

WHO DESIGNED CAPESTHORNE HALL?

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SINCE writing 'Sarah Clayton's Letter and John Wood of Bath' (*Transactions* Vol. 100) in 1946 new evidence concerning the building of Capesthorpe Hall, Cheshire, has been found by Dr and Mrs A. H. Gomme. It now seems certain that Capesthorpe Chapel which, led astray by some printed sources, I stated was coeval with the hall, was designed and built by William Smith of Wergs (Wolverhampton) in 1722 and that the building of the hall began about 1732. I agree with this opinion. A few years ago I acquired a picture of the old Grammar School in John Street, Wolverhampton, which was designed and built by Smith in 1712 for the Company of Merchant Taylors. This building is so similar to the chapel that it may well be from the same drawing-board.

Dr and Mrs Gomme found evidence that on 1 March 1731 John Ward of Capesthorpe accepted an estimate by Francis Smith of Warwick (William's brother) to build a new house for him 'according to the last Design'. In 1749 John Wood of Bath told Sarah Clayton of Liverpool, who was seeking Wood's services for Foster Cunliffe, that 'he planed Mr. Ward's house at Capestone'. Dr and Mrs Gomme suggest that Sarah misunderstood him and that the house was more probably designed by its builder, Francis Smith. I disagree *in toto*. The severance of Wood from the 1722 chapel disposes of the vexed question of his reputed immaturity in 1722. By 1731 he was an established architect with Queen Square, Bath, behind him and Prior Park just ahead. This, together with the evidence outlined below, proves beyond reasonable doubt that Wood's claim was true. He would have been rash indeed to mislead Sarah in order to collect a few guineas for the Cunliffe plans. She was the Liverpool Corporation's go-between and a false claim to Capesthorpe might have put at risk the Town Hall commission for which he was to receive about £1,100, plus a generous expense account for

his visits to the town. Sarah could easily check his claim, and her letter reveals that she made enquiries of 'Mrs. Shaw and several others' who knew Capesthorne. Her father, William Clayton, and John Ward represented south Lancashire boroughs in the same parliaments and the families were almost certainly acquainted. Her mother's family, Leigh of Oughterington Hall, was of the Cheshire squirarchy; the hall is about twelve miles from Capesthorne.

The possibility that Sarah misunderstood Wood is very remote. She was an astute women in her middle thirties in 1749, and from the age of twenty-two had shown an interest in business affairs. She inherited the manor of Parr (St Helens) in 1745 and in the next decade became the principal coal-owner in the area and a large retailer of coal in Liverpool. She was a close friend of the Cunliffes and was clearly concerned that Foster Cunliffe should obtain Wood's services during his Liverpool visit. She was unaware that Cunliffe had commissioned house plans from William Baker a few months earlier.¹

In separate passages in his *Essay towards a History of Bath*, Wood refers to 'Mr. Ward' and 'John Ward, Esq.' There are sound reasons for believing that the references are to John Ward of Capesthorne, who, as stated above, agreed to Francis Smith's estimate for building Capesthorne on 1 March 1731. In 1732 Wood started to build St Mary's Chapel, Bath, for the use of his tenants in or near Queen Square. The cost (£2,000) was subscribed by twelve persons including Wood, who states in his *Essay* 'The writing between the subscribers and me was settled by Mr. Ward the great Conveyancer'. This description of Ward is typical Woodian hyperbole, but he was indeed an eminent lawyer and as legal adviser to the Leghs of Lyme (Lady Newton, *The House of Lyme*), a family with large estates in Lancashire, Cheshire and elsewhere, would be an experienced conveyancer. It is possible that 1731 was the date of both the St Mary's Chapel 'writing' and the Capesthorne designs. Ward was of the social class and (born in 1670) the age group from which Bath drew most of its regular patrons, and in a boom period of country-house building it was perhaps to be expected that an occasional patron, impressed by Wood's achievements, would commission designs from him. The *Essay* mentions also that 'John Ward, Esq.' was a trustee and governor of the Bath Hospital in 1748, and from other contemporary sources we learn that he subscribed twenty guineas in 1737 and was first appointed a trustee and governor in 1739, the year following the

¹ See Arthur Oswald, *William Baker of Audlem, Architect*, Staffordshire Record Society, 1954, p. 116.

laying of the foundation stone. Wood, an enthusiastic promoter and supporter of the hospital, provided free designs and devoted thirty pages to it in the *Essay*.

By 1749 the Capesthorne designs were at least eighteen years old, and it may seem odd that Wood, with a great mass of outstanding architectural work behind him, should recall a small commission of so long before. I suggest that Wood was in casual contact with Ward, probably in connection with hospital affairs, until Ward's death in 1748. It is likely that as a trustee and governor Ward would be in Bath at least once a year. In 1748 Wood would be revising his *Essay* for its imminent second edition, and from its mention of 'John Ward, Esq.' as a hospital trustee and governor one may infer that the Capesthorne squire was a Bath 'regular' during his later years, and in consequence the Capesthorne designs would remain fresh in Wood's memory.

J. Baker's rough sketch of the main front of eighteenth century Capesthorne in his *Picturesque Plan of Roads in Lancashire*² [*sic*] depicts a house of seven bays with three stories and a basement; a triangular pediment spans the three central bays. No ornamentation is recognisable. Much more detail is in Blore's 1837 view of the garden front,³ which confirms the general accuracy of Baker's sketch. Style rarely provides firm evidence towards the attribution of a building, but it is germane to this enquiry to state that the main ornamental feature of the Capesthorne garden front elevation is the fenestral treatment of the ground floor, where alternate triangular and segmental pediments crown the windows. This treatment was very much in Wood's mind about 1731. He had used it with great effect on the north side of Queen Square two years earlier and was to use it three years later on the principal front of Prior Park where the doorway, as at Capesthorne, was crowned by an enlarged segmental pediment. Stylistically there is nothing in Blore's picture contradictory to Wood's claim.

Francis Smith's principal business was mason-contracting. He often built to his own designs as at Stoneleigh Abbey and Sutton Scarsdale, but at least a dozen of his known building projects are from designs by other architects. Dr and Mrs Gomme found that he built the eighteenth-century Capesthorne, and in recent years Christopher Hussey has suggested that he helped to build Lyme Park from Leoni's designs. I am not aware of any evidence on which one could confidently link Smith with the designs of Capesthorne, whereas there is ample evidence, direct, circumstantial and stylistic, on which they may be attributed to John Wood.

² Binns Collection, 1-141, Liverpool Record Office.

³ BM Add MSS 42028.