

# **'Tending to Strength, Beauty and Convenience in Building': the Staircase at Bletchingdon Park, Oxfordshire**

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## SUMMARY

*This article is an attempt to reconstruct and to set in its historical framework the staircase at Bletchingdon House, described by Dr. Robert Plot in his Natural History of Oxfordshire, and later destroyed. The stair itself was unusual and may have been designed by Sir Christopher Wren. The present mansion preserves the plan of the original Jacobean house into which the stair was fitted, but the house has subsequently been twice reconstructed, first in the early 18th century and secondly by James Lewis in 1782. His plans of the building which he was commissioned to update permit the reconstruction of its earlier phases and thus make sense of the unique stair.*

In 1677 Dr. Robert Plot, the county's first historian, described the staircase which then existed in Bletchingdon Park. He also published two plans.<sup>1</sup> He wrote that it was 'remarkable, not only that it stands on an area of 30 foot square, but for its rarity too . . . It being placed backward, opposite to the most honourable entrance of the house, between two wings that extend themselves beyond it, and the Gross of the pile, you enter upon it having passed by the Hall, and other offices usually placed by it.'

He observed that though he could not approve of its contrivance in all particulars, 'yet for the sake of its magnificence and variety from most, if not all, others, I cannot in justice but afford it a short description'.

You enter on it at doorway A (Fig. 1) and land upon the half pace 1, which together with the rest marked 234 etc are 6 foot  $\frac{1}{2}$  square: the figures in their natural order shew how you ascend from one half pace to another, by ascents of 7 steps, each about 5 inches  $\frac{1}{2}$  deep, and near 10 inches  $\frac{1}{4}$  broad: the half paces marked with the same figure lye on the same level, and therefore as 4 is the highest half pace in this first scheme, so it is the lowest in the second.

In which also the Order of the Figures shews the manner of Ascent just as in the former, only it must be observed, that as the Ascent to the half pace 4 in the first scheme, was suppose from East to West, so the Ascent higher from it in the second, is to North and South: Of which two Schemes placed alternately over one another, the whole Stair-case is framed from bottom to top, which is easily apprehended, if you but imagine the half

<sup>1</sup> R. Plot, *The Natural History of Oxfordshire* (1677), quoted in the edition of 1705, 272-3 and Table 13. His inclusion of the plans must, by analogy with his inclusion of plans of the Sheldonian Theatre, Oxford, raise the question of whether he perhaps had them from the architect. See G. Beard, *The Work of Christopher Wren* (1982), 16-17.

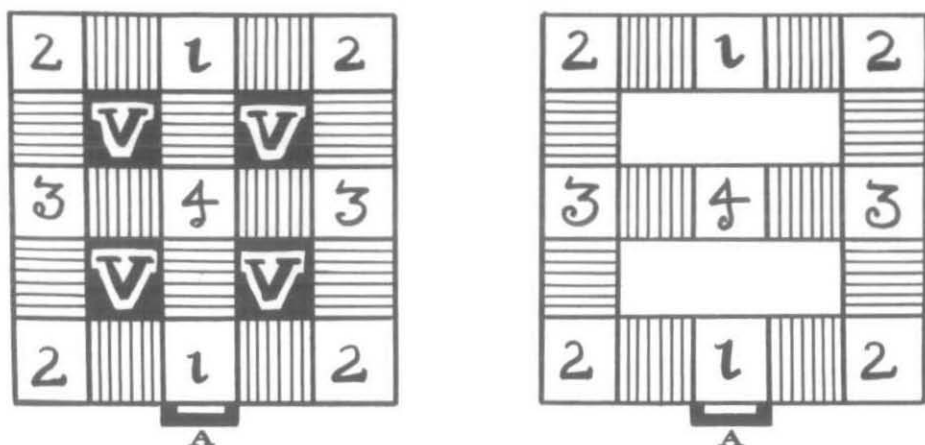


Fig. 1. Dr. Plot's plan of the staircase and (right) the actual layout of the flights of steps in the lower half.

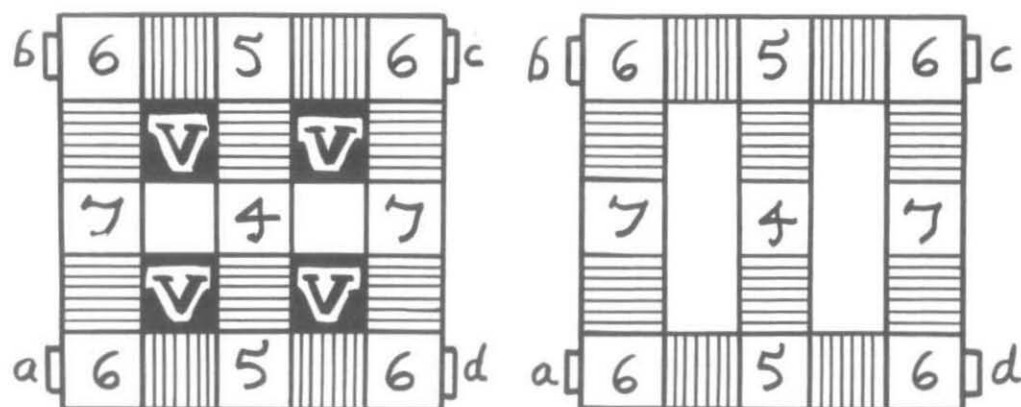


Fig. 2. Dr. Plot's plan of the upper half of the staircase and (right) the actual layout of the flights of steps.

pace 4 in the second Scheme, to be placed over 4 in the first, and such another frame as is delineated in the first Scheme to be placed on the second (Fig. 2): The Letters VV shew the vacancies that open a prospect from the top to the bottom of the whole Stair-case, and a b c d shew the places of the Doors into the Rooms at each corner of it.

In short, this Stair-case seems to be a composition of 4 half-pace open newel'd stair-cases, as may easily be perceived by the figures 123, 123, 123, 123, and 567, 567, 567, 567, only communicating in the middle; which indeed shews very magnificently, but has this Inconvenience, that there is no passage from one Room into another though on the same Floor, without going up and down many Steps: as in Scheme the second, if from a to b, and so of the Rooms of any of the other sides, you have no Passage but from 6 to 7, and so down again to 6, i.e. 14 Steps. But if you are to go from Corner to Corner, as suppose from a to c, or b to d & vice versa, whether you pass round the Sides, or over the middle half pace, you cannot do it, without ascending and descending in all twenty eight Steps.

From this information it is possible to reconstruct this unique structure (Fig. 3), destroyed and replaced before the extensive remodelling carried out in 1782.<sup>2</sup> Essentially the stair consisted of three flights of steps set at right angles to each other and separated by half-landings. The third flight of steps brought one to the centre of the square shaft which housed it; from there one ascended two more flights of stairs, again separated by a half-landing, to reach one of four doorways set in the corner of the square, at a height of approximately 16 feet. Between the doors set in the same wall two other flights rose to meet at a half-landing. Every flight had seven steps.

What do we know about the house into which this structure was fitted? Do we know who



Fig. 3. The reconstruction of the staircase.

<sup>2</sup> James Lewis, *Original Designs in Architecture*, vol. 2, plates III–VIII, first published 1797, in the reprint of 1967. The suggestion in *V.C.H. Oxon.* vi, 57, that the stair shown by Lewis was that described by Plot is erroneous, as is much else.

might be connected with the stair's design or construction? Do we understand the later history of the building? To all these questions there are partial answers.

Dr. Plot's description suggests that the stair fitted into a typical E-plan house of the late 16th–early 17th century abundantly illustrated in John Thorpe's *Book of Architecture*. Such a house could have been built in Bletchington after 1624 when Thomas Coghill bought both manor houses. Almost immediately he let the chief mansion of Adderbury's manor, described in 1596 as 'lately builded and repaired and called the new house'. The other, the chief mansion of Poure's manor 'called or known as the olde house' – though presumably only after the construction of a newer house – he took for himself. It was scarcely a desirable residence. The year before Coghill's purchase the previous owner, Lady Lenthall, had been given leave to take from lands of her trustees 'sufficient trees, timber and housebote for the needful upholding, repairing and building' of the house.<sup>3</sup> Coghill had 're-edified' it by 1637 and in 1645, when Oliver Cromwell summonsed the house, he reported it being 'strong and well defended'. By 1656, when the hard-pressed Sir Thomas was forced to sell, the property was described as 'the newe or Greate House'; in the hearth taxes of both 1662 and 1665 tax was paid on 30 hearths.<sup>4</sup>

A large establishment, possibly incorporating older foundations and built between 1624 and 1637, together with 'barns, stables, mawles, outhouses, orchards, gardens, courtyards and backsides', is entirely consistent with what is known of Thomas Coghill. Son of a London merchant, he became sheriff of Oxfordshire in 1632, was knighted the following year and remained active in county politics.<sup>5</sup> Bletchington appears to have been an important Royalist base. King Charles visited before marching to Cropredy (June 1644) and by March 1645 Coghill thought it prudent to purchase 200 muskets for the defence of his house, in which, in April 1645, there slept a Royalist garrison commanded by Sir Francis Windebank.<sup>6</sup> When Cromwell marched against them, Coghill urged, and achieved, surrender without a fight. Understandably loth to see his fine house destroyed, he appears to have cared neither about the disgrace it brought on Windebank, court-martialled and subsequently shot, nor about the military value of the commanding position the house occupied. The next month, May 1645, Coghill made the property over to his wife, possibly to escape consequences of confiscation, possibly by way of return for his use of her money. He was said to be £2,844 in arrears with the payment of an annuity of £240 left to his wife, Dame Elizabeth, by her aunt's will of 1631 and payable from 1632 onwards.<sup>7</sup> The sum suggests he may have been as much as ten years behind, and it is not far off the value of £3,000 put on the property in 1655 when Coghill tried to interest his kinsman, Bulstrode Whitelocke, in its purchase.<sup>8</sup> It is doubtful that even this sum would have been sufficient to defray the cost of building the seventh largest house in the county. Wroxton Abbey, built by Sir Thomas Pope in the 1620s and recorded as having 32 hearths in 1665, cost around £6,000 while the Bishop of Oxford's Palace at Cuddesdon, erected in the 1630s, cost around £3,500.<sup>9</sup> His wife, however, had other resources. By 1645 Dame Elizabeth had agreed, whether persuaded or pressed, to sell 'lands in Hertfordshire

<sup>3</sup> Valentia Deeds, Oxfordshire Record Office, catalogued by Dr. R. Darwall-Smith, E/6/3/1D/18, E/6/3/1D/1, E/6/3/1D/20, E/6/3/1D/13.

<sup>4</sup> Oxon. R.O., Valentia Deeds, E/6/3/1D/38–42; *ibid.*, Par. Rec. Mills Book c. 6, fo. 9; M. Weinstock (ed.), *Hearth Tax Returns for Oxfordshire, 1665* (Oxfordshire Record Society, xxi), 196. Adderbury's manor paid on only 7 hearths.

<sup>5</sup> J.H. Coghill, *The History of the Coghill Family* (1879), *passim*; R. Spalding (ed.), *The Diary of Bulstrode Whitelocke* (1889), 122.

<sup>6</sup> Ian Roy (ed.), *The Royalist Ordinance Papers 1642–46* (Oxfordshire Record Society xliii & xlix), xlix, no. 296, 358. Cromwell's letter, dated 25 April 1645, is quoted in full in W. Wing, *Annals of Bletchington* (1872), 39–40; F.J. Varley, *Siege of Oxford* (1932), 85–6; W. Hamper, *Life, Diary and Correspondence of Sir W. Dugdale* (1827), 70; I.G. Philip (ed.), *Journal of Sir Samuel Luke* (Oxfordshire Record Society xxix, xxxi, xxxiii), 118, 161, 178.

<sup>7</sup> P.R.O., C6/123/42, part 8, 8 May 1654.

<sup>8</sup> Longleat Archives, Whitelocke Papers, xvii, 5–7v.

<sup>9</sup> *V.C.H. Oxon.* ix, 172b; J.M. Falkner, *A History of Oxfordshire* (1899), 171.

which she had by inheritance to the value of £1,500' to clear her husband's debts. In return she was allowed to mortgage the 'manton house' and 'to take and enjoy the profits to her own use'.<sup>10</sup> In the circumstances, such profits she might make were probably poor recompense for the £4,344 Sir Thomas had raised from her assets. Nevertheless, the sum may give us a clue to the building's cost.

These arrangements, made immediately after Cromwell's attack, did little to benefit this obviously Royalist family. By 1647 Sir Thomas transferred the estate in trust to his son and himself entered into voluntary imprisonment for debt in the Marshalsea, its keeper Sir John Lenthall, from whom the manor had been bought. Contrary to the nature of the transaction, his son entered on the estate, and in 1654 only a complicated series of lawsuits concerning an equally complicated series of leases and releases attempted to ensure the arrangements for payment of the dowries to the eldest daughters, Elizabeth and Susan, set out in their aunt's will, and for re-possession of the estate by Sir Thomas.<sup>11</sup> During the court hearings the heir accused his father of 'wasting' his estate by cutting timber to build the house.<sup>12</sup> The charges were vigorously denied by Sir Thomas, who claimed that he had bought 'a great parte' of the timber he needed for building, 'there being but fallen timber on the ground'.<sup>13</sup>

In 1656 Sir Thomas was finally forced to sell the 'new or Greate' House and part of the estate for £10,000.<sup>14</sup> The purchaser was the Parliamentarian William Lewis of Y Fan, Glamorgan, lord of nearby Boarstall in right of his wife, Margaret, granddaughter of Sir John and his redoubtable Lady, Penelope Dynham, holder of Boarstall against siege in 1645.<sup>15</sup>

Sir Thomas and his family moved to a smaller house in the parish, where he died in 1659. His will detailed the disposition of his remaining possessions. His bequest to his second son included a cottage 'with the close adjoining now in possession of Robert Munchion'. He also specified a legacy of £1,000 to his third daughter Faith, and £800 each for Catherine and Mary as their dowries. No mention was made of his eldest son; a codicil made five days before he died, revoking part of a legacy to his second son and giving power to Dame Elizabeth to dispose of it as she would, suggests a measure of repentance.<sup>16</sup> Subsequently, arrangements were made for Thomas the son to inherit the lands.<sup>17</sup>

Within eight years Coghill's 'Greate' house changed hands three times. Its first owner, the Parliamentarian, Lewis, died in November 1661;<sup>18</sup> by January 1662 his widow was making arrangements for the disposition of her lands in preparation for her marriage, on 31 March 1662, to Charles Stuart, Duke of Lennox and Richmond, cousin to king Charles II.<sup>19</sup> The estate, however, formed part of her jointure. Richmond sold the property to Arthur Annesley, first Earl of Anglesey, on 2 February 1664, though the Duke took it back again immediately as a surety for a mortgage.<sup>20</sup> Anglesey took possession a year later, staying there regularly every summer.

There are therefore three people who might have commissioned the staircase, completed by 1677. Interestingly, there are also three people who could have executed such a stair, all

<sup>10</sup> P.R.O., C6/123/42, part 2, 5 May 1654.

<sup>11</sup> P.R.O., C6/41/105, 5 May 1654; C6/135/35, July 1653; C6/123/42.

<sup>12</sup> P.R.O., C6/123/42, part 1.

<sup>13</sup> P.R.O., C6/123/42, part 8.

<sup>14</sup> Oxon. R.O., Valentia Deeds, E/6/3/1D/39-40.

<sup>15</sup> Glenmor Williams (ed.), *Glamorgan County History*, iv (1974), 370.

<sup>16</sup> Coghill, op. cit. 57-9.

<sup>17</sup> Oxon. R.O., Valentia Deeds, E/6/3/1D/48-49.

<sup>18</sup> Lewis's death was noted in Blethingdon Parish Registers, burials.

<sup>19</sup> P.R.O., C108/53, box 2, unsorted, bundle 40; C108/9 boxes 1 & 2, unsorted.

<sup>20</sup> P.R.O., C108/9, box 2, unsorted; Oxon. R.O., Valentia Deeds, E/6/6/1D/3.

of them closely associated with Bletchingdon – Robert Springhall, mason, Robert Minchin, carpenter, and Christopher Wren, then Professor of Astronomy at Oxford University.

Robert Springhall was born in Kidlington in 1624 and had been apprenticed to a stone mason. He died in Bletchingdon in 1696, and had been resident at least from 1684. A specific link to work in the parish emerges from his deposition before the Court of the Chancellor of Oxford University in April 1681, in connection with the disputed accounts for the rebuilding of the Bishop of Oxford's Palace at Cuddesdon.<sup>21</sup> Springhall stated that 'he had worked on stone houses in Oxfordshire ... for the late Duke of Richmond and was now working for the Lord Privy Seal at Bletchingdon and likewise for Esquire Coghill there'. Anglesey held the office of Lord Privy Seal from April 1672 until resigning on 9 August 1682. Springhall's work in 1681 cannot have included the stair; it is unfortunate that we know nothing of his connection with the Duke of Richmond.

Robert Munchion, or Minchin as his name was spelt in the accounts of the Sheldonian Theatre, Oxford, was mentioned in Sir Thomas Coghill's will, as the occupier of one of the estate cottages. His father, Robert, also a carpenter, married in 1612 and was buried on 29 May 1631.<sup>22</sup> Robert II was said to be aged thirty in 1655.<sup>23</sup> In the hearth tax he is returned for payment on two hearths as is his brother, Richard. Robert appears to have died before 1684.<sup>24</sup>

As a child Robert would have seen the building of the 'greate house'; possibly his father was associated with it. He would probably have known Wren after the latter's arrival in the village and, in the 1660s, he worked under Wren's direction not only on the building of the Sheldonian Theatre in Oxford,<sup>25</sup> but also in charge of work commissioned by Trinity College Oxford which Wren discussed in a letter to the President dated 22 June 1665.<sup>26</sup> In it he makes it clear that Minchin held the plans for the building and was well able to make alterations to Wren's basic design, should they be needed. At the time, Wren was planning a journey abroad, for which the exact date of departure is not known. It is often said to have been in August.

The third candidate is Christopher Wren, appointed Professor of Astronomy at Oxford University in 1661. His connections with Bletchingdon were of long-standing by then, long predating his marriage to Sir Thomas Coghill's daughter Faith in 1669.<sup>27</sup> Wren's sister Susan married the rector Dr. William Holder in 1643. Holder tutored the young Wren in mathematics before he went up to Wadham College in 1648/9. John Aubrey tells us that 'the parsonage house at Bletchingdon was Mr Wren's home, and retiring place; here he contemplated and studied, and found out a great many curious things in mathematicks. About this house he made several curious dialls, with his own hands, which are still there to be seen'.<sup>28</sup> One of his sisters, Elizabeth, died there in 1648; another, Anne, married in 1660, and his father, once the Dean of Windsor but deprived of his livings before the end of the Civil War, died there in June 1658.<sup>29</sup> His sister and her husband did not leave the parish until 1662. For a good fifteen years therefore connections with the Coghills must have been close and their 'fortunes'

<sup>21</sup> Kidlington Parish Registers 1624, transcripts in Oxford City Local Studies Library; Oxford University Archives, Chancellor's Court Papers 1680/81; box 28:9–17, 26 April 1681. He paid towards the Militia levy of 1684: Mills Book, Parish Records deposited in the Oxfordshire County Record Office. Bletchingdon Parish Register, burials, 1696.

<sup>22</sup> Bletchingdon Parish Registers, marriages, burials, *idem*.

<sup>23</sup> Longleat Archives, Whitelocke Papers, vol. xvii, 6.

<sup>24</sup> *Hearth Tax Returns*, *op. cit.*; and Mills Book, Parish Records.

<sup>25</sup> For the building of the Sheldonian Theatre see *V.C.H. Oxon.* iii, 51.

<sup>26</sup> Printed in M.S. Briggs, *Wren the Incomparable* (1975), 37–8.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* Wren's marriage took place on 7 December 1669; Faith was the daughter of Sir Thomas, not of a non-existent Sir John.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted from Briggs, *op. cit.* 39. They are no longer to be seen.

<sup>29</sup> Entries in Bletchingdon Parish Registers, *s.v.* anno.

known to the Wren family. Sir Thomas's will suggests that the marriage was perhaps already accepted as a certainty.

Although this stair is unlike anything Wren executed *after* his appointment as the architect of St. Paul's or during the reconstruction of the City of London after the Great Fire of September 1666, we know that Wren had long been regarded as a master of Geometry. The list of his 'new theories' contained in *Parentalia*<sup>30</sup> suggests that he dabbled with the relationship between geometry and architecture. It may be that a number of experiments are grouped together under the heading 'New designs tending to Strength, Convenience and Beauty in Building'. Is it possible that this stair, dramatically geometrical in character, was one of them?

The house into which it was fitted was almost certainly Coghill's house, little changed from its original design. Such a house is not likely to have had a central stair, the idea of which was relatively new and relatively rarely found before the 1660s and the stair at Coleshill. In John Thorpe's *Book of Architecture* there are only three examples; Horkesby, Lincs., a house at Chelsea, and a third that is unidentified.<sup>31</sup> One sketch, T 150, shows two E-plan houses, one of which was given the porch within the E and had the stair on the opposite façade, the other of which reversed this plan, placing the stair within the E and the porch on the outer side. This would provide an exact parallel for the changes made at Blethingdon, but no such house is known to exist. The alternative, however, was erected as a lodge for the enlarged Richmond Park, built around 1605 at a cost of £538 17s. 4d.<sup>32</sup>

The source of the idea executed at Blethingdon must remain a matter of speculation. Nevertheless, it is worth pausing to consider the effect of inserting this stair into the existing E-plan house. It would have converted external courtyard space to an interior stair well, closed on three sides by the existing house and on the fourth by a new wall. Access to the upper rooms in the wings was provided either by altering existing windows into doors or by knocking new doors through. The whole must have been lit from above through a cupola. The structure achieves its aims awkwardly and, in a house which must have had two, and perhaps three, storeys, it was surely redundant. Other means of access to the upper floors must have existed, housed either in a projecting turret or in the corner of a room. There is also an unresolved difficulty in Plot's description; can there really only have been access to the opposite wing by passage of twenty-eight stairs? If so, this can only mean that the central hall was open to a height of two storeys, as it was at Cornbury in the 1630s. A hint that this was indeed the case will be examined later.

Whatever the truth, this stair would have updated a structure which by the 1660s was decidedly old-fashioned. It would have achieved this aim at relatively little cost, certainly far below that of rebuilding the entire structure. It was also a magnificent sight.

The exact date of its construction, however, remains unknown. There is no conclusive evidence to connect either any one of the three possible builders/designers with its construction nor any one of the three owners between 1656 and 1677, the *terminus ante quem*. Almost certainly it is safe to rule out the Parliamentarian Lewis, a professional collector of confiscated estates. The choice thus lies between the Duke of Richmond and the Earl of Anglesey. Both noble owners put small-scale work in hand.

<sup>30</sup> S. Wren, *Parentalia*, ed. T. Osborn and R. Dodsley (1750), 198–9.

<sup>31</sup> J. Summerson (ed.), *The Book of Architecture of John Thorpe* (Walpole Society, xl for 1966). No plans resembling Blethingdon are to be found in the plan book investigated by Alison Maguire and Howard Colvin, 'A Collection of seventeenth-century Architectural Plans', *Architectural History*, 35 (1992), 140–82.

<sup>32</sup> H.M. Colvin (ed.), *The History of the King's Works*, iv, 1485–1660, part ii, 233. The Commissioners' survey of 1649 reveals how Blethingdon could easily have been assessed on 30 hearths; they would have been in the outbuildings as well as the house: P.R.O., E317, Surrey, no. 46.



Richmond, an extravagant young man, had another, larger property at Cobham, Kent, to which he moved in 1665; before then he had rebuilt the central hall for a total expenditure of £2,688.<sup>33</sup> His marriage to Margaret Lewis brought him an additional income of £38,000,<sup>34</sup> and his papers show that he also put in hand some work at Bletchingdon where he almost certainly spent some time. He engaged a gardener, one Simon Purse of Bletchingdon; there are references in the Cobham accounts to payments to him.<sup>35</sup> A summary account for the eighteen months Lady Day 1662 to Michaelmas 1663 records a payment of £91 0s. 3d. to 'Robert Minchin and for building'.<sup>36</sup> However, as the auditor wrote at the bottom of the page, 'But for most of this summer's disbursements for ye house, stables, gardens, dayes workes and building the Accountant produces no acquittances'. Although reference to Minchin might imply the construction of the stair and 'building' might refer to the construction of the retaining wall, there is no certainty. There is no entry for purchase of timber. We do not know exactly what was done, except that, on the evidence of the hearth taxes, Richmond did not rebuild the property.

Richmond sold the property to Arthur Annesley, first Earl of Anglesey, on 2 February 1664. It was instantly mortgaged back to Richmond who continued to live there for another year. He finally moved, to Cobham, between December 1664 and February 1665 when at least £16 11s. was paid to the Bletchingdon carrier for the transport of goods, amongst which were the vines and a grate.<sup>37</sup>

The Earl of Anglesey probably took possession early in 1665. His daughter was married in the parish church there on 20 August 1665, possibly because the plague was raging in London.<sup>38</sup> In addition to buying the estate from Richmond, Anglesey subsequently bought other Coghill lands from Dame Elizabeth and the trustees for her children. It was agreed that part of the purchase price was to remain with the Earl for the payment of the dowries of Faith Coghill (£1,000) and Catherine (£800). Indentures tripartite were signed two days before the Earl's daughter's wedding.

We do not know of the transaction at firsthand, but only as the documents were recited when, in 1694/5, Sir Christopher Wren was accused by the Earl's daughter-in-law, Elizabeth, Countess Dowager the younger, of laying claim to estates in Bletchingdon on the grounds that they had been mortgaged to him, while she believed they formed part of her marriage jointure.<sup>39</sup> She asked that his claim be dismissed, and if not dismissed, then that it should be settled by the Countess Dowager the elder on the grounds that she knew of the matter, that she was friendly with Wren and in any case held considerable real and personal estate in her own right.

Wren's answer, lodged on the 23rd day of March 1695, was that he knew nothing of the Dowager Countess's marriage settlement, but that it had been agreed with Dame Elizabeth Coghill that part of the purchase money for certain specified lands should remain with Anglesey to provide dowries for Faith and Catherine. The arrangement had been formalized by indentures tripartite bearing date the eighteenth day of August in the seventeenth year of

<sup>33</sup> H.M. Colvin, 'Peter Mills and Cobham Hall', in H.M. Colvin (ed.), *The Country Seat* (1970), 42-6.

<sup>34</sup> *Cal. State Papers Domestic, 1663-64*, 528.

<sup>35</sup> P.R.O., Chancery Masters' Exhibits C108/10, box 1, unsorted; P.R.O., C108/10, box 1, unsorted. Purse was paid £5 for 'mellon glasses' and other necessities for the garden on 16 May 1662 and for work on the bowling green in July.

<sup>36</sup> P.R.O., C108/53, box 2, unsorted; labelled *The Account of Thomas Gregory*.

<sup>37</sup> P.R.O., C108/54, box 1, unsorted. He did not take them all; Plot comments on the marble used for at least some: *op. cit.* 79.

<sup>38</sup> Bletchingdon Parish Registers, marriages, *loc. cit.*

<sup>39</sup> P.R.O., C5/111/2.



King Charles (1665). Wren went on to state that he was informed that he was 'intituled' to the money after his marriage and that the interest on the thousand pounds was paid up until the Earl's death (in 1685), together with repayment of five hundred pounds of the principal sum. Five hundred pounds and the interest thereon were still outstanding in 1694/5.<sup>40</sup> It appears that Wren won, for in 1700 Elizabeth received lands in Ireland to compensate for the diminished value of her jointure based on lands in Bletchingdon.<sup>41</sup>

Whether the arrangement was a mark of respect to Wren, who had already commanded the King's attention, or recognition of his transformation of the house, possibly to mark the occasion of the Earl's daughter's marriage, or whether the arrangement was no more than the means for the hard-pressed Dame Elizabeth Coghill to find a way out of her financial difficulties, can only be a matter of speculation. Whatever reason lies behind it, the Earl clearly accepted responsibility for the payment of dowries for both girls and, in the case of Faith at least, honoured his word.

The Earl became a regular summer resident, and certainly carried out some work. He kept a diary; two volumes survive, in which he made an entry nearly every day between 9 May 1671 and 29 September 1684.<sup>42</sup> On the first page of the earliest surviving volume there is a detached entry dating to August 1667 recording a royal command to leave Bletchingdon for Windsor. But though the Earl wrote diligently, he confided little; repeatedly he records only that he 'did business and the usual duties'. Despite his nearly annual summer visits, only a few entries refer to the house itself; his social life there received more attention. The entries may be summarized as follows:

1671 28 May Thoughts possessed me this day of building a library at Bletchingdon for the advancement of learning and religion in my family.

1680 16 August Sett severall people on worke about moweing grass in Hall close and scouring the great court pond.

1682 4 September I resolved of building a chapell, library, drawing room and chamber for a chaplain over against the cloister in the back quadrangle.

1684 20 August the new beame was hoisted under the parlour.

Only this last entry suggests work in progress, but, except for the fact that the Earl did not, as had been his custom, go to Bletchingdon in 1683, perhaps because work was in hand, we do not know for certain how much of his intentions were carried out. Whether or not his 'resolve' accounts for the extensions to either wing, shown on a later plan, cannot now be ascertained. No entry supports the testimony of Robert Springhall, already mentioned, though he had been employed at Bletchingdon in 1681.

#### THE FATE OF THE STAIR – THE SURVIVAL OF THE HOUSE IN WHICH IT FITTED

The house as it stands now is essentially the result of the architect James Lewis's remodelling in the 1780s. But before he began work he took the then unusual step of publishing a plan of what he found (Fig. 4a).<sup>43</sup> It is worth summarizing the clues that suggest the survival of the

<sup>40</sup> P.R.O., C7/5/38.

<sup>41</sup> Oxon. R.O., Valentia Deeds, E/6/1/5L/1–2, from which it appears that a term of 41 years was agreed.

<sup>42</sup> B.L. Add MS. 40860, May 1671–October 1675; Add MS. 18730, October 1675–September 1685.

<sup>43</sup> Lewis drew what he found also at Sutton, Beds.; earlier, in 1748, Sir Edward Conyers of Copt Hall in Essex had commissioned plans of his old house before demolition: John Newman, 'Cophthall', in H.M. Colvin (ed.), *The Country Seat* (1970), 18–29.

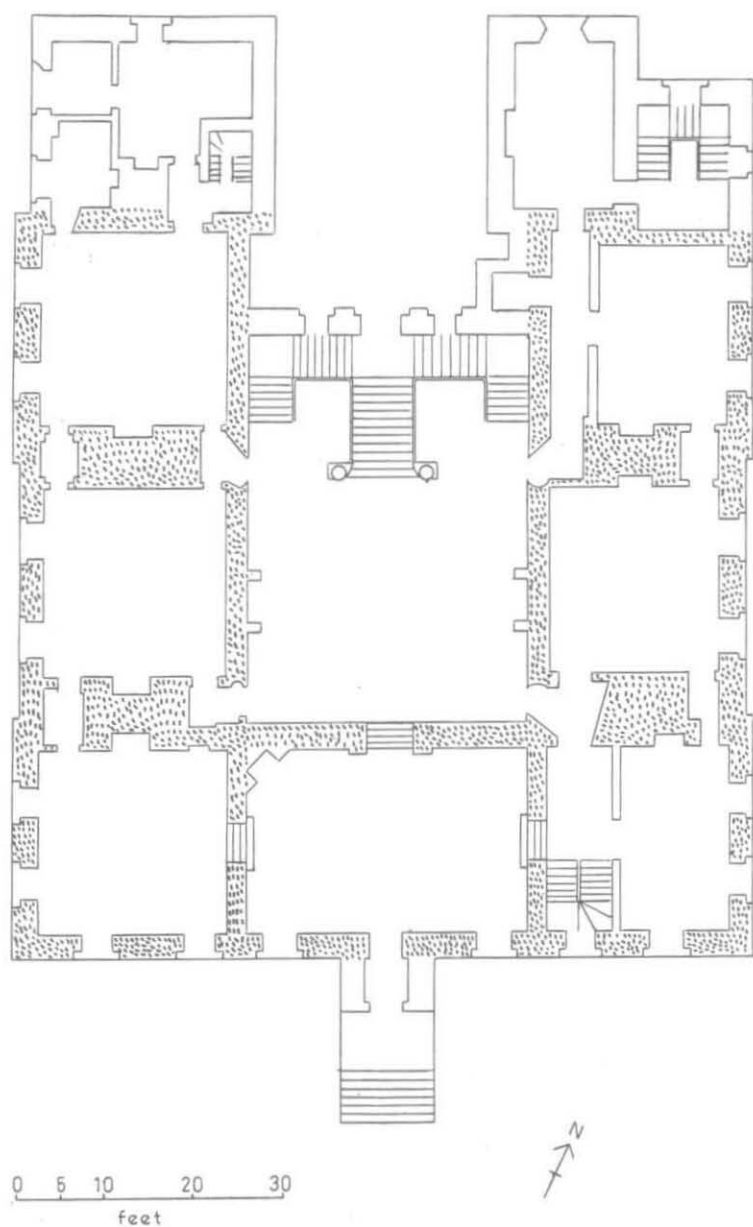


Fig. 4. Bletchington Park: plans redrawn from Lewis's *Original Designs in Architecture* 1797, vol. ii, plates iii and iv.  
 a) The 'principall' floor drawn by James Lewis before his alterations. The stippled walls indicate the outline of the earlier courtyard house.

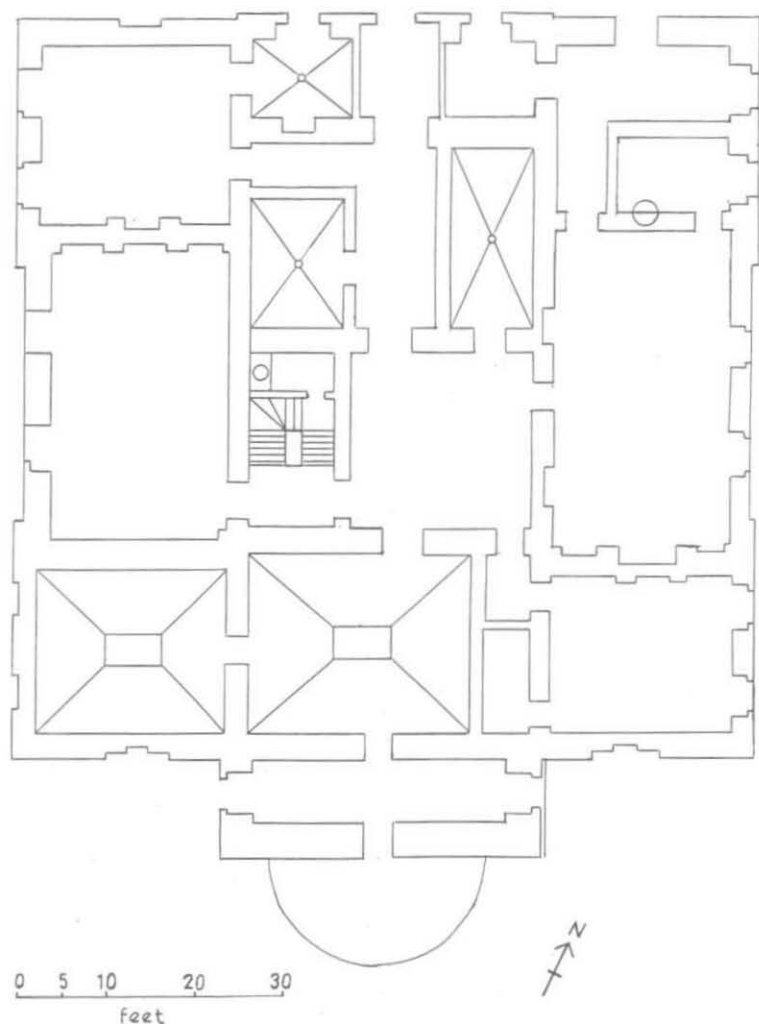


Fig. 4b. James Lewis's intended plan for the basement.

earlier building, in particular the traceable E-plan, changed only insofar as an extra room has been added to each wing, and the four massive back-to-back fireplaces. Another probably existed in the end wall of the east wing and may have been destroyed when the extension was built. Their size and position are more suggestive of early 17th-century work than of any later date. Before Lewis was engaged Mrs. Lybbe Powys wrote a description of her visit in 1778.<sup>44</sup> Together, these two sources allow us to identify some of the work which has obscured

<sup>44</sup> Emily J. Climençon (ed.), *Passages from the Diaries of Mrs Philip Lybbe Powys* (1899), 194–96.

Coghill's original house, built between 1624 and 1637, the basic plan of which we may deduce from Plot's description of the stair.

Plot wrote: 'It (the stair) being placed opposite the . . . entrance of the house, between two wings that extend themselves beyond it . . . you enter upon it having passed by the Hall'. This strongly suggests a typical E-plan Jacobean house, completely consistent with the known dates of construction. Plot added that the stair occupied a space 30 foot square and led to four doorways on an upper floor.

Just over one hundred years later Mrs. Lybbe Powys' description echoes that of Dr. Plot, but reveals an all-important change, the key to the interpretation of Lewis's plans and the clue to the continuing existence of the Jacobean house. 'You ascend a large flight of steps into a large hall, opposite you a second flight carries you into a second larger hall, in which fronts you by far the noblest staircase I ever saw.'

Although, like Dr. Plot, she arrived in front of a staircase through the hall she had first 'ascended a flight of steps'. Since Bletchington Park occupies level ground, she was standing on the upper floor of the Jacobean mansion. The rooms she described are therefore to be identified on Lewis's plan of the 'principal' floor.

This, however, is the level at which Dr. Plot described four doors, each at a corner of a thirty-foot square. These too are shown on Lewis's plan (Fig. 4a), marking out a 30-foot square. They are still there today.

The next stage is to discover whether or not the same disposition of space can be traced at Plot's ground floor level, that is, amidst Lewis's intended scheme for the basement, figure 4b. Less clearly, but still accurately, it is possible to locate first the entrance hall and then a space beyond it, corresponding exactly with Dr. Plot's dimensions and description. The assumption must be that the earlier remodelling had preserved much of the Jacobean house, the more so since the earliest floor levels, some 3 feet below that of Lewis, have been revealed in the recent restoration and give a room height of some 15 feet, which tallies with the evidence of the stair.

Mrs. Powys was not, however, looking at Dr. Plot's stair. Her description makes that clear. It is worth quoting in full:

I must say something of that we were at, as Mr Brown would style it, 'A place of vast *capabilities*' stands high, the ground lays well, and the views around it far preferable to most in that county. Mrs Annesley's is large, though only seven windows in front, the present approach through a fine stone gateway with iron rails, you ascend a large flight of steps into a large hall, opposite you a second flight carries you into a second or larger hall, in which fronts you by far the noblest staircase I ever saw. 'Tis of *Manchineale* wood<sup>45</sup> and after going up about twenty steps it turns to the right and left, making a gallery at the top which looks down into the hall, this gallery leads to all the chambers. On the ground floor are four parlours, library, and state bedroom; many rooms were fitted by the Lord Anglesey who built it, but which Mr Annesley was going to finish, but his sudden death prevented . . .

This is the stair shown on Lewis's plan. It gave no access to the lower floor, but only to the upper levels. In accordance with changing social customs, servants and family were separated, the servants relegated to the basement, their access to the upper floors limited to use of back stairs, while the family alone ascended the staircase shown by Lewis. The change of custom required the destruction of Dr. Plot's stair and the laying of a floor over the original courtyard space. It may also have necessitated flooring over the original two-storey high entrance hall, a job which was botched since Lewis's plan shows short flights of steps connecting the entrance

<sup>45</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*: a West Indian tree, *Hippomaul Mancinella*. In 1683 it was recorded that Machineel is a sort of timber for planks and sheathing.

hall with the rooms on either side and with the newly formed rear hall. Access to the basement was by a stair in the south-east room, possibly one belonging to the Jacobean house. It is certainly an odd place to insert a stair for such a purpose in a fashionable house.

When did this happen? Again, Mrs. Powys gives us the clue in her reference to 'the Lord Anglesey who built it'. The last Earl to own Bletchington was Arthur, fifth Earl, in possession between 1710 and his death in 1737. He had no heirs and divided his property between a much disliked cousin who received the title and as little else as possible while the larger share, including Bletchington, went to the eldest son of his great uncle, Francis, whose son predeceased him.<sup>46</sup> At the age of 13, Francis' grandson, Mr Arthur Annesley, succeeded to the property in 1750. Whatever plans he may have had were interrupted by his sudden death.<sup>47</sup> Mrs. Powys commented that Mr Annesley 'was going to finish' what the Earl had built. Whether she meant the first Earl or the fifth Earl we cannot be certain. What is clear, however, is that no change after 1737 can be ascribed to any Earl. That the style of the staircase and the details of the seven windows, revealed during recent restoration, are both consistent with an early 18th-century date is probably more than chance.

However, this represents substantial work and major changes to Coghill's house. The new staircase turned Coghill's ground floor into the present basement; by making his upper floor the 'principall' floor, it made necessary a new bedroom floor with the result that Coghill's attics also disappeared. The present attics, not necessarily in their present shape, were therefore probably constructed at this time. Lewis's work, carried out little more than one hundred years after Dr. Plot wrote, is reduced to drastic remodelling. Mrs. Lybbe Powys, on a second visit in 1789, described at least some of Lewis's changes.

We had not been there since the alterations he has made. I've mentioned being there before, and then spoke of an amazing grand staircase which for its vast extent is described, I think, in Plot's 'History of Oxfordshire' as one of the finest in England; but now in the same space it took up, is as large a one as one generally sees, a fine saloon and drawing room, besides a very fine hall, which was the entrance before, only from that first hall you formerly entered a second, which was entirely taken up by the vast staircase.<sup>48</sup>

While her identification of the stair she saw on her first visit is mistaken, the one she saw on her second visit is still to be seen today, as are many of Lewis's other alterations. He demolished the additions to each wing, reducing the ground plan to a square. He may well have reorganized the basement space. On the 'principall' floor he turned the centrally placed door opposite the entrance into a fireplace before completely remodelling the inner hall. This he did by dividing the 45-foot space almost equally. Its outer part became a saloon overlooking the garden, its inner side the stair well, lit from above. Changing the windows, he retained the wall that had been built to support the early 18th-century stair as the external wall of his new saloon, to which he added an exterior flight of steps giving access to the garden. In order to bestow the fashionable classical portico, which also required remodelling of the steps, on the entrance façade, he reduced the seven windows to five, as he then had to do also on the bedroom floor where his changes have recently been revealed. Whether or not Lewis remodelled the attics he found is not certain. To give himself space to create two very large reception rooms on the principal floor he completely removed two of the original Jacobean chimney stacks, drastically cutting back the size of the others, slimming down the interior walls of those he left and making use of the original flues. His work came to light in the recent restoration.

<sup>46</sup> Oxon. R.O., Valentin Deeds, Catalogue, vol. 2, Appendix IV, pedigrees 2 & 4.

<sup>47</sup> He was buried on 18 February 1773: Bletchington Parish Registers.

<sup>48</sup> *Passages from the Diaries*, op. cit. 238.

Only in the basement does evidence of the Jacobean house remain. When plaster was stripped from the western wall of the large east room and from the inner faces of the east and south external walls extensive areas of dressed stone were revealed. On the south wall five of the original seven windows could be seen, one of them so complete that it suggests that Coghill's house may have been of seven bays. Two doorways, both with dressed stone lintels, lead out of the original hall space into the north-east and south-west rooms. One was re-used by Lewis, the other preserved by being walled up. Overall in the basement Lewis made extensive subdivisions and raised floor levels, thus obscuring the Jacobean house; in so doing, he preserved it.

#### *A Note on the Reconstruction of the Stair*

I have chosen to reconstruct the stair on the basis of Dr. Plot's verbal description, not on the basis of the plan he published. The latter, schematically correct in showing the inter-relationship of the half-paces, could be read as showing seven steps *and* the half-pace, i.e. eight steps in all. This makes nonsense of the careful measurements provided by an obviously interested eye-witness, whose testimony on other matters there is reason to trust.

Dr. Plot states clearly that each ascent was of 7 steps, each  $5\frac{1}{2}$  ins. 'deep' (i.e. high). Each flight thus rises  $38\frac{1}{2}$  ins. and occupies a floor length of 11 ft.  $8\frac{1}{2}$  ins., including the half-pace. Allowing space for the mid-wall half-pace, the structure fits into a total wall length of 29 ft. 9 ins.

If, however, calculations are done on the basis of seven steps *and* the half-pace, the total rise is 44 ins., the floor length 15 ft.  $3\frac{1}{2}$  ins., requiring each side of the square to be 36 ft. 11 ins., a clearly visible difference in size from the stated thirty feet.

The same difference carries through into the room heights which work out either to 16 ft.  $0\frac{1}{2}$  ins. or 18 ft. 4 ins.

The difference becomes important when trying to establish into what sort of house the staircase fitted. My contention is that it was inserted into the lower level of a two-storey, E-plan house, possibly also with attics, built between 1624 and 1637 around an older structure. Its lower rooms must have been some 15 ft. in height.

An alternative possibility is that Coghill retained the lower level of the 'olde house' he purchased as a basement, which might explain the large, centrally placed fireplaces shown by Lewis, old-fashioned even in the 1620s, and built two storeys above that. However, if Coghill's Greate House was a three-storey edifice, it is a very early example of a style which became common only some thirty years later. For a date in the 1620s or early 1630s it is outside the idiom of both regional and national styles.

This theory also introduces other complications. If the stair sprang from the principal floor and rose to the present bedroom level, the four doors at the corners of a 30-foot square must be sought not at the lower level, where they clearly exist but would not have been needed, but at the upper. Four such openings exist, but cannot certainly be shown to belong to the 17th century. The two on the north correspond to the position of the 18th-century stairhead, but the two on the south become redundant because they would have opened onto the inner hall described by Mrs. Lybbe Powys. This must have been open to roof height, simply to provide light. If they did exist, survivals from the 17th-century house, Lewis made use of them as entrances to bedrooms. However, on the evidence of his plan for this floor, a door was necessary at both southern points and so the doors here may have been created by him.

I am grateful to Sir Howard Colvin for drawing my attention to several documentary sources, to the Park's new owner for allowing me access to the house during extensive restoration work during 1995/96, to Mr. Anthony Cleminson and Symm & Co.

The computer reconstruction of the staircase was generated by James Eaglesham of Eagle Design Stage, Belper, DE56 1GT, Derbyshire.

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