

THE TUDOR AND STUART PLASTERWORK OF WEST SOMERSET

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TUDOR and Stuart ceilings, friezes and overmantels of moulded plaster are not uncommon in many parts of England and Wales. The number of examples surviving in Somerset, notably to the west of the Parret, is so considerable that the existence of a local centre of the craft is clearly indicated.

As far as the writer is aware, no detailed study of the plasterwork of west Somerset has ever been undertaken. The following notes are intended merely to point out the possible scope of such a study, and to record various data bearing on the subject, which he has collected from time to time.

It is generally accepted that the moulded ornament of the ceilings and friezes of Wolsey's private apartments at Hampton Court, dating from *circa* 1525, was in all probability the inspiration of the later Tudor work of similar effect.¹ The material used in the Cardinal's rooms was chiefly a composition of whitening and glue, which was applied to wooden panels and beams. Some of the ornaments, however, were cast in lead. The effect was soon found to be more easily achieved in plaster.

At Nonsuch Palace, built for Henry VIII towards the end of his reign, plaster was freely used, and the immense variety of patterns employed in the plasterer's craft later in the century are believed to have had their origin there.

Whether or not Wolsey's moulded decorations at Hampton Court were the work of Italian craftsmen, as has often been thought, it is now conceded that the wealth of moulded plaster in England, and the development of the designs, must have been largely the work of Englishmen when the style of decoration became popular and spread from the court to the provinces.

WEST SOMERSET PLASTERWORK. TYPE I. *Early Elizabethan.*

The flourishing state of the plasterer's craft in West Somerset was probably due to the abundant supplies of excellent plaster

1 Laurence Turner, *Decorative Plasterwork in Great Britain* (1927), 1.

obtainable from the gypsum in the cliffs near Watchet, but no satisfactory data is known regarding the headquarters of the master-craftsmen.

Local taste and idiosyncrasy produced local peculiarities of pattern and style. Although it is certain that precisely the same patterns and designs are rarely found in different parts of the country, it would require much research to decide whether there was a close connection between centres of the craft in different counties—whether, for instance, as appears from a superficial examination of their work, the Cornish, the North Devon, and the West Somerset craftsmen were in close touch. The work of the Cotswold, East Somerset and Dorset plasterers seems to have affinities.

The writer believes that the earliest example of the first Somerset Type which he has seen (albeit in a house beyond the Devon border) is the ceiling of the Long Gallery at Holcombe Rogus.¹ A pattern here is formed by shallow ribs, and a number of paterae are introduced into the design, each containing one letter of the name of Sir Roger Bluett, who inherited Holcombe Rogus in 1523 when he was twenty, and died in 1566. He was, it is said, a friend of the Protector Somerset, and doubtless had seen Nonsuch Palace. The ceiling in question is unlikely to be later in date than 1560. The frieze below the ceiling is almost certainly contemporary, and has an intricate pattern—a Nonsuch pattern—of the kind in common use till the end of the century, and even into the Jacobean period. These friezes must have maintained their popularity because they formed a convenient transition between hangings or panelling and the the ceiling, especially in houses where little care had been taken that the horizontal and perpendicular lines of floor and wall should be precisely at right angles.

There is no parallel in Somerset to the work at Mapperton in Dorset, which is thought to be as early as 1540-1550.

The ceiling of the Hall at Poundisford Park may safely be attributed to the plasterer who made the ceiling of the Long Gallery at Holcombe Rogus (Pl. VIII). William Hill of Taunton had built the house in 1547. After his second marriage, which took place about 1570, he made certain structural alterations and inserted this

1 The ceiling of the upper room at Lytes Cary with the arms of Lyte and Horsey seems to be not later in date than 1550-60, but may be of Dorset origin.



Courtesy Country Life Ltd.

1. Poundisford Park. Hall Ceiling seen from Gallery.



Courtesy Country Life Ltd.

2. Poundisford Lodge. Ceiling and Overmantel of North Chamber.

ceiling.¹ His initials—W.H.—and those of his second wife—L.H.—are to be seen on the pendants in the corners of the Hall, one letter on each pendant. She was Lucy Ryves, and her home had been at Ranston in Dorset. The pattern of the frieze above the dais, and on the opposite wall, centres on confronting dolphins, and is found reproduced in the Drawing Room at Haddon Hall in Derbyshire—a rare instance of the same pattern found in two different parts of England. Four other complete ceilings of this period are to be seen at Poundisford Park, and friezes have survived in two rooms in which the ceilings have been modernized.

TYPE II. *Late Elizabethan and Early Stuart.*

Excellent examples of Type II are provided by the fine moulded ceilings at Poundisford Lodge in the White Room, the North Chamber and the Drawing Room.² These are obviously of later date than those of Type I at Poundisford Park, and though superficially similar, it is found on examination that there are differences in technique, and there is a subtle change in style which indicates that we have here the work of a different set of craftsmen. The ribbing is bolder, and variety of effect is introduced by the use of a certain number of ornamental *motifs* in lower relief than was used formerly. New patterns appear in the friezes, simpler than the patterns we have called 'Nonsuch'. In the older friezes, the raised surfaces were curved. In the new friezes, much use of flat bands was made in the raised ornament. It may be found that the new craftsmen came from North Devon—perhaps from Barnstaple—and settled in Somerset. At any rate, they held their own in the county for many years, especially when work was to be done in the larger houses. There are, nevertheless, numerous examples of friezes and ceilings preserved in smaller houses in West Somerset, which seem to date from the Jacobean period, and are from the older moulds, suggesting that the plasterers of Type I, though no longer fashionable, continued their craft.

The ribbed ceilings whether of Type I or Type II, are all grouped together in the parlance of the countryside, as 'spider's web' ceilings. A good 'spider's web' ceiling of Type II survives at Hyde Cottage, Bathpool. This example is probably as late as 1620, but it must be remembered that the carved beechwood moulds,

1 Illustrated, *Country Life*, 4 and 11 August 1934.

2 Illustrated, *Ibid.*, 24 June 1916.

which were employed, lasted almost indefinitely. In no single house can the accomplishment of the West Somerset Plasterers be better seen than at 18 Fore Street, Taunton.¹

Perhaps the last of the 'spider's web' ceilings made in Somerset were those inserted in the churches at Axbridge, *c.* 1636, where the design was traditional, and at Brent Knoll in 1637, where an effort was made to produce a gothic effect. When the period at which they were set up is considered, they seem archaistic—strange manifestations of Laudian taste.

TYPE III. *The Flemish Style.*

The ceilings at Poundisford Lodge, mentioned under Type II, must have been made for William Symes, who died in 1597. Those in the White Room and the North Chamber are joined to overmantels in a completely different manner—the new Flemish style, introduced by the refugees from the Low Countries, who crowded into England late in Elizabeth's reign. Both overmantels bear the initials of William Symes and his wife, Elizabeth, and that in the North Chamber is dated 1590. They are, therefore, early examples. Ceilings of Type II and overmantels of Type III are found together so frequently that we are forced to the conclusion that the plasterers of Type II (Pl. VIII, 2) were joined by a Flemish refugee—a man versed in strapwork patterns, whose crude figures and Biblical scenes appealed to their patrons. The early overmantels of Type III cannot have been the work of an Englishman. Such an overmantel as that at Dodington Hall shows that work which was not essentially dissimilar was made locally before the full tide of Flemish influence set in.

Efforts have been made to identify the Flemish refugee with the Dutchman, whom Gerard mentions as having settled at Minehead, and as having established an industry for the making of monuments and mantelpieces in the local alabaster.² Many early Stuart monuments survive in West Somerset which have been proved lately to be made of local alabaster. If they were the work of the Dutchman in question he cannot be identified with the Fleming of the overmantels, for they are restrained and classical in taste, and are innocent of his rollicking crudities.

1 Described, *Som. & Dor. N. & Q.*, xxi, 42.

2 *Som. Rec. Soc.*, xv, 12.

The Flemish style acquired an English flavour in the first quarter of the seventeenth century, and it is evident that it was being used then by English craftsmen.

Much work of local character was done for George Luttrell at East Quantoxhead between 1614 and 1629.

Types II and III seem to have merged gradually. A *chev-d'oeuvre* of the combined styles is the ceiling of the Court Room at Chard, now sadly decayed.¹ This work, however, is a production in the Dorset manner : Flemish influence, though it did not always develop on the same lines, was felt everywhere.

Much perfunctory work, which may be ascribed to the West Somerset plasterers is to be seen at Montacute, notably in the wide friezes dating from about 1610. The lively representation of a Skimmity Ride at the end of the Hall is perhaps as late in date as 1620. It is English in feeling, but owes much to the direct influence of Flanders in the previous generation.

The distinguished modern work, carried out at Greenham Barton c. 1930 for Mr. and Mrs. Fry by Smallcorn of Bath, should be mentioned.² The ceiling of the Withdrawing-room is of Type II. That in the Hall, though of Jacobean character, is unfortunately not of a style found in contemporary work in the neighbourhood.

A new chapel was dedicated at Chantmarle in Dorset on 14 September 1619. It was built under the direction of Sir John Strode who had endeavoured to make it a thing perfect of its kind, and to that end had employed the most skilful craftsmen he could find in the west country. He left a detailed account of the building³ :—

This chapel hath his outside of Hamdon stone ; his inside is plastered white, and fretted over with the sun, moone, stars, cherubims, doves, grapes, and pomegranates, all supported with 4 angels in the 4 corners of the rooffe, which inside was wrought by Eaton of Stoke-gursey or Stowey, in Somerset, and finished 2D Decembris 1615, who for his workmanship had 6*l.* 16*s.* ; and for the lyme, hair, timber, laths, and lath-nayles, I paid 5*l.* : also the carpenters had for sawing and cutting up of joysts 17*s.*

Was Eaton of Stogursey or Stowey the master-plasterer of Types II and III in 1615 ?

1 Illustrated, *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*, xxviii, i, 24.

2 Illustrated, *Country Life*, 9 Sept. 1933.

3 Hutchins, *Hist. Dorset*, iv, 5.

The surround of a fireplace at Kittisford Barton, which has been restored recently for Mr. and Mrs. Booth, is of great interest, for it seems to supply a link between Types II and III and Type IV (Pl. IX, 1). It is probably of the Cromwellian period. In the centre of the overmantel are the arms of Tristram Wood, who died in 1669,¹ impaled with those of his second wife, Helen, daughter of Thomas Drake of Wiscombe in Devon :—*Per chevron argent and ermine, a chevron sable, in chief two leopards, faces gules, a crescent for difference, WOOD, impaling, Argent, a wyvern wings displayed and tail nowed gules, DRAKE.* The arms are surrounded by a wreath typical of the period, the achievement being set on Jacobean strap-work ending in a free rendering of leaves and fruit of early Jacobean character. The jambs are also decorated with a pattern of leaves and fruit which is essentially Jacobean. The achievement is flanked by the initials W and D—an unusual instance of initials of surnames being given without those of Christian names. The treatment of the arms is very similar to that in the heraldry associated with Type IV. Tristram Wood inherited Overtown in Kittisford from his brother, Roger, in 1658,² and his plaster-work at Kittisford Barton is unlikely to have been inserted after that date.

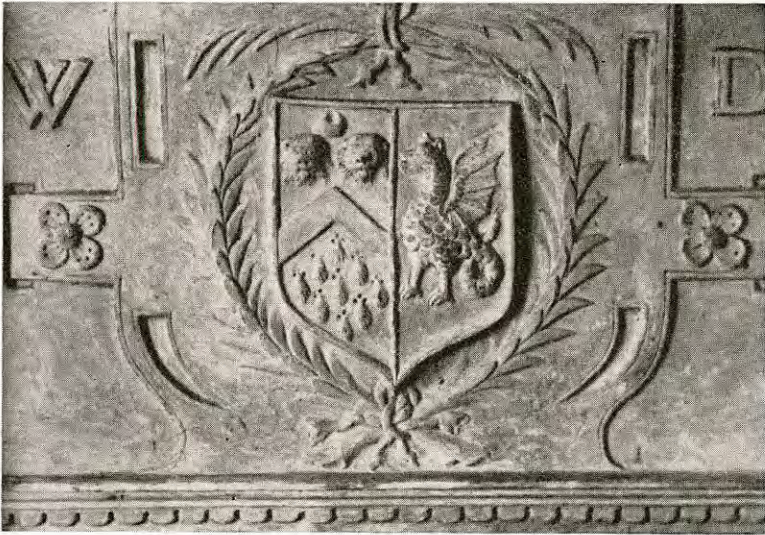
TYPE IV. *The Influence of Inigo Jones and his Pupils.*

All traces of Nonsuch patterns and spider's web work have disappeared in Type IV. There are few examples, and it is evident that they were carried out under the direction of one man. The old mastery of design was present, but the layout and the patterns were new.

The writer believes that the story of Type IV is closely connected with the work done for the Prideaux family at Forde Abbey, just over the Dorset border. As is well-known, Cromwell's Attorney General, Edmund Prideaux, purchased Forde Abbey in 1649, and carried out much work there in the classical taste of the period. Whether he employed Inigo Jones, who died in 1652, or not is uncertain, but it is thought that John Webb, or one of Inigo Jones's other pupils, was responsible for the greater part of the architectural design. Ceilings with deep mouldings and rich ornament were inserted in the Oak Bedchamber, the Dining Room and the Saloon.

1 Brown, *Som. Wills*, iv, 97.

2 Brown, *op. cit.*, ii, 80.



1. Kittisford Barton. Overmantel.



Courtesy Country Life Ltd.

2. Poundisford Park. Library Ceiling (seen inverted).

Laurence Turner considered that a local plasterer was employed, although the designs were basically of the Inigo Jones school.¹ Great ovals and corner panels were essential features. The leafy patterns with curiously unbotanical conventions, typical of the work of the plasterer of Type IV, appear here in the west of England, as we contend, for the first time. They are to be seen in rectangular panels in the Dining Room ceiling.² May we not conclude that the local plasterer employed at Forde Abbey was the plasterer of Type IV?

The major productions of the plasterer of Type IV are at (i) Gaulden Manor, (ii) Poundisford Park, and (iii) Ham by Creech St. Michael. It may well be that he made the fireplace surround at Kittisford Barton early in his career, and before he came under the influence of the Inigo Jones school.

(i) *Gaulden Manor*. This remote house in the parish of Tolland was acquired early in the seventeenth century by one of the Turbervilles of the Devon branch.³ It was the home of John Turberville—an active magistrate in Somerset during the Commonwealth and in the reign of Charles II. His wife seems to have been Bridget, daughter of John Willoughby of Peyhembury,⁴ and the arms of Turbeville, *Argent, a lion rampant gules crowned or*, impaling Willoughby, *Or, fretty azure*,⁵ are above the fireplace in an upper room, and in the centre of the overmantel in the Hall, where they are flanked by two other coats impaled by Turberville which have not, as yet, been identified.

The ceiling of the Hall at Gaulden Manor is in some ways the most remarkable specimen of plasterwork in West Somerset, though by no means the most beautiful. The decoration in this house is described in detail in the Society's *Proceedings* for 1877,⁶ and a theory is there advanced that it was inserted by bishop Turbeville of Exeter, who died *c.* 1570. The theory was abandoned in 1883,⁷ but was resuscitated in 1933.⁸ There can be no doubt that

1 L. Turner, *op. cit.*, 121.

2 *Ibid.*, Fig. 174.

3 Vivian, *Visitations of Devon*, 690.

4 *Ibid.*, 740.

5 Burke, *General Armory* (1878), 1118. A different coat for Willoughby of Peyhembury is given in the *Visitations of Devon*. The arms, in accordance with what seems to have been the invariable West Somerset custom for plasterwork, appear never to have been coloured.

6 *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*, xxiii, ii, 70-87.

7 *Ibid.*, xxix, i, 44.

8 See *Country Life*, 9 Sept. 1933, where the plasterwork is fully illustrated.

the Turberville plasterwork at Gaulden Manor is of the mid-seventeenth century, although earlier moulds seem to have been used for certain features, notably the human figures.

(ii) *Poundisford Park*. The ceiling of the Library at Poundisford Park has the same layout and the same patterns, and the same *motifs* are combined in original designs for the panels in the four corners of the room (Pl. IX, 2).¹ The layout centres on the crest of the Hills of Poundisford—a dove holding a branch in its beak, but the plasterer improved on the College of Heraldry, which gave the dove an oak-branch, and provided it instead with an olive-branch. The work has the feeling of a slightly later period than that at Gaulden Manor, and was undoubtedly inserted for Roger Hill, d. 1667, who had been one of Cromwell's barons of the exchequer, or for his son, William, d. 1680. It is worthy of note that Sir Roger Hill, who built Denham Place in Buckinghamshire later in the century, showed the family interest in the craft by having ceilings and friezes of the finest quality made for his new house.²

(iii) *Ham by Creech St. Michael*. The example at Ham is in the chief room of Coldharbour Farm. It is simpler than that at Poundisford Park. The same moulds were used in the ceiling of the large room, but the designs in the corner panels were omitted. The initials R.M.B. and the date 1679 appear above the fireplace, and are accompanied by a shield intended to represent the arms of the Merchant Adventurers or Hambrough Merchants:—*Barry nebulee of six argent and azure, a chief quarterly gules and or, on the first and fourth quarters a lion passant guardant of the fourth, and in the second and third quarters two roses gules barbed vert*.³ The arms have the appropriate crest and supporters. Unfortunately, the charges in the four quarters are reversed.

There is a frieze of late character in the upper room at Ham. The same frieze is repeated in the gazebo at Poundisford Park, built perhaps as late as 1690.

Two other examples, the heraldry of which is similar in treatment and which should probably be attributed to the same plasterer, may be mentioned. They are at (a) Cothelstone, and at (b) Cushuish Farm in the parish of Kingston St. Mary. Both are overmantels.

1 Illustrated, *Ibid.*, 11 Aug. 1934.

2 M. Jourdain, *English Decorative Plasterwork of the Renaissance*, fig. 122.

3 Burke, *op. cit.*, 6.

(a) That at Cothelstone is in a small house to the west of the park, and shows the arms of Coward of Wells :—*Argent, on a chevron gules three martlets of the field, on a chief of the second a culverin dismantled or.* It was doubtless inserted for Edward Coward who married Grace Lawrence of West Bagborough. He was the third son of William Coward who died in 1667.

(b) That at Cushuish is in a room which has been divided, the partition being carried through the centre of the panel. It bears the initials R.Y. and a date partly concealed. The initials R.I.Y., however, occur elsewhere in the house with the date 1673. The arms are those of the Butchers' Company of Exeter :—*Azure, two slaughter-axes addorsed in saltire argent handled or between three bulls' heads coupé of the second armed of the third, two in fess, one in base, on a chief argent a bear's head coupé gules between two block brushes (i.e. bunches of knee holly or butcher's broom) vert.* Supporters are also shown. As the house was called formerly 'Yea's House', the initials are presumed to be those of a member of the Yea family.

The elaborate and sophisticated work carried out at Dunster Castle about 1680 is outside the scope of these notes. Francis Luttrell must have employed a plasterer from far afield.

There seems to be no indication that the craft of the West Somerset plasterers continued into the eighteenth century. The examples of early Georgian decoration in plaster, surviving in the west of the county, seem to be of Bristol origin.¹

1 Patey (or Paty) of Bristol is said to have provided the decorations for the Royal Fort, a house of the time of George II, now part of Bristol University. Work attributed to Patey may also be seen at King's Weston, near Bristol, (M. Jourdain, *op. cit.*, 164), at Sandhill Park, Bishop's Lydeard, and at Nettlecombe Court.