

Gillingham Hall Norfolk



Figure 1. Engraving after a drawing by J S Cotman 1818

Impact assessment of proposed alterations

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Gillingham Hall

Summary

This report has been requested by South Norfolk District to assist in determining a forthcoming application to make alterations and additions to Gillingham Hall. This involves an appraisal of the North East wing in particular and assessment of the impact of the proposed development. The principal proposals are the removal of the first floor of part of the wing in order to create a lofty dining room and, along the south wall of the wing, the building of a glazed conservatory terminating in a circular annexe with a glazed cupola. Also it is proposed to extend by three bays the existing extension on the north gable-end of the main block.

The Historical Development of the Hall

The principal façade to the west has clear early 17th-century character created by the extended E plan, the off-centre axial chimney stack with four octagonal shafts, the parapeted gables with former finials to the kneelers and some early brick work (fig.2). Rising up from a stair outshut into the courtyard to the rear is the octagonal bell tower and belvedere beloved of Jacobean patrons with its original stair and ovolo-moulded mullion windows.



Figure 2. Façade. 18.vii:08

However, apart from these things the building is largely of the early 18th century. The wholesale remodelling of the main block involved the rebuilding of large parts of the west façade to incorporate sash windows with glazing bars beneath skewback arches with rubbed brick voussours. The most spectacular addition at this time was the second staircase outshut with a very fine stair of twisted balusters on open strings with carved tread ends. The wide handrail is wreathed at the foot and there is a panelled dado to the wall. The stair is typical in great houses of the late 17th and early 18th centuries.

Also belonging to the early 18th century is the L-shaped north-east wing.(Fig.3)

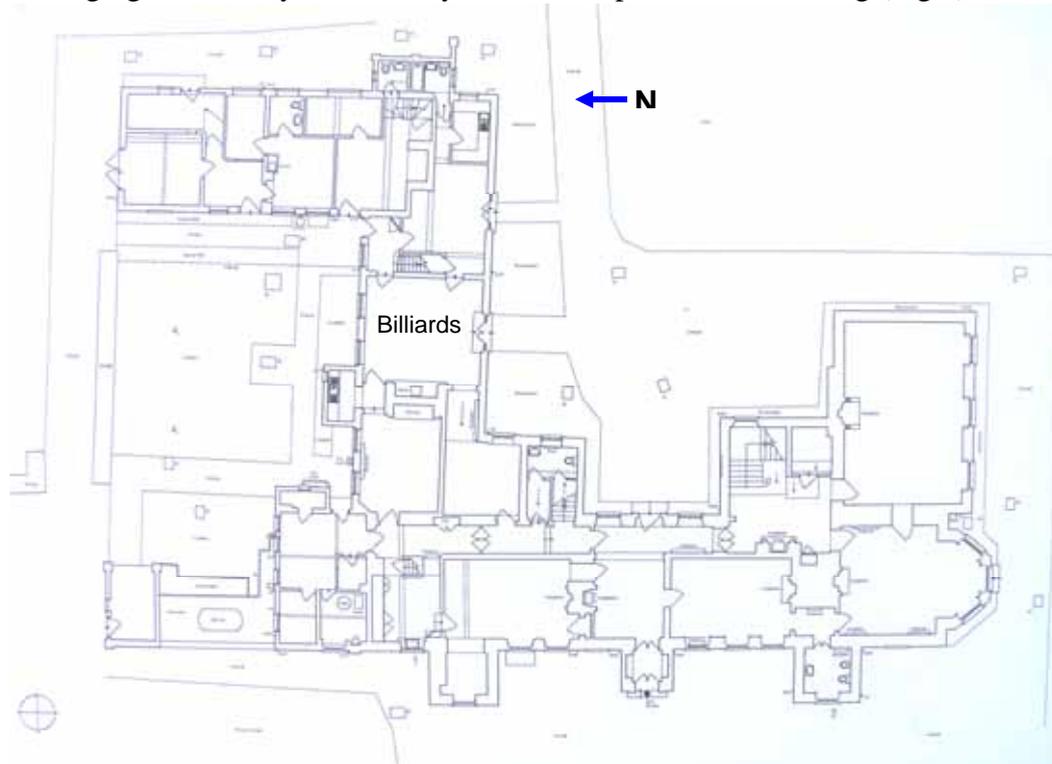


Figure 3. Plan as existing

The extension is a simple construction of brick with a plain dentil cornice and a hipped roof. Its initial purpose was as service rooms and accommodation for servants and has since become more part of the main house with the billiard room occupying the position of the former servants' hall. However the kitchen, to the west of the chimney stack, and other service rooms are in this wing. Small bedrooms occupy first floor level. The north elevation has a symmetrical arrangement of sash windows with glazing bars beneath skewback arches with rubbed brick voussoirs (fig. 4)



Fig. 4. West elevation of north east extension

There is a possibility that these ‘polite’ sash windows are replacements of the simpler cross mullion windows which continued to be used alongside the more expensive sash. The east elevation of the block has one or two of these windows surviving in this little seen area (Fig. 5). The windows include mullion and mullion-and-transom



Fig. 5. East elevation of north east wing

types with leaded glazing and metal casements. There is no attempt at symmetry and the elevation is decidedly vernacular.

The south elevation of the wing is marked by a pair of French windows accommodated in tall openings with finely turned semicircular arches with rubbed brick voussoirs (Fig.6). These graceful openings are a surprising enrichment of the



Fig. 6. South elevation of north east wing

otherwise plain elevation. The probable explanation is that they are principally to provide an acceptable face to the upper end of the house and secondly for the service rooms to profit from the extra light. The first floor rooms have a pair of double-glazed windows with plastic frames and imitation glazing bars. There is also a larger sash window with glazing bars. At the western end of the extension the wall returns to abut the staircase tower. There are single sash windows with glazing bars at both levels.

The Impact of proposed alterations.

The north extension

The proposed extension would match the existing north eastern wing. This would involve the demolition of a single storey out house of minimal architectural interest. The existing gable-end would become an internal wall and lose its parapet which is to be reproduced to form the gable of the north end. This will have the advantage of matching the gables of the principal elevation and the disadvantage of being different to the hipped gable of the north east wing with which it would form a courtyard.

The removal of the first floor in north east wing.

The proposal is to form a new dining room through the removal of the staircase and closets to the east of the present billiard room and to remove the first floor to increase the height of the room. The partitions, wall and stair are of no architectural interest. The plaster cornice of the billiard room is a modern reproduction of an 18th-century design. The room above has some 18th-century features of interest which would become redundant under the proposal. The principal loss would be the chimneypiece which has a late 18th-century duck's nest grate and an early 18th-century timber mantle. (Fig. 7) The latter is of a typical design with a carved architrave surmounted by a plain frieze with a moulded and slightly carved cornice above forming the shelf. The grate is of cast iron with a floral design in bas relief to each face.



Fig. 7

The two doors have large raised and fielded undivided panels typical of the 18th century. The door into the cupboard has forged hinges with decorated terminals (Fig. 8)



Fig. 8. Doorway in billiard room chamber beside stack

The Orangerie

This proposal involves the construction of a glazed conservatory against the full length of the south elevation of the north east wing. The proposal is to attach the double pitch roof above the level of the two arched windows. The most serious impact is where it is proposed to abut the original staircase tower. This would involve the blocking of two windows and the conversion of one window into a doorway. The latter has shuttered reveals which would be lost. The attachment of the proposed new building would reduce the visual impact of the tower which should be read as a separate unit containing the original Jacobean stair and supporting the octagonal belvedere. The orangerie itself is a bold design apparently subservient to classical lines of division into bays by pilasters which support an entablature. The domed circular structure attached to the corner is an exciting proposal recalling the domed conservatory at Catton Hall. The dome was removed during the Second World War. (See Burke's and Savills Guide to Country Houses, Vol. III, 1981. p.98).

Conclusion

The removal of the floor and the creation of the orangerie are evidently part of a single concept which would transform the east/west part of the service wings into a large and lofty formal dining room connected to the orangerie by the pair of arched openings. Apart from the damage to the fabric and visual prominence of the 17th-century belvedere and the loss or re-location of the chimneypiece in the billiard room chamber, the proposal would introduce an interesting transformation of the relatively plain south elevation without damaging impact. The conservatory would be in the

established late Victorian fashion comparable to Crown Point in Trowse Newton, Catton Hall and others.

As regards the less controversial northern extension there is scope for a debate on a choice between a hipped roof to match the existing north wing or a parapet gable to continue the method employed for the main block.

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