

NOTTINGHAM HOUSE

JOHN THORPE AND HIS RELATION TO KENSINGTON PALACE

By PATRICK A. FAULKNER

In 1689 for the sum of £18,000, William III purchased from his Lord Chancellor, Nottingham House,¹ and commenced that series of alterations and additions that was eventually to produce Kensington Palace.²

Nottingham House, a name it must be remembered, it can only have borne after Sir Heneage Finch was created Lord Nottingham in 1681, lay to the north of the Kensington Road next to Holland House and occupied the site of the central rooms of the State apartments of the present Kensington Palace (fig. 1).

Apart from Evelyn's and Pepys's mention of it, we have general proof of its existence and can gather some idea of its form from the plans prepared by Wren in carrying out his alterations and now preserved in the All Souls Collection (All Souls, vol. iii, 4 and vol. i, 12) (pl. X).

These show³ the form of the house in relation to the later buildings and show it to have been a rectangular block with characteristic semi-circular bays on the axis lying north and south with the entrance to the south facing the Kensington Road. Two other general plans⁴, ⁵ in the Wren Collection show these bay windows, and one further detailed plan is dimensioned.

This form, both in dimensions and particulars, agrees with a previously unidentified plan, no. 94, in the Collection of Thorpe drawings preserved at the Soane Museum. Though no scale is given on this plan, there are figured dimensions in pencil giving the three bays of the house from east to west as being 20 ft., 21 ft., and 20 ft. respectively, detail measurements that agree with remarkable accuracy with the dimensions of Nottingham House as preserved in the Wren Surveys. On this count alone, it is possible to identify without any doubt the Thorpe plan as a plan of Nottingham House.

The Thorpe plan has written over it in pencil, and later overwritten in ink, the name 'Sir George Coppin'. This Sir George may be traced as being the son of George Coppin who built the Market Cross at Dunwich;⁶ he was knighted in 1603⁷ and became a Clerk of the Crown to James I; died in 1619 and was buried in the chancel of the Church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields⁸ in which Parish the Kensington house lay. He bought the land in Kensington from Sir W. Cope, the builder of 'Cope Castle' later to become Holland House. Sir George's two elder sons, Robert (born

¹ Evelyn's *Diary*, February 25th, 1690 (Bohn ed.), 315.

² See also forthcoming paper, Kensington Palace in the *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*.

³ Wren Soc., vii. Plate xvii, A.S., Vol. I, 12.

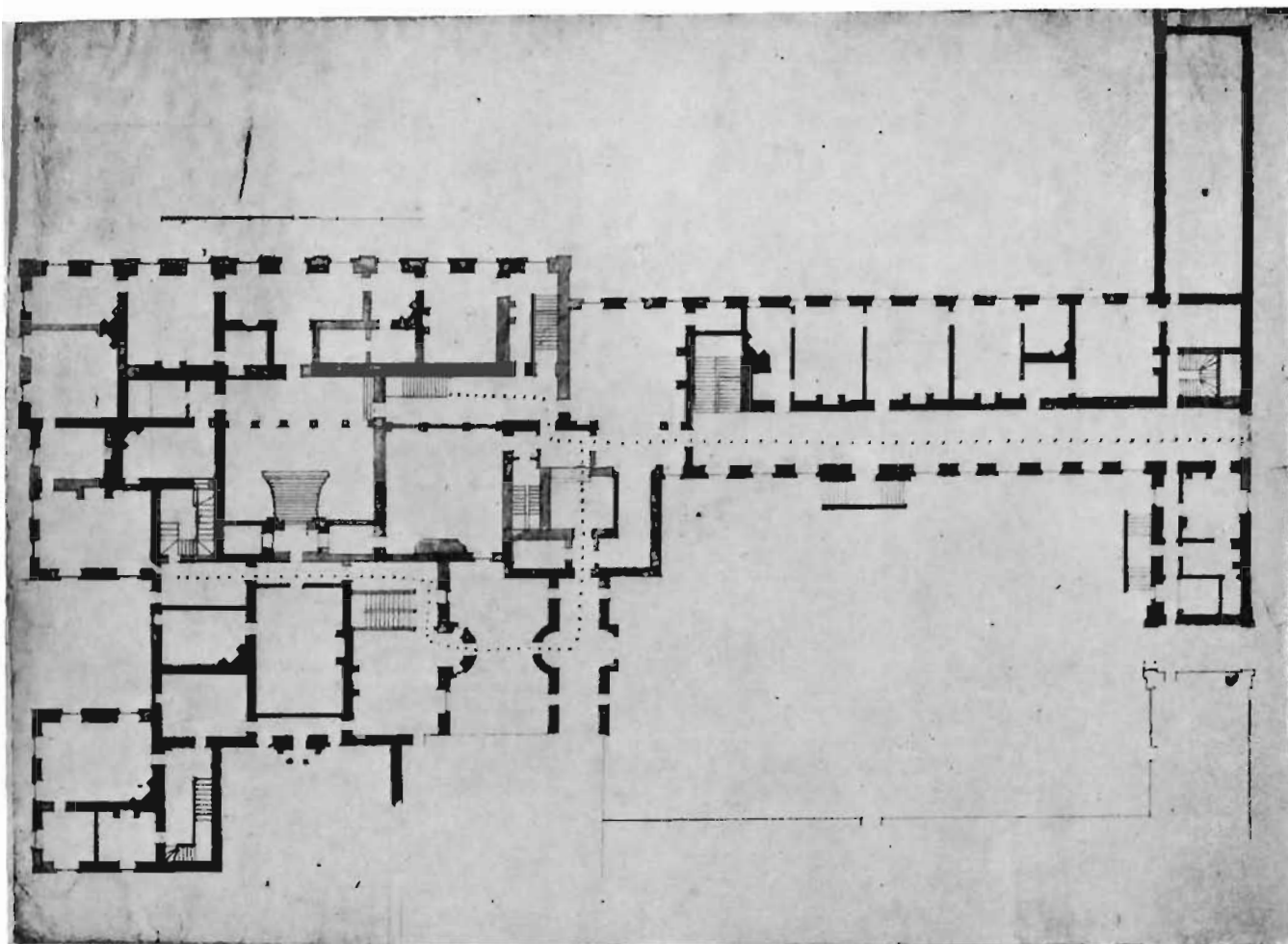
⁴ Wren Soc., vii. Plate xvii, A.S., Vol. III, 4.

⁵ Wren Soc., vii. Plate xix, A.S. Vol., III, 2.

⁶ *Harleian Soc.*, xxii, 45.

⁷ William Shaw, *Knights of England* (1905).

⁸ St. Martin in the Fields, Parish Registers, 1619.



PLAN OF KENSINGTON PALACE, c. 1695, SHOWING NOTTINGHAM HOUSE INCORPORATED IN LATER ADDITIONS BY
SIR CHRISTOPHER WREN
(*All Souls*, Vol. I, 12.)



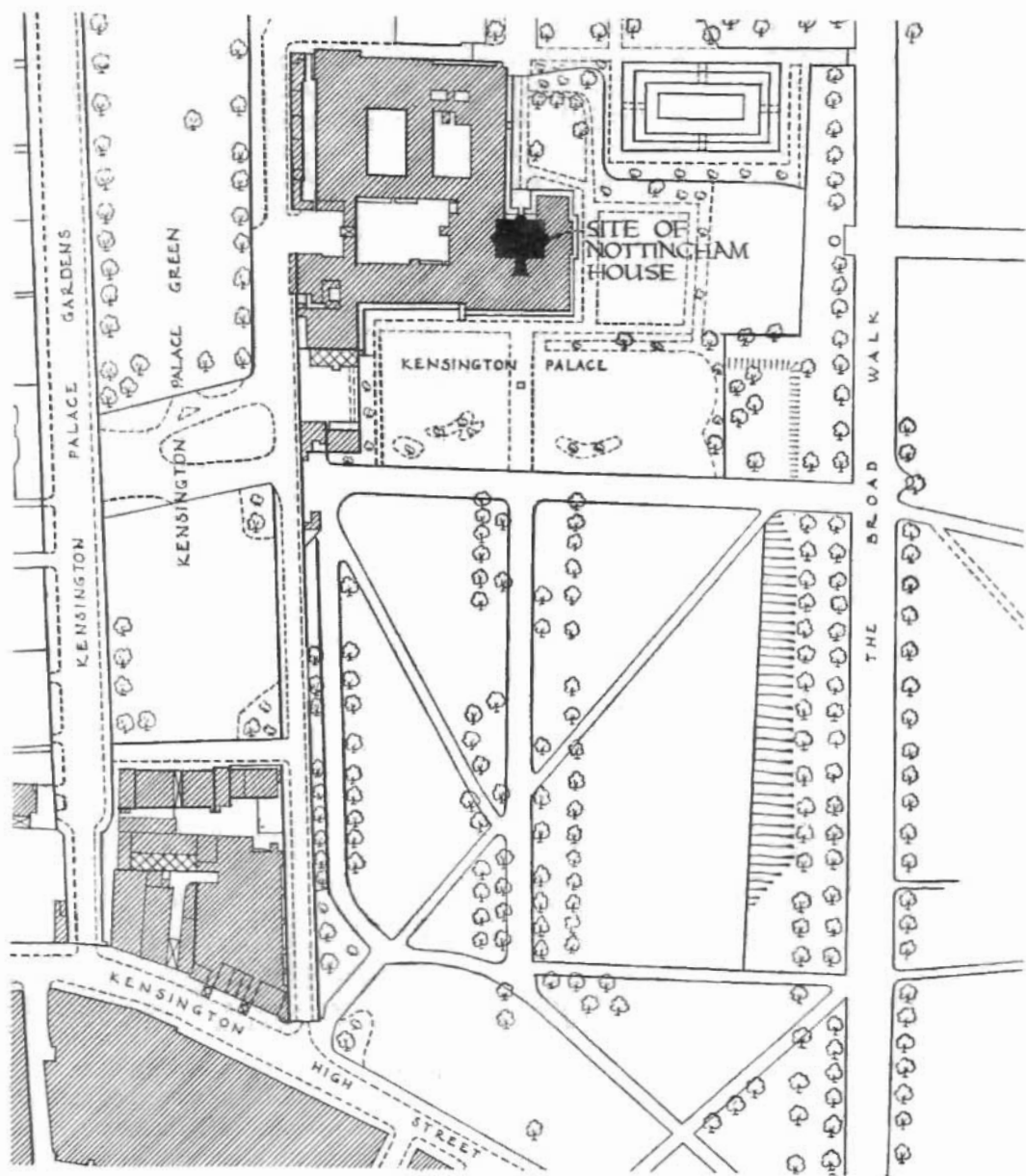


FIG. I. KENSINGTON PALACE: PLAN SHOWING RELATION OF NOTTINGHAM HOUSE TO THE PRESENT PALACE BUILDINGS

1584)¹ and Thomas (born 1604),² both held land in Kensington. It was from Thomas Coppin that, about 1620,³ Sir Heneage Finch purchased the house which remained in the Finch family until bought in 1689 by King William III.

The Finch's brought a succession of distinguished owners to the house.⁴ The first, Sir Heneage Finch, fourth son of Sir Moyle Finch of Eastwell, Kent, became Recorder of London in 1621, and in 1623, Speaker in Charles I's first parliament. After his death in 1631, the house passed to his second son John. Sir John Finch, knighted in 1661 after the restoration, spent the greater part of his life abroad and can thus have occupied the house seldom, if at all. He was in England, however, during the period 1660-65 and it may have been at this time that he sold it to his elder brother Heneage. Sir Heneage was in occupation of the house in 1663, remaining there until his death in 1682. A notable contemporary figure, Sir Heneage was already, at the time of his purchasing the Kensington house, Solicitor-General and had been created Baron Ravenstone. His rise was rapid. He became successively, Lord Keeper of the Seals and Lord Chancellor and was, in 1674, created Baron Daventry.

In 1681 Sir Heneage, a year before his death, was created First Earl of Nottingham, the title and what may, by now, be called Nottingham House, then passed to his son, Daniel Finch, second Earl of Nottingham, First Lord of the Admiralty. Seven years later in 1689, Nottingham House was sold to William III, when the Finch connexion with it ended, although Nottingham must have visited it many times in his capacity of Councillor to Queen Mary.⁵ The connexion was marked by the retention of a room in the house to be used as 'Lord Nottingham's Office'.⁶

The consideration of this house thus successively occupied by the Coppins and Finches, inevitably, in view of its inclusion in the Soane Museum Collection, raises the question of its authorship and to what extent we can hold John Thorpe himself responsible for the design. We are already indebted to Mr. John Summerson for what details we know of Thorpe's life.⁷ For his capabilities as a designer we must look to his drawings. The Thorpe plans are, many of them, quite clearly only measured drawings of existing houses. The existence, therefore, of a plan in this collection does not, of itself, prove that Thorpe was the architect of the house or, indeed, that he was even the author of the drawing.

The plans include a number of other drawings showing a remarkable similarity to the Coppin house and further to a whole group based on the same theme or a direct variant. In view of the consistency of thought that runs through these plans there seems little doubt that they may be attributed to the same hand and no reason why this should not have been the author of the greater part of the Thorpe drawings. Mr. Summerson has suggested that, if John Thorpe is to be considered as an 'architect' his most likely clients would be those minor officials in whose circle he moved. Sir George Coppin would clearly be such a person. If, then, we can consider Thorpe to be responsible for this group of houses, we must also accept his responsibility for the innovations they contain and his position as a pioneer in the planning, if not the external design, of houses of the period.

¹ St. Martin in the Fields, Parish Registers.

² St. Martin in the Fields, Parish Registers.

³ Loftie, *Kensington*.

⁴ Et seq. Brian l'Anson, *History of Finch Family*.

⁵ *Dictionary of National Biography*.

⁶ "Kensington Paye Book", 1689-90, Ministry of Works.

⁷ John Summerson, *Architectural Review* (Nov., 1949), 291-9.

Sir George Coppin's house (pl. XI), the date of which must be 1605 or shortly after, thus assumes considerable significance as being the fore-runner of a whole series of plans leading to the typical eighteenth century villa plan and marking the final breakaway from medieval tradition.

It is in the planning of the hall and its relation to the general layout that we find the greatest innovation. In detail, the hall in this series remains traditional; it possesses the screens and dais of a medieval hall. In its relation to the rest of the building, however, there is a sharp change, the relation of hall to parlour and stair case, remaining, in so far as it is functional, the same. The hall now is planned in relation to the approach and is placed axially with the entrance, lit from one end instead of from one side. The significance of this change lies in that it represents a new outlook with regard to space planning, relating, as it does, the internal plan of the house to the external plan of the layout surrounding it. Seventeen examples of this class of plan exist among the Soane Collection drawings.

This change had been foreshadowed for some time. Earlier houses, such as the well-known Compton Wynyates (1520), typify the inward-looking conception of the later medieval house planned to be considered from the court it surrounds.

By the end of the sixteenth century, this conception had altered to the extent of forming a symmetrical or almost symmetrical block that could be appreciated as a composition, in houses such as Doddington Hall (1593), Burton Agnes (1602) or Kirby Hall (1570).

It is in the Thorpe plans that we first meet with the remaining change, the relation of internal plan to external layout. The Coppin plan shows the most elementary version of this arrangement and may well be at 1605 the earliest example. More elaborate versions occur in Sir George St. Poole's House (fig. 4) and Lord Clanrickard's House (Somerhill). It does not, unfortunately, seem possible to fix these precisely in date, though Charlton House, Kent, can be dated at 1609-12 and represents the earliest date, apart from the Coppin House, connected with this form of plan.

The trend in planning initiated by these Thorpe drawings persisted in the Wren Period, and is well illustrated by a plan in the Worcester College Collection¹ which, though showing an advancement of planning technique is still based on the same axial theme of Sir George Coppin's home. It is important, therefore, to fix as clearly as possible, the date of this house, marking as it does, so significant a stage in the development of house planning (fig. 2).

In 1604-5 there is a reference in the Close Rolls (2 James I) to a lease between Sir Walter Cope, the builder of the adjacent Holland House, and Sir George Coppin. Furthermore, Sir George, who was knighted in 1603, leaves in his will 'my newe dwelling house . . . and all my lands and tenements commonly called and known by the name of Nottinghamwoods . . . unto the . . . Lady Anne Coppin, my wife.'² Sir George died in 1619,³ so that on this evidence alone his house must have been built between 1604 and 1619, stylistic evidence would place it nearer to 1604, say in 1605. He would, moreover, most probably have had the intention to build when

¹ Maiden Bradley, Wilts.

² Will of Sir Geo. Coppin, 1620, P.C.C. 30, Soame [Somerset House].

³ St. Martin in the Fields, Parish Registers, 1619.

SIR GEORGE COPPIN'S HOUSE - KENSINGTON

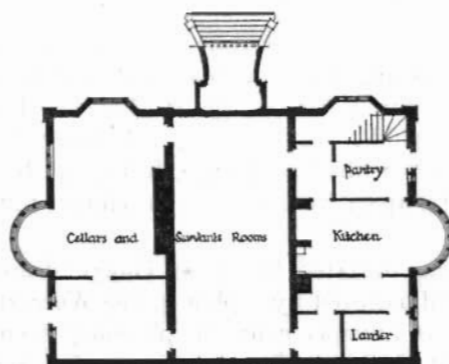
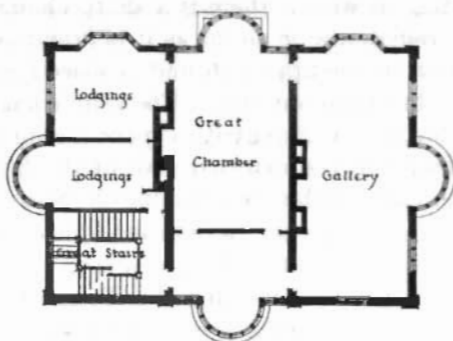


FIG. 2.

he bought the land in 1605 so that it is not unreasonable to place the date of the design in this year.

During the eighty or so years after it was built, Nottingham House passed through the hands of two generations of the Coppin family, and two of the Finch family. Moreover, Sir Heneage Finch was resident there on his elevation to the peerage, so there was considerable opportunity for alterations. As far as is known, there is no evidence to show what alterations, if any, were carried out or when, though it is possible that further research may clarify this.

There are, however, differences between the Thorpe plan and the house that existed when Wren started his alterations for William III and it is impossible at the moment to state if these represent changes in the design of the house when built or later alterations. The latter is the more likely.

It is, nevertheless, possible to make a tentative reconstruction of the house as Thorpe designed it on the basis of the Soane plan, the drawing in the Pepys Collection by Sutton Nichols, by entries in the Kensington Palace accounts and by analogy with other Thorpe plans.

As far as can be seen from the Soane Collection plan, the house was intended to stand to the north of a courtyard with a curtain wall, and there is a slight indication of pavilions in the centre of the wall. Whether this layout was actually carried out or not cannot be said, we only know that later there were other additional buildings attached or close to the main building.

The existing plan by Thorpe (pl. XI) clearly shows the principal, or, as we should say, the first, floor of the house. It must be remembered, when considering the plan, that the site slopes sharply from North to South and that then, as now, the ground floor on the south side becomes a basement on the north side.

Thorpe overcame this level difficulty by a flight of steps leading up to the main porch. These are not shown on his drawing but some such device must have been used and we have a drawing of them in the Wren plan (pl. X) and mention of them in the Wren accounts as being repaired.

The interior arrangement of the house can be traced clearly from the Thorpe plan. It was, we know, of three main storeys with attics above. This is shown to be the case on Sutton Nicholls' drawing of the north front after the Wren alterations and is confirmed by the Wren accounts¹ in which mention is made of 'Ye Garrett of ye Old Pile'. When Wren added his pavilions to the old building in 1689, he perpetuated the floor heights, so that the size and dimensions of each room can be determined with some accuracy.

The floor shown in the Thorpe plan is the principal floor, represented by the present first floor. Under it were the kitchen and servants' quarters. The device of placing the kitchen on the floor below the hall in a semi-basement is found in another plan by Thorpe for Sir John Danvers' house at Chelsea, a design for a town house on a limited site. It seems that the same planning was used here to make full use of the slope of the ground.

The kitchen itself occupied the western central bay and is marked on the Soane plan as 'kitchen under'. It is quite possible that the pencil markings on the drawing represent in this case the layout on the floor below, i.e. the ground floor.

Entrance to the principal floor was by means of a flight of steps leading to a

¹ Et seq. 'Kensington Paye Booke'.

porch which gave directly on to the screens. The screens may have been removed before Wren's time, as there is no mention of its demolition in the alterations; on the other hand, the passage behind the screens is shown intact in the only Wren plan which can be identified as being of this floor. It may, therefore, have been left. In either case, no details of it are available.

The hall itself was 12 ft. 6 in. high. As this corresponds with the existing floor levels of the building and in view of the pencilled figure on the plan, 12½, there seems no doubt that this was the dimension employed by Thorpe.

At the far end of the hall was the dais from which doors led to the staircase hall on the east and to the range of rooms on the west. Centrally on the east wall was the great fireplace. Behind the dais, filling the entire width of the hall, was the bow window with its side windows.

There is little or no evidence as to the internal treatment of the hall, unless some of the general items 'to repair of wainscott' etc., in the Wren accounts refer to this. The hall must have been either panelled or have had hangings over a panelled dado.

There are references in the Kensington pay-book to the 'Great Hall' and to the 'Great Old Roome' which can possibly be identified with Thorpe's Hall, especially as the entry regarding the fireplace occurs under the heading 'In Her Majesty's Apartments, 2nd Stoy'. (The 1689 accounts refer to the Ground Floor as the 1st Story or Ground Story indiscriminately.) Here we have a fairly complete description of the fireplace in the account for 'taking down ye grt chimney pieces in ye grt old Roome, cramping and new polishing itt and ye slipps and mending ye alabaster work and setting itt up again'. As this process appears to have been necessary in most of the rooms, Lord Nottingham must have been somewhat careless as to the state of repair of his house.

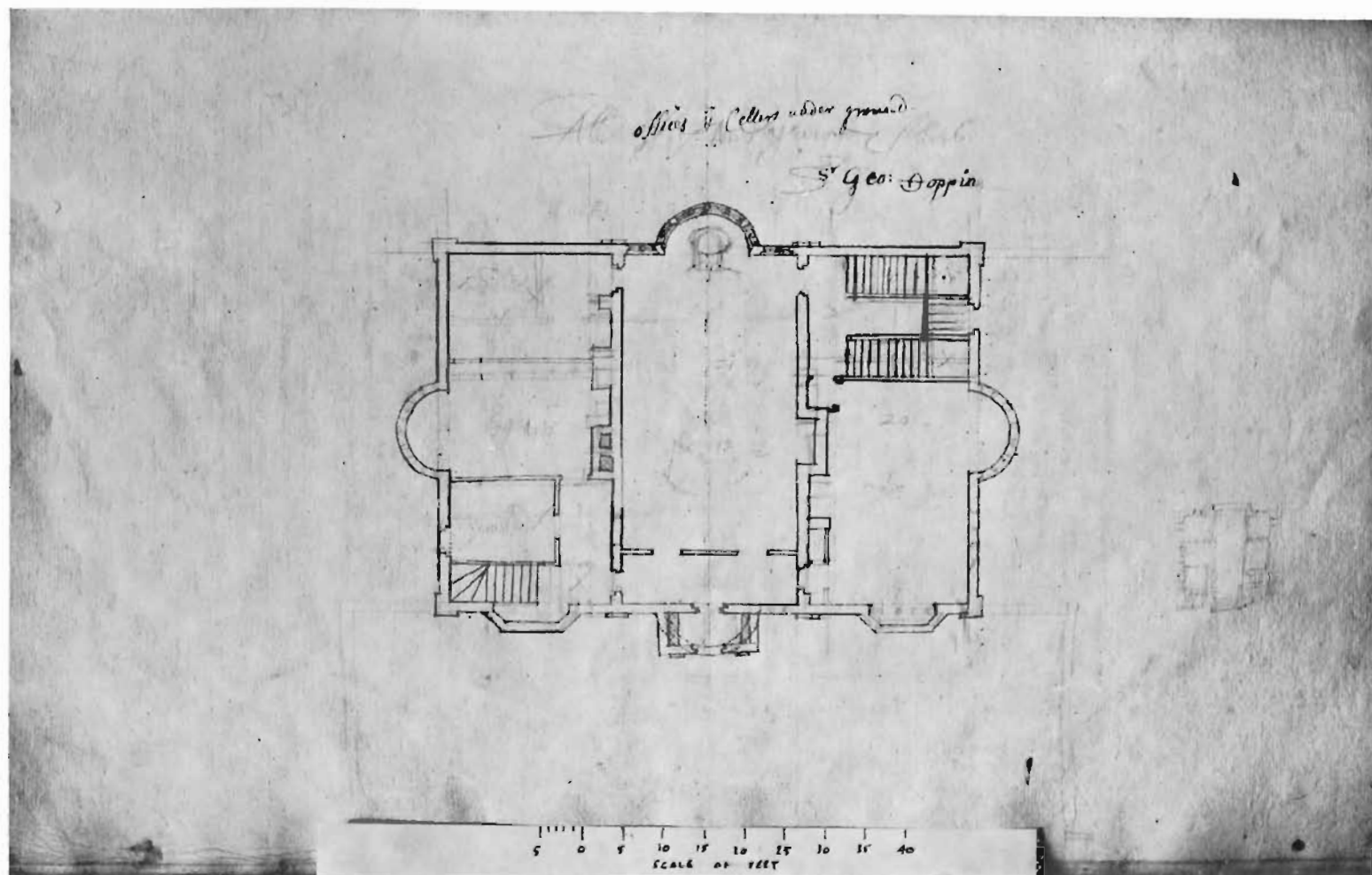
The great stairs were to the east of the dais. It is doubtful if they served more than the principal and second storey though there must have been some continuation up to the garrets which existed over the whole area of the house.

In detail, there is little that can be said of them. That it was a timber staircase is certain as in the Wren accounts for their removal only a carpenter is employed and there is no mention in this respect of either mason or bricklayer. All that can be said is that it was of the open well type, fairly spacious, being 4 ft. to 4 ft. 6 in. wide, and easy going with twenty-eight risers to the 12-14 ft. total rise. A possible analogy is Lyveden Old Building, Northants.

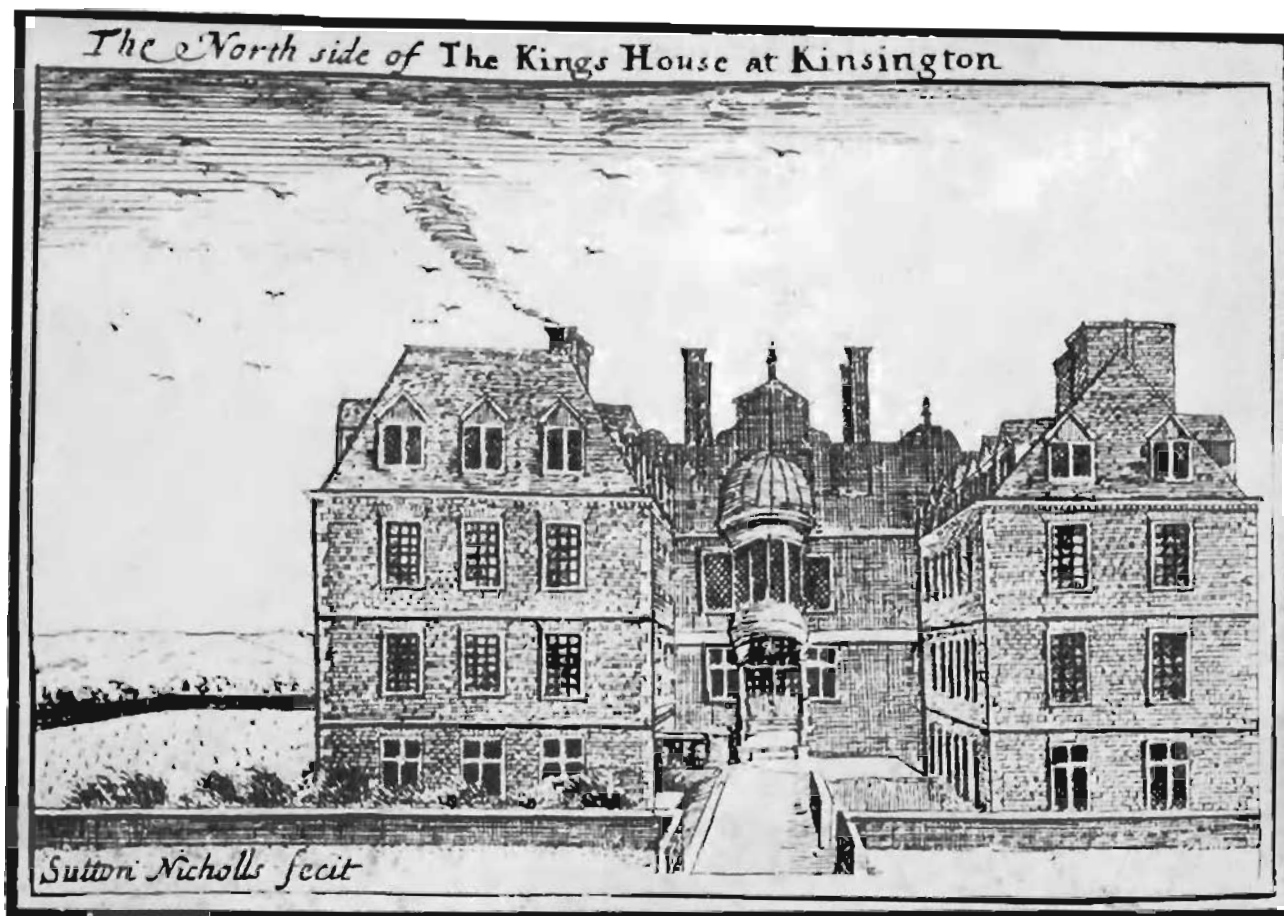
Beyond the staircase occupying the remainder of the east side of the house on this floor was the parlour, marked as such on Thorpe's plan. This is the traditional position for the parlour in planning of the period and is a room of some importance having, like the Hall, a great fireplace. Beyond its shape on the plan, nothing can be said of it though it was probably panelled in a similar manner to the Hall. A door at the south end led back into the screens passage.

There remain the three rooms on the west side of the house facing what is now Clock Court.

Thorpe gives us no clue as to what these were. Rooms in this area are referred to in the Wren accounts as 'Lord Overkirks' though it is difficult to identify exactly which rooms are intended. There is mention here of 'that which was Lord Nottingham's Chapel, now Lord Overkirk's Bedchamber' and further 'ye passage



PLAN OF SIR GEORGE COPPIN'S HOUSE : FOLIO 94 SOANE COLLECTION : THORPE DRAWINGS



VIEW OF NORTH SIDE OF NOTTINGHAM HOUSE AFTER THE ADDITION OF WREN'S PAVILIONS . . . PEPYS LIBRARY

into ye old chapell'. It is possible, therefore, that the central room with the bow window was the chapel and that the passage mentioned is that which is shown as running from the back stairs to this room. The chapel is in a comparable position in Sir John Danvers (S.C.21) and Burghley (S.C.106). It is strange, if this is the case, that Thorpe did not mark this room as such and it may be that this represents an alteration by Lord Nottingham in later years.

The remaining rooms can only be labelled as lodgings or possibly, in the case of the small room by the back stairs, as a servery.

Of the second floor (now represented by the State Apartment floor and called by Wren the Third Story) Thorpe tells us nothing. Analogy with other plans by him, more particularly Sir George St. Poole's House, where the layout is similar and both floors are shown, places the Great Chamber above the Hall. Wren carried out considerable alterations here in the layout of partitions etc., so that the exact size of this room cannot be determined.

An invariable feature of Houses of this period is the gallery. Again, Thorpe does not mention one. It forms, however, such a common feature in his houses that it is safe to assume that such did exist. To refer to only three of Thorpe's houses that are similar in layout to Sir George Coppin's, we have a gallery in Clanrickard House where it is shown over the parlour (202 S.C.), Sir George St. Poole's House where it occupies a similar position and a further unnamed plan where it is also shown over the parlour. There are numerous other instances where it is shown over an open arcade between flanking wings. It might be expected, therefore, that the gallery would have been placed, here also, over the parlour, but in this instance the space left by the stairs is insufficient.

It is possible, by a comparison of dimensions given in the 1690 accounts, to identify the long room shown on the Wren plans as extending along the west side of the old house as the Council Chamber. The length of the cornice, for instance, tallies. There is every reason to suppose, then, that Wren was here re-using an existing room and that this was, in fact, the gallery.

The rooms on the east side adjacent to the great stairs must, by both elimination and analogy, have been lodgings or bedrooms. Doubtless this applies also to the attic floor above which would have been devoted to sleeping chambers either for guests or servants, more likely the former, with servants' quarters in a separate building elsewhere.

The layout of the gardens and outbuildings, of the 1605 house, in the absence of further evidence, must remain unknown, the only hint being the wall indicated on the Thorpe plan and already mentioned.

The Wren accounts mention both 'the old wing' and the 'old range of building' indicating something of the nature of the extra work. There is also mention of the 'Old Brewhouse' and the 'Old Stable', both of which may have been incorporated in the 'Old Range'.

We know from Pepys' visit to Lord Nottingham's House that the gardens were already at that time, 1664, famous for their layout and he mentions the fountain which appears to have been on the south front, possibly in the centre of the court indicated on the Thorpe plan. There is also mention in the accounts of the 'leaded room' doubtless a summer house with a lead roof and of the 'Stone Summer House'. It is worth quoting Pepys for June 14th, 1664—'into Sir Heneage Finche's Garden

and seeing the fountain, and singing there with the ladies, and a mighty fine cool place it is, with a great laver of water in the middle and the bravest place for music I ever heard'. On another visit in 1668 he mentions the Grotto.

The earliest plan showing the whole layout of the palace, as it had then become,

KENSINGTON HOUSE - ADDITIONS BY SIR CHR. WREN IN 1689

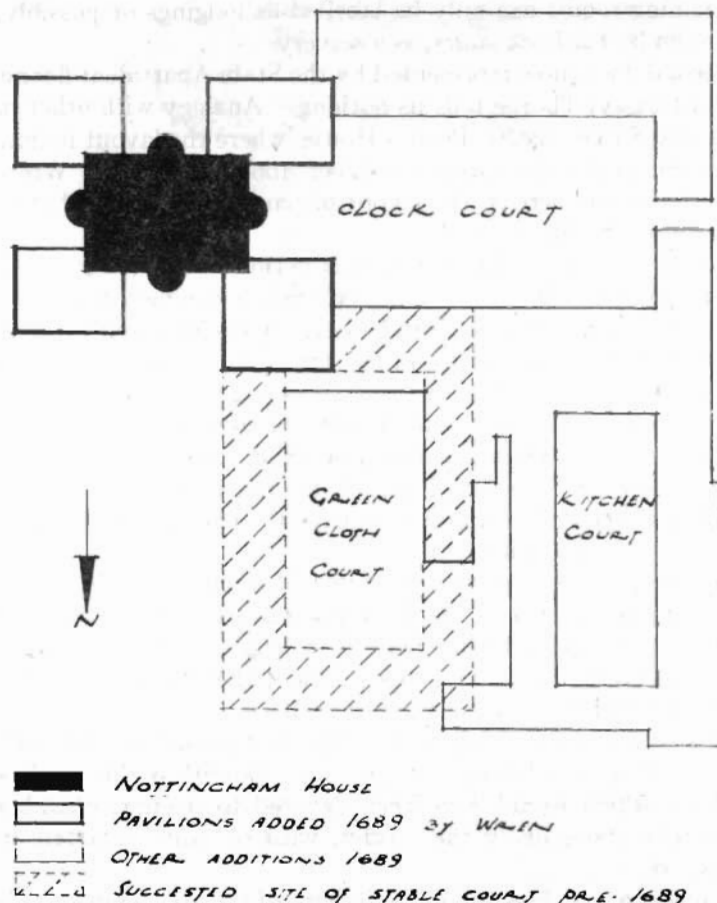


FIG. 3.

is dated 1717 (Ministry of Works). This shows three courts: the Great Court or Clock Court as it is now known and two courts to the north-west of the main building roughly on the site of the present Prince of Wales Court and Princess's Court, known to Wren as the Kitchen Court and Green Cloth Court respectively. It has hitherto been supposed that the buildings shown round Kitchen Court were part of Nottingham House, but there is no evidence to support this. In fact, the Wren accounts clearly show that the great kitchen on the south

side of this court was built from the foundations in 1689-90. It is more probable that the whole of this court and Clock Court were built by Wren, Kitchen Court being demolished and rebuilt in the early eighteenth century as Prince of Wales Court.

It has been possible recently to settle with some accuracy the form of the pavilions added by Wren to Nottingham House and while this is beyond the present purpose, it does give some proof of the position of the earlier buildings (fig. 3).

Wren was clearly working on the symmetrical recessional theme that he used on a larger scale at Winchester and Chelsea, with the existing house as the centre feature flanked by his new pavilions. Keeping this in mind, we find that he achieved a symmetrical elevation on the south, east and west sides and could have well done so on the north also. It seems more than likely, therefore, that the present Queen's Gallery wing and the north side of Clock Court mark the site of the outbuildings of Nottingham House in the form in which Wren found it. Whether the whole of the present Princess's Court was surrounded by buildings must be left in doubt, though the recent discovery of what may well be stable paving under the floors on the east side of the Court rather suggests that this was so.

Exterior

There remains to be examined the exterior of the house.

It can be inferred from the number of elevations appearing in the Thorpe drawings that he did show considerable interest in such detail, although in this instance no elevations seem to have been made. For a reconstruction of the external treatment of Sir George Coppin's House, we must, then, rely on secondary evidence.

A certain amount of detail may be gathered from the 'Kensington Pay Booke' for the 1689-1690 Wren alterations to the old house where references are made to materials and features.

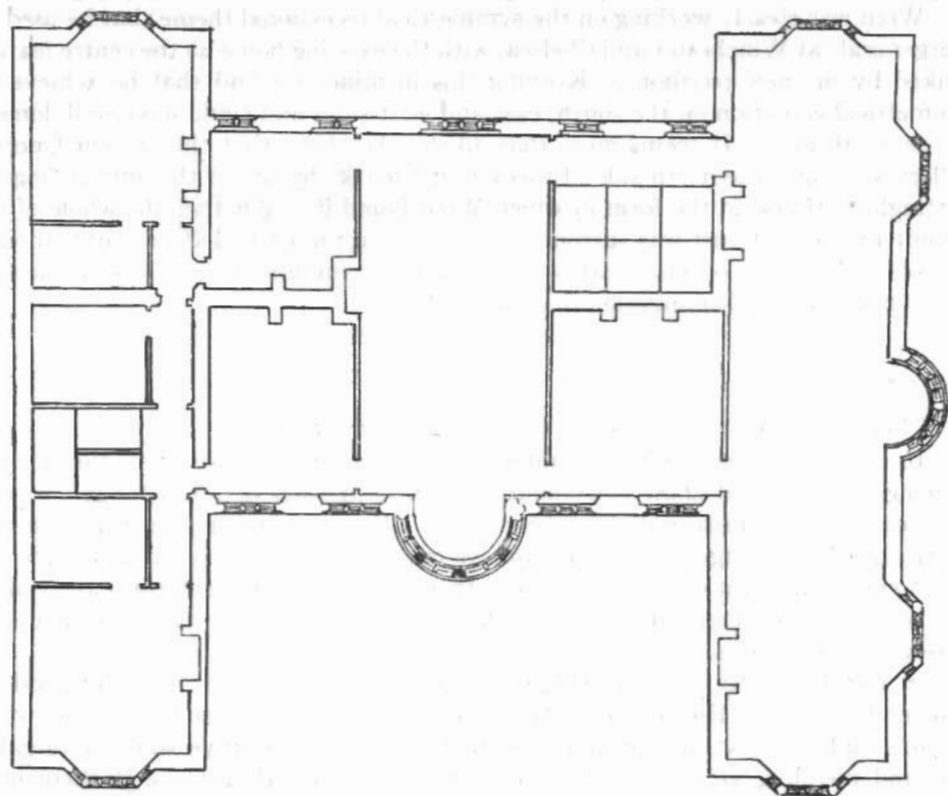
In October 1689, Thomas Hughes, Bricklayer, is paid for 'making good ye gable ends of ye old House' and again in December for 'stopping upp windows in ye gable ends'. Also, in the same month Hughes is 'raising ye walls of ye gable ends and mending ye battlements and tyling of ye old House'. 'Battlements' may probably be taken as referring to the parapet walls between the gables. That the general treatment of the exterior was brickwork is indicated by a further account of Thomas Hughes in August, 1690, for 'finishing the front of the old House'. Bricklayers' work is also involved in altering the stacks to the old house.

That there was masonry is evident, but precisely how much is not so clear. Thomas Hill, mason, in August 1690, is paid for 'cleaning . . . and rubbing down ye north front'; it is possible, therefore, that, like the neighbouring Holland House, the windows and string courses were of stone and the main wall surfaces of brick.

The most striking feature of the house was perhaps the bow windows already referred to. The Wren plans confirm their existence and they are mentioned in some detail in the accounts. Whether the accounts refer to alterations or only repairs is not clear; doubtless both took place. The amount of repair work in dealing with the Old House is noticeable and may indicate that the house was empty and unused at the time when it was purchased by King William. The circular bays had a cupola over them and half cupolas between first and second floor level. In December, 1689, there are lengthy references to work by John Heyward, carpenter, on the bow

windows, valuable as giving details and sizes. These include items such as 'Architrave freeze and Cornish of deale round ye 2 bow windows 2 ft. 3 in. deep', and a similar entry 'abt a cupulo on ye bowe window 2 ft. 6 in. deep'.

The deeper cornice would have been on the upper level, the smaller above the principal floor.



SIR GEORGE ST. POOLE'S HOUSE
FROM A PLAN IN SOANE COLLECTION

FIG. 4.

A further entry refers to 'spherical roofing in two half cupulos under ye bow windows being boarded'. What is not made clear is the nature of the roofing to these cupulos, whether it is tiling or lead. Thorpe's own elevations rather tend to fish-scale tiling.

These items from the Wren accounts give very little indication of the actual details of the elevations. They do, however, help to amplify the plan, from which, with their assistance, a general picture of the house may be built up.

The principal fronts facing north and south consisted of three bays, that on the south having two flanking splayed bays on either side of the porch, with a semi-circular bay over, shown dotted on Thorpe's plan. The north elevation was similar but had no splayed bays, only the central semi-circular bay, which, there being no porch on this side, presumably carried up through both stories. At the angles and dividing the elevations into nearly equal bays on the north and south, were pilasters.

The east and west elevations were plain, apart from the angle pilasters and the central semi-circular bays.

This general conception is confirmed by the drawing, preserved in the Pepys Collection, by Sutton Nicholls (pl. XII) showing the north front after the first stage of the Wren alterations in 1689. It must also be remembered that this does not show the building as left by Thorpe but after eighty years or so in which alterations could have been made. The Wren Surveys add little to this. There is considerable variation in the size of the semi-circular bays but in general they show the lower storey projecting slightly beyond the upper, as, in fact, might be expected. This is difficult to confirm as the draughtsmen of the time were apt to show features of one story on the plan of another. Thorpe's plan shows no stairs leading up to the porch. We know that such a stair must have existed and can only assume that that shown on the Wren period drawings was similar in form to, if not the, original.

The details of this general picture may be filled in by analogy with existing houses of the period and by reference to elevations by Thorpe himself included among his drawings, some with greater certainty than others.

It is, as has already been said, impossible to rely entirely on the evidence gained from the Wren accounts and Sutton Nicholls's drawing as both these are dealing with the house as it was in 1689 after considerable alterations, nor is there any proof that the plan in the Soane Collection represents in detail the house as built.

Alterations undoubtedly were carried out between 1605 and 1689 if, that is, we are safe in assuming that the house was originally in the form shown on the Thorpe plan. Of these changes the layout of the surrounding gardens and also probably that of the outbuildings, represent the greatest.

In the house itself, no sign appears on the Wren surveys nor does there seem to be any mention in the accounts of the splayed bays on the south façade. It may be either that they were never built or that they had already been demolished. The same is true of the eastern bow window and the bow window over the porch. Nicholls's drawing of 1689 shows a porch on the ground floor of the northern bow. This must surely have been a later addition. The chapel, referred to as 'Lord Nottingham's Chapel' may not have been part of the original intention. It is significant, though not conclusive, that Thorpe does not mention it.

In the main, however, the house that caught the eye of King William must have been as it was built some eighty-three years before for Sir George Coppin. It survived, though much altered by Sir Christopher Wren, the reigns of William and Anne until the survey of February 7th, 1718, ordered by Vanbrugh, Dartiquenave and Cholmley and carried out by Hawksmoor as a result of which it was ordered 'that the old body of the House, that is very ruinous and out of repair and wants rebuilding, be carefully considered off',¹

¹ Minutes, Board of Works, February 14, 1717/18; *Wren Soc.*, vii (p. 190).