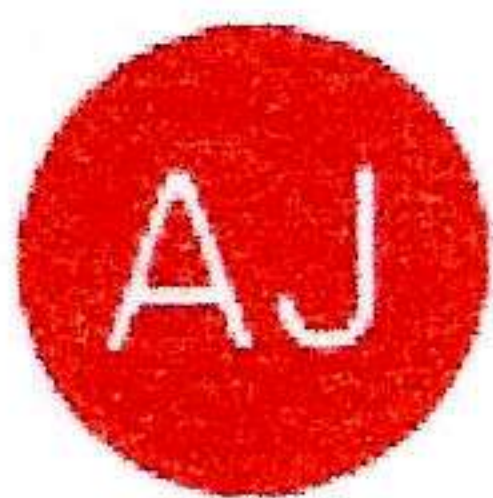
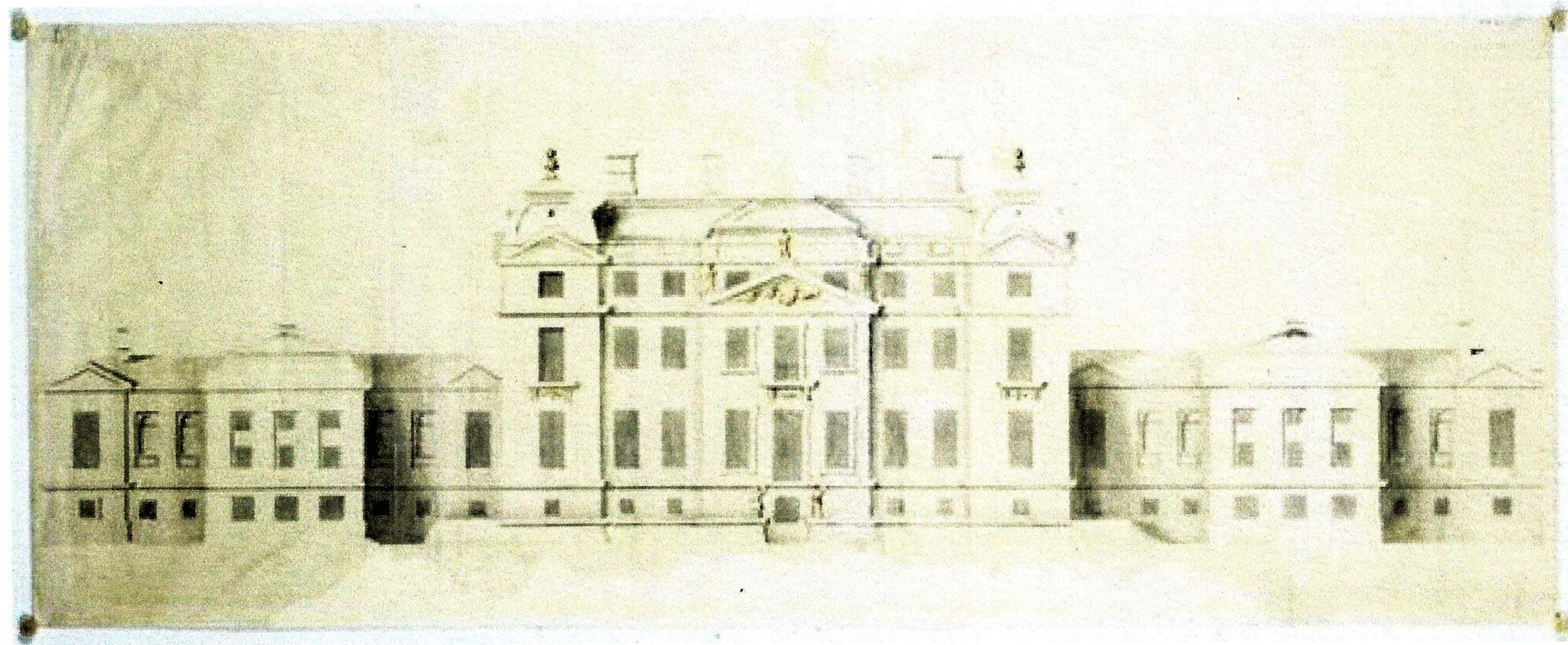


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The first woman architect

11 November, 2010 | By John Millar



American scholar John Millar believes that Elizabeth Wilbraham (1632-1705) was the prolific mystery architect behind some 400 buildings

In 2007, David Gladstone, the owner of Wotton House in Buckinghamshire, wanted to know what evidence could be found for identifying an architect for the house, so he sponsored a conference there in September 2007. A paper delivered at the conference by the late Howard Colvin, wondering if John Fitch could have been the architect, was published in the 2010 *Georgian Group Journal*.

I submitted a paper, however, asserting that Elizabeth Mytton, Lady Thomas Wilbraham (1632-1705) was the mystery architect. I have been researching the architecture of Elizabeth Wilbraham since 1959, when I was a schoolboy at Charterhouse in Surrey. This article is partially excerpted from my 2007 paper on Wilbraham and my forthcoming book, *First Woman Architect*.

When I was 14 years' old, for no apparent reason, I suddenly became passionately interested in the architecture of Christopher Wren, and I quickly devoured every available book and article on the subject. It took only a short time before I found more than 100 buildings that any ordinary person would attribute to Wren.

When I discussed that list with experts, however, I was told that Wren did not design them, but no one knew who did. Nevertheless, I continued to add to the 'Wren' list, and eventually found over 350 buildings I could attribute to the anonymous architect. In the late 1960s, I encountered the late Oliver Hill and John Cornforth, and one of them (I can't remember which one) told me to investigate Wilbraham further, as she was apparently much more active as an architect than anyone had previously suspected. I unfortunately failed to follow up on that advice for another 30 years.

Wilbraham, who was born the same year as Wren, became interested in architecture in her teens. Married at age 19 in 1651, she talked her husband into an extended honeymoon in the Netherlands and Italy, where she spent time studying architecture. She studied with Pieter Post in the Netherlands, and stopped at Landshut in Germany on her way to the Veneto and Rome; the Italian-designed Stadtresidenz at Landshut was the inspiration behind some of her most important buildings, including the 1662 Queen's Gallery at Somerset House. While in the Veneto, she became acquainted with some of the works of Palladio, and she later purchased the 1663 Godfrey Richards edition of Palladio's *I Quattro Libri* (volume I), a book that she annotated heavily over the years, and only one of many architectural books she is said to have owned.

With such training, it is not surprising that many of the 400 buildings attributed to Wilbraham show a strong familiarity with both Italian and Dutch (but not French) architecture, which she synthesised into a sophisticated British style. Some of her better known buildings include Belton, Uppark, Winslow, Temple Bar, Windsor Guildhall, the original Burlington House, and St Mary's Church, Ingestre. She designed Codrington Library, Oxford before Hawksmoor became involved.

Women in her day were effectively barred from practicing architecture, so Wilbraham was careful not to leave behind much evidence of her involvement, other than the dozen fine buildings she designed for her family (including Weston Park, Staffordshire, and the chapel at Woodhey, Cheshire). About 28 architectural drawings in her hand survive (including one showing the first sash windows in England at Ham), and five architectural models made at her direction. Evidence shows that she was Wren's principal architecture tutor, and he in turn had her design no fewer than 18 of his 52 London churches (notably St Bride's Fleet Street).

It was one thing to design buildings, but supervising construction was definitely not for a woman, so Wilbraham engaged a series of men to do that for her, many of whom were erroneously thought to have been architects in their own right because they supervised her buildings. These men included Henry Bell, William Bruce, the Fitch brothers, Robert Grumbold, Hugh May, Edward Pierce, Roger Pratt, the Earl of Ranelagh, William Samwell, Edward Stanton, and William Winde. Not having to supervise construction meant that she had time to design more buildings, and her work averages about eight projects per year. Most of her designs were for private houses, but she also designed churches and government buildings.

Wotton has always been seen to be closely related to Buckingham House (which later formed the core for Buckingham Palace). Although much of Wotton's original floor-plan is unknown, due to rebuilding after a major fire, Buckingham's plan was almost identical to the earlier Cliveden in Buckinghamshire. Cliveden (long since destroyed), in turn, contained many unusual details taken directly from Weston Park, which suggests a Wilbraham connection with its design. Buckingham's construction was supervised by Winde, who is already known to have supervised construction for Wilbraham family buildings, such as the addition to Chirk Castle, Wales, built for Elizabeth's daughter.

Wotton has a pair of elegant dependency buildings with casement windows, and on each of these is found elaborate carved decoration around the central upstairs window position, which is very similar to several other houses attributed to Wilbraham (such as Hanbury). Oval panels on the connecting walls recall the basement windows at Wilbraham's own Woodhey.

The most obvious characteristics of both Wotton and Buckingham are the use of giant Corinthian pilasters on the front elevations, sash windows, an attic storey with windows, and a flat roof made of lead. At Buckingham (nine-bays-wide), there are four pilasters around the central three bays, and one at each end of the front, whereas at Wotton (11-bays-wide on the front, but only nine on the rear) there are only two pilasters enclosing the central three bays, and one at each end. On the rear elevation, however, Wotton has four pilasters in the central three bays and one at each end, and some of the details of the rear elevation are similar to surviving drawings attributed to Wilbraham for Chatsworth.

Giant pilasters on the front of a building had first appeared (rarely) in Britain before Wilbraham's birth, but she seems to have employed the device frequently. Some of those buildings are similar to Wotton and Buckingham, and these include: Lees Court, Kent, 1650s, 13-bays-wide; Carpenters Hall, London, 1664, seven-bays-wide; Monmouth House, London, 1681, seven-bays-wide; Sir William Bruce's Kinross House, Scotland, 1685, 11-bays-wide (Lauderdale introduced Bruce to Wilbraham at Ham – she designed Kinross with a flat roof, which Bruce changed); Quendon Park, Essex, circa 1690, intended to be 11-bays-wide; Ven, Somerset, 1698, seven-bays-wide; Calke Abbey, Derbyshire, 1701, 13-bays-wide; Cottesbrooke, Northamptonshire, seven-bays-wide; the second Powis House, London, about 1704, nine-bays-wide; and Hinwick, Bedfordshire, about 1704, seven-bays-wide. She also designed several buildings with giant pilasters over a plain ground floor, including the Queen's Gallery, Somerset House; Badminton, Gloucestershire; the northern range of the Marketplace at Northampton; an unexecuted project for Lowther, Westmorland; a courtyard at St Thomas' Hospital, London; Clare College, Cambridge; and an unexecuted project for Tom Court, Christ Church College, Oxford. Henry Aldrich's Peckwater Quadrangle is believed to be based on an idea Wilbraham suggested.

Given the situation of a woman acting as an architect during a period in history when that was socially unacceptable, there will never be clear documentation of Wilbraham's authorship of any building, other than for her family. However, I am convinced that what little evidence exists points to Wilbraham being the architect of Wotton.

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