Chapter 1

Horace Walpole's Strawberry Hill House (1749) — Architectural Gothic

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Gothic architecture emerged out of the simpler, more robust Romanesque style in both France and England, and this new mode flourished in these countries and elsewhere from the early twelfth century through to the late sixteenth century especially in ecclesiastical and fortified contexts (Wilson 2004). The style developed in a way that dissolved masonry into a filigree web of architectural ornament, decorating its façades and rooflines, as well as internal elevations and additions, such as chantry chapels and tombs. These ornate additions combined with increasingly large windows allowing as much light as possible into churches — light was thought to represent the divine at the time — resulting in the great cathedrals, such as Beauvais, Picardy, developing an extensive exoskeletal framework of piers and flying buttresses to keep the structure intact and direct the outward thrusts of the high vault downwards.

Sir Howard Colvin notes that English masons continued to work in the Gothic tradition even during early eighteenth century (Colvin 1999: 221). There was a significant shift, however, when 'professional' architects and designers began to work in the Gothic style in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Britain. Figures such as Sir Christopher Wren and William Kent worked more typically in the Classical style — Gothic was a 'foreign' mode that they were not trained in (Lindfield 2016: 7–80). Walpole's construction — a self-consciously styled Gothic villa presented as the castle of his ancestors — was not the first example of a new Gothic house designed and built in eighteenth-century Britain. William Kent realized Esher Place, Surrey, *c.*1733, and Sanderson Miller was active from the 1740s when he Gothicised his Elizabethan country house, Radway Grange, Warwickshire. So although not the earliest example of a consciously Gothic Revival house, it was one of the first and, because of

Walpole's fastidious correspondence and retention of executed and rejected designs for its exteriors and interiors, we know more about it compared with any other equivalent building from this date.

It is no exaggeration to say that Horace Walpole, the author of *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) was deeply enamoured of the medieval past (Groom 2014: ix–xxxviii). Strawberry Hill (Fig. 1a), which began to take form from 1748 (Guillery and Snodin 1995: 109–16), expressed Walpole's overarching and enduring interest in Britain's Gothic architecture over a decade before *Otranto* emerged. The novel and Walpole's house appear to be equivalents to those of by and for William Beckford — *Vathek* and Fonthill Abbey, Wiltshire — though the novels and homes are of very different characters, scales and functions. The heart of Walpole's architectural project was Chopp'd Straw Hall, an asymmetric agglomeration of late seventeenth century structures (Fig. 1b) that Walpole rented in 1747 from Mrs Chenevix (Walpole 1948, vol. 12: 17; Snodin 2009: 15), though the following year he purchased it outright and re-christened it Strawberry Hill, a name that he purportedly discovered in the property's original title-deeds (Walpole 1948, vol. 12: 17).[1]

Insert Fig 1a And 1b Here

Figure 1a (upper). Strawberry Hill from the South East in 2014. © Peter N. Lindfield;

Figure 1b (lower). Horace Walpole, *Front of Strawberry Hill to the Garden as it was in 1747, before it was altered, and as altered.* 49 2523, f. 121,11.

Courtesy of the Lewis Walpole Library, Farmington, CT

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[1] This transformation is recorded in a drawing by Walpole pasted into a heavily annotated copy of Walpole's 1774 *Description of the Villa of Mr Horace Walpole*, Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University, bound with 49 3641.

The Preface to the first edition of *Otranto*, much like the house itself, underlines Walpole's historical concerns: in the persona of the fictitious translator, William Marshal, he claims spuriously that the novel was based upon a manuscript dating to the Crusades (Walpole 1764: iii). Consequently, his house and novel have been repeatedly linked in secondary criticism. W.S. Lewis, the great collector of Walpoliana at Farmington, CT, and the executive editor of the Yale edition of Walpole's correspondence, believed that *Otranto*'s castle was modelled directly upon, and hence can be mapped directly onto, Strawberry Hill's plan (Lewis 1934: 89; Silver 2009: 543). This is an oversimplification of their relationship (Lindfield 2016a: 3): Strawberry Hill and *The Castle of Otranto* are two distinct expressions of Walpole's interest in the Gothic, though both deriving ultimately from his unusual 'partiality to old Knights, Crusades, the Wars of York & Lancaster' (Farmington 49 2615 1: 52; Reeve 2014: 189–91). Neither were Strawberry Hill and *Otranto* the first of their kind in the Georgian period: there are earlier examples of Gothic Revival architecture in 18th-century Britain, while the Gothic literary aesthetic goes as far back as the early modern period. Nonetheless, Walpole's house and novel are two of the most important and well-known examples of the Gothic in Georgian Britain.

Contravening the approval of Classical design in Georgian Britain (Lindfield 2016: 11–14), not least as expressed by his father's country pile, Houghton Hall, Norfolk, (Weber 2013: 195–202) Walpole's architectural project was strident: 'the Castle (I am building) of my ancestors' (Walpole 1941, vol. 9: 149), he wrote to Sir Horace Mann in 1753, 'is so diminutive, I give myself a Burlington-air, and say, that as Chiswick is a model of Grecian architecture, Strawberry Hill is to be so of Gothic' (Walpole 1960, vol. 20: 361). Rather than employing a

fashionable architect to create the Gothic villa — such as William Kent, who designed and built the medievalist Esher Place, Surrey, for Henry Pelham *c*.1733 — Walpole gathered around him a group of workmen and amateur architects to assist in the design and to realise Strawberry Hill's architecture, decoration and furniture. Richard Bentley, the son of Dr Bentley, master of Trinity College, Cambridge, John Chute of the Vyne, Hampshire, and Walpole himself had the largest influence over Strawberry Hill's form and ornament, though professional architects, including Robert Adam and James Essex, too worked on the house and on its estate (McCarthy 1987: 63–115, 166–71; Lindfield 2017: XXX). Walpole and Chute, along with Bentley for a time, were at the centre of 'the Strawberry Committee' (frequently mistitled 'the Committee of Taste') that directed the house's creation (Haggerty 2009: 80–86; Riely 2009: 349; Clark 1962: 59).

Bentley's most important work at Strawberry Hill includes the house's chimneypieces and those in the Beauty Room (Fig. 2a) and Blue Bedroom (Fig. 2b) are idiosyncratic re-imaginations of medieval forms, combined according to the whims of an artist unbridled by concerns for historic fidelity. For the Parlour (Fig. 2c), Bentley's imagination was more architectural in nature whilst in contrast the later chimneypiece for the Holbein Chamber (Fig. 2d) was based heavily upon the tomb of Archbishop Wareham at Canterbury Cathedral (Walpole 1784: 42).

Insert Figure 2a, 2b, 2c, 2d Here

Figure 2a (upper left). Richard Bentley, *Chimneypiece for the Beauty Room*, *c*.1753. 49 3585 Folio, f. 27; Figure 2b (upper right). Richard Bentley, *Chimneypiece for the Blue Bedroom*, *c*.1753, 49 3585 Folio, f. 27; Figure 2c (lower left). Richard Bentley, *Chimneypiece for the Parlour*, *c*.1754. 49 3585 Folio, f. 32; Figure 2d (lower right). Godfrey, sculp., *Chimneypiece*

in the Holbein Chamber. In, 49 3582 Folio. All images courtesy of the Lewis Walpole Library, Farmington, CT.

In comparison with Bentley's overly decorative and distinctive reinterpretations of Gothic motifs, Chute's contributions were more acceptable to Walpole's increasingly precise understanding and appreciation of medieval forms. Bentley's deigns for the Library (Farmington, 49 3585 Folio, 36–38), for example, were rejected for being overly whimsical and unconvincingly medieval in 1753/54. Chute, Walpole wrote, 'was my oracle in taste […] and the genius that presided over poor Strawberry' (Walpole 1967, vol. 24: 209), whereas Walpole's latter-day assessment of Bentley from 1788 was critical: 'neither Mr. Bentley nor my workmen has *studied* the science [of Gothic], and my house therefore is but a sketch by beginners' (Walpole 1798: 668–69).

This change in part came from the increasing influence that prints and antiquarian sources had over Strawberry Hill. Whilst some of the earliest parts of the house, including the Venetian-style ogee-dominated fenestration from the 1753 elevations (McCarthy 1987: 63–66) and the chimneypiece in the Breakfast Room, were influenced by overtly Georgian Gothic plates in Batty Langley's *Ancient Architecture* (1741–42) and John Vardy's *Some Designs of Mr Inigo Jones and Mr Wm. Kent* (1744) (Farmington, 49 630; 49 3784), Walpole turned to antiquarian tomes for design cues, including Dart's *Westmonasterium* (1723) and Dugdale's *The History of St Paul's Cathedral* (1716). Prints provided the information necessary to achieve Walpole's archaeological aim: 'The general disuse of Gothic architecture, and the decay and alterations so frequently made in churches, give prints a chance of being the sole preservatives of that style' (Walpole 1784: i). Such antiquarian, topographical sources were not the typical models for most of the very small number of other Gothic houses realised in

early and mid-eighteenth century Britain, such as: Esher Place, Sussex; Alscot Park, Warwickshire; and Croft Castle Herefordshire. Arbury Hall, Warwickshire, is, even more than Strawberry Hill, the primary example of a scholarly Gothic Revival house from this period. Strawberry Hill, together with Walpole's collection of art and historical artefacts, became a museum to and of the medieval past (Walpole 1784; Snodin 2009: 87–116, 183–220, 275–34). This mimetic scheme, whilst not all-encompassing — Walpole 'did not mean to make […Strawberry Hill] so Gothic as to exclude convenience and modern refinements of luxury' (Walpole 1784: iii) — was designed to recreate the atmosphere of medieval churches, famously referred to by Walpole as 'gloomth'. Writing to Sir Horace Mann on 27 April 1753 Walpole articulates this aim: 'Gothic is merely architecture; and […] one has a satisfaction in imprinting the gloomth of abbeys and cathedrals on one's house' (Walpole 1960, vol. 20: 372). Walpole clearly revised his definition and understanding of the Gothic as by the time the second edition of *Otranto* was published in 1765 he had revised its subtitle from '*A Story*', to '*A Gothic Story*'.

The scale of Walpole's architectural ambition increased in the early 1760s with the creation of the State Apartment, or Gallery, with its *papier mâché* ceiling made in imitation of the Perpendicular fan vaults from the side aisle of Henry VII's Chapel, Westminster Abbey, (Walpole 1784: 47) and the Tribune, the vault of which is derived from that at York Minster's Chapter House (Walpole 1784: 55). For the Round Room, originally intended as the house's State Bedroom, Walpole envisioned a chimneypiece in imitation of the Shrine of St Edward the Confessor (Walpole 1973, vol. 35: 406–7). Finding it inordinately expensive to realise, he employed Robert Adam, the most fashionable and famous Neoclassical architect of the day, to design and produce it at lower cost. Whilst it deviated significantly from the shrine's form and Cosmati ornament (Fig. 4a), Walpole approved of its distinctly Neoclassical Gothic form (Fig. 4b): 'The design of the Chimney-piece is taken from the tomb of Edward the Confessor,

improved by Mr. Adam, and beautifully executed in white marble inlaid with scagliola, by Richter' (Walpole 1784: 53).

Insert Figure 4a And 4b Here

Figure 4a (upper). *Shrine of St Edward the Confessor*, from Dart, *Westmonasterium* (1723). Folio 646 742 D25. Courtesy of the Lewis Walpole Library, Farmington, CT; Figure 4b (lower). Robert Adam, *Round Room Chimneypiece. ©* Peter N. Lindfield.

Strawberry Hill's Gothic components and elevations consequently reflect the overarching aesthetic trends in Georgian Britain, ranging from the Rococo to Neoclassicism. The house is thus not only a record of Walpole's sustained and counter-cultural interest in the medieval aesthetic, but also Georgian design, fashion and taste more generally (Lindfield 2016: 42–179). The irregularity of Strawberry Hill stems from Walpole's creation of a doubly Gothic house: its external elevations are Gothic and its interiors, too, were also largely informed by medieval design. Whilst this double Gothic character can be seen in other houses from the period, including Alscot Park and Arbury Hall, other Gothic houses featured mainly Classical rooms. To complement these Gothic chimneypieces, vaults and wallpaper at Strawberry Hill, Walpole amassed a collection of supposedly medieval furniture. The pieces that he acquired included turned ebony furniture that he termed 'the true black blood' (Wainwright 1985: 250–57), tripod 'Welch' chairs (Lindfield 2016b: 2–6), and the Glastonbury chair that he thought dated to the Dissolution of the Monasteries (Olive 1994: 25–41). Walpole clearly relished the imaginative possibilities that these moveables offered Strawberry Hill's character:

I am deeper than ever in Gothic antiquities; I have bought a monk of Glastonbury's chair full of scraps of the psalms, and some seals of most reverend illegibility. I pass all my mornings in the thirteenth century, and my evenings with the century that is coming on. Adieu! (Walpole 1973, vol. 35: 106)

To supplement such supposedly ancient furniture — though not one is genuinely medieval — Walpole and his committee designed further pieces, such as the ebonised chairs, mirrors and table for the Parlour, and the benches, tables and chairs made for the Gallery (Lindfield 2016: 42–43, 174, 176–77; Snodin 2009: 35–36; Wainwright 1989: 84–87). Whilst thirty-three per cent of the designs in Thomas Chippendale's leading furniture pattern-book *The Gentleman and Cabinet-Maker's Director* (1754, 1755, 1762) were Gothic, Walpole's and his designers' approach to Gothic design was very different from Chippendale's more mainstream fashionable patterns (Lindfield 2016: 94–98, 100–105, 106–108, 110). Walpole leant increasingly and firmly towards antiquarian design, which mainstream fashionable Gothic did not embrace firmly until the end of the century (Lindfield 2016: 145–70, 180–203). Although it was predated by, say, Pelham's Esher Place (Lindfield 2016: 6–67; Weber 2013: 253–57) as a 'complete' Gothic residence, Strawberry Hill remains the first sustained and thoroughly documented recreation of, and most profound engagement with, internal and external Gothic forms in the Georgian domestic context.

Strawberry Hill had a lasting impact upon the Gothic Revival. It spawned other houses in its image and a number of 'Walpole Closets' or 'Strawberry Chambers' were realised, the most important of which is undoubtedly Lee, Kent, a building Walpole considered to be 'a child of Strawberry prettier than the parent' (Walpole 1948, vol. 12: 111; Reeve and Lindfield 2015). In addition, the term 'Strawberry Hill Gothic' is an accepted term even today for a certain type of whimsical Gothic, even though the villa exhibited serious and antiquarian

motivations that are not always acknowledged. Whilst few contemporary buildings directly reference Strawberry Hill itself, the style of the Gothic and the Gothic Revival, with its vaulted interiors ornamented with pointed arches, crockets and niches, still informs architectural decisions in the twenty-first century. Projects like the Drents Archief in Assen, The Netherlands (2011), the Ptuj Performance Center, Ptuj, Slovenia (2013), and the Stedelijk Museum Hof van Busleyden in Mechelen, Belgium (2013) all feature renovations to older buildings that utilize and, often, playfully reference original Gothic or Romanesque construction alongside contemporary architectural designs. Although Walpole might not approve of these modern architectural hybrids their antiquarian motivations and quest for the spiritual in the past would have assured him that his vision of the Gothic is alive and well.