



THE
GEORGIAN
GROUP

Maurice Howard, “‘His Lordship was the chiefest architect’: patrons as builders in 16th-century England”, *The Role of the Amateur Architect*, Georgian Group Symposium, 1993, pp. 7–13

“HIS LORDSHIP WAS THE CHIEFEST ARCHITECT”: PATRONS AS BUILDERS IN 16TH-CENTURY ENGLAND

Maurice Howard

My brief analysis of the 16th-century is confined to the very familiar ground of great domestic buildings. While the patronage of civic and ecclesiastical buildings reveals much of interest, from the point of view of the later concept of the “amateur” it is with the building of their houses that patrons’ most personal architectural voice is developed. I wish to examine the extent of the physical distance between patron and site in the 16th century, and the mental one as well, for the clue to their role in building lies in the consistency of attention they brought to both the design process and to the bricks and mortar of construction.

We must obviously beware of imposing on the 16th century a linear, smoothly evolutionary view of the development of the complex interaction between patrons of buildings and the executants of their ideas. Our perception of this process in later periods should not simply be extended backwards. The word “amateur”, as it is used from the late 18th century onwards, does not only indicate “non-professional”; it can also imply an enthusiasm that may lack discipline.¹ I suspect, however, that our concept of the “amateur” patron based on later, principally 18th-century examples, is not of someone poorly prepared in the theory and practice of architecture in commissioning a building. Rather, we imagine someone well-versed from the close study of treatises and pattern books, the beneficiary of a self-directed architectural education. The knowledge gained thereby enabled close supervision of every stage of building; from the choice of a correct or appropriate mode of design, through discussion of plans and suitable building materials, to the application of details of ornament outside and in, fixed and moveable.

In using the word “mode” I am implying a knowledge of decorum and therefore also implying that the architectural literacy of the later “amateur” was largely based on the exploration of the language of the revival of Classicism that provided the dominant discourse in Europe from the 15th century onwards but is usually assumed to be first fully understood in England only in the 17th century. That is to say I have to assume that a view from hindsight means that a judgment of 16th century building by later standards of Classicism is inevitable. Sixteenth-century English patrons were not simply precursors of this later definition of the “amateur”. Many recent scholars have stressed that their knowledge of building was complex in its grasp of the practicalities of construction, mixing modern architectural theory with more traditional advice books on health and other matters. They selected from the wide potential of Classical architecture open to them in the books they increasingly collected not because their understanding was flawed or erratic but because they wished to place these ideas in the context of familiar buildings, both in plan and in elevation.²

Two passages just a couple of paragraphs apart in Mark Girouard’s introduction to his book on Robert Smythson might seem at first sight to contradict each other, but in fact together sum up the situation perfectly. Having just warned against identifying figures such as Thomas Graves and Robert Adams, Surveyors of the Royal Works under Elizabeth I, as architects in the modern sense, Girouard turns his attention to their contemporary patrons and writes: “the employers and their friends form a more tangible and formidable body. It is reasonable enough to suppose that dealing as they were, not with architects of authority and repute but with comparatively uneducated and obscure artificers, their influence was greater than in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; and that they were more ready to dictate features of the design or to

alter it once it had been made". Then, stressing these patrons' needs of the expertise of others to realise their ideas on paper, he concludes, however, that "... the evidence is lacking that would enable us to call any of these amateurs architects in the same way as Alberti in Italy or, later, Sir Roger Pratt and Lord Burlington in England".³ Just so. If 16th-century patrons had a greater control over the building process it was not principally because they knew about architecture in the later sense of the term. The control was exerted through their command over manpower and resources; changes of direction in the building programme resulted from the aggrandisement of their power and the subsequent need to inflate the visible signs of their social position. This paper will concern itself, therefore, with how that control of the building process operated and what it sought to achieve.

The powerful figures of Tudor England faced conflicting advice on the efficacy and propriety of spending their money on domestic building. On the one hand, there were warnings about the dire consequences of excessive spending and ostentation, citing biblical and classical examples. This was frequently coupled, in the post-Reformation period, with a lament that traditional values of hospitality, once accepted by great house-owners as their responsibility, had been abandoned.⁴ On the other hand, a different kind of advice literature, and particularly the growing chorus of nationalistic topographical literature, commended individuals for spending on building if the result was an expression of the power and prosperity of great towns and cities or underlined the magnanimity of great rulers.⁵ Henry VIII was praised for his palaces by comparison with classical examples of rulers who were noted for building and, by extension, other acts of statesmanship; William Harrison comments that the King was "nothing inferior in this trade to Adrian the emperor and Justinian the law-giver".⁶ Since some of the greatest Elizabethan and Jacobean courtier houses were built to house the monarch on progress, their patrons might be expected to excuse their buildings as extensions of the glorification of the state. Their status as "royal" buildings extended to their making in the first place, for men such as William Cecil, Lord Burghley, employed the skills of the Royal Works for his own houses.⁷ But how far were great houses expressions of personal position and power?

One thing that impeded full control of the building process on a day-to-day basis in Tudor England was simply a question of time and therefore regular commitment. An important thread that runs through the 16th century is the patron *in absentia*. Nevertheless, it is often remarkable how much the patron managed to supervise, with the key help of deputies on site. The Henrician courtiers are a case in point. Their houses, technologically and structurally inferior to their Elizabethan counterparts, were built at great speed and often largely without their presence.⁸

Among the State Papers is the correspondence in 1535 between Thomas Cromwell and his bailiff which records the progress of his buildings at Austin Friars, at Hackney and at Ewhurst in Hampshire. Cromwell was by this time Chancellor of the Exchequer, Master of the Rolls and Master of the King's Jewels and too busy to be much on site. He received, nevertheless, detailed information about every practical aspect of construction, the carriage of materials and the payment of moneys to workmen. This example opens up for us the key matter of the importance of the relationship between patrons and their amanuenses on site. The Cromwell papers also reveal the wider net of local help that the patron needed to cultivate. "On Sunday last past" the bailiff writes, "I went to Ewhurst and there I vewed yo^r goodly frames; the doble fflores of yo^r hall and soler under yt be ffynsshed, and also the two sydes of yo^r hall and parte of the same caryed from the frame to the watersyde and more dayly shall come up by the grace of god/ they have busynes to gett caryage/ by cause of haye time and harvest/ but the parson of Ewhurst, which is good and diligent in yo^r busynes there saith we shall have cartes this next weke."⁹

Carriage of materials can sometimes be an early sign of an intention to build. Sir Thomas Wriothesley was having Caen stone shipped to the vicinity of Titchfield Abbey in Hampshire

some nine months before the dissolution of the Premonstratensien Abbey that he was to adapt into a new residence. Once dissolution had taken place, at the end of 1537, a remarkable series of letters from the royal commissioners and others on site record the progress of work and it remains the most extraordinary documentation of the *ad hoc* way some of these former religious sites were changed.¹⁰ Wriothesley is constantly urged to come to Titchfield and see the progress but he appears not to have done so for the entire period of work in the first months of 1538. He clearly though kept a sharp distant eye and knew what he wanted from the very preliminary stage of making a plan. One of the commissioners wrote: “for lak of tyme and opportunitie to mak a new plat I have sent yor owne agayne corrected as we think mete”.¹¹ The 16th century is full of references to patrons who drew their own plans, though quite how skilled or detailed these were is hard to determine.

The work at Titchfield also reveals another pattern of communication so key to the Tudor era; the close sharing of expertise among groups of courtiers whereby the transmission of knowledge became both a means of exchanging practical information and advice, and also an opportunity for kinds of social deference, of acknowledging the astute judgment of a fellow-courtier. At the time of dissolution, Sir William Paget, two steps behind his old schoolfellow, Wriothesley, in the greasy pole to power at Henry VIII’s court, and later builder of West Drayton, Beaudesert and the enlarged Exeter House in London, came to Titchfield, to advise on the viability of the site before the great changes commenced. Three months later a second visitor on Wriothesley’s behalf was Sir Richard Lee, later a famous surveyor of defences for the Crown and the deviser of his own monastic adaptation at the former Benedictine house of Sopwell on the outskirts of St Albans. It is clear that Lee had already had a hand in the building for he says in his letter to Wriothesley that the workmen on site plan to make the roof of the hall “shorter than I purposed it”.¹²

The degree of the patron’s involvement with the process of design and the execution of the building could be of a more profound kind if the statesman were relieved of great duties and found himself in retirement. Few were lucky enough to secure voluntary retirement from the court of Henry VIII, but one who got away with this was William, Lord Sandys who grew increasingly estranged from the King’s religious policies as the 1530s passed. For someone whose chief post was Lord Chamberlain of the Royal Household he managed to avoid attendance at Court successfully a number of times and was virtually absent altogether by the end of the decade. His major house had of course been The Vyne, Hampshire, until his assumption of the former monastic house of Mottisfont in the same county. By the summer of 1538 we know that he was keeping house near the site in order to oversee his works there. In a letter to Lady Lisle, the priest John Atkinson remarks: “He makes a goodly place of the priory and intends to lie there most of his life.”¹³ We know very little beyond this comment of Sandys’s involvement in the progress of his house, and he was to die in 1540. In another case however, semi-retirement crucially changed the direction of a building’s style. This is the house of Sir Thomas Smith at Hill Hall in Essex, where he took up semi-permanent residence from 1566 and to this house we shall return.

These are exceptions; by and large, great patrons remained distant figures, even when manifestly interested in the practice of building. Sir Christopher Hatton’s house at Holdenby in Northamptonshire became one of the most celebrated of the Elizabethan age, yet, predictably for one of Elizabeth’s most favoured courtiers and later Lord Chancellor, he was rarely at the house, as is revealed in the commendation for generosity in Barnabe Rich’s comment of 1581 that at Holdenby “such worthy . . . daily, hospitality kept, that although the owner himself useth not to come there once in two years . . .”¹⁴ One such visitor in Hatton’s absence was William Cecil in 1579 and their correspondence at this time remains one of the most famous and revealing of the shared experience among the courtier class. Hatton writes, acknowledging his debt

to Cecil's own house: "I fear me that as your Lordship shall find my house unbuilt and very far from good order . . . I humbly beseech you, my honourable Lord, for your opinion to the surveyor of such lacks and faults as shall appear to you in this rude building, for as the same is done hitherto in direct observation of your house and plot at Tyball's, so I earnestly pray your Lordship that by your good corrections at this time, it may prove as like to the same as it hath every meant to be . . ." ¹⁵

This physically distant patronage meant that houses were long in fulfilment and what resulted was a hybrid of the patron's aspirations at different periods of a successful career at Court. William Cecil was responsible for two major country houses. Theobalds, the manor of which Cecil bought in 1564, was, like Holdenby, developed principally in response to its role as a major venue of Queen Elizabeth's progresses.¹⁶ Burghley in Northamptonshire, more distant from London, had been his father's purchase. It was the chosen name of Cecil's peerage, and the local town of Stamford the chosen site for his burial. The house developed in such a way as it now reveals Cecil's own perception of his social position and his place in history.¹⁷ This was a lawyer whose legal taste for precedent led him to spend what little time he could spare copying out the genealogies of many of the great families of Europe.¹⁸ Burghley is a house that appears to blend the Classical increasingly with aspects of the medieval and it does seem that his visits there, sometimes years apart, prompted changes in direction that were the result of his increasing self-identity with traditional indications of social status, particularly after being raised to the peerage in 1571. It is now generally believed that what appear to be the most stylistically traditional parts of the structure, the great hall and vaulted kitchen, date from the later phase of building operations here, after the mid-1570s, as does the extraordinary west front, whose familiar, early-Tudor style presentation of central gatehouse, oriel windows and battlements are all expressed in Classical mouldings and features in miniature; arches for battlements, urns, obelisks. Given what we know, or can reconstruct, of the appearance of the earlier Theobalds, where Cecil used a more singular architectural vocabulary, the mix of architectural language in the later phases of Burghley was clearly an act of conscious choice.

What then makes for the difference between the great sprawling edifices of the leading courtiers and other great houses? If as historians of architecture we have identified a species of house with seemingly a tighter architectural integrity of plan or appearance than the likes of Burghley or Holdenby, to what extent is this due to the knowledge of the patrons concerned and their involvement with the building's progress? I will take three examples to explore different aspects of this, highlighting in turn what the practical hands-on experience of supervising building can achieve, how control of the economics of building can fulfil an extraordinarily ambitious idea and finally, on the verge of a completely new phase, how a patron who concentrated his mind on matching his reading to first-hand experience of the modern buildings of his day, found a new language of building that suited his needs.

The house that Sir John Thynne completed at Longleat in Wiltshire in 1580 was the result of almost 35 years of building work and the fourth structure on the site: there was an early house adapted from the original Augustinian priory, later given an extra wing and some form of Classically-ornamented symmetry; then a great fire in 1567 which led to a third phase and finally to a fourth, commencing about 1572, when the enveloping of the entire building with the present facades was carried out and completed within eight years. Thynne was certainly an intimate of the highest courtiers, though never holding, or it seems ever seeking, high office himself. His experience of great architectural projects came early in his career in the role of steward to Edward Seymour, Duke of Somerset and Lord Protector to Edward VI. He was therefore directly responsible for overseeing the building works at the Protector's great domestic projects, at Syon, Bedwyn Brail in Wiltshire and most famously, Somerset House. The connection between these projects and the final Longleat is not easy to draw, though a great deal of writing on the

house has assumed that somehow it was meant to resolve in more forthright and elaborate Classical dress, the Somerset House Strand facade.

Thynne seems at all times to have acted as his own surveyor, for throughout the extensive documentation no one else is ever mentioned in this role. It appears, however, that the key to the realisation of his ideas was the appointment of skilled and proven masons whom he selected after their success at other sites, most notably, for the realisation of the final phase, the construction of the facades, the appointment of Robert Smythson and the Frenchman, Allan Maynard. Longleat is thus an example of a much altered and revised house, brought to fruition by the dogged determination of its instigator, whose experience of the daily challenges of building made every detail seem important. Girouard cites, from the Longleat papers, the satire on Thynne by William Darrell of Littlecote in which the house takes on a personality of its own to lament its ever-changing appearance: "But now see him that by these thirtie yeares almost with such turmoyle of mynd hath byn thinking of me, framing and erecting me, musing many a tyme with great care and now and then pulling downe this or that part of me to enlardge sometyme a foote, or some few inches, uppon a conceyt, or this or that man's speech, and by and by beat down windows for this or that fault here or there."¹⁹

Control over the economics of building is exerted through the command of the building's physical resources and the ability to manage finance so that costs do not get out of control and the project can be realised. Elizabeth, Countess of Shrewsbury's work at Hardwick in Derbyshire is an extraordinary tale of value for money, based on the patron's previous experience of building projects at Chatsworth, a careful supervision of the building programme (her absences at Court were usually times when little building was carried out) and the necessity of using the materials over whose supply she had command. From the accounts edited by David Durant and Philip Riden, at a rough estimate the building of the old and new halls at Hardwick during the 1580s and 1590s cost something like £5,000 each, hardly more than twice the cost of relatively modest houses built 60 and 70 years earlier for which we have documentation and despite the great inflation of prices and wages that had taken place in the middle of the century.²⁰ The major part of the materials came either from her own estates or from those of her closest relatives; the limestone from a nearby quarry, the lead and slates from the estates of her Cavendish sons, the iron and glass from works she set up at South Wingfield, just a few miles distant. Only certain amounts of timber seem to have come from any further away.

A useful comparison here and a bench-mark of Bess of Hardwick's success comes from the decade following the completion of new Hardwick Hall, in the building of Robert Cecil's house at Hatfield in Hertfordshire from 1607 to 1612. Robert Cecil's late enthusiasm for great building enterprises led him to commission four great projects at the same time, a course which led to great financial difficulties and the temporary cessation of work in the spring of 1609. Hatfield cost in excess of £38,000, nearly four times as much as the two Hardwick houses put together.²¹ The bricks were made locally and one account for the timber suggests that this was purchased from the local estates of an adjacent landowner. For the rest, and particularly for consignments of Caen stone and Carrara marble for fireplaces, Robert Cecil paid huge sums for expensive materials that then had to be carried long distances. It can be argued, therefore, that in comparison to Bess, Robert Cecil's pursuit of the old form of courtier house, further aggrandized following his elevation to the Lord Treasurership in 1608, left him at the mercy of a building campaign for which he was financially unprepared and inexperienced.

Experience of organizing a building programme, allied to a more regular attendance on site, was one way of realizing the patron's wishes, and another the secure economic viability to make it happen. But it is undeniably a clear sense of purpose based on careful preparation through study of texts and evaluation of contemporary building that made for the most integrated achievement and one that looked forward to the great houses of the post Elizabethan-

Jacobean period. All the patrons hitherto discussed collected books on architecture and it was the practice to visit and gain inspiration from the houses of one's peer group.²² But the protracted building works of many great houses, particularly the so-called prodigy houses of the late-Elizabethan age, usually, with one or two exceptions, demonstrate an engagement with architectural treatises that did not seek to apply consistently the precepts therein. Moreover, these books needed to be a resource for everyday building practice. As the study of architecture became increasingly recognized as an ingredient of the aristocrat's education, so this threatened to turn this reading into something of a literary exercise and not prompt the use of books as working tools, as the means of resolving practical problems, a true step to professionalism. A major exception to this in the 16th-century was Sir Thomas Smith, for work carried out on Hill Hall during the 1580s revealed successive changes to a courtyard house that did follow an ever more particularized architectural vocabulary, one that was especially French in character and reflected the extended period that Smith spent in France between 1562 and 1566.²³ As he collected more books on architecture, so their previous dispersal under the headings "Mathematica" and "Philosophica" in his library was replaced by the new grouping of "Architectura" to include, amongst others, his new acquisitions of du Cerceau's 1559 *Livre d'architecture* and Philibert de l'Orme's 1561 *Nouvelles inventions pour bien bastir*.

In the early 17th century, it is Sir Roger Townshend who truly signifies a changing practice by patrons. Linda Campbell's article in *Architectural History* fleshed out more fully than before his personality and architectural education, underlining the already accepted opinion that his house of Raynham in Norfolk need not, for all its novelty, be attributed to Inigo Jones for want of a more likely inventor of its design, but that Townshend and his mason, William Edge, could well have devised it.²⁴ Like some of the most thoroughgoing and radical houses of the previous century (not therefore like the vast majority of great early Tudor houses, but like Hardwick New Hall of the 1590s) Townshend began his house on a completely new site. Indeed he changed his mind about this since foundations for one house laid in 1619 were abandoned after a re-think in 1622.

Set to inherit at least one great family home, his grandfather, Sir Nathaniel Bacon's Stiffkey, just 12 miles distant, Townshend was assured of wealth and position but not burdened by creating his new house in any familiar courtier image. Evidence now shows that in the crucial years 1618-19 he travelled to see the newest English buildings of his day and particularly Jones's works at Newmarket (though probably not, at this early date, the Prince's Lodging) and the Strand house of Fulke Greville. He also purchased books on architecture and at the same time "a payre of brasse compasses with steel poyntes", "a payer of little brasse compasses" and "a box rule with all devition thereon". While the eventual length of the work at Raynham, still unfinished at Townshend's death in January 1637, should warn us against privileging the early years of work up to 1622 (after which very little information about the building's progress survives) it does seem that, in the initial phase of his plans to build, Townshend's curiosity about modern building was matched by a freedom from constraint of building type and an ability to bring books and technical skills to bear on his project to produce something visibly, and probably on paper, coherent and achievable.

The triumph of Classical architecture had as much to do with its practicality, its offering of order and compactness to domestic buildings and the chance to work through problems with the treatise to hand as it was to do with some innate persuasion of style and ornament. Townshend may only be one of several contenders at this period, but he may be the proto "amateur" we are looking for.

NOTES

1. The first example of the word "amateur" given by the *Oxford English Dictionary* dates from 1784.

2. Alice T. Friedman, "Did England Have a Renaissance? Classical and Anticlassical Themes in Elizabethan Culture", *Cultural Difference and Cultural Identity in the Visual Arts*. Studies in the History of Art, 27, Washington D.C., The National Gallery of Art, 1989, 95-111.
3. Mark Girouard, *Robert Smythson and the Elizabethan Country House*, New Haven and London, 1983, 9-10.
4. Felicity Heal, *The Idea of Hospitality in Early Modern England*, Oxford, 1990.
5. The conflict between spending on building as indications of both excess and of "magnificence" has most recently been discussed by David Thomson, *Renaissance Architecture, Critics, Patrons, Luxury*, Manchester, 1993. See pp. 38-48 on England.
6. William Harrison, *Description of England in Shakespeare's Youth*, ed. F.J. Furnivall, London, 1877-80, I, 267. Also on Henry VIII's reputation for building see Simon Thurley, *The Royal Palaces of Tudor England*, New Haven and London, 1993, 39-40.
7. Mark Girouard, "Burghley House, Lincolnshire — I" *Country Life*, April 23, 1992.
8. Maurice Howard, *The Early Tudor Country House, Architecture and Politics 1490-1550*, London, 1987, *passim*.
9. P.R.O. S.P. 1/95, 71.
10. The documents were published in part by William St. John Hope, "The Making of Place House at Titchfield, near Southampton, in 1538" *Archaeological Journal* LXIII, 1906, 231-43.
11. P.R.O. S.P. 1/128, 24-27.
12. P.R.O. S.P. 1/130, 129-30.
13. *Letters and Papers, Henry VIII*, XIII (2), 176.
14. Cited in Eric St. John Brooks, *Sir Christopher Hatton, Queen Elizabeth's Favourite*, London, 1946, 159.
15. *Ibid.* 157-58.
16. Sir John Summerson, "The Building of Theobalds 1564-1585", *Archaeologia* XCVII 1959, 107-26.
17. Girouard, *Country Life*, 1992, *op. cit.*
18. B.W. Beckinsale, *Burghley*, London, 1967, 245-69.
19. On Longleat, Mark Girouard, "The Development of Longleat House between 1546 and 1572", *Archaeological Journal* CXVI, 1961, 200-22 and Chapter 1 of *idem, Robert Smythson, op. cit.* See p.76 for the Darrell satire.
20. *The Building of Hardwick Hall* edited by David N. Durant and Philip Riden, Derbyshire Record Society, Part 1, 1980, Part 2 (1591-98) 1984.
21. Lawrence Stone, "The Building of Hatfield House" *Archaeological Journal* CXII, 1955, 100-28.
22. On the collecting of architectural books, see the Appendix to Lucy Gent, *Picture and Poetry 1560-1622. Relations between Literature and the Visual Arts in the English Renaissance*, Leamington Spa, 1981.
23. P.J. Drury, "A Fayre House Buylt by Sir Thomas Smith": The Development of Hill Hall, Essex 1557-81' *Journal of the British Archaeological Association* CXXXVI, 1983, 98-123.
24. Linda Campbell, "Documentary Evidence for the building of Raynham Hall" *Architectural History* 32, 1989, 52-67. The earlier articles on which this enlarges are H.L. Bradfer-Lawrence, "The Building of Raynham Hall", *Norfolk Archaeology* XXIII, 1927-29, 93-146 and J. Harris, "Raynham Hall, Norfolk", *Archaeological Journal* CXVIII, 1961, 180-87.