Ruling Passions: The Architecture of the Cecils
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4 November 2020

In my last lecture I told the remarkable story of the Boleyn family, a dynasty that rose in four generations from Norfolk gentry to produce one of the greatest monarchs in England history – and I don't mean Anne, I mean Elizabeth I, who was of course a Boleyn. Their rise was founded on money from the city of London but consolidated through a series of spectacular aristocratic marriages that brought huge wealth, and with it influence. Court connections were vital too and there is no doubt that Thomas Boleyn's rise was aided by his close friendship with Henry VIII, a relationship that survived the execution of his daughter for high treason.

What is interesting about the Boleyns is that, until Anne became queen, none of them were great architectural patrons. None built a new house and, although they all extended, modified and improved the houses that they bought, or inherited, it is impossible to see architecture as one of the driving forces in their rise to, and maintenance of, power. There are reasons for this that we shall turn to later, but there is a sense that the Boleyns enjoyed and capitalised on the family connections embodied in the buildings that they acquired rather than having a passion for creating new ones.

Tonight, I shall be telling a different story, but I will be referring back to the Boleyns, because the contrast between tonight's dynasty and the Boleyns is very revealing. But first an incredibly important point. The Boleyns were effectively snuffed out as a leading family by the late sixteenth century. Through the tragedy of Anne's marriage and the execution of her brother the Boleyns exited the national stage and their estates were divided up and dispersed. The Cecil family, the subject of my lecture this evening, have been one of the most resilient and successful aristocratic dynasties in English history. Although some of the original estates and houses amassed in the sixteenth and seventeenth century are now gone, the family has played a remarkable role in national politics and culture and still retain three of the finest Jacobean mansions in the country. As a result, there is no way that I can possibly cover four hundred years and will be concentrating my remarks on the founding years of the family and their period of outstanding architectural patronage.

The rise of the Cecils was inextricably connected with the rise of the Tudors. Both families were Welsh and David Cecil, who was born in around 1460 rose on the coat tails of his godfather (or possibly his uncle) Sir David Philip who was in the household of Lady Margaret Beaufort, Henry VII's mother. There he rose to become one of her closest and most trusted servants. It is likely that David Cecil fought alongside Sir David at the Battle of Bosworth and then followed him to Lincolnshire where Lady Margaret had not only extensive landed and commercial interests but one of her favourite residences, Collyweston House. In 1488 Sir David was made Bailiff of Collyweston and took a large house in Stamford only four miles away. There he set David Cecil up with Alice Dicons, the daughter of a wealthy merchant and alderman of the town.

Who says connections don't matter? A Tudor loyalist with a route into the royal family and a foothold on the ladder of local power, David Cecil quickly became a leading local figure serving as MP in Henry VII's last Parliament and four of Henry VIII's parliaments. In his will, proved in 1541, he styled

himself esquire, but there was no great financial legacy left to his only son Richard who had to wait until his stepmother died before coming into any property. But crucially David Cecil saw to it that his son got a place in the royal household becoming a page of Henry VIII's chamber by 1517. The pages were responsible for keeping the king's chambers clean, fires lit and doing all the menial work in the royal lodgings. Richard must have been diligent and personable because he was promoted to a Gentleman of the Chamber by 1540. Concurrently Richard got a place in the king's wardrobe of the robes becoming a groom by 1528 and a yeoman of the Robes by 1539.

It was a cosmopolitan existence, travelling around the country with the king on progress, accompanying him to Guines for the Field of the Cloth of Gold in 1520 and rubbing shoulders with the great and the good. All his posts attracted a salary, but more important was the opportunity to petition the king, or his ministers, for other crown offices. Richard got his first post in 1517 and to this added a sheaf of keeperships, baliwicks and stewardships all of which attracted a salary and fees.

The fruits of office were sensibly invested in property. He first took leases in Lincolnshire property from Lady Margaret's former estate in around 1519 when he married Jane Heckington the daughter of a well off local Gentleman. He then continued with his purchase of the reversion of Little Burghley, Burghley and neighbouring lands from Sir William Compton in 1527; but his real opportunity came with the Dissolution of the monasteries which, in five years, yielded him, in succession, Stamford nunnery, priory and friary, to which in 1544 he added the manor of Essendine, Rutland.

His son and heir was William. Just as his grandfather had ruthlessly used his connections to get Richard a place at court, so Richard Cecil manoeuvred his clever young son into St John's College Cambridge which had, of course, been founded by Lady Margaret Beaufort. Here he had as Tutor Thomas Smith, of whom more in a moment. But William Cecil never finished his studies as he fell in love with Mary Cheke, the sister of one of his tutors and, against his father's wishes, married her. After bearing him a son, Thomas, his first wife Mary died and less than two years later he remarried Mildred Cooke. The first marriage was a love match, the second was a dynastic leg up. Sir Anthony, Mildred's father, a noted scholar, was also one of Henry VIII's Gentlemen of the Privy Chamber, an important post that brought him into intimate contact with the king. After Henry VIII's death, in the reign of Edward VI he became one of Edward's tutors, but, as an evangelical, he spent most of Mary's reign abroad.

The young William Cecil now had two routes to court, through his father and also through his father-in-law. The young man came to the notice of Henry VIII who was so impressed that he was granted the reversion of the keepership of the writs and rolls in the court of common pleas, an office which he was to obtain under Edward VI.

It is worth pausing at this point in the story, for it was at court where the Boleyns and the Cecils must have met. We have no record of this, but Richard Cecil would have known Thomas Boleyn well both of them were in the King's Privy Chamber. At this juncture the Cecils were esquires to the richer and grander aristocratic Boleyns; Thomas Boleyns' blood coursed with aristocratic corpuscles from the marriage alliances his family had made; even in disgrace, his daughter's marriage to the king had irreversibly enriched the family and their wealth remained on a vast scale to the modest estates of the Lincolnshire Cecils.

Whatever gifts Thomas Boleyn had; they were not intellectual. The young William Cecil, however, was not only highly intelligent, but had been trained at Cambridge by some of the most brilliant minds of the age. After five years he left fluent in Greek and Latin, in French and Spanish, adroit at maths and schooled in political philosophy and rhetoric. Richard, his father, guided him into the Inns

of court where at Grey's Inn he entered in to the vocational part of his training – the end game was not to be a lawyer, but to be equipped to serve at court.

It was probably through his father in law that Cecil became secretary to Protector Somerset early in Edward VI reign. And it was working for Somerset that Cecil had his introduction to architecture. Edward Seymour, Duke of Somerset, was one of the most important architectural patrons of the mid sixteenth century. Although Somerset House on the Strand still bears his name, it was far from his only commission. Hilary Mantel has made his Wiltshire house Wolf Hall almost as famous in her fictional account of Henry VIII's reign. Of all his buildings Somerset Place, as it was then known, is the most important and, as the building was being conceived, his inner circle included three of the most interesting figures in the development of sixteenth century architecture in England; John Thynne was his building agent, who commissioned Longleat House, then there was Sir Thomas Smith, builder of Hill Hall, Essex who had taught William at Cambridge, and William Cecil himself. For these men, as for Seymour, architecture was to become a passion.

Sir Thomas Smith was appointed Clerk of the Privy Council and Master of Somerset's Court of Requests. Both bodies met at Somerset House. Cecil succeeded Smith at Somerset's Court of Requests and both became Secretaries of State. It is inconceivable that Thynne, Smith, Cecil and Seymour would not have discussed every detail of Somerset Place as it rose on the Strand. This house was designed to stand out, be radical, and be ahead of its time; it was an expression in stone of Somerset's wider world picture, of his political, religious and economic programme of reform.

Somerset Place must be seen in the context of increasing use of renaissance architectural elements beginning around 1515. In the teens and twenties this was driven by the availability of northern European craftsmen working in terracotta and in technological advances in moulding and firing. During the 1530s and '40s the impetus was maintained by an increasing flow of prints and books providing a rich new seam of inspiration. The Strand facade of Somerset Place represented, at the time, a new departure for English architecture. It introduced a treatment that, as bay windows, would be taken up at Longleat and elsewhere as a core component of Elizabethan design, but the most novel element was unquestionably the centrepiece, based on a triumphal arch. Triumphal arches were a fundamental ingredient of early renaissance architecture, based on an easily understandable antique concept and well-preserved originals.

Cecil managed to ride the turbulence of the mid Tudor Period changing allegiances and masters without losing his head and with only a brief spell in the Tower. His religious convictions caused him to withdraw from court under Mary but in 1550 he secured a post in the protestant household of Princess Elizabeth, becoming her surveyor.

By the provisions of Henry VIII's will Mary had received estates worth £4,000 a year and Elizabeth estates worth £3,000; Mary's were confirmed in 1547, Elizabeth, who was still a minor when her father died, had to wait until 1550 to come into hers. Amongst Elizabeth's lands were a number of royal houses – Hatfield, where her nursery was first established; Ashridge and Enfield and Collyweston, her grandmother's house in Northamptonshire, which I have already mentioned. In London she was granted the large and splendid house formerly belonging to the bishop of Durham, Durham Place. To the princess now passed responsibility for the repair and maintenance of these places and she delegated this to William Cecil as her Surveyor for a fee of £20 a year – so Cecil's first appointment under Elizabeth was essentially one concerned with real estate, and in particular Hatfield, Ashridge and Enfield, the houses she favoured.

Hatfield, which I shall return to later, was a very fine house much liked by Henry VIII who consistently borrowed it from the bishop of Ely to whom it belonged; eventually, in 1538, he acquired it himself. There was only one state suite in the house, on the south front overlooking the gardens and

approached by a great stair, and this must have been assigned to Elizabeth and here she had her regular meetings with Cecil and his deputy who undertook most of the tedious everyday tasks of looking after the princesses property interests.

Elizabeth had barely ever used Durham House and, in 1553, the duke of Northumberland engineered a swap whereby Elizabeth would have the duke of Somerset's former house, Somerset Place, while he would add Durham House to his personal estate. In this way Elizabeth came into the possession of the most modern and striking town house in London, sited strategically on the Strand. The only problem was that much of it was uninhabitable. Most of the interior fittings installed before Seymour's death had been removed and sold to pay his debts and the rest of the house was incomplete. To make up for this the Office of Works was instructed to finish the half-built palace. The considerable sum of £900 was spent on the Princess's new home, a place her surveyor, Cecil, knew well.

Mary died in November 1558 and Elizabeth was told, at Hatfield, where she had been based since 1555, that she was now queen. That very day she chose the two men who were to be the key relationships in her life: Robert Dudley, who became the earl of Leicester in 1564 and William Cecil who became Lord Burghley in 1571.

Now, Elizabeth was quite unlike her father. Henry had clearly defined ambitions and his ministers' task was to fulfil them. His daughter had no such programme, she was a pragmatist to the core, she waited on events, responding slowly and hesitantly, usually asking for and listening to William Cecil's advice, advice which she might or might not take. She had no passion for building. Even if she had, it would have been a strange thing for a woman who owned near 70 domestic residences to want more. Elizabeth was never a great patron of architecture; indeed, she struggled to maintain and modernise the royal estate she inherited. During the Elizabethan age architectural initiative shifted from the crown to the ministers in its service. These men's wealth came not though salaries (which were negligible), but through the profits of office and through gifts from the Crown. Of all of these servants the greatest was William Cecil.

Cecil always had a house at Burghley in Lincolnshire as it now is, but his focus was in London and he lived in a house in Cannon Row in Westminster very handily placed for access to Whitehall and the offices, courts and councils at Westminster. It was in this house that his elderly father died in 1553. As his wealth and confidence grew, he took the Rectory at Wimbledon on a long lease and here William based wife Mildred and brought up his son Thomas. Most wealthy men had a suburban residence where they could retire from business in London and Westminster, and although the Wimbledon Rectory was not a new house, it was large, well-sited and conveniently close to Westminster.

The house had a great hall, withdrawing room, parlour and study on the ground floor and above a long gallery off which there were ten rooms. The attics had quarters for the servants. There was a courtyard of service buildings including stabling for 14 horses; there was even a hawks' mews. Cecil had 20 servants who wore a blue livery bearing the Cecil badge. Maintaining the household was expensive, the kitchen bill was already some £200 a year.

While Wimbledon was convenient for Westminster a trip to Burghley was a major operation. In May 1557 the journey involved the household getting to London by boat and road and then the next morning travelling to Royston where they spent the night, the day after they dined at Huntingdon and reached Burghley at nightfall. For a man as busy as Cecil, visiting his country estates could not be on impulse. Nevertheless, in around 1573 Cecil decided to start building at Burghley a great country house. The impulse to do this had probably long existed but the trigger was almost certainly

his peerage in 1572 and the following year his appointment as Lord Treasurer and his receipt of the garter. Cecil now had the status and the cash to make architectural waves.

Unlike the Boleyns who had the resources to build a new house, if they had wanted, Cecil set out to build a new house on new ground. Also unlike the Boleyns, who traded on their aristocratic connections, and whose large fifteenth century piles proclaimed them as part of the establishment, Cecil had come from quite humble stock and although he had land, had no great mansion at its centre. Burghley House was an exercise in constructing a dynastic seat - the central act in his ambition to raise the Cecils from country gentry into the élite community of the fifty-odd hereditary nobles. In 1572 Cecil took his title from Burghley and was to be left to his eldest son, Thomas.

Physical building work was accompanied by a systematic amassing of local power, influence and assets. The estate which he built up centred on Stamford gave not only the income necessary for a peer but also a base for regional power. Cecil became steward and recorder of Stamford, steward of King's Lynn and Yarmouth, recorder of Boston, surveyor of royal lands in Lincolnshire, keeper of Rockingham Forest and Cliffe Park and steward of numerous royal estates in the area. He became lord lieutenant of Lincolnshire in 1587 and of Hertfordshire and Essex in the following year.

So, Burghley House was primarily intended to be the seat of a great aristocrat wielding power locally as landed magnates had done for centuries. It might also be the venue for great national events connected with his offices of state, but Burghley House was far from London and not at all convenient for ambassadors of delegations unless they followed the queen on progress. Although the queen was once invited to stay her plans changed at the last moment and the state bed at Burghley was one of the few aristocratic beds she never slept in.

I have already explained that Cecil was part of a small group of avant garde patrons of architecture in the circle of the Duke of Somerset, his position as Lord Treasurer meant that he was also effectively in charge of the royal works, the queen's building department. I'm not going to talk about this tonight, but Cecil was intimately involved in the details of royal building for forty years – in fact he was effectively minister for architecture. The importance of this was two-fold, first that he personally had access to the best architects and craftsmen: these were deployed on his own building projects. But second that he understood the functional requirements of a house that was effectively to be used as a royal palace – and Cecil houses were designed to operate as just that.

So the west front of Burghley was designed by one of the leading architects from the royal Office of Works, Henry Hawthorne, and emphasised traditional architectural and social values with gatehouse, towers, turrets and bay window; inside the great hall has a hammerbeam roof. The courtyard, however, is a masterly assemblage of classical elements focussed on an extraordinary tower of the orders. While more correct in its deployment of the classical orders of architecture than most later Elizabethan buildings, Burghley is still a melange of classical elements rather than a house that could have been built in contemporary France where adherence to the rules of classical architecture rather than just its decorative use was de rigeur.

The completed house, and it was built in phases up until about 1588, was large but the principal suite of state rooms was not royal. The great chamber and privy chamber were large rooms with deep bay windows, but there was no presence chamber, a key royal room, and the bedchamber had no direct access to the closet, another royal requirement. The gallery was spectacular and led to more rooms the use of which cannot be identified now. The house was extraordinarily splendid but was the house of a great aristocrat not a royal palace.

Given the extraordinary size and splendour of Burghley why did Cecil embark on building a second country house at Theobalds in 1563-4? I think it is not hard to explain. Cecil was now enormously

wealthy, it is difficult to give a reliable figure for his total income, but Lawrence Stone lists him among the five wealthiest landowners in the realm, worth between £5,400 and £7,200 in landed income. One contemporary report at his death gave a figure of £5,600, another £4,000. It hardly matters as these figures were enormous in contemporary values and did not include all the financial fruits of office. Cecil could afford to build and needed to for two reasons. The first was because he wanted a house closer to London. He hardly ever visited Burghley, over a hundred miles away, as his many duties meant he was glued to the court. A house within a day's ride of London would replace Wimbledon Manor as a suburban retreat that he could actually use. The second reason was again dynastic. Cecil had now had a second son by Mildred. Robert Cecil would, in due course, need a house as his first born, Thomas, would inherit Burghley, so Theobalds was begun for his eventual use.

Having purchased Theobalds in in 1563 he began a building programme which went on to 1585. Completed, the house consisted of three great courts, standing in a park 3 miles long with a circumference of 8 miles. This was not Cecil's original intention, the house and grounds were at first much smaller – but the Queen liked the place and wanted to come and stay and to accommodate the whole court, Theobalds had to be extended. The design was Burghley's own, and the house became a model consulted by the other great Elizabethan and Jacobean builders.

It was not the exterior that impressed visitors, it was the extraordinary series of interiors where curiosity, delight and spectacle created a theatre for the court. At the entrance was a huge bunch of grapes that gushed red and white wine, in the great chamber was a grotto with precious stones and figures of men women and wild beasts creeping through the bushes, while the ceiling was constructed as the sky at night with a mechanical sun which moved across it.

Theobalds was no normal house; it was to Elizabeth and Cecil what Hampton Court had been to Henry VIII and Wolsey. It was the architectural embodiment of their joint enterprise in running the country. Ownership was not the point, what was significant was the ability of minister and monarch to share in the fruits of office. Elizabeth liked the house a lot, visiting on each of eleven years after 1571; apparently, in 1583, she said that she 'was never in any place better pleased, and sure the house, garden and walks any compare with any delicate place in Italy'.

Her enthusiasm for the house led Cecil to start, in around 1572, the construction of a whole new courtyard to the west of the house to contain two sets of lodgings, one for the queen and a suite mirroring it for a future royal consort. The quadrangle was not completed before William Cecil died in 1598: the queen remained in her original lodgings on the south front and, of course, no consort was ever found. But what had been achieved by 1603 was a house of royal proportions – in reality far too large for Cecil's taste's or purse. It is likely that before it was finished Cecil was already hoping that he might pass the vast place onto the Crown.

Before moving on to the second generation, to Cecil's two sons, Thomas and Robert, I should mention that William Cecil flirted with building a great house in Chelsea in 1595-6 and in 1582 bought Pymmes Manor in Edmonton for his second son Robert. It was near to Theobalds and provided a home for him and his wife Elizabeth and their growing family of children close to their eventual home.

Pausing now to take stock it will be seen that William had elevated his family vastly above his father's state amassing a portfolio of great houses set in huge landholdings. But perhaps William Cecil's greatest achievement was transferring his offices to his son Robert. Robert was not a natural born courtier. In an age where a fine leg was the first step on a ladder to preferment the hunchbacked Robert, only 5' 4" was not an obvious star. Famously Queen Elizabeth called him "my pygmy", and James I nicknamed him "my little beagle". But behind the jests was huge respect for a man who had inherited not only his father's posts but his genius.

Robert Cecil was one of the key architects of James I accession in 1603 and welcomed him to Theobalds just before his entry into his new capital. James was blown away by the size and splendour of the house and by its large- well-stocked hunting park. After his first stay in 1603 another nine royal visits followed in only four years including a lavish entertainment for Christian IV of Denmark in 1606. These visits demonstrated to the king that Theobalds was ordered and regular, modern and elegant with a disciplined arrangement of royal rooms, quite unlike the Tudor houses of state. It also was set in newly laid out pleasure gardens and integrated with a large hunting park which Cecil had formed enclosing former adjacent common lands. Most attractive of all, perhaps was its location, just 14 miles from Westminster - a German tourist claimed that from the roof of the great hall he could see the Tower of London. Sometime in late 1606 James began negotiations for its acquisition and the following May the house was transferred to the king in exchange for lands that included the manor of Hatfield.

The acquisition of a new royal house was a rare event and Ben Jonson devised an entertainment to accompany the handover. On 22 May the king and queen, and the whole court had a celebratory dinner and then entered the great gallery; as they took their seats they saw a white curtain dividing the room. This was suddenly drawn aside, and a 'gloomy obscure place' was revealed covered in black silk where a single shaft of light illuminated a figure representing the genius of the household. He sat dejected, his cornucopia drooping, his wrath lying on the ground, his eyes downcast. Addressing the court, he complained that he must 'change the loved lord he had' for another. Suddenly the black silk was whisked away, and a scene of dazzling brightness was revealed, and the figure of Mercury announced that his new master was to be 'the greatest king, the fairest queen'. The genius's spirits were revived by this hearty news and the entertainment ended with a choir singing 'Oh blessed change, and no less glad than strange, where we that lose have won, and for a beam enjoy the sun!'

Although only the merest fragments remain of this once vast mansion a survey made of it in 1650 by the parliamentary commissioners, together with a few surviving drawings allow us to reconstruct what it would have looked like in the 1620s. The house was approached by a causeway from the main London to St Albans road; this opened into a walled forecourt with buildings (that were converted into household lodgings) to its north and south. Behind this were two brick-built courts divided by a central range containing the great hall and stair. The entrance front was deliberately low allowing a view of the towering mass of the great hall crowned with a clock tower in the middle of the house. As was usual, the royal lodgings were on the sunny south front; they were approached through the great hall and up Cecil's grand stair that gave access, left and right, to the two royal suites. The queen's lodgings, on the east were those that had been used by Queen Elizabeth; James chose the newer lodgings on the west that William Cecil had begun, and which Robert had completed after his father's death.

The king had a vast presence chamber stripped of the whimsical decorations of William Cecil and richly panelled, this led to a privy chamber, withdrawing room and bedchamber and, beyond the usual closets was a gallery, at the end of which a broad stair led down to the gardens where the king could walk, or take his horse. A large room on the north of the house was allocated as the council chamber and next to it was a room for the king's clerks. The queen's lodgings were similarly arranged and at the end of her privy gallery was a lodging that had been used by Queen Elizabeth's favourites, but now became her closet, an arrangement mirrored later at Denmark House. In the Royal Collection there is a painting of Charles I, Henrietta Maria and his Lord Chamberlain, the earl of Pembroke, in an interior likely to be the great gallery at Theobalds.

Contemporary visitors almost run out of superlatives in attempting to describe the gardens. A particular feature was a series of canals, or moats that were cut round the house that allowed people to take a water tour of the gardens in a small boat.

Robert Cecil's transition from Elizabethan to Jacobean royal secretary was far from guaranteed and in the years after 1601 he was careful to build himself an insurance policy. He entered into a frenzy of land speculation becoming one of the largest purchasers of crown lands then flooding on to the market to fund the war in Ireland. As well as spending some £30,000 in 1601–2, he borrowed heavily from the City to enable him to scoop up prime property on the market. What this meant is that if all went according to plan, and his position in government continued, he would be well placed to entertain and impress the new king, but if, his plans failed and he lost office in the new regime, he could retire to his estates, plant his gardens, go hawking and pass his estate on to his son William.

One of his purchases was the Manor of Cranborne in Dorset which he bought as a hunting lodge. It was his first independent purchase of an important estate and it was a fine acquisition of a house which had ancient royal origins. When, in 1604, James I created Robert a viscount, he took Cranborne as his title. Soon James was visiting Robert at Cranborne for the hunting and Cecil decided to remodel the medieval manor house. Cecil asked the Somerset architect and mason William Arnold to take charge of the work. Arnold is one of the lesser known geniuses of Jacobean design, responsible for Montacute house and Wadham College Oxford as well as Cranborne Manor. We know Cecil spent hours closeted away with Arnold devising the scheme. It was a fascinating design which preserved the essentials of the medieval plan, its buttresses, battlements and corbelling and duplicated and embellished them to create a neo-medieval hunting lodge. Italianate loggias at front and back were the only stylistic concessions to the contemporary. Like his father at Burghley he wanted his house to be referenced back to the feudal past as well as containing all possible modern comforts.

In the same perilous period when his own job security was in question Robert also concentrated his energies on building himself a house in London. His father had been given a mansion on the Strand by Queen Elizabeth, this replaced the modest house on Cannon Row as his main private London residence - although of course he had lodgings at Whitehall and in all the queen's houses as well. What became Cecil House, and then Burghley House, was an early Tudor city mansion which had been enlarged by William. A surviving plan of it at Burghley House shows it to have been of some size, certainly large enough for Cecil to host a vast dinner party with the queen and the French Dauphin in 1581. The plan shows the ground floor and so it is not known how so many people were squeezed in without using every room.

Robert had a wing of this House during his father's life, but it was inherited by Thomas, his elder half-brother leaving Robert without a London residence. In 1599 Robert Cecil bought a house from Lord Herbert lying between the river and the Strand close to the Savoy. Like his father before him Robert drafted in the royal Office of Works to design and manage its expansion. The Surveyor of Works Simon Basil was in charge and was cheekily given orders to prioritise Cecil's building works over the kings. There were several phases of expansion, but in the Bodleian library there are plans which can probably be said to represent the house in around 1612.

Robert Cecil was probably very glad to get rid of Theobalds, which had become a behemoth guzzling money but its transfer to the king left him only with Pymmes House near London. Therefore, he decided to build himself an out-of-town residence at Hatfield, one of the properties transferred to him in exchange for Theobalds. Robert, like his father was a hands-on patron and during the five years that Hatfield House took to build he stayed in Hatfield parsonage with his wife and children so he could supervise the work going on next door. There was no one designer and Robert took a major role in all the decisions, but Simon Basil from the Office of Works and the architect Robert

Lyminge were key in formulating the design. The house cost the colossal sum of £38,000 and Cecil died in 1612 just before it was completed.

The plan and the elevation of Hatfield owe a great deal to Theobalds. The use of brick with stone dressings, the big square blocks at the corners, joined by a lower section, the architrave, frieze, and cornice running round the building, the balustrade and the flat roofs, the little domed turrets, the central clock tower and the open loggia, all take their cue from Theobalds, where Liming had worked and Robert had, of course, lived. There was a sense in which the house was almost a tribute to William Cecil. In 1611, when Robert had moved in, a portrait of his father adorned the book-room or study in his private suite, and one of Mildred, his mother, hung in his bedroom.

A visit to Hatfield gets you as close as you can get to the world of the early Cecils. The astonishing grand stair finished in 1611, the great chamber containing the marble fireplace carved by Maximilian Colt, the king's carver that sports a bronze statue of James I presented to Cecil by the king himself are more or less as Robert Cecil would have known them. But what is, in my opinion, one of the most gorgeous rooms in England is Cecil's long gallery. It has been altered, but not to its detriment and still has its original ceiling and fireplaces.

William Cecil seems to have decided quite early on that in Thomas, his eldest son and heir, the future of the family did not reside. He famously was to say that he was 'meet only to keep a tennis court'. Yet Thomas had a successful career under Elizabeth as a soldier and courtier and, after his father's death, as a regional magnate based at Burghley. On the accession of James I, he was first made a member of the privy council and in 1605, at 62 years old, earl of Exeter, at the same time as Robert was created earl of Salisbury. Thanks to his father's amassing of property in Lincolnshire and Northamptonshire Thomas was never short of money and his marriage to Dorothy Neville brought him an inheritance when her father died without male heir.

Through the Nevilles came Snape Castle in Yorkshire. This was an extremely useful inheritance as Thomas received a Commission from The Queen to be lord president of York (or president of the council of the north as it is sometimes known), a job that came with special orders to hunt down Catholic recusants. Snape was a convenient base for his duties and in the 1580s Thomas undertook a remodelling there. The core of the place was medieval and just at his half-brother had done at Cranborne Thomas opted for a re-medievalising of the building rather than an outright modernisation. Four battlemented corner towers give the castle its distinctive skyline, two of the towers are Thomas's.

Thomas was also a patron of modern architecture and commissioned two of the most interesting houses of his generation. The first was at Wimbledon where Thomas had grown up. In 1575 his father granted him the family house there and the following year he bought the nearby Manor house, its gardens and park from Sir Christopher Hatton. Thomas started from scratch choosing a new location for the house cut into the side of a hill with spectacular views and rising ground to the rear. On the terraces behind the house were 20 acres of superb gardens. The mansion was brick with stone dressings of asymmetrical H plan; the individual components – the bay windows, capped stair towers and flat parapet were familiar Cecil architectural devices, but the compactness of plan and majesty of setting were remarkable. The house was not large; only one room deep, its plan was U shaped with the east arm containing galleries, the central section a hall, great chamber and dining room and the western arm containing Cecil's apartments. Perhaps the most remarkable feature was the chapel set in the middle of the house facing the main stair. An open-work screen ensured that everyone would hear prayers being said each day. This was a chapel suited to a persecutor of papists.

The second new building was on the Burghley estate about a mile from the house and was a retreat where Thomas and his friends could stay to hunt, racehorses, play bowls, eat, drink and be merry. The main building, which was attached to two service ranges was in the shape of a Greek cross, one of the lateral wings containing a staircase. It was well kitted up for dining with extensive kitchens and cellars. The external form was one of the then fashionable devices where the plan, tightly constrained, made a letter or formal shape. The architectural details were harvested from Serlio's architectural treatise. The architect is unknown but Thomas, one of the richest men in England, surely was having fun here himself.

Robert, who had never enjoyed good health died in 1612 and his elder half-brother outlived him dying in 1623. Despite a determined effort in 1611–12 to reduce his debts by selling unwanted estates, on his deathbed Robert still owed the huge sum of £37,867. He had borrowed £61,000 over the previous four years, more than half from the London merchants. This he had largely invested in buying more land at Hatfield and Cranborne to make them centres of suitably large estates. Yet his asset base was huge and within two years his executors had cleared his debts and his son William was in possession of one of the largest landed incomes in the land. Now handed down father to son the Salisbury estates at Hatfield and Cranborne remain in the hands of his successors cherished and enjoyed by the family and visitors alike. Likewise, Burghley, in the hands of a family trust retains its ancestral connections with its builder. So, this is what the big pictures looks like.

In my first lecture this year I showed how the Boleyns amassed huge landholdings by brilliant marriages to heiresses and consolidated them through royal service and grants of land and privileges. The story of the Cecils is calculating and systematic in an entirely different way. Without the blood to marry into great wealth two brilliant men, father and son, systematically invested the fruits of royal service in land. They bought, built, amassed and consolidated. On the strength of their many offices, reinforced by palpable royal favour, they borrowed to buy still more. Both William and Robert looked to the future - they were dynasty building, creating houses and estates that have endured for 400 years.

The approach to building was different too. The Boleyns were eager to stress heir ancient lineage, their aristocratic descent. Owing property was dynastic affirmation. They wanted their houses to look old, any modernisation was carefully judged to bring modern comforts within a pre-existing structure. Of course, personal preference may have had an influence, but we should remember that the Boleyns were rich enough to commission great new houses, but they did not.

The Cecils came from much more humble stock - a fact that their opponents and detractors were keen to point out. The family was out to establish itself, not only through architecture but through the totality of an estate with a capital mansion at its heart. Those mansions made references to the ancient feudal rights and obligations of a landowner – such as the great hall at Burghley but were essentially modern houses built by new men. Yes, they were nouveau riche, and built in styles that made that clear.

Extremely intelligent and ambitious William and Robert knew they were laying the foundations of a dynasty and part of their extraordinary success was that their great houses became, in their lifetime, leaders in style. Without the Crown leading fashion, the Cecils and their richest contemporaries themselves made fashion and did not just follow it.

I made the point in my first lecture that it was to women that the Boleyns owed their wealth. Their characters are anonymous today, but we should not doubt their formidable influence in the family. The Cecils were also blessed with remarkable women, one heiress, but crucially Mildred, William Cecil's second wife, who was one of the most brilliant women of her age and who played a crucial role in partnership with William and in the education of Robert.

What ties the Boleyns and the Cecils together is their faith in the value of landed estates and property to secure long term security and achieve upward social mobility. What separates them is the methods they used to achieve it. In my next lecture we look at the Duke of Monmouth and his descendants and ask when you start at the top, is the only way down?