

Review Article

Andrew Saint on Mark Girouard

If you had to name two of the most distinguished architectural historians of the present generation, any list would include Andrew Saint, former Professor of Architecture at Cambridge and now Editor of the Survey of London, and Mark Girouard. It is therefore a great privilege for the AMS to be able to publish this extended review where one considers the most recent work of the other which revisits the topic which Girouard, alongside that of the English (and French) country house, has made his own.

**Mark Girouard, *Elizabethan Architecture*.
Yale University Press, 2009.
ISBN 978-0-300-09386-5.**

This sumptuous volume was produced near Florence, centre of colour-printing as well as Renaissance art. Its editor and designer – this reviewer must declare friendship with her by way of interest – told me how strange it felt to watch images of rampant gables, diamond-paned windows and curlicued chimneypieces roll off the press not far from Giotto's tower, the Uffizi and the Ponte Vecchio. Her disquiet was understandable. Endearing though Elizabethan architecture may look to English eyes, farther afield it rates as eccentric and marginal. How different the international fate of Elizabethan literature, thanks to one writer of genius.

If any book is capable of redressing the balance, this is the one. Forty-three years ago Mark Girouard's *Robert Smythson and the Architecture of the Elizabethan Era* introduced the most elegant writer on British architecture now living. Girouard is the last true exponent of what might be called the *Country Life* school of architectural writing – a blend of scholarship with up-market subject matter and the popular touch. His range extends well beyond country houses; he produced, for instance, much the most engaging study of Victorian pubs, too long out of print. But at the back of his mind has always been the great, the prodigious, the mysterious Elizabethan house. He has returned to it at last in this formidable book, which may fairly be regarded as his swansong.

Hardwick Hall graces the dustjacket of *Elizabethan Architecture* as it did *Robert Smythson*, and with good reason. Exploring the chilly, musty spaces of Hardwick first gave Girouard the boy a passion for architecture, years before the great mansion had passed to the National Trust or before he could get a measure of its astonishing qualities. For Hardwick is the touchstone. Enthroned atop a Derbyshire hill, its six glittering towers and tier upon graded tier of windows lour upon the landscape in austere and exquisite arrogance. Here surely is a masterpiece of the boldest, highest ambition. Nothing between King's College Chapel and Blenheim Palace is comparable. Abroad, what are its peers? Chambord perhaps, rather earlier, or Vignola's Caprarola. Nothing in Palladio, whose timid pedantries were to blight the English country house for centuries to come, has the guts or blazing originality of Hardwick. Remember that it rose in the years that brought *Richard II*, *Julius Caesar* and *The Faerie Queene* to birth, and was commissioned by the second lady of the realm, the redoubtable Bess of Hardwick, Countess of Shrewsbury, and you

Andrew Saint is General Editor of the Survey of London and former Professor of Architecture at Cambridge. His latest work is the biography of Richard Norman Shaw, a vastly expanded new edition of the work first published in 1976

have a grip on its creative context. It is of Hardwick that Girouard must be thinking when he makes almost his only European claim: 'The power of creating a compact and memorable entity is found in Elizabethan art of all kinds, not just in buildings; it was done better in England than anywhere else in Europe.'¹ That we should cower before the monuments of Florence becomes something to explain then, not assume.

Hardwick recurs constantly in *Elizabethan Architecture*, and with unstinting admiration. But Girouard is far from admiring everything from his period, or from presenting a mere series of setpieces on his favourite, familiar houses – Longleat, Burghley, Wollaton and Hardwick. His purpose is bigger: to pick apart the whole intricate texture of Elizabethan and Jacobean building, churches, tombs, colleges and inns of court as well as houses, inside and out. He then brings a lifetime's experience to bear in order to make as much sense as is possible of a culture for which documentation is scanty, leading figures are shadowy, and more than half the major monuments have been destroyed or overlaid. The wonder is that so much does survive. In the course of the book even specialist readers will meet scores of buildings utterly unknown to them.

A memorable introduction approaches the task crabwise. Tentatively, defensively almost, Girouard invites us to find the Elizabethans and their great buildings distant, artificial, aloof, introverted and unlovable. Lytton Strachey provides the epigraph: 'the creatures in [the Elizabethan world] meet us without intimacy; they are exterior visions, which we know, but do not truly understand.'² Girouard sees the age as knotted: torn between currents of liberation and repression, Platonic idealism and base pragmatism, shot through with anxiety, awareness of mortality and creative melancholy.

Much of this reading comes of course from literature and music, which are drawn on deftly as the book proceeds. But though Polonius is quoted at the outset, Girouard turns his back on Shakespeare, perhaps for fear of being overwhelmed. For Shakespeare and his poetic contemporaries, however opaque they may seem, are a hundred times more available and clearly motivated than the architects and craftsmen with whose creations Girouard grapples. Seldom do we even know what their clients were trying to achieve. In so far as their houses speak to us, they offer an abstruse series of devices, mottoes, statues and allegorical chimneypieces. The introduction is illustrated with fetching figures of Fortune and Destiny from Little Moreton Hall: 'The Wheele of Fortune Whose Rule is Ignoraunce', and 'The Speare of Destinye Whose Ruler is Knowledge'.³ Often we can go little further.

Did Elizabethan originality in architecture differ from the other arts? Girouard seems hesitant about that at the outset, preferring to let the picture emerge. Some groping towards newness there surely was: 'It was the discoveries of Copernicus that gave a sense of liberation, by lifting Earth up to join the planets, but these were scarcely available in Elizabethan England'.⁴ There were certainly continuities; the English Renaissance in architecture was accretive, not revolutionary. To get a grasp of what emerged after 1550, we have to know something about the wilder side of Henry VIII's building mania: Nonsuch Palace, timber-framed, clad with ornamental slates and probably vulgar-looking, or the showy, geometrical forts 'which fell like starfish or grew like sea-flowers around the English coast in the 1540s'.⁵ Then there was the Strand screen of the first Somerset House, built for the overweening Protector-duke of that name in the reign

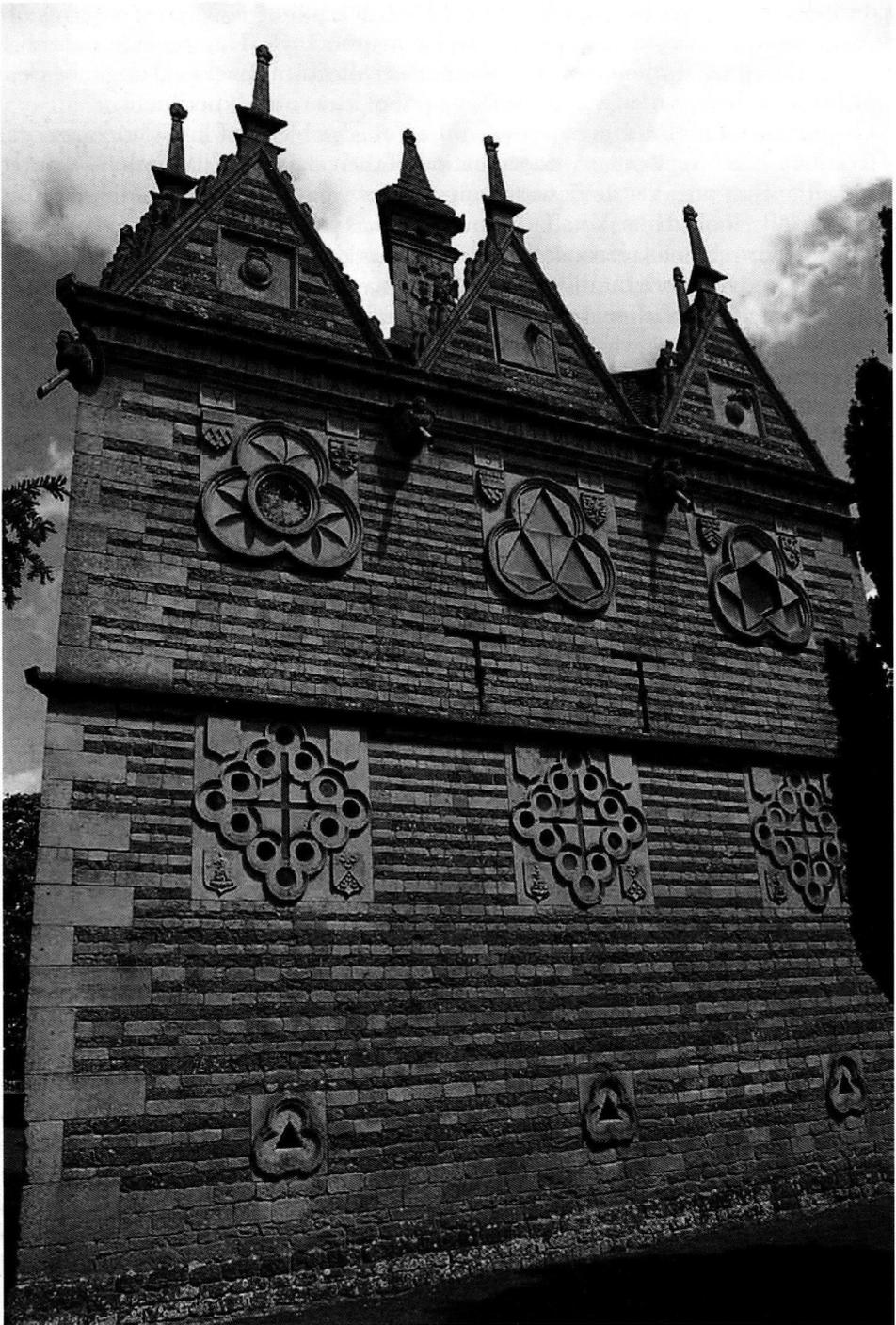
of Edward VI and, says Girouard, the first English building conceived in terms of the classical orders. If even a tithing of the Tudor aristocracy's Thames-side palazzi had survived, many puzzles about how Elizabethan architecture developed might be cleared up, for London then as now was the melting pot of ideas and experiment.

Originality in architecture depends on an elusive blend of knowledge, ignorance and freedom. Like every other western nation of their day, the Elizabethans wanted to build like the Romans. Yet there was scant sense of what a Roman building, a Roman house especially, looked like. You had to make it up as you went along. Few people visited Rome, while for religious reasons those that did and betrayed it in their buildings were suspect. Venice was more familiar, Paris and Antwerp yet more so. Hints were culled from the architecture of all these cities, or brought over by French and Flemish refugees from the wars of religion who trickled into Elizabethan craftsmanship after 1560 and form one strand in Girouard's story.

More helpful still were the books these cities produced. 'Serlio or Vredeman?', the title of one of Girouard's chapters, refers to the main authors plundered by the Elizabethan builders. Sebastiano Serlio is well enough known. His books, published intermittently from 1540 onwards, sorted out the classical orders for readers and presented Rome's main monuments. But the inventiveness and influence of the itinerant Dutchman, Hans Vredeman de Vries, have been overshadowed by the art-historical obsession with Italy. His *Architectura* of 1565, geared to northern building conditions, helped promote the craze for light-loving houses with broad expanses of glazing. Vredeman also brought into fashion the florid decorative patterning which, sometimes to Girouard's disdain, ran riot over Elizabethan and Jacobean surfaces in strapwork, cartouches and 'goitrously swelling silhouettes'.⁶ Yet in origin this restless ornament was as Roman as the orders themselves, as the walls of Pompeii and the Golden House of Nero attest.

Serlio and Vredeman stood to the architecture of the period as Plutarch's lives and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* did, respectively, to its literature. There were other French, Flemish and English source-books, so they did not stand alone. Nor did they stand apart. People cheerfully fused Serlian and Vredemanic motifs into one building. The path of Elizabethan architecture cannot be plotted by the vagaries of style and ornament. Much depended on the customer's fancy. One client might want decoration larded on, as Sir Francis Willoughby did in the Armada years at Wollaton, a 'prodigy house' indeed, with riotous, Vredemanic gables and a queer, inaccessible reception room on top which Girouard can only think refers to Solomon's Temple. But when Willoughby's architect, Robert Smythson, transferred to Hardwick, the result was different: clipped, bare and astringent, topped off only by balustrading and a few flourishes framing Bess of Hardwick's initials and coronet.

Girouard sees the Hardwick decade – the 1590s – as the moment when lurching experiment changes to the magic of high creativity. Once again the parallel with poetry is compelling. After James I's accession in 1603 there are some graceful and even noble creations, but the big houses lose the fire in their belly. Hatfield, built by the second of the great Cecils, Robert, Earl of Salisbury, is a dull thing after his all-powerful father William's exuberant Burghley. But this, it must be added, applies mainly to exteriors. The profuse vitality of interior ornament goes on until it jades palates in the reign of Charles I.



Rushton Triangular Lodge

Why did the Elizabethan grandees build on such a scale? On this the core of Girouard's reading is traditional. Their houses were about regional and dynastic power and the aspiration for jobs, gongs and status. England was safer now, so battlements and outworks could be dispensed with. Buildings could expand and breathe. Gatehouses, of which some splendid specimens are shown, were still *de rigueur*; but the 'castle style', when it was indulged, as by William Cavendish at Bolsover, was a playful, romantic conceit. The Dissolution had unleashed swathes of property. By Elizabeth's time much of it had accrued to new dynasts, some of whom – Sir John Thynne of Longleat, for example – overlaid their self-conscious novelties upon old abbey sites.

Girouard is instructive on 'progresses', and the old chestnut that the great mansions were built to solicit the queen's presence on her summer tours round the country. Evidence for this is mostly indirect, he says. As a tactic for winning privileges it was inefficient. Nor did Elizabeth tour as often as once was thought. When she did, she preferred the gifts and al fresco entertainments to pomp or grandeur. A royal descent was costly and could go wrong: 'At least seven cases are known of owners trying to get out of a visit.'⁷ Rather, Girouard thinks of the progresses as 'an important way of informing the upper classes of what was going on in the country-house world'.⁸ This lapse into a *Country Life* mode of expression is a reminder that the Elizabethan aristocracy did not yet trail across the land on arbitrary visits to bore one another. There being no magazines and few engravings or drawings, court progresses became a means of exchanging ideas about architecture and the crafts.

For every house extroverted in its ambitions, another was a fastness where individualists could work out their obsessions or their faith. Willoughby of Wollaton was a coalmine-owning scholar and paranoiac with, as it seems, no interest in the world beyond his flamboyant walls and his estates. Sir Thomas Tresham, in and out of prison for his Catholicism, emerged to erect two of the quirkiest and most touching of English structures, rife with stubborn, recusant symbolism. These are the miniature triangular lodge at Rushton (see photo) – it can be glimpsed from Midland main line trains – and Lyveden New Bield, marooned unfinished in a field and finely photographed in this volume. Sometimes it is just not clear what the obsession was about. Longford Castle, another building on a cranky triangular plan, is an example. It might be about religion and the Trinity, or it might not.

Girouard is surely right to envisage the grandest and the strangest of Elizabethan houses as plonked down upon, almost at odds with, their settings. That reading does not fit the smaller, sweeter buildings so well, enhanced farmhouses often, integrated into a working landscape and without summerhouses for dalliance or rooftop walks upon the leads. William Morris's Kelmscott Manor is a famous example of the type. The book is strictly about architecture, so Girouard's unwillingness to get sidetracked by estate or farming or even garden history can be forgiven. It is more regrettable that he does not engage with the theory, advanced by Jules Lubbock and others, that the great houses were deliberate exercises in economic patronage – semi-disinterested ways of stimulating the local and the national economy, in an era when encouraging homegrown crafts and trades and limiting imports looked like the best policy for prosperity. The evidence for this has always looked a shade slight. It is a shame that Girouard with his unique knowledge of the Elizabethan building trades declines to pronounce on the issue.

In the end the fabric of the buildings and their makers' identity are the meat and drink of the book. Its joy and its arduousness – not every page makes easy reading – consist in joining its author as he engages with these topics in discriminating detail. Take windows, for instance. The Elizabethan age is the golden age of the mullioned and transomed casement window, before architecture becomes corrupted by the stolidity of the Dutch sash. The casement units can be expanded upwards or sideways, in regimented tiers or eaves-hugging lines. They can break out into oriels or bays, canted or straight (the bay window is a signature motif in English architecture); they can even turn corners, as the modernists rediscovered with delight.

Girouard is brilliant on the window mullions whose mouldings make so subtle a difference to appearances, sometimes changing the mood of a building. At Longleat they are marked by two little grooves which he calls 'tramlines', imparting an objective definition to the façades. At Montacute they are concave and recessive, elsewhere they are confidently convex or 'ovolo'. At their best, the proportions of the window tiers are exquisite. Where the little square leaded divisions or 'comes' survive (too seldom), you can count off the diminutions of the units as they mount – seven, seven, six and five squares at Kirby Hall, much the same at Hardwick, where the comes run diamond-wise. Sometimes the leading branches out into an intricacy of trompe l'oeil patterning, sometimes it is shot through with golden armorial glass.

One purpose of the great 'towers of glass' was to cast light deep into interiors, light such as no medieval house could have dreamed of. The style made houses bright but cold, as Francis Bacon complained: 'one cannot tell where to become, to be out of the Sunne or cold.'⁹ Hardwick was almost uninhabitable in winter. But along with the light came greater opportunity and visibility for internal decoration. 'It is no coincidence that the efflorescence of Elizabethan glazing coincided with an efflorescence of Elizabethan plasterwork', notes Girouard.¹⁰

Who were the men who built these houses – not the customers but those who actually made them? Unearthing these village Hampdens is the ultimate fascination for Girouard, who announces in the foreword that he next intends a biographical dictionary of English architects for the century after 1540. He writes too well to waste himself on the drudgery of dictionary-making in old age, but let that be.

Most of those who flit through these pages are irrecoverable in their obscurity: to find a name twice counts as luck, and to fit one to a building's appearances is to win the lottery. Out of the ruck Girouard picks three for concerted attention. Each tantalizes in a different way. The first is Robert Smythson, main designer of Wollaton and Hardwick and a major contributor to Longleat. Smythson was more or less Girouard's discovery in 1966, and little has emerged about him since. His designs breathe range and authority and flair; he was unquestionably the greatest of the Elizabethan architects. There are even some surviving drawings by him and his son, yet his personality is a complete blank.

More interestingly treated is John Thorpe. A historiography attaches to Thorpe. His album of drawings has been well known since Georgian days and includes many of the most famous Elizabethan houses as well as some theoretical exercises. On its strength almost everything of note used to be attributed to him. Then the professional scholars decreed that was wrong, and wrote Thorpe off as an uncreative land-surveyor

and copyist. Now Girouard – on the strength of research by others as well as his own – has rehabilitated him. He is not afraid to assert that Thorpe probably (it must always be probably) designed houses, like Condover in Shropshire, Aston Hall outside Birmingham, and Holland House, Kensington. Enough is known about Thorpe's life to get some sense of how the smarter type of Elizabethan architectural career might be shaped: a start clerking in the Royal Works, a short spell in Paris, and then a plethora of surveying from which he seems to have made good money, and a modicum of designing, doubtless less profitable.

Girouard's most original feat of sleuthing stitches a career together for William Arnold. Montacute House, Cranborne Manor and Wadham College, Oxford, can all be attributed to this Somerset mason-builder, a trustworthy contractor-builder with a willingness to do what his client wanted, a penchant for warm West Country stone and a nice eye for detail – upside-down shell motifs, amiably shaped gables and the like. Arnold is the most serenely English of Girouard's three architects, unfazed by Serlian classical vanities or Vredemanic riot, though mindful of the hints such authors could offer.

Some books are so rich and various that a review can hardly do justice to them. This is one of them. What is rarer than its range of learning and illustration is Girouard's mastery of the material. The book is long, but not too long, and on many topics he has forced himself to be succinct: when he pronounces, he convinces. Its great subject, so long neglected as a whole, has now been treated definitively and illuminatingly. Here is the best monograph on English architecture since John Summerson's *Georgian London*.

NOTES

- 1 p. xiii.
- 2 p. x.
- 3 pp. xi, xviii.
- 4 p. xvii.
- 5 p. xii.
- 6 p. 214.
- 7 p. 20.
- 8 p. 20.
- 9 p. 269.
- 10 p. 287.

