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JAMES STUART AND THE LONDON BUILDING TRADES¹

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Like many aspiring artists, James ‘Athenian’ Stuart had found it necessary to travel abroad to gain a reputation at home when he abandoned a career as a fan-painter in London for the delights of Italy. In Naples, Rome, and Florence, he studied paintings and drawings, explored modern buildings and ancient archaeological sites, and, at the behest of Charles Watson-Wentworth, later second Marquess of Rockingham, he spent the winter of 1750 in Venice with Nicholas Revett, preparing for the journey to Greece that was to result in the four volumes of *Antiquities of Athens* (1762–1816). Paradoxically, for a man so closely associated with the development of neo-classical architecture in Britain, Stuart seems never to have received any architectural training.² The position in which he found himself upon his return to London in 1755 was perhaps no different to that experienced in 1719 by William Kent, but this has created obstacles in placing Stuart’s career within the development of the architectural profession and has skewed interest in favour of stylistic analysis of those commissions which bolster his reputation as a neo-classical pioneer. With prolific practitioners such as Robert Adam and Sir William Chambers, it is tempting to play down the roles of the client and the teams of craftsmen employed to execute their designs, but Stuart’s architectural career makes very little sense unless these factors are taken into consideration. Indeed, without the patronage of certain members of the Society of Dilettanti, it is conceivable that Stuart would not have developed an architectural practice at all, and someone must have ensured that his

buildings were structurally sound. Although no evidence has survived to suggest that he established an architectural office, an investigation into Stuart’s business practices reveals that, for nearly thirty years, he was loyal to certain craftsmen, with one team for work in the country and another for work in London, barring the occasional crossover, such as the plasterer Joseph Rose or carver and gilder John Adair. It is impossible to prove that this loyalty was necessary because Stuart lacked the skill to organise an architectural commission effectively. But that possibility cannot be dismissed, because his habit of leaving organisation to subordinates eventually led to his downfall and the end of his private architectural practice in 1781. Another reason for this loyalty may have been the somewhat repetitive nature of Stuart’s vision of antiquity. In this context, the appeal of craftsmen who could be relied upon to execute motifs from drawings supplied for other commissions needs little explanation.

The early 1760s were Stuart’s most prolific years as an architect, with work on nearly all of his country house commissions and three major town houses underway by 1763. Time has not looked favourably upon Stuart’s work in the metropolis – only three of six known works are extant, all much altered – yet building in London was an important aspect of his career as an architect. He made his fortune on a speculative building venture in Marylebone³ and, with the exception of Shugborough Hall, he received much larger-scale commissions in town than in the country. For a man whose reputation was based on a journey to Athens, town houses were also an



Fig. 1. Frieze, Music Room, Spencer House, St James's Place, London.

excellent medium for the display of the newly-discovered elements of ancient Greek architecture. No less a rival than Robert Adam visited Spencer House to see work in progress,⁴ while No. 22 Portman Square was open to the visiting public for much of its construction.⁵

After the recent restoration, Stuart's interiors at Spencer House are among the most important examples of his work to have survived, but they reveal that Stuart was already beginning to repeat himself. The Music Room frieze of alternating ewers, urns, and paterae reappeared at No.15 St James's Square and Holderness House, which were also under construction in the early 1760s (Figs. 1 and 2); the ceiling in Lady Spencer's Dressing Room had counterparts at Holderness House and Rathfarnham Castle, Co. Dublin (Figs. 3, 4 and 5); the Great Room chimneypiece has a double in the Great Room of No.15 St James's Square; and even the pedestals which stood in the Painted Room had been proposed for Kedleston Hall. The tripod perfume burners which stood atop these pedestals were also supplied to Lord Rockingham⁶ and Nathaniel Curzon,⁷ although it is unclear whether

these were replicated when required, or whether Stuart commissioned a number of items as a small speculative venture, secure in the knowledge that his patrons would recognise their appropriateness.

The destruction of Earl Spencer's papers after his death in 1783 frustrates any attempt to engage with the details of the construction history of Spencer House, but it may be significant that, between 1757 and 1759, the payments to craftsmen recorded in Spencer's account with Hoare's Bank include the name of only one man known to have worked with Stuart on other commissions, Joseph Rose.⁸ Until further evidence comes to light, it is difficult to determine whether Stuart inherited a team of craftsmen from John Vardy after he replaced the latter in 1759, or brought his own team of craftsmen to Spencer House, making the presence of Rose little more than a fortuitous accident. In the end, Spencer House reveals very little about Stuart's business practices or how he became an architect.

With Holderness House, Hertford Street, one moves a step forward. It was built for Robert D'Arcy, fourth Earl of Holderness, between 1761⁹ and 1765, but was altered significantly when the third Marquess of Londonderry purchased Nos.24 and 25 Hertford Street in 1822 and joined the two houses together,¹⁰ retaining several of Stuart's interiors. One ceiling was mentioned above in connection with Lady Spencer's Dressing Room. Another, the centre section of the Drawing Room of what became Londonderry House (Fig. 6), contained a coffered ceiling with a central domed octagon, a theme that reappeared at No.15 St James's Square (Fig. 7) and was adapted c.1780 for the first floor ceiling of the Tower of the Winds at Mount Stewart, Co. Down. Stuart's final interior was that of the boudoir, where a square-coffered cove with strongly demarcated corners was combined with a flat ceiling. The same cove was to reappear at Rathfarnham Castle (Fig. 4) and No. 22 Portman Square (Fig. 8).

Holderness House is a poorly documented commission and even Lord Holderness's Account Book of 1739–1768 records merely that Stuart

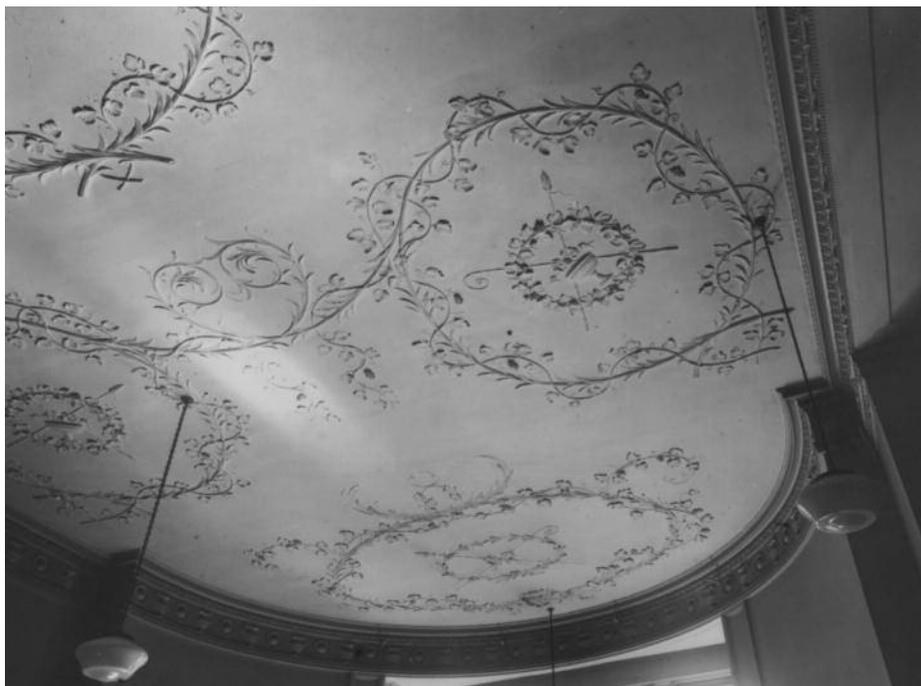


Fig. 2. Ceiling, Dining Room, No. 15 St James's Square, London. *English Heritage, NMR.*

received £50 in 1765. Adair received substantial payments amounting to £698 between 1765 and 1768, and Rose received payments in 1765 and 1766.¹¹ These payments were most likely for work at Holderness House, as they are too early to relate to alterations undertaken at Hornby Castle, for which the Yorkshire-based mason John Horobin received payments in 1768,¹² and too late for Sion Hill, Holderness's Middlesex villa, which he renovated in the late 1750s or early 1760s.¹³

One of the benefits of Stuart's early country house commissions, and the reason for mentioning them here, was the introduction which they provided to men such as the Rose family of plasterers, whom he presumably first encountered at Wentworth Woodhouse in the 1750s,¹⁴ and Adair, whom Stuart met at Nuneham Courtenay c.1756¹⁵ and employed at Holderness House, as well as at Shugborough,¹⁶

No.15 St James's Square,¹⁷ and Mrs Montagu's houses in Hill Street¹⁸ and Portman Square.¹⁹ Indeed, wherever one finds Stuart at work, one is almost guaranteed to find Adair.

In the early 1760s, the nature of the commissions that Stuart received began to change. This was due to the influence of Thomas Anson, MP for Lichfield and a founder member of the Society of Dilettanti. They met c.1756 and Anson seems to have given Stuart the opportunity to learn something about the business side of architecture by absorbing him into the reliable teams of craftsmen and workmen whom he had employed for nearly fifteen years at his Staffordshire seat, Shugborough Hall.²⁰ Through Anson, Stuart also met the sculptor Peter Scheemakers. His business relationship with the Scheemakers family endured for nearly two decades and resulted in monuments to Viscount Howe and



Fig. 3. Ceiling, Lady Spencer's Dressing Room, Spencer House, St James's Place, London.

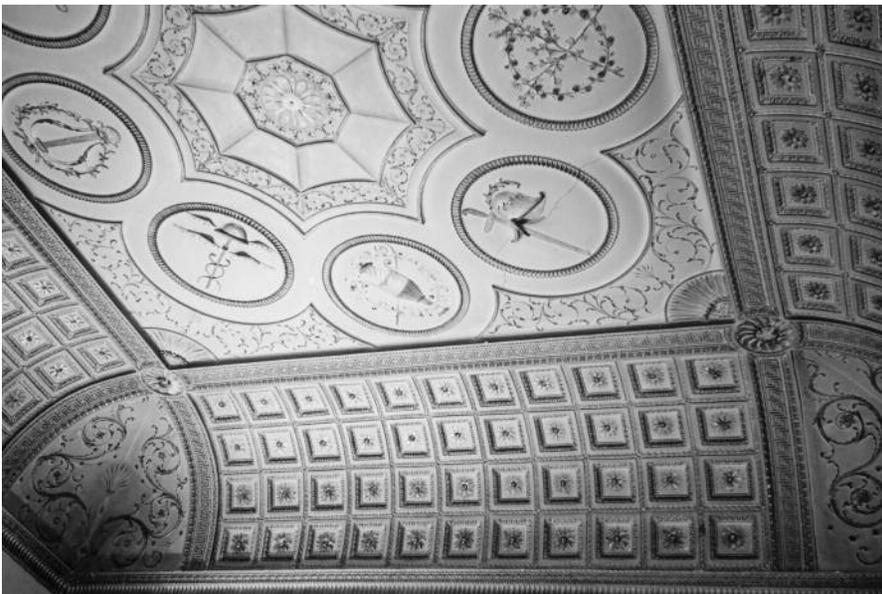


Fig. 4. Saloon, Rathfarnham Castle, Co. Dublin.



Fig. 5. Saloon, Holderness (later Londonderry) House, Hertford Street, London.
Country Life Picture Library.



Fig. 6. Drawing Room, Holderness (later Londonderry) House, Hertford Street, London. *English Heritage, NMR.*

Rear-Admiral Charles Watson in Westminster Abbey as well as a number of monuments to members of the Yorke family of Wimpole Hall.²¹

When Anson's brother, Admiral Sir George Anson died in 1762, he left Thomas a substantial fortune²² and a little-used town house, No.15 St James's Square, originally No.13 and known since 1831 as Lichfield House. The old house was demolished in 1763 and Stuart was awarded the most significant

commission of his career to date. Presumably, it was on the basis of his large inheritance that Anson rebuilt the house in stone rather than brick. Alas, no drawings in Stuart's hand have survived and the extant plans show the later alterations of Samuel Wyatt, but twenty letters in the Staffordshire Record Office provide some information about the manner in which Stuart conducted business and what aspects of the building were important to him.

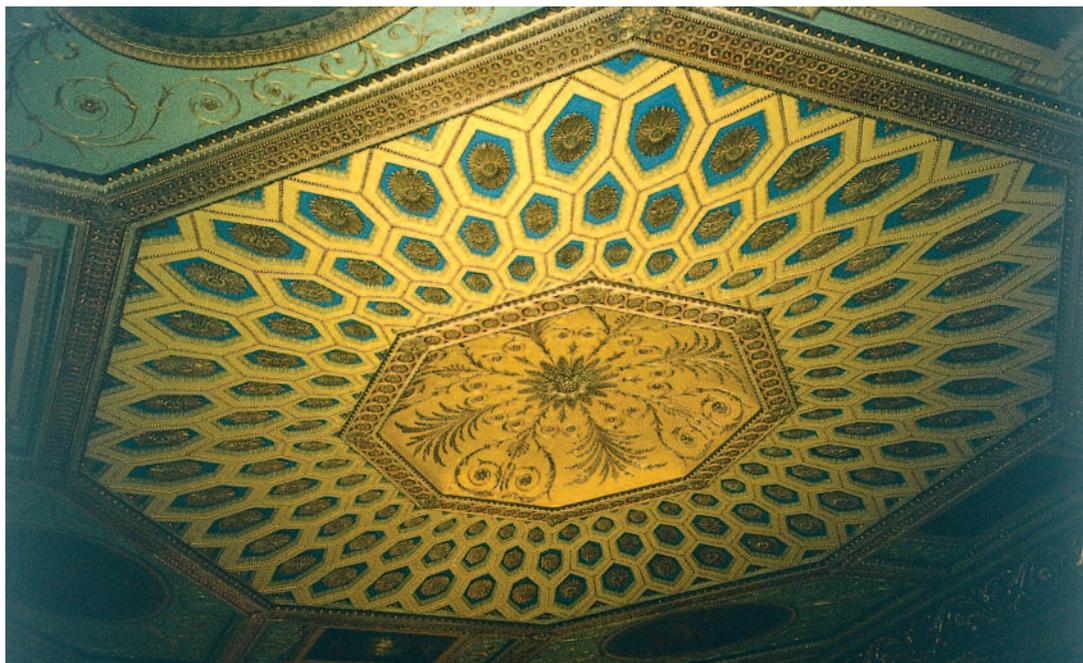


Fig. 7. Ceiling, Great Room, No. 15 St James's Square, London.

The first letter on the subject of building the house dates from June 1764:

I am honoured with your Letter of June 16 but have not received the money myself, nor have I yet given it to the Bricklayer Mason or Carpenter, Norris has not been to the Square to day, but I am to see him tomorrow & press him to forward his Book at the same time that I give him the 500£, & I shall then likewise deliver to Rockend & Evans their respective notes, one for 400, & the other for 300£.²³

From this letter, one presumes that the clerk of works was Richard Norris (c.1719–1779), a Holborn-based builder and surveyor,²⁴ through whom the master craftsmen were paid. This is not an unusual situation. A good clerk of works had ‘the ability and experience to understand the numerous trades represented on a building site and to keep ordered accounts.’²⁵ But another letter, dating from

November 1764, informs Anson that Norris had prepared some drawings for the house.²⁶ These drawings have not survived, but the fact that they existed at all is intriguing because the drawings were probably more than simple sketches. In 1760, James Adam claimed that he had amused Clérisseau ‘with the accounts of the Athenian’s Designs, or rather his manner of describing without any designs,’²⁷ and documents relating to Stuart’s surveyorship of the Royal Naval Hospital at Greenwich reveal that he had expected his deputies, Robert Mylne and then William Newton, to prepare large numbers of drawings for the reconstruction of the chapel after it was destroyed by fire in 1779. Both Mylne and Newton had complained that this extra work had gone unrecognised and unpaid.²⁸ Mylne, in particular, made clear that preparing drawings was not his job and suggested that Stuart was not merely

remiss in his duties but actually incompetent. This suggests that the key to Stuart's architectural career, what made it possible for him to build from the ground up, may have been Richard Norris's ability to translate rough sketches and ideas into three-dimensional form. In any event, Norris, the mason Alexander Routhead (d.1776), and the carpenter Charles Evans had plenty of design and construction experience to their credit.²⁹

The construction of Lichfield House appears to have been trouble-free although the relationship between Norris and Routhead was strained by the end of the work, when Routhead submitted a final bill of £282 2s. 9d. to Anson in April 1770. Routhead blamed Norris for the late presentation of this bill and claimed that Norris had rejected his account three times because he was unhappy with the way that the work had been measured.³⁰ Whether Stuart would have continued to work with Routhead is uncertain, but the puns on his name that feature in several of his letters suggest that Stuart's sympathies lay with his clerk of works and not his mason.³¹

The other interesting aspect of the construction of Lichfield House is the care and attention that Stuart lavished on the capitals of the façade. Partly because the site was so narrow (a mere 43 feet wide³²), and partly because it was to be the first stone façade in St James's Square, Stuart gave Anson's town house a Palladian-inspired temple-front that drew attention to his *leitmotiv*, the Ionic order of the temple of Minerva Polias, one of the three temples that Stuart had identified as forming the Erechtheion. So conscious was he of the statement made by using a Greek Ionic order on the exterior of such a prestigious commission, that the capitals are mentioned in most of his surviving letters to Anson.

On 23 August 1764, Stuart was pleased to report that pediments had been placed above the first floor windows and that he was busy designing the capitals,³³ and, within a month, that 'the Capitals, concerning which I do for the honour of Athens interest myself very much, are not yet finished, your

house is a topic of much conversation among the Connoisseurs in Architecture.'³⁴ To ensure accuracy, Stuart had Adair prepare a special model for the craftsmen³⁵ and he eventually turned to Scheemakers for their execution on the grounds that the workmen 'must not murder my Capitals the greatest grace & ornament of a building.'³⁶ By October, he could boast that 'I am much pleased with the Circumstance relating to the Ionic Capitals. I knew that they would be nearly the same size with the originals but was not aware that there is not a hairsbreadth of difference in their Diameters.'³⁷ In an era when many details of an edifice were worked out on the spot by master builders, however, it is unlikely that Stuart employed Scheemakers because he felt that a mason familiar with centring Roman Ionic volutes would find himself at a disadvantage when presented with a Greek Ionic capital. Presumably, he was trying to draw Anson's attention to the one feature of this façade that can truly be deemed an original contribution. His attention to these capitals was related to his decision to rewrite the text of the first volume of the *Antiquities of Athens* in order to emphasise the accuracy of his (actually Revett's) measurements after Julien-David LeRoy had published *Les Ruines des Plus Beaux Monuments de la Grèce* in 1758. Because Stuart and Revett's drawings of the Erechtheion were not published until 1789, using this order on the façade of Lichfield House was also a way of keeping alive interest in his publishing ventures.

Very little of the surviving documentation relates to the interior of Lichfield House, although a list of outstanding bills prepared by Anson's executors in 1773 includes the names of Mr Rose (plasterer) and 'Mr Birimwich' (paperhanger).³⁸ Thomas Bromwich was a paper-hanger and decorator with premises on Ludgate Hill.³⁹ Rose was most likely Joseph Rose senior, who by this date had been joined in the family business by his two nephews, one of whom was also named Joseph.⁴⁰

Without doubt, Anson was Stuart's most important architectural patron, yet even at No.15 St



Fig. 8. Morning Room, No. 22 Portman Square, London. *English Heritage, NMR.*

James's Square, he produced the same variations on a stylistic theme; the Great Room ceiling is akin to one at Holderness House and the chimneypiece is almost the same as the Great Room chimneypiece at Spencer House. As Peter Scheemakers provided a version of this frieze for a chimneypiece which he executed independently for the Cabinet Room of Corsham Court, Wiltshire,⁴¹ and as he is known to have been employed by Anson at Shugborough, he is the most likely executant of the Lichfield House and Spencer House chimneypieces. It would be interesting to know which was executed first.

After the activity of the first decade following his return from Athens, Stuart received few new commissions. Most of those members of the Society of Dilettanti who were willing to provide him with architectural work had already done so and, by the mid-1770s, many of them were dead. The exception was Elizabeth Montagu. In 1759, Mrs Montagu had commissioned a painting of a scene from *The Tempest* from Stuart⁴² and in 1760 he began to paint her Hill Street bedchamber with a scheme of zephyrs and cupids. With him came John Adair to supply the carving and gilding.⁴³ It took twelve years to

complete the zephyr room, yet, incredibly, Stuart was the architect whom Mrs Montagu chose to design her new town house in Portman Square in 1775.

No. 22 Portman Square is the most fully documented private commission of Stuart's career. When I published an account of its building history in 2001, my concern had been to explore the relationship that developed between patron and architect and to assess the influence that Mrs Montagu was able to exert over the design of her new home.⁴⁴ What has subsequently become clear, however, is that Stuart brought to this commission the very same craftsmen and master builders with whom he had worked at Holderness House and No.15 St James's Square; Adair, Norris and Evans. For nearly five years, building progressed smoothly under the watchful eye of Richard Norris but, after Norris died unexpectedly in May 1779, Stuart's lack of architectural training began to affect the project adversely. By spring 1780 Mrs Montagu's correspondence with friends, family, and the firm of Boulton and Fothergill had become a litany of complaints about Stuart's disorderly conduct and, even though the Morning Room and Great Room were unfinished, she fired him within the year. Work on the Great Room did not begin until 1790, to the designs of Joseph Bonomi, and does not concern us here. The Morning Room, however, featured a square-coffered cove combined with a complex pattern of interlocking circles, paterae and what were probably 'mechanical' paintings from Boulton and Fothergill (Fig. 8). This coffered cove was the last appearance of one of Stuart's favourite motifs, nearly twenty years after it was first used at Holderness House.

Much work remains to be done before a full picture emerges of the relationships that developed between patron, architect, and the teams of craftsmen and workmen involved in erecting Stuart's town houses but, from these preliminary investigations, it is apparent that he relied heavily on a preferred team of craftsmen. This may have been the secret of Stuart's early success, but ultimately it spelled the end of his private architectural career.

NOTES

- 1 A version of this paper was presented at *The Aristocratic Town House in the 18th Century* conference held at the University of Oxford in January 2003. I am grateful to Malcolm Airs and to those who contributed to a weekend of stimulating discussion.
- 2 This deficiency made Revett's carefully measured orthographic projections vital to the success of the *Antiquities of Athens*. For Stuart's acknowledgement that this was Revett's role in their joint venture, see James Stuart and Nicholas Revett, *Antiquities of Athens*, I, London, 1762, vii-viii.
- 3 No. 45 Harley Street was demolished in the nineteenth century and no record of its appearance has survived [Lesley Lewis, "Stuart and Revett. Their Literary and Architectural Careers," *Journal of the Warburg Institute*, II, 1938-1939, 137].
- 4 Edinburgh, Scottish Record Office, Clerk of Penicuik Muniments (hereafter Clerk of Penicuik Muniments), GD18 4852; London, Sir John Soane's Museum, Adam Drawings 54, No. 40.
- 5 San Marino (California), Henry E. Huntington Library, Montagu Papers (hereafter Montagu Papers), MO 5026.
- 6 Sheffield, Sheffield Libraries and Information Services, Wentworth Woodhouse Muniments (hereafter Wentworth Woodhouse Muniments), Vouchers for Works of Art.
- 7 Nicholas Goodison, *Ormolu: the Work of Matthew Boulton*, London, 1974, 140-141.
- 8 A transcription of Spencer's account at Hoare's is given in Joseph Friedman, *Spencer House*, London, 1993, 344-345. See also *ibid.*, 73-75 and 186-187. It should be noted that Rose's bill was submitted to Lord Spencer by Vardy and was for work executed prior to Stuart's involvement with Spencer House.
- 9 In April 1761 the Earl of Sandwich attempted to persuade Holderness to rebuild his town house on Whitehall, thereby releasing Sandwich from the leasehold, so Holderness House cannot have been under construction at that time [London, British Library, Egerton MS 3438, 190].
- 10 For a history of this commission, see Arthur Oswald, "Londonderry House," *Country Life*, LXXXII, July 10 1937, 38-44.
- 11 London, British Library, Egerton MS 3497, fols. 66, 67, 73 (Adair); *ibid.*, fols. 64, 67, 69 (Rose); *ibid.*, fol. 64 (Stuart).
- 12 *Ibid.*, fol. 72.
- 13 John Harris has suggested that Stiff Leadbetter was

- the architect of Sion Hill, while Stuart was consulted about the interiors. Work on the house at Sion Hill was probably underway at the same time as Lancelot Brown transformed the garden [John Harris, "Le Rouge's Sion Hill: A Garden by Brown," *THE LONDON GARDENER or The Gardener's Intelligencer*, V, 1999–2000, 24–28].
- 14 Jonathan and Joseph Rose were responsible for the ceiling and walls of the Great Hall and for work in the dining, drawing, supping and writing rooms at Wentworth Woodhouse [Marcus Binney, "Wentworth Woodhouse Revisited – II," *Country Life*, CLXXIII, March 24 1983, 710; Wentworth Woodhouse Muniments A-1201, A-1000 (1761), and A-1098, 2, 42].
 - 15 Seven of the seventeen paintings in the Drawing Room of Nuneham Courtenay had frames carved by John Adair [Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire Record Office, Lee Manuscript D/LE/D4/14].
 - 16 Stafford, Staffordshire Record Office, Lichfield/Anson Manuscript (hereafter Anson Manuscript) D615/E(H)/1/1.
 - 17 Anson Manuscript D615/E(H)/1/1.
 - 18 Montagu Papers MO 23.
 - 19 Kerry Bristol, "22 Portman Square. Mrs Montagu and her *Palais de la vieillesse*," *The British Art Journal*, II, No.3, Summer 2001, 72.
 - 20 For a concise history of Shugborough, see John Martin Robinson, *Shugborough*, London, 1989, 18–33. Accounts of Anson's building campaigns can also be found throughout Joyce Godber, "The Life of the Marchioness Grey of Wrest Park, 1722–97" and "The Travel Journal of her Husband, Philip Yorke, 1748–63," *Bedfordshire Historical Record Society*, XLVII, 1968, and in Bedford, Bedfordshire Record Office, Lucas Manuscripts L30/9/3/24, L30/9a/2/3, and L30/9a/5/98; Anson Manuscript D615/P(S)/1/3/23A; Eileen Harris, "A Flair for the Grandiose: The Architecture of Thomas Wright – II," *Country Life*, CL, September 2 1971, 546–550; and Alastair Laing, "O tempera, o mores!" *Apollo*, CXXXVII, April 1993, 227–232.
 - 21 Ingrid Roscoe, "James 'Athenian' Stuart and the Scheemakers Family: A Lucrative Partnership between Architect and Sculptors," *Apollo*, CXXXVI, September 1987, 178–184.
 - 22 Anson Manuscript D615/E(L)/69A.
 - 23 Anson Manuscript D615/P(S)/1/6/7.
 - 24 Howard Colvin, *Biographical Dictionary of British Architects, 1600–1840*, New Haven and London, 1995, 708–709.
 - 25 James Ayres, *Building the Georgian City*, New Haven and London, 1998, 34; Alan Mackley, "Clerks of the Works," *Georgian Group Journal*, VIII, 1998, 157–166.
 - 26 Anson Manuscript D615/P(S)/1/6/16.
 - 27 Clerk of Penicuik Muniments GD18 4864.
 - 28 London, Public Record Office, ADM 65/106; London, Royal Institute of British Architects, Library, Manuscript New/1/8/8.
 - 29 For Routhead, see Colvin, *op. cit.*, 835–836 and Survey of London, *The Parish of St James Westminster. Part I. South of Piccadilly*, XXIX, London, 1960, 192. For Evans, see Colvin, *op. cit.*, 355 and Steven Brindle, "Pembroke House, Whitehall," *Georgian Group Journal*, VIII, 1998, 98.
 - 30 Anson Manuscript D615/P(S)/1/6/31.
 - 31 In addition to Anson Manuscript D615/P(S)/1/6/7 (note 23 above), see also Anson Manuscript D615/P(S)/1/6/13, "The Masons do not advance so fast as I could wish & as they ought, Rockheads absence is rather blameable." The spelling of his name as Rockhead would support the suggestion that the "Rockhead Lydia" who was paid by the Duke of Grafton in 1761 was his wife or mother [Richard Hewlings, "Wakefield Lodge and other buildings of the second Duke of Grafton," *Georgian Group Journal*, III, 1993, 55; Richard Hewlings, "Women in the building trades," *Georgian Group Journal*, X, 2000, 79].
 - 32 J.M.W. Halley, "Lichfield House," *Architectural Review*, XXVII, May 1910, 275.
 - 33 Anson Manuscript D615/P(S)/1/6/9.
 - 34 Anson Manuscript D615/P(S)/1/6/13.
 - 35 Anson Manuscript D615/E(H)/1/1.
 - 36 Anson Manuscript D615/P(S)/1/6/16.
 - 37 Anson Manuscript D615/P(S)/1/6/15.
 - 38 Anson Manuscript D615/P(S)/1/6/54.
 - 39 Geoffrey Beard, *Georgian Craftsmen and their work*, London, 1966, 174.
 - 40 Rose was also mentioned in the surviving correspondence between Stuart and Anson: "Rose returns his sincerest thanks for the money you have been pleased to remit him, his receipt is inclosed" [Anson Manuscript D615/P(S)/1/6/21].
 - 41 Margaret I. Webb, "Chimney-Pieces by Scheemakers," *Country Life*, CXXI, March 14 1957, 493.
 - 42 Montagu Papers MO 5135.
 - 43 Montagu Papers MO 23.
 - 44 Bristol, *op. cit.*, 72–85; Kerry Bristol, "The Painted Rooms of 'Athenian' Stuart," *Georgian Group Journal*, X, 2000, 164–174.