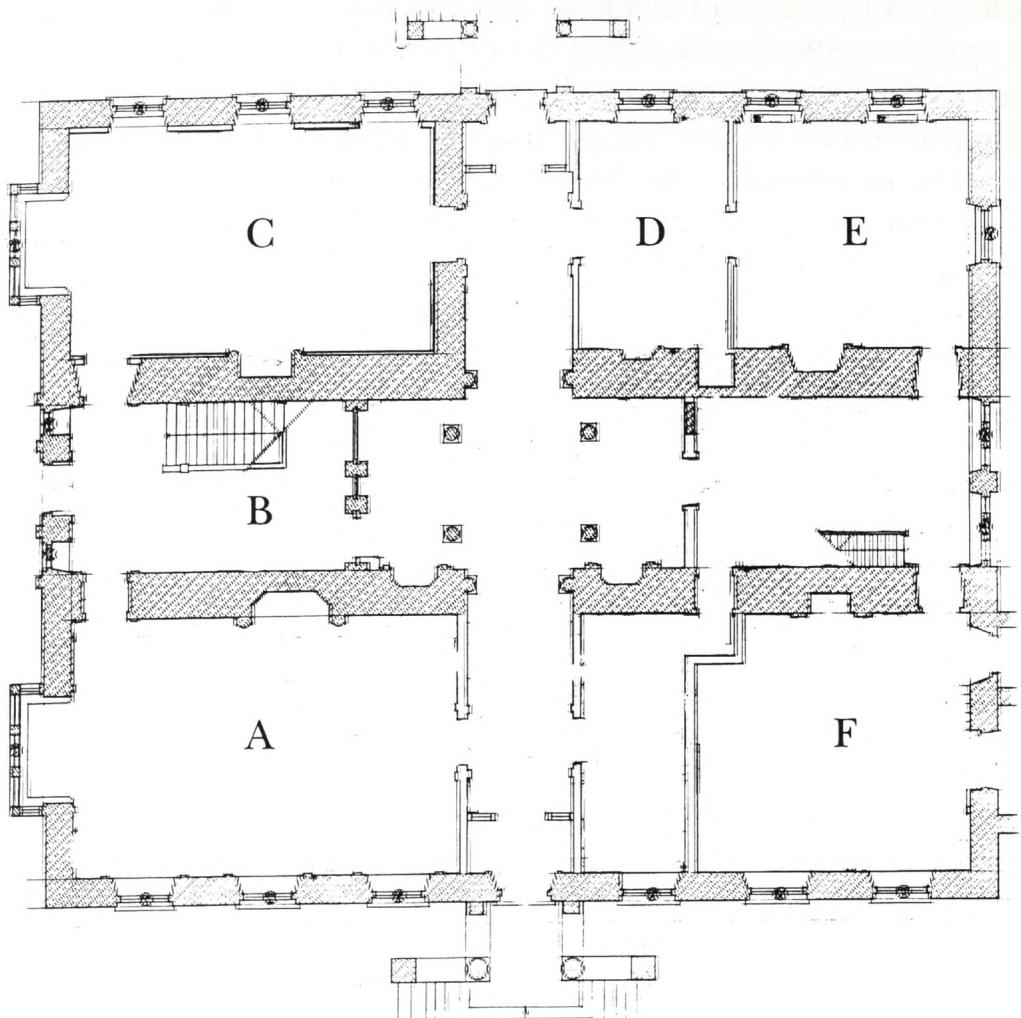


Fig. 4. Ground-floor plan of Thorp Hall (Freeland Rees Roberts).

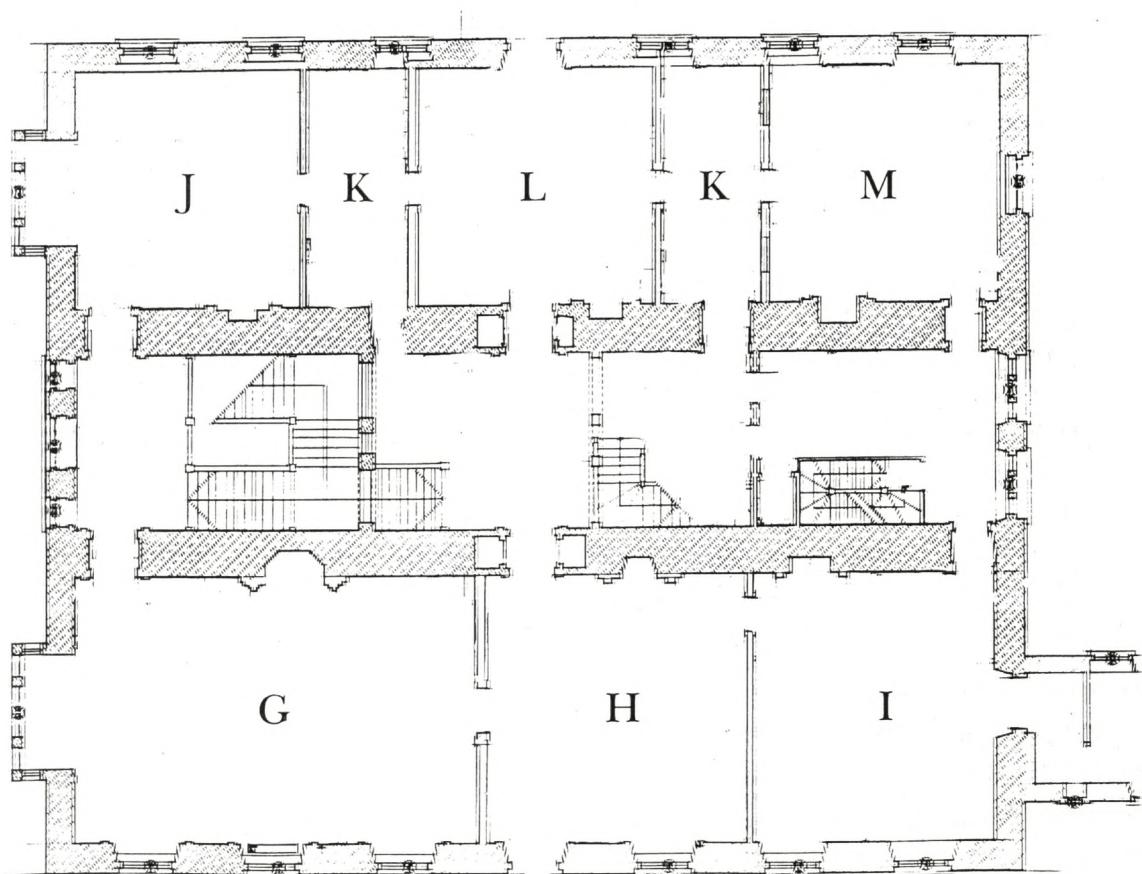


Fig. 5. First-floor plan of Thorp Hall (Freeland Ress Roberts).

Wendel Dietterlein's *Architectura* of 1593–94 and 1598, a distinctive feature of English architecture in the 1630s and '50s. Geoffrey Webb and Howard Colvin have pointed out a series of doors and windows based on a distinctive mannerism which consists in "breaking out the architrave with mitres into lugs and supporting those lugs on a half pilaster complete with capital, and finishing in a scroll at the bottom and sometimes embellished with a band half-way up".<sup>15</sup> This mannerism becomes a constant motif at Thorpe: it can be found on the doorway from the offices to the garden; on the central, first-floor window in the office range; over the central, first-floor windows of the north and south fronts of the house; on the chimney-piece in the "servants' hall"; on the ground-floor ante-room chimney-piece; on the doorcases of the Little Parlour (in restrained form); and above all in the Great Parlour.

This astonishingly sophisticated example of Mannerist panelling is given its basic framework by this motif framing the doorcase into the central passage, the chimney-piece, the door to the staircase and the windows. Each of the "architraves" is pierced at the top by a T-shaped panel, possibly again taken from Dietterlein. The Ionic volutes which end the dado rail and skirting board at the chimney also have a source in Dietterlein. The pilasters of the overmantel with their projecting scrolls have their echo in a similar motif on a much larger scale on the piers to the eastern gates. The other fully panelled contemporary room is the Little Parlour, although this is more restrained in its decoration.

But as well as this Dietterlein-inspired decoration a significant number of parallels can be found with contemporary work carried out by John Webb (with advice from Inigo Jones) at Wilton, the most important decorative scheme of the 1650s. This can be seen in the Great Parlour where the palm fronds which decorate the friezes of the lesser panels can also be found in the Single and Double Cube rooms at Wilton. The most important parallel with Wilton comes in the four surviving plaster ceilings, those in the ground-floor Ante Room, the Little Parlour, first-floor Ante Room and the Withdrawning Room. This is particularly true of the ceiling of the Little Parlour which is very close to, though not an exact copy of, a drawing for the Countess of Caernarvon's bedchamber at Wilton. Were these designed by a craftsman who had worked at Wilton or was Mills responsible, and if so how did he know of the Wilton designs? Perhaps one should not be too surprised as there are similarities of design between the coved decoration at Wilton and that at Cobham Hall, designed by Mills after the Restoration. Whatever the answer, it is further proof that the division between the work of Jones and Webb and that of the "Artisan Mannerists" is an artificial one, and that we should instead be tracing the connections that must have existed between architects, builders and craftsmen in the 1650s.

Finally, and in contrast to the Dietterlein work and the "Wilton" work, there is the decorative woodwork of the Great Chamber and Withdrawning Room (whose doorcases are now on the central corridor on the groundfloor). With its thin decorated pilasters and overdoors this seems to owe much more to engravings by Le Pautre or Marot of contemporary work going on in France, particularly in the Louvre, in the 1650s (Fig 2). At first sight this contrasts so strongly with the Dietterlein work that it would seem to imply a later period of work, but details such as the lion terminals of the consoles in the Great Chamber which appear to have been carved by the same hand that carved the lions over the gates in the north court suggest that they were carried out at the same time.

More work needs to be done on Thorpe Hall, particularly on the sources of the decoration,<sup>16</sup> but with its restoration Thorpe Hall firmly claims its place as the key surviving house of the 1650s and demonstrates that the decade is much more complex than is generally credited.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would particularly like to thank D. F. Mackreth for his detailed comments on this article and the architect Tristan Rees Roberts for providing the illustrations.

## NOTES

1. E. S. de Beer (ed.), *The Diary of John Evelyn*, London.
2. The original is in the British Museum (Add Ms 25303 f153) and is quoted more fully by Howard Colvin in "The Architect of Thorpe Hall", *Country Life* June 6, 1952.
3. Gyles Isham, "Thorpe Hall, Peterborough", *Reports and Papers of the Northamptonshire Antiquarian Society* LXII, 1960, 41.
4. "[Wilton and Coleshill] serve to bridge a period of ten years during which few other houses were built". Sir John Summerson, *Architecture in Britain 1530–1830*, London, 1977, 165.
5. Although he fought with the royalists in the Civil War, Blount subsequently came round to the Commonwealth and served on several of its commissions.
6. Pratt, although accused of royalist sympathies, actively supported the Commonwealth government; during the 1650s he sat on the Committee for Berkshire, was a J.P. and a Sheriff of the County. Indeed the nature of his activities meant he had to be pardoned by Charles II in 1662. (Nigel Silcox-Crowe, "Sir Roger Pratt" in Roderick Brown (ed.), *The Architectural Outsiders*, London, 1985, 6).
7. Timothy Mowl and Brian Earnshaw, "Inigo Jones Restored" *Country Life* January 30, 1992.
8. A. A. Tait, "Post-Modernism in the 1650s", in Charles Hind (ed.), *Inigo Jones and the Spread of Classicism*, London, 1987, 23–35.
9. A more detailed examination of this point can be read in Giles Worsley, "Inigo Jones: Lonely Genius or Practical Exemplar?", *British Architectural Association Journal*, 1993, forthcoming.
10. It should be noted, however, that we do not know whether Killigrew's house was built to this design or whether the Maltravers designs were executed.
11. The only known comparable use of projecting window bays is at Hamstead Marshall, Berkshire, rebuilt after the Restoration by Sir Balthasar Gerbier with whom Mills designed the triumphal arches erected in the City of London to celebrate the coronation of Charles II in 1661. It is not known whether Mills was involved at Hamstead Marshall.
12. John Harris and Gordon Higgott, *Inigo Jones: Complete Architectural Drawings*, London, 1989, 312–13.
13. H. M. Colvin, *Biographical Dictionary of British Architects*, London, 1978, 552.
14. Mowl and Earnshaw, *op. cit.*
15. Howard Colvin, "The Architect of Thorpe Hall", *Country Life* June 8, 1952.
16. See John Cornforth, "Thorpe Hall, Cambridgeshire", *Country Life* October 11, 1991.