

WINSLOW HALL, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE, THE PROPERTY OF MR GEOFFREY HOUGHTON BROWN – By ARTHUR OSWALD

Built in 1700 by William Lowndes, Secretary to the Treasury, Winslow Hall is one of very few country houses that can confidently be attributed to Sir Christopher Wren.

Scores of houses up and down the country are popularly believed to be the work of Inigo Jones or Sir Christopher Wren, but when dates, facts, circumstances and the buildings themselves are examined, most of the claims melt away and we are left with a small residue of probables, doubtfuls and possibles. That there should be so little documentary evidence, whether in the form of drawings or accounts and letters, for Wren's country house work has always been something of a mystery, and all the researches of the editors of the Wren Society volumes failed to dispel it. Yet it can hardly be supposed that an architect of his eminence would not have been frequently approached for designs by friends, acquaintances and more eminent patrons, or that he would not have found time to satisfy at least some of the requests. He lived so long and he found time for so much. No doubt, if we had a day-book of his like the diary of Robert Hooke, in which he entered casual payments for plans and sketches supplied, the problem would be solved. As it is, Marlborough House and Tring Park, both altered almost beyond recognition, are the only two houses which he is known with certainty to have designed for private clients. These are followed by two virtual certainties – Winslow Hall and Fawley Court, near Henley, both in Buckinghamshire.

The builder of Winslow Hall, William Lowndes, the reputed originator of the phrase Ways and Means, which he adopted as his family motto and which others applied as a nickname to himself, was Secretary to the Treasury from 1695 until his death in 1724. His office brought him into close touch with the Surveyor-General, so that when he decided to build himself a new house it was easy for him to ask Wren to provide plans and drawings. It was for his predecessor at the Treasury, Henry Guy, that Wren had designed the house at Tring, probably an early work of the 1670s, to judge by the engraving of it in Chauncy's *History of Hertfordshire*. The accounts which Lowndes kept have survived. They were discovered in a London bookshop and were bought by Mr. Norman McCorquodale, the late owner. The substance of them is printed in Volume XVII of the Wren Society. No actual payment to Wren occurs, but the accounts were closely scrutinised by him and several of the bills were "abated by Sir

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Chr Wren's Judgement," implying some degree of supervision. The absence of any mention of "draughts" or of a payment for them could be explained by a number of hypotheses : for instance, the drawing may have been supplied a year or two before the work began. No payment to Wren is recorded in connection with the Abingdon Town Hall, for which the accounts exist ; yet there can hardly be any doubt that it was designed by him.

In forming a judgement of Wren's country house work, Fawley Court and Winslow Hall, together with the engravings of Tring and Marlborough House before their alterations serve, in Mr Arthur Bolton's words "to set a standard by which other claims can be judged." All four are brick buildings and characteristic examples of his sure and sensitive handling of that material. There is an absence of display, a reliance for respect on proportion and texture, a feeling of good sense and that practical approach to a problem which is evident in all he did and wrote and which made him considerate, as few architects have been, of his client's purse – or, to use the Lowndes formula, his ways and means. Fawley Court, in plan of H shape, is of the normal two storeys, with the attic windows in the hipped

roof. Marlborough House has been much altered and heightened, but as originally designed it was also a house of two storeys and H plan, but with a parapet instead of an eaves cornice. Winslow Hall differs from both in being a tall compact block with flanking pavilions, which emphasise by contrast the height and mass of the main building. The tall cube has precedents in Ashdown House, Hall Barn and several other Cromwellian houses, and also certain Dutch examples, for instance Swanenburg (1652-54) designed by Pieter Post, but at Winslow Hall the whole composition is dominated by the majestic row of chimney-stacks, standing four abreast on the flat of the roof, the slopes of which are unbroken by dormers. Including the vaulted cellars and attic there are five storeys. Seen from the road, the house seems to tower above you, and it is a conspicuous object over long distances in its flat surroundings.

William Lowndes acquired the manor of Winslow in 1697. He was a native of this little market town and as a boy had gone to the free school at Buckingham. Before the dissolution of the monasteries Winslow had been one of the estates of St Albans Abbey, to which it had been given by the Mercian King Offa at the time when he founded the monastery. In 1540 Richard Breme, King's Serjeant and his wife, received a grant of the manor for their lives. After it had reverted to the Crown, it was granted in fee to Sir John Fortescue, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, whose son, Sir Francis, in 1620 conveyed it to the Duke of Buckingham. After being sequestrated and sold during the Commonwealth, it was returned to the second Duke at the Restoration, but he parted with it at the time when he began to repay his debts, and it belonged to Nicholas Goodwin, of Hammersmith, before Lowndes acquired it.

It is not clear from the accounts whether the old house occupied the same site, but when it was pulled down, 35,000 bricks were saved from it. The Lowndes family had lived in Winslow since the first half

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of the 16th Century. Robert Lowndes, William's father, fled to America at the outbreak of the Civil War, but returned in 1650 and his son was born at Winslow two years later. The accounts show that planting of the garden began in 1695, the year when Lowndes became Secretary to the Treasury and two years before he acquired the manor, so that the house was probably built on property which the family already owned or held on lease. The new lord of the manor had his coat-of-arms set up in a window of the chancel of the church.

The account book headed "Accompts of the Charge of Building the House att Winslow – with the Offices Out Houses and other Edifices belonging thereunto and making the Gardens there in the years 1699, 1700, 1701 and 1702 by Mr. Wm. Lowndes." The whole cost of the works, meticulously set out, under 16 different headings, amounted to £6,585 10s 2¼d. In addition to full particulars of all of the bills, there are copies of the agreements with the mason, Richard Mapletoft, and the bricklayer, John Yemens of Hampton, Middlesex. Mapletoft was a London mason, who in the general search of 1694, had premises in Holly Street in Clare Market. He was then working on Wallingford House in Whitehall. The quoines (spelt "Quines") are the first item mentioned. They were to be of stone from Cosgrave [sic] in Northamptonshire, and after "the best Rustick Fashion." For the two doorcases, front and back, a design was to be submitted and "first approved by the said William Lowndes," from which it would appear that Wren's share did not extend to details, though Lowndes may have shown the drawing to Wren before approving it. Mapletoft's work included the provision of chimney pieces, but four of these were provided by Edward Chapman of Bedford Row. The making and carriage of bricks accounted for nearly a sixth of the total sum spent. Yemens required over a

million ordinary bricks and nearly one hundred thousand rubbing bricks. When the roof was raised Lowndes gave the carpenters the customary dinner.

Three of the craftsmen engaged were or the Office of Works men – Matthew Banks, King’s Master Carpenter, Charles Hopson, King’s Joiner, and Joseph Roberts, King’s Serjeant Plumber. All three worked on St. Paul’s and on other buildings under Wren’s supervision, and their employment at Winslow strengthens the probability that he made designs for the house. John Churchill, who measured the whole job for working out costs, was a carpenter employed on the Royal palaces and at Marlborough House. Hopson’s bills suffered the largest abatements, in the region of 10%. Evidently Wren knew this man. Unlike Hopson, Mapletoft, the mason, was given £40 *ex gratia* “because of the dearness of his Stone and Great Trouble in getting it and because he performed his work well.”

As originally built the flanking blocks, containing respectively kitchen, brewhouse and laundry, and stables, coach-house, and “milkhouse” were detached from the main house, though the kitchen block was connected by a covered passage. In 1901 Mr. McCorquodale built a single-storey linking range on the east side with an entrance door in it facing the garden. Before his time a carriage sweep had been formed bringing you round from the road to the garden front.

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He abolished, or rather curtailed, this approach and laid out a formal garden where the drive had swept round before the garden front. The main front facing the road until recently had a sloping lawn in front of it, but an old painting of the house shows a terrace and steps, and since buying the property Mr Houghton Brown has restored the original arrangement (Fig.2). The brick retaining wall and footings of the steps were still there under the grass only waiting to be unearthed. The kitchen block seen on the left of the photograph, retains its original tall stack, echoing those of the house, but the corresponding one on the east has disappeared.

The elevations gain the quality of their texture from the framing of the windows in panels of lighter rubbed brick contrasting with the walling brick. In plan the main block is a rectangle, 63 ft. by 42 ft., with only the slightest projection of the central features below the great pediments. At either end the walls break forward a foot or two where the stair cases are accommodated. The original fenestration had been altered, on the main front, disastrously by the deadening substitution of plate glass, but Mr Houghton Brown has greatly improved its appearance by painting *trompe l’œil* sash bars on the glass of the ground floor and first floor windows. The alteration on the garden front (Fig. 3) has been restricted by substituting four panes for the original nine of each sash ; the change in scale is unfortunate, but the dark window openings are at least relieved by sash bars, though too few and too narrow. Of the two doorcases, the one on the main front (Fig.5) bears the inscription “William Lowndes AD MDCC.” For “Cutting Letters of Mr Lowndes name and date of the Year” Mapletoft charged 5 shillings.

In the arrangement of rooms there are few innovations ; indeed, the plan in some respects is old-fashioned. The entrance doorway opens into one end of the hall, and there is still a memory of the screens passage in the corresponding doorway on the far side, which brings you into the opposite end of the dining-room (Fig.6). Both the hall and the little room to the left of it have closets opening from them. The staircases, symmetrically placed at each end of the house, go up in dog-leg flights from cellars to attic (Figs. 8 and 9) and have landing galleries parallel to the flights. In Wren’s time room were still intercommunicating, but this arrangement of staircases made each bedroom and its closet self-contained by giving to each direct access from a landing gallery. It was a neat and

convenient way of dispensing with a central corridor. On the first floor there are four bedrooms, on the second only two, but here there is a long gallery facing south extending to five windows. All the closets are at the angles of the building. The prevailing fashion for corner fireplaces finds expression, particularly on the first floor, where they occur in three out of the four bedrooms.

One has the impression that the Treasury economist wished to be economical. He commissioned no ornamental plasterwork like the elaborate dining-room ceiling at Fawley Court. The staircases are of good plain joinery, with turned balusters, square newel posts, and moulded handrail. Hopson's oak panelling "of right Wainscot wrought with a fair Bolection" is all but no more than we should expect for a house of this time. There are good brass-plates and locks, the original ones supplied by Robert Greenway, who though condemned by Talman as "an ignorant fellow," seems to have done his work well enough.

Only in one room, the larger of the northward-facing, first-floor rooms, is there any special decoration (Figs. 10 and 11). Here the spaces above the dado are filled by four paintings not mentioned in the accounts and so probably done a few years later. The elaborate architectural framework to the scenes is the kind of thing one associates with David Marot, the architect, engraver and designer in many fields who took the style of Louis Quatorze to Holland where it assumed characteristic Dutch flavour. The artist was evidently much more interested in his architectural embellishments – the scrolls, cartouches, curtains and canopies - than the landscapes which they frame. In each panel there is a central figure or object – in one a vase, in another a fountain with a Triton blowing jets from a conch; in a third a shepherd with his dog sits on a kind of apron stage with his back turned to his sheep ; the fourth (right of Fig. 11) shows a

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gentleman discoursing on a flute to a lady, both of them sitting on a window sill, while the enchanted lady points to the landscape, which has a fountain pool in the foreground. Mr. Edward Croft-Murray tells me that he knows of no close English parallel to these paintings, which he attributes to an Anglo-French artist, who might have been the unknown Ricard, who assisted Laguerre probably in painting architectural accessories at Chatsworth. The woodwork has been painted grey and blue and the mouldings of the dado are marbled to accord with the veined marble bolection fireplace, which is one of the original ones. The early 19th century Aubusson carpet of rich colours, with magenta reds and greens prevailing, accords very happily with the Baroque paintings.

The fireplace in the dining room is not the original one, which has been displaced. The one now there was brought by Mr. McCorquodale from another room. Mr. Houghton-Brown's collection of furniture, which includes a considerable number of foreign pieces, chosen for their decorative qualities, is well set off by the oak panelling. The tapestry covering the end wall (Fig. 6) is one of a set of six arts and sciences made at Brussels from cartoons by Cornelis Schut, a disciple of Rubens. The subject is "The Arts of Peace." The cabinet in front of it is one of several handsome Buhl pieces in the house. The gilt chairs with tapestry coverings came from Lowther Castle, as did the pier table, composed of a Negro figure supporting a marble slab. A French clock in a Louis Quinze gilt case flanked by Rococo wall lights goes with another Buhl piece to make a handsome group at the other end of the room (Fig. 7). The armorial hanging seen in the photograph of the hall (Fig. 13) is one of four made by Lord Stuart de Rothesay, formerly of Highcliffe Castle. The little Rococo mirror (Fig. 14), one of a pair, is a very pretty and unusual example, introducing among its *rocaille* a peasant's cottage. Nothing precisely like this is illustrated in Chippendale's *Director*, though there are examples of girandoles introducing ruins of classical antiquity.

In planting his garden William Lowndes relied on the Royal gardeners, London and Wise, for the supply of his fruit trees. Planting of these began in the Autumn of 1695. In 1701-2 Wise charged a further £20 odd "to Plant the largest Garden, ye Kitchen Garden and ye Platts before ye House." The original lay-out observed the formalities of the time, but, as usual, they were not to the taste of a later generation. The garden front now looks out on a level expanse of grass planted with oaks and a few conifers that effectively frame the buildings when you look back (Fig. 3). This, one may suppose, was the area of "the largest garden." Eastward it is bounded by a long wall, on the far side of which lies the kitchen garden. The gates leading into it have W L on the overthrow. The accounts show that Lowndes contented himself with wooden gates instead of wrought iron for the forecourt. The iron gates seen in Fig. 4 are modern but the piers are original.

Winslow remained in the Lowndes family until the house was bought by Mr. McCorquodale. The great-grandson of the financier, also a William, assumed the name of Selby, having been left the Whaddon estate by his friend and neighbour, Thomas James Selby who died in 1772. Whaddon thereafter became the principal seat of the Selby-Lowndes family. Mr. Houghton-Brown, since buying Winslow Hall in 1948, has made a number of judicious improvements and by the painting of sash bars and the releveling of the forecourt has restored to the front much of the character it had lost. The house is now being divided into flats, to which, thanks to Wren's planning in self-contained units, it lends itself with a minimum of alteration.