



Gothic gorgeousness: over a 45-year period, Horace Walpole doubled the size of Strawberry Hill and turned it into a mini, turreted castle. Today, £8.8 million is needed to bring its rotting interior back to former glory

# Strawberry fair

Horace Walpole's hidden Gothic gem in Twickenham is a secret that needs to be saved for the future, says **Katrina Burroughs**

**S**TRAWBERRY Hill in Twickenham is as delicious as it sounds. The villa on the Thames was created by Horace Walpole MP, essayist, letter writer, and assiduous dilettante. Originally built by the coachman of the Earl of Bradford, the Georgian house began life as a strictly vanilla-flavoured dwelling called Chopp'd Straw Hall. Between 1747 and 1792, however, Walpole renamed it more poetically, doubled its size and turned it into a little Gothic castle, complete with crenellated towers and finials, windows with ogee arches and a stairwell based on a flight of stairs at Rouen Cathedral.



**Drama:** the stained-glass windows added to Walpole's theatrical setting

his home into a theatrical setting for his collection of antiques and Grand Tour artefacts, and a Gothic theme park for entertaining his many friends. Frequent visitors included John Chute from The Wyne, Hampshire, and illustrator Richard Bentley (with whom Walpole planned and designed the adornments to Strawberry Hill), the poet Thomas Gray, and celebrities of the day such as Kitty Clive, an actress whom he invited to live on the estate.

At every step you take in Strawberry Hill, there is evidence of the owner's delight in devising curiosities: there are disguised doorways leading to a dark, spooky stonework entrance hall that turns out to be wallpapered, and elaborate papier-mâché vaulting in the mirrored Long Gallery, through which the vivacious Kitty was occasionally lowered on a swing by candlelight as an after-dinner spectacle.

Nowadays, the stars of the house are the hundreds of stained-glass panels, many of which are 16th century gems, reclaimed from Flemish houses when they fell out of fashion in the 18th century. Other highlights include Bentley's chimneypieces, painted timber copies of ancient stone tombs. The glorious library is a forest of pierced Gothic arches, drawn from an illustration of Old St Paul's Cathedral, designed by Chute.

After Walpole's death in 1797, Strawberry Hill passed through a couple of pairs of hands before falling into the lap of a kindred spirit, Frances, Countess Waldegrave, who repaired and enhanced his vision with touches such as a ballroom, a breakfast room based on a Bedouin

Anna Chalcraft, house historian, says: "Walpole started the Gothic Revival movement at Strawberry Hill. He saw the style disappearing and wanted to retain it in the face of the Georgian building boom."

For a chap on a serious conservation mission, Walpole had a ball during the 45-year makeover. After renting the house for about two years, he bought it in 1749 from Mrs Chenevix, the owner of a renowned Charing Cross toy shop, and referred to it as his "little plaything house".

His extravagant game (including paying £776 10s for the estate, Walpole estimated he spent about £20,000 on the refurbishment) was to turn

**'At every step in Strawberry Hill there is evidence of the owner's delight in devising curiosities'**



Stars of the house: many of the glass windows came out of 16th century Flemish houses



Faded grandeur: damage in the entrance hall gives an idea of the repairs needed throughout the house

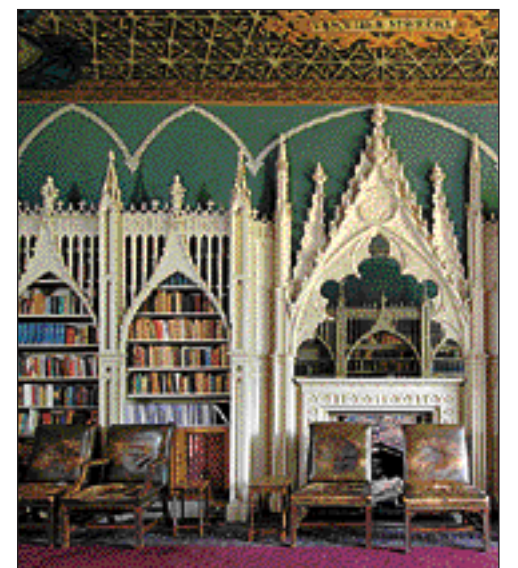
tent, and a stairwell ceiling with stained-glass quatrefoils on a midnight-blue background, adorned with gold stars.

The house was bought by the Catholic Education Council in 1923 for the Society of St Vincent de Paul, who later founded St Mary's College on the site. Institutional use took its toll and Strawberry Hill was added to English Heritage's register of Buildings at Risk and The World Monuments Fund (WMF) Watch List of 100 Most Endangered Sites in the World. The lease was recently transferred to the Strawberry Hill Trust, which, with the WMF, plans to open Walpole's castle to the public.

Walpole never expected this elaborate confection to survive him by many years. "My buildings are like paper," he wrote, "and both will blow away 10 years after I am dead."

But structurally, Strawberry Hill still stands firm. However, a tour of the villa reveals ripped wallpapers and cracked papier-mâché. Wall hangings are frayed and the tented textiles of the breakfast room are suspected of harbouring "woolly bears". The interior is in dire need of comprehensive restoration, which will cost £8.8million.

The research for Strawberry Hill's new makeover has begun and yielded many fascinating finds: original shutters, 18th century gilding and 23 pieces of early wallpaper underneath the 20th century decoration. Strawberry Hill is also one of the best-documented houses in the land, with more than 5,000 letters written by its owner detailing every stage of its Gothicisation. During Walpole's occupancy it became a tourist attraction, and he wrote his own guidebook (A Description of Strawberry Hill, 1774 and 1784).



Ornate forest: the arches in the library were taken from an illustration of Old St Paul's Cathedral

## EXCLUSIVE H&P TOUR

RESTRICTED public tours of the house start in May, and the WMF is offering a special preview tour of Strawberry Hill to the first 10 Homes & Property readers who email project manager Katie Taylor on [katie@wmf.org.uk](mailto:katie@wmf.org.uk).

To offer a donation, call 020 7730 5344, or send a cheque to World Monuments Fund in Britain, 2 Grosvenor Gardens, SW1W 0DH.

Pictures by Richard Holttum