Georgian plasterwork in Britain:
historiography, interpretation, restoration.
A case study of Fairfax House, York.

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is his own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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ABSTRACT

Fairfax House, a mid-eighteenth-century house in York, was restored in the 1980s and is now a museum. The house is examined in this thesis as the focus of a complex process of material change and interpretative development over time. In particular, the thesis explores the significance of the interior decorative plasterwork at the house in its social, cultural, material and aesthetic dimensions. The plasterwork and the house that contains it are material objects that have been subject to change over time, not only in substance but in the way they have been perceived and the meanings they have accrued. The full exploration of this dynamic process requires that they are analysed not only in the context of the eighteenth century, when both were created, but also the twentieth century, when the house was restored. The plasterwork played a central role in that restoration because of the significance it had developed among York's 'neo-Georgians', the influential group of conservation-minded individuals centred on York Civic Trust, who sought to bring the perceived qualities of Georgian civilisation to bear upon aesthetics and civic culture of modern York. The restoration of Fairfax House, which involved not only the reshaping of the plasterwork's material substance but also of its meaning and interpretation, was central to that process. Plasterwork itself is a marginalised field of study in architectural history and the thesis begins with a consideration of the historiography of plasterwork and the issues that arise from its study. The thesis then explores the place of Fairfax House, and specifically its plasterwork, in the culture and imagination of twentieth-century York, analysing the development of interest in the 'Georgian' and in the conservation of eighteenth-century buildings in York, the restoration of 1982-4 itself, and ends with a case study involving a close reading of the plasterwork on the Great Staircase in the house and an analysis of the way it has been interpreted and presented.

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INTRODUCTION

Past and Present at Fairfax House

Fairfax House and the view of York

In 1950 the Curator of York City Art Gallery, Hans Hess, established a scheme to increase the representation of modern works in the gallery's local topographical collection by commissioning each year an established contemporary artist to create a view of York.[1] This scheme was known as the Evelyn Award in honour of Dr W. A. Evelyn (1860-1935), a noted amateur photographer of York and local antiquarian who had been a member of York City Council's Art Gallery Committee from 1912 to 1935, and whose own extensive collection of views of York had been bought by the gallery in 1931.[2] The first work to be produced under the Evelyn Award programme was by John Piper (1903-92), who painted 'View of York from Clifford's Tower' in 1951 (**Figure 0.1**).[3]

Piper's painting of York is in watercolour, using a colour palette both limited and intense in a manner typical of his post-abstract Neo-Romantic landscapes.[4] He chose an elevated viewpoint for his picture, producing a vista of York as seen from the top of Clifford's Tower at the south-eastern edge of the city centre, looking north-westwards towards the Minster. As with many of the landscapes and architectural images Piper produced from the late 1930s onwards, his vision of York embodies a powerful tension between abstraction and finely-textured representational detail. The great bulk of the Minster, seen almost side-on, floats in space, at once massive and weightless. Between the Minster and the viewer's

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[1] Hugh Murray, Sarah Riddick and Richard Green, *York Through the Eyes of the Artist* (York: York City Art Gallery, 1990), pp. 7-8. The Evelyn Award ran from 1950 to 1962.
[2] Hugh Murray, *Dr Evelyn's York: The Life and Work of a Pioneer of Conservation in the City between 1831 and 1935, Illustrated by Many Photographs of a Changing York from his Slide Collection* (York: Yorkshire Architectural and York Archaeological Society, 1982), pp. 16-17, 80-81.
[3] *York Civic Trust Annual Report 1950-51* (York: York Civic Trust, 1951), item XVIII; Peter B. Brown, *Views of York: Portrait of a City 1610 to Present Day* (York: York Civic Trust, 2012), p. 55; Murray et al, *York Through the Eyes of the Artist*, pp. 150, 170.
[4] *John Piper: Catalogue of an Exhibition held at the Tate Gallery, Nov. 30th 1983 – Jan. 22 1984* (London: Tate Gallery, 1983), pp. 113-14, 123.

Figure 0.1. John Piper, 'View of York from Clifford's Tower' (1951). Watercolour, body colour, ink and pastel. (York Art Gallery, reproduced with permission.)

position the churches of All Saints Pavement and St Mary's Castlegate throw up a cluster of sculpted masonry, towers and pinnacles, embracing almost protectively the distant western towers of the Minster between spire and lantern. The patterns and shapes that make up the city emerge in hints, shapes, flashes of colour and isolated details from the agitated darkness that surrounds these gleaming forms, as delicate as carved ivory. The architecture of the historic city dominates the painting and gives it depth and structure, but the foreground is filled with the complex texture of mid-twentieth-century York, a tangle of roof, window and wall, and the intricate interweaving of streets and buildings. In the centre and dominating the lower half of the picture is a substantial eighteenth-century brick building with a pedimented roof. This is 27 Castlegate, which in 1951 was called St George's Hall and was occupied by a cinema and dance hall, but which is today better known as Fairfax House (**Figure 0.2**).

The prominence given by John Piper to this rather shabby building and its dingy surroundings was in accordance with his artistic vision of the architectural palimpsest which made up the English urban landscape, in which the mundane,
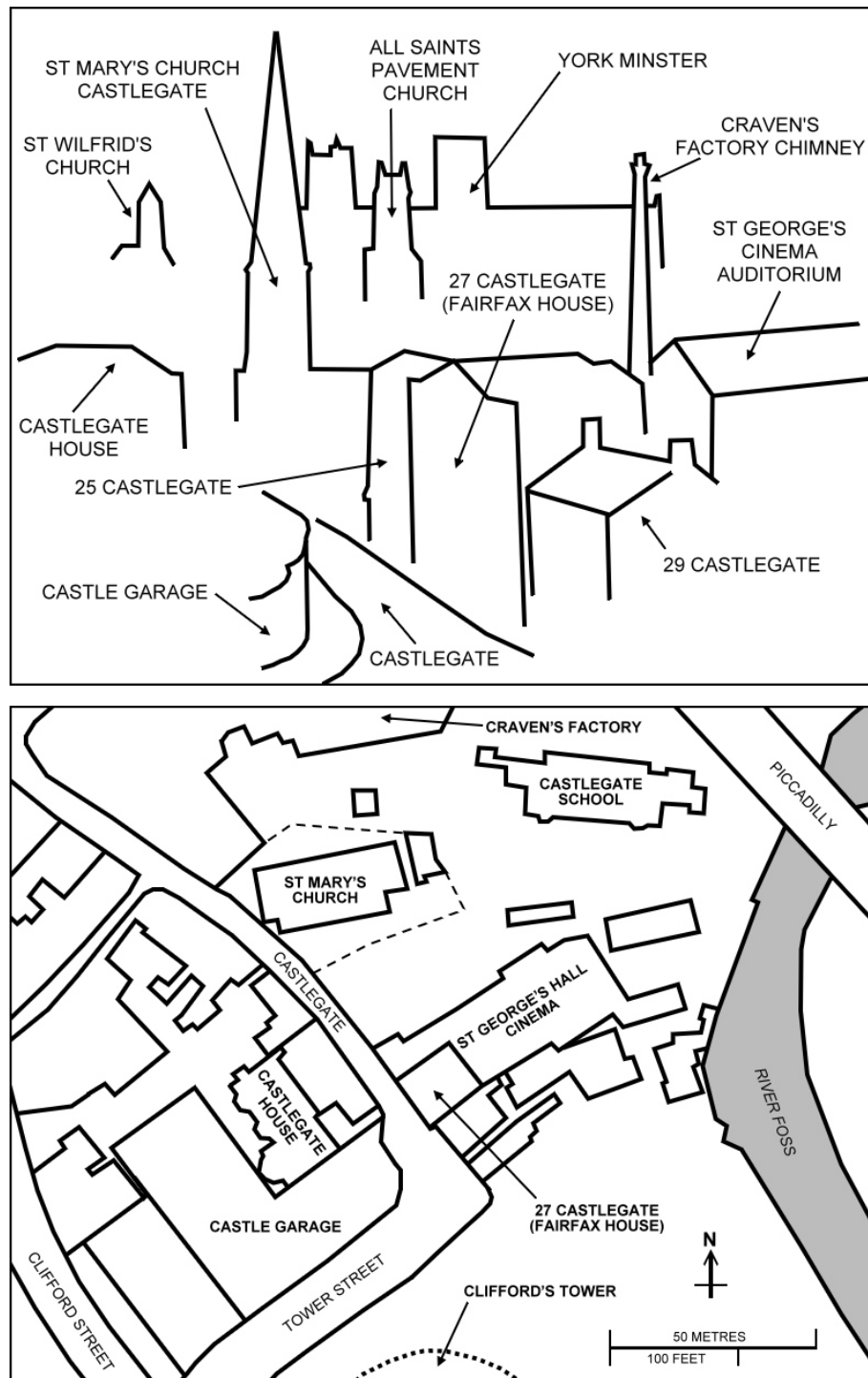
Figure 0.2. Top: diagram of the buildings shown in John Piper's 'View of York from Clifford's Tower'. Bottom: sketch map of the area shown in the painting as it was *c*.1950. (Author's diagram and map.)

ordinary and untidy was as worthy of attention as the grand, the exceptional and the celebrated.[5] This vision has a close affinity with what the architect George Pace (1915-75) called 'the York Aesthetic' in a paper published ten years after

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[5] Malcolm Yorke, *The Spirit of Place: Nine Neo-Romantic Artists and their Times* (London: Tauris, 2001), pp. 70-2, 90, 100.

Piper painted this picture.[6] 'The York Aesthetic', wrote Pace, 'is a very involved quality. It has little to do with the architectural importance, or the age of the buildings'.[7] It was rather the product of propinquity, contrast and set pieces, of irregularity, variety, human scale, and of 'public buildings, shops and houses all cheek by jowl', and it gave York – despite the city having 'very few individual buildings of outstanding architectural worth' – an 'Aesthetic very much greater than the sum of the parts and unsurpassed in this land'.[8] Pace's summary of the visual ingredients of the York Aesthetic could almost be a direct commentary on Piper's painting: 'The York Aesthetic contains an amalgam of silhouette (in which roofscape, interplay of towers, spires, chimneys, the bulk of the Minster, cooling towers, gas holders have their part), scale, materials, colour and texture'.[9] Buildings such as 27 Castlegate, the cinema and dance hall which had begun as a fine Georgian town house, are important constituent elements of that aesthetic. This building stands as a representative symbol of York's architectural fabric: in its varied history, its jumble of additions and alterations in varying architectural styles, its mingled grandeur and decay, its complex relationship with its surroundings, and its particular place in the collective imagination that has shaped York's development and the city's relationship with its own past and present.

To tell the story of 27 Castlegate is thus to tell to some degree the story of York itself. The part of the house's story which in the early 1950s lay in the future was a trajectory of neglect and decline followed by restoration and rebirth, and that too reflects an important element of York's twentieth-century history. The house is situated at the historically more respectable and wealthier western end of Castlegate adjacent to York Castle, but Castlegate, as street and district, was on the edges of York respectability in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with a mix of shops and houses of varying status, and retained that socially varied and marginal quality well into the twentieth century.[10] The fortunes of 27 Castlegate reflected that social character: the building's changing status, beginning as a

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[6] George G. Pace, 'The York Aesthetic', *York Civic Trust Annual Report 1961-62* (York: York Civic Trust, 1962), pp. 14-19.

[7] Pace, 'The York Aesthetic', p. 15.

[8] Pace, 'The York Aesthetic', p. 16.

[9] Pace, 'The York Aesthetic', p. 15, 17.

[10] Hih-Cheung Mui and Lorna H. Mui, *Shops and Shopkeeping in Eighteenth-Century England* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press / London: Routledge, 1989), p. 27; Matthew Jenkins, *The View From the Street: Housing and Shopping in York During the Long Eighteenth Century* (unpublished PhD thesis, University of York, 2013), pp. 41, 52-3.

substantial merchant's and aristocrat's town house, then a middle-class residence, then losing its residential character altogether to become a commercial establishment and a place of entertainment, before being 'restored' as a museum and heritage attraction, mirrors the changing history of Castlegate itself. Piper's painting shows the industrial and commercial character of the district in the 1950s: on the right is the bulky cinema auditorium, with rising above it the tall chimney of Craven's confectionary factory; on the left foreground is the Castle Garage, which occupied the corner site between Castlegate and Tower Street; and interspersed between these mundane structures are the remnants of the street's former aristocratic character, in the form of Fairfax House and Castlegate House, and the almost ghostly presence of York's medieval past in the three churches of St Mary's, All Saints, and the Minster.

Set within this context of transformation, the building now known as Fairfax House thus offers a promising subject for a 'building biography'. As Marvin Trachtenberg observed in 1988, such a study is an extremely flexible means of approaching the history of the built environment in all its complexity:

> It can range from the basic archaeological 'report' to the full-scale account of a building seen in its fullest material, visual, and socio-political terms. Indeed, because a building is a directly observable form, inherently anchored directly in context, it offers the historian the perfect subject for the full range of approaches – technological, formalist, iconographic, social, urbanist – in a compact, concentrated manner.[11]

Building biographies combine the human and the material, reflecting the idea that 'as people and objects gather time, movement and change, they are constantly transformed, and these transformations of person and object are tied up with each other'.[12] The 'human biography' of this dynamic is not necessarily the biographies of particular individuals, although such biographies do have a role to play where available, but can also be 'biography' in a more fragmented, partial or generalised

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[11] Marvin Trachtenberg, 'Some observations on recent architectural history', *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 70, no. 2 (June 1988), pp. 208-41, here p. 215.

[12] Chris Godsen and Yvonne Marshall, 'The cultural biography of objects', *World Archaeology*, vol. 31, no. 2 (October 1999), pp. 169-78, here p. 169.

form, drawing together the threads, themes and patterns of a range of lives that existed in relationship with a specific building. Thus the history of Fairfax House can be read as a processual interaction between the physical form of the building and significant individuals associated with it: in the eighteenth century, Viscount Fairfax and his daughter Anne, who refurbished the house in 1760-63, and their architect John Carr; in the nineteenth century, residents of the house such as Sir John Lister-Kaye and Mary Ann Pemberton, and the members of the Ancient Order of Foresters who bought the house in 1865; and in the twentieth century John Shannon and other leading figures in York Civic Trust, who restored the building, and Francis Johnson, architect of the restoration. Meanwhile, the 'biographies' of individual buildings can collectively contribute to an overview of a district, just as the biographies of individual people contribute to a wider social history.[13]

Meaning, time and materiality

Such approaches offer a valuable means of exploring the complex patterns of use that shape a given structure's history, but that history is itself not merely a matter of patterns of residence and use, changes in status, and material alterations made. Buildings are more than the physical enclosures for social and economic activities, or the stationary pivots around which such activities revolve. There is also for every building a less tangible but nonetheless crucial cultural dimension to its existence: a presence in meaning, imagination and memory. To put the matter concisely, throughout its history, but perhaps most of all during its twentieth-century history, Fairfax House was as important for what it *meant* as for what it *was*. Without that deeply-rooted and potent cultural dimension to its biography, Fairfax House would not have occupied the place it did in the imagination of York's 'new Georgians' between the 1930s and the 1980s, and would not have achieved rebirth, and the creation of new significance, in the restoration of 1983-4. It is through this imaginative process that the twentieth-century house was linked to the house of the eighteenth century in direct and resonant ways. The following report of an event that took place in early 1983 to

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[13] Jenkins, *View From the Street*, pp. 1-2, 36ff.

mark the beginning of restoration work on the house, published in the York Civic Trust *Annual Report* for 1982-3, provides a suggestive example:

> The superb qualities of Fairfax House, the plasterwork on the walls and ceilings, the cast and wrought iron work, the exquisite carving on almost every inch of wood in the house were the work of craftsmen of the 18th century – Joseph Cortese, Maurice Tobin, and Daniel Shillitoe amongst others. We felt that it was desirable before the work started to gather together all those engaged on the work of restoration to remind them that they were about to embark on the restoration of one of the finest houses in England and literally following in the footsteps of master craftsmen of an earlier age. So they met together at a reception given by the Trust in Castlegate House, – also by John Carr and opposite Fairfax House – one afternoon in January 1983. So there they all were – the plasterers, the decorators, the wood carvers, the joiners, the brick layers and carpenters, labourers and (so important) the apprentices, and having given them beer and sandwiches and tea and cakes we told them of the great and challenging task which lay before them. We spoke to them of John Carr, of Cortese, of Tobin and Shillitoe and we urged them to bring to their various tasks a sense of dedication and a realisation of the splendour of the house they were working on and what a challenge it would be to all their various skills. Elsewhere in this report will be found a photograph of them all standing in front of Fairfax House. May it prove in the years ahead to be a potent reminder of the 1983 restoration of a 1762 house and of the men engaged in it.[14]

This text, with its accompanying photograph (**Figure 0.3**) provides the kind of evidence which can be incorporated very effectively and usefully into the 'building biography' of Fairfax House, relating its restoration directly to episodes

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[14] York Civic Trust *Annual Report 1982-83* (York: York Civic Trust, 1983), pp. 8-9.

Figure 0.3. This group photograph of people involved in the restoration of Fairfax House was published in the York Civic Trust *Annual Report* for 1982-83, captioned 'A photograph for the archives the men engaged on the 1983 restoration of Fairfax House photographed in front of it'. In front are (left to right): Francis Johnson, architect; John Shannon, Chairman of York Civic Trust; and J. P. Birch, the primary contractor for the restoration. Behind them are the workers who carried out the restoration. Several of the figures in the background were clearly cut from other photographs and added to this picture to make it complete. (Source: York Civic Trust *Annual Report 1982-83*, illustration insert p. II.)

in the biographies of the craftsmen and others who contributed to that restoration project, as well as those of the leading figures in York Civic Trust; perhaps most notably the then chairman John Shannon, who wrote this account. Yet its significance goes far beyond that, revealing as it does the metaphysical dimension of the house's own biography as symbol and metaphor, and as a *transcendent* presence, literally transcending the barriers of time to unite the craftsmen of the 1980s with their predecessors of the 1760s and placing the one group in communion with the other in pursuit of a great endeavour – the resurrection of Fairfax House. The full significance of that 'resurrection', and the rebirth of the house after decades of neglect and decline, is a central theme of this thesis.

If the craftsmen who worked on the 1980s restoration of Fairfax House were to establish a communion with their eighteenth-century forerunners the obvious connection would be through the material substance of the house itself. This was made explicit in the passage above in the references to the plasterwork, ironwork and carved woodwork with which the modern craftsmen would be working. The physical continuity of the house was an essential element of its biography, its pedigree and its identity. The fact that the Fairfax House of the 1980s contained a large proportion of the original materials, and, perhaps above all, the original decoration of the middle of the eighteenth century, was constantly brought into

publicity and interpretation materials produced by the Civic Trust and the house itself. 'The great majority of Fairfax House's original decoration had thankfully survived … decorative detail was virtually intact', observed the guidebook to the house published in 1989.[15] Restoring the decoration connected the 1980s craftsmen to their 1760s predecessors: 'it revealed work of great accomplishment. It also gave our present day craftsmen a clear design to work from and resulted in replacement carving every bit as good as that of 225 years ago'.[16]

Questions of identity

It is this relationship between twentieth-century and eighteenth-century York, refracted through the prism of Fairfax House and specifically of its interior decoration, that lies at the heart of this study. Biography, whether of an individual, a community, or a building, imposes order on disordered reality, and through its narrative strategies constructs a stable identity for its subject rather than simply reflecting or describing it.[17] As has already been made clear, Fairfax House has a rich and varied history and is a mutable rather than a stable entity. The very name 'Fairfax House' is a modern creation, emerging in the years around the Second World War as a new consciousness of the building's Georgian identity took root in York.[18] During the time that the Fairfaxes were in residence there, the house was generally called 'Viscount Fairfax's House',[19] while it was subsequently most commonly referred to by its number, 27 Castlegate (which for a period in the mid-nineteenth century was changed to 31 Castlegate), although it was also sometimes called 'Castlegate House', a name confusingly also used for the house opposite.[20] From 1865 to the First World War it was called the 'Friendly Societies' Hall'

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[15] Peter Brown, *Fairfax House York: An Illustrated History and a Guide* (York: York Civic Trust, 1989), pp. 11, 15.

[16] Brown, *Fairfax House York* (1989), p. 30.

[17] Miriam Fuchs, 'Autobiography and geography: introduction', *Biography*, vol. 25, no. 1 (Winter 2002), pp. i-ix, here pp. iv-v; Giovanni Levi, 'The uses of biography', in Hans Renders and Binne de Haan (eds), *Theoretical Discussions of Biography: Approaches from History, Microhistory and Life Writing* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014), pp. 59-74, here p. 66; Ira Brucel Nadel, *Biography: Fiction, Fact and Form* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1984), pp. 151ff, 192.

[18] 'The Georgian Group', *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, 30 June 1947, p. 2.

[19] Letters and other references to the house in the Fairfax Papers at the North Yorkshire County Record Office commonly use this phrase, or variants of it.

[20] *Yorkshire Gazette*, 5 August 1843, p. 1; 1851 Census of England and Wales, National Archives, HO 107/2353 f. 520 p. 8.

Figure 0.4. View of the main façade of Fairfax House on Castlegate. The five-bay pedimented building in the centre is Fairfax House itself (27 Castlegate). The building on the left, where the entrance to the modern town house museum is located, is 25 Castlegate, an early nineteenth-century house which has been part of the Fairfax House ensemble since it was acquired by the cinema company and incorporated into the building in 1919. On the far side of 25 Castlegate are flats built as part of the Coppergate development in the 1980s. The building on the right is 29 Castlegate which dates from the 1840s and is not part of Fairfax House. On the left can be seen the 1980s Hilton Hotel, and above it the spire of St Mary's Castlegate church. (Author's photograph, September 2013.)

while for most of the twentieth century it was called St George's Hall or St George's Cinema; and upon acquiring the house for restoration in the 1980s, York Civic Trust considered calling it 'Fairfax House (Noel Terry Memorial)' but finally settled on 'Fairfax House', the name by which it is known today and which explicitly links it to its aristocratic eighteenth-century past.[21]

There are consistent strands running through the tapestry of the house's history, notably the status of its architect and the fine decoration of its interiors. John Carr (1723-1807) was the leading York architect of the eighteenth century, who worked mainly in the north of England and whose commissions included

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[21] *Yorkshire Herald*, 31 March 1900, p. 14; *Guide to the City of York* (York Chamber of Trade, 1924), p. 137; 'Fairfax House', *York Civic Trust Annual Report 1981-82* (York: York Civic Trust, 1982), p. 17.

town and country houses, public buildings, churches and bridges.[22] He is frequently described as the architect of Fairfax House when it would be more accurate to describe him as the architect of the *refurbishment* of Fairfax House, but the association of his name with the house is of great importance for its perceived architectural and historical status. The house is also celebrated for its interior decorative plasterwork, which was created in the 1760s by the Wakefield plasterworker Giuseppe Cortese (*fl*. 1725-78), who was of Swiss origin, and the York plasterworker James Henderson (*fl*. 1755-87).[23] The plasterwork is in a sophisticated Rococo style and is in an excellent state of preservation. It embodies and expresses the high status of the building as an aristocratic town house during the residence of Viscount Fairfax and his daughter Anne during the 1760s, but it also occupies a uniquely important place in the modern re-creation of the house as a restored Georgian town house museum. It is therefore essential to consider the plasterwork against its eighteenth- *and* twentieth-century contexts. The fabric of the house has a complex history and it is impossible to assign a clear 'building date' to it, but the origins of the building in its current form lie in two historical periods: the middle decades of the eighteenth century, when the town house was constructed on its present site, and the middle-to-late twentieth century, when the house was restored and the contemporary town house museum was created. Accordingly, this thesis explores both periods.

The original intention of this study was to explore the plasterwork as a case study in the mid-eighteenth-century architectural decorative (or ornamental) arts. The coherence of the plasterwork ensemble at the house – all created at the same time, and all surviving almost complete to the present day – and its high quality, both artistically and physically, make it an important example of mid-Georgian decorative art. The fact that the plasterwork is in a town house rather than a country house, that the house is in a provincial city (York) and not in London, that its creation involved a Yorkshire architect of the first importance (John Carr) and important Yorkshire plasterworkers (Giuseppe Cortese and James Henderson) for clients who were Catholic and – if only in a sentimental form – almost certainly

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[22] For Carr's career, see his entry in the *Dictionary of National Biography*; H. M. Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary of English Architects 1660-1840* (London: John Murray, 1954), pp. 122-5; Brian Wragg, *The Life and Work of John Carr of York*, ed Giles Worsley (York: Oblong Books, 2000).

[23] Summaries of Cortese's and Henderson's careers can be found in Geoffrey Beard, *Decorative Plasterwork in Great Britain* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1975), pp. 213, 223-4.

Jacobite, combine to add further layers of interest to the Fairfax House plasterwork as a subject of study. Yet, as work on this thesis progressed, it became clear that as a cultural phenomenon as well as a physical and artistic one, the plasterwork cannot be understood without a thorough examination of its twentieth-century history, and in particular the role that Fairfax House, and crucially its plasterwork, played in the revival of the 'Georgian' as a sociocultural agenda for the reshaping of the city of York in the modern era. In this process the York Civic Trust, founded in 1947, has played a central role. It was the Civic Trust which in the 1980s bought Fairfax House and restored it, creating the Georgian town house museum which is the house today.

Fairfax House has been in a sense mythologised and incorporated into the 'Georgian' as the York elite's master-myth for the modern age, and the house's plasterwork decoration (the work itself and the circumstances of its creation) have played a central role in that process. The plasterwork does not exist in a value-free aesthetic vacuum but is constantly created and re-created, interpreted and re-interpreted, in a process of making meanings. Understanding that process requires the crossing of various disciplinary and chronological boundaries, but for an artistic creation that exists simultaneously in time, space and the imagination, that is both inevitable and, I would argue, desirable. This approach has influenced the organisation and focus of the thesis.

Thesis organisation

The story of the Fairfax House plasterwork is in the end the story of Fairfax House itself, and to some extent vice versa, and this thesis seeks always to relate the plasterwork of the house to the house as a whole, and to put both fully in their context. As discussed above, this does not mean just the eighteenth-century context but requires sufficient attention be paid to the twentieth-century context as well. As a result the two periods are intertwined throughout.

The first chapter, 'A House in Castlegate', seeks to set the scene with an account of the house as a physical and historical presence in the York landscape. The concept of the 'building biography', discussed above, has proved of value here, illuminating the significance of the house as a physical presence and a

presence in the lives of the people who lived their lives in and around it. The chapter uses textual, physical and visual evidence to explore the place of Fairfax House in York from the eighteenth century to the twentieth, not only telling the story of the house but drawing out themes and questions to which subsequent chapters will return. This chapter ends with a brief survey of the interior of the house, its layout and decoration, which I hope will give the reader unfamiliar with the house a sense of its interior spaces and decorative treatments.

Chapter two, 'Problems in Plaster', addresses plasterwork as a focus of scholarly study, and in particular the ambiguities that have always beset its study as a phenomenon occupying a place of multiple intersecting marginalities within architectural history, as a decorative art and as a craft practice. These ambiguities have consequences for the way plasterwork has been perceived, interpreted and written about. In particular, with reference to the history of Fairfax House, the decorative plasterwork of the eighteenth century has been perceived and constructed in ways that reflect judgements of its artistry, craftsmanship, aesthetic merit and ideological content that have often been hostile. As opinions of 'the Georgian' have changed, so has the significance of Georgian plasterwork changed.

Many of the themes addressed in chapter two are returned to in more detail in the succeeding two chapters, which deal with the historiography of plasterwork. Plasterwork's own histories have tended to be told in a partial and fragmentary way, while the history of those histories has never been written. Chapters three and four constitute an effort to compile, for the first time, a study of the historiography of plasterwork. Chapter three, 'Writing the History of Plasterwork: The Nineteenth Century', explores the ways in which the low-profile craft of plasterwork gained a history in the nineteenth century, reflecting the desire of some practitioners and writers to claim a higher status for the craft, and to integrate its story with architectural and decorative arts history as a whole – a project that reflected the Arts and Crafts emphasis on integrating the arts and removing divisions between 'high' and 'applied' arts. For the plasterwork of the eighteenth century this characteristically resulted in an attitude of condemnation for failings in aesthetics and craftsmanship, a critique particularly applied to the Rococo, and this question is considered in detail. The same theme is traced into the modern era in chapter four, 'Writing the History of Plasterwork: The

Twentieth Century'. The period 1900-1930 saw a reassessment of the Georgian, and this affected the view of Georgian plasterwork, with writers such as Margaret Jourdain and Laurence Turner seeking to place eighteenth-century plasterwork in its social and historical context. With the writers of the post-war period, most notably Geoffrey Beard, the history of plasterwork entered the modern art-historical landscape, but continued to occupy a marginal position, recognised neither as architectural nor as decorative arts history, or as both and therefore not meriting attention in its own right.

The two historiographical chapters have sought to establish one important context for a proper understanding of the Fairfax House plasterwork: how plasterwork itself has been perceived, interpreted and written about. Chapter five, 'Recovering the Georgian in Twentieth-Century York', is concerned to establish the other vital context: how Fairfax House itself was interpreted and represented in reference to the perception among an important section of the York elite that the Georgian era offered a model – aesthetically and socially, but also morally and spiritually – for the modern world, and specifically for the city of York. Through the York Georgian Society and the York Civic Trust a model of Georgian York was created to offer solutions to modern problems of urban aesthetics and conservation, but for society more widely considered as well. Fairfax House, with its history and its decorative qualities, became a physical epitome of this ideal, and its ultimate rescue and restoration after decades of neglect and decline served as an epitome of the York Georgian project.

Chapter six, 'The Modern Histories of Fairfax House', turns the focus to Fairfax House itself and the place of the plasterwork in its varied twentieth-century history. The history of the house and its various transformations is considered in detail, with its consequences for the plasterwork and the way it was perceived. The various conceptions of the house and the way in which it might be conserved and re-created as a museum or other heritage attraction is considered, and the history of the ultimate acquisition of the house by the York Civic Trust and its restoration, is summarised.

Chapter seven, 'Anatomy of a Restoration', considers the restoration itself, and particularly its consequences for the plasterwork and other aspects of the house's interior. The issue of restoration itself is analysed with specific reference to the issues of interiors and the question of selecting one moment in a given

building's history and elevating it to a normative status by presenting the house and its contents as constituting a reconstruction of a particular historical moment.

The final chapter, 'Ambiguous Ornament', considers the plasterwork in detail against the background of the contexts established by the earlier chapters. Those chapters explored the ways in which the varied histories and interpretations of the house over 250 years impacted upon, and drew upon, the perceptions of the aspect of the house held up as its single most important element: the interior decorative plasterwork. Three issues are considered: the creation of the plasterwork and in particular issues of attribution, which have had an important influence on the restoration and re-interpretation of the house; the interpretation of the symbolic content of the plasterwork; and the place of the plasterwork at Fairfax House in wider plasterwork history.

CHAPTER 1

A House in Castlegate

Inscribing the past

Anyone walking through the streets of York will notice that there are many plaques giving information about the buildings, monuments and sites of the historic city. They are generally made of bronze, lettered in white, and bear the lion and fleur-de-lis emblem of York Civic Trust, the body responsible for them. In 1968 the Civic Trust described 'the provision of suitable plaques on buildings of historic and architectural interest' as one of the Trust's 'most important functions'.[1] This programme of public interpretation, the inscribing of histories into the substance of York's streets and buildings, is indeed a key element in shaping the city and the way it is experienced around a certain vision of its past. When Marie Tyler-McGraw wrote that 'Public monuments and displays are a form of civic education, and control of their sites, forms, and inscriptions is control of the meaning of local history',[2] her observation was made with reference to the particularly fraught and contested historical landscapes of civil war and slavery in the American South. However, her point is as applicable to the streets and buildings of York as it is to those of Richmond, Virginia. The handsome bronze plaques used by York Civic Trust to mark out buildings and sites of historical interest across the city can certainly be said to fulfil Tyler-McGraw's conceptualisation: they are self-consciously educative, ordering and normative, applying a web of meaning to the urban fabric and making collectively a subtle but potent statement about York and its past.[3]

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[1] 'Plaques', *York Civic Trust Annual Report 1967-68* (York: York Civic Trust, 1968), p. 10.
[2] Marie Tyler-McGraw, 'Southern comfort levels: race, heritage tourism, and the Civil War in Richmond', in James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton (eds), *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), pp. 151-68, here p. 157.
[3] Alan Whitworth, 'Bronze plaque guide to York', in Alan Whitworth (ed), *Aspects of York: Discovering Local History* (Barnsley: Wharncliffe Books, 2000), pp. 71-6.

The Trust began fixing 'bronze plaques with enamelled lettering, and bearing the emblem of the Civic Trust and the Coat of Arms of other insignia of the building or person being honoured'[4] on buildings and monuments of historical and architectural interest in 1951.[5] The scheme is part-funded by York City Council and has been since it began,[6] but the plaques themselves are produced to a Civic Trust design and, while some incorporate the City of York coat of arms, many contain no reference to City Council involvement. The plaques always feature symbols appropriate to the site, event or person being memorialised, commonly heraldic devices such as shields of arms and badges but also other designs such as a railway locomotive (York railway station), a representation of St Alcuin of York (Alcuin College, University of York), and a coin bearing the head of the Roman Emperor Constantine (outside York Minster). The choice of these symbols was a matter over which the Trust took much time and trouble: in 1957, for example, there was 'Considerable discussion' at the Trust's Executive Committee meeting over the suggestion that the plaque being proposed for the King's Manor should display the Civic Trust badge, the arms of the City of York, the Royal Arms as they were when St. Mary's Abbey was founded, and the arms of King Henry VIII. The Dean of York, Eric Milner-White, objected to the inclusion of the arms of Henry VIII, while several members of the committee 'thought it unnecessary to include the Civic Trust badge and the City Arms'.[7] This process, and the inclusion of the Civic Trust emblem on most of the plaques, declared the Trust's 'ownership' of the version of the past being presented – although it must be pointed out that the Trust frequently expressed its gratitude to the City Council 'for joining with us in the erection of these plaques'.[8] For the Trust, typically, the plaques were the concrete expression of an educative purpose.

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[4] John Shannon, *York Civic Trust: The First Fifty Years* (York: York Civic Trust, 1996), pp. 11-12. The *Annual Report* for 1951-52 (unpaginated) records that 'the first instalment of commemorative plaques' to be put in place numbered six.

[5] A scheme to mark out sites regarded as notable in York in this way was envisaged from the very beginning of the Civic Trust: see 'Projects', *York Civic Trust Annual Report 1946-7* (York: York Civic Trust, 1947), unpaginated, pp. 8-9 and 'Commemorative plaques', *York Civic Trust Annual Report 1947-48* (York: York Civic Trust, 1948), pp. 6-7.

[6] Shannon, *York Civic Trust*, p. 12.

[7] Meeting of the Executive Committee of the Council of York Civic Trust, 24 July 1957, minute no. 498. Fairfax House Archive. The King's Manor plaque ultimately bore the royal arms of the Tudors and the Stuarts. This plaque was subsequently replaced and the current version bears, ironically enough, the badge of York Civic Trust and the arms of the City of York.

[8] 'Plaques', *York Civic Trust Annual Report 1975-76* (York: York Civic Trust, 1976), p. 25. See also *York Civic Trust Annual Report 1967-68* (York: York Civic Trust, 1968), p. 10 and *York Civic Trust Annual Report 1978-79* (York: York Civic Trust, 1979), p. 37.

'The Trust has always believed that history should be made to come alive', commented the *Annual Report* for 1971-72, 'and that both citizen and visitor should be made aware of the significance of a house or a street name or some other facet of the City's character'.[9] The plaques are thus intended to be of benefit to the city and to enrich the experience of York's historic streets and buildings for residents and tourists, but the judgement as to what deserves commemoration, and in what form, is entirely the Civic Trust's.[10]

For most of their history there has been no standard design for the Trust's plaques: they vary in size, typeface and layout according to their location and the commemorative function they perform.[11] There is, however, a basic pattern, established at the beginning of the scheme, which is followed by the majority of the plaques erected since the 1950s: a rectangular panel made of bronze with the name of the place or person being commemorated in capitals at the top and an inscription of four or five lines below giving further information, with the text flanked by two roundels bearing suitable emblems. In 1981, reviewing the first thirty years of the plaque scheme, the Trust commented that 'The provision of these plaques throughout the city has frequently been the subject of appreciative comment by visitor and citizen alike, and they have unquestionably attained a reputation for authority and excellence'.[12]

Questionable histories and complex chronologies

Fairfax House is marked by three York Civic Trust plaques, one commemorating St George's Hall Cinema and mounted on the old cinema entrance, while the other two refer to Fairfax House itself. These latter two are identical and were erected following the 1983-84 restoration, one on the Castlegate façade and the other on

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[9] 'Plaques', *York Civic Trust Annual Report 1971-72* (York: York Civic Trust, 1972), p. 16.

[10] Peter Brown, then Chairman of York Civic Trust, observed in 2015 that the Trust had 'until recently, functioned in "silo-mode", considering itself one of a small number of experts engaged in the heritage decision-making process in York': *York: What Has Heritage Ever Done For Us?* (University of Leeds/AHRC, 2016), p. 10.

[11] See, for example, the plaque marking the surviving wall of York's Roman fortress, erected in 1953, *York Civic Trust Annual Report 1953-54* (York: York Civic Trust, 1954), plate 2B, which features a single roundel reproducing the design of a Roman coin; and the plaque erected outside the Minster School in 1968 to commemorate Alcuin of York, *York Civic Trust Annual Report 1968-69* (York: York Civic Trust, 1969), illustration facing p. 25, which uses a cursive chancery typeface rather than the Roman face used in the majority of the Trust's plaques, presumably in a reference to Alcuin's role as scribe and scholar.

[12] 'Plaques', *York Civic Trust Annual Report 1980-81* (York: York Civic Trust, 1981), p. 19.
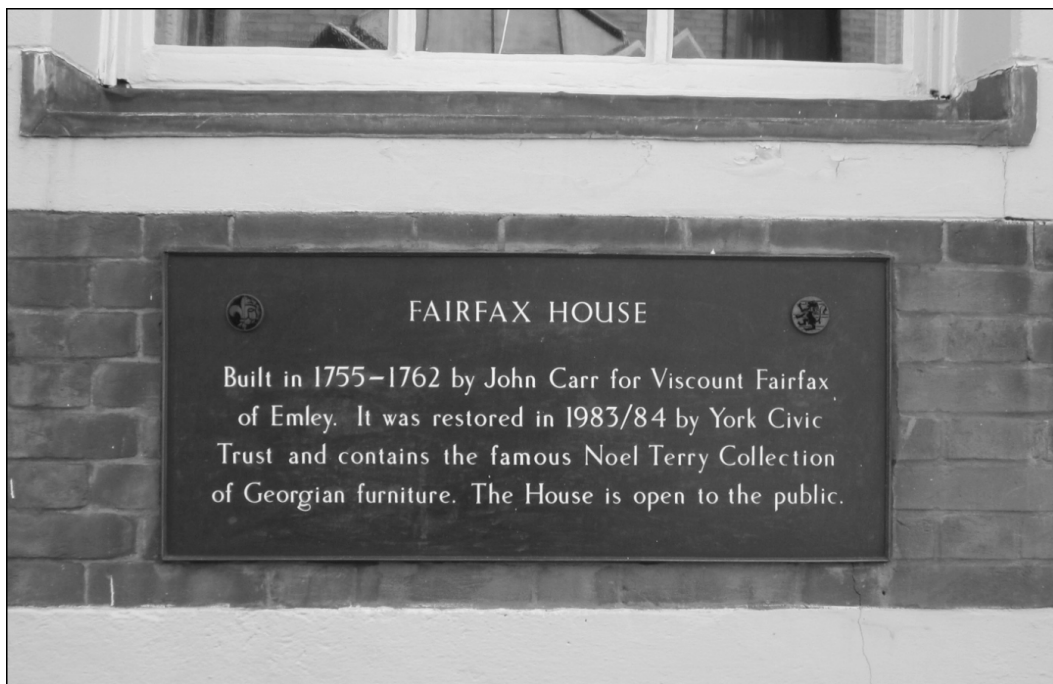
Figure 1.1. York Civic Trust plaque, *c*.1983, on the Castlegate front of Fairfax House. There is another plaque at the rear of the house, facing the Coppergate Centre, which is of identical design. (Author's photograph, June 2011.)

the rear boundary wall of the property (**Figure 1.1**). The Fairfax House plaques follow the common Civic Trust 'house style' summarised above. An inscription occupies the centre of the plaque with roundels on the left and right sides, with a roundel on the left bearing the badge of the Civic Trust and another on the right displaying the arms of the Fairfax family. The inscription reads:

FAIRFAX HOUSE

Built in 1755-1762 by John Carr for Viscount Fairfax of Emley.

It was restored in 1983/84 by York Civic Trust and contains the

famous Noel Terry Collection of Georgian furniture. The House

is open to the public.

The format of such commemorative plaques, and the restricted length of the text that can be accommodated, leaves little scope for nuance or ambiguity. In this sense the York Civic Trust plaques are typical of other categories of the same phenomenon such as the 'Blue Plaques' scheme which began in London in the 1860s (only being extended nationwide from 1998) and is now administered by

English Heritage.[13] The Blue Plaques are essentially biographical, concerned with buildings as presences in the lives of individuals identified as 'notable': as Lilian Chee has observed, a Blue Plaque on a house 'constructs architectural meaning performatively by announcing the primacy of the occupant's life in the history of the house … over architectural form, style, typology, or scale' and, by 'overwriting' the building's history with the relatively brief duration of that individual's occupancy, disrupts or at least misrepresents the 'temporal narrative' of that history.[14] York Civic Trust plaques, while strictly local in application, have a rather wider remit than the Blue Plaques with their biographical focus: in York many of the plaques do memorialise significant individuals, such as John Goodricke, George Hudson and Joseph Rowntree, but many others serve to mark specific buildings and locations as significant, from fragments of Roman wall to the site of the first flower show held by the Ancient Society of York Florists, and have no biographical element.[15]

The York Civic Trust plaques are also overwhelmingly positive and progressive in their presentation of York's past. Like the Blue Plaques, the Trust's plaques represent a consciously selective interpretation of the past, giving authority to that interpretation not only through their content but through their typefaces, layout, and the durable materials of which they are made. They claim the authority to mediate and shape the interaction between the present-day urban community and its past. Each has a relationship not only with its specific site but also with the network of other plaques and the collective interpretation of the urban realm that they constitute.[16] As the cultural geographer Derek Alderman has noted, 'Memorials, monuments, street signs, historical markers … give the past a tangibility and familiarity' and make 'the history they commemorate appear to be

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[13] Charles Mynors, *Listed Buildings, Conservation Areas and Monuments* (1999; 3rd edn, London: Sweet and Maxwell, 2006), p. 180; Caroline Harper, 'The politics of memory in the urban landscape: London's Blue Plaques', in Miles Ogborn, Alison Blunt, Pyrs Gruffudd, David Pinder and Jon May, *Cultural Geography in Practice* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 151-3.

[14] Lilian Chee, 'An architecture of twenty words: intimate details of a London blue plaque house', in Hilde Heynen and Gülsüm Baydar (eds), *Negotiating Domesticity: Spatial Productions of Gender in Modern Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 181-94, here p. 183.

[15] By 2016 there were over eighty York Civic Trust plaques in place across York. A partial list covering 1951 to 1995 can be found in the list of York Civic Trust grants in Shannon, *York Civic Trust*, pp. 127-134, while a list was published in the *Annual Report 1998-99*, pp. 56-7, which sought to include all the plaques extant in 1998.

[16] On the collective presence of historical markers in the 'heritage' landscape see Emily Orley, 'Places remember events: towards an ethics of encounter', in Hazel Andrews and Les Roberts (eds), *Liminal Landscapes: Travel, Experience and Places In-between* (New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 36-49.

part of the natural order of things'.[17] Many such plaques – this is very true of the Blue Plaques, but is also characteristic of many York Civic Trust examples – are fixed high on the walls of buildings, compelling readers literally to look up to them. The Fairfax House plaques, it has to be said, are mounted low on the front and rear façades, but nonetheless radiate durability, reliability and authority. Yet the brief account of the house's history they present is significantly misleading.

Every element of the text presented by the Fairfax House plaques is open to challenge as fallacious or at least questionable. The house was *not* built in 1755-62: its building and completion dates are not known with any certainty, and (as with almost all buildings) the complex, interwoven processes of construction, reconstruction and restoration that produced the Fairfax House we see today do not lend themselves to any straightforward chronological labelling. Nor was the house 'built by' John Carr. It is understandable (and in keeping with the tendencies of 'historical marker' projects such as the plaques) that the association of an architectural 'great man' with the house should be highlighted, and Carr's involvement in rebuilding and refurbishing is attested by documentary records as well as stylistic evidence. However, the building was already standing when he began work upon it, and the precise extent and nature of his involvement remains ambiguous and unclear. The statement that the house was built 'by John Carr for Viscount Fairfax of Emley' similarly makes clear and straightforward a situation which was in reality neither. The Viscount was indeed Carr's client at Fairfax House, but the house Carr worked upon was an extant one which the Viscount had bought. That purchase did not take place until 1760, further undermining the assertion that the house was 'built for' the Viscount between 1755-62. Carr did not *build* the house, and the house was not *built for* the Viscount.

The plaque text goes on to record the restoration of the house and the Civic Trust's responsibility for it. That the claim of ownership embodied in the Trust's plaques is more than usually justified in the case of Fairfax House is thus made amply clear, and the strong implication for the reader, given the close association between John Carr's 'building' of the house in 1755-62 and the Trust's restoration in 1983-84, is that the Trust returned the house to its condition as built 'by' John

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[17] Derek H. Alderman, '"History by the spoonful" in North Carolina: the textual politics of State Highway historical markers', *Southeastern Geographer*, vol. 52, no. 4 (Winter 2012), pp. 355-73, here p. 356.

Carr 'for' Viscount Fairfax. Not only does this suggest an association of a kind between Carr's enterprise and the Trust's, it also reflects a notion of historical continuity, linking the best of present-day York with the monuments, figures and cultural character of the York of the past – a continuity maintained by the Trust as custodians of York's heritage. The reference to the Noel Terry collection reflects the importance of the furniture to the restoration of the house, and the way in which the restored house was conceived: as discussed in later chapters, it was the gift of the furniture which ultimately persuaded York City Council to sell Fairfax House to the Trust and which thus made the restoration possible. Furthermore, the financial resources of the Terry family's Noel G. Terry Charitable Trust were put at the Civic Trust's disposal and played an important part in underwriting the entire restoration programme. In the light of this the Civic Trust intended to perpetuate the Terry name in the full title of the restored house:

> We intend to describe the House as 'Fairfax House (Noel Terry Memorial)' and this it will undoubtedly be. So let us record for posterity the unbounded gratitude we feel at the generosity inherited from him by the family of a man who in his lifetime made such a tremendous contribution to the City he loved.[18]

This proposal was not acted upon and the few words on the Fairfax House plaques are almost the only surviving reminder of it. The plaque text ends by stressing the enduring public-spirited nature of the Civic Trust's enterprise: 'The House is open to the public'.

Architect and attribution

Not every account of Fairfax House produced by York Civic Trust is as straightforward as that embodied in brief text to be seen on the plaques mounted on the house itself. Elsewhere the Trust amply acknowledges the complexity of the house's chronology and building history, and recognises the ambiguity over the precise contribution of John Carr to the structure as restored today. In the Trust's *Annual Report* for 1983-4 it was written that 'The shell of Fairfax House

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[18] 'Fairfax House', *York Civic Trust Annual Report 1981-82* (York: York Civic Trust, 1982), p. 17.

was built during the ownership of Joseph Marsh in 1755-56. The Architect is not known'.[19] The acknowledged anonymity of the original architect conflicts with the use a few paragraphs later of the heading 'Fairfax House – The Architect' over an account of the career of John Carr. This discontinuity neatly exemplifies the Trust's ambivalent position between what the evidence about the house reveals about its authorship, and its reluctance to give up or even downplay the house's association with their 'big name' architect, John Carr.[20] In other York Civic Trust publications the attribution is to Carr as sole architect with no reservations, and the same claim is found in other accounts of the house. The Royal Commission on Historical Monuments survey volume on *York: The Central Area* (1981) states:

> Fairfax House … is a fine residence built for Charles, Viscount Fairfax of Emley, to the design of John Carr, who also remodelled an earlier building, since demolished, as a back wing of servants' rooms and bedrooms, and constructed other outbuildings, also demolished.[21]

The RCHM account went on to refer to the building accounts among the Fairfax papers which were at the time of the survey at Newburgh Priory and are now at North Yorkshire County Record Office:

> Building accounts among the Newburgh Priory MSS. imply that the house was being roofed in 1755, but they are otherwise incomplete until 1761 when alterations to the rear wing were undertaken … Work on the main house was completed in 1762, when Lord Fairfax moved from High Petergate … in March 1765 Lord Fairfax paid John Carr fifty guineas 'on account of attending and designing his building'.[22]

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[19] 'Fairfax House – The Background', *York Civic Trust Annual Report 1983-84* (York: York Civic Trust, 1984), p. 6.
[20] 'Fairfax House – The Architect', *York Civic Trust Annual Report 1983-84* (York: York Civic Trust, 1984), p. 7.
[21] Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (England), *York: Volume V, The Central Area* (London: HMSO, 1981), p. 112.
[22] RCHM(E), *York: Volume V*, p. 112.

There is some confusion in this summary. The building accounts in the Fairfax Papers relating to Fairfax House do not begin until 1761 with a receipt from Wakefield stonemason Matthew Ward for his payment of 'Two Pounds and Sixpence in full for 9 Roses Carving for the Honble Lord Viscount Fairfax', received on 25 August 1761 from John Carr.[23] There is no reference in these papers to work on the roof being carried out in 1755; there is a painted date of 1755, accompanied by so far unidentified initials, visible on one of the roof timbers of the house (**Figure 1.2**) and the RCHM claim may originate with this rather than with the documentary records. Likewise, there is no specific warrant in

Figure 1.2. Painted date on roof timbers at Fairfax House, uncovered during the restoration of 1983-84. The date is 1755. This photograph was taken by Hare & Ransome, joinery contractors for the restoration. (Fairfax House Archive.)

the surviving documentation for the claim that Carr remodelled an earlier building, although this may have been the case. It was typical of Carr to re-use earlier buildings when adapting and rebuilding houses, and various instances of this practice are recorded at other houses which he rebuilt or adapted.[24] No traces of the buildings concerned remain, however, and whatever structures were there went unrecorded (beyond bare outlines on the Ordnance Survey maps) before

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[23] NYCRO: ZDV/F. These were the roses on the undersides of the steps of the main staircase, which were replicated on the new concrete treads installed during the 1980s restoration.

[24] Wragg, *John Carr of York*, p. 7.

demolition in 1919 when Fairfax House was converted into a cinema and dance hall. The significant point here, however, is that the implied contrast between the house, a 'fine residence … built' by John Carr, and the rear outbuildings and servants' quarters created when Carr 'remodelled an earlier building', is misleading. The house itself, as much as any of its outbuildings and service quarters, was an adaptation of an existing structure.

The question of the building chronology and architectural authorship ascribed to Fairfax House is important, because it obscures the essential fact that Viscount Fairfax bought and altered an existing house rather than creating a new one. The house that now stands as a 'restored' and 'preserved' Georgian townhouse at 27 Castlegate was not newly built by John Carr for the Viscount. Rather, Carr worked within the envelope of an extant structure to realise, as far as was practicable, the Viscount's vision for his York town house. That envelope, determined by the existing fabric of the house and the size of the property upon which it stood, was very restrictive. The result was a compromise. That compromised character is expressed in many aspects of the house's fabric today, from the visually crowded design of the Castlegate elevation to the complex and awkward arrangement of rooms on the first floor. Nor was the house *built* as a 'grand town house', even if Carr's alterations later made it one. The house bought by the Fairfaxes had not been built for elite socialising and entertaining. It is relatively large for a York town house and possesses a degree of grandeur both inside and out, but its original surviving detailing and the planning of the rooms within reflect its origins as the house of middle-class professionals rather than members of the nobility, a house intended for living and working rather than grand entertaining – and, furthermore, a house built relatively cheaply. Viscount Fairfax and John Carr together wrought a transformation upon the house, but the final outcome was a costly, compromised, ambiguous magnificence.

The history of Fairfax House

The only certainty in dating the original construction of Fairfax House is that no date can be ascribed to it with certainty. As noted above it is commonly described as dating from the 1750s or early 1760s, but parts of the present structure may

well be twenty or thirty years older, as the history of the site indicates a long pattern of sometimes very extensive rebuilding of existing properties rather than new construction beginning on or around a particular recorded date.[25] The fluidity of the house's identity, as recorded in its changing names – 27 Castlegate, Castlegate House, the Friendly Societies' Hall, St George's Hall, Fairfax House – was noted in the introduction to this study as a fundamental theme in the building's 'biography', and that fluidity was embodied in the changing physical form of the house over two centuries.

Fairfax House before the Fairfaxes

Among the Fairfax papers now kept at North Yorkshire County Record Office is a document compiled by the York lawyer Thomas Hardisty at the time of the Fairfaxes' purchase of the property in 1759-60 which lists the previous owners of this parcel of land as far back as 1599.[26] This 'schedule of deeds' shows that in 1704 Thomas Barker, a lawyer who owned a country estate at Otley, bought a plot of land on the north side of Castlegate, at the western end of the street near the junction with Castlegate Postern Lane (later Tower Street). This is the plot upon which Fairfax House now stands.[27] Four years later Barker purchased two gardens on the opposite, south side of the street, where the Viscount would later erect his coach house. Castlegate is one of the main streets of a long-settled part of York – the first entry in the schedule of deeds, for March 1599, records 'a house and garth' already standing on the site of the future Fairfax House – and Barker's purchase included both land and extant buildings. It seems likely, however, that these buildings were in origin extended parts of a house on an adjacent site rather than an independent structure in their own right. The record of Barker's transaction describes the plot purchased as 'all that piece of ground containing an outshott from the north side of the passage of Robert Jackson's house in Castlegate', an 'outshott' or 'outshot' being a projecting part of a building, or an

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[25] Fairfax House's Listed Building record (written 1954 and revised 1990) gives the date '*c*.1744': https://www.historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1259337 (accessed 23 June 2017).

[26] 'A schedule of deeds belonging to the estate lately purchased by Thomas Hardisty in trust for Anne Fairfax', undated, but compiled at the time of the Fairfaxes' purchase of the house in 1759-60: Fairfax Papers, NYCRO, ZDF/F.

[27] For the setting of Fairfax House and the layout of the Castlegate area, please refer to the map at the beginning of this thesis.

extension.[28] According to the description in the schedule of deeds the 'outshott' consisted of 'closets, rooms and spaces over the said outshott in the chambers of Jackson's house', and in the same account it is described as 'lately separated from the house by the partition brick wall made by Thomas Barker',[29] indicating that although this property was physically attached to Jackson's house steps had been taken to make it a separate dwelling.[30] Whatever structures may have been present on the site, Barker seems to have demolished or rebuilt them over the next few years to such an extent that the final result was effectively a new house. By the time of his death in 1724 a substantial self-contained house stood on the site, with gardens on the other side of the street.[31]

Figure 1.3. Gerard Vandergucht after Samuel Buck, 'The South Prospect of the Antient City of York from the Old Baile Hill', 1721. (York Minster Library.)

This house, with garden, is shown in Samuel Buck's 1721 engraving 'The South Prospect of the Antient City of York from the Old Baile Hill' (**Figure 1.3**), and was sufficiently notable a landmark to be identified in its own right as 'Lawyer Barker's House', numbered 27 (**Figure 1.4**). The house is shown as three stories in height with six windows on each floor and three dormer windows in the roof. The depiction of the house in this view does not necessarily give an accurate

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[28] 'A part of a building projecting beyond the general line; a projecting upper storey, etc.; a part built on to a building as an extension': *Oxford English Dictionary*, 'outshot', definition 2. The *OED* describes this as a Scottish and northern English regional term.

[29] 'A schedule of deeds', NYCRO ZDF/F.

[30] The fact that the deed refers to the 'partition brick wall' having already been put in place by Barker at the time of the sale suggests that he was already resident in the 'outshott', perhaps as a tenant, although there is no mention of this in the schedule of deeds. It may have been convenient for him to reside in the existing structure while building a new house on the remainder of the property, but this is a speculation: there is no evidence on the point.

[31] Gerry Webb, *Fairfax of York: The Life and History of a Noble Family* (York: Maxiprint, 2001), pp. 136-8.

and dependable impression of its appearance: the images of houses and other buildings in the Bucks' views of towns and cities are idealised and given a polite uniformity of appearance and cannot be relied upon as individual architectural portraits.[32] They do, however, give an impression of the presence and relative significance of particular buildings in the urban landscape, and clearly in this case the intention was to show that Thomas Barker's house was a large and notable establishment and an important element in the prospect of York.
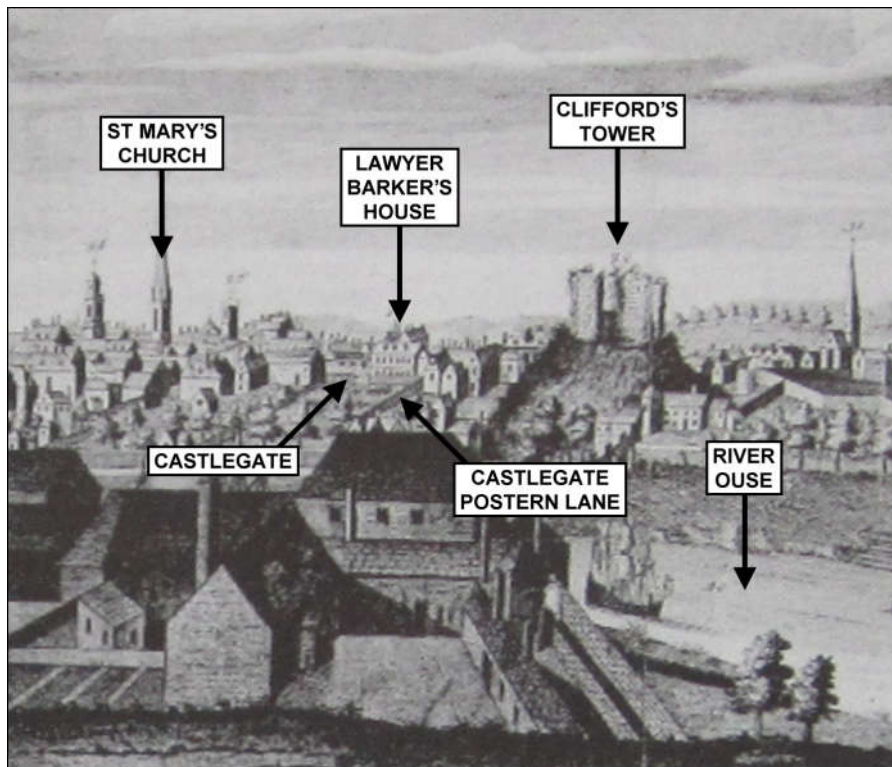
Figure 1.4. Detail of Samuel Buck's 1721 engraving showing 'Lawyer Barker's House' with its associated gardens on the other side of Castlegate. (York Minster Library.)

Thomas Barker died at the age of 73 in 1724. His will makes it clear that he regarded the house in Castlegate as his main residence, and it is notable that he left generous sums to the poor of the parish of St Mary's Castlegate, as did his widow Frances when she died in 1729. Much of the remainder of the will is concerned with the disposition of his extensive properties at Otley.[33] The house on

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[32] Mark Hallett, 'Pictorial improvement: York in eighteenth-century graphic art', in Mark Hallett and Jane Rendall (eds), *Eighteenth-Century York: Culture, Space and Society* (York: Borthwick Institute of Historical Research, 2003), pp. 24-49, here pp. 37, 40; Renzo Dubbini (trans. Lydia G. Cochrane), *Geography of the Gaze: Urban and Rural Vision in Early Modern Europe* (1994; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), pp. 53-6; Ian Waites, *Common Land in English Painting, 1700-1850* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2012), pp. 124-5.

[33] Borthwick Institute, Records of the Prerogative Court of York, will of Thomas Barker, 4 August 1724: Vacancy Reg f.129.

Castlegate he left to his nephew Edmund Laycon, on condition that he changed his name to Barker. The property is described as 'my messuage or dwelling house wherein I now live in Castlegate in the City of York, with orchards and gardens on the foreside and backside and also my two stables and coach house and the garth lying on the east side of the stables'.[34] The two stables and the coach house with the garth were on the opposite side of Castlegate from the house.[35]

Edmund Barker (formerly Laycon) died in 1735, and his brother Thomas Laycon Barker lived on in the house until his death in 1752.[36] The house was then purchased by Joseph Marsh 'of Harrigate' who is described as a coal merchant.[37] It happens that the land tax records for Castlegate have survived for 1749-1805 so we have information on the house's owners and its annual rateable value during this period. From 1749 to 1751, during the ownership of Thomas Laycon Barker, 27 Castlegate was rated at £12.0.0, and this remained unchanged under Joseph Marsh's ownership from 1752 to 1759.[38] The presence of the painted date 1755 on the roof timbers (**Figure 1.2**) suggest that Marsh carried out some rebuilding or repairs at the property, although nothing is known about the precise nature and extent of these works. The land tax register reveals that by November 1758 Joseph Marsh was bankrupt, and shows the occupant from March 1759 to early 1760 to have been a 'Boynton Wood, Esq.', who was presumably a tenant since on 10 August 1759, in the middle of Wood's occupancy, Joseph Marsh sold the house to John Mayer.[39] Mayer was a lawyer, a freeman of York and a family friend of the Fairfaxes who 'often acted as a trustee and legal advisor to the Catholic gentry' in York.[40] Three months later, on 17 November 1759, the 'Schedule of Deeds' records an 'Indenture between John Mayer Esq of the one part and the Hon. Anne Fairfax of the other part being a Declaration of Trust from the said John Mayer to

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[34] Borthwick Institute, will of Thomas Barker.

[35] There were several detached gardens of this kind in the area between Castlegate and the River Ouse: see Jenkins, *The View From the Street*, pp. 53, 78-9; Jane Harding and Anthea Taigel, 'An air of detachment: town gardens in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries', *Garden History*, vol. 24, no. 2 (Winter 1996), pp. 237-54, here pp. 239-40.

[36] Webb, *Fairfax of York*, p. 138.

[37] 'A schedule of deeds', Fairfax Papers, NYCRO, ZDF/F.

[38] Borthwick Institute, *Land Tax Register, St Mary Castlegate Parish, 1749-1805*, PR Y/MC 112.

[39] Borthwick Institute, *Land Tax Register, St Mary Castlegate Parish*. John Mayer was Lord Mayor of York in 1742 and again in 1762. He was of course a Protestant. For a summary of John Mayer's life and career see Robert H. Skaife, 'Register of marriages in York Minster' (part 2), *Yorkshire Archaeological and Topographical Journal*, vol. 2 (1873), p. 333.

[40] J. C. H. Aveling, *Catholic Recusancy in the City of York 1558-1791* (London: Catholic Record Society, 1970), p. 116.

Miss Fairfax'.[41] The Fairfaxes' purchase of the house was thus effected not directly but through an intermediary, with the property held in trust for Anne Fairfax. By having a Protestant as nominal purchaser of the house, the Fairfaxes avoided the double land tax imposed on Catholics by the Taxation Act of 1692 (IV William & Mary c.1).[42] The result was that by the end of 1759 the Fairfaxes had taken possession of the house and associated outbuildings and gardens at 27 Castlegate, and that the property was held in Anne Fairfax's name, not Viscount Fairfax's.

The town house, 1759-1863

The Fairfaxes owned Fairfax House from November 1759 to January 1772, when Viscount Fairfax died and Anne disposed of the house and returned to Gilling Castle.[43] The first three years were taken up with rebuilding and refurbishing the house to make it more to the Fairfaxes' liking: it is during this period that the fine interior embellishments, including the plasterwork, and such features as new windows and the Great Staircase, were put in. John Carr was the architect for the refurbishment and sub-contracted the craftsmen who worked on it, many of whom had worked with him on other commissions: Daniel Shillitoe who carved the wooden embellishments, Maurice Tobin who created the ironwork, James Henderson and Giuseppe Cortese who fashioned the plasterwork.[44] However, there is a gap in the records; and it is not until the summer of 1761 that the first accounts of refurbishment work appear in the Fairfax Papers in the form of a receipt from Wakefield stone carver Matthew Ward for 'Two Pounds and Sixpence in full for 9 Roses Carving for the Honble Lord Viscount Fairfax'.[45] Work must clearly have started no later than the spring of 1761, and its seems likely that some of the rebuilding would have begun in the summer of 1760 – Matthew Ward's carved roses, for example, were beneath the stair treads of the Great Staircase, and for the construction of the staircase to have reached the stage

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[41] 'A schedule of deeds', Fairfax Papers, NYCRO, ZDF/F.
[42] Aveling, *Catholic Recusancy*, pp. 110, 117n. On the double land tax, see W. R. Ward, *The English Land Tax in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), pp. 3, 69-70; Colin Haydon, *Anti-Catholicism in Eighteenth-Century England c.1714-80* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), pp. 47, 106-7.
[43] Brown, *Fairfax House York* (1989), p. 77; Webb, *Fairfax of York*, p. 207.
[44] Wragg, *John Carr*, pp. 75-80, 232.
[45] Receipt from Matthew Ward dated 25 August 1761, Fairfax Papers, NYCRO, ZDF/F.

where such embellishments were being carried out work must have been under way for longer than one season. The sitting tenant who came with the house, Boynton Wood, remained in residence until March 1760 so work could not have started until after that date.[46] The estimates and bills that survive for the painting of the house date from the autumn of 1762 to the spring of 1763, while the one piece of paperwork that survives pertaining to the plasterwork is from May 1762.[47] The Viscount complained in October 1762 that 'My Daughters house, which is just finished and paid for, drains me of all my money',[48] but in April of 1763 the *York Courant* reported that he had just celebrated his birthday by holding 'an elegant Entertainment and a Ball to above 200 Gentlemen and Ladies at his magnificent new House on the Castlehill in this City, which is just finished'.[49]

Once the redecoration and other alterations to the house were complete, the Fairfaxes made use of it during the York social seasons from the autumn to the spring and in the early summer of each year. It is impossible to recreate a complete picture of their movements between Gilling and York but the details of household business make clear that the Viscount and Anne were regularly resident in their Castlegate house for significant periods.[50] Surviving food and wine bills for the house, details of purchases of kitchenware and silver, candles and linen, as well as the records of decoration and redecoration, indicate that the Castlegate House was important to the Fairfaxes. Particularly notable is the construction of a substantial coach house on the plot of ground directly opposite Fairfax House itself, set back from the road behind fine iron gates.[51] Such investment of time and money in the house during the Fairfaxes' ownership provides supporting evidence for Rachel Stewart's argument in *The Town House in Georgian London* (2009) that the town house, far from being merely a subsidiary appendage of the country house, had a value and importance of its own which reflected the uses its owners made of it and the patterns of life they lived in it.[52]

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[46] Webb, *Fairfax of York*, p. 139.
[47] Receipt from James Henderson dated 21 May 1761, Fairfax Papers, NYCRO, ZDF/F.
[48] Viscount Fairfax, letter to his banker dated 9 October 1762, Fairfax Papers, NYCRO, ZDF/F.
[49] *York Courant*, 19 April 1763, p. 1.
[50] Webb, *Fairfax of York*, pp. 141-9, 152-6, 191-2; Brown, *Fairfax House York*, pp. 76-7.
[51] Receipt for stone carving by Daniel Shillito, 5 December 1764 and letters from John Carr to Viscount Fairfax, 15 June 1765 and 12 September 1765, Fairfax Papers, NYCRO, ZDF/F.
[52] Rachel Stewart, *The Town House in Georgian London* (London: Yale University Press, 2009), pp. 3-4, 5, 9-13.

Figure 1.5. Left: the arch of the Venetian window on the Great Staircase at Fairfax House photographed in 1983 before restoration, showing the escutcheon above the arch painted with arms identified by Francis Johnson as those of the Pemberton family. Unfortunately no clearer picture of this feature before restoration is available. (Fairfax House Archive.) Right: the escutcheon as restored in 1983-4, painted with the arms of the Fairfax family in a very 1980s style, and with the Fairfax crest added. The scroll beneath is engraved with the Fairfax motto, 'Je le feray durant ma vie', but because of the way the scroll is looped through the scrollwork of the escutcheon only the words FERAY DURANT are visible. (Author's photograph, July 2014.)

Viscount Fairfax died at Fairfax House in January 1772, and by May of that year Anne had sold the house.[53] For the following eight decades it remained a residential town house for a succession of members of Yorkshire aristocratic and gentry families. From 1772 to 1780 the house was owned by Mrs Mary Thornton (d. 1800), who was succeeded by Sir Walter Vavasour, Bt, of Hazelwood near Tadcaster (1766-1802), a member of a prominent Catholic landowning family which had intermarried with the Fairfaxes several times in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.[54] Vavasour sold the house in 1787 to William Danby (1752-1833) of Swinton Park, who sub-let it to Mr Hayward Constable. In 1792 the house was bought by Peregrine Wentworth, who became bankrupt in 1820, whereupon the house was bought by Sir John Lister-Kaye, Bt, of a notable Yorkshire landowning and political family, who sold it in 1843 to Mrs Ann Mary Pemberton (1784-1862), who owned the house until her death in late 1862.[55] None of these individuals appears to have made any significant changes to the interior or exterior of the house, except that Sir John Lister-Kaye 'built extensive

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[53] Letter from John Mayer to Anne Fairfax, 26 April 1772, Fairfax Papers, NYCRO, ZDF/F; Gerry Webb, 'Fairfax homes: Fairfax House, York', *Journal of the Fairfax Society*, no. 19 (April 2005), pp. 20-1; Webb, *Fairfax of York*, p. 207.

[54] Brown, *Fairfax House York*, p. 78.

[55] Borthwick Institute, *Land Tax Register, St Mary Castlegate Parish*, entries for 1772 to 1805; *Yorkshire Gazette*, 5 August 1843, p. 1 (sale of furniture by Sir John Lister Kaye); *Yorkshire Herald*, 7 February 1846 (proposed Castlegate improvements); Brown, *Fairfax House York*, pp. 78-9; RCHM(E), *York: Volume V*, p. 112.

stabling adjoining'.[56] At some point the escutcheon above the Venetian window was painted with a new armorial device, replacing the Fairfax arms (**Figure 1.5**), although it is unclear when this happened.[57]

The commercial premises, 1864-1914

Mrs Pemberton's death marked the end of Fairfax House's history as a residential town house. Her furnishings and other household effects were sold at auction in York over five days from 2 March 1863.[58] The house in Castlegate was advertised for sale repeatedly during 1863, so it appears that it took some time to find a purchaser.[59] The sale advertisements giving particulars of the house are of interest for what they reveal about its extent and internal arrangements at the time when it ceased to be a residence. The 1863 advertisement describes the house as follows:

> The Capital Mansion, situate in Castle-gate, in the City of York, recently occupied by Mrs. Pemberton, deceased, containing – on the Ground Floor, Library, Dining and Breakfast Rooms; on the First Floor, Two Drawing-Rooms, Ante-Room, One Bed-Room, and a Dressing-Room; on the Second Floor, Five Bed-Rooms and Two Dressing-Rooms; also Two Kitchens, Servants' Hall, Housekeeper's Room, and Pantries, with Servants' Apartments above. There are Three Coach-Houses, and Stabling for Nine Horses; Groom's House, Harness-Room, Wash-House and Laundry.[60]

Mrs Pemberton's establishment had been a fairly large one: the 1851 Census records seven servants living in the house.[61] Overall it is clear that the property at this time was as extensive as it had been during the Fairfaxes' residence. In March

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[56] *Yorkshire Gazette*, 24 December 1864, p. 7.

[57] Francis Johnson identified this coat of arms as being that of Pemberton, but the surviving photographs of this feature as it was before restoration make it impossible to confirm this identification: 'Fairfax House York: Schedule of Painters and Decorators Work', typewritten document dated 17 February 1983, p. 3. Francis Johnson Archive, Hull History Centre.

[58] *Yorkshire Gazette*, 28 February 1863, p. 7.

[59] *Yorkshire Gazette*, 17 January 1863, p. 7, 31 January 1863, p. 7, 7 March 1863, p. 7, 21 March 1863, p. 7, 19 September 1863, p. 7, 19 March 1864, p. 7.

[60] *Yorkshire Gazette*, 17 January 1863, p. 7.

[61] 1851 Census of England and Wales, National Archives, HO 107/2353 f. 520 p. 8.

and April 1864 the house was advertised as for sale again, through auction.[62] The advertisements at this time were more detailed (and adjectival):

> All that Capital MANSION HOUSE, situate in Castlegate, in the City of York, called 'CASTLEGATE HOUSE,' late in the occupation of Mrs. Pemberton, Deceased, containing,
>
> On the Ground Floor – Spacious and lofty Dining Room and Library, Housekeeper's Room, Store Rooms, Servants Hall, Butler's Pantry, Kitchens, &c. On the First Floor – Two spacious and lofty Drawing Rooms, Ante-Room, One Bed Room and a Dressing Room, with other Bed Rooms and Dressing Rooms and Servants Apartments. On the Second Floor – Five Bed Rooms and Two Dressing Rooms. There are extensive arched Cellars in the Basement, perfectly dry. Adjoining the House there is Stabling for Nine Horses Groom's House, Harness Room, Wash House and Laundry. And also all that GARDEN, situate immediately in front of the said Mansion House, but on the opposite side of Castlegate aforesaid, containing 850 superficial Square Yards, or thereabouts, together with the Coach-Houses erected thereon. The Garden is a very eligible Building Site, and has a frontage Castlegate of 70 Feet, or thereabouts, and to Tower Street of 110 Feet, or thereabouts.[63]

In December 1864 the York lodge of the Ancient Order of Foresters purchased the building and renamed it 'the Friendly Societies' Hall', intending to use it 'not solely for the accommodation of the Foresters, but to let off for other purposes',[64] thus not only creating a permanent venue for friendly society meetings away from the temptations of public houses but providing them with a rental income.[65] Early in 1865 the Foresters sold the land opposite the house, upon which the Viscount's coach house stood, to York City Council, to enable the widening of Castlegate

[62] *Yorkshire Gazette*, 19 March 1864, p. 7, 26 March 1864, p. 7, 2 April 1864, p. 7, 9 April 1864, p. 7; *Yorkshire Herald*, 2 April 1864, p. 1, 30 April 1864, p. 8.
[63] *Yorkshire Gazette*, 19 March 1864, p. 7.
[64] *Yorkshire Gazette*, 17 December 1864, p. 4, 24 December 1864, p. 7.
[65] Charles Walter Masters, *The Respectability of Late Victorian Workers: A Case Study of York, 1867-1914* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2010), pp. 103-4.

and the easing of the sharp corner between Castlegate and Tower Street.[66] The link between Fairfax House and the land directly opposite, established by Thomas Barker by his purchase of the latter in 1708, was thus brought to an end.

From the 1860s to the 1900s the Friendly Societies' Hall was the address for a number of businesses, societies and other concerns which rented space from the Foresters, including the Mechanics' Friendly Society, the Old Ebor Friendly Society, and the Ancient Shepherdesses' Friendly Society; the York Catholic Club and the City Club; the Ebor Permanent Building Society; the 'Church of England Library and Reading Room'; and W. D. Willison, 'House, Sign, and Ornamental Painter, Gilder, Paper-Hanger, Whitewasher, &c.', who was presumably based in the outbuildings at the rear.[67] It also served as a polling station and a venue for social and charitable events, and was used by York auctioneers, with viewings and auctions advertised as taking place 'in the Large Room', which is presumably a reference to the Saloon.[68] The Foresters had originally planned to build 'a large hall' in the house, but this did not happen and the building remained physically largely unchanged during their ownership.[69] During the First World War the house was used by the Army, and then in 1919 York Friendly Societies' Hall Co. Ltd. sold it (with 25 Castlegate) to St George's Hall Entertainments (York) Co. Ltd., for conversion into a cinema and ballroom.[70] The remaining portion of Fairfax House's story is told in chapter 6, 'The Modern Histories of Fairfax House'.

Exterior evidence

Despite the varying uses to which Fairfax House was subjected between the middle of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, its external

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[66] *Yorkshire Gazette*, 4 February 1865, p. 7.
[67] *Directory of York and Neighbourhood, 1885* (London: George Stevens, 1885), pp. 62-3; *Yorkshire Gazette*, 20 September 1890, p. 3; *Kelly's Directory of the North and East Ridings of Yorkshire 1913* (London: Kelly's Directories, 1913), p. 12; *Yorkshire Gazette*, 24 December 1881, p. 1; *York Herald*, 7 June 1883, p. 3; *Yorkshire Gazette*, 19 May 1883, p. 11. The hall was popular with female friendly societies, but the male societies were reluctant to abandon their traditional meeting places in pubs: Masters, *Respectability of Late Victorian Workers*, p. 104.
[68] *Yorkshire Gazette*, 3 November 1884, p. 6; *York Herald*, 5 January 1877, p. 10; *Yorkshire Gazette*, 25 May 1867, p. 1.
[69] *Yorkshire Gazette*, 17 December 1864, p. 4.
[70] Brown, *Fairfax House York* (1989), pp. 79-80; Webb, *Fairfax of York*, p. 238.

appearance changed relatively little. In discussing the exterior of Fairfax House
we need to make a distinction between the main elevation of the house facing
Castlegate and the other faces of the structure. Discussion of the 1980s restoration
of the house, both at the time and subsequently, has largely been concerned with
the interior. Where the exterior has been discussed it has been the 'unregenerate
detail and deplorable use of inferior stone'[71] of the Castlegate front (taken as
evidence that John Carr was *not* responsible for this elevation) which has been the
main point of focus. Those involved with the restoration had little interest in the
rear or side elevations of the house: the former, structurally unstable and regarded
as irredeemably compromised by later alterations, was largely demolished and
rebuilt, while the latter were largely invisible in any case.

As noted above, while the main front facing onto the street has been little
altered since the house was owned by the Fairfaxes,[72] the other elevations have
been variously concealed by other structures or very extensively altered and
rebuilt. The house, as has already been explained, while originally free-standing,
is on a restricted urban site and was always closely hemmed in by buildings on
either side. The original design of the side elevations is not fully known, but hints
remain. On the south-eastern and north-western ends are blank window recesses at
the level of the third floor, and a fragment of a band of dentilated brickwork
ornament (**Figure 1.6**). On the south-eastern end the rear two of these recesses
contained windows which were removed and the embrasures bricked up at the
time of the 1983-4 restoration. The other two, however, adjacent to the Castlegate
frontage, do not seem from their infill brickwork and the condition of the internal
walls ever to have contained windows – and four window openings would have
left the wall very weak at this point. One of the rearmost windows is visible in a
photograph from *c*.1900 but the two recesses towards the front are, as now, closed
with brickwork (**Figure 1.7**). Also notable in this image is the decorative
stonework of the return eaves cornice on this side of the house, continuing that on
the front elevation, which was removed during the restoration and replaced by a

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[71] 'Fairfax House – Viscount Fairfax', *York Civic Trust Annual Report 1983-84* (York: York
Civic Trust, 1984), p. 14.

[72] Originally the front of the house was set back some yards from the road and was furnished with
iron railings and a gate. These railings were removed when Castlegate was widened in 1867-8. The
condition of the stone sills and dressings on the front elevation indicates that they were cut back
much closer to the face of the house at some point, possibly in the late eighteenth or early
nineteenth century, presumably because of the poor condition of the stone.

Figure 1.6. View of the south-eastern end wall of Fairfax House, showing blind window openings and remains of original ornamental band and cornice. (Author's picture, October 2015.)

simple band of raised brickwork. Remnants of this cornice are still visible on the other side elevation (**Figure 1.8**). The presence of this level of decoration suggests that the side elevations of the house were originally much more visible than they are today (with either no immediately adjoining buildings, or lower buildings that imposed less on the sides of the house), and constituted an important element in the architectural impression created by the building, which is now lost to us. The RCHM survey of York published in 1981 records 'blind and open second-floor windows with stone sills' on this elevation.[73] A photograph taken during the restoration, undated but probably from late 1983 (**Figure 1.8**) shows the two window openings in the rearwards half of the elevation filled in with what is clearly recent brickwork, contrasting in lightness with the dark bricks infilling the two recesses nearest the Castlegate front, and the return eaves cornice stonework removed as part of the replacement of brickwork at roof level.

The other (north-western) end of the house is concealed behind the adjacent building, which was constructed in the early nineteenth century and was

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[73] RCHM(E), *York: Volume V*, p. 112.

Figure 1.7. Detail of photograph of Fairfax House taken c.1900, showing glazed window opening in south-eastern end wall. The original decorative cornice on this wall is also visible. (Fairfax House Archives.)

Figure 1.8. Detail of a photograph of the south-eastern end wall of Fairfax House taken during the restoration of 1983-84, undated but probably late summer 1983, showing two rearmost window embrasures infilled with new brickwork. (Fairfax House Archives.)
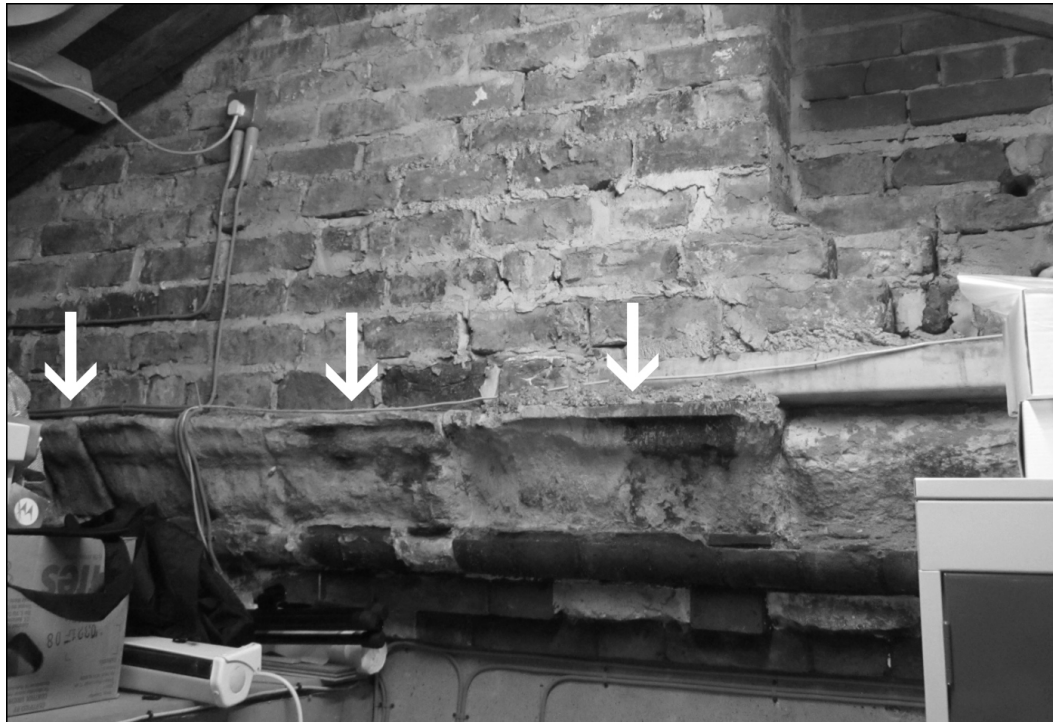
Figure 1.9. Remaining stonework of original external cornice, indicated by arrows, on the north-western end wall of Fairfax House, now within the roof attic space of the adjacent building (25 Castlegate). Window embrasures echoing those visible in the south-eastern wall are presently concealed behind the panelling visible at the bottom of the image, and extend below what is now the floor of the attic. (Author's photograph, May 2015.)

subsequently incorporated into the cinema and dance hall, and is now part of the Fairfax House museum. As a result only a very restricted portion of the gable is visible externally. The upper part of the adjacent building is an attic space used by the museum for storage, and within that attic the original north-western external wall can be seen. The remains of the original eaves cornice stonework, much decayed, are visible, the counterpart of that removed and replaced with plain brickwork on the south-eastern elevation. Near the front of the house the stone of the cornice has been cut back flush with the wall (**Figure 1.9**). The window embrasures with their stone sills are also present but appear to have been infilled with brickwork at the time of the restoration, presumably to provide a flat wall surface to the attic. The flat arches which surmount the window openings are concealed behind panelling and are not presently visible.

These traces of the original architectural treatment of the house's exterior, particularly the ornamental cornice, are important clues to the appearance and character of 27 Castlegate before John Carr's remodelling of the building. A distinctive characteristic of Carr's architecture is his preference for 'concentrating

all the elevational features on one face of the building'[74] so that his buildings tend to have a clear focus on the main elevation as the most decoratively treated part of the structure, with the other elevations in a lower architectural key, performing a subsidiary, supporting role. In the case of Fairfax House this hierarchy is clear, with the highest degree of ornament in banding, cornice and window treatments confined to the Castlegate elevation. With the exception of the returned eaves cornice, the sides (now obscured by adjoining buildings, which was not the case when Carr worked on the house) were treated plainly, with Carr's cornice and ornamental band between first- and second-floor windows rounding the corner of the building before coming to an abrupt halt after a few feet, with their line continued by the remnants in brick of the original decoration. Those remnants indicate a plainer style for the house before Carr's rebuilding. The brick dentilation of the cornice suggests that the front of the house was not originally rendered but was in exposed brick, as it is unlikely that the cornice would have been concealed beneath plaster. The original cornice can thus be assumed to have consisted of a carved limestone band supported on a brick soffit with dentilated brickwork below. The window recesses, meanwhile, could have been introduced by Carr – such features occur in buildings for which he was responsible elsewhere, such as Arncliffe Hall, Fangfoss Hall, the now-demolished Skeldergate House in York (which Carr built for himself), Bootham Park Hospital in York, and, perhaps most relevantly, Castlegate House directly opposite Fairfax House.[75] It is notable that Carr made use of blind window openings of this type to articulate the walls on either side of the large Venetian windows he used to light staircases in several of his buildings, notably Arncliffe Hall and Bootham Park Hospital,[76] thus avoiding the unbalanced effect of large areas of blank brick wall, and it is possible that he used this technique on the north-western and south-eastern elevations of Fairfax House. If so the effect is now entirely lost due to the erection of buildings against these elevations and the demolition and complete rebuilding

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[74] Wragg, *John Carr*, p. 7.

[75] Wragg, *John Carr*, pp. 10, 25, 67, 144.

[76] See Wragg, *John Carr*, pl. 6, pp. 10, 231-2; Anne Digby, *From York Lunatic Asylum to Bootham Park Hospital* (York: Borthwick Institute of Historical Research, 1986), pp. 3-4; Ivan Hall, *John Carr of York* (Wakefield: Rickaro Books, 2013), pp. 16, 18, 20; Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (England), *An Inventory of the Historical Monuments in City of York. Volume IV: Outside the City Walls East of the Ouse* (London: HMSO, 1975), pp. 48-9.

of the rearmost portion (now overlooking the rear courtyard of Fairfax House museum) as a flat wall during the 1983-4 restoration.

The problem of the plan

The interior of Fairfax House echoes the exterior in showing signs of gradual and incremental development and change, rather than following a single plan which was laid down from the outset. The changing social status of the building was one important motivating factor behind this pattern of piecemeal alteration. As Rachel Stewart has observed, the Georgian town house was a multifaceted phenomenon, which inevitably possessed multiple meanings and served multiple functions for those who owned it.[77] Stewart also emphasises the importance of entertainment as one of those functions.[78] Similarly, M. H. Port stresses the role of the town house as a social and entertaining centre,[79] and Mark Girouard observes that the domestication of socialisation, brought inside the house from external venues such as assembly rooms, was a central influence on the development of both town and country houses from the mid-eighteenth century.[80] Most discussion in this connection has focused on London town houses, but outside the metropolis entertainment and social activities were an equally important part of a town house's role. Fairfax House was certainly envisaged as performing this function in York, a centre for socialising for nobility and gentry from Yorkshire and beyond, for the Viscount and his daughter.

As noted above, however, as a site for entertaining and socialising Fairfax House was a compromise, an adaptation of an existing house which, for all its relatively large size, had been primarily created not for entertaining but as a residence. Before the Fairfaxes acquired the house it had been extensively rebuilt over a lengthy period, but it is notable that the building's rateable value remained at £12 throughout the period 1749-60, only rising to £18 in the year 1760-61, by

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[77] Stewart, *Town House*, pp. 11-13.
[78] Stewart, *Town House*, pp. 37, 43.
[79] M. H. Port, 'Town house and country house: their interaction', in Dana Arnold, Tim Clayton *et al* (eds), *The Georgian Country House: Architecture, Landscape and Society* (Stroud: Sutton, 1998), pp. 117-38, here pp. 129-30.
[80] Mark Girouard, *Life in the English Country House: A Social and Architectural History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1978), pp. 194-5.

which time the Viscount's own improvement works were under way.[81] The layout of the rooms inherited by the Viscount (and largely retained, despite his rebuilding of the house) certainly suggests a primarily domestic rather than entertaining purpose for the property. Entertaining was an important part of social interaction for members of the mercantile and professional classes, with hosts and visitors participating in card games, the consumption of tea and alcoholic drinks, but these activities did not necessarily require a large or grand room.[82] The Viscount clearly had ambitions to transform the Castlegate property into a grand town house primarily for entertaining, and John Carr was given the task of fitting spaces of the necessary grandeur and decorative quality into the existing shell. Any mid-Georgian house in which entertaining of any scale was to take place required a certain minimum of social spaces: a room for eating, a room for dancing, and a room for cards. The grander conception of a town house, however, demanded a more extensive suite of entertainment spaces disposed in a particular way. The internal arrangements created by Carr at Fairfax House suggest that his aim was to provide the Viscount with such a suite, albeit one constrained by the limitations of space and the already existing plan of the property.

The dominant element in the interior of Fairfax House is the main staircase, generally called the 'Great Staircase' in guide books and other materials published by the Civic Trust and the house. It is impossible to say with certainty what the staircase arrangements were before Carr's remodelling of the house as no records survive and no physical traces remain, but it is clear that Carr took the opportunity to rebuild the staircase hall (the term is used here to refer to the space enclosing the Great Staircase) and staircase of the existing house very extensively. The fact that the staircase is at right angles to the hall is a particularly dramatic and, in the context of Georgian town house layout, unusual strategy, and one which permitted the fitting of a very grand set of steps into what is a fairly restricted space. It also enabled Carr to incorporate into his staircase various features which he favoured and which are to be seen at other houses which he designed or rebuilt. The dramatically cantilevered stone treads (replaced at the restoration with concrete) and the elaborate ironwork of the balusters on the flights and the landing certainly

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[81] Borthwick Institute, *Land Tax Register, St Mary Castlegate Parish*.
[82] Benjamin Heller, 'Leisure and the use of domestic space in Georgian London', *Historical Journal*, vol. 53, no. 3 (2010), pp. 623-45, here pp. 623-5.
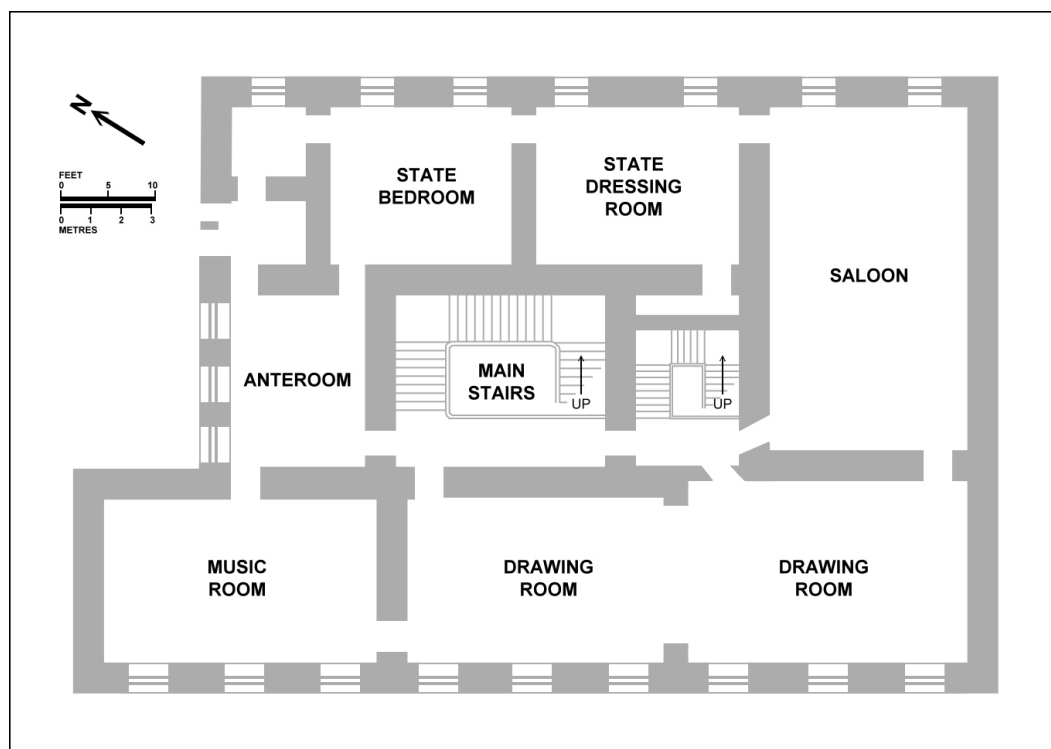
Figure 1.10. Simplified plan of the first floor of Norfolk House, St James's Square, London (Matthew Brettingham, 1748-52). (Author's diagram.)

date from Carr's rebuilding, as does the Venetian window which lights the intermediate landing. The absence of toplighting and reliance on a single large window is typical of Carr and can also be seen in his near-contemporary Castlegate House opposite Fairfax House.[83] It is also an arrangement characteristic of York town houses throughout the eighteenth century: the use of skylights to light stairs is uncommon in York houses before the early nineteenth century.[84] The ceiling is thus available for a dramatic display of decorative plasterwork, designed to unfold to visitors as they mount the stairs towards the main entertainment level of the house on the first floor.

For a provincial town house the main staircase at Fairfax House is very large and imposing, and its decoration is of a remarkable richness. It can be argued that in this respect the model for Fairfax House is not provincial town houses or even country houses, but the grandest conception of London town house of the kind established in the 1750s by Norfolk House.[85] Here the splendid staircase brought guests to a series of entertainment rooms arranged in a circuit on the first floor of

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[83] RCHM(E), *York: Volume V*, p. 115.
[84] Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (England), *An Inventory of the Historical Monuments in the City of York, Volume III: The South West* (London: HMSO, 1972), plate 90.
[85] David Pearce, *London's Mansions: The Palatial Houses of the Nobility* (London: Batsford, 1986), pp. 73, 77-8; Girouard, *Life in the English Country House*, pp. 195-8.

the house and opening into each other, with the stairs and the landing along its west side acting as the central structuring element of the plan and a social space in its own right (**Figure 1.10**). Each room was decorated in a distinctive manner, and while they were called the music room, drawing room, anteroom and so on, those names were not restrictive. The way the rooms were used depended on the needs of a particular event, rather than reflecting a specific functional definition. In addition the arrangement provided flexibility by allowing for only a part of the circuit to be used if the gathering was a smaller one.[86] The Great Staircase at Fairfax House is thus itself part of the entertaining infrastructure of the house and acts as a focus for the social rooms, giving access to the main rooms on the first floor and connecting that first-floor ensemble, via a carefully considered visual-spatial axis, with the Dining Room on the ground floor. This connection is made through the Staircase Hall, which has an elaborately decorated plasterwork ceiling contrasting with the much simpler decoration of the Entrance Hall which runs between it and the front door. The rearmost of the Dining Room's two doors opens directly across this decorated space onto the foot of the stairs; the centreline of the doorway is aligned with the central axis of the lower flight. This door thus connects the Dining Room with the upstairs portion of the house rather than with the other rooms on the ground floor. At a time when the family were in residence alone the first floor would commonly have been closed off entirely, except for the bedrooms and possibly Anne's dressing room, the location of which is unknown. Family dining could have taken place in a parlour on the ground floor, possibly the room in which the reconstructed kitchen is now situated. The patterns of room usage and movement between rooms during periods when the house was a private residence would have been very different from those in use during periods of entertaining, but the relative intermingling of private and public realms at Fairfax House in the disposition of bedrooms, dressing rooms (presumed) and socialising spaces is highly suggestive of the building's origin as a house for the professional/mercantile classes rather than the nobility.[87]

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[86] Michael McKeon, *The Secret History of Domesticity: Public, Private, and the Division of Knowledge* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), pp. 249-50.
[87] John Bold, 'The design of a house for a merchant', *Architectural History*, vol. 33 (1990), pp. 75-82; McKeon, *Secret History of Domesticity*, pp. 256-9.

Fairfax House: first floor plan, 2017.

Fairfax House: ground floor plan, 2017.
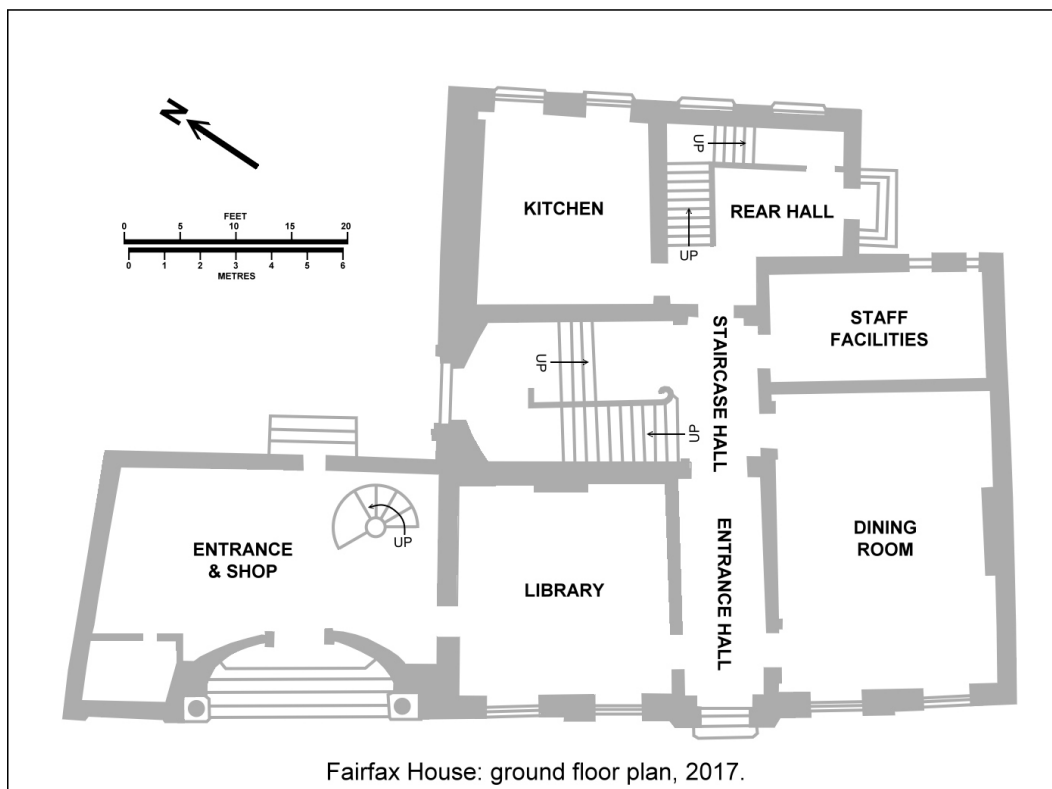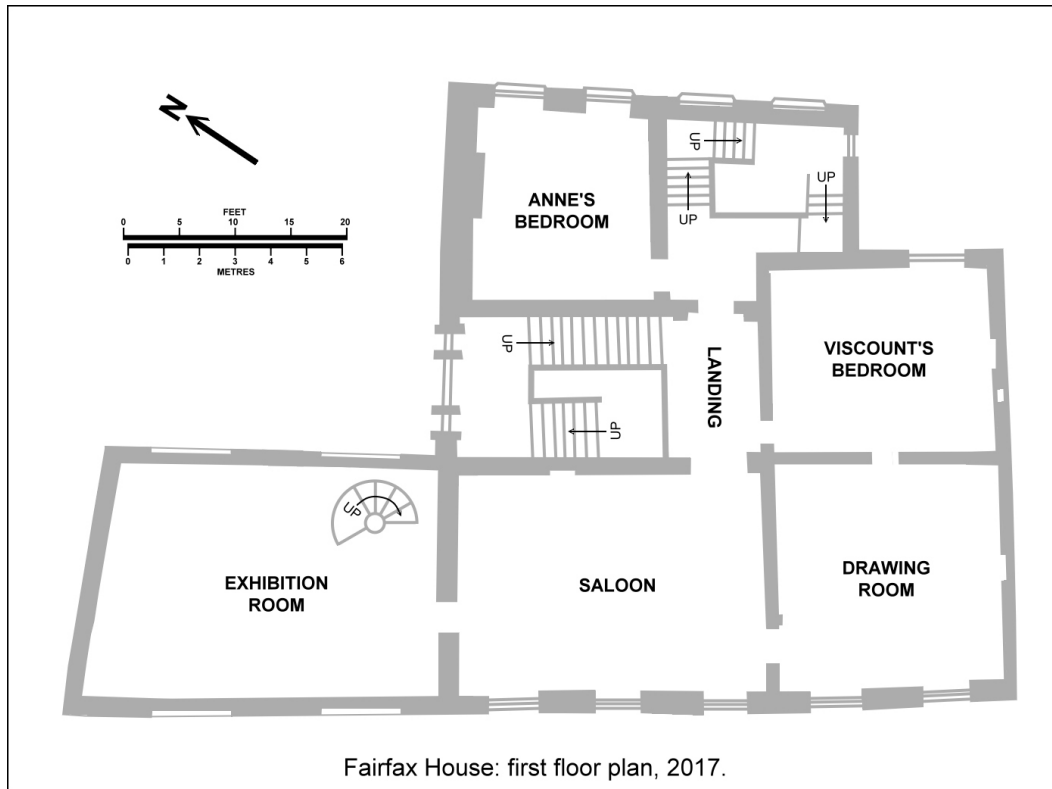
Figure 1.11. Plans of the ground and first floors of Fairfax House, 2017. (Author's diagram.)

The arrangement of the landing and the rooms on the first floor of the house reveals both the ambition of the Viscount's and Carr's schemes and the practical limitations on their realisation (**Figure 1.11**). There are three grand social spaces on this floor: the Great Staircase with its landing, the Saloon, and the Drawing Room. The latter two rooms are arranged across the front of the house, so that the Saloon has three windows and the Drawing Room two. These spaces thus occupy the key portion of the façade, the *piano nobile*. The way in which they are planned, however, is inconvenient. At the end of the landing that leads from the top of the Grand Staircase to the front of the house there are two doors. The first, which faces the staircase, leads not into a public 'social' room but into a private space – the room now known as the Viscount's bedroom. The second, at right angles to the first so that it faces along the axis of the landing, opens into the Saloon. The other main entertaining room, however, the Drawing Room, has no landing door of its own – it is only accessible via the Saloon, an arrangement which, while awkward, does express the higher social status of the latter.[88] There is no evidence that this arrangement was ever any different, so it seems Carr retained the plan that was already in existence. During the 1980s restoration project it was discovered that the dividing wall between Saloon and Drawing Room had been moved inwards towards the Drawing Room. It is not clear when this change was made, but it would be reasonable to assume that it was before work began on the ceilings of the Drawing Room and Saloon: the move was a very small one (a matter of 12-18 inches or so) but it would have had a major impact on the designs used on the two ceilings if they had already been in situ. However, this movement would not have brought about any alterations in the positions of the exits and entrances of either space – the doors must always have been where they are now.[89] Nor is there any evidence that the Viscount's bedroom was ever a social space of any kind: it has a decorated cornice but the ceiling is

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[88] John Cornforth, *Early Georgian Interiors* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), pp. 52-4.

[89] The reasons for this movement of the wall are unclear, but the materials and relationship to the surrounding structure indicate that it was carried out at the time of John Carr's rebuilding of the house, not as part of the original construction. The movement of the wall left the structure in a seriously weakened state and extensive steel and concrete stitching was installed during the 1980s restoration, as recorded in Francis F. Johnson and Partners, *Alterations and Improvements to Fairfax House, Castlegate, York for the York Civic Trust, 9 August 1982*, item 198 (Francis Johnson Archive, Hull History Centre). I am grateful to Peter Brown of York Civic Trust for discussing this aspect of the restoration with me.

plain, marking a clear distinction of status and purpose between this room and those at the front of the house. There was no doorway from this room into the Drawing Room until one was inserted in the nineteenth century, in the position now occupied by the modern jib door.

It seems then that the arrangement of Fairfax House's grand entertaining spaces was always somewhat congested and inconvenient, with the Drawing Room only having one door opening into the Saloon, and the door between Saloon and landing being located awkwardly at the end of a narrow landing. This positioning does contribute to the processional quality of the route from Dining Room to Saloon, with guests crossing the lower hall, mounting the staircase and turning right at the top to make their way along the main landing across the width of the staircase hall to enter the Saloon; but it also means that for social purposes flexibility was lost, as one could use the Saloon without the Drawing Room, but not vice versa, or at least not very conveniently; given that guests would have to pass through the former to get to the latter. For a gathering of any size, movement between these two rooms and the staircase landing would have been difficult as all the doors involved are within a few feet of each other. In addition, as the door between Drawing Room and Saloon is at the window side of the room, the entire width of the room must be traversed by those whose destination is the Drawing Room. Finally it must be noted that the Drawing Room, as a fairly deep space lit only by two windows on one of its end walls, does tend to be rather dark, although the treatment of the ceiling does mitigate this during daylight, and during the evening of course the room would have been lit by candles and it would not have been a significant problem.

However, Carr's remodelling of 27 Castlegate must be considered not only with reference to its compromises but also its successes. Fairfax House possesses two very fine entertaining rooms, each with rich decoration of high quality, and each with a strong character of its own. The management of the decorative scheme, moreover, is effective in creating a sense both of variety and climax during the process of movement between ground and first floor via the Great Staircase. The elaborate plasterwork decoration of the 'ceiling' to the Staircase Hall (actually the underside of the first-floor landing) acts as a prologue or curtain-raiser to the highlights of the staircase and its landings, which in turn prepares ascending guests for the splendours of the Saloon and Drawing Room.

Within each space the plasterwork possesses a distinctive character related to the identity and purpose of the environment it embellishes, and the individual decorative schemes also relate to each other as parts of an overall decorative scheme.

A survey of the interior

The main axis of the ground floor at Fairfax House extends from the front door (the main entrance to the house, opening into Castlegate) through to the doorway opening into the Rear Hall at the back of the house which accommodates the rear staircase. This axis runs through two hallways which are so distinct in character and purpose that they can be treated as separate spaces. The Entrance Hall proper runs from the front door to the arch which stands at the foot of the main stairs. Continuing from the front of the house to the back, the Staircase Hall runs from that archway to the door of the Rear Hall.

Figure 1.12. Left: view of the Entrance Hall from the front door of Fairfax House. The Library is on the left side and the Dining Room on the right. Beyond the first arch is the Staircase Hall. Right: ceiling of the Entrance Hall. (Author's photographs, 2011.)

The entrance hall of a Georgian house, whether in town or country, was seen as a transitional space in two ways: first, it connected other rooms within the house without truly being a room itself, and second, it linked interior with exterior

and was perceived as partaking of the character of both.[90] This characteristic view of the status of the entrance hall in houses of the mid- and later-eighteenth century also reflected a decline in the status of the hall, formerly the centre of the social life of a grand house, and the movement of social activity to an increasingly wide range of other rooms: saloons, drawing rooms, music rooms and libraries.[91] The transitional nature of the town house hall was expressed in its decorative treatment, which tended to position it as a space concerned as much with the outside as the inside, with painted walls in stone colours, the employment of architectural ornament such as arches and pilasters, and a restrained level of decoration, with more elaborate finishes reserved for spaces deeper inside the house. The Entrance Hall at Fairfax House follows this pattern.

The Entrance Hall at Fairfax House (**Figure 1.12**) does not provide a particularly grand entrance to the house itself but is well-proportioned and, with its pilasters, arches and elegant compartmented ceiling, entices the visitor with glimpses of greater grandeur further in. Doors are symmetrically disposed on either side immediately inside the front door, with the Library on the left (looking from the door into the house) and the Dining Room on the right. The second door to the Dining Room is beyond the Entrance Hall proper, opening into the Staircase Hall, and as noted above is directly aligned with the foot of the staircase. Lit only by the fanlight above the window, indirect light from adjacent rooms and the light that filters through from the Venetian window on the Great Staircase landing, the Entrance Hall is somewhat dark, a problem unfortunately magnified by the inappropriate blue colour scheme currently used there. During the 1760s the hall would almost certainly have been painted a plain light stone colour, reflecting the exterior orientation of the space and increasing the level of light.[92] The ceiling is shallowly coved above a decorated cornice: the coving is plain and the ceiling is divided by narrow enriched mouldings into three panels. The central panel contains a large ceiling rose while the panels on either side contain elaborate interlaced decoration. The ceiling decoration is restrained and static in conception, suitable to a space with a transitional character rather than requiring a distinctive

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[90] Andor Gomme and Alison Maguire, *Design and Plan in the Country House: From Castle Donjons to Palladian Boxes* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008), pp. 196, 292; Stewart, *Town House*, pp. 174-5.
[91] Cornforth, *Early Georgian Interiors*, pp. 54, 58-63, 68.
[92] Ian Bristow, *Interior House-Painting from the Restoration to the Regency* (DPhil thesis, 2 vols, Institute of Advanced Architectural Studies, University of York, 1983), vol. I, pp. 661-2.

Figure 1.13. View into the Staircase Hall from the Entrance Hall, showing the elaborate plasterwork beneath the first-floor landing of the Great Staircase. (Author's photograph, 2014.)

decorative character of its own, while the separation of the Entrance Hall from the Rear Hall and its enclosed design, emphasised by the arches at both the main doorway end and the inner end adjacent to the foot of the stairs, along with the coved ceiling, make clear its role as a linking space separate from the areas which it connects. The distinction between the Entrance Hall and the Staircase Hall is particularly important: the latter with its elaborate decoration is a true interior space and, in its relationship to both the Entrance Hall and the Great Staircase, a purposeful location in its own right.

The Staircase Hall, then, both develops from the Entrance Hall and is distinct from it. The ambiguous status of this space within the house is reflected in the various names used for it: Fairfax House guidebooks commonly refer to it as the 'staircase hall',[93] suggesting that its role is to serve as a passage to and from the Great Staircase, which rises from it, and that terminology is adopted here; but the position and significance of this space is greater than that characterisation implies. The effect of the first-floor landing above and the dominating presence of the Great Staircase is to give this space an enclosed atmosphere, encouraging those

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[93] See Brown, *Fairfax House York* (1989), p. 12.

Figure 1.14. Views of (left) the Rear Hall, which was entirely reconstructed during the restoration, and (right) the kitchen, a modern re-creation, the original kitchen having been in outbuildings that were demolished in the early twentieth century. (Author's photographs, 2013.)

standing within it to mount the stairs, as if the Staircase Hall were an anteroom to the staircase. The decoration here, however, imposes a distinct identity upon this essentially transitional space.

The scheme of ornament in plasterwork and carved wood in the Staircase Hall is highly elaborate, consisting of a complex blend of motifs and patterns on both walls and 'ceiling' (formed of the underside of the first-floor landing above). The ceiling decoration is based on raised mouldings in a linked diamond form, giving a more dynamic effect than the square low-relief mouldings in the Entrance Hall. The lower surface of the mouldings is decorated with a pattern of interlinked scrollwork enclosing five-petalled roses, while the borders carry an acanthus leaf moulding. Each diamond-shaped panel encloses a large ceiling rose of similar design to the one in the entrance hall, each ceiling rose being decorated with acanthus leaves and with eight small four-petalled roses on the innermost ring. These ceiling roses do not appear ever to have been used for mounting lamps. The ceiling panel is edged with an elaborate cornice and richly carved brackets support the outer edges. On the wall facing the staircase is an oval plasterwork medallion representing the figure of *Roma Aeterna*, 'Eternal Rome'.

Moving towards the rear of the house from the Staircase Hall takes us into the Rear Hall (**Figure 1.14**). The original everyday staircase (as distinct from the grand formal Great Staircase) is located in this space, but had been cut off short at the first floor when the house was adapted into a cinema in the early twentieth century. The lower flight was therefore entirely re-created, with concrete treads

and new wrought ironwork, in 1983. The Rear Hall itself is plainly decorated, no records of what was here in the eighteenth century having survived. A door from the Rear Hall, on the left of the archway leading into the Staircase Hall, opens into the Kitchen (**Figure 1.14**), which was installed during the restoration to give the house the complete suite of rooms necessary to create the impression of a re-created 'Georgian town house'. The room itself may have been a small parlour, but nothing is known of its original purpose, decoration or contents. The house's original kitchen was in the extensive outbuildings which were demolished by the cinema company after the First World War.

Figure 1.15. View of the Library ceiling, showing compartmented design and the busts of four literary figures on roundels. (Author's photograph, 2015.)

Returning to the rooms at the front of the house, on the left of the front door (looking into the house) is the Library (**Figure 1.15**). This room is nearly square and is lit by two windows facing onto Castlegate. The decoration of the ceiling is consistent with the use of this room, featuring the heads of four literary figures: John Locke, Joseph Addison, Alexander Pope and John Milton. The ceiling itself is elaborately decorated with festoons and diapered panels enclosing crossed palm fronds, but its organisation into compartments and its deep coving give it a formal

and contemplative quality. This room is one of two in the house to retain its original chimneypiece, which is in white marble with Siena marble decoration including a Greek key-pattern frieze.

Figure 1.16. General view of the Dining Room, looking towards Castlegate. The door in the centre leads into the Entrance Hall. (Author's photograph, 2014.)

On the opposite side of the Entrance Hall, situated to one's right as one enters the front door of the house, is the Dining Room (**Figure 1.16**). This large room is lit by two windows facing out onto Castlegate and, given its depth and its blue colour scheme, can be somewhat dark. The elaborate ceiling (**Figure 1.17**) depicts Abundantia, personifying abundance, and as with the other figures in the house is drawn from English translation (1709) of Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* (1593). The cornice expresses the Ionic order and is finished architecturally with guttae, and the doorcases are embellished with richly decorated pulvinated friezes and impressive broken pediments. These elements give the room a strongly formal quality, only partially counterbalanced by the Rococo scrollwork of the ceiling. The polychrome marble fireplace is original. The Dining Room has two doors: one at the window end which aligns with the door of the Library opposite, the other at the rear which leads directly to the foot of the Great Staircase.

Figure 1.17. The Dining Room ceiling. The figure in the central oval represents 'abundance'. (Author's photograph, 2014.)

The Great Staircase itself (**Figure 1.18**) is the most elaborate, dramatic and impressive space in Fairfax House. The steps run around the walls of the staircase hall and are cantilevered out from the walls, creating a dynamism enhanced by the height of the hall and the impressive Venetian window which lights the space. There are two generously-proportioned landings, an intermediate one directly beneath the window and a wide first-floor landing giving access to the main rooms. The delicate wrought ironwork is by Maurice Tobin of Leeds and echoes the Rococo decoration of the lower part of the staircase hall and the coving and ceiling, where some of the finest and richest plasterwork in the house is to be found. The figure in the centre of the compartmented ceiling, derived from Ripa's *Iconologia*, represents 'Military Architecture', and the decoration of the coving picks up the military theme with a warlike display of weaponry and flags, interspersed with dragons, birds and putti. The first-floor landing has a symmetrical arrangement of doors, with two facing the staircase and a further one at each end. The right-hand door, as one mounts the stairs, leads into the Saloon, while that on the left opens into the landing for the rear stairs and Anne's

Figure 1.18. View of the Great Staircase, showing Venetian window and ornamental plasterwork on ceiling, coving and walls. (Author's photograph, 2014.)

Bedroom. Of the two doors in the wall facing the staircase, the right-hand one leads into the Viscount's Bedroom while that on the left opens only into a shallow cupboard and is there purely to give visual balance.

The two bedrooms themselves (**Figure 1.19**) have no decorated ceilings but do have impressive carved doorcases and other timberwork, and finely moulded cornices. Both are decorated with wallpaper printed from original eighteenth-

Figure 1.19. The two bedrooms on the first floor of Fairfax House. On the left, Anne's Bedroom, and on the right, the Viscount's Bedroom. (Author's photographs, 2014.)

century blocks which have been chosen to correspond with the records of the decoration of these rooms among the Fairfax papers. The bedrooms are lit by windows opening to the rear of the house. Anne's Bedroom is lit by two original windows, while the wide window in the Viscount's Bedroom is entirely modern, having been installed when the rear wall of the house was rebuilt during the restoration. The identification of these rooms as bedrooms is confirmed by documentation from the 1760s. Each would have been provided with a dressing room, but the location of these is unknown. The Viscount's Bedroom opens by means of a jib door into the adjacent Drawing Room. This door is not original: the doorway was created during the period when the house was the Friendly Societies' Hall, and the jib door was fitted during the restoration.

The Drawing Room (**Figure 1.20**) is directly above the Dining Room but is distinctly smaller to allow space for the Viscount's bedroom to its rear. It is, as noted above, only accessible from the neighbouring Saloon, through a door on the window side of the room. The wall between the Saloon and the Drawing Room, along with the corresponding wall at the other end of the Saloon, were taken down by the cinema company in 1919 to create a single large ballroom across the front of the house. Beams encased in Georgian-style mouldings were inserted below the cornices so that the ceilings of these two rooms were undamaged by the removal

Figure 1.20. The Drawing Room. The wall on the left divides this space from the Viscount's Bedroom, and is pierced by a nineteenth-century doorway fitted with a modern door. The room is hung with green cotton damask. (Author's photograph, 2015.)

Figure 1.21. The ceiling of the Drawing Room, showing the deep coving with coffered decoration and the central figure of 'Amicitia'. (Author's photograph, 2015.)

of the walls and remain in situ, with almost all their original eighteenth-century plasterwork, to this day. The Drawing Room ceiling (**Figure 1.21**) is particularly fine, with deep coffered coving, an elaborate cornice and a richly-ornamented ceiling with a central figure of 'Amicitia' or friendship, taken from Ripa's *Iconologia*. The deep and richly embellished coving gives an illusion of additional height to this room, adding to the sense of grandeur and enabling it to sit alongside the much larger Saloon on equal terms.

Figure 1.22. A view of the Saloon. The door next to the fireplace opens onto the landing, while the door on the extreme right of the image communicates with the Drawing Room. (Author's photograph, 2017.)

The Saloon (**Figure 1.22**) is the largest room in the house, lit by three windows and running across the central bay and northern wing of the Castlegate frontage. As mentioned above, between 1919 and the restoration of 1983-4 the walls at either end of the room were taken down to create an uninterrupted space across the whole width of Fairfax House and 25 Castlegate. As originally constructed the Saloon had only two doors: one leading onto the first-floor landing, and one connecting with the adjacent Drawing Room. There is now a third door connecting the Saloon with the Exhibition Room which has been created on the first floor of 25 Castlegate. The door on the wall facing the

Figure 1.23. Detail of the Saloon ceiling, showing cornice decoration and frieze. Above each modillion is a lion mask. (Author's photograph, 2017.)

windows is a false door installed to provide visual balance with the landing door on the other side of the fireplace. The ceiling here is elaborate, featuring extensive scrollwork entwined with vines and oak-leaf circlets, baskets at the four corners representing the four seasons, and groups of musical instruments tied with ribbons, and sheet music. There is no central figure because this room was always lit by a central chandelier. One distinctive feature of the Saloon plasterwork is the frieze running around the room underneath the cornice, decorated with a scrolling pattern of acanthus leaves. The cornice itself is particularly elaborate, with the entablature embellished with lion masks – perhaps a reference to the lion in the Fairfax coat of arms (**Figure 1.23**).

The house's dedicated exhibition space lies beyond the northern wall of the Saloon, occupying the first floor of 25 Castlegate. This area formed part of the large dance hall during the cinema company's ownership of the house, and extended backwards across the rear wall of the staircase hall, blocking the Venetian window. Behind the modern panelling and built-in exhibition cases this room retains some original nineteenth-century features including window surrounds and a plainly moulded cornice. A spiral staircase leads from this room

down into the shop and up to the attics, which are now occupied by the behind-the-scenes offices of the museum and the Director's flat. These rooms are low in height, with original fireplaces of plain design, undecorated ceilings and simple moulded cornices (**Figure 1.24**).

Figure 1.24. The front of the second (attic) floor of the house was a long gallery during the Fairfaxes' residence. This space is now divided into offices but retains some original features, including two fireplaces, one at each end of the former gallery, and moulded cornices. Left: the fireplace at the northern end; that at the southern end is of the same design. Right: cornice detail from the office at the southern end. (Author's photograph, 2017.)

CHAPTER 2

Problems in Plaster

The ambiguities of plasterwork

Mrs Transome, mother of the prosperous and politically opportunistic landowner Harold Transome in George Eliot's 1866 novel *Felix Holt the Radical*, is a sympathetic figure but one stuck in a past age. As the narrative progresses she finds herself in deepening despair at the changing world around her and increasingly disconnected from its values and ideas. Ill-equipped to face the challenges of the world around her, Mrs Transome increasingly devotes herself to keeping up appearances through obsolete and meaningless outward show. Eliot conveys Mrs Transome's predicament through metaphorical allusion to decorative plasterwork or 'stucco':

> Mrs Transome had been in her bloom before this century began,
> and in the long painful years since then, what she had once
> regarded as her knowledge and accomplishments had become as
> valueless as old-fashioned stucco ornaments, of which the
> substance was never worth anything, while the form is no longer
> to the taste of any living mortal.[1]

This piece of imagery effectively highlights some of the characteristics of plasterwork that have proved problematic in its history and its historiography. Stucco is represented here as 'valueless' in itself: the only value it possesses is in its outward form, the decorative patterns into which it is shaped. As tastes and prevailing languages of visuality change, such decorative plasterwork loses that value and becomes a mere assortment of stale leftovers from an old, and now denigrated, epoch. Furthermore, plasterwork is not like a piece of furniture or a

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[1] George Eliot, *Felix Holt the Radical*, 3 vols (Edinburgh: William Blackwell 1866), vol. I, p. 28.

painting that taste has left behind and which can simply be removed from the scene. Taking away plasterwork decoration and replacing it with something more acceptable is laborious and inconvenient. Plasterwork is in practical terms part of the fabric of a building, arguably part of its architecture; just as the 'knowledge and accomplishments' painstakingly accumulated by Mrs Transome over many years (but now little more than a dead weight) are part of her fabric and embody the architecture of her existence.

Such problems in plaster are a matter not only of outward appearance but of the substance itself. This may seem paradoxical, given that plasterwork, an applied surface treatment, is arguably all about outward appearance. Plasterwork, when compared with carved stone or even the time-consuming complexities of a painted ceiling, was indeed technically straightforward and quick in application, and allowed the creation of impressive effects with relative ease and economy. This was reflected in Sir Henry Wotton's description of plasterwork in his *Elements of Architecture* of 1624 as a 'cheape piece of Magnificence',[2] although (as discussed below) what Wotton meant by 'cheape' is not as simple as might at first appear. In any case, if in the early seventeenth century plasterwork *was* among the less expensive of available decorative treatments, such was no longer the case by the middle decades of the eighteenth century.[3] Decorative plasterwork of any quality might appear relatively economical in cost when compared with the expense of a painted ceiling or carved decorative stonework, both of which took longer and required more expensive raw materials, but in *absolute* terms the cost was high.[4] An example of the expense involved is offered by the plasterwork interior at Denton Hall near Ilkley (**Figure 2.1**), built by John Carr *c*. 1768-72 for Sir James and Lady Ibbetson.[5]

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[2] Sir Henry Wootton, *The Elements of Architecture* (London, 1624), p. 108.

[3] See Tara Hamling, *Decorating the 'Godly' Household: Religious Art in Post-Reformation Britain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 19.

[4] Geoffrey Beard, *Georgian Craftsmen and their Work* (London: Country Life, 1966), pp. 27, 37.

[5] Denton Hall, also known as Denton Park, had been a property of the Fairfax family and was sold to the Ibbetsons in 1717. The Fairfaxes' Denton Hall burned down and the Ibbetsons built a new house on the site in the 1730s. Sir James Ibbetson inherited the property in 1768 and, having married the wealthy Halifax heiress Jenny Caygill in the same year, engaged John Carr to build him a new and much grander house. See Wragg, *John Carr of York*, pp. 135-7; R. G. Wilson, 'Merchants and land: the Ibbetsons of Leeds and Denton, 1650-1850', *Northern History*, vol. 24 (1988), pp. 75-100, here pp. 86-7, 92-3.

Figure 2.1. Denton Hall, Yorkshire, built by John Carr between 1768 and 1772, with internal decorative plasterwork by Thomas Rothwell. Engraving by Percy Heath after John Preston Neale, published 1829. (Source: private collection.)

Sir James Ibbetson inherited Denton Hall in 1768 and immediately set about replacing the existing 1730s house which was apparently 'in a ruinous condition'.[6] The construction dates for Denton Hall cannot be determined precisely but the surviving accounts date from 1772, indicating that the main part of the building of the house took place between 1768 and 1772.[7] The Ibbetsons' total expenditure on construction and decoration at Denton (excluding other buildings such as stables and service quarters) is recorded in the accounts as £9459 11s 7d (a further £1082 7s 0d was spent on furnishing the house).[8] The division of that total between the various crafts and trades involved is summarised in percentages in the chart below (**Figure 2.2**). Within this expenditure the single largest outlay was for the masons, who received payments of £2105 18s 2½d (22.26% of the total). The next largest

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[6] Wragg, *John Carr of York*, p. 135.

[7] A completion date of 1778 is sometimes given for Denton Hall but it is clear from the accounts that the house was largely if not completely built, decorated and furnished by the end of 1772: see Wragg, *John Carr of York*, pp. 63, 135.

[8] The accounts for Denton are now in private hands. They are reproduced in summary in Wragg, *John Carr of York*, p. 135, and in detail in Christopher Wilson and Andrew Mackley, *Creating Paradise: The Building of the English Country House 1660-1880* (London: Hambledon and London, 2000), pp. 237-9. For furnishing, see Christopher Gilbert, 'Gillow at Denton Hall, Yorkshire', *Regional Furniture*, vol. 12 (1998), pp. 2-13.
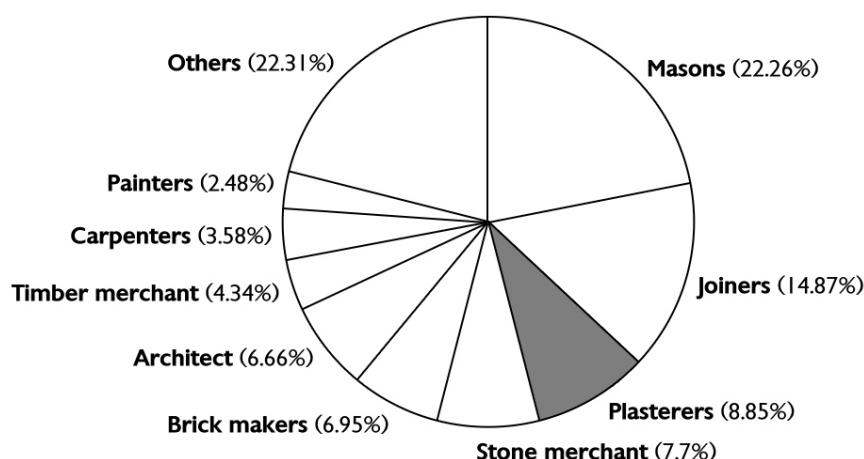
Figure 2.2. Relative expenditure on different crafts and trades during the building of Denton Hall, *c*.1772, given in percentages. (Source: Denton Hall building accounts reproduced in Wilson and Mackley, *Creating Paradise* (2000), pp. 237-9.)

charge was for the joiners who received £1407 0s 0d (14.87%). The third highest outlay was for the plasterwork, with the York plasterer Thomas Rothwell receiving £837 15s (8.85%) for his work at the house. This was significantly more than was paid to the brick makers (£658 4s 9d) or the painters (£235 0s 0d). For larger houses the expense was proportionally greater: for his work at Harewood between January 1766 and March 1770 Joseph Rose was paid £2,829 17s 0d,[9] while the Lafranchini brothers received £830 for their plasterwork in the 'new gallery' at Northumberland House in London, carried out between 1752 and 1754.[10] The only surviving contemporary record of the creation of the plasterwork at Fairfax House in the early 1760s is a receipt (**Figure 2.3**) from the York plasterer James Henderson for thirty guineas, being payment 'in part for ye Drawing Room Ceiling'.[11] This sum needs to be multiplied several times over to give any credible indication of the money spent on the plasterwork for the interior of the house as a whole. Given such significant investment in decorative plasterwork, and the cost of replacing it, it is understandable that it was rarely removed and replaced, except as part of far-reaching interior remodelling or a

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[9] Beard, *Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 241.

[10] Beard, *Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 220; 'Northumberland House', in G. H. Gater and E. P. Wheeler (eds), *Survey of London: Volume 18, St Martin-in-The-Fields II: the Strand* (London: London County Council, 1937), pp. 19-20; Carlo Palumbo-Fossati, *Gli stuccatori Ticinese Lafranchini in Inghilterra e in Irlanda nel secolo XVIII* (Lugano: Fondazione Ticino Nostro, 1982), p. 91.

[11] North Yorkshire County Record Office, Fairfax Papers, ZDV/F: receipt from James Henderson dated 21 May 1762. There is no surviving record of the total spent on plasterwork at the house.

complete rebuilding.[12] Mrs Transome would not have welcomed a sweeping transformation of her personality, and nor would the owners of houses with 'old fashioned stucco ornaments' have lightly undertaken the trouble and cost of wholesale removal and replacement.
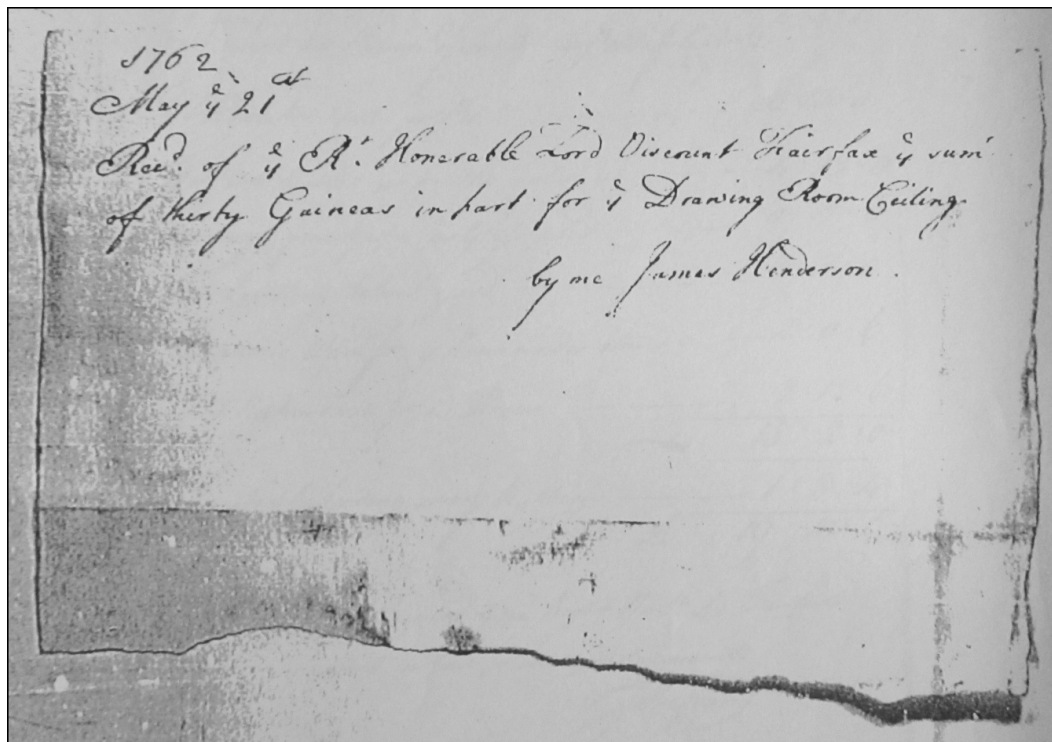
Figure 2.3. Receipt from James Henderson for thirty guineas in part payment for the Drawing Room ceiling at Fairfax House, dated 21 May 1762. (Source: Fairfax House Archive, original at North Yorkshire County Record Office, Fairfax Papers, ZDV/F.)

Financial considerations were clearly one reason why once plasterwork was in place it was in many cases left alone. Another was its perceived status as part of the structure of the building rather than its decoration or furnishing. It tended to be regarded as part of the architectural assemblage of a space rather than an applied treatment such as paint, fabrics or wallpaper which could be covered up or removed: existing between architecture and decoration, plasterwork was perceived as belonging in substance more to the former than to the latter.[13] The removal of plaster could itself be a very disruptive and slow process. In the mid-1770s Lady Louisa Conolly redecorated the Long Gallery at Castletown House in Co. Kildare and expressed some relief that she had decided not to remove the existing ceiling

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[12] Wilson and Mackley, *Creating Paradise*, pp. 169, 219-221.
[13] Conor Lucey, 'Introduction', in Christine Casey and Conor Lucey (eds), *Decorative Plasterwork in Ireland and Europe: Ornament and the Early Modern Interior* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2012), pp. 29-33.

plasterwork despite its old-fashioned style: 'The ceiling is heavy, but the excessive sloaness of the Plaisterers work comforts me for not having taken it down, as it must have been ages before we could have lived in the room'.[14] Building programmes were often long and drawn-out,[15] and rooms constructed and decorated at a later date would commonly feature decorative styles different from those of earlier rooms, fashions having changed: as John Cornforth observed, at Holkham Hall, where building and rebuilding took place over forty years from the 1720s to the 1770s, 'the architectural decoration of the house runs from early Palladianism to early Neo-Classicism'[16] and this is by no means an unusual case. It seems to have been relatively rare for those earlier rooms to be physically remodelled unless actual rebuilding of the structure within which they were contained was also taking place.[17] The plasterwork of the most important reception rooms might be reworked as part of a redecoration scheme, but even here the alterations were often partial rather than carried out wholesale, with cornices or central decorative motifs replaced with new elements shaped along more fashionable lines.[18] Rachel Stewart noted in her 2009 study of London town houses that many owners exercised restraint in the degree of redecoration and refurbishment carried out at a newly-purchased property: 'Extensive interior and exterior work, or even rebuilding, was an extreme way to adapt a house to one's particular needs or to keep up with fashion, but a new owner could readily make their mark through furnishings and furniture'.[19] If that was true of a property which had been newly bought it would seem to be even more the case with

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[14] Letter of Lady Louisa Conolly to Lady Sarah Bunbury, 26 May 1774. Quoted in Gillian Byrne, *The Redecoration and Alteration of Castletown House by Lady Louisa Conolly 1759-76* (unpublished MA thesis, St Patrick's College Maynooth, 1997), pp. 76-7. Lady Louisa's redecoration of the Long Gallery at Castletown did involve the removal of existing plasterwork from the walls and its replacement by painted 'Pompeian' decoration: *ibid.*, pp. 79-83. For an illustrated account of the redecoration, see Ann Margaret Keller, 'The Long Gallery at Castletown House', *Bulletin of the Irish Georgian Society*, vol. 22 (1979), pp. 1-53.

[15] Jon Stobart and Mark Rothery, 'Fashion, heritance, and family: new and old in the Georgian country house', *Cultural and Social History*, vol. 11, no. 3 (2014), pp. 385-406, here pp. 389-92.

[16] Cornforth, *Early Georgian Interiors*, p. 9.

[17] Wilson and Mackley, *Creating Paradise*, p. 220; Cornforth, *Early Georgian Interiors*, pp. 8-9.

[18] Stewart, *Town House*, pp. 21, 98, 180-1; Conor Lucey, 'Keeping up appearances: redecorating the domestic interior in late eighteenth-century Dublin', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy, Section C: Archaeology, Celtic Studies, History, Linguistics, Literature*, vol. 111C (2011), pp. 169-92, here pp. 170-1, 180-2, 185-6.

[19] Stewart, *Town House*, p. 118. It is of course the case that the Fairfaxes *did* engage in a major rebuilding of their York town house in Castlegate after purchasing it in 1760, including extensive new schemes of interior plasterwork, and had also carried out a significant redecoration and refurbishment of Gilling Castle in the mid-1750s, again including new plasterwork ceilings.

established families seeking to give a new look in whole or part to a house in which they were already resident.[20]

Ceilings were frequently the primary part of a room to be ornamented with plasterwork (and in many cases the only part), and often seem to have been left alone even if the remainder of a room was redecorated.[21] Thus Augustus Pugin, working with J. G. Crace in 1850 on the redecoration of Lismore Castle for the Duke of Devonshire, complained that 'there is nothing to be done but decorate as well as we can what is already there', and singled out the existing 'beastly' ceiling, which he was unable to replace as part of the redecoration, for particular criticism: 'it is plasterer's gothic and it will never be done well'.[22] In such interiors, whatever other changes were made, the styles of preceding ages remained in place above the heads of modern occupants: thus in 1893 the architect and writer G. T. Robinson lamented the presence in too many rooms of 'rigid, fossilised plaster' ornament from previous decades, the product of casting rather than moulding, 'which yet survives – or rather weighs upon us, for there never was life in it':

Do not you know too well those hideous centre-flowers; those curiously bad angle pieces; that dreadful running border as stiff as a corpse? and can you believe that people once rejoiced in such things and that these were admired? and, alas! are still in too many cases decreed the fitting inmates of our 'tasteful homes'.[23]

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[20] The mixture of different periods and styles of decoration typical of such houses became one of the underlying characteristics of the 'country house' style of furnishing that became influential in the twentieth century: see Louise Ward, 'Chintz, swags, and bows: the myth of English country-house style, 1980-90' in Susie McKellar and Penny Sparke (eds), *Interior Design and Identity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), pp. 92-113.

[21] G. T. Robinson, 'The decoration of ceilings', part I, *The Decorator and Furnisher*, vol. 21, no. 1 (October 1892), pp. 13-16, here p. 13.

[22] Letter of A. W. N. Pugin to J. G. Crace, 17 April 1850, quoted in Rosemary Hill, *God's Architect: Pugin and the Building of Romantic Britain* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 444; see also Jeremy Cooper, *Victorian and Edwardian Furniture and Interiors* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987, pbk. edn 1998), p. 45. Pugin never visited Lismore Castle himself, even when in Ireland, working purely by correspondence, and the redecoration scheme was largely carried out after his death.

[23] G. T. Robinson, 'The decoration of ceilings', part II, *The Decorator and Furnisher*, vol. 21, no. 6 (March 1893), pp. 220-1, here p. 221. Idiosyncratic punctuation and use of lower case in the original.

Such ornament was typically of debased design as well as stereotyped production, and given that it was also 'thick and stout … and heavy enough' to resist easy removal was, Robinson advised, best covered up by new light plaster mouldings of more acceptable design.[24]

During the nineteenth century, if a particular historical era was viewed with approval, as with the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods (which were felt to have a strong social, cultural and political affinity with the mid- to late-Victorian era[25]),

Figure 2.4. Joseph Nash, 'The Drawing Room at Speke Hall', watercolour dated 1864. The plasterwork ceilings at Speke Hall were widely seen as particularly fine examples of Jacobean decorative plasterwork. William Millar, George Bankart and Margaret Jourdain all give examples of plasterwork from Speke Hall as representative of high-quality English craftsmanship in plaster. (Sotheby's.)

the plasterwork of that era was also admired and held up as a model. This is reflected in the many interior views of the great houses 'of olden times' produced during this period by artists such as Joseph Nash (**Figure 2.4**) which depicted in rich detail the decoration of rooms inside sixteenth- and seventeenth-century mansions as a setting for imagined scenes of social life and reconstructed

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[24] Robinson, 'decoration of ceilings', part II, p. 221.

[25] Robert Colls, 'Englishness and the political culture', in Robert Colls and Philip Dodd (eds), *Englishness: Politics and Culture 1880-1920* (1986; 2nd edn, London: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 53-84, here pp. 67-8; Alun Howkins, 'The discovery of rural England', in Colls and Dodd, *Englishness*, pp. 85-112, here pp. 93-4; Krishan Kumar, *The Idea of Englishness: English Culture, National Identity and Social Thought* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2015), p. 125.

historical incidents within them.[26] In 1895 Frederick Parsons celebrated the interior decoration of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries with its 'richness, variety and picturesqueness' not only for its 'old-time beauty' but as a contemporary model: 'a dual impression of Elizabethan as it was and as it is being reproduced and interpreted, in sympathy with our age, in England to-day'.[27] However, where the style of a previous historical period was viewed unsympathetically, as was the case with eighteenth-century Rococo decoration during much of the nineteenth century, the continuing presence of the plasterwork that era had produced could be an embarrassment.[28]

These issues go to the heart of the ambiguities of plasterwork and the ambivalence with which it has been regarded by historians of architecture. Its very tendency towards fashionability on the one hand, and its role in preserving decorative styles regarded by later generations as outmoded on the other, mean that it is characterised simultaneously by adherence *and* resistance to the transient and mutable values of fashion. Its combination of superficiality and durability gives to plasterwork an intrinsic ambivalence, while also placing it at a nexus of vigorous and often morally-charged aesthetic and historical critiques. Is such plaster decoration architectural or ornamental, an innate part of a structure or a superficial addition? Its interiority adds another layer of ambivalence. As Penny Sparke noted in 2004, the relationship between architecture and the interior is complex and ambiguous: 'This complexity in the interior is intensified by its ambiguous relationship with architecture, which has both "owned" it and "disowned" it at different historical moments'.[29] As an aspect of interior decoration, does plasterwork qualify as 'architectural' at all? These questions in turn engage with issues of the ways in which the history of the built environment is conceptualised and written about, not least the conflation of the history of

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[26] Joseph Nash, *The Mansions of England in the Olden Time* (London: T. McLean, 4 vols, 1839-49), frequently reprinted in various forms. See William A. McClung, 'The country-house Arcadia', *Studies in the History of Art*, Vol. 25, Symposium Papers X: 'The Fashioning and Functioning of the British Country House' (1989), pp. 277-287.

[27] Frederick Parsons, 'Elizabethan interiors', *The Decorator and Furnisher*, vol. 26, no. 5 (August 1895), pp. 167-70, here pp. 168, 169.

[28] Peter Mandler, *The Fall and Rise of the Stately Home* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), pp. 73, 78, 86-7. For humbler middle-class homes, Helen Long offers a case study of the decline in the popularity of ceiling roses and elaborate cornices in the late nineteenth century: Helen Long, *The Edwardian House: The Middle-Class Home in Britain 1880-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), pp. 133-8.

[29] Penny Sparke, 'Introduction', in Susie McKellar and Penny Sparke (eds), *Interior Design and Identity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), pp. 1-9, here p. 2.

buildings with the history of *architecture*; and the significance of 'ornament' and 'decoration' in that enterprise.

The place of 'plastique'

Sir Henry Wotton (1568-1639) was a diplomat, traveller and author who published *The Elements of Architecture* in 1624. This book, assembled very quickly (as part of a bid by its author for patronage) from the works of others, particularly Vitruvius, Palladio and Alberti, is not a systematic, rigorous or indeed particularly innovative work, but has nevertheless been described as 'the second original English book on architecture … and the first English theoretical work on the subject'.[30] It does reflect the nature of its intended audience of gentlemen connoisseurs in its emphasis on order, harmony and hierarchy, not only in the aesthetics of architecture but in the way in which the enterprise of architecture itself is conceived.[31] If architecture was to be properly understood, Wotton argued throughout his text, it was essential that the carefully structured hierarchy governing the relations between architecture itself and the other art forms which could be employed in an architectural context was fully appreciated: thus '*Picture*, and *Sculpture* 'were to be 'subordinated … to *Architecture*, as their Mistresse'.[32] Beneath these subordinate arts, and therefore still lower in Wotton's hierarchy, were 'certain inferiour Arts likewise subordinate to them: As under Picture, Mosaique; under Sculpture, Plastique'.[33] The sixteenth- and seventeenth-century usage of 'plastique' or 'plastick' as a noun in relation to the arts denoted decorative production that was moulded rather than carved – and, by extension, was also applied to the material of which it was made.[34] It was derived from the Latin *plastice* and the Italian *plastica* as used in such terms as 'la plastica

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[30] Herbert Mitchell, 'An unrecorded issue of Philibert Delorme's *Le premier tome de l'architecture*, annotated by Sir Henry Wotton', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, vol. 53, no. 1 (March 1994), pp. 20-9, here p. 23.

[31] Anne M. Myers, *Literature and Architecture in Early Modern England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), pp. 54-7; Eileen Harris, *British Architectural Books and Writers 1556-1785* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 499-503.

[32] Wotton, *Elements of Architecture*, p. 108.

[33] Wotton, *Elements of Architecture*, p. 108.

[34] Thomas Blount, *Glossographia: or, A Dictionary Interpreting all such Hard Words of Whatsoever Language now used in our Refined English Tongue* (London, 1661), unpaginated, definitions of 'Plastique' and 'Plastick'.

scultura', via Italian works such as Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo's *Trattato dell'arte della pittura, scoltura, et architettura* (1584), which appeared in 1594 in an English translation.[35] Thus, when Cornelius Agrippa's satire *De incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum* (1526) was rendered into English in 1676 the text followed the original in translating the title of chapter 25, 'De statuaria & plastica' as 'Of Statuary and Plastick', but, in the account that follows, Agrippa's 'plastes' is translated as 'plaster', denoting a craftsman who *moulds* materials rather than carving them or casting with them. Thus 'plastick' is used to denote the material worked, the means of working, and the worker.[36] Wotton is part of this same tradition in his identification of the way plaster is shaped, *by moulding*, as the essential characteristic that sets plasterwork apart from sculpture.

For Wotton as for his contemporaries the fact that plaster was worked by moulding meant that it occupied a lower position in the artistic (and architectural) hierarchy than sculpture, which was shaped by carving. That ease of moulding when compared with carving, however, was the essential reason for using plaster as a decorative material: that is, forms and effects that could be created only with much labour using stone could be replicated in plaster much more easily. Part of the decorative value of plaster thus consisted in its ability to represent substances other than itself. In this, Wotton followed the argument of Lomazzo who had written in 1584 that 'Carving is nothing else but a painefull imitation of Plasticke',[37] indicating that similar decorative effects to those achieved with much labour by carving stone could be more easily reproduced in plaster, and that this was one of plasterwork's primary justifications. The result was naturally not as hardwearing as stone. Exterior ornament required stone or similar resilient materials, but for interiors plaster was suitable and could be finished to imitate stonework, and was thus 'the fittest to garnish Fabriques' inside a building.[38] This is the key to the proper understanding of Wotton's claim that plaster was a

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[35] Richard Haydocke, *A Tracte Containing the Artes of curious Paintinge Carvinge and Buildinge, written first in Italian by Io. Paul Lomatius painter of Milan* (London, 1594), preface, p. 7.
[36] *The Vanity of Arts and Sciences, By Henry Cornelius Agrippa, Knight* (London, 1676), p. 70. English translation of Cornelius Agrippa, *De incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum* (1526).
[37] Haydocke, *Tracte*, book ii, chapter xiv, p. 61; the original ('la scoltura non è altro che una imitatione faticosa della Plastica') is in Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo, *Trattato dell'arte della pittura, scoltura, et architettura* (Milan, 1584), book ii, chapter xiv, p. 159.
[38] Wotton, *Elements of Architecture*, p. 107.

'cheape piece of Magnificence'.[39] He was arguing, not that it was necessarily low in cost, but that it could represent good value, that it was suitable to its situation, and involved relatively little trouble – all meanings conveyed by the word 'cheape' in the seventeenth century.[40] The context of the quote, forming part of a discussion of the differing applications of interior plasterwork found in Italy and in England, makes this clear: 'Of this Plastique Art, the chiefe use with us is in the gracefull fretting of roofes: but the Italians applie it, to the manteling of Chimneys, with great Figures. A cheape piece of Magnificence, and as durable almost within doores, as harder Forms in the weather'.[41] This perception of the proper role of plaster again emphasises that *the interior* is its proper realm. Wotton was referring here not to plasterwork in general but specifically to the Italian practice of using plaster to create elaborate interior decorations, a practice not to be widely found in the early seventeenth-century English domestic plasterworking tradition.

Wotton declared at the beginning of his *Elements of Architecture* that the study of architecture 'can want no commendation, where there are Noble Men, or Noble mindes',[42] and his book has been described as representative of a type of English architectural publication 'intended as much for the gentleman as for the craftsman'.[43] The stated purpose of the *Elements* is to inform its readership of the principles of architecture (derived essentially from Vitruvius and Vasari), guiding their taste through the informed appreciation of architectural examples: 'casting the rules and cautions of this Art, into some comportable Methode … For though in practicall knowledges, every complete example, may beare the credite of a rule; yet peradventure rules should precead, that we may by them, be made fit to judge of examples'.[44] This applied to 'plastique' decoration as much as to every other aspect of architecture and building. Decorative treatments such as plasterwork, as 'not onely under Sculpture, but in deed very Sculpture it self', were subject to the same rules of due proportion, appropriateness and restraint as sculpture: that it 'bee not too generall and abundant' and that 'there bee a due moderation of this

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[39] Wotton, *Elements of Architecture*, p. 108.
[40] *Oxford English Dictionary*: 'cheap', meanings 2 and 3.
[41] Wotton, *Elements of Architecture*, p. 108.
[42] Wotton, *Elements of Architecture*, preface, first page (unpaginated).
[43] Lucy Elisabeth Rumble, *'Of Good Use or Serious Pleasure': Vitruvius Britannicus and Early Eighteenth Century Architectural Discourse* (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Leeds, 2001), p. 90; see also Myers, *Literature and Architecture*, pp. 54-5.
[44] Wotton, *Elements of Architecture*, preface, final page (unpaginated).

Ornament in the first approach'.[45] This reflected Wotton's hierarchically organised but integrated vision of architecture, which encompassed gardens and houses, interiors and exteriors, the practical and the ornamental.[46] For its possessor, Wotton wrote, a house was 'the Theater of his Hospitality, the Seate of Selfe-fruition … a kinde of private Princedom', and it was essential not only that it be well-built but that it be 'decently and delightfully adorned'.[47] Ornament and decoration was therefore not an additional and dispensable element of the architectural enterprise as rightly understood and practised, but an integral part of it, enabling architecture to fulfil the aims with which Wotton, paraphrasing Vitruvius, identified it: 'Commoditie, Firmenes, and Delight'.[48]

A matter of surfaces: the icing on the cake

It should be clear from the foregoing that the relationship between ornament and structure in architecture is anything but clear-cut. At the most basic level there is an organic interconnection as structural elements find expression in ornament, while ornamental treatments reflect underlying structures. Beyond these material considerations, but intimately connected with the material, are the ways in which the uses of buildings and the meanings they possess – the functional, experiential, and ideological dimensions of architecture – are expressed in ornament and decoration. In this respect Marzia Faietti's description of ornament as 'connective tissue between interior and exterior' is illuminating.[49] Faietti's specific reference in this description was to fresco decoration in the adjacent churches of San Giacomo Maggiore and Santa Cecilia in Bologna, in which the decorative

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[45] Wotton, *Elements of Architecture*, pp. 102, 103.

[46] In this respect Wotton's approach is very different from preceding works on architecture in English, whether original works or translations: John Shute's *The First and Chief Groundes of Architecture* (1563) is entirely concerned with the correct architectural use, derived from Italian authors such as Palladio and Serlio, of the classical orders. On the popularity in seventeenth-century Britain of translated editions of Palladio, Fréart, Vignola, Scamozzi and others, all primarily focused on the orders, see Rumble, *'Of Good Use or Serious Pleasure'*, pp. 89-109.

[47] Wotton, *Elements of Architecture*, p. 82.

[48] Wotton, *Elements of Architecture*, p. 1. This phrase derives from Vitruvius's reference in *De Architectura*, book I, chapter III, to 'firmitatis utilitatis venustatis' as the three qualities which all architecture should possess.

[49] Marzia Faietti (trans. Cara Rachele), 'Variety and metamorphosis: form and meaning in the ornament of Amico Aspertini', in Gülru Necipoğlu and Alina Payne (eds), *Histories of Ornament: From Global to Local* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), pp. 204-15, here p. 213.

treatment of an interior frieze relates directly to the architecture of an exterior portico which unifies the two church buildings.[50] That portico 'is a liminal space, the site of interaction and ambiguity between inside and outside' which constitutes, with the churches it connects, 'a unified program' of architectural ornament and decoration (encompassing carved work such as cornices and decoration such as frescoes).[51] The imagery of 'connective tissue' through which Faietti conceptualises this relationship is valuable beyond the particular instance she discusses, providing a useful way of approaching and interrogating the interconnectedness of substance and surface, ornament and structure, essentials and accidentals. In her analysis of the Bologna churches and their shared portico, Faietti pinpoints the presence of a direct relationship between the architectural and the decorative, the structural and the ornamental. Interior decoration and exterior ornament both reflect architectural structure. Both ornament and decoration express the structure of which they are part and contribute to its integrity as a unified whole, while playing distinct roles within that overall spatial and structural ensemble. This latter point returns us to Wotton's arguments for the status of ornament and decoration and again highlights the question of *surfaces*, a key issue in any consideration of the history and significance of plasterwork.

'Is stucco just the icing on the cake?' was the question Alastair Laing asked of his fellow attendees at a conference on eighteenth-century plasterwork in Ireland and Europe, held at Trinity College Dublin in April 2010.[52] Laing's contention was that decorative plasterwork has been seen by architectural historians as no more than a matter of surfaces, superficial rather than essential, unrelated to structure or to function. This in turn has led to its conceptual separation from the 'architecture' of buildings and relegation to a secondary level of importance, equivalent to that occupied by phenomena that could be regarded (rightly or wrongly) as temporary and incidental, such as the furniture in the rooms and the paintings hung on the walls. This, Laing argued, is a fallacious and profoundly misleading standpoint: rather than being no more than 'the icing on

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[50] Faietti, 'Variety and metamorphosis', pp. 211-14. On the churches and their architecture and decoration, see Clifford M. Brown, 'The Church of Saint Cecilia and the Bentivoglio Chapel in San Giacomo Maggiore in Bologna', *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz*, vol. 13, No. 3/4 (October 1968), pp. 301-324, esp. pp. 304-6.

[51] Faietti, 'Variety and metamorphosis', p. 213.

[52] Alastair Laing, 'Is stucco just the icing on the cake?', in Casey and Lucey (eds), *Decorative Plasterwork in Ireland and Europe*, pp. 36-46.

the cake', 'merely superadded ornament',[53] decorative plasterwork is in fact integral to the buildings that contain it, articulating and decorating, expressive at a fundamental (even a functional) level. At the risk of forcing beyond breaking-point a metaphor already strained by the fact that buildings with plasterwork interiors are cakes with their icing on the *inside*, Laing's argument was that plasterwork must be understood not as an additional extra, a set of decorative finishing touches on the surface, but as an essential element of a given structure's fundamental recipe, integrating its other elements – structural, decorative, ornamental – into a whole.

This argument is well made and clearly echoes Faietti's concept of ornament as connective tissue, yet in analytical power it falls short of Faietti's position in the sense that it only sidesteps the problem presented by the use in art and architectural history of the term 'decorative'. As David Brett has recently noted, for scholars seeking to approach 'the ornamental' and 'the decorative' with rigour and seriousness 'the very category of the "decorative arts" is part of the problem'.[54] Laing was seemingly content to accept the distinction between decorative and functional, and indeed the hierarchy implicit in the distinction, in arguing that to dismiss 'decorative' plasterwork as merely 'decorative' is to do it a disservice. Among the issues consequently elided is the difference between 'ornament' and 'decoration' in the context of architecture: Laing spoke of 'superficial ornament' and 'superadded ornament', qualifying the meaning of the term and transforming it into a synonym for 'decorative'. The examples Laing drew on for his discussion are churches, but the fact that the 'decorative' role played by plasterwork in these religious structures is in his view essential to their function as buildings only serves to reinforce the hierarchical subjugation of the decorative to the functional. This is so not least because, in selecting churches as his case studies, Laing was focusing on buildings whose functional purpose is in central respects *metaphysical*, so that to speak of stucco forming 'the irrational boundary between the actual terrestrial world and the depicted celestial one' is to recruit decoration into a functional role defined in somewhat narrow and genre-

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[53] Laing, 'Is stucco just the icing on the cake?', pp. 39, 40.
[54] David Brett, *Rethinking Decoration: Pleasure and Ideology in the Visual Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 2.

specific terms.[55] Laing recognised that in focusing on south German Rococo churches he was 'taking the type of building apropos of which' his thesis 'is least likely to be challenged',[56] but his answer to this criticism was to argue that his analysis would also be applicable to other types of *church*, rather than attempting to apply it to domestic, military, governmental or other secular architectural contexts. The elision of 'ornament' and 'decoration', meanwhile, evades another important question: the degree to which any given embellishment of the structurally necessary elements of a building engages with its architectonic character. This developed as an important issue among nineteenth-century writers on architecture who saw a moral element in the degree to which the form and extent of ornament in a particular architectural style was justifiable. Thus in 1897 James Ward argued that 'it is not always possible to divorce ornament from architecture, and it is hardly possible to design or construct good ornament otherwise than according to the laws that govern good architecture'.[57] He argued that the actual structural properties of architecture determined the form taken by ornament, as distinct from decoration: 'some very beautiful ornament, *or rather decoration*, has been designed otherwise than on architectural lines, but this kind of decoration has its beauty of technique and execution to recommend it, rather than its constructional qualities'.[58] It is notable that, for Ward, the Rococo style was in essence not only a surface treatment divorced from any relationship with underlying constructional realities but actually obscured their existence, and thus could never be considered as 'architectural' ornament at all: 'when decoration takes the place of construction, however well executed it may be, it becomes more of an incrustation than a requirement'.[59]

Such a categorisation is, in the final analysis, functionalist in its critique of decoration as 'incrustation', arguably echoing Adolf Loos's early twentieth-century condemnation of certain applications of ornament as superfluous and degenerate in his essay 'Ornament and Crime'.[60] Yet the notion that some forms of ornament can be seen as reflecting a 'requirement' while others are

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[55] Laing, 'Is stucco just the icing on the cake?', p. 38.

[56] Laing, 'Is stucco just the icing on the cake?', p. 40.

[57] James Ward, *Historic Ornament: Treatise on Decorative Art and Architectural Ornament* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1897), pp. 2-3.

[58] Ward, *Historic Ornament*, p. 3. My emphasis.

[59] Ward, *Historic Ornament*, p. 381.

[60] Adolf Loos, 'Ornament and Crime' (*c*. 1910), in Ulrich Conrads (ed), *Programs and Manifestoes on Twentieth-Century Architecture*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1970), pp. 19-24.

'superfluous' is highly problematic. No clearly defined boundary exists between 'architectural' embellishment ('ornament') and what is 'superadded' to architecture ('decoration'). The situation is rather the one argued for by Faietti in the case of the Bologna churches: a continuous dynamic interaction across zones of transition and mutability, in which architectural and non-architectural elements are interpreted and applied across a range of media and in a range of contexts; and in which how far ornament or decoration are essential to the function of a building or a room depends as much upon the sociocultural discourse of the way it is used as upon the substance of which its material presence is composed. Katie Scott has recently explored this issue in relation to early eighteenth-century French Rococo interiors, commenting on the value of studying 'the relational decoration of rooms' in establishing 'some of the ways in which architectural space managed the lives of individuals and helped shape their perceptions of society'.[61] In other words, the question of surfaces in architecture and interiors is as much social and experiential as it is functional and aesthetic.

A degree of confusion over what precisely is meant by 'decorative' and 'ornamental' in an architectural context has long beset the way in which the history of eighteenth-century interior plasterwork has been approached and written. As a matter of both interior design and decorative art, the plaster decoration of Georgian interiors has been regarded as doubly peripheral by historians of architecture who have tended to be concerned primarily with the exteriors of buildings and questions of architectural style.[62] In this they have followed the tendency of architecture itself to relegate the interior to a secondary position (and thus arguably to limit the profession's own engagement with the development of the interior, rendering the interior a marginal and ambiguous

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[61] Katie Scott, *The Rococo Interior: Decoration and Social Spaces in Early Eighteenth-Century Paris* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 7. See also Denise Amy Baxter, 'Introduction: constructing space and identity in the eighteenth-century interior', in Denise Amy Baxter and Meredith Martin (eds), *Architectural Space in Eighteenth-Century Europe: Constructing Identities and Interiors* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 1-12, especially pp. 2-4.

[62] Hannah Greig and Giorgio Riello, 'Eighteenth-century interiors – redesigning the Georgian: introduction', *Journal of Design History*, vol. 20, no. 4 (Winter 2007), pp. 273-89, here p. 275; Barbara Arciszewska and Elizabeth McKellar, 'Preface', in Barbara Arciszewska and Elizabeth McKellar (eds), *Articulating British Classicism: New Approaches to Eighteenth-Century Architecture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp. xx-xxviii, here p. xx; Dana Arnold, *Reading Architectural History* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 83ff; Michael Snodin and Maurice Howard, *Ornament: A Social History since 1450* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 16.

architectural product).[63] The history of interior design and decoration more generally, meanwhile, has fallen between established areas of study focused on the buildings themselves (the architectural) and those concerned primarily with their contents (furniture, works of art, objects such as porcelain and clocks).[64] This latter school of analysis partly embodies long-established antiquarian approaches to objects, but also encompasses sophisticated sociocultural readings of furnishings and possessions in the tradition of Walter Benjamin's dissection of the meanings of the private interior: 'To dwell means to leave traces. In the interior, these are accentuated'.[65] An important school of material history based on the analysis of objects has emphasised the tendency of historians to see the interior as a receptacle within which those objects are gathered, or a lived space in which the processes of living are expressed through the objects contained within it, rather than a subject of study in its own right.[66] It is notable that historians of the ancient and medieval periods, reflecting the importance of archaeological approaches and the limitations of surviving evidence, tend to have a less problematic attitude to the importance of analysing and understanding interior spaces and their decorative treatments.[67] For later periods of study there tends to be no such integrated approach. The consequent relegation of the interior to the margins of architectural history, or its separation into a distinct discipline (subsidiary, from the traditional viewpoint of architectural history, being largely concerned with the history of the decorative arts and furnishings) is paradoxical when the importance of the interior for the way a building is actually used and experienced is taken into account. To put the point in its simplest form, the functions of buildings tend to be performed inside them rather than outside. Pointing out that most of what might be called a building's 'life' is an *interior* life,

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[63] See Barbara Penner and Charles Rice, 'Constructing the interior – introduction', *Journal of Architecture*, vol. 9, no. 3 (Autumn 2004), pp. 267-73, here p. 267.

[64] Several of the important twentieth-century historians of plasterwork, such as Margaret Jourdain and Geoffrey Beard, were also influential historians of furniture design.

[65] Walter Benjamin, 'Louis Philippe, or, the Interior', in *Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century* (1939), in Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (ed), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings. Volume 3, 1935-1938* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 38-9.

[66] For example Asa Briggs, *Victorian Things* (London: Batsford, 1988); Leora Auslander, *Taste and Power: Furnishing Modern France* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996); Daniel Roche, *A History of Everyday Things: The Birth of Consumption in France, 1600-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Deborah Cohen, *Household Gods: The British and their Possessions* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006).

[67] See Maureen C. Millar, *The Bishop's Palace: Architecture and Authority in Medieval Italy* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2000), pp. 6, 8-9, 205, 252.

Elias Cornell argued for the interior's centrality, and for the exterior's marginality, in his 'tentative synopsis for a history of the interior' in 1997:

> The interior is, as a rule, a building's principal aspect, its very heart, the place where its intended activity, its events, use, function are fulfilled – determining the fundamental conditions for its users and visitors, their experience and state of mind. The exterior is, as a rule, subordinate, designed for introduction, preparation, presentation.[68]

This inversion of the accepted architectural hierarchy that privileges exterior over interior requires a shift in perspective akin to that brought about by works of art such as Rachel Whiteread's *House* (1993), which consisted of a complete concrete cast of the rooms and spaces within a demolished Victorian house in East London.[69] Here the exterior shell of a building is obliterated but its interior spaces are made solid and substantial so that interiors, normally out of sight and silent, are rendered visible and given a voice, making 'visible what is usually invisible' and exposing 'the underexposed and the overlooked'.[70]

Architectural history, like architecture itself, has tended to be reluctant to accomplish that change in outlook (or perhaps *in*look). The acceptance of the history of the interior as an integral part of architectural history, and the establishment of connections between studies of the interior in the history of architecture and related fields of enquiry in social and cultural history, is a recent development, as Hannah Greig and Giorgio Riello reflected in 2004: 'Until recently, however, studies of the Georgian interior rarely extended beyond the traditional remits of histories of architecture and the decorative arts. Only now is new research emerging that examines the social and cultural functions of the interior for this period, alongside its design features'.[71] When new scholarly attention begins to be paid to a previously disregarded or marginalised topic, it generally has the effect of changing the conceptualisation of the topic itself, and

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[68] Elias Cornell, 'Going inside architecture: a tentative synopsis for a history of the interior', *Architectural History*, vol. 40 (1997), pp. 24-63, here p. 24.
[69] Rachel Whiteread, *House* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1995).
[70] Shelley Hornstein, *Losing Site: Architecture, Memory and Place* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), p. 84; see also pp. 88, 91-2.
[71] Greig and Riello, 'Eighteenth-century interiors', p. 273.

such has certainly been the case with the eighteenth-century interior. Questions of decoration and ornament have naturally played an important role in that development, but have not always been integrated into considerations of the sociocultural and political dimensions of the interior which have tended to focus on more mainstream 'architectural' issues of plans and spatial arrangements, with individual aspects of decoration discussed in isolation or brought into the argument as supporting evidence for assertions which have their focus on matters of planning and social function.[72]

In general, the decoration of rooms and interior spaces has tended to be considered as a subsidiary element of the architecture of houses, or the background for their contents, rather than as a phenomenon to be studied in its own right.[73] While 'architectural ornament' applied to exteriors and embodying the vocabulary of the classical architectural tradition can be incorporated into the mainstream of architectural and architectural-historical writing (and indeed can perform an important role in the identification and classification of style), the *decorative arts* as applied to architecture, and particularly to interiors, has tended to be seen as possessing no such status. When architectural historians have turned their attention to plasterwork it has thus tended to be very much as a subsidiary concern, secondary to preoccupations with the materiality of architecture, formal issues of style and planning, and the determining role of the architect. The categorisation of interior plasterwork as a 'decorative' treatment has led to its marginalisation in a historiography that has in general shown little interest in the decorative arts, particularly those reflecting a craft or applied arts tradition. As Conor Lucey has observed, 'Located somewhat uneasily between the liberal and mechanical arts – inhabiting the realms of both sculpture (fine art) and craft (applied art) – decorative plasterwork has languished in the margins of architectural and interior design histories'.[74]

This overlooking of plasterwork by historians is unfortunate: decorative plasterwork was valued as creation and possession and contains, conveys and

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[72] For example John Summerson, *Georgian London* (1945; rev. edn New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), pp. 145-50 and Giles Worsley, *Classical Architecture in Britain: The Heroic Age* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), pp. 198-212, 234-5.

[73] David Watkin briefly notes the 'pioneering' studies of the history of interiors by John Fowler and John Cornforth in his *The Rise of Architectural History* (London: Architectural Press, 1980), pp. 186-7.

[74] Conor Lucey, 'Introduction', in Casey and Lucey (eds), *Decorative Plasterwork in Ireland and Europe*, p. 29.

expresses functional purpose, social meaning and cultural significance. In many cases it has remained little changed while furniture, paintings and other more fugitive aspects of decoration have been subject to transformation and removal, providing an enduring testimony to a given interior's character and purpose, and its significance for those who originally created and inhabited it. Rachel Stewart, in her study of *The Town House in Georgian London*, emphasised the importance of the interior as a means of expressing individuality, status and identity for the owner of the eighteenth-century town house:

> The interior was the place for making a 'figure': for displaying taste and wealth, or modesty and restraint … the town house relied on its interior to summarise its owner's personality, interests and ambitions. The carcass could not help in this respect, not least because the town house was so often a faceless box. However it was amenable to internal change. It was generally in its interior that the house revealed itself to be modern or old-fashioned, stylish or tasteless.[75]

If this dimension of an eighteenth-century house's history is to be adequately analysed, an integrated approach is necessary that does not subordinate interior to exterior, nor in turn subordinates decorative treatments to 'architecture'. The centrality of the interior to the processes of display and social differentiation that were the essential purposes of the Georgian town house, and the decorative treatments and furnishing through which those processes were carried out, naturally place decoration at the heart of any proper understanding of the ways in which these purposes were conceptualised, developed over time, and were given material expression. The nature of town houses (even a relatively large and elaborate example such as Fairfax House) tended to minimise their potential for external architectural display, as the majority were terraced meaning that only one elevation – that to the main street upon which it was built – was usually available, and the character of the Georgian urban fabric restricted the potential offered by

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[75] Stewart, *Town House*, pp. 180-1.

that elevation for richness of ornament or individuality. In that sense, the eighteenth-century town house is indeed a cake with its icing on the inside.

Icing is important to the appearance, meaning and reception of a cake, as well as being highly significant in shaping the ways in which that cake will be experienced, and we should not disregard it, nor demand that it is re-classified as one of the ingredients of the cake mix itself before we are prepared to take it seriously. Understanding this architectural and decorative confection in turn requires an integrative approach that analyses interior spaces in ways that mean, in the words of Katie Scott, that 'interiors are thus notionally filled with the interplay of different lives' and 'cease to be just so many flat, ornamented surfaces and regain their full three-dimensional significance'.[76] Decoration is not simply a background but is rather a key aspect of the shaping of architectural space, both determined by and determining the uses and meanings of individual rooms and interiors as a whole. Plasterwork, as one of the dominant interior decorative treatments of the eighteenth century and one which established the context within which other aspects of decoration and furnishing took their places, must be a key focus for study. It is far from superficial: on the contrary it is a substantial, fundamental and essential aspect of the way the spaces within a building are perceived and used.

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[76] Scott, *Rococo Interior*, p. 7.

CHAPTER 3

Writing the History of Plasterwork:
The Nineteenth Century

Ornament, art and artifice

'Some trades', wrote Stefan Muthesius of plasterwork in his 2009 book *The Poetic Home*, 'appear to have very little to offer in terms of a history'.[1] The historiography of plasterwork is indeed somewhat meagre, seeming to reflect in this the marginalised and equivocal position of the craft itself. Plastering was generally seen for much of its history as a mechanical trade with little claim to artistic status or to architectural (or even decorative) importance and little was published on the craft or its historical development until the late nineteenth century. The revival of interest in the historical development of plasterwork at this time reflected two inter-related developments: the emergence of Renaissance revivalism in architecture, and the increasing influence exerted by the Arts and Crafts Movement on architecture and decoration.[2]

The lack of interest in the development of plasterworking before the 1870s reflected aesthetic judgements which often had a moral dimension. Ceiling roses and other moulded enrichments were widely regarded by mid-nineteenth-century writers on architecture and decoration as instances of mass-produced ugliness, while plasterers' methods, as Stefan Muthesius noted, were seen as lacking in artistry and creativity:

> Plaster, or stucco décor was the most ubiquitous mode of
> decoration, yet no material features less in 19th-century

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[1] Stefan Muthesius, *The Poetic Home: Designing the 19th-Century Domestic Interior* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2009), p. 68.
[2] Lyn K. Baxter, 'Fellowship is heaven: plasterwork of the Arts and Crafts movement', in Alan Crawford and Colin Cunningham (eds), *William Morris and Architecture* (London: Society of Architectural Historians of Great Britain, 1997), pp. 23-38; Jeremy Musson, *Plasterwork: 100 Period Details from the Archives of Country Life* (London: Aurum, 2000), pp. 8-9.

discourses about the domestic interior … yet, after it reached its lowest ebb around 1860-70, the trade of the plasterer did pick up again moderately with the arrival of the neo-Renaissance style, which was generally welcomed as a richer alternative to Neoclassical 'monotony'. Northern versions of the Renaissance, and also neo-Rococo, demanded fine and varied work, and the Arts and Crafts movement in Britain finally revived coarser kinds of décor.[3]

It was precisely this connection with the applied arts and crafts that played a large part in reviving interest in the history of decorative interior plasterwork in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Arts and Crafts Movement of this period placed great store by the revival of what were seen as 'traditional' crafts,[4] and plasterwork was seen as a formerly highly skilled craft that, where not sidelined altogether by changes in fashion, had declined into the mechanical reproduction of stereotyped decorative schemes and motifs. The importance of architecture to the Arts and Crafts movement also served to give plasterwork, as a craft that had an exclusively architectural application, a particular status within the movement. Both as an artisanal activity and a craft culture, plasterwork was seen as ripe for revival.[5]

During the eighteenth century publications for practical plasterworkers (as distinct from lavish and expensive volumes on architectural decoration for the elite) were relatively limited in number, but books dealing with the technicalities of plaster and its architectural applications intended for those practising the plasterworking craft were published steadily from early in the nineteenth century.[6] Notable and widely circulated examples included Peter Nicholson's *The New Practical Builder and Workman's Companion* (1823-5) and *The Mechanic's Companion* (1845), and George R. Burnell's *Rudimentary Treatise on Limes,*

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[3] Muthesius, *Poetic Home*, pp. 68, 70.
[4] Mark Swenarton, *Artisans and Architects: The Ruskinian Tradition in Architectural Thought* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 19-21, 24-29; Gillian Naylor, *The Arts and Crafts Movement: A Study of its Sources, Ideals and Influence on Design Theory* (London: Studio Vista, 1971), pp. 25-9, 103-4, 147-8; Alan Crawford, 'Ideas and objects: the Arts and Crafts Movement in Britain', *Design Issues*, vol. 13, no. 1 (Spring 1997), pp. 15-26, here p. 17.
[5] Long, *Edwardian House*, pp. 133-4.
[6] James Ayres, *Building the Georgian City* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 14-15.

Cements, Mortars, Concretes, Mastics, Plastering, Etc. (1850).[7] Burnell included a chapter dealing with the history of the science underlying plaster and plasterworking ('Cursory View of the Progress of Discovery in the Science Connected with Limes, Etc.') but did not deal at all with the creative side of the craft or its history, while Nicholson's books were even more severely practical in approach.[8] The first book to devote significant attention to the *history* of decorative plasterwork and to reflect upon its status as a craft was produced not by an architect, art historian or theorist, but by a practical plasterer: William Millar's *Plastering: Plain and Decorative* (1897).[9] William Millar was a Scottish plasterer who practised mainly in Edinburgh and London. His *Plastering: Plain and Decorative* was intended as a guide to all aspects of the plastering craft for those involved professionally in it, but it was also an assertion of the artistic, as well as utilitarian, value of plasterwork, and of the craft of the plasterer. The book began with an 'introductory chapter' on the history of plasterwork across the world and since ancient times, contributed by G. T. Robinson,[10] and a chapter on 'Historical Plastering in England, Scotland, and Ireland'[11] by Millar himself. The inclusion of these two historical chapters clearly demonstrated that Millar wanted his fellow plasterworkers' knowledge to go beyond the merely practical. An understanding of the history of plasterwork would not only provide practitioners with examples of past work as inspiration, it would also increase their pride in their craft by informing them of its achievements and enabling them to relate their own work to its long history: 'As there seems to be a growing tendency towards the reintroduction and use of decorative plaster ceilings by modern architects of culture, it is desirable that plasterers should have a thorough practical knowledge

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[7] Peter Nicholson, *The New Practical Builder and Workman's Companion* (London: Thomas Kelly, 1823); Peter Nicholson, *The Mechanic's Companion, Or, The Elements and Practice of Carpentry, Joinery, Bricklaying, Masonry, Slating, Plastering, Painting, Smithing, and Turning* (London: John Locken, 1845); George R. Burnell, *Rudimentary Treatise on Limes, Cements, Mortars, Concretes, Mastics, Plastering, Etc.* (London: Virtue Brothers, 1850). On Nicholson see Ayres, *Georgian City*, pp. 130, 133, 152, 162-6.

[8] Burnell, *Rudimentary Treatise*, pp. 1-7. Nicholson, *Mechanic's Companion*, pp. ix-x.

[9] William Millar, *Plastering Plain and Decorative: A Practical Treatise on the Art and Craft of Plastering and Modelling* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1897).

[10] G. T. Robinson, 'Introductory chapter: a glimpse of its history', in Millar, *Plastering Plain and Decorative*, pp. 1-23.

[11] William Millar, 'Historical Plastering in England, Scotland, and Ireland', in Millar, *Plastering Plain and Decorative*, pp. 24-34.
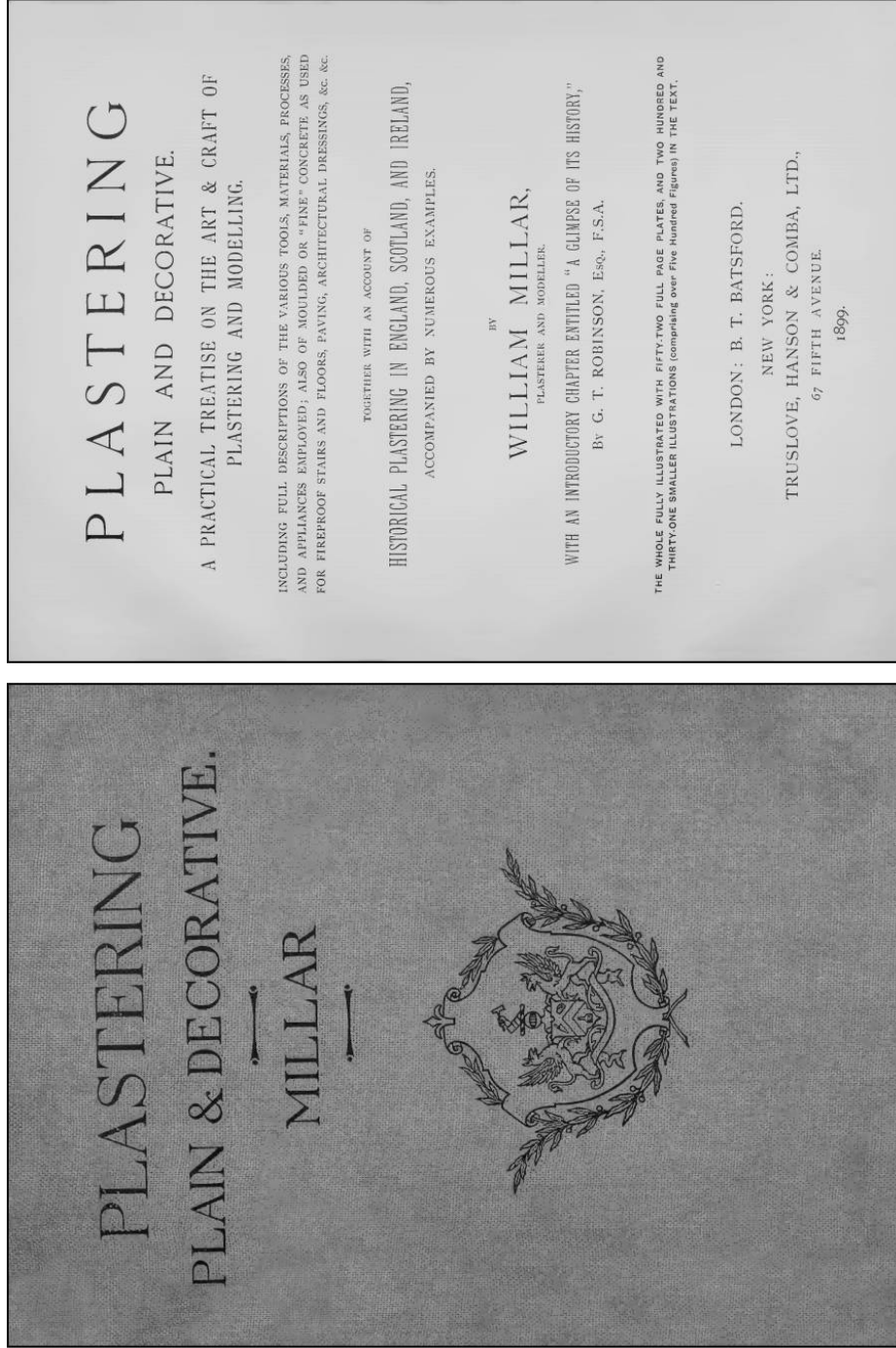
Figure 3.1. Cover (left) and title page (right) of the second (1899) edition of William Millar's *Plastering Plain and Decorative*, first published in 1897. The coat of arms on the front cover is that of the Worshipful Company of Plaisterers.

of this beautiful branch of their craft'.[12] What Millar may have meant by his reference to 'modern architects of culture' is worth examining, because it reveals much about the architectural and wider cultural context within which the renewed interest in decorative plasterwork in the late nineteenth century flourished. This was a context in which the notion of the 'Renaissance' played a central role.

Crafting the English 'Renaissance'

The term 'Renaissance' occupies an important but ambiguous position in the historiography of plasterwork from the second half of the nineteenth century into the first half of the twentieth, reflecting its status in architectural history more generally. In his two-volume *A History of Renaissance Architecture in England, 1500-1800* (1897) the architect and prolific writer on architectural history Reginald Blomfield defended his use of the term 'Renaissance' in the context of architecture because 'no other term exactly covers the ground':[13]

> By Renaissance architecture is to be understood the art that
> derived its first impulse from the revived interest in scholarship
> at the end of the fifteenth century; – particularly in the remains
> of Roman architecture in Italy; – and which ran its course
> through successive and clearly traceable stages until the original
> inspiration was superseded by other motives.[14]

Thus the initial arrival of Italian Renaissance influences in England was limited to isolated showpiece projects such as Nonsuch Palace, and had been abortive in the wider context. Blomfield wrote of the Renaissance as a movement that 'merely glanced off the strong habit of tradition' and petered out in 'several false starts'; it was not until the 'abler men of the seventeenth century' took up the Renaissance ideas that they flourished.[15] The rather obdurate resilience of native tradition was

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[12] Millar, *Plastering Plain and Decorative*, p. 124.
[13] Reginald Blomfield, *A History of Renaissance Architecture in England, 1500-1800* (2 vols, London: George Bell and Sons, 1897), vol. I, p. v.
[14] Blomfield, *Renaissance Architecture in England*, vol. I, p. vi.
[15] Blomfield, *Renaissance Architecture in England*, vol. I, pp. 1-2.

for Blomfield the means through which the Renaissance of Italy and France was transformed into something distinctively English. This transformation was a key element in contemporary theorisations of the history of English plasterwork. In a similar way G. T. Robinson, writing in Millar's *Plastering Plain and Decorative*, argued that it was only in the 1530s that the plasterwork of the Renaissance began to spread to the countries of northern Europe, arriving in England through the patronage of Cardinal Wolsey and King Henry VIII.[16] The king brought Italian plasterers to work at Nonsuch, effectively importing the Renaissance directly into England with them. Robinson stressed that decorative plasterworking was not unknown before the arrival of the Italians, but the characteristically Italian skills of modelling plaster figures and creating richly textured relief ornament were not native to English plasterers. It was via the work of the Italian artists at Nonsuch Palace that such practices came into the country and, imitated by the native workers, found their way into English plasterworking.[17] These English plasterers were craftsmen who learned their craft via hands-on work and experience rather than through 'artistic' training:

> The English plasterers quickly learned the operative lessons
> these Italians taught, though they never learned the skill of their
> arts of design; nor indeed was this necessary. The exigencies of
> English houses were different from those of Italian palaces, so
> they fitted their work for its purpose – a purpose never applied
> in any other country – that of covering a flat ceiling in a room of
> moderate height with a suitable plastered decoration.[18]

This interpretation served to stress the organic nature of English craftsmanship, rooted in a native tradition, absorbing foreign influences without ever really participating in the culture of which those influences are part.

The late nineteenth-century historiography of plasterwork located the origins of the 'English Renaissance' as it developed through the reigns of Elizabeth and James I in this tradition. This domestic English Renaissance could be criticised as

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[16] Millar, *Plastering Plain and Decorative*, p. 12.
[17] Millar, *Plastering Plain and Decorative*, pp. 14-15.
[18] Millar, *Plastering Plain and Decorative*, p. 15.

insular, uneducated, rough, naïve, even clumsy, but could also be seen as unselfconscious, robust and honest, and as producing work which expressed those virtues. It is this tradition which Reginald Blomfield and G. T. Robinson (from an architectural-historical viewpoint) and William Millar (from a practical viewpoint) argued should serve as a model for the plasterers of their own day. Certainly William Millar, discussing the distinctive character of English plasterwork of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, saw the English plasterer as an empirical rather than a theoretical worker. The stylistic vocabulary favoured by the English plasterworker was based not on complex allegories and classicised imagery culled from pattern books and prints, or classical themes borrowed from southern Europe and inappropriate to England, but on what was perceived to be a distinctively native tradition of gothic architecture. The source of the characteristic moulded and decorated beams and ribs found in English plasterwork ceilings was to be found in 'fan-tracing of Henry VII.'s time', argued Millar, and not in copying from the Continent: 'It has been suggested that they are borrowed from Continental sources but there is no evidence of plagiarism, and there are radical differences between the Renaissance of England and that of other countries'.[19]

This continuity and distinctiveness in native tradition was disrupted by the seventeenth-century architect Inigo Jones.[20] For Millar, Jones's influence on plasterworking and on plasterworkers was 'decidedly detrimental' because of the limited scope his architecture offered for decorative plasterwork, but he acknowledged his importance in bringing the 'Palladian character of architecture' with its 'trabeated and coffered ceilings' to England from the continent.[21] At the time when Millar was writing, Inigo Jones tended to be seen as the sole importer of true Renaissance architecture to England, drawn directly from its continental (specifically Italian) sources, bringing an end to the false starts and blundering of the English Renaissance – but also depriving it of much of its native inventiveness and vigour. Blomfield wrote that Jones 'returned to England filled with the very spirit of the great Italian artists of the Renaissance, and lifted the art of his country on to an altogether different plane', but also lamented that the 'homely fancy, the

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[19] Millar, *Plastering Plain and Decorative*, pp. 124-5.
[20] See Claire Gapper, 'The impact of Inigo Jones on London decorative plasterwork', *Architectural History*, vol. 44 (2001), pp. 82-7.
[21] Millar, *Plastering Plain and Decorative*, p. 125.

lovable humility, as one might say, of its traditional art' were laid aside so that 'the art of this country was to be no longer an affair of happy instinct, but completely conscious, dependent on scholarship almost as much as on capacity in design'.[22] What Jones brought to English architecture was thus intellect as opposed to feeling. This might be seen as a gain for architecture – and, perhaps more pertinently, for the status of architects – but Blomfield held that much was lost as a result, and that the loss was particularly marked in the field of the decorative arts and their application to architecture.

The same issue was explored with specific reference to plasterwork by G. T. Robinson who argued that the decline in the use of complex fretwork patterns of plaster decoration in houses of the 1620s and 1630s was caused by the growing influence of the more classically 'correct' architecture of Jones and his followers: 'the advance in the study of Renaissance architecture under Charles I, greatly due, no doubt, to the influence of Inigo Jones' resulted in 'ceilings of a plainer character'[23] requiring less creativity in the plasterworker. Plasterers lost confidence in their status and skills with the rise of the architect and the subordination of plasterwork to painted decoration. As a consequence, the art and craft itself declined, and formulaic cast enrichments reminiscent of 'the work of the pastry-cook and confectioner' took the place of decoration shaped by hand.[24] These conditions continued to characterise the plasterwork of the eighteenth century, a period Arts and Crafts theorists and practitioners tended to decry for its perceived devaluing of the status of the skilled craftsman.[25] Contrastingly, the plasterwork of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was held up as a positive source of inspiration, on the grounds that this was a period marked by creative handcraft rather than the mere assembly of mouldings, and unaffected by the perceived elitism and cosmopolitanism of the Rococo, neoclassicism and eclecticism of the eighteenth century.

Blomfield and Robinson saw a progressive continuity in their conception of the Renaissance as applied to architecture and related arts in England, arguing that the great break in that continuity came with the 'uncertainties' and incoherent

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[22] Blomfield, *History of Renaissance Architecture in England*, vol. I, p. 103.
[23] Millar, *Plastering Plain and Decorative*, p. 18.
[24] Millar, *Plastering Plain and Decorative*, p. 126.
[25] Peter Betjemann, 'Craft and the limits of skill: handicrafts revivalism and the problem of technique', *Journal of Design History*, vol. 21, no. 2 (Summer 2008), pp. 183-93, here p. 185.

'eclecticism' of the later eighteenth century. This was a betrayal not only of the spirit of the Renaissance but also of its specifically English character as it had evolved (using the word in its progressive nineteenth-century sense) during the preceding two centuries. This process of evolution reflected the rise to imperial greatness of the English people, the robust pragmatism and unaffected honesty of their character, and their clear sense of identity.[26] These were conceptions of 'Englishness' with powerful cultural and political resonance for Blomfield's late Victorian and Edwardian contemporaries:

> The remarkable expansion of the English people in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and the strong conservative instinct of the race, constitute the two contending influences which struggled for mastery in this new movement, and finally united to give it a distinctly national character. The two factors to be considered are, on the one hand, the constant importation of foreign ideas, and, on the other, the tenacious tradition of a people with a great historic past in architecture.[27]

Blomfield's 'two contending influences' were eventually synthesised and brought into harmony by Christopher Wren: 'it was the work of the greatest architect this country has possessed, perhaps our one architect of quite commanding genius, to gather up the broken threads and weave them together into one splendid and harmonious architecture'.[28] Wren's dominance (as retrospectively understood) of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries was thus conceptualised as a supreme and necessary synthesis, attaining the status of both an architectural and a historical inevitability.

The 'English Renaissance' as viewed from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was therefore truly in continuity with the Italian Renaissance, but, crucially, was also truly and distinctly English in character. Katherine Wheeler has written that the 'appropriation of English architecture of the sixteenth

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[26] See Peter Mandler, *The English National Character: The History of an Idea from Edmund Burke to Tony Blair* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 30-1, 54-5, 70-1; Angus Hawkins, *Victorian Political Culture: 'Habits of Heart and Mind'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 5-7.
[27] Blomfield, *Renaissance Architecture in England*, vol. I, pp. 1-2.
[28] Blomfield, *Renaissance Architecture in England*, vol. I, p. 2.

and seventeenth centuries as "Renaissance" nationalised the foreign roots of the style by grounding it in an English context'.[29] To put it another way, foreign roots in English soil produced a distinctively English tree. The architecture of the Tudor and Early Stuart periods had, after many false starts and fumbles, given rise to a distinctive national style, which had emerged from the interaction between continental influences and insular tradition. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, argued J. A. Gotch in 1901, the Italian ideas and forms being introduced into English architecture 'found in England a style long established, and still endowed with considerable vigour. At no period in its history had this style been so peculiarly English in its more elaborate efforts'.[30] He argued for the existence of a continuous 'stream of development' in domestic architecture in which the 'Italian Renaissance had been the main source of inspiration' and which was broken by the rise of eclecticism in the late eighteenth century.[31] Gotch's primary interest was in the architecture and planning of private houses, and his claim was that it was in these smaller domestic structures rather than in great palaces and mansions that the emergence of a distinctively English Renaissance style could be seen most clearly:

> The English house had developed on lines widely different from
> the Italian; it had to meet other wants, it had to contend with a
> different climate, it was subject to other traditions. The new
> style when it came, had to harmonise these strange traditions as
> well as its own, derived from a far distant past, with the original
> and fertile spirit of the age. The result is of abiding interest.
> Almost any of the great houses built in the reign of Elizabeth
> will show to the casual spectator examples of crudity in detail
> and imperfect classical proportion, mingled with reminiscences
> of Gothic notions; but a deeper scrutiny will disclose the fact
> that in spite of these shortcomings there is a national

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[29] Katherine Wheeler, *Victorian Perceptions of Renaissance Architecture* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), p. 101.

[30] J. Alfred Gotch, *Early Renaissance Architecture in England: A Historical and Descriptive Account of the Tudor, Elizabethan, and Jacobean Periods, 1500-1625* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1901), p. 3.

[31] J. Alfred Gotch, *The Growth of the English House: From Early Feudal Times to the Close of the Eighteenth Century* (London: Batsford, 1909, 2nd edn 1928), p. 201.

individuality and sense of genius in the handling of materials sufficient to raise the result to the dignity of a national style.[32]

That 'sense of genius in the handling of materials' is a key element in the conceptualisation of the individuality and creativity of the English Renaissance. The vigour and beauty of the native English style of the age was seen as resting to a great degree on craftsmanship, defined in terms not only of practical skills but also as a particular expression of *process* through which the notion of the 'craftsman' as a skilled, independent, creative individual was expressed. It is also notable that the emergence of an intellectualised, scholarly approach to the Renaissance, characterised by pattern books and the pedantic following of rules, was conceived as fatal to the freedom and creativity upon which the character of the *English* Renaissance depended. For Gotch it was the work of 'the men who were baffled' by the new ideas of the continental Renaissance in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries that was most worthy of examination, 'work which, judged from the standpoint of their better tutored successors, may almost be regarded as a failure, but work which exhibits a vitality, a fancy, and a sense of romance for which we look in vain in the more correct architecture of the eighteenth century'.[33]

Eclecticism and artistry: the 'Queen Anne' style

If late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century architecture was to be revived by the spirit of the Renaissance it was clearly necessary that the middle and late eighteenth century be disregarded in favour of earlier periods. From the late 1860s 'a shift of taste which – within a generation – brought English architecture back to the Renaissance'[34] began with a conscious attempt to re-create the pre-eighteenth century English Renaissance through the emergence of the 'Queen Anne' or 'Queen Anne Revival' style in British architecture, associated with the work of

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[32] Gotch, *Early Renaissance Architecture in England*, p. 5.
[33] Gotch, *Early Renaissance Architecture in England*, p. 6.
[34] J. Mordaunt Crook, *The Dilemma of Style: Architectural Ideas from the Picturesque to the Post-Modern* (London: John Murray, 1987), p. 169.

such architects as J. J. Stevenson, Basil Champneys and Richard Norman Shaw.[35] The eclecticism of this style (and the confusion it caused among some commentators) is suggested by the application to it of such labels as 'Stuart' and 'Early Georgian', as well as 'Re-Classic' and, significantly, 'Re-Renaissance'.[36] It took its inspiration from 'the time of the Jameses, Queen Anne, and the early Georges',[37] adopting elements of the English architectural vernacular of *c*.1680-1730: sash windows, red brick with stone dressings and a sometimes inventive use of classical ornament. To these could be added an eclectic mix of such earlier seventeenth- and sixteenth-century elements as happened to seize the architect's fancy, combined with asymmetrical planning (sometimes functionally expressive) and a picturesque variety of composition and outline. Architecture in this style, its adherents believed, when treated in a manner appropriate to modern requirements, could produce buildings that reflected national character and were historically rooted, but were also well suited to present-day needs, forming 'the nucleus of a good modern style', as the architect E. R. Robson wrote in 1874.[38] It also encouraged a new emphasis on the crafts of architectural ornament and decoration. Ironwork, ceramics, moulded terracotta, patterned brickwork, and plasterwork, both exterior and interior, featured strongly in 'Queen Anne' structures and their fashionability accordingly increased the demand for 'artistic' craftsmanship. The resulting buildings were functional but not utilitarian, and made use of decoration without losing dignity or a sense of purpose; and successful use of this style required that the architect be historically knowledgeable and aesthetically informed as well as technically competent – in short, Millar's 'modern architect of culture'.

G. T. Robinson, who contributed the introductory chapter on the history of plasterworking to William Millar's *Plastering Plain and Decorative* and whose views on the historical development of plasterwork were quoted earlier, can

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[35] Mark Girouard, *Sweetness and Light: The Queen Anne Movement 1860-1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 18ff.
[36] Girouard, *Sweetness and Light*, p. 18; Crook, *Dilemma of Style*, p. 175
[37] Edward Robert Robson, *School Architecture: Being Practical Remarks on the Planning, Designing, Building, and Finishing of School-Houses* (London: John Murray, 1874), p. 323. Robson was the first architect of the London School Board from 1871 to 1884, and favoured the Queen Anne Style for the Board's schools: see Catherine Burke and Ian Grosvenor, *School* (London: Reaktion, 2008), and Deborah E. B. Weiner, *Architecture and Social Reform in Late-Victorian London* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), pp. 41-50, pp. 52-4 and 58ff.
[38] Robson, *School Architecture*, p. 323.

BOLTON MARKET.——Mr. G. T. Robinson, Architect.
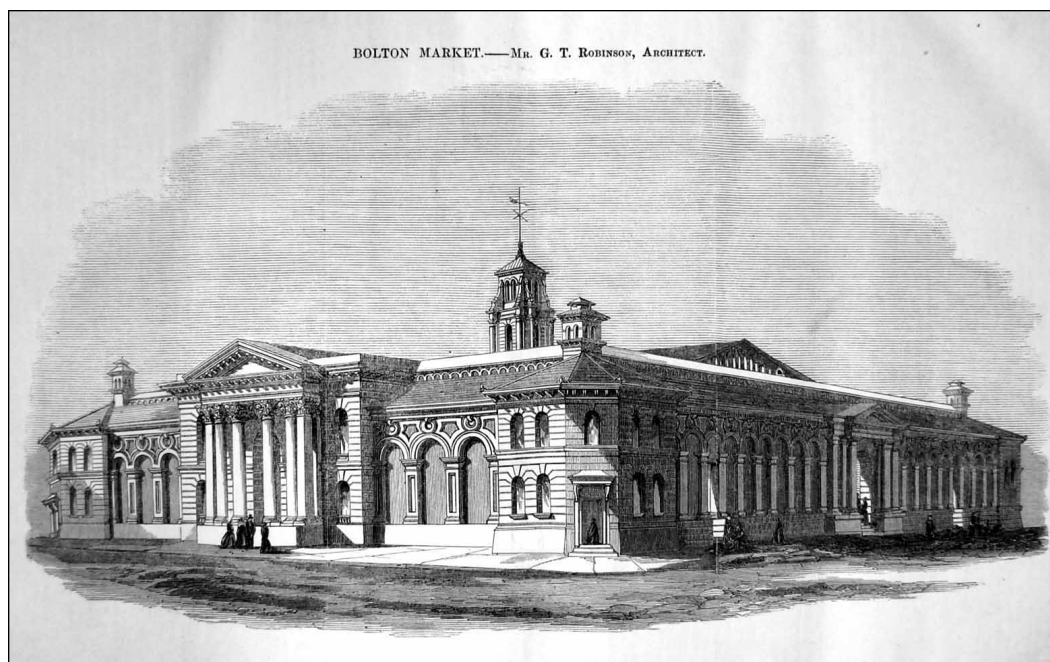
Figure 3.2. Bolton Market Hall, Lancashire, designed by G. T. Robinson and opened in 1855. (Source: *The Builder*, volume XI, no. 518 (1853), p. 25.)

perhaps be seen as precisely this kind of architect. George Thomas Robinson (*c*.1829-97)[39] worked in Leamington Spa and Coventry from about 1850, building private houses, churches and schools in the West Midlands and the Potteries. He was also responsible for some local civic buildings including Tunstall Market Hall, Burslem Town Hall, and the notable large market hall in Bolton, Lancashire, as well as many of the houses on the north and east sides of Cadogan Square in London.[40] He was a prolific writer of articles on art, furniture, architecture and interior design, in which he argued against artificial distinctions between the 'high' and the 'applied' or 'decorative' arts.[41] Robinson was recruited by the

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[39] Antonia Brodie, Alison Felstead, Jonathan Franklin, Leslie Pinfield and Jane Oldfield, *Directory of British Architects, 1834-1914: Volume 2, L-Z* (London: Continuum, 2001), pp. 488-9; obituary notices in *Illustrated London News*, 15 May 1897, p. 668 and *The Art Journal*, vol. 59, no. 7 (July 1897), p. 222.

[40] James Schmiechen and Kenneth Carls, *The British Market Hall: A Social and Architectural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), pp. 84-5, 101.

[41] A selection: G. T. Robinson, 'Suggestions in decorative design from the works of great painters', *Art Journal*, vol. 25, no. 1 (January 1886), pp. 8-11; 'Hints in design from great painters', *The Connoisseur*, vol. 1, no. 3 (March 1887), pp. 25-30; 'Decorative plaster-work; modelled stucco-work', *Journal of the Society of Arts*, vol. 39, no. 2005 (24 April 1891), pp. 439-474; 'The decoration of ceilings', part I, *The Decorator and Furnisher*, vol. 21, no. 1 (October 1892), pp. 13-16, part II, *The Decorator and Furnisher*, vol. 21, no. 6 (March 1893), pp. 220-221, 224. Robinson also contributed two essays to William Morris (ed), *Arts and Crafts Essays* (London: Rivington, Percival and Co., 1893): 'Fictiles', pp. 62-7, and 'Of Stucco and Gesso', pp. 172-86.

Manchester Guardian as art critic in 1869, was sent to France to cover the Franco-Prussian War in 1870 and was cut off in Metz during the Prussian siege.[42] As the only British correspondent in the city from August to November 1870 he sent out his despatches by means of balloons and made several attempts to cross the Prussian lines, disguising himself on one occasion as 'a very stupid peasant',[43] an effort which proved unsuccessful.

Throughout his career as both architect and journalist Robinson had a strong interest in the integration of the decorative arts with architecture, becoming one of the first members of the Art Workers' Guild in 1884. In some of his architectural writings Robinson was critical of what he called 'the Anglo-Dutch style – miscalled Queen Anne', referring dismissively to 'that scrap-book eclecticism, by which this strange hybrid was begotten'.[44] Yet his own architectural work is notable for its eclecticism and can be broadly characterised as lying within the Queen Anne Revival style, reflecting English seventeenth-century, Italian Renaissance and Gothic influences (the latter being particularly evident in his churches and schools). His buildings also reflect his interest in the decorative arts within architecture: Burslem Town Hall features a large amount of decorative ironwork, plasterwork and locally-produced tiles, while Tunstall Market Hall is externally ornamented with tiles and terracotta plaques and decorated internally with plasterwork in seventeenth-century compartmented style.[45]

Robinson rejected the affectations of the Aesthetic Movement along with any self-conscious rusticity in furnishing of the kind favoured by some of the earlier admirers of William Morris. He valued 'weightiness' in architecture, furniture and decoration, a quality which he associated particularly with the Stuart and Early Georgian periods. 'The change which is taking place in the arts of design as applied to domestic furniture, he wrote in 1884, 'is a very hopeful one':

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[42] William Haslam Mills, *The Manchester Guardian: A Century of History* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1922), p. 99; David Ayerst, *The Manchester Guardian: Biography of a Newspaper* (Cornell University Press, 1971), pp. 160-2, 182, 184-5. G. T. Robinson published a polemical account of the siege of Metz immediately upon his return to Britain under the title *The Fall of Metz: An Account of the Seventy Days Siege and of the Battles which Preceded It* (London: Bradbury, Evans and Co., 1871), which was republished three years later as *The Betrayal of Metz* (London: Bradbury, Agnew and Co., 1874) in an edition which was revised, expanded, and even more polemical.

[43] Ayerst, *Manchester Guardian*, p. 160.

[44] Robinson, 'decoration of ceilings', part I, p. 13.

[45] Information from a personal visit in June 2015.

> The reign of mean meagreness which has for some time ruled over us appears to be coming to a close; no longer is it deemed correct taste to encumber our drawing-rooms with rush-bottomed cottage chairs, no longer are combinations of broom-handles and thin spindles looked upon as marvels of design … It was a very odd phase, that elaborate affectation of simplicity through which we have just passed – a sort of parody of the shepherd and shepherdess period of Louis XVI.'s time, but which, oddly enough, only appeared in our furniture.[46]

Robinson saw this as importing the style of the cottage into the drawing room. He condemned it as inappropriate, self-conscious and meretricious, and dismissed it, memorably, as 'simply an evanescent reflex of the ephemeral affectation of a spasmodic clique'.[47] The point underlying his critique was that, in furniture as in architecture and decorative art, true creativity could only be achieved by an unselfconscious adherence to the principles of sound and unaffected design. In its fundamentals, his argument was not for or against decoration *per se* or the choice of one style over another: it was a moral rather than an aesthetic argument, concerned above all with decorative *honesty*. From this standpoint, pretended rusticity was as unacceptable as pretended sophistication. Decorative finishes inconsistent with how an object was made or the function it was intended to perform were innately (and equally) reprehensible, offending against the notion that true craftsmanship resides in the production of articles that are what they are, and 'resemble themselves'.[48] This concern with ethical honesty, to materials, to purpose, and to context, connected with a wider sense of identity which gave the Arts and Crafts Movement, in architecture, decoration and other respects, a sometimes markedly national and even nativist character.[49] Certainly an important strand of contemporary writing on decorative plasterwork is deeply concerned

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[46] G. T. Robinson, 'Cabinet-makers' art: domestic furniture', *Art Journal*, vol. 23, no. 12 (December 1884), pp. 373-6, here p. 373.

[47] Robinson, 'Cabinet-makers' art', p. 373.

[48] Margaret Olin, 'Self-representation: resemblance and convention in two nineteenth-century theories of architecture and the decorative arts', *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, vol. 49, no. 3 (Autumn 1986), pp. 376-97, here p. 378.

[49] Karen Livingstone and Linda Parry (eds), *International Arts and Crafts* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 2005), pp. 10, 80-1, 238; Javier Gimeno-Martinez, *Design and National Identity* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), pp. 53, 58-9.

with questions of craft as an expression of community and cultural/national identity. The historiography of decorative plasterworking in the British Isles from the 1880s to the 1960s (and in some respects beyond) is profoundly shaped by this 'identity politics' of plasterwork.

Arts and Crafts influences

The insistence upon the distinctive 'Englishness' of English plasterworking, its resistance to foreign influence (or at least its acceptance of such influence only on its own terms), and its possession of consistent and identifiable national characteristics, are central concerns of the historiography of plasterwork across the later nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. This interpretation is one of the key themes of George Bankart's *The Art of the Plasterer*, published in 1909. George Percy Bankart (1866-1929) was born in Leicester and studied at Leicester School of Art before training as an architect with Isaac Barradale, a leading figure in the Arts and Crafts Movement in the English Midlands. Through Barradale he became acquainted with the architect, furniture maker and decorative plasterer Ernest Gimson, and became increasingly concerned with the decorative arts himself, notably leadwork and ornamental plaster. He taught architecture and modelling at Leicester School of Art and joined the Bromsgrove Guild of Applied Arts, working to expand the decorative plasterwork and metalwork aspects of the Guild's architectural activities.[50] In his teaching and in his own work he elevated the status of the decorative (or ornamental) arts and consistently argued for the integration of architecture and ornament.[51]

Bankart wrote *The Art of the Plasterer*, as he explained in the preface, in part as a conscious effort to provide a continuation of Millar's *Plastering Plain and Decorative*, expanding the latter's chronological and thematic coverage. Importantly, however, as the difference in his title from that used by Millar indicated, he sought to place more emphasis on the artistic questions involved in

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[50] A. Stuart Gray, *Edwardian Architecture: A Biographical Dictionary* (London: Duckworth, 1986), p. 100; Michael Drury, *Wandering Architects: In Pursuit of an Arts and Crafts Ideal* (Donington: Shaun Tyas, 2000), p. 75.

[51] Richard Fellows, *Edwardian Civic Buildings and their Details* (London: Architectural Press, 1999), p. 101.

THE·ART·OF
THE·PLASTERER

AN·ACCOUNT·OF
THE·DECORATIVE·DEVELOPMENT·OF·THE·CRAFT

chiefly

IN·ENGLAND·FROM·THE·XVIth·TO·THE·XVIIIth·CENTURY

with chapters on

THE·STUCCO·OF·THE·CLASSIC·PERIOD
AND·OF·THE·ITALIAN·RENAISSANCE

also on

SGRAFFITO·PARGETTING·SCOTTISH
IRISH·AND·MODERN·PLASTERWORK

by

GEORGE·P·BANKART
Architect·and·Craftsman

LONDON
B·T·BATSFORD·94·HIGH·HOLBORN
NEW·YORK··CHAS·SCRIBNERS·SONS
MCMIX

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[45]

CHAPTER V.

STUCCO-DURO IN ENGLAND.
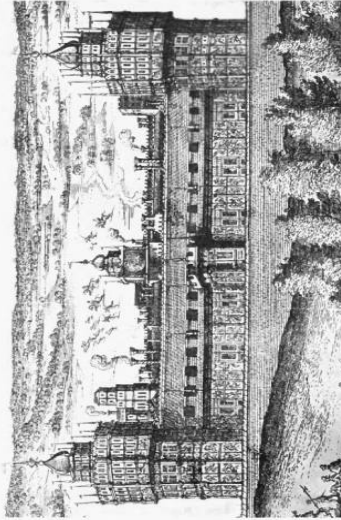
FIG. 57.—Nonesuch Palace, from Hoefnagel's Engraving.

THE art of the stuccoist was brought into England about 1538 when the royal palace of "Nonesuch" was built. (It stood on the hills between Epsom and Cheam, conveniently near to Hampton Court.)

We can form an idea of what it was like from the accounts of those who had seen it, and Mr Reginald Blomfield, A.R.A., availing himself of them, has an excellent description of it in his "Short History of the Renaissance in England." Braun tells us that the King "procured many artificers, architects, sculptors, and statuaries—Italian, French, and Dutch, as well as natives—who applied to the ornament of the mansion the finest and most curious skill they possessed in their arts."

Figure 3.3. Title page (left) and first page of chapter V 'Stucco Duro in England' with picture of Nonsuch Palace (right) from George Bankart's *The Art of the Plasterer* (1908; the date 1909 on the title page is, according to the British Library Catalogue, an error).

plasterwork, 'to comply with the wish for a comprehensive treatise on the decorative bearing of the plasterer's art (as opposed to its mechanical side)'.[52]

In his book William Millar had provided copious details of the technical side of plasterwork, from types of tools and methods of mixing to suggested profiles of cornices and the best lighting for a plasterer's workshop, but in Bankart's view he had neglected 'the history *and Art* of plasterwork', leaving these issues as 'but an incidental portion of his book'.[53] Bankart also offered the plasterworker plentiful practical advice, but gave far more attention to the historical and aesthetic development of plasterwork, the nature of the plasterworking craft, and the status of the plasterer as an artist and a craftsman. Bankart argued that the shortcomings of Millar's work in this respect were a reflection of its author being a practical artisan rather than a reflective and self-conscious artist: 'It must be acknowledged and admitted by all who knew him, that Mr Millar was a splendid mechanic rather than an artist of marked degree in his work'.[54] Bankart himself, by contrast, was aware of his status as an artist and addressed his book to others who already claimed for themselves the same status or, if they did not, needed to be educated into doing so. In short Bankart, while offering a wealth of practical plasterworking advice, was as much concerned with the *status* of plasterworkers and the *culture* of plasterworking as he was with the practical exercise of the craft.

The epigraph for Bankart's work is a quotation attributed to Ruskin: 'The greatest Art in the world was done for its place and in its place'.[55] This phrase does not appear in quite this form anywhere in Ruskin's collected works, and seems to be a misquoted version of a line from a lecture on 'Modern manufacture and design' given by Ruskin in Bradford on 1 March 1859: 'all the greatest art which the world has produced is thus fitted for a place, and subordinated to a purpose'.[56] Ruskin's argument was that the distinction between 'high art' and 'decorative art' is artificial and misleading, for *all* art has a decorative role, and it

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[52] George P. Bankart, *The Art of the Plasterer: An Account of the Decorative Treatment of the Craft chiefly in England from the XVIth to the XVIIIth Century* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1908), p. vii. The title page date is MCMIX, but Batsford advertised the book as 'just published' in the *Times Literary Supplement* for 17 December 1908 and library catalogues, including that of the British Library, give the publication date as 1908, so that is the practice followed here.

[53] Bankart, *Art of the Plasterer*, p. vii. The emphasis on '*and Art*' is in the original.

[54] Bankart, *Art of the Plasterer*, p. vii.

[55] Bankart, *Art of the Plasterer*, p. ii.

[56] John Ruskin, 'Lecture III: Modern manufacture and design', *The Two Paths* (1859); in E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (eds), *The Works of John Ruskin* (32 vols, London: George Allen, 1903-12), vol. 16, p. 320.

is only context that makes a particular piece of artistic production 'decorative': 'the only essential distinction between Decorative and other art is the being fitted for a fixed place; and in that place, related, either in subordination or in command, to the effect of other pieces of art'.[57] The issue of being 'fixed in position' is clearly of importance in the case of plasterwork, as is its relationship to other works of art, be they the furnishings of a room or the architecture of the room itself, or indeed to the building of which the room is part. This interpretation of the role of decorative art elevates the status of crafts that might conventionally have been considered inferior to academic arts, giving a high value to the work of the craftsman and the ideal of craftsmanship. Bankart espoused an essentially Ruskinian position in regard to decorative art generally, and of course plasterwork specifically, arguing in *The Art of the Plasterer* for the status of decorative art in terms that amount almost to a paraphrase of Ruskin's own:

> Constructive design has a mission to fulfil, a purpose to serve apart from 'ornament'. Ornament is a matter quite apart from constructive design, and is excusable and allowable only so far as it fulfils its own mission by being beautiful. The quality of beauty is again only to be considered in its suitability to the material from which it springs, to the place it is to occupy, and the purpose it is intended for.[58]

Bankart's use of the term 'ornament' rather than 'decoration' here and elsewhere is notable, the former term being associated with a certain dignity and a degree of integration with the architectural whole which the latter term, suggesting superficiality and frivolity, might appear to lack.

It is at the heart of Ruskin's view of craftsmanship that the creative spirit of the craftsman, given freedom and dignity in his work, will express itself in the work he produces.[59] The distinctive materiality of plaster and the haptics of its application make it, for Bankart, particularly suited to this role. The humble status

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[57] Ruskin, 'Modern manufacture and design', p. 320.
[58] Bankart, *Art of the Plasterer*, p. 2.
[59] See chapter 3 of P. D. Anthony, *John Ruskin's Labour: A Study of John Ruskin's Social Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 45ff. See also Crawford, 'Ideas and objects', pp. 18-19; Swenarton, *Artisans and Architects*, pp. 22-9.

of plaster brings it close to the hearts and souls of the people who work and live with it, and its flexibility and plasticity (and the time pressures at work in the process of shaping and carving, which demand a sure and practised hand from the plasterer), make of it a uniquely expressive medium:

> The material, such as it is, combines extreme ease of manipulation with great durability; to no other do the associations of our daily life cling more closely than to that with which the walls and ceilings of our homesteads are covered; from the humblest cottage to the sumptuous palace it is used as a clothing to the rougher material composing the structure. It is intensely sympathetic, it is intensely susceptible to every touch received from the hand of the worker, and for this reason no pains should be spared in the effort to make it seem to deserve its place in the buildings we erect.[60]

Bankart argued that arts classed as 'decorative', such as plasterwork should lose their subordinate status and be granted their true place in architecture. Alongside this, and as part of the same argument, he insisted that the decorative arts must be *worthy* of such an elevation in status. This necessitated a changed view of craftsmanship and, importantly, a new attitude on the part of the craftsman or craftswoman to the craft he or she practiced, and a new approach to the organisation of work itself. Modern plasterers were too often forced to hurry their work and use inappropriate modern materials with unsatisfactory final results. The plasterer of former times, working with traditional materials, 'modelled with fingers and tools *in situ* the actual plaster, fine drawn at its edges, full of detail', whereas his modern counterpart used plaster of paris ornaments cast in moulds, 'sound, dull, short to work, quick setting', giving 'to the modelling a heaviness and clumsiness unknown to the old stucco process of the Italians'.[61] If this problem were to be solved a revolution in the status of the plasterworker as an artist-craftsman was essential: 'The "artist" naturally feels whatever limitation there may be in his medium – but *it is because the "artist" has been so long*

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[60] Bankart, *Art of the Plasterer*, pp. 2-3.
[61] Bankart, *Art of the Plasterer*, p. 328.

divorced from the craft of the plasterer, and because modern plasters are being so grossly misused by decorators who are not "artists", that it is so necessary to insist upon this question of right and wrong use of material being upheld'.[62]

In true Arts and Crafts tradition, reflecting a line of thought traceable from Ruskin via Morris, Bankart exalted the image of the independent, creative artist-craftsman who took pride in his materials and his work, and was conscious of his place within the creative process. The history of English plasterworking which Bankart narrated in *The Art of the Plasterer* reflects this interpretation. Like Robinson and Millar, he pinpointed the reign of Henry VIII, and specifically the construction of Nonsuch Palace, as the moment at which the direct influence of the Italian Renaissance was first felt in England, and, also like his predecessors, he stressed the ways in which that influence did *not* affect the character of distinctively English plasterwork: 'The Italian nature was not in the English nature, and the latter, left to itself, struck out a line of its own, and ploughed its own furrow'.[63] The failure of the 'Italian nature' to shape native English plasterworking was revealed most clearly in English plasterworkers' treatment of the human figure: 'The Englishman, left to himself, tended towards the burlesque' in figure modelling, whereas the Italian 'came as near to the perfection of form as he was allowed to by the material'.[64] Bankart judged notable examples of sixteenth-century English figure modelling such as those at Hardwick Hall, Haddon Hall and St Michael's Mount to be significantly 'inferior to the Italian work', with figures of a 'pudding-like appearance' which 'clearly shows the unfamiliarity of the native artist with human and animal forms'.[65]

As might be expected, Bankart, with his emphasis on the importance of freedom and creativity in the art of the plasterer, took a similar line to that of Millar in criticising Inigo Jones's negative influence on plasterwork, almost paraphrasing the latter in his summary of the situation in Charles I's reign: 'During the early part of Charles I's reign the principle of design remained much the same, but towards the latter part of it the influence of Inigo Jones and Peter Paul Rubens affected the style a good deal'.[66] For Bankart, the advent of Jones

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[62] Bankart, *Art of the Plasterer*, pp. 328-9. Emphasis in the original.
[63] Bankart, *Art of the Plasterer*, pp. 89-91.
[64] Bankart, *Art of the Plasterer*, p. 53.
[65] Bankart, *Art of the Plasterer*, pp. 52, 53.
[66] Bankart, *Art of the Plasterer*, p. 165.

marked the arrival in England of two systems of authority that would undermine the freedom of the craftsman and bring to an end the organic development of the native plasterworking tradition: the dominance of the architect, and an increasing reliance on the pedantic following of 'rules' of classical architecture found not through practical work but in the pages of pattern books and textbooks.

> Inigo Jones … introduced an entirely new manner of ceiling decoration from Italy … Both in precept and practice Palladio's ardent disciple, and the first professional architect England had known, with him there was nothing for it but Rome, and until the revival of the Gothic (*c.* 1800) his influence continued to be felt … From the time of his coming, and after, there was none of the freedom of traditional craftsmanship that had existed in Queen Elizabeth's time, nor had he the benefits of traditional skilled craftsmanship to help him out. His men were expected and had to carry out his instructions implicitly … No more will be heard of the old independence of craftsman or master builder, for the architect had to be first.[67]

Bankart was not directly critical of the aesthetics of Jones's ceiling designs in themselves, giving descriptions of the decorative schemes and motifs and noting those that indicated the work of 'Italians' and others that were 'most likely the work of the English workmen that Jones employed'.[68] Overall, however, it is clear that Bankart regarded Jones's influence as negative. The academicism of the classical style Jones brought back with him from Italy and the consequences of his impact on working methods and the status of the craftsman inevitably led to a lowering of aesthetic quality, because a craftsman free to work inventively and in accordance with his own imagination, with nothing impeding or constraining the direct flow of inspiration from brain to hand, will inevitably produce more satisfactory work than one who is controlled in every detail by precise instructions from the architect.[69]

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[67] Bankart, *Art of the Plasterer*, p. 220.
[68] Bankart, *Art of the Plasterer*, p. 222.
[69] Bankart, *Art of the Plasterer*, p. 166, 220ff.

For Bankart, as for G. T. Robinson and William Millar, the influence of Inigo Jones and his followers set a trend which continued through the subsequent century of the continuing degeneration of the plasterworker's art, despite the presence in many of the interiors they discuss of particular instances of high quality workmanship. The Civil War and Commonwealth all but destroyed the native plasterworking art: when King Charles II 'returned to his devastated native country without any love for its native arts', argued Robinson in the historical chapter he contributed to Millar's book, there was 'but a mere tradition of the old art left, yet enough remained to resuscitate it in a new fashion'.[70] That process of resuscitation was unfortunately dependent on foreign influences, above all those coming from, or via, France, so that French fashions 'reigned supreme during the latter portion of the Stuart dynasty'.[71] This period saw the classical motifs of the Louis XIV style brought to English interiors, and decorative plasterwork becoming dominated by lavish naturalistically-modelled flowers and fruits:

> … henceforth naturalistically treated wreaths and festoons of flowers became the prevailing ornament, often very delicately modelled in stucco or carved in wood by Grinling Gibbons and his school, thus creating the so-called 'Queen Anne Style', which is much more talked about than understood, and which really ran through the reigns of William III and his successors until George II. Under their influence the ceilings became divested of other panelling than a broad margin surrounding it, filled with flowing ornament, and often with rounded or incurved angles; the cornice became of small importance, the frieze had disappeared, and a deep cove, plain or ornamental, replaced both.[72]

The native English tradition as identified by Robinson had emphasised compartmentalisation of ceilings and an emphatic treatment of cornice and frieze, the latter providing a field for the free expression of the plasterworker's creativity.

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[70] Millar, *Plastering Plain and Decorative*, p. 18.
[71] Millar, *Plastering Plain and Decorative*, p. 20.
[72] Millar, *Plastering Plain and Decorative*, p. 20.

The French influence undermined this model with a spatial division that provided a more limited scope for creativity and tended to encourage the repetition of stereotyped motifs: fruit and flower garlands, assemblages of armour, classical busts. Robinson claimed that this development became more marked with the appearance of the Louis XV style in which 'a more flowing and less architectural distribution of ornament took place, and the plain field of the ceiling became the more important feature, the ornament being driven into the corners and in the centres'.[73] In tracing this tendency as far into the eighteenth century as the reign of George II, Robinson offered a trajectory of decline that culminated in the first appearance of the Rococo in the 1720s and 1730s. The motifs of such decorative schemes were French and were created from moulds 'to the detriment of the plasterer's art … nor were these the only cast portions, but the repetitive curves, "mutton chop bones", as they used to be called, were cast in sizes and used to form the principal cartouches and leading lines'.[74] The domestic plasterworking craft was further debased by the plethora of pattern books produced in the latter decades of the eighteenth century which finally brought an end to the creativity and independence of the plasterworker, but also laid the foundations for a move towards greater simplicity and restraint in plasterwork decoration:

> Chippendale, Pether, Lock, and even Batty Langley brought out books of designs for plasterers and carvers, setting a very reprehensible fashion, too much followed nowadays, by divorcing design from craft, and by no means improving either. The plasterer's art thus became thoughtless and absurd, having no specific character of its own, and the dilletanti [*sic*] would have none of it. Simple purity became grateful to them because it was not ridiculous.[75]

The turn to Neoclassicism did not mark a revolutionary change for the plasterworking craft but, for Robinson, continued the decline in status that had already set in with the vogue for French decoration and the Rococo – indeed, it

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[73] Millar, *Plastering Plain and Decorative*, p. 21.
[74] Millar, *Plastering Plain and Decorative*, p. 21.
[75] Millar, *Plastering Plain and Decorative*, p. 22.

hastened 'the death of the artistic plasterer' who 'borrowed, not made, his designs; he cast his ornaments, not modelled them: he kept a stock of moulds which he used more or less inappropriately, fitting his borrowed design to the ornament rather than designing his ornament to fit an original one'. The popularisation of Roman designs from the middle of the eighteenth century, associated with 'the exhumation of the buried antiquities of Rome, and their study', and typified by the work of Robert Adam, led to an 'enfeebling effect' on plasterwork and the plasterworker's craft.

> Exceedingly pretty, they pleased the public taste; simple in their elements, they were easy to design; and full of work, they gratified their maker ... but very little work was left to the *art* of the plasterer. He chiefly cast the models another artist had made, for when his ornament became so monotonously repetitive there was no reason why he should model it separately. ... And now it is no longer the plasterer who adorns the house – it is the 'compo man' – again an Italian, so that the race and the place which caused the resurrection of plaster modelling caused also its death. Adam, indeed, 'brought death into the world', so far as this fine old art and craft is concerned.[76]

Robinson drew his short history of plasterworking to a close with the decline of the last decades of the eighteenth century. The remaining notable practitioners of the craft were capable of doing no more than 'assisting at its obsequies'. The likes of Joseph Rose and John Papworth were 'almost the last of a fine race of workers' but their craft had already died around them: 'the vain repetition of "ornament" by the yard ruined them and the art expired'.[77]

The discourses of 'craft' and 'Englishness' which had been so important to late nineteenth-century interpretations of the history of plasterwork both traced a trajectory of rise and decline. The narrative applied to the plasterwork of the middle and later eighteenth century traced a path of degeneration in both artistry and craftsmanship, intimately associated with the rise of pattern-book eclecticism,

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[76] Millar, *Plastering Plain and Decorative*, p. 23. Emphasis in the original.
[77] Millar, *Plastering Plain and Decorative*, pp. 23-4.

archaeologically-influenced motifs, and styles associated with French and Italian schools of decoration. Millar, Robinson, Bankart, Blomfield and others sought in reconstructing the histories of plasterwork to create a historiographical structure that would provide the basis for a new trajectory of recovery and restoration, marked by the rediscovery of old standards of craft and traditional ways of working. Paradoxically, the enterprise of rediscovery would lead to a new generation of decorative arts and architectural historians looking at the disregarded eighteenth century with new eyes. Among the results of that cultural movement would ultimately be the restoration of the mid-eighteenth century interiors at Fairfax House. We will consider that issue in detail after an exploration of the ways in which plasterwork history was written in the twentieth century.

CHAPTER 4

Writing the History of Plasterwork:
The Twentieth Century

Reassessing the 'Georgian'

Early twentieth-century writing on the history of plasterwork tended to carry over many of the aesthetic judgements and historicising preoccupations of the late nineteenth-century historiography, notably concerns with the 'Englishness' of English plasterwork and the role of foreign influences, the status of craftsmen and of craftsmanship, questions of changing styles, and evidences of progressive or degenerative development. The discussion of plasterwork by architectural and art historians overwhelmingly meant discussion of English country houses and large town houses, and, particularly after the First World War, this gave analysis of the topic a nostalgic, elegiac air in an age of neglect, demolition and redevelopment.[1] 'Where is Grosvenor House?', asked Charles G. Harper in 1930, reflecting on the destruction of the Georgian inheritance: 'it is not now the town residence of the Duke of Westminster, but the name given to that towering block of flats which has arisen since 1927 on that site'.[2] Yet this reawakening interest in Georgian buildings was more than a matter of nostalgia. During the inter-war years the eighteenth century was increasingly seen offering qualities of rational planning and aesthetic restraint which were relevant to an era looking to modernism for solutions to architectural and urban problems. This combination of nostalgia and modernist re-assessment brought the 'Georgian' into new prominence as a historical and stylistic category, influencing attitudes to country houses, urban landscapes, and individual buildings and their interiors with their furnishings and decoration – including plasterwork.

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[1] Dana Arnold, *Reading Architectural History* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 8-9; Cara Aitchison, Nicola E. MacLeod and Stephen J. Shaw, *Leisure and Tourism Landscapes: Social and Cultural Geographies* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 142-145.
[2] Charles G. Palmer, *Mansions of Old Romance* (London: Cecil Palmer, 1930), p. 86.

Before the First World War the influence of Stuart and early Georgian styles had been dominant on contemporary architects, reflecting the importance of the 'Queen Anne' movement in architecture. John Belcher, an architect who had been a founder member of the Art Workers' Guild in 1884, argued in 1913 that if 'there is to be a fresh development in our national architecture, it is only reasonable to suppose that the point of departure should be from the period in which it reached its greatest excellence'.[3] The period in question was that of 'Inigo Jones, Sir Christopher Wren and their followers', whose principles would inspire 'a purity and dignity in design, and that freshness and vitality which is the sign of a living art'.[4] During the 1920s however, the increasing preoccupation with a 'purer' (and more 'modernist') Georgian classical styles led a rejection of seventeenth-century classicism as compromised or immature.[5] Yet the architecture and interiors of the earlier 'English Renaissance' retained a strong appeal, not least because the grander Georgian houses, while celebrated for their historical interest and aesthetic qualities, were not necessarily seen as practical models for the architecture of the modern age:

> … we now look askance at those mansions of the eighteenth
> century, built for display, which were once the fashion. …
> 'Stateliness' we may say, came in, in general, with the reign of
> Queen Anne, and spread alarmingly throughout the eighteenth
> century, when the classic tradition grew up upon the decay of the
> Tudor and Renaissance styles of architecture.[6]

Such houses, built according to the canons of a classicism that was regarded as academic and imported (from Italy, or France, or France via Italy), lacked in their design, planning and decoration the 'homely' quality of the native tradition represented by Elizabethan and Jacobean architecture which, variegated by influences from the Netherlands and North Germany, was seen as the architecture

[3] John Belcher and Mervyn E. Macartney (eds), *Later Renaissance Architecture in England; A Series of Examples of the Domestic Buildings Erected Subsequent to the Elizabethan Period* (2 vols, London: B. T. Batsford, 1913), vol. I, p. 12.

[4] Belcher and Macartney, *Later Renaissance Architecture in England*, vol. I, p. 12.

[5] Elizabeth McKellar, 'Representing the Georgian: constructing interiors in early 20th-century publications, 1890-1930', *Journal of Design History*, vol. 20, no. 4 (Autumn 2007), pp. 325-44, here p. 325.

[6] Palmer, *Mansions of Old Romance*, p. 26.

of the 'English Renaissance'. In important respects, and particularly in domestic architecture which sought to be smaller in scale and homelier in effect, the influence of the 'Queen Anne' revival remained a potent element within English classicism as it developed during the 1920s and 1930s. The frame within which it was conceptualised and deployed placed more emphasis on its eighteenth-century than its seventeenth-century character.

'The Eighteenth Century, which for our fathers stood for all that was odious, insincere, and artificial, we have lately taken to our bosom', observed William G. Newton in his introduction to *Houses of the Wren and Early Georgian Periods* (1928) by Tunstall Small and Christopher Woodbridge. He went on to link that change in attitude to a new appreciation of the innate suitability of Georgian domestic architecture for the tastes and needs of the modern era:

> There is in our day much talk of the house as a machine for living; but for all the more gracious aspects of the household life of the moderately well-to-do no machines could be imagined more exactly suitable … it seems both in scale and detail to fit in with modern life, with none of the slight sense of discordance which the more naïve and childish charm of Tudor work or Jacobean brings with it.[7]

A new periodisation of architectural development was part of this reassessment of the Georgian past. An adjustment of perspective allowed the 'Palladian' middle of the eighteenth century to be seen as the focal point of a period which stretched from the latter half of the seventeenth century to the first half of the eighteenth. 'It is now recognised that the eighteenth century borrowed forty years from the preceding century and another forty from the nineteenth century', argued A. E. Richardson and H. Donaldson Eberlein in their study of *The Smaller English House of the Later Renaissance 1660-1830* (1925).[8] They divided their long eighteenth century into four sub-periods, reflecting a progressive development of English domestic architectural style: 'Transitional (Carolean), Early ("Wren

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[7] Tunstall Small and Christopher Woodbridge, *Houses of the Wren and Early Georgian Periods* (London: Architectural Press, 1928), 'Introduction' by William G. Newton, pp. 1, 2.
[8] A. E. Richardson and H. Donaldson Eberlein, *The Smaller English House of the Later Renaissance 1660-1830* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1925), pp. vi-vii

Period" and Queen Anne), Middle (Palladian), and Late (Revived Classic)'.[9] The Late Stuart period was thus interpreted as 'transitional' and the early nineteenth as a period of 'revival', bracketing the 'Palladian' eighteenth century as the period of the most developed and successful architectural style (and a style suitable to 'the smaller house' as well as the grand mansion). This had the effect of elevating the status of the eighteenth century, at least in its 'Palladian' form, so that it was represented as 'the high point rather than the nadir of English design',[10] reversing the attitude that had prevailed over the preceding decades.

It was in the late 1920s that new and substantial studies of the history of plasterwork appeared in Britain reflecting, to varying degrees, these trends. The concept of an 'English Renaissance' remained a core structuring element in these works: Inigo Jones retained his importance but Christopher Wren was increasingly seen as the central figure in English 'Renaissance' architecture. This reflected the rise of 'Wrenaissance'[11] architectural styles since the 1900s and the new roles accorded to Wren, as link between the classicism of the later seventeenth century and that of the early Georgian era, and as supposed creator of an English national architectural style.[12] The revival of interest in Georgian styles and awareness of their historical context influenced historical writing on eighteenth-century decorative plasterwork, softening some of the criticisms associated with the Arts and Crafts Movement (exemplified in the work of Bankart). Margaret Jourdain's *English Decorative Plasterwork of the Renaissance* (1926) and Laurence Turner's *Decorative Plasterwork in Great Britain* (1927) both attempted to assess eighteenth-century plasterwork far more on its own terms, reflecting an aesthetic and critical climate more sympathetic to the perceived Georgian virtues of cohesiveness and integrity, restraint and elegance.

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[9] Richardson and Eberlein, *Smaller English House*, p. vii.

[10] Elizabeth McKellar, 'Populism versus professionalism: John Summerson and the 20th-century creation of the "Georgian"', in Arciszewska and McKellar (eds), *Articulating Classicism*, pp. 35-56, here p. 40.

[11] On the origins of the term 'Wrenaissance' see John Cornforth, *The Inspiration of the Past: Country House Taste in the Twentieth Century* (London: Viking, 1985), p. 48.

[12] Christopher Reed, 'Enduring evanescence and anticipated history: the paradoxical Edwardian interior', in Morna O'Neill and Michael Hatt (eds), *The Edwardian Sense: Art, Design, and Performance in Britain, 1901-1910* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), pp. 165-89, here pp. 172-3; Richard A. Fellows, *Sir Reginald Blomfield: An Edwardian Architect* (London: A. Zwemmer, 1985), pp. 85ff; William Whyte, 'The Englishness of English architecture: modernism and the making of a national International Style', *Journal of British Studies*, vol. 48, no. 2 (April 2008), pp. 441-65, here p. 450-1.

Margaret Jourdain

By the mid-1920s Margaret Jourdain was an established authority on furniture and interior design, having published since the early 1900s a range of articles and books on the history of fabrics, furniture, and interior design and decoration, covering the period from the sixteenth to the early nineteenth centuries. Her earlier works appeared not under her name but under the names of the French interior designer Francis Lenygon and the coachbuilder and collector H. H. Mulliner, who collaborated in furniture dealing with Lenygon in London.[13] Jourdain's work marked a new departure in various ways: she regarded herself as an art historian concerned with facts and evidence rather than subjective judgements, or conclusions that might exceed evidential limitations. In her writing she 'cultivated an unadorned literary style that related the facts flatly and without flourishes'.[14] Jourdain made extensive use of illustrations and integrated them into her texts. She also sought to produce a cohesive 'interior history', considering carpets and lighting, paintings and plasterwork along with panelling, furniture and tapestries and the architectural framework of rooms and spaces.[15]

Elizabeth McKellar describes Jourdain as shifting 'away from the existing taste for late seventeenth-century classicism towards neo-Palladianism' and favouring William Kent rather than Christopher Wren as the inheritor of the tradition of Inigo Jones and the means of the transmission of that tradition into the later eighteenth century.[16] The resulting style, English Palladianism, was clearly 'Renaissance' but was also distinctively and identifiably 'national'. This is indeed true of her works on interior design and furnishing, and it was natural enough for her to feel an affinity for William Kent, who, like Jourdain, regarded interiors,

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[13] The text of *The Decoration of English Mansions during the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (London: T. Werner Laurie, 1909), published under the name of Francis Lenygon, is attributed to Jourdain, and she is known to have been the real author of Lenygon's *Decoration in England from 1660 to 1770* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1914). The second edition of this book was published by Batsford in 1922 with the slightly amended title *Decoration in England from 1640 to 1770*, still under the name of Francis Lenygon. The author of *The Decorative Arts in England 1660-1780* (London: B. T. Batsford, n.d., *c.* 1923) is given as H. H. Mulliner but the book was written by Jourdain. On the connection between Lenygon and Mulliner see John Harris, *Moving Rooms: The Trade in Architectural Salvages* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 104-5.

[14] Nicola Coldstream, 'Joan Evans (1893-1977)', in Jane Chance (ed), *Women Medievalists and the Academy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), pp. 399-422, here p. 403.

[15] Ralph Edwards, 'Obituary: Margaret Jourdain', *Burlington Magazine*, vol. 93, no. 580 (July 1951), p. 239.

[16] McKellar, 'Representing the Georgian', p. 340.

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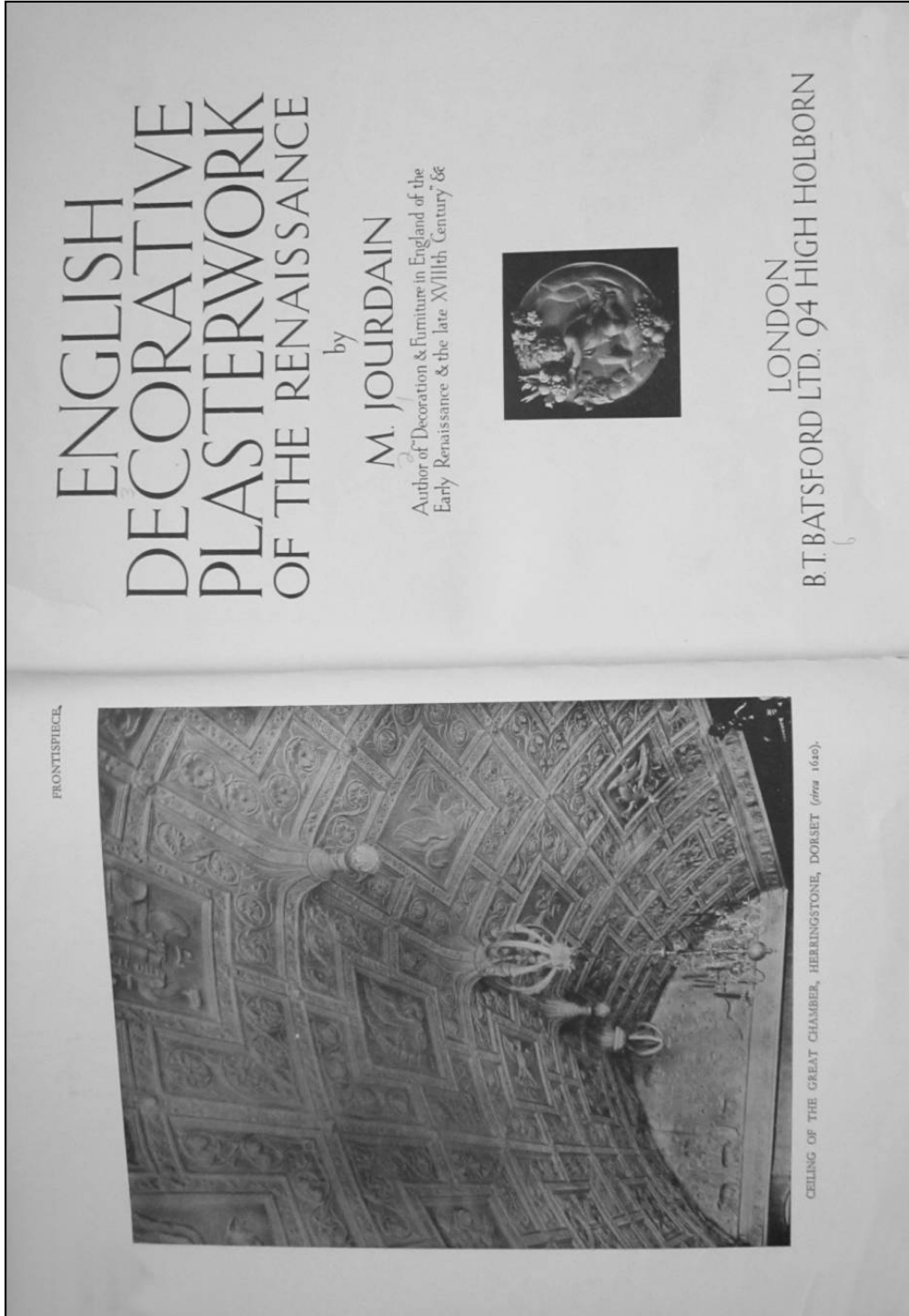
Figure 4.1. Title page and frontispiece of Margaret Jourdain's *English Decorative Plasterwork of the Renaissance* (1926).

exteriors and furnishings as constituent parts of an architectural whole and sought ideally to design the whole package (along with the gardens outside). In her book on plasterwork, however, this 'Kentian-Palladian' trajectory is not so evident.

In her preface to *English Decorative Plasterwork of the Renaissance*, Jourdain argued that the plasterwork of the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries was too little known and appreciated. It was of high material and aesthetic quality and, crucially, was both truly a 'Renaissance' art form *and* truly 'English':

> It is not, perhaps, yet generally realised what richness of decorative plaster exists in England, in spite of the amount that has been swept away during the nineteenth century. In this plastic material will be found a record of the evolution of Renaissance ornament and detail in this country from the accession of the Tudor sovereigns to the Greek Revival, and much of the work is of a high standard, both as regards design and execution. Contrary to the usual opinion, plaster in England was, with the exception of a certain number of Italian artists in the rococo style, the work of Englishmen; and both in the Early and Late Renaissance a distinctively national style was evolved, though naturally influenced by continental sources.[17]

In structuring the book, Jourdain made use of 'the two great divisions of Early and Late Renaissance'. The 'Early' period covered the years from 1540 to 1640, while the 'Late' period was 'subdivided into the Wren period and the Palladian school, with its variant of Rococo; and, finally, the classic revival of Robert Adam'.[18] The 'hinge' connecting the two periods of the English Renaissance was thus the era of Inigo Jones, as was the case for G. T. Robinson, Blomfield, Gotch and others, while the Palladian period was integrated into the English Renaissance tradition. The text itself is divided into introductory essays for each period (organised by chapter) followed by brief discussions of particular examples of plasterwork which are related to examples in the illustrations. True to her aim of providing

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[17] Margaret Jourdain, *English Decorative Plasterwork of the Renaissance* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1926), p. v.
[18] Jourdain, *English Decorative Plasterwork*, p. v.

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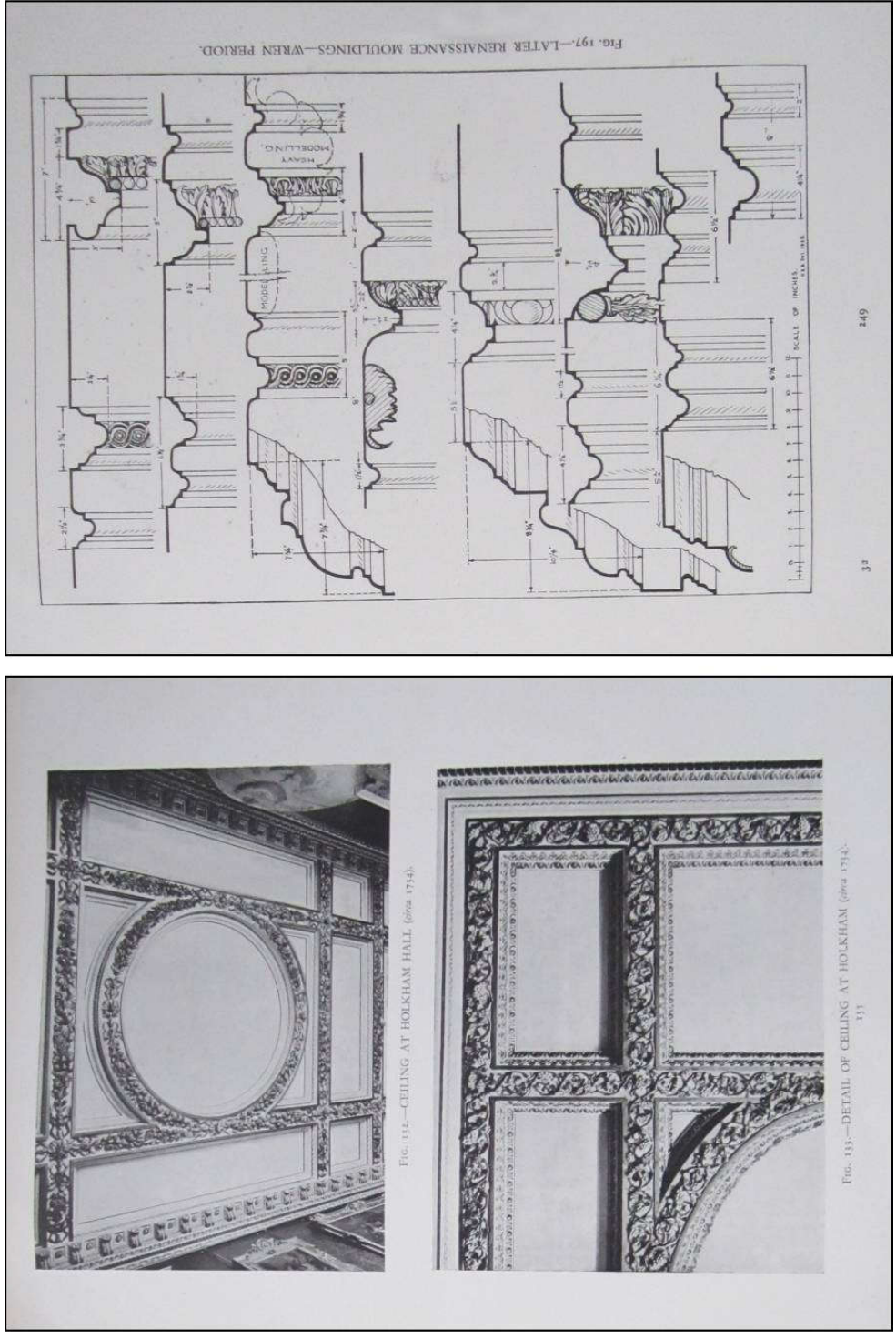
Figure 4.2. Examples of illustrations from Jourdain's *English Decorative Plasterwork*. The left-hand page shows details of a ceiling from Holkham Hall, the right-hand page shows examples of 'Later Renaissance mouldings – Wren period'.

historically-researched data drawn from original source materials, Jourdain also compiled a biographical 'Index of Plasterers' which prefaces the text.

Photographs and drawings are of great importance in Jourdain's book. When the architect Martin S. Briggs reviewed *English Decorative Plasterwork of the Renaissance* in *The Burlington Magazine* he summarised it as a 'collection of excellent illustrations of English plasterwork',[19] and the book's text can indeed be regarded as a commentary upon the images, rather than the images being additional to the text. In compiling the book Jourdain was able to use 'Mr. George P. Bankart's unrivalled collection of photographs of subjects … from the collection specially taken for Mr. George P. Bankart by Messrs. Lewis & Randall of Birmingham'.[20] Photographic illustration played an important role in architectural publications from the late nineteenth century onwards: Bankart's own book on plasterwork is richly illustrated with photographs of interiors and decorative details, and Millar's *Plastering Plain and Decorative*, while relying mostly on line drawings, also has a large number of halftone illustrations. The journal *Country Life* (first published 1897) made use of photography from the beginning, illustrating the interiors as well as the exteriors of the houses featured in its pages, taking advantage with other journals devoted to the arts such as *The Studio* (1896), *The Connoisseur* (1901) and *The Burlington Magazine* (1903) of the introduction of half-tone printing. This process enabled more delicate tonal values and reproduction of detail, and also permitted images to be fully integrated with text, a factor clearly significant for publications dealing with art and architecture and which increased the significance of photography in these fields.[21]

Both periodicals and books devoted to subjects such as architecture and the decorative arts benefited from the increasing availability and sophistication of photographic reproduction, with publications such as *Country House Baroque* (1940) being structured entirely around a selection of large-format photographs – in this case images of plasterwork in British and Irish country houses by *Country*

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[19] M. S. B. [Martin S. Briggs], '*English Decorative Plasterwork of the Renaissance. By M. Jourdain*', *Burlington Magazine*, vol. 50, no. 289 (April 1927), p. 222.
[20] Jourdain, *English Decorative Plasterwork*, pp. vi, vii. Jourdain also records that 'a few illustrations have been transferred from Lenygon's *Decoration in England, 1660-1770*', which was of course written by Jourdain herself: *ibid.*, p. vii.
[21] McKellar, 'Representing the Georgian', p. 326; Paul Jobling and David Crowley, *Graphic Design: Reproduction and Representation Since 1800* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), pp. 27-8; Jeremy Aynsley, 'Graphic change: design change: magazines for the domestic interior, 1890-1930', *Journal of Design History*, vol. 18, no. 1 (Spring 2005), pp. 43-59, here p. 46.

Life photographer Anthony Ayscough, with a descriptive text by Margaret Jourdain. The ready availability of such images was undoubtedly important in encouraging interest in plasterwork, preserving a record of structures that were no longer extant, and in making study of the subject possible for those unable to visit sites for themselves. The clarity with which the halftone image showed details, and the ease with which such detailed images could be integrated with an explanatory text, also made this method of reproduction particularly suitable for works concerned with architectural details such as plasterwork.[22] It can also be suggested that the use of photographs which apparently allowed the material to speak for itself encouraged writers on plasterwork such as Jourdain more readily to adopt a stance of supposed 'objectivity' towards the subject of their study.[23]

Jourdain followed convention in dating the arrival of decorative plasterwork in England to the reign of Henry VIII and the work of 'Italian craftsmen who were engaged on his palace of Nonsuch'.[24] The Italians provided a basis of expertise in plasterwork to their native counterparts, but Jourdain saw this as a technical, not an aesthetic, influence. English plasterworkers continued to use English motifs and styles, representing a continuity with what had gone before in architecture and architectural ornament. Jourdain ascribed the form of English plasterwork ceilings with their flat panels, ribs and bosses to the influence of 'the Gothic joiners' craft'[25] and stressed the 'Englishness' of Tudor and Stuart plasterwork. She was particularly concerned in the earlier portion of *English Decorative Plasterwork* to trace the origins of symbolic decoration to emblem books, and to argue that any Italian influence on English plastering was short-lived: 'What influence the Italians may have had disappeared by the reign of Elizabeth … the names of the plasterers who have so far come down to us are English'.[26] Her 'Index of Plasterworkers' accordingly contains many English names, causing her *Burlington Magazine* reviewer Martin Briggs to remark that 'It appears from the useful "List of Plasterers" in this book that most of the leading craftsmen were Englishmen, and that the clever Italian *stuccatori* with their tricks were not very

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[22] Micheline Nilsen, *Architecture in Nineteenth-Century Photographs: Essays on Reading a Collection* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), p. 19.

[23] Frederick N. Bohrer, 'Photographic perspectives: photography and the institutional formation of art history', in Elizabeth Mansfield (ed), *Art History and its Institutions: Foundations of a Discipline* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 246-59.

[24] Jourdain, *English Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 1.

[25] Jourdain, *English Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 1.

[26] Jourdain, *English Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 6.

numerous'.[27] Yet Jourdain also emphasised that 'while the plasterers seem to be English, the sources of figure subjects can, in many instances, be traced to pattern books engraved by artists from the Low Countries'.[28] Thus the argument was that the Italian style of figure-work was not followed by English plasterworkers, but through pattern books and other sources they nevertheless remained connected with the influence of the continental Renaissance, albeit through the indirect sources of Dutch and German pattern books rather than directly from Italy.

For Jourdain the *direct* influence of Italy is brought by Inigo Jones. Her account of Jones and the work connected with him and his follower John Webb is typically restrained and descriptive:

> In the setting-out of plaster decoration under the influence of Inigo Jones the field was divided by broad moulded ribs into compartments dominated by a large central compartment, often oval or circular. The projection of these ribs, of which the soffit is enriched with packed fruit or with classic detail, gives light and shade to this essentially simple treatment. In some cases the large central panel was destined for a ceiling painting.[29]

The brief descriptions of examples accompanied by illustrations following this introduction, are similarly factual in approach, but the aspects of the designs which Jourdain chose to highlight in these concise paragraphs tend to emphasise that new ingredients are at work, and that their origins lie in a more classically pure architectural vocabulary than is the case with the preceding Tudor and Jacobean schemes. Jourdain placed the work of Jones and his school in the classical tradition of architectural decoration, and implied the presence of a progressive development towards a purer classical style.[30] The significance of the use of wide ribs ornamented with moulded fruit and flowers for decoration becomes further emphasised in Jourdain's account of the 'naturalist school' which, between the Restoration and the end of the seventeenth century, made use of 'groupings, festoons, crossed sprays, or wreaths of flowers, leaves and fruit'

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[27] M. S. B., '*English Decorative Plasterwork of the Renaissance. By M. Jourdain*', p. 222.
[28] Jourdain, *English Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 8.
[29] Jourdain, *English Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 77.
[30] Jourdain, *English Decorative Plasterwork*, pp. 78, 79.

setting them 'within a simple geometric setting outlined with moulded ribs'. However, while the style of the plasterwork decoration expresses 'a fresh naturalism' Jourdain makes it clear that this style depends on a degree of contrivance that is far from natural:

> A new and finished technique had superseded the old handling … Repetitive detail and mouldings were cast; each unit of the floral ornament was made separately upon a core or stalk of strip lead or wire, grouped with others, and attached by the stalk to the ceiling. The wire or lead, the plaster leaf and flower (when still plastic), was adjusted and bent to fit in its position. … In addition to floral ornament, birds, *putti*, and cherub heads appear … At Astley Hall, Lancashire, one of these pendent *putti* is stuffed with strips of leather.[31]

For Jourdain the Restoration and later Stuart era had decorative richness and superficial beauty, but this concealed a decline in the status of the plasterworker and of his craft. From the 1690s onwards highly-quality work was created showing 'sharpness and vivacity of treatment', but the rise of the ceiling painter and the growing tendency for plasterworkers to rely on casting rather than freehand moulding were steadily undermining the freedom and creativity of the craftsman and the quality of the work he produced.[32]

That this period marks both a break in continuity and the beginnings of a significant era of decline for English decorative plasterwork is a made clear in Jourdain's next two chapters, Chapter IV covering *c*.1720-35 and Chapter V covering *c*.1735-70.[33] For Jourdain these middle decades of the eighteenth century saw the triumph of foreign craftsmen and foreign styles, as 'Italian' craftsmen 'brought with them the stock-in-trade of French ornamental detail'.[34] While the seventeenth century had seen native inventiveness and craftsmanship, the eighteenth century brought deference to authority and lifeless copying: 'A group of Italian-trained architects of the early Georgian period, to whom Palladio's *Book*

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[31] Jourdain, *English Decorative Plasterwork*, pp. 88, 90.
[32] Jourdain, *English Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 90.
[33] Jourdain, *English Decorative Plasterwork*, pp. 145ff, 159ff.
[34] Jourdain, *English Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 145.

of Architecture was the canon, took refuge in the unassailable security of "the ancients", to whom Inigo Jones was added as of equal authority'.[35] The resulting work was formulaic and lacking in character, produced by foreign craftsmen and reflecting foreign styles to which clients and craftsmen, under the spell of fashion, deferred. The second quarter of the eighteenth century saw the imitation of French styles become even more destructive to English plasterwork and plasterworkers, as 'the introduction of the rococo ornament and of the French papier-mâché overwhelmed the art and technique of the English plasterers'.[36]

It is notable that Jourdain did not condemn the Rococo style in itself, which she described as 'embodied in France in the light and inventive elegance of the Régence and Louis XV', implying that in its place it was both appropriate and pleasing. What concerned her was rather the way in which it had affected English decoration, exerting its influence over native craftsmen and their work by gradual but insidious stages beginning with 'the restless extravagance which first appear in alliance with Palladian ornament'.[37] Quoting Isaac Ware's view from the *Complete Body of Architecture* that the Rococo must be received 'with discretion' and blended with other elements to reduce it to a 'more decent appearance', Jourdain commented that the 'effect of this taming and trimming of the wildness of the original style is not, however, happy'.[38] The vocabulary Jourdain used to describe English Rococo, and the authorities from whom her quotes are selected, make clear her dislike: it is 'capricious', 'convoluted', consisting of 'arched lines and tangled semicircles', and represents a falling away both from the true line of Renaissance influence represented by the classical idiom of Inigo Jones and from the craftsmanship of English seventeenth-century plasterwork.[39] This decline reached its nadir with papier-mâché, and ready-made motifs being ordered from factories to be 'tacked to walls or the ceiling by local workmen'.[40]

Jourdain's final eighteenth-century stylistic period in plasterwork was 'The Classic Revival', associated above all with the Adam brothers, in whose work she distinguished 'an adaptation of the arabesques as interpreted by the Renaissance,

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[35] Jourdain, *English Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 145.
[36] Jourdain, *English Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 159.
[37] Jourdain, *English Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 159
[38] Jourdain, *English Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 159.
[39] Jourdain, *English Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 160.
[40] Jourdain, *English Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 162.

and a reversion to Roman practice'.[41] By 'Roman practice' Jourdain is referring to the compositional elements (square, hexagonal or octagonal panels, coffering, central rosettes, classical architectural enrichments) and motifs used in characteristically 'archaeological' Adam ceiling designs.[42] Jourdain's account of the work of Adam and his imitators has her typically factual and non-judgemental air, but the vocabulary she used to describe this style of 'classic revival' nevertheless implies that she saw it as literally superficial, a matter of *surfaces* rather than *essences*. Adam's work, Jourdain suggested, lacked depth both in physical terms and in its craftsmanship. Among the details she picked out for notice were the employment of 'cast medallions' and 'stock classical motifs', and the adoption of figures and elements from classical antiquity that were themselves 'light and graceful' but which were emptied of meaning and significance.[43] Jourdain saw the characteristic Neoclassical decorative elements as not only stereotyped and meaningless but liable to unreflective and tedious over-use: 'Circles and semi-circles enriched with radial fluting appear somewhat too frequently in some late eighteenth century interiors'.[44] Jourdain self-consciously constructed herself as an objective historian, but that is not to say that she did not take a position, and her judgement of eighteenth-century plasterwork is clear: its history was one of degeneration and decline.

Laurence Turner

A similar declinist approach to the plasterwork of the eighteenth century, and a comparable balance of contextualisation and critique, can be found in Laurence Turner's *Decorative Plasterwork in Great Britain*, published by *Country Life* in 1927. Turner's book, like Jourdain's and Bankart's, is extensively illustrated and has much to say about the history of plasterwork. Turner's openly opinionated style, however, makes his work closer in spirit to Bankart than to Jourdain. The Arts and Crafts virtues of craftsmanship, freedom, creativity and truth to materials are to the fore in Turner's account of the development of plasterwork from the

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[41] Jourdain, *English Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 189.
[42] Jourdain, *English Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 189.
[43] Jourdain, *English Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 190.
[44] Jourdain, *English Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 190, 192.
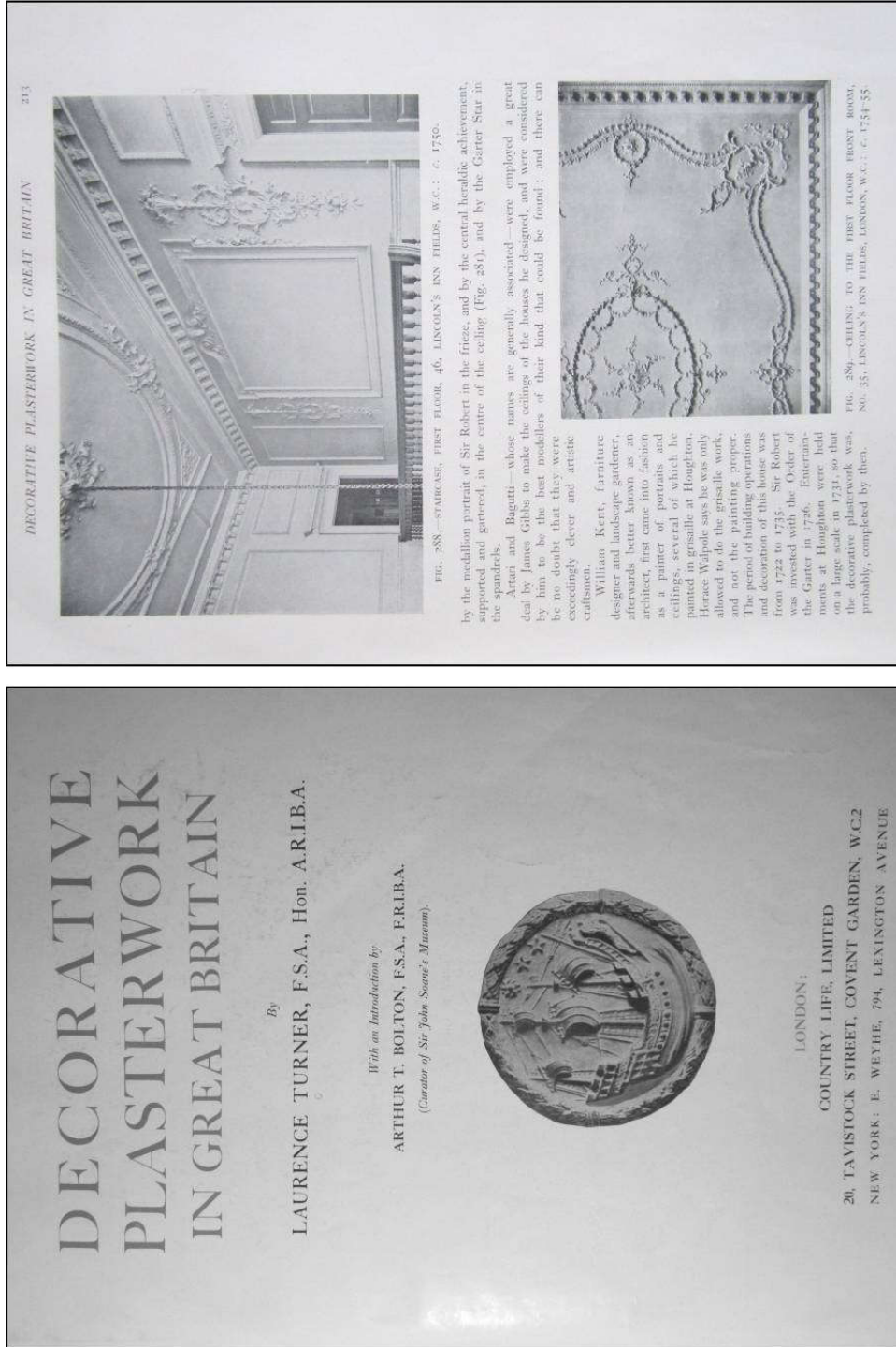
Figure 4.3. Left: title page of Laurence Turner, *Decorative Plasterwork in Great Britain* (1927). Right: sample page (p. 213) showing the integration of illustrations with the text.

sixteenth century to the early nineteenth, with the eighteenth century as a period during which those concerns were progressively downgraded, with consequences for plasterwork quality and craftsmanship throughout the nineteenth century.

Laurence Turner, like others before him, dated the beginnings of decorative plasterwork in England to the importing of foreign craftsmen to work on the grand projects of King Henry VIII and Cardinal Wolsey in the sixteenth century.[45] While accepting that 'It is well known that Italians did come here, and that their work is recognisable and still exists', he strongly criticised 'the too common English habit of attributing to foreigners the credit of making works of art of special excellence whenever there is uncertainty as to their authorship.[46] Turner consistently argued for the distinctiveness of English plasterwork and the role of native craftsmen in creating and developing it. He described the 'ingenuity displayed in inventing designs' and the 'diversity of *motifs*' used by the sixteenth-century plasterers as 'quite wonderful' and as distinctively English in character:

> The more carefully we examine the plasterwork decoration of the Tudor period and the way in which the work of the day was but a stepping-stone to the work of the morrow the more we shall realise the creative talent of these men. The art had a most surprising development, and largely helped to give English homes that distinctive character of which we are justly proud.[47]

For Turner the crucial transformation in English plasterwork occurred during Charles I's reign, 'due almost entirely to the powerful influence of the work of Inigo Jones upon his contemporaries and to the fashionable conceit of cultivated people for admiring the classical work of Palladio and his school'.[48] This was thus an elite project, contrasted by implication with the craftsmanship and creativity cultivated autonomously by the English plasterers of the preceding century.

As this suggests, Turner's attitude towards the 'Renaissance' was equivocal: while recognising that its spread from Italy to other countries represented artistic

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[45] Laurence Turner, *Decorative Plasterwork in Great Britain* (London: Country Life, 1927), p. 1.
[46] Turner, *Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 3.
[47] Turner, *Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 1.
[48] Turner, *Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 97.
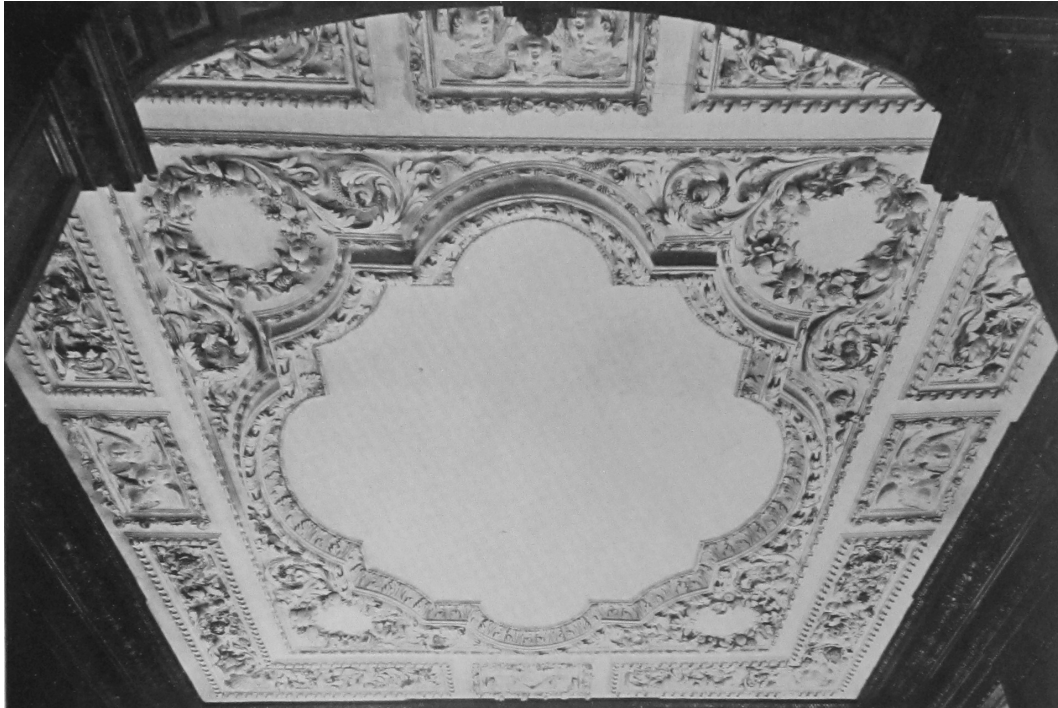
Figure 4.4. The ceiling of the Chapel at Belton House (by Edward Goudge, c.1685). Photograph from Laurence Turner, *Decorative Plasterwork in Britain* (1927), fig. 221, p. 154.

'progress', the form it took in England and its elite associations left him unable to view it entirely positively. When its influences were transmitted *indirectly* through native plasterers working creatively and in accord with their own traditions, the aesthetic outcome was, he argued, far happier. Thus, in his chapter on the plasterwork of James II's reign, Turner described the chapel ceiling of *c*.1685 at Belton House, by Edward Goudge, as being 'the finest example of decorative plasterwork to be found in the late Renaissance style'.[49] Importantly, however, he also argued that the Belton chapel, with other examples described and illustrated in the same chapter, was a very *English* manifestation of the Renaissance:

> I believe all the ceilings illustrated in this chapter are the work of English plasterers or, if not so, of men who had worked long enough in England to become so thoroughly imbued with the spirit of English work as to allow of their being reckoned as such. Plaster decoration abroad has quite a different feeling

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[49] Turner, *Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 154. Turner gives the date of Goudge's work at Belton as *c*.1685, while Beard (1975) dates it to *c*.1688.

about it … There is a fullness and breadth about this period of English plasterwork which distinguish it from what is to be found abroad, though the tricks of the craftsmen may, in many instances, be identical.[50]

For Turner, seventeenth-century admiration of Palladio was a 'fashionable conceit of cultivated people'.[51] Inigo Jones catering for that elite taste, acting as a conduit for Italian styles and creating designs that 'at once found popular favour with the educated class', those who 'desired buildings not of the traditional type, but of a kind that would set men's minds working in new channels' and also 'took pleasure in the distinction of being different from their neighbours'.[52]

For Turner, the persistence of 'Englishness' in plasterwork of this era revealed the continuity of 'Traditional design and traditional methods of making decoration in plaster which had been impressed upon the apprentice by father or uncle',[53] in contrast to the changing currents of fashion. Yet this could only be sustained where the craftsmen retained their independence and creative freedom. These were the very things being eroded by rulebook-based Palladian styles, the rise of the architect, fashionable painted ceilings, and the favouring of 'accuracy and mathematical exactness' and 'casts … stuck up in their places' over moulding 'freely by hand'.[54] He ended by pronouncing a kind of eulogy for the vanishing age of creative freedom in plasterwork:

> How strange must this ceiling have appeared to eyes accustomed to the homely plasterwork of the Elizabethan and Jacobean houses! How hard, cold and unsympathetic to those who saw this type of architecture for the first time! How sad the plasterers must have felt – if they realised the meaning of it all – for here was an end to their freedom! They were no longer to work untrammelled, fancy free.[55]

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[50] Turner, *Decorative Plasterwork*, pp. 156-7.
[51] Turner, *Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 97.
[52] Turner, *Decorative Plasterwork*, pp. 97-8.
[53] Turner, *Decorative Plasterwork*, pp. 98-101.
[54] Turner, *Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 116.
[55] Turner, *Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 116.

Turner's emphasis on the 'hard, cold and unsympathetic' character of this work reflected his deeply-held conviction that plasterwork decoration had to be true to the nature of the material itself: it had to be 'plasteresque'.[56] This meant it had to possess an organic softness and irregularity, qualities which naturally emerged from the hands of freely creative craftsmen and could never come from moulds and pre-cast elements assembled to an architect's plan. In this respect Turner was articulating one of the deeply-held convictions of the Arts and Crafts Movement, as expressed by the Scottish architect M. H. Baillie Scott in 1910: 'Let the finished plaster still retain some hint that it was soft and yielding when used'.[57]

The perfection of finish sought by classical architects left no room for the expression of individual character in plasterwork, and served to disguise both the character of the material and the true nature of plasterworking as a hand-craft. In such architecture 'the stone ashlar is rubbed smooth; mouldings have not the slightest trace of the tool left upon them' and the plasterwork follows the same smoothed and soulless pattern, 'as in stone or wood so it was in plaster'.[58] For Turner this was also a *false* classicism based on pattern books and abstract theorising rather than study of actual practice, for when 'the finest work of classic architecture is examined in the home of its birth, it will be found that there is an extraordinary vitality about all the work which is produced solely by the lively interest of the workman's individuality'.[59] That individuality would inevitably be lost in ceilings 'mechanically run from centres and by straight edges', which Turner contrasted with those that are 'full of life and energy', stressing the importance of 'irregularity', 'freedom in execution', and designs 'thought out' by the craftsman 'on the spot' rather than in accordance with a rigid plan.[60] 'Plasteresque' also expresses honesty in materials: decoration in plaster must not look like decoration created in any other material *but* plaster. Turner consequently insisted on a paradoxical structural honesty in appearance – paradoxical because it is based on the idea that although plasterwork is a surface treatment it should not look like one, but should express in its forms an underlying structure. A pursuit of

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[56] Turner, *Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 64.
[57] M. H. Baillie Scott, 'The art of building, with special reference to the use and abuse of materials', unpublished lecture of 1910; quoted in Diane Haigh, *Baillie Scott: The Artistic House* (London: John Wiley, 1995), p. 73.
[58] Turner, *Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 206.
[59] Turner, *Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 206.
[60] Turner, *Decorative Plasterwork*, pp. 64, 59, 26, 27, 15.

naturalism in ornament, with foliage and figures becoming more and more detached and requiring more and more additional support, is the ultimate betrayal of this architectonic quality, for 'as soon as ornament becomes so much detached that lead piping, twigs and rope have to be used … the architectural quality, which all decoration applied to buildings should have, disappears'.[61] All appearance of thinness and brittle hardness, implying superficiality and betraying the organic nature of plaster itself, should be avoided: the faults of 'thinness' and a 'hard, spiky appearance' have no place in plasterwork.[62]

Turner's critical attitude to the development of plasterwork in the eighteenth century reflects the importance he placed upon these qualities of creativity, honesty and architectural quality, all of which he saw as degenerating during a period when foreign influences and rule-book classicism, 'the popular caprice of admiring French art on the one hand and Palladianism on the other',[63] increasingly held sway. He argued that during this era the educated and fashionable classes regarded architecture 'based upon the imitation of classical models' as 'the only form of art worthy of attention'.[64] The result was a style of decorative plasterwork that was formulaic, rigid and stiflingly rule-bound: 'Rules were laid down for everything, until at last all architecture and ornament were designed – if one can call it so – and detailed by mechanical rules'.[65] As a result plasterwork decoration became 'dull and monotonous', and 'miserably weak and insipid'.[66] Examining the 1730s plasterwork at Nettlecombe Court in Somerset, Turner declared it 'unnatural to the instincts of an Englishman' and exclaimed 'How poverty-stricken is this work, both in design and execution, compared to that of the Stuart period! Why had art descended to such a low standard?'[67] Eighteenth-century English plasterers, Turner stressed, were capable of producing work of liveliness and vitality, but 'the imperious gentry' insisted instead on a

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[61] Turner, *Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 171.
[62] Turner, *Decorative Plasterwork*, pp. 53, 70.
[63] Turner, *Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 189.
[64] Turner, *Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 189.
[65] Turner, *Decorative Plasterwork*, pp. 189-91.
[66] Turner, *Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 218.
[67] Turner, *Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 216. Nettlecombe Court also contains notable mid-seventeenth-century plasterwork (see Beard, *Decorative Plasterwork*, pp. 30-1) including elaborate ceiling pendants, discussed elsewhere in Turner's book (pp. 105-6, 111-13) and giving extra weight to his comparison.

fashionable, uninspired, textbook classicism – a failure of taste on the part of the elite, and thus a failure of cultural leadership rather than of craftsmanship.[68]

Aesthetically, the results of this sociocultural and practical degeneration in plasterwork were clear. The essential 'plasteresque' and architectonic qualities of the plasterwork were lost: writing of the ceilings at Mawley Hall, Shropshire, Turner noted that the execution of the plasterwork was 'exceedingly skilful', but that the work was 'too hard and rigid to express rightly the quality of the material from which it is made'.[69] Decoration became harder and flatter in form and outline, a gradual but inexorable reduction in relief which culminated in the later work of the Adam brothers in which outlines and forms barely stood proud of the surface.[70] Such an approach was not seen by Turner as beneficial for aesthetics or craftsmanship, and he was no admirer of the Neoclassical style; but he did seek to place it in context as an understandable and perhaps necessary reaction to the excesses of the Rococo, with its French fancifulness and meaninglessness:

> This rococo ornamentation – so popular during the half-century before Robert Adam's reform – must have made all thoughtful architects and amateurs feel that the art of decoration needed something more interesting and intelligent in composition than the motiveless grouping of C and ƆC scrolls, derived from the style of Louis XV, and seldom from its best examples.[71]

Turner described much mid-eighteenth century work as 'a mere caricature' and criticised the period's 'confusion of taste'.[72] The Neoclassical style of ornament for all its weaknesses could thus be seen as a return to clarity and dignity, at its best producing 'magnificent' examples of decorative art.[73] Yet, Turner observed, for the plasterer there was 'very little credit to be got' from ceilings in this style, 'as the amount of modelling is exceedingly small. The same forms are repeated over and over again'.[74] This style of classical ornament, based on pattern books

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[68] Turner, *Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 223.
[69] Turner, *Decorative Plasterwork*, pp. 225-6.
[70] Turner, *Decorative Plasterwork*, pp. 224, 231.
[71] Turner, *Decorative Plasterwork*, pp. 233-4.
[72] Turner, *Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 153.
[73] Turner, *Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 246.
[74] Turner, *Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 242.

and using stereotyped motifs, 'did not give very much opportunity for the imagination of the craftsman to assert itself'.[75] Neoclassical work thus embodied the final triumph of just the qualities of repetitiveness, flatness, hardness, and lack of scope for individual craftsmanship associated with what Turner, like Jourdain, saw as the degeneration of plasterwork in the Georgian era.

The 1940s: Dutton and others

The chronological and stylistic structuring of architectural history established in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century continued after the Second World War, in a pattern typified by A. H. Gardner's *Outline of British Architecture*, published by Batsford in 1947. Gardner's 'Renaissance' lasted from 1500 to 1830 and was marked by an 'Early Renaissance' (1500-1650) of uneducated awkwardness, a 'Middle Renaissance' (1650-1750) in which the influence of Inigo Jones brought Britain into contact with the true stream of classical architecture and decoration, and finally a 'Late Renaissance' (1750-1830) which saw classicism decline into eclecticism and pattern-book copying. With the arrival of the Queen Anne style in the late nineteenth century came a 'revived Renaissance'.[76] Theorisations of interior decoration followed the same pattern.

From the 1950s this model did become more subject to question, however, as the influence of continental art history theory and method on British architectural history became more marked, and new archival and source material became available. Whereas the traditional English/British (the two often being elided) model of the 'Renaissance' had developed partly as a means of establishing a distance between developments in the British Isles and those on continental Europe, the post-war tendency was towards an emphasis on common themes and parallel developments.[77] These changes were reflected, to varying degrees, in the historiography of interior decoration, including the field of plasterwork history. The Second World War had far-reaching effects on issues of historic house

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[75] Turner, *Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 242.
[76] A. H. Gardner, *Outline of British Architecture: An Account for the General Reader of its Development from Early Times to the Present Day* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1945), pp. 63, 70-1, 79, 99-100, 111.
[77] Arnold, *Reading Architectural History*, pp. 99-100.

conservation, and on the perceived significance of the interior and the decorative and ornamental languages applied to it. War damage gave new impetus to preservationist movements, and brought a renewed awareness of the sociocultural dimensions of imperilled architectural heritage – not least in the interiors of historic houses, the spaces in which a way of life now seen to be profoundly threatened had been lived. Part of this was an emotional, almost spiritual, reaction to the violence and destruction that had marked the middle of the twentieth century. One author who wrote extensively on these topics and expressed this sentiment with particular clarity was Ralph Dutton, himself the 8th Lord Sherborne and thus a landed aristocrat, who became best known as the re-fashioner of his ancestral home, Hinton Ampner in Hampshire.[78]

Figure 4.5. The south front of Hinton Ampner, which was entirely reconstructed by Ralph Dutton between the 1930s and the 1950s to create a 'recovered' Georgian façade. This photograph was taken in 2016. (Source: National Trust, reproduced with permission.)

Hinton Ampner was a late eighteenth-century house with extensive Victorian remodelling when Ralph Dutton was born there in 1898. As a young man in the 1920s and 1930s he redesigned Hinton Ampner's gardens,[79] and upon his father's death in 1935 he began transforming the house, removing the nineteenth-century exterior and rebuilding the interior to 'return it' to its original eighteenth-century condition (but with modern conveniences). The result was as much invention as restoration, resulting in an architectural palimpsest composed of parts from altered

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[78] R. C. Richardson, '"Englishness" and heritage: Ralph Dutton (1898-1985), 8th Lord Sherborne', in R. C. Richardson, *Social History, Local History, and Historiography: Collected Essays* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2011), pp. 215-32.

[79] Brent Elliott, 'Historical revivalism in the twentieth century: a brief introduction', *Garden History*, vol. 28, no. 1 (Summer 2000), pp. 17-31, here p. 27.

or demolished Georgian properties in London and elsewhere.[80] Dutton also amassed a large collection of art, antiques and furniture at the house, much of which was lost in a serious fire in 1960, following which further extensive restoration and rebuilding was required, as well as continuing purchases of furniture and furnishings to replace what had been destroyed.[81] On Ralph Dutton's death in 1985 the house passed to the National Trust.[82]

In the introduction to his *The English Interior*, published by Batsford in 1948, Dutton reflected on themes of culture and society, preservation and heritage, and the role of the past (and the appreciation of the past) in a troubled present:

> During the eighteenth century a conversant knowledge of the rules and practice of domestic architecture was considered an essential part of a young man's education; without it he could hardly hope to be accepted within the well-defined barriers which then circumscribed polite and intellectual society. Now, once again, architecture has come to the fore; not certainly as a social asset, but as the manifestation of some deeper impulse, an impulse which has raised the arts to the position of an essential spiritual consolation in face of the grim tumult of the present day.[83]

The project of giving expression to this impulse was, as Dutton characterised it, profoundly concerned with issues of Englishness, 'for domestic architecture is closely entwined with the nature of the people of a country'.[84] In an age of destruction 'when the rich field of English domestic architecture is fast being impoverished and reduced' it was vital that society developed 'a sense of urgency if we are to learn, while there is yet time, all we can about these buildings which

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[80] For the history of the house, contents and gardens, see Ralph Dutton, *Hinton Ampner: A Hampshire Manor* (London: National Trust, 2010), first published in 1968. Citations in this chapter are from the 1988 paperback edition published by Ebury Press. See also Christopher Hussey, 'Hinton Ampner House, Hampshire', *Country Life*, 7 February 1947, pp. 326-9 and 14 February 1947, pp. 374-7.

[81] 'Country house destroyed', *The Times*, 4 April 1960, p. 10; Richardson, '"Englishness" and heritage', p. 220; Roy Strong, Marcus Binney and John Harris, *The Destruction of the Country House, 1875-1975* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1974), plates 113, 190; Frances Collard, 'The Regency Revival', *Journal of the Decorative Arts Society*, no. 8 (1984), pp. 7-18, here p. 13.

[82] 'Obituary: Lord Sherborne', *The Times*, 26 April 1985, p. 18.

[83] Ralph Dutton, *The English Interior 1500-1900* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1948), p. 9.

[84] Dutton, *English Interior*, p. 13.

have perhaps been England's greatest contribution to the arts'.[85] For Dutton the distinctiveness of English domestic architecture lay with the houses of the countryside rather than those of London and other cities. This was an important contrast to the situation in the centralised cultures of continental Europe: the dignitaries of church and state and members of the nobility and gentry did not remain in the capital to create lavish palaces but 'carried the learning of the continent to their houses in the country' so that great houses such as Knole, Compton Wynyates and Burghley 'reflected the culture which the Tudor monarchs had been able to bring to their courts and which was thence dispersed to the houses of the nobility in the countryside'.[86] It was thus the country houses which 'now provide the best and most representative examples to illustrate a survey of domestic architecture' – which, Dutton stressed, made it all the more 'tragic that the future of so many of these attractive houses should now be so uncertain'.[87] With so many such houses abandoned to neglect and destruction the record of English domestic architecture threatened to become unrepresentative, because while 'the famous houses of England will, under the care of the National Trust, undoubtedly survive … the unpretentious houses of some size, the houses of charm and of modest architectural merit … would seem to have little prospect of survival'.[88] This observation has a somewhat ironic ring, given that Dutton would bequeath Hinton Ampner itself to the National Trust in the 1980s.

Dutton's text is focused upon the interior, but the status of interiors in this assessment is ambiguous, with Dutton at times appearing to use the phrase 'domestic architecture' as a synonym for interior planning, design and decoration. He presents the study of interiors as one of the most important ways in which we can 'throw light on the lives and outlooks of the people of the period', yet he adheres to the traditional hierarchical view in which the interior is subordinated, both as a manifestation of architecture and as a subject of study, to the exterior:

> A book could be written on the exteriors of houses with no more
> than a passing reference to the rooms lying behind the façades,
> but the reverse is impossible. To understand the planning of a

[85] Dutton, *English Interior*, p. 9.
[86] Dutton, *English Interior*, pp. 9-10.
[87] Dutton, *English Interior*, p. 10.
[88] Dutton, *English Interior*, p. 12.

house, to master the form and arrangements of the rooms, the setting of staircases and domestic offices, to gain a picture of the life led by masters and servants, in order that all these facts and details should be comprehensible, it is necessary to view a building as a single unit and to inspect the elevations, general construction and layout before entering to examine the interior with minute attention.[89]

Despite Dutton's emphasis on the importance of studying interiors, the exterior of a building is presented by him here as architecturally self-sufficient, almost existing in isolation from the structure of which it is part. The interior, by contrast, is seen as a dependent, contingent phenomenon. Thus Dutton implies that to study exteriors is its own justification; the study of interiors *requires* justification through a holistic understanding of architecture dominated by the central significance of the exterior.

There is thus a tension between Dutton's characterisation of the interior as a uniquely valuable representation of the lives of the past as they were lived and its subordinate role as an object of study. The central issue here is architectural style as a means of ordering historical understanding of architecture itself. Dutton's understanding of style was dynamic and multifaceted rather than orderly, but remained fundamentally progressive in its interpretation of stylistic change, which was taken to be the basic structuring principle of architectural history.

It would be a convenience if architectural styles could be neatly arranged into centuries, or if with a change of monarch one style would snap crisply into the next. But the evolution is naturally very gradual, one manner melts into another, styles advance and recede only to return later with increased strength, and at no period after the accession of the house of Tudor can it be said that a single style had complete domination.[90]

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[89] Dutton, *English Interior*, p. 13.
[90] Dutton, *English Interior*, p. 11.
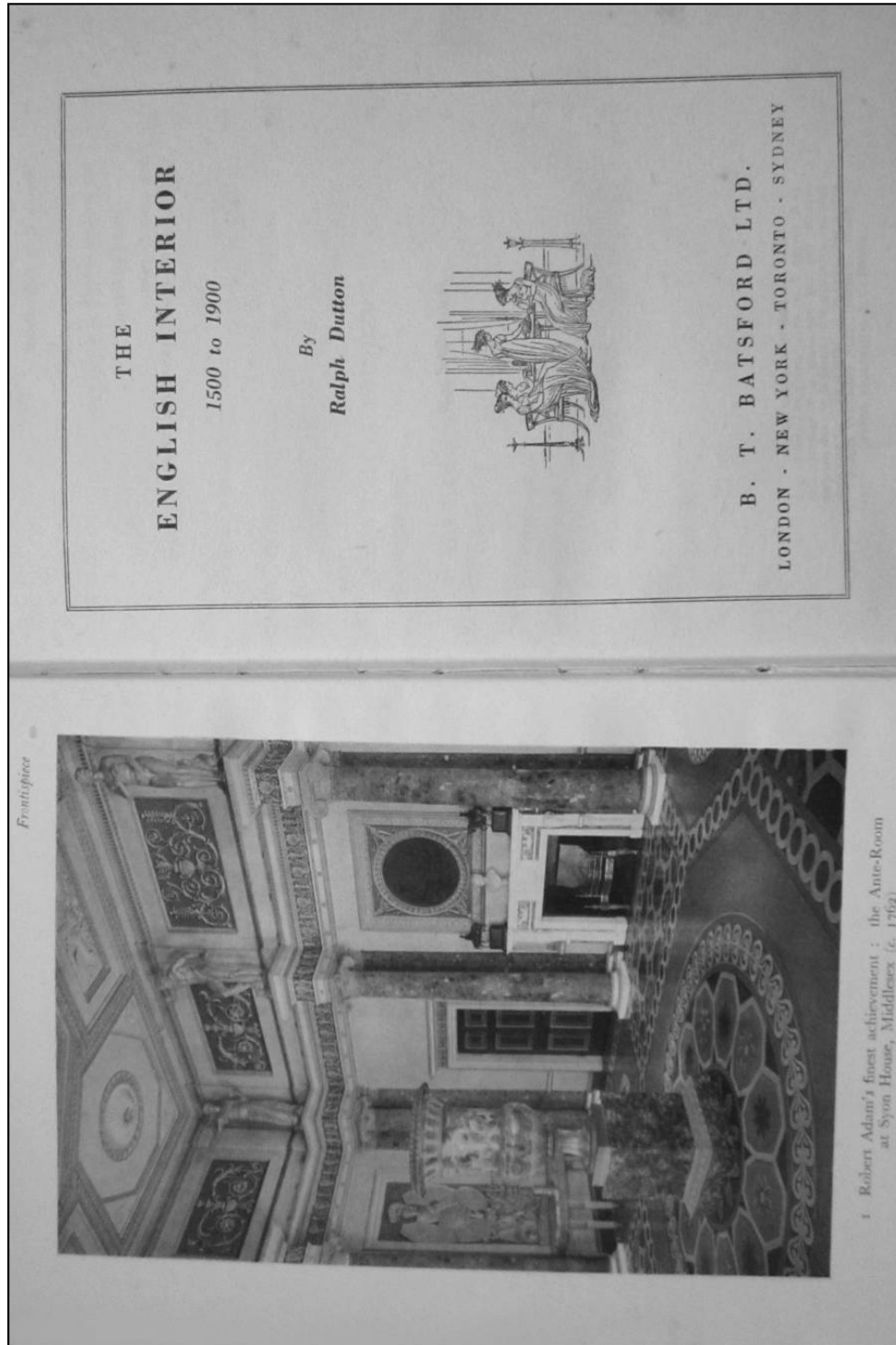
Figure 4.6. Title page and frontispiece from Ralph Dutton, *The English Interior 1500-1900* (1948). The frontispiece image, colour in the original, is of the Ante-Room at Syon House, Middlesex, and is described in the caption as 'Robert Adam's finest achievement'.

Dutton argued that in interiors this gradual 'evolution' was often obscured by the changeable, superficial nature of decoration and highly personal character of interiors as compared with exteriors.[91] This evolutionary development, not always immediately evident, was constantly present in the fundamentals of an interior, however obscured by incidentals. It is further suggested that the personal and unaffected nature of the smaller English country house offered a truer image of English national character than self-conscious splendour of grand houses whether in town or country. Similarly, Vita Sackville-West praised the 'middling houses' of England, 'as quiet as the country squire and the country existence where they belonged' in contrast to 'monsters of construction': a sentiment notably similar to Nikolaus Pevsner's famous claim in *The Englishness of English Art* that 'England has indeed never been happy with the Grand Manner'.[92]

Dutton did not treat plasterwork separately from his discussion of other aspects of interior decoration – wooden panelling, wall treatments, doorcases and archways, carved ornament, the form of staircases and so on. When he did discuss a particular example of plasterwork in detail it was in a way that implied a falling-off of quality between the Tudor and Stuart periods and the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Dutton's attitude towards the latter was particularly hostile: it was the era which 'had witnessed so calamitous a decay in the standard of taste' and created 'prevailing hideousness of interior decoration and furnishings'.[93] This aversion was undoubtedly felt by Dutton in very personal terms: he had nursed a lifelong dislike of the Victorian exterior and furnishings of Hinton Ampner, and as soon as the opportunity arose he had purged the house of its Victorianisms.[94] For Dutton the Victorians sinned against good taste and judgement through ill-advised eclecticism, a lack of restraint, and a failure to understand what was appropriate. He put forward the view that the rot had set in earlier, during the later eighteenth century with the rise of 'Romanticism' and 'Gothicism', although the Gothic Revival should be more justly seen as a symptom rather than a cause:

[91] Dutton, *English Interior*, p. 12.

[92] Vita Sackville-West, *English Country Houses* (London: Collins, 1945), pp. 39-40, 42; Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Englishness of English Art* (1955; pbk. edn, London: Penguin, 1964), p. 28. Pevsner makes the remark with reference to painting but his belief in its applicability to English artistic production in general is clear throughout his book: for the context to his comment, and responses to it, see Susie Harries, *Nikolaus Pevsner: The Life* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2011), pp. 491ff.

[93] Dutton, *English Interior*, pp. 186, 174.

[94] Dutton, *Hinton Ampner*, pp. 61-4, 74, 139; Richardson, '"Englishness" and heritage', pp. 219ff.

> In its inception the Gothic Revival was rather a spiritual than an architectural movement, a movement of spontaneous revolt against the rules of order and proportion which regulated and circumscribed creative impulse during the Augustan age of English art. It was a singular misfortune that the revival, which was based on the purest, if somewhat confused, principles should have contained the seeds of a widespread decay of taste; perhaps it might more fairly be said that Gothic was merely the style which had caught the public taste at a time when the decay made itself manifest …[95]

Taking the careers of Robert Adam and John Soane as measures of changing (and declining) tastes across the late Georgian era, Dutton emphasised the 'grace and fineness' of Adam's interiors and the overall harmony that governed the spaces he created, in which the rule was that 'all must be in keeping'.[96] This visual unity ensured that even those elements of the interior where Adam chose to be most stylistically innovative, his ceilings of low-relief painted plasterwork, struck no discordant note:

> The roundels, ovals, diamonds and rectangles of the painting, usually of scenes from Greek mythology … were the focal points in a plaster design of superb delicacy and grace … These elaborate ceilings are now usually painted white with the raised pattern in gilt but the original intention was to tint the plain surfaces in a variety of pale colours, pink, blue, green and mauve, to form a soft background for the relief which was left white.[97]

This 'delicacy and grace' was for Dutton an essential characteristic of the form of 'Georgian' which he had sought to resurrect at his own house: indeed, he brought an Adam ceiling from a house in Berkeley Square and re-erected it in the Dining

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[95] Dutton, *English Interior*, p. 146. This passage comes at the beginning of the chapter in which Dutton covers the period 1820-1900, entitled 'The Decay of Taste'.
[96] Dutton, *English Interior*, p. 134.
[97] Dutton, *English Interior*, p. 134.

Room at Hinton Ampner.[98] Dutton favoured the late eighteenth century and the Neoclassical style, and it is notable that he criticises the styles of the earlier and middle eighteenth century, particularly the Rococo, 'the work of Italians', which for him features decorations that too often 'bear little relation to the architectural features of the room' and is too elaborate, being 'over effusive' and lacking in 'admirable reticence'.[99]

Dutton spent some time discussing the work of John Soane, and noted the 'high degree of severity' and 'restricted use of decoration' in his interiors of the 1790s and 1800s but found admirable eighteenth-century lightness and grace in his work as well. He observed that Soane was capable of 'genial' compositions such as his work at Wimpole Hall (1791-3) in which a dramatic use of space and lighting combined happily with Adamesque surface treatments of the vaulted and arched ceilings.[100] Such work, representative of continuity with 'the principles of the eighteenth century' in which Soane had been trained, was contrasted by Dutton with the library at Stowe (1805-6) in which the inappropriate application by Soane of ribbed decoration copied from the vaulted interior of Henry VII's chapel at Westminster Abbey to a flat ceiling had produced an 'oppressive' effect.[101] Soane, for all his idiosyncrasies, was representative of the eighteenth-century tradition of restraint, balance and harmony until, under the influence of patrons obsessed with the fashionable Gothic taste, he allowed those values to take second place to such unreliable qualities as mood and atmosphere. It was indicative of the superficial qualities of plasterwork, both interior and exterior, that it was through this medium that buildings were often, as Dutton put it, 'given a coat of stucco' and fashionably 'Gothicised', with unfortunate results.[102]

C. P. Curran: Ireland and the 'Italians'

As with other writers working in the 1940s and 1950s, Dutton treated plasterwork as one subject among many that needed to be considered as part of the larger field

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[98] Dutton, *Hinton Ampner*, p. 66; Christopher Hussey, 'Hinton Ampner', *Country Life*, 14 February 1947, p. 375.
[99] Dutton, *English Interior*, p. 120.
[100] Dutton, *English Interior*, pp. 144, 145.
[101] Dutton, *English Interior*, p. 156.
[102] Dutton, *English Interior*, p. 155.

of architecture and interiors. Plasterwork as a subject in its own right experienced an eclipse in interest lasting more than thirty years after the publication of Jourdain's and Turner's books in the 1920s. It was not until the 1960s that a full-length study of plasterwork appeared in the form of C. P. Curran's *Dublin: Decorative Plasterwork of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (1967).[103]

C. P. Curran (1880-1972), a lawyer trained at Trinity College Dublin with a lifelong interest in art, literature, and eighteenth-century architecture, published three articles dealing with Irish plasterwork in 1939, 1940 and 1943.[104] His 1967 book built on the arguments he had first worked through in those texts. He viewed the Neoclassical use of moulds and cast decorations as marking a decline in the art and craftsmanship of plasterwork, describing the mid-1770s as 'the full Adam period – the beginning of eighteenth-century decadence – when repetition of plaster decoration from moulds and a species of mass production was becoming the rule'.[105] There was also, importantly, a nationalistic agenda to Curran's work: an assertion of the 'Irishness' of Irish plasterwork, a concern that the creativity of native workers should be given due recognition and that the role of foreign 'Italian' plasterworkers, who had for so long been given the credit for work carried out in Irish houses, should be seen in its true proportion.

> There is – perhaps everywhere – a mentality that regards as magnificent every work of the unknown foreigner ... There is also the chauvinist mentality to which any suggestion of a foreign influence at work is suspect. The adult, disregarding both opinions, will in this matter of our eighteenth century plaster work find the facts of the case so obvious, so parallel with the development of the craft in France, Germany and England, as to make the truth appear a platitude.[106]

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[103] C. P. Curran, *Dublin: Decorative Plasterwork of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (London: Alec Tiranti, 1967).

[104] C. P. Curran, 'Cesare Ripa and the Dublin stuccodores', *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, vol. 28, no. 110 (June 1939), pp. 237-48; C. P. Curran, 'Dublin plaster work', *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, 7th Series, vol. 10, no. 1 (March 1940), pp. 1-56; C. P. Curran, 'Ripa revisited', *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, vol. 32, no. 126 (June 1943), pp. 197-208.

[105] Curran, 'Cesare Ripa', pp. 237-8.

[106] Curran, 'Cesare Ripa', p. 238.
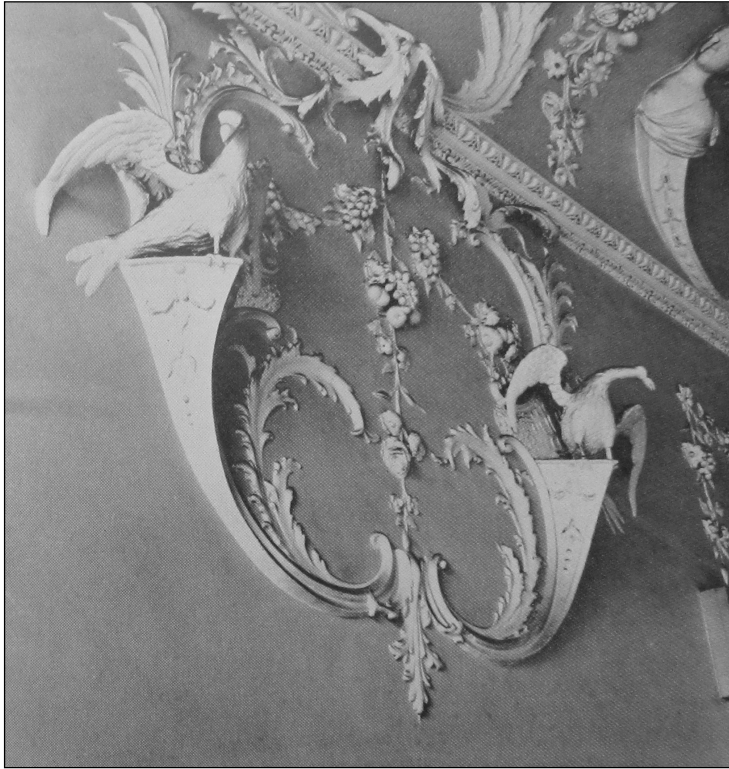
Figure 4.7. In his *Dublin Decorative Plasterwork of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (1967), C. P. Curran sought to argue for the important role played by Irish craftsmen such as Robert West in creating Irish decorative plasterwork and to downplay the contribution of 'foreign' workers. This photograph (fig. 105) of West's work at 20 Dominick Street, Dublin, is one of many used by Curran to illustrate the 'bold and attractive symmetry' of West's decorative schemes and his ability to take up influences from overseas but, as a native craftsman, to 'adapt them to a different conclusion' (p. 61).

In his 1940 paper Curran used guild and civic records to establish that the quality of Irish, and chiefly Dublin, plasterwork in the mid-eighteenth century rested on 'a body of skilled craftsmen pursuing their work here from an earlier date'.[107] Foreign influences were important, but the 'singular perfection' of the craft was more through stimulus of native genius than it was through the direct work of foreign hands: 'The excellence to which it attained in 1750 is unquestionably due to stimulus from without but it is equally true that there were long present in Ireland craftsmen capable of adapting themselves to new styles and practising them with inherited skill'.[108] This argument echoes that relating to the role of sixteenth-century Italian craftsmen in the English historiography, but moved to eighteenth-century Ireland and given a sharpened edge of national self-assertion. The historical context of Ireland in the first half of the twentieth century arose again in Curran's warnings about the destruction of Ireland's eighteenth-century heritage, and the urgency of the contemporary need to repair, restore and record, if that period's 'glories' were not to be lost: 'Much of the work has been wantonly destroyed, some fine unrecorded ceilings have been saved from ruin at the last

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[107] Curran, 'Dublin plaster work', p. 1.
[108] Curran, 'Dublin plaster work', p. 1.

moment; dry-rot, the beetle and the housebreaker are all at work and much has disappeared'.[109]

In *Dublin: Decorative Plasterwork of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* Curran extended and substantiated his argument, stating that while the 'diversity and excellence achieved by the middle of the eighteenth century' in Irish plasterwork was 'unquestionably due to outside stimulus',[110] both stylistic and historical evidence tends to reinforce the central importance of native plasterworkers and a native plasterworking tradition:

> There is ample evidence of such assimilation but in Ireland, even to a greater extent than in England, spurious folklore attaches foreign names at random to too much of this work and because a style is continental in style or origin, it is too frequently assumed that its practice lay solely or mainly in the hands of foreigners ... In fact, it requires but little examination to demonstrate the existence in Dublin of a body of skilled artificers pursuing their craft from an early date, confident and alert enough to adapt themselves to new styles and practice them with inherited skill.[111]

Curran used a chronological model of the development of decorative plasterwork which, like those we have encountered earlier, is built upon a fundamentally progressive framework which reflects this process of assimilation and refinement. He divided the history of plasterwork in Dublin from 1730 into periods 'which overlap but each has its special character', and defined these not by beginning and end dates but by identifying '1730, 1750 and 1775 as the central dates to the periods'.[112] This has the effect of implying a much greater fluidity to his periods than would be the case if they were defined in a more traditional manner, but also suggests a pattern of artistic rise and decline around a central high point (an apogee of artistic achievement) within each period.

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[109] Curran, 'Dublin plaster work', p. 47.
[110] Curran, *Dublin: Decorative Plasterwork*, p. ix.
[111] Curran, *Dublin: Decorative Plasterwork*, p. ix.
[112] Curran, *Dublin: Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 19.

> The first is the period when the compartment or framed ceiling
> is giving way to the more open style of late Louis XIV pre-
> rococo ornament … 1750 may be given as the high water mark
> of the next period, exhibiting most generally the fully figured
> ceiling and the complete transformation of Louis XIV ornament
> into rococo. The fully figured ceiling retreats fifteen years later
> … from the early 1770s rococo naturalism and the open ceiling
> with abundant bird motifs yield abruptly to academicism in the
> refined Adamesque style in low relief governed by geometry.[113]

Yet the notable point about Curran's periodisation of plasterwork development is that it placed the high point of the art precisely where Millar, Bankart, Jourdain and Dutton argued the symptoms of decline had become most evident: the mid-eighteenth century period of the Rococo: 'About 1750 rococo triumphed. In the decorative field the artist's fancy ranges free'.[114] The triumph of the 'gay tumult' of Rococo was, however, short-lived. It was supplanted by what Curran saw not as a reassertion of classical order but as a tame and deadening academic classicism: 'From 1770 it enters the period of Michael Stapleton and Thorp, masters of a silver age of decoration whose equivalent in England is Robert Adam'.[115]

Curran's position was that the Rococo marked the highest point of plasterwork artistry in Ireland, its particular virtues being all the better displayed by the fact that it was both preceded and succeeded by periods of relative restraint during which creativity was limited and a certain dullness resulted. The earlier forms of plasterwork decoration were constrained by the Palladian spirit and were 'admirable … resolute and dignified, but sometimes dull',[116] while in the subsequent Neoclassical style 'the legs of a compass replaced the free hand' and 'the improvisation encouraged by rococo and at least surface modelling *in situ* gave way to repetitive ornament that was wholly prepared in advance and applied *en serié*'.[117] The Rococo period, by contrast, was characterised by freedom and

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[113] Curran, *Dublin: Decorative Plasterwork*, pp. 19-20.
[114] Curran, *Dublin: Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 21.
[115] Curran, *Dublin: Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 21.
[116] Curran, *Dublin: Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 21.
[117] Curran, *Dublin: Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 71.

creativity. Curran implied that this placed Ireland more within the true French tradition of the Rococo than was the case on the other side of the Irish Sea, that in Ireland the spirit of the Rococo was allowed to flourish without the constraints that applied to it in England, and that its development in Ireland paralleled its development in France, the land of its birth.

> Ornament gains its independence. For good or ill it exists for its own sake and frees itself from structural purpose. The frame is extinguished and the symmetrical axis disregarded. In France it reigned for the short space of thirty-five years, say from 1730 to 1765 when it was replaced by the sobriety of Louis XVI and a doctrinaire classicism. In Ireland it had an equal life and ran the same course.[118]

Curran argued that Rococo was not simply one style of plasterwork decoration among others but had particular characteristics that made it the high point of the plasterer's art. It was truer to the innate qualities of plaster itself than the more restrained classical styles that used geometrically arranged pattern-book motifs and cast ornament, for it allowed the craftsman to exploit the full freedom offered by this uniquely tactile and plastic material. It permitted a great deal of naturalism in ornament, itself reflecting the qualities of the material itself: the Rococo 'exhausted the plaster possibilities of the material, explored its decorative freedom, its capacity for alert movement, its invitation to unfettered and graceful improvisation' and allowed decoration to 'spread over our walls and ceilings transcending the rigid forms and borders of the earlier period, their graceful asymmetry controlled only by the exquisite taste of the designer'.[119]

This interpretation of the Rococo period inverts the critique made by Bankart, for whom the Rococo marked the lowest period of plasterwork design, a point from which the art was only ultimately rescued by the influence of the Arts and Crafts Movement. In his 1940 article on the Dublin plasterworkers Curran made this explicit. After describing the career of Michael Stapleton, whose work he described as 'not wholly academic, rarely archaeological' and echoing in its

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[118] Curran, *Dublin: Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 21.
[119] Curran, *Dublin: Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 21.

naturalism 'the rococo masters of his youth', Curran wrote of Stapleton's death in 1801 as marking the end of an age of truly creative plasterwork: 'the revival of the craft must await the re-birth of a sense of design. Such a revival will also depend on the study of the work which is one of the glories of our eighteenth century'.[120] The Rococo period is thus not a *diversion* from the true nature and character of the art of plasterwork but the key to understanding the *essential values* of that art.

Curran's work relied both on aesthetic appreciation and archival research. His investigations in the archives of the City of Dublin and the records of great and small Irish country houses were greater in extent and depth than the equivalent researches of Bankart, Jourdain or Turner, all of whom took a more generalising view and were also working on a larger canvas. It needs to be said also that Curran, as much as his predecessors, had an interpretative framework for the plasterwork he studied which shaped the form his analysis took – in that sense a degree of teleology was at work, with varying degrees of subtlety.

The work of Geoffrey Beard

The next significant writer on plasterwork, Geoffrey Beard, united substantial archival research with a very broad field of enquiry encompassing not only the British Isles but Europe as a whole in his two books *Decorative Plasterwork in Great Britain* (1975) and *Stucco and Decorative Plasterwork in Europe* (1983). Beard, a prolific writer on the history of architecture, craftsmanship, and the decorative arts, sought in these lengthy and richly-illustrated studies to document plasterwork visually and textually, rather than offer subjective analysis or interpretation. In that sense he can be seen as the intellectual heir of Jourdain rather than Curran. He does nevertheless offer an interpretative view in terms of patterns of progressive development and decline in the history of plasterwork.

Beard began *Decorative Plasterwork in Great Britain* by denigrating the subject of the book as if some form of apology should be offered for devoting a substantial tome to plasterwork at all: 'It should not be claimed for plasterwork that it is as important a decorative medium as painting'.[121] He went on to explain

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[120] Curran, 'Dublin plaster work', p. 47.
[121] Beard, *Decorative Plasterwork*, p. v.

the importance of archival research to the study of plasterwork, but also the limitations of the available source material, given that 'Plasterwork is anonymous stuff, rarely signed, and few plasterers' names appear in the conventional, or unconventional, literature of art history about it'.[122] He also noted the limitations of the older historiography, commenting that when the earlier books were written 'forty and seventy years ago, their authors were more concerned with the appearance of plasterwork rather than the why and wherefore of it all'.[123] Among the most important 'wherefores' addressed by Beard was that of money. Previous writers on plasterwork had paid little attention to how finance was raised for building and decorating, being more concerned with the end result than with how it was brought about. Much of Beard's first chapter, 'Magnificent Building' is taken up with this question, dealing with sources of finance including rents and estate incomes, speculation and investment, and the role of marriage and inheritance.[124] The focus is on the country house, 'the hub of the landlord's existence … which gave his family status, sense of achievement and permanence', and upon which he spent his money in rebuilding and decoration.[125]

While Beard does discuss (and illustrate) other buildings, it is clear that he regards country houses as constituting the central canon of British plasterwork decoration. This not only reflects their artistic importance but the fact that, in the relationships between patrons, architects and craftsmen they embody and document, they offer the central body of material (and archival) evidence for the way in which plasterwork was created, and the pattern it followed in its historical development. This privileging of the country house is a constant theme in the writing of architectural history, as Dana Arnold has observed:

> The attraction of exploring a country house through the life of
> either its architect or patron – or indeed the interaction of both –
> is a significant force in the construction of its history ... this
> offers a tidy way of bundling together the disparate strands of
> the evolution of the country house into a neat, coherent and
> progressive history ... the tendency here is towards description

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[122] Beard, *Decorative Plasterwork*, p. v.
[123] Beard, *Decorative Plasterwork*, p. v.
[124] Beard, *Decorative Plasterwork*, pp. 3-8.
[125] Beard, *Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 8.

of either what the architect did or the broader perception of the stylistic consequences of the architect concerned. This separates the function of the building, the theory of the processes of architecture and the broader social and cultural significance. To this end the country house is presented in a kind of historical cul-de-sac divorced from any contemporary or theoretical meaning it may have.[126]

An additional complication is provided in the case of plasterwork by the role of ill-documented and often anonymous craftsmen – Beard himself called the 'very anonymity' of the subject 'too frustrating'.[127] However, the lack of information about the individuals who actually did the work tends to reinforce the emphasis on the better-evidenced patrons and architects. In turn it does not in itself lead to any questioning by Beard or other writers of the descriptive and biographical approach outlined by Arnold, nor of the presentation of the building itself, ideally a country house, with its decoration, as the self-justifying focus of plasterwork research. Beard himself implicitly justified the value of the list of plasterers that forms a substantial part of *Decorative Plasterwork* on the grounds that it 'includes most of the plasterers who are likely to have worked in the great country houses'.[128]

This traditionalist architectural-historical approach is also reflected in Beard's treatment of the question of the role played by foreign craftsmen in influencing the development of plasterwork in Britain and Ireland. He did not explicitly use the 'English Renaissance' periodisation of the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries which saw the Renaissance arriving in Britain in the early seventeenth century and persisting to the early nineteenth. However, the fundamental model of the influence of the 'Renaissance' on British arts and architecture underlying this theory was present in his interpretation of the role of foreign craftsmen in the eighteenth century. His argument was that the plasterwork of the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods saw great advances but remained artistically unfulfilled: 'The last years of the seventeenth century had allowed, by the elusive development of

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[126] Dana Arnold, 'The country house: form, function and meaning', in Dana Arnold (ed), *The Georgian Country House: Architecture, Landscape and Society* (London: Sutton, 1998, pbk. edn 2008), pp. 1-19, here p. 1, 3.

[127] Geoffrey Beard, *Craftsmen and Interior Decoration in England 1660-1820* (Edinburgh: Bartholomew, 1981), p. xvi.

[128] Beard, *Decorative Plasterwork*, p. v.

50. *The Moynle*, near Hereford: Stucco decoration attributed to Giovanni Bagutti and Giuseppe Artari, c. 1724

51. *Gubbins*, Hertfordshire: Drawing by James Gibbs inscribed 'Ceiling for Mr Sambrooks at Gubbins'. The ceiling was destroyed c. 1836. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford; Gibbs Collection, IV, 40

52. *Ditchley House*, Oxfordshire: The Hall, c. 1725. The Swiss *stuccatori*, including Artari, worked here for James Gibbs

53. *Ditchley House*, Oxfordshire: 1725. Receipt by Giuseppe Artari for work done, Oxford County Record Office, Dillon MSS

Figure 4.8. Page spread from Geoffrey Beard, *Decorative Plasterwork in Great Britain* (1967), showing typical examples of the large country houses he analysed and a sample of the range of evidence he used: photographs, drawings and financial records.

taste, a finer plasterwork (in technical terms) to appear in England than ever before. The workers, however, could not rid themselves of stiff, geometric borders and a hesitation at handling lifesize figures'.[129] Architects and patrons looked to foreign artists to remedy the deficiency, just as was the case with painting.

> In 1707 Charles Montagu, 4th Earl and subsequently 1st Duke of Manchester, went as Ambassador Extraordinary to Venice ... From an artistic point of view the significant thing to emerge was that the duke brought back with him to England in 1708 the decorative painters Giovanni Antonio Pellegrini (1675-1741) and Marco Ricci (1673-1729). There is no direct evidence that the duke sought out stuccoists in addition to painters, but presumably the word had gone swiftly abroad that patrons and work were available in England.[130]

Having identified the *stuccatori* as providing both aesthetic and technical quality not available to patrons from English plasterworkers, Beard addressed the issue of identifying the work of 'Italian' plasterers and compiling documented catalogues of work done by particular individuals, taking cases with 'exact documentation' and establishing stylistic and chronological relationships in order to proceed with the task 'of eventually isolating the work of the Swiss *stuccatori*, in England'.[131]

This desire to identify and categorise was at the heart of Beard's approach. It is notable that he spent little time theorising or reflecting on plasterwork as an aspect of art and architectural history (other than to regret that knowledge of it is not more widespread), nor on the ways in which its historiography has been and could be practised.[132] His writings position themselves as practical collections of relevant evidence, accounts of techniques and descriptions of finished works. In both his large-scale books on plasterwork the analytical and interpretative element of the text is about a third of the entire length of the work, with photographs and –

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[129] Beard, *Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 52.
[130] Beard, *Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 53.
[131] Beard, *Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 57.
[132] Beard, *Stucco and Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 9. This reflects Beard's overall approach in the many other works he published on architectural history, which tended towards the compilation of facts rather than analytical depth. See, for example, his *The Work of Robert Adam* (London: Bartholomew, 1978), *The Work of John Vanbrugh* (London: Batsford, 1986), *The Work of Christopher Wren* (London: Bloomsbury, 1987), etc.

crucially – alphabetical lists of plasterworkers taking up the bulk of the contents. In *Stucco and Decorative Plasterwork in Europe* the wide geographical scope entails an even more generalising and less analytical approach than is found in *Decorative Plasterwork in Great Britain*, and a longer list of plasterworkers.[133] This book also features a concise history of plasterwork from ancient times that strikingly echoes that compiled by G. T. Robinson for William Millar's *Plastering Plain and Decorative* a century earlier, tracing a line of development from Ancient Egypt and the Classical world through the Renaissance to the finest work of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Europe, followed by an overall decline in both aesthetics and craftsmanship.[134]

Since the appearance of Geoffrey Beard's works in the 1970s and 1980s there has been little scholarly attention paid to plasterwork and few English-language works devoted to it have appeared.[135] Beard's two books, with their rich store of documents and factual information structured by an overall historical narrative, continue to be basic texts of historical plasterwork research.[136] There has been little questioning of their overall approach: scholars working elsewhere in Europe have addressed and questioned the narrative embedded in such English-language plasterwork scholarship,[137] but those insights have not been influential except, to a limited degree, via writings on Ireland.[138]

A relatively recent book-length work devoted to the history and historiography of plasterwork is *An Insular Rococo: Architecture, Politics and Society in Ireland and England, 1710-70* (1999) by Timothy Mowl and Brian

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[133] Beard, *Stucco and Decorative Plasterwork*, pp.

[134] Beard, *Stucco and Decorative Plasterwork*, pp. 9-11, 27-32, 37-44.

[135] Christine Casey's *Making Magnificence: Architects, Stuccatori, and the Eighteenth-Century Interior* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017) appeared too late for me to make use of it in researching and writing this thesis.

[136] Conor Lucey, 'Introduction', in Casey and Lucey (eds), *Decorative Plasterwork in Ireland and Europe*, p. 23.

[137] For example in the work of Giuseppe Martinola and Carlo Palumbo-Fossati on the plasterworking families of Ticino: Giuseppe Martinola, *Lettere dai paesi transalpini degli artisti di Meride e dei villaggi vicini (XVII-XIX)* (Bellinzona: Dipartimento della Pubblica Educazione del Canton Ticino, 1963); Giuseppe Martinola, 'Stuccatore Ticinese in Inghilterra', *Bollettino storico della Svizzera italiana*, ser. 4 vol. 88 (1976); Carlo Palumbo-Fossati, *Gli Stuccatori Ticinesi Lafranchini in Inghilterra e in Irlanda nel Secolo XVIII* (Lugano: Fondazione Ticino Nostro 1982).

[138] The collection of essays edited by Christine Casey and Conor Lucey and published under the title *Decorative Plasterwork in Ireland and Europe: Ornament and the Modern Interior* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2012) brings together some interesting work on this theme, notably Andrea Spiriti, '*Esse est percipi*: stucco sculptors from the Lombard Lakes in eighteenth-century Ireland', Christine Casey, 'Stucco and sterling: the earning power of Ticinese *stuccatori*', and Joseph McDonnell, 'Bartholomew Cramillion and continental rococo'.

Earnshaw. [139] Mowl and Earnshaw describe their aim as tracing the course of Rococo architecture and decoration in Ireland, England and Wales 'with an emphasis on the purer "Insular Rococo" which developed in Ireland and the West of England, rather than on that Anglo-Italian compromise style which prevailed elsewhere in England and which still tends to be given undue prominence in architectural studies'.[140] To speak of one form of Rococo as 'purer' than any other is to beg many questions, particularly when the specific regionally prevalent style being held up as pure is one transmitted to Ireland via France and England and carried out by Swiss craftsmen and native plasterworkers who absorbed their influence and followed their fashionable styles. The freedom with which Mowl and Earnshaw find Irish characteristics in plasterwork attributed to Thomas Stocking and others in the West Country, even going as far as to claim Stocking himself as Irish in origin,[141] goes beyond what the evidence will sustain. As Edward McParland has observed in a review of *An Insular Rococo*, 'however "Irish" their plasterwork may appear, there is insufficient documentation to sustain a theory of cultural colonialism'.[142]

Their emphasis on native genius marks Mowl's and Earnshaw's arguments as possessing a lineal descent from the work of Curran in the middle of the twentieth century, but it is notable that beyond oddly labelling Curran 'the apostle of Ireland's eighteenth-century plasterwork'[143] and quoting two observations of his in support of their own positions, they do not really engage with his claims or his arguments.[144] Similarly, the 1991 catalogue *Irish Eighteenth-Century Plasterwork and its European Sources*, written by Joseph McDonnell and published to accompany an exhibition of that name at the National Gallery of Ireland, does not feature in *An Insular Rococo*.[145] In the essay accompanying the catalogue McDonnell outlines a more contingent and fractured picture of stylistic

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[139] Timothy Mowl and Brian Earnshaw, *An Insular Rococo: Architecture, Politics and Society in Ireland and England, 1710-70* (London: Reaktion, 1999).

[140] Mowl and Earnshaw, *Insular Rococo*, p. 1.

[141] Mowl and Earnshaw, *Insular Rococo*, p. 261.

[142] Edward McParland, review of *An Insular Rococo* in *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 142, no. 1167 (June 2000), p. 380.

[143] Mowl and Earnshaw, *Insular Rococo*, p. 232.

[144] Mowl and Earnshaw, *Insular Rococo*, pp. 220, 224, 232. The only work by Curran cited in Mowl's and Earnshaw's bibliography is his 1967 book *Dublin: Decorative Plasterwork of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*. None of Curran's earlier articles appears in the bibliography or is discussed, or even cited, in their text.

[145] Joseph McDonnell, *Irish Eighteenth-Century Plasterwork and its European Sources* (Dublin: National Gallery of Ireland, 1991).

development and artistic influence than Mowl and Earnshaw, noting that there is no particular privileging of either native or foreign approaches, and that there are strong links throughout the eighteenth-century between the plasterwork of Dublin and Irish country houses and that being created in London and the country houses of England.[146] Mowl's and Earnshaw's approach is simpler than either Curran's or McDonnell's and, in the end, less convincing because they construct an imagined Irish home of pure uncompromised Rococo, and look to that invented Ireland for what England might have enjoyed had the Glorious Revolution not triumphed in 1688-9. As it is, England was left with a 'lame and crippled rococo' and a haunting sense of what might have been.[147] In its teleological approach Mowl's and Earnshaw's anti-whig interpretation of late Stuart and early Georgian architectural history is simply whiggism reversed: 'might have been' is the mirror image of 'must have been'. For Mowl and Earnshaw there is only one road to Rococo.

A more balanced and sophisticated view of the Rococo and its influence upon European and Irish plasterwork can be found in *Decorative Plasterwork in Ireland and Europe*, edited by Christine Casey and Conor Lucey, a collection of essays deriving from a conference on 'Eighteenth-century plasterwork in Ireland and Europe' held at Trinity College, Dublin, in 2010.[148] The introduction from this volume, by Conor Lucey, and the essay by Alistair Laing entitled 'Is Stucco Just the Icing on the Cake?' have already been discussed in chapter 1 of this thesis. Of the other essays, there are two that are particularly worthy of note in this historiographical survey for their direct bearing on questions of importance in the history of the Fairfax House plasterwork. '*Esse est percipi*: stucco sculptors from the Lombard lakes in eighteenth-century Ireland' by Andrea Spiriti questions the notion, explicit in Beard and Curran and implicit in McDonnell, that the 'Italian' style of the European Rococo found its last home in Ireland, noting the inventive and varied styles of both native and foreign plasterworkers in Ireland between the 1730s and the 1780s and arguing that the division between 'Rococo'

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[146] McDonnell, *Irish Eighteenth-Century Plasterwork*, pp. 4, 7, 9, 13.
[147] Mowl and Earnshaw, *Insular Rococo*, p. 7.
[148] Christine Casey and Conor Lucey (eds), *Decorative Plasterwork in Ireland and Europe: Ornament and the Early Modern Interior* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2012).

and 'Neoclassical' is not as clear as subsequent historiography might suggest.[149] This argument can also be applied to England and has particular resonance for the lengthy career of Giuseppe Cortese in northern England and the nature of the so-called 'York School' of plasterwork, as will be discussed later. Christine Casey explores the financial aspects of the master plasterworkers of Ticino working far from home in Ireland and draws conclusions about their social position, noting that they 'were clearly perceived as artists and paid handsomely for their labour', but that they remained aloof from the surrounding culture, participating in distinctively 'Italian' cultural pursuits such as opera and not putting down roots in the host societies by marrying.[150] Cortese notably did not follow this pattern, as he married, raised a family, and was assimilated into his adopted city of Wakefield, where he lived for over thirty years.

These most recent explorations of the history of plasterwork indicate not least that, while the undocumented nature of much plasterwork and the difficulties of attribution remain, where the careers of individual plasterworkers can be reconstructed important insights into stylistic questions can be gained, and the overall historiography of this still neglected area of artistic and architectural history be further developed and enriched.

Conclusion: plasterwork histories

A number of themes arise from the discussion of the historiography of plasterwork in this and the preceding chapter. First, plasterwork occupies a marginal position within the history of interior design and decoration, which in turn occupies a marginal position within the history of architecture. This has led to the development of a disconnected historiography which has tended to treat plasterwork as a subsidiary theme within a larger picture rather than as an important subject in its own right. Such writing on plasterwork as has been produced has often been descriptive in nature and concerned with stylistic and

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[149] Andrea Spiriti, '*Esse est percipi*: stucco sculptors from the Lombard lakes in eighteenth-century Ireland', in Casey and Lucey (eds), *Decorative Plasterwork in Ireland and Europe*, pp. 77-92, here pp. 79, 86-7, 89, 92.

[150] Christine Casey, 'Stucco and sterling: the earning power of Ticinese *stuccatori*', in Casey and Lucey (eds), *Decorative Plasterwork in Ireland and Europe*, pp. 129-42, here p. 142.

chronological categorisation. In the nineteenth century works dealing with plasterwork were overwhelmingly practical in nature until the rise of the Arts and Crafts Movement produced a more reflective approach, associated with the new emphasis on craftsmanship. In parallel with this development, and closely connected with trends in the wider field of architectural history, writers on plasterwork emphasised the 'Englishness' of the domestic plasterwork tradition and transforming of the continental Renaissance into a distinctive national enterprise. The rise of a more 'learned' classicism, imported in the first instance by Inigo Jones, brought to an end the primacy of the individual craftsman and the dominant figure of the architect and the influence of the pattern book came to the fore. The historians of plasterwork who were associated with the Arts and Crafts Movement sought to end that dominance, which was associated with 'foreign' influences. Dislike of such foreign styles as the Rococo and of the stereotyped and moulded work which it encouraged led to a denigration of the eighteenth-century tradition in plasterwork in favour of earlier Elizabethan and Jacobean work. The middle decades of the twentieth century, however, saw a cultural turn in favour of the Georgian, in plasterwork and in architecture and urban planning. Among the results of that movement would be the 'new Georgianism' that characterised York from the late 1930s onwards, a movement which would ultimately bear fruit in the restoration of Fairfax House.

CHAPTER 5

Recovering the Georgian in Twentieth-Century York

The roots of a restoration

The preceding chapter discussed the reawakening of interest in Georgian architecture, interiors and urban planning in the first half of the twentieth century, and particularly in the years following the First World War. This movement was strong in Yorkshire, where the large number of eighteenth-century country houses and the presence of significant quantities of Georgian architecture in towns and cities such as Ripon, Hull, Bridlington, Richmond and York sustained awareness of and interest in the Georgian built heritage.[1] The foundation of the Georgian Society for East Yorkshire in 1937 and the York Georgian Society in 1939 gave an institutional expression to this regional commitment, and the establishment of the York Civic Trust in 1947, with its strong links to the York Georgian Society and a particular commitment to the preservation of 'Georgian York', reinforced the strength of the new Georgian movement in York and in Yorkshire.[2]

Thus the restoration of Fairfax House in 1983-4 had its roots in a movement to recover York's Georgian past that already had a long history. Decades before the restoration project began, Fairfax House was a focus of attention for those in York who were concerned about the city's inheritance of Georgian architecture and urban planning. From the late 1930s the hoped-for salvation and restoration of this building was conceptualised as providing a link between the York of the twentieth century and that of the eighteenth, and as bringing a physical expression of Georgian values to the centre of the modern city. This can be seen as part of a wider movement in mid-twentieth-century British architectural, urbanist and preservationist discourses to 'rediscover' and apply to modern life the perceived

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[1] Cornforth, *Inspiration of the Past*, pp. 48, 139-42; Katherine A. Webb, *Early Years of the York Georgian Society: Preservation, Education, Betterment and Design* (York: York Georgian Society, 2012), pp. 3, 7.

[2] Webb, *Early Years of the York Georgian Society*, pp. 27-8, 30.

virtues of the Georgian age. The 'Georgian' in twentieth-century York became the focus of a movement, elitist in sociocultural character, and with the York Georgian Society and York Civic Trust at its heart, which sought to bring not only the physical expressions of the eighteenth-century past to life in the twentieth-century city but to draw on the values and the perceived worldview of 'the Georgians' as a living influence on the contemporary age. The modern history of Fairfax House provides a unique window into the movement to 'recover the Georgian' in twentieth-century York.

New perspectives on the Georgian

It was in the later 1930s that the lessons Georgian architecture and town planning offered for the contemporary world became an issue which brought together preservationists and modernists. J. M. Richards reflected in his very popular and influential *Introduction to Modern Architecture* (1940) that the 'cottages in rural villages and the squares and crescents in the towns' which the eighteenth century had created possessed 'much appeal for us to-day' because of their 'order and consistency – a sense of the part being related to the whole – that contrasts strongly with the confusion of our own surroundings'.[3] Such sentiments helped to encourage a new consciousness of the 'Georgian' that encompassed urban buildings and streetscapes,[4] and which, influenced by the restrained aesthetics and rejection of ornament which characterised contemporary modernism, tended to value the sober restraint of the Neoclassical style rather than the eclectic ornateness of the 'Wrenaissance'.

In her 2004 essay on the career of Sir John Summerson, Elizabeth McKellar discussed *Architecture Here and Now* (1934), written by Summerson with Clough Williams-Ellis, which 'called for a return to order and simplicity in architecture for which the Georgian period provided the best model'.[5] McKellar noted that 'Two aspects of British eighteenth-century design were highlighted in this process: the picturesque landscape of open parkland, and the unadorned urban

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[3] J. M. Richards, *An Introduction to Modern Architecture* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1940), p. 20.
[4] Ben Cowell, *The Heritage Obsession: The Battle for England's Past* (Stroud: Tempus, 2008), pp. 106-8.
[5] Elizabeth McKellar, 'Populism versus professionalism', p. 38.

housing and rationalised town-planning tradition'. [6] There are few references to specifically urban qualities of Georgian architecture or planning before this, suggesting that enthusiasm for the urban dimension of the Georgian did not develop significantly until the 1930s. Even in the postwar years it was the country house that was seen as possessing unique and exemplary significance, with the urban eighteenth-century architectural heritage occupying a subsidiary position. Thus Rupert Alec-Smith, founder of the Georgian Society for East Yorkshire, told the York Georgian Society in 1962 that 'the greatest and most individual contribution that this nation has ever made to the arts was its building of the Georgian country house, a fashion that was so good that its spirit adorned our cities and towns as well'.[7] This attitude reflected not only the continuing unquestioned ascendancy of the country house in twentieth-century appreciation of Georgian architecture but the social elitism and conservatism that underlay important elements of the 'new Georgianism'.

As this new consciousness of the lessons that the Georgian age offered the urban environment developed through the middle decades of the twentieth century (**Figure 5.1**), it brought concern for the Georgian past into the public realm and the political arena of publicity and campaigning.[8] In London the Georgian Group was founded in 1937, initially as an offshoot of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, with the primary aim of drawing attention to, and attempting to protect, threatened Georgian *townscapes* as well as individual buildings. As Lord Esher, Chairman of SPAB 1932-1960, explained in 1937, the new group would be 'a focus for the large number of people whose architectural and artistic appreciation was fashionably limited to eighteenth-century work', and its campaigns would reflect the fact that 'The trend of modern development affected urban no less than rural amenities, and it was in the towns that much of the best work of this period was often stupidly and thoughtlessly demolished'.[9] A 1938 *Times* leader on 'The Georgian Boom' noted that 'During the last few years

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[6] McKellar, 'Populism versus professionalism', p. 38.

[7] York Georgian Society *Annual Report 1965-66*, p. 16.

[8] Neil Burton, 'A cuckoo in the nest: the emergence of the Georgian Group', in Chris Miele (ed), *From William Morris: Building Conservation and the Arts and Crafts Cult of Authenticity 1877-1939* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005), pp 237-58, here pp. 239, 241-3.

[9] 'Modern London "an amorphous mass": Lord Esher's criticism', *The Times*, 23 June 1937, p. 11.

Figure 5.1. This sequence of illustrations published in Lionel Brett, *The Things We See: Houses* (1947) encapsulates the argument that the 'modern' architecture of the twentieth century represented a return to the principles that had underlain the architecture of the Georgian and Regency eras – a return, in effect, to order after chaos.

the Georgian era has become fashionable' but argued that preservation efforts should go beyond individual buildings to include 'the larger task of preserving intact representative Georgian squares, terraces, and streets'.[10] This would make a

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[10] 'The Georgian Boom', *The Times*, 10 February 1938, p. 15.

representative cross-section of Georgian architectural achievement available to future generations, and constitute a public recognition of the eighteenth century as 'an age capable of intelligent town planning',[11] an approach which emphasised the urban rather than the rural legacy of the Georgian age. While the preservation of individual buildings continued to be conceptualised within an architectural-historical framework built around the 'great men' – architects, designers and patrons – who created them, there was a new consciousness of the more collective and artisanal effort involved in the creation of the eighteenth-century urban fabric as a whole.

This holistic approach to the architectural Georgian past, which recognised its presence in the modern world as existing not merely in isolated monuments but in a more generalised and cohesive sense of the urban fabric, representing not only a material but an aesthetic legacy capable of engaging directly with the concerns of the modern world, has been discussed in detail by Peter Borsay in his analysis of perceptions of the past and their modern significance in the city of Bath.[12] Borsay noted of Bath that 'Even in the eighteenth century the identity of the city was bound up with the making and remaking of its history', while during the twentieth century 'the image of classical (Roman and Georgian) Bath became fundamental to the place's contemporary significance and operation'.[13] The account offered by Borsay of the role of the eighteenth century in the re-imagining and re-creation of modern Bath has clear parallels with the history of York. Borsay writes of Bath that 'It could be argued that in no town in Britain has the past played such an active part in the present',[14] but it can certainly be argued that the past is as important to York as it is to Bath, and that it plays as active a part in the city's present; and York is similarly a city in which the ancient Roman and the Georgian have had particular influence on the way it has been perceived in the twentieth century.

In York in the first half of the twentieth century the growing awareness of the city's Georgian inheritance (**Figure 5.2**) had to compete with the established emphasis on Romans, Vikings and the medieval period. The new consciousness of

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[11] 'The Georgian Boom', *The Times*, 10 February 1938, p. 15.
[12] Peter Borsay, *The Image of Georgian Bath 1700-2000: Towns, Heritage, and History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
[13] Borsay, *Image of Georgian Bath*, p. 8.
[14] Borsay, *Image of Georgian Bath*, p. 8.

Figure 5.2. A photographic spread from *York and Its Buildings: The Capital of the North*, published by *Country Life* in 1931, reflects awareness of the Georgian 'streetscape' as part of the urban environment and of architectural details as well as of individual buildings.

the Georgian in York thus developed later, and more slowly, than was the case in Bath. Peter Borsay notes that in Bath a process of Georgian rediscovery began (rather earlier than in York) at the beginning of the twentieth century: 'it was in the decades before the First World War that an acute yearning for the Georgian age became widespread in Bath'.[15] This early development of interest in the Georgian urban past in Bath is perhaps explained by the dominance of eighteenth-century architecture in the city, and the association of the eighteenth century with the period of its greatest prominence and prosperity. These conditions did not apply in York, where the Georgian inheritance was less easy to isolate as an especially significant aspect of the city's past history and modern identity. During the 1920s and 1930s, however, both cities were equally strongly affected by the increased enthusiasm for the Georgian age, and particularly eighteenth-century architecture and urban planning.[16]

In Bath appreciation of the architecture and of its urban context as a whole was increasingly focused on the Georgian during the inter-war years: 'now commentators began to couch their accolades less in general terms, and more in

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[15] Borsay, *Image of Georgian Bath*, p. 73.
[16] Borsay, *Image of Georgian Bath*, pp. 157-8, 164ff.

respect of the specifically Georgian contribution'.[17] Other aspects of the city's history, perhaps most notably the medieval period, were downplayed, while the Victorian and Edwardian contribution to Bath's architecture was actively denigrated.[18] As noted above, the extent of surviving Georgian architecture in Bath and the city's eighteenth-century status as a centre of style and fashion made it credible to label Bath as a Georgian city, perhaps even *the* Georgian city. The more mixed inheritance visible in York made such a homogenisation and privileging of one historical period more difficult, and the re-presentation of York as a self-consciously and identifiably Georgian city was both a narrower and a more culturally focused project than was the case in Bath. To mark one important difference, the Georgian in Bath was seen as national in significance and in an important sense also commercial, to do with tourism and the selling of the city as a destination: 'Georgian Bath was projected as a piece of national history, and publicised and sold as a shrine at which to celebrate national identity'.[19] The creation of the image of Georgian York had touristic aspects but was far more civic than commercial in character, and (driven by local organisations such as York Georgian Society and York Civic Trust) remained essentially locally rather than nationally focused. The image of York as a national historic city was bound up with other periods in its history, notably the Roman and the medieval (**Figure 5.3**), or was conceptualised with reference to York's significance across the entire sweep of English (and/or British) history, a conception in which the Georgian era possessed only a marginal importance, if mentioned at all.

Borsay notes that by the middle of the twentieth century Bath was selling itself almost solely on its Georgian inheritance.[20] There was no such emphasis on any one particular period in York, which presented itself as encapsulating the whole of English and British history: 'Probably the most ancient city of the British Empire, and possibly of Europe, York abounds in associations of historical interest', proclaimed the city's official guidebook in 1907; 'it may truly be said that in no other city or town will be seen so many relics of past ages as in York'.[21] This claim to a kind of historical universalism was perhaps most memorably

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[17] Borsay, *Image of Georgian Bath*, p. 157.
[18] Borsay, *Image of Georgian Bath*, pp. 85, 89-91.
[19] Borsay, *Image of Georgian Bath*, p. 325.
[20] Borsay, *Image of Georgian Bath*, pp. 223-5.
[21] *York Illustrated: Official Guide of the York City Council*, 2nd edn (Bournemouth: W. Mate and Sons, 1907), unpaginated.
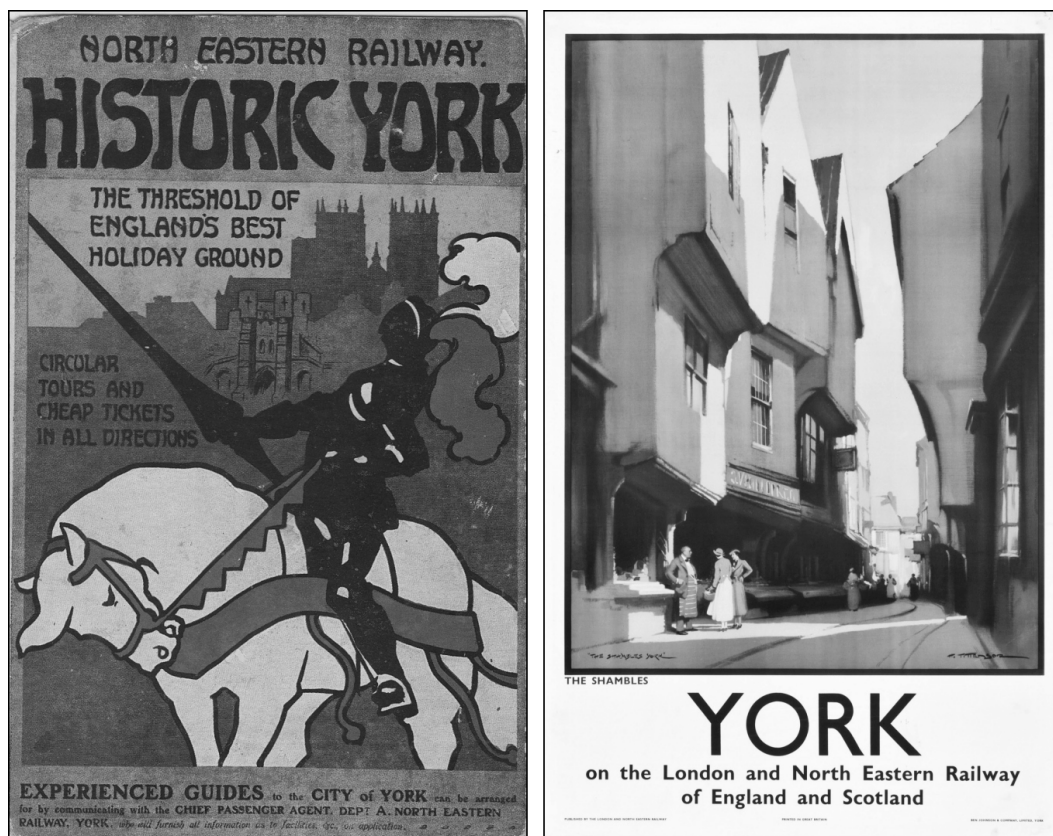
Figure 5.3. Posters produced by railway companies to advertise York as a tourist destination, representing it as an essentially medieval city. Left: poster published by the North Eastern Railway in 1906. Right: London & North Eastern Railway poster produced in the mid-1930s for the North American market. (Source: author's collection.)

summed up in the statement 'the history of York is the history of England', widely quoted and attributed to a visiting royal personage.[22] The eighteenth century was one part of York's past, but during the twentieth century York has not generally been considered a 'Georgian city' and has not particularly emphasised its Georgian inheritance when selling itself to the visiting public.[23] The list of 'The Main Dates of York History' included in the *Official Guide to the City of York* published by York City Council during the inter-war years entirely disregarded the eighteenth century: the list began with the foundation of the city by the Roman army in AD 71 and ended with the Parliamentarian siege of York in

[22] This phrase is often claimed to have been made by the Duke of York, later King George VI, during a visit to York following his marriage in April 1923, but there is no record of his having made this comment. His older brother the Prince of Wales visited the city on 31 May 1923 and gave a speech in the Guildhall but the text as given in contemporary press reports does not include the phrase: see the account in *The Times*, 1 June 1923, p. 13, in which his speech is reprinted.
[23] Kerry Downes discusses York in terms of notable Georgian buildings rather than the large set-pieces and self-conscious planning that distinguishes a 'Georgian city' such as Edinburgh: Kerry Downes, *The Georgian Cities of Britain* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1979), pp. 9-11.

1644, with seventeen of the twenty-two dates listed being before 1500.[24] As this suggests, the stress has long tended in such promotional material to be on York's remoter past: on the Romans (York as the 'City of the Legions', to quote the title of a 1930s British Pathé newsreel about the city[25]) and on the medieval era (loosely characterised as encompassing the period from the age of the Vikings to that of Richard III). The image of York to be found in countless postcards, railway posters, brochures and tourist guides has correspondingly been of a physical environment essentially medieval in character: winding narrow streets, timber-framed houses with jettied upper stories, the towers of churches, the whole ensemble dominated by the Minster and the city walls with their impressive gates.[26] This depiction of York dates from the emergence of modern tourism in the latter half of the nineteenth century and, as a 1926 analysis of the city by a town planner suggested, obscured the physical presence of other periods in the urban fabric:

> One's first impressions of York, received probably from perusing the plan of the city, from descriptive pamphlets and from the insistently vertical elements in the ensemble – including the Minster, churches, etc., – as seen from a distance, are that the whole of the city is typically Mediaeval in character and appearance. A closer analysis, however, contradicts these first impressions, and reveals an abundance of eighteenth and nineteenth century street architecture particularly in the main thoroughfares.[27]

There is a contrast here with towns and cities which were able to make much more of their Georgian heritage such as Cheltenham, Tunbridge Wells, Edinburgh, or, as discussed above, Bath. With the arguable exception of Dick Turpin, the eighteenth-century aspects of York's past have rarely been to the fore

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[24] For example 'The Main Dates of York History', *Official Guide to the City of York* (York: York Chamber of Trade and York City Council, 1933), pp. 35-6. The list appears to have been reproduced unchanged in each edition from 1917 until at least 1947.

[25] 'Now Come with Pathetone to – the City of the Legions – York', British Pathé, 1934.

[26] See the many examples, from the 1900s to the 1960s, reproduced in Beverley Cole, *York Through the Eyes of the Railways* (York: National Railway Museum, 1994).

[27] W. Dougill, 'An analysis of York', *Town Planning Review*, vol. 12, no. 2 (November 1926), pp. 125-36, here p. 129.

in its public image. The Romans, the Vikings, the Minster, and the city's medieval streets and buildings constituted the abiding image of York as seen by the tourist industry and the visitors it served, and this image was to a great degree constructed externally to the city itself. When from the inter-war years a new consciousness of York's Georgian character developed, it arose from within the city itself, and was concerned primarily with the conception of the city as a civic community rather than a *topos* for tourism. The focus of York's twentieth-century Georgianism was never primarily on how *others* saw the city, but on how the city *saw itself*.

Georgian York restored

In his 1937 speech Lord Esher had observed that the large numbers of Georgian buildings to be found in British towns and cities tended to make people 'careless and unobservant of their continual destruction'.[28] Certainly in the case of York, the sheer number of eighteenth-century buildings in the city tended to make them part of the background rather than a prominent aspect of the city's identity; and this, along with the emphasis already noted on preserving and celebrating the heritage of a more remote Roman and Medieval past, meant that the Georgian was a largely invisible part of York's urban environment until the period after the First World War.[29] Considerable antiquarian activity which went on in York in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – the recording of historical structures, publications on local history, programmes of lectures – and a number of influential individuals were noted for their research and writing on historical and antiquarian topics, such as Arthur Purey-Cust, who was Dean of York from 1880 to 1916 and published books and guides on York Minster and on the city's historical fabric more generally.[30] However, little attention was paid to the city's eighteenth-century past.

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[28] 'Modern London "an amorphous mass"', *The Times*, 23 June 1937, p. 11.
[29] Webb, *Early Years of the York Georgian Society*, p. 7.
[30] A. P. Purey-Cust, *The Heraldry of York Minster: A Key to the History of its Builders and Benefactors as Shewn in the Stained-glass Windows, and in the Carved Work in Stone* (2 vols, Leeds: Richard Jackson, 1890 and 1896); A. P. Purey-Cust, *York Minster* (London: Isbister and Co., 1898); A. P. Purey-Cust, *Walks Round York Minster* (Leeds: Richard Jackson, 1907); A. P.

Figure 5.4. This engraving of 1829 by Frederick Nash shows excavations carried out at St Mary's Abbey in York by the Yorkshire Philosophical Society. (York Art Gallery.)

Two local organisations established in the first half of the nineteenth century were important in fostering research and publication on the history of York: the Yorkshire Philosophical Society (YPS), founded 1822, and the Yorkshire Architectural and York Archaeological Society (YAYAS), founded as the Yorkshire Architectural Society in 1842.[31] Among the explicit purposes of the Yorkshire Philosophical Society was the maintenance of a museum of antiquities and the preservation of the remains of St Mary's Abbey, in the former grounds of which the YPS carried out archaeological investigations and established its headquarters and museum (now the Yorkshire Museum).[32] The Yorkshire Architectural Society began as part of the ecclesiological movement and was directly inspired by the Cambridge Camden Society founded in 1840. The York society's aim was to establish a continuity between the Church of England and the

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Purey-Cust, *Picturesque Old York: Chapters Historical and Descriptive* (Leeds: Richard Jackson, 1909).

[31] James M. Biggins, *Historians of York* (York: St Anthony's Press, 1956), pp. 19-20; A. D. Orange, *Philosophers and Provincials: The Yorkshire Philosophical Society from 1822 to 1844* (York: Yorkshire Philosophical Society, 1973); Derek Orange, 'Science in early nineteenth-century York: the Yorkshire Philosophical Society and the British Association', in Charles Feinstein (ed), *York 1831-1981: 150 Years of Scientific Endeavour and Social Change* (York: William Sessions, 1981), pp. 1-29, here pp. 6-9.

[32] Orange, 'Science in early nineteenth-century York', p. 8; Orange, *Philosophers and Provincials*, pp. 21, 31-2; Miele, *From William Morris*, pp. 17-18; Richard Hall, *York* (London: Batsford/English Heritage, 1996), pp. 19-23.

pre-Reformation church through archaeological and architectural research into medieval church planning and decoration, and through the exercising of influence where possible on both the conservation of old churches and on new church architecture.[33] As this suggests, the activities of these organisations, and of the individuals associated with them, tended to be focused on earlier historical periods (medieval and pre-medieval) and largely on ecclesiastical history and architecture. Secular buildings and later eras (in general terms, the period after the Civil War) received relatively little attention. In York many Georgian buildings were neglected, unsympathetically altered, or lost altogether; a process unconstrained by local or national legislation, which at this time offered no statutory protection to eighteenth-century structures.[34] The first public expression of anxiety at the fate of York's Georgian architecture was perhaps the lecture given by Dr W. A. Evelyn, a pioneer of York conservation and an important figure in YAYAS, on 19 November 1919 which drew attention to the threat posed to one of York's most important and beautiful Georgian houses by imminent conversion into a cinema and dance hall. That building was Fairfax House.[35] Dr Evelyn spoke out in defence of other eighteenth-century buildings in York (and lived in two fine Georgian houses in the city himself, first on Micklegate and then on Bootham[36]), but he was typical of his era in that his main concern was with the city walls, churches, and secular structures of an earlier period. York's conservationist preoccupation with the medieval and earlier periods was reinforced in the 1880s by episodes such as the dispute over the Church of England's plans to make redundant, and potentially demolish, a number of ancient churches in the city because of the reorganisation of the local parish structure. This episode, which became a national scandal, saw preservationist organisations such as the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings as well as local groups engage in bitter controversy with the Archdiocese of York.[37]

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[33] Murray, *Dr Evelyn's York*, pp. 5-6, 18-19; James F. White, *The Cambridge Movement: The Ecclesiologists and the Gothic Revival* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962, 3rd edn 2004), pp. 36-7. The 'York Archaeological' element was added to the society's name in 1902.

[34] John Delafons, *Politics and Preservation: A Policy History of the Built Heritage 1882-1996* (London: E. and F. N. Spon, 1997), pp. 46-8.

[35] Murray, *Dr Evelyn's York*, pp. 64-5.

[36] Murray, *Dr Evelyn's York*, pp. 7-8.

[37] The best account of this controversy is in Charles Dellheim, *The Face of the Past: The Preservation of the Medieval Inheritance in Victorian England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 115ff.

This emphasis on the more distant past changed markedly in York, as elsewhere, during the inter-war years. The Georgian Society for East Yorkshire was established in 1937 (at almost exactly the same time as the London Georgian Group) and its creation was motivated directly by the threat posed by redevelopment to the Georgian buildings and streets of Hull. The East Riding group played a part in inspiring the foundation of the York Georgian Society two years later, in the summer of 1939.[38] The York group shared with its East Yorkshire and London counterparts a belief that Georgian architecture and Georgian taste more generally should be protected and promoted, but did not reflect the same sense of imminent threat and tended to be less of a campaign group than the other societies. The East Yorkshire and London groups were both founded in direct reaction to the demolition of eighteenth-century buildings and the threat modern development posed to others. The York group did not consider itself primarily a protest group, and could afford to take a wider view of the significance of 'the Georgian' for the twentieth century: 'the new interest in the Georgian period was not just about preservation: it was about taste and fashion, and, further, about how Georgian design and planning could have vital lessons for the present day'.[39]

Influential in establishing the York Georgian Society's character was Oliver Sheldon, who served as chairman from 1939 until his death in 1951.[40] He was a member of the York social and commercial elite, a director of the Rowntree's confectionary firm, and a collector of Georgian art, silver and furniture with an acknowledged expertise in the period. He was also a thoroughly modern manager with a flair for publicity and for getting things done. He successfully overhauled Rowntree's managerial structure in the 1920s, bringing more professionalism to the firm while maintaining its traditions of humane paternalism and social responsibility, reflecting the approach he advocated in his book *The Philosophy of Management* (1923).[41] Sheldon's managerial philosophy was profoundly shaped by his association with the Rowntree family and their Quaker-rooted ideas of

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[38] 'Extracts from an address given by Colonel Rupert Alec-Smith', *York Georgian Society Annual Report 1965-66*, pp. 15-16; Webb, *Early Years of the York Georgian Society*, pp. 2-5.

[39] Webb, *Early Years of the York Georgian Society*, p. 7.

[40] Katherine A. Webb, *Oliver Sheldon and the Foundations of the University of York* (York: Borthwick Institute, 2009) is a much more wide-ranging study of Sheldon's life and achievements than the title suggests.

[41] Oliver Sheldon, *The Philosophy of Management* (London: Pitman, 1923).

service and social responsibility, and also by the social theories of John Ruskin: 'The practice of the art of fellowship is the first obligation laid upon management. Fellowship is the foundation of the life of goodwill'.[42] He believed that communal ties ruptured by the effects of the industrial revolution should be restored and that it was the task of twentieth-century leaders, whether in industry, politics or other walks of life, to undo the harmful effects of the individualism, greed and consequent chaos and injustice of the Victorian era. In many ways, for Sheldon as for others, the virtues of the Georgian age were essentially seen as counterbalances to the vices of the Victorian era. It was as much for its perceived 'anti-Victorian-ness' as for any qualities of its own that the Georgian age was an inspiration and an ideal. Sheldon argued that York's Georgian Society should not only further the cause of Georgian taste but testify to Georgian values in the way it conducted itself, so that it would 'above all, represent in these days of haphazard manners, the Georgian attributes of dignity, good order and courtesy'.[43] Under Sheldon's chairmanship the Georgian Society not only developed a particular character but was also highly successful: despite the first few years of its existence being overshadowed by the Second World War its membership rapidly increased, and the group pursued a highly active programme including surveying and recording York's Georgian buildings and running a popular programme of lectures, visits and other events.[44] As York emerged from the war to meet the challenges of a post-war world undergoing physical reconstruction and transformation, there was clearly a significant appetite in the modern city, not least among many of its most influential and well-connected citizens, for recovering, restoring and promoting the Georgian.

The York Georgian Society was directly and profoundly linked through organisational approach, philosophy, personnel and objectives with the York Civic Trust, founded in 1946. The founding fathers of the Civic Trust, Oliver Sheldon, Dean Eric Milner-White, Noel G. Terry and J. B. Morrell, were first brought together by the Georgian Society: the Society's most recent historian has written that in effect 'the York Civic Trust was a child of the York Georgian

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[42] Sheldon, *Philosophy of Management*, p. 85. See also *ibid.* p. 147, 'The essence of the new spirit, as opposed to the old spirit of the "iron hand," is fellowship'. For a discussion of Sheldon's managerial philosophy see Webb, *Oliver Sheldon*, pp. 10-11.

[43] Letter from Oliver Sheldon to Canon Chancellor Harrison, 1939. Quoted in Webb, *Oliver Sheldon*, pp. 16-17.

[44] Webb, *Early Years of York Georgian Society*, pp. 9-12.

Society'.[45] While the Civic Trust sought to fulfil a wider purpose, it took on much of its character from the Georgian Society. Certainly it inherited a particular preoccupation with the eighteenth century as a period which had created much worthy of preservation, and as a social and cultural as well as an aesthetic ideal to which twentieth-century York should aspire.

York Civic Trust and the image of the Georgian

The York Civic Trust was the first such body to be established in Great Britain, and was an early example of the rise of more popular, and at times more populist, organisations devoted to protecting aspects of both the natural and the built environment in post-war Britain. Local and regional groups and societies were an important element of this movement.[46] This is not to say that the York Civic Trust was in any way a grassroots organisation representing agitation and organisation from below: on the contrary, it was the creation of local elites and reflected their priorities and attitudes. It was from the outset a campaigning organisation which sought to have an effect upon York's appearance, character, and functioning as a civic community, but its campaigns were of a distinctly polite nature, marked by behind-the-scenes 'influence' rather than any form of public protest. Nevertheless, the Civic Trust's 'Georgianism' possessed a distinctly more dynamic and politically-socially engaged character than the more antiquarian and aesthetic approach of York Georgian Society. It was the Civic Trust that would ultimately purchase and restore Fairfax House, the quintessential effort to 'recover the Georgian' in modern York, so it is worth spending some time looking at the nature of the Civic Trust's 'Georgianism'. This had four aspects: a commitment to localism; the fostering of an urban aesthetic characterised by dignity and restraint; a belief in the importance of practical craftsmanship; and an attitude of benevolent elitism and social conservatism.

All these concerns were present in the founding text of the Trust, the proposal for 'The York Civic Trust for Preservation, Amenity and Design' which was

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[45] Webb, *Early Years of York Georgian Society*, p. 30.
[46] David Lowenthal and Hugh C. Price, 'The English landscape', *Geographical Review*, vol. 45, no. 3 (July 1964), pp. 309-46, here pp. 328-9; Cowell, *Heritage Obsession*, pp. 109ff, 119.

written by Oliver Sheldon, Dean Eric Milner-White, Noel G. Terry and J. B. Morrell and published in 1946. In this document it is notable that eighteenth-century York was held up as the ideal conception of a thriving and civilised urban community (**Figure 5.5**). It was this model, the Civic Trust's founders argued, which modern York should take as its inspiration and as a model to which it should actively seek to return:

> Before the revolutions in industry and transport entered with the nineteenth century, York was the artistic as well as the social Capital of the North of England. It had its own school of architects, of sculptors, of goldsmiths, of glass painters, of craftsmen in wood and wrought-iron, of clockmakers, of watercolourists. In our own age, even if the machine has circumscribed its province, craftsmanship has not lost its value; artistic standards still depend upon it. But it needs encouragement. The Trust is anxious to give that encouragement wherever it can, so that the City may not only recover its artistic reputation and life, but by the merit of its craftsmen set an example of good design and workmanship to the large populations of the North.[47]

In the same manner as Sheldon and his like-minded Georgian Society associates, the Trust tended to see the nineteenth century as the great dividing line between the old world and the new. The eighteenth century was seen as the last era which could be said to have been directly linked by social and cultural continuity and a certain affinity of spirit with the pre-industrial world that had been lost: 'until the industrial revolution arrived, the motive of dignity and beauty, conscious and unconscious, governed the general building thought of each successive age … That glory as a community we have lost for a century'.[48] This breach could be

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[47] York Civic Trust, *The York Civic Trust for Preservation, Amenity and Design* (York: York Civic Trust Association, 1946), unpaginated. This pamphlet was essentially a manifesto, laying out the founding objectives of the York Civic Trust and (discreetly) soliciting support.

[48] 'What is Modern Architecture?', *York Civic Trust Annual Report 1957-58* (York: York Civic Trust, 1958), p. 6.

healed if the spirit of past ages was summoned to the salvation of the present and the future through 'the witness and reproach of a more gracious past'.[49]

Figure 5.5. From the beginnings of its existence the York Civic Trust demonstrated in words and deeds its commitment to the Georgian. Left: the first illustration in the first YCT *Annual Report*, published in 1947, was this photograph of St Saviourgate, one of York's notable Georgian streets. Right: in May 1947 the Civic Trust presented a Georgian chimneypiece to the Corporation of York for installation in the Mansion House. This photograph of the chimneypiece *in situ* was published in the second YCT *Annual Report* which covered 1947-48. The Trust was not responsible for the electric fire.

For the Civic Trust the relationship between past and present should be marked by constructive engagement (with the present learning from the past wherever possible) and reconciliation rather than conflict. The reconciliation of past and present could be seen in the continuity of Georgian design principles in modern buildings. Thus in 1957 the Civic Trust welcomed a new public house in central York (while regretting the loss of its seventeenth-century predecessor) with the comment that 'Its lines are clean … with the modern emphasis on the horizontal (sometimes one feels that the new 20th century bears the image of "neo-Georgian writ horizontal")'.[50] The York Georgian Society took a similar

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[49] 'What is Modern Architecture?', p. 6.

[50] 'Modern buildings in the York scene', *York Civic Trust Annual Report 1957-58* (York: York Civic Trust, 1958), p. 7.

approach, arguing that 'it is principles that count and not the dated forms they take' and that 'it is to us friends of architecture the principles of Georgian architecture which matter. And they are without effort applicable to conditions today … Harlow New Town is more Georgian in spirit than a Neo-Georgian estate of cottages'.[51] This is the same link between the modern and Georgian which had been made by Summerson and others influenced by the Modern Movement before the Second World War. Here it was used by the Civic Trust and the Georgian Society to assert the enduring value of the Georgian 'spirit', and, more directly, the value of Georgian York as an exemplar for Modern York:

> Important as our unique mediæval and Georgian architecture is, we cannot afford to go down in history as mere mummifiers of the past. "Where," our successors will say, "is the architecture of their own time?" After all, if the 18th century inhabitants of York had decided to do nothing but preserve the mediæval City, York would have become a picturesque Emmett-like fossil; whereas in fact they gave us contemporary architecture, and that of such distinction and elegance that while we rightly aspire to produce buildings of equal quality in the style of our own day, their scarcity bears sufficient witness to the difficulty of the task.[52]

This was a socially and culturally conservative view of the relationship between past and present, but nevertheless a dynamic one. It was for the new age to take inspiration from the old, continuing its work and perpetuating its values not by sitting back and admiring what the past had created but by striving to create anew in the same spirit itself. The key to this endeavour lay in craftsmanship.

The Trust's appeal to the values of 'a more gracious past' was not simply a matter of the passive appreciation of aesthetics, but an embrace of the practical skills that underlay the physical heritage of that past, and a restoration of continuity through the encouragement of the practice of those skills in the present and future. Thus a concept of 'craftsmanship' was central to this notion of the

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[51] *York Georgian Society Annual Report 1955-56*, p. 54.
[52] 'Hungate Telephone Exchange', *York Civic Trust Annual Report 1952-53* (York: York Civic Trust, 1953), pp. 5-6.
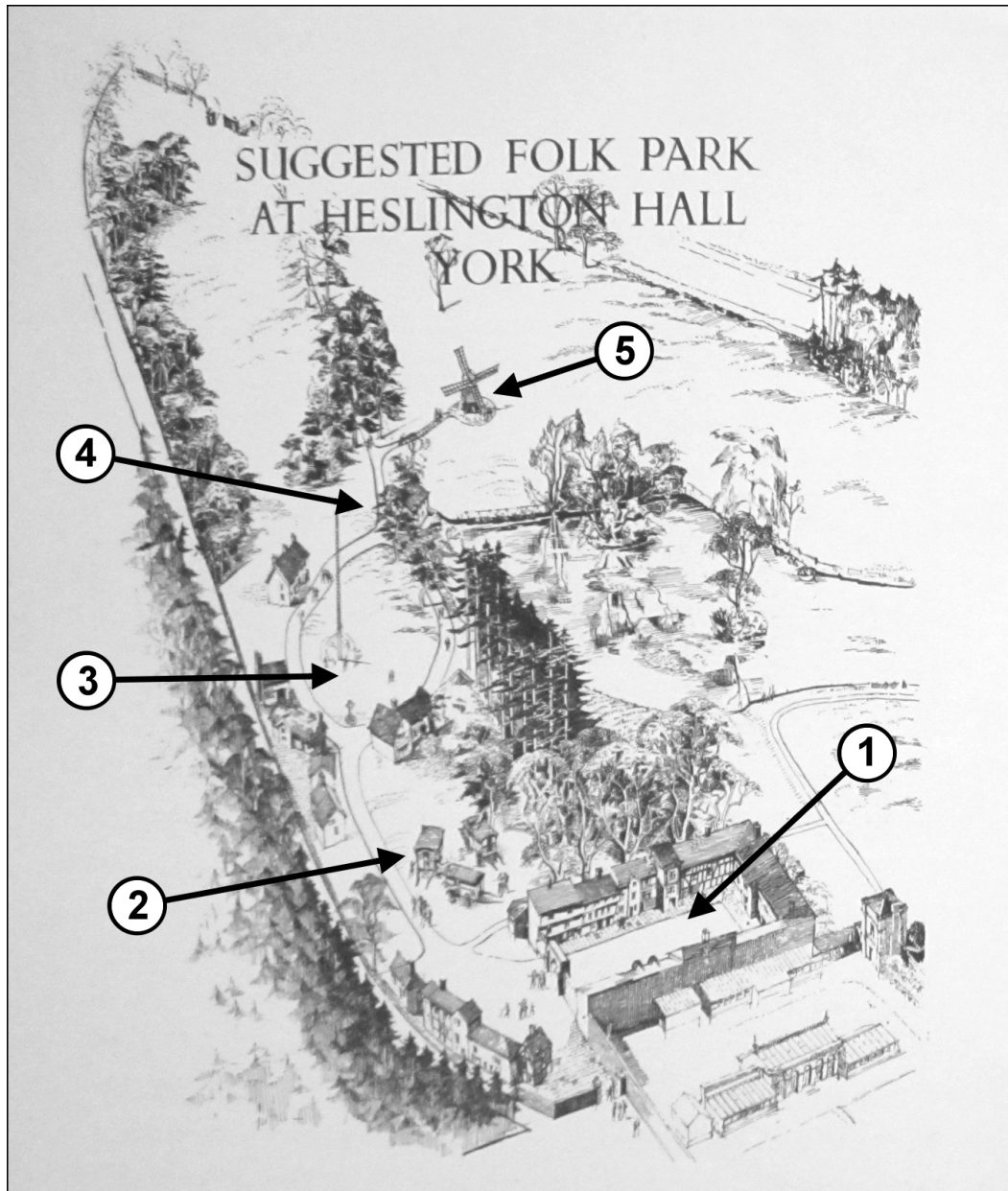
Figure 5.6. In 1959 York Civic Trust published a pamphlet proposing that the grounds of Heslington Hall, south of the city, be used for a 'folk park'. This plan of the proposed park was included in the pamphlet. The numbered features are: (1) 'urban street' of reconstructed buildings; (2) 'Gypsy Camp'; (3) 'village green' with Maypole and stone cross; (4) water mill; (5) post mill. The buildings were to be brought from various locations across Yorkshire and re-assembled on site. Mills, forges, workshops and so on would be fully functional, and craftsmen would ply their trades while visitors looked on. (Source: *Heslington Hall York: Suggested Folk Park* (York: York Civic Trust, 1959), p. 10.)

virtues of the Georgian civic community. In 1947, under the heading 'Proposed Guild of Craftsmen', the first *Annual Report* of the Trust for 1946-47 discussed (in rather paternalistic terms) the possibility of establishing a 'Guild of York Craftsmen' whose members would gain membership of the Trust by exercising their craft skills rather than paying the usual annual subscription of one guinea: 'Not only those who can afford an annual subscription to the Civic Trust and

kindred societies love their city, and desire to serve its beauty. Some may prefer to give the work of their own skilled hands'.[53] Such encouragement of York's craftsmen would be 'wholesome, stimulating, fruitful. No population's devotion to their city is so good and real as that which works voluntarily to increase its beauty and the benefit of all'.[54] Similar motives lay behind the Trust's support for a proposed 'Folk Park' (**Figure 5.6**) in the grounds of Heslington Hall, inspired by 'the famous folk parks or open-air museums such as Skansen, Den Gamle By and Frilandsmuseet'.[55] The park would consist of old buildings transferred from elsewhere, assembled into a reconstructed village around a green with a maypole and 'used and occupied; some of the old crafts such as Pottery, Weaving and Wood-turning might be set up again'.[56] There would also be a lake (with a coracle floating on it) and a 'Gypsy Camp', although it is not clear where the 'Gypsies' would have come from. The Trust did not want merely 'the shells of old buildings' but wanted the houses and workshops 'furnished appropriately, used and occupied', while outside the buildings 'traditional pastimes' would be acted out: 'A maypole on the green, morris dancing through the street, open-air plays by the lake'.[57] As will be discussed later, the desire to foster activities that encouraged what were seen as York's traditional craft skills within the city remained an important theme of the twentieth-century movement to 'recover the Georgian' in York, and was in particular to be an important aspect of York City Council's abortive 1970s plans to turn Fairfax House into a 'museum of eighteenth-century life'.

The architect Albert Richardson, himself one of the founders of the London Georgian Group, summed up the mission of the Civic Trust in an address he gave

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[53] 'Proposed Guild of Craftsmen', *York Civic Trust Annual Report 1946-47* (York: York Civic Trust Association, 1947), unpaginated.

[54] 'Proposed Guild of Craftsmen', *York Civic Trust Annual Report 1946-47* (York: York Civic Trust Association, 1947), unpaginated.

[55] *Heslington Hall York: Suggested Folk Park* (York: York Civic Trust, 1959), p. 12. Skansen Museum in Sweden was set up as part of the national Nordiska Museet in 1891 and became the inspiration for many other open-air museums across the world that brought together preserved and reconstructed buildings and traditional crafts. Frilandsmuseet (opened 1897) and Den Gamle By (opened in 1914) are both open-air museums of a similar type in Denmark. See Johan Hegardt, 'Time stopped: the open-air museum Skansen of Artur Hazelius', in János M. Bak, Patrick J. Geary and Gábor Klaniczay (eds), *Manufacturing a Past for the Present: Forgery and Authenticity in Medievalist Texts and Objects in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), pp. 267-306.

[56] 'Folk Park', *York Civic Trust Annual Report 1956-57* (York: York Civic Trust Association, 1957), pp. 21-2. In the same issue (p. 8) the proposed 'Folk Park' is identified as part of the Trust's 'New Vision' for York and a plan of the park is reproduced in the illustration section.

[57] *Suggested Folk Park*, pp. 14-15.

on 25 May 1947. On that date the Civic Trust presented York Corporation with a Georgian fireplace for the ceremonial seat of York civic government, the Mansion House on St Helen's Square (**Figure 5.5**). Speaking against a background of post-war austerity, he identified the 'special merit' of Georgian architecture as 'the way it encouraged grace with economy':

> We have the economy all right – a surfeit of it – but we could do with more grace. Let us rejoice in this symbol, for it represents a belief and a faith in the revival of taste. That must be the aim of your Civic Trust – to enable the man in the street to learn to share the same delights which please the eye of those who have studied the period. That cannot be done by legislation; only the influence of a body like yours can bring it about.[58]

For Richardson the role of the Civic Trust was thus to train sensibility, extending the cultivated and educated awareness of taste possessed by the informed elite to the 'man in the street'. The underlying assumption is that the aesthetics, style and philosophy of 'the Georgian' can be generally accepted as the epitome of cultivated taste. And the Civic Trust's mission to spread this new Georgianism was to be furthered through paternalistic educational enterprises, including those based on the practice of arts and crafts, and via the quiet but potent means of 'influence'. It was through these low profile and uncombative means, rather than through resort to open campaigning and the mobilisation of mass opinion and protest, that the York Civic Trust was to bring the Georgian spirit to active life in the modern city.

This notion of civilised, polite 'influence' has remained at the heart of the Civic Trust's conception of itself, continuing the tradition established by the York Georgian Society of rejecting (to quote Oliver Sheldon's terms) 'haphazard manners' and maintaining 'dignity, good order, and courtesy' in its dealings with the public realm.[59] 'We can only achieve our objects, in the main, by creating a lively interest', observed the Georgian Society in 1947: 'We cannot "command"

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[58] 'Gift to York Mansion House', *York Civic Trust Annual Report 1947-48* (York: York Civic Trust Association, 1948), unpaginated. The 'symbol' was the fireplace.
[59] Letter from Oliver Sheldon to Canon Chancellor Harrison, 1939. Quoted in Webb, *Oliver Sheldon*, pp. 16-17

respect for what the craftsmen and builders of 200 years ago created in York with such taste and sense of proportion; we can only, and gradually, "induce" it'.[60] Reflecting on its first ten years the Trust's *Annual Report* for 1955-56 observed that the Trust 'has not uttered its voice loudly in the streets; it has fought no open and but few secret battles', and that while 'a noisier policy might indeed have attracted more members … time has taught all preservation bodies that methods of peace accomplish more and better things than those of war or nuisance'.[61] The York Civic Trust did not want to cause a nuisance and run the risk of upsetting the very individuals and authorities which had the power to turn its visions into reality. There was also, however, an important internal reason for the Trust to prefer the quiet paths of discreet 'influence' to the noisy fields of open battle: it did not want to encourage the development of an activist membership that might begin exerting influence on its policies from within. The Civic Trust was not a democratic or populist body, and nor was it particularly concerned with creating a strong public identity for itself – it is notable, for example, that as late as 1983 the Trust did not issue its members with any form of membership card.[62] Its position was that the guardianship of York's heritage and character was always a task to be carried out discreetly by the enlightened and cultivated few. 'One of the most notable features of the history of York over the last 200 years', commented the *Annual Report* for 1977-78, 'has been the fact that in every generation there has been a handful of men and women (and it has never needed more than a handful) who cared about the city's heritage'.[63] The same point was made in 1979 when the Trust reviewed its achievements since 1946 and asserted that 'all this … has come to pass because in each generation a few people have cared (and it has never needed more than a few people) … Given that in the years ahead there will never be lacking a handful of people who really care, then indeed the best is yet to be'.[64] As Peter Mandle has commented, preservationist organisations in England from

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[60] York Georgian Society *Annual Report 1946-47*, p. 18.

[61] 'Ten Years Old', *York Civic Trust Annual Report 1955-56* (York: York Civic Trust, 1956), p. 1.

[62] 'Fairfax House', York Civic Trust document summarising practical issues relating to the opening of the house to the public, dated 22 August 1983, p. 1. This document explored possible opening hours, the numbers of guides and room stewards needed, and other such issues. The point relating to York Civic Trust membership cards arose from the question of special concessions being offered to YCT members: 'problem here in that Membership cards are not issued'.

[63] 'A Tradition of Caring', *York Civic Trust Annual Report 1977-78* (York: York Civic Trust, 1978), p. 6.

[64] 'Into the '80s', *York Civic Trust Annual Report 1978-79* (York: York Civic Trust, 1979), pp. 49-50.

the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries tended to see themselves as 'a small, embattled but enlightened elite (a moral but also sometimes a social elite), struggling against monolithic, possibly impersonal, certainly rather vaguely characterised "powers of darkness"',[65] and the mid-twentieth-century York Civic Trust can certainly be seen as embodying this perception.

There was always a touch of elitism in the Trust's attitude to the tourists who were increasingly the lifeblood of York's economy in the post-war years. The Civic Trust had taken early notice of the rise of tourism in the city, commenting in its 1951-52 *Annual Report* that 'York has entertained more visitors in the summer of 1952 than ever before' and claiming that this was one of the benefits of the York Festival of the previous year. The costs of that event, the Trust argued, had been 'completely wiped out by the prosperity brought to York by these continuous streams of guests' who had made York 'a pilgrimage place for individual holiday makers from the world over'.[66] The use of the word 'guests' for tourists and the emphasis on 'individual holiday makers' rather than large groups is very revealing of the Trust's attitude towards tourism in York, as is the term 'pilgrimage place', arguing for York's exceptionalism as, effectively, sacred space.[67] This philosophy is further spelled out later in the same article, where it is made clear that for York 'the provision of mere pleasure' to visitors is a 'secondary' consideration and that the city has a 'unique mission to nation and world':

> Our City gives something deeper, far more worth while, and *our guests feel it*. They say so again and again. It reveals *England* to them, English history, English social civilisation, English art and architecture, English religion, all these in the many dresses of the centuries, attractive, alive, carrying their years lightly. In fact York is in the process of *retaking her ancient rank as a capital* by being a microcosm of the past and present of the English people.[68]

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[65] Peter Mandle, 'Rethinking the "powers of darkness": an anti-history of the preservation movement in Britain', in Melanie Hall (ed), *Towards World Heritage: International Origins of the Preservation Movement, 1870-1930* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), pp. 221-39, here p. 221.

[66] '1951-1952', *York Civic Trust Annual Report 1951-52* (York: York Civic Trust, 1952), p. 1.

[67] See Ron Cooke, *Why York is Special* (York: William Sessions, 2006).

[68] '1951-1952', *York Civic Trust Annual Report 1951-52*, p. 1. All emphases in the original.

The Trust recognised York's economic realities and was *not* against tourism. Its suspicion and hostility was directed far more at business interests who saw York 'only as a commercial proposition, as a symbol on a market research graph', and if left unchecked would tear down 'buildings of character and charm' to replace them with 'monstrosities of concrete and glass'.[69] Tourism, if well conducted, would sustain precisely the qualities in York that the Trust wanted to preserve in a city which was 'well restored and cared for, its streets and shops attractive'[70] and in which 'more money spent in the city, more employment' brought 'a prosperity which permeates all strata of the city's life'.[71] A fundamental elitism was revealed, however, in the Trust's characterisation of the motivations that brought people to York: 'what a splendid thing it is that so many people *want* to come to York not to play bingo or ride on the big dipper but to see and enjoy things which are a tangible expression of the finer things of life'.[72] The Trust warned that York must not pander to the taste for garish fairground amusements and vulgarised history which too often accompanied mass tourism: 'Above all we must be sure the city preserves its integrity: no gimmicks, no "Queen Elizabeth slept here" nonsense, no "Ye Olde Tudor Shoppe" signs, no cashing in or surrender to blind commercialism'.[73] Tourism offered great benefits to a city whose older industries, from the railways to confectionery, were facing an uncertain future; but that did not mean embracing prosperity at any price.

The reference to 'blind commercialism' gains additional force when read in the context of the York Civic Trust's constant concern with the encouragement of the educated, cultivated 'gaze', whether on the part of visitors or residents. If it defined and protected its character appropriately and presented itself in the correct way, York itself would be the school that would educate the gaze of its visitors. The role of the visitor to York was not that of the ordinary tourist seeing diversion and amusement, but that of an acolyte serving at a shrine to the past. The connection between tourism and preservation was key to the Trust's perception of the type of city it believed York to be, and was in turn bound up with the

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[69] 'The Trojan Horse', *York Civic Trust Annual Report 1963-64* (York: York Civic Trust, 1964), p. 2.
[70] 'Tourism', *York Civic Trust Annual Report 1977-78* (York: York Civic Trust, 1978), p. 10.
[71] 'Tourism', *York Civic Trust Annual Report 1977-78* (York: York Civic Trust, 1978), pp. 10-11.
[72] 'Tourism', *York Civic Trust Annual Report 1977-78* (York: York Civic Trust, 1978), p. 10.
[73] 'Tourism', *York Civic Trust Annual Report 1977-78* (York: York Civic Trust, 1978), p. 10.

importance of preserving the kinds of things that the Trust valued, and preserving and presenting them in a manner of which the Trust approved.

All these preoccupations were articulated in an article entitled 'Why Preservation?', published in the Trust's *Annual Report* for 1964-5. Reflecting on the growth of tourism and what it meant for the future of the city, the Trust had rhetorically asked itself why visitors came to York. Its response to that question was permeated with nationalism, conservatism and cultural elitism:

> It may be, if you asked them why they came, that, with the inarticulate reticence of the Englishman, they would be unable to tell you. But we believe they come because here they can see before them the outward and visible signs of their country's history. Because they come from towns and cities which have long since succumbed to an industrial sprawl and which no longer bear proud evidence of their ancestry. They come because here they can for a short time escape from the rush and bustle of their everyday lives and savour for a while the grace and tranquillity of earlier ages. They come because living in an age of insecurity they can sense here the deep roots of their race. They can see beauty in brick and stone and sense for a short time the pleasure that springs from living in a civilised township.[74]

The phrases 'proud evidence of their ancestry' and 'deep roots of their race' are heavily laden with implications of ethnic-national identity, suggesting the existence of a stable core of 'Englishness' to which historic centres such as York, appropriately curated and presented, give access. Anyone can visit York and enjoy the sights, but this special initiate access is available only to those who are already part of the national community, who already belong, but who because of the alienating circumstances of modern life are unaware, or only dimly aware, of belonging. As a model of national identity this accords with Anthony D. Smith's argument that the national community defines itself through 'a sense of shared experience that marks that people off from others and endows it with a feeling of

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[74] 'Why Preservation?', *York Civic Trust Annual Report 1964-65* (York: York Civic Trust, 1965), p. 4.

belonging', and that 'memories and traditions, symbols and myths and values' are the basis for the identity – ultimately ethnic – that sustains that community.[75] The 'Englishman' who visits York and reads it correctly in terms of history and identity will be able to 'link hands across the centuries with the early Northumbrian kings and Churchmen, with William the Conqueror, William Rufus and every King of England who has visited or stayed in the city' and see 'some of the brightest threads in the tapestry of this island's long history'.[76] Having put these words into the mouth of the 'inarticulate Englishman' who was apparently representative of the most desirable category of York's tourist visitors, the Trust went on to argue for the preservation of York in the way one might make a case for a wildlife reserve. The destruction of historic cities elsewhere would mean that only in York could visitors see and experience the beautiful things that were passing from the commercialised, vulgarised and mechanised world of the bulldozer and the developer: 'These then would be reasons enough for seeking to preserve this lovely City, but they are made more important by the fact that the historic cities of England are fast disappearing under the bulldozer of commercial development'.[77]

If York was to stand as a redoubt of history, beauty and civilisation in this increasingly desecrated modern world it was vital that the buildings and historic features that attracted visitors to the city were preserved and presented in the right way. The historic city (by which was meant essentially the city within the walls, not the suburban or industrial areas) had to constitute an urban environment of restrained harmonious dignity, so that visitors would find the characteristics which the Trust was certain they sought without the activity of tourism itself being allowed to disrupt the essential character of the city. Through the exercise of its 'influence', the Trust was able to make this view count not only among preservation-minded elements in the community but also within the City Council and other bodies with important roles to play in shaping York's urban character. In the post-war decades the new Georgianism promulgated by the York Georgian Society and permeating the thinking of the Civic Trust was increasingly influencing the activities and policies of the City Council and the nature of public

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[75] Anthony D. Smith, *Nations and Nationalism in the Global Era* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), pp. 97-8.

[76] 'Why Preservation?', *York Civic Trust Annual Report 1964-65* (York: York Civic Trust, 1965), p. 5.

[77] 'Why Preservation?', *York Civic Trust Annual Report 1964-65* (York: York Civic Trust, 1965), p. 5.
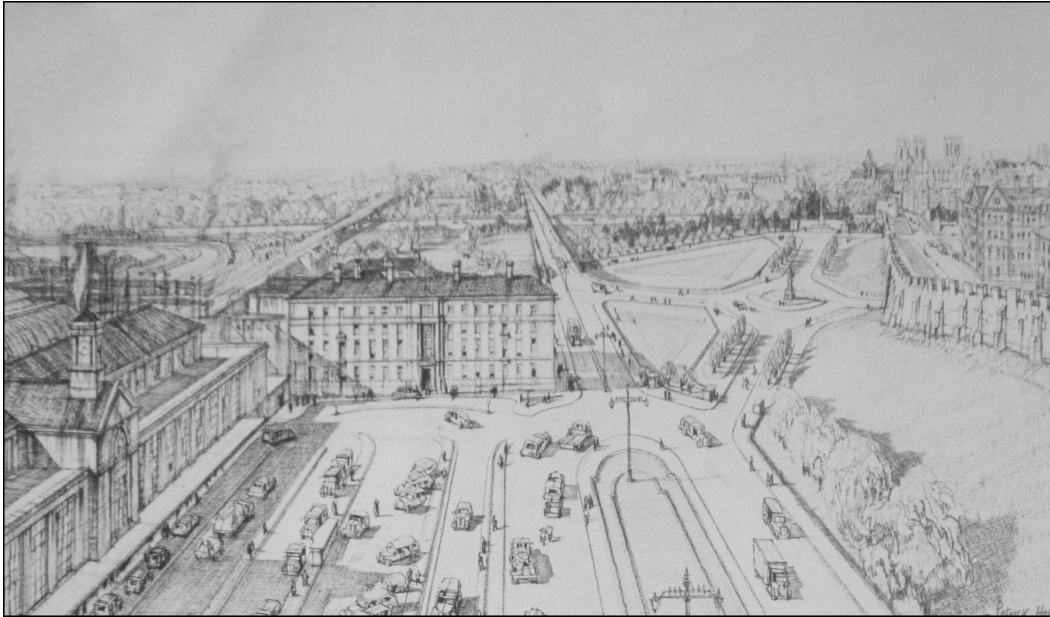
Figure 5.7. Professor S. D. Adshead's 1948 proposals for replanning York included suggestions for a number of new buildings which were visualised as being in a neo-Georgian style. This illustration shows the new LNER station and hotel which were to replace the existing 1870s station building and adjoining Royal York Hotel. (Source: S. D. Adshead, C. J. Minter and C. W. C. Needham, *York: A Plan for Progress and Preservation* (York: York City Council, 1948.)

debate about planning, preservation and conservation. This was a development Oliver Sheldon had consciously sought. In 1942 he had argued that the Georgian Society should not be 'purely an antiquarian society' but should be 'an educational society, promoting that same fine sense of proportion, balance and dignity in design in modern work as we admire in the work of the eighteenth century'; and in November 1944 he wrote that 'one of the major tasks' of the Georgian Society was 'to guide public and official thinking about the best combination of improvement and preservation'.[78] The scheme for replanning and 'improving' York produced by Professor Adshead in 1948, *York: A Plan for Progress and Preservation* (**Figure 5.7**), cited the 'great many fine examples of Georgian work' as one of the valuable qualities of the city centre, and proposed new buildings in neo-Georgian style; Charles Needham, a town planner and one of Adshead's collaborators on the plan, was himself a member of the York Georgian Society.[79] J. B. Morrell, twice Lord Mayor of York and one of the founders of the York Civic Trust, went so far as to claim in the 1955 edition of his *The City of Our Dreams* (first published in 1940) that 'York is largely a Georgian

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[78] Quoted in Webb, *Oliver Sheldon*, pp. 24, 25.
[79] S. D. Adshead, C. J. Minter and C. W. C. Needham, *York: A Plan for Progress and Preservation* (York: York City Council, 1948), unpaginated.

city' and that 'York within the walls is still a Georgian city'.[80] The handbook to the Historic Buildings Grant Scheme produced by the Council in 1966 explicitly stated that it was 'the Medieval and Georgian periods which were to leave a most distinctive mark on the future appearance and character of York'.[81]

The new emphasis given to the Georgian inheritance during the middle decades of the twentieth century, rivalling the city's medieval aspect rather than being eclipsed by it, played a key role in shaping the way York's character was perceived and identifying the means through which it would be maintained. In the restoration of Fairfax House during the last fifteen years of the twentieth century, this project of shaping a new Georgian York would reach its apogee.

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[80] J. B. Morrell, *The City of Our Dreams* (London: St Anthony's Press, 1955), pp. 61, 69.
[81] *City of York Scheme of Grants for the Preservation and Restoration of Historic Building* (York: York City Council, 1966), p. 2. Pre-medieval structures were naturally seen as making little significant contribution to the fabric of York's townscape, while Victorian streets and buildings were seen as offering nothing of value – an attitude representative of 1960s attitudes, but one which remained characteristic of York long after Victorian architecture had come to be properly valued elsewhere, and is still typical of York in the early twenty-first century. If a reassessment of the Georgian took place in the mid-twentieth century, York still awaits a similar adjustment of attitudes towards the Victorian.

CHAPTER 6

The modern histories of Fairfax House

Fairfax House: restoration and reinvention

On Friday 23 February 1979 the architect Francis Johnson, in company with the architectural historian Eric Gee and a York City Council official, visited Fairfax House. This was Johnson's first viewing of the interior of the house. Three days later, back in Bridlington where he lived and where his architectural practice was based, Johnson wrote to John Shannon, Chairman of York Civic Trust, giving his impressions of both the outside and the inside of the property.[1] Gaining entrance was not straightforward. Part of the first floor was rented by a dancing school which had a long tenancy agreement with the City Council,[2] and the proprietor of the school (who had a flat on the second floor) seems to have been reluctant to let the party into the house. 'The tenant', observed Johnson in his letter, 'seems to be an extremely stupid man and did his best to prevent us from entering the property'. The exterior of the house was shabby and showed signs of long neglect (**Figure 6.1**). Once inside, however, Johnson was deeply impressed by what he found. The exterior, he noted in his letter, 'does no justice at all to the splendours that lie within', and although the interior was 'in an appalling state' the quality of the original materials and workmanship, and the superb spatial qualities of the rooms, were still very apparent. Johnson summed up Fairfax House as 'undoubtedly one of the most important monuments in York' with 'an interior worthy of any capital City' and he concluded with a strong recommendation that the house be restored: 'It will be an expensive exercise to give it the treatment it deserves but the final result would be breath-taking'.[3]

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[1] Letter, Francis Johnson to John Shannon, 26 February 1979. Hull History Centre, Francis Johnson Archive.
[2] Brown, *Fairfax House York* (1989), p. 80.
[3] Letter, Francis Johnson to John Shannon, 26 February 1979. Hull History Centre, Francis Johnson Archive.

Figure 6.1. The former St George's Hall Cinema photographed in 1965, three years after the cinema closed. The large brick structure to the rear is the cinema auditorium, which was demolished in 1970. Fairfax House can be seen on the right. The building with the awning in the centre of the photograph, no. 25 Castlegate, is an early nineteenth-century house which was converted into the cinema entrance, with the first floor accommodating part of the large dance floor which ran across the front of Fairfax House. This building now forms the entrance and shop for Fairfax House, with exhibition space above. (Source: Fairfax House Archive.)

The recommendation to restore Fairfax House in Johnson's letter rested on the grounds of the building's architectural and, more particularly, its decorative qualities (particularly with regard to its interiors), and its exemplification of the traditions and achievements of eighteenth-century York craftsmanship. He also highlighted the fact that it was a *Georgian* building as an important factor in itself, noting that the preservation and opening to the public of such a Georgian house in York would increase the riches the city had to offer, rivalling attractions to be found in other historic urban centres:

> York certainly has the Treasurers house [*sic*] to offer as a furnished historic interior but this is in another part of the City and tends to link up with visits to the Minster, also it is not a specifically 18th Century house. To look elsewhere, the Greater London Council have been doing wonderful work in restoring a number of their 18th Century buildings such as Chiswick House and Kenwood and furnishing them appropriately, Bristol, Bath

> and Edinburgh (Scottish National Trust) have all taken outstanding 18th Century houses, restored and furnished them. Here I would say that none of the interiors as I know them come anywhere near the quality of Fairfax House which seems to me to be the epitome of all that is best in the inspiration and craftsmanship of the old Northern Metropolis during the mid 18th Century.[4]

Francis Johnson was writing here as someone for whom the classical architectural tradition of the eighteenth century was a living, contemporary phenomenon, and a guiding passion both personally and professionally. Johnson's commitment to the classical style of the Georgian age, as a practising architect and not a revivalist, was absolute: the architectural historian Giles Worsley described him as an architect in a living, not a revived, classical tradition.[5] His enthusiasm for Fairfax House, and his extolling of the virtues of eighteenth-century architecture and craftsmanship which he saw represented in it, is thus hardly a surprise. The passage quoted above gains particular significance, however, from its emphasis on the importance of Fairfax House to York, and its commitment to a certain vision of Georgian York, 'the old Northern Metropolis' of the eighteenth century, not merely as a historical phenomenon but, it is implied, as a pattern for the city's future. This aligns Johnson with the movement towards a 'new Georgianism' in twentieth-century York discussed in the preceding chapter.

There is a competitive element in Johnson's references to restorations of Georgian houses being carried out in London, Bristol, Bath and Edinburgh, a point he had also made in a letter of February 1977 when the York Civic Trust had first contacted him about Fairfax House: 'Bath and Edinburgh have both embarked on restorations of houses of this kind and duly furnished them and provided a very much appreciated tourist amenity in their cities'.[6] More important than York not being left behind as other cities exploited their Georgian heritage, however, was the argument that the Georgian era was of particular significance to

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[4] Letter, Francis Johnson to John Shannon, 26 February 1979. Hull History Centre, Francis Johnson Archive.

[5] John Martin Robinson and David Neave, *Francis Johnson, Architect: A Classical Statement* (Otley: Oblong Books, 2001), pp. 1-2.

[6] Letter, Francis Johnson to John Shannon, 24 February 1977. Hull History Centre, Francis Johnson Archive.

York, and that it was important for *modern* York to understand that significance and benefit from it. The Fairfax House restoration project, which in the late 1970s was at a formative stage and would not get underway in earnest until the middle of the following decade, was already being conceptualised as providing a link between the York of the twentieth century and that of the eighteenth.

Questions of restoration

During his visit to Fairfax House in February 1979 Francis Johnson discussed approaches to restoration with David Green of York City Council, and recorded his thoughts in his subsequent letter to John Shannon. He noted that Green had told him 'that the Corporation, when restoring, invariably conserve what they find in existance [*sic*]', which he described as 'an admirable philosophy' but questioned whether it was the best approach in this case: 'one wonders in an instance like Fairfax House whether it is enough. If any drastic restoration is necessary, one feels that it should echo to some degree what was undoubtedly there originally'.[7] In 1979 conserving what was in existence at Fairfax House would have meant preserving the cinema lobby and circulation arrangements on the ground floor, retaining the various early twentieth-century extensions on the northern side of the building (including that on the first floor which blocked off the staircase Venetian window) and the partitioning of several of the eighteenth-century rooms, and not re-instating the walls which had been removed at either end of the Saloon. This was not Johnson's vision at all: the phrase 'what was undoubtedly there originally' signalled his determination to bring the 'original' Fairfax House, which he conceived as the mid-eighteenth-century town house as the Fairfaxes had known it, back into existence from the architectural palimpsest which existed by the late 1970s. This comment by Johnson, which was entirely congruent with the approach taken by the York Civic Trust, brings into sharp focus both the general question of what kind of intervention the 'restoration' of a building is, and the specific question of the approach which was taken in the case of Fairfax House.

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[7] Letter, Francis Johnson to John Shannon, 26 February 1979. Hull History Centre, Francis Johnson Archive.

As Johnson's use of the phrase 'what was undoubtedly there originally' implies, fundamental to the process of heritage 'restoration' is the concept of turning back the clock to a state of existence that is, or at least is perceived to be, more truly authentic, more inherent to the structure being 'restored', than its latter-day condition. A building exists not only materially and spatially but *temporally*, and just as restoration always involves selection from among its material characteristics, so it requires a process of selection to be applied to its temporal condition. Structures persist through time, uses and users change, and they are reshaped and rebuilt: a building today is not the same building it was yesterday. In many cases the construction process itself continued for centuries (cathedrals are a notable example) making problematic the assertion of any straightforward 'completion date'.[8] Even where this is not the case, it is common for buildings with long histories to have undergone extensive rebuildings, perhaps on more than one occasion. When a building is 'restored', choices must be made about *what* condition it is being restored *to*, so that there is inevitably a process of selection and, it could be argued, of deception. Restoration may involve the excision of some parts of the structure which are judged 'inauthentic' or in some other way inappropriate. New elements may be created (or re-created) and added to the structure in an effort to replicate its 'authentic' earlier appearance. This leaves any question of 'authenticity' or 'truth' highly problematic, and the creation in this way of what he called 'a cold model of such parts as can be modelled, with conjectural supplements' was vigorously condemned by John Ruskin in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*: 'Do not let us talk then of restoration. The thing is a Lie from beginning to end'.[9]

The Ruskinian position on restoration is based on the principles that imitation cannot be art, that buildings belong to the age that created them and not to the present, and that any structural intervention beyond the bare necessity required to keep a building standing (and sometimes not even that) is essentially dishonest and corrupting. This standpoint has been extremely influential in the world of conservation but is in the end an extreme position which has been subject to much

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[8] Jukka Jokilehto, 'Authenticity in restoration: principles and practices', *Bulletin of the Association for Preservation Technology*, vol. 17, no. 3/4 (1985), pp. 5-11, here p. 9.

[9] John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849), in E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (eds), *The Works of John Ruskin* (32 vols, London: George Allen, 1903-12), vol. 8, pp. 243-4.

compromise in its practical applications. In conservation practice it has tended to find expression through the linked notions that any restoration should be minimal in approach (if in doubt, leave alone) and transparent as to its nature: any modern interventions that are required should not pretend to be anything other than what they are. This position, which has found its most influential expression in the Venice Charter of 1964,[10] reflects more pragmatically than the Ruskinian ideal the reality of buildings as objects subject to constant change, while accepting the need for integrity and transparency in the present's material dealings with the past.[11] In the end any striving for 'authenticity' and for the stabilisation of shifting identities relies on choices that are ideologically driven. As Wim Denslagen has commented in *Romantic Modernism: Nostalgia in the World of Conservation* (2009), the activities of preservation, conservation and restoration are themselves historically formed and represent, not so much a linear process of recovery, as a multilayered accumulation of interpretations and interventions that render any sense of the 'original' or 'authentic' deeply problematic:

> By the end of the eighteenth century, most medieval buildings only displayed a superficial resemblance to their original condition. The nineteenth century then embarked on the restoration of all these old medieval edifices, something that usually boiled down to new additions in historicising forms. The twentieth century gave all this work another going over, only what was involved then usually amounted to undoing what had been done in the nineteenth century. Today, the critics of architecture appear on the scene letting us know how inauthentic our historical cities have become.[12]

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[10] *International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites (The Venice Charter 1964)*, adopted by the 2nd International Congress of Architects and Technicians of Historic Monuments, Venice 1964. The history, significance and influence of the Venice Charter, and its contemporary interpretation and application, are comprehensively considered in Matthew Hardy (ed), *The Venice Charter Revisited: Modernism, Conservation and Tradition in the 21st Century* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2008).

[11] John H. Stubbs, *Time Honored: A Global View of Architectural Conservation* (Hoboken: John Wiley, 2009), pp. 136-7; Jukka Jokilehto, *A History of Architectural Conservation* (London: Butterworth-Heinemann, 1999), pp. xi, 237, 258, 296ff.

[12] Wim Denslagen (trans. Donald Gardner), *Romantic Modernism: Nostalgia in the World of Conservation* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009), p. 24.

The end-product of any restoration will inevitably involve an editing of a complex and layered reality into a coherent form that will tend to simplify both meanings and significance. This process reflects not the existence of objective and authentic 'truth' but a series of choices which are made within, and are shaped by, wider social, cultural and political contexts and debates concerned with community, class, identity both local and national, and the unavoidable issues of economics and financial viability.[13]

For 'heritage' buildings that are open to the public, a narrative of restoration will usually be presented to that public as part of the interpretation of the site. The pattern followed by such narratives is well-established: the story is generally one of neglect followed by rescue. A building will have entered into a period of decline, neglect and increasing physical deterioration, a period during which its merits were not recognised (or recognised only by a few), before it was rescued, often after a struggle, and restored. The process of restoration itself involves identifying a previous period as representative of the site's merits and importance (taking into account such issues as its historical significance, association with important events or figures, its aesthetic or amenity contribution or other value to the community) and intervening to reshape the structure into a form closer to that 'original' state. During periods when the restoration is proposed, argued for and in progress, and once the work is complete and the 'restored' property is launched into whatever new form of existence awaits it (generally, to serve as a heritage attraction open to the visiting public) the restored form is frequently presented as to some degree inevitable. The site as the visiting public see it is constructed, visually, verbally and experientially, as the normative, the original or primal, or at least the ideal state of the building. Thus Fairfax House is advertised as 'the finest Georgian town house in England',[14] which encourages the inference that existence as a Georgian townhouse is the natural condition for this particular site.

That normative, original state has to be 'recovered' from later alterations and accretions, and at Fairfax House, as in other similar properties, the process of restoration is narrated as a discourse of rescue and, crucially, recovery. However, what is 'recovered' is always ultimately the product of present concerns rather

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[13] Chris Miele, 'Heritage and its communities: reflections on the English experience in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries', in Hall (ed), *Towards World Heritage*, pp. 155-80, here pp. 158-9.

[14] This description was adopted as a formal advertising tagline in 2010 and is now applied to all publicity material produced by the house (information from Hannah Phillip).

than an unmediated reflection of the fragmented and intangible reality of a lost past, as T. G. Otte has observed:

> That relationship between the present and the imagined past is central also to preservation. Indeed, it is at the root of the dialectic that characterises all attempts to preserve the past and its relics. In its efforts to stem the progress of decay, to replace what has been lost, and to keep what remains, preservation creates an illusion of permanence and perpetuity. In preserving the remnants of the past, it transforms them by reinterpreting and recreating them in the light of present concerns.[15]

For the preserved historical *interior*, an issue of particular relevance to Fairfax House, the problems of selection, interpretation in the light of the present, and representation of the mutable as static, are especially acute, given the changing and transient character of the decoration and furnishing of interiors compared to (relatively) static exteriors. 'Interiors are ephemeral', observed Louise Ward in her 2004 essay on modern 'country house' style: 'Although an image captured momentarily in a photograph can give an impression of permanence, interiors are constantly changing through use, and it is therefore unsafe for the historian to treat them as fixed'.[16] Yet the tendency to do so is deeply rooted, particularly in houses open to the public in which a particular condition of the interior is presented as normal, existing outside the influences of change which are themselves the drivers of the very historical processes 'heritage' properties seek to exploit. Fashion, too, plays a role in the activity of restoration just as much as in the original creation of an interior and the transformation to which it may subsequently have been subject. John Fowler and John Cornforth summarised the difficulties associated with interiors in their 1974 survey *English Decoration in the 18th Century*:

> This lack of absolute standards and involvement with changing taste and fashion both make restoration of interiors singularly

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[15] T. G. Otte, '"The shrine at Sulgrave": the preservation of the Washington ancestral home as an "English Mount Vernon" and transatlantic relations', in Hall (ed), *Towards World Heritage*, pp. 109-36, here p. 109.

[16] Ward, 'Chintz, swags, and bows', p. 92.

difficult. Indeed, we believe there may be no such thing as a absolute restoration, putting the clock back to 1680, 1715 or 1750, when the house was built of the room was formed: all restorations are to some degree re-interpretations and are influenced by the times in which they are carried out.[17]

Houses that have been restored in order to be opened to the public as heritage attractions, and those who work in them, have their objects and collections, their displays and the narratives they have woven around them, and accordingly have an investment in staticity. As Margaret Ponsonby has observed, interiors 'frequently undergo changes when they are in use by occupants but curators and historians of historic houses tend to treat them as permanent'.[18] The work of those curators and historians inevitably depends upon the work of the restorers, who are guided by certain assumptions and intentions, and through their interventions create the physical conditions within which the work of selection and interpretation takes place. At Fairfax House the interiors were arguably always seen as more important than the exteriors, but they were also much-altered and devoid of original furnishings. This made the question of their restoration and interpretation highly problematic.

Town houses compared: Pallant House

Fairfax House is not the only provincial eighteenth-century townhouse to have undergone a significant restoration and transformation into a cultural attraction during the 1980s. Pallant House in Chichester (**Figure 6.2**), built 1712-14 and restored in two phases between 1979 and 1987, is now an art gallery, and forms an instructive comparison with Fairfax House. The fact that the restored Pallant House is an art gallery, rather than a 'preserved townhouse' with appropriate furnishings in restored rooms, makes for an important distinction between this 'restoration' and that carried out at Fairfax House; although, as will be discussed

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[17] John Fowler and John Cornforth, *English Decoration in the 18th Century* (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1974; 2nd edn 1978), pp. 21-2.

[18] Margaret Ponsonby, *Stories from Home: English Domestic Interiors 1750-1850* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), p. 170.

later, the particular character of the Noel Terry Collection and the manner of its display does mean that Fairfax House partakes significantly of the form and nature, if not of an art gallery, certainly of a museum; even if that fact is rarely openly acknowledged in the way in which the house is interpreted and presented to the visiting public.

Figure 6.2. Pallant House, Chichester. (Photograph by Peter Symonds, 2008, reproduced under a Creative Commons license.)

Like Fairfax House, Pallant House was originally built not for an aristocratic family but for a member of the mercantile classes.[19] Henry Peacham, a successful and recently-married wine merchant, built the house between 1712 and 1714 in a part of Chichester dominated by the tanning and leatherworking industries. The construction of Peacham's house, undertaken by the local master builder Henry Smart, marked the beginning of the area's eighteenth-century 'transformation in status from malodorous, lowly industrial … to high-class residential'.[20] The house, set back from the road behind railings and built of red brick with tall sash windows in a seven-bay front, was of very high quality both inside and out and

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[19] Alan H. J. Green, *The Building of Georgian Chichester, 1690-1830* (Chichester: Phillimore, 2007), pp. 93-5.
[20] Green, *Georgian Chichester*, p. 93.

reflected the latest architectural and decorative fashions.[21] The expense of the house was such that it was a contributing factor in the breakdown of Peacham's marriage, and the separation proceedings of 1717 involved testimony from several craftsmen involved in the building as to the costs of work carried out and, in particular, Mrs Peacham's spendthrift habits and her alleged role in imposing requirements on the builders that increased the expense.[22] After the Peachams' departure, the house remained a private residence in the hands of a succession of owners until it was acquired in 1919 by Westhampnett Rural District Council and converted into council offices.

As with Fairfax House, the depredations to which Pallant House was subject while in the care of unsympathetic owners who used the building for unsuitable purposes were an important element in the narrative of restoration: internal features were removed or damaged, suspended ceilings were installed and modern lighting and electrical arrangements fitted with little concern for the fabric.[23] This period of twentieth-century 'misuse' at Pallant House (1919-79) closely paralleled in time that experienced by Fairfax House at the hands of the cinema and dance hall company (1919-83). The house remained in the hands of the local authority (latterly Chichester District Council) until 1979, when the council's intention of vacating Pallant House and possibly disposing of the site placed the building's future in doubt.[24] The new uncertainty over the house caused considerable local concern, as its architectural merits had long been recognised: from the later nineteenth century onwards, when the 'Queen Anne' style of the house became newly fashionable, the house had achieved a position of some note among local architectural historians, artists and antiquarians, a prominence increased during the early twentieth century by a very popular but mistaken attribution to

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[21] Iain Nairn and Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Sussex* (London: Penguin, 1965), pp. 34, 183.

[22] Green, *Georgian Chichester*, p. 11. This may not have been entirely fair on Mrs Peacham. The evidence of her 'excesses' in the court records cited by Green is ambiguous. The spendthrift woman is of course a common trope in eighteenth-century culture: see Margaret R. Hunt, *Women in Eighteenth-Century Europe* (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 157-8. Viscount Fairfax implied that his daughter was to blame for the expense he incurred in buying and rebuilding Fairfax House, but there is little evidence in the accounts to back up this claim: Webb, *Fairfax of York*, pp. 145, 161.

[23] Sybilla Jane Flower, David Coke and Roy Strong, *Pallant House: Its Architecture, History and Owners* (Chichester: Pallant House Gallery Trust, 1993), p. 19.

[24] Flower *et al*, *Pallant House*, pp. 54-5.

Christopher Wren.[25] A campaign to save Pallant House began to take shape, and, as with Fairfax House, a narrative of rescue and restoration followed:

> After almost sixty years of use of council offices, the future of Pallant House hung in the balance. The idea of its conversion into an art gallery had already been discussed and rejected some years before, when, in 1977, the retiring Dean of Chichester, Dr Walter Hussey, proposed the bequest to Chichester of his private collection of paintings and sculpture, if the city could find an appropriate home for it. His wish for the collection to be shown in a domestic setting, and the growing movement within the city to press for the restoration and opening of Pallant House coincided; the eventual acceptance by the Chichester District Council, owners of Pallant House, of the Dean's collection for display at Pallant House assured the future of this excellent example of provincial Baroque architecture.[26]

The intention of the restoration was always that the house should be an art gallery and not any form of domestic townhouse museum. This was important in the level of local support for the project, as the city of Chichester at the time had no dedicated art gallery of its own and the lack was felt keenly.[27]

In saving Pallant House local voluntary endeavour had a crucial role to play, on the model later followed by York Civic Trust in the case of Fairfax House. The Friends of Pallant House, founded in 1979, raised the majority of the money for the restoration and oversaw the project in partnership with Chichester District Council (whereas in York the Civic Trust was entirely responsible for the restoration and running of Fairfax House once it had been acquired from York

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[25] Lawrence Weaver, *Sir Christopher Wren: Scientist, Scholar and Architect* (London: Country Life, 1923), p. 104; *Victoria History of the County of Sussex* (London: Victoria County History, 1935), p. 76; Arthur Beckett, 'A countryman's diary', *Sussex County Magazine*, vol. 15 (1941), pp. 382-3; Cecile Woodford, *Portrait of Sussex* (London: Robert Hale, 1984), p. 119.

[26] Flower *et al*, *Pallant House*, pp. 3-4.

[27] See Alan H. J. Green, *Culture, Conservation and Change: Chichester in the 1960s* (London: History Press, 2015), chapter 5, for an account of the movement to acquire an art gallery for Chichester in the 1950s and 1960s. The former church of St Andrew Oxmarket was converted into an art gallery in 1976 and conversion of Pallant House began three years later.

City Council).[28] The Pallant House partnership ended in 1985 and was replaced by an agreement between the council and the Friends to establish the gallery as a charitable trust on an independent basis.[29] Just as the bequest of the Noel Terry Furniture Collection was a central element in the restoration of Fairfax House, so a local private collection of great importance was fundamental to the rebirth of Pallant House as the Pallant House Gallery, in the form of the collection of paintings and sculpture accumulated by Walter Hussey.[30] The confirmation by Noel Terry's trustees was the deciding factor in committing York City Council to selling Fairfax House to York Civic Trust in the early 1980s, and similarly Dean Hussey's 1977 stipulation, upon leaving the bulk of his art collection to the City of Chichester, that it should be displayed in an appropriately restored gallery at Pallant House was essential in making the restoration project a reality.[31]

Pallant House was similar to Fairfax House in that no original contents survived due to the many changes of use the building had experienced. The restoration was concerned with the exterior of the building and an interior which, although much altered, retained many of its original features.[32] The trajectory of physical restoration at Pallant House was very different from that at Fairfax House, however, because the intentions were different: the Chichester house was 'restored' as an art gallery, not as an eighteenth-century townhouse. The rooms of the house, which largely retained original features such as panelling and coving, were to be used for the display of works of art. Their furnishings, while broadly appropriate in period, were to play a subsidiary role and were not in any way to constitute elements in an interior 'restored' to 'original condition'. A plaque mounted on the exterior of the house soon after opening spells out clearly the purpose of the restoration and the hierarchy of display implicit within it:

> After sixty years of use as local authority offices, a programme
> of restoration work on PALLANT HOUSE was initiated in 1979
> with the aim of giving CHICHESTER an Art Gallery and historic

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[28] Flower *et al*, *Pallant House*, p. 5. Information about the history of the Friends of Pallant House from the Pallant House Gallery website at http://www.pallant.org.uk.

[29] Museums and Galleries Commission, *Local Authorities and Museums: Report by a Working Party* (London: HMSO, 1991), p. 27.

[30] Neil Colyer, *The Walter Hussey Collection* (Chichester: Pallant House Gallery, 1983), p. 1.

[31] David Howard, 'The way forward: building on Dean Hussey's vision', *Musical Times*, vol. 153, no. 1919 (Summer 2012), pp. 73-86, here p. 78.

[32] Flower *et al*, *Pallant House*, pp. 5ff, 19; Woodford, *Portrait of Sussex*, p. 119.

house in which the fine art collection of DeWALTER HUSSEY,
DEAN OF CHICHESTER from 1955 to 1977, could be displayed in
a setting of period rooms, alongside furnishings of the 18th. and
19th. centuries.[33]

The furniture used to furnish the rooms at Pallant House is partly from the Hussey Bequest and partly made up of gifts and loans.[34] It includes some notable individual items but its role is supportive rather than central to the displays in each room. No attempt is made to furnish the rooms in a 'period' manner to represent domestic interiors, and there is no elaborate interior decoration (**Figure 6.3**). Pallant House has wood panelled walls, arched doorways, a simple staircase, moulded cornices and arched alcoves, but the carved woodwork is restrained and the ceilings are plain with no ornamental plasterwork. The spacious and impressive hall has an elegant moulded cornice, but the hall and staircase ceilings are both plain.[35] At Pallant House the fact that the art collection is primarily twentieth century, with only a few earlier pieces (identified as the 'historic collection'), makes it even more appropriate that the rooms present a background that is 'period' but aesthetically neutral. By contrast, the elaborately decorated interiors at Fairfax House would present a problem if the building were to be used primarily as an art gallery as their strong character has the potential to distract from, and even conflict with, any works of art displayed within those spaces. It is also notable that the restoration of Pallant House did not seek to return the building to an 'original' eighteenth-century condition but retained later additions and alterations such as a Victorian kitchen and a decorated cornice from *c*.1840 on the first-floor landing.[36] Most dramatically a large (and controversial) modern gallery extension designed by Colin St John Wilson was opened in 2006, a development consistent with the purpose and identity of an art gallery but incongruous for a historic house museum.[37]

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[33] Plaque erected by the Friends of Pallant House *c*.1985 and now on display inside the building. Dean Hussey's first name was Walter: the form 'DeWalter' is found only on this plaque.
[34] Information from Pallant House Gallery.
[35] Nathaniel Lloyd, 'Gems of English architecture, no. IV: Wren's House and the Pallant House, Chichester', *Architectural Review*, vol. 26 (May 1919), pp. 32-37; L. W., 'Wren's House and Pallant House, Chichester', *Country Life*, vol. 31 (27 April 1912), pp. 614-619.
[36] Flower *et al*, *Pallant House*, pp. 38, 43.
[37] 'Wilson's latest labour of love', *Building Design*, 30 June 2006, p. 3; Rob Gregory, 'In the company of friends', *Architectural Review*, vol. 220 (September 2006), pp. 84-91.

Figure 6.3. Interior gallery space at Pallant House. This room is on the first floor in the centre of the main street front, directly above the entrance hall, and was originally a parlour. The original panelling and cornice treatment can be seen, but the floor covering is modern. (Photograph reproduced courtesy of the Friends of Pallant House.)

When Pallant House was restored and opened to the public its role as an art gallery was seen as a new episode in its long and varied history, a perception lent additional force by the modernity of the art displayed there. The house could be seen as providing a link between the Chichester of Henry Peacham and the twentieth-century city. Through the bequest of Dean Hussey and the restoration project that had followed, the modern city had forged a link with the city of the past but also given Pallant House a new identity: 'In its restored state, Pallant House pays tribute to two men who, separated by 250 years, each contributed significantly to the artistic heritage of twentieth-century Chichester'.[38] When the house was restored the intention was not to 'turn back the clock' and present any one period of the house's existence as its normal, stable identity, nor to re-create furnished interiors of a particular era. Thus the issues of historical selectivity and the interpretation of 'authenticity' did not arise in too problematic a form at Pallant House, because the building was being used for something new. In the case of Fairfax House the period during which it can be considered to have been a 'Georgian townhouse' is only one part of a very varied history, and the privileging of that period – and indeed of the even more specific timeframe during which the

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[38] Flower *et al*, *Pallant House*, p. 3.

Fairfaxes were in residence at the house – determined to a large extent the trajectory of the restoration project from the beginning.

Fairfax House: locating restoration

The varied history of the building now known as Fairfax House has already been narrated in the first chapter of this thesis. From the construction of Fairfax House in the 1740s to the 1830s the description 'Georgian townhouse' for the building is apt, as its role was as a residence for a succession of noble, gentry and mercantile owners including the Fairfaxes.[39] From the 1830s to the 1860s it remained a residential property, although during this period it was of course in strict terms a *Victorian* town house although it remained a *Georgian* building in origin. In 1865 it ceased to be a residential establishment and became a commercial property, the Friendly Societies' Hall (**Figure 6.4**). In 1876 part of the building became home to the York City Club, established on the pattern of London gentlemen's clubs for York's business and commercial community.[40] These remained the position of the house until the First World War, when part of the house was requisitioned for military purposes. In 1919 the entire property was bought by the St George's Hall Entertainments (York) Company Ltd, and converted into a cinema and dance hall.[41] The cinema remained until 1962 and the dance hall until 1981, by which time it had become a dancing school; meanwhile the building itself had been bought by York City Council in 1962 for use as a store for items in the Castle Museum collection. The house was eventually bought by York Civic Trust in 1982, and was restored and opened to the public in 1984.[42]

The period during which Fairfax House can be considered to have been a 'Georgian town house' is thus approximately ninety years, from the 1740s to the 1830s. This amounts to a third of the entire 270-year history of the house. To be a residential town house was the function for which the building was constructed, so there is some justification for considering this to be its 'original' purpose. However, the 1980s restoration did not merely identify the 'Georgian town house'

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[39] Brown, *Fairfax House York* (1989), pp. 7-8, 65, 77-8.
[40] Brown, *Fairfax House York* (1989), p. 79.
[41] Brown, *Fairfax House York* (1989), p. 80.
[42] Brown, *Fairfax House York* (1989), pp. 38-40.

Figure 6.4. View of Fairfax House (no. 27 Castlegate), undated but taken before 1914 (a sign for Astill's joinery business, which was located behind the house and accessed through an archway in the front of 25 Castlegate, can be seen to the left of the façade of Fairfax House itself, and this business closed in 1914). During this period the house was not in residential use but was owned by the Ancient Order of Foresters and was known as the Friendly Societies' Hall. (Source: Fairfax House Archive.)

era as the one (from the various options available) to which the house should be returned, but selected a small portion of that era as constituting the specific period of the house's existence to be recreated in material terms. The period selected was that during which the house was the part-time residence of Viscount Fairfax and his daughter Anne. This amounted to slightly more than a decade, from the beginning of 1760, when the Fairfaxes purchased the house, to the spring of 1771, when Anne Fairfax sold it and moved back to Gilling Castle following her father's death in January of that year. The entire programme of restoration embarked upon by the Civic Trust was based on the assumption that being a Georgian town house, and specifically the Fairfaxes' town house, was the house's normative condition, and that all subsequent uses were in a sense *inauthentic* abuses of the structure and false turns in the house's history, that had to be rectified. This point of view is clearly expressed in the first edition of the Fairfax House guide book, in which Peter Brown wrote of the 'appalling abuse and

misuse' of the house in the twentieth century, and that once the house had ceased to be a residential property in the previous century 'it underwent a variety of changes in use from which its ultimate rescue and survival is little short of miraculous'.[43] This language of miraculous survival and 'rescue' is key to understanding the ideologies and interpretative decisions that governed the restoration project, a process in which the surviving eighteenth-century plasterwork played a centrally significant role.

As noted above, this is not to argue that the choice of the Fairfax era was innately arbitrary or irrational. The existence of a large body of documentary evidence about the Fairfaxes, including family papers relating to Fairfax House itself, and an argument of aesthetic or material coherence – that a Georgian house should have a Georgian interior rather than a nineteenth- or twentieth-century one – clearly carry some weight and have a part to play. The preservation of internal features dating from the Viscount's rebuilding of the house and the arrangement with the Noel Terry estate that the Terry furniture collection should be displayed in the house also contributed to the decision to privilege the mid-eighteenth-century condition of the house in the restoration. As discussed in the preceding chapter, this decision also reflected a wider twentieth-century cultural context in which an idea of the 'Georgian' was of considerable importance in influencing the way people concerned with the architecture, planning and character of York thought about the city's past and present, and sought to shape its future. York was an important arena for the architectural/cultural/heritage project of 'recovering the Georgian' – restoring and interpreting the eighteenth-century city not only as something worth preserving in its own right but as part of a cultural agenda for reshaping the modern city.

Fairfax House: the Georgian ideal

Fairfax House was ultimately purchased and restored by the York Civic Trust in the mid-1980s, but the neo-Georgians of York had been aware of the house and its importance since the inter-war years. As discussed in the preceding chapter, the

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[43] Brown, *Fairfax House York* (1989), pp. 38, 79.

York architectural preservationist Dr Evelyn had given a lecture on the house in November 1919 in which he had described its splendours and expressed anxiety at the forthcoming conversion of the house into a cinema and dance hall. Before the conversion work began he took a large number of photographs of the interior, and this collection of images was of great importance in recording the qualities of the building and, in due course, informing its eventual restoration.[44] From the late 1930s, during the house's period as a cinema and dance hall, and throughout its Second World War service as an RAF officers' billet and a NAAFI, the York Georgian Society kept a watching brief over the exterior and, as far as possible, the interior of the building.[45] By the spring of 1945 Oliver Sheldon was expressing anxiety at the 'process of dissolution' the house was undergoing, and urging the City Council to do what they could to preserve it as 'one of the few really fine Georgian buildings in the way of internal decoration'.[46] Sheldon's hope was that a restored Fairfax House could become a base for the 'learned societies of York'.[47] Throughout the 1940s and 1950s the Georgian Society and the Civic Trust together kept the City Council aware of Fairfax House and kept up the pressure for a solution to be found to at least prevent any further decay in the fabric and, ideally, for a long-term solution that would provide for the restoration of the house and its appropriate use. As early as 1946 the York Georgian Society was reporting that they had received 'assurances' from the owners of the building 'as to Fairfax House, Castlegate, which provide some basis for hoping that the ultimate use of this elegant house will be such as to preserve its character, and that in the meantime special care will be taken of its fine features'.[48]

The City Council were not unsympathetic and purchased the entire building when the cinema closed in 1962, a step welcomed by the Georgian Society and the Civic Trust. The new president of the Georgian Society, Lord Harewood, told the annual general meeting in 1965 of his relief that that, after the Society's long

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[44] Murray, *Dr Evelyn's York*, pp. 64-5; Brown, *Fairfax House York* (1989), p. 80. Dr Evelyn's photographic archive was acquired after his death by the Yorkshire Architectural and York Archaeological Society and is now in the special collections of the Minster Library in York.

[45] Webb, *Early Years of York Georgian Society*, p. 13.

[46] Letter of Oliver Sheldon to J. B. Morrell, March 1945. Quoted in Webb, *Early Years of York Georgian Society*, p. 18. Webb notes that 'The fate of Fairfax House, not resolved in Sheldon's time, was a constant source of concern' to Sheldon and the Georgian Society (*ibid.*).

[47] Quoted in Webb, *Early Years of York Georgian Society*, p. 18.

[48] York Georgian Society *Annual Report 1946-47*, p. 18. At this stage the house was still a cinema, and was owned and operated by the Rank Organisation through its ownership of the Gaumont-British Picture Corporation.

period of 'very considerable anxiety' about Fairfax House, he could now say that 'it is in good hands and that in due course they will do their utmost to restore it to its former splendour'.[49] He went on to offer the Council the assistance of the Georgian Society in any scheme of preservation and restoration, suggesting that this would be an opportunity for the society to prove that its commitment to protecting the eighteenth-century past was real and practical:

> Our finances are not such for us to offer lavish assistance, but I wonder if we could perhaps set ourselves as an objective … the restoration of one room perhaps or a part of the house for which we could make ourselves fairly responsible … If we want to see Georgian buildings preserved as they ought to be we ought at times to be prepared to offer hard cash as well as advice and encouraging noises and it seems to me this is a supreme example of such an opportunity to help.[50]

The York Civic Trust was also watching developments at Fairfax House closely, noting in its 1963-64 *Annual Report* that this building was 'without much doubt the finest middle eighteenth century house in York' and welcoming its purchase:

> We are glad that the Corporation have acquired this property and thereby, we trust, ensured that it will be restored to some of its former glory. There are many ways in which it could fit supremely well into the plans the Corporation have for developing that corner of the City as a municipal centre, perhaps, suitably furnished, as a worthy addition to the Castle Museum.[51]

When in 1967 St Mary's Church Castlegate was declared redundant the Civic Trust raised the possibility of the Council acquiring it and using it to house an exhibition devoted to the history of the City of York: 'The church itself stands

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[49] York Georgian Society *Annual Report 1965-66*, p. 12.
[50] York Georgian Society *Annual Report 1965-66*, p. 12.
[51] 'Fairfax House', *York Civic Trust Annual Report 1963-64* (York: York Civic Trust, 1964), p. 19.

within the boundaries of an area designated by the City Corporation as one for Civic re-development and already the Corporation own much of the property around, including the splendid Fairfax House of John Carr'.[52] Clearly a 'cultural quarter' was envisaged for this area, with the Castle Museum (itself housed in eighteenth-century buildings designed by John Carr), Clifford's Tower, the exhibition in St Mary's Church, and some kind of display in a restored Fairfax House forming a linked chain or cluster of heritage attractions. In the event such an exhibition was indeed installed in the former St Mary's Church, but Fairfax House's fate was a sad disappointment to York's Georgians, as it remained as neglected in the Council's hands as it had in those of the cinema company. The dancing school retained its tenancy of the first floor until 1982, and the rest of the building was used as a storeroom for the Castle Museum. No progress was made under the City Council's ownership in restoring the building or converting it to a museum or other heritage site. However, the various abortive plans that were made for the house during this period are interesting in their own right.

A typewritten proposal evidently originating from within the City Council Architect's Department, unsigned and undated but likely to date from *c*.1970, outlines a scheme for 'a museum of York craftsmanship'.[53] It begins with an assertion of York's historical importance as a centre of craftsmanship: 'From early medieval times up to the middle of the nineteenth century, York was the cultural capital of the North, its skilled craftsmen providing a wealth of high quality products for the nobility and gentry of the surrounding counties', with 'its most important creative period' being the years 'between *c*.1750 and 1820'.[54] Fairfax House would be 'ideally suited for use as a town-house museum' not least because of its local significance and association with some of the leading craftsmen of Georgian York: 'Fairfax House was designed by John Carr, Lord Mayor of York, with brickwork by Richard Swaile and William Fentiman, woodwork by William Grant, plasterwork by James Henderson, and painting by Samuel Carpenter, all Freemen of the City'.[55] This proposed town-house museum scheme involved not only restoring the building and decorating and furnishing the

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[52] 'St Mary's Church, Castlegate', *York Civic Trust Annual Report 1966-67* (York: York Civic Trust, 1967), p. 14.

[53] 'Fairfax House, Castlegate. A Museum of York Craftsmanship', undated document (*c*.1970?). Fairfax House Archive.

[54] 'A Museum of York Craftsmanship', p. 1.

[55] 'A Museum of York Craftsmanship', p. 1.
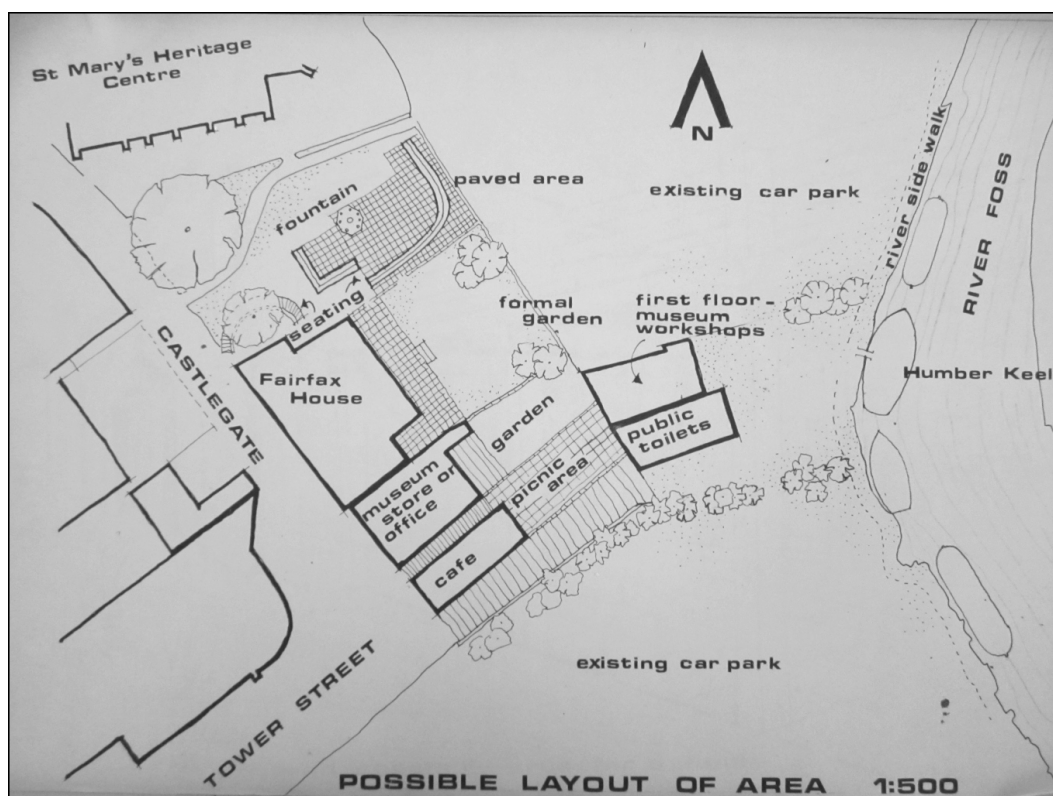
Figure 6.5. Plan of proposed museum development at Fairfax House, 1974. The house was to be surrounded by a paved and landscaped area with gardens, seating and a fountain, with a covered picnic area for school parties alongside. The museum site would have extended to the bank of the River Foss, providing considerable space for further activities and exhibits, while on the river a preserved Humber Keel, a type of powered barge used on the Foss and Ouse in and around York, would be moored as an additional attraction. (Source: *Fairfax House Castlegate: Recording and Analysis Report* (York: York City Council, 1974), reproduced courtesy Hull History Centre.)

rooms of the house in appropriate style but providing 'a suitable setting for a "trade fair" for York's Georgian craftsmen'.[56] This particular scheme went no further, but in 1974 the City Architect, R. H. Fogg, was commissioned by York City Council to carry out a survey of the condition of Fairfax House and prepare new outline proposals for its future use (**Figure 6.5**). Fogg supported a scheme of restoration and noted the importance of the house in the context of the street, recommending the retention of buildings to the south and new construction to the north (between the house and the former churchyard of St Mary's Castlegate) in order to re-establish the coherence of the streetscape, which in the 1970s somewhat petered out on either side of the house because of the undeveloped state of St Mary's churchyard and the area around Clifford's Tower. As for possible uses of the restored building, the plan at the time was for the area around the house to be developed 'as a Conference Hall and Hotel Complex', and it was

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[56] 'A Museum of York Craftsmanship', p. 1.

suggested that Fairfax House could form an integrated administrative centre with library and study accommodation for a conference centre, or could be connected to a hotel through a 'suitably designed link'.[57]
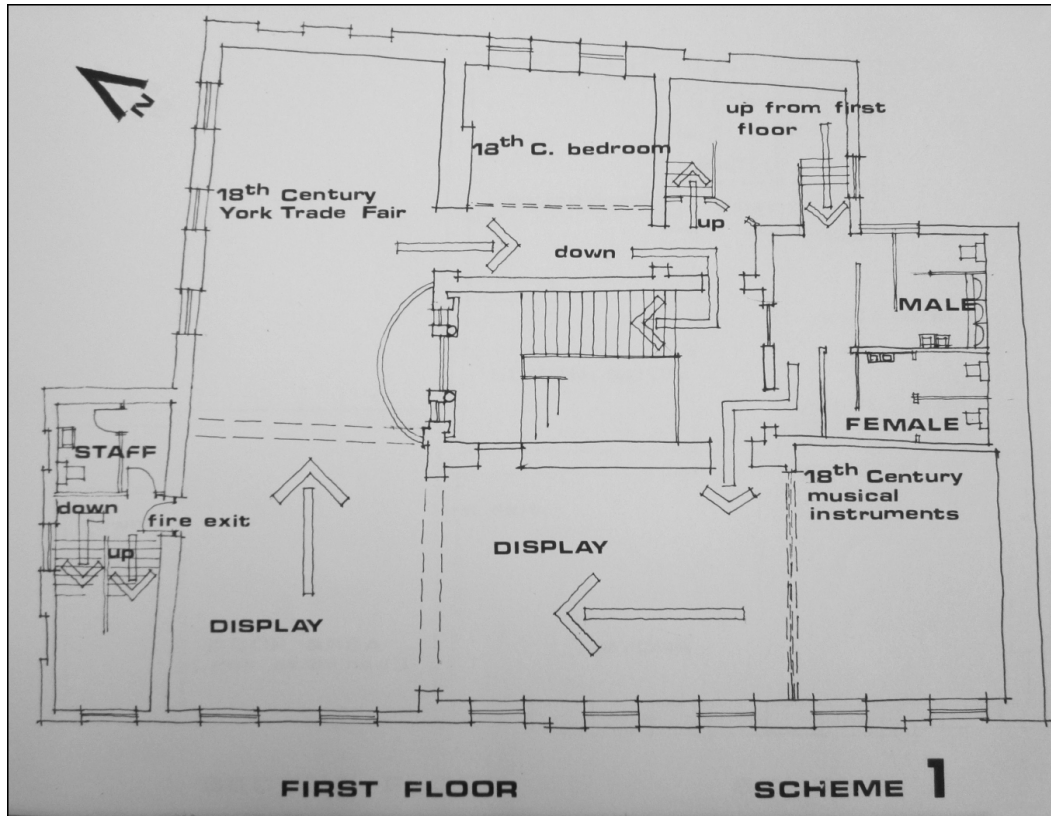
Figure 6.6. York City Council proposal from 1976 for the conversion of the first floor of Fairfax House into museum space. The rear portion of the large cinema foyer extension was to be used for an '18th Century York Trade Fair' in which craftsmen could make small items using traditional methods. Visitors would be able to watch the making process and purchase the items. One room would be recreated as an '18th C. bedroom'. This was the first of two proposed schemes: Scheme 2 reversed the flow of visitor circulation but had no specific suggestions for the use of particular spaces. (Source: *Fairfax House: Proposals for Restoration* (York: York City Council, 1976), reproduced courtesy Hull History Centre.)

None of these suggestions came to anything, and the 'Conference Hall and Hotel Complex' was never developed. In January 1976, however, the Council returned to the problem with a detailed report by the Historic Buildings Section of the City Architect's Department (**Figure 6.6**). This proposal, reflecting York Civic Trust's comments of ten years before, looked at the house and the area around it as a potentially unified whole to be developed for museum purposes: 'The whole of this area could be taken by the Museum, by removing old buildings to the rear and landscaping and planting down to the river, a rural or urban

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[57] *Fairfax House Castlegate: Recording and Analysis Report* (York: York City Council, 1974), p. 16.

museum complex could be developed'.[58] The scheme recommended by the report reflected this museum context but also emphasised Fairfax House's Georgian character by suggesting that it be used as a town house museum, 'taken over by the Castle Museum Committee and furnished in the manner of the period and opened to the public'.[59] The furnishings for the house were expected to come from the collections of the Castle Museum. The long-standing interest of the Georgian revivalists in fostering practical demonstrations of craftsmanship also found an expression in this scheme, with its suggestion that buildings to the rear of Fairfax House 'could become the Museum store or workshop, where perhaps visitors could circulate to watch restoration work being carried out. Various other craftsmen may also be encouraged to work in such an environment'. In a significant echo of York Civic Trust's 1950s proposals for a 'Folk Park' at Heslington (see above, pp. 172-3), the area stretching down to the river was identified as ideal 'for the possible reconstruction of historic or period buildings on the line of the urban or rural Folk Park scheme'. York Castle Museum itself, described in 1945 as 'a noted Folk Museum',[60] contained reconstructions of buildings, interiors and an entire period street, and had consciously reflected since its opening in 1938 as 'the folk museum of Yorkshire life' the notion of the museum as an arena for 'living history'.[61] This approach was concerned not merely to accumulate collected material but to use collections as a basis for representing the whole life of the past, generally in a specifically local context and in a way that contributed to the fashioning of notions of citizenship and identity – aims also vital to the purposes of the York Civic Trust.[62] The plans for Fairfax House clearly envisaged the interior spaces of the house as well as the outside areas forming part of the same approach as the main buildings of the Castle Museum, with the upper floor of the house playing host to an '18th century York trade fair' at which items made by craftsmen on the premises using authentic eighteenth-century techniques would be available for the public to purchase.[63]

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[58] *Fairfax House: Proposals for Restoration* (York: York City Council, 1976), unpaginated.

[59] *Fairfax House: Proposals for Restoration* (York: York City Council, 1976), unpaginated.

[60] M. M. Banks, 'Folk museums and collections in England', *Folklore*, vol. 56, no. 1 (March 1945), pp. 218-22, here p. 222.

[61] Laura Carter, 'Rethinking folk culture in twentieth-century Britain', *Twentieth-Century British History*, Open Access publication (August 2017), https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.10930, pp. 18-20.

[62] Carter, 'Rethinking folk culture', pp. 3-4. I am very grateful to Laura Carter for drawing my attention to her article and discussing these questions with me.

[63] *Fairfax House: Proposals for Restoration* (York: York City Council, 1976), unpaginated.

A further proposal from the Castle Museum in June 1980 made it clear how firmly the idea of a restored Georgian town house with appropriate furnishings was now established, and furthermore that a certain purism was being aimed at in the way such a house would be used. Noting that 'The concept of the restoration of a building to a historical period is relatively new' and that most supposedly 'period' interiors always involved compromises, mixes of periods and the use of 'relatively recent' styles of decoration, the document argued that a changed landscape of historical knowledge and its application through curatorial practice required a different, more self-consciously coherent approach:

> Recent advances in scholarship in the history, architecture, furniture, furnishings, and decoration have shown how different 18th century practice was to the received knowledge of later times … and a number of houses have been restored in the manner now regarded as more nearly authentic. Foremost among them are 1 Royal Crescent, Bath, and the Georgian House, Edinburgh.[64]

As 'the finest Georgian house in York, containing local craftsmanship of the first order', Fairfax House was ideally suited to be the home of such an authentic Georgian town house museum, embodying as it did 'a high point in York's fortunes, when the City's position as the cultural capital of the North was unrivalled, and it enjoyed the services of architects and decorators, cabinet, clock and musical instrument makers of national importance'. The proposal sought to avoid any suggestion of the traditional museum interior in the way the house would be laid out. There was to be a minimum of curatorial or interpretative intervention, and the impression to be given was one of a genuine eighteenth-century house into which visitors had happened to walk: 'The museum element of show-cases and didactic labels is neither appropriate here nor necessary. We may, for example, wish to show fine china, but it can be set either on a table or sideboard or in period display cabinets'.[65]

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[64] 'Fairfax House: Curator of the Castle Museum's Proposals for Conversion to a Georgian Town-house open to the Public', Castle Museum, York, June 1980. Unpaginated.
[65] 'Fairfax House: Curator of the Castle Museum's Proposals'.

None of these proposals was acted upon by the City Council, nor went beyond the initial outline phase. Under the Council's ownership, Fairfax House remained unrestored (although maintenance was carried out) and underused. Meanwhile, the long-standing interest of York Civic Trust in purchasing and restoring the house was intensifying. The Civic Trust and the Council had a long history of co-operation and relations between them were very good, and by late 1979 and early 1980 the Council's interest in selling the house and receptiveness to a bid to purchase it from the Trust was clear. In March 1980 the Council confirmed its intention to sell and issued a twelve-page prospectus for potential purchasers.[66] The title of this document, 'Fairfax House, Castlegate, York: Sale Particulars and Restoration Brief', made it clear that only purchasers committed to restoring the property need apply. This point was reinforced by the first of the 'general objectives' that were to guide the sale of the house: 'The successful tenderer will be required to renovate the building in accordance with the character and period in which it was constructed, retain and recreate the internal room layout where necessary, without removing any features of architectural interest'.[67] The Sale Particulars also made clear that 'the restoration is to be carried out to the highest standards consistent with such an important building'.[68] Clearly these specifications had the effect of restricting potential purchasers to the very small group capable of carrying out such a restoration, and guaranteeing a future use 'in keeping with the fine interior of this important building' and guaranteeing 'public access'.[69] There was no question of the house being sold to a purchaser intent on conversion to office or retail use, or even non-commercial activities such as education. The house was to be restored to a condition in keeping with its architecture and interior decoration, and used in a manner that gave the public access to the building.

York Civic Trust was such a purchaser, and opened negotiations immediately to acquire the house with the aim of restoring it to its Georgian condition and furnishing it appropriately. The Civic Trust, in keeping with its long-standing commitment to York's tourism industry, repeatedly emphasised the potential

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[66] 'Fairfax House, Castlegate, York: Sale Particulars and Restoration Brief', York City Council Estates Department, March 1980. Fairfax House Archive.
[67] 'Fairfax House, Castlegate, York: Sale Particulars and Restoration Brief', unpaginated [p. 1].
[68] 'Fairfax House, Castlegate, York: Sale Particulars and Restoration Brief', unpaginated [p. 1].
[69] 'Fairfax House, Castlegate, York: Sale Particulars and Restoration Brief', unpaginated [p. 1].

economic value to the city of Fairfax House as a heritage attraction. 'What we have tentatively in mind', Civic Trust Chairman John Shannon explained to the Council in November 1980, 'is that the house, when restored, could, on the lines of Bristol, Bath and Edinburgh, be furnished as a Georgian town house which would be unique in the City'.[70] The question of furnishing remained problematic: the City Council had been planning to use the rooms of Fairfax House as display spaces for eighteenth-century items from the Castle Museum, but the Civic Trust always aimed to restore the house as a Georgian town house, furnished to represent such a house as it might have been when lived in during the eighteenth century. The means to carry through the Trust's scheme were made available through the bequest of Noel Terry, a member of the Terry's chocolate family, one of the original founding members of the organisation and its long-serving Secretary. He was also a collector, on a very large scale, of eighteenth-century English furniture. During his lifetime his collection was kept at Goddards, the house he had built for himself near the Terry's confectionery works in southern York. When he died in 1980 the collection was left to a charitable family trust with the instruction that it should not be split up, and that it should be publicly displayed in York.

The Terry trustees decided to honour those wishes by presenting the furniture to York Civic Trust, on the understanding that it would be used to furnish Fairfax House in appropriate mid-Georgian style. It was unthinkable that the fine interiors with their superb plasterwork should be left unfurnished, nor was it acceptable to have furnishings in an unsuitable style that failed to relate to the interior decoration. Bringing the Terry Collection to Fairfax House would resolve this problem. In a letter to the City Council Noel Terry's son Peter explained that Francis Johnson 'who knows the collection well and is, in his own right, an expert in 18th century buildings and furniture', had advised the Trust that the collection 'should be displayed in the context of an 18th century house' and that Fairfax House 'would of course form an ideal place for the furniture to be exhibited'.[71] Further strengthening of the Trust's case came from the auction house Christie's, which in a letter of 18 March 1981 confirmed that its experts had 'had a full

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[70] Letter from John Shannon to the Chief Executive of York City Council, 12 November 1980. Hull History Centre, Francis Johnson Archive.
[71] Letter, Peter N. L. Terry to Chief Executive, York City Council, 7 September 1981. Hull History Centre, Francis Johnson Archive.

opportunity of appraising the contents of the late Mr. Terry's house' and that 'Undoubtedly the most important aspect of the contents of Goddards is the English furniture, which is outstanding'.[72] Christie's was particularly helpful to the Civic Trust in their closing statement that 'York would indeed be very fortunate to boast the acquisition of such a collection which approaches in value the sum of one million pounds'.[73] The offer of the furniture was decisive in strengthening the Trust's bargaining power, and in the autumn of 1981 the Council agreed to sell Fairfax House to York Civic Trust, on the understanding that it was to be restored and furnished as a Georgian town house museum open to the public.[74]

In October 1981, John Shannon gave the Annual General Meeting of the York Civic Trust an account of the 'negotiations which had taken place for the acquisition of the house for the Trust' and emphasised the importance of the bequest of Noel Terry's furniture collection in securing the purchase – an importance reflected in the fact that the meeting 'asked that their appreciation for the gift of the furniture be conveyed to the Terry Trustees'.[75] The gift of the furniture collection determined in important ways the trajectory which the restoration of the house and its presentation to the public as a town house museum would follow. In particular, it both highlighted the central importance of the interior to the house and its development as a museum, and introduced a challenging tension into that development. Previous museum schemes had seen the house as a suitable container for a mixture of physical collections and activities related to those collections. The house was itself a historical artefact of importance and the craftsmanship and beauty of its interiors, most notably the plasterwork, themselves formed an important aspect of the museum role it would perform, but ultimately the house was to be a background for the items on display within it. The arrangement of the rooms would only loosely express their original purpose and in some respects would have no relationship to that purpose at all,

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[72] Letter from the Valuations Department, Christie's, to Messrs Harland and Co. (lawyers for York Civic Trust), 18 March 1981, p. 1. Fairfax House Archive.

[73] Letter from the Valuations Department, Christie's, to Messrs Harland and Co. (lawyers for York Civic Trust), 18 March 1981, p. 2. Fairfax House Archive.

[74] Letter, Chief Executive, York City Council to John Shannon, 25 September 1981. Hull History Centre, Francis Johnson Archive; 'Fairfax House', *York Civic Trust Annual Report 1981-82* (York: York Civic Trust, 1982), pp. 16-17.

[75] York Civic Trust Annual General Meeting minutes, meeting of 14 October 1981, item 3832. Fairfax House Archive.

and there was no concern to 're-create' an eighteenth-century town house or to produce interpretation that particularly focused on the Fairfaxes or the way the house had been used during the eighteenth century. The involvement of the York Civic Trust, and the arrival of the Noel Terry furniture collection, changed all that.

CHAPTER 7

Anatomy of a Restoration

The condition of Fairfax House in 1981

The property purchased by York Civic Trust at the end of 1981 consisted not of one but of two houses: the eighteenth-century town house at 27 Castlegate which was known as 'Fairfax House', and 25 Castlegate, its immediate neighbour (**figure 7.1**). The latter was an early nineteenth-century house which had been bought with 27 Castlegate by the cinema company in 1919.[1] The ground floor was converted into an entrance and foyer for the cinema auditorium, and the upper floor became part of the dance hall which also incorporated the Saloon and Drawing Room at Fairfax House itself. As discussed in the preceding chapter, these two buildings had been treated as one property by the City Council and had both played a role in the Council's plans for a museum. The Civic Trust's plans for Fairfax House also involved both houses.[2]

The land to the north of Fairfax House, which had been occupied by the cinema auditorium, and related structures which had been demolished by the City Council ten years previously, were not part of the Trust's purchase.[3] This area was incorporated into a larger site which had been cleared of buildings and was now earmarked for commercial and retail development. The western part nearest Coppergate was excavated extensively by York Archaeological Trust in the 1970s and early 1980s,[4] while the rest was temporarily used for car parking. Between 1982 and 1984 the whole site would become the Coppergate Shopping Centre, with shops and flats extending to within a few metres of the rear of Fairfax House.

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[1] Brown, *Fairfax House York (*1989), p. 9.
[2] York Civic Trust *Annual Report* 1982-83 (York: York Civic Trust, 1983), pp. 9, 15-16.
[3] Letter from John Shannon, Chairman of York Civic Trust, to Roy Howell, Chief Executive of York City Council, 12 November 1980. Francis Johnson Archive, Hull History Centre.
[4] R. A. Hall and K. Hunter-Mann, *Medieval Urbanism in Coppergate: Refining a Townscape* (York: Council for British Archaeology, 2002), pp. 680-1, 684; D. M. Palliser, *Medieval York 600-1450* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 69ff.
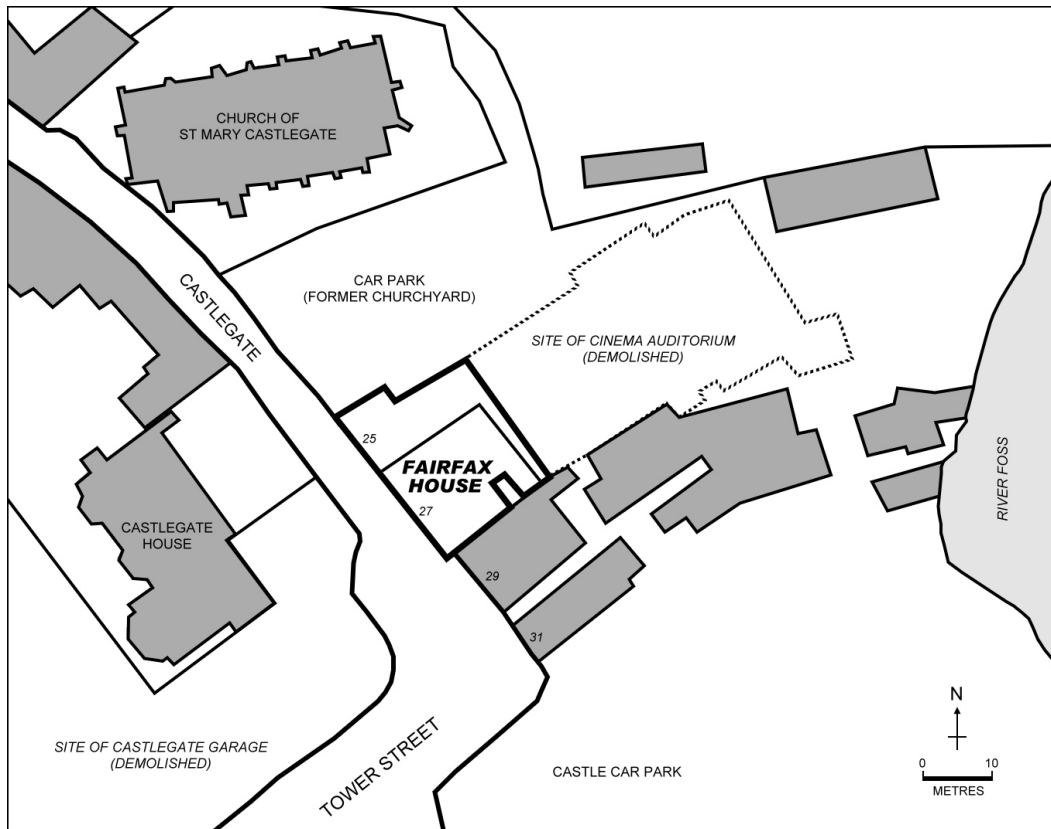
Figure 7.1. Plan of the area around Fairfax House as it was in January 1982, immediately after the house (nos. 25 and 27 Castlegate) was purchased by York Civic Trust. The land to the north and east of the house, including the site of the former St George's Cinema auditorium, was developed as the Coppergate shopping centre in 1983-4. (Author's diagram.)

This left the house as it came into York Civic Trust's hands with a much more restricted site than had been the case for the City Council museum proposals of the 1970s, which had envisaged the restored house having grounds at the rear stretching as far as the banks of the River Foss. The Civic Trust owned only 25 and 27 Castlegate and a small area of land at the rear of these buildings, most of which was at the time of purchase still occupied by the extensions added to these buildings by the cinema company (**Figure 7.2**). The Council had assumed that these structures would remain, incorporating them into their museum plans, but Francis Johnson was clear from the outset that they would have to be demolished. The key issue for him was that the structure attached to the rear of 25 Castlegate extended across, and blocked, the large Venetian window on the Great Staircase. 'I don't think that in any way we can agree to leave the rear part of the Cinema building in position blocking up the staircase window', he wrote to John Shannon in December 1981.[5] The Civic Trust agreed, and sought Listed Building consent

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[5] Letter from Francis Johnson to John Shannon, 21 December 1981. Fairfax House Archive.

Fairfax House: ground floor plan, January 1982.

Fairfax House: first floor plan, January 1982.
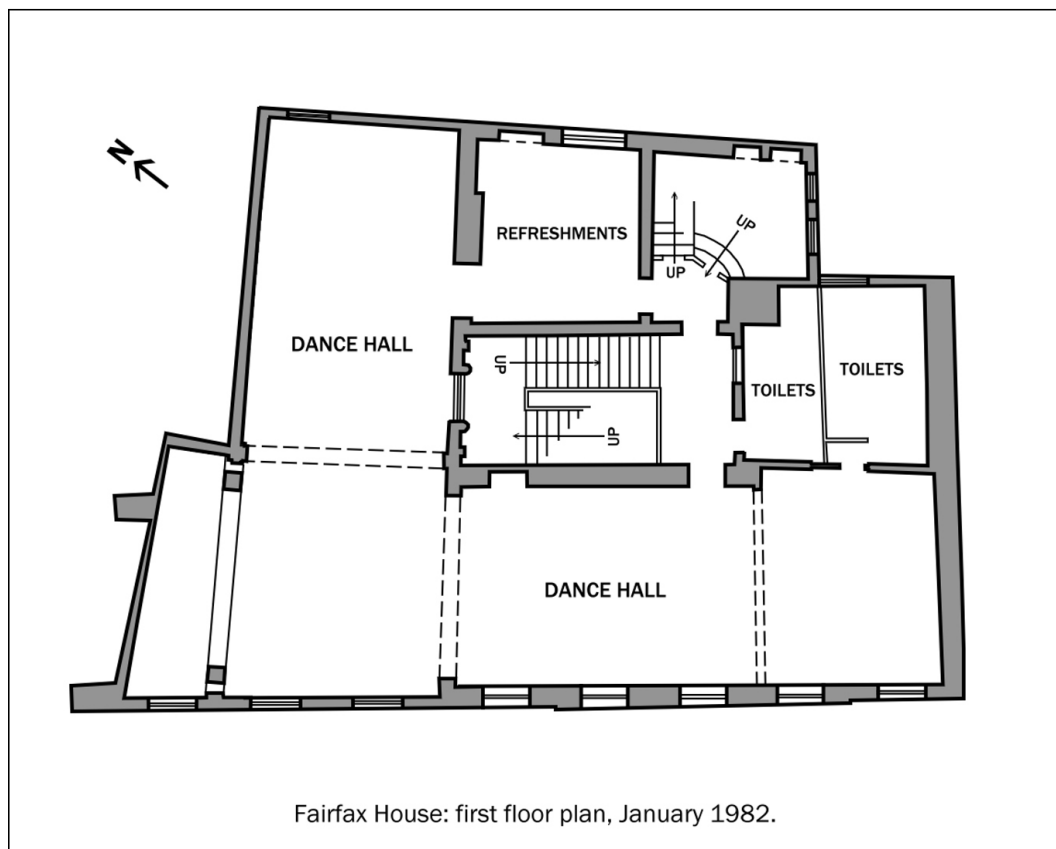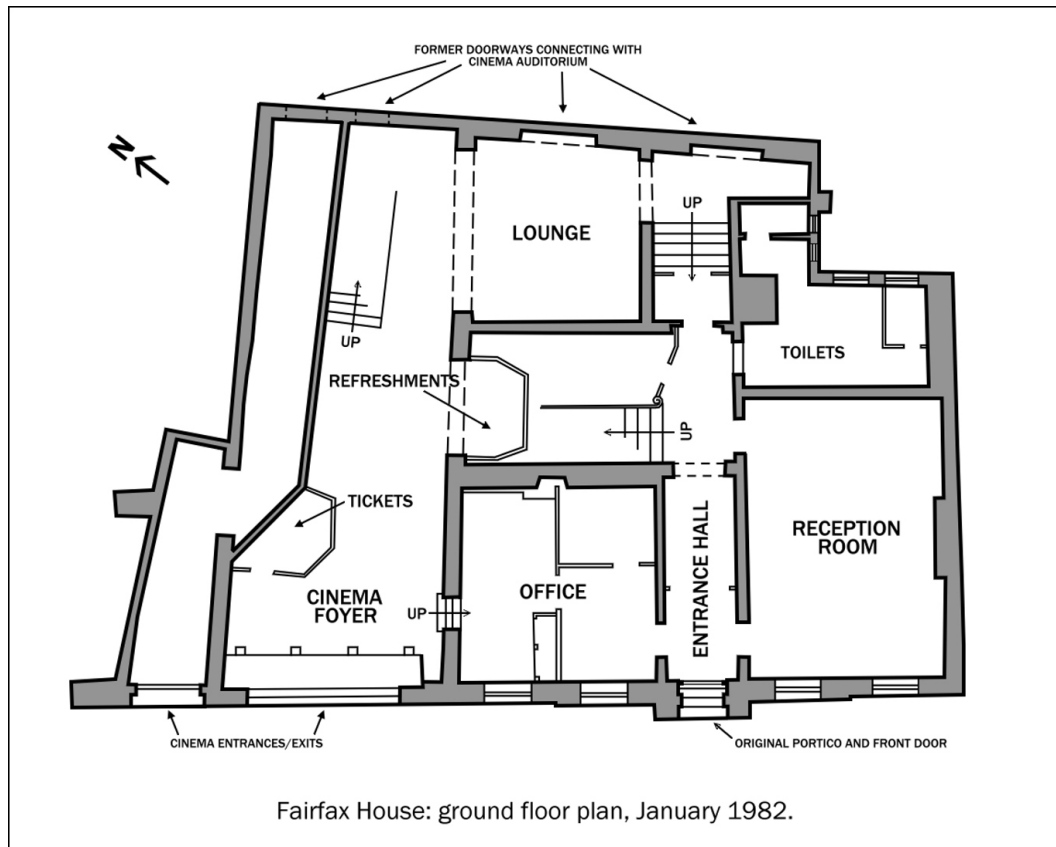
Figure 7.2. Floor plans of Fairfax House as it was in January 1982. The portion making up the northern corner of the house (containing the rear portions of the dance hall and the cinema foyer, on the upper left in these plans) was demolished by the Civic Trust. (Author's diagram.)

and permission from the City Council to demolish in February 1982. The opening up of the Venetian window became a highly significant act for the Civic Trust, symbolising the healing touch of the restorers in freeing the house from crippling abuses and distortions and permitting light to fill the newly re-created interiors that had formerly been sealed into darkness: 'one of the first things we did when we acquired the property was to restore the window and the light flooded in – it was like giving a blind man back his sight'.[6] More prosaically, the removal of these later structures meant that the rear of the house would have to be almost entirely rebuilt.[7]

The Trust had not carried out any detailed surveys of the house's condition before purchase and did not know exactly what work would be required to restore the property, but it would be very extensive and very expensive. In September 1980 the Council of the Trust had given authorisation for the purchase of the house to be pursued by the Trust but noted that 'the cost of restoration would be very high'.[8] In a letter dated 4 December 1981, two days after contracts had been exchanged, John Shannon told the National Heritage Memorial Fund (NHMF) that essentially the York Civic Trust had, with this project, taken an enormous leap in the dark: 'Our architect … has yet to survey the house thoroughly, but we fear for the foundations and it could well be that at the end of the day the restoration will cost us all the assets we have painstakingly built up since the Trust was founded in 1946'.[9] Shannon requested financial help from the NHMF to cover the purchase price of £30,000, which would enable the Trust to devote their own resources entirely to the restoration itself; but Shannon also declared of the restoration that 'even if it left us penniless at the end of the day we would consider the effort worthwhile'.[10] The purchase of Fairfax House and the commitment to restoring it were in the end an act of faith for York Civic Trust, the ultimate expression of their entire rationale and reason for existence.

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[6] 'Fairfax House – the background', *York Civic Trust Annual Report 1983-84* (York: York Civic Trust, 1985), p. 1.

[7] Letter from June Hargreaves, York City Council Planning Officer, to York Civic Trust regarding 'Proposed demolition of rear part of former St. George's Cinema adjoining Fairfax House', 11 February 1982. Fairfax House Archive.

[8] Minutes of the meeting of the Council of York Civic Trust, 8 September 1980, item no. 3817. Fairfax House Archive.

[9] Letter from John Shannon to B. Lang, Secretary of the National Heritage Memorial Fund, 4 December 1981. Hull History Centre, Francis Johnson Archive.

[10] Letter from John Shannon to B. Lang, Secretary of the National Heritage Memorial Fund, 4 December 1981. Hull History Centre, Francis Johnson Archive.

Only once the house was in the ownership of the Trust was a thorough survey made. Francis Johnson's survey, submitted to the Trust on 16 February 1982, made clear how much work was required if Fairfax House was to be stabilised and restored. His primary concerns were about the fundamental stability of the building, and he proposed that a concrete raft twelve inches thick be constructed, 'consolidated below with ash from the Power Stations. Virtually this is a little version of the great operation on York Minster'.[11] Externally the roof was in good condition but the 'pediment and parapet to Castlegate are now rendered and painted' which was 'out of context', and Johnson drew the Trust's attention to 'photographs depicting the former state in old red brickwork with stone dressings including a handsome Oculus in the tynpanum [sic] of the pediment with crossed palms below it',[12] with the clear implication that this should be recreated. Johnson laid out the rationale for the demolition of the remaining cinema company extensions: 'This will entail the building of a new rear wall to the remaining section which must be sited so that the splendid Venetian Window on the stairs is fully revealed, and adequately treated externally'.[13] This freeing of the rear of the house from later accretions, and particularly the proposed treatment of the Venetian window, formed a clear demonstration of the aim Johnson had expressed in his letter of 26 February 1979, quoted in the preceding chapter, that 'If any drastic restoration is necessary, one feels that it should echo to some degree what was undoubtedly there originally',[14] but also highlighted the paradox in that position because despite Johnson's use of the word 'undoubtedly' the reality was that nobody knew what had been 'there originally'. The rear and side elevations of Fairfax House before the early twentieth-century alterations were entirely unknown. Drawings by Francis Johnson & Partners from June 1982 (**Figure 7.3**) show the extent of rebuilding required at the rear of the building, with completely new masonry and new windows being installed to create a uniform 'Georgian' appearance. The external decorative masonry around the Venetian window had been cut back and what remained of it was embedded in the walls of the cinema extension. The initial proposal was to create an elaborate frame for this window

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[11] Francis Johnson, 'Preliminary Report: Fairfax House, Castlegate, York', 16 February 1982, p. 1. Fairfax House Archive.
[12] Johnson, 'Preliminary Report', p. 1.
[13] Johnson, 'Preliminary Report', p. 2.
[14] Letter, Francis Johnson to John Shannon, 26 February 1979, p. 2. Hull History Centre, Francis Johnson Archive.
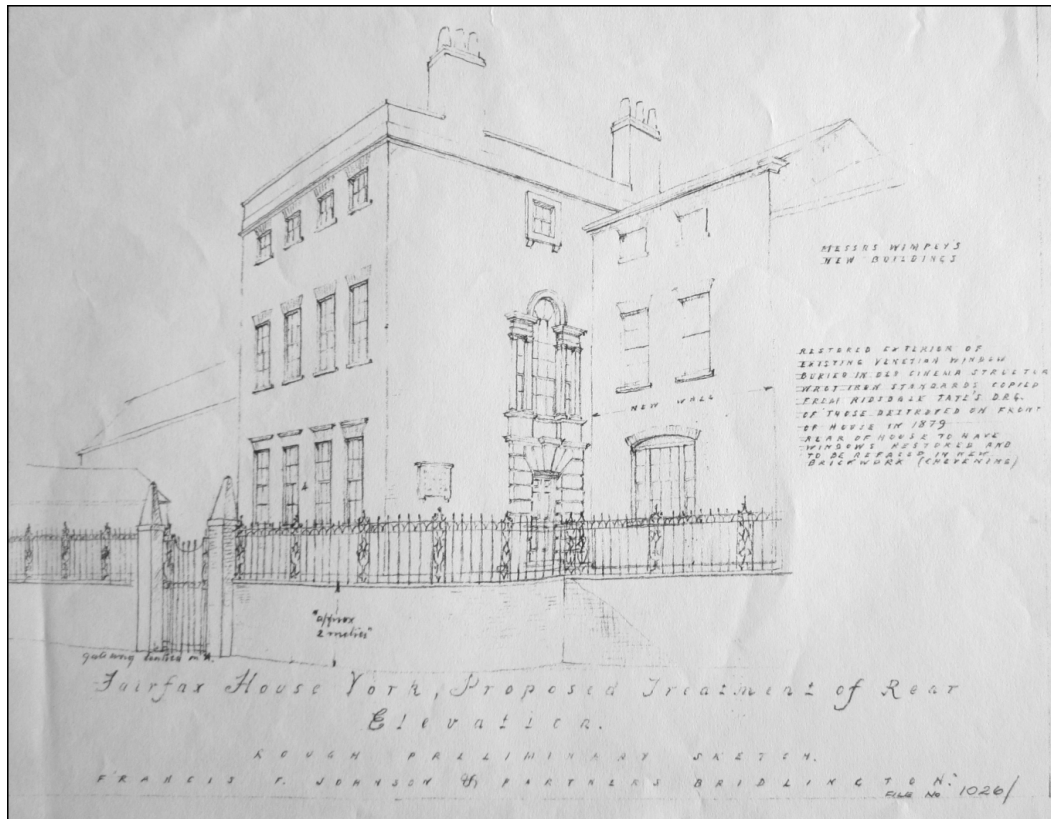
Figure 7.3. Drawing by Francis Johnson dated June 1982, showing possible treatments of the rear elevation of Fairfax House. The rear of the main block was essentially completed as shown, while the tripartite arched window on the ground floor to the right was replaced by a door leading into the shop. The Venetian window lighting the stairs can be seen in the centre with fully articulated arched centre, entablatures and pilasters with below it an elaborate door surround. In the event simpler treatments for both window and door were chosen. (Fairfax House Archive.)

which would echo the interior treatment, while suggestions for the door directly below varied from a fairly simple doorcase to an elaborate rusticated surround in the style of Nicholas Hawksmoor. As finally completed the exterior finish of the Venetian window was very simple, and a genuine mid-Georgian doorcase from a house in Low Petergate was installed underneath it.

If effective rebuilding was required externally at the rear of the house, the general decorative condition of the building internally demanded extensive intervention. The internal decorative woodwork, which was 'nearly filled level with paint at many places', was to be dismantled entirely and immersed in stripper: 'Very careful dismantling and refixing will be needed but the result may be startling'.[15] A new floor was needed in the Library and a new stone floor would have to be laid in the Entrance Hall; the remaining original fireplaces required cleaning and repair, and new chimneypieces were needed to replace ones which

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[15] Johnson, 'Preliminary Report', p. 2.

had been removed.[16] The steps of the Great Staircase, which had been 'brutally treated', would need replacing and the Venetian Window, 'the finest one in the City', with its columns and carved balustrade, needed stripping and cleaning.[17] The rear stairs, which ended on the first floor, should be extended to the ground floor to aid circulation, and the new section should 'carefully repeat the design of the upper flights'.[18] Johnson recommended the conversion of the rear room on the ground floor into 'an Exhibition Kitchen … Apparently kitchens of this kind are very popular indeed with the general public'.[19] The original kitchen was presumed to have been in the rear service quarters of the house, which had been demolished, unrecorded, in 1919, but if Fairfax House was to be presented to the public as a restored Georgian townhouse then it would require, for completeness, a kitchen.

The plasterwork of the house receives relatively little attention in Johnson's report: his view seems to have been that the work of restoration would amount to cleaning off old paintwork and attention to areas of damage. He noted that the plasterwork was 'generally clogged up with appalling decoration', particularly on the first floor, which would need removing, and there were some areas (notably in the Dining Room) that needed repair, but in general the condition of the ceilings was good and no major repairs would be necessary. As things turned out this was an over-optimistic view as there was considerable damage to some areas of the plasterwork, particularly in the Dining Room and the Drawing Room, although there was little loss of original material.[20] The remaining major piece of internal rebuilding that Johnson envisaged was the reinstatement of the missing end walls of the Saloon on the first floor, which divided that room from the Drawing Room on one side and the first floor of 25 Castlegate (which was to become the Fairfax House Exhibition Room) on the other and had been removed by the cinema company in 1919 to create the large dance hall.[21] The other major tasks were the rafting of the house, demolition of extensions and building of a new rear wall, and the reconstruction of the Great Staircase. With the exception of the concrete rafting, which was replaced by limited underpinning, all these works were duly carried out during the restoration work of 1982-3.

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[16] Johnson, 'Preliminary Report', p. 3.
[17] Johnson, 'Preliminary Report', p. 4,
[18] Johnson, 'Preliminary Report', p. 5.
[19] Johnson, 'Preliminary Report', p. 6.
[20] Johnson, 'Preliminary Report', pp. 3, 4.
[21] Johnson, 'Preliminary Report', p. 4.

Restoring the plasterwork

Given the centrality of the plasterwork to the perception of Fairfax House as a building of aesthetic beauty and historical importance, it is unsurprising that much emphasis was placed by the Civic Trust on the restoration of the interior plaster decoration. As noted above, Francis Johnson had passed only limited comments on the repairs needed to the plasterwork ceilings, noting mainly that they were 'clogged up with appalling decoration' which required removal, and that the Dining Room ceiling had been damaged by a leaking W. C. in the room above.[22] Johnson had made the same points in a letter of 21 December 1981 to John Shannon, writing that 'apart from cracks and ensuring the ceilings are safe, there is only that bad corner in the Dining Room to really worry us … The main thing on the plaster work is to get it cleaned off'.[23] At one stage the Trust was planning for the whole of the Dining Room ceiling to be taken down in sections, but as discussed below it was later decided that this would not be necessary. The removal of the decoration, which consisted of layers of paint including, most recently, thick applications of red and blue paint by the cinema company, was a major operation involving hours of manual scraping (**Figure 7.4** and **Figure 7.5**). This accumulation of paint entirely obscured much of the plasterwork's fine detail. The Civic Trust published a figure of 20,000 hours of labour devoted to cleaning off the plasterwork, at a total cost of £45,000,[24] although the Trust's internal financial summary puts the final cost at £53,000.[25] Photographs of this work under way became iconic images of the restoration project. In a manner that paralleled the significance accorded to the opening up of the staircase Venetian window, the laborious cleaning of the plasterwork became a process of great symbolic importance, embodying the rebirth of the house after years of neglect and decline.[26]

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[22] Johnson, 'Preliminary Report', pp. 3, 4.

[23] Letter from Francis Johnson to John Shannon, 21 December 1981. Fairfax House Archive.

[24] Illustration caption, centre spread (unpaginated), *York Civic Trust Annual Report 1982-83* (York: York Civic Trust, 1983); Brown, *Fairfax House York*, p. 15; Peter Brown, *Fairfax House York: An Illustrated History and Guide* (York: York Civic Trust, 2009), p. 5.

[25] Fairfax House expenditure summary, York Civic Trust, 1 September 1983, first page. Fairfax House Archive.

[26] The images were reproduced in every edition of the Fairfax House guidebook, in leaflets and explanatory booklets available in the house itself, and used in media reports of the restoration and re-opening of the house in the 1980s and 1990s.

Figure 7.4. Cleaning and repair of the plasterwork coving and ceiling in the south-eastern corner of the Drawing Room during the restoration of the house in 1983. The portion of coving on the left has had its covering of modern paint removed and has been cleaned down to the original plaster. On the section of coving to the right removal of the paint section by section is just beginning. The ceiling is still covered in modern paint awaiting removal, but the good quality of the original plasterwork under the paint can clearly be seen despite the blocking up of much fine detail. (Fairfax House Archive.)

Figure 7.5. Photograph taken in the summer of 1983 of the removal of the red paint applied by the cinema company from the Drawing Room ceiling. All this work was done by hand by employees of the York decorating firm Bellerby's. (Fairfax House Archive.)

While the vast majority of the eighteenth-century plasterwork in the main rooms of the house survived, it had all sustained varying levels of damage. There was cracking evident throughout the house, with some cracks – notably in the Saloon and the Dining Room – being deep enough to extend through the entire depth of the plaster, and wide enough to expose the underlying laths. More superficial cracks were widespread. Some areas of surface detail had been lost: vine leaves and parts of the oak circlets in the Saloon, foliage in the Dining Room, and significant portions of the figures on the coving of the Great Staircase ceiling including much of the goose's head. Cornices were damaged in every room, with the most severe damage in the Dining Room and the Viscount's Bedroom, where large sections were missing altogether. The plasterwork that gave most concern was the Dining Room ceiling. Leakage from the water closets which had been installed in the Viscount's Bedroom above had caused considerable damage to the north-eastern corner of the ceiling (**Figure 7.6**). Initially Francis Johnson had felt that entire removal of the ceiling in sections and complete refurbishment would be required, but after detailed examination he decided that only a portion of the ceiling would need to be taken down.[27] The final schedule of work specified

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[27] Record of preliminary meeting between architect (Francis F. Johnson and Partners), client (York Civic Trust) and contractors (William Birch and Sons Ltd), 11 November 1982, point no. 15. Fairfax House Archive.

Figure 7.6. Damaged portion of the Dining Room ceiling. All the original decorative plasterwork shown here was re-used when the ceiling was repaired and reinstated. (Fairfax House Archive.)

the removal of '40% of the whole ceiling area at the eastern end of the room' and the replastering of this area, including as full a recovery and reinstatement of the decorative plasterwork as was possible.[28]

Throughout this work the aim was to re-create the original 1760s plasterwork decoration as faithfully as possible. Although damage was severe in some areas it was not so extensive as to require the creation of very much entirely new work. The majority of the original decoration, even in badly damaged areas, could be re-used, while missing foliage and portions of figures could be reformed with reasonable fidelity to the originals through reference to the context and the use of evidence such as the photographs taken by Dr Evelyn in 1919 and other pictures taken in the course of the twentieth century. Thus, in the case of the damage to the Dining Room ceiling, the surviving portions of the plasterwork and photographic evidence together ensured that the re-created portion was true to the original in appearance;[29] however, original techniques were not used. The new portion of the

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[28] 'Fairfax House, York: Schedule of Work', November 1982, point no. 27 under 'Dining Room'. Fairfax House Archive.

[29] Francis Johnson, 'Fairfax House York: Resumé of the works being carried out for The York Civic Trust in restoring the building', handwritten document dated 24 October 1983, p. 3. Francis Johnson Archive, Hull History Centre.

Dining Room ceiling was fixed to expanded metal lath, not the wooden laths originally used, and gypsum plaster rather than lime plaster was used for new work and repairs. In some areas the modern plaster has proved to be too dense and to have too little key, resulting in portions becoming detached: an area of vine on the Saloon ceiling fell for these reasons in October 2016, and other areas have shown an increased tendency to crack and fragment since installation in the 1980s. The original lime plaster and its underlying structures have tended to be better at adjusting to the structural movement of the house than the repair work dating from the restoration.[30] This use of modern techniques is consistent with the approach used throughout the Fairfax House restoration. There was no policy of using the project as an opportunity to employ (and train people in) traditional building and decoration methods, as with the National Trust's restoration of Uppark House in Sussex following the fire there in 1989.[31] Thus the damaged treads of the Great Staircase were replaced with facsimiles cast in concrete, rolled steel joists were used to support floors and ceilings, and sections of the new walls at the rear of the house were constructed with concrete masonry blocks with an exterior facing of reclaimed nineteenth-century clamp bricks.[32] Traditional craft skills are in evidence at Fairfax House: York craftsmen worked on the moulding of replacement decorative plasterwork, the carving of new timber doorcases and other embellishments, and the provision of new cast iron railings and carved stone enrichments. Overall, however, for all the Civic Trust's emphasis on craft skills and of the modern workers 'literally following in the footsteps of master craftsmen of an earlier age',[33] this was a modern restoration project using modern materials and techniques.

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[30] I saw this damage personally, and was able to examine the fallen fragments of the ceiling decoration, for which opportunity I would like to thank Hannah Phillip and the staff at Fairfax House. I am also grateful to Richard Ireland (discussion and correspondence in 2012) and Sarah Mayfield (correspondence in 2016) for sharing their expertise on these points. Discussion and subsequent correspondence with Leonard S. Grandison of L. Grandison and Son, Peebles, Curator of the Cornice Museum of Decorative Plasterwork in Peebles, also helped to clarify many of the issues relating to modern and traditional plasterwork, and I am very grateful to Mr Grandison for his generous assistance.

[31] Christopher Rowell and John Martin Robinson, *Uppark Restored* (London: National Trust, 1996); 'Lost skills relearnt at Uppark', *The Times*, 10 September 1993, p. 4.

[32] Johnson, 'Fairfax House York: Resumé of the works', pp. 1, 6-7; Brown, *Fairfax House York* (1989), pp. 39-40; Brown, *Fairfax House York* (2009), pp. 8, 10-11.

[33] 'Fairfax House', *York Civic Trust Annual Report 1982-83* (York: York Civic Trust, 1983), p. 9.

Interior questions: furnishing, decoration

The interior of the house was of central importance in the restoration project, and, as the discussion above indicates, the question of how it was to be decorated preoccupied Francis Johnson and the Civic Trust from the outset. At the beginning of 1983, Francis Johnson prepared a 'Schedule of Painters and Decorators Work' for Fairfax House, listing all the preparation and painting work required for the exterior and interior of the house.[34] The schedule summarises the plastering and other preparation needed in each room and the scheme for painting the woodwork and window frames and the ceiling plasterwork. At this stage the final colour for most of the walls had yet to be decided: a note on the first page of the schedule says that 'Scrapes have been made and a fairly clear idea of the original colourings in the House itself has been obtained thereby'.[35] The Library is marked as 'colour to be selected', the Exhibition Room as 'colour to be chosen', the second floor flat as 'colour again to be decided upon'.[36] In the case of the Dining Room it had been decided that the colour would be blue, but the precise shade was 'to be chosen'.[37] For the Great Staircase a 'Grey Blue' was specified for the walls, while the Entrance Hall was to be painted 'Pearl Grey'.[38] The two first-floor bedrooms were to be hung with wallpaper and the Drawing Room and Saloon were to be decorated with 'stretched fabric' wall hangings in 'Sage Green Moiré' and 'probably Warm Crimson Damask' respectively.[39] It is notable that not all the decorative plasterwork was to be plain white: this point is discussed in more detail below. In the first instance it is worth examining how these colours were selected, and what relationship they bear to the evidence for the actual eighteenth-century decorative scheme in the house.

In his letter of 26 February 1979 reporting on his visit to the house, Francis Johnson recommended that in removing the 'badly broken coatings of paintwork which have accumulated over the centuries … careful investigation should be made as to the original colours employed. These might have a very important

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[34] 'Fairfax House, Castlegate, York: Schedule of Painters and Decorators Work', initialled 'FFJ' for Francis Johnson and dated 17 February 1983. Hull History Centre, Francis Johnson Archive.
[35] 'Schedule of Painters and Decorators Work', p. 1.
[36] 'Schedule of Painters and Decorators Work', pp. 2, 7, 8.
[37] 'Schedule of Painters and Decorators Work', p. 3.
[38] 'Schedule of Painters and Decorators Work', p. 1, 2.
[39] 'Schedule of Painters and Decorators Work', pp. 5, 7.

bearing on the redecoration of the house'.[40] The detailed Fairfax House guidebook published in 1989 noted that beneath the later additions and alterations to the structure the 'great majority of Fairfax House's original decoration had thankfully survived', and records that during the restoration 'the colour scheme [was] reproduced, based on scrapings taken throughout the house'.[41] Filed with the 'Schedule of Painters and Decorators Work' in the Francis Johnson Archive is an undated document bearing the simple heading 'Fairfax House' and with the explanatory rubric 'Following our investigation at the above we found the colours in various rooms as listed below'.[42] While this document is filed with material from Johnson's office it may very well have been produced by the decorators (the York firm Bellerby's) or some external consultant, as the terminology used for the rooms is such as might have been used by a person unfamiliar with the layout and nomenclature of the house: the Drawing Room, for example, is referred to as 'First Floor. Front: Small Room to Left' and the Dining Room as 'Ground Floor. Room to left facing front door'.[43] It seems reasonable to suppose that the scrapes were taken in early 1983, at around the same time that the 'Schedule' was being compiled. It is notable that in every room the colour of the ceiling and cornices is given as 'off white' with the exception of the Entrance Hall, which is described as 'off white light stone', and the Great Staircase, for which 'ceiling, cornice and ornament' are given as 'stone colour'. The walls of the Entrance Hall are simply given as 'blue', of the Library as 'Sienna colour', of the Dining Room as 'blue', while on the first floor the Drawing Room walls are described as being covered in 'stretched material', the walls of the two bedrooms as 'cream', and the Great Staircase itself as having 'blue' walls. No information is given for the Saloon.[44]

As a record of paint scrape data this document is extremely sketchy: no information is given on the precise location of the scrapes, how many scrapes were taken in each room, no record is given of the layering of paint and other wall coverings that must have been uncovered, and the description of paint shades is vague in the extreme. If any more detailed information was recorded during the

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[40] Letter, Francis Johnson to John Shannon, 26 February 1979, p. 3. Hull History Centre, Francis Johnson Archive

[41] Brown, *Fairfax House York* (1989), p. 11.

[42] 'Fairfax House paint investigation summary'. Undated, untitled and unpaginated document. Hull History Centre, Francis Johnson Archive.

[43] 'Fairfax House Paint investigation summary'.

[44] 'Fairfax House Paint investigation summary'.

restoration it has not come to light. It is not clear of what value this document may have been to the restorers of the house, or what role it played in the decisions taken as to the scheme of interior decoration to be followed. It is notable, however, that the colour scheme applied in the 1980s (and which remains in place in 2017) reflects the specifications in this document, as well as being broadly representative of mid-eighteenth-century decorative practice. Ceilings, cornices and plasterwork in all rooms are finished in matt off white, and on the ceiling and cornice of the Great Staircase the background to the decorative plasterwork is picked out in a pale pink. The walls of the Entrance Hall and Great Staircase are blue, the Library walls are painted a brownish yellow, while the walls of the Dining Room are blue (in a rather darker shade than that of the Entrance Hall and Great Staircase). On the first floor the bedrooms are both papered and the Drawing Room is hung with green cotton damask, while the Saloon (which is not covered in the paint investigation summary) is hung in red cotton damask. In the case of these latter two rooms documents exist among the Fairfax family papers recording the purchase of silk damask for the decoration of these rooms, which brings us to the second issue bearing upon the interior decoration of Fairfax House: the role of primary evidence from the period of the house's refurbishment and redecoration in the 1760s.

The decorator who carried out the interior painting and decoration at Fairfax House in 1762-3 was Samuel Carpenter, who had worked at the Assembly Rooms in 1755 and was admitted as a Freeman of the City of York by birthright in 1758.[45] In October 1762 he quoted prices for a range of painting work at Fairfax House including 'Stucco neatly done 4 times over at 9d p yard dead white' and 'Corners Ceilings included at 9d p yard 4 times over dead white'.[46] The painting white of decorative plasterwork, including all ceilings and cornices, was an entirely standard colour scheme in the 1760s.[47] The Fairfaxes also obtained a quote from Thomas Fothergill, whose prices were slightly cheaper: 'To Dead

[45] RCHM(E), *York: Volume V*, p. 102; Beard, *Craftsmen and Interior Decoration in England*, p. 149; *Admission Register of Freemen of the City of York*, City of York Archives Y/COU/3/1, vol. 5, p. 122, transcribed in Francis Collins (ed), *Register of the Freemen of the City of York. Volume 2: 1559-1759* (Durham: Surtees Society, 1900), p. 284.
[46] 'Mr Carpenters prices, Octr 1762', Fairfax Papers, North Yorkshire County Record Office, ZDV/F.
[47] Ian C. Bristow, *Interior House-Painting Colours and Technology 1615-1840* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 111.

White 3 or 4 times over at 7d pr yard'.[48] Three coats of paint would be regarded as the absolute minimum for painting plasterwork, with four coats being more usual[49] – possibly the suggestion from Fothergill that three would be used suggested to his potential clients that he might cut corners. For whatever reason, the Fairfaxes evidently chose Carpenter even though he was more expensive, as he was paid £9.0.0 in June 1762 and £21.0.0 in June 1763 for painting he had carried out at Fairfax House.[50] When it comes to evidence about what colours may have been used in the house interior, Carpenter's quotes are less informative than Fothergill's, as the latter gives some indication of the paint colours specified: apart from gloss and matt or 'dead' white, 'Pale Blew' and 'Fine Blew' are listed, along with 'Ollive', 'Stone Colour' and 'Green Colour'.[51] The colours given in this quote would have followed the specifications given by the Fairfaxes (via Reynoldson) and Carpenter would have followed the same specification, as is shown by an account dated 9 October 1762 which summarises the work done up to that point. The document is incomplete and does not give details for the ground floor rooms, but does specify the finishes for the first floor and the attic rooms. The rooms on the first floor were all decorated with hung fabric or wallpaper (discussed below), but the attic rooms were painted, with the colours given as 'Green', 'Stone ground' and 'blew', reflecting the 'Green Colour', 'Stone Colour' and the two shades of 'Blew'.[52] This information would have given some degree of documentary justification for painting the attic rooms, but, as the attic was not restored to its mid-eighteenth-century condition and was instead re-ordered as offices and a flat for the custodian this question did not arise. Contemporary documentation, meanwhile, provided some information for the first floor of the house (discussed below), but no direct information about the ground floor rooms. The information thus available to the restorers, if they sought to re-create an 'authentic' interior paint scheme, consisted of limited original records, the evidence gleaned from paint scrapes, and information from other houses of similar

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[48] 'Prices of Painting', Fairfax Papers, North Yorkshire County Record Office, ZDV/F.

[49] Bristow, *Interior House-Painting*, p. 109.

[50] Receipts dated 9 June 1762 and 21 June 1763 from Samuel Carpenter, Fairfax Papers, North Yorkshire County Record Office, ZDV/F. The accounts were paid through George Reynoldson, a York decorator, furnisher and haberdasher who acted as agent for many of the Fairfaxes' household transactions both for their York house and for Gilling Castle.

[51] 'Prices of Painting', Fairfax Papers, North Yorkshire County Record Office, ZDV/F.

[52] Account from Samuel Carpenter dated 9 October 1762. Fairfax Papers, North Yorkshire County Record Office, ZDV/F.

period and character. These all played a role, but in the final analysis it was the personal taste and inclinations of Francis Johnson that appear to have been the single most influential factor in shaping the decorative scheme applied to the interior of the house.

Francis Johnson had strong views on interior decoration and favoured colour and character rather than blandness and restraint.[53] Given the right kind of interior and an amenable client, Johnson would seize the opportunity to create 'a *tour de force* of rich architectural decoration' quite different from 'his usual austere astylar classicism'.[54] Such richness of effect can be seen, for example, in his interiors at Thorpe Tinley in Lincolnshire, Leck Hall in Lancashire, and Sledmere House, East Yorkshire.[55] At Fairfax House Johnson was working within the constraints of the existing Georgian interior with its carved wood and moulded plaster decoration, and as we have seen a certain amount of surviving information about possible earlier colour schemes; but this did not mean that he took a cautious or minimalist approach to the decoration. His comments in a letter of 9 December 1981 to John Shannon make clear that any evidence of original colour schemes obtainable from paint scrapes would not be treated prescriptively but as a starting point, and an optional one at that: 'Weren't you tickled about the Beningbrough decorations? I think that that gives us carte blanche. We can take scrapes and merely use the colours when it suits'.[56] The allusion to 'the Beningbrough decorations' is a reference to the late 1970s redecoration of Beningbrough Hall, an early eighteenth-century National Trust house a few miles north of York, by John Fowler and David Mlinaric, for whom paint scrapes and evidence of the house's eighteenth-century appearance were a starting point rather than being prescriptive.[57] The final result was informed by original evidence but was individual and contemporary: its restricted colour palate and lack of

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[53] Robinson and Neave, *Francis Johnson Architect*, pp. 43, 49.

[54] Robinson and Neave, *Francis Johnson Architect*, p. 73.

[55] Robinson and Neave, *Francis Johnson Architect*, pp. 72-4, 258-9, 266-7, 268.

[56] Letter from Francis Johnson to John Shannon, 9 December 1981, p. 2. Francis Johnson Archive, Hull History Centre.

[57] Cornforth, *Inspiration of the Past*, pp. 53-4; Jennifer Jenkins and Patrick James, *From Acorn to Oak Tree: The Growth of the National Trust 1895-1994* (London: Macmillan, 1994), p. 274; John Cornforth, 'A new direction at Beningbrough', *Country Life*, 7 June 1979, pp. 1856-7; Jane Hatcher, 'Beningbrough Hall: preservation and renewal', *York Georgian Society Annual Report 1980*, pp. 12-15; 'A picture of success: the restoration of Beningbrough Hall, Yorkshire', *Architects Journal*, vol. 169 (6 June 1979), pp. 1157-8; Martin Stancliffe, 'Begin with basic principles: restoration at Beningbrough Hall', *Antique Collector*, vol. 51, no. 8 (August 1980), pp. 40-3.

ornament, what *The Burlington Magazine* described as the expression of 'academic restraint rather than a sense of popular drama',[58] was the result of the designers' tastes and aesthetic choices rather than of a cautious archaeological approach. The new scheme was well-received in many quarters but Francis Johnson clearly felt it to be cold and dull. John Shannon, replying to Johnson's letter, endorsed the latter's view regarding the decorations: 'Like you I am most anxious that the visitor to the house is touched by the splendour of it, and I am particularly anxious to avoid the coldness of Beningbrough, however much it may please the purists'.[59]

Johnson was determined that the interior decoration of Fairfax House would have a distinctive character of its own, in accordance with his own interpretation of the spirit of mid-eighteenth-century decoration. As his 9 December 1981 letter makes clear, evidence of actual contemporary decorative schemes, whether material or documentary, was merely one issue to be considered, and by no means necessarily the decisive one. He went on to explain that his concerns were as much for aesthetics as for accuracy, and he was happy to trust his own judgement as to how the spirit or character of a mid-eighteenth-century interior was best to be conveyed: 'The impact of one room from another has to be considered and is very important in deciding the colours to be used and in a house of this period I don't think that they would be very wishy-washy but fairly positive'.[60]

The decoration Johnson sought for the interior of the house was certainly not 'wishy-washy'. In the Saloon, for example, he wanted 'somebody to give us the rich red crimson damask with which to clothe the upper part of the walls', which was clearly a personal preference, although he also argued that it was typical of the decoration of mid-eighteenth-century saloons and thus historically justified: 'I am pretty certain it would be hung in this way in Viscount Fairfax's time'.[61] There was evidence for this view in an estimate from Samuel Carpenter which is dated 9 October 1762 (the same date as the separate document dealing with painting which is discussed above) and gives details of wallpaper and fabric decoration at

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[58] John Ingamells, 'Beningbrough Hall', *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 121, no. 916 (July 1979), p. 460.

[59] Letter from John Shannon to Francis Johnson, 4 January 1982. Francis Johnson Archive, Hull History Centre.

[60] Letter from Francis Johnson to John Shannon, 9 December 1981, p. 2. Francis Johnson Archive, Hull History Centre.

[61] Letter from Francis Johnson to John Shannon, 6 January 1982. Francis Johnson Archive, Hull History Centre.

Fairfax House.[62] 'Green Flock' is specified for the Viscount's bed chamber and 'blew Flock' for his dressing room, both at 7½d per yard, and 'Mock India' for Anne's bed chamber, at a much more expensive 1s 3d per yard. Also specified are 'Crimson Flock' at 8½d per yard for an unidentified room referred to as the 'Back Chamber'. The location of the 'Chapell', decorated in 'Yellow Flock' at 7½d per yard, is likewise obscure: an attic location has been suggested[63] but it may have been on the first floor, a supposition strengthened by the fact that the 'Attick Rooms' in Carpenter's estimate are listed separately. These 'Attick' rooms are given as 'Front on Right Hand', 'Next on Right Hand', and 'Left Hand', to be decorated with wallpaper in 'Green', 'Stone ground' and 'blew' respectively. Carpenter notes that the 'Parlor' is to be hung with 'Crimson Flock 21 In wide at 8½d p yd'. If this refers to the room now known as the Saloon it provides support for Johnson's own decorative scheme; however, it may refer to the present Drawing Room, as elsewhere in the Fairfax documentation the current 'Saloon' is called the 'Drawing Room'. In any case, Johnson's arguments were not uncontested. In March 1983 John Cornforth wrote John Shannon a long letter giving his views on, among other things, the appropriate decorative treatment for the house. He saw the Saloon, with the Drawing Room, as 'the background to the best Rococo furniture', but – reflecting his choice of the word 'background' – argued for a less assertive quality to the decoration:

> I know Francis hankers after damask and a chandelier, but I think that would be too rich looking and also too dominant for the furniture … I still stick to the idea of a painted plain paper with sheets of the right size and the colour relating to the marble chimneypiece. I think the furniture would look good against a clear yellow, and then the curtains should be in tone too. I do not think a chandelier a good idea because that is so unTerry.[64]

Cornforth clearly felt that the proposed decorative scheme for the Saloon, complete with red damask and chandelier, had far more to do with Francis

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[62] Estimate from Samuel Carpenter dated 9 October 1762. Fairfax Papers, North Yorkshire County Record Office, ZDV/F.
[63] Webb, *Fairfax of York*, p. 144.
[64] Letter from John Cornforth to John Shannon, 15 March 1982. Fairfax House Archive.

Johnson than with what was appropriate for the house and the Terry collection, and was indeed a betrayal of the spirit of the latter: 'unTerry'.

The degree to which this *was* indeed a personal vision is indicated by a watercolour sketch Johnson produced of the proposed decorative treatment of the Saloon, now in the Francis Johnson Archive, which is undated but must be from very early in the restoration process – or possibly even before the sale to the York Civic Trust was made – as it shows no wall between the Saloon and the Drawing Room.[65] As discussed earlier, this reflects the City Council's plans for the house but not those of the Civic Trust which from the beginning envisaged the full reinstatement of the missing walls at either end of the Saloon. The sketch of the Saloon is accompanied by another of the Great Staircase. Both drawings are annotated in Francis Johnson's hand, and the notes on the Saloon drawing give some details of the proposed treatment of other rooms. The schemes indicated are colourful and elaborate. The first drawing (**Figure 7.7**) lays out Johnson's vision of the rich decoration he envisaged for the Saloon. The wall between dado and frieze is finished in red, which an annotation in the top right corner indicates is to be 'warm crimson or Indian Red'. The lower part of the walls was to be painted 'beige'. The scrolling plasterwork frieze was not to be plain white but would have its detail picked out in an unspecified colour. On the same illustration the walls of the Drawing Room are indicated as 'gold damask' with dado and carved timberwork in 'grey & white', while the main colours for the Dining Room and Library are given as 'pea green & white or parchment' and 'blue & white or green & white' respectively. Detail of the fireplace was to be picked out with gilding, although there is also a warning note exemplifying the balancing act Johnson was performing between his own inclinations and what the evidence would support: 'unless gilding discovered avoid'. The illustration of the decoration proposed for the Great Staircase (**Figure 7.8**) shows the walls finished in a 'warm stone colour' with a query added and answered: '?Lined as ashlar? I think not'. The skirting of the staircase and landing is to be 'Black and Gold Marbling' and the busts, when back in place on the walls, were to be finished in 'dark bronze'. The skirting of the staircase and landing was to be 'Black and Gold Marbling' and the busts, when back in place on the walls, were to be finished in 'dark bronze'. The

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[65] The two watercolour sketches of the Saloon and the Great Staircase are among Johnson's plans and elevations for Fairfax House held by the Francis Johnson Archive at Hull History Centre.

Figure 7.7. Watercolour sketch by Francis Johnson, undated but from early in the restoration of 1982–4, indicating his proposed decorative scheme for the Saloon at Fairfax House. (Francis Johnson Archive, Hull History Centre.)

skirting of the staircase and landing was to be 'Black and Gold Marbling' and the busts, when back in place on the walls, were to be finished in 'dark bronze'. The central recessed portion of the arch over the main window, and the backgrounds to the busts (where they are enclosed by the surrounding plasterwork palm fronds), were to be 'Dark Grey'.

Johnson's interest in using different shades of colour on the plasterwork is particularly notable. Georgian interior decoration provided plenty of inspiration for the use of colour on plasterwork. During the 1720s and into the 1730s gilding was sometimes employed to highlight particular elements of ceilings, cornices and friezes, while from the 1760s onwards the rise of the Neoclassical style with its 'archaeological' inspiration saw a marked revival of colour as ceilings were painted in colours based on rediscovered ancient Roman interiors. But, as noted earlier, for decoration dating from the middle of the eighteenth century, as is the case at Fairfax House, an all-over finish of plain white or off-white was the rule.[66] Francis Johnson was clearly interested in using a more varied approach to painting the Fairfax House interior plasterwork, using a range of colour treatments to highlight particular points in the interior and introduce a sense of variety and even drama to particular rooms. As noted above, he proposed at one stage that a dark grey be used as background to the stucco embellishments on the Great Staircase walls, presumably to make the 'dark bronze' busts stand out more clearly. The 'Schedule of Painters and Decorators Work' of 17 February 1983 contains a number of other recommendations for the plasterwork: the ceilings to be painted white in the Entrance Hall, Library, Drawing Room and Saloon, while the Dining Room ceiling was to be white but with the cornice painted a pale stone colour.[67] The plain ceilings and the cornices of the two bedrooms were to be plain white. The plasterwork medallion of Roma Aeterna and the brackets and enrichments on the staircase walls were to be painted in a pale stone colour, as were the cornices, 'with the high ceiling of the staircase to be picked out with darker colour'.[68] The ceiling and cornice in the Saloon were to be 'off white', as was the frieze, but in the latter case the painters were initially instructed to 'pick out the background

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[66] Beard, *Decorative Plasterwork*, pp. 19-20; Bristow, *Interior House-Painting*, pp. 108-9, 111; Cornforth, *Early Georgian Interiors*, pp. 125-6; Fowler and Cornforth, *English Decoration in the 18th Century*, pp. 67, 176-8, 184-5; Christopher Christie, *The British Country House in the Eighteenth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 54-5.
[67] 'Schedule of Painters and Decorators Work', pp. 1-4, 6-7.
[68] 'Schedule of Painters and Decorators Work', p. 2.

Figure 7.8. Watercolour sketch by Francis Johnson of proposed decorative treatments for the Great Staircase at Fairfax House. The sketch is undated but clearly contemporary with the sketch of the Saloon (Figure 7.7), and dates from early in the restoration. (Francis Johnson Archive, Hull History Centre.)

in colour to be selected'.[69] This was not followed through, however, and the frieze was painted plain white. The question of the Saloon ceiling arose again while the restoration work was ongoing, in August 1983, when Bellerby's, the firm dealing

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[69] 'Schedule of Painters and Decorators Work', p. 6.

with the decoration of the house, prepared a sample section of the Saloon ceiling 'with the "flat" areas painted a slightly darker shade so as to throw the decorative work into relief'.[70] The notion of a darker background to the decorative plasterwork was clearly still being considered at this stage. However, at the next site meeting in the early September, while it was noted that the 'sample area of flat ceiling to be painted to throw the decorative work into relief is still to be provided', Francis Johnson was now urging a cautious approach to such treatment, which 'would only be used if absolutely necessary and possibly not at all'.[71] Ultimately the ceilings were all finished in plain white with the exception of the Great Staircase, where the elaborate decoration of the flat ceiling and the cornice was finished in white with a background of pale pink. There is no rationale in the documentary records of the restoration for this choice, but it is notable that Johnson used colour backgrounds to eighteenth-century plasterwork which would almost certainly have originally been plain white in a number of his other commissions, including Heath Hall near Wakefield, a John Carr house with plasterwork by Cortese, which Johnson restored in 1961-65.[72] Here the decoration enhances the elaborate delicacy of the plasterwork, and presumably this was also Johnson's aim in the Great Staircase of Fairfax House.

Francis Johnson: architect of restoration

The architect who had written so enthusiastically of Fairfax House's potential in 1979 and would in due course oversee the restoration of the house wrote of himself in 1992 that 'I am a dyed in the wool traditionalist and have never really fitted into the milieu of modernism'.[73] Francis Johnson was born in Bridlington in 1911 and trained at Leeds School of Architecture He identified himself at an early stage with the classical architectural tradition and worked exclusively in the

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[70] Fairfax House site meeting records, site meeting no. 19 (25 August 1983), point 7(a). Fairfax House Archive.

[71] Fairfax House site meeting records, site meeting no. 20 (8 September 1983), point 7(a). Fairfax House Archive.

[72] Robinson and Neave, *Francis Johnson Architect*, pp. 100-1, 252-4, pl. 118.

[73] Lecture given to the Institute of Advanced Architectural Studies, University of York, 22 June 1992: quoted in Robinson and Neave, *Francis Johnson Architect*, p. 220.

classical style. He died in 1995 and was active almost to the very end of his life.[74] Johnson was primarily a domestic architect working on country houses, although his designs for churches were also notable: his new buildings and extensions to existing structures were in a robust and inventive classical style. He also worked extensively on restorations, particularly of later eighteenth-century buildings, and regarded his work as architect of the restoration of Fairfax House as the summit of his career as both architect and restoration expert.[75]

Francis Johnson was an architect with a strongly regional identity.[76] Born in Bridlington and trained in Leeds, his first architectural post was with a Hull-based partnership before he left after two years to establish his own practice in Bridlington, where he remained for the rest of his career and where his firm continues to operate today. Johnson's connection with York was via the Merchant Adventurers' Company rather than the Civic Trust: through the recommendation of Charles Needham, City Engineer at York City Council, he became architect to both the Merchant Adventurers' and the Merchant Taylors' companies.[77] In 1966 the Civic Trust was given a seventeenth-century town house at 17/19 Aldwark (subsequently named Oliver Sheldon House), adjacent to the Merchant Taylors' Hall, and selected Johnson as architect for the restoration of the building.[78] John Shannon noted in his 1996 history of the Civic Trust that this 'was our first employment of Mr Johnson, and it was the beginning of most fruitful association, culminating in the superb restoration many years later of Fairfax House'.[79] From 1971 Johnson was the architect for the restoration of the Church of All Saints in North Street, financed by the Civic Trust,[80] and upon the completion of the work in 1975 the Trust's *Annual Report* paid tribute to 'the skill, discernment, sympathy, and above all the unbounded generosity, of the architect, Francis Johnson'.[81] By the middle of the 1970s Johnson occupied a unique place as the

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[74] 'Obituary: Francis Johnson', *The Times*, 13 October 1995, p. 23.
[75] Robinson and Neave, *Francis Johnson*, pp. 53, 106.
[76] Cornforth, *Inspiration of the Past*, p. 48.
[77] Robinson and Neave, *Francis Johnson Architect*, p. 41.
[78] '17/19 Aldwark', *York Civic Trust Annual Report 1966-67* (York: York Civic Trust, 1967), pp. 7-8, '17/19 Aldwark', *York Civic Trust Annual Report 1967-68* (York: York Civic Trust, 1968), p. 6; 'Oliver Sheldon House', *York Civic Trust Annual Report 1968-69* (York: York Civic Trust, 1969), p. 22.
[79] Shannon, *York Civic Trust*, p. 51.
[80] 'Angels', *York Civic Trust Annual Report 1971-72* (York: York Civic Trust, 1967), pp. 10-12.
[81] 'All Saints', North Street', *York Civic Trust Annual Report 1976-77* (York: York Civic Trust, 1977), p. 7.

informal 'architect to the Trust' and was the natural candidate when it came to considering the most ambitious architectural project the Trust had yet considered: the restoration of Fairfax House.

The Civic Trust was in discussion with Francis Johnson about Fairfax House from at least the mid-1970s, and in early 1977 John Shannon seems to have had a detailed discussion with the architect about his involvement in the planned restoration of the house. There is no record of that meeting, but Johnson wrote to Shannon shortly afterwards expressing his enthusiastic interest in the project: 'It was very kind of you to bring up this matter and my own possible involvement with it. As you very rightly guessed it is something in which I should be very deeply interested and in which I would greatly enjoy having a hand provided that the City Architect is not inimical to the idea'.[82] Johnson does not appear to have inspected the inside of the house himself at this stage, but relied for his impressions of it on photographs provided by John Shannon: 'My eyes have literally devoured the photographs which you lent me'.[83] He commented on the very fine interiors, the staircase and its wrought iron balustrade, and placed particular emphasis on the plasterwork, writing that 'the sheer splendour of it all makes me think of that Valhalla of stucco work, Dublin. I should think that Cortese is the likely author. I have compared the photos with other work by him'.[84] Johnson was familiar with Cortese's work, having restored plasterwork by him at Heath Hall near Wakefield in the early 1960s.[85] Johnson said nothing in this letter about the exterior of the house, but repeatedly emphasised the richness of the interiors, writing that they gave Fairfax House a quality that no other Georgian townhouse open to the public possessed, and stressing, in a passage that he would echo in his 1979 letter, their importance in making the house a potentially successful tourist attraction:

> Bath and Edinburgh have both embarked upon restorations of
> houses of this kind and duly furnished them and provided a

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[82] Letter from Francis Johnson to John Shannon, 24 February 1977, p. 1. Hull History Centre, Francis Johnson Archive. The reference to the attitude of the City Architect reflects the expectation at this stage that York City Council would be restoring Fairfax House as a museum with Civic Trust involvement, rather than the Trust acquiring the house itself.
[83] Letter from Francis Johnson to John Shannon, 24 February 1977, p. 1.
[84] Letter from Francis Johnson to John Shannon, 24 February 1977, p. 1.
[85] Richardson and Neave, *Francis Johnson Architect*, pp. 100-102.

> much appreciated tourist amenity in their cities … The point
> here however is that neither the house in Bath nor Edinburgh
> can compare in any degree with the interiors of Fairfax House,
> York, and I think that if the Corporation were to charge admission
> they would be astonished how successful it would be.[86]

In 1979, as we have seen, he visited Fairfax House at the invitation of John Shannon. By the early 1980s, as the Trust pressed ahead with the acquisition of Fairfax House, it was confirmed that Francis Johnson, 'whose experience of restoring 18th-century architecture is unsurpassed', would be appointed architect of the restoration.[87]

Fairfax House: furnishing an identity

The 'Fairfax House' with which Francis Johnson and the Civic Trust concerned themselves, and which ultimately emerged from the restoration of the 1980s, was essentially the core of the original town house. The alterations associated with the conversion of the building into a cinema and dance hall in the early twentieth century saw outbuildings and rearward extensions, the outlines of which are visible on Ordnance Survey maps prior to the First World War, demolished and replaced by additions such as the cinema auditorium and related structures. During the discussions of possible restorations and conversions to museum use during the 1960s and 1970s it was always this core of the building that was the focus of attention, consisting of Library, Dining Room and Kitchen on the ground floor and Saloon, Drawing Room, the Viscount's Bedroom and his daughter Anne's Bedroom on the first floor. These rooms, with the linking spaces of Entrance Hall, Rear Hall and two staircases with their landings, are today the parts of the house accessible to modern visitors. The former entrance to the cinema, built into the ground floor of the house which was built directly adjoining Fairfax House in the 1840s, now forms the entrance and shop area, and above it is a room used for temporary exhibitions. The third floor of the main house was used for

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[86] Letter from Francis Johnson to John Shannon, 24 February 1977, pp. 1-2.
[87] 'Fairfax House', *York Civic Trust Annual Report 1980-81* (York: York Civic Trust, 1981), p. 29.

bedrooms, and a long gallery in the 1760s and is now occupied by administrative offices, storage space and the Director's flat. There is also a small basement, some staff facilities on the ground floor and an attic, none of which is open to the public. Fairfax House as it exists today is thus a complex mixture of spaces dating from different periods and each with its history of changing uses, changes in nomenclature and physical alteration. This reflects the house's history which is very varied and untidy. As discussed above that history was stabilised during the restoration essentially through aesthetic choices: a very brief period of the house's history, the decade from the early 1760s to the early 1770s when the Fairfaxes were in residence, was chosen as the era which the restored house would evoke. Thus a stable interpretation was erected around the discontinuities and fluctuations of the house's history just as the inadequacies of the fabric were remedied by the physical interventions of the restoration process.

The decision to privilege the mid-eighteenth century in the restoration was not an arbitrary one: it reflected the influence of a tradition of 'New Georgianism' in twentieth-century York, strongly associated with York Civic Trust and the York Georgian Society, which sought to place the Georgian era at the heart of York's self-perception and bring its influence, chiefly aesthetic but also in many ways moral and ethical, to bear upon the modern era. In that sense Fairfax House was an ideal location for the physical expression of these ideas: it was authentically Georgian, prominently located, and was laden with genuine surviving eighteenth-century decorative and architectural features and accompanied by an extensive body of archival records relating to its eighteenth-century history. At the same time, and paradoxically, it was also in important respects a blank canvas: the archival records were far from complete, the alterations to the house over the years had thoroughly disrupted the original interior arrangements and obscured the original uses of the rooms and, importantly, there were no original contents.

The restoration was primarily concerned with the house as a physical containing fabric, a position strengthened by the long-standing emphasis in architectural-historical and aesthetic discourse about Fairfax House on the interior rather than the exterior. In this conceptualisation of the house, the plasterwork came to inhabit a mediating role between interior and exterior, transmuting the disappointing character of the much-altered front and rear facades into the truly

Georgian environment of the interiors. Within those spaces nothing of the original furniture or other fittings had survived from the eighteenth century, and significant elements of the Georgian decorative interiors themselves – notably fireplaces – had been removed or dramatically altered.[88] Nonetheless, the main rooms with their wealth of plasterwork decoration and carved timberwork retained a powerfully mid-Georgian character, and this was recognised in the various schemes put forward for the restoration of the house as a tourist attraction in the 1970s when the building was in the hands of York City Council. As we have seen, the concept behind these proposals was very much one of a museum rather than a restored townhouse: much of what is now the drawing room, for example, would have been given over to displays of eighteenth-century musical instruments in glass cases, and the furniture would have been positioned and displayed in a conventionally museological manner, classed by period and maker, rather than seeking to reflect the ways in which such pieces might have been positioned and used in an actual mid-Georgian house.[89] This attitude not only reflected prevailing museological ideas, it also reflected the connection then existing between the house and the neighbouring Castle Museum, with its celebrated displays of recreated historical interiors. The Civic Trust approached the restoration with a different aim: that of creating an 'authentic' eighteenth-century townhouse interior, appropriately decorated and furnished.

The Civic Trust's ambitions in this respect were shaped during the latter half of the 1970s by the knowledge that the collection of Georgian English furniture acquired by Noel Terry would in all likelihood become available to them.[90] Their hope was that the acquisition of the furniture collection and of Fairfax House would form a never-to-be-repeated beneficial conjunction, bringing into their hands a Georgian house that needed furnishing and a Georgian furniture collection that needed housing. That is indeed what happened. Subsequent narratives of the restoration would highlight the offer of the furniture to the Civic Trust by Noel Terry's trustees as a crucial factor in persuading the house's then owners, York City Council, to sell it to the Civic Trust:

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[88] Brown, *Fairfax House York* (1989), pp. 15, 17, 27, 28, 30, 38.
[89] *Fairfax House: Proposals for Restoration* (York: York City Council, 1976).
[90] Brown, *Noel Terry Collection*, pp. 6-7.

> … when the York Civic Trust broached the idea of restoring
> Fairfax House in the centre of York as a permanent home for the
> collection, it offered the best possible solution. The house,
> which belonged to York City Council was unquestionably the
> finest Georgian town house in York with superb plaster work
> ceilings by the Italian master *stuccattore* [*sic*] Joseph Cortese
> and was a natural home for the Collection. Earlier approaches by
> the Trust to the City Council with the object of buying the house
> had met with an indeterminate response but this was to change
> in the light of the Trust's offer and the Council finally agreed to
> sell the house.[91]

In this passage a link is made between the plasterwork decoration of the house and
the suitability of the interiors to receive the collection. This reflected the fact that
the furniture Noel Terry had acquired possessed a coherence in date, national
origin and character. The majority of the pieces in the collection were mid-
Georgian (*c*.1740-*c*.1780), English in manufacture and 'domestic' in scale. They
were thus seen as suited to representing the furnishing of a mid-Georgian English
townhouse which, while richly decorated, was by no means opulent or palatial.
The high quality of the pieces added a further dimension to the restored house's
identification with 'craftsmanship'. These aspects of the collection reflected Noel
Terry's personal interests and enthusiasms and the collecting opportunities that
had been available to him. Yet this personal aspect also rendered the collection in
some ways idiosyncratic and unrepresentative once transferred to the setting of
the restored Fairfax House, and in some respects compromised the purity of the
'restored Georgian townhouse' conception. That this was recognised by the Civic
Trust from the beginning is attested by Peter Brown's observations in the
foreword to the Trust's catalogue of the Terry Collection:

> The presentation of the collection within Fairfax House has
> required several compromises in order that the integrity of both

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[91] Peter Brown, *The Noel Terry Collection of Furniture and Clocks* (York: York Civic Trust,
1987), p. 4. Joseph Cortese was invariably referred to as 'Italian' in York Civic Trust publications
throughout the 1980s and 1990s, a usage that followed eighteenth-century practice.

be maintained. A 20th century English gentleman's taste does not necessarily coincide with that of the 18th century Viscount for whom the house was built and it is unlikely that the house would have been arranged as we see it today.

Noel Terry bought each piece on its own merit and was not interested in creating or fashioning interiors in the style of the 18th century. The items have therefore been spread throughout the house in a logical manner, so that the vast majority may be enjoyed by all.[92]

In 1985 *Country Life* published a two-part article by John Cornforth to mark the opening of Fairfax House to the public following the restoration.[93] Although Cornforth had strong criticisms of the restoration and the way the house was presented, the idea of restoration as salvation nevertheless pervades his account: the miraculous transformation of the house from a neglected, near-derelict shell into an immaculate Georgian townhouse under the auspices of York Civic Trust. Cornforth's account begins with the recollection that when he first visited the house, in the mid-1970s the house 'had been so thickly painted in dark night-club colours that it was possible only to guess at the real quality of the decoration'.[94] In the large dance studio on the first floor 'a class of women were lying on their backs pointing their legs at the rich ceiling'.[95] Cornforth noted, regretfully, that he had not been able to photograph this scene, as the image 'would have made a vivid "before" to set beside … photographs taken just before the house was opened last October',[96] a point which stresses the centrality of the transformative discourse, with its constant 'before and after' comparisons, that underlies Cornforth's discussion of the house. The purchase and restoration of Fairfax House, he wrote, 'was a project as brave as it was imaginative' for the York Civic Trust. After explaining the funding required and how it was found, he ended by stressing that 'From now on the house has to earn its keep from visitors'.[97] He

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[92] Brown, *Noel Terry Collection*, p. 4.
[93] John Cornforth, 'Fairfax House, York – I', *Country Life*, 7 March 1985, pp. 569-573; John Cornforth, 'Fairfax House, York – II', *Country Life*, 14 March 1985, pp. 654-657.
[94] Cornforth, 'Fairfax House, York – I', p. 569.
[95] Cornforth, 'Fairfax House, York – I', p. 569.
[96] Cornforth, 'Fairfax House, York – I', p. 569.
[97] Cornforth, 'Fairfax House, York – I', p. 570.

also interpreted the house as an expression of a particularly local genius through its incorporation of work by craftsmen from York and the surrounding area: 'the house is a complete statement of the skill of the "York school"'.[98]

Cornforth devotes significant space to the decorative plasterwork, reflecting the importance of this aspect of the house's material character to the form the restoration had taken, and indeed the fact that it had taken place at all. He reached a balanced view on the relative roles of Joseph Cortese and James Henderson in creating the plasterwork, adopting a noticeably more moderate stance than was found in the various editions of the guidebooks and the interpretive materials produced by the house itself in which Cortese's name is dominant. Cornforth's account is more nuanced, reflecting a perception of the working relationship between the two plasterworkers and John Carr that is more collegial and less clear-cut than some traditional forms of attribution might suggest:

> The routine plasterwork was done by James Henderson, and it is suggested that the fine ornamental work was by Cortese, who had worked for Lord Fairfax at Gilling in the 1750s and seems to have had some kind of arrangement with Henderson, as well as frequently appearing on Carr's jobs. However, it has to be borne in mind that there is no mention of his name in the surviving papers, and no documented work by him has been traced between 1757 and 1762.[99]

Cornforth also described the quality of the work as uneven, with 'the handling of the reliefs in the dining room and the drawing room … noticeably less fluent than that of the ornament', suggesting that Cortese was not responsible for all the decorative work (this will be explored in detail in the next chapter). It should be noted that Cornforth had a similarly careful approach to the involvement of John Carr, pointing out that the house was *altered* by Carr, not *built* by him: 'Nothing is known about its building or its designer, but it was not Carr, as used to be thought and as can be seen by comparing its elevation with the much more

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[98] Cornforth, 'Fairfax House, York – I', p. 572

[99] Cornforth, 'Fairfax House, York – I', p. 571.

accomplished Castlegate House almost opposite it'.[100] It is notable that despite the clarity of the views expressed here by Cornforth on the respective roles of Cortese and Carr and his citing of the limits of the evidence in each case, York Civic Trust were simultaneously claiming the house for the latter and the plasterwork for the former while expressing only minimal caveats and qualifications.

In the second part of the article Cornforth addresses more directly the concept of Fairfax House as a preserved Georgian house open to the public and used to display the Noel Terry furniture collection. After noting that the National Trust for Scotland had preserved 7 Charlotte Square in Edinburgh as 'the Georgian house', setting out 'to give visitors to Edinburgh an idea of life in the New Town in about 1790', Cornforth contrasted the case of Fairfax House, 'an infinitely finer building' containing 'a much more important collection of furniture':

> But it is not a Georgian house in the sense of No. 7, and I am not at all sure it should try to be one. The exceptionally elaborate architectural decoration of the early 1760s and the contemporary furniture speak the same language, but in a strange way they argue, and there is a certain tension between them. I do not think that can be ignored: indeed I hope that it is accepted as part of the overall character of Fairfax House as it exists today.[101]

As a value judgement Cornforth's claim that Fairfax House is an 'infinitely finer building' than 7 Charlotte Square is arguable, as the latter is architecturally magnificent and utilises fine craftsmanship throughout: Cornforth's opinion is ultimately based not on any objective or qualitative assessments but on an aesthetic preference for the more florid style of the York house compared to the restrained neoclassicism of its 1790s Edinburgh counterpart. However, his linking of this judgement to the question of the furniture is revealing, for it emphasises the key role Terry's furniture collection played in the formation of the identity of the house during the 1980s.

The lack of original furniture in Fairfax House placed a problematic absence at the heart of the Civic Trust's efforts to formulate their restoration as a re-

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[100] Cornforth, 'Fairfax House, York – I', p. 571.
[101] Cornforth, 'Fairfax House, York – II', p. 654.

creation of the Fairfaxes' Georgian townhouse. The incorporation of the Noel Terry furniture collection into Fairfax House eliminated that absence and was thus a key element in the conceptualisation of the house as a property worth restoring and opening to the public, but it was also the source of the tension that Cornforth identified between the building as a re-creation of a Georgian townhouse (and, as a further step, a re-creation of 'life in a Georgian townhouse') and the building as an appropriate setting for the display of the furniture. This tension can be encapsulated in a question: how much 'townhouse' is there, and how much 'museum', in the description 'townhouse museum'? Cornforth argued that this tension was unavoidable, but took the view that in the final analysis the museum aspect at Fairfax House should be compromised as little as possible:

> The house should be seen mainly as a museum of Georgian furniture and decorative art, and the museum aspect should not be softened too much in an attempt to give what can only be a rather synthetic idea of life in mid-18th-century York. For the purely commercial reason that the house has to earn its keep from a minimum of 50,000 visitors a year, there has to be a degree of recreation of life, as in the kitchen and the two bedrooms. But, oddly, the element of make-believe is much more disturbing here than it is in the architecturally unremarkable interior of No. 7, probably because it devalues what is genuine and of high quality.[102]

Cornforth viewed Noel Terry's furniture collection as the central element in establishing what kind of attraction the restored Fairfax House was to be. He made clear both his enthusiasm for the restoration of the house and his concerns as to its possible outcome in his letter of 15 March 1983 to John Shannon:

> It is a marvellous challenge to have taken on, but an even more difficult one than I imagined, with a different balance to the one I had in mind. I think that the restoration of the house has to be

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[102] Cornforth, 'Fairfax House, York – II', p. 654.

done in accordance with current interest in historic interiors, paint colours, fabrics and so on in order to get as authentic a result as possible. But it cannot be a complete town house operation because of the character of the Terry collection, which is the formation of someone thinking on different lines, with an emphasis on the quality of individual items rather than a concern for the ensemble.[103]

Cornforth's sense of the dominance of the Terry Collection is reflected in his view that the name of the house, once open to the public, should refer to the collection: 'I know it is cumbersome but I feel that it should be the Terry Collection at Fairfax House'.[104] It is clear from an internal York Civic Trust document from August 1983 that notice had been taken of Cornforth's views on this point: the document records that 'John Cornforth favoured something tied in with "Terry Collection" rather than a Museum'.[105] In his 1985 article Cornforth spelled out his view that, having gone to the trouble and expense of saving Fairfax House, the Trust and its supporters should not take a wrong turning and allow its character to be compromised by too much 'make believe'. For all Cornforth's praise of the beautiful qualities of the house's interior, that character lay for him above all in the furniture from Noel Terry's collection that was to be displayed there. He urged a 'very strict acquisition policy' on the house so that any adulteration of the furniture collection could be avoided: inappropriate additions should not be made 'because of the strong character of Mr Terry's collection rather than because of the decoration of the rooms: things could creep in and strike wrong notes that would vibrate'.[106] Reflecting on the way the furniture had been displayed at Goddards, he observed that 'It was obvious that many of the individual pieces of furniture would be shown to better advantage at Fairfax House' but that the character of the collection was so strong that 'it was bound to play its own tune in

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[103] Letter from John Cornforth to John Shannon, 15 March 1983, p. 1. Fairfax House Archive. This letter was typed by Cornforth himself (he includes an apologetic note saying so) and is idiosyncratic in punctuation and full of errors and omissions which have been amended in pen. These issues have been silently corrected in the extracts reproduced here.

[104] Letter from John Cornforth to John Shannon, 15 March 1983, p. 1. Fairfax House Archive.

[105] 'Fairfax House', three-page summary of practical issues relating to the opening of the house to the public dated 22 August 1983, p. 3. Fairfax House Archive.

[106] Cornforth, 'Fairfax House, York – II', p. 654.

any house'.[107] Cornforth powerfully conceptualised the furniture collection as a coherent whole which would, in an almost sentient way, defend itself against any outsiders that were brought in: he wrote of 'arguments between the decoration and the furniture', and on the matter of possible new acquisitions he warned that 'the furniture will shout loudly at any new arrivals that it regards as *nouveaux riches*'.[108]

Looking at the way the furniture was displayed at Fairfax House in 1985, Cornforth was not convinced that the best interests of house or furniture were in fact being served by the way the two had been brought together, despite the superficial suitability of an eighteenth-century interior for a largely eighteenth-century furniture collection:

> It is marvellous in the saloon, for instance, to be able to compare
> the quality of carved mahogany furniture, the carving of the
> window architraves and the flowing scrolls of the plasterwork.
> But they are essentially comparisons of a 20th-century kind, and
> the choice of pieces of furniture is obviously that of a man
> moved by 20th-century enthusiasms and attitudes. The result is
> that none of the rooms strikes me as wholly 18th-century in
> feeling. It is a problem that arises not only from the relationship
> of the furniture to the rooms but from the whole matter of
> choice, arrangement, hanging and framing of pictures, the role
> of all kinds of fabrics, and the scarcely ever discussed subject of
> the influence of dealers on 20th-century taste. [109]

Essentially, Cornforth saw Noel Terry as a collector rather than as a furniture historian, an antiquarian, or indeed an aesthete; and that he was strongly and sometimes excessively influenced by the judgements of the dealers from whom he acquired his pieces. The results of this were evident to Cornforth in the collection that resulted: 'most collectors, as opposed to furnishers of houses, look at 18th-century furniture in what must be a very un-18th-century way; and certainly that

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[107] Cornforth, 'Fairfax House, York – II', p. 654.
[108] Cornforth, 'Fairfax House, York – II', p. 655.
[109] Cornforth, 'Fairfax House, York – II', p. 654.

appears to be so with Noel Terry'.[110] The catalogue of the Terry Collection published by York Civic Trust in 1987 made the same point, noting that 'A 20th century English gentleman's taste does not necessarily coincide with that of the 18th century Viscount for whom the house was built'.[111] The catalogue also described Noel Terry buying 'each piece on its own merit' and as 'not interested in creating or fashioning interiors in the style of the 18th century'.[112]

Influenced by dealers who thought in terms of individual pieces rather than ensembles of furniture as well as by his own tastes, Terry collected furniture as isolated instances of beauty and high-quality craftsmanship. Their relationship to each other, and to the interiors which contained them, was not his concern: 'Decoration even as a branch of architecture does not seem to have interested him … he was a single-minded collector, and he never looked at furniture as part of a complete composition'.[113] This inevitably undermined any attempt to combine the display of such a collection with the creation of authentic Georgian interiors, which always 'depend on the unity and balance of the whole, as well as the quality of detail'.[114] Noel Terry had certainly never aimed for balance in his collecting, in the sense of creating a collection including representative examples of the whole range of Georgian furniture. Nor had he ever bought furniture with any sense of its place in a domestic setting: as Charles Cator wrote in a profile of the collection published by *Country Life* later in 1985, 'He concentrated on the intrinsic quality and detail of individual pieces, with little concern for the relationship between pieces or between furniture and its setting'.[115] Cator also noted the 'predominance of the carver's rather than the designer's art' in the collection, reflecting the importance of the 'craftsmanship' theme that meant so much to York's neo-Georgians, and described Terry as 'suspicious of the fashionable and the decorative', implying another degree of tension between the fashionable and decorative interiors of Fairfax House and the furniture collection housed within them.[116]

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[110] Cornforth, 'Fairfax House, York – II', p. 654.
[111] Brown, *Noel Terry Collection*, p. 4.
[112] Brown, *Noel Terry Collection*, p. 4.
[113] Cornforth, 'Fairfax House, York – II', p. 655-6.
[114] Cornforth, 'Fairfax House, York – II', p. 656.
[115] Charles Cator, 'A purely private enthusiasm: the Noel Terry Collection of English furniture', *Country Life*, 5 September 1985, pp. 654-6, here p. 655.
[116] Cator, 'A purely private enthusiasm', pp. 656, 655.

The furnishing of Fairfax House after restoration was guided by a desire for domestic completeness, hence the creation of a reproduction kitchen within the house and the provision of modern beds built to eighteenth-century designs for the bedrooms. The hang of pictures was very varied, but was again guided by an effort to ensure that the walls were not left bare and that the pictures on display were not too incongruous. It is precisely these aspects of the presentation of the house with which Cornforth took issue. The reproduction beds attracted his strong criticism: they 'would be wholly acceptable in a private house, but are they really right in a museum alongside such "serious" furniture, and do they help to evoke a sense of the Fairfax period? For me I fear they do not'.[117] The drawing room, containing seventeenth- and eighteenth-century furniture and (in 1985) hung with pictures varying in date from the seventeenth century to the mid-nineteenth, 'looks fine, and the furniture is shown to advantage, but the total effect is not that of a mid-18th-century room, and any attempt to dress it up as one will fail and actually devalue it'.[118] The saloon created a feeling of more coherence and 'a much closer unity of style' but Cornforth argued that 'it does not create a convincing room' because Noel Terry 'chose chairs and a settee individually as rich examples of the chairmaker's skill'[119] rather than with any sense of the relationship between them or the context around them.

The place of the plasterwork

For Cornforth the interiors of Fairfax House were of much higher quality and of greater interest than the exterior: his account of the external architecture of the house in his *Country Life* articles was dismissively brief, limited to the observation that the designer of the house 'was not Carr, as used to be thought and as can be seen by comparing its elevation with his much more accomplished Castlegate House almost opposite it'.[120] Francis Johnson, in his letter to John Shannon following his visit to the house in 1979, had remarked that the exterior of the house 'has always been a puzzle to me' and in criticising the front elevation

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[117] Cornforth, 'Fairfax House, York – II', p. 655.
[118] Cornforth, 'Fairfax House, York – II', p. 656.
[119] Cornforth, 'Fairfax House, York – II', p. 656.
[120] Cornforth, 'Fairfax House, York – I', p. 572.

expressed himself in almost precisely the same terms later used by Cornforth: 'One only has to compare it with the magnificent exterior to Castlegate House opposite to realise that something has gone seriously wrong and that Fairfax House as it stands today is in no respect equal to John Carr's robust and erudite detailing'.[121] In his six-page report 'Fairfax House, Castlegate, York: How the Building was Saved', prepared for the Civic Trust in October 1983, Johnson further explored this question, revealing that his work on the restoration during the intervening years had not changed his opinions: 'For instance why did John Carr, brought up and trained in the use of stone, select a soft inferior sandstone for the lavish dressings of this ground elevation? The detailing too is not up to his accustomed standard (vide Castlegate House)'.[122]

Disappointment with the exterior of Fairfax House was as much a standard twentieth-century response to the building as was effusive enthusiasm for the interior. The entry on Fairfax House in the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments England volume on central York, largely written by Eric Gee, is dismissive of Fairfax House's 'rather crowded' front elevation, but stresses the magnificence of the interior: 'The glory of the house lies in the interior, especially the plasterwork'.[123] In the first edition (1972) of Nikolaus Pevsner's architectural guide to *York and the East Riding* the exterior of Fairfax House is notable by its absence, while the ceilings of the house are classed as 'among the best' in York.[124] The account of the building in the volume's gazetteer was almost entirely concerned with the interior of the house rather than its exterior, describing it as containing 'some of the finest mid c18 plasterwork in Yorkshire, although its condition at the time of writing is heartbreaking'.[125] The second, much revised and expanded edition of the same volume (1995) similarly emphasised Fairfax House's 'magnificent interior', calling it 'that most sumptuous of interiors',[126]

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[121] Letter, Francis Johnson to John Shannon, 26 February 1979, p. 1. Hull History Centre, Francis Johnson Archive.

[122] 'Fairfax House, Castlegate, York: How the Building was Saved', typewritten report by Francis Johnson, dated October 1983, p. 1. Fairfax House Archive.

[123] Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (England), *York: Historic Buildings in the Central Area. A Photographic Record* (London: HMSO, 1981), p. 17.

[124] Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: York and the East Riding* (London: Penguin, 1972), p. 39.

[125] Pevsner, *York and the East Riding*, p. 142. The account of the Fairfax House plasterwork was contributed by John Hutchinson.

[126] Nikolaus Pevsner and David Neave, *The Buildings of England. Yorkshire: York and the East Riding* (London: Penguin, 1972; 2nd edn 1995) pp. 72, 73.

Figure 7.9. The main façade of Fairfax House on Castlegate. To the left is 25 Castlegate, the former cinema entrance. (Author's photograph, June 2014.)

while the house's forty-nine line entry in this edition's gazetteer devoted thirty-four lines to the 'splendid interiors', including a detailed account of the plasterwork.[127] Even the closest we have to a standard account of John Carr's career, Brian Wragg's *Life and Work of John Carr of York* (2000), highlighted the *interior* of Fairfax House as the most important element of his refurbishment of the house in the 1760s: his work there was summarised in the gazetteer as 'Extensive internal alterations within a recently completed shell',[128] despite the existence of strong stylistic and some documentary evidence for Carr's

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[127] Pevsner and Neave, *York and the East Riding*, pp. 211-3.
[128] Wragg, *John Carr of York*, p. 232.

involvement in external alterations at the house.[129] The building was listed in the index not as 'Fairfax House' but as 'Fairfax House interiors',[130] and in the main text Fairfax House was described as containing some of Carr's 'most sumptuous interiors' with no reference at all to the exterior of the building.[131]

Overall it has been the interiors which have been seen as the most important aspect of Fairfax House, and above all this has meant the decorative plasterwork. Comparisons, both implicit and explicit, between the poor and uninteresting exteriors and the superb interiors were a constant feature of accounts of the restoration. 'The lavish finishes of these splendid interiors', observed Francis Johnson in his October 1983 account of the restoration of the house, 'reach their highlight in the stucco work. Greater familiarity with this has revealed for the most part its rock hardness'.[132] The interior plasterwork was represented in terms that contrasted sharply with those used for the exterior architecture: it was described as a complete and coherent decorative scheme of exceptional beauty and quality that lifted Fairfax House from the status of a significant local historical building to one of national importance. It was not enough for the plasterwork merely to be repaired and repainted, however: its significance had to be developed in other ways to establish an aesthetic and historical narrative that would reinforce the pedigree of the house itself. This was a matter of interpretation as much as of restoration.

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[129] Brown, *Fairfax House York* (1989), p. 8. Brown writes that 'Whilst uncertainty remains over Carr's influence on the exterior of the house, on the inside, his involvement is clear and total' (*ibid*., p. 11). However, bills and letters relating to Carr's work on the exterior of the house and its outbuildings, including work on pilasters and other external stonework, the wall and railings in front of the house (removed in the nineteenth century) and the coach house built for the Viscount opposite the main house, can be found in NYCRO ZDV(F).

[130] Wragg, *John Carr of York*, p. 252.

[131] Wragg, *John Carr of York*, p. 15. Carr's work on Fairfax House is illustrated with one picture, of the Great Staircase (unfortunately reproduced backwards): *ibid*., p. 33, fig. 22.

[132] 'Fairfax House, Castlegate, York: How the Building was Saved', p. 3.

CHAPTER 8

Ambiguous Ornament

A matter of interpretation

The interior plasterwork at Fairfax House emerged from the restoration of 1983-4 not only visually transformed and renewed but with a history and pedigree that had also been repaired, renewed, and created into a coherent whole from surviving fragments. It was not enough that the house had been rescued, it had to be re-interpreted and given a history – perhaps a mythology – of its own, and the plasterwork played a centrally important part in that process. As preceding chapters have made clear, the quality and importance of the plasterwork was a key element in sustaining the particular status of the house and in making the claim for it as a deserving case for restoration. It also embodied the Georgian era's perceived aesthetic pre-eminence, bolstering the neo-Georgian project for the renewal of the modern city along the lines of its eighteenth-century predecessor. The process of restoration itself was seen as establishing direct continuity between the craftsmen of Georgian York and those of twentieth-century York, and the plasterworkers who had created the interior decoration were pre-eminent among those craftsmen, exemplars of eighteenth-century York as a centre of virtuosi in the decorative arts. An additional dimension was given to the plasterwork, and thus to the house that contained it, with the emphasis on supposed concealed symbolic messages in the decoration communicating covert messages of allegiance to Jacobitism and Catholicism on the part of the Fairfaxes. Reinforcing the centrality of the plasterwork to the image of Fairfax House during its twentieth-century rediscovery and restoration has been the question of the attribution of the work to Giuseppe Cortese and (less prominently) James Henderson.

As already discussed, the plasterwork at Fairfax House had played an essential role in bringing about the restoration of the house in the post-war years,

when the York Civic Trust became an increasingly influential voice in shaping the aesthetics and the wider sociocultural character of York – as a historic city, a tourist centre, a civic community, and an inheritor of a proud eighteenth-century tradition as the 'Northern Metropolis'.

The Northern Metropolis

Many modern historians have taken York as an exemplar of the successful English eighteenth-century provincial social centre, notable for its combination of relative economic stagnation with a flourishing social and cultural life and an expansion of associated services in the retail and professional sectors. 'In the eighteenth century York was one of the most important and successful provincial centres from a social point of view', wrote Mark Girouard in 1989, 'although in terms of manufacture and commerce it was in decline'.[1] Girouard noted the 'complex array of services' provided in York, including the roles played by architects and artists who catered to the desire of their noble and gentry clients for settings and accoutrements appropriate to their status. Girouard's essay is a product of the late 1980s and was written in the aftermath of the restoration and opening of Fairfax House,[2] and he makes frequent reference to the Fairfaxes and their townhouse and to John Carr in his analysis of eighteenth-century York as a social centre. Fairfax House as a product of York craftsmen fits in well with his stress on York as a centre of artistry and craftsmanship: 'Apart from the services of doctors, lawyers, and other professional men, a whole series of what can be described as services of an artistic nature were on offer, including architects, painters, sculptors, woodcarvers, furniture-makers, and silversmiths'.[3] Girouard frames his discussion of the provision of these services in country towns by comparing them with those offered in London, identifying a key issue as 'to what extent they provided an alternative service to London'.[4]

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[1] Mark Girouard, 'The country house and the country town', *Studies in the History of Art*, vol. 25, Symposium Papers X: 'The fashioning and functioning of the British country house' (1989), pp. 305-28, here p. 310.
[2] The York Civic Trust *Annual Report* for 1983-4, which reported the completion of the restoration of Fairfax House and its opening to the public, is quoted as a source by Girouard.
[3] Girouard, 'The country house', p. 310.
[4] Girouard, 'The country house', p. 310.

The focus on London as the measure against which a provincial centre such as York should be measured is typical of both eighteenth-century and twentieth-century discourses. In his *Eboracum* (1736), the historian Francis Drake declared that 'though other cities and towns in the kingdom run far beyond us in trade, and the hurry of business, yet, there is no place, out of *London*, so polite and elegant to live in as the *city of* York'.[5] As Peter Borsay has commented, the form in which Drake's tribute is framed 'raises the issue as to what extent this was a culture of York – bolstering its identity as a civic society – and to what extent it was simply a clone of a metropolitan model'.[6] In that sense the absence of any strong local industry or economic activity in York may have left it better able to cater to the requirements of its regional elite for a social and cultural centre, enabling it to cultivate politeness and elegance unimpeded by the competing demands of clothworking or trade. For those to whom eighteenth-century York sought to appeal, London was the obvious model and the standard against which the 'Northern Metropolis' measured its success. Those who serviced the requirements of the nobility and gentry in York were careful to emphasise any links they had with London: thus John Tate, a dancing master, stated prominently in his advertising that he had studied 'in London with a French Dancing Master in order to perfect himself, while his son Thomas Tate, who took over his business in 1784, advertised himself as 'having employed his Time with Diligence and Assiduity for near Six Years in the profession of Dancing under the immediate Tuition of Mr. Wills, Harley Street, London'.[7] John Carr is notable for being the only architect from outside London to have been elected to membership of the Architects' Club, founded in 1791.[8] The link worked both ways, however, as Carr maintained strong connections with London, cultivating contacts and keeping abreast of architectural fashions, and using the capital as a base for work he carried out in the south of England such as Basildon Park, near Reading.[9]

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[5] Francis Drake, *Eboracum: Or the History and Antiquities of the City of York* (London, 1736), p. 241.

[6] Peter Borsay, 'Politeness and elegance: the cultural re-fashioning of eighteenth-century York', in Mark Hallett and Jane Rendall (eds), *Eighteenth-Century York: Culture, Space and Society* (York: Borthwick Institute of Historical Research, 2003), pp. 1-12, here p. 2.

[7] *York Courant*, 19 January 1748 and 2 March 1784. The Tates were among several notable dynasties of dancing masters in York during the latter half of the eighteenth century: see Barbara Peel, *Dancing and Social Assemblies in York in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (National Resource Centre for Dance, University of Surrey, 1986), pp. 24-5.

[8] Wragg, *John Carr of York*, pp. 1, 71.

[9] Wragg, *John Carr of York*, p. 48; Borsay, 'Politeness and elegance', pp. 3, 8.

York's relationship with metropolitan trends in architecture can be described as ambivalent: Eric Gee's 1979 observation that eighteenth-century York 'reflects the general trends, but is both backward because of the conservative taste of the populace and advanced because of the presence of Lord Burlington and other fashionable architects'[10] contains an important element of truth, but understandably over-simplifies a complex picture. Among the leading names in early eighteenth-century architecture who contributed to new building in York, Lord Burlington is the most notable. In May 1730 he was asked by the Trustees for the proposed new Assembly Rooms in York to design their building, and the resulting structure, opened for public use in 1732, 'resembled no other in Europe, of a pure classical architecture redolent of Antique Rome and owing nothing to more conventional Palladian precedents'.[11] Francis Drake, preoccupied as he was with linking modern York to its Roman predecessor, dedicated his *Eboracum* to Burlington and singled out the Assembly Rooms as 'a structure, in a truer and nobler taste of architecture, than, in all probability, the *Roman* EBORACUM could ever boast of'.[12] Viscount Fairfax was himself a subscriber to the building of the Assembly Rooms.[13] For the Viscount and his daughter, members of Yorkshire's landowning noble elite (albeit to some degree marginalised by their Catholicism) participation in urban society was an essential activity. The Viscount had kept up a residence in York from the 1730s, renting houses in various parts of the city at different times. In the 1730s he had a house in Micklegate, 'the principal papist residential area in York',[14] near the Bar Convent, and for a time in the 1740s rented another property in a more central location in Coney Street.[15] By 1760 he was living in a rented house at Petergate while work began on rebuilding and redecorating his new house in Castlegate.[16] This street was itself subject to the trend towards 'improvement' in the eighteenth century, reflecting its status as a 'processional way' that continued the line of the fashionable riverside New Walk into the city centre.[17] Castlegate had been closed to wheeled traffic at the western

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[10] Eric A. Gee, *The Architecture of York* (York: Cerialis Press, 1979), p. 75.
[11] John Harris, *The Palladian Revival: Lord Burlington, His Villa and Garden at Chiswick* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 26.
[12] Drake, *Eboracum*, p. 4.
[13] Drake, *Eboracum*, Appendix, p. lx.
[14] Aveling, *Catholic Recusancy*, p. 125.
[15] Aveling, *Catholic Recusancy*, pp. 125, 126; Fairfax Papers, NYCRO, ZDV/F.
[16] Aveling, *Catholic Recusancy*, p. 126; Fairfax Papers, NYCRO, ZDV/F.
[17] Jenkins, *View From the Street*, p. 79.

end in 1733, using bollards, and the appearance of gardens with summer houses on Castlegate and adjoining Castlegate Postern Lane (later Tower Street), and the building and refurbishing of grand houses such as Fairfax House and Castlegate House, marked the rise in fashionability and status of the street – despite the presence of the very poor Water Lanes connecting Castlegate to the river, only a short distance from the grand houses at the western end of the street.[18]

Building, rebuilding and decorating in Georgian York

Many English towns and cities experienced considerable new construction and rebuilding in the period 1680-1750 and York was particularly notable in this respect, both in the extent of works carried on and their quality.[19] Peter Borsay describes York as 'the most prestigious social rendezvous' of the English 'provincial capitals',[20] and the rise of the city in the early eighteenth century as a social centre for the gentry and nobility and its prominence as a resort for polite society fuelled an expansion in the construction and refurbishment of town houses and civic buildings.[21] This, along with the building and extension of nearby country houses, created a significant demand for building workers and craftsmen of all kinds, including plasterworkers. Of the building craftsmen listed in the 'Select Dictionary of Craftsmen' in Geoffrey Beard's *Craftsmen and Interior Decoration in England 1660-1820* some three out of four are shown as based in London or primarily worked in the capital, but of the remaining quarter the largest single concentration for many trades, including wood-carvers, gilders and

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[18] Jenkins, *View from the Street*, pp. 79-82.

[19] Peter Borsay, *The English Urban Renaissance: Culture and Society in the Provincial Town 1660-1770* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 8, 9, 30-1, 35, 61ff; Joyce M. Ellis, *The Georgian Town 1680-1840* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 14-15 Borsay, 'Politeness and elegance', pp. 1-12; Alison Sinclair, 'Eighteenth-century York', in Patrick Nuttgens (ed), *The History of York from the Earliest Times to the Year 2000* (Pickering: Blackthorn Press, 2001), pp. 212-43, here pp. 226-8; William Sheils, 'York 1696-1840', in Peter Addyman (ed), *The British Historic Towns Atlas, Volume V: York, Introduction and Gazetteer* (York: Historic Towns Trust and York Archaeological Trust, 2015), pp. 61-9, here pp. 62, 64-5.

[20] Borsay, *English Urban Renaissance*, p. 30.

[21] RCHM(E), *City of York: Volume V*, pp. lxxv-lxxvi; Sinclair, 'Eighteenth-century York', p. 231. The York Georgian Society pamphlets *Georgian Houses in York* (York: York Georgian Society, 1968) and *Georgian Public Buildings in York* (York: York Georgian Society, 1975) together provide a brief survey and examples of notable new buildings of this period, both public and private, in York.

plasterers, is found in York.[22] The dictionary lists 336 plasterers, 134 in London and 172 in provincial cities (the remaining thirty cannot be identified with any particular location), and of the provincial total the largest single group is that consisting of plasterers working in or near York, totalling 42 and thus making up 24% of the non-London craftsmen. The second-largest provincial concentration of plasterers is found in Bristol, where twenty are recorded as active during this period, less than half the York total.[23] These figures are imprecise and necessarily incomplete, and must be approached with caution: Beard himself described his list as 'select' rather than comprehensive for good reason.[24] However, they are a useful indication of the relative importance of York in the landscape of building and decorative crafts in the eighteenth century.

York had since the late medieval period sustained a well-established local plasterworking industry providing both plain and decorative work, although it appears that the city did not possess a significant number of permanently settled decorative plasterworkers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.[25] The Guild of Plasterers and Tylers of York, representing the general building trades of the city including those skilled in plain plasterwork, was granted ordinances by the city authorities in 1475, and when the bricklayers joined this same guild in 1572 it was granted new ordinances as the 'Guild of Plaisterars, Tylars and Bricklayers'.[26] The guild records indicate however that *decorative* plasterworkers, who were known as 'fretters' rather than 'plasterers', did not join this guild, tending to be peripatetic in nature and working outside the guild structures of apprenticeship and regulation.[27] The term 'fretter' relates to the nature of the work carried out by this group of plasterworkers, the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century usage of 'fret' referring to intricate designs rather than to the use of any

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[22] Beard, *Craftsmen and Interior Decoration in England*, p. 241.

[23] Beard, *Craftsmen and Interior Decoration in England*, pp. 241-292; Ayres, *Building the Georgian City*, p. 158.

[24] Beard, *Craftsmen and Interior Decoration in England*, p. vi.

[25] Sheils, 'Seventeenth-century York', p. 206.

[26] 'Ordinances of the Plasterers and Tilers' in Joyce W. Percy (ed), *The York Memorandum Book, Volume III* (Durham: The Surtees Society, 1973), vol. 186, pp. 183-90, 284-87; Tom Hoffman, 'The rise and decline of Guilds with Particular Reference to the Guilds of Tylers and Bricklayers in Great Britain and Ireland' (unpublished paper given to the Guildhall Historical Association, 2006). The bricklayers attempted at the end of the sixteenth century to break away again and form their own guild, but were unsuccessful: Palliser, *Tudor York*, p. 173.

[27] David Bostwick, *Decorative Plasterwork of the Yorkshire Region, 1570-1670* (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Sheffield, 1993), pp. 118-20.

particular material.[28] York Guild of Plasterers continued in existence throughout the eighteenth century, with records of regular admissions to the guild and other records preserved until 1801. From early in the century decorative plasterworkers did serve apprenticeships and join the guild, reflecting the development of a resident group of York decorative plasterworkers who were able to sustain careers as the number of building and refurbishment projects in the York region increased.[29] By the time Fairfax House was being reconstructed by John Carr for Viscount Fairfax in the 1760s, York was an established and thriving centre of the plasterworking trade and capable of sustaining the careers of a significant number of craftsmen specialising in high-quality decorative plasterwork in fashionable styles. The construction of new townhouses and public buildings and the refurbishment and enrichment of existing structures[30] provided a steady stream of work for highly-skilled decorative plasterworkers, many of whom were based in York and were guild members, freemen and in some cases held civic office, while the work available in York and Yorkshire also had the effect of attracting plasterers from further afield.[31]

Throughout the eighteenth century the list of plasterworkers based in or near, or otherwise strongly associated with, the city of York included many highly important, active and influential individuals. John Bagnall (*fl.* 1710-46) worked at large houses including Castle Howard in 1712 and Temple Newsam in 1726, and in 1731-4 carried out 'all the plaister work of the Great Room' at the York Assembly Rooms.[32] Isaac Mansfield, who found employment in both London and York, provided decorative plasterwork for Gibbs and Vanbrugh and worked at Blenheim Palace and Castle Howard, moved to York in 1704 and served as

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[28] James Ayres, *Domestic Interiors: The British Tradition 1500-1850* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 114. Ayres notes that intricately laid-out knot gardens were described as 'frets'.

[29] Bricklayers' plasterers' and tilers' accounts 1589-1778, Records of the York Guild: York Minster Archives, QQ.80/2/1-13; S. D. Smith, 'Inexorable decline or successful adaptation? The York Merchant Taylors' Company, 1662-1776', in R. B. Dobson and D. M. Smith (eds), *The Merchant Taylors of York: A History of the Craft and Company from the Fourteenth to the Twentieth Centuries* (York: Borthwick Publications, 2006), pp. 73-4. The guild became moribund in the nineteenth century before finding a degree of revival when plasterers and related trades became part of the newly-established York Guild of Building in 1954: 'York Guild of Building', *RIBA Journal*, vol. 116, no. 694 (October 1954), p. 134.

[30] Borsay, *English Urban Renaissance*, pp. 53, 55, 163-4.

[31] Geoffrey Beard, *Italian Stuccoists in Yorkshire* (York: York Civic Trust, 1986), p. 7; Wragg, *John Carr of York*, pp. 13ff.

[32] Beard, *Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 203.

Sheriff in 1728-9.[33] The notable Rose dynasty of plasterers was of Yorkshire origin, beginning with Jacob Rose, born at Norton near Sheffield.[34] His son Joseph Rose senior, who was almost certainly born at Norton himself, had strong York connections. He was apprenticed to the leading York plasterer Thomas Perritt (1710-59) in the late 1730s and produced plasterwork at Temple Newsam and numerous other houses in Yorkshire.[35] His nephew Joseph Rose junior worked at Harewood House in 1765-70 and other Yorkshire houses in the 1780s.[36] Perritt himself is recorded as contributing to the interior decoration at York Assembly Rooms in 1744 and Temple Newsam in 1741-7 while his elder brother William (*fl.* 1724-*c.*1770) was also a York plasterer and practiced his craft at Studley Royal and Newby Park as well as at houses in Warwickshire, London and in Scotland.[37] William Collins (1721-93), a sculptor and plasterworker who collaborated with Robert Adam, was active in Yorkshire and worked at Harewood House and Burton Constable in the 1760s.[38] Ely Crabtree (*fl.* 1760-1803) was one of John Carr's favoured plasterworkers towards the end of the eighteenth century, and appears to have had a working arrangement with fellow York plasterworker Thomas Henderson, son of James Henderson (*fl.* 1755-87) who also worked with Carr and is known to have created at least some of the plasterwork at Fairfax House.[39] James Henderson also contributed to the decoration at Harewood House, Temple Newsam and other large Yorkshire houses, working at Harewood in partnership with the York plasterer Thomas Rothwell (*fl.* 1765-9) and his son James, while Thomas Henderson's work is recorded at Wentworth Woodhouse.[40] York and Yorkshire also attracted a number of the Swiss-Italian *stuccatori* in the middle decades of the eighteenth century.[41] Giovanni Bagutti worked at Castle Howard in 1710, where he was assisted in some of his work by Giuseppe Plura (who may have been the same Giuseppe Plura who is later recorded as a stuccoist and sculptor in Bath and London although the identification is not certain).[42]

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[33] Beard, *Decorative Plasterwork*, pp. 227-8; RCHM(E) *City of York: Volume V*, p. lxxxvii.
[34] Beard, *Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 237; Beard, *Georgian Craftsmen*, p. 73.
[35] Beard, *Decorative Plasterwork*, pp. 237-8.
[36] Beard, *Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 240, 244.
[37] Beard, *Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 233.
[38] Beard, *Decorative Plasterwork*, pp. 211-12.
[39] Wragg, *John Carr of York*, pp. 77-8.
[40] Beard, *Decorative Plasterwork*, pp. 213-4, 223-4, 244-5; Wragg, *John Carr of York*, p. 78.
[41] Palumbo-Fossati, *Gli stuccatori*, pp. 41-44.
[42] Palumbo-Fossati, *Gli stuccatori*, pp. 34-5, 44; Beard, *Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 234.

Giuseppe Artari submitted designs for decorative treatments at Castle Howard in 1736, although the work there was eventually carried out by Francesco Vassalli (*fl.* 1724-63).[43]

Giuseppe Cortese was among the longer-established and less peripatetic of the Swiss-Italian plasterworkers who came to the British Isles to practice their craft during the eighteenth century. The majority of them travelled fairly widely in Britain and Ireland and often worked elsewhere in northern Europe before returning to Switzerland. Cortese, however, remained in England, and specifically in the north, for the whole of his career from his arrival in the late 1720s until his death in Wakefield in 1778.[44] His attested working career extends over a lengthy period of more than four decades, from 1730 to 1772, and all his work was carried out in northern England. No work by him has been identified in any other part of the British Isles nor on the continent.[45] By way of comparison, Giovanni Bagutti worked in England for about twenty-five years, between 1710 and 1735, at sites in London and the Home Counties but also in Cambridge and Yorkshire.[46] Giuseppe Artari, who was Bagutti's partner for a time, had an active career longer than Cortese's (from the 1720s to the late 1760s) but operated over a far wider geographical area, having worked in London, Middlesex, Cambridge, Oxfordshire, Devon, Yorkshire, Staffordshire and Warwickshire, and also on the continent: Artari also spent lengthy periods in Germany, where he died in 1769.[47] The three Lafranchini brothers (Paolo, Filippo and Pietro-Natale) were active in London, Northumberland, Hertfordshire, County Durham, and a number of houses in Ireland.[48] Cortese has no such geographical spread in his confirmed or attributed work: from his appearance in Yorkshire in the 1720s to his death in 1778 his operations were concentrated in Yorkshire and County Durham, with a little work in Lancashire. The conclusion to be drawn is that, like Thomas Stocking in Bristol and the West Country or Thomas Roberts in Oxford,[49] he

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[43] Beard, *Decorative Plasterwork*, p.p. 202-3, 248-9.

[44] Beard, *Decorative Plasterwork*, pp. 66-7.

[45] Beard, *Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 213; Palumbo-Fossati, *Gli stuccatori*, pp. 37, 43-4; Martinola, 'Stuccatore Ticinese in Inghilterra', p. 45.

[46] Beard, *Decorative Plasterwork*, pp. 203-4; Palumbo-Fossati, *Gli stuccatori*, pp. 43, 47.

[47] Beard, *Decorative Plasterwork*, pp. 201-2; Palumbo-Fossati, *Gli stuccatori*, pp. 7, 40, 43, 49.

[48] Beard, *Decorative Plasterwork*, pp. 219-20; Beard, *Stucco and Decorative Plasterwork*, pp. 169-70, 172, 211; Curran, *Dublin Decorative Plasterwork*, pp. 27-42; Brian de Breffny, 'The Lafrancini Brothers', *Irish Arts Review* (1988), pp. 212-21, here pp. 212-17; Palumbo-Fossati, *Gli stuccatori*, pp. 61-81, 83-91.

[49] Beard, *Decorative Plasterwork*, pp. 60, 62-3, 65, 68, 71, 235-6, 247.

found a market to sustain him among a class of clients who favoured the style in which he worked and who were building and decorating (or rebuilding and redecorating) in sufficient numbers and on a sufficient scale to sustain his business over the long term.

By the 1760s Cortese, who had a workshop in Wakefield, had been carrying out work in the North of England for more than three decades, with plasterwork attributed to him surviving at Burton Constable Hall, Brandsby Hall, Beverley Guildhall, Newburgh Priory and elsewhere.[50] In the 1750s he had worked with John Carr on the Fairfaxes' main residence at Gilling Castle, and it may have been the Carr connection that brought him to York to work on the plasterwork at Fairfax House in the 1760s, alongside Carr's usual York plasterer James Henderson.[51] Although it is important to note that no direct documentary evidence has come to light that unambiguously names Cortese as working at Fairfax House, the circumstantial and stylistic arguments for attributing a significant role in the creation of the interior plasterwork to him and his workshop are strong.[52] In addition it is logical that the Fairfaxes would want a plasterworker of proven ability and experience in serving the requirements of the Yorkshire elite to provide the decoration for their Castlegate town house, and even more natural that they should make use of a man who was known to them already and who had worked with their architect, John Carr.

A question of attribution

Cortese's work for the Fairfaxes at Gilling Castle was completed in the early 1750s.[53] It has suffered some losses over the years and is heavily overpainted, but it is possible to see important affinities between the work at Gilling and that carried out eight or ten years later at Fairfax House in York. A style of interlaced bands forming a diaper pattern can be seen at various locations in Gilling

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[50] Beard, *Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 213; John Cornforth, 'Newburgh Priory, Yorkshire – II', *Country Life*, 7 March 1974, pp. 482-5.

[51] Anselm Cramer, *Gilling Castle: The Story of the House and its Families* (Ampleforth: Ampleforth Abbey, 2008), p. 42; Beard, *Decorative Plasterwork*, pp. 68, 224.

[52] Brown, *Fairfax House York* (1989), p. 45; Webb, *Fairfax of York*, pp. 143-4.

[53] Beard, *Italian Stuccoists in Yorkshire*, pp. 14-15, 18; Cramer, *Gilling Castle*, pp. 23, 27, 42; Beard, *Decorative Plasterwork in Great Britain*, p. 213; Beard, *Stucco and Decorative Plasterwork*, p. 210.

including the Library and the former Chapel (**Figure 8.1**). A similar treatment of intersection points is very evident at Fairfax House (**Figure 8.2**). Similarities in the profiles of the scrolling strapwork can also be seen, although there is an increase in the sophistication of this and other aspects of the design between the 1750s and the 1760s.
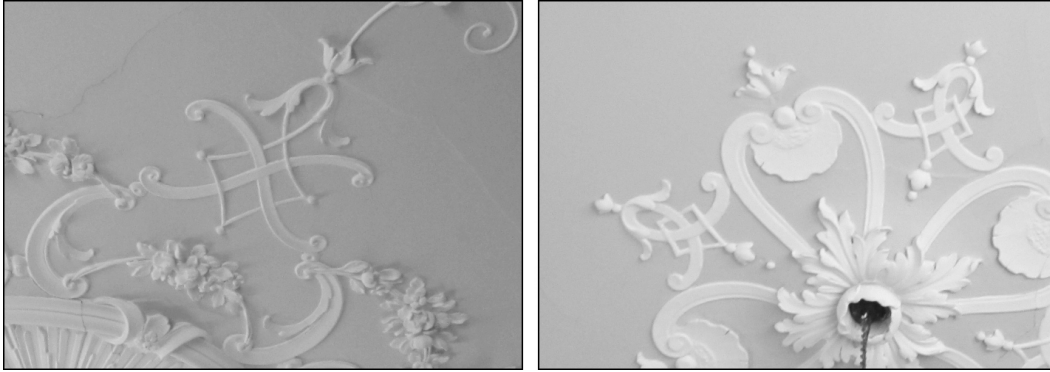
Figure 8.1. Interlacing strapwork in ceiling decorations by Cortese at Gilling Castle, *c*.1750. The example on the left is from the former Chapel, that on the right from the Library. (Author's photographs, June 2013.)
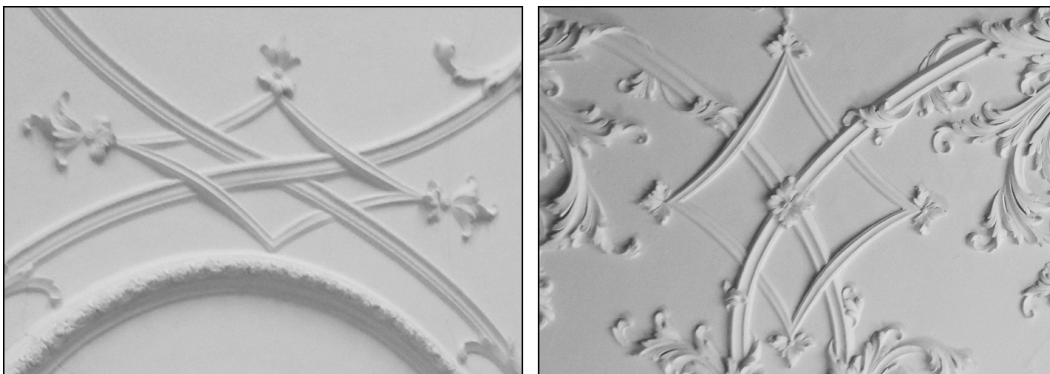
Figure 8.2. Examples of interlacing strapwork in ceiling decorations at Fairfax House, *c*.1762, from (left) the Dining Room and (right) the Saloon. (Author's photographs, July 2015.)

Particularly notable is the fluency with which Cortese transforms strapwork into foliage stems, and back again. This is strongly evident in his work of the 1740s at Newburgh Priory as well as at Gilling in the 1750s, and can also be found in the mid-1750s decoration which is convincingly attributed to him at Sutton Park, just north of York. At Fairfax House exquisitely-managed transitions can be seen in the Drawing Room and the Library, and perhaps above all in the Dining Room. The scrollwork here around the central roundel is composed of looping flat straps which transform into intricate outgrowths of curling acanthus leaves, from among which bursts further strapwork, all entwined with naturalistic flower stems and leaf garlands (**Figure 8.3**).

Figure 8.3. Detail of scrollwork from the Dining Room at Fairfax House, showing interweaving and transformation of strapwork and foliage between the central roundel and the ceiling margins. (Author's photograph, June 2013.)

The figures at Fairfax House are a dominant feature of the plasterwork, appearing in three (Dining Room, Drawing Room and Great Staircase) out of the five main decorated spaces (the two without figures are the Library and the Saloon, which both use central light fittings). The origins of these figures can be established with certainty: they are derived from Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia*, which first appeared (without illustrations) in 1593 and was published in illustrated form in 1603, and which went through many editions and translations over the next century, with an English translation by Pierce Tempest appearing in 1709.[54] The specific illustrations used by Cortese are the engravings by Isaac Fuller the younger for Tempest's 1709 edition.[55] The three allegorical figures Cortese used were: 'Abondanza' or 'Plenty', in the Dining Room; 'Amicita' or 'Friendship', in the Drawing Room; and 'Architectura militare' or 'Military Architecture', above the Great Staircase.[56] Comparison of the three Fairfax House figures with the

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[54] Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia overo Descrittione dell' imagini universali cavate dall' antichità e da altri luoghi* (Rome, 1593); Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia overo Descrittione dell' imagini universali cavate dall' antichità, and de propria inventione* (Rome, 1603); P. Tempest, *Iconologia: Or, Moral Emblems, by Cæsar Ripa* (London, 1709).

[55] Hans-Joachim Zimmermann, 'English translations and adaptations of Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia*: from the 17th century to the 19th century', *De zeventiende eeuw*, vol. 11, no. 1 (1995), pp. 17-25, here p. 23. For the illustrations to earlier editions see Stefano Pierguidi, 'Giovanni Guerra and the illustrations to Ripa's *Iconologia*', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, vol. 61 (1998), pp. 158-175.

[56] Tempest, *Iconologia*: 'Abondanza or 'Plenty', p. 1, fig. 1; 'Amicita' or 'Friendship', also given as 'Amity', p. 3, fig. 12; 'Architectura militare' or 'Military Architecture', also given as 'Architecture Military', p. 6, fig. 21.

Figure 8.4. Comparisons of ceiling figures at Fairfax House (left) with Isaac Fuller's engravings from Tempest's 1709 edition of Ripa's *Iconologia* (right). Top: 'Abondanza' or 'Plenty' (Dining Room). Middle: 'Amicita' or 'Friendship' (Drawing Room). Bottom: 'Architectura militare' or 'Military Architecture' (Great Staircase). (Author's photographs, July 2014.)

engravings in Tempest's edition of *Iconologia* shows how closely Cortese followed the originals by Isaac Fuller (**Figure 8.4**). All the attributes listed by Tempest in the text that accompanies each engraving, and illustrated by Fuller are carefully reproduced in the plasterwork figures: the cornucopia, garland crown and flower-strewn earth of 'Abondanza', the naked breast, heart held in the hand, and scrolls bearing mottoes for 'Amicita', and the compass, swallow and diagram of a fortification for 'Architectura militare'. There are some significant changes to the background details of the latter, and these are discussed below. The modelling of the figures is not equal to the best work of other notable Swiss stuccatori such as Giuseppe Artari or Giovanni Bagutti, the anatomy being somewhat flattened and the poses stiff, but this is typical of Cortese's work, as comparisons with Arncliffe Hall and Lytham Hall (**Figure 8.5**) indicate.

Figure 8.5. Figurework attributed to Cortese: (left) figure of Dawn in the Entrance Hall at Arncliffe Hall, North Yorkshire, *c*.1754, and (right), figure of Jupiter in the Staircase Hall at Lytham Hall, Lancashire, *c*.1760. (Photograph of Arncliffe Hall by Derek Lindstrum, 1978, University of York Library, reproduced under Creative Commons Licence. Photograph of Lytham Hall from author's collection.)

Overall the attribution to Cortese of the Fairfax House plasterwork is convincing on stylistic grounds, and it is reinforced by the fact that he had worked for the Fairfaxes in the past, had a strong association with John Carr, and is not known to have done any other significant work during the period 1762-3. The York plasterworker James Henderson also worked with Carr at, among other places, Harewood, Temple Newsam and Thirsk Hall, but has not been identified with any

figurework at these or any other locations, nor with decorative work of the standard reached by Cortese. It seems reasonable to suppose that Henderson carried out the flat work and the more straightforward decorative work such as compartment mouldings, cornices and run work, while Cortese completed the richly decorative elements of figures, scrollwork, garlands and other such work.[57]

Questions of meaning

A central element of the interpretation of the plasterwork after the 1980s restoration was the claim that Jacobite and Catholic symbolism was hidden in its figures and designs. The assumption that lay behind this claim was that Viscount Fairfax was a Jacobite sympathiser. He was of course a Catholic, but to be a Catholic did not automatically mean that one was a Jacobite.[58] For many contemporaries, the equation of support for the Stuart cause with Catholicism was an easy one to make, particularly at times of resurgent Jacobite threat,[59] but many mid-eighteenth-century Catholics were concerned to make clear their loyalty to the Hanoverian crown precisely in order to forestall such accusations. It must not be assumed from such protestations that Jacobite sympathies, at whatever level, were not present. The crown's active repression of open Jacobitism in the wake of both the 1715 and the 1745 risings must have been a powerful motivating force behind many of the expressions of loyalty among the Catholic gentry of Yorkshire.[60]

In 1745 rumours that Lord Fairfax was actively concerned in the rising and had arms and men concealed at Gilling Castle led to the castle being searched. It seems that Lord Fairfax drank the health of King George II with the officer leading the search party. If so, he must have been careful over which glass he offered his guest, for the Fairfaxes at that time possessed a set of Jacobite wine

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[57] Beard, *Decorative Plasterwork*, pp. 68, 224; Beard, *Italian Stuccoists*, pp. 18, 24.

[58] Geoffrey B. Seddon, *The Jacobites and their Drinking Glasses* (Woodbridge: Antique Collectors' Club, 1995), p. 57.

[59] Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England 1727-1783* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 202.

[60] Paul Kléber Monod, *Jacobitism and the English People 1688-1788* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 135

glasses engraved with the family crest.[61] It has also been claimed that the rosebuds ornamenting the ironwork of the landing balusters at Fairfax House are 'undoubtedly a hidden reference to Bonnie Prince Charlie and Lord Fairfax's disappointment at his "failure to come to flower"'.[62] Similar claims have been made in interpretative materials published by York Civic Trust and Fairfax House for the plasterwork containing encoded statements of the Viscount's 'support for the Jacobite cause'.[63] Naturally enough, if the Viscount *did* entertain Jacobite sympathies in the 1760s they could only have been expressed in disguised form; and, while his Catholicism was no secret, he may well have considered it prudent to be similarly circumspect about incorporating Catholic motifs and themes into highly visible decorative schemes in the more 'public' areas of his house.[64] As Murray Pittock has observed, physical manifestations of such marginalised, and indeed to varying degrees criminalised, cultures had to be 'fragmentary, enciphered, an aid to memorialisation of an unspoken linguistic sphere … a language of secrecy rather than of power'.[65] Symbolism such as that of the plasterwork at Fairfax House is thus of its nature open to being read at more than one level and with more than one meaning, with figures and emblems containing layers of significance, some readily apparent and accessible, some concealed and encoded. It must also be recognised that many of the elements to be found in the plasterwork – particularly on the Great Staircase, embellished with fantastic beasts, putti, hearts and roses, weapons and banners – are to varying degrees commonplaces of decorative plasterwork during this period, and while such elements may bear specific symbolic significance in particular instances, their mere presence in a decorative scheme does not necessarily imply that such is the case. Weaponry, for example, would have been hung in entrance halls and on the staircases of great houses in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and the

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[61] Monod, *Jacobitism and the English People*, pp. 128, 135; Cedric Collyer, 'Yorkshire and the "Forty-Five"', *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal*, no. 38 (1955), pp. 82-5; Hugh Aveling, *Northern Catholics: The Catholic Recusants of the North Riding of Yorkshire 1558-1790* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1966), pp. 368, 369.

[62] Webb, *Fairfax of York*, p. 88.

[63] Fairfax House Information Sheet, 'Highlights of the Staircase Ceiling' (York: Fairfax House, n.d., *c*.2000).

[64] On defining public and private in Georgian domestic interiors see Heller, 'Leisure and the use of domestic space', pp. 626-9.

[65] Murray Pittock, 'Treacherous objects: towards a theory of Jacobite material culture', *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 34, no. 1 (January 2011), pp. 39-63, here pp. 46, 48.

presence of plasterwork weapons in the Fairfax House staircase decoration can be seen as a continuation of that tradition.[66]

The claim of Jacobite symbolism has been made for to the presence of oak leaves in the Saloon and Library decoration, but the main concentration of such alleged imagery is found in and around the Great Staircase and its ante-space on the ground floor, the Staircase Hall. On the centreline of the wall of the latter, aligned with the centre of the ceiling panel and symmetrically positioned above the two doors in that wall (the rearmost Dining Room door on the right and a door presently used as the access to staff facilities on the left) is a large plasterwork wall decoration representing *Roma Æterna* (**Figure 8.6**). This is prominently located on the wall opposite the foot of the stairs and aligned with the centre of the staircase so that it cannot be ignored by anyone descending the stairs or approaching them with the intention of ascending. This figure is an unaltered reproduction of a design from Domenico De'Rossi, *Gemme antiche figurate date in luce da Domenico De'Rossi colle sposizioni di Paolo Alessandro Maffei*, published in four volumes in Rome in 1707-9. This publication provided illustrations and descriptions of a large number of ancient Roman carved gemstones from the collection of the famous humanist and antiquarian Paolo Alessandro Maffei (1653-1716). The text by De'Rossi accompanying the engraving of *Roma Æterna* explains that 'Roma is shown seated upon a suit of armour, with her head helmeted, with shield at her side and a figure of victory in her right hand', showing 'all the majesty, pomp, ornament and beauty' of 'the Queen of the World ... the home of empire, mother of kings and of gods'.[67] As for the two sheep and a goat represented in the engraving, De'Rossi frankly admits that he does not know their meaning, conjecturing that they are intended to symbolise the continuing importance to the Romans of the virtues of being humble and honest.[68] To the Catholic Fairfaxes it is reasonable to suppose that the

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[66] I would like to thank Claire Gapper, Jenny Saunt, Richard Ireland and Murray Pittock for illuminating discussions on this point.

[67] Domenico De'Rossi, *Gemme antiche figurate date in luce da Domenico De'Rossi colle sposizioni di Paolo Alessandro Maffei* (4 vols, Rome 1707-9), vol. 4 (1709), pp. 3-4. My translation.

[68] De'Rossi, *Gemme antiche figurate*, p. 4. Brown, *Fairfax House York* (1989), pp. 12, 85, suggests a heraldic connection with the Fairfax family on the strength of white goats shown as supporters in the overmantel of the fireplace in the Great Chamber at Gilling Castle (see Hugh Murray, *The Great Chamber at Gilling Castle* (Ampleforth: Ampleforth Abbey, 1996), p. 13) but the more likely explanation is that Cortese simply copied the whole design, goats and all, and that these animals had no particular personal meaning for the Fairfaxes.

Figure 8.6. Left: Roma Aeterna figure at the foot of the Great Staircase at Fairfax House. Right: the original of the design, an Ancient Roman carved gemstone from the collection of Paolo Alessandro Maffei, as illustrated in Domenico De'Rossi, *Gemme antiche figurate* (1709). (Left: author's photograph, 2013. Right: author's collection.)

idea of 'Eternal Rome' had a dual meaning. As a gentleman educated in the classical culture of his time the Viscount would certainly have been happy to honour the virtues of Ancient Rome, but as a Catholic he also saw that city as Eternal Rome, the centre of his faith and the source of spiritual authority. In a time of national military triumph and imperial expansion, Great Britain could also be seen as heir of the tradition of Ancient Rome,[69] giving this image an extra level of meaning and enabling it to bind together the interconnected elements of personal religion and national patriotism that run through the plasterwork of the Great Staircase.

In exploring the supposed meanings of highly symbolic decorative schemes such as the staircase plasterwork, it is important to consider the overall social, historical and cultural context in each case. This can be illustrated by a brief diversion to another decorated room in Fairfax House: the Library. Notable in the Library ceiling plasterwork are four medallions surrounded by oak-leaf garlands with head-and-shoulder portraits (**Figure 8.7**), based on well-known engravings, of four literary figures: philosopher John Locke, essayist and playwright Joseph Addison, and the poets John Milton and Alexander Pope. It has been suggested

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[69] Philip J. Ayres, *Classical Culture and the Idea of Rome in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 16ff.

Figure 8.7. Four heads of literary figures surrounded by oak-leaf garlands from the Library ceiling at Fairfax House. Top left, Alexander Pope; top right, John Milton; bottom left, John Locke; bottom right, Joseph Addison. (Author's photographs, 2015.)

that the selection of these individuals reflects the religious and political inclinations of Viscount Fairfax: Catholic and Jacobite.[70] As individuals these four men are hardly suitable as Catholic or Jacobite icons. Locke argued that religious toleration should not extend to Catholics because of their allegiance to a foreign prince, the Pope, and his contract theory of government justified the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688, and thus the exclusion of the Stuarts from the throne.[71] Addison was a devoted son of the Church of England and a committed Whig who served in Whig ministries under Queen Anne, expressed sometimes violently anti-Catholic views, and attacked Jacobitism through the pages of his journal *The Freeholder* in the wake of the 1715 rising.[72] Milton, whose father had abjured Catholicism for Protestantism, was a passionately committed Protestant

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[70] 'Highlights of the Library', in the Library room guidebook at Fairfax House (n.d.). Peter Brown's text in both the 1989 and the 2009 guidebooks to the house presents a more balanced view on the significance of the busts, playing down possible Jacobite or Catholic significance.

[71] F. J. McLynn, 'Jacobitism and the classical British empiricists', *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 4, no. 2 (September 1981), pp. 155-170.

[72] Manuel Schonhorn, 'Defoe and the limits of Jacobite rhetoric', *ELH*, vol. 64, no. 4 (Winter 1997), pp. 871-86, here p. 877; J. A. Downie, *To Settle the Succession of the State: Literature and Politics, 1678-1750* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994), p. 91.

himself and was strongly hostile to Catholicism in both poetry and prose.[73] Finally, Pope was a Catholic, but his Catholicism was moderate and Erasmian; he made a joke of his lack of piety and also joined the Freemasons, an act entirely contrary to Catholic teaching. In short, while he remained true to his faith and did not convert, he was hardly an exemplar of the kind of committed Catholicism exemplified by the Viscount and his family. Pope was on the fringes of Jacobite circles, however, and while his personal views on the Jacobite cause cannot be known for certain, it seems reasonable to suppose that he was a sympathiser, if never politically active in the cause.[74]

Three anti-Catholics and one Catholic; three anti-Jacobites and one crypto-Jacobite; the Fairfax House Library ceiling is hardly an assertion of Catholic or Jacobite allegiance. It does not speak with a clear and unambiguous religious-political message. These four literary figures decorate the Library because they are exactly that – literary figures. The artists and craftsmen who served the market for the interior decoration of great houses in the eighteenth century would provide busts, medallions and other images of such 'worthies' for their clients, which could be ordered in sets.[75] The four writers featuring in the Library were popular choices, signifying 'the moderns', while Greek and Roman writers would represent 'the ancients'. However, the use of oak leaves for the garlands around the busts is intriguing, given the significance of oak in Stuart iconography:[76] the more normal choice for such garlands would be laurel, although myrtle, ivy and oak were used in 'crowning' artists and writers in both the ancient world and in early modern Europe.[77] Given the unsuitability of the four writers in the Library ceiling as recipients of pro-Stuart honours, the oak leaves may have no 'Jacobite'

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[73] Clement Fatovic, 'The anti-Catholic roots of liberal and republican conceptions of freedom in English political thought', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 66, no. 1 (January 2005), pp. 37-58, here pp. 46-7.

[74] See Howard Erskine-Hill, 'Alexander Pope: the political poet in his time', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 15, no. 2 (Winter 1981-2), pp. 123-148.

[75] Malcolm Baker, 'Public images for private spaces? The place of sculpture in the Georgian domestic interior', *Journal of Design History*, vol. 20, no. 4 (Winter 2007), pp. 309-23, here pp. 317-8.

[76] Murray G. H. Pittock, *Poetry and Jacobite Politics in Eighteenth-Century Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 17-20.

[77] John L. Flood, 'Poets Laureate of the Holy Roman Empire', *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*, vol. 3, no. 2, 'British Studies Issue' (1997), pp. 5-23, here pp. 5-6, 12; J. B. Trapp, 'The owl's ivy and the poet's bays: an enquiry into poetic garlands', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, vol. 21, no. 3/4 (July-December 1958), pp. 227-55, here pp. 231-3, 234-5. The oak also has a strong patriotic association with Englishness and Britishness: see Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (London: Harper Collins, 1995), pp. 153ff.

significance, being simply a way of honouring the four as great literary figures, but the presence of oak is suggestive. Oak garlands (represented with acorns) are also present in the Saloon ceiling (**Figure 8.8**), surrounding medallions of musical instruments, with a fruitful vine in close proximity. Not every appearance of an oak leaf necessarily constitutes a coded statement of support for Jacobitism, but equally the choice of oak rather than other forms of foliage may be an expression

Figure 8.8. Oak-leaf garlands with acorns surrounding musical instruments in the Saloon ceiling plasterwork at Fairfax House. (Author's photographs, 2013.)

of sentimental sympathy for the Stuart cause, particularly given the prevalence of white roses in the plasterwork throughout the house (for example, in the floral garlands in the Dining Room and the festoons around the figure of Roma Aeterna). It is impossible to be certain.[78]

Turning to the stucco decoration of the staircase space itself, the key element here is one which tends to be somewhat disregarded in comparison to the rich display of beasts, banners, weapons and decorative flourishes around the cornices: the central ceiling motif of a female figure representing 'Architectura militare' (**Figure 8.9**). This figure is described in Tempest's text as follows:

> A Woman of ripe Years, in a noble Garment of divers Colours; a gold Chain about her Neck, with a Diamond; in one Hand the Mariners Compass, in the other the Description of an hexagon Fortification; a Swallow on her Fist, a Pickax and a Spade at her Feet. The parti-colour'd Vestments denote the Understanding of *divers Contrivances* in this Art. The golden Chain and Diamond, denote *Durability*, and *Excellency*; for Fortification is the best

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[78] Murray Pittock, *Material Culture and Sedition, 1688-1780: Treacherous Objects, Secret Places* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 74-5.

> Jewel of Princes, securing them from Enemies. The Swallow is remarkable for the *artificial* building her Nest [*sic*].[79]

As noted previously, Cortese's interpretation of 'Architectura militare' is largely faithful to this original: the chain and diamond about the woman's neck are there, as are the plan, the swallow, and the tools at her feet. However, there are important alterations. In the background of the original design is a small and indistinct fort with an unmarked flag flying above it. Cortese's version makes of the fort a much more prominent feature, with gun ports and battlements. The flag too is much larger and very clear: it is in fact a Union Flag, the flag of Great Britain since the Acts of Union in 1707. As a result of these alterations the fort with its flag now makes a clear statement about the supremacy of British military achievement. The second alteration, which is to the positioning of the figure, has a similar purpose. In the original the woman stands on a ground surface of grass and rocks, with mountains in the background. In Cortese's version the mountainous landscape has gone, the fort is on a rocky eminence to the left, and the figure now stands on a base consisting of both rocks and waves. Ripa's figure is definitely terrestrial, standing on *terra firma*, while Cortese's figure is more maritime in character, reflecting the triumph of British arms on both land and sea. It is interesting to note that both these changes are paralleled in adaptations made to the figure of Britannia in the seventeenth century, representing her seated on a rock surrounded by sea and adding the Union Flag to her shield, asserting the maritime character of British national dominance and asserting the national identity of the figure.[80]

The figure of 'Military Architecture' has thus been altered from a generalised piece of symbolism to a specifically national one, reflecting the immediate context of the Seven Years' War (1756-63) and the series of British naval and military victories that characterised that conflict, particularly during the 'year of victories', 1759.[81] This figure, celebrating British military achievement, is the key to the message of the scheme as a whole. The guiding principle of the stucco decoration on the staircase is an assertion of national pride based on military achievement,

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[79] Tempest, *Iconologia*, p. 6.
[80] See Derk Kinnane-Roelofsma, 'Britannia and Melita: pseudomorphic sisters', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, vol. 59 (1996), pp. 130-47, here pp. 130-1.
[81] Langford, *Polite and Commercial People*, pp. 338-9.

Figure 8.9. Figure of 'Architectura militare' on the Great Staircase at Fairfax House. (Author's photograph, 2015.)

and a reconciliation of that patriotic pride with the religious sentiment of commitment to Catholicism. In this sense the figure of 'Military Architecture' can be understood as a counterpart to the figure of 'Roma Aeterna', eternal Rome, on the wall below the staircase, with the two embodying and reconciling Viscount Fairfax's dual allegiance.

Historians have recently argued that ideas of national identity and citizenship aligned with nationhood were in flux during the mid-eighteenth century in ways that permitted new definitions of patriotism and national character to emerge. The pressure of war was a key element in this process, involving as it did the mobilisation of social and cultural constituencies, often marginal in nature, and their recruitment to the national cause.[82] To put it another way, the circumstance of a national war effort and the demands of the expanded fiscal-military state which it promoted did not lead to the development of a more tightly-drawn and exclusive pattern of national identity as might be expected, but to models that were at least potentially more flexible and inclusive. The decorative scheme at Fairfax House can be read in these terms as an effort to reconcile two identities that might normally be held to be in tension or indeed direct opposition, religious Catholicism and British patriotism, an effort carried out in the cause of (and which is fostered by) the pressures and conditions of war.[83] Around the central figure of 'Military Architecture', then, a scheme of decoration unfolds around the staircase ceiling that is powerfully martial and patriotic in character, but which also contains elements that speak of the Viscount's commitment to Catholicism – and these strands are aligned *with* each other against external enemies, not *against* each other as internal foes.[84]

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[82] Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (1992, 2nd edn, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005), pp. 71-7; Kathleen Wilson, '"Empire of Virtue": the imperial project and Hanoverian culture, *c*.1720-1785', in Lawrence Stone (ed), *An Imperial State at War: Britain from 1689 to 1815* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 128-64; Kathleen Wilson, 'Citizenship, empire, and modernity in the English provinces, *c*.1720-1790', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 29, no. 1 (January 1996), pp. 69-96; Dror Wahrman, 'National society, communal culture: an argument about the recent historiography of eighteenth-century Britain', *Social History*, vol. 17, no. 1 (January 1992), pp. 43-72, here pp. 61-2; Stephen Conway, 'War and national identity in the mid-eighteenth-century British Isles', *English Historical Review*, vol. 116, no. 483 (September 2001), pp. 863-893; Linda Colley, 'Whose nation? class and national consciousness in Britain 1750-1830', *Past and Present*, no. 113 (November 1986), pp 97-117, here pp. 100, 116. It has to be recognised that in discussions of the formation of British national identity, as elsewhere, English Catholics in the eighteenth century are victims of a persistent case of historian's blind spot: see, for example, Conway, 'War and national identity', pp. 880-3, in which Catholicism is discussed solely with reference to Ireland and the Irish (although Conway's more recent work takes a wider view: see Stephen Conway, 'Christians, Catholics, Protestants: the religious links of Britain and Ireland with continental Europe, *c*.1689-1800', *English Historical Review*, vol. 124, no. 509 (August 2009), pp. 833-862)

[83] Haydon, *Anti-Catholicism in Eighteenth-Century England*, pp. 100, 178-81.

[84] Murray Pittock has argued that the 'xenophobia of the eighteenth-century British state was aimed at its own subjects' and that the application of post-colonial theorisations to Jacobitism, with particular reference to Scotland, reflects discourses of difference and subjugation. It is part of the purpose of this chapter to suggest that the existence and potency of discourses of political/religious assimilation must also be recognised. See Pittock, 'Treacherous objects', p. 60.

To deal with the patriotic military symbolism first, the stucco decoration around the cornice incorporates a great number of weapons and banners or standards (**Figure 8.10**). For example, from behind the cartouche above the Venetian window, project four arrows, a bow, two lances, a sword, a halberd and a musket. From a trumpet hangs a banner bearing a design of oak-leaves, emblems of victory. On the wall to the right of the window are seven loose arrows and four gathered in a quiver, six lances, a halberd, an axe in fasces form, and two swords. A banner combining the Union Flag with a sword in an oak wreath, symbol of military victory, hangs from a trumpet. On the left-hand wall are seven loose arrows and four in a quiver, three lances, two swords, a bow and two muskets. A British flag flies proudly alongside a flag bearing the oak wreath emblems of victory. Finally, on the rear wall above the landing are three lances, a battleaxe in fasces form, a ball-and-chain mace, and a musket mounting a bayonet. From two of the lances fly military standards incorporating the Union Flag and emblems of victory. Two of the banners or standards incorporate the double-headed eagle of the Holy Roman Empire, which can be read as a personal tribute by the Viscount to his father, who (in common with other members of the English Catholic gentry and aristocracy) held a military position in the Empire when a young man in the early years of the eighteenth century, while his son was at school at Lamspringe Abbey in Germany.[85] All this weaponry is artfully disposed among curved decorative motifs, swags and cartouches in an eclectic Rococo style. In general the weapons are arranged to fan out from the centre of the composition on each wall, echoing the forms of architectural trophies, assemblages of weapons, armour, banners and other military equipment intended to symbolise victory in war, and this affinity is strengthened by the presence of laurel wreaths around the central blank cartouches of the two end panels.

The four cornice panels are arranged to present a type of conceptual narrative, which begins in the south panel behind the viewer who stands on the landing and looks towards the Venetian window, and runs from the viewer's right, around the cornice to end on the viewer's left. The narrative is structured around the concept of conflict on both a particular and a universal level: simultaneously the historical

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[85] Anselm Cramer (ed), *Lamspringe: An English Abbey in Germany, 1643-1803* (Ampleforth: Ampleforth Abbey, 2004); G. Holt, 'The education of Catholics from the Act of Uniformity to the Catholic Relief Acts', *Recusant History*, vol. 27, no. 3 (2005), pp. 346-58; Webb, *Fairfax of York*, p. 57.
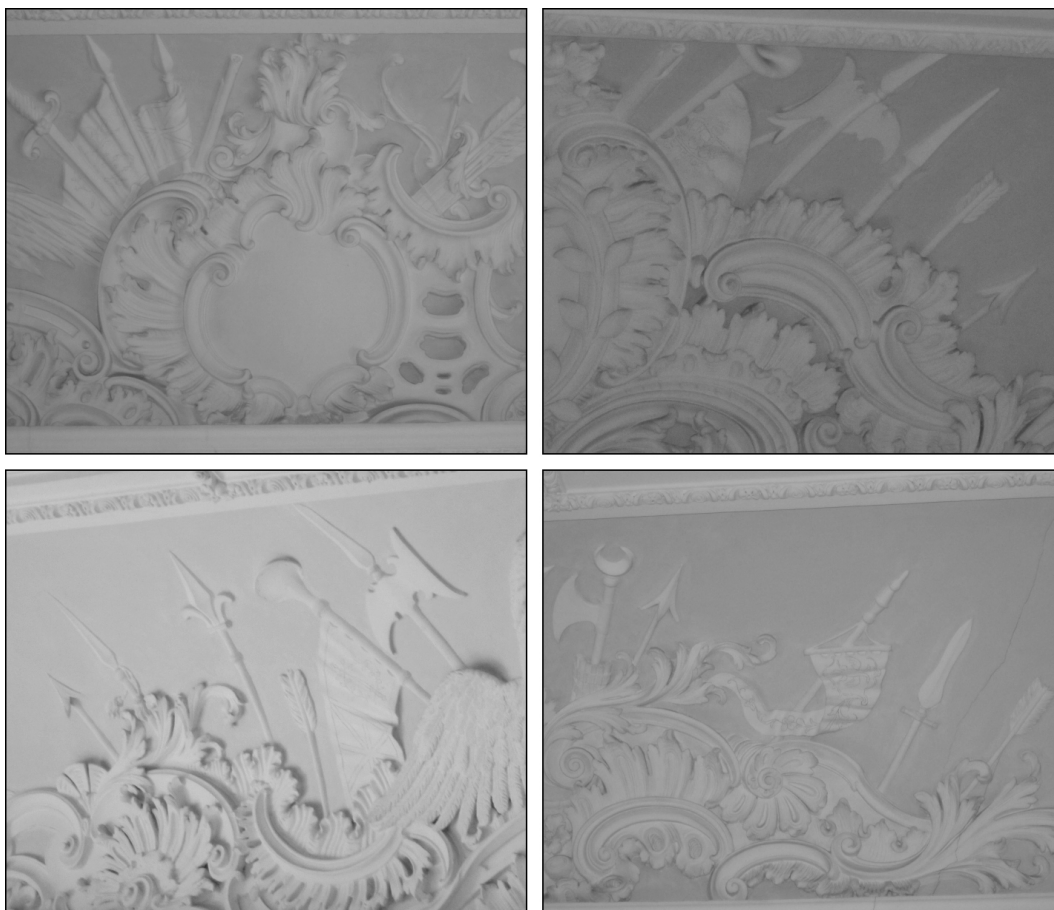
Figure 8.10. Weaponry in the plasterwork decoration of the Great Staircase at Fairfax House. (Author's photographs, 2013-2015.)

conflict of the Seven Years' War and the eternal conflict of good against evil (**Figure 8.11**). It begins with the alarmed goose above the landing. It has been suggested that this bird is a reference to the 'Wild Geese' regiments of Irish soldiers who took service with Catholic powers such as Spain, France and Austria in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[86] This is an appealing idea, particularly given that his own father's military service overseas might have given the theme of Catholic soldiers in exile a powerful resonance for the Viscount. There are problems with this theory, however. The term 'Wild Geese', which originated in Ireland in the late seventeenth century in reference to a specific event (the departure of Irish soldiers to join the army of King Louis XIV of France in 1691, following the final defeat of King James II's cause in Ireland) and became greatly favoured by the writers of later romanticising historiography, seems rarely if ever to have been used of such soldiers in the eighteenth century outside Ireland and Irish circles, making the use of this symbolism in the house of

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[86] Brown, *Fairfax House York* (2009), p. 27

Figure 8.11. Details from the Great Staircase plasterwork. Top left: the alarmed goose. Top right: putto with arrow and thunderbolt; Bottom left: eagle of Jupiter. Bottom right: flags between fasces and weaponry. (Author's photographs, 2015.)

an English Catholic nobleman unlikely: the reference would simply have gone unrecognised.[87] This is a particularly striking illustration of the romanticisation which has surrounded modern interpretations of the Fairfax House plasterwork. It is much more likely that this piece of symbolism draws on the world of Classical history and literature with which the Viscount and his circle would have been thoroughly familiar. The goose is associated with the giving of alarm, a warning of an external threat. This association, known to any classically-educated Georgian, derives from Livy's account of the thwarting of a surprise nocturnal attack on Rome by the Gauls in 386 BC when the geese sacred to the goddess

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[87] Micheline Kerney Walsh, 'The wild goose tradition', *The Irish Sword*, vol. 17, no. 66 (1987), pp. 4-15; Monod, *Jacobitism*, pp. 107-10. The term 'Wild Geese' was certainly current in Ireland during the Seven Years' War with reference to the anticipated French invasion which, it was hoped, would topple the Hanoverians, or at least free Ireland from English rule: for example the song 'The Return of the Wild Geese', reprinted in the Irish and English languages in C. P. Meehan (ed), *The Poets and Poetry of Munster: A Selection of Irish Songs by the Poets of the Last Century* (Dublin: James Duffy and Sons, 1860, 4th edn, 1885), pp. 200-3, which begins 'O, wait till I reach but the year Fiftyfour', i.e. 1754. See also Conway, 'Religious links of Britain and Ireland', p. 840.

Juno, who were kept in the Capitol, gave the alarm by cackling and clapping their wings.[88] The goose here is thus symbolising the necessity for the guardians of the state to awake and take arms against their enemies. In this context it is important not to forget how serious the direct military threat to Great Britain was during the Seven Years' War: in 1759 France had a well-developed plan to invade Britain, with 50,000 soldiers and hundreds barges to carry them ready to sail from the Channel ports by the late summer of that year.[89] French naval defeats and the Royal Navy blockade of France effectively ended the plan, although it was not formally abandoned until the very end of the war.[90]

The weapons and banners for the fight can be seen ready on the other side of the panel, including a battleaxe in *fasces* form (as symbol of justice and lawful authority and a conscious echoing of the Roman model of virtuous empire[91]), a lance, and a musket with bayonet and two battle standards, one bearing the Union Flag, the other a design combining a palm fronds and a sprig of oak, two ancient forms of honouring those who are victorious. The oak leaves to be found here and elsewhere in the stucco may have another significance, however, as a symbol of the Stuart dynasty and thus, in Hanoverian Britain, of Jacobitism.[92] If the Catholic Viscount Fairfax did indeed retain a sympathy for the Stuart cause he may have intended the oak leaves to possess this additional significance in addition to their more widely recognised symbolic meanings of honour and victory, just as the set of closed rosebuds worked into the metalwork of the landing balustrade may be intended to represent the unfulfilled promise of the Stuart line.[93] If that is the case, and in the absence of firm evidence it is a matter of speculation, the Jacobitism represented in the iconography of the Great Staircase is clearly of a passive, nostalgic variety, falling far short of any active political commitment to the Jacobite cause. The Viscount's behaviour during the Jacobite rising of 1745 and

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[88] Livy, *The Early History of Rome*, trans. Aubrey de Sélincourt (London: Penguin, 1960, repr. 1971), bk. 5, ch. 47, pp. 392-3.

[89] Jeremy Black, *Pitt the Elder* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 186-7; N. A. M. Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean: A Naval History of Great Britain, 1649-1815* (London: Allen Lane, 2004), p. 279.

[90] Rodger, *Command of the Ocean*, pp. 282-3.

[91] For examples of fasces used on funerary monuments of this period, see Ayres, *Classical Culture and the Idea of Rome*, p. 69

[92] See Eirwen F. C. Nicholson, '"Revirescit": the exilic origins of the Stuart oak motif ', in Edward Corp (ed), *The Stuart Court in Rome: The Legacy of Exile* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), pp. 25-48.

[93] Aveling, *Northern Catholics*, pp. 368, 369; Monod, *Jacobitism and the English People*, pp. 134-5; Brown, *Fairfax House York* (1989), p. 59; Webb, *Fairfax of York*, p. 88.

its aftermath bears out the contention that such vestigial Jacobitism as he may have retained was purely sentimental, making it unsurprising that any expression he chose to give to his Stuart sympathies in the iconography of his house is ambivalent and obscure, its execution restrained to the point of near-extinction.[94] With specific reference to the symbolism of the oak, it has been argued that by the later eighteenth century the oak was losing its partisan associations as a 'Stuart' or 'Jacobite' emblem and was becoming assimilated into the repertoire of national British symbols. Eirwen Nicholson has observed that from the accession of George III in 1760 'and the reconciliation of most Tories and Jacobites to the de facto regime at a politico-theological if not a sentimental level, the way was open for the oak's enduring adoption as an emblem of the British or English polity'.[95] Thus the presence of oak leaves in the Fairfax House staircase plasterwork does not necessarily undermine or contradict the patriotic message of the decorative scheme as a whole, and, on the contrary, may serve to reinforce it. Moving to the eastern panel, more weapons and standards, including another *fasces*, are encountered, followed by a putto who holds in one hand a thunderbolt and in the other a dart, pointing down to strike a person ascending the stairs. Ripa associates the thunderbolt with eloquence, but it is also an attribute of Jupiter, king of the gods, signifying the turmoil of war and the downfall of those who seek to attain too much greatness; thus the downfall of enemies. Like much of the decoration, the symbolism of the putto works on more than one level: the eloquent message of truth he conveys may simultaneously be one of religious truth or the truth of the national cause in war.

In the centre of the panel is a blank cartouche with more weapons – arrows, lances, a sword – bristling out from behind it, and flanking the cartouche is an eagle with wings outspread. This is the eagle of Jupiter, identified by the furled

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[94] Haydon, *Anti-Catholicism in Eighteenth-Century England*, p. 131; Monod, *Jacobitism and the English People*, p. 77. Eirwen Nicholson (Nicholson, '"Revirescit"', pp. 41-3) argues against suggestions that later eighteenth-century Jacobitism was nostalgic and empty of partisan content, writing that we should not find 'in the decorative and symbolic aspects of Jacobitism an invalidation of its challenge'. Much of her evidence, however, comes from before 1750; the atmosphere around the active, threatening Jacobitism of the 1710s and 1740s was very different from that prevailing in the 1760s, as the same author's comments in her 1997 essay 'The oak v. the orange tree' on changes in the significance of the oak after the accession of George III would appear to concede (see note 95 below).

[95] Eirwen E. C. Nicholson, 'The oak v. the orange tree: emblematizing dynastic union and conflict, 1600-1796', in Bart Westerweel (ed), *Anglo-Dutch Relations in the Field of the Emblem* (Amsterdam: Brill, 1997), pp. 227-52, here p. 248.

thundercloud in his beak (he looks towards the putto, who holds Jupiter's thunderbolt in his left hand), and symbolises supremacy, victory and conquest. Behind the eagle are battleaxes, arrows and lances, and a banner of the Union Flag combined with the oak leaves of military victory, mounted on a trumpet – another symbol of the proclamation of victory. In the centre of the north panel, above the Venetian window, is a cartouche surrounded by laurel leaves. On the right hand side weapons are displayed, and projecting from the other side are a bow, a sword, a lance and an arrow. That arrow is strategically placed, directed towards the open mouth of the figure of a dragon who, with a companion beast further around on the west wall, represents discord and tyranny. The dragons are symbolic of war and of Britain's enemies, and the arrow foretells the defeat of those enemies as they fall back before the advance of justice, truth and righteousness – and because the struggle symbolised by this design is simultaneously historical and particular (the Seven Years' War) and universal (the struggle of good against evil) that defeat can be seen in both geopolitical and religious terms.

Figure 8.12. The two Chinoiserie dragons – male on the left, female on the right – from the Great Staircase plasterwork. (Author's photographs, 2015.)

The two dragons (**Figure 8.12**) that are so prominent in the plasterwork are covered in both feathers and scales, with feathered wings and long serpentine tails, and their heads resemble the eastern rather than the western form of dragon. This is a clue to their nature, for they are in fact examples of Chinoiserie[96] – the interpretation in European art and design of the visual culture of China and other

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[96] Hugh Honour, *Chinoiserie: The Vision of Cathay* (London: John Murray, 1961), pp. 1, 125; Oliver Impey, *Chinoiserie: The Influence of Oriental Styles on Western Art and Design* (London: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 9

Asian countries. The Fairfax House decorative scheme is deeply imbued with the spirit of the Rococo, which always sat happily with Chinoiserie, a style which was at its height in English art and architecture in the 1750s and 1760s.[97] The dragon in the north panel has female breasts, making her an unusual feature in contemporary English art but not a unique one. A set of niches in the North Hall at Claydon House in Buckinghamshire is decorated with pairs of Chinoiserie dragons carved in wood by Luke Lightfoot: in each of the niches the pair is represented as one male and one female, with the female dragon with breasts. These carvings are from 1758-9, contemporary with the work at Fairfax House.[98]

Moving on to the final panel of the sequence, that on the western wall, we find the usual collection of weapons and encounter a putto holding aloft a blazing torch and a shield upon which two hearts and a rose are depicted (**Figure 8.13**). The conventional interpretation of this figure would be as a symbol of betrothal and marriage in the form of the Greek mythological figure Hymen. The presence of the two hearts on the shield would appear to reinforce the identification: and if Hymen is on one wall of the staircase, perhaps the putto on the other with his dart is intended to be Cupid? He may have stolen the thunderbolt he holds from Jupiter, signifying the triumph of love, as in Raphael's decoration of the 'Loggia of Psyche' at Villa Farnesina in Rome in which fourteen playful putti or amorini are depicted with the attributes of various Roman deities.[99] A quiver of arrows is prominently positioned near the putto with the dart, and another, this time accompanied by a bow, is similarly placed next to the putto with the torch, so perhaps both figures can be identified with Cupid. If Fairfax House was indeed intended by the Viscount as a dowry for his daughter Anne (then in her late 30s), then the presence of Cupid and Hymen (the two figures were often represented

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[97] John Summerson, *Architecture in Britain 1530-1830* (London: Pelican, 1953, 8th edn 1991), pp. 340, 369; James Stevens Curl, *Georgian Architecture* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1993), pp. 63, 65.

[98] R. S. Clouston, 'Claydon House, Bucks, the seat of Sir Edmund Verney, Bart. Part I', *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*, vol. 5, no. 3 (April 1904), pp. 12-34, here pp. 13-14 and plate p. 17; Robert M. Craig, 'Claydon House, Buckinghamshire: a mirror of mid-eighteenth-century English taste', *Southeast College Art Review*, vol. 12, no. 2 (April 1992), pp. 69-79, here p. 76 and figs. 12 and 14. The suggestion that the female dragon may represent 'James II's daughter Mary Stuart, who, by marrying the Protestant William of Orange caused not only the downfall of the Stuart dynasty but also, the last opportunity for Catholic ascendancy' is strained and tendentious in the extreme and can be disregarded: Brown, *Fairfax House York* (2009), p. 27.

[99] Luisa Vertova, 'Cupid and Psyche in Renaissance painting before Raphael', *The Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, vol. 42 (1979), pp. 104-21, here pp. 106-7; Pierluigi de Vecchi, *The Complete Paintings of Raphael* (London: Penguin, 1987), p. 7 and plate LIX.

Figure 8.13. Figure from the Great Staircase plasterwork that may represent the Greek god of marriage, Hymen. (Author's photograph, 2015.)

together), or a syncretic figure carrying aspects of both, is a possibility. The two hearts on the shield may equally be a reference to the fact that the Viscount was married twice, strengthening the familial aspect of the decoration. The alternative is to see the message of the figure with the torch as essentially religious in nature, with the torch standing for true religion (i.e. the Catholic faith) and the hearts possibly representing the hearts of Jesus and Mary, or symbolising that the twin loves of faith and country can exist side by side. The suggestion that the two hearts stand for sacred and profane love[100] is harder to justify, given that in Christian teaching profane love (the love of the earthly and fleeting) is something to be *overcome* by sacred love (the love of the pure and eternal) and not something to hold up alongside it.

The torch appears again on one of the two flags (**Figure 8.14**) which emerge from the left side of the cartouche in the centre of this panel: the precise design is

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[100] Brown, *Fairfax House York* (2009), p. 27.

unclear, but appears to consist of a flaming torch surrounded by flower garlands and sprigs of oak or laurel, with an object that might be a club behind it. Among

Figure 8.14. Flags from the Great Staircase plasterwork: behind is a Union Flag, and partially overlying it is a flag with a complex symbolic design of torch, club, chains and sprigs of foliage, that may refer to the myth of Hercules and Omphale. (Author's photograph, 2015.)

the common attributes of both Hymen and Cupid are lit torches and garlands, often of roses, both of which served as symbols of love: this flag, then, would appear to celebrate the triumph of love. The club may be a reference to Cupid stealing the club of Hercules in order to carve it into a bow, or to the myth of Hercules and Omphale, in which Cupid playing with Hercules's weapons symbolises his subjection to and effective emasculation by Queen Omphale, or more generally to the theme of the disarming of the strong by the power of love.[101] This banner is accompanied by the Union Flag, relating the generalised theme of the victory of love over brute strength to the triumph of virtue and truth expressed in the victory of the nation over its enemies. Beyond this figure and completing the sequence that runs around the cornice is the second dragon (**Figure 8.12**), scaled and feathered like his companion, threatened by swords,

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[101] Katie Scott, 'Under the sign of Venus: the making and meaning of Bouchardon's *L'Amour* in the age of the French rococo', in Caroline Arscott and Katie Scott (eds), *Manifestations of Venus: Art and Sexuality* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 69-89, here pp. 81-2; Estelle Lingo, *François Duquesnoy and the Greek Ideal* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 57-63.

lances and arrows and in the act of being put to flight by the forces of justice and truth (whether visualised in religious or patriotic terms).

Since Fairfax House was restored and opened to the public in the 1980s an 'authorised version' of the meanings of the interiors has been presented through the guidebooks, associated literature and other interpretative materials connected with the house. The ceiling of the Great Staircase, according to the 1989 guide book to the house, presents a 'superb display of the 18th century taste for allegory proclaiming on the one hand, a support for King and country with its strong military theme, a risky allegiance to the Roman Catholic cause and a dangerous support of the Jacobite cause'.[102] The later 2009 edition of the guide book asserted that the Great Staircase plasterwork contains 'subtle and sometimes blatant references to Catholicism and the Jacobite cause' which may 'seem to us a rather provocative and dangerous thing to do … but clearly this was not considered a problem by Lord Fairfax'.[103] Webb's history of the Fairfaxes wrote of the 'hidden allusions to the Roman Catholic faith for those able to recognise them' in the plasterwork and ironwork of the staircase.[104] An unpublished paper by John Rayne-Davis, a historian of York Catholicism, described the plasterwork of the staircase as containing 'some fairly erudite anti-establishment symbols' intended to convey an anti-Hanoverian message.[105] Such interpretations were repeated in mainstream accounts of the house, such as Simon Jenkins's *England's Thousand Best Houses* (2004), in which the Great Staircase ceiling is described as 'encrusted with Cortese's stuccowork … The deeply coved ceiling is militaristic, with weapons, trophies, flags and putti holding a light for the 'true religion', Fairfax being a Roman Catholic'.[106] Interpretative materials in the house echo the same version of the plasterwork. A recently-installed information panel on the landing of the Great Staircase begins by placing the decoration in the historical context of the Seven Years' War, but goes on to describe the potential 'coded' meanings of the decoration as follows:

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[102] Brown, *Fairfax House York* (1989), p. 59.
[103] Brown, *Fairfax House York* (2009), pp. 26-7.
[104] Webb, *Fairfax of York*, p. 200.
[105] John Rayne-Davis, *Catholic Symbolism at Fairfax House York* (unpublished paper, 2007), p. 3. Fairfax House Archive.
[106] Simon Jenkins, *England's Thousand Best Houses* (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 907.

> It is important not to forget, however, that Viscount Fairfax and his daughter Anne were deeply committed Catholics. It is possible that the Viscount and Cortese may have worked closely together to embed coded references to their Catholic faith into this decorative scheme. Note the torch of 'true religion' held aloft by a putto … More subversive meanings may also be present. The display of oak leaves, a recognised symbol of the Stuart cause, on some of the stucco banners may reflect the Viscount's Jacobite inclinations.[107]

This explanation continues to be backed by the authority of Fairfax House itself and the York Civic Trust. The 2009 Fairfax House guide book asserts that 'the complex array of imagery' around the Great Staircase 'has only recently been fully understood'.[108] But it has been argued in this chapter, in the context of Fairfax House's history both during the eighteenth century and since, that this understanding is neither as comprehensive nor as soundly-based as has been suggested. The decorative scheme of the Great Staircase at Fairfax House does lend itself to a coherent, but inevitably provisional, interpretation: that its message is one of apparently incompatible and even oppositional national and religious identities coming together harmoniously in a struggle against the forces of chaos and destruction, and that the struggle should be seen in both the historical terms of the Seven Years' War and the transcendent terms of the universal struggle of good against evil. However, complex decorative schemes such as that of the Great Staircase speak with many voices, some of them seemingly disharmonious or obscure in their messages. It is clear that the tensions, ambiguities and mysteries contained within this virtuoso exercise in symbolic and decorative art will repay much more detailed investigation. The Great Staircase is a long way from giving up all its secrets.

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[107] Information panel on the Great Staircase landing at Fairfax House, installed January 2011.
[108] Brown, *Fairfax House York* (2009), p. 26.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has ranged widely in pursuit of its stated objective: to explore the interior decorative plasterwork at Fairfax House in its social, cultural, material, symbolic and aesthetic dimensions, in the context of the century which created it, the eighteenth, and the century which re-created it, the twentieth. In doing so it has sought to make a contribution not only to the history of eighteenth-century decorative art and architectural ornament, but to the history of heritage, conservation and restoration, and the cultural and ideological influences that have acted upon these aspects of the modern history of our built environment. Three major themes have been discussed, and in turn the thesis has made a contribution to three areas of study: the history of plasterwork; twentieth-century conceptions of 'the Georgian' and their influence on the conservation movement in modern Britain; and the history of Fairfax House.

The history of plasterwork

Plasterwork has been a neglected and marginalised aspect of architectural history, being concerned with interiors rather than exteriors, with craft production rather than art, with the work of largely anonymous craftsmen rather than prominent named architects, and with decoration – the superficial matter of surfaces – rather than with the essences of architectural form and those aspects of ornament which contribute to style. Where addressed at all, plasterwork has been considered as a subsidiary element of the wider history of architecture, as a background rather than an important topic in its own right for the history of furniture and interior design, and as a superficial extra in a building rather than an aspect of its fundamental identity or purpose. This study has aimed to reconsider and to challenge these assumptions, first by interrogating the historiography of plasterwork in chapters 2 and 3 to trace how and why it has come to be judged in these terms, and the consequences of that judgement for the history of architecture and interiors, and second by adopting a methodology which integrates the study of

a building's plasterwork into the wider context of its 'biography', not only in material terms but in terms of its place in society, culture, and the imagination.

The plasterwork at Fairfax House has been shaped during its 250-year history in multiple ways, and it is important to place that complex process in social, cultural and historical contexts across the whole of that period. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 proceed on the assumption that a given piece of applied human creativity, whether an entire building or a decorative plasterwork interior, does not become a passive given of history once it reaches the stage categorised – often somewhat arbitrarily – as 'finished'. It continues to be created and re-created, and its history does not come to an end. It is, rather, a continuous process of transformation, through the action of environment, human activity, intentional and unwitting intervention, and the changing preoccupations and focuses of individual and collective minds through the complex webs of culture and imagination. The eighteenth-century plasterwork inside Fairfax House has 'survived' to the present day, but that survival is a dynamic process, not simply one of endurance: and the fact that it is materially still present in the house, and in a condition broadly representative of that it possessed when first installed, is as much the result of twentieth-century influences as it is of eighteenth-century creativity. That in turn, demands that the sociocultural dynamics which led to the restoration and preservation of Fairfax House as a Georgian town house museum are analysed.

Conceptions of the 'Georgian'

Fairfax House is a Georgian building in a historic city which contains much in the way of important Georgian architecture and streetscapes. Yet 'the Georgian' is more than a merely chronological category covering the British historical period from the early eighteenth century to the early nineteenth century; nor is it a merely descriptive and passive category in architectural history. It is rather an expression of certain ideological readings of the past as expressed in the physical traces that past has left to subsequent ages. 'Georgian', particularly through the twentieth century, has come to mean more than a stylistic categorisation of buildings on the grounds of the period of their construction (itself frequently a mutable concept) or based on a structure's possession of certain patterns of fenestration, ornament, or

layout. As chapters 4 and 5 have argued, to align oneself with the Georgian in British architecture and conservation in the middle decades of the twentieth century meant the adoption of a certain attitude to the aesthetic and even moral condition of the built environment, and by extension the espousal to varying degrees of a contemporary rather than historical programme for social change. In short, despite the connection between the Modern Movement and the revision of attitudes to Georgian architecture and urban planning in the early twentieth century, that programme tended to be elitist, conservative, and anti-modernist. This was certainly the case in York, where the York Georgian Society and – even more so – the York Civic Trust sought to find in the social, cultural and aesthetic values of the Georgian age a suitable model for reshaping the future of their city in terms that would ensure the rejection of the modern, commercial and industrial world. Chapter 4 in particular has explored the ways in which the York Civic Trust sought to obliterate the Victorian age and reach directly from the twentieth century to the eighteenth century – a preoccupation most directly expressed in the desire to mould the twentieth-century craftsmen working on the restoration of Fairfax House into worthy successors of their eighteenth-century predecessors.

The history of Fairfax House

In common with many historic houses that have been restored and preserved as museum houses for the visiting public, Fairfax House tells an officially sanctioned story about itself. The house's interior plasterwork plays a central role in that story, as the single most important and most highly-regarded aspect of its architecture and decoration. The fundamental element in the authorised history of Fairfax House is its restoration – its rescue from the 'neglect' of various commercial uses in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and its rebirth as an immaculate Georgian town house, connecting in physical form the York of the late twentieth- and early twenty-first-centuries with the 'Northern Metropolis' of gentry, aristocrats and craftsmen, of the eighteenth century.

Tracing this complex process of transformation in material terms paralleled by perceptual transformation has required extensive analysis of the Fairfax House of the twentieth century as well as the Fairfax House of the eighteenth. The

interior plasterwork of the house has always existed not only in the physical world but in the minds and imaginations of those associated with it, and this remains the case as the house persists through its current incarnation, that of a preserved Georgian town house museum. As with its predecessors, that incarnation is a transient one, but it has brought a new dimension of self-understanding and self-presentation to the house which has not applied in the same way to its earlier forms – to put it another way, *representing* a building as a Georgian town house is a very different matter from the same building *being* a Georgian town house. A museum is a very large-scale intervention in the modes of existence and representation that are woven around a historic building, and that intervention shapes its own histories that are in turn woven into the fabric of the general history of that building. It is for this reason that historic houses tell stories about themselves. The story that Fairfax House tells is interrogated in chapters 6 and 7, which look at the process of restoration, with a particular focus on the plasterwork, and at the plasterwork itself, culminating in chapter 8 in a detailed reading of the culminating point of the eighteenth-century plasterwork scheme, the Great Staircase.

The interpretations of the Great Staircase plasterwork have occupied a central role in the history of Fairfax House as it has been represented since the restored house opened to the public. That history has been woven around the Fairfaxes, John Carr the architect, and Cortese the plasterworker, and incorporates colourful and engaging stories about secret histories, encoded messages in perilous times, and this has added an extra dimension to the physical attractions of a beautiful and historic house for its visitors. These stories are not in themselves 'wrong' but they are partial and to some degree misleading. A proper contextualisation of that history is important if we are to view the Fairfax House plasterwork in its true light, enable our understanding to inform the wider field of architectural history, and thus serve the histories not only of Fairfax House itself but of historic buildings and their decoration more generally. If this thesis is seen as a step in that direction, it will have fulfilled its purpose.

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