

# Introduction: the intellectual culture of the English country house

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Between 1500 and 1700 large-scale changes took place in England. London grew from a significant conurbation of some 50,000 people to one of the largest cities in Europe, an imperial entrepôt of more than half a million people, a ten-fold increase.<sup>1</sup> The population of England had grown in the same period from about 3 million in 1500 to 5.5 million in 1700, just less than doubling in size. This is a staggering development, especially as the rate of London's increase was based on immigration because the death rate outstripped the birth rate for the whole of this period, so unhealthy was life for ordinary people in the capital.<sup>2</sup>

As England was changing, the nature of designing and building houses was changing with it, and there was a dramatic increase in the number of substantial houses built throughout the country. Not only did the aristocracy start to erect buildings designed for more comfortable living, but such transformations in architectural possibilities meant that the gentry was also able to sustain a wide range of projects so that by the early seventeenth century every third village had a 'resident squire'.<sup>3</sup> Put in the most basic terms, large provincial constructions were no longer designed primarily for defence and hospitality. Rather, they were designed with everyday living, comfort and taste in mind. The basic design of large houses with a central hall heated by one fire in the middle of the room was superseded through technological improvements in heating and insulation. Advances in chimney manufacture enabled flues to be built so that a number of rooms could be heated and smoke directed upwards more efficiently.<sup>4</sup> Windows became more common and larger, letting more light into more rooms.<sup>5</sup> It became possible to build houses that were more comfortable and more desirable.

The growth of such building stimulated an interest in and market for interior design. The grand houses of many of those families that rose to prominence in the sixteenth century were adorned with tapestries, paintings, elaborate fireplaces,

mouldings, ornate ceilings, as well as expensive furniture.<sup>6</sup> Such work could, of course, contribute in vital ways to the intellectual nature of the individual house, and owners did have their houses designed and stocked with objects that suited their own tastes and interests. Many, especially those of wealthy Protestants contained paintings, textiles and wall hangings that told stories of favourite Bible stories, such as the pictures of Jeroboam in the Dryden home at Canons Ashby, Northamptonshire, and the wall paintings telling the story of Hezekiah in Sir Thomas Smith's house, Hill Hall.<sup>7</sup> As Nicholas Cooper has pointed out, having pictures and carefully designed objects in the house 'is evidence ... of the growing visual education that would lead knowledgeable individuals, by the mid-seventeenth century, to see buildings and works of art not so much in terms of meaning as of style.'<sup>8</sup>

Early modern country houses were often founded on existing structures, transforming them from relatively uncomfortable medieval manor houses into grand provincial palaces for the elite. Such developments played a significant role in stimulating change. The country house became an emblem of, and a centre for, new developments in intellectual culture, and enabled the wider diffusion into English culture and practice of domestic and continental innovations in art, architecture, animal husbandry, gardening and a host of other fields. A useful case study is Petworth House in West Sussex, the southern seat of the Percies, the earls of Northumberland, and a location of some importance for two of the chapters and the first part of the Afterword in this volume. The house that stands today, celebrated extensively by Turner in the nineteenth century, was largely the creation of Charles Seymour, the 6<sup>th</sup> Duke of Somerset, who rebuilt it between 1688 and 1696 in a slightly later era of great reconstruction. The fortified medieval manor house that occupied this site (elements of which were incorporated into the later comprehensive remodelling) was a less ostentatious affair, one that had been augmented and renovated from the simple house that was found to be 'greatly ruined' when Henry Percy, the 8<sup>th</sup> Earl, was confined to it from 1574 for conspiring against the Crown.<sup>9</sup> Thereafter, through the tenures of the 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> Earls, the extensive surviving household accounts demonstrate that Petworth was rendered able to entertain the nobility and the local gentry in lavish style when required.<sup>10</sup>

The Percies had long been associated with treason and the 'old faith', and their restriction to the south was the primary motivating factor for Petworth's Tudor and Stuart prominence. It was while he was imprisoned in the Tower of London for apparent complicity in the Gunpowder Plot that Henry Percy, the 9<sup>th</sup> and 'Wizard' Earl, began to draw up and annotate elaborate plans for an entirely new house at Petworth.<sup>11</sup> Although this new vision would never be built (the reasons for its abandonment are unknown), the plans reveal a nobleman engaging fully with the intellectual ideas and innovations that were transforming country house culture in the early modern period. This was not

to be a gaudy construction built simply 'for envious show' like those derided by Jonson in his celebration of Penshurst, but instead shows Northumberland's determination to adhere to classical architectural models of scale and space in order to create an environment suitable for scholarly study and experimentation (as discussed further in Alison McCann's Chapter 7): the newly refashioned estate would house pursuits from alchemical research and wide-ranging literary study to horse breeding.<sup>12</sup> It would also continue to function at the centre of the wider community, opening through an elaborate gatehouse of 'hewn stone', with a clock and a battlemented roof, into the town itself.<sup>13</sup>

The ambition is extraordinary: the Earl planned a series of interconnected and enclosed quadrangular courts paved in stone (the first to be considerable: 360 by 400 feet) surrounded by open and closed galleries whose walkways were to be floored with marble and lined with Doric pillars. Square towers marked the ends of a space marked 'Gallery' or 'Library' that was to be a remarkable 315 feet long, with doors of 20 feet in height marking the entrance to the Hall.<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile the Earl's annotations on his plans indicate a care to address lines of vision from gallery windows and a keenness to use specific building materials and techniques to reduce noise and maintain heat. Finally, all exterior facing walls were to be battlemented and 'garnished', the walls clad with local Horsham stone. The total cost carefully estimated by Northumberland's steward Robert Flood was £2,810.<sup>15</sup>

These plans were not an idle aristocrat's fancy: like many later Tudor and Stuart noblemen Northumberland was keen for his house to be an instrument as well as a manifestation of his learning. He had already engaged in rebuilding his smaller house at Syon, south of London, and brought typically assiduous learning to his practical experience. A list of books he intended to send to his friend Sir John Holles from the Tower, reproduced by Gordon Batho, is a compendium of up-to-date and necessary architectural knowledge. It includes Vitruvius, 'father of all the rest', Vignola, Jacques Androuet du Cerceau, Lorenzo Sirigatti, Jacques Perret, Philibert de l'Orme, Sebastian Serlio, Wendel Dietterlin, Leon B. Alberti and Palladio – as Gordon Batho remarks, 'in short, all the best of classical and Renaissance writings on architecture'.<sup>16</sup>

The spatial development of the country house exemplified in Northumberland's plans for Petworth produced two apparently opposite but actually interrelated effects. On the one hand there was a growth in the possibility of privacy as the wealthy, at least, could have their own rooms and did not have to spend quite as much time in the company of others.<sup>17</sup> Beyond their libraries, it became possible for men and women to have their own rooms for study and private devotion, or where they would choose to be alone with important members of the household such as secretaries and stewards, often known as 'closets'.<sup>18</sup> The possibility of private study increased the likelihood of the development of an intellectual culture in the private house. Closets could also serve as studies, as is made clear

when a letter written by an associate of Sir Francis Godolphin described the heartbreak caused when a fire burned down most of his house in Cornwall, including 'his closet wherein was most of his writings'.<sup>19</sup> In fact it was only in the 1570s that the word 'study' was commonly used in inventories of houses, indicating that the creation of this separate room was now recognised as a major innovation in household design.<sup>20</sup>

Although the 9<sup>th</sup> Earl of Northumberland's plans to realise a new Petworth do not detail the upper floors of the building, a detailed inventory taken at his death in 1632 does give a useful sense of the luxury a primary country house residence was expected to encompass, and reveals what this particular gentleman kept in his closet. There are a careful mix of public and private spaces, and the major chambers were adorned with Ottoman carpets and decorated to specific colour schemes with elaborate furnishings bound with the Percy crescent.<sup>21</sup> Given the Earl's intellectual pursuits it is not surprising – here as in many other noble houses – that 'the Library was one of the most important rooms', containing sixty-four chests of books (their display on bookshelves was a later innovation), four globes, seventy-eight pictures ('Turks', 'Emperors' and others) and a cupboard of mathematical instruments.<sup>22</sup> In keeping with other gentlemanly studies, Northumberland's closet led off his personal bedchamber. It contained forty-four folio volumes, twenty-eight vellum books, and thirty-three pamphlets, 'with maps and other writings in a wainscot box separately'.<sup>23</sup> This closet was indeed the working intellectual heart of his country house and estate.

As Northumberland's unique plans for Petworth demonstrate, a prolonged period of peace and relative stability, the widespread consolidation of estate incomes due to more sophisticated means of land management, and a new openness to new and classical architectural ideas from the continent meant that country houses started to develop their own particular nature and character, created by an owner who saw it as his – or her – duty to help develop the character of the area. While London dominated the life of the nation, country houses often tried to foster particular regional identities, drawing on local loyalties to do so.

This is particularly evident in the growth of the 'country house poem' genre.<sup>24</sup> Such poems, dating from the early seventeenth century, were inaugurated by Amelia Lanyer's 'The Description of Cooke-ham' which laments the break-up of the ideal female community established by Margaret Clifford, Countess of Cumberland in Cookham, Berkshire. Lanyer provides a description of the house as an (idealised) intellectual centre which determines the character and nature of the surrounding area as the women are left alone to practise their particular brand of religious devotion:

In these sweet woods how often did you walke,  
With Christ and his Apostles there to talke;

Placing his holy Writ in some faire tree,  
 To meditate what you therein did see.  
 With *Moyes* you did mount his holy Hill,  
 To know his pleasure, and performe his Will.  
 With lowly *David* you did often sing,  
 His holy Hymnes to Heavens Eternall King.  
 And in sweet musicke did your soule delight  
 To sound his prayses, morning, noone, and night.  
 With blessed *Joseph* you did often feed  
 Your pined brethren, when they stood in need.  
 And that sweet Lady sprung from *Cliffords* race,  
 Of noble *Bedfords* blood, faire stem of Grace;  
 To honorable *Dorset* now espows'd,  
 In whose fair breast true virtue then was hous'd:  
 Oh what delight did my weake spirits find  
 In those pure parts of her well framed mind[.]<sup>25</sup>

The poem suggests that a marriage in the family leads to the demise of the community, a painful reminder that the country estate was never self-sufficient and that it had to be maintained through interaction with an external world that was often indifferent to its merits. Estates could only continue to exist if they had sufficient finances to preserve their bucolic world, which generally meant complicated marriage alliances. In his only country house poem, 'To Penshurst', Ben Jonson praises the Sidney family at Penshurst but reminds his readers that it is marriage that makes the world go round when the Sidney tenants send tribute 'By their ripe daughters, whom they would commend / This way to husbands' (the poem is considered in relation to the house in Edward Town's Chapter 4).<sup>26</sup> Marriage is also the central thread by which Andrew Marvell charts the long evolution of Nun Appleton from monastery to country house (a trajectory followed by many Tudor houses), the seat and retreat of Lord Fairfax, in his celebrated 'Upon Appleton House'.<sup>27</sup> Lanyer, more so than Jonson or Marvell, commends the intellectual nature of the world she has lost, the women speaking directly to the biblical figures they worship who feature in the poem alongside the nobles who determine and shape their world. Readers understand that this community has the power and ability to create a self-contained pious retreat in which the women are free to worship properly, disrupted only by the unwelcome intrusions of the outside world. What the speaker especially enjoys is not the architectural beauty of the house itself, nor the carefully manicured gardens and grounds, but the intellectual stimulation of the household, a sense of belonging to a community that nurtures its own and in which individuals grow together in spiritual understanding. Lanyer is celebrating a particular space in which women can develop together and readers would have known that she was idealising this life. Nevertheless, the poem registers an acute sense of loss based on a Utopian ideal, an understanding of what a well-run country house could provide for those fortunate enough to live there.

The development and brief flourishing of a genre of country house poetry in the early and mid-seventeenth century marks and charts the new prominence of such 'prodigy' houses, showing how they became emblems of a society conscious of its own achievement of a civilised way of living, and conscious also of the forces that threatened to undermine and overthrow that achievement.<sup>28</sup> New emphases on learning and display, on Arcadian abundance and on writing a natural and permanent aristocracy into the landscape played their part in the work of poets from Lanyer and Jonson, through Carew and Herrick, to Marvell as they presented the country house and estate as a synecdoche for the English state. As a result of this new prominence, the intellectual culture that generated and was generated by the early modern country house is central to our understanding of this period as a whole, but its study also offers new perspectives on the ways this past informs conflicted attitudes to the countryside and its heritage today.

The volume begins with a succinct overview of the field by the historian of architecture, Maurice Howard, who issues a timely reminder of the crucial significance of the visual aspects of great houses and their collections in the early modern period. The profound religious, political and social developments of this time encouraged a new ethos of what the country estate represented, ensuring that by the eighteenth century the role of great houses as topoi of the imagination and 'Temples of the Arts' was well established. These 'power houses' hosted gatherings of intellectuals, functioning as centres of political discussion and scholarship as well as religious devotion, enshrining and promoting the status and influence of their patron owners.

Following Howard's opening chapter, the volume is organised into four interconnected parts. In Part I, Reconstructing the English Country House, Alden Gregory's discussion in Chapter 2 of Archbishop Warham's sumptuous palace at Otford in Kent amplifies how such architectural edifices functioned symbolically, presenting a carefully constructed public face for the owner. At first sight, a damp, waterlogged position just off the main road from London to Canterbury might seem an inauspicious location to erect a showy new house that even boasted privy chambers; however, as Gregory demonstrates, it enabled the Archbishop to capitalise on the hagiographic value of the fountain associated with Becket located there – bolstering his image as a latter-day Becket – and, furthermore, to display his holiness in the form of hospitality and largesse to passing travellers. In this way, Gregory argues, the house formed a symbolic buttress to Warham's waning powers. While little is left today of this princely edifice in Kent, even less remains to evidence the splendour of a Tudor mansion that was once a dominant site in the Oxfordshire political landscape. In Chapter 3 Matthew Neely investigates the fascinating project undertaken by the Bodleian Library aimed at reconstructing Rycote, the seat of the earls of Abingdon and their forebears since the reign of Henry VIII. As Neely describes, saving the

house from historical oblivion has meant the painstaking piecing together of the past from a wide selection of sources ranging from archaeological evidence to engravings, sales catalogues of interior goods and furnishings, privy council records, pay books, letters and antiquaries' descriptions. In the final chapter of this section, Chapter 4, Edward Town illuminates the networks of patronage between two Jacobean mansions, Penshurst and Knole, demonstrating in the process how a poem, in this case Ben Jonson's 'To Penshurst', can function as an invaluable source in the reconstruction of the intellectual history of the country house.

In Part II, *The Culture of the English Country House*, Tara Hamling's study in Chapter 5 of the interior decoration of the long gallery at Lanhydrock House in Cornwall demonstrates how this magnificent space with its decorative plasterwork and complex iconography played a key role in the piety and politics of the seventeenth-century house. As Richard Simpson's examination of Sir Thomas Smith's Hill Hall in Essex reveals in Chapter 6, a rather different space, namely the stillhouse, with its vast collection of alchemical books and distillation vessels, was the prime intellectual hub of this household where the 'strange, wondrous and incredible things of nature' were subject to experimentation and an abundance of medicines were manufactured. Henry Percy, 9<sup>th</sup> Earl of Northumberland, clearly shared Smith's pronounced interests in alchemy and new science generally; and in Chapter 7 Alison McCann surveys the library and archive at Petworth House in Sussex, piecing together the concerns and activities of Thomas Harriot, the talented astronomer and mathematician whom the 9<sup>th</sup> Earl maintained in his household. In chapter 8, country house poetry again comes under the spotlight as Nicolle Jordan brings ecocritical methodology to bear on the verses of Anne Finch, Countess of Winchelsea. Adopting this innovative approach, Jordan demonstrates how Finch's estate poems register significant changes in the political and natural landscape of post-Restoration England. As Elizabeth Zeman Kolkovich illuminates in her study of the Elvetham House entertainment for Elizabeth I in Chapter 9, printed accounts of newsworthy events, such as this one in Hampshire, can also function as important sources in the quest to reconstruct the once formidable but now sadly obscured intellectual culture of country estates.

In Part III, *The Country House Library and its Intellectual Significance*, James Raven provides an informative introduction in Chapter 10 to early modern book collecting and the relationships among books, their owners and households. He argues that bibliomania – the great passion for books that developed in the late seventeenth century – was motivated by a range of factors including intellectual interests, an urge to improvement, practical problem solving and entertainment; but prestige, family pride and the desire to bequeath a collection played significant roles too. A new emphasis on education in this period certainly meant that country house occupants increasingly comprised

scholars and connoisseurs of books. In Chapter 11 Susie West addresses the material conditions of keeping a book collection within the early modern house using a methodology drawn from architectural history. In the process she offers important new case studies of pre-1700 book collecting by Norfolk gentry families, foregrounding the evidence for book rooms and other spaces that might have housed collections prior to the emergence of libraries. Hannah DeGross's study in Chapter 12 examines book collecting by the earls of Howard and their families in Naworth Castle in Cumbria. She reminds us of the palimpsest-like mode through which nearly all aristocratic book collections were formed and of the variety of textual interactions that inevitably occurred in complex households. Her approach provides valuable insights into the personal library and reading habits of an aristocratic woman inhabiting the house in the late seventeenth century, namely the 2<sup>nd</sup> Countess of Carlisle.

The final Part of the volume, IV, Case Study: Wilton House, narrows its lens to focus on the estate bestowed by Henry VIII on Sir William Herbert, 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Pembroke, at the dissolution of the monasteries. As these chapters reveal, the house and gardens of Wilton Abbey underwent cumulative early modern transformations, reflecting the particular intellectual passions of its successive owners – all famous patrons of the arts. In the celebrated re-design of the Wilton garden in the 1630s involving Inigo Jones, a cypress grove was laid out to resemble an amphitheatre and, as Marta Straznicky argues in Chapter 13, this feature suggests a rich interplay between architecture, landscape and the theatrical arts at Wilton – a prime site of English Arcadianism. Straznicky reflects that the most important function of the amphitheatre structure might well have been the prospect of the estate that it offered, transforming Wilton into a spectacle representing order, wealth and power at the height of the family's political influence. As Louise Noble writes in Chapter 14, Wilton served as a gathering place for writers, thinkers and scientists who shared creative and intellectual interests and Protestant convictions – the Wilton Circle. Noble's focus is on the scientific and technological preoccupations of the Circle, and in particular its concern with hydrological innovation and finding a practical solution for managing and distributing rural water. She describes how the art of floating meadows was both an aesthetically pleasing and pragmatic response to the latter need and illustrates how the 'progressive Pembroke's' enthusiastically embraced the new technology. In Chapter 15, Anne Myers demonstrates how Wilton House's status as both a converted monastery and an early English masterpiece of English Palladian style has made it particularly susceptible to the emphases of both antiquarian and aesthetic modes of architectural literacy; as she foregrounds, this elicits the same interpretive tensions between concerns about human history and others about visual experience that are registered in seventeenth-century country house poems.



The volume concludes with comments and reflections from a curator, a conservator and an archivist working for the National Trust today, a reminder that the intellectual history of the country house continues into the future.

## Notes

- 1 E. A. Wrigley and R. S. Schofield, *The Population History of England, 1541–1871: A Reconstruction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), Appendix 5.
- 2 Steve Rappaport, *Worlds Within Worlds: Structures of Life in Sixteenth-Century London* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 67–76.
- 3 Nicholas Cooper, *Houses of the Gentry, 1480–1680* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 5; Olive Cook and A. F. Kersting, *The English Country House* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1974), Chapters 2–4.
- 4 Maurice Howard, *The Early Tudor Country House: Architecture and Politics, 1490–1550* (London: George Philip, 1987), p. 17.
- 5 Howard, *Early Tudor Country House*, pp. 134–5.
- 6 For one especially impressive collection, see Santina M. Levey, *An Elizabethan Inheritance: The Hardwick Textiles* (Swindon: National Trust, 1998).
- 7 Tara Hamling, *Decorating the Godly Household: Religious Art in Post-Reformation Britain* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010); Anon., *Canons Ashby* (Swindon: National Trust, n.d.), pp. 20–1; Paul Drury, with Richard Simpson, *Hill Hall: A Singular House Devised by a Tudor Intellectual* (London: Society of Antiquaries, 2009), pp. 180–213.
- 8 Cooper, *Houses of the Gentry*, p. 319.
- 9 Carole Levin, 'Percy, Henry, Eighth Earl of Northumberland (c.1532–1585)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), [www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/21938](http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/21938).
- 10 See G. R. Batho (ed.), *The Household Papers of Henry Percy* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1962) and Lord Leconfield, *Petworth Manor in the Seventeenth Century* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954).
- 11 Detailed and reproduced in Gordon Batho, 'The Percies at Petworth, 1574–1632', *Sussex Archaeological Collections*, xcv (1958), 1–27, especially pp. 22–5. The original plans are now sadly lost.
- 12 As represented in the scale and classifications of library as well as the plans: see Gordon Batho, 'The Library of the "Wizard" Earl: Henry Percy Ninth Earl of Northumberland (1564–1632)', *The Library*, s5–XV, 4 (1960), 246–61.
- 13 Batho, 'The Percies at Petworth', p. 22.
- 14 Batho, 'The Percies at Petworth', p. 23.
- 15 Batho, 'The Percies at Petworth', p. 25.
- 16 Batho, 'The Percies at Petworth', p. 25.
- 17 See Lena Cowen Orlin, *Locating Privacy in Tudor London* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
- 18 Alan Stewart, 'Epistemologies of the Early Modern Closet', in *Close Readers: Humanism and Sodomy in Early Modern England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 161–87.
- 19 Cooper, *Houses of the Gentry*, p. 300.
- 20 Cooper, *Houses of the Gentry*, p. 300.
- 21 Batho, 'The Percies at Petworth', p. 19.
- 22 Batho, 'The Percies at Petworth', pp. 20–1.

- 23 Batho, 'The Percies at Petworth', p. 22.
- 24 Alastair Fowler, *The Country House Poem: A Cabinet of Seventeenth-Century Estate Poems and Related Items* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994).
- 25 Aemilia Lanyer, 'The Description of Cooke-ham', in David Norbrook and Henry Woudhuysen (eds), *The Penguin Book of Renaissance Verse* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), lines 81–98 (p. 416).
- 26 Ben Jonson, 'To Penshurst', in Norbrook and Woudhuysen (eds), *Penguin Book of Renaissance Verse*, lines 54–5 (p. 422).
- 27 Andrew Marvell, 'Upon Appleton House, To My Lord Fairfax', in Nigel Smith (ed.), *The Poems of Andrew Marvell* (London: Pearson Longman, 2007), pp. 210–41.
- 28 G. R. Hibbard, 'The Country House Poem of the Seventeenth Century', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 19:1/2 (1956), 159–74, p. 159.