The Province House: English and Netherlandish Forms in Gables and Chimneys

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ONE of the most outstanding houses in seventeenth-century Boston, if not in all New England, was the Peter Sergeant (later Province) House, 1676-1679, the last remnants of which were swept away in a demolition of 1922.[1] Although it has been recognized that its style owed a general debt to certain aspects of architecture of the Low Countries of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries,[2] neither its ultimate sources in Holland nor its subsequent English intermediaries have been precisely identified.

The most distinctive feature of the original 1679 house was the presence of shaped, curvilinear gables, usually termed "double-curved" or "Flemish" gables.[3] A conjectural restoration of the north wall reveals that it was articulated by a massive end chimney in combination with an exuberant gable, composed of a series of convex curves separated by steps. (Fig. 11.) This motif was apparently duplicated in the south-end wall, while along the east or entrance facade were two or three smaller Flemish gables of similar shape at the roofline.[4] These decorative, linear forms owed their immediate derivation to their use upon numerous Elizabethan and Jacobean manor houses and utilitarian buildings and, although a familiar element in the vernacular architecture of the entire English countryside,[5] were most commonly seen in the Eastern counties. Indeed the popularity of the shaped gable as a decorative feature was such that the tradition persisted in the country building of the Stuart period and was to survive well into the eighteenth century.[6]

Gables had been a favorite design element throughout the Tudor age, but never so much as after 1570 when, with the development of the more compact H and half-H plan for the smaller house, the simple, straight gable was favored as one of the most impressive methods of ending a roof line. Also during the decade of the 1570s and in those counties where brick was used almost exclusively due to the scarcity of stone and timber —the East Anglian region of Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex—multicurved gables with contrasting profiles began to appear. First in Essex at the group of brick buildings known as Great Graces, Danbury, ca. 1560-1570,[7] and then almost simultaneously in Norfolk where the Manor House, Bracondale, Norwich, 1578, has one shaped gable and in Suffolk where Shire Hall, Woodbridge, ca. 1575, still survives,[8] representatives of this motif are found. Shortly thereafter, examples of the curved gable became numerous in the adjacent counties and in Kent to the south the first dated example is Ford Place, Wrotham, ca. 1605, which has three shaped gables with semicircular tops on its north side.[9] By the 1620s and 1630s there was a real profusion of dated examples throughout Lincolnshire and Cambridgeshire, the neighboring Eastern counties to the north.

Attempts have been made to recognize certain characteristic groups of curved

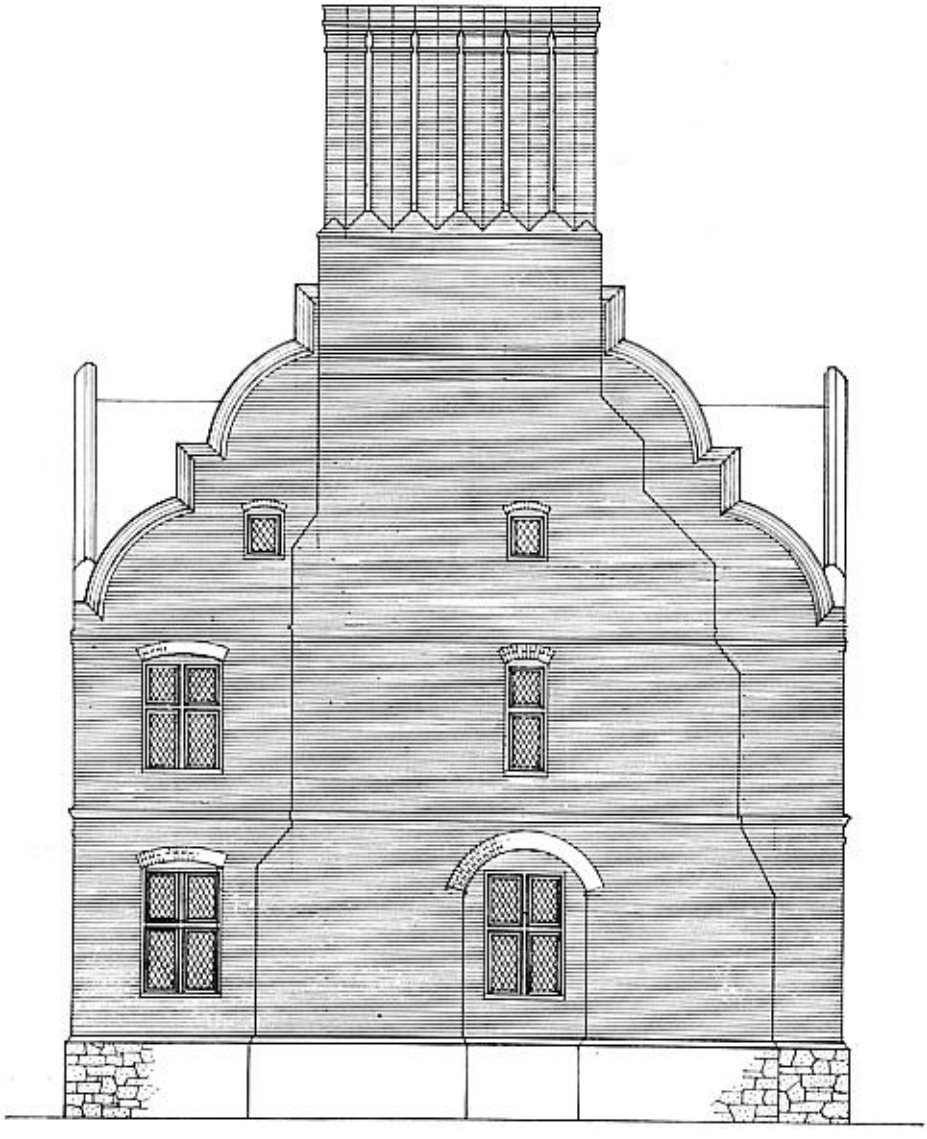

FIG. 11. THOMAS T. WATERMAN: CONJECTURAL DRAWING OF THE NORTH WALL

gables and to classify them both as to stylistic features and geographic distribution.[10] Several major categories, often termed the "Norwich" type (a compass top, a step, then a convex curve terminated by another step), the "second Norwich" type (the same outline as the preceding but with the addition of a second convex curve at the base), the "North Norfolk" type (a rounded top, then a convex curve terminating with a concave curve and all separated by steps) or the well-defined "Suffolk" type (two convex curves separated by steps and presenting a broad, ample outline against the sky), have been isolated.[11] But even though these gable forms are usually seen in certain districts of the Eastern counties, they are also frequently found scattered far from their normal locale and thus defy analysis as to division by category and region. Be that as it may, wherever and in whatever form curved gables existed in England, the origins remain the same: the facade designs for the minor houses of the more remote rural areas of the Low Countries.

That the forms of late sixteenth-century English gables were directly derived from Dutch architectural models is confirmed by an examination of Bourne Mill, near Colchester, Essex. (Fig. 12.) Originally built as a fishing lodge in 1591, Bourne Mill's two oversized end gables rise in alternating concave and convex curves, separated by steps, each stage of which carries a pair of polygonal, obelisk forms. The rather elaborate composition is terminated by the central accent of a single chimney shaft. These features are almost a reproduction of the handling of the upper half of the facade of the small Sacristan's house located in the provincial, northeastern Dutch town of Deventer, Overijssel. (Fig. 13.) Mannered and picturesque in silhouette, this town house of 1588 is in the tradition of Netherlands domestic design of this period. It also betrays its Dutch provenance in that its shaped gable comprises the major feature of the street facade and does not form, as at Bourne Mill and at certain other English examples of the period, 1570-1700, the principal element of the side or end facade.

This idea, that of the placement of the single, shaped gable on the street frontage, was continued throughout the seventeenth century by a number of Dutch buildings such as the house at Nes on the Frisian Island of Ameland, 1625. (Fig. 14.) Like so many of its Dutch compeers, the dwelling at Nes features a brick elevation composed of concave curves punctuated by the rhythm of rectangular pinnacles. Although more decorative in concept and outline than most of its English successors, the Nes gable is still an obvious model for one of its East Anglian reflections: Fen Ditton Hall, Fen Ditton, Cambridgeshire, 1633. (Fig. 15.)[12] Indeed the Hall at Fen Ditton, in the treatment of its elevations and the parade of gables on both its east and south fronts (actually there were originally five small gables of varying shapes on the south front instead of the one surviving from the nineteenth-century reconstruction),[13] represents another aspect of Netherlandish influence in England in that the main facade, as at Nes, now incorporates profiled gables. In fact, the surviving south gable at Fen Ditton, with two convex curves separated by steps and capped by a flat molding, not only suggests Dutch ancestors in its placement and profile but also American descendants for it circumscribes an outline almost identical to that at the north gable of the Province House, Boston.

FIG. 12. BOURNE MILL, NEAR COLCHESTER, ESSEX, 1591
Photograph National Monuments Record.

After recognizing the architectural antecedents of the "Flemish" gable, we can easily understand the importance of such a house as Blickling Hall, Norfolk, 1619-1620. The three gables of its south front have roots in Dutch precedent and parallels in contemporary English usage. Of far more reaching significance is that these gables, in placement and outline, may be one of the models for the ordon-

nance of the two-story elevation once existent on the east facade of the Province House. In spite of its more grandiose scale and such diverting elements as the angle turrets, it is possible to see the south front of Blickling Hall as both an intermediary and a connecting link between the Netherlandish gable form and that used in the American colonies.

Documentary evidence confirms the marked stylistic analogies between the vernacular architecture of the Low Countries and that of England and its American colonies. There had been immigration into England from the Netherlands since the twelfth century onwards, but the number increased dramatically after 1568 when the Dutch provinces rebelled against Philip II of Spain. Thousands of Protestants fled to avoid religious persecution from their Catholic masters, and, before the official end of the revolt in 1648 when the Northern provinces achieved independence, it is estimated that 100,000 Netherlanders had left their native land, mostly for refuge in England.[14] This sudden influx of settlers from the Low Countries created colonies of émigrés who might exert influence on English art and architecture. As early as 1561, 406 persons in all were allowed to settle in Sandwich to carry on weaving, and soon other towns such as Norwich and Colchester were petitioning to have the Dutch settle amongst them.[15] Although many were engaged in the cloth industry, a number of joiners, master masons and carvers were among the refugees who established settlements in East Anglia.[16] Such a design as the strapwork—stonework imitation of the curves formed by leather bands—at Bourne Mill, Essex might have been executed by a Netherlandish workman or an Englishman familiar with Dutch gable design.

Knowledge of Dutch architecture also entered England through other firsthand contacts such as English travelers abroad and, at secondhand, through the medium of pattern books. Although few titled Englishmen journeyed to the Netherlands in comparison to those who toured France and Italy,[17] there was continual, intimate exchange between England and the Low Countries among the class of artisans and tradespeople who ventured abroad to improve skills, purchase goods, visit relations or find employment.[18] In addition to the merchant classes, there was the presence of English armies in the Low Countries. The first troops were sent by Elizabeth I in 1585, and, until well into the seventeenth century, there were English mercenaries who knew the Netherlands intimately.[19]

But perhaps the most pervasive influence of all were the lavishly illustrated pattern books, compiled and published in the Netherlands. Few English books of this period were illustrated or even contained engraved title pages; thus, it is pertinent to note the Low Countries publications of J. Vredeman de Vries whose *Architectura* appeared in 1563 and *Compartimenta* in 1566. The pages of De Vries, depicting exceptionally extravagant and convoluted strapwork, provided numerous prototypes for the many forms of the curvilinear gable. Any instance of direct imitation is rare, however, for the English tended to use a more simplified, less decorative version of the double-curved gable than that printed in De Vries's books.[20]

In marked contrast to the strong dependence of the English and American versions of the "Flemish" gable upon Dutch sources, the use of grouped chimney shafts upon the Province House seems to be a purely English develop-

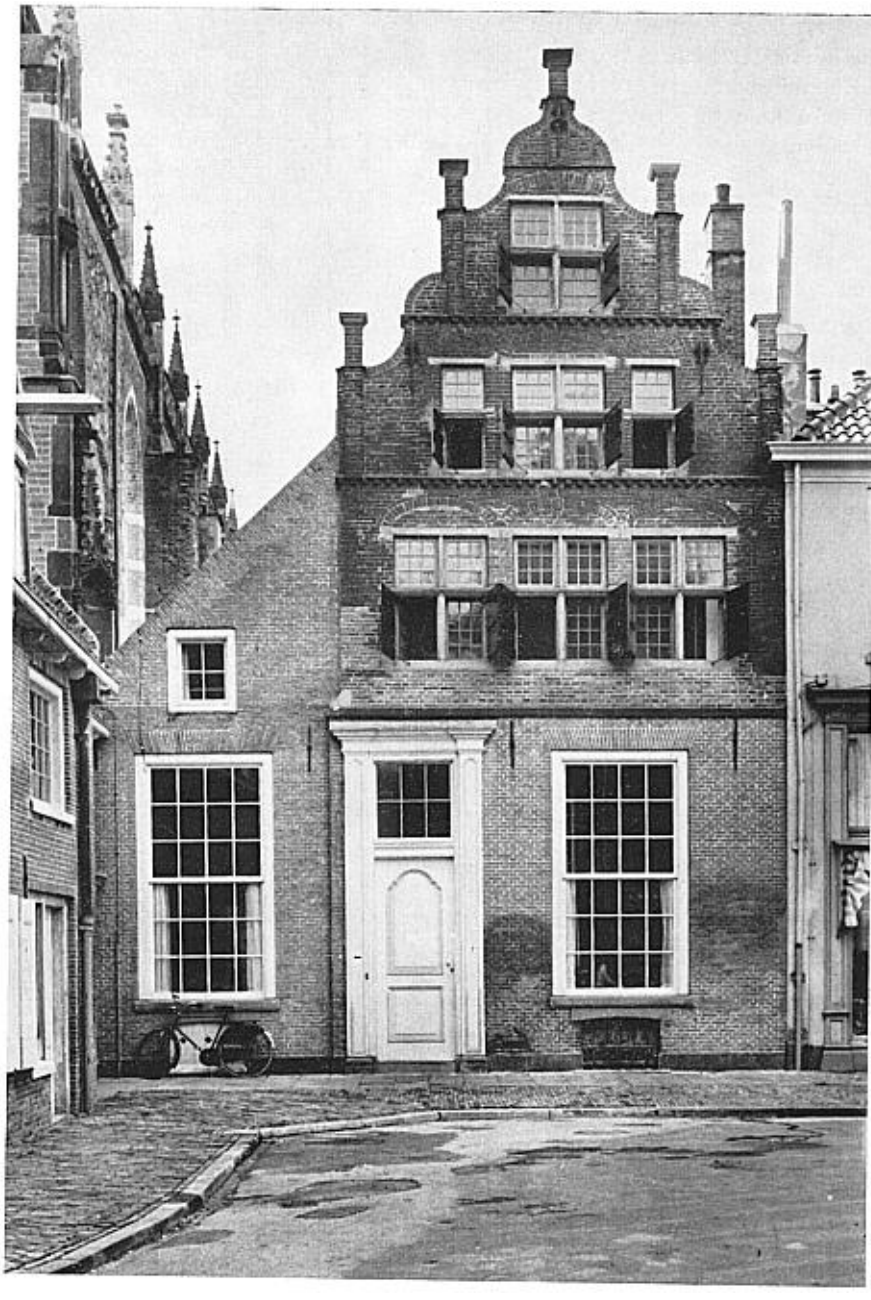

FIG. 13. HOUSE OF THE SACRISTAN, DEVENTER, OVERIJSSEL, 1588
Photograph Rijksdienst voor de Monumentenzorg.

FIG. 14. HOUSE AT NES, AMELAND, FRIESLAND, 1625
Photograph Rijksdienst voor de Monumentenzorg.

ment. Smaller houses such as Breccles Hall, Norfolk, 1583 nearly always featured one or more gigantic chimney breasts, surmounted by shafts massed in groups of two or three, or often as many as thirteen as at Lilford Hall, Northamptonshire, ca. 1635. This banding of chimneys together and the achievement of an effect by sheer mass rather than by decorative devices is almost never seen in

FIG. 15. FEN DITTON HALL, FEN DITTON, CAMBRIDGESHIRE, 1633-1637
Photograph copyright *Country Life*.

the Low Countries during the period under consideration. It also seems evident that only occasionally did the English unite the curvilinear gable and the massed chimney shafts into a single element, even though both were to be found on numerous sixteenth- and seventeenth-century buildings.[21] Therefore it seems to be left to the American colonies and to the Province House to unite the native elements of both Holland and England into a single, dominating design.

NOTES

[1] OLD-TIME NEW ENGLAND, XI, No. 4 (April, 1921), p. 178; XIII, No. 4 (April, 1923), pp. 190, 191; XXIII, No. 1 (July, 1932), p. 22.

[2] Hugh Morrison, *Early American Architecture* (New York, 1952), p. 74, mentions the presence of Flemish gables.

[3] Not to be confused with the so-called "Dutch" gable, which is crowned with a pediment, characteristic of the period 1630-1660, and seems to have been created in London and the Home Counties.

[4] Morrison, *Early American Architecture*, pp. 73, 74.

[5] Few of the great houses of this period featured Flemish gables. Notable exceptions are Kirby Hall, Northants., Wollaton Hall, Notts., and Hatfield House, Herts.

[6] Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Suffolk* (Baltimore, 1961), pp. 48-49, lists the Suffolk houses with shaped gables. Many of the examples cited date from just before and after 1700.

[7] N. Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Essex* (Baltimore, 1965), p. 156.

[8] For a line drawing of Woodbridge, see C. L. Cudworth, "Dutch Influence in East Anglian Architecture," *Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society*, XXXVII (1937), p. 28, fig. 2, a.

[9] Probably almost contemporary with the gables at Knole, Kent, which are of similar type and outline.

[10] C. L. Cudworth, "Dutch Influence in East Anglian Architecture," pp. 24-42, *passim*.

[11] For drawings of East Anglian gable types, see Cudworth, p. 29, fig. 3.

[12] A full discussion of the architectural history of Fen Ditton is given by Arthur Oswald, *Country Life*, CXXXVI (September 24, 1964), pp. 764-767 and CXXXVI (October 1, 1964), pp. 832-838.

[13] The south front, as extant in 1801, is reproduced from a print in *The Gentleman's Magazine* by A. Oswald, *Country Life*, CXXXVI (October 1, 1964), fig. 3.

[14] D. W. Davies, *Dutch Influence on English Culture* (Ithaca, New York, 1964), p. 9.

[15] William Cunningham, *Alien Immigrants to England* (London, 1897), p. 153.

[16] Davies, *Dutch Influence on English Culture*, p. 14.

[17] John Walter Stoye, *English Travellers Abroad, 1604-1667* (New York, 1968), pp. 239-242.

[18] Stoye, *English Travellers*, p. 240, cites the registry of a Yarmouth, England passport official of 1637-1638, which records the occupations and reasons for travel of those voyaging to Holland during that period.

[19] Davies, *Dutch Influence on English Culture*, p. 8.

[20] One notable exception of an exact copy survives in John Thorpe's book of drawings, today in the Soane Museum, London. For a view of this elevation, see J. Alfred Gotch, *Early Renaissance Architecture in England* (London, 1914), p. 263, fig. 283.

[21] Treasury Farm House, Ickham, Kent, 1663, has a brick gable on the street frontage. Composed of concave and convex curves, this gable forms an integral unit with a bold chimney breast. Such an elevation is rare in seventeenth-century England.