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AN ARCHITECT FOR LYDIARD HOUSE

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In 1740 Lydiard House, Wiltshire, was a much extended, late medieval country house, originally built upon an H-plan.¹ It had been untouched by the first wave of the classicising Neo-Palladian revival that swept across England in the first quarter of the eighteenth century, a circumstance to be remedied by a radical re-styling in the 1740s. Until now the architect responsible for the remodelling of Lydiard has remained elusive, with no evidence emerging to support the stylistic attributions that have been made.² New research has, however, discovered a documentary source linking Lydiard to both its architect and master builder.

Until 1742 Lydiard Park was owned by Henry, 1st Viscount St John, known to his four children as ‘Old Frumps’.³ At his death in April 1742 St John had attained the age of eighty-nine, and his eldest son, also Henry, the notorious 1st Viscount Bolingbroke (Fig. 2), who had retired to France with his wife, formerly Marie-Claire de Descamps des Marcilly,⁴ was already sixty-five. Bolingbroke had surrendered Lydiard to his half-brother, John, who became 2nd Viscount St John on their father’s death (Fig. 3). A letter from Bolingbroke to his brother in April 1743 confirms that he transferred the estate to St John prior to their father’s death, as early as 1739. Bolingbroke wrote: ‘I said you and Your children were to keep up the Family, and in that view I put you four years ago in possession of the Seat of it’.⁵ Contrary to current perceptions, however, it would seem that, although showing no interest in the running of the estate, Bolingbroke did not completely abandon the income generated by Lydiard to his half brother.⁶

It was, therefore, John St John, twenty four years Bolingbroke’s junior, who initiated the Neo-Palladian remodelling of the house sometime between spring 1742 and spring 1743. The timing of the remodelling suggests that, although Lydiard had been set aside for St John by Bolingbroke, there was an agreement that no work would begin while their father was alive. Bolingbroke and the chronically ill Marie-Claire had returned to France in the autumn of 1742 after arranging the affairs of ‘Old Frumps’.⁷ They did not take up residence in England again until 1743 when Bolingbroke moved into the family’s London home of Battersea Manor.⁸

An inscription inexpertly trimmed and re-located on an unfinished wall in a narrow attic corridor provides the evidence for the remodelling (Fig. 1). However, substantial and repeated payments to one ‘Nath. Ireson’ are recorded in St John’s account ledger at Hoare’s Bank, beginning in April 1743 with £110.⁹ The speed with which the first payment was made to Ireson indicates that St John had a clear idea of how Lydiard was to be modernised from the moment he inherited the estate and probably for some time before the death of his father, which, at his age, had long been expected. The timing suggests that St John also knew well in advance that Bolingbroke would settle Lydiard upon him; his generosity was well-known.¹⁰

The payments from John St John to Nathaniel Ireson continued twice yearly from April 1743 until 2 October 1746. Thus it would seem that the extensive remodelling of Lydiard was carried out between 1743 and 1746 and was largely completed

within the first three years of St John's unfettered ownership of the estate, contrary to what has previously been thought.¹¹ This speedy transformation of Lydiard from outdated manor to Neo-Palladian country house in three years is supported by a letter written by Bolingbroke to his half-sister Lady Luxborough in 1744: 'I am glad to hear that My Lord St John has done so much at Lydiard. . . . He seems pleased with what he has done. . .'.¹² The implication is that much of the work had already been carried out.

In the context of the consistent payments to Ireson between 1743 and 1746, it is tempting to consider that he may have been both architect and builder, roles that were still to become clearly defined in this period. This theory is strengthened by Ireson's construction of Colen Campbell's Stourhead House as early as 1720.¹³ The architectural novelty and success of Stourhead would have elevated Ireson's reputation as a master-builder within the county, and the location of Stourhead, within forty miles of Lydiard Park, might have brought Ireson to St John's attention. It would be strange if the Hoares of Stourhead and St Johns of Lydiard were not acquainted socially.

As with many master-builders of the eighteenth century, Ireson's capabilities extended beyond mere construction into the field of architectural design. As an architect, Ireson is known to have been influenced by Thomas Archer and favoured a 'vigorous provincial Baroque style' displayed in such houses as Crowcombe Court, Somerset.¹⁴ There is, however, no known evidence that he designed buildings in the Neo-Palladian style. It would, therefore, be surprising if Lydiard House, so pure in its Jonesian Neo-Palladianism, and closely following the design at Wilton, had been designed by Ireson (Figs. 4 and 5). Despite his undoubted capabilities as a master builder and the evidence of his extensive involvement in the rebuilding of Lydiard, Ireson does not emerge as its obvious architect purely on stylistic grounds.

If it was not Nathaniel Ireson, then who was responsible for the design of Lydiard? Lydiard

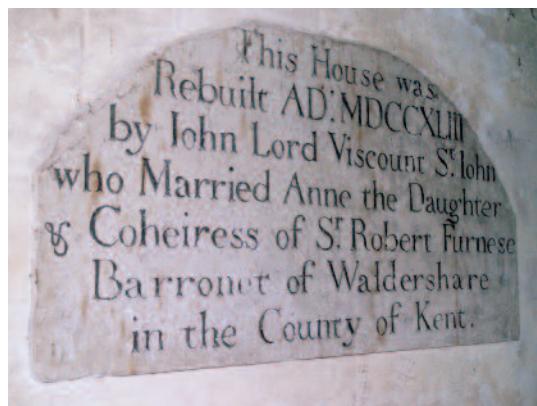


Fig. 1. Lydiard House, inscription.
Carole Fry.

House has been attributed to Roger Morris (and others) in the past. However, until now his authorship has been mere speculation. Certainly the confident use of the Neo-Palladian idiom in the re-working of the existing building suggests an experienced architect and the Jonesian-Kentian interiors are very much in his manner.¹⁵ Morris was the favoured architect of the 9th Earl of Pembroke, the owner of Wilton House, upon which the design for Lydiard is closely based. Lydiard follows the design of Wilton in the use of corner towers, although at Lydiard the design deceives the onlooker into perceiving an incomplete form as the whole, whereas Wilton has true towers. Lydiard's two new facades are articulated by three towers, one at each end of the two facades and one where the two elevations meet at a right angle (Fig. 5). The old approach to the house was centred on this point, so that any visitor would have assumed the house to be of a symmetrical, quadrangular form with four towers. In reality the two new facades mask the later medieval and seventeenth-century ranges, as well as the parish church, that still exist to the rear. The quoins at Lydiard are also a direct reproduction of those at Wilton and create the impression, at least from a distance, that the towers project from the



Fig. 2. Joseph Highmore (attrib.), *Henry St. John, 1st. Viscount Bolingbroke*, 1745.
Lydiard House, Swindon Borough Council, presented by the late
Derek Sherborn in 1955.



Fig. 3. Joseph Highmore (attrib.), *John St. John, 2nd. Viscount St. John, 1745*. Lydiard House, Swindon Borough Council, presented by the late Derek Sherborn in 1955.

Fig. 4. Wilton House. *Carole Fry*.

facades, thus adding visual depth and interest to otherwise flat elevations. The Jonesian window surrounds on the towers at Lydiard have triangular pediments and skirted architraves, another direct copy of the detailing at Wilton.

The circumstantial evidence and speculation surrounding Morris's association with Lydiard can now be supported by St John's ledger at Hoare's Bank. The account records a payment on 10 September 1744 to 'Ro: Morris' for £42.¹⁶ This entry is likely to mean the architect Roger Morris rather than his kinsman, Robert, who, although occasionally practising as an architect and surveyor, was much better known as an architectural theorist. Indeed Robert's published designs have been described as 'competent but somewhat pedestrian. They hardly suggest that he was an architect of much distinction, and no building of any importance can be attributed to him'.¹⁷ This payment may therefore have been made to Roger Morris and is the only

recorded payment to him in the account, open between 1735 and 1749. Most importantly, this is the only payment from St John's account to any known architects apart from Nathaniel Ireson. The payment to Roger Morris occurs more than a year after the first payment to Ireson, which perhaps indicates that work had already begun before professional advice was sought from Morris. However, the accounts can not be taken to be a comprehensive record of St John's financial transactions during the years 1735–49. The most plausible interpretation is that Morris had been involved from the very start of St John's project to remodel the old family house, probably before the death of the first Viscount St John, and before Ireson was appointed, and that the initial payments to him were not recorded at Hoare's. The frequent gaps of several months without payments in St John's ledger make this a strong probability. Of particular importance in this respect is the absence of any entries between 1736

Fig. 5. Lydiard House. *Carole Fry*.

and 1742, the most crucial period in the design stage of Lydiard.

Roger Morris would have been an obvious choice of architect for St John. In that 1744 letter Lord Bolingbroke, writing to his sister, Lady Luxborough, implies that their brother, like many other contemporary patrons, was attempting to advance himself through architecture, thus demonstrating to the world that he was a man of taste and learning:

I am glad to hear that My Lord St John has done so much at Lydiard. I abandoned it to him that he might restore the family seat, and that by living there decently and hospitably he might restore the family interest too much and too long neglected. He seems pleased with what he has done, and vanity and ostentation may get, in some degree, the better part of another person's advance, tho' it be as exorbitant as I have ever heard of in any.¹⁸

For St John, the appointment of Roger Morris, Pembroke's disciple, would have served several

purposes: drawing himself to the attention of the Earl, proving himself a man of virtuosity and learning and, therefore, worthy of advance, and raising his profile locally as the owner of a magnificent Palladian building. The new Lydiard would have represented a new beginning for the family under his ownership. Certainly Bolingbroke's correspondence with his half-sister, where he acknowledges that the family interest has 'too long been neglected' suggests that he too was aware of this need.

This discovery of St John's account provides an architect for Lydiard, a house that has long been the focus of speculation. The account also narrows the period of construction to between spring 1743 and the end of 1746. Establishing Lydiard as the work of Roger Morris, one of the most competent and well-known Palladian Revival architects, has confirmed precisely the kind of prestigious connection for which St John was hoping when he selected Morris to remodel the house.

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NOTES

- 1 John Bold, *Wilton House and English Palladianism*, London, 1988, 144.
- 2 Howard Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects 1600–1840*, London, 1978, 562; Michael Gray, 'Lydiard Park Wiltshire: An Analysis and Architectural Assessment', *Friends of Lydiard Tregoz Report*, XXX, 4; Steven Parissien, *The Careers of Roger and Robert Morris, Architects*, unpublished D.Phil. thesis, University of Oxford, 1989. It has also been suggested by Walford Wynn-Jones that Thomas Prowse or Isaac Ware may have designed Lydiard.
- 3 Walter Sichel, *Bolingbroke and his Times: The Sequel*, London, 1902, 359.
- 4 For more information on Bolingbroke and Marie-Claire see M.R. Hopkinson, *Married to Mercury, A Sketch of Lord Bolingbroke and his Wives*, London, 1936.
- 5 Brian Carne, 'John, Viscount St John (1702–1748)', *Friends of Lydiard Tregoz Report*, XXX, 35.
- 6 London, C. Hoare and Co., Customer Ledgers 44, fol. 434, and S, fols. 62 and 243. St John's account includes several large payments to Bolingbroke in 1744 and 1745, amounting to £3,000 over 2 years.
- 7 Hopkinson, *op. cit.*, 205.
- 8 Sichel, *op. cit.*, 555.
- 9 C. Hoare and Co., *loc. cit.*, and Customer Ledger T, fols. 53 and 435.
- 10 For Bolingbroke's character see C. Petrie, *Bolingbroke*, London, 1937, and C.G. Robertson, *Bolingbroke*, London, 1947.
- 11 Brian Carne, 'Some St John Family Papers, reproduced with Corrections and Additions', *Friends of Lydiard Tregoz Report*, XXVII–XXIX, 1994–1996, 121.
- 12 London, British Library (hereafter BL), Add. MS. 34,196, fol. 147.
- 13 Giles Worsley, *Classical Architecture in Britain: The Heroic Age*, New Haven and London, 1995, 101.
- 14 Howard Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects 1600–1840*, New Haven and London, 1995, 529.
- 15 Discussion with Prof. Steven Parissien.
- 16 C. Hoare and Co., Customer Ledger 44, fol. 434.
- 17 Colvin, *op. cit.*, 1995, 664–665.
- 18 BL, Add. MS. 34,196, fol. 147.