

# SIR JAMES THORNHILL, DOROTHY LUTTRELL AND THE CHAPEL IN DUNSTER CASTLE 1721-1723 *A DOCUMENTARY STUDY*

BY JEREMY BARKER

## INTRODUCTION

Sir James Thornhill, born in Dorset in 1675, was the first great English artist of the eighteenth century and in a very real sense the father of the emergent school of English art that his son-in-law, William Hogarth, later championed so effectively. He was that rare phenomenon in the eighteenth century, the apprentice who rose to the top of the social order. Thus he became Serjeant-Painter and History Painter to the King, Master of the Painter-Stainers Company, Knight and Member of Parliament for his native town, Weymouth and Melcombe Regis. In an age that had hitherto regarded native artists to be too inferior to foreign artists to be entrusted with major works, he proved the contrary and displacing the foreigner, won the contracts to paint the dome of Saint Paul's Cathedral, Hampton Court and Greenwich, to say nothing of the houses of the great up and down the country—Chatsworth, Blenheim, Hanbury Hall and Wimpole to name but a few.

What is less well known is that Thornhill was also an accomplished architect. His interest here is amply demonstrated from the beginning of his career to the end. His early sketch-book, now in the British Museum, gives a convincing picture of his keen interest in all aspects of architecture. So too the notebook of his visit to East Anglia and the Netherlands in 1711, and the notebook of his journey to France in 1717 is artistically speaking chiefly concerned with architecture and interior decoration and the drawings in it are to match. George Vertue records that:

March 1722 . . . Sir James having carried his point to be Serjeant painter and history painter, and to be knighted, now on all hands declared himself to be opposite all . . . (the interest of the Surveyors and Officers of the King's works) and by drawing and designing, and demonstrating their ignorances in ye Art of Building, he would sett himself up against them for the Place of Surveyor or Architect, and in short for all in all.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover it was around this time that he repurchased, redesigned and rebuilt the family home at Thornhill in Dorset, was Mr. Styles' architect for Moor Park<sup>2</sup> and may well have had a hand likewise in the design of the almshouse he built for decrepit mariners in Melcombe Regis (1722)<sup>3</sup>, and have even had a hand in Sherborne House for Henry Seymour Portman (1720). He later designed the statues on the Clarendon Building in Oxford and his advice was sought on the façade of the Queen's College in the 1730s. In the aftermath of the great fire in Blandford Forum in 1731, it was to Thornhill that people turned for the rebuilding though his death in 1734 prevented him from doing anything more than preliminary drawings. Clearly, contemporaries regarded him as an accomplished architect.<sup>4</sup>

It is not therefore a matter of surprise that Alexander Luttrell's widow, Dorothy, when

seeking an architect to build a chapel in Dunster castle in Somerset, should have turned to Thornhill.<sup>5</sup> The chapel was built on the south side of the castle in the years 1721–3, and in the words of Maxwell Lyte, *apparently under Thornhill's direction*.<sup>6</sup> It is the purpose of this article to test that assertion by a presentation of the evidence, both written and pictorial, which exercise also reveals something of Thornhill's methods as well as going far to establishing what the exterior and interior appearances of the chapel were like.

The chapel, alas, no longer exists, having been demolished when major alterations were made to the castle by Anthony Salvin between 1869 and 1872.<sup>7</sup> Only Thornhill's large painting of *Moses and the Brazen Serpent*, which once hung in the chapel, is still extant, it having been transferred to the Parish and Priory Church of St George in Dunster where it yet remains for all to see.<sup>8</sup> The written evidence on the chapel is to be found for the most part in the Luttrell family papers which were all deposited in the Somerset County record office in Taunton when Dunster Castle was given to the National Trust in 1976.<sup>9</sup>

#### DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

The relevant documents are fourfold, the first of which is the estimate for the building.<sup>10</sup> On the outside of this document is written

An . . .  
Of the Chappel  
In Somersetshire

On the inside, in a beautiful copperplate hand (quite definitely not that of Thornhill) is written

An Estimate of the Building of the Chap-  
pel Supposing it were to be done in London where  
Portland Stone is 2s a foote Cubical, Work-  
Manship of Moldings 1s 6d a foot, and Plain  
Workmanship 1s 2d foot

22 Rods of Brickwork at £5—10s the Rod	£121-0
1500 feet Supply of Ashlar Stone to case the outer Wall at 2s 0d the foot	150-0
340 feet Supply of Coin Stones at 3s the foot	51-0
The Stone Doorcase and Paving and Step	70-0
The Four Windows of Stone	100-0
The Plinth of the Building of Stone	20-0
The Cornice at the eaves and Pediment	300-0
The Round Window	3-0
Paving the Chappel with plain Stone	22-10
Paving and Steps at the Altar	25-0
Four Iron Windows and Casements with glass and Painting in toto	54-0
Carpenters' Work of the Roof, Boarding for Lead, Coving and Floors for the Seats	86-0
Joiners Work of Seats and Outer Door	60-0
Joiners Work at the Altar	120-0
Plaisterers Work	15-0
Plumbers Work in the Covering and Pipes	100-0
	£1297-10

Although Thornhill's name is not specifically attached to the document, it seems most likely that it came from his office in the light of subsequent correspondence, and its presumed origin in London where Thornhill worked, and there may be a hint too in the reference to Portland stone, the quarries for which were under the control of his close friend and political associate, Edward Tucker, Surveyor of His Majesty's Quarries, Ways, Cranes and Piers in Portland and Mayor from time to time of Thornhill's parliamentary constituency, Weymouth and Melcombe Regis.

Under the second heading, there is a mass of accounts being

The Disbursements of William  
Withycombe for my Honourable Mistress  
Madam Dorothy Luttrell for the  
Building ye Chaple in ye year 1722.<sup>11</sup>

The accounts actually start in 1721 with payments for stone:

March 9 1721 paid Robert Baker 4 days to draw stone at pereton quarry 0-04-0

and this goes on until April 27 when Thomas Arney is paid 5s 11d for five and half days with board. The accounts start again in the next year when William Withycombe records:

June 9th 1722 Then the Chapple works began

and there follows a list of payments for haulage, lime, stone, labour, plumbing, plastering, timber and the sawing thereof. Payments go on right through 1723. These *Disbursements* give interesting insight into the material used, and the organisation, progress and accounting of a building project at this time. But there is no hint of the architect here.

Thirdly, and more importantly for the purpose of this article, there are three letters written by Francis Gwyn to Dorothy Luttrell concerning the internal decoration of the Chapel which date from February and March 1723. Gwyn was a kinsman of Dorothy and he acted as intermediary between her and Thornhill in London. The letters are short and are best quoted in full:<sup>12</sup>

Whitehal Feb 19 1722/3

Madam

Sir James Thornhill has  
now finished the draft for the Inside of your Chaple  
only desires to look it over once more for halfe an  
hour, to give such particular directions that your workmen  
may not mistake; I think it is very handsome,  
and he sayth it will in his opinion come within the expense  
you proposed; you will have noe other tymber for  
wainscot (than) Deal which is to be painted of the stone  
colour (to answer) the Pilasters which are to be of the  
stucco; the Wainscot is to be about four foot and halfe  
high, as soon as Sir James hath perfected the Draft,  
I will send it downe to you and he will procure a Workman  
to come downe to you and finish the stucco worke and agree with  
him by the yard before he comes downe; I should be  
glad to have the opportunity to send downe the Draft  
in a Box that it may not be rumpled and wore out as the

other was: which will make it plainer to be worked upon. I am Madam after this to returne you my thanks for the 3 potts of laver, which is the best I ever tasted; I am Madam with great respect

Your most faithfull Kinsman  
and obedient humble servant  
Francis Gwyn

Whitehal March 2nd 1722/3

I had Madam the Honour of Your letter of the 23rd. of the last month, and had reason to hope that I should have sent the Draft to my Cousin Yarde this morning that it might have come to you in her Box, but Sir James Thornhill is at present gone to Greenwich<sup>13</sup>, and will returne again on Monday. He had the Draft again from me finding it necessary to add some further directions that the workmen might not mistake in the Execution of it. The Dutch oake will certainly doe very well for any of the wainscot; price the workmen say it is as cheap as Deal; I mentioned Deal s . . . it must be painted of the stone colour, as the Stucco Worke is: Therefore if Deal is cheaper it may doe as well: and then the Dutch oake may be made use of for the Benches and Pulpit.

I shall have the Draft (God willing) to send you downe by the carryer on Saturday next; and shall send it my Cousin Yarde in good time to convey it; I am Madam with very true respect

your most faithfull Kinsman  
and servant  
Francis Gwyn

Whitehal March 9th. 1722/3

I could not Madam answeere your letter sooner which hath been soe long in my hands till I could acquaint you that this day I sent the draft perfected by Sir James Thornhill to my Cousin Yarde by her servant who called for it; so that it will come downe to you in a box of hers by the carryer tomorrow.

I think it extreemly handsome, and Sir James assures me it will not be dear; I doe not doubt but that he described every thing soe well that your workmen will comprehend it, and you may begin as soon as you please upon the wainscot worke. The Draft which is made for the ceiling will be very handsome and is to be done by the same Playsterer; Sir James will find out such a Man fit for your Purse; contract with him by the yard and send him downe to you, so that I hope you will be at a certainty with him. The Festoons (as Sir James calls them) which are between the Pilasters and the Windows, are not to be don with stucco but Sir James will send down a man who shall

... them in paint without any great Charge  
 when all the rest is don, and the work is ready for it  
 what ever is wanting to Explain to the workmen  
 may be pleased to let me know it, and you shall have further  
 explanations; but I hope it is pretty plain, and will not need it.  
 I have a bad pen and ink, but could not omit giving you  
 an Answer by this post and assuring you I am Madam with greatest  
 respect

your most faithfull Kinsman  
 and humble servant  
 Francis Gwyn

It is reasonable to conclude from these letters that Thornhill was indeed the architect and it must be beyond doubt that he was responsible for the interior decoration. The documents as a whole confirm too that the main body of the chapel was constructed in 1722 from June onwards, though work on the quarrying of the stone had begun in 1721, the remaining work, along with the interior decorations, being completed in all probability in November 1723. The fourth document, the Will of Dorothy Luttrell,<sup>14</sup> confirms that the work was finished after her death on 19 November 1723, for she specifies that:

I give and bequeath

unto Sir John Trevelyan Baronet and the said Mr. Kymer<sup>15</sup> the summe of Three Hundred and fifty pounds to be laid out in the finishing and compleating the Chappel which I have already begun.

Payments were indeed made thereafter. There is that on 24th November 1723 for five loads of stone from Minehead Bay for the Chapel (£0-10-0), another for two hogsheads of lime on the 29th, and on the 12th December we have *paid to Thomas Partridge for 12 days Work helping Mr. Sidnall (?) about the Chaple 0-12-0*. On the 16th December old Mr. Withycombe and his son are paid £146-05s-3½d also for work on the Chapel. The work seems then to have been complete.

If these documents then serve to confirm Thornhill's standing as architect as well as painter, they also serve to show us something of the man and his business methods. He is at pains to make sure that the work does not cost more than the estimate and acts as agent in contracting out work to artisans whose ability he knew and at a rate carefully fixed beforehand. Nowadays, one would expect the architect to have a hand in the supervision of the building work; in those days, given the great difficulties of travel especially in the winter, this cannot have been a practical proposition when the work was to be done, as with this chapel, far afield. Hence the need to act through a kinsman of the client and the great care that Thornhill takes in making absolutely sure that the Draft will be readily comprehensible to the workmen on the spot. This must, of course, have been easier when the workmen were chosen by and known to him. The one regret is that the Draft referred to and, indeed, all the other plans, are lost. Perhaps when the work was done they too were so *rumbled and wore out* as not to be thought worth preserving.

#### THE PICTORAL EVIDENCE

What then did the chapel look like? There are three sources of information on this. There is first the ground-plan of the chapel<sup>16</sup> which shows its outside dimensions to be about of 30ft x 20ft. with an internal door going into the north-east corner of the chapel and with a pew at first floor level, presumably the family pew. Its height was that of the second storey of the main building. The other two sources are the written documents listed above and the

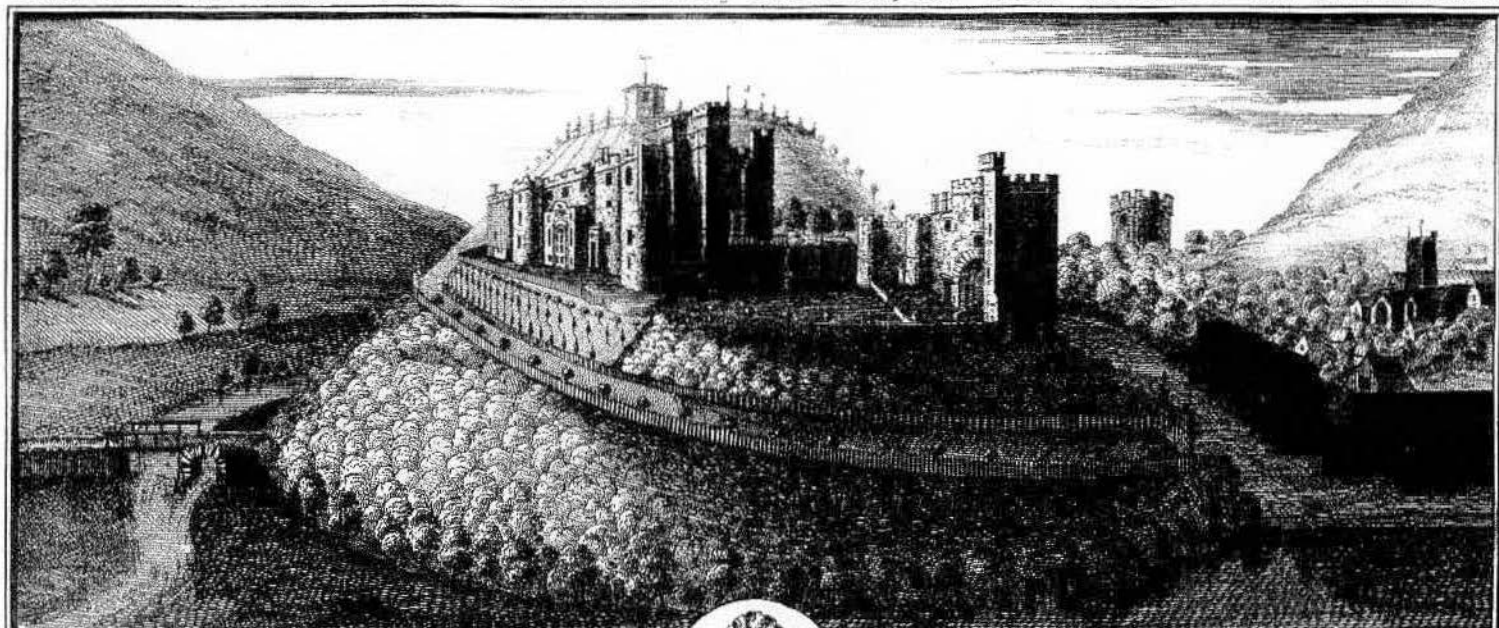
paintings, drawings and prints of the castle and these two kinds of information need to be treated together. Although there are none of the interior of the chapel,<sup>17</sup> at least thirteen pictures of the south elevation from the exterior executed between the construction of the chapel and its demolition by Salvin in 1869 still survive. They differ widely as to quality, purpose and detail. (Appendix A)

To take the exterior of the chapel first, the Estimate indicates the chapel was build of brick with an ashlar facing and coigns, with a door and step and a stone cornice and *pedament*. All the pictures agree on this and show a rounded pediment hiding a shallow-pitched roof of lead, but thereafter, the differences multiply though there are only three basic variants. The first of these (A) is that of Buck whose print dates to 1733 (Plate 1). He has what appears to be a rather flat structure with three windows on either side of the door which is surmounted by a fanlight and with an additional window in the east wall. This was copied with minor modifications by Ralph in his print engraved by Ryland, and by at least two others. There is secondly W. Turner's landscape (Variant B) done in 1800 which puts the castle in a sweeping, wooded setting and turns the chapel into an imposing porch and of one storey in height only. It is difficult to give this a lot of credence since it complies with so few of the indications given in the Estimate and elsewhere. It seems likely that he copied J. M. W. Turner's painting of the same year and not realising what the chapel actually was, interpreted it otherwise and painted it accordingly.

Variant C is contained in an eighteenth painting, distinctly amateur in technique and which still hangs in the castle. It conforms well with the terms of the estimate, showing a high central door (not unlike that of Sherborne House) with four windows, two up and two down on either side, in conformity with architectural practice in the age of Sir Christopher Wren, and with a very clear fanlight (perhaps the round window of the estimate).<sup>18</sup> This corresponds in large measure with Bonnor's picture which appears in Collinson's *History of Somerset*<sup>19</sup> (Plate 2) which shows considerable detail even though his intention appears to be to show off the estate as much as the castle itself. We see an imposing and well-proportioned structure but with an additional window to the west not mentioned in the Estimate. This basic structure is born out by J. M. W. Turner's painting of 1800 (now in the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York—Plate 3). It is clear in this that there is no window to the east and it is the only time that the low-pitched lead roof is visible. The lower part of the façade however is obscured by foliage. The same pattern is just discernible in Turner's sketch of 1811 but very much the most helpful of all is John Buckler's picture of 1839 (Plate 4) which has the advantage of being focused specifically on the chapel itself. He has a reputation for topographical accuracy which Buck does not and he confirms Variant C, showing the south windows and doors, the pediment, coigns and string-course and also the west window. There are three others. There is John Gilpin's of 1808 which shows no detail and is concerned with depicting the scene in the most picturesque light possible complete with precipices, and two lovely and lengthy anonymous water-colours of 1752 and 1754 which are not concerned to give more than impressions of the castle and the elements that comprise it.

In conclusion, we can be reasonably sure that Buckler, Bonnor, J. M. W. Turner and the amateur artist of the eighteenth century give us the most accurate images of the chapel and from them we can glean a fairly good idea of the appearance of its exterior. The nature of the interior, however, must remain more speculative. There being no drawing of the inside, the only evidence we have lies in the Estimate, in Gwyn's letters to Dorothy Luttrell, with the painting of *Moses and the Brazen Serpent* in Dunster Church and Maxwell Lyte's plans. Given that the family pew was to the north and the door to the south, and that there is a window to the West, the altar and its step must surely have been to the east, where liturgically it should have been anyway. This would have allowed room for the Thornhill painting (which is some 6 ft × 4ft) behind the altar where indeed his *Last Supper* is in St. Mary's,

THE NORTH EAST VIEW OF DUNSTER CASTLE, IN THE COUNTY OF SOMERSET.



To Alexander Lutterell Esq<sup>r</sup>  
 This Prospect is gratefully Incribed by  
 Your most humble Serv<sup>t</sup>  
 Jam<sup>s</sup>. & Nath<sup>l</sup>. Buch.



THIS CASTLE and Hon<sup>or</sup> of Dunster was by the Gift of W<sup>m</sup>. of Conyng, the Bishop of W<sup>m</sup>. de Mohun, & continued in his Family till S<sup>t</sup>. John de Mohun one of the 1<sup>st</sup>. H<sup>er</sup>. of Garter, & the last Lord of that Family having no Male Issue, convey'd it to Trustees for the Use of his Wife who after his Decease in 1460. of H. 6. 3<sup>rd</sup>. sold it same to J<sup>hn</sup>. Glyn, Lutterell, Daughter of Hugh Courtenay, E. of Devonshire & Wife of S<sup>t</sup>. And<sup>ew</sup>. Lutterell & S<sup>t</sup>. Hugh Lutterell her Son Lieut<sup>ant</sup> of H<sup>er</sup>. Highness & Sonward of J<sup>hn</sup>. Haybold to H. Hen. the 6<sup>th</sup>. Queen, added several Building, new standing & left it Castle & Hon<sup>or</sup> to his Decease. viz. Alex<sup>ander</sup>. Lutterell Esq<sup>r</sup>. the 11<sup>th</sup>. in Descent from S<sup>t</sup>. Hugh Lutterell is J<sup>hn</sup>. perenne P<sup>ri</sup>or of the Priory.  
 1. Bowling Green. 2. Dunster Church. 3. The Priory.  
 J. & A. Buch delin. in July 1733.

Plate 1.

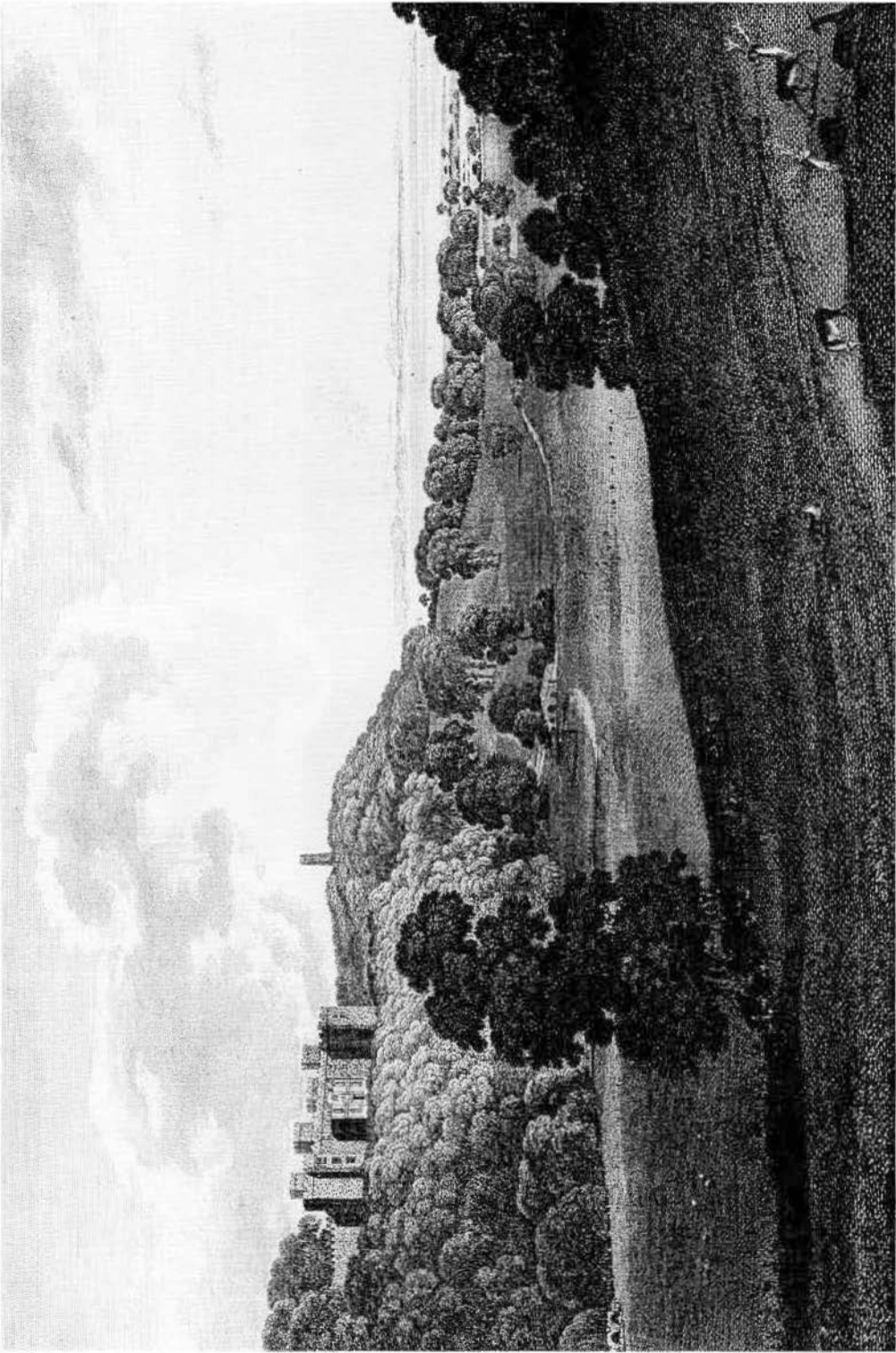


Plate 2. 'Dunster Castle, The Seat of John Fownes Luttrell Esq.' From Revd. John Collinson's *History and Antiquities of . . . Somerset*, 1791.



Plate 3. J. M. W. Turner's view of Dunster Castle (The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, 1980. 32. Reproduced by kind permission).

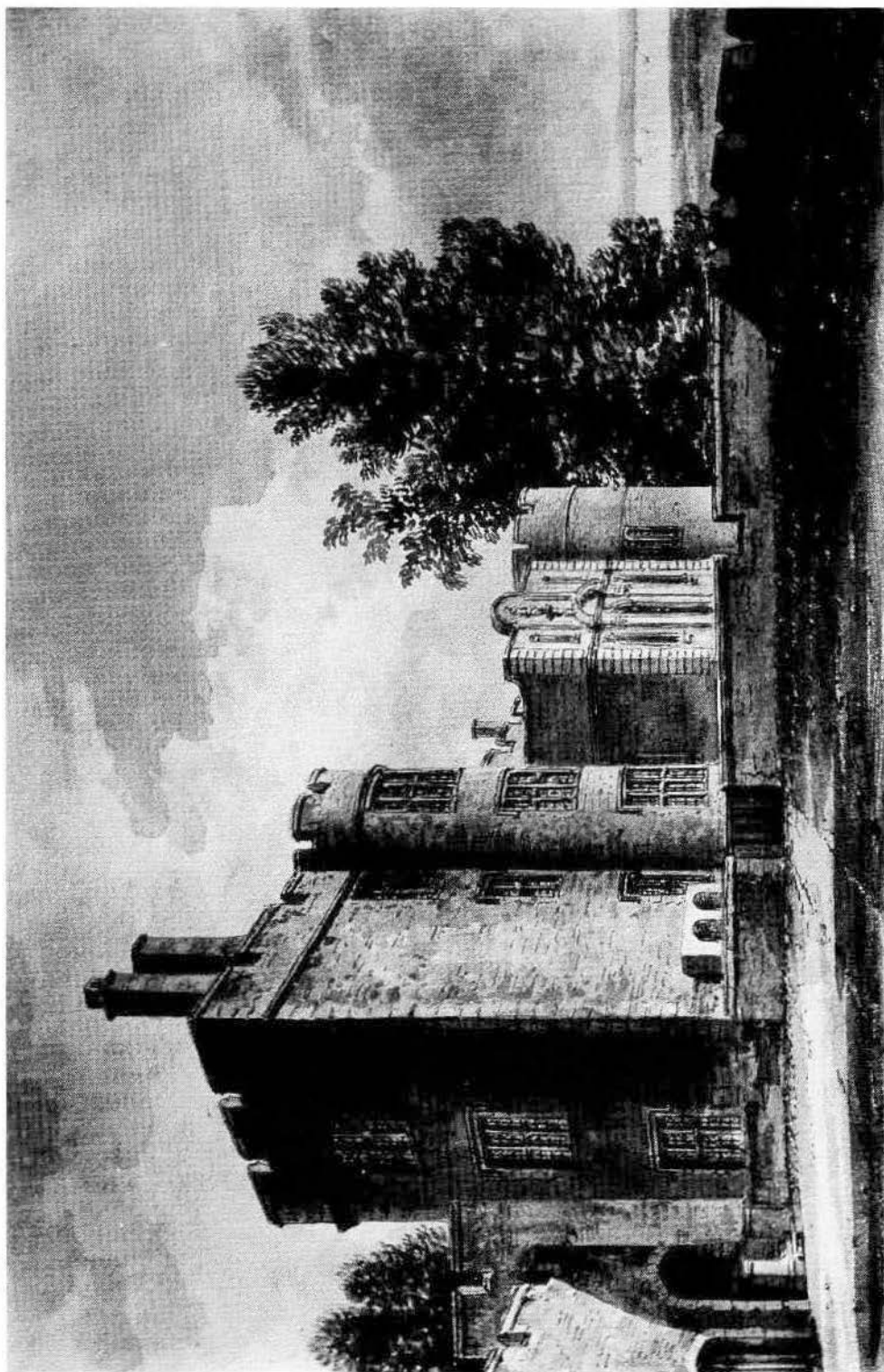


Plate 4, John Buckler's picture of 1839 (Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society).

Weymouth and was in the Priory Church of St. Peter, Dunstable. Facing this presumably were the pews, and to the right, out of the way of the internal door, the pulpit also mentioned by Gwyn, and made perhaps of the Dutch oak. The floor was of stone. The decoration consisted of panelling, presumably deal (*of the stone colour*), was to a height of 4 ft. 6 ins and above that was stucco work (20) and pilasters (again *of the stone colour*) and with festoons painted onto the plaster between the windows and the pilasters.

What the effect was is a matter of conjecture. Maxwell-Lyte says it was florid and incongruous but without giving his reasons. Gwyn prefers the adjective *handsome*. Baroque it certainly must have been but doubtless restrained in the English manner. In the end, it must be for the reader to decide.

## CONCLUSION

Colvin, in discussing Thornhill's activities as architect, concludes that he did enough *to justify (his) claim to be taken seriously as an architect*.<sup>21</sup> Dezallier d'Argenville met Thornhill in 1728 and says *he practised architecture like a professional* and had built *several houses*.<sup>22</sup> What one can gather from the sources on the construction of the Chapel at Dunster Castle bears out both these claims. There is an absolute assurance about it all that leaves one in no doubt as to Thornhill's professionalism as an architect and his mastery of the details of design, construction and decoration. The regret is that subsequent generations set too little value on his work at Dunster for it to survive.

## REFERENCES

- 1 Vertue, George *Notebooks* (Walpole Society, George Vertue Vol. 1; OUP 1912), pp.100–1.
- 2 Hudson, T. P. *Moor Park, Leoni and Sir James Thornhill* (Burlington Magazine; Vol. cxiii, 1943, p. 657).
- 3 The plaque from the building is now in the Dorset County Museum, Dorchester. It reads *J. Thornhill Esq. Fundr. Mar 30 MDCCCXXII Ed Tucker Mayor*.
- 4 Thornhill, Sir James *Diary and Sketchbook of Tour of the Netherlands 1711 and Notebook of a Visit to France with prices for art and other objects in Paris February–April 1717* (National Art Library, Victoria and Albert Museum). See also Mayhew Edgar de N *Sketches by Thornhill* (HMSO; London–1967) and Colvin, H. *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects 1600–1840* (Murray; London 3rd ed. 1995. Pp. 975–7). Thornhill's drawings for Blandford Forum are in the Sir John Soane Museum, London.
- 5 Dorothy managed the estate on behalf of her eldest son Alexander for twelve years until her death on the 19th November 1723. According to Maxwell Lyte, contemporaries described her as *a very prudent and charitable woman and the good Lady of the Castle*. (Sir H. C. Maxwell Lyte; *A History of Dunster*, St. Catherine's Press, London, 1909, p. 367). There is a portrait of her in the Castle painted by Michael Dahl.
- 6 E. Croft Murray, *Decorative Painting in England 1537–1837* (Country Life; 1962) Vol. 1; p. 267.
- 7 *Dunster Castle* (National Trust Guide Book, 1996) p. 58.
- 8 E. Croft Murray, p. 267.
- 9 *Dunster Castle*, p. 5. I am very grateful to the Luttrell family for the use of these papers without which this article would have been impossible.
- 10 *Luttrell Papers*—DD/L—2–46–8.
- 11 *Luttrell Papers*—DD/L—1–15–6.
- 12 *Luttrell Papers*—DD/L—2–46–6.
- 13 There are two good reasons for Thornhill being in Greenwich. It might have been to do with his murals in Greenwich itself, but it might also have been in connection with his being a leading

- Freemason, and a member, and at one time Master, of the Greenwich Lodge. (UGLOW, Jenny Hogarth—a Life and a World Faber & Faber, London, 1997, p. 108).
- 14 *Luttrell Papers*—DD/L—2—46—6.
  - 15 Dorothy Luttrell's executors.
  - 16 Gibb, J. H. P. *The Medieval Castle at Dunster* (*Somerset Archaeological and Natural History*, 1981) p. 3, & Maxwell Lyte, p. 370.
  - 17 There should, however, be the Inventories made periodically in the eighteenth century which might help with the layout, of the chapel. They are referred to by Maxwell Lyte but it has not so far proved possible to discover their whereabouts.
  - 18 It has been suggested that, in view of the whiteness of the stone in this picture, Portland stone was used. Bonnor's painting likewise shows a lighter stone than the main castle, though Buckler and others do not. Haslam, Richard *Dunster Castle, Somerset—II* (*Country Life* 23 July 1987), pp. 102—6.
  - 19 Collinson, Reverend John. *The History and Antiquities of Somerset* (R. Cruttwell, Bath—1791) Vol. ii, p. 13.
  - 20 The plasterer to whom Withycombe subsequently made payment was James Clarke. He was paid *in toto* a little over the estimated sum.
  - 21 Colvin, p. 977.
  - 22 Quoted in Colvin p. 976.

#### APPENDIX A

- 1 1733 Samuel and Nathaniel Buck.
- 2 Copied by B. Ryland and engraved I. Ralph.
- 3 Lady's Supplement also copied from Buck.
- 4 Additional Buck copy.
- 5 C18th painting in the Castle.
- 6 Anonymous water-colour 1752.
- 7 Anonymous water-colour 1754.
- 8 1791 Drawn and engraved by J. Bonnor from Collinson.
- 9 1800 J. M. W. Turner, reproduced by kind permission of the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York.
- 10 1800 W. Turner, engraved by S. Rawle.
- 11 1808 Rev. John Gilpin.
- 12 1811 J. M. W. Turner Sketch, Tate Gallery.
- 13 1839 John Buckler.

Author: J. Barker, [REDACTED].