

A History of Hampden House

by Tim Oliver

Hampden House, set in the wooded Chiltern Hills of South Buckinghamshire, has a special beauty and interest. But it is very complex and diverse, having been built, extended, remodelled and redecorated many times in the last six and a half centuries. Successive owners have never torn it all down to start from scratch, but have always preferred, or been able, to add, rebuild or renovate part. Like most old houses and most cathedrals, it is not a unity but a fascinating agglomeration of work of different periods, a vast jigsaw puzzle with pieces of every century since the 14th.

The whole house has a most difficult architectural history and nothing is quite what it seems at first sight. For example the entrance front of the house, the main west wing, was built in the 14th century as the kitchen, buttery and pantry, remodelled with a skin of criss-cross-patterned brickwork in the early 16th century, and largely rebuilt as a suite of family rooms with the most up-to-date details in the mid 17th century. But what we actually see as we approach the house, a charming Georgian Gothic design, dates from 1743 and is both skin-deep and much altered. It was ingeniously adapted out of the 16th and 17th century fabric and very soon changed, by being battlemented in 1752 and stuccoed over in 1757. Whether anything of the 14th century still stands after all this is quite impossible to say, as the walls are all plastered on the inside and stuccoed or brick-faced on the outside.

Our evidence is, first, the structure as we see it now; second, the Hampden, Trevor and Hobart family papers in the County Record Office in Aylesbury; third, accounts of the parish of Great Hampden in the various Buckinghamshire county histories and; fourth, other collections of unpublished papers. Further information about the house might turn up almost anywhere; for example in the mid 18th century, the time of the last John Hampden (VIII) and his cousin the diplomat, collector and architect Robert Trevor, first Viscount Hampden, we might find details in the latter's diplomatic papers in the Public Records Office, in the Netherlands where he was our ambassador, or in Bedfordshire, where Bromham was his original family home, or at Durham, where a younger brother was bishop or in Sussex, where the brother had a country estate. There is a similar range of potential sources of information for earlier and later periods.

We know a good deal about the upbringing of the tragic suicide, John Hampden VII, while on the Grand Tour. His travelling tutor's journal of 1671-3 happens to survive in Oxford's Bodleian Library, which takes us in spirit hundreds of miles from Buckinghamshire, but tells us nothing of John's home. Information about the other owners' lives could come to light in unexpected places.

To help you understand this intriguing house, we should first glance at the main personalities involved, then discuss its development period by period and finally go on tour room by room.

A long succession of John Hampdens have been the main builder of the present house, one in each century from the 14th to the 18th, while several more John Hampdens have been among the owners.

PERSONALITIES

(i) *Three early Hampdens*

John Hampden I, of the old knightly family who took their name from the place, was here by 1346, sat in Parliament in 1351 and 1363 and died in 1375. To judge from the mouldings of the main south door of the hall, he built a fine stone manor house, probably on a new site a little further from the church than the old family home, which he may have pulled down or used as farm buildings. This new house of about 1350 is the nucleus of the present house; its date is not very precise and it could possibly have been the work of John's father Reginald, or his son Edmund.

Edmund's son, John Hampden II, was here from the 1420s until his death in 1458. Judging from the architectural details, he built the large south porch, later raised and battlemented, which is still the central feature of the south front. He had permission in 1447 to enclose a 600-acre hunting park at Great Hampden and served as sheriff of Buckinghamshire in 1456. This activity in starting to transform the landscape while also taking part in public affairs was part of a very long tradition. This John's great grandson, John Hampden IV had been knighted before 1513 by Henry VIII and died in 1553. He was a courtier and a naval and military commander. Extravagant building schemes were the rage and Hampden House was grandly re-fronted and remodelled, as the criss-cross-patterned brickwork of the outer walls, especially of the south front, attests.

This reconstruction may have been completed in the 1560s by a cousin¹, Griffith Hampden, whose father, John V inherited the estate from Sir John (IV). Henry VIII has set the fashion for building with his vast schemes for palaces such as Hampton Court, but his daughter Elizabeth was much more tight-fisted and preferred to save, and, at the same time, stimulate building by others. On her regular summer progresses she usually stayed at newly refurbished great houses and at Hampden her bed, or reputed bed, was shown to visitors until this century².

(ii) John Hampden 'The Patriot'

The most celebrated member of the family, John Hampden VI (1594-1643), inherited Hampden and a larger group of neighbouring properties acquired by marriage and purchase when his father William, Griffith's son, died young in 1597. He was educated at Lord Williams' School, Thame in 1606-9, Magdalen College, Oxford in 1609-12 and the Inner Temple from 1613. Magdalen had long been known as a strict Calvinist college, which attracted boys from wealthy Puritan families up and down the country. In 1619 he married a neighbouring squire's daughter, Elizabeth Symeon from Pyrton, just across the Oxfordshire border. Between 1620 and 1629 Hampden sat in Parliament, as he did in the Long Parliament from November 1640. In 1637 he became prominent among the opponents of Charles I's arbitrary government when he refused to pay 'Ship Money' tax and stood trial using the defence that the tax was illegal, not having been granted by Parliament. There was widespread resistance in many other areas, particularly from the Puritan gentry. At the same time the group of Puritan ministers who were campaigning to abolish bishops included William Spurstowe, the rector of Great Hampden appointed by John VI.

John Hampden's great reputation rests on his reasoned opposition to the Crown in the London Parliament and his tragic death. When Civil War finally broke out in 1642, he raised a regiment of Buckinghamshire 'Greencoats' and marched against Watlington in Oxfordshire in the early weeks of the war. He died in June 1643, after his pistol exploded in his hand while fighting Prince Rupert's raiding force on Chalgrove Field in Oxfordshire³. As a martyr of the Parliamentary cause, John Hampden VI is commemorated at Westminster and by a splendid memorial of 1743 in Great Hampden Church and an Obelisk of 1843 on the battlefield. In Aylesbury Museum we can see the refurbished ancient helmet that was hung up in church above the grave.

John Hampden VI was well known as an enthusiastic in architectural and farming matters. Nathaniel Giles, rector of Chinnor in Oxfordshire, sought his advice when rebuilding his rectory on a grand scale with gardens and orchard, a banqueting house, stables and barns and later came to be at his deathbed. John VI built three large sections of Hampden House, the central block of the east wing in about 1620 and the north east wing in about 1640, when he reconstructed the west wing.

The next two generations went through a fairly unlucky patch. John VI's son Richard was appointed to Cromwell's House of Lords, but made his peace with Charles II at the Restoration in 1660, eventually rising in Parliament to be Chancellor of the Exchequer under William III before he died, deep in debt, in 1695. The grandson, John Hampden VII, fought in the Duke of Monmouth's ill-starred rebellion in 1685, got off when tried for high treason and killed himself in 1696, one of a long string of suicides in this period of agonizing decisions on loyalties.

Neither of these Hampdens seem to have altered the house, though it is possible that the west and north west wings, just attributed to John VI in about 1640, were built by Richard in about 1650, as repairs after damage in war.

(iii) Three Georgian owners

Richard Hampden, son of John VII and great-grandson of the great John VI, also sat regularly in Parliament in the reigns of Queen Anne and George I. In 1718 he was appointed Treasurer of the Navy and probably then started large scale building at Hampden, where the north front and north-east and south-east wings are clearly of about this time. But in 1720, his Navy accounts proved £74,000 out. Speculating in the South Sea bubble, which burst in that year, ruined many investors and even the Governor of the Bank of England, Humphrey Morice, was found when he died in 1731 to have embezzled trust funds and forged bills. Richard, accused of playing the market with public funds, had half his lands sold over his head by Act of Parliament, though Great Hampden was settled on Richard's younger brother and heir, John.

John Hampden VIII, the last of the true Hampdens of Hampden, inherited in 1728 and died in 1754. His steward's detailed but muddled accounts and rough working 'Day Books', which survive among the family papers in the County Record Office, make it clear that, though far from rich, he fitted out the new wings, reconstructed the centre of the house and created the west front as a main entrance.

A cousin, Robert Trevor, inherited Hampden when John VIII died. He became 4th Baron Trevor in 1764 and was made 1st Viscount Hampden in 1776. He was a keen collector and amateur architect who probably had a good deal to

¹ *A very distant relative.*

² *Queen Elizabeth I visited Hampden House in 1564 and 1592.*

³ *Contemporary accounts refer to a gun shot wound to the shoulder and not an exploding pistol.*

do with most of the stages of John VIII's building works, even though he was out of the country for most of the time in the diplomatic service in Holland. His own surviving estate papers lack the detail of the 1730s and 40s since the steward who had previously accounted for both income and expenditure at Hampden, was now trusted only to supervise income from farming and wood sales. However, another source of information, Robert's letters, show that he was involved in at least minor works at Hampden in the late 1750s. In some ways Robert is the most fascinating of the owners of Hampden. As a young graduate at Oxford in the 1720s he must have known the great architect Hawksmoor who was building the large Gothic North Quadrangle of All Souls College, where he was a fellow, along with Dr George Clarke the leading virtuoso and amateur architect.

At this time Robert made a design for a large round library based on the Pantheon in Rome. It remains at the Ashmolean Museum among the plans of James Gibbs, architect of the large round library, the Radcliffe Camera, which is Oxford's grandest architectural feature. Gibbs had taken on the commission when Hawksmoor, who made the preliminary designs had died. At West Wycombe Park is one of Robert's designs for 'a Hospitable Nobleman's Kitchen'.

Another group at the Royal Institute of British Architects include a pentagonal five-towered house like a castle, a six-sided church and an eight-sided temple. Among the estate papers at the County Record Office are schemes for estate cottages, for a spectacular circular staircase for Lord Foley, a kinsman, for both classical and gothic garden features and for the long Gallery at Hampden.

THE FORM AND DEVELOPMENT OF HAMPDEN HOUSE

(i) *Eleventh to thirteenth centuries*

The remains of the Hampdens' first manor house probably lie beneath the lawns somewhere between the present house and the church. Excavation could reveal post-holes dug into the chalk to hold the main timbers of separate hall, kitchen, chambers, storerooms, stables and barns, altered and rebuilt at various times on flint or chalk block foundations.

(ii) *Fourteenth century*

In about 1350 the first, John Hampden or John de Hampden built a new stone house with linked rooms. It forms the basis of the present house. The great hall remains with its fine south doorway, but it has lost its north doorway opposite, the three doorways in the west wall that led to pantry, buttery and kitchen, all its windows and the original roof. The kitchen range has become the entrance foyer after many changes. Just to the east of the hall most of the first floor solar or family room and its under-croft probably remains with no recognisable features, the north wall removed when the main staircase was installed in the 17th and 18th century. With its stables and a walled garden the medieval house no doubt lay within a fairly small walled or moated enclosure.

(iii) *Fifteenth century*

In the 1430s or 40s John Hampden II brought the house up to date with the large porch outside the south door and presumably various other changes. The roof of the porch is of 1741, when the top floor was added, but the two lower floors are ancient. Remains of an old stone spiral staircase have been exposed on all three floors, the top section having no doubt been a turret above a flat-pitched roof. The great hall now has a fine fifteenth century timber roof or rather false ceiling. This is not original but was brought from elsewhere and fitted in about 1920.

(iv) *Sixteenth century*

Between the 1530s and the 1560s Hampden House was again modernised. The outer skin of brickwork, with its characteristic Tudor criss-cross patterns, is of this time. Probably the walls themselves were by then partly weathered chalk block and partly timber framed and had to be rebuilt in places but simply given a new face in others. Many gables and bay windows so typical of this time will have been added. There are several ornate chimneystacks, which seem to be 19th century, but remade on the old lines, while a number of fine early Renaissance carved panels all reset in modern panelling, suggest that John Hampden IV put in some splendid panelled rooms. The only interior feature of this time to remain in position is a timber attic doorway over the main staircase. We must imagine a fine normal walled garden with knot-patterned beds designed to set off the battened brick walls.

(v) *Seventeenth century*

The tall centre section of the east wing dates from about 1620, or very much at the time of the first marriage of John Hampden VI. It has a basement, chambers and parlours on the two lower floors and a long gallery on the top floor, with its original low-pitched roof. The wing has lost all its splendid plasterwork and panelled rooms in later alterations. One fine blocked window on the first floor with parts of others and a reconstructed top floor fireplace give the date, but from the outside and on the ground floor every detail is of the 18th century.

Twenty or thirty years later, the main west wing was drastically remodelled and re-roofed. From being the kitchens this part of the house was turned into a family suite. On the first floor the southwest turret room has a fine plaster ceiling and plain classical fireplace, which is matched by another in the adjoining room over the entrance foyer. In the attics are several more similar fireplaces of the same style.

Some doors, the staircase of the wing and the gallery of the great hall are all consistent with the most up to date taste of a wealthy but puritanical architectural enthusiast of just before the Civil War. The best example of this austere style is the church of St Paul, Covent Garden, completed in 1638 by Inigo Jones for the Earl of Bedford, a puritan like John VI.

The gallery round the great hall linked the new rooms in the west wing with John Hampden VI's slightly older reception rooms in the west wing. The northwest wing served as the kitchens until very recent times and, although no original details are visible, it must have been built shortly before the older kitchens were reconstructed, to keep the house habitable.

(vi) Eighteenth century

We have seen above that the north front and northeast and southeast wings were most likely built by Richard Hampden, but left incomplete on his financial disgrace in 1720, to be finished in the 1740s by his brother John VIII. The accounts of the steward Henry Hardsing show that three Gothic features were in hand in 1741-2, John VIII's first years of large-scale building.

These were the arcade or cloister along the back of the southeast wing, the raising and re-roofing of the Old Porch and the Gothic Porch or west front. Robert Trevor, John's cousin and heir, was already a keen amateur architect and it may well have been he who suggested enhancing the authentic medieval Hampden House with these remarkably early mock medieval features by letter or while home on leave from his embassy in Holland.

Very expensive works in 1743, poorly detailed in the accounts, probably included re-roofing the great hall with an attic floor over it, and the present mock Jacobean main stairs. By the 1750's there was quite a vogue for fake Elizabethan and Jacobean detail. In 1744 to '46 many references to caring and fireplaces to the Bow Dining Room and the Bow window Bedchamber show that the northeast and southeast wings were being finished off internally. The richly classical detail of the fireplaces and extraordinary plasterwork were probably designed by the London architect builder Edward Shepherd (best known for Shepherd Market in Mayfair), who had begun life as a plasterer. He was paid for supervising the building works in 1743-5.

The gardens and grounds saw a good deal of attention in these years. A new kitchen garden was made in 1741-2 lawns laid, brewhouses built and repaired and so on. The 'Heritage' of 1747 was thatched and cost only £7, but the 'Pinery' of 1751, a hothouse for pineapples, came to over £80. Robert Trevor's period as owner, from 1754 to 1783, saw a good deal of embellishment rather than construction. The Drawing Room, the main ground floor reception room in the centre of the east front may have kept its Jacobean panelled walls and plastered ceiling until 1756-7, when Trevor's letters show that he was concerned about laying of a 'cherry wood floor' and similar work. The splendid marble fireplace and elegant rococo ceiling of the Drawing Room must be of this phase. The grounds saw many changes; a new garden was planted with flowering shrubs and turfed in 1755. This will have replaced or spelt the doom of the stiffly planned formal gardens, just then going out of fashion. A new fascination with flowers is suggested by the large new orangery and greenhouse put up in 1755-6.

(vii) Nineteenth and twentieth century

The most recent addition of any size to the house is the cloister arcade, with a passage over, of 1741-2. For about a century and a half, from 1760 until 1910 or '20, it remained virtually unaltered, with some rooms papered with 18th century Chinese wallpaper and a Georgian state bed known as 'Queen Elizabeth's bed' in the north eastern most room on the ground floor, even though downstairs bedrooms had very much gone out of fashion in the 1760s. The Earl of Buckinghamshire of the Hobart family, who inherited the Great Hampden Estate in 1824, lived more often at Blickling in Norfolk and even put Hampden up for sale in 1847.

At about the end of the First World War, the house was lavishly refitted with a variety of styles. A genuine 15th century great hall, which had been dismantled and rebuilt in 1704 as a barn at Great Kimble a few miles away, was taken down again and fitted into the hall at Hampden. In both its previous manifestations, it had been a steep pitched roof but now it had to be flattened to squeeze it under the mid Georgian attic floor, which had replaced the original roof in 1740s.

The hall and the ground floor rooms were lined with mock 16th century panelling incorporating some finely carved genuine sections, which may have been discovered, banished to maids' rooms or remote corridors. The northeast wing suffered the most dramatic changes. It had compromised two splendid ground floor rooms, an anteroom and the state bedroom, whose magnificent domed ceilings occupied the space over. The domes were destroyed and modern bedrooms put in their place, no doubt to cater for fashionable week end parties, while the two rooms were thrown

together on the ground floor to make a reception room of ballroom scale. The party wall was replaced by a screen of Corinthian columns, which matched the remaining Georgian plasterwork extremely well. But more incongruously leaded casements were put in all the ground floor windows of the east front, replacing the mid-Georgian sashes which can be seen on the upper floors.

The spacious country house life for which Hampden was done up lasted scarcely two decades. The house was leased out in 1939 as a girls boarding school, which closed in 1978.

During 1978-82, Hammer Films made no less than twenty-two films here. The house then lay empty for three years. Then in a very sad state of disrepair the house was rescued and found a new role for the future. Tim and Susie Oliver were delighted to be able to purchase and renovate this marvellous historic house.