

Designed to Impress: The Jacobean Ornament in Plaster, Wood and Stone

1. What made up Jacobean Style

i) The influence of the Renaissance

The Renaissance (re-birth) signified the interest in all aspects of ancient Classical civilisation - at first in Italy and then to a lesser extent in the rest of Europe - which had occupied scholars, artists and architects for at least a century before Aston Hall was built. Artists of the Renaissance were eager to adopt Classical styles of architecture with its symmetry, columns and orders with established code of ornament. They converted to their own use these, and the designs discovered in palaces, villas and tombs around Rome and Naples, particularly those found in cave-like chambers called grottoes. The decorations inside were called grotesques and were notable for the use of medallions, a focus or axis in design and their symmetry. By the time the

interior of Aston Hall was designed, grotesque ornament had been developed into a complete system of decoration. The artist Raphael had much to do with this. And this interpretation and distortion of antique motifs was called 'Mannerism'. A structure and a framework was given by the use of strapwork to what were originally a loose composition of designs. Strapwork resembled strips of folded and twisted leather and was first used by Rosso Fiorentino in the fifteen-thirties in the palace of Fountainbleau. Strapwork was enthusiastically taken up and used all over Europe. Aston Hall has some particularly fine examples.

ii)

The influence of the Low Countries and Flemish craftsmen

Protestant England had little direct contact with Catholic Italy during the sixteenth and early seventeenth century. A few highly skilled craftsmen did come to England for a short time, but greater influence was wielded by artists and craftsmen of Northern Europe and the Low Countries. The latter was physically closer and had

common interests both regarding religion and commerce. There was also a great immigration of Protestants Flemish craftsmen during times of Catholic suppression at home. It was their interpretation of Renaissance Classical architecture, adapting and using ornament for its own sake, with little regard for the pure Classical orders, which can be clearly seen in the Jacobean decoration at Aston Hall. Many of the more exuberant designs are of Northern Europe artists rather than those of Renaissance Italy.

Aston Hall had become almost unfashionable by the time it was completed. Artists and architects led by Inigo Jones began to look directly to Italy for inspiration and to adopt purer Classical styles.

iii) **The power of the printing press**

The spread of ideas was helped enormously by developments in printing techniques, an area in which the Low Countries was particularly advanced. Pattern books - books of drawing and designs compiled by Flemish and German artists such as de

Bry, de Vries and Dietterlin were widely circulated and used. Previously the only means of reproducing designs had been by hand - now the latest vogue was accessible to all. English craftsmen could follow foreign fashions by means of pattern books. The designs were used in other ways too such as in embroidery, metalwork, lacework etc.

Improved printing methods also had far reaching consequences with regard to the spread of books. The translation of the Bible and more available copies made it accessible to everyone. It was often the only book a family possessed. Great emphasis was placed on the study of the Old Testament that helped prolong and accentuate medieval beliefs, particularly those of the supernatural and the proximity of the devil: witch hunts were a part of everyday life in the seventeenth century. Moreover an increasing number of other books sold at this time told tales of fabulous animals and extraordinary peoples, of adventures and discoveries in strange lands e.g. Edward Topsell's "History of Serpents" described Ethiopian dragons ninety feet long. Such stories

reflect the greater opportunities that existed for overseas travel.

Masques, a combination of elaborate verse, mime, ballet and spectacle were one of the principle form of courtly entertainment in the early seventeenth century and provide further evidence of popular interest in fantastic stories, full of allegory, complicated symbolism and pageantry.

The ornament at Aston Hall bears witness to the popular interests and quirky beliefs of the age. If strange animals like camels existed so too could unicorns, wyverns and gryphons. The devil seemed only a step away from human embodiment, this feeling is vividly conveyed in the Green Drawing Room ceiling.

iv) **The tenacity of tradition**

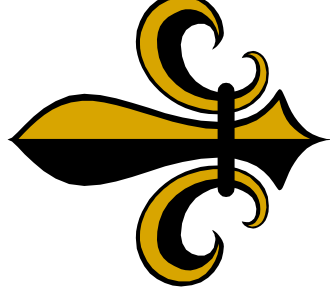
An interpretation of classical ideas and architecture flowed into England via craftsmen and pattern books from the Low Countries. They were taken up with enthusiasm but as decorative features grafted on to

traditional English forms - as symmetrical, gabled manor houses with mullioned windows. An attempt has been made at symmetry in the building of Aston Hall, with service quarters to the north and family quarters to the south, and the original main entrance was not placed centrally.

Little respect was paid to pure representation of the classical orders and this is more than evident in the house. They were seen as additional decorative features to add to the wealth of traditional ornament, which was the stock in trade of any craftsmen. Many of these had been trained in the long established Gothic school, which paid particular attention to the value of decoration in providing visual information to the illiterate, and a display of powerful symbolism. The animals, plant and flowers depicted at Aston Hall had had special meanings for centuries. They may still have been used for their symbolic value or they may have been just decorative features used to further display the educated and cosmopolitan character of sir Thomas Holte, and also his wealth and status in society.

The change from Catholicism to Protestantism meant less to emphasis on church decoration. Nevertheless craftsmen and plenty of scope in the new homes of the affluent who were keen to impress with a riot of costly carving work. Indeed some fireplace overmantles bear a close resemblance to family monuments in churches.

The blossoming interest in mathematics and sciences, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, also had a part to play, as can be seen in the plasterwork ceilings of Aston Hall: they have a repeating pattern based on mathematical principles, which seems as if it should continue beyond the wall, fitting in with contemporary ideas of infinity and the universe having no voids.



Materials, Tools and Techniques

From:- *The Grand Old mansion* by Oliver Fairclough
pub. Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery

Once most of the house had been roofed, the fitting out of the interior could begin, and progress was less dependent upon the weather and the seasons. In the seventeenth century ceilings were often plastered before the floors were laid, which allowed waste plaster to fall into the voids. The plaster used was a pinkish mixture of slaked lime and fine sand, with hair added as a binding agent. Ceilings throughout the house appear to have been painted a soft white colour. Those in the great hall and in seven rooms on the first floor were modelled in shallow relief with linear geometrical strapwork patterns and ornamented with masks, mythical animals, heraldry and foliage, and had a deep entablature generally with a moulded frieze. These ceilings were time-consuming to make and therefore expensive. The plasterers had first to plaster over the oak lathes in the usual way, then mark out the pattern and begin to build up the ribs before skimming the ceiling with a coat of hard white plaster containing Derbyshire gypsum. The ribs are all 'run' (put

up and then shaped with profile moulds). All the relief ornament was present and a lied with the details finished with knife or needle acid with the plasterer's fingers. The cornices are supported on wooden brackets, and the decoration of the friezes is built up in much the same way as that of the ceilings. The animals ornamenting the frieze in the Best Lodging Chamber and the figures of the Nine Worthies in the great dining room are supported by wood and wire armatures. Where the original floorboards remain their edges have been cut to overlap, except in the Long Gallery which may have been floored last. Unlike the structural timbers, the oak boards had to be properly seasoned to prevent them warping and were therefore stored for some time before use. They were laid and nailed in place by the carpenters, but the rest of the internal woodwork was the province of the joiners, who were generally recognised as a separate trade. They built and carved the staircases and the hall screen and made the panelling (over 3,000 square feet in the long gallery alone). Their principal achievement was the great staircase. This cantilevered out from the walls and has an open well in the centre, a spectacular arrangement found in great houses from about 1605. Instead of banisters, the stairs have a balustrade pierced with a flowing

strapwork design and twenty-two highly carved newel posts. The string below is decorated with winged horses and wyverns. All this closely resembles the staircase at Crewe Hall, Cheshire (built 1615-36 and burnt in 1866), and there is also a smaller and cruder staircase of this type at Benthall Hall, Shropshire. The newel and the balustrade were picked out in red and blue-grey, a colour scheme repeated on the walls of the stairwell which were decorated with a painted representation of the balustrade. The main staircase at Knole, Kent (c.1605-6) is lavishly painted in this manner (and a humbler example survives at Harvington Hall near Kidderminster). It is likely that woodwork elsewhere in the house was also painted, but nothing has survived eighteenth-century redecoration and nineteenth-century paint stripping.

The masons also had plenty to do inside the house. Doors in the great hall and into the kitchen, great parlour and great dining room had large carved surrounds. There were at least twenty-seven fireplaces in the house. Nearly all are of the same grey sandstone but in the more important rooms they are carved and inset with black marble. Some have large carved overmantels and this height and

abundance of ornament make the chimney-pieces the dominant feature of these rooms. The long gallery has an alabaster overmantel, and there is another in the eighteenth century best drawing room, which is not in its original position. These overmantels are made in sections, and they may not have been carved on site.

Fireplaces, panelling and ornamental plasterwork, through made in the late 1620s and 1630s, are all firmly in the Jacobean tradition. There is no sign of the courtly Franco-Italian decorative style of Inigo Jones. The jewelled strapwork and grotesque animals of Sir Thomas's bedchamber ceiling or the masks and baldequins of the great staircase would have been part of the craftsman's normal stock-in-trade built up during the latter part of the sixteenth century.



A Tour of the House

The Entrance Hall

Seventeenth Century Use

This was a room to impress and overwhelm the visitor, and also a place for Sir Thomas Holte's forty servants to eat and celebrate feast days.

The Ceiling

The ribs may be direct copies of those of earlier wooden hammerbeam roofs. The Tudor geometric design of interlocking stars was old fashioned by the time this house was built. The star was a symbol of Divine guidance, hope, eternal life and the eyes of the night.

The fleur-de-lis is a stylised lotus or lily, the flower of light and life. Its spearhead also represented masculine and military power which maybe why it was adopted as an emblem by the beings of France.

The tree symbolized dynamic life (as opposed to static stone) and the principle of nourishing, sheltering and protecting. A deciduous tree represented the world constantly re-viewing itself - the life principle.

The tulip became an ornamental motif in Northern Europe from the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. The plant, indigenous to the Middle East, was first cultivated in England in 1577. It was the Persian symbol of perfect love.

The strap work patterns are typical of Jacobean decoration.

The unicorn was the symbol of Scotland - the lion and the unicorn together represented the union of England and Scotland under one crown when James I succeeded to the English throne in 1603. It also a- symbolized virtue and strength of mind and body.

The Doorcases

The shape of arch echoes the Renaissance and is decorated with a typical stylised seventeenth century flower design. The scrolls and strapwork carved in the stone spandrels are repeated in the woodwork spandrels of the arches on either side. These two arches were originally entrances into a screens passage that ran along the north end of the hall - the paintings are from a later time.

The Overmantel

The heavy stone-carved strapwork decoration is reminiscent of family monuments in churches. The pointed taffrils on either side the doggerel verse are typical of Jacobean ornament. It seems Sir Thomas Holte felt the verse necessary to remind the household of traditional attitudes to service.

The Walls

The columns of the arches are typical of the Flemish interpretation of classical design - a Corinthian column has been set on a pedestal and its shaft decorated with strapwork.

The Great Parlour

Seventeenth Century Use

This was one of Sir Thomas Holte's private rooms. Others, at the back of the house, were gutted and altered at a later time. Sir Thomas would have taken his meals here when he was not entertaining. Guests were always taken upstairs as a mark of respect.

The ornamentation

This room has undergone many alterations but has been restored to look much as it did in the seventeenth century.

It seems likely that the ceiling originally had moulded designs.

The frieze around the top of the walls possibly displays imitation triglyphs - alternating grooved blocks with small pendants, which are associated with the Classical Doric order (of course they are totally out of context here).

The block decoration is called dentil - like teeth.

The jewelled strapwork which resembles a bat is a similar design to one seen in the Entrance Hall. The round knobs and small beads represent jewels set in leather straps.

The panelling is of Oak and was Originally called "seelyng" or "ceiling". Various designs and pilasters break the uniformity and it was most probably decoratively painted using several different colours.



The Main Stairs

In the Seventeenth Century

A grand stairs was a significant feature. Guests were swept up to the Great Chamber on the first floor.

Cantilevered stairs designed around an open well and fashioned solely in wood were still a relatively new feature at this time, and fully stretched seventeenth century engineering techniques. The whole stairs is thought to have been originally painted a blue-Grey colour maybe with some red here and there. The decoration is very fanciful and elaborate.

The balustrade consists of panels of jewelled and beaded strapwork (imitation leather straps set with round jewels and beads).

The newel posts display the Classical grotesque plan of building up ornament symmetrically. The lion's mask tops a vertical axis with what appears to be a flame or horse's tail at the bottom. The lion symbolises strength and courage, which could be complimented by the flame as a

symbol of power and energy. Attributes Sir Thomas would be keen to display. The strapwork at one point turns into a fan of feathers or maybe a palmette - a formalised palm leaf. The palm is traditionally associated with triumphal processions, which may explain its appearance near the processional route to the Great Chambers for guests and the feast, which was carried from the kitchens with great ceremony.

Along the string course rare wild fantastic animals with horse's feet, a monster's or bird's head and wings. They have a strange dream like quality as they dissolve into ornament.

The urn is a Classical feature displaying an Ionic capital, and would have had a wooden carved human or animal figure on the top. The fleshy, stiff-leaf, acanthus decorating the urn symbolises immortality - however it was an essential component of the Corinthian and Composite orders!



The Great Dining Room

Seventeenth Century Use

Guests were entertained with sumptuous feasts in this room, after which it may have been used for dancing or the performance of a masque. The room displays furniture and fittings of a later age but the ceiling and the overmantel are from the seventeenth century.

The doorcase

This is elaborately carved in stone, highlighting and emphasising the importance of the room.

The ceiling

Overall the ceiling seems like a massive piece of plasterwork wallpaper cut from the roll and stuck up. The repeating pattern is designed to appear continuous, maybe a reflection of seventeenth century scientific thinking, influenced by the Classical scholars, that the universe had no voids.

The flat ribs have the appearance of jewelled (faceted jewels) and beaded strapwork providing a framework for grotesque masks, cherub faces, profile caricatures of

soldiers and anthropomorphic (human-like) figures, which dissolve into foliage.

The masks are a common feature to grotesque ornament in the original ancient Greek and Roman art they were usually in the form of a god or goddess appropriate to the decoration.

The cherub or winged child's head was an immensely popular ornament in the seventeenth century, it signified the presence of divinity and Divine Wisdom and so fits in with the masks.

Classical portrait heads in profile were often incorporated in strapwork and scrolling foliage as well as on cameos, gems, coins and medals. The use of colour for moulded plasterwork ceilings was very much a feature of Tudor and early Stuart interiors. If it was used on this ceiling it could have emphasised ornamental details, as well as being more practical than white, given that both the candles and smoke from the fire would have caused black smuts.

The frieze

The frieze of Nine Worthies (two were added later) was a very popular theme of Elizabethan and Jacobean decoration. The presence of such noble figures, from the Bible, legends and myths, was supposed to improve and strengthen one's own character. They are - Hector of Troy, Alexander and Julius Caesar, Joshua, David and Judas Maccabeus, King Arthur, Charlemagne and Godfrey de Bouillon. Wood and wire are incorporated in the plasterwork to strengthen the figures.

Alternating with the figures, is a frieze of strapwork swags of drapery and fruit, exotic birds and a bell-shaped flower heads.

Faceted lozenges - symbolising femininity and creativity - and rosettes decorate the strapwork. The birds are in varying designs, above the door to King Charles Room there appears to be a pelican piercing its breast.

This design had particular significance and derived from medieval sources. The pelican-in-her-piety, nourishing young with blood from her own breast, became a symbol of Christ's work and resurrection. The inaccuracy of the

bird's features shows how unfamiliar such birds were to the craftsmen, they relied on sketches or pattern books.

The Overmantel

The fireplace was the focal point of Elizabethan and Jacobean times.

The overmantel made of sandstone and black marble was divided into two or three sections, and the Classical orders and motifs have been used freely. The pilasters are not positioned in true Classical style, although the tapering design with a formal swag is a Classical feature. The Ionic capital has been used as a mere decorative feature, and so too the Classical scrolls up the side. Scrolls symbolised learning and knowledge, and the passing of time.

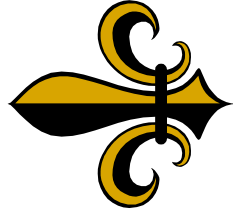
Acanthus leaves form the brackets supporting the mantel shelf, and below these are three straightforward faces.

Two stylised lion masks (see Main Stairs) dominate the lower half of the fireplace, and glaring out of the top section are two masks with the horns of the devil.

Coat of Arms

The coat of arms placed high on the overmantel displays Sir Thomas Holte's venerable ancestry. Use of armorial bearings was widespread at this times "Everyone vaunts himself ... I am gentleman ... I am honorable ... I am noble ... my father was this ... I am come of this house, and I am come of that" (Stubbes)

Shell ornament provides a delicate finish to the top. Shells represent birth, regeneration and life.



King Charles Room

Seventeenth Century Use

This was the best Lodging Chamber and King Charles I is reputed to have slept in this room in 1642.

The Ceiling

The strapwork looks remarkably like leather belts and is set with rosettes. The rose or rosette symbolises heavenly perfection - it also stands for silence and secrecy and was hung in council chambers as a reminder of discretion. This seems very appropriate as the King stayed here during the first part of the Civil War when he may well have discussed the -progress of war with close advisers in this room.

The cabochon, a raised oval or circular ornament was often used at the centre of repeating ornament, here it is seen off set.

The Frieze

The animals in the frieze are a mixture of real, exotic and fantastic, and were modelled around a wood and wire frame.

The wyvern was a mythical beast illustrated in medieval bestiaries (manuscripts of animal designs). It was depicted as a winged dragon with two eagle legs and a serpent-like barbed tail - an emblem of war and pestilence.

The gyyphon was a fabulous beast with the head and talons of an eagle and the body of a lion and originated in the Ancient East. It signifies courage and watchfulness.

The goat stood for creative energy and vitality.

The stag symbolises renewal and creation and is often associated with the Tree of Life. The trees in the frieze unite the symbolism of the animals representing dynamic life, renewal and regeneration. Birds are a feature of tree symbolism and signify spirits, divine manifestation and ascent to heaven.

The camel signified royalty and dignity, and in a kneeling position depicts humility.

The cow was the Great Mother and symbolised the productive power of the earth.

The dog was a symbol of nobility.

The chameleon (above the windows) represented the element of air and in Christianity it represented Satan taking on different roles to deceive mankind.

The lion symbolised strength courage and fortitude.

The unicorn stands for virtue and strength of mind, the two horns joined in one symbolises the union of opposites and undivided sovereign power.

The panther was said to save people from the Evil One.

The bear could represent the 'Resurrection and new life but also evil, cruelty and greed.



The Green-Drawing Room

Seventeenth Century Use

The company would withdraw to this room after their main meal to drink sweet wine and eat sweet meats - sugar coated fruits, spiced cakes, suckets and gilded marchpane (marzipan). It was also a place to play dice, cards, musical instruments or just to chat.

The door frames and the cornice date from the eighteenth century.

The Ceiling

It seems as if seventeenth century imagination has run riot, and it is not hard to see how the word grotesque achieved its modern meaning. The mixture of hideous and humorous features seen in the profile masks is typical of the grotesque designs in the German and Flemish pattern books.

The roots of ornament in medieval tradition are also evident in the similarity between the creatures represented here and the fantastic half-h half-animal characters which inhabited the margins of medieval

manuscripts. Furthermore, contemporary beliefs in the supernatural, the closeness of the devil and the fear of witches can be easily felt.

The seventeenth century acceptance of bizarre animals together with distortion is well illustrated. Satyrs usually had human heads with horns and a goat's beard, human hands and arms, but goat's bodies from the waist down. The satyrs represented here have diverged from the normal representation.

Symmetry and balance has been achieved by the mirror image effect. Other strange half-dragon creatures bear a similarity to gryphons or wyverns (see King Charles' Room) but have no wings. The bird would be an eagle, symbolising victory and pride, and also the Last Judgement when it throws the damned out of the nest.

The sun represents the all-seeing divinity and its power - 'the intelligence of the world'.

The ribs on this ceiling are actually a framework themselves for scrolls incorporating the popular pomegranate and pea-pod ornament. The pomegranate

symbolised immortality, fertility and plenty, complimenting the satyrs. The pea-pod ornament or *cosse de pois* was an early seventeenth century design, it usually appeared as sprays of graduated dots similar to peas.

The Overmantel

This chimney-piece shows great restraint and sophistication in its make-up compared with other seventeenth century examples in the house. It is made of alabaster and black marble.

Scrolling strapwork and pinnacles top straightforward Corinthian pillars. The detail includes delicately carved human faces and simply cut faceted jewel and lozenge shapes.



The Long Gallery

Seventeenth Century Use

The Long Gallery was a very fashionable seventeenth century feature in the houses of the wealthy. It was used for taking exercise by walking up and down its length, and for displaying the best furniture, family portraits and tapestries. This was the showroom of the house.

The Ceiling

The plaster ceiling has an all over pattern in shallow relief that seems to display a greater delicacy in contrast to others in the house. A repeating pattern has been used again with different centre ornaments used on each side of the ceiling. Taken as a whole the ceiling and frieze decoration could be seen as an allegorical representation of Sir Thomas Holte's principal source of wealth agriculture. The cornucopias (horns of plenty) symbolise a goat's horn filled with wheat denoting the fertility of the earth and fruitfulness. In this context the palm fronds represent the Tree of Life with birds amongst its branches; bearing good fruit in old age it symbolises fertility and longevity. Dragons heads can be made out amongst the palm fronds - this dracontine (dragon-like),

zoomorphic ornament has its roots in medieval wood-carving and further back, in Celtic and Viking art.

The disc is a sun symbol and stands for renewal and the generative powers of nature.

Other leaves are difficult to identify. They may be acanthus symbolising life and immortality, or oak representing strength and protection, or they may be further stylised palm fronds.

The Frieze

Portrait heads (see Great Dining Room) are positioned amongst foliage and pea-pod ornament (see Green Drawing Room). The mirror image effect has again been used. The Heads, with foliage seeming to come from their mouths, are very like the fertility symbol, the Green Man, of Medieval ornament.

The Panelling

The expense of lining this room with floor to ceiling panelling, all hand carved, must have been tremendous. Classical influence is apparent in the way the wall has been divided into bays by pilasters. The pilasters, however,

have been treated to the Jacobean touch with carved imitations of faceted jewels, strapwork and ornament like tear drops. The manner in which some of the designs were cut out of wood and then glued on is apparent at one point where the strapwork decoration has become unstuck and is missing.

The panels have the Renaissance arch and in each of the triangular spandrels a design has been curved: a separate design for each layer of panelling.

The Overmantel

The overmantel is made up of sandstone, alabaster and black marble, and is a mass of strapwork interspersed with masks and Classical features.

The lion masks (see Main Stairs) of the Great Dining Room fireplace are repeated here, although one has a very human appearance. Shell or palmette ornament is used below the lion masks and to each side there appears to be sections of a lion's foot. Above are three volutes - spiralling, scrolling forms which are the basis for the Ionic Order carved with acanthus leaves (see Main Stairs). The volutes are out of their proper Classical context and

upside down! The panels between the volutes are set with further strapwork and gryphon or bird-like heads similar to those on the string courses of the main stairs. These heads can be seen again further up as part of the scrolls (see Great Dining Room) on the edge of the overmantel.

Three caryatid figures carry the entablature (horizontal beam connecting columns) on their heads in the correct fashion for Classical orders. Caryatids should be draped female figures, these spring from acanthus leaves. Further lions masks adorn the top of the overmantel together with Sir Thomas Holte's coat of arms. The Holte symbol, the squirrel, is depicted on the fender and above the coat of arms in stain glass in the north window of the Long Gallery.



The Red Room

This room opens off the Oak stairs, so called because of its acorn pendant finials. The acorn was a popular pendant ornament as it was easily produced on a lathe. It took on the symbolism of the oak (see Long Gallery).

Seventeenth Century Use

The Red Room was described in an inventory of 1654 as "The best chamber over the hall" and was so named because red fabrics were used throughout, an early example of the French fashion for matching upholstery.

The Overmantel

Fluted columns support a formal arrangement of strapwork. Above, set in a semi-circle, is the symbol of one of the Cardinal Virtues - Prudence. She holds a serpent and originally, probably held a mirror in the other hand.

Temperance is depicted on the overmantel of another room, not open to the public at present. Sixteenth and seventeenth century Flemish and German engravers provided patterns for the creation of these virtues, each

symbolised in different ways, although such allegories had been popular since medieval times. Others may have included Faith, Hope, Charity, Justice, Fortitude, Patience, Humility and Chastity.

The finials on either side of the top appear to be painted with the fleur-de-lis (see Entrance hall) and the middle finial is decorated with the popular acanthus leaves.

