



The courtier's house

*St Giles House, Dorset. Part I
The Seat of the Earl of Shaftesbury*

The harmonious appearance of this great house belies a complex history of expansion, demolition and restoration, as John Martin Robinson explains in the first of two articles

Photographs by Paul Highnam



ST GILES House reads today as a largely Georgian building with Georgian interiors in a Georgian park. In reality, however, it is much more complex. The present house (**Fig 1**) has grown by slow accretion from a Tudor core, which, in turn, occupied the site of an earlier manor house. This manor was acquired by a gentry family, the Ashleys, through marriage in the mid 15th century.

In the early 17th century, the only daughter of the then squire, Sir Anthony Ashley, married Sir John Cooper. Their son in turn, Sir Anthony Ashley Cooper, jurist, eminent statesman, Lord Chancellor and founder of the Whig Party, inherited St Giles in 1631. He was created 1st Earl of Shaftesbury in the reign of Charles II and made Wimborne his principal seat. It has been the Shaftesburys' seat ever since.

A Historic Buildings Report on St Giles compiled by John Cattell and Susie Barson in 2003 has done much to clarify the evolution of the building. By the early 17th century, the house comprised a large complex of buildings divided by the River Allen. On the west side of the confluence was a 16th-century court of offices on a U plan. These were demolished and replaced in about 1750 by two long parallel western service wings, which, in turn, were demolished in 1973.

In the 1650s, a bridge connected the court of offices to the main house. This was apparently laid out on a conventional H-shaped plan with a central hall and wings to each end (to the east and west). It was substantially reconfigured in about 1625 by Sir Anthony Ashley (the 1st Earl's grandfather-in-law). He was otherwise an ambitious builder, responsible for the surviving almshouses of 1626 next to the church and the large stables (**Fig 5**) in a distinctive symmetrical Jacobean gabled style. His work to the house was similar in style.

Sir Anthony created a kitchen in part of the west wing and its large early-17th-century brick fireplace has been discovered during recent restoration work. He also rebuilt the adjacent hall, perhaps on the footprint of its predecessor. In its place, he erected a two-storeyed range that incorporated a hall on the ground floor and a large chamber above known as the Great Dining Room. This new hall range is shown on the first-known depiction of the house on a map of 1659 by Palmer with a large chimney-stack in its rear wall.

During the major 18th-century changes to the house, the ground level was raised on the north side of the building, turning Sir Anthony's hall and kitchen into a basement. ➤

Fig 1: St Giles House, built in 1651, viewed from the north-east



Fig 2 left: The library interior was created in the early 19th-century

Fig 3 facing page: A view from the Small Drawing Room into the Large Drawing Room hung respectively in green and yellow silk. The distant paintings preserve their 18th-century frames in architectural frames and are part of the original 18th-century hang

At the east end of the hall, there survives a mid-16th-century doorway with a four-centred arch that formerly led to the withdrawing apartments that occupied the second, eastern wing. This building was, however, demolished by the future 1st Earl in 1650 to make way for his new building, which now forms the principal east front of the house facing the impressive beech avenue, which he laid out at the same time. On March 19, 1650, he recorded in his diary: 'I laid the first stone of my house at St. Giles.' This was intended to provide more up-to-date accommodation in anticipation of his marriage five weeks later.

The new building was taller than the old house and radically different in style, comprising a symmetrical seven-bay principal elevation and shorter return wings framing a small inner courtyard and abutting the early-17th-century hall. It was planned to provide a fashionable 'Great Apartment'.

The architect of the 1650 house is not known, but it was inspired by Inigo Jones's design of 1638 for a house for Lord Maltravers in London, a building that established the popular English format of the symmetrical house with a hipped roof and dormers. The historian John Bold has suggested that it was the work of Capt Richard Ryder, who was in contact with John Webb at Wilton and who built the new west wing at Cranborne, next door to St Giles, in 1647–50.

The 1650 interiors showed the same Jones-Webb influence as the exterior. The

present Large (North) and Small (South) Drawing Rooms retain original fittings, respectively a splendid stone Classical chimneypiece and a rich moulded stucco ceiling with oak wreaths. (Fig 3) The original Small Drawing Room fireplace is probably that now in the Stone Hall. It was originally the state bedchamber. There was also a 'cabinet', now incorporated into the library.

Although a Parliamentarian in the Civil War, Ashley Cooper was closely involved in the Restoration of Charles II in 1660 and became a member of the celebrated political circle known as the CABAL. Charles II visited St Giles and stayed in the new state apartment in 1665 when he travelled there from Dorchester. Seven years later, in 1672, Cooper became Lord Chancellor and was created 1st Earl of Shaftesbury. It was undoubtedly in the hope of attracting further royal visits that more work was done to the house in 1670–74.

A new state bedroom and state dressing room were constructed to the south west, joining the 1650 range to the south end of the 16th-century service wing and completing the enclosure of a central courtyard, part of which was used for the new Grand Stairs. These 1670s works were designed by Thomas Glover, whose best-known work is the charming College of Matrons of 1682 in Salisbury Cathedral Close.

Glover's building accounts survive and show that the rooms were handsomely fitted out using leading London craftsmen,

but little now survives, although the late-17th-century carved timber chimneypiece and overmantel in the old library (Avenue Room) on the first floor of the east front may be a survival; it is reminiscent of Ham House.

The subsequent two Earls did little to St Giles. The 3rd Earl, the famous philosopher, admired by Voltaire, who was largely responsible for moulding 18th-century aesthetic thought, did not put his theories into effect at home. He thought the house too big and rambling. He wrote: 'Far from adding anything to St Giles, I would to God I could in any way contract.' It was left to his son, another Anthony, who succeeded as 4th Earl at the age of 23, to create a coherent whole.

His wife, Susannah Noel, was the daughter of the 3rd Earl of Gainsborough and she had artistic and musical tastes, befriending Handel. Together, they embarked on ambitious improvements that were largely responsible for the major architectural quality of the house as it is today. The work is well documented in the Shaftesbury family archives, with building accounts running from 1732 to 1750, and included the rebuilding of the church, landscaping the grounds with cascades and lakes, planting elms and yews and commissioning superb new furniture, as well as the remodelling of the house itself.

The architect responsible was Henry Flitcroft. His name is first mentioned in the Memorandum of Works of 1740, which described the remodelling of the Great Dining ➤





Room. Work to the house continued until 1745, when attention shifted to the grounds, although the demolition of the old service court and the erection of the long west wings took place in about 1750. Flitcroft was paid £100 for his plans in 1743.

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The craftsmen were all first-rank Office of Works men from London whom Flitcroft employed at Woburn and elsewhere. They included John Devall, the mason for chimneypieces, and John Boson, wood carver (best known for William Kent’s Royal Barge for Frederick, Prince of Wales), and Peter Scheemakers, the sculptor who modelled the Classical heads in the Great Dining Room frieze. Furniture was supplied by the fashionable William Hallett of St Martin’s Lane in London, but little of that now remains in the house.

Flitcroft’s work inside included new ceilings and marble chimneypieces in many of the rooms and the complete architectural decoration of what is now known as the White Hall (**Fig 4**), as well as the remodeling of the Great Dining Room within its 17th-century shell. Externally, he gave a uniform gloss to the house, disguising its phased development. He added a crenellated parapet all round, creating an even roofline, moulded stone architraves to the windows and new Portland Stone doorcases in the centre of the east and west fronts, the former

with an open swan’s-neck pediment and the latter forming a two-storeyed centrepiece with a rusticated Doric doorway. Flitcroft received his final payment of £21 in 1749.

The 4th Earl and Countess’s work in the grounds after 1745 remain remarkably complete. These were described by Richard Pococke in 1754 as ‘very beautifully laid out in a serpentine river, pieces of water, lawns etc., and very gracefully adorned with wood’. Among the buildings they erected within them are The Towers (built by John Barrett), the ‘hermit’s cave’ and, above all, the grotto (**Fig 6**). This was created in 1749–50 and is the finest of the genre to survive.

It was the work of John Castles of Marylebone, the most fashionable purveyor of such work in Georgian London. He operated from the ‘Great Grotto’ in Paddington Street, which he opened to the public at half a crown a head and provided refreshments and, later, a cold bath for visitors. His fashionable patrons included Princess Amelia, who built her own grotto at Gunnersbury Park. As well as making grottos, Castles sold do-it-yourself kits of shells and cement to amateurs to make their own. His reputation was sealed by the grotto he created for Sir Robert Walpole in Chelsea.

That at St Giles presides over a spring that feeds the lake and comprises two rooms, the outer lined with flints and minerals and the inner covered with exotic shells from the Caribbean supplied by Alderman Beckford of Jamaica.

The 4th Earl’s contribution is the dominant element at St Giles as it exists today, but his successors in the early 19th century employed Thomas Cundy (Senior), surveyor to the Grosvenor estate in Mayfair, to cement-render the exterior in line with Regency



Fig 6: The spectacular grotto covered in shells imported from the Caribbean

taste and to knock together the three rooms along the south front to make a fashionable large library living room (**Fig 2**) to contain the books of the Philosopher 3rd Earl.

The bookcases designed by Cundy were grained oak, but Flitcroft’s three chimneypieces were retained. This room had scagliola columns made by Joseph Alcott, but, sadly, these were removed in the mid 19th century by the 7th Earl to make space for more bookcases, so the room has lost its original Regency character.

Cundy’s main contribution was the roofing over the central courtyard in 1813 to create the Stone Hall, with a Soanic plaster vault and central oval lantern. (This may have been based on a Soane idea as he was consulted in 1793.) The main staircase was also replaced at the same time. Cundy’s Stone Hall is a worthy contribution to the house and acts as a focus of communications on both floors.

The last major works to St Giles were carried out in the 1850s by the most famous member of the family, the philanthropist 7th Earl who employed P. C. Hardwick to modify some of the interiors, especially the Library, the Tapestry Room and Small Dining Room, and to add two towers with steep French pavilion roofs at the junctions between the main block and the west service wings. These assertively Picturesque additions proved structurally unstable and were removed in 1886.

On the main block, the roof was rebuilt—with pedimented 17th-century type dormer windows—to contain servants’ bedrooms. Late-Victorian and Edwardian changes comprised mainly decoration and the installation of electric lighting in 1900. The house survived unaltered all through the 20th century, finally falling into decay that has only just been reversed, as we shall discover next week. 🐉

Fig 4 facing page: The White Hall interior was created by Flitcroft in the 1740s.

Fig 5 below: The brick stables of the 1620s feature a Jacobean gabled style

