

FURTHER NOTES ON THE USE OF THE STENCIL IN MURAL DECORATION.

By FRANCIS W. READER

In a brief review of the use of the stencil in mural decoration which appeared recently in the *Journal*,¹ I ventured to advance the opinion that not only was the stencil largely employed in the production of wall-papers of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but that at this period it was also extensively used in painting directly on the plaster wall surface.

Although this view was supported by no more than six examples, these were in four widely separated districts, precluding the possibility of a mere local usage, while they all possessed some common characteristics, indicating a practice that was much in vogue. Moreover, the patterns employed were, in some instances, of so great a variety that it seemed improbable that so many different stencils would have been cut for a work of an exceptional nature.

The fact that so few examples had attracted notice is not surprising, as houses of the eighteenth century have been generally considered as too recent to contain unpictorial paintings of any interest. Even wall-papers of this period are seldom looked for, or found, in this manner. The walls of these houses, also, have been repeatedly stripped and re-papered, by which process earlier methods have, in most cases, been long ago destroyed or too obliterated to obtain recognition. It is possible, however, that some still remain under panelling or wallpaper.

Even in earlier houses most wall-paintings are destroyed unless they are found under panelling, when the painted surface has been revealed in good condition. It is in this way that the great majority of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century paintings have been brought to light. They have very rarely been sought or recovered from under whitewash or wallpaper. How-

¹ *Arch. Journ.* xcv, 112-122.



EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY STENCILLED WALL PAINTING, 15, MARKET HILL,
SAFFRON WALDEN. DISCOVERED 1916

Drawn by F. W. Reader from tracings and notes by G. Mavnard.
 $\frac{1}{3}$ rd of full size.

ever, the walls of earlier houses have received some little observation, and it is owing to this that the few eighteenth-century stencil paintings have obtained notice. All these have occurred in sixteenth- or seventeenth-century houses, some of which, however, had been refaced or otherwise modified in the eighteenth century, but no example, so far, has been observed in an eighteenth-century building in this country.¹

Several probable examples have recently been reported, but these I have had no opportunity to inspect. An important contribution to the small series of these works has, however, come from my old friend, Mr. Guy Maynard, in the form of tracings and notes of a painting discovered at 15, Market Hill, Saffron Walden, in 1916. After seeing my former paper on this subject, Mr. Maynard kindly sent me the material which has enabled me to make the drawing here reproduced (Pl. i).

It is a remarkably rich decoration, simply produced by two stencils, green and white on a dark blue ground. The designer of this pattern had evidently explored the possibilities of his craft with great success, and has skilfully made use of the outlines of the details, so as to avoid an excess of the 'ties' which form the great defect of much stencil work.

This design shows that refined, intelligent ornament can be produced by the stencil without resorting to the dull monotony of Chinese brush-work, or the crude

¹ Since the above was written and already in type, I have come across the following in *Tales of Old Inns*, by Richard Keverne, p. 83, where the hotel, 'The Royal Fountain,' at Sheerness, is described: 'The walls of the corridor, and some of the bedrooms on this floor (the second) have behind their wall-papers a simple decorative design, apparently stencilled on the plaster, now grown hard as stone.' The present building is described as Georgian, and is said to have been erected during the Napoleonic wars when the dockyard was enlarged, and that an inn formerly occupied the site. There seems little doubt that this stencilled ornament was contemporary, or little later than

the building, and that it belongs to the series under review.

In the present conditions, it is a matter of difficulty to obtain further details, but the house is in the hands of Trust Houses Ltd., a firm who have earned a reputation of sympathetic regard for antiquities, and they have kindly promised to consider what can be done to recover this decoration when times are more propitious.

It is to the credit of Trust Houses Ltd. that they have preserved the memory of this work, if only verbally, as it forms the first instance of such painting having been, in any way, recorded as occurring in an eighteenth-century building, so far as I have been able to discover.

powderings which have caused this method to be regarded with so much prejudice and disparagement.

The extensive application of the stencil in the production of wallpaper during the eighteenth century evidently did much to develop its capabilities to a level never approached in previous ages, and which has not been maintained in modern times. Its adaptation direct to the wall surface is so obvious a process that there seems little doubt that it was a fairly general practice.

Although the evidence of this, so far noticed, may be considered somewhat slender, very considerable confirmation has reached me from a quarter in which it never occurred to me to make enquiry. Yet, when pointed out, it certainly seems the most probable field for such an industry to have been carried, and where it was likely to have flourished with even greater success and popularity.

A copy of the *Journal* containing my former note on the stencil was sent by our member, Dr. Joan Evans, to Miss Janet Waring, of New York. This led to my receiving a letter from Miss Waring, expressing her great pleasure in what I had recorded, and telling me that such stencil work was plentifully found in America.

Miss Waring has made an extensive study of the subject of stencilling, which both as wall and furniture decoration was a practice which flourished in America from the eighteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth century. In 1937 Miss Waring published the results of her researches in an elaborately-produced book,¹ an important and excellent work which seems to have gained far too little recognition in this country, and I feel the more fortunate in being the possessor of a copy by the kindness of the author.

Wall decoration, which constitutes the larger portion of this book, is represented by examples from nearly fifty different houses, many of which have several rooms decorated by means of the stencil. Over eighty patterns are illustrated by photographs and drawings, several being in colours. Many of these paintings have

¹ *Early American Stencils on Walls and Furniture*. By Janet Waring. New York. 1937.

remained intact, others have been skilfully recovered from beneath wallpaper and carefully restored so as to obtain the complete scheme of decoration. Usually, the wall space is divided into frieze, filling and dado, or skirting. The better examples display considerable taste and refinement, possessing an individuality which, in spite of the limitations of the tool employed, makes a far more satisfactory decoration than most of the printed wallpapers of the period.

In many cases the author has succeeded in obtaining the date of the building in which these paintings occur, particulars of the owners and of the craftsmen who executed the work.

The labour, time and travel necessary for gathering all this material must have been immense, and it is most fortunate that Miss Waring should have undertaken the collection of such facts and traditions of this old-time industry that had survived in America, or they must have soon been as completely lost and forgotten as in the land from whence this industry emanated.

It may easily be understood that memories of such a craft would survive longer in a country where it was apparently the first method by which the walls of houses were decorated to any extent amounting to a custom.¹ In this country, where painting had been employed for centuries, this stencilling could hardly have had the attraction of a novelty, while it appears to have been regarded as an inferior substitute for wallpaper, with which it was generally covered, as soon as the cost of wallpaper was sufficiently reduced to make its use economical, leaving the earlier craft and its workers in obscurity.

Naturally, the industry would have reached America somewhat later than its development here, and the

¹ America had also some pictorial wall-paintings of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, although they were even more exceptional than with us. An account of these has been given by Mr. Edward B. Allen, *Early American Wall-Paintings*. Some of them appear to have been executed by artists specially brought from this country, while others were by con-

tinental refugees. Mr. Allen also includes a brief mention of the stencil paintings, but attributes their origin to a supposition that had obtained some credence, that they were an introduction by the Germans. This claim has been shown by the researches of Miss Waring, to have no foundation in fact.

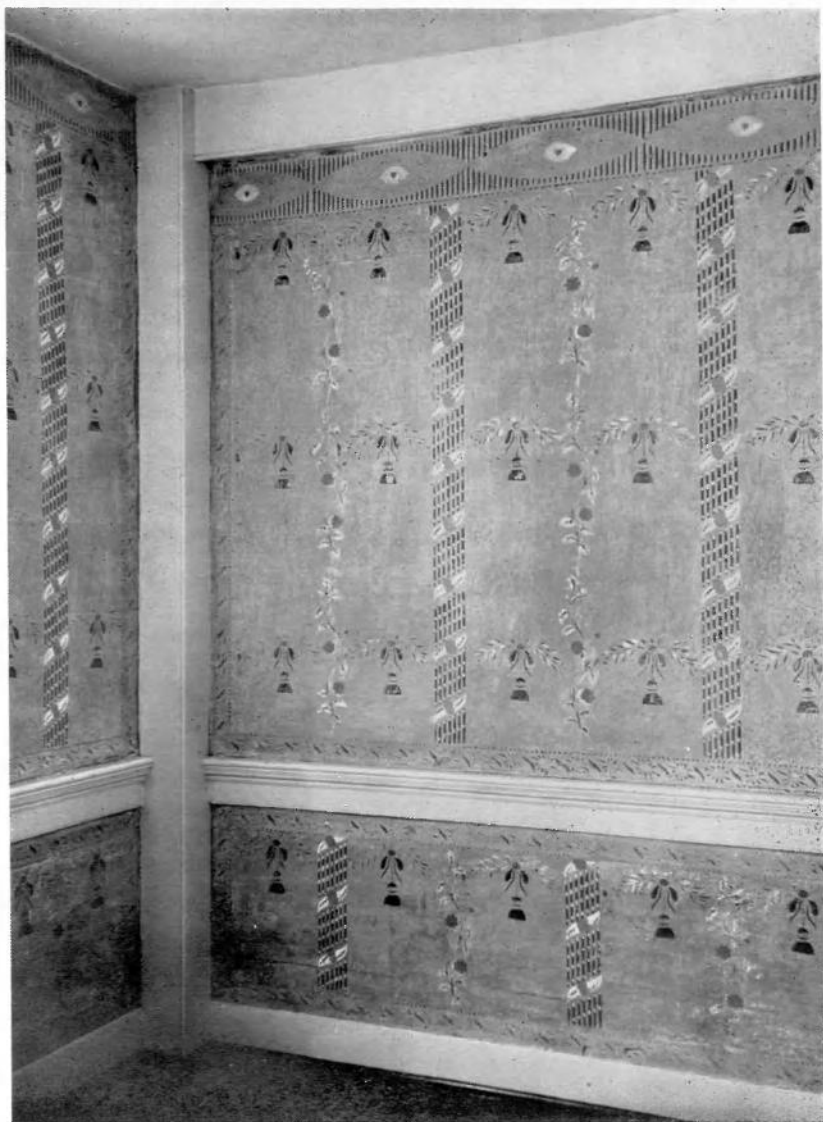
earliest date that Miss Waring has been able to establish is 1778, but some may be earlier. It also appears to have attained its maximum of popularity during the first quarter of the nineteenth century.

It is noteworthy that of the large number of these paintings in America, all of them have been found in country districts. The greater liability of renovation and change in large towns may have caused the disappearance of these works, but it seems probable that wall-paper was considered a more fashionable method, and therefore preferred even if the expense were greater. In the towns the material and workers skilled in hanging papers would have been available, but to have sent these to remote country districts must have added very materially to the expense, while the influence of fashion in such districts would probably not have been so strong as in the towns.

Many of the eighteenth century houses in America in which these stencilled decorations occur are substantial, and even stately buildings of brick and stone, their owners being people of wealth and position, who were content to avail themselves of the services of a stenciller residing in their district, who needed no further appliances than he could carry in a pack on his back, nor materials other than he could obtain at the local store. Not only were the walls decorated in this manner, but also the floors.

Improbable as it may seem, that decoration would long survive exposed to the wear and tear of the floor-boards, several examples are figured and described by Miss Waring. One of these has an elaborate vine-scroll border, which is reproduced in colours. Most of them are geometrical patterns, apparently in imitation of parquetry, or figured oilcloth, some of which bear evidence of having been repainted during the time of their being regarded as an adornment of the house. We are told that some of these had remained for several generations hidden beneath layers of newspapers covered with carpet.

It may be that wallpapers were in use simultaneously with stencil paintings, as a wallpaper factory was established in Philadelphia as early as 1730, and it



STENCILLED WALL, CURTIS HICKOX HOUSE, WASHINGTON, CON.

would be interesting if observation in America can throw light on this point.

It is clear, however, that in the country districts of the New England States stencilling direct on the plaster surface of the walls was extensively practised, and was executed by craftsmen who settled in these districts, as well as by itinerants and amateurs.

In a lesser degree, there seems little doubt that a similar condition of things maintained in this country, and that by the emigration of some of our craftsmen the process was carried to America. Although the number of our examples so far discovered is too small to form a basis for definite conclusion, it is interesting to note that they are all in agreement with those of America, in having occurred in small country towns or in isolated districts.

As regards the insignificant proportions of the English examples compared with the profusion of those of America, although it may be that the latter country proved to be a more productive soil for the development of the craft, and also that its growth was somewhat subsequent in date, it must be borne in mind that all those of this country have been accidentally stumbled upon in the search for earlier paintings, while several preserved fragments have rested for some years in museums without their real nature having been suspected. For better evidence that it was an industry of some proportion we must turn to America. Miss Waring says :—

‘A majority of the settlers in the section where stencilled walls remain were of English ancestry, and their memories and cultural traditions reached back to the shires of England, especially to East Anglia.’

Stencilled walls have not been found in foreign settlements, and all the names of the artisans known to have executed this work are British.

Reasoning on the facts stated above, Miss Waring decided, in 1935, that before publishing her book she would come to this country fully expecting to find the source from which the American paintings had been derived. After indefatigable and widespread enquiries, she succeeded only in obtaining the universal assurance

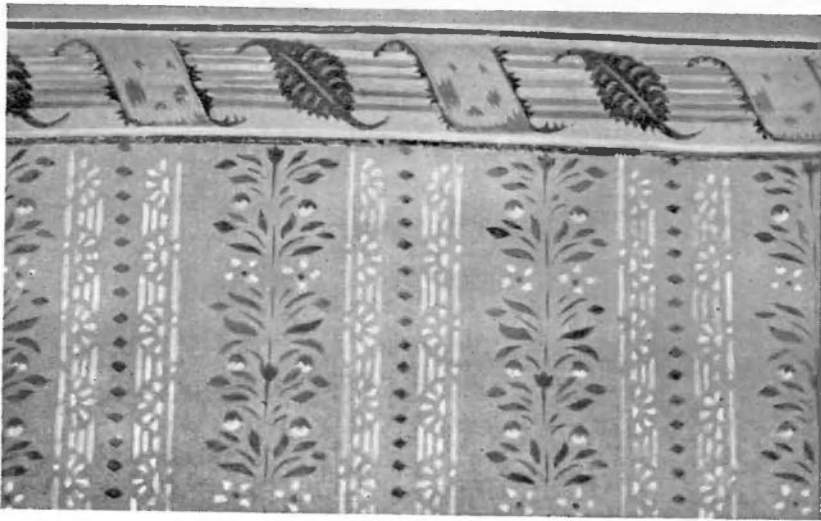
that no such work had anywhere been discovered here. At that time only one example had been recognised, that at the Crown Hotel, Aylesbury, this having been published in the *Archaeological Journal* in 1932. Unfortunately, it must have escaped the notice of all from whom enquiry was made. This is much to be deplored, as in the following year the examples at Northleach, Gloucestershire, were discovered, and would have formed sufficient evidence to have linked up the handicraft in the two countries, and would also have enabled Miss Waring to have expressed her conclusion with greater confidence in her book which was published in 1937.

Few and fragmentary as our examples are, they have many characteristics in common, such as the strong borders and floral motifs. Stripe designs predominate in both series, and it is notable that the reeded and entwined pilasters alternating with free floral stripes, as the Saffron Walden example (Pl. i) is to be found in many American paintings, a few typical instances of which (Pls. ii and iii) are here reproduced by the kind permission of Miss Waring.

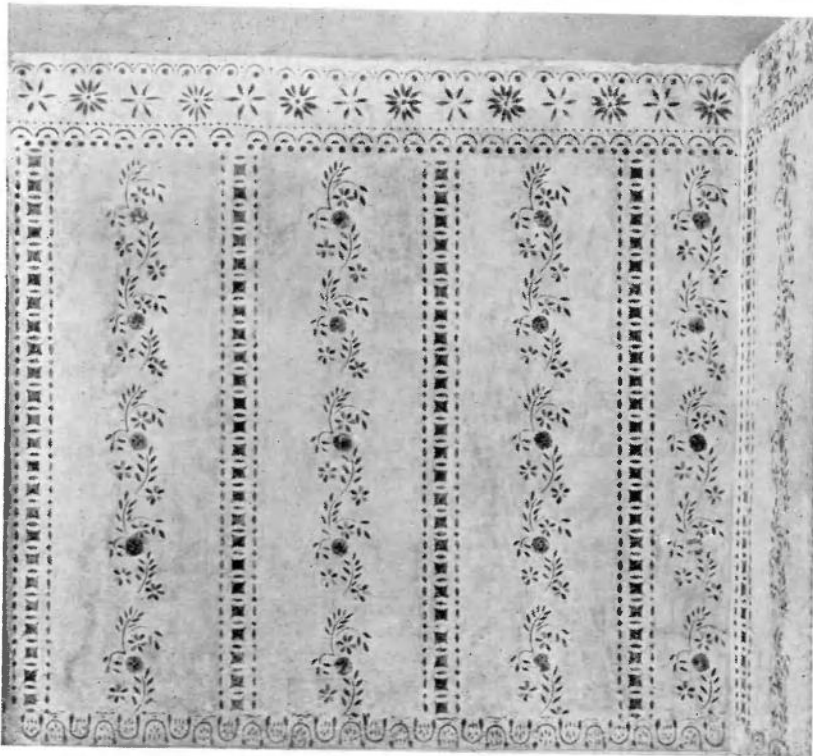
An excellent addition to the steadily-growing series of these eighteenth and early nineteenth-century stencilled wall-paintings has just reached me through the kindness of the Rev. G. Montagu Benton, who has sent the photograph reproduced on Plate iv, and supplied these particulars :—

'This stencilling is at the Griffin Inn, Danbury, which was built in the late sixteenth century. There is a great deal of it, in an excellent state of preservation. It was brought to light in a large room (now two bedrooms) on the first floor, in 1923, by the removal of the wall-paper and canvas with which it was covered. The decoration consists of a simple leaf design in dark green and sage green, on a white background with a slightly pinkish tinge.'

It is a pleasing design of an 'all-over' pattern of foliage and flowers, in brush work, obviating the necessity of 'ties.' The two imposed stencils have been skilfully employed to produce a rich but unobtrusive decoration of the wall-surface. Such patterns are



A. WALL STENCILLING, ROBBINS HOUSE, PITTSFIELD, MASS.



B. WALL STENCILLING, HOUSE AT BROOKFIELD, VERMONT



STENCILLED WALL-PAINTING. GRIFFIN INN, DANBURY
EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

frequent in wall-papers, but have not hitherto been met with among the stencillings direct on the wall. That at Northleach¹ might, in general terms, be similarly described, but it is crude and elementary by comparison.

This Danbury example makes the ninth pattern recorded, and these have occurred in the four counties of Bucks, Gloucestershire, Essex and Kent. Although the number is still small, it should be remembered that the first was only recognised in 1931, and that as recently as 1935 such work was declared by many authorities to be non-existent in this country. The series now recorded makes it certain that this craft was an extensive one, although all knowledge of it had been lost for a century.

In view of the soaring prices of wall-paper, a revival of this simple method of stencilling may well come about, when these earlier examples, together with those of America, may prove to be a useful field for study to the future decorator.

NOTES ON PLATES II AND III

PLATE II.—The Hickox House, Washington, was built by Curtis Hickox in 1797. This excellent example of stencilled wall decoration was found by the great grandson of the first owner, when the opening between two rooms was widened a few years ago. It had been covered with a fine French wall-paper, about a century old, and this was skilfully removed so that both the paper and the painting have been preserved.

The painting can therefore be dated as soon after the building of the house, or at least in the early years of the nineteenth century. It is admirable both in design, and colour. It is painted in red, blue, black and white on a soft grey background. A portion of the decoration is reproduced in colour in Miss Waring's book.

PLATE III A.—A good example of the stripe pattern from a house in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. There is no definite record of the building of the house, but the town records show that the land was sold in 1792, to Joshua Robbins, and that from 1800 to 1820 the house was occupied by Oliver Robbins.

PLATE III B.—Stencilled wall of an old house at Brookfield, Vermont. It also has a dado, in which the weeping-willow figures, this being a frequent motif in American stencilling. It is dated about 1810.

¹ *Arch. Journ.*, xciv, Part 2, Pl. v.