

Oxfordshire

BURFORD PRIORY

Description and Building Analysis, by Nicholas Cooper

1. The Medieval Buildings

Little survives of the medieval buildings, although what exists is now more visible than before the house was restored in the early twentieth century.¹ Some medieval fabric was incorporated into the Elizabethan house, in addition to a number of re-used masonry fragments found in the course of restoration work in 1908. The west wall of the Elizabethan house made use of an earlier wall, which remains, and retains a four-centred arch for a westward-opening doorway. Internally, the new house incorporated a late thirteenth-century arcade running east and west, of which evidence was found in 1908 of five piers; this implies six bays or more. Three of these piers were repositioned and reduced in height, and span to the north of their original line to form a screen across the hall: this was created by la Terrière, on the line of a removed, later wall.² Other medieval walls or foundations may have been incorporated into the Elizabethan house, though none is now apparent.

The essential components of a medieval hospital such as that at Burford were a chapel and a hall, generally in line, but sometimes arranged in some other way. However, it is uncertain whether the arcade here related to a chapel or to an aisled hall, and from the surviving remains it is not possible to recover the layout of the medieval buildings.

2. The Elizabethan House

As a life tenant, Edmund Harman, the first secular owner, had no incentive for large-scale building, and the only known views of the Priory before nineteenth-century alterations suggest that the house was of c.1580, the work, therefore, of Lawrence Tanfield and his successors.

The general plan and appearance of the Elizabethan house can be made out from drawings made shortly before its partial demolition in 1808, even though the existing arrangements in 2006 bear little relation to it.³ Although much remains uncertain about

¹ This description of the medieval buildings essentially follows that by Walter H Godfrey, 'Burford Priory', *Oxoniensia*, 4 (1939), 71-88. Godfrey's plan at p. 74 corresponds to his original phased survey plan, which in 2006 was hanging in the house.

² Photographs preserved in the Priory in 2006 show these piers as first discovered; what was done is described in a letter and sketch of 14 February 1921 by the builder Samuel Groves (of Milton-under-Wychwood) to WH Hutton, preserved in the house.

³ Three drawings made before 1808 have been seen. These are: (1) the view in Skelton, *Antiquities of Oxfordshire* (1823), which though published after the partial demolition of the house seems to be based on a drawing made earlier by a member of the Lenthall family. The original of this has not been traced, but a photograph of it, then in the Lenthall family house at Bessels Leigh, is preserved at the Priory. (2) A pencil drawing dated 1808 (Bodleian Library, MS Top. Oxon a 64, 7). (3) A small ink sketch dated 1780 (Bodleian Library, MS Top. Oxon d 282, f. 163). There are substantial discrepancies between all

its original form, these illustrations show it to have been of three storeys and attic, built to a conventional E plan, and facing eastwards towards the town. At the centre of this east front was a porch rising the full height of the house; on either side of this was a recessed bay, and the façade was terminated by two-bay, forward-projecting wings on either side. The west wall of the house was formed in part of the medieval, north-south wall described above; one jamb and part of the head of a blocked sixteenth-century window remain on this line at first-floor level. The building was crowned by an irregular line of pinnacled gables, save for the porch which rose to a semi-circular gable with radiating panels – a form deriving ultimately from French sources, but resembling that on the porch of Corsham Court in Wiltshire (1582).

The porch was shown as four-storeyed before 1808, when it was removed and its frontispiece rebuilt as three storeys in a new position, though incorporating most of the pre-existing elements. The early views show a highly confused arrangement, and it is not certain whether they can be relied on. As existing, the centre is framed by two tiers of superimposed Corinthian columns, separated by a lower band with a pair of figures and rising through three further bands of ornament to the semi-circular gable. The figures appear to be of wild men, possibly Hercules with a lion-skin on the left and a figure emblematic of Harman on the right; he carries a ragged staff, and between his feet there is a figure of an animal, perhaps a crouching hare.⁴ These identifications are far from certain. Between them is a coat of arms of Lenthall, probably dating from the seventeenth century.

Entrance was probably into a screens passage at the northern end of a hall, which rose through a storey and a half: its position is indicated by a tall window shown in early drawings, which probably lit the hall. The principal rooms of the house lay in the south end, and the principal staircase was probably in a westward projection at the high end of the hall; that was later reconstructed to house the existing, early eighteenth-century stair. Godfrey's plan shows a lost, matching projection at the house's northern end; this may have housed a secondary stair.

Little remains of the internal decoration of the Elizabethan house, though the drawing room (probably originally the great chamber) on the first floor, at the south end, has a plaster ceiling with pendentives, and is enriched by a geometrical pattern of flat ribs with vines and pomegranites. The present hall, which bears no relationship to the form or location of the original, is heated by a late sixteenth-century chimneypiece with Ionic columns, wreathed with trailing rose briar in low relief; this was moved to its present position in 1908 from an unidentified part of the house, which was then ruinous.

By 1808 the main, east front, which was slightly asymmetrical when built, had probably been made more so by later alterations. There were irregularly placed window ways on each wing, probably Elizabethan in date, but possibly altered. Most other windows, if original, appear by then to have had their mullions removed. Scars on the south front show where earlier windows had been altered or removed; it is possible that one or both of the eastern window bays originated there.

three of these. The 1808 drawing, though included among the Buckler collection, is clearly not by any recognised member of that family and is poor in execution; of the three, it appears the least reliable. The 1780 drawing is also poor, but agrees more closely with the engraving in Skelton and may therefore tend to confirm it. Nevertheless there are details in Skelton that seem highly confused, in particular those of the porch.

⁴ The possibility that these were heraldic supporters has been considered but dismissed: Burford Priory, letter from HS Scott-Gatting, Garter King at Arms, to HG Hutchinson, 5 Oct. 1915.

3. Seventeenth and eighteenth-century alterations

Some alterations were carried out for William Lenthall, though the extent of his work is not clear. It has been suggested that he may have built the northern part of the southern wing, and the corresponding southern part of the northern one, thus doubling their width; there is, however, no evidence for this.⁵ William Lenthall's principal remaining work is the chimneypiece in the first-floor drawing room, which has strong affinities with the carving in the chapel (q.v.). It is likely that the mason-architect John Jackson of Oxford was responsible for both.

Extending west from the south wing's eastern end is a two storeyed range, with oeil-de-boeuf windows to the basement and round-headed windows on the principal floor. This essentially reproduces a range of this form shown in nineteenth-century drawings,⁶ and though it was largely collapsed before 1908 some fragments seem still to have been standing at that date to inform the reconstruction.⁷ Neither the original date nor the purpose of this range are known, though as reconstructed it provides three chambers on the upper floor, and family rooms (terminating in a loggia) on the ground floor. It has been suggested that it was built by William Lenthall as a gallery for his pictures (*see separate report*), but it is clear that these were hung on the principal stairs and in the Great Chamber.⁸ In the 1920s Godfrey incorporated late seventeenth-century keystones in the window heads, but it is not known whether these are original to these locations. Stylistically it appears to have been of c.1680-1720 if Godfrey's reconstruction is to be relied on.

Early in the eighteenth century a new stair was built, in an existing, square projection at the rear of the house which was reconstructed with tall, round-headed windows. This has a plaster cornice and ceiling enriched with foliage in high relief, inlaid treads to the stair, and twisted balusters.

4. The work of 1808

In 1808 the house was reduced in size from seven bays to three, and to a simple rectangle in overall plan. The southernmost bay containing the first-floor drawing room, and the projection containing the principal staircase, were retained essentially unaltered. The porch was dismantled and reconstructed on three storeys, against the northern bay of the original south wing. An entirely new block was built against the north face of this, to match the south bay; the bay window that formerly fronted the Elizabethan house's north wing was removed and placed on the front of this new work, to match that on the surviving south bay. Behind this façade, planning was conventional for the date, with four rooms on the ground floor either side of an entrance passage. The services were in a plainer range extending west at its northern end, which probably incorporated some earlier work.

⁵ Jennifer Sherwood and Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Oxfordshire* (1974), 510. Lenthall could not have been responsible for building the southern part of the south wing, since this contains the room with Elizabethan plasterwork to the ceiling.

⁶ Bodleian Library, MS Top. Oxon a 38, f. 33; and a drawing by George Shepherd of 1815, at Burford Priory.

⁷ Godfrey, *op.cit.* 79. What remained before Godfrey's work is shown in undated photographs preserved (2006) in the house.

⁸ WH Hutton, *Burford Papers*, 19, citing an unnamed (pre-1808) source.

5. Twentieth-century work: 1908 and 1923.

By the early twentieth century the house was semi-derelict and substantial parts of it had collapsed. A visitor who made a drawing of the drawing-room ceiling in 1908, before repair work began, recorded ‘some patches ... already on the floor.’⁹ In 1894 it was reported that:

the whole place is now in a ruinous condition. The chapel will before long be merely a heap of stones and timber, while the house itself is quite deserted, except that a few back rooms are occupied by a sort of caretaker.¹⁰

The photograph that accompanies this account shows the house with much of the glazing lost from windows, a broad settlement-crack in the front wall to the north of the porch, large holes in the roof of the chapel, and heavy growths of ivy.

Colonel de Sales le Terrière bought the house in 1908 and seems to have supervised its restoration himself, the work being undertaken by the building firm of Alfred Groves of Milton under Wychwood.¹¹ Full details of what was done do not survive, but some derelict areas at the north end of the house were demolished, the hall fireplace (and probably some others) was installed in its present position, and the wall between the 1808 entrance passage and the room to its north was removed and replaced by two bays of the medieval arcade (as described above in section 1).

Emslie J Horniman, who bought the house in 1912, seems to have done little until c.1922, when he employed Walter Godfrey to rebuild the lost east-west range of 1680-1720. Though it was believed that this had been built as a picture gallery, there was no attempt to recreate it as such; instead the intention was to provide additional bedrooms and reception rooms, with an open loggia on the ground floor looking south onto the garden at the western end. Horniman also undertook some work in the garden, where Godfrey built (or rebuilt) two summer houses.

Read more in the EPE book *Burford: Buildings and People in a Cotswold Town* by Antonia Catchpole, David Clark and Robert Peberdy (published 2008)

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⁹ National Monuments Record Centre, Swindon, MD 1946/120. Photographs preserved at Burford Priory show the room with areas of plaster missing.

¹⁰ JA Gotch, *Architecture of the Renaissance in England* (London, 1894), I, 22, and plates 34-5.

¹¹ Godfrey, op. cit. 71. La Terrière's sketch design for the rebuilding of the south-west range survives at Burford Priory.