

WROXTON ABBEY: A HOUSE AND ITS BUILDERS

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There are some houses whose beginnings are the most interesting thing about them: where one hopes to recover the building's original form, to understand the intentions of its designer, and to discover why it was built and what its owner wanted from it. But all buildings have a history after they were first built, and in some the most interesting thing is how they have been used and altered over the years to meet changing needs and changing tastes. While there is much that is uncertain about the origins of Wroxton Abbey, the way in which the house has been altered, improved, redecorated and enlarged by successive owners says a good deal not only about changing ways of life but also about changing attitudes to the past. The earliest alterations, less than a century after it was built, were carried out by an owner and his brother who found the house old fashioned and inconvenient. Later alterations were done by owners who also wanted to make it convenient for modern living, but who wanted to recover, or even to improve, its air of antiquity.

A second, central, factor in the Abbey's history is that it remained unfinished for two hundred and fifty years. However, the reasons have nothing to do with fashion or attitudes to the past, and everything to do with the vicissitudes of the family's history, and these too are worth describing.

At first glance, Wroxton Abbey is a text-book Elizabethan house. The plan looks like the standard 'E' of so very many late sixteenth and early seventeenth century houses. Its only departure from symmetry appears to be the tall window that lights the hall. The highly decorated porch is a fine example of the inventive play with renaissance forms that characterised the decoration of the period. But in fact the house has a complicated growth. Successive owners have altered and replaced much that was done by their predecessors, and a great deal in its history is obscure.

There are virtually no documents surviving from the likely period of its building. In the seventeenth century, much was done to sweep away what was by then the unfashionable decoration carried out for its builders.