

Rediscovering Lee's Lost Library Ante-Chamber

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Thomas Barrett (1744–1803), antiquary, engaged Britain's most prestigious architect of the day, James Wyatt (1746–1813), to reconstruct and refurbish his country pile, Lee, Kent, from 1781. John Dixon's depiction of the house from 1785 (**Fig.1**), together with another watercolour from the same year now in the British Library, confirms the house's external completion by 1785 and illustrates its Gothic, collegiate-style elevation dominated by the octagonal Library's tower and spire modelled upon that at Batalha Abbey, Portugal.¹ Lee's interior, partially supervised and guided by Barrett's friend, Horace Walpole (1717–97), featured both Neoclassical spaces, not least the principal staircase hall, and Gothic apartments, including the Library and the Walpole Closet, the latter of which is now installed in the British Galleries at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.² This modest room (2.21 x 5.72 m), salvaged from the house shortly before its demolition in September 1953, was located at the eastern terminus of the house's southern façade, and considered by Walpole to be a 'delicious closet [...] so flattering to me'.³ Walpole also lavished the Library with high praise and considered it supremely medieval and in due deference to the work of William Wykeham (c.1324–1404), founder of New College, Oxford, and builder to Edward III: it 'is the most perfect thing I ever saw [...] I wish William of Wickam were alive to employ and reward Mr Wyatt — you would think the latter had designed the library for the former'.⁴ Lee, consequently, is an important structure in the history of the Gothic Revival for its connections to Walpole, one of Georgian Britain's most ardent supporters of medieval forms, and Wyatt.

Until recently, the only fragments known to have survived the house's demolition are the Walpole Closet and a select number of presses from the Library.⁵ John Carter's recently discovered 1791 sketches of the house, James Wyatt's fragmentary designs, Georgian engravings, and photographs of the house's interior were thought to be the only other visual records of Lee.⁶ This evidence and the house have been examined in a recent essay by Matthew Reeve and me, "A Child of Strawberry": Thomas Barrett and Lee Priory, Kent', *The Burlington Magazine* December (2015). After the essay's publication, and by extraordinary chance, a second room was salvaged quietly from Lee at the last moment by Ian Phillips, an antiques dealer. This private act of preservation was not publicised widely and the room — effectively a minor passage within the house — was consequently forgotten about and not included in modern scholarship on the house, though *Country Life* illustrated its vault in

¹ Paul Mellon Collection, Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, B1975.1; British Library, London, Add MS 32366, f. 40 (lower drawing). See Matthew M. Reeve and Peter N. Lindfield, "A Child of Strawberry": Thomas Barrett and Lee Priory, Kent," *The Burlington Magazine* 157, no. December (2015), p. 839.

² See *ibid.*, pp. 872–73; Victoria and Albert Museum, London, W.48-1953.

³ Horace Walpole, *The Yale Edition of Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, ed. W.S. Lewis, et al., 48 vols., vol. 12 (London: Oxford University Press, 1944), p. 111.

⁴ Horace Walpole, *The Yale Edition of Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, ed. W.S. Lewis, Robert A. Smith, and Charles H. Bennett, 48 vols., vol. 31 (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 342.

⁵ Presses, include Victoria and Albert Museum, London, W.51-1953.

⁶ Carter's drawings: London, British Library, Add Ms 29930, ff. 3–6; Wyatt's designs: London, Victoria and Albert Museum 92.D.59; Engravings such as London, British Museum, 1912,0319.5, and John Preston Neale, *Views of the Seats of Noblemen and Gentlemen: In England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland* 2nd ed., 5 vols., vol. 2 (London: Sherwood, Jones and Co., 1824), Lee; some of *Country Life's* images were published in H.V. Ralph, "Book Man and Printer Extraordinary: Brydges and the Lee Priory Press," *Country Life* 23 March (1978), p. 778–79, and Hugh Honour, "A House of the Gothic Revival," *Country Life* 30 May (1952), pp. 1665–66.

Hugh Honour's 1952 essay.⁷ Now that the room has resurfaced, I take the opportunity here to address this room's place within Lee's interior, and offer a detailed reading of a remarkable and surprise survival from James Wyatt's *corpus* of early Gothic Revival of work.⁸

The fragments from this room (**fig.2**) comprise the fan-vaulted ceiling (2.14 x 3.6 m), a pair of doors and door cases, an ogee-headed archway surround, and a suite of four enclosed bookcases. Happily, two drawings from John Carter's 1791 survey of the house depict the room (**fig.3**) and identify it as the Saloon.⁹ Access to the Ante-Chamber was gained directly from the house's Neoclassical Staircase Hall, and it led, via a dog-leg, directly into the eastern part of the octagonal Library. This stark contrast between Gothic and Neoclassical spaces is not unusual in the architecture of Horace Walpole's circle, including Donnington Hall, Berkshire (designed 1763), or in Wyatt's Gothic Revival country houses, such as Sandford Priory, Berkshire (1780–9), and on a grander, more ambitious, scale at Ashridge Park, Hertfordshire (1808–13).¹⁰

This Ante-Chamber complements Lee's Library in a number of ways. Foremost is their shared architectural character: Walpole thought the Library fit for a Prior, and its Gothic character, informed by medieval Chapter Houses, is ably introduced by the Ante-Chamber. The Library's presses, certainly designed by Wyatt, are also incorporated into the Ante-Chamber and promote continuity: they are almost identical to those in the Library and have the same cresting and panelled doors below the diaper-encrusted dado.¹¹ However, as illustrated by Carter, the upper shelves of the Ante-Chamber's presses are protected by doors finished with blind lancets.¹² Their treatment suggests the bookcases contained items not for continual display and immediate access, though Lee's 1834 sale catalogue does not offer any guidance here.¹³ These presses, like those in the Library, are important and relatively early examples of polychrome Gothic Revival furniture: reds and blues are used to pick out the micro-ornamental detail, much like the seat furniture at Shobdon Church, Herefordshire (c.1755), the Pomfret Cabinet (1752–53), the suite of Windsor hall chairs commemorating the marriage of John Perceval (1711–70), second Earl of Egmont, to Catherine Compton in January 1756, and the barber-pole painted Welch chairs Walpole acquired from Dickie Bateman's house, the Priory, Old Windsor, in 1774, and displayed subsequently in Strawberry Hill's Star Chamber.¹⁴

This passage-like Ante-Chamber should also be understood within the context of Lee's Strawberry Closet: a modest apartment in the south-east of the house made and named

⁷ Honour, "House of the Gothic Revival," p. 1666. Nevertheless, a door from this room was included in the 1975 Gothic exhibition in Brighton and illustrated in the catalogue: Royal Pavilion Art Gallery and Museums Brighton, *Gothick* (Brighton: Royal Pavilion Art Gallery and Museums Brighton, 1975), p. 22, pl. 14. This did not promote wider discussion of the room from which is originated.

⁸ The fragments are, at the time of writing, in the possession of Architectural Heritage, Taddington Manor, Cheltenham.

⁹ London, British Library, Add Ms 29930, f. 4.

¹⁰ Peter N. Lindfield, *Georgian Gothic: Medievalist Architecture, Furniture and Interiors, 1730–1840* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2016), pp. 144–46, 156–9, 189–94.

¹¹ The majority of the salvaged presses are at London, Victoria and Albert Museum, W.51–1953.

¹² London, British Museum, Add. Ms 29930, f. 4.

¹³ W. Sharp, *Lee Priory, Kent: Catalogue of All the Superb Antique and Modern Household Furniture (Heir Looms Excepted)* (Canterbury: W. Sharp, 1834), pp. 1–24.

¹⁴ See Peter N. Lindfield, "The Countess of Pomfret's Gothic Revival Furniture," *The Georgian Group Journal* XXII (2014), pp. 77–80. See also Horace Walpole, *A Description of the Villa of Mr. Horace Walpole, the Youngest Son of Sir Robert Walpole Earl of Orford, at Strawberry-Hill, near Twickenham. With an Inventory of the Furniture, Pictures, Curiosities, &c.* (Strawberry Hill: Thomas Kirgate, 1784), p. 42; Matthew Reeve, "Dickie Bateman and the Gothicization of Old Windsor: Architecture and Sexuality in the Circle of Horace Walpole," *Architectural History* 56 (2013), pp. 105–14; Peter N. Lindfield, "Triangular Chairs at Strawberry Hill: The Genuine and the Fabricated," *The Furniture History Society Newsletter* 204, November (2016), p. 4.

in homage to Walpole's Gothic villa.¹⁵ Both the Ante-Chamber and Strawberry Closet have fan-vaulted ceilings made loosely in imitation of that in the Gallery at Strawberry Hill, itself a derivative of the side-aisle vaulting in Henry VII's Chapel, Westminster Abbey.¹⁶ The Strawberry Closet (2.21 x 5.72 m) is slightly larger than the Ante-Chamber (2.14 x 3.6 m), however the additional scale was not put to decorative use: each fan vault in the Strawberry Closet has only one row of panelling, whereas the Ante-Chamber's has two rows (**fig.4**). Complementing this increased filigree effect typical of exuberant Perpendicular fan vaults, the encircled octofoil at the centre of Strawberry Closet's vault is substituted for an ornate rose-window oculus in the Ante-Chamber's design (though subsequently filled in). And extremely unusual in the history of medieval Gothic and its eighteenth-century revival, the Ante-Chamber's vaulting combines both fan vaults and tierceron vaults: the tiercerons are found at the northern and southern extremities in between the fans. This, coupled with the highly decorative blind panelling, demonstrates the cultivated range of architectural forms influencing Wyatt's work, derived from studies and restorations of medieval architecture.¹⁷ It only partially helps lessen the repeated criticisms levelled at Wyatt's Gothic by, amongst other antiquaries, John Carter.¹⁸

It is possible that further fragments were liberated from Lee before its demolition, and I encourage anyone with fragments to contact me. Although seemingly incidental given the known survivals from Lee, and Carter's illustrations, the Ante-Room presents Wyatt's pre-Fonthill and Ashridge Gothic in a nuanced light. It appears even more ambitious and densely decorative in comparison with the other, contemporary, interiors at Lee, and reveals his, and his assistants', understanding of medieval architecture beyond mere quotation. The Ante-Chamber is an imaginative and simultaneously scholarly space, and shows Wyatt's Gothic at its best.

Image Captions

Fig. 1: John Dixon, 'Thomas Barrett's Lee, Kent', 1785. (Courtesy of The Yale Center for British Art, New Haven).

Fig. 2: James Wyatt, 'Fragments from the Library Ante-Chamber at Lee', c.1785–90. (Courtesy of Architectural Heritage)

Fig. 3: John Carter, 'View in the Saloon, entering [sic] into the Library at Lee', 1791. (© The British Library Board)

Fig. 4: James Wyatt, left: 'Vault from the Library Ante-Chamber at Lee', c.1785–90 (Courtesy of Architectural Heritage), and right: 'The Strawberry Closet, Lee', c.1785–90 (© Victoria and Albert Museum, London)

¹⁵ Victoria and Albert Museum, London, W.48:1 to 3-1953.

¹⁶ Walpole, *Description of the Villa*, p. 47.

¹⁷ John Martin Robinson, *James Wyatt (1746–1813): Architect to George III* (London: Published for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art by Yale University Press, 2012), pp. 221–30.

¹⁸ See John Frew, "Richard Gough, James Wyatt, and Late 18th-Century Preservation," *The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 38, no. 4, (1979), pp. 366–74.