



THE
GEORGIAN
GROUP

Howard Colvin, 'Was John Fitch the Architect
of Wotton House?', *The Georgian Group
Journal*, Vol. XVIII, 2010, pp. 1-7

WAS JOHN FITCH THE ARCHITECT OF WOTTON HOUSE?

HOWARD COLVIN

This is the edited text of the last lecture the late Sir Howard Colvin is known to have given, at Wotton House, Buckinghamshire, in September 2007. It is published here as a tribute to Sir Howard, a supporter of the Georgian Group and of its Journal, to which he contributed on several occasions.

As we all know, the evidence for the building of Wotton House is sadly inadequate. In all probability all the documentary evidence, and certainly a large part of the architectural evidence, perished in the fire of 1820. All we have is the inscription INCHOATA 1704, 'begun 1704', over the doorway and the date 1707 on the stable clock, plus a note made by John Buckler in 1815 that there was then visible, apparently on the forecourt wall, an inscription giving the name of 'John Keene master of the Free Masons at Mr Greenville's work at Wotton under Bernwood Forest Novr. 23, 1706'.¹ So the date of construction is firmly established as 1704-7. Of John Keene I know nothing, but as a mason he was probably only a subsidiary or sub-contractor for a house built mostly of brick.

The identity of Richard Grenville's architect therefore remains unknown. In seeking for possible candidates some speculation is permissible, indeed necessary. In putting forward the name of John Fitch I do not claim to have solved the problem conclusively, merely to be drawing attention to evidence that he is a likely candidate. John Fitch, born in Hertfordshire in 1642, was the youngest of two remarkably successful builder-architects.² His elder brother Thomas Fitch played a prominent part in the

rebuilding of London after the Great Fire of 1666, contracting to carry out the important work of cutting and wharfing the Fleet-Ditch, hitherto a noisome stream flowing into the Thames from Holborn, the lower portion of which was to be made into a canal lined with wharves. For this difficult task, for which seventeenth-century building technology (at least in England) was barely adequate, Thomas Fitch received over £50,000 and earned a knighthood: probably the first to be awarded to an English building contractor. His brother John was involved only marginally in this great operation, but from 1679 onwards the Fitch brothers undertook major works of fortification at Portsmouth to the designs of Sir Bernard de Gomme, Charles II's chief military engineer, and at Hull, where their workmanship was supervised and severely criticised by Sir Martin Beckman, the engineer in charge.

Thomas Fitch was a carpenter by trade, John a bricklayer. As such, he was frequently employed by Robert Hooke, for instance in building the Bethlehem Hospital in 1675-6, the College of Physicians in 1674-8 and Montagu House, Bloomsbury, in 1675-8. He had the contracts for building two Wren churches whose walls were faced with brick (St Anne & St Agnes, Gresham Street and St Michael Bassishaw), but in 1674, despite Hooke's recommendation, he failed to secure the bricklayer's contract at St Paul's Cathedral (where there was a lot of brickwork in the crypt). His contracts for the two churches included the structural carpentry, which he must have sub-contracted, perhaps to his brother.

The large scale of John Fitch's operation as a

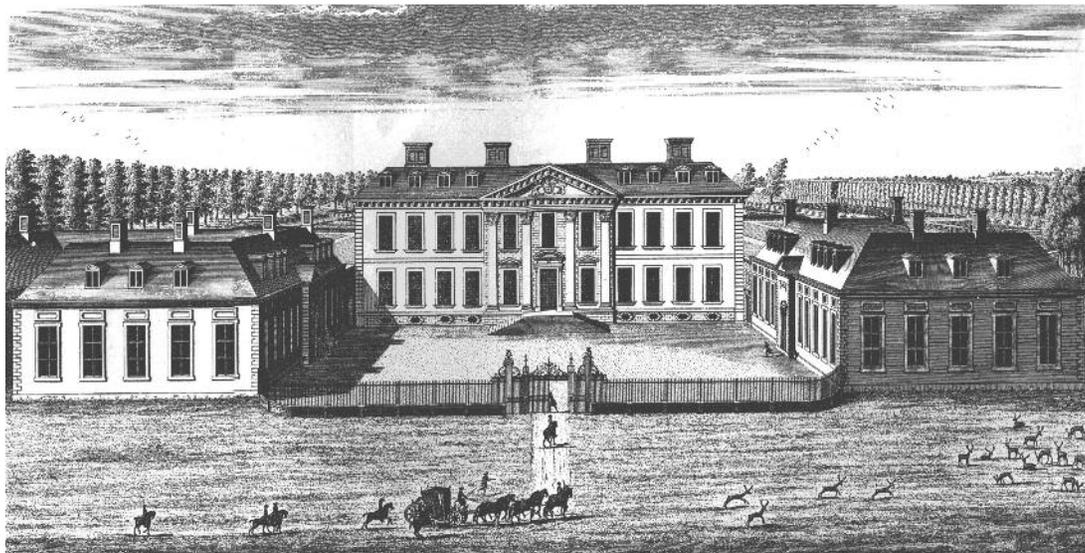


Fig. 1. Kiveton Park, Yorkshire. J. Badeslade & J. Rocque, *Vitruvius Britannicus*, III (1739), pl. 11–12.

building contractor – perhaps the result of his extensive military works at Portsmouth and Hull – is apparent from the exceptionally comprehensive contract by which he undertook to build Buckingham House for John Sheffield, Duke of Buckingham, in 1702–5. He agreed to perform all the mason’s, bricklayer’s, carpenter’s, smith’s, glazier’s and sawyer’s work for £7000,³ in other words to build the structure, leaving the roof to be covered, presumably by a plumber, and the interior to be fitted up with plasterwork, joinery, carving, etc., under the direction of architect in charge, who, as we know, was William Winde. Only Fitch is named in the Duke’s memorandum about the building of his house, but the identity of several of the other craftsmen employed has been established by Richard Hewlings from the Sheffield family papers.

Like his brother, who designed, among other buildings, Wolvesey, the Bishop’s Palace at Winchester, John Fitch, besides building a building contractor on a large scale, could also offer his services as an architect or surveyor. Although possibly not quite literate, signing some documents with what seems to

have been a stamp, he was capable of making architectural drawings. His ‘draught’ or ‘modell’ for the remodelling of Albury Park, Surrey, for Heneage Finch, first Earl of Aylesford, is mentioned in a letter written in 1698 by Finch to his brother the Earl of Nottingham.⁴ Albury was later so extensively rebuilt by Soane, Hakewill and others that I have been unable to find any pictures of the house as altered by Fitch.

At the same time Fitch was involved in the building of Kiveton (pronounced and sometimes spelled as ‘Keeton’) Park in Yorkshire for Thomas Osborne, first Duke of Leeds. Osborne was a very great man indeed: as Lord Treasurer he had been Charles II’s chief minister in the 1670s, and in 1688 he was one of the architects of the ‘Glorious Revolution’. Until his fall in 1696 he was still a major figure in English politics under William and Mary. Fitch had built his Whitehall lodging in the 1660s, and in the 1690s he appears at Kiveton, where in his retirement the Duke was building the mansion that was demolished in 1811, but whose front was recorded by Badeslade and Rocque in 1739 (Fig. 1).

Here Fitch was not the principal building

contractor – that was a London master-carpenter called Daniel Brand who appears in the Buckingham House building accounts as a sub-contractor – but he was advising the Duke of Leeds on architectural matters from 1698 onwards almost until the time of his death in 1706. Among the Duke’s surviving papers is a memorandum that plasterwork in the chapel at Kiveton was to be done by Edward Goudge ‘according to the draughts formerly drawne, and the agreement between Mr Fitch and me’.⁵ In 1700 the Duke made a note ‘to speak with Mr Fitch’ about a ‘Book of Estimates’ made by a mason or sculptor called Vernon for a tomb that he had commissioned in Harthill Church,⁶ and in 1705 Fitch owed the Duke £185 in connection with a transaction concerning lead.⁷

A set of drawings for the main structure of Kiveton is attached to the carpenter’s contract dated 3 March 1697/8.⁸ It is unlikely that, as has been claimed,⁹ these drawings were made by Brand, but they do not match a drawing at Chatsworth that is attributable to Fitch, and although the latter appears to have been the man in charge of the works at Kiveton, it is by no means certain that he was the author of the design. To borrow from Colen Campbell’s phrase, he may have been the ‘conductor’ of a building designed by someone else. A plan for a large house inscribed ‘For the Duke of Leeds at Keiton in Yorkshire’ survives among William Talman’s drawings in the Royal Institute of British Architects’ collection, but it bears no relation to the house as built, and the drawings attached to Brand’s contract were certainly not a product of Talman’s office. Kiveton was attributed to Hooke by the late Giles Worsley on stylistic grounds.¹⁰ Hooke’s diary for these years is unfortunately lost, and expert opinion is not satisfied that the contract drawings were his work.¹¹ The authorship of the design therefore remains unresolved.

From Kiveton Fitch moved on to Chatsworth, where in 1699 he took charge of the works following the dismissal of William Talman by the Duke of

Devonshire in 1696. Fitch’s standing as an architect or surveyor rather than as a mere building craftsman is shown by the fact that his new employer sent a man and two horses to Kiveton to bring him to Chatsworth.¹² The situation here was that the Elizabethan house was being rebuilt in stages. The east and south sides had recently been rebuilt to Talman’s designs but the important west front facing the park remained unaltered. Having first valued outstanding mason’s and joiner’s work on the south front with the aid of his measurer John Sanders, Fitch appears to have made a design for the west front which survives in the Chatsworth archives (Fig. 2). It shows an engaged Corinthian portico as the central feature of an eleven-bay front with, at each end, semi-detached Ionic pilasters as returns to match those already built by Talman to the east. It was to be 160 ft. in length, but the Ionic pilasters added an extra twelve ft., making a total of 172 ft., corresponding to the length of the west front as built. The drawing is inscribed ‘Agree to this designs Witness John Sanders’, followed by Fitch’s signature. This was evidently the ‘Designe and Draft’ which he undertook to build for £2773 by a contract dated 13 July 1700.¹³

Work on this front had started before the Duke changed his mind and ordered the substitution of a design which conformed closely to the architectural format of the recently completed south front. Some masonry already executed had to be demolished,¹⁴ and Fitch’s intended Corinthian portico was replaced by the Ionic one with which we are all familiar. The new west front was essentially a continuation of Talman’s south front with the important addition of a portico. As it was built four years after Talman’s breach with the Duke, his responsibility for the design has never been fully acknowledged by architectural historians, and the drawing for it in the Chatsworth archives is by an as yet unidentified hand.¹⁵ However, in the first volume of his *Vitruvius Britannicus*, published in 1715, Colen Campbell states unequivocally (if only in the

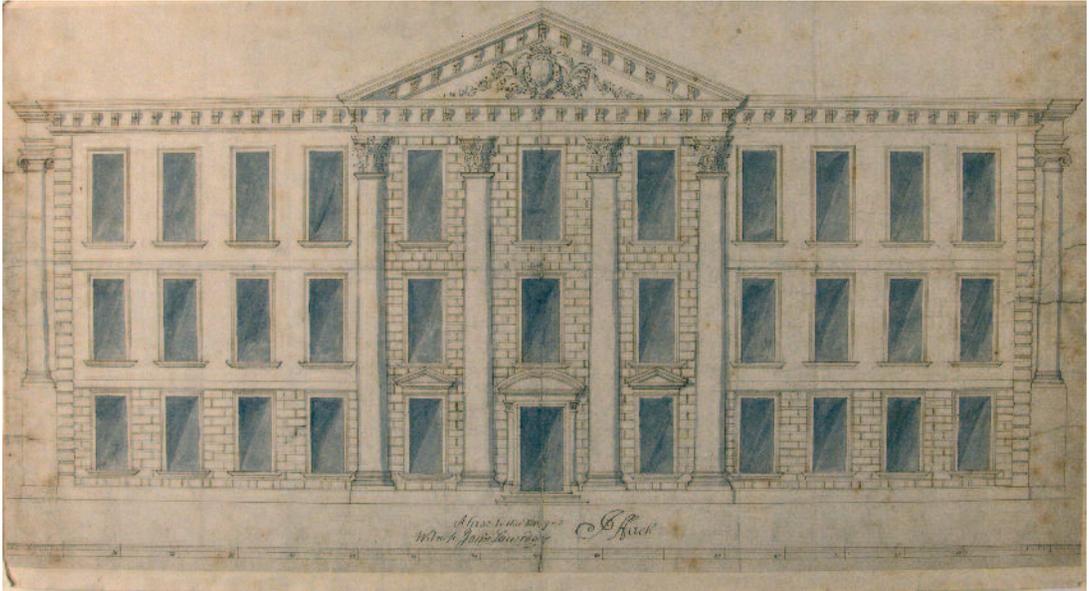


Fig. 2. Design, probably by John Fitch, for the west front at Chatsworth, c.1699.

© Devonshire Collection, Chatsworth, reproduced by permission of Chatsworth Settlement Trustees.

French caption to the engraving in his bilingual publication) that the west front was ‘inventé p[a]r M. Talman’. Whoever made the drawing that was eventually approved by the Duke, it is very likely that it was the realisation of what Talman had envisaged before his dismissal in 1696. Grander in scale than Fitch’s eleven-bay front, the nine bay elevation had the merit of carrying on the theme of the south front without Fitch’s awkward change of orders at the south-west corner.

Fitch remained in charge of the works at Chatsworth until August 1701.¹⁶ That he was still active as a builder is evident from his contract for Buckingham House in 1702. He died in 1706 at the age of 64, leaving an estate near Wimborne in Dorset which he had purchased in 1691, complete with a good house (High Hall) of c.1670. Thereafter he joined the ranks of the country gentry, being described as ‘esquire’ in formal documents and establishing a family whose descendants are still in residence at the present day.

As the builder of Buckingham House and the surveyor employed by the Dukes of Leeds and Devonshire, two of the greatest men in the country, John Fitch was clearly a well-known figure in the English architectural scene in the early years of Queen Anne’s reign. What evidence is there to suggest that he might have been employed at Wotton by Richard Grenville in 1704?¹⁷ First there is the obvious resemblance between the north front of Wotton and the courtyard front of Buckingham House, which led Lysons, in the Buckinghamshire volume of his *Magna Britannia*, published in 1802, to state that Wotton was ‘built after the model of Buckingham House’.¹⁷ If Grenville admired the Duke of Buckingham’s new mansion he could hardly do better than employ the man who had just built it and was conversant with the design even if it was not yet quite complete, and who had the additional recommendation of having been employed by two great Whig peers, the Dukes of Devonshire and Leeds.

Then there are architectural links between

Wotton and Kiveton. Sir James Thornhill's sketch of Wotton (Fig. 3) shows the low screen-walls linking the wings to the main block. These are ornamented with large oval blind windows or panels, each with four keystones. At Kiveton there were similar windows in the basement of the main block. These were presumably the 'ovals' whose method of glazing figures in a note already mentioned in which the Duke of Leeds reminded himself to 'speak with Mr Fitch' about another building matter.¹⁸ The only other house I can recall with oval basement windows was Montagu House in Bloomsbury, which Fitch had built to the designs of Robert Hooke in 1675-9.¹⁹ Oval windows are also shown at basement level in an unpublished sketch by Hooke for an unidentified public or collegiate building.²⁰ Their presence at Kiveton may support, but does not prove, the attribution of the design of that house to Hooke.

There are two other features that Wotton shares with Kiveton. One is the channelled masonry that at both houses distinguishes the three central bays of the garden front from those on either side (Fig. 4). The other is the rectangular panels over some of the principal windows in the office wings. Although

channelled masonry may not have been quite as distinctive a feature as oval basement windows, its use both at Kiveton and Wotton to emphasise the centre of a facade seems to have only one precedent in English country-house architecture: Petworth House, Sussex, built c.1688-90. It is, however, also a feature of Fitch's design for the west front of Chatsworth. Was it Fitch who, having built one such front at Kiveton, and projected another at Chatsworth, designed a third at Wotton? As for the panels, they and the double-transomed windows beneath them are virtually identical at both houses.

To whom, then, can the design of Wotton be attributed? Not to Hooke, whose death in March 1703 presumably rules him out as a candidate for the design of a country-house begun, as we know, in 1704. In any case, with its flat roof and attic storey Wotton does not fit easily into Hooke's long succession of houses and other buildings with pitched roofs and dormer windows, nor is it likely that he would incorporate so obvious a copy of the front of Buckingham House into a house of his own invention. But Fitch, who had been involved in the building of two houses - Montagu House and

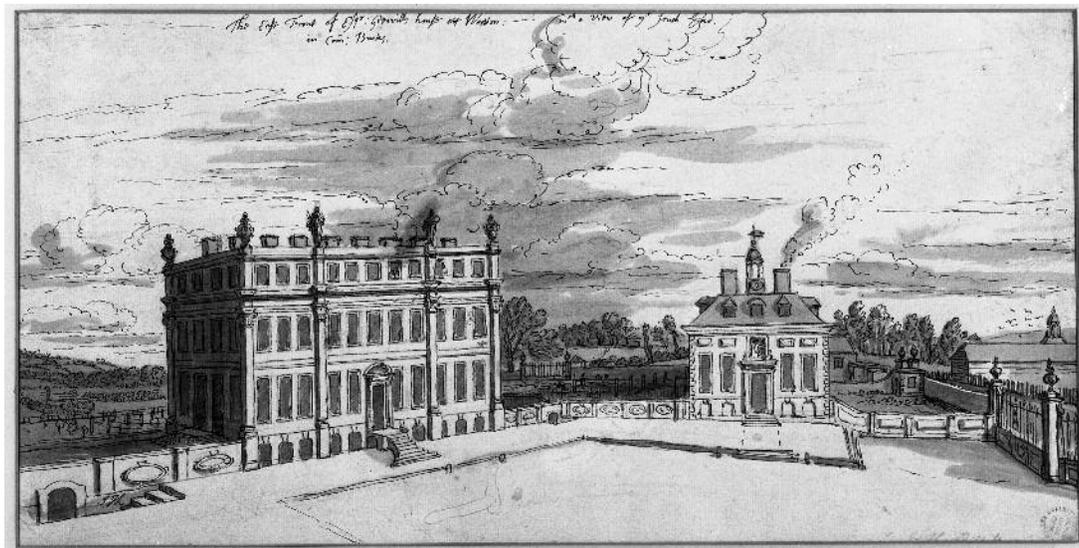


Fig. 3. Sketch of Wotton House by Sir James Thornhill, c.1715. *From the Buckinghamshire County Museum collections.*



Fig. 4. The west front of Wotton House. The attic storey was lowered by Sir John Soane in 1821–2. *Geoffrey Tyack*.

Kiveton – with oval basement windows, as well as another ‘conducted’ by William Winde which was the source of Wotton’s garden front, might well have combined these features in house designed by himself. In other words, some distinctive features of Wotton’s architecture makes sense if we accept the hypothesis that Richard Grenville’s architecture was John Fitch.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Editor is grateful to the executors of the late Sir Howard Colvin for permitting publication of this article; to John Harris and Richard Hewlings for supplying the text; and to David Gladstone for organising the conference at Wotton House at which Sir Howard’s paper was read, and for supporting its publication here.

NOTES

1. British Library (BL), Add. MS. 36359, f.125.
2. For their careers and further biographical details, see Colvin, *Biographical Dictionary of British Architects 1600–1840* (New Haven & London, 2007), pp. 377–9.
3. University of London Library, MS. 533, ff. 8–11.
4. Leicestershire Record Office, Finch Papers, bundle 22, no.116.
5. Yorkshire Archaeological Society’s Collection, Leeds, DD5/24/19. I am grateful to Dr Anthony Geraghty for telling me of this document. The agreement between the Duke and Fitch may conceivably turn up among the still unsorted Osborne papers at Leeds.
6. *Ibid.* For a photocopy of this document I am indebted to Mr Jim Jamieson, the Yorkshire Archaeological Society’s Archivist.
7. BL, Add. MS. 28041 (Duke of Leeds’s diary), f.4.
8. Yorkshire Archaeological Society’s Collection, as above, DD5, Box 3.
9. In *Georgian Group Journal* 11 (2001), pp. 192–5, where they are illustrated as ‘contract drawings by Daniel Brand’.

10. Giles Worsley, 'Taking Hooke Seriously', *Georgian Group Journal* 14 (2004), pp. 15–16.
11. I am grateful to Dr Anthony Geraghty and Dr Gordon Higgott for discussing these drawings with me.
12. Francis Thompson, *A History of Chatsworth* (1945), p. 66.
13. Chatsworth Archives, printed in *Wren Society* 17, pp. 40–2.
14. Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 69; Chatsworth Archives, Building Accounts Vol. 7, p. 18.
15. Illustrated by Thompson, *op. cit.*, pl. 21. A manuscript inscription in the blocking course gives the Duke's approval.
16. BL, Add. MS. 9424, ff. 182–3, information supplied to Samuel Lysons from the Chatsworth Archives in 1816: 'Mr Fitch made bargains, supervised and paid the people until 27 August 1701, when he went away'.
17. S. Lysons, *Magna Britannia* I (1806), p. 673.
18. 'Memorand. The Glas windowes in ye ovals to be on the inside of ye irons'.
19. *The Diary of Robert Hooke*, ed. H.W. Robinson and W. Adams (1935), p. 224.
20. One of a small group of drawings attributable to Hooke among the Feilding papers in the Warwickshire County Record Office.