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THOMAS COKE AND HOLKHAM FROM 1718 TO 1734: THE EARLY HISTORY

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The major William Kent exhibition held in New York and London in 2013–14 was a catalyst for new research on the history of Holkham Hall in Norfolk. Holkham is acknowledged as one of eighteenth-century Europe's most remarkable country houses, but the evidence for its authorship has remained frustratingly elusive. Julius Bryant's essay in the book that accompanied the Kent exhibition reviewed afresh the relative contributions to the design of Holkham by its owner-creator Thomas Coke (first Earl of Leicester from 1744), his executant architect Matthew Brettingham Senior, and his friends Richard Boyle, third Earl of Burlington, and William Kent, this last being the author of the few surviving drawings on the basis of which construction began in 1734. Bryant also drew attention to the role played in the completion of the house by Coke's widow Lady Margaret in the years from 1759 to 1765, a role amplified in the article by Amy Boyington that appeared in last year's volume of this journal.¹

The present author's contributions have included an article which argued that a supposedly early 'Holkham I' – shown in a partial set of drawings in the British Library – in fact represents a reworking of the house post-construction, made by Brettingham when prospecting for new clients after Coke's death in 1759.² In his pioneering and valuable work on the house from the 1980s onwards, Leo Schmidt had promoted this scheme (which shows the house much as built but without its four pavilion wings) as dating from the mid-1720s, thereby

suggesting that 'Kent had no hand in the very first designs'.³ This hypothesis – accepted in many subsequent accounts – can now be removed from the narrative, with Holkham repositioned so that its formal appearance is seen as belonging with the architectural design vocabulary developed by Kent elsewhere in the same 1730s period. A second essay by the present author, which necessarily began with a substitute account of the history of the Holkham landscape and ideas for the house prior to the emergence of the final concept in 1733, appeared in Italian in an exhibition catalogue last year.⁴ The current article is reworked from that essay (and its accompanying catalogue entries) for the benefit of non-Italian readers. As will be suggested here, the early history of Holkham can be read as a fascinating microcosm of the rapidly changing approach to architectural design in élite circles in the 1720s and early 1730s.

* * *

When, on 13 May 1718, one month before he came of age at 21, Thomas Coke stepped from the boat at Dover that had returned him to England after a Grand Tour of almost six years' duration, it might be wondered what intention he harboured as to how he would house the prodigious collection of manuscripts, books, paintings and sculptures he had amassed whilst travelling in Europe, which was following him home. But where, in fact, was home?

For the last stage of his journey Coke had been met at Boulogne by Humphrey Smith (together with his son, Edward), Steward of the estate of Holkham on the north Norfolk coast that he had inherited in 1707, when aged only 10. Doubtless he recalled that the Smiths had also accompanied him as far as Dunkirk on his departure six years previously, following a brief visit to Holkham. That visit had surely been memorable to the 14-year-old boy for the drums, ships' guns and church bells that had sounded, as well as for the estate's large but nondescript mostly sixteenth-century house, Hill Hall, standing largely empty after the sale of its contents following Coke's parents' premature deaths.⁵ Perhaps, then, Coke arrived back in England his mind already fixed on the creation of what has recently been called the 'Plinian estate' and 'great seaside Roman villa' that Holkham would become, inspired by those palaces and villas with their libraries and art collections he had visited in Europe.⁶ However, it should be recognised that the eighteenth-century tradition of British country houses being built or refashioned to display Grand Tour collections was one that Holkham itself was to do much to establish. Moreover, as a child Coke had been largely raised away from Norfolk – in London and Derbyshire – and there is evidence that he actively considered establishing his country domain on historic Coke family property elsewhere in England. Today, Holkham Hall stands for us as perhaps the greatest Neo-Roman house of early eighteenth-century Europe, a pointed statement of reaction against what was seen as the licentious treatment of antique precedents found in Baroque architecture. Its genesis, however, was not a straightforward reflection of advanced Neo-classicism in the young Thomas Coke's intellectual outlook and taste. Furthermore, its current surrounding landscape gives little idea of its creator's intentions at the time the house was conceived.

More pressing in Coke's mind when he reached Dover than any plans for a country house will surely have been his impending marriage to Lady Margaret

Tufton, daughter of the sixth Earl of Thanet, which was to take place only seven weeks later. This advantageous match, designed to insert the very wealthy commoner into an established aristocratic family, must have been pre-arranged and, as a result, Coke no doubt expected that his life for the immediate future would be spent at Thanet House in Great Russell Street, London, the lease of which was to come to him as part of his new wife's dowry. Indeed it was to Thanet House that packing cases of Grand Tour purchases were duly delivered over the ensuing months – and, within a matter of days of taking possession of the house, Coke employed the Italian-trained architect James Gibbs to extend it eastwards with a 'great new room', the better to accommodate them.⁷ The extension was almost certainly a library, placed under the care of the Neapolitan Dr Domenico Ferrari, a scholarly protégé of Dr Thomas Hobart (Coke's Grand Tour tutor), who had accompanied Coke and Hobart through France and as far as Turin. The library also doubled, however, as a reception room, where Coke's erudition could be displayed to a wider public. It is clear, moreover, that whilst some of the paintings and statues that Coke had acquired in Europe were kept in warehouses on their arrival in London, others were unpacked and positioned in Thanet House.⁸ Certainly on display in London from 1720 was his statue of the goddess Diana, the purchase and export of which from Rome had been such a coup. The sculpture became known well enough in London élite circles for it to have been ingratiatingly featured in the King's Staircase at Kensington Palace, painted between 1725 and 1727 by William Kent, whom Coke had met and befriended in Rome in 1714.⁹

It does not seem to have been long, however, before Coke turned his attention to the possibility of building a new house on a country estate. In March 1720 he commissioned the architect Colen Campbell to go to examine Stoke Poges in Buckinghamshire, where the founding ancestor of the Coke dynasty, the Lord Chief Justice Sir Edward Coke, had resided at



Fig. 1. Detail of Map of Estate of Holkham, Norfolk, c.1744-59.
(*Holkham Archives, M/68*)

the end of his life a century before.¹⁰ The fact that Campbell was accompanied by the Holkham Steward Humphrey Smith, as well as by ‘two builders’, shows how seriously Coke considered establishing himself in Buckinghamshire, for, whilst Smith could assess the economic potential of the estate, the latter two professionals would have been the essential advisors on the practicalities of actually building on the site. The problem with Stoke Poges, however, was that Coke no longer owned it – and, although he visited it at least twice at this time, the possibility of purchasing it back receded as the estate became embroiled in legal suits, just as his own finances suffered serious setback. Moreover, around the same time that Campbell went to Stoke Poges, he

and Smith were also recompensed for using the London-King’s Lynn stagecoach, one of the standard means of travel to and from Holkham. It seems probable, therefore, that Campbell was asked to make a comparative study of the prospects for building either at Stoke Poges or at Holkham.¹¹

It is instructive to see that Coke’s early thoughts about a country house led him to liaise not with James Gibbs, whom he had employed at Thanet House less than two years previously and who had trained in Rome with the late Baroque architect Carlo Fontana, but with Campbell, author of *Vitruvius Britannicus* – the first two volumes of which Coke purchased, also in March 1720. In his 1715 preface to this seminal publication, Campbell had explicitly

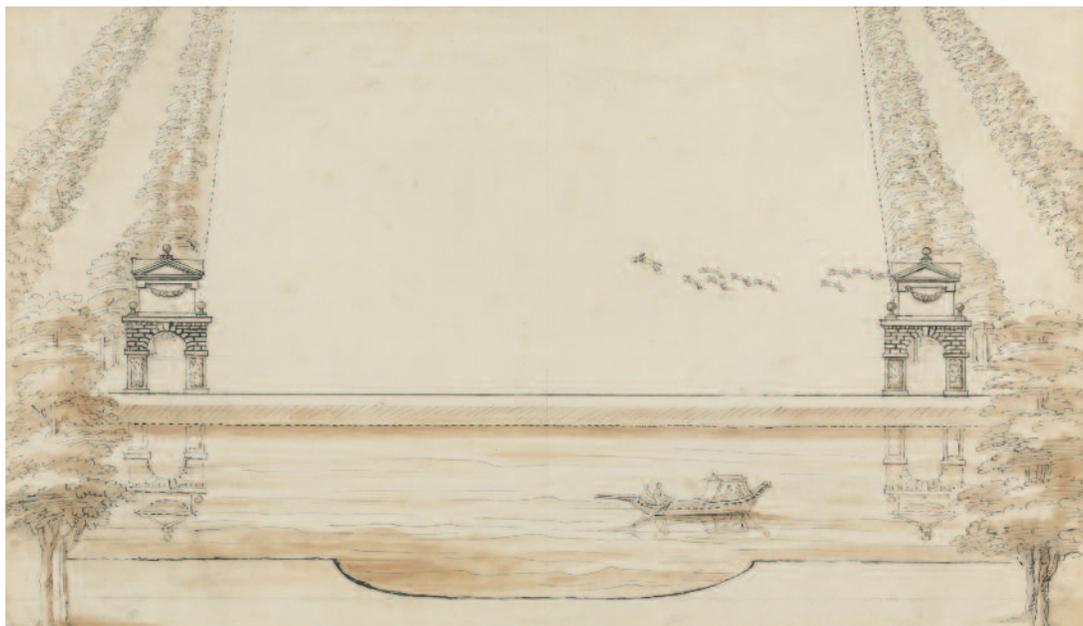


Fig. 2. William Kent: Design for the South Basin, 'Porches' and South Lawn at Holkham, c.1730–32.
(*Holkham Archives, PM/8*)

denounced seventeenth-century Italian architects, including Fontana (although this was presumably Domenico rather than Carlo). As is well known, he called for a return to order based in particular on the uses of the antique made by Andrea Palladio in the Veneto in the sixteenth century and by Inigo Jones in England in the seventeenth. This call had quickly found a sympathetic audience in young English virtuosi, foremost among them the 'architect-earl', Richard Boyle, third Earl of Burlington. In 1719–20 Campbell had used the model of Palladio's Palazzo Iseppo Porto in Vicenza when rebuilding the south front of Burlington House in Piccadilly, London, where he had probably also ousted Gibbs as Burlington's preferred architect. Coke and Burlington had known one another since at least January 1715 when they had evidently met in Turin, and their friendship was quickly resumed back in England.¹² In May 1721 the Cokes attended a ball given by Lord and

Lady Burlington at Chiswick and by that November Coke's own thoughts about a country establishment had settled definitively on Holkham, from where his uncle, Michael Newton, was able to report that 'Mr Coke likes this place so well now that I believe if he ever builds it will be here'.¹³

Michael Newton's letter, written to his father Sir John – who had been one of Coke's guardians during his minority – demonstrates that whilst any initial doubts Coke may have had about building at Holkham had now been overcome, such a new house still might not transpire ('if he ever builds'). The uncertainty presumably reflected the fact that the previous year Coke had suffered a very serious financial blow. Like many of his peers – a lot of them older and more experienced – Coke was tempted to invest heavily in stock of the South Sea Company, as it soared in value ten-fold from January to August. Within four months the share value had fallen right

back to where it started. Coke's losses in the South Sea Bubble amounted to some £38,000, to add to a debt of £15,000 he had quickly incurred through gambling and other expenditures since taking charge of his fortune. During the early 1720s Coke was paying a quarter of his annual income of about £10,000 in interest to creditors and was evidently in no position to embark upon an ambitious building project in Norfolk. This did not stop him, however, from literally preparing the ground for a new mansion. As was typical for Tudor (and earlier) manor houses, Hill Hall was surrounded by parcels of land owned or tenanted by other Holkham villagers, with a road passing close by its south front. In 1722 Coke obtained a writ to close the road, thereby commencing the process of isolating his property from the wider public sphere.

Coke's work on the landscape at Holkham appears to have begun in earnest in the mid-1720s. A lawn, positioned so as to lie to the south of the site intended for the house, was levelled and seeded from 1724 to 1729; a lake north-west of Hill Hall was created by the damming of a stream called the Clint from 1725 to 1731; and, from 1726, lines of trees stretching south from the lawn were planted, leading towards the gentle hill on which Obelisk Wood was planted between 1726 and 1730. All of these features can be seen faintly overlaying the existing landscape on a map of Holkham probably dating from the mid-to late 1720s.¹⁴ They can be seen more clearly on a map of the estate that post-dates Coke's elevation to the Earldom of Leicester in 1744 (Fig. 1). The extensive lawn sloped down southwards to what was, at first, a geometric basin of water, excavated from 1730 to 1734 and fed from the lake by a linking channel (Fig. 2). South of the basin, the trees lined the upward slope, converging on a rectangular opening in Obelisk Wood. The southern axis then continued through the wood to the summit of the hill, on which the Obelisk was built from 1730 to 1732 (Fig. 3). The boundary of the park initially lay somewhat to the south of that – but the 1720s map

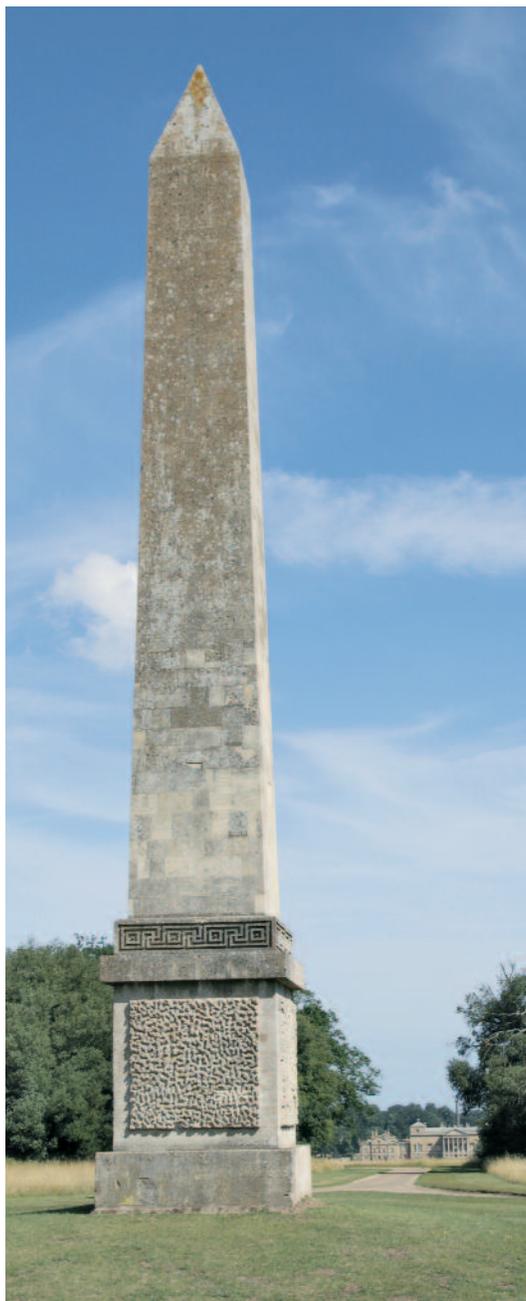


Fig. 3. William Kent: The Obelisk, Holkham, 1730–32.
(Photo: Carl Impey)



Fig. 4. William Kent: The Temple, Holkham, 1731–34.
(Photo: Carl Impey)

makes it clear that, from the start, the axis was envisaged as continuing directly south for another mile and a half to Longlands Farm, as in the present day. The Obelisk stood in a *rond point* clearing in its wood, whilst a second *rond point* just to its north-west was envisaged as the site on which the Temple would be built from 1731 to 1734 (Fig. 4). From the beginning long, straight *allées* were conceived, radiating from these two *rond points*, nine from the Obelisk and five from the Temple. On the post-1744 map (Fig. 1) the vistas are given the names of nearby villages. In the relatively flat north Norfolk countryside the buildings of nearby villages probably

offered variety in what might otherwise be monotonous views, but it could also be that Coke wished the Obelisk and Temple to be visible from a distance to his neighbours and tenants, as a domineering gesture.

The origins of this approach to landscape design lie clearly enough in late seventeenth-century French and Dutch layouts, examples of which Coke had seen for himself in Europe. The ideas were also currently fashionable in England, where they were undergoing development by Stephen Switzer, Charles Bridgeman, Alexander Pope and others. Coke was familiar with these developments, as seen

at his friend the Duke of Newcastle's gardens at Claremont in Surrey, largely the work of Bridgeman (including the 'Round Bason' with its obelisk of 1715 to 1718). He had also visited Cirencester in 1723, where Pope was laying out grand avenues with the owner, Lord Bathurst.¹⁵ Moreover, the third volume of Campbell's *Vitruvius Britannicus*, to which Coke was a subscriber in 1725, provided bird's-eye illustrations of further country-seat landscapes of this type including Boughton, known to Coke as the estate of his friend and London next-door-neighbour, the Duke of Montagu. The growing interest in the culture of antiquity in England at this time led to publication, in 1728, of Robert Castell's *Villas of the Ancients*, an attempt to visualise the domains surrounding Pliny the Younger's two villas at Laurentinum and Tuscum. The south-west quadrant of Tuscum was envisaged with French-style gardens (including an obelisk in a *ronde point* with numerous *allées*). Although Castell's book was supported by and dedicated to Lord Burlington, Coke rather surprisingly did not own a copy, so that his early ideas for the landscape at Holkham were more likely influenced by his visual experience of current fashions in English landscape design than by a conscious intention to create a Neo-classicising 'Plinian estate'.

Coke was certainly well acquainted with his friend Lord Burlington's Chiswick where, in 1725, the architect-earl began upon the new villa, key features of which (the south portico, the north front window arrangement, the cannon-ball machicolations and the design of the gallery) would ultimately reappear in the design for Holkham. The gardens at Chiswick were on nothing like the scale of the landscape proposed for Holkham and had even less relief, but the Chiswick that Coke would have seen in the late 1720s bore distinct similarities. To the north of Burlington's villa was a formal grove of trees, through which a straight axis ran to a *patte d'oie*. The three *allées* branching off from there all led to small, terminating buildings. Meanwhile, to the west lay a rectangular

water basin with semi-circular ends. Nearby was the Ionic temple designed by Burlington, the circular pool in front of it complete with a small central obelisk. William Kent, who had been domiciled with Lord Burlington since their joint return from Italy in 1719, included the Ionic temple in his *Designs of Inigo Jones*, (published in 1727 and owned by Coke), by which time he had begun his own career as a designer of garden buildings. His first architectural intervention in a landscape is now known to have been at Shotover Park, Oxfordshire, where, in 1724–25, the octagonal temple was built to his design as well, it seems, as the obelisk.¹⁶ Having given these proofs of his ability to produce effective garden buildings, Kent, as a longstanding and trusted friend, was inevitably the person to whom Coke turned for the design of the Obelisk and Temple at Holkham (Figs. 3 and 4). Kent also designed a pair of 'porches' (quadrifrontal open pavilions with heavy tops), which were built from 1732–36 and described by a German visitor as having 'Coffins upon them mit quirlands [garlands].'¹⁷ These pavilions were placed on the south side of the rectangular basin Kent laid out south of the site for the new house, and also served as the northern termini of the framing avenues of trees leading to and from Obelisk Wood (see Figs. 1 and 2).

The Obelisk and Temple that Kent provided for Coke both have interesting antecedents. Kent's drawing for the Obelisk survives in the Holkham archives and is correspondent with the monument, though the pyramidal peak was given a more steeply pointed profile in construction.¹⁸ The blunter version shown in the drawing makes it clear that Kent's design was a derivative of the obelisk he put up for Colonel James Tyrell at Shotover – and also of that he designed in 1728 for Wrest Park, Bedfordshire.¹⁹ Wrest belonged to the Duke of Kent, whose eldest son, Lord Harrold, was both a Grand Tour friend of Coke's and subsequently his brother-in-law. The Shotover and Wrest obelisks were both only about 50 feet tall, whilst that at Holkham reaches to 80 feet. All three have a Greek Key frieze

at the base of the shaft, but the pedestal decorations are different. At Shotover there is a laurel garland, whilst *bucrania* and *paterae* were proposed for Wrest, as well as a ball and star on top. Holkham, meanwhile, has rustication of the *bugnato* type used by Burlington for the basement at Chiswick. Handwritten notes on Kent's drawing, attributed to Coke himself, give evidence of a debate as to whether this 'rock work' should 'project beyond the plain part of the dado or no'. The rustication was cut in 1732, apparently bringing to an end a two-year period of construction.

By this date obelisks were becoming quite common features in the English landscape garden: the first of the two at Chiswick, for example, went up before 1727, whilst that at Boughton was illustrated in the third volume of *Vitruvius Britannicus* of 1725.²⁰ As a frequent visitor to Boughton, Coke would have seen it. The distinctiveness of the Holkham Obelisk thus lies less in its form than in its situation, axially positioned between the entry to the park (now a mile and half away on a dead straight but pleasantly undulating road to the south) and the centre of the house another half mile, exactly, to the north. In this respect it differs from its most obvious ancestor, the obelisk erected by John Vanbrugh at Castle Howard in 1714, for that was a monument to an individual military hero (the Duke of Marlborough) and the long driveways either side of it do not relate directly to the house itself. As markers of axial routes, obelisks appear in Freemasonic iconography and it might be speculated that this was Coke's intention at Holkham, not least because it was in 1731 that he served for a year as Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of English Freemasons.²¹ Coke did not, however, possess any significant Masonic literature in his library and there is no particular evidence that he was interested in such esoteric symbolism. He had, however, acquired a copy of the 1590 edition of Domenico Fontana's book *Della trasportatione dell'obelisco vaticano et delle fabbriche di nostro signore papa Sisto V*, so that an interest in

obelisks as spectacular markers of urban routes and spaces in the modern city of Rome can certainly be assumed. The greater height of the Holkham Obelisk over Kent's earlier versions at Shotover and Wrest doubtless relates to its pivotal function within the overall layout of the estate. It has also been pointed out that the presence of the classical evergreen oak, *quercus ilex*, planted from 1726 in Obelisk Wood, might be seen as another embodiment of Coke's memories of Italy, and that illustrations of the tree feature in the manuscript of Virgil's Eclogues he had bought.²² There is no foundation, however, to the myth that the trees at Holkham are literally descended from boughs used to pack Coke's sculptures on their journeys from Italy to Norfolk (which, in any case, went through an intermediate stage of unpacking and repacking in London).

A short distance away from the Obelisk, though not visible from it, was the site chosen for Kent's Temple at Holkham. The Temple was (and is) not visible from the house either, so that the pivotal function of the Obelisk within the landscape remained unchallenged until the erection of the monumental column to Coke of Norfolk to the north of the house in the mid-nineteenth century. Thomas Coke can hardly have been unaware that the temple design he was given was a recycled version of one Kent had proposed (but evidently not built) for Sir Charles Hotham at Dalton Hall, Yorkshire, in about 1729, since the Dalton plan, elevation and section were included in Isaac Ware's *Designs of Inigo Jones and Others* of c.1731, a book Coke owned.²³ For the deep portico Kent took the distinctive 'mutulary' Doric order, with its boldly projecting cornice, which Fréart de Chambray had illustrated in his *Parallèle de l'architecture antique avec le moderne* as found in fragments adjacent to the church of S. Maria at Albano.²⁴ The source was followed in almost every particular except that Kent added an attic base to the columns, evidently disliking Fréart's use of Vitruvius to justify this omission (which is

unusual in ancient Roman practice). Fréart's metope *paterae* were also replaced at Holkham with motifs in roundels that include the Coke ostrich crest. The plan of the Holkham Temple is closely similar to that for Dalton, although the latter was to have had a square cella and Pantheon dome with lower ceiling, whereas at Holkham the cella is octagonal and rises full height to a faceted dome with thermal windows, clearly owing its allegiance to Burlington's Chiswick. Indeed, Burlington is said to have praised the Holkham Temple as 'the best executed piece of work he had seen performed in his time'.²⁵

Inside, the Holkham Temple has four niches, intended to house statuary but now painted with modern scenes of the surrounding estate. In his 1773 edition of *The Plans, Elevations, and Sections of Holkham*, Matthew Brettingham Junior recorded that the niches were filled with plaster casts of four sculptures, all with Medici provenances: the Venus, the 'Little Apollo', Ptolemy and a Dancing Faun. Brettingham's section of the Temple shows the two western niches with the Venus de' Medici and the statue (now in the Museo archeologico nazionale in Florence) known to us as the 'Idolino of Pesaro' but sometimes taken in the past to represent Apollo.²⁶ One of the four casts was supplied by Sir John Buckworth in September 1734 at a cost of 12 guineas, and it is possible that a second was in place by the following January, that is well before any of Coke's Grand Tour purchases of sculpture came anywhere near Holkham.²⁷ The presence of casts of famous male and female beauties in the Temple, as also the exquisitely detailed internal doorcase, with Kent's scallop shell surmounting the cartouche (on which the Coke arms has been painted in much more recent times), suggests use of the building for cultural purposes. Kent also supplied an elaborate chimneypiece similar in form to one in Strangers' Wing in the house itself, so that it must have been envisaged that significant amounts of time would be spent in the building. Indeed, the Holkham inventory compiled in 1760, just after Coke's death,

states that the small room on the east side of the Temple was lined in crimson damask and crowded with a large settee and five chairs with gilt frames and crimson damask checked covers.²⁸ The fact that the main octagon room itself only had eight mahogany stools and also a stove in it, however, suggests that the building was also used for briefer respite from walking or seasonal sporting activity.

The Temple was completed in 1734 – the year building began on the house itself at Holkham. Coke's thoughts about the new house had not, however, lain dormant during the previous decade, notwithstanding the financial restraints from which he suffered as a result of the South Sea crisis. The account books for 1725–26 include a payment of 16 guineas under Coke's 'sundry expenses', evidently to Colen Campbell again, while in 1726 a payment of 10 guineas was made to the Norwich architect Matthew Brettingham (Senior) for 'drawing a Plan of a New House'.²⁹ The only documentary evidence we have of Coke's early thinking about the design of Holkham Hall itself comes in the posthumous account of the house given by Brettingham's son, Matthew Brettingham Junior, who stated that Coke had 'once entertained [a thought] of adopting Palladio's plan of a villa, begun though not finished, at Meledo, a place in the Vicentine, for the brothers Trissini'.³⁰ Although the younger Brettingham did not give a date for this idea, it is worth noting that, in 1724, Campbell had produced a design for Goodwood in Sussex that was based on Palladio's Villa Trissino as illustrated in *I quattro libri dell'architettura*, with its central *corps de logis* and quadrant corridor links to a pair of service wings (Fig. 5).³¹ Goodwood was the home of the Duke of Richmond, a friend of Coke's at least since the early 1720s, so it is very likely that the design was known to him. It was, in any case, included in the third volume of *Vitruvius Britannicus* that entered his library in 1725. For Goodwood Campbell had sought to adapt Palladio's plan to eighteenth-century English circumstances by enlarging its rooms and joining the

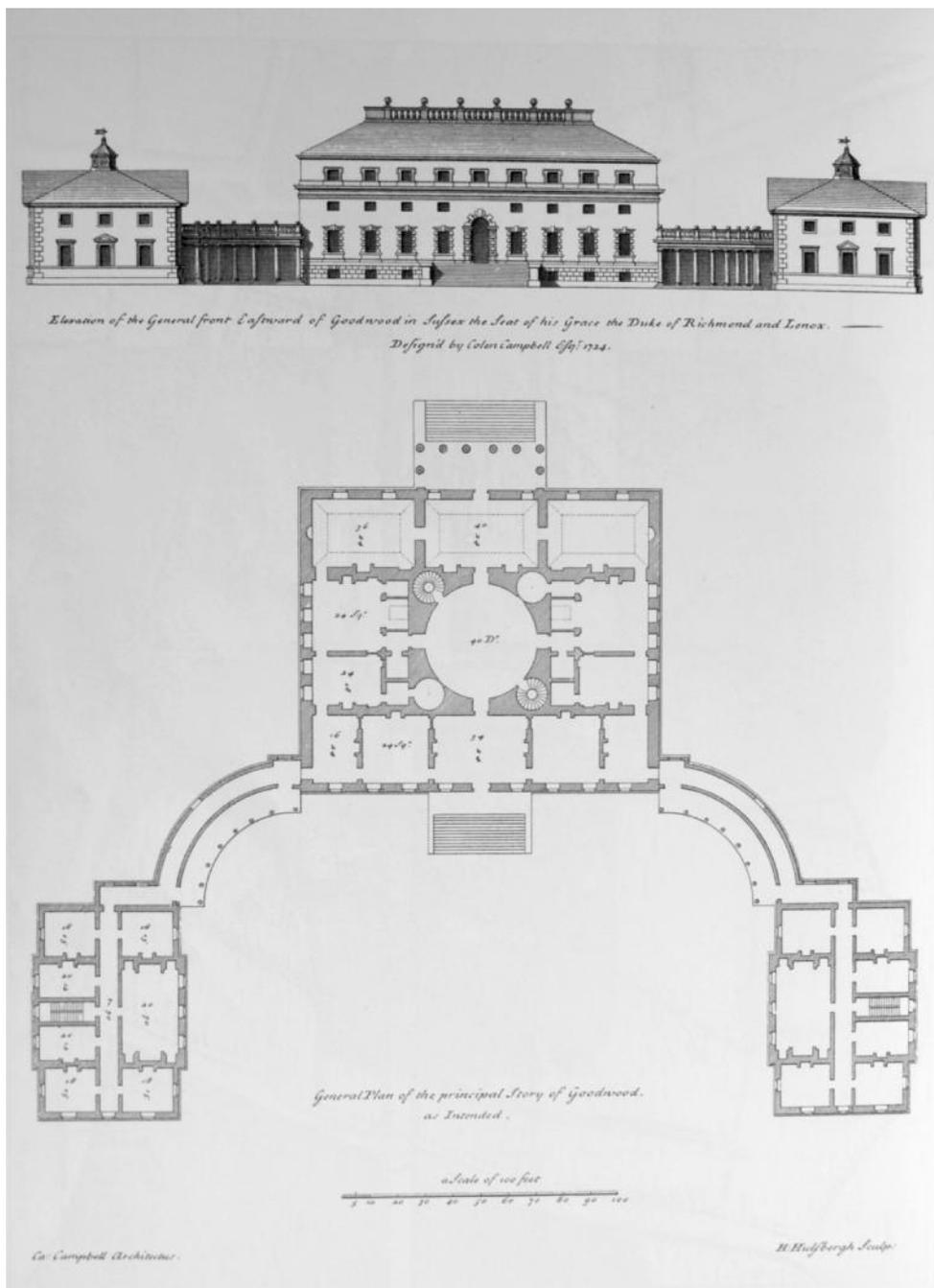


Fig. 5. Colen Campbell: Plan and Elevation of Design for Goodwood, Sussex,
from *Vitruvius Britannicus*, III, 1725, Plate 53.
(Faculty of Architecture and History of Art, University of Cambridge)

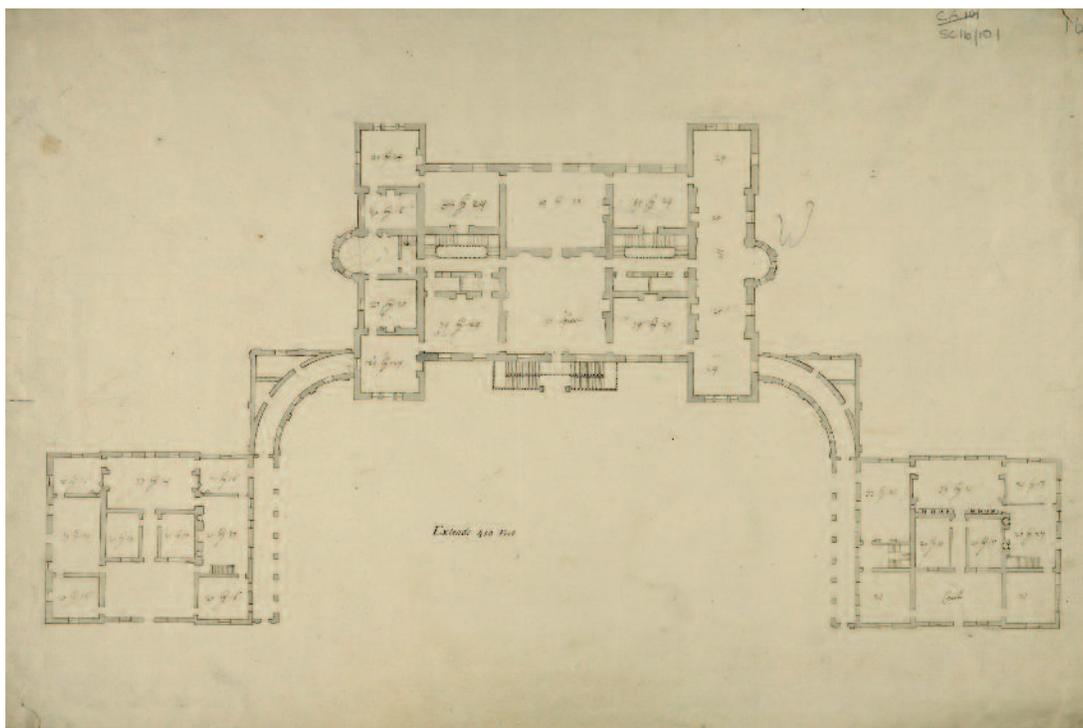


Fig. 6. Unknown hand: plan of a country house with two service wings, included among the Colen Campbell drawings purchased by the RIBA in 1967, ?mid-1720s. (*RIBA Library Drawings & Archives Collections, SC16/101*)

corridors to the corners of the main block itself rather than to an open portico. He also abandoned the Villa Trissino’s distinctive central cupola in favour of a balustraded roof terrace. Nevertheless, Campbell’s proposal for the Duke of Richmond came to nothing, and it is notable that the younger Brettingham recorded that the Villa Trissino idea was laid aside by Coke ‘as probably not answering the situation, nor being large enough to admit of offices adequate to [his] family and fortunes.’³² Perhaps, if Campbell did indeed make a design for Holkham in the mid-1720s, it might be found among the unattributed country house designs in the Campbell collection of drawings that entered the Royal Institute of British Architects in 1967. Indeed, one such drawing there, although not annotated in

Campbell’s hand (nor that of Brettingham) does show a country house based on the Villa Trissino model but combined with the plan of Houghton, as well as with the entrance steps of Wanstead. Unlike Houghton, however, a gallery was proposed for what appears to be the entire west side, with a small central bay borrowed from Blenheim (Fig. 6). This would seem a more plausible candidate for Holkham than that recently suggested by John Harris: the most grandiose of all Campbell’s surviving designs, an urban-scale twenty-five-bay palace with an octastyle portico in the manner of Wanstead.³³

Nothing came of the 1726 ‘Plan of a New House’ and three years later, in the early summer of 1729, Colen Campbell travelled to Norfolk again, presumably for a further consultation with Thomas

Coke about possibilities for building.³⁴ He fell ill, however, and died back in London in September. Campbell's demise coincided with the definitive rise of the influence of Burlington as Coke's guiding architectural star for, in a letter of 16 July 1731, Lord Hervey reported to Frederick, Prince of Wales, that during a visit to the 'park in embryo' at Holkham the previous day, Coke had shown him 'a Burlington house with four pavilions on paper'.³⁵ This tantalising statement presumably refers to a design for Holkham by Lord Burlington himself, although Hervey evidently appreciated that Burlington's name had by then become synonymous with the new Palladian architectural idiom (which he saw as an imposed foreign import). Mention of a 'house with four pavilions' has led to much discussion of Palladio's unbuilt Villa Mocenigo, illustrated in the *Quattro libri*, as the likely model for the 'Burlington house' and, indeed, for Holkham as eventually built. It was, in fact, the younger Brettingham who first discussed the Villa Mocenigo in connection with the history of Holkham in 1773. It should be noted, however, that Brettingham could only say that the generic four-pavilion idea 'seems to have been borrowed' from the Villa Mocenigo, whilst the principal drive of his argument at this point was to suggest that curved corridors leading to pavilions were functionally defective.³⁶ In other respects, indeed, Palladio's design – with the house set around a peristylar central courtyard and the four rectangular *barchesse* given over to stables and other menial service buildings – would appear a very unsuitable model for an eighteenth-century villa on the north Norfolk coast. It is more likely, therefore, that the Burlingtonian idea for Holkham in 1731 was based, as Cinzia Sicca has suggested in an important but much-overlooked observation, on the four drawings by John Webb that Burlington owned, showing the planned addition of four bedchamber pavilions to Inigo Jones's Queen's House at Greenwich.³⁷ In three of these designs, the pavilions were to be linked to the existing building by small

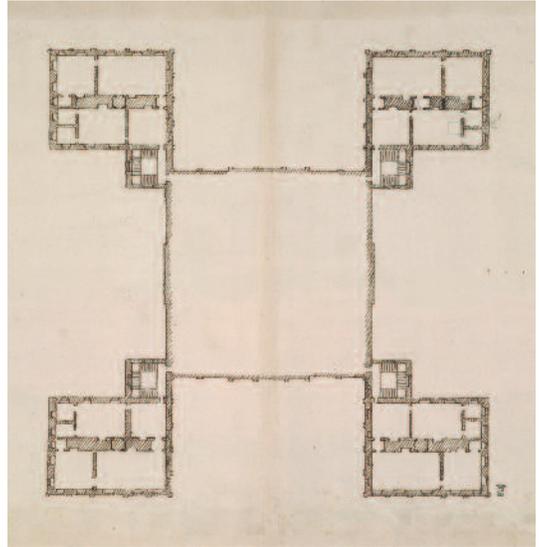


Fig. 7. John Webb: Design for adding Four Pavilions to Queen's House, Greenwich, 1660–70.

(Royal Institute of British Architects Drawings Collection)

square or rectangular buildings on the corners, all containing staircases (Fig. 7). This was very much how the links would soon be configured in Kent's plan of Holkham and, with the exception of the internal staircases, it was how, in 1738, Burlington was to add four pavilions on to Tottenham Park, the central block of which he had designed two decades previously (Fig. 8).³⁸

On 12 December 1731, five months after Lord Hervey had seen the proposed 'Burlington house with four pavilions on paper' at Holkham, the architect-aristocrat Sir Thomas Robinson visited Coke's 'large estate around an exceeding bad old house'.³⁹ Robinson – unlike Lord Hervey an enthusiast for Burlingtonian Palladianism and the designer in 1725 of his own twin-towered house Rokeby – was aware that Coke was 'beginning his improvements', but made no mention of the Burlingtonian design. It would be unwise to read too much into this otherwise significant omission,

however, for Robinson did not indicate whether Coke himself was actually present at Holkham at the time of his visit. Furthermore, there are good grounds for thinking that Coke seriously intended to commence building the Burlingtonian scheme. The usual routine for the family was to be domiciled in London for the first six months of each year and to move to Holkham for the second half of the year. In 1731, however, they travelled to Norfolk in June – and stayed there for an uninterrupted period of nineteen months until February 1733. Moreover, before leaving London Coke had purchased a ‘Measuring instrument’, a ‘Drawing Table, a T and a Level’, clear evidence of his intention to set up an architect’s office at Holkham.⁴⁰ Coke himself had both acquired architectural instruments and received lessons in architectural draughtsmanship from Giacomo Mariari whilst in Rome in 1714, but it seems unlikely that the technical equipment he bought in 1731 was for his own use. Those lessons had taken place sixteen years

previously and will have been predicated on the Roman late Baroque tradition – entirely different in approach and form from the new English Palladian idiom. Moreover, there is no evidence that Coke had practised architectural design in the intervening period (when he had hired Gibbs, Campbell and Brettingham) or that he did so subsequently.⁴¹ The drafting equipment was surely intended for Brettingham to use when at Holkham, as seems to be confirmed by the fact that it was in 1732 that Coke began making regular payments to Brettingham.⁴² The extent to which the ‘Burlington house with four pavilions’ related to the design of Holkham as eventually built must also remain an open one. Even if Burlington did not make that design himself he presumably knew about it, since it was being shown around by Coke in aristocratic circles from 1731. When, however, in November 1733 Coke showed Burlington William Kent’s drawings for Holkham, which certainly related to the house as built, it is clear



Fig. 8. John Buckler: View of Tottenham Park, Wiltshire, c.1824.
(*Wiltshire Museum, Devizes*)

that there were significant elements in both plan and elevations that Burlington was seeing for the first time, so that the ultimate scheme cannot have related closely to any design that he himself had produced.⁴³

It is likely, then, that the design of Holkham Hall as we have it today has its origin in a concatenation of events that occurred in 1733. It was in that year that Coke's financial position was significantly ameliorated when he gained two sinecure posts – as Postmaster-General and as Captain of the Band of Pensioners – each of which guaranteed him additional income of at least £1,000 per annum. This was to add to the grant of the Dungeness Lighthouse of about £1,375 per annum that Coke had secured in 1729 on the death of his father-in-law, the Earl of Thanet.⁴⁴ For his part, Kent emerged definitively in 1733 as an architectural designer in his own right through his role as Master Carpenter at the Office of Works. Having secured the patronage of the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Walpole, it was in 1733 that Kent designed and began construction of the new Treasury Building on Whitehall – and also took over responsibility for designing a new Parliament House at the Palace of Westminster from Burlington, who

fell out with Walpole in March and ceased playing a role in public life.⁴⁵ Burlington's involvement in architectural design decreased after this date, although Coke's admiration for his architectural ideas and achievements remained undiminished, as can be judged from the letters he wrote to Bretteingham from 1733 as well as from the fact that so many of the features at Holkham echo those in Burlington's own works, particularly at Chiswick, Tottenham and – in the case of the Marble Hall – the York Assembly Rooms. As has been seen, however, Coke's letters make it clear that Burlington himself played no great role in the actual design of Holkham as built – and also that Kent, although he continued to keep an apartment at Burlington House, did not from now on consult with his mentor on all architectural matters. Of Coke's central role in generating ideas for his house – such as the conception of the Marble Hall as a 'tribunal of justice' modelled after Palladio's visualisation of the Roman basilica in Daniele Barbaro's translation of Vitruvius – there can be no doubt.⁴⁶ However, it was Kent who made the designs for the principal elevations of Holkham – that for the south front



Fig. 9. Paul Fourdrinier, after William Kent: 'The Seat of the Right Hon.ble Lord Lovell at Holkham in Norfolk', c.1734. (*Provost, Fellows and Scholars of The Queen's College, Oxford*, 52.B.17.Cat.151)

serving as the basis for an engraving by Paul Fourdrinier, which presumably marks the official start of building in 1734 (Fig. 9).⁴⁷ The print cannot have been published without Coke's sanction – or without his approval of the way it clearly names Kent, at the bottom left corner, as the architect of the house.

* * *

Thus, in the sixteen years that elapsed between Thomas Coke's arrival home from his Grand Tour and the breaking of ground for Holkham Hall, the imagined house had been through a number of iterations before Kent gave it the form on which construction began. None of those imagined houses are known to us for certain, but the sequence of architects involved – Gibbs (at Thanet House), Campbell, Burlington, then Kent himself – speaks indicatively of the rapid development of English Palladianism in the 1718 to 1734 period and of the fact that Thomas Coke kept pace with that development. One striking thing to note, however, is Coke's apparent loyalty to Campbell right up to the latter's death, well after he had been discarded by others in the Burlington circle. Perhaps this was a result of Campbell's involvement in designing some of the most palatial country houses of the 1720s, notably Wanstead and the Norfolk neighbour Houghton – houses that were on a grander scale than anything produced by Burlington. At Holkham Coke also followed the developing fashion of English landscape gardening of the same period. The axial layout with its incidental buildings was respondent to what he saw when visiting his many friends and peers elsewhere in the country, although the use of the Obelisk as so pivotal a landscape feature at Holkham was innovative.

English landscape design was to develop significantly in the 1730s – and Holkham was to change with it: in the early 1740s Kent would rework the basin south of the house along the more informal lines characteristic of his later work at, for example,

Rousham (which Coke visited in 1741). The effect of the changes was to produce a more Claudian vision, what has been called 'a piece of Italy in miniature'.⁴⁸ That phase also included more informal planting of trees and the construction of the 'Seat on the Mount', from which Coke could watch the south front of his great house arising. All was swept away when, in the last two decades of the eighteenth century, Coke's great-nephew's gardener, John Sandys, brought the parkland sweeping up to the south front of the house. Then, from 1849 to 1855 W.A. Nesfield laid out the formal terraces that today effectively project the house out on a walled apron above the pastureland. The south portico itself remained aloof, never receiving the steps envisaged for it that had been modelled on the distinctive arrangement of steps at Chiswick (see Fig. 9).

The south portico at Holkham also differs markedly from that at Chiswick, however, in the very plain nature of the Corinthian order deployed, with no architrave or frieze enrichment at all (at Chiswick Burlington had used perhaps the most profusely decorated of all Roman Corinthian orders, that of the Temple of Castor and Pollux in the Forum). The Holkham portico can thus be read as a sign of the increasing taste for severity in architectural form that came to characterise the house as its design developed after 1733. The extensive surface rustication proposed by Kent was restricted just to the basement level (perhaps a consequence of the decision to build in local brick rather than in Bath stone, as initially intended). Moreover, not a single one of the ceilings inside the house received the inset paintings that Kent surely intended for them.⁴⁹ It would be wrong to suppose from this that Kent's design ideas for the house were abandoned; many more of his drawings than those few now surviving are known to have been available at Holkham after his death in 1748.⁵⁰ Even after Coke's death in 1759 his widow continued to work with Kent's designs, and two ceilings, six chimneypieces and one overmantel in the Strangers' Wing are attributable to

him on the basis of Matthew Brettingham the Younger's text and plates. By then, however, major aspects of Holkham, including the Marble Hall, had been significantly revised by Coke himself, working with Matthew Brettingham Senior; and this process of change was continued by Lady Margaret who brought the house to completion in 1765, having replaced Brettingham with James Miller as executant architect. Thus Thomas Coke (and subsequently his wife) can fairly be credited with co-authorship of Holkham as it exists today, having for so long worked to develop the designs for the house produced by the friend Coke had made as a teenager in Rome in 1714, to which he had committed in 1733.

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ENDNOTES

1. Julius Bryant, 'From "Gusto" to "Kentissime": Kent's Designs for Country Houses, Villas, and Lodges', in Susan Weber (ed.), *William Kent: Designing Georgian Britain* (New Haven and London, 2013), pp. 210–19; and Amy Boyington, 'The Countess of Leicester and her Contribution to Holkham Hall', *Georgian Group Journal*, 22 (2014), pp. 53–66.

2. Frank Salmon, "'Our Great Master Kent" and the Design of Holkham Hall: A Reassessment', *Architectural History*, 56 (2013), pp. 63–96.
3. Leo Schmidt, 'Holkham Hall, Norfolk – I', *Country Life*, 167 (24 January 1980), pp. 214–7; and Leo Schmidt, Christian Keller and Polly Feversham (eds.), *Holkham* (Munich, 2005), p. 100.
4. Frank Salmon, 'Thomas Coke e Holkham', in P. Bruschetti *et al* (eds.), *Seduzione Etrusca: Dai segreti di Holkham Hall alle meraviglie del British Museum* (Milan, 2014), pp. 255–75. The essay also took the opportunity to review recent publications on Coke and Holkham, correcting some errors that have crept in.
5. See Mary-Anne Garry, *Wealthy Masters – 'provident and kind': The Household at Holkham 1697–1842* (Dereham, Norfolk, 2012), pp. 17, 30, 36 and 54.
6. J. Harris, 'William Kent: A Life' and 'Garden Buildings', in S. Weber (ed.), *William Kent*, pp. 35 and 401.
7. Garry, *Wealthy Masters*, pp. 64–65; D.P. Mortlock, *Aristocratic Splendour: Money & the World of Thomas Coke, Earl of Leicester* (Stroud, 2007), pp. 66 and 140–41.
8. E. Angelicoussis, *The Holkham Collection of Classical Sculptures* (Mainz am Rhine, 2001), p. 26.
9. See Schmidt *et al*, *Holkham*, pp. 34–35. I am grateful to Andrew Moore for pointing out to me that the Diana must have been sufficiently known for Kent's inclusion of it in his painting to have been effective.
10. Holkham Archives, A/7, p. 89 and A/8, p. 46. See also Leo Schmidt, 'Inventing Holkham', in Schmidt *et al* (eds.), *Holkham*, p. 88. Mortlock, *Aristocratic Splendour*, p. 52, dated this expedition to 1719 (New Style) and reported that a carpenter and bricklayer were of the party, although the account actually lists 'two builders'. Garry, *Wealthy Masters*, pp. 154 and 163, describes Coke having visited Stoke Poges in 1721 and also his house at Minster Lovell, Oxfordshire, in both cases with the architect William Talman. Talman had died in on 22 November 1719. The confusion was doubtless caused by a visit made by Coke, in the company of William Kent, to John Talman in May 1721 (see Mortlock, *Aristocratic Splendour*, p. 52). It appears that Coke never considered rebuilding his manor house at Minster Lovell which, in fact, he was to have pulled down in 1747.

11. Holkham Archives A/8, p. 52, records the ‘earnest’ paid for Smith’s and Campbell’s fares in accounts up to the end of March 1720. Since the ‘earnest’ was a deposit, the journey itself (which might have been either to or from King’s Lynn) could have taken place in April 1720.
12. Charles Warburton James, *Chief Justice Coke, his Family and Descendants at Holkham* (London, 1929), p. 190, stating that Coke was attended by Burlington’s physician during an illness. In addition to resuming his friendship with Burlington, Coke also became a ‘close friend’ of Lady Burlington (see Mortlock, *Aristocratic Splendour*, p. 136).
13. Mortlock, *Aristocratic Splendour*, pp. 106 and p. 53; and Schmidt et al, *Holkham*, pp. 88–89.
14. See Tom Williamson, ‘The Development of Holkham Park’, in Schmidt et al, *Holkham*, fig. 25 on p. 59. Williamson dates this map to 1720, thereby suggesting that the new landscape features superimposed have a very early date of inception after Coke’s return from the Grand Tour. Michael Newton, however, did not mention that Coke had already made plans for the Holkham landscape in his letter of 1721, whilst some of the tenancies indicated and the mention of ‘Lord Lovel’ on the map show that it was certainly still in current use in 1728 (when Coke became Baron Lovell). I am very grateful to Christine Hiskey for drawing this information to my attention. No new house is indicated on the map, although the trees do clearly converge on the site east of Hill Hall where Holkham Hall would eventually be built.
15. In 1728 Coke also sent his head gardener to examine the landscape at Chatsworth (see Williamson, ‘Holkham Park’ in Schmidt et al (eds.), *Holkham*, p. 61).
16. See Howard Colvin, ‘The Townsends of Oxford: A Firm of Master-Masons and its Accounts’, *Georgian Group Journal*, 10 (2000), p. 58, n. 33. Kent’s design for the obelisk at Shotover is Chatsworth Volume 26A, fol. 59v.
17. See Schmidt et al, *Holkham*, fig. 68 on p. 111 for the 1744 sketch and description of the emergent Holkham made by Friedrich Carl von Hardenberg, Hanoverian court director of buildings and gardens.
18. See J. Dixon Hunt, *William Kent: Landscape Garden Designer – An Assessment and Catalogue of his Designs* (London, 1987), p. 139, cat. 56, and Salmon, ‘Thomas Coke e Holkham’, in Bruschetti et al (eds), *Seduzione Etrusca*, p. 258.
19. For Kent’s elevation of the Wrest Obelisk, in the Bedfordshire Archives, see Catherine Arbuthnott et al, ‘Chronology’ in Weber (ed.), *William Kent*, fig. 4 on p. 19.
20. For early eighteenth-century obelisks in general see R. Hewlings, ‘Ripon’s Forum Populi’, *Architectural History*, 24 (1981), pp. 39–52.
21. For Coke and Freemasonry see Schmidt et al, *Holkham*, pp. 36–37 and 100–03. For a countering discussion of the implausibility that Coke sought to create a Masonic programme at Holkham see Salmon, ‘“Our Great Master Kent”’, pp. 83–86.
22. See W.O. Hassall, ‘Ilexes at Holkham’, *Garden History*, VI/1 (1978), pp. 58–60.
23. For an illustration of the Dalton temple design see Harris, ‘Garden Buildings’, in Weber (ed.), *William Kent*, fig. 15.3 on p. 395.
24. Coke was later to take the order of the Temple of Fortuna Virilis [Portunus] for use in the Marble Hall at Holkham from Fréart’s *Parallèle*: see Leo Schmidt, *Thomas Coke, 1st Earl of Leicester: An Eighteenth-Century Amateur Architect* (1980), fig. 18 for an illustration of this page showing Coke’s inscription.
25. W.O. Hassall, ‘The Temple at Holkham’, *Country Life* (16 May, 1968), p. 1310.
26. Matthew Brettingham [Junior], *The Plans, Elevations, and Sections, of Holkham in Norfolk*, 2nd edn., (London, 1773). The plate is unnumbered; in some copies it follows plate 53.
27. 7 September 1734: ‘To Sir John Buckworth for a statue £12.12.0’; and 3 January 1734/5: ‘To Mr Oliver for mending and cleaning ye statues £0.8.8’. I am grateful to Christine Hiskey for supplying these references from the Temple accounts.
28. T. Murdoch (ed.), *Noble Households: Eighteenth-Century Inventories of Great English Houses – A Tribute to John Cornforth* (Cambridge, 2006), p. 225.
29. Holkham Archives, A/7, p. 309 and A/33, p. 53 respectively. Whilst the payment to Brettingham certainly pertained to Norfolk it is not possible to say whether that to Campbell related to Holkham or to London. Leo Schmidt has speculated (see *Holkham*, pp. 89 and 92), that the British Library plans (‘Holkham I’) were drawn by Brettingham in 1726 on the basis of a ‘now lost’ design by Campbell of 1725–26. However, the physical Brettingham drawings were made much later – and, on stylistic grounds, it can be argued that Campbell could not

- possibly have designed the building shown by the British Library drawings at any time (see Salmon, “‘Our Great Master Kent’”, p. 71.
30. Brettingham, *Plans* (1773), p. viii.
 31. Andrea Palladio, *I quattro libri dell'architettura* (Venice, 1570), Book II, p. 60.
 32. Brettingham, *Plans* (1773), p. viii.
 33. See Julius Bryant, ‘From “Gusto” to “Kentissime”’, in Weber (ed), *William Kent* p. 212, reporting Harris’s verbal communication. For this scheme see John Harris, *Catalogue of the Drawings Collection of the Royal Institute of British Architects: Colen Campbell* (Farnborough, 1973), catalogue number [42] on p. 17 (and Figs. 139 and 140, the latter unfortunately lost since at least 1993). It is plausibly speculated there that a design of such scale might be related to William Benson’s aspirations to rebuilding the House of Lords in 1718 rather than to a country house. Against the possibility that Fig. 6 here shows a Campbell design for Holkham is Brettingham’s statement that the scheme – which extends to a total width of 410 feet – was not ‘large enough’ for the requisite ‘offices’, since both wings in Fig. 6 are service buildings. However, significant space was lost in the footprint of both for open courts.
 34. Garry, *Wealthy Masters*, p. 156.
 35. Giles Strangways, Earl of Ilchester, *Lord Hervey and his Friends* (London, 1950), p. 73.
 36. Brettingham, *Plans* (1773), pp. vii–viii.
 37. Cinzia Sicca, ‘Holkham Hall’, in Boris Ford (ed.), *The Cambridge Guide to the Arts in Britain: Volume 5 – The Augustan Age* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 153. See also Bryant, ‘From “Gusto” to “Kentissime”’, in Weber (ed), *William Kent*, p. 213.
 38. There has been confusion in the recent scholarly literature about the date of the addition of the wings at Tottenham. One elevation for these at Chatsworth, however, is actually signed and dated 1738 by Burlington (Boy. [18]. 13, see John Harris, ‘The Building Works of Lord Viscount Bruce’, *Lord Burlington and his Circle: Papers Given at a Georgian Group Symposium at the Victoria and Albert Museum on the 22nd May 1982*, p. 45, Fig. 15). I am grateful to Charles Noble at Chatsworth for having confirmed this information.
 39. See R.E.G. Kirk (ed.), *The Manuscripts of the Earl of Carlisle Preserved at Castle Howard* (Historical Manuscripts Commission: London, 1897), p. 86.
 40. Garry, *Wealthy Masters*, p. 111. Garry notes that Coke’s June 1731 journey from London to Holkham took him via Petersham. Burlington’s design for a house at Petersham for the first Earl of Harrington, however, can only postdate Harrington’s arrival there in 1732.
 41. A portrait print of Coke that appears to show him as an ‘architect-earl’ with a plan, dividers in his hand and the south front of Holkham behind, was actually produced posthumously (see Salmon, “‘Our Great Master Kent’”, pp. 63 and 86–87).
 42. Garry, *Wealthy Masters*, pp. 111 and 162.
 43. Christine Hiskey, ‘The Building of Holkham Hall: Newly Discovered Letters’, *Architectural History*, 40 (1997), pp. 146–47.
 44. See Mortlock, *Aristocratic Splendour*, pp. 213–14.
 45. See Frank Salmon, ‘Public Commissions’, in Weber (ed.), *William Kent*, pp. 314–63.
 46. Brettingham, *Plans* (1773), p. vi.
 47. See Salmon, “‘Our Great Master Kent’”, pp. 75–76, for comparison of the Holkham print with an almost identically captioned print issued in 1734 to mark the inception of Kent’s Treasury Building. The Fourdrinier print of Holkham standardizes the portico steps to the Chiswick model, Kent’s drawing (see Schmidt et al, *Holkham*, p. 96, or Bryant, in Weber (ed), *William Kent*, ‘From “Gusto” to “Kentissime”’, fig. 8.37 on p. 214) having offered an elliptical alternative on the west side. Other variants include the placement of three statues on the pediment and a reduction in the number of tiny attic windows.
 48. Williamson, ‘Holkham Park’, in Schmidt et al (eds.), *Holkham*, p. 63. According to Williamson, the Holkham accounts suggest that the renewed phase of landscaping had begun in 1737.
 49. Kent’s drawing of 1737 for the Holkham Library (for the best reproduction see Schmidt et al, *Holkham*, p. 179) shows the lunettes and ceiling filled with figurative and grotesque decoration, much like that executed at Houghton, and he is known to have worked on a painting for one of the bedchamber ceilings in the Family Wing (see Hiskey, p. 154).
 50. Holkham Archives, A/37, p. 240, is an account recording Coke’s purchase from Matthew Brettingham Senior of ‘Kents drawings for Holkham’ at a price that suggests a substantial corpus.