

XIII.—CHESTERS.

BY ROBERT BRIAN WRAGG.

The most successful provincial architect of the eighteenth century was John Carr of York (1723-1807). He is known to have executed over 150 projects and, doubtless, many others which have gone unrecorded. His affluence was such that even the presentation of a fine church, designed by himself, to the town of his birth caused him no financial embarrassment. He died leaving £150,000 "to collateral relations".¹

Perhaps owing to the connotation "of York", Carr is usually regarded as an architect whose life and works were largely confined within the boundaries of his native shire. Recently this has been found to be anything but true. For example, in Nottinghamshire alone, at least twelve sizeable projects are attributed to him.² His travels ranged far and wide. Regularly each year in May he visited London, but for what reason no one has so far discovered. It was whilst investigating this mystery in the Sir John Soane Museum, London, that I came across a small and insignificant book.

Robert Morris' *Select Architecture*, published in 1755, is merely one of the many pattern books churned out during the century, enabling even the smallest builder to make a creditable shot at a house . . . or a Doric Column. But the copy in the Soane Museum was put to other use: on the

¹ *Gent's Magazine*, lxxvii (i), 1807, 282.

² Thoresby Park, 1768; Welbeck Abbey, c. 1765; Newark Town Hall, 1776; Colwick Hall, 1776; Grandstand, Nottingham, 1776; Clifton Hall, 1779-97; Nottingham Assembly Rooms, 1778; Blyth Hall, c. 1775; Grove Hall, c. 1762; Ossington Church, 1782; Langford Hall, c. 1780; House in Potter St., Worksop, 1770.

flyleaf is written "John Carr 1758" in the architect's inimitable flowing hand, and on the backs of the plates are rough ink sketches done by Carr, perhaps to while away the long evenings during one of his extensive tours of inspection.

Several were easily identifiable. "Aston House" turned out to be Aughton Court (formerly Aston Hall built for Lord Holderness in 1772) and "Revd Mr Masons House at Aston" proved to be the Rectory erected by Canon William Mason, friend of Walpole, and premier poet of his day. But with "Design for Mr Grieves Northumberland" little success was achieved—unfortunately, for it was the first indication of Carr having worked in Northumberland. It might have been an early proposal for Ord House, near Berwick, owned by William Grieve, although the sketch in Morris was for a larger building; or, more probably, it might have been for Swarland House, a mansion designed for D. R. Grieve and attributed to James Paine, which cannot now be examined, having been long since demolished.³

More difficult of solution—or so it seemed—was the sketch entitled "Designed for . . . Errington Esq" (plate XXIV, fig. 2). An Errington often appeared in the lists of those attending the assemblies at York. Perhaps Errington was a Yorkshireman. A process of elimination found the most promising bearer of the name to be the gentleman who owned a house at Clints, but his was a mediæval not a classical building; this, curiously enough though, had been altered by Carr.⁴ Turning, rather fortuitously, to Northumberland, possible candidates were reduced to the Erringtons of Beaufront, Walwick Grange and Sandhoe. One of these, John Errington (d. 1783), of Walwick Grange, built the great mansion of Chesters,⁵ near Humshaugh, in 1771.⁶

Finely situated on rising ground to the east of the remains of the Roman station of the *Ala Secunda Astorum*, it has had

³ *Arch. and Bldg. News*, June 15, 1934, 304.

⁴ *Kirkleatham A/c Book*, 1763. N. Riding Record Office.

⁵ J. Hodgson and F. C. Laird, *Beauties of England and Wales*, xii, 1813, i, 135.

⁶ W. W. Tomlinson, *Guide to Northumberland*, 1888, 185.

a chequered history. Alterations were carried out to it in 1832 and 1837 by that most prolific Newcastle architect, John Dobson (1787-1865);⁷ and then, about 1894, the house was extensively rebuilt by R. Norman Shaw, R.A. (1831-1912).⁸ The main building, virtually gutted, was re-arranged

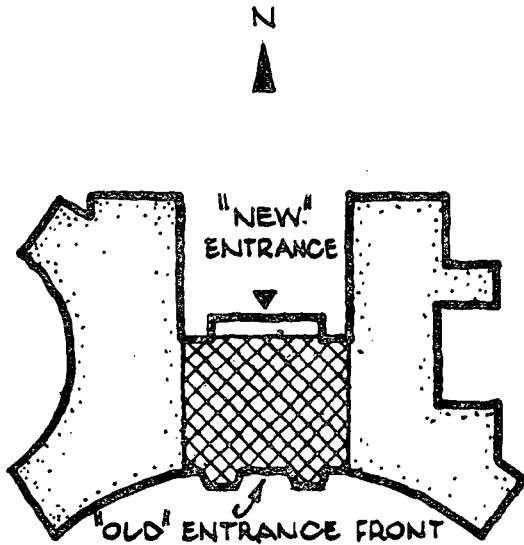


FIG. 1. CHESTERS.

Sketch block plan of house existing to-day.

so that the main entrance came no longer on the south, overlooking the prospect, but on the north; and the original flanking buildings, demolished, were replaced by vast, curving Shavian wings. (See fig. 1, and plate XXIV, fig. 1.) Externally, however, the centre block remained much the same as designed by its eighteenth century architect. But who was this man? Sir William Chambers (1723-96) has been suggested; a glance at his comprehensive letter

⁷ H. M. Colvin, *Dict. of English Architects*, 1954, 178.

⁸ *Country Life*, xxxi, 1912, 244-8.

books⁹ shows that although he built Green Park in London for *Henry Errington* of Sandhoe about 1770, he did nothing for *John Errington* at Chesters. Fortunately, a survey was prepared of the house in 1884 (fig. 2), prior to Shaw's alterations, and comparison with the sketch in Morris

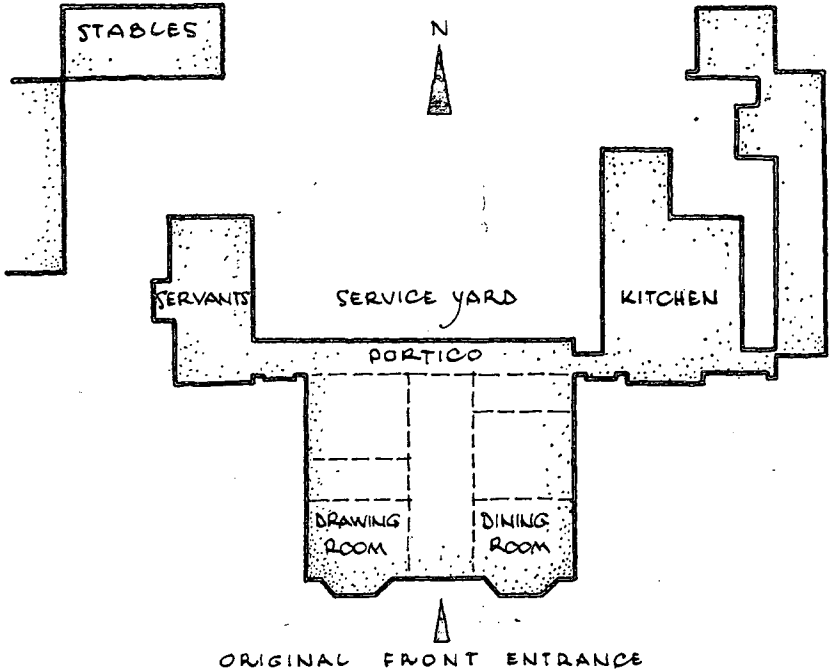


FIG. 2.

Sketch from survey, dated 1884, in Chesters Estate Office.

indicates that, apart from one or two insignificant details, both illustrate one and the same building. Cornices, plinths, the Venetian window, proportions of the columns to the south porch and other details of the house itself are entirely typical of the *Yorkshireman*. There is no doubt that Carr was the architect.

⁹ Brit. Museum, 41133, ff. 24, 51 v, 58 v.



FIG. 1. CHESTERS. SOUTH ELEVATION, PREVIOUSLY THE ENTRANCE FRONT; SHOWING THE CARR CENTRAL BLOCK WITH SHAW'S WINGS.

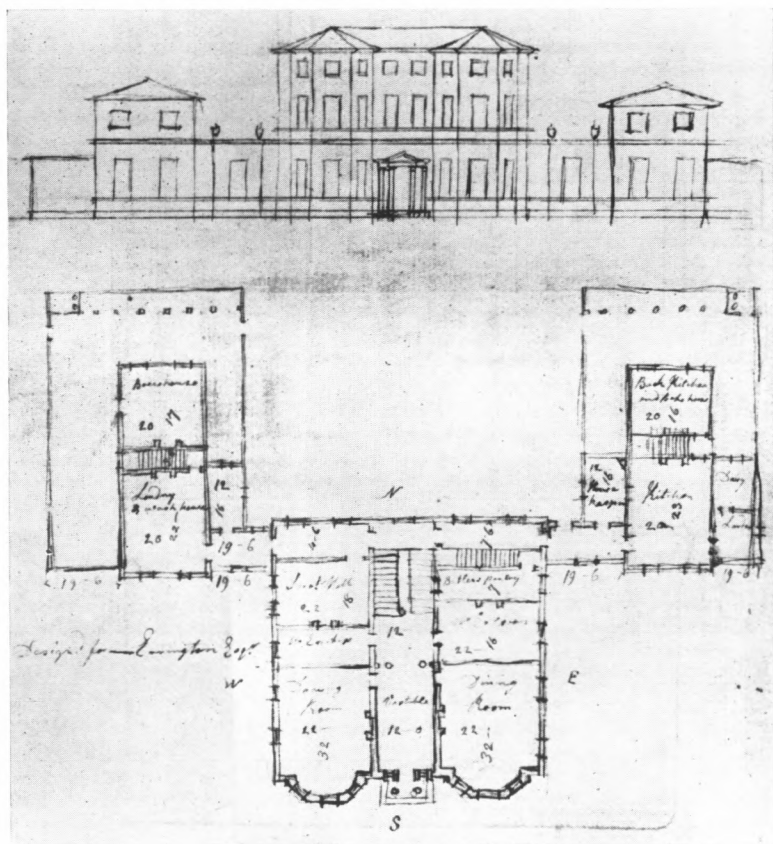


FIG. 2. SKETCH BY CARR ON BACK OF A PLATE IN MORRIS' *Select Architecture*.
Photo by courtesy of the Curator, Soane Museum.

Chesters cannot be claimed as one of Carr's best designs. The main hall, running through the plan like a corridor, is unimaginative; whilst the wings, lying so far back, could only have been seen together from the front at a considerable distance. However, there are several points of interest. A square plan, hipped bays rising the full height of the building, and no two rooms alike—the dining and drawing rooms which appear to be similar, in fact, have differently treated bays—are all characteristic of John Carr. He had, moreover, no inhibitions about duality—a term used architecturally to describe a composition in which two parts balance each other, there being no dominant to resolve them: he would as lief design a bridge with two or four arches as one with the more usual unequal number of openings. Here also at Chesters, two sets of windows appear over the entrance porch where only one would normally be expected; similarly, the windows of the wing pavilions express a duality. But perhaps the most noticeable thing about Carr's sketch is the way he quite deliberately orientated the building so that the offices faced north and the main rooms faced south. And yet it is sometimes inferred that orientation did not really become the concern of architects until the building of the Red House by Norman Shaw in 1859.

How Carr received the commission is open to speculation. Maybe it was simply due to his growing reputation, for by 1772, he had already completed his largest mansion, Harewood House, and served a term as Lord Mayor of York. Perhaps, however, the seal on a letter¹⁰ which he wrote in 1765 gives a hint. It appears to be that of the Carrs of Cocken who were related to the Northumberland Carrs, merchants of Newcastle,¹¹ but what right had John Carr to use it? Certainly Isabella, grand-daughter of Sir Ralph Carr of Cocken and Mayor of Newcastle, married in 1741 to Sir Henry Ibbetson, Bt., had commissioned John Carr to build Denton

¹⁰ To Lord Fairfax about Castlegate House, York; Fairfax Papers; Yorks Arch. Soc.

¹¹ J. Burke, *Hist. of Commoners*, ii, 1836, 354-6.

Park, near Ilkley, one of his biggest jobs. Furthermore, the architect's relatives always claimed that they belonged to a cadet branch of a wealthy north country family.¹² It may well be that the first of their kind to settle in Horbury in the seventeenth century came straight from Newcastle. The interesting possibility of Carr having received the job at Chesters through Northumbrian family connections, distant though they may have been, cannot be entirely discounted. Certainly, many a commission has been gained on more tenuous grounds.

In the preparation of this article I wish to acknowledge the assistance of: Mary Wragg, John Summerson, Rev. J. Forbes, W. D. H. Smith, and the Grants Committee, University of Sheffield.

¹² Carr Family Papers, Browsholme Hall.