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THE FINANCIAL PROBLEMS OF SIR THOMAS ROBINSON

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It is always a mistake to think that you have written the final word on a subject. Last year's *Georgian Group Journal* included an article which I wrote on new material that had emerged on Sir Thomas Robinson in the course of research for his entry in the *New Dictionary of the National Biography*. I assumed then that I had drawn a line under the matter. But publication often stimulates new discoveries and the article led to several responses. Most of them are little more than footnotes, but one in particular helps to fill major gaps in our knowledge of Robinson.

When I wrote about Robinson's house in Yorkshire, Rokeby Park, in 1987 it was believed that the title deeds had been destroyed during the Second World War. Subsequently, it has been discovered that this was not the case.¹ The title deeds have now been studied by the current owner of Rokeby, Sir Andrew Morritt. It is to him that I am indebted for the new information in this article and for permission to publish it. They provide proof that financial problems led Robinson to sell Rokeby, as well as details of his marriage in Barbados, his illegitimate daughter and the disputes that followed the sale of Rokeby.

It has always been assumed that Robinson was forced to sell Rokeby, an estate that had been in his family since 1610 and where he had designed and built the house, but proof was lacking. That is all too evident among the title deeds which show that Robinson was heavily in debt when he came to sell Rokeby to John Sawrey Morritt in 1769. In May 1740 Robinson obtained a £4,000 mortgage on Egglestone Abbey from Thomas Snow and Robert and Richard Warner. In 1742 he mortgaged land at Mortham to

Thomas Worsley and others to secure a loan of £7,000. That was on 15 May. On 17 and 18 May he leased for a year and mortgaged land at Rokeby, Mortham and Egglestone Abbey to Sir Miles Stapleton and Thomas Smith to secure the sum of £2,810, with interest set at 5%. 1742 was the year Robinson became Governor of Barbados and in March he had established a deed of trust which would enable his brothers to pay his debts during his absence on the island.

If Robinson had hoped to reduce his debts during his governorship he was sadly mistaken. Disputes with the island's assembly over improvements to the governor's residence left him sadly out of pocket.² But while in Barbados he married a wealthy widow, Sarah Salmon, who was reported in *The Gentleman's Magazine* as having brought him a dowry worth £30,000.³ However, among the documents is a copy of their marriage articles, which shows that Robinson did not do so well from the marriage as had been assumed.

The settlement is dated 10 March 1742 (that is old style, in fact 1743), four days before the wedding. In it all Robinson's private estate on the island, described as a considerable quantity of plate, chinaware, books, household goods, furniture, coaches and horses, were to go to Sarah Salmon should Robinson predecease her. Robinson also promised to provide sufficient lodging, diet and accommodation for Samuel Salmon, Thomas Salmon and Sarah Salmon, the unmarried children of Sarah Salmon, until the sons were 21 and the daughter 18.

Robinson also agreed that Sarah Salmon's property, described as a considerable real and

personal estate consisting of lands, houses, negroes and other slaves, money, bank stock, outstanding debts, plate, jewels, goods, wares and merchandise, should remain hers except for the sum of £7,000. Furthermore, £10,000 of her money was to be held by trustees to accumulate the income for so long as Robinson remained governor. When he ceased to be he was to receive £4,000 and the balance was to be held in trust for the survivor with other trusts if there were children of the marriage. Sarah Salmon also agreed that she should have no right of dower or of intestacy over any of Robinson's real or personal estate outside Barbados.

This suggests that Robinson received not much more than £11,000 – and that was presumably in Barbadian pounds, which, according to Robinson, were worth two thirds of a pound sterling.⁴ This was a useful sum, but clearly not enough to cope with his mounting debts. Robinson returned to England in 1747, grumbling about how much money he had lost through the governorship. Not that that stopped him building. He was soon remodelling Rokeby and building a new house overlooking the Thames in Whitehall.⁵

Unsurprisingly, Robinson soon needed more money. In 1752 he transferred the various mortgages made in 1742 to Sir James Lowther and replaced them with a general mortgage of £20,000. This was followed by a further £5,000 mortgage from Lowther in 1757, together with a bond for £10,000 on condition of repayment of the £5,000.

Following the death of Sir James Lowther the mortgages were taken over by his son, also called James, in 1758. Meanwhile, the financial situation worsened. Robinson was clearly failing to pay the interest on the mortgages and in 1764 £2,000 in arrears was capitalised and charged on the mortgaged land. Meanwhile, Robinson carried on building. He had left his Whitehall house and in 1764–5 built Prospect Place, a very large house beside Ranelagh Gardens, in which he had built up a major financial stake.⁶

In 1765 the Rokeby estate was placed on the market. But it took time to sell. In the meantime, six further loans were extended to Robinson by Lowther between 30 December 1764 and 30 June 1767. At the end of that year, on 30 December 1767 Robinson gave another mortgage to Lowther to secure the further sum of £5,080 in respect of the bonds.

By 1769 Robinson owed Lowther the very substantial sum of £32,080. By a deed dated 27 May 1769 Lowther secured a loan to him of £25,000 from Sir Robert Ladbrook by a sub-mortgage of the mortgage from Robinson to Lowther. A second mortgage of £4,500 on lands at Rokeby, Mortham and Eggleston Abbey to Richard Johnson was dated 1 January 1769.

Given debts of this scale it was not surprising that Robinson was trying to sell the Rokeby estate, but it appears that his first attempt failed. According to the Revd. William Oliver, a former rector of Rokeby, Robinson entered into an agreement to sell Rokeby Park and its furniture for about £44,000 to John Johnstone, commonly called Nabob Johnstone, the fifth son of Sir James Johnstone of Westerhall, Dumfriesshire, in about 1767. The purchase fell through, apparently because of a dispute about a large painting at Rokeby, *The Governor going to church*. (This handsome painting, which shows Sir Thomas Robinson seated in his coach and escorted by numerous horsemen entering Bridgetown, formerly hung in the Servants Hall at Rokeby. It was sold to the Barbados Museum in 1977).⁷

It was not until 16 September 1769 that a contract for the sale of Rokeby and the house and its contents was agreed between Robinson and Henry Flitcroft, acting as a trustee for John Sawrey Morritt. This cannot be the well-known architect who had died on 25 February that year, and is presumably his son, also Henry (1742–1826), a barrister by profession.⁸ However, it does raise the intriguing question as to whether Flitcroft the younger was continuing a family business, as acting as a house agent was one of the lesser known activities of architects in the 18th and

early 19th centuries.⁹ The price realised by the sale of the 1,800 acre estate was £47,500. Since the estate yielded an annual income of £1,186 6s it was valued for sale at a 40-year purchase, a very respectable sum. However, by the time the mortgages had been settled Robinson cannot have been left with much money.

This probably explains why Robinson never completed the church he was building at Rokeby, which was intended to serve as the family mausoleum. The contract included the stipulation that Robinson was to complete the church within six months. Nothing had happened by the time he died in 1777 and in the end John Carr was brought in to finish the work for Morritt.¹⁰

Inevitably, Morritt and Robinson's executors were forced into litigation. A deed of compromise was reached on 21 October 1783 between Morritt, Fleming Pinkston and James Parkinson, the executors, and, as third party, Robinson's daughter Ann and her husband William Casper Pirnor. This reveals that the sale had not been without complications. Somewhat surprisingly (perhaps he had no financial alternative) Robinson, an avid collector, had agreed to include in the sale the furniture, book cases, pictures, statues, busts and other things in the house – including the previously disputed *The Governor goes to church*. Robinson and Morritt had fallen out over some of the busts, statues, relievos and articles of furniture (perhaps not surprisingly, given Robinson's earlier altercation with John Johnstone). The dispute had been left to the arbitration of Alexander Wedderburn, later Lord Loughborough, Lord Chief Justice, and Matthew Duane. Their award of 31 March 1770 had determined that Robinson was entitled to everything in the house not included in the inventory of 16 September 1769 (which presumably accompanied the sale deed), and was given the right to be buried in the new church and to remove the bodies of Lady Lechmere (his first wife) and Sir Septimus Robinson (his brother) from the old church to the mausoleum in the new church. Morritt clearly had the better of the arbitration.

According to the 1783 award Robinson had not completed the church, settled the dispute over the furniture (in particular Robinson had removed some relievos Morritt felt should have been fixtures) nor vested in Morritt the benefit of various mortgage terms. As a result Morritt was claiming £121 10s from the executors and Ann Pirnor. Robinson's executors had had the articles awarded to Robinson valued at 140 guineas.

Agreement was reached whereby Morritt released the executors over the outstanding mortgage terms and the cost of completing the church. In return the executors and Ann Pirnor released Morritt from all claims but retained 'a picture of Sir Thomas Robinson's brother and sister and any other picture or pictures of the family of Sir Thomas Robinson'. (The document originally also included here a picture of General Wade, companion in size to the painting of Robinson's brother and sister, but this was deleted from the final agreement.) The right of Sir Thomas Robinson's family to be buried in the church was also confirmed.

One final detail revealed by the documents concerns Ann Pirnor's birth. Robinson's first wife had died in 1739. Sarah Salmon had not joined him on his return to London and Robinson had not married again. It transpires that Ann Pirnor was Robinson's daughter by Elizabeth Nicholson of St Ann's, Westminster. She was born on 9 August 1754 and the following year Robinson established a trust for the support and maintenance of Elizabeth Nicholson of St Ann's, Westminster, and her daughter, Ann Robinson. The trustees were his close friend the Earl of Chesterfield and Fleming Pinkstan, who was to be one of the executors of Robinson's will. The trust was to pay Elizabeth Nicholson an annuity of £50 for life out of the income of Rokeby from the death of Sir Thomas Robinson and then to Ann Robinson for her life. It was also to pay Ann Robinson £1,000 on her marriage.

Robinson never forgot his daughter. She was left the residue of his estate. But for a man as aware of his



Fig. 1. Ivory portrait medallion of Sir Thomas Robinson, Bart., 1730.
Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

dignity as Robinson it must have pained him that his daughter, even his illegitimate daughter, should have married an apothecary. Pirnor's Christian name was deliberately left blank three times in his will.¹¹

Three other small points that have emerged since last year are also worth noting. Robinson's will, drawn up in 1775, notes that he 'lived in intimacy for more than half a century' with the Earl of Chesterfield. Richard Hewlings points out the architectural significance of this.¹² Chesterfield was responsible for Isaac Ware's most important building, Chesterfield House in London, built in 1748–9, but two engravings of Rokeby Park, drawn and engraved by Ware, show that Robinson employed him before that date. One of the engravings, of the park gates, prominently notes that Robinson had been appointed Governor of Barbados on January 18, 1741.¹³ This is an inscription that is unlikely to have been made at any time other than in the first flush of the appointment, certainly not one that would have been made after Robinson's somewhat ignominious return from Barbados in 1747, and suggests the engraving was probably made in 1741. Robinson subscribed to Ware's translation of Palladio's *Four Books of Architecture* in 1737 and proposed Ware for the Royal Society of Arts.¹⁴ A design by Robinson for the parsonage at Rokeby was included by Ware in his *Complete Body of Architecture* of 1756, the only design in that work not by Ware.¹⁵ Given Robinson's intimacy with Chesterfield, and given the fact that we already know that he actively promoted the architectural careers of both Daniel Garrett and William Robinson,¹⁶ it is highly likely that Ware was another protégé encouraged by Robinson and that Robinson lay behind Chesterfield's choice of Ware as architect for Chesterfield House.

Francesca, Viscountess Irwin's account at Drummond's Bank shows consistent payments from 1755–60 by Lady Irwin to Sir Thomas Robinson for rent.¹⁷ This is presumably for a London house and one must assume that it was for the house he built in Privy Gardens in Whitehall in 1749. This suggests Robinson did not live there for very long and is consistent with our knowledge that he was renting Soho House in 1755.¹⁸ The rate books for St Margaret's, Westminster, show Robinson paying rates on the Privy Gardens house from 1750 (the previous year the site was described as 'demolished'). The house was rated at £60 (increased to £100 in 1753) and Robinson continued to pay rates on the property until at least 1762. It comes as no surprise to discover that by then he had accumulated £58 6s 8d in arrears, an exasperated clerk noting in the 1756 ratebook 'When the law of England determines it he will pay'. The rate books for the years immediately following 1762 do not include Privy Gardens so it is not clear when he sold the house.¹⁹

Katharine Eustace, Assistant Keeper at the Ashmolean Museum, also sheds light on the ivory portrait medallion of Robinson in the museum (Fig. 1). She notes that the medallion may have been executed by the Roman ivory carver Pozzo, although this remains conjectural without further documentary evidence. She also comments that the antique dealer Jonathon Harris, through whose hands the medallion passed, suggested that the inscription 'Sir Thomas Robinson Bart Roma 1730' may have been added later in England. This would explain the slightly cramped nature of the inscription and the mystery as to why the inscription should refer to Robinson's baronetcy when this was not granted to him until after his return to England in 1731.

NOTES

- 1 The papers are now held by the solicitors Dickinson Dees in Newcastle.
- 2 Giles Worsley, 'New Light on Long Sir Thomas', *Georgian Group Journal*, IX, 1999, 7–12.
- 3 *Gentleman's Magazine*, XIII, 1743, 332.
- 4 Worsley, 'New Light...', *cit.*, 12.
- 5 Giles Worsley, 'Rokeby Park – II', *Country Life*, CLXXI, March 26, 1987, 176; Giles Worsley, 'Entertaining Architecture', *Country Life*, CLXXII, October 6, 1988, 142–3.
- 6 Giles Worsley, 'I thought myself in Paradise', *Country Life*, CLXXVIII, May 15, 1986, 1380–5.
- 7 Oliver found the reference to the failed sale in a heavily annotated copy of a late-18th- or early-19th-century book on Yorkshire owned by a friend and passed on the information in 1947 to E.M. Shilstone, Honorary Secretary of the Barbados Museum and Historical Society. Unfortunately, he did not tell Shilstone the name of the friend or the book. However, he did copy out the note: 'Sir Thos Robinson, about 1767, sold Rokeby Hall and furniture for about £44,000 to John Johnstone Esq., commonly called Nabob Johnstone. He was 4th [actually 5th] son of Sir Jas Johstone of Wester Hall in Co Dumfries. The purchase was not carried into effect. A dispute arose about a large picture of Sir Thos entery [sic] into Barbados which he wished to retain.' [*'The Governor going to Church'*, *Journal of the Barbados Museum and Historical Society*, XXXV, 1978, 234–42.] I am grateful to Sir Andrew Morritt to drawing my attention to this article. Sir Andrew explains that Oliver was vicar of Rokeby until 1962 and was an accurate and reputable local historian.
- 8 Howard Colvin, *Biographical Dictionary of British Architects*, New Haven and London, 1995, 366.
- 9 No study seems to have been published on the role of the architect as house agent, but in 1755 Stiff Leadbetter acted as agent for the sale of Wharton House in Dover Street, which was sold by the Countess of Oxford to the Earl of Halifax and William Ffolkes as trustees for Sir Edward Hussey-Montagu [Greater London Record Office, MDR 1755 2/453–6]. Richard Hewlings also notes Sir John Soane's activities negotiating the purchase of 11 Downing Street in 1796–1801 [Richard Hewlings, '11 Downing Street: John Soane's Work for John Eliot (1797–1805)', *Transactions of the Ancient Monuments Society*, XXXIX, 1995, 51–4].
- 10 Colvin, *cit.*, 220.
- 11 Worsley, 'New Light...', *cit.*, 13–14.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 13.
- 13 British Library, King's Topographical Collection XLV 26e.
- 14 Worsley, 'New Light...', *cit.*, 5.
- 15 Isaac Ware, *The Complete Body of Architecture*, London, I, 1756, 37.
- 16 Worsley, 'Rokeby Park – II', *cit.*, 176.
- 17 27 December 1755, £50; 3 December 1756, £150; 31 December 1756, £75; 26 March 1757, £75; 28 June 1757, £75; 27 January 1758, £150; 17 April 1758, £75; 22 March 1759, £125 'for half year's rent to Lady Day next'. I am grateful to James Lomax, curator at Temple Newsam House, for alerting me to these payments and to Mr Philip Winterbottom, archivist at the Royal Bank of Scotland, for confirming them.
- 18 Survey of London, XXXIII, *Parish of St. Anne, Soho*, London, 1966, 145.
- 19 London, Westminster City Archives, E373 f.21–2, f.23; E375 f.20; E378 f.19; E384 f. 19; E388 f.19; E392 f.19; E396 f.19; E400 f.19; E404 f.19; E408 f.20; E412 f.22; E416 f.22; E420 f.22; E424.