

## EXTENSIONS TO THE HOUSE AND FIRST FOLLIES

In spite of his dislike of politics Thomas Anson travelled to France on government business in June 1748. He was taking a message to the French foreign minister from Lord Sandwich at the time of the peace negotiations at the end of the War of the Austrian Succession. Lady Anson wrote to her sister in law, Jemima, at Wrest Park that he would be away for six weeks and would meet Philip Yorke, Jemima's husband, there.

Lady Anson's letters reveal that Thomas was in France with his friend James Mytton, with whom he had travelled in Italy twenty years earlier.

The building of the library and drawing room, assumed to be the work of Thomas Wright, may have been begun while Thomas was out of the country.

The Chinese House had already been built, in 1747, based on drawings made in China by George Anson's colleague Captain Piercy Brett. The landscaping, including the lake, cascades and colonnade bridge, may have been begun as early as this. If they were the work of Thomas Wright it would have been immediately after his return from Ireland.

"A tour through the whole Island of Great Britain" published in 1748 mentions the ruins, and the Essex Bridge that links Shugborough to Great Haywood:

*"There are some Ruins built with large Stones, which the present Possessor found on the Spot; and which have a very good effect. At the Bottom of the Garden, in the publick Road, is a large standing Water, which in Winter, and after great Rains is impassable: over it is a Stone Bridge of 39 Arches, for Horse and Foot Passengers; but it is too narrow for Wheel-carriages."*(6)

The work seems to have been intended to make the house a suitable country seat for George Anson and Elizabeth Yorke who had become engaged in January 1748 and who were married on 25 April 1748.

The refurbishments of the house included a room devoted to George Anson's naval adventures, and the exotic landscape, with its fanciful mixture of buildings, may have been designed to reflect George's circumnavigation, though the Egyptian deities in the dining room are more likely to refer to Thomas's Egyptian voyage.

The other two roundels in the dining room are of a maenad, a frenzied follower of Dionysus, and a Chinese figure, almost certainly Confucius.

## LADY ANSON'S LETTERS

Elizabeth Yorke, Lady Anson, wrote many letters to Thomas Anson, often mentioning details of her visits to Shugborough. She was a witty and well educated woman and friend to many "bluestockings", including her equally witty Sister in law Jemima Grey and the circle of young writers and poets who were also close friends of the

architect and astronomer Thomas Wright, including Catherine Talbot and Elizabeth Carter.

Lady Anson's letters to Thomas in Paris tantalizingly refer to his own lost, and obviously amusing, letters to her:

“The titles of the chapters which your letter contains, excite our curiosity and impatience very highly, as they promise that your memoirs will be extremely entertaining.”(letter wrongly dated 1749).

She refers to Thomas having “spent four days at the magnifique Palais de Versailles.”

Only a few days later (June 28th) she is writing to Thomas about Bonnie Prince Charlie, then in France:

“I beg my account of the low state of the monarchy here may not tempt you (or you French ministerial friends) to send us over the young Gentleman, whose forlorn and neglected condition we heard from you with so much pleasure”.

Lady Anson also sends Thomas a list of souvenirs to buy for their friends, including crayons for the Duchess of Bedford, and a French embroidered short apron and tippet for Lady Hardwicke.

These letters refer to a French friend M. St George whom Thomas was meeting in Paris. St. George had been the Commander of L'Invincible which Anson had taken in the Battle of Finisterre in 1747. Anson's fleet fought French ships bound for Quebec, including La Gloire, and the East Indies, including L'Invincible. M. St George delivered his sword to Anson on board the Prince George with the words:

“Monsieur, vous avez vaincu L'Invincible et la Gloire vous suit.” (3)

George Anson reported to Lord Sandwich:

“To do justice to the French officers, they did their duty well and lost their ships with honour.”

Glory followed within a month when George Anson was created Baron Anson of Soberton in the County of Hants, and only six months later the war was coming to an end and Thomas Anson was free to travel to Paris and buy luxury goods for Lady Anson and her friends.

M. St Georges immediately became a friend of the family and is mentioned in several letters. He is not to be confused with “Chevalier St Georges”, the name Bonnie Prince Charlie used when he escaped to France. In 1750, confusingly named as 'Chevalier St Georges' he was elected a member of the Royal Society, supported by Anson, the Duke of Richmond, prime minister Henry Pelham and others.

On November 1st 1749 Lady Anson reports that M St George had been out of touch, apart from writing to Lord Parker (the Anson's cousin, later Earl of Macclesfield) for a couple of Fans. “So high do they carry their resentment of the treatment shown him

by the English that was not permitted to accept a very civil invitation to dine at Aubigny with the Duke of Richmond.” St George moved in the highest society but obviously his compatriots had not forgotten that the French had been at war with the English only a few months before.

#### THE EXTENSIONS TO THE HOUSE – THOMAS WRIGHT

Philip Yorke and his wife, Jemima, Countess Grey visited Shugborough not long after this trip, in August 1748, when the library and dining room were finished. Lady Grey referred to the library as “exceedingly odd and pretty library.”

An entry in Philip Yorke’s journal in 1763 mentions that the ceilings were by “Vassalli, who lives in the neighbourhood”.

Francesco Vassalli came from Lugano, in northern Italy. He worked on many important houses, including Hagley Hall, where James “Athenian” Stuart built the first strictly Grecian building, a Doric Temple, just before working at Shugborough, in 1758. Vassalli also worked at Patshull Hall and Chillington Hall. (1)

As Vassalli lived locally it seems likely he was brought over to England by Thomas.

It now appears (see DNB) that the painter Nicholas Dall, who painted large pictures in the drawing room, murals in the Green House and landscapes of Shugborough over nearly 30 years, was also brought over from Bologna by Thomas and then became a successful theatrical painter.

The ceiling in what is now the Dining Room is based on Guido Reni’s Apollo and the Hours, with the roundels of Isis, Serapis, a Maenad and Confucius.

It is generally assumed, following research by Eileen Harris, that the rebuilding of the house and laying out of the grounds from 1748 was designed by Thomas Wright of Durham, who had recently worked for Lady Anson’s sister-in-law Jemima at Wrest Park, Bedfordshire.

There are no documents to prove Wright’s activity at Shugborough, but the landscape was typical of his style and Eileen Harris found that details of the ceiling design matched Wright’s drawings for his lost house Nuthall Temple.

The eccentric mixture of buildings is typical of Wright’s landscapes, including those that he had planned in Ireland in 1746.

It is possible that Wright provided drawings without actually visiting, but nothing is known of Wright’s activities immediately after returning from Ireland, By 1749 he was working at Stoke Park for his last major patron Norborne Berkeley. Stoke was a very romantic garden with tunnels and druidic features. Thomas Anson visited it in 1756 when Wright was still at work there.

In May 1749 Lady Grey had referred to the ridiculous appearance of the small bowed extension on the West Front (now replaced by the saloon) – which may have looked

strange before the house was rendered. This would have marked the end of the work attributed to Thomas Wright. Bow windows were a distinctive Wrightian feature.

On June 13th 1749 (the date is fixed by a reference to Bonnie Prince Charlie in Venice) Lady Anson writes to Thomas about “Mr Flitcroft”, who had a new process for rendering on brick to make it look like stone. Thomas Flitcroft was a distinguished architect then working for Lord Hardwicke at Wimpole. His method may have been used to cover the old brick house and make it match the new extensions, assumed to be by Wright.

## THE CAT’S MONUMENT

Lady Anson, in Bath on 16th August 1749, wrote to Thomas to suggest a stone quarry which could make the Cat’s Monument. It’s possible that Wright had supplied a drawing before this date. She calls it “Kouli-Kan’s Monument” (2).

The most likely source of the name, usually spelled as Lady Anson spells it, is the 18th century Persian Emperor Kouli-Kan – the European name for Nadir Shah, emperor of Persia and conqueror of India who died in 1747. It seems most likely that the eccentric looking cat was one of Thomas’s Persians and named after the Emperor.

Descendants of Kouli-Khan were still there nearly twenty years later.

The botanist Joseph Banks visited Shugborough in 1767 and mentioned that he saw two animals new to him, Persian Cats and Corsican goats. The Corsican goats are also featured on the Cats Monument. These creatures seem to have been “Muffoli”. James Boswell mentions them in his “Account of Corsica”. He probably heard of them from Banks as he did not meet Anson until 1772.

*“...there are now two of them at Shug borough in Staffordshire, the seat of Mr. Anson, who has a rich assemblage of what is curious in nature, as well as of what is elegant in art.”*

Thomas Anson told Banks that his cats had died of distemper apart from one last survivor, which was pure white. Perhaps all the cats had been descended from Kouli Khan who had, presumably, died twenty years before.

## THE GOTHIC PIGEON HOUSE

The gothic Pigeon House was built in 1748 or 1749. It was attached to the ruins by the river. Thomas Wright was one of the first to build follies in the gothic style. Lady Anson writes to Thomas on November 1st 1749:

“Sorry was I to hear so indifferent account of the Pigeons, whose having so little Taste would almost make one suspect them to be of the same Race with those Birds upon the Tuscan Altar you and I contemplated so long, of which it is doubtful whether they are Doves or Crows...they had so little sense of the many Beauties of their new

Palace that you cannot wonder if Lady Grey and I durst not trust ourselves to the conduct of such simple animals.....”

## THE PAGODA

Lady Anson also mentions the long vanished wooden pagoda under construction in November 1752. This was the first pagoda in England. The pagoda at Kew was built in 1762.

Also built around this time was a wooden obelisk on the hill, perhaps not far from the junction of the farm drive and the Lichfield Road. This blew down in the nineteenth century.

Shugborough only acted as a country residence for George and Elizabeth for a few years – though during all this time it was primarily the home of Thomas and his sisters.

By 1752 George had bought Moor Park in Hertfordshire as their seat and Elizabeth was waiting for Thomas to “ ‘comb it’ a genteel phrase for opening and improving” the park – suggesting that it was Thomas who was seen as the adviser on matters of taste. Their lives together at Moor Park would be short. Elizabeth died in 1760, George in 1762. Thomas sold Moor Park for £25,000.

By the mid 1750s Shugborough was an eccentric roccoco landscape, mixing styles inspired by cultures from all round the world. The overall mood may not have been particularly serious. “Kouli Kan” has the comicality of an 18th century Cheshire Cat.

The Shepherds Monument, whenever it was built, stands as a gateway between two worlds. It links a world of Shepherds and Shepherdesses in a fantasy Arcadia, with a quite different attempt to explore and recreate the spirit of Ancient Greece. The period between 1758 and 1762 marks a change in European fashion and Shugborough is at the forefront of new and revolutionary ideas.

## THE NORFOLK CONNECTION

In 1750 Thomas bought the manor of Knightley in Staffordshire from Thomas Coke, first Earl of Leicester, for £15,000. Coke had bought many art works in Italy as a young man and was building Holkham Hall to display them. He lost a fortune in the South Sea Bubble and needed to raise money to finish Holkham. A few years later the Ansons bought extensive estates in Norfolk from Coke, and Admiral Anson was Lord Lieutenant of Norfolk. Letters from Coke to Thomas in 1749 suggest that they did not know each other before this, but the connection with the Coke family became very important in later generations, through marriage, and through Thomas’s employment of agricultural reformer Nathaniel Kent.(4)

(1)Wolverhampton City Council website “Important finds at the Molyneux Hotel 21/12/2004)

(2) Staffordshire Records Office D615/P(S)/1/310A

(3) Captain S.W. C. Pack CBE MSc ADC RN: Admiral Lord Anson, Cassell, 1960

(4) Letters from Thomas Coke, 1st Earl of Leicester and Deeds in Staffs Record Office

(5) Staffs Record Office (bound with letters from Lady Anson to Admiral Anson)

(6)

[http://books.google.co.uk/books?output=html&as\\_brr=0&id=HSgJAAAAQAAJ&dq=thomas+anfon&pg=PP5&lpg=PP5&q=anfon](http://books.google.co.uk/books?output=html&as_brr=0&id=HSgJAAAAQAAJ&dq=thomas+anfon&pg=PP5&lpg=PP5&q=anfon)