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‘A TEDIOUS BUSINESS’: ROBERT ADAM AND JOSEPH ROSE, PLASTERWORK AND PAY DISPUTES

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Pay disputes can reveal much about the collaborative dynamics of a building project. This article examines a case between Robert Adam and Joseph Rose & Co., the plaster firm he employed extensively.¹ Their disagreement concerned an aspect of Rose’s work at Nostell Priory in West Yorkshire. This major plasterwork commission was undertaken between 1766 and 1777 for Adam’s patron Sir Rowland Winn, fifth Baronet. Archived correspondence between Robert Adam and Joseph Rose testifies to a fraught moment in their long-standing collaboration.² In broader terms, it illustrates how financial negotiations formed a key feature of the Adam office’s subcontracting practices.³ By tracing Adam’s intervention in Rose’s remuneration, the mechanics of this prolific partnership are further understood.

The Adam office’s operational role in supervised projects is a rich area of study.⁴ The scarcity of surviving administrative records from the Adam brothers’ architectural practice, however, presents distinct research challenges. This partly explains why Adam’s well-documented activities as a designer have tended to eclipse his supervisory duties. This belies the fact that budgeting, account-keeping and payment were labour-intensive aspects of building work for architects and craftspeople alike. They created a substantial workload for the Adam office, which deserves fuller acknowledgement. Adam was a facilitator as well as a creator; he assisted with the logistical aspects of craft production, and

often administered payment to craftspeople on behalf of clients. Fortunately, much of the building documentation concerning Adam’s work at Nostell survives. It forms a vital archival resource, now held by the West Yorkshire Archive Service in Wakefield. Correspondence, memoranda, estimates, accounts and bills help flesh out Adam’s role. They establish the scope of his activity, which extended far beyond the provision of designs. As Rose’s experience at Nostell aptly illustrates, certain events compelled Adam to become more heavily involved in matters of pay. Rose’s eventual settlement points to Adam’s role as an intermediary, working collaboratively to ease tensions between craftsman and client. Equally apparent, however, are the precautions Adam took to protect his own family practice from accusations of malpractice.

Building work was underpinned by economic processes: estimating, contracting, mensuration, and payment. As an architect and surveyor with an important supervisory remit, Adam exerted influence across these areas. This was especially true of payment; Adam’s intervention at critical moments might alter or accelerate his craftsmen’s remuneration. The physical completion of the works did not mark the end of interaction between the Adam office, its clients, and subcontracted craftsmen. Rather, it was often just the beginning of a process prolonged by debt obligations and staggered instalments. This created financial interdependency, with the attendant risk of being left out of pocket.

As such, building sites were fertile terrain for pay disputes, particularly over contested standards of workmanship. The settlement of Rose's plasterwork bill for Nostell is a distillation of these themes. It forms an instructive example of Adam's conflicted intervention in the financial affairs of a much-valued craft firm.

Adam's role in the economic management of his commissions was by no means exceptional. Contemporary architectural publications cited financial acumen among the list of desirable attributes for architects. This diminished the likelihood of a worst-case scenario – building work aborted midway, and all parties mired in debt. Isaac Ware, William Chambers, and John Soane expanded on these issues in their respective treatises, conflating trust and authority, building expertise and financial probity. Ware's *A Complete Body of Architecture*, first published in 1756, advocated 'sufficient materials, and sufficient money: the skill of the architect is to be employed in making the most of the former with the least expence [*sic*] of the latter.'⁵ Chambers, too, aligned architectural competence with deft economising. An architect was one:

'in whose honour and judgment the employer confides and to whom the employed look up for protection and justice as mediator and judge between them, on subjects generally important [...] attentive to justify the confidence reposed in him, he must neither inadvertently, nor otherwise, bring on unexpected ruinous expenses [...].'⁶

Architects, he argued, should enter the market for building materials vigilantly, recognising the 'caution with which dealers and tradesmen of almost all denominations, conceal the secrets of their trade; and the real profits they have thereon'.⁷ As a 'very competent judge of every economical particular', they became immune to these deceptions.⁸ Soane's much-cited guidance to architects in *Plans, Elevations, and Sections of Buildings*, published in 1788, also embraced financial responsibility:

'[the architect] is the intermediate agent between the employer, whose honour and interest he is to study, and the mechanic, whose rights he is to defend. His position implies great trust; he is responsible for the mistakes, negligences [*sic*], and ignorance of those he employs; and above all, he is to take care that the workmen's bills do not exceed his own estimates.'⁹

Architects were expected to safeguard the financial interests of clients and craftspeople, without compromising their own integrity. Adam's correspondence with his patron at Nostell reveals him navigating these complex demands.

ROBERT ADAM AND JOSEPH ROSE AT NOSTELL PRIORY

Nostell Priory, a country house near Wakefield, has long attracted critical attention (Fig. 1). This owes much to the successive contributions of two prominent Georgian architects, James Paine and Robert Adam.¹⁰ From the 1730s, Paine oversaw a major building phase in the Neo-Palladian manner for Sir Rowland Winn, fourth Baronet. On his death in 1765, the house was inherited by his son, Sir Rowland Winn, fifth Baronet. By August 1766, Paine had been dismissed and Adam appointed for a Neoclassical remodelling of the interiors. Adam's lengthy engagement at Nostell, from 1766 into the early 1780s, lends this commission to economic analysis. It created employment for local and London-based craftspeople over two decades, the payment of which produced a substantial paper trail. Throughout this period, Robert and James Adam, assisted by their London office clerk John Austin, sustained regular correspondence with individuals stationed at Nostell to oversee the works. They included Benjamin Ware, the clerk of works, and Cosmo Wallace, an appointed measurer. Collectively, this team performed a multitude of tasks with a strong practical bearing on the cost and progress of work.

The costlier features of Adam's interiors were



Fig. 1. The east-facing entrance front of Nostell Priory. (© National Trust Images/John Millar)

typically decorative painting and plasterwork. The latter was monopolised by Joseph Rose & Co., which operated from premises on Queen Anne Street East in London. This family-run firm was a continual presence at Nostell for over a decade, executing interior and exterior plasterwork. Much of their work can still be viewed *in situ* today, particular highlights including the Top Hall, Library, and Saloon (Fig. 2). Rose’s account book survives among the Nostell Papers, detailing work completed ‘Under the Direction of Mess^{rs} Robert and James Adam Architects’.¹¹ Running to an impressive 49 pages, it records Rose’s vast undertaking in microscopic detail. Information on the firm’s working methods, including the size of the on-site team and the division of responsibilities between designated roles, can also be extrapolated. These aspects have been discussed elsewhere.¹² Rather than expand on the account’s contents here, its subsequent settlement is the key focus.

The Herculean task of measuring Rose’s plasterwork fell to Cosmo Wallace.¹³ In one documented visit to Nostell between 3 August and 9 September 1776, Wallace spent 37 days measuring plasterwork, carving, and brickwork. Sir Rowland was billed a total of £19 8s 6d for his expertise, and a further £4 13s for ‘M^r Wallace’s Coach hire & Expences [*sic*] to Nostell’.¹⁴ At 10s 6d per day, Wallace was remunerated far more generously than the clerk of works at Nostell, who received a weekly wage of 18s.¹⁵ During his visit, Wallace noted inconsistent standards of workmanship. His observations are recorded, albeit briefly, in a memorandum compiled for Adam’s benefit: ‘M^r Wallace say he observes the works is not Eaqually [*sic*] well Done’.¹⁶ Adam apparently held Wallace in high esteem, assuring Sir Rowland that Rose’s account had been examined ‘with the utmost Strictness and attention’.¹⁷

Despite his praise of Wallace, elsewhere Adam

Fig. 2. Detail of the Saloon ceiling at Nostell Priory, with plasterwork undertaken by Joseph Rose & Co. (© *National Trust Images/Chris Lacey*)



was scathing about the salary expectations of measurers and accountants: ‘The wages of these sort of people have increased prodigiously within these few years, & any of them that know measuring & Bookeeping [*sic*] [...] dont ask less than a hundred a year to go at any distance from London though very few of them deserve the half of it’.¹⁸

This jaded assessment followed Adam’s abortive attempt to poach a bookkeeper from another employer. After tentatively agreeing, the individual later rejected Adam’s employment offer as a point of honour, unwilling to leave his current master ‘without his Consent’.¹⁹ If skilled measurers were as scarce as Adam maintained, he had clear

incentives to retain Wallace’s services over successive commissions. This appears to have been the case, as Wallace’s name appears frequently in Adam’s account ledgers with Drummonds bank. Between 1767 and 1778 he received over twenty separate payments, ranging from around £5 15s to two sums totalling £526 over a week in 1769.²⁰ While Adam is widely known for working repeatedly with the same trusted craftsmen, the fact that he extended this approach to measurers and clerks of works also deserves mention. Adam evidently valued the practical benefits of this long-term collaboration, which promised ease of communication, familiarity with Wallace’s working methods, and confidence in his aptitude for the task.

Adam’s complaint to Sir Rowland over the dearth of competent measurers highlights the specialised nature of their work. While measuring could be performed by a number of individuals, it was also a distinct occupation in its own right. It required sound mathematical skills in order to tailor suitable formulae to specific craft sectors. Throughout the eighteenth century, a flourishing print culture responded to this demand. As key reference works, mensuration manuals often ran into multiple editions. Their readership might include architects, surveyors, builders, craftspeople and the clerk of works. Isaac Keay’s *The Practical Measurer* was reprinted throughout the century after the initial 1704 edition. It was soon outstripped by Keay’s competitor Edward Hoppus, whose *Practical measuring made easy* reached its twelfth edition by 1790. Each author staked a claim for his work as a major improvement on the existing literature, resulting in what Eileen Harris has termed a ‘war of tables’.²¹ Skilled measurers such as Cosmo Wallace remain under-explored figures in Adam scholarship, overshadowed by the high-profile activities of their employer. Such ‘invisible’ processes as measuring are easily overlooked, because they delivered intangible results alongside the concrete output of Adam’s craftsmen. Nonetheless, measurers served

an important function by incentivising high-quality workmanship. As Rose discovered to his cost at Nostell, significant sums were deducted from his bill when standards were perceived to fall short.

Ostensibly, measurers occupied a position of neutrality. They harnessed their ‘unbiased’ mathematical expertise to apportion costs. In an ideal scenario, they produced calculations to which the architect, patron, and craftspeople were happy to submit. In practice, however, it was often at this stage when tensions surfaced. Calculations were then unpicked, and the criteria for assessing workmanship brought under scrutiny. Measuring processes raised fundamental questions around expertise; who was best placed to judge another’s work? This debate was particularly pronounced in the context of Adam’s interiors, hallmarked by intricate ornamentation in wood, plaster, paint, and stone (Figs. 3 and 4). Adam’s decorative schemes were manifestly labour-intensive. They required time and skill to execute – and a commensurate effort to measure. In this context, basic formulae lifted from trade manuals might seem a blunt tool. At Nostell, this placed additional pressures on Adam and Wallace. As Adam’s correspondence attests, they needed nuanced criteria to process Rose’s account. The elusive value of his plasterwork created ambiguities further down the line, once his payment became a contested matter.

ROSE’S PLASTERWORK ACCOUNT FOR NOSTELL PRIORY

The penultimate and final pages of Rose’s Nostell account book are particularly instructive in light of the dispute that ensued. Before Adam and Wallace imposed a deduction, the sum total of Rose’s bill stood at £1,822 3s. This was a substantially larger sum than he had charged for several earlier commissions. For example, he billed £1,107 16s 8½d for Kedleston Hall in Derbyshire, and £1,139 18s 0d for Shardeloes



Fig. 3. The Top Hall at Nostell Priory. (© *National Trust Images/Paul Barker*)



Fig. 4. Detail of Joseph Rose & Co.'s plaster ceiling in the Top Hall.
(© *National Trust Images/Paul Barker*)

in Buckinghamshire.²² However, Nostell was not his largest undertaking, even in Yorkshire; his plasterwork at Harewood House, executed 1766–70, totalled £2,829 17s od.²³ This account was also examined by Adam, presumably a similarly painstaking task. Rose’s account book for Nostell lists the eighteen separate instalments that formed part of his payment over the period 1766–77. They were administered by five individuals, using a combination of cash and bills.²⁴ They amounted to £1,013 12s 6d, leaving an outstanding balance of £808 10s 6d.²⁵

Once the plasterwork at Nostell had been measured exhaustively by Wallace in August 1776, he and Adam took the decision to make a deduction. This was due to deteriorating plasterwork on the facades of the ‘Riding house, Green House, Banqueting Room, East & West Wings &c’, which Adam stipulated needed to be redone.²⁶ These areas formed the south range of the grand quadrangular

stables, Adam’s extension to the north and east ranges, built c.1763 under the fourth Baronet to Paine’s designs.²⁷ Adam’s design for the south range consisted of a five-bay riding house in the centre, the three central bays forming a bowed loggia of arches (Fig. 5). It was flanked by a garden house on the left and a greenhouse on the right, both of which terminated in pavilions with Venetian windows and pyramidal roofs. Rose’s plasterwork for the south range amounted to £233 3s 4½d, and is detailed comprehensively on pages 34–36 of his account.²⁸ Adam and Wallace decided to halve Rose’s bill for this work, deducting £116 11s 8¾d from his remaining balance. This is entered into the account book as follows: ‘To be allowed by M^r Rose One half of the Amount of outside Stucco on Riding House &c which gave way.’²⁹ Rose then received his nineteenth instalment in August 1777, a modest sum of £12 12s, leaving a balance of £679 6s 9¼d.³⁰



Fig. 5. The south range of the stables at Nostell Priory, built to Robert Adam’s designs.
(© National Trust Images/James Dobson)

Fig. 6. The final page of Joseph Rose's account book, signed by the Adam brothers.
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Whereas Wallace measured Rose's plasterwork *in situ* in August 1776, a year elapsed before his calculations were finally processed and signed off by the Adam office. The final page of Rose's account book, dated 13 August 1777, bears the joint signature of Robert and James Adam. It includes the following reassurance, intended for Sir Rowland (Fig. 6):

'The Preceding Articles of this Bill have been carefully examined by us & the prices in general settled on as reasonable terms, as any Work done by M^r Rose in other Houses in Yorkshire executed & Settled under our direction. We are of opinion [*sic*] that the Articles of Work done at the Fronts of the Riding House, Green House &c which have given way & must be done anew [...] That only one half of Said Sum Viz^t £116.11.8¼ Should be paid by Sir Rowland Winn to M^r Rose [...].'³¹

The 'other Houses in Yorkshire' likely refer to Rose's neighbouring commissions at Harewood House and Newby Hall. Adam appealed to Sir Rowland's

personal frame of reference – notable houses in the region – to assure him of his reasonable prices.

Adam's accompanying correspondence provides further context for the settlement of Rose's bill. His letter to Sir Rowland dated 5 September 1777 is particularly instructive:

'M^r Wallace has at last finished all M^r Roses Accounts, it has been a tedious business, But I flatter myself that every part of it has been gone through with the utmost Strictness and attention, I gave my best aid where he was at a loss about any thing in the different parts of it, & we have put such prices as are rather under than above the ordinary allowance in similar cases, M^r Rose left it altogether to be settled by us nor did he ever see the bill till it was in the State it now is [...].'³²

Alongside his written endorsement of Rose's account, quoted earlier, Adam's letter combines the watchwords of the diligent architect: strictness, attentiveness, and fair pricing. These principles were probably instilled in him from a formative phase

in his architectural career. Prior to his Grand Tour during 1754–58, Robert assisted with the family practice in Scotland, receiving training from his elder brother John. Alistair Rowan has described John’s ‘extraordinary competence’ as both a builder and architect.³³ He undertook careful inspections of building work and provided clients with detailed written commentaries, undoubtedly informing Robert’s subsequent approach. Reporting candidly on the ‘tedious business’ of Rose’s Nostell account, which presented distinct challenges due to its length and density, Robert stressed the time and energy he had invested. Measuring, he implied, was an art as much as an exact science; even Wallace, despite his considerable expertise, needed an architect’s insights for certain items. While they likely had access to a basic pricing framework, and perhaps had Rose’s original estimate to hand, these remained finely tuned judgments.

Adam’s natural propensity for self-promotion filters through his correspondence with Sir Rowland. Having endured the ‘tedium’ of Rose’s account, he did not pass up this prime opportunity to apprise Sir Rowland of his efforts. Adam also insisted they erred in his patron’s favour, underpricing items when in doubt. Significantly, his correspondence reveals that Rose did not gain access to these calculations until the matter had been settled between Adam and Wallace. While this was in accordance with a prior agreement, Rose possibly regretted this course of action when he was finally shown the bill by Wallace. He resented the deduction for faulty plasterwork, and wrote to Adam defending his actions. Before responding to Rose on this delicate matter, Adam first conferred with his patron. He explained that ‘we thought it necessary that you should have the Bill to look over & examine before we said any thing more on the subject to him.’³⁴ Adam duly enclosed Rose’s letter of complaint in his own correspondence to Sir Rowland, cautioning ‘he seems displeased with the deduction.’³⁵

In his letter to Adam dated 20 August 1777, Rose claimed to be ‘much surprized to see so large a deduction made from the outside work’.³⁶ Absolving his team of responsibility, he maintained that critical instructions issued by his brother, Jonathan Rose, had been ignored:

‘I apprehend you have not been informed that the usual & necessary preparations were not made for receiving the stucco; I mean the covering of the cornices & other projections with lead; the securing the joints of the coping in the Parapet walls &c; which has undoubtedly been a principal excuse of its failure. My brother told me when I was at Nostel [*sic*], that he had repeatedly set forth the necessity of these preparations, but in vain. Had this not been the case, I verily think [...] that £75:8:6 would have been a very sufficient deduction.’³⁷

Rose cited travel and delivery costs as a fair justification for a revised settlement. He suggested that Sir Rowland had in fact been undercharged, because his account excluded these additional travel-related expenses. Rose presented this argument to Adam as follows:

‘I also beg leave to mention another circumstance which may possibly have escaped your attention, such that I have not made the customary charge for the mens travelling *time* to & from Nostel [*sic*] during the course of eleven years which that work has been in hand, nor any charge made for the carriage of their boxes; nor even the Packing cases for the Medallions & Models sent from London, nor Portorage for any thing.’³⁸

The sum total of these miscellaneous expenses, which had accumulated over an eleven-year period, was potentially vast. It appears that Rose, like other craftspeople, was at liberty to bill for these items at his discretion. With hindsight, he now regretted his former decision not to do so.

Rose was not alone in attempting to leverage his omission of delivery costs towards a more generous overall settlement. Certain parallels can be drawn with Antonio Zucchi, the Venetian artist who

collaborated with the Adam brothers on numerous occasions. At Nostell, Zucchi's contribution ranged in scale from four large paintings for the Saloon to smaller landscapes and architectural *capricci*, ceiling lunettes and medallions (Fig. 7). His letters to Sir Rowland have been discussed in depth in an

article by Frances Sands, so are only briefly touched upon here.³⁹ Zucchi faced a similar dilemma to Rose, fearing his patron might balk at his hefty upcoming payment. When preparing his bill for Sir Rowland, Zucchi, like Rose, opted to exclude delivery costs. His circumstances, however, differed



Fig. 7. Antonio Zucchi's decorative painting on the Tapestry Room ceiling at Nostell Priory.
(© National Trust Images/Andreas von Einsiedel)

from the more urgent financial situation facing Rose. Zucchi was in a position to correspond directly with Sir Rowland on the subject of payment, and could therefore lay the diplomatic groundwork. Rose exchanged limited correspondence with his patron, but on matters of pay he was obliged to route his correspondence via Adam. Adam was then at liberty to qualify and contextualise Rose’s requests in his own letters to Nostell.

Writing to Sir Rowland on 16 August 1776 regarding his upcoming bill, Zucchi drew attention to his singularly low prices. As he was careful to remind Sir Rowland, they had been pre-authorised by the Adam brothers.⁴⁰ In a further gesture of goodwill, Zucchi noted his decision to waive travel-related costs:

‘I have set the nearest prices, such that I never have, nor could I for any other Gentlemen, make an account with so much restriction, however I gave to Mr Adams [*sic*] the faculty to arbitrate and settle with you, well knowing that both are conoisours [*sic*] and reasonable enough – I also beg to remark that in the account I have not included any dayly expence of my workman, for their journys and all the time they remaind at Nostill in your service, which would certainly amount to a sum.’⁴¹

This was an exercise in managing expectations, as Zucchi pre-empted his patron’s displeasure at a substantial payment. He emphasised the restraint of his bill by implying it could have been larger still. Zucchi was aware, perhaps, of Sir Rowland’s notoriously dilatory approach to settling bills with craftspeople.⁴² Possibly, pragmatism also guided Zucchi’s decision not to record miscellaneous expenditure; he wrote of being ‘so much occupy’d as I am this summer, so as not to have one day for my-self’.⁴³ Though their circumstances differed, the decision taken by Rose and Zucchi to omit travel-related expenses from their bills is significant. It hints at the challenging business conditions under which they operated. In a culture defined by deference to patronage, prompt payment was by no

means guaranteed. A display of tact was required to combine assertiveness with due deference. Paradoxically, by excluding certain forms of expenditure from a bill, craftspeople might hope for a better overall settlement.

Rose sensed the futility of his attempt to claw back travel-related expenses retrospectively. As he confessed to Adam:

‘The truth is (& ashamed I am to say it) that a regular account has not been kept of these things; and as I could not make an accurate account, I have made none at all; & however moderate I meant to be in my charge to S^r Rowland Winn I think some allowance for these things, shou’d be made in my favor, after having offered these things to your consideration, I have only to add, that the whole is finally submitted to your determination [...].’⁴⁴

At this late stage, Rose had little recourse but to admit the error of his ways and appeal to Adam’s generosity for a better outcome. For such a successful enterprise, the confession of poor accounting practices at Joseph Rose & Co. is perhaps surprising. Geoffrey Beard describes the younger Joseph Rose as ‘perhaps the best known and busiest craftsman in England’, so accounting lapses were presumably a sign of overstretched resources.⁴⁵ Ashleigh Murray draws similar conclusions in her introduction to a recently published facsimile of Rose’s sketchbook for Harewood House. She notes that the firm was involved with at least ten houses in the year 1770 alone, ‘meaning that the Roses’ personal attention may have been stretched considerably’.⁴⁶ Whether omitting travel costs was a considered time-saving strategy or merely an accidental oversight remains unclear. Nostell presented a particularly heavy administrative burden due to the scale and duration of the commission. Nonetheless, there is evidence to suggest that Rose continued to grapple with record-keeping throughout his career. In the early 1790s, working for Sir Christopher Sykes at Sledmere House in East Yorkshire, he was obliged to make a similar

confession. As he informed his patron in one letter: ‘I must own I did not keep a list of the bills I sent you, nor there [*sic*] amount – therefore I must beg the favor of you to send me word how the money is to be disposed off.’⁴⁷

CHARLES CLARKE AND THE PLAISTERER’S BILL

Rose’s plasterwork bill for Nostell forms an instructive comparison alongside a more high-profile pay dispute. From the early 1770s, the plasterer Charles Clarke was employed as a clerk and measurer for Thomas Clark, Master Plasterer to the Office of Works.⁴⁸ Clarke later acquired experience as a journeyman plasterer before returning to form a partnership with his former master. In the early 1780s the pair worked at Somerset House under William Chambers. They charged £1,352 11s 3d for their work, which was measured by James Paine.⁴⁹ Paine then deducted £181 11s 8¼d from the bill, which Chambers did not overturn. To some degree, Clarke had greater cause for complaint than Rose; he faced losing over an eighth of his overall bill, proportionally double Rose’s deduction at Nostell. Incensed at the handling of the affair by Chambers and Paine, Clarke pursued a more drastic course of action. In 1783, shortly after the death of his partner, he published a polemical account in a pamphlet entitled *The Plaisterer’s Bill*.⁵⁰ It disputes Paine’s suitability for the task of measuring, describing ‘how injudicious, and very often how inequitable, the plan adopted by such surveyors, in valuing the ornamental work done by plaisterers’.⁵¹ Clarke gave short shrift to those who ‘pompously, as well as ignorantly, pronounce on the merits or demerits of what they do not understand’.⁵²

While Rose had not rejected Wallace’s valuation criteria per se, Clarke presented an unsparing critique of the status quo for measuring plasterwork. He saw an imbalance between the intricacy of

the task at hand, and the incompetence of under-qualified surveyors. The mutable cost of plasterwork was a further complicating factor: ‘the judgment’, he claimed, ‘must in a great measure be guided by the prime cost of the particular articles made use of, which often are fluctuating; therefore no regular or invariable price can be fixed on, much depending on particular circumstances’.⁵³ The dearth of expertise that Clarke witnessed in surveyors would not have been so urgent, were it not directly making an impact on the financial outcomes for subcontracted plasterers. He framed this as a matter of personal integrity, nonplussed as to why some ‘who must be conscious of their own insufficiency, should run the risk of losing their characters, and injuring others, by interfering in matters they were inadequate to’.⁵⁴ In his view, they supplanted ‘true knowledge’ with ‘presumption’, exploiting ‘every unfair means, to blind, or please those, from whom they derive their power’.⁵⁵ From this uncompromising assessment, Clarke concluded that ‘no surveyor can be so proper a judge of plaisterer’s ornamental works, as the practical workman’.⁵⁶ The current system should be overhauled, he argued, in favour of one that privileged the embodied knowledge of the plaster trade. Clarke observed the damaging implications of an over-deferential culture, in which craftspeople were defenceless against measurers, and measurers simply acquiesced to the agenda of architects and their clients.

Both Rose’s letter and Clarke’s pamphlet engage with questions of honour, constructing a defence of their personal standards. Clarke, in more strident terms, envisioned *The Plaisterer’s Bill* as a response to the unwarranted attack on his reputation. It would serve as ‘a short narrative of my conduct, during my servitude and commercial connections, that my character may appear in its proper light’.⁵⁷ Key differences emerge between Rose’s more discreet negotiations, and the publicity garnered by Clarke. Rose did not explicitly question the suitability of Adam and Wallace to measure his plasterwork. That

was not the contentious issue, but rather the poor preparation caused by a disregard for instructions. Clarke, by comparison, risked irreversible damage to his relationship with Chambers and Paine through his detailed *exposé* of their poor conduct. The financial loss he had incurred at Somerset House was merely one aspect of his grievance. The prospect of reputational damage was more troubling, an experience Clarke universalised in his pamphlet:

‘Nor is the pecuniary loss sustained by such a reduction the only cruelty tradesmen experience; character too, materially, though innocently, suffers; and those who have laboured to conduct themselves through every department of their profession with ingenuousness and honesty receive a stigma, instead of that approbation they really merit’.⁵⁸

Ambitious in its scope and demands, Clarke’s pamphlet testified to the ‘duty every man owes to himself, to endeavour, on all occasions, to vindicate his integrity’.⁵⁹

On the merits of record-keeping, the opinions of Rose and Clarke diverged. Rose, in his letter to Adam, candidly admitted to accounting lapses. Clarke took an entirely different approach, marshalling his accounting skills to strengthen his case. *The Plasterer’s Bill* not only describes his assiduous record-keeping, but also demonstrates it in its textual composition. This is most apparent in the transcribed correspondence from Chambers and Paine embedded in Clarke’s account. By quoting them verbatim and at length, he placed their conduct on trial. In this legalistic context, it fell to witnesses – his readership – to form judgments on the evidence before them: ‘I shall’, he wrote, ‘submit it to the candid to determine, whether, upon the whole, from what has been advanced already, we have been treated with that common justice requisite in dealings of man with man’.⁶⁰ When summoned by Chambers to discuss the bill, Clarke recounted how he arrived armed with documentation: ‘I accordingly went, took the prices into my ledger against the separate articles’.⁶¹ He recommended

wider adoption of this strategy to shield craftspeople against unfounded accusation: ‘I would recommend to all masters [...] to keep a regular account of the prime cost of every such separate article, and make his charge accordingly’.⁶² A watertight accounting system, he implied, was an outward display of trustworthiness. It seems unlikely that Rose held this conviction with the same fervour; he struggled to attain the meticulous standards advocated by Clarke.

A confluence of factors shaped a craftsperson’s response to a pay deduction: confidence in securing commissions under other employers, and financial security at that point in time. Unsurprisingly, in the light of their contrasting approaches, Rose and Clarke faced different outcomes. At Nostell, a private country-house commission, Rose’s instinct was to settle with Adam directly through private correspondence. Despite his evident frustration, airing these grievances in public possibly never occurred to him; either way, the prospect of a sustained and harmonious working relationship with Adam carried major incentives. Clarke, by comparison, appeared willing to sever his ties with Chambers, whom he claimed ‘[held] up threats to intimidate me from vindicating myself’.⁶³ Their dealings descended into acrimony, with Chambers allegedly insisting ‘that it did not become a tradesman to be thus clamorous, in going about the town complaining – That it would be more for my advantage to be quiet, if I expected business hereafter – and that I should create myself many enemies’.⁶⁴

The public nature of the Somerset House commission perhaps gave Clarke a heightened moral imperative to make these dealings transparent. This is consistent with a publicised inspection undertaken a decade later, when Chambers once again found himself in the spotlight for Somerset House. During a Royal Academy prize-giving ceremony on 10 December 1790, guests were reportedly ‘much alarmed by two cracks which were heard during the time of delivering the Medals’.⁶⁵ Nine architects were rapidly appointed for a safety assessment –

among them, Robert Adam, the brothers James and Samuel Wyatt, and John Soane. Fortunately for Chambers, they reached the consensus that 'there was not any danger [...] [and] that such precautions have since been taken, as must effectually preclude every cause of alarm in future'.⁶⁶ Accountability – whether between architects and their employers, or subcontracted craftspeople and architects – remained at the heart of these interactions.

While the circumstances differed, the pay disputes examined here foreground the architect-craftsperson relationship. They expose the various factors that caused these relationships to prosper or flounder. What were the trade-offs between immediate financial gain and the preservation of a long-term partnership? When did evidence of poor conduct become a red line, triggering a dispute in which craftspeople staked their financial security and future employability? It is worth revisiting Rose's complaint from Adam's perspective; this was, after all, a mutually beneficial collaboration. Adam relied heavily on Joseph Rose & Co. for the exceptional quality of their work. Whereas he regularly switched between a handful of trusted decorative painters, carvers, gilders, and stonemasons, he tended to employ only Rose for plasterwork – at least for his English commissions. It was entirely in Adam's interests to avoid pay disputes with the firm monopolising this aspect of his interiors.

Adam could not afford to ignore the lessons of Rose's Nostell account. He advised Sir Rowland on how to modify his payment practices, the essence of which was 'little and often'. This avoided unwieldy accounts that placed onerous responsibilities on the measurer and architect. Regarding Rose's bill, Adam admitted 'I was surprised to find the balance due to him turn out so large'.⁶⁷ He continued:

'I dare say you will be so too, But as it arises from the Work executed during so long a Course of time, there is no help for it; It is pity you had not settled sooner with him, that the state of Accounts might have been known, which are always most distinct when kept

short; I find that he expected the balance was to have been much greater in his favour, So that both partys may be dissappointed [*sic*] [...]'.⁶⁸

Through this diplomatic but subtly critical guidance, Adam explained how an unsettled bill created a widening gap between expectation and reality. Rose overestimated what was due, Sir Rowland did the opposite, and both were ultimately frustrated.

On 1 September 1778, Rose wrote out a receipt for Sir Rowland (Fig. 8), confirming that he was eventually paid £713 6s.⁶⁹ This was a notable improvement on the balance of £679 6s 9³/₄d initially calculated after Adam's deduction. It reflected 'one years interest added to it (in consideration of its not being paid sooner)'.⁷⁰ Ironically, this was not too far off Rose's initial proposal for a £75 concessionary deduction, instead of £116. It was a compromise that perhaps placated him, and was possibly engineered by Adam to smooth tensions. Adam, for his part, was keen to emerge with his reputation untarnished. Writing to Sir Rowland, he maintained he had remained neutral throughout: 'I may venture to assure you that my brother & I have acted in this affair, as if it had been our own, & in every Article had it in view to do justice to both, as we knew that was what you wished & recommended'.⁷¹

Adam's intention to 'do justice to both' resembles later statements from Soane, who described the architect as 'the intermediate agent between the employer, whose honour and interest he is to study, and the mechanic, whose rights he is to defend'.⁷² Soane's role in arbitration was occasionally recognised in a more official capacity, as Laurence Kinney detailed in his article 'John Soane and Property Disputes'.⁷³ He helped resolve disagreements between other architects and their clients, concerning substandard construction, building prices and fee disputes. While Adam faced an internal matter in his dealings with Rose, his exacting standards and attentiveness were similarly apparent – at Nostell, if not across the board.⁷⁴ Adam's engagement in this continual

Fig. 8. Joseph Rose's receipt for Sir Rowland Winn, dated 1 September 1778.
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low-level diplomacy was necessary to satisfy clients and craftspeople, but it also served his own architectural practice.

Adam could not remain entirely neutral in pay disputes when his architectural standing was also at stake. He took precautions in case matters escalated, requesting from Sir Rowland the return of Rose's letter as a personal insurance policy: 'It is a voucher of his leaving every thing to be settled by us.'⁷⁵ Unfortunately for Adam, his disagreement with Rose over substandard plasterwork was a bitter taste of things to come. Over the following decade, the Adam brothers suffered the repercussions of their association with Liardet's patented stucco. The period 1777–87 witnessed three major lawsuits, the first of which was 'Liardet vs Johnson'. These events are detailed in depth in an article by Frank Kelsall.⁷⁶ Despite their best intentions, the Adam

brothers could not remain neutral actors when building activity was fundamentally collaborative. They played an active role in the financial management of their commissions, and were capable of altering the outcomes for subcontracted craftsmen. This degree of involvement left them similarly exposed to reputational damage.

Adam's repeated use of trusted artists and craftsmen is a widely recognised feature of his practice. The focus here has been to delve deeper into how these relationships were sustained, particularly in the fraught context of a pay dispute. Pay disputes laid bare the collaborative nature of building work, and the financial interdependency that it engendered. As Clarke's pamphlet exemplifies, they were aggravated by ambiguities – perceptions of misplaced authority or a deficit of expertise. The settlement of Rose's bill exposes the more arduous

aspects of Adam’s role. Equally, it demonstrates how architects relied on wider networks to monitor workmanship. The aesthetic qualities of Adam’s interiors are often attributed to his accomplished design skills, and they were clearly a critical factor. Yet no design, however proficient, could anticipate the myriad contingencies that had an impact on production further down the line. Over the course of a project, the Adam brothers corresponded closely with clerks, bookkeepers and measurers to mitigate production obstacles and promote high standards. Archive sources reveal the complexity of Adam’s task, as he triangulated the demands of clients, craftsmen, and his own architectural practice.

ENDNOTES

- 1 For background information on the firm Joseph Rose and Co., see Geoffrey Beard’s extensive scholarship, notably *Decorative Plasterwork in Great Britain* (London: Routledge, 2015) and ‘A Family’s 50 year Supremacy’, *Country Life*, 8 December 1960. See also A. Murray, ‘Joseph Rose and Company’, *Georgian Group Journal*, 20 (2012).
- 2 See Beard’s comprehensive entry on Joseph Rose junior on pp. 238–44 of his ‘Select List of Plasterers’, in *Decorative Plasterwork in Great Britain*. Joseph Rose junior (1745–99) was the son of Jonathan Rose, and nephew of Joseph Rose senior (c.1723–80). Beard notes that the inter-generational partnership between the two Josephs has led to difficulties when attributing work. This study proceeds on the basis that the correspondence cited concerns Joseph Rose junior, who by the late 1770s had become a more dominant presence in the firm. However, it is difficult to rule out a possible attribution to his uncle, Joseph Rose senior.
- 3 For further biographical information on Robert Adam and his brothers, and analysis of their work, see M. Sanderson, *Robert Adam and Scotland* (Edinburgh: HMSO, 1992) and C. Thom (ed.), *Robert Adam and his Brothers: New light on Britain’s leading architectural family* (Swindon: Historic England, 2019). For an exhaustive survey of the Adam brothers’ works within different architectural typologies, see D. King, *The Complete Works of Robert and James Adam* (Oxford: Architectural Press, 2001).
- 4 For further analysis of the Adam brothers’ working methods and alternative supervision models, see A. Rowan, *Robert Adam: Catalogue of Drawings in the Victoria and Albert Museum* (London: V&A publications, 1988), and ‘The Adam Brothers and Contemporary Office Practice’, in G. Worsley (ed.), *Adam in Context* (Suffolk: The Lavenham Press, 1993). For an instructive discussion of Adam’s long-distance supervision of commissions, see C. Lucey, ‘Design by Correspondence: Robert Adam and Headfort House’, in Thom (ed.), *Robert Adam and his Brothers*.
- 5 I. Ware, *A Complete Body of Architecture. Adorned with Plans and Elevations, from Original Designs* (London, 1767), p. 40.

- 6 W. Chambers, *A Treatise on the Decorative Part of Civil Architecture* (London: Priestley and Weale, 1825), p. 100.
- 7 Chambers, *Civil Architecture*, p. 134.
- 8 Chambers, *Civil Architecture*, p. 135.
- 9 J. Soane, *Plans, Elevations, and Sections of Buildings: executed in the counties of Norfolk, Suffolk, Yorkshire, Staffordshire, Warwickshire, Hertfordshire, et cetera* (London: 1788), p. 7.
- 10 The original house on the site incorporated the remains of a twelfth-century priory, which became defunct after the Dissolution of the Monasteries in the 1530s. For more background on the architecture, interiors, and furnishings of Nostell Priory, see E. Harris, *The Genius of Robert Adam: His Interiors* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001); S. Raikes and T. Knox, *Nostell Priory, Yorkshire* (Swindon: The National Trust, 2008); and F. Sands, ‘Nostell Priory: History of a House, 1730–85’ (PhD Dissertation, University of York, 2012).
- 11 West Yorkshire Archive Service (Wakefield): Nostell Papers (hereafter NP), WYW1352/3/3/1/5/5/2, Joseph Rose’s account book for Sir Rowland Winn, 1766–77.
- 12 A. Murray in *Georgian Group Journal*, 20 (2012), pp. 103–118.
- 13 A will survives for Cosmo Wallace, proved on 28 August 1812. National Archives, PROB 11/1536/394.
- 14 NP, WYW1352/1/4/45/4, account between Sir Rowland Winn and Robert Adam and James Adam, 1776–77. It amounts to £829 9s 7d and was settled 10 April 1777.
- 15 NP, WYW1352/1/4/27/1, Letter, Robert Adam, London, to Sir Rowland Winn, Nostell, 26 August 1766.
- 16 NP, WYW1352/3/3/1/5/2/20, ‘Memorandums for M^r Adam’, August 1776.
- 17 NP, WYW1352/3/3/1/5/2/16, Letter, Robert Adam, London, to Sir Rowland Winn, Nostell, 5 September 1777.
- 18 NP, WYW1352/3/3/1/5/2/11, Letter, Robert Adam, the Adelphi, to Sir Rowland Winn, Nostell, 15 February 1776.
- 19 NP, WYW1352/3/3/1/5/2/12, Letter, Geo. Salisbury to Robert Adam, February 1776.
- 20 Royal Bank of Scotland Archive, Customer Account Ledgers for Robert Adam (1764–69) and Robert and James Adam (1770–1784). Reference numbers range between DR/427/48–136.
- 21 E. Harris assisted by N. Savage, *British architectural books and writers 1556–1785* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 42.
- 22 G. Beard, *Craftsmen and Interior Decoration in England 1660–1820* (London: Bloomsbury, 1981), pp. 281–3.
- 23 Beard, *op. cit.*, p. 281.
- 24 The individuals named are Mr Allen, who covered payments to Rose between 1767–73, Sir Rowland Winn, Mr Fowler, Charles Goodair, and Mr Taylor.
- 25 NP, WYW1352/3/3/1/5/5/2.
- 26 NP, WYW1352/3/3/1/5/5/2.
- 27 On the design and execution of the stables, see ‘Design for a cupola for the stables, 1776, as executed in 1827–29 (1)’, Sir John Soane’s Museum Collection Online, http://collections.soane.org/drawings?ci_search_type=ARCI&mi_search_type=adv&sort=7&tn=Drawings&t=ARC385 (Accessed: 9 July 2020).
- 28 NP, WYW1352/3/3/1/5/5/2.
- 29 NP, WYW1352/3/3/1/5/5/2.
- 30 NP, WYW1352/3/3/1/5/5/2.
- 31 NP, WYW1352/3/3/1/5/5/2.
- 32 NP, WYW1352/3/3/1/5/2/16.
- 33 A. Rowan, ‘Johnnie, the eldest Adam Brother’, in C. Thom (ed.), *Robert Adam and his Brothers*, p. 4.
- 34 NP, WYW1352/3/3/1/5/2/16.
- 35 NP, WYW1352/3/3/1/5/2/16.
- 36 NP, WYW1352/3/3/1/5/5/11, Letter, Joseph Rose, Queen Anne Street East, to Robert Adam, Adelphi, 20 August 1777.
- 37 NP, WYW1352/3/3/1/5/5/11.
- 38 NP, WYW1352/3/3/1/5/5/11.
- 39 F. Sands, ‘The Art of Collaboration: Antonio Zucchi at Nostell Priory’, *Georgian Group Journal*, 19 (2011), pp. 106–119.
- 40 NP, WYW1352/3/3/1/5/4/5, Letter, Antonio Zucchi to Sir Rowland Winn, 16 August 1776.
- 41 NP, WYW1352/3/3/1/5/4/5.
- 42 There is stark evidence for this in Sir Rowland’s dealings with Thomas Chippendale. See L. Boynton and N. Goodison, ‘Thomas Chippendale at Nostell Priory’, *Furniture History*, 4 (1968), pp. 10–61.
- 43 NP, WYW1352/3/3/1/5/4/5.

- 44 NP, WYW_{1352/3/3/1/5/5/11}.
- 45 G. Beard, ‘A Family’s 50 year Supremacy’, *Country Life* (8 December 1960).
- 46 A. Murray and K. Holland, *Joseph Rose: Working Drawings: Facsimile of a Sketchbook at Harewood House* (Somerset: Kate Holland, 2019).
- 47 Hull University Archives, Hull History Centre, Letters to Sir Christopher Sykes, GB 50 U DDSY_{3/6/1}, Letter, Joseph Rose, Queen Anne Street East, to Sir Christopher Sykes, Sledmere, 18 September 1794.
- 48 Beard, *Decorative Plasterwork in Great Britain*, p. 75.
- 49 Beard, *Craftsmen and Interior Decoration*, p. 250.
- 50 C. Clarke, *The Plaisterer’s Bill for Works done at the New Buildings, Somerset-House [...]* (London: 1783).
- 51 Clarke, p. 14.
- 52 Clarke, p. 12.
- 53 Clarke, p. 13.
- 54 Clarke, p. 12.
- 55 Clarke, p. 12.
- 56 Clarke, p. 13.
- 57 Clarke, p. 4.
- 58 Clarke, pp. 3–4.
- 59 Clarke, p. 27.
- 60 Clarke, p. 19.
- 61 Clarke, p. 20.
- 62 Clarke, p. 14.
- 63 Clarke, p. 34.
- 64 Clarke, p. 30.
- 65 *The Kentish Gazette*, Friday 14 January 1791, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/> (Accessed: 6 July 2020).
- 66 *The Kentish Gazette*, *op. cit.*
- 67 NP, WYW_{1352/3/3/1/5/2/16}.
- 68 NP, WYW_{1352/3/3/1/5/2/16}.
- 69 NP, WYW_{1352/3/3/1/5/5/8}, Joseph Rose’s receipt for Sir Rowland Winn, for the sum of £713 6s od, 1 September 1778.
- 70 NP, WYW_{1352/3/3/1/5/5/8}.
- 71 NP, WYW_{1352/3/3/1/5/2/16}.
- 72 Soane, *Plans, Elevations, and Sections.*, p. 7.
- 73 L. Kinney, ‘John Soane and Property Disputes: The Argyle Rooms & All Souls College, Oxford, two case studies’, *Architectural History*, 41 (1998), pp. 131–144.
- 74 For an example of Adam catastrophically mismanaging a budget, see Dr John Turton’s letter, dated 14 July 1788. Turton wrote of being ‘cruelly disappointed, as well as much surprised at Exceedings’, after Adam’s scheme for Brasted, his country villa in Kent, cost almost double the estimated £5,000. London Metropolitan Archives, CLC/B/227/MS03070–54.
- 75 NP, WYW_{1352/3/3/1/5/2/16}.
- 76 F. Kelsall, ‘Liardet versus Adam’, *Architectural History*, 27 (1984), pp. 118–126.