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THE AVARICE AND AMBITION OF WILLIAM BENSON

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In his own lifetime William Benson's moment of fame came in January 1719, as the subject of an anonymous pamphlet:

I do therefore with much contrition bewail my making of contracts with deceitfulness of heart ... my pride, my arrogance, my avarice and my ambition have been my downfall ...¹

To us, however, he is also famous for building a precociously neo-Palladian house in 1710, as well as infamous for his corrupt, incompetent and consequently brief tenure as Surveyor-General of the King's Works, which ended in his dismissal for deception of King and Government.² Wilbury, whose elevation was claimed to be both Jonesian and designed by Benson, and whose plan was based on that of the Villa Poiana, is notable for apparently anticipating the neo-Palladian revival of the 1720s. Even if one accepts Giles Worsley's compelling argument for a fluidity of 'baroque' and 'neo-Palladian' architectural styles in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Wilbury, in its adaptation of earlier models, does appear paradoxically to be looking forwards. Whether or not Benson was the architect,³ it might be supposed that he was an early champion of neo-Palladianism. At the Board of Works, his replacement of Hawksmoor with the self-proclaimed proto-Palladian Colen Campbell suggests that he may have been a man with a mission. His mad pretence that the House of Lords was on the verge of collapse, which extended to shoring it up with scaffolding and going to the lengths of evacuating the Lords to Westminster Hall, was

probably motivated by his desire to build a neo-Palladian parliament house.

That Benson had any direct impact on the spread of neo-Palladian ideas other than his patronage of Campbell through the Board of Works is, however, unlikely. Howard Colvin's comprehensive and excoriating account of Benson's surveyorship shows only too clearly that his pre-occupations were financial and self-motivated, rather than aesthetic. He did not publish on architecture, neo-Palladian or otherwise and, with the exception of Wilbury, appears to have left no significant buildings, either in a private or official capacity. This absence of a context for Wilbury makes the house even more startling; it appears to spring from nowhere and, as far as Benson's architectural output is concerned, to lead nowhere. In fact, Benson did build other houses for himself, but none of them survive. Despite the limited survival of relevant documentation, it is possible to reconstruct them, if rather sketchily. In doing so the relationship between Benson's material and cultural concerns becomes a little clearer.

Benson was born in 1682, the eldest of 14 children (Fig. 1), and grew up in Bromley St Leonard, Essex, at that time a village within reach of the City of London. His merchant father, Sir William Benson, purchased the manorial rights in 1692, acquiring a parcel of land that included the manor house. Benson inherited the manor on the death of his father in 1712.⁴ The estate as described in 1715 included Bromley House and gardens 'with the Wilderness, Fish Ponds and Paddock, all walled in'. In addition were several houses and fields, a limekiln, a fishery

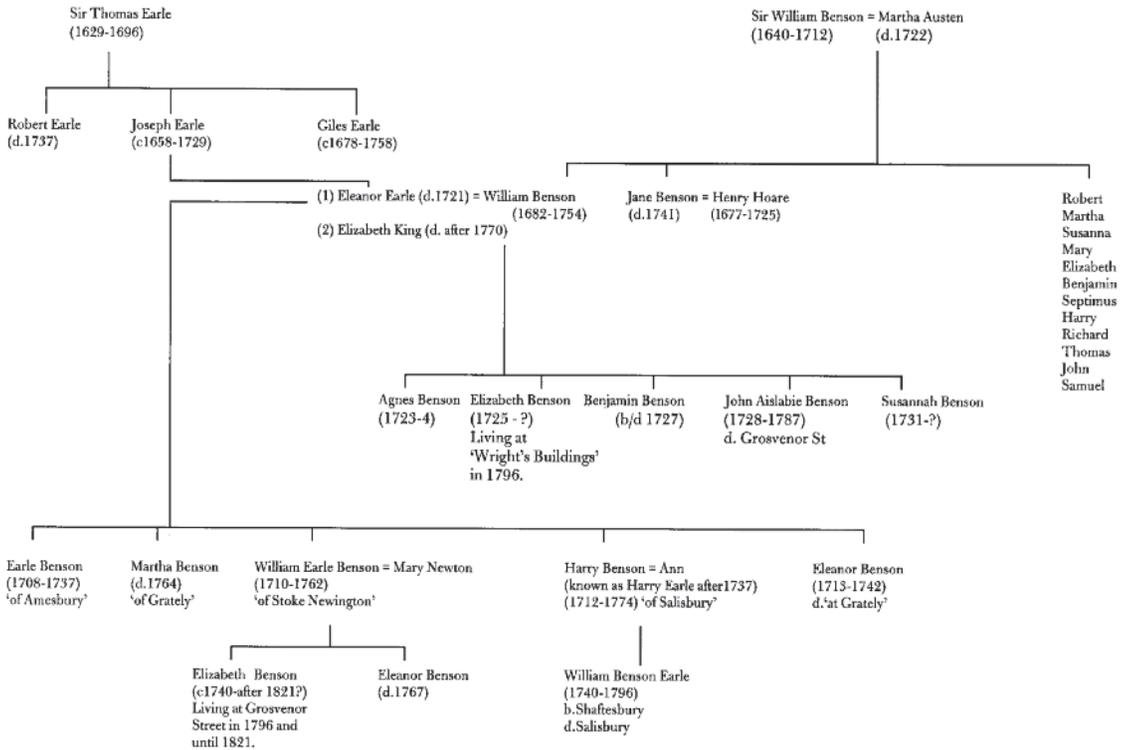


Fig 1. The family of William Benson

and an ozier ground.⁵ It is shown on John Rocque’s map of 1746 (Fig. 2). The manor of Bromley St Leonards originated as a Benedictine nunnery and the topography of the Benson estate, its proximity to the river Lea, its rabbit warrens and fishponds, refreshed at every tide by means of a sluice from the river, must derive in part from the conventual complex. The brick boundary wall was judged by the late eighteenth-century writer Daniel Lysons to be partly medieval and it probably described the boundaries of the monastic precinct.⁶ The only medieval building known to survive intact was St Mary’s, the convent chapel which became the parish church and retained elements of its twelfth-century fabric until it was destroyed during the Second World War. Given its position in relation to the

church, the manor house may have been built on the site of the west cloister range.

A sketch plan of Bromley House is shown on Lee and Gascoyne’s 1703 *Survey of Bethnal Green in the Parish of Stepney* (Fig. 3). Built during the 1630s, it was ‘a large brick edifice’, notable for its ‘imposing elevation, the number of its lofty and spacious apartments, the grandeur of its wide spiral staircase and its almost unlimited prospect over the Counties of Essex, Kent, Middlesex and Surrey, with the majestic Thames flowing between’.⁷ Surviving illustrations of the house show it to have combined, in common with other gentry houses of this period, traditional and modern features (Figs 4 and 5).⁸ It conformed to an H plan, but its roof was hipped rather than gabled, and the regular fenestration

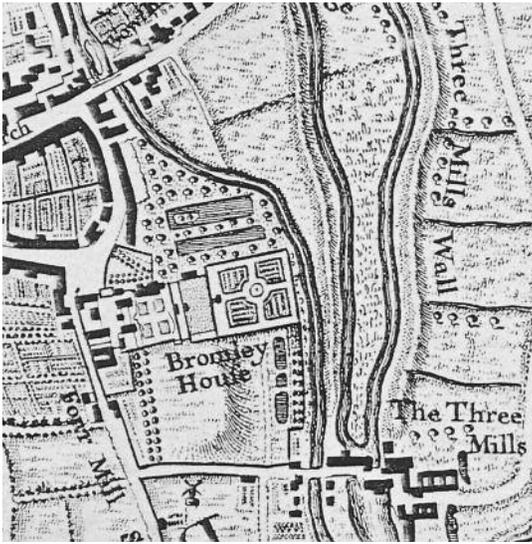


Fig 2. William Benson's Bromley estate (from John Rocque, *Exact Survey of the City's of London, Westminster ... and the Country near Ten Miles Round*, 1746). Guildhall Library

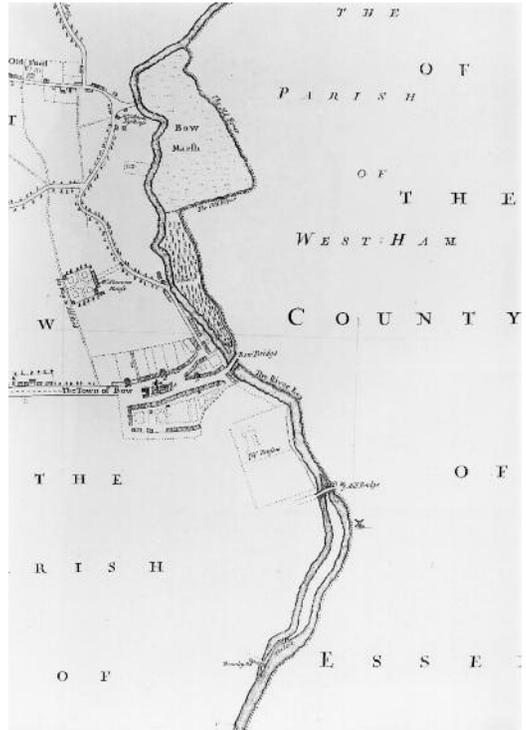


Fig 3. Bromley House (from William Lee & Joel Gascoyne, *Survey of Bethnal Green in the Parish of Stepney*, 1703). Guildhall Library

suggests that the old-fashioned hall and chamber arrangement had been rejected for a more symmetrical disposition of rooms. The ground floor at Bromley House was raised over a basement range that presumably contained the service accommodation. The house also incorporated classical features in its porch, which had rusticated piers and a broken pediment, and in its loggia, reminiscent of the monastic cloister, opening onto the formal garden to the east. That the staircase was recorded as a principal feature suggests a large stair hall. Visitors' memories of fine views over the surrounding countryside indicate that the public rooms may have been placed on the upper floor. There may even have been a gallery above the loggia, as at Holland House, Kensington.⁹ The house,

elevated above the river Lea, also had a large water cistern incorporated into the uppermost terrace of its formal gardens, and could be reached through a doorway and passage in the brick supporting wall of the upper garden. Its precise function is not known, but Dunstan's description of its 'good supply of excellent water' suggests that it provided the household with water for domestic use.¹⁰ If so, it was an unusual provision and is of interest in relation to Benson's hydraulic engineering interests at Amesbury and Shaftesbury.

Benson's father is said to have altered the house, perhaps adding the porch, which bore his arms.¹¹ He also extended the chancel of the parish church, for which he held the freehold, adding a projection at the east end of about ten feet square to house new

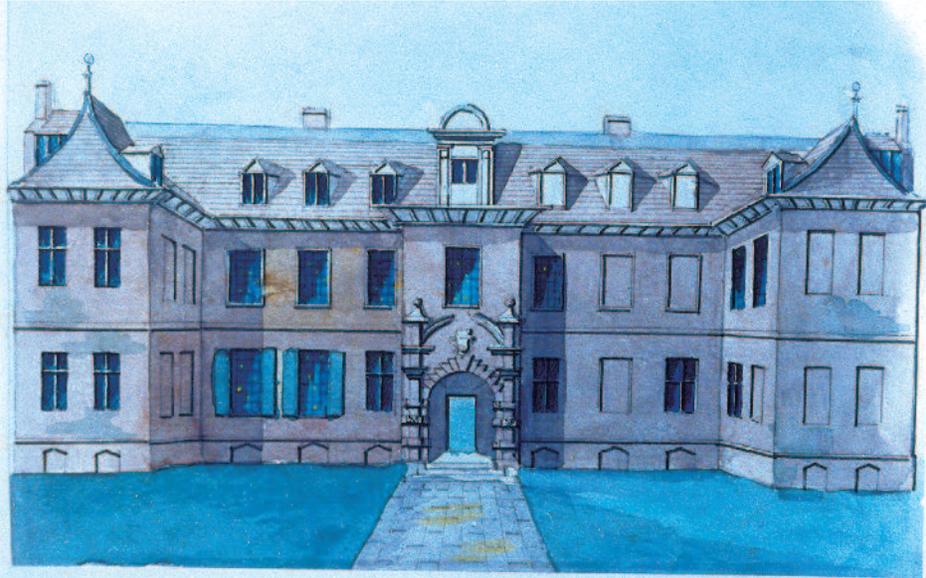


Fig 4. The west front of Bromley House in 1810, showing Sir William Benson's porch.
Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives

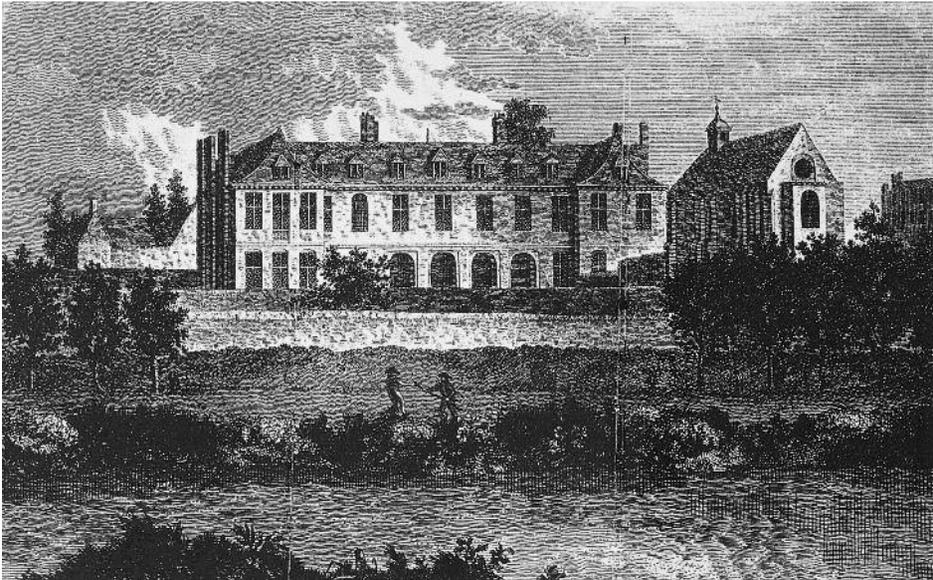


Fig 5. The east front of Bromley House in 1790, showing the loggia and St Mary's Church
with Sir William Benson's rebuilt east end.
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altar tablets inscribed with the Commandments and a painted figure of Moses.¹² He glazed the new east window with his own coat of arms, alongside those of his wife, England, the City of London and the Drapers' Company. Beneath this projecting recess he built a burial vault, in which he and his children were subsequently interred. A doorway in the east wall allowed members of the Benson family to enter the vault directly from their own land without passing through the church. Another doorway, knocked through the medieval sedilia, gave the Bensons access to the chancel.¹³ That Sir William demonstrated his seignorial rights over the manor by transforming the east end of the church is unsurprising. He was a merchant. His wife Martha was the daughter of a jeweller.¹⁴ To all intents and purposes a self-made man, who had purchased rather than inherited the position, he was bound to claim the significance of his own family.

Although enjoying the rights deriving from the lordship of a rural manor, Sir William's real milieu was the City and the continental connections afforded by trade. A stalwart of the Drapers' Company and a sheriff of the City of London, his circle included the goldsmith banker Henry Hoare and the Treasury Solicitor Anthony Cracherode. His sons Benjamin and Henry were apprenticed to merchants in Holland, while his youngest son, Septimus, spent several months in Paris before beginning his training as a lawyer.¹⁵ Whether William Benson was also sent overseas to serve a mercantile apprenticeship is not known, but he certainly travelled in Germany and Sweden during his twenties.¹⁶ Sir William's wealth came principally from the sale of iron, which he probably imported from Sweden, and of malt.¹⁷ Between 1707 and his death in 1712, however, he set in train a plan to change his investments, switching from the fluctuating nature of trade to the more reliable prospects offered by land. On 8 October 1707, he and Joseph Earle, a rich Bristol merchant, agreed the terms of a marriage settlement for their heirs William

Benson and Eleanor Earle.¹⁸ Joseph Earle settled on the couple an estate in North Stoke, Somerset, along with £1,000, Eleanor's mother's jewels and the promise of £5,000 at his death. Sir William undertook to invest £10,000 in land and to leave his son £10,000 at his death. The landed estates were to be managed by four trustees, including Henry Hoare and Joseph Earle's brother Robert, who were to preserve them for the use of 'the first and every other son and sons of William Benson' by Eleanor.¹⁹

After the marriage, which took place 'soon afterwards',²⁰ Sir William conveyed one half of the manor of Poplar and Bromley to the trustees. In 1709 he bought, for £5,000 and 'at the desire of Joseph Earle and William Benson ... the capital messuage and lands of and in Newton Toney'. Before he died he bought a fee farm in the manor of Poplar and Bromley.²¹ In 1711 and 1712 he was selling off his stocks of iron and malt.²² By 1716 the estate income derived principally from rents, the capital now administered by the trustees being used to buy and maintain property. In 1717, with the purchase of further freehold lands in Newton Toney and in Amport, the trustees agreed that Sir William's promise to expend £10,000 was now fulfilled.²³

The marriage was a turning point for Benson, establishing him as a significant landowner and binding him to a family that enjoyed political, as well as mercantile, credibility. Joseph Earle, Benson's father-in-law, was the eldest son of Sir Thomas Earle, who had traded successfully in New England from 1647, and was both Mayor of and MP for Bristol in 1681. Joseph, who took over the family business, was Whig MP for Bristol from 1710 until 1727 and owned the Little Park estate in Bristol, which he developed.²⁴ His brother Giles was an MP for Chippenham from 1715 until 1722 and thence until 1747 for Malmesbury. From 1716 until 1720 he also, through his close acquaintance with the Duke of Argyll, had the confidence of the Prince of Wales.²⁵ The parliamentary success of his in-laws may have encouraged Benson's own political aspirations.

High Sheriff for Wiltshire in 1710, Benson stood for parliament at both Minehead and Shaftesbury in 1713 before winning the Shaftesbury seat in 1715. His success in Shaftesbury was undoubtedly assisted by his scheme, first introduced in around 1702, to supply the town with piped water from Wincombe Park, a Wiltshire estate with two large natural ponds on a hilltop just north of Shaftesbury.²⁶ The water was raised by a horse-engine at Wincombe Farm and conveyed into a large reservoir in the High Street. The maintenance costs were such that the project was abandoned three or four years later. In about 1714, the year before Benson stood successfully for parliament in Shaftesbury, he restored the system and again supplied the town with water, distributing it to all quarters of the town through lead pipes, although according to one account ‘in Summer it was seldom or never fit for nice uses, as for coffee and tea.’²⁷

The most remarkable fact about Benson’s parliamentary career was that within a few years of being elected he had managed to oust Sir Christopher Wren from the post of Surveyor General ‘to the amazement’, as another MP put it, ‘of everyone and the whole world besides’.²⁸ The Surveyorship was given to Benson to keep him happy until the lucrative position he really wanted – one of the two Auditors of the Imprests – became free. In 1717 Benson had managed to secure reversionary rights to the auditorship for himself and for Edward Wortley Montagu. According to Joseph Addison, writing to Wortley Montagu at the time:

Mr Benson, being convinced that forms of law would in their ordinary course be very tedious ... in the affair of the auditors, has procured the grant of a reversion for those places to you and himself, after which if an ejection ensues, you are in immediate possession. This ejection he believes, may be soon brought about by law, unless a voluntary surrender make such a proceeding unnecessary.... [this] affair being transacted by my Lord Sunderland.²⁹

The auditorships were held for life and as the ‘ejection’ hoped for by Benson did not take place

he had to look elsewhere. In 1725, Nicholas Hawksmoor reported that:

William B – n Esqr. In extream Need of an employment could find nothing at that time, but ye Office of Workes to fall upon, soe disguising himself under the pretence of an Architect got himself made Surveyour Generall and also power (assisted by ye worthy gentleman last mentioned) to Destroy the Settlement of ye Office, to Turn out Sr Chrisr. Wren.³⁰

The ‘worthy gentleman’ was ‘Mr Ayslaby, being Chancellor of ye Exchqr’.³¹ Benson had powerful allies in Lord Sunderland, the new First Lord of the Treasury and John Aislaby, the new Chancellor. Aislaby was to remain a close friend; Benson even named his youngest son after him.³² Most significantly, Benson also managed to win over the new king, perhaps with the assistance of the advantageously connected Giles Earle.³³ Benson’s construction, for George I, of a spectacular fountain at Herrenhausen, the King’s palace in Hanover, was perhaps the single act that got him the surveyorship. This creation is still attributed to Benson, but the credit should have gone to the Reverend Thomas Holland, an overly modest Amesbury curate with an aptitude for hydraulics, from whom Benson pinched the idea and the mechanic needed to put it into practice. Holland had devised a way of creating a water-jet up to 100 feet high using a chain pump. He provided such fountains at Wanstead for Lord Tilney and at Wilton for the Earl of Pembroke.³⁴ Benson passed off the invention as his own:

He made his late Majesty, and all the gentlemen and ladies that came with the King from Hanover, believe this performance to be his, and talked himself into the place of being Surveyor to the Board of Works ... this gentleman prevailed his Majesty to let him erect one of these engines at his gardens at Herrnhausen, which now performs very well, having for power the force of a whole river. But Mr Holland had neither the credit of this machine nor any profit of it, though his Majesty paid three times as much as was agreed for.³⁵

Benson must have encountered Thomas Holland in

Amesbury, having taken a 21-year lease on Amesbury House in February 1708.³⁶ The house was built by John Webb, reputedly to the designs of Inigo Jones, and owned by Lord Bruce. The lease allowed Benson to make improvements to the estate. These included replacing ‘the old gate house’ with ‘a handsome and convenient gate’; demolishing ‘the two old summer houses now standing upon the garden walls’ and repairing the walls; pulling down the old kitchen, bakehouse and outbuildings, and re-using the materials to ‘set up in a convenient place near (the house) . . . a new convenient and substantial kitchen, scullery and bakehouse’.³⁷ The lease also provided for Benson to build ‘in some convenient part of the . . . lands’ a lead cistern ‘and bring water into the same’ in order to supply the house and outbuildings at Amesbury. The lead was to be taken from ‘the old fountaine in the Garden’, which was to be stopped up, and any other lead or iron which Benson could find on the premises.³⁸

The absence of any further documentation relating to Benson’s tenure and the extensive building works of subsequent owners make it difficult to determine whether he carried out these improvements. The survival of two seventeenth-century lodges, Diana’s House and Kent House, suggests that he did not get as far as demolishing the two summer houses. However, Henry Flitcroft’s survey of the estate, undertaken in 1726 for its new owners the Duke and Duchess of Queensberry, probably gives a reasonable indication of Benson’s activities at Amesbury, including some of the planting (Fig. 7).³⁹ Flitcroft’s survey shows an orderly arrangement of ancillary buildings located close to the main house, suggesting that Benson may indeed have rebuilt the kitchen, scullery and bakehouse ‘in a convenient place near the house’, as required.

The location and date of ‘the old gate house’ is uncertain, but in the early seventeenth century there was a gate house near the George Inn.⁴⁰ It may even have been the medieval ‘gate with the gate house in the base court’, saved from demolition in 1543.⁴¹ No

gate house appears on Flitcroft’s survey, but a gate is shown near Kent House, at the easternmost corner of the estate. The gate piers, which survive today, are stylistically compatible with the dates of Benson’s tenure (Fig. 8). They are about 15 feet high, semi-rusticated and surmounted by cornices topped with square bases and stone balls. If, as appears likely, Benson built them, his contribution to the Amesbury site was significant, changing the orientation of the estate by moving the main entrance from its earlier position near the George Inn. The new entrance allowed access from the London Road without travelling through the centre of the town. Indeed, the avenue shown to the east of the gates was clearly planted for this purpose.

Although the extent of his work at Amesbury cannot be established with certainty,⁴² the lease is nonetheless instructive, revealing that Benson’s plans for living in an old house were contingent on his having licence to modernize it, improving both the service and access facilities and the appearance of its most public aspects, the gate and estate walls. It suggests too that Benson may have intended to live there for longer than he did, the purchase of the nearby Newton Toney estate in 1709 and the subsequent construction of Wilbury being at this stage unanticipated. In showing that Benson had licence to dismantle buildings on the estate, the lease supports John Bold’s suggestion that Benson could have been using material from Amesbury for his garden buildings at Wilbury.⁴³ It could also shed light on other activities at the new house, particularly Benson’s readiness to re-use existing materials and to provide adequate and convenient service accommodation.

Benson was living at Amesbury when he built Wilbury House on his new estate at nearby Newton Toney. The design was based on the earlier house, with neo-Palladian details.⁴⁴ It is likely that the idea of using Amesbury as the primary source for the design was Benson’s. It is not hard to imagine what sort of an impact Webb’s house must have made on

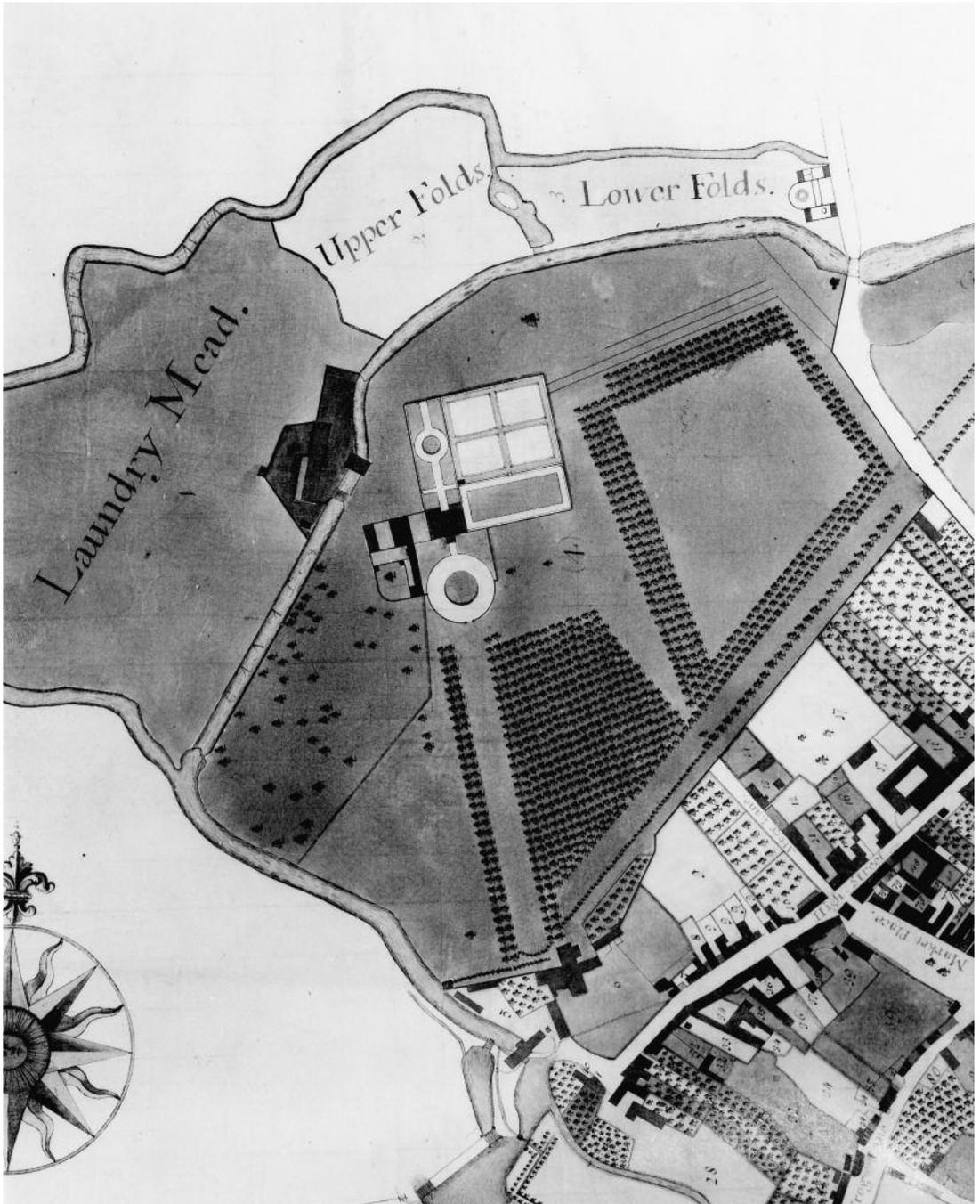


Fig 7. Henry Flitcroft, survey of Amesbury, 1726. *Wiltshire Record Office*



Fig 8. Gate piers near Kent House, Amesbury. *Anna Eavis*

him. By comparison with Bromley House, Amesbury, although already about 50 years old, must have seemed radically forward-looking. And at this time Amesbury was believed to be by Inigo Jones, which gave it added kudos. Wilbury has been described as a villa or occasional residence, the assumption being that Benson's principal house was elsewhere.⁴⁵ It is true that Benson retained Bromley House and, for a time, maintained the Benson connection with the parish. In 1714 he commissioned from the Essex sculptor Thomas Stayer a vast monument for the church at Bromley (Fig. 9). Of veined white marble, it was dedicated to his parents, but it also bore the names of the entire Benson family, including those still living.⁴⁶ The monument was – at

16 feet high by 7 feet wide – by far the largest and most ostentatious in the church and cost Benson the considerable sum of £121.⁴⁷ That Benson occupied Bromley House after his father's death, however, is unlikely. He appears to have made efforts to establish his family in Wiltshire. His second son, born in 1710, was baptized at Amesbury. All of his younger children were baptized in the church at Newton Toney and most of them chose to be buried there, as did his wife Eleanor, which suggests an affiliation to the place.⁴⁸ And as late as 1730 Benson was styling himself 'William Benson of Wilberry Park'.⁴⁹ It is possible that, during his Surveyorship, he retired to a house at weekends within a few hours drive of London. In a letter to Lady Sundon, in which he discusses a staircase to be painted for her by James Thornhill, he writes on a Sunday morning from 'South Lodge' and talks of 'being obliged to return to town this evening'.⁵⁰ By the mid-1720s he did have a villa of sorts, but it was not in Wiltshire.

In 1719 Benson's brother Benjamin bought Brownsea Island, in Poole Harbour.⁵¹ He conveyed it to William Benson in 1724, who converted the sixteenth-century blockhouse on the island into a house for himself.⁵² The local citizens were enraged and the Corporation of Poole petitioned the king in protest, arguing that the 'castle' and its garrison of six men had, since Henry VIII's time, protected the town from:

the insults of our enemies and more especially from the ravages ... committed by privateers which are ... continually lurking up and down and infesting our coast, and have even attempted to take ship within our havens, which they would have often effected, had they not been beaten off by cannon from that castle ... But now ... WB Esq, having lately bought the said island of Brownsea, has set up a title to the said castle, it being situate on his island, and the same castle ... has actually spoiled or converted to a dwelling house.⁵³

The crux of the issue was whether the castle belonged to the Corporation of Poole or to the owner of the island. In Benson's mind there was no doubt.



Fig 9. Thomas Stayner, monument to Sir William Benson and his wife Martha, erected 1714. Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives

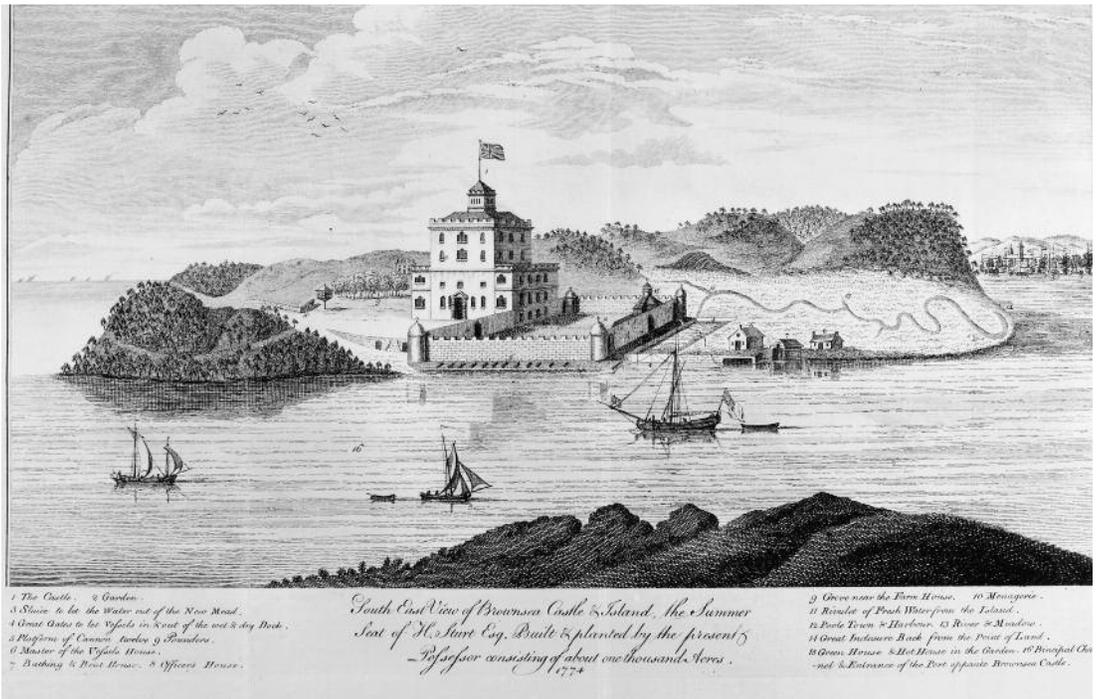


Fig 10. Isaac Taylor, south-east view of Brownsea Castle and Island, 1774.
English Heritage (NMR)

He argued that the Government never owned the Castle, and that any use of it by the Crown or Corporation of Poole was only by the permission of the proprietor. The case rumbled on and was referred to the Attorney General in 1726, at which time Robert Crosby, solicitor for Poole warned the Corporation:

I have left all the papers with the Attorney General for Mr Benson to take coppies against next meeting. I have sent you an abstract of all the papers if you have any more pray send them to me especially originals – when and by whom the Castle was erected. Mr Benson took notice you suggested the Castle was built in Henry 8ths time which I believe you was mistaken in. Mr Benson goes into the Country in a day or two to examine witnesses about this affair for affidavits to lay before the attorney so I think it advisable for you to get more affidavits to support your position.⁵⁴

The Corporation managed to assemble a number of ancient witnesses, who testified to the history of the castle but in the end, Benson seems to have persuaded the Attorney General to abandon the case.⁵⁵

It is difficult to ascertain exactly what sort of house Benson built. No contemporary drawings of it are known to survive and rebuilding by subsequent owners has obliterated evidence of Benson’s tenure.⁵⁶ Sir Humphrey Sturt, the owner from 1765, is credited with having transformed the castle and cultivated the island. It was claimed that when he purchased the island it had

an Old House only, which was in a very ruinous state and being of little or no value, and without Gardens, since when Mr Sturt built a very excellent Castle thereon, with suitable offices ... besides laying out

Gardens and building Hothouses therein ... Mr Sturt also built a malthouse, brew house, stables and he also planted a large tract of ground.⁵⁷

This account, from a certificate of improvements made by Sturt, may be misleading in its implication that little significant work was carried out before 1765. Benson entertained Frederick, Prince of Wales at his house there in 1741,⁵⁸ which in itself suggests a building of note. He sold it before 1744, when a Southwark gentleman, Thomas Chamberlain, conveyed it to John Lock, a mariner from Portsea. The deed of sale lists the castle, two tenements, a barn, a stable, a turfhouse and a blacksmith's shop.⁵⁹ It is possible that Lock neglected matters to such a degree that Sturt was indeed faced, twenty years later, with little more than a ruined house. John Hutchins, who visited the island before and during Sturt's ownership of the island, noted that of Benson's castle all that survived was 'an house, in which is a tolerable large room'.⁶⁰ He also suggested that Sturt did not have to start entirely from scratch, but instead 'made great additions to the castle, preserving the great hall built by Auditor Benson'.⁶¹ Charles Van Raalte, a later owner of the castle, stated that Sturt preserved not only Benson's 'great hall' but also the 'ancient staircases and carvings'.⁶² The 'great hall' may have been the saloon '24ft square, and the same in height' described in 1829, comparable in proportion to the south hall at Wilbury.⁶³ The earliest known drawing is by Isaac Taylor and was made during the ownership of Sir Humphrey Sturt (Fig.10). Although it is not possible to distinguish Benson's work from Sturt's with certainty, the means by which the block-house was adapted as a castle are clearly visible. Hutchins's description of Benson's 'house with a large room' suggests that Benson simply converted the square, single-storey building, its walls 9ft thick and 40ft long, into a lodge with a rusticated entrance, a 'cube' saloon and some small upper rooms.

It is worth considering why Benson bought the island, at a remove from the rest of his country

estates. His brother Benjamin, a stone merchant and his right hand man at the Office of Works, who bought the island first, may have hoped to capitalise on stone or mineral extraction. Copperas manufacture, for example, was flourishing when Celia Fiennes visited the island in the 1680s, but had petered out by 1704.⁶⁴ When Benson acquired it from him he seems to have done so with the express purpose of building a house, which he started immediately. This was notable because – as the citizens of Poole pointed out – no previous owner of the island had ever contemplated living there. According to Hutchins, Benson 'sometimes resided [at Brownsea] for his diversion'⁶⁵ and it is undoubtedly the case that he bought it as an occasional residence. He may simply have conceived of the house as a bathing lodge. He owned two editions of Flayer and Barnard's *History of Cold Bathing*, a book first published in 1722, which advocated the therapeutic properties of cold bathing as practised by the Ancients. The existence of a 'great hall', however, suggests something a little more ambitious. He owned a copy of *Descriptions des Maisons de Pline* and, while not achieving anything on this scale, perhaps wished to develop Brownsea, with its stunning scenery, as a maritime villa like Pliny's at Laurentum. There may be a further dimension. Brownsea was then – and still is – remarkable for its flora and fauna. This must have appealed to Benson, who owned many books on natural history. He is said to have paid a botanist £200 'to collect all the curious plants in the island, to the number of several hundreds, which were pasted up in the hall.' This display was the showpiece of the house.⁶⁶

Benson's library, which at the time of his death comprised about 2000 books, shows him to have been a keen Latinist with a particular devotion to Virgil, owning over 90 editions of, or commentaries on, the poet's works.⁶⁷ In 1725, the year after he began building at Brownsea, Benson published his own translation of parts of Virgil's *Georgics*. In it he

advocated Virgilian methods of cultivation, including the importation of plants recommended by Virgil, a practice that he himself carried out. He refers to a type of grass which he imported from Persia and to the difficulty of obtaining *cytissus* (a plant celebrated as cattle feed by Virgil) from anywhere other than a garden in Naples.⁶⁸ In his view that Virgil's methods should be adapted for modern use Benson was perfectly in accord with the thinking of Richard Bradley, the first professor of Botany at Cambridge University.⁶⁹ In 1725, the year of Benson's publication, Richard Bradley published his *Survey of Ancient Gardening & Husbandry*. This was primarily an evaluation of the writings of Cato, Varro, Virgil and other classical writers with suggestions for using ancient methods in contemporary husbandry. Bradley too noted the usefulness of *cytissus* and advocated its development in England. He also revealed plans to set up a botanic garden in Cambridge. Bradley made a persuasive case for the identification and cultivation of rare plants, along the lines of Dutch botanic gardens, including the import of exotic specimens. His plans for a research area, where exotic plants of economic importance could be studied, cultivated and propagated to start new agricultural enterprises in other parts of the world may well have appealed to Benson, and Brownsea would have been the perfect location to experiment in this way. According to Van Raalte, Benson 'brought the island into a more advanced state of cultivation ... and he lavishly planted it with various kinds of trees'.⁷⁰ It was more recently claimed that Benson 'planted more than 10,000 saplings, to the benefit of the existing great and lesser spotted woodpeckers that welcome the rotting boles of his trees'.⁷¹ Unfortunately neither of these assertions were supported by any evidence, and Hutchins reported that it was Sturt who began planting trees on the island.⁷² Benson's use of the saloon as a *cabinetto* of botanical specimens, however, is compelling.

Virgil's *Georgics* were translated into English for the first time in 1692 by John Dryden and published

with an affirming introduction by the young Joseph Addison. Benson used the occasion of his own publication to pour scorn on Dryden's work. His edition presented on each page the Latin version, sandwiched between his own translation and Dryden's version, and was amply referenced with self-justifying footnotes.⁷³ His principal criticism was of what he perceived to be Dryden's inadequate grasp of the principles and practice of husbandry. He devoted much space to correcting Dryden's interpretation of agricultural details and claimed, in his introduction, that much English farming was based on Virgilian husbandry:

In those parts of England which the Romans principally inhabited all along the Southern Coast, Latin words remain to this hour among shepherds, and ploughmen in their rustic affairs ... there is more of Virgil's Husbandry put in England at this instant than in Italy itself.

Benson's claims were taken seriously enough by agronomists for Jethro Tull to have to deny them in 1733.⁷⁴ Stephen Switzer came immediately to Benson's defence, devoting the editorial of his August issue of *The Husbandman* to repudiating Tull's anti-Virgilian stance. Benson's participation in this debate and his detailed comments about methods, supported by one of the leading writers of the day, suggests that he had more than a passing acquaintance with the subject. More significantly, it gives a telling glimpse of how he viewed the farming of his lands in Wiltshire and Hampshire. Given the tone of his writing, it is not far fetched to suppose that Benson perceived himself as embodying and practising classical virtues and principles.

Benson had another, more conventional, kind of occasional residence in the house he built in Grosvenor Street, one of the earliest streets to be laid out as part of the Grosvenor family's development of their Mayfair lands in the 1720s. In 1725 he and his brother Benjamin took assignment of a building agreement for 36ft of frontage on the south side of Grosvenor Street. Their plot extended from

Grosvenor Street to Mount Street. In it the brothers built two narrow houses, each only 18ft wide.⁷⁵ Whereas Benjamin let his house from time to time, Benson retained his for his own occupation until 1753, the year before his death. After this it was occupied by his youngest son John Aislabie Benson and finally by his grand-daughter and sole surviving heir Elizabeth.⁷⁶ After her death in around 1820 the two houses were knocked into one. The house was rebuilt by Detmar Blow in 1910.⁷⁷

No drawings of Benson's house survive, so in the *Survey of London's* excellent volume on the Grosvenor Estate it is one of the few buildings not illustrated. Houses built on Grosvenor Street varied considerably in size, with frontages ranging from 17 to 55 feet. Benson's, therefore, was one of the narrowest. Although, for obvious reasons, a unified design for the entire street was not attempted, a degree of architectural homogeneity was achieved. Most houses had three main storeys and a garret with a brick facade, segmental-headed windows and a flat doorcase with projecting hood.⁷⁸ The inventory taken at Benson's death in 1754 describes a 3-storey house with garret.⁷⁹ Although one storey higher, the house may have looked a little like the one that Benson's friend Colen Campbell built for himself on nearby Brook Street. Campbell's house was only 20ft wide and was one of a pair that he built on a double plot at around the same time as the Benson brothers, in 1726 (Fig. 11).⁸⁰

The *Survey of London* has shown how internal arrangements varied from house to house.⁸¹ The narrowness of Benson's house limited the flexibility of the plan, which must have been one of the simplest on the estate, probably comparable to that of 13 Upper Brook Street, a 22ft wide house built in 1728 (Fig. 12).⁸² The 1754 inventory indicates that there were two principal rooms on each storey, one to the front and one to the rear of the building, with only one staircase. The ground floor rooms appear, from the wainscot and deal furniture they contained, to have been for private, rather than public use. In the

passage, however, which must have given onto the staircase, was a mahogany table, a table clock and a pair of painted floor cloths. The dining room and drawing room were on the first floor. The dining room, large enough to seat six people for dinner, was furnished with a mahogany oval dining table and mahogany chairs upholstered in brass-nailed black leather. There was a large mirror in a gilt frame and a walnut desk, bookcase and chamber table. The floor was covered with a painted cloth. The drawing room had yellow silk curtains, yellow-upholstered walnut chairs, a mahogany pillar and claw table and – for more comfort than the dining room – a Turkey carpet. Benson's bedroom, hung with yellow harrateen, was at the front of the house on the second floor. His wife's, at the back of the house, was hung with green serge. On the top floor were two garret bedrooms, probably used by servants. Certainly, by 1800, when a fire seriously damaged the upper part of the house, 'the servants were the greatest sufferers, their property being all in the attic storey and none saved'.⁸³ Comparison with other Grosvenor Estate plans suggests that while the kitchen and wash-house may have formed a one-storey block at the back of the house, the remaining ancillary accommodation was probably located at the far end of a yard or garden. Benson had inconvenienced his neighbours by refusing to give up any part of his plot for a public stable yard.⁸⁴ His own stable was two-storeyed, with a bedroom on the upper floor. During the 1800 fire, much of his grand-daughter Elizabeth Benson's 'valuable furniture was preserved and conveyed through the gardens into the stables'.⁸⁵

Although he always maintained a principal residence elsewhere, the Grosvenor Street town house was useful to Benson for the rest of his life and it was subsequently adapted for the bachelor existences of his son and grand-daughter. It was also up-market. The westward development of London by and for the upper classes during the eighteenth century has been well documented. In 1735 Grosvenor Street was described as 'a spacious well

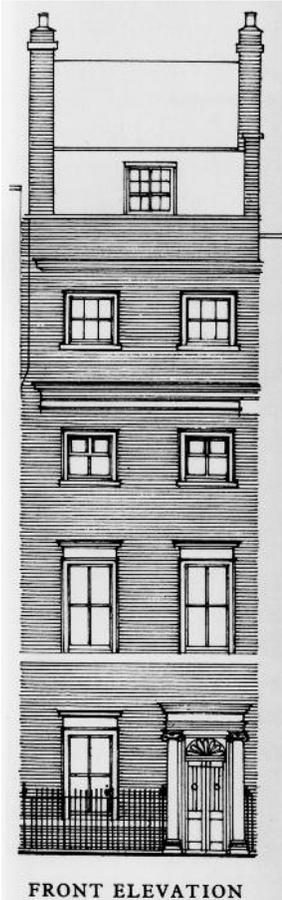


Fig 11. Colen Campbell's house, no. 76, Brook Street, London, built to his own design. Campbell's house had two storeys and a garret; the two top storeys were added in 1871-2 by Thomas Cundy. *Crown copyright (NMR).*

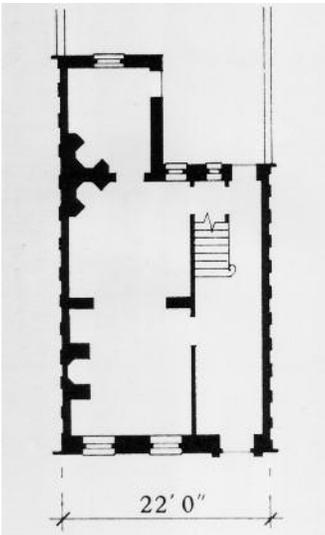


Fig 12. Ground plan of no.13, Upper Brook Street, London, built in 1728 (demolished). *Crown copyright (NMR).*

built street, inhabited chiefly by People of Distinction'.⁸⁶ Benson, in abandoning his east London address and acquiring a west London one, was acting according to his class and social aspirations. The village he left behind, Bromley St Leonards, went into decline at about this time. By the 1740s Bromley House could no longer be sustained as a family home and was being used as a school. It was demolished in the early years of the nineteenth century and by 1900 the site of the fishponds were covered with factories 'and the gardens by rows of small houses'.⁸⁷

Brownsea and Grosvenor Street were both investments that Benson made independently of his marriage settlement. As such they were his to dispose of as he chose. Bromley and Wilbury, on the other hand, were to devolve, along with the estates in North Stoke and Ampport, to his eldest son Earle and thence to Earle's heirs. Benson's wife Eleanor died in 1721, and within six months Benson had married Elizabeth King, a woman 'of no fortune' whom he had engaged to look after his two daughters, Martha and Eleanor.⁸⁸ He and Elizabeth had five more children, of whom two – Elizabeth and John Aislabie – were to survive into adulthood. While his daughters could be married off, there was no provision for the youngest son. In addition, Bromley, a large house with a considerable estate, appears to have become something of a millstone around Benson's neck, involving him in ongoing and expensive efforts to defend his right to the title.⁸⁹

In 1729 when his eldest son Earle came of age, Benson took the opportunity to initiate a process that would release the capital tied up in the settled estates.⁹⁰ The young Earle Benson, travelling in Europe with his private tutor, was summoned from Utrecht to sign a document that barred the entail. It was agreed that the estates should be sold, the proceeds being divided between father and son and invested in New South Sea annuities, pending the purchase of a new estate no more than 40 miles from London. North Stoke was sold in 1729, Bromley in

1730 and Wilbury in 1734, generating a total of about £35,000.⁹¹ It was later claimed that Benson had secreted Earle in lodgings in St Martin's Lane, where he was allowed no contact with friends or family, in order to pressurise him into signing. It was probably not difficult for Benson to persuade his young son to sign the document, given the combination of paternal authority and the promise of ready money. But once Earle realized – in 1734, when only £13,000 was invested in South Sea annuities – that he was not going to get half of the proceeds, he regretted having agreed to the plan. He complained to his father and, on 20 November 1734, Benson responded by banishing him from home.⁹² Earle removed himself to Amesbury and asked various friends to petition Benson on his behalf. On 20 March 1735 Benson sent him a letter, in which he claimed to have incurred expenses of £12,950 in the sale of the estates. These included various legal costs and all the furniture at Bromley House and Wilbury.⁹³

The next day Benson took a 29-year lease on a house in Wimbledon. Daniel Lysons mistakenly identified Benson's house as The Keir,⁹⁴ but the most likely candidate was an early seventeenth-century property on the south side of Wimbledon Common, demolished in 1763.⁹⁵ It was owned by Dame Mary Hamond, to whom Benson paid £60 per year for the term of his lease.⁹⁶ The house was built in or just before 1617 and by 1660 had been enlarged. An inventory taken in 1674 describes a two-storeyed house with a large hall, two parlours, dining room, staircase, five chambers, service buildings and a 'great barn'.⁹⁷ By Benson's death in 1753 the accommodation was more extensive, the seventeenth-century hall and parlour arrangement having been adapted for eighteenth-century tastes. The inventory taken at Benson's death distinguishes between 'old' and 'new' buildings, suggesting that he bought an old house and extended it.⁹⁸ There were two staircases, one referred to as the 'back' stair and the other as 'the Great Staircase' which was 'hung with India paper framed'. The Great Staircase

presumably gave onto the principal rooms, 'The Great Dining Room', the drawing room and the 'outer' and 'inner' libraries. The dining room could accommodate twelve for dinner, twice as many as the dining room at Grosvenor Street, and was similarly furnished in mahogany and black leather. It was panelled, with two pier glasses fixed in the wainscoting, and green harrateen hangings. The drawing room, also large enough to hold twelve people had, as at Grosvenor Street, a Turkey carpet and was furnished with a mixture of mahogany and walnut. It was spectacularly kitted out in crimson silk damask.⁹⁹

It is perhaps not surprising that Benson had two libraries, given that he was adapting his needs to the existing accommodation, which may not have provided one room big enough to house all of his books. The naming of the libraries (as 'inner' and 'outer') is intriguing in its implications for the layout of the house. Although it might be assumed that the inner library opened directly off the outer library (like the arrangement at Ham House, Richmond), the inventory states that there was a 'little closet' between the two rooms. Both were furnished with book shelves, but the inner library was clearly the bigger room and the more important. The outer library, with four chairs and a table, had one picture in it, a 'sea piece'. By contrast, the inner library, with four tables, six leather-upholstered chairs and a microscope, was hung with two landscapes, a print of the Duke of Cumberland, a three quarter-length portrait of King William III and, perhaps most interesting for our purposes, a portrait of Inigo Jones.

Benson's paintings seems to have been housed principally at Wimbledon rather than at Grosvenor Street where there is only mention of a few prints and 'a picture of a boy piping' in Mrs Benson's room. His collection included several portraits, some of family and friends and many with Hanoverian connections. His friend, the Treasury Solicitor Anthony Cracherode, had his own bed chamber at Wimbledon which was hung with pictures of George

I, George II and Queen Caroline. William III appeared in the Great Dining Room. Also in the Great Dining Room, which was, after all, one of the two public rooms in the house, was a large picture of Benson himself on horseback. In the Drawing Room, the other public room, there were two portraits of Benson, one three-quarter length and one half-length.

Although the kitchen, brewhouse and laundry may have been integral with the house, the inventory suggests that the remainder of the extensive ancillary accommodation (including a stable, coach-house, barn and granary) was arranged around a forecourt. There was also a courtyard in which there was a tree with a seat built around it and a green painted wooden settee. About the garden we know nothing, although the contents of the gardener's tool house suggest that it was well maintained.¹⁰⁰ In 1725 Richard Bradley had bemoaned the inability of the English gentry to grow exotic plants. He blamed the design of English conservatories which he described as 'pompous edifices' built with no regard for the requirements of tender foreign plants.¹⁰¹ Benson, who was importing seeds as early as 1725, may have overcome these inadequacies. At Wimbledon he had a greenhouse that contained, in addition to thirty pots of seeds and flowers, 'about fifty pots with Exoticks'.¹⁰²

Benson's house had five principal bedchambers. The 1754 inventory names one as Benson's, one as his daughter Elizabeth's and one as Anthony Cracherode's. Benson had a separate dressing room. There was also a bathing room, with a bathtub, a lead rubbing brush and two close stools. Another room is referred to as 'The Nursery'. Although its contents suggest that by 1754 it was simply used as a bedchamber, its name may indicate an earlier purpose. Given the respective sizes of the houses at Grosvenor Street and Brownsea, the sale of Wilbury in 1734 must have left him with nowhere to accommodate his children. By this date, of course, Earle was living in Amesbury and it is probable that William and Harry, Earle's brothers, had also left

home. There is evidence that Martha and Eleanor, Benson's two unmarried daughters by his first wife, continued to live in the vicinity of Newton Toney.¹⁰³ But by 1734 Benson also had three young children by his second wife (Elizabeth, aged nine; John Aislabie, aged seven; Susannah, aged three). His sale of Wilbury, conceived as early as 1729, was ostensibly carried out to generate funds for the purchase of lands within forty miles of the capital, suggesting that Benson had long planned to establish a principal residence closer to London.¹⁰⁴ In 1735, his long-awaited appointment as Auditor of the Imprest presumably required his regular presence there, perhaps sooner than he had anticipated. Pending the purchase of a suitable freehold estate, Wimbledon's proximity to the capital allowed him to commute between his Mayfair town house and his suburban family home with relative ease.

The Wimbledon lease may have provided a convenient residence, but it did not amount to a significant investment for Benson's heirs. And as Auditor, Benson must have felt the need for a grander house; it is hard to imagine that he would be content to have exchanged Wilbury Park for a leased house in Wimbledon. Towards the end of the 1730s he was promoting himself as a man of cultural significance, a gentleman of letters and a patron of the arts. In 1736 he wrote a set of essays, entitled *Letters concerning poetical translations and Virgil's and Milton's Arts of Verse*. These made clear his admiration for both poets – and his view of Milton as the natural heir of Virgil. In 1737 he erected a monument to Milton in the south transept of Westminster Abbey, buying a bust by Rysbrack for the plinth.¹⁰⁵ There was a little disquiet at so public an endorsement of the regicidal poet. Less than thirty years previously, the Dean of Westminster Abbey had ordered the obliteration of Milton's name on a monument to John Phillips.¹⁰⁶ But as Francis Peck, writing to Dr Grey in 1739, said:

Mr Benson ... is ... a gentleman, I assure you, of exceeding good sense, and learning, and candour... I do not see how Westminster Abbey is profaned by a

Cenotaph in honour of Milton, considered only as a poet. His politicks I have nothing to say to. You or I may write of Milton and Cromwell and still think as we please.¹⁰⁷

In reality Benson's adulation of Milton followed a rehabilitation already wrought by Addison, Richardson and Bentley. Others, like Alexander Pope, were appalled not so much by the veneration of Milton as by the self-promotion of Benson's monument.¹⁰⁸ The inscription, which might be expected to praise or quote the poet, records that:

In the year of our Lord Christ One thousand seven hundred thirty and seven
This bust of the Author of *Paradise Lost*
Was placed here by William Benson Esquire,
One of the two Auditors of the Imprests to his Majesty King George the Second
Formerly Surveyor General of the Works to his Majesty King George the First.

At the same time Benson also had a medal engraved, commemorating not only John Milton but, typically, his own part in erecting the monument. Engraved with a profile portrait of Milton based on a drawing by Faithorne, it bore a Latin inscription which translates as 'Rysbrach sculptured [the monument] of marble erected by William Benson Esq. In the Church of St Peter, Westminster, in the year of grace 1737'. The medal was to be presented annually, on the anniversary of Milton's birthday, to the author of the best poem in praise of *Paradise Lost*. Several copies in gold, silver and copper were struck. A total of 30 were still in Benson's possession at the time of his death, and they are mentioned in the wills of his children and grandson.¹⁰⁹

In 1738 Benson commissioned two further marble busts of Milton from Rysbrack (Figs. 13 and 14). One was a copy of the Westminster Abbey bust and showed Milton in old age which, according to George Vertue, Benson 'carry'd to his Country house which he has built'.¹¹⁰ The other showed Milton as a young man. Both are now in the Library at Stourhead. It has hitherto been assumed that Benson

had the busts made for Wilbury and that Henry Hoare acquired them when he purchased the house from Benson. But the busts were made four years after Benson had sold Wilbury to Hoare. They did not find their way to Stourhead until after 1796 when they were bequeathed to Richard Colt Hoare by Benson's grandson William Benson Earle, who had them in his house in Salisbury and wrote in a codicil to his will:

Should I ever be kindly permitted by my cousin Elizabeth Benson to call the two Marble Busts of Milton (by Rysbrach) my own of which I have had the possession so many years I should certainly add the same in a bequest to Sir R'd Hoare hoping & wishing to honour our great & divine poet with a permanent station at Stourhead.¹¹¹

If Benson's 'Country house' was not Wilbury, which house can it have been? The villa at Brownsea was too small to be described as such. Wimbledon hardly qualified as a 'country house' and, in any case, Benson did not, despite his alterations, build it. As we have seen, Benson planned to direct the revenue accruing from the sale of the settled estates in a freehold estate within reach of London. Two years after Benson installed himself at Wimbledon, his son Earle died of smallpox.¹¹² Earle was still living in Amesbury and there is no evidence that father and son had been reconciled. After his death Benson appears to have taken charge of the South Sea annuities. This, as well as his own share of the sale, gave him considerable capital.¹¹³

In addition to liquidating the settled estates during the 1730s, Benson was also preoccupied with the legacy to which his third son Harry was entitled. Benson's father-in-law, the rich Bristol merchant Joseph Earle, had died in 1729, leaving his landed estates to his childless, ageing brother Robert. His executors were empowered to invest Joseph Earle's personal monies 'in the purchase of some lands of inheritance'.¹¹⁴ The whole was remaindered, in the absence of a filial heir, to Harry. As Robert was unlikely to father a son, Harry was almost certain to



Fig 13. Michael Rysbrack, *Young Milton*, 1738. *The National Trust*



Fig 14. Michael Rysbrack, *Old Milton*, 1738. *The National Trust*

inherit. Joseph Earle had taken the precaution of stipulating twice in his will that Harry's legacy would be rendered null and void if Benson so much as attempted to get his own hands on any of the money.¹¹⁵ Benson thus kept well away from Joseph Earle's cash, despite asserting that his father-in-law still owed him £5,000,¹¹⁶ but he did help to direct the purchasing activities of the executors.

In 1730 Benson rather neatly sold the North Stoke estate to them, thereby killing two birds with one stone, making £4,000 for himself and securing the estate for Harry.¹¹⁷ In 1736 a landowner from Wallop, William Swanton, sent a note to Henry Hoare's land agent, asking if he knew of a purchaser for Grately Farm, which he was anxious to sell. Grately, situated between Newton Toney and Ampport, was in the vicinity of lands bought in 1720s by Benson and Hoare.¹¹⁸ All except two fields were let to a tenant.¹¹⁹ Hoare presumably tipped off Benson, who in turn arranged for Joseph Earle's executors to purchase the estate, along with additional lands from Benson and his friend Anthony Cracherode. Robert Earle died in 1737 and Harry thereby inherited a substantial estate that comprised Grately, North Stoke, and property in Bristol. As a condition of the legacy was the adoption of his grandfather's surname, Harry Benson thereafter became Harry Earle.¹²⁰

In 1741 Benson made a will.¹²¹ His eldest son was dead. His second son William was a sea captain in the East India Company.¹²² With his third son well provided for, he left everything to his youngest son John Aislabie, then 13 years old. When Benson died, however, William was shocked and angered by his exclusion. Claiming that Benson had repeatedly promised to leave him 'a better estate than his brother Harry's', William registered his protest by taking possession of his father's 'real estate, of which consisted only a dwelling house and about seventeen acres of land in Grately, Hampshire'.¹²³ That Benson built this house is strongly suggested by the fact that he kept, on the landing of the staircase at Wimbledon

'the model of Grately House'.¹²⁴ The circumstantial evidence suggests that he built it no earlier than 1737, when his son Earle's death enabled him to take full advantage of the income generated by the sale of the settled estates. It is probable that he purchased and retained the untenanted fields (one of 17 acres) listed in Swanton's note, while Joseph Earle's executors bought the rest of the farm.

The house appears as a block plan on an estate map drawn for Benson's grandson in 1790 (Fig 15).¹²⁵ That no other drawings of it are known to survive is regrettable, for this was a house of considerable size and pretension. A gateway with two substantial lodges gave entry onto a large square walled forecourt. The house itself consisted of a main block, approximately 96 feet wide by 45 feet deep, flanked by two long recessed wings. Each lateral wing terminated in a projecting block, which extended back towards the road, hidden from view by the forecourt and estate walls. The northernmost parts of these blocks must have contained the service accommodation. In the absence of further details one can only speculate that the garden or south front, which was about 240 feet wide, may have had a tower or pavilion at each end of its flanking wings. It gave onto a garden with a fountain and a ha-ha to the fields beyond. The design may, like other country houses of the 1730s, have drawn on Colen Campbell's influential Wanstead.¹²⁶ And although not on the scale of Holkham Hall or Wentworth Woodhouse, the design appears to have shared neo-classical elements with them, not least in its use of lateral link buildings. More unusually, it also had two rectangular inner courtyards, located to either side of the main house, behind the flanking wings.

Although the plan as a whole cannot be shown to derive from a specific antique source, the existence of the inner courts, an important feature of Roman houses as reconstructed by Scamozzi and Castell, may suggest a Roman influence. Giles Worsley has shown that the application of Roman architectural models, both in principle and detail, was not



Fig 15. Plan of Grately Lodge. *Hampshire Record Office*

uncommon by the mid eighteenth century, even among amateur architects.¹²⁷ Benson owned copies of Felibien d'Avaux's *Descriptions des Maisons de Plin*e (1699) and Castell's *Villas of the Ancients* (1729), which included reconstructions of Pliny's villas at Laurentum and Tuscum. His writings on Virgil strongly suggest that he perceived himself within a Classical landscape, perhaps literally, given the surrounding countryside. Not far away is Stonehenge, declared by Inigo Jones to be Roman; Benson had a copy of Jones's treatise on this subject.¹²⁸ A Roman road runs through Grately and nearby is Quarley Hill, an Iron Age camp which in Benson's time was believed to be Roman.¹²⁹ The house at Grately was the centrepiece of the Benson

family's consolidated country estates and lay surrounded by farmland and woodland, embodying his Virgilian ideal (Fig 16). His commission of the Milton busts in 1738 must have been made in conjunction with the construction of the house and would have been perfectly in keeping with its neo-classical overtones, given Benson's belief that Milton was Virgil's poetic heir.

It is not clear to what extent the house was used by the Benson family. In August 1741 Benson became 'slightly disordered in his understanding' while returning from Buxton, where he had been taking the waters. In September he became deranged, threw himself out of a second floor window and was subsequently, by order of his doctor, under the

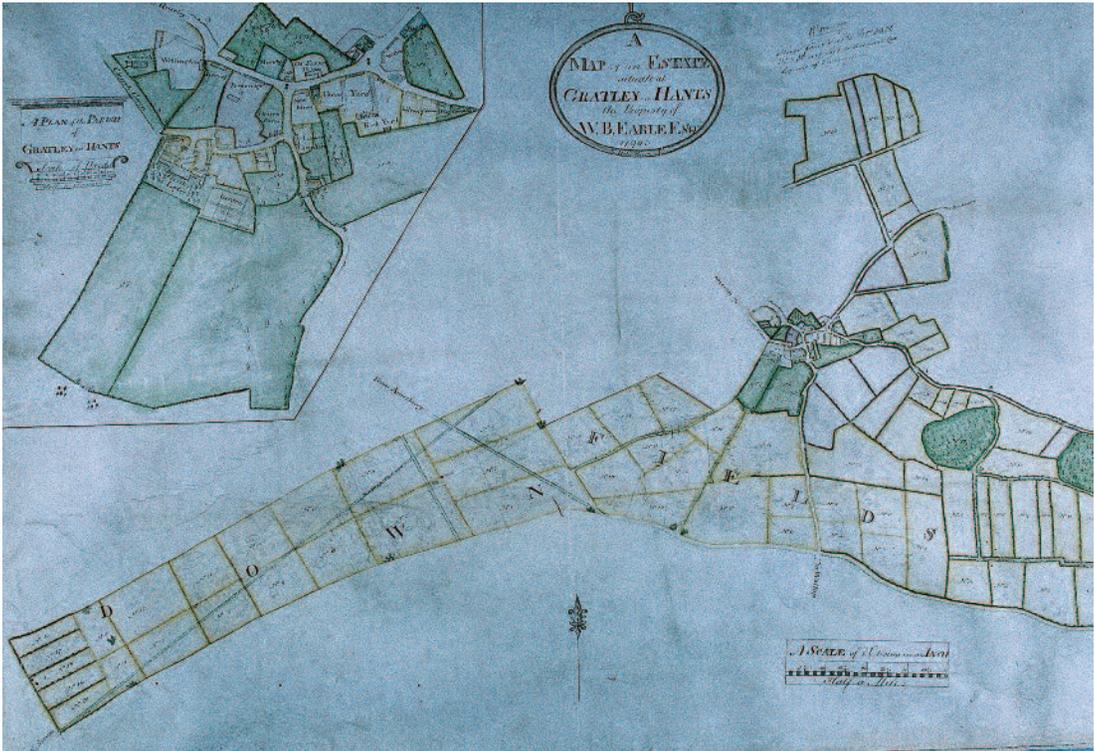


Fig 16. Estate map of Grately, Hampshire. *Hampshire Record Office*

supervision of two male attendants.¹³⁰ Although he had recovered by December the following year, his son William described him as being in a melancholy state until he died and it was said that in the latter part of his life 'he lived very retired, chiefly at Wimbledon'.¹³¹ The suggestion that Benson went into semi-retreat after his illness is partly supported by his sale, between 1741 and 1744, of the villa at Brownsea. Whether his children occupied Grately House is uncertain. In documents of 1738 and 1742, his son Harry Earle is described as being 'of Grately', but by 1750 was living in the Close at Salisbury.¹³² Benson's daughters Eleanor and Martha appear to have lived in the village of Grately, but whether in Grately House is not known.¹³³ Benson probably let the house on a series of short-term leases. In 1753

Miss Villiers Pitt lived there.¹³² The following year Benson, a week or so before he died, let it furnished to Francis Palmer for one year. This agreement was cancelled by William, who seized the house on his father's death, preventing the inclusion of its contents in the executors' inventory.¹³⁵

The house, by then called 'Grately Lodge', is unlikely to have been used as a country residence by William, who lived in Stoke Newington.¹³⁶ Isaac Taylor's *Map of Hampshire, Including the Isle of Wight*, drawn in 1759, shows it in the possession of W. Mitchel Crotley, suggesting that William had followed his father's example and let it.¹³⁷ William died in 1762 and bequeathed Grately Lodge to his wife Mary for her life and thence to his brother Harry, who already owned most of the village and

lived in the Cathedral Close at Salisbury.¹³⁸ There is no evidence that Mary Benson, who outlived Harry, ever lived at Grately. Harry's son William Benson Earle inherited the Grately estate from his father and must have acquired Grately Lodge following Mary Benson's death.¹³⁹ He remained in Salisbury and does not appear to have ever stayed at Grately Lodge, using the house of one of his tenants, Hugh Mundy, whenever he visited the village.¹⁴⁰ The 1779 enclosure award identifies a path 'for the use of ... William Benson Earle ... and his tenant or tenants, occupiers of his Mansion House at Grately ... and to ... any other person ... having lawful occasion to go to and from the said Mansion House'.¹⁴¹

The value of the Grately estate to Benson's son and grandson was agricultural. Both took a keen interest in its management, Harry building a granary and William Benson Earle investing in new 'instruments of husbandry' including a drill plough, a winnowing machine and a 'perambulator complete with its compass'.¹⁴² Neither appears to have been interested in the fabric of the house and its use by a series of tenants probably generated maintenance problems. William Benson Earle let the house and its grounds separately. In 1794, for example, Robert Berret was leasing from him 'the woodhouse within the walls of the Lodge Lower Court together with the Court and Garden adjoining'.¹⁴³ Although recorded in 1790 the house had disappeared by the time that a tithe map was produced in 1837. The field in which it had stood was called 'Great House Meadow'.¹⁴⁴ It has long since been built over.

Attracting an almost universally bad press, and of a corrupt vindictiveness apparent in much of the scanty documentation relating to his affairs, Benson's reputation has never recovered from his assault on the King's Works. Nevertheless, his adaptation, construction and inhabitation of several houses simultaneously, each serving a distinct purpose, is instructive. By 1726 he had built a country house at Wilbury, a maritime villa on Brownsea Island and a fashionable town house in Mayfair. By the late 1730s

he had added a suburban residence in Wimbledon and replaced Wilbury with a grander country residence at Grately. For a man who had not inherited a number of separate residences, this was unusual. With the exception of Wimbledon, Benson's houses all appear to have been neo-Palladian or classical in style, the country and maritime residences expressing architecturally his cultural preoccupations, which were truly classical and apparently unmediated by the Italian Renaissance. Benson's library contained far more books on classical verse, gardening and husbandry than it did on architecture and it is the importance which he accords to the poetic and the practical aspects of his Roman ideal which is of particular interest. The degree to which Benson took account of both in his settings for his houses, and especially Wilbury, where he claimed responsibility for 'all the ornaments within doors and without and all the implements of husbandry',¹⁴⁵ would benefit from further research.

In practical terms Benson's suite of houses equipped him to operate at the highest social level. Following his appointment as Auditor in 1735, he sought to establish himself as a significant cultural figure, patronising the arts, building a substantial country residence, entertaining the Prince of Wales at Brownsea. It was a rehabilitation cut short by the long-term effects of his madness in 1741. Brownsea was sold and Grately was let to a series of tenants. Of his children, only two, William and Harry, married and had children. That they did so before Benson's breakdown may be significant. Years later his granddaughter Elizabeth, having been courted by Elizabeth Harris as a bride for her son James (later Earl of Malmesbury) was suddenly dropped. In a letter to him, Elizabeth Harris explained why: 'some very good friends of yours are averse to an alliance in a family where there is a disorder that never wears out'.¹⁴⁶ Neither Elizabeth Benson nor William Benson Earle ever married. Elizabeth lived alone at Grosvenor Street and William Benson Earle remained in Salisbury, where he wrote poetry and

composed liturgical settings for the Cathedral. He inherited his grandfather's love of Milton, made his Grand Tour in 1764 and became a Fellow of the Royal Society and the Society of Antiquaries. Unlike his grandfather, however, he appears to have been popular, amenable and a great benefactor. When he died, the estate that Benson had worked so hard to secure was broken up and bequeathed to a number of his friends. William Benson Earle's virtues are commemorated in verse in Salisbury Cathedral on a monument designed by Flaxman and paid for by his principal legatee, the Reverend Horace Hayes.¹⁴⁷ His grandfather was not so affectionately remembered:

He posed as a Maecenas, a generous patron of art,
architecture, and learning, while his politics took the
form of recouping himself, by lucrative office, for his
over-indulgence in Aesthetics.¹⁴⁸

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NOTES

- 1 Anonymous, *Mr. S— O— his Last Speech in P—t on Saturday, January 24, 1718/19*, London 1719, 1. This satirical overview of Benson's achievements in office is reliable in its identification of his corrupt activities, listing all of those recorded by Howard Colvin (see below).
 - 2 Howard Colvin, *The History of the King's Works*, V, 1660–1782, London, 1976, 57–65.
 - 3 William Talman and John James have been suggested as Wilbury's architect by Giles Worsley and John Harris respectively [Giles Worsley, *Classical Architecture in Britain: The Heroic Age*, New Haven and London, 1995, 88; John Harris, *The Palladian Revival: Lord Burlington, His Villa and Garden at Chiswick*, New Haven and London, 1994, 14].
 - 4 James Dunstan, *The History of the Parish of Bromley St Leonard, Middlesex*, London, 1862, 48 and 76.
 - 5 London, Tower Hamlet Archives (hereafter THA), Deed 8091, Listing of holdings to support William Benson's parliamentary candidacy in Shaftesbury.
 - 6 Daniel Lysons, *The Environs of London*, II, London, 1795, 59.
 - 7 Lysons, *op. cit.*, 61; Dunstan, *op. cit.*, 157.
 - 8 Aldermaston Court and West Woodhay, for example, both built in Berkshire in 1636. Both are illustrated in Nicholas Cooper, *Houses of the Gentry 1480–1680*, New Haven and London, 1999, 181 and 184 respectively.
 - 9 Cooper, *op. cit.*, 135 and 160–61. Cooper also cites Condover Hall, Shropshire (1595), Bidston Hall, Cheshire (1620), and Charlton House, Woolwich (1607–12), suggesting that a fashion for combined gallery and loggias originated in London but was soon taken up in the provinces.
 - 10 Dunstan, *op. cit.*, 159.
 - 11 Lysons, *op. cit.*, 61.
 - 12 C.R. Ashbee (ed.), *Survey of London*, I, *The Parish of Bromley-by-Bow*, London, 1900 (hereafter *SoL*, I) 28.
 - 13 Dunstan, *op. cit.*, 90 and Lysons, *op. cit.*, 62–3.
 - 14 G.W. Marshall (ed.), *Le Neve's Pedigrees of the Knights Made by King Charles II, King James II, King William III and Queen Mary, King William alone, and Queen Anne*, Harleian Society, VIII, London, 1973, 494–95. Sir William was the son of Robert Benson of Yorkshire. His wife was the daughter of John Austin, jeweller, of Brittons, Essex.
- Le Neve notes that Sir William was not entitled to the arms he bore.
- 15 THA, 8094, *Account book for the trust estate of Sir William Benson*. Payments show that Benjamin and Harry were brought back from Holland for their father's funeral in 1712. Each was subsequently contracted to a merchant in Holland. In 1712 and 1713 payments are recorded for Septimus's wig, entrance to the Temple and a four month visit to Paris. He died, aged 16, in 1714.
 - 16 Kenneth Woodbridge, *Landscape and Antiquity: Aspects of English Culture at Stourhead 1718 to 1838*, Oxford, 1970, 18: 'your cousin Billy Benson is gone to Hamburgh, and from thence to Sweden' (letter from Richard Hoare, May 1701).
 - 17 Sweden was the principal source of iron at this time. Sir William's account book records regular payments for the sale of iron and malt during 1711 and 1712 [THA, 8094]. In 1707 Benjamin Benson, an English merchant based in Königsberg and probably Sir William's brother, was importing iron from Stockholm to England via Königsberg [London, British Library (hereafter BL), Add. MS 22,266, fol.14]. That the Benson family had Swedish contacts is implied by the choice of 'The Swedish resident Mr Lienerons' as godfather to Septimus, Benson's youngest brother, in 1697 [THA, Poplar & Bromley Parish Register]. Benson's own trip to Sweden in 1701 is also suggestive.
 - 18 The marriage settlement is summarized in PRO, C11/1672/13 and in Sir William Benson's will [PRO, PROB 11/528]. The original deed [Trowbridge, Wiltshire Record Office (hereafter WRO), 383/527] is so damaged that it is largely unreadable.
 - 19 PRO, C11/1672/13. The other trustees were Henry Austen, a clerk from Bromley and Henry Fane, a Bristol gentleman.
 - 20 *Idem*.
 - 21 At the cost of £2,608 14s [PRO, C11/1672/13].
 - 22 THA, 8094. In 1712 sales of iron and malt generated around £3,600. In December 1711 his South Sea shares yielded £3,509.
 - 23 THA, 8094. In 1713 payments were made for 'work done at several houses in Noble Street'. The team of craftsmen included William Roberts (bricklayer), Mr Lovett (carpenter), Richard Roberts (plasterer), Mr Worrall (smith), Mr Maslin (mason), Mr Wilson (glazier) and William Chapman (painter). Payments

- for repairs and ground rents continued to be made for these houses and others in the Minorities and Forster Lane until at least 1724. In 1715 'some houses in Bow' were purchased in the name of Benson's brother, Benjamin. In 1717 £75 5s was spent on freehold land in Newton Toney and £960 on land in Ampport, Hampshire. See also PRO C11/1672/13 for a summary of the purchases in relation to the terms of the marriage settlement.
- 24 Roger H. Leech, *The St Michael's Hill Precinct of the University of Bristol: Medieval and early Modern Topography*, Bristol, 2000, 21. As the new owner of the Little Park estate in Bristol he rebuilt the Manor House in Park Lane in the early 1690s and lived there until his death in 1729. From 1714 he developed two new residential streets on the estate.
- 25 For the political careers of the Earle family see Romney Sedgwick, *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons, 1715-1754*, London, 1970, II, 1-2. For Giles Earle see Leslie Stephen (ed.) *Dictionary of National Biography*, XVI, London 1888, 318-19.
- 26 John Hutchins, *The History and Antiquities of the County of Dorset*, 3rd ed., III, London, 1861-1870, 45.
- 27 *Idem.*
- 28 Jacob Banks, *A Letter from Sir Jacob Banks to William Benson, Esq.*, London, 1719, 9.
- 29 W. Graham (ed.), *The Letters of Joseph Addison*, Oxford, 1941, 377, letter to Edward Wortley Montagu (then Ambassador in Constantinople), 28 September, 1717.
- 30 Kerry Downes, *Hawksmoor*, London, 1959, 245, letter to Lord Carlisle, 1725.
- 31 *Idem.*
- 32 Trowbridge, Wiltshire Record Office (hereafter WRO), Newton Toney parish register records the birth, in 1728, of John Aislabie Benson.
- 33 This is certainly implied by the 1719 satire (see note 1), which notes that 'my Worthy Kinsman, Mr. G...s E...e, who spoke both first and last, has been very eloquent on my Behalf'.
- 34 John Theophilus Desaguliers, *A Course of Experimental Philosophy*, II, London, 1763, 521.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 527.
- 36 WRO, 283/44
- 37 *Idem.*
- 38 WRO, 283/44.
- 39 WRO, 944/1.
- 40 John Bold with John Reeves, *Wilton House and English Palladianism: Some Wiltshire Houses*, London, 1988, 96.
- 41 Bold, *op. cit.*, 95.
- 42 There is no evidence that he succeeded in supplying the house with water. While the presence of the canal is suggestive, it probably pre-dates Benson's tenure. His familiarity with the work of Thomas Holland may, however, have developed through his hydraulic plans for Amesbury.
- 43 Bold, *op. cit.*, 133.
- 44 *Ibid.*, 126.
- 45 *Ibid.*, 125.
- 46 *SoL*, I, 8. Although described by the Survey of London in 1900 it was, regrettably, not photographed by the Royal Commission when the church was surveyed in the 1930s. It was destroyed during the Second World War.
- 47 THA, 8094. The payments were made in instalments over several years.
- 48 WRO, Newton Toney Parish Register.
- 49 HRO, 28M83/1/16.
- 50 BL, Add.MS 20,102, fol. 12. Benson proposed an iconographic programme with a classical theme: 'Mr Thornhill agrees to paint some figures on every side and against you come to Town next week He will have made three or four sketches for your approbation. Wee shall pitch upon some little Ovidian story for each piece. I have chosen an Apollo for the ceiling which in my poor opinion does best in that situation because of the Glory which looks best overhead. Wee intend to have the Birth of Pallas for the Long Side one of the Herculean Labors for the right hand & a Daphne or a Pan on the left.'
- 51 Dorchester, Dorset Record Office (hereafter DRO), D1/2693B. He purchased it from William Clayton, Esq. .
- 52 *Idem.*
- 53 DRO, D1/2693A.
- 54 DRO, D1/2693B.
- 55 DRO, D1/2693A.
- 56 Very little information about Benson's ownership of the island survives. Matters are further obscured by local legends of Benson's madness and involvement in black magic, perhaps initially generated as a result of Benson's unpopularity in Poole and his breakdown in 1741, and still rehearsed in guidebooks today [see, eg., Rodney Legg, *Brownsea, Dorset's Fantasy Island*, Sherborne, 1986, 16].
- 57 DRO, Brownsea Island, *Certificate of Improvements made by Sir Humphry Sturt to castle and buildings on Brownsea*, 1817, 11 August.

- 58 John Hutchins, *The History and Antiquities of the County of Dorset*, I, London, 1774, 219.
- 59 DRO, Brownsea Island, Indenture between Thomas Chamberlain and John Lock, 9 March 1744.
- 60 Hutchins, *op. cit.*, 219.
- 61 *Idem.*
- 62 Charles Van Raalte, *Brownsea Island*, London, 1906, 77.
- 63 *Jones' Views of Seats of Noblemen and Gentlemen in England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland*, second series, London, 1829, u, u2. When the contents of the house were auctioned in 1857, the sales catalogue recorded a 'splendid large circular Roman mosaic pavement on the saloon floor' [John Lewis Partnership Archives, 1857 Sale Catalogue].
- 64 Christopher Morris, *The Journeys of Celia Fiennes 1685-1712*, London, 1947, 10-11; see also John Lewis Partnership Archives, *Brownsea History*, MS, 5.
- 65 Hutchins, *op. cit.*, 219.
- 66 *Idem*; Van Raalte, *op. cit.*, 77-8.
- 67 BL, B740/2, *A Catalogue of the Entire and Valuable Library of the Late William Benson, Esq., Sold by Samuel Baker at his house in York Street, Covent Garden, from 3-8 March 1755*. The catalogue is to be approached with some caution as it only represents Benson's collection as it was in 1755 and may omit books held at Grately (see below) and those allegedly destroyed during his later years at Brownsea. By far the greatest proportion of books concern husbandry or classics. The number of architectural books is, at about 12, relatively low and does not include any editions of Palladio.
- 68 William Benson, *Virgil's Husbandry: An Essay on the Georgicks*, London, 1725.
- 69 S.M. Walters, *The Shaping of Cambridge Botany*, Cambridge, 1981, 16-26.
- 70 Van Raalte, *op. cit.*, 70.
- 71 Garth Christian, 'Brownsea Island - A Famous Sanctuary Saved', *Country Life*, CXXXII, August 2, 1962, 244.
- 72 Hutchins, *op. cit.*, 219.
- 73 *Idem.*
- 74 Jethro Tull, *Essay on Tillage and Vegetation*, London, 1733, 'It's my opinion that the Italians in changing Virgil's field husbandry have acted more responsibly than these English who retain it, because I think it impossible for any scheme in general to be worse'.
- 75 F.H.W. Sheppard (ed.), *Survey of London, The Grosvenor Estate in Mayfair*, XXXIX, Part 1, General History (hereafter *SoL*, XXXIX), London, 1977, 21.
- 76 London, Westminster Archive Centre, St George's Hanover Square, Rate Books, 1726-1820.
- 77 F.H.W. Sheppard (ed.), *Survey of London, The Grosvenor Estate in Mayfair*, XL, Part II, The Buildings (hereafter *SoL*, XL), London, 1980, 45.
- 78 *Ibid.*, 33.
- 79 PRO, PROB 3/53/43. The rooms are listed as follows: 'The Back Garret; . . . the Fore Garret; . . . the Staircase; Mrs Benson's Room Two pair Backwards; Mr Benson's Room Two pair Forwards; The Dining Room One Pair; The Drawing Room; The Passage; The Hall; The Back Room Ground Floor; The Kitchen; The Washhouse; The Harness Room; The Stables; The Coachhouse; The Room over the Stable; The Room under the Stairs; The Wine Vault'.
- 80 *SoL*, XL, 15-17.
- 81 *SoL*, XXXIX, 107-111.
- 82 *Ibid.*, 109, Fig 3a.
- 83 *Gentleman's Magazine*, LXX, 1800, 477.
- 84 *SoL*, XL, 80.
- 85 *Gentleman's Magazine*, *loc. cit.*
- 86 *SoL*, XL, 33. In 1736, 22 of its 74 houses were occupied by titled inhabitants and many others by government officials and senior churchmen. See also M.H.Port, 'West End Palaces: The Aristocratic Town House in London, 1730-1830', *London Journal*, XX (1), 1995, 19.
- 87 *SoL*, I, *cit.*, 15.
- 88 PRO, C11/1672/13, *Chancery suit, William Earle Benson v John Aislabie Benson, Initial Pleadings, 1756*.
- 89 *Idem.*
- 90 *Idem.* The events summarized in the text are described in detail.
- 91 *Idem.*
- 92 *Idem.* Unfortunately, the name of the house is not given. In a letter to his son, quoted in this document, Benson wrote 'I leave you the liberty of my house until next Wednesday night that you may in the mean time provide for yourself elsewhere'.
- 93 *Idem.* The original letter is not known to survive, but is quoted in full here.
- 94 Daniel Lysons, *The Environs of London*, I, London, 1792, 539. The Keir was not built until 1789 [Richard Milward, *pers. comm.*].
- 95 London, Wimbledon Society Museum, Ref. A23.162. I am grateful to Dr Elspeth Veale and Mr. Richard Milward for their identification of Benson's house.

- 96 PRO, PROB 3/53/43.
- 97 London, Lambeth Palace, Inventory No. 1653.
- 98 *Idem*. The inventory lists the following rooms: The Garret over the New Buildings and Closet; The Little Closet on the Stair Head; The Closet lower down; The Bed Chamber over the Dining Room; The Maids Chamber on the Stairs; Mr Cracherode's Room; Miss Benson's Room; Mr Benson's Room; The Lobby; The Nursery; Mr Benson's Dressing Room; The Garrets over the Old Buildings – The first Garret on the left hand, The Second Garret backwards, The Third back Garret, The Fourth Garret or Apple Room, The Fifth or Further Garret; the Closet; The Staircases – the Back Stair and Passages, The Great Staircase; The Drawing Room; The Great Dining Room; The inner Library; The Room over the inner Library; The little Closet between the Two Libraries; The Bathing Room ...; The Outer Library; ...the Hall; The Butlers Pantry; The Kitchen Scullerys and Pantrys; The Brewhouse; The Cellar; The Laundry; The Closet by the Kitchen; The Out Pantry; The Greenhouse, Yard and Garden; The Barn, Coachhouse and Stable; The Room over the Coachhouse; The Loft; The Hamper Hole; The Granary; The Coachhouse Stable; The Fore Court; The Powder Room; The Further Courtyard; The Gardener's Tool House.
- 99 *Idem*, 'three pairs of crimson damask window curtains with brass rods ... three stuffed seats to the windows covered with crimson silk damask ... a settee covered with crimson silk damask . . '
- 100 *Idem*, 'A Scythe, Two Rools, Two Spades, a Dung Fork, Four Dutch Hows, an Edging Iron, a Paddle, a large Hoe ... a Turfing Iron, a Scoring Knife, Two Mattocks, Four watering Pots, a long cutting Hook, a Hammer, Two Dippers, Two pairs of Sheers, Two Rakes, Two Mole Traps, a Shovel, a Dung Barrow, Three Dozens of Pots'
- 101 Richard Bradley, *Survey of Ancient Gardening & Husbandry*, London, 1725.
- 102 PRO, PROB 3/53/43.
- 103 WRO, Newton Toney parish register. In 1735 William was 25 and Harry 23 years old. Eleanor was 22. Martha's age is not known, but she is likely to have been older than William. In 1742 Eleanor died not far from Newton Toney 'at Grately'. Martha was living in Grateley in 1758 when she made her will [HRO, 1764A/12]. Both women were buried at Newton Toney.
- 104 PRO, C11/1672/13.
- 105 John Kenworthy-Browne, 'Portrait Busts by Rysbrack' in Gervase Jackson-Stops (ed.), *National Trust Studies 1980*, London, 1979, 72. The bust was originally made for Thomas Serjeant, and was bought by Benson from Sir Joseph Eyles.
- 106 Arthur Penrhyn Stanley, *Historical Memorials of Westminster Abbey*, London, 1882, 262.
- 107 S.A. Allibone, *A Critical Dictionary of English Literature ...* Vol 1, London, 1872, 167.
- 108 'On poets' tombs see Benson's titles writ' [Alexander Pope, *The Dunciad in four Books*, London, 1743, Book III, line 325].
- 109 Edward Hawkins, Augustus W Franks and Herbert A Grueber, *Medallic Illustrations of the history of Great Britain and Ireland to the Death of George II*, II, London, 1885 and 1969, 524.
- 110 Kenworthy-Browne, *op. cit.*; see also Katharine Arundell Esdaile, *The Art of John Michael Rysbrack in Terracotta*, London, 1932, 34, on the terracotta model for one of the busts, now in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.
- 111 PRO, PROB 11/1273.
- 112 PRO, C11/1672/13 and PROB 11/685.
- 113 PRO, C11/1672/13.
- 114 PRO, PROB 11/636.
- 115 *Idem*, 'I declare that if William Benson on pretence of any money due to him ... molest my ... executor ... none of his children ... shall have any benefit...'
- 116 PRO, C11/1672/13.
- 117 *Idem*.
- 118 HRO, 28M83/1/1. In 1723 Henry Hoare settled an account with his agent Thomas Francis which included a payment of £13 6s for the conveyance of 'Gratley estate' to Mr Hoare. After Hoare's death in 1724 the title deeds to the land could not be found, 'but as Mr Auditor Benson was concerned in the purchase of the severall estates mentioned ... there is some reason to imagine them amongst his writings or left by him in the hands of somebody but he tells me he knows nothing of them'. Hoare had also purchased 'the manner of Greatly and a message & farm therein' in 1719.
- 119 HRO, 3M54/1 and 2.
- 120 PRO, PROB 11/636. Harry's wife and children also took this name, his elder son being known as William Benson Earle.
- 121 PRO, PROB 11/812.
- 122 PRO, C11/1672/13. He resigned his ship in 1750.
- 123 *Idem*.
- 124 PRO, PROB 3/53/43.

- 125 HRO, 28M83/1/10.
- 126 John Summerson, *Architecture in Britain, 1530 to 1830*, Harmondsworth, 1963, 192–194; Worsley, *op. cit.*, 127. Those closest to Grately included John Wood's Prior Park, begun in 1735 and John Sanderson's Stratton Park, Hampshire, built for Lord John Russell in 1731.
- 127 Worsley, *op. cit.*, 131–51.
- 128 Inigo Jones [John Webb (ed.)], *The most notable Antiquity of Great Britain, vulgarly called Stonehenge, restored*, 1655. Benson owned a copy of the 1725 edition.
- 129 C.F.C. Hawkes, 'The Excavations at Quarley Hill, 1938', *Papers and Proceedings of the Hampshire Field Club and Archaeological Society*, XIV, Part 1, 1938, 138. Hawkes shows that John Aubrey's erroneous description, in his *Monumenta Britannica*, of Quarley as 'a great Roman Camp', repeated in Gough's 1789 edition of Camden's *Britannia*, retained some credence as late as 1915. Benson's old friend Henry Hoare had a house in Quarley and, in 1723, he and Benson inserted a Serlian east window in the church, its exterior and interior inscribed, Roman fashion, with their names [Colvin, *Biographical Dictionary*, *cit.*, 123].
- 130 PRO, C11/1672/13.
- 131 Colvin, *King's Works*, *cit.*, 65. See PRO, C11/1672/13 for William Earle Benson's description of his father's ongoing melancholia (which may be overstated in support of his claim against his step-brother). See J. Nicholls, *Literary Anecdotes of the Eighteenth Century*, II, London, 1812, 139, for reference to Benson's withdrawal to Wimbledon.
- 32 HRO, M83/1/2,3 and 4. And in 1740 Harry Earle had registered the birth of his son William Benson Earle in Shaftesbury [DRO, Shaftesbury, St James parish register].
- 133 See note 96.
- 134 Francis Price, *A Series of Particular and Useful Observations made with Great Diligence and Care upon that Admirable Structure the Cathedral-Church of Salisbury*, London 1753. The list of subscribers to this volume includes Miss Villiers Pitt, resident of 'Greatley Lodge'.
- 135 PRO, PROB 3/53/43, 'since the deceased's death William Earle Benson Esq. hath ... taken possession of such estate pretending himself intitled thereto.' The inventory notes the exclusion of 'the furniture of the deceased at Grately'.
- 136 PRO, PROB 11/872. William Earle Benson died in Stoke Newington in 1762, having made his will there in 1758. In it he refers to 'Grately Lodge'.
- 137 Swindon, National Monuments Record, AO2232, PF33/7.
- 138 PRO, PROB 11/872.
- 139 Continuing uncertainty over the validity of William Earle Benson's will [PRO, PROB 11/872] – probate was still not granted in 1821 – may explain why his nephew William Benson Earle referred to the Milton busts as belonging to his cousin Elizabeth.
- 140 HRO, 28M83/1/2. This memorandum formalizes William Benson Earle's habit of using Mundy's House 'as he has always had, whenever he has visited Grately'. His father appears to have had a similar arrangement with Hugh Elton, in whose Grately home he retained personal possessions [PRO, PROB 11/995].
- 141 HRO, Q1/19.
- 142 *Idem*; and PRO, PROB 11/995.
- 143 PRO, PROB 11/1273.
- 144 HRO, 21M65/F7/99/1–2, *Grately Tithe Map and Award*.
- 145 PRO, C11/1672/13.
- 146 HRO, 9M73/G1256/41. Letter from Elizabeth Harris to her son James, 11 November 1769. I am grateful to Rosemary Dunhill for this reference.
- 147 William Benson Earle's will [PRO, PROB 11/1275] provides much information on his interests, friends and charitable bequests. See J. Nichols *Illustrations of the Literary History of the Eighteenth Century*, London 1828, 346–47, for a character sketch and biographical note. For details of the Flaxman monument see Edward Croft-Murray, 'An Account Book of John Flaxman, RA', *Walpole Society*, XXVIII, 1939–40, 60.
- 148 *Wiltshire Archaeological Magazine*, XLVI, 1932–34, 135–6.