A STAIRCASE BY GRINLING GIBBONS

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“On the north side of Rickmansworth Road is Cassiobury Park, formerly the seat of the Earls of Essex. . . . The estate comprises five hundred acres, a part of which is occupied by the West Herts Golf Club. The remainder is being developed as a residential quarter.”

These low-keyed remarks from a London guidebook of 1951 catalogue the undoing of the great English country house that contained the staircase shown on the opposite page, acquired by the Museum twenty-five years ago and recently set up in the gallery of English furniture next to the Kirtlington Park Room. The house which served as a setting for this superlative woodwork had a long and remarkable history.

A tribe of ancient Britons called the Cassii used the acreage, now in the suburbs of London, as a camp site and gave its name to Cassiobury. During the Middle Ages the land was farmed for the monastic orders of Saint Albans, and its history in private ownership only began at the Dissolution. In 1541 a grant of land then seventeen miles outside of London passed from Henry VIII to one of his officials, Sir Richard Morrison, who built a house on it. In the seventeenth century this property passed to a great-granddaughter, Elizabeth Morrison, married to Arthur Capel, father of the first Earl of Essex. The Earls of Essex of the Caroline creation are not kinsmen of the Tudor Earls of Essex; when the earlier lines ended, the title was recreated and bestowed on a new man. So Arthur, second Baron Capel, received the earldom from Charles II in 1661, in reward for this father’s loyalty to Charles I.

Cassiobury was taken in hand by the first earl with the purpose of making good the disrepair and losses to the estate during the time of civil disturbance. Retaining one wing of the Elizabethan house, he built a pedimented central wing and crossed it with a lateral wing, to give the plan of the house the form of an H.

Building projects at Cassiobury were incidental to the earl’s other undertakings, for he held important posts abroad during this time, first as Ambassador Extraordinary to Denmark, then as Lord Lieutenant of Ireland from 1672 to 1677. Letters from Dublin Castle, filled with political and topical matter, contain few and perfunctory allusions to the works at Cassiobury. In a letter dated May 16, 1674, he wrote to his brother, Sir Henry Capel: “This I can do, and yet send over now and then one or two hundred pounds to raise and cover the building of that wing which is begun at Cassioberry, but then I must resolve to stop my building there for this and the next

ABOVE: Cassiobury Park as built for the first Earl of Essex, 1672-1680. The left wing was part of an older house. From John Britton’s “History and Description . . . of Cassiobury Park,” 1838. Dick Fund, 1941
The staircase from Cassiobury Park, Hertfordshire, carved by Grinling Gibbons in ash and pine, 1677-1680. Rogers Fund, 1932
year and only cover what is begun, and leave the inside finishing to some further opportunity, all which I would be very glad to do." The next year, in June 1675, before an extemporaneous visit to England, he is beset by an image of the unfinished fabric and possible resulting discomfort: "I wish you would tell Mr. Hugh May that he should hasten the casing of the front of the house at Cassiobury, and the covering of it, and that it be done with all the dispatch imaginable, for unless that part of the house be roofed and tiled before I come, I do not know how I shall be able to lie one night there." During this visit, which lasted ten months, the earl’s presence at Cassiobury must have hastened the works, but it is probable that the scheme for the two wings and their interior fitting, including the staircase, was not carried out until after his recall from Ireland in 1677.

Three years later the house was complete. In an entry for April 18, 1680, the diarist John Evelyn gives a full-length description of the house and gardens: "On the earnest invitation of the Earl of Essex, I went with him to his house at Cassiobury, in Hertfordshire. . . . The house is new, a plain fabric, built by my friend, Mr. Hugh May. There are divers fair and good rooms, and excellent carving by Gibbons. . . . Some of the chimney mantels are of Irish marble, brought by my Lord from Ireland, when he was Lord Lieutenant, and not much inferior to Italian. . . . The library is large and very nobly furnished."

The first earl had only a short remnant of life for enjoying his new house. Serving the state and his conscience with slow-blooded method among the disorderly combinations of Restoration politics, he moved away from the preserve of safety into a zone of great personal danger. Put at the head of the treasury in 1679, he resigned on a scruple, as reported in an account of that time: "The niceness of touching French money is the reason that makes my Lord Essex’s squeazy stomach that it can no longer digest his employment of first commissioner of the treasury." Out of office and disillusioned by Charles, who accepted French money to pay his mistresses, Essex found much to dislike in James, Duke of York, the heir presumptive, who promised to revive the wars of religion and place the nation under tribute to Rome. He voted for the Exclusion Bill to debar James from the succession, and, when this motion failed, joined a party of extremists, among whom were the Duke of Monmouth and Lord John Russell. Though he must have sought to appease the fanatics of this splinter group, he was named by an associate and charged with complicity in the regicide Rye House Plot. Taken from Cassiobury to the Tower of London in July 1683, he was found there three days later with his throat cut. The circumstances of the earl’s death were never clarified, but a doctor’s autopsy and the balance of the evidence indicated that he committed suicide. The arrest for treason may have brought him to despair by snatching away his character for trustworthy and considered action and assigning the part of conspirator and assassin.

Hugh May, the architect of seventeenth-century Cassiobury, was a kinsman of the Earl of Essex, who addressed him as "cousin" in a letter from Ireland. While working for his relative at Cassiobury, May served at the same time as architect to the Crown at Windsor Castle, where he held the post of Comptroller of the Works from 1673. Some of the apartments planned by May still exist in the Upper Ward at Windsor, though his exteriors were altered later.

In the interiors of Cassiobury and Windsor May was assisted by the wood-carver Grinling Gibbons. The carved wainscot which survives from these two commissions is Gibbons’s earliest identified work, although his association with May began earlier. Their meeting must have been a consequence of the familiar "discovery" incident reported in Evelyn’s Diary for January 18, 1671: walking in a field near his seat of Sayes Court, Deptford, Evelyn chanced to look in at the windows of an isolated cottage where Gibbons was carving a wooden copy of a Venetian Crucifixion by Tintoretto, "such a work as for the curiosity of handling, drawing, and studious exactness, I never had before seen in all my travels." Gibbons, born in Holland probably of English parents, was then about twenty-two years old. A short time afterwards Evelyn, who sometimes prompted the king on artistic subjects, introduced Gibbons with his now com-
pleted carving to Charles II. Though his morceau de réception was not acquired for the royal collections, Gibbons continued in Evelyn’s favor: “His Majesty’s Surveyor, Mr. Wren, faithfully promised me to employ him. I having also bespoke his Majesty for his work at Windsor, which my friend Mr. May, the architect there, was going to alter and repair universally.”

Having steered him into this employment, Evelyn followed Gibbons’s later successes in his Diary with interest and balanced pleasure. Gibbons’s chisel gained him the title of Master Carver in Wood to the Crown. Though he continued to work on the interiors of country houses, perhaps his best known wood carving was executed between 1695 and 1697 for the choir of Saint Paul’s Cathedral, after designs of Sir Christopher Wren. A few drawings and ornamental designs by Gibbons have been preserved, and several sculptures in marble and other media can be given to him or to his workshop, notably some of the carved stonework detail on the façades of Blenheim Palace.

The carved woodwork at Cassiobury may be uniquely from the hand of Gibbons, since he would have been likely to execute early commissions without assistants, and Evelyn mentions in the account of his visit “the excellent carving by Gibbons.” The total coverage of his carving will never be known, for the wing that contained the earl’s private apartments was knocked down about 1800 when some of the other rooms suffered remodeling. At this time the fifth earl submitted to the mania for overbuilding which destroyed much clean and self-contained English architecture of earlier date. It is perhaps true that Cassiobury looked out of trim after a hundred years. The house is slighted in the Ambulator, a guidebook of 1782: “The front and one side are of brick. . ., the other side very old; but was the house rebuilt in the modern taste, it would be one of the most agreeable seats near London.”
The size of the house must have seemed modest to the fifth earl, who had inherited other estates, with their revenues, and was prepared to bring Cassiobury up to the mark. He demolished the two front wings of the old H-shaped house and added a congeries of rooms to make an uneven brick barrack, built around a quadrangle. A mutation of neo-Gothic architecture, from designs by James Wyatt, was fixed on to this building and completely obliterated the first earl's Dutch Palladian façades.

While the house was proliferating in plan and running up into a crenelated attic, square battlements, and Gothic pinnacles, some of the interior wainscot was modified. The plan at the top of page 234 shows the first-floor arrangement of the Restoration house. In the early nineteenth century the main block shown in this plan was shortened by one room, the round-bayed wing at right angles to it was demolished, and the names and uses of nine remaining rooms contain-
Portrait of George Viscount Malden (1757-1839), later the fifth Earl of Essex, the transformer of Cassiobury, and his sister, Lady Elizabeth Capel, painted in 1768 by Joshua Reynolds. Gift of Henry S. Morgan, 1948
ABOVE: Ground plan of the first floor of the seventeenth-century house at Cassiobury. BELOW: Ground plan of the first floor of the house as altered and enlarged by the fifth Earl of Essex in the early nineteenth century.
ing Gibbons’s carvings were changed. Four staircases are shown in this diagram.

When the house was massively reoriented in the early 1800’s, the staircases were altered. The principal staircase of the old house is indicated under the letter F in the plan of the house before alteration. In the ground plan of the Gothic-revival house (p. 234, below) it is shown in a position adjoining the Great Cloister, where a subsidiary staircase is indicated under the letter M on the plan of the old house. Though removed from one part of the house and set up in another, the stairs illustrated on page 228 are composed of elements carved by Grinling Gibbons between 1677 and 1680 for the house of that period. These elements are a unique example of Gibbons’s staircase carving, for no other staircases by the master carver survive in English houses.

This finely detailed wood carving is now exhibited in Gallery 19 on the first floor. Since the original aspect of the stairs could not be recovered, the object in setting them up has been to display Gibbons’s handiwork to best advantage without departing from seventeenth-century architectural principles, given the static wall and ceiling limits of a Museum gallery. The stairs rise in three flights to a balustraded landing above. As they are now installed they conform in appearance to other seventeenth-century staircases, such as those at Thorpe Hall, dating about 1655, and at Sudbury, 1676-1677.

The sharpness of Gibbons’s cutting was not originally overlaid with paint or varnish. Twenty years after he had worked there Celia Fiennes described in her journal the appearance of his wood carving at Windsor: “There is also the most exactest workmanship in the wood carving, which is (as the painting) the pattern and masterpiece of all such work both in figures fruitages beasts birds flowers all sorts, so thin the wood and all white natural wood without varnish.” Before the Museum acquired the staircase a later covering of stain and varnish had been removed, so that the wood surface accords with Miss Fiennes’s description and Gibbons’s intention. Three principal woods were used: pine for the handrail and oak-leaf-and-acorn string, solid ash for the scrollwork balustrade and pine-cone finials, and oak for the risers, treads, and landings. In his naturalistic carvings of flower and fruit formations and dead-game arrangements Gibbons attempted to reproduce in wood the feats of the Dutch still-life painters. For the acanthus flowers and foliation, the bursting seed pods of the staircase balustrade, he may have turned to plates of French ornamental designs, such as the

View of Cassiobury Park as it was remodeled after designs by James Wyatt, about 1800. Reproduced in Britton
foliage friezes engraved by Jean Lepautre. The oak leaves and acorns, as displayed on the string, were a royalist device alluding to the twenty-four hours which Charles II spent hidden in the Boscobel "Royal Oak" during the Civil War.

The nineteenth century brought further augmentation to the stores of Cassiobury. Paintings by Turner, Landseer, and Wilkie were added to walls already crowded with family portraits. French furniture and decorative objects were procured by the fifth earl, and four separate libraries were filled with books. Backstairs seventeen maids' rooms, three valets' rooms, and two footmen's rooms were equipped and put in order. After the first World War the tax structure bore hard upon holders of property near London, and the tenor of life changed for the inhabitants of well-run English estates. For whatever reason, a sale was held in June 1922, which lasted ten days and dispersed the contents of the house in 2606 lots. Some items from Cassiobury, published in the catalogue or sold separately, have reappeared in public and private collections. Six English stained-glass roundels from the Great Cloister are in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. A bureau plat from the Inner Library, by the French maker who signed B.V.R.B., is in the Elisabeth Severance Prentiss collection at the Cleveland Museum. Some of Grinling Gibbons's carvings for the rooms were acquired for the Hearst and Wernher collections.

Three paintings from the house reached the Metropolitan Museum from several sources. A double portrait by Sir Joshua Reynolds represents the fifth earl, the transformer of the house, as a boy of ten with his sister, Lady Elizabeth Capel. This painting now hangs in a gallery of later eighteenth-century English furniture. The portrait of the first earl's brother, Sir Henry Capel, and the double portrait of his sisters, Mary Duchess of Beaufort and Elizabeth Countess of Carnarvon, were both painted by Sir Peter Lely and came to the Museum in the bequest of Jacob Ruppert. In the fifth earl's great house they hung in the main library, one room's remove from the staircase. They now hang on the walls of the gallery where the staircase has been installed.