

Foreword

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Georgian, Neo-Georgian, modern

Ruskin in 1853 called Gower Street a ‘desert of Ugliness’.¹ Just over a hundred years later, Ralph Dutton described the 18th century as ‘an era of consummate achievement’ in the visual arts.² The revolution in taste which separates these verdicts occurred during a century of extraordinarily rapid economic and social change which, while transforming relations between town and country, modified perceptions and evaluations of the past and its architecture. The advent of modernity and England’s troubled relationship to modernism – although not the main theme of this book – are very closely connected with changing attitudes towards Georgian architecture during the 20th century.

Alexandra Harris’s book *Romantic Moderns* has demonstrated that the embrace of the new and nostalgia for the old comfortably coexisted in interwar England in ways that they did not elsewhere.³ Studies like this force us to rethink the idea that modernism was a foreign import, brought to England by artists and architects fleeing from fascism in the 1930s. However, they fail to register the trauma of the sterling crisis at the beginning of the decade which led to the formation of a National Government and brought to a close an era of experiment. The historian Peter Mandler suggests that 1931 represented an important watershed, marking a significant shift from the adventurous ideas of the 1920s to the more culturally conservative ones of the next decade.⁴ In response to an increasingly xenophobic climate, the artist Paul Nash enquired ironically whether artists would soon be asked to ‘Paint British’.⁵ It was in this context that admiration for Georgian and Regency architecture served as a barometer of class and social allegiance.⁶ In the 1920s, Georgian was very much the prerogative of an elite who reacted against the cult of the homespun

and the vernacular fostered by the Arts and Crafts Movement. This was the decade in which Stephen Tennant imported Rococo furnishings to Wilford Manor, a sturdy Detmar Blow house formerly inhabited by his mother, and choreographed a series of *fêtes champêtres* there and at nearby Wilton House, where he and his friends were photographed by Cecil Beaton in 1927 costumed like characters from a painting by Watteau.⁷

Eleven years later, Evelyn Waugh’s essay ‘A Call to the Orders’ set its sights on a new target: the manifestations of contemporary urban sprawl. Waugh describes in medicalised terms the events of the previous decade. The arterial road, with its modernistic factories, semis and tube stations, is the legacy of what he termed the ‘post-war Corbusier plague’, a period of infection which must be followed by a period of convalescence. Against this debased and tinpot modernism Waugh set the architecture of solidly built provincial town houses and rectories and the palatial country houses of Whig oligarchs, which – despite their size – accommodated ‘homely and tranquil family lives’. He wrote:

We have had a fright – a period of high fever and delirium, a long depression, and now we are well on the way to recovery. We are again thinking of stone and brick and timber that will mellow and richen with age, and we have instinctively returned to the school in which our fathers excelled. The baroque has never had a place in England . . . and the fashion has returned for more austere models – that superb succession of masterpieces from Vanbrugh to Soane which are grouped, far too vaguely, under the absurdly insular title of ‘Georgian’.⁸

Mandler has shrewdly analysed the admiration for Georgian architecture in the interwar period in terms of changes which loosened ties between the aristocracy and the land. A reassessment of the Georgian town house – ‘high

fashion Georgianism', as he terms it – was a pragmatic response to changed times, with houses formerly only used during the London season given a new lease of life. This occurred in tandem with the growth of scholarly interest in the 18th century.⁹ An article by Christopher Hussey of 1931 describing four London houses of the early 1800s decorated by Lord Gerald Wellesley, H S Goodhart-Rendel and Edward Knoblock proposed an interesting parallel between the Regency and the modern. We are told that the Regency era and the early 1930s were the product of 'similar social conditions' and shared an 'impatience with triviality'.¹⁰ Goodhart-Rendel's decor of coffee-coloured walls, blue-grey pilasters and black picture frames was described as 'sane, civilised and formal', providing an antidote to contemporary fashions for 'the amorphous, the grimly functional and the merely "fun"'.¹¹ Curiously, despite Wellesley's and Knoblock's reputation as wealthy aesthetes, the louche and extravagant aspects of Regency design were downplayed; instead, it was presented as a substantial and erudite alternative to the eclecticism and frivolity of fashionable contemporary interior decorators.

Ironically, the new-found interest in the Georgian era did not stop the threat to a great many 18th- and early 19th-century buildings. It has been pointed out that the heyday of enthusiasm for Georgian architecture was marked by proposals to demolish or drastically alter some of its most important monuments: the Adelphi, Carlton House Terrace, Waterloo Bridge and the Bank of England.¹² And if Hussey's 1931 article presented the Regency in selective terms, the concept purveyed by developers was even narrower. Gentrification and changing land values encouraged interpretations of the Regency which – despite Hussey's claim to the contrary – were incompatible with modern architecture. In Chelsea, a part of London which in the 1930s was being transformed from a bohemian quarter into a desirable middle-class residential area, the Cadogan Estate demolished run-down Regency terraces and redeveloped sites behind Old Church Street with compact Neo-Georgian houses equipped with garages. An article in *The Architect & Building News* alluded to 'the Regency tradition that, in its dignity, seamliness and urbanity, seems so eminently suited for well-bred domesticity at the present day'.¹³ European architects such as Steen Eiler Rasmussen and Walter Gropius had paid tribute to the sophisticated approach to urban design evident in the

Georgian city. However, the elements which they especially admired – standardisation, brick, the compact arrangement of dwelling units – were not things which English developers of the 1930s wished to emulate.¹⁴ Gropius and Mendelsohn were accordingly compelled to build white houses in Old Church Street to harmonise with a pair of Oliver Hill Neo-Regency houses behind them, rather than the brick-faced buildings which they wished to place there.¹⁵

Popular as Georgian and Neo-Georgian architecture became in town, the Georgian country house remained at this time a minority taste, supported by those retreating from creeping suburbanisation and modernisation, like Evelyn Waugh, and by connoisseurs seeking an environment and way of life distinct from that of their parents. An example of the latter is Ralph Dutton, who cultivated a taste for the Georgian and systematically expunged his family's additions to their ancestral home, Hinton Ampner, Hampshire, which he asked Wellesley to restore for him so as to reveal the plain lines of the original house of 1793.¹⁶ However, distinctions between the attitudes of the dandy, the snob, the connoisseur of the purest Georgian architecture and the patron of avant-garde contemporary art were rarely clear-cut. Nancy Mitford described Faringdon House, designed in 1790, which belonged to the composer and painter Lord Berners, as 'plain and grey and square and solid, sober and restrained'.¹⁷ But Lord Berners' existence here was none of those things, appearing as almost a burlesque of the traditions of the English country house. Paintings by Balla, Corot and Dali were hung in a fantastically decorated interior. A celebrated photograph shows a formal tea-party in its exquisitely furnished drawing room, where Penelope Chetwode Betjeman's Arab stallion drank tea from a saucer.¹⁸ Berners enlivened the grounds with a flock of fantail pigeons whose feathers were dyed pastel colours, placed paper flowers in the park and – despite vehement opposition from the local council and residents – built a tower folly on Faringdon Hill, accompanied by a notice which read: 'Members of the public committing suicide from this tower do so at their own risk.'

The example of Berners' near neighbour Gavin Henderson illuminates some of the complex and contradictory aspects of the appreciation of Georgian architecture in the interwar years, and suggests a transition from playfulness to a new seriousness. In 1934 Henderson

inherited a fortune, a title and a large country estate, Buscot Park, Oxfordshire, from his financier grandfather, the first Lord Faringdon. The house he inherited – built around 1780 – had been altered with a large columned porch, balustrade, dormer windows and a large west wing (Fig 0.1). In the 1880s Lord Faringdon had filled the house with his art collection and commissioned Edward Burne-Jones to paint the series *The Legend of the Briar Rose* for the drawing room. After his grandfather's death, Henderson stripped the house of Victorian additions and commissioned the architect Geddes Hyslop to design a pair of pavilions to flank it (Fig 0.2). At about the same time the garden (designed by Harold Peto in the 1900s with a series of terraces and canals stretching from the house down to the lake) was given a new network of paths in a goose-foot configuration, reinforcing the formal character of the original landscape setting of the house. Internally, the house was extensively remodelled, and ceiling paintings and fireplaces from 18th-century houses which were then being demolished or redeveloped were installed.¹⁹

Henderson, educated at Eton and Oxford, was one of the Bright Young People, one of whose exploits included setting the Thames ablaze with petrol during his stag party in 1927. His mission to de-Victorianise the house appears at first glance comparable to the projects of other enthusiasts for the Georgian such as Ralph Dutton and Christopher Hussey, who carefully expunged the traces of their parents' taste from the country houses they inherited. But, while advocating the severe plainness of 18th-century architecture, Henderson – like his neighbour Lord Berners – also relished flamboyance. A magnificent suite of furniture in Egyptian style by Thomas Hope was purchased for the hall. Henderson was also a discerning patron of contemporary art. He commissioned Eric Ravilious to paint a pair of watercolour views of the house stripped of its Victorian porch and parapet (Fig 0.3). These topographical paintings show the simple austerity of the house in its remodelled state. They served to situate Henderson in the tradition of the country house improver, someone whose sense of history was combined with relish for the spare modernist aesthetic of the 1930s.



Fig 0.1
Buscot Park (built around
1780), photographed
before the removal of
Victorian additions.
[© Country Life]



Fig 0.2
Buscot Park: view from the south in 2013.
[© Elizabeth McKellar]



Fig 0.3
Eric Ravillious, Buscot Park from South, watercolour, c 1939, showing the house after the removal of additions.
[© Faringdon Collection Trust]

The 1930s also brought Henderson an engagement with left-wing politics. Murals were painted in the undercroft of the new east pavilion (Fig 0.4). But rather than selecting Rex Whistler or one of the decorative painters associated with the Regency revival, Henderson asked Diego Rivera's English pupil Jack Hastings to decorate it with scenes from contemporary local life: political rallies, agricultural shows, his friends and neighbours at work and play (Figs 0.5 and 0.6).²⁰ Politics and

connoisseurship continued to mingle at Buscot. In 1938 Henderson, who worked in a Republican field hospital in Aragon during the Spanish Civil War, offered a home in the lodge beside the lake at Buscot for children evacuated from the Basque region during the conflict. After the Second World War, Buscot became the venue for political conferences, and home to a growing collection of contemporary art. Henderson sat on the Fabian Society's executive committee, joined the London County Council as a councillor and



*Fig 0.4
Buscot Park: east elevation
and swimming pool, seen
from the archway of the
new east pavilion
containing a squash court
and private theatre.
[© Elizabeth McKellar]*



Fig 0.5 (far left)
Buscot Park: mural by Jack Hastings in the passageway between the main house and the east pavilion, showing gardeners in front of the house, 1936–7.
[© Faringdon Collection Trust]



Fig 0.6 (left)
Buscot Park: mural by Jack Hastings in the archway between the main house and the new east pavilion, showing a political rally and Faringdon Labour Party, 1936–7.
[© Faringdon Collection Trust]

was a member of the Historic Buildings Committee of the Greater London Council in 1965.²¹

The 1940s and 1950s brought a new phase of interest in the Regency, this time as a style with affinities to the delicate modernism of the Festival of Britain. Hugh Casson was a prime mover in both. At St John Waterloo, a church of 1822–4 which was badly bombed during the Blitz, Thomas Ford, the architect to the diocese of Southwark, undertook a restoration in a simplified Regency mode; the work was completed in time for the church to serve as the Festival church in 1951. Ford regarded Regency architecture as a pre-eminently urban style, with the additional advantage of being inexpensive, and employed it in his post-war work for the diocese.²²

After the Neo-Georgian

The desire to shock and establish a distance from mainstream taste which powered the Neo-Georgian taste of the 1920s and 1930s was also to underpin the 20th-century revival of interest in the Victorians. Victorian art and architecture had been in the interwar years a minority taste, savoured for its strangeness and esoteric symbolism. Henderson's collection of Regency furniture happily coexisted alongside the cycle of paintings by Burne-Jones at Buscot Park. When his grandfather's art collection was dispersed in 1934, Henderson bought back at the sale important works by Watts and Leighton. His contemporary Evelyn Waugh, who purchased

a country house in Gloucestershire and replaced the family coat of arms on its Georgian façade with his own, published a biography of Dante Gabriel Rossetti as his first book in 1927.²³ In 1954 he furnished his bedroom with an extraordinary painted washstand designed by William Burges. John Betjeman noted the growing popularity of the Georgian with developers and with a wider public, writing scornfully: 'Georgian is nicely and cheaply faked. Blocks of flats, all London over, have Regency beds and Brighton-Pavilion curtains, out of scale with the cupboard-like rooms in which they are placed, no doubt, but unmistakably Georgian. Even an estate agent knows what Georgian means.'²⁴ Betjeman's essay (whose real subject was Victorian architecture) began: 'Victorian buildings will never become as smart as Georgian ones are today.' He was to be proved spectacularly wrong. The book in which Dutton lauded the 18th century in 1954 was called *The Victorian Home*. Aimed at a popular market, it attempted to rehabilitate the later 19th century by freeing it from its association with ostentation and tastelessness, and succeeded very well in doing so.²⁵ For post-war homemakers, the Victorian love of possessions and the 19th-century cult of the family was to prove irresistible. Today, the enduring popularity of the Georgian with developers, builders and homebuyers is only rivalled by that of the Victorian. The history of that subsequent and surprising architectural revival provides another fruitful topic for future research alongside those of the Classical revivals of the 20th century explored in this volume.

Notes

- 1 Ruskin, J 1996 *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed Cook, E T and Wedderburn, A. *Modern Painters, Vol III, Part iv*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 324
- 2 Dutton, R 1954 *The Victorian Home*. London: Batsford
- 3 Harris, A 2010 *Romantic Moderns: English Writers, Artists and the Imagination from Virginia Woolf to John Piper*. London: Thames & Hudson, 4
- 4 Mandler, P 1997 *The Fall and Rise of the Stately Home*. London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 5
- 5 Nash, P 1931 'Nature, life and art'. *Weekend Review* 5, December, 715
- 6 See Stamp, G 2014 'Our love affair with the Georgian'. *Country Life*, 29 March
- 7 Harris 2010, 75–6
- 8 Waugh, E 1938 in Gallagher, D (ed) *The Essays, Articles and Reviews of Evelyn Waugh*. London: Methuen, 215–18
- 9 Mandler 1997, 280
- 10 Hussey, C 1931 'Four Regency houses decorated by Lord Gerald Wellesley, Mr. Edward Knoblock and Mr. H. Goodhart-Rendel'. *Country Life*, 11 April, 450
- 11 Ibid, 456
- 12 Byron, R 1937 *How We Celebrate the Coronation*. London: Architectural Review; Watkin, D 1979 'Architectural writing in the thirties'. *Architectural Design* 49, nos 10–11, 85
- 13 *Architect & Building News* 1934 'Vernon House, Trafalgar Square, Chelsea', 26 January, 137
- 14 See Rasmussen, S E 1991 *London: The Unique City*, rev edn. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press
- 15 Campbell, L 1992 'Gropius in London: modernism and tradition', *Proceedings of the Second International Docomomo Conference*. Dessau, Germany: German DOCOMOMO Group, 270–2; Campbell, L 2013, 'Gropius in Old Church Street: a "comedy of errors" in Chelsea', paper for 'Stylistic Dead Ends' conference, Oxford
- 16 Mandler 1997, 286–7
- 17 Quoted by Wilkes, R 2001 'Cultured country house'. *Daily Telegraph*, 26 May
- 18 Reproduced in Girouard, M 1978 *Life in the English Country House: A Social and Architectural History*. London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 299
- 19 Trustees of the Faringdon Collection 1982 *The Faringdon Collection, Buscot Park*. National Trust
- 20 Hastings became the 15th Earl of Huntingdon in 1939. See his obituary in *The Independent*: 'The Earl of Huntingdon', 11 September 1990.
- 21 Trustees of the Faringdon Collection 1982, 5
- 22 Drake, R 2014 'Thomas Ford and Hans Feibusch, a unique collaboration', paper for 'Twentieth-Century Churches: New Buildings for a Changing World', Ecclesiological Society conference
- 23 Carpenter, H 1989 *The Brideshead Generation: Evelyn Waugh and His Friends*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 308
- 24 Betjeman, J 1952 *First and Last Loves*. London: John Murray, 132
- 25 See Stamp, G 2002 'I was Lord Kitchener's valet, or, How the Vic Soc saved London' in Harwood, E and Powers, A (eds) *The Sixties: Life, Style, Architecture*. Twentieth Century Architecture 6. London: Twentieth Century Society, 131–44