



RESTORATION ■ Fact and Fiction

Robert Harbison visits the Gothic Revival Strawbery Hill, whose painstaking restoration by Inskip & Jenkins retains a hint of Horace Walpole's phantasmic world of dreams.

Horace Walpole's villa at Strawbery Hill is famous as one of the earliest monuments of the Gothic Revival, in the first frivolous stage before it got serious and returned to its roots in medieval religion under the influence of Pugin. You could say that Ruskin and even Proust are descendants of Walpole, who comes near the beginning of the long process of substituting art for religion. Maybe without this crucial lineage public funding wouldn't have been available for the current magnificent restoration of Walpole's paper castle, but we might partly spoil the fun of a visit to Strawbery Hill if we're too conscious of what it gave birth to.

Like that other elaborate architectural fiction, John Soane's house in Lincoln's Inn Fields, Walpole's fantastic dwelling doesn't spring into its inventor's head fully formed, but grows by degrees into something more ambitious and also more gnarled and complicated than it started out. The narrative of its growth is partly preserved in the order in which you visit it: the last rooms on the circuit are Walpole's later, more mature idea of what he wants his house to be. So the house that grapples with various notions of the meaning of history embodies a historical sequence itself. Maybe there are two main ways of approaching this potentially phantasmagoric

sequence of interiors: historically and aesthetically. You can start with Walpole's efforts to give himself a history by fleshing out semi-imaginary ancestors with heraldry, anecdote, and most substantial of all, architecture. Spaces in his house, initially nondescript, are given such names as refectory, cloister, armory and chapel. We remember that Walpole wrote the first Gothic novel, named after a building – The Castle of Otranto – and unconsciously we want our visit to his house to resemble reading a novel, and to form a single narrative. But we find the fictional spaces mixed in with others of more ordinary character, like the Breakfast Room or China



Above: Ceiling of the Library and Tribune (left: Ellen O'Sullivan); the Library (left: Richard Johnson).
Left: Strawbery Hill after its £2.9 million restoration (left: KOS). The building began life in 1698 as a small house of Tudor times. It was transformed into a little Gothic castle by Horace Walpole, author, collector and the son of England's first prime minister, between 1717 and 1792. Walpole made by the Countess Waldegrave in the nineteenth century. In 1923 the house and grounds became St Aloysius College, with new buildings added that remain in use by the college. The house itself was used by the Victorians (shown until 1992), by which time it was an English Heritage's At Risk register.



Closet. This reflects the author's mercurial temperament, and the way that romantic tendencies in this place are always being undercut by irony.

Gothic moods and motifs are intermittent at Strawberry Hill. You may mistake this for inconsistency or lack of seriousness, but a psychology of the picturesque has been applied with special rigour in the ordering of spaces. In the end the house reads like a novel: the sequence of rooms works better in one direction than in reverse, and effects depend on surprise that will never again be quite as powerful as it was the first time. The prime example of this is the Great North Bedchamber following on from the Tribune, which Walpole calls the Chapel for its 'true air of Devotion'. This relatively small

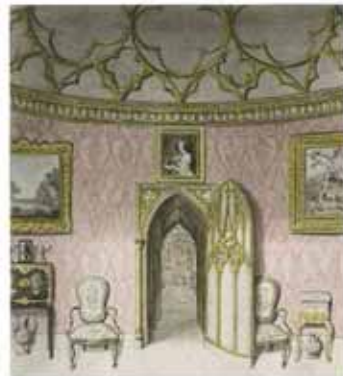


Above: The Gallery during restoration (jhr: KDS); eighteenth century watercolour of the Gallery; the Gallery before restoration. Below: First floor plan, section A-A. 1 Round Room, 2 Beauclerk Closet, 3 Tribune, 4 Gallery, 5 Small Closet, 6 Gilded Closet, 7 Great North Bedchamber, 8 Turb. Ceiling Passage, 9 Heilwin Chamber, 10 Red Bedchamber, 11 Star Chamber, 12 Blue Bedchamber, 13 Armoury, 14 Library, 15 Breakfast Room, 16 Green Closet.



space is crammed with the greatest prizes of his collection, especially miniature portraits, thoroughly unsacred in most people's eyes, but somehow transfigured by their owner's reverence for them. After this culminating vision of the collection comes a twisted corridor eccentrically lit by a skylight. And then, when you think the visit is finished, the Great Bedchamber bursts upon you, another grand space after the extreme condensation of the cabinet with its smaller cabinets holding smaller and smaller treasures.

One of Walpole's twisting corridors, a ridged, intestinal one, introduces the grandest space of all, the Gallery, originally stuffed with paintings interspersed with traceried, mirrored niches that fracture the light and view like the most extreme effects of late



Gothic in Batalha and Strasbourg, places that Walpole certainly couldn't have known. All these corridors, pure picturesque devices, are being reinstated. They don't function simply by themselves, but as contrasts, making the large spaces just beyond feel larger and more unforeseen.

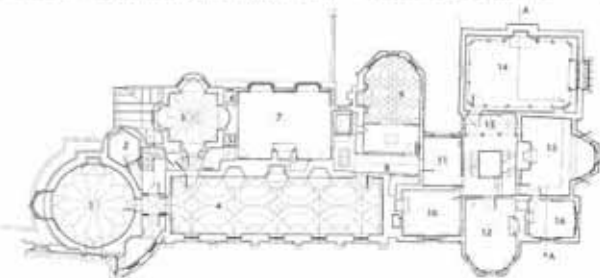
As in Soane's house, skylights are a repeated picturesque device at Strawberry Hill, dispelling Gothic gloom while instilling the idea of light as a mystery that can turn up unexpectedly. The quatrefoil lights at the top of the stair tower, carefully restored and flooding the tall tube with daylight like a Baroque lantern, are the most spectacular of these. The contrast with the dark low entrance hall, said to refer to Pope's most Gothic poem, is the first of many architectural surprises set up to disconcert the observer, which modern visitors will have to resimulate for themselves because the public route will not begin there.

But it is now possible to experience Walpole's spaces in the shapes and sequences he intended, with their materials – bare wood floors, damask hangings, limewash render – and vivid original colours restored. It is also possible to appreciate the central function of the Library in the whole conception. The difference between Soane's and Walpole's fantastic houses comes home most powerfully here, which was the grandest room until outstaged by the Gallery.



Above: Restored Round Room (jhr: RH); eighteenth century watercolour of the Round Room; the room before restoration. Below: Main staircase (jhr: KDS).

The tracery of its bookcases is taken from a stone screen at Old St Paul's, perhaps the Gothic building most frequently copied at Strawberry Hill, a structure that exists no longer, but lives on here. Most preposterously it lives on in the tracery pattern on the ceiling of Robert Adam's Round Drawing Room, a monstrous enlargement of the rose window on the west front of Old St Paul's. This room also includes the most expensive architectural fitting in the house, a chimneypiece in





coloured marbles designed by Adam and viewed by Walpole as a modern equivalent of Cosmati work. The restorers are particularly proud of its pristine condition, much evidence of the priests' cigars when it functioned as the common room of a Jesuit college now removed.

Of course it is wonderful to have so much of the fabric stripped back to how it was in Walpole's time. And yet, occasionally a



Above Restoration details (jpr: RH, KOS). Below Restored Blue Bedchamber (jpr: RH); eighteenth century watercolour of the room, condition before restoration.

glimpse of the patina of the intervening years, like the mellow nineteenth century richness of the Breakfast Room with its velvet ceiling like an arab tent makes one wish that occasional signs of age could remain.

The greatest loss, which makes this house finally so different from Soane's, is the disappearance of Walpole's collection, dispersed in the great sale lasting some twenty days in 1842. The house was really nothing more than a display cabinet, or a series of cabinets, especially the smaller rooms like the Beauclerk Closet and the Tribune, for viewing Walpole's magically diverse collection. Many individual objects tied their owner to particular historical figures, especially royal ones: bits of their clothes, a hat, gloves, a comb or a



piece of their tomb. The web of associations was made stronger by intermediate owners; Walpole documents meticulously the important people who've owned his objects since they set off on their travels through the centuries. It all knits mysteriously together to bind him to the human past and make him part of something larger. Thus the single man with no descendants looks backward to fabricate genealogies that will link him indissolubly to other human beings.

Walpole's collection isn't really lost; the whereabouts of at least a thousand items are known. London museums have ended up with quite a few, while many remain in private hands, some of which might still find their way back to Strawberry Hill. That would bring us closer to the phantasmic world of dreams that Walpole seems to have inhabited, where he was visited by personages from paintings in the Gallery, who took him to see collections destroyed centuries ago in fires, or let him interview a king on the eve of his assassination. The scrupulous rationality of the current restoration still leaves room for an inward understanding of the collector and the collection through a ghostly kind of reinhabiting.

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Inskip & Jenkins writes
When we began the project in 2005 the house was as the Vincentian fathers left it in 1993. Considered stewards, nevertheless their needs required adaptations to the building: rooms were subdivided and re-decorated to reflect 1960s conservative taste – mock-baronial with fondant colours. Unseen at this stage was the condition of the villa's timber-frame structure, cut away over the past fifty years for the insertion of services, and damp held in by the thick coat of cementitious render – factors which left the east end of the house lacking structural integrity. It soon became apparent that

Walpole's Gothic castle was truly in a sorry state, though through his constant self-obsessive recording in his writings, commissioned watercolour views and publications his realised vision could be read: a primitive gothic castle referencing memories of venerable ancient buildings and a three-dimensional architectural commonplace book. Looking at Walpole within a cultural context the value of his building as an early and important expression of the Gothic Revival and a highly litigated example of the picturesque could be understood. The constant guide was Walpole's own letters describing the development of his ideas and the

works that were obsessively collected, edited and published by the voracious Mr Lewis in his 48-volume edition, published by Yale. This evidence was supported by systematic paint analysis – carried out as part of the methodological approach to the understanding of the building, the development and realisation of Walpole's vision, and the impact of later alterations rather than simply establishing the sequence of decoration.

The complexity of the staircase, Library, Gallery and Round Room had always been clearly apparent to Strawberry Hill visitors and the restoration now gives an understanding of the distinctive nature of groups of spaces, such as the apartment as a group of rooms, united by colour and richness of decoration. The intimate rooms of old house to the east with the rooms concealed within rooms, such as the Green Closet and Plaid Bedchamber, are hoped to be restored in the next phase of works.

For the understanding of the house as a neo-gothic space it was essential to recover Walpole's circulation, the irregular plan, the constant change of levels and the vertical division on the ground floor between Hall and Winding Cloister. This interlaced pattern of travel through the house, directed by light and shade, gave and again gives a sense of greater space,



unrested, and being lost – once again the route up, over and through the house reflects Walpole's description of his Castle of Otranto.

Top: Great North Bedchamber (jpr: KOS). Above: Portrait of Horace Walpole, 1754, by John Gilt (Eccart private collection). Above left: The Gallery (jpr: KOS). Walpole said of this room 'I begin to be ashamed of my own magnificence'.

Project team: Architects: Peter Inskip & Peter Jenkins. Architects: design team: Peter Inskip, Stephen Cox (project architect), Kevin Rogers (architectural historian), project manager: Gill Fanshawe; structural engineer: Martin Williams; mechanical & electrical services: Martin Thomas Associates; contractor: E Bowman & Sons; client: Strawberry Hill Trust.

