



1—The Baroque west range of Stoneleigh Abbey, built for Edward, 3rd Lord Leigh, between 1720 and 1726

STONELEIGH ABBNEY

WARWICKSHIRE

THE PROPERTY OF THE STONELEIGH ABBNEY PRESERVATION TRUST

BY JOHN CORNFORTH

The Baroque west range of Stoneleigh Abbey, near Kenilworth in Warwickshire, was left unfinished and unfurnished when the 3rd Lord Leigh died in 1738. Now, as the house emerges from half a decade of repair, a comparison of inventories throws light on how the principal rooms were originally conceived and their uses altered later.



2—The saloon. The central room on the main floor of the west range, it was originally conceived as the hall. In the early- to-mid-19th century, it was renamed and the scagliola columns added at which time it was used as the largest sitting room of the house

F EW country houses have experienced as hard a time as did Stoneleigh Abbey in Warwickshire between 1960—when it suffered a major fire—and 1996, when the present preservation trust was established. The ways in which the structure and future of this important country house have both now been secured will be considered in a later article. This article considers the original planning and furnishing of the great Baroque west range (Fig 1), drawing on the extensive Stoneleigh archive, now at the Shakespeare Centre in Stratford,

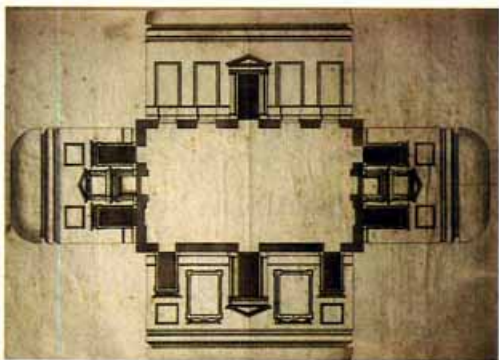
particularly through a comparison of the 1738 and 1850 inventories.

The show parts of Stoneleigh Abbey have been somewhat reduced since it was opened to the public in the 1950s. The historic contents on display have also been pared down to a minimum, so it is hard for visitors today to grasp exactly what they are looking at. A disturbed late-20th-century history follows on from a bumpy 18th-century history, the architectural aspects of which have been largely disentangled by Professor Andor Gomme, particularly in *The Antiquaries Journal* of 1988. The original furnishing and decoration

of the principal rooms have, however, attracted less attention.

In the simplest terms, the west range, a provincial version of a Roman Baroque palace, rising from the banks of the Warwickshire Avon, was built between 1720 and 1726, for Edward, 3rd Lord Leigh (of the first creation). Although he is thought to have made the Grand Tour, he is not recorded in *The Dictionary of British Travellers in Italy* unless he is the Mr Leigh who suffered from the pox in Venice and left for Rome in March 1709: that is possible because he did not succeed his father until November 1710. His architect was Francis Smith of Warwick. When Lord Leigh died in 1738 at the age of 53, it seems that the interior was not completely finished or furnished. He left his widow in control, but when she died in 1743, his son, Thomas, the 4th Baron, started work again, but with Francis's son, William Smith.

William Smith died in 1747 and the house was still unfinished when Lord Leigh died in 1749 at the age of 36. His heir, Edward, the 5th Baron, was a minor, so the house was shut up in 1750 and much of the secondary contents sold. When Edward came of age, in 1763, he immediately made the house habitable. He also had ambitious plans prepared by Timothy Lightoler for transforming the hall, completing the plasterwork on the



3—William Smith's 1740s design for the hall, which incorporates a coved ceiling

principal staircase, remodelling some of the family rooms and building on a vast new north range to match the west range.

The last was not even started—in 1774, Lord Leigh was declared insane. He died unmarried in 1786, and the barony became extinct (it was recreated for Chandos Leigh in 1839). Those, as well as later, successions were marked by changes of taste and ways of living, and rooms were renamed in a bewildering way. Thus exactly what the 3rd Lord Leigh intended for the decoration and furnishing of the house, and how this relates to what survives of his furniture, is difficult to understand today.

The natural place to start is the central room on the main floor of the west range (Fig 2). This was conceived as the hall but, as with several early-18th-century houses, it was renamed as the saloon in the early-to-mid-19th century. It became the largest sitting room of the house, with a surprising variety of furniture listed for it in 1850. The only architectural change made at that point was the insertion of scagliola columns and, possibly, the stone chimney-pieces were painted for the first time.

How far the 3rd Baron had got with the hall by 1738 is not clear. It seems to have been panelled and rather bare, with only four gilt-leather seats and four window curtains. The seats were probably the late-17th-century set illustrated by W. A. Thorpe in an article in *The Connoisseur* in March 1947. In the 1740s, the 4th Baron had discussed fitting up the hall with William Smith, who produced a new design for the room with a coved ceiling (Fig 3).

All the present decoration, including the elaborate plasterwork, dates from 1762–64, when the room was completed under the direction of Lightowler, with Vassalli as the probable *stuccadore*. At that stage, the room was furnished, unusually, with a pair of large settees and scroll-ended stools covered in horsehair. This suggests an

ambivalence about its character and use—softer than a hall but harder than a saloon.

The 19th-century name of the room has been retained (together with its 1980s paint scheme). There is no longer the furniture to arrange it either as a 19th-century saloon nor an 18th-century hall, which creates an uneasy feeling in one of the finest and most richly decorated mid-18th-century rooms in the county.

To the north of the hall lie the three rooms of the 3rd Lord Leigh's Great Apartment, originally called the Best or Great Parlour, the drawing room and Best Bedchamber—characteristically, the term 'state' does not seem to have been used at that time. Their significance is expressed in the sequence of the capitals in their entablatures, as well as in the unusual use of crimson upholstery in all three rooms.

By 1850, the Best Parlour was called the Velvet Drawing Room (Fig 6). It is still furnished as such, with a particularly fine early-18th-century walnut and parcel-gilt set of chairs, stools and table. But, in an odd way, they do not suit it because the order in the room proclaims that it was not intended as a drawing room. Orders, as opposed to pilasters, flanking the chimney-piece are less often found in early-18th-century interiors than might be expected and hardly ever in drawing rooms, where hangings of some kind would be expected.

The darkening of the oak in this room has distracted attention from the overall architectural quality of the original design. This is almost as grand as the Great Parlour at Badminton, also designed by Francis Smith. It has a complete set of pilasters and pairs of half columns at each end, a complete entablature with beautifully carved mouldings and no dado to break the vertical thrust of the room.

In the early 18th century, fully upholstered chairs of the richness of those now displayed here would have been too fine



4—A pilaster in the original drawing room. (Above right) 5—The distinctive capitals of the pilasters in the Best Bedchamber incorporate the Leigh coronet and arms

for a completely panelled room. Indeed, in 1738 the room had a set of walnut chairs with crimson velvet cushions, valued at £15. This room was, however, always done in crimson. There were velvet window seats valued at £8 10s, because of the cost of the velvet, and, what is described as 'in Grain' mohair curtains valued at as much as £25. Mohair was frequently used at that time. If glazed, it took on the lustre of silk, so it was employed when a material one down from silk or mixed damask was needed.

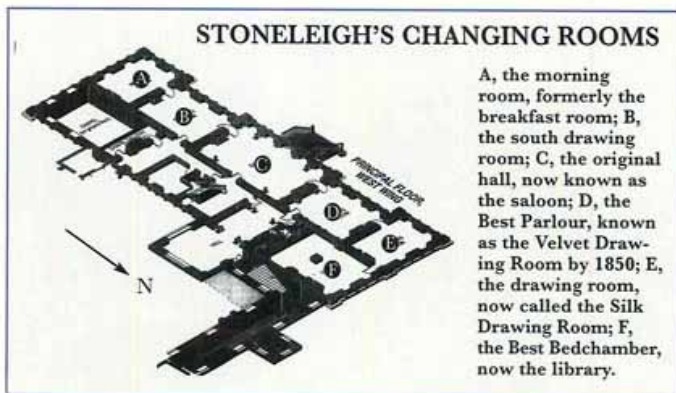
The original drawing room (Fig 7) next door, on the north-west corner of the house, is architecturally one step down from the Great Parlour. This has only a pair of pilasters (Fig 4), with Ionic capitals flanking the chimney-piece (a favourite idea



6—The original Best Parlour, long called the Velvet Drawing Room because of its velvet-upholstered chairs and stools

of Francis Smith) and only a cornice, not an entablature. It also has a dado, which acts as a check on its height. In 1850, this drawing room was called the Silk Drawing Room, but by then it had lost its famous set of needlework chairs that was valued at no less than £60 in 1738. They are now once more back in the room.

However, it would again have been odd to have such chairs in a completely panelled room in the early 18th century. What have long gone from the room are the two pieces of crimson velvet hangings which were valued at £40 in 1738. There is evidence of nail holes on the north and





7—The original drawing room, now called the Silk Drawing Room. The needlework chairs were ordered by the 3rd Lord Leigh

cast walls. That raises insoluble questions about the history of the main wall panels.

The hangings were of the same colour as the four sets of mohair curtains, which were lined with crimson tammy and valued at £40. There was a large pier glass valued at £30, which appears to be the exceptionally tall one on the north wall; a carved and gilt table at £8 8s, which could be the one still there (Fig 10); a chimney glass with serpentine branches at £12 12s and a large glass sconce at £12 (Fig 9).

The 1738 inventory shows that the room behind (now the library) was originally the Best Bedchamber. This again has pilasters flanking the chimneypiece. They have distinctive capitals that derive from Borromini via prints by Rossi (as so often with Smith), and incorporate the Leigh coronet and arms (Fig 5). The bed was of crimson velvet and valued at £300 6s.

There were crimson silk window curtains and crimson velvet window seats. In

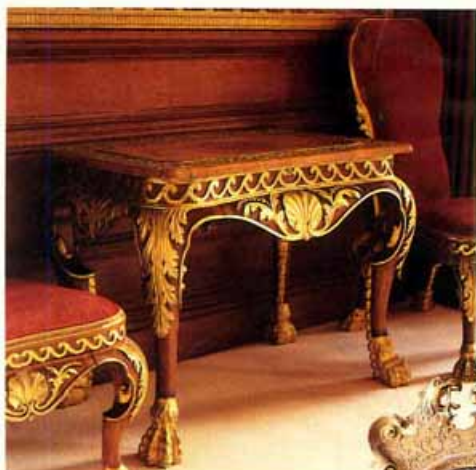
this room also stood, in 1738, the distinguished set of two armchairs and six side chairs in walnut and parcel-gilt (Fig 11) and pair of stools already mentioned as (now) in the Velvet Drawing Room and valued at £50. The present velvet is old but probably not original, and the gilding may also have been renewed. Given the value of the bed, it is surprising that the furniture was not gilded.

These chairs are of distinctive shape, particularly in their legs and unusually architectural use of a Vitruvian scroll for the frieze. This is also used on the pier tables (Fig 8). Both suggest the work of the two James Moores. The elder James Moore was long involved with the furnishing of Blenheim. The combination of walnut and parcel-gilt recalls the furniture in the Bow Window Room and saloon at Blenheim, mentioned in the 1740 inventory as brown and gold: was that, in fact, walnut and parcel-gilt, as at Stoneleigh?

If the Moores were involved at Stoneleigh it is more likely to be the son rather than the father (who died in 1726). The son's name also occurs in the 1732 accounts for Davenport House, Shropshire, another house designed by Smith.

What the 1738 inventory clearly reveals is the contrast between the furnishing of the west rooms in crimson and the simplicity of the everyday rooms to the right of the hall. These included the parlour, now called the South Drawing Room, adjoining the hall, now saloon, and the Common Drawing Room, now the morning room, on the corner overlooking the river. The latter now has the furniture from Queen Victoria's Bedroom. There were also two modest parlours flanking the great stairs on the east side of the west range.

However, what is not clear is how the 3rd Lord Leigh intended the house to be entered on a daily basis—was the so-called servants' hall below the saloon originally



8—One of the parcel-gilt walnut tables originally provided for the best bedchamber, possibly by James Moore the Younger

conceived as a lower hall, with a door similarly placed to the present public entrance?

The bedrooms over the Great Apartment were still unfurnished in 1738, but it is still striking that the value of the contents of the whole place, including plate, linen and livestock, came to £4,821 16s 1½d.

When Edward, 5th Lord Leigh, came of age there were as many as 14 rooms on the top floor of the west range needing attention and plenty of painting was required on the main floor. Lord Leigh set to with a will—as can be seen from the full set of bills that run up to 1763: from Bromwich and Leigh for wallpaper and *papier mâché*, Gomm for furniture, and Thomas Burnett for upholstery. The Gomm account is one of the principal sources of information for that firm and it is sad that some of the



10—A gilt gesso table with the Leigh coat of arms, in the drawing room



9—One of the gilt mirrors in the drawing room

(Right) 11—The parcel-gilt and walnut chair, upholstered in crimson velvet, originally provided for the Best Bedchamber, possibly by James Moore the Younger



identifiable furniture has been sold recently.

A generation later, in 1806, Mrs George Austen and her daughter Jane stayed with their cousin James Henry Leigh, who had inherited Stoneleigh that year. Mrs Austen wrote: 'You go up a considerable flight of steps (some offices are under the house) into a large Hall; on the right hand is the dining parlour, within that the Breakfast room, where we generally sit, and reason good 'tis the only room (except the Chapel) that looks towards the River. On the left hand of the hall is the best drawing room, within that a smaller; these rooms are rather gloomy Brown-wainscot and dark Crimson furniture; so we never use them but to walk thro' them to the old picture gallery. Behind the smaller drawing room is the state Bed Chamber with a high dark crimson Velvet Bed; an alarming apartment just fit for a Heroine.'

How the house stirs the imagination of visitors is important. Fortunately, the Stoneleigh archive is huge and there is an enormous amount to draw on to help explain the evolution of the interior decoration and furnishing, as well as the building of the house. That, in turn, will make it possible to bring the house to life, by reflecting different points in its history.

Stoneleigh Abbey (01926 858535) is open to the public from Easter until the end of October on Tuesdays to Thursdays, Sundays and Bank Holidays. Photographs: Tim Enrie-Tait.

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