

A dream of a place

Smedmore House, Dorset, home of Dr Philip Mansel

An eye-catching house on the Jurassic Coast remains in the hands of the family who built it. Jeremy Musson explores its layered history

Photographs by Paul Highnam



Fig 1 above: The different phases of the house's development can be seen from the garden—the 1760 front to the left and the 1700 elevation in the centre, a refronting of the early 1600s manor house. Fig 2 right: The 1760–1 entrance front with its paired bow windows and pedimented door case. The house overlooks Kimmeridge Bay

SMEDMORE is one of those remote houses that catches the eye at a long distance (*Fig 2*). It stands on rising ground near Kimmeridge Bay in Dorset, a handsome building of pearl-grey stone, which, on a fine day, shines out from the vivid greenness of the hillside. The house presents a jaunty mid-18th-century appearance, a wide symmetrical frontage with an attic and round, swelling, semi-circular bow windows.

Sir Arthur Bryant—the historian of England so admired by both Churchill and Attlee—leased the house in the 1950s as a retreat. In 1953, A. L. Rowse wrote of the house as being ‘very virginal and lovely, waiting at the end of the road beyond which there is no further. It is a dream of a place’.

It is certainly a place on which dreams have been projected—some of exciting new opportunities and

wealth and others of position and security. The first recorded house on this site was built not merely as an up-to-date and compact manor house, but as part of an ambitious investment by a lively Jacobean knight, William Clavell, who wanted to mine for alum and then use natural shale for glass-making.

This was ‘Sir William Clavile, descended of antient Gentry’, whose historic family manor house was at Barnston only a few miles away, but whose ancestors had owned Smedmore since the late 14th century. He had been knighted for military service in Ireland ‘against the Rebellion of Terrone [Tyrone]’.

He built ‘a little newe house at Smedmore and beautified it with pleasant gardens,’ according to Thomas Gerard’s 1620s manuscript history of Dorset (published as John Coker’s *A Survey of Dorsetshire* in

1732). Both the alum mining and then the glass-making were dismal failures, principally because other agents acquired the relevant monopolies. We might still, however, imagine that his ‘newe house’ was at least bravely built and well glazed as an advertisement of his entrepreneurial endeavours.

But Sir William’s financial collapse was precipitous, despite his next project to extract salt from seawater. His property was handed over to trustees after 1623, who sold much of the land to redeem his debts (said to be in the region of £20,000). In an attempt to pull something from the wreckage, a small property, including Smedmore House, was settled on him for life and, on his death, this passed to his kinsman, Roger Clavell of Winfrith Newburgh.

Roger appears to have been a frugal and hardworking farmer, with little pretension to the trappings of ‘antient >





Gentry'. Nevertheless, many of the estate's debts, incurred by Sir William, were not to be paid off for another 90 years.

Roger's grandson, Edward Clavell (1676–1738), inherited the property and benefited from the mercantile activity of his father, Walter, a prosperous East India merchant. Walter lived mostly in Bengal and, although he inherited in 1676, never returned to live at Smedmore. He was content, however, for his son to re-establish the family in the county.

Edward, born in Cossimbazar, but educated at St Paul's, was briefly MP

for Weymouth in 1709–10 and had also married well, first to Jane, the daughter of merchant-prince Sir Edward Littleton, who was for a time the new East India Company's 'governor' in Bengal. Edward was married again, in 1717, to Elizabeth, a daughter of George Damer of Dorchester.

As well as settling the estate's ancient debts, Edward was responsible for remodelling the house in about 1700, shortly after his own coming of age, bringing everything up to date. Through this and other means, including acquiring lost farms, he reasserted the family's historical claim to gentry

‘These rooms stir the imagination, they are full of picturesque ghosts’

status in the county. For him, the garden front to the south-west was classiscised in modestly Baroque fashion (Fig 1).

The new front was little more than a re-dressing of the early 1600s house with tall windows in bolection-moulded surrounds and it may originally have been five bays long. Its main door is framed by a projecting cornice supported on finely detailed brackets linked to the carved surround of the first-floor window above.

There is a deep parapet above, behind which sit triangular pedimented dormers and a panelled brick chimney. The two window architraves of about 1700 used on the western return may possibly have been reused in the 1760s work to retain the consistency of detail to the garden side.

The wainscoted central room at the centre of this front—known as the Cedar Room—must have been an entrance hall, with two parlours either side, only one of which survives, with an ornamented cornice and a bolection-



Fig 3 above left: The entrance hall with distinctive Rococo decorated brackets supporting Classical busts. Fig 4 left: The fine oak staircase of about 1700, seen from first-floor level. It possibly fills a former courtyard

moulded chimneypiece. The main 1700 staircase behind the Cedar Room may have been inserted into an earlier courtyard space (Fig 4), given the presence of an early 1600s external doorcase in the passage beyond. First-floor rooms retain the box cornice and low dado panelling consistent with a date of about 1700.

There are no known records of the appearance of the main front to the north-west at this time, but it is likely that it was given a superficially Classical external treatment. The windows looking into the internal courtyard—framed by another early 1600 building, possibly a former brew house later adapted into a laundry—remained unaltered. The grand stone stableyard entered

through a stately arch, which lies at a distance above the house to the east, may be a little later in construction, closer to 1720.

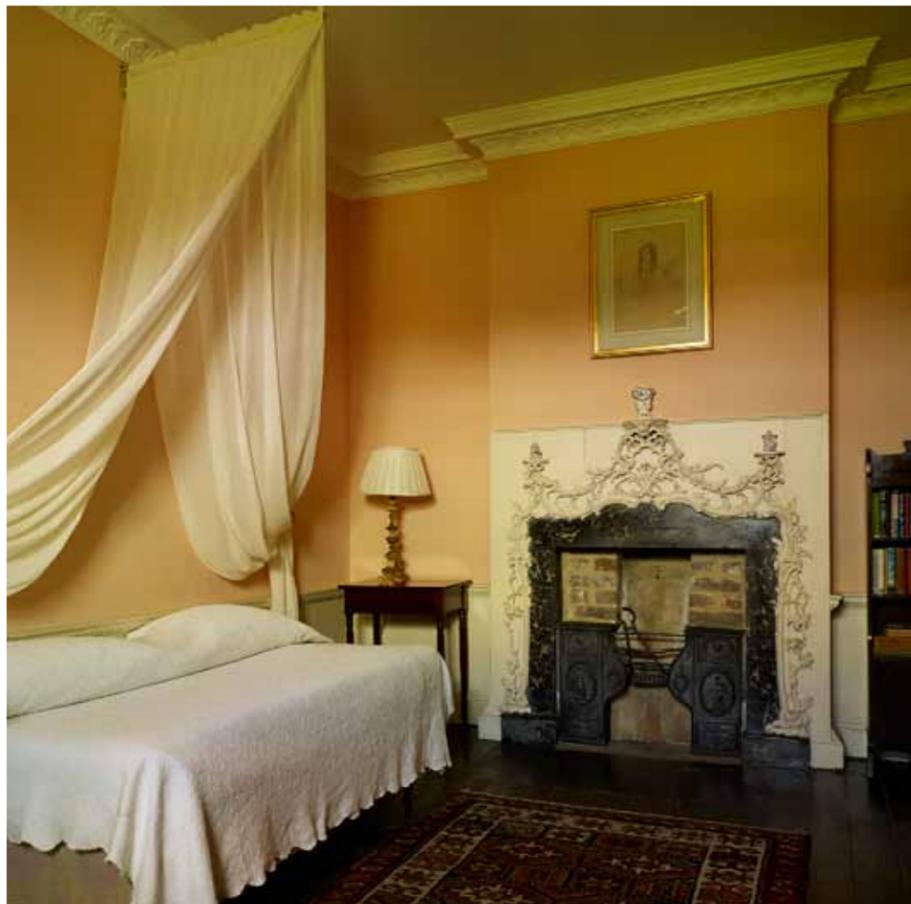
Edward's second son, George, who inherited from his elder brother in 1744, later decided on an even more extensive remodelling, creating a new entrance front on the north-west. No architect is known, although an estimate for the work does survive. 'An Estimate to Build 3 rooms &c agreeable to a Plan hereunto annexed' for £1,450 16s 7f d' also refers to an 'Octagon', which suggests the bows were originally to be semi-octagonal. The plan has long been lost. This work seems to have been completed by 1761.

The simple architraves of the windows

on the main façade are marked by a central keystone that strikes a slightly old-fashioned note. They may be evidence of a connection to the architect or masons of Came House near Dorchester, built for John Damer in the 1750s, which has a very similar window detail. They also occur on the main elevation of the house of the neighbouring estate at Creech Grange, designed for Dennis Bond by Francis Cartwright of Blandford.

Both Damer and Bond were friends and trustees of settlements made in George Clavell's will. In *East Dorset Country Houses* (2013), Michael Hill looks to the Bastard family of designers, who had, in 1761, just completed internal improvements at neighbour- ➤

Fig 5: The drawing room: one of the rooms created in 1760-61 with its dramatic views to the sea



ing Lulworth Castle and are associated with good mid-century plasterwork in the wider county.

The central entrance door is framed with Ionic-order engaged columns supporting a triangular pediment. The generously proportioned new rooms are the entrance hall (Fig 3), dining room and drawing room we see today. These rooms have walls that are panelled in plaster frames, with ornate modillion cornices, although the ceilings are plain. In one of the new rooms on the first floor is a delicately carved Rococo chimney-piece (Fig 6).

Practical matters were not ignored; a spacious new stone kitchen with a distinctive Venetian window, with related offices either side lit by simple Gothic arched windows, seems also to have been added in about 1760.

The house has changed little from this period. George died without a direct heir, so the estate passed to his nephews in turn, William and John Richards, who changed their name to Clavell. The Rev John Clavell died in 1833 without a will. A fierce battle for the inheritance between his niece, Louisa, and his

farm manager, 'Old Barnes', was won by the niece and her husband, Col John Mansel—from whom the present owner, Dr Philip Mansel, directly descends. Col Mansel recorded in his diary: 'Intense anxiety evinced by all orders of Society as to the result of the trial whether poor Smedmore shall remain in the same family it has for four centuries been or pass into the hands of a set of forgers.'

Surprisingly, much of the fine furniture and pictures in the house came here only in 1934. They are from the collection of Lady Elizabeth Villiers, heiress in England of the Earls of Athlone—the 1st Earl (Godart Baron de Ginkel) being the Williamite general of Dutch origin. Lady Elizabeth left her collection to her niece, Kitty Mansel, who, in turn, left it to her nephew, Maj Rhys Mansel, the then owner of Smedmore.

This bequest accounts for the huge bird paintings, in the staircase hall, in very rare painted late-17th-century frames and the portrait after Van Dyck of the children of Charles I. Also from this source comes most of the marquetry furniture and the early-18th-century cabinets on stands

Fig 6: A beautifully carved Rococo chimney-piece in a first-floor room of about 1760. Incorporated into the top of the design are three brackets for the display of porcelain



in the drawing room, as well as the china in the house—especially that concentrated in the dining room.

It was perhaps the echoes of other houses here that prompted Lord David Cecil, in *Some Dorset Country Houses* (1985), to observe that the main rooms here are 'in the highest degree welcoming and reassuring; but they also stir the imagination. They are full of picturesque ghosts'.

The present owner, Dr Mansel, is a distinguished historian of France and the Ottoman Empire, currently writing a biography of Louis XIV.

He took over the estate from his father, Maj John Clavell Mansel, in 1989. Dr Mansel has been a faithful guardian of Smedmore and its setting and has significantly extended the tree planting around the house.

He also set in train the rescue of the derelict Clavell Tower, designed by the eccentric Rev John Clavell, which was threatened with collapse into the sea. The folly, built in 1830–1, was dismantled and rebuilt a greater distance in from the sea, with the interior tactfully converted to holiday accommodation by the Landmark Trust.

The well-chosen colour schemes in the house introduced by Dr Mansel bring out the delicate detail of the interior work: for instance, the warm yellow in the drawing room (Fig 5), a room lit both from the south-east and south-west, and the pale stony-pink of the dining room (Fig 7), lit only from the north-west. This last colour was chosen on the advice of the late Gervase Jackson-Stops, a leading authority on the English Rococo.

Many fine pieces of Fürstenberg china have been hung on the walls in a display inspired by northern

Fig 7: The elegant dining room painted in a stony pink colour on the advice of Gervase Jackson-Stops and hung with Fürstenberg china

European interiors. Many of the family papers remain in the house, but others are deposited in the Dorset History Centre, catalogued in modern times by Elizabeth Allen and J. P. Ferris.

Many writers and artists have been entertained in this house during Dr Mansel's tenure and its sense of calm, handsome English retreat has nourished many enquiring minds. *Smedmore House is available for occasional letting, events and weddings; for further information, visit www.smedmorehouse.com*