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Chapter 7

Making an English country house: Taste and luxury in the furnishing of Stoneleigh Abbey, 1763–1765

Jon Stobart

In a 1774 inventory of Stoneleigh Abbey, the ancestral home of the Leigh family, a bed chamber named for its distinctive wrought work drapery included, amongst a wide array of furnishings: six mahogany back stools, two French elbow chairs, ‘a fine old Japan Cabinet’, a Wilton carpet, a steel stove grate and a ‘large pier Glass in a Rich Carved and Gilt frame’.¹ In many ways, this room represents the eclecticism of the English country house, combining influences and objects from Britain, Europe and the wider world in a blend of materials, cultures and styles.² The English elite had long drawn inspiration from contemporary and historical cultures in mainland Europe, most notably Italy, the Netherlands and France. Classical Rome and Renaissance Italy had a huge impact on architectural styles, most notably in the rise of Palladianism in the early eighteenth century. French influences were more important in terms of the layout of English country houses in the early decades of the eighteenth century, and French taste had a big impact on furnishings styles following the Restoration and again from the 1770s.³ As the chapters by

¹ Shakespeare Centre Library and Archive (SCLA), DR18/4/43, 1774 inventory with 1806 amendments.

² See Stephanie Barczewski, *Country Houses and the British Empire, 1700–1930* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), 180–88.

³ Mark Girouard, *Life in the English Country House. A Social and Architectural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978); Geoffrey Beard, *Upholsterers and Interior Furnishings in England, 1530–1840* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 81–6; Dena Goodman,

Clemente, North and Ilmakunnas make clear, the English elite was part of a broader alignment of European elite taste with French modes and fashions; but they also shared in an episodic critique of French luxury as emblematic of decadence, ostentation and excess.⁴ Nonetheless, continental Europe was an important source of ideas and material objects, including paintings, sculptures, books, furniture and clothing. These were often collected whilst on the Grand Tour, on specific shopping trips or via auctions of the collections of deceased or dispossessed noblemen – an increasingly common feature of post-Revolutionary France. Equally, there were a growing number of British dealers who could supply their well-heeled customers with luxury goods, especially from France which was increasingly constructed as the locus and arbiter of refined taste.⁵

Overlain onto these European influences and goods were an ever larger range of products and tastes coming into Britain from the wider world, especially India and China. These sparked the enduring fashion for Chinoiserie, both in the form of genuine Indian cottons, Chinese wallpapers and Chinese and Japanese porcelain, and the European copies that proliferated through the

‘Furnishing discourses: readings of a writing desk in eighteenth-century France’, in *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century*, eds. Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Eger (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 71–88.

⁴ William H. Sewell, ‘The empire of fashion and the rise of capitalism in eighteenth-century France’, *Past and Present*, 206 (2010), 81–120.

⁵ See, Francis Haskell, ‘The British as collectors’, in Gervase Jackson-Stops (ed.), *The Treasure Houses of Britain* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1985), 50–59; Jennifer Jones, ‘Repackaging Rousseau: femininity and fashion in Old Regime France’, *French Historical Studies*, 18 (1994).

seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁶ Whether seen as ‘physical representations of empire’ or a reflection of a taste for the exotic, goods and commodities from the East and West Indian trade were increasingly common in English houses, not least in the shape of mahogany – a material that became central to English furniture making.⁷ In some instances, there was a blending of European and oriental styles, both in terms of broad designs – most famously, perhaps, Thomas Chippendale’s chinoiserie – and in the fabric of individual pieces, as seen for example in the painted mirrors in the Ante Room at Shugborough.⁸ This kind of cosmopolitanism is often seen as a core characteristic of the European elite. It was a means of defining and defending their status, in part by marking their ‘reach’ as consumers – that is, their ability both to afford such luxuries and have the right connections through which they might be obtained – and in part

⁶ Emile De Bruijn, ‘Consuming East Asia: continuity and change in the development of Chinoiserie’, in *The Country House: Material Culture and Consumption*, ed. Jon Stobart and Andrew Hann (Swindon: Historic England, 2016); John Cornforth, *Early Georgian Interiors* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 253–63; Anne Gerritsen and Stephen McDowall, ‘Material culture and the other: European encounters with Chinese porcelain, ca. 1650–1800’, *Journal of World History*, 23:1 (2012), 87–113; Maxine Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 77–84, 105–10.

⁷ Barczewski, *Country Houses*, 137. See also Anna Jackson and Amin Jaffer (eds) *Encounters: the Meeting of Asia and Europe, 1500–1800* (London: V&A Publications, 2004).

⁸ Stephen McDowall, ‘Shugborough: Seat of the Earl of Lichfield’, *East India Company at Home* (August, 2014), <http://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/eicah/shugborough-hall-staffordshire/>

because it signalled their taste and discernment; they knew which goods to select and how to integrate them into their material culture.⁹

It is easy to find examples of these cosmopolitan cultures of consumption amongst English country houses. They are perhaps most obvious in those with close connections to empire, often because the owners wished either to celebrate or hide the source of their new-found wealth, and amongst those where the owner had political or social ambitions, marked by a desire to move on a European stage.¹⁰ However, there has been little attempt to question the extent to which this cosmopolitanism characterised the English landed elite more generally, beyond a proliferation of mahogany furniture and desire to dine *à la Française*. In this chapter, I explore the processes and priorities involved in furnishing a country house, Stoneleigh Abbey, in the mid 1760s, and stress the importance of English suppliers and the construction of a largely English material culture, albeit one that drew materials and decorative cues from overseas. In taking a case study approach, it is clearly impossible to state which modes of behaviour were more typical of the English elite as a whole, but it offers the opportunity to explore in detail the networks of craftsmen and retailers which supplied one particular house and the ways in which they related to each other and to the owner of the house in making and implementing a particular form of elite English taste.

Stoneleigh Abbey in Warwickshire was formerly a Cistercian Abbey which was purchased by Thomas Leigh, a London merchant, in 1571. A Baronetcy and later a Barony were conferred

⁹ For more on these aspects of luxury consumption, see: Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 3–63; Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure*, 28–31.

¹⁰ For example, the various case studies published as part of the project *East India Company at Home* (<http://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/eicah/case-studies-2/>); several of the chapters in Stobart and Hann, *Country House*; Barczewski, *Country Houses*, 136–96.

during the seventeenth century and, through purchase and marriage, the estate grew in size so that, by the time that Edward, fifth Lord Leigh, came of age in 1763, it produced an income of around £10,000 per annum. It was at this time that Edward began to refurnish a house that had been left incomplete by his grandfather and had lain empty during Edward's minority following the death of his father in 1749. The Leigh archive includes an extensive set of bills which reveal much about the decoration and furnishing of the house, as do a number of memoranda drawn up following Edward's coming of age. Unfortunately, there is only a small amount of personal correspondence, in part because most of Edward's letters were burnt following his death. It is therefore easier to trace the processes of consumption than uncover underlying motivations.

The network of supply

The bills indicate that furniture was acquired in a piecemeal fashion through the first half of the eighteenth century. Walnut chairs came in a variety of styles, John Taylor's bill from 1736 listing twelve matted, six carved and eighteen compass chairs. There was also a range of parcel-gilt furniture: John Pardoe of Temple Bar supplied, amongst other things, a 'neat carved' gold chimney glass, and there are sets of parcel-gilt walnut chairs with matching pier tables provided for the Great Apartment.¹¹ In addition, Edward, third Lord Leigh commissioned a set of seven walnut veneered and gilt-gesso chairs with painted coats of arms and embroidered covers depicting scenes from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, possibly from Pardoe or from Thomas How of Westminster.¹² By the 1740s, Thomas, fourth Lord Leigh, had moved on stylistically and was buying mahogany furniture, particularly tables. Five were supplied by H. Hands; they cost between £2 2s 6d and £3 apiece, suggesting that they were either modest in size or quite plain.

¹¹ SCLA, DR18/5/2047, DR18/5/2218; J. Cornforth, 'Stoneleigh Abbey', *Country Life*, 14 March 2002.

¹² Jackson-Stops, *Treasure Houses*, 202–3.

The overall impression gained from these bills is that the Leighs had fairly conservative taste, following the trends rather than leading them. Some of the gilt walnut pieces were quite grand, and they created a suitable display of wealth and status when assembled in the Great Apartment,¹³ but this was not a family indulging in the luxurious splendour of baroque or rococo in the French style, as seen at Wilton House, for example. Moreover, the quantities and costs involved were modest, certainly in relation to the surge of spending that took place in preparation for Edward, fifth Lord Leigh's occupation of the house. In just two years, much of Stoneleigh Abbey was substantially refurbished, some rooms in the west range being properly finished for the first time since their construction nearly 40 years earlier. There were major purchases of silver tableware, including a chased epergne costing £139 14s, from Thomas Gilpin of Serle Street, Lincoln Inn Fields and a wide variety of napkins and tablecloths in damask, dimity and diaper, plus hundreds of yards of Irish linen for sheets, supplied by Jordan Biggar, whose shop was on Leadenhall Street.¹⁴ Both were items that might be found in any respectable household, but the quantity and quality marked this out as the consumption of a wealthy landowner, whilst the engraving of crests and coats of arms on the silverware was a constant reminder of Edward's rank and dignity.¹⁵

Spending on silverware and household linen ran to a total of £1116 10s 7d between 1763 and 1765, but these were not the key items or suppliers in this programme of refurbishment. Three

¹³ According to the 1738 inventory, the furniture in the Great Apartment, had a combined value of £834 5s 6d – SCLA, DR18/4/9.

¹⁴ For example, SCLA, DR18/5/4251, 4028, 4193, 4343–5.

¹⁵ On middling consumption of linen, see Woodruff Smith, *Consumption and the Making of Respectability, 1600-1800* (London: Routledge, 2002), 130–8. For its use in elite households, see D. M. Mitchell, 'Fine table linen in England 1450–1750: Ownership and use of a luxury commodity', (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of London, 1999).

men dominated Edward's outgoings and did much to shape the subsequent character of Stoneleigh Abbey, at least beyond the Great Apartment laid out by his grandfather in the late 1720s and 1730s. They were the furniture maker, William Gomm; the wallpaper merchant, Thomas Bromwich, and the upholsterer, Thomas Burnett, who together supplied goods to the value of £4659 15s 5d.¹⁶ William Gomm had opened his workshops and showroom in Clerkenwell Close in 1736 and enjoyed a good reputation amongst contemporaries, although he is little known today.¹⁷ He appears to have been influenced by Chippendale, subscribing to his *Director* in 1754. Designs believed to be in Gomm's hand resemble Chippendale's Anglicised rococo, but he also sketched others in gothic and Chinese style, indicating versatility and an ability to respond to the tastes of individual clients.¹⁸ Thomas Bromwich had a reputation as one of the leading wallpaper merchants of the mid-eighteenth century, supplying many wealthy customers, including Horace Walpole.¹⁹ His showroom on Ludgate Hill was an important venue for selecting wallpapers, Walpole's friend, the poet John Gray, describing in detail the range of gothic, flock and stucco papers available, whilst Mrs Lybbe Powys noted with approval his work at Fawley Court in Buckinghamshire. Here, the papers were Chinese in style and 'adorn'd with

¹⁶ SCLA, DR18/5/4408, DR18/5/4402, DR18/5/4571, DR18/3/47/52/15.

¹⁷ Lindsay Boynton, 'William and Richard Gomm', *The Burlington Magazine*, 122 (1980), 395–6.

¹⁸ The designs are held at the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum in Delaware, USA. See Boynton, 'William Gomm', 396.

¹⁹ E.A. Entwistle, 'Eighteenth-century London paperstainers, Thomas Bromwich at the Golden Lyon on Ludgate Hill', *Connoisseur* (October 1952), 106–10.

very good prints, the border cut out and the ornaments put on with great taste'.²⁰ Both Gomm and Bromwich were clearly able to meet a taste for English, European and exotic designs. Far less is known about Thomas Burnett. Like Gomm, he was not of the top rank, yet was clearly well-established by the 1760s and is named as a Fellow of the Society for the Promotion of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce between 1761 and 1768. Together with his partner, Gilbert Burnett, he had premises on the Strand, from which they ran a substantial business, capable of supplying elite customers with large quantities of drapery and soft furnishings, as well as items of furniture and a range of upholstery services.²¹ Significantly, they were identified in directories as upholstery, cabinet and carpet warehousemen, undertakers and appraisers; in short, they do not appear to have made furniture themselves, but rather specialised in the supply of pieces made by other tradesmen – a role by no means unusual for upholsterers at this time.

Looking to metropolitan suppliers was quite normal when making such important purchases especially in the second half of the eighteenth century when Chippendale, Mayhew and Ince, and later Hepplewhite, Sheraton and many others, began to issue sample books which allowed provincial customers to choose from a range of possible designs in the comfort of their own homes.²² What is perhaps more surprising is that the Leighs never appear to have looked

²⁰ Alan Sugden and John Edmundson, *A History of English Wallpaper, 1509-1914* (London: Batsford, 1926), 79; Caroline Powys, *Passages from the Diaries of Mrs Philip Lybbe Powys of Hardwick House, Oxon: AD 1756–1808* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1899), 146.

²¹ Geoffrey Beard and Christopher Gilbert, *Dictionary of English Furniture Makers, 1660-1840* (London: Maney & Son, 1986), 131-2.

²² See Amanada Vickery, 'Women and the world of goods', in *Consumption and the World of Goods*, ed. John Brewer and Roy Porter (London: Routledge, 1993), 281; Clive Edwards,

beyond London in the manner seen at Boughton House or Swallowfield Park, where goods were acquired direct from French dealers or on shopping trips to Paris, and at Englefield House and Sichtermann's Groningen mansion with their arrays of exotic goods acquired via the English and Dutch East India Companies (see Kuiper's chapter).²³ Yet this dependence on English and especially London craftsmen was also seen at Audley End, Arbury Hall and many other country houses, including Nostell Priory (see Bristol's chapter). Does this reflect a taste for English furniture, the emergence in the mid eighteenth century of what John Cornforth calls 'an age of English craftsmanship and decoration',²⁴ or merely the convenience of buying from suppliers whose workshops and showrooms were relatively accessible and whose reputation was familiar? Were the goods supplied by these men also English?

Supplying luxury and taste

Gomm's furniture was mahogany and mostly for bedchambers and dressing rooms. The 183 chairs he supplied were intended for upholstery, most being described as 'stuff back and seat' or

Turning Houses into Homes. A History of the Retailing and Consumption of Domestic Furnishings (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 66–71; Beard, *Upholsterers*, 161–3, 223–5, 257–8.

²³ Margot Finn, 'Swallowfield Park, Berkshire', *East India Company at Home* (February, 2013), <http://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/eicah/case-studies-2/swallowfield-park-berkshire/>; Kate Smith, 'Imperial objects? Country house interiors in eighteenth-century Britain', in *The Country House: Material Culture and Consumption*, in Jon Stobart and Andrew Hann (Swindon: Historic England, 2016). Furniture made by English craftsmen was sometimes upholstered with French tapestries; for example, several sets of chairs supplied by Chippendale being finished with specially commissioned tapestries from the Gobelins factory. See Jackson-Stops, *Treasure Houses of Britain*, 333.

²⁴ Cornforth, *Early Georgian Interiors*, 191–203.

'nail seats with neat carved backs' and were finished with Chinese trunk, ogee or plain feet.²⁵ There were chests of drawers, Pembroke tables, clothes presses and chests, sometimes with fretwork cornices, and serpentine commodes, perhaps resembling that in one of his designs. Gomm was thus supplying suites of furniture very much in line with restrained English taste, although the 'French elbow chairs' were probably rococo and perhaps built to the pattern shown in his manuscript designs.²⁶ The upholstery work undertaken by Burnett mostly involved covering Gomm's chairs, either with silk, mixed or worsted damask or more often morine – a watered and stamped woollen fabric widely used in domestic furnishings.²⁷ Some pieces of furniture were also supplied, either in mahogany or, in the case of beds, in wainscot with mahogany legs and posts. However, the bulk of his bill comprised bedding (including mattresses, bolsters and quilts) and drapery, generally in the same fabric and colour used for the chairs. The result was a series of bedchambers and dressing rooms which were colour coded and graded according to the quality of the drapery: Yellow Damask, Blue Morine, Crimson Worsted Damask, and so on. These colour schemes were continued through the wallpapers supplied by Bromwich. In the Blue Morine room, for instance, he hung 'fine saxon blue and white mock embossed' paper, whilst 'crimson ground stucco paper' was put up in the Crimson Worsted Damask room.²⁸ Most rooms had papers described as mock embossed, stucco, ground

²⁵ SCLA, DR18/5/4408.

²⁶ Henry Francis du Pont Winterhur Museum in Delaware, USA.

²⁷ SCLA, DR18/5/3/47/52/15. On morine or moreen, see Clive Edwards, *Encyclopaedia of Furnishing Textiles, Floorcoverings and Home Furnishing Practices 1200–1950* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 142-3.

²⁸ SCLA, DR18/5/4402. The rooms are named in this way on both Bromwich's and Burnett's bills.

stucco, sprig or embossed – the kind of ‘neat and not too showey’ papers desired by the wallpaper buyers discussed by Amanda Vickery.²⁹

Viewed as a whole, then, this huge outlay on furniture, drapery and wallpaper appears to be an exercise in large-scale refurbishment in a restrained manner. The overall spending was massive, but so too was the quantity and range of goods being acquired. Importantly, however, the bedchambers were not all treated the same in terms of outlay and décor, the differences between them revealing much about Edward’s ideas of taste and luxury.

A series of bedchambers and dressing rooms, numbered 2 to 8 on the bills presented by all three tradesmen, were furnished in a broadly comparable manner. They all had stucco or mock embossed wallpapers, costing between 3d and 6d per yard, and were furnished with morine drapery costing 2s 4d per yard. The furniture supplied for each room was fairly uniform: Gomm’s bill itemises a night table, chest of draws, dressing table, basin stand or Pembroke table, and usually a set of chairs for each; the cost varied according to whether there was a dressing room en suite, rather than reflecting differences in the quality of the pieces (Table 7.1). The beds installed by Burnett were of a standard type: 5 foot 3 inches by 6 foot 6 inches, made from wainscot and uncarved mahogany, and costing £4 17s. The overall cost for each room was the equivalent of three to six year’s wages for a senior servant, and in this sense they were luxurious reflections of Lord Leigh’s wealth and standing.³⁰ However, they were by no means magnificent. Typical of ordinary guest rooms in an English country house, they were situated on the second floor and were comfortable and practical, rather than splendid.

²⁹ Amanda Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors. At Home in Georgian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 166–83, quote from 177. See also Sugden and Edmundson, *English Wallpapers*.

³⁰ Jon Stobart and Mark Rothery, *Consumption and the Country House* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), chapter 1.

Table 7.1 Cost of furnishing standard guest bedchambers at Stoneleigh Abbey, 1763-65 (£ s. d.)

Room	Burnett	Bromwich	Gomm	Total
2. Blue morine (bed)	40-0-2	4-0-1	19-13-0	63-13-3
3. Yellow morine (bed)	42-14-5	2-19-3	19-13-0	65-6-8
4. Crimson morine (bed/dressing)	73-1-5	7-16-5	36-8-0	117-5-10
5. Green morine (bed/dressing)	68-3-4	8-9-2	36-8-0	113-0-6
6. Green morine (bed)	46-13-9	5-16-4	36-8-0	88-18-1
7. Blue morine (bed/dressing)	68-3-5	8-4-8	46-8-0	122-14-1
8. Crimson morine (bed/dressing)	54-19-1	7-7-9	39-18-0	102-6-10
Average	56-5-1	6-7-8	33-10-10	96-3-7

Source: SCLA, DR18/3/47/52/15, bill from Thomas Burnett, 1765; DR18/5/4402, bill from Thomas Bromwich, 1765; DR18/5/4408, bill from William Gomm, 1765.

A different standard of furnishing characterised the rooms on the first floor (Table 7.2). A conventional approach to luxury can be seen in No.14 and No.15, although this is less apparent in either the furniture supplied by Gomm or the wallpaper than in the richness of Burnett's drapery and upholstery work and the quality of the bedding. The bedsteads were wider, longer and taller, with 'gothic feet posts, neatly carv'd' and a 'set of rich carv'd Cornishes & carv'd testers'. In all, they cost £18 16s – four times those found in the standard rooms. In No. 14, the 'mixt Damask' hangings, with their lustring linings and lace trimmings, together with a fringed silk valance came to just short of £100. The bed itself was stuffed with the 'best sweet Goose feathers', further comfort and luxury being added by the 'superfine' white calico quilt (costing £6 10s) and Wilton carpet (£4 14s 6d). The window curtains were again of blue mixt damask and the chairs supplied by Gomm were covered in the same fabric and trimmed with silk. Next door, No.15 was fitted out in a very similar fashion, the pair offering a vivid picture of refined

luxury: rich carving, costly fabrics, and a fine feather bed. In this context, luxury was something sensual and pleasurable, but also splendid and costly; it defined Lord Leigh as a man with a taste for the finer things in life and a purse that allowed him to indulge these tastes. Importantly, these were rooms for guests and so offered the opportunity for displaying luxury and taste, but they exhibited little sign of the exotic or the cosmopolitan; these were conventional signs of rank and status in an English house. Much the same was true of the Dining Parlour and Chapel, which were similarly luxurious in their use of drapery. For the former, Burnett supplied 200 yards of ‘rich green silk and worsted damask’ for curtains, with further quantities for cushions made for the window seats and for covering a set of 24 chairs, again supplied by Gomm. The total cost of £211 18s 8 ½d was easily overshadowed by the £473 0s 10 ¼d laid out on the chapel, in which in a ‘rich crimson Genoan velvet’, edged with gold fringe, was used for hangings, seat covers and cushions. This opulence was given a rococo twist in the form of a communion table made by Gomm to designs by Timothy Lightoler, Lord Leigh’s architect at Stoneleigh. This is described in the bill as ‘An Exceeding handsome Mahogy Communion Table the feet very neatly carved with Flowers & foliage, the Frame very richly Carv’d, on the Front a Cherubins Head, Foliage & Flowers’. At £31 10s it was easily the most costly piece supplied by Gomm and the only one that suggests anything like a significant departure from plain English furniture.³¹

Table 7.2 Cost of furnishing ‘special’ bedchambers at Stoneleigh Abbey, 1763–1765 (£ s. d.)

Room	Burnett	Bromwich	Gomm	Total
14. Blue Damask	235-10-2	6-6-1	25-7-0	267-3-3
15. Yellow Damask	241-9-1	11-0-5	21-1-0	273-10-6

³¹ SCLA, DR18/5/4408.

17. Crimson Damask	71-9-11	24-14-3	30-10-0	126-14-2
18. Crimson Damask	71-9-11	27-7-6	30-10-0	129-7-5
20. Miss Leigh's	296-13-6	35-1-0	59-2-0	390-16-6
21. Lord Leigh's	209-12-8	21-1-11	27-12-0	258-6-7
Average	187-14-2	20-18-6	32-7-0	240-19-9

Source: SCLA, DR18/3/47/52/15, bill from Thomas Burnett, 1765; DR18/5/4402, bill from Thomas Bromwich, 1765; DR18/5/4408, bill from William Gomm, 1765.

It would be a mistake, however, to think that this was the only taste exhibited by Lord Leigh. As with any aristocratic house, different rooms served different functions and carried different meanings. A contrast is often drawn between rooms of state and those for the family, or between dining and drawing rooms, and I have discussed elsewhere the distinction between Stoneleigh Abbey's Great Apartment, as a symbol of rank and heritage, and the Dining Parlour and Breakfast Room, which were more fashionable and sociable spaces.³² We can also see engagement with diverse systems of taste being played out in different bedchambers. For No.17 and No.18, Gomm and Burnett supplied conventional furniture and drapery, the cost of which was in line with that for other bedchambers; but Bromwich hung Chinese wallpaper, giving the rooms a completely different character. In the former, he hung 14 sheets of 'Indian Taffaty paper' at 30s per sheet and a papier-mâché border; in the latter, he charged for 27 sheets of

³² See Cornforth, *Early Georgian Interiors*, 275; Jon Stobart and Mark Rothery, 'Fashion, heritage and family: New and old in the Georgian country house', *Cultural and Social History*, 11 (2014), 385–406. For a similar analysis of Audley End, see Hannah Chavasse, 'Fashion and "affectionate recollection": Material culture at Audley End, 1762-1773', in *The Country House: Material Culture and Consumption*, ed. Jon Stobart and Andrew Hann (Swindon: Historic England, 2016), 67–77.

'Indian Birds and flowers' at 12s per sheet, a papier-mâché border and Indian Colours. From the price, and the fact that the paper came in sheets rather than by the yard, it is likely that these were Chinese not English papers;³³ either way, they demonstrated a rather different side of Lord Leigh's sensibility and taste. By this date, Chinese wallpapers were starting to be viewed simply as another decorative option rather than a direct reference to the orient, but they reveal an exoticism rarely glimpsed at Stoneleigh Abbey.³⁴ Moreover, their deployment alongside English style furniture and drapery suggests the kind of eclectic cosmopolitanism highlighted by Barczewski, Berg and others, and encapsulated in the silver epergne supplied by Gilpin. Whether viewed as chinoiserie or exuberant rococo, the pineapple which tops it is a link to the exotic and the luxury of these fruit.³⁵

This eclecticism was still more apparent in Lord Leigh's own bedchamber and that for his sister, Mary. Her rooms were furnished with particularly high quality pieces, including a clothes press costing £12 12s, a serpentine commode dressing table at £15 15s and a bed 'richly carv'd with Reeds and Ribbons' and hug with green mixed damask. There were curtains to match and a very fashionable 'fine pea green paper' costing 12d per yard. This display of conventional luxury is reflected in the large totals for the bills from Gomm and Burnett (see Table 7.2); Mary's rooms were clearly intended to reflect her status. More remarkable, perhaps, is the presence alongside

³³ See Ellen Kennedy Johnson, 'The taste for bringing the outside in: nationalism, gender and landscape wallpaper (1700–1825)', in Jennie Batchelor and Cora Kaplan (eds), *Women and Material Culture, 1660–1830* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 121–3; Emile de Bruijn, Andrew Bush and Helen Clifford, *Chinese Wallpaper in National Trust Houses* (Swindon: National Trust, 2014). It is also telling that Bromwich charged for a total of 26 days labour for hanging paper and borders in the two rooms.

³⁴ Cornforth, *Early English Interiors*, 253–64; Jackson-Stops, *Treasure Houses*, 432–95.

³⁵ Barczewski, *Country Houses*, 136–96; Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure*, 77–84, 105–10.

these of a total of 17 'Indian Pictures in Party gold frames' for which Bromwich charged £17 11s, plus another £9 9s for a matching papier-mâché border. These Chinese landscapes were hung as pictures in a manner that was peculiarly English, and were set alongside gilded mirrors and family pictures; the room thus combined old and new luxuries and an emphasis on family. Yet eclecticism could involve more than a blending of east and west. In Lord Leigh's rooms, Bromwich supplied '147 yards of painted paper to match a Chintz' that was being used for the bed hangings. The latter appears to have been present already as there is no account of it in Burnett's bills, which is perhaps unsurprising as its use was formally prohibited at this time, and it must have given Lord Leigh's room a flavour of orient. At the same time, however, Burnett charged £3 16s for leather and work to renovate the gilt leather hangings that remained in the room from an earlier decorative scheme. Old and new, tradition and fashion, heritage and exoticism again coincided within this a single room.

Making taste and making compromises

Developing and implementing this decorative scheme was a long and drawn out process, with changes and compromises inevitably being made along the way.³⁶ Determining who was responsible for its overall conception is difficult in the absence of Lord Leigh's correspondence, but it appears that the architect played a limited role. Lightoler designed various fireplaces and the communion table built by William Gomm, but he lacked the strong hand that Robert Adam wielded at Osterley, Harewood and elsewhere in producing his fashionable but ultra-expensive neo-classical interiors. Indeed, there are several unexecuted room designs, mostly in a 'frilly rococo', the absence of which is notable from the walls and ceilings of Stoneleigh.³⁷ There is

³⁶ Richard Wilson and Alan Mackley, *The Building of the English Country House, 1660-1880. Creating Paradise* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2000).

³⁷ SCLA, DR18/5/4203; DR671/33.Gomme, 'Abbey into palace', 97.

nothing to indicate that he influenced the overall plans for furnishing. The earliest indication of planning this is a memorandum written by Samuel Butler, the steward, on 2 October 1762. It mostly notes the need for painting in various rooms, but decisions about furniture must have been made around this date as a letter to Burnett, dated 27 April 1763, gives directions about which rooms are ready to take furniture.³⁸ He was certainly involved at an early stage as he drew up his own 'Memorandum about furniture for the Rooms' which is sketchy in detail and clearly records a developing situation in which many decisions about the final appearance of various rooms were still to be made.³⁹ This was entirely in keeping with the practices of upholsterers, at least in the first half of the eighteenth century,⁴⁰ but it does not mean that he was responsible for drawing up as well as executing the designs. Indeed, it seems certain that Lord Leigh himself had a hand in developing the decorative schemes. Such involvement was common amongst his contemporaries and there is a surviving note in Edward's own hand that records his intentions for furnishing the chapel, plus some thoughts on a number of other rooms.⁴¹ In this he probably benefited from the help of William Craven, his former guardian and maternal uncle. Craven was certainly present at Stoneleigh Abbey for considerable periods of time during the early 1760s, Burnett's early schedule of work identifying 'Mr Cravens Room' in the south-west corner of the attic storey of the west range. With no wife and little prospect of

³⁸ SCLA, DR18/3/47/52/6.

³⁹ SCLA, DR18/3/47/52/14 – no date.

⁴⁰ Cornforth argues that cabinet makers were increasingly taking on many of these responsibilities in the second half of the century: Cornforth, *Early Georgian Interiors*, 212–14.

⁴¹ SCLA, DR18/3/47/52/12, Memorandum from Edward, fifth Lord Leigh, concerning the chapel, no date. See also Edwards, *Turning Houses into Homes*, 44–52, 66–71; Hannah Greig, *The Beau Monde: Fashionable Society in Georgian London* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 32–62; Geoffrey Tyack, *Warwickshire Country Houses* (Chichester: Phillimore, 1994), 12–15.

getting one, the young Edward Leigh appears to have leant heavily on his kinsman for support and advice, many bills being sent to Craven even when Edward had officially reached his majority.⁴²

There were, then, several individuals offering advice and input as the plans for decorating and furnishing Stoneleigh Abbey developed: architect, upholsterer and uncle. It was probably one of these men that persuaded Lord Leigh to adopt crimson for the drapery in the chapel, rather than the blue suggested in his note, and there were undoubtedly other modifications along the way. However, it is apparent that, once the overall scheme for each room was determined, he left much of the detail to the respective craftsmen – men who could be trusted to execute the plans to a high standard of taste and quality. Indeed, the scale of the refurbishment meant that this kind of delegation was inevitable. In this light, Bromwich especially was an obvious choice: a dealer with an established and strong reputation for serving the gentry, and one with kudos and the capacity to provide a range of fashionable papers. Burnett and Gomm are less famous, but clearly had similar qualities.

This is not to say that the refurnishing process always went smoothly. Through 1763 the house was in a state of chaos, with carpenters, plasterers and carvers completing work on the Hall and some of the bedrooms; gilt leather hangings being removed from one room to another, and painters everywhere. In response to a letter from Burnett, which informed him that the ‘shades’ [i.e. window blinds] for most rooms were ready for delivery, Butler replied in February 1764 that ‘our house is now in greater confusion than ever [...] as we are making great alterations in the middle part of the house’.⁴³ Rooms were furnished as and when they were ready, with many

⁴² For example, SCLA, DR18/5/4028, DR18/5/4069. On the influence of wives, see Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors*, 83–8.

⁴³ SCLA, DR18/17/27/96 – 1 February 1764.

of the attic rooms being the first to be completed. Yet there inevitable delays: Bromwich charged £8 8s for '24 Days, 2 Men stud still for want of the Rooms being ready'.⁴⁴

This was a minor grievance; more serious was a dispute that arose between Samuel Butler and Mr Greenhouse, Burnett's foreman who was responsible for overseeing the various workmen engaged in assembling and fitting the furniture, and undertaking a wide range of upholstery work. The circumstances were described in detail in a letter from Butler to Burnett, dated 13 October 1763. A consignment of goods was unpacked was found to be sub-standard. It was:

universally complained of, the Wood appearing to be (as it really is) very green, & the workmanship very [poor]; this prov'd the topic of discourse the next day at Dinner when every person present (without exception to any) agreed in the above relation and Mr Greenhouse particularly mentioned that he supposed that they were such as Mr Gomm usually exported.⁴⁵

Gomm was duly written to, but clearly replied to deny all knowledge of the consignment, which meant that the shoddy furniture must have come from Burnett. Lord Leigh then directed that the goods be returned to Burnett at the upholsterer's expense, but Butler reports that, upon hearing this, Greenhouse:

Seemed not inclineable to comply, but desirous of retaining some of the best of them. I do not blame him for endeavouring to serve his Master as far as he decently may, but S^r when I have his Lordship's orders how I am to act, I shall not submit to have them countermanded by any workman about the House [...] I assure you Sir, I have so good an opinion of you as to believe that you would not endeavour to impose any goods upon his Lordship, but what were deserving of reception, & I conclude these were sent before you had inspected them. It is true

⁴⁴ SCLA, DR18/5/4402.

⁴⁵ SCLA, DR18/17/27/84 – 13 October 1763.

they are intended chiefly for Servants Rooms, & therefore only to be plain, but yet ought to be neat & good in their kind [...].

Here, we see Butler expressing the irritation felt at the poor quality of the goods, but more particularly at Greenhouse's attempts to defend the shoddy furniture, and emphasising the need to meet certain standards of workmanship in order that the furniture would comply with Lord Leigh's requirements. In the end, the matter was resolved amicably enough: Craven agreed on Lord Leigh's behalf that the faulty furniture could remain, at a reduced price, and Butler wrote again to Burnett saying that 'the affair between Mr Greenhouse & myself is ended, as you desire, for indeed we never had any dispute before or since the time I wrote to you about it – we are now, as I hope we ever shall remain, good friends'.⁴⁶

I have dwelt on this episode at length because it shows that questions of quality and taste were contingent, not absolute. Standards were established and judgments were made, even about furniture for servants; but pragmatism played an important part. Even the wealthiest might choose to accept goods that are not the best because it was simpler and cheaper to do so. What is also striking is the speed at which this dispute escalated and subsequently subsided. The initial letter to Gomm was written on 27th September and the matter was rounded off with Butler's letter to Burnett barely a fortnight later.

Conclusion: taste and identity

What, then, did taste and luxury mean for Lord Leigh and how does this inform our broader understanding of the country house and elite taste and identity? Perhaps the most notable feature is its mix of conservatism and fashion, old and new, Englishness and exoticism. Luxury is seen in the costly drapery and high quality furniture that characterised much of the work

⁴⁶ SCLA, 18/14/27/85 – 27 October 1763

undertaken at Stoneleigh Abbey in the early 1760s. There were important nuances, however: different grades of luxury made certain bedchambers stand out in terms of the richness of their furnishings, whilst different types of luxury were seen in the chinoiserie and the retention of older decorative features in other rooms. One striking omission is the absence of overt references to European and especially French taste. The latter was increasingly questioned in broader society as unpatriotic and unmanly, and formed part of a wider critique mounted against the aristocracy by an increasingly vocal middling sort. Aristocratic excess and decadence contrasted with the solid virtues of the middling sort in a manner that parallels the conflicts in taste described in Clemente's chapter on Naples. Yet, despite the costs involved, Stoneleigh Abbey has much in common with these sentiments: over and over again in the bills presented by Burnett, Gomm and Bromwich, we see richness being qualified neatness and elegance – ideals that, as Vickery argues, encapsulate provincial gentility.⁴⁷ The emphasis was on the solid virtues of mahogany and upholstery, rather than gilding and rococo flamboyance. We might even see this as representing in material terms the English (or British) self-identity as solid, manly and virtuous – although this was far from being the kind of patriotic consumption seen in attempts to create national styles of dress (see North's chapter).

This is not to say that Stoneleigh Abbey lacked gilded magnificence or the splendour of silver tableware epitomised in the epergne but also seen in an array of candlesticks, tureens, tea urns and cutlery. Indeed, the blending of these two genres was an important part of country house culture. Families like the Leighs occupied an important borderland between the national aristocracy and local gentry; a position which can, in some ways, be seen in the material culture

⁴⁷ Jon Stobart, 'Luxury and country house sales in England, c. 1760–1830', in *The Afterlife of Used Things: Recycling in the Long Eighteenth Century*, ed. A. Fennetaux, A. Junqua and S. Vasset (London: Routledge, 2015); Amanda Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 161.

of their houses. It is significant, however, that these two worlds were represented by different parts of the house: the state rooms of the Great Apartment paraded aristocratic credentials in crimson drapery and gilded furniture; the breakfast room, dining room and bedchambers formed the stage on which the Leighs showed themselves to be tasteful, social and English. Yet this Englishness did not preclude an eclecticism that happily blended mahogany, Chinoiserie, rococo and Gothicism with neatness and elegance. The cosmopolitanism that this implied was matched by pragmatism, both in the design of tasteful interiors and the process of furnishing the house. Bedchambers were equipped, first and foremost, to be comfortable and convenient; choices about styles, colours and textures were contingent and negotiated, with craftsmen playing a key role in shaping the detail of the resulting decorative schemes, and decisions and standards were always susceptible to the vagaries of everyday life – quality might be compromised for convenience. Above all, what emerges from this study is the huge time and effort required of the owner, architect, craftsmen and senior servants to produce a tasteful expression of luxury.