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THOMAS ROBINS AND THE DORSET SKETCHES

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A chance visit to Hanford House in Dorset led to the discovery of an important trade in exotic specimens from Jamaica between artist Thomas Robins, gentleman scientist Henry Seymer, the Duchess of Portland and other 'Enlightened' naturalists. This article considers Robins's links with the county of Dorset and in particular the owners of the four properties he recorded there: Bryanston, Eastbury House, Hanford House and Smedmore House. It also contextualises, for the first time, the magnitude of this exchange, which centred on Blandford Forum, and the vital part Robins's son Luke played in these artistic and scientific endeavours.

Thomas Robins the Elder (1716–1770) was an artist who, unlike any other, could record the country estates of the Georgian gentry not only with topographical accuracy, but equally in such a way that captured their very fragility and essence. He depicted these views, usually in watercolour on vellum, with the minute and masterful skill adapted from his experience as a fan painter. His birds-eye views, populated with vignettes of human and animal activity, pay homage to the tradition of country-house painting that began in the late 1600s. His proficiency as a botanical artist, hinted at on his fans, is shown in the beautifully lavished borders and exquisite studies of exotic flowers and butterflies of his later work. A sketchbook containing 133 drawings and watercolours provide the sources for a number of his known finished paintings, as well as the expectation that there may be others waiting to be rediscovered. Not only is Robins eminent as a

recorder of the brief fashion for the rococo garden; his depictions of Bath at the height of its expansion in the eighteenth century are, outside London, unrivalled in quantity.

So little direct evidence about Robins has come to light that, to try to understand his working practices, I have turned my attention to the houses he depicted in order to reveal more about the man through his patrons. This approach quickly bore fruit on a chance visit to Hanford House in Dorset. The discoveries that visit led to form the basis of this article. The common connection between Robins's patrons is perhaps their seasonal visits to Bath, a mutual interest in exotic specimens and a fascination for Chinese and rococo garden designs.

The significance of Robins' artistry was revealed by John Harris through his seminal publication *Gardens of Delight* (1978).¹ Harris unravelled fundamental misunderstandings, which led to the discovery that Robins had a son, also Thomas (1748–1806), who was an artist, also working in Bath, and responsible for a large body of botanical works. My research has revealed that a further son, Luke John (1740–1782), was also an artist, and employed to record the natural history of Jamaica.

The sketchbook, now in the Victoria & Albert Museum, contains at least six sketches of four country estates in Dorset. They range from the highly finished pen and wash prospect of Robins' friend Henry Seymer's Hanford House, to the quick and spontaneous pencil sketch of Smedmore House. Apart from the Hanford view, the Dorset sketches are perhaps the loosest and least detailed of all the



Fig. 1. Thomas Robins, The Lime Works near Warminster, (Cley Hill), pen, signed & dated 24 June 1758.
(© Victoria and Albert Museum, London)

identified drawings in the sketchbook. There are, however, no known finished paintings that relate to these, or any other, Dorset houses or gardens by Robins. Of the four houses depicted, three are within a short distance of Blandford Forum – Hanford, Bryanston and Eastbury. The principal route, at this time, from Bath to Blandford was past Cley Hill, near Warminster – a location also featured in Robins’ sketchbook, dated 1758. (Fig. 1)

BLANDFORD FORUM

After the devastating fire of 4 June 1731, Blandford Forum was rebuilt in the classical style by the brothers John and William Bastard. Newman and Pevsner described the centre of Blandford as ‘one of the most satisfying Georgian ensembles anywhere in England’.² ‘Modern’ Blandford ‘contrasted strikingly with the majority of the county’s medieval towns and villages’ making this ‘elegant new town...one of the

centres of the county’.³ The Bastard brothers were from a family of builders and worked together as architect-surveyors.⁴ Their designs for Blandford were created in collaboration with Sir James Thornhill, whose prominence as an artist had waned during the 1720s. He turned instead to politics, becoming Whig MP for Melcombe Regis. He continued, however, to receive local commissions, including one from George Bubb Dodington at Eastbury. His son-in-law, William Hogarth, is known to have visited his in-laws at the family seat, Thornhill House, near Stalbridge, about eleven miles northwest of Hanford House. It is widely accepted that it was Bubb Dodington who encouraged Thornhill to enter politics; one can only imagine the local consternation – and amusement – when Hogarth’s triumphant, yet corrupt, Tory MP in his *Election* series bore a marked resemblance to Bubb Dodington.

Blandford Forum in the eighteenth century was not the provincial market town one might expect it to

be, but the epicentre of Dorset's Enlightenment, with a national and international reputation. One of the most eminent residents, in terms of scientific and antiquarian pursuits, was Dr Richard Pulteney (1730–1801), a devotee of Carl Linnaeus' scientific classification systems. He was an associate of, and regular correspondent with, Robins' friend Henry Seymer.⁵ Pulteney's other correspondents included Sir Joseph Banks, Dr Daniel Solander and the Duchess of Portland, all of whom appear to have been acquainted with Robins and his artist sons Luke and Thomas.

THOMAS ROBINS THE ELDER (1716–1770)

Robins was born in 1716 and baptised at St. Mary's Church in Charlton Kings, near Cheltenham on 3 February. Thomas's father, William, was from London and moved some time before 1699. He married Sarah Holder on 5 November 1699; she was obviously a lady of some independent means who, in 1709, had purchased a beedle messuage (a dwelling

with outbuildings and land) in Moorend, on the west side of Charlton Kings. In August 1712 she died childless, leaving her property to her sixteen-year-old unmarried niece Margaret, with a life interest for William. A year later, William married Anne and subsequently bought the Moorend property from Margaret in 1718. William and Anne went on to have seven children. Thomas was their second son.

In about 1730 Robins was apprenticed to Jacob Portret, a moderately wealthy local painter of fashionable trinkets such as fans, snuffboxes and possibly teapots.⁶ Here we have the source for Robins' miniature technique and also the 'Chinese' appearance of his motifs and figures. In his Will of 1743, Portret left his house, best furniture and £200 (equivalent to over £25,000 today) to Robins. Portret's house was adjacent to the water splash and watercress beds to the north of the town; the area, captured by Robins in a recently identified sketch, was redeveloped in the 1970s, but links to its past remain in Portuert Close and Portuert Way.⁷ (Fig. 2) In 1757 Robins sold this house to William Prinn for £210; this may signal the date when Robins moved his family full-time to Bath. Prinn's father, John, was



Fig. 2. Thomas Robins, Charlton Kings (from the north), Gloucestershire, pencil, c.1755.
(© Victoria and Albert Museum, London)



Fig. 3 Thomas Robins, Henbury House, Henbury, Somerset, c.1758.
 (Courtesy of Bristol Museums, Galleries and Archives. Photograph by Dan Brown)

an early patron of Robins and his mother, Elizabeth, was from the last generation of the Rogers family to live at Bryanston before it was sold to the Portmans.

At the age of 19, on 15 June 1735, Robins married Margaret Holder in Boddington, about five miles north-west of Cheltenham. Margaret was a niece of his father's first wife Sarah (although not the Margaret named in her will). She was born in 1713 to John and Mary (John was Sarah's younger brother). At his marriage then, it seems likely that Thomas had completed his apprenticeship and was beginning to make his way in the world. Thomas and Margaret had six children, all of whom were baptised in Charlton Kings between 1736 and 1748.

The burgeoning city of Bath was a place of immense opportunity in the mid-1700s and Robins spent a substantial amount of time there. His drawings of the developing Georgian townscape are a vital visual record. There are at least 45 sketches of

Bath and its environs identified in the sketchbook.⁸ They date from c.1754 to 1765, and were mainly undertaken between the months of April and June, when Bath was relatively free of fashionable visitors. Evidence from the other dated sketches would suggest that Robins would spend July and September undertaking commissions to paint country estates. He would then return to Bath for the fashionable autumn-winter season, and provide art lessons to the gentry. In October 1752 he advertised that he could be found at George Sperens's (1711–1796) shop, the Fan and Crown in Orange Grove. Robins also produced fashionable fans and engravings, including his 'Prospect of the City of Bath', published in October 1757. A list of purchasers of the engraving, with monies received by Sperens and paid to Robins, is pasted to the back of Robins' 'Prospect of Henbury', now in Bristol City Museum & Art Gallery. (Fig. 3) Sperens, possibly from

Gloucester, was an important and long-term collaborator with Robins.

Robins moved permanently to Bath in 1767–8,⁹ living in Marchant's Court, a development described as 'entirely new' by architect John Wood in 1749. The court, developed by Quaker banker Richard Marchant, comprised thirteen small houses, and provided a link from the High Street through to the Quaker Meeting House. The actual date of Robins' first visit to Bath, however, remains elusive, but we do know that his painting of *The King's and Queen's Bath* dates from 1747. He is often credited with being a subscriber to Thomas Thorpe's *An Actual Survey of the City of Bath, in the County of Somerset, and of Five Miles Round*, published in 1742; however, this Thomas Robbins is more likely to have been the well established gardener from Widcombe who was also responsible for the replanting of Orange Grove in 1737.¹⁰

Until April 1752 Robins was an overseer for the poor in Charlton Kings; to hold that position he needed to be resident there. He retained and bought property in his home town describing himself on a legal document from 1750 as 'Thomas Robins of Charlton Kings, Painter'.¹¹ It seems probable then that he came to Bath to work for the season, returning home before travelling further afield to undertake commissions. In 1748, the year his son Thomas was born, he undertook 'A West Prospect of the Spaw and Town of Cheltenham' and for Benjamin Hyett 'Marybone House' and 'Buenos Aires' (Painswick House), the last two having exquisite borders decorated with native birds and plants juxtaposed with exotic shells. It was possibly in 1748, or shortly before, that Robins travelled to Berkshire to paint the Hon. Richard (Dickie) Bateman's house and garden, Grove House, Old Windsor. Bateman, a friend of Horace Walpole's, was a pioneer in garden design. He laid out his grounds at Old Windsor with fanciful Gothic and chinoiserie elements.¹² His famous love of flowers and his pastime as a collector of exotic shells may have influenced the graceful

borders that completed Robins's views, like that of Painswick House (Buenos Aires) signed and dated 1748,¹³ but shells appear in the border of only one of the two views Robins painted of Grove House.

Within Bath, Robins' patrons included the surgeon Jerry Peirce of Lilliput Castle and the postal service and stone-quarry entrepreneur Ralph Allen of Prior Park; there are at least seven sketches that relate to Allen's seat Prior Park in the Robins sketchbook. In fact, Robins' sketch of Smedmore House may have been undertaken whilst on his way to Weymouth to see Allen. From 1750 onwards, Allen and his family had 'begun the tradition of spending a month or more at Weymouth in the late summer'.¹⁴ Other members of Bath's society also patronised the seaside resort, including Bath's famous Master of Ceremonies Richard 'Beau' Nash. Through Allen it is possible to link Robins to Alexander Pope, Sanderson Miller, Henry Fielding, William Pitt the Elder, George, first Lord Lyttelton and Richard Temple, first Viscount Cobham.¹⁵ These individuals were certainly interested in gardening, and in particular in 'honouring each other with monuments' in order to build political consensus,¹⁶ but whilst some were actively exchanging stone and fossil specimens, they do not appear to be involved in the trade of exotics.

Robins' career took him to houses in many different counties including Shropshire, Warwickshire and Berkshire; these new commissions conceivably came from the connections he made in Bath and as recommendations through his established patrons.¹⁷ Perhaps the link is more precise: a mutual interest in exotic flora, fauna and insects, combined with a fascination for Chinese and rococo designs that served as the inspiration for the transformations of their gardens. Nevertheless, alongside Robins' important and beautiful record of these country seats, he and his sons produced a large and important body of botanical and natural history paintings, the exact consequence of which is only just beginning to be appreciated.

HENRY SEYMER AND HANFORD

Robins's highly finished prospect of Hanford House, Child Okeford – about five miles from Blandford Forum – is inscribed, in a flowing script, 'Hanford ye seat of Henry Seymer Esq' (No.5), and dates from c.1763. (Fig. 4) It is a bird's-eye view and shows the east front of the fine Jacobean house built between 1604 and 1623 for Sir Robert Seymer (d.1619).¹⁸ This front, which faces the formal parterre garden and contained the principal rooms, is built of ashlar stone. It has four steep gables, topped with paired round-shafted chimneystacks, a typical feature of early seventeenth-century Dorset architecture. At either end, two five-sided polygonal window bays balance the design. The barn, stables and other outbuildings form an enclosed courtyard on the west side of the property. To the right is the family's chapel, surrounded by a hedge with stone steps up to the entrance. The prospect also chronicles the surrounding fields and plantations. In the distance Robins has included the church spire of St. Nicholas, Child Okeford, shown against Hambledon Hill, and

Holy Rood Church at Shillingstone to the west. Unlike Robins' known finished prospects in oil and watercolour, the pen and wash drawing omits any vignettes of activity, which could heighten and enhance the view, and help establish scale.

Whilst visiting the house (now a school), to substantiate whether the view Robins captured has survived, I was introduced to the natural history paintings of Henry Seymer (1714–1785) and his son, also Henry (1745–1800). I subsequently made contact with Richard Vane-Wright, retired head of entomology at the Natural History Museum, who gave me access to his transcriptions of Seymer's diaries (private collection). The diaries not only reveal an important friendship with Robins, and Thomas Junior, but also the exchange of exotic specimens facilitated by Luke.

Seymer's diaries show that he and Robins were in contact by 1765, though frustratingly the whereabouts of any journals for the years 1756 to 1764 are not documented.¹⁹ We therefore do not know how or when Robins first came to meet

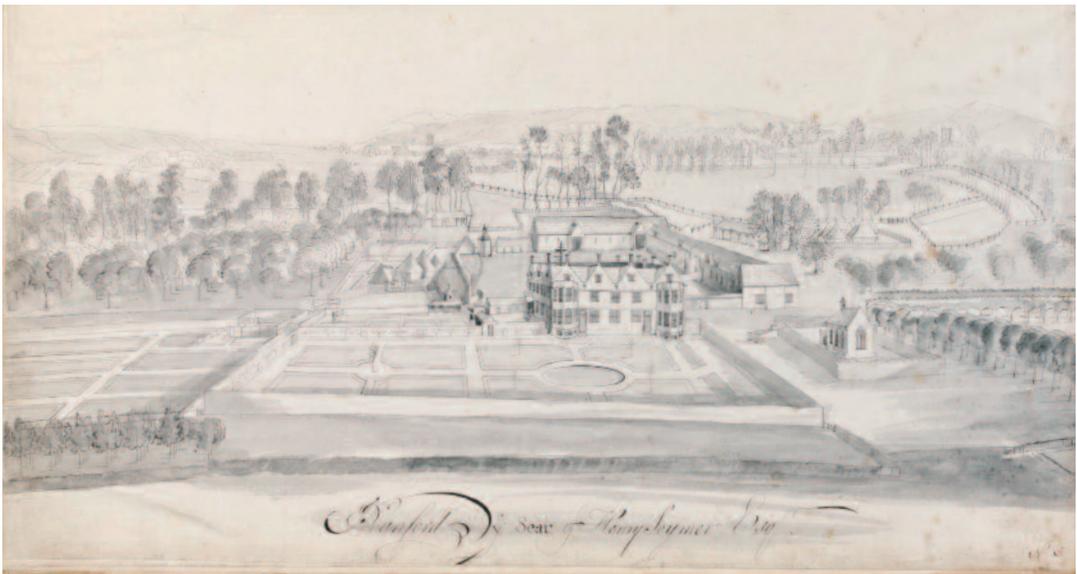


Fig. 4. Thomas Robins, Hanford House, Dorset, Black pen & wash, c.1763.
(© Victoria and Albert Museum, London)

Seymer. By his early forties Seymer was already ‘an established and mature naturalist and painter.’ Vane-Wright and Hughes have identified that the first sheets that make up his *Butterflies and Plants* – a set of 72 watercolours – were completed in 1755.²⁰ But there is little doubt that Robins was influential on Seymer’s artistic development, and that contact may have been made initially as tutor and pupil. As we have seen, Robins advertised himself as an art teacher and is known to have taught Lady Somerset, a distant relative of Seymer’s.²¹ Seymer made regular visits to Bath, and one of his daughters was resident there, but he did not like the town. He wrote to Pulteney that

‘there is no place, more disagreeable to my disposition than this, every body seems eternally busy without doing any rational thing, fiddling, dancing, dressing, gaming & scandal seem, one or other of them, to employ all the polite, genteel part: which their inferiors are contriving schemes to get that money which they seem to catch at every pretence to part with, so very plenty appears that commodity here; but all this while the streets throng with beggars, and the poor cry’ tho but few will help them. Here are two large shops of Books, fill’d with modern Histories, for the Ladies, & a deal of other thin stuff, but scarce a book worthy the perusal of a lover of natural History’.²²

The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge preserves a bound collection of 108 watercolours that comprise ‘Robins Florilegium’, which contains several images that Seymer copied for his *Butterflies and Plants*. In addition, within the Phillipps Collection (sold at Sotheby’s on 29 November 1976), there was a volume of flower drawings by both Robins and Seymer.

Collecting, growing and painting exotic and indigenous specimens were important occupations for Seymer. He grew exotic fruit and vegetables in his garden ‘planted in the natural ground against the walls, with moveable sash-lights before them’.²³ His most prized collection, however, is believed to have been his shells; his study of malacology was one he shared with Dr Richard Pulteney. Seymer and Pulteney were in correspondence after the former

moved to Blandford Forum from Bath in 1765. Pulteney ‘frequently declared that some of the happiest hours of his life were passed in Mr Seymer’s society.’²⁴ The two communicated regularly, and exchanged books and knowledge. Evidence related by Vane-Wright illustrates that Seymer was happiest alone at Hanford engaged in scholarly research:

‘Whatever busies the mind without corrupting it, has at least this use that it rescues the day from Idleness, and he that is never idle will not often be vitious. May all my posterity act upon this principle, I have found it answer, & never wanted what is called company to make me happy; the lover of Natural History will be always able to say, Nunquam minus solus quam cum solus.’²⁵

The publisher John Ryall dedicated his edition of Mark Catesby’s *Hortus Britanno Americanus* (1763), and the subsequent edition, *Hortus Europae Americanus* (1767) to Seymer, whom he acknowledged as being eminent within the field of natural science.²⁶ And Daniel Solander, one of Carl Linnaeus’ pupils and collaborator with Joseph Banks, named the plant *Solandra gradiflora* (as termed by Swartz) the *Seymeria*.

Aylmer Bourke Lambert, Vice-President of the Linnaean Society, recalled in 1811 that Seymer’s ‘cabinets of shells were very rich, as he never lost an opportunity of procuring the finest that came to market; and, although he resided at so great a distance from the metropolis, he had always agents in town on the lookout to secure any collections that might be brought to this country by voyagers; and he procured many rare species in consequence of the celebrated voyage of the immortal Cook.’²⁷ Seymer certainly laid out considerable sums to ensure he had a superlative shell collection. His agent, Mr Foster, successfully won a New Zealand Sun shell from the auction of shells brought by Cook’s voyage on *Resolution* at Langfords in November 1775. Corroboration came in 1960, when S. Peter Dance discovered that a shell in the Museum of Zoology at Cambridge was complete with a label in Seymer’s

handwriting ‘*Trochus Sol imperialis*, Australia Cooke 1775. Cost £2.17s-od.’²⁸

As a Fellow of the Royal Society, Pulteney introduced Seymer, and thus the Robins family, to other notable collectors, including Margaret Cavendish Bentinck, Duchess of Portland, whose husband had been a Fellow since 1739, and John Fothergill. The Dowager Duchess’s first visit to Hanford was in July 1772. The following year, on 12 June, Seymer noted that he had received about 24 shells from the Dowager, but only three were of any good and none was new to him.²⁹ Seymer seems to have been engaged in a form of private rivalry with the Dowager. He noted on 30 August 1776 that although her collection contained 530 species of English Lepidoptera, it was ‘no great collection’ compared to his 696. For the last twelve years of her life, however, the Dowager never omitted spending some time at Hanford on her way to Weymouth. It seems certain that Seymer introduced her to the work of the Robins family; she owned botanical works by Thomas Junior, and further research is under way to discover if Luke was represented in her collection as well.

As *The Seymer Legacy* shows, Jamaican species make up one fifth of all the butterflies and moths included in Seymer’s *Butterflies and Plants*.³⁰ Luke Robins was the main source of these specimens; and Seymer Junior named a moth – *Sphinx lukea* – after him. Seymer’s diaries and correspondence show that he was actively trading in exotic specimens brought and sent to England by voyagers, Luke being of particular significance. Lambert states that it was on Seymer’s recommendation that John Ellis, a plantation owner from Jamaica, set out to make ‘as complete a collection of drawings of the natural history of that country as could be procured.’³¹ It is almost certain that this John Ellis was the son of Anne, daughter of the plantation owner Peter Beckford and wife of George Ellis, Chief Justice of Jamaica. Seymer knew the Beckfords – dining with them and the Portmans regularly – and was related to

them through marriage. In 1745, Anne’s brother Julines bought Stepleton House (between Blandford and Shaftesbury). Here we have the link between Ellis and Seymer and thus Ellis to Robins.

Throughout Seymer’s letters and diaries there are references to the exchange of specimens and paintings with various members of the Robins family. For instance, on 8 April 1765 Seymer records that he wrote to Thomas Robins before travelling to Bath at the end of the month. On 29 June he went to see Ellis and Luke with a box of seeds. By 8 July Robins wanted ‘flys’ (butterflies), which Seymer probably delivered two days later when he records a further visit to Bath. On 9 November 1767 he notes:

‘Received the things Luke sent from Jamaica and some drawings from Robins.’ By the following August Seymer was anxious that Pulteney return a box of his drawings, which he hoped Pulteney would annotate with any necessary explanations, because Seymer considered himself ‘a miserable Botanist’ and feared making ‘any blunders’. The drawings were then destined for Bath and Robins.³² This exchange continued with Thomas Junior and Luke even after the death of his ‘worthy friend Mr Robins at Bath’ in 1770 and his own failing eyesight, which forced him to give up painting in 1775.³³

Luke was back in England in 1773 and visited Hanford in August and November. On 11 November Seymer visited Luke (probably at his lodgings in London) and borrowed his drawings, which he then sent on to Bath, presumably to Thomas Junior.³⁴ On 22 January 1778, Seymer went to see Thomas Junior with an Angle Shades moth and large Purple Carabus beetle for Thomas to copy. Significantly, Seymer records that on 7 May 1778 he visited Thomas Junior with one of Luke’s books of flower paintings and, two weeks later, sent Junior another ‘of Luke’s large books of drawings [containing] copies of the [butterflies] *Virgaureae*, *Arion* and a *Net*’.³⁵ It is therefore certain that paintings by Luke were in circulation in Britain, and that not everything was lost with John Ellis when he went down with the



Fig. 5. Luke Robins, Swallowtail Butterflies, including examples of 'black swallow tail with blue bars and greater black border yellow swallow tail', watercolour, 1770s. (Licence granted by the Rt Hon. The Earl of Derby 2012. Photograph by Dan Brown)

ship the *British Queen*, in 1782.³⁶ Recent research has revealed that three bound volumes of paintings, entitled *The Natural History of Jamaica*, contain a large proportion of original works by Luke. (Fig. 5) These volumes were collected by Edward Smith Stanley, thirteenth Earl of Derby, but Luke's initials of L.J. Robins had been erroneously deciphered as 'Lieutenant Robins'. The exact provenance of these volumes is not yet established, but one of the Earl's sources was Aylmer Bourke Lambert, whose stepmother was Henry Seymer's daughter Bridget. Lord Derby's collection also contains botanical

works by Thomas Robins the Elder, namely *Rosa Mundi* and *Lizard* and *Yellow Horned Poppy* and *Bearded Tit*.³⁷

Tragically, in 1782, Luke drowned as he tried to cross a river in St Georges, a parish to the east of Annotto Bay, Jamaica, where he is recorded as living. Luke was subsequently forgotten and his works misattributed, but William Wright's letter to Sir Joseph Banks on 20 August 1782, asking whether he had heard of Luke's death, clearly indicates that he was considered a key contributor to the greater understanding of the natural world. The Seymers,

Robinses and their circle, which included Fothergill, Pulteney, Lambert and the Duchess of Portland, all benefitted from Luke's record of, and trade in, the butterflies and insects of Jamaica, including some now extinct species.

BRYANSTON

Regular visitors to Hanford House were the Portmans from nearby Bryanston. Henry William Portman and his wife Anne (*née* Wyndham) are mentioned frequently in Seymer's diaries recording various visits to each other's estates. Portman, who owned property on the outskirts of Bath in Hinton Charterhouse, Wellow and Combe Hay, acted as a courier between Robins and Seymer. On 24 May 1767, Seymer noted that he wrote to Robins and 'returned his box and some flies by Mr Portman'. Before Portman married in 1766, he often dined at

Hanford with Seymer's other notable friend the Rev. William Chafin, who sent plants and birds to Pulteney and was a fellow shell collector. His brother George of Chettle House was Seymer's main hunting companion. George Chafin and Portman were witnesses to Henry's marriage settlement with Bridget Haysome in 1744.³⁸

The Bryanston that Robins recorded and Seymer knew was positioned where the nineteenth-century Church of St Martin now stands. Sir William Berkeley-Portman had bought the estate from the Rogers family in the 1680s,³⁹ and the family stayed there until 1927 when they lost the property through death duties. In that time the family re-built the house twice; firstly to a design by James Wyatt (1778) and secondly with Norman Shaw's robust Late Victorian mansion begun in 1890. The original gabled medieval house with a classical wing was included in Leonard Knyff's and John Kip's *Britannia Illustrata* (1707) as plate 77.⁴⁰ (Fig. 6)

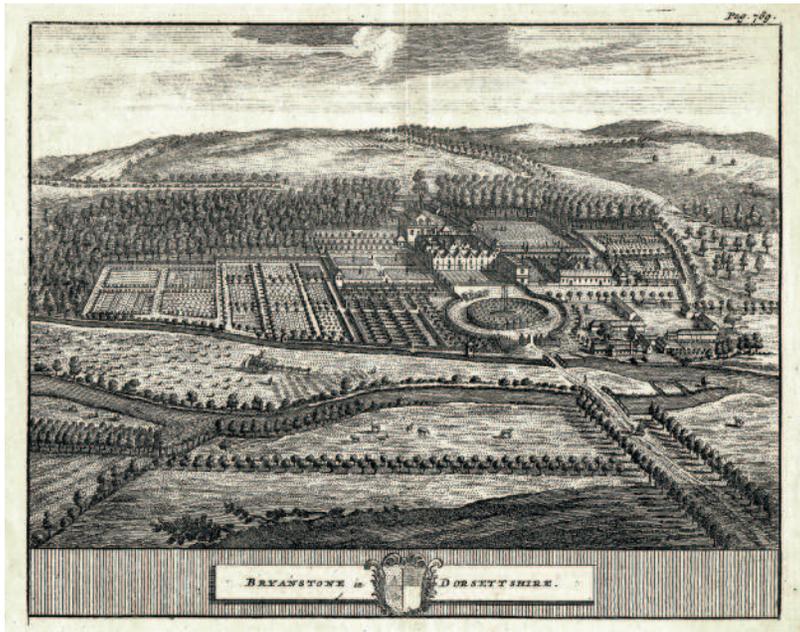


Fig. 6. Pieter van der As (1659–1733) (after Kip and Knyff), Bryanstone, Dorsetshire, Copperplate (*sic*) Engraving, from James Beeverell's *Les Delices de la Grand Bretagne et de l'Irlande, Ouvrage tres utile et tres Curieux*, published 1727. (*Author's Collection*)

It was through a study of the Kip engraving, on the suggestion of Anthony Mitchell, that Robins' sketch No. 108 was finally identified.⁴¹ (Fig. 7)

Some time in 1769 Portman sent 'a curious flower' for Seymer to inspect; an acknowledgement of his friend's interest in natural history, or an indication that he too shared the interest? Pulteney is known to have been an advocate of another local natural historian, John Galpine. With his family's background as nurserymen, Galpine created a small, double pink rose, known as the Kingston or Blandford. Galpine provided specimen trees for a number of important gardens in the area, including Bryanston.⁴²

Robins' drawing, inscribed 'No. 108' in ink at the bottom right, shows the six-gabled entrance front and the classical wing to the right, as recorded by Knyff and Kip. Their engraving allows for greater interpretation of Robins' light pencil sketch. The imperceptible circular sweep in the foreground for instance, is suggestive of the formal turning-circle and fountain. Similarly Robins' sketch includes detail that improves our understanding of the demolished building, such as the stone piers and iron railings that provided a boundary between the driveway and the formal and domestic grounds.

EASTBURY HOUSE

Within seven miles of Hanford, via Smugglers Lane, are the remains of Dorset's most ambitious country house – George Dodington's Eastbury House. The sheer size and cost of the build made this an infamous property and one that proved irresistible to Robins to sketch. 'Its construction... must have caused a great stir in the country and have been received among the local gentry with mingled feelings of curiosity, ridicule and envy.'⁴³ In all there are four sketches that relate to Eastbury in Robins' sketchbook.

In 1716, George Dodington, Lord of the Admiralty, commissioned Sir John Vanbrugh to

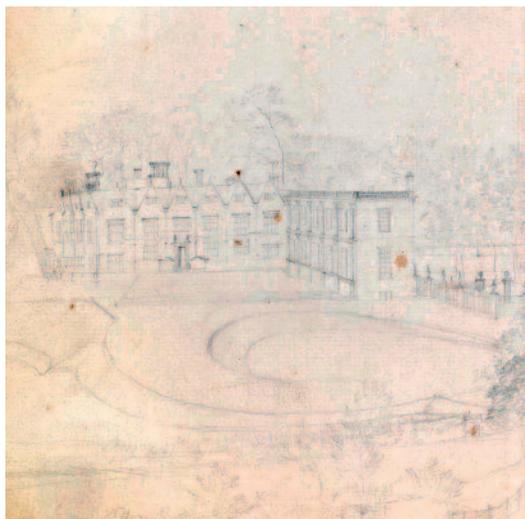


Fig. 7. Thomas Robins, Bryanston House, Dorset, pencil, 1760s. (© Victoria and Albert Museum, London)

design an imposing country house, but when he died in 1720 only the wings and forecourt had been completed. Having no issue, he left his fortune, including £30,000 to facilitate the completion of Eastbury, to his nephew George Bubb Dodington, later first Baron Melcombe (1691–1762). Bubb Dodington was reputedly the son of an apothecary from Weymouth and was perhaps overwhelmed with the opportunities his inheritance afforded him. His resounding reputation is as an over-ambitious political sycophant and turncoat. Lord Hervey noted that 'people really despised him' and that 'his vanity in company was so overbearing, [and] so insolent'.⁴⁴ Both the Whigs and the Tories despised him because of his habitual change of allegiance.

After a successful appointment as envoy to Spain, however, Robert Walpole made Dodington Lord of the Treasury in 1724; this seems to have prompted the recommencement of building work at Eastbury. After Vanbrugh died in 1726, the house was finished to the designs of Roger Morris (1695–1748).⁴⁵

Richard Cumberland, private secretary to the Earl of Halifax, left a rich description of Eastbury:

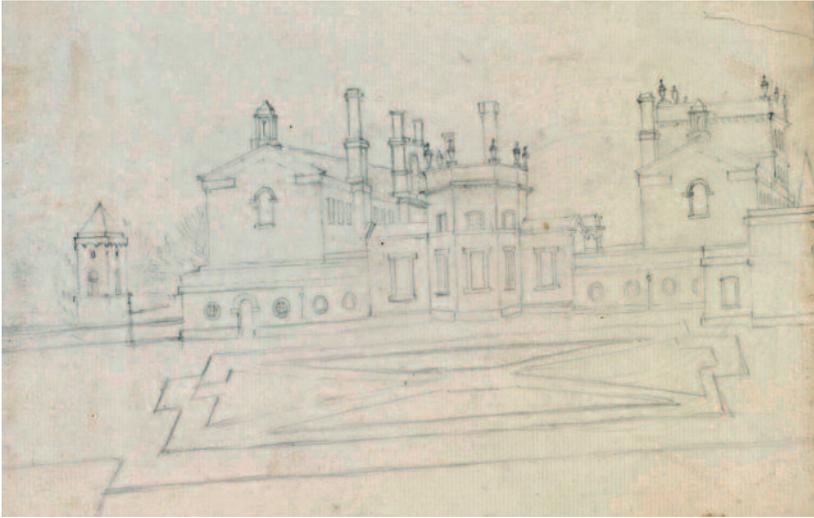


Fig. 8. Thomas Robins, Eastbury House, Dorset (detail of left wing), pencil, c.1763–5.
(© Victoria and Albert Museum, London)

‘His mansion was magnificent, massy, and stretching out to a great extent in front, with an enormous portico of Doric columns, ascended by a stately flight of steps; there were turrets and wings that went I know not whither, though now they are levelled with the ground, and gone to more ignoble uses. Vanburgh, who constructed this superb edifice, seems to have had the plan of Blenheim in his thoughts, and the interior was as proud and splendid as the exterior was bold and imposing. All this was exactly in unison with the taste of the magnificent owner, who had gilt and furnished the apartments with a profusion of finery that kept no terms with simplicity, and not always with elegance or harmony of style. Whatever Mr Dodington’s revenue then was, he had the happy art of managing it with that regularity and economy, that I believe he made more display, at less cost, than any man in the kingdom but himself could have done.’⁴⁶

Robins produced three pencil sketches of the garden façade. No. 111 is a detail of the left wing, showing the multiple windows, edifices and chimneys with a parterre to the front. (Fig. 8) No. 9 is an ambitious record of the complete façade, which conforms to other known contemporary paintings of Eastbury. (Fig. 9), and Robins’s No. 7 is a detail of the main

block. The Rev. Richard Pococke visited Bubb Dodington’s estate in October 1754 and whilst he was beguiled by the interiors, Charles Bridgeman’s Baroque grounds were a disappointment to him.⁴⁷ ‘The gardens are well laid out’, he observed, ‘lawns, clumps, and some walks of trees in the old way, and there is an open pavilion at the further end of the garden, with a pediment in front supported by columns.’⁴⁸ Pococke’s ‘open pavilion’ was in fact Vanbrugh’s Corinthian Temple, as sketched by Robins (No.118), situated halfway up the hill to the east; its portico was 30 ft. high. (Fig. 10). Robins provides the only known sketch of the temple in situ, collaborating the design as recorded in *Vitruvius Britannicus* (1717).⁴⁹

In accordance with his uncle’s will, and having no issue, Bubb Dodington’s extensive property, including his holdings in Somerset and Dorset, were settled on his cousin Richard Grenville, second Earl Temple. Temple was not positive about the inheritance of Eastbury House and, according to Horace Walpole, had ‘always threatened to pull down that pile of ugliness when it should be his’.⁵⁰

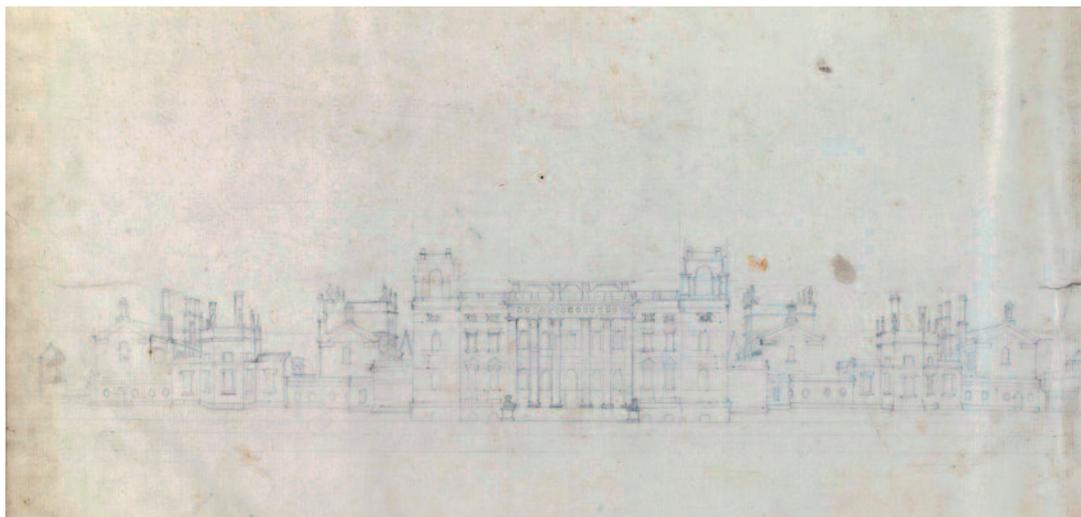


Fig. 9. Thomas Robins, Eastbury House, Dorset, View of the Garden Front, pencil, c.1763–5.
(© Victoria and Albert Museum, London)

After visiting Eastbury in August 1762, however, Temple warmed to the estate. He wrote to his brother-in-law and fellow M.P. William Pitt:

‘Eastbury...as an house in very magnificent, and a very pleasing habitation. The ground about it very

pretty and as you know a very fry country. A good deal of wood is got up since I last saw it, and if it were not for Stowe I think I could find in my heart upon the whole to take to it very kindly, so much so that I almost think I shall purchase all the furniture with an intention to pass a month there every year’.⁵¹

John Harris has suggested a date of 1762 for Robins’ sketches of Eastbury. No finished painting by Robins is known, and so his motivation can only be surmised. It may simply be due to Eastbury’s reputation, or the convenience of its location to Hanford, or, if 1762 is correct, that the property had just been inherited by Temple, an individual with whom Robins may have had personal contact with through Ralph Allen and William Pitt (M.P. for Bath, 1757) or Seymer. Being unable to find a tenant, however, in 1777 Temple carried off to Stowe anything of value, including ‘white marble chimney-pieces of Italian workmanship’ and ‘the marble pavement of the saloon’, and then, according to Laurence Whistler, he ‘blew it up with gunpowder’.⁵² All but one wing of the house was demolished and Wyatt apparently reused the stone for his version of nearby Bryanston.



Fig. 10. Thomas Robins, Corinthian Temple, Eastbury, Dorset, pencil, c.1763–5.
(© Victoria and Albert Museum, London)



Fig. 11. Thomas Robins, *Mr Clavell in the island of Purbeck, Dorset*, (Smedmore), pencil, after 1761.
(© Victoria and Albert Museum, London)

SMEDMORE HOUSE

The motivation for Robins to sketch the Clavell family's seat at Smedmore remains even more ambiguous. No connection to his Dorset friends, or to the trade in exotic specimens, has been found. It is conceivable that Robins just knew of and admired the property from his visits to nearby Weymouth. Sir William Clavell chose the location for his seat so he could take advantage of the bituminous shale of Kimmeridge Bay – it was hoped that shale would prove to be a suitable alternative to coal. Clavell's 'little newe House, ... beautified ... with pleasant gardens' is first mentioned in c.1632.⁵³ Robins shows the new north front, dated 1761 on the rainwater heads, which is actually wider than the seventeenth century range behind. This, the entrance front, has two projecting semi-circular bay windows with square window surrounds and a stringcourse. The

front has not been altered, making Robins's sketch not entirely accurate – something not usually associated with Robins' work however rapid or unfinished. His depiction shows a proportionally thinner or taller house and his bays are rusticated, when in reality the windows reach almost to ground level and were certainly so by the third edition of John Hutchins' *History and Antiquities of the County Dorset* (1861).

Robins' pencil sketch, inscribed 'Mr Clavell in the island of Purbeck, Dorset' and numbered 133 in the top-left corner, is very loose and, unlike the rest of the sketchbook, not pasted in. (Fig. 11) Despite its imprecision the scene is full of movement and interest, with a number of vignettes being played out. In this way it is similar to Robins' known finished paintings, such as his 'Prospect of Henbury House', near Bristol (c.1758) (Fig. 3), or the 'West Prospect of



Fig. 12. Detail of Thomas Robins the Younger's signature, 1786.

the Great House and Spaw House, Cheltenham' (1748), suggesting that he did, or at least intended to, produce a painting of Smedmore. A shepherdess stands just left of the centre with a large group of (over-sized) sheep. Other livestock are in smaller groups enjoying the pasture. A single horseman is riding away to the east, whilst a wagon, being pulled by two horses, is speeding out to the north. A coach is arriving at the front door, and in the distance is the Dorset coastline with the masts and sails of the passing ships.

CONCLUSION

Robins' Dorset drawings represent far more than the country houses they depict. These mostly minor works embody the eighteenth century's far more enlightened approach to the disciplines of art and science. The sketches have revealed an extraordinary domestic trade in exotic specimens that traversed considerable social and geographic boundaries.

In his later years, fewer and fewer architectural features appear in Robins' paintings until his works were purely botanic. On his death, his son Thomas continued his father's business, humbly hoping for the continuance of the favours shown his father by the visiting nobility and gentry to Bath. In 1787 he

advertised that his 'pictures of exotic plants and insects may be seen at his apartments in Chandos Buildings and at Mr Richard's Print Shop, Broad Street', Bath.⁵⁴ He signed and dated each of his works, 'Painted from Nature... Bath', and although not all the paintings are entirely accurate in terms of the combination of specimen, pupae and plant, the true impact of this short inked statement can now be more fully understood and appreciated. (Fig. 12) Luke, John Ellis and their fellow adventure voyagers went to extraordinary lengths to satisfy the growing demand for knowledge of the natural world in eighteenth-century England.

POSTSCRIPT

Seymer's extensive collection of exotic specimens was sold in February 1786.⁵⁵ Vane-Wright and Hughes agree that although Seymer Junior 'shared his father's interest in natural history [he] lacked his father's overriding enthusiasm.'⁵⁶ The Duchess of Portland's collection was also sold in 1786, but the 4,000 separate lots resulted in the auction lasting 37 days. Thomas Junior died a bankrupt shortly after pawning 102 of his 'flower paintings' to the Bath and West Society.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NOTES

- 1 J. Harris, *Gardens of Delight: the Rococo English Landscape of Thomas Robins the Elder* (London, 1978).
- 2 J. Newman & N. Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Dorset* (London, 1972), p. 95.
- 3 G. Yarker, *Georgian Faces: Portrait of a County* (Dorset County Museum, Dorchester, 2010), p. 85.
- 4 H.M. Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects* (New Haven and London, 2008), pp. 106–8. The Bastard brothers were also furniture makers, carpenters, clockmakers and plaster workers.
- 5 Pulteney arrived in Blandford in 1765. The first of Seymer's known letters to him is dated 18 April 1766 in the Pulteney Correspondence at the Linnaean Society. See R.I. Vane-Wright & H.W.D. Hughes, *The Seymer Legacy: Henry Seymer and Henry Seymer Junr of Dorset, and their Entomological Paintings with a catalogue of Butterflies and Plants (1755–1783)* (Forrest, Ceredigion, 2005)
- 6 Portret is often referred to as a porcelain painter, which, at this date in England, seems unlikely. The contents of his home, at his death, included a large number of teapots. He may have been decorating Chinese import porcelain, but more likely is Delftware.
- 7 The location for sketch no. 126 was eventually resolved by the author in collaboration with Daniel Brown in December 2011.

- 8 Since 2005, the author has been working on identifying the location of all 133 sketches with the help of John Harris, the late Howard Colvin, Anthony Mitchell and Daniel Brown. Works have also been attributed in the collections of the British Museum and Gloucestershire Archives.
- 9 J. Sale, *Charlton Kings Local History Society Bulletins* 44 (Autumn 2000), 45 (Spring 2001) and 47 (Spring 2002). Portret's will of 1743 refers to Robins as 'of Charlton Kings'. Robins's last rental payment to Prinn for land adjoining his own was made in 1767. William Lerner's will (made in November 1768) refers to Robins 'now living in Bath'.
- 10 Bath Record Office, Chamberlain's Accounts, 2 Sept. 1734 (1732–3), 30 May 1738 (1736–7): T. Fawcett & M. Inskip, 'The Making of Orange Grove', *Bath History* V, (1994).
- 11 Sale, *op. cit.*
- 12 Harris, *op. cit.*, p. 12.
- 13 Eighteen different species of shell have been identified in this border by Dr Martin Rix. Harris, *op. cit.*, vol. 2.
- 14 B. Boyce, *The Benevolent Man: A Life of Ralph Allen of Bath*. (London, 1967), p. 131.
- 15 C. Spence, 'For True Friends: Jerry Peirce's Patriot Whig Garden at Lilliput Castle', *Bath History* XII (2011); C. Spence, 'Without Pomp!': Ralph Allen's Romantic Haven at Claverton (2011), www.cathrynspace.com
- 16 T. Richardson, *The Arcadian Friends* (London, 2008), p. 310.
- 17 For example, Sharrington Davenport of Shropshire had a house in Bath.
- 18 A. Oswald, *Country Houses of Dorset* (London, 1959), p. 95.
- 19 R.I. Vane-Wright, notes taken from the Seymer diaries, with kind permission of Andrew Hamilton (2005).
- 20 Vane-Wright and Hughes, *op. cit.*, p. 1. The paintings remained with the family, unpublished and little known for over 250 years.
- 21 A.B. Lambert, 'Anecdotes of Henry Seymer, read at a meeting of the Linnaean Society of London, 5 February 1811', reproduced in J. Hutchins, *The History and Antiquities of the County of Dorset*, (London, 3rd Ed., 1861), I. Cheltenham Art Gallery owns a copy of Robins' Prospect of Cheltenham by Lady Somerset.
- 22 3 January 1768.

- 23 Lambert, *op. cit.*
- 24 *Ibid.*
- 25 Vane-Wright, *op. cit.*, 6th October 1755. ‘Never less alone than when alone’.
- 26 Lambert, *op. cit.*, John Ryall, London, May 2, 1763.
- 27 *Ibid.*
- 28 S. P. Dance, *Shell Collecting: An Illustrated History* (University of California Press, 1966). Vane-Wright and Hughes, *op. cit.*, p. 24.
- 29 Vane-Wright, *op. cit.*
- 30 Vane-Wright and Hughes, *op. cit.*, chapter 6.
- 31 Lambert, *op. cit.* Lambert confirms this, but does not say which Robins.
- 32 Vane-Wright and Hughes, *op. cit.*, p. 26.
- 33 Vane-Wright, *op. cit.*, 22nd January 1770. Inscription on painting ‘Henry Seymer aged 60, failing eyesight (and with the kind help of his son) made this April 1775. He now gives up his art and hangs up his gloves.’
- 34 Seymer records Luke’s address as 6 Bells Dove Court, Lombard Street. John Ryall lived at 17 Lombard Street.
- 35 Vane-Wright, *op. cit.*, 20th May 1778.
- 36 Lambert, *op. cit.*, Ellis was intending to present the entire collection, amounting to thousands of drawings, to the British Museum.
- 37 C. Fisher (ed.), *A Passion for Natural History: The Life and Legacy of the 13th Earl of Derby* (National Museums & Galleries on Merseyside, Liverpool, 2002), pp. 62, 77, 151.
- 38 Dorset Records Office, Dorchester, D/SEY/JPO21, dated 4 September 1744. Other witness included George Chafin of Chettle and Robert Henley of Glanvilles Wootton.
- 39 John Rogers bought the 2,500-acre estate in 1415 and his descendants remained there for over 250 years. Elizabeth, the sister of William Rogers who sold the estate, married John Prynne of Charlton Park, Charlton Kings.
- 40 No other Dorset residence was included in *Britannia Illustrata*, dismissing any suggestion that Robins was trying to recreate Kip and Knyff’s work.
- It is probable that Bryanston’s inclusion in *Britannia Illustrata* was because Henry Portman was a subscriber to that publication.
- 41 Anthony Mitchell, National Trust Regional Director (retired), in discussion with the author, 2006.
- 42 Yarker, *op. cit.*, p. 85.
- 43 A. Oswald, *Country Houses of Dorset* (Tiverton, 1994), p. 149.
- 44 *Lord Hervey’s Memoirs* (London, 1984), p. 176.
- 45 C. Hussey, *English Country Houses: Early Georgian* (Woodbridge, 1986), p. 31 ‘by contract for £9,000’ in 1733. (Drawings in the Royal Library, Windsor; Country Life, 11 February 1949, p. 317.)
- 46 *Memoirs of Richard Cumberland* (London, 1807), I, p. 113.
- 47 C. Bridgeman, ‘A Plan of Eastbury the Seat of the Right Honourable George Doddinton Esq.’ (Bodleian Library, University of Oxford. MS. Gough Drawings a.3, fol.10), illustrated in T. Mowl, *Historic Gardens of Dorset* (Stroud, 2003), p. 54, plate 21 and colour plate 3.
- 48 J. Cartwright (ed.), *The Travels through England of Dr Richard Pococke (1750–57)* (Camden Society, 1888–9), II, p. 140.
- 49 With thanks to John Harris and Vaughan Hart. Eastbury’s Corinthian Temple appears in *Vitruvius Britannicus* II, pls.52 and 53 and III, pls.15–17.
- 50 W.S. Lewis (ed.), *The Yale Edition of the Correspondence of Horace Walpole* (New Haven, 1937), XXII, p. 80.
- 51 The National Archives, Chatham Papers, 30/8/61, ff. 71, 73, quoted in J.V. Beckett, *The Rise and Fall of the Grenvilles: Dukes of Buckingham and Chandos, 1710 to 1921* (Manchester, 1994), p. 55.
- 52 Beckett, *op. cit.*, p. 57; L. Whistler, *Sir John Vanbrugh: Architect and Dramatist, 1664–1726* (London, 1938), pp. 204–5.
- 53 Mowl, *op. cit.*, note 19, p. 186. Thomas Gerard of Trent.
- 54 *Bath Chronicle*, 29 November 1787.
- 55 Lambert, *op. cit.*, Hutchins, IV, p. 67.
- 56 Vane-Wright and Hughes, *op. cit.*, p. 278.