

Shugborough: Seat of the Earl of Lichfield

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Shugborough Estate, Staffordshire. Image courtesy of Stephen McDowall.

This case study is an examination of Shugborough, Staffordshire, the seat of the Earl of Lichfield, which touches on some aspects of a larger research project on the property that I hope to publish more extensively elsewhere. Shugborough differs from some of the other properties on which case studies are being produced under the auspices of the ‘East India Company at Home’ project, most obviously in its primary links to the Royal Navy, rather than the East India Company (EIC). In this regard I hope that the story of Shugborough, its connection with the Anson family, its ‘Chinese House’ and its armorial porcelain might provide a useful comparison,

against which the project team and associates can view the EIC merchants' properties that are the more central focus of their research. My own particular interest in Shugborough lies in the Chinese and Chinese-style objects and structures that adorn the estate, and this case study is deliberately focussed on this single aspect of this fascinating property.¹

Two Brothers

The story of Shugborough as we now know it is essentially that of two brothers: Thomas Anson (1695-1773) and his younger brother George (1697-1762). Thomas



George Anson, 1st Baron Anson. 1755. After Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792). Oil on Canvas. London: National Portrait Gallery. NPG 518.

was a founder member of the Society of Dilettanti in 1732, established for the appreciation of classical Greek art. He travelled extensively around the major Mediterranean cities in 1740, and became Member of Parliament for Lichfield in 1747. The Shugborough estate, far smaller than the one we know today, had originally been purchased in 1624 by William Anson (d. 1644) of Dunston, Staffordshire, and a modest two-storied house had been constructed there in 1695. Thomas Anson inherited the estate on the death of his father William (1656-1720) in 1720, and from the late 1730s onwards, slowly began to acquire the

surrounding properties. But in 1744 the return of his brother from abroad allowed improvements to the estate to begin in earnest.

¹ The best single treatment of Shugborough more generally is probably still John Martin Robinson's *Shugborough* (London: The National Trust, 1989).

Commodore George, soon Admiral Lord Anson had just completed a triumphant and extremely lucrative circumnavigation of the globe. The expedition to harass Spanish possessions in the South Seas had not gone well, until in 1743 he managed to capture the Spanish galleon *Nuestra Señora de Covadonga*, loaded with American silver.² The Commodore's personal share in the prize amounted to a vast fortune, which financed much of the early work on Shugborough during the 1740s and 1750s. Probably the most famous naval officer of his day, George lived at [Moor Park, Hertfordshire](#), from 1754 until his death in 1762, which precipitated another round of improvements at Shugborough, Thomas having inherited the bulk of his brother's wealth.

George Anson had by his own account spent several harrowing months in Canton (Guangzhou) during 1743 dealing with obstinate and obstructive Chinese mandarins, and his impressions of China and its people, described at length in his *Voyage Round the World* (1748), was not high.³ Indeed, the Commodore had reserved particular scorn for Chinese artists and craftsmen, labouring 'under that poverty of genius, which constantly attends all servile imitators,' and whose skills were easily surpassed by their Japanese and European counterparts.⁴ Should we be surprised, then, to find at Shugborough so many Chinese or chinoiserie objects acquired either during the circumnavigation or in the years immediately following? What did such objects mean when placed within this country house context?

The remainder of this case study will reflect on these issues with reference to both the 'Chinese House' to the north of Shugborough, and the various objects of Chinese origin or chinoiserie taste that are now located within the Mansion House. This division reflects the estate as viewed by visitors today, although it is perhaps worth noting here that this was not the way eighteenth- or even most nineteenth-century visitors to Shugborough would have experienced its 'Chineseness': the Chinese

² On the voyage see Glyn Williams, *The Prize of all the Oceans: The Triumph and Tragedy of Anson's Voyage Round the World* (London: HarperCollins, 1999).

³ Richard Walter comp., *A Voyage Round the World in the Years MDCCXL, I, II, III, IV by George Anson, esq.* (London: John & Paul Knapton, 1748).

⁴ Walter comp., *Voyage Round the World*, p. 411. For a discussion of this aspect of Anson's account, see Anne Gerritsen & Stephen McDowall, 'Material Culture and the Other: European Encounters with Chinese Porcelain, ca. 1650-1800,' *Journal of World History* 23.1 (March 2012): 87-113 (pp. 107-9).

objects and furnishings having been moved from the Chinese House to the Mansion House for safekeeping only in 1885.

Context: China in the Eighteenth-Century British Landscape



Plate. Jingdezhen, China. Wanli reign (1573-1620). Porcelain decorated in underglaze cobalt blue. London: Victoria & Albert Museum. C.588-1922.

Chinese decorative objects such as porcelain had been known in Britain long before Commodore Anson's unhappy stay at Canton in 1743. The Venetian painter Bellini had portrayed as divine eating ware several Chinese blue-and-white vessels in his *Feast of the Gods* (1514), but by the mid-seventeenth century, such dishes were already becoming commonplace in Europe, thanks in the British case largely to the activities of the EIC. Interest in Chinese gardens was slower to take hold, but began by the end of the seventeenth century with an initial

focus on the art of garden layout. Sir William Temple's classic essay of 1685, in which he contrasted the regular forms of European gardens with the designed irregularity of their Chinese counterparts, 'where the Beauty shall be great, and strike the Eye, but without any Order or Disposition of Parts, that shall be commonly or easily observ'd,' was to a generation of British intellectuals highly influential.⁵ Addison's *Spectator* essay of 1712 echoed Temple's account of the Chinese, who chose 'to shew a Genius in Works of this Nature, and therefore always conceal the Art by which they direct themselves,' adding that 'I would rather look upon a Tree in all

⁵ William Temple, 'Upon the Gardens of Epicurus; or, of Gardening, in the Year 1685' in *The Works of Sir William Temple, Bart. in Two Volumes* (London, 1720), vol. 1, pp. 170-90 (p. 186).

its Luxuriancy and Diffusion of Boughs and Branches, than when it is...cut and trimmed into a Mathematical Figure.’⁶

In 1743, coincidentally as Commodore Anson was attempting to refit his ship in Canton, Jean-Denis Attiret, a French Jesuit employed at the court of the young Qianlong 乾隆 Emperor (r. 1736-1795), described in a long letter the Garden of Perfect Brightness (*Yuanmingyuan* 圓明園) outside of Beijing. The widely-read letter, which was published in Paris in 1749, and soon translated into English by Joseph Spence, stressed above all the ‘beautiful Disorder’ of the emperor’s gardens, although he too was perceptive enough to note that the natural features he admired



Chinese House, Shugborough, Staffordshire. Image courtesy of Stephen McDowall.

had in fact been carefully ‘placed with so much Art.’⁷

The fashion in Britain for architectural garden features in the Chinese taste was intense, but much shorter lived, dating only from the late 1730s, and may, as some scholars have suggested, have been sparked in part by the publication in 1735 of Jean-Baptiste Du Halde’s (1674-

1743) *La Description de la Chine*.⁸ Tim Richardson links the fashion to domestic politics, describing as ‘one of the wonderful eccentricities of the age’ the fact that

⁶ Joseph Addison, ‘On the Pleasures of the Imagination,’ *The Spectator*, no. 414 (25 June 1712), reprinted in Donald F. Bond ed., *The Spectator* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965) vol. 3, pp. 548-53.

⁷ Sir Harry Beaumont [Joseph Spence] trans., *A Particular Account of the Emperor of China’s Gardens near Peking* (London: R. Dodsley, 1752), pp. 9-10, 38. On interest in, and borrowings from, the botanical aspects of Chinese gardens during this period, see Jane Kilpatrick, *Gifts from the Gardens of China: The Introduction of Traditional Chinese Garden Plants to Britain, 1698-1862* (London: Frances Lincoln, 2007).

⁸ Patrick Conner, *Oriental Architecture in the West* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1979), p. 49; Emile de Bruijn, ‘Found in Translation: The Chinese House at Stowe,’ *Apollo* (June 2007): 53-9 (p. 53). Du Halde’s vast compendium was published in English the following year under the title *The General History of China* (London, 1736).

Chinese decoration was used in the service of British patriotism.⁹ Several such structures existed in Britain prior to the construction of the Chinese House at Shugborough, although it is not entirely clear which was the earliest. In a letter of 1753, Horace Walpole claims that the ‘several paltry Chinese buildings and bridges’ at Wroxton were ‘of the very first’ to appear in Britain, but does not provide a date of construction.¹⁰ The Chinese House at Stowe in Buckinghamshire (‘a house built on piles, after the manner of the Chinese, odd & Pretty enough...’) is recorded in a visitor’s record of 1738.¹¹ The Chinese House at Woburn, Bedfordshire appears on a 1738 estate map.¹² A set of anonymous paintings of Old Windsor in Berkshire show that several chinoiserie architectural features, including a slightly bizarre-looking farmhouse, were in place there by 1741.¹³

By the 1750s it was possible to consult a manual such as William & John Halfpenny’s *Chinese and Gothic Architecture Properly Ornamented* (1752) for one’s chinoiserie design needs, but by the end of that decade it had already become all too clichéd, as Robert Lloyd’s poetic send-up of 1757 suggests:

Now bricklay’rs, carpenters, and joiners,
 With Chinese artists, and designers,
 Produce their schemes of alteration,
 To work this wond’rous reformation.
 The useful dome, which secret stood,
 Embosom’d in the yew-tree’s wood,
 The trav’ler with amazement sees
 A temple, Gothic, or Chinese,
 With many a bell, and tawdry rag on,
 And crested with a sprawling dragon;
 A wooden arch is bent astride
 A ditch of water, four foot wide,

⁹ Tim Richardson, *The Arcadian Friends: Inventing the English Landscape Garden* (London: Bantam Press, 2007), pp. 368-71, argues that the choice of theme ‘was certainly a political act, because the reputed virtue of Confucius was intended to throw into sharp relief the venality of Walpole, as well as the King and Queen’s unseemly obeisance to him.’

¹⁰ Walpole to John Chute, 4 August 1753. See W. S. Lewis ed., *The Yale Edition of Horace Walpole’s Correspondence*, Volume 35 (London: Oxford University Press, 1973) p. 74.

¹¹ Conner, *Oriental Architecture*, p. 45.

¹² Bedfordshire and Luton Archives and Records Service (R1/237), cited in Patrick Conner, ‘Chinese Themes in 18th Century Gardens’ in David Beevers ed., *Chinese Whispers: Chinoiserie in Britain, 1650-1930* (Brighton: The Royal Pavilion & Museums, 2008), pp. 55-63 (p. 56).

¹³ John Harris, ‘A Pioneer in Gardening: Dickie Bateman Re-assessed,’ *Apollo* (October 1993): 227-33. The farmhouse (see Harris’ figure 2) hardly appears ‘Chinese’ to modern eyes, but a contemporary observer, Richard Pococke, considered the house and surrounds to be ‘in the Chinese taste.’ See *The Travels throughout England of Dr. Richard Pococke*, ed. James Joel Cartwright (Westminster: Camden Society, 1888-89), vol. 2, pp. 64-5.

With angles, curves, and zigzag lines,
From Halfpenny's exact designs.¹⁴

The Chinese House, c. 1747



Chinese House, Shugborough, Staffordshire. Image courtesy of Stephen McDowall.

Such was the domestic context in which a Chinese House, complete with boathouse, was erected on an island in an artificial canal to the north of Shugborough estate in 1747. Approached by a pair of bridges, also of Chinese design, the exterior of the house was originally painted pale blue and white with fret patterns (this is clearly shown in a watercolour (c. 1780) by Moses Griffith (1747-1819) hanging in the Verandah Passage at Shugborough). The original colour scheme seems mostly to have survived inside the Chinese House, which is decorated in light turquoise, with a separate alcove decorated with red lacquer fretwork and golden



¹⁴ Robert Lloyd, 'The Cit's Country Box' in *The Poetical Works of Robert Lloyd, A.M.* (London: T. Evans, 1774), vol. 1, pp. 41-6.

monkeys flying kites of birds (see image above). Eileen Harris persuasively attributes the landscaping and the rerouting of the canal around the Chinese House in 1747 to Thomas Wright.¹⁵



Margot Finn, Ellen Filor, Kate Smith and Stephen McDowall on red iron bridge by the Chinese House. Image courtesy of Kate Smith.

Since the flood of 1795 and the rerouting of the Sow, the Chinese House no longer stands on an island, but on a small promontory, with a new red iron bridge, built by Charles Heywood in 1813, leading towards the Cat's Monument. Some repairs were undertaken in the late twentieth century to restore the Chinese House to its

present condition (a photograph taken by Osvald Sirén in the late 1940s shows considerable damage to the underside of the roof).¹⁶ The building was originally set amongst larches, often referred to by eighteenth-century observers as 'Indian Trees,' but these have not survived.

Shugborough also boasted a pagoda, c. 1752, which stood on the other side of the Mansion House, and seems to have been washed away in the floods of 1795. We know from a letter of 14 November 1752 that the 'skeleton' of the pagoda had been completed by that date.¹⁷ Jemima, Marchioness Grey (Lady Anson's sister-in-law), mentions the apparently completed pagoda at Shugborough in her correspondence of August 1763.¹⁸ The pagoda is clearly visible in *A View of Shugborough from the Park from the East* by Nicholas Thomas Dall (d. 1776), which hangs in the Swallow Passage of the Mansion House.

¹⁵ Eileen Harris, 'A Flair for the Grandiose: The Architecture of Thomas Wright – II,' *Country Life*, 2 Sept 1971: 546-50.

¹⁶ Osvald Sirén, *China and Gardens of Europe of the Eighteenth Century* (rpt: Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1990), plate 73B. Sirén seems to assume that the Chinese House was built after the Great Pagoda at Kew.

¹⁷ Staffordshire Record Office, D615/P(S)/1/4/75.

¹⁸ Joyce Godber, *The Marchioness Grey of Wrest Park* (Bedford: Bedfordshire Historical Record Society, 1968), p. 73.

The Chinese House seems to have been the first of Thomas Anson's new garden features constructed after his brother's return. It was soon followed by a number of other garden structures of more classical taste: Thomas Wright's Cat's Monument (1749); Samuel Wyatt's Ruin (c. 1750), and the Shepherd's Monument, started by Wright before 1758 (and the subject of much speculation ever since).¹⁹ From around 1760 onwards, Thomas Anson engaged the services of James 'Athenian' Stuart, who produced for Shugborough several structures after the designs in *The Antiquities of Athens* (1762; co-authored with Nicholas Revett), of which both Thomas and George Anson had been subscribers to the first edition. [John Walsh also employed James Stuart to work on his home [Warfield Park in Berkshire](#), the subject of another project



Tower of the Winds, Shugborough, Staffordshire. Image courtesy of Stephen McDowall.

case study.] The Stuart structures are: a Doric Temple (c. 1760; reliefs added after 1842); a Triumphal Arch (c. 1765), which was adapted into a memorial following Admiral Anson's death in 1762; a Tower of the Winds (before 1767), and the Lanthorn of Demosthenes (1771), with a metal tripod cast by Matthew Boulton and a ceramic bowl by Josiah Wedgwood. According to Wedgwood, 'Mr Stewart [sic] said he knew Mr Anson would glory in having the Arts of Soho and Etruria united in his Trypod, and that it would be a feather in our Caps which that Good Gentleman would delight in taking every opportunity to shew to our advantage.'²⁰ The present tripod at the top of the Lanthorn is a fibreglass copy.²¹

¹⁹ The very brief summary in this paragraph is based on George T. Noszlopy & Fiona Waterhouse, *Public Sculpture of Staffordshire and the Black Country* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005), pp. 100-17.

²⁰ Wedgwood to Thomas Bentley, dated 24 to 26 December 1770, in Ann Finer & George Savage ed., *The Selected Letters of Josiah Wedgwood* (London: Cory, Adams & Mackay, 1965), pp. 100-1. On this collaboration see Nicholas Goodison, 'Mr Stuart's Tripod,' *The Burlington Magazine* (Oct 1972): 695-705.

²¹ For a brief chronology of Stuart's buildings at Shugborough, including plates showing their correspondence with designs from *The Antiquities of Athens*, see David Watkin, *Athenian Stuart: Pioneer of the Greek Revival* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1982) pp. 25-8.

The juxtaposition of buildings in the Chinese taste and those in a classical style can only partly be explained by the competing interests of the two Anson brothers (although this was certainly a factor). The sight of a Chinese house surrounded by classical ruins might seem rather incongruous to us today, but for this brief period in the mid-eighteenth century such pairings evoked little surprise. Yet as the art historian Wu Hung has recently observed, the relationship between these two types of buildings, both in gardens but also in European visual culture, has thus far received little scholarly attention.²² While it cannot on its own provide a satisfactory explanation, it is interesting to note that some early eighteenth-century commentators seem to have seen parallels in the way classical and Chinese gardens were laid out. In 1728, probably drawing on Temple and Addison, Robert Castell expressed the view that the designer of Pliny's garden at Tuscum had been 'not unacquainted' with the manner of the Chinese garden, in which, 'tho' the Parts are disposed with the greatest Art, the Irregularity is still preserved; so that their Manner may not improperly be said to be an artful Confusion.' This manner was surely to be preferred over gardens that show too much artifice, as 'it cannot be supposed that Nature ever did or will produce Trees in the Form of Beasts, or Letters, or any Resemblance of Embroidery, which imitations rather belong to the Statuary, and Workers with the Needle than the Architect; and tho' pleasing in those Arts, appear monstrous in this.'²³

Of what he calls the 'flimsy fantasy of doll-like lovers, children, monkeys, and fishermen lolling about in pleasure gardens graced by eternal spring' of eighteenth-century chinoiserie, David Porter argues that 'there was no substance to such a vision and indeed no desire for substance.'²⁴ Walpole in 1750 refers to the 'whimsical air of novelty that is very pleasing' created by Chinese temples and bridges, which for the most part appears to have been the sole purpose of such buildings.²⁵ In this regard the significance of the Chinese House at Shugborough is that it seems to have been the earliest garden structure in a Chinese taste for which a claim to authenticity was

²² Wu Hung, *A Story of Ruins: Presence and Absence in Chinese Visual Culture* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012), pp. 14-6.

²³ Robert Castell, *The Villas of the Ancients Illustrated* (London: Printed for the author, 1728), pp. 116-8.

²⁴ David Porter, *Ideographia: The Chinese Cipher in Early Modern Europe* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 135.

²⁵ Walpole to Sir Horrace Mann, 2 August 1750. See W. S. Lewis ed., *The Yale Edition of Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, Volume 20 (London: Oxford University Press, 1960) p. 166.

made. This claim was based on its supposedly having been built from a sketch drawn in China by Peircy Brett, one of the officers on the HMS *Centurion*, Commodore Anson's flagship during the voyage of circumnavigation. Sketches made by Brett had been the basis for the 42 copper-plated engravings that illustrated the 1748 edition of the *Voyage Round the World*, where the fact that these 'were not copied from the works of others, or composed at home from imperfect accounts given by incurious and unskilful observers, as hath been frequently the case in these matters; but the greatest part of them were drawn on the spot with the utmost exactness,' represented a particular point of pride.²⁶ A travel record of 1782 by Thomas Pennant (1726-1798), who is listed as a subscriber to the first edition of the *Voyage Round the World*, highlights 'the genuine architecture of *China*, in all its extravagance,' later adding that the Chinese House 'is a true pattern of the architecture of that nation, taken in the country by the skilful pencil of Sir *Percy* [sic] *Brett*: not a mongrel invention of *British* carpenters.'²⁷ Unfortunately the original design for the Chinese House, which formed part of the collection of the late Earl of Aylesford at Packington Hall, seems to have been lost in a fire in late 1979.²⁸

The question of 'authenticity' is of course a complex one. The same Chinese House that Pennant thought was 'not a mongrel invention of British carpenters,' is described in Hugh Honour's classic 1961 study as 'as delightful a specimen of mongrel chinoiserie as ever appeared in England.'²⁹ But the fact that an explicit claim to authenticity was made in this case is interesting, and links the Chinese House at Shugborough to the designs for Chinese structures at Kew, later drawn up and published by William Chambers. One might add here that this preoccupation is mirrored today in a Western obsession with recreating 'authentic' Chinese gardens, usually now taken to be the so-called 'scholar' gardens of Ming Suzhou (although these too are available to us only through much later reconstructions).

²⁶ 'Introduction' to Walter comp., *Voyage Round the World*.

²⁷ Thomas Pennant, *The Journey from Chester to London* (London: B. White, 1782), pp. 67-9.

²⁸ My thanks to the present Earl of Aylesford for attempting, unsuccessfully, to locate this design for me. An image of the design was published (before the fire) in Conner, *Oriental Architecture*, plate 22, but is difficult to make out properly. I have thus far also been unable to locate the photograph used for this book.

²⁹ Hugh Honour, *Chinoiserie: The Vision of Cathay* (London: John Murray, 1961), p. 151.

The Mansion House

The most significant, and in many respects disastrous, event in Shugborough's nineteenth-century history was the great sale of 1842, held to repay the considerable



Chinese objects in the Blue Drawing Room at Shugborough. Image courtesy of Stephen McDowall.

debts accumulated by Thomas, 1st Earl of Lichfield (1795-1854), who, 'between spending and speculating...has half ruined a noble estate' according to one observer.³⁰ The extensive catalogue of the sale, which lasted a full two weeks, gives an indication of the vast collection of books, wine, paintings and sculptures lost to the estate.³¹ These losses make understanding mid-eighteenth-century Shugborough much more difficult, as Vicky Coltman has shown with regard to the dispersed sculpture collection.³²

Remarkably, the majority of Shugborough's important Chinese objects survived. Reading through the contemporary report on the 1842 sale that appeared in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, providing an

impressive list of 'some of the most remarkable articles,' their purchasers and the prices they realised, one is struck by just how fortunate we are that so many Chinese

³⁰ Thomas Greville, cited in Robinson, *Shugborough*, p. 45.

³¹ *A catalogue of the Splendid Property at Shugborough Hall, Stafford: To be sold at auction, by Mr. George Robins, on the premises, on Monday, the 1st Day of August, 1842, and thirteen following days (Sundays excepted), commencing at twelve o'clock each day most punctually.* Staffordshire Record Office D615/E(H)13.

³² Vicky Coltman, 'Thomas Anson's Sculpture Collection at Shugborough: "Living Good and Pleasing" or "Much Taste a Turn to Roman Splendour",' *Sculpture Journal* 12 (2004): 35-56; "Providence Send us a Lord": Joseph Nollekens and Bartolomeo Cavaceppi at Shugborough,' *Acta Hyperborea* 10 (2003): 371-96.

and chinoiserie items were spared.³³ The suggestion that they were a last-minute withdrawal from the sale only makes their deliverance all the more fascinating.³⁴ Why, and by whom, were the Chinese items at Shugborough considered too important to sell?

Having survived the sale, the contents of the Chinese House, including the porcelain, the painted mirror pictures, fret tables, rushbottom chairs and even the Rococo plasterwork ceiling (c. 1747; now in the Verandah Room) were removed to the Mansion House for safe keeping in 1885. Most of these decorative objects and pieces of furniture are usually said to have been acquired by Commodore Anson while he was in Canton in 1743.³⁵ It is in most cases impossible to corroborate this, and references to decoration and furniture in the Ansons' correspondence of 1747-48 tend to suggest that many pieces were acquired only during the building's construction around this time. A letter from Thomas to George dated October 1747, for example, records that 'the three Chinese Lanthorns' arrived safely.³⁶ One interesting dimension that deserves further consideration is the extent to which the building – and its decoration in particular – was considered a female domain. Research on the 'nabob' suggests that eighteenth-century East India Company excess was often represented in Georgian stereotypes as feminine and effeminate.³⁷ Was this stereotype actively embraced by the women of Shugborough? The personal correspondence of the family is at times suggestive: another of Thomas' letters states of the Chinese House that 'we propose to take Advantage of Lady Anson's [being] here to finish it.'³⁸

Most famous amongst the Chinese objects dating from the time of the circumnavigation is the 208-piece Qianlong period armorial porcelain dinner service, decorated with another design by Peirey Brett, on display in a mahogany cabinet in

³³ 'Sale at Shugborough Hall,' *Gentleman's Magazine* 18 (Oct 1842): 405-7. Marble sculptures and paintings are the only items listed here.

³⁴ Robinson, *Shugborough*, p. 48, citing a manuscript copy of the sale catalogue at the William Salt Library, Stafford. This manuscript can no longer be located.

³⁵ See for example Robinson, *Shugborough*, p. 57; Corinne Daniela Caddy, *The Complete Working Shugborough Historic Estate: Souvenir Estate Guide* (Stafford: Staffordshire County Council, 2008), p. 58.

³⁶ Thomas Anson to George Anson, 12 Oct 1747, British Library Add. MS 15955, fo. 60r.

³⁷ Tillman W. Nechtman, *Nabobs: Empire and Identity in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

³⁸ Thomas Anson to George Anson, undated (after 24 Oct 1748), British Library Add. MS 15955, fo. 85v.

the Verandah Room. Views of the lighthouses at Plymouth and Macao decorate the rims of the plates, which also display the Anson crest and arms. The service is usually said to have been presented to Commodore Anson by the grateful European merchants of Canton after the crew of the *Centurion* helped to extinguish a fire in that city in late 1743.³⁹



Mirror painting in the Ante Room at Shugborough. Image courtesy of Stephen McDowall.

The two painted mirror pictures now in the Ante Room were also brought in from the Chinese House in 1885. These would have been sent to China for decoration around the mid-eighteenth century, and are considered amongst the best mirror paintings of their period.⁴⁰ The technique of back painting on glass is thought to have been introduced to China by the Italian Jesuit Giuseppe Castiglione (1688-1766; Ch. Lang Shining 郎世寧) while he served the Qing court between 1715 and 1766.⁴¹ Two walnut, parcel gilded, chinoiserie mirror frames in the Blue Drawing Room, only one of which retains its original (early Qianlong) Chinese mirror painting, may have been carved by Thomas Chippendale (1718-1779).

The Blue Drawing Room also contains a large mahogany display cabinet, which closely follows a design in Chippendale's *Gentleman and Cabinet-Maker's Director* of 1754 (see image at start of section). Its contents include a set of *famille verte* porcelain dishes (c. 1725), Yongzheng *famille rose* porcelain lanterns and a pair of Qianlong *famille rose* rectangular ink stands. Recently put on display in the Yellow Bedroom are several late-Qianlong cloisonné enamel and gilt pieces, including a set

³⁹ On this dinner service and the problem of its origins, see Stephen McDowall, 'The Shugborough Dinner Service and its Significance for Sino-British History,' *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 37:1 (2014), pp. 1-17.

⁴⁰ David S. Howard, *A Tale of Three Cities – Canton, Shanghai & Hong Kong: Three Centuries of Sino-British Trade in the Decorative Arts* (London: Sotheby's, 1997), p. 149.

⁴¹ de Bruijn, 'Found in Translation', p. 55.

of jardinières, believed to have come from the Garden of Perfect Brightness in Beijing in 1860. The Swallow Passage contains a long-case lacquer clock with a representation in the dial of Admiral Anson's flagship at the (First) Battle of Cape Finisterre (1747), and a beautifully decorated gold chinoiserie design on the body.

Other items at Shugborough relating to the circumnavigation include the sword surrendered in 1743 to Commodore Anson by the captain of the *Nuestra Señora de Covadonga*, a silver gilt punchbowl (1768) engraved with a decoration of the HMS *Centurion* by Daniel Smith and Robert Sharp, and a model (1747) of the *Centurion* now loaned to the estate by the National Maritime Museum. What remains of the figurehead of the *Centurion* hangs in the Verandah Passage.

Conclusion: Reading Shugborough, Reading Chinoiserie



Shugborough, Staffordshire. Image courtesy of Stephen McDowall.

Shugborough represents, in very tangible form, a fascinating example of the British engagement with China during the eighteenth century. Admiral Anson despised the Chinese, thought them unparalleled 'in artifice, falsehood, and an attachment to all kinds of lucre,' and professed to consider their talents in the decorative arts to be 'of

a second rate kind.’⁴² Yet Shugborough itself seems to defy this Sinophobe stance. Something of that ambivalence is captured in part of a lengthy anonymous poem on Shugborough in the Staffordshire Record Office, dated 1767, formerly attributed to Anna Seward:

Here mayst thou oft regale in Leric Bower,
Secure of Mandarins’ despotic power...
Safe from their servile yoke their arts command
And Grecian domes erect in Freedom’s Land.⁴³

Should we try to separate the ‘reality,’ however problematic, of the Admiral’s experiences in Canton,⁴⁴ from the deliberate fictions inherent in the chinoiserie style, in order fully to understand a place like Shugborough? Porter argues that the majority of eighteenth-century chinoiserie collectors ‘were content simply to enjoy a delicious surrender to the unremitting exoticism of total illegibility,’⁴⁵ and yet, repeated references to the Chinese House as a genuine specimen of Chinese architecture suggest that at Shugborough, a type of legibility *was* valued. Either way, we can only regret that amongst all the family journals and correspondence regarding the estate and its buildings, the only person who seems never to mention the Chinese House is Admiral Anson himself.

⁴² Walter comp., *Voyage Round the World*, pp. 393, 411.

⁴³ Robinson, *Shugborough*, p. 21. There does not seem to be any evidence to support Seward’s authorship of this poem.

⁴⁴ See Glyndwr Williams, ‘Anson at Canton, 1743: “A Little Secret History”,’ in Cecil H. Clough and P. E. H. Hair (eds.), *The European Outthrust and Encounter: The First Phase c. 1400-c. 1700* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1994), pp. 271-90.

⁴⁵ Porter, *Ideographia*, p. 134.