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# FITCH AND THORNHILL AT WOTTON HOUSE

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The posthumous article by Sir Howard Colvin, 'Was John Fitch the Architect of Wotton House?' in the last volume of this *Journal* presented a cogent argument for Fitch's involvement, based on links with Buckingham House and three Fitch features.<sup>1</sup> John Fitch, a successful bricklayer turned contractor, surveyor and architect, was responsible under the architect William Winde for the building in 1702–5 of Buckingham House, on which Wotton House, begun in 1704, is often said to have been based. The stylistic similarities between Fitch's other work and Wotton are the oval panels with four keystones on Wotton's forecourt walls, also found at Fitch's Kiveton House, Yorkshire, of the 1690s; the channelled masonry on the three central bays of Wotton's west elevation, also seen on the design probably by Fitch for the west front of Chatsworth of about 1699; and the rectangular panels over double-transomed windows in the service wings at both Kiveton and Wotton.

Fitch, however, died in early 1706,<sup>2</sup> perhaps eighteen months into the building of Wotton, and the main construction was not completed until at least 1707, the date on the southern stable block and also that of Langley Bradley's clock in the north kitchen pavilion; in 1863 Sheahan, followed by many modern accounts, gave 1714 for completion, but he is not always reliable.<sup>3</sup> A skilled bricklayer like Fitch himself could have continued with the plans. This may explain the inscription apparently on the forecourt wall, according to John Buckler in 1815, recording that the brickwork was by John Keene, and dated after Fitch's death, on 23 November 1706.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, this slightly unusual bricklayer's

inscription may have been in response to a dispute over the execution of Wotton's design. The sketch of Wotton by Sir James Thornhill (see above, p. 25), perhaps intended for an engraving such as those in *Vitruvius Britannicus*, was first published in 1915. In the accompanying article William Niven raised the possibility that Thornhill could have been the architect, an idea elaborated by John Harris.<sup>5</sup> This suggestion apparently arose from Buckinghamshire histories, such as Britton & Bailey's statement of 1801 that 'The stair-case and hall were painted by Sir James Thornhill, for which he received 1,000 L annually for three years'.<sup>6</sup> By 1813 the Lysons' publication expanded Thornhill's remuneration into a 'wage of £1,000 per annum and board', still for painting only the 'Saloon and Staircase'.<sup>7</sup>

Thornhill's role at Wotton, however, was probably more than painting two rooms. At Greenwich in 1708–25 he was paid £3 per square yard for the ceiling and £1 for the walls, while in 1716 the Duchess thought 25s. per yard too much for grisaille in Blenheim's Great Hall. A salary of £1,000 p.a. over three years would have been too high for someone painting just two rooms who had completed his apprenticeship only ten years before in 1696.<sup>8</sup> It could, therefore, have been partly for him acting as surveyor and contractor, an obvious role after Fitch's death if he was the most experienced craftsman on site with appropriate skills in these areas. In 1715 Thornhill made an architectural drawing for All Souls College, Oxford,<sup>9</sup> while from 1720 he was 'Chief Architect' at Moor Park, Hertfordshire, earning £3,500 as surveyor, according to Horace Walpole.<sup>10</sup>

Thornhill had apparently already worked at both houses with Fitch features which could have influenced Wotton: Chatsworth in 1702–8 and Kiveton in 1705. This raises the possibility of Thornhill rather than Fitch being the designer of these features at Wotton, especially since they could all have been added comparatively late in the building process, perhaps after Fitch's death.<sup>11</sup>

Keene's bricklaying inscription of late 1706 may also be in response to Thornhill's aggressive and presumptuous nature in claiming a design role. Vanbrugh complained of Thornhill's 'volatile' personality when the latter projected himself as an architect as well as a painter in 1719.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, Thornhill's sketch of Wotton may reflect design disagreements. It is curiously centred around a hill on the horizon with a gateway leading to it, leaving the north pavilion to the right and the main house to the left at an awkward angle. Thornhill was clearly making a point here: the south front of the house is shown in shadow, a deliberate but impossible fiction since the similarly-facing south façade of the north pavilion is in the light. The house's south front is the least satisfactory feature of Wotton's design. From the exterior its four bays lack the central focus demanded by the terrace, central steps and formal garden below. Meanwhile the interior is limited to two rooms, each originally with a French window, but without a central door leading out onto the terrace. This front could have been started before Thornhill arrived to decorate the interior prior to taking over the building. His sketch appears to record his dislike of its aesthetic inadequacies.

In addition, the Buckingham House plan was changed by locating Buckingham's weak west front on Wotton's east, making Wotton's five-bay pavilions too powerful for the four widely spaced pilasters on the central block. The projecting screen wall, gates and railings, apparently not originally matched at Buckingham House, may have been added to ameliorate this imbalance, perhaps by Thornhill before 1711. They were in place before his sketch and

by 1716, when Richard Grenville locked 'The Iron barres' to keep out his mother.<sup>13</sup> They may relate to the ironwork supplied by Montigny in 1711–12, although this could refer to the Grenville chapel in Wotton Church and have been inspired by the earlier house gates.<sup>14</sup> It is unlikely that Thornhill worked at Wotton for six or eight years. The tradition of three years but with board would fit best with a Wotton sojourn of 1706–08,<sup>15</sup> just after his work in about 1705–06 at Addiscombe, Surrey, inherited by William Draper from his uncle, Sir Purbeck Temple, the brother-in-law of Eleanor and thus Richard Grenville, the builders of Wotton.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, Thornhill presumably added the Latin inscription in the tympanum over the central door on the west front leading into the two rooms he had decorated: INCHOATA 1704 ('Begun 1704'). Below it, on the frieze, is carved a complex cipher (see Fig.1, page 21) which can perhaps be construed as Thornhill's own name and thus his claim to part of Wotton's design.<sup>17</sup>

Sir Howard's scholarship has resurrected Fitch's probable role at Wotton long after his death. Thornhill's painted work at Wotton was destroyed by fire just over a century after its completion, but his fame survives too. Indeed, if his staircase ceiling was a circular version of a typical scene of Olympian deities,<sup>18</sup> it may have influenced Stowe and Wotton.<sup>19</sup> Kent painted a circular scene of Olympian deities on Stowe's North Hall ceiling, while after the fire of 1820 Soane designed for Wotton's new hall a circular glazed oculus, linking earth with sky, and soon to be reinstated.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## NOTES

- 1 Howard Colvin, 'Was John Fitch the Architect of Wotton House?', *Georgian Group Journal* 18 (2010), pp.1-7.
- 2 Howard Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects* (New Haven and London, 2008), pp. 377-8.
- 3 James Joseph Sheahan, *History and Topography of Buckinghamshire* (London, 1863), p. 448.
- 4 British Library (BL), Add. MS 36359, f.125, quoted in Gordon Nares 'Wotton House, Aylesbury - I' *Country Life*, 1 July 1949, p.41. Thomas Hearne in 1716 noted 'a fine new house of the Greenvils'.
- 5 William Niven, 'Mr Weller's Collection of Buckinghamshire Prints and Drawings: View of Wotton House by Sir James Thornhill', *Records of Buckinghamshire* 10.6 (1915), pp.379-380; John Harris, *The Artist and the Country House* (London and New York, 1979), p.259. Thornhill's drawing, headed 'The East Front of Esqr. Grenville's house att Wootton in Com: Bucks - w<sup>th</sup> a view of y<sup>e</sup> South End' (The Buckinghamshire County Museum) is signed Js. T. on the bottom left wall beside the steps to the terrace.
- 6 John Britton and Edward Wedlake Bailey, *The Beauties of England and Wales I: Bedfordshire, Berkshire and Buckinghamshire* (London., 1801), p.350.
- 7 Daniel and Samuel Lysons, *Magna Britannia*, I, part 3. (London, 1813).
- 8 Thornhill was apprenticed to Highmore from 1689 to 1696. He was made a Freeman of the Painter-Stainers' Company in March 1704.
- 9 Colvin (2008), pp. 1038-9.
- 10 Niven, *op. cit.* p.379. The painting fee of £3,100 in 1725 was later reduced to £800. In 1724 he charged £1,350 for Wimpole chapel. Thornhill also belonged to the Freemason's lodge in Greenwich, like Hawksmoor and James: Matthew D.J.Scanlan, 'Nicholas Hawksmoor: The Little-known Story of an Architect and Freemason', *Freemasonry Today*, 4 (Summer 2007).
- 11 Alan Fausel, 'Sir James Thornhill', *Grove Dictionary of Art* XXX (London, 1996), p.758. The location of Thornhill's signature on the screen wall may be significant.
- 12 Colvin (2008), p. 1038. Thornhill's tendency to promote himself was evident by 1704 when he included his own portrait on the staircase at Stoke Edith. He was called 'a lover of drink' in the poem describing the journey to Wimpole: BL, Lansdowne 846.
- 13 The date of 1715 often given to Thornhill's Wotton sketch is conjectural, based presumably on Sheahan's unsubstantiated completion date of 1714. For the incident of 1716: see Michael Bevington, 'Familial and Architectural Links between Stowe and Wotton', *The Grenville Landscape of Wotton House* (New Arcadian Journal, 65/66, 2009), p.25.
- 14 Edward Saunders, 'Jean Montigny, a master smith' *Georgian Group Journal* 9 (1999). pp.33-43. The Grenville Mortuary Chapel at Wotton Church was built or rebuilt in 1710: Nares, *loc.cit.*, 8 July 1949, p. 113.
- 15 By 1706 Thornhill was presumably married with a family. His son John died on 23rd September 1757 aged 57, according to the inscription in St Paul's, Hammersmith, while his daughter Jane was 20 when she eloped with Hogarth in 1729. Judith, his wife, was born in about 1673.
- 16 William Draper inherited Addiscombe in 1700 and Evelyn, Draper's father-in-law, noted the 'new-building'" in 1702: John Evelyn, *Diaries & Correspondence* II (London, 1882), pp. 358, 368. Evelyn also claimed he 'discovered' Grinling Gibbons on his Sayes estate; Gibbons was said to have worked at Wotton. The Draper link probably led to Thornhill's work at Greenwich and then the Hawksmoor link at Easton Neston.
- 17 To construe THORNHILL, read repeatedly from left to right. The letter N is central both to the almost symmetrical cipher and to the surname, and the equally prominent H is repeated in the surname. If challenged, Thornhill might justify it as an obscure cipher from the Latin above, INCHOATA MDCCIV. A horizontal segment is missing from the right side. Bevington, *op.cit.*, p.34, n.6.
- 18 e.g. Sir James Thornhill 'Sketch for a Ceiling Design' (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, A510, WA1937.110), showing perhaps Aeneas, Romulus or Caesar being elevated to Olympus, with History and Time below. Such a scene could anticipate the foundation of a new dynasty, as in the 1710 Grenville-Temple marriage.
- 19 'Plans of Wotton House previous to its renovation in 1821 after the Fire in 1820' (Sir John Soane's Museum, London, 34/1/5) show the original hall was three bays wide and thus almost square and suitable for a circular ceiling painting.