

## Chapter 3

# Southill House

by *ANDREW BROOKES*

**T**HE HOUSE AT Southill Park is widely acclaimed as the masterpiece of the architect Henry Holland. While externally the architecture has become blurred by both passage of time and by inappropriate repairs, particularly in the 1960s, the interiors survive almost unaltered as a perfect example of the complete Regency house. As a reaction, perhaps, to the flamboyance of the baroque style of the early house, Holland's style, perfected at Southill, is a statement or perhaps more accurately an understatement of restraint in architectural form and decorative detailing.

Henry Holland was born in London on 20 July 1745. The son of a Master Builder, Holland learned his trade in the family business. Holland's father, Henry Holland senior, began an association with Lancelot 'Capability' Brown in the mid 1700s and this proved to be of considerable benefit to Holland the younger, who developed skills as a designer, no doubt gaining experience through speculative developments in London. Henry Holland senior worked closely with Lancelot Brown at Ashridge in Hertfordshire in the early 1760s, and Brown's reputation and connections must have opened many doors to the able and ambitious son. Indeed in 1777 the Park at Southill was redesigned by 'Capability' Brown for Viscount Torrington. In 1773 Henry Holland married Brown's daughter Bridget by which time he had established his own thriving architectural practice employing, among others, John Soane who was to become one of the most creative and original architects of his time.

The commission at Southill came relatively late in Holland's busy and successful career. Unlike many of his contemporaries Holland had not travelled to the Mediterranean and perhaps this apparent privation allowed Holland to develop such an individual style which was to influence both his contemporaries and his successors. Samuel Whitbread I had purchased the Southill estate in 1795 and immediately began to plan the extensive alterations which took four years to complete. In 1796 Samuel Whitbread I died and was succeeded by his son Samuel



*Samuel Whitbread II by John Opie, 1804*

Whitbread II, and a long and surprisingly close relationship developed between the new patron and his architect.

Admiral George Byng, first Viscount Torrington, created a new mansion on the site of the present house, and set out the park and gardens at a cost which apparently strained his considerable fortune. Documentary evidence indicates that Torrington's house was almost certainly completed by November 1726. Almost seventy years later, by which time the family fortune had completely disappeared, Torrington's grandson, John Byng the diarist, lamented the late Admiral's extravagance. Following a visit to Turvey near Bedford in 1793, where John Higgins was building Turvey House on a bare hillside, Byng wrote "Now this is so like a London tradesman, or an admiral! My grandfather thus built Southill House in an open field; and had to plant trees, to dig canals, to make



mounts, and to throw away his money in vile taste! When ready-built houses, and ready-grown trees are to be bought all at once. . . as wise people have done, purchasing house, furniture, and wine all at a stroke; and sit themselves down, the next day, in their own houses, quietly with all their comforts and luxuries about them. Men do not make fortunes before they are 50 years of age, when they are harass'd and worn out; and then should buy a place ready cut and dry'd. Now my grandfather admiral and my uncle admiral would, from folly and pride, rear places, and they both died ere they were finish'd, leaving their heirs encumber'd with great houses and inadequate estates".

A view of Southill House by Badeslade about the year 1739, published in *Vitruvius Britannicus*, shows the house and park. The Palladian style house has a southerly approach with a formal park extending to the north, with vast avenues of trees, woodland and water gardens, and formal ponds and canals to the north west. In the distance, floating serenely at the further extremity of the canal, is a three masted man'o'war, no doubt artistic licence to flatter the Admiral!

There is no documentary or other evidence yet found to suggest an architect. The Palladian style of Torrington's new house prompted the suggestion that Isaac Ware may have been the architect, although it is now known that the date of the house is too early for any possible connection. Ware only started his apprenticeship in 1721 and his first known commission came in 1733 in London. Without firm evidence of the date of Torrington's house a connection with Ware was perhaps a reasonable assumption. Ware was a strict follower of the Palladian ideal which was the stylistic inspiration for the new house. Ware's patron, the third Earl of Burlington (1694-1753), was enormously influential in the establishment of the Palladian revival in England during the early Georgian period. The originator of this architectural style was Andrea Palladio (1508-1580) who studied ancient classical architecture in Italy and established a set of principles embodied in his famous publication *The Four Books of Architecture*. This work was translated by Isaac Ware from the Italian and re-published in 1738 under the patronage of Lord Burlington. A later link with Ware is more possible. Ware worked extensively in the 1740s at nearby Chicksands Priory, seat of Sir Danvers Osborn, Lord Torrington's grandson, and he may then have supervised some minor alterations at Southill. Henry Holland's plan drawings of the house as it was in 1795 compared to earlier plan drawings show changes to the Eating Room and Drawing Room and perhaps this was the work of Isaac Ware.

No other candidate as architect of this house has been suggested in place of Ware. It could be that the Admiral, a practical man, built the house without an architect, employing an experienced builder to provide a degree of competence.

Drawings survive in the Southill archive to give a good understanding of the house built by Lord Torrington. The design was typically Palladian in style consisting of a three bay, five storey main block flanked by two three-storey wings. The pedimented pavilions are dominated by large Venetian windows facing north and south. Single storey arcaded links join the pavilions to the main block. The house was brick faced as illustrated in coloured versions of the elevational drawings. During the recent restoration work, red facing bricks with mortar joints lined out in the early eighteenth century style were found behind the 1796 stone ashlar facing. Indeed, much evidence of the first house survives, mostly hidden, except in the basement and attic where doors, doorcases and oak floorboards have remained in rooms considered by Holland to have been architecturally unimportant.

If we compare it with the present house, the plan layout of Lord Torrington's house could hardly have been more different. The principal entrance was to the south by way of a single storey pedimented portico, no doubt bearing the family crest. The kitchen lay at the east end of the house in the pavilion. Keeping food warm *en route* to the Eating Room at the other end of the building must have presented considerable practical problems. All the principal rooms at ground floor level faced north, over the park. While this is contrary to modern, and indeed late Georgian, taste there are advantages. Rooms are not brightly lit by sunlight and views over the park are consequently clearer. However slight these advantages may seem it is quite apparent that the layout of the rooms did not please a tenant of the house, Lord Polwarth, who wrote in 1779 that Southill was "a place built and fitted up by an Idiot, with great expence, in which every room and every office is good in itself, but every room and every office stands in the wrong place". However, Polwarth's wife considered that there were sufficient good rooms in the centre block for them to make themselves comfortable. "Most of the servants then lay in the underground floor, but there are 3 or 4 rooms near the kitchen that would do for our upper servants at least."

The early Georgian fashion for red brick, particularly where good building stone was unavailable, fell out of favour in the latter half of the eighteenth century. 'Capability' Brown expressed a particular dislike for red brick facings which in his opinion "could set a valley in a fever". In 1795 Samuel Whitbread I saw that his son would need a seat in Bedfordshire and purchased the Southill estate. There was little delay in appointing Holland to oversee alterations to the house, although the elder Samuel did not live to see the new house occupied. In 1796, following his father's death, Samuel Whitbread II took up the reins and there followed a long and affectionate relationship between the new owner and





*The Rebuilding of Southill in 1797 by George Garrard*

the architect. Holland transformed the house. A new service wing to the east provided accommodation for the kitchen and laundry. The former Great Hall was extended to the south to become the new Drawing Room. The whole composition was radically recast with a new driveway providing access to the north side of the house. Gone was the grand entrance portico of Torrington's house. The north door into Holland's new Hall was a wonderful understatement with no architectural emphasis. This severe design was apparently not appreciated by a later generation, who built a new Hall and *Porte Cochère* at the west end of the house. To the south, colonnaded loggias softened the formal relationship between the house and garden. A contemporary picture by Garrard shows the house in the process of rebuilding. Masons are seen working huge blocks of stone refacing the house. Interestingly, Holland chose the only available local stone for the rebuilding. Quarried from the harder chalk beds, Totternhoe clunch is a relatively weak stone and therefore perhaps a surprising choice. This deficiency must have been known to Holland and the more durable Portland stone was used for the cornice, with Ketton stone for the parapets. The clunch facings have not weathered well, and recent repair work included substantial refacing, again using clunch from the nearby Totternhoe quarry. Previously, refacing had been carried out



*Henry Holland, bust by George Garrard*

using Portland stone and Bath stone with disastrous visual effect. The warm honey colour of weathered clunch is its great attraction and this, too, must have been known to Holland.

The masterpiece created by Holland was a great delight to his patron. The beauty and subtlety of this wonderful house have been widely acclaimed and the house considered Holland's masterpiece. Decorated and partly furnished by

Holland, Southill House provides a unique combination of formal grandeur and domestic warmth and simplicity which has been enjoyed by succeeding generations of the family for two hundred years.

Holland died in 1806 soon after completion of the new house. As a mark of affection Whitbread commissioned a bust of Holland which bears the following inscription on the plinth:

“Business is often friendship’s end  
 From business once there rose a Friend.  
 Holland! that Friend I found in thee,  
 Thy loss I feel, when e’er I see  
 The labours of thy polished mind:  
 Thy loss I feel, when e’er I find  
 The comforts of this happy place;  
 Thy loss I feel when e’er I trace  
 In house, in garden, or in ground,  
 The scene of every social round.  
 Farewell !  
 In life I honoured thee;  
 In death thy name respected be”.

Samuel Whitbread II encouraged many contemporary artists including George Garrard and Garrard’s father-in-law, Sawrey Gilpin. Pictures and sculptures by Garrard survive together with painted overdoors by Gilpin. The French artist, Alexandre Louis Delabrière painted the superb decoration in the Painted Parlour which survives to this day, together with excellent contemporary painted decoration in the Dining Room which has recently been skilfully restored. The whole composition is a remarkable combination of patron and artist, producing a great work of architecture with pictures and furnishings which have survived changing fashions over a period of two centuries, and Southill remains essentially an elegant and comfortable family home.