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OULTON PARK, CHESHIRE: AN ATTRIBUTION TO TALMAN

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Looking through photographs in the *Country Life* archive for a book on lost country houses, one early eighteenth-century house stood out, Oulton Park, Cheshire, badly damaged by fire in 1926 and subsequently demolished.¹ It is not a house that has received much attention. Though illustrated in *Country Life* in 1908 and in Charles Latham's *In English Homes* in 1909,² it is unmentioned in Kerry Downes's *English Baroque Architecture*, and James Lees-Milnes's *English Country Houses: Baroque* includes only a brief description and a single view.³ Similarly, Peter de Figueiredo and Julian Treuherz's *Cheshire Country Houses* (1988) gives the house 13 lines and one photograph.⁴ Perhaps the fullest account is that in John Martin Robinson's *A Guide to the Country Houses of the North-West* (1991), but even this has only a single photograph.⁵

It is generally accepted by these authors that the house was built by John Egerton in 1715 or 1716 and altered by Lewis Wyatt for Sir John Grey Egerton in c1816–26. No firm attribution to an architect is given, though, following a tradition that dates back to the early nineteenth century, Lees-Milne mentions Vanbrughian touches. Robinson suggests one of the Smiths of Warwick, on the grounds of similarities with Cottesbrooke Hall, Northamptonshire, and Mawley Hall, Shropshire.

The *Country Life* photographer, probably Latham himself, took only four views: of the north or entrance and north-east fronts; of the south and south-west front (Fig. 1); of the small dining room showing part of one wall and, most impressive of all, the hall (Fig. 2). Two less oblique views of the

entrance front in the National Monuments Record reveal the pediment more clearly (Fig. 3) and there is a photograph of the south front of the house after the fire.⁶ An early image of the north front made in about 1733 can also be found on an estate survey carried out by William Williams (Fig. 4).⁷ Though this needs to be treated with some care as it is not entirely accurate (as in the treatment of the entablature of the frontispiece), it shows that the house originally had a central cupola and more urns along the rooftop balustrade. This is confirmed by an unpublished sketch of Oulton Park by Abraham Dickson, now in the Yale Center for British Art, of about 1736, which again shows a central cupola.⁸ A copy by John Broster of an early sketch, with a cupola, is in the library at Tatton Park, Cheshire.⁹ The Cheshire Record Office holds a later eighteenth-century engraving of a view by M. Griffith (Fig. 5).¹⁰ There is no known view of the south front before 1908.

The more one looks at the photographs and drawings of Oulton Park, the more unusual it appears. The entrance front was fifteen bays wide. In the centre was a three-bay stone frontispiece with straight, French quoins at the corners, round-headed windows on the ground and first floors and Corinthian half columns supporting a pediment with an elaborately carved tympanum packed with military symbolism. Unusually, the entablature broke forward over the columns, which meant that the lower corners of the pediment also broke forward. The pediment was incorporated into a raised attic, which was the base for the octagonal cupola.

Flanking the frontispiece were intermediate



Fig. 1. South front, Oulton Park, Cheshire (Charles Latham, 1908). *Country Life*.



Fig. 2. Hall, Oulton Park, Cheshire (Charles Latham, 1908). *Country Life*.



Fig. 3. North front, Oulton Park, Cheshire (photographer and date unknown). *National Monuments Records Centre*.

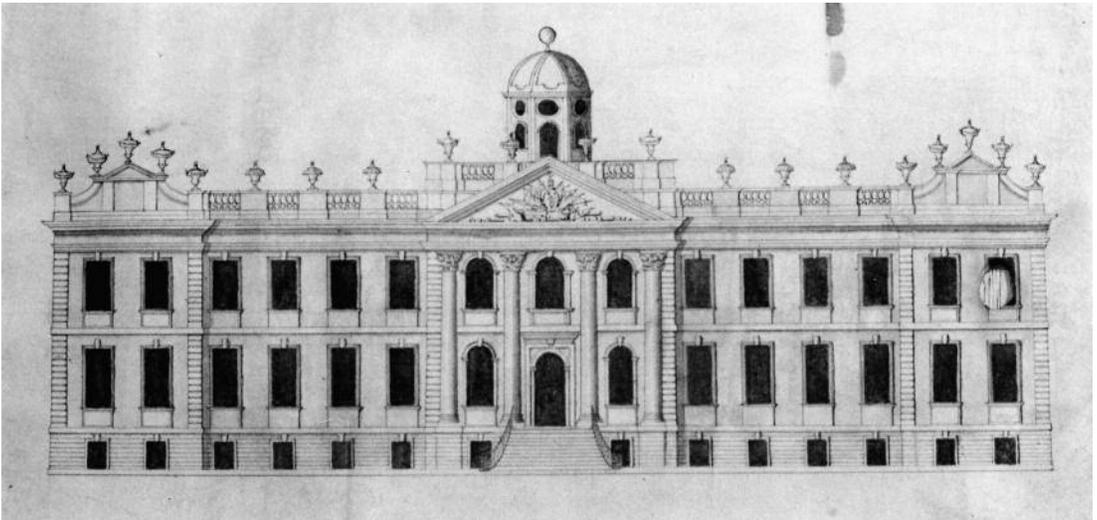


Fig. 4. William Williams, drawing of the north front of Oulton Park, made for an estate survey *c*1733. *Cheshire Record Office*.

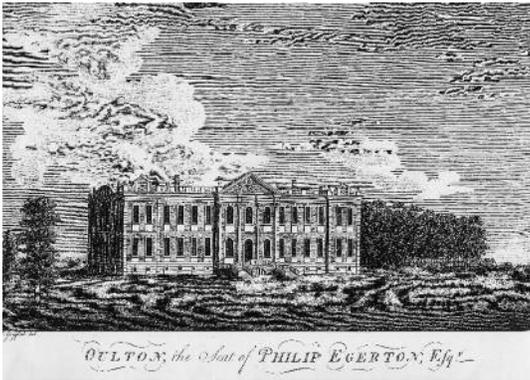


Fig. 5. M. Griffith, 'Oulton the Seat of Philip Egerton Esq' (engraving, c1770–86). Cheshire Record Office.

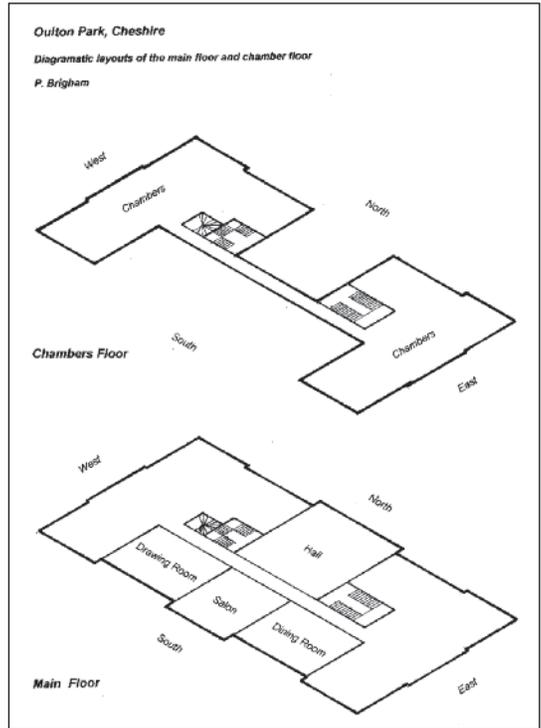


Fig. 6. Isometric plan of the ground and first floors of Oulton Park. Peter Brigham.

sections of four bays, with two almost equal-height storeys of brick over a basement floor of channelled stone. The window surrounds were of stone, with a central keystone, aprons under ground- and first-floor windows, a plat band and an emphatic entablature and balustrade. The two-bay end sections repeated this, but with the balustrade replaced by what might be described as 'Dutch' gables (though the end pavilions of Palladio's Villa Barbaro at Maser (Fig. 16) are a plausible source).¹¹ The roofline was decorated with twenty Baroque urns.

The side elevations, facing east and west, were of seven bays with a central three-bay segmental pediment flanked by a pair of chimneystacks with bulging acanthus leaf decoration. The window treatment repeated that of the main elevation but without the entablature or the aprons. The Griffith engraving (Fig. 5) shows a central door into the rustic and the *Country Life* article describes a sunk courtyard

beneath the east façade, carefully concealed by walls and balustrade, that gave access to the offices in the basement floor.

All this is unusual, but what made Oulton Park remarkable, perhaps unique, was the south or garden front. This was of thirteen bays, with two-storey pavilions with 'Dutch' gables flanking a tall, nine-bay, single-storey *piano nobile*, with an attic over the central three bays. The central three bays projected slightly, the corners being marked by Ionic pilasters supporting a deep Ionic entablature. This entablature was continued over the intermediate ranges, which also had a very tall parapet wall and balustrade. The post-fire photograph shows that the central nine bays of the basement were lit by circular windows, though the end pavilions had square-headed windows, like those on the north front.

Thus Oulton is not what it initially appears, a conventional double-pile, two-storey house, but

wraps two-storey ranges on the north, east and west around a range of tall single-storey rooms on the south front. This is a highly distinctive and unusual design.

No plan or detailed description of the interior survives but we know that the entrance hall was in the centre of the north front and that the state rooms occupied the south front and, in 1819, contained many family pictures.¹² *Country Life* refers to the suite of 'lofty salons' along the south front and notes that the rooms on either side of the entrance hall were smaller and simpler. From this information and from documents in the Cheshire Record Office,¹³ it is possible to establish a very generalised interpretation of the layout (Fig. 6). The room names are those current in the 1820s.

On the main floor the perimeter of the house was occupied by the entrance hall then, reading clockwise, a family suite: Lady Egerton's boudoir; Lady Egerton's dressing room; Lady Egerton's bedroom (the north-east corner room); and Sir Philip's dressing room. The oak parlour (probably the room illustrated by *Country Life* as the small dining room) lay in the south-east corner and was followed by three tall state rooms across the centre of the south front: the dining room, the salon and the drawing room.¹⁴ In the south-west corner was the library/billiard room; then a room in the north-west corner with no specific name. Having turned the last corner back into the north range came the Japan room and finally the 'north front room'. In 1825–7 the first floor, which was effectively divided into east and west halves, had four bedrooms, two dressing rooms, adjacent to the south-west and north-west bedrooms, and six 'rooms'.¹⁵ A central 'core' with corridors, the east (best) staircase, the west staircase, at least one subsidiary stair and two lightwells ran down the east-west spine of the house on both floors. As can be seen in the *Country Life* photograph of the hall (Fig. 2), the first-floor corridor opened into the hall through three arches, providing a sense of spatial penetration that was a noticeable feature of the house.

With this sequence established it is possible to

suggest how the house was originally organised. The entrance hall led to the salon in the centre of the south front, which was flanked by two further tall reception rooms and two lower rooms beyond. To the left of the entrance hall lay the family suite, to the right the principal guest suite. This probably comprised a room to the west of the hall, the Japan room and the principal guest bedroom (in the north-west corner). An inventory of 1732, cited by Sir Philip de Malpas Grey-Egerton in his catalogue of works of art in 1864, reveals that the Japan room was originally known as the Japan Withdrawing Room and had a 'set of old Japan', presumably oriental lacquered panels, valued at £50.¹⁶ These were described in the 1908 *Country Life* article as being "lacquered in green, red and gold upon a black background", with "intricate scenes of houses, people, birds and vegetation" and "some panels about 12ft by 6ft". If these rooms were originally the principal guest suite then it is not surprising that they had lost their purpose by the 1820s (as is clear from the names attributed to them at that date) given that grand ground-floor bedroom suites were no longer in fashion.

The layout of the staircases in Figure 6 is conjectural. The one to the east of the hall was called the best staircase and its size and layout are known from a localised plan of 1814.¹⁷ In memoranda dated October 1817 and November 1818 Wyatt proposed enhancement of it and also of an important west staircase.¹⁸ In the same documents he refers to a 'circular' staircase on the west side. This probably ran all the way from the basement to the attics. There was probably a secondary family entrance in the rustic in the centre of the west end and one of the functions of the 'circular' staircase would have been to connect this with the main floor. These Wyatt memoranda are also the source of our knowledge of the existence of courts or lightwells which lit the staircases.

The planning was undoubtedly grand. The two principal bedrooms were both preceded by a pair of withdrawing rooms and have what could have been a large dressing room behind. The suite of reception

rooms would have been very noble. But it is also surprisingly practical – and inventive. While the state rooms are taller, and therefore grander, than in a conventional two-storey house, the other rooms are low, and therefore easier to keep warm. There is also a clear distinction between family, guest and reception rooms.

Apart from the *Country Life* photographs of the hall and the small dining room, which appears a relatively conventional, early eighteenth-century panelled room, no illustrations are known of the interior. The Chester Archaeological and Natural History Society, visiting in 1907, described the reception rooms as lofty, with highly decorated cornices, and reported that some of them had domes.¹⁹ *Country Life* noted that the ‘lofty salons’ had plain walls and heavy cornices supporting elaborately coved ceilings of caissons fitted with rose and other ornaments in high relief. The rooms on either side of the entrance hall were described as smaller and simpler.

We might have a better feel for the interior of the house had Sir Philip de Malpas Grey-Egerton transcribed the 1732 inventory, rather than just listing the names of rooms cited. However, he did mention a number of portraits listed including one of Sir Thomas More, three Van Dycks, of the Earl of Strafford, Archbishop Laud and Archbishop Juxon, and a set of Flemish tapestry of the Four Seasons 10ft 9in high and valued at £100 in the Tapestry Withdrawing Room (by 1864 the drawing room). In one of the rooms was ‘The Entombment’, attributed to Caravaggio, which was evidently saved from the fire and now hangs in nearby Little Budworth church. The rooms mentioned in the inventory cannot be directly related to what is known of the arrangement of the house but the materials used to describe them reveal a clear hierarchy of expense. Thus the Yellow Damask Bedroom and Crimson Damask Bedroom, listed after the Japan Withdrawing Room, are likely to have been in the guest apartment. The Blue Mohair Bedchamber, the

Blue Cafoy Dressing Room, and the Green Mohair Bedchamber may, perhaps, have been part of the family suite. Other rooms included the Yellow Callamanca Bedchamber, the Plaid Room, the Stripped Callamanca Dressing Room, the Red and White Callamanca Dressing Room, the Blue and White Callicoe Bedchamber, the Oak Room and the Smoking Room.²⁰

Some alterations were carried out at unknown dates in the eighteenth century. Griffith’s engraving (Fig. 5), made during the ownership of Philip Egerton (1732–86), who succeeded in 1770, shows a Palladian peron (subsequently replaced during Wyatt’s alterations) instead of the original steps. Sir Philip Malpas de Grey-Egerton dated this to 1773.²¹ It also shows that the cupola had been removed and the number of urns drastically reduced to pairs on either side of the pediment and on each of the pavilions. It would be interesting to know whether the cupola originally lit the entrance hall, not unlike the way the dome at Castle Howard lights the hall there. It was in the right position and at the right height to do so.

More substantial work was carried out by Lewis Wyatt, who worked at Oulton Park between 1817 and 1827, throwing the principal rooms on the south front en suite, enlarging the dining room and heightening the drawing room.²² He also made alterations outside. Sir Philip de Malpas Grey-Egerton mentions the removal of the double flight of steps to the entrance hall, erected by his father; the addition of a substantial terrace to the south, west and north of the house (significantly altering its appearance, as can be seen in Fig. 1); demolition of the summer house and stables in the park and the erection of new stables.²³

This list can be expanded by studying documents in the Cheshire Record Office. Work included extensive, though unlocated, plasterwork; rebuilding the entrance steps on both north and south fronts; dropping the cill level of the state-room windows on the south front; and giving the north entrance a square-headed door.²⁴

A critical question is how much Wyatt altered the south front. The end pavilions appear intact, but the tall parapet walls over the single-bay ranges are unusual and the upper part of the centrepiece is very uncomfortable. The evidence suggests that the tall parapet walls are original. A memorandum by Wyatt dated 16 October 1817 refers to the “parapet walls over the Dining and Draw’g rooms to be taken down and re-built in a different form – (query – by lowering the ridge of the roofs over ditto. – about 3 or 4 feet and covering them with lead – the parapets may be lowered nearly as much)”. However, it would appear that this work was never carried out as the *Country Life* photograph (Fig. 1) shows that these rooms still had slated roofs. Wyatt’s memorandum implies that their strange proportions were found uncomfortable in the early 19th century, but not so uncomfortable that it was felt worth spending substantial sums on alterations. It also explains the purpose of the high parapet walls, which served to disguise the slope of the roofs over the dining and drawing rooms.

The upper part of the centrepiece is more problematic. Though the language of urns, pilasters, French quoins, stone window surrounds and brick is the same as the rest of the house, there is something unconvincing about the way the three attic-storey windows break through the balustrade, unbalancing the whole composition. This discomfort is emphasised by the volutes (one of which is just visible in the *Country Life* photograph (Fig. 1) as an integral part of the lower balustrade, in the shadow of the centrepiece) that run uncomfortably into the centrepiece, as if they had once served some more significant purpose but had become redundant. The suggestion that the upper part of the balustrade may have been altered is reinforced by the fact that its roof-level balusters did not follow the pattern of the balusters around the rest of the house, but that of the balusters on external steps added by Wyatt. No specific written reference has been found to Wyatt building the three-bay first-floor projection, but according to his 1817 memorandum when he was

looking at the unaltered house he saw only “four attics in the centre over the Salon”. All this suggests that what we see in the *Country Life* photograph was perhaps a Wyatt enhancement of more modest servants’ attics into better-lit bedrooms.²⁵

Most tantalising of all is what Wyatt did to the entrance hall. This double-height space (Fig. 2) with its giant Corinthian pilasters is remarkable and impressive. The concatenation of pilasters, capitals and entablatures in the corners presents a staccato vigour that is far superior to comparable work by Francis Smith of Warwick at Sutton Scarsdale, Derbyshire, of 1724, and perhaps at Wingerworth Hall, Derbyshire. Indeed, it is hard to rival anywhere. The bulbous acanthus leaf brackets from which the vaults spring have a similarly knowing sophistication. By comparison, the hall at Beningborough Hall, Yorkshire, of 1716, perhaps the most similar double-height giant-pilastered hall, seems clunky and provincial, and the hall of Gilling Castle, Yorkshire, with which it has also been compared, almost rudimentary.²⁶

All, except the chimneypiece, which is clearly Lewis Wyatt’s work, appears so impressively early eighteenth-century that it comes as a shock to discover bills for at least 240 man-days of skilled plasterwork in the hall in 1819 and 1820. These are among the accounts for extensive plasterwork carried out by Robert Hughes and Son of Manchester between 1819 and 1827.²⁷ Work in the hall included running cornice, small flowers in the frieze, casting and fixing festoons, panelling openings, preparing and fixing trusses and moulding a large truss. Wyatt’s 1817 memorandum mentions two outside circles in the hall to be opened up and the upper gallery to be finished across the staircases with open arcades (this latter probably refers to the upper corridor, not the hall). A memorandum by Wyatt of 1818 suggests cutting away the whole of the festoons over the doors; fixing new frames and stained glass medallions in the circular windows; fixing new sashes and frames in the lower windows; finishing the gallery

and strengthening the front; and enlarging the upper centre arch.

Much of this is mysterious. The circular windows are presumably the circular features between the vaults on the side walls of the hall, but it is difficult to see how these could have been opened up as there were presumably bedrooms on the far side of the wall. It would appear from the *Country Life* photograph that the two circles in the south-west corner of the hall at least were not opened up. It should be remembered that Wyatt's memoranda were suggestions of work to be done, not records of completed work, and may not have been executed.

So how much of the room is original and how much Lewis Wyatt? Hughes could have been restoring the room, repeating features that were already there – much as happened at Syon House in the 1830s.²⁸ He could have been elaborating the room, building on an established language. Or he could have given it a completely new, though fundamentally early eighteenth-century, character. This last seems implausible. We know from Ormerod's history of Cheshire, which was published in 1819 and so describes the house before Wyatt's alterations, that the entrance hall was "ornamented with pilasters of the Corinthian order" and had a black and white marble floor.²⁹ There is nothing to suggest in Wyatt's memoranda or Hughes's bills that the pilasters or entablatures were remade. Similarly, the bulging acanthus-leaved brackets, for instance, are very close to the pair of chimneystacks with bulging acanthus leaf decoration on the east and west elevations, a feature unlikely to have been added by Wyatt. It seems reasonable to believe that the bones of the rooms are original and that it is details that have been altered. One possibility, if the cupola did originally light the hall, is that the new plasterwork was intended to make good the upper part of the room, which must have been altered when it was removed.

Oulton Park is obviously an unusual house in search of an architect. Who could that be? There has been a traditional attribution to Sir John Vanbrugh,

first recorded, it seems, by Daniel Lysons in *Magna Britannia* in 1810 and repeated by George Ormerod in his history of Cheshire of 1819.³⁰ This should not be accepted. The only architectural element at Oulton Park that might be considered Vanbrughian is the use of round windows in the basement of the south front, not enough upon which to base an attribution.

It is clearly not the work of any neo-Palladian (who would consider it too licentious) nor of James Gibbs, with whose work there are no obvious parallels. In the absence of any other lead one might be tempted to follow John Martin Robinson and suggest Francis or William Smith of Warwick, the leading masterbuilders in the Midlands at this time, whose work is suitably idiosyncratic.³¹ But there is another, even more idiosyncratic, architect who should be considered, William Talman, in whose work parallels can be found for virtually every element at Oulton Park.

Despite the key position that Talman held in British architecture in the last decades of the seventeenth century, surprisingly few country houses are firmly attributed to him, and these vary so much in appearance that it is sometimes hard to know exactly what it is that makes a Talman design. One would not automatically connect Oulton Park with the architect of the south front of Chatsworth House, Derbyshire, Holywell House, Hertfordshire, or Dyrham Park, Gloucestershire. But then at first sight one would not associate any of those houses with each other. However, if Oulton Park is compared in detail with other designs by Talman, particularly those made for the Duke of Newcastle in 1702–3, together with a pair of designs formerly in the Lowther Castle collection, clear similarities emerge.³²

Clear parallels can be drawn between the north front of Oulton Park, particularly as seen in the William Williams drawing (Fig. 4) and a drawing by Talman in the Sir John Soane Museum (Fig. 7). If the cupola and the 'Dutch' gables are ignored, the two elevations are very similar, both with two storeys over a rustic, an emphatic balustrade and ornamented

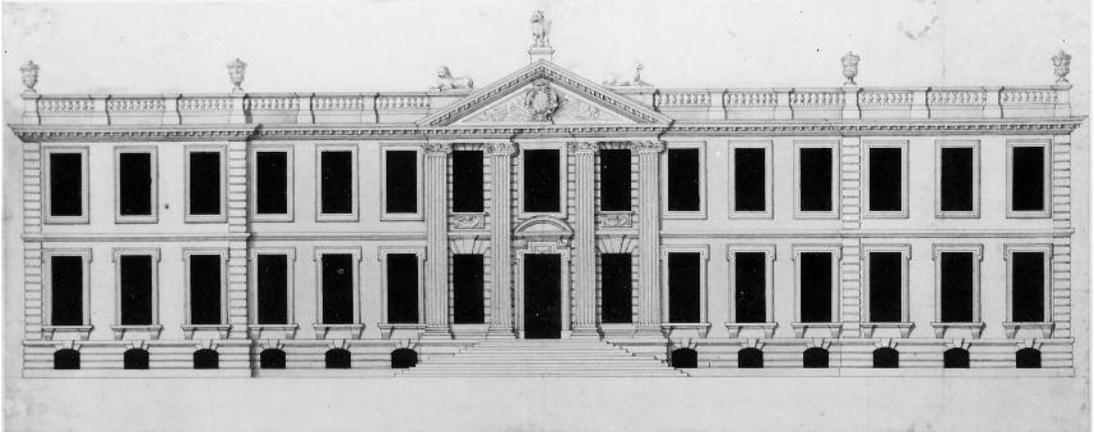


Fig. 7. William Talman, design for the Duke of Newcastle (drawing, c. 1702–3).
Courtesy of the Trustees of the Sir John Soane Museum.

skyline, and fifteen bays long with a three-bay giant pilastered and pedimented frontispiece. Both designs use French quoins to mark the slight projection of the end pavilions, though in the Soane Museum drawing these are of three, not two bays. In both cases the entablature breaks within the frontispiece: over the central bay in the Soane Museum drawing, over all three bays at Oulton Park.

The side elevations at Oulton Park can similarly be compared to the side elevation of one of the designs for the Duke of Newcastle (Fig. 8). This time, Oulton Park is the less elaborate of the two, but both are of seven bays, with a three-bay pedimented centrepiece flanked by slightly recessed double bays, the breaks and corners again being marked by French quoins. The elevation is two storeys high over a rustic, with a doorway, seen clearly in the Griffith engraving of Oulton Park (Fig. 5), in the centre of the rustic. Combining a *piano nobile* entered by a perron with access to the rustic at the side is characteristic of Talman's designs for Thames Ditton (Fig. 9) and Haughton,³³ though it is not unique to him.

One of Oulton Park's most distinctive features is the unusual broken entablature of the north frontispiece. This is a feature that Talman used on the most ambitious of his designs for the Duke of Newcastle (Fig. 10).³⁴ 'Dutch gables' used on the end pavilions at Oulton Park appear twice in Talman's designs, though both times in rather more elaborate form and to mark the centre of the building (Fig. 11).³⁵ A variant without the curved brackets is used over the end pavilions in the grandest of the Duke of Newcastle elevations (Fig. 10). French quoins are a regular feature of Talman's designs (Figs. 7, 8, 10 and 11)³⁶ and were used at Dyrham Park, Gloucestershire. Channelled rustication on the basement floor is also commonplace (Figs. 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11).³⁷

Segmental pediments, like those used on the end elevations at Oulton Park, were used on the stables at Dyrham Park and twice in drawings (Fig. 12).³⁸ Talman's fondness for an emphatic entablature topped by a balustrade, preferably articulated by piers and urns, as seen at Oulton Park, appears repeatedly in his work, at Chatsworth and Dyrham Park and in numerous designs (Figs. 7, 8 and 11).³⁹

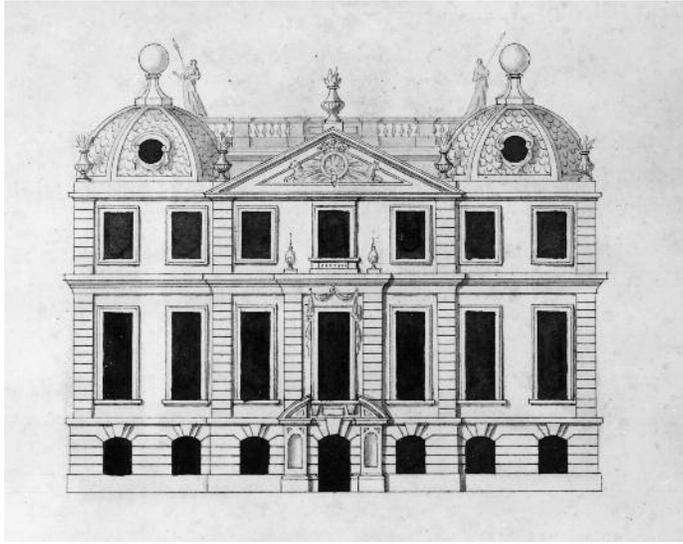


Fig. 8. William Talman, design for the Duke of Newcastle (drawing, c1702–3).
RIBA Library Drawings Collection.

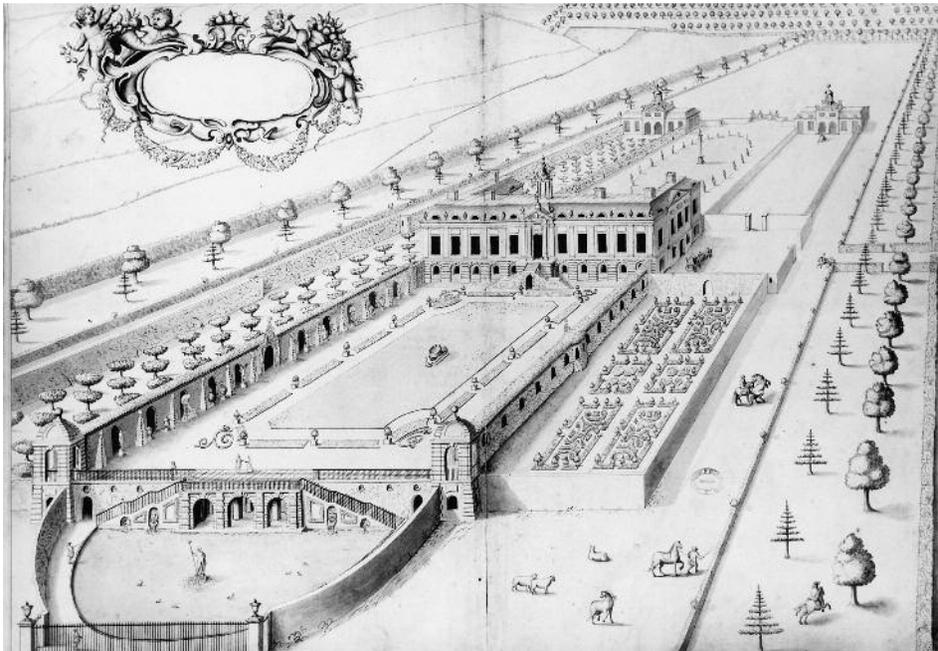


Fig. 9. William Talman, design for the Thames Ditton Trianon (drawing, c1700).
RIBA Library Drawings Collection.



Fig. 10. William Talman, design for the Duke of Newcastle (drawing, c. 1702–3).
Courtesy of the Trustees of the Sir John Soane Museum.

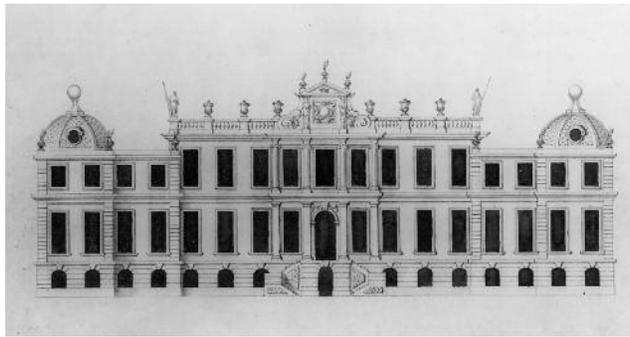


Fig. 11. William Talman, design for the Duke of Newcastle (drawing, c. 1702–3).
RIBA Library Drawings Collection.

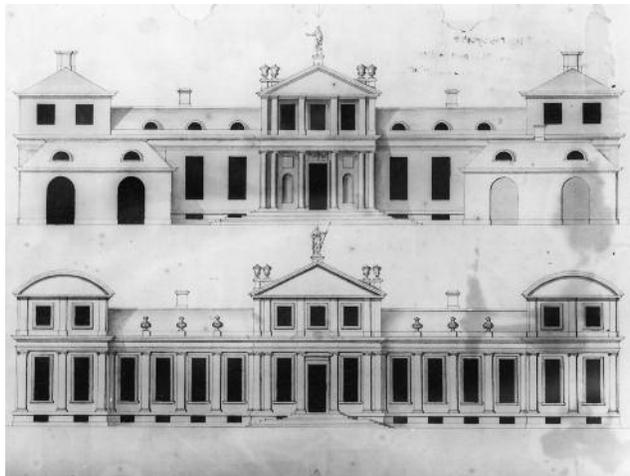


Fig. 12. William Talman, design for a house, formerly in the Lowther Castle Collection (drawing, n.d.).
RIBA Library Drawings Collection.

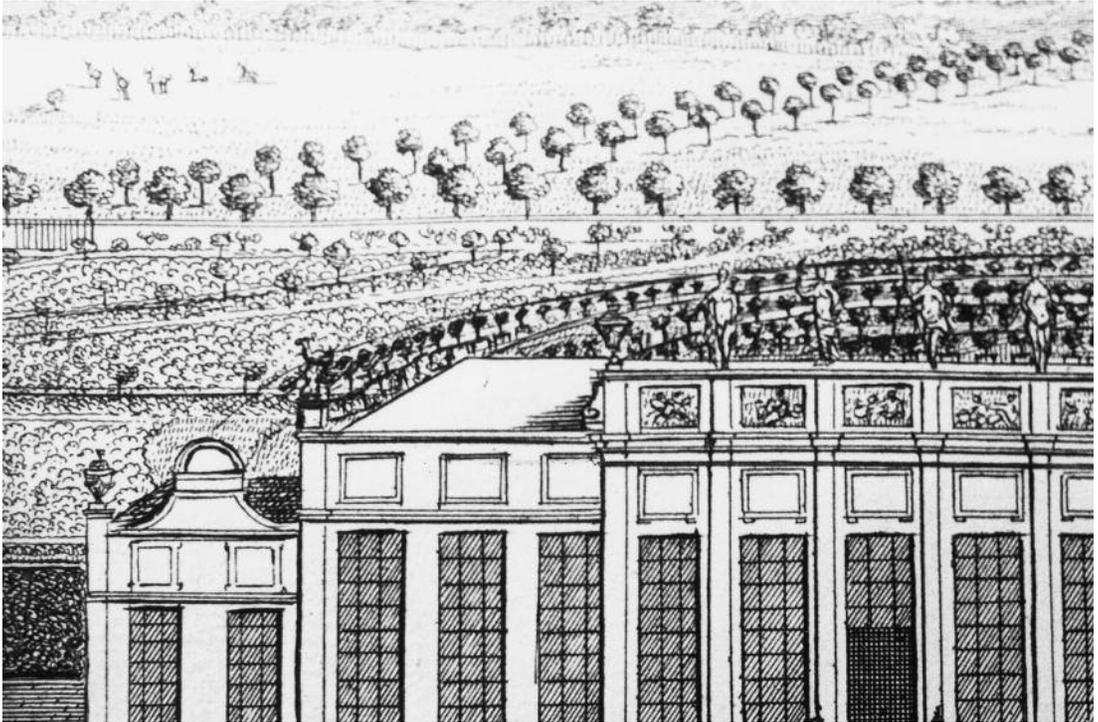


Fig. 13. William Talman (attributed), the Orangery at Wanstead, Essex, from J. Kip and L. Kniff, *Britannia Illustrata*, London, 1707.

Talman also uses volutes similar to those flanking the centrepiece on the south front at Oulton Park to support a central Dutch gable on two of the Duke of Newcastle designs (Fig. 11)⁴⁰ and on the greenhouse at Wanstead House, Essex, firmly attributed to Talman by Harris (Fig. 13).⁴¹ The articulation of the facade as a series of staccato elements, characteristic of both the north and south elevations of Oulton Park, is particularly evident in two of the Duke of Newcastle designs (Figs. 10 and 11).⁴²

But it is the south façade that is most telling. The idea of combining a single principal storey (over a rustic) with two-storey wings and centrepiece seems to be without peer in contemporary English architecture, except in Talman's work. He can be seen toying with the idea at the Thames Ditton Trianon (Fig. 9), where there is a single main storey over a low

rustic. It is more clearly articulated in the grandest design for the Duke of Newcastle (Fig. 10). The comparison with Oulton Park would have been clearer before the rustic was obscured by Wyatt's terrace.

The most direct comparison is with the Lowther design (Fig. 12). As at Oulton Park, this has a rustic and a single-storey principal floor with two-storey end pavilions and centrepiece. The rhythm of bays is almost the same, 2-4-3-4-2 as against 2-3-3-3-2. In both cases the centrepiece is divided by an emphatic entablature and the end pavilions are given elaborate architectural treatment: a segmental pediment in one case, a 'Dutch' gable in the other. Strong similarities with a design for stables by Sir Christopher Wren, now among the drawings at All Soul's College (Fig. 15), suggest a possible source for the Lowther Castle design and for the garden front at Oulton Park.⁴³

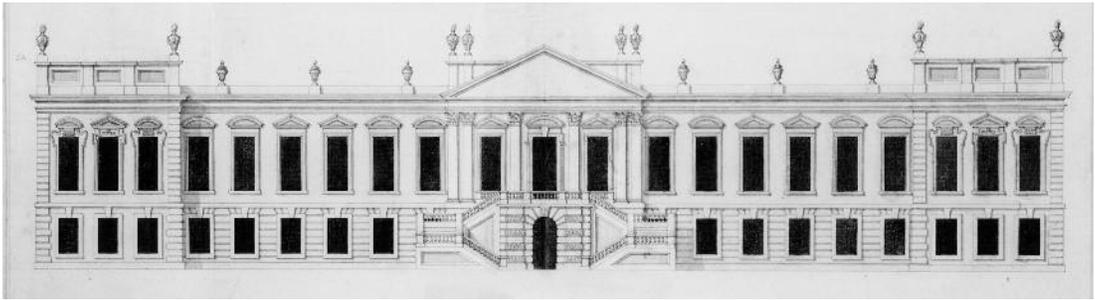


Fig. 14. William Talman, design for the Duke of Newcastle (drawing, c1702–3).
Courtesy of the Trustees of the Sir John Soane Museum.

The design, which is shown to be for Charles II by his monogram and crown, is for a single-storey building with a tall, hipped roof and two-storey centrepiece and pavilions, the latter with segmental pediments. Dr Anthony Geraghty confirms that the drawing is almost certainly in Wren's hand and would have been held at the Office of Works, where Talman would have been able to examine it. He points out that a common source for such a composition is Palladio's Villa Barbaro (Fig. 16), which makes the use of 'Dutch' gables at Oulton Park, also found at the Villa Barbaro, particularly significant. The use of Palladian precedents but in a manner that owes nothing to the traditional neo-Palladian vocabulary, would fit with what we know of Talman's approach to Palladian precedents elsewhere in his work.⁴⁴

None of the known plans of Talman's houses exactly follows that of Oulton Park, but two parallels can be pointed out. Placing two staircases on either side of the hall in the spine of the house, found at Oulton Park, was a characteristic feature of Talman's planning and can be seen in his designs for Kiveton Park, Yorkshire, Castle Howard, Yorkshire, and the Trianon designs.⁴⁵ We also know from the Chester Archaeological and Natural History Society description that some of the rooms at Oulton Park

had domes (though none of the other sources mention anything more ambitious than 'heavy cornices supporting elaborate coved ceilings'), a feature clearly spelt out in one of the plans for the Duke of Newcastle.⁴⁶ Above all, the plan of Oulton Park is one of the most original of its day and we know from his designs for Kiveton, the Trianon and the Duke of Newcastle, among others, that Talman was a highly inventive planner.⁴⁷

Individually, one or two of these motifs might be put down to a common architectural language. When virtually every element of Oulton Park, even the basic planning and disposition of the building, has a precedent in Talman's work the case becomes difficult to resist. If so, what might have been the original form of the centrepiece on the south front? It is impossible to be certain but a number of possibilities suggest themselves. One would be a lower, windowed attic with pediment as in the Lowther design (Fig. 12).⁴⁸ Another might be a tall pediment backed by a raised attic, as in one of the designs for the Duke of Newcastle (Fig. 14) and indeed, much as the William Williams drawing (Fig. 4) shows the pediment of the north front of Oulton Park. Alternatively, the presence of volutes may suggest a low parapet as on the Greenhouse at Wanstead (Fig. 13).

Although the architectural language seems to talk

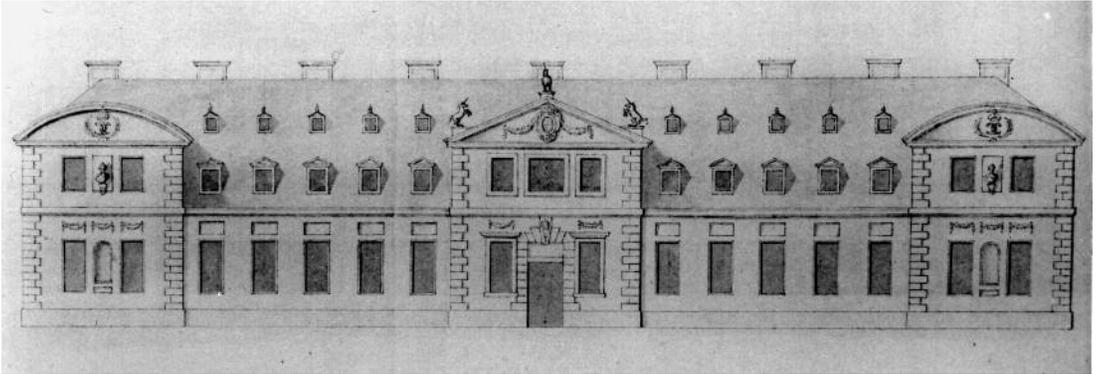


Fig. 15. Sir Christopher Wren, design for stables for Charles II (drawing, n.d.).
All Souls College, Oxford.

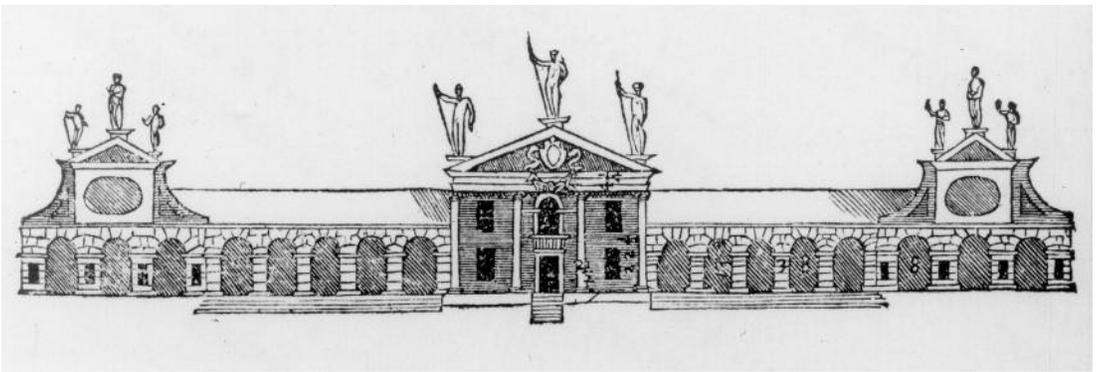


Fig. 16. Andrea Palladio, the Villa Barbaro at Maser, from *Quattro Libri dell'Architettura*, Venice, 1570, II, 51.

so clearly of William Talman, only tangential links have been found to connect him to the house. The builder of Oulton Park was an obscure Cheshire squire, John Egerton, who inherited the estate on the death of his father in 1698. Egerton did not sit for Parliament and, apart from helping make the River Weaver navigable, left little mark on history beyond a bad-tempered row with his brother and his nephew and heir, Philip Egerton, recorded in a letter and a memorandum. These make it clear that John Egerton was responsible for rebuilding Oulton Park. The letter referred to “The many thousand pounds I have laid out in the house and gardens at Oulton, I need not mention the exact sum, every one that sees them

will compute it for me”. In the memorandum he referred to “a kindness not to be overlook’d, the expense and fatigue of building a house for his heir, for it must be allowed the regard to posterity more than my own pleasure was the ruling motive of that work”.⁴⁹ Egerton was so distrustful of his heir’s intentions towards his new house that in a codicil to his will, drawn up just before he died, he insisted that his nephew take out a bond of £2,000 guaranteeing that he would reside at least six months of the year at Oulton.⁵⁰

Though no date is given for Oulton Park in Ormerod’s history of Cheshire, Lysons, writing in 1810, states that the house “was built in or about

1716".⁵¹ Sir Philip de Malpas Grey-Egerton, writing in his privately printed *A Historical Account of the Possessors of Oulton... compiled from public and private documents* of 1869, declared of John Egerton that "In 1715 he set about rebuilding". Grey-Egerton clearly had access to family papers, some of which he prints in the *Historical Account*, but he does not make clear the evidence for this statement. If accepted, it means that though Egerton succeeded his father in 1698, when he was 42, he did not start on a complete rebuilding until he was nearly 60 and had presumably realised that he would never have children. By this time Egerton could have been in poor health, as we know that he suffered from failing eyesight and by the end of his life was blind.

On the face of it 1715 or 1716 seems unlikely. Certainly a date closer to 1698 would fit better with the 1703–4 date of the designs for the Duke of Newcastle, with which Oulton Park bears such close stylistic similarities. Building accounts in the Grey-Egerton papers in the Cheshire County Record Office, while incomplete, suggest that building work may indeed have begun on John Egerton's succession, if not before.

No account books survive from 1688 to 1696 but there are two for 1697 to 1701. One, kept by Robert Taylor, has payments from December 1697 to March 1699 and from July to December 1700.⁵² The other, kept by William Whaley, runs from 6 October 1698 to 31 July 1701.⁵³ The next two account books are from 1706–13 and 1709–14, the latter being kept by the steward, John Billington.⁵⁴

Among the payments starting December 1697 in the first two account books, which specifically indicate construction of a new building at Oulton, are those for measuring the new building; laying a drain; levelling; measuring boarding and flagging; wainscoting and sash windows 'at Oulton'; glazing; locks; 'new pillars at Oulton'; wainscoting the two end rooms; and slating new building at Oulton. Dates for these go through to 1699, and there are items for furniture in 1700. Billington's accounts

include a payment in 1709 to Mr Crane, a painter who also worked at Cholmondeley Old Hall, for eight books of gold leaf.

The sums recorded are clearly fragmentary, totalling only £35 for building work, though at least £130 was spent on furniture. But they do show that a 'New Building' was in hand, that it was at Oulton, and that it was a building of some distinction, as references to sash windows, a slate roof, wainscot and pillars demonstrate. It seems likely that work may have already begun before December 1697, that is during his father's time, though John Egerton makes it clear he considers the house to be his work, not that of his father. 'Measuring' suggests measuring completed building work, perhaps the shell, rather than measuring out the ground. If so, there is a logical progression to installing windows and wainscot the following year and painting doors and buying furniture the year after that. This makes a date of perhaps 1695 or 1696 to 1700 plausible for the house. As fitting-up (suggested by references to gilding in 1709) could well have continued after 1700, perhaps 1715 was the date of final completion.

Even if the attribution to Talman is accepted as plausible along with a date of c.1696–1700, one further problem has to be faced. John Egerton, as far as we can tell, lived a life of provincial obscurity, in contrast with Talman's patrons, most of whom were Whig grandees, men like the Dukes of Bolton, Chandos, Devonshire, Leeds and Newcastle, the Earls of Carlisle, Clarendon, Exeter, Fitzwilliam, Northampton, Portland, Portmore, and Tankerville. Egerton's political affiliations are unclear but his father, Sir Philip Egerton, was a staunch Tory, evident from the presence in the house of paintings of the Earl of Strafford, Archbishop Laud and Archbishop Juxon. He was twice MP for Cheshire, helped search the houses of leading local Whigs after the Rye House Plot, was active in James II's parliament and imprisoned in Chester Castle in 1690 as a Jacobite suspect.⁵⁵

On the face of it, it seems unlikely that John

Egerton moved in the same social or political circles as the majority of Talman's clients. The nearest prospective Talman commissions were at Lowther Castle in Westmorland and Welbeck Abbey in Nottinghamshire, well beyond Egerton's presumed geographical range. The closest family link to a definite Talman commission is through Egerton's uncle Sir John Egerton of Wrinchill, who married Anne, daughter of George Winter of Dyrham Park, Gloucestershire. Anne, who died in 1680, was the aunt of Mary Winter, her brother John's only surviving child. It was Mary Winter who married William Blathwayt, bringing him Dyrham Park, where he employed Talman in 1698–1704. The connection, through the niece of an aunt living a couple of hundred miles away, is tenuous and in the absence of further knowledge of the intimacy of family relations is probably worth no more than being noticed.

However, in 1686 John Egerton married, as his second wife, Elizabeth Cholmondeley, making him the brother-in-law of Hugh Cholmondeley, an influential Whig who rebuilt his house, Cholmondeley Old Hall. This lies nine miles from Oulton Park and just over a mile from Egerton Hall, the family's other estate. Cholmondeley rallied early to the cause of William III in 1688 and was rewarded by being created Baron Cholmondeley in 1689 and Earl of Cholmondeley in 1706. There is no direct evidence to link Talman to Lord Cholmondeley, who did not obtain high office at court until Talman had largely been abandoned by his Whig clients, and who is known to have employed Vanbrugh at Cholmondeley Old Hall in 1713.⁵⁶ Were it not for the absence of any sign of Vanbrugh at Oulton Park, the Cholmondeley connection might suggest a link between Egerton and Vanbrugh, but it may simply mean that Lord Cholmondeley was conventional in his use of Whig-favoured architects.

As John Harris has kindly pointed out to the authors, Talman's close associate George London drew up plans for an extensive new garden at

Cholmondeley Old Hall in 1694.⁵⁷ John Harris describes the relationship between London and Talman as "undoubtedly one of close collaboration", and continues that "it is therefore rewarding to speculate on the extent to which London may have summoned Talman to design those architectural parts of his gardens. Generally, where Talman goes, London follows, or vice versa. At Chatsworth, Burghley, Castle Ashby, Dyrham, Castle Howard, Hampton Court, Middlesex as well as Hampton Court in Herefordshire, probably Kimberley and Fetcham, and possibly Lord Clarendon's Cornbury, the chief architect and gardener of the Williamite Court were together".⁵⁸

It is unlikely that Lord Cholmondeley would have intended remodelling his gardens on such a grand scale without planning work on his antiquated house as well. Presumably nothing came of this as the first evidence we have of building work at Cholmondeley Old Hall is in 1702, when Richard Jones, a London surveyor, attempted to redesign the house.⁵⁹ So could Cholmondeley Old Hall have been another abortive commission for William Talman? And could it have been Lord Cholmondeley who introduced his brother-in-law to Talman? In the absence of firm documentation Oulton Park must remain an attribution. The parallels with Talman's work are striking and it is hard to see to whom else it could be plausibly attributed. On the other hand, though there are tempting connections, there is no clear link between Egerton and Talman. In the preface to his brief study of Talman, *William Talman: Maverick Architect*, John Harris described the frustration of trying to pin down new attributions to the architect: "Alas, year succeeded year, and the task was like trying to run up a down escalator".⁶⁰ In that sense Oulton Park could be described as a quintessentially Talman building.

NOTES

- 1 Giles Worsley, *England's Lost Houses*, London, 2002, 48–9.
- 2 Charles Latham, *In English Homes*, 1909, III, London, 313–6.
- 3 James Lees-Milne, *English Country Houses: Baroque 1685–1715*, London, 1970, 283.
- 4 Peter de Figueiredo and Julian Treuherz, *Cheshire Country Houses*, Chichester, 1988, 261–2, fig. 183.
- 5 John Martin Robinson, *The County Houses of the North West*, London, 1991, 55–6.
- 6 Swindon, National Monuments Record, BB 59/573; Cheshire County Council House of Images.
- 7 Chester, Cheshire Record Office (hereafter CRO), DEO/1/12, published in the *Society of Architectural Historians of Great Britain Newsletter No. 74*, Autumn 2001, 6. The drawing must date between 1733, when the survey of the Egerton estates was begun on the succession of Philip Egerton, and 1735, when the survey was completed.
- 8 New Haven, Yale Center for British Art, Department of Rare Books, 'The First book of houses of Archibald Dickson', fol. 36. The book includes drawings of a mix of fantastical and real houses, the latter include Crewe Hall, Cheshire, dated 1738, and Bold Hall, Lancashire. The Oulton drawing is not inscribed but is identical to the William Williams drawing. I am grateful to Richard Hewlings, who identified this drawing, for this information.
- 9 Tatton Park, library, YDR 6–6, incorporated into an expanded version of Daniel King, *The Vale Royal of England*, which Broster put together in 1797. Broster's drawing was probably made in the 1790s. De Figueiredo and Treuherz, *op. cit.*, refer to this sketch.
- 10 CRO, VPR 3. There are two versions of this engraving. One is dedicated to Philip Egerton, probably the one who inherited in 1770 and died in 1786. Another, with more mature trees, is dedicated to Sir John Grey-Egerton, post 1807.
- 11 Andrea Palladio, *I Quattro Libri dell'architettura*, Vicenza, 1570, II, 51.
- 12 George Ormerod, *The History of the County Palatine and City of Chester*, London, 1819, II, 118.
- 13 CRO, DEO 200/4 and 213/1, particularly a listing for the installation of bells in 1825–7.
- 14 Two small drawings for proposed localised alteration dated 1814 in CRO, DEO 213/1 only 'work' if the dining room was east of the salon.
- 15 The bell installers' list includes items for attic storey rooms for lady's maid, housemaids, and a bedroom, 'late the housekeepers'. These were probably the rooms over the salon and do not appear to have been accessible by the two principal staircases.
- 16 In the mid nineteenth century these were believed to have come from the previous house on the site. Sir Philip de Malpas Grey-Egerton, *A Historical Account of the Possessors of Oulton*, 1869, 18–9.
- 17 CRO, DEO 213/1.
- 18 *Ibid.*, DEO 200/4.
- 19 'Notes on Oulton Hall', *Chester Archaeological and Historical Society* (hereafter CAHS), NS, XV, 1907–8, 141.
- 20 Saloon, Tapestry Withdrawing Room, Crimson Damask Withdrawing Room, Japan Withdrawing Room, Yellow Damask Bedchamber, Crimson Damask Bedchamber, Blue Mohair bedchamber, Blue Cafoy Dressing Room, Green Mohair Bedchamber, Yellow Callamanca Bedchamber, Plaid Room, Striped Callamanca Dressing Room, Red and White Callamanca Dressing Room, Blue and White Callicoe Bedchamber, Oak Parlour, Smoking Room [Philip de Malpas Egerton Grey, *Descriptive Catalogue of the Pictures and other Works of Art at Oulton Park, Cheshire*, London, 1864, ix]. The set of Flemish tapestries of the Four Seasons in the Tapestry Withdrawing Room were valued at £100, the set of 'old Japan' in the Japan Withdrawing Room was valued at £50.
- 21 Grey-Egerton, *Historical Account*, *cit.*, 29.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 36.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 35–6.
- 24 James Lees-Milne suggests, some of the idiosyncracies of the exterior, particularly the Dutch gables, were Wyatt's work. However, we know from the William Williams survey drawing that these date from the early 18th century [Lees-Milne, *Baroque*, *cit.*, 283]. The original round-headed door can be seen in the William Williams, Griffith and Broster views.
- 25 CRO, DEO 200/4 and 213/1.
- 26 Lees-Milne, *Baroque*, *cit.*, 247, 271, figs. 396, 438.
- 27 CRO, DEO 200/4 and 213/1.
- 28 Eileen Harris, *The Genius of Robert Adam: His Interiors*, New Haven and London, 2001, 73.
- 29 George Ormerod, *The History of the County Palatine and City of Chester*, London, 1819, II, 118.

- 30 Daniel Lysons, *Magna Britannia, Vol. 2: Topographical and Historical Account of Cheshire*, London, 1810, 540; Ormerod, *County Palatine, cit.*, 118.
- 31 In particular, one might note the use of French quoins (Baginton Hall, Warwicks., 1714–23; Newbold Revel, Warwicks., 1716; Swynnerton Hall, Staffs., 1725; Davenport Hall, Shropshire, 1726–30 and Kinlet Hall, Shropshire, 1727–29); an interest in the use of giant orders as external pilasters, as on the garden front at Oulton Park, (Cottesbrooke Hall, Northants., 1703–13; Sutton Scarsdale, Derbys., 1719–24; Chicheley Hall, Buckinghamshire, 1719–25; Sandywell Park, Glos., c.1720–29; Stoneleigh Abbey, Warwicks., 1720–25; Alfreton Hall, Derbys., 1724–25; Swynnerton Hall, Staffs., 1725 and Mawley Hall, Shropshire, c.1728–33); and double-height pilastered halls (Newbold Revel, Warwicks., 1716 and Wingerworth Hall, Derbys., 1726–29). However, as Andor Gomme makes clear in *Smith of Warwick: Francis Smith, Architect and Master-Builder*, Stamford, 2000, these features are by no means confined to Francis Smith, and given the very distinctive elements at Oulton Park that are not found elsewhere in Smith's *oeuvre* the link is too tenuous to make a plausible attribution. Moreover, if, as seems likely, Oulton Park was begun in the late 1690s, it would have been exceptionally early in Francis Smith's career.
- 32 These are held by the RIBA Library Drawings Collection and the Sir John Soane Museum. See Jill Lever (ed.), *Catalogue of the Drawing Collection of the Royal Institute of British Architects T-Z*, 1984, 12.
- 33 John Harris, *William Talman: Maverick Architect*, London, 1982, fig.59.
- 34 It also appears in the main cross wing of Bretby Park, Derbyshire, which John Harris attributes to Talman [Harris, *Talman, cit.*, fig. 83]. Talman also broke the entablature over the central bay in two designs [*ibid.*, fig. 7 and fig.64].
- 35 See also Harris, *Talman, cit.*, fig.64.
- 36 See also *ibid.*, figs. 61 and 64.
- 37 See also *ibid.*, figs. 64 and 69.
- 38 See also *ibid.*, fig. 61.
- 39 See also *ibid.*, figs. 41, 54, 62 and 69.
- 40 See also *ibid.*, fig. 64.
- 41 *Ibid.*, fig. 90.
- 42 See also *ibid.*, fig. 64.
- 43 Oxford, All Soul's College, II.100, reproduced in *The Wren Society*, V, London, 1928, pl. XXXI.
- 44 Giles Worsley, "William Talman: Some stylistic suggestions", *Georgian Group Journal*, II, 1992, 6–18.
- 45 Harris, *Talman, cit.*, figs. 13, 47 and 52.
- 46 *CAHS, cit.*, 141; Harris, *Talman, cit.*, fig. 63.
- 47 Harris, *Talman, cit.*, figs. 14, 57, 63 and 68.
- 48 See also *ibid.*, fig. 13.
- 49 Grey-Egerton, *Historical Account, cit.*, 19, 54–60.
- 50 *Ibid.*, 13, 22 and 57.
- 51 Ormerod, *County Palatine, cit.*, II, 118; Lysons, *Magna Britannia, cit.*, II, 540.
- 52 CRO, DEO/212/6.
- 53 *Ibid.*, DEO/212/7.
- 54 *Ibid.*, DEO/ 217/1, 2/1.
- 55 Basil Duke Henning (ed.), *The House of Commons, 1660–1690*, London, II, 1983, 255.
- 56 Lord Cholmondeley was first Comptroller of the Household and then Treasurer from 1708 to 1725 with only a short break in 1713–14.
- 57 CRO, Cholmondeley Papers, DCH/K/3/26.
- 58 Harris, *Talman, cit.*, 43.
- 59 CRO, Cholmondeley Papers, DCH/L/29.
- 60 Harris, *Talman, cit.*, 14.