

Swakeleys

Swakeleys is, quite simply, one of the most remarkable and attractive houses in London. With its dramatic roofscape crowded with Dutch gables and towering chimneys, the house is an improbable discovery, set in its own parkland yet tucked out of sight behind the quiet interwar suburbs of Hillingdon. It is a remarkably complete survival of an idiosyncratically English episode in architectural history and a lavish expression of the burgeoning commercial prosperity of 17th century London.

History

Like many great houses, Swakeleys is known simply by the name of its estate, called after the Swalclyve family who owned the land in the 14th century. The present house was built in 1638 by Edmund Wright, a wealthy London merchant then at the peak of his prosperity. It was intended as a palatial suburban retreat within easy reach of the City, where he probably had another house. Wright died only a few years later, leaving Swakeleys to his daughter Katherine, whose husband Sir James Harrington was a prominent Parliamentarian. At the Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660, Harrington fled the country, leaving his wife alone. Penniless, she sold Swakeleys to the rich banker Sir Robert Vyner. Vyner lent the government vast sums of money which it never repaid, and in 1684 he was bankrupt. He died in 1688, allegedly from a broken heart at the death of his only son a few months earlier. In 1707 the house passed to his brother's grandson, also Robert Vyner. Robert must have modernised the interiors, since much of the existing panelling and doors have an early 18th century appearance. By 1750 Swakeleys was in the hands of the Rev. Thomas Clarke, in whose family it remained until 1923, when much of the land was sold off for housing, since when the house has served various uses. In the 1980s, the house was the subject of an award-winning restoration, funded by its conversion to offices.

Exterior

Swakeleys is a rare example of what the architectural historian Sir John Summerson dubbed 'Artisan Mannerism', a style developed by London craftsmen for patrons who were keen to update the prevailing Jacobean style with the latest classical elements taken from Italian and Northern European architecture. It is built of brick, still a prestigious material in the 1630s when most houses were of timber. The ornamental details are applied in render, including scrolls at the base of the gables and triangular pediments above. This particular kind of 'Dutch gable' is, in fact, peculiar to English architecture and has been dubbed the 'Holborn gable', after the London district where they first appeared. Tantalising evidence within the roof structure suggests that the house was originally crowned by a timber cupola or tower, rising in the centre above the chimneys. To the north of the house, the original stable block survives in office use.

Samuel Pepys' visit

The earliest account of Swakeleys comes from the diary of Samuel Pepys, who was invited to dinner by Sir Robert Vyner in 1665. Interestingly, to a man of Pepys' sophistication the house already looked old-fashioned, less than thirty years after it was built:

'Merrily to Swakeleys, Sir R. Viner's. A very pleasant place, bought by him of Sir James Harrington's lady. He took us up and down with great respect, and showed us all his house and grounds; and it is a place not very modern in the garden nor house, but the most uniform in all that ever I saw; and some things to excess. Pretty to see over the screen of the hall (put up by Sir J. Harrington, a Long Parliament man) the King's head, and my Lord of Essex on one side, and Fairfax on the other; and upon the other side of the screen, the parson of the parish, and the lord of the manor and his sisters. The window-cases, door-cases, and chimneys of all the house are marble.'



The East Front



The Great Hall

Great Hall

By the 17th century, the Great Hall was used not for dining but as the ceremonial heart of a house, where visiting guests would be received. It is dominated by the arched screen added by Sir James Harrington in the latest Baroque style. This is crowned by the bust of Charles II noted by Samuel Pepys in 1665, who would have appreciated the irony of seeing a republican's screen topped by a sculpture of the King! The shields held by cherubs are painted with coats of arms of members of the Clarke-Thornhill family who owned Swakeleys throughout the 19th century.

The huge fireplace, in a Baroque style, was probably added in Sir Robert Vyner's time. The two busts in classical dress are anonymous, though the right-hand one may be the 'lord of the manor' or the 'parson of the parish' mentioned by Pepys. The left-hand bust appears, stylistically, to be later and might represent a member of the Clarke-Thornhill family. Vyner's great-nephew, who inherited Swakeleys in 1707 would have found the house stuffy and old-fashioned and it was probably he that added the panelling in this room as well as the Corinthian pilasters framing the windows. The black marble window surrounds are original and were no doubt intended as a conspicuous show of wealth. They are highly unusual.

Screens Passage

The screens passage, running from the front door to the stair hall, is a traditional feature originating in medieval houses. It would have given the adjacent Hall a certain level of privacy, whilst allowing free circulation between that room, the front door, the kitchen and the staircase beyond. From here can be glimpsed the bust of Lord Fairfax on the screen, as mentioned in Pepys's diary

Dining Room

The Dining Room, behind the Great Hall, is lined with 17th century panelling that may have been installed when the house was first built. The black marble chimneypiece is an unusual design and could also be original. This room indicates how much of the interior would have looked before subsequent owners modernised it in the latest taste.

Staircase

The staircase is mysterious. We know it was built during the Victorian period and yet it looks like a much earlier design, perhaps of c. 1700, so it is possible that the old staircase was simply rebuilt in facsimile. The two wooden posts against the wall are all that survive of the original staircase of 1638, which would have had thickly carved panels instead of the elegant balusters seen today.

The walls and ceiling of the stair hall are covered in oil paintings of mythological subjects, which may date from 1707 when the young Robert Vyner moved in. This was a very fashionable way to decorate gentry houses in the early 18th century. The walls show the Death of Dido, who lies on a funeral pyre, and on the opposite side her lover Aeneas founding the city of Lavinium. High up on the ceiling the goddesses Juno and Iris ascend into the heavens.

Great Chamber

Much of the first floor is taken up by one large room, the Great Chamber. This was the most prestigious room in the house. As a grand entertaining space, its use would have been reserved only for special guests, who might enjoy a lavish dinner there. The plaster ceiling, divided into square compartments by thick moulded beams, shows the influence of Inigo Jones, the royal architect who introduced the classical Italian style of architecture to England. After dinner, the company would have strolled along the adjoining long gallery (since subdivided), which when Pepys visited was filled with the very finest furniture.



The Dining Room



The Staircase



Death of Dido, detail



The Great Chamber in the 1920s, before the contents of the house were sold