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Dr Claire Gapper

The Decorative Plasterwork of Apethorpe, Northamptonshire: A City Plasterer Working in a Courtier's House, 1622-1624

The compulsory purchase of Apethorpe by English Heritage in 2004 remains highly controversial. What however is not in doubt is that the programme of emergency repairs undertaken since then has uncovered much new information about this long-underappreciated building. Claire Gapper provided a detailed analysis of the important series of plaster ceilings in the state apartments built to accommodate James VI and I. Those rooms – the Great Chamber, the Withdrawing Chamber, the King's Chamber, the Duke's Chamber and the Long Gallery – are the nearest thing to a surviving example of a suite of Jacobean royal apartments. But this was a private house. The owner, Sir Francis Vane, later 1st Earl of Westmorland, began the rebuilding work in 1622. As the ceilings would not have been installed until construction was well-advanced, the plasterwork can now be recognised as the pre-eminent instance of such ceilings from the very last years of James I's reign. One of Gapper's themes was that, even in court circles, fashions in plasterwork lagged slightly behind Inigo Jones's *avant-garde* ideas about interior design. Not until Ham House a decade later would the full-blown Jonesian style be applied to the plaster ceilings in an English house. Yet isolated details of that new style do appear at Apethorpe amidst the more traditional motifs. The name of the plasterer is not known, but Gapper hazarded a guess on stylistic grounds. There are strong similarities to Edward Standing's documented work at Blickling and comparisons can also be made with Standing's work at Forty Hall and Chilham Castle. But Standing was not a royal plasterer and, if he did indeed do the work at Apethorpe, this was a case of a leading City artisan working for a prominent courtier on a building intended for use by the King. He therefore adjusted his style to suit current court tastes. **AB**