

A RENAISSANCE HALL FOR BLACKWELL-IN-THE-PEAK

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BLACKWELL-IN-THE-PEAK was one of the several Derbyshire manors held by William Peveril following the Norman conquest. Peveril granted the manor, together with that of Lenton, Nottinghamshire, and other smaller parcels of land in these two counties, to the priory he founded at Lenton. The value of Blackwell manor to the priory lay in the revenue from tenancies and tithes which contributed to the priory's upkeep.¹ Since Blackwell manor is some considerable distance from Lenton the appointment of a responsible and trustworthy, local collector of these dues was inevitable. In 1500, John Hilton, then prior of Lenton, appointed a Richard Blackwall of Blackwell to "the office of collector of rents and tithes of the Priory in High Peake" at the annual fee of 40 shillings and one gown. Richard was one of four of the ten tenants of the manor who had the name Blackwall at that time. That he was the principal representative of this family is implied, not only by this appointment, but by his holding the manor with all tithes and lands, with other priory tithes in Monyash, Chelmorton, Fairfield, Flagg and the Peak. For these tenancies and privileges he had a lease for 90 years from 16 September 1501 at a yearly rental of £10.²

Clearly the Blackwall family took its name from the place, and so it might reasonably be presumed that these agreements formed the renewal of previous contracts not in evidence. Indeed it seems likely that the Blackwall family had played an important part in the affairs of the manor since it had passed to Lenton priory during the reign of Henry I. The family continued to live in the manor house at least until 1559,³ but by 1631 no one of the name of Blackwall held a tenancy in the manor.⁴ The reason for this upheaval can be attributed indirectly to the dissolution of Lenton priory and the subsequent issue of letters patent in June 1552, which granted Blackwell manor to Sir William Cavendish of Hardwick in exchange for his property in the south-east of England.⁵ On Sir William's death in 1559 the manor passed to his

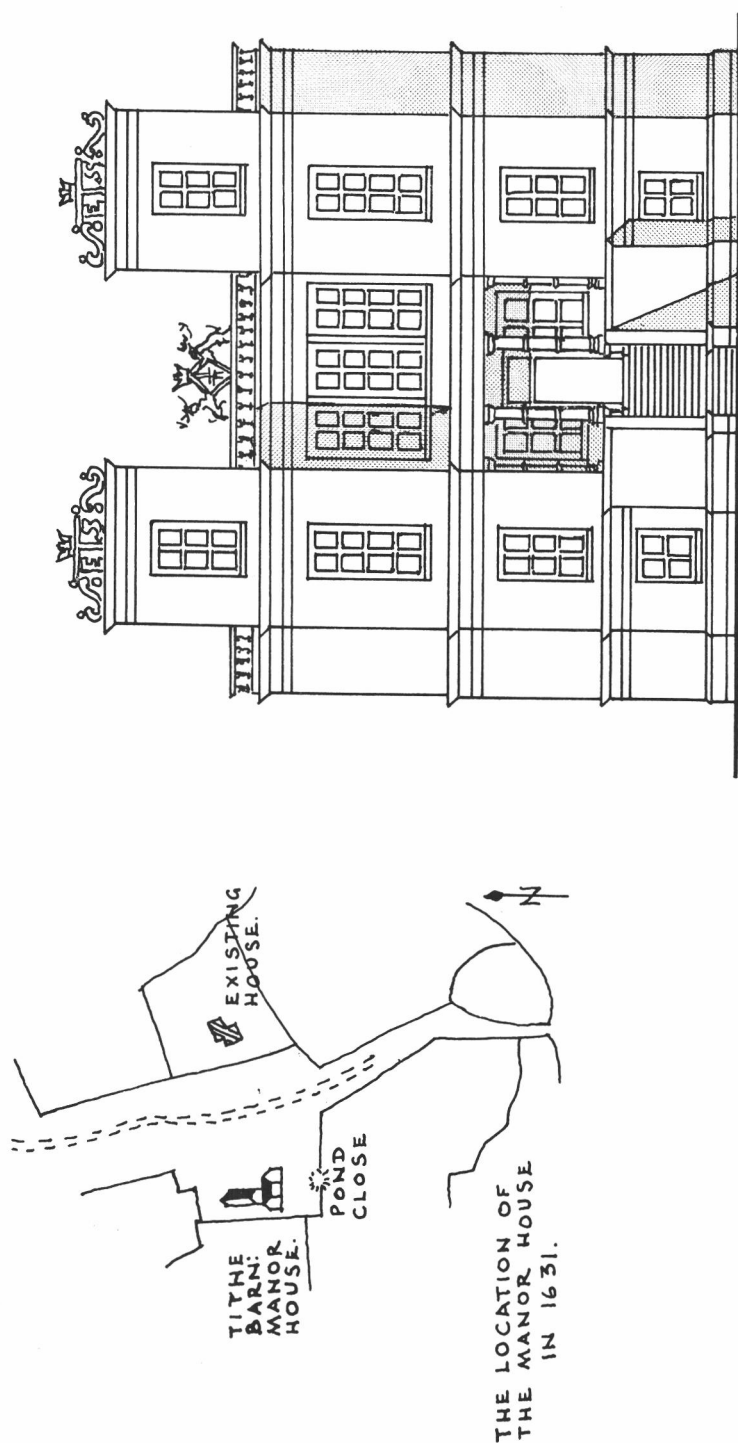
¹ F. B. Stitt, ed., *Lenton Priory estate accounts 1296 to 1298*, Thoroton Society Record Series, XIX (1958), xi, xx, xlii.

² Survey of the manor of Blackwall, early 16th century, and tenancy agreements 1500/1. Portland MSS., Shire Hall, Nottingham, DDP. 48, 21.

³ Seizin of property of Sir William Cavendish in the manor of Blackwell. Richard Blackwall was amongst those present. Portland MSS., DDP. 48, 14.

⁴ Tenancy lists and survey compiled for William, earl of Newcastle. Portland MSS., DDP. 49.

⁵ Sir William exchanged property in Lincolnshire and Middlesex for property or tithes in Blackwell, Ashford, Flagg, Chelmorton and Greenlow as part of his policy to extend his possessions in the Peak District. Portland MSS., DDP. 48, 11.



RECONSTRUCTED ELEVATION, BLACKWELL MANOR HOUSE.

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FIG. 14. Blackwell, site plan and reconstructed elevation of the manor house.

wife Elizabeth, Bess of Hardwick, subsequently to descend to her heirs by him,⁶ but it remained under her control, however loosely, for about fifty years until she died in 1608. It must have been towards the end of this period, when she was less preoccupied with affairs of state and marital difficulties, that Elizabeth, then Elizabeth Shrewsbury, contemplated raising the status of Blackwell manor by building a new stately home there.

All evidence suggests that this last project of an inveterate builder was never started; in particular there is the incomplete nature of the plans prepared for the building and the lack of representation of a house of this scale and character on William Senior's survey of the manor taken in 1631. The manor house represented on Senior's drawing is not extant, but the drawing indicates a residence suitable for a tenant of some standing, such as Richard Blackwall. It was a two-storeyed building with the long front facing south and with projecting gables at each end of this principal elevation. The house was situated between the tithe barn (where the existing barn now is) and the pond at the top of "Pond Close", in the area presently occupied by the copse to the west of the existing farmhouse called Blackwell Hall (Fig. 14). Despite the graphic evidence for this manor house in Senior's survey there is some suggestion that the building was not, at that time, in a fit state to house a tenant for the demesne. The tenancy agreements which accompany the survey, compiled for William, earl of Newcastle, include the manor house and demesne lands. Both house and lands were leased to five tenants of the manor who occupied other farms in Blackwell or Chelmorton. Three tenants held the demesne land in 1666, the principal being Edward Buxton of Chelmorton, and no mention of the manor house was made.⁷ Indeed, it would seem that thereafter the demesne land was never occupied as a unit, a division which could surely not have occurred had Elizabeth's stately home been built.

The plans for Elizabeth Shrewsbury's house at Blackwell-in-the-Peak are included in the collection of the Smithson drawings preserved at the Royal Institute of British Architects. This collection is partly made up of measured records of buildings and is similar in this respect to those compiled by other "surveyors" of the period as a guide to the design of the "platts" and "uprights" which Elizabethan rebuilding demanded.⁸ The Smithson collection also contains plans and elevations prepared at the request of patrons which formed the basis for some subsequent buildings. There is no reason to doubt that the plans for Blackwell Hall were commissioned and the fact that the house was not built confirms this belief (Fig. 15). Robert Smithson's

⁶ Elizabeth Shrewsbury left Blackwell to Sir Charles Cavendish, her youngest son. Although this inheritance was subsequently challenged by the elder brothers, it remained in the ownership of the Portland branch of the family until the 19th century when it was transferred to the Devonshires. Portland MSS., DDP. 48, 3 and 14.

⁷ The tenancy list of 1665/66 was compiled with a view to countering the claim of a Richard Blackwall to ownership of the manor and to the rent of tenancies. The case was settled in the duke of Newcastle's favour in November 1676. Portland MSS., DDP. 49.

This dispute arose from the forfeiture of the manor to the Commonwealth for treason. Richard Blackwall purchased the estate from the Trustees for the sale of Lands and Estates in March 1652. Apparently he did not succeed in occupying the premises but received the rent from some tenants — which was to be repaid by the Blackwall family following the action of 1676. P.R.O.: SP. 23/107, SP. 23/18.

⁸ John Summerson, *Architecture in Britain, 1530-1830*, 27.

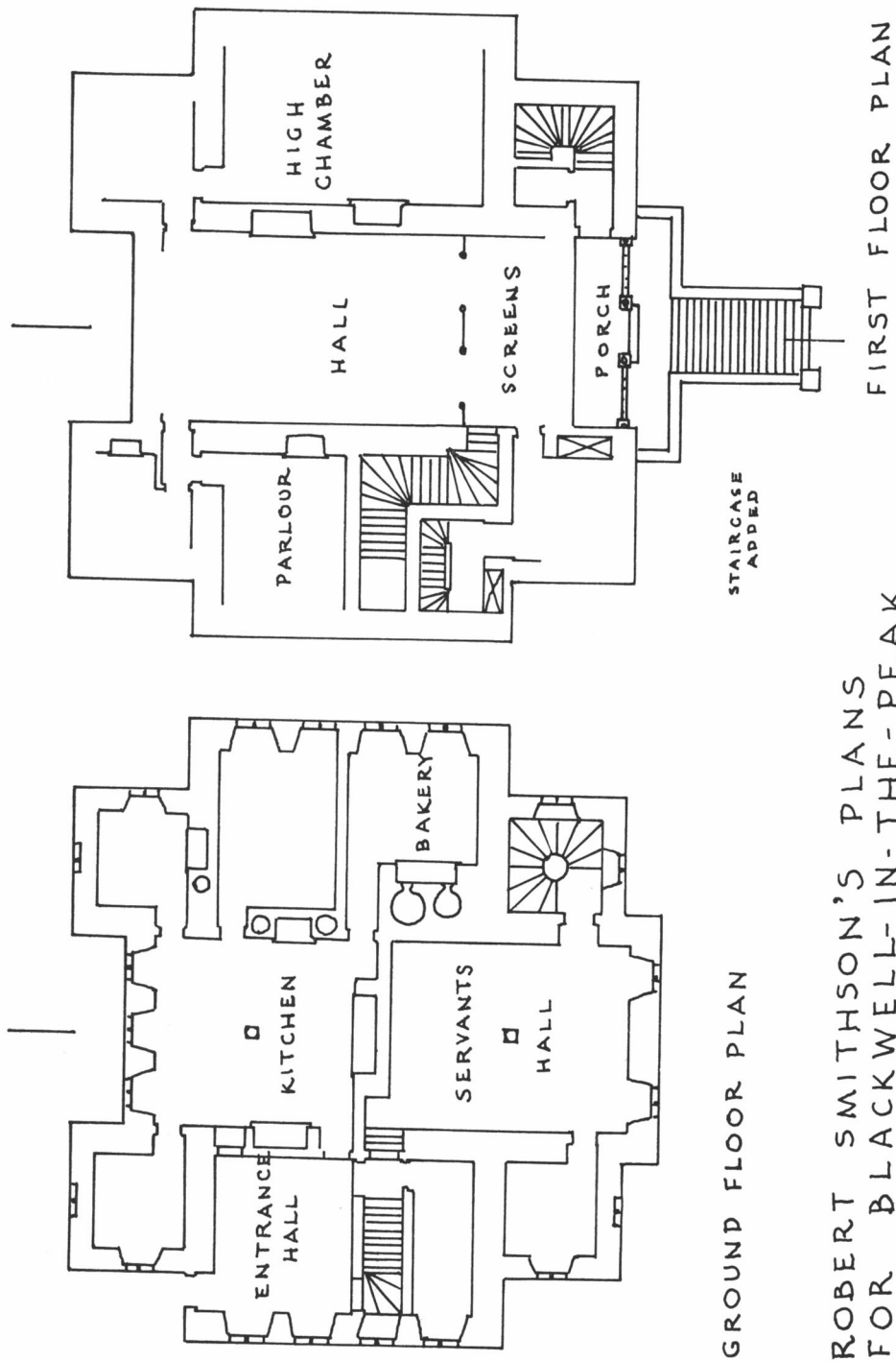


FIG. 15. Blackwell, Robert Smithson's plans.

plans for Blackwell were probably drawn between the years 1596 and 1608;⁹ two famous houses also attributed to Robert, Wollaton and Hardwick Halls, were designed previous to this and it is in relationship to these, and to the smaller houses at Barlborough and Bolsover, that the plans have especial significance.¹⁰

Throughout the latter part of the reign of Elizabeth and for some years afterwards, attempts were being made by those "architects and surveyors" dedicated to the pursuit of Renaissance learning to produce an integrated relationship between the irregularities of medieval hall accommodation and the dictates of Renaissance symmetry. Robert Smithson had achieved this rationalization in his linear plan for Hardwick Hall in which he placed the long axis of the hall at right angles to the length of the E-shaped building; he failed to do so in his square design for Wollaton where the hall lies across the principal axis of approach and is entered indirectly. One might sensibly presume that a man of Robert Smithson's ability and tenacity of purpose would make a further attempt to correct this failure, and this he did in his proposals for the small square house at Blackwell.

At first glance the plans for Blackwell Hall indicate a design consistent with that of Barlborough. For the house was intended to be a block roughly cubical, defined at the corners with towers. In this block Smithson put the hall at first-floor level in the centre of the building, arranged to run from front to rear; on either side of the hall he planned the great high chamber and the parlour. These were linked to the hall at the dais end by way of the rear tower chambers, whilst the front towers were allocated as staircases connecting the screens passage, lying between them, to the kitchens on ground level and to the private rooms (possibly including a long gallery as at Barlborough) on the second floor. In this way Smithson created on plan a powerful principal axis running from front to rear of the building about which the whole accommodation was balanced.

This axis was emphasized in elevation by his treatment of the outline of the plans (Fig. 14).¹¹ Unlike Barlborough, where the projection of the towers from each face is shallow, Blackwell was to have considerable projection of the towers beyond the front and rear faces, whereas the side faces of the central block were intended to protrude beyond the towers to the same amount. The recesses thus created to front and rear of the house would, had the house been built, have marked the main axis without conflict from similar recesses in the side elevations, as occurs at Wollaton Hall. Both the positioning of the hall and the projection of the flanks of the building are evidently inspired

⁹ Mark Girouard attributes the plans for Blackwell to Robert Smithson, drawn between 1590-1600, and suggests Sir Charles Cavendish as client. Sir Charles took possession of Blackwell manor in 1608, six years before Robert Smithson's death in 1614, shortly before John Smithson was preparing the plan of Bolsover Castle for Sir Charles Cavendish and when Robert appears to have been less active in the practice. Between the years 1590-1600 Charles' mother, Elizabeth Shrewsbury, was in possession of the estate. *Architectural History*, V (1962).

¹⁰ Summerson, 34 (Wollaton); *Archaeological Journal*, CXVIII (1961), 220 (Hardwick), 225 (Barlborough), 203, 205 (Bolsover).

¹¹ No elevation was drawn for these plans by Robert Smithson. The elevation shown here has been projected from the plans by the author and incorporates detailing taken from Hardwick Hall and proportions based upon the systems for proportioning of buildings used at that time.

by the planning of Hardwick and mark a departure from the compromise plans of the other small square houses such as Barlborough, which found the inspiration for their form and detailed planning in the square castle keep.

At Barlborough and in the "Little Keep" at Bolsover symmetry is not an integral part of the plan. In these cases the hall is offset from the main axis, and a false axis of design is indicated by the stress placed upon the decoration of selected doors and windows or by the use of architectural features disposed symmetrically about the house. At Blackwell the symmetry was to be absolute, and Robert Smithson intended to employ decoration techniques at Blackwell solely to accentuate the true axial nature of his design. One feature common to these three houses was the external "grand staircase" which led from the ground to the first floor. At Barlborough and Bolsover this terminates in a small landing from which, on formal occasions, entry was made to the lobby of the hall through an elaborately decorated doorway.¹² At Blackwell, Smithson intended to use this form of approach in a more gracious and spacious manner. He proposed to extend the ground floor in advance of the front towers to form a spacious platform upon which visitors could congregate and at the same time to add dignity to the platform by marking the entrance with an open colonnade between the towers — a simple and satisfying treatment.

In view of the working partnership that existed between Robert Smithson and his son John, it seems surprising that the proposals for Blackwell were not considered by John for his rebuilding of Bolsover Castle, which commenced in 1613. Instead the example of Barlborough was followed, and the plan was arranged with the staircase, and not the hall, as the central focus around which a maximum number of well lit rooms could be planned. This very practical solution could in no way be amalgamated with the conception for Blackwell Hall, in which the double-storey hall was to dominate the central area. By doing so it reduced the second-floor accommodation by one-third and at the same time divided it down the centre. Undoubtedly Smithson intended that a gallery over the screens passage should link these two flanking areas as at Hardwick; what is in doubt is the type of accommodation he proposed to have there, for no second-floor plan was prepared for the building. The supporting walls of the first-floor plan give a clue as to what might have been intended, and the most that could be included were one room with two small chambers and a long gallery or three rooms and three small chambers. In either case the rooms would have been too few or too small for a house of this quality, and this may be one of the factors which caused the plans for Blackwell to be abandoned and later ignored when Bolsover was designed.¹³

¹² When Barlborough was first built this external stairway, and a small servants' staircase, formed the only access to the first floor. A second entrance and main staircase were added in the 18th century. An internal main stairway to the first-floor level was included in Smithson's plan for Blackwell Hall.

¹³ From the plans attributed to John Smithson in Mark Girouard's assessment of the Smithson collection it is clear that John Smithson was loath to break with the medieval disposition of the hall and ancillary accommodation. Romanticism is also seen in his treatment of Bolsover Castle. The accommodation of the Little Castle at Bolsover soon became inadequate. Additional buildings were erected by 1634 to overcome this deficiency. A similar situation occurred at Barlborough. N. Pevsner, *The Buildings of England, Derbyshire*, 63-4.

It is indicative of the transitional nature of this period that the common sense vested in the traditions of the previous age should appear to have prevailed. The truth is that aesthetic perfection does not necessarily produce functional or economic excellence, and the converse is also true. The plans for Blackwell Hall, seen in their contemporary context, fall into the category of economic failure, and this form of plan was not used to any extent until the Renaissance followers of Palladio in England forgot the value of utility in the search for cultural grandeur.¹⁴ When this happened Robert Smithson's form of plan for Blackwell came to be commonly used as the basis for the design of the central stateroom block of great houses such as Kedleston Hall;¹⁵ in these houses the problems involved in planning private and service rooms were banished to the wings. Thus, even from the limited evidence available to us, it can be seen that in spite of its limited accommodation the house proposed for Blackwell-in-the-Peak would have been of considerable architectural and historical significance had it been built. In particular it would have supplied an important missing link in the chain of Early Renaissance thought in Derbyshire, a link which none of the existing great houses of the area provides.

¹⁴ Inigo Jones, the first Palladian, was a contemporary of Robert and John Smithson but Palladianism did not dominate the Renaissance in England until the turn of the 17th century.

¹⁵ Summerson, plan, 225.