

Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

The English Country House Chapel: Building a Protestant Tradition, by Annabel Ricketts

Journal Item

How to cite:

West, Susie (2009). The English Country House Chapel: Building a Protestant Tradition, by Annabel Ricketts. The Journal of British Studies, 48(3) pp. 753–754.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2009 The University of Chicago Press

Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:
<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1086/604759>

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk

Annabel Ricketts. *The English Country House Chapel, Building a Protestant Tradition*. Reading: Spire Books Ltd, 2007. Pp348. \$90 HB

This book was long-hoped for by those who knew of Annabel Ricketts' research and then of her early death. As the prelims explain, Annabel was an experienced researcher and teacher who undertook her PhD as a mature candidate before her death in 2003. Her husband Simon Ricketts then acted as editor to turn the thesis into this handsome book. This lucid account is generously illustrated with plans, photographs of interiors and details and historic images, particularly with 35 colour plates, although a list of illustrations would have been welcome.

The structure of the book follows a chronological exploration of the changing circumstances of early modern English private chapels, to be found within the country houses of the gentry and aristocracy. The 150 years following the Reformation in England (brought about by Henry VIII's severance from Rome as a matter of politics rather than conscience) saw significant experimentation by country house owners in the layout of their houses. Dr Ricketts' investigation of just one space in the total plan is a powerful means of bringing some precision to basic questions. These include who opted to maintain a chapel within their houses, how they ordered, furnished and whether they consecrated the space and why these practices shifted over time. She reminds us that the houses with chapels that we may visit today tend to present 'a fully Protestant solution' adopted in the late seventeenth century; one summed up on the dust jacket photograph of the chapel at Chatsworth, Derbyshire, as one of the most lavish aristocratic survivals. It is a standard technique, but no less useful, to take such an apparent 'end point' and excavate its origins, argued here to be a series of tortuous transformations. Tortuous, of course, because these spaces invoke religion and have to be understood within the context of contested practices arbitrated by the State.

The narrative tackles two distinct academic fields, architectural history and ecclesiastical history, and unifies them in a material history of religious practice. It remains, on balance, a work of architectural history whose original contribution comes from the use of archives and field work to search out lost and extant chapels. The limitations of the evidence are fully acknowledged, from the unknowable omission of inventory takers to the unexplainable variations in practices from owners who otherwise share a social profile. Stronger examples reappear rather frequently, because they must serve to exemplify possible answers to a range of questions. However, a great strength is in the use of plans to set out the fundamental architectural question about where these spaces were at different periods. The plans also allow a clearer look at how these spaces changed shape over time. These are basic points for architectural historians, but the religious requirements of access and orientation are complex throughout the period and understanding them in three dimensions (as a house plan's two dimensions encourage us to attempt) is a challenge. It is helpful to remember that the key to the lettering of the plans is in the prelims, rather than in the captions; the methodology behind the key is not discussed in the published text, but it does position the viewer within the chapel, looking out to the rest of the house. Thus the plans have a consistent approach to identifying spatial relations between the chapel and the other main rooms, such as the great hall, parlour, great stairs or kitchen, and indeed external spaces. This comparative approach provides the evidence for how the chapel space fits in to the bigger changes that the

English country house plan undergoes, from a late medieval courtyard form to the compact, symmetrical form of the 1680s.

The first two short chapters offer a brief overview of themes to be pursued in the chronological chapters. The first is an apparent dichotomy between status and spirituality, as possible answers to why the elite would wish to maintain private chapels. Not surprisingly, the answer usually involves both motives, nuanced by evolving Protestant responses to conspicuous consumption at home and to the example of continental Baroque extravagance. This latter point is explored in the final chapter's use of Chatsworth's chapel as an acceptably English Protestant equivalent of counter-Reformation magnificence. Perhaps this account would have been restructured, or amplified, if Dr Ricketts had been able to rewrite the thesis into a book. It is ambitious in tackling decorative schemes but lacks space to support a richer account of the emergence of specifically English Protestant anxieties about the relationship of art to religion. The second brief chapter is an extremely useful summary of the regulation of private chapels through acts of parliament and frameworks within the Church of England, the appointment of chaplains and the issue of whether chapels needed to be consecrated; all points necessary to remember in subsequent discussions.

The four chronological chapters then take the early Tudor, Elizabethan, early Stuart and Restoration divisions of the 150 year span, setting out the evidence for location within the house plan, external appearance, decorative schemes and discussing all this in the relevant socio-cultural contexts. For example, the early Stuart chapter tackles a resurgence of private chapel construction ahead of the time more usually associated with high visibility of observance under Charles I. Some of these spaces are clearly Puritan in intent, centred on the pulpit rather than the altar: how different they look to the 'serene picture' of the typical later seventeenth-century layout that Ricketts sets up as the stereotype to be deconstructed at the beginning of the book. It is rather like walking in to different Christian denomination spaces now, an experience to be understood synchronically but of course also representative of different solutions to how to worship, formed diachronically.

The additional value of this book comes from the gazetteer, which lists the chapels that Dr Ricketts considered while researching her thesis, built or altered between 1485 and 1700. It is not intended to be an exhaustive index of country house chapels, looking outwards to urban, pre-Reformation or Welsh examples as it does. It is a useful summary of the examples used in the main text with additional sites, and their patrons, dates, and literature. Turning to find a favourite house may reveal omissions, but the pleasure of engaging with this book is that it prompts new reflections on old assumptions. It is a matter of regret that readers will not be able to share their own discoveries with the author.

Susie West
Art History Department
The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK