



THE
GEORGIAN
GROUP

Charles Hind, 'A Bookplate Designed by
William Kent', *The Georgian Group
Report & Journal*, 1989, pp. 64-65

A BOOKPLATE DESIGNED BY WILLIAM KENT

Charles Hind

William Kent has long been established as one of our most versatile eighteenth century architects and designers, equally at home designing buildings, gardens or furniture, painting ceilings and history pictures, or illustrating books. Despite John Harris's recent discovery of a hitherto unknown group of William Kent's drawings for Esher Place,¹ it might have been thought that there was little still to find which might shed further light on Kent's circle of patrons and their commissions. However, I can add one more name to the list of Kent's patrons — Arthur Onslow, Speaker of the House of Commons. The commission might be regarded as one of Kent's most minor recorded to date and it was the design of Mr Speaker Onslow's bookplate.

Arthur Onslow was born in 1691, and was educated at Winchester and Wadham College, Oxford, though he took no degree. He was called to the Bar at the Middle Temple in 1713, but his shyness and reserve prevented him from becoming a successful barrister. Instead he became secretary to his uncle Sir Richard Onslow, Chancellor of the Exchequer 1715–16, and Treasurer to the Post Office until he resigned on entering Parliament for Guildford as a Whig in 1720. He quickly made his mark, and supported Sir Robert Walpole when his fall appeared imminent following the death of George I in 1727. Onslow's reward the following year was to be made Speaker of the House of Commons, when Walpole defeated his enemies and reestablished his position, and the Speaker retained his post until his retirement in 1761. Although he owed his preferment to Walpole, his subsequent relations with the Prime Minister were not always happy, and he is generally remembered for a sturdy though sometimes pompous independence and is considered the first career Speaker. His



contemporary, Lord Hervey, wrote of him: 'No man courted popularity more, and to no man popularity was ever more coy. He cajoled both parties and obliged neither; he disobliged his patron [Walpole] by seeming to favour his opponents, and gained no credit from them because it was only seeming'.² He died in 1768.

His bookplate bears his arms and motto, set within a cartouche, with the Commons mace and the Speaker's Purse. Until its discovery Arthur Onslow was not recorded as employing William Kent in any capacity. He never lived at Clandon Park, the great house in Surrey built by Giacomo Leoni for his cousin Thomas, 2nd Baron Onslow, although the estate was inherited in 1776 by his son George, 4th Baron Onslow and 1st Earl of Onslow. Instead he lived at Imber Court, near Thames Ditton, a property inherited by his wife Anne Bridges from her uncle. An enlargement to the house was proposed (and possibly never executed) by the amateur architect Sir Thomas Robinson of Rokeby, Yorkshire. Onslow's only Yorkshire connection was through his mother, for his family had been based in Surrey for more than a century, and Robinson was presumably a political or social connection made in London. The fact that Kent too was a Yorkshireman is probably irrelevant, and the most likely connections between him and the Speaker are Sir Robert Walpole and Queen Caroline. As the occasional ally of Walpole and Chancellor to the Queen between 1727 and 1737, Onslow was regularly in touch with two of Kent's most elevated patrons, apart from Lord Burlington. Furthermore, of the several houses in Surrey where Kent worked, Esher Place, home of Hon. Henry Pelham, a close ally of Walpole, was less than two miles from Imber; Claremont and Oatlands were not much further, and Hampton Court on the other side of the Thames in Middlesex was less than three miles off.³

It is not possible to establish the date at which the bookplate was designed. As it includes the mace of the House of Commons and the Speaker's Purse, it evidently dates from after Onslow's preferment as Speaker in 1728. If we assume that the connection with Kent lies through Walpole and Queen Caroline, it might be relevant that by 1731 it was known that Walpole 'was not well with the Speaker, and consequently the Speaker [is] not well at court'.⁴ Quite possibly, Onslow marked his appointment with a new bookplate, for no earlier version is recorded,⁵ and Kent was already known as an occasional book illustrator.⁶ No assistance is provided by the identification of the obscure but prolific engraver Benjamin Cole, who is recorded as working between the 1720s and 1750s. So far as I am aware, this is the only bookplate that William Kent designed and as such is worthy of a footnote in the continuing research into his life and work.

NOTES

1. J. Harris, 'William Kent and Esher Place', in *The Fashioning and Functioning of the British Country House*, ed. by G. Jackson-Stops, etc., Washington, 1989. pp.13–26.
2. Cited by Romney Sedgwick in Onslow's entry in *The History of Parliament. The House of Commons 1715–1754*, Vol. II, 1970, p. 309 as taken from Lord Hervey's *Memoirs of the Court of King George II*, 1931.
3. At Esher Kent made large additions to Bishop Waynefflete's Tower and laid out the grounds for Pelham in the early 1730s. At Claremont and Oatlands Kent designed garden buildings for the Duke of Newcastle before 1738 and the Earl of Lincoln circa 1745 respectively. The work at Hampton Court Palace in 1732 included the gothic gateway in Clock Court and adjacent apartments.
4. Unattributed but quoted by Romney Sedgwick in Onslow's entry in *The History of Parliament, op. cit. supra*.
5. His library was transferred to Clandon Park when his son inherited the house in 1776, but it was sold at Sotheby's by the 4th Earl Onslow in March 1885. The bookplate which prompted this article was pasted into a copy of *The Book of Common Prayer*, 1734, now in the British Library (press mark 468.c.14).
6. He had illustrated John Gay's *Poems on Several Occasions* in 1720 and James Thomson's *The Seasons* in 1730.