COUNTRY LIFE 125 1897-2022

ENGLISH HOMES . . . OLD & NEW

English Home, part VII
1725–60

Each month of this 125th-anniversary year, COUNTRY LIFE describes a period in the development of the English great house. In the seventh of this 12-part series, **John Goodall** looks at the mid-Georgian world

ON January 9, 1731, Thomas Watson-Wentworth (from 1746 the Marquess of Rockingham) hosted 'a large entertainment to all my tenants in the neighbourhood and their wives and some neighbouring gentlemen' at his seat at Wentworth Woodhouse, South Yorkshire. There were about 1,000 guests, so, to prevent confusion, each 'had tickets sent them with the name of the rooms they were to repair to, men by themselves, and women by themselves, with a few men at each table to help them and women servants ready at their coming to show them and assist them in taking off their hoods etc, men to conduct the men and the chief were carried to the best rooms and the inferior according to their rank'.

It's easy to imagine Georgian country houses as the backdrop to an existence as polite, ordered and elegant as their architecture. This event at Wentworth Woodhouse, however, was connected to their vital role in the rough and tumble of politics. Parliament had consistently been an important institution in English affairs, but the events of the Glorious Revolution in 1688, and the constitutional monarchy that the succession of George I in 1714 confirmed, changed its character. To exercise political power, it was now necessary to control votes in the House of Commons. That, in turn, made election to its membership hugely important and established rival political interests; those of the Whigs—the architects of the new political regime—and the Tories, their opponents.

Fig 1 above: **Nicholas Dubois's 1720s stair at Chevening, Kent.** *Fig 2 right:* **Delicate plasterwork of the 1730s in the dining room at Easton Neston, Northamptonshire**

There were effectively two kinds of parliamentary seat: those representing a shire or county and those of a town or borough. The terms of the franchise varied, but the right to vote was usually attached to property and, in towns, the ownership of land within defined boundaries. That meant that those →

Fig 3: **The Marble Hall at Wentworth Woodhouse , South Yorkshire, begun in the 1730s. Encircling galleries are a Palladian commonplace**

aspiring to political power aimed to command the necessary property either to shape election results or, ideally, to determine them absolutely. That was most commonly possible in boroughs with small electorates, hence the terms 'pocket' (or 'rotten') boroughs. In many county votes, however, the electorate had to be wooed with flattery, promises or money. Rivalry in contested elections could be bitter and the expenses involved ruinous.

Yorkshire had the largest and most unpredictable electorate of all, hence Watson-Wentworth's huge entertainment, which aimed to win support for his Whig interest, as well as the immense scale of his house, which grew by degrees through his political career into an architectural leviathan. Not only did it need to be big to accommodate vast receptions—his ticket-holding guests steered to their places like a theatre audience—but it was demonstrative of power. In this last respect, the house was a public building illustrative of his status and political outlook. No less importantly, it aimed to cast into architectural shadow the seat of a Tory neighbour and distant relative at Stainborough. The two houses and their associated landscapes developed in fierce rivalry to include terraces, temples, monuments and even a castle and ruined city, romantically strung along a hilltop.

Politics was the mainspring of country-house building across the kingdom during the 18th century, from the vastly ambitious Houghton and Raynham (COUNTRY LIFE, *April 6, 2016*), Norfolk (both directly connected to the career of Britain's first Prime Minister, Robert Walpole) to more modest buildings, such as Thirsk Manor, North Yorkshire (COUNTRY LIFE, *June 1, 2022*). It was made possible, however, by the exceptional prosperity of the kingdom at large. Agricultural improvement was turning well-managed English estates into hugely profitable assets. Concurrently, the City of London was developing a sophisticated financial market that offered a new route to wealth.

This brought risks—illustrated by the collapse of the South Sea Company in 1720—but the ability of the British government to

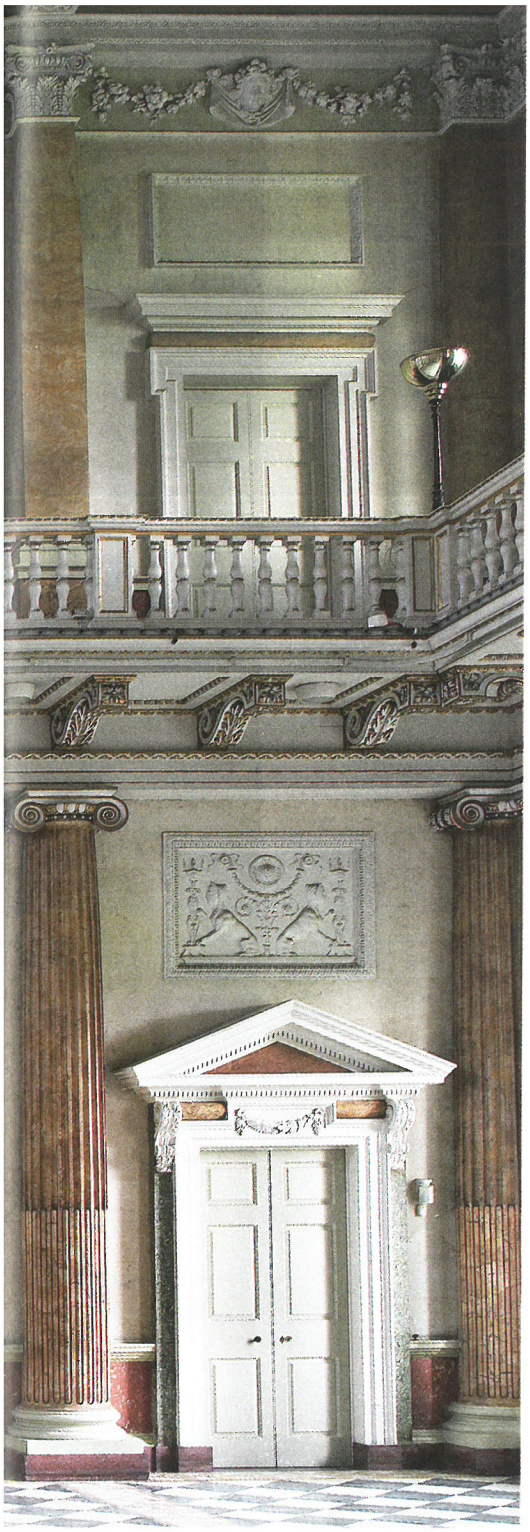

Fig 4: **William Kent's state bed in the Green Velvet Bedchamber, Houghton, Norfolk**

restructure its vast debts underpinned the kingdom's military commitments and growing trade networks. In the process, Britain was transformed into the wealthiest nation in the world. We are attuned today to the cruelties and injustices this created, but the prosperous Georgian probably stirred sugar into their tea with as little thought as to how these commodities were produced as we have today when we purchase a new mobile phone.

The crucial point of cultural reference for the wealthy and educated throughout this period was the world of ancient Rome. Its familiar personalities and history were imbued with a heroic quality that the British were pleased to recognise in themselves. It was for this reason, for example, that Walpole's portrait bust in the hall of Houghton portrays him in a toga with the inscription 'first amongst the British Senate', a title echoing that of the Emperor Augustus. That association was fed by the fashion for gentlemen to travel on the so-called Grand Tour. Such journeys offered an encounter with the physical vestiges of the Roman world and the rich artistic life of Italy. For many, the experience was formative, creating circles of friendship and instilling a lifelong enthusiasm for all things Italian, ancient and modern.

Watson-Wentworth did not go on the Grand Tour (although his son later did and bought art enthusiastically), but he showed a keen understanding of the fashions it generated in his plans for Wentworth Woodhouse. The house he began in 1724 and which filled with guests in 1731 drew many of its busy and idiosyncratic architectural details from an illustrated volume of Roman Baroque palaces —Domenico de Rossi's *Studio D'Architettura Civile* (1702). Incidentally, such borrowings demonstrate how fundamental illustrated publications had become to the practice of English architecture. It was a point that English building professionals increasingly exploited as the 18th century progressed.

During the 1720s, admiration for the Italian attracted immigrant professionals in many fields (most famously in music) to Britain. Of outstanding importance in domestic architecture were stuccadores, such as Giuseppe Artari, Giovanni Bagutti and Francesco Vassalli, all of whom came from the Swiss canton of Ticino. Their decorative plasterwork introduced the flowing forms of the Rococo style to English interiors. It took a generation for English craftsmen to match their work. Inevitably, however, a reaction was already in train, its foundations laid by the publication in 1715 of the first volume of a compendium of architectural designs by Colen Campbell called *Vitruvius Britannicus* or *The British Architect.* →

Fig 5: **The Tribune Horace Walpole added to Strawberry Hill, Twickenham, then west of London, in 1760–62. Its intricate Gothic detailing is borrowed from York Minster**

In the introduction to this unashamedly patriotic volume—its title implicitly linking the British buildings it illustrated with the Roman architect Vitruvius—Campbell derided the 'affected', 'licentious' and 'chimerical' work of recent Italian architects. He instead praised the 16th-century 'restorers' of architecture, who, in his view, had rescued the grandeur of Roman architecture from the 'barbarity' of Gothic. In particular, he singled out Vicentine architect Andrea Palladio, author of *The Four Books* (1570). He then claimed the 17th-century architect of the Stuart court, Inigo Jones, as the rival of Palladio and asserted through his work an equality between the English and Italian traditions of building.

Campbell's work popularised a simplified idiom of Classical architecture termed Palladian that would dominate English design into the 1760s. It helped that the first full, English edition of the Palladio's treatise appeared in 1721 (translated by a Venetian architect active in England, Giacomo Leoni), followed by engravings of Jones's designs by William Kent in 1727, Isaac Ware in 1731, and John Vardy in 1744. Palladian buildings possessed strict underlying geometry, which, in turn, created interiors of regular volume (usually rectangular) with strict proportional relationships between length, height and width (***Fig 7***). Externally, they were symmetrical and employed contrasting textures of masonry, including ruggedly finished or 'rusticated' blocks of stone. Their decorative grammar was based on the 'Five Orders', the different types of column capital and base—Doric, Ionic, Tuscan, Corinthian and Composite, as described by Vitruvius—which could be applied to doors, windows and screens.

Palladianism was—paradoxically—Classical, Italian and (through Jones) British all at once, which allowed it to appeal to everyone. Its strict rules were helpful as well, although it was important to interpret them with taste. in his *Moral Essays* (1731–35), for example, the poet Alexander Pope praised Campbell's influential patron, the arbiter of architectural taste and godfather of Palladianism Lord Burlington, and famously mocked those who uncritically transferred Italian architecture to a British climate and were 'Proud to catch cold at a Venetian door;/Conscious they act a true Palladian part,/And, if they starve, they starve by rules of art.' Small surprise, therefore, that when Watson-Wentworth decided to extend Wentworth Woodhouse in 1733, he was careful to send his designs to Lord Burlington for approval. The regimented detail of the new Palladian frontage and hall (***Fig 3***) forms a fascinating contrast to the Baroque flamboyance of the old.

The principal rooms of Palladian houses were generally elevated to first-floor level,

Fig 6 above: **Kelmarsh, Northamptonshire, begun 1732, with a central block and service wings.** *Fig 7 right:* **Mereworth Castle in Kent, designed by Colen Campbell**

the *piano nobile*, that was approached up an external stair. In most respects, the internal decoration of rooms on this 'noble floor' followed in patterns established in the late 17th century. The principal distinction was between interiors with hard finishes of marble, stone and timber that were connected to the outdoors—including entrance halls and spaces for the display of collections of sculpture—and formal domestic interiors beyond. The latter were hung with silks and velvets in varied colours and held furniture upholstered in the same materials. One common exception to this treatment was the dining room, where fabrics might absorb the smell of food. The principal bedroom, with its state bed (***Fig 4***), generally formed part of this main floor.

The most important decorative fixtures internally were doorcases and fireplaces. Paintings were sometimes given architectural frames in important rooms, a treatment that effectively turned them into fixtures (***Fig 2***). Particular attention was given to the decoration of internal staircases, which were usually suspended or cantilevered from the wall to give the illusion that they hung in space. These might be constructed of stone with iron rails, but there was also a tradition of virtuoso timber structures of this kind (***Fig 1***). Furniture made use of exotic timbers, such as mahogany. Kitchens and services might be incorporated into pavilions set to either side of the main block of the house and connected to it by passages (***Fig 6***). The general preference was for level or balustraded parapets, rather than high-pitched roofs.

Meanwhile, there were new categories of building that began to shape patterns of domestic life. To attend Parliament and the Court, the nobility needed houses in the squares and terraces around St James's Palace. These buildings were outwardly plain—indeed, foreigners marvelled at their outward conformity—but internally they were jewel boxes. Some also desired a villa, a small country house within striking distance of the capital. Villas were not a new idea in England, but they now proliferated, particularly along the Thames. As domestic buildings, they combined the rich and informally arranged interiors of contemporary town houses with (in miniature) the planning, architectural language and demonstrative gardens and landscapes of a country seat.

The Palladian idiom was particularly well suited to the design of both town houses and villas, which could assume compact and perfect forms. A case in point is Lord Burlington's influential villa at Chiswick. Villas could also be experimental, as with Horace Walpole's pioneering 'little Gothic castle' at Strawberry Hill (***Fig 5***). Such buildings were intended for the entertainment of small social circles with common political and cultural interests. These same groups might also discuss architectural design with reference to professionals and friends, a reality that sometimes hopelessly confuses issues of attribution. Crucially, the London-based figures involved in these projects—individuals such as James Gibbs, Kent and, from the 1760s, Robert Adam—naturally came to dominate contemporary country-house commissions, too.

Even as the fashion for Palladian design was at its apogee, the ideas that would inform the next generation of domestic fashions were already circulating. The understanding of the Classical past was growing more sophisticated with the exploration, in particular, of Greek buildings. There was also new interest in the architecture of the Middle Ages, which, as we shall see, would have a transformative effect on English taste.

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