



Each month of this 125th anniversary year, **COUNTRY LIFE** illustrates a period in the development of the English great house. In the eighth of this 12-part series, **John Goodall** looks at the age of Robert Adam

ON Friday we went to see—oh! the palace of palaces! and yet a palace without crown, without coronet—but such expense! Such taste! Such profusion!’ So begins Horace Walpole’s enthusiastic description of Osterley Park, Middlesex, in a letter dated June 21, 1773, to his muse on domestic subjects, Anne, Countess of Upper Ossory.

Osterley had been acquired in 1562 by the Elizabethan founder of the Royal Exchange, Sir Thomas Gresham, and redeveloped by him as a grand courtyard house. What commanded Walpole’s admiration two centuries later, however, was not the Tudor building, but its complete overhaul by the vastly wealthy banking family, the Childs.

Walpole’s emphasis that this was a palace without a crown or coronet—in other words, that it was neither royal nor aristocratic—is significant. It was built instead with money from the City of London; as Walpole describes it, ‘a shop is the estate’. If title was the conventional adjunct of great wealth, Osterley represented something quite different: mercantile wealth as derived from Britain’s trading empire.

The unrivalled scale and reach of Britain’s trade was on display throughout the house, as Walpole noted: ‘Mrs Child’s dressing-room is full of pictures, gold filigree, China and Japan. So is all the house—the chairs are taken from antique lyres, and make charming harmony... Not to mention a kitchen-garden

that costs £1400 a year, a menagerie full of birds that come from a thousand islands...’

Osterley was both a product and an expression of the changing face of Britain as an increasingly confident global power. The kingdom was wealthy, with highly developed agriculture and industry, plus a rapidly improving turnpike road system to connect its many prosperous towns and cities. However, one city eclipsed all others: London. This was the financial seat of Britain’s trade and a crucial place of resort for anyone with an interest in the political, judicial or economic life of the realm. It was both a national and global capital and, by the end of the 18th century, the population was fast approaching one million.

In these circumstances, it was only natural that London should become the unrivalled focus of the Arts in Britain, drawing professionals of all kinds. The need for the powerful to entertain, the appetite for novelty and sheer wealth available generated unrivalled commissions in both the public and private sphere. Added to which, it was only in London—where everybody who was anybody came at least once a year—that new buildings could enjoy a truly national audience (rather than being consumed by way of expensive publications).

The dominance of London further served to formalise the Arts themselves, encouraging particular groups to establish clubs →

Fig 1: Robert Adam’s monochrome hall at Syon Park leads into a symphony of colour



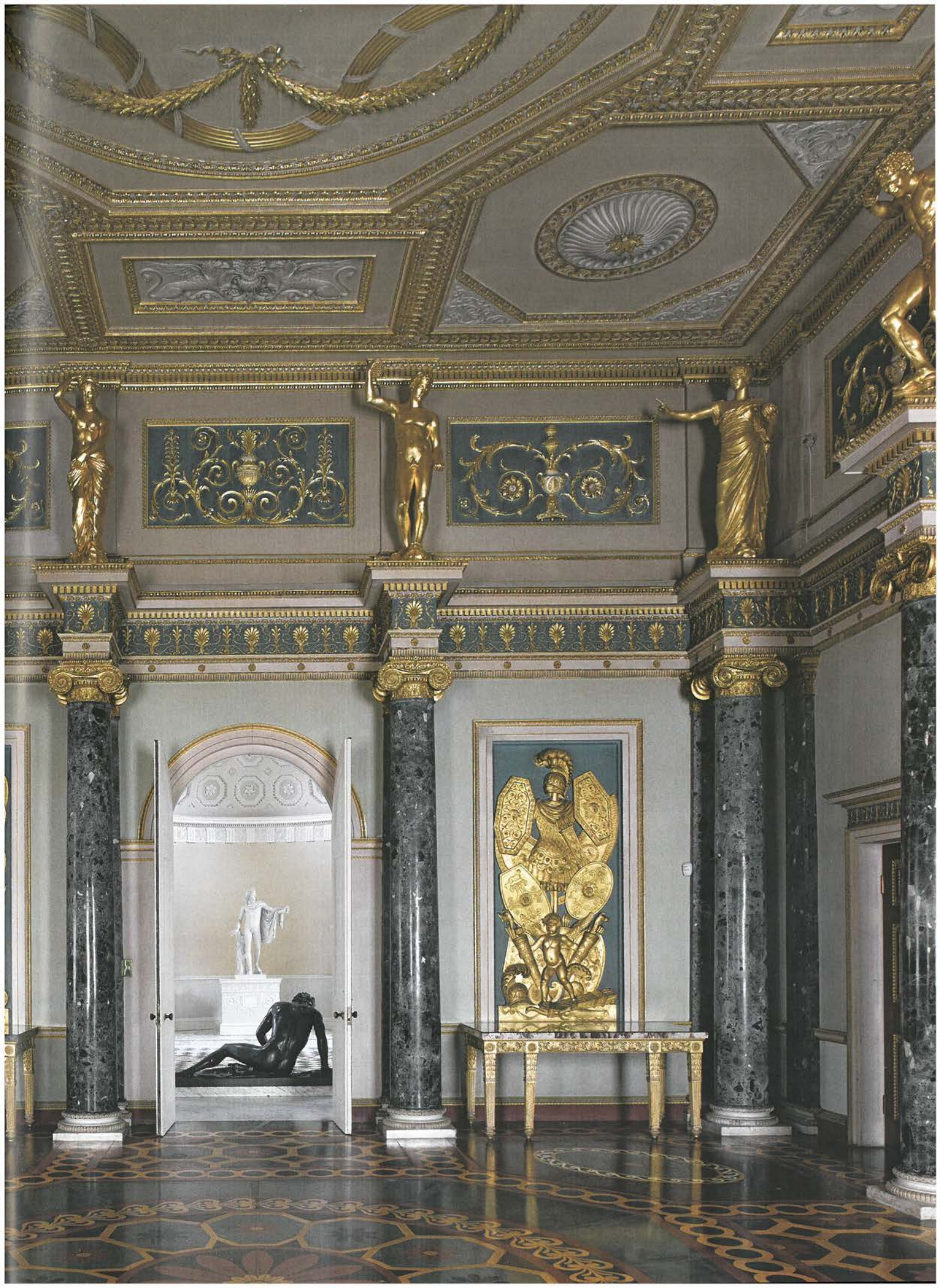


Fig 2 right:
Wedderburn,
Berwickshire,
combines
Classical ideas
from Split in
Croatia with
castle forms.



Fig 3 far right:
The 1790s Music
Room at Powder-
ham Castle,
Devon, which
was designed
by Adam's rival,
James Wyatt

and national societies such as the Royal Academy. It also encouraged specialisation among decorators, upholsterers, furniture makers and architects and, with the help of new industrial processes, made widely available such things as printed wallpaper and floor carpets. In the process, there came into being for the first time a much stronger sense of national taste and identity than ever before. In this regard, it's worth saying that the King and the Court were important, but played a relatively marginal role in shaping fashion. There were, of course, significant regional practitioners of domestic architecture, figures such as Carr of York, but, to an unprecedented degree, the tastes of the country house and the modes of life within it were now being forged in the capital.

Osterley stood outside London, but it was easily accessible from it—hence Walpole's visit from his nearby villa at Strawberry Hill in Twickenham. As a work of architecture, moreover, it was also entirely shaped by cosmopolitan taste. A columned gateway or portico had been inserted to open out the courtyard of the Tudor house to the surrounding parkland. The portico was—in Walpole's view—'as noble as the Propylaeum of Athens'. He had never been to the Greek city, which was still a very remote place for an Englishman, but the reference made clear the Classical magnificence of the design. There were also 'a hall, library, breakfast-room, eating-room... a gallery 130 feet long, and a drawing room worthy of Eve before the fall'.

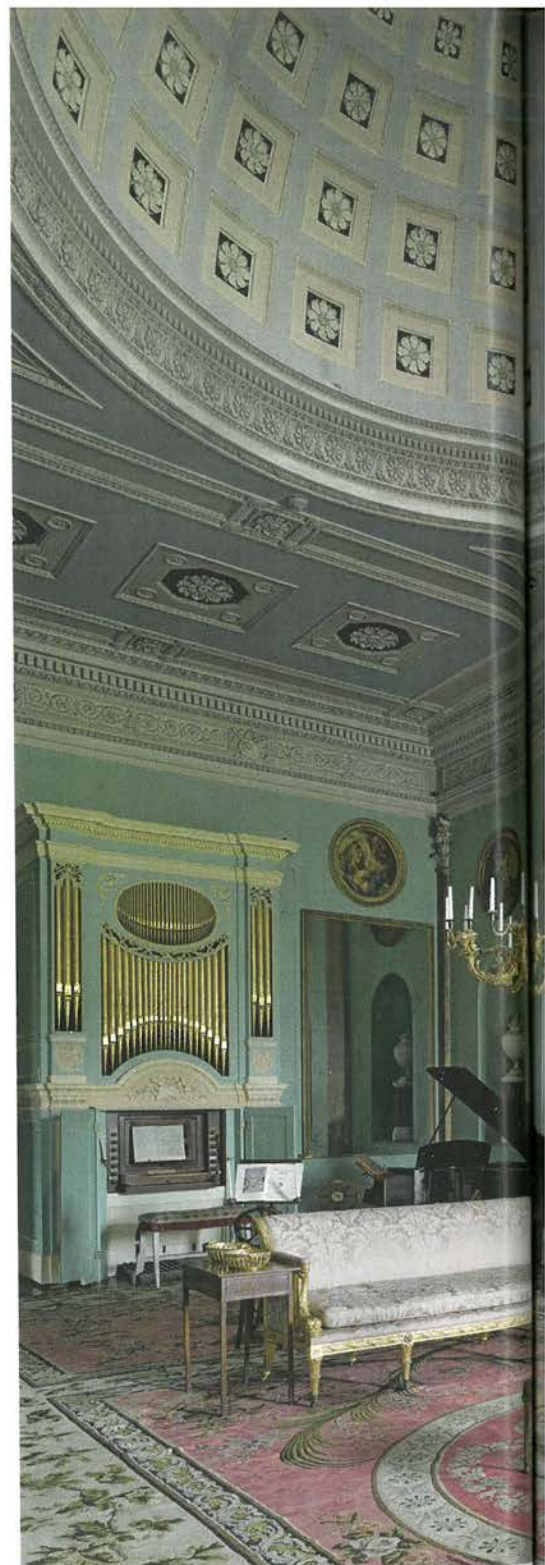
As Walpole notes, the figure behind this transformation was one Robert Adam, a Scottish-born architect who had recently launched himself on the London scene with

‘The tastes of the country house were now being forged in the capital’

a revolutionary neo-Classical aesthetic (**Fig 1**). Adam's approach to interior decoration was archaeologically informed, drawing inspiration from new discoveries being made about the Classical world. These included finds from jealously guarded excavations in the shadow of Mount Vesuvius (an inscription identifying the city called Pompeii was discovered in 1763). No less important were new surveys of classical remains far beyond the familiar routes of Grand Tourists in Italy.

Adam himself had sailed from Venice to Split, Croatia, in 1757 to examine the Roman remains there and subsequently produced a sumptuously illustrated book, *Ruins of the Palace of the Emperor Diocletian at Spalatro* (1764). His work makes quotations from these buildings, some very unexpected (**Fig 2**). The same year, there appeared the first accurate survey of Athenian architecture, *The Antiquities of Athens* by James Stuart and Nicholas Revett.

Adam's approach, which he called the Antique, was a refinement of the Palladian style that had held sway since the 1720s. In the preface to the first volume of a luxuriously produced series of illustrated books written with his younger brother, called *The works in architecture of Robert and James Adam, Esquires* (from 1773), he contrasted



the 'massive' detailing and 'ponderous compartments' of earlier interiors with his own 'beautiful variety of light mouldings, gracefully formed, delicately enriched and arranged with propriety and skill. We have [also] introduced a great diversity of ceilings, friezes, and decorated pilasters, and have added grace and beauty to the whole (**Fig 9**)'.

As a means to variety, Adam made highly sophisticated use of colour, sweeping away a short-lived taste for painted schemes of white with gilded detailing. His colour palette was derived both from the example of Roman painting and ceramics, the latter being the most highly prized (and portable) of classical objects. Fascination with ceramics and their



Fig 4 above: Wyatt's dining room at Crichel, Devon, of 1776. Fig 5 below: Adam regarded the south front of Kedleston, Derbyshire, as an exemplum of 'movement and contrast'



surface finishes continued to shape domestic decoration into the 19th century and underpinned the development of Wedgwood as a modern, classically inspired ceramic.

Adam designed every aspect of his most important interiors, from ceilings to carpets and furnishings. He presented his ideas to patrons in beguiling drawings, sometimes with alternative colour schemes for particular rooms. This allowed for a coherence of design never previously seen before, in which ceilings and floors adopted matching patterns and designed furnishings—and sometimes even fittings—were carefully placed for effect.

At Osterley, the Adam interiors opened up in dramatic sequence; the Tudor fabric →



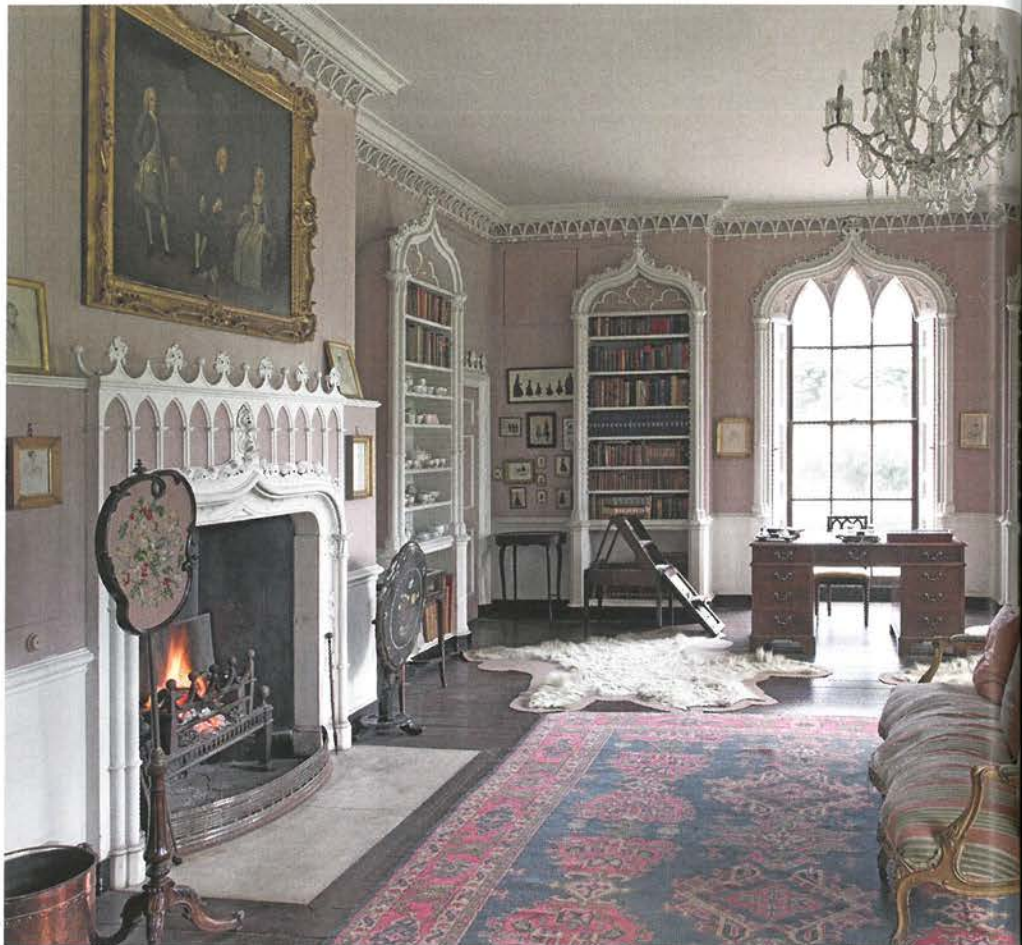
Fig 6 above: The fabrics of Adam's Osterley bed were formerly brilliant green.

Fig 7 right: The Gothic library at Milton, Oxfordshire, pointedly commissioned by a Catholic lacemaker based in London

prevented the creation of a large interior for entertainment, often a preferred arrangement in this period (**Fig 3**). Walpole later penned a description of the interiors that captures a sense of their variety of detail and decoration: 'The deep crimson frieze in the pale green damask drawing-room has admirable effect; and all the designs in the next and principal drawing-room are excellent, but too profusely distributed... so that the rich Gobelin tapestry has no repose, no simplicity to set it off... Thence you pass into the state bedchamber hung with green velvet, and where the magnificent bed is said to have cost £2000—but that sumptuous bed is woefully deformed by a heavy... dome (**Fig 6**).'

Adam's architecture also explored the new aesthetic of the Picturesque. As defined by one of its early advocates, the clergyman William Gilpin, this was 'a term expressive of that peculiar kind of beauty, which is agreeable in a picture'. Then—as now—it is a term usually applied to landscape. Yet, in Adam's mind, it created 'movement' in architecture. (**Fig 5**) 'Movement,' he wrote, 'is meant to express the rise and fall, the advance and recess, with other diversity of form, in the different parts of a building... [which] have the same effect in architecture, that hill and dale, foreground and distance, swelling and sinking have in landscape.'

The realities of domestic life in late-Georgian country houses are captured in countless diaries, letters and even amateur watercolours. One of the richest accounts of rural life across the whole period described here comes from the voluminous diary of James Woodforde, a country parson in Norfolk, who kept a diary almost every day of his adult life between



1758 and 1802. He remained unmarried and divided his time between his Norfolk living and his relatives in Somerset, regularly passing through London en route between them.

The diary gives the superficial impression of a peaceful and innocent life taken up with animal husbandry, quarrelling parishioners and concerns with servants. Evening entertainment took the form of cards—with modest associated gambling—or, occasionally, music and dancing. Woodforde himself comes across as a sympathetic and kind man, accepting of social convention and without much intellectual curiosity or imagination. At regular intervals, however, wider events such as tumultuous political meetings and bank runs forced themselves into his consciousness.

‘In Adam's mind, the Picturesque aesthetic created “movement” in architecture’

Woodford was far removed from the high society that was entertained at Osterley, but he was still a man who met with squires, baronets and fellow clergy. On September 4, 1783, for example, he was entertained by the Bishop of Norwich to 'a very elegant dinner'.

His account is worth quoting at length: 'We had two courses of 20 dishes each course, and a dessert after of 20 dishes. Madeira, red and white wines. The first course amongst many other things were two dishes of prodigious fine stewed carp and tench, and a fine haunch of venison. Amongst the second course of fine turkey poult, partridges, pigeons and sweetmeats. Desert—amongst other things mulberries, Melon, currants, peaches, nectarines and grapes. A most beautiful artificial garden in the centre of the table remained at dinner and afterwards, it was one of the prettiest things I ever saw, about yard long, and about 18 inches wide, in the middle of which was a high round temple supported on round pillars, the pillars were wreathed round with artificial flowers—on one side was a shepherdess on the other a shepherd, several handsome urns decorated with artificial flowers also et cetera.' The description is a reminder that the opulence of late-18th-century domestic life was not only to be found in architecture and fittings (**Fig 4**).

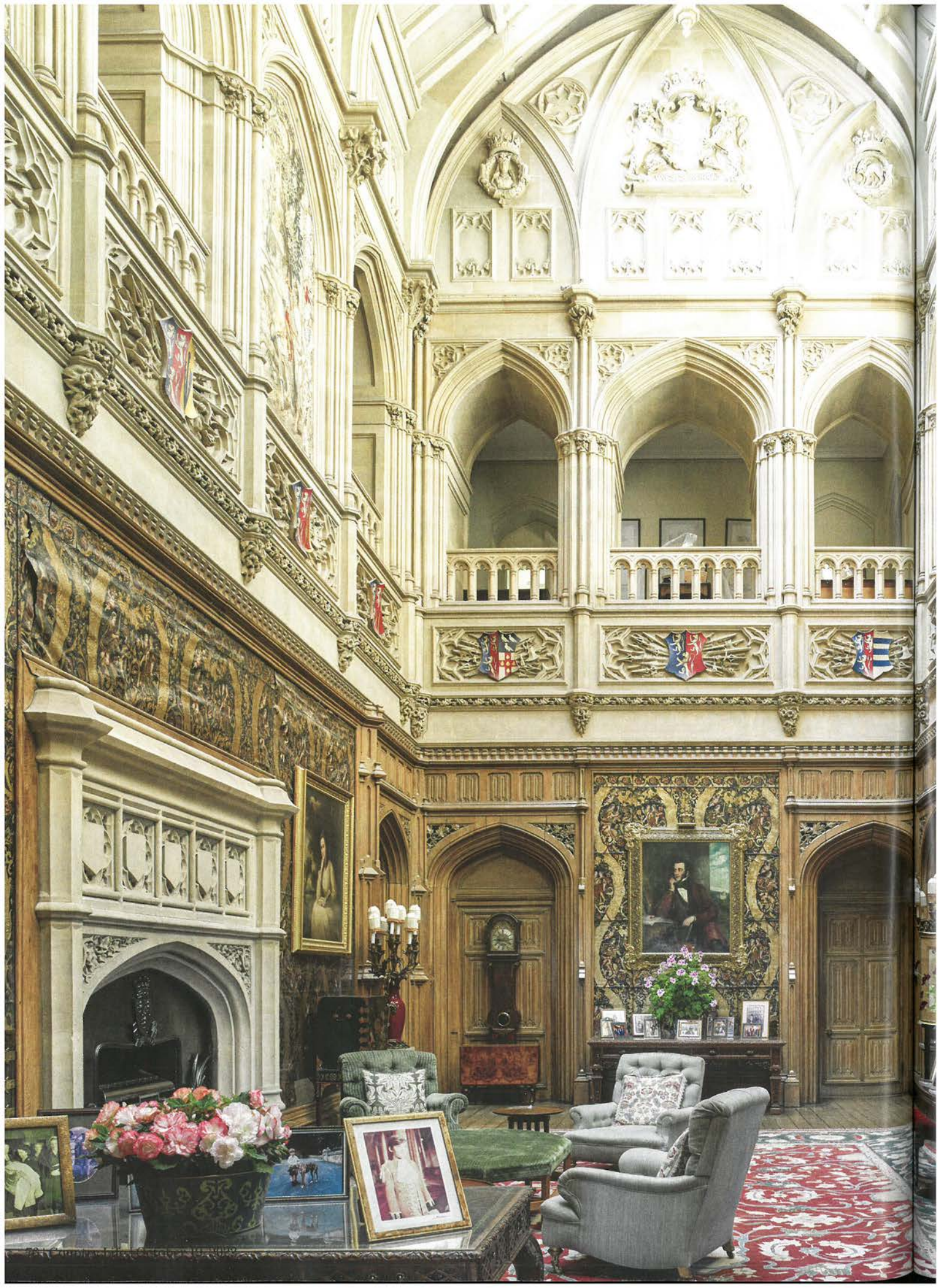
Adam's ideas brought about a revolution in domestic taste and were widely copied by rivals, including the prolific James Wyatt (**Fig 8**). They also coexisted with other radically different aesthetic approaches. There were individuals with antiquarian interests, for example, who continued to build houses in the Gothic style (**Fig 7**), including Walpole



Fig 8 above: Wyatt's Cupola Room at Heaton, Lancashire, with Antique decoration by the painter Biagio Rebecca. Fig 9 left: Adam's sculpture hall at Newby Hall, North Yorkshire, with its coffered vaults

himself. Robert Mylne, who studied in Rome during the 1750s and launched his career in London in 1760 with a new bridge across the Thames at Blackfriars, applied a more functional aesthetic to the language of Classicism. He simplified architectural forms in response to radical theories developing in both France and Italy that recognised the fundamental laws of architecture in Nature.

This movement toward rational simplification grew in popularity through the 1780s and 1790s, introducing, for example, the broad, shallow vaults found in late-Roman buildings to domestic interiors. It also took place against the backdrop of one seismic political upheaval: the French Revolution in 1789. Britain was initially divided in its response to the events unfolding in France, but soon emerged as a leading belligerent in the Revolutionary Wars that ensued. That, in turn, limited access to the Continent and changed Britain's perception of itself, encouraging a rediscovery of its own landscape and history (or what passed for it). As we will discover in the next instalment, these would profoundly colour the English Regency home. 🐉





Each month of this 125th-anniversary year, COUNTRY LIFE illustrates a period in the development of the English great house. In the 10th of this 12-part series, John Goodall looks at the Victorian age

AT noon on November 1, 1851, a 23-year-old American, Anna Maria Fay, and her aunt boarded 'the funniest old-fashioned little steamer' to carry them into Liverpool docks after an Atlantic crossing. Anna was born and educated in Georgia, the daughter of a banker and businessman. She had been invited to England for an extended stay by her Bostonian uncle and another aunt, Catherine, who had leased fully furnished Moor Park, just outside Ludlow, Shropshire, for the good of their health. The whole arrangement speaks of the steadily gathering ease of travel in this period and the international appeal of English country living.

Anna was eager to be pleased by the country she was visiting and, over the next 10 months, wrote home regularly. From these letters, published as *Victorian Days in England* (1923), we gain a vivid impression of genteel English life as seen through fresh, but perceptive eyes. Britain was changing rapidly at the time. Parliamentary reform in the 1830s had switched the emphasis of representation from the countryside to Britain's burgeoning cities, dealing a blow to the power of the gentry. Industry and international trade, meanwhile, were creating fortunes throughout urban centres, such as Belfast, Manchester, Glasgow,

Liverpool, Cardiff and Newcastle. Vast new houses were being raised on the proceeds.

Ludlow was a relative backwater by contrast—which clearly constituted part of its charm to Anna—but even here change was inescapable. In 1852, she witnessed the public celebrations that accompanied the opening of the railway in the town and, later that year, experienced the realities of modern electioneering when she saw an 'elegant gentleman' canvassing a shopkeeper for the conservative vote and receiving in reply 'the reproaches of a vulgar radical'.

By 5.30pm on the day of her arrival in Liverpool, Anna had travelled by boat to Birkenhead and 'in a most comfortable car[riage] with four others' to The White Lion at Shrewsbury. She marvelled in the course of this remarkably swift journey at 'the wonderful solidity of the railways... the beauty of the country, the lovely hedges, the picturesque cottages, scattered on every side, the air of culture, of content, of prosperity'.

Next morning, she rose for the final leg of the trip at 4.30am and, about four hours later, passed through the lodge gates of Moor Park before driving 'through the avenue, shaded by lofty oaks, with sometimes a lovely lawn... and glimpses of landscape breaking through' to the house itself, 'built of brick, covered here and there with ivy'. It was, in fact, an early-18th-century building and Anna's description of it is prefaced by a short account of its owners, the Salwey family. →

Fig 1: Highclere Castle, Hampshire, designed by Charles Barry in the 'national' Gothic of the Houses of Parliament



Fig 2: Minley Manor, Hampshire, rebuilt in the 'French Loire *château* style', after a fire in 1870, with high, steeply pitched roofs

It is striking that Anna's letters repeatedly enter into the historical details of the houses, castles and churches she visited. What she recounts was researched or quoted from authorities, in this case from *Burke's Peerage*. Her care in this regard speaks of the enormous significance that antiquarianism—the study of the physical past—had assumed in Britain. Not only did the study fuel intense debates about architectural style (**Fig 1**), from which the Gothic Revival drew strength, but it was inextricably linked to the Romantic movement, as well as to ideas about political and social change.

Entering Moor Park, the visitor came to 'a very large square hall panelled with oak to the ceiling, and the floor is of marble. In the centre stands a billiard table...' Placing the table in this space made the game accessible to both sexes. Such arrangements would soon change, however, as life in houses became increasingly divided along lines of sex. By the 1870s, specially built billiard rooms began to be created, often as part of a male preserve that included a smoking room (**Fig 7**). Around the hall 'hang the ancestors, prim gentlemen in wigs and stiff ladies in brocades'.

Opening off one side of the hall was the library, with a very dated collection of books

assembled in the early 18th century. Later in her stay, Anna did sample some of these books, but declared herself too much of a 'Goth' to enjoy them and instead enjoyed the more romantic fare—presumably Walter Scott and such like—of 'Mr Partridge's circulating library'. The family also read American papers and magazines delivered each week by steamer. Anna took up the study of painting and German during her stay, but she resisted archery, a sport that enjoyed huge popularity, particularly among young ladies, in the 1850s.

Beyond the library was an oak-panelled dining room with a table and buffet. On the other side of the hall were the 'drawing rooms', two interiors separated by folding doors (allowing them to be joined for formal entertainment) and furnished with 'quite modern furniture'. That modernity was no coincidence. The Regency enthusiasm for new and comfortable kinds of furniture continued into the late 19th century. Nests of chairs and more exotic furnishings with fulsome upholstery, such as ottomans, for conversations and relaxation were now a commonplace. They made 18th-century furniture seem uncomfortable and redundant in a domestic setting.

It was in reference to such furniture that Anna describes the principal drawing room as 'our sitting room, the windows of which command a lovely view'. The interior was coherently decorated with red curtains, red and yellow wallpaper and red upholstery. It was here that she passed her time and wrote part of her first letter, noting: 'In front of the table where I sit is a case reaching to the ceiling on which are placed some curious stuffed birds and a wild cat (killed on the estate).' Hunting trophies had been displayed in English houses since the 16th century, but the preservation of whole animals made possible the striking passage of specimens from scientific study to domestic decoration in the 19th century.

A conservatory, probably a recent addition to the house, created a covered garden space that was directly connected to the main rooms by means of two 'boudoirs', probably little more than small draft lobbies. At one end of the hall was a 'broad' staircase (**Fig 8**) to the 'bedchambers on each side of a long corridor'. Her uncle had a 'dressing-room hung with tapestry and adjoining is a sort of closet', although Anna makes it clear that she didn't see the inside of the closet. She shared her room, and probably the bed, with her visiting

aunt. Its decoration was 'entirely Chinese. The walls, the furniture, the china on the washstand, the curtains of the bed and windows...'; all presumably 18th-century survivals.

The household comprised 'Miss Dodd, the governess; Fischer—Aunt Catherine's German maid... the butler and a boy under him, the coachman... the gardener, the keeper, and the porter, the chambermaid, the laundry-maid, the cook, and the scullion'. Anna emphasises that this was a small household because—initially at least—her uncle 'accepts no invitations', having come to recover his health.

By contrast, great houses in this period had huge and ever-expanding bodies of servants organised by department—such as the kitchens, stables and gardens—into strict hierarchies and often with specialist responsibilities. Liveried male servants generally acted in public roles, with women working behind the scenes. Service arrangements expanded accordingly, with rooms for every kind of distinct task. The rambling service areas were connected by labyrinthine corridors and stairs to the polite rooms of the house. The division between the two was absolute and the move between them—through the proverbial 'baize door'—was expressed by the change from the functional to the opulent (*Fig 4*). Strictly segregated accommodation for male and female servants was also provided, often on upper floors of houses or in new wings. →



Fig 3 left: The entrance of Westonbirt House, Gloucestershire, with the Baroque fireplace of the hall visible in the distance. The house of 1864–74 employs several different styles. Fig 4 below: The drawing room of Eastnor Castle, Herefordshire, created in 1849 by the architect A. W. N. Pugin and the decorator J. G. Crace. Note the heraldic family tree over the fireplace





Fig 5 above: Domestic worship at Tyntesfield, Somerset. Fig 6 right: Victorian dining at Waddesdon, Buckinghamshire

Households need timetables to run to and Moor Park, for all its relative modesty of scale, was no exception. 'We rise early at half-past seven, have prayers at half-past eight, and breakfast a quarter of an hour later. After breakfast the children go to their school-room... I write or sew until eleven or twelve, when we go out driving. Uncle Richard goes shooting... We lunch when we return, and at six we dine. In the evening we form a very cheerful party by the drawing room fire, reading or sewing, or playing games with the children.' Riding was an important pastime and one of the first outings Anna made from the house was to attend a meet of the local hounds. She regularly attended churches and was interested in the conduct of services, as well as their architecture and music (**Fig 5**).

In provincial company, Anna discovered that it was considered 'particularly genteel to be pale and slender', which suited her own figure (although she kept putting on weight, which came to her as a pleasure). She struggled with the strictly observed convention of shaking hands vigorously upon arrival and departure from any group, as well as dinner conversation with local gentry on 'the never-ending theme of poachers', followed by minute accounts of the day's shooting or hunting and platitudes about the weather. 'They are not a very intellectual set,' she concluded, 'but they are very sociable and pleasant.'

Her first exposure to aristocratic society came with a dinner invitation from Harriet Clive, Lady Windsor, to nearby Oakly Park



on New Year's Day 1852. This was a much more modern house enlarged in two stages from 1819 and again in 1836. On arrival, her party was conducted into a library by liveried servants and 'an elegant circle of ladies and gentlemen rose to meet us'. No one introduced themselves, which meant that she only gradually discovered who their company was. When dinner was announced, the women were led into dinner in strict order of social precedence. Anna was impressed by the beauty of the jewellery and dresses of the women and also by the sophistication of the company, which was well travelled. She later expressed surprise that the Clive family was also well read in American literature.

Grace was said before the party of 20 sat down at a long table splendidly dressed with a massive centrepiece and four candelabras (**Fig 6**). Soup was followed by several varieties of fish, meat and then game. Dishes were laid

out on a sideboard and served at the table by the 'portly butler in white vest and cravat and black coat' and 'about six footmen in red plush and blue coats'. The service was entirely of silver but dessert—including 'ices and jellies... and every variety of fruit'—was served on china. At the end of dinner: 'A large cup with handles on each side filled with toasted ale is brought in, and the gentleman to whom it is given first takes a long draught, after which the footman passes it to the next.'

This ceremony of the loving cup completed, Lady Windsor gave the signal for the women to rise and they left the room in order of precedence. As the company passed through the hall, Anna was shown engravings of the Great Exhibition, which had recently closed. They continued to the drawing room and 'coffee was brought in, and some of the ladies sat down to their beautiful worsted work'. Anna looked at watercolours with one of the daughters



Fig 7 above:
The smoking room at Cardiff Castle is decorated with a wealth of fantastical imagery in paint and sculpture.

Fig 8 left: The main stair in the Jacobean style at Stokesay Court, Shropshire. It was prefabricated in London in the 1880s and transported to the house by rail



of the house and, when the gentlemen came in, music was performed. She was astonished that the company particularly delighted in what she termed 'negro melodies', including *The Blue-tail Fly*, a thinly veiled attack on slavery.

Anna returned to America in late August 1852 on the steamer, first to live in New York and later Boston. She never came back to Moor Park and she wouldn't have recognised it by the time she died unmarried in her nineties in 1922. The house was sold in 1873 to Johnstone Jonas Foster, whose fortune derived from his family's textile industry. He transformed the Georgian house in a fashion typical of the late-Victorian period, adding high-pitch roofs in the French manner (**Fig 2**) and inserting windows with large plate-glass panes to lighten the interior. The main rooms were decorated in distinct period styles (**Fig 3**) and the plan re-ordered so the life of the family could continue in private rooms without interruption by staff or guests. Today, the building is a school. As the end of the century approached, however, technology and new tastes were reshaping domestic life, as we shall see in the next instalment. 🐦

Acknowledgements: Michael Hall