

Legacy of a SUGAR BARON



Peregrine Bryant and Alexandra di Valmarana take us on a tour of the Jamaican and English houses of John Tharp

Good Hope

The Good Hope
Slave Hospital

John Tharp was born on 11 January 1744, the son of reasonably prosperous sugarplanters in Jamaica who owned Bachelor's Hall in the parish of Hanover. After Eton and Cambridge, he returned to Jamaica and worked on the Potosi Estate, marrying Elizabeth Partridge, joint heiress of Potosi, in around 1766. The following year he sold Bachelor's Hall and, with the aid of his interest in Potosi, purchased the adjoining estate of Good Hope. Thus, at the age of 23, he became the largest plantation owner in the parish of Trelawny, then called St James.

Built by John Williams in 1755 and enlarged by Tharp in the 1780s, Good Hope has a layout both typical and indicative of life in Jamaica. Entertaining and private living accommodation are on the first floor, which because of the slope of the land links to ground level at the rear. The principal reception rooms are at the front, with a central corridor running straight through the house and giving access to the bedrooms to the rear. Tharp used the house frequently for meetings and entertained lavishly with wine and champagne imported from Europe.

The secondary buildings are of almost better quality. They are all ashlar limestone and include the Counting House, Entrance Lodge, Warehouse, Coach House, Overseer's House, Mill Buildings and the Slave Hospital. This last recalls the slavery that lay at the root of the immense sugar wealth enjoyed by Tharp and his contemporaries. Although the movement against slavery was gaining strength during the last quarter of the 18th century, the trade was not abolished in the colony of Jamaica until 1 August 1838 and Tharp was



still actively buying slaves in the first few years of the 19th century. It is hard not to feel that part of the impetus to build the Slave Hospital in 1792 was to demonstrate that slaves were humanely treated.

A critical part of Tharp's sugar business was export and he soon recognised the importance of the nearby deep water port of Falmouth. Early in the town's development, Tharp built one of the principal wharfs and on it constructed his town house to oversee trade. The layout closely echoes that at Good



Outbuilding at Good Hope, 18 ft square, the plain

lower room supposedly a cell for miscreant slaves.

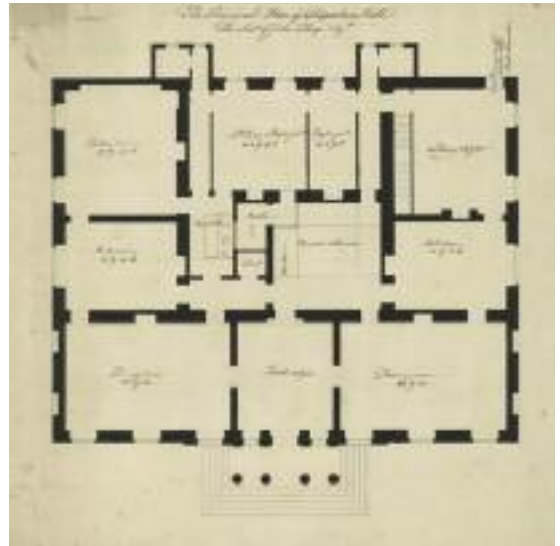
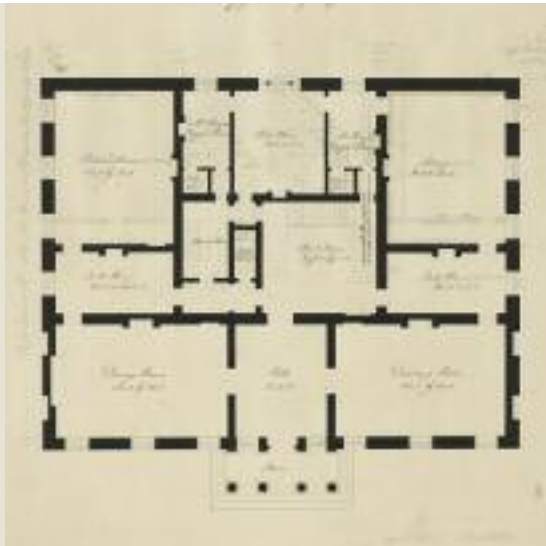
Hope, albeit on a smaller scale. Recent repairs have uncovered evidence that all the windows facing the sea were tripartite, with central triple hung sashes and ventilating louvres, as at Good Hope. The cornice in the principal reception room is similar to some of the cornices at Good Hope and the louvres have identical mouldings. Such internal detail suggests that the construction of this house and at least the fitting out of Good Hope were carried out contemporaneously, in the 1790s.

By the late 1780s, Tharp was spending much of his time in England, intending in due course to retire there and live the respectable life of an English gentleman of substantial means. His total estimated worth has been set as high as £4m (in terms of purchasing power, about £750m today). In London, he first rented Home House at 20 Portman Square, from the extraordinary Jamaican-born Elizabeth Countess of Home, whose father had been Governor there. The exterior was designed by James Wyatt and the extraordinary interiors by his great rival, Robert Adam. As his own home, Tharp bought 41 Portland Place by James Adam, where he spent £3,000 on a complete overhaul.

In 1791, he bought a substantial country estate, Chippenham Park in Cambridgeshire, from a Mr Smith, who had himself purchased it from Lord Sandys in 1780. The 17th century house had been largely demolished by Smith, leaving only a rump, and Tharp immediately set about planning its substantial enlargement. The earliest surviving of these proposals was by James Wyatt in 1794, for a building sitting in front of the surviving earlier house; this was grand in its ambition, with a tetrastyle Corinthian portico and bas relief panels over arched tripartite windows, but when compared with later plans suggests the house Wyatt would like to have built rather than the one his client wanted. Wyatt's revised plans from June 1798, which replace the surviving house with a new design but retain the two rear wings and a linking passage at the basement level, are influenced by his client's Jamaican lifestyle. The basement contains the expected domestic offices but also Tharp's Office, Strong Room and Waiting Room. A private staircase leads to this suite of rooms from Tharp's Dressing Room on the principal floor, which contains not only the various reception rooms – Dining Room, Drawing Room, Library and Billiard Room – but also the Tharps' bedroom, maintaining the Jamaican style of living on one level. The bedchamber level above is for guests only. Also, significantly, there is a dressing room to the west of the principal bedroom for Mrs Tharp and one to the east for Mr Tharp. We do not have a principal elevation of this proposal but the plans indicate that it has become more conventional in its fenestration and has only a single-storey portico.

A further set of drawings survives from two months later, August 1798, but this time from the hand of Francis Sandys. His proposals are extraordinarily similar to Wyatt's. Why the change of architect? Perhaps a clue lies in the most significant alteration to the ground floor plan, where the principal bedroom now appears as 'Mr Tharp's Sleeping Room' with adjoining dressing room; there is no reference to Mrs Tharp. In December 1800, only a year after their marriage, Tharp's wife Ann was discovered to be pregnant as a result of an affair with Tharp's son-in-law. This would have been cause enough to write her out of the plans, but 1798 is two years before the very public discovery of the affair. Might Tharp have earlier suspected his much

1798 plans for Chippenham Park, Cambs by Wyatt (right, June) and by Francis Sandys (far right, August).



younger wife of infidelity? And was Wyatt sacked because he himself was thought to have had a relationship with Mrs Tharp? John Martin Robinson confirms that Wyatt was known to have had a roving eye and Mrs Tharp proved herself susceptible. At any rate, Francis Sandys produced further designs for the house and a 19th century watercolour of the south front, presumably as built and before its later and current incarnation, suggests his hand in the semi-circular portico and window treatment.

Sandys also designed and built the Newmarket Lodges and Triumphal Arch. The motto on the latter, *In spe spiro* or 'in hope I breathe', was the motto of Tharp's first wife's family, the Partridges. (His own family motto, *Virtutis Amore*, was perhaps a sentiment so transgressed by his second wife that he could not bear to use it). 'In Hope I breathe' might also have been a punning reference to a desire to return to Good Hope, the English air being polluted by the perfidy of his wife and son-in-law. Tharp did indeed return to Jamaica in 1802, soon after the legal resolution of his wife's affair, and never returned to England. He spent most of his time at Good Hope, where his estates were being managed by his illegitimate son John Harwood. He died there in 1804, owner of about 25,000 acres in Jamaica and some 3,000 slaves. The last of his houses, celebrated as its only circular great house, is Jamaica's Chippenham Park, perhaps influenced by Sandys's Ickworth or even Belle Isle on Windermere by John Plaw. It has been suggested that the circular plan was left incomplete because of the collapse of his marriage to Ann. If so, it serves as a sad metaphor for the disastrous end of his second marriage.



Tharp's last house, Jamaica's circular Chippenham Park

This article is a version of a talk given by Peregrine Bryant to the Friends of the Georgian Society of Jamaica.