

Oxfordshire

THE GREAT HOUSE

The Panel Paintings, by Nicholas Cooper

The Great House is remarkable for the painted wainscot in the entrance hall, on the stairs, and in a room on the first floor, including devotional scenes very unusual for the period.

Panels in the entrance hall are painted with figures and attributes, presumably of five Virtues, of which four can be identified as Charity, Faith, Hope and Justice. Hope overlooks a harbour scene with a battlemented tower – a reference to John Castle as the owner of the house. Several devotional books are named in the panel depicting Faith. These can be identified as:

- Thomas Stanley (1625-78), *History of Philosophy*, 4 vols, 1655-62 (here ‘Stanley, Lives of ye Philosophers’)
- Jeremy Taylor, *Holy Living* (1650) and *Holy Dying* (1651) (here ‘Taylor Holy Living and Dying’)
- Thomas Comber (1645-99), *A Companion to the Temple and Closet ... in an Essay upon the Daily Offices of the Church* (1672-6) (here ‘Comber of ye Common Prayer’)
- Anon, *The Whole Duty of Man* (1658) (here ‘Whole Duty of Man’)
- Anon, *The Ladies Calling ... by the author of The Whole Duty of Man* (1673) (here ‘C.E. Warwick Ladies Calling’)

A fifth figure carries a flaming heart; at her feet is a putto overcoming a satyr.¹ Over the doors to left and right of the entrance hall are smaller panels, possibly representing Day and Night.

In the passage leading to the first-floor Phase 3 south-west block and on the return flight to the Phase 1 first floor, there are panel paintings with devotional and scriptural images. Many of these are severely darkened (while others have been over-cleaned), but a number of scenes can be made out, including:

- (Old Testament) Adam and Eve, Jacob's Dream and King David
- (New Testament) St. Luke (and probably the other Evangelists), the Virgin and Child, the Adoration of the Magi, the Instruments of the Passion, the Crucifixion and Resurrection.

Other religious images include St Michael slaying the dragon, and several images incorporate short texts in Greek. The more complex images – such as St Michael – are almost certainly copied from engravings, though no attempt has been made to identify them.²

There are a smaller number of non-religious images in the same area. These include Atlas carrying the globe, and two relating directly to the house itself and to its owner. One of these is a contemporary figure, seated full-length in undress, probably intended as a portrait of John Castle himself, with a flying dove and what is probably intended as a view of the Great House from the front. The other is a view of the house from the south (garden) side, with a small standing figure in early 18th-century costume and a carriage, and with the initials WM in the upper left and right corners. It has been suggested that these stand for William and Mary (i.e. 1688--94); this is possible, though the fact that the painting shows the house with the Phase 2-4 additions makes it unlikely. Some other paintings have not been identified.

There is a further group of decorative paintings in the first-floor Phase 2 room (now bathroom), comprising conventionalised wreaths and groups of fruit and flowers. Hutton in 1905 recorded a painted crucifix in this room, 'with an angel pointing to it from a skull, and the word *Memento*,' and three lines of further Latin inscription.³ There are further epigrammatic devotional inscriptions in the closet at its north-west corner. These read: (a) *Fidei per sentum castrum fit tutum* (a clear reference to Castle himself) on the closet door,⁴ with a picture of a tower; (b) in the window seat and elsewhere *Si Christum noscis nihil est si caetera nescis; Christum nescis nihil est si caetera noscis; Mens sana in corpore sano* (an obvious reference to Castle's profession); (c) *Influentia entis ornamenta mentis; Praeter propter vitam vivimus Credenda, Agenda, Patenda*.⁵ The shutters in the east wall, now sealed shut and which probably mark the position of a former window, are said to enclose an altar; this has not been confirmed.

The artist of these paintings is unknown. They may be compared with other Oxfordshire paintings of the same period at Stanton Harcourt, Yarnton, and Sutton Courtenay, but the resemblance is not so close as to make it certain that they are by the same hand. They have been ascribed to Jacob de Wet, who has himself been identified with a Dutch prisoner from Abingdon reputed to have undertaken the Sutton Courtenay paintings; but there seems no firm basis for any of these attributions.⁶ Their religious and moral character makes them very unusual for the period, and they are linked with the owner of the house not only by the references that they contain, but also by his documented involvement with the management of local charities and the church.

¹ Probably wrongly identified by Hutton as Venus.

² Hutton considered the ultimate source of the St Michael to be a painting by Guido Reni.

³ Hutton, *Burford Papers* 121. These have not been seen (2006).

⁴ Cf. the similarly punning inscription on the tomb of Castle's father, presumably composed by John Castle: *Pro Christo scilicet semper castellani* (Hutton, *Burford Papers*, 22).

⁵ Christopher Hussey, 'The Great House, Burford, Oxfordshire,' *Country Life*, 98 (1945), 508-11.

⁶ Edward Croft-Murray, *Decorative Painting in England* (1962), I, 231-2.