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**Paradise on a Limited Budget: how Norborne Berkeley funded his
improvements at Stoke Park.**

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Paradise on a Limited Budget: how Norborne Berkeley funded his improvements at Stoke Park

By WILLIAM EVANS

In *Creating Paradise: The Building of the English Country House, 1660–1880*, Professor Richard Wilson and Dr Alan Mackley examined how landowners funded the building or improvement of their principal mansion houses.¹ Although Gloucestershire was one of the counties they examined, they made no mention of houses built or altered in that county between 1720 and 1770, so they did not study what Norborne Berkeley did at Stoke House (later known as the Dower House) and its estate, Stoke Park, which straddled the boundary between the parishes of Stapleton and Stoke Gifford.

The Works at Stoke Park

What Berkeley accomplished at Stoke Park (Fig. 1) has been related elsewhere.² Briefly, he did the work in two phases, each involving work on the house and its surroundings. Probably early in the 1740s he created a park immediately south and south-west of the house; in 1743 he planted trees west of the house and laid out tree-lined paths and walks. In 1744 and 1745 he formed plantations, planted belts of trees along the boundaries of his park, and removed hedges so as to reduce the number of fields. In 1750, having engaged the gentleman-designer Thomas Wright, Berkeley constructed a root house, a tunnel (which may have been part of a water feature) and a praetorium, the last intended to represent the general's quarters in a Roman army camp.³ From 1749 Berkeley turned to altering the house. By 1753 he and Wright had added to each end of its south-west front a one-storeyed canted bay, linked together by a loggia of five rounded arches with prominent key-stones. One bay included an octagon room, elaborately plastered and decorated and intended for entertainment. Between December 1755 and July 1756 Berkeley had a small rotunda built in the park at a cost of about £150 and some time after 1756 a sarcophagus-like monument was erected in memory of the 4th duke of Beaufort.

1. R.G. Wilson and A.L. Mackley, *Creating Paradise: The Building of the English Country House, 1660–1880* (London and New York, 2000), esp. pp. 297–352.

2. The principal accounts are J. Russell, 'The archaeology of Stoke Park, Bristol', *Bristol & Avon Archaeology* 8 (1989), 30–40; D. Lambert and S. Harding, 'Thomas Wright at Stoke Park', *Garden History* 17 no. 1 (1989), 69–82; M. Batey and D. Lambert, *The English Garden Tour: a view into the past* (London, 1990); S. Harding, *Proposals for the Restoration of Stoke Park, Bristol* (Bristol, 1990); N. Kingsley, *The Country Houses of Gloucestershire* vols. 1 and 2 (Chichester, 2001 and 1992); T. Mowl, 'The castle of Boncoeur and the wizard of Durham', *Georgian Group Journal* (1992), 32–39; T. Mowl, *Historic Gardens of Gloucestershire* (Stroud, 2002).

3. Probably not self-referential: Berkeley did not become a colonel of militia until 1758.



Fig. 1. In 1773 Stoke House was one of many English country houses featured in a sepia-on-white dinner service designed and manufactured by Josiah Wedgwood for Catherine the Great, empress of Russia. The set, consisting of 952 pieces, is known as the Frog service, from the empress's little green emblem painted on each item. One plate showed a view of Stoke on its escarpment overlooking the park. After the export of the original service Wedgwood produced for exhibition at the firm's London showrooms a smaller service, painted in polychrome enamels and without the frog device, of which this damaged compotier (a stemmed dish for desserts such as stewed fruit) survives. By courtesy of the Wedgwood Museum Trust, Barlaston, Staffordshire.

In 1760 Berkeley started a second phase. He entered into a contract with the Bristol builder James Paty II to do works in accordance with Wright's plans.⁴ By 1761 a gothic arcade, costing £55, was erected.⁵ Indoors, the octagon room on the ground floor in the south-east corner was plastered and decorated.⁶ The former great hall was divided into a drawing room and space for a grand staircase. A large dining room was formed, subdivided at its south end by a screen of Roman Doric columns supporting a decorated entablature. The fenestration of the south-west and south-east fronts was altered. Crenellated parapets were added to the south-west wing to hide the gables. Out in the park, north of the house, a new bridge with battlements was constructed over Stoke Lane to support a carriageway leading to Sims Hill, a viewpoint over the surrounding countryside.⁷ In 1761 Berkeley had an obelisk built in the grounds and also a copy of the tomb of the Horatii and Curiatii that he had seen on his Grand Tour at Albano near Rome. In 1762 he had a gateway built at Broomhill in Stapleton and a corn mill with a pond to feed it.

Wilson and Mackley distinguished four categories of house: (1) building on the grandest scale financed, as in the case of Dyrham, by profits of office and patronage; (2) middling-sized houses built by second-rank landowners, 'the greater gentry', reliant on neither office nor place; (3) houses built by newcomers to landed society, funded largely out of the profits of trade, as in the case of Dodington; and (4) houses on smaller estates.

In relation to the second category, into which Stoke House falls if only because it is difficult to fit it into any of the others, Wilson and Mackley concluded that building was funded by a combination of one or other of the building owner: inheriting the land, cash or realisable investments; acquiring land and cash on marriage; acquiring land or cash or both on the death of an in-law; obtaining income from office or place; borrowing; gaming; selling assets to raise cash; and inclosing open land to increase rental income. Berkeley drew on or resorted to some of those expedients, but in many respects his familial and financial position and his consequent strategy appear to have been unique. The purpose of this article is to explore why that was so.

Berkeley's Finances: assets and obligations

Norborne Berkeley's position differed in several respects from that of many of his contemporaries who set about improving their houses and grounds. In some ways he was better off, in some worse, than others. Unlike many builders of Gloucestershire mansion houses, he was not a new man: he started with the advantage of an inheritance of a landed estate and other wealth. His father, John Symes Berkeley, died in 1736 while Berkeley was on his Grand Tour. Berkeley himself came of age in December 1738. He was the only son; he had one sister, Elizabeth. Under his father's will and family settlements Berkeley inherited the bulk of his father's estate. That consisted of a lease of a house in Clifford Street, Piccadilly; its contents, which included over £850 worth of silver plate; about £5,500 worth of post-bubble South Sea stock; Stoke House and its contents; the Stoke-Stapleton estate; other lands in Gloucestershire, Wiltshire, Norfolk and Suffolk producing about

4. Gloucestershire Archives (GA), D 2700/QP 3/6/3. I am grateful to the duke of Beaufort for permitting access to and use of Berkeley's estate and personal accounts and related records kept by Berkeley's steward, Silas Blandford, which now form part of the Badminton Muniments, the bulk of which are on deposit at Gloucestershire Archives (D 2700) and part of which are kept at Badminton (hereafter Bad. Mun.).
5. GA, D 2700/QP 3/6/6, b.2.
6. Bad. Mun. FmS 6/5/5.
7. GA, D 2700/QP 3/6/6, b.5.

£1,150 a year; and mining rights in the Kingswood coalfield in south Gloucestershire producing over £3,000 a year.⁸ Berkeley could reasonably expect a total annual income of some £4,150.

Under his late father's marriage settlement Berkeley was obliged to pay his mother £500 a year and a lump sum of £6,000, both obligations being charged on the Stoke estate, and to allow her to continue to occupy the house in London. On reaching the age of 21 Berkeley sold his father's South Sea stock; with the proceeds, and other money from the estate, he paid off the capital sum of £6,000 due to his mother; and he made the house in London over to her. That left him obliged to pay his mother the jointure of £500 a year.

In 1740 Berkeley's sister Elizabeth married Charles Somerset, a younger son of the duke of Beaufort. Although the Somersets were heavily in debt, the marriage relieved Berkeley of the obligation of maintaining his sister.

Berkeley showed an early sign of financial self-discipline in 1741 by giving up horseracing.⁹ In the same year he entered parliament as a member for Gloucestershire. He had the support of the Tory Somersets but, given their debts, they probably were in no position to give him substantial financial help. He expected opposition from the interest of his Whig relations the Berkeleys of Berkeley castle, but their expected candidate withdrew from the contest on the day the poll opened and no other candidate appeared. Even if Berkeley did not have to buy votes, he may well have incurred other expenditure to facilitate his candidacy. There is no indication in the estate accounts of what Berkeley spent on being elected to parliament in 1741, so it is possible that any significant expenditure may have been borne by the Somersets. In the longer term, though Berkeley was a member of parliament until 1763, he never had to fight a contested election and thus to bear the cost of buying votes, which might have amounted to several thousand pounds in Gloucestershire: even more had he stood for Bristol. Unlike many M.P.s and unlike the Somersets, Berkeley never had to buy into or cultivate a pocket borough. At most his recorded election expenses came to about £30.¹⁰

Berkeley's mother died in 1742, which freed him of the liability to pay the £500 annuity, and he became absolute owner of the estate, so he could do with it what he wished. Berkeley never married, so unlike many landowners he did not acquire either a dowry along with a wife or a father-in-law upon whose death he might expect an inheritance. On the other hand he never had to make financial provision for a widow in the event of his death. Nor did he have a legitimate son for whom he would have been obliged, as a gentleman of means, to finance first an education or a Grand Tour or both, and then a career, place or other means of support, with a house to go with it until such time as he should inherit from his father or from in-laws. Nor did he have legitimate daughters whose marriages he would be expected to endow or whose maintenance he would have been expected to fund. Berkeley fathered at least four children and made financial provision for them, or for their mothers, in different ways and in differing degrees, but the regular payments he made to the mothers, and the other sums he paid for his children's maintenance or advancement, were not large compared with what he would have incurred had he fathered children within marriage and launched them into polite society.

So when his mother died Berkeley owed no significant duties of maintenance to other family members. He was free to borrow on the security of his land, to mortgage it up to the hilt if he wished, but he did not do so at that time. To provide a London residence he took a lease in 1742 of a house in Grosvenor Street for 7 years at £120 a year.¹¹ The rent for that plus the rent of £15

8. Bad. Mun. FmSF 4/9.

9. Norborne Berkeley (hereafter NB) to Somerset 17 June 1741: *ibid.* FmJ 2/24.

10. GA, D 2700/QP 3/4.

11. *Ibid.* QT 5/3/2.

a year for a stable and coach house in Barlow Mews off Bond Street¹² appear to have been the only property commitments Berkeley entered into at that time: by contemporary standards, a modest one.

That apparent prudence may have reflected the fact that Berkeley was under some financial disadvantages. He inherited little free capital. His father's South Sea stock and some of the cash went to pay the lump sum of £6,000 due to his mother under her marriage settlement. His mother's accounts of his guardianship show that most of the income that arose during his minority went on the expenses of his Grand Tour, leaving him only a few hundred pounds over. The sale of the Clifford Street lease may have produced some cash.

Income and Borrowing

That meant that all Berkeley's expenditure, whether on Stoke Park or anything else, had to come out of five sources of income, of which two were reliable, three speculative: the rents from tenants of his agricultural lands in Gloucestershire, Wiltshire and Norfolk; the income from his mines in the Kingswood coalfield; any profits he might make from his home farm at Stoke; the profits of any other business he might engage in; and any income he might get from exploiting any public offices he might obtain. There was not much prospect of the last, because as a Tory Berkeley was not likely to be appointed to any public office so long as George II was king and the Whigs continued in power,¹³ particularly as Berkeley was not only a Tory but linked to the Jacobite Somersets. Although Berkeley became a J.P. in 1745¹⁴ and a colonel of the militia in 1758, it was not until 1760 that significant and potentially lucrative public office came his way, but even then his appointment as a groom of the bedchamber, which required attendance at court during certain months, paid him only £500 a year.

Initially Berkeley's estates, apart from the coal mines, produced a net income of at most £1,600 a year, of which about £500 came from Stoke; about £100 from Stapleton; £500 from Hilmarton in Wiltshire; and about £500 from Brancaster in Norfolk. From 1743 Berkeley had the incalculable benefit of having Silas Blandford as his steward. Blandford's accounts, kept meticulously and in detail, show that Berkeley paid for most expenditure on each of his properties from the income from that property. Income from those sources fluctuated: whilst in some years the net profit from Stoke exceeded £500, in 1756 it was little above £300. His estate accounts suggest that whilst Berkeley was not averse to spending money, he required all expenditure to be recorded and accounted for, and that he exercised a degree of financial control.

At the same time there were several calls on Berkeley's disposable income. Early on in September 1739 he showed his impulsive generosity by donating £500 towards the protection of Bristol traders from Spanish privateers.¹⁵ He made the normal charitable donations expected of a man in his position, particularly towards the county infirmary at Gloucester and also that at Winchester: the latter served the militia regiments of which Berkeley was colonel when they were camped nearby. He regularly spent between £30 and £60 a year on clothes for poor people in Stapleton and Stoke Gifford and on other measures towards the relief of poverty in the Bristol area, such as gifts of

12. *Ibid.* QT 5/3/1.

13. Duke of Newcastle to Viscount Chetwynd 19 May 1756: British Library (hereafter BL), Add. MS 32865, f. 51; W.C. Lowe, 'George III, peerage creations and politics, 1760–1784', *The Historical Journal* 35/3 (1992), 587–609.

14. BL, Add. MS 35602: Hardwicke papers CCLIV. 54, 57, 75, 83.

15. City of Bristol Reference Library, Southwell V, 7 November 1739.

coal and bread. After his death it was apparent that he had made annual payments of 10 guineas a year to the Bristol infirmary and 1 guinea to its chaplain, 7 guineas towards the local farmers' feast, and 1 guinea to the Bristol postmaster.¹⁶ Berkeley funded a spinning school where flax, produced on his estate or purchased locally, was spun by children and young people who would otherwise have starved. In 1767, by which time Berkeley had successfully claimed the dormant title Baron Botetourt, Josiah Tucker, dean of Gloucester, wrote to the earl of Shelburne, then secretary of state for the southern department, with a copy of an inflammatory letter that had been intercepted by the local postmaster. He said there was no need for alarm, because 'the common people of all the clothing counties are sufficiently frightened by the latest exertions', and 'a scheme is likewise begun, munificently encouraged by Ld Botetourt, for selling household bread to the poor at a low price'.¹⁷

These recorded gifts are not cumulatively large, but Berkeley had a reputation for generosity, not least to relations. In 1750 he stood godfather to the earl and countess of Berkeley's second daughter Elizabeth, later Lady Craven and margravine of Anspach. In her memoirs many years later she recalled him often giving her money to buy toys, and that he gave her a doll every year. When he discovered that she was giving the money to poor people in and around the village of Berkeley, he asked for a list, so that he could give them money directly.¹⁸ Nor was Berkeley ungenerous to his employees. When his steward's son was apprenticed as an apothecary at the Bristol infirmary, Berkeley paid the premium, waiving repayment when the lad completed his apprenticeship.

In so far as Berkeley wished to incur expenditure that his income would not cover, he resorted to borrowing, and like many of his contemporaries he borrowed significantly. In March 1748 he borrowed £6,000 from the duke of Beaufort at 4 per cent interest and on the security of a mortgage.¹⁹ It is not clear how the duke was able to produce such a sum: probably it came from borrowing also, because when he died his estate was well over £100,000 in debt. Nor is it clear why Berkeley borrowed a sum of that order, but it may be significant that it was a year or so before he started the first phase of improving the grounds of Stoke. That £6,000 will have enabled him to spend comfortably, whether for improving his house or park, for commercial purposes, or for any other reason: the income from his estates comfortably covered the interest payments. But in addition to that Berkeley borrowed heavily from several other sources, all at 4 per cent. As early as 1751 he borrowed £1,000 from Esplin, a local lender; by June 1752 he had borrowed £3,000 from Gregory Bush, a Bristol apothecary and money lender. In 1754 Berkeley was paying interest to his attorney Griffiths, and some of the account entries for payments to Griffiths the following year are in code. In November 1756 Berkeley gave Bush a bond for £6,000.²⁰ In 1760 he was paying interest to a man called Jones; in the same year he borrowed £1,000 from a Bristol bank, possibly to pay off existing debts, and also £300 from his steward's brother John Blandford, to whom he gave a bond. In September 1760 Berkeley owed £4,000 to a Bristol apothecary-turned-lender called Berjew, but that might have been a loan replacing or consolidating earlier ones. By June 1761 he owed £3,000 to Berjew and £1,000 to John Blandford.²¹ In 1765 he drew two bank bills for £1,000

16. GA, D 2700/QT 1/2.

17. *Calendar Home Office Papers 1766–1769*, p. 151 no. 402, 11 January 1767.

18. B. Little, 'Norborne Berkeley, Gloucestershire magnate', *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* LXIII (1955), 387–8, citing E. Craven, *Memoirs of the Margravine of Anspach* (London, 1826), I, 25.

19. GA, D 2700/QP 3/9/84.

20. *Ibid.* QP 3/9/85.

21. *Ibid.* QP 3/4/7(5).

each and with them paid off £2,000 of the debt to Berjew.²² Because Blandford's accounts do not record all Berkeley's private transactions it is difficult to be sure whether a particular borrowing was a replacement for an old one, but the general impression is that, apart from the £6,000 borrowed from the duke of Beaufort, at any one time Berkeley owed a similar amount to several creditors in total.

Financial Setbacks and Commitments

Towards the end of 1759, when Berkeley was about to embark upon the second phase of improvements at Stoke Park, his financial planning was upset by an unforeseen call on his resources. Horace Walpole relates that Berkeley's niece Anne Somerset, daughter of the late 4th duke of Beaufort, was due to marry the earl of Northampton with a dowry of £10,000, but the noble peer threatened to withdraw from the proposed alliance unless the sum was increased to £18,000. With the 5th duke still a minor, and his trustees, of whom Berkeley was one, selling lands in order to pay off the 4th duke's debts and legacies, the Somersets were not in a position to pay what Northampton demanded and, according to Walpole, Norborne Berkeley made the sum up with £8,000 of his own money.²³

In fact Walpole reported only half the story and got the figures wrong. The late 4th duke had promised Northampton £12,000, but his will was drafted in such a way that only £3,500 could be paid until such time as the next duke should reach the age of 21.²⁴ When it became apparent that the Somersets could not call on the late duke's trustees to raise the cash and could not themselves pay such a sum, their bankers Drummonds found another customer, Francis Holburne, then vice-admiral of the blue and commander-in-chief at Portsmouth, who was willing to lend the trustees the money on the security of a mortgage on the late duke's estate. The 4th duke's executors, of whom Berkeley was one, agreed. The mortgage would take some time to arrange, so on 12 September 1759 as a temporary measure Berkeley gave Northampton his personal bond for £12,000, on the understanding that it would be cancelled once the executors had granted the mortgage. The earl promptly assigned the bond to the admiral for cash, thereby rendering Berkeley personally liable to the admiral for £12,000. By February 1760 the admiral's lawyers had investigated the executors' title and had discovered that they had no power to charge the duke's estate with the daughters' marriage portions.

Berkeley, incandescent with anger, sacked the executors' lawyer for not having made sure the late duke's will gave the executors full enough powers and for not pointing out the difficulty before any commitment was given to Northampton; railed against Drummonds, not altogether fairly, for creating the problem by introducing the admiral; and irrationally demanded that the admiral dismiss his lawyers who, only doing their job, had not unreasonably advised him not to accept a mortgage from executors with no legal power to grant one. Berkeley considered that as the admiral had been promised landed security, it was a matter of honour that he should be given it, so Berkeley mortgaged his own Stoke Park estate to the admiral.²⁵ That meant that at a time when Berkeley, already some £10,000 or more in debt, was undertaking the second phase of works at Stoke, he

22. Ibid. QP 3/4/7(1-5): account for the interest payments.

23. Horace Walpole to Mann, 1 August 1759: W.S. Lewis (ed.), *Horace Walpole Diaries* (London, 1960).

24. Counsel's opinions, 4 to 10 February 1760, and correspondence between NB and James Unwin, 14 to 23 February 1760: GA, D 2700/PB 1/4.

25. GA, D 2700/NR 1/5.

no longer had power to grant a first mortgage over his estate to raise money for his own purposes, and he needed to rein in his expenditure to ensure that in the event of the admiral calling the mortgage in, he could repay the debt. That left Berkeley with less available to spend on his house and park than he would otherwise have had.

Similarly, there were commercial calls on Berkeley's disposable income. In 1761, by which time Berkeley was receiving £500 a year as a groom of the bedchamber, he was persuaded by his neighbour Charles Bragg to invest £5,000 in William Champion's copper works at Warmley (no doubt using the money borrowed from Berjew and John Blandford). In 1766 and 1767, well after the second phase of works at Stoke was completed, Berkeley was to lend the Warmley business, in which he was in effect a partner, another £12,000.²⁶

Berkeley's Financial Strategy

The overall picture is of Berkeley borrowing heavily, under arrangements of some complexity but within his means and reasonable expectations, and funding the improvement of his park and house out of foreseeable income plus spare cash as and when it arose. The negotiations around his niece's marriage in 1759 must have upset his plans, but debt and its consequences were familiar features of the social and political groups in which Berkeley moved. His neighbours the Codringtons at Dodington were also deep in debt. Compared with previous generations of the Somersets, Berkeley was a model of financial prudence.

Berkeley kept his expenditure low at Stoke Park in several ways. He never employed an expensive fashionable architect. It is true that he used and paid Thomas Wright as designer and adviser, but their relationship was that of companionable friends with shared interests and cannot be characterised as wholly or even mainly commercial. Berkeley reduced his financial obligations to Wright by giving him an apartment in the mansion house at Stoke, which may explain why the accounts do not include regular payments to Wright. Berkeley did not engage expensive London-based craftsmen: he used Bristol craftspeople like Thomas and James Paty, Thomas Stocking and Margaret Mitings for important work, people like the Greenways from the nearby parish of Mangotsfield for less critical but still specialist work, and local masons like Thomas Lynch, grandfather of Hannah More, for unskilled labour. For some of the work at Stoke Park Berkeley was his own labourer: in 1764 he wrote to an acquaintance, 'Stoke improves every day, am already obliged to clear away plants that were set in the year 50 – am become a workman myself and so please with the profession as to lament nights and Sundays'.²⁷ That he enjoyed manual labour enthusiastically is not inconsistent with the possibility that he may not have had much choice.

Berkeley timed and allocated his expenditure so as to minimise its impact on his finances. He set to work first on the grounds rather than the house: planting was cheaper than building. That allowed him to pay interest on his borrowings and to accumulate any spare cash to pay for building works later. He spread the landscape works over several years and had them designed for low-cost maintenance. As Elizabeth Percy, duchess of Northumberland, shrewdly observed of the landscaping, 'It contains 500 Acre but as it is chiefly Eat by Cows Horses and Sheep there are only 8 Men employ'd in keeping it'.²⁸ Berkeley spread the building works also over several years. He confined himself to altering the house as distinct from replacing it; he did not attempt an

26. *Ibid.* QP 13/2; Bad. Mun. FmL 6/3/42–43.

27. NB to Stephen [?] 14 October 1764: GA, D 2700, acc 4629 box O.

28. BL, Northumberland MSS 126/177.

extravagant neo-classical design; he restricted works to what the public and visitors were most likely to see: outside, the north, east and west façades; inside, the formal entertaining rooms like the octagon room, the dining and drawing rooms, the hall and the grand staircase.

For much of the work Berkeley used local materials, not expensive stone from Bath. In 1749 his steward was buying stone, wood and other materials, and opening up limekilns, but he was also paying local people to collect stones from the estate.²⁹ That prompts the question whether Berkeley had an overall plan with a financial strategy to back it or whether the scheme for both the building works and the landscaping and the means of their financing evolved as he went along. The progress of the works and the borrowing are consistent with either possibility, but the borrowing in 1748 of such a large sum as £6,000 from the duke of Beaufort (several years after the Somersets had helped Berkeley into parliament and his sister had married Charles Somerset, and so presumably not related to either event) might indicate that by that date Berkeley had a plan and had worked out how much it would cost. Overall, the picture is of a generous man, indulging in the conspicuous consumption for which his rich contemporaries were notorious, but spending prudently and within his means. Only when he invested too enthusiastically in William Champion's and Charles Bragg's Warmley venture did Berkeley become uncomfortably stretched: but that is another story.

29. Rentals and other accounts 1748–1753: GA, D 2700/QP 3/4/4.