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Cowley Manor watercolours by Thomas Shotter Boys

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Cowley Manor in Gloucestershire and some unpublished watercolours from the studio of Thomas Shotter Boys

By ALASTAIR SMART

COWLEY MANOR, near Cheltenham, may justly be regarded as one of the most unusual and perfect examples of Victorian domestic architecture to have been preserved.¹ There could scarcely be a more tasteful adaptation of the English Palladian tradition; and the impression made especially by the imposing south front, with its three storeys and balustraded parapet, is enhanced by the beauty of the landscaped park and the surrounding countryside. The house has been likened to Barry's Cliveden, and the comparison is not unfavourable to Cowley.²

The present structure incorporates a great part of an earlier manor house built by Henry Brett at the end of the seventeenth century. At that time the manor and the lovely little church of St Mary the Virgin, which dates back to the early thirteenth century and contains a Norman font, was owned by the Dean and Chapter of Westminster, who leased the estate to Henry Brett in 1695. Brett erected his house close to the church, on its west side; but the present mansion owes its character almost wholly to the taste of a rich landowner, James Hutchinson, who acquired the lease about 1852 and entirely remodelled the building in the Italian style, employing George Somers Clarke as his architect. He also laid out the terrace and the garden, with a lake, fountains and cascades and a tree-lined avenue—entered, at the west side of the park, by a magnificent gateway. The new building seems to have been completed by the late 1850s.

¹ The Manor was purchased in 1946 by the Gloucestershire County Council, and has since been used as a conference house for residential courses and other educational purposes, I am deeply indebted to the County Archivist at Gloucester, Mr Brian S. Smith, for so courteously answering my inquiries and supplying me with essential information.

² Cf. *Country Life*, xx, 500 (4 August, 1906), 162ff., where the history of the house and the various phases of the building programmes are discussed in some detail; and also D. Verey, *Gloucestershire, I: The Cotswolds (The Buildings of England)*, edited by Sir Nikolaus Pevsner (Harmondsworth, 1970), 202f. Present knowledge of the early history of the manor is founded principally upon R. Bigland's *Historical, Monumental and Genealogical Collections relative to the County of Gloucestershire* (1791), I, 431.

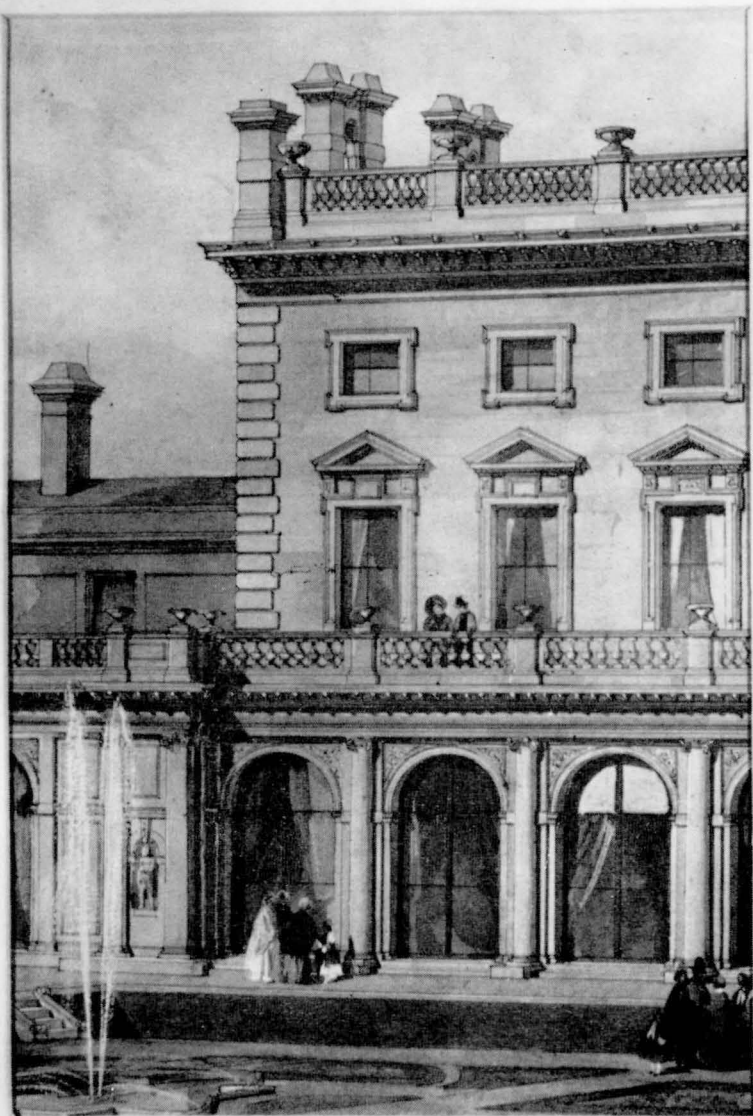


PLATE I *Cowley Manor: the south front.* Watercolour: 10 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. x 7 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. c. 1860. (Private collection, England)

facing p. 198

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Hutchinson occupied the house until about 1895, when he sold it to Sir James Horlick, who extended it westwards and made various other alterations, although preserving in the main the elegant character of Hutchinson's five-bayed mansion. Indeed on the south side the six-bayed extension added by Horlick carefully carries on the style of the existing façade, the only substantial change being the masking of the beautiful arched windows on the ground floor—alternating with graceful applied columns—by claddings of late Victorian design which have since been removed, but which can still be seen in old photographs.³ The symmetry, however, of Hutchinson's simple, square building was destroyed by the addition, to the west, of the present portico—an admittedly splendid structure in itself which makes impressive use of Ionic columns, flanked by pilasters of the same order—and of the west wing. One purpose of these extensions was to join Hutchinson's former residence to what remained of the original manor house, which was now wholly absorbed into the new building, so that today the south façade completely hides it from sight. The consequent asymmetry was in fact inevitable, since the closeness of the church to Hutchinson's house prevented any corresponding extension eastwards. The architect engaged by Sir James Horlick to undertake all these building works was R. A. Briggs.

Our knowledge of the appearance of Cowley Manor during the middle years of the Victorian Age, as it would have been known, for example, to Alice Liddell (the 'Alice' of Lewis Carroll's romances), who used to visit Cowley when her uncle, the Rev William Wren Liddell, was rector of the church,⁴ has lately been increased by the discovery of a group of watercolour views, taken from the terrace on the south side, which are traditionally ascribed to the great topographical draughtsman Thomas Shottesby.⁵ These drawings evidently formed the component parts of a single panoramic prospect of the Manor and its church of considerable size, which was at some time cut into sections, presumably for convenience.

One of the drawings (PLATE I), showing the western end of the south façade, is particularly delightful on account of the inclusion of some exquisitely touched-in figures in mid-Victorian dress, which are

³ *Country Life*, art. cit., 163. A photograph illustrating the article shows very clearly the division between the darker stonework of Hutchinson's house and the lighter stonework of the extensions added by Sir James Horlick.

⁴ Arthur Mee, *Gloucestershire* (edited by E. T. Long) (London, 1966), 110. I am greatly indebted to the Rev Ian Pulford, Rector of Coberley and Cowley, for his kindness in giving me invaluable information about this connection with the Liddells.

⁵ Private collection, England. The watercolours were purchased by Henry Browne Hagreen at a sale of the contents of Shottesby's studio after the artist's death in 1874. Until recently they were in the possession of the purchaser's grandson Mr Philip Hagreen.

so typical of Boys's charming manner: similar figures feature in many of his surviving watercolours (PLATE II) and in the lithographs for his *Picturesque Architecture in Paris, Ghent, Antwerp, Rouen, &c.* of 1839, and for the even more celebrated *Original Views of London as it is*, published three years later, both of them landmarks in the history of lithography and of topographical art.⁶ Beyond the small, single-storeyed west wing, we can see in the watercolour the original seventeenth century manor house. Another watercolour (PLATE III) gives us a glimpse of St Mary's Church before the removal of the stunted spire and corner finials.⁷ The pine tree to the left is the ancestor of similar trees that still stand in the neighbourhood of the church, adding to the grandeur of the setting. A further watercolour (not here illustrated) shows the left wing and the stately trees of the avenue.

It is clear that the watercolours date from the time of Hutchinson's occupancy of the house but before the alterations to the structure of the church tower: some engraved views published in a sale catalogue of 1874—the year, as it happens, of Boys's death—already represent the tower in its present state. We can assign the watercolours to the last period of the artist's life, and even if they were executed with the assistance of a pupil the superb quality of the treatment of the figures would appear to establish Boys's direct participation. Boys has not yet been accorded the critical attention that has been given, for instance, to his friend and virtual master Richard Parkes Bonington⁸, upon whose style he largely based his own, and I know at present of few watercolours by him that are securely datable in the period between the publication of the *Original Views of London* and his death in 1874:⁹ a pencil drawing of 1861 in

⁶ For these volumes see especially E. Beresford Chancellor, "*Original Views of London as it is, by Thomas Shottler Boys, 1842*": *A Re-issue . . . with Descriptive Notes to each Plate, and a Short Introduction* (London, 1926); idem, "*Picturesque Architecture in Paris, Ghent, Antwerp, Rouen, etc. Drawn from Nature on Stone by Thomas Shottler Boys, 1839*": *A Re-issue . . . with Descriptive Notes to each Plate, and an Introduction* (London, 1928); and Michael Twyman, *Lithography, 1800–1850* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 161, 211ff.

⁷ A useful pamphlet on St Mary's, Cowley, has been published by the Rev S. I. Pulford (1960), and is available at the church. See also D. Verey, loc. cit.

⁸ See especially Marion Spencer, *Richard Parkes Bonington (1802–1828): A Reassessment of the Character and Development of his Art* (Doctoral Thesis, University of Nottingham, 1963). Dr Spencer is now completing a full *catalogue raisonné* of Bonington's works, to be published by the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art.

⁹ None of the watercolours by Boys in the British Museum is dated after 1833: cf. Laurence Binyon, *Catalogue of Drawings by British Artists . . . in the British Museum*, I (London, 1898), 138f. Of the watercolours in the Victoria and Albert Museum, the last dated example is of the year 1838: this is the *Rue de Rivage, Abbeville*, which is related to Plate No. 8 of the *Picturesque Architecture . . .*, published in 1839, I am much obliged to Mr C. M. Kauffmann, Assistant Keeper in the Department of Paintings, Victoria and Albert Museum, and to Mr Michael Twyman, of the University of Reading, for their helpfulness in answering inquiries.

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the Victoria and Albert Museum, giving a perspective view of the west façade of the International Exhibition building at South Kensington, together with a ground-plan,¹⁰ may be mentioned as one of the better known examples of his late style.¹¹ In addition, therefore, to the value of the Cowley watercolours as topographical drawings of manifest accuracy which record the appearance of the Manor around the middle of the nineteenth century, their publication may be of some service to students of a once neglected but now much esteemed artist.

¹⁰ Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Department of Paintings, E 719, 720-1955.

¹¹ At the Great Exhibition of 1851 there had been a special display of the revolutionary new lithotint process developed in England by Hullmandel, the printer of the Plates in Boys's *Picturesque Architecture* and *Original Views of London* and of works by other topographical artists of the period. Cf. J. F. Walton, *A few explanatory remarks, addressed to artists and amateurs, on the means by which the plates exhibited by Hullmandel and Walton are executed* (Exhibition, Hyde Park, London, 1851); and M. Twyman, *op. cit.*, 150, 220, 220n, 235, 243n, 253.