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GATTON TOWN HALL

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The small village of Gatton in Surrey was the fourth most rotten borough in the country at the time of the Great Reform Act of 1832.¹ More of a hamlet than a village, it still has no shop or public house today; yet it had returned two Members of Parliament since at least 1450.²

It is therefore all the more bizarre that such a place should have a town hall, albeit a building with the character more of a park ornament (Fig.1 & 2), directly opposite the entrance front of the house. The description of it, its setting and the thought processes behind it, in Pevsner's *Surrey* cannot be bettered:

Town Hall. A very English political joke. Built in 1765. An open Doric temple on a knoll in the park, six columns (of iron incidentally) and a pedimented roof under which 'elections' (nominations, more accurately) for the rotten borough were held. In front an urn inscribed 'Stat ductis Sortibus Urna / Salus populi Suprema Lex Esto / Comitium Gattoniense MDCCXV / H M Dolus Malus Abesto' – that is 'When the lots have been drawn, the urn remains / Let the well-being of the people be the supreme law / The place of assembly of Gatton 1765 / Let evil deception be absent.' Political cynicism could hardly go further but there may at the same time have been an element of genuine if hypersensitive melancholy behind it, the exact spirit which pervades Gray's famous 'Elegy' (written 1751) and Goldsmith's 'Deserted Village'.

There remains the question of authorship. It will be argued here that this is closely linked to the patron of the commission, the then lord of the manor, Sir George Colebrooke, second baronet. He had succeeded by special remainder to the baronetcy created in 1759 for his next elder brother, James

Colebrooke.⁴ Sir James had bought the Gatton estate for £23,000 in 1751⁵, but on his death the estate passed, unlike the baronetcy, to his two daughters. Sir George promptly bought Gatton from his nieces and thereby obtained control of the rotten borough for himself, retaining it until his bankruptcy in late 1773 forced its resale in 1774.⁶

Presumably in order to finance the purchase, Sir George hurriedly sold off his existing country house, Arnold's or Arno's Grove, in Southgate, Edmonton, Middlesex,⁷ even though he was in the midst of a campaign to remodel that house to (Sir) Robert Taylor's designs.⁸ The Middlesex land registry also records a flurry of other sales by Sir George in 1762–63, including properties in Islington, Stepney, Chiswick and St. Paul's Shadwell,⁹ besides the sale of outlying property associated with Arno's Grove to Stephen Godin, John Berens and Jonathan Craven in 1762–63.¹⁰

George Colebrooke was the youngest of three brothers who were repeatedly associated with Sir Robert Taylor. The eldest brother, Robert (died 1784), employed Taylor to build a family mausoleum at Chilham, Kent in 1754–55. The second son, Sir James, had occupied from 1756 to his death in 1761 No.1 Greek Street, Soho, a house famed today for its richly rococo, stucco interiors, commissioned for Richard Beckford and tentatively attributed to Taylor by the Survey of London.¹² Finally, Sir George himself is not only noted as commissioning Taylor at Arno's Grove,¹³ but the design of the town house at 32 Soho Square, that he built 1773–75, is also attributed to Taylor by the *Survey of London*.¹⁴ Admittedly Sir George was to



Figure 1. Gatton Town Hall, Surrey, dated 1765, here attributed to Sir Robert Taylor, viewed from the house to its south. *Richard Garnier*



Figure 2. Gatton Town Hall, viewed from the north showing relationship to the house. *Richard Garnier*



Figure 3. Gatton Town Hall, detail of Doric entablature and pediment. *Richard Garnier*

consult elsewhere in 1771, obtaining plans from Robert Adam to remodel the interior of his then newly acquired town house, 20 Arlington Street, St. James's, but that scheme was not carried out.¹⁵ Sir George also consulted Robert Mylne concerning park ornaments for Gatton, but as this was similarly in 1771, it too post dates the construction of the 'Town Hall'.¹⁶ As these contacts with different architects are some six years after the Gatton town hall was built, the circumstances for Taylor's

involvement here would seem very plausible.

Turning to the character of the building itself, it might at first be thought that the town hall is an exercise, in the round, of such pattern book Doric, two-dimensional, front doorcases as were produced by innumerable master builders or carpenters at this date (Fig. 3). But so early a use of iron for the columns would seem to contradict such an idea, and Taylor has recently been associated with using iron for strengthening within his sash windows.¹⁷ From



Figure 4. Arno's Grove, Southgate, Middlesex, one of a pair of garden urns (on 20th century plinth), from 1760–2 scheme by Sir Robert Taylor for Sir George Colebrooke. *Richard Garnier*



Figure 5. Arno's Grove, one of a second pair of garden urns from 1760–2 scheme by Sir Robert Taylor for Sir George Colebrooke, on original plinth with ropetwist moulding. *Richard Garnier*

a stylistic viewpoint, he was no stranger to such 'pattern book' accuracy in his own doorcases, as at his Grafton Street houses of the 1770s, for instance.¹⁸

The urn is the telling point here. It is very similar to a pair of urns at Arno's Grove, also due to Sir George Colbrooke (Fig. 4). The three are of the same outline with handles composed of a pair of snakes with open jaws, their tails crossed at Gatton and curled back just short of crossing at Arno's. The plinths of all three, and the other pair of urns at Arno's Grove, were all ornamented with a circular ropetwist (Fig. 5), although the first pair at Arno's have now lost their original plinths.¹⁹

It can thus be shown that the combination at Gatton of a patron both documented as employing and disposed by family links to patronise Taylor, a building that reflects known elements of his work and the existence of an urn that parallels others at the previous commission to him from the same patron, makes a strong case for attributing this eccentric 'town hall' to Sir Robert Taylor. Exactly what the puritanically pragmatic architect might have thought of such political insouciance can only be imagined.

NOTES

- 1 Victoria History of the Counties of England, *A History of Surrey*, III, London, 1911, 197, which also states that in the 18th century 'the proprietor was usually the only voter.'
- 2 *Idem.*
- 3 Ian Nairn, Nikolaus Pevsner and Bridget Cherry, *The Buildings of England, Surrey*, Harmondsworth, 1971, 252-3.
- 4 G. E. C[okayne] (ed.), *Complete Baronetage*, v, Exeter, 1906, 116.
- 5 *Idem*; G. S. Prosser, *Illustrated History of the County of Surrey*, London, 1828, 'Gatton'; E. W. Brayley, *Topographical History of Surrey*, IV, London, 1841, 310-11.
- 6 *Idem.*
- 7 London, London Metropolitan Archives (hereafter LMA), MDR/1762/3/134-5.
- 8 W. Watts, *Views of Seats of the Nobility and Gentry*, London, 1779, pl.63.
- 9 LMA, MDR/1762/1/209; 1762/2/208-9; 1763/2/441; 1763/3/567; 1763/3/655.
- 10 *Loc. cit.*, MDR/1762/3/496, 1763/2/35-6-7 and 1763/2/447; Richard Garnier, 'Two 'Crystalline' Villas of the 1760s', *Georgian Group Journal*, VII, 1997, 9-25.
- 11 Howard Colvin, *Biographical Dictionary of British Architects*, New Haven and London, 1995, 966.
- 12 Greater London Council (ed. F. H. W. Sheppard), *Survey of London* (hereafter SOL), XXXIII, London, 1966, 88-106.
- 13 W. Watts, *loc. cit.*.
- 14 SOL, XXXIII, 118-20.
- 15 Information from Sir Howard Colvin.
- 16 Christie's, London, 30 Nov. 1983, *Sir Albert Richardson Collection of Architectural Drawings*, Lot 37.
- 17 Information from Mr. Charles Brooking of the Brooking Collection of Architectural Detail, University of Greenwich.
- 18 Marcus Binney, *Sir Robert Taylor*, London, 1984, pl.71.
- 19 Richard Garnier, 'Arno's Grove, Southgate', *infra*, 131, fig. 11, illustrates these urns in their original setting.