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Three Episodes in the History of Audley End

given by Dr. Mark Girouard in the Servants' Hall, Audley End on Saturday 26th June, 1982 on the occasion of the Annual General Meeting of the Ancient Monuments Society.

One of the obvious but fascinating things about English country houses is that they are all so different. You can put them into neat little groups but when you come and look at each individual country house it has a quality all of its own. That is certainly true of Audley End which is quite unlike any other country house in England. Its story falls into three different episodes which work together independently in an intriguing and curious way. I am going to give you a quick round-up of these three episodes, not going into too much detail because there is always the guidebook. On the other hand the guidebook was basically written in 1958, and is much in need of revision so there are quite a few points that I can bring up which are not in it. In particular, an important article on Audley End by P.J. Drury was published in *Architectural History*, the journal for the Society of Architectural Historians, in 1980. It throws a great deal of new light on it and I must confess in all honesty has provided me with much of the material for the talk that I am about to give you. Another valuable study which has come out since the guide-book was first published is J.D. Williams' *Audley End: The Restoration of 1762—97*. (Essex County Council, 1966).

Anyway let us start with a first phase. An enormous house, far bigger than what is here today, was put up roughly speaking between 1603 and 1616 by Thomas Howard, Earl of Suffolk. The Howards had had a rough passage in the 16th century and lost the great majority of their estates to the crown by attainder but when James I became king in 1603 they came back into favour in a big way and the majority of their estates were returned to them. For reasons which there is no time to go into, the major part of the estates of the Duke of Norfolk were returned not to the Duke himself but to his uncles who became Earls of Suffolk and Northampton. So they did very well, and the whole Howard family were basking in the sunlight of royal favour. It is in that situation that Audley End was built.

It is fascinating for us today because it is the only survivor, even if just in part, of a distinctive group of huge houses, each as big as any palace, namely Theobalds, built by Lord Burghley; Holdenby, built by Christopher Hatton; and Audley End. These gigantic houses were as big as palaces for a very straightforward reason, that they were all effectively built as palaces, in that they were planned for constant royal residence. It started with Lord Burghley who became Queen Elizabeth's Lord Treasurer and right-hand man. Elizabeth was a little on the mean side, so rather sensibly, instead of building palaces for herself, she went and stayed with her subjects. She stayed constantly with Lord

Burghley at his house at Theobalds; it became in effect one of her main residences outside London, and poor Lord Burghley had to put her up. To begin with this was absolutely insupportable, but he successively rebuilt and enlarged Theobalds until it became the Blenheim of the 16th century. Now this, of course, cost him an enormous amount, but in those days politicians expected a handsome commission on everything they did, and the leading people in the Government made a great deal of money out of it. Lord Burghley, in spite of his being in many ways a very honourable, wise, and infinitely hard-working man, accepted the standards of the time and, in spite of his vast building operations at Theobalds and Burghley, died a very rich man.

I suspect that other people thought that they could repeat this pattern, so first of all you get Christopher Hatton at Holdenby. He was Elizabeth's favourite, he became her Lord Chancellor, built another absolutely vast house, as big as Theobalds, at Holdenby, and I am pretty sure that he was hoping to take over from Lord Burghley as Lord Treasurer when Burghley, who was considerably older than him, died. Elizabeth would then move from Theobalds to Holdenby, which was all ready and waiting for her; Hatton would become the greatest man in the country and make a great fortune as Burghley had done. But unfortunately it did not work out that way at all; Elizabeth never came to Holdenby, not even once, though it was all built for her (as Hatton specifically stated) and not only that, but he sickened of a mysterious disease when he was only 51 and died long before Lord Burghley. So he died not only having failed to achieve his ambitions, but leaving his descendants with enormous debts and a huge white elephant of a house which they could not keep up, and rattled around in until they finally succeeded in selling it to Charles I as a palace.

Finally you get the Earl of Suffolk, at Audley End, doing very much the same thing as Hatton and Burghley. He built a huge house and obviously intended it to be a place to which James I would come regularly. I am sure he was hoping from early on to become Lord Treasurer, as indeed he did in 1614. When I was working on my book *Life in the English Country House* I became interested in another house, not quite as big as Theobalds, Holdenby and Audley End, but clearly related to them. This was Hatfield, built by Robert Cecil who was Lord Suffolk's rival, and again explicitly designed to entertain the monarch in. A contemporary inventory makes it clear that the big rooms on the first floor formed two matching sets, one for the king and the other for the queen. They were virtually twins, to either side of the hall and Long Gallery. It then occurred to me that surely Audley End was designed in the same way as Hatfield. This incidentally had not been suggested before by anyone and it explained what has always been considered an oddity of Audley

End, the fact that it has twin porches to either side of the hall on the main front of the house. The explanation seemed straightforward: one was the King's porch leading to his state apartment on the first floor to the right of the hall, and the other was the Queen's porch leading to her state apartment on the left. What was little more than a guess on my part has been supported by the researches of P.J. Oliver in the article which I referred to earlier. The only important survivor of these two royal suites today is what is now called the Saloon; this is the original King's Great Chamber, or Presence Chamber, and has one of the gayest and most inventive of surviving Jacobean plasterwork ceilings.

As I also said earlier, Audley End was originally far bigger than it is now. A huge long gallery over an arcade joined the two wings of the half-H which now stick out at the back of the house, and made the main block into a courtyard. In front of this a forecourt with ranges of lodgings to either side more than doubled the size of the house. The long gallery was 220 feet long and 30 feet wide, and, almost as big as the great hall, an enormous kitchen projected to one side. P.J. Oliver in his very interesting article suggests that the house was built in two stages within a quite short period of 15 years or so, the main block in the first stage, and the forecourt in the second. According to Horace Walpole (whom one should not take too seriously because he very often got things wrong), the whole of Audley End was designed by a mysterious Fleming called Bernart Janssen. P.J. Oliver, however, suggests that the forecourt buildings were designed by John Thorpe. The fact that his plan of Audley End in his book of drawings shows the forecourt noticeably different from what was ultimately built, suggests that it is his own variant design. I find this an intriguing and convincing suggestion because there is a strong contrast between the main block which was, and is, quite stark and severe, a great rectangular mass in the vein of Hardwick, and the forecourt, which was all pretty and delicate and fluttering, with little crispy embattlements and turrets. There is evidence even that the turrets on the main block and the two porches were also added in a second phase. They, too, have the decorative, pretty, small-scale, and slightly corrupt flavour of full-fledged Jacobean architecture. Of course nearly all this work has gone now, but the porches are still there. Historians have always been looking for buildings designed by John Thorpe, one of the great mystery and shadow figures of English architecture, and the porches may be among them.

I referred to the slightly corrupt feeling that I find in Jacobean architecture. Certainly in many ways it was a corrupt age, and there is, I think, a strong contrast between the great age of Elizabeth and the slightly degenerate age of James I, at any rate in court circles. Political corruption went to heights which were unacceptable even by the standards of the time. Life at court was

pretty dissolute. There are descriptions of James I, his Queen, and all their courtiers rolling drunk at court festivities, and architecture and decoration was in keeping. There was rather a good example of this in the Long Gallery at Audley End. Elizabethan long galleries tended to have decoration which was supposed to inspire the right thoughts in the people who exercised in them. For instance in the Long Gallery at Hardwick, Justice and Mercy on the two fireplaces were there to give a moral education to Bess of Hardwick as she was walking up and down. The Long Gallery at Audley End had the Labours of Hercules over the fireplace, which was I suppose quite suitable, but up in the stucco of the ceiling were the loves of the gods and goddesses, which perhaps is suggestive of Jacobean lushness and looseness coming in (and what could be lusher or looser than the screen in the entrance hall at Audley End?).

Moreover, James I unlike Elizabeth, mixed up sex with politics, and this proved to be the undoing of the Howards family and Lord Suffolk with them. James fell in love with young George Villiers, whom he later made Duke of Buckingham, and within a few years the huge clan of the Villiers and all its connections had come in in a big way and the Howards had gone out. The Earl of Suffolk was put on trial on charges of corruption, expelled from his job as Lord Treasurer in 1618, found guilty (I think it was probably not too difficult to find him guilty), put in the Tower, and fined £30,000. This was ultimately commuted to £7,000, but he was still left with a big fine, the profits all gone, a useless monster of a house, and debts of perhaps a million pounds in today's money. It was all a great embarrassment and a great come-down, a very similar situation to that at Holdenby, and the Howards got out of it in the same way. In 1666 the house was bought by Charles II as a royal palace, because it was handy for Newmarket. It was a little hunting or racing box, so to speak. It seems likely that Charles II did this on the spur of the moment and afterwards regretted it. In terms of architectural style, he bought it at the last possible moment, when Jacobean architecture was still just considered respectable; but within a few years of the purchase, it had gone absolutely out of fashion. Charles II obviously became embarrassed by the style of his house, did not have the money to do anything about it, and very seldom came there.

It is quite interesting to trace Jacobean architecture going out of fashion in this particular period. For instance, you get the same people changing their point of view. Here is John Evelyn at Audley End in 1654 saying, a little doubtfully "A mix'd fabric twixt antique and modern but without comparison one of the stateliest palaces of the kingdom". By 1670, a few years after the King had bought it, he is describing it in a much more

patronising way as "a cheerful piece of Gothic building or rather antique-modern but placed in an obscure bottom". In 1660 Pepys was at Audley End, full of praise: "a house in which the stateliness of the ceilings, chimney pieces and form of the whole was exceedingly worth seeing". But by 1667 "the house doth appear very fine but not as fine as it had heretofore to me, particularly the ceilings are not so good as I always took them to be, being nothing so well wrought as my Lord Chancellor's ones". That was the great new Clarendon House which Lord Clarendon had just built in Piccadilly. It and similar houses made Audley End seem totally out of date within ten years of Charles II buying it. Moreover, Lord Suffolk had run it up in a hurry, trying to get the greatest possible show with the least expenditure of money, and had faced it with clunch, which is an easily workable stone but a very soft one. By the 1660s, when Charles II acquired it, it was already beginning to fall into pieces, and it got into an increasingly bad state of repair.

It was at this period, however, that the Clerk of the Works, Henry Winstanley, produced some fascinating engravings of Audley End in its glory, which remain the main evidence as to what it was originally like. He dedicated them to Christopher Wren, and what Christopher Wren thought of the building we actually do know. He said in 1695 that "the fabric is weak, built after an ill manner, rather gay than substantial". It is rather a nice description, I think. Anyway, William III did not like the house at all, and in 1701 his advisers put up to him the brilliant idea, why not give it back to the Earls of Suffolk? The Suffolks had been living very comfortably in a substantial apartment at one corner of the forecourt as Keepers of the palace. They were now faced with the appalling prospect of getting the whole house back again. Charles II had originally bought it for £50,000, but had kept £20,000 on mortgage. William III announced that he was going to pay back the mortgage by the simple method of returning the house. The then Earl of Suffolk could not say no to his King, so he got it back.

So, from 1701 to 1751, you have a sad, complicated story about which I will not go into in any detail, of the Suffolks owning the house but unable to look after it, of the whole house deteriorating and more and more of it being demolished. It used to be thought that the demolition was all done in one swoop on the advice of Sir John Vanbrugh, who was a friend of the fifth Earl, but it now seems that it was actually done in at least three phases. Vanbrugh, who had a tenderness for Jacobean architecture, kept as much as he could, and just demolished the side ranges of the forecourt and the great kitchen; the front range and the gatehouse were kept, and not demolished until about 1725. According to Horace Walpole, Vanbrugh also designed the

big screen between the hall and the present stone staircase. The evidence is by no means cast-iron but it is possible that he did indeed design that screen, and also the very grand staircase going up to the saloon behind it. There apparently was a phase when there was no staircase in this space, but it is not absolutely certain whether there was once a Jacobean grand staircase which had been taken out to be replaced.

Anyway, there was demolition, more demolition, and finally in 1745 the tenth Earl of Suffolk got a report from his surveyors recommending the removal of the Great Gallery at the back. He was about to do it when he died. The estate and house was bought by the Countess of Portsmouth who had a family connection. The house was in a terrible state, completely empty, no glass in the windows, and the great lantern about to collapse, so she took down the Long Gallery and portions of the two side wings. But she did not demolish the house as a whole, and when she died in 1762 she left it to her nephew. He became Sir John Griffin-Griffin, and was later created Lord Braybrooke and inherited the title of Lord Howard de Walden. He inaugurated the second creative phase of the house, from 1762 until his death in 1797.

He had a certain amount of money, though not enormously rich, and he devoted his life to rescuing what remained of Audley End from the evil days on to which it had fallen. There is a nice letter from Lord Chatham in 1765 saying "As you are at Audley End I imagine you are deeply engaged in the amusing cares of building, planting, decoration etc." That is exactly what he was doing, but "amusing" perhaps does not give enough of an impression of the devotion he gave to Audley End. It was to a large extent his life; he was married but did not have children. A remarkable aspect of his work there from as early as the 1760s was that he did not try to make Audley End Georgian; instead he tried very hard to keep its feeling as a great Jacobean house.

Now this does relate to what was going on in the mid-18th century. After a period when Jacobean was totally out of fashion, the antiquarianism, and the sense of history that goes with antiquarianism, both of which are very much a feature of the mid-and late-18th century, made people more interested in the past. There was a greater sense of history as applied to buildings, and a growing interest in the Gothic and Jacobean styles, so that one finds quite friendly references to Elizabethan and Jacobean buildings. For instance, in the 1750s Bishop Pocock visited Worksop in Derbyshire and wrote that "its towers and turrets give it a grand look like a castle". In 1762 the poet Thomas Gray was fascinated by Hardwick, and a few years later wrote "It looks like a great old castle of romance". There is something of this feeling about the first Lord Braybrooke's approach to Audley End. On the other hand, it never occurred to him that the whole of his

restoration should be Elizabethan. He restored the outside substantially as it had been, though he had to reface it. There is, I think, very little in the way of original Jacobean stonework, other than the two porches. But he kept to the original design, and in addition built a new gallery behind the Hall to make the circulation work. He did a certain amount of rather interesting Georgian-Jacobean faking, particularly in the frieze of the Saloon and in some details in the Hall, but on the whole what he did inside was up-to-date, and his embellishments to the park were up-to-date Classical. He put in a new chapel (in the space formerly occupied by the Queen's Great Chamber) to replace the old chapel that had been demolished. Here he did go in for a sort of Strawberry Hill Gothick. The result is one of the most charming and delightful features of the house, an 18th-century version of what Horace Walpole rather scornfully called "King James's Gothic", which had actually been the style of the original Jacobean chapel.

But for the main work inside he employed Robert Adam. He made the rather curious change, it may seem to us, of moving the main rooms from the first floor, where they had been in the usual Jacobean way, down to ground floor. In this he was following the fashion of the time; grand rooms up on the first floor were going out of fashion, and the accepted practice was to have rooms much closer down to the garden level. One finds exactly the same sort of thing happening at Longford Castle in Wiltshire at the same period; the grand Elizabethan rooms up on the first floor were abandoned and new state rooms installed in what had been the Elizabethan parlours on the ground floor. That is what Lord Braybrooke did at Audley End, and got Adam to decorate the rooms. I think one can say that it was a mistake from the point of view of Adam's work, for the ground floor rooms are very low ones, and their proportions are antithetic to Adam's style. Adam did his best but I do not really think the results were very successful, with two exceptions. One is the Little Drawing Room, a most exquisite and delightful little Adam room, one of the nicest there is in existence, absolutely perfect and sparkling in all its detailing; but of course this is a small room so the proportions are just right. The other was the big library added to the end of the east wing. Being at the end, it was possible to build its ceiling up much higher than in the other rooms. It must have been a magnificent room, but it went in the alterations of the next generation. In addition, Lord Braybrooke filled the house with fine pictures and furniture, everything again in the latest fashion. He died in 1797, leaving the house in pristine condition. He had without any doubt saved its life.

Then a little later comes the third creative period at Audley End which in its way is equally interesting: the period of the third

Lord Braybrooke who inherited in 1825. By then the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods and their architecture had progressed a good deal further in people's favour, and were rapidly becoming fashionable. I think it was all a bit to do with the French Revolution which had given the English upper classes a severe shock, and made them feel that they should disassociate themselves from Continental aristocrats and emphasize their Englishness and their attachment to the old English ways. The 'ancient English hospitality' was a lot talked about, so was life in the great hall, there was a vogue for giving lavish parties to the tenantry. All this had very much come into the forefront after 1800, and with it Elizabethan architecture began to come back into fashion as the prime example of houses designed for the ancient English hospitality. I think it was something of this feeling that the third Lord Braybrooke brought to the house. He was actually one of the first people to go over to Neo-Elizabethan on a considerable scale. He was not like the first Lord Braybrooke, who was content to keep the outside and a few details of the house, Jacobean, and for the rest to be Neo-Classical. Lord Braybrooke wanted everything to seem rather Elizabethan. The two attitudes are epitomized at the main entrance to Audley End, by the first Lord Braybrooke's elegant Classical archway with its Coade stone lion at the top, and then to one side of it the third Lord's completely Neo-Jacobean lodge. So one gets this big contrast between the work of the two centuries and also a complete *volte-face* in that the third Lord Braybrooke moved the main rooms back up to the first floor, and put the main bedrooms into the Adam reception rooms on the ground floor.

Throughout the house he installed very lavish Neo-Elizabethan or Neo-Jacobean decoration. He retained what few fireplaces had survived from the old Jacobean days, but most of what one sees is his work. Even in the Hall most of what is there now dates from his period, although of course the entrance screen and to some extent the ceiling are original Jacobean work. One way and another he spent a lot of time and money in the 1820s and 1830s re-Jacobeanizing, if that is the right expression, the inside of the house. Also, he gave it a change in character which expressed the general movement of the time away from the considerable, if elegant, formality of the late 18th century, to a greater emphasis on informality, as expressed in the lounging easy life of the country house weekend. One gets a strong feeling of this in the watercolours of the interior of Audley End made by an unknown artist in 1851. There is a nice description, too, by Mrs. Bancroft, the wife of the American ambassador, who came there in 1847. She was brought up the grand staircase into the great first-floor saloon to be received by the family, but, grand though it was, she was delighted by its relative informality. She says:

"Notwithstanding it is a vast size, the sofas and tables are so disposed all over the apartment as to give the most friendly, warm and hospitable effect." She describes how "after dinner the young people had a rowdy game of cards and the elder ones seemed to prefer talking to a game of whist. The ladies brought down their embroidery or knitting, and later a tray of wine and water is brought in and a quantity of bed candlesticks. Everyone retires when they like". The watercolours show how much clutter there was about the house, but all rather easy going, gay and cosy.

And this is basically how it remained, of course with minor changes, while the Braybrookes lived there. This brings me to the last point I want to make, which is the state of the house today. Here I was rather touched to see, in the current Department of the Environment guidebook to Audley End, a little bit of paper, which when you pull it out you find saying "We have done this all wrong but we are now trying to do it better". It is extraordinarily upright and unexpectedly honest of a Government department. But I think it is basically true. When the Ministry of Works (as it then was) took over the house, it still had the atmosphere of a lived-in country house. It was substantially as furnished and decorated by the third Lord Braybrooke in the early and mid-Victorian period but with later alterations, and it had that comfortable lived-in air. Then the Department set out with great purism to weed out the nasty Victorian furniture, bring back the best pieces, and, with the best intentions of the world, try to get the Adam rooms back to how they had been in Adam's day. That was a very debatable decision, and there are things to be said on both sides, but I think considering that the rooms had never been Adam's best in the first place, and that the Library, the finest room, had gone and most of the contents had been dispersed, it was possibly a mistaken decision and led to a certain sterility in the result. Anyway they did it, weeded out the house, arranged it in what they thought was a correct way, and now they are beginning to have second thoughts and are trying to go back to the house as it is shown in photographs taken at the end of the Braybrooke occupancy. You can see the effects of this in some of the upstairs rooms, where the very pretty Victorian wallpapers have been put back. They are doing their best, and I think with considerable success, although it is never altogether possible to turn the clock back after major changes have been made; you always lose something in between. Still, in spite of all its vicissitudes, Audley End remains one of the most fascinating of English country houses.