

Highfield Hall, A Brief Historical Assessment

Prepared for The Cape Cod Conservatory of Music and Art, April 5, 1977

by Maximilian L. Ferro, AIA, RIBA

Josephine and Josiah K. Lilly III gave Highfield Hall and Tanglewood to the Cape Cod Conservatory of Music and Art in 1972. The Conservatory subsequently hired an architect to help it decide what to do with these two mansions. Tanglewood was demolished in 1977. Highfield Hall barely escaped the same fate. The editors of Sprintsail wish to thank Mr. Ferro for his work. What follows is an edited version of his report on the condition of Highfield Hall in 1977.

George Moses, author of *Ring Around the Punchbowl*, showed considerable architectural sensitivity when he described Highfield as "a sybaritic dream come true, a model of spacious, gracious living...." He goes on to narrate how Frank Beebe loved music, fashioning his entertainments around it, and how the stair landing and even the upstairs hall, actually called the Music Room, were favored sites for musical groups at Beebe parties. Nor are these the only obvious places for music: the long dining room now has a good site for a piano, the ballroom niche fairly cries out for a chamber ensemble, and even the front library and huge hall seem quite suited to music appreciation. My first impression of Highfield Hall, like Moses', was one

of a magnificent public building, one simply begging for masses of elegantly clad guests moving to and fro to the strains of equally elegant music.

The Exterior

The very typical and harmonious exterior of the Hall has unfortunately been quite severely savaged in recent times. What used to be the romantic, rustic silhouette of a great Queen Anne Revival house, one

of the greatest vernacular styles in American architectural history, has now been given a rather clumsy 'southern plantation' look, executed with all the sensitivity one might expect from a restaurant chain. Apparently, this strange modification was perpetrated only in 1952 by a Mr. Ter Heun, on whom no vestige of Beebe taste had rubbed off,



Highfield Hall, summer 2001. Photo by Susan Shephard.

and the actual work was performed by a local carpenter without benefit of architectural design. With the new porch, the house, which had historically been buff with dark chocolate brown trim, was painted a garish pseudo-colonial white. It is interesting to note, at this juncture, that no color is less colonial than white, which actually became popular in the Greek Revival period (1820-1860), and has been with us ever since, at various intervals.

The Queen Anne revival (1875-1895) was a counter-cultural attempt to recapture the naivete of architecture before classical principles of balance and decoration were fully understood. Though its name is a misnomer (such principles WERE understood by the time Anne became queen), the style mimics English architecture of the interface between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, when elements of both existed side by side.

Highfield Hall still boasts the tall, modeled chimneys, the steep and irregular roofline, the stickwork and varied textures, and several other hallmarks of the Queen Anne style. Under the added porch, the picturesque silhouette remains, and it is to be hoped that someday the house will be restored to its original appearance.

The Hall

The great hall is one of Highfield's most impressive spaces. It has superb dark stained hardwood floors, a three foot dado of vertical panels, gilt sconces, and large eight-panel doors to flanking rooms. All of this woodwork was presumably originally dark-stained, with white walls above, giving a baronial appearance far removed from today's canary yellow hue. Somewhat eclectically, both doors and panels are chamfered, a feature associated not with

Queen Anne but with the quasi-contemporary Stick Style. Also noteworthy in the Hall is the stained glass over the entrance which is in the geometric taste of the period.



Narrow stained/painted glass window in the dining room. This "surprise" window had been sheetrocked over in the 1950s, and was only discovered a year ago. Photo by Susan Shephard.

In the Hall, we can clearly see a line in the flooring which relates to the modern porch. While the house originally seems to have projected just as far forward centrally before the porch was added, both library and dining room were clearly extended to be flush with the center. As for the hall itself, it seems to have been reworked within the same envelope: probably the line in the floor corresponds to an earlier vestibule, now removed and replaced with a closet and powder room. Please note that this end of the room has different sconces, not really matching the others in either style or color. In our energy conscious era, the replacement of the vestibule would be a high priority.

Lastly, there is visible plaster damage on the ceiling about one third of the way into the room, and readhesion of this plaster should be done promptly if worse problems

are to be avoided. This can be simply done by pushing loose laths back up and refastening them to the joists above with countersunk screws, which can then be hidden by spackling.



Detail of library mantel. This was the only unpainted mantel in the building. Photo by Liza Fox.

The Dining Room

The dining room has been adversely affected by the addition of the new porch, at least to the extent that its former square configuration has given way to a less logical proportion. The original fireplace wall of the room is composed of a symmetrical arrangement of doors flanking the mantel, though the doors are of dissimilar size. The mantel and mirrored overmantel are pure Queen Anne, though these and the doors should not be painted but stained according to the aesthetic precepts of the period. The lengthening of the room occasioned by the addition of the new porch has borne mixed fruit: the bow windows are ghastly, worthy of the least discerning

lumber yard, but the collage scenic is quite intriguing, and might be worthy of careful conservation. Such a contradiction is common in matters of preservation, which are seldom settled without compromise. Whether or not this wallpaper is retained does, after all, directly affect whether the vulgar new porch should be forgiven. In any case, we can state without fear of controversy that the new paper, applied over an earlier grass-patterned cloth, needs at least some urgent localized readhesion before present tears become too extensive to be dealt with. The present blue-green color of the dining room, Federal in flavor, is quite palatable in spite of its later origins.

The Library

The library would have been quite a small room, probably a drawing room or reception room, before the addition of the front porch. Yet, since old and new photos show no change in chimney location, there seems to be no chance that rooms were differently arranged. The mantel is a fine one, with a late 19th century tile surround, but belongs stylistically to the Georgian Revival in spite of its curious dark wood finish. I suspect it is a 20th century embellishment, something that could be easily tested by inspecting one of the nails with which it is fastened. Also in this room, I noted that the tiles that form the fireback in the fireplace are in need of replacement, that shelves probably contemporary with the new porch have been removed, and that early air registers to the basement have been blocked up and their grilles are gone.

The Ballroom

This is the largest and most difficult room to interpret. Frankly, an exact determination of its age would require more careful investigation well beyond the scope of this brief report. I would want to take several more hours looking at nails, counting paint lay-

ers microscopically, and examining carpentry details in comparison to the rest of the mansion. More important at the moment is to simply state that it is a very fine room in many respects, displaying a still naive Georgian Revival decorative vocabulary yet tinged with Queen Anne peculiarities. My emotional tendency would be to suspect that the ballroom was remodeled at the turn of the present century or in its early decades, probably superseding two earlier communicating parlors. This was probably done before the remodeling and enlargement of Tanglewood, and may have been its inspiration.

There are now two fireplaces in the room, one at either end, both very Adamesque and both with tile surrounds, one Delft and one Majolica. As at Tanglewood, some of the more elaborate reliefs are plaster, and are beginning to chip. Of particular note are the wood dado with raised field paneling, the exquisite cornice with triglyphs, and the museum-quality door trim, which makes the transition between dado and cornice in a most

tectonic way, visually supporting the latter. The top of the door trim, in fact, blends into a mantel-like lintel form decorated with a festooned panel.

The projecting bay is trabeated with Ionic pilasters supporting the cornice, though these are somewhat squat by Georgian Revival standards. More perturbing is the very odd juxtaposition of the very fine shell-motif corner cupboard with a smaller and less sensitive china cabinet: so strange a duality of purpose is more reminiscent of the Queen Anne desire to startle the onlooker than of Georgian Revival refinement. Nothing but praise, on the other hand, is necessary with respect to the other built-in and centrally located cupboard. The colors in the room, a very Adamesque blue-green with cream trim, are very apt, and should not be changed. All in all, this is the best room in the house, a joy to visit.

Ballroom Porch

In the exterior corner formed by ballroom and den is an attractive little origi-



Ballroom fireplace with majolica tile surround and all original woodwork and trim. Note the elaborate ceiling moulding. Photo by Susan Shephard.



Breakfront top and ceiling moulding detail, ballroom. Photo by Liza Fox.



Mantelpiece detail, ballroom. Photo by Liza Fox.

nal porch which has since been enlarged in a rather insensitive manner. Again, restoration of this element would be a simple matter at some future date.

The Stair

The majestic front staircase is fully worthy of the scale and grandeur of the house. It boasts a large,



Trim detail, ballroom door. Photo by Liza Fox.

massive lower newell, with smaller secondary newells and chamfered balusters. Like the doors on the first two floors, the stair should really be classified as Stick Style rather than Queen Anne, contributing to the not unattractive eclecticism of the whole.

At the first landing, we find three little but incredibly lovely windows of relatively modern floral pattern stained glass. Among all of the house's laudable features, these are my sentimental favorite, and it is tempting though probably incorrect to ascribe this little embellishment to Helen Gertrude Randall,

the glamorous crook who was the mansion's most colorful past occupant. I will try to learn more about



Mantelpiece detail, ballroom. Photo by Liza Fox.

this very unusual stained glass, and will let you know what I discover.

The upstairs stair hall, apparently used as a music room during past entertainments, has now been debased by a great deal of the cheapest possible modern shelving, again an easy matter to remedy at some future date.

The Bedchambers

I was only able to get into two of the second floor bedrooms, as others were locked, but this should be sufficient to our present purpose. These were the rooms above the library and den respectively. The former, probably the master bedroom, has a simple



Stair landing, stained glass window. Photo by Susan Shephard.

Federal mantel, framing what appears to be an earlier, original Queen Anne fireplace opening. The real surprise is to be found in the bathroom, which has a much finer Queen Anne fireplace with overmantel set with five splendid tiles of flowers. To have so grand a fireplace in a bathroom is certainly unusual, and I am tempted to think that it relates to a rearrangement of rooms that left an original bedroom fireplace in this odd location, but, as I could not get into adjacent rooms, this must remain a matter of conjecture.

The second bedchamber I visited is the one above the den, and this was a more straightforward example of Queen Anne elegance. Its mantel is set with three lovely round tiles of classical portraits, and there is a surround of fine dark green tiles, very popular during the third quarter of the 19th century. This room, which has a modernized bath/dressing room, also has a splendid little piece of Victorian Gothic stained

glass, probably original to the house and floral in motif. Over the kitchen wing there are more bedrooms, still with Stick Style doors but simplified trim, which may have housed the principal servants.

The Third Floor

The third floor is reached by the service stair, which does need some plaster repairs at this level. This floor was for the exclusive use of the staff, and contains their former bedrooms, work rooms and storage rooms. Heat was supplied by a single stove in the hallway, and the stovepipe hole is still visible through the skylight which lights this interior corridor. To bring heat into the individual bedrooms,

their doors, which are in the retrograde Italianate style, have louvered lower panels. This I found to be an interesting and eloquent social document. There is now a great deal of paint peeling on this unheated floor, but it is a tribute to the soundness of Highfield Hall that here, as elsewhere, there is little that could be considered major damage.



Detail of Japanesque mantel in front north bedroom, second floor, 2002. Photo by Susan Shephard.

The Basement

The basement is huge and complex. It was once largely finished, with plaster walls and ceilings, but much plaster has been ripped down in the process of introducing new wiring, new plumbing, and other periodic practical modifications. There are many rooms: a coal bin, laundry, butlery with shelves for bottles, toilet, workshops, garden room, and storage places. There are two little new oil burners, and the ghost of a massive old octopus of a coal-fired warm air furnace. In one enormous storage room, hundreds of old theatre seats await final decay.

Again, nothing in the basement appeared cause for alarm during my brief visit. There was instead an air of abandon and disrepair which could easily yield to the care which could accompany renewed intensive use. I might mention in passing that such a spacious

basement, with due remodeling, might prove a viable location for batteries of practice studios, either stick-built or prefabricated. There are some reasonably effective modular units produced by the Wenger corporation on the market, whose weakest point, the lack of floating floor construction, can be best neutralized in basement installations.

Conclusion

In a sense, the conclusion of this report was prestatd in its introduction. Highfield Hall is a very fine mansion of the Queen Anne Revival period which still retains much of its original beauty and historical appeal.

Maximilian L. Ferro, AIA, RIBA
The Preservation Partnership
Natick, MA



Highfield Hall restoration: preliminary design of proposed entry elevation by architect Noah Greenburg, August 2001.