

Visit to Chiswick House

15 May 2014

Few houses can have been the subject of so much archaeological, academic and curatorial enquiry as Lord Burlington's villa at Chiswick. Our guides for the morning were Treve Rosoman and Ricky Pound, Chiswick's house manager.

Gathering in the forecourt on a beautiful spring morning, Treve explained to our twenty members how the house, known to Burlington as the New House, was never

intended to be a stand-alone building, but was built as an adjunct to a Jacobean house that stood to the east. That house, known then as the Old House had been bought by Burlington's grandfather, the 1st Earl of Cork, and was one of a number of similar mansions built by wealthy merchants and courtiers lining the route taken by royalty to their Richmond and Hampton Court palaces.

Our visit was timed to coincide with the William Kent exhibition at the V&A. The relationship between Burlington and Kent has been the subject of much research and speculation over the years, with conflicting claims about the contribution each made to the architecture and décor of the house and garden. There are few records of how the house was used by Burlington; the first inventory being dated 1770, some seventeen years after his death, when the house had passed by marriage to the Dukes of Devonshire.

Background to the building of Chiswick House

Lord Burlington embarked on the Grand Tour in 1717 to experience the recently discovered Augustan age of Rome in literature and the visual arts. Burlington was enthralled by what he found in Rome, where he also encountered the composer Handel, various Italian musicians and the sculptor Guelphi – inviting them to accompany him to England and lodge at Burlington House where their careers flourished and earned Burlington the title 'The Apollo of the Arts'. He returned to Italy in 1719 exclusively to study the buildings of the late Renaissance by architects such as Palladio and Scamozzi, whilst amassing a collection of original drawings by Palladio.

At Chiswick amongst his first works on the house were to put a new façade to the Old House entrance. Building the New House probably came about partly to celebrate his marriage in 1723 and partly to replace the burnt-down west wing of the Old House, and was structurally finished in 1727.

The House

Entering the house at the ground floor, or 'rustic' through a simple bronze door, was the entrance used in Burlington's day on all but the grandest occasions. We passed through a narrow corridor into a low octagonal space ringed with columns lit only from radiating corridors.

This room is now entirely devoid of furniture, enabling us to appreciate Burlington's skilful manipulation of space and light. All of the furniture at Chiswick was taken to Chatsworth at the end of the 19th century when the house became a mental asylum prior to its sale to Chiswick Borough Council, c. 1930.

Treve explained this Lower Tribunal was originally furnished with 'Eight Mahogany Windsor Elbow Chairs' set against the walls. The three interconnecting northern

rooms facing the garden formed the library with bookcases and reading tables. The remaining small rooms included a room containing £2,436 worth of plate and a linen room. With a wine cellar below, this floor was used for family entertaining. Formal dining took place in the Old House, with the kitchens sited in a wing beyond the two houses.

The Link Building and Summer Parlour

Today this attractive columned ground floor space contains a lead Sphinx by John Cheere, brought in for safety, from the garden where it was formerly one of a four that guarded the house to the north and south, according to Greek mythology, and believed to be the first example of their use in England.

Beyond, past an apse containing a group of three marble statues brought from Hadrian's villa at Tivoli which Burlington initially placed in the Ionic Temple, we found the Summer Parlour or Garden Room, a delightful baroque pavilion with windows on one side facing the garden, possibly designed by James Gibbs. This room was created entirely by Kent for Lady Burlington, and "furnished at her own expense". It also had a small china closet to the right of the room.

At this point of the tour, our attention was drawn to the considerable influence Lady Burlington is thought to have had on the decoration of the villa. She and William Kent, both from Yorkshire families, but from very different backgrounds, enjoyed a close relationship, well documented by their surviving correspondence. Kent included her Savile crest of an owl numerous times in the coffered ceiling.

This richly furnished room originally contained a magnificent pair of mahogany pier tables with carved and gilded owls to the angles, with complementary gilded mirrors. Treve informed us that while undergoing restoration prior to its loan from Chatsworth to the exhibition at the V&A one of the pair was found to have the name 'Wm. Kent' inscribed on the reverse of one owl mount and 'John Boson' on the reverse of the other.

It is believed that Boson was apprenticed as a carver of ships figureheads and he is known to have carved elements of Prince Frederick's magnificent state barge, designed by Kent (now at Greenwich). Boson became one of William Kent's close circle of craftsmen and took a lease from Burlington on a house designed by Kent in 1734 at the top of Savile Row. In addition to carved furniture, Boson had an important reputation for carving marble fireplaces.

The First Floor: The Upper Tribunal

Returning to the sunlight we then enjoyed the rare privilege of mounting the formal staircase to re-enter the house on the first floor. Pausing under the portico, Ricky

disclosed that the superb deeply cut Corinthian capitals are also believed to be from Boson's workshop. Passing through a narrow central corridor, under a strategically placed bust of Augustus above narrow double doors we emerged into the light filled, central octagonal Dome Saloon. Directly ahead of us hung Van Dyck's portrait of Charles I and his family, one of eight paintings lining the octagon, brought by Burlington from his town house in Piccadilly. It is thought that it acknowledges that king's granting of an earldom to Burlington's grandfather.

The room was originally furnished with four red marble-topped tables, on 'flying boy' carved giltwood stands, each flanked by four mahogany hall chairs – round-backed variations of the pedimented design to be seen in the sculpture gallery.

Scrolled gilded brackets on the wall supporting classical busts are substitutes. The original busts are at Chatsworth, while two of the original brackets of wood, sanded and finished to look like stone, were included in the Attic Sale and sold for £90,000. The beautiful glass chandelier, hand-cut in the 1990s, was copied from a period original from Thornham Hall, Norfolk.

The Sculpture Gallery

The plan of the first floor is similar to the ground floor. Ahead, was the Gallery overlooking the garden, profusely decorated with gilded architectural ornament including female heads surmounted with baskets of fruit emerging from Corinthian capitals. The gallery has been furnished according to a watercolour of 1828, when it contained pedimented mahogany hall chairs that have been acquired, one at a time, over the last few years. The still incomplete set has now been augmented with reproductions, leaving the informed visitor the sport of spotting the authentic.

By far the most spectacular acquisition for the restored house was the pair of gilded side tables, bought in 1996. The superb inlaid marble tops are thought to be those bought by Burlington in Genoa in 1719. The frames constructed in soft wood are now thought to be a very early design of Kent's carved by the Italian sculptor Guelphi who also carved many of the urns to Kent's design in the garden. These frames are considered to be unique examples of the transition from Italian baroque to English Palladian furniture design. They had remained at Chiswick until c. 1892 when a tenant, 3rd Marquis of Bute, acquired them. Treve recalled the excitement, of using leading-edge technology to reveal the original gilding under many later layers of gilding and lacquer.

The Red and Blue Velvet Rooms

The Red Velvet Room was the primary picture gallery, recently successfully re-hung by English Heritage in close approximation of Burlington's original collection. The walls

are lined with a collection of Kentian chairs from Wroxton Abbey, which are rather out of scale with the room. Treve drew our attention of the error of omitting the dado during the restoration of the room in the 1950s and how it upset the balance, making Kent's pedimented door-cases appear top-heavy.

We were able to experience the correct proportions when we entered the sumptuous Blue Velvet Room, which retains its dado and correctly proportioned side chairs. Here Burlington's privileged guests were shown his collection of architectural drawings. The mahogany pier-table possibly Benjamin Goodison on display today is a good substitute for the original desk, now at Chatsworth. A recent acquisition is a parcel-gilt mahogany pole screen, probably by Kent, from Chiswick, another piece from the Chatsworth 'Attic Sale' in 2010.

The Green Velvet Room

On the opposite, eastern side of the house is Lady Burlington's mirror suite of rooms. The Green Velvet Room (considered a feminine colour) is now hung with a set of fascinating mid-18th-century views of the estate by Rysbrack, bought by English Heritage. Here are five upholstered and gilded chairs from the set of ten designed by Kent, and made in 1735 by Stephen Langley, for Lady Burlington's Summer Parlour. The proportions are at odds with this room and it is to be hoped they will eventually return to the room for which they were designed.



Fig. 2 One of a pair of marble-topped side tables in the Roman manner probably made by Giacomo Guelphi to designs by William Kent, c. 1730. The matching mirrors are made from plaster and were copies of the originals now at Chatsworth and made c. 1955

Lady Burlington's Bedroom

The final room was Lady Burlington's Bedroom, a small square room, where she died in 1758 – the mirror of Lord Burlington's Blue Velvet Room.

The room was originally hung with Tenier's designed tapestries and, uniquely in this house, it had a fireplace with silver-mounted fire-basket for burning wood; the burning of cheaper coal would have melted the silver. According to the 1770 Inventory the room also contained a large four-poster bed, two gilt settees, a mahogany French commode and two marble topped tables on gilded stands. The room now contains a mahogany roll-top writing desk, c. 1785 associated with Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, and mentioned in the 1811 inventory along with a pair of upholstered French fauteuils by Tillard, which feature in a late nineteenth century photograph of the house. Also part of the 'Attic Sale' acquisitions they seem, however, to my eyes a little out of place standing on the stone floor amidst Kent's baroque scheme.

Jeremy Bate



Fig. 3 Late 18th-century roll-top desk and two chairs in the french manner made for Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, c. 1780 and photographed in this room at Chiswick in 1895 (Photograph Treve Rosoman, courtesy of English Heritage)