What part did decorative plasterwork play in the transformation of the Great House before 1660?

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Decorative plasterwork has become one element that characterises the image of the Great House in England. Wide-ranging social and economic change accompanied the end of the medieval period and the arrival of the Tudor dynasty in 1485. The domestic stability England enjoyed during the Elizabethan period was cemented by the end of hostilities with Spain when James I ascended the throne. As a result, substantial change occurred in the form, function and internal decorative design of the Great House. As will be exemplified in this essay, plasterwork continued to be important as a decorative material in the Caroline period and reflected changing fashions in architectural and artistic design. In this essay I will argue that this change was more of an evolution than a transformation, as it occurred slowly over a long period of time.

In 1501 Henry VII granted a charter to the Worshipful Company of Plasterers of London, giving the trade formal recognition and attesting to its rising popularity as a material. As Beard has pointed out, Plaster and Stucco are distinct entities; the best plaster being derived from burning gypsum and the more usual kind of English plasterwork being comprised of slaked lime, sand and a binding agent such as hair. Stucco is derived from the addition of marble dust to slaked lime, rather than sand or hair. Gapper comments that the term ‘pargetting’ was used in the sixteenth century to mean internal as well as external plastering; alongside the term ‘plaster’.

For the purposes of this essay, ‘plasterwork’ will be taken to include both plaster and stucco work and will focus on the role internal decorative plasterwork played in the evolution of the Great House. Thus, this essay will not discuss the modern definition of ‘pargetting’ or other external uses of decorative plasterwork. For the purposes of this essay, the ‘Great House’ will be defined as a seat of an aristocratic or gentry family, principally in the countryside. The geographical scope of this essay will be limited to England.

Airs has argued that despite the eighteenth century being commonly thought of as ‘The Age of the Country House’, the Tudor and Jacobean period has a greater claim to this title. It is

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3 Beard, p. 9.
4 Beard, p. 12.
undoubtable that the period of 1530-1660 saw considerable social and economic change, culminating in the upheaval of the Civil War and the relatively short Commonwealth years before the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660. The Dissolution of the monasteries in the period 1536-1541, saw the transfer of monastic land and buildings to established noble families and ‘new’ men.\(^7\)

This created a rare opportunity for such beneficiaries to construct new buildings or convert and assimilate former monastic buildings into new building schemes. Whereas the medieval and early Tudor Great House were planned with functionality in mind, style in itself was more of a consideration in later buildings.\(^8\) Airs and Yorke celebrate the rich variety that can be found in the design of the Great House during the Elizabethan and Jacobean period; commenting that ‘an amazing wealth of type and scale’\(^9\) survives and that such buildings ‘mirror the same variety of form that endears the countryside to us, with no one house being the same as the next’.\(^10\)

During the Tudor period there was a gradual shift away from communal modes of living in the Great House.\(^11\) Whereas the hall dominated such houses of the medieval period, by the Elizabethan period its importance was on the wane.\(^12\) The hall’s previous dominance in the Great House, informed its construction and decoration as the most high-status room in the building. In a period dominated by intricate timber and stone roof structures in the hall of the Great House, such roofs were elaborately carved, decorated with ‘devices’ and engineered to showcase the ‘strength and unity’ of the resident family.\(^13\)

From the 1540s onwards, the plan form of new-build Great Houses began to transition from a courtyard, one pile arrangement to an increasingly symmetrical double or triple plan form; yet most continued to be planned around a hall.\(^14\) However as modes of living increasingly favoured privacy, and the medieval open hearth was replaced by chimneys, the great chamber

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\(^7\) Yorke, p. 21.
\(^8\) Yorke, p. 12.
\(^9\) Airs, p. ix.
\(^10\) Yorke, p. 7.
\(^11\) Yorke, p. 15.
\(^12\) Yorke, p. 28.
was becoming the successor of the great hall. The great hall at Burghley House, built in 1578, was the last to have an open timberwork roof.

Flat plastered ceilings became fashionable for halls and by 1600, most halls were built as single storey structures as at Montacute House, Somerset. Accompanying the rise of the great chamber and subsequently the parlour in popularity, the Jacobean period saw long galleries also becoming a fashionable addition to the plan form of the Great House. With lower ceilings now a reality in high-status rooms of Great Houses, the stage was set for decorative plasterwork to become the medium of choice for ceiling ornamentation in the sixteenth and seventeenth century.

As plasterwork ceilings succeeded those of carved timber and/or stone in high status areas of the Great House, clear correlations can be drawn between styles popular in the former building mediums and those that emerged as popular in plaster. Elaborate patterns of rib work had been popular as a decorative ceiling style in medieval secular and holy high-status buildings, particularly in the medium of stone.

Possibly dating from 1500, plasterwork being notoriously difficult to date, one such example of a decorative plaster ceiling utilising rib work patterning can be found at Haddon Hall, Derbyshire (Figure 1). The solar of the Great Chamber, now known as the Drawing Room, displays elaborate rib work which appear to form an inner and outer star of eight points. Gapper has commented that the eight-pointed star was to prove enduringly popular throughout the sixteenth century. The star rib work motif utilised in this ceiling, albeit a simplified version and seemingly devoid of bosses, is reminiscent of gothic lierne stone rib work ceilings. Musson utilises the Great Chamber at Lytes Cary Manor, Somerset (Figure 2) to make the connection between late gothic stone vaulting design and Tudor plasterwork.

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15 Girouard, p. 40.
16 Thurley, p. 231.
17 Thurley, p. 231.
18 Girouard, p. 100.
19 Beard, p. 10.
ceilings. This ceiling demonstrates a more elaborate geometric pattern, known as fretwork, which was to become fashionable in the Elizabethan and Jacobean period.

A fine example of the decorated gothic style in a secular Great House can be found at Crosby Hall (Figure 1). The Hall was originally built between 1466 and 1475 in the City of London by a merchant, the building was painstakingly moved from Bishopsgate to Cheyne Walk, Chelsea in 1910. The Great Hall at Crosby contains an imposing oriel window, the ceiling of which comprises lierne rib vaulting. In comparing such a stone ceiling with the decorative plasterwork ceiling at Haddon Hall and Lytes Cary Manor, it is clear that during the early Tudor period, the decorative gothic style was informing interior style in the Great House and decorative plasterwork was an important design element utilised in the evolution of the Great House.

This crossover in design form between mediums can also be seen when timber roof carpentry forms are compared with decorative plasterwork ceilings. As Gapper has stated, ‘plasterwork drew inspiration from developments which had already taken place in interior decoration using other materials, namely timber and stone’. Pendants can be seen as part of the Gothic style and a development from the flat, medieval boss. Pendants were employed as a decorative feature in timber roof structures, particularly hammer beam roofs, in the late medieval and early Tudor period. An example of this use of pendants can be found in the Great Hall at Eltham Palace, London; built by Edward VI between 1475 – 1480.

23 Claire, Gapper, ‘Chapter I - Materials and Their Uses - British Renaissance Plasterwork’.
28 Beard, p. 18.
29 Beard, p. 31.
This distinctive design feature transitioned from timber roofs in the halls of Great Houses to Elizabethan plasterwork in later halls and great chambers. A clear example of this transition can be found at Trelince Manor, Cornwall.\textsuperscript{31} A plasterwork ceiling with distinctive large pendants accompanies an overmantel bearing the date of 1572.\textsuperscript{32} As plasterwork decorative schemes on ceilings and overmantels were often devised together, it could be assumed that the ceiling is broadly contemporary. The Elizabethan Great Hall at Parham House, Sussex incorporates similarly large pendants within its plasterwork ceiling.\textsuperscript{33}

Whereas the timber roofs of Great Houses were designed to be the star of the show, decorative plasterwork ceilings of the Tudor and Jacobean period were designed as part of the overall decorative scheme of a room.\textsuperscript{34} Such ceilings were designed to complement the other elements present in the room such as wall coverings, wainscoting or movable furniture.\textsuperscript{35} Girouard states, ‘much of the splendour of medieval great chambers, as of medieval halls, was in their moveable furnishings’.\textsuperscript{36}

This would arguably have held true for the Tudor and Jacobean great chamber and thus it must be remembered that where the plasterwork ceiling survives in a Tudor or Jacobean room, some or all of the other contemporary elements have long since disappeared. In certain cases, the main driver in the evolution of a room within a Great House was a fine stone fireplace rather than the decorative plasterwork ceiling. Cruickshank cites the example of the Great Chamber in South Wraxall Manor, Wiltshire to make this point.\textsuperscript{37} Whether one element is superior to another is debatable, yet the two elements clearly complimented one another to grand effect.

The decorative plasterwork as one element in the overall decorative scheme of a room where other integral elements have survived, occurs at the High Great Chamber at Hardwick Hall, Derbyshire. The Countess of Shrewsbury, commonly referred to as Bess of Hardwick, began

\textsuperscript{32} Musson, \textit{Plasterwork}.
\textsuperscript{34} Jourdain, Margaret, \textit{English Interior Decoration 1500 to 1830 - A Study in the Development of Design} (London, New York and Sydney: Batsford, 1950), p. 3.
\textsuperscript{35} Musson, \textit{How to Read a Country House}, p. 102.
\textsuperscript{36} Girouard, p. 53.
building Hardwick (New) Hall by the end of 1590.\textsuperscript{38} Interestingly Hardwick Old and New Halls were alike in shunning almost entirely details derived from architectural pattern books.\textsuperscript{39} Instead, biblical and other subject prints form the basis for the majority of the decorative schemes utilised.\textsuperscript{40}

It is clear that the High Great Chamber was intended to provide the climax of a visitor’s Hardwick experience.\textsuperscript{41} The decorative scheme employed in the room tells two interrelated stories.\textsuperscript{42} The Brussels tapestries relate the history of Ulysses\textsuperscript{43} and the plaster frieze glorifies the goddess Diana; personified by Queen Elizabeth.\textsuperscript{44} This incredibly lively and intricate plasterwork frieze has been principally attributed to Abraham Smith\textsuperscript{45} and was devised using inspiration from continental prints of engravings.\textsuperscript{46} The frieze can be seen as unusual for the period as it appears it was always painted.\textsuperscript{47} The effect of the painted frieze, coupled with the tapestries, no doubt created a room of rich colour and seamless figurative story and symbolism.

As Thurley has noted, heraldry and the four orders of architecture ‘mixed effortlessly’ with images derived from the Bible, ancient history and mythology.\textsuperscript{48} This is evidently the case at Hardwick Hall. It must be acknowledged, however, that the importance of advances in printing that led to the wide circulation of printed pattern sources helped to transform the imaginative world of craftsmen and many patrons during this period.\textsuperscript{49} Printing revolutionised the spread of knowledge and this was especially important in architecture as it enabled the spread of line drawings.\textsuperscript{50}

\textsuperscript{39} Wells-Cole, p. 260.
\textsuperscript{40} Wells-Cole, p. 260.
\textsuperscript{41} Wells-Cole, p. 269.
\textsuperscript{42} Wells-Cole, p. 269.
\textsuperscript{43} Wells-Cole, p. 269.
\textsuperscript{44} Wells-Cole, p. 270.
\textsuperscript{45} Beard, p. 10.
\textsuperscript{46} Wells-Cole, p. 270.
\textsuperscript{47} Beard, p. 19.
\textsuperscript{48} Thurley, p. 214.
\textsuperscript{49} Musson, \textit{How to Read a Country House}, p. 111.
\textsuperscript{50} Thurley, p. 211.
There is not the capacity within this essay to discuss the many and varied European or domestic influences on English plasterwork. Yet it must be noted that the single-most influential printed source with regard to sixteenth century English architecture was Sebastiano Serlio’s *Regole Generali Architecturra*; profusely illustrated and used primarily for this reason.\(^{51}\) Decorative Plasterwork ceilings inspired by the designs of Serlio can be found at Deene Park, Northamptonshire, created in the 1590s.\(^{52}\) This example (Figure 8), illustrates how Serlian influence was incorporated into the aforementioned existing architectural devices of the sixteenth century.

To return to Hardwick, the building’s architect Robert Smythson, took advantage of the emerging fashion for double or triple pile plan forms which allowed the great hall to be placed in the centre of the house; running from front to back.\(^{53}\) Smythson created a single storey hall of this fashion at Hardwick, enabling the High Great Chamber to be placed directly above, approached by an elegant staircase.\(^{54}\)

Cruickshank has commented that Tudor buildings represent a golden age of English architecture; a bridge between the gothic style of the medieval period and the neoclassical that defined later architecture.\(^{55}\) It is clear that this gradual evolution in fashionable plan forms for the Great House, coupled with the increasing adoption of the classical order in architecture and interiors seen at Hardwick Hall, was to set the tone for the continued evolution of the Great House. Thurley has argued however that the architecture of the classical orders played only a minor role during this period and most prominently fed the English passion for surface decoration.\(^{56}\) Certainly at Hardwick (New) Hall, decorative plasterwork can be seen as one vehicle utilised in this passion and thus the evolution of the Great House. Nonetheless, it was no more integral to this evolution than the adoption of an overall new plan form, the resulting grand staircase or the tapestries and intricately carved wainscoting present in the decorative scheme of the High Great Chamber (Figure 6).

The reign of Charles I saw the early Palladian style of Inigo Jones gain traction in the fields of architecture and interior design; further fuelling the internal and external evolution of the Great

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\(^{51}\) Thurley, p. 211.
\(^{52}\) Wells-Cole, p. 19.
\(^{53}\) Thurley, p. 231.
\(^{54}\) Thurley, p. 231.
\(^{55}\) Cruickshank, p. 31.
\(^{56}\) Thurley, p. 213.
This transition did not always occur at the same rate. Internal decorative schemes could still follow Jacobean styles in the early years of Charles I reign, whereas externally the influence of Inigo Jones’ early Palladianism was beginning to be seen. Decorative plasterwork had an integral role to play in this continued evolution, as had been the case in earlier periods.

An example of this uneven transition can be seen at Forty Hall, Enfield, Middlesex; completed in 1632 (Figure 1). The exterior architecture of the Hall, demonstrating early adoption of the classical principles of symmetry, a double-pile ‘compressed’ plan, porches, a Diocletian window and the obscuring of room function from the exterior show Jones' influence.

![Forty Hall, Enfield, Middlesex; completed in 1632](image1.jpg)

Figure 1: Forty Hall, Enfield, Middlesex; completed in 1632. Left – Front and left side elevation. Right – Left side elevation. Photographs copyright Annika McQueen, 2018.

The interior of Forty Hall reflects both early and emerging tastes for decorative plasterwork. In the Great Chamber, the plasterwork ceiling (Figure 2) combines earlier tastes for fretwork, narrow ribs and the inclusion of a date; with emerging tastes for classical motifs such as sprays.

After the 1630s, the last vestiges of the gothic style favoured in the sixteenth and early seventeenth century and seen above at Forty Hall, was replaced by intricately moulded fruit and flowers adorning rib work and large ovals. Gapper has argued that the Hall’s city merchant owner, Sir Nicholas Rainton, was a Puritan and may have had an aversion to the this emerging Jonesian fashion for enriched ribs.

The impact of the Civil War on the Great House cannot be addressed in depth in this essay, but it undoubtedly retarded the evolution of the Great House to a certain extent. Though building did continue in the Commonwealth period. An example of a plasterwork ceiling commenced in the Commonwealth period was to be found at Coleshill House, Berkshire, completed in 1662 (demolished 1950s). The plasterwork ceiling of the library, gallery and hall at Coleshill demonstrated a clear Palladian influence via the work of Inigo Jones, and the use of large ovals intended to be filled with paintings.

In conclusion the changes that occurred in the form, function, material and internal decorative schemes of the Great House before 1660 was less of a transformation and more of a slow evolution. The popularity of plasterwork in the Great House from the Tudors to the Restoration, demonstrates its importance in the evolution of such buildings, but must be considered alongside the prevailing social, economic and architectural changes which fuelled this

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62 Penoyre and Penoyre, p. 10.
65 Musson, How to Read a Country House, p. 113.
popularity. Post-Restoration the creation of plasterwork was revolutionised by stucco durro, a harder and quicker drying plaster.\textsuperscript{66} This enabled undercutting which lent itself to the elaborate naturalistic motifs that became fashionable.\textsuperscript{67} Plasterwork was to become a more important vehicle for the continued evolution of the Great House post 1660, as the interest of the Restoration house shifted from form to decoration.\textsuperscript{68}

\textsuperscript{66} Hill and Cornforth, pp. 40–41.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{68} Hill and Cornforth, p. 38.
Bibliography


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