

PEEL HALL, AN ARTISAN MANNERIST PUZZLE IN CHESHIRE

R.C. Turner, M.A.

Peel Hall near Ashton (SJ 498 698), presents three very different faces to the world. The south and garden front is the most imposing (plate 1). It is in ashlar, of two storeys and an attic, and has an almost exactly symmetrical placement of windows. Two massive lateral chimneys give the front some articulation, and there are moulded bands at first and second floor. The mullions and transoms of the windows are rounded to the front and cyma-moulded behind. The doorcase is restored and has a Tuscan architrave with a triglyph frieze but it is very similar to the doorcase visible in the earliest traced print of 1811, except for the loss of mid-bands to the columns.¹ The other classical details are the modillions added to the second floor band around the canted two-storey bay window which forms the right hand end.

The west front is very different. The south range projects forward and retains its elements. The remainder is lower, though still of two storeys and an attic, and vernacular in feel. The original windows are mullioned and transomed, but there are some blocked and altered openings and the four-centred arched doorway is partly hidden by a later porch. The north gable wall is rebuilt in a mixture of rubble and brick.

The most remarkable view is to be seen within the angle of the two ranges (plate 2). This is blank except for a number of blocked openings, partly hidden by brick lean-tos. All the openings begin above a basement level. The east front has a large moulded fireplace at its centre, with two doorcases, one above the other at the right-hand end. At the left end and just visible over a brick lean-to is the top of a



Plate 1: The garden front from the south-west. Photograph P. Sherratt

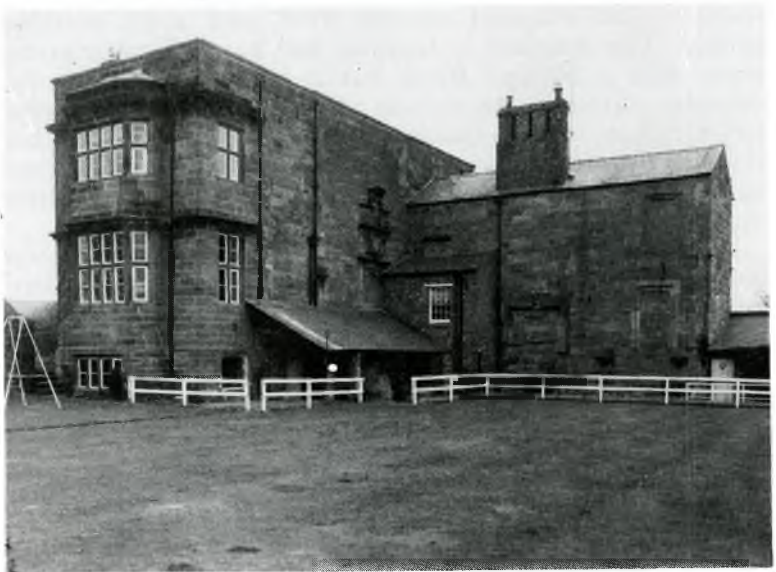


Plate 2: the internal angle of the present Peel Hall, showing the blocked openings. Photograph P. Sherratt



Plate 3: the doorcase and date cartouche, formerly within the great hall.
Photograph P. Sherratt

keyblock above which is an elliptical medallion. This lean-to also hides a sumptuous doorcase visible on the north front with finely carved spandrels to a round arch, which carries an ornate pedimented cartouche with the date 1637 (plate 3). This front also has a column capital and a single voussoir hanging rather precariously a few feet inside a straight joint between the ashlar front and rubble interior. It can also be seen that the west range has been reduced in height.

The interpretation of this apparent muddle of high quality architectural features has always proved a puzzle. Pevsner and Hubbard remarked,² 'In the lower wing perhaps, and at the back certainly, pieces were re-used – at the back e.g. the fine carved surround containing the date 1637'. What this article sets out to prove is that Peel Hall was an

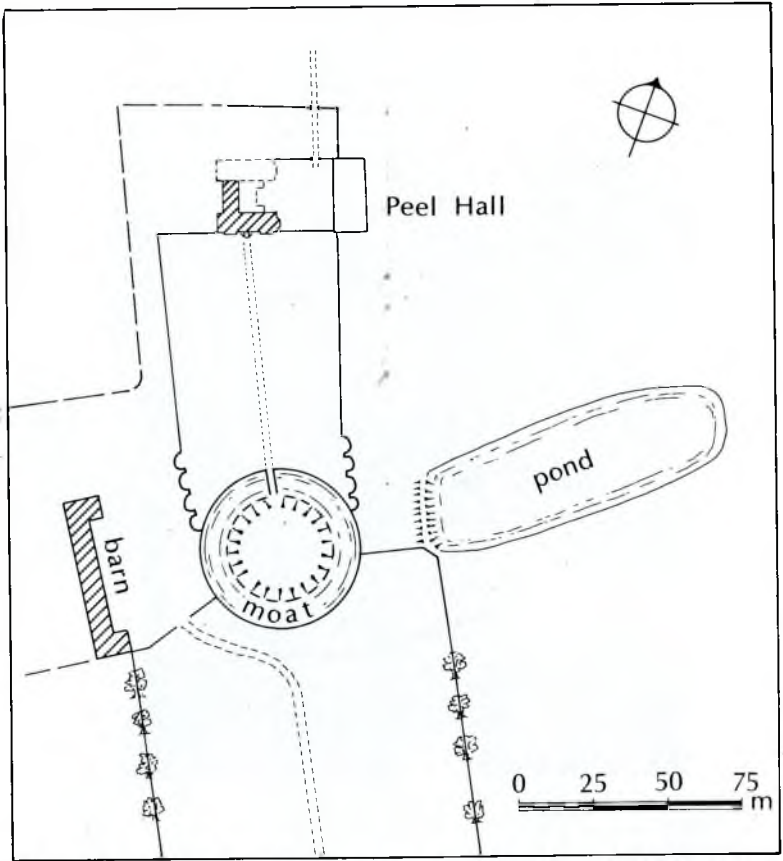


Figure 1: Peel Hall and its surroundings in the mid 17th century (reconstructed from aerial photography)

imposing Artisan Mannerist gentry house with all its features *in situ* and not re-used.

Most important clues to the reconstruction of this house are to be found in the surviving contemporary garden walls and inside the building. The house is at present approached around the back, there is no front door and no direct access to the south front. This looks across a walled garden, bounded by tall brick walls which narrow to increase the perspective effect, a Mannerist detail in itself. The view was closed by a large circular moat, which is still just visible, crossed by a twin arched causeway leading to a summer-house on a prospect mound, surviving into this century³ (fig. 1).

PEEL HALL : reconstructed plan

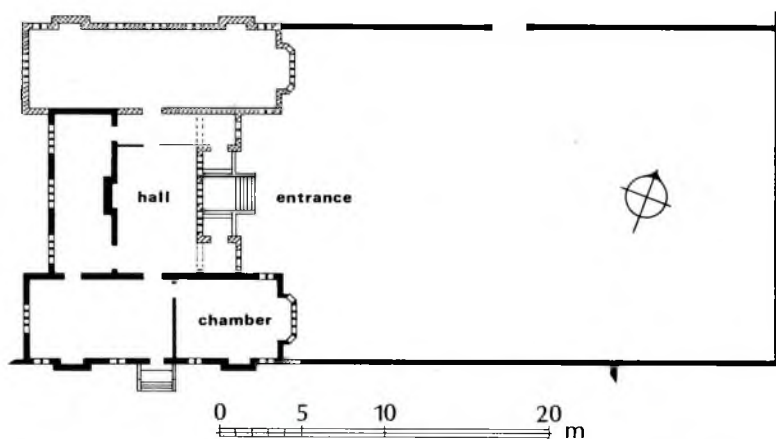


Figure 2: Peel Hall plan; the surviving part is in black, the remainder is reconstructed

Original but reduced and blocked gateways survive in the garden walls to the east. These show that the original approach led up to the east side of the present building, which looks up the valley of the Ashton Brook. This is the facade on which the modillions are an extra classical detail. If the main approach was from the east, then how do the blocked openings in this facade fit in? They are the remains of a centrally placed hall on a *piano nobile*. A reconstruction of the plan is possible by adding a mirror image of the south range to the north side, where it exactly fits the garden wall (fig. 2). The change in masonry shows the line of the front wall.

For the full detail of this hall to be understood, it is necessary to look inside. Behind the brick lean-to and under the elliptical medallion is a fine Tuscan doorcase which now leads into a tiny bathroom. It has slots to hold a wooden doorway. The capital and voussoir hanging on the outside wall must have been part of an identical doorcase. This provides a passage or crossing of the hall of considerable status. The doorcase with the dated cartouche is at the centre of this crossing and opens directly opposite the main doorway of the garden front. The symmetry of the planning is becoming more obvious. The hall must have been open through two storeys to the roof, to make the cartouche

visible. At the opposite end of the hall, there must have been a gallery over a lesser or the screens passage. Close inspection of the stonework at the reconstructed floor level shows regularly spaced, blocked joist holes *c.* 25cm square, which carried the floor of the hall.

To finish the reconstruction of the plan of the hall, the problem of lighting must be considered. With a passage or crossing at either end, there is no room for a central porch or entrance as well as sufficient windows to light the room. The hall is also above ground level and to preserve the symmetry of the main facade, an imperial, external staircase would seem the most appropriate. Further classical and mannerist detailing would be expected on this front.

What has been reconstructed is an Artisan Mannerist house with an advanced plan. It can be compared with Raynham Hall, Norfolk⁴ which though begun in 1619–22, was unfinished in 1638. The plan of the hall is almost identical, but Peel Hall has not the depth of rooms behind and no domestic chapel is reported by contemporary authors.⁵ The south range must have contained the main withdrawing rooms and now contains an ornate open well staircase, but this does not look to be in its original position. A minor staircase lies behind the hall. The function of the rooms in the missing range is unknown.

The builder of Peel Hall is not certainly known. The manor of Peel and the earlier Peel Hall passed by marriage to the Hardware family of Chester in the middle of the 16th century. They were dealers in rubio or Spanish iron and had a substantial townhouse and premises in Watergate Street. Their principal country property was in Bromborough, Wirral.⁶ William Webb's itinerary of the county of 1623⁷ gives the following description,

And herein the goodly ancient house called the Pool, or the Pile and fair demesnes, the habitation of the Hardwares, a Race of worthy Gentlemen, the heir whereof Henry Hardware Esq. is now in minority, but the inheritance of the house belongeth to Sir Robert Cholmely.

All the Hardwares were called Henry, and traditionally Henry Hardware IV was responsible for Peel Hall. The date 1637 is more likely to represent completion than commencement and Henry Hardware II (1561–1639), sometime Mayor of Chester, was still alive as occupier of the Bromborough estate. Henry Hardware IV also died in 1639, as did his infant son, the estate then passing to an uncle, John

Hardware. Soon after 1639 the house was bought by Roger Wilbraham of Dorfold Hall, of whom more later.

It remains possible that the house was never completed to its ambitious plan. However, the great hall can be shown to have been demolished rather than being uncompleted, but perhaps only archaeological excavation would prove the north wing. It must have been a house of status, and was the home of Col. Roger Whitley, four times Mayor of Chester, who entertained and put up King William III at Peel Hall on his way to Ireland. The earliest traced print of 1811 by John Musgrave shows the house reduced to its present size. This is reputed to have been the work of Booth Grey who combined a considerable holding in the Ashton area in the early 19th century, built a new house at Ashton Heyes, and converted the halls to farmhouses.⁸

The architecture of Cheshire is very provincial, and at some periods it seems almost defiantly so. It is therefore worth speculating how Peel Hall came to be built by a merchant family with only local connections. The answer would seem not to lie in Chester but with a group of prominent people from Nantwich. The most spectacular house of the Jacobean and Carolean period in the county is Crewe Hall. It was begun in 1615 but not completed until 1636. It was built for Sir Randolph Crewe who, for two years (1625–6), was Lord Chief Justice of the Upper Bench, before resigning over the imposition of Ship Money. From his earnings as a lawyer and government official, he bought the Crewe Estate from the Fouleshurst family and embarked on his new house.⁹ The final building had a great impact on local society and moved Thomas Fuller to write in his *Worthies of England*,¹⁰

Nor must it be forgotten, that Sir Randal first brought the model of excellent building into these remoter parts, yea, brought London into Cheshire in the loftiness, sightliness and pleasantness of these structures.

It was such a model building that all the craftsmen working on the new school at Audlem in 1655 were paid to visit Crewe Hall and study the methods used.¹¹

The building in its original form was a richly detailed E-plan house with a bold Renaissance porch and gateway.¹² As Harris has pointed out, alteration and extension of this building began before 1700 and its original appearance is only known from the one print.¹³ The plan of the house would appear to survive intact. The porch opens into a

screens passage leading to an inner courtyard. The original great hall is to the right and occupies half of the main front. The east range contains the exuberant staircase and the parlour is beyond. The chapel is directly opposite the entrance and is set across the north range with its bow window projecting from the middle of the rear elevation. The family pew is a gallery with access from first floor. The upstairs rooms, a great chamber, long gallery, library and small drawing room form a suite of state rooms.¹⁴

Another Nantwich man with strong London connections was Sir Edmund Wright (Lord Mayor of London in 1640). He built Swakeleys, Middlesex between 1629–1638, a substantial Artisan Mannerist house. The detailing is similar to Peel Hall with the addition of ‘Holborn’ gables, but the plan is more traditional with the hall off-centre and reached from a passage behind the central porch. Summerson wrote, ‘What a gulf there was between the taste of the Court and that of the City, which Swakeleys fairly represents.’¹⁵ It is not certain that Wright had a new house in or around Nantwich, though Webb mentions ‘a very fine brick house of Mr Wright’s’ on Mill Street,¹⁶ but he did establish almshouses in the town in 1638.¹⁷ These survive, though they have been moved, and are a simply detailed brick terrace, except for an entrance archway with Tuscan columns and big volutes. Another founder of almshouses in Nantwich was Sir Roger Wilbraham of Townend House, in 1613. He was a successful London lawyer whose son Thomas entertained James I. All that survives from these almshouses is another Renaissance archway, this time with two niches and a raised pedimented centre, now in the garden at Dorfold Hall. Sir Roger bought Dorfold to give to his brother Ralph, who built the present Dorfold Hall in 1616, the interior not being completed until 1621. Pevsner and Hubbard considered the plan of this building odd: ‘a double-pile plan, i.e. with subsidiary rooms behind the hall and behind the Great Chamber which lies above the hall.’¹⁸ The hall is centrally placed between crosswings and is entered by a projecting porch in one corner, balanced by a bay window in the other. The entry into a crosswing and a centrally placed hall can be seen elsewhere in Cheshire, at Tattenhall Hall (completed by 1622) and Lower Huxley Hall. Rachel Clive, the heiress to Lower Huxley Hall, married Thomas Wilbraham in 1619. A little further afield, the Dorfold Hall plan is repeated at Nerquis Hall, Flintshire, built for Sir John Wynn, 1635–40 (fig. 3). The

Nerquis Hall c.1640

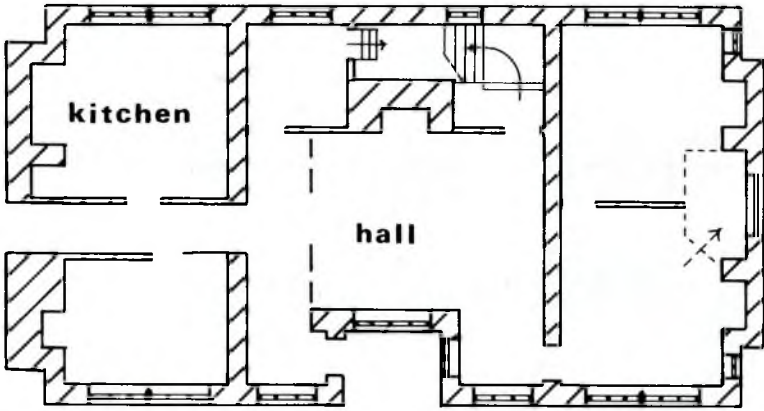


Figure 3: A condensed version of the Peel Hall plan in North Wales (after A. Furze).

original contract for this house survives and shows that it was drawn by a tradesman, Evan Jones, carpenter, though it may have been copied from one by a professional architect or surveyor.¹⁹ All these buildings have typical Jacobean detailing. The plan at Peel Hall therefore, seems to be a logical evolution and embellishment of existing local country houses, and is not as revolutionary as is claimed for Raynham Hall, Norfolk.

Ralph Wilbraham's son Roger has been mentioned before as the purchaser of Peel Hall soon after its probable completion. It is over twenty miles from Dorfold Hall and did not remain long in the family. His cousin Ralph died there in 1657 and left all his estates to the poor. Roger Wilbraham was also connected with the only other known Artisan Mannerist country house in the county. This was Wottenhall Hall dated 1635, but now demolished (fig. 4). At this period the Wottenhall estate was sold by John Breton to Roger Wilbraham, so again it is not certain who was responsible for its construction. It had three shaped gables surmounted by pediments and matching two-storey bay windows with decorative, pierced, stone parapets. At the centre was a big pedimented doorcase with a Tuscan order and a rusticated arched doorway.²⁰ Roger Wilbraham seemed to have been an enthusiastic builder or collector of



Figure 4: Wattenhall Hall, Cheshire, built 1635, now demolished.

Mannerist houses, all of which he could not have used. That Roger Wilbraham was greatly influenced by Sir Randolph Crewe can be seen in an extract from a letter he sent to John Crewe, on Sir Randolph's death in 1645,

'The truth is he was the glory of his profession, the grace of his country, and a prop of comfort to his friends, amongst whom there is few more weakened than myself, there being not many more interested in his affections. But this learns us how rightly to value creature comforts, to be thankful for them whilst we enjoy them, but not to sit or rest upon them.'²¹

For the period 1615–1640, a group of wealthy Cheshire merchants and professional men, many with London connections, were inspired to build country houses in the style of their contemporaries and social equals in the capital. This interest was fostered by Sir Randolph Crewe and Crewe Hall but developed and continued to incorporate new trends up to the Civil War. Of the later houses Peel Hall, Ashton would seem to have been the most ambitious. The severe disruptions of the Civil War and the inter and intra family rivalries which it fostered, appear to have suppressed this growing architectural interest, and Cheshire returned to being a provincial backwater until the later eighteenth century and the work of Samuel Wyatt and others.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 This is by J. Musgrave, in a volume bound by J. Broster in 1817, now in the collection of Mr. A. Waterworth, Crewood Hall, Kingsley.
- 2 N. Pevsner and E. Hubbard *The Buildings of England, Cheshire* (1971), p. 64.
- 3 R. Glasgow, *The Hardwares of Chester* (1948), p. 31.
- 4 Plan and description in J. Summerson, *Architecture in Britain 1530-1830*, (1970, Penguin) p. 160.
- 5 A list of all churches, chapels of ease and domestic chapels, is given in P. Leycester, *Historical Antiquities of Great Britain and Ireland and Cheshire* (1673, London), p. 197.
- 6 Glasgow, pp. 36-40.
- 7 Published in D. King, *The Vale Royal of England* (1656, London). part II, p. 101.
- 8 G. Ormerod, *The History of Cheshire* (1882), vol 2, p. 332.
- 9 *Ibid*, pp. 310-11.
- 10 T. Fuller, *The Worthies of England*, (1662), p. 178 repeated from King, *Vale Royal*, p. 75.
- 11 B. Redwood, 'Audlem Free Grammar School' *Jnl. Chester Arch. Soc.* vol. 51, (1964), p. 46.
- 12 King, *op. cit.* part II, p. 75.
- 13 J. Harris, *The Artist and the Country House* (1979), Sotheby's, p. 32.
- 14 Pevsner and Hubbard, *op. cit.* p. 194.
- 15 Summerson, *op. cit.* p. 158.
- 16 King, *op. cit.* part II, p. 71.
- 17 J. Hall, *A History of the Town and Parish of Nantwich* (1883), pp. 369-72.
- 18 Pevsner and Hubbard, *op. cit.*, p. 201.
- 19 P. Smith, *Houses of the Welsh Countryside* (1975 HMSO), p. 334.
- 20 Illustration and measured drawings from J. Douglas, *The Abbey Square Sketchbook* (1872 London), vol 1, no. 24.
- 21 Hall, *op. cit.* p. 455.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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