

WALL-PAINTINGS AT PEMBROKE COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE

By Denys Spittle

DURING the renovation of the south range of the second court at Pembroke College, Cambridge, in 1964, some internal partitions were removed in order to restore a large first-floor room to its original proportions. The work required the temporary removal of some panelling and in the process a number of wall-paintings were revealed whose bearing on architectural procedure in the seventeenth century is of particular interest.

The south range, or Hitcham Building, is named after the College benefactor, Sir Robert Hitcham (died 1636), whose bequest to the College of his estate at Framlingham, Suffolk, was confirmed by the Court of Chancery in 1653. The building accounts show that the range was begun in 1659¹ and completed in 1660-61, when payment was made to 'Mr. Mills, when he came to take measure of the building . . .'.² Peter Mills, to whom must be accredited the design of the range, was one of that small group of architects who, based on London, distinguished themselves by practising an individual style which missed being academic in its excessive use of decoration and contortion of architectural detail. Mills at the time was Master of the Tylers' and Bricklayers' Company of London, and his sympathies were openly Parliamentary although he continued in responsible positions after the Restoration. His link with Pembroke College continued after his employment there, for the College in 1668 allowed him to retain a tenancy of three houses of theirs in Budge Row in the City of London for a further thirty-four years 'in consideration of his great losse susteyned by the Fire'.³ At Pembroke, Mills employed John Young as head mason and William Allenby as head bricklayer.

¹ A. Attwater, *A Short History of Pembroke College, Cambridge* (1936), p. 76; and R. Willis and J. W. Clark, *Architectural History of the University of Cambridge* (1886), I, p. 146.

² Pembroke College Muniments, Framlingham Box 1.4.

³ H. M. Colvin, *Dictionary of English Architects, 1660-1840* (1954), p. 390.

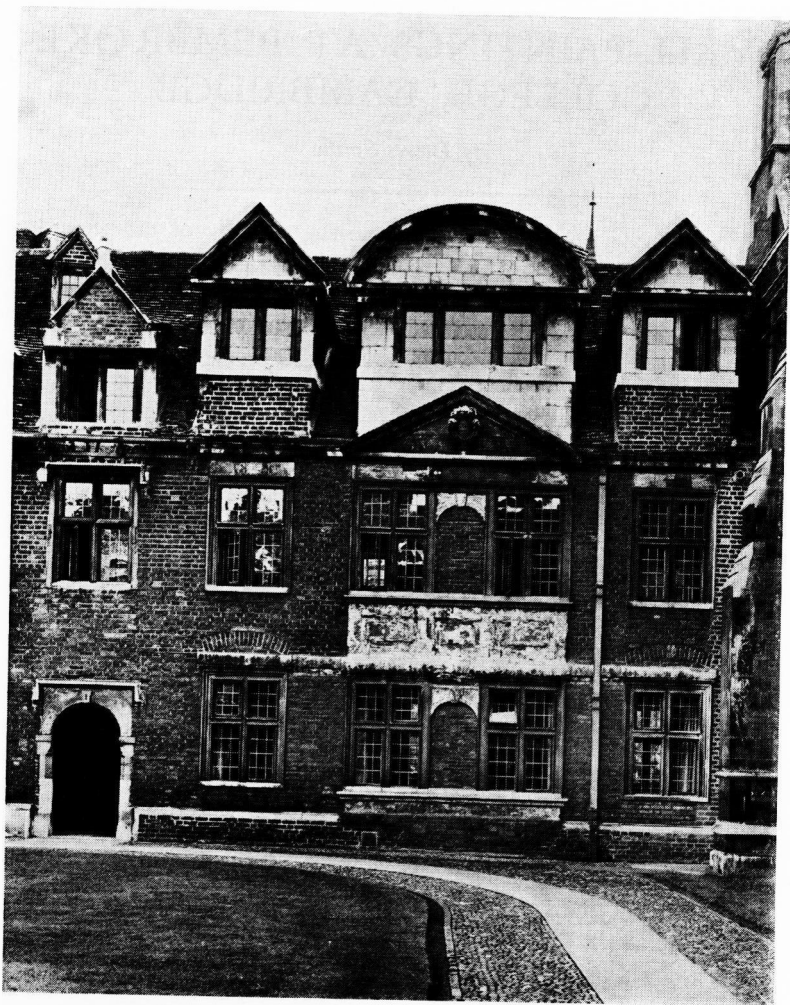
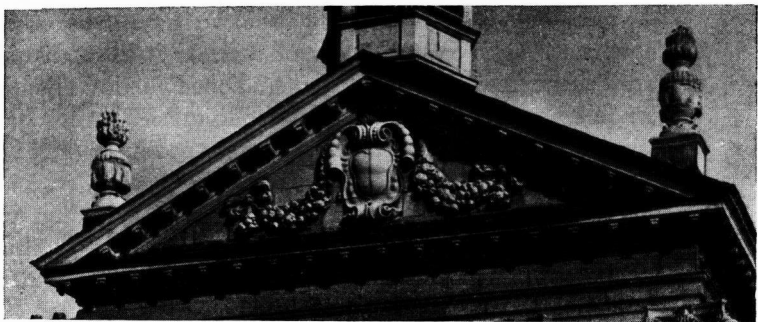


PLATE I: Pembroke College: the west end of the north front of Hitcham Building
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PLATE II: Pembroke College (*opposite*)

- (a) The west pediment of the chapel
 - (b), (c), (d), Hitcham Building: wall-paintings in the large first-floor room, now known as the Thomas Gray Room
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(a)



(b)



(c)



(d)



The brick-built Hitcham Building has eleven bays on the north, or court, side. The eastern seven of these bays have an old-fashioned character with simple stone-mullioned windows but the western four are distinguished by a more classical treatment with a freer use of stone and a central semi-circular pediment (Plate I). As this western and more elaborate section was specially set aside for the Master's use in 1679,⁴ it has been held that its building was of that date. However, the architecture is in accord with Mills' style and, as he died in 1670, it must be accepted that his payment in 1660-61 relates to the whole range.

The recently discovered wall-paintings, which confirm this dating of the western part of the range, have perhaps greater historical interest than decorative value. The largest and most significant is on the east wall (Plate IIb) and depicts a large monochrome cartouche flanked by swags of fruit and flowers hung from ribbons. On the south wall is a painting in the same technique of a large urn from which flames issue (Plate IIc). The paintings are placed arbitrarily and very low on the wall and were clearly not designed to decorate the room. Their presence was explained when their similarity to the sculpture in the west pediment of the nearby College chapel was noticed (Plate IIa). Likewise, the acroterial urns on the eastern and western pediments are very close to the painted one. The limits of the pediment are shown by an incised line enclosing the paintings, which are doubtless life-size cartoons for the more important and decorative sculptural detail of the chapel.

Sir Christopher Wren has been accepted as architect of the chapel by most authorities but, as Sir John Summerson and Professor Geoffrey Webb have pointed out, there is no documentary proof for this attribution. It is not mentioned as by him in *Parentalia* but the accuracy of this work is open to criticism and the traditional attribution cannot be seriously challenged in view of the circumstances which surround the building of the chapel: it was due to the benefaction of Christopher's uncle, Bishop Matthew Wren, that a new chapel was begun in 1663.⁵ In addition, on grounds of style, the design could hardly be other than Wren's at

⁴ Pembroke College Register, IV, p. 107.

⁵ *Parentalia*, p. 33; and Pembroke College Treasury, 'Collegium' Box, F.2.4.

this date, while its affinities to work in France, for example the Sorbonne Chapel by Lemerrier (1635), are clear. The advanced nature of its style may be contrasted with the provincial character of the Hitcham Building only two years its senior.

Attempts to ascribe an authorship to the paintings or even to link them to a particular mason have been unfruitful. As chance has it, the building accounts are sadly silent about the masons employed on the chapel although the contracts with the bricklayers and woodcarvers have survived.⁶ The paintings are by an assured hand and it would be tempting to attribute them to someone in Wren's circle for the guidance of a local mason. A likely candidate as mason would be Robert Grumbold of Cambridge, and the fact that it would have been his first work for Wren adds some support to the suggestion that precise instructions would be necessary. Grumbold was employed by Wren on Trinity College in 1676 and on Emmanuel College in the following year.⁷ Hawksmoor's description of him as 'our honest and skilful artificer'⁸ hints at a lack of originality calling for a measure of supervision. Maybe a building account will make its appearance and so prevent further conjecture. At least one can now say that between 1663 and 1665, when the chapel was consecrated, the large room with the paintings was used as a mason's office.

The room contains other wall-paintings. On the west wall is a drawing in black and red chalk showing the head and shoulders of a bearded man wearing the costume of c. 1615, and this is presumably a copy of some earlier portrait (Plate II d). The drawing-technique is somewhat laboured and it seems unlikely that the subject or the artist will be identified. Also, there is on the south wall a smudgy drawing of a man in black clothes, standing behind a balustrade. The paintings were not whitewashed over when the architectural ones had served their purpose as cartoons, and they doubtless remained visible until the turn of the seventeenth century when the existing panelling was installed. In 1747 the room was

⁶ Willis and Clark, *op. cit.*, I, pp. 155-6.

⁷ Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, *City of Cambridge* (1959), pp. 64, 237.

⁸ A. T. Bolton (ed.), *The Bridge, St. John's College, Cambridge* (Wren Society, vol. XIX), p. 105.

subdivided to make a set for the poet Thomas Gray,⁹ who had not long before moved from Peterhouse after a difference of opinion with that College. The partitions added at that time were removed during the recent alterations and the room is now known as the Thomas Gray Room—an inevitable choice of name but scarcely logical in view of its reinstatement to a condition that existed before his occupation. Parts of the panelling, of about 1700, are now hinged to allow the paintings to be inspected.

Acknowledgements: The Plates are reproduced by permission of the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (Crown Copyright). The four blocks for Plate II have been kindly loaned by Pembroke College, in whose *Gazette* (October, 1965) a notice of the paintings first appeared.

⁹ P. Toynbee and L. Whibley (editors), *Correspondence of Thomas Gray* (1935), III, p. 1222.