John Thorpe’s Drawings for Thornton College, the House of Sir Vincent Skinner

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John Thorpe (1565-1655) included in his book of architectural drawings plans labelled ‘Thornton Colledge’. The likelihood of these plans being preliminary drawings for that house rather than inaccurate surveys is here discussed in the light of a ground plan of the vanished building recovered during the 19th century at the instigation of the then Earl of Yarborough.

A previous discussion of John Thorpe’s Designs for Dowshy Hall and the Red Hall, Bourne demonstrated that there was ample evidence for his authorship of the design of both houses. Dowshy and the Red Hall are of similar plan form and show a competent if uninspired grasp of architectural composition. Thornton College occupies an important place in his oeuvre as a house inspired by Andrea Palladio’s Villa Valmarana. It may be that the Palladian source is at second hand because a closely related plan was published in 1601 by the Huguenot Jacques Perret as a design for a Protestant Temple. Perret’s perspectives of his design also show a profound debt to Smythson’s Wollaton Hall, Nottinghamshire, which was virtually complete by 1588. Dr Giraud points out the relationship of the Wollaton plan to that of Serlio’s Poggio Reale as well as to Mount Edgcumbe. Certainly Thorpe made use of Palladio’s Quattro Libri at this time, but his acquaintance with Serlio’s Second Book is thought to start only in 1611 when it was first published in English. Circuitous though the derivation from Italian Renaissance sources may be, there can be little doubt that Thorpe and Skinner were as aware of them as many of their contemporaries.

What makes the Thornton College plan distinctive amongst Thorpe’s work is the use of what appear to be buttresses. These do not appear on a plan of Wollaton or of Mount Edgcumbe nor do they appear in Palladio’s plan for the Villa Valmarana. They do appear in Serlio’s plan and in Perret’s Protestant Temple design. Perret’s perspectives show clearly that his ‘buttresses’ were pilasters applied to each of the three storeys. Another plan by Thorpe, for an unexecuted house, has what appear to be pilasters applied to the corners of a much closer interpretation of the Villa Valmarana; these are however fewer in number and slimmer in bulk (T152). In the absence of sufficient architectural fragments or any other evidence at Thornton there is little further to add to our knowledge of the elevations. Unless Thorpe had access to an Italian edition of Serlio it appears that his source must have been Perret’s engraving of 1601. This Protestant Temple design may have recommended itself as an appropriate conceit rather than because of any similarity it had to Wollaton Hall. What could have appealed more to the Elizabethan love of allegories than to build a version of the Protestant Temple on the site of an Abbey and a College?

Sir Vincent Skinner was a son of John Skinner of Thorpe-by-Wainfleet, Lincolnshire. A Member of Parliament and Scriptor Talliarum, he was knighted by James I at Theobalds on 7 May 1603. His marriages to two widows in succession probably brought him property, but by 1610 he was deeply in debt. The acquisition of the Thornton property in 1602 culminated in the consolidation of the manor in 1607. It seems that his debts accumulated as a result of his purchases of land and the building and furnishing of his house there. A substantial part of this debt was to Sir Michael Hickes who frequently received more than 15% from the interest on sums advanced in the course of his money-lending.

What has brought the problems of Thornton and Skinner’s building there into a new light is a plan of its foundations. This survey came to light accidentally during a search for material relating to 18th-century estate building on the Yarborough estates in Lincolnshire. Fortunately the ground plan of Thornton College house is instantly recognisable, otherwise it could easily have been overlooked as it forms only part of a large sheet for the most part given over to a survey of the ruins of Thornton Abbey. From the character of the draughtsmanship the survey appears to have been drawn up between 1860 and 1880. The scale used is 1 : 180 which applies to the whole sheet. At first sight this scale appears to be inappropriate for a house until it is realised that the ground plan is of the wide foundations of a substantial building. Perhaps it was this peculiarity that gave rise to the only inscription referring to the plan of the footings, a tentative and faintly pencilled ‘Supposed House’. White’s Directory in 1856 states that the Abbey ruins were ‘shewn to the public by the occupant of the adjoining house ... the abbot’s residence ... afterwards the seat of the Skinners who sold the estate to the Suttons’. The then Earl of Yarborough was the owner of ‘these interesting ruins’ and, putting two and two together, it would seem that this survey was drawn as a guide for 19th-century tourists who ventured as far as Thornton Abbey Station on the new railway.

White’s Directory outlines the history of the site quite satisfactorily apart from the brief episode discussed here.

Fig. 1 Nineteenth-century plan of Thornton College taken from a survey of Thornton Abbey, Lincolnshire. Reproduced by kind permission of the Earl of Yarborough.
Fig. 2 T68i. John Thorpe. Pen and ink sketch-plan for Thornton College. The plan is contained within the dark rectangle. If the reversed image of T67 and T69 (Henry VII Chapel, Westminster Abbey) with its hatched ground-plan are disentangled from the sketch Thorpe's proposals may be seen. The round entrance porch with its rectangular flanking lobbies should be compared with the arrangement on T67. In plan the compass window to the parlour is less shallow and the two stairs are set in square compartments but the general disposition of rooms is followed throughout the series.
‘Wm. le Gros, Earl of Albemarle... in 1139... founded a Priory of black canons... dedicated to the Blessed Virgin. It was raised to the rank of an Abbey in 1148... Henry VIII... honoured the abbey with a visit... in 1541... and... at the dissolution... refounded it as a COLLEGE for a dean and prebendaries... but it was finally suppressed in 1553, when its nineteen members received pensions, and it was granted, in exchange, to the Bishop of Lincoln.’

The site was sold to Sir Robert Tyrwhitt in 1575 and in 1602 it was bought by Sir Vincent Skinner. It seems that Sir Vincent intended to make Thornton his seat as he consolidated the manor in 1607. From the superscription on a letter 'Thornton Colleg[e] my house...' written by Sir Vincent in 1611 it would appear that building was well advanced.¹¹

There is a plan for this house drawn by John Thorpe, the man the 19th-century historians thought to be England’s first architect. Subsequent historians have dealt less kindly with Thorpe’s reputation as an architect, but he is still regarded as a skilled surveyor second only to the famous John Norden.¹² Where informed opinion changes from one extreme to the other the truth probably lies somewhere in the middle. Not that we can truly describe Thorpe as an architect in the modern sense; we must rather see him as a deviser of house plans who left much of the actual execution to the builders employed by his patrons. Thorpe was a clerk in the Royal Works frequently travelling long distances to undertake land and building surveys, a position which brought him into contact with ‘men of substance in the shires’. It was for two such men, Sir William Rigdon and Sir Thomas Darrell, that Thorpe prepared plans for houses at Dowsby and Horkstow. The complicated story of transposed plans and a chain of events that ended with the ‘Dowsby’ plan being built as the Red Hall, Bourne, and the ‘Horkstow’ design being built at Dowsby in modified form, has been discussed previously.¹³

Three drawings by John Thorpe survive from the series that he made for the house. The first is a free-hand ink drawing (T68) (Fig. 2), which is inscribed ‘Thornton College, Lincolnshire/Sir Vincent Skinner’ with some rooms named ‘Hall 58 (feet)/sto 34 (feet) but[e]ry, kyt[chen], lodd’, and ‘chapel’. A cross dimension is given for the hall, 32 (feet), and another, 25 (feet), for the ‘butry’. This sketch could only be recovered by infra-red transmission photography because it had another sheet pasted over it. The second drawing is an enlargement of it to almost double the scale, but a major alteration drawn on a pasted-down slip was carried out after the design was completed (Fig. 3). The scale is ¼ of an inch to ten feet, 1:160. It is identified twice, ‘Sr Vincent Skynn’ and ‘Sr Vincent Skinner’s Thornton Colledg’. Rooms are again named, ‘Hall, kyt., pastry, lar, lodd, inn’ pler, lodg, inn’?, chaple, pantry’. The third drawing is for the upper floor of the house to the same scale (Fig. 4). There are two inscriptions, ‘Gallery’ and ‘Studdy’, with an alteration identified as a ‘dore’ in the gallery wall. A sum ‘80 – 31 = 49’ appears in the lower margin.
The original plans as far as they go closely resemble what was built (Fig. 5). In essence the house was to have a hall placed not in the medieval fashion but in the new Elizabethan way so that it could be entered from outside through a small vesica-plan porch at the lower end opposite the dais. In line with the hall, behind the dais, was a chapel with two rows of pews. Beyond this again was a large parlour with a compass window. Ranged to left and right of this axis lay the remaining ground-floor rooms, the arrangement interrupted in the centre of the house so that windows could light the dais and the chapel. On the first floor was the most dramatic room. Here a long gallery over a hundred feet in length lay over the hall, chapel, and parlour. The remaining rooms were arranged in a similar way to that followed on the ground floor. There were intended to be two stairs, one more ambitious than the other. The more ordinary one led up from two doorways sited in the middle of the long wall of the hall and the other from an internal porch and lobby leading from the chapel and the parlour and the ‘lodge’.

From a comparison of the intentions of the plan and the limits imposed by the newly recovered survey evidence, it is obvious that the house was erected to a final draft that is now missing. The two ends of the house seem to have been built in accordance with those in Thorpe’s book. The centre of the house has been telescoped, jumbling the arrangement so carefully worked out for lighting the chapel and dais. Perhaps the shortening of this part of the house might be assumed to be for reasons of economy, but the main outcome was a more successful arrangement for the parlour. In the sketch and ground-floor plans the back wall of the great parlour was lost in gloom over forty feet from the nearest window; this was reduced to thirty feet in the amended version. What was lost in the building seems to have been a sacrifice of finesse for practicalities. The flood of light from opposing five light windows across the dais was lost and a similar array in the chapel was abandoned together with the twin arches of a loggia.

At this point it is essential that some assessment of Sir Vincent Skinner’s contribution to the design is made. It seems that the decision to telescope the centre of the house came about because of his insistence on retaining the hall dimensions given on the first ink sketch-plan by Thorpe, (T681) (Fig. 2). The first design was for a hall 38 feet by 34 feet where the second drawing has 55 feet by 25 feet. As built, the hall was nearer to the first concept, being the same in width and only a foot or so shorter. John Thorpe it seems counselled caution. Thirty-four feet was an enormous span for an Elizabethan carpenter to bridge, and the enormously wealthy builder of Wollaton settled for less. If this insistence on retaining the larger hall came from Skinner, it is indicative of the value that he put on his house, a value that drove him deeper into debt. Of the fragments of correspondence that survive the most evocative of this is that dated 25 February 1610-11: ‘I purchased of my majestye now iiij yeres past the manor of Thornton adjoyning to Thornton College my house and habitation for my sonne if I maie be so happy to hold it and leave it to him.’ From this it seems that he intended Thornton to be a fitting seat for a dynasty of Skinners rather than as mere aggrandisement.

It is said but salutary that Thornton collapsed completely in a cloud of dust, depriving posterity of a great wonder; pride indeed went before a fall. Abraham de la Pryme wrote down the fate of the house in 1697 almost eighty years after Skinner’s death. It is said that the suppressed College was pulled down and the materials used in the erection of a ‘most stately hall’. This hall ‘when it was finished, fell quite down to the bare ground without any visible cause and broke in pieces all the rich furniture that was therein’. Skinner then set about repairing his loss by building another house ‘out of the stones that the other was built of, which hall now

![Fig 6 Block of stone carved with helmeted heads in cartouches; this is assumed to have come from Sir Vincent Skinner’s house and may have been part of the staircase at the time of the collapse.](image-url)
stands on the east side of the court of the abbey, and is all built on arches of some of the old [abbey] building'. From 1610 it appears that Skinner's financial affairs worsened further, no doubt exacerbated by the collapse and the cost of building again. Skinner was buried at St Andrew's, Holborn, on 29 February 1615-16, following his death in a debtors' prison in High Holborn run by one Isaac Brinthurst. Although Skinner's son William repudiated administration of his will, the family regained possession and remained for several generations at Thornton.17

It now remains to be seen what can be discovered about John Thorpe's contribution. It seems certain that he had little or no control over the building of houses to his plans. At Dowsby the house is of Lincolnshire limestone, fine ashlar for the front and dressings with a ferruginous rag for the common walling, but the Red Hall at Bourne is in brick with limestone dressings. The Red Hall has an amateurish quality that looks quite cottagey in contrast to the professional work at Dowsby. There is in common a quantity of mouldings and fireplaces that it is tempting to attribute to the Thorpe masonry business run from Kings Cliffe, Northamptonshire, by John Thorpe's brother Thomas. All that remains at Thornton is one fragment that seems associated with the house that Thorpe designed.18 It is a block intended as a free-standing plinth with reliefs on its faces representing a curly bearded warrior wearing a curious helmet. Surrounding the heads are identical cartouches in a surprisingly up-to-date Italian manner rather than the cruder Germanic one to be expected at this date.

It is now possible to see a little more clearly Thorpe's approach to architectural problems. In the examination of the drawings for Dowsby in particular it was seen that crosses and short diagonal strokes deleted certain features for which others had been substituted. The plan of Dowsby as built is the result of transforming a U-plan into a rectangular one. In the three stages for which there is good

Figs. 7 T172 and T171. John Thorpe. Plan for Little Charton, East Sutton, Kent. An earlier essay, possibly of 1585, which includes many of the features of the Thornton plan arranged in a square.
evidence at Thornton, it is possible to see a procedure. The free-hand sketch (T68) (Fig. 2) incorporated the basic ideas into a framework acceptable to Thorpe and his patron. The sketch was then elaborated into a workable form practical to build. As at Thornton this could be altered (not always, it is hoped, with such disastrous results). In the process the main plan elements were preserved. At Thornton these were the hall, chapel, and Parlour set in line below the long gallery on the first floor. For these the symmetry of the ‘hour-glass’ plan was given up to become a symmetry about another axis at right angles to the first. The whole emphasis of the plan was changed to accommodate a slightly larger stair and an increase in kitchen storage space. This orderly quality was lost in the building itself to be replaced by a system of voids opposing solids across the ‘waist’ of the house.

In extension of the plan sequence for Thornton there are others, in particular one for Little Carlton, East Sutton, Kent (Fig. 7).19 Here the elements of the Thornton plan are rearranged as a square with the compass, triangular and stepped triangular bay windows bursting out of its strict confines. Little Carlton seems to have been started in accordance with the plan (T171, T172) for Robert Filmer in 1558, but the project was abandoned in 1609, unfinished. An incidental both the Little Carlton and Thornley plans (T68) share is the provision of small mural chambers for garderobes. At Carlton these are housed in turrets shown as additions to the plan, but at Thornton they are constructed inside the ‘butress’ walling at the corners of the house. Garderobes seldom appear in Thorpe’s drawings and are shown as a circle cut into a horizontal platform (on T144 for example). At Carlton a similar arrangement, shown off the inner chamber of the ‘lodge’ next the parlour, has been amended by pushing it out into a turret. The arrangement at Thornton may be seen more clearly because the ground-floor plan survives showing the circular section of the chute added in brick. There is an unfortunate confusion where one garderobe appears to discharge into the corner pier already occupied by a bake-oven in the kitchen beneath.

Thornton and Little Carlton share another feature, the porch entrance to the hall, expressed in different geometry. Thornton has a vesica plan (rather than a canted square) with added internal porches on either side to enable the area to be used like the screens passage of the ‘medieval’ plan. Palladio’s Villa Valmarana plan has rectangular compartments with staircases here, an element shared with Perret’s Protestant Temple arrangement.

One minor matter is left over, the sum on the lower margin of T68 which reads ‘80 – 31 = 49’. If this is translated into a foot measurement of the building on T67, then 80 feet is the combined width of the main stair, great parlour, and inner parlour. The 31 feet represent the dimension of the longer stair and lobby axis from the outer wall-face to the inner wall-face against the parlour. The subtraction gives 49 feet, the width of the parlour and inner parlour. The calculation was probably part of those necessary when the design was telescoped.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite the former remoteness of Thornton in a county that was itself considered remote in the early 17th century it was still thought suitable as a landed property for a Member of Parliament. In addition it was thought desirable to make an architectural show in what had become a cultural desert. From these conclusions it seems that perhaps some reassessment is needed of the low opinion expressed by contemporary writers of Lincolnshire.

There are secure grounds for accepting John Thorpe’s authorship of the designs. There is, as there was at Dowsby and Bourne, a clear progression of ideas and a sense of development in the Thorpe drawings that rules out any possibility of their being mere surveys. This cannot be extended to all Thorpe’s drawings but many more, as Sir John Sumner has already suggested, may be working drawings rather than inaccurate copies of surveys.

It seems safe to assume that the house was built between 1603 and 1610, with the most likely period for its erection being 1607 to 1610. The house had collapsed into ruin well before 1615. This indicates that the plans were completed in 1603 at the earliest or 1605 at the latest. Thorpe’s development of this plan is thus seen to be contemporary with his drawings for Dowsby (T28), Horkstow (1607-16), and Lord Clancricarde’s house at Somerhill, Kent, a Palladian plan built 1610-13 (T20) (Fig. 8).20

Unfortunately, there seems little likelihood of finding evidence for the fronts of the house. Between completion and collapse there is so little time in which such a record could have been made. It seems improbable that Palladian elements were used or that classical detailing occurred in any but the indiscernible way common to most Elizabethan work. From the scanty evidence of the carved stone plinth it seems equally improbable that the elevations were in the medievalising manner of Smythson’s Little Castle at Bolsover, Derbyshire.

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NOTES

General: The prefix ‘T’ is Sir John Sumner’s identification of the series of John Thorpe’s drawings and is used throughout his work (see note 1). In this paper Sir John’s work is indispensable but, in the light of Thorpe’s apparent method of architectural composition, his classifications (Sumner, 1964-66, pp. 29-30 ‘C’, ‘F’, and ‘H’) are largely ignored because these may be combined by manipulation of the plan elements. Compass points are taken from the survey drawing and have been taken to apply to the Thorpe designs T67, T68, and T69 as well.

Sir Nicolaus Pevsner, The Buildings of England, Lincolnshire, 1978, p. 402, says ‘Thornton Abbey… The site being the only in the area is not less puzzling. The abbey was purchased in 1610 by Sir Vincent Skinner, who, according to De La Pynne, demolished the ‘college’ (probably an almshouse) and built a large house out of the site, on the west side of the abbey plot…’. This house was surveyed by John Thorpe. The plan was spatially ingenious and the house looked an example of Gothic Revival – or Survival. This entry is an improvement on that in the preface (p. 66) where the chapel is mistaken for a stable (DLR).

2 Miscellaneous plans, uncatalogued, Muniment Room, Brocksley Park.
6 Girouard, Robert Smythson, pp. 64-6.
7 Cinzia Maria Sica, II Palladianismo in Inghilterra, in Electa Editrice, Palladio: La sua Ercide ‘Nel mondo, Milano, 1980.
8 Sumner, Architecture of John Thorpe, pp. 65-6.
Fig. 8 T202. John Thorpe, Plan for Lord Clintonarde's house at Somerhill, Kent, possibly 1610 to 1613. The house still exists and corresponds in most respects with the plan. This appears to be a refinement of the 'Palladian' schemes for Thornton which follows a more 'English' arrangement.

9 Alan G. R. Smith, Servant of the Cecils, the Life of Sir Michael Hickes, pp. 154-9.
12 Ibid., p. 12.
13 See note 3 above.
15 Lansdowne MS 92, no. 18, quoted in Summerson, op. cit., p. 65.
18 It was seen in the garden of the present house at Thornton and photographed fifteen years ago (DLR).
19 Summerson, op. cit., T172 and 171, pp. 90-91. N.B. Sir John does not agree that these are garderobes but it is difficult to see what else they could be (DLR).