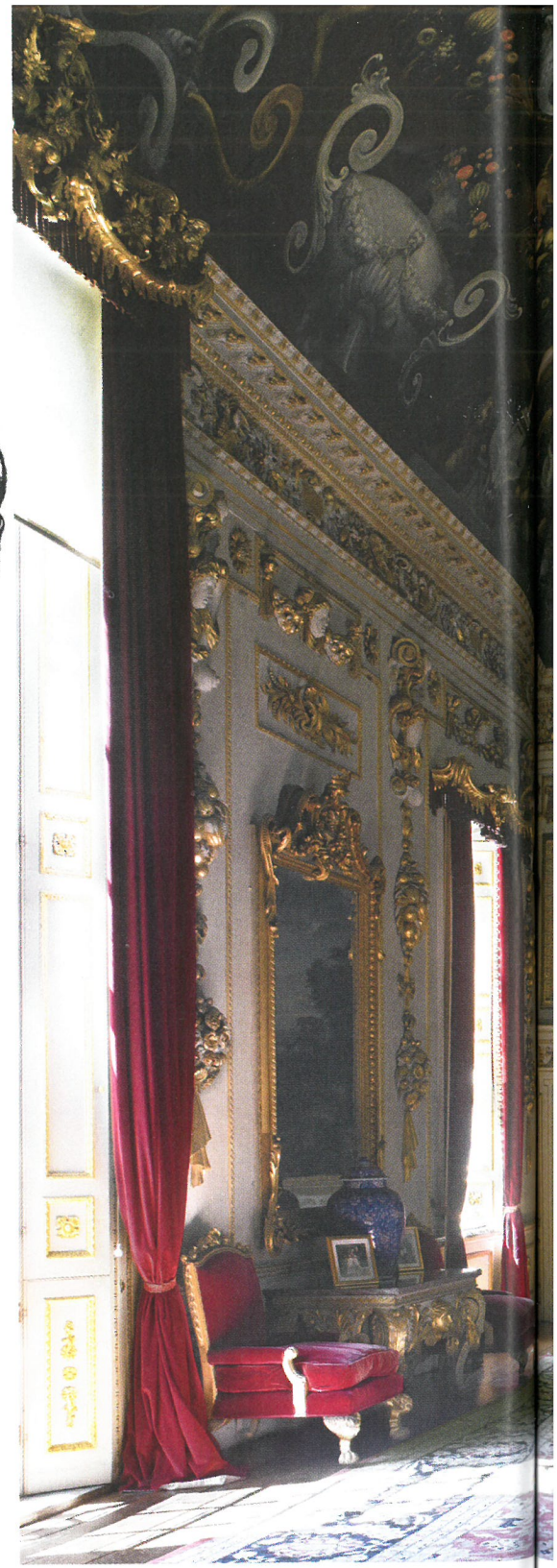
COUNTRY LIFE 125 1897-2022

ENGLISH HOMES . . . OLD & NEW

English Home part V
1630–88



Each month of this 125th anniversary year, COUNTRY LIFE illustrates a period in the development of the English great house. In the fifth of this 12-part series, **John Goodall** looks at developments through an age of revolution

ON the afternoon of January 30, 1649, Charles I stepped onto the executioner's scaffold from the Banqueting House of his principal palace at Whitehall, Westminster. In the bitter cold, he wore a thick shirt, concerned that, if he shivered, it might be thought that he trembled in fear. He addressed the crowd briefly and, having laid his head on the block, signalled to the heavily disguised executioner to proceed. The King's neck was severed at a single blow and, according to one witness of royalist sympathy, Philip Henry: 'There was such a groan by the thousands then present as I never heard before and desire I may never hear again.'

The groan might well have been the dying gasp of the English Middle Ages, for the axe that hewed the sinews of the King also overthrew the social order he represented. The full significance of that overthrow, moreover, was physically reflected across the full extent of the kingdom. During the course of bitter fighting since 1642, the inherited architectural landscape of Britain—many of its cities, towns, castles, country houses and churches—had suffered devastating damage.

Indeed, it could be that the Banqueting House was deliberately chosen as the backdrop to Charles I's execution to make a political point. Both by function—as a chamber for extravagant Court entertainments—and by its Classical form, this building summed up in architecture what was to the regicides the discredited life, fashions and character of the Stuart Court. If this was the case, they would not have appreciated the irony that, in an architectural sense, it also represented the future.

The Banqueting House had been designed in 1619 by Inigo Jones, a pivotal figure in the grand narrative of English architecture. From 1615, he introduced to the Court and its circle a new Classical idiom learnt not only from published treatises, but at first hand from European travel and visits to Roman buildings. This idiom set aside the busy outlines and complex geometry characteristic of Jacobean architecture and assumed in its place symmetry, uniformity and simplicity of form. In the 1620s, this idiom was adopted for the first time in country houses and, in the process, these grand domestic buildings were transformed, both in appearance and as living spaces.

Introduced by Jones, for example—and by the circle of building professionals and patrons who absorbed, discussed and developed his ideas (the subject of architectural authorship in this period is hugely complex)—was the Roman temple façade with columns surmounted by a gable or pediment, which, by the 1620s, had made its first monumental appearance in an English house (***Fig 2***).

No less important was a striking change in the treatment of roofs. By long tradition, the overwhelming preference in English great houses had been for flat leads that could be used for recreation and exercise. Now, the French delight in high and steeply pitched roof lines with sloping gable ends came to England. In some cases, old and new fashions were united by erecting a balustraded viewing platform on top of these so-called 'hipped' roofs.

The interiors of these new buildings were also strikingly innovative. In terms of planning, they were compact and symmetrical, a departure from the spacious courtyard layouts characteristic of most great houses

Fig 1: **The Double Cube Room at Wilton, Wiltshire, originally a dining room. Painting is integral to the architectural effect of the space**

to date (although, importantly, such compact planning was anticipated in English castle design and buildings derived from it). Whereas before, the chambers in a courtyard house had opened off one another in strict sequence, the clustering of rooms created freedom of circulation between them. This, in turn, had an impact on use and furnishing.

By long-standing convention stretching back to the Middle Ages, formal English interiors incorporated a space removed from the entrance of the room—often defined architecturally by a dais or oriel window—to which privileged individuals could withdraw. The internal asymmetry that such arrangements necessarily imposed, however, was no longer aesthetically acceptable. As a result, for the first time, these rooms began to be symmetrically planned, with box-like proportions and uniform fenestration.

One of the earliest and most famous series of such interiors was created with the involvement of Jones at Wilton, Wiltshire. This includes the so-called Double Cube Room, which is named after its proportion and was cast in its present form with deep coves after a fire in 1647 (***Fig 1***). As innovative as the form of the room are the large canvases and illusionistic paintings that carry the eye of the beholder beyond the physical confines of the room. The whole is inspired by French example and offers us a vivid impression of the lost 17th-century interiors of Whitehall, which the patron of the work, 4th Earl of Pembroke, Lord Chamberlain of Charles I's household, knew well. →

Fig 2 above: **Raynham, Norfolk, begun in the 1620s, preserves perhaps the earliest surviving temple frontage in an English house.**
Fig 3 below: **Compact and uniform: Cobthorne, Northamptonshire, built in the 1650s by William Boteler, a Parliamentarian soldier**

Before the Civil War, the ideas promulgated by Jones enjoyed a very limited audience outside the Court and London. The establishment of a new political order following Charles I's execution in 1649, however, and the eagerness of Britain's new rulers to express their power in architecture, gave it national currency. Suddenly, across the kingdom from the 1650s, compact and uniform houses with hipped roofs began to spring up (***Fig 3***).

> 'The eagerness of Britain's new rulers to express their power in architecture gave Inigo Jones's ideas national currency'

In terms of internal decoration, there were important points of continuity with earlier domestic arrangements. One such was the emphasis given to the fireplace as the focal point of a room. Similarly, the tradition of decorative plaster ceilings continued, although with Gothic-derived vaulting patterns replaced with Classically inspired detailing (***Fig 4***).

The informality of life that these compactly planned buildings made possible was

Fig 4: **The saloon at Forde Abbey, Dorset, with English tapestry copies of Raphael's Cartoons bought by Prince Charles at Genoa in 1623**

part of their appeal. During the early 17th century, it became increasingly rare for gentlemen to enter into domestic service and the traditional system of payment for household service by the provision of livery in food and clothing was commuted to money. As a consequence, domestic service became an exclusively menial task undertaken by paid servants. In the process, both the scale and the ceremonial of noble life was vastly simplified.

In response, houses, as well as the rooms within them, physically contracted. At the same time, the lives of servants and those they served were teased apart. The hall, for example, entirely lost its function as an eating space and became a splendid architectural prelude to the living interiors of the house. In some cases, it also accommodated the main staircase, to spectacular effect (***Fig 5***).

Families now universally retreated to a 'dining room', where they could eat with friends and visitors. Other private rooms grew in popularity, such as the study or library, in which it was possible to work in solitude.

The Restoration of the monarchy in 1660 did little to diminish the popularity of the idiom first developed by Jones or its associated style of life, but the patterns of building in its aftermath were complicated. Some individuals clung on to their traditional lifestyles and houses. One such was the formidable Lady Anne Clifford, estranged wife of the Earl of Pembroke, creator of the Double Cube Room at Wilton, who restored at vast expense a chain of castles in Westmorland, Cumberland and Yorkshire from the 1650s.

Others, particularly Royalists returned from long exile, who had encountered at first hand the sophistications of domestic life abroad in Holland and France, desired to restore their ruined ancestral estates in the most modern fashions. Regardless, the predominant taste was for rich interior decorative schemes in which flamboyant ornament encrusted all architectural fittings, including ceilings (***Fig 8***) and stairs (***Fig 7***). For Royalists, the motif oak leaf, symbolic of the tree at Boscobel House, Shropshire, in which Charles II had hidden to avoid capture in 1651, enjoyed particular prominence.

The scale of rebuilding that followed the Civil War and Restoration had an important effect on professionalising the whole architectural process. In this regard, the series of huge urban fires—of which the Great Fire of London in 1666 is merely the most important and celebrated—played an important role in →

Fig 5: **The hall and stair combined at Coleshill in Berkshire, begun 1650. The central door on the landing led into the dining room**

training up a new generation of architects, contractors and builders, who transferred their skills to local country-house building.

There were other interconnected developments in the period that drove forward change in the home. One was the growing reach of Britain's global trade, which was bringing new produce, materials and plants to the kingdom, from coffee, tea and chocolate to pineapples and exotic timber. These not only began to re-shape domestic life, but fed a growing intellectual interest in the study, by practical experiment and observation, of the physical world in all its branches. Pursuit of what was termed 'natural philosophy' became focused in the Royal Society, founded in 1660.

For those engaged in such study, the garden now assumed a new significance. There was a steady increase in the scale and complexity of formally planted gardens, not to mention the creation of hot houses for the propagation of new plant species. Bound up with these changes was an interest in creating much closer visual connection between houses and their gardens. It became fashionable, →

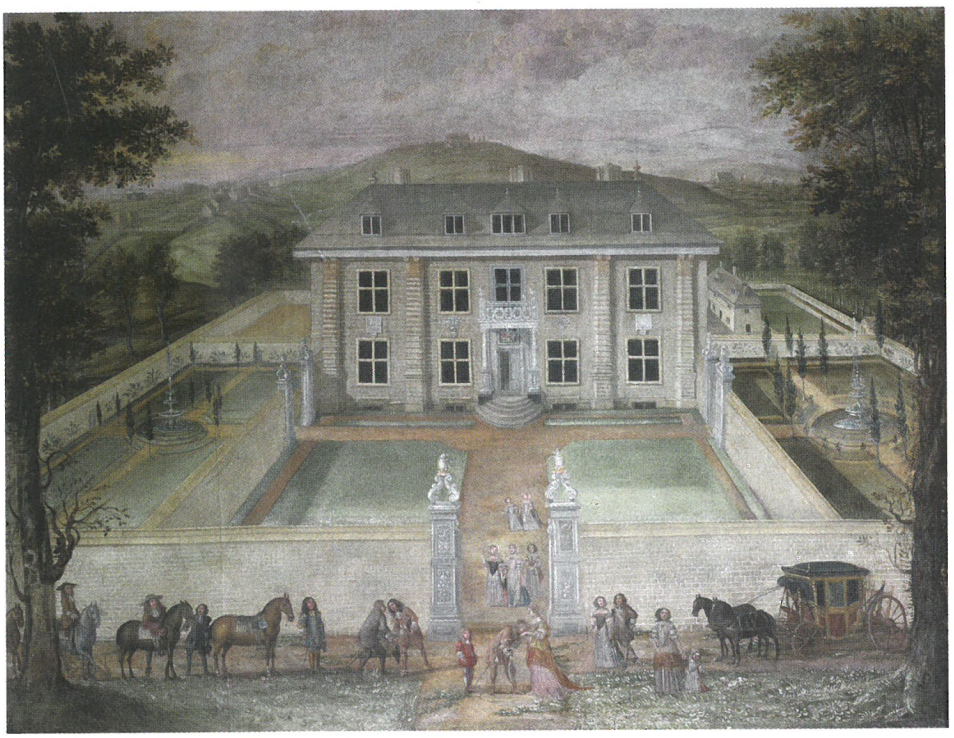


Fig 6: **Peter Hartover's view of Capheaton, Northumberland, 1667–69, built from castle ruins**

Will Pryce; Paul Highnam/Justin Paget/Paul Barker/Country Life Picture Library