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# ACHITAPHEL'S ARCHITECT

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William Taylor was a discovery of the late Sir Howard Colvin's. The first account of Taylor's life appeared in the 1978 version of Colvin's *Biographical Dictionary of British Architects 1600–1840*, and an expanded version appeared in the 1995 edition. Taylor was a surveyor active in the reign of Charles II, apparently in three widely separated areas. His earliest patrons came from the City of London – the Pewterers' Company (in 1668–70), and the bankers Sir Robert Clayton (in 1671–74), John Morris (in 1674), and Sir John Banks (in 1678). He subsequently gained other patrons in the west Midlands, where Morris had property – working at Weston Park (in 1674), Aldenham Park (in 1684–91), Minsterley Church and Kedleston Hall (both in 1688) – and the West Country, where Clayton had property – working at Longleat (in 1682–84), Orchard Portman and Halswell (both in 1684).<sup>1</sup>

In 1998 Bridget Clarke published an article in *The Georgian Group Journal* which greatly enriched Colvin's accounts. She found that Taylor was born in Stepney in 1632, the son of a Master of the London Carpenters' Company, of which he was also a member. She suggested that he might have been the architect of Nynehead Court, Somerset (dated 1675), and she showed that he designed and built Chipley, in the parish of Nynehead (begun in 1681), and Escot House, Devonshire (built between 1684 and 1692), previously believed to have been designed in 1677 by Robert Hooke (under whom Taylor had worked as carpenter at St Dionis Backchurch, London, in 1670).<sup>2</sup> Fortified by Miss Clarke's discoveries, John Harris then attributed work at four other West

Country houses to William Taylor on grounds of visual resemblance – Dunster Castle (c.1680), Hestercombe, Mount Edgcumbe (before 1688), and Wembury (after 1685).<sup>3</sup>

Miss Clarke explained the geographical division of Taylor's work. She showed that some of his West Country and west Midland patrons, despite the distance which separated their properties, were connected. Sir Edward Acton of Aldenham, Shropshire, was married to a cousin of the wife of Edward Clarke of Chipley, Somerset; Sir Robert Clayton, who employed Taylor at Brownsea Island, Dorset, was the partner of John Morris, who employed Taylor at Rossall, Shropshire; Lord Weymouth of Longleat, Wiltshire, owned the living of Minsterley, Shropshire.<sup>4</sup>

She also showed that the connections of some of them were political. Clayton, Clarke and Sir Walter Yonge of Escot supported the exclusion of the Catholic Duke of York from the royal succession, preferring Charles II's bastard son, the Duke of Monmouth. Yonge had entertained Monmouth during his progress through the West Country in 1680, and both Yonge and Clarke had been among Monmouth's supporters who were arrested early in 1685. The Exclusionists were led by the Earl of Shaftesbury, 'Achitaphel' in Dryden's *Absalom and Achitaphel*, and their political philosophy was designed by Shaftesbury's secretary and physician, John Locke. Clayton, Clarke and Yonge were attached to Shaftesbury's party, and Shaftesbury made Clarke his trustee before he fled to Holland. Sir John Banks, another of Taylor's patrons,

although a Tory, also sought Shaftesbury's advice about a tutor for his son, Caleb, and appointed Locke to the post. Yonge entrusted Locke with the formation of his library. Locke, a childhood friend of Mrs Clarke's uncle, became a close friend of the Clarkes and his *Thoughts concerning Education* were written as advice on the upbringing of their children. Indeed much of the information in Bridget Clarke's article on the construction and finishing of Chipley and Escot was taken from the correspondence of Locke with the Clarkes and the Yongs. It would appear that Taylor acted as architect to Shaftesbury's supporters, just as Locke acted as their philosophical mentor.<sup>5</sup>

As it happens, Taylor appears to have been Shaftesbury's architect also. Between 1670 and 1675 Shaftesbury added a drawing room, great parlour, great stair and several lesser rooms to his house at Wimborne St Giles, Dorset.<sup>6</sup> Although the agreement for building these rooms has not been found, Shaftesbury's notes on it were transcribed by Howard Colvin in 1963 and the transcript deposited in the National Monuments Record. They make it clear that the other party to the agreement, the builder, was Thomas Glover, but that he was 'To make the stayres according to Mr Tayler's design'.<sup>7</sup> Presumably, Mr Taylor was architect of the whole apartment, not just the stair, and, in view of the patrons whom Bridget Clarke identified, he must surely have been William Taylor.

But in 1963 Colvin had not heard of William Taylor, and it did not occur to him that the Mr Taylor whose stair design had to be followed was an architect. By the time that he wrote Taylor's biography in 1978 his notes were in the National Monuments Record, and he had forgotten their inclusion of Taylor's name.<sup>8</sup> Today, however, with the aid of Bridget Clarke's research, it is possible to complete one circle of William Taylor's patrons and to show that he acted for their leader as well.

NOTES

- 1 Howard Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects 1600-1840*, London, 1978, 819; Howard Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects 1600-1840*, New Haven and London, 1995, 968-69.
- 2 Bridget Clarke, 'William Taylor: new discoveries', *Georgian Group Journal*, VIII, 1998, 1-11.
- 3 John Harris, 'William Taylor: further attributions', *Georgian Group Journal*, VIII, 1998, 12-18.
- 4 Clarke, *op. cit.*, *passim*. I am grateful to Bridget Clarke for observations on this paragraph.
- 5 *Idem*.
- 6 Swindon, *loc. cit.*, RCHME inventory file, Dorset, vol. 5, Wimborne St Giles (4), St Giles House. The house is described in Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England, *An Inventory of Historical Monuments in the County of Dorset: East Dorset*, V, London, 1975, 94-7, although the work of 1670-75 is not identified there. A more precise analysis of its building phases, locating the 1670-75 apartment, is being prepared by John Cattell and Susie Barson for publication by English Heritage.
- 7 Swindon, English Heritage, National Monuments Record; For Glover, see Howard Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects 1600-1840*, New Haven and London, 1995, 411-12.
- 8 Letter from Sir Howard Colvin, 24 November 2007. With reference to the forthcoming edition of his *Biographical Dictionary*, this letter continued 'Unfortunately I do not think that this is a fact that can now be got into the text'.