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Hidden Masterpieces: John Thorpe and Old Somerset House

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To coincide with its inclusion in our current [Hidden Masterpieces](#) exhibition, Dr Manolo Guerci discusses Jacobean architect John Thorpe's drawing of Old Somerset House.

The below pages show the iconic Strand elevation of Old Somerset House, one of the most important, if not the most important of the so-called Strand palaces in London, built by Edward Seymour, Lord Protector Somerset, between 1547 and 1552 [see M. Guerci, *London's 'Golden Mile'. Great Houses of the Strand, 1550-1650* (2021), pp. 58-60].

The drawing was probably produced in c.1603 as a working survey – with proposed alterations – as is typical of most of the work included in the Soane Museum's volume of John Thorpe's work. The floor plan (below) provides an idea of what the house would originally have been like. It shows the sheer scale of the main quadrangle, which measured 100 feet across by 120 feet, as well as, through inscriptions, the vertical layout of the house: there are two storeys facing the Strand and three storeys facing the River Thames, counting the partly sunk basement below the east, south and west wings (respectively left, top and right in the plan).

In addition, as again is typical of Thorpe, the plan includes information about the upper floors. The Hall, no doubt double-height, is on the left-hand side of the south wing, probably followed,

at least in the original arrangement, by a big kitchen (moved to the basement by the time of this plan). Thorpe's inscriptions also inform us of the original arrangement of the inner court on the east (left) of the main quadrangle: this was composed of a suite of state rooms including the Great Chamber, Presence Chamber and Gallery, which must have complemented those in the Strand wing (not included in this plan but of which there is alternative evidence). As for the architectural language of the main courtyard, it was, Thorpe writes, 'after' that of the Strand front.

A famous frontage

The elevation, facing the Strand, is perhaps the most quoted in English architectural history, and certainly the most famous part of the house (and of Thorpe's drawing). Its appearance of 1552 has become a controversial issue, as Simon Thurley has challenged the established view that this drawing shows the original front: Thurley re-dates it to c.1610–11 as opposed to the date of c.1603 previously suggested by Sir John Summerson [see S. Thurley, *Somerset House. The Palace of England's Queens 1551-1692* (2009), pp. 98-101; J. Summerson, *The Book of Architecture of John Thorpe*, *Walpole Society* 40 (1966), pp. 69-70]. What was questioned by Thurley was whether the palimpsest of the Strand front, with its eclectic mixture of native and foreign influences best epitomised by the triumphal-arch motif of the gatehouse and the semi-circular projecting windows within it, was the first of its kind or one of the last. Typical of the English Renaissance, this front is generally cited as a model for other houses, not least those built by Somerset's inner circle such as Sir John Thynne's Longleat House in Wiltshire, Sir Thomas Smith's Hill Hall in Essex or Lord William Cecil's Burghley House in Northamptonshire.

Thurley's tantalising suggestion is based on an estimate of work dated 16 March 1610 and on a mason's bill of 1611 for £500-worth of works including 'railes and ballisters'. Though significant, these

mainly related to details and what was probably maintenance work, much needed after more than a century. We know, for instance, that from 1609 the house underwent substantial work for James I's Queen, Anne of Denmark, including the cleaning and restoration of the Strand front. According to Thurley, however, Thorpe's drawing 'shows neither Protector Somerset's House nor the house as altered by Anne of Denmark'. The first would have lacked, at the least, the decorative pattern shown along the roofline, which was possibly crenellated (as depicted in the Agas map – a bird's-eye view of London, first printed from woodblocks in 1651), and would have had chimneys as the principal roofline element. The second, as later evidence suggests, did not resemble Thorpe's elevation in all its details. But if that elevation, as previously believed, is not a record of what Somerset erected, what was the drawing's scope?

Investigating Thorpe's design

In 1966, in his *The Book of Architecture of John Thorpe*, Summerson suggested that the drawing might show a proposal, not necessarily by Thorpe, and carried out from 1609 – referring, however, to the plan attached to the elevation. While the latter, he maintained, 'almost certainly belongs' to Somerset's time, a view confirmed by Howard Colvin in 1982 [H. Colvin (ed.), *The History of the King's Works*, (1963-82), volume 4, p. 254, fn. 5]. Thurley, instead, considers the elevation to be part of the proposal, pointing at Simon or Edward Basil, respectively the Surveyor of the King's Works and his brother, then clerk of works at Somerset House, as those for whom Thorpe may have produced his design.

In the absence of conclusive evidence, one is left with stylistic analysis, on which the established view has essentially been based so far. In 2009, Mark Girouard revisited the whole palimpsest of this façade, affirming how it unequivocally derives from Serlio in almost all its parts even if 'it is easy enough to pierce the classical disguise and see the traditional Tudor entrance façade behind it'

[M. Girouard, *Elizabethan Architecture: Its Rise and Fall* (2009), p. 142]. Behind this kind of exercise, as every scholar dealing with the subject (Thurley included) has argued, ought to be Lord Protector Somerset, the well-known architectural patron, together with his fellow amateur architects Thynne and Burghley. After all, the point of erecting an elevation along the Strand, itself unusual because it was at the expense of valuable letting properties (only four other Strand palaces had such a feature), was to make a grand and novel gesture, as Somerset is credited with having done.

When it comes to specific details, such as the top stage of the bay windows, which would have raised the 'north side towards the streete . . . with ashlar cornish, railes and ballesters', as in the 1610 estimate, Thurley might be right. Probably part of the much-needed repairs and modifications for Queen Anne, the square with an inscribed circle motif which frames both top stages remained a favourite device of the early seventeenth century, for instance in the woodwork of the Hall and Chapel at Hatfield (supervised by Basil). In contrast, the flaming grenades on the very top, not seen before the 1560s and definitely derived from Serlio, had gone out of fashion in the early seventeenth century. But if one assumes replacement, the grenades would have been in keeping with what was there before. In fact, this whole top-stage apparatus at Somerset House was identical to the courtyard roofline built in 1575–78 at Burghley House in the country: if Edward Seymour was not the first in the chain, whoever reworked his façade in the early 1600s must have copied it from Burghley House. This is peculiar, and in a way brings us back to where we started, for it is much more plausible that the latter house was inspired by the former, not vice versa.

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produce a new critical edition-cum-catalogue of the Soane Museum's important volume of drawings by John Thorpe, for publication on our website.

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