Ayscoughfee Hall: the building of a great merchant's house

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1975 is European Architectural Heritage Year and it is appropriate that this paper, dealing with the almost unknown house of Ayscoughfee, should be published as part of Lincolnshire's recognition of one of its houses which, with the exception of Gainsborough Old Hall, is the most interesting of its type in the county.

Lord Torrington's account of the house was written when he saw, and later visited, the house on 2 July 1790. He had travelled from Crowland past St. Guthlac's cross and Cowbit when 'another mile, and to Spalding, a large, clean, well-built, Dutch-like, canal'd town; and to a good inn, whence I first took my bookseller, vainless, walk, and then to a more curious speculation: For as I entered the town I had observed a very ancient house of bay-windows, surrounded by a low wall, in two stories as I now desired an admission, and was received by the master, Colonel Johnson, a very old, worn-out man, who led me into his parlour... This good old parlour was covered with portraits, some seemingly very good; but it was heated by a fire, as was also his bedroom, in which were several excellent cabinet pictures... into a room where his daughter was drying roses... The very old hall was properly furnished with armoury, buff-coats, and many curiosities, of ancient warfare... there are many good pictures of esteemed masters, but all in disorder and decay - like the owner.1 Soon after Lord Torrington's visit the Colonel died, in 1793, and was succeeded by his son, Maurice Johnson, the minister of Spalding who soon 'commenced to put things in order... and cut down the yew trees in front of the hall'.

The house is by far the largest old mansion in Spalding; and as Pevsner observes in his account of the buildings of the town, it was complemented by one of the richest Benedictine Priories in the county, founded in 1052 and a castle. Both of these disappeared and the prosperity of the town was based on trade brought by the river Welland not patronage from Lord and Prior.2 The Welland is now a very much tamed 'canal' in the Dutch manner having been 'improved' both by Vermuyden in the seventeenth century and more drastically in this century by the Lincolnshire River Authority. As a result the water level has dropped considerably to the detriment of the view but to the benefit of the security of the town on its low site.3 The parish church, built by the priory on the Welland's east bank in 1284 was on the site of an earlier, Norman, cemetery chapel of St. Thomas of which certain details remain. At the east end of the present church are flat Norman buttresses assigned to a late twelfth century lengthening of the original cemetery chapel.

Of the several houses of the time, specially worthy of note, John, the Almoner who died in 1274 and William de Littleport who died in 1293. Dugdale, summing up the achievements of John, says 'the list of his purchases and acquisitions for the benefit of his convent shows not only his economy and industry but explains how necessary an Act of Mortmain was, to put a stop, in some degree, to so unbounded a liberty as was once enjoyed by religious houses in acquiring property'.4 From this one would suppose that not only large tracts of land and common, arable and buildings were "acquired" from the pious parishioners but that, from the strength of the property holding, the Prior had great power in furthering not only the increasing prosperity of his "convent" but also of the secular community. His successor, William de Littleport, according to Dugdale, "rebuilt the conventual church... many of the buildings (having been) damaged by an overflow of the sea... in 1288".5 Unlike Pevsner, Dugdale attributes the "rebuilding" of the parish church to him, in the years before his death in 1293; but it may be that the works between 1284 and 1293 were the eastern additions to the church.

This preface is not merely to set the relationship of Ayscoughfee hall in historical perspective and economic climate. In a more concrete context fragments of building associated with the church, that is the "houses" of the Guild of St. Thomas and the B.V.W. as well as possible stray detailing from the church itself, appear reused in Gayton House, alias 'Holyrood house' of 1481.6 Gayton House has itself now been demolished as well as the Guild structures. The arrangement of buildings running along the Welland bank downstream from the stone bridge of 1858 is, first, a group of tenements including the picturesque thatched and whitewashed public house, then the modern group round the alley to the parish church beyond which is the new office block on the site of Gayton House. The house of Ayscoughfee stands on the adjacent, larger area, set back behind an asphalted carriage sweep. From an early map in the collection of the Spalding Gentlemen's Society it appears that all these sites had built on them, before the modern agglomerates had either replaced or obscured them, long tenements that is at least four, running back from the river with their gabled frontages resembling a very open plan rather like Amsterdam before every vacant lot was built over. Of these tenements the sixty feet long north 'cross-wing' of Ayscoughfee was probably the southernmost.

Such an arrangement of tenements, suggesting a planned layout for the eastern extension of Spalding across the river from the old nucleus of Friary, castle and market, may mean that there was encouragement of commercial development along the river's eastern bank. Before canalisation the Welland water probably was some feet higher and the banks un-piled or revetted, with the ravine sloping gently up to the gable ends of the tenements, allowing boats to be drawn up alongside them. It is possible that short 'canals' ran back into the plots, being cut at right angles to the river. Such is the case at Newark, where a tiny canal was cut from the river to enable Handley's boats to reach the warehouse at the end of the little 'park' north of the house.7 In Spalding, if my interpretation of the various activities is correct, the development must have taken place in the thirteenth century.

Ayscoughfee may be the last survivor of a series of houses of this type. Although most printed evidence points to a date of building in either 1420 or 1429, by Sir Richard Aldwyn. Gooch cites that it was built in 1420 'the same year that William of Waynells was ordained deacon in Spalding parish church'.8 There is evidence in the house itself of many building phases, not merely of 1420-9 but from the thirteenth century, at least, until the present.

These building phases are more easily identified from the roof structure and an examination of two drawings in the Banks collection rather than from the present exterior. Pevsner's brief description of the house would tend to leave an impression of an Elizabethan 'H' type house incorporating minor fragments of earlier Tudor brickwork.9 There is certainly evidence for an Elizabethan 'facelift' made more aggressively apparent by the work of 1845 in the 'tudor' style. The sixteenth century work replaced a degree of work in the gothic taste made about 1791-2. The eighteenth century remodelling and decoration being a refurbishment of the panelled
elliptical heads in the upper stage almost heralds the renaissance into Lincolnshire. Their very existence would not be known were it not for the two drawings in the Banks' collection and a parallel interpretation of a remark in a very ancient house by Lord Nottingham in his Diary. The doorcases of the hall are of slightly, almost imperceptibly, nodding ovial form with roll mouldings and complex foot plinth-stops, all in ashlar excepting the one leading from the oriel bay on the east into the brick vaulted lobby to the north cross-wing.

Certain arrangements of the hall at Ayscoughfee resemble those of Bewley Court, Lacock, Wiltshire, including, fortuitously, the nineteenth century mutilations. At Bewley the hall arrangement is almost identical except for the stair leading from the oriel in the long wall of the hall. At Ayscoughfee the stair is sited in the southern cross-wing. At Bewley the cross-wings, although smaller than Ayscoughfee, reflect the original layout of both houses, which give in our present context a lodgings wing in the north cross-wing and service rooms and kitchen in the south cross-wing. Again the Banks collection drawings confirm the siting of the cross-entry; a cross-entry rather than a cross passage because there is no evidence for a space in the hall. Under the cross-entry, are two small chambers subdivided from the hall at some time in the early seventeenth century. Whether these small chambers were the support for a gallery at the service end of the hall is a matter of conjecture; the window, shown in the Banks collection drawing of the west front, appears to be contemporary with the rest of the brick walling. This window need not necessarily have opened from a pantry or larder but may have merely relieved the gloom of a rather low Erood. The siting of the pantry or larder within the hall and between kitchen and hall is followed at Gainsborough Old Hall but there is a sheer framed wall at the hall's low end there, with larders flanking a passageway under the 'housekeepers' chamber' to the kitchen. It is a possibility that Basil Wymberley (1592-1641) who owned Ayscoughfee as well as another house at Pinchbeck may have been responsible for this alteration. The layout of Gainsborough Old Hall, with a chamber at first floor level at the low end of the hall has its counterparts largely in the houses of the upper echelons of the clergy; at Ayscoughfee there was certainly a large chamber of some importance on the first floor reached not from the hall itself but, as at Lamphey palace, Pembroke, by an outer stair. Ayscoughfee's stair is not strictly 'outer' as it runs up inside the building, but its main entrance was shared by the entrance to the service. Immediately on entering the service and kitchen wing from the north side of the east end a stair under a brick vault with cross groins of moulded brick rose westwards to give access to a large upper chamber. One truss, the terminal one of the west end, remains from a concave braced collar roof. This single survivor stands on the double wall-plate used throughout the building but which is here found with a slight cavetto moulding to the inner faces, as is the case in the north cross-wing. Arras hooks, spaced at eighteen inches, still survive for part of the length. This chamber was re-roofed for three bays with a curious queen-post derivative.

The queen-posts stand, morticed into the tie beams with braces rising in 'depressed arch' form to both the collars and to a square-set purlin over the head of the queen-posts. One roof of this type is found over the parlour wing of Church Farm, Castle Bytham and both are, apparently, of sixteenth century work. Eastwards, at Ayscoughfee the roof degenerates into a common, Lincolnshire, unbraced trapped purlin type of the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century. In the east gable is a three-light mullioned window with cusping set under a shallow arch; in the Banks collection drawing this is shown, mutilated by the insertion of a sashed window. This window must have matched the one shown on the same drawing, at the east end of the north cross-wing.

The whole ground floor of the south cross-wing is
gutted and remodelled in a very drastic fashion. As an illustration of the extent of the work it is only necessary to follow the course of the drawing-room chimney stack; the drawing-room was originally two which were knocked into one, a fireplace was inserted into a stack let into, and built up from, the blocked doorcase to the hall. The flue from this hearth travels up the wall and across the garret space in a brick tunnel to join up to the original chimney stack 'nudled' into position by lengths of old iron and battens of oak and softwood, that rises from the roof ridge; the wall that originally supported it and divided the rooms has completely gone. The outer wall of the south front is the only noticeable variation in bonding to occur in the house. At the ends, for a distance of some six feet, the wall survives intact but then the plinth masonry dips and sash windows are found in a Flemish bond wall of reused brick. A third level, a 'secret level', became fashionable the old service wing was virtually rebuilt to provide south facing rooms looking out into the 'yew hedge gardens'. At this time the kitchen was relegated to the north range because, again referring to the Banks collection drawing, the kitchen was still at the south side in circa 1800, the water-butt, still surviving, being shown against the kitchen door. The style of living in the house in the late middle-ages is well illustrated by the roundel of carved wood with a deer's head over this door. We have an example of the old weathered detail, a merchant watching a young servant issuing 'dole' to two vagrants, the servant being on bended knee symbolic of 'charity and humility'. An excellent photograph, in the collection of the Spalding Gentleman's Society, shows the detail of the carving before it became so badly weathered and virtually unintelligible.

Of the later work at Ayscoughfee little is worthy of note architecturally but, archaeologically and socially there is much worthy of consideration. Lord Torrington, as early as 1790, had considered the house of interest as 'an ancient house'. The Johnsons ruined this house contrary to their professed interests by an insensitive taste and an even more deplorable choice of architect for their remodelling of 1845 onwards.18 The old house aristocratic by Lincolnshire standards by its very size and ornament was only partially 'Georgianised', the thatch for example was only removed in 1772 and replaced by slate, presumably not that on the house at present. The work may have started earlier than 1845 because Gooch records that the stone windows were taken out and replaced by wooden ones after the death of the Colonel Maurice Johnson that Lord Torrington visited. This was in 1793 and may give a date for the refenestration of the south front but certainly not for the unforgivable onslaught on the west facade. This front was stripped of every piece of detailing and spurious, face-beded yorkstone quoins were keyed into the wild brick. New 'modern gothic' windows gave a five bay centre with central 'tudor' doorcase all of stone, a great achievement of arms was set up as a cumbersome ornament over the centre. Not only was the tower feature added but the early turret was extended upwards and the whole assemblage crowned by a pierced gothic parapet. It is sad to reflect that their enjoyment of the no doubt well meant work was shortlived, the death of a young daughter precipitated their move from Ayscoughfee to the healthier climate of Blundeston, Suffolk. Little work, except maintenance and the addition of a very utilitarian office has been done in this century. It would be a marvellous experience for all interested in architecture to see the house restored to at least the appearance that Lord Torrington saw. All the roof timbers appear sound and very little would have to be done to restore the north range under chambering recrating roof; over the hall little would have to be done except the removal of effete Regency plasterwork and the replacement of some impose.

Conclusion

From the evidence here put forward a complex situation arises.19 If one accepts the visual evidence then the building history may start at least in the thirteenth century, however if one accepts the plan and the elevations known to have existed there is no evidence for work on this site earlier than the late fifteenth century and most likely the early sixteenth century when much timberwork would be available from the Priory Buildings at the Dissolution. If the brickwork under the roofing of the north range is co-eval then it must rank amongst the earliest brick building in England and this cannot be the case. The removal and reuse of roofs is known in Lincolnshire, primarily from the Red Hall at Bourne where the roof is certainly reused. The other consideration is that, in common with much Lincolnshire carpentry, the archaic roof design survived into the age of early Tudor brick rebuilding;20 certainly the jointing of the roof over the north range is not archaic it is merely simple. There is no sign of the 'notched' or even 'secret joint' and even the early in the early sixteenth it is certain that the profile and general scheme is archaic even to the lack of any tie-beams at all. 1481, the year in which Holyrood, the house immediately north of Ayscoughfee was built from the materials of the house of the Guild of St. Thomas may be the starting point for alterations. The dedication of the chapel of Ayscoughfee in 1486 may mean that the whole building was erected in the five years from 1481-6 and that all material of an earlier date is reused and that the roofs are of timber not merely re-used but re-erected that is with the exception of the hall roof, all of which is in new wood. It is fortunate that financial expenditure appears to have brought together the collection of roofs to provide, thoughout its sita, a cross section of the better class of Lincolnshire roofs in one building which seems safe for the foreseeable future for further study.

Footnotes

3 Gooch, op. cit., 1946, 'In 1286 a terrible hurricane, with horrible raging of the wind, broke the sea barrier... The waves beat with such fury against the monastic walls that they did considerable damage and the town also suffered frightful loss', he also notes earlier floods in 1256, 1254, and 1257.
4 Monastic


6 PRO MR 1132 dated 1804.

7 Gooch, op. cit. p.111, p.250.

8 Peasgood, 1964.

9 that is the north wing and addition, the Banks collection drawings show some stone, modified, windows as well as the twin cant bays to still hall. One of the cant bays, blocked, first floor east gable wall, south wing, visible in roof space.

10 Smith, J. T., Medieval Roof: a classification, Arch. J. Vol. CXV, June 1960, pl.XIVA. The roof of a chapel at the west end of the dormitory, Blackfriars, Gloucester. A drawing by Buckler, coll. BM, (add MS, 36457, f.74.) and pp.114-116 'normally dated to the 14th century'.


12 almost completely destroyed at Ayscoughfee but a parallel exists at Tattershall Castle; vide marquis Curzon and Tipping, H. A., Tattershall Castle, 1929, pl.10, 16 and pl.9.


14 vide Smith, J. T. op. cit. 1960, pl.XVII and fig. 12 (p.126-7)

15 Smith, J. T., op. cit., Pl. XIVA, Oxney Abbey. Demolished building, drawn by Buckler (n.12 above) and p.124, '...shows very clearly its descent from the turreted hall... the lower purins are still set squarely on their supporting posts'. By inference a rebuilding of the roof in the 15th century may be made.

16 Peasgood, N., 1964, p.655, 'perhaps by William Todd', '...1845'.

17 From the point of view of design by ownership the story is of little less complicated. If one accepts that the Ayscoughfeehall was built by Sir Richard Alwyn in 1420 and that it was subsequently rebuilt by his son Nicholas Alwyn, mercer and Lord Mayor of London in 1499. This property reverted in 'tail' to his nephew who became in his
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turn Lord Mayor of London in 1523. In 1619 Bevile Wymberley (1592-1641) owned Ayscoughfie and lived there; he was followed by Dynokate Waipole who lived at Ayscoughfie for a short time until 1642. Before Wymberley's death in 1641 John Johnson, of Pinchebeck, bought the property from his friend Wymberley. The sons of succeeding marriages continue the Johnson line; Francis

Johnson, 1638-1685, John Johnson, 1672-1688, but then Jane outlived her brother by fifteen years and having married Maurice Johnson, no direct relation, the family changes but not the name. His son, Maurice, 1714-1795, Colonel of the 1st Regiment of Foot Guard and the acquaintance of Lord Torrington, was followed by his son, also Maurice until his death in 1834. The Lords of Ayscoughfie were, in 1789, Lord Eardley and then the Johnsons by purchase, the family having been stewards of the Manor of Spalding cum membirs for generations, at least from 1709, to the Duke of Buckleugh and of the manor of Kirton to the Earl of Exeter. It was Maurice Johnson of Ayscoughfie hall who founded the Gentlemen's Society in 1710 and who saw much fighting

in Flanders under Cumberland in 1746-7.

20 It has been pointed out that it is not impossible for the roof of the north wing to be in situ. I am indebted to Dr. Edward Peters for the observation that the roof could have been underbuilt in brick at a later date. As it is not possible to examine the underside of the twin wall plates no evidence can be found for mortices of post-heads and eaves

bracketing (i.e. to the outer plate). There is one cross-wall, visible under the stairframe, where diamond-targeted plaster

inscribed studding is the building material. However cross-

walling 'buckheads' in both stone and brick houses, are found in framed wood with heavy studding until the mid 17th

century in Lincolnshire.

Appendix

A Trewe and perfect Inventory of all the goods . . . of

Thomas Wimberley late of Spalding . . . 1616.

In the Hall . . . (various goods including 'a longe table

with the frame two formes and the bench . . . a square

table a frame and a forme . . . fier irons . . . two

bransen hanging Candlesticks . . . £2.2.8.

In the dinynge parlour . . . (a longe table & frame & two

carpettes . . another table & Carpett . . xii buffett

stooles & . . quysions . . xiii Chaires . . a Cobord

with the Cloth . . fier irons tongs shovell bellowes .

£9.7.4.

In the little hall . . . (goods valued at £1.0.0.)

In a little closet . . . (goods valued at £1.7.4.)

In the new parlour . . . (goods valued at £12.3.8.)

In the candle howse . . . (goods valued at £2.8.4.)

In the larder . . . (goods valued at £11.19.10.)

In the brewe howse . . (goods valued at £6.7.8.)

In the Kitchen . . (goods valued at £25.2.2.)

In the Dery . . (goods valued at £4.12.8.)

In the Cheese Chamber . . . (£6.8.10.)

In a Corne Chamber . . . (£15.6.10.)

In the Hall Chamber . . . (10.4.)

In the Buttry . . . (£10.6.6.)

In his Lodging Chamber . . (£232.5.6.) . . including

silver, jewels & 'apparel'.

In his closet . . (£707.14.6.) . . including £271.19.6.

'reidy money'.

In the gallery . . (£17 . . defaced .)

In the parlour chamber . . (£130.18.5.)

In the little chamber . . defaced

In the high chamber . . (£11.12.0.)

In the serving men Chamber . . (£3.2.0.)

In the yard . . Stable . . a total of £1427.6.0.

[i.e. a 'running' total.]

Crops and stock &c. 'In the Marshfield' . . £1421.6.0.

Ref: L&O Inv 118/164 Note that at the end of this

inventory is added his property at Bitchfield, thought

by Gooch (p.255 op. cit. 1940) to have been his seat.

By inference only can this inventory be associated

with Ayscoughfie; the number and disposition in

sequence of the rooms certainly fit the 'route' that

an inventory maker would have taken. It also implies

an inserted floor to the hall before 1616. Bevile,

Thomas's son, owned Ayscoughfie, 1619.
Plate II  The west front of Ayscoughfee Hall drawn by C. Nattes in the closing years of the eighteenth century, by kind permission of Lincoln City Library, Banks collection.

Plate III  The east front of Ayscoughfee Hall; Nattes' drawing shows the surviving 'oriel' or cant-bay to the dais. The tower feature of the present building is drawn in its former lower height, almost a continuation of the roofline with a tourelle. Reproduced by kind permission of Lincoln City Library, Banks collection.
Plate IV  The interior of the great hall of Ayscoughfee. A reconstruction by the writer of its former state, the evidence for the roof is extant, the fenestration partially extant and partially from the Nattes elevations; the doorcases at the north end are conjectural but there is evidence for access to the north cross-wing at these points. The open fire is doubtful as there must have been a hearth and wall flue which has not survived.
Plate V  The five basic stages of roof construction. Left, the cross-saline braced collar roof of single scantling and no tie beams; centre, the hall roof of tie beam and braced collar principal rafters and butt purlins. Right, lower, the surviving end truss of an earlier roof (a similar decayed one is found in nineteenth century work at the north end of the building ex situ) next the queen-post roof, almost a 'double crown post' type. Lastly on the right, the partially windbraced clasped purlin roof. N.B. double wall plates and ashlar throughout.
Plate VI  Ground plan of Ayscoughfee showing, as far as possible the mediaeval and Tudor work seen by Torrington and sketched by C. Nattes. Some later work is shown; the textured area of the south wall is the area of Flemish-bond brickwork and the open unemphasised areas are later extensions or internal re-arrangement.
The roof structures of Ayscoughfee Hall.

Plate VII

A  The cross-salire braced collar roof over the north range.

Plate VII B  The braced collar truss surviving at the west end of the south wing; there is some evidence for an earlier framed building here but, owing to the lower part of the posts being removed, it is impossible to determine whether they merely descended to wall corbels.
The roof over the great hall. An intricately carved roof of cambered tie-beam and cambered collar principal rafter type. Moulded double tier purlins run from truss to truss. Above are sections of mouldings to a different, indicated, scale.
Plate VII D  Lower, the roof over the south wing, above, for comparison, the roof of the parlour cross-wing at Church Farm, Castle Bytham; here the square-set purlins of the Ayscoughfee roof 'D' are refined to become angled to the roof slope with all the tenons canted to compensate (see inset top right for detail).

Note:  for comparisons and parallels vide Vanessa Parker, The Making of Kings Lynn, 1971, p. 53 et seq, and p. 74 fig. 17, p. 75 cont.