

The great Gothic castle that's just a house of cards

TWICKENHAM, the main entrance to St Mary's University College - a Catholic foundation that awards, mostly to would-be teachers, degrees from the University of Surrey. Academic staff hurry home at the end of the day. A porter jangles his keys in impatient anticipation of locking the front door.

Two students, holding hands, stare at a notice board in a way that suggests they're not really interested in the notices.

There are hundreds of colleges just like St Mary's. Except for one thing. Attached to its 1920s building is the most extraordinary house in England.

The house is called Strawberry Hill. It was built by Horace Walpole - man of letters and son of Britain's first prime minister - 250 years ago in such an exuberantly original fashion that it gave its name to a style of architecture. Strawberry Hill Gothic is the stuff that dreams are made of.

And nightmares, too. Not surprisingly Walpole had a nightmare there that inspired his book, *The Castle Of Otranto*, the first Gothic horror novel.

Pedestrians, passing by on the road outside, have no idea what treasures lie beyond the dilapidated walls. Monica Burns, a care worker, thought it must be a school. Dale Wainwright, who works in computers, pronounced it closed. Craig Hill, a bus conductor, thought that it used to be a monastery.

With a little bit of luck and about £5 million from the Heritage Fund, Strawberry Hill will be renovated and opened to the public by 2010. None of them will have ever seen anything like it before. Nothing like it exists.

Walpole wanted to create a house which, in a word - not of his invention as some claim - was sharawadgi. By that, he meant lacking in all symmetry. In fact, most of the rooms have perfectly balanced designs.

BUT they also have two features that are far more extraordinary than the occasional fireplace built to look as if it has been built into the wrong place on the wall.

Every room is a riot of extravagant gothic arches and almost every feature of the house is based on something that Walpole's Committee of Taste guaranteed was medieval.

In the Library there is a gothic arch in front of every bookcase. These have to be swung back before the books on the top shelves can be handed down.

Their design is based on a side door in Old St Paul's - the cathedral destroyed in the great fire of London and replaced by the design of Sir Christopher Wren. In the Long Gallery, the wall that faces the window has tall alcoves. Each one has a canopy made up of three gothic arches. The Long Gallery's fan-vaulted ceiling is copied from the ceiling in the Henry VII chapel in Westminster Abbey.

The Tribune, in which Walpole kept the most valuable items in his collection of coins, miniatures, medallions and medals, is named after the room in the Uffizi Palace in Florence - where the most valuable coins, miniatures, medals and medallions were kept.

And most extraordinary - and some would say most sacrilegious - of all, most of the fireplaces are copies of tombs in the great cathedrals of Europe.

The armoury was decorated with shields and breast plates 'taken in the holly wars'. They are still there. Raymond Davies, my guide, suggested they had been bought in the 18th-century equivalent of Portobello Road.

DAVIES - a writer, researcher and actor - is an enthusiast for both Walpole and Strawberry Hill. It is easy to understand why. Everything about the house, from the windows to the wallpaper, is irresistibly ridiculous.

Walpole himself saw the joke. He thought that the pinnacle on the top of one of his towers looked like a candle snuffer.

He failed to realise one of his hopes: he wanted to fill the house with 'gloomth', another word of his invention meant to describe the combination of the warmth and gloom that he thought suffused the great cathedrals.

But, despite the ancient stained glass that remains in some of the windows, Strawberry Hill is light and airy. It seems astonishing that so much stone masonry could be sculpted with such delicate precision.

The astonishment is based on a misapprehension. Apart from the outer walls, there is barely an ounce of stone in Strawberry Hill.

The gothic arches are made of painted wood, the interior walls are thin board and the vaulted ceilings are papier mache.

Walpole did not expect his house to last. It would, he assumed, be blown on the winds of time like his writing. That it still exists is a miracle.

It has survived more than time. In 1810, Strawberry Hill passed to the much married Lady Waldegrave, grandson of Horace's brother. All her husbands were libertines. The contents of the house were sold to keep them out of a debtors' jail.

During the war it was bombed and since then moths and dust have begun to corrupt it and mice have made their homes in the papier mache ceiling. Yet most of the fabric remains - extravagant, complicated and slightly absurd.

Strawberry Hill is a peculiarly English folly. Count the days until the English, at a small fee, can enjoy its absurdity once more.

Roy Hattersley - Daily Mail, Tuesday, January 31, 2006