

THE LOSS OF OUR PANELLED ROOMS

By R. W. Symonds, F.S.A.

IN his essay entitled "Blakesmoor in H——shire," Charles Lamb describes how, while journeying northward, he could not resist going some miles out of his way to see an old house which had impressed him as a child. But "I was apprised that the owner of it had lately pulled it down. . . . I was astonished at the indistinction of everything. Where had stood the great gates? What bounded the courtyard? Whereabout did the out-houses commence? A few bricks only lay as representatives of that which was so stately and so spacious."

Lamb goes on to describe how he would have suffered had he witnessed the actual demolition. ". . . at the plucking of every panel I should have felt the varlets at my heart. I should have cried out to them to spare a plank at least out of the cheerful store-room, in whose hot window-seat I used to sit and read Cowley . . ."

Our Victorian grandparents and great-grandparents did not like the look of plain things. A plain painted panelled room, for example, was anathema to them; and they quickly canvassed it over and applied highly patterned wallpaper.

It follows that the merit of old panelling was not appreciated in the nineteenth century: when renovations were taking place, it was ruthlessly wrenched out and used for firewood, or for a partition in a stable or pigsty. But even in those benighted times, it was realised that a richly carved oak chimney-piece should not be used wantonly, for it could be sold to the dealers in Wardour Street.

The Wardour Street dealers, who were the first "antique dealers," collected carved fragments, both English and foreign, in order to build them into sideboards, buffets and cupboards, for such ornate pieces of furniture were saleable.

In the 1880s and '90s, when the collecting of oak furniture was becoming fashionable, and an oak-panelled room was thought the best setting for it, old oak panelling began, slowly, to be appreciated: dealers began to buy it and owners became conscious of its worth. And when, during the decade before the first world war, American

collectors came into the market for old English panelling as well as for old English furniture, dealers started to offer high prices for the best panelled rooms. Thus the owner of the Star Inn, Great Yarmouth, was tempted to sell one of the most outstanding rooms in East Anglia with its fireplace and decorated plaster ceiling complete. It crossed the Atlantic.

After the first world war, the trade with America in panelled rooms became brisk, and deal painted rooms, of which an abundant supply was then at hand, were also shipped across the Atlantic. The deal room came into favour with Americans when it was found that, by stripping off the paint and bleaching and wax polishing the wood, a pleasant grey-brown colour was obtained; although the panels were often disfigured by knots and the carving by the coarse grain of the wood: our eighteenth century ancestors were aware of these defects of soft deal and for this reason they so wisely painted it.

The best quality panelling was made, of course, for the mansions of wealthy people. In such great houses, the rooms were lofty and the panelling, with its cornice, was often 12 to 13 feet high. To fit such a panelled room into a modern house, a London flat or a New York apartment, it has to be reduced by at least 2 to 3 feet. The original proportions of the panelling are therefore destroyed; for the pedestal, the shaft (i.e., the wall), and the entablature, with its frieze and cornice, are not arbitrary measurements but based on the classic orders. One cannot therefore reduce one part without destroying the proportions of the whole. To the dealer who wants to sell the room, this consideration is of little or no moment.

Many outstanding panelled rooms have been ruined in this way. One is reminded of Lamb's sentiments on the obnoxious practice, which was only beginning in his day, of tearing the ornaments out of an ancient house and fixing them into a modern one: ". . . and all its old ornaments, stripped and carried away to the owner's other house, where they were set up, and looked as awkward as if someone were to carry away the old tombs they had seen lately at the Abbey, and stick them up in Lady C's tawdry gilt drawing-room."

Panelled rooms which are bought by English or American museums are not, of course, mutilated in this way; for then the room is built to suit the panelling and the panelling is not cut to fit the room.

What was said to be the finest deal panelled room in Ireland—it dated from the second quarter of the eighteenth century and came from a house called Rossanagh—was sold in 1928 to a wealthy

American who wished to present it to Yale University. This room was quite outstanding, but being of Irish design, it had, compared with an English room, an unusual architectural character. The chimney-piece was richly carved and the overmantel decorated with swags of flowers in the manner of the school of Grinling Gibbons. It had a beautifully proportioned Venetian window with Corinthian columns and finely carved caps. Unfortunately the American owner died and instead of the room going to Yale, where it would have been properly exhibited, it was sold to a New York film company who scrapped the rich plaster ceiling and used the panelling for their board-room.

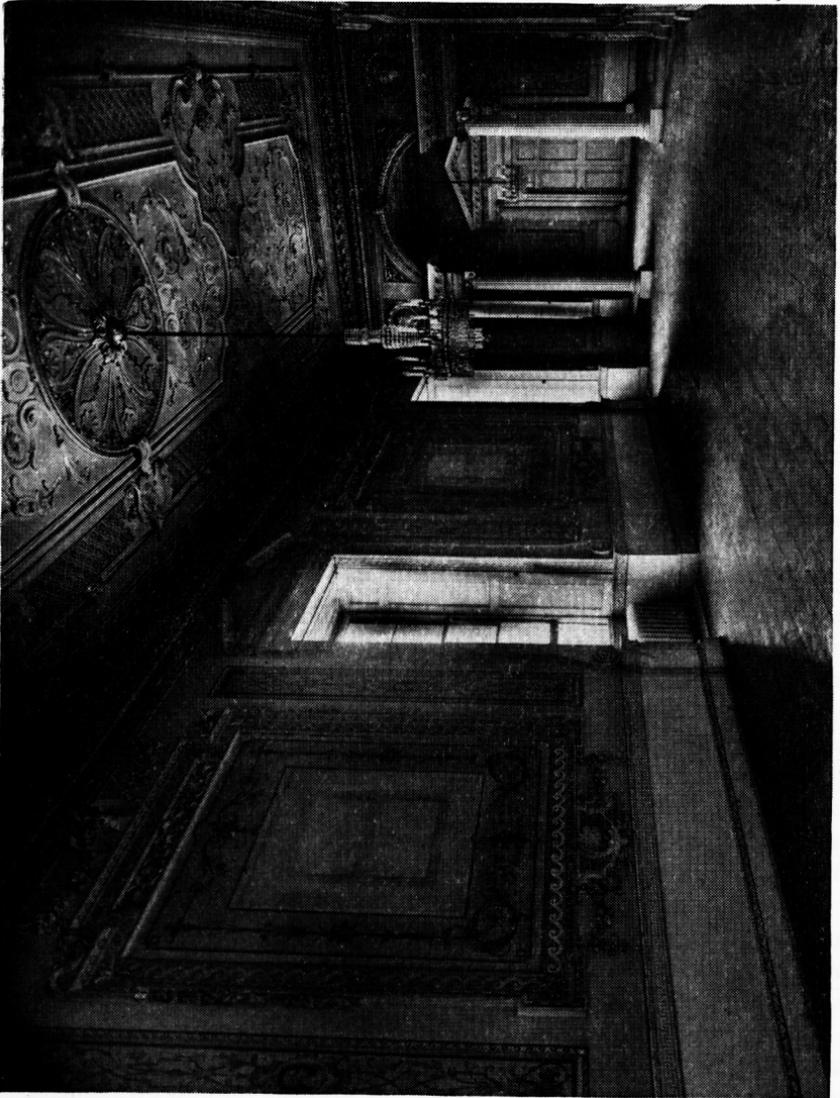
One of the most outstanding Elizabethan panelled rooms in the country is the Great Chamber, Gilling Castle, Yorkshire, built by Sir William Fairfax in 1585. The panelling is of unusual design for it is formed of a series of rectangular panels, each of which is contained in a frame carved with a bold egg and tongue moulding. Inside each panel is a framework which divides it into four corner spaces with a diamond in the centre. The oak of which the panelling is made is of fine quality quarter-cut wainscot (i.e., imported oak from the Baltic), inlaid with sprigs of flowers in the four corner panels, and with a geometrical pattern in the diamond, all of lighter toned woods. The design of the panel and the type of the inlay suggest North Country work, for it is not the work that one associates with London craftsmen.

The most decorative feature of the room is a deep painted frieze which surmounts the panelling; it depicts trees upon which are hung the escutcheons of all the Yorkshire families who were entitled to bear arms, including the Royal Arms of Elizabeth I in the uppermost panel of the chimney-piece, so that the Queen is among her Yorkshire gentry.

To complete the effect of this colourful frieze and the carved and inlaid rich oak panelling, the sun shines through stained glass windows which display the heraldry and genealogy of the Fairfax family.

Sometime in the 1920s, all this panelling, painting, stained glass and plaster work was removed from its original site, and packed up in cases for export to America; for it had been bought by William Randolph Hearst, the newspaper proprietor and art collector. But for some reason the order to send it across the Atlantic never came, and for over twenty years it lay in its packing cases. Then Hearst died and it was put up for sale.

This time it was bought by a firm of antique dealers who most



The Long Gallery at Gilling Castle with 18th century deal painted panelling

generously offered it to Ampleforth College, the present owners of Gilling Castle, at a price below that which they could have obtained elsewhere. So, by a stroke of good luck, or, rather, by several strokes of good luck, this unique panelling returned to the only setting worthy of it.

There was, however, no such happy ending over the sale of the panelling in the Long Gallery at Gilling Castle, which occurred at the same time as the sale of the panelling of the Great Chamber.

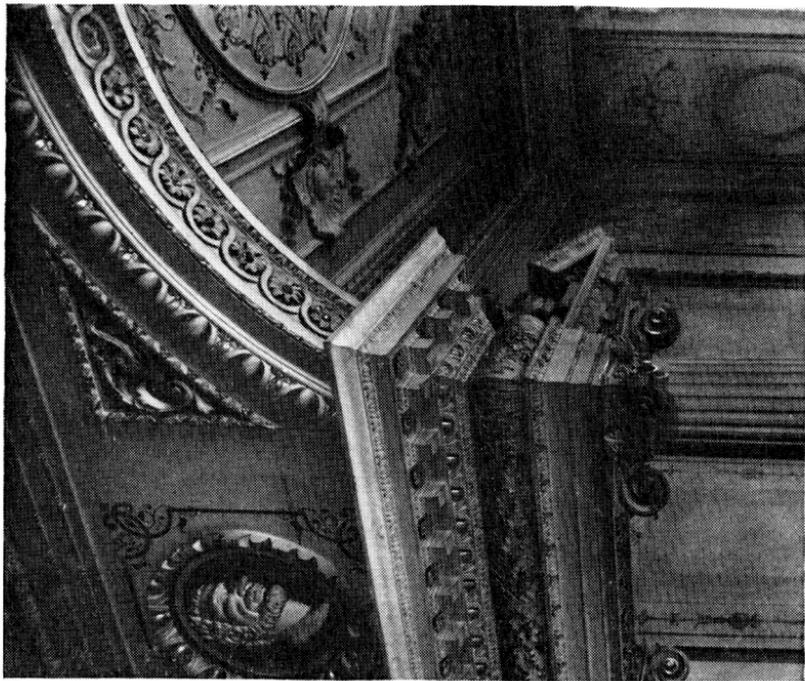
The panelling of the Long Gallery was designed by William Wakefield, an architect who designed a number of alterations at Gilling in the eighteenth century. Fortunately, Wakefield did not sweep away the beautiful panelling in the Great Chamber, but he fitted up the Long Gallery (which originally must have had Elizabethan wainscot, like the Great Chamber) with deal painted panelling of early Georgian classical design. As can be seen from the illustrations (which were taken when the house was about to be sold), Wakefield ran into difficulties with the design for he was endeavouring to put a classical treatment into a 90-foot long gallery built two centuries earlier, the proportions of which did not agree with the classical proportions of the eighteenth century. In other words, the gallery was too low and consequently the arches above the two screens at either end were segmental instead of semi-circular as they should have been.

The execution of the panelling, with its crisp carving, shows the best quality work of the eighteenth century joiner and carver. The plaster ceiling is in the contemporary French rococo style and therefore not in complete harmony with the classical treatment of the panelling. Unfortunately the plain panels were marred in 1846 by arabesque decoration being painted on them. Such work was entirely unnecessary and completely out of keeping with the architectural character of the room; it is another example of the Victorian dislike of plain surfaces—every square inch had to be filled with pattern.

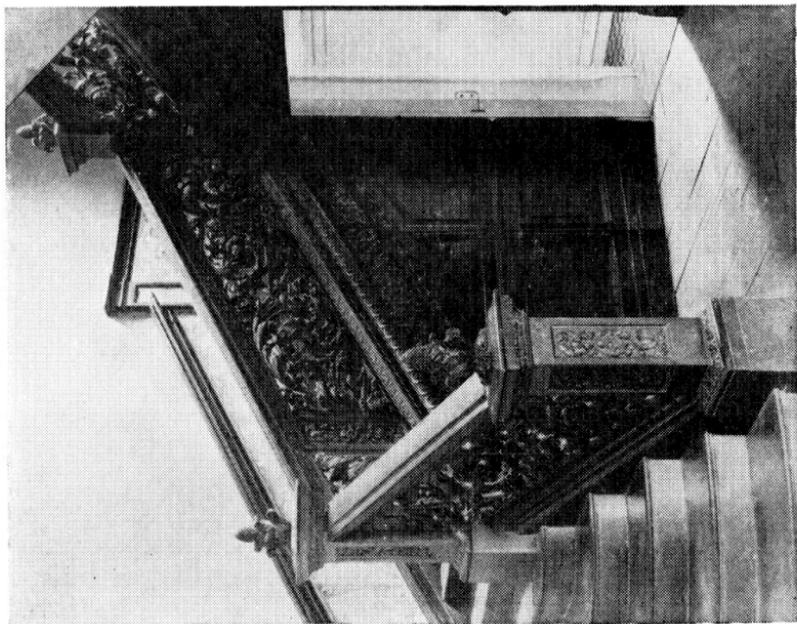
The panelling of the Long Gallery is now on the other side of the Atlantic and has, most probably, been broken up to do service for several rooms.

Another far more regrettable loss to the country occurred in the early 1920s when Cassiobury, the seat of the Earl of Essex, came into the housebreaker's hands; and its superlative panelling, chimney-pieces and staircase, enriched with Grinling Gibbons' carving, were put up to auction. Evelyn visited Cassiobury on April 18th, 1680:

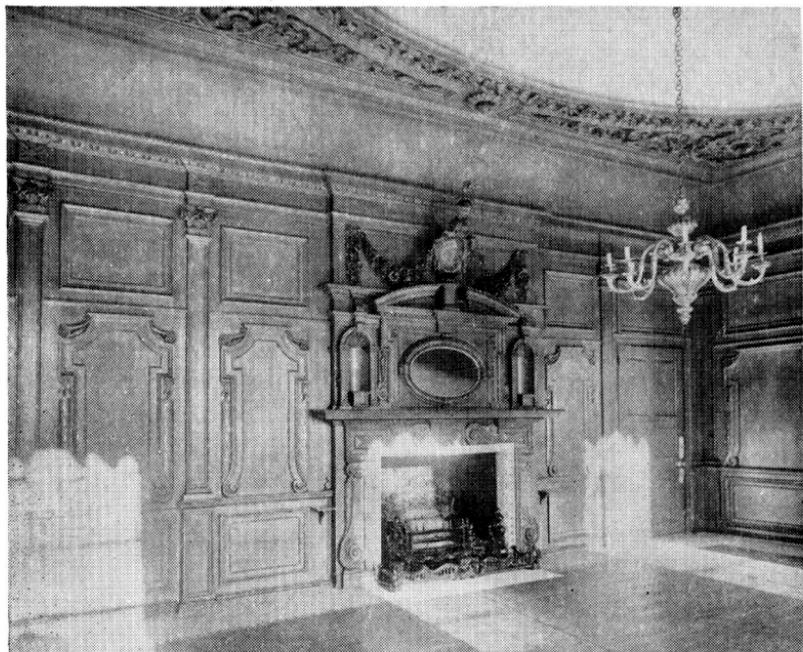
“On the earnest invitation of the Earl of Essex, I went with him



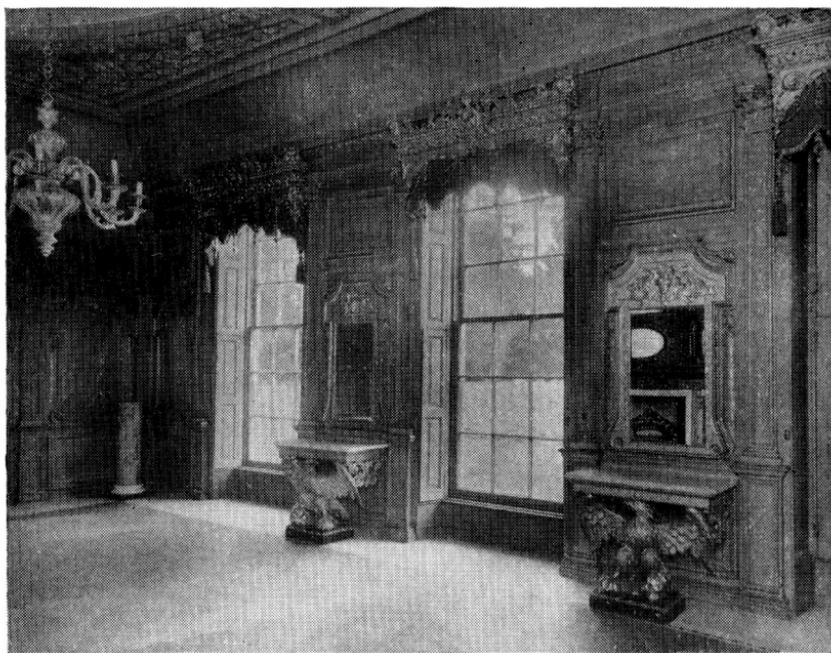
Detail of woodwork in Long Gallery, showing the high quality of the carving



Staircase with carved panels instead of bannisters, at Cassiobury



Early paneled room in the classical style, mid-17th century. The candle branch is of gilt gesso of late 17th century date.



Another view of the room, fig 5 showing Georgian eagle pier tables and glasses, also Victorian gilt window cornices.

to his house at Cassiobury, in Hertfordshire. It was on Sunday, but going early from his house in the square of St. James, we arrived by ten o'clock; this he thought too late to go to church, and we had prayers in his chapel. The house is new, a plain fabric, built by my friend, Mr. Hugh May. There are divers fair and good rooms, and excellent carving by Gibbons, especially the chimney-piece of the library. There is in the porch, or entrance, a painting by Verrio of Apollo and the Liberal Arts. One room pargetted with yew, which I liked well. Some of the chimney mantels are of Irish marble, brought by my Lord from Ireland, when he was Lord Lieutenant, and not much inferior to Italian. . . . The library is large, and very nobly furnished, and all the books are richly bound and gilded . . .

"No man has been more industrious than this noble Lord in planting about his seat, adorned with walks, ponds, and other rural elegancies; but the soil is stony, churlish, and uneven . . ."

The beautiful staircase, up which Evelyn walked, is illustrated on page 60.

As far as the present writer knows, all the fittings of this lovely house realised comparatively small sums at the auction, but afterwards, through the channels of the antique trade they found their way to America for very large sums. Unfortunately the whereabouts of the library chimney-piece and the staircase are unknown.

The sad story of the panelled rooms of our old mansions, can be concluded by a description of the "Great Chamber" or drawing-room, in an old house that lay in the hollow on the north side of the Hog's Back. It is made of wainscot oak and dates from the middle years of the seventeenth century. This rare and interesting type of panelling shows the beginning of the Italian influence which was introduced into England by Inigo Jones. Total disregard for the proportions of the classical orders is a feature of this early type of pre-Restoration panelling. The ceiling, with its deep cove and enriched plaster panel is original. In the centre of the ceiling hangs a rare candle branch of gilt and burnished gesso work: it dates from the late seventeenth century. Very few branches of this early date have been preserved outside the Royal Palaces. The pair of eagle pier tables, which stand against the pier wall between the windows, with their attendant looking-glasses, specially designed to fit the wall panels, date from about 1730-40. This panelled room, the branch and the tables are now in America. The coved ceiling, upon which the proportions of the room depended, was overlooked, and left behind.

Lamenting the loss of such old panelled rooms is crying over

spilt milk. Unfortunately the law to prevent the export of works of art of national importance was passed too late; but the smaller number of beautiful panelled rooms which now remain are secure.



The Great Chamber, Gilling Castle, with its beautiful Elizabethan oak panelling and painted frieze.