



THE
GEORGIAN
GROUP

John Harris, 'James Gibbs, Eminence
Grise at Houghton', *New Light on English
Palladianism*, Georgian Group Symposium,
1988, pp. 5-9

JAMES GIBBS, EMINENCE GRISE AT HOUGHTON

John Harris

There are a few great houses that have always been regarded as complete things: a considered work seen relentlessly through from beginning to end with no stops and starts. Houghton Hall, Norfolk, begun in 1722 to the designs of Colin Campbell, is one of them and regarded as the most complete neo-Palladian house in this country. Yet there were always problems with this simplistic viewpoint, not the least William Kent's direct intervention in the creation of architectonic interiors from 1725 and the inexplicable appearance of James Gibbs as architect of the domes, of which the south-west and south-east are dated 1725 and 1727, while another is said to be dated 1729.

There has been an extraordinary mute acceptance of this state of affairs, despite the fact that a little enquiry would reveal serious flaws in the account of the building. Not the least is a decidedly odd and non-Campbellian detail (Fig. 4) of the upper windows of the side facades, whose architraves are brought up to form scrolls, or miniature scrolled pediments, pushing against the keystone, while their lower architraves break forward as a mask in the auricular style. It was only recently when John Cornforth was re-assessing gardens and interiors¹ that I decided to turn over the evidence of Houghton's building and see how it related to the appearance of this trio of architects, all of whom hated each other!

Sir Robert Walpole inherited the estate in 1700. When Sir Matthew Decker visited the house in 1728 he was correctly informed that the plantations were then 21 years old, due to improvements begun in 1707, the year an attempt was made to reconstruct the old house. The architect employed is likely to have been Alderman Henry Bell of Kings Lynn, who was then building Andrew Fountaine's house at nearby Narford. Bell and Walpole were not only friends, but in return for political favours, Walpole had secured for Bell a Captaincy in the Marshland Militia. It is worth commenting at this juncture that the only precedents in English architecture for windows of the aforementioned Houghton sort are to be found on buildings by Bell in King's Lynn and at Kimbolton Castle.

Whatever was done to Houghton has not been recorded, and after another attempt to reconstruct the old house in 1716, Walpole finally decided to build a new one in 1720. This final decision probably initiated the survey by Thomas Badeslade showing a Switzerian garden with wiggly paths and the outline of what must have been the old house. Not much can be deduced from the block plan, but it was nearly as large as the new Houghton and had main fronts of unequal length forming small courts at the ends. A forecourt was flanked by office blocks.

Hitherto the process of building the new house has been seen as fairly straightforward.² Thomas Ripley the architect, and a valued servant of Walpole's, was appointed supervisor in 1720, and we can speculate that Isaac Ware, then apprenticed to him, might have been employed in the works office, his first introduction to a house that he would later commemorate in a grand folio monograph.³ In June 1721 Ripley was viewing timber for the house. In August he was investigating stone at quarries, and Robert Hardy was appointed clerk of works. On 24th May 1722 there were celebrations when the first

stone was laid, and by 7th December the brick cellars had been completed and the first stone course laid. So much seems straightforward, and it has always been assumed that Campbell had already been appointed architect, even if his name does not appear in the admittedly sparse accounts. But was he? When we turn to his two elevational designs⁴ they are clearly inscribed, initialled and dated, 'First Design 1723 CC', that is by the old calendar after the end of March that year. Now all this is quite extraordinary, for these 'First' designs were produced nearly three years after Ripley's appointment and a year after the laying of the first stone. It does not make sense, and the answer may lie in those puzzling windows.

There is one clue to this enigma. In the RIBA Drawings Collection there are two elevations (Figs 1 and 2)⁵ in Gibbs's hand. The authenticity of these has not been questioned, and Dr. Terry Friedman in his monograph on Gibbs (1984) has rightly recognized Gibbs's hand and their provenance from Campbell's collection of drawings. This biographer of Gibbs did not enquire further, but then nor did Mr Harris when he catalogued these drawings with Campbell's own for Houghton!

The puzzling windows are there on the sides, and Dr. Friedman reasonably assumed that these elevations were drawn up by Gibbs to see how the intended domes would look. However, when the drawings are examined in detail worrying discrepancies with the built Houghton are to be observed. Indeed, there are so many that we must conclude that the drawings are designs made before 1723. In brief, a few concern window details and sizes, variations on the rustics, a different door to the portico, a different approach stairs, varying proportions and ratios of wall to void, and the actual measurements of the block plan. How do we explain this?

Although the well known view made by Edmund Prideaux,⁶ showing scaffolding in position and the south-west dome of 1725 completed, has often been published, it has not been observed that the domes replaced a conventional hipped roof, rather than Campbell's architectonic Wilton-style towers as published in *Vitruvius Britannicus* III, 1725. We might wryly speculate that even then Kent and Gibbs were at work, a full year before Campbell dates a design for the office blocks. Campbell must have been furious at the obnoxious Gibbs meddling with his house. but was it his house? It seems not.

One other document in the RIBA may buttress the case for Gibbs as architect of Houghton in 1720 or 1721. A plan⁷ (Fig. 3) that does not come from the Campbell Collection is inscribed 'Sr. Robt. Walpole's at Houghton' in a hand that is suspiciously like Gibbs's. Not only does it fit Gibbs's elevations, but it has an identical arrangement of stairs to the saloon front. It is surely significant that this plan of extended double-pile Pratt-Clarendon House derivation is peculiar to Gibbs, but not to Campbell who never used it when building new or inventing theoretical designs.

At this point it is useful to introduce Edward Harley (later 2nd Earl of Oxford), to whom Gibbs owed everything, for Harley was his constant promoter. Although Harley and Walpole were often politically divided, in the early 1720s they shared a deep love and reverence for Cambridge. When Harley sent Gibbs's designs for the Senate House to Cambridge in 1721, Walpole could hardly have been unaware or unappreciative of this, and he contributed generously to the building. There is also the active promotion by both of the building of King's College in 1723.

Later Harley was full of contempt for Houghton. In 1732 he wrote that the domes were 'by Gibbs from the *first design* [my italics]. The house as it is now is a composition of the greatest blockheads and the most ignorant fellows in architecture that are. I think Gibbs was to blame to alter any of their designs or mend their blunders'. In the light of the RIBA drawings this makes some sense, that they are the 'first design', but 'now' spoiled by 'blockheads', meaning surely Campbell and Kent. Even if there is some

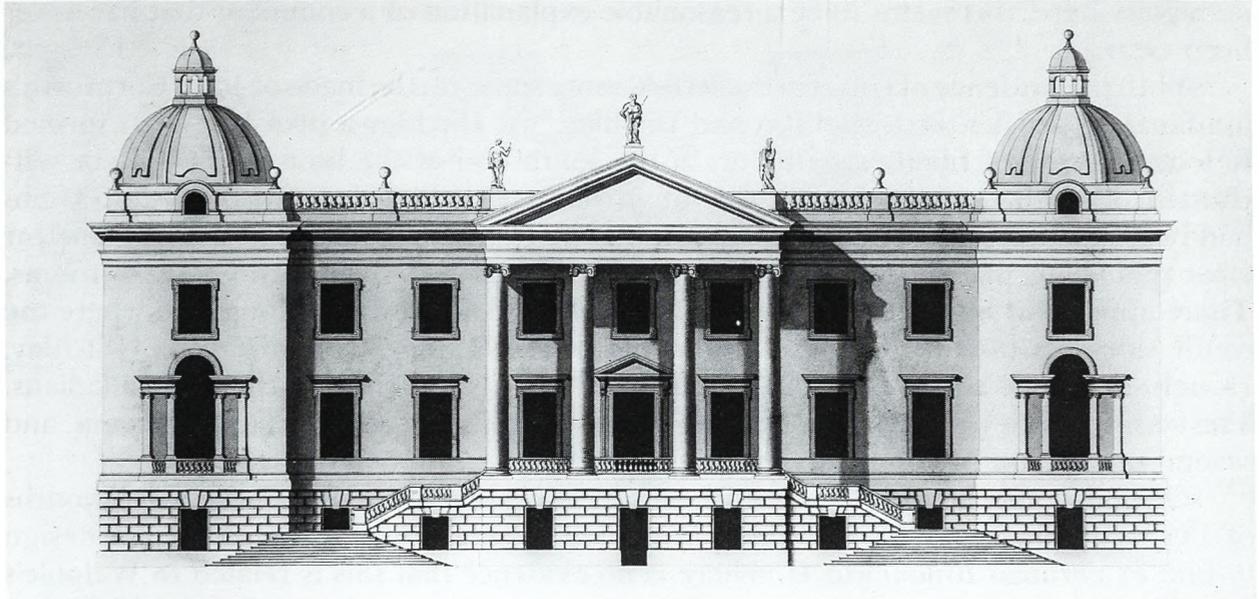


FIG. 1. James Gibbs, elevation of portico front for Houghton (British Architectural Library Drawings Collection)

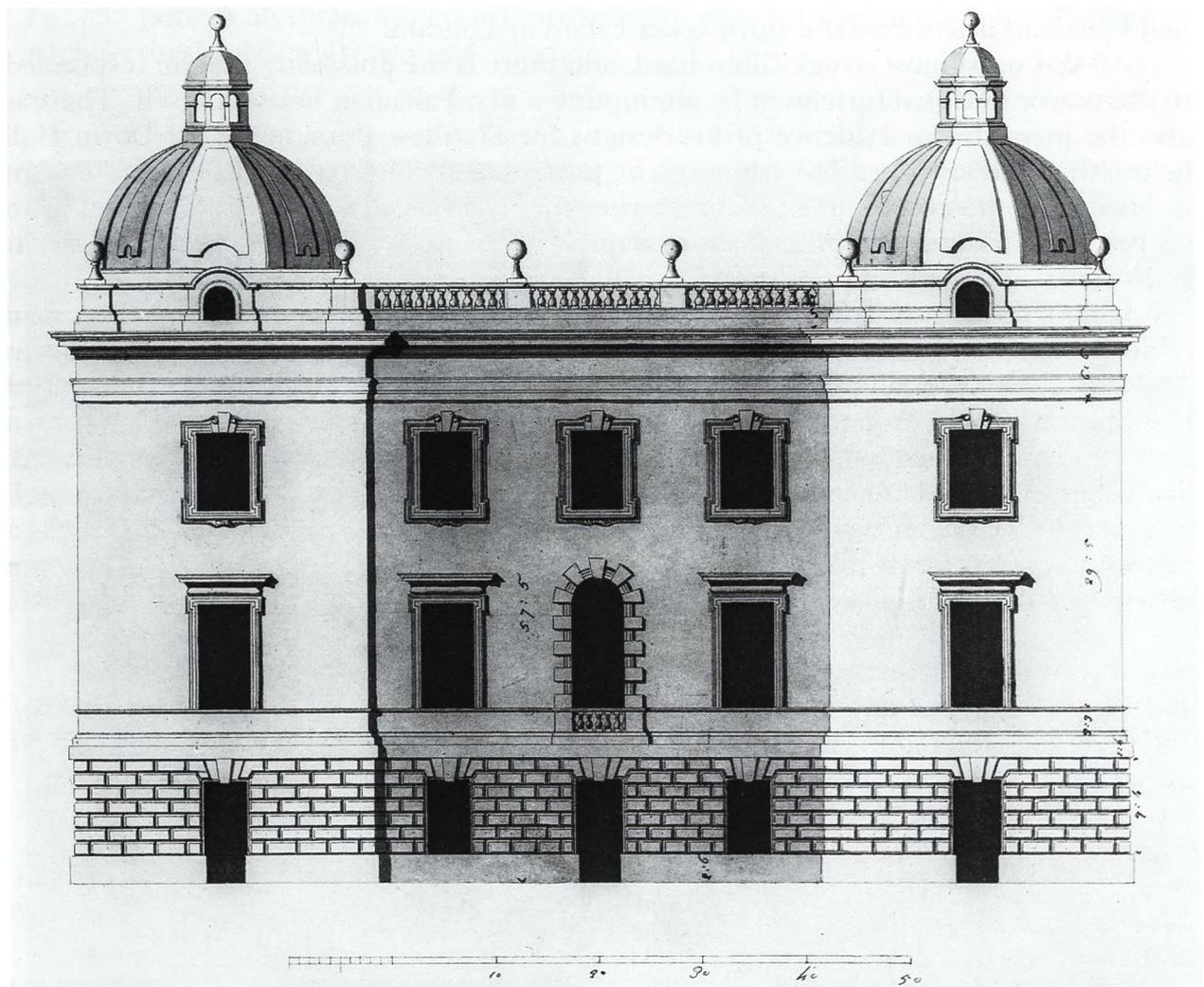


FIG. 2. James Gibbs, elevation of side front for Houghton (British Architectural Library Drawings Collection)

ambiguity here, this seems to be a reasonable explanation of a comment that has never been clear.

With the evidence of Gibbs in the RIBA, more sense can be made of John Cornforth's illuminating articles on Houghton and Ditchley.⁸ At Ditchley a plan had been formed to locate a suite of family apartments at the south end of the house. These were self-contained and had access from a sort of garden court. Significantly, by 1723-5 Gibbs had been pushed aside by Henry Flitcroft and William Kent, although it is still unclear what role Gibbs played in the building of the fabric and the very few Gibbsian rooms. There appears to be direct cause and effect between Ditchley and Houghton where the south side was also formed as a self-contained unit for the family. Like Ditchley, Houghton can be seen to possess rooms in the styles of Gibbs and the neo-Palladians. The stone chimney piece in the Hunting Room, that in Sir Robert's Supper Room, and several others, are in Gibbs's style, not that of either Campbell or Kent.

Obviously the crucial years of this enquiry are 1720 and 1721. In the early months of 1717 Campbell may have come to Walpole's attention when he dedicated a design to him in *Vitruvius Britannicus* II, There is no evidence that this is related to Walpole's rebuilding attempt the previous year. However, it must have been clear to Gibbs that the Great House was undergoing a reformation. Campbell's neo-Palladian Mereworth was begun by 1721, the year of Lord Burlington's Tottenham Park. By this year also John James's Wricklemarsh was rising at Blackheath; and there was all the very obvious neo-Palladian activity on the Burlington Estate in London.

All this must have struck Gibbs hard, and there is the possibility that he responded to the power of this reformation by attempting a neo-Palladian house himself. There is also the inconclusive evidence of his designs for Matthew Prior made for Down Hall before that poet died in 1720. Although he published an advanced neo-Palladian design in his *Book of Architecture* in 1728, and writes that it was made for Prior, the block plan on Bridgeman's garden designs⁹ shows a quite different H-shaped house to the villa as published.

It may seem astounding that Gibbs might have made designs for Houghton, had them passed on to Campbell, who purloined them as his own. However, this was Campbell's way, he who could blatantly expunge Gibbs's name from the roll-call of British architects in *Vitruvius Britannicus*. Of course, we must consider Walpole's role in all this. It would be in character for him arbitrarily to employ or dismiss as whim dictated, turning from Gibbs to Campbell, then to Kent, and perhaps back to Gibbs, although there are no documents to prove that Gibbs was actually on site from 1725. This is a convoluted story, but it may do good by compelling us to see the building of the Great House as a far more complex process than at first appears.

NOTES

1. In: John Cornforth, 'Houghton Hall, Norfolk', *Country Life*, 30th April, 1987, 7th May, 1987; and in 'The Growth of an Idea', *Country Life*, 14th May, 1987.

2. What documents have survived are published in J. H. Plumb, *Sir Robert Walpole*, 2 vols., London 1956.

3. Isaac Ware, *The Plans, Elevations and Sections of Houghton in Norfolk*, 1735, the first monograph on a neo-Palladian house.

4. Cf. John Harris, *Catalogue of the Drawings*

Collection of the Royal Institute of British Architects, Colen Campbell, 1973, no. 7, (8-9).

5. Harris *op. cit.*, no. 7, (12-13).

6. Edmund Prideaux, cf. John Harris, 'The Prideaux Collection of Topographical Drawings' in *Architectural History*, vol. 7, 1964, pl. 50.

7. Harris, Campbell, *op. cit.*, no. 7 (7).

8. Cf. John Cornforth in *Country Life*, 17th and 24th November 1988.

9. Terry Friedman, *James Gibbs*, 1984, pp. 299-300.

