

William Porden's State Bed for Eaton Hall, Cheshire

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I have addressed the late-Georgian architectural history and furnishing of Eaton Hall, Cheshire, in two separate essays published in *The Georgian Group Journal* (2013) and *Furniture History* (2012).¹ What I did not discuss in either of these is the role of regional craftsmanship in the house's reconceptualisation as one of the most ambitious and impressive Gothic-style residences of the nineteenth century. Regional furniture is considered frequently to be a distinct, cheaper and less sophisticated alternative to the fashionable output of leading London firms, but William Porden, Eaton's architect in the first two decades of the nineteenth century, proposed local workmanship for another purpose: to maintain the exclusivity of his idiosyncratic designs — especially the State Bed. This essay addresses Porden's role at Eaton, and how the State Bed's proposed manufacture on the Grosvenor estate, or at nearby Chester, fits within his broader control of the house's transformation and improvement.

Eaton, the country seat of the Grosvenor family, was redeveloped and expanded comprehensively during the nineteenth century (Figure 1). The first programme was undertaken by William Porden (c. 1755–1822), and it began shortly after Robert Grosvenor (1767–1845) inherited the earldom and family property from his father, Richard (1731–1802), first Earl Grosvenor, in 1802. Porden, who served in the office of the leading Georgian architect James Wyatt (1746–1813) as an assistant and 'turned' him to Gothic, became surveyor of the first Earl Grosvenor's London estate around 1785.² Leaving Wyatt's firm, Porden gradually built up his own architectural practice, and his early works include a row of houses in Phillimore Place, Kensington (1787–89). For the Prince of Wales (later George IV) he designed the stables, now known as the Dome, and riding house of the Royal Pavilion, Brighton, between 1803 and 1808, and in 1805 he submitted Gothic designs for Downing College, Cambridge, though his proposals were passed over in favour of a Classical design by William Wilkins (1778–1839).³ Porden's work at Eaton overlaps with these other projects, and it is one of the most important and prestigious monuments in his career. In 1802 he saw an opportunity to increase his influence over the Grosvenor estate beyond the London properties with Robert's succession to the earldom, and between 1803 and 1814 he was engaged heavily in Eaton's refashioning. After Eaton's completion in the mid-1810s, Porden was dismissed as the Grosvenors' surveyor, and the house's subsequent expansion between 1823 and 1825 was undertaken by Porden's former clerk of works, Benjamin Gummow (1766–1844). Thereafter, William Burn (1789–1870) remodelled

¹ Lindfield (2012), pp. 155–80; Lindfield (2013), pp. 137–51.

² For Porden's introduction of Wyatt to Gothic, see Lindfield (2016), pp. 194–95.

³ Tyack (2015). For Downing College's designs, see especially British Architectural Library, RIBA66813, RIBA66815, RIBA66828, RIBA12246, RIBA35971.

2 WILLIAM PORDEN'S STATE BED FOR EATON HALL, CHESHIRE



1 *Eaton Hall*, after 1826. B1977.14.10668. Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection

the pile between 1846 and 1851, and Sir Alfred Waterhouse (1830–1905) remade the structure proper in a Victorian Gothic guise in the 1870s.

The structure at the centre of Porden's improvements was a nine-bay Caroline house built between 1675 and 1682; he encased this earlier structure within an elaborate Gothic skin of pointed-arch windows with ogee-flip mouldings, pinnacles and pierced castellations, and it was expanded to the north and south with Gothic wings to accommodate the Library and suites of bedrooms. From the outset of this progressively ambitious, expansive and expensive project, Porden advocated a Gothic rather than a Classical design:

We will suppose that in Grecian Architecture, your House would be completed in two years, at an expense of £10,000; and in the Gothic that it would take up to 3 years, and cost £15,000. Is the time or the money to be put in competition with gratification of having a mansion in that Style which you like the best? Presuming that Lady Grosvenor and your Lordship prefer the Gothic to the Grecian, I think the other considerations are only as dust on the Balance.⁴

Despite significantly underestimating the cost of the modifications — by October 1812 the bills had totalled more than £100,000⁵ — Porden appropriately pushed Gothic as an exclusive style representative of family lineage, elevated station and wealth:

⁴ Grosvenor Family Archive, 9/278, 19 Jan 1803, f. 1v.

⁵ Cornforth and Acloque (1971), p. 307.

Of the Gothic Architecture, though it is now better understood than it was a few years ago, the majority are comparatively ignored, yet every one is delighted with its richness, and sensible of its improving character. Its expensiveness, or the opinion of its being so, has prevented it from becoming common as well as the difficulty there has been of getting workmen to execute it. It therefore is preferable on the score of preserving that distinction to Rank and Fortune, which it is to habit of the age to diminish. As to convenience and comfort it may be made equally excellent with the Grecian. With regard to splendour it is far superior, and its variety is infinite. Were I to be asked, in what Stile I would construct a Building if my Commission was unlimited in magnitude and expense, I should answer in the Gothic.⁶

The responsibility that Porden assumed for Eaton's improvement extended well beyond the house's façade: he also designed its internal architecture and ornamental details, furniture, and even carpets (Figure 2). Numerous designs tracing his involvement at the house are now lodged in the Cheshire West and Chester Record Office, and they illustrate his *en suite* Gothic vision for Eaton whereby the internal decoration and ornament reflects the house's external architecture.⁷ Referring to some of Gillows of Lancaster's furniture designs for the house, (Figure 3) Porden felt that they were generic and, as such, unsuitable for one of England's most important families:

The Chairs are very good; but they want some improvement in their form and embellishment and after all they are any-bodies Chair — they were made for the Marquis of Abercorn and Sir Thomas Somebody — I would have them made for Lord Grosvenor.⁸

Throughout his letters to Lord Grosvenor, Porden appears to be genuinely and consistently concerned with creating a unique house representative of the Grosvenor lineage reaching back to Hugh Lupus and Gilbert le Grosvenor, both of whom came to England in the Norman Conquest.⁹ The way to achieve this proposed exclusivity was to embrace fully Porden's suggestions. Although no designs exist for the chairs seen in the Bucklers' depiction of the Entrance Hall (Figure 2a) it matches Porden's overly simple and architectural design style seen in his proposals for a settee, sofa bed and chaises longues.¹⁰ Like Eaton's architecture, at least some of its furniture was made to the 'Grosvenor pattern'.

REGIONALISM AND THE STATE BED

Regional manufacturing and craftsmanship appear to have concerned Porden a great deal; in numerous letters to Lord Grosvenor he discusses the cost of fitting out Eaton and how these expenses can be managed and mitigated by employing local rather than metropolitan craftsmen. Considering the house's chimneypieces on 18 November 1808, he outlines how their on-site production would be financially beneficial:

The State Bed Room Chimney Piece I do not believe I could have got done for any thing like the money, perhaps not for double the money as I had an estimate of one made by a mason

⁶ Grosvenor Family Archive, 9/278, 19 Jan 1803, ff. 1v–2r.

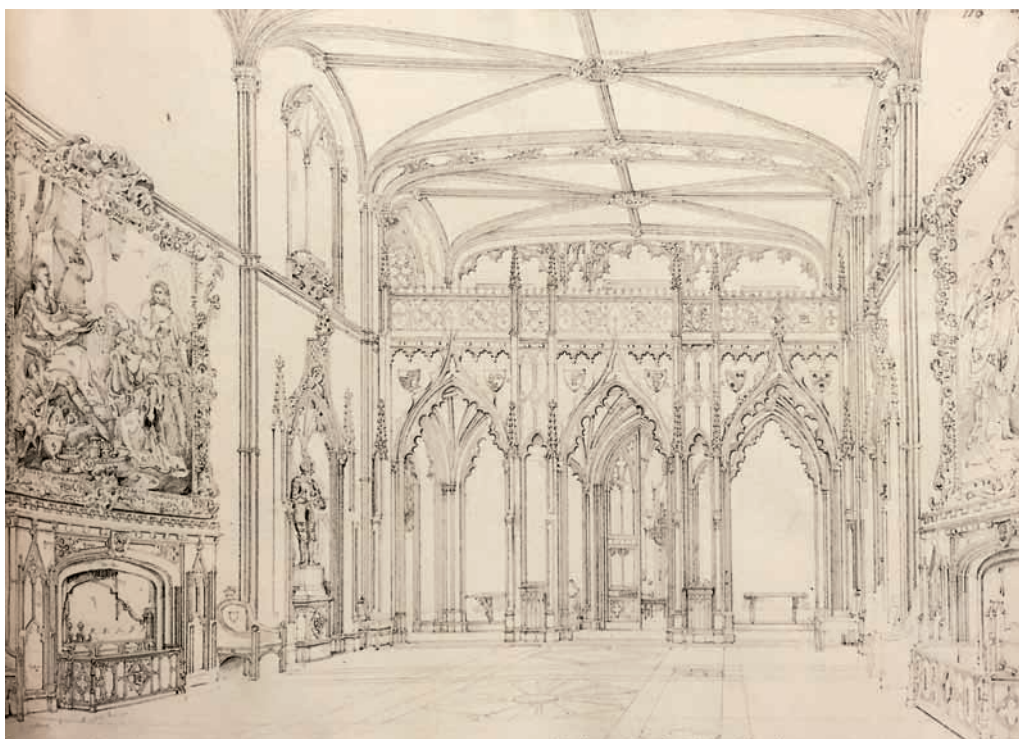
⁷ Cheshire West and Chester Record Office, ZCR63/2/723–823. See Lindfield (2012) and Lindfield (2013).

⁸ Grosvenor Family Archive, 9/278, 12 November 1807, f. 1v. See Lindfield (2012).

⁹ See Buckler and Buckler (1826), p. 3.

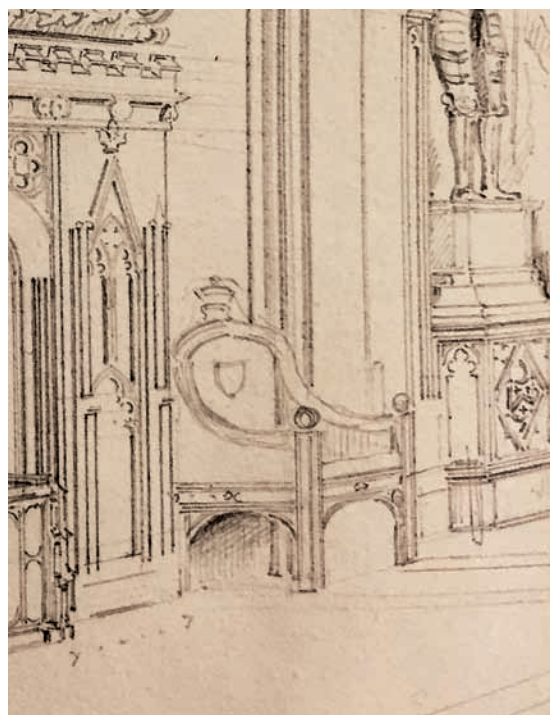
¹⁰ Cheshire West and Chester Record Office, ZCR63/2/790–92.

4 WILLIAM PORDEN'S STATE BED FOR EATON HALL, CHESHIRE



2 (above) Buckler, *Interior View of the Great Hall at Eaton Hall, Cheshire; The Seat of the Right Honble Earl Grosvenor*, 9 and 10 June 1823. BL Add. MS 36360, f. 100. © The British Library Board

2a (right) Buckler, *Detail of Interior View of the Great Hall at Eaton Hall, Cheshire; The Seat of the Right Hon'ble Earl Grosvenor*, 9 and 10 June 1823. BL Add. MS 36360, f. 100. © The British Library Board





3 Gillows, *Design for a chair for Lord Grosvenor's Drawing Room*, 38.37.25 (left); *Design for a chair for Lord Grosvenor's Dining Room*, 38.37.24 (right). © Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

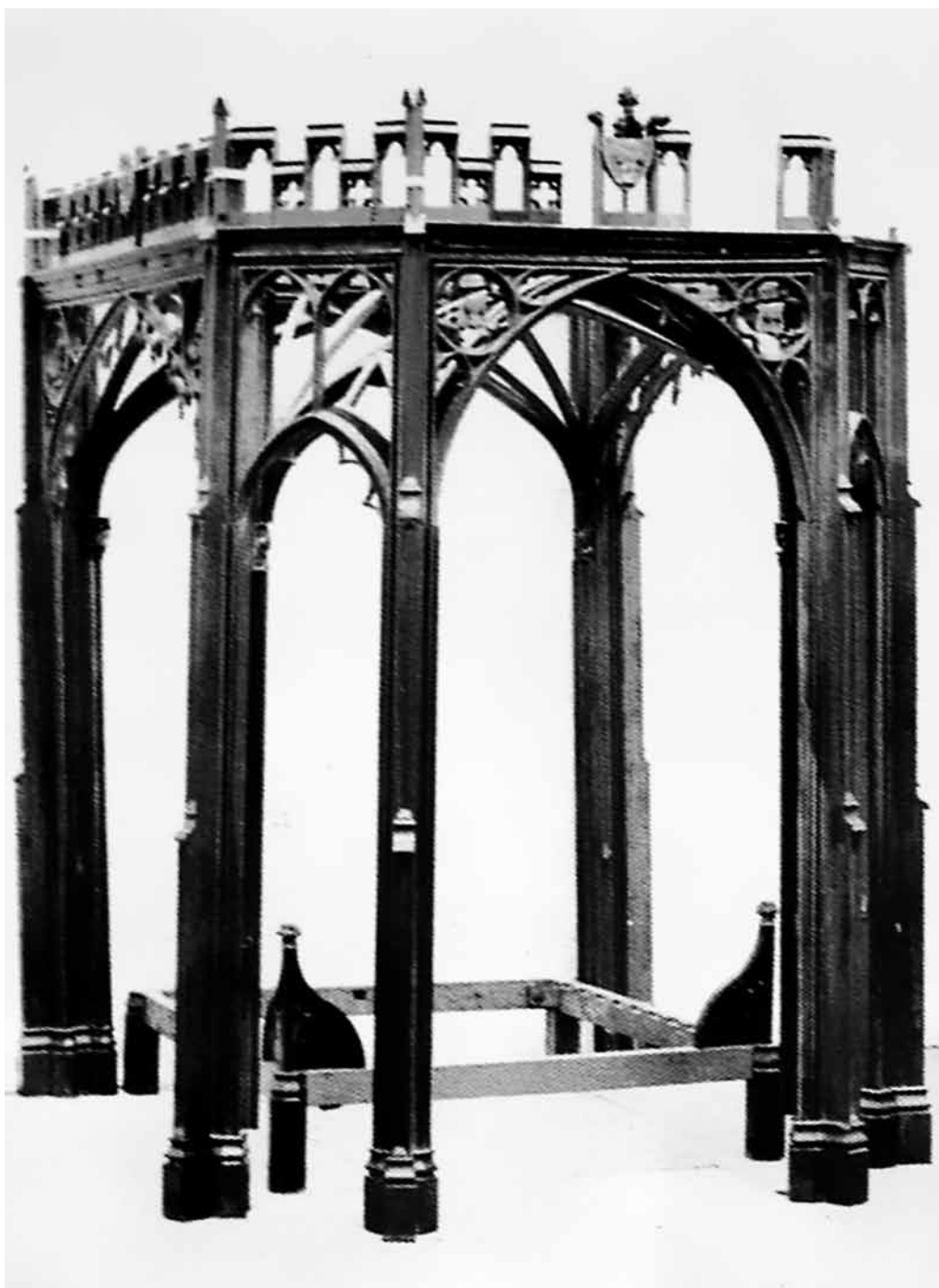
before I determined to have it done at Eaton. It is a work that must be admired by all judges and yet it would require a months work to be made perfect.¹¹

Towards the end of the decade-long improvements to Eaton, Porden's attention was drawn to the State Bed Chamber and to the bed itself. While there is no known surviving design for the bed, and the bed itself no longer appears to exist, a 'six poster' tester State Bed supplied in 1823 by John Davis of 20 Lower Brook Street, London, is extant and was sold by Sotheby's at the 1992 Eaton sale (Figure 4), although it was misattributed to Gillows and misdated to 1820.¹² We can, based upon his known designs for Eaton's furniture, assume that Porden's State Bed design was highly architectural and of a simplified, pared-back structure decorated with Gothic panelling, much like Davis' offering.

¹¹ Grosvenor Family Archive, 9/278, 19 December 1808.

¹² Sotheby's (1992), Lot 136, pp. 16–18. Davis's accounts describe the State Bed in sufficient detail for it to be identified as lot 136 in the 1992 sale [Grosvenor Family Archive, Circ 461, f. 133]. The relationship between Davis' State Bed and Porden's lost design is addressed in Lindfield (2012). The capitals on Davis' State Bed are set with gilt wheat sheaves (derived from the Grosvenor coat of arms) and reproduce Porden's 14 December 1805 design for capitals in the State Bedchamber [Cheshire West and Chester Record Office, ZCR63/2/778].

6 WILLIAM PORDEN'S STATE BED FOR EATON HALL, CHESHIRE



4 John Davis, *Eaton Hall's 'Six-Poster' State Bed*, 1823. Courtesy of Sotheby's, London

Although we lack evidence of Porden's State Bed design, he pointedly recommended its creation on the Eaton estate, or at the very least at nearby Chester. This advocacy of regional production was not based upon cost, though saving on the bed's packaging and transport from London was a happy by-product of this choice. Instead, Porden urged local fabrication to preserve his design's exclusivity. Given that local craftsmen fitted out Eaton's interiors per Porden's architectural proposals, they would have been naturally predisposed to crafting an overtly architectural State Bed; this makes the bed's regional production particularly sensible and a natural extension of the craftsmen's work on the estate. Porden's larger concern to preserve the bed's exclusivity matches his above quoted criticism of the generic Gillows chairs: he wished for the State Bed to be 'of' and 'only for' the Grosvenors:

I shall send this Evening Designs for the smaller Library Tables to stand by the fire & A design for the State Bed. The first I think will conveniently accommodate four persons for reading or writing. The Second will have an appropriate effect and be rich and picturesque. If you approve of it I would recommend the Woodwork to be made at Eaton or at Chester, not only because You will have it better done, and save packing cases and carriage; but because it will continue your own, for if made in London it will perhaps be seen in every house that pretends to gothicism. The Draperies may be made in London or at Chester without danger of being spoiled as the form of wood work will direct the Upholsterer. If your Lordship and Lady Grosvenor do not approve of this design we will chearful [sic] prepare some others.¹³

Porden's design for the State Bed has not be traced, yet the bed's form is consistent with Eaton's new Library presses made in imitation of Porden's originals, and which were recorded by the Bucklers in 1825.¹⁴ It is possible that the State Bed was made locally and according to Porden's design and advice, however it matches exactly that invoiced by Davis at £128 16s — just over £100 more expensive than the other beds supplied by Davis.¹⁵ It was invoiced as:

a very elegant & richly carved state bed with Gothic moulded ribs & rich foliage creeper carved out of the solid wood 'double gilt' in burnished & matted gold.
To four richly carved Gothic tops ornaments — 3 for sides and one for centre all finely gilt &c burnished & matted gold¹⁶

The State Bed depicted here was undoubtedly made by Davis in London, but contrary to Porden's fears for his own proposal, it was not copied. The exclusivity of the Eaton State Bed is remarkable given that it offers a significant elaboration of the tester-bed type as a micro-architectural shrine, which is especially illustrated by comparing it with Gothic State Beds illustrated in George Smith's *Collection of Designs for Household Furniture* (1808) and Ackermann's *Repository of Arts* (1813) (Figures 5 and 6).¹⁷ Porden's interest in exclusivity did not influence and impact upon Davis' State Bed, and it received high praise in the house's 1824 guidebook *The Eaton Tourists* (1824):

¹³ Grosvenor Family Archive, 9/278, 7 January 1811, f. 1r.

¹⁴ See Buckler and Buckler (1826), p. 4.

¹⁵ Grosvenor Family Archive, Circ 461, ff. 21, 42, 55, 62, 74, 85, 97.

¹⁶ Grosvenor Family Archive, Circ 461, f. 133.

¹⁷ Smith (1808), pl. 28, pp. 6–8; Agius (1984), pp. 77–78.

8 WILLIAM PORDEN'S STATE BED FOR EATON HALL, CHESHIRE



- 5 George Smith, *A Collection of Household Furniture and Interior Decoration in the Most Approved and Elegant Taste* (1808), pl. 28.
<https://books.google.co.uk>



6 Rudolph Ackermann, *Repository of Arts*, Vol. IX, No. 53 (May 1813), pl. 35. L 212 (8vo).
Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection

The bed appears as an immense couch under a Canopy, standing at such distance from the circle, as to admit a passage round, giving a very imposing appearance to the whole — and you would empathically exclaim this is a ‘State Bed’ — the style of the form of the supporters of the canopy is so correctly architectural — so correctly the light gothic harmonizes, that it can be but rivet the attention and admiration — shewing the genuine talents of the architect of the exterior itself — Porden.¹⁸

Although this publicity failed to compromise the exclusivity of Davis’ bed, Porden’s concern for local craftsmanship emphasises the high regard that he had for regional furniture production and its supposed ability to preserve his unique ‘Grosvenor Gothic’ aesthetic at Eaton.

CODA

Regional furniture is often, though not universally, distinguished from leading metropolitan fashion in terms of form, motifs, carving, materials and construction methods. The impact of regional rather than metropolitan production can be gauged by considering two pairs of torchères made for James Murray (1690–1764), second Duke of Atholl. The first pair supplied by Chippendale and Rannie in 1758 cost £7 7s 0d plus packing; to augment this pair in 1760 the Duke did not turn to Chippendale’s firm but to John Thomson of Edinburgh, who produced a second pair for the lower sum of £5 5s 0d.¹⁹ When examined closely, Thomson’s set is of a markedly lower quality than Chippendale’s work and is characterised by less fluent and shallow carving, and

¹⁸ Anon. (1824), p. 83.

¹⁹ Blair Castle Archives, MSS 701, and Blair Castle Archives, Catalogue of Contents of Blair Castle 1696 to 1890, f. 11.

10 WILLIAM PORDEN'S STATE BED FOR EATON HALL, CHESHIRE

is overall of a more elongated and stilted form lacking the thick and energetic scrollwork typical of Chippendale's style. Porden's advocacy of an Eaton- or Chester-made State Bed was not driven by cost, but instead by the potential for regional production to maintain the exclusivity of an apparently unique and 'prestigious' design that attested to the rank and importance of the Grosvenors. This overlooked late-Georgian architect suggests an important benefit of regional furniture that is easy to forget in modern criticism.

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