

Gilling Castle

Our afternoon visit was immensely rewarding and we are grateful to the community at Ampleforth Abbey for permission to visit its preparatory school, and to Fr John Fairhurst OSB for his warm welcome and his skill in showing us this complicated building.

The original castle was a square fortress built between 1370 and 1400 for the Etton family, its interior marvellously re-modelled in the late 16th century, for the Fairfax family, who owned it from 1492 to 1895. In the 18th century the family greatly enlarged the castle and undertook an ambitious scheme of re-decoration. The west side of the fortress was transformed with two long wings enclosing an entrance courtyard (that on the south may be a re-modelling of an earlier, 16th-century addition). A stone double stair leads to the Entrance Hall on the *piano nobile*. By 1736, William Wakefield, the Yorkshire gentleman architect (d.1730) was credited with work at Gilling. The interiors were fitted out and decorated in the 1740s by the builder and woodworker

Matthew Ward of Crakehall, North Yorkshire, with plasterwork by the Italian-Swiss, Giuseppe Cortese (active c. 1725–78). Cortese worked in several North Yorkshire houses and lived for a while in Whitby. He had many connections throughout Yorkshire, and the cabinet maker Edward Elwick of Wakefield was an executor of his will. Matthew Ward is still an emerging figure, but clearly worked for several Catholic families (as the Fairfaxes were) in North Yorkshire.

The plasterwork in the Entrance Hall is ambitious, with elaborate swags and festoon by Cortese, enlivening a classical scheme of arched niches between pilasters. Other plasterwork from his hands survives in overmantels in other rooms, including the White Ante Room. A rival to the Entrance Hall in its plasterwork was the Gallery, in the south wing, but the ceiling there was sadly destroyed in 1930, when the panelling (by Matthew Ward) was removed for separate sale, together with the panelling of the Great Chamber (including its stained glass). The purchaser of both sets of panelling was William Randolph Hearst, the newspaper tycoon, who almost certainly intended them for St Donat's Castle in the Vale of Glamorgan.

The intervention of World War II and Hearst's death resulted in the happy outcome, in 1952 (funded by a group of well-wishers), of the return of the Great Room panelling and glass. The Gallery panelling could not be returned because of alterations to the ceiling height in the creation of the school chapel, but survives now in the collections of the Bowes Museum, Barnard Castle, though no longer shown as a full room.

The Great Chamber, which was the main object of our visit, ranks with the woodwork at Sizergh in terms of magnificence. The walls are panelled with three tiers of equally sized rectangular panels, each panel divided by mouldings into a central lozenge-shaped panel, with four shaped spandrels. The central lozenges are inlaid with a complex interlacing pattern in bog oak and holly (with a variety of patterns on different panels). The spandrel panels are inlaid with single sprigs of honeysuckle, carnation or marigold, said to be in pearwood. Above is a deep frieze, painted onto vertical boards, with trees representing each Wapentake or administrative area of Yorkshire, hung with shields representing the arms of the resident gentlemen of each. In the north-east corner is a depiction of a musical party, with six men and women seated on a bench, playing stringed instruments. Though the frieze has been repainted more than once, it remains a powerful element in the whole. The chimneypiece, in fine classical style, is reminiscent of contemporary engravings by Hans Vredeman de Vries (1527–c. 1607). It carries the royal arms of Elizabeth I, together with the Fairfax arms and four shields that show the marriages of Sir William Fairfax's four sisters. This ties the dating of the room very tightly to the last years of the 16th century, in line with the wonderful armorial glass of the two windows, carrying the name of the maker, Baernard Dininckhoff, (recorded as working in York, though presumably originating from the German states) and the date 1585, although some, at least, of the glass must have been added after the marriage of Thomas Fairfax in 1594. The fine pendant ceiling that caps the whole scheme remained at Gilling after the panelling was removed.



A Robert 'Mouseman' Thompson Oak Reading Chair, c. 1930's, with adjustable ladder-back and seat, arms with a hole for the adjustable book rest, and an ashtray. The shaped arm support is carved with the mouse signature. The chair was originally fitted with leather-covered cushions. Courtesy Ampleforth Abbey & College (Photo Jeremy Bate)

Members may wish to know that the 1594 inventory of the castle (with others made for the Fairfax family at Walton and at Gilling between 1594 and 1624) was published by Edward Peacock in *Archaeologia*, vol. 48 (1884), pp. 121–56. I am indebted to Anselm Cramer OSB's Gilling guidebook for this reference. These inventories are not probate inventories but made for the family, and contain much more detail than usual, giving a strong sense of colour and luxury. In 1594 the furnishings of the Great Chamber more than complemented the grandeur of the panelling and plasterwork:

Imprimis one drawinge table of walmutte cutt and carued of three leaves longe and xij stooles cut and carued xv li.

Item a greene clothe with a greene silke frindge for the same table liij s. iiij d.

Item xij stooles couered with greene clothe and frindged with greene silke iiij li.

Item one long carpitt of tapistree for the same table vj li.

Item one chaire couered with grene clothe and frindged with grene silke xxvj s. iiij d.

Item iiij litle stooles couered with grene clothe and frindged with greene silke xiiij s. iiij d.

Item one square table, and a grene cloth to the same frindged with greene silke xxiiij s.

Item one silke carpit square for the said table frindged with greene silke x li.

Item ij cubbourdes cut and carued with two greene clothes to the same and frindged with greene silke iiij li

Item v quishions of Nedlework xxv s.

Item one paire of brasen awnde irons, a pair of tonges, and a fire panne iij li

Item two longe quishions of blacke and reade sattan figured iij li

Summa liiij li. xij s iiij d

When the panelling was removed in 1930, both rooms were re-panelled by the local craftsman Robert 'Mouseman' Thompson, and the gallery still contains his work. We often see later pieces from the workshop, so it was particularly interesting to see this panelling, and many other pieces, including the original carrels, and for private study by the boys, now in the lower corridor. Ampleforth Abbey first commissioned pieces from 'Mousey' Thompson in 1919 and continue to do so from his descendants to this day.

Further reading:

Anselm Cramer, Gilling Castle. *The Story of the House and its Families*. Saint Laurence Papers xi. Ampleforth Abbey, 2008

Edward Peacock, FSA, 'Inventories made for Sir William and Sir Thomas Fairfax, Knights, of Walton, and of Filling Castle, Yorkshire, in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries.' *Archaeologia*, vol. 48 (1884), pp. 121–56.

Sarah Medlam, 'Matthew Ward at Gilling Castle', *Furniture History*, vol. xxxiii (1997), pp. 109–16.

Hugh Murray, *The Great Chamber at Gilling Castle*. Saint Laurence Papers viii. Ampleforth Abbey, 1996.

Sarah Medlam