

CASTERNE HALL

STAFFORDSHIRE

THE HOME OF MR AND MRS CHARLES HURT

At first glance, Casterne Hall, near Ashbourne, seems to be a classic example of a smaller manor house of the early 18th century. But how much of the house is actually Jacobean? OLIVER GERRISH examines the evidence.



1—The entrance front of Casterne Hall from the south. The house is a fine example of a smaller manor house of the early 18th century. It was probably rebuilt in the late 1730s as a house for an heir awaiting his inheritance.

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ASTERNE HALL is one of those unusually pretty and compact early-18th-century houses that seems to sum up some of the finest qualities of English domestic architecture. The house stands proudly on an escarpment overlooking the Manifold Valley. In the distance can be seen the ruins of another Peak District manor house, early-16th-century Throwley Hall, illustrating vividly the different directions in which the story of an individual house may evolve.

The Casterne Hall we see today (Fig 1) is a late-Baroque composition in grey limestone, which sits well in the landscape. It belongs to a smaller country-house type much influenced by James Gibbs's *Book of Architecture* (1728) and associated in this part of the world with the work of the Smith dynasty of builders. Francis Smith worked at Melbourne Hall in Derbyshire in the mid 1720s, and worked for the Hurts' cousins at nearby Calke Abbey, also in Derbyshire. His son, also called William, worked on the east front of Melbourne Hall and Radbourne Hall in the 1740s. There is, however, no documentary evidence for the involvement of the Smiths.

The main façade of Casterne Hall is of five bays over three storeys. The central bay breaks forward slightly, and emphatically frames the distinctive door surround, set in rusticated stone, above which is a pedimented window. The overall composition closely compares with nearby Parwich Hall, in Staffordshire, which differs from Casterne in being built of fashionable red brick, and having a pediment over the central bay. Perhaps Casterne did have a more elaborate pediment over the entrance bay; certainly the roof seems to have been altered in the early 19th century.

Despite the relatively compact size of the house, Casterne certainly holds its own within the dramatic Peak District landscape. Gervase Jackson-Stops admired the house for possessing an unmistakable 'grandeur in miniature' (COUNTRY LIFE, February 1, 1979). The present article considers the evidence for Casterne being an adaptation of a forgotten early-17th-century manor house. Despite the relative sophistication of the early-18th-century interiors, the low proportions of the principal rooms seem to be defined by the adapted Jacobean house, which preceded the present one.

The Hurt family had settled near Ashbourne by the early 16th century, and purchased Casterne in 1617, when they built a new house, adapted in the early 18th century. Their principal seat from 1690 was Alderwasley Hall in Derbyshire, which they gained through marriage with the Lowe family. Their history is given in two principal sources: first, Louis Hurt's privately printed *Alderwasley and the Hurts* (1909), and more recently in Derek Wain's *The Hurts of Derbyshire* (2002).

The early-18th-century rebuilding was carried

out for Nicholas Hurt (1710-1767) who died the same year as his father and thus never moved to the main seat at Alderwasley. The house he rebuilt was then the family's older but lesser seat. The new house was of suitable status for an heir waiting for his main inheritance—Nicholas Hurt also remained a bachelor, so the estates went to his younger brother, Francis.

Although a major new façade was then added to the south, it seems likely that the new house absorbed a considerable portion of the early-17th-century building. The north façade (Fig 2), possibly the original entrance front as it faced towards the now-lost hamlet rather than to the wilder landscape views of the south, still has several elements that can be read as 17th-century, including blocked mullion windows. There is further evidence of an earlier house at cellar level and in the quantity of fine dressed stone discovered in the gardens, where it had been reused.

Casterne has an attractively simple plan, with smaller rooms opening off a central hall, which runs the full depth of the house to the elegant staircase (Fig 4). The hall also contains an extremely handsome chimneypiece (Fig 3), which is an example of provincial Baroque of the most untamed sort. The great wave-like volutes generate a feeling of almost physical energy in the room, the ceiling of which is surprisingly low, perhaps one of the first indications of adaptation from an earlier house. One designer that has been mooted for this chimneypiece is a Staffordshire master mason, Richard Trubshaw, of Haywood, who was known to borrow Italian Baroque details in his designs, such as a that of a doorcase at Emral Hall, Flintshire.

What would originally have been two early-18th-century parlours on the west side were made into one large drawing room in the 1950s (Figs 5 and 8). The Oak Room (Fig 7), to the east of the hall, is fitted in a slightly haphazard manner with early-17th-century panelling, which must have been reused from some other part of the original Jacobean house. Like the West Parlour, it has an early-18th-century buffet-niche. The oak panelling, as with that throughout the house, was painted over in the mid 20th century, and the oak revealed in the 1950s restoration.

The panelling would have come from the house built in about 1618 by one Nicholas Hurt (1567-1642), who had recently purchased the manor there. The inventories of 1667 and 1678, which were attached to the wills of Nicholas Hurt's son and grandson, describe the interiors of the early-17th-century house, and both mention a 'boarded room'. Another chamber contained a 'great bed' introduced, it is thought, after the marriage of Nicholas Hurt (1621-67) to the daughter of Sir Henry Harpur of Calke Abbey in Derbyshire.

However much of a Classical set piece Casterne seems from the south, the rear (north) front has convincing evidence of the early-17th-century house. In *The Hurts of Derbyshire*, Wain refers to a local legend that there was a 'famous old feudal mansion' here in the time of Henry V. Although all trace of this has been lost, careful examination of the north front shows just how much of the 17th-century house survived.

As you look at the north front, two wings break forward to east and west. Although that to the west has



2—The rear of Casterne Hall, from the north. This front shows evidence of the Jacobean manor which was the basis of the present



3—The provincial Baroque design of the hall chimneypiece is probably derived from engravings of Italian architecture



4—The early-18th-century staircase probably occupies the same position as its early-17th-century predecessor



5—The alcove in the drawing room suggests it was once used for dining



6—A portrait of Cecilie Hurt, by Sir Francis Grant, her brother-in-law



7—Oak Room, with panelling salvaged from the original Jacobean house



8—The drawing room. It was opened up into one large room in the 1950s by the present owner's mother

been considerably reduced in height, it is still clear that these were originally both of three storeys. Between the two towers were two smaller towers, and a narrow recessed centre between them. The two wings were originally probably capped with an ornamental parapet.

Could this have been the principal façade of a compact, non-courtyard house of the Smythson-type, perhaps of an hour-glass-shaped plan? This suggestion may not be as wild as it seems, because there were strong family connections to patrons of the Smythsons, particularly John Smythson.

The estate neighbouring Casterne was Blore Hall, seat of the ancient Basset family. Nicholas Hurt of Casterne is recorded as living at Blore for a period in the early 1600s, and is thought to have been some sort of guardian to Elizabeth Basset (whose father, William, died in 1601). In 1618, Miss Basset married Sir William Cavendish (later Earl of Newcastle) of Bolsover Castle, for whom John Smythson was then rebuilding Bolsover's Great Gallery range as well as the Little Castle at Bolsover (COUNTRY LIFE, December 5, 2002). In about 1618, while Nicholas Hurt was rebuilding his manor house at Casterne, he was also involved in building a new chapel (dedicated to St Bertram) which survives today, on the south side of nearby Ilam parish church.

Other early-17th-century houses with the same symmetrical front and inner tower arrangements as Casterne Hall include Enville Hall, Staffordshire, although that is on a larger scale than may have been at Casterne. The arrangement of the north front also suggests the original Jacobean plan of the house. The north-west wing would probably have contained the kitchens and domestic offices, the north-east wing the family apartments. There was presumably a hall in the centre and the inner towers were provided for staircases.

Useful evidence is also found in the 1667 and 1678 inventories which list on the ground floor a hall, a parlour, a kitchen and a buttery, and on the first floor, a Hall Chamber, a Boarded Chamber, a Parlour Chamber and a Porch Chamber. The eastern of the two decipherable inner towers is still the staircase compartment of the house today, although obviously entirely refitted in the early 18th century.

Sadly, there is no visual record of the original house. However, the house as remodelled probably in the 1730s or 1740s for Nicholas Hurt has remained little altered to the present day. Casterne was tenanted from the late 18th century onwards and sold from the Hurt estates in 1919 (the rest of the main Hurt estates at Alderwasley Hall were sold in 1928).

However, the present owner, Charles Hurt, inherited the house from his father, Michael Hurt, a nephew of the Maj Hurt who sold Casterne in 1919. The house had been bought then by the White family. The house had been bought then by the White family. When they came to sell who were the tenant farmers. When they came to sell in 1953, they expressed a preference for selling to a member of the Hurt family and it was bought by Mr and Mrs Michael Hurt. Mr Hurt's father also managed

to buy a number of family heirlooms. These, together with inherited pieces, helped to furnish the house in a triumphant spirit of family revival. The heirlooms included important furniture, but particularly notable are the portraits by Joseph Wright of Derby of Francis and Mary Hurt, the entrepreneurial younger brother of the Nicholas who rebuilt Casterne. He and his wife lived at Alderwasley Hall.

Francis's son Charles married Susanna Arkwright of Hillersley, daughter of the industrialist Sir Richard Arkwright, inventor of the spinning jenny. There is also an interesting series of paintings of Hurt family members, including some fine works by Sir Francis Grant, a brother-in-law to one Francis Hurt of Alderwasley Hall, who died in 1854. Cecilie Hurt (Fig 6), who is depicted in an attractive oil sketch, was a granddaughter of the Duke of Rutland.

Casterne Hall was carefully revived in the 1950s by the present owner's parents, and new gardens and orchards laid out. Mrs Michael Hurt (now Lady Rumbold) made some judicious alterations, including opening up the main drawing room to help recapture the flavour of a family house. The baton has now passed to Charles Hurt, a writer, and his wife, Susannah, an artist, who continue a careful programme of restoration and improvement.

The roof has been completely renewed. Every room save one has been overhauled, and yet thanks to the artistic instincts of Mrs Hurt, they give the admirable impression of being untouched. Mrs Hurt also has a background in paintings restoration and in that capacity has worked at Chatsworth, Derbyshire, and Charleston Farmhouse in Sussex. The major works in the 1950s had been much needed, but 50 years on, additional work was required, as a house of the age of Casterne requires regular attention. Several blocked-up windows have been opened and a new terrace with a fine view over the valley constructed over the old cellar on the west of the house.

The gently understated interiors of the house still contain a run of pictures illuminating the connections of this to other Derbyshire land-owning and entrepreneurial families, including the Sitwells of Renishaw Hall—the genealogist Sir George Sitwell, Bt (father of Osbert Sitwell), was proud of his connection to the Hurts' ancient line. The little altered farmbuildings in a courtyard to the north side, which are mostly late-18th-century, have been carefully repaired.

These buildings, like the house, have been used as a setting for period films. There can be few better places to evoke the life of the Peak District squirearchy of the 18th century, of whom the Hurts were such classic examples as both landowners and entrepreneurs. The return of the Hurt family as owners, the fine landscape setting, the two phases of building and the thoughtful 20th-century restorations combine today to make Casterne one of the most attractive smaller country houses of the Staffordshire-Derbyshire borders.

Photographs: Paul Barker.

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