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‘CONTRIVING LORD CONWAY’S HOUSE’: WHO REALLY DESIGNED RAGLEY HALL?

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This article sheds light on the complex collaborative processes involved in late seventeenth century country house design. It re-examines the authorship of Ragley Hall, Warwickshire (1679–83), commissioned by Edward, third Viscount Conway, and executed by William Hurlbutt, with particular reference to evident derivations from the architecture of Sir Roger Pratt. Robert Hooke’s proposed plan, presented to Conway in 1680, has been reconstructed, providing substantive evidence that Hooke’s proposals were not adopted. This reconstruction is shown to bear an extremely close resemblance to the design of Tring Park (1680), built for Henry Guy and attributed to Sir Christopher Wren.

At the commemorative symposium for Howard Colvin, held in Oxford in May 2011, Andrew Saint delivered a paper entitled ‘The conundrum of “By”’, which sought to reconsider the principle – for which Colvin was the supreme proponent – that ‘buildings can be meaningfully attributed to individuals’. Saint’s point was to examine whether scholars should continue to pursue a biographical approach to ‘so complex and collaborative a subject as the making of buildings’, and under what circumstances it is helpful to say a building is ‘by’ an individual at all.¹

This paper considers two great country houses of the late seventeenth century, where the acknowledged architectural authorship may not be as clear-cut as the evidence at first suggests: Ragley Hall in Warwickshire, and Tring Manor in Hertfordshire. The two houses are contemporaneous, their

construction dating from c.1680. The reason for considering them together is an indirect, but pivotal, connection that has emerged while re-examining Robert Hooke’s unexecuted design proposals for Ragley Hall. Both cases also serve to illuminate the dynamic collaborative processes that can make it difficult, and perhaps inappropriate, to nominate a sole designer or, to use the language of the late seventeenth century, ‘contriver’ of such buildings.

RAGLEY: POST-RESTORATION NEW BUILD ON AN AMBITIOUS SCALE

Ragley Hall was one of the largest completely new country houses to be built in the decades between 1660 and 1700. Its footprint was exceeded by other mansions of the period: Bolsover Castle (1660s), Althorp (1666–8), Drayton House (1670s), Holme Lacy House (from 1674), Burghley House (1670s–80s), Boughton House (from 1686), Chatsworth (from 1687) and Petworth (from 1688). All of these, however, were remodellings or extensions of older, existing buildings.² A complete new build on the monumental scale of Ragley Hall was unusual in the post-Restoration period; the only other house that comes near was Nottingham Castle, built for William Cavendish, first Duke of Newcastle, between 1674 and 1679, and even that probably incorporated earlier structures.

Edward, third Viscount Conway (1623–1683), had begun the project in the mid-1670s or earlier; in 1677, he wrote to his cousin Edward Harley that one



Fig. 1. Ragley Hall, Warwickshire: entrance front. (Author)

of the two service buildings flanking the entrance court was complete and a ‘model’ of the house had been designed.³ The foundations of the main house were probably laid in 1679, the walls begun in 1680.⁴ Raising such an extravagant new country house was an aspirational undertaking. The explanation Conway gave to Harley was that he was ‘playing the fool laying out money upon building, having chiefly undertaken it because I find my grandfather designed to build here’. A more substantive reason would be that, by the mid 1670s, Conway had extended beyond his Irish power base, was increasingly part of Charles II’s courtier circle, and must have needed a grander English seat than the ‘old, irregular building’ that was the existing Ragley Hall.⁵ Work was still under way in 1683 when Conway died, after which the structure was completed according to his instructions, but the house left unfinished and uninhabited for more than 50 years.⁶

Ragley Hall as we see it today (Fig. 1) reflects substantial alterations in the mid and later eighteenth century. The bird’s eye view published in Knyff and Kip’s *Britannia Illustrata* in 1707 (Fig. 2) provides

some evidence of its original appearance, although it is not clear how complete the house was at the time Knyff surveyed the building, probably in the late 1690s. A sketched elevation on a contemporary estate map (Fig. 3) cannot be accurate in showing the entrance at ground, rather than principal, floor level, or in portraying the curious frontispiece of two imposed orders embracing the door and window

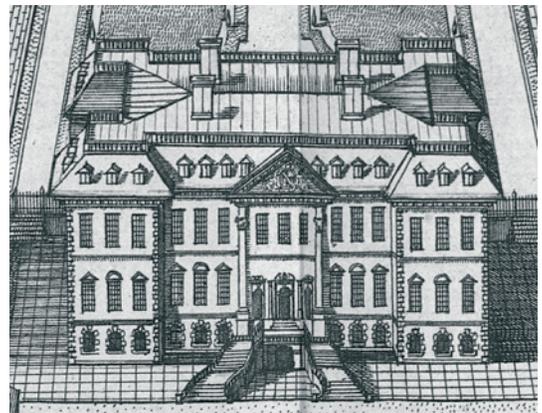


Fig. 2. Ragley Hall: L. Knyff & J Kip, *Britannia Illustrata*, 1707 (detail). (RIBA Library Photographs Collection)

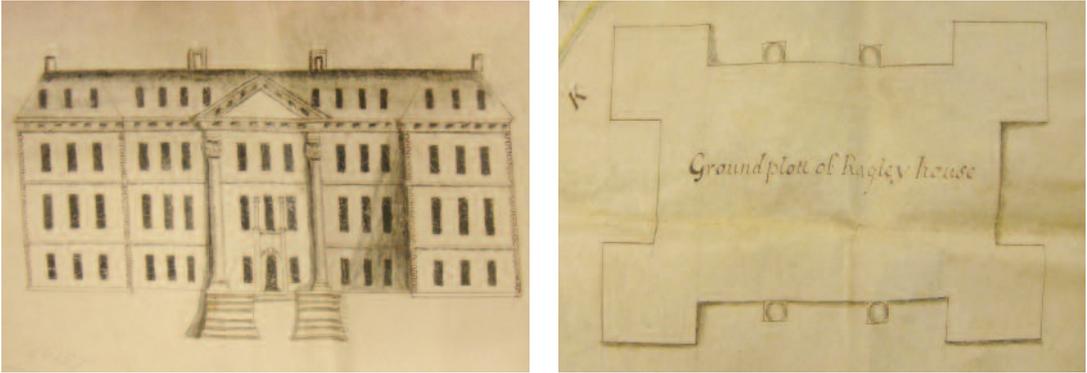


Fig. 3. Ragley Hall, entrance front and block plan: sketches from an estate plan, late 17th century.
(*Warwickshire County Record Office, CR 114/3/6/2*)

above.⁷ Nevertheless, in broad terms, the two images are mutually and credibly supportive. The ‘body with pavilions’ block plan is confirmed on a further sketch on the estate map (Fig. 3). Evidence for the original internal plan is provided by a survey of the principal storey drawn by James Gibbs, c.1750, when work on the interiors was restarted (Fig. 4).⁸

For over 40 years, the architect of Ragley Hall was held to be Robert Hooke, following the publication, in 1937, of Hooke’s diary entries and letters to Conway, dating from 1679–80, concerning the design and building of the house.⁹ Peter Leach correctly challenged this attribution in 1979 by proposing that Hooke’s contribution ended with

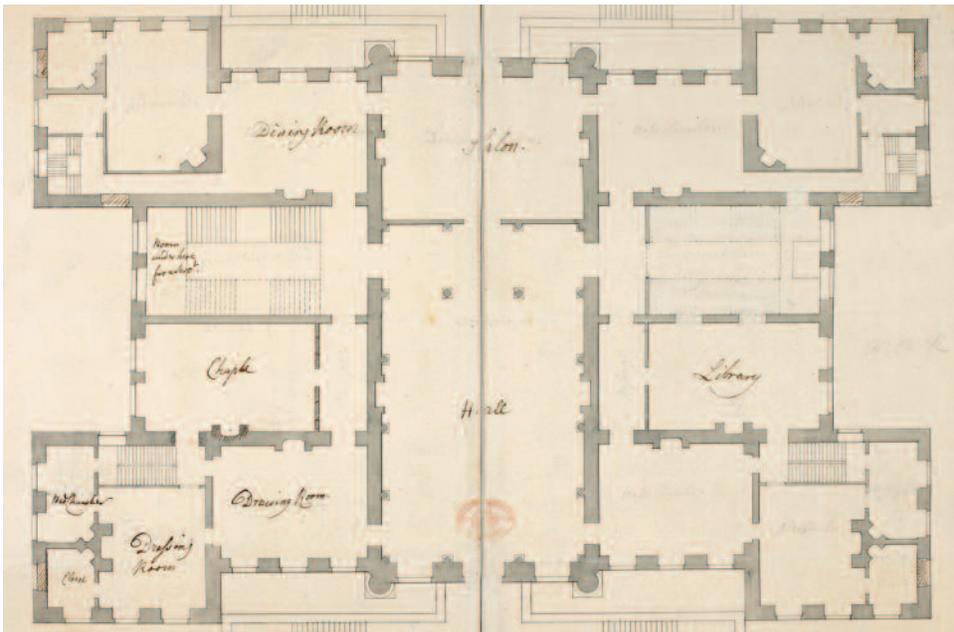


Fig. 4. Ragley Hall, plan of the principal floor, James Gibbs, c.1750. (© *British Library Board, Add MS 31323 W3*)

that correspondence.¹⁰ He then went on to determine that the designer of Ragley Hall was ‘almost certainly Mr Holbert’: William Hurlbutt, a master carpenter and builder of note in Warwickshire. Howard Colvin endorsed this view, but maintained that Hooke modified the design.¹¹ Geoffrey Tyack proposed that the final house ‘owed something to Hurlbutt, something to Hooke, and probably something to Conway himself’.¹²

William Hurlbutt had designed a stable block for Conway’s Irish estate at Portmere in Co. Antrim, in 1670.¹³ His country house practice embraced, with his brother Roger, the remodelling of the state rooms in Warwick Castle (1669–1678) for Lord Brooke, and an unidentified project (c.1670) for Lord Tracy at Toddington Manor in Gloucestershire. Colvin also made a ‘tentative’ attribution to the Hurlbutts of the remodelling of Tredegar House in Monmouth (1664–1672), on the basis that the plan of Tredegar, like Ragley, has corner pavilions, and that there are similarities in detail with Maiden Bradley, where Hurlbutt was taken by Sir Edward Seymour, probably at Conway’s recommendation (although in what capacity we do not know).¹⁴

None of this, in itself, leads to the conclusion that William Hurlbutt was the sole or principal author of Ragley Hall. It has been assumed that he designed Conway’s ‘model’, but there is no evidence of this; we do not even know if it was a physical model, or simply a plan, as the contemporary term could have implied either.¹⁵ In his final surviving letter to Conway, dated 17 August 1680, Hooke suggests strongly that Hurlbutt was serving as a supervising builder or surveyor, not a designer. Conway appeared by then to be stalling over Hooke’s proposals, so one would not expect Hooke to be generous to Hurlbutt (whom he had previously described rather dismissively as ‘a carpenter but a Pap’¹⁶); but it is enough to sound a note of caution:

‘... it will be much better for Dispatch to send Leonard up with the old module and in a fortnight or thereabout he may Return wth it back againe completed

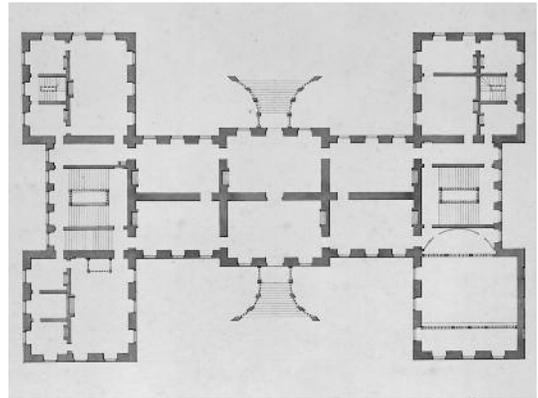


Fig. 5. Clarendon House, London: plan (‘Plan de la maison du Duc d’Albemarle a Londres’): Christian Elsteter, 1699. (© Bildagentur für Kunst, Kultur und Geschichte, Berlin/Berlin Dahlem, Kupferstichkabinett 79.D:25 [7])

and Rectified, when it will be very easy for Mr Holbert or any^{els} yo^{re} Ld^p shall employ to proceed wth the whole work without much if any further direction ... In the meantime Mr Holbert cannot well doe amiss if he proceeds in carrying up the front and Rear Walls and all the cross-walls for those apartments which are little if at all altered...¹⁷

‘Leonard’, described by Hooke in his diary as ‘an ingenious German mechanick’, was servant to Francis Mercury Van Helmont, the Flemish alchemist and kabbalist who resided at old Ragley Hall as physician and companion to Conway’s wife Anne from 1671 until her death in 1679. He must have performed some function in relation to Conway’s new house, for Hooke also writes that:

‘Here I can often be wth him [Leonard] and he may have what help is needful for Expedition Soe that he will rid [accomplish] more in a week here than in a month in the country ... when Leonard is come up y^r Ld^p may be assured noe time shall be lost in the Doing of it, at least he will want noe help nor materiales Mr Davys having already upon my desire provided for him a very good workman and convenient place, nor shall he want any necessary Directions or overseeing that can be given him’.¹⁸

THE RAGLEY PLAN AND
ITS DERIVATIONS

Peter Leach determined the source of Ragley’s most distinctive architectural feature, its corner pavilions, to be Serlio’s design based on Poggio Reale.¹⁹ This may ultimately be true, but the concept had already been executed widely in Europe (notably in French chateaux) since the late sixteenth century, and had also been explored in England, in the designs of John Thorpe and John Webb, in the early seventeenth. There was, however, a much more immediate and conspicuous exemplar in Roger Pratt’s Clarendon House on Piccadilly (Figs. 5 & 6).²⁰ Indeed, Roger North, writing in the mid-1690s, cited only Clarendon House and Ragley Hall as examples of the ‘body with pavilions’ form.²¹ Built in 1664–6 for Lord Chancellor Edward Hyde, first Earl of Clarendon, and sold in 1675 to Christopher Monck, second Duke of Albemarle (both well known to Conway²²), Clarendon House, despite being demolished in 1683, was, as Summerson put it, ‘imitated far and wide, both closely and loosely’.²³

Like Clarendon House, Ragley Hall was an impressive fifteen bays wide, with the same 3-3-3-3-3

rhythm, suggesting a degree of emulation. The pedimented central projection, hipped roof with its prominent modillioned cornice, dormers and balustraded platform (all typical, if not exclusive, features of Pratt’s architecture) make the two elevations looks strikingly similar (compare Figs. 2, 3 & 6). No cupola is shown in the two surviving late seventeenth-century images of Ragley, but there is evidence, discussed below, that one was always intended, so this non-essential feature was possibly omitted when the structure was finished off quickly after Conway’s death.

At both Clarendon House and Ragley Hall, the pavilions were laid out as fully functioning apartments comprising main and subsidiary rooms, in the continental tradition (compare Figs. 4 & 5). This is quite different from Tredegar, which remained essentially a house of single pile ranges around a courtyard, where the angle pavilions were occupied by principal rooms in the enfilade and served mainly to articulate the elevation.²⁴ It is also a different idea from the minor angle projections, containing only one small room, seen for example at Stowe House (1676) or the old Kedleston Hall (c.1700).

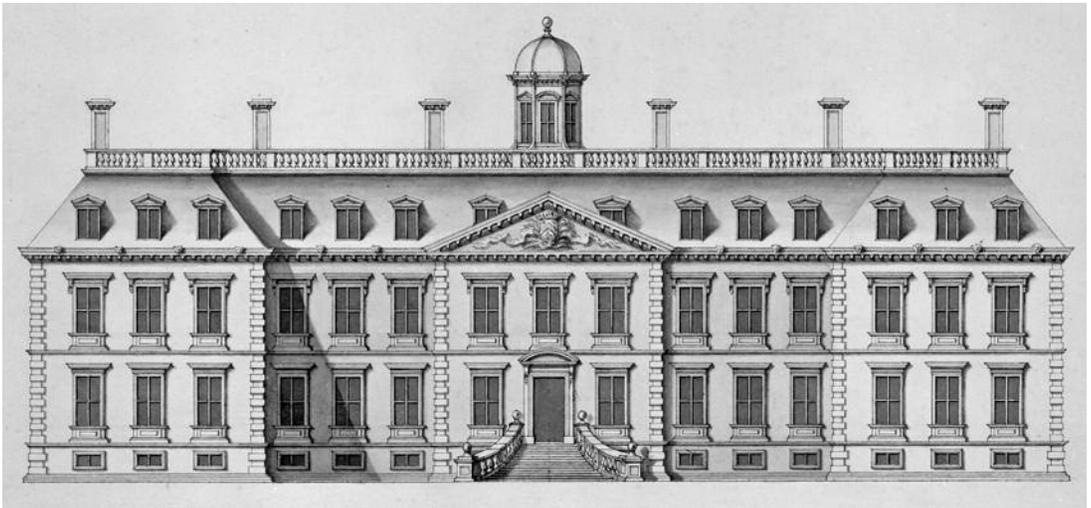


Fig. 6. Clarendon House, London: elevation (‘Elevation de la maison du Duc d’Albemarle a Londres’): Christian Elsteter, 1699. (© Bildagentur für Kunst, Kultur und Geschichte, Berlin/Berlin Dahlem, Kupferstichkabinett 79.D.25 [8])

Where Ragley Hall as a ‘body with pavilions’ house does differ from Clarendon House is in its much deeper body, and in particular its long axial hall. Leach suggests a printed source in Palladio’s Villa Valmarana and it is true that the principle of an axial *sala* with spaces arranged symmetrically to either side was typical of Palladian villa planning.²⁵ However, for more immediate and relevant precursors, one can look again to Roger Pratt, who had already used the deep cruciform plan at Horseheath Hall and Kingston Hall (now Kingston Lacy), both 1663–5 (Fig. 7).²⁶ Examples of this form are rare. William Samwell used variations at The Grange (1670) and Eaton Hall (1675), but running the hall to such a great depth, with the parlour (rather than the open portico of a Palladian villa) beyond, produced significant practical challenges to lighting the core of the house.

The generic similarity between Ragley Hall and these two Pratt houses is reinforced by a specific detail. The Gibbs survey of Ragley (Fig. 4) shows two columns at the inner end of the hall, supporting a gallery running across at the upper level, connecting the twin stair landings. Pratt’s Kingston Hall, built for Sir Ralph Banks, had the identical arrangement (Fig. 7). The gallery at Kingston (described by Pratt as a ‘pergolo’) gave access to the dining room on the first floor, as well as linking the two sides of the house across the ‘Great Anti-Room’, as Pratt called the double height hall.²⁷ It has been suggested by Anthony Cleminson that the columns could have had the additional structural function of supporting the cupola.²⁸ The relationship between the Ragley and Kingston plans is direct, for William Hurlbutt had been to Kingston during a previous commission: the Warwick Castle Accounts show that he was paid 19 shillings for ‘going into the west to see Sr Ralph Bancks house’.²⁹

The design of Ragley Hall therefore seems to have been a composite of elements derived, not from original sources in Serlio or Palladio, but from recently built houses by Roger Pratt, with which

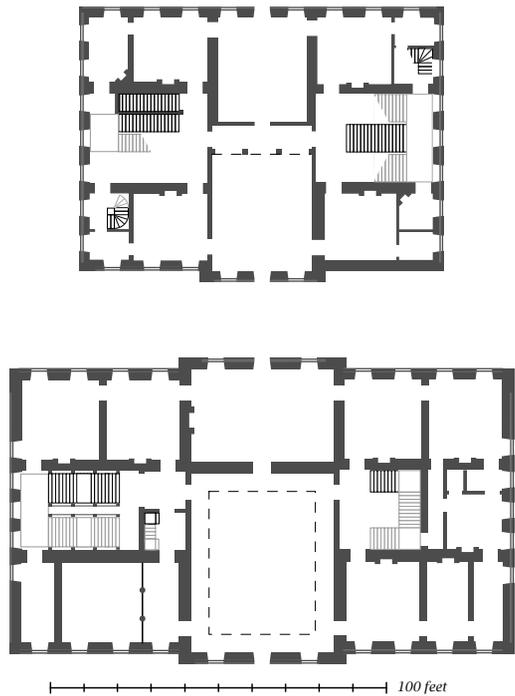


Fig. 7. Kingston Hall, Dorset (top) and Horseheath Hall, Cambridgeshire (bottom): reconstructions of the principal storey plans as built in 1663–5.

Conway and Hurlbutt were familiar and which they could easily copy, adapt and develop to meet Conway’s aspirations. One point to be considered is whether Pratt himself could have contributed anything to the project. Although he relinquished his role as City of London Surveyor, received his knighthood for services to architecture and ‘retired’ to Norfolk in 1668, most of his architectural writings date from the early 1670s, including, in 1672, his brief outline for a grand residence, ‘The house for the Prince’.³⁰ The overall scheme for Ragley must have been conceived by the mid 1670s at the latest, and Pratt continued to visit London regularly, often for long periods, until at least 1682; so it is not impossible for him to have met with Conway on any one of these visits.³¹ There is, however, no evidence of any such personal engagement. The ambitious patron Conway

almost certainly conceived his own grand design, and the capable craftsman-architect Hurlbutt applied his knowledge and experience to ensure the vision could be successfully executed. This is reinforced by a small, but perhaps important, point: in a letter from Robert Hooke to Conway discussed below, Hooke refers to the great hall as being ‘designed by y^r Ldp’. No doubt there were further contributions, from the ‘ingenious mechanick’ Leonard, or others in Conway’s extensive circle. This process of collaborative effort was to be complicated yet further when Robert Hooke became involved.

THE ROLE OF HOOKE: A PROFESSIONAL CONSULTANT

It is not clear why Conway turned to Hooke in 1679, when the project was well under way. It was a year in which Conway’s circumstances changed radically: now in his mid-fifties, he lost his first wife, immediately started the process of selecting a new bride who might bring fresh hope of an heir, and was created Earl. He may have been reconsidering the design of Ragley in the light of his changed status and circumstances, or simply seeking a professional second opinion on such a significant undertaking. It was by no means unusual for a patron to elicit, accept or reject alternative advice. Sir John Lowther, for example, claimed the design of Lowther Hall (1692) principally for himself, after apparently seeing designs from Robert Hooke and William Talman.³²

Conway would have known Hooke through many London connections.³³ Hooke had technical knowledge and experience of large projects, principally public buildings, but also including contemporary house designs for Ralph Montagu at Montagu House in London (1675–9) and Londesborough House for the first Earl of Burlington (1676–8). Above all, he was a senior partner in Wren’s practice, with all the kudos that carried. He would therefore have been the ideal

consultant, and the ten guineas paid to him by Conway in July 1679, and the thirty guineas in June 1680, estimated at more than £1000 and £3000 respectively in today’s terms, would have represented substantial if not excessive consultancy fees.³⁴

The first meeting recorded by Hooke was with ‘Lord Conways man about house’ (this might have been Hurlbutt or Leonard), on 20 June 1679. On 24 June he was working on ‘Lord Conways Designe’ and the following day went to see Conway, a meeting at which Hurlbutt and others were present. On 5th July, Hooke ‘Spake with Lord Conway, shewd Designe’ and was paid the ten guineas.³⁵ This ‘Designe’ has been linked with a surviving elevation by Hooke, which represents a fifteen-bay house with what appear to be angle pavilions. If this was indeed for Ragley, it was materially different from the executed building. The pavilions are pedimented, there are large oval windows with embellished surrounds to the frontispiece at first floor level, and the roof is largely concealed by tall parapets.³⁶

On 31 October 1679 Hooke received a letter from Conway, presumably inviting him to Ragley; Hooke’s reply, dated 15 November and sent on the 20th, makes apology for not taking up the invitation because of ‘an important occasion’.³⁷ The letter goes on to propose substantive revisions to the design, notably the external stairs: ‘The Ascent indeed is too long and too high to be wthout Doors, which has caused me to consider afresh the whole Designe, and to vary the module itself...’. Hooke’s idea was to create a wide portico recessed under the body of the house, with the stairs to the principal floor lying entirely within it, ‘somew^t of the nature of the Great Stairs at Somerset House, next the Garden’, and therefore always being ‘dry and clean’.³⁸ From this portico the stairs would rise to a landing or ‘vestibule’ for footmen, which was apparently also to extend across the full nine bays between the pavilions. Hooke expressed hope that Conway would be in London ‘before the foundations are begun to be Layd, that so I may have the Hon^r of Discoursing this Designe

with y^r Ld^p before final Resolutions be made past Recalling’. The remainder of this letter clearly suggests that Hooke is now very keen to intervene, and to prevent work starting until he has the opportunity to get to Ragley ‘to see everything put into a good order for the beginning and compleating thereof.’

It is unlikely that much if any work took place on the new building over the winter, and Hooke and Conway met again in London on 31 March 1680. In June that year Conway repeated his invitation to Hooke to come to Ragley. This time, Hooke accepted, and spent a week there between 23 and 30 June, accompanied by the joiner Roger Davies. During this time, he ‘Viewd module shewd many faults, made a great many alterations, put the 2 great stairs into one and viewd the situation and ground round about’. On his departure, he received the thirty-guinea fee and spent the next couple of weeks ‘contriving’ the house, receiving ‘Lord Conways man’, corresponding and sending drafts, and finally, on 20 July, sending a letter and ‘designe of 3 floors’.³⁹ Those plans are now lost, but the description and annotations in the surviving letter are sufficiently intelligible to reconstruct, in broad terms, Hooke’s proposed plan of the principal storey.

HOOKE’S DESIGN: WHAT RAGLEY MIGHT HAVE BEEN

This reconstruction (Fig. 8) comes with caveats: firstly, it is evidence, not proof; and secondly, it is intended to be accurate in its general scheme, but not in specific detail. The premise is that Hooke was working within a footprint that had already been determined. On 17 August 1680 he wrote to Conway saying that construction of the front and rear walls, and some of the cross walls, could proceed while his revised interior plans were considered, suggesting that the foundations must have already been laid. On this basis, Hooke’s proposals must be fitted

within the same dimensions of overall breadth and depth as those that Gibbs drew (Fig. 4), and which still exist today.

Within this frame, Hooke proposed two very distinctive elements: a 66-foot long, 44-foot wide hall; and a vestibule ‘in the very centre of the house’. The only physical possibility for that combination of spaces would be a laterally aligned hall. Superimposing a hall of these dimensions on the plan of the house shows that it would have fitted the deep central range at Ragley with remarkable accuracy. This makes sense of a description in Hooke’s earlier letter, of 15 November 1679, in which he described a great Hall ‘four score foot square’. Hooke cannot have been using ‘square’ in the modern sense (80 feet by 80 feet would have been impossible), and it seems likely that he was using the contemporary meaning of a room 80 feet long lying ‘square’, or at right angles, to the entrance. This also concurs with his comment that the vestibule in the July 1680 plan ‘takes off that great Length y^r Ld^p objects against in the Hall soe that the Remaining part is but 66 foot, which is some^{wt} shorter than that Designed by y^r Ld^p’.

Hooke thought that Conway might consider 44 feet too wide (‘because 4 foot more than the former’), so he proposed rows of ‘Corinthian pillars of timber’ supporting a gallery running around three sides of the hall, reducing its width to ‘33 feet in the cleer’; behind the columns and under the galleries were to be niches in the wall for statues, busts, vases or other ornaments. This, according to Hooke, would be a great improvement on Conway’s original (and ultimately executed) design, which ‘will at best be Dark at the uper or best end thereof, It will be open to the passages of Stairs Parlor etc. It will be covered by a half pace and It will have no prospect save at the Lower end.’ In Hooke’s revised design, ‘the uper end is next the light, lyes free from the trouble of passage, and may be as close or open as shall suit wth the present use’. Although Hooke does not mention it, there would also have been a superb open prospect from the ‘best end’ over the landscape to the south.

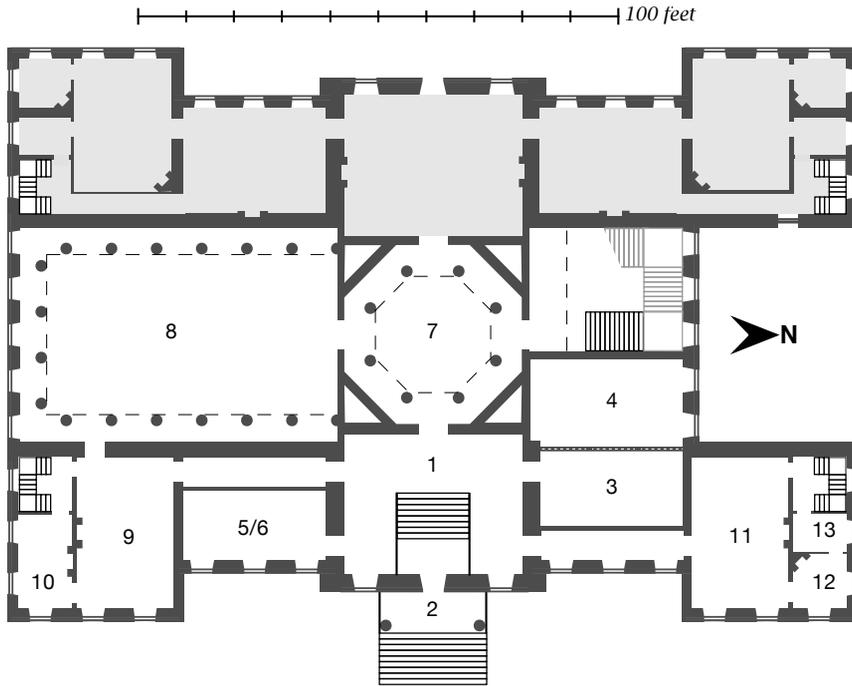


Fig. 8. Ragley Hall: schematic reconstruction of Robert Hooke's plan for the principal storey, as proposed in 1680.

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Half of ascent within the house 2. Portico and half pace to external stair 3. Gallery to chapel 'even with floor of the Hall' 4. Chapel 'clear from the ground to the top of the first storey' 5/6. Steward's room? 7. Vestibule in the 'very centre of the house' 8. Hall, 66×44 feet, galleries reducing the width to '33 feet in the clear' | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 9. Little parlour, 20×30 feet, which 'may be a withdrawing Room to the Hall' 10. Withdrawing room to the little parlour 11. Library 'of the same bigness with the little parlour' 12. Closet 'to study in' 13. Room 'to lock up instruments manuscripts Rarities etc.' <p>The west front (greyed area) was not substantially altered in Hooke's revisions.</p> |
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The precise form of Hooke's central vestibule ('because y^r Ld^p likes a vestibule though not for footmen') is impossible to reconstruct: in his view, it would be 'of as great ornament and convenience as anything can be in the house'. It was to be 'open to the top in an octagon', and its eight columns were intended to support a 'Cupolo at the top', reached by stairs behind some of the octagon's sides. This cupola was to be 'a very fair room, the contrivance of w^{ch} I hope I shall have time enough to acquaint y^r Ld^p with hereafter'. Four other sides of the vestibule would have admitted light from the roof, presumably

through skylights set around the cupola. Importantly, Hooke explains that the vestibule 'sirves to lead into all parts of the house both in the first and second storeys'. The columns must therefore also have been designed to support a gallery allowing passage from front to rear and side to side of the house at the upper level.

The two front pavilions on the principal floor were made over to family use. The south-east pavilion would be the little parlour, thirty by twenty feet, with its own withdrawing room; the parlour itself could also act as a withdrawing room to the

hall, to which it was adjacent, when the hall was in use as a great entertaining room. The north-east pavilion was to contain a library, also thirty by twenty feet, a closet and a ‘room to lock up Instruments manuscripts Rarities etc.’ These and the other small pavilion rooms on both main storeys would be only twelve feet high, allowing mezzanine rooms above, so there must have been private stairs in both pavilions.

The disposition of the spaces to the centre of the entrance (east) front seems to be a revision of Hooke’s previous proposal, made in November 1679, for the nine-bay recessed portico and landing above. Conway had rejected this idea and, in the July 1680 design, Hooke placed the ascent half outside the house and half inside, reducing the landing area to only the three central bays. The spaces to either side were used to create a gallery for the chapel (which rose up from the ground floor) and to extend the Steward’s room. The reconstruction here is speculative, but the gallery certainly makes sense if the chapel was in the adjacent part of the central range, on the opposite side of the central vestibule to the hall. This side of the house must also have been the position for the great stair; we know that Hooke had already ‘put the 2 Great stairs into one’, so no space was required for its twin.

Hooke’s proposal did not much alter the design of the great state rooms on the garden (west) front, retaining the great parlour at the centre, withdrawing rooms to either side and chambers with associated facilities in each pavilion. Over two storeys, there would be eight or ten apartments (the letter is inconsistent here), each complete with drawing room, bed chamber, closet, dressing room, stool room, servants’ room and back stairs. The central circulation space provided by the vestibule meant that every apartment would have ‘free access to the great staircase, hall chappell Library Great Parlor Little parlor entrance etc wthout at all intermingling or running through one another’. So this plan was not constrained by the typical enfilade arrangement of the period, ‘yet in the 2nd story you may goe

round the house through each of them’, this outer circulation route being enabled by the balcony spanning the window end of the hall.

The implications of Hooke’s plan are that the lateral position of the great hall must have eroded the recess between the pavilions on the south end of the building; the recess at the north end may have been correspondingly deeper. However, Hooke allowed for flexibility in the disposition of this central range or ‘middle part’, which ‘can be made shorter and narrower, or wider and longer, as your Ld^p shall best like, for the Difference of charge is little more than for floor and Roof’. The loss of plan symmetry, and in particular of the two projecting pavilions to the south, was probably totally antipathetic to the grand continental effect that Conway was trying to achieve. The offset hall, although totally rational in its design and intention, was no doubt an equally unwelcome solution, at a time when the central hall was rapidly becoming *de rigueur* for fashionable houses. It is, perhaps, unsurprising that, after more than a year of discussion and correspondence, Conway did not adopt any of Hooke’s ideas.

HOOKE’S RAGLEY AND WREN’S TRING: A RECYCLED CONCEPT?

The arrangement that Hooke proposed to Lord Conway was profoundly unorthodox. A lateral, offset hall had been standard practice in Elizabethan and Jacobean houses but had become rare in new-built houses in the latter part of the seventeenth century. A lateral hall in the middle, rather than the front, range of a three-range plan appears to have been unprecedented; it did, however, appear in one contemporary house: Tring Manor, in Hertfordshire, attributed to Christopher Wren by Roger North in the mid 1690s, and never since challenged.⁴⁰

Tring was built for Henry Guy (1631–1711), a career politician close to Charles II, who held highly profitable revenue posts and served as Gentleman of

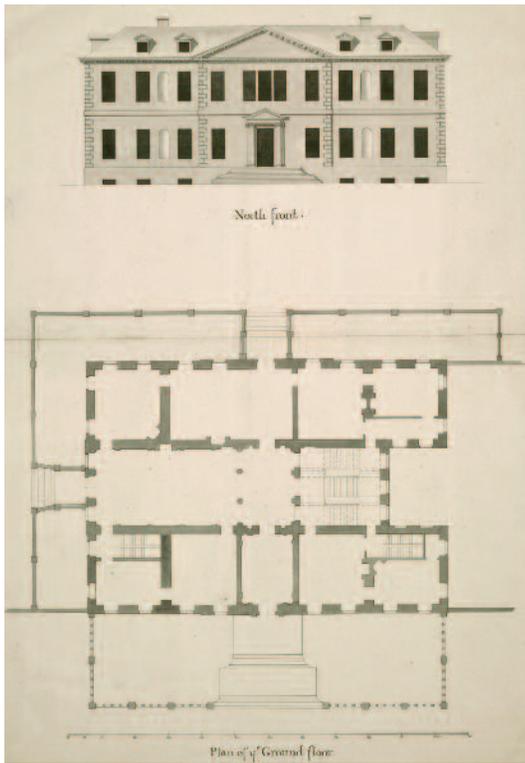


Fig. 9. Tring Manor, Hertfordshire: survey elevation and plan, 1680s. (*RIBA Library Drawings & Archives Collections*)

the Privy Chamber from 1675 to 1679, when he was appointed Secretary to the Treasury, a lucrative position he managed to secure for far longer than most incumbents. In 1680, Charles II granted Guy and his heirs the reversion of the manor of Tring after the death of the queen consort, and at the same time the queen and her trustees conveyed to Guy their interest.⁴¹

A late seventeenth-century survey elevation and plan of Tring Manor (Fig. 9) shows an identical arrangement to Hooke’s design for Ragley as reconstructed here, with the hall extending laterally through the central of three ranges to one side of a central axis, and the stairs to the other. The door to the great parlour was aligned with the front entrance,

as in Hooke’s design for Ragley, (although the great parlour itself was offset at Tring). The axial passage, corresponding to Hooke’s central vestibule in his Ragley design, was divided from the main part of the hall by a column screen. Thus the hall could be used independently as a grand entertaining room, unencumbered by the constant passage of traffic to the stairs and parlour: exactly as Hooke had proposed to Conway for Ragley. Like the Ragley reconstruction, the ground plan is asymmetrical; at Tring, the basement kitchen filled what Roger North called the ‘notch’ beyond the great stair, ‘but is no higher, than permits fair windows to the staires above it’.⁴²

An accompanying survey section and plan of the hall at Tring (Fig. 10) shows the main part to be of double height, lit by two rows of windows to its ‘upper’ end, where there was also direct access to the gardens. Between the two rows of windows was a gallery, linking the front and rear ranges of the chamber storey across the hall. This arrangement is described in detail by Roger North, who criticises both the proportions and the fenestration:

‘The height of the hall, are 2 full storys of the order, and the ceiling is the floor of the garrets. This is too high, and doth not conforme to the other demensions of the room. It is lighted only at the end, and with 6 windoes, that is 3 in each story, one over another. . . . These 3 windoes in breadth, take up too much of the room, and the peirs are too litle, so that the light is not easy and naturall, but constrained and huddled.’⁴³

Above the passage leading from the entrance to the great parlour was the upper landing to the great stair, which overlooked the hall, and where ‘from the ceiling a shell is lifted up, cuppolo-wise over the gallery’: the equivalent of Hooke’s ‘cupolo’ above the central vestibule at Ragley, brought down a storey. At Tring, this structure was intended to add height to the space, which was lit by triple windows to either end, perhaps presaging the great cross-gallery at Hawksmoor’s Easton Neston.

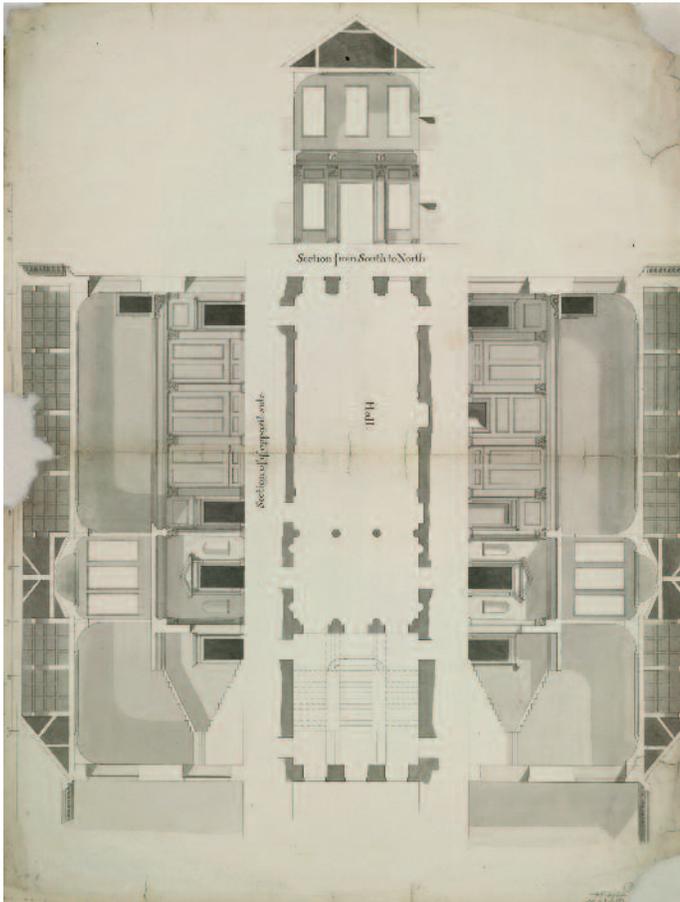


Fig. 10. Tring Manor, Hertfordshire: survey sections and plan of the hall, 1680s. (*RIBA Library Drawings & Archives Collections*)

The attribution of Tring Manor to Christopher Wren was made in his lifetime, so it is difficult to question. However, the striking similarity to Hooke’s design for Ragley, and the fact that there appears to be neither a common source, nor any similar example, must give cause for reconsideration. The dating of the two designs is extremely close. Hooke’s letter to Conway, accompanying the lost plans, is dated 20 July 1680. Colvin dates Tring ‘possibly c.1670, more probably c.1680’; Kerry Downes suggests the mid 1680s.⁴⁴ As Guy was not granted the estate until 1680, it is impossible to see how the house could have been started much earlier.

Did Hooke or Wren originate this unique design? The two men were, of course, friends and

fellow scientists from their student days, as well as colleagues in architectural practice from 1670, when Hooke was one of the two surveyors appointed to assist Wren in rebuilding the City churches.⁴⁵ Wren was an exceptionally busy man, far too involved in the great architecture of church and state to develop a country house practice. Nevertheless, Henry Guy would have been a difficult man to refuse, and would no doubt have felt entitled, through his closeness to Charles II, to request that Wren, the Surveyor-General of the King’s Works in person, should design his new house.

It is just possible that Wren did indeed conceive the Tring design and that Hooke’s intensive activity in the early weeks of July 1680 was focused on

adapting that same very unusual design to the established Ragley footprint. It seems much more probable that Hooke’s work was the original, and that when Wren was importuned by Guy to design his house, Hooke was able to pass over the basic concept for Ragley that had been rejected by Conway. Wren may well have worked up the architectural details for Tring, which Hooke had not specified for Conway (‘Door windows chimneys ornaments etc. are here omitted, being obvious enough’). The originality inherent in the ingenious plan was almost certainly Hooke’s, while North’s attribution to Wren rested principally on his role as the front man in the client relationship.

As to whether this merits a formal re-attribution is perhaps not the point: it serves, more importantly, as a further example of the complex processes and contributions that can make it both difficult and simplistic to attribute such buildings as either Ragley Hall or Tring Manor to a single mind or hand.

NOTES

- 1 A. Saint, ‘The Conundrum of “By”’ (Paper presented at the ‘Architectural History After Colvin’ symposium at St John’s College Oxford, May 2011). Quotations taken from the abstract.
- 2 Based on square footage of the main house, excluding service buildings. See P. Smith, ‘Interior planning in the English country house, 1660–1735: spatial theory and practice’ (PhD thesis, Courtauld Institute, 2001).
- 3 Letter from Lord Conway to Sir Edward Harley, November 1677: Harley manuscripts (*Hist.MSS. Comm.* 14 (1896)).
- 4 In August 1680, Robert Hooke urges Lord Conway to ‘hasten wth the front wall’: M. I. Batten, ‘The architecture of Dr Robert Hooke, F.R.S.’, *Walpole Society* 25 (1937) p. 103.
- 5 So described by Jeremiah Milles in 1743, when it was still standing and occupied: British Library, Add MSS 15776, f.166 (Jeremiah Milles tour, 1743).
- 6 Roger North, writing in 1695–6, says he saw the house when it was ‘but one story high’, but does not date his visit. See H. Colvin and J. Newman (eds.)

- Of Building, Roger North’s Writings on Architecture* (Oxford, 1981) pp. 76–7.
- 7 Warwickshire County Record Office, CR114/3/6/2.
 - 8 On the death of Edward Conway in 1683, the Ragley estates passed to his second cousin Popham Seymour-Conway (d.1699), then to his brother Francis Seymour-Conway (d.1732). Francis’s son, also Francis, inherited (as a minor) and was created Earl of Hertford in 1750. He employed James Gibbs to work on the unfinished interiors at Ragley Hall c.1748–55. Gibbs’ major achievement there was the remodelling and decoration of the great hall: H. M. Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects* (New Haven and London, 2008), p. 423. The annotations on the survey plan indicate Gibbs’ designated room uses, rather than the original ones, and the drawing shows a number of his proposed changes.
 - 9 Batten, *op. cit.*, pp. 97–103.
 - 10 P. Leach, ‘Ragley Hall Reconsidered’, *Archaeological Journal* 136 (1979), pp. 265–8
 - 11 Colvin, *Dictionary*, p. 549.
 - 12 G. Tyack, *Warwickshire Country Houses* (Chichester, 1994), p. 166.
 - 13 Colvin, *Dictionary*, p. 549.
 - 14 H. M. Colvin, ‘An architect for Tredegar House?’, *Architectural History* 25 (1982), pp. 6–7. The similarities between Tredegar and Maiden Bradley are in fact closer than those between either house and Ragley Hall.
 - 15 For example, the plans for rebuilding London produced by Wren and Hooke after the great Fire were both described as ‘models’.
 - 16 Batten, *op. cit.*, p. 98.
 - 17 *Ibid.*, p. 103.
 - 18 Roger Davies was a master joiner who worked closely with Hooke, and was specifically involved in advancing the new sash window concept at Hooke’s Royal College of Physicians in 1672–3. See S. Inwood, *The man who knew too much* (London, 2003), pp. 132–3.
 - 19 S. Serlio, Book III, *On antiquities* (1540).
 - 20 The most likely sources for Clarendon House are Salomon du Brosse’s Chateau du Blérancourt and Palais du Luxembourg. John Thorpe drew the Luxembourg plan, and John Webb based his unexecuted design for Belvoir Castle on it. The drawings made by Christian Elsteter post-date the demolition of the building in 1683, and appear to have been copied from plans and elevations still

- circulating. See F–E Keller, ‘Christian Elsteter’s drawings of Roger Pratt’s Clarendon House and Robert Hooke’s Montagu House’, *Burlington Magazine* (October 1986), pp. 732–736.
- 21 Colvin & Newman, *op. cit.*, pp. 76–7.
- 22 Conway’s brother-in-law John Finch was presented to the King for his knighthood by Edward Hyde; another brother-in-law, George Rawdon, served under and was an intimate of Monck’s father, the 1st Duke of Albemarle. See M. Nicholson, *Conway Letters* (London, 1930), p. 187(n) and p. 127(n).
- 23 J. Summerson, *Architecture in Britain 1530–1830* (London, 1953), p. 95. Belton House, Lincolnshire (1684), is usually considered to be the primary example of the Clarendon House influence, although it was H-plan.
- 24 M. R. Apted, ‘The Seventeenth-century buildings at Tredegar House, Newport’, *Ancient Monuments and their Interpretation: Essays Presented to A J Taylor* (Chichester, 1977), pp. 315–335; D. Freeman, *Tredegar House*, Newport Borough Council (1989).
- 25 Leach, *op. cit.*
- 26 The Kingston Lacy plan is based on the reconstruction by A. Cleminson, ‘The transition from Kingston Hall to Kingston Lacy’, *Architectural History* 31 (1988), pp. 120–136. The Horseheath Hall plan is based on *Vitruvius Britannicus*, III (1725), Plate 91.
- 27 R. T. Gunther (ed.), *The Architecture of Sir Roger Pratt* (London 1928) pp. 98–116.
- 28 A. Cleminson, ‘Pratt’s Kingston Lacy’, interpretation from Gunther (1983), Sheets 5 and 6. Reproduced in N. Silcox-Crowe, ‘The life and work of Sir Roger Pratt (1620–1685)’ (PhD thesis, University of Reading, 1986), Figs. 94–5.
- 29 Warwickshire Record Office, Warwick Castle accounts, TN III (20 February 1670): according to *VCH Warwickshire* VIII, pp. 460–1, the visit was to see the interiors as a model for the new state rooms at the Castle.
- 30 Gunther, *op. cit.*, p. 194; he suggests that the unnamed Prince was probably the Duke of York, who married Clarendon’s eldest daughter.
- 31 N Silcox-Crowe, *op. cit.*, pp. 83–7. Visits are recorded by Pratt in June 1673 (when he viewed Wren’s first model for St Pauls); in August 1674 on the way to Bath with his wife; in May 1675; a long visit between April and July 1676; and on four occasions during 1678–9, described as ‘Extraordinary Journeys to London, and forced long staye there’.
- 32 See Colvin, Crook and Friedman (eds.) ‘Architectural Drawings from Lowther Castle’, (*Architectural History* monograph, 1980), p. 9. Lowther’s own design received ‘the correction and approbation of Sir Samuel Morland, a man surpassing most if not anie of the Age in Mechanicall and Mathematical knowledge’.
- 33 For example, Conway was a member of the Royal Society, and had also met with Hooke at the home of their mutual acquaintance Lady Ranelagh, who was sister to the Royal Society’s Robert Boyle.
- 34 Modern values estimated using National Archives historic inflation calculator.
- 35 Batten, *op. cit.*, p. 97.
- 36 British Library, MS 5238, folio no. 60. The collection contains other drawings by Hooke, relating to public and private commissions. Given the provenance in Hooke’s papers, it is unlikely that this is the actual design presented to Conway, although it could be a copy or a preliminary version.
- 37 Batten, *op. cit.*, p. 99.
- 38 Presumably he was referring to the recessed portico beneath the arcade below the gallery, visible in Kip & Kniff, *Britannia Illustrata*, 1707.
- 39 Batten, *op. cit.*, pp. 101–3.
- 40 Colvin & Newman, *op. cit.*, pp. 62, 124.
- 41 *VCH Hertfordshire* II, p. 383. The Manor had previously been in the possession of Queen Henrietta Maria, wife of Charles I, and the remainder after her death in 1669 had been settled on Catherine of Braganza, wife of Charles II.
- 42 Colvin & Newman, *op. cit.*, p. 74.
- 43 *Ibid.*, pp. 74, 124.
- 44 Colvin, *Dictionary*, p. 1160; K. Downes, *The Architecture of Wren* (Reading, 1988), p. 104. Downes points out that Wren was known to have visited Tring in 1687.
- 45 Colvin, *Dictionary*, p. 533: ‘Hooke must not be thought of merely as [Wren’s] junior assistant. In the eyes of the City, he was Wren’s colleague rather than his subordinate.’ Matthew Walker has noted that collaboration between Wren and Hooke on major institutional commissions was limited by their professional roles: M. Walker, ‘The Limits of Collaboration: Robert Hooke, Christopher Wren and the designing of the monument to the great fire of London’, *Notes. Rec. Royal Society*, 65 (2) (2011). This, however, would not apply to private commissions.