

DECORATIVE PAINTINGS OF THE
SIXTEENTH AND EARLY SEVENTEENTH
CENTURIES RECENTLY DISCOVERED IN
BOSWORTH HOUSE, WENDOVER

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Most visitors to Wendover have noticed the group of modest, half-timbered buildings with its clusters of ornamental brick chimneys on the south side of the High Street. Many may have peered into the gateway under the overhanging gable and remarked the ancient carved stoup or font built into the wall. Some, probably, have been sufficiently curious to ask for information, and may have learned the local tradition that " these buildings were once an old monastery."

Until quite recent times, this range of what is now three separate houses, was one property called Bosworth House. One portion, now a shop, on the east side of the gateway, while on the west extended the principal buildings which terminated with the stack of three circular chimneys. (See Plates I and IIA).

So far as is at present discovered, there is nothing to support the tradition of the monastic origin of these buildings, and, as they stand, they appear to have been erected shortly after the Dissolution. There is evidence however, that this was a re-building of earlier structures, and the foundations of other buildings have been met within the garden at the back, so that there is a possibility of some truth under-lying the legend. On the other hand the stoup or font, which is of 14th or 15th century date, may have been brought from elsewhere and have given rise to the monastic story.

In fact, another local tradition is that this is the font from the old chapel of St. John which stood back



PLATE I BOSWORTH HOUSE.

on the Tring Road near the Clock Tower, and which was demolished in the early 19th century.¹

This question as to the earlier origin of Bosworth House must remain in suspense, but the present building has revealed quite other interests which have recently come to light.

When Sheahan wrote (1862), Bosworth House consisted of at least the two houses on the west of the gateway, and was then in the occupation of Zachariah Phillips, a farmer, who is mentioned by Sheahan as being one of the largest landowners in Wendover. The Phillips were an old local family who are among the list of tenants on the Manorial Map of 1620, and they figure frequently in the Registers² during the 17th and 18th centuries, where they are described as following the trades of shoe-makers and bakers. In 1775 a Zachariah Phillips, baker, marries Sarah Patterson, spinster, both of Wendover. The Zachariah Phillips mentioned by Sheahan appears to have prospered as a farmer.³ He was well remembered by Mr. Robert Deering, who died on Good Friday, 1931, aged 93 years and 10 months, and whose father was employed on the farm, while he occasionally worked there as a boy.

About 60 years ago, as Mr. Deering informed me, this western range came to be divided and occupied as two private dwellings. This was probably after the death of Zachariah Phillips in January, 1868.

Since the division the house adjoining the gateway on the west side retained the name of Bosworth House, but in the copy deeds they are described as "Bosworth House Nos. 1 and 2."

¹ *History of Bucks*, Sheahan, p. 212.

² *Wendover Parish Registers*, Philimore, Vol. II., 1904.

³ He is described as a farmer in the *Bucks Directory* of Ennsson and Craven, 1853.



A. Bosworth House about 1870.



B. Upper Floor in No. 2 Bosworth House, during Removal of Panelling.

The property was part of the Manorial Estate until after the Great War when it came into the possession of Mr. Fred Wood, the builder, in Wendover. In 1923, Bosworth House No. 1 was converted into the Post Office, necessitating a good deal of structural alteration on the ground floor. In the course of these operations it was found that the walls and old timbers had originally been decorated by hand painting.

It was not until long after the completion of the alterations that Mr. Wood told me of this, and I found that with the exception of a timber brace,

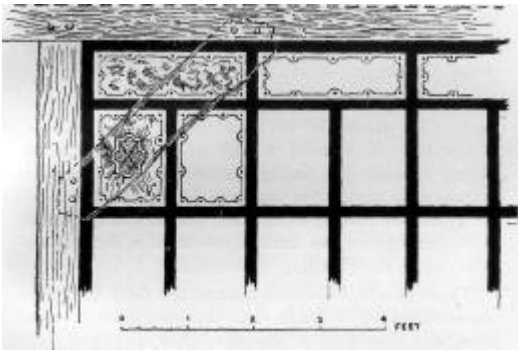


Fig. 1. Diagram showing position of the Brace figured on Plate IV

nothing had been preserved or recorded. This, unfortunately, is the usual fate of such discoveries, and although the find struck Mr. Wood as one of interest, he found everyone else who saw it was so indifferent that he naturally concluded that it was of no importance. On my assuring him that the painting was probably of the time of Queen Elizabeth, and of such interest that the Aylesbury Museum

would be glad to have the fragment he had preserved, he at once handed it over to me for that purpose. This brace is figured on Plate IV, and its position in the scheme of decoration of which it formed part, is shown in the diagram Fig. I.

So matters remained until the Spring of 1930, when Bosworth House No. 2 became vacant and Mr. Wood decided to renovate it and occupy it himself.

On stripping the wall-papers on the east wall of the upper floor it was found that beneath them was oak panelling of the 17th century, which on being taken down revealed a richly painted wall surface in very good condition. (See Plate IIB). Mr. Wood at once sent to inform me of this and kindly gave me every facility for investigation.

The design of this painting was a double row of cartouche panels in brilliant colour as shown in Plate III. It was on a wall of wattle and daub filling between the timber framework, and formed a partition to screen the staircase leading to the attic. (Fig. 3). A coating of fine hair plaster brought level with the face of the timbers produced a flat surface over which the painting was carried.

These panels which constituted the field, had been surmounted by a frieze, but this had been covered over with lime-wash so that the colour was destroyed, the pattern only being possible to recover, as is shown on Plate V. The lower portion of three feet had been left plain and had apparently been covered with a wainscot dado.

In the further work of repair, the interior of the building became cleared of modern accretions so as to reveal the original timber structure. I am indebted to our member, Mr. Ernest G. Theakston, F.R.I.B.A., for his kind services in measuring and producing the plans and section, and other material



DETAIL OF PAINTING ON EAST WALL OF UPPER FLOOR, NO. 2 BOSWORTH HOUSE (1)

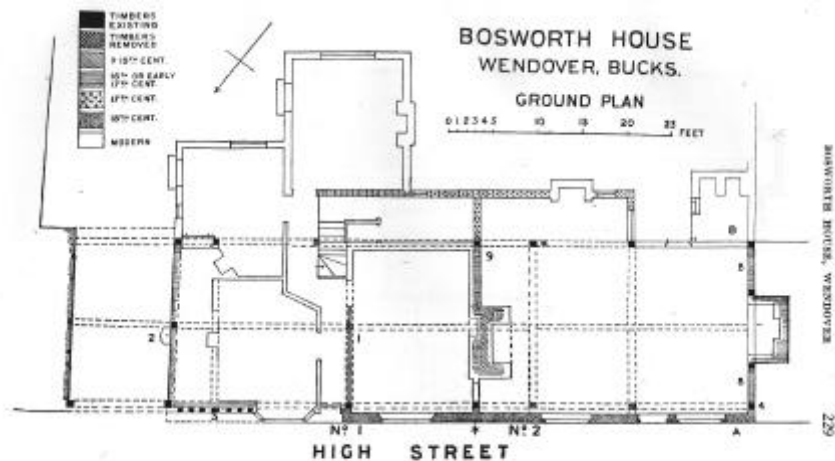


Fig. 2.

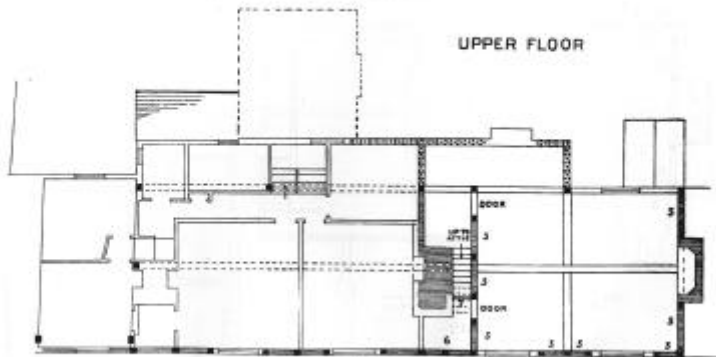


Fig. 3.



Left : PAINTED UPRIGHT FROM NORTH WALL OF UPPER STOREY OF NO. 2 BOSWORTH HOUSE (1)

Right : PAINTED BRACE FROM GROUND FLOOR OF NO. 1 BOSWORTH HOUSE (1)

help. It will be seen that all modern partitions and the central staircase have been omitted on the plans and section (Figs. 2, 3 & 4) of No. 2, so as to show its original condition. The attempt to indicate with shading the date of the various walls is a matter for which I am responsible.

After the stripping of the wallpapers, it was found that the painting of the cartouche panels had been carried round the entire upper floor, which must have formed one large room, measuring about 30 feet by 20 feet.

On the front wall the treatment was somewhat different from that of the side walls, the ornament

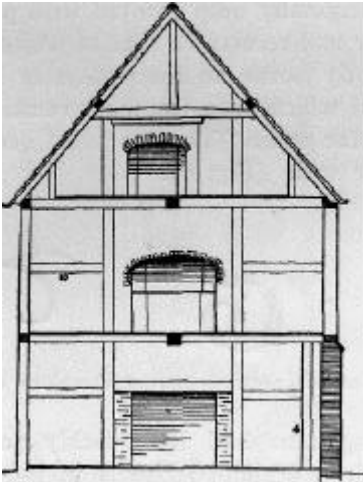


Fig. 4. Section of No. 2

on line A-B of Ground Plan.

being adapted to the surface which was broken by having two large bay windows with smaller lights connecting them at the top. Although the bay windows had been partly blocked and smaller more modern windows inserted and the little top lights entirely filled with brick, evidence of the former conditions were found showing it to have been as represented on Fig. 5.

The studs were all decorated independently with a vertical pattern of interlaced strap-work and jewels (Plate IV). In the spaces between and flanking the bay windows, the frieze was brought down under the sill of the small lights and had only one row of the cartouche panels.

On the west wall the panels were disposed similarly to those of the east wall, but only in the bays on either side of the chimney-breast (Fig. 5).

The removal of a mid-nineteenth century grate led to the disclosure of a perfect Tudor fireplace of moulded brick (Plate IX_B). The chimney-breast above had originally been painted with plain red, and subsequently had received a coat of white or buff, and had apparently borne an inscription in black Gothic characters of which on a fragment remained. At the side of this the name " Thomas " had been written in 17th century style (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6. Remains of Inscription over Fireplace of Upper Floor.

The ceiling also had been richly painted, being divided up into scalloped panels in imitation of the moulded ceilings of the period, the panels being filled with floral ornament and diaper patterns. This had been so damaged by constant repairs that it was not possible to ascertain the design with certainty, therefore that represented on the diagram (Fig. 5) is largely conjectural.

Time had been less kind to the ground floor. The original front wall which followed the line of the timbers carrying the oversail of the upper floor



Painted Frieze of Design Illustrated in Plate III

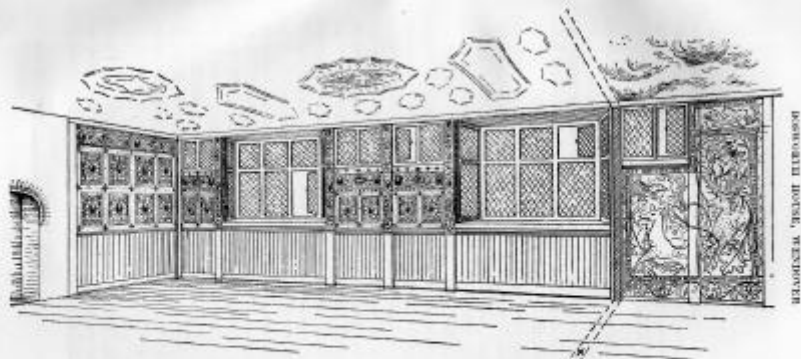


Fig. 5. Diagrammatic Restoration of Upper Floor of No. 2, with the Passage connecting the two buildings. The east partition wall omitted; its position shown by X.

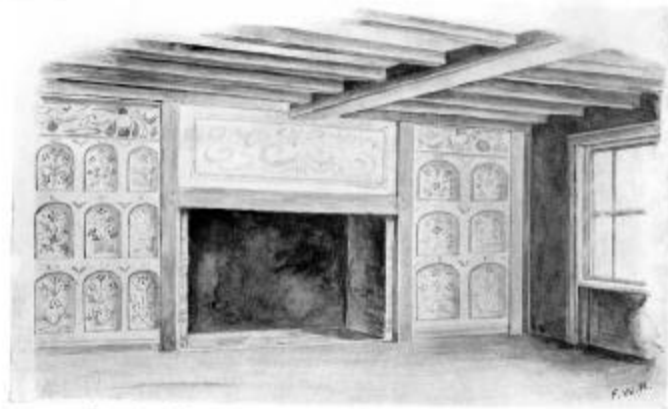
(4 on plan Fig. 2) had been removed, apparently in the 18th century. Only a small portion at the north-east end remains in its original condition (3 on Plan, Fig. 2 and see Plate I. A new wall was then built supporting the front of the upper floor and in front of which it slightly projects.

At the conversion of the house into two tenements the ground floor of No. 2 also suffered other alterations. Originally the large fireplace in the west wall alone existed, but when this floor was divided into rooms and a central staircase installed, a second fireplace was opened up in the back of the western chimney-breast of No. 1. The south wall also was removed, and fresh walls built to form more apartments. The original wall surface remained therefore only on the west. During its long service as a farmhouse kitchen, this wall had suffered much ill usage, to disguise traces of which it had received numerous coats of lime-wash, and this in turn became covered with wall-papers. Beneath all these obscurities the original decorated surface was recovered, though naturally much mutilated. The scheme employed here was an arrangement of three rows of coved niches represented in a wall surface having other architectural embellishments. This extended from the floor to a height of seven feet, above which was a frieze of a little more than a foot in depth. Each niche had been filled with a conventional floral design, which although few of them could be definitely made out appeared to have been different in each case. The best preserved portion is represented in colour on Plate VI, and the general scheme on Plate VII.

These niches suggest those often found in Tudor garden walls and their filling of flowers may offer an explanation of the garden wall niches, the purpose of



DETAIL OF PAINTED WEST WALL IN LOWER STOREY OF NO. 2 ROSWORTH HOUSE (4)



Restoration of Painted West Wall in Lower Storey of No. 2 Bosworth House.

which is not definitely known. Niches as interior wall decoration were sometimes employed in oak panelled rooms as at the Red Lodge at Bristol, dated 1590.⁴

A similar painted example is in the Victoria and Albert Museum, South Kensington, being a door from Coopersale House, Epping, but the floral fillings are more naturalistic and lack the grace and delicacy of those in Bosworth House.

The main apartment on the ground floor does not appear to have been ceiled originally, but the little room at the back, which may have formed the entrance to an exterior staircase, had a ceiling which was decorated at the corners with a trident in red-brown (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7. Ceiling ornament of small apartment on Ground Floor.

The most remarkable of the series of paintings found in this house was in the little passage connecting the two sections on the upper floor (6 on plan, Fig. 3) and on the inside of the brick filling of the front wall, which formed two panels divided by the timber studs (Plate VIII). The right hand panel extended to the full height of the wall, that on the left was curtailed by having at the top one of the small

⁴ *Architecture of the Renaissance*, J. Alf Gotch, Vol. II., p.8.

lights of the bay window. Over the whole space was carried a design of a conventionalised woodland scene drawn with great freedom and skill, and of a different character from any such mural painting so far known to me. It had been covered with lime-wash, and over this sheets of the *Bucks County Chronicle* of 1848-9 had been pasted. On these being stripped some of the lime-wash came away revealing the painting. After the rest of the lime-wash was scraped off, it was found that a frieze of a floral scroll about a foot in depth ran along the top of the higher panel and a similar scroll formed a skirting to both panels. The intervening space on the right contained an antlered male of the fallow deer, above which was a bird in flight, probably a pheasant. On the left was the doe, with an owl and a crested bird above. Around these animals was very graceful, well-drawn foliage. Little more than the black outlines remained, the colour having been for the most part destroyed by the lime-wash, but sufficient remained to show that the design was of quite a distinct character from the Italian arabesque of the period so frequently found in simple black and white. It belongs probably to the early 17th century, as it resembles in many respects the tapestries of that date.

A smaller panel of floral ornaments only (Plate IX._A), formed the opposite side under the staircase (7 on plan Fig. 3), while the ceiling was painted to represent clouds. (Fig. 5).

The decoration of this passage apparently belonged to No. 1, and probably the main apartment had been decorated in this manner, and may, even yet, lie hidden beneath the present wall coverings.

Of other examples of these early mural paintings in the smaller houses Bucks, unfortunately, has few.



Painted Panels in Upper Storey in Passage Connection Nos. 1 and 2
Bosworth House.

PLATE IX



A. Painted Panel in Upper Storey
under Staircase in Passage between
Nos. 1 and 2 Bosworth House.



B. Fireplace in West Wall of Upper Storey, No. 2 Bosworth House.

The Royal Commission volumes record but three examples, one north of the county at Loughton Manor House, which is in the Italian arabesque style of the late 16th century. A photograph of this is fortunately, re-produced, as it has since been covered up.⁵

Two instances are given in the south, an early 17th century painting of Adam and Eve in "The Spring," Meadle, Monks Risborough, and some much restored figure subjects of the 17th century at Hulcott Manor House.

Paintings of the late 16th or early 17th centuries have recently been discovered in a small house adjoining the Old Grammar School at Amersham. Later, opportunity may occur for a full record of these paintings, which seem to be of considerable interest.

When it is remembered that painting by hand was the general method by which the wall surfaces of the lesser domestic houses of the 16th and early 17th centuries were decorated, it may seem strange that examples of this important craft are of such extreme rarity. Here and there fragments have been preserved, but little attempt has been made to recover or record the scheme of decoration to which they belong.

Great numbers of instances must have come to light, but their usual fate is rapid and total destruction and consignment to the rubbish-cart, "unwept, unhonoured and unsung."

The case of Bosworth House No. 1 is a striking and illuminating example of what is unwittingly going on even at the present time, while the great activity in

⁵ *Royal Commission Bucks*, Vol. II., plate, p. 178.

re-building all over the country will soon have removed the opportunities for any such discoveries in the future.

Through the kindness and public spirit of Mr. Wood, in addition to the timber brace already mentioned, a portion of the cartouche panels (Plate III), the panel A, Plate VII, and the piece of ceiling (Fig. 8), have been presented to the Aylesbury Museum, but owing to lack of space they cannot yet be exhibited.

A portion of the cartouche panels was also presented to the Victoria and Albert Museum, South Kensington.

All illustrations to this paper, except Plate I, have appeared in the current number of *The Archaeological Journal*, vol. LXXXVII, 1930, and are re-produced here by kind permission of the Royal Archaeological Institute. The narrow margins of Plates III and VI are explained by their appearance in the *Journal* quoted, which has a larger page.

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