



Friends News

Keeping in touch during the Covid 19 restrictions

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Our thanks go to Malcolm Mason for this month's contribution

Friends keeping in touch
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The architecture, settings and interiors of country houses

Whenever I am fortunate to attend a concert or a talk at Cobham Hall, I cannot fail to admire the design and practical skills which produced such a fine building, be it the fine Tudor brickwork with diapering on the exterior, or the later neo-classical interiors. Perhaps that is because I have a passion for historic buildings. But I suspect that many visitors to Cobham experience the same emotions.

I wonder, however, how many of us give a thought to how the rooms were used in the heyday of Cobham Hall as a family home. No doubt, for instance, there may have been occasions when the Gilt Hall was used for grand candlelit balls which would have been quite a sight to behold.

At what time in the history of the house would such events have been likely to have taken place? I suspect that it would most likely have happened in what we think of as the Regency period although not necessarily confined exactly to the reign of

the Prince Regent.

It was a period of great change in the country when fortunes were being made by those who were able to benefit from the improvements in production deriving from the Agricultural Revolution and subsequently the Industrial Revolution. The British Empire was also taking shape during the 17th century which opened up new trade routes and the creation of wealth for those involved in commerce with the colonies.

In aesthetic terms it was the time of the 'Picturesque Movement' whereby 'picturesque' became a visual criterion which the traveller could use to judge the beauty of the places he or she visited. The landscape paintings of such influential artists as Claude and Poussin, which tended to include sites of classical antiquity, added very much to interest in the 'picturesque' in this country.

Throughout the 18th century the 'Grand Tour' by aris-

tocrats from this country to visit and study sites of classical antiquity particularly in such countries as Italy and Greece had been viewed as an experience which defined an aristocratic education. In fact Dr Johnson is quoted as saying, "a man who has not been in Italy is always conscious of an inferiority, from his not having seen what it is expected a man should see."

It was thus a period when those who were rich from significant developments in agriculture, industry and commerce wished to demonstrate their importance by turning their properties into works of art, generally with a neo-classical emphasis and a picturesque setting. This new wealth facilitated the purchase of large acreages of agricultural land to create the picturesque settings. However, large houses such as Cobham Hall and Lees Court, Sheldwich (home of Earl Sondes) were already the focal point of large estates. It is said that Earl Darnley and Earl Sondes could travel from their homes to the Thames and Herne Bay respectively without leaving

land in their ownership. I do not know if this was still so in Regency times, but their landholdings would certainly have been extensive. Elsewhere, the drive to create picturesque settings for houses sometimes involved the removal of existing buildings or even the relocation of whole villages that were considered to be eyesores. The attractive village of Milton Abbas in Dorset is probably one of the most well known examples. It was created when the 1st Earl of Dorchester demolished the medieval village of Middleton on his estate in the 18th century and moved the settlement to its present location. In this connection and in many other cases it was fortuitous for Lancelot 'Capability' Brown, undoubtedly a talented landscape gardener, that he was in the right place at the right time for the fashion of the day.

Although some palaces such as Castle Howard and Blenheim Palace were built, for the most part it was the construction of Georgian mansions in moderately sized parkland which made an impact upon the rural scene in the latter part of the 18th century. There were of course some substantial houses dating from earlier times which were altered during the Regency period to improve accommodation and to keep up with fashion. Whereas hith-

erto larger houses were designed mainly to meet the needs of the family as a home, a much greater emphasis was now also being placed upon the provision of space for the purposes of entertainment. Family accommodation occupied a relatively much smaller but cosier part of the house. Anyone who has visited such large houses as Kedleston Hall in Derbyshire cannot fail to appreciate that, for example, the large impressive entrance hall and saloon (with a domed ceiling rising to 62 feet) are not there for normal domestic use. On a smaller scale both Cobham Hall and Lees Court have rooms which were originally intended to accommodate a large ball.

When considering the driving force of architectural fashion at this time it is interesting to compare, for instance, the development and subsequent remodeling of Cobham Hall with that of Osterley Park in West London which was built in the 1570's with similar Tudor brickwork and capped towers at the corners. The Tudor alterations to the medieval hall at Cobham took place from the 1570's at roughly the same time that Osterley was being built. Remodelling of Osterley by Robert Adam in 1761-80 also took place whilst major alterations to Cobham Hall were being carried out in the 1760's -

1780's. Clearly it was a time to keep up with architectural fashion if one could afford it.

Associated with these changes in house design there were related changes in society taking place amongst the aristocracy and upper classes. Perhaps understandably, the owners of the new or enlarged remodelled houses were proud of their new homes, and for many their elevated position in society, and wished to make their peers aware of this.

Those who have read the novels of Jane Austen will be aware that from time to time grand balls were held in the larger of the country houses. However, during the Regency it became popular to entertain guests not just to a ball but to stay over the weekend. The work of Telford and Macadam in developing the basis for modern road construction brought about a significant improvement in communication prior to the advent of the railways, which made it easier for guests to travel from further afield.

One such guest who was a good friend of John 4th Lord Darnley was Prince Puckler-Muskau. It seems from his journals that in 1815 and 1826-27 he visited not only Cobham Hall,

but a number of the stately homes and palaces in this country including Windsor Castle. Although the prince was generally in admiration of the lead taken by the British aristocracy in architectural design during the Regency, he like others of his standing in France and Germany at the time, was inclined to be critical of what they saw as a lack of noble lineage to medieval times amongst the upper classes in our country. It appears that perhaps, with an element of chagrin because they were not the beneficiaries of the changes which had taken place in Britain, the French and German aristocracy tended to look down upon the British aristocrats as 'newcomers' whose vast wealth was made in comparatively recent times.

Nevertheless, the prince was a longstanding friend of the 4th Earl and enjoyed his visits to Cobham Hall. He writes in his journal of relaxing in the evening at Cobham Hall where the Earl, who suffered from gout, rested, whilst other guests enjoyed evening conversation.

Weekend stays at the very large houses like Chatsworth, Blenheim etc. were frequent occurrences during the winter months but could involve many more guests. This placed considerable additional demands upon the household staff who would probably have been supplemented by some retainers accompanying the guests who would also have to be accommodated. Entertaining on this

scale naturally involved the provision of relatively vast quantities of food and drink, quite in contrast to the more frugal life style of the family throughout the rest of the year.

The Regency therefore, saw a move away from the nature of visits in earlier times which tended to be much shorter with formal entertainment provided by the hosts, to occasions when the guests would stay for a few days and could make use of the house to entertain themselves. This could be with informal activities such as billiards, riding, shooting, music, card games, etc. as they wished.

This is only a brief synopsis of the changes which were taking place in this country in Regency times that led to a new architectural fashion and social activity amongst the aristocracy and upper classes.

Malcolm says,

“Over the years I have visited many of the stately homes of England and there are many which I have yet to visit.

I have an interest in social change relating to these houses but cannot say that I dwell very much upon the lineage of former owners. My main interests lie in the architecture, the settings of the houses, interior decoration and the skills of those employed in their construction, decoration and furnishing. As I indicated at the beginning of this article, these are aspects of house development which never fail to impress me when I visit Cobham.

I hope that we and others will be able to enjoy the magnificence of Cobham Hall for many years to come.”