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# GEORGIAN EXEMPLARS: JOHN WEBB'S COUNTRY HOUSES

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John Bold

few ages can brag of a good surveyor of building, or such as wee call architects. Inigo Jones was one, who did all things well and great. But since there has bin Pratt for Clarendon hous, Webb for Greenwich gallery, and Connersbury, and at present Sir Christopher Wren; dexterous men . . . (Roger North)<sup>1</sup>

NORTH WAS UNUSUAL IN RECOGNIZING the individual contribution of Webb. King Charles I had recognized the singularity of his Surveyor of the Works, and Inigo Jones was acting on his 'speciall command' in bringing up a pupil, Webb, in the study of Architecture, 'with an intention that hee should have succeeded him in his place'. But the times were not propitious for an easy succession. At the Restoration Webb petitioned the returning King Charles II, claiming that there were 'scarce any of the greate Nobility or eminent gentry of England but he hath done service for in matter of building, ordering of medalls, statues and the like'. But the Surveyorship had already been given away to Sir John Denham, in the words of John Evelyn, 'a better poet than architect'. Webb was granted the Reversion but even this was to prove an empty promise as Denham, 'under pretence . . . that if I had his reversion hee could not sell it', prevented its passing the Great Seal.

If he could not follow him in office, Webb followed Jones in spirit. Jonesian classicism was a Court based architecture, and Webb himself devoted a great deal of time to designing palaces in the sky. But his more material contribution to English architecture was to take the new style to the country, synthesizing from his Jonesian and Italian Renaissance sources to make accessible to a larger clientele the sophisticated and learned classical language of the Caroline Court. His country house practice was considerable, and I want to look here at three of his most important commissions: the proto-Palladian villas, Gunnersbury and Amesbury, both attributed by Colen Campbell to Jones and Wilton, where Jones, Webb, and Isaac de Caus were all involved.

## WILTON HOUSE

Wilton has been much pored over and much discussed, but much remains elusive. It has in recent years been investigated by RCHM, and if the restoration programme goes ahead its structure will be looked at again by HBMC. My own, possibly interim, conclusions follow.

Webb worked on Wilton during both of the major periods of construction, in the seventeenth century. Early in his career, he assisted Inigo Jones in making designs which were executed by Isaac de Caus. After the fire of 1647 which gutted the south side state rooms, he was in sole charge of their refitting.

The Wilton Abbey buildings had been granted after the Dissolution to William Herbert, later the 1st Earl of Pembroke, and it was his quadrangular house which Philip, the 4th Earl, began to alter and enlarge in the 1630s. The genesis of these works is well known. Aubrey relates that King Charles I 'did put Philip . . . Earle of Pembroke upon making this magnificent garden and grotto, and to build that side of the house which fronts the garden, with two

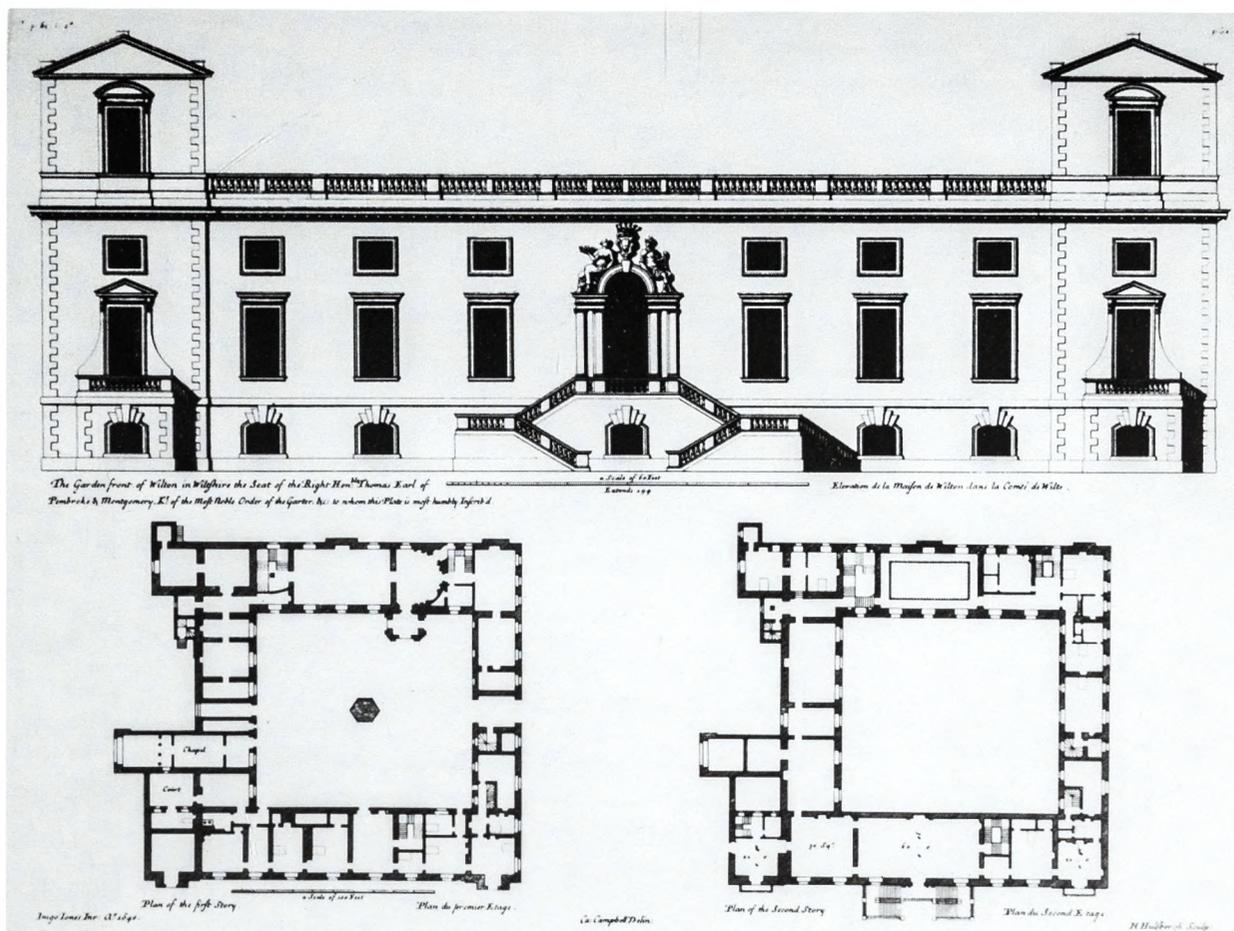


FIGURE I. Wilton House. C. Campbell, *Vitruvius Britannicus*, II (1717)

stately pavilions at each end, all ‘*al Italiano*’.<sup>2</sup> The King recommended Inigo Jones as architect, but he, being busy, passed the commission on to Isaac de Caus, to whom he extended ‘advice and approbation’.<sup>3</sup>

Work on the house began in 1636 with the taking down of ‘that side of Wilton house which is towards the garden’, prior to the commencement of building a new range of 400 ft extent.<sup>4</sup> This grand front, which aligned with the central avenue of the garden, was begun but was then drastically reduced, perhaps as a result of the 4th Earl’s financial difficulties, its place being taken by the curtailed scheme which substantially survives today. In effect the initial revision involved taking the eastern half of the grand design and adding a further bay at its west end in place of the pedimented portico. The ‘two stately pavilions at each end, all *al Italiano*’, Wilton’s most distinctive and emulated features, were an afterthought which was dictated not only by the need to provide vertical emphasis to the façade, but was also required by the presence of the Tudor towers at the ends of the east entrance range. For a satisfactory marriage of the new south wing with the existing range to the east, it was necessary either to demolish the Tudor towers altogether or rebuild them in a style in keeping with the new south front. De Caus’s grand scheme and his drawing for the curtailed scheme imply the demolition of the Tudor towers, and we can perhaps infer from this that the 4th Earl initially intended the new south range, even in its curtailed form, to be merely the first in the total rebuilding which proved to be beyond his means. Italian precedents for the design of the towers can be found not only in the work of Palladio, but also more directly in that of Scamozzi, whom Jones had met in Venice in 1614. As built, the towers were rather more ‘*al Italiano*’ than they are today: prior to their rebuilding after the fire of 1647, they were terminated not by the familiar pedimented gables but by hipped, tiled roofs.<sup>5</sup>

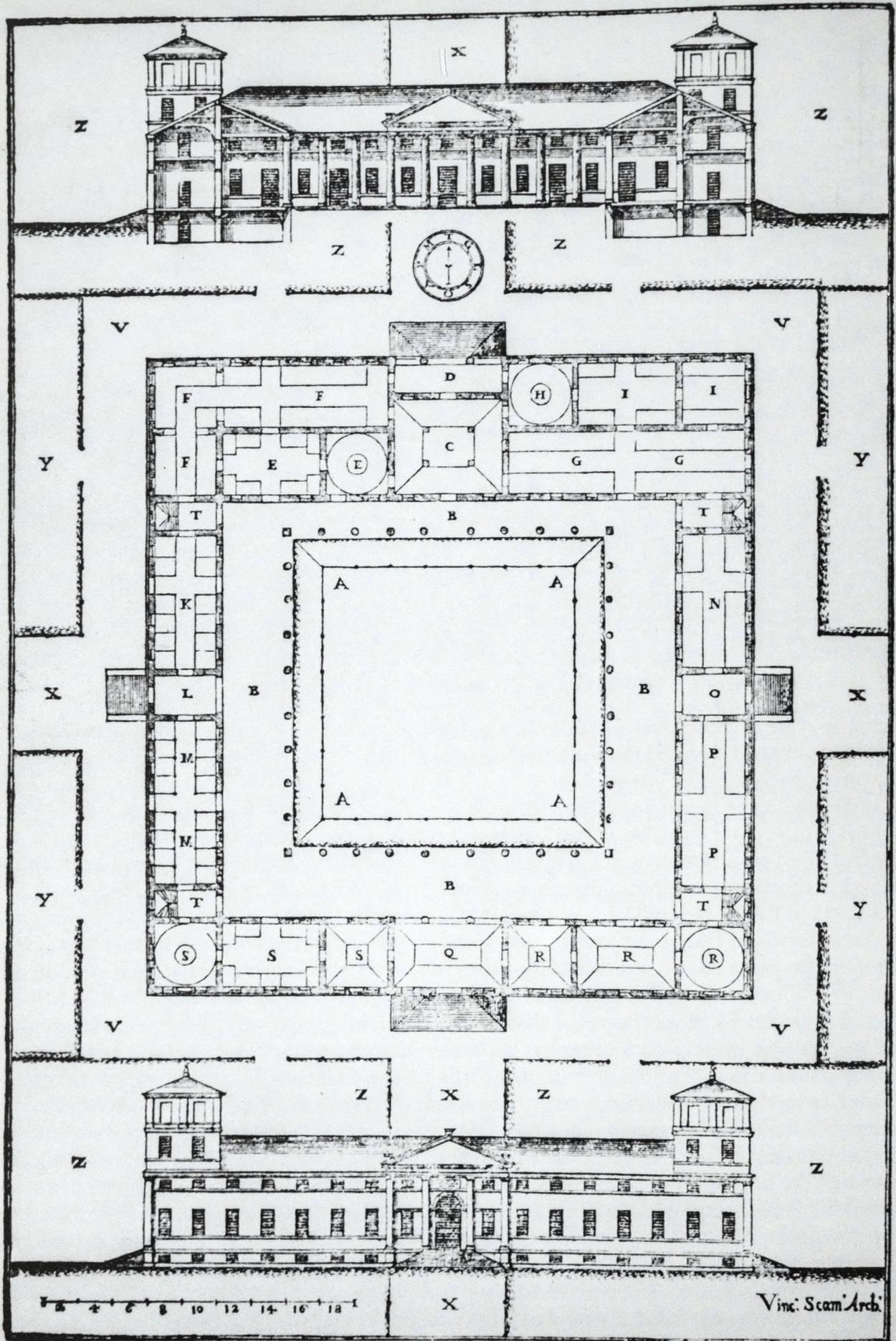


FIGURE 2. From V. Scamozzi, *L'Idée della Architettura Universale*, I, III (1615), p. 284

The 1647 fire was caused, according to Aubrey, 'by airing of the roomes'. In 1648, he continued, 'Philip . . . re-edified it, by the advice of Inigo Jones; but he, being then very old, could not be there in person, but left it to Mr Webb' The extent of the fire has been discussed by Mr Colvin, and his conclusions have been supported by recent structural investigation which confirms that the south range was damaged severely but that the masonry shell survived. Webb's work involved him in rebuilding the upper stages of the towers, which he redesigned, and in refitting the state rooms. By May 1652, these were complete.

Wilton suffered very considerably in the early nineteenth century at the hands of James Wyatt, who made alterations in all four wings of the house with the apparent intention of transforming it back into a medieval abbey, but fortunately he altered the south range least of all. The surviving Jones-Webb drawings of ceilings and doors relate to the south range state rooms.<sup>6</sup> Some of them are dated 1649 and are assuredly Webb's. Others, datable to the later 1630s, have been attributed to Jones but they have more in common with other drawings by Webb than they have with others by Jones, being marked out fully with a stylus, with ruled pencil lines and without the strong outline and freehand verve which one would expect from Jones but which one would be surprised to find in the young Webb.<sup>7</sup>

The drawings are titled in ink by Jones, but their measurements and, in the case of two of them, the black chalk titling, are in Webb's hand. A comparison of this group of drawings with one of Webb's dated ceiling designs of 1649 for Wilton shows that although the dated drawing is styled rather differently, the drawings have much in common: the full use of the stylus, the black chalk underdrawing, the pen and wash handling of the schematic drapery and fruit swags and garlands, and the method of noting measurements. As designs, these ceilings are rather sophisticated for the Webb of the 1630s. They rely heavily on the designs of Jean Cotelle, whose contemporary ceiling designs for Parisian hôtels appear to have been

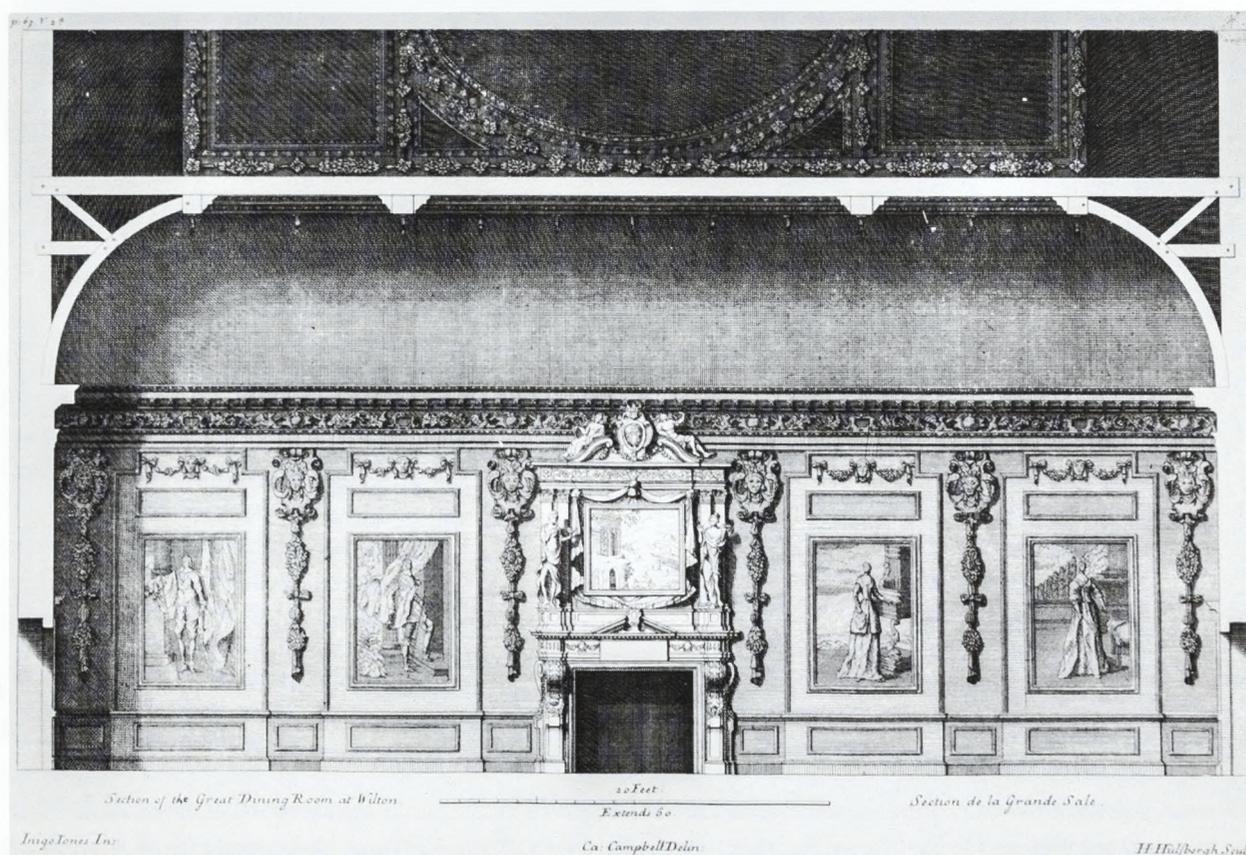


FIGURE 3. Wilton House, Double Cube Room. C. Campbell, *Vitruvius Britannicus*, II (1717)

available in the Office of Works, and Jones's inscribed titles may be read as evidence of the Surveyor's direction and approval of the pupil's efforts. A comparable endorsement occurs with a group of designs for doors. Drawn and annotated by Webb, and titled by Jones, these also are datable to the later 1630s. The present designs for almost all the doors on the main floor of the south front, including the blind ones, thus confirming the involvement of Jones and Webb in the original laying out of the state rooms, producing the designs which de Caus executed, and demonstrating that Webb's re-fitting after the fire did not involve any changes to the plan of the south range.

The seventeenth-century visitor, entering the house via the Holbein porch, would have passed through the hall, up the stairs to main floor level and along the west wing before arriving at the first of the state rooms, the Single Cube Room. This and the adjoining Double Cube Room are the most complete survivals at Wilton from the Webb period, the decoration of both of them dating from after 1647. Their original flat ceilings, with upper windows within the friezes, were destroyed by the fire, and in his reconstruction Webb replaced them with deep, painted coves. Both rooms retain their painted decoration, their richly carved swags and garlands set onto the wall panelling, and their Francophile chimney-pieces, designed by Webb after the engravings of Jean Barbet. Webb incorporated the Herbert wyvern in the idiosyncratic composite capitals of the Cube Room's overmantels and in the cartouche over the magnificent great door of the Double Cube Room.

The Double Cube Room as recorded by Colen Campbell in *Vitruvius Britannicus* is symmetrical. Here, as elsewhere, he was correcting what he found. The middle window is not directly opposite the chimney-piece and the side windows are not equidistant from their

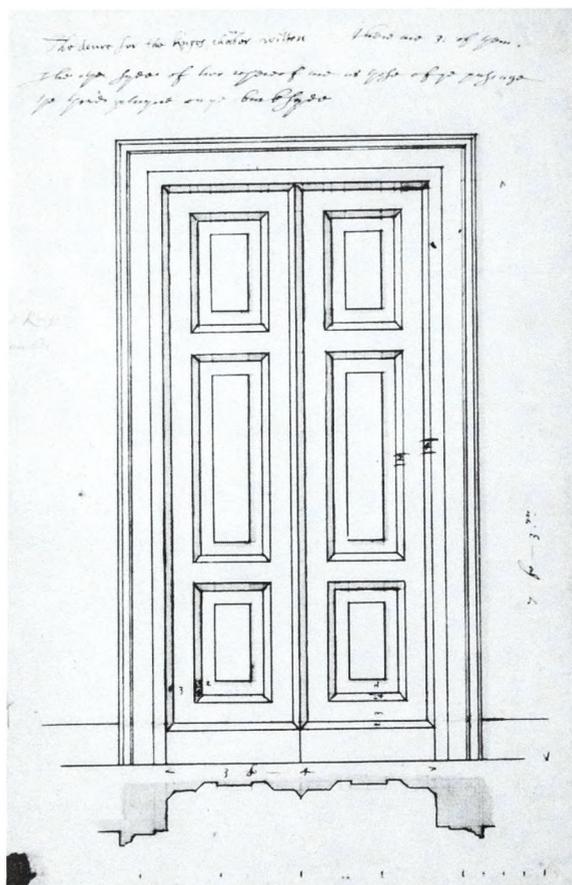


FIGURE 4. Wilton House, Door for the King's Bedchamber (Wiltshire CRO, 2057 H1/1a)

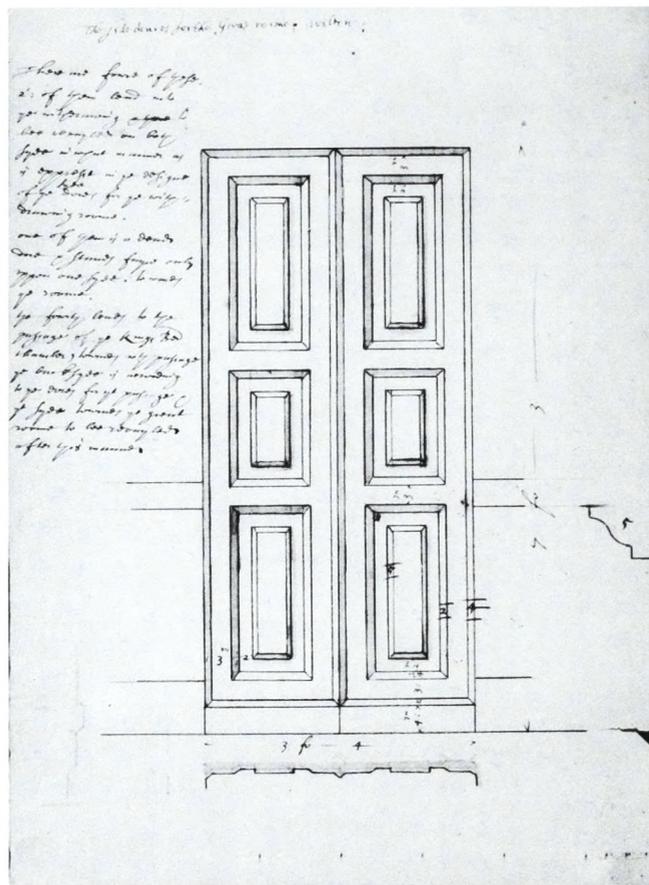


FIGURE 5. Wilton House, Side doors for the Double Cube Room (Wiltshire CRO, 2057 H1/1a)

respective corners. These peculiarities can be explained only by the replanning which was made necessary by the curtailment of the original grand scheme after work on it already had begun.

Beyond the Double Cube Room in the seventeenth-century layout was the Geometrical staircase, described by Evelyn as 'artificial winding stayres of stone'. The stair rose from the ground to the first floor. It had a coved ceiling for which a drawing by Webb survives, and its walls were later painted 'in Arabesco' by Andien de Clermont, who was employed at Wilton in the 1730s. This staircase and the adjoining passage room were removed by Wyatt in his creation of the Ante Room. The new ceiling was then painted in a conscious pastiche of the de Clermont manner.

The next two in the sequence of state rooms retain their Webb chimney-pieces after Barbet, the magnificent example in the King's Bedchamber incorporating the Herbert wyvern in its decorative carving. This room was remodelled c. 1735 to form the Colonnade Room, the closets at its north end being removed and a colonnade inserted, probably to the design of the 9th 'Architect' Earl of Pembroke. The singerie ceiling was painted during the same period by de Clermont. Wyatt contemplated the destruction of this room but settled eventually for decorative embellishments. The panelling now is ill fitting and appears to have been tampered with, whether during the 1730s or 1800s is unclear.

Among Webb's surviving ceiling designs, four represent alternative schemes for the Cabinet Room at the south-east corner of the house. One of these dates from the later 1630s and the others from 1649. The present ceiling, above the seventeenth-century cornice, has a surround painted by de Clermont, with a splendid inset central painting by Giordano, *The Conversion of St Paul*, which was placed here in the 1730s.

The adjoining small room, the Little Ante Room, positioned to the north of the Cabinet Room within the south-east tower, retains its very free plasterwork of c. 1650, possibly inspired by the engraved designs of Le Pautre, which now frames Sabbatini's *Birth of Venus* which was installed in this position after 1731.

At the west end of the south range, within the south-west tower, the original 'Passage Room' to the garden, with wooden steps leading down, and its adjoining staircase, have been remodelled to form the Hunting Room. The drawing for its ceiling decoration shows that it was slightly wider than the Cabinet Room at the east end, a detail which Campbell ignored. The small difference in width in the two apparently identical towers was yet another consequence of the adjustment which was needed when the original grand rebuilding scheme was curtailed: the new end wall of the west tower was built 3 ft further west than perfect symmetry would dictate, to bring it into closer alignment with the central avenue of the garden, which had been laid out already to align with the central portico of the original scheme. The double staircase at this point, since removed, in projecting still further beyond the line of the end wall, helped to foster this illusion of axial alignment.

The present ceiling in the Hunting Room is of the Wyatt period. It is probable that the original 1630s ceiling was replaced after the fire by the ceiling which was described by Celia Fiennes as depicting sporting scenes. The present double order of panelling in the room frames inset panels of hunting scenes by Edward Pierce which alternate with hunting trophies attributed to de Clermont. The room was remodelled and the panelling reset by Wyatt when he replaced the adjoining staircase with a new stair in a stair tower and extended the Hunting Room into the space made available. The new ceiling was painted in the same de Clermont pastiche style as the new ceiling in the Ante Room.

Although Wilton is very far from being an intact survivor of its period, there is enough surviving for us to understand how it came to the archetype of many of the great houses of the eighteenth century. The two greatest neo-Palladian houses, Holkham and Houghton, were indebted to it in their massing, and its towers were a major source of inspiration until beyond

the mid-century. It provided a mine of Palladian details. It is perhaps remarkable that this was so, given that it evolved piecemeal out of compromise and necessity, providing a particular solution to a particular problem. It was a collaborative work of architectural serendipity. Webb's individual solutions to the problems of villa design were potentially at least capable of a greater exemplifying rôle.

## GUNNERSBURY HOUSE

The proliferation of the villa in the eighteenth century was one of the most significant developments in the whole history of English architecture. All around the capital in the 1720s, Defoe found evidence of the building boom as the 'present encrease of wealth in the city of London, spreads itself into the country, and plants families and fortunes'.<sup>8</sup>

Gunnersbury House was the suburban villa *par excellence*. For this, perhaps in retrospect the most important commission of his career, John Webb drew on the work of Palladio and Inigo Jones to provide a design of great typological significance. Begun in the late 1650s for the advocate, Sergeant John Maynard, the house became a fashionable centre in the eighteenth century when it was owned successively by the Joint Secretary to the Treasury, Henry Furnese, who was an art collector of some distinction, and then by the third daughter of King George II, Princess Amelia, who held receptions 'of a most brilliant description'.<sup>9</sup>

Gunnersbury was recognized in the eighteenth century as a house of archetypal importance. Campbell published it as a design of Jones, and at least three further engravings and one group of watercolours were made of it during the course of the century. William Angus in 1797 commended especially the view from the loggia which commanded 'a fine prospect of Surry, of the Thames, and of all the Meadows on its Banks for a great extent, even to London'.<sup>10</sup> Just as the Palladian villas of the Veneto looked onto the Brenta, so did the neo-Palladian villas of the Home Counties look over the Thames. Regrettably, the loggia did not survive long into the next century. Mr Morley, a speculator and manufacturer, demolished the house in 1800–01 and disposed of the land in lots.

In the planning of Gunnersbury, Webb contrived to combine a central sequence of grand spaces for parade with more intimate suites of rooms at the angles of the building for less formal occasions. The grand spaces would have provided Maynard with the 'handsome and well adorned places to walk in' which Palladio recommended for the houses of advocates. Entry from the north was made into a paved, stone hall of eight columns which, in the manner of Palladio's Villa Badoer, effectively divided the building into two, symmetrical halves. Such columned halls had occurred before in Webb's theoretical studies and in his designs for Durham House and Belvoir Castle, but this, unlike them, was built, and surely would have impressed with its unprecedented classical grandeur, although Sir Roger Pratt was probably right to complain about the lack of light in a room which was very long and relatively low, with windows only at its north end.<sup>11</sup>

The division of the columns in the entrance hall into two groups of four emphasized the central doorways, one of which gave on to the grand Imperial staircase. The combination of an open well with three parallel flights first appeared at Philip II's Escorial, a building which was of some importance in the background of the Whitehall Palace designs of Jones and Webb. At Gunnersbury, at the top of the first single flight, the stair divided into two flights to give access to the first-floor saloon which was aligned directly over the hall. This grand, coved room, a double cube of approximately 50 ft × 25 ft × 25 ft, was clearly in the line of descent from Jones's Newmarket, Wilton and Webb's Durham House and Belvoir designs. Furnese was said in 1742 to be fitting up the room 'in a most elegant Taste', proposing to hang it with his 'fine Collection of capital Pictures' which 'will render it one of the finest rooms in England'.<sup>12</sup> Roger North had been less admiring, for the same reasons as Sir Roger Pratt. He

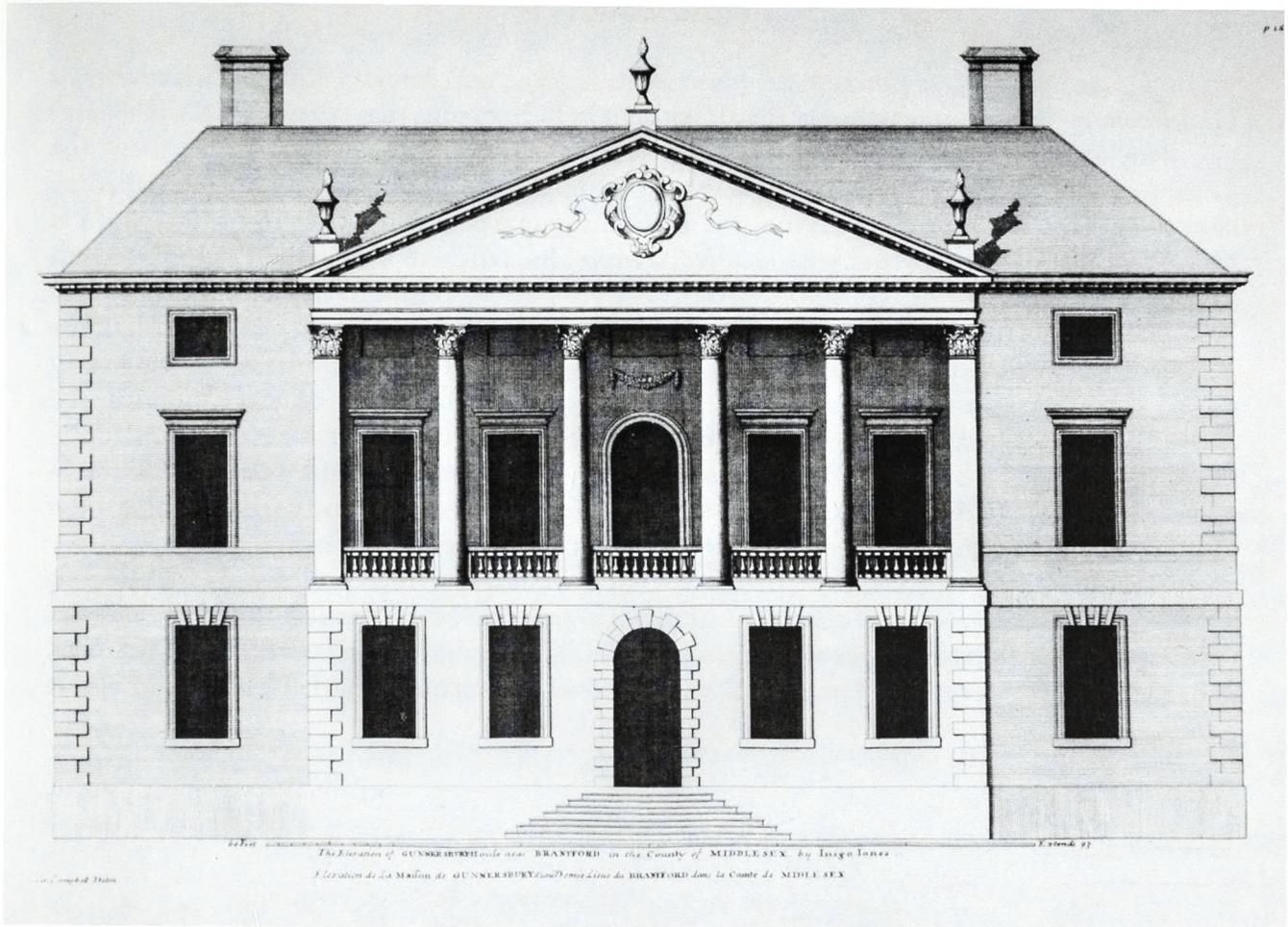


FIGURE 6. Gunnersbury House. C. Campbell *Vitruvius Britannicus*, I (1715)

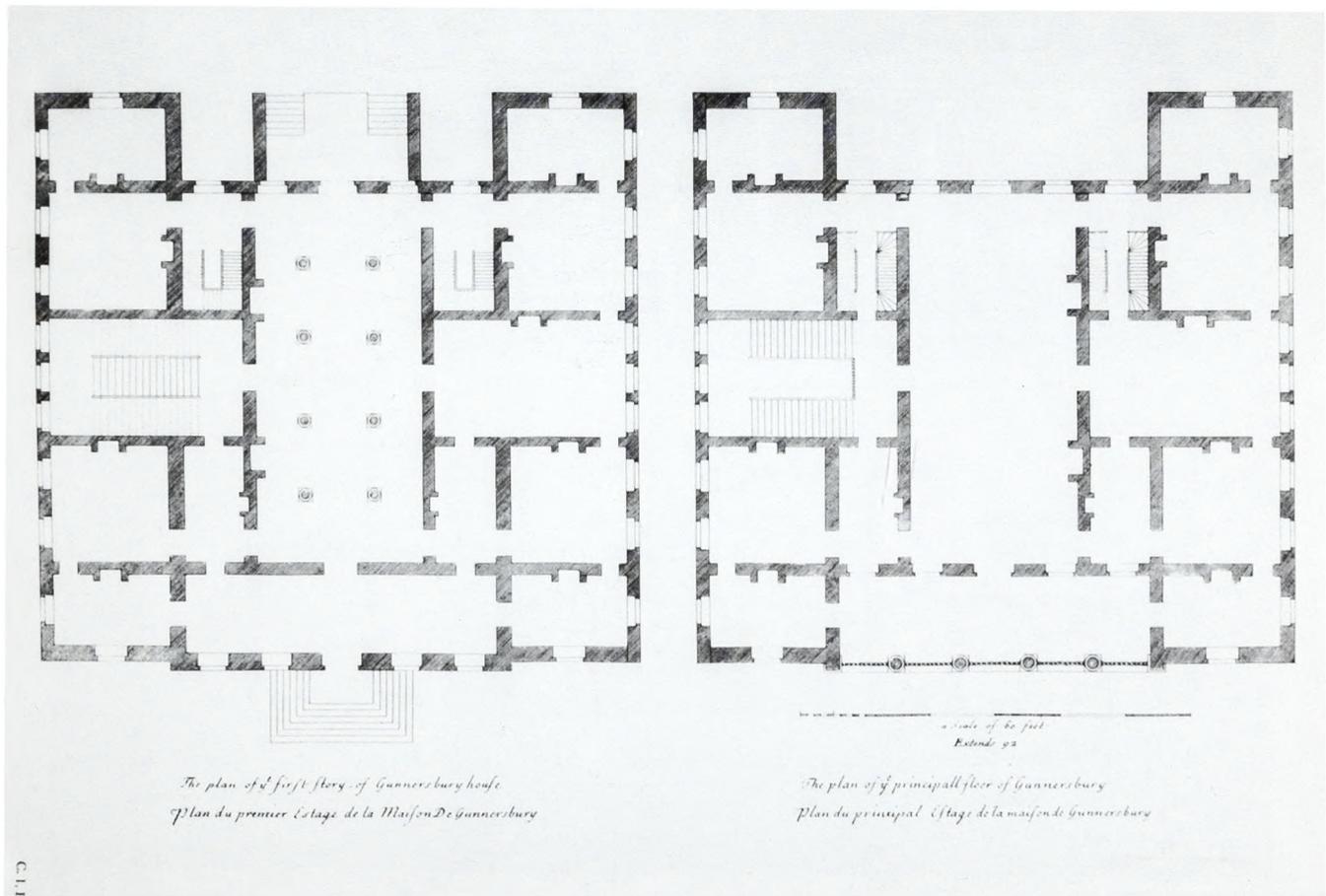


FIGURE 7. Gunnersbury House. C. Campbell, *Vitruvius Britannicus*, I (1715). Plans

was, he wrote, 'a great friend to portico walks abroad' but he found the saloon at Gunnersbury 'most unpleasant because it hath no light but from that covered walk'.<sup>13</sup>

The portico was the climax of Gunnersbury's grand, processional route from the ground-floor hall, up the stairs and through the saloon. Here Webb was building on Palladian columned halls and saloons with loggias, and on the precedents provided by Inigo Jones at Newmarket and, more particularly, at the Queen's House where he had built a similar south facing loggia with a portico *in antis*.

The sale catalogue produced in 1787, after the death of Princess Amelia, in addition to the saloon on the principal floor, lists her card room, library, billiard room, morning sitting room, four bed-chambers, and two dressing rooms. The functions of the rooms can be expected to have changed after a century of use but Webb's basic plan, as recorded by Campbell, would have remained. His provision of discrete separable clusters of inter-connecting rooms, disposed around the grand, formal spaces, was indicative of a new impetus in English architecture towards spatial separation and privacy.

Webb at Gunnersbury revealed himself to be a master of architectural synthesis. He took elements from the inherited classical vocabulary and skilfully balanced them against the requirements of function to produce a type of building which was new to England. The Palladian villa at its best could provide the setting for both formality and informality without

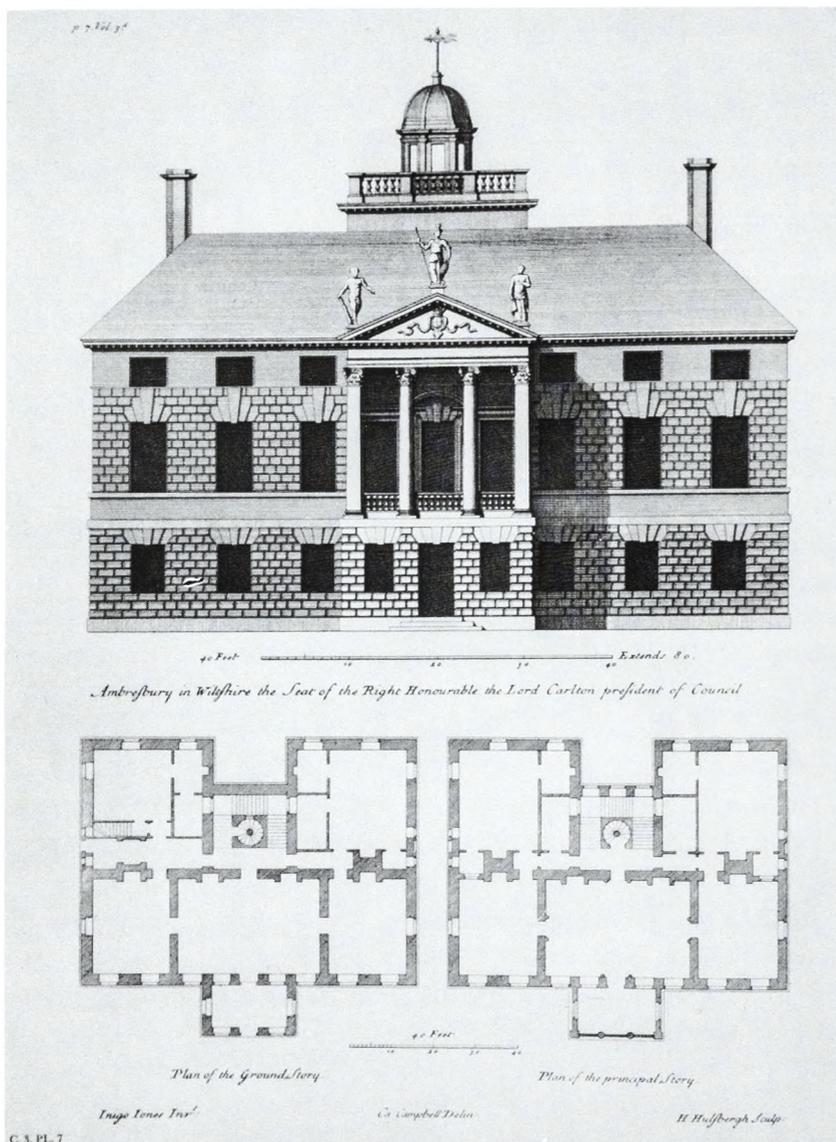


FIGURE 8. Amesbury Abbey. C. Campbell, *Vitruvius Britannicus*, III (1725)

significantly sacrificing either one to the other. Webb was to refine this mode of planning further at Amesbury.

### AMESBURY ABBEY

Amesbury has been justly described as John Webb's 'triumph in country house design'.<sup>14</sup> Themes adumbrated at Gunnersbury were here brought to mature fruition in an ensemble whose 'uncommon grandeur', C. R. Cockerell tells us, 'fills and occupies the mind'.<sup>15</sup>

Webb's Amesbury, built on the site of an older Priory, was designed before 1660 for the Marquess of Hertford. Hertford died in October 1660, shortly after being restored to the Dukedom of Somerset, and the title passed to his grandson who was only eight years old. The Marquess's death left his widow in some financial confusion and in letters written in 1664 she referred to debts 'whereof there hath beene no interest paid since the Duke's death', and to 'moneys owing to the workmen for the building at Amsbury'.<sup>16</sup>

For the sources of the design we must again look to Palladio and Inigo Jones. It has been suggested that the house is an elaboration of an early Palladio design, the Villa Godi at Lonedo, where there is a comparable symmetry about a central axis and an elevation which might have provided a model for the rear of Amesbury. However, the front of Amesbury is

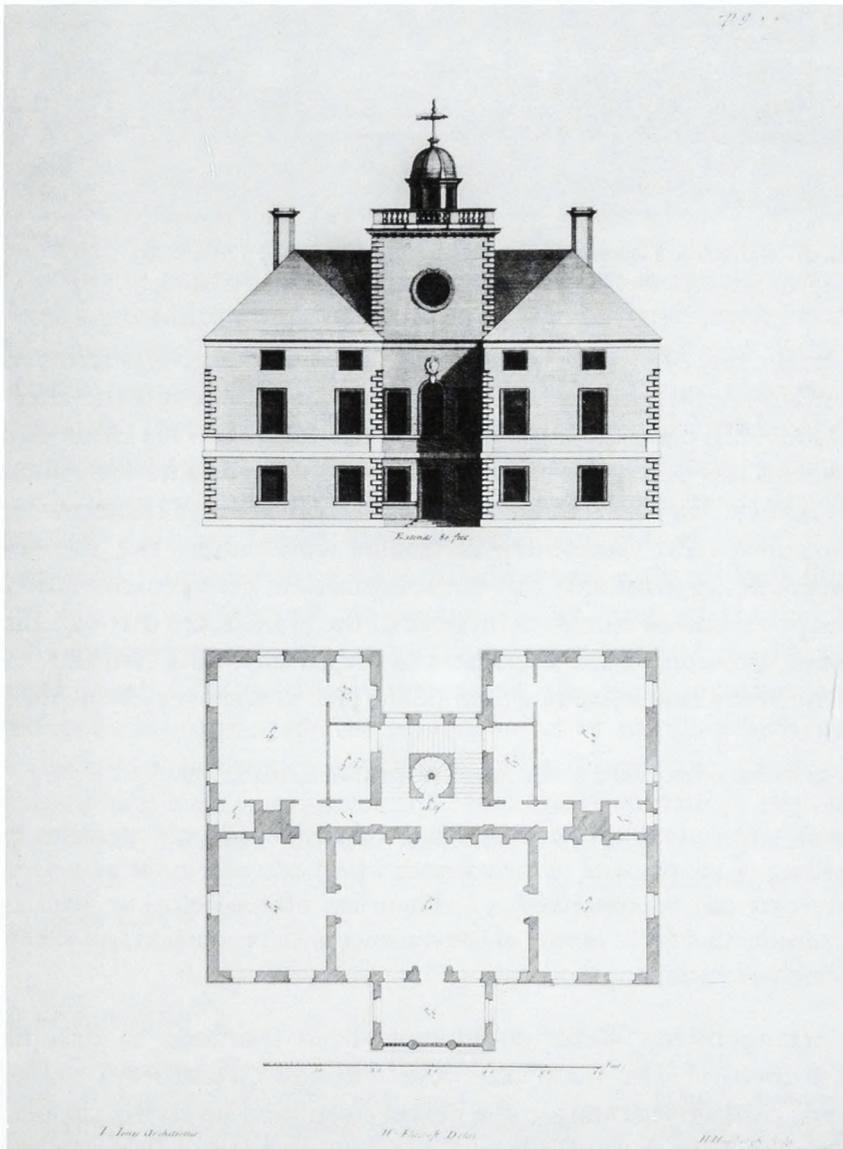


FIGURE 9. Amesbury Abbey. Rear elevation and first-floor plan. W. Kent, *Designs of Inigo Jones* (1727)

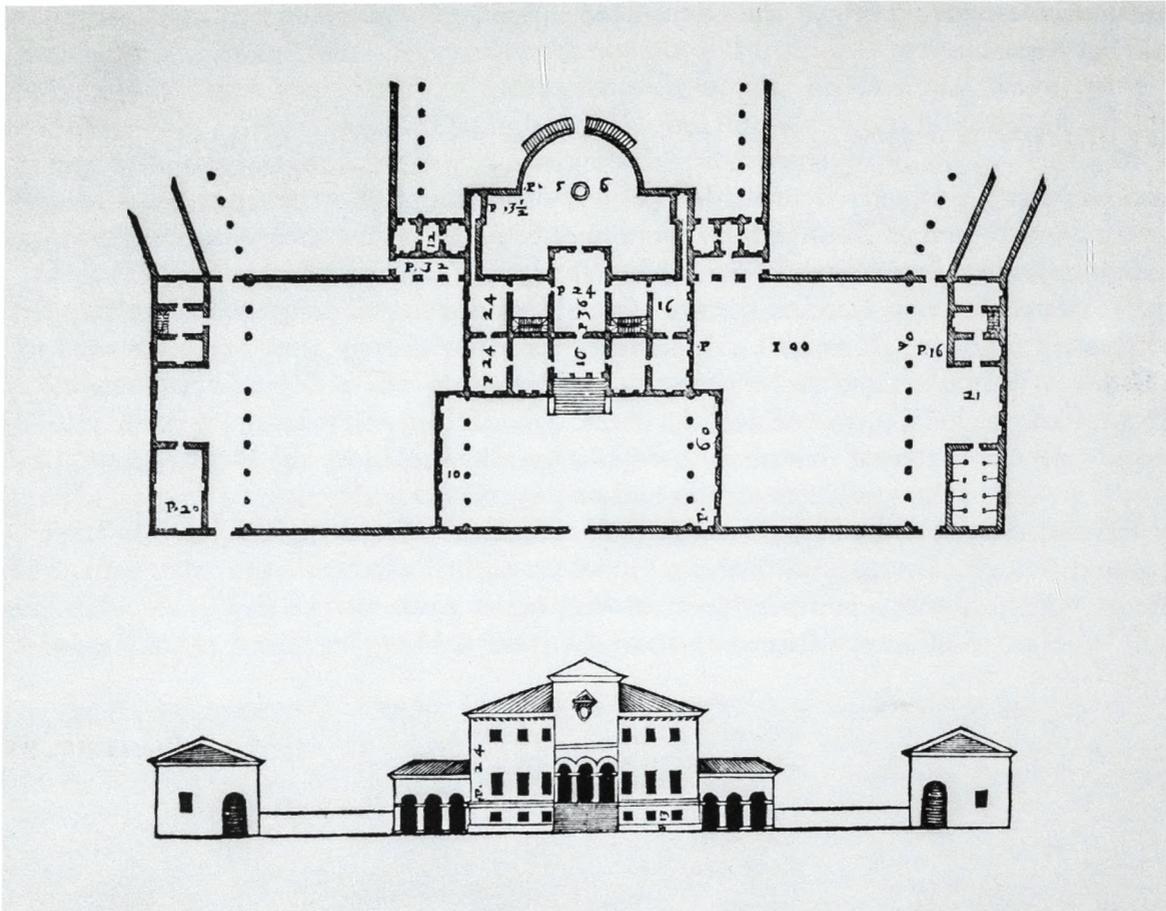


FIGURE 10. Villa Godi. A. Palladio, *I Quattro Libri dell' Architettura*, II (1570), p. 65

Jonesian rather than Palladian, in the line of descent from Newmarket, although it is stamped with Webb's own distinctive mannerisms: the dramatically heavy keystones and the alternating rusticated and ashlar masonry. In plan, the house is far subtler than the Villa Godi, and more integrated in its elements, and it is perhaps more productive to see it as a development from Gunnersbury. At Gunnersbury, the discrete clusters of interconnecting rooms were placed around the grand, formal spaces. Amesbury is smaller and tauter, the idea of interconnecting groups of rooms being retained, but communication between the suites being more direct because of the provision of corridors on both of the main floors through the centre of the house. This was made possible by the alignment of the ground-floor hall and the first-floor saloon across the front of the house, rather than being placed transversely as they were at Gunnersbury.

It was the planning of Amesbury which drew the highest praise from Cockerell:

Plan regular and remarkably elegant. Saloon above stairs delightful with handsome dressings to doors, chimney pieces and ceiling — contrivance of the staircase with backstairs in the newel the most convenient and elegant that can be conceived . . . There are offices below as well as abundant bed Ro: above & I consider that for economy of convenience with proportion and effect, it may challenge any Ho: in England ancient or modern.

For his remarkable staircase arrangement, Webb could have been indebted to designs published by both Serlio and Rubens.<sup>17</sup> The main stair rose through two storeys to the chamber floor, whilst the central, oval service stair in the newel continued up to the cupola. This very elegant arrangement inspired both Sir William Chambers and James Paine to the

sincerest form of flattery in their respective designs for Lord Bessborough's villa at Roehampton and for Belford Hall, Northumberland. In neither case did the device appeal to the owners as much as it did to the architects: the servants perhaps were too close for comfort.

The disposition of the stairs appears to have been Webb's starting point in his planning of the house. The neatness of the contrivance, allied with the provision of the corridors, enabled him to make the rear rooms especially usable as self-contained apartments, comprising bed-chambers and accompanying dressing rooms, separate from the formal sequence of hall-main stair-saloon-portico. The saloon achieved grandeur despite its relatively modest size; its coved ceiling, accommodated within the chamber storey, recalling the Cube rooms at Wilton, not only in architectural form but also in its painted decoration.

Amesbury was held in high regard in the eighteenth century. Although being in Wiltshire, it is unlikely to have been known to as many people as fashionable Gunnersbury, its design did achieve a wide circulation through being published by both Campbell and Kent. It had already inspired the first house of the neo-Palladian movement and Inigo Jones Revival, William Benson's Wilbury, and it was held in high regard by Burlington who borrowed from it at Tottenham Park.

Later in the eighteenth century, when Amesbury was owned by the Duke and Duchess of Queensbury, its accommodation was increased by the addition of wings designed by Henry Flitcroft. These were swept away in the 1830s when the house was substantially rebuilt in a rhetorical late Palladian style by the fashionable and eclectic country-house designer, Thomas Hopper. He retained some of Webb's walls and one of the original chimney-pieces, but it is essentially Hopper's house rather than Webb's which we see at Amesbury today.

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In drawing conclusions about Webb's contribution to country-house design, we are hampered by the limitations of both survival and contemporary comment, but with the aid of his drawings, his correspondence and his annotations to Palladio and Serlio, it is possible to identify certain broad characteristics and concerns. He was a system builder at heart, a would-be theoretician, yet in his commissioned buildings he was always concerned to develop his systems according to the requirements of function and he was always pragmatically prepared to trim them according to their cost. He was skilled in the synthesizing of designs, drawing repeatedly on a small number of sources, compulsively annotating and comparing 'authorities' as he worked his way towards the solution of the problem.

He favoured grand, impressive spaces, particularly the antique sequence of columned halls and cube rooms. He favoured porticoes and first-floor loggias, despite the vicissitudes of the English climate. Notwithstanding the preoccupation with grand effects, Webb also endeavoured to provide the private suites of rooms which increasingly were seen as being necessary for domestic convenience. This is especially apparent in his innovative designs for villas which were justly celebrated by a later generation, even when their author was not.

Webb, in short, was the man above all who brought to domestic practice the architectural style, the quality of construction and organization, and the intellectual integrity of the Jonesian Royal Works.

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3. Cf. H. Colvin, 'The South Front of Wilton House', *Archaeological Journal*, cxI (1954), pp. 181-90.
4. Cf. A. A. Tait, 'Isaac de Caus and the South Front of Wilton House', *Burlington Magazine*, cvI (1964),

p. 74. The de Caus drawing for the grand scheme is at Worcester College, Oxford, and for the curtailed scheme at the RIBA; v. J. Harris and A. A. Tait, *Catalogue of the drawings by Inigo Jones, John Webb and Isaac de Caus at Worcester College, Oxford* (1979), and *Catalogue of the Drawings Collection of the RIBA, C-F* (1972).

5. G. Popper and J. Reeves, 'The South Front of Wilton House', *Burlington Magazine*, cxxiv (1982), pp. 358-61.

6. Seven of the ceiling drawings are at Worcester College, v. J. Harris and A. A. Tait, *op. cit.*; others are in the collection of the RIBA, v. J. Harris, *Catalogue of the Drawings Collection of the RIBA: Inigo Jones and John Webb* (1972), and at the Ashmolean Museum, Cotelle Album 89A. The drawings of doors are at Wiltshire County Record Office, 2057 H1/1a.

7. I am indebted to Mr Gordon Higgot for sharing his ideas from his forthcoming Ph.D. thesis on the dating of the drawings: 'The Architectural Drawings

of Inigo Jones: attribution, dating and analysis', University of London.

8. D. Defoe, *A Tour thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain* (1724-26), p. 168.

9. F. Turner, *History and Antiquities of Brentford* (1922).

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11. R. T. Gunther, *The Architecture of Sir Roger Pratt* (1928), p. 37.

12. Defoe, *op. cit.*, 1742.

13. H. Colvin and J. Newman, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

14. By J. Harris, *The King's Arcadia* (Arts Council, 1973), p. 207.

15. J. Harris, 'C. R. Cockerell's "Ichnographica Domestica"', *Architectural History*, 14 (1971).

16. Wiltshire County Record Office, 1300/227A and 227B.

17. S. Serlio, *Tutte l'Opere d'Architettura et Prospetiva*, vii (1619), p. 149; P. P. Rubens, *Palazzi di Genova* (1622): Pal. del Babilano Pallavicino.