

Review Article:

Paul Drury, *Hill Hall*

by

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Drury, Paul, with a major contribution by Richard Simpson, *Hill Hall: a singular house devised by a Tudor intellectual*, London: Society of Antiquaries (2009), 2 volumes, 534pp., 378 figs. £55. ISBN 978-0-85431-291-7.

The importance of Hill Hall escaped the RCHM(E) investigators who reported in 1921 on the 'modern' (i.e. post-1714) ornamental work of the courtyard.¹ Pevsner in 1955 challenged this perception, finding that the house 'has not so far found the attention it deserves', recognising the singularity of the 'remarkable motif of attached columns in two superimposed orders all the way round' the courtyard.² Eric Mercer questioned with some vigour Pevsner's dating of the remarkable mural paintings in the house to c. 1570, since this would be a freakishly early date for such a display and 'if placed in the early seventeenth [century] they can be fitted, with some reservations, into a coherent sequence of development'.³ Pevsner, however, seems to have got it about right: Hill Hall is exceptional.

Paul Drury has been involved on and off with Hill Hall since 1981 when he was invited as Director of Chelmsford Archaeological Trust to become responsible for the study and investigation of the house, gutted by fire in 1969 and continuing to deteriorate before being taken into care in 1980 by the Department of the Environment. Excavations in the 1980s, with interim reports, followed, by which time Drury was an Inspector of Historic Buildings with English Heritage. He played no part in the beginnings of the restoration of the courtyard elevations from 1988, but was back a decade later when Wessex Archaeology undertook further evaluation and together with Drury were invited to complete the present report. Wessex, together with English Heritage are co-sponsors of this two-volume, laminated, wipe-clean, boxed set published by the Society of Antiquaries. The breaks in the continuity and consistency of excavation, investigation during repair work and archival compilation have made it 'painfully clear' to Drury 'that there are many questions which it was anticipated would be answered by further and better understanding of the fabric ... that will not now be answered at all'. However, since Paul Drury is the pre-eminent archaeological investigator of buildings of his generation, with an astonishing ability to visualise and reconstruct three-dimensional form from the smallest of physical fragments or archival hints, the reader's opportunity for indulgent regret is small. No one could have made a better job of analysing the architectural evolution of this house.

The focus of the book is firmly upon understanding the physical form of the house built and rebuilt in three phases by Sir Thomas Smith, a 'leading protestant humanist

intellectual' and sometime ambassador to the French court. In 1557-8 he replaced an earlier medieval house, possibly a hunting lodge, with a new one in brick and timber-framing on a courtyard plan. In 1568-9 he rebuilt the north and west ranges 'more solidly and splendidly' in brick, and the south and east ranges in 1574-5. The addition of a service range was in progress when he died in 1577. Later works included the reconstruction of the east range, creating a new baroque main front with a giant order, c. 1714; the addition of corridors in the north and west ranges as part of a general modernisation in 1789-1815; the rebuilding of the west front in 1844 and the damaging remodelling by Blomfield, more inclined to a William and Mary than Elizabethan style, from 1909, for Charles and Mary Hunter who first leased and then bought the house in 1923 from the last of the Smiths to be connected with it. The Hunters' money came from coal, Charles making a fortune which his wife, a leading society hostess, 'made it her business to spend'. Charles died in 1917 and Mary, impoverished, was forced to sell in 1925. Requisitioned during the Second World War and used first as a maternity home and then an RAF officers' billet, from 1952 it was home to a women's open prison until the 1969 fire left it in ruins. Now, restored, it comprises eight apartments, with another nine in the service courtyards: 'the design ingeniously managed to fit the apartments into the existing envelope with a minimal impact on the fabric' – a process which of course was helped by the loss of fabric which already had taken place. The architect for this ingenious phase unfortunately is not named. In fact this is a house which did not trouble Colvin at all,⁴ the only significant mention of an architect in its entire history being the post-*Biographical Dictionary* Blomfield who does not come out too well. Sir Thomas Smith seems to have been his own architect, drawing on his period in the circle of Protector Somerset, on his direct experience of French architecture, which included accompanying the court on a tour of the provinces (here helpfully mapped), on his five copies of Vitruvius, and collaborating with Richard Kirby, the carpenter, whom he appointed 'cheefe Archितe overseer and M[aste]r of my works for the p[er]fecting of my howse according to the plott...'.

Although largely written by Paul Drury, *Hill Hall* is a collaborative venture with many contributions by others, generously acknowledged, most notably Richard Simpson who has contributed a substantial chapter on the wall paintings and the painted tiles and glass. There are also sections on window glass, objects relating to daily life (pottery, lockplate and keys), environmental and scientific studies (animal bone, marine shell, plant microfossils and molluscs, tree-ring and ICP-AES ceramic analysis, pigment residues) and the restoration of the house and the paintings. Particular credit is due to Linda Coleman for the outstanding series of fold-out phase plans (in the ring-bound illustration volume which supplements the main text), and the reconstruction drawings of the outer and courtyard elevations. The placing together of these drawings is particularly helpful, contrasting with the division of the investigation, analysis and discussion of the phases of the house into seventeen 'period' sections which betrays the fact that this is really an enormous and rich archaeological report rather than an art-historical monograph on the house.

This is a volume which shows its working out in the accepted manner of archaeological endeavour, so that the process – of intervention and recording – often appears to be as important to those involved as any conclusions which may be drawn, and the various

types of evidence and investigation appear to be given equal weight. It is to the credit of the author of *Hill Hall* that he does not lose sight of the need for interpretations and conclusions, however difficult: for example, 'the resulting reconstruction might seem to be stretching interpretation to its limits, but equally, to show a skeletal elevation devoid of windows would be more misleading. It should be taken as expressing the likely general form of the elevation, within a framework of horizontal and vertical divisions which is not in doubt'. This is helpful and judicious; elsewhere we are cautioned: 'absence of evidence is not evidence of (original) absence'. But notwithstanding the elegancies of formulation, and the regular appearance of 'overviews', in which the significant points of the investigative process are made clear, the arrangement by periods (1.1.1 to 3.8) is irritating for those who prefer dates and makes this a difficult book to read. The reader with a short attention span, or pressed for time, would be well advised to go first to the half-page summary (which stops at 1923), usefully provided in French and German as well as English, and then straight to pages 247-282 for an overview and conclusions on Smith and his houses. There his career, his buildings and his French sources are explored, and the wider context of courtier houses is considered: this was 'among the most exceptional and personal, although not one of the largest, houses of its time'. Smith was in France on three occasions between 1562 and 1572, his longest stay, as ambassador, being from September 1562 until April 1566, during which time he travelled extensively throughout the country, staying in the houses of the great and taking due note of antiquities. He was, in the words of the title, 'a Tudor intellectual', seeming for Drury 'to have seen himself first and foremost as a scholar throughout his life. Intellect and reason could be bent to the service of politics and self-advancement, but only so far. He seems not to have doubted the rightness of his conclusions, even if everyone else did; a man of integrity certainly, but vulnerable to adventures which common sense rather than scholarly analysis might have avoided'. He applied himself to practical matters, not only architecture, buying a set of mathematical instruments and making drawings, but also gardening and chemistry, distilling potions and being conned into funding a scheme to produce copper by boiling iron in sulphuric acid. He wrote an account of English institutions and the legal system, and also 'the most impressive piece of economic analysis produced in the 16th century'. His approach to building led to problems for later owners of Hill Hall, for not only was he building in a period of transition and development in which buildings came and went with rapid, often not durable, piecemeal alterations and replacement, but he was himself given to an experimental approach to construction which resulted in structural weaknesses, notably in the roofs.

Following his return from his long embassy in France, Smith embarked on the rebuilding of the house which he had completed only ten years before. The new north and west ranges were conservative in plan, the intention being to create a continuous suite of first floor rooms to accommodate a sequence of wall paintings of Cupid and Psyche. The asymmetry of the north courtyard elevation is shown here to be a function of the creation of rooms to display the paintings: the architectural composition is sublimated to the demands of the interior. The orders are derived from Hans Blum but their superimposition is based on French examples. Also French is the designing from inside to out which was an expedient compromise rather than clumsy. As Monique Chatenet demonstrated in

an essay in this journal in 1999, there was a regular use of blind windows and variations in the rhythm of windows in 16th-century France, in order to accommodate the cross walls whose position was governed by the highly regularised placing of the bed, leading to symmetrical facades being applied independently of the internal layout.⁵ As certain of the houses published by Du Cerceau show, however, symmetry was not always possible and 'when nothing worked out, one dispensed with symmetry'. So too did Smith at Hill Hall. In the new south and east ranges, away from the demands of paintings, Smith achieved a symmetry which for Drury suggests a 'much more accomplished architectural design', enabled in part by the shift to incorporating the fireplaces within the cross walls rather than projecting. The south and east courtyard facades both have three storey frontispieces with superimposed orders, and on the outer fronts of these ranges, the innovative use of the giant order suggests that Smith was paying attention to more than politics and the pursuit of peace when visiting Anne, duc de Montmorency, Constable of France, at Ecouen, a house known also through publication by Du Cerceau. Betrayed perhaps by a slightly too early dating for Hill Hall, Pevsner's nerve deserted him on the



Fig. 1

Hill Hall, the paintings of the story of Cupid and Psyche; main scene (left), the departure of Psyche's sisters.

Photograph, Tobit Curteis and Associates

employment of the giant order, Ecouen being 'not early enough to make influence on England at all probable', so he concluded that here we have not the experimental and innovative Smith but 'a very rustic echo from Wren'.⁶

Inside the house the ambitious sequence of Cupid and Psyche paintings, imitating tapestries and covering the full height of the walls with almost life-size figures and *trompe l'oeil* (Fig. 1) provides a further echo from Ecouen. There, this allegory of the human and the divine, the soul and love, was depicted in painted glass, based on the same series of thirty-two engravings by Michiel Coxcie as Smith was to follow for the paintings on lime plaster at Hill Hall by an unknown artist. This triumph of love over adversity was a popular theme in the houses of the European great – Raphael in the loggia of Agostino Chigi's villa (later the Farnesina) in Rome and Giulio Romano at the Gonzaga villa, the Palazzo Te, Mantua, providing the most celebrated 16th-century depictions.⁷ The paintings at Hill Hall, analysed in great detail here by Richard Simpson, are datable to 1568-9, only two years after the publication of William Adlington's translation into English of *The Golden Asse of Lucius Apuleius*, which includes 'The Marriage of Cupid and Psyche'. Smith therefore was early, rather than unique, in England to celebrate a narrative which grew in significance over the next half century, finding particular favour at the Caroline court. The court dramatist, Shackerley Marmion, published a poem on the subject in 1637, with a second edition in the following year – *Cupid and Psyche; or an Epic Poem of Cupid and his Mistress* – and Jacob Jordaens was commissioned in 1639 to produce twenty-two paintings on the theme for the Queen's House, Greenwich – eight were installed (now lost). Four of the Cupid and Psyche paintings at Hill Hall survive and two more were dismantled in 1937 – fragments survive in the Victoria & Albert Museum. The rest have been lost through changes in decorative taste and structural alterations to the house (including the corridors inserted upon the advice of Repton who was here advising on the park in 1791), as well as through the devastating fire.

At Fontainebleau in 1563-4, Smith would have seen the integration of the 'latest architectural and decorative achievements of an international style' and at Ecouen during the same period would have seen the mixture of classical and Biblical stories derived from prints. At Hill Hall, in addition to Cupid and Psyche, he commissioned a sequence of paintings of Hezekiah, King of Judah (Fig. 2), whose radical religious reforms had a particular resonance for one who had been directly engaged in the Protestant reforms of 1548-9 which introduced a standard form of worship and established the first English language prayer book. Four panels survive, based on the woodcuts known to Smith in *La Sainte Bible*, 1554. Simpson provides an exemplary reconstruction and analysis of this *exemplum*. He then goes on to discuss the extraordinary ensemble of painted tiles and glass. In a thrilling piece of detective work he shows that a surviving fragment of tile with billowing drapery, an arm and sceptre, is identifiable as a fragment of *Magnanimity* as engraved by Cornelis Cort in 1560 (digital reconstruction makes the point), but not necessarily *after* Cort – tiler and engraver could have had a common Antwerp source (this is careful history). This surviving fragment offers a hint to the possibility that *Magnanimity* was one of a group of eight personified virtues, balancing the sequence of deadly sins on painted glass, two of which survive. Simpson's analysis and reconstruction entirely justify his conclusions on the exceptional qualities of the house: 'the more consistent



Fig. 2

Hill Hall, the paintings of the life of King Hezekiah; King Hezekiah about to open the doors of the temple in Jerusalem (detail)

Photograph, Tobit Curteis and Associates

with contemporary continental practice, the more exceptional Smith's house appears in terms of its English context'. Eric Mercer was right to recognise the 'freakish' quality of this ensemble for this time, 'outside of the normal sequence of development'. The whole decorative ensemble was perhaps intended as part of a state suite for Queen Elizabeth I, whose visit was anticipated in 1570, but in the event she did not arrive: 'hir Majesty meneth not to make hir progress into Essex'.

The final chapter of the book deals with the restoration of the house (Nick Hill) and the conservation of the wall paintings (Tobit Curteis). This was a lengthy saga, extending over thirty years, beginning with post-fire salvage and elementary consolidation and continuing with changes in sponsors, funding, philosophy and purpose. It could have provided an ideal opportunity to discuss with some detachment the evolution of ideas

about the conservation, restoration and reconstruction of historic buildings over this period. However, Nick Hill is principally concerned with the works of 1993-98 which ended with the house divided into private apartments. He considers levels of restoration, ownership and function in his conclusion, noting the developing 'process of defining the qualities and features which are of greatest significance to a historic building', but in basing his text on a journal article published in 1998,⁸ his story is primarily the blow-by-blow account of a closely engaged participant rather than fully reflective, and I wonder how far it might have been better informed by taking into account *Conservation Principles Policies and Guidance* by Paul Drury and Anna McPherson (English Heritage, 2008). Even if this was published too late to inform *Hill Hall*, the ideas which it embodies have been developed over a long period and, given the identity of the author, we might expect the example of Hill Hall to have influenced the *Principles*. It is indeed in Drury's conclusion sixty pages earlier that we are told that the now secure house 'has been spared the blight of "enabling development" that has crowded out the setting of so many similar houses'.

As it is, we learn a lot from Nick Hill about the process of contracting, and sub-contracting, the excitements of architectural discoveries, the finding of evidence, the making of bricks and much more, with the deployment of many enthusiastic exclamation marks: 'Here was a challenge for replication indeed!' Full credit is given to named craftsmen and contractors, with the exception of the hapless steelwork subcontractor who, notwithstanding the fact that the issue had been 'flagged in the contract preliminaries', 'struggled with the concept of non-uniform steelwork' when required to fit the roof trusses to the building rather than the building to the trusses. Significance dictated that the restoration should lay emphasis on the parts of the Smith house for which there was good evidence for their appearance – the courtyard elevations and the south front. On the north and west elevations, 'where Smith's work was less fine and evidence not so clear', the later appearance, including the 19th-century Roman cement, has been retained. The east front, which from the photographs appears to have survived the fire quite well, remains Baroque. The reader would have gained a better understanding of the decision making and results of this commendable and extensive restoration described by Hill if someone had thought to include new photographs. This seems to be a very well illustrated book, but of the eight fronts, external and courtyard, only two – the two sides of the south range – together with an oblique aerial view of the east front, are shown. In view of the importance of the house, the significance of the restoration and the great care and attention which has been given to collecting archive illustrations and preparing reconstruction drawings, this is an extraordinary and damaging omission.

In discussing the conservation of the wall paintings, Curteis describes and illustrates earlier interventions (Ministry of Works men in suits, with brushes, 1951); considers the paintings' condition before their recent treatment and describes the process of analysis and conservation: 'Bird droppings were removed using water or IMS/acetone'. This section is one for the specialists. The end, of both chapter and book, comes quietly and bathetically with 'Future preventative conservation' (of the paintings), which seems to amount to making sure that the roof and rainwater disposal system are well maintained: 'serious and extremely costly short-term damage is more likely to occur from negligence in this area than from any other source'.

As noted above, and as acknowledged by its principal author, *Hill Hall* is a 'report'. It has the command of detail of the best reports and in its scattered 'overviews' and 'conclusions' it aspires to arrive at the condition of being a book which would justify its status as a handsome boxed-set. It is a tribute to the close observation and keen analytical intelligences of Paul Drury and Richard Simpson that the ostensible subject, Sir Thomas Smith and Hill Hall, and the wider issues relating particularly to Elizabethan international culture, are so very well illuminated. This is a model of what can be achieved through very detailed analytical recording and careful, time-consuming research, both carried out over several years in this case. However, the problem of dividing the subject according to architecture, paintings, and artefacts, and then further dividing these into a large number of periods, is that it is very difficult to gain an overall view on specific issues: there are mini-syntheses but no overall synthesis. One example of this will suffice: the corridors are discussed by Drury under Period 3.4 (p.310); Simpson tells us that 'later changes in the layout of the internal plan destroyed some material' (p.180), a subject to which Curteis returns at the end (p.405), but there does not appear to be a discussion of the impact of the corridors on the painted decoration. Could a greater synthesis and more coherent text, discussing such cross-over matters, have been achieved? Should all this material have been published at all, or would it have been better to produce a readable text and either archive the rest or make it available on-line for the obsessively committed searcher? Could the two authors now step back from the detail and produce a short, well-illustrated summary volume which lays emphasis on the significant? That would be a conclusion devoutly to be wished. More importantly in the current scare-mongering, economic situation, with its intellectually and socially destructive outcomes, when will such a spasmodically brilliant and exceptional endeavour as this report again be believed to be affordable?

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NOTES

- 1 Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (England), *Essex*, II (London 1921), 235-6.
- 2 N. Pevsner, 'Hill Hall', *Architectural Review*, 117 (May 1955), 807-09; see also N. Pevsner, *Essex*, Buildings of England (Harmondsworth 1954).
- 3 E. Mercer, *English Art 1553-1625* (Oxford 1962), 136.
- 4 H. M. Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects 1600-1840* (3rd edn, New Haven and London, 1995), in which the only mention of Hill Hall concerns one of Humphry Repton's 'Red Books'.
- 5 M. Chatenet, 'Cherchez le lit: the place of the bed in sixteenth-century French residences', *TAMS* 43 (1999), 7-24.
- 6 Pevsner, 'Hill Hall' (1955), op.cit.
- 7 Both of these sequences and the Ecoen glass, now in Chantilly, are described and illustrated in S. Cavicchioli, *The Tale of Cupid and Psyche* (New York 2002).
- 8 N. Hill, 'Hill Hall, Essex: the post-fire restoration', *Transactions of the Association for Studies in the Conservation of Historic Buildings*, 23 (1998), 29-49.