

Horace Walpole 1717-1797 and Strawberry Hill

Some talk of Gunnersbury,
For Sion some declare;
And some say, that with Chiswick House
No villa can compare;
But all the beaux of Middlesex,
Who know the country well,
Say, that Strawberry Hill, that Strawberry
Doth bear away the bell

Though Surry boasts its Oatlands,
And Claremont kept so grim
And though they talk of Southcote's,
'Tis but a dainty whim;
For ask the gallant Bristow,
Who does in taste excel
If Strawberry Hill, if Strawberry
Don't bear away the bell.

The above verses, written by Lord Bath, indicate how Strawberry Hill was regarded in its day. This note gives a brief biography of Horace Walpole and a short description of how he transformed a small house in Twickenham into the magnificent house it had become by his death in 1797.

Horace Walpole, fourth son of Sir Robert Walpole (Prime Minister 1721-1742) by his first wife, was born at Arlington Street in London on 24th September 1717. Much of his boyhood was spent at his father's house in Chelsea. In 1725, when he was 8 years old, Walpole spent a summer holiday at Cambridge House, Twickenham and is reputed to have met Alexander Pope there. He received his early education at Bexley in Kent, but in 1727 he entered Eton College, where his friends included the future poet Thomas Gray. He left Eton in 1734 and went up to King's College, Cambridge in the following year. His attendance at the college over the ensuing 4 years was somewhat intermittent and he does not appear to have found university life particularly stimulating. In a letter written in 1735 he refers to both Cambridge and Oxford as "two barbarous towns o'er-run with rusticity and mathematics".



Horace Walpole
by Rosalba Carriera
1741

He left King's in 1739 and, in the same year, embarked with his friend Gray on the regulation 'Grand Tour' of the continent. He returned to England in September 1741 to find that, during his absence, he had been elected (in May 1741) the Member of Parliament for Callington, Cornwall and subsequently became MP for Castle Rising (Norfolk) in 1754 and then, in 1757, MP for Lynn, also in Norfolk. He retired from Parliament in May 1767. During the next few years, his time was spent partly with his father in London and partly at the family seat at Houghton, Norfolk. The unique collection of paintings at Houghton was the inspiration for his **Aedes Walpolianae** (1747), a volume which, besides containing a descriptive catalogue of the paintings, also included his **Sermon on Painting**.

In 1747, Walpole moved to Twickenham, to a small house near the river. Built in 1698, it was called 'Strawberry Hill' after the area of land on which it stood, known as 'Strawberry Hill Shot', and in its time had been occupied by the actor and dramatist Colley Cibber and by Dr. Talbot (1685-1737), Bishop of Durham. At the time that Walpole became interested in the house it was the property of "three minors of the name of Mortimer", and had as its tenant Mrs. Elizabeth Chenevix. Mrs. Chenevix (nee Deard) was the wife of Paul Daniel

Chenevix and the owner of a fashionable London toyshop which, in the **Daily Advertiser** of 1739, was described as being "on the corner of Warwick Street near Pall Mall". She sub-let Strawberry Hill to Walpole who purchased "a new little farm" for £1,356 10s in 1748 by authority of a private Act of Parliament.

In 1765 Walpole embarked for Paris and there formed a close friendship with the blind but brilliant Mme. Du Deffand (d. 1780), then nearing the age of 70. He revisited her in France on a number of later occasions and corresponded regularly with her until her death.

Another significant and lasting relationship began in about 1787, when Walpole first became acquainted with the sisters, Agnes and Mary Berry, then in their early 20s and he was 70. He described them in a letter to Lady Ossory as "the best-informed and most perfect creatures I ever saw at their age...entirely natural and unaffected, frank, and, being qualified to talk on any subject, nothing is so easy and agreeable as their conversation". In 1791, the sisters came to live at Little Strawberry Hill – once occupied by another friend of Walpole, Kitty Clive the actress - near his own home. Walpole's friendship with the two sisters was an extremely close and affectionate one. Their company continued to delight him until his death.

In 1791 Walpole succeeded to the title of Earl of Orford on the death of the third Earl, his elder brother's son. By his time of his death, 2nd March 1797 – at his house in Berkeley Square, Walpole had spent £20,720 in turning Strawberry Hill into "the most celebrated Gothic House in England".

4,000 of his letters still exist. He wrote a biographical study, a novel, a verse drama, a set of tales, and a collection of verse and drama. In his poem **Strawberry Hill** he wrote:

'On lofty hills like Windsor
Such heroes ought to dwell
Yet the little folk on Strawberry Hill
Like Strawberry-Hill as well.'

Strawberry Hill



Strawberry Hill
by J. H. Müntz 1758

'You will perceive by the date of my letter that my love for London is worn out; I have got an extreme pretty place just by Twickenham, which I am likely to be pleased with for at least some time, as I have many alterations to make. The prospect is delightful, the house very small, and till I added two or three rooms scarce habitable.'

So wrote Walpole in a letter to C. H. Williams on 27th June 1748. Three weeks earlier he had written to Horace Mann – 'I am now returning to my villa, where I have been making some alterations: you shall hear from me from Strawberry Hill, which I have found out in my lease, is the old name of my house; so pray, never call it Twickenham again.'

After its purchase the development of Strawberry Hill became his overriding interest for many years. To start with Walpole was only concerned with 'planting and fowls and cows and sheep.' Then the rebuilding began. He gradually expanded the grounds of the estate from its original 5 to 46 acres and the house was transformed into the celebrated Gothic house at the cost of £21,000. In a letter of 28th September 1749, Walpole refers to his 'future battlements' – an indication that Walpole was obsessed with his vision of the house itself. He wrote in a letter of 10th January 1750 that 'I am going to build a little Gothick castle at Strawberry Hill.' He also referred to the house as a 'small capricious house' built to please 'my own taste.' In order to make sure that the results of such a project would meet his aesthetic requirements, he formed a Committee of Taste, consisting of himself, John Chute and Richard Bentley. John Chute (1701-1776) was a connoisseur whom Walpole had met on his Grand Tour – the elevation of the house and many of the interior details were largely his work. When Chute died in 1776, Walpole wrote that he was 'the genius that presided over poor Strawberry' and was 'my oracle of taste.' Richard Bentley (1708-1782) was a skilled artist and draughtsman, but his attempts to put Walpole's ideas into visual terms were frequently to meet with the latter's disapproval. He was unstable, harassed by both marital and financial problems and his membership of the Committee ended abruptly in 1761 after a quarrel with Walpole. He was replaced in 1762 by Thomas Pitt – a neighbour with architectural leanings. A third person – not a member of the Committee, but indispensable to them because he possessed both the practicality and experience needed to realise their ideas – was William Robinson of the Board of Works. He had already supervised the first alterations to Strawberry Hill in 1748. This was a small two-storeyed wing to the north and although nothing is known of its external appearance, the existing Kentian Gothic chimney-piece in the Breakfast Room gives us some idea. Walpole later stated that it 'was not truly Gothick.' Johann Heinrich Muntz, 'resident artist' at the house between 1755-59, also became a member of the Committee for a short time until he was dismissed by Walpole 'for very pertinent behaviour.'

Walpole's method was to take various details of Gothic buildings (either first-hand or from illustrations in topographical books) and adapt them to his purposes. Neither his approach, nor that of the other two members of his Committee, was particularly scholarly. As he confessed in a letter to Mary Berry written on 17th October 1794, the rooms at Strawberry Hill were 'more the works of fancy than of imitation.' It did not, for instance, seem incongruous to him to scale-down certain details of ecclesiastical architecture and transfer them to a domestic setting.

The first phase of the rebuilding was completed in 1753. The original house had a Gothic south front added, complete with battlements and wooden pinnacles and was covered in white plaster. Behind this, the rooms had also been altered. On the ground floor these included The Little Parlour (formerly the Supper Parlour), the Beauty Room (formerly the Yellow Bedchamber), the Hall (or 'Paraclete') and a small staircase. The wallpaper in the hall and on the staircase was painted to resemble part of Prince Arthur's Chantry at Worcester. On the principal floor, the additions at this time included the Armory, the Blue and Red Bedchambers and probably the Star Chamber. All these rooms were smaller and less elaborate than the later ones, their Gothic elements being limited to chimney-pieces, doors and windows. The earlier 1748 wing and the east front were similarly treated and completed with a library – the ceiling painted by the French painter Jean-Francois Clermont who was paid £73 10s, the chimney-piece copied from tombs at Westminster and

Canterbury and the bookcases from Dugdale's **St. Pauls** – and refectory (later the Great Parlour) – with an inaccurate Gothic chimney-piece by Bentley – in 1754.

Walpole described Strawberry Hill and its environs in a letter to Sir Horace Mann dated 12th June 1753:

'This view of the castle is what I have just finished, and is the only side that will at all regular. Directly before it is an open grove, through which you see a field which is bounded by a serpentine wood of all kinds of trees and flowering shrubs and flowers. The lawn before the house is situated on the tope of a small hill, from whence to the left you see the town and church of Twickenham encircling a turn in the river, that looks exactly like a seaport in miniature. The opposite shore is a most delicious meadow, bounded by Richmond Hill which loses itself in the noble woods of the park to the end of the prospect to the right, where is another turn of the river and the suburbs of Kingston as luckily placed as Twickenham is on the left; and a natural terrace on the brow of my hill, with meadows of my own down to the river, commands both extremities. Is this not a tolerable prospect? You must figure that all this is perpetually enlivened by a navigation of boats and barges, and by a road below my terrace, with coaches, post-chaises, wagons and horsemen constantly in motion, and the fields speckled with cows, horses and sheep. Now you shall walk into the house. The bow-window below leads into a little parlour hung with a stone-coloured Gothic paper and Jackson's Venetian prints ... From hence under two gloomy arches, you come to the hall and staircase, which is impossible to describe to you, as it is the most particular and chief beauty of the castle. Imagine the walls covered with (I call it paper, but it is really paper painted in perspective to represent) Gothic fretwork: the Gothic balustrade to the staircase, adorned with antelopes (our supporters) bearing shields; lean windows fattened with rich saints in painted glass, and a vestibule [the Armoury] open with three arches on the landing place, and niches full of trophies of old coats of mail, Indian shields made of rhinoceros's hides, broadswords, quivers, long bows, arrows and spears ... The room on the ground floor is a bedchamber [the Yellow Bedchamber, afterwards the Beauty Room] hung with yellow paper and prints, framed in a new manner invented by Lord Cardigan, that is, black and white borders printed. Over this is Mr Chute's bedchamber [the Red Bedchamber] hung with red in the same manner. The bow-window room [the Blue Bedchamber] one pair of stairs is not yet finished; but in the tower beyond it is the charming closet [later the China or Green Closet] where I am now writing to you. It is hung with green paper and water-colour pictures; has two windows; the one in the drawing looks to the garden, the other to the beautiful prospect; and the top of each gluted with the richest painted glass of the arms of England, crimson roses, and twenty other pieces of green, purple, and historic bits. I must tell you by the way, that the castle, when finished, will have two and thirty windows enriched with painted glass ... Out of this closet is the room where we always live [the Breakfast Room], hung with a blue and white paper in stripes adorned with festoons, and a thousand plump chairs, couches and luxurious settees covered with linen of the same pattern, and with a bow-window commanding the prospect, and gloomed with limes that shade half each window, already darkened with painted glass in chiaroscuro, set in deep blue glass. Under this room is a cool little hall [the Waiting room] where we generally dine, hung with paper to imitate Dutch tiles ... it is incredible how small much of the rooms are. The only two good chambers I shall have, are not yet built; they will be an eating-room [the Refectory or Great Parlour] and a library, each 20 by 30, and the latter 15 feet high ... The Chinese summer house which you may distinguish in the distant landscape, belongs to my Lord Radnor.'

The ground floor room, which had originally served as a kitchen was, in 1755, transformed into a China Closet or China Room. The floor was laid with tiles bearing coats-of-arms and the ceiling had paintings by Johann Heinrich Muntz, Walpole's 'Swiss painter that I keep in the house.' The chimney-piece had a mixed pedigree, the upper part being taken from a window of an ancient farmhouse in Essex and the lower part from a chimney at Hurstmonceaux in Sussex. Also in 1755, the room on the principal floor situated over the Breakfast Room was made into a bedroom 'composed of seven lights' filled with painted glass.

The second building phase began in 1758. Another short wing was added to the west end of the hall which contained the Holbein chamber (a bedroom on the first floor) and the Little Cloister (on the ground floor), both designed by Chute and completed in 1761-63. These two rooms formed a court in front of the north entrance. The walls of the Holbein Chamber were hung with copied of Holbein drawings. The ceiling was copied from the Queen's dressing-room at Windsor and there was a chimney-piece by Bentley, copied mainly from Archbishop Warham's tomb at Canterbury. There was a gently curved papier mache ceiling and Bentley also contributed the screen in this room, although the design of its 'pierced arches' was taken from the gates of the Choir at Rouen.

The Great Cloister on the ground floor and the Round Tower at the west of the house were built in 1761. The Great Cloister was based on Chute's drawings. The ground floor of the Round Tower was occupied by the kitchen. On the principal floor above was the Round Tower – not completed until 1771. Its chimney-piece, inspired by the tomb of Edward the Confessor in Westminster Abbey, was 'improved by Mr [Robert] Adam and beautifully executed in white marble inlaid with scagliola by [John Augustus] Richter.' The ceiling was also painted by Adam, taken from a round window in old St. Paul's.

In 1763, the Gallery and Tribune were finished. The Gallery (situated above the Great Cloister) was the most magnificent room in the house. The design was based initially on Bentley's drawings, but the final version was the work of Thomas Pitt (1737-1793) – later Lord Camelford – who replaced Bentley on the Committee. Pitt 'had taken a small house at Twickenham – Palazzo Pitti' from 1762-64 and he elaborated on the original plan. Of particular note was the fan-vaulted ceiling, the design of which was taken from one of the side aisles in Henry VII's Chapel at Westminster Abbey 'all Gothicism and gold, and crimson and looking-glass'. Pitt also embellished the Tribune (previously called the Cabinet and, earlier still, the Chapel). This room was 'square with a semicircular recess in the middle of each side, painted stone-colour with gilt ornaments, and with windows and niches, the latter taken from these on the sides of the north door of the great church at St. Albans' and was partly lit by a glazed star in the roof.

For the third and final phase, Walpole employed professional architects. In 1772, The Great North Bedchamber – the only large bedroom in the house and built above the Servants' Hall - on the principal floor was completed. This had a chimney-piece designed by Walpole from the tomb of William Dudley, Bishop of Durham, at Westminster and carved by the master mason at Westminster Abbey, Thomas Gayfare. It contained a bed 'which would have become Cleopatra on the Cyndus, or Venus if she was not past Cupid-bearing'. The last main addition to the house was made in 1776. This was the Beauclerk Tower, conceived by Chute and designed by James Essex and containing a hexagonal closet in which were displayed 7 drawings executed by Lady Diana Beauclerk for Walpole's

Mysterious Mother. The Beauclerk Tower adjoined the Round tower and had a pointed circular roof.

Besides the rooms which formed the house itself, a number of buildings were added to the grounds of Strawberry Hill. These included the Embattled Wall, which extended along the north-west front of the house; 2 screens in the Prior's Garden – possibly supplied by John Carter and the iron Garden Gates – supported by Gothic piers. This pair of gates was erected in 1769 and was designed by James Essex with the Gothic piers copied from Bishop Luda's tomb in Ely Cathedral. Essex also designed new Offices for the servants in 1777, but they were not built until 1790 by James Wyatt. Robert Adam made 4 designs for the Cottage between 1766-68, but Walpole rejected them for a design by Chute in 1769. Bentley's Rococo shell bench dates from c.1759, but his Chinese Pavilion was never built. The Chapel in the Wood was started in 1772 and completed in 1774. Designed by Chute, the front was carved by Thomas Gayfare and was a replica of the tomb of Bishop Audley in Salisbury Cathedral. Inside was a 13th century shrine from the Church of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, which had been 'bought for 47 guineas on behalf of Sidney Herbert who utilised some of the pillars at Witton House'.

The Strawberry Hill Press

In 1757, Walpole built the Printing House in the grounds. In September 1759 he wrote to the Earl of Strafford '...I have begun to build a new printing-house, that the old one may make room for the Gallery and Round Tower.' It was finished at the end of October when he wrote again to Strafford 'My new printing-house is finished, in order to pull down the old one, and lay the foundations next summer of my round tower.' It was in use by the end of the following May. Although it possessed no Gothic features, it was probably the most important building as it was the headquarters of Walpole's private press – 'the Offinia Arbuteana or the Strawberry Hill Press.' The first book issued from the press was an edition of the **Odes** of Thomas Gray (1757) – Walpole's old schoolfriend. Amongst Walpole's own works printed here were the **Mysterious Mother** (1768) – a blank-verse drama – and the **Essay on Modern Gardening** (1785). A work particularly important for its documentary value was issued from the press in 1774. This was Walpole's **Description of the Villa of Mr Horace Walpole at Strawberry Hill near Twickenham, with an inventory of the furniture, pictures, curiosities etc.** The **Description** ...was subsequently revised and reprinted in 1784, accompanied by engravings.

In c.1758, Walpole wrote the somewhat facetious **Parish Register of Twickenham** – a list, in octosyllables, of the local notables. The full text can be read in his **Letters**, volume 42, pp. 488-90. At the end of the piece Walpole wrote:

'...enough if I consign
To lasting type their notes divine:
Enough if Strawberry's humble-hill
The title page of fame shall fill.'

In the celebrated 'Gothick romance' **The Castle of Otranto** (1764), the author endeavoured to combine supernatural machinery and everyday characters in a work could be described as the first example of a genre which still persists in various forms today.

Walpole printed just 6 copies of **Hieroglyphic Tales** in 1785 – a collection of nonsense tales containing allusions to friends, their houses and families.

After Walpole's death

Walpole bequeathed Strawberry Hill to Mrs. Anne Damer, daughter of his friend and cousin General Conroy, together with £2,000 a year to keep it in repair. Mrs. Damer eventually resigned the property to the Dowager Duchess of Waldegrave, in whom the remainder of the fee was vested. It later passed to George, 7th Earl Waldegrave who sold its contents by auction in 1842.

Frances, Lady Waldegrave inherited Strawberry Hill on the death of her husband in 1846. She was married 4 times – to 2 sons of the 6th Earl of Waldegrave and her 4th husband was Chichester Fortescue, (1823-1898) later Lord Carlingford and then Lord Clermont. The Countess was a leading figure in Victorian society whose passion for entertaining on a lavish scale was only equalled by her passion for building. In 1856 she began restoring the house, which had remained in a rather derelict state after the contents sale in 1842 – she also tried to find many of the dispersed treasures.

The Library and Gallery were redecorated and the walls of the latter were hung with crimson silk. The Prior's Garden was replaced by a large entrance hall and the Offices were converted into bedrooms. Probably the most ambition of Lady Waldegrave's projects at Strawberry Hill was the building of a new suite connecting the western end of Walpole's house with the new bedrooms. The suite included a large drawing-room and dining-room. The artist Henry Phillips was commissioned to paint a series of pictures for the drawing-room.

When Lady Waldegrave had finished her building programme, the house had 58 rooms and acres of roof. She died suddenly in 1879 and, as Fortescue could not bear to live in the house with its memories, it was sold. In 1888, Strawberry Hill was put up for auction, but only attracted a top bid of £15,000 and was withdrawn from sale. It was owned by the Stern family for a time.

It was purchased in 1923 by the Catholic Education Council and in 1927, Strawberry Hill was formally opened as St. Mary's Roman Catholic Teachers' Training College. It is now an integral part of Surrey University. In more recent years many of the cumbersome 19th century additions have been removed. In 1958-9, the 19th century entrance hall was demolished and the north front was rebuilt to Walpole's original design under the direction of Sir Albert Richardson. As a result, Horace Walpole's "little Gothick castle" now closely resembles its original appearance.

Further Reading

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- Tribute to Horace Walpole and Strawberry Hill House on the occasion of the bicentenary of his death on 2nd March 1797.** 1997 (Borough of Twickenham Local History Society Paper no 74)
- Works** There are a number of editions of his works and letters in the Local Studies Library. The most detailed and complete edition of his letters is the Yale Edition of **Horace Walpole's Correspondence** edited by W.S. Lewis.
- Walpole, Horace

More information on Horace Walpole and Strawberry Hill is available from the Local Studies Collection.