

An Account of Seventeenth Century Aston Hall

A Visitor's View

A seventeenth century noble visitor to Sir Thomas Holte's new home would have approached the house from the Birmingham to Lichfield Road up a long avenue of chestnut trees. A remaining short stretch of this avenue can still be seen.

The surrounding area has undergone a complete transformation since the seventeenth century. Back then it was mainly heath and farm land with evidence of iron working: a furnace on Aston Heath and forges down by the River Tame.

Nearer the house - the wall and palings across the front of Aston Hall have gone. The two lodges still stand: one for the porters and one for the gardeners.

Originally formal gardens were laid out on the south side of the house and the service quarters (brewhouse, bakehouse, milkhouse, washhouse, storerooms, etc) were well hidden on the north side. The stable was also situated here. All but the stables in this range of were outbuildings were demolished in the nineteenth century.

The noble visitor would have approached the main door to the house. This door was originally to the right of the present entrance. It was moved to the centre to fit in with a later fashion in house design.

King Charles I was amongst those to visit St Thomas Holte. He stayed a night at Aston Hall as he travelled from Wolverhampton down to Kenilworth in October 1642.

The Main Rooms

The Entrance Hall

In earlier years the Great Hall had been the heart of the house or castle - a place for all to eat, for entertainments and for a range of everyday activities. By the seventeenth century the master and his family had come to expect greater privacy and to set themselves apart from their servants.

When Aston Hall was built it was still the fashion to have a 'great' hall in the centre of the house. Between meals the room probably buzzed with activity as 'footmen scurried about on errands to different parts of the house. Sir Thomas' servants still ate and entertained themselves in the hall. Tenant farmers paid their dues here on rent days.

A number of alterations have been made to the hall since Sir Thomas' time, the main one being the removal of a passage - the screens passage - from the North end of the hall. This passage would have protected the hall from draughts from the original main entrance. The ribbed and moulded plasterwork ceiling, the oak panelling and the strapwork decoration above the doors and fireplace all date from the seventeenth century. The flagstones and painted classical scenes are eighteenth century, and the frieze (on the tops of the walls) of heraldic animals is a nineteenth century copy of an original seventeenth century frieze in King Charles' Bedroom.

The Great Parlour

The Great Parlour was one of a number of private rooms for the use of the master and his family - others may have included a Little Parlour and a Winter Parlour that have been altered long since. This room itself has seen many changes but it has been restored to show its original use as a private dining room. Guests would not have been taken here. They would

have been insulted if entertained on the ground floor, guests were always taken upstairs as a mark of respect.

Sir Thomas and his family ate and entertained themselves in the Great Parlour. The Tudor fashion for oak panelling or wainscoting continued into the seventeenth century. It was both decorative and provided insulation. Oak darkens with age so the room would not have appeared gloomy to Sir Thomas. A late sixteenth century tapestry hangs on the wall. It is one of a set of four, all illustrating the history of Judah (Genesis XXXVIII). Originally the tapestry would have been in bright, vivid colour livening up the room and, like the panelling, lining the room to give added warmth in days before central heating.

The flooring material - rush matting - was very modern and up-to-date for the time. In earlier years it was common to throw down rushes in summer and straw in winter. When this covering become dirty and smelly the room was cleaned out like a stable and fresh rushes or straw laid down. Carpets, imported from Turkey and Persia were often put on the table or hung on the wall as they were far too expensive to be laid on a dirty floor.

The idea of a top table for the more important family members still existed in the early seventeenth century a leftover from medieval days. Upholstered chairs were very scarce and mainly imported from abroad. The main means of making a chair more comfortable was to add a loose cushion stuffed with feathers, wool or rags.

The heavy, solid oak tables with their bulbous legs and stretchers at floor level had their origins back in Elizabethan times. Their solidity reflected a more peaceful, settled period as opposed to trestle tables that could be packed up at a moments notice. Tablecloths were of linen (made from the flax

plant). This was far more common a material than cotton. Cotton was a very expensive import from India.

The buffet cupboard would have held plates, dishes and goblets. These would have been made of pewter rather than wood or pottery.

Meals

Two large meals a day were served - dinner served between 11 am and 12 noon and a smaller supper served between 5 pm and 6 pm. Huge quantities of food involving many meat dishes and made of several courses were eaten in a leisurely way, washed down with wine from the cellars or ale.

Silver or pewter plates and tankards were used and pointed knives and spoons were the main eating tool. Forks, with only two prongs, were just being introduced from Italy, but they were very rare for actually eating. They were mostly used for getting food off the serving dishes. It was quite common for people to carry their own cutlery, knife and spoon, around with them in special boxes.

If guests were expected then the Great Chamber or Great Dining Room was prepared upstairs, and the food carried in grand procession from the kitchen across the Entrance Hall, up the magnificent grand stairs and served with great ceremony.

The Great Stairs

The stairs was placed, as was traditional, to one side of the central hall. The method of construction, however, was very up-to-date for the period and it was a major achievement for the builders. The stairs extends the height of the house, with an open well and has no supports on the outside. It is one of the first cantilevered staircases. A carved open work

balustrade in flowing strapwork is in place of banisters. A representation or shadow of the balustrade was originally painted on the walls of the stair well: an effect called trompel'oeil. The part below the balustrade is decorated with mythical beasts - wyverns and leviathans. At intervals up the stairs are twenty-two, highly carved newel posts. The newel posts probably had carvings on the top, they would not have been flat.

The Cannonball Damage

The Civil War between the Royalists and the Parliamentarians broke out only seven years after the completion of Aston Hall. Sir Thomas' was a supporter of the Royalist cause and had the house garrisoned with royalist musketeers. Such an action was seen as a threat to Parliamentary Birmingham (then a town three miles away) and soldiers were sent from Coventry to reduce (take) the house. During the ensuing cannon bombardment much damage was done to the house. Most was later repaired but cannonball damage can still be seen in a newel post on the stairs. The Parliamentarians won the day and Sir Thomas was taken into custody without a shirt to shift him.

The Great Dining Room

The full magnificence of pomp associated with the noble and wealthy in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century centred around the Great Chamber. Sir Thomas and his guests would have been served supper and dinner with great ceremony by server, carver and cupbearer. The arrangement of a top table would have been observed, and it was quite likely a cloth canopy arrangement would have been erected over Sir Thomas and his principal guests. This would almost certainly have been done for King Charles in 1642. The portrait of King Charles, his queen, Henrietta Maria and their two eldest children hangs here as a reminder of that visit.

The room has seen many changes over the years. Nevertheless, the ceiling, the frieze and the fireplace with its ornate overmantel still remains from Sir Thomas' time, and are all in full blown Jacobean style. The ceiling is wonderfully patterned in broad strapwork ribs with decorative floral motifs and grotesque masks copied from the popular Flemish pattern books. Horse hair was stirred into wet plaster as a binding material before it was poured into moulds.

The frieze represents Nine Worthies of Pagan, Jewish and Christian legend - Hector of Troy, Alexander, Julius Caesar, Joshua, David Maccabeus, King Arthur, Charlemagne and Godfrey Bouillon. Two more, Perseus on the North wall and a made up character on the South, were added later. The Worthies were a very popular theme at this time, symbolising virtue, courage and heroism.

The fireplace was the focal point of all the best rooms in the seventeenth century and attention was drawn to it by the height and ornamentation of the over mantel. It is likely logs of wood burnt in the grate held in by large firedogs or andirons. The coal basket dates from a later time. The iron fire-back helped throw out heat into the room and prevented the wall behind from burning.

The Great Chamber was not only used for eating. It was being used for music, dancing and the lying in state of corpses before funerals.

Heating and Lighting

The main source of heating at Aston Hall was by open log fire. Coal was becoming more popular but it came from open cast mines and was a smelly, dirty fuel.

Candles provided light in the main part of the house. The best were made in moulds of pure wax and sometimes perfumed.

Poor quality candles were made by dipping a wick (string) twenty times into tallow (a mixture of beef and mutton fat).

Rushlights were probably used by the servants. The piths (centres) of rushes were drawn across melted fat and left to harden. They were held in a special stand. Neither candles nor rushlights gave good light, they flickered and danced in draughts from around ill-fitting oak doors. The most was made of daylight people often got up around 6.30am. They went to bed early in wintertime.

Chamber pots or close stools (a stool with a chamber pot inside) were used for toilets. They were emptied by the servants into an open stream that by the side of Aston Hall flowing into a pond (Dovehouse Pool).

The Best Lodging Chamber

It seems unusual by modern standards for a bedroom to open directly off a dining room. Ideas of privacy were very different in the seventeenth century and it was usual for people to walk through a bedroom on their way to another room. Bedchambers were not only used for sleeping but also as sitting rooms, hence 'lodging chamber'

Bedsteads were considered the most important article in the home. They were costly items and bequeathed in wills as such. The fourposter (or tester bed) that would have been in this room in the seventeenth century, was made up of a carved bed head with two posts and two further posts at the foot supporting a heavy canopy called a tester. The base of the bed would have had a rope mesh. The ropes were pulled to make them taut and hold the mattresses firmly hence the term 'sleep tight'. On top of the ropes were placed one or two large feather mattresses, then linen sheets, pillows, bolster,

blankets and coverlet. The hangings, curtains and valance were usually embroidered and as rich as could be afforded.

The room is so named as a reminder of King Charles' visit. The portraits of Charles and Henrietta hang here for the same reason. The cabinet was once thought to have been a present from the King to Sir Thomas but its workmanship is of too late a date for this to be possible.

Bathroom?

There were no bathrooms, of course, and most people washed in a basin in the bedroom. Baths were taken very infrequently and involved heating up large quantities of water over an open fire in the kitchen and carrying it up to pour into a wooden tub in the bedroom. Soap could be bought but was usually homemade. Toothbrushes were not available; the teeth were occasionally rubbed with a cloth using a powder. This could be a mixture of chalk and charcoal, soot or the ground up skulls of mice.

The Green Drawing-Room

This room is part of the suite of rooms for entertaining and, shows the interest in using smaller private rooms by the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. It was a more cosy place to withdraw (the with drawing room) after the main meal. Sweetmeats would be eaten here - sugar coated fruits, spiced cakes, suckets and gilded marzipan washed down with sweet wines. This was called the banquet course. Card and dice games may have followed; or the company could have been entertained with music on the viol, lute, flute or a new keyboard instrument - the virginal, a forerunner of the piano.

Much of the furniture is from the eighteenth century, and so too the cornice and doorcases. But the plasterwork ceiling is a seventeenth century original with its grotesque half-man, half-

beast characters taken from Flemish pattern books. The costly, reproduction flock wallpaper is a copy of a late seventeenth century design. The original paper was expensive to make too. The design was printed, painted or stencilled in slow drying glue and then powdered silk or wool was applied so the pattern showed in velvety relief. The substance used to achieve this colour gives its name to this particular shade, arsenical green.

The Long Gallery

The Long Gallery was a very fashionable feature in the houses of the well-to-do at this time, and it was very much a symbol of wealth and status. The Long Gallery developed from long walkways built at ground level which were used in poor weather to take the daily walk doctors recommended to ensure good health. Walking in rain or snow was even more unpleasant in those days without modern waterproof and lightweight warm clothing. By the time Aston Hall was built the Long Gallery had become an integral part of the grand suite of rooms at first floor level.

Such long rooms were useful places to display the best furniture, family portraits and tapestries, and for entertaining guests with music and dancing.

No expense was spared in decorating this room. The ceiling has a fine plasterwork arabesque design and it is likely goat's hair (much finer than horse's hair) was used to bind the plaster. The wainscotting or panelling, divided at regular intervals by pilasters, is hand carved in a popular renaissance design - the rounded arch. A number of differing patterns have been carved between the arch and edge of the triangle.

The magnificent chimneypiece has been ornately covered in grey sandstone and alabaster. It was usual to display coats of

arms on chimney pieces as they were the focal point of each room. Sir Thomas coat-of-arms can also be seen in stain glass in the north window of the Long Gallery. It was vital to display this symbol of one's origins - each design represented a family in Sir Thomas' ancestry (coats-of-arms were joined on marriage). Sir Thomas was especially proud to add the red hand to his coat-of-arms. He was allowed to do this when he received his baronetcy in recognition of his help in quelling trouble in Ireland. The open helmet above is the symbol of a knight and baronet, and the squirrel is Sir Thomas' particular emblem.

Sir Thomas Holte's Bedroom

This 'bedroom' is reached by leaving the Long Gallery through the Blue Room and turning sharp left on the landing through a doorway to a passage. This area was part of Sir Thomas' bedroom and has been altered since the house was built to make what is now the Chinese room and a passage. Part of the original ceiling can still be seen in the passage. Sir Thomas chose the room above the kitchen for his bedroom, obviously with cold winters in mind! The fire was kept alight all night in the kitchen and would warm his room above. The 1654 inventory (list made of everything in the house when Sir Thomas died) tells us he slept between linen sheets on a mattress stuffed with feathers, with another mattress underneath. He slept propped up on a pillow and three bolsters, and covered with a quilt, a counterpane and a yellow rug. No doubt the 'Bedstid' recorded in the inventory refers to a fourposter or 'tester' bed that would have had curtains to pull around to keep out the draughts.

The Red Room

This room was 'The best chamber over the hall' and it seems red fabrics were used after the French fashion for matching upholstery.

The 1654 Inventory(list of items in the house made after Sir Thomas died) records that in this room there were:-

"Sixe peeces of Orris one Kittermuster stufte curtaine and Rode One bestid one Matteris one quilte one featherbed one bolester one pillow two blanketts one Red Rugg Curtaines valance testor and head cloth of Redd stufte laced, One rounde table one liverie Cubboard one Cheare two stools one ioyned stoole more one Carpett one Cubboard cloth of Red stufte laced one velvet foote stoole, one silke Quishion one lookenge glasse one pair of brase Aundirons one brasse fire shovell one pair of tonges one pair of Bellowes prized at XXVII LI(£27).

The over-mantel of the fireplace has a drawing of a woman holding a snake and possibly a mirror. She symbolises Prudence one of the Four Cardinal Virtues popular themes in the early seventeenth century.

The oval wooden frame in this room was put between the sheets and a container of hot coals placed inside to warm the bed.

Dick's Garrett

In Sir Thomas' Holte's time the servants would have slept all over the house - in inner chambers (small rooms next to bed chambers) or odd corners, or maybe on the hall floor as in olden days. But as the seventeenth century progressed it became common to sleep the servants in attic quarters. Ten or fifteen servants may have slept here on straw mattresses. Other attics on the second floor were also used. The more important servants such as the steward and the cook would not have been expected to share, they would each have had their own quarters.

This room is named after a servant Dick who was thought to have hanged himself here. It is said he stole from the pantries and was to be punished by having his hand severed. Dick was so appalled at the degradation and shame of having a hand removed that he hanged himself from a rafter in this attic. His ghost is reputed to roam around the top of the house from time to time.

The armour is a reminder of the forty musketeers who garrisoned the house during the Civil War.

The Kitchen

Sir Thomas Holte would not recognize his kitchen. It underwent great alteration in the seventeenth century. Nevertheless cooking methods changed very slowly. Kitchen activities of the seventeenth century continued into the eighteenth with only a few improvements such as enclosing the open fire and improving methods of turning the spit. In the seventeenth century spits were turned by means of a spit boy, a jack or a small dog in a drum. The eighteenth century spit, that you can see today, was turned by a fan, spinning in the chimney in the rising heat.

Food was kept in pantries and store rooms close the kitchen. meat safe (displayed with a stuff duck and pheasants) has been placed at the back of the room. The house was largely self sufficient. Farms on the Holte estate would have supplied grain (milled locally), meat and dairy products.

Butter and cheese would have been made in the milkhouse. Vegetables would have been grown in the kitchen garden. Items such as sugar, spices, exotic fruits, almonds, and rice would have been bought at markets or from travelling merchants.

The food was prepared at the large round table. The rectangular table was reserved for chopping meat. Food, particularly sugar, salt and spices, could be crushed by means of the ball and mortar. There were very large ones in some kitchens. Roasting was done on spits in front of an open fire. A pan underneath caught dripping fat. Food could be boiled in iron or brass pots suspended by hooks over an open fire, or baked in one of the three ovens that were in the kitchen in Sir Thomas' time. These were heated in the same way as the later eighteenth century ovens that can be seen on either side of the kitchen range. Wood was burnt inside first to heat up the oven walls, and then the ashes raked out and food cooked on the oven floor by the heat radiating from the walls.

