

THE SUPERVISION OF THE BUILDING OF DYRHAM PARK

GLOUCESTERSHIRE BY WILLIAM BLATHWAYTE c 1698-1702

William Blathwayt (?1649-1717) was the son of William Blathwayt (?1594-?1650) of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, London and was brought up by his uncle, Thomas Povey, after the death of his father. His later life shows unmistakably his uncle's influence and it was through him that Blathwayt chose to follow a Civil Service career, thus gaining useful introductions to the Diplomatic Service. His personal tastes and delight in the possession of beautiful objects were a reflection of his uncle's choices, but Blathwayt lacked both his originality and connoisseurship.

Rising through his Civil Service positions he became Secretary of State to William III and because he spoke fluent Dutch, an attribute rare in Englishmen of the period, he often accompanied the King on his frequent trips to the Hague.

In September 1686 Blathwayt heard of a possible betrothal to a Miss Wynter of Dyrham, an heiress to the country estate. Thinking it to be an advantageous match he met the lady, and seems to have been greatly attracted to her. After the complicated marriage settlement had been completed he married her, at Dyrham church; they had four children, three of whom, William, John and Anne, survived. His wife died, after only five years of marriage, in 1691.

After her death Blathwayt concerned himself with official duties and rebuilding his house, which he refurnished with paintings and books purchased on his journeys to the Hague and Amsterdam. He corresponded with his bailiff at Dyrham and carefully studied his household accounts and letters reporting on the progress of the building, sending them back with suitable comments. He was later dismissed from the Secretaryship of War at the removal of the Tories in 1710 he lost his seat for Bath in the House of Commons. At the early age of 61 he retired to the country where he lived for seven years, suffering from palsy, until his death in 1717.

Although Blathwayt's letters reveal his great administrative technique and meticulous diplomatic style they reveal little of his personality. He was thorough, honest and affectionate to his wife and children and he had an enormous talent for organisation and arranging. Rather solemn and hardworking in youth, he grew up into a serious pedantic man, nicknamed "the elephant" by his colleagues, either as an observation on his memory, or more probably on his grave ponderous manner and his inability to accept or fabricate new ideas.

William Blathwayt remarked upon the need for rebuilding the Elizabethan manor house at Dyrham, the residence of the Wynter family, even as early as 1686 while he was still contemplating the marriage with Mary Wynter. However, it was not until after her death in 1691 that actual work was started, with the demolition of the original building except probably what is now called the "Great Central" hall.

The new house was built under the supervision of two different

architects, each with a different style, in two stages between c.1692 and c.1702. The first architect who designed the west facade was a Frenchman, Samuel Hauderoy whose work was completed in 1694. The other architect was William Talman whose east side was completed after 1702. Their two contrasting appearances, that of the foreign style in the case of the west side and the more rectangular, elaborate east side make Dyrham Park almost two houses in one and if only for this would make it of interest. The building of Dyrham Park is almost entirely documented down to the last inch by documents, both letters and accounts, among the archives at the Gloucestershire Record Office.

However, this essay mainly concentrates on the supervision of the building work by Blathwayt as found in correspondence relating to it, which was sent regularly between Blathwayt, at his work in either London or the Hague, and his bailiff, Charles Watkins, in the period between 1698 and 1702. This correspondence takes the form of letters and weekly accounts which were sent to Blathwayt from Watkins, in which he describes the building progress leaving a suitable margin for Blathwayt to express his opinions, advice and criticisms which were duly complied with upon receiving the corrected letter.

These letters reveal to a great extent the amount which Blathwayt supervised the work and they can be categorized into several main groups:-

- (a) Blathwayt's orders to Watkins, the bailiff, a relation, whom Blathwayt refers to as "Cuzen" and to Trewman, the rector of Dyrham Church and his accountant.
- (b) His criticisms of delays, poor workmanship and labour difficulties, and
- (c) The obtaining and application of materials.

Documentation of the building progress starts about 1698, and the first few letters deal with the levelling of the ground and the construction of a pigeon house. A typical letter from Blathwayt to Watkins in September 1698, starts thus,

"I have no further trouble to give you at present .....  
Mr. Trewman must not advance too much money to P. West\*  
I expect proposals for all sorts of works that are to be  
carried out this winter by way of preparation, and next  
summer where hands enough and skilful ones are to be employed."

Unfortunately the system of communicating Blathwayt's orders in letters resulted in confusion in some cases, not least between the workmen, Blathwayt's bailiff and himself, as in a letter dated August 1698.

WATKINS:- ..... and the great pond will be made an end of by  
tomorrow night and then they will begin upon the wall niches  
and fountains which Broad has undertaken to do before winter.

BLATHWAYT:- ..... what is meant by these words? The work ought to be  
finished in September.

\* A builder and mason engaged on the site.

Such a system was not very efficient, a conclusion which can be reached by reading a number of the following letters. It failed because Blathwayt's orders were communicated to the workmen by his bailiff and since he was not personally at Dyrham, the workmen, who were local men hired anyway, lacked a stimulus to improve their work and were consequently tempted to leave jobs unfinished in favour of more pleasurable activities. Such events can be classified under the general heading of "labour difficulties" and consist of a number of isolated incidents rather than a continuous apathy, although this might have existed too.

There were numerous delays to the building programme which naturally enough had to be reported to Blathwayt by letter, thereby prolonging the delay until Blathwayt's orders and suggestions were received. One such delay was concerned with the collapse of the greenhouse\* roof, an incident which occurred in October 1701. Here is an extract from the letter written by Watkins to Blathwayt describing it:

WATKINS:- The matter is this; he had arched above a third of the greenhouse wrong, as appeared by the consequence for no sooner was the center taken away but the arch all fell and now its said that besides his doing it wrong there is too little abutment for it to rest upon and considering that the walls are but thin it is thought advisable to line it with another wall as high as the arch which will be a strengthening to the greenhouse and as a good abutment..

BLATHWAYT:- I suppose 'tis not intended I should be at the charge of mending this arch.

It is in this letter we read of the first instances of labour difficulties and Blathwayt's irate reply illustrates his lack of sympathy and impatience in such matters.

.... Hunter has been backwards and forwards at Bristol but has had four hands here constantly employed all but one week and then he had only two.

BLATHWAYT:- Which is not to be endured and Hunter's money is to be stopped for more men than those who are wanting that he will be sure to have his full number upon the place.

A further comment in this letter by Blathwayt firmly stresses the fact that he is unwilling to pay for his workmen's mistakes:

.... I hope you will take care not to overpay P West (the builder employed in the construction of the greenhouse) and that I be not at the charge of his false work.

From this point references to troubles over work, workmen and payments are increasing and at least one can be found in almost every letter.

\* The early term for an orangery, where the exotic plants and shrubs were moved to during winter.

It is less frequent to find a letter which Blathwayt has written on a separate piece of paper instead of in the margin of his bailiff's report but these letters were often for the more important, specific subjects:

Hague 2nd November. Blathwayt to Watkins.

BLATHWAYT: I have received your two last letters and hope by what you wrote that Hunter and Porter may be brought to reason and that they will ease me of their company as soon as may be.

I suppose the greenhouse arches are done and the glass put up ....

I wonder Hunter should exceed in the mouldings I trusted it to his skill wherin it seems I am deceived.

Later letters carry on in the same vein....

Whitehall 31st May. Blathwayt. Watkins.

WATKINS: John Jacobs has been sent for to do some jobs and make good some defects in the tiling but he sent word to Mr. Wynter that he would not come until he know how he should be paid for all his job work

BLATHWAYT: An odd answer - methinks another workman be got who be maybe more diligent.

Dyrham 4th June 1701. Watkins.

WATKINS: ....I have been stirring up Ph West all that I can and to give the fellow his due he takes little pains in his own person from 5 o'clock in the morning till after 7 at night

BLATHWAYT: .... But not to be excused for not engaging men enough.

The chief instance of labour disputes occurs in the next letter and Blathwayt's comments although intended seriously are somewhat comic in their content -

Whitehall 9th September 1701.

WATKINS: Mr. Wynter writes me word that Hunter has taken a job of joyner work at Bristol

BLATHWAYT: Abominable!

WATKINS: .... All here as even the Gate and Doors kept close and no lingering people as I can see or hear of

BLATHWAYT: .... nor their women

WATKINS: (referring to Hunter) we can easily do without him.

BLATHWAYT: .... then he is not of any use.

WATKINS: (again about Hunter) ... after the workmen have finished ...

BLATHWAYT: Hunter will never have finished.

Blathwayt's post script reads thus ...

This proceeding of Hunter is unpardonable, use all possible means to get him and his men back. 'Tis a scandal and of ill example.

Perhaps if Blathwayt had offered a larger wage to his workmen such differences of opinion would not have arisen, as it was Hunter was not the only offender in this direction ....

Thurs. 7th January 1702

**BLATHWAYT:** I have great reason to complain of Porbear who is leaving my work for a considerably time. Pray admonish him severely and lett him dispatch before I come down which I hope may be in less than a month.

This situation merited a separate letter of which here are several extracts:

Blathwayt to Watkins.

I can't forbear writing to you tho' it be only repetition. 'Tis most scandalous Hunter and his men should be permitted to leave the house they that are like to trouble it most by their long stay at Dulbury proceedings.

'Tis not to be endured and besides stopping all payments to anything that belongs to Hunter. The person at Bristol should be spoken to not to entertain my servants. I suppose Mr. Wynter being come, all goes at sixes and sevens .... 'Tis absolutely necessary for you to step down again to see things go on and brought to finishing which the workmen don't love.

Hurnall (the gardener) I suppose thinks little of the matter and no account of his fruit this year though I said so much the last. I hope Porter too will be so quickened that Monday not find any of his work unfinished not Green when I come down. These people want stirring up solidly and not to be overfed with money. Pray think of it ....

I am your assumed friend and servant.

W. Blathwayt.

Upon further examination of the following letters it becomes evident that Blathwayt's stern words had little or no effect -

Dyrham 26th June 1703.

.... some of the labourers being gone off to Harvest work.

**BLATHWAYT:** .... not to employ them any more

The recurrence of trouble led to a classic comment by the exasperated Blathwayt -

... Hunter intends never to have finished but to loiter in the country at my expense.

Not all of the disputes however were concerned with payments or bad workmanship -

Dyrham 13th July 1702

**WATKINS:** I missed some of the workmen this day particularly Richard Broad and his people and upon enquiry find it to be Box revell so must not expect them before tomorrow.

Another aspect of the building progress which can be traced through the letters is the obtaining of materials and Blathwayt's orders on their application. They are too numerous to quote so I shall confine myself to several of the more interesting examples concerning the delivery of deals from Sweden and setting up a stone eagle, Blathwayt's crest, on the top of the house.

Stockholm. Aug. 31st 1701. "J. Robinson puts the deals on a Swedish ship as he cannot find an english one. The consignment consists of both ordinary and double deals which makes a larger number of square feet than Blathwayt wanted."

November 1701. Watkins to Blathwayt

**WATKINS:** .... upon further examination I find that he (a builder named Humphreys) has left some of his chimney pieces unpolished and pretends they will lose their gloss if they are polished so long before they are put up.

**BLATHWAYT:** Nonsense.

**BLATHWAYT (undated):** I should be glad the Eagle could be sett up next week without prejudice to the House walls and Glass Windows.

There are one hundred less seven skins of gild leather for the Great Room which are to be fitted up as soon as may be and the opportunity of wet weather to be taken.

(These skins were set up in the drawing room of Dyrham Park - still called the gilt leather room to this day.)

In conclusion, I include extracts of letters which give further insight into Blathwayt's character. It seems that nobody was beyond criticism, even his favoured friend, "Cuzen" Watkins.

Dyrham. 5 October 1698. Watkins to Blathwayt

**WATKINS:** I have not yet received any answer from you since my last return to Dyrham.

**BLATHWAYT:** .... I have constantly answered all your letters.

A further instance of Blathwayt's meticulous nature -

Dyrham 25th July 1689

Mr. Watkins is desired to write in larger paper

leaving a margin for the answer.

His short temper and impatience with the asserted incompetence of  
Watkins -

November 1701.

WATKINS: .... The kitchen court lies in much disorder and  
might have been paved at this time if we had had any  
orders.

BLATHWAYT: .... How could I think of it without your mentioning  
it to me.

His preoccupation with thrift -

Whitehall 3rd Feb.

I have rec'd yours of the 8th which cost about 3d.  
postage in exceeding two ounces weight whereas if you  
had sent your dispatches in two or more packets they  
would have gone free. Pray lett this be a rule to  
you and everybody else for the future.

Finally, his reluctance to concern himself with other affairs:-

Dyrham 3rd August 1698.

WATKINS: I drank with the Mayor and some others of them at the  
same House

BLATHWAYT: All possible care is to be taken not to bring me under  
inconvenience by drinking with the Corporation or my  
spending any thing upon them or anyone on my account  
The Act not being very strict in this particular and  
tis better to do too little than too much till the  
time for bringing in petition which is fourteen days  
after the sitting of the Parliament be over.

This essay has been an attempt to explore and draw inferences from,  
the supervision of the building progress by Blathwayt. However, this is  
only a small part of the chronicle of the building of Dyrham Park and it  
is obvious that many major questions have had to be ignored through this  
specialisation. Questions like where did the workmen come from? How  
many? How much did it cost? (A question which would involve sorting  
through all the invoices and bills documenting the building, a very large  
task.) What were the original furnishings of the house? This small  
attempt is indeed only scratching the surface of a highly involved and  
absorbing topic.

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#### Sources

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