

A vanished Tudor country house: Butley, East Suffolk

by Valerie Fenwick

The aged Queen Elizabeth was still on the throne of England when, on a wintry day in 1601, John Talbot at Wantisden Hall learned that his neighbour Robert Forth had died. Both men farmed their acreages, but John was a tenant, merely renting his hall and land from Michael Stanhope who was busy building himself a country house in the park at Sudbourne. The inventory of the contents of Robert's house compiled by four men that day bears John's signature. Written in English on strips of paper, it survives in Norwich Record Office for the reason that the will was proved in the Consistory Court of the Norwich Diocese. It is an important document, vividly recreating the mansion which Robert built when, some time after his marriage in 1562, he moved from Hadleigh to live at Butley.

In the decades following the Dissolution there was a boom in house-building by aspirational businessmen who bought up former monastic estates as they came on the market. Robert had inherited his wealthy clothier father's acquisition of a defunct Augustinian priory and its core manors of Butley, Boyton and Tangham (Capel St Andrew). From a survey made seven years before his death we know that Robert farmed more than three fifths of the 5,300 acres himself. Much of it was heath, only suitable for grazing his 998 sheep, or for sporadic cultivation of rye of which 140 acres had been winter-sown at the time of his death. His dairy-herd, his brood mares and working horses grazed on the 400 acres of marsh pasture he kept in hand.

Robert required a grand house to proclaim his status. He chose to build it in the north-east corner of the walled priory precinct. Many of the buildings had already been demolished or converted to agricultural purposes by previous tenant farmers; the barns they created from the refectory and reredorter are still in use to this day. However, amongst numerous farm buildings there survived a water-mill, a brew-house, a dovecote, a warrener's lodge and an enormous gatehouse. This last Robert incorporated as the north wing of his new house. Its passageway, blocked up 140 years later, formed the entrance to his best stables, whilst the present-day kitchen and sitting room were used by him to store building materials and fodder.

Subsequently his grandson was forced by debt to sell off much of the estate and mortgage the rest. In the early 18th century the mansion was described by a local historian: *'Tis an old decayed and irregular structure contiguous to the east side of the Gatehouse, having but one wing on the front and a portal adorned with four pilasters of the Doric Order, two below and as many above, all of freestone, as is likewise the Entablement. Over the door are the Arms of Forth... impaled with Glemham...'* (Hawes, 1712).

The inventory shows that there were 22 bedrooms. The main reception room was the Hall with its large fireplace and walls hung with weapons. It was here that Robert held manorial courts and entertained visitors and tenants. Family meals with his wife Frances, née Glemham, and 11 children were taken in the Parlour, a big room with a bay window no doubt matching that of the main bedroom. Despite being puritan, Robert lived well and had a reputation for 'housekeeping'. The inventory shows that turkey and goose, bacon, herrings, cheese, oysters and claret appeared on his table. Silver as well as pewter is itemised. Hawes described the dining room [the Parlour]: *'the wainscot painted a copper colour adorned with fluted columns of the Ionic Order with intercolumnar quadrangular panels on which are two small fluted pilasters supporting an arch in the centre of which is a fleur-de-lis, the whole copiously gilded, the whole said to have cost not less than £50. The ceiling has panels of crocket work and the windows have coats of arms in stained glass.'* Towards the end of his life Robert was increasingly strapped for cash, but resident staff included his falconer, brewer, tailor and stonemason.

The avenue known today as the Clumps did not then exist and the new house faced east, approached through a pilastered gateway emblazoned with coats of arms both inside and out. The track from the parish church crossed his large arable fields, and that from the south an old wood pasture known as Home Park. The new gateway, like the house itself, was built of materials from the estate: oak; bricks fired from clay excavated close by; masonry embellishments salvaged from the priory ruins; and mortar from sand and rubble burnt in kilns. From Hawes' description the gateway resembled the inner elevation of the surviving gateway of Stutton Hall, built by Robert's friend, Sir Edmund Jerny, a few years earlier (Sandon, 1977: pl. 76). The main entrance itself appears to have been somewhat similar to Christchurch Mansion in Ipswich which does survive. Sadly the only representation is an engraving of 1738 showing one end shortly before it was demolished. Today there is no trace of the mansion above ground level.