

Vanbrugh's Kings Weston



South Front of Blenheim Palace, Oxfordshire. Vanbrugh's greatest work shares many features incorporated in his designs for Kings Weston

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It's not known how Edward Southwell made his choice of architect to design his new house, but in engaging Sir John Vanbrugh he secured himself one of the finest buildings in England. Vanbrugh might have seemed an unusual choice for anyone of a 'frugal' disposition: he had designed two of the largest and most elaborate houses in the Country - Castle Howard and Blenheim Palace. Indeed these were almost the extent of his architectural portfolio when, in about 1710 he undertook Southwell's commission. Kimbolton Castle in Cambridgeshire of about 1707 is the only other major project to pre-date Kings Weston. Vanbrugh's work at Blenheim and Castle Howard continued to occupy him over much of the time Kings Weston was being built.

In the 1690's Robert Southwell had plans and surveys undertaken in order to update and re-face the old manor but it appears they were never carried out. What Vanbrugh saw when he first visited would have been the same Tudor manor that Kip engraved in about the same year. Whether Edward Southwell's decided to restrict the size of the house for reasons of economy, or whether through Vanbrugh's well-documented respect of ancient buildings, the footprint of the new house was almost identical to the old one - roughly 90ft square in plan. The new plan also preserved other features of the old house. The stair hall reflected the dimensions of the old Great Hall, and the stair towers of the old house were replaced with modern spiral staircases in the same location. Although nothing of the original fabric remained the hope was to echo the character of the old place.

The new house was not built directly on the foundations of the old. The present entrance front was probably begun first and was set forward from the old building to enable it to continue in use



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Sir John Vanbrugh 1664-1726

while construction work continued. Stone was sourced from the quarries on the estate and lime mortar from its lime kilns. Vanbrugh kept in regular contact with Southwell as building progressed. By 1713 work had reached roof level when he wrote *"I am in so much care about this one point of the chimneys answering what I expect of them that I could be glad to make some tryals' with boards about height etc before they are carried-up."* Always concerned about the impression his buildings gave from a distance, Vanbrugh appears to have aimed at what he referred to as his "castle air". Kings Weston announced itself fortress-like, with the castellated



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The approach, H. Grimm, 1789

arcade of chimneys being the first impression of the house on approach from Shirehampton. This feature was ably demonstrated in a painting by Hieronymus Grimm in 1789.

As built, Kings Weston encapsulated some of Vanbrugh's favourite themes. Wild roofscapes epitomize Blenheim Palace and also many of his later projects. Arcades were another favourite motif and he used these as screens between entrance hall and stairs in a number of projects. The hall of Grimsthorpe Castle, Lincolnshire, best expresses how Kings Weston once appeared inside.



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Grimsthorpe Castle Hall, 1720

The 'castle air' was further expressed in the mock fortifications of the Great Terrace and Great Court.

After work on the house was completed in about 1719 plans were drawn up to elaborate the grounds with new ornamental and practical buildings. Southwell and Vanbrugh understood the value of the spectacular views and topography of the site. Together they began moulding it into the sort of idealised classical landscape that Claude Lorraine might have painted. Indeed Southwell had collected several paintings by that artist.



**KINGS
WESTON
ACTION
GROUP**

Kings Weston Action Group
c/o 75A Alma Road, Bristol, BS8 2DW
For further information
tel. 07811 6666 71
email. KWactiongroup@gmail.com

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