

# John Smythson, Master Cook to Queen Elizabeth I

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*A Tudor portrait in Hull was for many years wrongly identified as John Smith, mayor of Hull, but is in fact of John Smythson, Master Cook to Elizabeth I. Smythson was a man of some substance, reasonable wealth and social standing. He lived in Eltham in Kent and several details of his career can be uncovered. The portrait, which is the first surviving picture of a Royal Master Cook, was painted by an accomplished artist who was probably associated with the Court.*

JOHN SMYTHSON is the first Master Cook to the Royal Court whose appearance is known from a portrait and about whom we have a number of details (Fig. 1). At this time the sovereign's master cooks were invariably members of the Worshipful Company of Cooks of the City of London, and so Smythson's social standing demonstrates the status of the company and its relationship with the court.<sup>1</sup>

The picture in question is a three-quarter-length Tudor panel portrait, currently displayed as part of the Hands on History Museum in Hull, and formerly identified as John Smith, mayor of Hull in 1563.<sup>2</sup> The picture, c. 1120 × 760 mm, shows a middle-aged bearded man, richly dressed and wearing a hat, with two gold chains round his neck. An inscription on the top left reads AN DNI 1568 AETATIS SVE 45, while a shield of arms is shown at the top right. The museum is housed in the buildings of the former Hull Grammar School and the picture was for many years in the school hall, where its first misattribution occurred. It is seen in a painting of the hall by Thomas Tindall Wildridge which dates from c. 1880 and was meant to be an impression of the school during William Wilberforce's schooling there in the 1760s.<sup>3</sup>

The school was founded in 1486 by Dr John Alcock, successively bishop of Rochester, Worcester, and Ely, and subsequently Lord Chancellor.<sup>4</sup> Under Edward VI the grammar school was suppressed, but it was re-established by Queen Elizabeth. In 1578 Alderman William Gee, who was three times mayor of Hull, opened a subscription for the purpose of repairing the school. This resulted in the erection of a new building, in which Alderman Gee was joined by the Corporation of Hull. Gee himself contributed £80 and 20,000 bricks, and left two houses in the Butchery (later Queen Street) for the benefit of the school. In 1586 the school was declared, by inquisition, the property of the Crown, and in the following year the queen gave the school house, garden and other tenements, 'formerly given to superstitious uses', to Luke Thurcross, the then mayor of Hull and other members of the corporation.

In 1988, when the school was run by the Humberside County Council, it was renamed the William Gee School for Boys. The school merged with Hull High School to form Hull Collegiate School in 2005. Given Alderman Gee's role in the 16th-century re-foundation of the school it is not surprising that, at some unknown date,



FIG. 1. Portrait of John Smythson  
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he was identified as the subject of the Tudor panel portrait in the hall. However, when the picture was cleaned in 1947 it was identified as representing John Smith, mayor of Hull (1563), and subsequently it went on show in the Ferens Art Gallery and then in the Guildhall of Hull. The reason for this attribution was that the cleaning had revealed a coat of arms at the top right of the picture; these could be identified as those of John Smythson of Kent, but, despite this, it seems to have been argued that the similarly named John Smith had appropriated the arms for his own portrait, 'as was not unusual practice'.<sup>5</sup> This is hardly credible and would have been entirely illegal, but the attribution survived until recent years.

I became aware of the picture in the course of preparing a new history of the Worshipful Company of Cooks of London.<sup>6</sup> Amongst the company papers was correspondence dating from 1947 between W. Foot Walker, secretary of the East Riding Antiquarian Society and the clerk of the Cooks' Company. The first letter, dated 8 July, is self-explanatory:

John Smythson, Master Cook to Queen Elizabeth, b. 1523, d. c. 1590

In the process of cleaning a panel oil painting which has been in the Hull Grammar School for some hundreds of years and hitherto presumed to represent Wm Gee, a 16th century benefactor, the clearly painted coat of arms of the above John Smythson was revealed.

There is little doubt that the arms and the portrait were painted at the same time. The former correspond exactly with the official blazon granted by patent on May 27, 1572.

Will you kindly tell me whether the name of John Smythson occurs on the roll of your Wardens?

A second letter from Mr Foot Walker, dated 21 July 1947, further identifies Smythson as 'of Eltham, County Kent', and states that 'we are indebted to Rr R H D'Elboux FSA of Whitelands, Battle, Sussex' for the identification.<sup>7</sup> 'My own information came from, the Harleian Society, Vol 66, Add Ms 37.147, Patent 27 May 1572. The full grant, which I have not seen, will be found in Harleian Ms 1441, folio 49b British Museum.' A final letter, dated 31 July, adds that it should be possible to send some further information when a reply is received from Sir Owen Morshead, librarian and archivist of Windsor castle (1927–58), and that if John Smythson had a link with Hull it may well have been through the Chartered Company or Society of Merchants, incorporated in 1577. Only one letter in response is preserved, from G. W. Sherrard, Clerk to the Cooks' Company, in which he states that the 16th-century records of the company have not survived.

Foot Walker's identification of the arms in Hull portrait was easily confirmed. They are *argent a chevron sable charged with three fleurs-de-lys of the field, on a chief azure a lion passant guardant or*. The crest, not shown in the portrait, is *a hand and arm embowed, habited argent, hand proper holding a battle axe, handle or with the Motto Trust in God*. Volume 66 of the Harleian Society describes this and reads 'Smithson, John, of Kent, given by patent at London 27 May, 1572, 4 Queen Elizabeth, by Sir Gilbert Dethick', with references to heraldic manuscripts in The Queen's College, Oxford and the British Library.<sup>8</sup> These were checked and found to give the same information and to illustrate the arms and the crest. Somewhat surprisingly, Foot Walker did not consult the full text of the grant of arms in the College of Arms, MS Vincent 162/135, where it is headed *Litterae Patentes Johannis Smithsonn alias Tayler*. The name Tayler is not mentioned in the text of the grant; however, a contemporary note attached to the record reads:

The Pedigree of John Smithson of some called Taylour because his father was one of the Wardrobe to King H 7 and at that time all those that were admitted to that place must have skill in the Taylor's Craft or else were not thought fit for that place etc. The said John Smithson is Master Cook to the Queens Majestie Queen Elizabeth. Anno 1576.

The College contains other references to 'John Smythson als Taylor' in docquet books relating to 'Dethick Grants'.<sup>9</sup>

It is not uncommon in Tudor documents to find the use of the term 'alias' followed by an alternative name, but this usually denotes illegitimacy, with the first name being that of the mother, the second the father.<sup>10</sup> The pedigree note might suggest otherwise, and there are other possibilities which are explored below. A further inconsistency is that the grant of arms is dated 1572, while the picture bears the date 1568 in the upper left-hand corner. Finally, the note of the pedigree identifies Smythson as being Master Cook to the Queen and the grant refers to him as 'of Kent', but not of Eltham.

The fact that the grant of arms post-dates the picture by four years can be resolved by examining the surface of the painting. The arms in fact appear twice — in the upper right-hand corner and on a ring worn prominently on the first finger of the sitter's left hand (Fig. 2). Examination of this reveals that this detail has been added. The band of the ring is very crudely painted and may be compared with the carefully painted ring on the little finger of the right hand (Fig. 3). Moreover, the arms on the ring are depicted so that they can be read directly by the viewer, but would have appeared upside down to the wearer — an elementary mistake that a professional painter would not have made. We may therefore accept that the picture was painted in 1568, but that both the arms on the ring and those in the top right corner were added after they had been granted in 1572, presumably because the sitter was very proud of his new armigerous status. The figure in the portrait is dressed in the fashion of Master Cooks, as described by the diarist Henry Machyn in 1559: 'and then cam the master cokes rydyng in cottes in brodere, and chynes of gold'.<sup>11</sup> The man in the Hull portrait wears an embroidered jacket and has two gold chains round his neck. In later times the mayors of Hull also wore gold chains, and these are seen in a portrait of Sir Samuel Standidge, mayor in 1795, displayed in the Hull Maritime Museum, but these chains are different in form from those in the picture of Smythson.

It is not known who painted the portrait or why is it in Hull. The panels are not in good condition and would benefit from careful restoration, but enough remains to show that it was a work of some quality. It has been suggested that it might be by the Court painter Stephen van der Meulen, but the discovery of his will dated 1563 rules this out, as the picture carries the date of 1568. It seems to be a work of the Anglo-Netherlandish School and I am most grateful to Karen Hearn for the following comments. The posture of one hand on the hip was a common international convention and is found on many English portraits by foreign artists; the disposition of the fingers on Smythson's right hand (that is, the one on the viewer's left) is distinctive and can be seen (in reverse) in a portrait by Cornelis Ketel, but this artist only arrived in London in 1573. Even closer comparisons for the form, with the same composition and hand disposition, may be seen in the rare works of Arnold Bronkhorst, who was active between 1565–80, and it is also sometimes used by Hans Eworth. Another possibility is the painter S. van Herwijck whose work has been recently studied by Bendor Grosvenor.<sup>12</sup> In the absence of a signature or other evidence, we can only say that the portrait was painted by an accomplished artist who may well have had associations with the court of Elizabeth I.



FIG. 2. Detail of the left hand

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By contrast, a considerable amount of information can be discovered about John Smythson's life and career. In John Nichols's *The Progresses and Public Processions of Queen Elizabeth* he is recorded as Master Cook to the Queen, presenting New Year gifts to her on several occasions and receiving gifts of gilt plate in return.<sup>13</sup> In 1577–78 he gave 'a feyer marchpan' (a fair marzipan cake) along with John Dudley, Servant of the Pastry, who gave 'a great pie of quinces and wardenes [pears] gilt'. In the following year, 1578–79, Smythson is recorded as John Smythson alias Taylor, giving this time 'a fair marchpan with a cattle in middle'. In 1588–89 he is again referred to simply as John Smithson, Master Cooke giving 'one fair marchpan, with St. George in the middle' and John Dudley 'one fair pie of quinces orangeado' (candied orange peel). The same lists contain records of gifts from Elizabeth Smythson, the queen's Laundress and, as we shall see, John Smythson's wife.

If the frequent description of Smythson as 'alias Taylor' did indicate that he was illegitimate, he overcame any social stigma from his birth to become a man of



FIG. 3. Detail of the right hand

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substance, recorded as holding properties in Kent, London, Lincolnshire and Herefordshire, as well as having an important position at Court.<sup>14</sup> The first extant reference to his landed interests reveals that from 1562 John Smythson leased directly from Queen Elizabeth some significant property in Westminster. A document records a feoffment (letters patent) for £1,372 1s. 2½d., issued by Queen Elizabeth I to Thomas Hutton and Richard Dawes of London, gentlemen, on 4 March 1600; as is normal in such cases, the text of the lease goes on to recite earlier leases, including on 17 May 1588 the transfer of the premises for fifty years to Anthony Cave, subject to the leases to Elizabeth Smythe, Laundress to King Edward VI, for life, on 5 March, 1532, and then to John Smythson otherwise Taylor, a Master Cook of the Royal Household, in 1562 for twenty-one years from the death of Elizabeth Smythe. The property concerned included a tenement and garden called the Vyne Garden, a meadow and close called Kechenors and Bergeons, a garden called the Ostrey Garden and a close called the Mylbancke within the sanctuary of St Peter's abbey, Westminster.

This indicates several things about Smythson. He was already in 1562 a Master Cook, but perhaps not yet 'the' Master Cook to the Queen. We can guess that his mother was Elizabeth Smythe, Laundress to Edward VI and that she died in 1562, when John, who had adopted the name Smythson, took on the leases of the Westminster properties. These included the Vyne Garden, subsequently Vine Street (now Romney Street, between Horseferry Road and Smith Square on the Embankment), which contained a productive vineyard:<sup>15</sup>

'There was a garden', says Stow, 'they called the Vine Garden, because perhaps vines anciently were there nourished, and wine made.' Under date of 1565, in the overseers' book, a rate is made for 'the Vyne Garden', and 'Myll', next to Bowling Alley. In the first year of Edward VI [...] payment was made to 'Rich. Wolward, keeper of the King's house at Westminster, j mark to repair the King's vineyard there.' In that reign the place appears to have been enclosed with houses and other buildings. 'With a parcel of ground called the Mill-bank, valued at 58s., it was given by Edward VI., in the third year of his reign, to Joanna Smith, in consideration of service.'

All this indicates that the Vine garden was a well-known and valuable property.

In 1573 Smythson acquired three more substantial properties. Firstly, John Smythson alias Taylor purchased from Sophronia Ball ten acres of wood at Kidbrook, Kent, for the sum of £40,<sup>16</sup> then the rectory or church of Worlaby, in Lincolnshire, with appurtenant lands, was leased to John Smythson alias John Taylor for twenty-one years at a yearly rent of £7, together with the advowson of the vicarage. Finally in this year, the site and capital messuage of the manor of Hide, in Herefordshire, with lands in Hidehill, Aldon and Wintercote (properties of the lordship of Leominster and of the priory of Leominster), were leased to John Smythson alias John Taylor, for twenty-one years at a yearly rent of £8 13s. 4d. It may not be coincidental that he acquired all these lands in the year after he had received his grant of arms.

Smythson's property portfolio continued to expand. On 23 June 1575 Thomas Twyste of Eltham, one of Her Majesty's Ordinary Servants, conveyed to John Smythson alias Taylor, Chief Master Cook to the Queen, two parcels of land at East End in Eltham and Bexley, comprising about four acres. The following year, on 20 May 1576, Henry Heron, citizen and Merchant Taylor of London, sold to 'John Smythson als Taylor of Eltham, Esq, a messuage in Eltham with appurtenances and easements'. On 16 November, 1582, Ralf Bower of East Greenwich and Agnes his wife sold to John Smythson alias Taylor, the Queen's Master Cook, one third part of a cottage and land in Eltham for £5, while in 1583 Thomas Rooper granted to John Smythson alias Taylor a close in Eltham in exchange for part of the land given for the discharge of the cistern of the parish.

The most revealing of these transactions is dated 26 February 1585, when John Smythson, Chief Master Cook to the Queen, out of affection for his daughter Elizabeth, wife of Hugh Miller, one of the queen's footmen, enfeoffed to his loving friends and kinsmen, William Ballard of Lincoln's Inn, Gentleman, Henry Smythson and John Poste, two of the children of her Majesty's Kitchen, and Ardern More, of the town of Bedford, his messuage where he dwelt and lands in the town of Eltham, reserving a life interest to himself John Smythson and wife Elizabeth.<sup>17</sup> This confirms John's residence in Eltham and his marriage to Elizabeth, the Queen's Laundress — a post which she may have taken over from Elizabeth Smythe, Laundress to Edward VI, who, as noted, was possibly John Smythson's mother. The deed continues that the property was to pass, in default of issue to Hugh and Elizabeth, to their son Smythson Miller. Thus we know that John's daughter Elizabeth was married to Hugh Miller and they had a son named Smythson Miller.

William Ballarde of Lincoln's Inn was a witness to John Smythson's will, which he made three years later, on 29 December 1588.<sup>18</sup> Another witness was Ambrosio Lupo of Milan (1505–91), one of the queen's musicians, who was a significant figure in the development of Tudor court music. As is normal, Smythson describes himself as being 'sicke of bodye but in perfect memory', and proceeds to bequest the lease of the Vyne Garden in Westminster in 'as large and ample manner as the same was granted unto

me from the Queen's Majestie, unto Smithson Miller, my daughter's sonne', following the death of John's wife Elizabeth, whom he appoints as his executrix. The fact that almost the entire will is taken up with provisions relating to the Vine Garden emphasises its importance, although the will does say that with regard to the disposition of 'my landes I have allreadye set forth in a certeyne deed of uses which is enrolled', dated 1585. This deed has not been found.

John Smythson appears to have died shortly after this — his last New Year gift to the queen was made a few days after drawing up his will, and he was buried in Eltham parish church on 3 July 1590. He was survived by his wife and she, named as Elizabeth Smythson or Taylor, was granted the lease of four water mills in the parish of Hemel Hempstead in 1590–91.<sup>19</sup>

Elizabeth's own will, when she was 'sick of body but in perfect memory', was made on 20 May 1593, and her burial alongside her husband in Eltham church took place on 16 November of the same year. It is much more detailed will than that of her husband and specifies that her burial should be 'in the channcell of the parish church of Eltham, nere unto my late deceased husband, having assured hope that when Christ Jesus my saviour shall come to judgment it shal be raised againe and be joined together with my soule and so bothe, through his death and merittes, shall be partakers of the kingdome of heaven'.<sup>20</sup> She leaves 40s. a year to 'my neere[st] Anne Bore', the wife of Raffe Bore of Greenwiche and 40s. apiece to Anne's four sons and one daughter. The lease of a messuage called Harwardes, in Watford parish in Hertfordshire, she leaves to Smithson Miller, the son of Hugh and Elizabeth Miller, and £100 to their daughter Susan, to be paid 'of my plate and moveables' on the day of her marriage. To her cousin Richard Dyck she gives 'a guilte boule', while another cousin's wife was to receive 'my ringe with Turkish stone and all my ruffes'. The wife of a third cousin was left 'a ringe with a diamond'. Christian Gilpyn was left 'my taffeta gowne and a taffeta kirtle', while Ann Bore received her cloth gowns. To her daughter Elizabeth Miller, she left 'all my best apparel, my best rings, my greate ring with the stone and my chaynes'. Everything else, including 'all my goodes moveable and unmoveable which are unbequeathed', she left to her son-in-law, Hugh Miller, who was made her sole executor.

The reason why the portrait of John Smythson is in Hull may lie in the fact that the Smythsons formed a large and extended clan in Yorkshire, represented in all the Ridings and with members of the family recorded in Hull.

In trade and commerce the Smithsons were active and successful. In those days, when nobles and gentlemen paid as much for fine dress as their wives, clothing was a very profitable line of business, and so from the reign of Henry VIII onwards we have notices of prosperous merchants, younger sons, of the name, who in London, Yarmouth, York, Leeds, Hull, and Richmond made money and had lands.<sup>21</sup>

I have suggested that John Smythson may have been the son of Elizabeth Smythe, laundress, but the name Smythe is equally common in Yorkshire, and we have seen that the former attribution of the portrait was to John Smith, mayor of Hull in 1563. Although the letters 'y' and 'i' are effectively interchangeable in the name Smith, it is of some interest to note that both Elizabeth Smythe and John Smythson almost invariably spelled their name with a y. Unfortunately, it has not proved possible to identify the 'alias Taylor'. Taylor is a very common name, and without even a first name to help he cannot be traced. Equally, I have been unable to trace John Smythson, Master Cook, to the city of Hull, but I have little doubt he was there at some point and it is



not impossible that he was educated in the grammar school, to which he gave or left his portrait. Whatever the case, the new attribution of this portrait, together with the documentary references cited above, provide our first detailed information about a royal Master Cook, revealing that the holder of this office was an established figure both at Court and in Elizabethan society as a whole.

## NOTES

1. The evidence for this is found in the company's early charters. The charter of King Edward IV (11 July 1482) begins 'Know you that We bearing in mind how our well beloved honest and freemen of the Mistery of Cooks of our City of London have for a long time outside the aforesaid City, personally taken and borne, and to this day do not cease to take and bear, great and manifold pains and labour as well at our great feast of St George as at others according to our command'. The charter of James I (19 May 1616) opens with the words, 'The many services heretofore done and performed and as yet continued to our noble progenitors, Kings and Queens of England, as also to ourselves since our first coming unto the Imperial Crown of this Realm by our well beloved subjects, the honest freemen of the said Mistery of Cooks of our said City of London, in their own persons as well as at the Royal Feast of our Coronation, at the entertaining of our dear brother the King of Denmark, the marriage of my well beloved daughter the Lady Elizabeth, our annual Feasts of St George, as at the entertaining of foreign Princes and upon all other occasions when they are thereunto required'. See A. Borg, *A History of the Worshipful Company of Cooks* (Huddersfield 2011).

2. Hull Museums, Accession No KINCM: 2007.10094.

3. Hull Museums, Accession No KINCM: 1994.165.10.

4. 'A History of Kingston on Hull', in T. Bulmer, *History, Topography, and Directory of East Yorkshire (with Hull), Comprising Its Ancient and Modern History* (Preston 1892); R. J. Schoeck, 'Alcock, John (1430–1500)', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 60 vols (Oxford 2004), I, 593–95.

5. Reference given to me by Susan Capes of the Hands on History Museum, from the museum records.

6. See n. 1 above.

7. R. H. D'Elboux was an antiquary who, amongst much else, worked on the papers of the 18th-century Kentish parson the Revd Brian Faussett, who amassed a huge collection of memorial inscriptions and heraldry in the county. Fausset's papers are preserved in the Library of the Society of Antiquaries of London.

8. *Grantees of Arms Named in Docquets and Patents to the End of the Seventeenth Century*, ed. W. Rylands, Harleian Society Visitation Series 66 (London 1915), 237, citing (in the following order) Oxford, The Queen's College MS 145, fol. 28v; London, British Library MSS Harley 1441, fol. 78; Additional 14295, fol. 7, 24v; Harley 1359, fol. 12v; Harley 1441, fol. 49v (copy of grant).

9. For example, in London, College of Arms MS Vincent Old Grants, 1/285. (I am most grateful to the late Peter Gwynne-Jones, Garter Principal King of Arms, for his assistance with this.)

10. This was frequently but not invariably the case: in 1521 there is a record of Joan Barron, daughter and heir of Margaret Welle, who was 'daughter and heir of John Smyth alias Smythson, late of Potto [in Whorlton], Yorkshire', so there could be a more innocent explanation for the use of *alias*. See Kew, The National Archives (hereafter TNA), Court of Requests: Pleadings, REQ 2/12/27.

11. The full text reads: 'The xxj of Marche the quen[']s master cokes and odur her offesers, and at Mylleden ther they dynyd, [with] all maner of mett and drynke; and ther was all maner of artelere, as drumes, flutes, trumpetes, gones, mores pykes, halbardes, to the number of v C.; the gonners in shurtes of maylle and [...] pykes in bryght harness, and mony swardes and v grett pesses of gones and shot in [...] the wyche dyd myche hurt unto glass wy[ndows;] and cam a grett gyant danssyng, and after [that a] mores dansse dansyng, and gones and mor[es pikes]; and after cam a cart with a grett wyth and ij [bears?] with-in the cartt, and be-syd whent a gret [...] of grett mastes; and then cam the master cokes rydyng in cottes in brodere, and chynes of gold, and mony of the quen[']s servandes in ther levery, to the cowrt, and ther they shott ther pesses, and with-in the parke was ij C. chamburs gret and smalle shot, and Quen[']s grace standyn in the galere; and so evere man whent in-to the parke, showhyng them in batell ray, shutyng and playhyng at bowt the parke; and a-for the quen was on[e] of bayres was bated, and after the mores dansers whent in-to the cowrt, dansyng in mony offeses.' See *The Diary of Henry Machyn: Citizen and Merchant-Taylor of London, from A.D. 1550 to A.D. 1563*, ed. J. G. Nichols (London 1848), 184–201.

12. B. Grosvenor, 'The Identity of "the famous paynter Steven": Not Steven van der Meulen but Steven van Herwijck', *British Art Journal*, 9 (2009), 12–17.
13. J. Nichols, *The Progresses and Public Processions of Queen Elizabeth* (London 1788).
14. *Hasted's History of Kent: Corrected, Enlarged, and Continued to the Present Time . . . Part 1: The Hundred of Blackheath*, ed. H. H. Drake (London 1886); *Calendar of Patent Rolls, 1560–1563*, 335 (alias).
15. W. Thornbury and E. Walford, *Old and New London: A Narrative of Its History, Its People, and Its Places, Illustrated with Numerous Engravings from the Most Authentic Sources*, 6 vols (London 1873–78), IV, 1–13; *Calendar of Patent Rolls, 1560–1563*, 335.
16. *Hasted's History of Kent* (as n. 14), 141 (*Feet of Fines, Kidbrook*).
17. *Ibid.*, 207 (*Addenda to the History of Eltham*).
18. For Smythson's will, proved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury, see TNA, PROB 11/116/172.
19. See *The Victoria History of the County of Hertford*, ed. W. Page, 4 vols (London 1902–23), II, 215–30.
20. Elizabeth's will is now TNA, Prerogative Court of Canterbury, PROB 11/83/40. Between 1872 and 1879 the old medieval parish church was completely demolished, and a new building, designed by architect Sir Arthur Bloomfield and built by James Naylor of Rochester, was erected 3 m north of the old site, occupying a larger area. Some of the original memorial plaques were retained, but unfortunately not those of the Smythesons. I am most grateful to Margaret Taylor of Eltham for giving me the dates of the burials of both Smythesons (*sic*) as recorded in the church burial registers.
21. See G. R. Smithson, *Genealogical Notes & Memoirs of the Smithson Family*, ed. W. Ball Wright (London 1906), 3.