

Nathaniel Ireson, of Wincanton : Master-BUILDER

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ON the occasion of the visit of the Somerset Archæological Society to Crowcombe Court on 23 June 1937, the writer, in describing the building, following to a large extent the articles published in *Country Life*, 22 and 29 April 1933,¹ pointed out that there was a single detail that might give a clue to the precise date of the exterior of the present house, viz. the unusual capitals to the four angle pilasters of the main block (Plate XVII). 'Consisting simply in incurving volutes emanating from foliage, they are almost peculiar to the work of the Bastard family of builders centred round Blandford in Dorset.'

Soon after this appeared in print (*Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*, lxxxiii, 43) it was most interesting to learn from Mrs. Trollope-Bellew's letter to *Country Life*, 15 October 1938, and the accompanying editorial note, that the indenture of Thomas Carew's articles of agreement for the building of the house, dated 6 July 1734, with Nathaniel Ireson of Wincanton, had come to light.

According to George Sweetman (*History of Wincanton*, 1903), Ireson was not a cultured man, and, although sometimes styled an 'architect', he called himself a master-mason; he was, however, a somewhat remarkable and versatile person, and in the Sweetman manuscripts (which are preserved at Taunton Castle) he is described as an architect, sculptor, builder, designer, brick-maker, plasterer, quarry-owner, house- and landowner, churchwarden, money-lender, and, moreover, a skilled potter. Some of his best pieces of Delft have changed hands for large sums of money, especially those inscribed or bearing dates (chiefly 1737, 1738, 1739, 1740 and 1748).²

¹ Vol. lxxv, no. 2205, pp. 423-4.

² It is hoped that the subject of Wincanton pottery may be presented in a future volume of the *Proceedings*.

Ireson was born in 1686, probably at Nuneaton. However, he appears to have been living at Ladbrooke, Warwickshire, when aged twenty-five, for his daughter, Martha, was baptized there on 30 September 1711. He settled at Stourton, West Wiltshire, in 1720, when he built (1720-2) the mansion known as Stourhead for Henry Hoare, from designs by Colin Campbell, the architect of Wanstead House and author of *Vitruvius Britannicus*, who died in 1729. Henry Hoare was the second son of Sir Richard Hoare, Lord Mayor of London in 1712, virtual founder of the banking-house which still bears his name.

About 1726 Ireson purchased Windmill Farm at Wincanton and built Ireson House, where he lived until his death on 18 April 1769, at the age of eighty-three years, and members of his family continued to reside there until the beginning of the nineteenth century.³ About 1851 the house was considerably altered, and it has been much modernized since that time. In 1748 Ireson built the chancel of Wincanton Church at his own expense, but it was replaced when the church was almost entirely re-built in the late eighties of last century. Before that (c. 1743) he had been responsible for the building of the classical chancel of Bruton Church,⁴ a work of outstanding merit. This was done to the order of Charles, second surviving son of William Lord Berkeley of Stratton, in memory (it is said) of his father. Ireson is also believed to have designed and built the chapel at Redlynch House (1750); and the church records of Kingston Deverill, West Wiltshire, state that he did some work there in 1724. He altered several of the 'lesser houses' in his own neighbourhood, such as Balsam House and 'The Dogs' at Wincanton.

As a sculptor Ireson is represented by tablets in the churches of Gillingham, Wincanton, Stourton, Hornblotton, Brewham, etc. He is reputed to have carved and erected the statue to himself in Wincanton churchyard, near the south-east corner of the church. It is life-size and measures, with the pedestal, 14 or 15 ft. in height. The pedestal was of brick cased with polished lias stone, but falling into decay it was replaced,

³ His will was dated 24 September 1765.

⁴ This chancel is described by Dr. F. C. Eeles in *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*, lxxix (1933), p. 6, where, however, there is no mention of Nathaniel Ireson.

c. 1865, by the present stone structure, upon which the names of the Ireson family have been inscribed down to the year 1876.

On the North side.

In memory of NATHANIEL IRESON master-builder who erected this monument for himself and family, most of them lying near this place. He died April 18, 1769, aged 83 years.

Also MARY, wife of the above Nathaniel Ireson, who died Decr. 6, 1772, aged 85 years.

Also THOMAS IRESON MORRISH who died November 29, 1861, aged 76 years.

On the East side.

Also NANCY, daughter of Francis and Elizabeth Ireson Morrish, who died July 14, 1839, aged 22 years.

Also RICHARD IRESON MORRISH who died August 20, 1839, aged 20 years.

Also NATHANIEL IRESON MORRISH who died March 24, 1840, aged 23 years.

Also SARAH, wife of Thomas Ireson Morrish, who died June 24, 1824, aged 44 years.

On the South side.

Also CHRISTOPHER MORRISH gent who died December 20, 1835 aged 79 years.

Also NANCY his wife, daughter of Richard and Ann Kettermasters, who died February 3, 1811, aged 54 years.

On the West side.

Also MARTHA IRESON who died January 17, 1797, aged 73 years.

Also NATHANIEL IRESON MORRISH who died June 26, 1863, aged 21 years.

Also ROBERT FRANCIS, son of Thomas and Martha Ireson Morrish, who died June 8, 1859, aged 15 years.

Also MARTHA, wife of Thomas Ireson Morrish, who died March 18, 1876, aged 69 years.

In 1725 Nathaniel Ireson had his portrait painted in oils, but its present home is unknown to the writer.

Windmill Farm, where Ireson built his house, proved to be a valuable acquisition. He not only found a bed of the most workable building stone (the quarry holding out until about 1900), a clay which enabled him to keep a brick-kiln going, and a bed of sand which he wanted for brick-making, but

also the clay suitable for his pottery. No wonder, therefore, that he became a rich man.

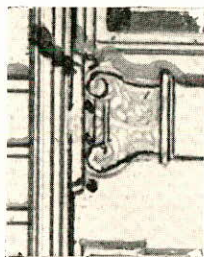
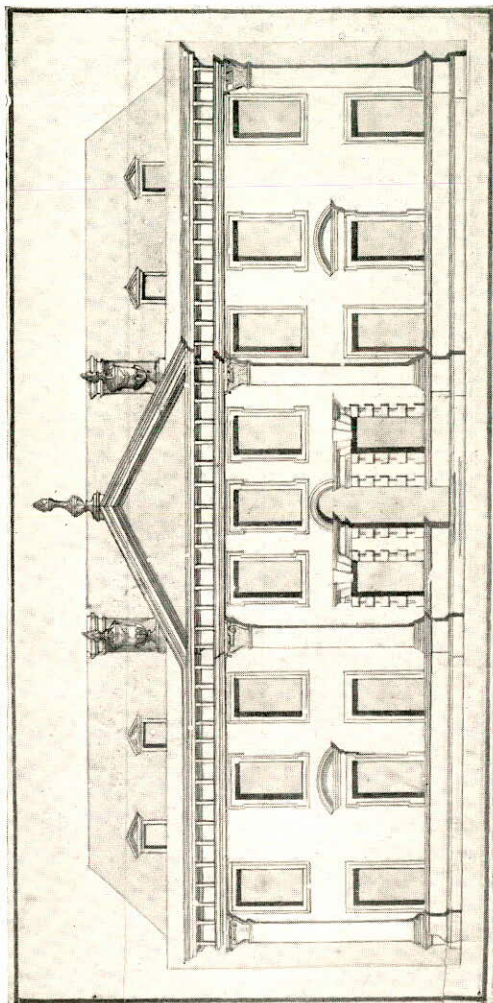
Sweetman makes no allusion in his collected notes to Crowcombe Court, Somerset. There Nathaniel Ireson must have been called in as master-builder, and followed the architect, Thomas Parker, who may have died at that time.⁵

Ireson's visits to Blandford, no doubt, brought him into contact with the Bastards. In Hutchins's *History of Dorset* it is recorded that the church at Blandford was 'designed and built by John and William Bastard, natives of the town', and the building 'was finished by them inside and out, except the tower and turret'. Then 'the building was stopped for some years, after which it fell *into other hands*, who rejected the spire, and instead thereof erected the wooden turret'.

As Blandford Church is stated to have been opened on 8 April 1739, and other work was 'stopped for some years', the part taken by Ireson must have been at a somewhat later date, as Sweetman in his notes gives 1741 as the time when Ireson was 'busy' with the building at Blandford Church; but this date is not authoritative. Apparently, therefore, Ireson knew Blandford and the Bastards and the 'Composed Capitals' before this, and at least as early as 1734, the year in which he began work at Crowcombe Court (Plate XVII).

In the light of the discovery of Ireson's name at Crowcombe, we can add to his architectural designs, through the kindness of Mr. Christopher Hussey (editor of *Country Life*) and of Lord Methuen, one for the north front of Corsham Court (Plate XVIII). This is dated 1747, and hitherto it had not been possible to decipher the inscription convincingly, which appeared to read 'Irgon's plan'. This is evidently 'Ireson's', the *e* and long *f*, badly written, looking like a *g*. The design, which was not executed, is interesting as introducing the peculiar type of capital found in the work of the Bastards at Blandford and also at Marlow Place, and used by Ireson himself at Crowcombe.

⁵ There was a Thomas Parker of East Quantoxhead, not far from Crowcombe, whose will was proved in 1734.



DETAIL OF A
CAPITAL

NATHANIEL IRESON'S UNEXECUTED DESIGN
FOR THE NORTH FRONT OF CORSHAM COURT (1747)

By Permission of "Country Life Ltd."