



SWAKELEYS ESTATE

Swakeleys Estate is, quite simply, one of the most remarkable historic and palatial residences in London, with its dramatic roofscape, crowded with the combination of Dutch gables, classical detailing and towering chimneys. It is also a rare, richly detailed and remarkably complete survival of an idiosyncratically English episode in evolving architectural history and a lavish, flamboyant and stylish expression of the burgeoning commercial prosperity of early 17th century London and the links between Crown, politics, fashion, power and high finance.

Early History

Swakeleys Estate, called after the Swalclyve family which owned the land in the 14th century, is not the first important residence on the Estate. Records going back to the middle ages mention a substantial manor house surrounded by a moat. Nothing is known of its appearance, though there are many old timbers in the roof of the present buildings which were probably recycled in the 1630s from the earlier buildings.

In 1629 the Estate was purchased by Edmund Wright, a wealthy London merchant then reaching the peak of his prosperity. Sir Edmund Wright is chiefly remembered for commissioning the magnificent buildings at Swakeleys, completed in 1638. It was intended as a palatial retreat within easy reach of the City of London, where he would have had another home, no doubt also a home with which to impress his visitors with his power, good and fashionable taste and immense wealth. A member of the Goldsmith's Company, Wright was an important financier, wealthy enough to afford a second home away from the noise and filth of seventeenth century London. As his business and Royal contacts were in the City, he would have spent most of his time there; Swakeleys would probably have been occupied more by his wife and children and used for grand, power-broking, entertaining. Wright reached the peak of his success in 1640, when he served as Lord Mayor of London, making him one of the most powerful businessmen in the country, as well as one of the richest.

Architecture

Swakeleys was built to impress, in an exuberant style of architecture later dubbed 'Artisan Mannerism' by the historian Sir John Summerson. The style was developed by London craftsmen for patrons who were keen to update the prevailing Jacobean style with classical elements taken eclectically from Italian and Northern European architecture. This is shown on the exterior, where traditional Tudor-style windows are combined with up-to-date Dutch gables. This particular kind of 'Dutch gable' is, in fact, peculiar to English architecture and has been called the 'Holborn gable', after the London district where they first appeared.



Swakeleys is built of brick, a prestigious material in the 1630s. The ornamental details are applied in render, including the scrolls at the base of the gables and the triangular pediments above. What really strikes the eye, however, is the extraordinary outline of the building, caused by the Dutch gables' continuing around the projecting wings. Like the great Elizabethan and Jacobean mansions before, with its H-shape, the building has a constantly shifting silhouette as one walks around it, with four beautiful elevations. 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, there is the original stable quadrangle.

Later Owners

The Estate was inherited by Sir Edmund Wright's daughter, Katherine. Katherine's husband, Sir James Harrington, was a prominent Parliamentarian, fighting against the monarchy. England by this time was deep in Civil War. It was Sir James Harrington who installed the arched screen in the Great Hall. When the monarchy was restored in 1660, Sir James fled the country to save his life, leaving his wife alone. Katherine sold the Estate to the rich banker and Royalist financier, Sir Robert Vyner. From leading Royalist in Sir Edmund Wright, prominent funder of the Crown under King Charles I, to prominent Parliamentarian in Sir James Harrington, back to leading Royalist and financier, Sir Robert Vyner under King Charles II, power, politics and influence turned full circle at Swakeleys under the Stuart Kings.



When Sir Robert Vyner acquired the Estate in 1665 he was fast becoming one of the richest men in the country. In that year he invited the diarist Samuel Pepys to dinner, whose description is an evocative document of Swakeleys at that time:



‘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.. and after dinner Sir Robert led us up to his long gallery, very fine, above stairs (and better, or such, furniture I never did see), and there Mrs. Worship did give us three or four very good songs, and sings very neatly, to my great delight.’



Sir Robert Vyner and his family – Copyright: National Portrait Gallery, London

This account by Samuel Pepys illustrates how Swakeleys was used again as a place of entertainment and for the cultivation of power and influence. Pepys’ remark that it was ‘not very modern’ shows how quickly architectural style was moving. Vyner did not modernise the house extensively, but he may have installed the large and impressive fireplace in the Great Hall. Most of Vyner’s money was spent on loans to the King and his government, which gave him immense political power.

In 1707 Swakeleys Estate passed to Vyner’s great-nephew, also called Robert Vyner. He seems to have modernised almost every room. There is no written evidence to confirm this, but much of the panelling and doors has an early eighteenth century appearance. It was probably he who added the impressive Corinthian pilasters framing the windows in the Great Hall.

By 1750 Swakeleys was in the hands of the Rev. Thomas Clarke, in whose family it remained until 1923. Members of the family had their coats of arms painted onto the Harrington screen. In the 1980s, on the initiative of three local businessmen, the house was the subject of an award-winning restoration, funded by its conversion to offices at that time.

The Interiors

The house is entered from the west front leading into the 'screens passage'. This is a traditional feature originating in medieval houses: here a gracious hallway that is open to the Great Hall on one side, through a triple-arched screen that divides the two, affording a certain level of privacy, and which leads the eye to the main staircase hall along a fine stone and marble floor. The Great Hall itself also originates in important and great medieval houses; by the time Swakeleys was built it had become the ceremonial heart of the house, where visiting guests would be received. It still enjoys a fine stone and black marble floor and the black marble mullions of the windows are very much in evidence. They are original and were no doubt intended as a conspicuous show of wealth. They are highly unusual. Traditionally, the screen passage and Great Hall would take up the whole width of one wing; at Swakeleys a dining room is added, producing an innovative layout.



The walls of the great staircase hall are covered in murals of rich oil paintings of mythological scenes within a painted, formal, classical, building structure expressed with four great columns and capitals supporting their entablature. These show the Trojan hero Aeneas and Queen Dido, as well as the goddesses, Juno and Iris, on the ceiling. The artist and date are unknown, but this was an extremely fashionable way to decorate grand spaces like this in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

This was designed to lead impressively and principally up to the Great Chamber on the first floor, at once the most prestigious room in the house, as a grand entertaining space, and at the same time one of the most private and exclusive rooms, reserved only for the most special, important and honoured guests. Its most interesting feature

is the plaster ceiling, which is divided into square compartments by thick moulded beams. When Swakeleys was built, this ceiling would have appeared strikingly modern. It is influenced by the work of the royal architect Inigo Jones, whose ceiling at the Banqueting House, Whitehall (1619-22) is also divided by thick beams. The original long gallery led off this chamber.