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Stoneleigh Abbey, Warwickshire, England; from Humphrey Repton's Designs for Stoneleigh Abbey, 1809.

MAKING ROOM FOR SOCIABILITY IN THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLISH COUNTRY HOUSE

JON STOBART

In a letter written by Jane Austen's mother, Cassandra, when visiting Stoneleigh Abbey with relatives just after Mary Leigh's death in 1806, she takes her correspondent on a tour of the house, starting at the main entrance:

You go up a considerable flight of steps to the door [...] and enter a large hall. On the right hand is the dining-room and within that the breakfast-room, where we generally sit; and for reason good, 'tis the only room besides the chapel which looks towards the view. On the left hand of the hall is the best drawing-room and within a smaller one. These rooms are rather gloomy with brown wainscot and dark crimson furniture.¹

This short passage introduces both the key ideas that I want to discuss in this paper and the spaces through which I will explore them: respectively, the construction of spaces for sociability and the Dining and Breakfast rooms at Stoneleigh Abbey in Warwickshire, the ancestral home of the Leighs – one of the wealthiest families in Warwickshire.

As Mark Girouard argued nearly forty years ago, sociability was an increasingly important characteristic of the eighteenth-century English country house.² He saw this as happening initially through the spread of the social house and later with the arrival of informality. These shifts were marked by changes in the arrangement of rooms, including the decline of the enfilade; the construction of specialist new spaces, such as conservatories and billiards rooms, and the shifting material culture of saloons, drawing rooms, boudoirs and libraries.³ Implicit in this is a recognition of the spatiality of the country house; that is, that its spaces were both the 'geographical site of action' and the 'social possibility for engagement in action.'⁴ In other words, new forms of living and entertaining served to shape the English country house, but were at the same time moulded by the domestic material culture thus created.

Many of these changes are encapsulated in Humphry Repton's famous juxtapositioning of the Cedar Parlour with the Modern Living Room.⁵ The former is a static and formal space;

1 Reproduced in W. Austen-Leigh, R. Austen-Leigh and D. le Faye, *Jane Austen. A family record* (London, 1989) 139-140. The Austens were cousins of the Rev. Thomas Leigh who inherited Stoneleigh in 1806 after a lengthy dispute with a rival claimant. They travelled to Warwickshire with the Reverend Leigh as he made his first visit to the newly acquired property – see G. King, 'The Jane Austen connection', in: R. Bearman, ed., *Stoneleigh Abbey. The house, its owners, its lands* (Stratford-upon-Avon, 2004) 163-177.

2 M. Girouard, *Life in the English country house. A social and architectural history* (New Haven, 1978) 181-244.

3 J. Cornforth, *Early Georgian interiors* (New Haven, 2004).

4 P. Arnade, M. Howell and W. Simmons, 'Fertile spaces. The productivity of urban space in Northern Europe', *Journal of interdisciplinary history*, XXXII (2002) 518. See also J. Stobart, A. Hann and V. Morgan, *Spaces of consumption. Leisure and shopping in the English town, c.1680-1830* (London, 2007) 18-22.

5 H. Repton, *Fragments on the theory and practice of landscape gardening* (London, 1816). See also N. Cooper, 'Rank, manners and display. The gentlemanly house, 1500-1750', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, XII (2002) 291-310.



The Great Hall (now the Saloon) at Stoneleigh Abbey.

the circle of chairs signalling for Repton archaic practices of inclusive but rigidly formal politeness. The latter, by contrast, is dynamic and informal, the scattering of chairs and tables encouraging a variety of activities and a fragmentation of the company into smaller groups, each focused on a particular activity. Here we have a clear picture of how (new) social practices produced and how they were dependent upon different spatial arrangements. Repton's 'before' and 'after' thus offer an idealisation of both social space and social practice; the transformation is profound in architectural and material as well as behavioural and cultural terms. As such, Repton's paired images are typical of the ways in which the changing spatiality of the country house is viewed through a series of archetypes, often in the form of canonical country houses, each exhibiting the quintessential characteristics of their age.⁶ This is a bit like studying the history of urban development through the creation of new towns or major redevelopment schemes; it obscures the messiness and contingency of change and the inertia exerted by the existing materiality of streets and buildings or, in the case of country houses, rooms and furniture. Much can be gained, therefore, by exploring the creation of spaces for sociability in a single house, not least because focusing on the subtle changes within a particular space allows us to recover more of the nuanced relationship between social practice and spatial context than is possible in general surveys.

Stoneleigh Abbey, in the English Midlands, offers a useful case study because the essential fabric of the house changed little between the building of a grandiose West Range in the 1720s and the addition of a new entrance in the 1830s which reoriented the house and changed the function of several rooms. My analysis focuses on its ownership through three generations of

⁶ D. Arnold, *The Georgian country house. Architecture, landscape and society* (Stroud, 1998) 1-19.

the Leigh family, from Edward, third Lord Leigh (1684-1738), through his son Thomas, fourth Lord Leigh (1713-1749), to his grandchildren, Edward, fifth Lord Leigh (1742-1786) and Mary Leigh (1736-1806), both of whom died unmarried and childless. I begin by exploring how the imperatives of sociability shaped the materiality of key rooms at Stoneleigh, arguing that their furnishing and refurnishing reflected and framed changing social practices, but also the particular interests and tastes of the owner. I then broaden the argument to engage with two broader issues, both of which are important to our understanding of elite consumption. The first is that these spaces reflect a desire for comfort, both in a physical and social sense; the second is that this investment in the infrastructure for polite sociable interaction within the country house reflects a deep engagement in the so-called new luxury by elite consumers like the Leighs. In both instances, I seek to blur and nuance the boundaries between categories.

SOCIAL SPACES AND SPACE FOR SOCIABILITY

The country house is often seen as a single entity, designed to communicate the power and taste of the owner, but we should not let this view obscure its composition as an assemblage of spaces, each of which served different and complementary functions. Thus attempts to create space for sociability often centred on particular rooms, whilst others remained more private or served as symbols of rank and status. At Blenheim Palace, for example, there was a sharp distinction between the private apartments of the Duke and Duchess of Marlborough, ranged along the eastern side of the house, and the rooms of state on the south front.⁷ The simple public-private distinction that this implies was complicated at Stoneleigh Abbey (Figure 1): the Great Apartment, laid out in the 1720s by Edward, third Lord Leigh, was unequivocally public and remained the key symbol of family and rank, although this status was less evident to Cassandra Austen, when she visited in the early nineteenth century, than the gloominess of the décor. Two smaller parlours at the back of the West range were essentially private, allowing for social interaction within the family and household, perhaps extending to estate business. The focus of public sociability was undoubtedly the Dining Parlour and Breakfast Room where Cassandra noted that they mostly sat. In contrast with the Great Apartment, this pair of rooms changed markedly over the course of the eighteenth century, in both the quantity and character of the furniture they contained.⁸ These changes are apparent from a series of inventories made between 1738 and 1806, generally at the death of the owner. It is impossible to know whether items were omitted, but internal evidence and checks across to detailed bills for furniture suggest that they were reasonably comprehensive in terms of larger items.

Having contained little more than two dozen chairs, an oval dining table, two side tables, a tea table and three cupboards in 1738, they were increasingly filled with a wide variety of specialist furniture. By the time of Mary Leigh's death in 1806, there were also foot stools, book stands, an ink stand, a mahogany tub, a pot stand and a pot cupboard, two plate warmers and

7 Girouard, *Life in the English country house*, 160.

8 J. Stobart and M. Rothery, 'Fashion, heritage and family. New and old in the Georgian country house', *Cultural and social history*, XI (2014) 385-406.

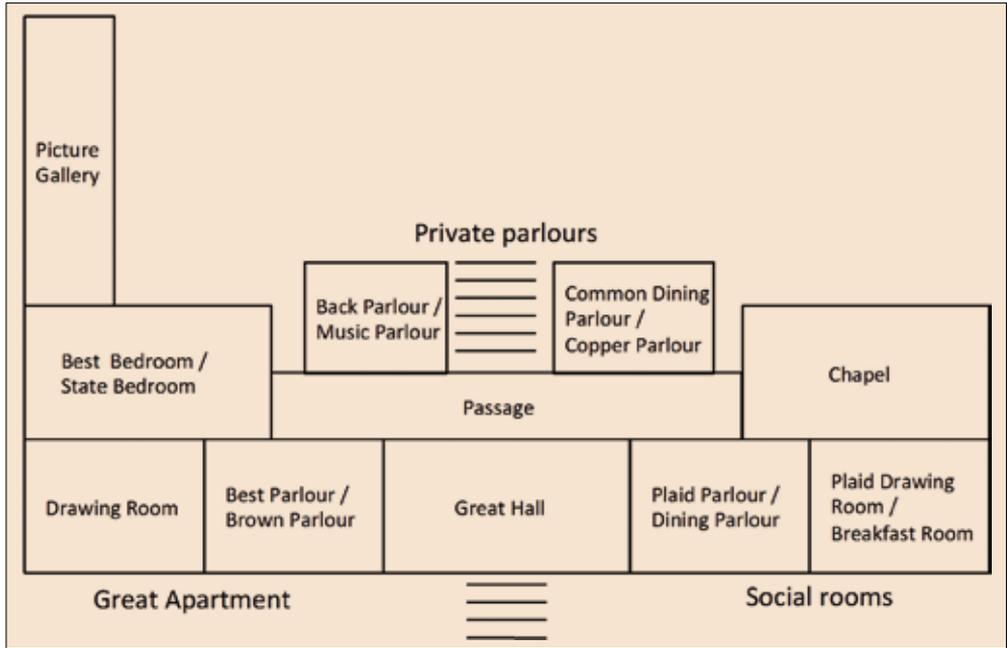


Figure 1 Schematic floor plan of Stoneleigh Abbey in the eighteenth century.

two pedestals, an inlaid Pembroke table and four small mahogany tables (Table 1).⁹ Within this overall process of accretion, there are some telling developments. First is the increasing quantity of games and musical instruments. The former included card tables which were central to domestic as well as public sociability;¹⁰ but there was also a box of battledores and shuttlecocks, and by 1786 two backgammon tables, a chessboard and a set of draughts, offering a wide variety of diversions, some of them quite energetic. In 1774, there was an organ which was later joined by a harpsichord before both were later replaced by a grand piano. Second, and even more striking, is the dramatic increase in the number of paintings. From a couple of portraits listed in the 1738 inventory, there were a total of 37 itemised in 1774: 22 landscapes, historical pieces and still life paintings, and 15 family portraits. The fact that the latter were listed separately in the inventories might suggest that they were also hung separately, but it is impossible to be certain. What is clear is their collective importance; indeed, paintings had become the key decorative feature of the rooms in the second half of the eighteenth century. As in other houses, they communicated the taste of the owners, but also provided a stimulus for conversation.¹¹ In contrast, chinaware disappeared from the rooms, at least as an object of permanent display. The 1749 inventory of what was then called the Plaid Parlour, had listed china on an old tea table and in two cupboards, plus a set of 'ornamental china upon the

9 Shakespeare Central Library and Archive, Stratford-upon-Avon (SCLA), DR18/4/59 inventory for 1806.

10 J. White, *London in the eighteenth century. A great and monstrous thing* (London, 2013) 340-341.

11 C. Saumarez Smith, *Eighteenth-century decoration. Design and the domestic interior in England* (London, 1993) 70-73. See also C. Christie, *The British country house in the eighteenth century* (Manchester, 2000) 188-215.

Cupboards and Cabinet', which together were valued at £6 6s.¹² By 1774, however, it was being stored in cupboards in the service rooms from whence it was brought when needed for serving tea, in conjunction with the tea chest listed in the 1786 inventory, or for meals, served on the four-piece mahogany dining table purchased for £30 from William Gomm in 1764.¹³

Table 1 Type and quantity of furniture in the Dining Parlour and Breakfast Room at Stoneleigh Abbey, 1738-1806

	1738	1749	1774	1786	1806
Chairs	24	24	28	28	27
Tables	4	5	5	7	10
Cupboards	3	2	1	1	2
Screens	1	3	2	3	4
Carpets	–	1	1	2	2
Other	–	2	2	7	14
Music/games	1	1	4	11	5
Total items of furniture	33	38	43	59	64
Sconces/ girandoles	4	2	2	2	2
China	3 sets	3 sets	–	–	–
Paintings	2	–	37	41	52
Wood/fabric	walnut/ plaid	walnut/ plaid	green damask/ mahogany	green damask/ mahogany	green damask/ mahogany

Source: SCLA, DRI8/4/9 inventory for 1738; DRI8/4/27 inventory for 1749; DRI8/4/43 inventory for 1773 with 1806 amendments; DRI8/4/69 inventory for 1786; DRI8/4/59 inventory for 1806.

As well as these quantitative changes, there were also shifts in the character of the furniture and the materials from which it was made, perhaps most notably the switch in soft furnishings from plaid to damask. The former had been so important to the character and identity of the rooms that in 1738 and 1749 they were referred to as the Plaid Parlour and Plaid Drawing Room (see Figure 1); yet it was replaced by a lighter and more fashionable green damask – a colour associated with love and a popular choice for drawing rooms as well as bed chambers.¹⁴ The outlay was considerable, with the upholsterer's bill for these two rooms alone coming to £211 18s 8d.¹⁵ At the same time, there was a change from walnut to mahogany furniture, a move that marked both a material and stylistic transformation, with the newer mahogany pieces being lighter and finer.

Overall, then, we see at Stoneleigh Abbey precisely the kind of revolution in social space that Repton envisaged. The Dining Parlour and Breakfast Room were made into spaces for polite

¹² SCLA, DRI8/4/27 inventory for 1749.

¹³ SCLA, DRI8/5/4808, bill from William Gomm.

¹⁴ A. Vickery, *Behind closed doors. At home in Georgian England* (New Haven, 2009) 174; Cornforth, *Early Georgian interiors*, 196.

¹⁵ SCLA, DRI8/5/3/47/52/15, bill from Thomas Burnett.

sociability. There were games and musical instruments for entertainment, paintings to admire and discuss, an assortment of tables around which small groups could assemble, desks for reading and writing, and also an impressive, but flexible dining table around which the company could gather for meals. All these changes were made without recourse to physical alterations of the rooms; plans for ornate plasterwork on the walls and ceiling came to nothing, and they retained their original panelling, repainted on at least two occasions in a fashionable dead white.¹⁶ It was thus quite straightforward, and relatively inexpensive, for country house owners to mould domestic space and create settings appropriate to their changing social needs.

SOCIAL SPACES, PERSONAL PREFERENCES AND CONTINGENCIES

Despite this power to manipulate space, it would be misleading to see these changes as a simple shift from ‘before’ to ‘after’ or a linear progression towards a space for informal sociability. Rather, it was a long draw-out process marked by continuity as well as change and characterised by two notable features: the personal preferences of owners and the contingency that arose from the variable resistance of the existing material culture of the house.

The original décor was clearly constructed around the tastes of the third Lord Leigh. The choice of plaid may have reflected his political allegiances, there being a long-standing perception of the Leighs as having strong Jacobite tendencies.¹⁷ There is probably some truth in this: the family owed its noble status to Charles I and there are two pictures of King Charles listed in the inventories of Stoneleigh Abbey. Yet plaid was common enough as a furnishing fabric, even if its popularity had peaked around the turn of the eighteenth century, making it rather dated by the late 1720s when Lord Leigh was furnishing these rooms. So this probably reflects conservative taste rather than a desire to mark political allegiance – a reminder that elites were not always at the cutting edge of fashion.¹⁸ The retention of this scheme through the reign of Thomas, fourth Lord Leigh, reflects both his apparent lack of interest in décor (no rooms at Stoneleigh were radically altered during his time) and the continued presence in the house of his mother, who acted as a constraining influence on spending and probably on expressions of new tastes as well.¹⁹

Thomas’s son, Edward was a very different character: an avid bibliophile with interests in maths, art and especially music. The first of these is seen in his impressive collection of books and his plans for a grand new library at Stoneleigh, complete with museum and rooms for his scientific instruments.²⁰ The last two impacted directly upon his refurnishing of the Dining Parlour and Breakfast Room, which included musical instruments and genre paintings for the first time. In part, this kept Stoneleigh in swim with the times. Music was an increasingly im-

16 A. Gomme, ‘Abbey into palace: a lesser Wilton?’, in: R. Bearman, ed., *Stoneleigh Abbey. The house, its owners, its lands* (Stratford-upon-Avon, 2004) 82-115; J. Stobart and M. Rothery, *Consumption and the country house* (Oxford, 2016) 58-60.

17 M. MacDonald, “‘Not unmarked by some eccentricities.’” *The Leigh family of Stoneleigh Abbey*, in: R. Bearman, ed., *Stoneleigh Abbey. The house, its owners, its lands* (Stratford-upon-Avon, 2004) 144.

18 C. Edwards, *Encyclopaedia of furnishing textiles, floorcoverings and home furnishing practices, 1200-1950* (Aldershot, 2007) 163.

19 Stobart and Rothery, *Consumption and country house*, 112-124.

20 J. Stobart, ‘The luxury of learning. Books, knowledge and display in the English country house, c.1750-2800’, in: N. Coquery and A. Bonnet, ed., *Le commerce du luxe. Production, exposition et circulation des objets précieux du Moyen Age à nos jours* (Paris, 2015) 242-249; SCLA, DR671/33.

portant part of country house culture in the second half of the eighteenth century; but the volume of sheet music and the choice of an organ, along with his violin lessons and membership of the Catch Club in London, indicates a serious engagement with making and consuming music that went beyond the polite attributes of the elite. Whilst this was not the kind of grandiose instrument installed at Rockingham House, Carton and many other country houses in the early nineteenth century, it was a substantial piece, costing £100.²¹ The impact that it had on the rooms as social space went beyond its materiality, not just in terms of its ability to fill the space with sound, but also its position as a potential focus for social interaction. Similarly, paintings were not simply an aesthetically pleasing backdrop or a sign of connoisseurship; they too could act as focal points for sociability. Here, Edward's taste was quite wide ranging and had different impacts. The views of Rome and Venice, for instance, spoke of engagement with the wider world and especially the cosmopolitanism of the grand tour, although he brought them to Stoneleigh in 1763 from another of the Leigh's houses rather than acquiring them directly. The family portraits, meanwhile, said more about Edwards' pedigree; bringing them into these social rooms from the more formal Picture Gallery (see Figure 1), possibly reflected a desire to communicate this pedigree to social visitors. Certainly, there was no shortage of space in either the Gallery or Dining Parlour, and both Edward and Mary appear to have been quite happy to move paintings between rooms as well as between houses – another reminder that formal distinctions were not fixed.²²

Edward's tastes were very different from those of his father, but were broadly shared by his sister, Mary. With music, her introduction of a harpsichord and later a piano offered the potential for more intimate music making. In common with many elite women, it seems likely that Mary could play these instruments (she had certainly had music lessons as a girl), so it is reasonable to see them as reflections of her own preferences as well as a move to greater informality. Similarly, her taste in paintings was similar, but perhaps a little more modern. She showed her connoisseurship in pieces by Dutch masters such as Teniers and Wouwerman, and her cultural currency in landscapes and conversation pieces by more recent artists, such as Gainsborough, Turner and Zoffany.²³ The impact of these additional paintings on the rooms is thus subtle, adding a gloss of contemporary taste and specific talking points for her guests who would, no doubt, have been familiar with both the painters and the subjects.

Personal taste was thus important in the construction of social space, but it was not all about choice and volition. Whilst the elite had money to change their domestic environment (even if they might choose not to), the existing materiality of space still exerted inertia and made change contingent. Conceptually, this might be related to the so-called Diderot effect which, in its most straightforward manifestation, worked 'to prevent an existing stock of consumer goods from giving entry to an object that carries cultural significance that is in-

21 K. Mullaney-Dignam, 'Useless and extravagant? The consumption of music in the Irish country house', in: J. Stobart and A. Hann, ed., *The country house. Material culture and consumption* (Swindon, 2016) 156-158, 160-161; Christie, *The British country house*, 287-289; SCLA, DR18/5/4069, bill from M. Wright.

22 Stobart and Rothery, 'Fashion, inheritance and family'. There is no suggestion that the Leighs moved substantial quantities of household goods between houses on a seasonal basis and we know that Mary Leigh purchased a large quantity of Wedgwood tableware for her house in Kensington. See J. Stobart, "'So agreeable and suitable a place". A late eighteenth-century suburban villa', *Journal of eighteenth-century studies*, XXXIX (2015) 89-102.

23 SCLA, DR18/17/32/186, List of pictures bought at auction, 1788. The total cost of these was £514 10s 6d.

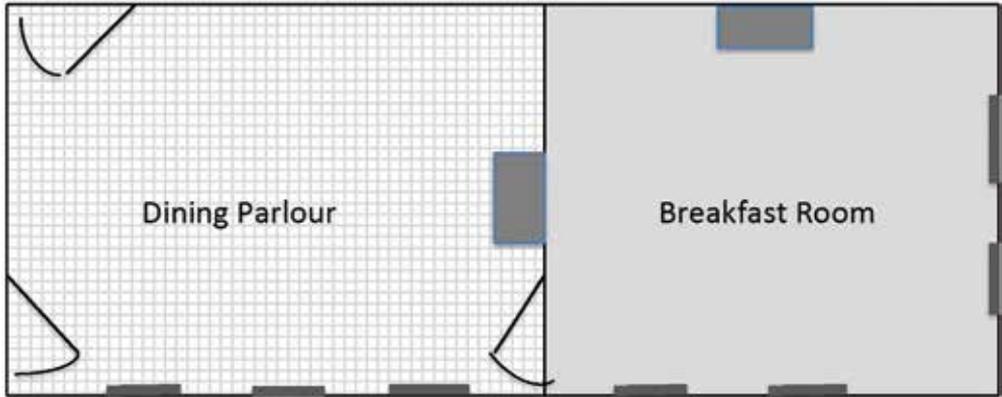


Figure 2 Schematic floor plan of the Dining Parlour and Breakfast Room, showing doors, windows and fireplaces.

consistent with that of the whole'.²⁴ In other words, the established materiality of the rooms was a conservative influence, resisting the introduction of new goods that did not conform with the status quo. Following this logic, change would either be incremental, additions being made in a way that complemented the existing set of goods, or profound, sweeping away the status quo ante and replacing it with a new steady state in which all the goods belonged together. At Stoneleigh Abbey, we can see evidence of both of these processes, although change was framed by a room geography that remained constant. Unlike Repton's images and the more profound reworking of rooms at Audley End, for example, doors and windows were left unchanged, despite the extensive refurbishment undertaken for Edward, fifth Lord Leigh.²⁵ There was no attempt to open up the rooms or to link them more directly with the garden – something which would have been quite difficult as the sloping ground meant that the Breakfast Room was effectively on the first floor. Change thus had to occur within existing spatial parameters which governed movement into and through the rooms, and did much to dictate the positioning of furniture (see Figure 2).

Within this framework, incremental change can be seen in the gradual introduction of new pieces. This is seen in the small additions made by Thomas, fourth Lord Leigh (a mahogany cistern, an India cabinet and a flowered carpet), but they are more apparent during Mary's period of control. The rooms that she inherited in 1774, when her brother was declared insane and put into care, were gradually modified over the following decades. Initially, she left Edward's furniture in situ, adding pieces that suited her social needs: the writing desk, pedestals, marble stand, tea chest, harpsichord and games noted earlier. Largely of mahogany and often brought from elsewhere in the house, these would have blended with the existing set of goods whilst extending the social uses of the rooms. In the twenty years that followed, change was more extensive, but still took place largely within the existing decorative trope. The green

²⁴ G. McCracken, *Culture and consumption. New approaches to the symbolic character of consumer goods and activities* (Bloomington-Indianapolis, 1988) 123.

²⁵ H. Chavasse, 'Material culture and the country house. Fashion, comfort and lineage' (unpublished PhD thesis; University of Northampton, 2015) chapter 3.

damask was complemented by striped seat covers and nankeen cushions, and an array of small and some larger pieces (including the piano) were brought into the room, this time often being purchases made by Mary herself. However, these additions were to some extent balanced by removing other items: the organ and music desks, a Pembroke table, a Persian carpet, the box of battledores and shuttles, several paintings and all of the original chairs. Sometimes these reflected her life stage (battledore was really a young person's activity) or her personal preference (the paintings); but there was also signs of a shifting aesthetic, most notably in the replacement of the chairs with others, including elbow and janned chairs, from elsewhere in the house.

As with Diderot's study, the gradual removal and addition of pieces eventually produced a markedly different space that in part reflected slightly different forms of sociability and in part changing taste. More profound change only took place between the reigns of the fourth and fifth Lords, Thomas and Edward. As we have already noted, these two men were of a very different cut, but the opportunity for a thorough refurbishment lay as much in demographic accident as personal preference. Thomas had died aged just 36, leaving his children as minors. Whilst the sale that followed his death meant that many rooms were cleared, this was not the case for the Dining Parlour and Breakfast Room.²⁶ However, the house stood empty for about fourteen years after Thomas's death, which meant that Edward could, where he chose to, make a clean break with earlier decorative schemes. That he elected to keep the Great Apartment largely as it was whilst replacing practically all of the furniture in his rooms for entertaining guests reflects the different function of the rooms and the extent to which this was communicated through assemblages of material objects.²⁷



The Honourable Mary Leigh, tenant for life at Stoneleigh Abbey from 1786.

CONCLUSIONS: SOCIAL SPACES AND CULTURAL CONTEXTS

The spaces for sociability at Stoneleigh Abbey were thus a complex product of social practices and personal preference, modified by the extant materiality of the rooms: form and function were mutually constitutive. In common with much of the literature on country houses, and indeed the domestic material culture of the middling sorts, I have thus far considered these changes within the broader context of sociability and politeness, the norms and ex-

²⁶ SCLA, DR18/4/26, Inventory of the goods remaining in Stoneleigh Abbey ... after the sale in July 1750.

²⁷ Stobart and Rothery, 'Fashion, heritage and family'.

pectations of which were themselves shifting during this period.²⁸ Yet there were other concerns that impacted upon rooms for entertaining, not least the need to make them physically comfortable. Crowley sees this emerging as a key concern for eighteenth-century homeowners, at least in the Anglo-American world.²⁹ He argues that physical comfort was initially of secondary concern to the imperatives of fashion and gentility,³⁰ an assertion that raises two closely linked questions for the present analysis: were the social rooms at Stoneleigh becoming more physically comfortable and is there evidence of a conflict or trade-off between comfort and gentility?

Cold, damp and darkness were perennial concerns for country house owners and they unsurprisingly invested much time and effort in ameliorating these problems.³¹ At Stoneleigh, the changes made by Edward, fifth Lord Leigh, and his sister Mary undoubtedly made their rooms for entertaining more comfortable environments in a physical sense. The introduction of bath stoves in place of grates in the early 1760s would have helped to keep the rooms warmer because, like Rumford stoves, they served to project more of the heat of the fire out into the room.³² Even so, the size of the rooms meant that the fire would still have formed an important focal point, with chairs being positioned to enjoy the heat – an arrangement apparent from the deployment of a growing number of fire screens (Table 1). Warmth and comfort were further enhanced by carpets, which first appear in 1749, but are present in both rooms only after 1774, a Wilton carpet and a Scotch and later a Brussels carpet being listed in the 1786 and 1806 inventories. Cornforth argues that comfort also came with increased quantities of upholstered furniture, but the extent to which this occurred at Stoneleigh is difficult to assess as the inventories note seat covers but not the nature of any underlying upholstery. Cushions on the window seats were a constant feature and the one clear sign of improvement came in the last two decades of the eighteenth century when Mary introduced two new sets of chairs, including ten French elbow chairs ‘with nankeen cushions quilted’.³³ Perhaps surprisingly, though, there were no sofas, despite them being introduced into other rooms in the house and becoming almost a standard feature of drawing rooms elsewhere – even at the far more modest house of the Drydens in Canons Ashby.³⁴ Similarly, there is little to suggest that lighting was significantly improved: the earlier sconces were replaced by girandoles, but these were apparently fewer in number and, whilst Mary Leigh experimented with the new Argand lamp, only one purchase is recorded, suggesting that she continued to rely predominantly on candles held in moveable candlesticks. These rooms may have been fashionable and sociable spaces, but they would have remained quite dark before one of Mary’s successors, James Henry Leigh, spent handsomely on a range of lamps, lustres and lights in the 1810s.³⁵

28 See, for example, Girouard, *Lite in the English country house*; W. Smith, *Consumption and the making of respectability, 1600-1800* (London, 2002).

29 J. Crowley, *The invention of comfort. Sensibilities and design in Early Modern Britain and Early America* (Baltimore, 2001). See also J. Cornforth, *English interiors 1790-1848. The quest for comfort* (London, 1978).

30 Crowley, *The invention of comfort*, 148.

31 J. Fowler and J. Cornforth, *English decoration in the eighteenth century* (London, 1974) 220-230.

32 Crowley, *The invention of comfort*, 187-190.

33 SCLA, DR18/4/59, inventory for 1806.

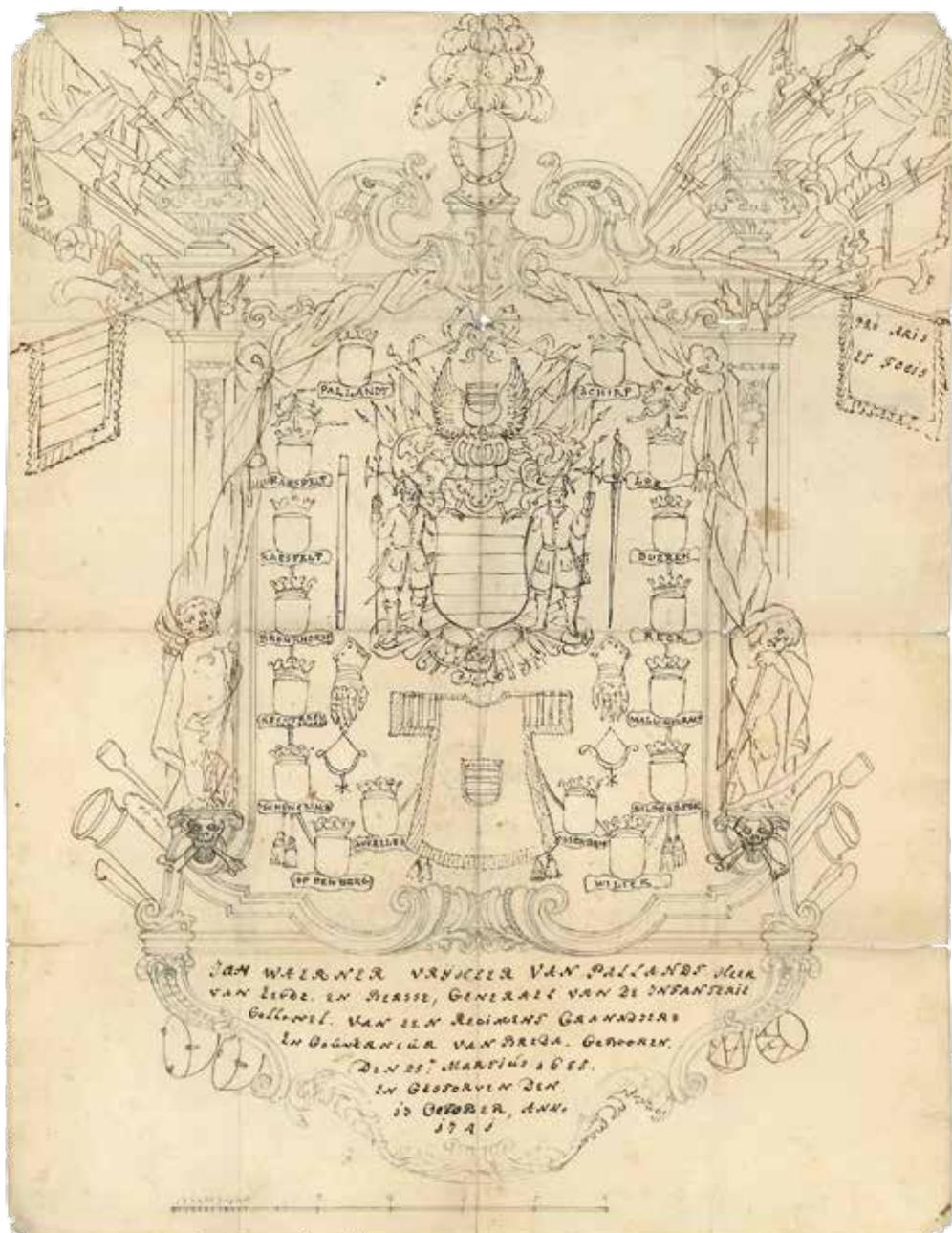
34 J. Stobart, ‘Inventories and the changing furnishings of Canons Ashby, Northamptonshire, 1717-1819’, *Regional furniture*, XXVII (2013) 1-43.

35 SCLA, DR18/5/6992, bill from Hancock, Shepard and Rixon.

Whether this means that gentility was more important than comfort rather depends on the definition of comfort. Seen purely in terms of physical ease and well-being, it is hard to see a profound change in the level of comfort afforded to Mary's guests over that available to those of her grandfather seventy years earlier. Yet these rooms did afford comfort, both physically and, more importantly, socially. They provided a setting that allowed for and indeed encouraged appropriate social interaction: music, reading, writing, playing cards or board games – even the fire screens were decorated with maps, making them a conversation piece as well as a practical item of furniture. To focus solely on physical comfort is thus to miss the importance of social comfort that derived from conforming with the changing norms of polite entertainment, including both the correct bodily deportment and social interaction. A seat might be physically uncomfortable, for example, but could make the sitter socially comfortable if it meant that they sat correctly and could engage with their fellow guests. This might mean the polite circle of Repton's cedar parlour, reflected in the relative emptiness of the Plaid Parlour with its promise of formal tea drinking, or alternatively the more relaxed atmosphere of his modern living room, also found in the informality and profusion of Mary's Breakfast Room.

Recognising the importance of social comfort is significant not only in how we interpret the form and function of rooms for entertaining – that is, their spatiality – but also in how we view elite consumption more generally. Ideas of taste, comfort and pleasure; the communication of cultural meanings, and practices of inclusive sociability and reciprocity were, for De Vries, the defining features of 'new luxury'. This formed a radical departure from the 'old luxury' of established elites, which strove for status differentiation through grandeur, exquisite refinement and exemption from moral strictures.³⁶ Yet the rooms for entertaining at Stoneleigh Abbey deny this binary division. On one hand, the cost of the soft furnishings introduced by Edward, fifth Lord Leigh and the old masters and fashionable new paintings purchased by Mary spoke of the exclusivity of old luxury; yet the decorative china, card tables and chess sets, and assemblages of occasional furniture linked the Leighs to the values and norms of new luxury. Indeed, it is possible to see these rooms as a microcosm of the broader complexities, contradictions and contingencies of elite culture and elite consumption: at once defensive of its established and hereditary status and in the vanguard of new social practices and cultures of politeness and sensibility.

³⁶ J. de Vries, *Industrious revolution. Consumer behaviour and the household economy, 1650 to the present* (Cambridge, 2008) 44-45. See also Smith, *Making of respectability*.



Ontwerp voor een wapenbord ter herinnering aan Johan Werner van Pallandt in de Eusebiuskerk te Arnhem, 1741. Deze ongesignde tekening kan worden toegeschreven aan de Arnhemse wapen-
tekenaar Willem ten Haegh.