STAIRCASES

(including some Hampshire examples).

BY WALTER E. TROKE.

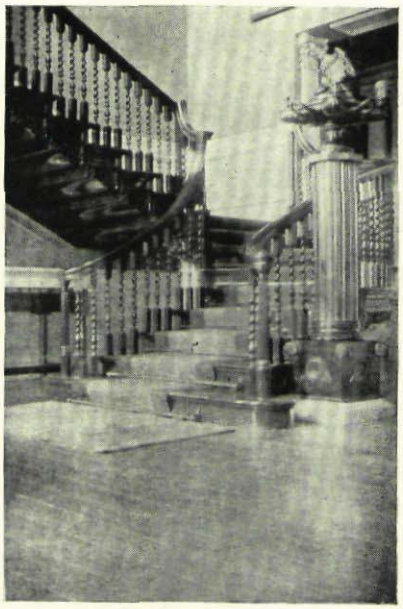
The magnificent examples of English craftsmanship, of post-middle 15th century date, in so many of our ancient country and town houses and cottages, show the greatness of a past age, and exemplify the brilliant and glorious spirit pervading the crafts during that period of three hundred years.

The staircase, so important an adjunct in English homes, was a feature which fired the artist with zeal to lavish upon it the artistic expression of his age; and so we can trace the gradual growth of the mediæval newel stair, through the fading Gothic influence of the 16th century, to the exotic forms and devices of the incoming Renaissance which appeared in its wooden successor, still to be seen in many of the existing domiciles of the Tudor days.

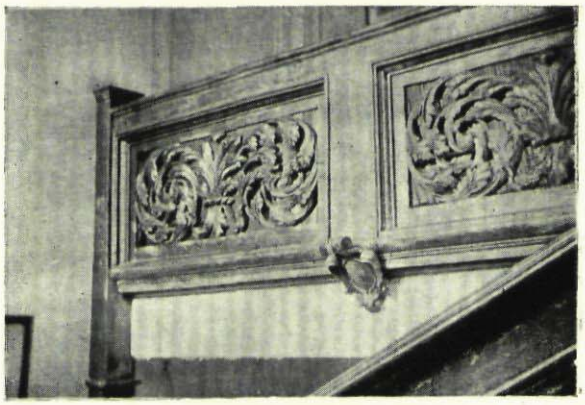
Soon after the suppression of the monasteries (1536 and 1539), and with the change in warfare by the use of artillery, a new outlook was given to the times. Castles and fortified dwellings were no longer tolerated, and an impetus was thus given to the building of purely domestic homes, many on the sites of ecclesiastical ruins, as at Palace House, Beaulieu, and Place House, Titchfield, or in proximity to some long-revered stronghold, such as Arundel Castle, Sussex, and Merdon Castle, Hursley. In this manner the country house evolved, and such fine examples are in evidence as Bramshill; The Vyne, Basingstoke; Grove Place, Nursling; Moyles Court, Ellingham; St. Margaret's, Titchfield; all in Hampshire: and well-known examples as Haddon Hall, Great Chalfield, South Wraxall, Bramhill Hall, Loseley Court, Lacock Abbey, Montacute, Longleat, and Coleshill, showing the many paths by which art and necessity together attained their noble aims in an age when magnificence and pomp were the order of the day.

Mediæval staircases were almost invariably constructed on the newel principle, that is, with stone steps winding round a central column or newel. Very little attempt was made at decoration, although, in a few cases, as at Winchester Cathedral,[1] and Tattershall Castle, a handrail was ingeniously carved in the outer wall, and in some instances[2] the head of a newel staircase was the object of artistic treatment, in that the newel rose above the top step and supported a small radiating vault. In some examples the steps themselves were supported upon a stone-ribbed vault. In the refectory at Beaulieu Abbey there is an excellent example of a mediæval straight stairway, with its stone-ribbed vault above, and beautiful arcade to the hall.

[1] Thirteenth century turret on south of Bishop Langton's Chantry.
[2] Edington Church, Belsay Castle, Alnwick Castle, etc.



STAIRCASE AT SOUTH STONEHAM HOUSE, SWAYTHLING.



STAIRCASE PANEL AT NO. 11, THE CLOSE, WINCHESTER.

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Another interesting, though plain, stairway can be seen in the Great Hall at St. Cross Hospital, Winchester.

The newel staircase, with its tortuous and winding stone steps, persisted right into the early part of the 16th century. About the middle of this period a great change manifested itself, consequent upon the introduction of a new domestic plan, and the newel stair gradually gave way to its wooden successor.

The general effect of the early wooden staircases was one of massiveness in the size of timber used, and boldness, subdued by refinement, in the design of newels, balusters, strings, and handrails.

The essential parts of a wooden staircase, the treads and risers, were constructed of comparatively thin boards, resting on a framework of wood. The panel, or filling-in, between handrail and string, began to develop in the Elizabethan Period, and it is in this ornamentation that the artistic thought of each period is seen.

In the earlier examples, this filling-in consists of turned, tapered, or pierced balusters, heavily designed. Newel posts, too, were usually large and square, and projected well above the handrails, which were fixed between successive posts.

A great number of newel post finials were used; but the most common was the ball, as at Hambleton Old Hall, Rutland, and Cranborne Manor House, which, apparently, owed its popularity to its simplicity. The ball finial was occasionally developed into the acorn motif. A very favourite device of the Elizabethan carvers was a massive and ungainly termination, variously finished, as seen at Chawton House, and Grove Place, Nursling. Often the head of a post formed a pedestal for a figure or heraldic device, as at Shedfield New Place.

The turned baluster of these early staircases was generally uniform in thickness from top to bottom, and was enriched with many grooves and recesses repeated alike above and below the centre. When tapering or pierced balusters were used, small keyed arches were sometimes sprung between each pair of balusters.

During the 17th century an entirely new idea was conceived in the design of the filling-in. Balusters were temporarily discarded, and the whole space between handrail and string filled with a continuous sunk and pierced pattern. At first this pattern was based on the strapwork motif (Bethnall Hall, and The Deanery, Winchester); but later gave way to the wonderfully carved panels of scrollwork and interlaced ornament, as seen at No. 11, The Close, Winchester, and elsewhere, and which was brought to such perfection in the unmatched carving wrought by that superb master of his craft, Grinling Gibbons. It should be noticed that in the finest examples, two of which are at Sudbury and Cassiobury, that the strings are straight, or close,

and embellished with a wealth of carving, which is expended on all the members of the staircase.

This phase of staircase design lasted until the end of the 17th century; but it should be noted that although a large number of important houses possessed staircases carved with a great degree of refinement, yet many humbler dwellings still followed the turned baluster motif, such as can be seen at Otterbourne Manor Farm (1690). This example is in three equal flights, framed together with newels, strings, and handrails, of a lighter character than those members of earlier date. The balustrade consists of spiral members, sixteen to each flight, giving to the whole a quiet and dignified appearance. A similarly designed staircase is at No. 3, The Close, Winchester.

One of the features of this period was the reduction in the height of the newel post. The handrail was now coming into its own as an important member, and ran from the top of each newel post into the side of the next above. The newels were occasionally accentuated by baskets of fruit and flowers, gracefully carved, and placed on the handrail exactly over them. (Sudbury Hall.)

The closing years of this century saw the degeneration of the carved panel, and instead of the spirited scrolls and life-like carving of the earlier work, coats of arms, weapons, flags, and other warlike equipment were introduced. (Ham House, Surrey.)

A remarkable development took place during the 17th century, which was to affect architecture very considerably. It was the appearance of the architect as a personal element in the design of buildings. Hitherto, the architect, as such, was unknown, and although the design of so many fine mediæval structures must have evolved from a master mind, yet records are silent until we hear of such men as Inigo Jones, John Thorpe, Sir Christopher Wren, John Webb, and others.

Inigo Jones (1573-1652), perhaps the finest of the Renaissance architects, and whose designs are marked by Classical purity and balance, seems to have disliked the foliated panels, as no record or example exists as proof of his having used anything but the baluster. The baluster as used by Jones is characterised by its singularly Classical shape; *vide* staircases at Ashburnham House, 1640 (in collaboration with Webb); Coleshill, 1650 (Sir Roger Pratt, possibly collaborating with Jones and Webb); The Vyne, Basingstoke, c. 1770 (John Chute).

We have now reached a period when lightness and grace are the dominant features in staircase design, and it is interesting to compare the late 16th century examples with the work of this period, where the newel post is designed subservient to, and in concord with, the complete staircase. (*cf.* Knole House, Kent, 1605; and No. 92, High Street, Southampton, c. 1720.)

STAIRCASE AT NO. 92, HIGH STREET, SOUTHAMPTON.

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