

# Reviving a Gothic wonder

A house Horace Walpole built for fun and is now home to a Catholic college may recover its past glories at last - if television viewers are prepared to come to its rescue

STRAWBERRY HILL House is worth saving for the nation for its name alone. It is one of those that, like the House in the Clouds, or Clouds Hill, kidnaps the imagination. And, once visited, Horace Walpole's dandy-house stays sharply focused in the mind's eye of everyone with the slightest streak of whimsy or romance in their make up.

Since the mid-1920s, this eighteenth-century Gothic fa-la has been the home of St Mary's College, a Catholic seat of learning, and now a part of the University of Surrey, originally founded at Brook Green, Hammersmith in, 1850. This was at the height of the Gothic Revival in architecture, a decorative and evangelistic style that peppered the country with a dense sprinkling of crockets and finials, needle-point spires and pointed arches. For the next half-century, the nation would peer in and out of churches, law courts, government buildings and even private houses as if through a glass darkly, through the medium of stained-glass windows, crowded with Burne-Jones's angels, saturated in dense colour.

These windows and those buildings owed much to Strawberry Hill House, although, unlike the prickly bulk of its Victorian scions, Walpole's Thames side retreat at Twickenham, some miles upstream of Hammersmith, was a light-hearted affair. It was not underpinned by muscular, revived Victorian Christianity, much less by reborn Catholic sentiment, but by a theatrical gaiety and eighteenth-century playfulness.

A little tired and crumbly today, Strawberry Hill is about to become much better known than it is as one of the architectural stars of the second of the BBC's *Restoration* television series, in which small-screen viewers get to decide which wobbly historic building they would most like to see restored.

Strawberry Hill certainly needs help. Deserves it, too. It is, serendipitously, one of the most important, as well as delightful, English buildings of its time, a house that came to play a surprisingly important role in the rejection of Georgian taste and sensibilities. Walpole would probably have been appalled by the numbing dreariness of so much of the mass-produced Victorian Gothic architecture that could, one way or the other, trace its roots back to Twickenham, but then this father of the Gothic novel had, unwittingly, sown a seed that would blossom not just into dark and scary Victorian churches, but, ultimately, into Hammer House of Horror films and our persistent love of the macabre.

If you have never been to the house- now St Mary's main building - you might at first be a little disappointed by Strawberry Hill. Walpole's domestic folly, for all its towers and Gothic frills, is not as dramatic as the Prince Regent's Brighton Pavilion, and much less assured than Barry and Pugin's Palace of Westminster. But, of course, this is a private house, not a prince's pleasure dome, much less a nationally funded monument. Quirky and rather insubstantial, Strawberry Hill is built of modest brick and stucco, and so easy prey to a

damp English climate. Inside, however, visitors are transported into a world of high-spirited fantasy. Camp. Funny. To our eyes, film-set Gothic; or "Gothick", as Walpole and his contemporaries would have it.

Some of the richest rooms are reached through some quite ordinary Georgian interiors. These, though, are readily forgotten. What we remember are the lavish library, the long gallery, and other spaces as rich in pattern, detail and colour as a medieval breviary. All the more memorable for being hidden inside a house often used for conferences and wedding receptions; all the more fun for being architecturally "incorrect".

Horace Walpole, aesthete, dilettante, collector, novelist, man of letters, was the wealthy fourth son of Sir Robert Walpole, prime minister from 1721 to 1742. He bought what had been a plain Georgian house in Twickenham in 1749, then spent the next half-century converting it into a mock castle.

Walpole had no concern for exact styles of Gothic architecture. These, in any case - that familiar litany of EE, Dec, Perp - had yet to be classified. The "Gothick" style, and spirit, was viewed as entertaining gloom, yet the magpie-eyed Walpole found it all too diverting, a form of entertainment on an epic scale, a touch spooky, like his own Gothic horror novel, *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), the first of its kind. Most of all, he found it amusing, a way of provoking mild outrage, of undermining Georgian grace and poised stylistic manners.

One way to get connoisseurs' tongues wagging wildly was to plunder Gothic sources - a fan-vaulted ceiling copied from the vaulting of Henry VII's chapel at Westminster, fireplaces modelled on medieval archbishops' tombs - and to reassemble such fragments into a fairytale architectural composition.

The original house, probably dating from the 1690s, was known, equally delightfully, as "Chopped-Straw Hall". It had been bought, or possibly built, by a coachman retired from the service of the Earl of Bradford. He had, apparently, made a small fortune selling his lordship's top-quality hay while feeding his horses on cheap straw. Leased to a succession of glamorous tenants including Dr Talbot, Bishop of Durham, Colley Cibber, the Marquess of Carnarvon, Lord John Sackville and Mrs Chenevix, a fashionable toyshop owner, Walpole bought it - "a little plaything house" - when he was just 30.

His latest plaything sat on five acres of land enchantingly known as "Strawberry Hill". The name settled, Walpole announced his intention to "build a little Gothic castle" here, calling on friends to offer him Gothic antiquities. The estate grew to 46 acres, while the house - adorned with one of the finest private collections of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century stained glass - became ever more fanciful, inspiring younger, wealthy dilettanti like William Beckford to invest in such stupendous Gothic piles as the ill-fated Fonthill

Abbey, Wiltshire. This *faux*-monastic settlement boasted a 280-ft high central tower. It collapsed in 1825, two years after Beckford had, fortuitously, sold his mind-bendingly monumental folly.

When Walpole, a childless homosexual and, by then, the 4th Earl of Orford, died in 1797, Strawberry Hill passed, through the sculptress Anne Seymour Damer, to his great niece, Laura, Countess of Waldegrave. Sadly, many of the Walpole treasures were sold off to fund family debts in the "Great Sale" of 1842, which lasted for an astonishing 32 days.

The loss to Strawberry Hill, and ultimately to the nation, was great. Walpole's catholic taste ensured that items that went under the auctioneer's hammer in spring 1842 included some 12,000 engravings of "English Heads", what was supposedly the finest collection of enamels and miniatures in Britain, paintings, books, furniture and such curios as a hat worn by Cardinal Wolsey and a vulcanised date plucked from the excavation site at Herculaneum.

Five years later, Frances Waldegrave married the liberal MP, G. G. Harcourt and in the mid-1850s extended Strawberry Hill to host grand political receptions. Asset-stripped and overextended, Walpole's folly was bought by an American hotel chain in the early 1880s, but sold on almost immediately afterwards. Finally, Lady Michelham sold the property to the Catholic Education Council, which is why St Mary's College is here today, although occupying later buildings.

Over the years, Strawberry Hill itself has fallen into a long afternoon sleep; its splendid interiors are very tired, while the house is currently on the World Monument Fund Watch List of the 100 Most Endangered Sites. Yet, like so much of the Georgian architecture we treasure today, its fanciful interiors had never been intended to last. Walpole built for immediate effect, not for posterity. He used papier-mâché for the fan vaulting in the Long Gallery, while some parts of the building are made of nothing more than timber frames skinned with render. Walpole wrote, "my buildings are paper, like my writings, and both will be blown away 10 years after I am gone .."

What will save the house for the future is, above all, money. Between them the Strawberry Hill Trust, the well-connected Friends of Strawberry Hill and the Building Preservation Trust need to raise £7m. to restore the house, and a further £5m. to endow it for the future.

Will it succeed? Yes. Once the house is known to a wider, TV-watching public, it will surely become the national treasure that it has always been in the hearts of connoisseurs of eccentric, wilful, playful architecture, of those who care for grown-up dolls' houses and everyone who has dreamed not of a TV-makeover "dream home", but of a true dream brought to life.

The Strawberry Hill Trust, set up in 2002, plans to take on the lease of Strawberry Hill in 2006 and to complete restoration in 2009. In 1753, Walpole wrote, "I have carpenters to direct, plasterers to hurry, papermen to scold, and glaziers to help: this last is my greatest pleasure: I have amassed such quantities of painted glass, that every window in my castle will be illuminated with it: the adjusting and disposing it is vast amusement." Hopefully, the restoration of this Gothic folly-turned-Catholic college will afford as much pleasure to those who hope to restore it to its full theatrical glory 250 years on as it did to the talented and amusing fourth Earl of Orford.

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