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# THE 1740s: THE LOST DECADE

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Architectural debate seldom happens in an economic vacuum. The boom years of the 1980s saw intense stylistic activity. Modernism was toppled from its exclusivist position and Post-Modernism, Deconstructionism, New Modernism and the Classical Revival have all struggled for attention. Now, with the construction industry settling into severe recession, the pace of change will probably slow as the volume of new building shrinks. Equally dramatic cycles of boom and bust marked the 18th century, and it can be argued that there is a similar correlation between these cycles and the rate of stylistic change.

Sir John Summerson hinted at this connection in his 1959 essay on 'The Classical Country House in 18th-century England', recently reprinted in *The Unromantic Castle* (1990), where he argued that the emergence of neo-Palladianism coincided with a boom in country house building in the half decade between 1720 and 1724. Subsequent research by economic historians into broader building trends shows this to make sense, for these were the peak years of a remarkable economic boom that began with the end of the War of the Spanish Succession in 1713 and continued until about 1727, with only a brief hiatus caused by the South Sea Bubble in 1720.<sup>1</sup>

But while the 1720s were years of widespread country house building, the reverse is true of the 1740s. Although the point has seldom been commented upon, country house building tailed off after about 1735 and the decade before 1748 saw remarkable few new houses begun. This slump had stylistic implications as profound as the boom of the 1720s. It can be clearly charted in the careers of specific architects, but is also seen in the individual aspirations of patrons, as well as in the number of houses built.

James Gibbs was one of England's most prolific country house architects in the 1720s and early 1730s, but after enlarging Quarrell, Stirlingshire, in 1735-36 he had virtually no work for over a decade. A new house at Hampstead Marshall, Berkshire, was begun in 1739 but abandoned incomplete the same year; the same happened to a scheme for remodelling Hartwell House, Buckinghamshire, in 1740; plans for remodelling and extending Kiveton Hall, Yorkshire, in 1741 came to nothing; and schemes for Kirtlington Hall, Oxfordshire, Catton Hall, Derbyshire, and Wiston Park, Sussex, were rejected. It was only in 1749 that his country house practice picked up again with two new houses at Bank Hall, Lancashire, and Patshull Hall, Staffordshire, and a major remodelling at Ragley Hall, Warwickshire. By then it was too late to revive his career and Gibbs's death in 1754 brought an end to this late rally. Terry Friedman, Gibbs's biographer, suggests that this break was largely self-imposed, arguing that Gibbs devoted less time to his country house practice and consequently accepted fewer commissions.<sup>2</sup> However, the number of rejected schemes suggests that Gibbs was anxious to maintain his country house practice but was unable to gain employment.

Gibbs was not alone in this situation. A survey of other leading architects shows a similar pattern. Roger Morris, who was very busy until 1732, had no new country house commissions after 1733 until he began Inveraray Castle, Argyllshire, in 1745. This was followed by Kirby Hall, Yorkshire, in 1747 and Brandenburg House, Hammersmith, in 1748, but again the rally came too late for Morris, who died in 1749. Kirby Hall was built in association with Lord Burlington, who had been involved at Northwick Park, Gloucestershire, Boynton Hall, Yorkshire, Petersham Lodge, Surrey, and Holkham Hall, Norfolk, between 1730 and 1734, but thereafter designed no country houses until Kirby Hall. William Kent was also busy in the late 1720s and early 1730s, but his country house work tailed off after Holkham in 1734. The only house with

which he was involved was the remodelling of Rousham Hall, Oxfordshire, in 1738, and in the 1740s he had no commissions until he designed Wakefield Lodge, Northamptonshire, in 1748, the year of his death. John James had two commissions in 1733, Standlynch, Wiltshire, and Baylies House, Buckinghamshire, but no further work until he was called to Welbeck Abbey, Nottinghamshire, in 1742. He died in 1746. James Leoni had five commissions in 1728-35, but only received three new commissions between 1735 and his death in 1746. Lord Pembroke, who was an active country house designer in the 1720s and did not die until 1750, designed nothing except garden buildings after Wimbledon House, Surrey, in 1732.

All these architects were established before 1730, but the paucity of new commissions was particularly hard for architects trying to establish themselves. John Sanderson built two substantial houses in 1730-31, Kelham Hall, Nottinghamshire, and Stratton Park, Hampshire, but this promising start fizzled out. It was not until 1747 that he was called upon to work on another country house, the completion of Kirtlington Park, Oxfordshire, and it was only in 1750 that he was asked to design a new house. Isaac Ware was one of Lord Burlington's protégés, and, like Kent and Flitcroft, should have been well placed to receive commissions early in his career. But though he was a practising architect from 1733, when he was 26, his first significant house was the suburban Clifton Hill House, Bristol in 1746, and he was 43 before he had his first significant country house commission, the remodelling of Chicksands Priory, Bedfordshire, in 1750. For the rest of the decade he was busy with country houses. Matthew Brettingham was also well known in the Burlingtonian circle as the executant architect at Holkham, but no country houses can be definitely attributed to him until he remodelled Euston Hall, Suffolk, in 1750-56 at the age of 51. Between then and his death in 1769 he was well employed. John Vardy is another architect who might have been expected to establish a private practice in the 1740s. He was also a protégé of Burlington, and held a succession of clerkships in the Board of Works from 1736, but it was not until the 1750s that he designed any country houses.

Among potential builders, Sir Francis Dashwood's history is instructive. Dashwood was a passionate architectural enthusiast, a founder member of the Dilettanti Society, who inherited his estate at West Wycombe, Buckinghamshire, as a boy of 16 in 1724. He spent the next 15 years travelling extensively, but by 1739 he was ready to build. Drawings were prepared and work began on the park but nothing was done to the house. It was not until 1748, nearly a decade later, that he was reported to be again considering rebuilding. This time work was soon under way and continued throughout the next decade.<sup>3</sup> At the same time many of the larger building projects begun about 1735, such as Holkham Hall, Norfolk, Wentworth Woodhouse, Yorkshire, Prior Park, Avon, and Nostell Priory, Yorkshire, progressed only slowly, and were not completed until the 1750s or 1760s. At Hartwell House, Buckinghamshire, James Gibbs's plans to remodel the Elizabethan house were abandoned in 1740 when only the Great Hall had been done, and work was not revived until 1759.<sup>4</sup> Other projects, such as Thorndon Hall, Essex, begun in 1734, and Hampstead Marshall, Berkshire, were abandoned unfinished.

Of course, the slump was not absolute, for the circumstances of individual landowners varied. The Countess of Oxford, a great heiress in her own right, was widowed in 1741 having long suffered the wild extravagance of her husband, which even forced the sale of their house at Wimpole in 1738. Independent at last, she quickly set about remodelling her ancestral home, Welbeck Abbey, Nottinghamshire, to make her comfortable in her old age. In Scotland the Duke of Argyll was already 61 when he succeeded to the title in 1743 and was not prepared to delay rebuilding the uninhabitable Inveraray Castle, Argyllshire. Sir James Dashwood had a large enough fortune, especially as his wife was an heiress in her own right, to ignore the economic climate when he built Kirtlington Hall, Oxfordshire, in 1742-46. Linley Hall, Shropshire, built by Henry Joynes for Robert More in 1743-46, is exceptional in that More had succeeded in 1719 and inherited further property in 1731, so that there seems no particular

reason why he should have delayed rebuilding until the 1740s, but even he seems to have been forced to suspend his activities in 1744-45, not completing the roof until 1746.<sup>5</sup> But compared to the volume of building carried out in the 1720s and early '30s and the dramatic boom of the 1750s which will be discussed below, one has to search for new houses built between 1740 and 1748.

It was not only the building of new country houses that slumped during these years. Although William Kent had three important town house commissions in the 1740s — 22 Arlington Street (1741-50), 44 Berkeley Square (1742-44) and 16 St James's Place (c.1740-43) — this was exceptional. Gibbs and Leoni, who had both been active in London in the 1730s, had no urban commissions, and such work as other architects had was largely insignificant. Sir John Summerson has shown how the expansion of London slowed down in the 1730s, and that by the end of the decade at least fifteen hundred houses were uninhabited in St Martin's and adjacent parishes.<sup>6</sup> In Bath, John Wood's grandiose schemes for rebuilding the city ground to a halt during the 1740s, and it was only in 1753-54 that he was able to revive them.<sup>7</sup>

After the boom years of the 1720s, broader building trends show a slow rise to about 1736 followed by a decline which became precipitous in 1740.<sup>8</sup> War with Spain in 1739 ushered in nearly a decade of conflict, the War of the Austrian Succession. Government expenditure soared from £4,725,000 in 1738 to £9,398,000 in 1744 and reached £12,544,000 in 1749.<sup>9</sup> Interest rates rose, particularly in 1744-45, making it difficult to borrow and uneconomic to realise capital held in stocks, and did not recover until 1749.<sup>10</sup> Land tax, which particularly hit landowners, was increased to 4s in the pound with the total sum collected rising from £1,134,000 in 1739 to £2,130,000 in 1741.<sup>11</sup> Matters were worsened by two appalling harvests in 1740 and 1741. Bankruptcies and riots were common. The same years saw successive severe winters causing the loss of half the country's sheep, a problem exacerbated by serious outbreaks of foot rot in 1745 and 1747. Meanwhile the price of grain, of particular importance to landowners, hit a long-term low in 1743-44. It was not a time to invest or build.<sup>12</sup>

The Peace of Aix-la-Chapelle in 1748 saw a dramatic change. Government debt meant that the land tax was slow to come down, but the sum collected fell from £2,212,000 in 1750 to £1,288,000 in 1754. Interest rates were low and trade boomed, with Pelham's conversion of the public debt in 1751 making money even cheaper and adding a final stimulus to activity. Timber imports rose sharply, reaching a peak in 1753.<sup>13</sup> In agriculture, the years between 1751 and 1753 were a time of high grain prices. This dramatic economic stimulus, coupled with a decade's pent-up demand, was reflected in the building of country houses and London houses. Nearly all the architects established before 1735 mentioned above who had little work in the following decade received commissions in the years that immediately followed the Peace of Aix-la-Chapelle. More significantly, these years saw a sudden rash of new architects. It is hard to think of any important architect who established a successful career between 1735 and 1745. By contrast the number of architects who appear in the 1750s and 1760s is legion.

James Paine started slowly with Heath Hall, Yorkshire, in 1744, then Hickleton Hall, Yorkshire, in 1747, but from 1749 he was continually busy. William Hiorne, born in about 1712, suddenly became active in 1748 and produced a string of houses over the next decade. John Carr, born in 1723, built his first house in 1748 and thereafter was never short of work. Sir Robert Taylor, who had a successful career as a master mason and monumental sculptor, turned to architecture with enormous success in 1753 when he was nearly 40, perhaps as a result of the surge in demand for architects. Stiff Leadbetter followed the same path. Born in about 1705, he established himself in Eton, Berkshire, as a builder, and there is no evidence of him working as an architect before 1753, but by 1759 he was so busy that he had to turn down the offer of work at Hartwell House, Buckinghamshire. The commission went instead to Henry Keene, born in

1726, for whom the boom meant that he could establish himself as an independent architect in his early 20s.

The 1750s were a boom decade for new country houses and this does not seem to have been severely affected by the Seven Years' War from 1756 to 1763. It was on the back of this boom that these architects could launch their careers so dramatically and yet still leave plenty of room for newcomers like Sir William Chambers, Robert Adam, Lancelot Brown and James Wyatt in the 1760s. There was also space for a whole new school of provincial architects such as James Essex in Cambridge, Anthony Keck in Gloucestershire, Thomas Atkinson in Yorkshire and Thomas Pritchard in the Welsh Marches.

The 1740s slump in country houses had its effect on architectural style as clearly as it did on architectural careers. Its first effect was to kill off the Baroque strand of country house design. If by 1730 neo-Palladianism had gained the high ground of the architectural establishment, particularly in the Office of Works, its victory in the country was not yet complete. There still remained a vigorous tradition of houses that owed nothing to neo-Palladianism and looked back to an essentially Baroque tradition. This was strongest in the work of provincial master builders like Nathaniel Ireson at Berkley House, Somerset, of 1730-32 and Crowcombe Court, Somerset, begun in 1734. Its most successful exponent was Francis Smith of Warwick, who continued the Baroque style until his death in 1738. A decade later, when the new wave of country house building began, this tradition had been extinguished.

In its place a Palladian orthodoxy had been established. A whole generation had grown up for whom neo-Palladianism was the accepted style of building, and this, combined with the survival of a significant number of the first generation of neo-Palladians such as Burlington, Kent and Morris, and of their protégés, such as Ware, Brettingham and Vardy, led to a uniformity of approach unmatched since the Baroque experiment had destroyed the Prattian consensus in the late 1690s. But this did not lead to loss of individualism. Whereas the 1740s had seen little stylistic development, the volume of building in the 1750s, stimulated by pent up demand, led to significant advances, particularly in the work of Paine, Taylor and Carr. The sudden boom in building also helps explain why the Gothick style, of which there had been a trickle of examples in the 1730s and 1740s, was so widespread in the 1750s.

By identifying the effective break in country house building it is also possible to show that what is sometimes seen to be a "villa revival" among neo-Palladian architects in the 1750s is better explained as a part of a general revival of country house building. The villa never went out of fashion, but like all types of country house few examples were built in the 1740s. It is fair to say that in the 1720s and early 1730s neo-Palladianism as seen in the new country houses of Campbell, Burlington, Pembroke and Morris was a villa style, the only exception being Houghton Hall, Norfolk, whose provenance is uncertain.<sup>14</sup> In the 1730s these were joined by a number of neo-Palladian great houses such as Wentworth Woodhouse and Holkham, but not at the villa's expense. With the recovery of country house building the villa was again more popular than the great house, but examples such as Croome Court, Worcestershire (1751); Hagley Hall, Worcestershire (1753) and Harewood House, Yorkshire (1759) show that the great house was still a significant building type.

Like the dog that did not bark, the lost decade of the country house is a valuable clue towards unravelling the puzzling history of neo-Palladianism.

## NOTES

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4. Gervase Jackson-Stops, 'Hartwell House, Buckinghamshire', *Country Life*, November 22, 1990.
5. Arthur Oswald, 'Linley Hall, Shropshire — I', *Country Life*, September 7, 1961.
6. John Summerson, *Georgian London*, London, 1988, 84-85.
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9. B.R. Mitchell, *Abstract of British Historical Statistics*, Cambridge, 1962, 390-91.
10. T.S. Ashton, *An Economic History of England. The 18th Century*, London, 1955, 27, 170.
11. Mitchell, *op. cit.*, 390-391.
12. Ashton, *op. cit.*, 54, 57.
13. Mitchell, *op. cit.*; Lewis, *op. cit.*, 19; Ashton, *op. cit.*, 40.
14. John Harris, 'Who designed Houghton?', *Country Life*, March 2, 1989.