

The Story
of the
Country House

• CLIVE ASLET •

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CHAPTER ONE



Medieval

KING John rarely stayed more than a few days in the same place. While he was a restless and worried man, whose showdown with his barons led to the signing of a ‘great charter’, Magna Carta, in 1215 – which he subsequently revoked – his state of perpetual motion was not solely the result of neurosis. It was normal for monarchs, bishops and noblemen to travel constantly between their many properties. In fact the ruling class was forever on the move. The court and royal administration followed the king and knights might be away for months on campaign. A great territorial estate was not likely to form a single block; the result of inheritance, royal favour and marriage, it might be scattered throughout the kingdom. The lodgings that great people built for their own accommodation were precisely that: rooms where they lodged before going on to somewhere else. There were few pieces of furniture and nothing except the four walls was permanent. The colourful tapestries with which the walls were hung could be rolled up. Medieval lords took their domestic possessions with them, in a great series of carts – seventeen carts ‘at every remevall’ for one earl – and the travelling chests were unpacked on arrival



FIG. 8 *Lytes Cary Manor in Somerset demonstrates the cellular principle on which early country houses were built. Rooms accreted around the great hall, the function of the different parts being plainly visible from the outside. The owners were a landed gentry family called Lyte with connections to the law. © Alamy*

laws, with the result that Welshmen had to take surnames. Ireland, meanwhile, was a divided into areas that had been conquered by Anglo-Normans, originally a small fortified Pale around Dublin, to which had been added Leinster and other parts of the South. The rest of the island was Gaelic-speaking and ruled by numerous chieftains in a state of constant warfare. English influence had been weakened by the Wars of the Roses but Henry VIII tried to reassert it by cajoling the native 'wild Irish' into submission and granting English titles to Gaelic noblemen. Plantations or colonies of English and Welsh Protestants were settled on former monastic lands or those that had been confiscated from rebellious chiefs. Ireland remained Catholic outside the English plantations, and its chiefs lived in tall castles. Those who built country houses were torn between the late medieval life that continued in traditional halls, with ritual feasting amid their retainers, and the Renaissance ideas that were the last word in England. Supported by Spain, the wild Irish opposed the further spread of English settlement, with the result that the biggest army to leave England during the sixteenth century – seventeen thousand



FIG. 21 *Chiswick House, to the west of London, was designed by the gentleman architect Lord Burlington in 1723–9 as a homage to Andrea Palladio’s Villa Rotonda in the Italian Veneto. Originally it was attached to a large Jacobean house and served as a showcase for Burlington’s architectural ideas, in a severe style based on ideal proportions as seen in both Palladio and Inigo Jones.* © Historic England Archive

show. People could hardly help seeing it: it stood only a few feet from an important road into London on one side and is only a little more distant, on the other, from the Thames. Kent designed interiors; he provided the furniture, in the manner of the *saloni* of the Roman and Venetian aristocracy, lined with immense, gold-encrusted tables and chairs, supported on carved eagles, sea creatures and lions.

Chiswick possessed only a few score acres of land – a flea bite compared to the estates that Burlington owned in Yorkshire and Ireland. But that land could be gardened and Kent was on hand to produce a stream of enchanting sketches – a little dog pees on Lord Burlington’s shoe, hares dance in the moonlight – in brown wash and rapid squiggles of line. Out went the straight sides of the canal. It was turned into an irregular lake, fed – for the short periods when the waterworks could produce enough flow – by a splashing cascade. Grass was brought up to the feet of the Villa, as though it were set in open countryside.

epic poetry, he was weaving textiles; when he was not weaving textiles, he was delivering lectures on his romantic brand of socialism; when he was not lecturing, he was writing utopian tracts, or founding the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, or designing wallpaper (fig. 39). The nail which stabilised this fizzing Catherine wheel of energy was the home. Morris had a romantic concept of it, reinforced by his vision of the Middle Ages. Naturally his own homes were central to him.

The first was Red House at Bexleyheath, begun in 1859 by a twenty-five-year-old Morris, newly married to a beautiful young wife, Jane Burden. Designed by the austere and reticent Webb, the idiom was that of a Gothic Revival parsonage, combining red brick, pointed arches and sash windows. Artist friends who stayed with the Morrises were pressed

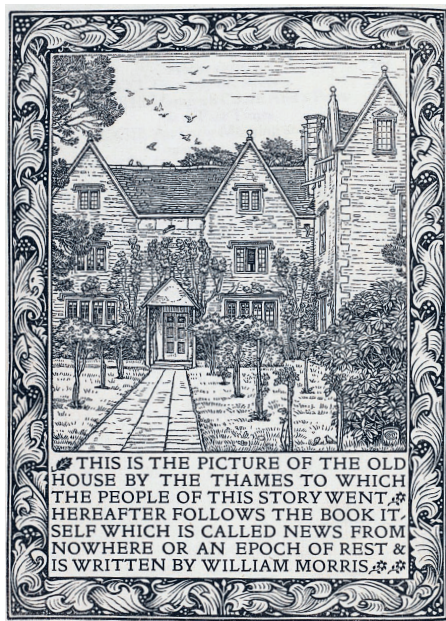


FIG. 39 *Kelmscott Manor, on the banks of the Thames in Gloucestershire, was William Morris's domestic ideal. In his utopian story, News from Nowhere, he wrote that it seemed to 'grow out of the soil' – a building that had no known architect but was instead the product of generations of anonymous craftsmen and the families who had lived in it for centuries. Fizzing with energy, Morris was the engine house of the Arts and Crafts Movement, to which both rural life and home-making were specially important.*

CHAPTER NINE



Turn of the Century

THE years 1890 to 1914 were a golden age of the country house. Not only was domestic architecture served by an exceptional richness of architectural talent but the rise of the professional classes, supplemented by wealth from industry and Empire, provided many opportunities to build. In the novels of Henry James, the country house evokes an ideal state of human existence which, after centuries of evolution, has reached a level as close to perfection as it is possible for mortals to achieve. George V did not have much of an eye for architecture but he and his generation had made life ‘a masterpiece of well ordered, unostentatious elegant living’, as his son the Duke of Windsor remembered a little sourly. The perfection of the British country house at the turn of the century was recognised by the Prussian government, which sent the architect and civil servant Hermann Muthesius to report on the advanced state of British domesticity: this he did, with Germanic thoroughness, in the three volumes of *Das Englische Haus*. Art architects such as Baillie Scott received commissions throughout Europe.



FIG. 41 *The turn of the twentieth century saw a great flourishing of country-house architecture in Britain. It was an era of sound building, when traditional styles were revered, crafts were revived and a particular thought was given to the 'small country house' built with only a few acres of land. One country house of this type was Perrycroft, on the edge of the Malvern Hills in Worcestershire, built by the radical C.F.A. Voysey for the Quaker MP J.W. Wilson, financial secretary to the Miners' Union. Completed in 1895, it is in a more picturesque idiom than Voysey would normally allow himself; he championed simplicity.*
© Country Life Picture Library

Architects became so anxious not to appear brash that they increasingly kept whatever architecture was already on site or incorporated pre-used materials that bore the patina of age: silvery oak, weathered brick, ancient stone details. This was both romantic, in that it revelled in the softness of visual effect that suggests the passing of years; and rational, because the SPAB had strict views about the ethics of faking history. At Standen, Philip Webb had not wanted to make the pre-existing farmhouse appear an integral part of the country house he created. Not all owners or architects were so scrupulous. But as the twentieth century wore on, more and more owners would fall under the spell of old country houses, going out of their way to restore them when it might well have been cheaper and more practical to start again.

The architectural historian Timothy Brittain-Catlin has recently described this as the most striking development of the age. Many if not

Build quality can be as high as anything done in the past. An American architect wept when he visited one of the several chapels built by Craig Hamilton in the grounds of a country house. He could not believe it was possible to achieve such perfection of materials and craftsmanship in the sublunary world. He found it akin to a spiritual experience – as he called it, ‘transcendent’.

Such wonders cannot be achieved without large budgets and it was predicted that the financial winter of 2007–8 would blast the money tree. The gloom was unfounded. Spending continued, sometimes on a grand scale. The space needed by super-rich clients only increased. Home cinemas are the norm. Display space is needed for the collections of classic cars or contemporary art. Gyms and sauna suites can be extensive.



FIG. 47 *The Laskett, Herefordshire. Roy Strong and his wife Julia Trevelyan-Oman bought a three-acre field from a farmer and embarked on the creation of the largest formal garden in England to be made in the second half of the twentieth century. The inspiration was Hidcote Manor in the Cotswolds, the formal gardens of the Tudor and Stuart period and Renaissance Italy. Sir Roy remembers that ‘for the first 15 years the only labour were two gardeners who came for one day once a fortnight’: it was a difficult time for country-house owners.* © Clive Nichols