

Sir William Chambers and the building of Parkstead House, Roehampton

by JOAN P. ALCOCK

INTRODUCTION

Manresa House, Roehampton, one of several large houses in that village, now a suburb of London, has had three phases of occupation and its history has been little recorded. The house was first the home of the Earls of Bessborough, second a Jesuit noviciate, and third an educational establishment. The main block, which faces Richmond Park, was built by Sir William Chambers as Parkstead House in the 1760s for William, 2nd Earl of Bessborough; this building is illustrated in *Vitruvius Britannicus* and described in the principal histories of Surrey. The Earl used the building as a country house, but on the marriage of his son, Frederick, Viscount Duncannon, to Henrietta, daughter of Earl Spencer, he allowed the young couple to live there. Bessborough House, later Parkstead House, became the centre of their social and political life and this continued after Frederick had succeeded to his father's title in 1793 and had inherited the principal residence in Cavendish Square.

The third Lady Bessborough loved her Roehampton house. Here she brought up her three sons and her wayward daughter, Caroline, who was to marry William Lamb and to scandalise London Society as she pursued Lord Byron. Here she entertained her lover, Lord Granville Leveson Gower, and here she surrendered him so that he could marry her niece, Lady Henrietta Cavendish. Together with her sister, Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, Lady Bessborough became one of the foremost Whig hostesses of the age and the two played a not inconsiderable part in ensuring Fox's victory in the Westminster election in 1784.

The main Whig social centre was Devonshire House in Piccadilly (demolished 1923) but Roehampton was also used to entertain aspiring Whig politicians. Friends and relatives visited constantly and after the outbreak of the French Revolution the Bessboroughs were hosts to French emigrés, who had settled in Wimbledon. Among the many admirers of Lady Bessborough was the Prince Regent who hurried to Roehampton in 1809, after her break with Lord Granville, in order to proposition her. He even swore that he would give up Mrs Fitzherbert but all Lady Bessborough could notice, as she later wrote to Granville, was an 'immense grotesque figure floundering about, half on the couch, half on the ground'.

After Lady Bessborough's death in 1824, the 3rd Earl preferred to live in London and in 1827 Roehampton was leased to a banker, Abraham Wildey Roberts, who used the house as a summer residence. The 3rd Earl died in 1844 and his son extended Roberts' lease so that the house became the latter's permanent home.

Roberts died in 1858 and the 5th Earl sold the property to the Conservative

Land Society, which had been formed with the intention of buying large areas of land, dividing them into small plots and selling them to freeholders in order to increase the number of Conservative voters. The house, together with forty-two acres of land, was sold, through an intermediary, to the Society of Jesus, which took possession of the property in September 1864 with the intention of using it as a noviciate. Chambers' wings were pulled down and during the next thirty years the Jesuits erected a chapel, a dining hall and two wings at right angles to the original block. In 1957 a fourth side was added to create the present courtyard.

The Jesuits held the property (renamed Manresa after the place in Spain where Ignatius Loyola composed the *Spiritual Exercises*) which stretched from Richmond Park to what is now the Alton Road, until after the Second World War, using it as a noviciate, a centre for Retreats and in the 1950s as a training establishment for teachers for their Order. In 1947 land was compulsorily purchased by the then London County Council for the development of the Alton Estate. Tall blocks of flats soon surrounded the house and a loss of privacy was inevitable. When the Council wished to extend the Alton Estate and insisted on the purchase of more land, the Society decided to give up the house. Negotiations for the sale of the property were begun and these were completed in 1962 when the London County Council began the conversion of Manresa House so that it could accommodate the primary department of the then Battersea Training College, which had a Home Economics building at Clapham Common. In 1976 Battersea College of Education amalgamated with the Polytechnic of the South Bank and the house was used by the Professional Educational Studies Department. The Polytechnic vacated the building in 1979; it is now used by students of Garnett College and Putney Adult Educational Institute.

DATE OF THE BUILDING

The main Chambers block, with its splendid ceilings and porticoed facade, is still basically as Chambers designed it. It was one of his earliest commissions and a study of its details can help to reveal some of the principles which guided him throughout his career.

Parkstead House, known as Roehampton Park House¹ in the early 19th century, is one of the least altered works of Sir William Chambers. John Harris remarks that 'despite later additions and the complete rebuilding of the wings, the central body of the villa is well preserved, and its interiors display Chambers' early style of decoration better than anywhere else now that Duntish has been demolished'.²

Exactly how William, 2nd Earl of Bessborough, came to commission Chambers to build a villa at Roehampton is not clear. In the 18th century any professional man, especially at the start of his career, had to rely on patronage and possibly Chambers had met Lord Bessborough in Italy.³ On the other hand Lord Bessborough may have been impressed by the competence of Chambers' *Treatise on Civil Architecture*,⁴ to which his brother-in-law, the Duke of Devonshire had subscribed. Such a book, serving as a prospectus, laid emphasis on the classical features, which would have appealed to Lord Bessborough, who was a collector of antique sculpture. Unfortunately the letter books of Sir William Chambers, preserved in the British Library,⁵ begin in 1769 and make

no reference to the building of Parkstead nor to the relations between Chambers and his client. It can be assumed that they were cordial, because Lord Bessborough recommended Chambers to his son-in-law, Earl Fitzwilliam, for whom he altered Milton Park, Peterborough. Lord Bessborough also recommended him to Lord Barrington, who wrote to Chambers on 13 September 1766, 'My friend, Lord Bessborough, recommended you as an assistant in some rooms which I want to fit up in Berkshire.' This house was Beckett Park.⁶

There are some references to Lord Bessborough in Chambers' later letters, eg in one to Lord Fitzwilliam, dated 30 October 1773: 'I saw Lord Bessborough yesterday and am to dine with his lordship tomorrow at Rowhampton where we are to plan a temple for Milton Park'. One letter indicated that Lord Bessborough had thought of selling the property and had consulted Chambers about it. On 24 October 1770, Chambers wrote to Robert Taylor: 'I forgot to mention that I had seen Lord Bessborough and that I had told him that you knew of a chap for Roehampton. He said that he had no intention of selling it but as he had heard that Mr Fordyce demanded £400 an acre for his land he would be willing to dispose of all for half his money. If you know of a chap who would give that I imagine it may be a bargain'.

There is also uncertainty about the actual date of building the house. Pevsner and Summerson both date it too early, 1750 and 1759 respectively, but it seems most likely that the building should be dated to the 1760s.⁷ In the calendar of Surrey deeds in the Minet Library, Camberwell, is an indenture of sale. This mentions on 18 April 1744 property sold by Francis Hitchens to Thomas Thorpe consisting of three cottages, three gardens and one acre of land at Roehampton; a second entry records the sale of this land on 28 June 1763 by William Thorpe to John Carslake of Putney and the third on 1 July 1763 records that the land was assigned by Carslake to the Earl of Bessborough for 1,000 years at a rent of £82 a year.⁸ Lady Bessborough had died on 20 January 1760 and this event may have decided Lord Bessborough to leave his country house at Ingress Abbey, just west of Gravesend, and have a new house built on the other side of London. Chambers must have been asked to draw up plans soon afterwards, because his designs for the ceilings are dated between 1761 and 1763.⁹ On 30 September 1762, Chambers wrote to Lord Abercorn and mentioned that Roehampton 'was not yet covered in'. Lord Bessborough's name appears in the rate book in 1762 and he may have been living there at the time although it is certain that the building was not finished. The purchase of the land in 1763 might have been intended to round off the estate.

ORIGINS OF THE DESIGN OF THE BUILDING

The design of Parkstead is based on the Palladian villa. The prototypes appear to be Colen Campbell's Mereworth¹⁰ and Isaac Ware's villa (now demolished), which he built in 1754 for the financier, Bouchier Cleeve, at Foots Cray, Kent¹¹ and which was a severer version of Mereworth. The first design for the facade¹² lacks an attic storey but its row of Ionic columns and arrangement of windows on the first floor, was clearly inspired by Foots Cray. The drawing of the house in *Vitruvius Britannicus*¹³ reveals only two windows on the attic floor (see fig 1). In this case the centre front room would be lit entirely by skylights. One circular skylight still survives, having its original decoration round the rim. The room,

however, is a large one and the skylight is needed to give extra light in the rear. The facade of the house certainly has more attractive proportions without the windows, which appear to be rather uncomfortably situated above the portico but they are functionally necessary and were probably part of the original design. *Vitruvius Britannicus* also shows three chimneys whereas the present building has only two. Both Mereworth and Foots Cray have pediments over the windows on the *piano nobile*; Chambers omitted these, thus giving the front a more restrained appearance. The omission of pediments was not favoured by the Palladian architects, although Inigo Jones had omitted them at Wilton and the amateur architect, Lord Pembroke, omitted all but the central pediment at Marble Hill, Twickenham (1728). At Duddingston House, Edinburgh, which Chambers designed just after Parkstead, he replaced the pediments. The balustrades beneath the windows and the strong line of the string course are also adapted from Foots Cray, but Chambers gave still greater strength to his house by adding rustication to the basement and quoins at the sides. The latter were needed to give a definite end to the facade because the sides of the villa were not faced with stone.

Another model for Parkstead was the house which Colen Campbell had built for Lord Herbert in Whitehall about 1724 (now demolished);¹⁴ the rusticated centre part of the basement projects to support a portico. Chambers accepts this although substituting for Campbell's three arches a central doorway (its lintel ornamented with swags) with a window on each side. An earlier example available to Chambers was Amesbury, Wiltshire, built by John Webb but possibly designed by Inigo Jones. This house was larger than the normal villa, and the portico was raised on a protrusion which had square-headed windows and doors. Chambers' arched windows have the bold keystones of Webb's and the two small square basement windows, partly hidden by the stairs, are almost an exact copy of those at Amesbury except for the keystone which Chambers thrusts up into the string course.

Chambers gave added distinction to his house with the curving stairs, for neither Amesbury nor Lord Herbert's house had these; Foots Cray and Mereworth were both approached directly by a broad straight stairway. Stourhead had two flights of stairs, but they ran parallel to the house. The Parkstead stairs are similar to those designed by John James for Sir Gregory Page's house in Blackheath,¹⁵ although the pattern of those railings is less elaborate. The treatment of the hexastyle portico is very severe, especially as the pediment is unrelieved by any decoration. In the original design Chambers seems to have followed the pattern of the porticos at Amesbury and at Lord Herbert's villa, having two central columns and double columns in the Doric style at each end; there are no stairs on this drawing and once these had been added six equal columns presented a more agreeable appearance.

The treatment of the facade is strictly in accordance with Palladian principles as laid down by Lord Burlington and Colen Campbell. If anything, Chambers was more severe, reducing his ornament to a minimum. Christopher Hussey remarks that 'it is difficult, in fact, to deny that Sir William Chambers was a fastidious but visually dull designer, notwithstanding that his writing and teaching were, in the end, to have more lasting influence on English architects than the achievement of his life-long rival', namely Robert Adam. His *Treatise on civil architecture* emphasises the sparse, almost ruthless nature of his

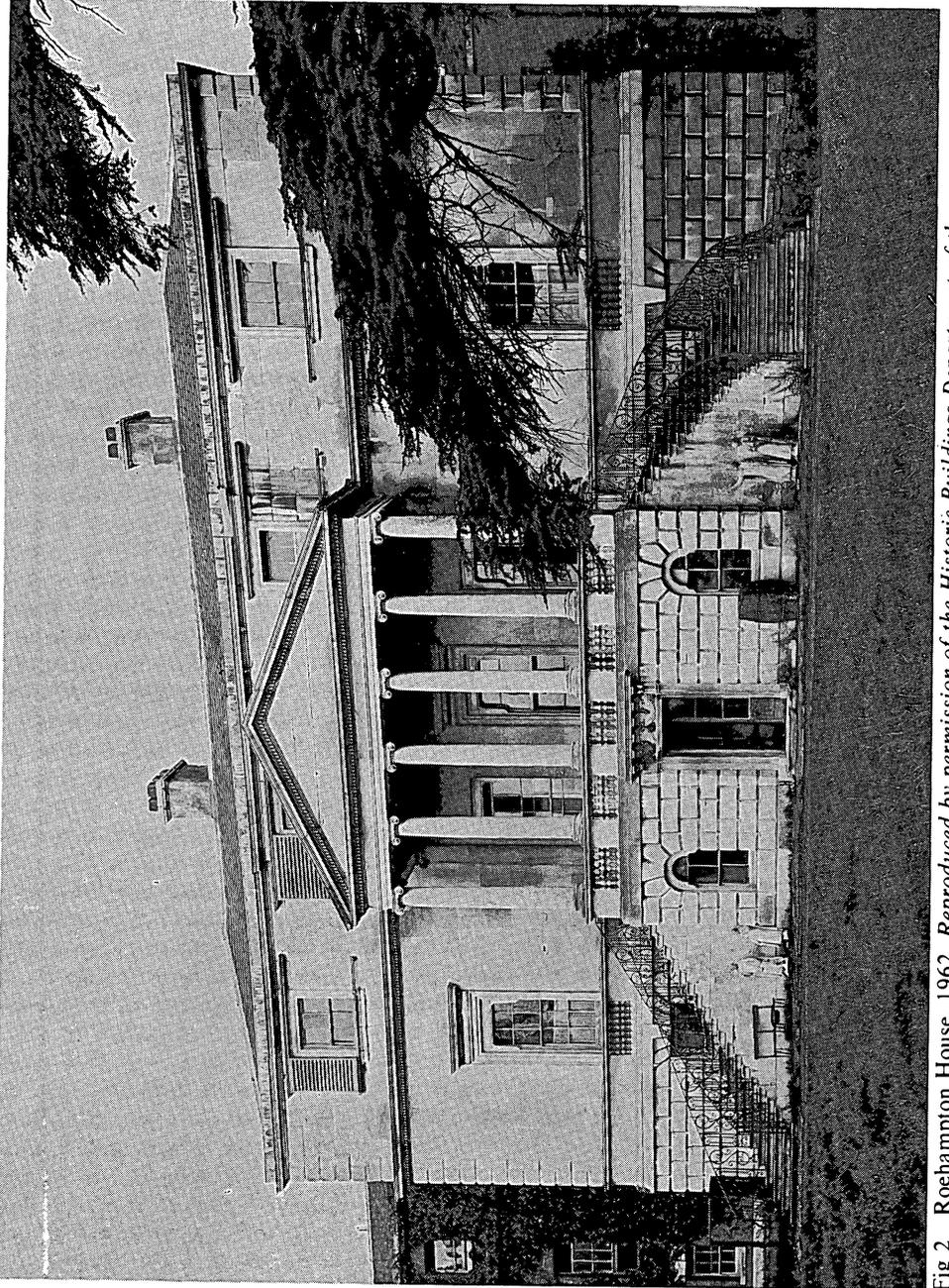


Fig 2 Roehampton House, 1962. Reproduced by permission of the Historic Buildings Department of the Greater London Council

approach to architecture, at least as applied to the exterior of his buildings, and a glance at Somerset House will show that he never deviated from these principles. The intention was to create the effect of a temple in a grove of trees and as such it would be viewed from Richmond Park.¹⁶ Creevey wrote on 15 July 1823, 'I had a really charming day at Roehampton yesterday. It is quite a superb villa, a house with 500 acres of beautiful ground about it, and all Richmond Park appearing to belong to it'.¹⁷

Only the facade of Parkstead was faced in stone; the rest was of dark grey brickwork with stone quoins at the corners. The side facing the courtyard (ie away from the Park) had no decoration, not even pediments above the windows on the first floor. The wings on either side were hidden from the viewer in Richmond Park. This side was altered in 1863 when the Jesuits added the stone corridor and it is not certain what was the original appearance of the basement. The present doorway leading into that corridor is said to have been taken from the original house, and if this is so it would seem that rustication extended over the basement area. A photograph taken in 1962 and published in the private Jesuit Journal, *Letters and Notices*, for that year shows that the doorway protruded slightly but there was no porch (see fig 2). The style of the doorway is reminiscent of that later devised by Chambers for Berners Street and Somerset House.

In the interior planning of Parkstead, Chambers seems to have followed the basic planning of Amesbury as applied to the ground and first floors. From the portico one enters a large hall with a large room on each side and two smaller rooms to the rear flanking the staircase; at Amesbury both of these rooms can be entered from the staircase but at Parkstead only one is so accessible. The ground floor is also similar although instead of Webb's large room Chambers filled the space with two long narrow rooms flanking a central corridor which gave access to the main staircase. The plan of the house compares favourably with that of Duntish, Dorset (now demolished), which Chambers had built about 1760. Here, a double flight of steps leads up to a large entrance hall on either side of which lie one large and one small room. The facade at Duntish was not so impressive — there was no portico and no stucco. Peper Harow has a somewhat similar plan except that the rooms are placed all round the staircase,¹⁸ and the interior planning owes much to Colen Campbell's Stourhead.

An unusual device was present at Amesbury and Parkstead. Within the main staircase well at Amesbury is a circular stair (1662) for use of the servants, which Chambers reproduced as an octagonal stair at Parkstead. There was access at each landing and the general effect, before the staircase was pulled down in 1888 after a fire, would have been rather curious. At Peper Harow Chambers placed both the main and the servants' staircase in the centre of the house but divided by a wall into two completely separate compartments.

The accommodation at Parkstead was extended by the building of wings which were presumably constructed at the same time as the main house. A sketch plan made by William Newton¹⁹ (fig 3) seems to suggest that these consisted of two corridors or colonnades curving out to join two small blocks built to the same design. This, however, was drawn from memory and a more accurate plan is in *Vitruvius Britannicus* (figs 4 and 5) where two small double-storey blocks are attached to the house by small passages. The open spaces beyond these blocks are confined by walls which then return to enclose the

entrance court. The stabling may have been placed in the northern block where a row of stalls is indicated in a map of 1861, although the Jesuits' description of the property suggests there was a separate coachhouse. The wings and their connection are not dissimilar from the arrangement at Duddingston, but only one wing was completed here. Isaac Ware had designed somewhat similar wings for Lord Chesterfield's house in Mayfair but with lengthened colonnades. Duntish had attached wings but they did not enclose a court.

THE GROUNDS

The grounds of Parkstead were laid out by Chambers, although very little of them now remains. According to a rough sketch of the area attached to Parkstead²⁰ the grounds stretched from Richmond Park to the Kingston Road, where entrance was through iron gates hung on tall square pillars each surmounted by a lion and decorated with bucrania and swags.²¹ One road swept through the estate from Roehampton Lane to the Kingston Road and the main drive led off this to the house. The grounds may have been built up piece by piece as the Earl gradually bought more land round the house. Eventually they were surrounded by a wall. Harrison mentions that in the hurricane, which took place on 15 October 1780 part of Lord Bessborough's wall was torn down by the force of the gale.²² A large tree, 29 feet in circumference and 110 feet high, standing close to the entrance of the house and close to the lane leading from Putney Heath to Barnes Common, had several branches torn off it. The hurricane started here and swept through to Hammersmith. The deeds of the house are accompanied by a sketch plan²³ which seemingly shows the pieces of land added to the estate. There is also mention of William Travel and John Prance owning buildings which were pulled down by the 2nd Earl when the lands were extended. The land included a portion on the other side of Roehampton Lane next to the King's Arms. The original size of the grounds seems to have been ten acres to which another four were added by the end of the 18th century. In 1796 permission was granted to the 3rd Earl to enclose part of Putney Upper Common.

In time, a large kitchen garden was laid out, beyond the road through the estate, where exotic fruits such as pineapples and melons were grown. Chambers designed two paths to encircle the house and a half-moon-shaped lawn in front of it. The land dropped towards Richmond Park, from which it was separated by a sunken fence. The large area of grass in front of the house was built up in the Jesuit's time when it was decided to create a football field. The gardens which Chambers designed lie under this, although there seems little indication of formal garden planning; the layout was seemingly in the tradition of the English parkland, no doubt to make it appear to be an extension of Richmond Park.

In accordance with the tradition of landscape gardening at that period Chambers designed temples and rotundas for the grounds, and these were placed so that they could be seen at the end of a vista. One, at least, survived when the Jesuits bought the estate and it remained until the 1960s. It consisted of a rectangular room of Portland stone, lined with alabaster, with four columns with Corinthian capitals forming a semi-circle in front, the whole being surmounted by a dome. Chambers had devised many classical temples for the grounds at Kew,²⁴ and the Parkstead temples were a development from these.

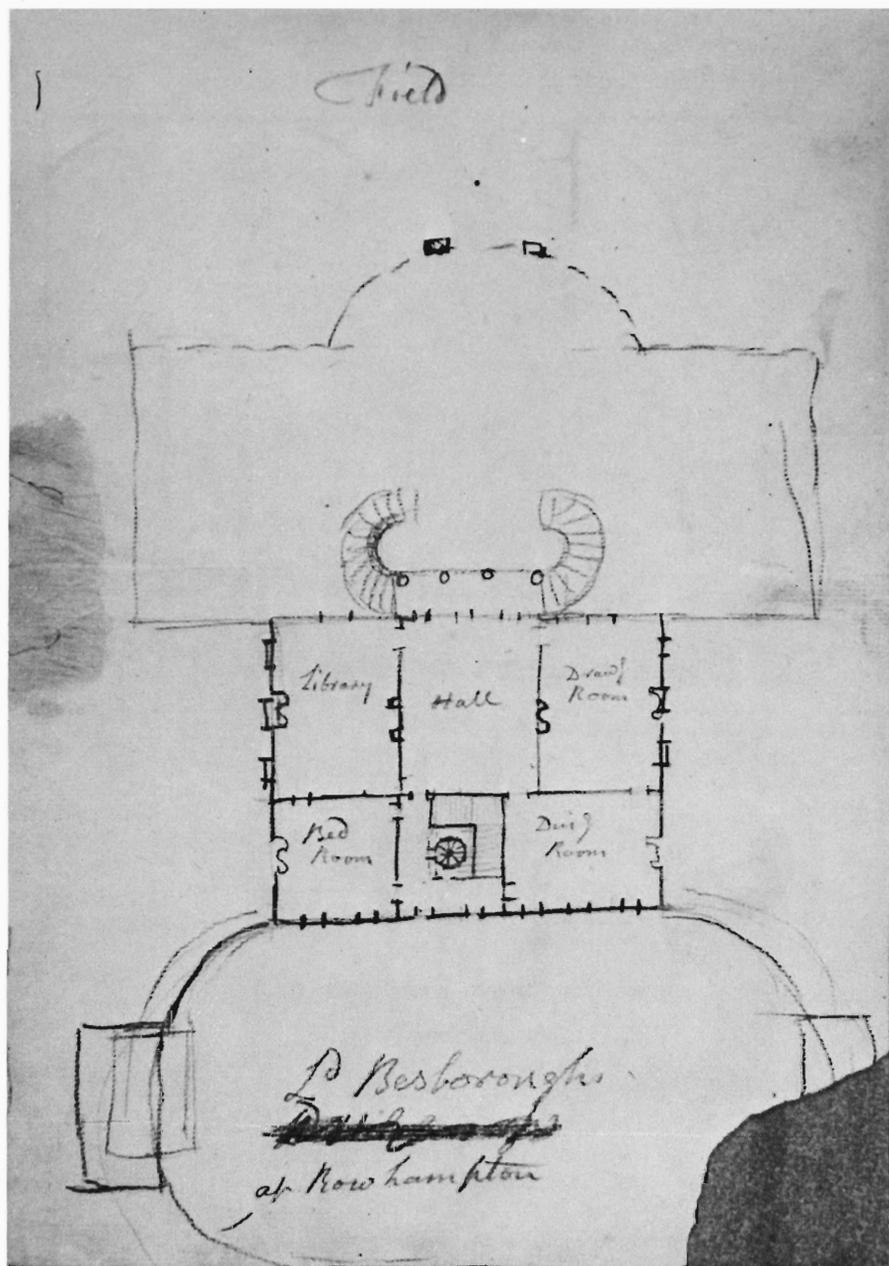
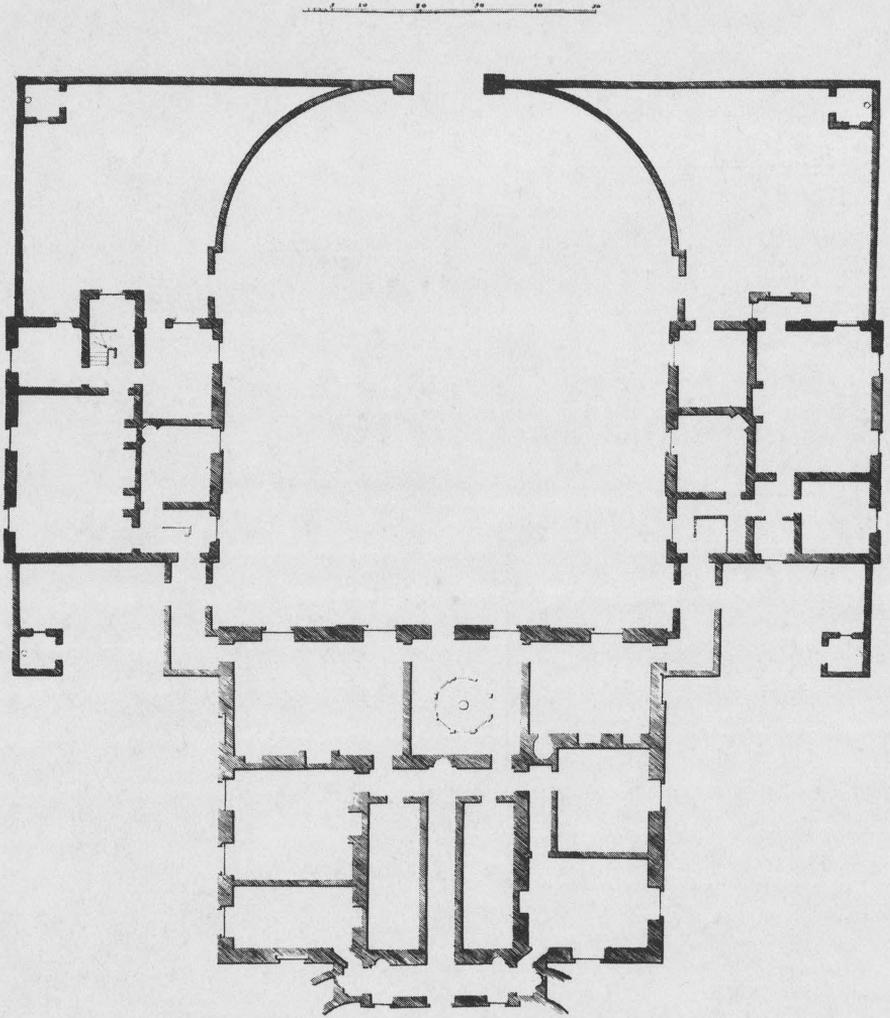


Fig 3 A drawing made c1790 of the plan of Parkstead by William Newton. Reproduced by permission of the British Architectural Library: Drawings Collection. (© RIBA Collections)



*A General Plan of the Right Hon^{ble} the Earl of Roehampton's Villa,
At Roehampton in Surrey.*

Plan General de la Maison de Monsieur Le Comte de Roehampton.

Fig 4 Ground plan of the house, from *Vitruvius Britannicus*

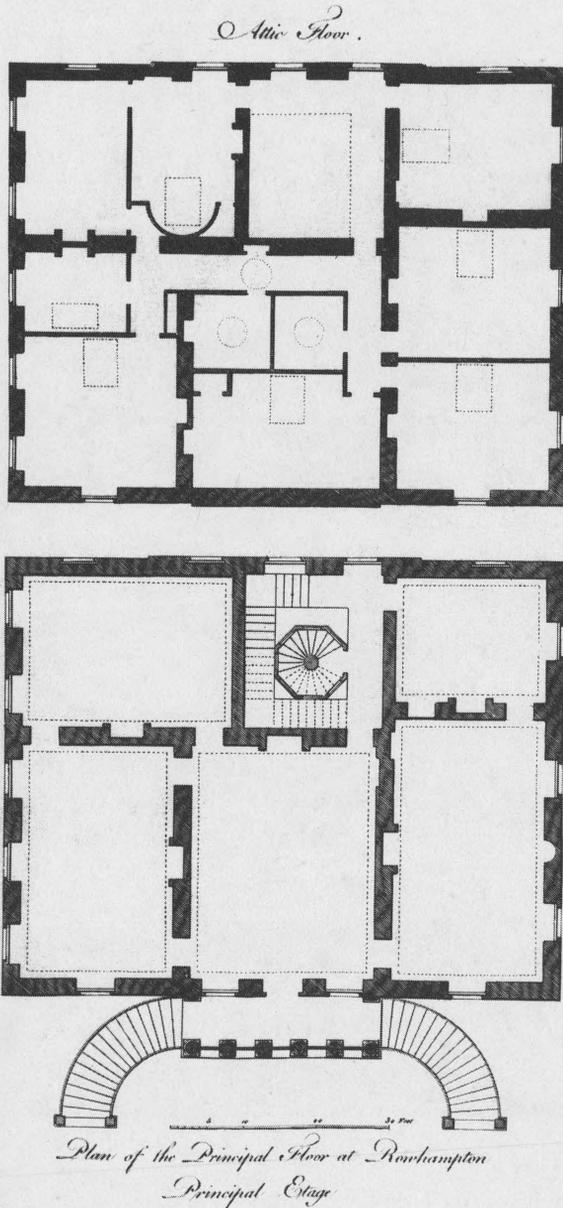


Fig 5 Plans of the principal and attic floors, from *Vitruvius Britannicus*



Fig 6 The Hall. Reproduced by permission of the Historic Buildings Department of the Greater London Council

The base of the temple still survives in the grounds but the upper part has been dismantled. A second temple has been dismantled and rebuilt in the grounds of the Principal's house at Mount Clare (Garnett College).

The legend that it was in one of these temples that Lord Bessborough and the Prince Regent used to gamble appears to have no foundation other than a sentence in Brayley's *History of Surrey*.

THE INTERIOR

The interior of Parkstead poses particular problems, the main one being the origin of the inspiration for the ceiling decorations. The designs for the ceiling are in the Print Room Library of the Victoria and Albert Museum. There are ten of these but only five of the ceilings in the main house are highly decorated. Some of the ceilings may have been designed for rooms situated in the wings but it is more likely that some of the designs were not carried out, for example one labelled 'No 10 ceiling of the China Room for Lord Bessborough's' (2216.42). A design showing a central panel within strong ribbing (2216.29) may have been a sketch of a first idea for the room with the coved ceiling. The central cartouche is similar to that executed later for the drawing room ceiling at Peper Harow.

One piece of evidence is available to indicate the use of the rooms in the house. When William Newton sketched the plan of the building he labelled the rooms placing the hall in the centre, with the library to the right of the person who entered and the drawing room to the left; beyond the library was the principal bedroom, which could also be approached from the main staircase; behind the drawing room was the dining room and this could be entered also from the hall. For want of further information these descriptions must be taken as correct, although Newton's plan has discrepancies such as in his positioning of the fireplaces (see fig 3).

An architect in the 18th century was often the contractor arranging for workmen to be hired and materials to be bought. A Mr Key, the Clerk of Works, was later employed at Duddingston, near Edinburgh. Joseph Wilton, an ornamental plasterer and sculptor of chimney-pieces, did work for Chambers at Parkstead and elsewhere; his father, William Wilton, was also an ornamental plasterer and could have worked on the Roehampton ceilings. Another plasterer, Thomas Collins, Wilton's apprentice, widely employed by Chambers, worked on this house and at Styche in Shropshire, which Chambers also built in the 1760s. Other craftsmen were one Webb and one Rogers, a joiner and a carpenter respectively²⁵. Chambers had to employ and pay these men and later letters show that often he had to press his clients for instalments which he could use to reimburse his workmen. He himself would receive commission on the work done. Chambers' relationship with his clients was always one of mutual respect except in the case of Lord Milton, for whom he built Milton Abbey, Dorset, and with whom he had difficulty over payment.²⁶

Many of the motifs and patterns which Chambers used at Roehampton are to be found in the other houses where he was employed about the same time or just after, in particular, Duntish Court, Dorset, and Peper Harow, Surrey.²⁷ The latter was built for the 2nd Viscount Middleton between 1765 and 1773, and the design of the panelling and the door-cases is strikingly similar to those of

Parkstead. The panelling of the hall of Peper Harow still retains its original colouring and the restraint of the white architectural scheme against a flat coloured ground may have been first tried out at Parkstead. At the latter a frieze of drapes and urns, each drape surmounted by a lion mask runs round the hall (see fig 6). The walls are compartmentalized, each compartment being divided by columns of palm bark decoration, and the palm motif is repeated over the windows; below these is a design of lamps lit at both ends. Bead and reel within egg and tongue effectively etch out the wall panels, while the string course, patterned with Vitruvian scroll, clearly delineates the lower part of the wall. The doorcases in the hall follow strictly classical lines; all have fluted, patterned overcases and the effect at the fireplace end is strictly symmetrical. Above each door in the side walls is a pediment; above each door on the fireplace side is a wreath with a bracket set below on which a bust could be placed.

The stone chimney-pieces in the hall at Parkstead and at Peper Harow are almost exactly the same design, and one at Charlemont is similar;²⁸ as Joseph Wilton carved the last two he probably carved the Parkstead one also. The bucrania and drapes, the projecting dentils, are exactly the same; only the decoration of the frieze and the arrangement of the trophées of musical instruments are different. At Peper Harow the chimney-piece supports a bust of the Duke of Marlborough; the Parkstead fireplace may have supported a similar bust, its effect enhanced by the supporting volutes.

The other chimney-pieces have been removed, but the one in the room next to the chapel (the Jesuit sacristy) may have come from the Chambers block, as it is similar in style to others of his, especially those at Peper Harow. The coloured marble columns have Ionic capitals and the frieze is elaborately carved with acanthus leaves. Adam designed a somewhat similar one for the drawing room at Shardeloes. Buckinghamshire; only the frieze is different.

THE CEILINGS

The ceilings at Parkstead were particularly fine and were some of Wilton's best work. They are elaborate and retain some of the French influence which Chambers had absorbed. Later, Chambers' designs became more severe, whereas Robert Adam preferred a lighter style of decoration. Chambers evolved, according to Gwilt, 'a more graceful outline, an easy flowing foliage and elegant imitation of such flowers and plants and other objects in nature as were best adapted to the purpose of architectural ornament'.²⁹

Chambers' original drawings for the ceiling designs differ somewhat from what was eventually carried out. In these designs Chambers was following the prevailing taste set forth by James Paine, that is, a personal interpretation of Rococo-Palladian style. The work of Paine at Brompton Hall, Hertfordshire, built in 1765-68 but with decoration after 1770, shows the full interpretation of this style.³⁰ Chambers' style is more restrained and he uses the restriction of Palladian rib divisions, especially in the hall. The best-known exponent of this style is, of course, Robert Adam, and though during the 1760s Adam's work was less infused with motifs of antiquity (as seen in his work at Syon House), both he and Chambers had introduced to England a style of classical plasterwork in which trails of acanthus play a major part.

There are two designs for the ceiling of the hall (2216.26, 30), one being

entitled 'The Ceiling in Lord Bessborough's Saloon at Rowhampton', signed 'W. Chambers' and dated 1763. The notes on the back of the drawing seem to indicate that the ceiling was already executed but not to Chambers' satisfaction, especially regarding the projections of the foliage and the ribs. The heavy rib projections with their guilloche patterning, breaking up the ceiling into compartments, owe a great deal to early 18th-century Palladian ceilings, especially those at Chiswick House. Isaac Ware's ceiling for the library of Chesterfield House had similar rib patterning, although the flats were more elaborately decorated. Chambers wrote generally of ceilings in 1759, 'Ceilings are either flat or coved in different manners. The simplest of the flat kind are those adorned with large compartments, either let into the ceiling or being flush with its surface and surrounded with one or several mouldings. . . and when some of the mouldings which surround the compartment are enriched and some of the compartments adorned with well executed foliages, or other stucco or painted ornament, such ceilings have a very good effect; they are very proper for all common dwelling houses, and for all low apartments'.³¹

The other design (2216.26) is more elaborate; there are more compartments, and the large projecting squares in the corners are reduced to a quarter of the size of those executed. Two more compartments are added so that the central area is reduced, and these contain Victories pouring water out of urns. The central flat has more decoration, including a roundel of foliage encompassing the main design, the ribs are heavily decorated, and the effect would have been rather overwhelming even allowing for the size of the room; by increasing the area of the flat and placing the central design inside an oval rib pattern decorated with foliage, Chambers increases the sense of space. Tripods and urns are motifs taken from antiquity and the frieze of urns linked by drops is particularly pleasing; an unusual motif is the dropped dentils round the edge of the ceiling; bosses of swirling acanthus, one in the centre and one in each corner compartment, are similar to one drawn by Chambers, now in the Print Room (7078.16). This type of boss also appears on the ceiling of the room to the right of the hall. A more florid design of the central compartment, with eight rays and not four, appears in the design for the gallery ceiling at Pembroke House (2216.24).

The room to the right of the hall is called the library on William Newton's plan and it has a more elaborate ceiling than that which was originally designed (see fig 7). A design labelled 'No 9 ceiling in the Library at Rowhampton' (2216.41) bears no relation to this ceiling nor to any other in the house. A third design is labelled 'Cornice in the library at Rowhampton 1/13 of the height of the Room' (7078.34), and this, with its flowing acanthus leaf, bears some relation to the projecting decoration on the frieze in the so-called library. Another design (2216.25) clearly relates to this room. It has the heavy ribs but with a more simple design within them than that executed. The heavy guilloche pattern in the ribs is similar to that used later by Paine in the drawing room at Brocket Hall³², and the lightness of the designs in the compartments with the mask and musical instrument motifs is extremely pleasing; the florid scrolls reveal the move towards a controlled rococo style; in each corner compartment an owl perches on top of a reed.

To the left of the hall, according to Newton, was the drawing room, 35 ft×21 ft. Here the technique is completely different: the ribbing is now composed of palm tree bark and the rococo designs are confined to the end compartment; the



Fig 7 Ceiling of the room to the right of the hall, labelled 'Library' in Newton's plan. Reproduced by permission of the Historic Buildings Department of the Greater London Council



Fig 8 Ceiling of the room to the left of hall, labelled 'Drawing room' on Newton's plan. Reproduced by permission of the Historic Buildings Department of the Greater London Council

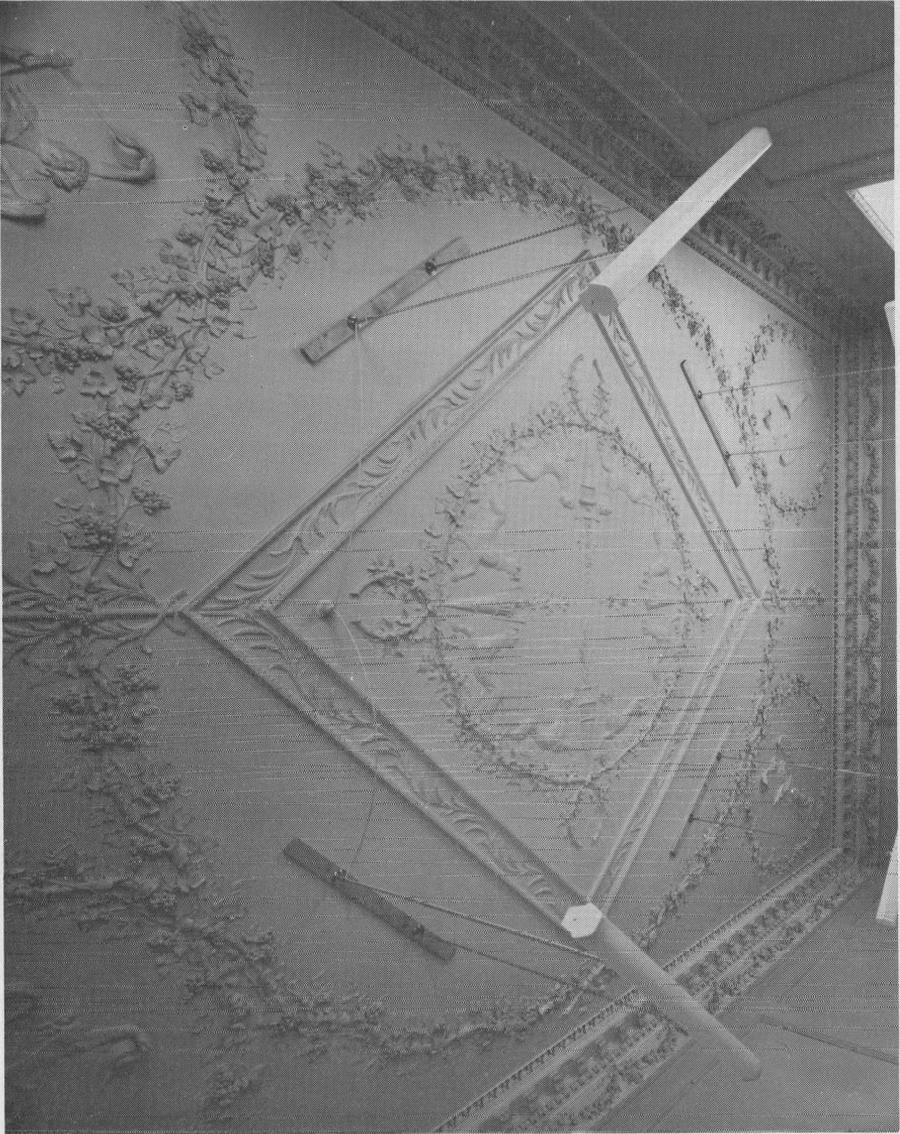


Fig 9 Ceiling of the room to the left at rear, labelled 'Dining room' on Newton's plan. Reproduced by permission of the Historic Buildings Department of the Greater London Council

cornice, of egg and dart motif, is heavier and the frieze consists of compact scrolls of acanthus; the central boss is surrounded by a circle containing a rather stiffly worked out design of vine branches and fruit (see fig 8). The vine was becoming increasingly popular as a motif but this particular example has not the vivacity which Adam could give it, as he did on the dining room ceiling at Shardeloes, Buckinghamshire, which he was working on at about this time.³³ The design of the foliage in the outer compartments, both here and in the library, might be compared with foliage carved during the Augustan age on panels and tombs in Rome, especially that on the *Ara Pacis Augustae* (13–9 BC) where the stems curl round to end in open-petalled flowers.³⁴

The room behind this, called by Newton the dining room, had a most elaborate ceiling which, in view of the room's small size, is rather too detailed (see fig 9). No previous design for this exists in the Print Room, but there is a strong infusion of classical motif including that of winged Victories pouring water from jugs, which Chambers had included in his first design for the hall ceiling and then rejected. These Victories³⁵ are set within roundels of vines which are joined to a larger circle of vines enclosing the central scene; the treatment of the vines is looser and richer than in the previously described room; two thyrses entwined by stylized corn ears link the vines to a lozenge composed also of stylized ears enclosed within parallel lines. The central design of pairs of dogs facing urns is Etruscan in feeling. From the urns rises foliage differing in character — roses, leaves, corn ears. The whole impression of the ceiling, together with its rich cornice and frieze (composed of swags), is reminiscent of French classicism.

The last of the staterooms is described by Newton as the bedroom. There is no design for this in the Victoria and Albert Museum collection. Its ceiling (fig 10) is not as elaborate as the others but is coved in form; the corners of the coves are effectively disguised by means of candelabra enclosed by complex curves of swags and sprays to form a uniform cartouche; the thick ribbing of the central part provides a foil for four thyrses arranged in a lozenge pattern. The contrast to the ceiling in the other small room is clearly apparent and the heaviness of the design recalls Palladian rib-structuring. The doorcases are left entirely plain.

The only other decorated ceiling which has survived from Chambers' time is in the basement, where passages lead to the central staircase and to rooms on each side of the block (see fig 11). The ceiling is decorated with a design of reeds and with sprays of stylized foliage, some forming cartouches enclosing classical-type heads. These, seemingly inspired by grotesque decoration which Chambers had seen in Rome, were executed by him in the rococo manner. He did not use grotesque forms to the same extent as Robert Adam and their presence at Parkstead is indicative of his early style. Later such devices would be rejected in favour of sparser and more controlled designs. The ends of the side passages, before they were replastered in the 1960s, originally were designed with two lunate niches, placed one above the other, with a panel placed between them on which were placed three cupids; beneath the lower lunate was a design of a wreath enclosing a ship's prow. The division between wall and ceiling had a thick ribbing of acanthus decoration.

The ceilings in Parkstead, which are still in good condition, although some repairs have been carried out to the one in the hall, show that Chambers was drawing on an elaborate repertoire. He was to reduce this and his later ceilings

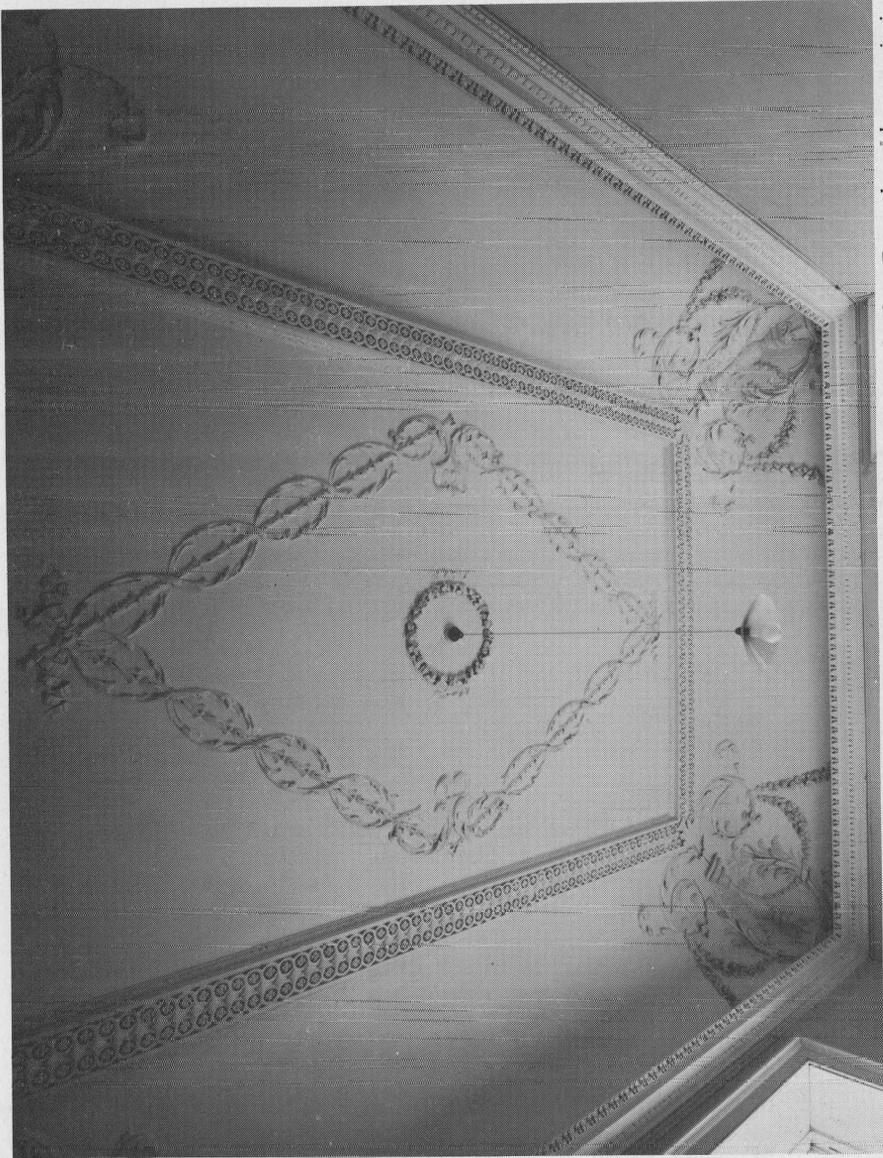


Fig 10 Ceiling of the room to the right at rear, labelled 'Bedroom' on Newton's plan. Reproduced by permission of the Historic Buildings Department of the Greater London Council



Fig 11 Passage near entrance. *Reproduced by permission of the Historic Buildings Department of the Greater London Council*

are more sparse in design. In some rooms at Parkstead the effect may even be considered florid. The whole design is confident and assured, carried out by competent workmen.

THE STAIRCASE

The same competent originality can be seen in the design of the staircase. The Renaissance interpretation of the staircase — that is, a stair ascending on each side of the entrance hall — was later abandoned in favour of a single flight usually placed in the centre of the house and ascending round a staircase well. After 1755 a stone staircase with wrought iron balustrades became very popular, and it was this type which Chambers designed for Parkstead, basing it on William Kent's work, especially that in the old Treasury (1736) and at 44 Berkeley Square (1735). The result was a graceful flight with a wrought iron balustrade in reversed S-shaped design separated by double parallels, which echoed the balustrade on the steps at the front of the house; the rise and tread of the stair allows an elegant ascent without fatigue. Once the state apartments had been placed on the first floor an extra staircase had to be arranged for the servants. This was sometimes placed in another part of the house, but at Parkstead Chambers preferred, as mentioned above (p 203), to copy the design which Webb had used at Amesbury. Webb may have taken this idea from a plan reproduced in one of the books of architecture written by the Italian architect, Serlio,³⁶ where an inner staircase is provided in a circular well inside the main staircase. Another architect, Scamozzi, mentions several different types of staircase including single or double flights with a concealed staircase in the centre.³⁷ The result was ingenious but clumsy and, because the light at Parkstead enters from one side alone, it could have made the whole staircase very dark. It is not known if the inner staircase had walls (broken by apertures to let in the light) or was left completely open (in which case concealment of the servants was impossible).

The Bessborough staircase achieved some fame, for it provided inspiration for other houses. When Frederick Hervey, 4th Earl of Bristol and Bishop of Derry, was building a house at Ballyscullion in Ireland he wrote to his daughter, Lady Erne, on 8 March 1787, that 'the house is perfectly circular in imitation of one I saw upon an island in the Westmorland lakes'. This was Belle Isle, Windermere, built by John Plaw, 1774–75. After describing the rooms he continues: 'The Staircase in the centre of the house is oval, and like a double screw includes the Back stairs like Ld. Bessborough's at Roehampton and that of Marshall Saxe at Chambord'³⁸. Ballyscullion was never finished and was pulled down in 1813, but it provided inspiration for the 4th Earl's next house which the architect, Francis Sandys, built at Ickworth in Suffolk.

The Parkstead staircase has fine door-cases on the first floor with overcases but no pediments. The lintel has a design of three swags, the central swag surmounted by a tripod, the side ones by a quiver. The design on the wooden dado is of jugs tilted at an angle and set in a roundel, alternating with rosettes and separated by acanthus. The jug motif is to be found in the Doric entablature of the theatre of Marcellus in Rome, which Chambers had illustrated in his *Treatise on civil architecture*.³⁹ The central boss of the ceiling of the staircase well has a marked rococo flavour with its controlled foliage design, but this is

contained within ribs decorated with Vitruvian scroll pattern. At the four corners are bosses somewhat similar to one reproduced in the *Treatise on civil architecture*.⁴⁰

CONCLUSION

The Roehampton villa was Chambers' first private commission for a house and it prepared the way for a great career. In it he put into practice those ideas and methods which he had advocated in his *Treatise*. He himself knew exactly what qualifications an architect should possess. He was fluent in French, Italian and Swedish and said of the architect:

'Proficiency in the French and Italian languages is also requisite to him; not only that he may be enabled to travel with advantage and converse without difficulty, in countries where the chief part of his knowledge is to be collected; but also to understand the many and almost only valuable books treating of his profession the greater part of which have never been translated'.

Above all there had to be genius, that extra, hidden talent, without which no architect could aspire to the highest ranks:

'To these qualifications, mental and corporal, must be united genius; or a strong inclination and bias of mind towards the pursuit in question; without which little success can be expected. This quality, whether it be the gift of God or a fortuitous propensity; whether innate or acquired; has not inaptly been compared to those instincts implanted in nature in different animals'.⁴¹

This genius, innate perhaps, but also a result of intense preparation and hard work, was present in Chambers, and at Parkstead he began to draw on that experience and scholarship which was to serve him so well for the next thirty years.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 Minet Library, Camberwell, Calendar of Surrey deeds, 4750, 4765
- 2 Harris, J. *Sir William Chambers*, 1970, 245
- 3 Martiensen, H. An inquiry regarding the architectural theory and practice of Sir William Chambers. PhD thesis, University of London, 1951
- 4 Chambers, Sir William. *Treatise on civil architecture*, 1759
- 5 BL Addit MSS 41133-6
- 6 Dickens, L. and Stanton, M. *An eighteenth-century correspondence*, 1910, 432
- 7 Pevsner, N. *The buildings of England, London*, 1953, 2, 439; Summerson, Sir John. *Architecture in Britain, 1530-1830*, 1953, revised 1963, 254, 260
- 8 Minet Library, Camberwell. Calendar of Surrey deeds, 4750, 4765
- 9 Victoria and Albert Museum, Print Room Library; Harris, op cit, 245
- 10 Summerson, op cit, pl. 135(A)
- 11 *Vitruvius Britannicus*, 1767, 4, 8-10
- 12 V and A, Print Room Library, 3355.9. 2b; Sir John Soane Museum, 43/4¹⁰
- 13 *Vitruvius Britannicus*, 4, 11
- 14 *Ibid*, 3, 14
- 15 *Ibid*, 4, 61
- 16 Harris, op cit, 53
- 17 Gore, J. (ed), *The Creevey Papers*, 1963, 196

- 18 Hussey, C. *English country houses: mid-Georgian, 1760–1800*, 1956, 113
- 19 Royal Institute of British Architects Library. Sir Banister Fletcher Library Drawings Collection
- 20 Minet Library, Calendar of Surrey deeds, 4750
- 21 Minet Library, drawing in the local collection
- 22 Harrison, E. *An account of the hurricane which happened at Roehampton Lane and places adjoining on 15th October 1750*, 1781
- 23 Minet Library, Calendar of Surrey deeds, 4750
- 24 Chambers, Sir William. *Plans, elevations and perspective views of the garden and buildings at Kew*, 1758
- 25 Information from Mr Harris. After the second world war part of the ceiling of the hall fell down. It was repaired by a local craftsman who made his own blocks from moulds taken from the patterns on the surviving half of the ceiling; it is almost impossible to distinguish the copy from the original
- 26 BL Addit MSS 41133
- 27 Hussey, op cit, 111–114
- 28 A design for the hall chimney piece is in the Metropolitan Museum, New York, 35/37/4 but this is not the same as the one in situ
- 29 Quoted in Jourdain, M. *English decorative plasterwork of the Renaissance*, 1926, 189
- 30 Paine, James. *Plans, elevations and sections of noblemens' and gentlemens' houses*, 1773, 2, especially pls 91–93. I am indebted to Mr John Newman of the Courtauld Institute of Art for discussion on the interpretation of the Parkstead ceilings
- 31 Chambers, Sir William. *Treatise on civil architecture*, 1759, 83
- 32 Paine, op cit, pl 92
- 33 Stillman, D. *The decorative work of Robert Adam*, 1966, pl 122
- 34 Strong, Mrs A. *Roman sculpture*, 1907, 2, 18
- 35 Several persons who have visited the house have suggested to the author that these victories were later additions to the ceiling, possibly being added as late as the 19th century, but they seem to be part of the original design: see Chambers, op cit, 84
- 36 Serlio, Sebastian. *Settino libro d'architettura*, 1619, 7, chapter 60
- 37 Sekler, E.F. The development of the British staircase. PhD thesis, University of London, 1948, 120; Scamozzi, *L'idea della architettura universale*, 1615
- 38 Quoted by Hussey, op cit, 242
- 39 *Treatise*, opposite 21
- 40 *Ibid*, opposite 84
- 41 *Ibid*, 9