A Drawing of the Great Chamber at Whitehall in 1601

In 1954 Leslie Hotson published *The First Night of Twelfth Night*, a book the special pleading of which concerning Shakespeare's play as a *pièce à clef* has caused it to be rather distrusted. The historical documents Hotson discovered and gathered in the book, however, are remarkable and can now be supplemented. On Twelfth Night in 1601 Queen Elizabeth, celebrating Christmas at Whitehall, received two foreign visitors: Grigori Ivanovich Mikulin, the Muscovite ambassador, who was entertained to dinner in the Great Chamber after attending service with the Queen in the Chapel, and Virginio Orsino, Duke of Bracciano, who after also attending the service and being briefly present at the ambassadorial dinner, joined the queen at a play in the evening, which was presented in the Hall. Hotson would have this to have been *Twelfth Night*, although a disinterested view of the evidence seems to suggest a mixed show with music, possibly presented by several companies doing short pieces rather than whole plays.

Hotson quotes documents from Russian and Italian archives bearing on the events of this day, and from two English manuscripts which give some account of them. The longer of these, preserved in the papers of the Duke of Northumberland, corresponds very closely with the details given in a second document, a record which is clearly connected with the heralds who were partly responsible for the ceremonial ordering of the processions to and from the Chapel, and the rituals to be followed at dinner. Hotson saw the first document himself; his knowledge of the second was restricted to a manuscript in the Marquess of Ripon's papers (or a copy of it), and which he quoted almost in full on pages 190 and 191 of his book. But this document is an eighteenth-century copy of selected items from a manuscript anthology of ceremonial occasions collected in the early seventeenth century by Augustine Vincent, a book preserved in the College of Arms and known as *Vincent's Presidents*. His collection includes transcriptions of ceremonial events from as early as 1399—the majority are Elizabethan and Jacobean.1 Vincent joined the College of Arms in 1616 and died ten years later; his copying of what was presumably a contemporary set of memoranda in the heraldic records therefore belongs to this decade, at most twenty-five years after the events recorded. Hotson was examining an incomplete third-hand copy.2

The written text of the Vincent manuscript corresponds exactly in substance with the eighteenth-century copy. The later copyist changes details of spelling, contractions, and capitalisation; Hotson's transcript of this document in turn introduces deliberate and possibly inadvertent silent changes to contractions, punctuation, spelling, and capitalisation, and he adds his own running glosses—some correct and some not—within square brackets.3 In the interests of accuracy, therefore, I transcribe the seventeenth-century text fully here. What is of far more interest is that the eighteenth-century copyist stopped at the foot of the first page of a three-page original. The remaining two pages, an opening in the bound manuscript, give a plan of the Great
Chamber as set up for the dinner, with notes on and depictions of furniture, seating, and ceremonial events during the progress of the meal. A reproduction from a photograph of these pages follows. (It should be noted that the relatively tight binding of the volume has prevented a completely flat image of the original, and there is distortion of text and drawing at the centre of the photograph.) The plan is in ink, coloured with a grey wash. Its orientation places north at the bottom of the plan, west, from which direction the room was lit, to the right, and east to the left. The drawing shows a plan of the room, partially 'exploded' to demonstrate a third dimension; it is not to scale. It includes annotations on the positions and movements of people involved in the ceremonies connected with the occasion.

Had Hotson seen this drawing he would not have claimed, as he does, that 'the great Chamber on the otherside towards the Tarras' was the Great Chamber, Queen's Side (wherever that may have been in the rather misty topography of Whitehall), which claim he supports with his own rather fanciful map of Whitehall, opposite page 175 of his book. Dinner on Twelfth Night in 1601 was held in the Great Chamber, the largest room at Whitehall after the Hall and successive Banqueting Houses. It stood on an upper storey, to the south and west of the Hall, and had a large bay window that looked out westwards into the Pebble Court, the Preaching Place, and across to the Banqueting House. It was frequently used for the presentation of plays: most recently before the date of the dinner on St Stephen's Night (26 December 1600), when the Chamberlain's men had acted there, and it was to be used again for plays at the following Shrovetide.

The room is therefore of considerable importance to the history of theatre and drama, and previously our knowledge of it has been drawn from circumstantial accounts which mention it, or details of it, in passing, and from a series of later ground-plans of Whitehall drawn, and subsequently engraved, after the Restoration. These show the palace buildings at ground level, and hence the room that lay below the Great Chamber, which served immemorially as a wine cellar; the plans may therefore be interpreted in the light of one of the few surviving pieces of Tudor Whitehall, the identical wine cellar which now lies beneath the Ministry of Defence buildings. Inevitably the Vincent drawing provides less information about the Great Chamber than we would like, but its clear testimony to the layout of the room in the early seventeenth century is an invaluable addition to what has hitherto been known.

It shows clearly that there were two points of access to the Great Chamber, which was the largest and most public of the suite of rooms inhabited by the monarch. The second traditional name for this outer room, the Guard Chamber, indicates one of its functions, and its invariable inhabitants. At the dinner in 1601 'The Guard caried ye Muscouites measses,' but there were also presumably a number of them on ceremonial duty in addition to the 'Sargeants at Armes' whose position is shown on the plan. The public entry was the 'Great chamber doore' positioned in the north wall of the room, at the western corner. Access to this door would have been by steps from ground level, and on Twelfth Night 1601 the dishes for the meal were carried up these stairs from the kitchens below. 'The doore into the Presence chamber' is shown to have been on the eastern wall, opposite the great bay window, and this door, representing a more intimate
approach to the monarch's presence, would have been closely guarded and scrutinised than the entry at the diagonally opposite corner of the room. The precise layout of the royal chambers beyond this point remains in some doubt, but certainly on all occasions when the Great Chamber was used for ceremonial events with the monarch present, including the performance of plays, the south-eastern entry would have been of great hierarchial importance.

Nearly every other physical feature shown in the drawing was removable, and would have been removed following this particular occasion, as the 'degrees and deales' provided for the play eleven days previously had also been removed. The hangings which covered the walls, the state, with its throne, cloth of estate, and canopy, the cupboards and tables used for the dinner, were all struck like stage settings, and kept in storage until they were needed again.

When they had gone there remained a large room with windows on its western side, which in the drawing looks almost square: the plan measures 15 cm by 17.2 cm (1:1.15). This is certainly inaccurate—we know from the later plans that the Great Chamber was longer than its width, although the various plans give rather different proportions, and none of them has demonstrable authority over the others. It seems as if the very rough measurements of the room were about thirty feet wide by about sixty feet long (1:2)—the plans and archaeological remains together suggest such a shape. It is of course impossible to say whether Vincent has compressed a more accurately proportioned original sketch to fit the shape of his own pages.

Very little supplementary information about the room can be inferred from the Works accounts, which often afford oblique glimpses of the interior structure and decoration of royal apartments. They do indicate that the Great Chamber was heated with a fireplace (which was probably positioned in the eastern wall, opposite the windows, and the hearth of which may be represented by the lines forming a trapezium which circumscribes the eastern cupboard on the plan), that the roof lay directly overhead, and therefore that the room was probably quite high, and also that the floor was of wood. The general style of decoration no doubt conformed to the elaborate late medieval fashion favoured by Henry VIII.

The general significance of the drawing for our attempts to re-imagine the theatrical use of the chamber (Hotson's fourth chapter of The First Night of Twelfth Night is given over to a fairly historical-romantic treatment of the St Stephen's Night performance) is that it establishes 'high' and 'low' ends for the room. The queen undoubtedly would be placed at plays where she sat at dinner in January 1601—indeed the supporting brackets for the canopy over the state quite possibly defined its position within a few feet on all occasions: it would certainly always be placed, as it is in the drawing, on the centre line of the room. The entry from the Presence would have further determined that the southern end of the room was site of the royal seat. The hierarchy of seating at a play is also partly suggested by the drawing, in showing the arrangement of tables and cupboards hugging the walls, with observers facing towards the centre of the room or towards the queen beneath the state. For plays, although there is evidence for centrally placed stages at Whitehall (a method of staging to which Hotson became particularly attached), all surviving plans of royal theatricals show seating built around three sides
of a rectangular room, with the state placed at the front of the seats across the width of
the room, and with a stage facing it at the opposite end. What the Great Chamber
drawing shows very clearly is that whether actors played on a raised stage or on the
floor of the chamber, a tiring house, built within the room and probably positioned
where in the drawing we see 'A cupboard of gilt plate tenne stories high,' would have
been a necessity. There was no screen, and no easily accessible space outside the room
from which to manage entries, costume changes, and so forth. The Great Chamber
door could hardly have been used as an actors' entry when it was the main access to the
room, and when on such a popular and crowded occasion as a Christmas play it was
probably shut once the seats were full.

One further detail of the drawing possibly has a bearing on theatrical performances.
At the dinner, musicians seated within the bay window provided continuous
entertainment: 'This window with musick all the time.' The Duke of
Northumberland's manuscript also notes 'The Children of the Chappell to come
before the Queene at Dinner with a Caroll,' but this would have been in addition to
the instrumental tafelmusik provided by the musicians throughout the dinner. In the
Works accounts for the following year (October 1601—September 1602) there occurs
this interesting sequence of records: 'framing and setting vp a broade stage in the
midle of the haule makeing a standing for the Lorde Chamberlaine makeing and
setting vp viij pictons in the haule and entries framing and setting vp a flower in it the
ground (round) windowe in the haule for musitions.' Assuming that the 'broade
stage' was for a play, the musical entertainment which was to go with it—an association
firmly enough established by the Works and Revels accounts, and by instructions for
the Twelfth Night play in 1601—was provided by musicians seated, once again,
within the recess of the bay window, space otherwise lost behind the straight rows of
degrees. (A floor was required in the Hall performance because the musicians were not
seated at the chamber floor level, where they would have been unable either to see or
to be heard.) It seems quite likely that the Great Chamber drawing once again
indicates a traditional and familiar position, in this case for musicians in the larger
court chambers, whether performing at a banquet or at a play.

FROM VINCENT'S PRESIDENTS (pp 155–7)

The League between the Muscouite and the English (by eatinge Bread and Salt with
the Queene) was confirmed.
At the Court at Whitehall 610 Januarij a10 1601. being Twelwe-day it was ordeyned
that the Embassador for the marchants of Muscouia should in confirmeinge the
League dine or eate Bread and Salt with the Queenes Maies. It also then happened
that the Duke of Braciano Virginio Vrsino cousin germane to the Duke of Florence
and the now Queene of France, arriued in England to see her Maies, and was
appointed at that tyme to come to the Court.
Sir Hierome Bowes knight and other gent' with coaches were sent to conduct the
Embassadour, and at the Court the Earle of Bedford, Doctor Perkins and others received
him, and brought him vp to the Presence chamber, where the Counsell sittt usually.

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And for the Duke of Braciano Seigneurl. Virginio Vrsino, were sent the Earle of Rutland and his brethren the Lo: Darcy the Lord Sandes and others who met him at the Court gate; he beinge thether brought by (\textsuperscript{yr}l. W\textsuperscript{m}l. Cecill and others.

The Queens Maiestie came forth to the closett and after a while proceeded to the Chapell; and then the Duke was p\ldots ced to see the Offering at the windowe in the Closet on the Queenes side, and the Muskouite on the other side at the other window. And after the Creed song, her Maiestie went to the Offering downe to the Chapell and offered the Gold, Frankinsence and myrrhe and returned and so departed, to her Chamber accompanied with the Duke by her, and the Muskouite went by Garter before the Sword.

In the interim the great Chamber on the otherside towards the Tarras was prepare\ldots pared with an Estate and two cupbords of plate therein, where her Maiestie dined:\textemdash; as in the ensueinge page is delineated.

NOTES


2 Hotson evidently missed the opportunity to make a further discovery. The HMC \textit{Sixth Report} (1877), Hotson's source for finding the documents, clearly states that the contents of the Ripon manuscript 'seem to have been copied from books in the Herald's College.' Page 139 of what is now MS VR 6066 in the Leeds District Archives plainly declares that the account of Twelfth Day comes from a series 'collected by Augustine Vincent, Officer of Arms.' The eighteenth-century page, like the original, ends with the words Hotson omitted in his transcript (p 191): 'as in the ensuing page is delineated.' There is no ensuing page in the Ripon document, but the possible survival of a plan in the original might have prompted Hotson to widen his search.

3 I am grateful to W.J. Connor, Archivist, and A.J. Jamieson, Assistant Archivist, of the Leeds District Archives for answering my queries about and providing me with a transcript of the document cited by Hotson.


6 The dimensions of the surviving remains of Wolsey's Wine Cellar, as it is now known, which lay directly below the Great Chamber, form very neatly a double square in plan: 32 feet by 64 feet. It is unlikely that the Great Chamber corresponded exactly with these dimensions, although the width of the cellar defines the width of the entire range.

7 PRO E/351 3204, 3213, 3222, 3230.

8 See Colvin, p 304.

9 Hotson, p 181.

10 Malone Society \textit{Collections x}, p 18.

11 See Hotson.