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LADY POMFRET'S HOUSE: THE CASE FOR RICHARD BIGGS

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Pomfret House in Arlington Street, central London's only complete Gothick house, has perplexed historians since John Cornforth's exciting discovery among the *Country Life* archive of photographs¹ taken shortly before the house was demolished in 1934. These he published in *Country Life Annual* 1970, suggesting Sanderson Miller as the architect. In this he followed Horace Walpole,² for after all Walpole lived in a house on the opposite side of the street. In 1987 Michael McCarthy re-examined the evidence³ and came to the conclusion that the lodges on the street⁴ and the front⁵ to the court behind them, were the work of Miller, whereas the garden front and the interior were by Sir Roger Newdigate assisted by Henry Keene. But he did not explain why there should have been a division of responsibility, and he dismissed the creative role of Stiff Leadbetter.

In so doing McCarthy may have relied upon Simon Houfe's account⁶ of Lady Pomfret's diaries. In reporting that Leadbetter had been involved in building since April 1756 and had been paid £200 in 1759, McCarthy assumed that Leadbetter was the executant builder, and was probably correct. However, his clinching evidence for Newdigate's role at Pomfret House is based upon Houfe's misinterpretation of Lady Pomfret's diary entry on December 12, 1760. Whereas Newdigate was reported as having come 'to inspect the work', in fact, the entry only reads '. . . also Mr Newdigate & Mr Lockwood'.

Significantly, Houfe is more explicit when he reports on Leadbetter. On April 24, 1756, Lady Pomfret 'went alone to Mr Leadbetter to settle my Place for Building', a reference to the plot at 18 Arlington Street that finally became vacant in February 1757, and upon which work began in March. In October 1758 Lady Pomfret 'walk'd thro' her house for the first time; at the end of 1759 Leadbetter was paid £200 'on account'; and in the spring of 1760 'Mr Leadbetter came' and Lady Pomfret 'went over the House with him'.

Now in all this Newdigate is unrecorded as having had anything to do with the building or decoration of the house, and likewise Miller. However, no one has picked up the comment relayed by Houfe that a Mr Biggs came to Lady Pomfret in the summer of 1757 'about' her plans. According to Howard Colvin's *Biographical Dictionary of British Architects*, Mr Biggs is Richard Biggs, Clerk of the Works at Windsor Castle from 1745 until his death in 1776. Colvin observes that in Sir John Soane's Museum is a folder⁷ of plans that include various designs for adding Gothick bays to John Bidleson's house at Bray, Berkshire, 1757; designs for Mrs Pritchard at Hare Hatch, also Berkshire and 1757; a survey of Ruislip Farm, Middlesex, taken on October 12, 1758; and, relevantly in the context of Leadbetter, a survey of houses in Priest Street, New Windsor, taken on December 5, 1758 for Sir Robert Rich of Grosvenor Square, and with the authority of the Provost of Eton College. What has not been identified among this collection are three drawings for Pomfret House, all by Biggs. These demonstrate that Biggs exercised considerable responsibility at Pomfret House, independent of Leadbetter.

What is extraordinary about the myth of Miller, Newdigate and Keene at Pomfret House is its insubstantiality: nothing in Lady Pomfret's diaries, nothing in Newdigate's voluminous papers. In contrast, Leadbetter and Biggs are involved throughout on a continuous basis. In perusing Lady Pomfret's diary entries for that December 1760, the entry on the tenth of the month is startlingly significant: 'Mr Leadbetter came afterward and brought his Account and after he was gone Mr Biggs came',⁸ so Biggs was independent of Leadbetter. In what way?

Turning again to Mr Colvin's *Biographical Dictionary* it will be observed that Leadbetter and Biggs must have been acquainted, for while Biggs was in charge at Windsor Castle, Leadbetter had his yard and wharf across the river at Eton, and had been employed by Eton College in 1759. Both were active in south Buckinghamshire and north Berkshire in the vicinity of the Thames.

The Pomfret drawings by Biggs suggest that he was the authority on the Gothick style. One is of the front to the court dated February 1757, and inscribed by Biggs, 'Sketch of a Gothic Building'⁹ (Fig. 1). Clearly this demonstrates that his visit to Lady Pomfret in the summer of 1757 was not his first. This drawing is a design, for there are far too many differences, many of them subtle ones, to the front as built, and yet it relates to all the main elements of the finished front. There are also pencilled pentimenti, and across the facade at first floor level, indicated by the inscription 'Great Room' on the wall section, are preliminary studies for the fan vaulting¹⁰ that was eventually installed in that room.

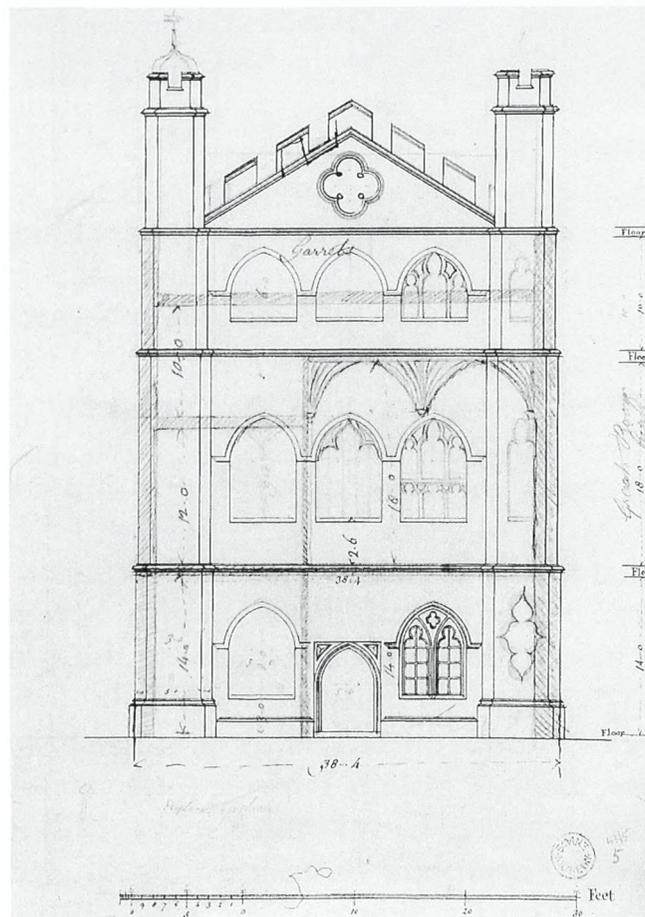


Fig. 1. Richard Biggs, Design for the courtyard front of 18 Arlington Street (Sir John Soane's Museum).

The two other designs¹¹ are variants for the park front with its two bay windows, but, in contrast to the linear court-front drawing, these are precisely rendered.¹² One is more ornamented with trefoil leaf decoration in the spandrels of the window heads and is inscribed 'copy' on the recto, and on the verso 'copy of Delivered ye 19th Mar 1757'. The significance of these inscriptions is quite clear. They do not refer to copies made by Biggs for another, but are Biggs's retained office copies. Unfortunately, no photograph seems to have been discovered of the park front, so reliance must be made upon the rather crude watercolour¹³ in the British Museum, published by Houfe. This conveys the impression of amply-proportioned bows or bays with hints of ogees. In fact, as can be seen in a photograph of one of the interiors on the park side, these bays had the tall pointed lights as in Biggs's design.

The temptation is to regard Biggs as the Gothick authority, working in partnership with Leadbetter as builder. Just because so little is known about Biggs is no reason for him to be

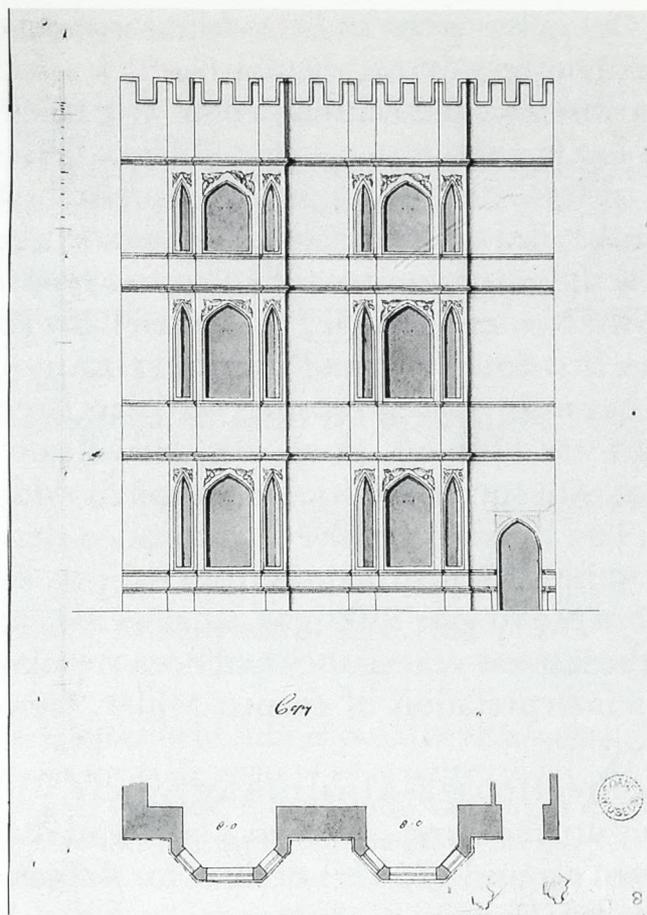


Fig. 2. Richard Biggs, Copy of a design for the park front of 18 Arlington Street (Sir John Soane's Museum).

rejected or demoted. His post of Clerk of the Works at Windsor Castle was a responsible one, and in this he was a successor to Isaac Ware, who had held the same post from 1727 to 1733. It may be significant that Biggs subscribed to Toms' *Views of All the Ancient Churches in the Cities of London and Westminster* in 1739.

As for Leadbetter, he has had a bad press. Although Michael McCarthy leans heavily¹⁴ upon Lady Pomfret's observations in the autumn of 1759 about Langley Park, Buckinghamshire, built for the 3rd Duke of Marlborough in 1755, in fact she only calls it 'plain-stone', and criticises it for not having an 'Apartment'. In fact, the duke's requirements were for an utilitarian house to use as a lodging on the road from London to Blenheim. The house exists with handsome rooms, although none are large. Nevertheless, this comment, even if adverse, did not prevent Lady Pomfret from employing Leadbetter right through her building operations with evident satisfaction.

At Newton Park near Bath, Leadbetter produced a splendid house in 1761, and at Elvills¹⁵ in Surrey in 1766 he showed his mettle with a symmetrical Gothick house with single-storey Gothick bows and drip-mould windows. It is also relevant that it was Leadbetter whom Sir William Lee asked to remodel Hartwell House, Buckinghamshire, in 1759, not Henry Keene, who only got the job because Leadbetter was too busy.¹⁶ In this year too he had executed unspecified work at Hartlebury Castle, Worcestershire, for the Bishop of Worcester, and a year later made a room for the Bishop's Palace, Worcester. So at Hartlebury he had already been in contact with Henry Keene's Gothick work of about 1750, in the chapel there. But what is distinctive about Keene's work is its ogee style of Decorated Gothick, in the Kent-Miller-early Newdigate tradition. In contrast, this ogee style is eschewed at Pomfret House for Perpendicular Gothick.

It is true that there may at first appear to be a generic resemblance¹⁷ between Sanderson Miller's Lacock Abbey front of 1754 and the Pomfret House court front. However, the sources for Lacock are well founded in the ogee Decorated style of Kent's immensely influential Esher

Place and also indeed, in the Gothick of Wren and Hawksmoor. As in so much, Hawksmoor is an anomaly, for at All Souls' he employs Perpendicular Gothick as no one else did until James Essex. In the Pomfret House interiors the Perpendicular style rules in a fanatical way. For the court front it may not seem too fanciful to see a resemblance between the west front of Eton College Chapel with its two turrets rising above a gable, and in the Perpendicular style of that Chapel, and in the Perpendicular of St George's Chapel, Windsor, a building in the care of Biggs, it is not so fanciful to identify the inspiration for the Pomfret House 'trim'.

If work had begun on the house in March 1757, when Lady Pomfret walked through her rooms in October 1758 for the first time a year and a half later the rooms must have been, at least partly finished, for after all, they were entirely finished two years later. Even if they were not, the crucial years for the interiors are 1759-60. In all this, Newdigate is noticeable only by his absence. It beggars belief that with such a huge job no scrap of evidence should have survived among Newdigate's papers, had he been involved on detailed design decisions, especially if Leadbetter and Biggs were awaiting his instructions from Arbury. Even Keene is absent, and if he was the executant builder of Newdigate's designs, what were Leadbetter and Biggs doing at Pomfret House throughout the last few years if they had been supplanted by Keene? If we are to believe Michael McCarthy's interpretation of events, Miller, Newdigate, Keene, Biggs and Leadbetter were all there together.

It is very easy to see Pomfret House as a trial run for Arbury, with Newdigate moving from an early phase in his amateur architectural career to a later and maturer one. The evidence¹⁸ does not bear this out, for even around 1765 his designs for Arbury are still mixed Decorated and Perpendicular, and when they become purer Perpendicular in the dining room, the dating of that work is imprecise, being given as c.1765-88. Surely what sets Pomfret House apart is its exposition of this disciplined Perpendicular style. After all it was only in about 1765 that James Essex, a serious Goth, employed Perpendicular, and so advanced are the Pomfret House interiors that Soane's Gothick library at Stowe of 1805 would not look out of place beside them.

Leadbetter and Biggs should not be dismissed because one is believed to produce dull buildings, nor because neither is known to have a substantial body of Gothick work to their credit. It is not enough to assume that Newdigate was responsible because he Miller and Keene were known to Lady Pomfret. What strikes one about Pomfret House is a seriousness and professionalism that suggests that Richard Biggs may have been the unknown genius of Windsor Castle. Perhaps Leadbetter knew that his colleague was studying the Gothick of St George's Chapel, and applied to him to fulfil Lady Pomfret's wish to have a Gothick town house. If so, Biggs rose to the challenge and produced Perpendicular designs untrammelled by the powerful precedents of what had been done before in the 18th-century.

NOTES

1. A set of these photographs is in the National Monuments Record.
2. The first mention by Walpole is in his 'Book of Materials' for 1757: *cf. Anecdotes of Painting in England* (ed. Hilles and Daghlian), V, 1937, 161. Walpole ought to have known, but it is clear that he distanced himself from this house, as he distanced himself from the Pomfret circle of Midland amateurs. He is also notoriously inaccurate with other attributions.
3. Michael McCarthy, *The Origins of the Gothic Revival*, New Haven, 1987.
4. The lodge needs further study. The single storey front with its half-octagon bays and battlemented parapets is shown in Hugh Phillips, *Mid-Georgian London*, 1964, figs. 79 and 358, one document dated 'Ao 1760'. Thus the lodge was not heightened at that date if this refers to the date of the drawing and not the date of completion of the house. The heightening may have taken place after Lady Pomfret's death when a later owner required more office accommodation, lacking at the site.
5. McCarthy does not clearly distinguish between the front to the street, ie that of the lodge, and the entrance

- front to the court behind the lodge. For this lodge *cf.* Cornforth, *op cit.*, 138, fig 1, and also Hermione Hobhouse, *Lost London*, 1971, 31.
6. Simon Houfe, 'A Taste for the Gothick', *Country Life*, March 24, 1977, 728-30; and March 31, 800-01; in particular p.801 deals with Pomfret House.
 7. 'Miscellaneous Drawings of Old Houses in the Country &c' (Soane Museum Drawer 6-7), inscribed as having come from the collection of Sir William Chambers. This provenance is intriguing, for Chambers is unlikely to have acquired Biggs's drawings for other than professional reasons. It will not escape notice that Biggs was a subordinate of Chambers in the Office of Works.
 8. I am grateful to Simon Houfe for clearing up this anomaly and bringing the December 12 entry to my attention.
 9. Soane Museum Drawer 6-7, no. 5
 10. I think these studies for fan vaulting, in detail not as executed, clinch the argument that this is a design.
 11. Soane Museum, Drawer 6-7, nos. 8-9.
 12. *Ibid.* no. 9.
 13. Houfe, *op cit.*, 728, Fig. 3.
 14. McCarthy, *op cit.*, 140.
 15. *Cf.* William Watts, *The Seats of the Nobility and Gentry*, 1784, pl LXV.
 16. Gervase Jackson-Stops, 'Hartwell House, Bucks', *Country Life*, November 22, 1990, 69.
 17. McCarthy, *loc. cit.*, 140.
 18. McCarthy's account of the development of Arbury is not at all detailed as to dates. In dating the dining room to 1765-88, what does this mean in terms of what we see today? And how can one use Arbury as a judge of Newdigate's handling of Gothick, if the saloon vaulting is dated as late as 1798? The earliest document appears to be the new south front design dated by McCarthy c.1765 'at the earliest', but this contains ogee forms. *Cf.* also Michael McCarthy, 'Sir Roger Newdigate: Drawings for Copt Hall, Essex, and Arbury Hall, Warwickshire', *Architectural History*, vol. 16, 1973, 30. It would help to be provided with a proper chronological account of the Arbury work.