

Vanbrugh's least-known masterpiece

Kings Weston House, near Bristol

To coincide with the publication of his new book on the country houses of Sir John Vanbrugh, illustrated from the archives of *COUNTRY LIFE*, Jeremy Musson explores one of Vanbrugh's least-known architectural masterpieces

Photographs by Paul Barker



↑ *Fig 1: Kings Weston House looks over the Bristol Channel, to the hills of Wales and the Severn Bridge. The arcaded chimneys connected by arches dominate the outline of the building. Their bold and abstracted Classical detailing is typical of Vanbrugh*

KINGS Weston House stands in a majestic position overlooking the Bristol Channel. Begun in 1711 for patron Edward Southwell, Kings Weston was designed by the most heroic of country-house architects of the early years of the 18th century, Sir John Vanbrugh. He was by then already well known as the designer of Castle Howard and Blenheim Palace (although neither was complete, and for both of which he owed a considerable debt to his assistant, the architect Nicholas Hawksmoor).

Vanbrugh's career almost defines the English Baroque as it is usually understood in terms of country-house design (see *Great Architects*, *COUNTRY LIFE*, November 12). His close friendships with senior soldiers, Whig politicians and aristocrats meant something: Robert and James Adam in



The patron

Edward Southwell, who built Kings Weston, is depicted in a full-length portrait in the hall. He is shown pointing to a ship—suggesting a connection with the transatlantic trade that so defined the wealth and success of nearby Bristol in the 18th century. It was a decisive period in the house's expansion, in relation both to Ireland—where Southwell served as chief secretary to the 2nd Duke of Ormond, the lord-lieutenant of Ireland—and, ultimately, to the Americas (Southwell's father had been secretary to the Board of Trade's plantation committee). The industry and modern housing that surround Kings Weston today echo its illustrious past.





↑ **Fig 2: Kings Weston House, which was designed by Vanbrugh and begun in 1711, combines the stately Palladian temple-like entrance front with a highly original skyline, which has led this house to be compared to a fantasy castle from a painting by Claude**

Works in Architecture (1764–64) acknowledged Vanbrugh's understanding of the 'art of living among the great', of what they wanted in their houses and how they planned them: 'A commodious arrangement of apartments was therefore his peculiar merit.'

Kings Weston is still 'a building to savour. A more compact building than Vanbrugh's better-known masterpieces and on a less-extensive stage, it combines an acknowledgement of Palladian models with the same idiosyncratic imagination that Vanbrugh displayed in his more famous works. The new house at Kings Weston replaced a large 16th-century house, shown in an engraving by Johannes Kip. The estate had been purchased in 1679 by Sir Robert Southwell, the father of Vanbrugh's patron Edward, who inherited it in 1702.

The house, built in warm local stone, still commands its elevated position today. It presents a curious temple-cum-castle outline to distant views (*Fig 1*), enhanced by a peppering of twisting, flame-lidded urns along the parapet and some highly unusual arcading of chimney stacks—the latter connected by arches with prominent keystones. This outline, of the vertical, pedimented house crowned with an unmistakably castellar roof structure, has often been compared to the overall form of the kind of fairytale castles seen in the mid-17th-century paintings of Claude (*Fig 2*).

Although not such a leading Whig politician as the Earl of Carlisle, nor a military hero such as the Duke of Marlborough, Edward Southwell was nonetheless a man of unusual education and sophistication. He was con-

sidered a moderate Tory, and was, therefore, a little unusual among Vanbrugh's clients, who are traditionally associated with the Whig cause. He sat as an MP for Bristol from 1713. In the first volume of *Vitruvius Britannicus*, Colen Campbell referred to Southwell as 'the Angaranno of our age'. The reference is to Palladio's patron, to whom was dedicated the first two volumes of *I Quattro Libri*, and for whom the Villa Angaranno in the Veneto was conceived. The designs for Kings Weston House appear in the same volume of *Vitruvius Britannicus*.

Kings Weston House is entered on the south, where it presents a conventional seven-bay temple front, with the round-headed and slightly arched windows so characteristic of Vanbrugh's work. The central three bays ➤

→ *Fig 3*: The magnificent entrance hall of Kings Weston House, still double-height and filled with light from the two tiers of windows of the south-facing entrance front, but altered by the architect Robert Mylne in the 1760s, to accommodate this splendid series of family portraits that emphasise the achievements and dynastic associations of the Southwell family

are set forward and framed by broad Corinthian pilasters (two paired at either side and two single pilasters flanking the pedimented door), creating a stately Classical effect. The pilasters are crowned by a pediment, which is, in turn, framed within the parapet. On entering, you find yourself in the breathtaking double-height hall (*Fig 3*).

‘Kings Weston combines an acknowledgement of Palladian models with the same idiosyncratic imagination that Vanbrugh displayed in his more famous works’

With its two tiers of arched windows, the outer wall is little altered from the early-18th-century building period, but the hall was remodelled by Robert Mylne in 1763–68 (see *COUNTRY LIFE*, January 23, 1953), to incorporate an unrivalled series of dynastic family portraits, including the builder of the house. Indeed, the house is still home to yet more family portraits, vested in a trust and on permanent public display in the house, such as paintings by Kneller of Southwell's first wife, Lady Elizabeth Southwell (née Cromwell, the daughter of the 4th Earl of Ardglass), who died in 1709. His second wife was the daughter of William Blathwayt, another senior civil servant and well remembered as the patron of Dyrham Park in Gloucestershire.

The plan of the house seems square when viewed from the entrance and the two sides, but is, in fact, U-shaped around a rear courtyard, so that the towering north wall of the staircase hall would have been like a tiered arcade of arched windows, allowing maximum natural light into the space between two projecting shallow wings. Later additions changed the impact of this elevation, but it is again tempting to see some degree of ‘castellar’ inspiration here.

The principal reception rooms lie on the west side, looking over the Bristol Channel. The feeling of light and engagement with the landscape is still felt most vividly in the room



on the south-east corner, known as the Horse Room, after the equestrian paintings which hang there. The centre of the east front is also enlivened by a handsomely composed doorcase, with rustication and a dramatic keystone, the two storeys above also varied in their composition in an otherwise austere façade. From here, an avenue leads up rising ground to a heavily rusticated Italianate loggia composed of three arches.

This last is only one of a series of buildings that hint at an imaginative Baroque landscape in the original laying out. Vanbrugh's involvement in the landscape at Castle Howard, and, more importantly, at Stowe for Viscount Cobham, suggests an acute feeling for park layout, and particularly the placing and impact of temple structures within the landscape. There is also a demure and correct Palladian

temple to the north, and a corbelled brew house, with a hint at the castle style, that, as so often in Vanbrugh's work, is perhaps both Roman and medieval in inspiration.

Letters between Southwell and Vanbrugh show his patron's careful interest in the detail of the work, and include reference to a trial in boards of the highly original chimney arcade (much as was done for the memorable turrets at Blenheim). For instance, on October 23, 1713, Vanbrugh wrote with characteristic positivity: ‘As to the objections you mention, I can only say I cannot think as they do, tho’ it may be I am wrong. As to the door being too little, if an alteration be thought necessary I can show you how to do it; but of these particulars it is better to talk than to write.’ The mason for the works was George Townesend, who also worked at Blenheim.



The flying staircase

Vanbrugh's *tour de force* lies in the major public room that opens beyond the entrance hall. This is filled with an astonishing flying staircase in an exotic West Indian mahogany that rises to a first-floor gallery. The gallery was, it appears from the plans published in *Vitruvius Britannicus*, originally intended to be open at the raised first-floor level. This would have meant the entrance and staircase halls were engaged spatially through round-headed arches, with echoes of Castle Howard's great hall. The staircase hall was altered again in the early 19th century, and given some 'baronial' touches, such as a new carved chimneypiece, in the late 19th century.

Among the most playful effects that remain from the early-18th-century decoration of the house are to be found in the arched niches in the staircase hall, and are repeated on the elevated level of the first-floor landing: *grisaille* paintings of classical sculpture and Italianate urns of decidedly Baroque swagger, the urns picked out in a vivid bronze-gold effect. These *trompe l'oeil* details are strong hints of the visual and cultural ambition of Vanbrugh's patron. The curving surfaces on which some of the paintings are executed enhance the illusion that these are real objects.



Some early drawings survive, in an album of unrelated drawings now in the Bristol Record Office, catalogued in *Architectural History* in 1967, by Kerry Downes.

As mentioned above, some major alterations were carried out by the architect Robert Mylne, which included a series of new plasterwork ceilings, and the reworkings of the steps on the south and east front. Southwell's grandson became the 20th Lord De Clifford in 1776. His son, the 21st Lord De Clifford, died without heirs in 1832, and the estate was bought by banker Philip Miles, whose family had built Avonmouth and who also served as MP for Bristol.

His son, Philip Napier Miles, inherited the

house, which was used as a hospital in the First World War and then by the military in the Second World War. In 1955, it was threatened with demolition, but, instead, the building served as a technical college, and, in the 1970s, a police college was housed here, which left in 1995. After five years of uncertainty, the house and five acres was acquired by chartered surveyor John Hardy, who has restored the house and rescued the plasterwork ceilings. Mr Hardy now runs it as a popular wedding venue and conference centre, with public access and a tea room for walkers in the park.

Vanbrugh's Kings Weston House is an extraordinary sentinel building, not only for

its individualistic architecture, but for its associations with the international trade and politics of early-18th-century Britain. It is an unmistakable and internationally important treasure, and yet it is surprisingly little known, even by those who live close by.

Kings Weston is open to the public and is available for event hire. For details, visit www.kingswestonhouse.co.uk

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