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WILLIAM TAYLOR: FURTHER ATTRIBUTIONS

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For some time it has been apparent that William Taylor, an architect working chiefly in the west country and Shropshire, was clearly a cut above the provincial average. It was already known that he had City of London connections and must have been familiar with the work of Wren and Hooke. Now that Bridget Clarke has established his identity, I am delighted to add my own observations on Taylor's known architectural *œuvre*, and, by attribution, to extend it.

The starting point could be Halswell, built for Sir Halswell Tynte *c.* 1688–89 (Fig. 1). Although I had visited Halswell in December 1948 for the auction of the Kemeys-Tynte portraits, I was not able to study Halswell properly until I came that way again in the early 1960s. What I noted as an adolescent historian was the concave niche of the central door, likening it to the west door of St Mary le Bow,¹ and also to the concave window openings of Hugh May's work at the Upper Ward at Windsor



Figure 1. Halswell House, Somerset, entrance.
Howard Colvin.

Castle, 1675. I speculated that the architect must have been a London man. It was not until Howard Colvin's discovery of a letter from Taylor at Longleat referring to his visit to 'Sir Haswell's' that it became clear that the architect of that house was William Taylor.²

During the later 1970s' when trawling for paintings for my book *The Artist and the Country House: A history of country house and garden view painting in Britain 1540–1870* (1979), I found a view at Dunster Castle, Somerset, showing the south front as altered *c.* 1680³ (Fig. 2). It had many details in

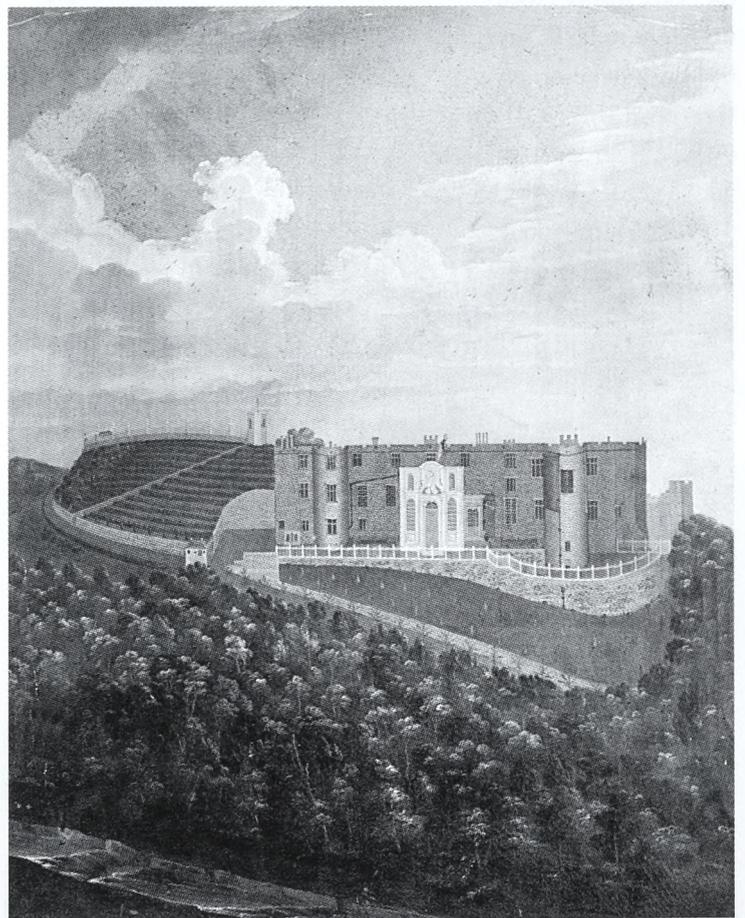


Figure 2. Dunster Castle, Somerset: eighteenth-century view of the south front. *John Harris.*

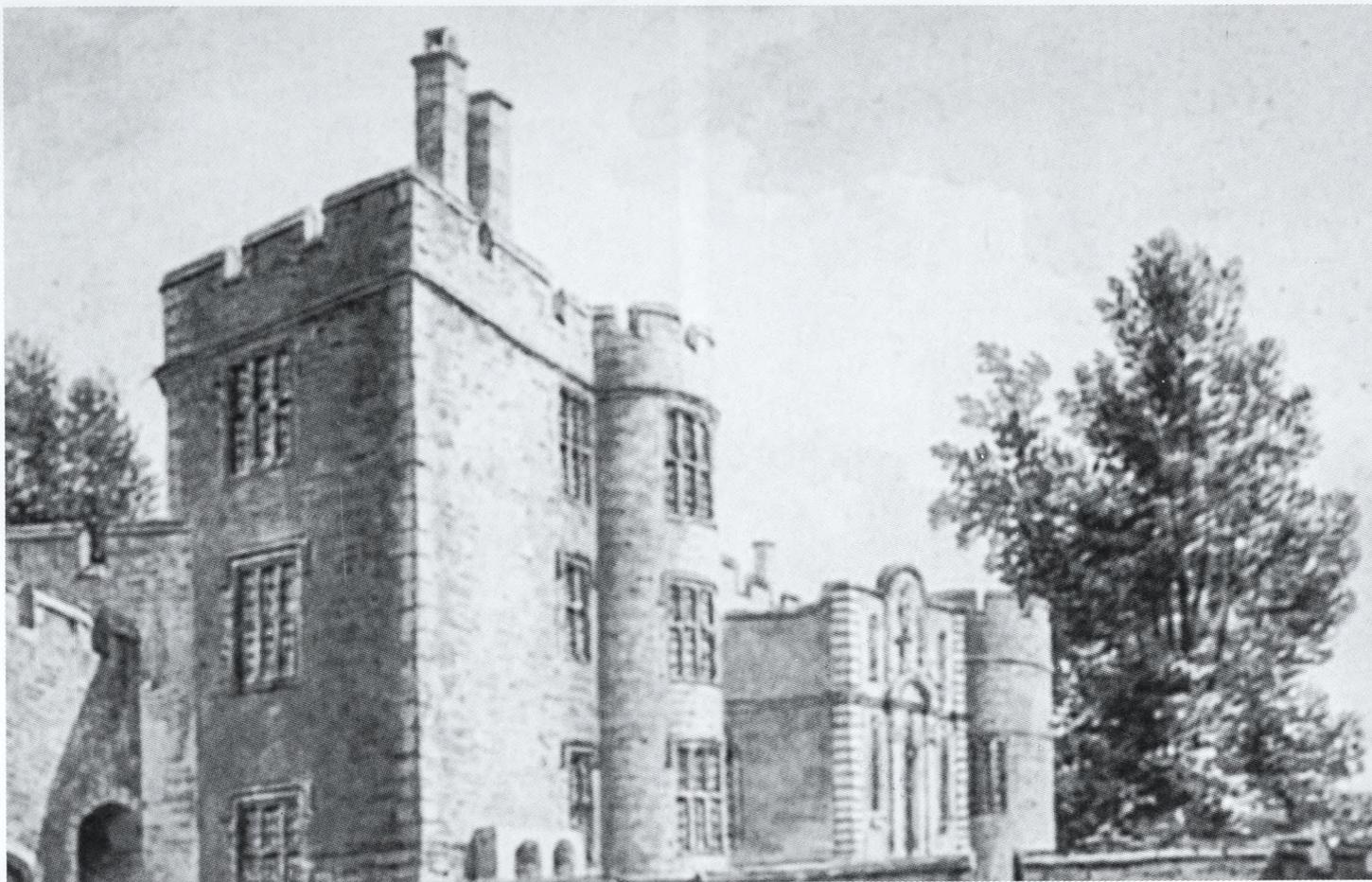


Figure 3. John Buckler, Dunster Castle, Somerset, south front in 1839. *John Harris.*

common with Halswell, but its most distinctive feature was the stone centrepiece which projected considerably from the face of the wall to which it was attached – maybe as much as five feet – in effect a grand porch lit also from the sides. This was also evident in Buck's print of 1733⁴ and John Buckler's watercolour of 1839⁵ (Fig. 3). The interior work at Dunster confirmed all my suspicions that the architect was a Londoner: the Withdrawing Room and Great Parlour have ceilings in an Edward Goudge style, and there is a characteristic Edward Pierce style stair with scrolled foliate balustrade incorporating hunting animals, as well as much other decorative carved woodwork about the castle. In particular the ceilings seemed fairly consistent with that in the Chintz Room at Halswell.⁶ I also noticed the stable range at Dunster surviving with its complete interior fittings.

Minsterley Church, rebuilt at Lord Weymouth's expense, 1688–89,⁷ could equally be another starting

point. The Dunster frontispiece resembles it as well. The west front (Figs. 4–6) is attached not to a conventional tower of square plan, but to a slab-like one barely five feet in depth. Minsterley is a design not in the sophisticated Wren or Hooke mode, but one of idiosyncratic vigour, borne out by the provincial drafting style of Taylor's design for the west front preserved in the archives at Longleat (Fig. 7).

Two years ago Sir Howard Colvin sent me a xerox of a lost oil painting of *c.* 1700 showing Sir Francis Warre's Hestercombe House, Somerset. The blackened painting was photographed in 1872 when it was fortunately also copied as a drawing (Fig. 8). Hestercombe, an estate adjacent to Halswell, had another stone frontispiece in Taylor's style applied to, and projecting from, an earlier elevation. The frontispiece had been added for Sir Francis Warre in the 1680s. The crudity of the 1872 drawing prohibits detailed analysis, but the projection has a



Figure 4. Minsterley Church, Shropshire:
west front. *John Harris.*

balustraded termination rising above the old roof-line, under which was a large central niche with a balustraded balcony over an entrance door that seems also to have had concave jambs. Although this elevation was destroyed in the general rebuilding of the house *c.* 1720–30, a watercolour by Coplestone Warre Bamfylde of the 1780s may suggest the concave doorway had been incorporated into the new front,⁸ for the door is shadowed in such a way as to suggest it is concave. The stable range that can be seen in the drawing exists, although rebuilt in the nineteenth century. It retains some Taylorian elements and is clearly related to the stable at Dunster. Its simple γ -tracery windows to be seen in the drawing are related to those in the nave windows at Minsterley (Fig. 9).

In addition, Richard Hewlings raises the possibility that Taylor might have worked at Mount Edgcumbe, on the Cornish side of the Tamar, but until 1844 in part of Devon⁹. Mount Edgcumbe was



Figure 5. Minsterley Church, Shropshire:
west front. *John Harris.*

built in 1547, but sometime in Charles II's reign Sir Richard Edgecumbe (d. 1688) embellished the main entrance with pilasters taking a cornice similar to that at Minsterley¹⁰ (Fig. 10). Inside the pilasters, partly buried colonettes are reminiscent of the engaged columns at Halswell. The detail is carved in granite, which explains why, although rich, it is coarser than Minsterley's or Halswell's.

Bridget Clarke's study of her ancestor Edward Clarke of Chipley, has revealed the web of Taylor's City connections. In March 1674 he wrote from Weston in Staffordshire raising the intriguing possibility of involvement in the rebuilding of Weston Hall for Sir John and Lady Wilbraham from 1671, attributed to the amateur endeavours of Lady Wilbraham herself.¹¹ However, the sophisticated front bears no Taylorian fingerprints. But the same Weston letter refers to the need to rebuild a farmhouse belonging to the City of London, Alderman John Morris at Rossall in Shropshire. Can it be a



Figure 6. Minsterley Church, Shropshire:
west front. *John Harris.*

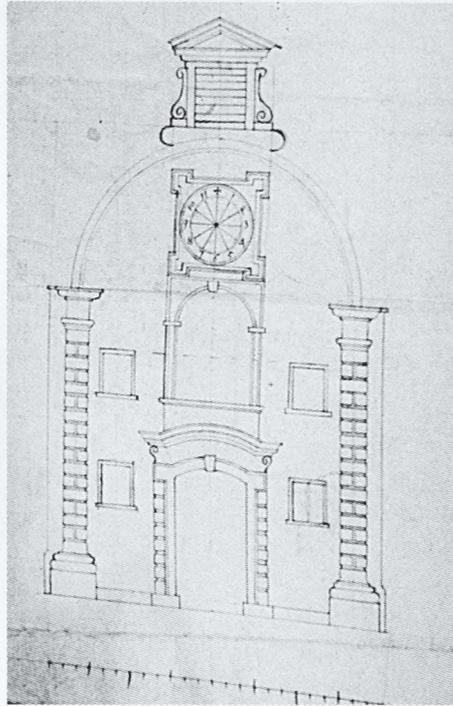


Figure 7. William
Taylor, proposal
drawing for Minsterley
Church, Shropshire.
John Harris.



Figure 8. Hestercombe House, Somerset: drawing of 1872
after an oil painting of c. 1700. *Philip White.*



Figure 9. Minsterley Church, Shropshire:
aisle window. *John Harris.*

coincidence that the existing house at Rossall¹² is dated 1677 and was built for Edward Gosnell, a City merchant?

In that same March 1674 letter Taylor wrote, 'I have bin downe in the west country'. Whether this was for the new house built c. 1674–75 at Nynehead Court, Somerset, for Clarke's neighbour John Sandford, another City merchant, can only be speculation. What survives is certainly an advanced elevation for the county, fenestrated with entablatures and keystones of the later Chipley sort. If by Taylor, Nynehead would be his first documented west country commission. Its City merchant origins are obvious, as were the expensive works (£4500 in c. 1678) spent on The Friars, Aylesford, Kent, by Sir John Banks, likewise a City merchant, a client of both Clayton and Morris of Rossall. The accounts show that Taylor as 'Surveyor' was supervising the work of such eminent London craftsmen as Joseph Lem the bricklayer, Thomas Woodstock the carpenter and Valentine Housman the joiner, work

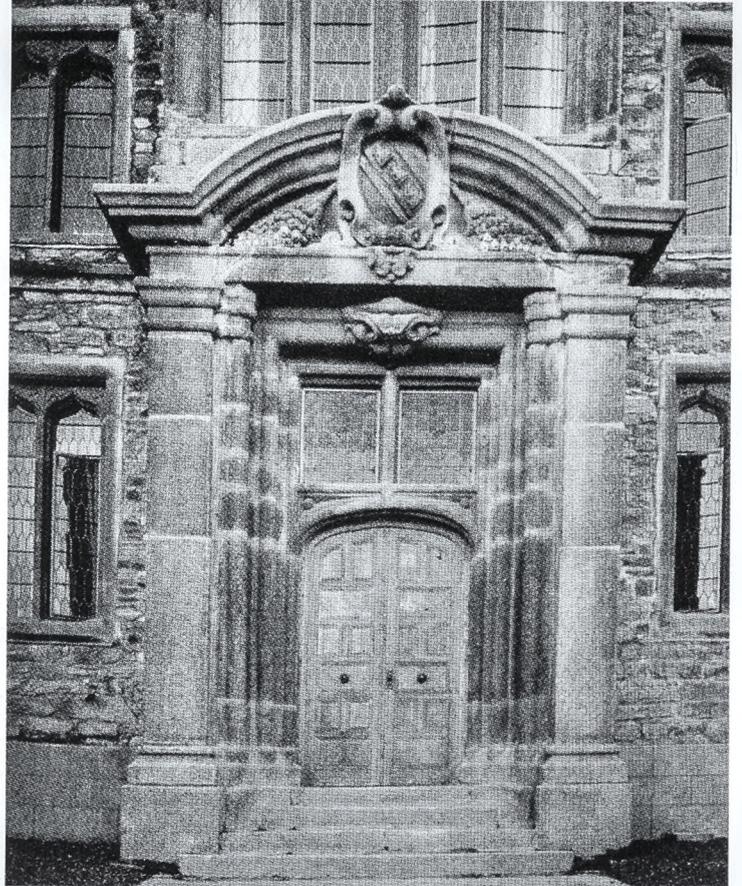


Figure 10. Mount Edgcombe, Cornwall (formerly Devon):
entrance. *Country Life.*

which included refacing the entrance range, tied together by a modillion cornice.¹³ The quality and style of the interior (Fig. 11) suggests that, this early, Taylor was capable of interior design of the highest City of London quality.¹⁴

The one surviving illustration of Chipley shows a front that could be either the entrance or the garden front. The centre bay rising to an unusually tall semi-circular pedimented gable with artisan scrolled half side pilasters, and lit by a tall semi-circular headed window, might be seen as speaking the same provincial language as Minsterley, and so does the clumsy flattened pediment to the middle three bays. However, this front does not display the 'great frontispiece according to the dorick order', or the 'great mudillion cornish like that of St Brides steepell', mentioned in the articles of January 1681—unless, of course, it refers to a Hestercombe-Dunster type of frontispiece applied to the elevation we cannot see. Despite such an idiosyncratic elevation, such bold solutions were not necessarily carried

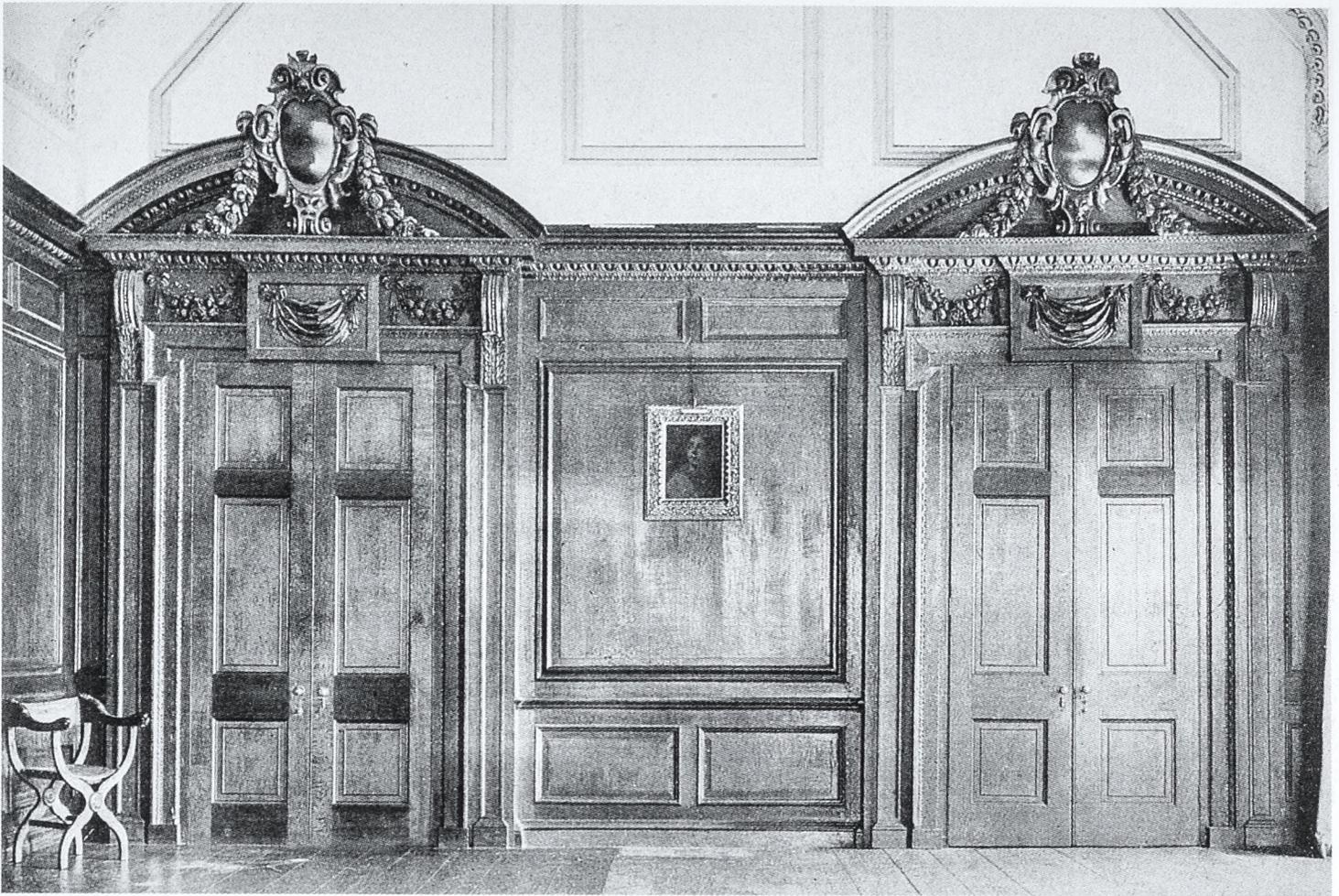


Figure 11. The Friars, Aylesford, Kent: hall interior. *Country Life*.

through the rest of the house. Chipley is otherwise conventional for the 1680s, as is the range at Aldenham Park, Shropshire, possibly built by Taylor in 1689 for Sir Edmund Acton,¹⁵ related to the Clarkes by marriage.

Escot is a different matter. According to Miss Clarke, Robert Hooke had made a 'draught' for Sir Walter Yonge in 1677, but this would have been for a house on another site, possibly at Mohun Ottery, as Bridget Cherry suggests in her study of the Devon country house.¹⁶ So the articles of agreement in August 1684 were for a house in a different location seven years later. As demonstrated by Halswell, finished about 1689, Taylor had then acquired an elevational sophistication not evident in the earlier

oeuvre. This new display of competence may be the case at Escot. Certainly the rusticated work can be recognized again at Dunster and Minsterley, and Escot's balustraded parapet rising above the roofline at Hestercombe. However, as Mrs Cherry observes with Escot, there are Netherlandish details commoner to Hooke than Taylor. She also argues convincingly that Wembury House near Plymouth, built by John Pollexfen from 1685, is by the architect of Escot¹⁷ (Fig. 12). Pollexfen was also a City man and a friend of Hooke's. Clearly Hooke and Taylor were professional colleagues, if not friends, and Taylor may well have been one of Hooke's executant builders. On this complicated matter, the case must rest.

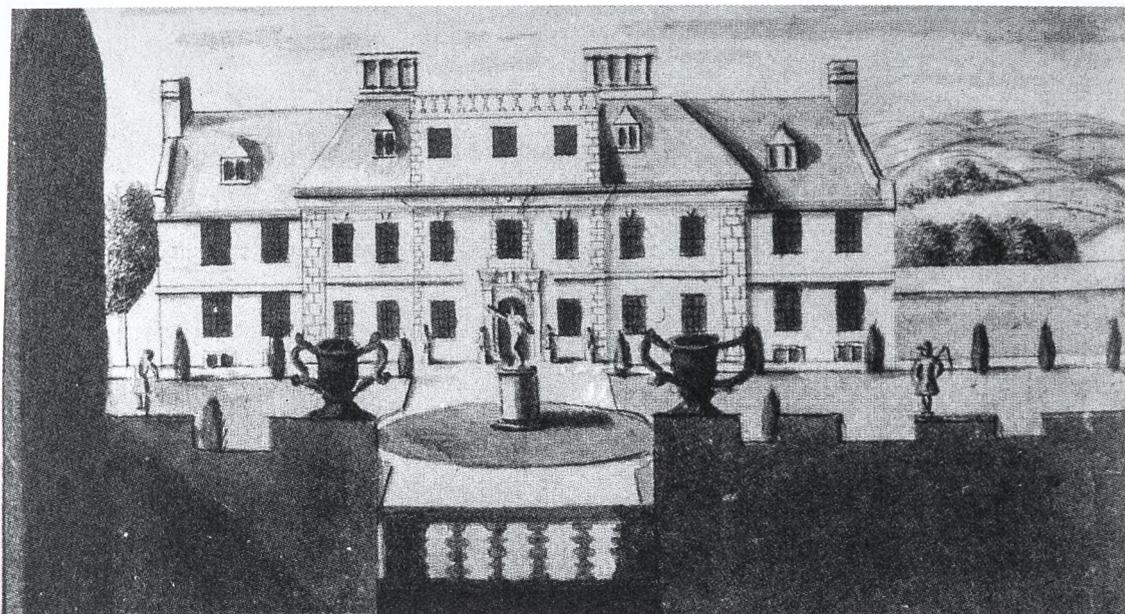


Figure 12. Edward Prideaux, Wembury House, Devon, c. 1720. *Country Life*.

NOTES

- 1 As Bridget Clarke demonstrates, Taylor refers to both St Brides, Fleet Street and St Mary le Bow.
- 2 Howard Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects 1600–1840*, London, 1978, 519. By Colvin's third edition of 1995 it had become clear that Taylor was based in London.
- 3 Richard Haslam, 'Dunster Castle, Somerset', *Country Life*, CLXXXI, 16 and 23 July 1987, 124–27, 102–06
- 4 Haslam, *op. cit.*, 125, fig. 2
- 5 Haslam, *op. cit.*, 127, fig. 7
- 6 *Country Life*, XXXIV, November 21 1908, 710
- 7 Taylor had been working for the 1st Viscount Weymouth at Longleat, Wiltshire, from c. 1682 [Colvin, *op. cit.* 969]. It must have been Taylor's suggestion that the centre bay of the south entrance front was to have a columnar framing extending the whole height of the front and capped with a segmental pediment. This is shown in a painting at Longleat of the house seen from the south west, reproduced in the catalogue of the Christies exhibition January–February 1989, *The Anglo-Dutch Garden in the Age of William and Mary*, pl. XIV, cat. no. 101a, here incorrectly dated c. 1700. It shows London's gardens soon after 1682–4 and before the old greenhouse was demolished.
- 8 Philip White, *A Gentleman of fine taste The Watercolours of Coplestone Warre Bampfylde*, Taunton, 1995. I am very grateful to Philip White for sharing his knowledge of Hestercombe and lending me his photograph of the drawing. He observes, as I do, the relationship of the existing stable range there rebuilt in the nineteenth century, to that at Dunster.
- 9 W. G. Hoskins, *Devon*, London, 1954, 11.
- 10 Baron Porcelli and Mark Girouard, 'Mount Edgcombe, Cornwall–1', *Country Life*, CXXVIII, December 22 1960, 1551
- 11 *Country Life*, xcVIII, November 9 1945, 818–21
- 12 It has only been possible to examine this from xeroxes of photographs, and not at first hand. The north wing could be an advanced elevation of the late seventies, but judgement on this must be deferred. I am grateful to Anna Eavis for sending me xeroxes from the National Monuments Record
- 13 Names supplied by Howard Colvin from accounts in the Kent Record Office
- 14 'The Friars, Aylesford', *Country Life*, L1V, October 27 1923, 570–77, and November 3 1923, 606–13, for views of the staircase and ceiling, ballroom or gallery, especially the gallery doors.
- 15 Gervase Jackson-Stops, 'Aldenham Park, Salop', *Country Life*, June 23 1977, 1737, figs 8–9
- 16 Bridget Cherry, 'The Devon Country House In The Late Seventeenth And Eighteenth Centuries', *Devon Archaeological Society's Transactions*, XLVII, 1988, 108, observing similarities in plan between Escot and Hooke's Ragley.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 110–12