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WEST DEAN HOUSE, WILTSHIRE: A POSTSCRIPT

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Soon after the publication of Volume XI of the *Georgian Group Journal* in 1999, containing my article on West Dean House, Wiltshire,¹ I came across another useful illustration of the steps at the centre of the huge new garden terrace at West Dean, which I had attributed to William Talman (Fig. 1). This drawing, hitherto unrecognised, is the earliest known view of this garden structure.² Whilst browsing through *Architectural History*, V, 1962, devoted to Mark Girouard's edition of the Smythson collection of drawings, in the search for something else, I noticed a drawing attributed to John Smythson the younger, with the inscription "Dean Tarras". I recognised the structure depicted in the drawing; the word "*Dean*" in the caption referred to West Dean and the word "*Tarras*" was an eighteenth-century spelling of the word terrace. The details in the drawing match exactly the central staircase depicted in the oblique view of the west front of West Dean House which is attributed to Thomas Sandby,³ and which formed an important part of my previous article.

In the catalogue section of the Smythson volume Mark Girouard describes this drawing as a "*Design for terraced garden steps with central alcove....Pen, sepia pen and brown wash*".⁴ But the somewhat sketchy nature of this perspective drawing suggests that it is in fact a topographical record of a built structure, rather than a design drawing. It differs from all the other designs attributed by Mark Girouard to John Smythson the younger, in its sketchy quality and in its unfinished state.

John Smythson the younger was the second son of Huntingdon Smythson and the great-grandson of

the eminent Elizabethan architect Robert Smythson.⁵ John Smythson the younger was described as "*a Man of some Skill in Architecture*" by George Vertue in 1725,⁶ but no other evidence has yet come to light about his architectural career. Even the attribution of the small number of drawings in this collection to him is, as Mark Girouard admits in his introduction, largely circumstantial. If this drawing really is by him it is presumably a record of a visit that he paid to West Dean some time between the garden's construction in around 1700 and his death in 1717. Unfortunately none of the other surviving drawings in the Smythson collection relate to West Dean House or garden.⁷

A comparison of the Smythson drawing with the watercolour attributed to Thomas Sandby is revealing. Smythson shows the central staircase in more detail than Sandby. His drawing shows that the central arch was filled with a niche and a stone seat, or possibly a basin. It was not an archway, as might have been inferred from the Sandby drawing. Smythson shows the arch itself in greater detail, delineating its moulded stone surround with panelled pilasters and a lion's-head mask on the keystone. The drawing also shows that the Ionic columns either side of the niche were fluted, matching the Doric columns on the flanking conservatories. Smythson also shows that the lengths of wall immediately behind these columns were rusticated, again like the wall behind the conservatory columns. This juxtaposition of fluted columns in front of rusticated walling is a characteristic of Talman's style that helps to further strengthen the attribution of this structure to him. The Smythson drawing shows the lesser side niches

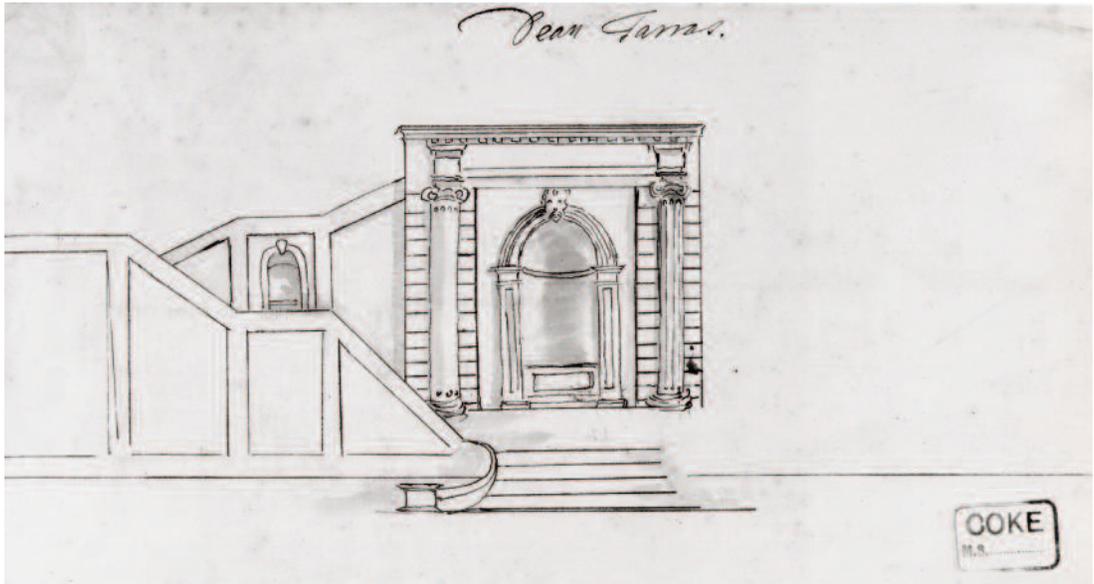


Fig. 1. Attributed to John Smythson the younger, elevation of the stair at the centre of the terrace at West Dean House, Wiltshire. *London, RIBA Library, Drawings Collection.*

at first landing level in more detail as well, confirming what the Sandby drawing only hints at, that these niches have plain architraves with simple keystones. Unfortunately the Smythson drawing does not include the back wall of the structure and the two much larger niches at the return landings, roughly visible in two early nineteenth-century engravings.⁸ But it is possible to infer from this drawing that they too were articulated with plain stone surrounds like the two smaller side niches.

It is not known why John Smythson the younger chose to record this particular garden staircase in Wiltshire. But West Dean does have one link with Nottinghamshire and the Midland counties where the Smythsons were based. For it was owned at this time by the Pierrepont family, Dukes of Kingston, whose main seat was Thoresby Hall in the heart of Sherwood Forest. Two of the other drawings in this collection which are attributed to John Smythson the younger are for garden structures,⁹ which might suggest that he had a particular interest in garden

design, and that he was recording it as a reference for later designs of his own.

Whatever the reason John Smythson the younger chose to record the central garden staircase at West Dean, architectural historians must be grateful that he did. We must also be particularly grateful that this drawing did not appeal to Mrs Chaworth Musters, or it too might have been used by a drunken rabble in their unsuccessful attempt to burn down her home, Colwick Hall.¹⁰ Fortunately this drawing was spared from becoming one of those rare architectural drawings which were used to destroy a country house rather than to build it, and its eventual identification has allowed it to shed further light on both the history of garden architecture and the career of William Talman.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NOTES

- 1 Peter Smith, 'West Dean House, Wiltshire', *Georgian Group Journal*, IX, 1999, 86–106.
- 2 Mark Girouard (ed.), 'The Smythson Collection of the Royal Institute of British Architects', *Architectural History*, V, 1962, 174, plate IV/7. This drawing is also illustrated and discussed in Jane Brown, *The Art and Architecture of English Gardens*, London, 1989, 34, pl. 7.
- 3 I should have made it clear in my previous article on West Dean that the two watercolour drawings of the house, now in the Enfield Museum at Forty Hall, are unsigned and undated and that I have attributed them to Thomas Sandby. John Harris who initially identified these drawings attributes them to Thomas Malton, and they are catalogued as the work of Malton at the Enfield Museum. I am grateful to the Hon. Lady Roberts, Curator of the Print Room at The Royal Collection, for pointing out this inaccuracy. It is to be hoped that Lady Roberts, who is studying the works of Paul and Thomas Sandby, may soon be able clarify the attribution of these drawings.
- 4 Girouard (ed.), *op. cit.*, 62.
- 5 This John Smythson is referred to as "John III (1640–1717) of Bolsover" in Appendix III, "The Smythson Family Tree and the Later Smithsons", Mark Girouard, *Robert Smythson And the Architecture of the Elizabethan Era*, London, 1966, 222–23.
- 6 Quoted in Girouard (ed.), *op. cit.*, 23.
- 7 The two drawings that followed this one in the earliest known catalogue of these drawings, Nos. 98 & 99, and which are therefore most likely to have been related to it, were unfortunately destroyed by fire. As Mark Girouard states in his introduction, J. A. Gotch recorded that "Colonel Coke tells me that a number [of drawings] were lent years ago to Mrs Chaworth Musters, of Colwick, near Nottingham, and unfortunately perished in the fire which destroyed that house". Colwick Hall, which was built in around 1700 and remodelled by John Carr in 1774–76, was the home of Mrs Chaworth Musters during the early years of the nineteenth century. The house was not in fact destroyed by fire at this time, though it was attacked by Reform rioters on the night of October 10th 1831. When "a fire was kindled in one of the rooms, which would have reduced the edifice to a heap of ruins, but some thinking that a feather-bed would accelerate the power of the destructive element, threw it upon the flames, and left it. The consequence was, that the fire was smothered." Mrs Chaworth Musters "at the time of the attack was in the drawing-room with her daughter and Mademoiselle de Fey, a foreign lady, who was on a visit. They happily escaped to a shrubbery, and notwithstanding the rain poured down, they lay concealed under the foliage of some thick spreading laurel trees, till the rioters took their departure." Far less fortunate were the 24 drawings then on loan to her from the Coke family, including the two that might have been of West Dean, which were presumably used as kindling to start the fire [T. Bailey, *Annals of Nottinghamshire, History of the County of Nottingham*, London, 1853; Pete Smith, 'Wollaton Hall; Comfort and Security', in Malcolm Airs (ed.), *The Regency Great House*, Oxford, 1998, 102–3].
- 8 Smith, "West Dean," *cit.*, figs. 5 and 7.
- 9 Girouard (ed.), *op. cit.*, IV/6 (Design for a small pavilion in a formal landscape), 62, 173, and IV/8 (Design, perhaps for a gazebo or garden pavilion), 63, 175.
- 10 See note 7.