

KS2/3
Aston Hall
A Jacobean House

Background Information

Aston Hall was built for Sir Thomas Holte between 1618 and 1635. Sir Thomas was a local landowner and dignitary. He had received, at first a knighthood, and then a baronetcy from James I and had the house built as a statement of his wealth and importance. It was put up on the largest of his manors at Aston, overlooking the church and small village.

The Hall was approached through an avenue of trees leading from the main Birmingham to Lichfield road: the visitor would have looked up towards an imposing brick creation with tall turrets, glittering windows and broken skyline. A short stretch of chestnuts have been planted in recent times to give some idea of the effect. Two lodges were built in front of a large courtyard: one housed the gardeners and the other the porters.

Important guests would have been greeted in the Entrance Hall and taken to a guest suite of rooms on the first floor - Great Chamber (Great Dining Room), Best Lodging Chamber (King Charles' Room), Withdrawing Room (Green Drawing Room) and Long Gallery. These rooms still retain much original Jacobean work in plaster, wood and stone. A beautiful, geometrically designed garden would have been laid out on the south side to be viewed from the windows or strolled in on fine days.

Located on the north side were kitchens, larders, pastry, buttery, stillroom and sculleries. The stable block still remains but a range of buildings running at right angles to the stables, and parallel with the house, has been demolished. These buildings would have been made up of a bake-house, brew-house, wash-house, milk-house, cheese house and wool-house.

Kennels for hunting dogs and mews for falcons were further essentials for the wealthy Stuart gentleman and would have been found on the north side too.

Sir Thomas Holte lived in the house with his second wife and any remaining alive and unmarried children (he had 16 children but only 6 lived to adulthood).

In October 1642 (two months after Charles I declared war on his parliament and their supporters) Sir Thomas was honoured with a visit by King Charles I as he made his way south from Shrewsbury where he had been raising troops to serve the Royalist cause. Shortly after leaving Aston Hall the king's army was engaged in one of the first big battles at Edgehill. Aston Hall itself was attacked in December 1643 by a Parliamentarian force from Coventry. Royalist soldiers had been sent from the garrison at Dudley Castle to help defend the house and earthworks were hastily thrown up in the park. Following a 3 day bombardment Sir Thomas surrendered. A cannonball hole in the staircase provides a lasting reminder of the attack.

Aston Hall was lived in as a home for nearly 250 years. It was opened as a museum in 1858.

A Jacobean House: KS3 Worksheet

Outside

The overall appearance of the east front of Aston Hall still appears much as it did when the house was first built.

- Why was Aston Hall built on a slight hill?

- What is it built from?

- How can you tell it is a grand house?

Entrance Hall

A grand entrance room and the servants dining hall.

- In what way is this first room decorated to impress guests entering the house?

- Note the clue that tells us the servants ate in here?

- The picture of Sir Thomas Holte is a useful source of information. What does it tell us?

Great Parlour

The furniture is Jacobean (from the time of James I).

- How would you describe it?

- How would the chairs have been made more comfortable?

- What covers the floor?

The Main Stairs

This is one of the first cantilevered staircases ever to be put into a grand house and the only Jacobean stairs now left that rises to the second floor.

- Why do you think these stairs were expensive to build?

First Floor Landing

- Why is the stair post a reminder of the seventeenth century Civil War ?

- From which direction did the cannonball come?

The Great Dining Room

This room underwent changes in both the 18th and 19th centuries.

- How can you tell this room was built to impress?

Look at the large portrait of Charles I and his family.

- What symbols of kingship have been portrayed?
- What else is the picture intended to show?

King Charles' Bedroom

This room is much changed from Stuart times: only the Jacobean plasterwork ceiling and frieze remain. It is still possible to consider the king getting ready for bed.

- How would the king wash with no bathroom?
- What would he have used for a toilet ?
- What evidence shows this is an important room?

Green Drawing Room

Originally this 'withdrawing room' was for sitting, playing cards or eating the sweetmeat course at the end of a meal. The ceiling and fireplace are from the time the house was built.

- What materials have been used in the ceiling and fireplace?

Long Gallery

It was very fashionable to have a long room like this to 'promenade' (walk) up and down.

- List the Jacobean features of this room.

The Red Room

The fireplace and much of the furniture comes from Stuart times.

- Describe the furniture.

- Why does the fireplace look typically Jacobean(of the time)?

Dick's Garret

The Civil War armour is a reminder of the time when the Royalist soldiers were quartered here.

? Who do you think usually slept here?

? Write down how this room differs from the grand rooms on the ground and first floors.

The Kitchen

There have been many changes to this part of the house. There would have been a number of rooms for preparing food: kitchens, pastry, stillroom, buttery, larders and so on.

- Look at the walls and note down the evidence of the outside wall of the original kitchen.

- Look in the Servants' Hall (created in the late C17th or early C18th) can you find further evidence of the first kitchen?