

**DECORATIVE PLASTERWORK IN SOUTH-WEST ENGLAND
c.1550-1640**

Volume 1 of 2

Submitted by Nigel Laurence Pratt to the University of Exeter
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Signature:Nigel Laurence Pratt.....

ABSTRACT

This thesis is the first comprehensive academic analysis of domestic decorative plasterwork in South-West England, which survives in a variety and abundance that exceeds other areas of the country. It focuses on the Post-Reformation period from c. 1550 to c. 1640, which covers the foundation and development of the craft to a point of divergence between the vernacular and polite traditions in the mid-seventeenth century. As a primarily object-based study it presents a close analysis of decorated ceilings, overmantels and friezes in the region based on their physical presence and location within the houses. This study is underpinned by a gazetteer of plasterwork from 485 houses from Cornwall, Devon, Somerset and West Dorset, supported by maps, tables and 296 photographs and illustrations. Of these houses, 62 were visited as part of this study and recorded in detail, concentrating on four key geographic areas: the borders of West Somerset, Devon and Dorset; the North Devon port of Barnstaple and its hinterland; the region's capital at Exeter; and the South Devon mercantile centres of Dartmouth and Totnes.

This study places the corpus of plasterwork within the context of the social, economic, and architectural developments of the period. It assesses the nature of the medium, the techniques employed in its production and use, the designs adopted and adapted, and the internal and external sources for these. It analyses the operation of plasterwork workshops within their geographical parameters and the respective roles of the client and plasterer and examines their input into design choices. It presents new understandings of the use of iconography in plasterwork and how the display of heraldic, biblical, and classical imagery and its placement within the house was used by the client to communicate identity and status. This thesis also presents new evidence that the architecture of late-sixteenth century high status houses was consciously manipulated to prioritise the visual qualities of the plasterwork.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This thesis is the first comprehensive academic study of decorative plasterwork in the South-West. As such it contributes to scholarship on plasterwork in the region and to the broader understanding of the decorative arts, architecture, and visual and material culture of England in the period from 1550 to 1640. The distinct local tradition that developed in the region during this period produced plaster ceilings, overmantels and friezes of a vitality, variety, and abundance not seen in other parts of the country. Because of this high concentration of plasterwork, the South-West gives an unparalleled opportunity to draw meaningful conclusions relating both to the plasterers carrying out the work and to the clients who commissioned it.¹ The study period spans the beginning of the plasterwork tradition in the mid-sixteenth century to the mid-seventeenth century when a more mannered national style of classical design begins to take hold in the higher status houses. This period was a time of rapid economic and societal change, that is reflected both in the plasterwork and the houses that contain it.

Documentary evidence for plasterwork is rare. This study is therefore object-based and adopts primarily 'archaeological' methodology using the physical evidence of the plasterwork itself and its context to analyse the techniques, materials, designs and iconography, and the relationship with the contemporary plan-form of the house. Using this approach my thesis explores how plasterwork was adapted in response to various constraints; how the plasterers operated, their relationships with their clients and the geographical parameters within which they worked; how it functioned relative to the social status of the owner and whether this changes through time; and why decorative plasterwork became so established in the region.

While limited county-focussed synopses of plasterwork have been undertaken previously, as a concentrated academic analysis across the South-West this thesis enables its nature and extent to be quantified and questioned at a detailed level for the first time. This analysis is underpinned by the Gazetteer

¹ The term 'client' rather than 'patron' is used throughout this thesis as it better reflects the relationship between those paying for the work and undertaking it, see Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 1.

(Appendix D). In assembling this data the thesis represents a considerable expansion of the previous county studies. A dataset of 485 houses across the region is sufficiently large enough to be queried to extract meaningful statistical information. Such an analysis of a single decorative medium in the South-West also has value nationally, by allowing the distinctiveness, or otherwise, of the plasterwork to be compared to other regions and by providing a model for similar studies across other disciplines.²

1.1 Thesis structure

This thesis covers domestic decorative plasterwork in South-West England from c. 1550 to 1640, which is referred to as the 'study period' throughout the text. Due to inherent vagaries in dating, some examples originating after 1640 are included where relevant to the discussion. For the purposes of this study, the South-West region is taken as comprising the area broadly to the west of a notional line from Bristol to the Isle of Portland, excluding the city of Bristol but encompassing the modern administrative area of West Dorset, and the counties of Somerset, Devon and Cornwall (see Map C2, Appendix C).

The figures given in brackets after the house names in the text are a unique identifier and refer to the entry in the Gazetteer (Appendix D), which contains a description and bibliographic references for each house. The unique identifier comprises a two letter administrative district code followed by a sequential number. For example, Holcombe Court (MD11), is the eleventh entry in the Mid Devon section of the Gazetteer. The location of these houses is shown on Maps C5-C19 in Appendix C. Where houses contain rooms that have specific names, for example the 'King's Room' or 'White Chamber' these are given. For other rooms the conventional terms such as 'hall' and 'parlour' are used. For consistency, the word 'room' is used for the ground floor and 'chamber' for the first floor. For ease of reference and because some illustrations are referred to

² Only Yorkshire and London have been studied to this level, see David Bostwick, 'Decorative Plasterwork of the Yorkshire Region, 1570-1670', (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Sheffield, 1993) and Claire Gapper, 'Plasterers and Plasterwork in City, Court and Country, c. 1530-c.1640', (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of London, 1998) and *British Renaissance Plasterwork* <<http://www.clairegapper.info>>. For elite patronage in Scotland see also John Napier, 'Kinship and Politics in the Art of Plaster Decoration' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Dundee, 2012) and for religious depictions in the South West, Tara Hamling, 'Decoration and Devotion: Religious Representations in West Country Decorative Plasterwork, c. 1550- c.1660' (Unpublished M.Phil. thesis, University of Birmingham, 1999).

multiple times across the chapters, this material is contained in the appendices in Volume 2, which comprises: Appendix A, photographs and drawings; Appendix B, tables and graphs; Appendix C, maps; and Appendix D, the Gazetteer.

Chapter 1 critically reviews the published and unpublished literature and source material, which includes national and regional studies of plasterwork and where relevant architecture and the decorative arts. The research methodology and the formation and potential limitations of the sources used for the dataset are also set out. An understanding of the nature and potential of the dataset is essential for its effective interpretation and the final part of this chapter addresses the factors that must be considered when querying the data.

To gain an understanding of how and why decorative plasterwork was commissioned and installed, and the motivations for this, it is vital to place it in the broader context of the period. In particular, it should be framed by the economic and social drivers for change, which are reflected in the architectural and decorative developments in the period. These factors are critically assessed in Chapter 2. This chapter builds on secondary sources but also draws extensively on my professional experience gained from twelve-years working with historic buildings in the South-West. This knowledge also informs Chapter 3, which assesses the material and working processes of the plasterer that are essential to understand the practical constraints they operated under and the effect these had on the executed schemes.

The sources, designs and iconography of the plasterwork are critically examined and quantified against a chronological framework in Chapter 4. Section 4.1 of this chapter builds on Anthony Wells-Cole's pioneering study of printed sources but also presents many new attributions for the plasterwork sources in the region revealed through research for my thesis.³ Chapter 5 concentrates on the craftsmen carrying out the plasterwork and how, in the absence of documentary sources, they might be identified through the physical manifestation of their work. To facilitate this four areas showing concentrations

³ Anthony Wells-Cole, *Art and Decoration in Elizabethan and Jacobean England: The Influence of Continental Prints, 1558-1625* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997).

of plasterwork that cover the spectrum of plasterwork development through the period in both rural and urban contexts are identified for closer study. This chapter also assesses the evidence for three named plasterers, John Abbott, Robert Easton and Thomas Forde, who were active in three of the areas in the early seventeenth century.

The client and their motivations for selecting plasterwork forms the focus of Chapter 6. Here the plasterwork can be viewed in the context of a greater amount of documentary evidence relating to the clients. This chapter shows how these sources when combined with the material evidence of the executed schemes can offer a valuable insight into the commissioning of plasterwork. To this end, the extended case study of two houses at Poundisford in Somerset set out in this chapter is illuminating. In addition to careful consideration of the design and iconography, important decisions had to be made by the client as to where within the house to install the plasterwork and this forms the focus of Chapter 7. This chapter presents original research on the placement of plasterwork within the interior and positions the dataset in the context of the social and architectural developments of the second half of the sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries. It argues that in the final quarter of the sixteenth century decorative plasterwork was given priority in asserting status over architecture which was manipulated to accentuate the inherent display qualities of the plasterwork. The concluding Chapter 8 brings together the multiple themes explored in this study and summarises its original contribution and value to interdisciplinary scholarship.

1.2 The study of plasterwork

1.2.1 Architectural studies

Ornament occupies an important place in the history of architecture and the decorative arts and offers tremendous scope for scholarly study.⁴ Once installed, plasterwork, like stonework and carved woodwork, is semi-permanent

⁴ This potential has been set out, for example, by Gülru Necipoğlu and Alina Payne, eds., *Histories of Ornament: from Global to Local*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016) and by Michael Snodin and Maurice Howard, *Ornament: A Social History Since 1450*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996).

and less susceptible to being moved, although this is not unknown.⁵ As a form of ornamentation, decorative plasterwork from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries therefore has the advantage of often being the only element of a contemporary interior decorative scheme that survives in situ. Its fixed nature within the building makes analysis and interpretation more secure in comparison with contemporary furniture and textiles. While reconstructions of interiors using evidence from probate inventories can be attempted, the positioning and details of the portable objects within the room are invariably lost or obscured as they are removed or introduced from elsewhere.

Despite this potential, decorative plasterwork has been largely neglected by previous architectural and art histories. The reasons for this are rooted in the very nature of the medium, which does not fall easily within one particular discipline. In architectural studies, this lack of attention is in part because plasterwork straddles the boundary between polite architecture and vernacular building.⁶ Consequently, decorative plasterwork does not fully occupy either side of what has traditionally been two distinct areas of research. Polite architecture of the period is succinctly defined by John E. Crowley as ‘that which deferred to Renaissance imperatives of style’.⁷ The building historian Eric Mercer offers a longer description of vernacular architecture as:

Being of traditional form, are built in traditional ways with traditional materials and use traditional ornament [...] are common within, and peculiar to, one or more limited parts of the country [...] are small and mean in comparison with some of their neighbours.⁸

In the incorporation of classical elements within its design and in the higher status houses where it is found, decorative plasterwork, largely, although not exclusively, aspires to fall within the realm of polite or formal architecture which is often in advance of the house that contains it. Studies of Tudor and Stuart

⁵ See John Harris, *Moving Rooms: The Trade in Architectural Salvages* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007).

⁶ The usefulness of this dichotomy of terms has been called into question, see Adrian Green in ‘The Polite Threshold in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth Century Britain’, *Vernacular Architecture*, 41 (2010), pp.1-9.

⁷ John E. Crowley, *The Invention of Comfort: Sensibilities and Design in Early Modern Britain and Early America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), p. 47.

⁸ Eric Mercer, *English Vernacular Houses: A Study of Traditional Farmhouses and Cottages* (HMSO: London, 1975), p.1.

polite architecture have, however, tended to concentrate on stylistic details of exteriors and the plan-form of the country houses of the nobility and upper gentry. This approach is typified by the articles that appear from the late nineteenth century in *Country Life* magazine. The application of plasterwork designs by generally unknown craftsmen independent of the architect means that decorative plasterwork does not always fit into the architectural narrative and is often overlooked as a less important or non-intrinsic part of the building's fabric.⁹ More recent architectural studies dealing with great houses have taken different, and more holistic, approaches to the subject. Mark Girouard's study *Elizabethan Architecture*, published in 2009, is the most comprehensive of these and notable others have been written by Malcolm Airs, Nicholas Cooper, and Maurice Howard.¹⁰

The very nature of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century decorative plasterwork in its execution and use of locally sourced materials in houses built in the late medieval tradition, also place it within the scope of vernacular building studies. As Nicholas Cooper has observed, students of vernacular architecture have tended to neglect ornament and research into these buildings has consequently been even more specialised than their polite counterparts.¹¹ This is exemplified by the pioneering introduction to the subject by R.W. Brunskill, *Vernacular Architecture: An Illustrated Handbook*, first published in 1971, which classifies and divides buildings according to their component parts.¹² By contrast, in *English Houses 1300-1800: Vernacular Architecture, Social Life* Matthew

⁹ Where dated, plaster overmantels are, however, sometimes used by historians to give precise dates for architectural phases, although this methodology is not without its pitfalls.

¹⁰ See Mark Girouard *Elizabethan Architecture: Its Rise and Fall* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009); Malcolm Airs, *The Tudor and Jacobean Country House: A Building History* (Stroud: Bramley Books, 1998); Nicholas Cooper, *The Houses of the Gentry, 1480-1680* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999); and Maurice Howard, *The Building of Elizabethan and Jacobean England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007).

¹¹ Nicholas Cooper, 'Display, Status and the Vernacular Tradition', *Vernacular Architecture*, 33 (2002), p. 29.

¹² This has now run to four editions. R. W. Brunskill, *Vernacular Architecture: An Illustrated Handbook*, 4th edn (London: Faber and Faber, 2000) is the most recent and follows the same format as its predecessors.

Johnson has adopted a more theoretical and interdisciplinary approach, which places buildings in the context of their contemporary landscape and society.¹³

Decorative plasterwork has been better served by county focussed vernacular building studies, which are collectively the best source for getting a national overview for houses of gentry level and below. Although the depth and geographical coverage is inconsistent, South-West England is fortunate in having published studies covering Devon and Somerset.¹⁴ Dorset benefits from a five volume architectural survey by the Royal Commission for Historical Monuments of England, which includes descriptions and photographs of decorative plasterwork.¹⁵ Cornwall has the least published work, but has a revised volume in the *Buildings of England* series, as do Devon, Dorset and Somerset.¹⁶

1.2.2 Decorative art studies

The study of plasterwork has been hindered in the past by the same malady that has afflicted research into late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century British decorative art, namely the perception that it represented a debased or illiterate form of classicism and is not worthy of lengthy scholarly consideration. This is identified by Lucy Gent who summarises it as the belief that British art progressed from 'benighted ignorance to continental adulthood'.¹⁷ This low

¹³ Johnson includes a discussion of the meaning of the skimmington plasterwork panel at Montacute (SS18) in *English Houses 1300-1800: Vernacular Architecture, Social Life* (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2010), pp. 113-118.

¹⁴ For Devon see Peter Beacham (ed.) *Devon Building: An Introduction to Local Traditions*, 2 edn (Exeter: Devon Books, 1995), Hugh Meller, *The Country Houses of Devon*, 2 vols (Crediton: Black Dog Press, 2015). For Somerset, Jane Penoyre, *Traditional Houses of Somerset* (Tiverton: Somerset Books, 2005).

¹⁵ The two volumes covering the study area are: Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (England), *An Inventory of the Historical Monuments in the County of Dorset. Vol. 1: West* (London: HMSO, 1952) and *An Inventory of the Historical Monuments in the County of Dorset. Vol. 3: Central Dorset* (London: HMSO, 1970).

¹⁶ See Peter Beacham and Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Cornwall* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014); Bridget Cherry and Nikolaus Pevsner *The Buildings of England: Devon* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989); Michael Hill, John Newman and Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Dorset* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2018); Julian Orbach and Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Somerset, South and West* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014); and Andrew Foyle and Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Somerset North and Bristol* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011).

¹⁷ Lucy Gent, 'Introduction', in *Albion's Classicism: The Visual Arts in Britain, 1550-1660*, ed. by Lucy Gent (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), pp. 1-18.

regard has led to indigenous plasterwork being further marginalised by art historians who have tended to concentrate on imported styles and individual foreign artists, rather than look at what is considered to be a backward art executed by largely anonymous English craftsmen. As a consequence, even in comparison with other native decorative arts, the study of plasterwork has had less appeal than other categories.¹⁸

1.2.3 National plasterwork studies

The low academic esteem of decorative plasterwork has not been helped by its craft status and association with the building trade. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, fibrous ornamental plasterwork was used in countless contemporary suburban houses as a cheap means of decorating ceilings using standardised moulds. This did nothing to enhance the credentials of decorative plasterwork as an 'art'. In houses of greater antiquity, historic plaster, including decorative work, was often regarded as expendable and was routinely scraped away to reveal earlier, and what was perceived as academically more interesting, medieval fabric. This practice was in part a pragmatic response to the problem of how to deal with damp or poorly preserved historic plaster but was to a greater extent driven by antiquarian motives.

The perception of decorative plasterwork began to change with the emergence of the Arts and Crafts movement in the second half of the nineteenth century. Under the influence of John Ruskin and spearheaded by William Morris, the movement espoused craft-based systems of production, promoting the authenticity of materials and past techniques. The removal of plaster to reveal earlier features and the falsification of history were the antithesis of the 'anti-scrape' philosophy promoted by Morris and enshrined in the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings manifesto of 1877.¹⁹

¹⁸ For example, Phillip Lindley acknowledges that plasterwork has been ignored in comparison with the study of tomb sculpture, see Phillip Lindley, *Tomb Destruction and Scholarship: Medieval Monuments in Early Modern England* (Donington: Shaun Tyas, 2007), p. 32.

¹⁹ For an overview of the movement and the foundation of The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings by Morris see Chris Miele, ed., *From William Morris: Building Conservation and the Arts and Crafts Cult of Authenticity, 1877-1939* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010).

In tandem with the rise of the Arts and Crafts movement, the end of the nineteenth-century saw a proliferation of practical manuals on all aspects of traditional building construction aimed at educating and inspiring tradesmen and their apprentices. Amongst these is William Millar's *Plastering Plain and Decorative* published in 1897.²⁰ Although Millar intended his book primarily as a practical treatise drawing on his extensive experience working as a plasterer, he does include an account of the development of plastering in Britain and an introductory chapter by George Robinson FSA, presumably to add some academic credibility, that places British plasterwork in a classical European context. As a geographic overview of the development of plasterwork in Britain, *Plastering Plain and Decorative* has deficiencies and omissions, there is no mention of West Country plasterwork for example. The contemporary success of the book, which ran to a further three editions, was, however, as a technical guide for practitioners and it remains influential still being referred to as the 'plasterer's bible'.²¹

The latest of edition of *Plastering Plain and Decorative* published in 1927 was extensively revised by the Arts and Crafts architect George Bankart.²² Bankart's most significant contribution to the study of decorative plasterwork had, however, been published nineteen years earlier.²³ While Bankart fully recognized the value of practical training, his book *The Art of the Plasterer* was driven by a different agenda explicitly stated in the title and elaborated on in his introduction:

[...] with the present reawakening of the handicrafts connected with the great art of building, 'Plaster' will again become the medium of decorative expression in the hands of men of education, refinement, and ability to

²⁰ William Millar, *Plastering Plain and Decorative: A Practical Treatise on the Art and Craft of Plastering and Modelling* (London: Batsford, 1897).

²¹ A review of the 1988 reprint recommends that 'Any young professional working in historic buildings should be made to read it from cover to cover [...]', quoted in Hester Lacey, 'Pressing Ahead' *Cornerstone*, 31, No. 4, 2010, pp. 78-81.

²² William Millar and George P. Bankart, *Plastering, Plain and Decorative*, 4th edn (London: Batsford, 1927).

²³ George P Bankart, *The Art of the Plasterer: An Account of the Decorative Development of the Craft, Chiefly in England from the XVIth to the XVIIIth Century [...]* (London: Batsford, 1908). The title 'Art of The Plasterer' may have been taken from a book of the same name reissued in 1680 by Edward Pearce and referred to in Geoffrey Beard, *Decorative Plasterwork in Great Britain* (London: Phaidon, 1975), p. 52.

understand and to use it from its simplest to its most elaborate form according to the possibilities and limitations of its nature as a material.²⁴

In seeking to elevate decorative plasterwork to a fine art, alongside painting, sculpture and architecture, Bankart betrays a somewhat elitist stance towards contemporary practitioners. While his Arts and Crafts sensibilities were no doubt sincere, Bankart felt compelled to distance decorative plasterwork of the past from its 'mechanical and trade side' that he saw as being epitomized by William Millar, a craftsman descended from a family of plasterers, who he describes as a 'splendid mechanic rather than an artist of marked degree in his work'.²⁵

To help promote higher quality plasterwork Bankart offers a more expansive overview of its history than Millar, and includes an explanation of how the materials and methods evolved through time. In his preface, Bankart professes to have no 'particular predilections or prejudices', but the bulk of the *Art of the Plasterer* concentrates on British plasterwork of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and he saw little of value in decorative plasterwork created after the death of Sir Christopher Wren.²⁶ Given this bias, it is not surprising that he recognizes the importance of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century South-West plasterwork. *The Art of the Plasterer* includes nine drawings of ceilings from Exeter and photographs of other examples from across the county, although it is questionable whether he actually visited any of these buildings as the drawings are clearly derived from James Crocker's *Sketches of Old Exeter* published in 1886.²⁷

The historic revivalism of the 1920s saw two further books on decorative plasterwork published. The first of these was Margaret Jourdain's *English*

²⁴ Bankart, *Art of the Plasterer*, p. 1.

²⁵ Ibid., Preface.

²⁶ Chapter 9 of *Art of the Plasterer*, is titled 'Eighteenth-Century Degeneration', but Bankart reserves his most scathing criticism for contemporary nineteenth century work, which he describes as 'uninteresting, bad and uncouth', pp. 279 and 310.

²⁷ James Crocker, *Sketches of Old Exeter with Letter Press* (London: Hudson and Kearns, 1886). The photographs in the *Art of the Plasterer* are of Barnstaple, Chittlehampton, Bideford, Dartmouth, Landkey, Totnes, West Down and Weare Giffard.

Decorative Plasterwork of the Renaissance.²⁸ Jourdain uses many of Bankart's photographs but has a more analytical, balanced and tightly focussed structure that omits any direct advice for contemporary practitioners. Taking the mid-sixteenth to late eighteenth centuries, Jourdain carefully subdivides the timespan by periods or schools, with each given broadly the same weight - redressing Bankart's post-eighteenth century myopia. This more academic approach is seen in the section dealing with sources of design, which recognises the correlation between northern European prints and English plasterers in the period 1540-1640 and, for the first time, a list of known plasterers is included.

Laurence Turner's *Decorative Plasterwork in Great Britain* was published a year later than Jourdain's book and covers the historical development in much the same manner.²⁹ As one of the *Country Life* series of publications, its physically large quarto size makes full use of high quality photographs, which were technically difficult to achieve at this time. Understandably, given the book's publisher, it concentrates on examples from greater houses, almost all of which were in private hands and the plasterwork otherwise not accessible to the public. Turner hoped that illustrating the very best examples of plasterwork would act as an incentive for contemporary plasterers to aspire to the high standards of earlier work.

Bankart and Turner's desire to inspire and educate contemporary practitioners to produce plasterwork with the spontaneity and naturalness of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, did not fully come to fruition. The 1920s did see an appreciation of the historic qualities of plasterwork. It was on occasion salvaged from demolished houses and reused and reconstructions of ceilings using casts from originals and historically accurate facsimiles were created by firms such as

²⁸ Margaret Jourdain, *English Decorative Plasterwork of the Renaissance* (London: Batsford, 1926) - despite the title the book covers Scotland and the period up to the late eighteenth century.

²⁹ Laurence Turner, *Decorative Plasterwork in Great Britain* (London: Country Life, 1927).

Smallcorn of Bath at Greenham Barton, Stawley (TA29).³⁰ The rise of modernism and corresponding decline in historical revivalism in fashionable houses of the 1930s meant, however, that there was no place for decorative plasterwork in contemporary architecture and consequently no widespread mid-twentieth century resurgence in the craft.

It was almost fifty years before the next national synopsis of plasterwork, Geoffrey Beard's *Decorative Plasterwork in Great Britain*, was published.³¹ Beard had little need to instruct or inspire the client or creator of new ornamental plasterwork as the demand for such work was effectively dead. There was, however, a real need to inform the emerging building conservation profession of curators, architects and specialists who were now responsible for preserving the surviving corpus of historic plasterwork. Although sharing the same title as Turner's earlier work, Beard's book in format and approach is closer to Jourdain but offers an expanded and more comprehensive list of over 300 plasterers.³² While this remains the most comprehensive published national overview, West Country work of the Early Modern period is not well represented by Beard.

Although not exclusively concerned with plasterwork, since Beard's *Decorative Plasterwork in Great Britain*, two books have made important contributions to the study of the medium in the post-Reformation period. Anthony Wells-Cole's seminal *Art and Decoration in Elizabethan and Jacobean England* published in 1997 assesses how and why prints imported from mainland Europe, principally the Netherlands, had such a profound impact on contemporary English craftsmen and clients.³³ The copious examples Wells-Cole provides of prints alongside photographs of decorative art, and in particular plasterwork, depicting

³⁰ According to Jeremy Musson, the Reindeer Inn at Banbury, Oxon was a particular favourite, with casts appearing in numerous locations, including the Blue Room at Montacute, Somerset (SS18), see Jeremy Musson, *Plasterwork, 100 Period Details from the Archives of Country Life* (London: Aurum Press, 2000), p. 10. For Greenham Barton see E.H.D Williams 1981 'Report on Greenham Barton, Stawley' (Somerset Vernacular Architecture Group, 1981) SRO DD\W/WLNR11/10.

³¹ Geoffrey Beard, *Decorative Plasterwork in Great Britain* (London: Phaidon, 1975).

³² Beard states in his preface to *Decorative Plasterwork in Great Britain* that Jourdain had urged him to expand her list.

³³ Wells-Cole, *Art and Decoration*.

identical subjects and compositions interpreted by English craftsmen, convincingly demonstrates just how pervasive this was. In terms of the study of late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century decorative art, Wells-Cole has shifted the paradigm. Since the publication of *Art and Decoration in Elizabethan and Jacobean England* the question is how much decorative art of the period in England was not influenced by continental prints. However, as with many wide-ranging works, some of the detail relating to the South-West needs revision and Chapters 4 and 5 of my thesis revisit the source prints in the region and the influence of the Abbott family of North Devon plasterers.

The second of these books, Tara Hamling's *Decorating the 'Godly' Household* of 2010, focusses on the nature, meaning, and function of figurative religious imagery in a domestic context.³⁴ Hamling shows that contrary to what might be expected, religious iconography demonstrably flourished in houses in the immediate aftermath of the Reformation - a period typically characterised by iconoclasm. While the South-West has a high concentration of biblical imagery in comparison with other regions, it constitutes only a relatively small part of the total.³⁵ Hamling's approach of placing religious decorative art in the context of how the household operated can, however, be usefully extended to the secular subjects, symbols and motifs that constitute the majority of the decorative plasterwork schemes in the South-West in this period.

1.2.4 South-West plasterwork studies

The majority of decorative plaster schemes in the region are found in Devon, which has long been noted for the quality and quantity of this work. Its importance has been summarised by Bridget Cherry in the 1989 *Buildings of England* volume for Devon:

³⁴ Tara Hamling, *Decorating the 'Godly' Household: Religious Art in Post-Reformation Britain* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010). *Decorating the 'Godly' Household* built upon the author's M.Phil thesis, which is the only previous study of the medium across the South-West region, see Hamling, 'Decoration and Devotion.

³⁵ On overmantels for example only 12% of the subjects depicted can be classed as religious, see Appendix, Table B6.

The county's prosperity is expressed by the luxurious ornament that can be found in both large and small houses, to a degree unparalleled elsewhere in England.³⁶

It is therefore not surprising that of the counties in the region Devon has been subjected to the most attention.³⁷ The first of these studies was published in the *Transactions of the Devonshire Association* in 1909 and is a perfunctory description of six ceilings in the county and is typical of the short notes that appeared in local antiquarian journals at this time.³⁸ The next to appear was the study of Barnstaple ceilings published by the local architect Bruce Oliver in 1917, which remains a useful source as it includes details of schemes in the town that are no longer extant.³⁹ Rather than just describing the plasterwork, Oliver also attributes it to one family or a guild of craftsmen, although he holds back from analysing this further based on cast motifs. Iris Brooke in her 1950 *Country Life* article 'The Riddle of the Devon Plasterers', is more empathetic and confident in her approach and uses the evidence from moulds to draw parallels between plasterwork in different houses, mainly in East Devon, and speculates whether Italian or English craftsmen were responsible.⁴⁰

The first comprehensive county-wide synopsis for Devon was undertaken by Kathleen and Cecil French in 1957.⁴¹ They took approximately 100 examples from across the county and divided them, on stylistic grounds, into six periods ranging from 1550-1914, which have proved to be broadly correct. In addition to providing the first gazetteer for Devon, this paper deals in some detail with a history of the Abbott family of plasterers and, based on similarities between

³⁶ Cherry, *The Buildings of England: Devon*, p. 60.

³⁷ For county-based lists see the Gazetteer, Appendix D.

³⁸ J. T. Fouracre, 'Ornamental Lime-Plaster Ceilings and the Plasterers Craft in Devonshire', *Transactions of the Devonshire Association for the Advancement of Science, Literature and Art*, 41 (1909), pp. 256-62.

³⁹ Bruce W Oliver, 'The Early Seventeenth-Century Plaster Ceilings of Barnstaple', *Transactions of the Devonshire Association for the Advancement of Science, Literature and Art*, 49 (1917), pp. 189-99. Some of Oliver's source material is held in the North Devon Record Office and North Devon Athenaeum.

⁴⁰ Iris Brooke, 'The Riddle of the Devon Plasterers', *Country Life*, 29 Dec 1950, pp. 2214-16.

⁴¹ Kathleen French and Cecil French, 'Devonshire Plasterwork', *Transactions of the Devonshire Association for the Advancement of Science, Literature and Art*, 89 (1957), pp. 124-44. Notebooks and photographs that formed the basis of the Frenchs' paper are a useful resource in their own right and are held in the Devon Heritage Centre, Devon plasterwork c.1955 by Kathleen and Cecil French, 5031Z.

illustrations in the Abbott design book and known examples, builds a putative list of attributions.⁴² While the Abbott genealogy and attributions offered by French and French should be regarded as questionable, the premise that the book dates to the early seventeenth century has recently been supported by research on the watermarks carried out by Jenny Saunt.⁴³

The significant contribution of Kathleen and Cecil French to the national reputation of Devon plasterers is acknowledged by John Thorp in his chapter 'Wall Painting and Lime-Plaster Decoration' in *Devon Building*, published in 1990.⁴⁴ While short, Thorp's paper remains the best summary of the decorative plasterwork of the county yet published but does not include a gazetteer. John Thorp has also produced a number of valuable reports on individual houses through the Keystone historic building consultancy, although very few of these are publicly accessible which has hindered academic study.⁴⁵

Fewer scholars have tackled Somerset. Around the time of the Frenchs' paper, A. W. Vivian-Neal published a study of West Somerset that divided the plasterwork of the area into four chronological styles.⁴⁶ Vivian-Neal's paper is particularly important as it identifies for the first time the Somerset plaster Robert Eaton.⁴⁷ Building on this, a putative corpus of work for Robert Eaton is provided by John and Jane Penoyre in their *Decorative Plasterwork in the Houses of Somerset 1500-1700* published in 1994.⁴⁸ This thin volume is the

⁴² The Abbott book is now held at Devon Heritage Centre MS.404M/B/1. Due to its fragility, the book was not available for examination and the analysis presented in this thesis is based on a CD-ROM supplied by Devon Heritage Centre. For a detailed assessment of the Abbott book see Section 5.4.2.

⁴³ Jenny Saunt's PhD thesis concentrates on a later period and contains a comprehensive assessment of the Abbott book see 'Decorative Plasterwork in England, 1660-1700: Form, Materiality and Making' (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of London, 2016).

⁴⁴ John Thorp, 'Wall Painting and Lime-Plaster Decoration', in *Devon Building: An Introduction to Local Traditions*, ed. by Peter Beacham, 2nd edn. (Exeter: Devon Books, 1995), pp. 129-49.

⁴⁵ These reports are mainly produced for private clients but enter the public domain where submitted to local authorities with planning applications. Where known these are listed in the Gazetteer, Appendix D.

⁴⁶ A. W. Vivian-Neal, 'The Tudor and Stuart Plasterwork of West Somerset', *Proceedings of the Somersetshire Archaeological and Natural History Society*, 96 (1952), pp. 143-51.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

⁴⁸ John and Jane Penoyre, *Decorative Plasterwork in the Houses of Somerset, 1500-1700* (Taunton: Somerset County Council, 1994).

most comprehensive published local study of plasterwork in the country to date and contains an impressive amount of primary research gathered through fieldwork. The chief value of *Decorative Plasterwork in the Houses of Somerset* to scholars is the 124 photographs and illustrations and comprehensive gazetteer and it remains an invaluable resource.

1.3 Research methodology

1.3.1 Formation of the dataset

Contemporary sources for plasterers and their works are limited. As a result, much of the plasterwork in the region has been attributed to the Abbott family of Frithelstock, Devon and to Robert Eaton of Stogursey, Somerset, both of whom are known from records.⁴⁹ The stylistic evidence of the plasterwork itself, and the time span involved, clearly demonstrates that there were other practitioners operating in the area. Attempts at unearthing written records by scholars indicate that the potential for adding to these names through documentary research is limited.⁵⁰ Probate inventories list movable goods, but exclude fixtures and fittings and while useful for identifying the furnishing and use of rooms, do not mention fixtures such as plasterwork. Diaries, correspondence and household accounts are comparatively rare from the period but can provide glimpses into the relationship between tradesman and client. With the notable exception of the Abbott book, no records kept by plasterers are known to survive. Illustrative material depicting the interiors of English houses below court level from the study period does not exist.⁵¹ There are, however, later engravings, and from the late nineteenth-century photographs, that depict plasterwork reproduced in the transactions of the newly formed county

⁴⁹ These are discussed in full in Section 5.4.2.

⁵⁰ Through documentary research on Dartmouth Todd Gray has recently discovered a third named plasterer from the early seventeenth century called Thomas Forde, see 'Plaster and Dartmouth Guildhall in 1614', *Devon Buildings Group Newsletter*, 37 (2019), 43-47.

⁵¹ As noted by Hannah Greig 'Eighteenth-Century English Interiors in Image and Text', paintings of the élite do on occasion show plasterwork, for example the 1618 portrait of Alatheia Talbot, Countess of Arundel and Surrey by Daniel Mytens, that shows a long gallery, in Jeremy Aynsley and Charlotte Grant, eds., *Imagined Interiors: Representing the Domestic Interior Since the Renaissance* (London: V & A Publishing, 2006), p. 102.

antiquarian societies. For country houses *Country Life* magazine, launched in 1897, remains an invaluable source.⁵²

The most comprehensive source of data are the statutory 'Lists of Buildings of Special Architectural or Historic Interest'. Almost all the examples of decorative plasterwork known to survive in context within the region are found in listed buildings and crucially records for these have been digitised and can be searched online through the National Heritage List for England.⁵³ This data underpins the Gazetteer presented in Appendix D. The list entries do, however, have inherent limitations and an understanding of these is important to utilise their potential as a research tool to its full effect. The most obvious of the shortcomings is that the list entries are text only and do not contain illustrative material. The descriptions in the first lists produced were also perfunctory and contained no more than necessary to identify the building.⁵⁴ For the national resurvey commissioned in 1982, longer descriptions were compiled in a more structured manner, with for the first time the guidance for inspectors specifically giving plasterwork as an example of the sort of interior feature that should be noted.⁵⁵ The national resurvey was never completed but Devon is fortunate in that the majority of the county was revised and has over 19,000 listed buildings, more than any other county in England. For Somerset with 11,750 listings, Dorset 9,500 and Cornwall 12,500, the individual list descriptions do not usually contain such detail.⁵⁶ For these counties plasterwork is mentioned where the Inspector was able to gain access to the interior, although it is fair to say that smaller houses are probably underrepresented in the dataset.

⁵² These have been digitized and can be viewed online at *Country Life* <<https://search.proquest.com/countrylifearchive/>>, accessed 9 July 2019.

⁵³ All buildings built before 1700 that contain a significant proportion of their original fabric are listed, see Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 'Principles of Selection for Listing Buildings' (unpublished 2010) p. 5. For online lists see Historic England The National Heritage List for England, *Historic England* <<https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/>>, accessed 18 November 2018.

⁵⁴ For the origins and development of the statutory lists see John H. Harvey, 'The Origin of Listed Buildings', *Transactions of the Ancient Monuments Society*, 37 (1993), pp. 1-20.

⁵⁵ Department of the Environment 'Manual of Instructions for Listing Inspectors', (unpublished, 1982). For the background to the resurvey see Marty Robertson, and others, 'Listed Buildings: The National Resurvey of England', *Transactions of the Ancient Monuments Society*, 37 (1993), pp. 21-92.

⁵⁶ Figures correct as at 18 November 2018.

With over 50,000 South-West listed building entries in the digitised National Heritage List a methodology was required to quickly extract plasterwork dating to the period 1550 to 1640. For ease of handling the large numbers, each county was divided into administrative districts. A search was then made for listed buildings within a date range of 1200-1700 where the list text contained the key words 'plaster', 'plasterwork', 'overmantel', 'frieze' and 'ceiling'. This captured medieval houses where plasterwork was installed later and houses dating through the whole seventeenth century. Plain non-decorative plasterwork and late seventeenth-century houses were excluded from the lists through manual sorting. Where there was ambiguity, such as where the lists are less specific about dates, for example plasterwork was described as 'seventeenth century' in a house clearly dating to the early part, this record was included. The data subset was then compared with the published sources.⁵⁷ This picked up omissions in the list text, such as the entries for Weare Giffard Hall (TR29) and Wolfeton House (WT6), which make no mention of decorative plasterwork despite this being an important and prominent internal feature.

The dataset was augmented by a search of the so called 'grey literature'. These reports are typically the product of privately commissioned historic building surveys and where present plasterwork is usually recorded.⁵⁸ Some of these are lodged within Local Authority Historic Environment Records, mostly in paper form. There is also a collection in the Devon Rural Archive which was consulted as part of this study. Where submitted as part of a planning application these 'grey' reports can be downloaded from the Local Planning Authority websites by searching under the house name. These websites were also fruitful sources for retrieving owners' contact details for arranging site visits.

Local Record Offices proved useful resources for no longer extant plasterwork. In particular, the French archive held at the Devon Heritage Centre includes

⁵⁷ These are the relevant *Buildings of England* volumes and for Devon: French, 'Devonshire Plasterwork', Thorp, 'Wall Painting and Lime-Plaster Decoration', and Hugh Meller, *The Country Houses of Devon*; for Somerset Penoyre, *Decorative Plasterwork in the Houses of Somerset*, pp. 71-84 and building surveys by the Somerset Vernacular Architecture Group, which are housed in the Somerset Heritage Centre, DDV; and for Dorset, RCHME *Dorset. West and Central Dorset*.

⁵⁸ Foremost amongst these are those produced by Keystone Historic Building Consultants.

notes and photographs of lost schemes in Devon.⁵⁹ The West Country Studies Library collection also contains prints, mainly from the nineteenth century, of now demolished Exeter buildings. Similarly, the North Devon Record Office and North Devon Athenaeum have photographs of Barnstaple plasterwork, which has had a particularly high attrition rate. These repositories and the Somerset Heritage Centre in Taunton were visited for this study. Further useful sources of photographs are the Historic England National Buildings Archive, containing architectural photographs from 1850-1990s and the National Historic England Archive, which can be searched online.⁶⁰ Combined, the sources of data give 485 houses within the study area recorded as containing decorative plasterwork. This breaks down as: 34 in Cornwall; 286 in Devon, 145 in Somerset; and 20 in West Dorset.⁶¹

1.3.2 Fieldwork

Based on the density and distribution of plasterwork, four areas from the dataset were selected for closer study: Area 1, the predominantly rural area of West Somerset, East and Mid Devon and West Dorset; Area 2, the north Devon port of Barnstaple and its hinterland; Area 3, the region's capital at Exeter; and Area 4, the south Devon mercantile centres of Dartmouth and Totnes.⁶² Cornwall was not included in these areas due to the more dispersed distribution of the houses but Cornish houses do, however, contain some of the most important schemes in the region and are used extensively throughout the text.⁶³

For each of the four areas in the dataset a number of houses were chosen for recording visits. The selection was based on the type and amount of plasterwork present. Given that only a sample of houses could be inspected as part of this study and that, of those selected, access was not always granted, it

⁵⁹ Devon Heritage Centre, 5031Z.

⁶⁰ For National Building Record see <<https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/photos/englands-places/>>. The Historic England Archive catalogue is available at <<http://archive.historicengland.org.uk/>>, accessed 19 July 2019.

⁶¹ During the fieldwork some unrecorded plasterwork has been discovered, see Gazetteer, Appendix D. While it is unlikely that any major schemes will come to light, it is not uncommon for elements of a scheme to be exposed during building work, for example at 1-5 Bridge Street, Bideford (TR3).

⁶² These areas are discussed in detail in Section 5.4.2 and are shown on Map C3.

⁶³ These are principally Lanhydrock House (CO9), Prideaux Place (CO18) and Trecice (CO29).

was pragmatic to prioritise those houses with more extensive schemes or that contained particularly important or complete plasterwork. While it is acknowledged that this could be seen as skewing the findings by looking at the exceptional rather than the ordinary, it was considered that sites that would yield the maximum amount of information represented the best use of resources and listing all recorded sites in the Gazetteer would also allow those visited to be placed in the context of the dataset as a whole.

Inevitably, there were some important buildings, such as Court House, East Quantoxhead (SS6) and the Gate House, Combe Florey (TA6), where access was not possible. Balancing this, where opportunities to inspect plasterwork not on the initial target list presented themselves, such as the major Cornish houses, these were taken. While it is acknowledged that there is a risk of bias inherent in collecting data of this type, the list of sites presented in the Gazetteer (Appendix D) is considered to be as complete a record of surviving, moved and lost plasterwork as possible.

1.3.3 Recording methodology

Once identified, the owners of the selected houses were contacted and arrangements were made for a recording visit. Not all owners were receptive and would allow access; others allowed access to certain rooms or placed restrictions on photography or time allowed. Most were, however, very accommodating and supplied additional information and help.⁶⁴ During the visit, where circumstances allowed, each element of the plasterwork scheme was photographed.⁶⁵ The position of the plasterwork in the room was noted as well as the type of room and its location within the plan-form of the house. Summaries of these field notes are included in the Gazetteer in Appendix D and copies of the entries were written-up and made available to the owners.

⁶⁴ A list of those kind enough to grant access is given the Acknowledgements section to this thesis.

⁶⁵ Available light was found to give better results than electronic flash, which where used, was preferably set up obliquely off-camera. The majority of the images were captured as high resolution RAW images using a Nikon D90 digital SLR camera with an 18-105mm Nikkor lens.

1.3.4 Laser scanning

Decorative plasterwork is a three-dimensional medium and therefore eminently suited to being recorded in this way. During the course of this study the possibility of using 3D imaging was investigated. In January 2015, the opportunity was taken to record elements of the plasterwork at The Walronds, Cullompton (MD6) using portable 3D laser scanning equipment in conjunction with the University of Exeter's Digital Humanities Department. The results were impressive and allowed a true image to be reproduced that reflected the relief of the modelling to an extent that cannot be conveyed through conventional photography and an accuracy difficult to achieve through drawing (Fig. 1.01 and 1.02). Recording in this way could allow an exact facsimile of the plasterwork to be laser printed that would in turn be used to create a mould that could greatly assist in any future conservation work. The results proved that the technique was worthy of further investigation and can be used to good effect in the field. Its usefulness will undoubtedly increase with advances in the processing speed and reduction in the cost of the equipment.

1.4 Interpreting the dataset

In analysing the dataset and when field recording there are three factors that must be kept in mind: the surviving plasterwork may not be representative of the scheme as originally installed; it may have been moved to, or from, another location; or it may be a later copy of sixteenth- or seventeenth-century work. An understanding of the agencies that may have potentiality affected decorative plasterwork since its original installation is therefore important in order to make informed conclusions from what survives, or is absent.

1.4.1 Survival of plasterwork

The examples of decorative plasterwork surviving today can only be considered to be a proportion of what was created in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁶⁶ The rate of attrition is impossible to accurately quantify but the multitude of influencing factors include: changes in fashion; physical

⁶⁶ Where documentary evidence survives for plasterwork that is no longer extant, these have been included in the Gazetteer, Appendix D.

deterioration; the demolition or remodelling of the host building; and relocation.⁶⁷

There were undoubtedly some losses of interior schemes from the later seventeenth century onwards due to changes in fashion when earlier plasterwork may have been viewed as stylistically outdated. The number of surviving schemes, however, suggests that these losses may not have been as widespread as might be supposed. One reason for this preservation is that it was seen as desirable to retain earlier plasterwork, even when other areas of the house were updated. This is particularly the case with heraldry, which served as an important reminder of the family's established status or, in the case of royal arms, loyalty to the Crown. This, coupled with interest in early architectural styles, particularly with the 'Jacobethan' revival in the nineteenth century, meant that early plasterwork schemes were valued because of their antiquity.⁶⁸ In some houses, that maintained their status over a period, a tradition of later owners commissioning further plasterwork was established. A good example is Nettlecombe Court, West Somerset (WS15). Here the hall has a scheme from around 1600, a room off the hall has an heraldic overmantel dated 1641, the parlour has plasterwork of c.1704, the main staircase has Rococo-style plaster of the mid-seventeenth century and the drawing room an Adam-style ceiling of 1788.⁶⁹

A further reason why plasterwork survives is economic. Houses often dropped down the social scale over time, sometimes being split into smaller units, and the capital was not always available to modernise their interiors. While decorative, the plasterwork performed an intrinsically practical purpose and would not have been removed without good reason, as taking down a decorative scheme would have involved the considerable expense of re-plastering, even if it was done in plain plaster. On occasion, remodelling an

⁶⁷ For an attempt to quantify the survival rate of houses see C. R. J. Currie, 'Time and Chance: Modelling the Attrition of Old Houses', *Vernacular Architecture*, 19 (1988), pp. 1-9.

⁶⁸ Although its influence varies through time, historic revivalism is a constant thread running through British architectural history. The best overview of this is John Summerson, *Architecture in Britain 1530-1830*, 9th edn (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993).

⁶⁹ For a description of the plasterwork see Orbach and Pevsner, *Somerset, South and West*, p. 482-83.

interior can actually preserve earlier schemes, albeit usually in fragmentary form. For example, at Marshwood Farm, West Somerset (WS3), where the first-floor ceilings were reduced in height by the insertion of a flat ceiling and the lunettes from the former barrel ceiling survive in the loft void above (Fig. 1.03).⁷⁰ More dramatic is the upper chamber at Prideaux Place where the whole of the ornate early seventeenth-century ceiling depicting the story of Susannah and the Elders was encased intact by a later ceiling until the decorative plasterwork was exposed in the 1980s.⁷¹

A strong motivation to remove plasterwork is deterioration. From the surviving examples, decorative plasterwork is, however, inherently stable and surprisingly robust. At Hardwick Old Hall, Derbyshire, for example, sixteenth-century plasterwork continues to survive in the roofless ruin of the house. Where plasterwork deteriorates it is usually through the associated effects of continued damp.⁷² In these situations, unless there was the desire, money, or compulsion through statutory protection, to restore or replicate the current scheme, it would often be removed and replaced with plain work.

Ultimately, the fate of a plasterwork scheme is linked to the building that contains it. In general, houses at the lower end of the social scale constructed of less robust materials, do not survive as well as those of higher status, which were better built and consequently had a greater longevity. This process, termed the 'vernacular threshold' by Brunskill, means that each class of building has a date, which varies regionally, before which no examples survive.⁷³ In terms of decorative plasterwork, the 'vernacular threshold' is less relevant because the houses that contain it are usually above the threshold line. This is not to say that there was not considerable modernisation, reduction and demolition of these houses over time. In rural housing of yeoman level and

⁷⁰ Further examples are at Cogworthy, Yarnscombe (TR32) and Lee Barton, High Bickington (TR18) where friezes survives in the roofspace.

⁷¹ The National Heritage List for England (NHLE), <<https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1212008>>, accessed 6 March 2019.

⁷² The factors contributing to the deterioration and damages of plasterwork are set out in detail in Alison Henry and John Stewart, eds., *English Heritage Practical Building Conservation: Mortars, Renders and Plasters* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), pp. 123-62.

⁷³ R. W. Brunskill, *Vernacular Architecture*, pp. 28-29.

above, the mid-sixteenth to early seventeenth century was a period of transformation.⁷⁴ Decorative plasterwork, however, belonged to the new order and was installed, rather than removed, as outmoded medieval houses were upgraded.

An ever present threat to buildings is fire. In urban centres the risk was historically higher and in the early modern period many towns were repeatedly afflicted by destructive fires. Between 1700 and 1799 for example, Tiverton experienced eleven significant conflagrations, Crediton nine, including the Great Fire of 1743 which accounted for 460 houses in the West Town, and there were six fires in Honiton. In terms of number of fires, these towns were in the top six worst affected in England.⁷⁵ The absence today of decorative plasterwork from these prosperous towns of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is, almost certainly, a result of the later loss of buildings, rather than a lack of wealthy clients to commission the work in the period. In recent times the risk of fire, in both urban and rural locations, has diminished but losses still occur.⁷⁶

Nationally, the loss of country houses through the economic travails of their owners, particularly after the two World Wars, has been well documented but complete demolition of country houses within the study area is rare.⁷⁷ In urban areas the loss of historic houses is more acute, largely through redevelopment pressures. The two cities in the region have been particularly badly affected. In both Exeter and Plymouth the Second World War German bombing raids took a toll. In Exeter a notable loss was Bampfylde House (EX1), although fragments of plasterwork and photographs of it in situ survive. Exeter buildings were also lost in the decades immediately before the war. A comparison of James

⁷⁴ This was described by the historian W. G. Hoskins as 'The Great Rebuilding' see 'The Rebuilding of Rural England 1570-1640', *Past and Present*, 4, Nov. 1953, pp. 44-59 and is discussed in Section 2.5.

⁷⁵ See E. L. Jones, S. Porter and M. Turner, *A Gazetteer of English Urban Fire Disasters 1500-1900* (Norwich: Geo Books for the Historical Geography Research Group of the Institute of British Geographers, 1984), pp. 29-44.

⁷⁶ These include in 1967 the North Devon Tudor mansion of Dunsland House (TR9), the plasterwork ceilings at 5 Higher Street, Dartmouth (SH11) in 2010 and Sydenham House, near Marystow, Devon (WD11), in 2012.

⁷⁷ Attention was brought to this at the landmark exhibition 'The Destruction of the Country House 1875-1975' held in 1974 at the Victoria and Albert Museum. See also Giles Worsley, *England's Lost Houses: from the Archives of Country Life* (London: Aurum Press, 2002).

Crocker's *Sketches of Old Exeter* published 1886 with the paper by Harbottle Reed from 1931, graphically shows the extent of this.⁷⁸ At 196 High Street, Exeter (EX16) a plasterwork royal arms of Elizabeth I in an incongruous survival within an almost wholly redeveloped modern building but it is far more common for plasterwork to be lost with the building. As late as 1972 the demolition of the medieval house at 38 North Street, Exeter (EX17) saw its remaining early seventeenth-century plaster ceiling pulled down (Fig. 1.06).⁷⁹

1.4.2 Moving plasterwork

The ceiling from 38 North Street, Exeter serves to illustrate a further point that despite its seeming fragility, plasterwork can, when required, be removed and reused relatively easily. A complete half of the North Street ceiling survives thanks to the Rev. Sabine Baring-Gould who salvaged it in 1899 and installed it at Lewtrenchard Manor, West Devon (WD10).⁸⁰ Baring-Gould had set about an interior decoration scheme using a combination of salvaged sixteenth- and seventeenth-century woodwork and plasterwork interwoven with new high quality work in the best Arts and Crafts tradition. Baring-Gould's motivation for rescuing the North Street ceiling is clearly stated in his book *An Old English Home and its Dependencies*:

Why then should the ceilings of our rooms be blank surfaces? We spread carpets of colour on our floors. We decorate richly our walls. Why should the ceiling alone be left in hideous baldness, in fact, absolutely plain?⁸¹

Baring-Gould was not the first to introduce elements of historic interior decoration into new locations. This had taken place from the medieval period onwards and had picked up pace during the mid-sixteenth century.⁸² An early

⁷⁸ See Crocker, *Sketches of Old Exeter* and Harbottle Reed, 'Demolition of Ancient Buildings of Exeter During the Last Half Century', *Transactions of the Devonshire Association for the Advancement of Science, Literature and Art*, 63 (1931), pp. 273-82.

⁷⁹ Fragments of the ceiling were salvaged during the 1972 rescue excavation and are now in the Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter, see John Thorp, 'The Construction, Appearance and Development of a Merchant's Town House c.1500-1740: 38 North Street, Exeter', *Proceedings of the Devon Archaeological Society*, 70 (2012), p. 204.

⁸⁰ it was removed due to road widening. The complete ceiling is illustrated in Crocker, *Sketches of Old Exeter*, pl. 48

⁸¹ Sabine Baring Gould, *An Old English Home and its Dependencies* (Methuen & Co: London, 1898), p. 89.

⁸² In particular, the dissolution of the monasteries between 1536 and 1540, saw the widespread movement of salvaged material see Harris, *Moving Rooms*, pp. 11-35.

suggestion of moving plasterwork may be found in the will of John Elyott of Port Eliot, St. Germans, Cornwall, dated 1576 where he instructs that 'No ceilings of the houses called Porte Elyott to be removed'.⁸³ It is not certain that these ceilings were decorated plaster but given the date, and that they were obviously valued by Elyott, it would appear probable.⁸⁴

The peak period for relocating decorative plasterwork was, however, between 1920 and 1960, when a substantial number of rooms from sixteenth- and seventeenth-century houses, including their plaster ceilings and overmantels, were stripped and shipped out, predominantly to North America.⁸⁵ Much of this material subsequently found its way to museums, where entire rooms were reconstructed, and into private houses or other buildings, while other examples have vanished. The late sixteenth-century plaster overmantel currently installed in the reconstructed parlour at St Nicholas Priory, Exeter (Fig. 2.12), is illustrative of this trade and has a convoluted recent history, crossing the Atlantic twice. It was one of three overmantels removed from the Elizabethan townhouse at 229 High Street, Exeter, exported, and purchased by the American newspaper tycoon and art collector William Randolph Hearst in 1934. The overmantel subsequently found its way to De Young Museum, San Francisco, before being repatriated by the Royal Albert Memorial Museum (RAMM), Exeter, in 2001.⁸⁶ Not all plasterwork was exported abroad and schemes from one building could be moved to more than one location within the region, such as the enriched broad-rib ceilings from 7 Cross Street, Barnstaple, which are now at Stafford Barton, Dolton (TR10) and Shute Gatehouse near Axminster (ED24).

⁸³ The National Archives, Will of John Elyott or Elliott, Gentleman of Saint Germans, Cornwall, dated 11 February 1578, PROB 11/60/111. I am indebted to Prof. Sam Smiles for bringing this to my attention.

⁸⁴ The house originated as the Priory of St Germans but has been much altered, most notably in Sir John Soane's remodelling of 1804-09 see Peter Beacham and Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Cornwall* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014), pp. 546-50.

⁸⁵ See Harris, *Moving Rooms*, p. xv and pp. 235-51.

⁸⁶ See John Allan and Kate Osborne, *St Nicholas Priory: From Monastery to Museum* (Exeter: Royal Albert Memorial Museum, 2009), p. 44 and Harris, *Moving Rooms*, pp. 236-37.

These examples demonstrate that while the plasterwork retains an intrinsic academic interest that might otherwise have been lost entirely from now demolished buildings, once removed from its context its historic value is diminished. Unless its former location has been recorded, or it can be ascertained that it is not in its original position, there is also the potential to mislead the researcher attempting to attribute meaning from its current location.

In the absence of documentary evidence, some broad observations can, however, be made regarding the likelihood of the plasterwork being out of its original context. Ceilings are physically difficult and therefore expensive to move and reinstall and are consequently less likely to be taken down during house modernisation or sold off. As a result, where ceilings survive in a building there is a high chance they are in their original position.⁸⁷ Overmantels are more portable and therefore vulnerable to being removed, although on occasion they might be retained by the owner and moved to another part of the house, or to another property in their ownership, especially if adorned with family heraldry.⁸⁸ It is not generally practical to reuse friezes, which by their nature are difficult to remove intact and taking new moulds from the existing frieze and replicating these offers an easier option.⁸⁹ Friezes are also less vulnerable than ceilings to neglect, so often represent the only remnants of a lost scheme, such as at 1-5 Bridge Street, Bideford, Devon (TR3) (Fig. 6.03) and Combe Sydenham, Somerset (WS21) (Fig. 1.04). As a general rule, it would be expected that ceilings and friezes survive in greater quantities in their original positions than overmantels.

Researchers must also be wary that while the plasterwork may survive in its original position, the function of the room might have changed. For example, where the former parlour has become a kitchen. It is also not uncommon for the status of houses to decline over the centuries from when originally built, so a manor house could become a farmhouse, which is later divided into three

⁸⁷ John Harris has noted the omission of plaster ceilings from room reconstructions in museums, *Moving Rooms*, p. 2.

⁸⁸ Harris also cites the example of the Earl of Northampton moving chimneypieces from Canonbury House, Islington, to other family seats, *ibid*, p. 2.

⁸⁹ This was the case in the hall at Holcombe Court (MD11) which was restored in the mid-nineteenth century.

cottages. For this reason, when drawing conclusions based on the position of plasterwork and house status, it is important to have an understanding of the architectural development of the building.⁹⁰

1.4.3 Dating plasterwork

The most common method of dating plasterwork is on stylistic grounds. There are established broad chronologies for Somerset and Devon which, with caution, can also be used for other parts of the region.⁹¹ The chronological development of plasterwork during the period is discussed further in Section 3.3.8. Designs and motifs used as enrichments can, however, have a surprisingly long life and as moulds can be repeatedly reused, they can span a long period, potentially beyond that of the career of the individual plasterer.⁹²

While stylistic dating can give a broad date range, a more precise date can be obtained by research into the history of the house and its occupiers. Absolute dates can be obtained where plasterwork is dated. In these cases, the date, which forms part of the decorative scheme, is almost certainly when the plasterwork was installed. Dates scratched into the plaster by the plasterer that are not decorative are much rarer. These are difficult to spot and are liable to be obscured by overpainting. There are four known within the study area, which on this limited evidence suggests this practice dates to the early seventeenth century and was confined to ceilings: Hinton House, (SS10) dated 1636; 2 and 3 The Green Woodbury (ED32), which has an indecipherable name with the date February 1633; Alphington Rectory (EX8) dated 162[7/9] (Fig. 1.05), and 62 Boutport Street (ND4) dated 1620.

Using other parts of the building's construction to give a date is also possible in some cases. For example, where a dendrochronological date for a roof is available this would give a terminus post quem for the ceiling immediately constructed below. At the Court House, Chard (SS6) the felling date for the roof timbers is 1632 and as the oak was always used 'green' the elaborate

⁹⁰ This is discussed further in Chapter 2.

⁹¹ For Somerset see Penoyre, *Decorative Plasterwork in the Houses of Somerset*, and for Devon, see French, 'Devonshire Plasterwork'. These have been refined by this thesis.

⁹² See Section 5.4.

plasterwork applied to the barrel-vaulted ceiling must be contemporary or later.⁹³ A further example at Holcombe Court, Devon (MD11), can be more closely tied in. The roof to the long gallery has been dated by dendrochronology to 1542-1553, while its plasterwork ceiling, contains individual letters surrounded by wreaths spelling out ROGER at the west end and BLVET at the east end. As Roger Bluett died in 1566 it is most likely that the ornamental ceiling dates to the late-1550s.⁹⁴

The spelling out of a full name such at Holcombe Court is rare and initials depicted on plasterwork are more common. Where it is possible to tie these to an individual through documentary research a date range can be assigned. It is common for an overmantel to have two sets of initials and in such cases it is reasonably certain to signify a marriage union, which may be documented. Usefully, such designs often include a date, but the date is not necessarily the date of the marriage. For example in Poundisford Lodge, Somerset (TA23) the date '1590' on the Oak Room overmantel cannot date the marriage of William Symes and Elizabeth Hill, whose initials appear, as their first son John was born in 1573.⁹⁵

Where heraldry is present, using this to ascribe a date is possible although this can be more easily, if albeit broadly, done with royal coats of arms. Family arms are a common feature of decorative plasterwork but often these cannot be closely dated, even where they celebrate a marriage. For example, at Holcombe Court, Devon, a plaque in the stairwell has the arms of John II Bluett impaling Mountjoy Blount, commemorating the marriage of John to Dorothy Mountjoy Blount in 1544. While possible, it seems too early a date for the plaster given that the house was rebuilt 1550-1560.⁹⁶ A further Holcombe

⁹³ A. J. Arnold, R.E. Howard and C. D. Litton, 'Tree-Ring Analysis of Timbers from Manor Court House, Fore Street, Chard', (English Heritage Centre for Archaeology Report 27/2004).

⁹⁴ Daniel Miles and Martin Bridge, 'Tree-Ring Dates from the Oxford Dendrochronological Laboratory List 246, *Vernacular Architecture*, 43, (2012), pp. 97-100.

⁹⁵ See Andrew Thrush and John P. Ferris, eds. *The History of Parliament: the House of Commons 1604-1629*, (2010) <<http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1604-1629/member/symes-john-1573-1661>>, accessed 20 March 2014.

⁹⁶ For a history of the family see Charles Scott-Fox, *Holcombe Court: A Bluett Family Tudor Mansion*, (Exeter Short Run Press: Charles Scott-Fox, 2012).

overmantel in the Great Parlour is dated 1591 but the heraldry celebrates a marriage that took place 19 years earlier in 1572.

A further dating method is available where the plasterwork design is based on an identifiable print. The date of the first publication of the print provides the earliest date for the plasterwork. It would also be a reasonable assumption that the print, which would have typically originated in Antwerp, would take some time to reach South-West England. The print could also remain in circulation for many years following its publication.

A potential pitfall for the researcher is mistaking modern reproduction or restoration of early plasterwork for sixteenth- and seventeenth-century work. The nature of the material means that it can be impossible to differentiate between early and later work without conducting invasive investigation into the fabric. Nineteenth-century 'Jacobethan' style ceilings are particularly prone to misattribution, although sometimes the poor execution of later work, or its appearance in an atypical context, can give it away. An example of this is the ceiling in the Oak Parlour at Montacute House (SS18). This ceiling uses casts taken from the early seventeenth-century ceiling in the Globe Room at the Reindeer Inn, Banbury, Oxon, and can be identified as a later insertion, even without the documentary evidence to confirm this (Fig. 1.07).⁹⁷ Other schemes such as the Library ceiling also at Montacute House, dating to 1876, and the hall ceiling at Mapperton Manor, Dorset (WT12) from the 1920s (Fig. 1.08), which uses moulds from Dean Head in North Devon (ND52), are more convincing.⁹⁸ Where moulds are taken from original work and using a traditional lime plaster it can be impossible to identify original plasterwork from a surface inspection, especially if on a ceiling or frieze which can often be difficult to view at floor level.

⁹⁷ The Globe Room was the focus of controversy in 1912 when Lord Curzon, coincidentally the owner of Montacute, blocked its export to the USA. The original ceiling has not survived but the moulds were used by the architect Thornton Smith at Montacute, at the behest of Lady Curzon and to the disapproval of her husband, and in at least three other houses, see Harris *Moving Rooms*, p. 77-78 and note 28, p. 285.

⁹⁸ The ceiling at Mapperton is part of early twentieth-century alterations by the new owner Mrs Labouchere, who also added the entrance hall and dining room ceilings which include the Munro/Labouchere arms, John Sandwich, pers. comm. 9 January 2015. For Montacute, see Julian Orbach and Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Somerset, South and West*, p. 469.

Modern freehand modelling is easier to isolate, unless part of a restoration of an earlier piece. Where skilfully done it can, however, often be very convincing, such as the overmantel at West Coker Manor, Somerset (SS28) created by Claire Venables in c. 2010 and installed above an early sixteenth-century fireplace. This piece incorporates a similar, but not identical, fruit motif to the c. 1600 overmantel in the Portman Room within the house but the intention here is to complement the original rather than deceive and the overmantel is not based on an original. A further example is the overmantel formerly from 69 High Street, Barnstaple (ND8), which for many years was thought lost. A replica of this has been produced by the contemporary plasterers Geoffrey Preston and Jenny Lawrence for a private client at a house in Dorset (Fig. 1.09). This incorporates one of the original knight figures identified for the client as coming from 69 High Street (Fig.1.10).⁹⁹ In such situations, especially where earlier plasterwork survives, the knowledge of the building's owner, who in this case commissioned the piece, is invaluable.

⁹⁹ The figure was discovered in an antique shop, the whereabouts of the central scene is unknown. My identification was based on the photograph in Bankart, *Art of the Plasterer*, p. 79. A further photograph (Fig.1.10) exists uncatalogued in the North Devon Record Office and North Devon Athenaeum collection. I am grateful to Shyam Parekh for bringing this additional photograph to my attention, *pers. comm.* 17 May 2018.

2. ARCHITECTURE AND SOCIETY

To understand how decorative plasterwork became so established in the South-West and why identity, status and learning were expressed through this medium, it is essential to place it in the context of wider economic, social and architectural developments in the period. These factors are therefore examined in some detail in this chapter. Sections 2.1 to 2.4 provide the regional context and explore the changes in the economy and society of the South-West during the period, which allowed the increasingly affluent propertied classes to make proportionally greater investments in their housing, decoration and material goods. Section 2.5 assesses the causes and effects of the architectural developments during the period and how, by embracing these improvements, the upper and middle ranks of society could explore the potential of their house interiors as platforms for decorative display.

2.1 The South-West region

2.1.1 Topography and communications

The South-West peninsula of England is bordered by the Bristol Channel to the north, the English Channel to the south, and Atlantic Ocean to the west (see Map C1). It is a maritime region which has a diverse terrain and character. There are areas of high open moorland, at Bodmin Moor in Cornwall, the central granite mass of Dartmoor in south-west Devon, and Exmoor straddling the border between north Devon and west Somerset. By contrast, there are low-lying fens of the Somerset Levels and flat marshland to their north drained by the River Parrett. The majority of the region is, however, gently rolling landscape punctuated by farmsteads, villages and small towns, with high wooded hills and rich valley pasture.

At its narrowest point in the east, the peninsula is just 54 kilometres wide and constrained by the high wooded Quantock Hills to the north and Blackdown Hills to the south. The gap through the Vale of Taunton represents the main land

route to and from the rest of England.¹ While the towns of the region were linked by roads, all communications by land were difficult, slow, and did not improve throughout the period.² At best, the region was four-five days horse ride from London, with Cornwall more distant and even less accessible. When James I was proclaimed King on 24th March 1603 news of his accession took six days to reach North Devon, and this may well have arrived by sea from Bristol as for long distances maritime travel was undoubtedly the quickest means of transport.³

2.1.2 Economy, population and settlement

Proximity to the sea gave the South-West trading advantages and the peninsula had the added benefit of two maritime routes: along the north coast emanating from Bristol, taking in the port of Bideford, the principal port of Barnstaple and the inland port of Bridgwater; and a south route, which included Dartmouth, Plymouth, and the river ports of Exeter and Totnes. These coastal settlements benefitted from trading links with South Wales, Ireland, the upper reaches of the Severn and well beyond the region to France, Portugal, and Spain. They also had ready access to the lucrative North Atlantic fisheries that were exploited from the 1560s.⁴

The prosperity of the region was, however, underpinned by agriculture. The vast bulk, perhaps as much as 92%, of the population resided in the countryside and of these some 70% were primarily engaged in farming.⁵ Much of this rural settlement was dispersed, with numerous isolated farmsteads, hamlets and

¹ There were less direct coastal routes, however, followed by John Leland in the 1540s, see *John Leland's Itinerary: Travels in Tudor England*, ed. by John Chandler (Stroud: Alan Sutton, 1992).

² Amongst contemporary accounts noting the difficulty of the terrain is Tristram Risdon, *The Chorographical Description or Survey of the County of Devon* (Plymouth: Rees and Curtis, 1811), p. 4.

³ Quoted in M. J. Stoye, 'The Counterfeit King: Popular Reaction to the Accession of King James I, 1603', in *Devon Documents*, ed. by Todd Gray (Tiverton: Devon Notes and Queries, 1996), pp. 177-83.

⁴ See Todd Gray, 'Fisheries, Exploration, Shipping and Mariners in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries' in *Historical Atlas of South-West England* ed. by Roger Kain and William Ravenhill (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1999), pp. 379-80.

⁵ These are national figures from c. 1600, E. A. Wrigley, *People, Cities and Wealth: the Transformation of Traditional Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), p. 170.

villages of medieval origin, forming a significant part of the settlement pattern. The majority of the region is pastoral, where high rainfall and heavy soils meant that only small quantities of cereals could be grown but rough grazing was available for cattle and sheep.⁶ The fertile lowland soils, in the valleys of Somerset and Dorset, in the South Hams and Exe valley of Devon and along the coastal strips of Cornwall and north Somerset provided the opportunity for arable farming and here corn, oats, barley and fruit were produced. Sheep were the single most important agricultural commodity and the sixteenth century saw a sharp increase in their numbers. The wool produced was used to supply the cloth trade, in particular to manufacture a type of fabric known as kersey, centred on the Tiverton, Cullompton and Uffculme area, and from the early sixteenth century, finer cloth known as serges.⁷

Cloth production contributed to the wealth and growth of towns across the region. In the lay subsidy returns of 1524/5, nine of the hundred wealthiest towns in England were located within the study area.⁸ Of these, Exeter was the regional capital, with a population of around 8,000 rising to 11,500 by 1660, during which time it ranked consistently as the fifth or sixth largest English provincial town.⁹ Other important towns in the region in the national top 100 were, in order of tax-paying population: Crediton (31st); Plymouth (44th); Taunton (49th); Tiverton (52nd); Bodmin (54th); Ottery St Mary (62nd); Cullompton (64th); Colyton (67th); Barnstaple (73rd); Totnes (75th); and Torrington (93rd).¹⁰

⁶ For a discussion of agriculture in the region see Joan Thirsk, 'The Farming Regions of England', in *The Agrarian History of England and Wales: Volume IV 1500-1600*, ed. by Joan Thirsk (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), pp. 71-80.

⁷ Michael Havinden, 'The Woollen, Lime, Tanning and Leather-Working, and Paper Making Industries, c. 1500-c. 1800', in *Historical Atlas of South-West England*, p. 338.

⁸ Based on tax paying population see Alan Dyer, 'Ranking lists of English Medieval Towns' in *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain: Volume 1 600-1540*, ed. by D.M. Palliser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 761-63.

⁹ C. G. Henderson, 'The City of Exeter from AD 50 to Early Nineteenth Century', in *Historical Atlas of South-West England*, p. 492. The year 1660 is the first year for which reliable figures are available, see Jonathan Barry, 'South-West', in *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain: Volume 2 1540-1840*, ed. by Peter Clark (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 71.

¹⁰ Listed by number of taxpayers in 1524, Alan Dyer 'Ranking lists of English medieval towns' in *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain: Volume 1*, pp. 761-63.

Crediton and Tiverton owed their position to cloth production, while Plymouth's growth was due to it being a base for British naval power. Taunton was the county capital of Somerset and its success continued into the seventeenth century, with Thomas Gerrard describing the town in 1633 as being 'chiefe in the whole County setting aside the Citties'.¹¹ The most prosperous town in Cornwall was Bodmin, which owed its position partly to the cloth industry but also to its association with the tin trade. During the study period, Cornwall was the centre of the tin mining industry, the proceeds of which funded the building of the two great houses at Lanhydrock (CO9) and Godolphin (CO4).¹²

The population in the region rose steeply during the period. This mirrored the national trend which, with the occasional blip, in England climbed from an estimated 3 million in 1551 to 5 million in 1636.¹³ Within the region, Devon had a particularly steep rise, from one of the least peopled counties in England immediately after the Black Death, to the second or third most populated in the sixteenth century.¹⁴ In 1600, Devon had the third highest population in the country with 258,587, in comparison, Somerset had a population of 168,984, Cornwall 102,892, and Dorset 74,961.¹⁵

The increase in population coincided with a period of high inflation and a rise in food prices, as agricultural production failed to keep pace with demand.¹⁶ The increasing value of agricultural produce benefitted the large land holders who were able to enlarge their farms at the expense of their tenants.¹⁷ Merchants

¹¹ Thomas Gerard, *The particular description of the county of Somerset, 1633* ed. by E. H. Bates (London: Harrison and Sons, 1900), p.55.

¹² Other areas of the region produced minerals: Dartmoor provided another source for tin extraction but this was on a much reduced scale by the sixteenth century: at Combe Martin in North Devon silver was mined; Somerset also provided minerals, including, lead, zinc, iron and coal.

¹³ E. A. Wrigley and R. S. Schofield, *The Population History of England 1541-1871: a reconstruction* (London: Edward Arnold, 1981), p. 208.

¹⁴ See W. G. Hoskins, *Devon*, comm. edn. (Tiverton: Devon Books, 1992), p. 170.

¹⁵ Stephen Broadberry, Bruce Campbell, Alexander Klein, Mark Overton and Bas van Leeuwen, *British Economic Growth, 1270-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 25.

¹⁶ Keith Wrightson, *Earthly Necessities: Economic Lives in Early Modern Britain* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 128-31.

¹⁷ Jane Whittle, 'Land and People' in *A Social History of England 1500-1750*, ed. by Keith Wrightson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 156-57.

also profited from rising prices and there were booms in tin mining and shipping. This, the rewards of public office, and the inability of employees to demand higher wages, served to increase the profits of the middle and upper ranks of society, who were able to use this income to secure, amongst other benefits, a high level of domestic comfort.

At the lower end of society, an abundance of labour depressed wages and the shortage of land caused by engrossment resulted in rising rents and a fall in the real value of wages. The hardest hit were the wage dependent whose income did not keep pace with inflation. Despite an increase in building activity for example, wages for building craftsman in the period 1500 to 1650, although rising from 6d. to 1s. 5d. a day, could not keep up with the six-fold rise in prices.¹⁸ This pattern was repeated amongst all the wage dependent who lived against the backdrop of the risk of unemployment, eviction, vagrancy and starvation.¹⁹

2.2 Social division

The widening wealth-gap between the upper and middle ranks and the majority of the populace exacerbated divisions in a society that was already deeply stratified. These divisions preoccupied contemporary observers. Writing in 1577, the historian and topographer William Harrison in his *The Description of England*, divided society into four sorts: at the top were gentlemen; next were citizens or burgesses, defined by their trade and freedom of their cities; followed by yeomen who were freeholders of land or tenants of the gentry; and at the bottom were artificers, husbandman, labourers and servants.²⁰ Between the top and bottom of these groups there was great inequality. In Exeter, the most prosperous and populated city in the region, some 3% of the population owned

¹⁸ Paul Slack, *Poverty and Policy in Tudor and Stuart England* (London: Longman, 1988) p. 47.

¹⁹ For an analysis of farm workers wages see Gregory Clark, 'The Long March of History: Farm wages, population, and economic growth, England 1209-1869', *Economic History Review*, 60 (1), (2007), pp. 97-115.

²⁰ Harrison devotes a whole section to 'degrees of people', *The Description of England*, pp. 94-123. By contrast Thomas Westcote, writing in 1630, demotes merchants to the third tier behind yeomen, Thomas Westcote, *A View of Devonshire in MDCXXX: With a Pedigree of Most of Its Gentry*, ed. by George Oliver and Pitman Jones (Exeter: William Roberts, 1845), p. 51.

50% of the property.²¹ This concentration at the top end of society is reflected in the built record, notably in new houses, and the rebuilding and upgrading of existing houses and their furnishings, which included the installation of decorative plasterwork. Amongst the wealthiest, the period also saw a boom in the erection of funerary monuments and the endowment of almshouses, hospitals and schools. Despite comprising the minority of the population, the gentry are therefore disproportionately represented in the surviving built record and material culture in comparison with the lower sectors of society.²²

2.2.1 The gentry

Of his four sorts, William Harrison was most interested in the gentry, who he divided into three sub-groups: the greater sort, comprising princes, dukes, marquises, earls, viscounts and barons; secondly, knights and esquires; and lastly, those called simply 'gentlemen'.²³ Just two families represent the first sub-group in the region: the Bouchiers, Earls of Bath, whose seat was at Tawstock, in north Devon; and the Russell family, Earls of Bedford, based at Tavistock. The Russells were the chief beneficiaries of the dissolution of the monasteries and the largest landowners in the South-West.²⁴ From the second Earl's death in 1585, however, they were largely resident outside of the county and the third Earl of Bath, William Bouchier, who held the position of Lord Lieutenant until 1623, took over their pre-eminent position.²⁵

In Harrison's second group there were a number of politically prominent leaders in the mid-sixteenth century including, Sir Thomas Denys, Sir Hugh Pollard, Sir

²¹ This was in 1524-5 but the situation remained broadly unchanged through the sixteenth century. Robert Whiting, *The Blind Devotion of the People: Popular Religion and the English Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p.10.

²² For Kent and Lancashire Keith Wrightson gives the proportion of gentry to the general populace in 1600 at just 2% this is likely to be similar for other counties, Keith Wrightson, *English Society 1580-1680* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1982), p. 24.

²³ Harrison, *The Description of England*, p. 94.

²⁴ The Russells had capitalised on the power vacuum left by the Courtenays, Earls of Devon, after Henry Courtenay was attainted in 1536. Their substantial land holdings in the region were built on ex-monastic land. See Joyce Youings, *Devon Monastic Lands: Calendar of Particulars for Grants 1536-1558*, Devon and Cornwall Record Society, 1 (Exeter: Devon and Cornwall Record Society, 1955), pp. xx-xxi.

²⁵ Mark Stoye, *Loyalty and Locality: Popular Allegiance in Devon during the English Civil War* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1994), p. 19.

Richard Edgcumbe, Sir Peter and Sir Gawen Carew and Sir Peter Courtenay.²⁶ At the lowest end of this sub-group - the non-titular describing themselves 'Mr.' or 'gent' - there was considerable blurring and discussion as to what constituted a gentleman.²⁷ A degree of wealth was implicit but lineage, education, and public service were equally important. The ability to live on the land, or more accurately off the rents of the tenants, without directly engaging in manual labour was also a prerequisite, as was marrying into established gentry families, although downward mobility was possible by the same means. Ancient lineage was highly prized but its absence was something that could be worked around. The creative interpretation of genealogy to provide social legitimisation through a respectable pedigree was relatively commonplace and a coat of arms could effectively be purchased.²⁸

2.2.2 The middling sort

Sitting below the gentry in the social hierarchy were the crown servants, lawyers, doctors, teachers, academics, merchants and the lower clergy, termed the 'middling sort'.²⁹ These professional classes and the merchants who had amassed wealth through trade or held public office were on the cusp of the gentry but generally lacked the required land.³⁰ The middling sort could also encompass the successful yeoman farmer, who due to their land holdings locally might possess a status equal to the lower gentry, as noted by contemporary writers in Devon.³¹ The Devon yeoman Robert Furse encapsulates the path to gentry status. In a book written for his son John in 1593 he set out in detail his ancestry, the land that his forebears held and the

²⁶ Helen Speight, 'Local Government and the South-Western Rebellion of 1549', *Southern History*, 18, (1996), p. 3.

²⁷ See Henry French, 'Gentlemen: Remaking the English Ruling Class' in *A Social History of England 1500-1750*, ed. by Keith Wrightson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 269-89.

²⁸ Felicity Heal and Clive Holmes, *The Gentry in England and Wales, 1500-1700* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994), pp. 34-37.

²⁹ For a discussion on the usefulness and relevance of the term 'middling sort' in historical studies see Henry French, 'The Search for the 'Middle Sort of People' in England, 1600-1800', *The Historical Journal*, 43, 1 (2000), pp. 277-93.

³⁰ As Heal and Holmes have noted, full affirmation of gentry was dependent on ownership of land and access to office, *The Gentry in England and Wales*, p. 8.

³¹ For example Westcote, *A View of Devonshire in MDCXXX*, p. 49.

sizeable estate he had himself built-up through acquisition and inheritance.³² It was of great importance to Robert that his son was aware of how his ancestors had risen from relatively humble origins. By 1620 John Furse had been granted arms and the family's gentry status was secured.

In practice, there was some fluidity and little formal distinction between the upper yeomanry and lower gentry.³³ For example, the architect/builder William Arnold was recorded as a yeoman in his home at Charlton Musgrove in Somerset but further afield in Dunster signed himself as 'gentleman'.³⁴ Some yeomen clearly had sufficient wealth, education, lineage, and local standing to live as gentry and were seemingly content to maintain, rather than enhance, their social status.³⁵ A position in the gentry class could also bring extra responsibilities, financial as well as civic and not all established families of yeoman status aspired to move up the social ladder.³⁶

2.3 Education and learning

An understanding of the degree of education available to the house owners who commissioned decorative plasterwork is important, as literacy closely correlates to social and occupational status.³⁷ The evidence from David Cressy's study in East Anglia indicates that literacy was almost universal amongst men of the gentry, the clergy and 'professional classes' but dropped down to 12% of common artisans and craftworkers.³⁸ Assuming the South-West had similar

³² For Furse's account see Anita Travers ed. *Robert Furse: a Devon Family Memoir of 1593*, (Exeter: Devon and Cornwall Record Society, 2012).

³³ As noted by Keith Wrightson, 'Sorts of People in Tudor and Stuart England' in *The Middling Sort of People: Culture, Society and Politics in England, 1550-1800*, ed. by Jonathan Barry and Christopher Brooks (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994), pp. 30-31.

³⁴ Mark Girouard, *Elizabethan Architecture: Its Rise and Fall* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 391.

³⁵ Mildred Campbell, *The English Yeoman Under Elizabeth and the Early Stuarts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1942), p. 51 and pp. 265-266.

³⁶ The administrative duties of the gentry in Devon in the early seventeenth century are set out in Mary Wolfe, *Gentry Leaders in Peace and War: the Gentry Governors of Devon in the Early Seventeenth Century* (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1997). Those of yeoman status could also hold public office at a local level.

³⁷ The extent to which plasterers influenced the choice of design is discussed in Chapter 5.

³⁸ David Cressy, 'Educational Opportunity in Tudor and Stuart England', *History of Education Quarterly*, 16, No. 3 (1976), p. 314.

levels of literacy, this research suggests that those commissioning the plasterwork would have almost certainly been able to read, whereas the artisans carrying out the work would not. There is, however, evidence to show that at least some plasterers were literate. The Abbott book, for example appears to have been used by successive members of the family of plasterers in the seventeenth century and contains written-out recipes for mixing and applying colours.³⁹ The only surviving sixteenth-century design drawing surviving from Ramsbury Hall, Wiltshire also includes text written by the plasterer.⁴⁰

Formal schooling would not have been essential for plasterers as the basic level of geometry and arithmetic required to install a plaster scheme could have been obtained through practical apprenticeship. The nature of the medium makes it generally unsuitable for textual work beyond the initials and dates, although there are examples of longer pieces of writing such as at Rowlands Hill, Ashill, Somerset (SS1).⁴¹ Smaller sections of text and numbers are relatively common, forming the principal subject on 17% of overmantels (Table B6) and as subsidiary feature on a multitude of others. Text occasionally caused problems for the plasterer, suggesting an unfamiliarity with letters. On the hall overmantel at Coalharbour, Somerset (TA9) the plasterer left insufficient space for the inscription 'GOD BE OUR DEFENCE' and the final three letters have to be accommodated above (Fig. 2.01). There are also anomalies with dates and initials: on the Elizabethan royal arms at Poundisford Park, Somerset (TA24) (Fig. 2.02) the letters 'E R', for Elizabeth Regina, are transposed; and on the Great Chamber overmantel at Trevice, Cornwall (CO29) the Roman numerals finish with the arabic number '3' (Fig. 2.03).

2.3.1 Schools

It is likely that those plasterers who were literate had received a basic level elementary education, which was widely available locally through 'petty

³⁹ For a transcription of this text see John Chenevix Trench, 'John Abbott's Manual of Limming', *Association for Studies in the Conservation of Historic Buildings*, 11 (1986), pp. 21-26.

⁴⁰ The drawing is reproduced as Fig. 29 in Claire Gapper, 'Chapter 4 From Timber to Plaster: Courtly Ceilings in the Sixteenth Century', *British Renaissance Plasterwork* <<http://clairegapper.info/from-timber-to-plaster.html>>, accessed 15 August 2016.

⁴¹ For an analysis of text on plasterwork see Section 3.3.5.

schools'.⁴² For higher status children, basic education might also be gained by private tuition at home, or placement in another household. Education was, however, very much dependent on gender, wealth and an individual's position within the family relative to their siblings. In middle-ranking families, the eldest son, as principal inheritor of the estate, was generally on a pre-ordained and advantageous direction in this respect. Younger sons could be expected to enter a profession, such as law or the church, mercantile employment, or from the mid-sixteenth century enter into an apprenticeship.⁴³ For daughters of the gentry formal education was less certain. Young women might receive home tuition but were less likely to progress beyond petty school level before the later seventeenth-century when private academies were established in cities, including Exeter.⁴⁴

From the second half of the sixteenth century, educational opportunities for boys increased through the establishment of grammar schools, benefiting middle-ranking families.⁴⁵ While similar monastic schools had existed earlier, the period saw a proliferation of grammar schools and by the close of the sixteenth century most market towns in the region had one. Boys attending such schools could expect to follow a classical curriculum, which would include Latin grammar, Greek, Hebrew, French, Italian and music.⁴⁶ The education provided in such schools would have enabled them to understand and appreciate the iconography that was a feature of classical figurative scenes used in the decorative arts.

2.3.2 University and Inns of Court

The period saw an increase in the number of new college foundations at both Oxford and Cambridge. University was, however, expensive and access was

⁴² Petty schools were attended by pupils from across the social spectrum and from both sexes, Adam Fox, 'Words, Words, Words: Education, Literacy and Print', in *A Social History of England 1500-1750*, ed. by Keith Wrightson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 130.

⁴³ Apprenticeships were increasingly followed by those claiming gentry backgrounds in the period, see Christopher Brooks, 'Apprenticeship, Social Mobility and the Middling Sort, 1500-1800', in *The Middling Sort of People*, pp. 61-62.

⁴⁴ Fox, 'Words, Words, Words', p. 132.

⁴⁵ See Cressy, 'Educational Opportunity in Tudor and Stuart England', pp. 309-11.

⁴⁶ Heal and Holmes, *The Gentry in England and Wales*, p. 260.

restricted to those who could pay, which was predominantly the gentry. Across four Cambridge colleges, for example 33% of matriculands were gentry, 22% sons of clergy, 16% substantial tradesmen and 15% of yeoman parentage.⁴⁷ The education received at the universities was varied but the undergraduate student would expect to be versed in logic and philosophy, with Greek and Latin classics, mathematics, history, modern languages and theology also to the fore.

Following university, or as an alternative, were the London Inns of Court, providing an education in law and almost exclusively the preserve of the gentry class.⁴⁸ Devon in particular was notable for lawyers, and as observed by Thomas Fuller in the mid-seventeenth century, was second only to Norfolk, for those 'who by the practise thereof, have raised such great estates'.⁴⁹ Of the professions available in the period, the law offered the best opportunity for prosperity and further social advancement. A career in law was especially attractive to younger sons of the gentry and provided a vehicle for achieving wealth and power.⁵⁰

2.3.3 Travel

Further study opportunities could be gained through travel to mainland Europe. For craftsman this could be particularly beneficial.⁵¹ The master mason Nicholas Stone, for example, left Devon to take up an apprenticeship in London and worked for a time in Amsterdam. Another accomplished artist, Exeter-born Nicholas Hilliard, best known for his portrait miniatures, spent two years in France and time in Geneva as part of John Bodley's exiled household.⁵² Also in temporary exile at this time, but in Venice with Edward Courtenay, Earl of Devon, was Edmund Tremayne. In 1574, some seventeen years after his

⁴⁷ Cressy, 'Educational Opportunity in Tudor and Stuart England', p. 312.

⁴⁸ *ibid*, p.189.

⁴⁹ Thomas Fuller, *The History of the Worthies of England* (London: T. Tegg, 1840), New edn., vol. I, p. 413.

⁵⁰ For a brief synopsis see Stephen Pugsley, 'Landed Society and the Emergence of the Country House in *Tudor and Early Stuart Devon*' in *Tudor and Stuart Devon: the common estate and government - essays presented to Joyce Youings*, ed. by Todd Gray, Margery Rowe and Audrey Erskine (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1992), pp. 112-13.

⁵¹ Foreign craftsmen working in England are discussed in Section 5.1.

⁵² Bodley had fled Devon following the persecution of Protestants during Mary Tudor's reign

return, Tremayne set about rebuilding Collacombe Manor, Lamerton (WD8), installing decorative plasterwork and incorporating European continental Renaissance-inspired details, which are advanced for their time in the region and must have been inspired by the architecture he saw first-hand during his time in Italy.⁵³ Following the disruption caused by the Reformation and the end of the Anglo-Spanish war, it became less hazardous for English travellers to visit the mainland Europe. The early seventeenth century saw the beginnings of what would become known as the Grand Tour, where the upper echelons of the English gentry travelled through France to the artistic centres of Northern Italy to absorb the cultural highlights.⁵⁴

2.3.4 Print

The impact of imported illustrative prints which served as patterns for craftsmen is dealt with in Chapter 4 but mention must be made of the printed texts serving a different market.⁵⁵ A proliferation of printing in the late sixteenth century made classical works such as Virgil, Homer and Horace available to the grammar school pupil and rural gentry or clergy in greater numbers than ever before.⁵⁶ Something of the variety of books available in the early seventeenth century can be seen the inventory of the Exeter bookseller Michael Harte.⁵⁷ Of the 4,500 books only a small proportion have individual titles listed, but religious works, prayer books, psalms and bible commentaries and school books feature. Also present are histories of France, Spain and Venice, a French dictionary and translations. To support his bookshop Harte, who had returned to Exeter after an apprenticeship in London, must have had a ready supply of local educated customers.

⁵³ For a description of the house see Hugh Meller, *The Country Houses of Devon*, 2 (Crediton: Black Dog Press, 2015), pp. 276-78.

⁵⁴ Edward Chaney and Timothy Wilks, *The Jacobean Grand Tour: Early Stuart Travellers in Europe*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014).

⁵⁵ Most books did in fact include an illustration as a frontispiece and some were illustrated throughout.

⁵⁶ Dominic Baker-Smith, 'Renaissance and Reformation' in *Sixteenth Century Britain, The Cambridge Cultural History of Britain Vol. 3*, ed. by Boris Ford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 15.

⁵⁷ This has been published in Ian Maxted, 'A Common Culture?: The Inventory of Michael Harte, Bookseller of Exeter, 1615', in *Devon Documents*, ed. by Todd Gray (Tiverton: Devon Notes and Queries, 1996), pp. 119-128.

For the wider market, broadside ballads, which sold for less than a penny, were easily obtainable.⁵⁸ Tessa Watt has estimated that as many as four million copies of broadsides might have been in circulation in the second half of the sixteenth century.⁵⁹ These, along with illustrative prints and tables and chapbooks, covered a wide range of popular entertainment subjects including news, Protestant religion, political affairs and instruction. Although aimed towards the lower ranks of society, the ballad songs in particular would have been performed in various social contexts and familiar to the gentry. The broadsides were generally illustrated and while only around 250 sixteenth century broadsides survive, none of these appear to have directly influenced contemporary plasterwork designs in the South-West.⁶⁰ They do, however, in one sense parallel plasterwork as prints and tables were often purchased for decorative purposes to adorn household walls although they were catering for a far less affluent market.

2.4 The Reformation

The reigns of Edward VI, Mary and the early years of Elizabeth I saw considerable upheaval caused by the religious schisms that reverberated throughout society and were felt right down to village level.⁶¹ The affects of this on the perception and use of decorative plasterwork in the period are discussed in Chapters 6 and 7 but there are two strands of particular relevance here as they impacted primarily upon those of gentry rank and their economic status.

Firstly, the Dissolution of the monasteries from the 1530s saw a redistribution of land formerly held by the monasteries. The first to benefit from the 1530s were the most wealthy and favoured by King Henry VIII. In Devon, the King rewarded John Russell, the Earl of Bedford, who had no previous landed interest in the

⁵⁸ These were often sold by the ballad singer or travelling chapmen.

⁵⁹ Tessa Watt, *Cheap Print and Popular Piety, 1550-1640*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 11.

⁶⁰ *ibid.*, p. 42, for survival rates.

⁶¹ For the effects on a single Devon village see Eamon Duffy, *The Voices of Morebath: Reformation and Rebellion in an English Village* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001).

county, the large holdings of Tavistock Abbey.⁶² Land was also released for sale. Local landowners, such as Sir John Fulford, who acquired Dunsford, the Drakes of Musbury, and the Bluetts who purchased Holcombe Rogus, benefitted by being able to purchase former monastic land and the legal rights that went with it. Others on the fringe of the gentry, such as the merchant Robert Davie who bought Canonteign Manor (TE5) in 1542, could also take advantage and acquire the land they needed to qualify for acceptance into the gentry class.⁶³

Secondly there was a reduction in the amount of money given to the Church by the gentry.⁶⁴ Evidence of this is seen in the material record of the mid-sixteenth century onwards when parish church building and embellishment of ecclesiastical fabric and interior fittings virtually ceased. The reasons for the reduction in patronage include the abolition of the doctrine of Purgatory, the perception that anything donated to the church might be confiscated and a desire to understand the Word of God, that could now be read in the Bible.⁶⁵ This desire for literacy saw the growth of grammar schools, especially after the Chantry Acts of the 1540s, which allowed former monastic property to be reused for educational purposes, such as the Edward VI Grammar School in Totnes, Devon, which occupied the buildings of the former Totnes Priory.⁶⁶ New grammar schools were established by wealthy benefactors such as the self-made wool merchant Peter Blundell who founded Blundell's School, Tiverton in 1604. As well as benefitting charitable institutions such as almshouses and schools, funds could also be redirected to modernising private houses to a more comfortable standard.

⁶² Youings, *Devon Monastic Lands*, pp. xx-xxi.

⁶³ Hoskins, *Devon*, p. 84.

⁶⁴ For an outline of the reduction of church funding in the region see Whiting, *The Blind Devotion of the People*, pp. 93-101.

⁶⁵ Matthew Johnson, *English Houses 1300-1800: Vernacular Architecture, Social Life* (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2010), pp. 109-10.

⁶⁶ See Smiles, 'Education and Learning', 'Education and Learning', in *West Country to World's End: The South-West in the Tudor Age*, ed. by Sam Smiles (London: Paul Holberton Publishing, 2013), p. 95.

2.5. Architectural developments

2.5.1 Rural house plan-forms

From the medieval period onwards, rural houses, with the exception of the lowliest cottages, shared common elements in their plan-forms regardless of size and status. Typically one room deep and rectangular in plan, the body of the house would be entered by an offset through-passage formed by a screen and with an external door at the opposite end, so it was possible to enter and leave the house from the front or back without going into any of the rooms. On one side of the passage, the 'higher end' of the house comprised the hall and parlour or inner room. The hall was invariably the largest and most important room in the house heated by a central open hearth and typically a bench set against the wall furthest from the through-passage occupied by the head of the household and close family members.⁶⁷ The room behind the bench was a smaller and unheated parlour, sometimes with a first-floor chamber above. On the opposite side of the through-passage, the 'lower end' contained the service rooms, which in middling status houses of the late sixteenth century, included the kitchen, again sometimes with a floor above.⁶⁸ This basic linear layout, which is generally described as the 'three-bay through- or cross-passage, house', persisted in the rural dwellings of the middle ranks until the eighteenth century. This plan-form is the most common surviving across the South-West and makes up the bulk of the housing where decorative plasterwork survives.⁶⁹

In the sixteenth century, the great houses of the social élite shared these common attributes of layout and household function which would have been readily recognised by those occupying houses lower down the social scale. They did, however, have to satisfy the additional requirements of accommodating a larger household and display their owners' social standing. At

⁶⁷ The medieval hall, with its origins in the Dark Ages, is laden with symbolism. Usually located on the ground-floor, but in high status buildings sometimes on the floor above, the significance of the hall was such that the word was often used as synonym for the whole building, such as with a guildhall.

⁶⁸ In the medieval period, kitchens often occupied detached buildings and in higher status later houses separate ranges.

⁶⁹ One variation in the western uplands of the region is the longhouse where the through-passage divides the hall from a shippon housing animals. See Peter Beacham, 'The Longhouse', in *Devon Building: An Introduction to Local Traditions*, ed. by Peter Beacham, 2nd edn. (Exeter: Devon Books, 1995), pp. 47-59.

their core, the hall, parlour and through-passage were all present but there were differences in overall plan-form, scale and decoration. In terms of importance, in the early seventeenth century the hall, for example, might be superseded by a first-floor great chamber, such as at Forde House, Newton Abbot (TE26). Other room types included the long gallery, such as at Holcombe Court (MD11), which had no equivalent in lower status houses.⁷⁰ In the mid-seventeenth century a further change occurred with the development of deeper floor-plans with rooms to the rear. In these double-pile house the stairs were typically located opposite the main entrance. This allowed the hall to be bypassed by visitors who could, if need be, proceed directly to the upper chambers.⁷¹

The great houses of the later sixteenth century also developed symmetrical imposing facades and wings defining courtyards and were often built to 'H', 'E' or 'U-shaped' plans. Houses in the region which exhibit these plan forms include: Trerice (CO29) and Prideaux Place in Cornwall (CO18); Canonteign Manor (TE5) and Forde House (TE26) (Fig. 2.04) in Devon; Poundisford Park (TA24), Barrington Court (SS3) and Montacute House (SS18) in Somerset; and Chantmarle, Dorset (WT4). The use of the E-shape plan-form is particularly interesting at Chantmarle as the builder, Sir John Strode, deliberately chose this shape for symbolic reasons and 'Emmanuel 1612' is inscribed on the porch.⁷² There was also a requirement for extensive service ranges to be accommodated within the symmetry of these plans. This was achieved with separate buildings, or through an internal courtyard arrangement, such as at Cadhay, Devon, built by the lawyer John Haydon in around 1545 using material recycled from the suppressed College of Priests at Ottery St Mary and Dunkeswell Abbey.⁷³

⁷⁰ The uses of the long gallery, or gallery, are set out by Rosalys Coope, 'The Long Gallery: Its Origins, Development use and Decoration', *Architectural History*, 29 (1986), pp. 59-63 and Lenan Cowen Orlin, *Locating Privacy in Tudor London* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 226-261.

⁷¹ Nicholas Cooper, *The Houses of the Gentry, 1480-1680* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999). p. 286.

⁷² See Arthur Oswald, *Country Houses of Dorset*, 2nd edn. (London: Country Life, 1959), pp. 97-98.

⁷³ Meller, *The Country Houses of Devon*, p. 3.

Other gentry houses made a more direct use of former monastic buildings. This introduced constraints that restricted both plan-form and exterior appearance and made the attainment of symmetry impractical. Buckland Abbey (WD1), for example, was converted to a house by Sir Richard Grenville in the 1570s by utilising the abbey church, with the great hall at the centre of the crossing.⁷⁴ Externally the house still betrays its monastic origins, although as Maurice Howard points out these would have been less apparent prior to the nineteenth-century restoration which exposed formerly concealed medieval architectural features.⁷⁵ Other conversions in the region include Torre Abbey (TB1) by Thomas Ridgeway and the lavish Wembury House built by John Hele in 1592 described by the antiquary Tristram Risdon as ‘a magnificent house, equalling if not excelling all other in these western parts [...]’.⁷⁶

The later sixteenth century also saw existing medieval houses rebuilt in more contemporary forms. Berry Pomeroy (SH2) was the most significant of these being purchased by Edward Seymour, Duke of Somerset in 1547, the most powerful man in England. Within the castle walls, Seymour built the closest the region had to a Tudor prodigy house. Enough of the ruins and material recovered by archaeological excavations in the 1980s survive to demonstrate the early use of Renaissance architectural details, including plasterwork (Fig. 2.11).⁷⁷ Also exceptional for its Renaissance planning is the colonnaded north front to Godolphin, Cornwall (CO4). The house, which had its origins in the fourteenth century, was extensively remodelled in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries and incorporates an archway which is remarkably similar to that at Collacombe Manor in Devon (WD8).⁷⁸

⁷⁴ In the South-West, former monastic buildings were generally not converted into houses until many years after their transfer to secular hands. A respect for the Church and the possibility that land could have been restored to the Church, negating any private investment in buildings are the primary reasons for this relative reticence.

⁷⁵ Maurice Howard, *The Building of Elizabethan and Jacobean England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 41.

⁷⁶ Risdon, *The Chorographical Description or Survey of the County of Devon*, p. 200. Nothing of Sir John Hele’s house survives, the current house of c. 1800 is the third on the site.

⁷⁷ Stewart Brown, ed. ‘Berry Pomeroy Castle’, *Proceedings of the Devon Archaeological Society*, 54 (1996).

⁷⁸ Peter Beacham and Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Cornwall* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014), p. 212.

By the late medieval period, archways and gatehouses no longer fulfilled a defensive function. The disappearance of the portcullis and its machinery allowed more spacious accommodation in the rooms above, which could be lit by windows and heated by fireplaces. Inventories indicate that these rooms were occupied by family members or as guest accommodation.⁷⁹ The gatehouse also gave the opportunity for the owner to display their status and present the decorative themes that might be repeated in the main house. At Combe Florey, Somerset (TA5) for example, the decorative plasterwork in the gatehouse dated 1593 hints at the now lost scheme in the demolished main house.⁸⁰ Porches attached to the main range could also work in this way and commonly incorporate Renaissance design elements. Although allowing for an increase in living space with the provision of a small first-floor chamber, like archways and gatehouses, the porch was primarily a means of displaying status. Porches feature on farmhouses of the middle ranks from the early seventeenth century, such as the Old Manor House, Combe Florey (TA6) and Rashleigh Barton, Devon (MD24).

2.5.2 Urban house plan-forms

Early modern town houses in the South-West can be broadly split into two types: the gable-end plan, built at right angles to the street; and the side-on plan, built lengthways and parallel to the street frontage. Both of these encompass a variety of layouts adapted to particular sites. In Exeter for example, Portman gives six variations of the basic types.⁸¹ The majority of town houses of the sixteenth-century were sited on the long narrow strips of medieval burgage plots. In Totnes, the plots were only 4.6 to 7.6 metres wide.⁸² These spatial constraints led to houses being built gable-end on to the street frontages and to maximise space the front upper floors were sometimes jettied, as in the case of 224-9 High Street, Exeter, which is five storeys in height. Typical of

⁷⁹ Paula Henderson, *The Tudor House and Garden: Architecture and Landscape in the Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Centuries* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 68.

⁸⁰ See Section 5.4.2.

⁸¹ D. Portman, *Exeter Houses 1400-1700* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1966), pp. 24-29.

⁸² Michael Laithwaite, 'Totnes Houses 1500-1800' in *The Transformation of English Provincial Towns*, ed. by Peter Clark (London: Hutchinson, 1984), p. 67.

these gable-end houses are 38 North Street, Exeter (EX17) and 15 Fore Street, Taunton (TA32), which in their mid sixteenth century phase comprised a shop fronting the street, with a chamber above, a side-passage leading back to an open hall and a rear room with a detached kitchen in the service courtyard.⁸³ The 'deux corps de batiments' plan with detached kitchen block to the rear, is also particularly common in the merchant's houses in Fore Street, Totnes.

Where space and finances allowed, the more prosperous town residents could acquire two or three burgage plots and, as an alternative to the gable-end plan, build side-on. Here the main elevation was parallel to the street which offered a longer and consequently a more imposing frontage. Two variations of these can be seen in Cullompton. The Manor House, built in 1603, has three rooms with a through-passage across the street frontage. Its near neighbour The Walronds (MD6) of 1605, has a through-passage U-shape plan with symmetrical facade and is essentially a rural plan-form transposed to the town.

Former monastic property within towns was also converted to domestic housing. In Exeter, John Russell's grand Bedford House, the largest house in the city, occupied the site of the former Dominican friary, and St Nicholas Priory (EX16), acquired by a leading city merchant William Hurst in 1575, incorporated part of the Benedictine monastery.⁸⁴ Other members of the gentry built new town houses to complement their country seat. Richard Bampfylde, for example, owned Bampfylde House in Exeter (EX1) and Poltimore House (ED23) some 9 kilometres to the north-east of the city. Although Bampfylde House was lost in the Exeter Blitz in 1942, it was recorded by Robert Dymond 68 years earlier and had a similar U-plan to the Walronds but with an ornate two-storey porch in one corner that Dymond suggests was a later addition, albeit closely contemporary with the 1590 build date.⁸⁵

⁸³ The floor plan and sections of the demolished 38 North Street are illustrated in Michael Laithwaite 'Town Houses up to 1660', p. 104 and see also John Thorp, 'The Construction, Appearance and Development of a Merchant's Town House c.1500-1740: 38 North Street, Exeter', *Proceedings of the Devon Archaeological Society*, 70 (2012), pp. 147-250. For 15 Fore Street see Robert Taylor, 'Town Houses in Taunton, 1500-1700', *Post Medieval Archaeology*, 8(1) (1974), pp. 65-66.

⁸⁴ Bedford House was demolished in the 1770s.

⁸⁵ Robert Dymond, 'Bampfylde House, Exeter', *The Archaeological Journal*, 31 (1884), pp. 95-107.

A further feature of some Devon towns of the period are butterwalks. These comprise rows of houses with the first-floor built-out over the pavement and supported on columns. These street arcades formed shelter for stalls with the houses or shops behind and were occupied by the merchant class. There are surviving examples at Totnes, which is late medieval in origin, and Dartmouth (Fig. 2.05), which is early seventeenth century, both of which contain decorative plasterwork.⁸⁶

2.5.3 Transformation of houses

While the basic late-medieval plan-forms of rural and town houses persisted, from around 1550 a fundamental transformation occurred in middling status houses with the introduction of three architectural elements: the chimney; the ceiling; and the glazed window. With some regional variation, these occur across England broadly simultaneously, the main difference being in the rate of adoption across the social spectrum. Generally, elements that were common in the middling status housing in the mid-seventeenth century were found in higher status housing of the upper echelons seventy or so years earlier, and in the very grandest houses of the medieval period.

Chimneys

The chimney was the most outwardly visible sign of the changes within the house. This was typically the first of the three elements to be introduced, although they could also be installed simultaneously with ceilings and windows. The proliferation of chimneys quickly changed the roofscape in villages, with as William Harrison writing in 1577 observed in Essex, '[...] the multitude of chimneys lately erected'.⁸⁷ As Harrison also noted, the chimney was not a new concept. The principle of venting smoke out of building through a flue was in fact long established and the chimney had been present in high status houses

⁸⁶ It is likely that this type of building was once more common in towns. There is a further surviving example at Plympton St Maurice. Contemporary plans show similar arcaded buildings at Crediton and Kingsbridge. See Laithwaite 'Town Houses up to 1660', p. 115.

⁸⁷ Harrison, *The Description of England*, p. 200.

in England since the twelfth century.⁸⁸ Below this rank, the hearth, which provided the only form of heating and cooking, was usually centrally placed in the hall, with the smoke allowed to fill the space and escape up through the roof in an uncontrolled manner or, more rarely, confined within a smoke bay.⁸⁹

By the later sixteenth century, a three-bay through-passage rural house of the middle ranks might have had two or three axially placed chimneys inserted, although not always installed at the same time. The first chimney to be put in was usually in the hall to replace the open hearth, typically against the through-passage, which would be furthest from the high-end of the hall. In parts of Devon and West Somerset, however, it was not uncommon for the hall stack to be placed externally in a lateral position and proudly displayed on the front elevation. The kitchen would have a fireplace of equal size to the hall, but almost always axially placed at the end of the building. At the opposite end, the smaller parlour or inner room would have a correspondingly small sized fireplace or be left unheated. The upper rooms would utilise the same chimney stacks as the rooms below but might equally be unheated, except in the higher status rural and urban houses where the principal chambers would be expected to have a fireplace.

The provision of a chimney meant that the hall would no longer be filled with smoke and its furnishings coated with soot. This freedom from pervasive grime enabled new expressions in interior decoration to be introduced into the room. This included the area immediately above the fireplace, as noted by Sir Henry Wotton who wrote, 'beeing in trueth a piece of polite and civill discretion, to convert even the conduits of soote and smoake, into Ornaments'.⁹⁰ The insertion of the hall chimney shifted the focus of the room to the newly installed chimneypiece. In houses across the upper and middle echelons of society, the chimney was the physical manifestation of the owner's wealth and aspirations and an overmantel occupying the area immediately above the fireplace became a realm for display.

⁸⁸ A list of early examples is given in Margaret Wood, *The English Mediaeval House*, 3rd edn. (London: Ferndale Editions, 1981), pp. 290-91.

⁸⁹ The smoke bay was a transitional arrangement which might also serve a kitchen.

⁹⁰ Wotton, *The Elements of Architecture*, p. 108.

Ceilings

Once a means of efficiently venting smoke out of the interior had been incorporated into the building, there was no longer a reason why the hall needed to be open up to the roof. Full enclosure became a matter of choice and fashion and most middle status houses quickly followed this route. Even where the hall remained unenclosed, first-floors were inserted above the service or parlour end which jettied into the hall space.

Ceiling form developed through the period. Medieval ceilings comprised the open joists and larger floor beams supporting the floorboards above. The exposed timber floor beams were chamfered and typically moulded with decorative stops where they met the wall, or more rarely elaborately decorated such as in the hall at Godolphin (CO4) which has carved vine trails, bosses and leaves (Fig. 2.06). The floorboards were clearly visible from the ground-floor so might have painted decoration. Alternatively, the joists between the beams could be under-boarded, creating a double layer but with the main beams still exposed forming rectangular or square compartments. An early sixteenth-century example of this type of ceiling with moulded beams and a geometric decorative rib pattern can be seen in the Small Dining Room at Barrington Court (SS3) (Fig. 2.07).⁹¹ The compartment ceiling, with the beams and infill between enclosed by plain or decorated plaster beams, continued through the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and there are numerous survivals in houses of the period. Holcombe Court (MD11) contains a good selection of these, seen in the library (exposed timbers), parlour (decorative plastered beams or false beams and decorative infill), and the Judges Room (plastered beams and plain infill).

An alternative to the compartment ceiling type, more conducive to large geometric decorative plaster schemes, was the flat ceiling. Early examples needed timber ribs or battens arranged in rectilinear patterns, known as

⁹¹ This may have been relocated from a house in Norfolk, see Julian Orbach and Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Somerset, South and West* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014), p. 107.

fretwork to prevent sagging, such as at Wortham Manor, Lifton, Devon.⁹² James Ayres has suggested the timber ribs could be the inspiration for the plaster ribs that came later.⁹³ It appears more likely, however, that fretwork was influenced by timber or stone fan vaulted medieval antecedents. These elaborate patterns included carved bosses at the intersections breaking up the pattern, which are a feature of decorated plaster ceilings. The Elizabethans were greatly interested in form as opposed to structure and were content to replicate medieval structural shapes and patterns in plaster.⁹⁴ Plaster ceilings could also be put up relatively quickly which meant it was comparatively cost-effective to acquire what Sir Henry Wotton termed the '[...] gracefull fretting of roofes [...]'.⁹⁵ At upper floor level, the development of the the dropped tie-beam roof, where the tie-beam sits flush with the floor rather than on top of the walls, enabled the roof space to be utilised and a flat ceiling to be inserted above. An early example of this roof type in the region, dated by dendrochronology to 1550-1560, is at Holcombe Court (MD11) which gives the flat ceiling to the hall and allows the formation of a long gallery above, both of which have decorated plaster.⁹⁶

The most conducive ceiling type for the display of plasterwork is, however, the barrel-vault. This provides an uninterrupted area for the ostentatious display of decorative plasterwork for first floor rooms, with semi circular lunettes at each end that give a flat vertical surface and a further opportunity for ornamentation.⁹⁷ Notable examples survive at Forde House (TE26) and at Poundisford Park (TA24). At Marshwood Farm, Somerset (WS3) the top section of the barrel-vaulted ceiling is preserved in the roof space following the later insertion of a flat ceiling (Fig. 1.03). Conversely, at Little Court, West

⁹² See Arthur Oswald, 'Wortham Manor, Devon II: The Home of Captain P. W. Burgess and Miss Burgess', *Country Life*, 119, 7 Jun. (1956), p. 1230.

⁹³ See James Ayres, *Domestic Interiors: The British Tradition 1500-1850* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 112.

⁹⁴ Girouard, *Elizabethan Architecture*, p. xiii.

⁹⁵ Wotton, *The Elements of Architecture*, p.108.

⁹⁶ The earliest known example is Hampton Court dated 1530. The Holcombe Court roof is illustrated in Scott-Fox, *Holcombe Court*, p. 13. The dating is given in Daniel Miles and Martin Bridge, 'Tree-ring dates from the Oxford Dendrochronological Laboratory List 246', *Vernacular Architecture*, 43 (2012), p. 98.

⁹⁷ John Thorp gives an outline of the barrel vaulted ceiling in the context of earlier developments in 'Roof Carpentry in Devon from 1250-1700', in *The English Medieval Roof: Crownpost to Kingpost*, ed. by John Walker (Chelmsford: Essex Historic Buildings Group, 2011), p. 111.

Bagborough (TA40) and at St Nicholas Priory, Exeter (EX16) (Fig. 2.08) the upper part of the barrel ceiling has been removed at a later date, isolating the decorative plaster below and exposing the timber arch-braced roof construction above. Where height above the ceiling is limited, a truncated version of the full barrel-vault might be used to give a coved ceiling with a flat centre section. Examples of decorated coved examples occur at Prideaux Place, Cornwall (CO18) and two, by the same workshop, at Cottles Barton (WD13) and Westcote Barton (WD14), which are both in North Tawton.

The insertion of upper floors above the hitherto open hall created more living space within the house and changed the pattern of circulation. In early layouts, only the master chamber at one end of the house had private access, sometimes with its own newel stair winding up next to the fireplace, with the other first-floor rooms opening directly onto each other, meaning the rooms had to be accessed in sequence. In higher status houses, the stairs were typically placed on the rear outside wall close to the through-passage and contained within a projecting stair turret.

While the basic three-bay rural house plan persisted, from the mid-seventeenth century the more 'polite' double-pile house plans appeared. These could accommodate timber balustraded staircases within the body of the house.⁹⁸ These balustraded framed staircases were high status decorative features in their own right and the carved timber work was on occasion accompanied by plasterwork ceilings, the most notable example in the region being Chelvey Court, Somerset (NS2), where a large and elaborately decorated pendant drops from the stairwell ceiling.⁹⁹

Glazing

As with chimneys and ceilings, glazed windows were not a new development but occurred only in the highest status houses and ecclesiastical buildings prior to the late sixteenth century. All houses had windows but these were formerly

⁹⁸ Cooper, *The Houses of the Gentry*, pp. 141-43.

⁹⁹ Illustrated in 'Country Homes Gardens Old and New: Chelvey Court, Somerset, the Residence of Mr Cottle', *Country Life*, 23, 21 May (1910), p. 742.

unglazed and merely apertures containing lattice work controlled by wooden shutters.¹⁰⁰ The primary function of these early windows was to regulate ventilation rather than let in light or provide a view outside, as recognised by the contemporary physician Andrew Boorde who advised on the best position of windows to give a healthy flow of air.¹⁰¹

While the technology to produce glazed windows existed in the medieval period, no window glass was produced in England in the mid-sixteenth century.¹⁰² Window glass was imported through London, chiefly from Lorraine and Normandy, and was an expensive commodity. The reintroduction of window glass manufacturing into England from 1567 was a direct result of the arrival of immigrant glassmakers fleeing religious persecution in mainland Europe.¹⁰³ Initially manufacture concentrated in the Weald area of Sussex with its abundance of timber for fuel, but from 1610 when a furnace using cheaper coal was introduced, production shifted further west and into the Midlands.¹⁰⁴ The increase in availability of the product and reduced transport costs led to a fall in prices in the late sixteenth century.¹⁰⁵ As a moveable good, it was, however, still sufficiently valued to be included in the 1591 probate inventory of the Exeter merchant and Receiver of the city Richard Sweete's town house.¹⁰⁶

Evidence from surviving houses in Exeter suggests that glazed windows were seen as a status symbol, with houses such as 225-226 High Street having windows across the width of the facade. Outside of the towns, window glass was more rare. In the inventory of Thomas Blampin of Gittisham, Devon dated

¹⁰⁰ William Harrison notes in 1577 that instead of glass 'wicker or rifts of oak in checker wise' were used, *The Description of England*, p. 197.

¹⁰¹ Andrew Boorde, *The Booke for to Learne a Man to be Wyse in Buyldyng of His Howse for the Helth of Body [and] to Holde Quyetnes for the Helth of His Soule, and Body*, (London, 1550).

¹⁰² Eleanor S. Godfrey, *The Development of English Glassmaking 1560-1640* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), pp. 11-12.

¹⁰³ John E. Crowley, *The Invention of Comfort: Sensibilities and Design in Early Modern Britain and Early America* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 2000), p. 64.

¹⁰⁴ Godfrey, *The Development of English Glassmaking*, pp. 62-65 and 212-13.

¹⁰⁵ For a detailed analysis of the prices of window glass see Godfrey, *The Development of English Glassmaking*, pp. 200-15.

¹⁰⁶ The inventory of Richard Sweete who died in 1591, sets out the glass in detail on a room by room basis with a total value of 52s. 8d., quoted in Portman, *Exeter Houses 1400-1700*, p. 48.

1623, his hall had 'window leaves' but presumably no glass, although the high value of other material goods listed, totalling £944 16s, shows that Thomas was a wealthy individual.¹⁰⁷

An awareness of the architectural qualities of glazing was widely exploited in rural houses at gentry level. Where finances allowed, getting the maximum natural light into a room required large windows which were deliberately placed to intensify the reflective qualities of natural light on white plaster ceilings and overmantels, which contrasted with the walls which would have had darker painted decoration, timber panelling or textile hangings.¹⁰⁸ The vast window illuminating the hall at Trerice (CO29) (Fig. 2.09) for example, has twenty-four sections and 576 individual panes of glass, illuminating the plaster ceiling (Fig. 2.10).¹⁰⁹ Similar walls of near solid glazing in the double-height halls with plaster ceilings can be seen at Collacombe Manor (WD8), Nettlecombe Court, (WS15), Holcombe Court (MD11) and Poundisford Park (TA24).

2.5.4 Drivers for architectural change

The adoption of chimneys, ceilings and glazed windows should be viewed as part of the transformation of houses first identified by W. G. Hoskins as the 'Great Rebuilding'.¹¹⁰ This saw new houses built in a fully enclosed form and the conversion of existing houses. The Devon yeoman Robert Furse was typical of those carrying out such work:

He made the hall larger by all moste the iij parte and incresed one mor lyght to the same by one wyndowe, and of the olde shyppen he made a kychen and a paste howse, he made all the chambers over the same he made the porch and enterye and syled the hall and glaste all the wyndoes.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁷ Margaret Cash, *Devon Inventories of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Torquay: Devon and Cornwall Record Society, 1966), pp. 29-30.

¹⁰⁸ The very different effect of the decorative plasterwork under artificial lighting is discussed in Section 7.3.

¹⁰⁹ The coincidence of large glass windows and decorated plaster ceilings is discussed in Section 7.2.

¹¹⁰ W. G. Hoskins 'The Rebuilding of Rural England 1570-1640', *Past and Present*, 4 Nov. (1953), p. 44.

¹¹¹ Travers, *Robert Furse*, pp. 72-73.

It is not known whether Robert Furse installed decorative plasterwork at his house but in adding a ceiling to the hall and glazing to the windows he was engaged in a process that was being repeated across England from the mid-sixteenth century in the houses of the middle ranks.¹¹²

The central premise of Hoskins' Great Rebuilding thesis, that a large number of medieval houses were rebuilt in the period 1570-1640, is broadly accepted but it has been refined and its chronology questioned and extended in both directions according to the locality.¹¹³ Even allowing for a longer period of rebuilding than Hoskins suggests, given the preceding long period of innate conservatism in housing developments, the changes got underway within a relatively short timescale across the whole country. In the remoter part of the South-West, the developments appear to have percolated down the social scale to relatively modest households at an early date. Writing in his *Survey of Cornwall* in the 1580s, Richard Carew remarked on improvements in housing he had witnessed:

[...] walles of earth, low thatched roofes, few partitions, no planchings or glass windowes, and scarcely any chimnies, other than a hole in the wall to let out the smoke [...]. To conclude, a mazer and a panne or two, comprised all their substance: but now most of these fashions are universally banished, and the Cornish husbandman conformethe himselfe with a better supplied civilitie to the Easterne pattern.¹¹⁴

Carew's statement is perhaps too unequivocal but while the earlier ways of living were not 'universally banished', in the South-West, the transition to fully enclosed house with chimneys, ceilings and glazed windows was substantially complete within three generations.¹¹⁵

¹¹² It is likely that the chimney had been installed prior to 1572. The house is now a ruin but was recorded in the early twentieth century - there is no mention of plasterwork, G. W. Copeland Notebook, 1934-1936, Plymouth and West Devon Record Office, MS 712/1/3.

¹¹³ For two reassessments see R. Machin, 'The Great Rebuilding: A Reassessment', *Past and Present*, 77, Nov., 1977, pp. 33-56 and Colin Platt, *The Great Rebuildings of Tudor and Stuart England* (London: University College London Press, 1994).

¹¹⁴ Richard Carew, *The Survey of Cornwall and an Epistle Concerning the Excellencies of the English Tongue: A New Edition* (London: E. Law and J Hewett, 1769), p. 67.

¹¹⁵ Crowley, *The Invention of Comfort*, pp. 61-62. The exaggerated nature of Carew's account is also highlighted by Mark Overton, Jane Whittle, Darren Dean and Andrew Hann, *Production and Consumption in English Households, 1600-1750* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 123.

The reasons for this change have been the subject of much scholarly debate. The enclosure of the hall allowed the insertion of upper-floor chambers and increased the space available to the household. For Hoskins, the increase in the number of rooms was a response to social changes requiring a greater desire for privacy, more comfort and increased social and gender segregation.¹¹⁶ This orthodoxy has been questioned by Lena Cowen Orlin. Orlin argues persuasively against the assumptions that privacy was desirable and arrived at through evolutionary change from the more primitive medieval communal life, as in the highest status medieval houses there was already a degree of segregation.¹¹⁷

Certainly, in élite houses space was more use specific and each room had a single purpose, whereas in middling status houses rooms needed to be multifunctional. Cooking, for example moved from the hall to a separate kitchen, while dining for the family took place in the parlour or another dedicated room. The increase in the number of rooms, either within the main range, or in the case of service rooms in a rear wing must, however, have led to a greater segregation with those performing domestic tasks or involved in household production. This is seen not only in the surviving buildings but in inventories where new names for rooms begin to appear in the mid-seventeenth century.¹¹⁸ These inventories also demonstrate a proliferation in the range of decorative furnishings, with fabric hangings, curtains, and carpets and the accumulation of material goods such as ceramics, pewter and silver tableware which became commonplace.¹¹⁹ Orlin sees these moveable goods as a motivation for the creation of additional rooms, such as closets, which were used as cupboards to store valuables, rather than private spaces for personal retirement.¹²⁰

¹¹⁶ Hoskins, 'The Rebuilding of Rural England 1570-1640', p. 54.

¹¹⁷ Lena Cowen Orlin, *Locating Privacy in Tudor London* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 106.

¹¹⁸ Crowley, *The Invention of Comfort*, p. 55.

¹¹⁹ This expansion of material goods is commented on by Harrison, *The Description of England*, p. 200. Rooms in lower status houses were, however, more sparsely furnished than is generally appreciated, see Lorna Weatherill *Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture in Britain 1660-1760* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 8.

¹²⁰ Orlin, *Locating Privacy in Tudor London*, pp. 102-105 and p. 302.

Upper chambers did offer a degree of comfort as attested by the presence of fireplaces, which in the higher status rooms could display decorated plaster overmantels. This improved liveability was no doubt welcomed by the house occupants but Hoskins' 'desire for privacy' is not reflected in room function. In houses of sufficient status to contain plasterwork the principal rooms served one of three basic purposes: public receiving spaces where individuals of unequal status could mix; societal, where those of equal status communed; and the personal spaces within the house.¹²¹ The development of upper chambers led to a recalibration of room use within the house but not necessarily an increase in privacy. The largest first-floor room fulfilled a societal function, where dining and entertaining took place. The other upper chambers, some of which would have been used for sleeping, were accessed by family members, servants and privileged guests and cannot be regarded as private.

Conclusion

In the years 1550 to 1640, the majority of the housing stock of England occupied by the middle ranks of society was radically altered. At the start of the sixteenth century, the houses of the gentry, merchants, and wealthy yeomanry, took essentially the same form as two hundred years earlier. By the mid-seventeenth century, there had been a fundamental transformation in the level of comfort they offered and how they were used, decorated and furnished by their occupants.

The evidence presented in this chapter shows that it was the gentry and their equivalent that had the wherewithal to embark on these building projects and commission decorative plasterwork in the period. The prevailing economic conditions were highly favourable to this class and led to improvements in housing, notably the introduction of chimneys and glazed windows, and the flooring over of open rooms. Although the adoption of these features was not directly driven by the desire to provide platforms for decorative display, the process gave the propertied classes the opportunity to explore this potential

¹²¹ These categories broadly follow those of Katie Scott, *The Rococo Interior: Decoration and Social Spaces in Early Eighteenth Century Paris* (Yale New Haven and London, 1995), p. 105. Scott identifies these in relation to Parisian apartments of the eighteenth century but they can usefully be applied to elite English housing in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

within the interiors of their houses. In the South-West this is particularly evident in the contemporary installation of ornamental plasterwork schemes that fill these newly created spaces from the mid-sixteenth century. How this was achieved in practical terms is discussed in the next chapter.

3. MATERIALS, METHODS AND DESIGN

The production of plaster is a straightforward process relying on the basic minerals of lime, or gypsum, mixed with sand, water and hair. This simple material is, however, capable of producing decoration of surprising complexity and durability. Section 3.1 of this chapter outlines the constituent materials that comprised the plaster mixes available in the period and how these were produced. Section 3.2 shows how this material was skilfully manipulated by the practitioners using three basic techniques of hand-modelling, run-moulding and press-moulding and how the material and techniques were combined to produce a finished scheme. The concluding Section 3.3 assesses how the designs were employed to create the principal room elements of ceilings, friezes, and overmantels that comprised the finished schemes.

3.1 Materials

The use of plaster as building material has a long history in Britain, dating at least as far back as the Roman period.¹ The application of plain flat plaster was an efficient way of rendering internal, and sometimes external, walls with added draught proofing, sanitary, and fire resistant qualities. On occasion this might have painted designs applied but the potential of plaster as a three-dimensional decorative medium took longer to establish. The modelling of plaster to form shapes and patterns for ornamental effect was a technique introduced to Britain from mainland Europe in the 1530-40s. The best known of the early practitioners is Nicholas Bellin of Modena, who worked at Fontainebleau before arriving at the court of Henry VIII in 1537. Bellin is known to have created high quality Renaissance plasterwork at the palaces of Nonsuch, Whitehall and Hampton Court.² Outside of these royal works, decorative plaster was rare and restricted to élite residences, but from the last decade of the sixteenth century

¹ Plaster recovered during archaeological excavation is relatively common at Romano-British domestic sites but has yet to be found in an Iron Age context, although an earth 'daub' was used to line the walls of round-houses.

² See Martin Biddle, 'Nicholas Bellin of Modena', *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, 3rd series, 29 (1966), pp. 106-21.

the market expanded to the houses of the middle ranks of society, served by the emergent regionally-based workshops.³

The composition of plaster varied between practitioners. Accounts from Whitehall for 1540 list 'morter makerse To mothen the Italyon', suggest that Bellin was using a different plaster mix to that employed by his British contemporaries on the same project.⁴ It is, however, likely that the native plasterers were engaged in plain plasterwork, while Bellin produced the decorative elements. While plaster can differ according to the preferred recipe of the plasterer and the term 'plaster' can encompass a wide variation of mixes depending on its application, in essence the core constituent was always either gypsum, lime or a combination of both. Each material offers different qualities that, according to preference, availability and cost, governed how and where it was used.

3.1.1 Gypsum plaster

The nature of his work and experience at Fontainebleau makes it highly probable that the plaster mix used by Nicholas Bellin was gypsum-based, or at least contained a high proportion of this material. Gypsum plaster is produced by burning naturally occurring hydrated calcium sulphate ($\text{CaSO}_4 \cdot 2\text{H}_2\text{O}$) found in minerals. Of these minerals, gypsum and alabaster give the purest form of plaster. During the burning process, some of the water which makes up the crystalline structure is driven off, forming calcium sulphate hemihydrate. This is ground to a fine powder, which is commonly known as plaster of Paris, the name being derived from the large deposits of gypsum at Montmartre outside the city.

Documentary sources demonstrate that plaster of Paris was imported into England from Montmartre in the sixteenth century using long established trade routes.⁵ Salzman for example, cites customs accounts from Southampton for 20

³ These workshops are discussed in Chapter 5.

⁴ Claire Gapper and Jeff Orton, 'Plaster, Stucco and Stuccoes', *Journal of Architectural Conservation*, 17:3 (2011), p. 8 and 12.

⁵ L. F. Salzman, *Building in England Down to 1540: A Documentary History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), p. 155.

cwt. of 'plaster de Parrys' for the vaulting of Winchester Cathedral in 1532. Plaster of Paris could also be obtained from stones occurring in England, with sources at Purbeck in Dorset, Nottingham and Yorkshire.⁶ The cost of transportation was undoubtedly a major factor in dictating which of the sources was exploited. Malcolm Airs cites the example of gypsum travelling from Lincolnshire to Suffolk, by way of road, sea, river and road, which suggests considerable organisation was involved in moving the material.⁷ For long distances, water transport was invariably less expensive than overland and southern England, particularly London, was therefore better placed to receive imports from France and Purbeck than from the Midlands or North.

To create gypsum plaster, the powdered plaster of Paris must be recombined with water. The plaster has a very fast setting time of around 15 minutes, which does not lend itself readily to freehand modelling and is best used for making plaster casts created from moulds. Once set, the interlocking crystals of gypsum give a smooth, white, crisp appearance. Gypsum plaster also had good fire-retardant qualities and was used for lining chimneys. A less desirable quality is that once cured it is brittle and dissolves readily in water, making it vulnerable in damp conditions.

3.1.2 Lime plaster

Lime plaster has an equally long history of use in England. The raw material is limestone, which is widely obtainable across the country and where not available, chalk or seashells could be substituted.⁸ Limestone occurs across the South-West, and in Devon the main areas are on the north and south coasts at Combe Martin and around Torbay and Plymouth with outcrops inland in north and west Dartmoor. The wide availability of limestone meant that lime-based plaster was less expensive than gypsum. For this reason, and also because the

⁶ The exploitation of alabaster in the East Midlands is described by William Harrison in 1577, *The Description of England*, ed. by Georges Edelen (Ithaca, New York: Published for the Folger Shakespeare Library by Cornell University Press, 1968), pp. 358-59.

⁷ Malcolm Airs, *The Tudor and Jacobean Country House: A Building History* (Stroud: Bramley Books, 1998), p. 129.

⁸ As noted by Harrison, *The Description of England*, p. 196.

local plasterers were familiar with it, lime formed the basis of almost all the decorative and plain plasterwork in the region in the period.

Lime plaster relies on a process commonly known as the 'lime cycle'. This starts with limestone of almost pure calcium carbonate (CaCO_3) which is heated in a purpose-made kiln to over 900 degrees centigrade to drive off carbon dioxide (CO_2) and produce calcium oxide (CaO), or 'quicklime'. Historically, lime kilns were located on building sites with permanent kilns situated close to the source of the material or at coastal locations, demonstrating that limestone was imported and exported by sea.⁹ The quicklime produced in the kilns is highly caustic and hazardous to handle and transport as it reacts violently with water. This reaction can be harnessed by placing the quicklime in a pit or trough and slaking with water, to produce calcium hydroxide (Ca(OH)_2). This material is then raked and sieved and either has more water added to create lime putty, which is the core constituent of lime plaster and is stored wet, or is dried, ground, and powdered to create hydrated lime, which can be bagged.

When the lime is exposed to air, the calcium hydroxide reacts with the carbon dioxide returning the material back to its hard-set calcium carbonate form, completing the lime cycle. This process is, however, slow, and depending on conditions can take months or even years to completely harden-off. As it dries it shrinks and, if not controlled, cracks. Once set, however, lime plaster is surprisingly resilient. This is attested by plaster recovered from archaeological excavations. At Berry Pomeroy Castle (SH2) for example, decorative plasterwork had survived some 400 years in the ground and can be seen in the reconstructed female figure displayed at The Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter (Fig. 2.11).¹⁰

Lime is an extremely versatile material. Depending on how it is combined with other materials, it can be used for a variety of purposes in buildings. To produce

⁹ For a synopsis see John Torrance, 'On the History of Lime-Burning in East Devon', *Transactions of the Devonshire Association for the Advancement of Science, Literature and Art*, 146 (2014), pp. 253-84.

¹⁰ For an analysis of this see John Thorp, 'The Excavated Ornamental Plaster Fragments' in S. Brown ed. 'Berry Pomeroy Castle', *Proceedings of the Devon Archaeological Society*, 54 (1996), pp. 275-90.

a plaster the lime putty is combined with fine sand and animal hair. Sand, or aggregate, is a constituent common to all mortars and plasters, but hair is only used in plasters. The purpose of hair as a binding material is to render the mixture more workable and help prevent cracks forming during drying. Accounts indicate that two types of hair were used, 'black hair' for coarse work and the more expensive 'white hair' for fine plaster.¹¹ On occasions hair would be omitted, such as at Fiddleford Mill, Dorset, where excavated fragments of ceiling ribs and friezes dating to 1560 contained only lime putty and fine sand.¹²

To create a decorative scheme, or indeed to apply plain plaster to a wall or ceiling, two distinct types of lime-based plaster were typically used in combination. Firstly, a rough thick earth backing coat was applied. Analysis of the early seventeenth-century decorative plaster at 5 Higher Street, Dartmouth (SH11) revealed this backing coat to comprise 50% lime, 25% aggregate and 25% earth and short soft hair.¹³ This was put directly onto the solid wall, or in the case of ceilings and partitions, to riven timber laths of oak or chestnut, nailed to a timber framework. In some areas of north and west Somerset, the moors and wetlands produced reeds that could be used instead of the split laths. Reeds have a greater resilience than laths to decay and can hold a considerable weight, such as seen in the highly decorated ceilings at Barrow Court, Barrow Gurney (NS1).¹⁴

Over this backing or 'pricking-up' coat, a secondary ('floating' or 'straightening') coat of lime putty, silver sand and fine hair was applied. Finally, a finishing coat was added which at 5 Higher Street comprised a lime putty with a small amount

¹¹ A document relating to the plastering of Dartmouth Guildhall includes accounts for both types of hair see Todd Gray, 'Plaster and Dartmouth Guildhall in 1614', *Devon Buildings Group Newsletter*, 37 (2019), p. 44, whereas Exeter Guildhall accounts for 1593-4 specifically mention only the white variety, see S. R. Blaylock, 'Exeter Guildhall', *Proceedings of the Devon Archaeological Society*, 48 (1990), p. 164.

¹² John Thorp, 'Fiddleford, Sturminster Newton, Dorset. Documentary History & Report on the plasterwork', unpublished report prepared by Keystone Historic Buildings Consultants for English Heritage, 1995, quoted in Claire Gapper, 'Chapter 1 Materials and their Uses', *British Renaissance Plasterwork* <<http://clairegapper.info/materials-and-uses.html>>, accessed 15 August 2016.

¹³ Sean Wheatley, Jeff Orton and Henry Orton, '5 Higher Street, Dartmouth, Devon' (unpublished report, Sean Wheatley Plastering Specialist, 2011).

¹⁴ John and Jane Penoyre, *Decorative Plasterwork in the Houses of Somerset, 1500-1700* (Taunton: Somerset County Council, 1994), p. 47 and p. 83.

of gypsum and fine hair. The mix of a thick earth backing coat and fine finishing coat is typical for the South-West in the period. This can be seen in the fragments of early seventeenth-century plaster from 38 North Street, Exeter (EX17) (Fig. 3.01).

3.1.3 Additives

The addition of gypsum to the finishing coat of lime plaster identified at 5 Higher Street, is not unexpected. This practice, known as 'gauging', is used to speed up the setting process of lime plaster, and also balance the shrinkage during drying to prevent cracking. It may also have given a finer final finish to the work. The Reynell household accounts entry for Wednesday 18 May 1630 includes a hogshead of lime, at 4s 2d, and an unspecified but smaller amount of plaster of Paris, at 3s 3d.¹⁵ It is tempting to assume that this was intended for the extensive decorative plasterwork at the Reynell's family seat at Forde House, Newton Abbot (TE26).¹⁶

In addition to gypsum, other additives could be included in lime plaster. These are, however, very difficult to extract for scientific analysis and while individual plasterers would have had their own favourite recipes, identifying these, while theoretically possible, is problematic as a wide number of substances were used. The setting time of lime plaster could also be speeded up with crystalline additives of alum and potassium sulphate and its strength increased with mineral additives such as magnesium and fluorosilicate.¹⁷ To retard the set, size (typically rabbit-skin glue) or urine could be added to the mix.¹⁸ Another known retardant is red wine and, as David Bostwick has pointed out, the plasterer's

¹⁵ Todd Gray, ed., *Devon Household Accounts, 1627-59, Part 1* (Devon and Cornwall Record, 1995), p. 90.

¹⁶ It should be noted, however, that there are alternative uses for these materials. Plaster of Paris, for example, could also be used as a 'underlay' for the rush matting for floors, while lime had a variety of uses in building construction as a render and mortar and as an agricultural fertiliser.

¹⁷ For an explanation of this process see Trevor Proudfoot, 'Decorative Lime Plaster', *The Building Conservation Directory* (Salisbury: Cathedral Publications, 2001).

¹⁸ Geoffrey Beard, for example, speculates that horse's hooves may have been boiled down as an additive, see *Decorative Plasterwork in Great Britain* (London: Phaidon, 1975), p. 9.

tools belonging to late seventeenth-century Devon plasterer John Abbott, include an initialled wine bottle.¹⁹

3.1.4 Colour

Once fully set, the plaster would be finished with a limewash comprising lime putty thinned with water, or a whitewash using chalk, which could be bound with size to give a more durable distemper finish.²⁰ The wash would cover any variations in colour, small cracks and slight imperfections in the plasterwork, and unless a pigment was deliberately added, would naturally give a white appearance. Most plaster was finished in this way and in his contemporary account William Harrison specially mentions the ‘delectable whiteness of the stuff.’²¹ Similarly, in 1611 Robert Cecil was informed in a letter that the ‘frett sealing’ in the gallery at Hatfield House ‘willbe fullye finished with the whitinge of it’.²² The completed plasterwork scheme could, however, also be coloured. There were potentially three coloured finishes that could be used on plaster in the period: limewash, painting, and gilding. These were seldom used in the South-West. An explanation for this rarity may be that colour was actually used regularly but has not been identified below later layers of paint. The vast majority of schemes are now presented with a white finish and have not been scientifically analysed, which would involve physically stripping away centuries of emulsion paint, distempers and limewashes. However, where such an intervention through restoration has taken place, the use of colour in the very earliest layers still seems to be the exception.

Small amounts of mineral-based pigment could be added to the basic limewash mix to give an overall colour-wash. The use of coloured limewash for internal decorative plaster appears not to have taken place in period, although it has

¹⁹ The tools are held by the Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter. David Bostwick, ‘Decorative Plasterwork: Materials and Methods’, in *Interior Finishes and Fittings for Historic Building Conservation*, ed. by Michael Forsyth and Lisa White (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), p. 28.

²⁰ Ian C. Bristow, *Interior House-Painting Colours and Technology 1615-1840* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), pp. 111-14.

²¹ Harrison, *The Description of England*, p.197.

²² Quoted in Claire Gapper, ‘Patrons, Plasterers and Architects: Designing Decorative Plasterwork in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries’, in *Architect, Patron and Craftsman in Tudor and Early Stuart England: Essays for Malcolm Airs*, ed. by P. S. Barnwell and Paula Henderson (Donington: Shaun Tyas, 2017), p. 146.

been used in recent restoration schemes to give a softer coloured finish to match or imitate stone. This can be seen to good effect in the Great Chamber at Holcombe Court (MD11) (Fig. 6.08). Coloured limewash and distempers were comparatively cheap, and unlike expensive oil paints, could be applied without the plasterwork being completely dry, which in the case of lime plaster could be many months. It is therefore curious that they were not employed more frequently. Based on the available evidence, where documentary sources refer to limewash they are most likely describing external plaster and render, which require this for weather protection and are commonly coloured today.

In the most expensive schemes, the plaster might be gilded, although this was more common in later seventeenth- and eighteenth-century work, particularly in mainland Europe.²³ There is documentary evidence for gilding, albeit on the very highest status work on the ceilings of the royal palaces. These materials were typically applied to give decoration to plain flat plaster rather than to pick out elements modelled in relief, although at Whitehall and Woodstock the ribs and applied ornament had additional coloured decoration.²⁴ The royal arms in the High Upper Chamber at Hardwick Hall, Derbyshire also has gilding, which is believed to be contemporary, while the frieze is painted.

There were clearly enough plasterers using oil-based paint in late sixteenth-century London for this to be a source of irritation to the Painter-Stainers Company, who sought a monopoly on the use of paint. Evidence of this demarcation dispute can be found in a bill presented to the Court of Common Council in 1603 that restricted members of the Company of Plaisterers to a palette of five colours: 'whiting, blacking, redlead, redocker, yellow ochre and mingled with size only'.²⁵ Outside of London, and the jurisdiction of the Painter-Stainers, there were no such restrictions on the use of paint, and the plasterer John Abbott's book contains seventy-eight recipes for a range of colours,

²³ Examples of high status plasterwork can be seen in Peter Thornton, *Seventeenth-Century Interior Decoration in England, France and Holland* (London: Yale University Press, 1978).

²⁴ For a description of these Royal decorative schemes see Eric Mercer 'The Decoration of the Royal Palaces from 1553-1625', *Archaeological Journal*, 110 (1953), p. 153.

²⁵ Quoted in James Ayres, *Art, Artisans and Apprentices: Apprentice Painters and Sculptors in the Early Modern British Tradition* (Oxford: Oxbow, 2014), p.105.

including a section on oil based paints.²⁶ Abbott's paint recipes were, however, provided for the explicit use on stained hangings and were not specifically for plasterwork.²⁷

There is limited evidence in the South-West to demonstrate that ceilings and friezes were coloured in the period. Where now painted, such as the ceiling in the Library at Weare Giffard (TR29) (Fig. 3.02), this finish was most likely added in the nineteenth century or later. Where plaster was painted it was in a very specific and limited way so as to pick out heraldic devices.²⁸ A better candidate for contemporary plaster painting at Weare Giffard is the frieze in the hall. The heraldry here may have originally been painted to match the shields below, which are part of earlier sixteenth-century timber panelling, which include the arms of Henry VIII (Fig. 3.03). In the library at Montacute House (SS18) (Fig. 3.43) the large framed shields that repeat in the frieze are currently plain but in an illustration of the frieze in Bankart, however, the heraldry is depicted and was presumably painted at this time.²⁹

In the hall at the Walronds, Cullompton (MD6), the restoration of the overmantel in 2009 stripped away the garish and poorly executed painting from 1955 to reveal a sequence of repainting following changing fashions stretching back to its initial installation in 1605.³⁰ This earliest layer of what is believed to be a contemporary scheme, had traces of vermilion colour on the central shield (Fig. 3.04).³¹ This has been recreated in red, black, blue and gold leaf during the

²⁶ The Abbott book is held in Devon Record Office but a transcript of the liming section has been published by John Chenevix Trench, 'John Abbott's Manual of Limming', *Association for Studies in the Conservation of Historic Buildings*, 11 (1986), pp. 19-26.

²⁷ For description of the textiles and methods see Ayres, *Art, Artisans and Apprentices*, pp. 249-55.

²⁸ The colouring of heraldic arms also occurs on stone overmantels and funerary monuments, although again this it is not always certain the extent to which this was added at a later date.

²⁹ George P. Bankart, *The Art of the Plasterer: An Account of the Decorative Development of the Craft, Chiefly in England from the XVIth to the XVIIIth Century* [...] 2nd edn. (London: Batsford, 1910), p. 147.

³⁰ This is illustrated in John, R. L. Thorp 'Wall Painting and Lime-Plaster Decoration', in *Devon Building: An Introduction to Local Traditions*, ed. by Peter Beacham, 2nd edn. (Exeter: Devon Books, 1995), p. 85.

³¹ Eddie Sinclair, 'The Walronds, Cullompton, Devon, Polychromy Report' (unpublished November 2009), p. 5.

recent restoration (Fig. 6.14). Other parts of the hall overmantel showed traces of a red ochre followed by what could have been a scheme of marbling, which has not been recreated in the restoration. In the principal chamber at the Walronds, the heraldry on the overmantel showed no evidence of original paint below the modern layers and these were removed during the restoration to give a plain white finish. A third overmantel, in the hall chamber, also showed no evidence of original paint.³² It is not clear why the hall heraldry was painted and the principal chamber overmantel, which is coeval and also has an heraldic shield, was not. It may be that the overmantel, along with the painted wall plaques above a door, were part of a wider heraldic scheme with the greater expense of paint being deployed in this most public room in the house.

The overmantel from 229 High Street, Exeter, now residing at St Nicholas Priory (EX16) (Fig. 5.34), is also understood to have had a contemporary colour scheme, although it is now presented with a white finish.³³ Analysis of the overmantel formerly in the Drawing Room at the Grange, Broadhembury (ED5) but now located in the Speed Museum, Kentucky, has also revealed traces of colour and silver leaf.³⁴

Heraldic detail is almost always picked out in the plaster modelling, even where overpainted. The application of paint was therefore not essential in order to interpret the heraldry. Although dating from the eighteenth century, the large coat of arms in St Lawrence's Hall, Ashburton, Devon, concealed below its modern paint the original plaster which has been scored in various patterns to represent heraldry. This demonstrates that it was meant to be 'read' unpainted but had the colour applied once the markings had become indistinct through subsequent years of limewashing.³⁵

³² Ibid., p. 4.

³³ John Allan and Kate Osborne, *St Nicholas Priory: from Monastery to Museum* (Exeter: Royal Albert Memorial Museum, 2009), p. 412.

³⁴ Unpublished report quoted in Hugh Meller, *The Country Houses of Devon*, 1 (Crediton: Black Dog Press, 2015), pp. 445-46.

³⁵ Jane Schofield, Pers. comm., 9 April 2014.

Where heraldry is not picked out in the plaster it may have been intended to be left blank for aesthetic purposes. The overmantel in the hall at Buckland Abbey (WD1) (Fig. 3.56) has three shields with a smooth plain finish, as does the central inverse tear-drop shaped cartouche in the hall at Trerice, Cornwall (CO29) (Fig. 3.05). Both overmantels by the same workshop. In these cases the shields were perhaps never intended to be painted with heraldry. It is notable that at Trerice the overmantel in the first-floor great chamber has a similar cartouche to the hall but here it contains heraldry that is finely modelled in plaster, demonstrating that such intricate work was within the plasterer's skill-set (Fig. 3.06). That such work was applied to one overmantel and not the other within the same house further supports the supposition that on occasion shields were intended to be left plain of heraldry.

3.2 Methods

There are no contemporary accounts from the study period that deal with the technicalities of producing decorative plasterwork. Methods would have differed slightly between practitioners but it can be confidently deduced from the surviving evidence of the schemes that these were fundamentally the same as recorded in building trade books from the early eighteenth century.³⁶ Essentially, three basic techniques, often used in combination, were utilised to produce decorative plasterwork: run-moulding; press-moulding; and freehand modelling. Plaster is caustic so all of these techniques required trowels and small modelling tools to manipulate the material. These tools are illustrated and described by Randle Holme in 1688 and fifteen years later by Joseph Moxon (Fig. 3.07).³⁷

3.2.1 Run-moulding

Run-moulding was an essentially mechanical process which produced the profiled plaster commonly used for cornices, ceiling ribs and the framing decoration for overmantels. These mouldings were run in situ using profile

³⁶ For example see Joseph Moxon, *Mechanick Exercises. Or, the Doctrine of Handy-works*. [...] 3rd edn (London: Joseph Moxon, 1703) and Richard Neve, *The City and Countrey Purchaser and Builder's Dictionary; or, The Compleat Builder's Guide* [...] (London: Richard Neve, 1703).

³⁷ Randle Holme, *The Academy of Armory* [...] (Chester, 1688), Bk. 3, Ch. 9 pp. 391 and 396 and Joseph Moxon, *Mechanick Exercises*, plate 2.2. A comprehensive description of plasterer's tools is given in Millar, *Plastering Plain and Decorative*, pp. 537-47.

moulds. The core of the plasterwork was formed of coarse earth plaster over riven laths and the profile was achieved by dragging a moulding board guided by a fixed timber framework known as a 'horse', along this backing coat, or along a second coat of applied plaster.³⁸ The running mould was fitted with a series of templates (known as muffles) which reduced in size with the smallest used for the final finishing coat of plaster. For deep cornices the moulding would be built up over a wooden frame spanning the ceiling and the wall with the laths nailed to this. For broad-rib ceilings the ribs were formed by running the two outer mouldings, either side of a core, which could be left plain, or decorated using casts from press-moulds or perhaps stamped.

3.2.2 Press-moulding

The majority of the shallow-relief repeated designs seen in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century plasterwork utilised pre-formed three-dimensional carved moulds to produce plaster casts. These moulds were either cut in the negative to produce direct positive plaster designs, or alternatively for larger schemes it is likely that a single positive carving would have been used to produce multiple temporary one-off negative moulds from which the same number of casts were formed.

No original moulds from the study period are known to survive, although some positive moulds might exist unrecognised as decorative pieces. For the negative-cut moulds, the surviving casts made from the plasterwork during the repairs to Holcombe Court in the mid-nineteenth century give an idea of what these would have looked like (Fig. 3.08). Where original moulds do survive from the late seventeenth century and later they were commonly made from fine-grained wood, such as box or lime wood, although lead casts could also have been used for smaller details.

The wooden moulds are likely to have been supplied to the plasterers by joiners. There is documentary evidence of this close relationship from Old Thorndon Hall, Essex, where in 1587 the joiner David Harrison was paid to

³⁸ John, R. L. Thorp, 'The Construction, Appearance and Development of a Merchant's Town House c.1500-1740: 38 North Street, Exeter', *Proceedings of the Devon Archaeological Society*, 70 (2012), p. 206.

produce carved moulds for the plasterer Richard Barfeilde who was engaged to make the ceilings.³⁹ This also demonstrates that moulds were on occasion custom made for individual jobs. It could equally be the case that the same joiner produced the moulds for the plaster that also carved the woodwork as there is evidence to show that some craftsmen practiced both trades. The Gunby brothers, for example, produced the plasterwork and the moulds at Gawthorpe Hall, Lancashire and for a number of houses in Yorkshire in the early seventeenth century.⁴⁰

In the South-West, where plaster, carved timber, and stone are present within a house and in context, no direct correlation between decorative designs has been identified by this study. At Montacute House (SS18) for example, the chimneypiece in the Dining Room (Fig. 3.09) comprises stone, timber and plaster with no shared common design elements. Further to this, in London the demarcation disputes common between the company of plasterers and the painter/stainers and plumbers do not seem to occur with the joiners, who included wood carvers in their number.⁴¹ This suggests that few plasterers strayed into the timber or wood carving.⁴² These would have required different skills, as plaster involves adding material to create the finished piece, whereas timber and wood carving is a subtractive process.

To produce negative moulds the wood was carved in reverse. This was not without technical issues. The inherent inflexibility of wood made undercut designs hard to achieve as they were difficult to release from the mould. For this reason, only shallow low-relief designs could be produced in wooden moulds. To aid release, an agent (olive oil is used today) was coated inside the mould

³⁹ Information from Malcolm Airs, quoted in Claire Gapper, 'Chapter 3 The Plasterers' Company of the City of London', *British Renaissance Plasterwork* <<http://clairegapper.info/plasterers-company.html>>, accessed 15 August 2016.

⁴⁰ See David Bostwick, 'The Jacobean Plasterwork at Gawthorpe Hall and its Sources', *Apollo* (May 1994), pp. 24-28.

⁴¹ The lack of disputes in London is noted by Claire Gapper, 'Chapter 3 The Plasterers' Company of the City of London', *British Renaissance Plasterwork* <<http://clairegapper.info/plasterers-company.html>>, accessed 15 August 2016. For the relationship between the trades see Ayres, *Art, Artisans and Apprentices*.

⁴² There is, however, at least one example of a plasterer producing stone carving, with Abraham Smith's work at Hardwick Hall, Derbyshire.

and the stiff plaster pressed into it and left until firm enough to be removed, typically up to five days for lime plaster if no additional setting agent, such as gypsum, was added to the mix. The ornament was extracted from the mould when the plaster was partially set and manipulated with a modelling tool to produce the final effect. This element of final finishing by hand means that casts taken from the same moulds do not necessarily produce identical decorations and can have subtle differences. There are also examples where the cast design must have been finished by hand, as with the floral spray at 69 High Street, Barnstaple (ND8) where the high-relief daffodil trumpets were clearly achieved in this way (Fig. 3.10).

Sir Hugh Platt, writing in 1594, describes the moulds used for friezes as 'halfe a yard long, and a foot in breadth' (0.45 by 0.30 metres).⁴³ An examination of surviving friezes in the South-West suggests they are broadly within this range, typically between 20 and 40 cm deep. At Poundisford Lodge, Somerset (TA23), two very slight variations of the flat-fret tulip design were used for the friezes in the Oak Chamber and parlour. A practical explanation is that different plasterers from the same workshop were working simultaneously on each floor of the house and only had access to one of each of the moulds.

Cast ornament could also be formed from more than one mould. At 38 North Street, Exeter (EX17), the floral sprays are made-up of two sections comprising upper and lower moulds (Fig. 5.43).⁴⁴ This can also be seen with the floral spray at 6 Duke Street (SH7) where the break between the moulds is visible (Fig. 5.44). Friezes also allowed multiple moulds to be used. In the Long Gallery at Holcombe Court (MD11), the frieze comprises two alternating moulds in one continuous run.⁴⁵ In this way the plasterer had the freedom to create a variation on the continuously patterned frieze utilising a limited number of moulds.

Where repetitive designs were required it would have been time consuming, given the long setting time of lime plaster, to use a single wooden mould. The

⁴³ Hugh Platt, *The Jewell House of Art and Nature* (London: printed by Peter Short, 1594), p.68.

⁴⁴ This is also identified by Thorp, 'The Construction, Appearance and Development of a Merchant's Town House', p. 206.

⁴⁵ This frieze is identical to the bottom two strips from Haddon Hall, Derbyshire (Fig. 5.02).

geometrically complex parlour ceiling at Poundisford Lodge (TA23), is typical of the late sixteenth-century. A close study of this ceiling reveals two floral spray casts, using an identical finial, were used twelve times each and one 'jelly mould' boss design cast thirty-five times (Fig. 3.11). At 5 Higher Street, Dartmouth (SH11) the ceiling utilised eight different moulds, while highly decorated early seventeenth-century ceilings with enriched flat-ribs, such as the master chamber at Rashleigh Barton (MD24) used a similar number of moulds and degree of repetition but also included a very high level of freehand modelling.

Given the repeated use of a limited number of moulds, a large amount of pre-casting took place, most likely on a bench on site, or in the plasterer's workshop. Close inspection of the ceilings at Alphington Rectory, Exeter (EX8) and Dean Head, Swimbridge (ND52) during my site visits revealed lines around floral sprays which suggests that cast decoration was added in to the existing ceiling when dry or nearly dry. David Bostwick has also found evidence in Yorkshire of fleur-de-lis casts being pinched to form a lug to aid fixing, which also suggests they were applied to the wet plaster ceiling when the casts were dry.⁴⁶

To produce the casts Hugh Platt describes an alternative to the re-usable negative mould.⁴⁷ A one-off mould made from size and beeswax would be taken directly from an original carved in the positive. The negative mould could then be filled with plaster to produce an identical cast copy.⁴⁸ Platt goes on to describe how an artist might 'cast off whole borders for chambers or galleries'.⁴⁹ In this way one timber positive mould could produce multiple negative one-off size and beeswax moulds from which would be cast an equal number of positive plaster casts.

⁴⁶ David Bostwick, 'Decorative Plasterwork of the Yorkshire Region, 1570-1670' (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Sheffield, 1993), p. 234.

⁴⁷ Platt, *The Jewell House of Art and Nature*, pp. 41-68.

⁴⁸ This process is essentially the same as used today, where silicone or plaster moulds are taken from originals to restore lost features in historic schemes.

⁴⁹ Platt, *The Jewell House of Art and Nature*, p. 68.

This type of one-off mould does have advantages over the reverse-cut reusable timber mould. Although producing single moulds for each cast introduces an extra production stage, multiple casts could be made simultaneously, rather than waiting for each to dry before it could be removed from the mould and re-used. The greater flexibility of the single-use mould also allows the plaster cast to be easily extracted, giving more opportunity to cast high-relief shapes. A further advantage is that it did not require the original master for the moulds to be carved in reverse, which was undoubtedly an easier proposition for the wood carver. A drawback, however, is that a size/beeswax mould, unlike its modern silicone equivalent and contemporary wooden reverse-carved versions, could only be used once as it is necessary to destroy the mould to extract the cast. The wide use of single-use moulds would explain the lack of surviving wooden moulds from this period, although it should be noted that no three-dimensional masters have been discovered.

Stamped decoration

There is a variation of the press-moulding technique where a stamp, cut in the same reverse manner, was applied directly to the almost set plaster to produce a repetitive pattern. This was a fast and economical way of achieving a decorative scheme in plain plaster that did not require the input of a skilled ornamental plasterer. It would, however, only be suitable for producing quite small patterns. The lack of surviving examples that can be easily identified suggest a technique that was rarely used. In Devon, Bakers Thatch, Braunton (ND24), contains a heraldic lion passant, an ornate fleur-de-lis, a handled pot with daisy-like flower and a scallop shape stamped into the plaster. In Somerset, at The Corner House, Alhampton (ME8), there are bird, tree, flower and leaf motifs. Cynthia Cramp identified similarities between these stamped designs and late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century relief tiles, but she does not consider it likely that the same stamps were used for both tiles and plaster.⁵⁰ This hypothesis is also borne out by this study, which can identify no concordance. Where larger decorative schemes are present, however, stamped

⁵⁰ Cynthia Cramp, 'North Devon Relief-decorated ceramics in the household', in *West Country Households 1500-1700* ed. by John Allan, Nat Alcock and David Dawson (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2015), pp. 205-06.

decoration would have been one of the techniques available to the plasterer and may have been incorporated within enriched broad-ribs.

3.2.3 Hand-modelling

All but the simplest plasterwork schemes involved an element of freehand modelling, which was the most common technique for producing decorative plasterwork in the South-West.⁵¹ Three-dimensional modelling for decorative work is made up in layers in much the same manner as for flatwork. To minimise shrinkage, graded sands of various particle sizes are added to lime putty, with each layer using progressively finer sand.

The slow drying time of lime plaster would have been an advantage in hand-modelling large elaborate pieces such as overmantels, as it allowed the layers of the work to be built up gradually. As hand-modelling required some time to produce, larger high relief pieces would have needed additional support while drying. It has been suggested by John Thorp that animal and human figures would have been pinned through their eyes to hold them in place until dry.⁵² While pinning must have taken place, it is more likely that the holes represent a way to add a more lifelike appearance, for example, the central figure in the pediment on the chamber overmantel at the Luttrell Arms, Somerset (WS6), has eyes, nostrils and ears pierced (Fig. 7.45). Small holes are also seen in the hall frieze at Widworthy Barton (ED29) (Fig. 4.46) and there is a proliferation on the overmantel at Greenway, Devon (SH23) (Fig. 3.60). These were added for decorative effect. In any event, were the holes only required for pinning they could have easily been filled-in afterwards and would leave no external trace.

For larger pieces, fixing and permanent support was sometimes required. In the case of ceilings, evidence of this would usually be obscured under floorboards or in the roof space. At Lanhydrock (CO9) stitching is clearly visible in the gallery ceiling from floor level and on close examination many of the

⁵¹ This can be contrasted with London where the technique was seldom used, see Claire Gapper, 'Chapter 5 The London Evidence', *British Renaissance Plasterwork* <<http://clairegapper.info/the-london-evidence.html>>, accessed 15 August 2016.

⁵² Thorp, 'The Construction, Appearance and Development of a Merchant's Town House', pp. 147-250.

enrichments have thin wires, often disguised as necklaces or collars on the plaster figures (Fig. 3.12). The purpose of these is visible in the roof space where the numerous supporting wires can be seen connecting the plasterwork ceiling to the roof structure above, which are also plastered, presumably to make them visible and less hazardous to anyone picking their way through the roofspace.⁵³ This is, however, evidence of a later conservation repair, rather than part of the original construction.

Where thin three-dimensional shapes were required, armatures of wood, twigs or copper wire might be employed to add reinforcement or form the shape with a thin veneer of plaster. Damage to a bird figure in the parlour ceiling at Rashleigh Barton (MD24) clearly shows how this was achieved, with the leg of the bird revealed to be a small piece of wood (Fig. 3.13). The figures on overmantels in the gallery at Lanhydrock (CO9) carry spears and swords, which are most likely wood, while the harp carried by the David figure has strings, presumably created from wire (Fig. 3.14).

3.2.4 Application of plasterwork

Planning

The design of a plasterwork scheme was clearly pre-planned and it seems probable that the pattern, which may have been derived from a published illustration, was first drawn out on paper, although not necessarily in great detail. Millar and Bankart, writing in 1927, state that:

Full size or large scale drawings are helpful in working out an idea; but it is better to work directly in clay or plaster than to needlessly absorb time and energy that should be devoted to the model.⁵⁴

No sixteenth-century fully worked-up drawings of plasterwork schemes are known to survive, with the exception of a drawing for Ramsbury Hall, Wiltshire.⁵⁵ This dates to the late sixteenth century and was drafted onto paper in precise,

⁵³ In May 2016 the National Trust had a display board in the gallery showing these.

⁵⁴ William Millar and George P. Bankart, *Plastering, Plain and Decorative*, 4th edn. (London: Batsford, 1927), p. 76.

⁵⁵ Ramsbury Hall was demolished in the eighteenth century and it is not known whether this scheme was ever executed, Claire Gapper, 'Patrons, Plasterers and Architects', p. 152.

and apparently measured, detail and clearly meant for presentation to the client. In the central section the plasterer has written, 'In this place did I mean to drawe my lordes armes But this plase is so troblesome unto me that I Can not do it unto my mynd.' This has been taken to suggest that the plasterer was incapable of drawing the arms due to a lack of draughtsmanship.⁵⁶ Given the careful rendering shown in the rest of the drawing, however, it could equally be true that the draughtsman, who was presumably the plasterer, was embarrassed by not being familiar with the arms of his client.

The Ramsbury drawing is certainly better executed than the early seventeenth-century plasterwork depictions in the Abbott book. The book, which belonged to several generations of North Devon plasterers named John Abbott, is a unique survival.⁵⁷ The book's function has been open to debate and it has been known variously as a copy, sketch, pattern or design book depending on whether it is considered to have been started in the early or mid-seventeenth century.⁵⁸ It contains 300 sketches of plasterwork and is clearly the product of more than one hand covering early and late seventeenth-century styles. Crucially the book measures approximately 9 cm by 13 cm and its portability made it possible to take on site and perhaps discuss ideas with the client. The designs include geometric ceilings drawn onto grids scored into the paper and these could have been used to plan layouts.⁵⁹

Aside from paper drawings a further possibility may be put forward that designs could have been planned out onto the floor or wall. There is no surviving evidence for this but chalk or charcoal patterns would have left few traces. This process is described in 1660 by the gentleman architect Sir Roger Pratt who

⁵⁶ Claire Gapper, 'Chapter 4 From Timber to Plaster: Courtly Ceilings in the Sixteenth Century', *British Renaissance Plasterwork* <<http://clairegapper.info/from-timber-to-plaster.html>>, accessed 15 August 2016.

⁵⁷ Late seventeenth century drawings in the Abbott book are, by contrast, more expertly drawn.

⁵⁸ Based on watermark evidence, Michael Bath writing in 1998 states that the Abbott book is a copy book created in the 1650s or 1660s and using some earlier sources, see 'The Sources of John Abbott's Pattern Book', *Architectural History*, 41 (1998). A re-assessment of the watermarks by Jenny Saunt in 2016 places the book to around 1615, which suggests that the drawings from this period were used to create contemporary designs, see 'Decorative Plasterwork in England, 1660-1700: Form, Materiality and Making' (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of London, 2016).

⁵⁹ Claire Gapper, 'Patrons, Plasterers and Architects', p. 147.

stated: 'If there be any difficulty therein, these divisions may first be traced out upon the floor of the room, where they are intended to be placed'.⁶⁰ There is also precedence for constructional graffiti in non-plasterwork contexts. Medieval church windows were on occasion incised onto walls next to where they were constructed. This also occurs in a domestic context in the 1550s at Acton Court, near Bristol, with the details for the base of an oriel window set out on a plastered wall.⁶¹

Ceilings

The skill of the plasterer is seen to its most dramatic effect with ceilings, sometimes termed 'fretwork'. These could comprise highly complex geometric rib patterns, with circles, ellipses, quatrefoils, squares, rectangles and diamond shapes, with applied enrichments. The first stage of construction involved nailing the riven laths to the ceiling, beams and cornices and applying a thick backing coat of earth plaster which was pushed through the gaps with a trowel to about 5-15mm (1/4"- 5/8") thick. This was scratched with a cross-hatch pattern to form a key for the next coat. The secondary 'float' coat of lime putty, sand and hair to a thickness of about 10-15mm (3/8"- 5/8") was added and ruled with straight lengths of timber. As this began to set a devil float (a wooden float with nail points projecting about 2mm (1/16") from each corner) was then passed over the surface to give a key for the finish coat.

The design was transposed directly onto this second plaster coat. This was probably guided by twine strung across from the corners of the room to give a centre point. The position of the ribs could then be marked onto the plaster using a pair of mason's compasses to draw the semi-circular arcs and the positions of the enrichments.⁶² As an alternative, Roger Pratt gives a detailed account of setting out a ceiling using a whited line:

⁶⁰ See *The Architecture of Sir Roger Pratt: Charles II's Commissioner For the Rebuilding of London After the Great Fire, Now Printed for the First Time From His Note-Books*, ed. by R. T. Gunther (New York: Arno Press, 1979), p. 81.

⁶¹ The Acton Court oriel drawing is illustrated in *Airs, The Tudor and Jacobean Country House*, p. 91. Further examples of this are set out in John Crook, 'New Light on the History of St Mary's Church, Old Basing, Hampshire: an Incised Design for a Post-Medieval Window', *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, 154:1 (2001), pp. 92-133.

⁶² At 5 Higher Street, Dartmouth (SH11) the original string marks could still be seen, Sean Wheatley, '5 Higher Street, Dartmouth, Devon'.

The way of laying out these ceilings is this, the spaces being first measured out on top of the wall, [...] from thence with a whited line which reaches throughout [...] and if there be any circle, oval etc. the centre thereof being first found out, the rest will easily be perfected with a line as aforesaid'.⁶³

The ribs were formed using run-moulding by adding plaster to the pattern and running back and forth with the horse to provide the profile of the plasterwork. Broad or double-ribs were produced in the same way, but in the case of the enriched flat-ribs of the early seventeenth century, it seems likely that the pattern was either cast or stamped into the plaster using the technique described in Section 3.2.2. At the technically difficult intersection of the ribs, particularly for thin-rib ceilings, it was common to cover the join by adding low-relief press-moulded bosses, typically with multiple leaves curving to meet the flat ceiling (Fig. 3.15). Within the shapes created by the ribs and their terminal ends, further press-moulded cast enrichments, such as floral sprays could be added.

Where pendants are present, David Bostwick has suggested that these were prefabricated.⁶⁴ This may have been the case with smaller pendants of solid plaster, but where timber armatures were used they had to be created in situ and fixed to the ceiling. Pendants may also have been made of turned wood, as is the case of one of the examples in the hall at Poundisford Park (TA24) (Fig. 3.34) and the small pendants in the hall, Trerice (CO29) (Fig. 3.32).⁶⁵ In the chapel of the Penrose Almshouses, Barnstaple (ND13) the pendant is made of wrought iron (Fig. 3.16). Smaller pierced pendants are likely to have also been formed of metal (see Figs. 3.35-3.37). Pendants carrying a candelabrum had to support a great weight and would have to be strong enough to allow this.

The final finishing coat of plaster comprised a high proportion of lime putty, perhaps 1:1 with fine sand, to a thickness of 2-5mm (1/16"- 3/16"), sometimes with the addition of fine short chopped hair. This was applied between the ribs

⁶³ *The Architecture of Sir Roger Pratt*, p. 81.

⁶⁴ Bostwick, 'Decorative Plasterwork of the Yorkshire Region', p. 234.

⁶⁵ For Poundisford Park see Penoyre, *Decorative Plasterwork in the Houses of Somerset*, p. 49.

and enrichments. Other decorative pieces within the room used the same basic constructional techniques and materials as ceilings.

Friezes

In comparison with ceilings, friezes were relatively straightforward to produce. These utilised long timber moulds, and their repetitive nature meant that there would have been limited hand-modelling intervention required. At Cothay, Somerset, (TA28) the intersections in the corners of the room have human faces modelled (Fig. 3.17) while Knightstone, Devon (ED21) (Fig. 4.45) has a lively rendition of imps. The complexity of the frieze in the Great hall at Gauden Manor, Somerset (TA36) also suggests a level of hand-modelled work.

Overmantels

The area above the fireplace within the room area presented a defined vertical space for decoration. Overmantels were generally hand-modelled by the plasterer and could reach a high level of sophistication. Cast enrichments could also be included to build up the design, although it is unlikely that run mouldings would have been utilised given the relatively short runs required for the overmantel frame. Some overmantels, dating to the seventeenth century, were comprised entirely of cast decoration, such as in the hall chamber at The Walronds (MD6), the porch chamber at Old Manor, Combe Florey (TA6) and at Great Howton (TE23). These would have been quicker and cheaper to produce than the more elaborate hand-modelled examples.

Installation

There are no surviving plasterwork schemes from the period with corresponding documentation, which makes assessing how long a typical scheme took to install difficult. Some idea of time taken can be gained through assessing how long such work would take today. The overmantel formerly at 69 High Street, Barnstaple (ND8) (Fig. 1.09) can be regarded as fairly standard for the early seventeenth century, with a central scene and two flanking figures. A

reproduction of this, incorporating one of the original flanking figures in 2019 by the sculptor and plasterer Geoffrey Preston took forty days to complete.⁶⁶

It is known that in 1614 Thomas Forde was employed for 51 days to carry out plasterwork at Dartmouth Guildhall, for which he was paid 1 shilling and 4 pence per day.⁶⁷ We do not, however, know how much, if any, decorative work was involved although we do know that Forde had the assistance of a 'workeman of Exeter', 'his man' and 'his boy'.⁶⁸ It is also documented that in 1615 the client Sir John Strode paid the plasterer Robert Eaton £6 16s to produce the plaster ceiling in his private chapel at Chantmarle (WT4).⁶⁹ If we allow a day rate the same as Thomas Forde received, Eaton would have taken 102 days to complete the ceiling.⁷⁰ Sir John Strode's description of the ceiling at Chantmarle makes it very clear that this was highly decorated and we do not know how many others worked with Eaton.⁷¹ Eaton's work is perhaps more comparable to the ceiling of the nave at St John the Baptist Church, Axbridge, Somerset, for which George Drayton was paid ten guineas in 1636.⁷² Allowing for wage inflation, to say 1 shilling and 10 pence per day, then the Axbridge ceiling would have taken 112 days to complete, which given its presumably larger size than Chantmarle would be expected.

⁶⁶ Geoffrey Preston usually works with gypsum-based plaster using clay models and latex moulds and this particular piece which used seventeenth century techniques might have been constructed quicker with a greater familiarity with the material, Jenny Lawrence, Pers. comm., 7 January 2020.

⁶⁷ This document relating to the plastering of Dartmouth Guildhall has been published in Todd Gray, 'Plaster and Dartmouth Guildhall in 1614', p. 43-47.

⁶⁸ See Gray, 'Plaster and Dartmouth Guildhall in 1614', p. 46.

⁶⁹ Quoted in John Hutchins, *The History and Antiquities of the County of Dorset*, ed. by William Shipp and James Whitworth Hodson 3rd edn 4 (Westminster: J.B. Nichols and Sons, 1870), p. 5.

⁷⁰ This day rate figure is based on the work of Henry Phelps Brown and Sheila V. Hopkins in, *A Perspective of Wages and Prices*, (London: Methuen, 1981), pp. 1-12. The difficulties in calculating these day rates for different trades, which include regional variations, are discussed in Airs, *The Tudor and Jacobean Country House*, pp. 196-200.

⁷¹ For Strode's description see Section 5.4.2.

⁷² The ceiling cost is given at Church of England, <http://www.stjohnthebaptistaxbridge.org.uk/history.asp>, accessed 17 September 2018. For the attribution see Foyle and Pevsner, *The Somerset North and Bristol*, p. 82.

While these figures are calculated on day rates, rather than piece rates or contact payments, they do provide a rough benchmark for the length of time that the plasterer might have taken to complete a scheme. What is clear is that this was dependent on the surface area to be plastered, the complexity and density of the design, and the techniques used. An overmantel using a high level of hand-modelling and armatures would, for example, take longer than a simple thin-rib ceiling that might comprise mainly moulded ribs and cast embellishments.

3.3 Design

3.3.1 Ceilings

There were three basic types of ceiling construction to which decorative plasterwork was applied in the period: the compartment, where the structural floor beams divided the area into flat square segments; the barrel-vault, which gave a high semi-circular surface area; and the flat ceiling, where the floor beams were fully hidden, giving a wide and level decorative surface of the same dimensions as the room.

For the compartment ceiling, the design is dictated by the fixed position of the floor beam(s). The divisions created by the beam layout meant that these ceilings did not generally lend themselves to elaborate expansive flowing designs. The beams were typically plastered and could be modelled to replicate the elaborate moulding sometimes found on medieval exposed timber beams (Fig. 2.06). Other treatments include a running frieze on the surfaces of the beam, as at Cothay Manor, Somerset (TA28) (Fig. 3.17), which might also extend to around the top of the wall. Alternatively, individual motifs cast from moulds could be applied to the soffit, as at Dean Head, Swimbridge Devon (ND52) (Fig. 3.78). Within the plastered compartments, applied enrichments could be added, often in the form of simple bosses. Occasionally, the compartments could contain more elaborate designs, notably geometric thin-ribs, such as seen on the parlour ceiling at Holcombe Court, Devon (MD11) (Fig. 3.18).

In decorative terms, barrel-vaulted or coved ceilings, which occur on upper floors, and flat ceilings were essentially treated the same. The exception being at each end of the barrel-vaulted and coved ceiling, which allowed for an extra semi-circular, or for coved trapezium-shaped, vertical area for display. This part of the ceiling, termed a lunette, could either be treated as an extension of the ceiling design, such as in the two upper chambers at Poundisford Lodge (TA23) (Fig. 3.19), or as a centrepiece, more akin to an overmantel, as in the King Charles Room at Forde House (TE26) (Fig. 3.20) and the gallery at Lanhydrock (CO9) (Figs. 4.15 and 7.28). The large continuous space offered by barrel-vaulted and flat ceilings gave scope for elaborate decorative designs. In almost all cases, the basis for these schemes was a geometric pattern formed by run-moulded ribs, of either thin single, or broad flat double, type.

Thin-rib ceilings

The thin-rib plaster ceiling design is derived from timber fretwork.⁷³ The earliest decorated plaster ceiling recorded in the South-West is believed to be in the Great Chamber at Lytes Carey (SS8) (Fig. 3.21). This has been dated to 1533 on the basis of being contemporary with the date on the bay window of the southwest wing, and the presence of the shield of arms of Henry VIII flanked by fleurs-de-lis and Tudor roses in the lunette.⁷⁴ The attribution date is early, and the arms could equally represent Edward VI or Elizabeth I, but the Lytes Carey ceiling, and the similar example in the solar at Orchard Wyndham (WS29) (Fig. 6.23), are undoubtedly amongst the first executed in the region. Both share the characteristic thin single straight intersecting ribs used to form the geometric pattern and minimal simple enrichments, of fleurs-de-lis, Tudor roses and heraldic shields, that are typical of the earliest ceilings and persist throughout the period.

A later development of this design, arriving by the second half of the sixteenth century, has gentle curves incorporated into the ribs forming quatrefoil, leaf or petal designs. The Long Gallery at Holcombe Court (MD11) of c.1560 is among

⁷³ The term fretwork was used interchangeably in the period for timber and plaster. The most notable timber fretwork ceiling is in the Wolsey Closet at Hampton Court Palace dated c.1526.

⁷⁴ Penoyre, *Decorative Plasterwork in the Houses of Somerset*, p. 14.

the earliest displaying this variation (Fig. 3.22). Where combined with pendants, the ribs could converge to give a similar impression of fan vaulting and on occasion descend part way down the wall in the manner of a pendentive, as in the hall at Collacombe Manor (WD8) and the Great Chamber at Holcombe Court (Fig. 3.23).

The thin-rib design was remarkably long-lived and continued through the study period. The style reached its peak in the early seventeenth century coinciding with the introduction of the broad-rib variant (Table B4). Both styles frequently coexisted within the same house, such as at Forde House (TE26) with the new broad-rib design usually being reserved for the best rooms. They could also be found within the same ceiling, such as in the hall at Green, Bishopsteignton (TE3), which dates to 1615. Here the ceiling is divided into three by cross-beams and the central part has an enriched broad-rib straight geometric design, while the outer sections are curved thin-rib with floral spray.⁷⁵

In Dartmouth, where the broad-rib design was not adopted, a wider variant of thin-rib moulding was sometimes used, as at 6 Duke Street (SH7), dating to the 1630s. Another variation of this wider rib type was used in North Devon at Dean Head, Swimbridge (ND 52) (Fig. 3.24) and at 69 High Street, Barnstaple (ND8) where the centre of the ribs are hollow. These should not be seen as a transition towards the broad-rib type (see below) as they are contemporaneous.

In actuality, the thin-rib design outlives the broad-rib variant but in lower status houses in a debased form. At the Old Manor, Talaton, Devon (ED26), dated 1639, the ribs have lost their well-defined moulded appearance and have simpler geometric designs. At Windout Farmhouse (TE36) (Fig. 5.53) and Little Hackworthy (TE37) near Tedburn St Mary, Devon, the ceilings have a crudely executed thin-rib reed design. The thin-rib style continued into the eighteenth century but by this time was even less sophisticated, such as seen in the examples from 1726 at Yarner Cottage, Newton Abbot (Fig. 3.82), and 1737 at Penstone Barton, Colebrooke, Devon. Both ceilings have the dates and initials

⁷⁵ Given the date it seems unlikely the central section is a later replacement.

written in reverse and presumably were intended to be viewed reflected in a mirror or bowl of water on the table below.⁷⁶

Broad-rib ceilings

Broad-rib ceilings start to appear in the region from c. 1600, which is contemporary with London and South East England.⁷⁷ The wide flat-rib patterns tend to be less flowing and use straighter geometry than the contemporary thin-rib variant. Broad-rib designs occur on both flat and barrel-vaulted ceilings but typically these ceilings tend to be more densely decorated than the thin-rib type. The broad-ribs could be either plain moulded, as at the Court House, Chard, Somerset (SS6) (Fig. 3.25), or more commonly enriched with motifs or repeated running patterns between the ribs as in the first-floor rear room at 18 Fore Street, Taunton (TA33) (Fig. 3.26). The hall ceiling at Nettlecombe Court, Somerset (WS15), dated 1599, is amongst the earliest to display broad-ribs in the study area and is notable as the design incorporates both plain and enriched types (Fig. 3.27). The broad-rib ceiling also owes something to strapwork design, although the only example that clearly mimics this is in the Great Parlour, Beckington Abbey, Somerset (ME4) which dates to around 1640.

The enriched broad-rib ceiling is usually associated with a high degree of embellishment that could reach an intensity of decoration that may be described as visually overwhelming. Notable examples occur at Rashleigh Barton, Devon (MD24) with its menagerie of beasts, the Long Gallery at Lanhydrock (CO9) and at Prideaux Place (CO18), Cornwall. Both Cornish examples contain Biblical scenes set in cartouches incorporated into the ceiling rib design, as do the Barnstaple ceilings at 62 Boutport Street (ND3) and at 7 Cross Street (ND5).⁷⁸

⁷⁶ For Yarnar Cottage see Kathleen and Cecil French, 'Devonshire Plasterwork', *Transactions of the Devonshire Association for the Advancement of Science, Literature and Art*, 89 (1957), p. 128. For Penstone Barton see Peter Brears, 'Dinner on the Ceiling: the 17th-Century Plasterwork at 144 Fore Street, Exeter', in *West Country Households 1500-1700*, p. 365.

⁷⁷ The earliest ceiling Claire Gapper identifies outside of a royal context is in the Great Chamber of Broughton Castle, Oxfordshire, dated 1599, which is broadly contemporary with those in the South West. Claire Gapper, 'Chapter 4 From Timber to Plaster: Courtly Ceilings in the Sixteenth Century', *British Renaissance Plasterwork*, accessed 15 August 2016.

⁷⁸ The Cross Street ceiling is now relocated to Stafford Barton, Dolton (TR10).

Why the broad-rib style developed at this time is unclear, although as with the thin-rib ceiling, there are early examples at Hampton Court Palace, Middlesex from c. 1526.⁷⁹ Claire Gapper has identified the enriched version of the broad-rib ceiling as coinciding with the popularity of bands of etched decoration on armour and embroidery on clothing that became fashionable from the 1550s.⁸⁰ There is, however, a considerable time-lag between this and their popularity as a ceiling design in the South-West.

Spiral ceilings

The rarest type of ceiling design in the period was not constrained by a frame of geometric ribs but utilised spirals of plant stems and foliage to give a more free-flowing appearance. The four examples from the South-West date to the early seventeenth century (Table B4). The best known of these is the Tree of Jesse ceiling from an upper chamber at 12 Duke Street, Dartmouth (SH9) (Fig. 3.28). Here the spirals emanate from the recumbent Jesse figure and true to the standard 'family tree' interpretation of the image, they are populated by the ancestors of Christ, with the four Apostles and Jesus and Mary at the top. The two other spiral examples in the region do not directly equate to family trees. The three part free-flowing design of foliage on the parlour ceiling at Rashleigh Barton (MD24) (Fig. 3.29) also issues from a central point, in this case the family coat of arms but in concept this is clearly not a family tree and is populated by exotic animals. The barrel-vaulted Parlour Chamber ceiling at Weston Farm, Wambrook, Somerset (SS26) has similar spirals but these emanate from a central circle and the heraldry and animals are absent. All three ceilings date to the mid-1630s.

Transitional and later ceilings

The 1640s saw the introduction of ceilings derived from the classical designs introduced by Inigo Jones in London. These 'Jonesian' ceilings were either flat or divided into compartments by heavy plastered beams and are characterised

⁷⁹ The ceilings from Cardinal Wolsey's lodgings are illustrated in Laurence Turner, *Decorative Plasterwork in Great Britain* (London: Country Life, 1927), p. 5.

⁸⁰ See Claire Gapper, 'Chapter 4 From Timber to Plaster: Courtly Ceilings in the Sixteenth Century', *British Renaissance Plasterwork*, accessed 15 August 2016.

by a large classical wreath centrepiece. The ceiling at Anderson Manor, Dorset, which comprises a central wreath of bay leaves with floral sprays and a pendant is, if contemporary with the house build date of 1622, a very early example of this.⁸¹ The thin-rib ceiling in the West Room at Hinton House, Somerset (SS10), can be securely dated by inscription to 1636. In contrast to the rest of the ceiling, which is populated by a myriad of birds and animals, both real and mythical, the circular wreath at Hinton House is very plain. The hall ceiling at Gaulden Manor, Somerset (TA36) (Fig. 3.79), dated to 1642, has no rib-work but comprises three wreaths. The Gaulden Manor wreaths are more decorative than Hinton House, with two containing allegorical scenes and the other a decorated pendant. Such figurative scenes within the wreaths are rare but there is a further example, showing the Sacrifice of Isaac, on the low enriched broad-rib ceiling at Coalharbour, Creech St Michael (TA9) (Fig. 3.80), which could be thirty years later in date than Gaulden.⁸² The ceiling in the Wing Chamber at Nettlecombe Court (WS15) also has a single wreath, here containing the Trevelyan family crest, and a mix of enriched broad-rib and thin-ribs providing the framework, and is similar to the example in the parlour at Poundisford Park (TA24) which contains the Hill family crest (Fig. 3.30). Both date to the 1640s. A further example, also likely to date to this period at 15 The Strand, Bideford (TR8), has an enriched oval enclosing an unusual enriched broad-rib geometric pattern.

Pendants

Pendants are derived from the Gothic architectural tradition and have precursors in both timber and stone fan-vaulted ceilings. As well as a decorative function, they could be used to support candelabra and tend to be found in higher status houses, which had hall and upper chamber ceilings of sufficient height to accommodate them. Pendants occur with both thin-rib and broad-rib ceilings and can be divided into three broad categories: where the ribs descend downwards most of the way to the pendant, sometimes termed pendentives, such as in the Great Chamber at Mapperton, Dorset, (WT12) (Fig. 3.31); where

⁸¹ Illustrated in 'Country Homes Gardens Old and New: Anderson Manor, Dorset, the Residence of Mr. J. C. Tabor', *Country Life*, 37, 3 Apr. (1915), pp. 446-51.

⁸² The overmantel at Coalharbour is dated 1679.

the ribs form half the pendant, as at Trecice (CO29) (Fig. 3.32); and where the pendant begins close to the ceiling, such as in the hall at Nettlecombe Court (WS15) (Fig. 3.27) and the square ornate example at Chelvey Court (NS2) in the north of the county. All three types are contemporaneous. There is some variety seen in the lengths, primarily dictated by ceiling height. At Forde House (TE26), the high barrel-vaulted Upper Bed Chamber has three long pendants, while the flat lower ceiling of the Dining Room has a pendant that is little more than an elongated roof boss (Fig. 3.33). Where more than one pendant is present, such as the array of fifteen seen in the hall at Poundisford Park, the largest forms the centrepiece (Fig. 3.34).

Pendants are either solid or open. The open variety coincide with the introduction of broad-rib ceilings and could reach a particularly high level of sophistication, as seen at the Great Chamber at Herringston House, Dorset (WT20). Here four curved bands enclose a fruit tree with a boy climbing up the trunk and between the bands are figures of boys eating apples, and four more boys, also eating apples, sit dangling their legs over the edge (Fig. 3.35). There are similar 'caged' figures at 62 Boutport Street, Barnstaple (ND3) and the Long Gallery, Lanhydrock (CO9), (Fig. 3.36) while the Great Chamber at Prideaux Place (CO18) (Fig. 3.37) has four human faces within the pendant.

Corbels/brackets

The interface between the ceiling and wall could be bridged by a decorated bracket or corbel. Like the pendant, they derived from the medieval timber/stone tradition, although only the very highest status roofs from this period had carved decoration. In contrast, plasterwork decoration could be applied relatively cheaply to cover those intrusive areas where the roof structure was visible in the room, usually where the roof trusses transferred the loading to the wall. These areas of structural stress could be protected by figures, echoing Atlas, metaphorically and physically helping to hold the roof up. In the hall at Buckland Abbey (WD1) and in the upper chamber at 62 Boutport Street, Barnstaple (ND3) satyrs holding shields decorate the brackets (Fig. 3.38). Similar figures, although perhaps not covering structural elements, also occur above the dais in the hall at Collacombe (WD8). In the Long Room at Forde House (TE26), the

cornice is supported by brackets of winged female figures in Elizabethan dress, some holding posies. Almost identical figures appear to be supporting a ceiling beam to the first-floor gallery to the hall at Widworthy Barton (ED29) (Fig. 3.39) although in this case the figures are not performing a structural function and are decorative.⁸³

At Trerice (CO29) tiny heads and torsos modelled in high relief terminate the thin-ribs that converge down from the ceiling in a similar manner to the pendants. The brackets below look like an afterthought but are probably contemporary (Fig. 3.40). The hall at Collacombe Manor (WD8) has a similar treatment but with low relief flowers in place of heads. Again, these features are decorative rather than disguising a structural purpose. In the hall at Knightstone Manor (ED21), however, it is clearly evident from the exposed timber roof that the corbels perform a structural purpose supporting the trusses and these are decorated by elaborate plaster bearded faces.

3.3.2 Friezes

The decorative frieze, at the interface of the ceiling and wall, has its origins in classical architecture. In Britain, there are clear medieval precursors in the form of timber decoration, notably in church carving such as along the top of rood screens. Less common is decoration at wall plate level in high status medieval open roofs and the mid fifteenth-century pierced example at hall, Lytes Carey (SS8) is a rare example.⁸⁴ Paint was also used to produce wall friezes. This can be seen in painted Renaissance motifs of the early sixteenth century grisaille decoration surviving at Acton Court in Gloucestershire, and in the post-Reformation frieze in an upper chamber at St Nicholas Priory, Exeter (EX16).⁸⁵

The plaster frieze, while often incorporating different design motifs, is usually coeval with decorative ceilings. The principal purpose of the frieze was to form

⁸³ In the case of Widworthy the figures may have been relocated, as the result of twentieth-century restorations. The date of 1616 was recorded in 1791 as being incorporated in the hall ceiling which was lost in a fire of 1800, see Meller, *The Country Houses of Devon*, p.1102.

⁸⁴ This is in contrast with the Great Chamber plaster ceiling scheme at Lytes Carey which does not have an accompanying plaster frieze.

⁸⁵ For Acton Court see Kirsty Rodwell and Robert Bell, *Acton Court, the Evolution of an Early Tudor Courtier's House* (Swindon: English Heritage, 2004), p. 185.

an area of transition between a decorated ceiling and the wall hangings or panelling that decorated the room. Friezes are almost always combined with a decorative plasterwork ceiling. Where friezes are found without a decorated ceiling it is a reasonable supposition that the ceiling has been replaced.

Narrow friezes

The narrow frieze of between 20 and 40 cm deep is the most commonly encountered in the South-West. Moulds were invariably used for plaster friezes and once these were carved by the joiner for a one-off cost, there was no difference in the amount of effort required by the plasterer to produce either a highly decorated or more plain frieze. The decision of which design to choose would therefore come down to aesthetics rather than costs. The long narrow nature of the frieze lent itself to repetitive linked patterns. The join between each individual casting could be easily disguised to give the effect of a continuous pattern around the room, and on occasion the ceiling beams. The same moulds were sometimes used to provide shorter runs of friezes which could be applied as horizontal decoration to overmantels.

Deep friezes

Additional depth could be achieved by placing one narrow frieze above another. This technique was, however, very rarely used in the South-West with only two examples known: the three-level frieze at Moorhayes, Cullompton (MD7) (Fig. 3.41) and the fragmentary two-level strip at Nutcombe Manor, Devon (MD5), which dates to c. 1620. The Moorhayes frieze echoes the five-strip frieze at Haddon Hall, Derbyshire (Fig. 5.01 and 5.02), and in fact uses identical moulds.⁸⁶

Deeper friezes of a unified design are more common. In the Dining Room at Forde House (TE26) (Fig. 3.42), the same mould, or combination of moulds, used to create the frieze was also used to decorate the ceiling in the Orange Room, to unusual visual effect (Fig. 6.07). This deeper squarer variant is far less common than the narrow frieze which could also be included in the same

⁸⁶ This is discussed in Chapter 5.

scheme, such as in the Library at Montacute House (SS18), where the narrow strapwork frieze is extended down by around 0.9m to give a total depth of 1.38m (4 feet 6 1/2 inches) (Fig. 3.43).⁸⁷ The deeper portion has repeated plaster panels and festoons with hand-modelled heads in high relief. The same design is also found in the Oak Parlour below a different strapwork frieze. This would have represented a considerable amount of work over a standard moulded frieze, and in proportions and design is closer to overmantels than the standard narrow frieze. The frieze in the Crimson Bed Chamber at Montacute utilises four separate moulds for a simpler variation of the basic design with the detail focussed on the festoons rather than the panels (Fig. 3.44). An integral part of this design above the fireplace, but still part of the frieze and of the same dimensions, is an overmantel incorporating a scene depicting the Judgement of Paris. This technique of extending the frieze down the wall can also be seen in the principal rooms at 18 Fore Street, Taunton (TA33).

3.3.3 Wall plaques

The term wall plaque is used in this thesis to describe any self-contained set piece on a wall not above a fireplace. In terms of design, they share common attributes with overmantels and friezes but are close to the former in that they usually comprise a single design set-piece. Wall plaques, however, do not generally conform to the same architectural conventions as overmantels. In some cases the designs were, however, interchangeable, for example in the hall at Buckland Abbey (WD1), where the wall plaque (Fig. 3.45) could easily have swapped places with the Four Virtues scene that occupies the space above the fireplace.

Wall decoration is usually restricted to the upper parts of the wall but it can extend further down. In the Court Room at the Court House, Chard (SS6), the scheme which incorporates figures, strapwork and biblical scenes, descends down from the ceiling to the lunette and overmantel, although these latter two features are slightly out of alignment (Fig. 3.46). In the ground-floor chamber at 18 Fore Street, Taunton (TA33) there are large Tudor Roses below a deep frieze, dated 1627. The porch chamber at the Old Manor House, Combe Florey,

⁸⁷ These measurements are given in Bankart, *The Art of the Plasterer*, p. 147.

Somerset (TA6) is unusual in having a complete wall scheme. Here plaster panels divided by fluted pilasters extend three quarters of the way down three walls (Fig. 3.47). Despite this, the simplicity of the design, the small size of the moulds and the low density of their application, means the scheme does not overwhelm this small room.⁸⁸ There would clearly have been no space for any other form of decorative scheme, such as panelling or hangings, in this chamber to alter this effect and it is most likely coeval with the erection of the porch in the early seventeenth century.

3.3.4 Overmantels

The potential for decorating the chimney breast above the fireplace was exploited at an early stage. In the Abbot's Parlour, Muchelney, for example, the late fifteenth-century fireplace has an elaborate carved stone overmantel. Carved stone or timber was joined from the third quarter of the sixteenth century by plaster.⁸⁹ In practice, there was little difference between timber, stone and plaster designs, all of which continued through the period, but the workability of plaster allowed for more ornate high-relief decoration, and importantly in plaster this could be achieved at lower cost. For the areas each side of the fireplace aperture, stone and timber remained the preferred material, presumably due to the vulnerability to damage and these could, as with the important carved stone group around Bristol, reach high levels of sophistication.⁹⁰ There are also examples where all three materials are used in one chimneypiece, such as in the hall at Weare Giffard (TR29), where the fire aperture is defined by a Tudor-style arched composition in stone with three fishes and a Tudor rose in the spandrels, flanked by grotesque timber figures, with a plaster overmantel above (Fig. 3.48).⁹¹

⁸⁸ Conversely, in the hall at the Old Manor the ceiling rosettes are oversized.

⁸⁹ From the early seventeenth century an overmantel might be decorated by a stained hanging or painted mural, such as discovered in the hall at Bradstone Manor, Devon.

⁹⁰ See Mark Girouard, *Elizabethan Architecture: Its Rise and Fall* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), pp. 324-29.

⁹¹ According to a painted inscription on the overmantel plinth, the fireplace was restored by George Fortesque in 1832 and it is possible that a degree of reconstruction, perhaps introducing the carved woodwork, took place at this date.

The dimensions of overmantels are physically constrained by the width of the fireplace opening and the space between the top of the bressummer and the ceiling. Typically, the height of the room meant these overmantels are in rectangular 'landscape' proportion and wider than they are tall, which mirrors the prints that often provided the source for the design. Where the height of the ceiling was low, the design had to be constrained. At Hawkridge Barton, Chittlehampton, (ND28) and Beara Farmhouse, Ilfracombe (ND40) (Fig. 6.06) for example, the top of the overmantel is crudely cut-in to accommodate the ceiling beam, the jarring effect of this today is exacerbated by the plaster that has been stripped from the beam.⁹² Where height was not an issue, such as where double-height ceilings were present, overmantels could assume taller dimensions as at Nettlecombe Court (WS15) and Wolfeton House, Dorset (WT6) (Fig. 3.49).

Within the South-West, no two overmantels have been found to be of an identical design and the plasterers clearly exercised much creativity here. There are, however, certain formal architectural conventions that are characteristic. The designs typically comprise four elements: a centrepiece, flanked by vertical elements that stand on a plinth and support an entablature above. The central frame might be plain rectilinear or comprise a decorative cartouche of scroll or strapwork. Within this, the central focus of the piece would, in 46% of cases, be a coat of arms, or on 19% of overmantels a pictorial scene of Biblical or classical derivation. On smaller overmantels, typically those in upper chambers, a more simple central decorative element might be employed, accounting for 35% of the dataset, which are often accompanied by initials and date.⁹³ These could utilise cast rather than hand-modelled motifs. Examples include: the floral spray in the hall chamber at the Walronds, Cullompton (MD6) (Fig. 3.50); and the lion rampant in the Parlour chamber at the Old Manor, Combe Florey (TA6), which is likely to date to the first half of the seventeenth century.

The flanking vertical elements of the overmantel are classically derived and might be full Caryatid or Atlas figures, or half figures (Terms) emerging from

⁹² A photograph held in North Devon Record office shows the Beara Farm ceiling beam plastered. The overmantels may be by the same workshop.

⁹³ For a breakdown of the figures see Table B6.

columns, examples of which occur in the Great Chamber and Parlour Chamber at Holcombe Court (MD11) (Fig. 3.51).⁹⁴ In the early seventeenth century, these flanking figures could take on a less classical appearance and may be dressed in a contemporary style such as at Cowick Barton, Exeter (EX7) where the full figures standing on pedestals represent Charity and Humility (Fig. 3.52) and at Boringdon House, Plymouth (PL1), which has very large personifications of Peace and Plenty.⁹⁵

Classical columns or pilasters were also used as flanking elements, such as in the two chambers at Mapperton House (WT12) (Fig. 3.53), which are likely to date to around 1550, and at the mid-seventeenth century Trewarne Manor, Cornwall (CO26) (Fig. 4.60). The large overmantel in the hall at Collacombe Manor, Lamerton (WD8), dated 1574, is notable for its decorated pilasters and classical pediment (Fig. 3.54). Alternatively, the flanking elements might be putti figures sitting on scrolls, or in the case of Widworthy Barton, (ED29) squirrels eating acorns are supported on the scrolls (Fig. 3.55). The entablature and plinth could be plain or incorporate a narrow frieze, or applied decoration such as triglyphs or rosettes could be added.

There were departures from this convention. The elongated overmantel in the hall at Buckland Abbey (WD1) dated 1576, has three cartouches and four flanking figures personifying the four cardinal virtues (Fig. 3.56). The 'Triumph of Time' scene at Dean Head, Swimbridge (ND52) (Fig. 5.21), has just a cartouche but no flanking figures or outer frame, while the same subject at Binham Farm, Old Cleave (WS16) (Fig. 5.22) includes flanking figures but also has no frame. The early seventeenth-century overmantels from Dartmouth have similar frameless treatments and the examples from Lower Street (SH13) and 10 Duke Street (SH8) have religious figures each side of the central scene.

⁹⁴ For ease of reference 'Term' is used to describe all half figures emerging from columns.

⁹⁵ The right hand figure at Cowick Barton is identified by Tara Hamling as Humility, see *Decorating the 'Godly' Household: Religious Art in Post-Reformation Britain* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 113.

3.3.5 Text

The most common form of text in plasterwork are the initials of individuals which, excluding those of monarchs, occur on sixty-one decorative schemes in the study area. These are often accompanied by dates and heraldry. Where these occur on overmantels the letters are usually unadorned, but on ceilings the letters are typically contained within a decorative surround, often a circular wreath with four leaves used to create a square. Examples of this occur at Holcombe Court (MD11), where the individual letters on the Long Gallery ceiling spell out 'ROGER BLUETT', or more commonly just initials on the ceilings at St Nicholas Priory (EX16) (Fig. 5.33), Trecice (CO29), Great Fulford (TE12), Bogan House, Totnes (SH45) (Fig. 3.57), and the no longer extant overmantel from King John's Tavern, Exeter (EX21) (Fig. 4.56). In the hall at Poundisford Park (TA24) the pendants in the four corners of the room have the initials 'W, H' and 'L, H' for William and Lucy Hill whose marriage in c. 1570 gives a terminus post quem for the ceiling.

Full names are less common. A notable example being the overmantel in the Gatehouse, Combe Florey (TA5) which has the name 'JOHN FRAUNCIS' accompanied by the date 1593. Amongst four sets of initials referring to the Tozer family on the Great Howton (TE23) overmantel dated 1634, the name 'JOSEPH T' is spelt out (Fig. 3.58). At the nearby Whiddon Park House (WD4) another early seventeenth-century overmantel has the name 'UPCOTT' below an heraldic shield flanked by the initials 'W W' and is also dated 1634 (Fig. 6.15). Dates can also accompany heraldry without initials. Text in the form of mottos also forms a constituent part of royal arms, although this is sometimes omitted, such as the simple scheme at Kings Gatchell (TA29) (Fig. 3.63).⁹⁶

Mottos, not directly connected with families, but which had a meaning that would have been familiar to those viewing, also occur. For example, the overmantel at Deckport, Hatherleigh (WD7) has the motto 'SIC TRANSIT GLORIA MUNDI' (so passes the glory of the world). In a particularly charming composition, an overmantel from the Old Vicarage, Barnstaple (ND20) has the

⁹⁶ For the royal arms these are 'Honi soit qui mal-y-pense' - (Shame on whomsoever would think badly of it) - around the Order of the Garter; and 'Dieu et mon Droit' (God and my right).

motto 'NON SINE LABORE' (nothing without labour) in scrolls held by the figure climbing tree to gather fruit (Fig. 3.59), while other figures relax at the base. In the mid-seventeenth century hall ceiling at Gaulden Manor (TA36), the wreath containing King David has the text 'NABLIO ET CITHARA LAUDATE' ('Praise him with harp and with lute') and the last trump wreath has an angel blowing the text 'SURSITE MORTUI ET VENITE IN [I]UDICIUM' (Arise from the dead and come to judgement).⁹⁷ The ceiling wreath at Bournes, Wiveliscombe (TA43) has Venus and Cupid with the motto 'SINE CERERE ET BACCHO FRIGET VENUS' (Without corn and wine love grows cold).⁹⁸ Where space does not allow a full motto this was abbreviated, such as the angel figure on the ceiling at Herringston House (WT20) which has the initials 'G I E D' (Gloria in Excelsis Deo) (Fig. 3.62). The text on these ceilings with small scrolls near the figures' mouths has parallels in the earlier tradition of wall painting, such as the overmantel in the Merchant's House, Colyton (ED10), which is probably early sixteenth century.

Text in English relating to biblical subject-matter also occurs. The earliest example is the now lost overmantel dated 1577 from King John's Tavern, South Street, Exeter (EX21) (Fig. 4.56), which had the succinct motto 'LOVE GOD ABOVE AL THINGS'.⁹⁹ On the overmantel in the principal chamber at Trewarne, Manor (CO26) depicting the Sacrifice of Isaac, there is a scroll containing the words 'OLD ABRAHAM HOLD THY HAND IT DOTTH SUFFICE GOD LOVETH OBEDIENCE MORE THAN SACRIFICE' (Fig. 4.58), which directly relates to the scene.¹⁰⁰ A less well executed example of the same subject from Alston, Malborough (SH25) had a banner with the text 'OH ABRAHAM IT DOTTH SUFFICE OBEDIENC IS MORE THAN SACRIFICE'.¹⁰¹ The overmantel at Greenway, Galmpton (SH23) includes an extract from Daniel 3:25 'SAID, LO, I

⁹⁷ Translated in Michael Bath, 'The Sources of John Abbott's Pattern Book', p. 54.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 54.

⁹⁹ The King John's Tavern overmantel is depicted on an unpublished drawing from the 1840s by John Gendall and held in the West Country Studies Library, Exeter, DHC, LD.

¹⁰⁰ Illustrated in H. Dalton Clifford, 'A Cornish Manor Rich in Legend', *Country Life*, 132, 13 Sep. (1962), pp. 576-77.

¹⁰¹ Illustrated as Fig. 19, in Keystone Historic Buildings Consultants, 'Alston, Malborough, Devon' (unpublished, 2014).

SEE FOUR MEN LOOSE, WALKING', taken directly from the King James Bible, which dates the plasterwork to the second decade of the seventeenth century or later (Fig. 3.60).¹⁰²

The hall plaster frieze at Rowlands Hill, Ashill, Somerset (SS1) contains a long religious text in English without images (Fig. 3.61). This is taken from the late-sixteenth century *The Governance of Virtue* by the theologian Thomas Becon, published in 1566.¹⁰³ Extended pieces of text are, however, rare in plasterwork. Text was easier to execute in paint, either applied onto the decorated plaster as in the Guildhall, Totnes (SH36) (Fig. 4.57), or directly onto the plain wall as seen in the long quote from Psalm 53 at Moxhayes Farmhouse, Membury, which dates to the late seventeenth century.¹⁰⁴

3.3.6 Arcades

The arcade design is derived from the classical arch and was popular in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. It is the only motif found in plaster that also directly occurs on carved furniture and timber panelling, with examples in the dining room at Weare Giffard (TR29), in the Judge's Room, Portledge (TR2), and the overmantel from Wortham, Lifton, Devon. There are surviving plaster arcade overmantels from the area around Taunton which occur in upper chambers and have enough common elements to suggest they were by the same plasterer. The example from King's Gatchell (TA29) (Fig. 3.63) includes the arms of James I and has a further two arches above which are a fragment of a larger scheme as does the arcade at Kittisford Barton, Stawley (TA30).¹⁰⁵ The overmantel at Hankeridge Farm (TA42) is also from this group (Fig. 3.64).

¹⁰² The scene may be derived from the source print 'Drie jongelingen in de brandende oven', which appeared in Pieter van der Borcht (I) *Prentbijbel met voorstellingen van het Oude en Nieuwe Testament* (Antwerp: Michiel Colijn, 1613).

¹⁰³ Thomas Becon, *The Early Works of Thomas Becon [...] Being the treatises published by him in the Reign of King Henry VIII*, ed. by Rev. John Ayre (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1843). I am grateful to David Bostwick for recording the text and identifying the source, David Bostwick, 'Rowlands, Ashill' (Unpublished, 2017).

¹⁰⁴ The Totnes example dated 1624 has clearly been repainted and it is possible that the text was added at a later date. For Moxhayes, see photograph in Nat Alcock, 'Houses in the Yarty Valley', *Devon Buildings Group Newsletter*, 33 (2015), p. 52.

¹⁰⁵ The Kittisford overmantel has not been inspected but is described in Penoyre, *Decorative Plasterwork in the Houses of Somerset*, p. 80.

There are further Somerset examples at Coalhabour (TA9) which is later in date, while the overmantel at Sherford House (TA35) is dated 1679 but stylistically belongs to the early seventeenth century.

Outside of Somerset, in the hall chamber at Ayshford Court, Burlescombe (MD3) dated 1631, the arcade is included in the lunette, rather than an overmantel and has the Ashford arms and floral sprays within undecorated arches. The Ayshford Court example is clearly by a different hand to the Taunton group but has close similarities with the Alphington Rectory (EX8) overmantel, where the central arch contains arms flanked by Bouchier knots and is of a similar date and almost certainly from the same workshop (Fig. 3.65). There is a further Devon example in an upper chamber at Town Mills, Landkey (ND47), which is possibly from 1659 as the overmantel in the floor below is dated. From the surviving examples, the arcade style is early seventeenth century, although at Moorhayes (MD7) there was a thin-rib pattern, now lost, which is close to an arcade in design and could be as early as the 1560s (Fig. 5.08).

3.3.7 Enrichments

Within the basic framework offered by the ceiling, frieze, overmantel and wall plaque there was considerable scope for adding more decoration to enrich the design. Enrichments may be defined as the decorative elements that embellish the greater plasterwork scheme or cumulatively may form a decorative feature. The repetitive nature of their application means that they are typically cast from shallow press-moulds and once in the plasterer's possession these moulds would have been used again on other jobs. Enrichments are most noticeably used to decorate ceilings but also occur on both walls and overmantels. On ceilings, they are found filling-in gaps in geometric patterns, as terminal ends to rib-work, or at the intersections of ribs. On overmantels, enrichments typically fill the void between the cartouche or frame and the edge of the piece or vertical elements. Wall plaques and deep-friezes can be formed wholly of cast enrichments, such as in Rooms 9 and 10 in Montacute House (SS18).

A variety of designs were utilised but in addition to the fleur-de-lis and Tudor rose, the most common motifs encountered are the floral spray and what may be termed the 'jelly mould' boss designs. With variations in shapes and dimensions, these four basic embellishments appear in numerous schemes throughout the study period.

Royal badges

The Tudor rose and fleur-de-lis were the earliest embellishments adopted by plasterers and were particularly popular being commonly used in schemes from the 1550s onwards. The design of fleur-de-lis ranges from a Gothic-style heraldic, to more floral or stylised depictions. The example in the Long Room at Forde House (TE26) and Herringston House (WT20), includes two opposing dolphins, and at 38 North Street, Exeter (EX17) there are animal heads with protruding tongues (Fig. 3.66). Tudor roses are more uniform in their execution, although there is some variation in size. It is not always clear, however, where these had specifically royal connotations, or were merely used as one of the palette of decorative embellishments available to the plasterer. Where they are crowned, or positioned close to royal arms, royal badges explicitly conveyed a loyalty to the Crown. At the now lost Abbot's Lodge, Exeter (EX2) the arms of Elizabeth I were flanked by a slipped and crowned Tudor rose and a crowned fleur-de-lis, which emanated from a lily.¹⁰⁶ In the White Room at Poundisford Lodge (TA23), while the royal arms are absent the slipped and crowned Tudor rose and crowned fleur-de-lis of c.1590 are prominently displayed and form centrepieces in the opposing lunettes and there is little doubt that these overtly demonstrate allegiance to the Tudor monarchy (Fig. 3.67).

The popularity of these royal badges extended beyond the end of the Tudor period, as seen on the overmantel at Great Combe, Stoke Fleming (SH27) and another slipped and crowned example accompanied by the initials 'C R', for Charles I, surviving at Great Howton, Devon (TE23) dated 1634 (Fig. 3.58), although this rather curious overmantel may utilise earlier moulds and it is possible that the initials were added to one of these. The thistle, associated with

¹⁰⁶ These are recorded in Thomas Grace, 'Armorial Bearings at The Abbot's Lodge, The Close, Exeter', *Devon and Cornwall Notes and Queries*, 9 (1917), p. 99.

the House of Stuart, is rarer but, in addition to the aforementioned Great Combe example, it also occurs without the crown on the Lanhydrock ceiling (CO9). Given the learned background of the owner John Robartes its presence here may not necessarily be purely ornamental.¹⁰⁷

Other emblems with royal associations, such as the portcullis, are also uncommon, but there is an example in the Porch Chamber at the Old Manor, Combe Florey (TA6). The Prince of Wales feathers found on the first-floor chamber ceiling at 64 Fore Street, Totnes are accompanied by the initials 'C P'. In this case the initials could refer to the house owner Charles Prideaux, Mayor in 1625 when Prince Charles rode through the town or, as John Thorp suggests, the future Charles II who became the Prince of Wales in 1638.¹⁰⁸ There is a further example on the ceiling in the Great Chamber at Herringston House (WT20) (Fig. 3.68).

The Tudor rose and fleur-de-lis occur most frequently without crowns and in contexts where they may be described as decorative embellishments. This is particularly the case with the Tudor rose, where the round symmetrical shape could be easily incorporated into schemes, for example as roof bosses. At Lytes Carey (SS8), there is a clear distinction between the decorative Tudor roses used at the central intersections of the ribbed ceiling, and those flanking the royal arms on the lunette. Tudor roses are used as bosses in the first-floor chamber at 18 Fore Street, Taunton (TA33) (Fig. 3.69), but here the flat spaces between the ribs are decorated with fleur-de-lis. In the hall at the Old Manor, Combe Florey (TA6), each element of the low four-compartment ceiling is dominated by a large rose measuring approximately 1m diameter (Fig. 3.70).

In decorative terms, the fleur-de-lis could stand in for the floral spray. Examples can be seen on the Solar ceiling at Orchard Wyndham, West Somerset (WS29), and the Drawing Room and Great Chamber at Mapperton (WT12) (Fig. 3.71) where they comprise the principal decorative element, and 10 High Street,

¹⁰⁷ Robartes' intellectual leanings and their influence on the ceiling design are described by Hamling in *Decorating the 'Godly' Household*, pp. 182-91.

¹⁰⁸ John Thorp, 'The Construction, Appearance and Development of a Merchant's Town House', p. 210.

Totnes (SH37) where they form the terminal ends of the ceiling ribs, again in association with Tudor roses (Fig. 3.72). At Portledge (TR2), on the barrel vaulted stairwell ceiling, the floral sprays are contrived from a three-headed thistle, further blurring the line between royal emblem and decorative motif.

Floral sprays

Floral sprays occur most frequently as terminal decorations at the angles of ceiling ribs. They encompass both the thin-rib and broad-rib traditions but are also found as the principal decoration on the simpler type of overmantel (Fig. 3.50) and occasionally on wall plaques (Fig. 3.44) where casts are used. In essence, floral sprays in plasterwork are low-relief stylistic representations of symmetrically arranged flowers, stems and leaves. A variety of designs were utilised and the moulds, which might be used in different combinations to form a single piece, were used over a long period as there is no obvious typological development evident through the study period, although some early seventeenth-century floral sprays have thin spiral stems with less foliage and are in lower relief. Examples of this later type can be seen at Hinton House, (SS10) (Fig. 3.73), Great Combe (SH27), and the ceiling from 38 North Street, Exeter (EX17) with the stems terminating in animal heads.

Bosses

Bosses can be described as a decorated circular conical shape, often with ribs and beading at the base (Fig. 3.74). These are typically found at the intersection of ceiling ribs in thin-rib ceilings in the manner of a roof boss in timber or stone roofs. This role is not applicable to broad-rib ceilings, as the ribs run into each other to give a continuous effect, but they could be incorporated within the rib, as in the Dining Room at Forde House (TE26) (Fig. 3.81). A common design of boss is the 'jelly mould' motifs, which can be seen on overmantels and wall plaques, such as in the Crimson Bed Chamber, Montacute (SS18) (Fig. 3.75) where they are combined with floral sprays. The circular boss shape is often accompanied by multiple leaves, dependent on the number of intersecting ribs with the hand modelled leaves angled down the depth of the rib to meet the ceiling (Fig. 3.15). A variation on this has eight tiny faces in flower heads as can be seen on the ceilings of the great chambers, at the Walronds (MD6) (Fig.

1.01), Holcombe Court (MD11) and at Weare Giffard Hall (TR29), or four larger and more sinister looking heads, as at 10 Duke Street, Dartmouth (SH8) (Fig. 3.76).

Other enrichments

The variety of enrichments grew throughout the period as new designs were introduced and previous ones carried forward through the continued use of the old moulds or traditional hand-modelled designs. In particular, the first three decades of the seventeenth century saw an increase in the variety of individual embellishments, these included: grotesque masks; heraldic shields; medallions; angels; flowers; fruit; and animals, both fanciful and naturalistic. The sheer exuberance of the decorative plasterwork of this period is encapsulated in the Master Chamber ceiling at Rashleigh Barton (MD24), which has a myriad of hand-modelled animals, including four fox-like creatures around intertwined tendrils two of which have turned their heads to watch birds in adjacent panels (Fig. 3.77). Similar highly enriched ceilings survive at 62 Boutport Street, Barnstaple (ND3), and the Cornish houses at Lanhydrock (CO9) and Prideaux Place (CO18).

3.3.8 Chronology

A chronology of plasterwork design is set out in Appendix B (Tables B4-B6). In summary, the earliest decorative plasterwork is the straight thin-rib geometric ceiling which occurs from the mid-sixteenth century onwards. These typically had simple late-medieval inspired enrichments, such as fleur-de-lis, Tudor Roses and heraldic shields. Grotesque friezes seem to occur slightly later with flat-fret and strapwork friezes perhaps later still. By the 1570s, curved thin-ribs and floral sprays appear.

Overmantels arrive later than ceilings and have the advantage of sometimes being dated through inscription or by heraldry. The earliest dated example is the 1572 overmantel in the hall at Trerice (CO29) (Fig. 3.05). More typical are those falling within the date range 1590-1610. After this date a greater variety of design is encountered which are less likely to subscribe to the classical four-part form described in Section 3.3.4.

The first decade of the seventeenth century also saw the introduction of the broad-rib ceiling design and thin spiral, both of which are present at Rashleigh Barton (MD24). The final ceiling development, at the very end of the study period, is characterised by the large oval wreath which appears in the 1640s.

Conclusion

In the hands of a skilled plasterer, the material was no restriction on the variety of designs executed. This chapter shows that the design of the three principal decorative elements of ceilings, friezes and overmantels utilised different techniques drawn from the relatively narrow range of themes and motifs that were available to the plasterer and their client in the period. These designs were often adapted, combined and employed in inventive ways to give considerable variation but to a great extent the designs employed were influenced by the physical constraints of the room. Put simply, the decoration chosen for the ceiling, frieze, and overmantel elements had to occupy a pre-defined fixed space within the room, which influenced the design that could be employed. Ceilings, for example, lent themselves to large open-patterned geometric schemes; friezes to narrow linear repetitive decoration; and overmantels to single set pieces.

In the mid-sixteenth century, ceilings were a new feature in the houses of the middle ranks, but there were medieval antecedents in high status buildings. The earliest plasterwork ceilings in the South-West were influenced by these medieval timber and stone designs, as seen in the thin-ribs, bosses, heraldry and pendants. The interlocking geometric patterns were, however, derived from Renaissance styles that proved remarkably long-lived. In the South-West, the geometric rib patterns continue into and beyond the broad-rib ceiling tradition, which was established in the region at the start of the seventeenth century.

Friezes, like ceilings, existed in timber and stone before being adopted by plasterers. More than the other elements, friezes occupied a restricted space, typically as a narrow band at the top of the wall. More flexibility was rarely sought, but when this was required, friezes could extend down, although very

rarely was this achieved by adding additional narrow friezes, as at Moorhayes, Cullompton (MD7). More common is the deep frieze, which did not have late-medieval antecedents. This was typically built-up using multiple casts, usually common to ceilings, and did not use the same grammar of continuous repeated interlinked decoration seen in the narrow friezes.

The standard narrow frieze used moulds that could potentially have been in circulation over a long period of time, perhaps in different hands, and in terms of decoration they typically disregard other plaster elements in the room. It should be noted that as friezes were formed from moulds they are primarily the creative product of the woodcarver. While the plasterer may have owned the mould, and would have no doubt paid extra for elaborate carvings, they may not necessarily have had any creative input into the design. This would explain why moulds were seemingly selected in isolation and could remain in circulation for a long time.

Overmantels were predominantly hand-modelled and as such gave the plasterer the most scope to demonstrate their skills. The design of overmantels does, however, conform closely to conventions that are interpretations of classical architectural forms. These typically contain a centrepiece within a cartouche that can be closely based on printed sources. There are exceptions to this, notably from the second decade of the seventeenth century onwards, when a more free design approach was adopted, as seen in the religious subject overmantels from Dartmouth. This period also saw flanking figures, that moved away from classical-style caryatids towards more contemporary clothed figures.

Given the differences in the origins of ceilings, overmantels and friezes, it is not surprising that their decorative treatment diverged, even within in the same room. In the Parlour Chamber at Holcombe Court (MD11) for example, the grotesque frieze breaks at the overmantel and is continued along its entablature as a geometric flat-fret design before returning to its grotesque form. This can give the impression that they were installed independently. While it is possible that the elements were installed at different dates, or by different plasterers, this

study shows that large number of occurrences where ceilings, overmantels and friezes are all present but utilise different decorative styles indicates that this is not the case.

The rarity of direct correlations between the design treatment of ceilings, friezes and overmantels and other contemporary decorative features, demonstrates that the decoration was limited to a palette specific to each element with minimal interchangeability. The reason for this is mainly practical: the ribs on ceilings were clearly not easily transferable to friezes or overmantels, while friezes typically repeated running patterns, which tend to have a top and a bottom and were too wide for ceiling ribs and for most overmantels. Within these physical parameters skilled plasterers were, however, able to adapt their designs using a combination of inventiveness and the careful selection of elements taken from source material. These sources, and how they influenced the style and iconography of plasterwork in the South-West, are discussed in the following chapter.

4. SOURCES, STYLE AND ICONOGRAPHY

This chapter explores the factors that influenced the design of decorative plasterwork from its earliest appearance in the South West in the 1550s to the advent of new classically inspired ornamentation that emerged ninety years later. This saw the essentially indigenous heraldic embellishments of the earlier period joined by a greater array of classically derived ornament of the Italian Renaissance, transmitted through northern Mannerism. Sections 4.1 and 4.2 of this chapter assess the sources for the design and decoration, principally the prints that emanated from the Low Countries of northern Europe, the import of which coincided with the start of the decorative plasterwork tradition, and how these principal decorative styles were interpreted for plasterwork. Section 4.3 analyses the iconography and meaning of the decoration used in the plasterwork schemes of the period in the region.

4.1 Sources

The introduction of what may be termed 'Renaissance style' across England in the mid-sixteenth century has conventionally been attributed to an influx of foreign craftsmen, usually either Netherlandish or Italian.¹ In the sixteenth century there was, however, another medium by which decorative styles could be transmitted without direct physical contact between practitioners. It was predominantly through print, rather than people or objects, that continental designs spread into England. Trade links between the Netherlands and South-West England, particularly for wool, were well established and the routes the prints took, most likely bound in volumes, must have made use of these pre-existing contacts. It would be expected, although the evidence is circumstantial, that prints entered the South-West via the entrepôts, particularly those on the southern coast, most likely direct from the low countries, and in particular Antwerp, which was the principal trading port in Europe and the main centre for printmaking in the sixteenth century. A further possibility is that prints came into the region by way of other mechanisms, such as through the London book trade. By whichever means the prints arrived, there is no doubt that these sources had a huge influence on the decorative arts in the South-West.

¹ This discussed further in Chapter 5.

4.1.1 Cartouches and subjects

Anthony Wells-Cole's assertion that the designs of the Flemish artists Hans Vredeman de Vries (1527- c.1606) and Jacob Floris (1524- 1581) are the most commonly encountered in the South-West is reinforced by my study of plasterwork.² The influence of each artist can also be seen in different elements of plasterwork design. Vredeman de Vries is principally associated with strapwork cartouche designs, while Jacob Floris' cartouche and figurative scenes were also widely used and adapted.

Elements from the architectural ornament prints of Vredeman de Vries published in Antwerp in 1565 as *Den eersten boeck, ghemaect opde twee colommen Dorica en Ionica* and *Das ander Buech, gemacht auff die zway Colonnen, Corinthia und Composita*, were particularly influential.³ In Somerset, Vredeman de Vries' strapwork designs appear on the ceiling in the long gallery at Beckington Abbey (ME4) and overmantels at Court House, East Quantoxhead (WS7) and Poundisford Lodge (TA23).⁴ Cartouche designs from de Vries' *Exercitatio alphabetica nova et utilissima*, published in 1569 were also popular.⁵ The cartouche on the overmantel in the hall at Nettlecombe Court (WS15) dated 1599 (Fig. 4.01), identified by Wells-Cole as being based on plate 22 in *Exercitatio alphabetica* (Fig. 4.02), shows the considerable complexity of these compositions which required a large scale treatment.⁶

Further study has revealed that in Devon, prints from Jacob Floris' *Veelderhande cierlijke Compertementen* suite published in 1564, were used for the plaster overmantel cartouches in the hall at Buckland Abbey (WD1) dated

² Anthony Wells-Cole, *Art and Decoration in Elizabethan and Jacobean England: The Influence of Continental Prints, 1558-1625* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), pp. 43-93.

³ Hans Vredeman de Vries, *Das ander Buech, gemacht auff die zway Colonnen, Corinthia und Composita* (Antwerp: Hieronymus Cock, 1565) and *Den eersten boeck, ghemaect opde twee colommen Dorica en Ionica* (Antwerp: Hieronymus Cock, 1565).

⁴ John and Jane Penoyre, *Decorative Plasterwork in the Houses of Somerset, 1500-1700* (Taunton: Somerset County Council, 1994), p.7.

⁵ Hans Vredeman de Vries, *Exercitatio alphabetica nova et utilissima* (Antwerp: Christopher Plantin, 1569).

⁶ Wells-Cole, *Art and Decoration*, pp. 75-76.

1576 and the lunette in the Long Room at Forde House (TE26) of c. 1610.⁷ The drawing showing Triton playing a musical instrument, but with a different cartouche, was used for an overmantel at the Manor House, West Down (ND60) (Figs. 4.43 and 4.44). Floris' next suite, *Compertimentorum quod vocant multiplex genus lepidissimis historioliis poetarumque fabellis ornatum*, was published two years later and was even more popular, particularly in the east of the study area.⁸ At Montacute House (SS18) there are three overmantels with cartouches deriving from *Compertimentorum* prints.

Jacob Floris also provided the source for the central scenes within cartouches. The depiction of the Brazen Serpent shown on the overmantel in the Parlour Chamber at Holcombe Court (MD11) (Fig. 4.03) is directly taken from a *Compertimentorum* print (Fig. 4.04), as is the central scene depicting Spring in the White Chamber at Poundisford Lodge (TA23) (Fig. 4.05). In both cases the cartouche used is not from the same print as the subject. This cartouche, also used in the Gatehouse at Combe Florey (TA5) (Fig. 5.10), seems to be an amalgam of the *Compertimentorum* Four Seasons prints, and was perhaps of the plasterer's own devising.⁹

The Jacob Floris 'Spring' cartouche (Fig. 4.06) is, however, used for the overmantel originally from 69 High Street, Barnstaple (ND8) (Fig. 4.07). This overmantel contains a scene depicting the Annunciation that is not derived from a Floris print.¹⁰ In this case the source print by Maarten de Vos (Fig. 4.19) did not have an associated cartouche. The Floris 'Spring' cartouche is also found in the Crimson Bed Chamber at Montacute House (SS18) (Fig. 4.08). Again this has a different central scene, this time in a rectangular rather than oval form,

⁷ Jacob Floris, *Veelderhande cierlijke Compertementen* (Antwerp: Hans Liefrinck, 1564).

⁸ Jacob Floris, *Compertimentorum quod vocant multiplex genus lepidissimis historioliis poetarumque fabellis ornatum* (Antwerp: Hieronymus Cock 1566).

⁹ The plasterer was almost certainly Robert Eaton, see Section 5.4.2.

¹⁰ Wells-Cole's assertion that the overmantel came from Dunster Castle is incorrect (*Art and Decoration*, p. 55). It was certainly at 69 High Street (ND8), Barnstaple, until 1964 and then moved to a house in Bristol before being acquired by Barnstaple Museum, see Art Fund, 'Decorative plaster overmantel; the centre being a depiction of The Annunciation' <<https://www.artfund.org/supporting-museums/art-weve-helped-buy/artwork/6963/the-annunciation-devon-school-of-plasterers>>, accessed 26 March 2017.

from the Judgement of Paris *Compertimentorum* engraving (Fig. 4.09).¹¹ Instances where both the cartouche and the scene originate from a single print are rare. An example is the overmantel in the King Charles Room at Dunster Castle (WS5) (Fig. 4.10), dated 1620, which is a close copy of the Floris Judgement of Paris print. A consequence of this is that the central scene is less prominent within its elaborate cartouche.

For biblical scenes, single-bound volumes of prints were available that comprised the work of different artists. The first edition of *Thesaurus veteris et novi Testament* produced by the publisher Gerard de Jode in 1579, covering both the Old and New Testaments, was particularly popular in England in the early seventeenth century and was used as a source for plasterwork in the Cornish Houses of Lanhydrock (CO9) and Prideaux Place (CO18).¹²

On the barrel-vaulted ceiling in the Great Chamber at Prideaux Place (CO18) the scene of Moses Striking The Rock (Fig. 4.11) contained in one of the lunettes is based on a *Thesaurus eteris et novi Testament* print by Hieronymus Wierix and Jan Sadler, after Crispijn van den Broeck (Fig. 4.12). Here the plasterer has adapted the rectangular print by devising some additional figures to fill the corners of the isosceles trapezium-shaped lunette.¹³ The eight panels depicting the Story of Susanna and the Elders utilise a simplified version of three of Jan Collaert's four *Thesaurus eteris et novi Testament* prints of the subject, after Gillis Coignet: the Elders making advances towards Susanna; the Elders accusing Susanna before the people; and the Elders are stoned to death (Figs. 4.13 and 4.14). The fourth of Collaert's prints, where Susanna is led away to be executed, was not used and the remaining five scenes in the plasterwork

¹¹ Floris' Judgment of Paris print, derives from Marcantonio Raimondi's c. 1515 engraving of a Raphael drawing, and was particularly popular. A further plaster overmantel depicting the Judgment of Paris in a first-floor chamber at Lanhydrock has been examined and is most likely a nineteenth century piece executed in a loose sixteenth century style.

¹² Gerard de Jode, *Thesaurus veteris et novi Testamenti* (Antwerp: Gerard de Jode, 1579). Both schemes may be by the same plasterer, see John Cornforth, 'Prideaux Place, Cornwall I: the seat of Mr. Prideaux Burne', *Country Life*, 131, 1 Feb. (1962), p. 229.

¹³ At the opposite end of the room the lunette contains a recent rendition of the Prideaux-Brune coat of arms.

are from unknown sources, some of which as Wells-Cole has speculated, may have been the plasterers' own invention.¹⁴

At Lanhydrock (CO9), the two overmantels and lunette over the west end in the long gallery illustrate the Story of David and Saul (Fig. 4.15). These are based on prints by Jan Collaert after Ambrosius Francken, which also feature in the *Thesaurus eteris et novi Testament* (Fig. 4.16). Only three of the four Collaert prints in this series were used at Lanhydrock. The scene where Saul and his armour-bearer commit suicide is absent and the space where this might have been expected to be located, in the east lunette, is occupied by the Robartes coat of arms. The ambitious ceiling has thirty-six scenes from the Book of Genesis contained within the twenty-four separate panels. The panel depicting the Sacrifice of Isaac (Fig. 4.17), is from a *Thesaurus eteris et novi Testament* print after the prolific artist Maarten de Vos (1532 - 1603) (Fig. 4.18).¹⁵ This composition was also used for the overmantel in the principal chamber at Trewarne Manor (CO26) (Fig. 4.60) and in Devon at Alston, Malborough (SH25).¹⁶ Further study of the de Vos illustrations depicting the meeting of Jacob and Rachel, and Jacob's dream of the ladder, suggest that these may also have been used for the Lanhydrock panels.

De Vos' work also forms the basis of another collection, the fifty-one numbered prints titled *Vita, Passio, et Resurrectio Jesu Christi*, published in 1598.¹⁷ My research has identified a print from this series showing the Adoration of the Shepherds used for the overmantel formerly in 69 High Street, Barnstaple (ND8) (Fig. 1.10).¹⁸ The central scene on the overmantel depicting the Annunciation (Fig. 4.07) also formerly at 69 High Street, is taken directly from a de Vos *Vita, Passio, et Resurrectio Jesu Christi* print (Fig. 4.19). Versions also

¹⁴ Wells-Cole, *Art and Decoration*, p. 105.

¹⁵ Maarten de Vos contributed 78 of the c. 300 prints in the *Thesaurus*.

¹⁶ For Alston see Keystone Historic Buildings Consultants, 'Alston, Malborough, Devon' (unpublished, 2014), p. 19.

¹⁷ Adriaen Collaert, *Vita, Passio, et Resurrectio Jesu Christi* (Antwerp: Adriaen Collaert, 1598).

¹⁸ This is also illustrated in George P. Bankart, *The Art of the Plasterer: An Account of the Decorative Development of the Craft, Chiefly in England from the XVth to the XVIIIth Century* [...] 2nd edn. (London: Batsford, 1910), p. 79.

occur on the 7 Cross Street (ND5) ceiling, now at Stafford Barton, Dolton (TR10) and the Annunciation scene on the ceiling at 62 Boutport Street (ND3) (Fig. 4.20). The plates depicting The Deposition; The Agony in the Garden; Christ's Lamentation over Jerusalem; and Christ Blessing Little Children are used for four of the seven overmantels at Court House, East Quantoxhead (WS7).¹⁹ The *Vita, Passio, et Resurrectio Jesu Christi* prints do not include any cartouches, these framing designs had to be taken from other sources, such as the Jacob Floris cartouches used at 62 Boutport Street and 69 High Street.

The Judgement of Solomon was a popular scene in the decorative arts of the period, occurring on four overmantels in the study area. A print by Dirck Coornhert after an engraving by Jacob Floris' elder brother Frans, from 1556 (Fig. 4.21) was used for an overmantel formerly located in Cross Street, Barnstaple, which is now missing (Fig. 4.22).²⁰ The main difference between the print and the plasterwork depiction is that in the plasterwork the executioner has his sword raised, adding more drama to the scene. The raised sword posture is also followed in an English woodcut print depicting a simplified version of the scene taken from a ballad, but this is sufficiently different from the Barnstaple overmantel not to have been the source.²¹

There are, however, English woodcut prints that did provide the source for biblical figurative scenes. On the overmantel at 10 Duke Street, Dartmouth (SH8) (Fig. 4.23), Wells-Cole has noted that the flanking figures of Moses and David are derived from John Payne's frontispiece to the first edition of the King James Bible, published in 1629 (Fig. 4.24), while the Pentecost central scene here is probably taken from a Flemish print after Crispijn van den Broeck from Christopher Plantin's *Biblia Sacra*.²² The same print is used for another overmantel formerly located at Lower Street, Dartmouth. This overmantel has

¹⁹ Of the remaining three, two depict heraldry, the remaining one a mermaid-type figure.

²⁰ This overmantel was sold on the London art market c. 1930, Kathleen French, 'A Devon Plasterer', *Country Life*, 133, 28 Mar. (1963), p. 668.

²¹ This is illustrated in Tara Hamling, *Decorating the 'Godly' Household: Religious Art in Post-Reformation Britain* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 99.

²² Wells-Cole, *Art and Decoration*, p. 163, The Holy Bible containing the Old Testament and the New (Cambridge: Thomas and John Buck, 1629) and Christopher Plantin, *Biblia Sacra* (Antwerp: Christopher Plantin, 1583).

four panels, two from the Old Testament and two from the New Testament, introduced between the figures and scene that Tara Hamling has identified as being taken from *A Booke of Christian Prayers* published in London in 1578.²³ The frontispiece of Day's *A Booke of Christian Prayers* was the basis for the Tree of Jesse ceiling at 12 Duke Street (SH9) (Fig. 3.28).²⁴ While the plasterwork uses the standard iconography for this story, both source and plasterwork share a similar Virgin and Child figure and more tellingly the recumbent Jesse is denoted by his name on his sleeve. It is notable that these Dartmouth pieces are devoid of Renaissance style cartouches and decorative flourishes.

English sources have also been identified for two of the ceiling panels at Lanhydrock (CO9), which again are not within cartouches. Hamling has noted similarities with the prone Adam figure in woodcuts showing the Creation of Adam and Creation of Eve from the *Bishops' Bible* of 1572.²⁵ There are, however, also some differences however and this attribution is open to question. A further attribution by Hamling is more certain. At Cowick Barton, Exeter (EX7) (Fig. 3.52) the crudely executed figures of charity and humility and the named central scene from Philippians 3:14 are taken from John Downname's *A Guide to Godlynesse*, published in London in 1622, which also provided the model for a version of this scene on the plaster overmantel at Holcombe Burnell Barton, Devon (TE17).²⁶

4.1.2 Geometric ceilings and friezes

For ceilings, individual Flemish prints were less influential. In the Parlour at Wolfeton House (WT6) the design of the ceiling (Fig. 4.25) is from a Jacob Floris *Compartmentorum* print (Fig. 4.26), and is thought to date to c. 1600.²⁷ If this date is correct it is an exceptionally rare example where a contemporary

²³ See Richard Day, *A Booke of Christian Prayers* [...] (London: John Daye, 1578) and Hamling, *Decorating the 'Godly' Household*, pp. 234-235. The overmantel is now located at Ridge Hill, Dartmouth (SH15).

²⁴ Hamling, *Decorating the 'Godly' Household*, pp. 114-15.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 187-88.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 117, John Downname *A Guide to Godlynesse*, published in London in 1622.

²⁷ This ceiling is believed by Wells-Cole to date to 1600, see *Art and Decoration*, p. 56.

ceiling can be linked to an engraving, the ceiling is, however, in remarkably good condition with a crisp appearance not unlike later gypsum plasterwork and it could potentially date to the 1860s restoration of the house.

Although not copied directly for ceilings, the designs of Italian architect Sebastiano Serlio (1475- 1554) exerted the greatest influence on plasterers. More specifically, the twelve ceiling designs shown in Folio 68 of Book IV of his treatise, published in 1537 (Fig. 4.27) set out the symmetrical interlocking geometric rib-work patterns that inspired English plaster ceiling designs for 100 years from the mid-sixteenth century.²⁸ Serlio's designs, which would have been for painted timber ceilings, were easily translated into plasterwork and provided the inspiration for the geometric ceilings in the period. It should also be noted that the curvilinear shapes that were common on plasterwork ceilings in the region from the late sixteenth century do not occur on the Serlio ceiling drawings, where the geometric shapes comprise straight lines. Serlio's designs for mazes or knots do, however, use curves, and these were also adapted for plasterwork ceilings, although this study has identified no direct correlations in the South-West. Serlio's garden designs also feature in the John Abbott book, which contains sketches of double-lined patterns that Wells-Cole has identified as coming from William Lawson's knot gardens from *The Countrie Housewifes Garden*, published in London in 1617.²⁹

The interchangeability of the geometric pattern designs between plasterwork and other trades is also highlighted by Walter Gedde in *A Booke Of Sundry Draughtes, Principaly Serving for Glasiers: and not Impertinent for Plasterers, and Gardiners: be sides sundry other professions*, published in 1615, which as the title suggests, was principally aimed at glaziers.³⁰ Wells-Cole has

²⁸ Book IV formed part of Serlio's larger work which was often published in one volume as *Tutte l'opere d'architettura, et prospetiva* (Complete Works of Architecture and Perspective). The first English version, translated from Dutch rather than direct from the Italian was published by Robert Peake in 1611. Serlio's coffered ceiling designs did not become popular in England until the early eighteenth century.

²⁹ Wells-Cole, *Art and Decoration*, p. 160, William Lawson, *The Countrie Housewifes Garden* (London: Roger Jackson, 1617).

³⁰ Walter Gedde, *A Booke Of Sundry Draughtes, Principaly Serving for Glasiers: and not Impertinent for Plasterers, and Gardiners: be sides sundry other professions* (London: Walter Dight, 1615).

demonstrated that Gedde's patterns were not all of his own design and many, if not all, of the 103 drawings were derived from other sources, including three adapted from Serlio's Book IV.³¹ The last print in *A Booke Of Sundry Draughtes* is very different from a Serlian ceiling and comprises a series of flowing curved lines forming a distinctive tulip pattern (Fig. 4.28). Penoyre and Penoyre have identified two South-West ceilings that use this design, the hall in Nutcombe Manor, Clayhanger (MD5) (Fig. 4.29) and a smaller version in the Parlour at Plud Farm, Stringston (WS25).³²

In style, friezes are clearly from the northern European tradition. These are either interpretations of the grotesque, from which the trailing-stem style developed, or the strapwork style, which spawned the flat-fret designs. There are no examples identified of friezes being taken directly from printed sources in the region. Printed designs for friezes did exist, for example by the early sixteenth-century German artist Daniel Hopfer. To make the most efficient use of paper, Hopfer represented stacked multiple friezes on single prints. The architecturally unconventional use of stacked narrow friezes at Moorhayes (MD7) (Fig. 5.08) and Haddon Hall, Derbyshire (Figs. 5.01 and 5.02) is likely to be as a direct result of their depiction on prints and Hopfer's print of ten friezes (Fig. 4.30) has designs similar to those found in these houses.

4.1.3 Emblem books

Emblem books of allegorical illustrations with mottos and explanatory text were popular in late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Of these, Geoffrey Whitney's, *A Choice of Emblemes and other Devises*; Henry Peacham's, *Minerva Britanna* and George Wither *A Collection of Emblemes Ancient and Moderne*, are the best known English emblem books, although these represent only a fraction of the output from mainland Europe.³³ These books were

³¹ Anthony Wells-Cole, 'Who was Walter Gedde?', *Furniture History*, 26 (1990), pp. 183-84.

³² Penoyre, *Decorative Plasterwork in the Houses of Somerset*, pp. 15-16.

³³ Peter Daly, 'Introduction' in *The English Emblem Tradition*, 1, ed. by Peter M. Daly with Leslie T. Duer and Anthony Raspa (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), p. x. Geoffrey Whitney, *A Choice of Emblemes and other Devises* (Leydon: Christoph Plantin, 1586); Henry Peacham, *Minerva Britanna* (London: Walter Dight, 1612); and George Wither, *A Collection of Emblemes Ancient and Moderne* (London: AM, 1635).

certainly in circulation in the South-West and the Abbott book includes thirty drawings of emblems that were copied from the poet George Wither's *A Collection of Emblemes Ancient and Moderne*, published in 1635.³⁴ This popularity did not, however, transmit to the plasterwork of the region.³⁵

One reason why emblem books were neglected as plasterwork sources may have been that in most cases the pictures required the accompanying text to stimulate the intellectual exertion that was an intrinsic part of their appeal. Text was challenging to render in plaster. Drawings from emblem books were used on occasion but as part of larger schemes rather than centrepieces. There are two examples on the ceiling in the West Room at Hinton House (SS10). Here the long-haired mermaid figure holding a golden ball in each hand and with a long tail forming a starred frame (Fig. 4.31), is taken directly from the illustration representing 'Eternitas' in Henry Peacham's *Minerva Britanna* of 1612 (Fig. 4.32). On the opposite side of the ceiling is a figure based on Peacham's illustration of 'Homo Microcosmos'.³⁶

The Long Gallery ceiling at Lanhydrock (CO9) has a number of allegorical birds: holding a mirror; sitting on a Bourchier knot; wearing a crown; an ostrich with a horseshoe; a pelican-in-her-piety, a phoenix rising from a crown; and a crane. These are fairly standard depictions that would have been well-known. The ostrich with horseshoe, for example, appears in several emblem books including George Wither *A Collection of Emblemes* and their attributes were long established and are likely to have been familiar to both client and plasterer.³⁷

³⁴ See Michael Bath, 'The Sources of John Abbott's Pattern Book', *Architectural History* 41 (1998) p. 50.

³⁵ This is in contrast with the London area where allegorical figures rather biblical subjects were favoured, although in general the influence of these books on decorative arts was less than continental subject prints, Wells-Cole, *Art and Decoration*, pp. x and 164.

³⁶ Peacham, *Minerva Britanna*, p. 141 and p. 190. Further afield, the 'Doctrina' illustration was used at Blickling Hall, Norfolk and Langleys, Great Waltham, Essex.

³⁷ The ostrich's ability to digest anything it swallows is mentioned by Pliny the Elder and in Shakespeare's *2 Henry VI*. Such symbols populate the art of the period, for example, both the pelican-in-her-piety and the phoenix symbols feature on jewellery shown in portraits of Elizabeth I painted by Nicholas Hilliard. These attributes may have classical or medieval origins. Some, such as the double-headed eagle, may have taken on a heraldic meaning.

4.1.4 Other printed sources

Depictions of animals and birds with symbolic meaning were less intellectually challenging to interpret than the more complex iconography found in the pages of the emblem books. These creatures, with more easily understood and standardised attributes, populate early-seventeenth century ceilings as peripheral decoration rather than forming the main subject. Many of these are clearly derived from woodcut illustrations in Edward Topsell's *The Historie of Foure-Footed Beastes* first published 1607.³⁸ The book was extensively drawn upon by the plasterer at Forde House (TE26) and in particular at Herringston (WT20), which includes in the north lunette of the Great Chamber an elephant and a Rhinoceros (Fig. 4.33), recognisably derived from Topsell by the extra horn on its back (Fig. 4.34). The ceiling of the gallery at Lanhydrock (CO9) has even more exotic creatures from *The Historie of Foure-Footed Beastes* such as the mythical Su (Figs. 4.35 and 4.36) Lamia and Mantichora. The Lanhydrock ceiling also includes creatures, such as the Crocodile, Dragon and Boas (Figs. 4.38 and 4.39), from *The Historie of Serpents* also by Topsell and published in 1608.³⁹ These creatures are reversed on the plaster ceiling from how they appear on the page, with their heads to the left-hand side, suggesting that the Lanhydrock plasterer was right-handed.

The study period also saw the publication of a large number of herbals, which coincided with the popularity of floral designs across the decorative arts. The direct influence of these is, however, hard to discern. Claire Gapper has suggested that the herbals were, however, unlikely to have been the source for plasterwork and identifies pattern books specifically produced for artists and craftsmen as the source for floral designs.⁴⁰ These include Jacques Le Moyne de Morgues', *La Clef des Champs pour trouuer plusieurs animaux, tant bestes*

³⁸ Edward Topsell's, *The Historie of Foure-Footed Beastes* (London: W. Jaggard, 1607) was copied from *Historia Animalium* by the Swiss encyclopaedist Conrad Gesner published in Zurich in the 1550s.

³⁹ Edward Topsell, *The Historie of Serpents* (London: W. Jaggard, 1608).

⁴⁰ Claire Gapper, 'Chapter 4 From Timber to Plaster: Courtly Ceilings in the Sixteenth Century', *British Renaissance Plasterwork*, accessed 15 August 2016.

qu'Oyseaux, avec plusieurs fleurs et fruitz, published in London in 1586.⁴¹ The woodcut depictions of flowers in *La clef des champs* are more stylised than those in the scholarly herbals. They do not, however, display the strict symmetry seen in the plasterwork floral sprays, so while they may have provided inspiration they should not be seen as a direct source.

Mention should also be made of the most common form of printed material in circulation, which were the broadside ballads printed from woodcuts. These were sold by the ballad singer or travelling chapmen, rather than through the bookseller trade, and at less than a penny were cheap, plentiful and easily obtainable.⁴² They do not, however, appear to have acted directly as sources for contemporary plasterwork designs and they were primarily aimed at the lower ranks of society and not at those who could afford to commission plasterwork. As a consequence, these prints are less likely to have been presented to the client by the plasterer as the source for an expensive commission. They also lacked the sophisticated Renaissance cartouche decoration that attracted the plasterer and client to the imported engravings.

4.1.5 Other media

Leaving aside printed media, there were limited means by which Renaissance ornament could be disseminated. Few everyday items were decorated in this way and such ornamentation was restricted to expensive high-end luxury objects, such as tapestries imported from the Low Countries. The influence of these decorative pieces is difficult to quantify, especially as they rarely survive in context. Those engaged in producing plasterwork would have been aware of decoration on other media but these were far less influential than printed works they shared as a common source. While woodwork, plasterwork and stonework were broadly related both chronologically and stylistically in a number of sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century houses in the region, evidence for full

⁴¹ Jacques Le Moyne de Morgues, *La clef des champs, pour trouuer plusieurs animaux, tant bestes qu'Oyseaux, avec plusieurs fleurs et fruitz* (London: Jacques Le Moyne de Morgues, 1586).

⁴² These were often sold by the ballad singer or travelling chapmen, rather than through the bookseller trade. Tessa Watt has estimated that as many as four million copies of broadsides might have been in circulation in the second half of the sixteenth century, Tessa Watt, *Cheap Print and Popular Piety, 1550-1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 11.

cross-fertilisation across decorative arts is elusive. A possible example may be the depiction of the Judgement of Solomon on the plaster overmantel at Barrington Court, Somerset (SS3), which has some stylistic similarities with the carved stone overmantels in the great chamber at Wolfeton House, Dorset (WT6), the Library at Montacute House (SS18) and at Wayford Manor, Somerset. The low-relief cartouche and small-scale figures on the plaster overmantel at Barrington Court could be a conscious imitation by the plasterer of these more expensive stone examples in nearby houses.

In common with wall paintings, plasterwork was almost always produced on site. Painted cloth hangings and wood carving, which were used to adorn internal spaces in a similar way to plasterwork, would be brought in and as a consequence less likely to be fully bespoke. Where plasterwork and other carving survive in context within the same room, there was little, if any, cross-over suggesting that the pieces were prepared in isolation and without a coherent overall design vision from the client or practitioner. In the Dining Room at Montacute (SS18), the chimneypiece dated 1599 comprises stone, timber, and plasterwork but with no decorative similarities between the elements (Fig. 3.09). Although the Montacute chimneypiece could have been assembled from disparate, but contemporary, pieces at a later date there are similar instances in other houses, such as the hall overmantel at Weare Giffard, where again the stone and timber parts have no common attributes in their decoration (Fig. 3.48), which suggests each element was produced separately by different craftsmen.⁴³

Where the same motif does appear on plasterwork and other media the evidence suggests that it is because they shared a common printed source, rather than the practitioner directly copying another piece. Friezes share the narrow strip attributes of embroidery borders and there is some similarity in design. For example, the linking ribbon seen in Thomas Trevelyon's *Miscellany* design for embroidery of 1608 (Fig. 4.40) and the tulip and anthemion flat-fret plaster friezes (Fig. 4.41).⁴⁴ Figurative scenes also occur across media. The

⁴³ The surmounting plaster cartouche with female head at Montacute is later.

⁴⁴ Thomas Trevelyon *Miscellany* of 1608, Folger Shakespeare Library MS V.b.232, folio 271 recto, <<https://luna.folger.edu>>, accessed 1 July 2019.

Judgement of Paris print by Floris was particularly popular, occurring on three overmantels in the study area and was also the source for a table carpet from Hardwick Hall, Derbyshire and a glazed terracotta plate produced in France.⁴⁵

Plasterwork could, of course, be based on other plasterwork, as the plasterer might execute the same design in different locations. While this was undoubtedly the case for individual cast elements and hand modelling, such as the hanging fruit leitmotif used by the plasterer Robert Eaton (Figs. 1.02 and 5.11), no examples of identical compositions in different houses have been found. There is also the possibility that a different plasterer, not necessarily connected, may copy the work of another. This appears to have been the case for The Triumph of Time over Fame scene, which occurs on four overmantels within a limited geographical area in North Devon and West Somerset (Figs. 5.21-5.24). All of these differ, both from one another and from the sixteenth century source print by Georg Pencz (Fig. 5.20), but all include Pencz's distinctive image of a child being pushed in a baby-walker.⁴⁶ Equally possible is that the plasterer was working to a closely defined brief from their client to emulate the work they had seen at another house.⁴⁷

4.2 Principal decorative styles

4.2.1 Grottesque

This style was derived from Roman antecedents rediscovered through Italian Renaissance decoration of the early sixteenth century. For ease of reference, this type of ornamentation can be taken to include Arabesque, which had different origins, and did not include figures or animals, but in late sixteenth-century northern Europe had, in effect, been assimilated with the grottesque style.

⁴⁵ An illustration of the plate can be found in Alain Gruber ed. *The History of Decorative Arts: The Renaissance and Mannerism in Europe*, trans. John Goodman (New York: Abbeville Press, 1994), p. 423. The table-carpet from Hardwick Hall, is illustrated in Wells-Cole *Art and Decoration*, p. 257.

⁴⁶ Wells-Cole, *Art and Decoration*, p. 162. This is discussed further in Section 5.4.2.

⁴⁷ The mechanisms by which plasterwork schemes were commissioned and selected are discussed further in Chapters 5 and 6.

Grotesque ornament is characterised by densely applied scrolls, foliage, fruit, figures, fanciful creatures, dolphins, medallions and other motifs all intertwined. This style reached England in the mid-sixteenth century and was termed 'antic'.⁴⁸ The breadth of subject and complexity of design were graphically described at the time by Henry Peacham:

The forme of it is a generall, and (as I may say) an unnaturall or unorderly composition for delight sake, of men, beasts, birds, fishes, flowres & c. without (as we say) Rime or reason, for the greater variety you shew in your invention, the more you please, but remembering to observe a methode or continuation of one and the same thing throughout your whole worke without change or altering. You may, if you list, draw naked boys riding and playing with their paper-mills or bubble-shells upon Goates, Eagles, Dolphins &c. the bones of a Rams head hung with strings of beads and Ribands, Satyres, Tritons, Apes, Cornu-copia's, Dogs yoakt, & c. drawing Cowcubbers, Cherries, and any kind of wild traile or vinet after your owne invention with a thousand more such idle toyes, so that herein you cannot be too fantastical.⁴⁹

In its purest, and most complex form, the grotesque style is commonly encountered on narrow friezes. The c. 1550 frieze in the Great Chamber at Mapperton House (WT12), with scrolled foliage and figures holding medallions containing male and female Renaissance heads facing each other, is one of the earliest and best examples in the region (Fig. 4.42). This has parallels with the frieze in the Wolsey Closet from some twenty-five years earlier.⁵⁰ The hall frieze at Knightstone Manor (ED21) shows something of the inventiveness and complexity of the style, with a frieze of mermaids and sea creatures accompanied by high-relief winged goblin figures in the corners of the room which have flexed legs dangling down (Fig. 4.45).⁵¹

Slightly less sophisticated, but still capturing the spirit of the grotesque, are the friezes containing the strange figures which are in the hall at Widworthy Barton (ED29) (Fig. 4.46) and at Torre Abbey (TB1), which clearly utilise the same

⁴⁸ Also known as 'Antique' or 'Antike'.

⁴⁹ Henry Peacham, *The Gentlemans Exercise* (London: W. Stansby for John Browne, 1612), p. 50.

⁵⁰ This comparison is illustrated in Margaret Jourdain, *English Decorative Plasterwork of the Renaissance* (London: Batsford, 1926), p. 40.

⁵¹ The frieze has similarities with the one in the Peacock Chamber at Orchard Wyndham, Somerset (WS29) and the long gallery at Penheale Manor, Cornwall (CO7).

mould. Grotesque friezes could also use a simple repetitive pattern, such as the opposing Pegasus motif with ribboned baton seen in the hall at Forde House (TE26), the Council Chamber at Totnes Guildhall (SH36) (Fig. 4.47), Manor Farm, South Somerset (SS21) and in a number of North Devon houses. The suitability of the grotesque style for friezes meant that it persisted throughout the period and there is a notable late derivation in the hall at Gaulden Manor (TA36) from the early 1640s, although by this time it is less commonly encountered (Table B5).

4.2.2 Strapwork and flat-fret

The strapwork style comprises wide flat interlaced bands, usually pierced or studded, reminiscent of leather or fretwork. Its origins may lie in Islamic art but its use in plaster can be traced to the Italian craftsmen working at the Galerie de François I at Fontainebleau in the mid-1530s. The design was popularised by the cartouche designs depicted on the prints of the Flemish artists, principally Hans Vredeman de Vries and Jacob Floris. A simple linear form of strapwork is a common motif on friezes. The interlocking complexity of the more developed Dutch Mannerist form of strapwork, usually with rolled ends, lent itself best to three-dimensional cartouches on overmantels. Both styles can be seen on the overmantel in the Great Chamber at Holcombe Court (MD11), which also has a strapwork wall frieze (Fig. 4.48). The broad-rib ceiling design has some similarities with strapwork seen on cartouches. There is one ceiling in the region, in the Great Parlour, Beckington Abbey, Somerset (ME4), which is very clearly a strapwork design.

In terms of execution, the repetitive low-relief simple flat-fret designs produced from shallow-cut moulds are similar to strapwork. Flat-fret designs are rare, with the exception of the tulip or anthemion pattern, which is found on narrow friezes on the Devon/Somerset border from the 1590s and has also been identified at Bogan House, Totnes, Devon (SH45). In this simple design, the tulips or anthemion are alternately inverted and are linked by scroll or ribbon. At Poundisford Lodge (TA23), the anthemion frieze appears in the Oak Room (Fig. 5.15) and on the overmantel in the White Room, while the tulip pattern in the parlour. Outside of these two designs, alternatives are rare. One example, from

the 1640s is in the Wing Dining Room at Nettlecombe Court (WS15), which has a large angular key pattern with leafy ends.

4.2.3 Trailing-stem

The term 'trailing-stem' is useful for describing the loose trailing flower, fruit, and tendril, thin-stemmed designs which became popular from the first decade of the seventeenth century. On friezes, where they are most commonly encountered, these simple flowing open designs give a less intense visual effect than strapwork or grotesque design. They do not tend to include additional figures or motifs, although there are exceptions, such as in the Master Chamber at Rashleigh Barton (MD24), which includes mythical creatures and heads in medallions. A more typical example of this type is the floral frieze at Hankridge Farm, West Monkton (TA42) (Fig. 4.49). Other examples in Somerset include a flower or leaf and grape motif, such as at Coalharbour Farm, Creech St Michael, (TA9), Halsewater Hall, Halse (TA12) and Cothay Manor (TA28). The trailing-stem design also occurs as the principal design element in spiral ceilings, such as in the parlour at Rashleigh Barton (Fig. 3.29), or as an enrichment on a broad-rib ceilings, seen in the Master Chamber (Fig. 3.77) in the same house.

4.3 Iconography

4.3.1 Heraldry

Heraldry was an important signifier of status in the period. It is therefore not surprising that this is the most common single subject for plasterwork. Coats of arms modelled in plaster comprise 46% of the principal subjects for overmantels (Table B6). Of these heraldic overmantels, 86% show family arms, with the remainder being royal, mercantile, or municipal arms. Many houses contain more than one coat of arms, at Nettlecombe Court (WS15) for example, there are three sets of family arms on overmantels representing four families.

Family arms

On overmantels, family coats of arms typically form the central focus. Exceptions to this are rare, notably in the two upper chambers at Mapperton

House (WT12), the family arms occupy the central position in the composition but in terms of scale usually merge with the surrounding Renaissance decoration (Fig. 4.50). In most compositions, however, the arms dominate while other decoration is subservient, often acting as a frame. As Maurice Howard has pointed out, heraldry was an exact science so the arms needed to be unambiguous in their presentation.⁵² That is not to say that a high degree of decorative embellishment could not be allowed. A strapwork cartouche and flanking figures were typically added, perhaps making up for the relative plainness of the arms. In comparison with royal arms, which seem to have received a more conservative treatment, this embellishment could reach a high degree of sophistication, such as the dynastic showpieces in the Gatehouse, Combe Florey (TA5) (Fig. 5.10) and the Great Chamber at Holcombe Court (MD11) (Fig. 6.04).

Family arms are less frequently seen on ceilings, lunettes, wall plaques and friezes. One exception is 18 Fore Street, Taunton (TA33), where the arms occur on the ground-floor chamber as a wall plaque (Fig. 4.51) and as smaller shields on the first-floor rear chamber ceiling.⁵³ Family arms also occur on the parlour ceiling and in the great chamber lunette at Rashleigh Barton (MD24). Individual shields are applied to the wall in the hall, Weare Giffard (TR29), which also has tiny painted arms in the strapwork frieze (Fig. 3.03).⁵⁴ The narrow nature of friezes make them less conducive to heraldic display, but there is a further example on the strapwork frieze in the Parlour at Montacute House (SS18) where the heraldry is also painted. Whether the painted finish was contemporary is unclear.⁵⁵ The hall frieze at Rashleigh Barton (MD24) (Fig. 7.20) has high-relief shields, which might have been intended to be painted. By contrast, in Room 11 at Montacute House and in the Great Chamber, Trecice (CO29), shields form an intrinsic part of a grotesque frieze and must have been

⁵² Maurice Howard, *The Early Tudor Country House: Architecture and Politics 1490-1550* (London: George Philip, 1987), p. 120.

⁵³ See Robert Taylor, 'Town Houses in Taunton, 1500-1700', *Post Medieval Archaeology*, 8 (1) (1974), p. 68.

⁵⁴ The heraldic shields are described in A. W. B. Messenger, 'A Survey of the Heraldry at the Hall, Weare Giffard, Devon', *Transactions of the Devonshire Association*, 75 (1943), pp. 171-210.

⁵⁵ This is discussed in Section 3.1.4.

left intentionally plain. A distinction needs to be drawn between plasterwork that has been left deliberately blank and where it was once painted but is now plain. There are examples, such as in the hall at Trerice (Fig. 3.05), which could actually represent a looking glass, and the overmantel and wall plaque in the hall at Buckland Abbey (WD1) (Fig. 3.45) where these have probably been left intentionally blank. This must have been for aesthetic reasons, as in both cases the families were armigerous. At the relatively modest Nutcombe Manor (MD5), however, the family, although still of gentry status, is unlikely to have mustered sufficient arms to fill the two vertically divided plain shields on the overmantel.⁵⁶ In this case, the intention might have been to suggest that the family were of a higher status.

Royal arms

Royal arms remained popular through the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries (see Table B6). As the majority of this period coincided with 45 year reign of Elizabeth I, it is not surprising that her arms account for 52% of royal arms depicted on plasterwork. It is, however, often impossible to differentiate between the arms of the Tudor monarchs unless they are accompanied by initials or dates.⁵⁷ The arms of Elizabeth I in the hall at Poundisford Park (TA24) are identified by initials, although unusually the letters set each side of the crown are transposed and read 'R E' (Fig. 2.02). In the hall at Weare Giffard (TR29) the Tudor arms (Fig. 7.02) have no letters but the date of 1599 place them in Elizabeth's reign.

Where dates and initials are not present the identity of the monarch is less certain. When Henry VIII died in 1547 decorative plasterwork was only just beginning to become established and as a result his arms are far less likely to be modelled in plaster. A potential Henrician candidate is in the Great Chamber at Lytes Carey (SS8) (Fig. 3.21). Here the Tudor arms, which are lacking supporters but are flanked by the Tudor rose and fleur-de-lis, have been

⁵⁶ Illustrated in Hugh Meller, *The Country Houses of Devon*, 2 (Crediton: Black Dog Press, 2015), p. 718.

⁵⁷ Usually these comprise a lion and dragon but Henry's arms were also supported by a greyhound, as with the timber example in the hall, Weare Giffard. The library in the house also contains a timber overmantel with the arms of James I flanked by the figures of Victory and Plenty.

attributed to Henry VIII on the basis of the date of 1533 for the room but could equally have been installed sometime after this date.⁵⁸

Given the brevity of Edward VI's reign, which was also early in the decorative plasterwork tradition in the region, it is not surprising that there are only three potential candidates, none of which can be categorically assigned to Edward. At Holcombe Court the attribution is based on the owner Roger Bluett being knighted by Edward VI in 1547.⁵⁹ It is possible that these arms (Fig. 4.52) were formerly located in the north or west wings, which were erected as part of Sir Roger's rebuilding programme of the 1550s and 1560s. The relocation may have taken place at the time of the mid-nineteenth-century remodelling of the hall as Edward Ashworth, who visited the hall before the reconstruction, records the arms of the Lord Protector of Somerset, Sir Edward Seymour, (presumably in plaster), at the east end of the hall.⁶⁰ Another example, although in a non-domestic context, is in the Court Room at Totnes Guildhall (SH36). This has the royal arms accompanied by the text 'ANNO DOMINI MCCCCCLIII EDWARDE VI', marking the the date of the charter granted by Edward, allowing the former Benedictine Priory to be used as a guildhall. While the arms are undoubtedly those of Edward, it seems likely that these were added retrospectively, perhaps in the 1624 rebuilding. The third putative example is at Walreddon Manor in West Devon (WD18).

The arms of the Stuart monarchs can be easily distinguished from those of the Tudors. There are five examples, representing 22% of royal arms. belonging to James I. The example in the Library at Mapperton (WT12) (Fig. 4.53) is executed with a high degree of skill and is flanked by Terms but overall has a much plainer treatment than the family arms in the hall (Fig. 4.54). By contrast, the arms of James I at Kings Gatchell, Somerset (TA39) are so crudely done as to be unrecognisable were it not for the presence of the initials 'I R' and lion and

⁵⁸ Penoyre and Penoyre believed the plasterwork to date to 1533, see *Decorative Plasterwork in the Houses of Somerset*, p. 14.

⁵⁹ Charles Scott-Fox, *Holcombe Court: A Bluett Family Tudor Mansion* (Exeter: Exeter Short Run Press, 2012). p. 26.

⁶⁰ Other arms on the south wall are also no longer present, for a description see Edward Ashworth, 'The Manor House of Holcombe Court and the Church of Holcombe Rogus, Devon', *Transactions of the Exeter Diocesan Architectural and Archaeological Society*, 6 (1861), p. 239.

unicorn (Fig. 4.55). In addition to Mapperton House, there are particularly good examples in the lunette of the barrel vaulted ceiling at Hams Barton, Chudleigh, (TE7) and the ceiling in the Great Chamber, Herringston House, Dorset (WT20). The example in St Hydroc's church next to the house at Lanhydrock (CO9), which has been relocated, is likely to have originally been placed in a domestic context as royal arms in churches are rare pre-1660.⁶¹ In their modelling, these arms, dated 1621, are very similar to the plasterwork seen in the Robartes arms in the long gallery of the house (Fig. 4.28) which is after 1636, and may be by the same plasterer.⁶²

The arms of Charles I are less common, with only three examples known. Much of Charles' reign was blighted by political turbulence which may have dissuaded outward displays of loyalty. This was not, however, always the case and at Boringdon House, Plymouth (PL1) the massive overmantel has the arms of Charles, with the initials 'C R', flanked by over-life-size figures of Peace and Plenty. Clearly the Parkers, who occupied Boringdon, had no qualms displaying their allegiance to the King.⁶³ A more typically sized example, dated 1640, can be found in the hall at Great Combe, Stoke Fleming (SH27) flanked by a slipped and crowned Tudor rose and a similarly treated thistle.

Merchant arms and corporate badges

Mercantile arms depicted in plaster are rare. There is one example from the sixteenth century, on the now lost overmantel at King John's Tavern, Exeter (EX21) (Fig. 4.56), with a merchant mark accompanied by initials and dated 1577. Below this is the inscription 'LOVE GOD ABOVE AL [sic] THINGS'. The combination of a mercantile motif and religious instruction also occurs at Coalharbour Farm (TA9), which dates to 1679 (Fig. 2.01). Here the arms of the Merchant Adventurers Company of London are accompanied by the inscription 'GOD BE OUR DEFENCE'. While the dataset is limited, merchant arms seem to have been most popular in the seventeenth century. There is a further example

⁶¹ The National Trust curator, Paul Holden, shares this view and believes the arms came from the old stone hall in the mansion. Personal communication, 3 May 2017.

⁶² These arms are different in execution to those in the morning room of 1636.

⁶³ Through most the Civil War Plymouth sided with Parliament.

from the 1670s, this time showing the arms of the Butchers' Guild of Exeter, at Yeas Cottage, Cothelstone (TA8). Both these late seventeenth-century examples of merchant arms occur in rural Somerset houses, while it might be expected that they would be more common in towns where there would have been a concentration of merchant groups.

There is one example in an urban context in the front chamber lunette at 62 Boutport Street, Barnstaple (ND3), which has the arms of the Spanish Company and dates to 1620 (Fig. 4.65).⁶⁴ A further example of the Spanish Company arms occurs just three miles to the west across the River Taw at Higher Rookabeare Farmhouse, Fremington (ND34). In the lunette opposite the Spanish Company arms at 62 Boutport Street are the Barnstaple town arms of a three towered castle. They also appear in the form of a badge on ceilings in the merchant houses at 7 and 8 Cross Street (ND5 and ND6) (Fig. 4.66). Such municipal badges were confined to urban environments. At Totnes, the town emblem, a castle with keys, is evident in the ceiling at 64 Fore Street (SH32), which was occupied by the mayor, and reputedly paid for by the town council in 1625.⁶⁵ The town council also provided the overmantel in the council chamber at Totnes Guildhall (SH36), which has a larger and fuller treatment of the arms than the Fore Street ceiling and is dated by inscription to 1624 (Fig. 4.57).

4.3.2 Figurative scenes

Within the South-West, after heraldry figurative scenes are the most common type of imagery, appearing on 19% of overmantels (Table B6) and on five ceilings (Table B4). In terms of subject matter, of the forty-three figurative depictions on overmantels, seventeen are from the Old Testament, ten from the New Testament, thirteen from classical sources, and three which have scenes

⁶⁴ The Spanish Company arms differ slightly from the recorded arms for the company, but have been badly overpainted, see Arthur Charles Fox-Davies, *The Book of Public Arms: A Complete Encyclopædia of all Royal, Territorial, Municipal, Corporate, Official, and Impersonal Arms* (London: T.C. and E.C. Jack 1915), p. 744.

⁶⁵ Thana Kendall and Diana Simmons, *The Decorated Ceilings in and around Totnes* (Totnes: Totnes Heritage Group, 2009), p. 18.

that are neither classical nor biblical and do not appear to have been sourced from prints.⁶⁶

Biblical images

In broad terms, the removal of images from churches brought about by the Reformation of the mid-sixteenth century coincided with the emergence of religious depictions in domestic contexts.⁶⁷ Religious imagery was, however, only allowable within certain constraints. For the subject of the piece not to become a focus for veneration, individual sacred figures, such as the Virgin Mary, Christ and the Apostles were not generally depicted but bible stories that featured these were permissible.

On the evidence of surviving plasterwork, New Testament scenes first appear in the early decades of the seventeenth century. The most notable of these are the overmantels depicting the life of Christ at Court House, East Quantoxhead (WS7) from the 1620s. The infant Christ and the Virgin Mary are depicted in the hall frieze at Gaulden Manor (TA36) c. 1640, the ceiling at 62 Boutport Street (ND3), and the relocated plasterwork formerly from 7 Cross Street (ND5) and at 69 High Street, Barnstaple (ND8) from around 1620. In Dartmouth, Old and New Testaments are combined. The Virgin and Child and the apostles occur on the Tree of Jesse ceiling at 12 Duke Street (SH9). The Pentecost overmantel from 10 Duke Street, Dartmouth (SH8) clearly places the Virgin at the centre but this is flanked by larger figures of King David and Moses (Fig. 4.23).

This shift in the use and placement of religious imagery towards a domestic-based backdrop for didactic religious practice and moral guidance for family members coincided with the rise in popularity of decorative plasterwork. It should also be noted that stylistic similarities seen in the modelling of the figures strongly suggest that the same plasterer who carried out the Dartmouth commissions in the first half of the 1630s, in 1633 also installed the elaborate

⁶⁶ For the purposes of the figures, flanking figures to overmantels, such as personifications are excluded.

⁶⁷ A detailed exposition of this process is given by Tara Hamling, *Decorating the 'Godly' Household*, while the Northern European background is outlined in Andrew Morrall, 'Domestic Decoration and the Bible in the Early Modern Home', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Bible in Early Modern England, c. 1530-1700*, ed. by Kevin Killeen, Helen Smith and Rachel White (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 578-97.

ceiling depicting the apostles, evangelists and scenes of Christ in the Peamore family chapel at Exminster, St Martin (Fig. 5.56). Such work was therefore also being commissioned in formally consecrated spaces in this period.

The Old Testament was especially useful as a source as certain depictions could be seen as prefigurations of the life of Christ. This can be seen in the imagery of the Sacrifice of Isaac and Moses and the Brazen Serpent which were understood as analogous with the Crucifixion. This is explicit in a Netherlandish woodcut from 1465 where these two Old Testament scenes flank a central Crucifixion.⁶⁸ In plasterwork, the majority of these symbolic substitutes or 'surrogate images' date to the second and third decades of the seventeenth century.⁶⁹ There are rare exceptions. The scene of Moses and the Brazen Serpent on the Parlour Chamber overmantel at Holcombe Court (MD11) (Fig. 4.03), is likely to date to the 1590s and is the only known depiction of this scene in plaster.⁷⁰

The Sacrifice of Isaac is by far the most popular single subject found in plasterwork and occurs in nine of the fifty-six recorded biblical plasterwork schemes in the South-West. In addition, the Abbott book contains two variations of the scene, one with the angel to the left of Abraham (Fig. 4.58) and one with the angel to the right (Fig. 4.59). The second sketch has an arc over it, suggesting the design was intended for a lunette. The iconography is long established in the decorative arts and appears on many prints and in other media. The Trewarne overmantel (CO26) (Fig. 4.60) was, however, clearly taken from the print by Maarten de Vos from *Thesaurus eteris et novi Testament* (Fig. 4.19) as the figures of Abraham and Isaac, carrying his sticks, also appear on the right of the scene as the prelude to the act of sacrifice. This inclusion, which prefigures Christ carrying the cross, adds a further element to the story and usefully fills the righthand of the frame as, in comparison with the print, the plasterer has brought these to the fore. To reinforce the iconography, in at least

⁶⁸ British Museum Collection Online <https://research.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/>, accessed 22 February 2020.

⁶⁹ The term 'surrogate image' is used by Hamling, *Decorating the 'Godly' Household*, p. 241.

⁷⁰ This is by the same hand as the overmantel in the Great Chamber at Holcombe Court, which is dated 1591.

two examples, on the overmantel in the principal chamber at Trewarne, Manor (CO26) (Fig. 4.58) and at Alston, Malborough (SH25), there is text that in both cases refers to Abraham's obedience. A third example, from the first-floor rear chamber at 18 Fore Street, Taunton (TA33) has banners which might have had text, although this was possibly painted given their small size.⁷¹

The themes of obedience and redemption seen in Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac would have appealed to the head of a household. There was also an undoubted visual attraction in the iconography of the scene. The climax of the story is simply and dramatically depicted with Abraham, sword raised, and the angel interceding. The exception to this standard iconography can be seen in the porch at Marshwood Farm (WS3) which shows the scene prior to this but still contains the narrative elements necessary to tell the story, including an angel peeping through the clouds (Fig. 4.61).⁷² This version may have been devised by the plasterer and not based on a print and was perhaps commissioned by a client wanting a more patriarchal rendition of the story. In both the dramatic and intimate presentations, the contemporary viewer could draw out the concepts of unquestioning obedience, sacrifice and redemption and the parallels that are found in the Crucifixion. In addition, the adoption of an image encompassing these virtues would reflect, by association, on the owner and remind the members of the household of their duties. As a result, the iconography of the Sacrifice of Isaac had much to offer the early modern householder.

The depiction of Adam and Eve in plasterwork, is the next most commonly encountered scene and appears in five houses in the study area. This seems to have been used in a slightly different way to the Sacrifice of Isaac. While the image typically depicts the figures, the Tree of Knowledge and the Serpent, it should perhaps be less seen as a substitute for the Crucifixion in the same way, although through his death Christ redeemed man from Adam's Original Sin and parallels can also be drawn between the obedience of Adam and of Christ. Tara Hamling has noted the occurrences of the image on beds and within bed

⁷¹ Overpainting has obscured the detail here.

⁷² The plasterwork is almost certainly an overmantel relocated from elsewhere in the house.

chambers and associations with the 'pleasurable vices of Sloth and Lust'.⁷³ It has also been suggested that depictions of Adam and Eve may have associations with the putting on and removal of clothes.⁷⁴

Of the remaining thirty-seven instances of biblically themed plasterwork there are nineteen different scenes. Clearly, there was a degree of choice as to which biblical subject could be selected. In many instances the choices would be almost self-selecting. In the first-floor court room at the Court House, Fore Street, Chard (SS6) the figures of Wisdom and Justice are accompanied by depictions of the Judgement of Solomon, the Fiery Furnace and Daniel in the Lion's den. Collectively these represent trials, justice and liberation, which would be entirely appropriate given their court room setting.⁷⁵ A variation of the Judgement of Solomon scene, which occurs three times on regional plasterwork, is now at Stafford Barton (TR10) and dated 1640 (Fig. 4.62). While this overmantel must have been moved here from elsewhere, it is nevertheless notable that the central Solomon figure is missing.⁷⁶ The obvious omission has led Hamling and Richardson to speculate that this is deliberate and Solomon would have been 'present' in the room, in the form of the owner and presiding over such matters.⁷⁷ It is, however, equally possible that the Solomon figure was removed when the overmantel was relocated as the composition is otherwise very similar to a sketch in the Abbott notebook, where the Solomon is depicted looking very much like a seventeenth century monarch (Fig. 4.63).

Classical images

Like biblical scenes, classical depictions contained meanings for the client and viewer, although an education to grammar school level would be an advantage in recognising these. The most common depiction in the South-West, the

⁷³ Hamling, *Decorating the 'Godly' Household*, p. 174.

⁷⁴ Tara Hamling and Catherine Richardson, *A Day at Home in Early Modern England: Material Culture and Domestic Life, 1500-1700* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017), pp. 48-49.

⁷⁵ The detached hall to the rear of 9 Fore Street building has long been considered to have been the court house of the manor, see 'Manor Court House', *Proceedings of the Somersetshire Archaeological and Natural History Society*, 28 (1882), pp. 23-24.

⁷⁶ See Keystone Historic Buildings Consultants, 'Stafford Barton, Dolton, Devon', Report K274 (Unpublished, 2008), p. 24.

⁷⁷ Hamling and Richardson, *A Day at Home in Early Modern England*, p. 201.

Judgement of Paris, was a popular subject across Northern Europe. The three plasterwork examples from the region, at Montacute (SS18) (Fig. 4.08), Dunster Castle (WS5) (Fig. 4.10) and Wolfeton House (WT6) (Fig. 3.49), are derived from a Jacob Floris' *Compertimentorum* print of 1566, which shows Paris handing the golden apple prize to Venus (Fig. 4.09). The story features in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which existed in English translation and was very well known amongst the educated classes, being extensively read and recited in sixteenth-century grammar schools.⁷⁸ The story, which has Paris judging a beauty contest between three goddesses, has less immediate gravitas than, for example, the Judgement of Solomon and does not convey a moral message that can be extrapolated in the same way. Although the scene can be loosely interpreted as demonstrating that ill-judged decisions can have bad consequences - Paris chooses Venus for less noble reasons which ultimately leads to the Trojan War - the chief attraction for the client may have been the visual appeal of the three naked goddesses. This was, however, evidently not the case at Dunster Castle, which has the goddess figures modestly dressed and rendered in a more gender neutral fashion than is shown in the Floris print (Figs. 4.09 and 4.10).⁷⁹

Another *Metamorphoses* depiction can be seen on the overmantel in the upper chamber of the Luttrell Arms, Dunster (WS6) which shows the death of Actaeon (Fig. 4.64). Here the opportunity to show the bathing scene, where Actaeon out hunting accidentally spies the naked Diana, or indeed the dramatic pursuit of the transformed Actaeon, was eschewed. Instead the client, who was almost certainly George Luttrell, selected the scene where Actaeon, who is depicted part-transformed with small antlers, is being devoured by three of his own hounds who look more embarrassed than terrifying (Fig. 4.64).⁸⁰

Like many of the *Metamorphoses* stories, the meaning of the death of Actaeon story is open to contradictory interpretations. These include a profligate Actaeon brought down by his obsession with hunting dogs and a Christian reading where

⁷⁸ Jonathan Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 21.

⁷⁹ The plaster version also deviates in the depiction of Paris, who is missing his Phrygian cap.

⁸⁰ The depiction is unusual in that the dying Actaeon is still shown as a man rather than a stag, research for this thesis has not identified a source print for this.

Actaeon represents Christ.⁸¹ A contemporary early seventeenth-century interpretation of the myth is set out by George Sandys in *Ovid's Metamorphosis Englished, Mythologizd and Represented in Figures*.⁸² In Sandys' reading, Actaeon's voyeurism becomes espionage against a monarch and once this act is committed his underlings, represented by the hunting dogs, feel empowered to act in the same presumptive way towards him.⁸³ This hierarchical exposition is especially interesting given the iconography of the overmantel as a whole. Immediately above the scene, and set within a pediment, is the well-dressed male demi-figure of George Luttrell who is resting his hands on the outer frame containing the Actaeon scene and staring out into the room (Fig. 7.45). Each side of the demi-figure are supporting lions holding shields depicting the royal insignia of England. The figures flanking the frame are female caryatids, who each display a bare leg, perhaps alluding to the voyeuristic subject matter of the scene.

There are further overmantels depicting scenes from *Metamorphosis*. At Chevithorne Barton, Tiverton (MD22), the overmantel depicts Orpheus charming the beasts, and is taken from a German woodcut of 1563 by Virgil Solis.⁸⁴ At Stafford Barton, Dolton (TR10) the overmantel, which was originally from 7 Cross Street, Barnstaple (ND5), has an unsophisticated rendition of Daphne on the left in the process of turning into a laurel tree, with leaves for her hands, and Apollo on the right side shooting an arrow.⁸⁵ This scene appears to have been based on a French woodcut of 1557 by Bernard Salomon.⁸⁶ When situated at Cross Street, the dimensions of the overmantel make it likely to have

⁸¹ See Leonard Barkan, 'Diana and Actaeon: The Myth as Synthesis', *English Literary Renaissance*, 10, (3) (1980), pp. 318-30.

⁸² George Sandys, *Ovid's Metamorphosis Englished, Mythologiz'd and Represented in Figures: An essay to the Translation of Virgil's Aeneis* (Oxford: John Lichfield, 1632).

⁸³ Leonard Barkan, 'Diana and Actaeon', p. 328.

⁸⁴ Virgil Solis, *Metamorphoses Ovidii* (Frankfurt, 1563), p. 119. This print was also used for an overmantel at Haddon Hall, Derbyshire. This woodcut appears in a reversed form in Bernard Salomon, *La Metamorphose d'Ovide Figurée* (Lyon: Jean de Tournes 1557).

⁸⁵ Illustrated in Keystone, 'Stafford Barton, Dolton, Devon', p. 29 and L. A. Shuffrey, *The English Fireplace: A History of the Development of the Chimney, Chimney-piece and Firegrate with their Accessories, from the earliest times to the beginning of the XIXth Century* (London: Batsford, 1912), pl. 60.

⁸⁶ Salomon, *La Metamorphose d'Ovide Figurée*.

been in an upper chamber, and its meaning, which can be interpreted as the 'triumph of chastity over desire', would have had an obvious moral message.

Allegorical images

The Triumph of Time over Fame, which occurs on four overmantels, is the third most common scene depicted in the South-West after the Sacrifice of Isaac and Adam and Eve. It is found exclusively in a limited area of North Devon and West Somerset, occurring at Dean Head, Swimbridge (ND52) (Fig. 5.21), Binham Grange, Old Cleeve (WS16) (Fig. 5.22), 103 High Street, Barnstaple (ND11) (Fig. 5.23), and the Manor House, West Down (ND60), (Fig. 5.24). The ultimate source for all the overmantels has been identified by Anthony Wells-Cole as an early sixteenth-century woodcut print by the German engraver Georg Pencz (Fig. 5.20), although disparities in the plaster depictions suggest that not all of these were worked directly from the print.⁸⁷

The print is one of a series of six processions inspired by a suite of fourteenth-century poems by Petrarch, with each attribute defeating the one before and in turn being overcome by the next in the sequence. Matthew Johnson has likened the Triumph of Time image on plasterwork to a funeral cortege, serving as a reminder of 'Man's inevitable end'.⁸⁸ While the subject of the print is clearly a triumphal, and not a funerary, procession, Johnson's interpretation of the meaning is also perhaps too simplistic. The forewarning of death through *memento mori* imagery in art was very popular in the period appearing across a variety of media including prints, paintings, funerary monuments and jewellery.⁸⁹ This imagery almost invariably includes a human skull or skeleton. The Triumph of Time print does not include these and were the intention to provide a straightforward *memento mori* then the Pencz print showing the Triumph of Death, the focal point of which is a skeleton wielding a scythe, would have been the more obvious choice. The possibility that the plasterer(s) only had access to one Pencz print cannot, however, be discounted. As Wells-Cole has noted,

⁸⁷ Wells-Cole, *Art and Decoration*, p. 162.

⁸⁸ Matthew Johnson, *English Houses 1300-1800: Vernacular Architecture, Social Life* (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2010), p.148.

⁸⁹ See Nigel Llewellyn, *The Art of Death: Visual Culture in the English Death Ritual, c. 1500-1800* (London: Reaktion Books, 1991).

aside from the South-West examples cited above, no other piece of decorative art in England appears to have been based on this print, or indeed any other of the Pencz series.⁹⁰

Aside from its visual qualities, the Triumph of Time nevertheless offers a more subtle variation of a *memento mori* image, serving as a lesson in humility, demonstrating the pointlessness of pursuing the vanity of money and social position given the transitory nature of life. The certainty of death is therefore implicit in this iconography. The figure of Father Time, personified as a winged bearded old man holding an hour glass and scythe, was sufficiently known and more commonly seen as a single figure, rather than as a participant in a scene. The association with death is attested by the appearance of the figure of time on funerary monuments in the period where it was typically accompanied by other personifications.⁹¹ The only plasterwork depiction of Father Time unaccompanied is on an overmantel at Trenearne, Cornwall (C019).⁹² This figure, which appears slightly sinister to modern eyes in a domestic context, is as Tara Hamling has noted, a permanent reminder to the household of the 'looming presence of death'.⁹³

There is a small group of seemingly unique figurative scenes that were not sourced from classical or biblical stories, or indeed derived from identifiable prints that may be described as allegorical.⁹⁴ The 'resting knights' wall plaque from the hall at Buckland Abbey (WD1) (Fig. 7.08) may also represent a *memento mori*. The centre of the plaque has a tree dividing a mirror image composition of a seated knight, elbow resting on a skull, a pile of armour and a warhorse. The melancholic pose of each of the figures, head-in-hand leaning against a tree (Fig. 7.10), is reminiscent of Democritus Abderites from the

⁹⁰ Wells-Cole, *Art and Decoration*, p. 162. It may be significant that this scene is the only one of the suite copied into the Abbott notebook. This is discussed further in Section 5.4.2.

⁹¹ For example, the Eveleigh monument, Bovey Tracey, Devon of 1620, where Time is flanked by Charity and Justice.

⁹² Illustrated in Hamling, *Decorating the 'Godly' Household*, p, 278.

⁹³ *Ibid.* p. 278.

⁹⁴ While these share characteristics with emblem book illustrations, a search through the three most popular: Whitney, *A Choice of Emblemes*; Peacham, *Minerva Britanna*; and Wither, *A Collection of Emblemes*, did not find parallels for these.

frontispiece of the 1628 edition of Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (Fig. 7.11).⁹⁵ It also has echoes in *An Allegory: (Vision of a Knight)*, c. 1504 by Raphael and Isaac Oliver's miniature of Edward Herbert, c. 1602-1617.⁹⁶ None of these depictions, however, include a skull. The combination of melancholic pose and skull seen on the Buckland Abbey plaque is, however, relatively common on funerary monuments in the period.⁹⁷ Although the presence of the skull suggests a *memento mori* the choice of iconography almost certainly relates directly to the owner rather than a more generic depiction.

The skimmington ride panel from the hall at Montacute House (SS18) (Fig. 7.04) also falls into the category of specific commission. The panel depicts a South-West regional variation of the European charivari, a noisy mocking impromptu procession instigated by the community to shame an individual for a misdemeanour, usually in their domestic marital relationships.⁹⁸ The most common reason for a skimmington, and the one depicted at Montacute, targets a husband for allowing his wife to beat him.⁹⁹ The panel comprises two scenes in one frame, read from left to right: the 'crime'; and the 'punishment'. In the first scene (Fig. 7.05), a figure holding what appear to be a pair of gloves, indicating high status, stands on the left of the composition observing a husband, taking a break from carrying out his wife's domestic tasks, represented by the baby he carries.¹⁰⁰ Helping himself to a drink from a barrel, the husband is chastised by his wife who beats him over the head with a shoe. In the second scene (Fig. 7.06), the observer relays what he has seen to another villager and in spreading the word so incites the mob to carry out the punishment that forms the main subject of the right side of the panel. The husband, or a proxy - the figure is

⁹⁵ Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (Oxford: Henry Cripps, 1628).

⁹⁶ See paintings by Raphael, *An Allegory: (Vision of a Knight)*, c. 1504, oil on poplar, National Gallery, London and Isaac Oliver, c. 1602-1617, watercolour on vellum, Powis Castle, Wales.

⁹⁷ See Christine Fauch, 'Constructing the Dead: Late Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Century Effigy Sculpture in Devon', *Journal of the Church Monuments Society*, 14 (1999), pp. 48-52.

⁹⁸ The skimmington is noted as a tradition particularly prevalent in West Country wood-pasture areas, D. E. Underdown, 'The Taming of the Scold: the Enforcement of Patriarchal Authority in Early Modern England', in *Order and Disorder in Early Modern England*, ed. by A. Fletcher and J. Stevenson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 129-30.

⁹⁹ Martin Ingram, 'Ridings, Rough Music and the "Reform of Popular Culture" in Early Modern England', *Past & Present*, 105, Nov. (1984), p. 90.

¹⁰⁰ For the symbolism of gloves see Robert Tittler, *Portraits, Painters, and Publics in Provincial England, 1540-1640* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 130.

enthusiastically participating by playing a woodwind instrument and has a drum - rides a pole carried by the mob that form a procession through the village, represented by the buildings in the background.¹⁰¹ Above the pole-riding figure flies a bird. This almost certainly represents a cuckoo, the inference being that the pole-rider is also a cuckold.¹⁰² Leading the mob is a figure wearing a cloak. It is tempting to see this as a representation of Sir Edward Phelips himself who commissioned the work.¹⁰³ This representation of a skimmington ride is the only known interpretation of a folk custom depicted in plasterwork in the region. No source print has been found but in style it bears a superficial resemblance to the English woodcuts popularly known as broadside ballads.¹⁰⁴ The elongated rectangular shape of the plaster panel suggests it was not based on a single print, which were typically rendered in 3:2 ratio, and the composition might therefore have been wholly conceived by plasterer, perhaps guided by the client Sir Edward Phelips.

While not depicting a folk custom as such, there is also a communal spirit to the fruit gathering scene depicted on the overmantel in the Old Vicarage, Barnstaple (ND20) (Fig. 3.59). The overmantel depicts a centrally placed tree, bearing round fruit, which are almost certainly apples, being climbed by a figure. Below the ascending figure is a crowd of figures all standing with the exception of the two nearest the trunk, one seated the other in a melancholic prone position. Even without the explanatory latin motto shown on a banner extending from the tree climbing figure, which translates as 'nothing without labour', the iconography is clear in its representation of the protestant ideals of the rewards of hard work, which could be both spiritual and financial. A similar meaning may

¹⁰¹ By custom, the substitute rider was the next neighbour nearest the church, *ibid.* p. 86.

¹⁰² Martin Ingram has noted that a man beaten by his wife was conventionally assumed to be a cuckold, *ibid.* pp. 86-87.

¹⁰³ Phelips could equally be the figure holding gloves witnessing the misdemeanour on the left of the scene. This need not mean that Phelips would have physically participated in such activities, although there is, however, evidence to suggest that the lower gentry could support such actions, see Ingram, 'Ridings, Rough Music and the 'Reform of Popular Culture'', pp. 104-106.

¹⁰⁴ Anthony Wells-Cole thought the panel must have been based on a 'popular print', *Art and Decoration*, pp. 163-164. The two observers at the back of the group immediately to the right of the building are very similar to those present in the *Skimmington-Triumph, Or the Humours of Horn Fair* print of 1720, which may in turn have been based on an earlier print. No other aspect of the print is similar to the Montacute panel, see British Museum Collection Online <https://research.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/>, accessed 22 February 2019.

be construed from the depiction of a squirrel and tree from the upper chamber at Rashleigh Barton (MD24), which has no accompanying text.¹⁰⁵

Narrative sequences

A narrative could be extracted from a single scene. For example, Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, where the key elements necessary to convey the story are incorporated: Abraham in the act of swinging his sword; a kneeling Isaac next to the sticks he carried for his own funeral pyre; the interceding angel; and the ram in the thicket. Narrative sequences of plasterwork are more rare. Examples are known from two Cornish houses. The gallery at Lanhydrock (CO9) has Old Testament scenes on the ceiling and the life of David on the overmantels and a lunette. The upper chamber ceiling at Prideaux Place (CO18) has scenes depicting Susannah and the Elders. The series of overmantels depicting the life of Christ at Court House, East Quantoxhead (WS7) could form a narrative, although this would involve processing through the house, entering and leaving one ground-floor and three first-floor rooms.

There is one possible example of a narrative frieze. This is found in the hall at Gaulden Manor (TA36) and has biblical imagery including the Virgin and Child, Salome being presented the head of John the Baptist, Adam and Eve, and St Martin giving his coat to a beggar.¹⁰⁶ According to Robert Dunning these scenes symbolize the life of the Catholic bishop of Exeter James Turberville and were installed by Bishop James great nephew John Turberville who owned Gaulden in 1642.¹⁰⁷ On stylistic grounds the date is credible, although it is more questionable whether the scenes form a narrative sequence relating to the bishop. The 'Chevy Chase' frieze at St Michael's Mount (CO13), may be slightly earlier in date and comprises a succession of hunting scenes of different

¹⁰⁵ A squirrel holding a nut is also the crest of the Bluett family of Holcombe Court, and a family connection is possible.

¹⁰⁶ The frieze is described in Penoyre, *Decorative Plasterwork in the Houses of Somerset*, p. 27 and Hamling, *Decorating the 'Godly' Household*, p. 128.

¹⁰⁷ R. W. Dunning, 'The Plasterwork at Gaulden Manor', *Proceedings of the Somersetshire Archaeological and Natural History Society*, 116 (1972), pp. 113-14.

animals in a continuous composition.¹⁰⁸ In this sense the Chevy Chase is not strictly narrative as it is without an obvious beginning or end across the composition as a whole.

Portraits

Portraits of identifiable individuals in plaster are not common with only two examples known in the region. The medium was perhaps not suited to lifelike representations in comparison to wall paintings and stone carving.¹⁰⁹ At the Luttrell Arms (WS6) the demi-figure on the upper chamber overmantel (Fig. 7.45) bears a superficial resemblance to George Luttrell's monument in St George's Church, Dunster and to his painted portrait. The context of the image, which is within a building he owned but from which he was frequently absent, means that it almost certainly represents him.¹¹⁰ The other example, also on an overmantel from 8 The Quay, Bideford (TR7), has a centrally placed full figure which is usually taken as being Sir Brevil Grenville, holding in each hand a cartouche containing family arms.¹¹¹

Conclusion

While decorative plasterwork represented a new craft in the mid-sixteenth century, the designs and iconography used did not appear out of nowhere. This chapter identifies two principal strands that can be traced in the plasterwork of the South-West. The earliest design elements appearing in the 1550s are a continuation of the late-medieval gothic tradition fused with early sixteenth-century Renaissance elements. The popularity of these motifs continued through the study period and was joined within twenty years by the second

¹⁰⁸ Karen M. La Borde, gives a date range of 1600-1641, see 'Hunting for Hidden Meaning: an Analysis of the History, Interpretation and Presentation of Seventeenth-Century Plasterwork at St Michael's Mount, Cornwall' (unpublished M.Phil thesis, University of Birmingham 2011), p. 86.

¹⁰⁹ For portraiture in wall paintings see Kathryn Davies, 'Visual Communication in Early Modern Buildings', in *Architect, Patron and Craftsman in Tudor and Early Stuart England: Essays for Malcolm Airs*, ed. by P. S. Barnwell and Paula Henderson (Donington: Shaun Tyas, 2017), pp. 164-168.

¹¹⁰ The painting is illustrated in Sir H.C. Maxwell Lyte, *A History of Dunster and the Families of Mohun and Luttrell*, 1 (London: St Catherine Press, 1909), opp. p. 176. For a description of the iconography see below. The purpose of the figure is discussed in Section 7.3.2.

¹¹¹ Illustrated in French, 'Devonshire Plasterwork', pl. 18c.

strand, which saw the introduction of later Renaissance Mannerist design and iconography, primarily transmitted through the medium of prints imported from the Low Countries.

The impact of printed sources should not be underestimated. The correlations between plasterwork and prints are most readily recognised in the cartouche and the figurative scene, particularly those designs based on the work of the Flemish artists Hans Vredeman de Vries and Jacob Floris. While the designs of cartouches and scenes were adapted by the plasterer, their appearance on plasterwork is almost always indicative of the use of a source print. Many depictions use standard iconography which makes isolating whether a scene came from an individual specific source or is a more generic representational convention difficult. For example, the Sacrifice of Isaac, which was popular across the decorative arts, almost invariably has Abraham, sword in raised arm, about to slay the kneeling Isaac. Other popular standardised depictions, such as King David at Prayer, could also have been derived from a number of printed sources in circulation.

The ready availability of prints undoubtedly widened the choice of designs available. The client commissioning the work and the plasterer implementing the scheme were able to select from a variety of designs based on these printed materials. There are also designs with no obvious relation to known printed sources. In some instances this could be because the source print has been lost or cannot be identified. It could also be the case that the design was the invention of the client or plasterer. This relationship between those commissioning the work and the plasterer who carried it through, and how the designs were selected, used and viewed, is discussed in the next two chapters.

5. THE PLASTERER

Far more is known about plasterwork techniques and designs than those who carried out the work in the South-West, who remain shadowy figures. Using the evidence of their surviving schemes as the primary source, this chapter focuses on the plasterers and how they worked. Sections 5.1 to 5.3 examine the origins of plasterers in the South-West, how they were trained, organised and gained commissions. In Section 5.4, four areas within the region that show high concentrations of plasterwork are studied in detail. Within these areas, occurrences of identical casts and hand-modelling styles allow individual plasterers, or workshops, to be isolated and the geographic parameters within which they operated to be identified and placed in a regional context.

5.1 The origin of the South-West plasterers

The scarcity of written records concerning the plasterers has tempted scholars into the spurious attribution of plasterwork schemes. One idea, that held prominence in the mid-twentieth century, was that the introduction of Renaissance decorative style in the mid-sixteenth century was due to an influx of foreign craftsmen, usually either Netherlandish or Italian. Iris Brooke, in her 1950 *Country Life* article, speculated that the angel figures' hairstyles on the plasterwork at Widworthy Barton (ED29) (Fig. 3.39) and the Grange, Broadhembury (ED5), indicated that they were made either by an Italian or someone who had recently studied in Italy.¹ Writing in 1952, A. W. Vivian-Neal stated that the overmantels at Poundisford Lodge (TA23), 'cannot be the work of an Englishman' and ascribed them to an unidentified Flemish refugee thought to reside in Minehead.² Similarly, writing in 1957 Kathleen and Cecil French

¹ Iris Brooke also identified the overmantel figures of Justice and Truth from The Grange, Broadhembury (ED5) as being by the same workshop, see 'The Riddle of the Devon Plasterers', *Country Life*, 108, 29 Dec. (1950), p. 2214.

² A. W. Vivian-Neal, 'The Tudor and Stuart Plasterwork of West Somerset', *Proceedings of the Somersetshire Archaeological and Natural History Society*, 96 (1952), pp. 145-46.

considered the arrival of Flemish immigrants into Totnes and Dartmouth as the catalyst for local plasterers to produce their work.³

These assumptions were not entirely unfounded. Firstly, the presence of foreign craftsmen in England in the sixteenth century is well documented. In particular, the two years after 1585 saw the religious persecutions of Protestants in Antwerp leading to perhaps as many as 40-50,000 refugees seeking asylum in England, among which are known to have been craftsmen.⁴ In the South-West, John Allan, using the lay subsidy rolls, has identified a substantial community of immigrant workers in the early sixteenth century.⁵ These included Breton woodworkers in West Cornwall and significant Dutch populations in Exeter and Dartmouth. It was also known that decorative plasterwork had been introduced by Italians engaged on royal commissions in the early sixteenth century and the early eighteenth century heralded the arrival in England of *stuccatori* from the lakeland areas on the border of Italy and Switzerland.⁶

The second reason for attributing plasterwork to foreign migrants is the perception that English craftsmen were not as accomplished in producing good quality work as their continental counterparts. Thomas Elyot writing in 1531, stated that when an Englishman wanted 'anything well paynted, kerved, or embrawdred' he was obliged to 'abandone our owne countrymen and resorte to straungers'.⁷ Similarly, in 1577 John Leake highlighted a lack of inventiveness amongst native craftsmen: 'We ought to favour the Strangers from whom we learned so great benefits [...] because we are not so good devisers as followers

³ See Kathleen and Cecil French, 'Devonshire Plasterwork', *Transactions of the Devonshire Association for the Advancement of Science, Literature and Art*, 89 (1957), p. 125. In contrast, Bruce Oliver, writing in 1917, identifies the plasterers working in Barnstaple as being English, see 'The Early Seventeenth-Century Plaster Ceilings of Barnstaple', *Transactions of the Devonshire Association for the Advancement of Science, Literature and Art*, 49 (1917), p. 196.

⁴ Lien Bich Luu, *Immigrants and the Industries of London, 1500-1700* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 4.

⁵ John Allan, 'Breton Woodworkers in the Immigrant Communities of South-West England, 1500-1550', *Post Medieval Archaeology*, 48:2 (2014), pp. 320-56.

⁶ This movement is documented by Christine Casey, *Making Magnificence: Architects Stuccatori and the Eighteenth Century Interior* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017).

⁷ Thomas Elyot, *The Boke Named The Governour devised by Sir Thomas Elyot Knight*, 1, ed. by H. H. S. Croft, (London: Kegan Paul, Trench & Co., 1883). p. 140.

of others'.⁸ This belief in the inferiority of native craftsmen was also put forward by Christopher Wren, who in 1694 observed that English artists, while possessing practical skills:

[...] are dull enough at Inventions [...] education in that which is the foundation of all mechanick Arts, a practice in designing or drawing, to which everybody in Italy, France and the Low Countries pretends to more or less'.⁹

The third reason for favouring an influx of foreign craftsmen over English was the invasion or 'migrationist' theory, which was prevalent in mid-twentieth century scholarship and in particular in archaeology.¹⁰ In essence, this school of thought held that sudden introductions into indigenous material culture were brought about by the physical presence of new people populating an area. By direct contact with these incomers this theory also allowed the native craftsmen to adopt the new foreign practices through a process of acculturation or diffusion.¹¹

There are, however, strong reasons to suggest that the South-West decorative plasterer tradition was founded by British craftsmen. The plasterwork used in the region was executed in lime plaster and not the gypsum-based stucco plaster used in mainland Europe. Where stucco was used for decorative work in England in the sixteenth century it was by those plasterers, such as Nicholas Bellin, who had entered the country from overseas to carry out royal works. There is no evidence that this stucco-based plaster was used in the South-West until late in the seventeenth century. In addition, foreign craftsmen were more prevalent in some trades than others. In London, for example, where the bulk of immigrant craftsmen were based, very few foreigners were engaged in the

⁸ From John Leake's treatise on the cloth industry, quoted in Wells-Cole, *Art and Decoration in Elizabethan and Jacobean England: The Influence of Continental Prints, 1558-1625* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), p. 3.

⁹ Quoted in Geoffrey Beard, *Decorative Plasterwork in Great Britain* (London: Phaidon, 1975), p. 22.

¹⁰ A useful synopsis of the then prevailing invasion theory can be found in Grahame Clark's seminal article 'The Invasion Hypothesis in British Archaeology', *Antiquity*, 40 (1966), pp. 172-189. Although dealing with Prehistory, Clark's assertion that invasion has to be demonstrated rather than assumed is also relevant to later studies.

¹¹ see Luu, *Immigrants and the Industries of London*, pp. 5-17.

plastering work.¹² The earliest decorative work in the South-West is also very much in the English Gothic stylistic tradition of thin-rib ceilings decorated by a limited heraldic repertoire of Tudor roses, fleur-de-lis motifs and family arms.¹³ In late sixteenth-century plasterwork these Gothic elements exist alongside Renaissance influenced plaster designs. Further to this, as seen in Section 4.1, it is clear that this continental influence entered into the plasterers' stylistic vocabulary direct from printed sources, imported primarily from the Low Countries; an area where there was no tradition of decorative plasterwork in the late sixteenth century.¹⁴

5.2 Organisation and training

In the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, plasterers belonged in the upper tier of skilled building artificers. This group, which included other similarly skilled craftsmen such as joiners and masons, were part of what, one hundred years later, Daniel Defoe would term as superior 'Guides or masters in such works or employments and these are called artists, mechanicks or craftsmen'.¹⁵ They were nevertheless, as Mark Girouard has noted, placed within William Harrison's fourth tier and were therefore the social inferior of the yeomen and gentry who commissioned their work.¹⁶ They were also below some skilled crafts, such as goldsmiths, who made-up the civic elite.¹⁷

¹² Claire Gapper, 'Chapter 3 The Plasterers' Company of the City of London', *British Renaissance Plasterwork* <<http://clairegapper.info/plasterers-company.html>>, accessed 15 August 2016.

¹³ John, R. L., Thorp, 'Wall Painting and Lime-Plaster Decoration', in *Devon Building: An Introduction to Local Traditions*, ed. by Peter Beacham, 2nd edn. (Exeter: Devon Books, 1995), p. 131.

¹⁴ Tara Hamling has identified the lack of fixed decoration in Dutch houses, which might relate to the market for oil painting, see *Decorating the 'Godly' Household: Religious Art in Post-Reformation Britain* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), pp. 9-10.

¹⁵ Daniel Defoe, *A Plan of the English Commerce: Being a Compleat Prospect of the Trade of this Nation, as well the Home Trade as the Foreign* (London: Charles Rivington, 1728), p. 5.

¹⁶ See Mark Girouard, *Elizabethan Architecture: Its Rise and Fall* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 23.

¹⁷ See Susan Flavin, 'The Decorative Arts, Change and Development in the Sixteenth Century' in *West Country to World's End: The South West in the Tudor Age*, ed. by Sam Smiles (London: Paul Holberton Publishing, 2013), p. 34.

5.2.1 Guilds

It was usual for the skilled crafts to be organised into urban-based guilds. Membership of guilds bestowed several advantages. Members could control entry into the trade and protect against the encroachment by untrained workers, tradesmen and strangers. Guild membership also ensured that employment conditions and wages were maintained and that the welfare of family members were looked after in the event of illness or death.¹⁸ There is, however, no evidence to show that plasterers operating in the South-West belonged to guilds. In general, guilds were less developed in the region and there is, for example, no equivalent of the London Plasterers' guild in the South-West.¹⁹ This is not to say that plasterers could not be members of local guilds formed by other trades.²⁰ Exeter was the only urban settlement in the region of sufficient importance to host guilds. These included the company of Carpenters, Masons, Joiners, Glaziers and Painters, incorporated by the city council in 1586.²¹ Membership records of this company have not survived but in the absence of a dedicated plasterers' guild, this might be regarded as the natural home for a decorative plasterer.

The two best documented plasterers operating in the seventeenth century in the region, John Abbott and Robert Eaton are both recorded as being resident in villages some distance from Exeter and are unlikely to have been part of a

¹⁸ The advantages of craft guild membership are set out in James Ayres, *Art, Artisans and Apprentices: Apprentice Painters and Sculptors in the Early Modern British Tradition* (Oxford: Oxbow, 2014), pp. 28-43.

¹⁹ The Worshipful Company of Plasterers of London, which was founded in 1501 before decorative plasterwork became established, had no control outside of the city. See Claire Gapper, 'The London Plasterers' Company and Decorative Plasterwork in the 16th and early 17th Centuries', *Journal of the Building Limes Forum*, 9 (2002), pp. 7-26.

²⁰ Bostwick considers it more likely that decorative plasterers emerged not from the 'wet trades' but from the ranks of joiners and wood carvers and in this case would therefore be more likely to have been members of Companies of Joiners and Carpenters. See David Bostwick, 'Decorative Plasterwork of the Yorkshire Region, 1570-1670' (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Sheffield, 1993), p. 118.

²¹ William Cotton, 'Some Account of the Ancient Guilds of the City of Exeter', *Transactions of the Devonshire Association for the Advancement of Science, Literature and Art*, 5 (1872), pp. 117-38.

guild.²² There was good reason to be based in the countryside. Plasterers, like other craftsmen, might be expected to farm small agricultural holdings to sustain themselves and their families between jobs.²³ Even a prolific plasterer such as Robert Eaton is recorded as a yeoman and leasing a cottage and land in 1614, although this would have been towards the end of his plastering career.²⁴ At the time of his death in 1727, John Abbott, who is described as a 'gent', held farms, which also provided an income.²⁵ It is therefore possible that the rurally-based Abbott and Eaton were not members of guilds. As Malcolm Airs has pointed out, such organisations were unknown on the country house sites, so being outside of a guild would not have been a disadvantage in gaining lucrative commissions or hiring apprentices.²⁶

5.2.2 Apprenticeships

It is possible that some South-West plasterers were trained in urban guilds outside of the region. It is not known, for example, where John Abbott, Robert Eaton and Thomas Forde learnt their trade. In the case of Abbott, it has been assumed that he was from a line of plasterers stretching back into the sixteenth century.²⁷ Robert Eaton, whose earliest work is from 1590, belongs to the second wave of plasterers operating in the region and is perhaps more likely to have been apprenticed outside of the South-West, or trained locally with the first wave of plasterers in the region who operated within the same geographic area. Thomas Forde is identified in the rates of the parish of Dartmouth St Clement as

²² In the case of Abbott, Frithelstock or Langtree in North Devon, which are 80 kilometres from Exeter, and for Eaton, Stogursey, which is 70 kilometres from the city.

²³ See Malcolm Airs, *The Tudor and Jacobean Country House: A Building History* (Stroud: Bramley Books, 1998), pp. 163-64.

²⁴ Somerset Heritage Centre, Stogursey Parish Records, D\P\stogs, quoted in Jane Penoyre, *Traditional Houses of Somerset* (Tiverton: Somerset Books, 2005), p. 43. No other records for Robert Eaton are known.

²⁵ Copy of the will of John Abbot of Frithelstock, North Devon Record Office, 956 M/W1, <http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/65a3e344-7908-454f-946b-89355d78ee64>, accessed 13 July 2018.

²⁶ Airs, *The Tudor and Jacobean Country House*, p. 186.

²⁷ See Section 5.4.2.

a plasterer in 1610 and the absence of earlier work in the town may also suggest he was apprenticed elsewhere.²⁸

By 1600, the large quantity of schemes being commissioned (Table B1) suggests the presence of a number of trained plasterers. Where an appropriate guild existed it would be expected that they would also be responsible for supervising indentured apprenticeships or a comparable period of training.²⁹ It may be significant that of the 1,350 apprentices drawn from all over the country to the London Company of Plasterers between 1597 and 1662, only 10 originated from Cornwall, Devon and Dorset.³⁰ While they would not necessarily return to their place of origin after training, given the high number of decorative plasterwork schemes executed in these counties, proportionally few plasterers in the region appear likely to have been London trained.

The plasterer John Abbott is documented as having taken Laurence Mabyn as an apprentice in 1719.³¹ A further Abbott apprentice is also recorded in a settlement examination from Langford Budville, Somerset in 1732. In his testament, Peter Greenwood claimed to have been apprenticed at the age of seven to John Abbott Junior, a plasterer of Frithelstock. The word 'junior' is significant here and suggests that it was John Abbott's son who had followed in his father's trade and taken Mabyn as an apprentice.³² If Peter Greenwood's testimony is accurate, seven can be considered a very young age to enter into an apprenticeship, which would typically last seven years, as was the case with

²⁸ See Todd Gray, 'Plaster and Dartmouth Guildhall in 1614', *Devon Buildings Group Newsletter*, 37 (2019), p. 44.

²⁹ Ayres, *Art, Artisans and Apprentices*, p. 44.

³⁰ The situation was different for Somerset which did dispatch apprentices to London. Claire Gapper, 'Chapter 3 The Plasterers' Company of the City of London', *British Renaissance Plasterwork* <<http://clairegapper.info/plasterers-company.html>>, accessed 15 June 2019.

³¹ R. Pearse Chope, 'John Abbott, plasterer', *Devon and Cornwall Notes and Queries*, 14:7 (1927), p. 290.

³² John Abbott is usually described as being born in 1639/1640, but Mike Baldwin has postulated, that he was actually born in 1647, see 'Graviti In Publicke Places and Yet Inwardly Licencious: The Custom House, Exeter', *Devon Buildings Group Research Papers 2* (2006), pp. 25-26.

Laurence Mabyn.³³ While this would have meant that Greenwood would have completed his seven year term at the age when most apprenticeships started, it is not inconceivable that his apprenticeship lasted longer, as in London Claire Gapper has noted that some indentures lasted over fifteen years.³⁴ Once completed it was usual for the newly freed apprentice to serve a short period as a journeyman, or paid employee of their master.³⁵ Whether Peter Greenwood finished his apprenticeship and set out on his own is not known but it is probable that this system of local training recorded in the late seventeenth century was also responsible for producing the majority of the South-West plasterers from the earlier period.

5.3 Commissions

At the beginning of the decorative tradition in the mid-sixteenth century there would certainly have been fewer practitioners. This shortage of plasterers would have taken some time to redress. If a master only took one apprentice at any given time, it would take at least seven years for the next generation of plasterer to set up in business, so the numbers of plasterers operating would increase relatively slowly.³⁶ In this early period when the fashion for decorative plasterwork was taking hold among the élite households, the demand for plasterwork was met by a relatively small number of workshops operating over a large area and travelling some distance between commissions.

5.3.1 Obtaining work

Evidence from other parts of the country supports the premise that individual plasterers were sought-after by those commissioning high status building

³³ The length of apprenticeships could vary but under the Statute of Artificers of 1563 apprentices were bound to their masters for a period of at least seven years, see Donald Woodward, *Men at Work: Labourers and Building Craftsmen in the Towns of Northern England, 1450–1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) p. 55.

³⁴ Claire Gapper, 'Chapter 3 The Plasterers' Company of the City of London', *British Renaissance Plasterwork*, accessed 15 June 2019.

³⁵ Woodward, *Men at Work*, pp. 64-72.

³⁶ For London, Claire Gapper has calculated that between 1599 and 1654 only 9.75% of plasters took more than one apprentice, Gapper, 'Chapter 3 The Plasterers' Company of the City of London', *British Renaissance Plasterwork*, accessed 15 June 2019.

programmes.³⁷ A letter sent in 1554/5 by Sir William Cavendish of Hardwick Hall in Derbyshire to Sir John Thynne of Longleat, Wiltshire, gives an insight into how the process of obtaining the services of a plasterer worked:

[...] Sir I understand that you have a connyng plaisterer at Longlete which haith in your hall and in other places of your house made dyverse pendants and other prettye thynges. Yf your busynes be at an ende or will by the next sommer after this that comyth in I woold pray you that I myght have hym in to Darbyshire for my hall is yet onmade [...].³⁸

It would seem that Sir John would not spare his plasterer as five years later Sir William's widow Bess of Hardwick wrote:

After my verey hertie commendacions vnto you good Sir Iohn Thyn and to my Lady, Thies are even so to desire you to spare me your plaisterer that flowred your halle whom I wolde gladly have furthwith to be sent either to my howse at Chattesworthe whiche way Master Hyde can instrute hym Or elles to London that I may sende hym downe with all spede my selfe [...].³⁹

Once the services of a skilled plasterer had been secured at Hardwick Hall there was clearly an incentive to retain them. Abraham Smith, who in addition to plastering also carried out stone carving at Hardwick Hall from the late 1580s, was provided with a wage, a rent-free farm and allowed the Cavendish livery.⁴⁰ The security of tenure that Smith enjoyed was unusual. Most craftsmen were to some degree itinerant and travelled between jobs.

Work could not only be secured on the recommendation of clients but also the house builders who had previously employed them, or from other craftsmen.⁴¹ Kathleen and Cecil French identified a link between John Abbott and the master mason/architect William Arnold based on the attribution of the plasterwork at

³⁷ A similar letter from the study area is discussed in Section 5.4.2.

³⁸ Quoted in Beard, *Decorative Plasterwork in Great Britain*, p.26.

³⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 26-27.

⁴⁰ David Durrant and Philip Riden, *The Building of Hardwick Hall, Part 2 The New Hall, 1591-98*, 9 (Chesterfield: Derbyshire Record Society, 1984), pp. lxiv and lxxii.

⁴¹ See Airs, *The Tudor and Jacobean Country House*, pp. 77-78 and 149-65.

Montacute House (SS18).⁴² There is, however, a better correlation between William Arnold and the Somerset plasterer Robert Eaton. With the possible exception of the skimmington panel in the hall, which is stylistically different, the plasterwork at Montacute is very likely to have been by Eaton. Both Eaton and Arnold also worked at Wolfeton House (WT6) and Melplash House.⁴³ It is entirely possible that Eaton was employed at these houses on the recommendation of Arnold, who was known to favour a team of Somerset craftsmen that included members of his family.⁴⁴

When skilled plasterers were in short supply they would cover a greater geographic range.⁴⁵ This is supported by the occurrence of a plaster motif found in the Devon/Somerset border also found in the Midlands, Yorkshire, and Northumbria. The top and middle elements of the five-level frieze in the Drawing Room at Haddon Hall, Derbyshire (Fig. 5.01 - level 1 and Fig. 5.02 - level 3) has a 'confronting dolphin' mould that is used in the hall at Poundisford Park (TA24) (Fig. 5.03).⁴⁶ David Bostwick has also identified another example of the 'confronting dolphin' frieze from amongst excavated fragments from Edlingham Castle in Northumbria.⁴⁷ The confronting dolphins at Haddon Hall differ slightly in having cherub heads with wings included, which are missing from the Poundisford Park frieze. The confronting dolphins without the cherubs also occurred on the top and bottom of a three-level frieze from the first-floor room identified by this study at Moorhayes, near Cullompton (MD7) (Fig. 3.41).⁴⁸ This

⁴² French and French also associate Arnold with the plasterer John Abbott, see 'Devonshire Plasterwork', p. 129. This is also followed by Wells-Cole, *Art and Decoration*, pp. 163-164.

⁴³ For Arnold's connection to the Dorset houses see Arthur Oswald, *Country Houses of Dorset*, 2nd edn. (London: Country Life, 1959), p. 29. The Melplash overmantel is now at Mapperton House (WT12).

⁴⁴ See Peter Hill, 'William Arnold and his Stone Masons', *Notes and Queries for Somerset and Dorset*, 37, part 380 (September, 2014), pp. 317-24.

⁴⁵ The number of surviving schemes (Table B1) demonstrates that there were more plaster schemes installed after 1600 and therefore more plasterers operating in this later period.

⁴⁶ This was first noted in 1934, see Christopher Hussey, 'Country Homes Gardens Old and New: Poundisford Park I, Somerset, the Seat of Mr A. Vivian Neal', *Country Life*, 76, 4 Aug. (1934), p. 119.

⁴⁷ Bostwick, 'Decorative Plasterwork of the Yorkshire Region', p. 92.

⁴⁸ The plasterwork in this room is no longer extant but there is a French photo held in the Devon Heritage centre, 5031Z.

suggests that two versions of the design, one with dolphins only, and one with dolphins plus cherubs, were carved, presumably by the same joiner. Alternatively, and more convincingly, for ease of flexibility in use and design, the friezes were often built up using short lengths of moulds, so in this case the dolphin and cherub would have utilised two independent moulds.

It is, however, not just the grotesque confronting dolphin pattern that appears at Haddon Hall and in the South West. Closer inspection of the middle element of the Moorhayes frieze (Fig. 3.41) demonstrates that it is the same as level 4 at Haddon Hall (Fig. 5.02). This mould is also used in the Long Gallery at Holcombe Court (MD11) (Fig. 5.04), which in addition incorporates level 5 of the Haddon Hall frieze (Fig. 5.02), a mould that is also used on its own in the King's Room at Poundisford Park (TA24) (Fig. 5.05).⁴⁹ The parlour chamber frieze at Holcombe Court (Fig. 5.06) is found at Moorhayes as part of the dolphin frieze, although the dolphin element is not found at Holcombe. This frieze is also at North Lees Hall, Derbyshire (Fig. 5.07). In addition, three motifs from Moorhayes (Fig. 5.08) are also at Haddon Hall: the fleur-de-lis (1) is in a second-floor room in Peveril Tower; the Tudor rose (2) and Tudor rose/fleur-de-lis (3) are both in the ceiling of the bay of the Solar. The Tudor rose/fleur-de-lis is also seen on the upper chamber ceiling at Whitley Hall, Ecclesfield, near Sheffield. There are further links between the Somerset/Devon work and the Midlands with the ornament in the border of the lozenge surrounding the Tudor arms at Rowlands, Ashill (SS1) using the same mould which was later used at Mayfield Old Hall, Ashbourne, Derbyshire.⁵⁰

If the principal mechanism for the plasterers travelling between commissions was at the request of their clients, as illustrated by the Hardwick Hall letters, then a connection at this level of society might be expected. This explanation has been put forward by the Penoyres, who follow Vivian-Neal in suggesting that the marriage of Elizabeth Manners, the niece of Sir John Manners of

⁴⁹ The gallery frieze from Poundisford Park also occurs in the hall at Holcombe Court and Rowlands, Ashill.

⁵⁰ I am grateful to David Bostwick for the information relating to the use of the Derbyshire moulds, pers. comm., 7 November 2018.

Haddon Hall, to Sir William Courtenay of Powderham in 1573 may provide the link between Derbyshire and the South West.⁵¹ Further research for this thesis reveals additional links. William Courtenay's third wife was Jane Hill, niece of William Hill of Poundisford Park. The Courtenays' are also linked to Holcombe Court through the marriage in 1544 of John Bluett of Holcombe Court and Dorothy Mountjoy Blount, a member of one of the richest families in Derbyshire, whose half-sister Gertrude had married Henry Courtney in 1525.⁵² These links are, however, convoluted and the extent to which they could have influenced the engagement of a plasterer is difficult to verify in the absence of documentary evidence. In actuality, most of the prominent Devon and Somerset families were linked through marriage. For example, the Moore family of Moorhayes, where the same plasterers had also installed a scheme, were long established and well connected, although apparently not directly linked to the Courtenays, Hills, Bluetts or Blounts.⁵³

5.3.2 The role of the plasterer

The extent to which the plasterer chose, or helped to select, the scheme for the client, is best seen in the repeated use of the same motifs in different houses. A single floral spray mould could be used, or combined with another mould, to form variants that might be deployed by the plasterer on multiple commissions. In addition, hand-modelled motifs might be repeated, such as the distinctive hanging fruit used by Robert Eaton (Figs. 1.02 and 5.11). It would seem unlikely that the client would wish to be involved in the selection of this level of ornamental detail, so much of this work would be left to the plasterer to devise. Similarly, beyond expressing a preference for thin-rib or broad-rib ceiling design, which were the two principal ceiling options available after c. 1600, a client might not have participated in choosing the type of pattern the ribs formed. It is of course possible that the plasterer sketched out a design to present to the

⁵¹ See Penoyre *Decorative Plasterwork in the Houses of Somerset*, p.27. The Manners family owned Haddon Hall.

⁵² For the Bluett family history see Charles Scott-Fox, *Holcombe Court: A Bluett Family Tudor Mansion* (Exeter: Exeter Short Run Press, 2012), p.126.

⁵³ Vivian, *The Visitations of the County of Devon: Comprising the Herald's Visitations of 1531, 1564, and 1620 / With additions by Lieutenant-Colonel J. L. Vivian* (Exeter: For the author, by H. S. Eland, 1895), p. 572-74.

client before installation. The Abbott notebook contains a number of sketches of these ceiling patterns, that could have potentially been used in this way.⁵⁴

The only certain design drawing for a scheme known to survive in England is one for Ramsbury Hall, Wiltshire, dating to the late sixteenth century.⁵⁵ This particular scheme was for an aristocratic client, in this case Mary Sidney, wife of the 2nd Earl of Pembroke. The lack of other survivals suggests that such a service was not generally extended to less affluent clients, at least in the form of a presentation drawing on paper.⁵⁶ Where moulds were used, it is possible that the client may have been given a choice between what the plasterer had in their possession, which they would at least be able to view in cast form prior to application.

It is also very likely that the plasterer possessed some continental prints from which the client could make a selection. The plaster overmantels in the group attributed to Robert Eaton have scenes and cartouches taken directly from Jacob Floris's *Compertimentorum*. This indicates that Eaton had in his possession a copy of this volume, or had made copies from it, and used it for multiple commissions. Alternatively, he could have owned selected individual prints, which would have been less costly to acquire. This would explain why there are some potentially suitable prints from the *Compertimentorum* which, on the basis of surviving examples, were not used as sources for plasterwork.⁵⁷ It seems probable that the client might have chosen the central scene, while the cartouche and the other ornamental elements were left to the plasterer's discretion. It is notable that while individual elements and subjects are repeated there are no two overmantels in the region that are identical and only a dozen subjects occur in more than one figurative scene. The plasterer, in combination

⁵⁴ See Section 5.4.2.

⁵⁵ For details of the Ramsbury Hall sketch see Claire Gapper, 'Patrons, Plasterers and Architects: Designing Decorative Plasterwork in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries', in *Architect, Patron and Craftsman in Tudor and Early Stuart England: Essays for Malcolm Airs*, ed. by P. S. Barnwell and Paula Henderson (Donington: Shaun Tyas, 2017), p. 152.

⁵⁶ Claire Gapper, 'Chapter 4 From Timber to Plaster: Courtly Ceilings in the Sixteenth Century', *British Renaissance Plasterwork*, accessed 22 September 2018.

⁵⁷ Examples taken from *Compertimentorum* are set out in Section 4.1.

with the client, therefore exercised some creativity, albeit using a standard palette of design elements which were also partly dictated by the space the piece had to occupy.

5.4 Workshops

5.4.1 Identification

Given the relative paucity of documentary sources, the appearance of plaster casts from identical moulds in multiple locations is used to trace the mobility of an individual plasterer or workshop.⁵⁸ This evidence should, however, be interpreted with care. In the case of Haddon Hall, it is tempting to take the occurrence of common moulds used in geographically distant locations to suggest the existence of an individual, or firm of plasterers, travelling from the Devon/Somerset border to the Midlands and Northumbria, some 600 kilometres away. The chronology cannot be pinned down with sufficient accuracy to demonstrate which of these schemes, that all date to between the 1570s and 1590s, was executed first. David Bostwick has noted that a portion of the frieze which occurs at Haddon Hall (Fig. 5.02 level 4) had a long life in the Midlands, forming part of the early seventeenth-century frieze at Copley Hall, Yorkshire and was used as late as 1676 on an overmantel in a small house at Washford Bridge, near Sheffield.⁵⁹ My research shows this same design present on the middle of the Moorhayes (MD7) stack and in the long gallery at Holcombe Court (MD11) (Fig. 5.04). Further to this, the Tudor rose/fleur-de-lis motif seen at Moorhayes (Fig. 5.08 (3)) and the hall at Holcombe Court, appears on a ceiling at Whitley Hall which is dated to 1584. The dating of the Holcombe Court gallery and hall ceilings to the 1560s and the hall at Poundisford Park (TA24) to 1570 would, however, suggest that, if this concordance of moulds is attributed to human movement, then the plasterer travelled from the South-West to the Midlands.

⁵⁸ For Devon see French, 'Devonshire Plasterwork', p. 128 and Thorp, 'Wall Painting and Lime-Plaster Decoration', p. 136. David Bostwick also used this approach for Yorkshire, 'Decorative Plasterwork of the Yorkshire Region'.

⁵⁹ David Bostwick, Pers. comm., 7 November 2018.

Where moulds are known to have been used there were other agencies, aside from the same plasterer being physically present, to account for an identical design appearing in different locations. For example, multiple identical moulds could be produced by a joiner and acquired by plasterers in different areas. Alternatively, a single mould could also be employed for a time then passed on to a descendant, or even borrowed, exchanged, or sold.⁶⁰ Against this, the degree of coincidence between identical motifs and that the use of all the shared moulds appears to cease in the South-West around the time they appear in the Midlands, strongly suggests that the same plasterer was responsible.

Evidence from the South-West also shows that individual moulds could be used over a long period of time. For example, the floral spray on the ceiling at the Dodderidge Library in Barnstaple (ND16), which is securely dated to 1667, uses the same mould as in the rear chamber at the nearby 62 Boutport Street (ND3) (Fig. 5.09), which is dated 1620.⁶¹ Given the almost fifty-year gap between the decoration of the ceilings, it is unlikely that the mould was used by the same plasterer and it is probable that it was passed on to other practitioners, perhaps members of the same family or apprentices.

While moulds were commonly used for shallow-relief repetitive motifs, the role of hand-modelling in producing schemes must not be underestimated. Much decorative plaster, that might upon first consideration be identified as using a mould, would have been hand-modelled, or at least finished by hand. This can be seen where common plasterwork motifs of ostensibly the same design in different houses have proved to have dimensional differences, indicating that they were most likely modelled by hand. This method would have been the quickest, and for a skilled plasterer the easiest, method of executing the

⁶⁰ Malcolm Airs cites an example of brick moulds being borrowed to model plaster window details at Oxnead and Stiffkey Hall, Norfolk in the 1570s, *The Tudor and Jacobean Country House*, pp. 91-92 and 108.

⁶¹ This mould was also used on the thin-rib ceiling at 69 High Street, Barnstaple (ND8).

design.⁶² Examples of this can be seen with the highly populated ceilings of the early seventeenth century, such as Lanhydrock, Cornwall (CO9) and Rashleigh Barton in Devon (MD24) where the sheer variety of animals and other beasts present would have been extremely time consuming, and given their high-relief technically difficult, to produce using moulds. They would also require a large number of moulds to be in the possession of the plasterer who would have almost certainly used these on other commissions, for which there is no surviving evidence.

The individuality of the plasterer is best seen in their depiction of the human form, particularly faces and hands, which would always have been hand-modelled and required skill to execute convincingly. These show obvious variations and should therefore be seen as the more reliable signature of an individual plasterer than a mould. Where both distinctive hand-modelling and moulds occur in combination in multiple locations a more positive attribution to a workshop or individual is possible.

5.4.2 South West workshops

The occurrence of identical casts from moulds with hand-modelled plasterwork of a particular style in different locations has allowed the putative identification of workshops. Identification is not always straightforward, however, as there are many instances where a cast appears out of context or alongside others that can also be attributed to a different workshop. John Thorp has suggested that there were three or four plastering firms operating in Devon in the early seventeenth century, and specifically identified two.⁶³ According to Thorp, one of these probably introduced the enriched broad-rib ceiling into the county and was responsible for most of the high quality work including the schemes at Forde House (TE26), Green, Bishopsteignton (TE3), The Grange, Broadhembury (ED5), Hams Barton, Chudleigh (TE7) and Widworthy Barton

⁶² I am grateful to plaster conservator René Rice who has observed these differences between the Walronds (MD6) and Montacute House (SS18), both attributed to the plasterer Robert Eaton. Personal communication, 10 April 2014.

⁶³ Thorp, 'Wall Painting and Lime-Plaster Decoration' p. 136.

(ED29). The other group Thorp identifies is a firm that operated in the Dart valley.

Thorp's assessment is interesting as it suggests that in the early seventeenth century, when the production of decorative plasterwork was at its peak in the region, one firm was responsible for high quality plasterwork, predominantly in country houses, across most of Devon. Further to this, the country house firm that produced the finest work operated over a wider area than those firms whose work is more localised and concentrated in particular towns. This mirrors the mid- to late sixteenth-century situation, where it is assumed that fewer plastering firms were in operation and travelled greater distances to undertake commissions. To test whether the evidence supports this across the region, a more in depth study can be made of individual areas. A distribution map of plasterwork (Map C2) shows high concentrations of plasterwork around West Somerset, East Devon and West Dorset; Barnstaple and North Devon; Exeter; and Dartmouth and Totnes. The four areas selected for closer study are shown on Map C3.

Area 1 - West Somerset, East Devon and West Dorset

This geographically large area encompasses comprises parts of the administrative authorities of South Somerset, West Somerset, Taunton Deane, East Devon, Mid Devon, and West Dorset and contains a number of towns important in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In these towns, however, the quantity of surviving plasterwork schemes does not reflect this status. In Taunton, a vernacular building survey carried out by Robert Taylor in 1974 identified sixteen houses originating from 1500-1700, in various states of completeness.⁶⁴ Of these, my research has revealed only two that are still known to contain decorative plasterwork: the substantial scheme at 18 Fore Street (TA33); and the fragmentary frieze discovered during this study at 15 Fore Street (TA32). Neither Crediton nor Tiverton have extant schemes, or evidence for their former presence, and of the other wealthy 'cloth towns' in the area, only The Walronds in Cullompton (MD6) has decorative plasterwork

⁶⁴ Robert Taylor, 'Town Houses in Taunton, 1500-1700', *Post Medieval Archaeology*, 8 (1) (1974), pp. 63-79.

surviving from the study period. This absence is almost certainly due largely to historic fires in the towns destroying much of the early sixteenth-century building stock.⁶⁵

The area is, however, notable for the instances of high quality work in rural houses from the period 1590-1615 that seemingly emanate from one firm of plasterers. Writing in 1952, Vivian Neil tentatively ascribed some of this work to the 'master plasterer' Robert Eaton (or Easton) who is recorded by Sir John Strode in 1628 as having worked at the chapel he built thirteen years earlier at Chantmarle, Dorset (WT4).⁶⁶

This chapel hath his outside of Hambdon stone; his inside is plastered white, and fretted over with the sun, moone, starrs, cherubims, doves, grapes and pomegranates, all supported with 4 angells in the 4 corners of the rooffe, which inside was wrought by Eaton of Stoke-gursey or Stowey, in Somerset, and finished 2 Decembris 1615, who for his workmanship had 6l. 16s.; and for the lyme, hair, timber, laths, and lath-nayles, I paid 5l.; also the carpenters had for sawing and cutting up of joysts 17s.⁶⁷

A further documentary source referring to Eaton was discovered by Robert Dunning and published by the Penoyres in 1994.⁶⁸ In a letter that echoes the Cavendish correspondence to Sir John Thynne of Longleat, John Frauncis of Combe Florey wrote in September 1599 to John Trevelyan at Nettlecombe Court:

[...] the sooner he hath don with you the glader shall I be for that Robert Yeaton the plester man cometh unto me this day and cannot worke long before the chemley [chimney] must be made, which I have a longe tyme expected to be done by Bartlett [...].⁶⁹

⁶⁵ For factors influencing survival see Section 1.4.1.

⁶⁶ Vivian-Neal, 'The Tudor and Stuart Plasterwork of West Somerset', p. 147.

⁶⁷ Quoted in John Hutchins, *The History and Antiquities of the County of Dorset*, ed. by William Shipp and James Whitworth Hodson 3rd edn. 4 (Westminster: J.B. Nichols and Sons, 1870), p. 5. The extract is from a transcription from 1708 of a book apparently started by Sir John Strode in 1628 relating to his estates and held in Dorset Heritage Centre, Cat. Ref. D-BUL/M/4.

⁶⁸ Penoyre, *Decorative Plasterwork in the Houses of Somerset*, p. 41.

⁶⁹ Somerset Heritage Centre, Letter from John Francis of Combe Florey to J. Trevelyan concerning sending a workman to help build a chimney, 12 Sep 1599, DD\WO/56/4/40.

Neither of Eaton's documented plasterwork schemes are extant. Sir John Strode's chapel at Chantmarle (WT4) survived in a dilapidated state into the nineteenth century before being demolished and while part of the seventeenth-century house remains, the current plaster ceilings date to the restoration of 1910.⁷⁰ In Somerset, John Frauncis' great house at Combe Florey was demolished and a new house erected higher up the hill around 1730.⁷¹ The gatehouse range (TA5) was, however, spared destruction and contains a decorative plaster ceiling and an overmantel inscribed with the date 1593 (Fig. 5.10).⁷² The Penoyres postulated that given the six year gap between John Frauncis' letter and the gatehouse plasterwork, it is reasonable to assume that Eaton returned to Combe Florey to undertake the gatehouse scheme.⁷³

If this circumstantial evidence is accepted and the Combe Florey gatehouse (TA5) scheme is indeed by Robert Eaton, then particular decorative elements present here can be extrapolated to attribute work in other houses to Eaton (see Map C4).⁷⁴ The most distinctive and recognisable elements can be identified in the hand-modelled fruit motif (Fig. 1.02 and 5.11), a particular style of face and hair on figurative work (Fig. 5.12), and putti, often with sashes, seated on a strapwork scroll (Fig. 5.13). Eaton also used a particular fluted scroll (Fig. 5.14) that can be seen on overmantels in: the two main upper chambers at Holcombe Court (MD11); Weare Giffard Hall (TR29); The Walronds (MD6); Lord Curzon's Room at Montacute House (SS18); Combe Florey Gatehouse (TA5); Widworthy Barton (ED29); Mapperton (WD12); West Coker Manor (SS28); Wolfeton House (WT6); and on the Apollo and Ceres overmantel at Poundisford Lodge (TA23).

⁷⁰ It had been demolished by 1870, Hutchins, *The History and Antiquities of the County of Dorset*, 4, p. 7.

⁷¹ Orbach and Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Somerset, South and West*, p. 215.

⁷² Despite several attempts the gatehouse proved inaccessible and was not inspected as part of this study. There are, however, photographs published in Penoyre, *Decorative Plasterwork in the Houses of Somerset*, pp. 30, 41, 62 and 67.

⁷³ Penoyre, *Decorative Plasterwork in the Houses of Somerset*, p. 41.

⁷⁴ This premise has been followed by Julian Orbach in his update of the *Buildings of England for South and West Somerset*, who credits more schemes to Eaton, some of which are open to debate, see Orbach and Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Somerset, South and West*, pp. 48, 124, 292, 467, 469, 482, 483, 509, 531, 664, 671 and 704.

For cast work, among the moulds that Eaton commonly used for friezes are a distinctive flat-fret tulip and anthemion pattern. The tulip frieze is seen at Poundisford Lodge; Combe Florey Gatehouse; The Walronds; West Coker Manor (Fig. 4.41); Wychanger, Luccombe (WS13); and outside of the area at Bogan House, 43 High Street, Totnes (SH45). The anthemion pattern frieze occurs at Poundisford Lodge (Fig. 5.15) and on the overmantel in the north-east parlour of Marshwood Farm, Carhampton (WS3). Eaton also used a strapwork design for friezes at Weare Giffard (Fig. 3.03); Montacute House; The Walronds; and the overmantel at Wolfeton House (Fig. 3.49), and a grotesque design used in upper chambers in Weare Giffard and Montacute (Fig. 5.16). A 'jelly-pattern' mould was used for ceiling bosses (Fig. 3.15), which on occasion incorporated tiny flower heads with human faces between the ribs, as at Weare Giffard, Holcombe Court and The Walronds (MD6) (Fig. 1.01). While there are similarities in the floral sprays that Eaton used for ceilings, his moulds seem to travel less between commissions, although they were used repeatedly within the same house. At the Walronds, variety between rooms was added by using a long and short finial to the same lower part of a floral spray mould to create two alternate designs.

These stock Eaton motifs are hard to correlate with Sir John Strode's description of the sun, moon, stars, cherubim, doves, grapes, pomegranates, and angels produced for his chapel. It should, however, be borne in mind that all the other work attributed to Eaton occurs in a domestic context and in this case Sir John, who is known to have tightly controlled other aspects of the building of Chantmarle, is likely to have been quite specific in his requirements for his chapel and would have instructed Eaton accordingly.⁷⁵

The distinctive decorative elements that can be attributed to Eaton recur in rural houses across the eastern part of the region (Map C4). These date from the early 1590s at: Poundisford Lodge (TA23), Holcombe Court (MD11), Widworthy Barton (ED29), Combe Florey (TA5) and Weare Giffard (TR29). From the first decade of the seventeenth century, schemes can be identified at Littlecote

⁷⁵ Strode's diary shows that he took a personal close interest in the design and execution of the house, Michael Hill, John Newman and Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Dorset* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2018), p. 189.

House on the Wiltshire/Berkshire border, Montacute House (SS18), Wolfeton House (WT6), West Coker (SS28), The Walronds (MD6), dated 1605, and the relocated overmantel from Melplash Court (now at Mapperton (WT12), dated 1604. Chantmarle (WT4) installed in 1615 is the only recorded work from the second decade of the seventeenth century. The seven overmantels at Court House, East Quantoxhead (WS7) also have similarities with these but are almost certainly by a different hand.

As noted above, Holcombe Court (MD11) shares the same frieze moulds as Haddon Hall. It is therefore tempting to link these houses through Eaton, but in this case it seems certain that the same plasterer would not have been responsible for all the elements of the plasterwork in the house, or even within a particular room. The plasterwork in the hall at Holcombe Court contains no identifiable Eaton work. Similarly, the other major house which shares elements of the Haddon Hall frieze, Poundisford Park (TA24), has no Eaton work evident and in any case pre-dates his period of activity by some fifteen years.⁷⁶

The only plasterwork that can be attributed confidently to Robert Eaton from outside of the region is at Littlecote House, which is some 150 kilometres east of Eaton's Somerset home.⁷⁷ From 1589 Littlecote House was owned by Sir John Popham, the Attorney-General, who like Eaton was from the Bridgwater area in Somerset. It is highly likely that Eaton was dispatched to Wiltshire to work at Littlecote at the request of Sir John. It is also possible that Eaton had worked for Popham at his main residence of Wellington House, Wellington, which was destroyed in the Civil War.⁷⁸

Leaving the Wiltshire commission aside, there would, as Malcolm Airs has suggested, have been enough work on the Devon, Somerset and Dorset

⁷⁶ There is a possibility that Eaton might have been connected with the earlier workshop.

⁷⁷ I am very grateful to Claire Gapper for identifying Littlecote as being from the Eaton workshop, Claire Gapper, 'Plasterwork in the South West and Robert Eaton', unpublished notes.

⁷⁸ For an account of the house see Rev. John Collinson, *The History and Antiquities of the County of Somerset*, 2 (Bath, 1791).

borders to sustain Eaton throughout his career.⁷⁹ If we take it that Robert Eaton entered an apprenticeship at the age of fourteen and served seven years, and assuming 1590 as the earliest dated work attributed to him, then he was probably born in the late-1560s and would have married in his early thirties.⁸⁰ The Chantmarle ceiling (WT4), which was among his final commissions, would have been completed while he was in his late forties. There are no later works that have been attributed to him, either on documentary or stylistic evidence.

Some of the design attributes of the putative Robert Eaton group do continue further into the seventeenth century within the area but with a different, and less sophisticated, treatment. This may be a continuation of the Eaton workshop by an apprentice adopting his master's stylistic tropes. This is best seen in the figures, especially the faces and hands and with slimmer putti. The figures are distinctive and feature recessed chins and clumsy hands, such as seen in the treatment of caryatid figures at The Luttrell Arms, Dunster (WS6) (Fig. 5.17). Hands could, however, also be an issue for the better executed figures attributed to Eaton. For example the putti on the overmantel in Lord Curzon's Room, Montacute (SS18), has the thumbs of the hands reversed (Fig. 5.13). Other examples of the West Somerset group can be seen on overmantels at Marshwood Farm (WS3), Binham Farm (WS16), 18 Fore Street, Taunton (TA33) (Fig. 5.18), Nettlecombe Court (WS15) and Little Court, West Bagborough (TA40). The Binham Farm overmantel has been linked by the Penoyres with the skimmington ride panel at Montacute House (Fig. 7.04), based mainly on the combination of low relief landscape and higher relief figures.⁸¹ Even allowing for the overpainting at Binham there is little doubt that this is of lesser quality than the Montacute work. Plasterwork in this West Somerset group dates from around 1610.

⁷⁹ Airs, *The Tudor and Jacobean Country House*, p. 151.

⁸⁰ Robert Eaton is recorded as marrying in Grace Waterman in Stogursey in 1602, Penoyre, *Decorative Plasterwork in the Houses of Somerset*, p. 43.

⁸¹ Penoyre, *Decorative Plasterwork in the Houses of Somerset*, pp. 34-35.

Area 2 - North Devon and Barnstaple

This area comprises the current administrative districts of North Devon and Torrington, which contain two important towns in the early seventeenth century: the port of Bideford on the River Torrington; and its more prosperous neighbour Barnstaple 15 kilometres to the north-east on the River Taw. The disparity in wealth between the two towns is reflected in the distribution of plasterwork, with Barnstaple having eighteen buildings recorded as containing schemes in comparison with six in Bideford. Both towns have, however, suffered a high attrition rate over the last 100 years. Of the eighteen Barnstaple buildings with plasterwork in the early twentieth century, only half still survive today in some form, either in situ or relocated in other buildings. The most notable of these relocated examples being the ceilings moved from 7 Cross Street (ND5), which now reside in Stafford Barton (TR10) and the Gatehouse at Shute Barton (ED24) and plasterwork from 69 High Street (ND8), some of which has reappeared on the antiques market.⁸² Limited recording of the lost schemes does, however, exist in photographs taken in the early and mid-twentieth centuries.⁸³

The North Devon plasterer John Abbott, along with Robert Eaton and Thomas Forde, is one of the few named plasterers operating in the region in the seventeenth century.⁸⁴ It is Abbott, however, who dominates the study of Devon plasterwork, due largely to the unique survival of the Abbott book. Abbott is also recorded in the Exeter Receiver's Book in 1681 as being paid £35 for plastering and fretwork at the Customs House and in the churchwarden's accounts for Frithelstock Church in 1676 as 'making of the King's Arms and writing in the

⁸² The Annunciation overmantel is now in Barnstaple Museum. Figures of knights from another 69 High Street overmantel have recently come to light in a private collection, email from owner to Nigel Pratt, 16 April 2018, *pers. comm.*

⁸³ In addition to those published, notably by Bruce Oliver in his paper 'The Early Seventeenth-Century Plaster Ceilings of Barnstaple', there is archived material in the French collection in the Devon Heritage Centre, DHC 5031Z, the North Devon Record Office and North Devon Athenaeum contain photographs of Barnstaple work, although not all have been catalogued.

⁸⁴ There are two churches in North Somerset with ceilings attributed to the plasterer George Drayton, St John Baptist, Axbridge (1636) and St Mary, East Brent (1637), Andrew Foyle and Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Somerset North and Bristol* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011), p. 82 and Orbach and Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Somerset, South and West*, p. 281. A plasterer named Thomas Lane also undertook work in Exeter in 1689, Thorp, 'Wall Painting and Lime-Plaster Decoration', p. 143.

Church and playsteringe of the Church and porch'.⁸⁵ The Abbott book, which contains sketches of earlier styles of plasterwork alongside later seventeenth-century designs, has led to a generally held view among scholars that it was owned by an earlier John Abbott and subsequently passed down and added to by later generations of the family.⁸⁶ The differences in the styles of the drawings demonstrates that the book is undoubtedly the product of more than one hand and it is signed in the flyleaf 'John Abbott' in various styles of signature.⁸⁷

The earliest date written into the book is 1662 so a degree of uncertainty exists as to whether the book was actually started in the early seventeenth century. In 1998, an analysis of the watermarks on the pages of the notebook by Michael Bath overturned the consensus and seemingly demonstrated that the book could not have been produced before the 1650s.⁸⁸ The watermarks, have however, recently been re-evaluated by Jenny Saunt, who re-positions the date of the book to as early as 1615.⁸⁹ Saunt's analysis of the watermarks is convincing but even without this evidence the book sits demonstrably more comfortably as having early seventeenth-century origins and being added to by later John Abbotts.⁹⁰ The early date explains some of the elements present throughout the book that would be archaic if it were started in the 1660s.⁹¹

⁸⁵ The North Devon plasterer John Abbott (1639/40-1727) is nationally known and listed in Geoffrey Beard's select list of plasterers, Beard, *Decorative Plasterwork in Great Britain*, p. 200. Mike Baldwin also lists several attributions, see 'Graviti In Publicke Places and Yet Inwardly Licencious', pp. 5-28.

⁸⁶ The notion of an Abbott dynasty of plasterers was put forward by Margaret Jourdain, 'A 17th Century Plasterer: John Abbott of Barnstaple and His Sketch Book', *Country Life*, 87, 2 Mar. (1940), pp. 222-25 expanded by French and French, 'Devonshire Plasterwork', p. 136-140 and also followed by Wells-Cole, *Art and Decoration*, p.22 and James Ayres, *Art, Artisans and Apprentices*, p. 46.

⁸⁷ For an analysis of the four different hands present in the book see Jenny Saunt, 'Decorative Plasterwork in England, 1660-1700: Form, Materiality and Making' (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of London, 2016), pp. 300-24.

⁸⁸ Michael Bath, 'The Sources of John Abbott's Pattern Book', *Architectural History* 41 (1998), pp. 49-66.

⁸⁹ Saunt, 'Decorative Plasterwork in England, 1660-1700', p. 278.

⁹⁰ For a putative Abbott genealogy see Saunt 'Decorative Plasterwork in England, 1660-1700', pp. 271-273.

⁹¹ These are discussed by John Chenevix, 'John Abbott's Manual of Limming', *Association for Studies in the Conservation of Historic Buildings*, 11 (1986), p. 20.

Other evidence supports an early seventeenth century date. The Abbott sketches taken from Edward Topsell's *The Historie of Foure-Footed Beastes*, for example, are all derived from the edition published in 1607.⁹² Abbott does not use any of the illustrations in Topsell's *The Historie of Serpents*, which was published a year later, suggesting he did not have access to this book.⁹³ Crucially as both of Topsell's Histories were published in a single volume in 1658, it appears that John Abbott only knew the 1607 edition of the *Foure-Footed Beastes* book.⁹⁴

The re-positioning of the Abbott book back to the early seventeenth century re-establishes it as a working design book into which several generations of Abbott plasters planned-out schemes, sketched ideas and copied printed sources. While this gives a specific and plausible purpose behind the book, identifying which early seventeenth-century plasterwork schemes the contemporary John Abbott carried out is still problematic.⁹⁵ The sketches of the early seventeenth-century work contained in the book are naively executed and not consummate with the accomplished skill seen in the majority of the plasterwork itself. It is, however, possible that Abbott was not equally gifted as a draughtsman, or was actually responsible for the more crudely executed work in the area, such as the Judgement of Solomon overmantel now at Stafford Barton, Dolton (TR10) (Fig. 4.62).

Many of the sketches for overmantels in the Abbott book use common depictions in wide circulation, such as the Sacrifice of Isaac (which occurs twice), Adam and Eve and the Judgement of Solomon.⁹⁶ One sketch from the Abbott book, showing the Triumph of Time over Fame (Fig. 5.19), has received

⁹² Edward Topsell, *The Historie of Foure-Footed Beastes* (London: W. Jaggard, 1607).

⁹³ Edward Topsell, *The Historie of Serpents* (London: W. Jaggard, 1608).

⁹⁴ This is supported by Abbott illustrating the Gorgon which is only present in the 1607 Topsell edition, as noted by Bath, 'The Sources of John Abbott's Pattern Book', p. 60.

⁹⁵ Based on Saunt's genealogy this is likely to be either John Abbott who was aged 59 in 1615 or his son John Abbott the elder of Southcott, who would have been aged 35, 'Decorative Plasterwork in England, 1660-1700, p. 271.

⁹⁶ The design of the Stafford Barton overmantel (TR10) is very close to the Abbott sketch although it is curiously missing the Solomon figure.

particular attention from scholars due to the rarity of the source print by Georg Pencz (Fig. 5.20) and the limited geographical distribution of the executed schemes.⁹⁷ Of the four plasterwork depictions of this scene, the best known are at Dean Head, Swimbridge (ND52) Fig. 5.21), which based on its location Michael Bath has identified as 'more than likely to be the work of Abbott, or of his workshop' and at Binham Grange, Old Cleeve (WS16) (Fig. 5.22).⁹⁸ The two lesser known depictions are on overmantels which are believed to be no longer extant, at 103 High Street, Barnstaple (ND11) (Fig. 5.23) and the Manor House, West Down (ND60) (Fig. 5.24).⁹⁹ All four plasterwork designs and the Abbott sketch were sourced from the single Pencz print. Comparison across the executed schemes, however, indicates that there were four different hands at play. The Barnstaple example is quite crudely worked and differs in composition from the print and other depictions in its simple design. By contrast, the overmantel at the Manor House, West Down is finely modelled and closest to the Pencz print. On the Manor House overmantel the scene is flanked by caryatids, as is the Binham Grange example, although this is less well executed. The modelling of the Binham figures place it in the post-Eaton West Somerset group discussed in Area 1 above, which given their geographical distribution would exclude Abbott as the instigator. The Dean Head overmantel differs from all the other depictions by reversing the composition.

The lack of a cohesive treatment for the scene is not surprising given that different workshops were involved. The choice of print is, however, interesting. Pencz woodcuts used for decorative schemes are exceptionally rare nationally.¹⁰⁰ The Triumph of Time iconography was only circulated across a relatively confined area of North Devon and Somerset and yet was shared with four different workshops. How the Abbott sketch fits into this is unclear. As

⁹⁷ See Wells-Cole, *Art and Decoration*, p. 162 and Bath, 'The Sources of John Abbott's Pattern Book', pp. 57-58.

⁹⁸ Bath, 'The Sources of John Abbott's Pattern Book', p. 57. The overmantel is illustrated in Penoyre, *Decorative Plasterwork in the Houses of Somerset*, fig. 39.

⁹⁹ Both overmantels are depicted in Bankart, *The Art of the Plasterer*, p. 78, published in 1910. The Manor House, West Down is still extant but neither the listed building description nor Pevsner mention this overmantel so has most probably been removed.

¹⁰⁰ Wells-Cole, *Art and Decoration*, p. 162.

Michael Bath observes, the simplistic Abbott sketch could not have acted as pattern for the plasterwork schemes.¹⁰¹

If it is assumed that the Somerset example is from the post-Eaton West Somerset firm and this is discounted, which if any of the three other plasterwork depictions of the Triumph of Time scene was the work of the Abbott family is not clear. The Abbott sketch includes a figure with a scythe, which is not included in the Pencz woodcut or any of the extant plasterwork schemes except Dean Head (ND52). The Dean Head overmantel does, however, belong to the Barnstaple group, which includes the Annunciation overmantel from 69 High Street (ND8) (Fig. 4.07) and the Judgement of Solomon overmantel formerly at Cross Street (Fig. 4.22). It should also be noted that the ceiling, with its distinctive hollow rib design formerly at 69 High Street and surviving at Dean Head (Fig. 5.57), has a pattern very close to a design in the Abbot book (Fig. 5.58).¹⁰² Dean Head therefore has two plasterwork pieces that relate to drawings in the book. The depiction of the Judgement of Solomon overmantel on the Cross Street overmantel, however, clearly deviates from the version of the Abbott sketch (Fig. 4.63). It should also be questioned as to why the Abbott Triumph of Time sketch shows the chariot travelling left to right, while in the Dean Head overmantel it is going in the opposite direction. If the Abbott drawing was sketched from this overmantel, or was the design drawing, it would be expected to correspond to the same orientation.

The Triumph of Time depictions demonstrate that the relationship between the sketches in the Abbott book and completed plasterwork designs is complex and cannot, at present, be fully determined. What is clear from the surviving evidence is that sophisticated plasterwork was being undertaken in the area in the 1620s and 1630s. This high quality plasterwork, seen in merchant houses in Barnstaple, was the product of a single workshop or a small number of related firms.¹⁰³ The best and most complete surviving scheme in the town, and a good

¹⁰¹ Bath, 'The Sources of John Abbott's Pattern Book', p. 57.

¹⁰² Both 69 High Street and Dean Head also share floral sprays.

¹⁰³ This was first brought to wider attention by Bruce Oliver, 'The Early Seventeenth-Century Plaster Ceilings of Barnstaple', pp.189-199.

starting point for closer study, is at 62 Boutport Street (ND3).¹⁰⁴ The house contains three decorated ceilings: a thin-rib design at the street entrance (Fig. 5.25); and two broad-rib examples further back from the frontage.¹⁰⁵ The two broad-rib ceilings were formerly at first-floor level prior to the removal of the ground-floor ceiling (Figs. 5.26 and 5.27). The middle and largest room in the building has a ceiling that is dated 1620. A number of the motifs that appear here also present on other schemes in the town and further afield.

The front ceiling at 62 Boutport Street shares a single cast Pegasus motif (Fig. 5.28), a floral spray and square grape and vine with the ceiling and hall at Dean Head, Swimbridge (ND52). The Pegasus frieze, which occurs in the rear room at 62 Boutport Street (ND3) was used at Shapcott Barton, Knowstone (ND24) and the demolished 69 High Street, Barnstaple (ND8).¹⁰⁶ The house at 69 High Street contained plasterwork the equal of the Boutport Street work, and shared elements with Dunsland (TR9) to the west of Barnstaple and Dean Head parlour ceiling ribs and floral sprays. The rear room ceiling at 62 Boutport Street also contains satyr corbel figures (Fig. 3.38) similar to those from the 1570s in the hall at Buckland Abbey (WD1) but closer study of the faces suggests that they are by made by different plasterers. In terms of modelling, the Boutport Street figures are closer to the angel corbels in the Long Room at Forde House, Newton Abbot (TE26) which may be contemporary. There are further similarities with the Forde House floral sprays employed in the rear room with a slight difference in the termination of the uppermost stems, which at Boutport Street finish with four buds as opposed to a single bud at Forde House.¹⁰⁷

The middle room ceiling at 62 Boutport Street also has the same trailing-stem, fruit and flower frieze as Dean Head, Swimbridge (ND52) (Fig. 5.29), although as no frieze is visible on photographs taken of 62 Boutport Street in the 1950s

¹⁰⁴ 62 Boutport Street is now in commercial use as a bistro after many years as a bank and prior to this a hotel.

¹⁰⁵ For ease of reference, working back from the street frontage the ceilings will be referred to as 'front', 'middle' and 'rear'. The inscription is not visible from current floor-level.

¹⁰⁶ A Pegasus frieze of slightly different design is also found in the south-west of Devon, in the Guildhall, Totnes (SH36) and in Newton Abbott at Forde House (TE26).

¹⁰⁷ The Forde House version of the spray also appears in houses discussed in Area 3 below.

this could conceivably be a modern introduction.¹⁰⁸ The middle room contains the most impressive ceiling in the building and is important for the four biblical scenes depicting Adam and Eve, Abraham sacrificing Isaac (Fig. 5.30), The Annunciation, and The Adoration, which are set in strapwork cartouches within enriched broad-ribs forming a pattern containing a myriad of animals. This is undoubtedly by the same workshop as the similar, if slightly less ornate, flat-ceiling formerly at 7 Cross Street (ND5) but now at Stafford Barton (TR10). The design is also shared by the ceiling in the Long Gallery at Lanhydrock (CO9) of c. 1636, but the modelling of the figures differs and this is likely to be the product of different craftsmen.

The cartouches used at 62 Boutport Street (ND3) are derived from prints by the Flemish artist Jacob Floris. In Floris' 'Spring' engraving from the *Compertimentorum*, the 'lions' are human grotesques and the human heads are more animal-like, with the headdress becoming horns. The 'lion' head is a fairly common motif and also occurs, with smaller ears, at The Luttrell Arms, Dunster (WS6), Montacute House (SS18), and at Rashleigh Barton (MD24) with much larger ears (Fig. 5.31). The human head design is less common but in addition to 62 Boutport Street, it appears on the overmantel depicting the Annunciation, which was at 69 High Street (ND8) (Fig. 4.07) and on the Triumph of Time overmantel at Dean Head (ND52) (Fig. 5.32) and at West Coker Manor, Somerset (SS28).

Area 3 - Exeter

Like Barnstaple, Exeter has suffered a high rate of attrition and the number of surviving plasterwork schemes does not correlate with the city's importance as the principal settlement of the region in the period. Of the total of twenty-four buildings containing plasterwork known to have been in existence within the city and in its immediate environs in the late nineteenth century, only ten survive with plasterwork in various states of completeness.

¹⁰⁸ See French collection in the Devon Heritage Centre, DHC 5031Z. The listed building entry (NHL 1385041) raises the possibility that the ground-floor front ceiling is an early twentieth century reproduction, which would suggest that other elements of the plasterwork have been restored. It seems, however, improbable that Bruce Oliver, who includes a photograph of the ceiling in his 1917 article would not have mentioned this, see Oliver, 'The Early Seventeenth-Century Plaster Ceilings of Barnstaple', pp. 189-199.

In terms of chronology, the Exeter plasterwork covers a broad spread across the period. Among the earliest is the now lost scheme from King John's Tavern, South Street (EX21) where the overmantel was dated 1577.¹⁰⁹ This includes the square wreaths containing initials that are also found in ceilings of a similar date at St Nicholas Priory (EX16) (Fig. 5.33), and in Totnes at 16 High Street (SH40) and Bogan House (SH45), as well as Holcombe Court (MD11), Trerice (CO29) and Great Fulford (TE12). St Nicholas Priory also contains an overmantel removed from the demolished 229 High Street (EX14) (Fig. 5.34). This is one of only two overmantels surviving within the city limits, the other, also depicting the Tudor arms, is at 196 High Street (EX13) and is now encompassed within a modern shop.

The comparative absence of overmantels in the city means that the identification of workshops must rely primarily on cast rather than hand-modelled work. While much plasterwork was lost in the twentieth century, some of these schemes are depicted in James Crocker's, *Sketches of Old Exeter* published in 1886. Comparison of Crocker's drawing of the parlour ceiling in St Nicholas Priory with the current ceiling (Figs. 5.35 and 5.36) demonstrates the accuracy of his work, although the renderings of floral sprays can be more stylised. Nevertheless, Crocker's drawings of the ceilings at the demolished Chevalier Inn, 78-80 Fore Street (EX10), for example, show floral sprays that look close to those that survive at 7 Cathedral Close (EX5).¹¹⁰

The ceiling at 7 Cathedral Close (EX5) and at the Old Rectory Alphington (EX8), which is just to the south of the city and dated 1627/9, provide examples of a group of moulds used across Exeter and further afield. The most common is a four-flower and palm mould (Fig. 5.37) which is found at both the Old Rectory and 7 Cathedral Close as well as at the since demolished Bampfylde House (EX1). Examples also occur at: Westacott Barton, North Tawton (WD14);

¹⁰⁹ A sketch from the early-nineteenth century survives in the West Country Studies collection, P&D05618.

¹¹⁰ James Crocker, *Sketches of Old Exeter with Letter Press* (London: Hudson and Kearns, 1886), pl. xlv.

Treasbeare, Clyst Honiton (ED7); and at Clysthayes (MD18) and Dunsmoor Farm (MD19), Silverton. A floral spray topped with rose and fleur-de-lis (Fig. 5.38) was also found at Bampfylde House, Poltimore House (ED23) and Forde House, Newton Abbot (TE26). The Long Room at Forde House and Bampfylde House (EX1) also share a bare-breasted figure and dolphin frieze (Fig. 5.39). A three-flower mould with acorns from 7 Cathedral Close (Fig. 5.40) is found at Bradninch Manor (MD2), The Grange, Broadhembury (ED5), Hams Barton (TE7) and Widworthy Barton (ED29). A variation with the finial flower replaced by palm was used at Forde House and Burrell House, Saltash (CO31). A distinctive flower, seed pod and grape mould (Fig. 5.41) is found at: 7 Cathedral Close; Forde House; The Grange, Broadhembury; Bradninch Manor; Widworthy Barton; Hams Barton, Chudleigh (TE7); but not at the Old Rectory, Alphington. A version with an extended finial was again used at Burrell House. These floral spray moulds are found in conjunction with both the thin-rib and broad-rib ceiling variants.

There is insufficient evidence to ascertain whether the workshop responsible for this group of schemes was based in Exeter. It can, however, be demonstrated that it covers a relatively large geographic area, extending from Widworthy Barton in the east, to Burrell House in Saltash some 100 kilometres to the west. This group includes Bampfylde House, Ford House and The Grange which were large-scale commissions in high status houses. If the grotesque frieze at Widworthy Barton (ED29) (Fig. 4.46) was executed by the same firm as the floral spray in the house, then Torre Abbey (TB1), which shares this frieze, may be added to this list.

The plasterwork that appears in Exeter from the 1630s onwards shows sufficient differences to earlier work to be either an evolution of an existing workshop's style in response to changes in fashion, or more likely, given the lack of crossover in designs, indicates the presence of a new workshop. The best recorded scheme from this period is from 38 North Street (EX17). This is illustrated in Crocker and part survives at Lewtrenchard Manor (WD10) with salvaged examples of individual casts from the ceiling and frieze also held in

the RAM Museum, Exeter.¹¹¹ This particular scheme has, however, been identified by John Thorp as being by the Dart Valley firm, discussed in Area 4 below, and there are no other examples from this workshop known in the city.¹¹²

Area 4 - Dartmouth and Totnes

The ports of Dartmouth and Totnes on the River Dart are geographically close, and like their North Devon equivalents, Bideford and Barnstaple, the towns' plasterwork reflects their relative prosperity. Totnes has eighteen buildings recorded as containing plasterwork, spread from the late sixteenth to mid-seventeenth century. By contrast, Dartmouth has half as many plasterwork schemes, almost all of which date to the decade 1630-1640, coinciding with a period of wealth in the town and the development of reclaimed ground of the New Quay area.¹¹³ The surviving schemes appear to post-date the plasterer Thomas Forde who is documented as living in the town in 1610 and working at the Guildhall in 1614.¹¹⁴ The Guildhall was demolished in the mid-nineteenth century and while some plasterwork could potentially have been relocated to Newcomen Cottage (SH15) it is not certain whether any of this came from this building.¹¹⁵ It is, however, not inconceivable that Forde was still operating twenty-years later and it should also be noted that at the Guildhall he worked with an unnamed adult male and boy, who could well have continued his business in Dartmouth into the 1640s.¹¹⁶

Totnes and Dartmouth have examples of what, on the basis of floral sprays, John Thorp has grouped together as the Dart Valley firm, which as mentioned

¹¹¹ See Crocker, *Sketches of Old Exeter*, pl. 48.

¹¹² John Thorp, 'The Construction, Appearance and Development of a Merchant's Town House c.1500-1740: 38 North Street, Exeter', *Proceedings of the Devon Archaeological Society*, 70 (2012), p. 207.

¹¹³ See Ray Freeman, *Dartmouth and its Neighbours* (Chichester: Phillimore, 1990), p. 80.

¹¹⁴ See Todd Gray, 'Plaster and Dartmouth Guildhall in 1614', p. 44.

¹¹⁵ Permission from the owner to inspect the plasterwork at Newcomen Cottage in 2015 was not forthcoming.

¹¹⁶ Further research into parish records may reveal a birth, death or marriage date for Thomas Forde.

above, includes 38 North Street, Exeter (EX17).¹¹⁷ Thorp's inclusion of the 38 North Street ceiling rests on the common use of two floral spray moulds.¹¹⁸ The most frequently encountered of these has four opposing beasts as terminal ends (Fig. 5.42), which can be seen in Dartmouth at 6 Duke Street (SH7), 5 Higher Street (SH11); and 9 and 12 The Quay (SH13 and SH14). Examples of this mould also occur in Totnes, at 50 and 64 Fore Street, (SH31 and SH32). The second mould is less common (Fig. 5.43). This comprises two distinct elements with two flowers on the bottom and a finial at the top. This is used in Dartmouth at the Royal Castle Hotel, 11 The Quay (SH13) and at Fore Street, Totnes.¹¹⁹ At 9 The Quay (SH13) the flower part of the cast is used with a different finial. At 6 Duke Street the lower flower element is used with the finial from the opposing beast mould (Fig. 5.44). While at 5 Higher Street both the beast and flower mould lower parts appear with a different finial, and in the case of the flower cast a variation in the terminal ends.¹²⁰ At 5 Higher Street, Dartmouth and 48 Fore Street, Totnes (SH29), the finial of the opposing beast mould is also used on its own. This graphically illustrates that where the designs comprised two distinct parts, the tops and bottoms from different moulds could be interchanged to increase the variation in the plasterers' repertoire.

Another cast which appears on ceilings attributed to the Dart Valley firm is a distinctive fleur-de-lis and flower motif (Fig. 5.45). This can be seen at 10 Duke Street, Dartmouth (SH8) and 48 and 50 Fore Street, Totnes. There is also an example at 63 Wolborough Street, Newton Abbot (TE29), which shares the frieze with an upper chamber at Forde House (TE26) (Fig. 5.46). The densely decorated ceilings beams at 48 Ford Street are quite different in style to the ceiling beam at 38 North Street, Exeter (EX17) (Figs 5.47), which is more open-patterned and incorporates animals within the trailing stem. The use of part of

¹¹⁷ Thorp, 'Wall Painting and Lime-Plaster Decoration' p. 136.

¹¹⁸ These are illustrated as Figs. 51d and 51e in Thorp, 'The Construction, Appearance and Development of a Merchant's Town House', p. 208.

¹¹⁹ The Fore Street Totnes example form part of an eight-pointed star design and is illustrated in Thena Kendall and Diana Simmons, *The Decorated Ceilings in and around Totnes* (Totnes: Totnes Heritage Group, 2009), p. 21. The building is not identified.

¹²⁰ The Higher Street casts are illustrated in Sean Wheatley, Jeff Orton and Henry Orton, '5 Higher Street, Dartmouth, Devon' (unpublished report, Sean Wheatley Plastering Specialist, 2011).

the finial of the North Street flower floral spray mould at 48 Fore Street, Totnes, would, however, link these plasterwork schemes.

A further divergence within the group can be seen in the treatment of overmantels. Two distinctive examples survive in Dartmouth, at 10 Duke Street (SH8) and in Newcomen Cottage, 4 Ridge Hill (SH15), which was removed from a demolished house in Lower Street.¹²¹ These both depict the Pentecost and have figures modelled with slightly over-large heads. The Tree of Jesse ceiling at 12 Duke Street (SH9) also has the same style figures. No equivalents survive in Totnes, but the Peamore Chapel ceiling in St Martin's Church, Exminster (Fig. 5.56), dated to 1633, is certainly by the same plasterer. There is another now absent overmantel, depicting the Judgement of Solomon, recorded in one of the eastern houses in the Butterwalk in 1950.¹²² Tara Hamling has identified this as the example now in Stafford Barton, Dolton (TR10) (Fig. 4.62).¹²³ This overmantel has been relocated from elsewhere and the date, offset on the side of the composition of 1640 fits in with the construction of the Butterwalk. Stylistically, however, the figures on the Stafford Barton overmantel are very different and the execution much cruder than the other surviving Dartmouth schemes. On this basis it would seem less likely that this North Devon overmantel, which bears a very close similarity to a John Abbott drawing (Fig. 4.63), originated in Dartmouth.

There are no stylistic references in the Dartmouth overmantels that are shared with other Dart Valley ceilings, although the overmantels do have an absence of cast decoration. The Tree of Jesse ceiling figures (Fig. 7.43) are by the same plasterer as the overmantels and the ceiling includes winged putti heads (Fig. 5.48) that occur on other ceilings in Dartmouth, such as 5 Higher Street (SH11) and 6 Duke Street (SH7). The overmantels and ceilings are therefore by the same firm. It is curious that the figures have no parallels in a domestic context outside of Dartmouth, and especially in nearby Totnes. It is possible that this

¹²¹ The overmantel from Newcomen Cottage is illustrated in Tara Hamling, *Decorating the 'Godly' Household*, p. 224 and p. 234.

¹²² Percy Russell, *Dartmouth: A History of Port and Town* (London: Batsford, 1950), p. 98.

¹²³ Hamling, *Decorating the 'Godly' Household*, p. 85.

figurative work was subcontracted to a separate workshop, or an individual plasterer within a firm who was only occasionally called upon to exercise his modelling skill for depicting religious figures.

5.4.3 Chronological development

On the basis of surviving casts from identical moulds, John Thorp's assessment of three or four firms operating in Devon in the early seventeenth century is broadly accurate.¹²⁴ The relationship between these firms and the degree to which they overlapped chronologically and developed through time is difficult to tease out. It is therefore not possible to support Thorp's further assertion that much of the best Jacobean work in the county was carried out by a single workshop.¹²⁵ The moulds used in Exeter in the 1620s are found in a high proportion of the better quality schemes across the south of the county. But the Barnstaple work of this date, and that carried out in the Dart Valley, is equally accomplished and is not linked stylistically. This work is mostly urban-based but the Barnstaple group might include the remarkable plasterwork at Rashleigh Barton (MD24), which lies some distance from its nearest town of Hatherleigh.

From the earlier period, the work attributed to Robert Eaton from the 1590s to 1615 can be identified mainly on the basis of his hand-modelled figurative work. This was continued by another firm appearing slightly later, or the same workshop without Eaton, or whoever was responsible for the figures. This change is best seen in the different modelling treatment of figures on overmantels, where given the similarity of overall design, the plasterer was probably trying to replicate Eaton's style of work. If only the evidence of the cast work from this group was available the transition from one plasterer to another could not be identified as it is the hand-modelled work that identifies an individual practitioner.

Given the time period over which moulds were used and marked differences in the design context in which they appear, they must have changed hands on

¹²⁴ Thorp, 'Wall Painting and Lime-Plaster Decoration' p. 136.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

occasion. The mechanisms by which a mould could be transferred are numerous but the most likely is that the next generation within a firm might inherit the mould. An apprentice setting up on their own could also acquire a mould from their former master or ask a joiner to carve a new one of the same, or similar, design. It is equally possible that a joiner made two identical moulds which were sold to separate firms.

The plasterwork trade in the South-West, while allowing locally-served apprenticeships, was not regulated by guilds in the same way as London. Perhaps because of this the quality of the schemes in the South-West is variable. While plasterers would have had alternative means of income to sustain them between commissions, it seems likely that some of the crudely executed work, especially from the mid-seventeenth century onwards, was done by tradespeople whose primary occupation was unlikely to be plastering and who were not formally trained or apprenticed. Once acquired, moulds were a relatively straightforward means by which an unskilled plasterer could execute a scheme. At the Old Manor House, Combe Florey (TA6) for example, all the plasterwork in the house is from moulds. In the case of Beara Farmhouse, Ilfracombe (ND40), the plasterer clearly had possession of a number of well-carved moulds but these are in contrast to the poorer quality hand-modelled work that accompanied them (Fig. 5.52). In the immediate years after the Civil War, the quality of plasterwork is further reduced. This rustic work – it is almost exclusively found in the rural housing – is not totally confined to lower status houses. Enough of the overmantel above the panelling in the Judge's Room at Holcombe Court (MD11) (Fig. 5.49) is visible to suggest this does not match the high quality work in the rest of the house. At Canonteign Manor (TE5) (Fig. 5.50), the strapwork cartouche of the overmantel may be described as 'serviceable', but is not what might have been expected in a house of this status and does not stand comparison with work from thirty-years earlier.¹²⁶

These less well executed schemes tend to continue with traditional designs past the period when they were fashionable and used in high status houses.

¹²⁶ The Canonteign cartouche is similar to the one framing the crudely executed figures at Holcombe Burnell Barton (TE17), which also has similarities with an overmantel at Cowick Barton, near Exeter (EX7).

One rung down the social ladder from Canonteign and Holcombe Court, and later in date, the plasterwork at Lower Tarr Farm, Lydeard St Lawrence (TA16) is in an earlier style that is not in-keeping with its 1691 date and is quite poorly executed (Fig. 5.51). Other notably rustic work, which is likely to be earlier than Lower Tarr, survives at Windout Farmhouse (TE36) (Fig. 5.53) and Little Hackworthy (TE37) near Tedburn St Mary, Devon. Again, small heraldic casts are used and in both houses the double-headed eagles are particularly crudely done. The most extraordinary example is, however, the ceiling at Lewishill, Dunsford (TE13) with its strange angel figures and naive renderings of animals (Fig. 5.54). Also part of this group, and geographically close but not necessarily by the same plasterer, are the curious crudely hand-wrought crosses applied to ceilings at Nattonhall, Drewsteignton and Coombe Court, Moretonhampstead. These date to the second half of the seventeenth century and have no parallels in earlier plasterwork.¹²⁷ All of these examples are part of an emerging new vernacular stylistic tradition and despite the obvious lack of skill in their application, would have been created by a craftsmen, albeit of limited ability.

These archaic schemes are in marked contrast to the highest quality contemporary crisply modelled work seen, for example, in the 1650s at Forde Abbey, Dorset and later at the Custom House, Exeter of 1680 and Dunster Castle (WS5) dated 1681 (Fig. 5.55). These demonstrate that at the same time that the debased vernacular schemes were being installed, there were still highly skilled plasterers operating in the South-West installing fashionable plasterwork for high status clients using the classical architectural language introduced by Inigo Jones. Whether the introduction of this new style represents the arrival of new plasterers into the region is unclear but it did require new skills and an awareness of the latest architectural styles. It was not only the advanced execution and design that marked-out these later seventeenth century schemes. The sharper undercut designs were technically difficult to realise in lime-based plaster and required a gypsum-rich plaster to achieve the crisp sharper-angled appearance that the designs dictated.

¹²⁷ Both ceilings are illustrated in Keystone Historic Buildings Consultants, 'Coombe Court, Moretonhampstead, Devon', Report K831 (Unpublished, 2013).

Conclusion

The existence of the stylistically definable workshops within the South-West identified in this chapter demonstrates that plasterers were more itinerant in the sixteenth century, when plasterwork was in demand nationally but there were fewer practitioners to carry out the commissions. By the turn of the seventeenth century, there was enough work to sustain a plasterer within a relatively confined geographical area, which may be seen in the towns of Totnes, Dartmouth and Barnstaple, and to a lesser extent Exeter. The periods of prosperity and stability gave rise to building projects that enabled the plasterer to amass a number of commissions within a locality. This does not, however, mean that they were permanently based in a particular area and not all the plasterwork in the region was necessarily carried out by local plasterers. In the same way as Robert Eaton travelled to Wiltshire to undertake work for Sir John Popham, a plasterer might enter the area from the outside to undertake commissions and then return to their place of origin.

Outside of the towns, plasterers might still travel some distance between commissions. In Cornwall, there are fewer schemes than Devon and no local workshop has yet been positively identified, although there are similarities between the figures on the ceilings at Lanhydrock (CO9) and Prideaux Place (CO18) and overmantel at Trewarne (C026).¹²⁸ The other principal Cornish scheme at Trevice (CO29), dated 1572 and 1573, was executed by the same workshop that in West Devon completed the schemes at Collacombe Manor (WD8) in 1574, and Buckland Abbey (WD1) in 1576.¹²⁹ The gaps between these plasterwork installations may be significant and indicative of the time taken to execute these schemes, or for the plasterer to gain commissions. At the opposite end of the quality spectrum, it seems unlikely that whoever did the ceiling at Lewishill, Dunsford (TE13), would have travelled outside of their immediate area to execute their naive craftwork.

¹²⁸ This has also been identified by Tara Hamling, see 'Decoration and Devotion: Religious Representations in West Country Decorative Plasterwork, c. 1550- c.1660' (Unpublished M.Phil. thesis, University of Birmingham, 1999), p. 10.

¹²⁹ This connection is made by Christopher Hussey, 'Collacombe Manor, Devon I: the Home of Major and Mrs Archibald Jacks', *Country Life*, 131, 19 Apr. (1962), p. 907.

Documentary evidence suggests that commissions were gained by élite patronage and recommendation. If good work was done for a client then further commissions could follow from others in their social circle, or on the recommendation of the overseer of the building project. This is particularly evident in towns where there was a high concentration of potential clients. This is best seen in the prosperous Devon towns of Exeter, Barnstaple, Bideford, Totnes and Dartmouth where a single firm could undertake multiple schemes. They could also carry out work for the same clients' country houses. Assuming the now destroyed plaster ceiling from Poltimore House (ED23) was seventeenth century, then one plastering firm undertook work at both the Bampfylde family's city and country residences.¹³⁰

Ultimately, the plastering workshops would have fulfilled their individual commissions and moved on to the next job. Geographic labels, such as 'Dart Valley firm', are therefore best taken loosely. In this case, for example, it identifies a concentration of work in a particular area, and the firm could equally have been based in Exeter as Totnes or Dartmouth, or as with Robert Eaton and John Abbott, in a rural location. Nevertheless, the study of extant schemes presented in this chapter demonstrates that there are geographic parameters that define the appearance of particular designs and other motifs. It can also be shown that where these recur across the region it can be ascertained, with varying degrees of certainty, that a particular firm or individual was responsible for the plasterwork.

¹³⁰ The listed building description National Heritage List for England (NHLE), <<https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/1098310>>, accessed 22 February 2019 suggests that the plaster ceiling at Poltimore was a nineteenth century copy, although French and French place it in the seventeenth century, 'Devonshire Plasterwork', p. 130.

6. THE CLIENT

Decorative plasterwork offered unparalleled scope for interior display that was constrained only by the dimensions of the rooms and the wealth and aspirations of the client commissioning it. This potential was made possible by an acceleration in architectural development during the sixteenth century, providing new internal areas to exploit that could be viewed in the higher natural light levels facilitated by glazed windows. It was also enabled by the availability of plasterers, whose knowledge and skills for the greater part met the ambitions of their clients during the period. This chapter focuses on the client who commissioned decorative plasterwork and how this conveyed messages of status, belief, learning and control. Section 6.1 presents an analysis of the role of the clients, who they were and what influenced their choices. In Section 6.2, the motivations for selecting a decorative plasterwork design are interrogated and a case study of two Somerset houses is presented providing an insight into the individual incentives behind installing plasterwork.

6.1 Commissioning plasterwork

6.1.1 House status and social position

The social position of those commissioning plasterwork can be most easily gleaned from houses they occupied. The vernacular building historian R. W. Brunskill divided houses into four types: Type A, the Great House, occupied by those of the highest rank and of national status and great wealth; Type B, the Large House, the homes of those of local importance, such as the gentry or successful merchant; and Type C, the Small House, housing those of significance in the locality, such as the yeoman and tradesperson, and in towns the wealthier tradespeople.¹ Brunskill's fourth category, D the Cottage of the labourers and artisans that served the majority of the population, is not relevant here as these houses did not contain decorative plasterwork.

While useful, there is a blurring between house type categories, especially B and C. The status of the house when built would have been equal to that of the

¹ R. W. Brunskill, *Vernacular Architecture: An Illustrated Handbook*, 4th edn. (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), p. 24.

owner and in general there was, in the words of Sir Henry Wotton, 'the keeping of a due Respect between the Inhabitant and the Habitation'.² The subsequent fate of houses could, however, differ. This is most readily seen in the middle ranks, where the houses could quickly move up or slip down the social scale. For example, manor houses could be reduced in status to farmhouses within a generation or even, in the longer term subdivided in cottages, used as a farm building or demolished. In the other direction, a farmhouse could be extended and gentrified as the owner's financial situation improved.

Just over half of the schemes occur in houses classified as Type C (Table B1). The figures, however, disguise a more nuanced picture. The houses of this type made up the bulk of the housing stock and fewer élite and gentry houses in categories A and B were built in the period.³ As a percentage of the housing stock, it is likely that more plasterwork was installed in higher status houses of Types A and B. Due to variances in survivability precise figures are difficult to gauge.⁴ An estimate can, however, be made from listed building entries. In Devon, of the 530 Grade II entries from the period 1558-1603, which mainly comprise Type C, 208 or 39% contain the text 'plaster' or 'plasterwork'. This compares with 91 or 66% of the 137 Grade II* and Grade I entries, the bulk of which are of Type A and B.⁵

In addition, a greater number of the Type C houses, some 71%, only had plasterwork in one room, compared with 46% of the Type B houses of the middle and lower gentry or successful merchant (Table B2). For Type A houses of the upper gentry some 62% had plasterwork in two or more rooms. These figures do not take into account the quality of the plasterwork or volume of the wall or ceiling covered. For example, a yeoman house might have a single overmantel with two or three cast motifs, whereas a gentry house might have an

² Henry Wotton, *The Elements of Architecture: Collected by Henry Wotton Knight from the Best Authors and Examples* (London: John Bill, 1624), p. 119.

³ In Devon for example, there are forty-five houses in the study period listed at the highest grade I, which would typically fall into Types A and B. Source: The National Heritage List for England, *Historic England* <<https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/>>, accessed 14 January 2019.

⁴ See Section 1.4.1.

⁵ The date range is the reign of Elizabeth I. The list entries can be searched at National Heritage List for England, *Historic England* <<https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/>>, accessed 14 January 2019.

intricate hand-modelled overmantel installed at a greater cost, in addition to a ceiling and frieze. There is also a chronological variable, that shows that the number of houses of Type C with plasterwork increases sharply at the turn of the seventeenth century (see Table B1). This may be partly due to the higher survival rates of later houses but more likely this demonstrates a degree of social emulation within the ranks of the lower gentry and upper yeomanry.

There are a number of factors to account for this but the desirability of plasterwork and choices made by the client are inextricably linked to its fashionability, the conspicuous display of status and learning, and the desire to control the behaviour of the household through moral exemplars. To these should be added the more prosaic factors of the physical space available, the availability of a plasterer to undertake the commission at a given time, and the affordability of the scheme to the client. In interpreting the data in the Gazetteer (Appendix D) it is important to note that a plasterer operating in 1600 would most likely have been engaged on a small commission by a client closer to their own social status occupying a Type C house. However, while in terms of overall numbers commissions for great houses were rarer, the plasterer would have spent a greater proportion of their time engaged on larger scale schemes for elite clients occupying houses of Types A and B.

In all cases, for domestic plasterwork the client commissioning the work would be the male head of the household. Where the plastering work coincided with other building or rebuilding work, it is likely that the person who employed the other tradesmen would have also, either directly or indirectly, engaged the plasterer. This could either be on the recommendation of a member of their peer group or another craftsman they had employed.⁶

While it might be expected that those directly engaging the plasterer selected the design, this may not always have been the case. A distinction needs to be made between those who commissioned the work, which in most cases would be the male head of the household and those who chose the scheme, which

⁶ See Malcolm Airs, *The Tudor and Jacobean Country House: A Building History* (Stroud: Bramley Books, 1998), pp. 77-78.

could have been the householder's wife, and to a degree the plasterer.⁷ According to the historian Adrian Green, it was women who chose textiles and furnishings, while men purchased expensive furniture or plate, and together they agreed on items such as plaster decoration, panelling and wall hangings with the recommendation of craftsmen.⁸ The collaborative process Green describes is compelling but for plasterwork there is a dearth of documentary evidence to support this. The range of subjects and decorative motifs depicted in plaster were not gender specific, although some subjects, such as the Judgement of Paris, with its representation of a beauty contest between goddesses, and the rough justice of the skimmington panel from Montacute House (SS18) (Fig. 7.04), might be expected to appeal to the male client. The location of plasterwork within the house cannot offer any further clues, as individual living spaces within a house were not exclusively the domain of men or women.⁹ It should therefore, not be assumed that the plasterwork in a particular room would have necessarily been chosen by the husband or wife.

In the absence of documents, precisely who commissioned plasterwork is always likely to be the subject of supposition. At Holcombe Court (MD11) for example, the small chamber above the muniment room contains an overmantel with the Chichester family arms and the initials 'E C'.¹⁰ Edward Chichester, was executor of Richard II Bluett's will and managed the estate for ten years until the coming of age John III Bluett, in 1624.¹¹ Whether Edward Chichester desired to make his presence felt at Holcombe Court through commissioning this overmantel himself, or the room was prepared for him by a member of the Bluett family, is not known.

⁷ There are recorded cases outside of the region, notably Bess of Hardwick, where a woman was clearly responsible for choosing and retaining the services of a plasterer, alongside other craftsmen engaged in building work, see David Durrant and Philip Riden, *The Building of Hardwick Hall, Part 2 The New Hall, 1591-98*, 9 (Chesterfield: Derbyshire Record Society, 1984).

⁸ Adrian Green, 'Consumption and Material Culture' in *A Social History of England 1500-1750*, ed. by Keith Wrightson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 253.

⁹ See Jane Whittle, 'The House as a Place of Work in Early Modern Rural England', *Home Cultures*, 8:2 (2011), pp. 136-37.

¹⁰ These initials have generally been taken to commemorate the marriage of Elizabeth Chichester to Richard Bluett in 1572 see Cherry and Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Devon*, p. 490. On stylistic grounds alone this is unlikely.

¹¹ Scott-Fox, *Holcombe Court*, p.19.

6.1.2 Cost

In commissioning plasterwork, cost was undoubtedly a factor. In comparison with other decorative arts, plasterwork was an economic way of achieving what Sir Henry Wotton termed in 1624 as 'A cheape piece of Magnificence'.¹² In some applications both timber and stone could substitute for plasterwork and had a longer tradition of being utilised for interior furnishing. These materials were, however, more expensive commodities and incurred greater transportation and processing costs.¹³ Plasterwork was formed of comparatively inexpensive raw materials, comprising lime putty, sand and hair, with timber and nails for the supporting structure, which could be transported in their separate constituents and combined on site. This was not the case for carved stone and timber, which had to be transported at some expense, unless the client had access to their own woodland or quarry close by.

The hierarchy of materials is also reflected in labour costs. For John Strode's chapel at Chantmarle, Dorset (WT4) it is recorded that the plasterer Robert Eaton received £6 16s for his elaborate ceiling. By contrast his joiner counterpart Edward Batten was paid £11 8s for wainscoting, the pulpit and seating.¹⁴ Even allowing for the day rates for plasterers being lower than woodworkers, which in turn were below that of masons, the difference in cost also reflects the fact that plasterwork was quicker to produce than woodwork.¹⁵ It is notable that Eaton finished his work on 2 December 1615 while Batten, who might of course have started later, completed his commission on 20th February 1617.

This combination of cheap materials and low labour costs meant that decorative plasterwork was invariably less expensive than a stone or timber equivalent.

¹² Henry Wotton, *The Elements of Architecture: Collected by Henry Wotton Knight from the Best Authors and Examples* (London: John Bill, 1624), p.108.

¹³ The impact of wood resources on craftsmen is discussed in Susan Flavin, 'The Decorative Arts, Change and Development in the Sixteenth Century' in *West Country to World's End: The South West in the Tudor Age*, ed. by Sam Smiles (London: Paul Holberton Publishing, 2013), p. 33.

¹⁴ Quoted in John Hutchins, *The History and Antiquities of the County of Dorset*, ed. by William Shipp and James Whitworth Hodson 3rd edn 4 (Westminster: J.B. Nichols and Sons, 1870). pp. 5-6.

¹⁵ For pay comparisons see Airs, *The Tudor and Jacobean Country House*, p. 198.

There are no surviving schemes for which documentary sources survive. In the case of the Dartmouth Guildhall, however, we know that the labour cost for the plasterer Thomas Forde and his team of three, came to £8 16s and 4d. This constitutes approximately two-thirds of the total cost of the plastering job, which came to £13 15s and 6d, including materials, transport and timber.¹⁶ This, as the historian Todd Gray has noted, was comparable to one man's annual wage.¹⁷ For smaller commissions, such as hand-modelled overmantels, the cost would have been proportionately less. The reproduction of the overmantel formerly at 69 High Street, Barnstaple (ND8) (Fig. 1.09) in 2019 by the sculptor/plasterer Geoffrey Preston took around forty days to complete.¹⁸ Allowing for a greater familiarity with the materials and techniques giving a faster work rate in the early seventeenth century, and a daily pay of 1 shilling and 4 pence, this overmantel would have cost approximately £3 including materials. While the number of schemes in houses of Type C (see Table B1) attests that middling status clients were prepared to pay for such work, the cost was still significant and the decision to commission decorated plasterwork and how much could be afforded would have required careful consideration.

For ceilings, the cheapest option for the client was not to plaster but to leave the structural timbers exposed to view. Cost was not always the primary motivation for this and there are instances where there was a deliberate decision not to plaster a high status exposed timber ceiling. The most notable example in the region is the hall at Weare Giffard (TR29), where the magnificent medieval hammer-beam roof was never enclosed by a ceiling. It should also be noted that technically installing a plaster ceiling here would have been difficult. At Knightstone House (ED21), the roof is also exposed but it is probable that a plaster ceiling was installed and later removed, most likely in the nineteenth century, to reveal an ornate arch-braced timber ceiling of the fifteenth century.¹⁹ This was the case at Little Court, West Bagborough (TA40) where the line of the removed barrel-vaulted ceiling can be clearly seen on the plaster (Fig. 6.01).

¹⁶ Todd Gray, 'Plaster and Dartmouth Guildhall in 1614', *Devon Buildings Group Newsletter*, 37 (2019), p. 44.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Jenny Lawrence, *Pers. comm.*, 7 January 2020.

¹⁹ See Bridget Cherry and Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Devon* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989), p. 529.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries there was, however, a move away from exposed timber ceilings, and the beams, even where visibly dividing the ceiling into compartments, were typically plastered and often decorated with friezes, such as in the upper chamber at 63 Wolborough Street, Newton Abbot (TE29) (Fig. 6.02).

There were also instances where a plain plaster ceiling might be accompanied by an ornamental frieze or an overmantel, as at Court House, East Quantoxhead (WS7), which has seven overmantels but no decorative plaster ceilings.²⁰ The picture may, however, be skewed by differences in the survival rates of individual elements. As discussed in Section 1.4.1, there are various factors influencing survival but as a general rule, ceilings are the most vulnerable to being removed, while friezes were less so. Fragments of friezes are often all that survive of a scheme, such as at Combe Sydenham (WS21) (Fig. 1.04) where a ceiling, which would have almost certainly been decorated, has been completely lost and 1-5 Bridge Street, Bideford (TR3) (Fig. 6.03) where a concealed fragment of frieze is all that remains. In other cases, such as in an upper chamber at Marshwood Farmhouse, Somerset (WS3), the decorated lunettes that survive in the loft space above an inserted flat plain ceiling indicate the presence of a former barrel-vaulted ceiling (Fig. 1.03).

For friezes, plaster again offered significant cost benefits to the client. A single timber carved mould could produce plaster casts not only for an individual room but could be used again in other locations. By contrast, even a simple pattern carved repeatedly in wood was far more labour intensive and therefore expensive to furnish all but the smallest rooms. Timber was consequently very rarely used for friezes but does sometimes occur with plaster ceilings, such as at 10 Duke Street, Dartmouth (SH8), which dates to the early seventeenth century.²¹ At 10 High Street, Totnes (SH37) (Fig. 6.04), the timber frieze, if it is coeval with the room panelling, may be later in date than the mid-sixteenth-century ceiling.

²⁰ Montacute (SS18) is another important house that lacks decorative ceilings.

²¹ The 'pegasus' frieze in the first-floor parlour at 10 Duke Street is inscribed with the date '1634', there is a further timber frieze at the back of the room, this compliments the plaster ceilings and overmantel which are contemporary.

The cost advantage of plaster was less clear-cut with overmantels. Both timber and stone were commonly used in these applications and their hard-wearing qualities and permanence offered advantages that might have encouraged some clients to pay a premium over the cost of a plaster equivalent.²² In some high status houses there are instances of timber and stone being used in conjunction with plasterwork. In the hall at Weare Giffard (TR29), the decorated stone fireplace carved with three fishes and a Tudor rose is flanked by grotesque figures carved in timber (Fig. 3.48).²³ This is a good example where the inherent strength of each material was put to its optimum use.

Cost was also a consideration for the client once the decision to use plasterwork had been taken. Schemes that primarily comprise a limited number of moulds would be less expensive than those that were more labour intensive involving multiple moulds and hand-modelling. While the more complex schemes occur in the higher status houses, there are early seventeenth century cases, such as that installed by the Clotworthy family at Rashleigh Barton (MD24) (Fig. 6.05) and also seen at Bellamarsh Barton (TE22), where houses occupied by the yeomanry and lower gentry have high quality decorated broad-rib ceilings that are the equal of those found in the houses of the county élite. Occurrences of high quality plasterwork in lower gentry houses are also found at the beginning of the study period. Higher Moorhayes (MD7) and Rowlands, Ashill (SS1) contained mid-late sixteenth-century plasterwork by the same plasterer as the higher status houses of Holcombe Court (MD11) and Poundisford Park (TA24).²⁴ At this time it would be expected that the shortage of plasterers would have made this work more expensive than later in the study period, when more workshops were in operation.

²² Contemporary funerary monuments were almost invariably stone, which was undoubtedly seen as a more permanent material. There is an example of plaster being used in this context, for the monument to Sir Arthur Champenowne 1587 at Dartington Old Church, Devon.

²³ According to a painted inscription below the plaster overmantel, the hall was restored by George Fortescue in 1832 and the carved timberwork to the fireplace may have been introduced at this time.

²⁴ The same plasterer also appears to have been working at Haddon Hall in Derbyshire.

6.1.3 Space

On one level, the selection of decorative plasterwork by the client can be seen as a pragmatic response to covering the walls and ceilings within the house. The double-height hall found in the higher status housing offered the greatest volume and the largest potential space for display with the opportunity to install full height windows to intensify the impact of the plasterwork. Taller overmantels could be installed in these high-ceilinged rooms, although the design in this context was less suited to being based on subject prints, which were almost invariably produced in the horizontal rectangle of a landscape format. In these cases, the demands of the client to fill the space posed a design challenge for the plasterer.

The Dining Room at Wolfeton House, Dorset, (WT6) is not double-height but high enough to require a portrait ratio overmantel (Fig. 3.49). Here the plasterer has adapted the landscape format print from the Jacob Floris *Compartmentorum* suite to a portrait ratio, which they have flanked by demi-figures emerging from elongated columns. The plasterer, in this case most likely Robert Eaton, was clearly less comfortable here with fulfilling his client's requirement to decorate a tall narrow space, which has resulted in a less satisfactory composition. The hall at Nettlecombe Court (WS15) presented a similar challenge. The overmantel (Fig. 4.01) has a small landscape ratio coat of arms and figures set centrally within a square frame filled with a low relief cartouche and smaller figures enacting a hunting scene and a small frieze of shields above. Given its large size, the small scale of the decorative elements mean that overall the piece lacks a strong visual impact. By contrast, the overmantel in the hall at Boringdon Hall, Plympton (PL1) has filled the space between the chimney piece and double height ceiling by using a large Royal arms and flanking figures to the extent that it dominates the room.

Single-height rooms had lower ceilings and this resulted in overmantel designs of flatter proportions. Generally, these could be accommodated without aesthetic compromise but there were occasions where lower ceilings and beams could interfere with the design. For example, at Hawkridge Barton, Chittlehampton (ND28) the overmantel is squeezed right up to the ceiling to the extent that it is cut around the earlier ceiling beam, although there is apparently

space below. This indicates that the fireplace was formerly larger, as a similar overmantel at Beara Farm, Ilfracombe (ND40) (Fig. 6.06), which also has a beam cutting through, occupies the whole space between the top of the fireplace and ceiling. At the Old Manor, Combe Florey (TA6) the hall has very large Tudor roses on the ceiling that seem to pay no regard to its low height and cannot be comfortably viewed from floor level (Fig. 3.70). The accompanying floral sprays and winged putti heads are formed from moulds of normal size, giving an incongruous juxtaposition.

Where the client had a large space that needed to be filled economically, the repeated use of moulds might be brought into play. In the Orange Room at Forde House (TE26), a large rectangular design, possibly from a single mould, was used nineteen times (Fig. 6.07).²⁵ This first-floor room also has a barrel-vaulted ceiling which maximises head room. Barrel ceilings are often associated with the most highly decorative plasterwork schemes, such as the master chamber at Rashleigh Barton (MD24), gallery at Lanhydrock (CO9), at 62 Boutport Street (ND3), Barnstaple, and in the Long Room also at Forde House. In the Orange Room, however, this opportunity was not taken. In all likelihood this ceiling was originally intended to host a highly decorated plaster scheme which was not installed by the clients, Sir Richard and Lucy Reynell, either for reasons of economy or because the status of this room changed.

6.2 Motivations

As a pragmatic solution to decorating a large expanse of ceiling or wall at a relatively cheap cost, plasterwork was an attractive choice. There were, however, clearly other reasons why a client chose to install decorative plasterwork. The motivations behind an individual, or a married couple's, desire for this form of decoration at a particular time were varied. What is consistent is that ornamental plasterwork remained a fashionable choice as a decorative medium in houses from upper gentry to yeoman status throughout the study period.

²⁵ It is also used in the frieze of the ground-floor dining room/parlour of Forde House. Given its large size, it possible that design was built up from more than one mould.

6.2.1 Display of status

Status and membership of an élite social group was most commonly conveyed through the display of heraldry.²⁶ This remained the obvious decorative choice for the established gentry and highly desirable for those that strove to attain this status. The depiction of coats of arms in plasterwork followed the medieval tradition of using heraldry as a personal identifier in various media. By the mid-sixteenth century, this had become increasingly codified, with attempts at regulation administered through visitations by heralds.²⁷ The expansion of the gentry class through the study period led to a corresponding increase in the granting of arms. It is fair to say that ancestry pre-occupied those of middling rank and above in the period and bearing arms was a *sine qua non* of possessing gentry status. In his *Compleat Gentleman* of 1622, Henry Peacham devotes an entire chapter to heraldry and states:

How should we give nobility her true value, respect, and title, without notice of her Merit? and how may we guess her merit without these outward ensignes and badges of vertue, which anciently have been accounted sacred and precious [...].²⁸

The importance of heraldry to the gentry of the time is explicitly stated by the financial outlay seen in the elaborate plasterwork treatments, such as installed by Richard Bluett in the Great Chamber at Holcombe Court (MD11) (Fig. 6.08) and John Robartes at Lanhydrock (Fig. 7.28). Lower down the social scale, gentry status was clearly also important to the clergyman Edward Kellett, who placed his arms on the overmantel in an upper chamber at Little Court, West Bagborough (TA40) (Fig. 6.09).²⁹ Kellett, who resided at Little Court from 1608 to 1641, came from relatively humble origins and achieved gentry status through his religious writings.³⁰

²⁶ For statistics relating to iconography see Section 4.3 and Appendix B.

²⁷ These periodic visits were first carried out in Cornwall 1530, Devon and Somerset in 1531, and Dorset 1565.

²⁸ Henry Peacham, *The compleat gentleman fashioning him absolute in the most necessary & commendable qualities concerning minde or bodie that may be required in a noble gentleman* (London: Francis Constable, 1622), p. 138.

²⁹ Kellett's coat of arms are also included on his monumental brass in West Bagborough Church, see Arthur B Connor, 'Monumental Brasses in Somerset Part VII', *Proceedings of the Somersetshire Archaeological and Natural History Society*, 83 (1937), pp. 126-27.

³⁰ Arnold Hunt, 'Kellett, Edward (c.1580–1641)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <<http://0-www.oxforddnb.com.lib.exeter.ac.uk/view/article/15287>>, accessed 28 May 2015.

Family arms lent status, social prestige and established or reinforced identity and presence in a locality. Those without arms might also imply gentry status without this being formally granted. The Old Manor House, Combe Florey (TA6) has an array of cast heraldic emblems placed on the walls, including a boar, stag's head, lion rampant, fleur-de-lis and a mythical fox-like creature known as an enfield (Fig. 3.47). Similar emblems were sometimes employed as visual puns, as acknowledged by Henry Peacham who in 1612 wrote:

Excellent have beene the concept of some Citizens, who wanting Arms, have coined themselves certain devises as neere as may be alluding to their names, which we call Rebus.³¹

At the Old Manor House, however, the sheer number and variety of devices could not possibly represent a rebus for an individual family. Further to this, many of the emblems have royal connections, including the lion rampant motif that forms the centrepiece, accompanied by four fleur-de-lis in the corners of the overmantel in the upper chamber. If it is accepted that these devices have no heraldic connection to the family occupying the house, then the intention behind their selection must have been for more than for their decorative qualities. The choice of heraldic emblems instead of, for example, a floral spray, suggests that the owner was deliberately identifying with a higher social group. These royal motifs are, however, unlikely to have greatly impressed a viewer of gentry status. Their effect on visitors of equal status, or even an uneducated contemporary observer unable to 'read' a coat of arms, might have also been limited. The social cachet of these individual emblems would not have been as great as a full family coat of arms, which would signify status, or full hand-modelled royal arms that would lend authority and been more expensive to commission than cast emblems and so signified wealth.

For those without armorial bearings a further possibility was to 'borrow' these from an élite family. The parlour overmantel at the Old Rectory, Alphington (EX8) (Fig. 3.65) has the Bouchier arms with coronet flanked by Bouchier knots.³² It is improbable that a member of the Bouchier family, who were the

³¹ Henry Peacham, *The Gentlemans Exercise. Or an exquisite practise, as well for drawing all manner of beasts in their true portraitures* [...] (London: W. Stansby for John Browne, 1612), pp. 165-66.

³² Rev. H. T. Ellacombe, 'Chimney Piece at Alphington Rectory', *Transactions of the Exeter Diocesan Architectural and Archaeological Society*, (Second Series) 5 (1892), p. 16.

Earls of Bath, resided here but the arms left no doubt as to their patronage and served as a constant reminder to the occupier of their virtual presence. The arms of one of the foremost Devon families would, in a similar way to royal arms, also lend the occupier status by association.³³ Similarly, at the Luttrell Arms (WS6) in Dunster, which appears to have functioned as an inn, the Luttrell family arms can be found in an upper chamber, signifying their ownership, even though their main seat was at Dunster Castle.

With some exceptions, royal arms were hand-modelled and therefore expensive, so would have been found in higher status houses. Displaying royal arms explicitly implied loyalty to the crown and at the same time lent sovereign authority to those displaying them. The degree to which they substituted for family arms is a matter of conjecture. There are examples where the family had no arms of their own but displayed royal arms. This may have been the case at Rowlands, Ashill (SS1). At Poundisford Park (TA24), the same plasterer has installed royal arms in the hall, while the Hill family arms occur in glasswork in a first-floor chamber, although it is possible that the plasterwork was installed prior to arms being granted in 1570. Royal arms do, however, commonly occur in the houses of armigerous families who would not need these to stand in for their family arms, for example at Hams Barton, Chudleigh (TE7), Collacombe Manor (WD8), and Weare Giffard (TR29).

A further way of acquiring the use of heraldry was through membership of a guild or company. Merchant arms were clearly important for the urban élite who identified with guilds and companies in the towns where they conducted their business. The front chamber lunette at 62 Boutport Street, Barnstaple (ND3) has the arms of the Spanish Company and dates to 1620 (Fig. 4.65).³⁴ A further example of the Spanish Company arms occurs just five kilometres to the west across the River Taw at Higher Rookabeare Farmhouse, Fremington (ND34). The overmantel here is dated 1630 and is clearly by a different hand to Boutport

³³ Two other houses have the Bouchier Arms, Weare Giffard (TR29) and Rashleigh Barton (MD24), both of the occupying families had their own arms.

³⁴ Barnstaple, along with Plymouth and Exeter, was one of the privileged ports of the Spanish Company, and in 1605 had twelve merchants who were members. See Pauline Croft, ed., *The Spanish Company*, London Record Society 9 (London: London Record Society, 1973), pp. 95-113.

Street. It includes the initials 'G s P' and 'W P'. The former is almost certainly for Gilbert Paige, a mayor of Barnstaple, who is recorded as owning Higher Rookabeare in 1647.³⁵ Paige also held property in the town, while this did not include 62 Boutport Street it is possible that the Spanish Company arms were also present in one of his town houses.³⁶

6.2.2 Religious belief

Religious observance underpinned daily life in the early modern house.³⁷ What Christopher Hill described as the 'spiritualization of the household' is reflected in the number of religious subjects depicted on plasterwork in the South-West, which exceeds that in other regions of England.³⁸ In terms of subject matter, however, biblical imagery was never as popular as heraldry, but the evidence seen in room placement suggests that religious depictions were used in a more specific way.³⁹

It might be expected that particular stories from the bible would have been selected by the client for personal reasons. This is evident in houses with schemes containing multiple biblical images. The most complete example of a religious schema is the early seventeenth-century plasterwork in the gallery at Lanhydrock, Cornwall (CO9) (Figs. 6.10 and 7.27). This was commissioned by John Robartes whose Presbyterian beliefs are reflected in his theological library still located at the house. As Tara Hamling has demonstrated, the Old

³⁵ National Archive, 'Will of Gilbert Paige, Merchant of Barnstaple', Devon, 1647, MS PROB 11/200/411.

³⁶ Lysons puts forward the idea that 62 Boutport Street (also known as the Golden Lion Hotel) was the town house of the earls of Bath, although there is no proof of this and the Bath arms mentioned in the large room are no longer extant, Daniel Lysons and Samuel Lysons, *Magna Britannia: Volume 6, Devonshire*. (London: T Cadell and W Davies, 1822), p. 585.

³⁷ See Tara Hamling, *Decorating the 'Godly' Household: Religious Art in Post-Reformation Britain* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010) and Tara Hamling and Catherine Richardson, *A Day at Home in Early Modern England: Material Culture and Domestic Life, 1500-1700* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017).

³⁸ Christopher Hill, *Society and Puritanism in Pre-revolutionary England* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986). The other areas studied in-depth are Yorkshire and London, Tara Hamling, 'Decoration and Devotion: Religious Representations in West Country Decorative Plasterwork, c. 1550- c.1660' (Unpublished M.Phil. thesis, University of Birmingham, 1999), p. 1.

³⁹ This is discussed in Section 7.

Testament iconography used on the ceiling, overmantels and one lunette, were carefully chosen by Robartes to express his religious and political convictions.⁴⁰

While Lanhydrock is an example of a client's intellectual requirements being expressed through decorative plasterwork, other schemes would have had similar motivations behind their installation but can be less clearly tied to an individual. For example, the story of Susannah and the Elders, which is told on eight ceiling panels in the great chamber at Prideaux Place (CO18) (Fig. 6.11), must have had a personal resonance for the owner. The ceiling has generally been assumed to have been installed by Sir Nicholas Prideaux, who remodelled the house in the early seventeenth century.⁴¹ The similarities with John Robartes' gallery ceiling at Lanhydrock (CO9) would, however, suggest a date closer to the 1630s, by which time Nicholas' son John had inherited the house.⁴² It is perhaps significant that correspondence between John Prideaux and John Robartes shows that the two men were friends, which increases the likelihood of John Prideaux commissioning the ceiling.⁴³ In any event, the ambitious scale of the work and consequent expense of the commission strongly suggest that the subject matter was not casually chosen.

The plasterwork ceiling at 62 Boutport Street, Barnstaple (ND3), also has Old Testament scenes, showing Adam and Eve and the Sacrifice of Isaac, in addition to The Annunciation and Nativity from the New Testament. The owner of the house when the early seventeenth-century plasterwork was installed is not known. The presence of mercantile and town arms in the lunettes, however, suggests that he was one of the civic élite and this chamber may have fulfilled a semi-public function. The client would have instructed the plasterer to include these arms and in all likelihood also selected the biblical scenes, which were

⁴⁰ For a full discourse on the plasterwork and Robartes's beliefs see Tara Hamling, *Decorating the 'Godly' Household*, pp. 182-91. There is also a descriptive and succinct account in John Thorp, 'The Ornamental Plasterwork of the Long Gallery at Lanhydrock, Cornwall: Puritan Images for Changing Times', *Apollo* (April 1998), pp. 30-34.

⁴¹ Peter Beacham gives the ceiling date as c. 1614, see Beacham and Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Cornwall* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014), p. 393.

⁴² Nicholas Prideaux died in 1628, see P. W. Hasler, ed., *The History of Parliament: the House of Commons 1558-1603* (1981) <<https://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1558-1603/member/prideaux-nicholas-1550-1628>>, accessed 9 July 2019.

⁴³ This link between John Prideaux and John Robartes was uncovered by Tara Hamling, see Hamling, 'Decoration and Devotion', p.9.

paralleled in the town at a now relocated ceiling originally at 7 Cross Street (ND5). There were other New Testament scenes in Barnstaple, showing the Annunciation and Adoration of the Shepherds on overmantels formerly at 69 High Street (ND8) (Figs. 1.10 and 4.07).

Like Barnstaple, Dartmouth was dominated by a coterie of protestant mercantile élite.⁴⁴ Dartmouth also has a concentration of religious scenes, which can be seen with the Pentecost overmantel from 10 Duke Street (SH8) and Tree of Jesse ceiling at 12 Duke Street (SH9). These differ from those at Barnstaple through their lack of Renaissance decoration and were clearly by a different workshop. It is possible that the preponderance of religious subjects became fashionable among a relatively small group. By contrast, there are no depictions of religious subjects recorded in Totnes, which would have been the domain of a similar group of equally wealthy inhabitants.

At Dartmouth the biblical subject matter dominates the compositions and is largely unadulterated by superfluous decoration. Such additional decoration would usually have been left to the inventiveness of the plasterer and it is possible that the client specifically instructed them not to include this. On occasion such ostensibly decorative elements might also have held some meaning for the client. The two stylistically related ceilings at Treasbeare, Clyst Honiton (ED7) (Fig. 6.12) and Upcott Barton, Cheriton Fitzpaine (MD4) contain three-fish and three-hare motifs that are also found on carved roof bosses in churches.⁴⁵ In both examples, the ceilings are not overly populated with other motifs and it is possible that these fish and hare motifs may have had a religious meaning and were accordingly deliberately chosen by the client.⁴⁶

In at least one case, the biblical depictions chosen seem at odds with the client's beliefs. At Court House, East Quantoxhead (WS7) the four scenes of the

⁴⁴ See Mark Stoye, *Loyalty and Locality: Popular Allegiance in Devon during the English Civil War* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1994), p. 20.

⁴⁵ See Tom Greeves, Sue Andrew and Chris Chapman, *The Three Hares: A Curiosity Worth Regarding* (South Molton: Skerryvore Productions Ltd, 2016), pp. 260-61. The three fish motif also occurs at Herringston House, Dorset (WT20).

⁴⁶ A three-fish motif also occurs at Herringston House, Dorset (WT20) but here it forms a small part of a more highly decorated ceiling scheme.

life, passion and resurrection of Jesus Christ on overmantels occupying principal rooms were installed by George Luttrell. However, as Tara Hamling has pointed out, these New Testament scenes appear contrary to George Luttrell's documented protestantism.⁴⁷ Luttrell had stipulated that his daughter could only inherit the £1,400 bequeathed by her mother if she did not marry a 'Popish Recusant or the son of a Popish Recusant'.⁴⁸ Upon first consideration, the overmantels would not, reflect Luttrell's documented religious leanings. The remodelling of the Court House in the 1620s coincided with George Luttrell marrying his second wife Sylvestra Capps, who had been a maid to his deceased first wife.⁴⁹ A rainwater spout on the north-east wing with both their initials and the date 1628 suggests that the work to provide a suitable house for his younger wife was being carried out right up until George's death in 1629.

As work at the Court House effectively ceased in 1629, the four New Testament plaster overmantels, which are the only depictions of the adult Christ in this medium in the South West, must have been installed by George Luttrell. All four overmantels are based on Maarten de Vos's engravings published in *Vita, Passio, et Resurrectio Jesu Christi*. As Anthony Wells-Cole has argued, this suggests that it was Luttrell who personally chose the printed source material for the plasterer, rather than the plasterer presenting his own source material to his client.⁵⁰ This would not account for a further overmantel depicting a strange mermaid creature. It is hard to imagine that George Luttrell provided a source, or was able to articulate to the craftsman, what Julian Orbach has described as 'an over-taxed attempt to mythologize a naked female figure'.⁵¹ The Penoyres saw this mermaid as an allegory of retribution for the sins of the flesh.⁵² In the context of Luttrell's relationship with the much younger

⁴⁷ Hamling, *Decorating the 'Godly' Household*, p. 97.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Sir H.C. Maxwell Lyte, *A History of Dunster and the Families of Mohun and Luttrell*, 1 (London: St Catherine Press, 1909), p. 177.

⁴⁹ Giles Worsley, 'The Court House, Somerset: the Home of Colonel and Mrs Luttrell', *Country Life*, 181, 22 Oct. (1987), p. 94.

⁵⁰ Adriaen Collaert, *Vita, Passio, et Resurrectio Jesu Christi* (Antwerp: Adriaen Collaert, 1598). Wells-Cole, *Art and Decoration*, p. 107.

⁵¹ Julian Orbach and Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Somerset, South and West* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014), p. 292.

⁵² John and Jane Penoyre, *Decorative Plasterwork in the Houses of Somerset, 1500-1700* (Taunton: Somerset County Council, 1994), p. 38.

Sylvestra and that he was in his late sixties when the plasterwork was installed, perhaps this should be considered, alongside the four scenes from the *Vita, Passio, et Resurrectio*, as part of George Luttrell's legacy of providing what Tara Hamling has described as an environment conducive to 'sedate and pious widowhood'.⁵³

6.2.3 Social control

In a similar way to the display of heraldry reinforcing social hierarchy and religious imagery eliciting certain behaviours, there were alternative ways that patriarchal control over the viewer might be achieved by the client commissioning plasterwork. The most extraordinary example is in the hall at Sir Edward Phelips's mansion, Montacute House (SS18) (Fig. 7.03) which was completed in 1601. The Montacute panel depicts a South-West regional variation of the European charivari, folk custom. At first sight, it appears unconventional that Phelips, a lawyer who held high office as Speaker of the House of Commons and Master of the Rolls, chose this as a subject matter for his hall, which is in contrast to the classical and religious plasterwork elsewhere in the house.⁵⁴

The placement of the panel at the high end of the hall and its depiction of a misdemeanour and its punishment, served as a reminder to the lower social orders to keep their place. The panel may, however, have conveyed other messages. The stereotypical subject matter of the henpecked husband beaten by his wife would have been familiar to all visitors to the hall and the imagery in the panel would have spoken across the social classes. There is an element of lightheartedness and humour in the depiction, as if the whole event would have been an enjoyable festive diversion from the mundanity of everyday activities. In this context, the skimmington panel may not have been intended as an entirely serious invocation to social order, but was placed here as a backdrop to entertainment. The presence of the skimmington panel can be interpreted as

⁵³ As Hamling notes, if this was Luttrell's intention it was in vain, see *Decorating the 'Godly' Household*, p. 97.

⁵⁴ For biographical details see Rebecca S. More, 'Phelips, Sir Edward', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <<https://0-doi-org.lib.exeter.ac.uk/10.1093/ref:odnb/22089>>, accessed 20 November 2018.

Phelips giving his permission to guests in the hall to behave in a free manner, albeit within the constants imposed by custom and hospitality and with himself in the leading role as the arbiter of patriarchal authority within the community.

6.2.4 Commemoration

The desire to commemorate an event or significant forbear could be satisfied through the installation of plasterwork. There are numerous instances where the decoration contains a personal element that can be tied directly to individuals. The most commonly seen personal identifiers are initials, which are found on fifty-eight plasterwork schemes within the study area. Where initials occur on portable objects, such as ceramics, silver, pewter plate and oak furniture it can be demonstrated that these refer to a husband and wife and are generally taken to commemorate marriage unions.⁵⁵ Plasterwork appears to have followed this convention. Initials are often seen in combination with heraldry, that signified the union of two armigerous families through marriage. Typically there are two sets of initials present, usually on overmantels but also on other decorative elements, such as the pendants in the hall at Poundisford Park (TA24) (Fig. 6.13) or directly on ceilings, for example at St Nicholas Priory, Exeter (EX16) and Bogan House in Totnes (SH45) (Fig. 3.57). It should, however, be noted that while in plasterwork initials typically represent a husband and wife, where dates are present evidence suggests that these do not date the marriage and in all cases identified within the South-West study area the date refers to when the plasterwork was installed in the house.

Initials and heraldry could also commemorate past people. Of the four sets of initials installed in 1605 on the hall overmantel at the Walronds, Cullompton (MD6) (Fig. 6.14), only the 'I P', belonging to John Peter, represented a person living at the time.⁵⁶ Through installing this overmantel, John Peter was commemorating his late wife, Emmeline Paris who died in 1602, whose arms are combined with Peter on the overmantel and her father Humphrey and grandfather Henry. This form of retrospective commemoration occurs in other houses. The overmantel in the hall at Court House, East Quantoxhead (WS7),

⁵⁵ Green, 'Consumption and Material Culture', p. 251.

⁵⁶ The family tree is reproduced in Keystone Historic Building Consultants, 'Conservation Plan for the Management of the Walronds, Cullompton, Devon' (Unpublished, 2010), p. 17.

may be an example of this. This has the date 1629 and George Luttrell's initials.⁵⁷ George Luttrell died on 1 April 1629 and the absence of his wife Sylvestra's initials from the overmantel suggests that it was installed, or finished, later that year as a memorial to her husband.⁵⁸

A further example of commemoration can be found at Whiddon Park House, Chagford (WD4). The first-floor overmantel (Fig. 6.15), which is the only plasterwork surviving at the house, has the letters 'W W' each side of arms and the name 'UPCOTT' below. The letters most likely refer to William Whiddon, who was resident in the early seventeenth century and was related to the Upcott family through his mother, Sir John Whiddon's second wife Elizabeth Shilton.⁵⁹ The house has no direct connection to the Upcott family and it is unclear why their name is so prominent, but it might acknowledge the source of inherited wealth.

Commemoration of an ancestor may have also been the motivation behind the heraldic shield on the stairs at Holcombe Court (MD11) (Fig. 6.16). This has the arms of John Bluett impaling Mountjoy Blount. This commemorates the marriage of John Bluett to Dorothy Mountjoy Blount in 1544, but the plaster shield would be exceptionally early if contemporary with this date. The marriage between John and Dorothy was important as it provided much of the capital for the expansion of the house in the period between 1540-1560 and the arms probably date to the end of this period, or alternatively they may commemorate Dorothy's death in 1570.⁶⁰ In erecting the Bluett/Mountjoy arms to a later family member Roger Bluett, or his son John Bluett, was recognising his forbears and reinforcing his own credentials as the rightful custodian of the property.

⁵⁷ See photograph in Elaine Jamieson and Barry V. Jones, 'Court House, East Quantoxhead, Somerset: a Jacobean Manor House and its Surrounding Landscape', Archaeological Investigation Report Series A1/01/2004 (Exeter: English Heritage, 2004), p. 37.

⁵⁸ Sylvestra remarried in early 1630 and it is also possible that she did not want her initials to accompany George's on the overmantel.

⁵⁹ Thomas Moore, *The History of Devonshire from the Earliest Period to the Present* (London: R. Jennings, 1833), pp. 411-12.

⁶⁰ Dorothy Blount was the daughter of Sir Blair Blount of Derbyshire, one of the wealthiest men in the country, Charles Scott-Fox, *Holcombe Court: A Bluett Family Tudor Mansion* (Exeter: Exeter Short Run Press, 2012), p. 126.

A further example of the acknowledgement of forebears may also be seen in the installation of the wall panel in the hall at Buckland Abbey. The composition of the panel is unusual (Fig. 7.08). From the left (Fig. 7.09), the panel depicts a figure, in a contemplative pose resting against a tree, upon which is hung a shield with a skull contained in a hollow in the trunk below. The figure gazes towards a discarded pile of armour and weaponry with a similarly relaxed unsaddled warhorse looking back towards him. The centre of the composition has another tree, with vines bearing grapes, upon which is a shield and banner probably originally destined to take a painted motto. The right side of the panel is a mirror image of the left, although there are differences in the armour pile and the position of the saddles.

The 'resting knights' panel at Buckland Abbey is generally taken to be coeval with the overmantel on the adjacent wall depicting the Four Cardinal Virtues dated 1576 and forming part of the rebuilding work carried out by Sir Richard Grenville.⁶¹ Were the wall panel to date to 1576 then its installation coincided with Grenville being knighted and serving as sheriff of Cornwall. By the standards of his eventful life this was a period of relative calm when he was not engaged in naval activities overseas.⁶² The panel is, however, more likely to have been installed sometime after 1576. There are two reasons for this reinterpretation. Firstly, there are no stylistic similarities between this panel and the more stiffly executed dated overmantel. Secondly, at this date it would be exceptionally advanced for a figurative depiction in plasterwork in the South-West. In addition, there is the curious nature of the composition, with its mirrored scene, suggesting two similar lives and the presence of the death's-heads.

While the composition needs to fill a long rectangular space above the panelling, there seems no reason why it depicts two knights, unless these are two individuals. While it is possible that it was installed by Grenville to

⁶¹ See Lawrence Weaver, 'Country Homes Gardens Old and New: Buckland Abbey, Devonshire, a Seat of Sir Francis F. Elliott-Drake', *Country Life*, 37, 11 Mar. (1916), p. 338 and Anon, *Buckland Abbey, Devon* (London: National Trust, 2003), p. 18.

⁶² His time at Buckland Abbey coincides with his frustrated efforts to reignite his seafaring activities. By 1585 Grenville had sold Buckland Abbey and was again at sea. David Loades, 'Grenville, Sir Richard', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <<https://doi-org.lib.exeter.ac.uk/10.1093/ref/odnb/11493>>, accessed 23 November 2018.

commemorate his father and grandfather, both of whom had been in active military service, it is more likely to have been installed by a member of the Drake family who acquired the house in 1581. The best candidate is Sir Francis Drake's nephew, also Francis, who inherited Buckland Abbey from his father Thomas Drake in 1606. Thomas Drake had seen active service with Sir Francis and memorialising the two brothers in such a way would be entirely appropriate. The early seventeenth-century date would also be more in-keeping with the style and the popularity of the melancholic *memento mori* subject matter of the plasterwork panel.

6.2.5 Competition

Fashion, emulation and prestige were major motivations behind a client's desire to install plasterwork but there might also have been an element of competition between social peers. This can be difficult to untangle but a close study of two neighbouring houses in Somerset provides a valuable insight. Poundisford Lodge (TA23) and Poundisford Park (TA24) were both constructed in the mid-sixteenth century some 500 metres apart within a former medieval deer park. The park, which from at least the early thirteenth century belonged to the bishopric of Winchester, encloses 178 hectares and is located between Taunton, 5 kilometres to the north, and the Blackdown Hills that lie to the south. In 1534, Roger Hill, a Taunton merchant, leased the northern part of the park that contained a medieval lodge from the Bishop of Winchester. At the same time, the southern part, which was devoid of buildings, was leased to another local merchant, John Soper.⁶³

On Roger Hill's death in 1546, the Lodge passed to his wife and subsequently to their second son Robert and his heirs and not, as might be expected, to their eldest son William.⁶⁴ From a later account, it seems that Roger had at one time intended to leave the estate to William:

⁶³ This information is from an account of 1653 by Roger Hill's grandson, Roger, held at Somerset Heritage Centre 'Cartulary of Roger Hill of Poundisford Park, Pitminster, compiled 1653-57, with later additions made c.1670', MS DD\XVNL/1, pp. 1-3.

⁶⁴ Roger Hill's will is published in Frederick Brown, *Abstracts of Somerset Wills etc. copied from the manuscript collections of the late Rev. Frederick Brown, M.A., F.S.A.*, 1 (London: privately printed for Frederick Arthur Crisp, 1887), p. 34.

But in the absence of the said William, his eldest sonne who employed himselfe in the life of his farther (hating an idle life) as a murchant being beyond the seas the said Roger Hill his father, in his old age, by the importunitie of Margarey his wife, made his will, and thereby gave away a great estate in lands and a very great personall estate to her younger children and others [...].⁶⁵

On his return in 1546, William Hill found his brother Robert ensconced at the Lodge. While William was denied his inheritance of the northern part of the park, he amassed sufficient independent wealth through trade to purchase the lease for the southern part from John Soper for £1,040.⁶⁶

It can only be surmised, whether William felt an emotional attachment to Poundisford, or was aggrieved at missing out on his inheritance and wanted to prove a point by building a neighbouring house to overshadow his brother's. The new house William Hill built, known as Poundisford Park, was architecturally advanced for its time.⁶⁷ It stands at three-storeys high and is a symmetrical 'H-shape' in plan, with a two-storey central hall lit by a double-height window. A west wing contains the parlour and chambers over, while the service range is in the east wing. There is no documented date for the building of the house but it seems likely that it was constructed soon after William acquired the southern part of the park.⁶⁸

At the same time as William was constructing Poundisford Park, his younger brother Robert Hill was building at Poundisford Lodge.⁶⁹ The extent to which Robert incorporated the medieval lodge into the new house is not clear, but in all likelihood they occupy the same site as no traces of the earlier building are known in the park.⁷⁰ The new house is of one mid-sixteenth-century build date and is two and a half storeys high and like Poundisford Park 'H-shape' in plan,

⁶⁵ SHC 'Cartulary of Roger Hill', p. 4.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, p. 3.

⁶⁷ Nicholas Cooper, *The Houses of the Gentry, 1480-1680* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 75, and pp. 265-65.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, p. 75.

⁶⁹ Poundisford Lodge is generally regarded as being of the same date as Poundisford Park, see Orbach and Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Somerset, South and West*, p. 531.

⁷⁰ The house has yet to be subjected to a detailed architectural survey and a full inspection of the house was not possible as part of this study.

with the hall range extending from north to south and lateral wings to the north-west and south-west. By the late sixteenth century the house was in the possession of William Symes, a merchant from Chard, who had married Robert Hill's eldest daughter Elizabeth, probably around 1570.⁷¹

While the houses were contemporary and broadly of a similar size, the plasterwork they contain is from different phases of the development of this decorative medium in the South-West. At Poundisford Park decorated ceilings and friezes survive over all three storeys.⁷² None of this work is dated by inscription but the hall pendants bear the initials of William Hill and his second wife Lucy (née Ryves), who married c. 1570 (Fig. 6.13). If the possibility of the initials being applied retrospectively to pre-existing ceiling pendants is discounted, then this provides a *terminus post quem* for the ceiling. Further dating evidence is seen in the family crest, a dove holding a branch, which is found on plaster brackets next to the fireplace in the Queen's Room (Fig. 6.18).⁷³ This crest, along with the family arms, was granted in 1570, and also appears in heraldic glass within the room, singly and impaling the Trowbridge arms for William's first wife, Ann.⁷⁴

Poundisford Park is unlikely to have ever contained plaster overmantels as given the good survival rate of other plasterwork in the house, it is probable that had they been installed some trace would remain. The brackets next to the fireplace in the Queen's Room would, for example, have made it physically difficult to incorporate one in this particular room. Moreover, overmantels were a late sixteenth century development. The earliest dated overmantel in the region is in the hall at Trecice (CO29) dated 1572, so when William and Lucy Hill

⁷¹ Their first son John was born in 1573, see Andrew Thrush and John P. Ferris, eds. *The History of Parliament: the House of Commons 1604-1629*, (2010) <<http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1604-1629/member/symes-john-1573-1661>>, accessed 20 March 2014.

⁷² The second floor was not available for inspection when the house was visited, but the plasterwork was extant in 1985, although in poor condition, see Architecton, 'Poundisford Park, Poundisford, Wellington, Somerset: A Brief Report on the Condition of the House with Recommendations for Repair' (Unpublished, 1985).

⁷³ This recurs on the oval wreath ceiling in the Parlour which dates to c.1660.

⁷⁴ Frederic Thomas Colby, ed., *The Visitation of the County of Somerset in the Year 1623* (London: Harleian Society, 1876), p. 50.

commissioned their plasterwork around 1570, or slightly later, the option of plaster overmantels may not have been offered by the plasterer, or requested by the client.

The plasterwork at Poundisford Lodge is some twenty-years later in date than at the Park. It was installed during William and Elizabeth's tenure and their initials appear on the surviving overmantels in the Oak Room (Fig. 6.19), which has the date '1590' and in the White Room (Fig. 6.20), which is undated but was almost certainly installed at the same time. In addition to the overmantels, Poundisford Lodge has two fine decorated barrel-vaulted ceilings on the first-floor and an elaborate thin-rib flat ceiling in the parlour. It is probable that all the plasterwork was commissioned by William and Elizabeth Symes and is the work of Robert Eaton. The hand-modelled overmantels and tulip and anthemion friezes certainly belong to Eaton's workshop and the open-pattern ceilings have floral sprays, similar to those he used elsewhere. On stylistic grounds, it is likely that all the plasterwork in the house is of a single phase, although there is the possibility that, as was documented at Combe Florey (TA5), it could have been installed by Eaton, or indeed another plasterer, at different dates.⁷⁵ This scenario occurred at Holcombe Court (MD11), which is another house with Eaton plasterwork.

If it is accepted that in both Poundisford houses the plasterwork was from a single phase, then this presents a conundrum as in each case the construction of the house pre-dates its installation by some distance. For Poundisford Park this discrepancy is around twenty years and for the Lodge perhaps as many as forty years. If it is assumed, as is generally accepted, that the dates for the houses and the dates of the plasterwork are correct, then there is no satisfactory explanation for the disparity between the build date of the houses and the installation of the plasterwork. At Poundisford Lodge, the two first-floor decorated ceilings are barrel-vaulted, a form typically associated with being installed on upper floors in sixteenth-century houses to take advantage of the

⁷⁵ Christopher Hussey was of the view that the ceilings were earlier, 'Country Homes Gardens Old and New: Poundisford Park I, Somerset, the Seat of Mr A. Vivian Neal', *Country Life*, 76, 4 Aug. (1934), p. 119.

ornamental qualities of decorative plaster.⁷⁶ It is therefore likely that the ceilings and overmantels were installed as part of a secondary building phase, instigated by William and Lucy Symes.

William and Elizabeth Symes's installation of the plasterwork at Poundisford Lodge in 1590 is likely to coincide with their acquisition of the house, which had originally been bequeathed to Elizabeth's half-brother James Hill on Robert Hill's death in 1581.⁷⁷ The plasterwork can be seen as part of the Symes' desire to leave their mark on the house as they approached the end of their life together.⁷⁸ Their initials are prominently displayed on both overmantels, although in neither case are they the focus of the design. The central subject of the Oak Room overmantel is a fruit motif commonly employed by Robert Eaton (Fig. 5.11), which is an unconventional choice as a centrepiece for an overmantel of this size in a house of this status. William Symes was granted arms in 1591 and so just missed the opportunity to incorporate these in the overmantel, as is more usual in high status houses.⁷⁹ The White Room overmantel (Fig. 4.05) depicting the subject of Spring includes the goddess Ceres who is typically associated with fertility, fecundity and plenty so is not unexpected in a bed chamber, although given that the couple married some twenty years before the date on the overmantel and were probably in late middle age, the subject-matter seems a less obvious choice. The connection of Ceres to cereal crops might have been significant. The sources of William Symes' wealth are not known but if connected with the corn trade then it is easy to see the appeal that this particular subject might have held. The ceilings at Poundisford Lodge have no elements that William and Elizabeth Symes need have necessarily personally selected, and they may have left this aspect to Robert Eaton. A possible exception is the White Room lunettes that contain the

⁷⁶ This type of ceiling does have a medieval precursor with exposed timbers but this would have been seen as an out-dated design for a new ceiling in 1550.

⁷⁷ Brown, *Abstracts of Somerset Wills*, p. 67.

⁷⁸ William Symes died in 1597, National Archive, MS Will of William Syms, Merchant of Pensford, Somerset, 1597, PROB 11/90/142.

⁷⁹ The granting of arms is recorded in Harry Rylands, ed., *Grantees of Arms named in docquets and patents to the end of the seventeenth century, in the manuscripts preserved in the British Museum ... and elsewhere, alphabetically arranged by the late Joseph Foster ... and contained in the additional MS. No. 37147, in the British Museum* (London: Harleian Society, 1915), p.248.

royal symbols of a Tudor rose and a fleur-de-lis (3.67). In both instances these motifs are in their less common crowned form, explicitly conveying a message of loyalty to the Tudor monarchy.

The plasterwork at Poundisford Park is closer to the build date of the house but even allowing a four year hiatus for William Hill commencing construction following his acquisition, and ten years for the completion of the house, this still leaves a disparity between build date and plasterwork of some ten years.⁸⁰ It is, however, hard to envisage an earlier incarnation of the hall without the plasterwork as today this appears very much as a single architectural piece. The motivation for the installation of plasterwork may have been a celebration of the marriage of William to his second wife Lucy Ryves in 1570. On stylistic grounds alone, the ceilings with their tightly patterned geometric designs, notably in the King's Room (Fig. 5.21), and in the hall with fleur-de-lis rather than floral sprays at the angle ends (Fig. 5.22), could easily belong to the decade before the 1570s.

The fleur-de-lis at Poundisford Park are similar to Moorhayes, near Cullompton (MD7) (Fig. 5.08). Moorhayes also had Tudor royal arms comparable to those in the hall at Poundisford Park, and Holcombe Court and these schemes are by the same plasterer. In addition, the 'confronting dolphin' frieze found in the hall at Poundisford Park is also seen at Moorhayes and at Haddon Hall, Derbyshire. There are other similarities in the plasterwork at these houses. The frieze in the King's Room at Poundisford Park (Fig. 5.05) is also present in part of the Haddon Hall frieze, while the gallery frieze is found in the hall at Holcombe Court (MD11).⁸¹ Poundisford Park is the only one of these houses where the plasterwork can be dated and the precise chronological order of the creation of the schemes is not clear, although the South-West examples seem to pre-date those in the Midlands.⁸² The long gallery at Holcombe Court is perhaps slightly earlier than 1570, so it is possible that William Hill commissioned the plaster

⁸⁰ Malcolm Airs gives 10 years as the typical time taken to build a small country house, although it was possible to build faster, see *The Tudor and Jacobean Country House*, p. 103.

⁸¹ The long gallery frieze at Holcombe Court appears at Moorhayes and Haddon Hall which further links these schemes.

⁸² See Section 5.4.1.

based on that he had seen there, or perhaps he was familiar with Moorhayes which is also in the locality.⁸³ What is certain is that Robert Eaton cannot be responsible for the plasterwork at Poundisford Park as he was not operating until around 1590, although coincidentally he did work at Holcombe Court as well as at Poundisford Lodge.

William Hill and William Symes both began as local merchants, who advanced socially and achieved gentry status.⁸⁴ The Hill family was slightly ahead in this regard, being granted arms in 1570. Symes, who had married William Hill's niece Elizabeth, achieved this status in 1591, shortly after his acquisition of Poundisford Lodge. For William Symes, who was described by a contemporary as 'a pedlar, and a base fellow', gaining a country seat through marriage could be seen a social advancement, although he did hold other land in Somerset and Dorset.⁸⁵

The granting of arms for both the Hill and Symes families broadly corresponds to the installation of major plasterwork schemes in the houses. While this may be coincidental, it does demonstrate that at this point each felt established and secure enough to invest additional money into their country houses. Decorative plasterwork, which was beginning to be established in élite houses of the early part of the study period, would have been a fashionable and desirable addition to the interior. This was particularly the case for William Hill. In the early 1570s, when Hill commissioned his plasterwork, Poundisford Park was among the few élite houses in the South-West that had this decorative treatment. This comparative rarity must have enhanced, or at least consolidated, Hill's social standing. Poundisford Park eclipsed its slightly smaller neighbour at Poundisford Lodge both architecturally and in its early adoption of decorative plasterwork, which appears to have been absent from the Lodge until the 1590s.

⁸³ Holcombe Court is 20 kilometres west of Poundisford, while Moorhayes is 25 kilometres south-west.

⁸⁴ Their eldest sons, Roger Hill and John Symes rose even further and both served as Members of Parliament.

⁸⁵ Quoted in Andrew Thrush and John P. Ferris, eds. *The History of Parliament: the House of Commons 1604-1629* (2010) <<http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1604-1629/member/symes-john-1573-1661>>, accessed 20 March 2014. For Symes holdings at death see Brown, *Abstracts of Somerset Wills*, p. 52.

In contrast to the house, which in terms of its symmetry was architecturally current in the mid-sixteenth century, the plasterwork in Poundisford Park is quite conservative for the date. The Renaissance flourish, seen for example in the early ceilings in the upper chambers at Mapperton House (WT12), is absent, as are the overmantels which form a key element of the other schemes from the early 1570s at Trerice (CO29) and Collacombe Manor (WD8). The use of the heraldic fleur-de-lis as terminal ends in the ceiling design looks backward and parallels another Somerset scheme at Orchard Wyndham, Somerset (WS29) (Fig. 6.23), which is likely to date to around 1550 and an early scheme at 10 High Street, Totnes (SH37) (Fig. 7.15).⁸⁶

By the time William and Elizabeth Symes commissioned the schemes at the Lodge, decorative plasterwork was increasingly a feature of higher and middle status houses. This work would have lacked the exclusivity and novelty of the earlier Poundisford Park plasterwork. Later alterations to the house have possibly denied us the great hall centrepiece found at the Park but what survives in the three rooms at the Lodge is nevertheless of high quality in terms of its execution and design, albeit not as grand as the Robert Eaton schemes executed in the first-floor chambers at Holcombe Court. These differences are subtle but reflect the relative social positions between the longer established Bluetts at Holcombe Court and the more recent arrivals the Hill family.⁸⁷ The acquisition of the country estate at Poundisford had provided the Hill family with the opportunity to progress socially. This advancement was not curtailed by the abrupt change to the usual line of inheritance that caused a split in the family. Instead, during the course of the second half of the sixteenth century, each branch created a country house decorated in accordance with their acquired status.

⁸⁶ Penoyre dates the Orchard Wyndham ceiling to c. 1547, see *Decorative Plasterwork in the Houses of Somerset*, p. 14.

⁸⁷ The Bluett family had been at Holcombe Court since the early fifteenth century, see Scott-Fox, *Holcombe Court*, p. 119. The Hill family claimed to be a junior branch of the higher ranking Hill family from Spraxton in Somerset. See H. Avary Tipping, 'Country Homes Gardens Old and New: Poundisford Park, Somerset, the Residence of Miss Sale.', *Country Life*, 39, 17 Jun. (1916), p. 758.

6.2.6 Emulation

The occupants of Poundisford, William Hill and William Symes, may be described as typical 'men on the make' of the late sixteenth century. Ornamental plasterwork, however, also appealed equally to the established gentry families who had risen to prominence earlier. This attraction to high status clients endured into the seventeenth century with those who had attained status through professions, most notably law. Evidence from the South-West shows that plasterwork was an integral and prominent part of the interior of newly built houses, for example both Montacute House (SS18) and the Forde House (TE26), where it features in all the principal rooms.

By the early seventeenth century, the client-base for decorative plasterwork had also broadened. This saw schemes installed in less grand houses. Rashleigh Barton (MD24) is typical of the rural housing occupied by the upper levels of the yeomanry and lower gentry of the period. The owners of Rashleigh, the Clotworthys, were actually a long-established gentry family but their seat at Rashleigh Barton is nevertheless a cob farmhouse built in the late medieval vernacular tradition. Externally, it is indistinguishable from the houses of prosperous yeoman and it has none of the architectural pretensions of, for example Montacute or Forde House. Instead of rebuilding the exterior in a grand manner, the client John Clotworthy invested in lavish internal plasterwork decoration. John, who had married Margeret Lawrence in 1625, was clearly proud of his plasterwork and their initials appear twice in the house: on an upper chamber lunette dated 1633 and on an overmantel dated 1631.⁸⁸ John Clotworthy also valued his gentry status and his arms appear on their own, and in combination with the Lawrence and Rashleigh arms, in four locations (Fig. 6.24). In addition, the arms of the Bouchier family, who do not appear to have been directly connected to the Rashleigh or the Clotworthy families, occur on the lunette in the Great Chamber.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Lt. Col. J. L. Vivian, *The Visitations of the County of Devon: Comprising the Herald's Visitations of 1531, 1564, and 1620 / with additions by Lieutenant-Colonel J. L. Vivian* (Exeter: For the author, by H. S. Eland, 1895), pp. 203-04.

⁸⁹ In addition the Clotworthy arms survive on a timber overmantel and on the porch, while a 'person from Birmingham' is said to have made off with another carved coat of arms from an overmantel, see W. G. Hoskins and H. P. R. Finberg, *Devonshire Studies* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1952), p. 144.

Conclusion

This chapter demonstrates that while the individual client's motivations behind the installation of the schemes are lost, these can be surmised through correlating the owner and the plasterwork they chose to install. While decorative plasterwork was comparatively inexpensive it was not a necessity and its benefits, while desirable, were not essential. The additional cost and space constraints in the middling status houses meant that the selection of the plasterwork needed to be carefully considered. For the most part, cost-effective decorative schemes using simple moulds prevailed in these houses.

As seen in Chapter 3, to acquire heraldic pieces the client had to commission more expensive one-off hand-modelling but from the popularity of this type of decoration it is clear that for those who attained gentry status this was considered money well-spent. More rare are the figurative schemes, which were also hand-modelled and therefore expensive to produce. These could be tailored to a client's individual requirements but some scenes, notably the Sacrifice of Isaac, were sufficiently popular to suggest a degree of emulation within a peer group. This was the case with the urban élite of Dartmouth and Barnstaple and their predilection for biblical imagery, which may be contrasted with Totnes and Exeter where it is noticeably largely absent. Classically inspired and allegorical scenes were almost certainly chosen by the client for personal reasons and are consequently more rare. Unlike religious imagery, the meaning of the classical story depicted need not necessarily have been the primary purpose behind its selection by the client, although the act of commissioning such scenes implies a degree of learning. Their rarity in middling status rural houses may be more to do with their greater expense rather than a lack of education among the lower gentry and yeoman class.⁹⁰

⁹⁰ The sons of those of middling ranks would have received a degree of classical learning at grammar schools, see Section 2.3.1.

7. POSITION AND PERCEPTION

As much as the imagery selected, the location within the house the client chose to place their plaster decoration is an important consideration in understanding how it was used to reinforce identity and status. This placement reflects the contemporary purpose of the room and gives a valuable insight into the operation of the household at the time. Section 7.1 of this chapter assesses how the iconography of the plasterwork relates to the function and plan-form of the house, and to the status and aspirations of the owner. Sections 7.2 and 7.3 offer an analysis of the contemporary perception of decorative plasterwork and how its qualities were maximised through the conscious manipulation of the internal architecture of the house.

7.1 Iconography and placement

The choice of scheme for a particular location within the house was a conscious decision, or series of decisions, on the part of the client or the plasterer. This was particularly the case where schemes incorporated text or figurative scenes, which held inherent meanings and were consequently carefully selected by the client. Writing in 1675, William Salmon's advice 'Of the Displaying of Pictures and Paintings' lists the rooms in a house and the type of subject matter that was considered suitable as decoration in these locations.¹ While it may not have been codified in such an explicit manner, it is a reasonable assumption that such considerations were relevant to the client, plasterer and viewer during the study period. Iconography and placement would therefore be expected to follow certain conventions which were quickly established.

Because plasterwork may be the only surviving, or part surviving, element of a greater decorative scheme, it is instructive to assess, whether, as might be expected, a correlation can be identified between the function of the room and the plasterwork within it. This is best seen in the overmantels, which were usually the prime focus for display in the room. The proportions of the vertical space between the top of the fireplace aperture and the ceiling mirrored those

¹ Published in William Salmon, *Polygraphice: or The Arts of Drawing, Engraving, Etching, Limning, Painting, Washing, Varnishing, Gilding, Colouring, Dying, Beautifying and Perfuming*, 2nd edn. (London: Printed by Andr. Clark, for John Crumpe, 1675), pp. 159-60.

of the the prints which often provided the source for the cartouche design and/or the subject. An analysis of overmantels that survive in situ that can confidently be assigned to a particular room is presented in Table B7. From this it can be seen that for all rooms, family arms represent the single most popular subject, comprising the centrepiece on 46% of overmantels. These are followed by 29% of the overmantels which are primarily decorative but could include the initials of the client but without heraldry and may be described as commemorative. Figurative schemes depicting biblical, classical or allegorical scenes made up 20% of the dataset. The remaining 5% of overmantels display royal arms.

7.1.1 The Hall

Throughout the sixteenth century, the requirement for a ceremonial or public room was satisfied by the hall.² Traditionally, the hall had been the principal room in the house, and as such its relative size and decoration reflected the status and aspirations of the owner. The use and importance of this room did, however, shift through time and by the early seventeenth century the way in which this room was used could vary, even between houses of similar status.

Put simply, in higher status houses it changed its function from a room for everyday living, dining, and social interaction to a symbolic space reflecting the owner's status. As Vitruvius argued, educated men of rank required, 'imposing public rooms appropriate to their dignity' and the symbolic functions of the open-hall therefore meant that the upper gentry needed to retain these spaces longer.³ In many grander houses, such as Weare Giffard Hall, Devon (TR29), the exposed timbers of the open-hall were not enclosed by a ceiling when the chimney stack was inserted. In this case the reason is almost certainly because the high quality elaborately decorated late medieval hammer-beam roof was still sufficiently valued in the late sixteenth century. There are also many examples of the double-height hall in high status houses that were constructed *de novo* in the mid- to late sixteenth century, such as Poundisford Park (TA24). In most middling status rural houses, however, the symbolic uses of the hall were not as

² Nicholas Cooper, *The Houses of the Gentry, 1480-1680* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 275.

³ Vitruvius, *The Ten Books of Architecture*, tr. by M. H. Morgan, ed. by A. A. Howard (Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 1914), Book 6, Chap. V, p. 182.

important. Evidence from Kent suggests that the first houses to have floors installed above the hall were of yeoman status.⁴ Double-height halls in middling status houses are rare in the South-West. One example is Hill, Christow (TE6), although here the hall to the farmhouse was perhaps not enclosed as a conscious decision by the owner to retain its function but may have been left open due to insufficient financial means or motivation to carry this out.

By virtue of its size and position, the hall is the easiest room to identify in the plan-form of both urban and rural housing in the period. Despite the changes in its function, the hall typically remained the largest room in both floor-plan and volume throughout the study period. As a repository for decorative plasterwork the hall therefore offered great potential. Where a ceiling was introduced, either at double- or single-storey height, the hall offered the best opportunity for expansive ceiling decoration. In terms of rib design there is no difference between double- and single-height ceilings, but where the room was double-height, long pendants to enhance the decorative effect could be accommodated. The double-height hall could also allow for a taller overmantel, over the fireplace, which was typically situated halfway along the wall on the long axis of the room.

The fireplace was not, however, the main focus of the hall. This role continued, at least until the end of the sixteenth century, to be fulfilled by the high-end occupied by the head of the household and their social equals. This was situated furthest from the entrance off the through-passage and was sometimes raised above floor level by a dais. Other members of the household and guests sat at lower benches along the long axis of the room. Although those of unequal social status would mix within the hall, a clear social hierarchy was thus maintained through seating position. This is reinforced by the decoration, which augments the authority of the head of the household. The application of plasterwork immediately behind the head of the household followed on from the earlier tradition of wall paintings on plain plaster in this position, such as the large Tudor arms at Bradley Manor, Newton Abbot (TE25) (Fig. 7.01) and the life-size portrait of Henry VIII discovered at the Old House, Milverton,

⁴ Sarah Pearson, *The Medieval Houses of Kent: An Historical Analysis* (London: HMSO, 1994) pp. 134-5.

Somerset.⁵ Plaster royal arms installed at the high-end follow this practice but are noticeably smaller in scale, occupying less of the wall and, as seen at Holcombe Court (MD11), Poundisford Park (TA24) and Weare Giffard (TR29), could be accompanied by other decorative motifs.⁶

The decoration in the hall at Weare Giffard, which is an heraldic tour-de-force, is unusual in having three plasterwork coats of arms at the high end.⁷ Here the royal arms are accompanied by the arms of the Bouchiers, the Earls of Bath and the Russells, the Dukes of Bedford. While not directly connected with the house these were the two most powerful families in the region. All three sets of arms are the same size, although those of Elizabeth I (Fig. 7.02), which have a plaster slipped and crowned Tudor Rose set above, occupy the central position, and so have primacy. The arms of the Fortescues, who owned the house, are not present at the high end, but instead appear on the large plaster overmantel over the stone fireplace on the west wall. In addition, there are a number of smaller heraldic plaster plaques on the walls and tiny painted shields on the plaster frieze, as well as a carved timber arms of Henry VIII on the wall opposite the fireplace (Fig. 3.03). Through the decoration of this one room the Fortescue's local influence was closely allied with and augmented by regional and state power.

The changes in the function of the hall are reflected in the decorative focus of the room and the shift away from the high end. While the high end of the hall might still be used by the head of the household on occasion, the fireplace became the principal area for display. As seen at Weare Giffard (TR29) and Collacombe Manor (WD8), the overmantels above these fireplaces could host

⁵ For Bradley Manor see James Lees Milne, 'Bradley Manor, Devon: the Home of Mrs Alexander Woolner', *Country Life*, 96, 1 Sep. (1944), 377-79; for Milverton see Julian Orbach and Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Somerset, South and West* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014), p. 446.

⁶ The royal arms at Holcombe Court look to be sixteenth century but may have been relocated here. Edward Ashworth who visited the hall before its reconstruction in 1858 records the arms of the Lord Protector of Somerset, Sir Edward Seymour, at the east end of the hall. Other arms recorded on the south wall are also no longer present. See Edward Ashworth, 'The Manor House of Holcombe Court and the Church of Holcombe Rogus, Devon', *Transactions of the Exeter Diocesan Architectural and Archaeological Society*, 6 (1861), p. 239.

⁷ The heraldry is discussed in A. W. B. Messenger, 'A Survey of the Heraldry at the Hall, Weare Giffard, Devon', *Transactions of the Devonshire Association for the Advancement of Science, Literature and Art*, 75 (1943), pp. 171-210.

family arms with royal arms at the high-end. In terms of subject matter, of the twenty-nine halls identified as having plaster overmantels, twenty-two have family arms as the main subject (Table B7). Only three examples of royal arms have been identified in this position, reflecting that these were traditionally placed at the high-end. At Boringdon Hall, Plympton (PL1) the overmantel, which contains the arms of Charles I flanked by figures of Peace and Plenty, is large and of a scale that could not have been easily accommodated at the high-end of the hall.

There seems to have been a reluctance, probably the result of a long-standing tradition, to place anything apart from royal arms on the walls at the high-end of the hall, although there are exceptions. The use of the space above the dais in the hall at Sir Edward Phelips's mansion, Montacute House (SS18) (Fig. 7.04) to depict a folk custom is atypical. The plaster representation of a 'skimmington ride' is doubly unusual as it is the only known interpretation of a folk custom depicted in plasterwork in the region. The broad subject of 'crime and punishment' is not, however, incompatible with the communal but hierarchical nature of the hall. Generally, imagery in larger scale figurative set-pieces, typically overmantels, is divided between biblical depictions, which would have been generally known and classical scenes which might require some education to understand. At Montacute, Sir Edward Phelips provides a representation which is neither classical nor biblical that everyone, regardless of social standing, would recognise. As such, the only room within the house where this panel could be placed to this effect is the hall, where family, servants and visitors would mix. Its vernacular style, which is devoid of Renaissance embellishment, and its theme are in marked contrast to the classically inspired plasterwork situated elsewhere in the house, where visitors of a lower social rank would not have ventured. Despite its plainness in decoration and its prosaic subject matter seemingly devoid of either biblical or classical metaphor, the skimmington panel is expertly executed and in this respect it is at least the equal of other plasterwork in the house.

Given that the high-end of the hall traditionally displayed symbols of authority, primarily royal arms, used to reinforce hierarchy and ultimately control the viewer, the Montacute panel, with its depiction of a misdemeanour and its

punishment, serves as a reminder to the lower social orders to keep their place. The panel may, however, have conveyed other messages. The stereotypical subject matter of the henpecked husband beaten by his wife would have been familiar to all visitors to the hall and the imagery in the panel would have spoken across the social classes. The position of the wall panel which occupies the width of the high end of the hall demonstrates that this was clearly not chosen as merely a rustic image of rural life. It is nevertheless interesting that William Salmon advises:

Let the *Hall* be adorned with Shepherds, Peasants, Milk-maids, Neat-herds, Flocks of Sheep and the like, in their respective places and proper attendants; as also Fowls, Fish, and the like.⁸

Such bucolic scenes, might not typically include a 'skimmington' but the version presented at Montacute is certainly a more tame and orderly rendition of the custom than is recorded in documentary sources.⁹

In contrast to Montacute, the high-end of the single-storey height hall at Buckland Abbey has a wall panel of a more private and personal nature (Fig. 7.07). The 'resting knights' panel (Fig. 7.08) was most likely installed after 1606 when the nephew of the former owner Sir Francis Drake's inherited the house. It commemorates Sir Francis and his brother Thomas Drake who had both seen active military service.

The placement of the subject matter suggests that the hall at Buckland Abbey was used in a different way to Montacute (SS18). The message the Buckland panel conveys is not one of social control. The resting knight figures portrayed are obviously men of past action and high status but there is little suggestion of a need to reinforce a hierarchy at Buckland Abbey. Neither is there an inclusive or communal aspect referencing the mixed social gathering that traditionally took place in a hall. Whether the imagery could be understood by all visitors to the hall was not a consideration at Buckland Abbey. The calm introspection of the knight figures and the horses which gaze back at them is in marked contrast to the open body language and busy movement of the skimmington participants, who are almost inviting the onlooker to join in with them.

⁸ Salmon, *Polygraphice*, p. 159.

⁹ Underdown, 'The Taming of the Scold', p. 132.

The hall at Buckland Abbey was not a space where those of different social classes would have been present simultaneously on regular occasions. The origins of the house as an abbey give it an unconventional plan-form, which may partially explain this. Despite the hall being lavishly appointed with plasterwork, the abbey was not extensively remodelled and it retains much of its earlier building fabric and floor plan. This may have meant that the hall, which is a more intimate space and relatively small for the size of the house, could not function in a traditional way.

7.1.2 Parlour

The parlour, which has its origins in the medieval period as a semi-private retiring room off the hall, represents a space where only those of equal social status would meet. Like the hall, the function of the parlour changed and varied between houses of different status and type through the study period. The semi-private function was, however, a constant and only those on intimate terms with the owner would pass through the hall and be admitted to the parlour.

In smaller houses, the parlour would have served as a multi-function space for family dining and entertaining guests. In the grander houses, formal dining would have taken place in the great chamber and the house may well have contained more than one parlour.¹⁰ As a room where a high degree of comfort was a prerequisite, the parlour was invariably heated by a fireplace proportionate to the size of the space. This study has identified thirty-one houses with decorative plasterwork overmantels within rooms that functioned as a parlour (Table B7). In terms of subject, almost half the central elements in this data subset were family arms. In what was essentially a semi-private family space, this is perhaps to be expected, although the arms also reinforce the status of the owner and would be useful as a reminder to visitors.

Five of the total number of overmantels in parlours are what may be described as decorative. These schemes would typically use casts, or simple hand-modelled designs, that would have been quick and cost effective to install. In

¹⁰ For instances of multiple parlours see Cooper, *The Houses of the Gentry*, pp. 290-93.

the parlour at Dean Head, Swimbridge (ND52), this economy is seen in the same moulds used on the overmantel (Fig. 7.12) repeated on the ceilings and walls. The decoration might include initials, in lieu of arms, which while not conveying status would signify family ownership of the space and in many cases may commemorate a marriage. For those who did not have family arms these schemes offered an alternative to the more expensive hand-modelled royal arms or figurative scenes that constitute the remainder of the examples.

7.1.3 Upper chambers

In terms of number of rooms decorated, across the whole dataset there is an almost equal split between schemes on the ground-floor and the upper chambers (Table B3). However, this bald interpretation of the numbers does not give the full picture as it takes no account of the quality or density of decoration within the room. To assess this, overmantels may be usefully taken as an indicator of the status of the room. Overmantels were typically the centrepiece of the room, even where other plasterwork was present, and only heated rooms would have the requisite fireplace, which is a further indicator of status. Even in higher status houses it was not unusual for chambers to be unheated. Excluding kitchens, which never received decorated plaster overmantels, a house might typically have two ground-floor fireplaces; one heating the hall; and the other the parlour, with corresponding fireplaces in the upper chambers sharing these flues.¹¹ While there were more upper chambers than ground-floor rooms, the number of fireplaces might be the same on both floors, or more usually there would have been fewer first-floor fireplaces as the location of stacks was dictated by the ground floor plan and did not always allow for the convenient location of additional flues upstairs.¹² That two-thirds of overmantels are located on upper floors is therefore significant as it suggests that in the early seventeenth century, when the majority of overmantels were installed, the best rooms in the house must have been located on the upper floor.

¹¹ In Dorset, the Hearth Tax returns for 1662-1664 show that 90% of houses had four hearths or fewer, see Bob Machin, 'The Houses of the Dorset Hearth Tax', in *Houses and the Hearth Tax: the Later Stuart House and Society*, ed. by P. S. Barnwell and Malcolm Airs (York: Council for British Archaeology, 2006), p. 74.

¹² The reasons for this are structural: chimney stacks needed to start at ground-floor level.

Identifying the contemporary uses of upper rooms is more difficult than on the ground-floor, where the function of the room can be more easily ascertained from the plan-form and location of fireplaces. There are also similarities in the decorative treatment of the rooms, between semi-private chambers, where visitors of equal or higher status might be entertained, and more private bed chambers occupied mainly by the family.¹³ Within a particular house, however, it is often possible to rank these rooms in terms of importance by their decoration and size.

In towns, the front upper chamber of the gable-end-on house-plan commonly combined the function of the hall and parlour, and was usually the most highly decorated room in the house.¹⁴ At 64 Fore Street, Totnes (SH32), this first-floor chamber ceiling contains the initials 'C P', Prince of Wales feathers and the town arms.¹⁵ This combination of municipal, royal and personal would suggest this room had a semi-public societal function. At 10 High Street, Totnes (SH37), which on stylistic grounds dates to c. 1560, there is a clear hierarchy displayed in the plaster ceilings: the ground-floor ceiling has a simple thin-rib pattern but no enrichments (Fig. 7.13); the first-floor rear ceiling also has a thin-rib pattern but includes limited Tudor rose and fleur-de-lis enrichments (Fig. 7.14); while the first-floor front ceiling is the most elaborately decorated and has a more complex ceiling design with a greater number of Tudor roses and fleur-de-lis (Fig. 7.15). The principal room could, however, also be set deeper into the floor-plan. At 18 Fore Street, Taunton (TA33), the room containing the elaborate double-rib ceiling and Sacrifice of Isaac overmantel is located on the first-floor but towards the rear of the building (Fig. 7.16).

¹³ Bed chambers could not be described as 'private' in the modern sense. For example, presentations made in the bedchamber for childbirth and the period following childbirth when female guests were received, see Sasha Roberts, 'Lying among the Classics: Ritual and Motif in Elite Elizabethan and Jacobean Beds' in *Albion's Classicism*, ed. by Lucy Gent (London and New York: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 328.

¹⁴ John Thorp, 'The Construction, Appearance and Development of a Merchant's Town House c. 1500-1740: 38 North Street, Exeter', *Proceedings of the Devon Archaeological Society*, 70 (2012), p. 225. While this is broadly correct, chamber usage could be more nuanced, see Michael Laithwaite, 'Totnes Houses 1500-1800' in *The Transformation of English Provincial Towns*, ed. by Peter Clark (London: Hutchinson, 1984), pp. 75-86.

¹⁵ The initials could refer to the house owner or the future Charles II.

By the early seventeenth century, in élite rural houses the principal first-floor room, typically called the great chamber, often surpassed both the parlour and hall for decorative embellishment. In these houses the great chamber became the main area for dining and entertaining, albeit only for those of equal social status. This is apparent at Holcombe Court (MD11). Here the lavish decoration of the great chamber (Fig. 7.36), dated 1591 on the overmantel, has eclipsed the hall. Similarly, at Forde House (TE26), dated c.1610, the hall (Fig. 7.17) is again less adorned in comparison with the more ornate treatment seen in the parlour (Fig. 7.18) but both are surpassed by the broad-rib ceiling and deep frieze and the main upper chamber (Fig. 7.19), which has a more intricate enriched broad-rib ceiling, lunettes and angel corbels. At Forde House, this principal upper chamber, known as the Long Room, has surpassed the hall as the largest space in the house.¹⁶

This change in hierarchy is also evident at Rashleigh Barton (MD24), a house of lower gentry status with plasterwork dating to the 1630s. Here, the decoration in the hall (Fig. 7.20), which has a frieze and decorated ceiling beam, is also exceeded by the parlour (Fig. 7.21) but it is clearly evident that the client spent most money on the lavish decoration in the main upper chamber (Fig. 7.22). At Bellamarsh Barton, Kingsteignton (TE22), a superior yeoman house, the upper chamber could well have been the only room with significant decoration as there is an absence of plasterwork elsewhere in the house.¹⁷ The highly decorated broad-rib barrel-vaulted ceiling here is above the porch and is not the largest room on the first-floor. The double-height porch would have been regarded as a desirable addition to a farmhouse of the period, and it may well have been that the owner installed the plasterwork as part of the works when the porch was added in the early seventeenth century. It should also be noted that at the Old Manor House, Combe Florey (TA6), the porch chamber is also the best decorated room in the house.

¹⁶ A floor plan is published in Mary O'Hagan, *A History of Forde House, Newton Abbot, Devon* (Newton Abbot: Teignbridge District Council, 1990), p. 70.

¹⁷ The list entry describes the seventeenth century hall as 'surprisingly plain', The National Heritage List for England (NHLE), <<https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1165120>>, accessed 22 February 2019.

In terms of decorative themes, there is a marked difference between the upper chambers and the hall and parlour. On upper floors, family arms which dominate overmantels in the hall and parlour, are closely matched in number by those classed as decorative (Table B7). This may be due to non-armigerous owners in lower status houses wishing to decorate their bed chambers, particularly from the second decade of the seventeenth century when more simple cast decoration and initials are found in yeoman status housing. It should also be noted that first-floor fireplaces were also generally smaller than those on the ground-floor which gave less space for the figurative schemes and may have encouraged a more straightforward decorative treatment. That said, 21% of upper floor overmantels have figurative scenes (Table B7). Tellingly, eighteen of the twenty-four biblical scenes on overmantels occur in upper floor chambers. A further two, depicting Naboth's vineyard (Fig. 7.23) and the Sacrifice of Isaac, now in the porch at Marshwood Farm (WS3), are relocated overmantels of a size that suggests they were originally from smaller upper-floor fireplaces, presumably located elsewhere in the house.

The position of biblical plaster within the house was carefully considered. Much is consistent with Tara Hamling's observation that the most significant additional function of the upper chamber was as a venue for collective prayer.¹⁸ This is allied to the personal form of religion prevalent after the Reformation and a greater focus on the family, in what Christopher Hill identified as the spiritualization of the Protestant household.¹⁹ In good Protestant households, gatherings could take place twice daily and after dinner there would be communal bible readings and psalm singing. The most convincing example of a room fulfilling this function is the first-floor front chamber at 10 Duke Street, Dartmouth (SH8) (Fig. 4.23) which contains the Pentecost overmantel. The central focus is the Virgin surrounded by the Apostles but these are dwarfed by the flanking figures of Moses with his tablets and David with his harp. These flanking figures are in the position traditionally occupied by classical caryatids, and represent divine law and psalm singing, offer clues to the activities which may have taken place in this chamber. The similarities of this imagery, and a

¹⁸ Tara Hamling, *Decorating the 'Godly' Household: Religious Art in Post-Reformation Britain* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 148.

¹⁹ Christopher Hill, *Society and Puritanism in Pre-revolutionary England* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), p. 473.

further example now relocated elsewhere in the town (SH15), to a medieval triptych altar used for devotional purposes has also been noted.²⁰ The impact of this explicitly biblical imagery is heightened by the absence of superfluous ornament, noticeably the lack of a Renaissance cartouche. This strongly suggests that the overmantel was installed to aid religious observance and its location in the house further indicates that this would have taken place in a semi-public environment.

Some of the best examples of biblical representations in principal upper chambers are not on overmantels but are found on ceilings. There are important schemes in Barnstaple, at 62 Boutport Street (ND3) (Fig. 5.26) and 7 Cross Street (ND5) (now removed), depicting, Adam and Eve, the Sacrifice of Isaac, the Annunciation and the Adoration. At Prideaux Place, Cornwall (CO18), the great chamber ceiling has a series of scenes depicting the story of Suzannah and the Elders (Fig. 6.11), while the most remarkable example is the Tree of Jesse ceiling at 12 Duke Street, Dartmouth (SH9) (Fig. 3.28). All of these ceilings date to the early seventeenth century and were installed in rooms with a semi-private purpose. The imagery would create a certain ambience but the size of the rooms, with the exception of the more intimate Dartmouth example, would not be conducive to private meditation.

Instances of biblical scenes in rooms that can be positively identified as bed chambers are less common. An exception is the Court House, East Quantoxhead (WS7), which contains four of the twenty-three biblical depictions on overmantels, the highest number from any single house in the South-West. Of the Court House overmantels, three are in upper chambers. There were specific reasons why so many biblical depictions are present and it seems improbable that all of these rooms were used regularly for religious observance, although this number of overmantels would have given some flexibility in this respect.

At Holcombe Court (MD11), there is a depiction of Moses and the Brazen Serpent on an upper chamber overmantel (Fig. 4.03). In terms of status this room is second to the great chamber, which is larger and contains a heraldic

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 222-23.

overmantel, although it is still well appointed and is more highly decorated than the parlour and hall on the ground-floor. This was possibly not a fully private space but would have been occupied by the head of the household and his wife as a bed chamber.²¹ The choice of iconography is interesting as this story is a prefiguration for the crucifixion and would have been recognised as such.²² It may be significant that the overmantel dates to the 1590s and is one of the earliest plaster biblical depictions in the study area. When the Moses overmantel was installed at Holcombe Court, more overt New Testament iconography might have been considered less acceptable than in the mid-seventeenth century when the Court House (WS7) overmantels were created.

Religious observance formed part of daily life in the period and would have taken place in rooms without any biblical plasterwork. Such observance might take the form of performing everyday tasks, such as dressing and undressing and it has been suggested that these activities are associated with images of Adam and Eve.²³ Occurrences of this image on beds and within bed chambers are common and linked to the 'pleasurable vices of Sloth and Lust'.²⁴ The association of the bed chamber with Adam and Eve iconography is, however, not clearly seen in the plasterwork of the South-West. Three of the depictions - in the gallery at Lanhydrock (CO9), at 62 Boutport Street (ND3) and 7 Cross Street (ND5), Barnstaple - are on ceilings of large semi-public rooms, rather than more intimate bed chambers. The remaining two at Beara Farmhouse, Ilfracombe (ND40) (Fig. 7.25) and Parsonage Farm, Over Stowey (SEII), are in middling status houses. The presence of Adam and Eve in their plaster form would have been a far cheaper alternative to an expensively carved timber bed containing this imagery.

²¹ These chambers were occasionally accompanied by more private closets some of which during the seventeenth century had evolved into a study, see Cooper, *Houses of the Gentry*, p. 296.

²² See Section 4.3.2.

²³ Hamling and Richardson, *A Day at Home in Early Modern England*, pp. 48-49.

²⁴ Hamling, *Decorating the 'Godly' Household*, p. 174.

The presence of decoration on carved beds, or indeed in other decorative media, might account for the comparative lack of heraldry in upper chambers.²⁵ For overmantels, family coats of arms comprise the principal subject on 40% of the upper floor examples, but this compares with 60% of those on the ground-floor (see Table B7). The bed chamber had an important role in the continuance of the family through the rites of marriage, birth and death. While these rituals would have been played out with varying degrees of participation from servants, family members and their peer group, the upper bed chambers were essentially private spaces. Family arms served to remind the occupants of their obligations to the past, present and future generations, but the greater proportion of these on the ground-floor indicates that their primary purpose was to impress the viewer from outside of the immediate family and household.²⁶

7.1.4 Gallery

The gallery, or long gallery, is found only in the highest status houses. The status of these upper-floor rooms in the hierarchy of the house is reflected in their comparatively lavish decorative treatment. Five galleries contain extensive plasterwork in the region, Holcombe Court, (MD11), Lanhydrock (CO9), Trecice (CO29), Penheale Manor (CO7), while Montacute House (SS18) has a strapwork plaster frieze and might originally had a decorated ceiling. The galleries at Holcombe Court and Lanhydrock are separated in time by some eighty years but both have features that can be linked to their respective owners and the rooms' function.

The gallery at Holcombe Court is the grandest sixteenth-century example in Devon. The long narrow proportions of the gallery allow a different decorative ceiling treatment from other rooms in the house. Here the thin-ribs form parallel lines that follow the long-axis of the room, splitting intermittently to form pointed ovals enclosing motifs, such as Tudor roses and 'snowflakes' (Fig. 3.22). The scheme continues into the window recesses, but not into the nine small chambers divided-off from the gallery by the plank doors, which may have been

²⁵ Many beds bore coats of arms, primarily because they were expensive items and status could be expressed through ownership, see Roberts, 'Lying among the Classics', p. 328.

²⁶ This is also seen with coats of arms on other decorative arts and on the exteriors of buildings, see, for example, Mark Girouard, *Elizabethan Architecture: Its Rise and Fall* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), pp. 225-29.

servant's chambers. The plasterwork ceiling contains individual letters surrounded by wreaths spelling out 'ROGER' at the west end and 'BLVET' at the east. The letters 'R' and 'B' also appear on the east end wall (Fig. 7.26). Roger Bluett died in 1566, but in this case the plasterwork was not retrospectively commemorative and pre-dates his demise, as the roof above, which is almost certainly coeval with the ceiling, has been dated to between 1542 and 1553.²⁷ If the plaster was installed in the late 1550s, this would make it the earliest plasterwork in the house, and perhaps the county. The gallery at Holcombe Court, which is likely to have been used for gentle exercise, would have had a semi-private function where the owner Roger Bluett and his guests might walk and converse.²⁸ Both the gallery and its plaster decoration would have held considerable prestige when installed in the house and signified the importance of this space and the activities it promoted, while Roger Bluett's initials left it in no doubt as to who had commissioned the work.

By the 1630s when John Robartes built the gallery at Lanhydrock (CO9), these indoor recreational spaces were nearing the end of their popularity. Within this space Robartes had installed twenty-four ceiling panels depicting scenes from the Book of Genesis arranged sequentially (Fig. 7.27).²⁹ Unlike Holcombe Court, which is unheated, the Lanhydrock gallery has two fireplaces. The overmantels over these fireplaces, along with the east gallery lunette, have episodes from the life of David. The presence of fireplaces is significant as it suggests that Robartes and his guests would have lingered in the room, rather than merely used it as an area for exercise. The biblical scenes chosen for the ceiling would also encourage contemplation. The use of this room would therefore appear to have been different to the gallery at Holcombe Court. Like Bluett, however, Robartes also made sure that he was personally identified with the space and the east lunette (Fig. 7.28) has one of the more intricately

²⁷ The roof structure has been dated by dendrochronology, Daniel Miles and Martin Bridge, 'Tree-ring dates from the Oxford Dendrochronological Laboratory List 246', *Vernacular Architecture*, 43 (2012), p. 98.

²⁸ For the uses of a gallery see Rosalys Coope, 'The Long Gallery: Its Origins, Development Use and Decoration', *Architectural History*, 29 (1986), pp. 43-72 and Lena Cowen Orlin, *Locating Privacy in Tudor London* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 226-261.

²⁹ John Thorp, 'The Ornamental Plasterwork of the Long Gallery at Lanhydrock, Cornwall: Puritan Images for Changing Times', *Apollo* (April 1998), 30-34, p. 33.

produced heraldic plasterwork designs in the region.³⁰ These arms are the only non-biblical principal element of plasterwork in this richly decorated room.

7.1.5 Staircases and lobby areas

The development of upper floors required at least one staircase. These typically ran from the ground-floor up alongside the fireplace as winder stairs, or as newel stairs within their own stair turret or rear wing.³¹ As such they were squeezed into the traditional narrow plan-form. From the early seventeenth century, staircases became architectural statements in their own right positioned close to the main entrance. In the gentry houses, this development corresponded with the change in the location of the principal societal room to the first-floor which required favoured guests to be invited upstairs.

In the double-pile houses of the mid-seventeenth century, stairwells were clearly areas to display wealth but attention was focussed on the carved timber work of the balusters and newel posts, rather than the ceilings, which were more difficult and potentially hazardous to view. These were spaces to pass through while ascending or descending, and therefore elaborate ceiling decoration was generally superfluous. Where present, the plasterwork is usually sparse, such as at Holcombe Court (MD11) which has a simple rib design with no enrichments (Fig. 7.29). At Forde House (TE26), where the stairs are not a highly visible part of the design, there is only a frieze. A further reason why these spaces were seldom decorated was that stairwells tended to be lit from a single window which made a plaster ceiling difficult to see. This issue was circumnavigated at Chelvey Court, Somerset (NS2), where a large and visually intrusive elaborately decorated pendant drops from the mid-seventeenth-century stairwell ceiling.³²

The treatment of lobby areas, porches and through-passages was similar to stairwells. Although the entrance to the house gave the owner an opportunity to

³⁰ These may actually be fifteen years earlier than the rest of the long gallery plasterwork.

³¹ For a synopsis of the development of staircases see Linda Hall, *Period House Fixtures and Fittings, 1300-1900* (Newbury: Countryside Books, 2005), pp. 100-32.

³² Illustrated in, 'Country Homes Gardens Old and New: Chelvey Court, Somerset, the Residence of Mr Cottle', *Country Life*, 23, 21 May (1910), p. 742.

display their interior decoration to visitors, in general these areas were seldom decorated. This demonstrates that these were spaces to pass quickly through, as visitors were typically received in the hall or proceed to the service areas of the house. A further factor is that the areas restricted size did not encourage grand decorative statements. Where present, decorative plasterwork in porches and passages is limited to simple rib patterns.³³ A rare example of decorated porches, with through-passage, can be seen at Poundisford Park. Here the simple thin-rib design is embellished by five bosses in the porch at the south entrance (garden front), although this is just a foretaste of the elaborate work in the hall beyond.

7.2 Architectural manipulation

On one level, the introduction of plasterwork decoration can be seen as a response to the accelerated architectural development that occurs in gentry-level houses from the mid-sixteenth century onwards. These developments are set out in detail in Chapter 2 but can be summarised here as: enclosure of the hall; installation of chimney stacks; and introduction of glazed windows. There is, however, evidence to suggest that the act of viewing plasterwork was also a factor that influenced house design.

The large surface area and additional height afforded by barrel-vaulted ceilings were particularly conducive to displaying plasterwork. The popularity of these ceilings in first-floor rooms coincides with the introduction of decorative plasterwork from the beginning of the decorative tradition in their thin-rib variant reaching their most ornate form in the early seventeenth century with the enriched broad-rib designs. It is highly likely that barrel-vaulted ceilings were specifically installed within houses to show-off plasterwork to its best advantage, which allowed pendants to be installed without affecting headroom and creating additional vertical spaces for display at each end with lunettes. These ceilings reached their highest level of sophistication in the early seventeenth century, notably at Herringston House, Dorset (WT20), Lanhydrock (CO9), 62 Boutport Street, Barnstaple (ND3) and Rashleigh Barton (MD24) and

³³ The only highly decorated porch is at Marshwood Farm (WS3) where the figurative panels have almost certainly been relocated from elsewhere.

represent expensive decorative statements by the client that were intended to impress the viewer.

Flat ceilings could also be used to good effect, which could be accentuated through architectural adaptation. The hall at Poundisford Park (TA24) has a flat ceiling but contains two particular features that are conducive to the display of decorative plaster (Fig. 7.30). Firstly, there is a large double-storey height window that takes up half the long-axis of the hall, with the remaining part occupied by a bay window, with its own plaster ceilings and a matching bay accessed by an arch opposite. This allows what for the time must have been an exceptional amount of natural light into the hall illuminating the plaster ceiling, which in turn reflects the light back into the room. To take advantage of this there are two smaller opposing internal windows that borrow light from the hall for first-floor chambers. At the lower end of the hall at first-floor level is an internal oriel window (Fig. 7.31). The first-floor gallery over the screens passage, which also has a decorative plaster ceiling, is lit by windows at each end, so the oriel offers only marginal additional light into this space. Increasing interior light levels cannot, therefore, have been the primary purpose of this window. Instead, the oriel was installed to allow a view from the gallery to the hall. While the dais end can just be seen, the window height is set to allow a better view of the elaborate plasterwork, in particular the pendants and the royal arms beyond which are directly aligned with the centre of the window (Fig. 7.32). In turn, the decorated gallery ceiling is also visible from the hall floor, allowing this scheme to become part of the hall decoration. The oriel is almost certainly contemporary with the plasterwork, demonstrating that it was carefully planned to allow views of the plasterwork.

A similar arrangement can be seen at Collacombe Manor (WD8) where the double-height hall is also lit by a large window but here the three small windows to the first-floor gallery opposite have arched plaster surrounds and form a cohesive part of the design (Fig. 7.33). This is taken further at Trerice (CO29) where the entire short axis of the hall at the east end over the through-passage has arches, ten open and two blind (Fig. 7.34). This is described in the house

guidebook as a musicians' gallery.³⁴ The height of the openings would not, however, aid the transmission of sound into the hall, unless the instruments were held up to the opening. It would also be difficult for the musicians to view what was going on below, which would have been crucial to the accompaniment of dancing. Again the purpose of the openings seems to be more to give a view of the array of plaster ceiling pendants (Fig. 3.32) than the hall below. It is notable that the plasterwork schemes at all three houses date to the first half of the 1570s when the respective hall was either created or remodelled.

The concept of viewing the ceiling up-close from a gallery is taken a step further at Holcombe Court (MD11) and Nettlecombe Court (WS15). At both houses the gallery over the through-passage is open giving an unrestricted view over the whole hall with the ceiling extending into the gallery space. At Holcombe Court the overmantel in the great chamber, which is the most impressive single piece of plasterwork in the house (Fig. 6.08), is aligned with the door opening to the gallery which creates a visual frame for the plasterwork when viewed from the high-end of the hall (Fig. 7.35). In this way, the great chamber overmantel becomes a focal point from the hall, which does not have its own overmantel, and so becomes a principal feature of both rooms. In addition, the position of the overmantel gives visitors to the hall a tantalising borrowed glimpse of the lavish decoration in a room beyond to which they may not have been afforded access.

The great chamber at Holcombe Court also has evidence for alterations to existing rooms coinciding with the installation of plasterwork. The chamber is lit by one south-facing and two west-facing windows (Fig. 7.36). These window openings were enlarged from smaller mid-sixteenth century examples around 1591, at the same time as the elaborate plasterwork was installed.³⁵ Despite the dark seventeenth-century-style moulded timber panelling, which if installed in the period would have had a far paler appearance, the combination of windows and plasterwork in the great chamber give it a light and airy appearance, which must have been the intention behind the late sixteenth-century remodelling.

³⁴ Joanna Wood, *Trerice* (London: National Trust, 2007).

³⁵ Charles Scott-Fox, *Holcombe Court: A Bluett Family Tudor Mansion* (Exeter: Exeter Short Run Press, 2012), p. 48.

In towns, the large windows that could extend across the facades also gave the opportunity to display internal plasterwork to passers-by. This is particularly noticeable on the High Street and Fore Street in Totnes. Here the plasterwork ceilings in the upper chambers are clearly visible externally at street level, especially at twilight when the interior would be internally lit and the window shutters open. While the restricted frontage afforded by narrow plots gave limited opportunities for outward external display, the plasterwork visible from street level gave those passing by a glimpse of the wealth of the occupant. The placing of decorative ceilings here therefore must have been deliberate. At 16 High Street, Totnes (SH40) (Fig. 7.37), the façade is elaborately decorated, which is unusual for a house in the region. The internal plasterwork can be seen as an extension of this, albeit using different design elements.

7.3 The perception of plasterwork

The perception of plasterwork was dependent on cultural factors that varied between time and place. How plasterwork was perceived by contemporary viewers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, what Michael Baxandall terms the 'period eye', is clearly different to how it is seen in a modern context.³⁶ The aspect of the visual experience that is governed by cultural influences, termed *visuality*, is an important consideration in studying how plasterwork is viewed today.³⁷

7.3.1 Colour

The desire for light within the interior space was clearly one of the primary motivations for installing plasterwork. What William Harrison describes as the 'delectable whiteness of the stuff', demonstrates that plasterwork was highly valued at the time for its ability to reflect light.³⁸ As discussed in Section 3.1.4 decorative plasterwork in the period was rarely coloured. A mix of pure lime

³⁶ Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 29-108.

³⁷ For a discussion on the concept of *visuality* see Alexa Sand, 'Visuality', *Studies in Iconography*, 33 (2012), pp. 89-95. For a useful synopsis of recent research into how textiles were experienced in domestic interiors see Catherine Richardson and Tara Hamling, 'Ways of Seeing Early Modern Decorative Textiles' *Textile History*, 47, 1 (2016), pp. 4-26.

³⁸ William Harrison, *The Description of England*, ed. by Georges Edelen (Ithaca, New York: Published for the Folger Shakespeare Library by Cornell University Press, 1968), p. 197.

putty and water, which gives a pure white colour, was the easiest, quickest and cheapest way of providing a finish to a scheme without requiring the plasterer to return later to apply the colour. In a period where window glass and interior lighting were expensive and therefore limited in their application, the reflective properties of plaster helped illuminate the coloured furnishings in the room under both natural and artificial light. That said, it should be noted that in the great chamber at Plas Mawr, Conwy, where the restored overmantel, frieze and ceilings have recently had paint applied to selected elements, there is little discernible loss in light levels, although again overall the plasterwork here does remain predominantly white.³⁹

There may have been other reasons for plasterwork being left white. For religious scenes, Tara Hamling has suggested that the whiteness of plaster encapsulates the contemporary protestant values with its connotations of purity.⁴⁰ Further to this, it is also posited that the uncomfortable effect on the viewer straining their eyes to look at white figures against a white background was calculated to prevent the images from being looked upon for too long and becoming a focus for private devotion.⁴¹ There are, however, counter arguments to this. Firstly, colour is absent from almost all plasterwork not just where religious subjects are depicted. Scenes that can be interpreted as having an overtly religious meaning represent only 12% of depictions on overmantels (see Table B6). While there are no biblical depictions in the study area where colour has been identified, the same can also be said of all of the non-religious figurative work, with the occasional exception of heraldic detail. There is therefore no evidence to suggest that religious scenes were treated any differently to other subjects in terms of applied finish. Secondly, there is evidence to show that images susceptible to becoming the focus for veneration could simply be avoided. For example, the Moses and the Brazen Serpent overmantel from Holcombe Court (MD11) was chosen to represent the Crucifixion. Imagery showing Christ or the Virgin is very rare and where it

³⁹ Illustrated in Rick Turner, *Plas Mawr, Conwy* (Cardiff: Cadw, 2008), p. 28.

⁴⁰ Tara Hamling, 'The Appreciation of Religious Images in Plasterwork in the Protestant Domestic Interior' in *Art Re-formed: Re-assessing the Impact of the Reformation on the Visual Arts*, ed. by Tara Hamling and Richard L Williams (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2007), pp. 147-67.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* p. 157.

occurs it dates to the early seventeenth century, when this imagery may have been better tolerated. Thirdly, there are contemporary examples of Old Testament scenes using colour seen in textiles and wall paintings but it should also be noted that the engravings that formed the source material for the plasterwork were monochrome and the viewer was therefore used to seeing imagery in this way.

While there were no liturgical reasons why colour could not be used for religious scenes in domestic decorative plasterwork, in addition to its light reflecting qualities, there were, however, practical advantages in leaving plasterwork white. Plasterwork with a white finish could enhance, rather than hinder, the viewers' experience. The obscuring of detail when viewing white-on-white compositions is most apparent where plasterwork is subjected to direct harsh modern artificial lighting. When experienced under natural or artificial early-modern lighting levels this becomes less of an issue. By candlelight, the absence of colour gives positive advantages and the three-dimensional relief seen in figurative scenes creates shadows. Some appreciation of this can also be gleaned under constant oblique artificial lighting such as the top-lit display of the overmantel at 10 Duke Street, Dartmouth (SH8) (Fig. 7.38). This effect would be heightened by flickering candlelight which could give the illusion of movement and bring the scene to 'life'. Many figurative scenes on overmantels use high-relief undercut modelling, with figures placed within a defined fore-, middle- and background. This would have enhanced their impact under candlelight, for example on the upper chamber overmantel at Dean Head (ND52) (Fig. 7.39). Under candlelight such compositions in white plaster give a much enhanced viewer experience unmatched by dark timber carving or two-dimensional coloured wall paintings and textiles.

7.3.2 Viewing and being viewed

On ceilings, there is, however, a better argument for religious scenes being made deliberately difficult to view on ceilings. Tara Hamling cites two instances of this: Lanhydrock, Cornwall (CO9) and 12 Duke Street, Dartmouth (SH9).⁴² At Lanhydrock (Fig. 7.40), John Thorp has pointed out that the gallery would have

⁴² Hamling, *Decorating the 'Godly' Household*, pp. 256-60.

been entered from the east end, via the now demolished front wing.⁴³ Starting with Adam and Eve, the viewer would then progress through selected Old Testament stories along the south side before turning and walking back along the north side. While this makes for a slightly awkward and uncomfortable viewing experience, there was no reason why this would have been made deliberately so. In this case, the scenes are historical rather than contemplative so would not have been the subject of veneration. In addition, the gallery also contains additional high relief Old Testament depictions from the life of David on the overmantels and a lunette where no attempt has been made to hinder the viewer. It should also be noted that the high number of biblical scenes John Robartes wished to incorporate in this room meant that the ceiling had to be utilised as an area for display.

The second example, the Tree of Jesse ceiling at 12 Duke Street (SH9), is more of a challenge to the viewer given the restricted dimensions of the room and low ceiling height (Fig. 7.41). The use of this first-floor front chamber was clearly different from the gallery at Lanhydrock (CO9) as visitors would not have been expected to process around the room or change their viewpoint. Only a small section of the Duke Street ceiling can be seen from one viewpoint and in terms of understanding it makes limited interpretative sense unless the viewer is aware of the whole composition (Fig. 7.42). To the modern viewer, the low height of the ceiling and sheer number of figures has an oppressive effect.

The ceilings at Prideaux Place (CO18), and at 62 Boutport Street (ND3) and the relocated 7 Cross Street Barnstaple (ND5), are further examples where the religious imagery was perhaps not meant to be subjected to prolonged observation. The inclusion of the religious images was clearly important to the client. They could, after all have made an equally impressive social statement with a decorative ceiling, as did many of their contemporaries, and it is significant that within the South-West there are no instances of non-religious figurative scenes on ceilings. As with the ceiling scheme at Lanhydrock, the presentation of a moral exemplar is also likely to have been the motivation for choosing the Suzannah and the Elders scheme at Prideaux Place.

⁴³ Thorp, 'The Ornamental Plasterwork of the Long Gallery at Lanhydrock, Cornwall', p. 33.

For Mark Hawkings, who constructed the Butterwalk in Dartmouth around 1635, and the Barnstaple merchants, the inclusion of religious images on the ceilings may have had a further purpose. Mercantile, as well as social, transactions almost certainly took place within these rooms. The presence of religious images not only marked the owner as a pious man, but also meant that his dealings were taking place under the eyes of God - or at the least the steady gaze of the religious figures shown on the ceilings (Fig. 7.43). The presence of patriarchal figures in the ceilings can be seen as a proxy for the earthly patriarch.⁴⁴ In this way, some element of behavioural control could be constantly imposed on those present in the room, even in the absence of the head of the household. This may also be seen with the winged angel-heads who watch over the occupants of the room and are relatively common on the early seventeenth-century ceilings including those in the Butterwalk, Dartmouth (Fig. 5.47).

The concepts of being under surveillance and surrogate power expressed through plasterwork extend beyond religious imagery. The skimmington ride wall panel at Montacute House (SS18) (Fig. 7.04) falls into this category and the death of Actaeon overmantel in the upper chamber of the Luttrell Arms, Dunster (WS6) (Fig. 7.44) is a more sinister manifestation of this. The Luttrell Arms overmantel is dominated by the demi-figure of George Luttrell who stares out into the room (Fig. 7.45). The pose is similar to portrait busts found in funerary monuments popular among the professional classes from around 1600.⁴⁵ The purpose of the Luttrell figure is not, however, commemorative. There is little doubt that Luttrell, with his proxy royal authority represented by the lions each side of him, presides over the room and commands the space.⁴⁶ As discussed in Section 4.3.2, a contemporary interpretation of the classical myth by George Sandys could see Actaeon's voyeurism, or spying, as an act of espionage against a social superior.⁴⁷ If Sandy's reading of the myth is followed in the

⁴⁴ This is set out in Hamling, 'To See or Not to See?', pp. 170-97.

⁴⁵ Nigel Llewellyn, *The Art of Death: Visual Culture in the English Death Ritual, c. 1500-1800* (London: Reaktion Books, 1991), p. 120-121.

⁴⁶ The Luttrell Arms seems to have always been an inn and the room is currently used as a bedroom. George Luttrell's arms with those of his second wife whom he married in 1622, occur in the adjoining bedroom. See Orbach and Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Somerset, South and West*, p. 276.

⁴⁷ See George Sandys, *Ovid's Metamorphosis Englished, Mythologizd and Represented in Figures: An essay to the Translation of Virgil's Aeneis* (Oxford: John Lichfield, 1632), p. 328.

iconography, then the presence of George Luttrell could be seen as a warning to those present in the room, who might be expected to be Luttrell's social inferiors, against disloyalty. The function of this upper chamber at the time is not known but it is possible that it may have hosted a manorial court. George Luttrell was by any standards extremely litigious and depicting himself in such a controlling manner would not have been out of character.⁴⁸ George Luttrell's influence through his plaster personification continues to this day. Cleaning staff at the Luttrell Arms have reported that the watching figure of George Luttrell still unnerves guests and it is not unknown to find toilet paper stuffed into his eye holes.⁴⁹

Conclusion

From the evidence presented in this chapter, it can be seen that the positioning of plasterwork within South-West houses of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century did not reach levels of formality described by William Salmon in 1675.⁵⁰ There is, however, evidence for the conscious placing of decorative themes based on intellectual learning, with John Robartes' Lanhydrock (C09) gallery scheme being the best example in the region.⁵¹ A correlation between room function and the plasterwork scheme placed within, can be firmly established in the houses of the region.

The hierarchy of rooms within the house can also be traced in the plasterwork. This is best seen in high status houses with close to complete plasterwork schemes in multiple rooms. The foremost change in room function was the culmination of the process that saw the focus of family shift away from the hall to the parlour and upper chambers. This can be identified in the plaster decoration of the houses. In the early 1570s at Poundisford Park (TE24) and Trerice (CO29) the hall is still the most highly decorated room in the house,

⁴⁸ Sir H.C Maxwell Lyte, *A History of Dunster and the Families of Mohun and Luttrell*, 1 (London: St Catherine Press, 1909), p. 175.

⁴⁹ Personal communication, 11 March 2014. In the current room configuration a four-poster bed is positioned directly opposite the figure.

⁵⁰ Salmon, *Polygraphice*.

⁵¹ In the South-West this perhaps not to the extent seen at New Hardwick Hall, Derbyshire, which Wells-Cole has described as 'part of a deliberate iconographical programme', Anthony Wells-Cole, *Art and Decoration in Elizabethan and Jacobean England: The Influence of Continental Prints, 1558-1625* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), p. 290.

although there is a degree of ornamentation evident in the upper chambers. By the 1590s, as seen at Holcombe Court (MD11), the principal upper chamber had edged-out the hall in terms of decoration. In the first decade of the seventeenth century at Forde House (TE26), the simpler and stylistically conservative decoration in the hall had been eclipsed by the principal upper chamber and the parlour. This is even more apparent in the 1630s at Rashleigh Barton (MD24), which is lower down the social hierarchy. Here the simple heraldic frieze and plain moulded ceiling beams in the hall seem perfunctory in comparison with the highly decorated parlour and upper chambers that lie beyond.

In terms of where the client spent their money, the hierarchy of rooms had clearly shifted from the ceremonial communal hall, to the societal spaces of the parlour and principal upper chamber. Private chambers, while not personal spaces in the modern sense, also received decorative plaster treatment.⁵² On occasion this decoration might also exceed that in the hall. In the highest status houses, however, the hall retained its ceremonial and social function into the seventeenth century and remained a space which was, as Lorna Weatherill has termed, 'front stage'.⁵³ As such, it was still a place to make a public statement through royal, or more commonly family heraldic display. As the hall became less important for social occasions, the former decorative focus on the high end changed to the fireplace. This shift of emphasis can be seen at the Walronds (MD6) where the position of the doors in the hall takes the attention from the high-end to the plaster overmantel which becomes the primary feature of the room. The hall here, like at Rashleigh Barton (MD24) and Forde House (TE26), becomes less a room for everyday living and more a circulation space for the household, or for guests to wait to be received before passing through to other parts of the house.

There was a reduced requirement within higher status houses for a communal space to entertain. This coincided with a broadening of the client base for decorative plasterwork. From 1600 the majority of plasterwork schemes appear

⁵² For the concept of privacy in the period see Lena Cowen Orlin, *Locating Privacy in Tudor London* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁵³ Lorna Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture in Britain 1660-1760* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 9.

in lower status houses (Table B1). In these houses the parlour and upper chambers were always the preferred locations for decoration.

The change in the use of religious iconography from the church interior to a domestic-based backdrop for didactic religious observance, and the moral guidance of the household, is seen across the decorative arts and is supported by evidence from plasterwork across the South-West. Decorative plasterwork could visually assist with these activities without becoming a focus for worship. The presence of religious scenes is related directly to the use of the room. This chapter reinforces the notion that societal and more private rooms were particularly favoured for religious imagery (Table B7). It has also shown that there was an absence of biblical imagery in rooms identified as the hall.

Non-biblical figurative scenes could also be used to elicit certain behaviours. This is seen in its most overtly benign manifestation with the moral messages of the apple picking figures from the Old Vicarage, Barnstaple (ND20), the squirrel with acorn from an upper chamber at Rashleigh Barton (MD24) and in the commemorative resting knights panel from Buckland Abbey (WD1). More subtle messages are contained in the skimmington panel at Montacute (SS18) and death of Actaeon overmantel in the Luttrell Arms. At Montacute, the panel can be interpreted as reinforcing the household as a 'little commonwealth' and a microcosm of the state and it is not insignificant that this panel is located in the hall, where all members of the household as well as those from the wider community would be able to view it. The skimmington panel conveys this message through a lighthearted depiction of a village custom which is in marked contrast to the death of Actaeon panel where the demi-figure of Luttrell offers a more unsettling experience for the occupants falling under his watchful gaze.

This chapter also clearly demonstrates that the placement of plasterwork within a room was used to enhance its decorative impact. This is seen not only in the installation of barrel-vaulted ceilings but also in the alignment of doors and windows to allow views into other spaces, or to borrow extra visual interest from another room. Such careful planning of interior decoration was not a feature of the late medieval houses. Its coincidence with the beginning of the decorative plasterwork tradition in the 1570s suggests that, while plasterwork could be

regarded as a 'cheape piece of Magnificence' by contemporary observers, it was nevertheless highly valued for its decorative attributes that could be augmented and manipulated through deliberate architectural adaptation.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Quoted in Henry Wotton, *The Elements of Architecture: Collected by Henry Wotton Knight from the Best Authors and Examples* (London: John Bill, 1624), p.108.

8: CONCLUSION

As the first concentrated study of decorative plasterwork across the region, this thesis explores multiple themes: the techniques and materials used and how these are adapted in response to various constraints; how the craft workers of the time operated, their sources and the geographical parameters within which they worked; the role of the clients, who they were, what influenced their choices and their motivations; and how the plasterwork related to the contemporary plan-form of the building, how it functioned, was perceived in the period. In addition, this thesis identified the divergence of the classical and vernacular traditions that occurred in the mid-seventeenth century and beyond the study period.

One of the fundamental questions raised by this study is how and why the decorative plasterwork tradition became so widely adopted in the South-West region. The social and economic conditions conducive to house owners investing in decoration, which are explored in Chapter 2, were certainly in place in the region in the study period. These conditions were not, however, unique to the South-West. The raw constituents of plaster and the techniques used, discussed in Chapter 3, were also not exclusive to the region as these were also readily available and used across England. In answering this, it is informative to compare the region with other areas in England which did not develop a strong plasterwork tradition. In terms of prosperity, Norwich for example, exceeded Exeter and was the largest regional capital in the country in the period.¹ Interior decorative plasterwork was not, however, widely adopted and the *Buildings of England* volume for Norfolk states that plasterwork before the seventeenth century in the county is a subject 'hardly requiring mention'.² East Anglia does have its own external plaster tradition, known as pargetting, so

¹ See Paul Slack, 'Great and Good Towns 1540-1700' in *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain: Volume 2 1540-1840*, ed. by Peter Clark (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 352

² Nikolaus Pevsner and Bill Wilson, *The Buildings of England: Norfolk 1: Norwich and North-East* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1997), p. 106.

decorative plasterwork techniques were known and used in the region.³ Both regions had an expanding gentry class looking to update, or build new, houses decorated in the contemporary style. Key to the popularity of internal decorative plasterwork in the South-West was the availability of plasters from the 1560s to carry out commissions. More importantly, once this tradition had taken hold it continued to be fuelled by a demand that could be satisfied by plaster workshops operating on a local and regional level.

The earliest of these plasterers for whom a corpus of work can be identified, operated on the Devon/Somerset border. This workshop carried out commissions at Holcombe Court (MD11), Poundisford Lodge (TA23), Moorhayes (MD7) and Rowlands Farmhouse, Ashill (SS1) in the 1560s and early 1570s. The casts from the moulds they employed vanish abruptly around 1570 but reappear slightly later in the Yorkshire/Derbyshire area. The occurrence of these casts from moulds at Haddon Hall, Derbyshire has been known for some time.⁴ The discovery during research for this thesis of the Higher Moorhayes (MD7) photograph (Fig. 5.08) and in Tiverton Museum the Royal arms and two cast motifs from this scheme that were erroneously catalogued as 'carved stone' has expanded the concordance between the plasterwork of the South-West and East Midlands.⁵ In addition to travelling with an individual plasterer, the mechanisms by which a mould design might be transferred were numerous, including purchase, inheritance and replication. On current evidence, the explanation put forward in this thesis is that the plasterer, or an apprentice, moved from the South-West to the Yorkshire/Derbyshire area where the same moulds are used later and into the seventeenth century.⁶

³ The term pargetting could in the study period also apply to internal plastering, Claire Gapper, 'Chapter 1 Materials and their Uses', *British Renaissance Plasterwork*, accessed 15 March 2019. The external pargetting tradition was particularly strong in Essex and Suffolk, examples are illustrated in George P Bankart, *The Art of the Plasterer: An Account of the Decorative Development of the Craft, Chiefly in England from the XVIth to the XVIIIth Century* [...] 2nd edn. (London: Batsford, 1910), pp. 56-75.

⁴ This was first noted in the 1930s by Christopher Hussey, 'Country Homes Gardens Old and New: Poundisford Park I, Somerset, the Seat of Mr A. Vivian Neal', *Country Life*, 76, 4 Aug. (1934), 116-120. p. 119.

⁵ The Moorhayes photograph is in the Devon Heritage Centre, French archive, 5031Z and the arms in Tiverton Museum Acc. No. TIVMS: 1977.727. I am very grateful to David Bostwick for the information relating to the use of the moulds in Yorkshire and Derbyshire houses, pers. comm., 7 November 2018

⁶ For Yorkshire, see David Bostwick, 'Decorative Plasterwork of the Yorkshire Region, 1570-1670' (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Sheffield, 1993).

The vacuum left by the departure of this workshop was filled around 1590 by the appearance in broadly the same Devon/Somerset area of a firm associated with the plasterer Robert Eaton. This may not be a coincidence and Eaton could have possibly been linked to this earlier group. Eaton would certainly have been familiar with their work as he was commissioned to install further plasterwork at Holcombe Court (MD11) in 1591. The close study of Robert Eaton presented in Section 5.4.2, has added to and corrected the published corpus of work attributed to this plasterer.⁷

More importantly, unlike John Abbott for whom we only have his book and some putative attributions, the corpus of work associated with Robert Eaton allows an insight into the geographical parameters within which a workshop operated in the late sixteenth century. By the very nature of their trade, plasterers, who created their work in situ, were peripatetic. For their commissions they were reliant on the recommendation of their clients or fellow tradesmen engaged on building projects.⁸ It is possible that Robert Eaton could have obtained commissions through the architect William Arnold, who was known to favour Somerset craftsmen, and further documentary research here might reveal a connection.⁹ With a relatively low number of plasterers available, such networks could be quite narrow and, as stated in Section 5.4, at the turn of the seventeenth century there were perhaps four plastering workshops operating in the region. The distribution of schemes by Eaton (Map C4), shows that, with the exception of a Wiltshire commission executed for his Somerset compatriot Sir John Popham, he spent all of his working life within 60 km of his home at Stogursey in Somerset. Eaton was sustained by a number of wealthy clients engaged in ambitious building programmes and would have moved between commissions by personal recommendation. Other firms, who were based in the

⁷ John and Jane Penoyre, *Decorative Plasterwork in the Houses of Somerset, 1500-1700* (Taunton: Somerset County Council, 1994), pp. 41-43. The corpus of work by Eaton listed by the Penoyres has been expanded upon and amended in this thesis. This study also suggests that some of the work attributed to Eaton by the Penoyres and Julian Orbach are actually the product of a further later firm, appearing around 1615, but continuing some of Eaton's design tropes, see also Julian Orbach and Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Somerset, South and West* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014).

⁸ See Malcolm Airs, *The Tudor and Jacobean Country House: A Building History* (Stroud: Bramley Books, 1998), pp. 77-78.

⁹ For Arnold's workforce see Peter Hill, 'William Arnold and his Stone Masons', *Notes and Queries for Somerset and Dorset*, 37, part 380 (September, 2014), 317-24.

urban centres of Barnstaple and Dartmouth for example, might create the majority of their work within an even smaller geographic area.

The plasterwork attributed to Robert Eaton can also illuminate how sources were used by practitioners of the decorative arts in the period. For figurative work, throughout his career Eaton appears to have been sustained by subject prints from a single source, Jacob Floris' *Compartmentorum* suite. The pervasive influence of printed sources on the plasterwork of the region is well established and my thesis adds further South-West examples to this corpus, such as the Apollo and Ceres overmantel installed by Eaton at Poundisford Lodge (TA23). The occurrence of prints from a single source used for multiple commissions also sheds light on the relationship between plasterer and client. In the majority of cases, the plasterer offered the client a choice of design from a selection of prints they had in their possession, rather than the client having a preconceived idea of the exact subject matter they wanted. In interpreting the prints, the plasterer faced the challenge of transmitting a two-dimensional drawing to a three-dimensional object. This thesis demonstrates that plasterers were clearly not merely skilled copyists and would adapt designs for each commission using cartouches from one print and a scene from another. Two of the more interesting compositions, the skimmington ride from Montacute (SS18) (Fig. 7.04) and the resting knight panel from Buckland Abbey (WD1) (Fig. 7.08) have no identifiable corresponding print. Similarly, the apple pickers overmantel from the Old Vicarage, Barnstaple (ND20) (Fig. 3.59) shows a vitality that must have been the product of the plasterer's invention.

Once firmly established in the South-West in the 1570s, demand for decorative plasterwork amongst the gentry grew quickly. This was fuelled by new entrants with an appetite for acquiring the necessary accoutrements of their class and established families taking advantage of the newly fashionable medium for display. This is most manifestly expressed through heraldry. The Gazetteer (Appendix D) has allowed the ubiquitous presence of heraldry in plasterwork in the region to be quantified for the first time. Heraldry represents the single most popular form of iconography, occurring as the principal motif on 46% of overmantels (Table B6), as well as on ceilings, wall plaques, lunettes and friezes. These plasterwork coats of arms combined arcane imagery from the

medieval period, with up-to-date Renaissance decorative cartouches and surrounds. This combination of the stylistically conservative and contemporary evidently proved irresistible to the South-West gentry and remained popular throughout the study period, becoming the stock-in-trade of the plasterer.

While plaster could be seen as a transitory material in comparison with timber and stone, its use to display lineage and status through heraldry clearly demonstrates that it was regarded as part of the permanent fabric of the building. The high numbers of surviving heraldic schemes attests to this and may also be testament to its importance to later owners, especially if they were tied through kinship. Removing family arms would be seen as weakening the contemporary owner's right to occupy a particular house by disrupting the link to their forebears and the prestige through association that comes from belonging to a long established family in a particular locality.

Heraldry was not the only means of including a personal identifier to claim ownership of a space. Initials and dates are also relatively common subjects for decoration in their own right, again particularly on overmantels where they occur on 17% of the dataset (Table B6). Where a pair of initials appear with a date, this has conventionally been taken to be the date of the marriage. Closer study has, however, proven this not to be the case and the date refers to when the plaster scheme was installed, sometimes post-dating the marriage by many years, as at Poundisford Lodge (TA23). The presence of initials does, however, demonstrate that the commemorative function of plasterwork was clearly important to those who installed the work and this has generally been overlooked by previous studies.

A key theme in this study is how plasterwork was perceived by the contemporary viewer. This was clearly important to the client on many levels and influenced the iconography chosen for a particular room. At the simplest level, a decorative ceiling conveys messages relating to the wealth and taste of the owner. Heraldic, biblical, and to a lesser extent, classical scenes could all be placed so as to reinforce certain behaviours from both guests and members of the household. These behaviours were linked to the purpose of the room and predilections of the owner. The extent that decorative plasterwork was used to

control the viewer has also been brought to the fore by my findings. Such control might be in ways that could be interpreted as benign, for example through the use of biblical imagery to promote religious observance and appropriate moral behaviour.

While the effect of religion on the everyday life of the household should not be underestimated, the extent to which this is reflected in the plasterwork across the region is variable and not representative of its importance. Taken as a whole, biblical scenes account for just 12% of subjects found on plaster overmantels. Religious imagery, particularly on ceilings could, however, be particularly powerful, introducing an active presence into the space. The Tree of Jesse ceiling at 12 Duke Street, Dartmouth (SH9) (Fig. 3.28), which occurs in a domestic/mercantile context is directly paralleled by the ceiling within the church of St Martin, Exminster (Fig. 5.56). In both the secular and the religious contexts the occupants of the space are subject to the watchful gaze of literally dozens of pairs of eyes.

A more earthly secular manifestation of this form of social control is the demi-figure and moral scene on an overmantel in an upper chamber at the Luttrell Arms, Dunster (WS6). The occupants of the room would have been constantly aware that they were being observed by the proxy figure of George Luttrell. The analysis of the iconography in the scene below this figure, presented in Section 7.3.2, explicitly shows the consequences of going against the will of the most powerful person in the locality.

In addition to its iconographical potential, this thesis demonstrates that while plasterwork was less expensive than similar work in timber or stone, it was clearly highly valued for its visual qualities and placed within the house to maximise this impact. What has been less appreciated is the extent that the client was prepared to allow physical alterations to the house to facilitate its display. In their late sixteenth and early seventeenth century enclosed form, barrel-vaulted ceilings were the most conducive spaces to the display of plasterwork and must have been installed with this intention in mind. The space required for these meant they had to be placed in upper chambers, which also suited the shift in social importance from the ground-floor to the first-floor

chambers. As structural elements of the house, the presence of barrel-vaulted ceilings would indicate that the client intended to commission decorative plaster at an early stage.

Such forward planning to accommodate plasterwork is also evident in the internal first-floor window openings that were deliberately sited to direct views across to the plasterwork ceiling from the gallery. This study has identified this arrangement in the double-height halls at Collacombe Manor (WD8), Poundisford Park (TA24) and Trerice (CO29), which are all from the 1570s and early in the regional decorative plasterwork tradition. It was, however, the importance of the hall and not the status of plasterwork that declined in the late sixteenth century. Such architectural adaptations were therefore not required later in the period as the decorative focus shifted to the more intimate societal first-floor chambers.

At the peak of the South-West tradition in the first three decades of the seventeenth century, decorative plasterwork was being installed in middling status houses, which comprise the majority of the dataset (Table B1). It is notable that the quality of the plasterwork in houses such as Rashleigh Barton (MD24) was equal to that in higher status houses, suggesting it was the same workshops carrying out these commissions. By the mid-seventeenth century, however, there were clearly two classes of workshop operating in the region: those producing high quality fashionable work for wealthy clients; the other markedly less skilled, using out-of-date moulds and unsophisticated hand-modelling in a debased version of the earlier style for the rurally-based middling status clients. The variability in the quality of the mid-seventeenth-century schemes in the South-West was unlikely to be the result of a lack of regulation by a plasterers' guild, which was absent in the region, as there is no evidence of poor quality work in the earlier period. The occurrence of poorly executed plasterwork broadly coincides with the Civil War period but perhaps more importantly it is also concurrent with the transition towards more technically demanding classical styles, first seen with the arrival of the oval wreath ceiling around 1640.

This divergence between polite and vernacular is identified in architecture in the 1660s by Colin Platt and is reflected in plasterwork from the 1640s onwards.¹⁰ In yeoman status houses, outdated late sixteenth-century designs were still being installed through to the early eighteenth century. However, in this continuation the unsophisticated interpretation of the earlier work takes on even more vernacular characteristics, seen for example in the strange angel figures from Lewishill, Dunsford (TE13) (Fig. 5.54). This work is in striking contrast to what may be termed the national style of classical plasterwork designs being installed in higher status houses in the mid-seventeenth century. Post-1640, the demand for plasterwork was thus fulfilled by both highly skilled and less technically competent plasterers satisfying opposite ends of the market. This dichotomy is not evident during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries but this continuation of the vernacular style is nevertheless a testament to the enduring popularity of the decorative plasterwork tradition in the South-West in its most inventive and vibrant period.

¹⁰ Colin Platt, *The Great Rebuildings of Tudor and Stuart England* (London: University College London Press, 1994), p.152.