

THE BUILDING OF CHICHELEY HALL

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CHICHELEY HALL, the great house built for Sir John Chester in the first quarter of the eighteenth century, has proved a puzzle for everyone who has written about its architectural history. The difficulty has been to reconcile a date as early as 1703 for its completion with the later features, such as the Palladian aspect of the great entrance hall and the dated rain-water pipes of 1721. What has caused the reluctant acceptance of the earlier date is the reliance placed on an entry in a document, dated 1701, about the plantation of trees on the estate between 1698 and 1717, in which is mentioned a new ditch "made and quicked across ye great ground on ye Hill from ye now new House to ye Ford Gate". This was quoted by Mr. Arthur Oswald in the first of his three articles on the Hall which appeared in *Country Life* in 1936,¹ in which he assumed that the house itself had already been begun and "that the fabric was completed in 1703, if not earlier". This was also the opinion of the late Mr. R. E. Chester Waters in 1878.² New light, however, has now been thrown upon the building operations by the discovery that Sir John Chester's *Account Books*, which cover the period 1699-1724, are in existence. There exist, moreover, about 60 letters written by Sir John to his intimate friend, Burrell Massingberd of Ormsby Hall, Co. Lincs., as well as about 40 from their protégé, William Kent.³ It is from this material that we can learn who it was who designed and built Chicheley Hall and that we are in the position to supply some of the dates for the building operations.

The Massingberd letters are now the property of the Society of Genealogists, by whose kind permission I am able to make use of them. I am greatly indebted to Mr. H. M. Colvin, who not only has given me his opinion about some of the extracts quoted from the letters, but has taken me to Chicheley Hall, which we were able to visit by kind permission of the present owner, Lord Beatty. Since our visit there, through the kindness of Major J. G. B. Chester, Mr. Colvin has seen Sir John Chester's *Account Books*, extracts from which he was able to copy and let me see. These have proved invaluable for throwing light on the building of Chicheley Hall.

Although this paper is primarily concerned with the building of the present Chicheley Hall, Sir John's *Account Books* also give facts about the rebuilding

¹ 9th May. The others appeared on 16th May and 23rd May.

² *Memoirs of the Chesters of Chicheley*, 528.

³ Some of these letters were used by Margaret Jourdain, *The Work of William Kent*, 1948.



PLATE 3. Chicheley Hall—West Front.



PLATE 4. Chicheley Hall—South Front and Stable Block.

of the Chancel of the nearby Church. 1708 is the accepted date because of the dated rain-water pipes and there is confirmation of this in the first *Account Book*, 1699–1708. In October, 1704, Sir John's first wife, Anne Wollaston, had died and, we presume, it was as a memorial to her that the Chancel was rebuilt. The chief mason, to whom considerable payments were made, was James Oldfield, but whether he actually designed the Chancel is not stated. He was associated with Francis [Frank] Baxter, the joiner, on work in the Chancel; e.g., in June, 1708, Oldfield received £3 2s. for "carving ye capitals & Trophys"⁴, and in September, 1709, £33 2s. 6d. for "his work about ye monuments" to Sir John's parents and his first wife; while in August, 1709, Baxter received £2 12s. for "making ye communion table". The iron gate separating the Chancel from the nave, presumably the one which exists today,⁵ was supplied by Richard Thompson for £3 13s. 6d. in June, 1713. All this had happened, however, before Sir John began his correspondence with Burrell Massingberd, which has survived and largely deals with the building of Chicheley Hall.

At the same time that work was being carried out on the Chancel of the Church in 1709, there are entries in the *Account Book* 1708–23 to Oldfield for work at "ye house on ye hill". This was previously thought to refer to the Hall, but it was really Hill Farm, south of Chicheley, which was meant.⁶ It was the mistake made about the interpretation of this entry that has caused all the dating difficulties.

For the rebuilding of Chicheley and its furnishing with works of art from Rome, Sir John, it seems, relied to a great extent on Massingberd's influence. Both were men of culture and imagination and were desirous of rebuilding the houses to which they had succeeded, but neither was in a hurry to do so. Massingberd was but a young child when his father, Sir Drayner of Ormsby, died in 1689, leaving him his heir, while Sir John succeeded to the Chicheley Estate in 1697–8, on the death of his father, Sir Anthony. He, however, was then living at Shenton Hall, Co. Leicester, the home of his first wife's mother, Mrs. Wollaston, and he continued to live there despite his wife's death in 1704. In 1714 both men married and in the case of Sir John it has formerly been thought that he returned to his native county and moved into his new house.⁷ The *Account Books* show that this was not so, the Chesters going to relations and paying visits only to Chicheley, where sometimes they received guests. On 25th June, 1716, for example, Sir John wrote to Massingberd, thanking him "for ye great favour of your & your Lady's good company here".

Before dealing with the letters, it should be noticed that the late Mr. Chester Waters had seen some original plans, as he stated that the "huge square mass of red brick with stone facings and a flat roof" has not "a balustrade and statues on the roof—the merit of this simplicity is due not to the architect, but to his employer, for the original plans show these hideous accessories in tasteless profusion".⁸

In 1711–12 Massingberd went on the Grand Tour⁹ and in Rome he met

⁴ *Country Life*, 9th May, Plate 13.

⁵ *Op. cit.*, Plate 16.

⁶ Information from Major Chester.

⁷ *Country Life*, 9th May.

⁸ *Op. cit.*, 527, 8. Major Chester can give no information about the existence of these plans.

⁹ Sir John had wanted his son William to go with Massingberd, but was met with a refusal.

William Kent, whose chief work then was the copying of pictures. He became one of Kent's patrons and in May, 1713, Sir John followed his example. This information is given in a letter which contains the first reference to building at Chicheley.

1713. May 14. *Massingberd to Kent. Draft.*

I have laid out and sent you money . . . 20 guineas from myself and 20 pounds from Sir John Chester of Chicheley in ye county of Buckinghamshire Barronet, at whose house I was contriving to lay him out some money in building & speaking of my intentions to send you some money in order for your support at Rome & mentioning ye hopes we had of your becoming a Great Painter, he said, he would readily . . . contribute towards it, and immediately gave me £20 for you & desired I would write to you to send him what I thought fitt . . . I desire you will send him a letter of thanks & it's probable if he likes ye things you send you will have more money from him.

Thus started the traffic in pictures, both copies and of Kent's "own invention", as well as in antiques, which were sent from Rome, via Leghorn, to London for the ultimate adornment of Chicheley and Ormsby Halls. Some items for Sir John will be mentioned.

1713. August 4. *Massingberd to Kent. Draft.*

Good Dear Kent studdy hard if you may answer ye character I have given of you, & if you stay 7 or 8 years longer, & we should live till then, I hope to have a staircase for you to paint a la Italiano ye first thing you do & I believe if Sr J. Chester is alive he will have another.¹⁹

In 1714, 1715 and 1716 Kent was copying pictures for Sir John, e.g., "ye Aurora of Guercino" and "ye Leda of Corregio". On the other hand, "ye Galatea" was of his own composition.

1716. March 20. *Kent to Massingberd.*

I have bought for Sir John a bust of Paris²⁰ . . . I have reciev'd a letter from Sr John Chester from Thorpe dated January ye 2nd. I am very much obliged to you & him for ye good oppinion you have of me, and I can assure you I am very uneasy yt I have not done more for ye obligations yt I have.

1716. August 12. *Chester to Massingberd. Chichley.*

I believe I shall be obliged to stay here so late in ye yeare. . . . I hope to have one stable up before I leave this place, some of ye windows and Masks are done after your designe, which in my opinion look extream well & Oldfield is now about ye Garden Door Case of Roch Abbey stone which will look very fine, when ye slate comes he shall goe about yr table.

1716. August 28. *Chester to Massingberd. Chichley.*

I have this morning been very buissy in setting out ye ground for ye stable.

1716. December 10. *Chester to Massingberd. Thorpe.*

I perccive my Paris is safe with you, I wish ye Homer had been so . . . I shall be extream glad to enjoy your good Company at Chichley & to receive yr

¹⁹ The ceiling of the staircase was meant.

²⁰ This antique bust, mentioned by Mr. Oswald in *Country Life*, 23rd May, is in the possession of Major J. G. B. Chester. It was mentioned on 27th May, 1788, by William Cowper, the poet.

instructions in relation to my building, there being no person whose judgment I value more in that as well as all other affaires. . . . ye Roch Abbey stone works fine. I dare say you'll be pleased with it.

1717. February 15. *Kent to Massingberd.*

I have receivd your measure for ye cieling peice . . . if Sr John Chester will please to send a measure I shall do one for him before I leave Rome.

1717. June 29. *Chester to Massingberd. Chichley.*

I conclude Parker ye Bricklayer hath been with you before this time, if not ye Carpenter, by ye Character given me of ye former, I believe he will please you & hope ye latter will doe so too.

It appears that Sir John was able to send on some of his workmen to Ormsby, but it was only for "mending" the house, as on 27th June, 1715, Massingberd had written to Kent, "I find I can't well afford to build a new house as I once intended", but was busy "in repairing my old house where I intend to spend most of my time". The new house had to wait until the time of his son, William Burrell Massingberd, who had as his architect James Paine.¹² The foundation stone was laid in June, 1752. It is, however, with Chicheley that we are concerned.

1717. August 14. *Kent to Massingberd.*

Your cieling peice is done & only waits yt I finesh ye copy for Sr John, in ye Borgese pallace of Diana & her nimphe, by Dominichino, and then shall send ym.

1717. August 18. *Chester to Massingberd. Chichley.*

I perceive Mr. Kent talks of returning into England, if he doth it soon ye ceiling of my starecase must be deferred till he comes, but of that & other matters when I have ye happyntess of seeing you here, which I hope will be next month.

1717. September 12. *Chester to Massingberd. Chichley.*

What I do with your advice is ye most approved by me & therefore shall deferr sending ye measure of my starecase to Mr. Kent till I see you.

1717/18. January 18. *Kent to Massingberd.*

For Sr John Chester, ye stare case you mentioned, in ye midle where the painting may be, just ye well hole, which you say will be 14 foot square, I suppose above ye cornice the three winders almost square yt are in ye cove. I would divide ye rest of ye cove where there are no windows & paint Basso relivos, if you like ye subject out of Ovid yt is Herse & her sisters a sacrificing to flora & Mercuri a flying when he fell in love with her, there will enter a peice of ye Temple.

Two months later, on 15th March, Kent repeated the above suggested design, saying he had sent in January a letter from Signor Giacomo¹³ and "likewise a sketch of Sr John Chesters starecase as we understand you". He also said, "we design square" the three windows "in ye cove above ye cornice". It was thus the design of Kent, the painter, and Mariari, the architect, that was proposed

¹² Massingberd Papers, Society of Genealogists. There are drawings in the Lincolnshire Record Society, so Mr. H. M. Colvin informs me.

¹³ Giacomo Mariari. This letter, dated 14th January, 1717, with two sketches has survived amongst Kent's letters. Mariari offered his services to Massingberd, who was acting for Sir John, but they were not accepted.

for the staircase ceiling at Chicheley. This scheme never came into being. Sir John, at least by October, 1719, had decided on demolishing the existing house and building anew.

There was, however, never any question of abandoning Kent's "cieling peice". He had sent the sketch for it on 8th June, 1718, "if it has ye fortune to be liked in England as its here I hope he'll [Sir John] be very well pleased". The work had been begun in August and on 15th November Kent had written to Massingberd, "I am still at work upon Sr John's cieling peice which I do upon tow large cloths for ye convenience of bringing. I have another copy done from Nicolo Pussin a companion to yt I sent him of Dominchino." The work for the ceiling was completed in December.

Kent returned to England at the end of 1719, without apparently knowing that Sir John had decided to pull down his house.

1719/20. February 10. *Kent to Massingberd*. London.

I shall finesh the cieling in its place which I considered [I] could not do so well other ways.

The agreement for demolition was in the following terms:¹⁴

October 1719. Agreed with Mr. Smith to pull down Chichley house dig ye foundations for a new one & make ye suff at £50.¹⁵

Ditto. Agreed with Mr. Smith to build my house agreeable to ye Model as by ye agreement doth appear for £638.

Francis Smith signed the receipt for £688 on 17th November, 1720. Thus we learn the name of the master-builder a good while before he is mentioned in the letters, as we shall see. Work of rebuilding began in earnest in 1720, as we learn from payments entered in Sir John's *Account Book* 1708-23. Some of the craftsmen had already been employed on the Chancel of the Church, e.g. James Oldfield, stone-mason, and Francis Baxter, joiner. Others were associated with Smith's work elsewhere, e.g. Thomas Eborall of Warwick, joiner, at Ditchley and Sutton Scarsdale and Edward Poynton, stone-carver, at the latter place.

The letters are silent about the pulling down of a house, so until they begin again we must rely on information given in Sir John's *Account Books*. Payments were entered from January, 1719/20, up to November, 1720, to Francis Smith for "pulling down ye house at Chichley" and for "building my house", while the brickmaker, Sam[uel] Burgen received £30 12s. 6d. for "making & burning 86900 of Bricks at 5s. 6d. per 1000" and for lime.

As might be expected, William Kent was an interested spectator of what was happening at Chicheley, whenever he could get away from his patron, Lord Burlington.

¹⁴ *Account Book* marked A.

¹⁵ Suff=sump, a pit or well.

1720, March 19. *Kent to Massingberd*. London.

Upon Mr. Bathurst[s]¹⁶ desire I have been at his house, & from thence he carryd me to see Sr John where I see all at work & preparations made which I think the [w]hole designe will not be much amiss, though if things had not been gone so far, I believ'd I should have given my opinion to have had some alterations.

He was again there in 1722, as we learn from Massingberd, who was critical of what had been done and had himself produced a draft. Smith's name is now for the first time mentioned.

1722, May 3. *Massingberd to his Wife*. London.

When I came to Chichley I was so fretted to see such havoc made in the architecture, especially in the garden front, which was at first all laid out by my direction, that if Sir John had been at home when I first saw it, I should not have forborne the rudeness of exposing all the faults to the utmost, but he came not home till some hours after & I had time to vent myself to Frank Baxter, who told me Mr. Kent had found all the same faults as I had done, but The Knight, & his builder Smith (who I believe is an honest man & a very good bricklayer) must needs turn all our antique into modern London proportions etc, & so have made a shift to spoil a deal of good free stone of several sorts, however I made a shift with a little of my Lady's help (whose conversation put me into a right key for it) to play the Courtier more than is natural to me, & admire everything & to say the truth—the workmen have performed their duty extremely well, & it will be an extraordinary good house within & want nothing but a little more height in the first two storeys, which my draft had given.¹⁷

(1722, September ?). *Chester to Massingberd*. Chichley.

Ye stone Mason hath been so engaged that yr chimney peice is not yet begun, but hope it will soon, ye Brickmaker hath got a very good workman, who hath made a great many this summer . . . Acton & his brother Charles Baldwin¹⁸ were here lately in their way to Staffordshire, my Nephew Duncombe¹⁹ is going to build, I carryed Mr. Smith (yt built my house) over to him last week & about 3 weeks hence he is to bring him a Draft; . . . I have made considerable advance in finishing, ye Plaisterer's²⁰ work is near done in ye Hall & staircase & a good deal of ye joyner's in ye former.

These two letters mention the name of Smith as the builder, or architect of Chicheley. This has already been established by the entries in the *Account Book*, 1708-23. The question of who was responsible for the Palladian hall, separated from the stair-case hall by three marble pillars, is solved by an entry in the *Account Book*: "Pd. Mr. Flitcroft for drawing ye designe of ye Hall, etc., £5 05. 0." Mr. Colvin has suggested that, at this early date in his career, it is possible he was acting as draughtsman to Kent. Some place had to be

¹⁶ Benjamin Bathurst (1693-1767) of Mixbury, Co. Oxford.

¹⁷ Letters in *Country Life*, 20th October, 1960, with Mr. Oswald's reply.

¹⁸ The Baldwins, or Baldwyns, of Aqualate and Dockleton. Charles had been with Massingberd on the Grand Tour.

¹⁹ Francis, b. 1690, son of Francis Duncombe of Broughton, Co. Bucks., by his second wife, not by Mary Chester. No house has survived.

²⁰ Isaac Mansfield.

found in the new house for Kent's ceiling piece. The obvious and, indeed, only place would be in the Great Hall. It is still there now, and has recently been restored by the present owner. The two cloths, mentioned by Kent on 15th November, 1718, are clearly visible.

Another feature in the hall is "ye Niche of ye Tabernacle", which is mentioned in a letter from Sir John.

1723/4. February 29. *Chester to Mussingberd*. Chicheley.

My son Toller²¹ was with Mr. Kent for his advice about ye Nich(e)²² of ye Tabernacle in my Hall, which I had thought of finishing with my own Marble, which at first Mr. Kent seemed to approve, but since inclines to a statue Painted; if you should see him before you leave ye Town, I desire you'll present my service to him & lett him know its 4 foot 4 inches from ye Floor, 7 foot high & 3½ wide. yt if he determines for ye latter I hope he will doe me ye favour to paint it, & shall leave ye price to him.

It was the "statue painted" that was chosen and was done by Kent; for it he received £12 12s. in May, 1725.²³ It has been removed by the present owner owing to its bad state of preservation.²⁴ The cost for the "Tabernacle" was allied with that of the "Frontispiece"²⁵; for both of these Sir John paid £54 15s. in 1722. In the same year, for "ye chimney peice in ye Hall" Fletcher received £50 16s., setting it up himself.²⁶ Sir John had indeed made certain that the Entrance Hall was to be worthy of the newly built Chicheley Hall.

Separated from the Entrance Hall by three arches is the great staircase, which was the work of Francis Baxter, the joiner; for it he received £90 in April, 1723.²⁷ It is one of the chief features of Chicheley and a very fine piece of work although the size of it seems too big for the limited well into which it had to fit.²⁸ The ceiling is too near the top of it, so it may have been for this reason that Kent's ceiling piece, meant to be over the staircase, was eventually put into the hall. Isaac Mansfield was responsible for "Plastering ye Hall & Staircase" and was paid £108 in September, 1722, which Sir John considered "is at very high rates".²⁹

Sir John spared no expense on his house; for example, splendid locks were provided by John Wilks of Birmingham from September, 1721.³⁰ The workmen's wages alone from "ye 22d of Xber 1722 to ye 18th April 1724" amounted to £390 8s. 4d. and more were to come. The last entries in the *Account Book*, 1723-25, were to the stone-carver, Edward Poynton of Nottingham, for £53 4s. and to the joiner, Thomas Eborall of Warwick, for £182 15s. The latter had already received £36 16s., in December, 1724, for "ye joyners work in ye Rooms by ye Garden".

²¹ John Toller of Billingborough, Lincs. m 171k, Catharine, d. of Sir John Chester.

²² Partly seen, *Country Life*, 16th May, Plate 6.

²³ *Account Book*, 1723-25. The statue represented Mercury.

²⁴ Information from Lord Beatty.

²⁵ Frontispiece? There was "an architectural feature", now removed, in one of the Libraries, which must have come from elsewhere. *Country Life*, 16th May, Plate 8. The wood-carver was James Richards.

²⁶ *Op. cit.*, Plate 5.

²⁷ *Account Book*, 1723-25.

²⁸ *Country Life*, 16th May, Plate 6.

²⁹ *Account Book*, 1708-23.

³⁰ The first payment was for £15 2s.

New stables (South Block) were also being built. Sir John wrote on 27th March, 1723, to Massingberd, "my stables being now building I cannot spare my stonemasons till they are done & my Hall floared". There exists among the family papers "An estimate for building a stable . . . according to a Draught given in by Fran: Smith". It amounted to £217 19s. 4d. Sir John was satisfied with the work, as in March, 1724, he gave Smith £11 15s. for "building coach house stable, etc.", and courteous man as he was, he added, "given Mr. Smith for his care & good performancc 10 guineas & sent his wife a broad p[iece]".³¹ The building of the stables is commemorated by the date 1725 on the rain-water heads. Sir John's building activities were only cut short by death, his last letter being written within a month of his end.

1725/6. January 12. *Chester to Massingberd*. Newbold.

I am now to acquaint you ye moment I receivd yr letter I writ to Mr. Smith & sent it by F. Baxter, who brought your letter from Chicheley & promised me to deliver it to him at Warwick. I have not yett heard from him, when I doe shall give you ye trouble of another letter. I have long wanted to see him on account of ye Parsonage house of Chicheley, which we have some thought of rebuilding next summer. After many promises Mr. Bridgman came to Chicheley in 9ber last. I was then in Staffordshire & could not see him, his Plan is not yett come to my hands, but hear he talked of filling up ye canal, which I shall readily come into.³²

At the back of this letter is written in Massingberd's hand "Sr Jno Dyed soon after this before my answer could come to his hand". The day of death was 6th February, 1725/26. Three years later Massingberd was also dead.

It is thus only in Sir John Chester's last letter that the master-builder of this remarkable house is clearly identified as Francis Smith of Warwick (1672-1738). Previously, without this information and without the knowledge of the existence of Sir John Chester's *Account Books*, the most likely name put forward, as architect, was that of Thomas Archer.³³ Burrell Massingberd, on his own admission, appears to have made designs and to have issued directions, but these were not adhered to by Smith.³⁴ Indeed, apart from the principal front, with its swept-up cornice and Berninesque doorcase, the exterior is in every way characteristic of Smith's usual country-house style: so is the plan, for which he alone may well have been responsible. William Kent is seen chiefly in the role of internal decorator. That his was the directing mind behind Henry Flitcroft for the entrance hall seems likely but cannot be proved. In short, the "wonderfully rich and architectural treatment" of the house, as Mr. Oswald says,³⁵ must be due to Francis Smith, Burrell Massingberd, William Kent and Henry Flitcroft, with Sir John Chester as arbiter between them. Chicheley Hall is the latter's only memorial, as the date of his death was never added in the vacant space on the tablet he had erected to his first wife in the Chancel of the nearby Church.

³¹ *Account Book*, 1723-25.

³² The Parsonage house was rebuilt later: the canal was never filled in.

³³ Nikolaus Pevsner, *Buckinghamshire*, Chicheley, pp. 93-5, M. Whiffen, *Thomas Archer*, 1960, 33.

³⁴ Letter of 3rd May, 1722.

³⁵ *Op. cit.*, 9th May.