

# Oxfordshire

## THE GREAT HOUSE

### Building Analysis, by Nicholas Cooper

The Great House is one of the two outstanding late 17th/early 18th-century houses in Burford – the other being the present Methodist Chapel in the High Street (No. 75), now greatly altered inside and a little later in date. As one of the largest houses in the town, and one of the few with architectural pretensions, it has always been lived in by members of the gentry or professional classes.

The house appears to be of four main building-phases, the first three probably very close in date: a painting of it from the south, incorporated into the wainscot and probably no later than c.1730, shows the house substantially as it now exists. However, the probable re-use and rearrangement of existing material, both externally and internally, leaves many uncertainties about the original layout of the house, and about the way in which it has been altered subsequently.

#### *Phase 1: The Front Range to Witney Street, c.1695-1710*

The major part of the building – the seven-bay block facing north onto Witney Street – was almost certainly built by John Castle. Its exact date is not known, but stylistically a date of c.1695-1710 seems likely. The façade is of three storeys, above a basement which is lit by *oeil-de-boeuf* windows. The principal floors have windows with projecting cornice and pulvinated frieze to the surrounds, the upper floor has round windows. The front door is reached up a flight of five steps, and the façade has a pediment to the central three bays. Chimneys at either end are battlemented, and there is a battlemented parapet – a clear reference to the name of the owner, which is repeated in certain of the internal decoration.<sup>1</sup>

When built, services were housed in the basement. There is a former kitchen to the east, with a blocked fireplace opening with a depressed arch some 8 ft. wide with central keystone. To the west is a bake-house with three separate hearths, of which the outer

two have ovens in the rear. It is possible that these arrangements remain from the former Black Boy inn (see Ownership) – though as the basement arrangements correspond exactly to the room divisions on the ground floor, it seems more likely that they are of the same date. There are further cellars, of later date, to the rear.

The front range contains, on the ground floor, a two-bay entrance hall between two parlours, the larger to the east. The painted decoration of this entrance hall is discussed separately (Paintings). On the first floor are two bedchambers at east and west, each with a smaller dressing room towards the centre, and linked by an east-west passage which provides access to all four rooms from the stair. The second floor is open through the full length of the house, forming a gallery probably referred to in John Castle's will (below).

There was a small, gabled, southern projection at the centre of the south front. However, it seems to have been too small to have wholly contained a stair, and it is uncertain how the stair was arranged originally. It is clear that the present arrangement is the result of alterations (discussed at *Internal Arrangements*, below).

### ***Phases 2 and 3: The South-West Wing, c.1700-1730***

To the rear of the Phase 1 front range, two wings project south with a narrow passage between them, which leads to the present back entrance of the house.

The south-west wing is of two periods, distinguishable on the west side by straight joints in the masonry. Now comprising an L-shaped block, it seems to have begun as a shorter wing, roofed north-south and ending in a second-floor gable with round window, which remains. The roof space of this short wing forms a small room opening off the south-west of the attic gallery. On ground and first floors the rooms of this wing also remain, forming the present kitchen (ground floor) and bathroom (first floor). Both are enclosed on their east with thick masonry walls, originally external. The wainscot of the first-floor room appears to retain the shutters of a former window piercing this east wall, while on the south wall alterations in the wainscot indicate that a former window at the centre of the room has been blocked and replaced by a door further to the west.

John Carter's will of 1727, leaving the house to his cousin, required that Elizabeth Castle should be allowed the use of various outhouses, of the kitchen

'for dressing her meat, the use of the cellars there for setting her drink, the sole use of my chamber called the Green Room lying next the street and adjoining next to the other room I have heretofore given her and ... liberty power and authority to walk in the gallery of my said now dwelling house and other rooms.'

It seems probable that these rooms were the first-floor western room in the Phase 1 front range, and the smaller Phase 2 room (the present bathroom) in the wing to its rear.

Probably at an early date this wing was extended on the east side and at the south end. This southern extension, roofed east-west, runs at right angles to the earlier wing, and houses a large room on each of ground and first floors. At the same time as the building of this new block, the earlier wing was enlarged to the east by the building of a broad passage, connecting the new block to the original front range on ground and first floors.

Windows to this new block have moulded architraves with pulvinated frieze identical to those of the Phase 1 front range to Witney Street. It is not clear whether these windows are original to this new work, or whether they may previously have been on the Witney Street range's south front. A former street door to the west has a carved stone shell-hood, with a mask with stylised rams' horns. It is uncertain whether this hood, of a similar date to the Witney Street frontage, is original to this location, or has been placed here subsequently.

#### ***Phase 4: The South-East Wing: c.1720-40***

The south-east wing now comprises one large room on the ground floor, and several smaller rooms on the upper floors. The ground-floor room is heated by a fireplace with a similar surround to that of the original basement kitchen in the Phase 1 range; this may have been moved to its present location from elsewhere. Most windows have rusticated surrounds. A tall, narrow block was added on the west side of this new wing, in the angle formed with the Phase 1 range, providing either closets or else lobbies to improve access to it. This closet block is lit by oeil-de-boeuf and round windows probably re-used from the rear of the original Witney Street block, and the windows of the south-east wing have themselves probably been reordered: their present arrangement is very irregular.

Beneath this wing is a cellar with a barrel-vaulted ceiling, extending back from the Phase 1 kitchen. At the south end of this cellar is a well, set beneath the wall, with a division which probably formerly divided it into two parts with internal and external access. The internal well presumably provided water for cooking and other domestic uses.

#### ***Phase 5: The Garden Door, c.1950***

At an unknown date in the 20th century a small block was added, moving the garden door to the south, and providing a lobby behind it which also improved communication between the south-east and south-west wings.

#### ***Phase 6: The Studio Wing, 1994***

A further range was added in 1994 against the west side of the Phase 4 wing, to accommodate the collection of prints and drawings made by the house's then owner, Christopher Lennox-Boyd. This is of two storeys, lit at the southern end by a heavy Venetian window.

#### ***Internal Arrangements: Wainscot and Stair; the First Floor***

Although the overall development of the house seems fairly clear, there are many questions outstanding about the detailed history of its internal arrangements. The staircase, with turned balusters (two to a tread), appears early 18th-century in its details, and the wainscot with heavy bolection-mouldings is uniform throughout the house and is of c.1695-1710 in character. But both stair and wainscot have very clearly been altered.

The stair juts forward into the entrance hall, with balusters on one side of the lower flight but none on the other, where a plain board conceals the structure. Moulded cheeks, on the baluster side, are partly concealed between the stair and the wainscot of the stair compartment. Rising from the entrance hall, the stair divides beyond the rear wall of the Phase 1 range, one flight returning to the front-range first floor, and the other

continuing to give access to a landing in the Phase 3 rear wing. The stair compartment is entirely lined in bolelection wainscot, but where the stair rises to the first-floor passage in the Phase 1 front range, wainscot appears to have been removed and the stair and handrail cut through. It is, however, very far from clear how the first floor was reached before this alteration was made.

The landing in the Phase 3 wing is also lined with bolelection wainscot on the north, south and west sides, but is wholly glazed towards the east; these eastern windows have relatively light glazing-bars, and may be late 18th-century. It is uncertain whether there was a solid wall here previously, or whether the entire area has been reconstructed, re-using existing woodwork. In several locations areas of wainscot butt awkwardly together, and sections have almost certainly been moved or reconstructed; unfortunately the uniform ochre paint with which it was covered in the 20th century has not only concealed earlier decoration, but has also made it difficult to distinguish between original wainscot and later replica.<sup>2</sup>

In the first-floor Phase 2 room – the present bathroom – is a small closet cut through the thickness of the eastern wall at the north end, and lit by an internal window from the Phase 3 landing on the east side. It is possible that the space filled by this closet was formerly a door leading from the staircase, before its extension to reach the southern Phase 3 block. This Phase 2 room has decorated bolelection panelling on the north, west and south walls, which is probably original to it; on the east wall, where the closet has been inserted, panels are raised and fielded. There is similar wainscot on the landing to the east, beneath the internal window where the closet has been formed. However, it is not clear why the formation of the closet should have brought about the replacement of all of the panelling on the east wall – as evidently it has.

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<sup>1</sup> There was a similar reference to the family name on the tomb of Thomas Castle, John Castle's father: Hutton, *Burford Papers*, 22. This cannot now (2006) be found.

<sup>2</sup> In the early 20th century the wainscot was painted 'a dull red colour' (Hutton, *Burford Papers*, 21). It is uncertain whether this represented the original decorative scheme, although recent paint scrapes have revealed marbelling of this colour elsewhere in the house. Reference to a 'green room' in John Castle's will may refer either to the wall colour, or to the colour of upholstery.