

MATTHEW BRETTINGHAM
AND THE COUNTY OF NORFOLK

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MATTHEW BRETTINGHAM the elder seems to have been one of those men about whom legends grow. He has been described as a pupil, in the formal sense, of William Kent, although the only basis for this seems to be the fact that he acted as clerk of the works at Holkham, for which Kent provided the drawings; the *Dictionary of National Biography* credits him with two periods of foreign travel, one on the strength of an anonymous book now ascribed to someone else, the other as the result of a confusion with his son, Matthew Brettingham the younger.

His life was in reality rather less glamorous. There is no evidence that he ever studied architecture formally, or travelled abroad. His success story was the result of attention to detail, hard work, and making the acquaintance of the right people. In later life he developed quite a flourishing architectural practice, partly in London, but mainly in improving country houses. He became known in this field because of his work at Holkham, and it is possible that he was chosen to act as clerk of the works there because he had already become known locally as a competent builder both for Norfolk Quarter Sessions and for other clients.

Born in 1699, the second son of Launcelot Brettingham, bricklayer, of Norwich, he was apprenticed to his father, and in 1719, on the same day as his elder brother Robert, he was admitted a freeman of the City of Norwich, as a bricklayer. Generally speaking, the brickwork in the buildings for which he was responsible was of good quality (though one of his detractors claimed that he was not worth nine shillings a week as a craftsman) so that his apprenticeship may well have been a genuine one, but he soon became, if he were not from the beginning, a building contractor rather than a layer of bricks.

This was a period during which the older system, in which the client entered into direct relations with the different craftsmen required to build a house, was giving way to a newer system, in which he employed a single general contractor, who was responsible for the whole, including sometimes work now done by the architect.

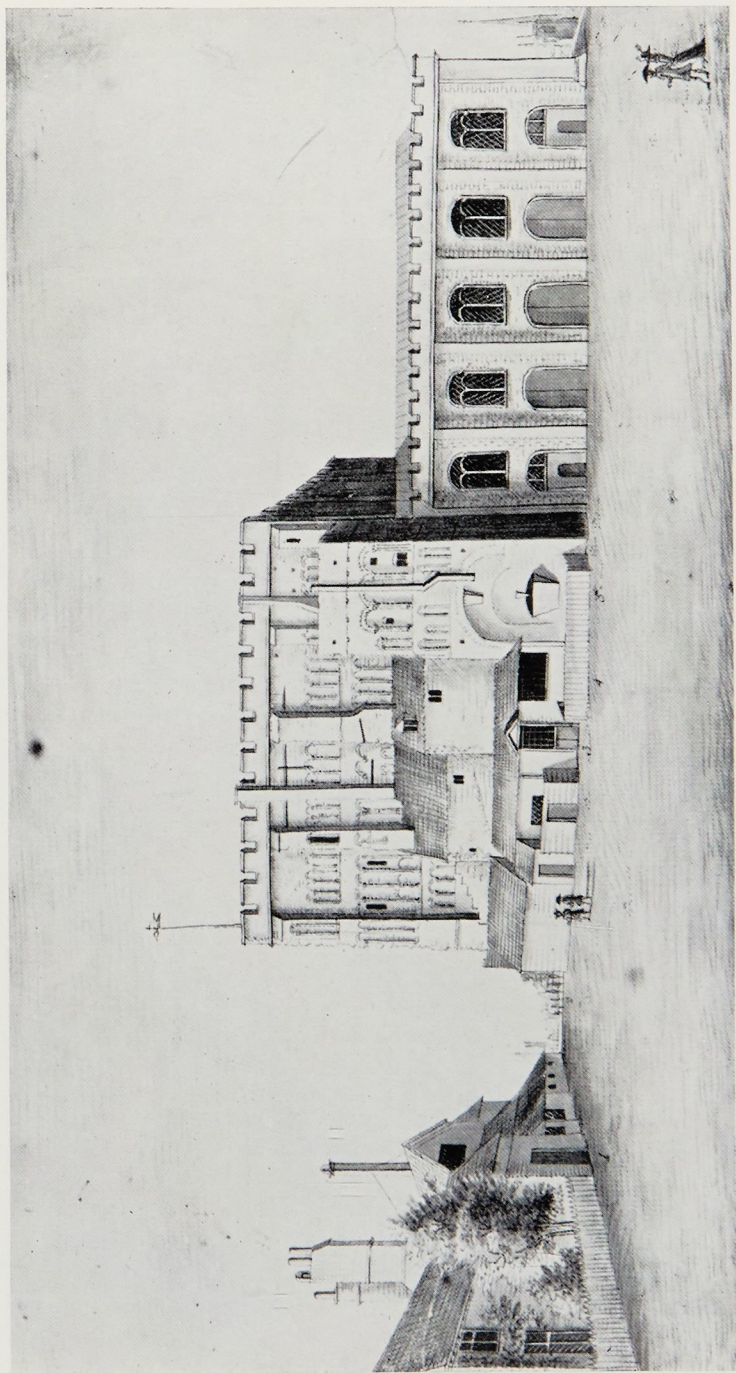
There were in Norwich at that time, as in many provincial cities, a number of craftsmen, usually masons, bricklayers, or carpenters, who developed as general contractors, partly by employing craftsmen of the lesser trades, such as glaziers and tilers, partly by employing each other as sub-contractors for trades that could not be covered by their own employees. The best known Norwich examples were Thomas Ivory, a carpenter, and Matthew Brettingham.

At this time the justices of the county, sitting in Quarter Sessions, besides dealing with criminal business, had a fairly extensive range of administrative duties. They were responsible, among other things, for the maintenance and repair of such of the bridges as were recognised as county bridges, and for the upkeep of Norwich Castle, which was the county gaol, and the Shirehouse, which adjoined the Castle. They had no permanent organisation for the repair of any of these. If a bridge needed repair, it was reported to the justices at Quarter Sessions, who, if they were satisfied that it was in need of repair, and that it was a county bridge, usually appointed one of their own number to see to it. Presumably the appointed justice made use of workmen to carry out the work, and, as professional skills became more specialised, of a surveyor to design at least the more extensive works; but details rarely survive in the records of the court. Any payment is made to the justice on his producing details of his expenditure. The details have often disappeared with time.

Gradually a few names begin to appear, and payment is made direct; unfortunately the practice is sporadic. In 1730 Robert Brettingham, Matthew's brother, was paid £100 for work at Lakenham Bridge, and the next year £98 for Trowse Bridge. This brought his total receipts for the two bridges up to £348. In 1731 again, Mr. Brettingham, whether Robert or Matthew does not appear, received £112 for work on the gaol.

These payments were clearly for building works; but by 1733 Matthew was certainly being employed as a surveyor. He was in that year paid two guineas for surveying Bawburgh Bridge, and three years later five guineas for surveying Acle Bridge. The sums appear small; but even twenty years later, when he was practicing in London, his standard fee for plans for the alteration of a country house was only ten guineas, and for a new house twenty. It seems likely, therefore, that these bridge plans involved a substantial measure of rebuilding. These are probably not his only works for the county at this time. For the reasons given above other work done by him is very likely unrecorded. His son, writing some time later, said he "built several bridges in the county."

There is a gap soon after this in the sequence of Order Books, probably owing to the fire at the Shirehouse mentioned later, and there are no further entries relating to Brettingham's bridge works. Fortunately an eighteenth-century copy exists of the more important orders of the court as to bridges; and it appears from this that by 1744 he had become accepted as the adviser of the justices on bridge repairs, at least for the east of the county. A committee was appointed in that year to repair Earlham Bridge "conformably to the opinion of Mr. Brettingham." He appears to have been acting both as surveyor and building contractor, for in 1745 he received £450 towards the repair of county bridges as well as £21 for surveying county works. It seems likely that although the office was not yet instituted he was acting as county surveyor. There is in the Norwich City Library a plan and elevation for a new bridge at Lenwade signed with the initials "M. B." The county spent £597 on work at Lenwade in 1741-43 and it seems likely that this may be one of the works for which he was paid as surveyor.



By permission of the Norwich Museums Committee

The Shirehouse, Norwich, c. 1780. Castle Museum, Norwich

He was still the chief adviser of the justices when, in September 1746, a fire destroyed the Shirehouse; and it is not surprising that he was put in charge of the rebuilding. Nothing survives of the terms of his employment, and indeed there seems to have been some ambiguity at the time. A bricklayer, carpenter, and stonemason were appointed, but it never seems to have been clear whether Brettingham was the contractor, and they were sub-contractors, or whether he was acting purely as surveyor, and they were all main contractors.

The bricklayer was Matthew's brother Robert. He does not come very well out of the subsequent arguments, a fact which seems to have been recognised in the family. The carpenter was Thomas Ivory, later responsible for the Assembly House and Octagon Chapel at Norwich. The mason was John Parsons of Wells, who had worked with Brettingham before at King's Lynn and probably at Holkham.

Brettingham is usually thought of as a Palladian architect and most of his work is in that style. The new Shirehouse was, however, Gothic with Norman overtones. This was presumably due to the fact that it adjoined the Castle; and while this was Norman rather than Gothic, it was no doubt felt that Gothic was more appropriate alongside a genuine mediaeval building. The Gothic style did not, as is sometimes thought, spring full-grown from the brain of Horace Walpole. Even the most classical of architects had used it where the circumstances seemed to require it. Wren at Oxford, Hawksmoor at Westminster, even Kent, the "proper priest" of the Palladian movement, at Hampton Court, had built in the Gothic style. Brettingham, who had practical experience of the style, having rebuilt the aisles and nave of St. Margaret's, King's Lynn, and done repair work at Norwich Cathedral, was ready to follow their example.

An Act of 1747 authorised the holding of Quarter Sessions and Assizes within the City and County of Norwich (which, unlike the Castle and Shirehouse, was not part of the County of Norfolk) until a new Shirehouse could be built. In July 1749, which is the earliest date covered by the first Order Book surviving after the fire, Quarter Sessions was still meeting at the Norwich Guildhall. The sessions of October was the first meeting at the new Shirehouse, so it can be assumed that the practical completion took place somewhere between these dates. Apart from clearing up the site, however, Brettingham was still busy nearby, since he was asked in October 1749 to carry out such immediate repairs to the adjoining Castle as he thought necessary. The work required seems to have been mainly rebuilding broken-down battlements. From time to time payments were made on account, covering both jobs.

All seems to have gone smoothly until April 1751, some eighteen months after the completion of the Shirehouse. The court at that time, having received a complaint from John Parsons the stonemason that Matthew Brettingham owed him a large sum, ordered Brettingham to produce an account of his receipts and disbursements for consideration by a committee, and to pay to Parsons any sum due within a month. This date was altogether too optimistic. It was not until the following year that full accounts were produced, and the more closely these were examined the more the complications grew, since

Brettingham put in several attempts at a complete account which were not always mutually consistent.

By July 1752 the committee had met on several occasions to wrestle with the accounts, and were in a position to report to Quarter Sessions. They dealt separately with the bills of the three main contractors.

Parsons' bill for stonework covered both the supply of stone and the working of it. The figures are confused, but it seems clear that the accounts which Brettingham had been putting forward for payment were not on the same basis as Parsons' own charges. Parsons' charge for the supply of stone was £425; Brettingham had valued this variously at £608 and £650. Conversely, Parsons claimed £403 for workmanship; Brettingham allowed only £358 and £300. It is not clear what the object of such discrepancies could be, but whichever set of Brettingham's figures was accepted, the county was being asked to pay over £100 more than Parsons had charged. When Brettingham was asked to explain the discrepancies he refused to go into particulars, and claimed that he had made the bills as surveyor to the best of his ability; if the county objected and remeasured the work it meant that he was to be considered, not as a surveyor, but as a contractor. In that case he claimed to be entitled to be paid on the value of the work done which he now claimed to be £1,090.

Thomas Ivory's bill for carpenter's work amounted to £345, and this was supported by a valuation made on his behalf by six workmen, which came to £392. A rival valuation, made on behalf of the county by Mr. Nicholls and five other workmen came to £263 only. Some of the details seem to show a deliberate attempt to mislead rather than plain muddle. A stud partition was charged at 30s. a square on the ground that it was quartered oak, 5 in. by 4 in. On uncovering and examination it proved to be fir, 3 in. by 3 in., worth only 20s.

The biggest discrepancies occur in the bricklayer's account of Robert Brettingham. This covers more than bricklaying in the narrow sense, for he was also responsible for the flintwork, the pantiles on the roof, ceiling and plastering, and tile and lump paving. The work once again was valued by six workmen for the contractor and six for the county. Except in minor details they disagree in almost every point. Robert Brettingham's workmen's rate per yard or per foot is greater than the county's, and their measurement of work done is also greater. For example, the brickwork, according to Brettingham's workmen, amounted to 2,262 yards, to be charged at 4/6 a yard. The county's workmen measured it at 1,919 yards, which they valued at 4/- a yard, making a difference of some £125. The biggest single discrepancy was in the charge for faced flintwork. Not only did Brettingham's workmen measure it at 4,078 feet against 3,870, but they charged it at 1/4 a foot against 6d., producing a difference of over £175. Altogether the county's workmen held that the bill of £1,009 was overcharged by £337.

Taking the three bills together the committee found that the £2,439 claimed was too much by £676, or more than a quarter. The court ordered that copies should be delivered to Ivory and the two Brettinghams, who were asked for an explanation. Parsons' bill seems to have been accepted as correct, though not Brettingham's handling of it. No explanation appears to have been forth-

coming, and at the next sessions the court resolved to refer the dispute to two arbitrators, one appointed by each side. The county nominated John Phillips of Brook Street, Grosvenor Square, a master carpenter of standing, who had worked at the Radcliffe Camera and Audley End, and who was, some twenty years later, to act as surveyor for the Society of Arts when Robert Adam built their premises in the Adelphi. Brettingham chose Alexander Rouchard, a stonemason, who had worked on the house which Brettingham had built in St. James' Square for the Duke of Norfolk. He seems to have been less well known than Phillips but is said some years later to have designed a naval hospital and storehouse at Plymouth.

This was in October 1752; and there for some while the matter rested. The site had never been properly cleared up and in 1755 the court ordered that the old scaffolding still lying there should be taken away by a fixed date. If not it was to be thrown on the Castle Hill. The Court becoming perturbed at the time the two arbitrators took to reach agreement not only asked Lord Hobart and Mr. Bacon to press for the valuations to be done but also wrote direct to Phillips. It was, however, ten years before Phillips' valuation and Rouchard's were received. As might perhaps have been expected, they failed to agree. The detailed valuations have not been preserved, so it does not appear whether any progress at all had been made.

It seems clear that the view of the court was that Brettingham had already had in his payments on account all that was due and more. He, however, put in a last demand for the additional sum which he claimed was due. This was referred for Counsel's opinion. What that opinion was is not recorded; indeed, there is no further entry in the Order Book relating to the dispute. There is no record of any further payment to Brettingham or of any repayment by him. It seems that the matter was allowed to drop. His son, Matthew the younger, writing about his father many years later, said, "He . . . erected the Shirehouse on the Castle Hill, and put on the battlements to the Castle, for which business he never got fully paid for his trouble, through the opposition of some of the County Gentlemen and the ill behaviour of his brother Robert who did the flint Stone Work of the Shirehouse." Neither of the Brettinghams seems to have been employed by the County again.

The Shirehouse which caused so much trouble did not have a very long life. This does not seem to have been due to any deficiencies in the building, although the investigating committee had reported that the tiling had been done very slightly, with the laths not bored, but split with the nails, and that the partitions were not so substantial as they should have been in such a building. The difficulty was that the Castle was used as the County Gaol, and early in the nineteenth century it became necessary to enlarge it. There was not enough room on the Castle Hill for the enlarged gaol and for the Shirehouse, and a new Shirehouse was built on a new site in the Castle Ditches by William Wilkins the younger.

Brettingham's career was not seriously affected by the dispute. From 1747 he worked from London as well as Norwich, and he built up a list of clients

which included a Royal Duke and at least twenty-one other peers and peeresses. He was able to send his son Matthew the younger on the Grand Tour to study architecture with a sum of money in his pocket estimated by Robert Adam at £15,000 or £20,000. Even if this was, as is likely, a gross exaggeration, the few hundred pounds lost over the Shirehouse were mortifying rather than crippling.