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COCKERELL'S MODEL FOR LANGTON: A HOUSE FOR THE "DORSETSHIRE NIMROD"

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Langton House, near Blandford Forum in Dorset, was the most ambitious country house designed by the architect Charles Robert Cockerell. An ingenious design model for the house has recently come to light (Fig. 1).¹ Its survival is poignant as Langton, like so many austere and unlovable country houses of its date, was demolished shortly after the Second World War.² The circumstances which led to the creation of the model are recorded in Cockerell's diaries; these provide an informative account of the influential role of the architect's model in the conception and development of the design of the house.³

Cockerell's patron at Langton was James John Farquharson (1784–1871), a Dorset landowner who is remembered in the county even today for his prodigality and obsession with foxhunting.⁴ Farquharson inherited his fortune from his father, an East India shipping merchant of Scottish extraction, who had bought extensive estates in Dorset and settled at Littleton. When the young James John came of age he took up residence at Langton, a neighbouring estate which had been purchased for him under the terms of his father's will.⁵ He had recently come down from Oxford where he had contracted something of a *mésalliance* by marrying Ann Stevens, his former college bedmaker.⁶

In 1824 Farquharson engaged Cockerell (1788–1863) to make alterations and additions to Langton – a former parsonage which he considered to be insufficiently large and impressive for a man of his wealth and pretensions. The proposed improvements must have been intended to consolidate the squire's social position, and to provide a large and dignified setting for his round of opulent entertainments.⁷ Cockerell had by this time worked on a number of country house refurbishments, and had earned himself a considerable reputation.⁸ Moreover, he, like Farquharson, had family connections in the East India Company.⁹

Cockerell paid his first visit to Langton on Saturday April 17, 1824 and noted in his diary that the family – Mrs Farquharson and three sons (the "2 eldest illegitimate") – were "very polite & good heart, but dull".¹⁰ Although Cockerell sought an economical scheme for improvement for the house, he found it difficult to devise a solution "which was not equivalent to a new building", the expense of which "would not be answered by any proportion of comfort or advantage". He considered that "no part of the House was convenient & substantial enough to last 10 years without heavy repairs".¹¹ Cockerell spent days drawing up and presenting his proposals to Farquharson, noting that the latter "seemed pleased with the suggestions [and] evidently has his pockets full of money". He added, significantly, "Mrs F [was] also very anxious for a new house".¹² These factors undoubtedly encouraged Cockerell to recommend the construction of an entirely new mansion, and compelled him to explain to his patron that "if he had the money a new building would be better money's worth than the repair of the old".¹³ Before leaving Langton, Cockerell promised Farquharson "3 plans of additions & 2 for a new House" for a proposed expenditure of £10,000.¹⁴

Cockerell reworked the designs for several days, despatching them to Langton with a letter noting "the expectation of these gave me great pleasure . . . tho' to design is an effort & a source of anxiety".¹⁵ The alternative schemes, however, did not prompt a decision from Farquharson, and he instead responded by suggesting plans of his own for the house.¹⁶ His own

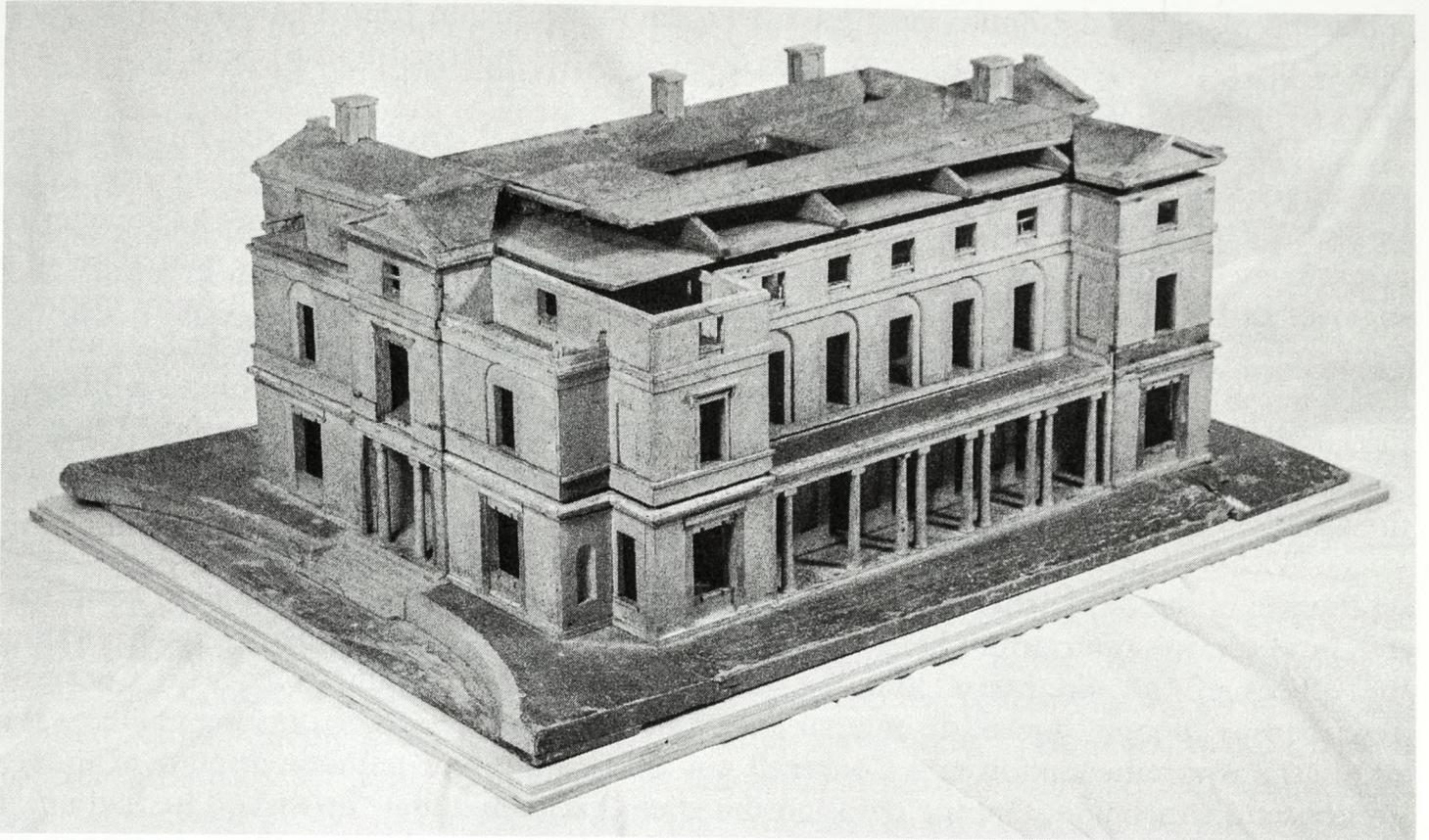


Fig. 1. Model of Langton House, Dorset, made to the designs of C. R. Cockerell in 1825.

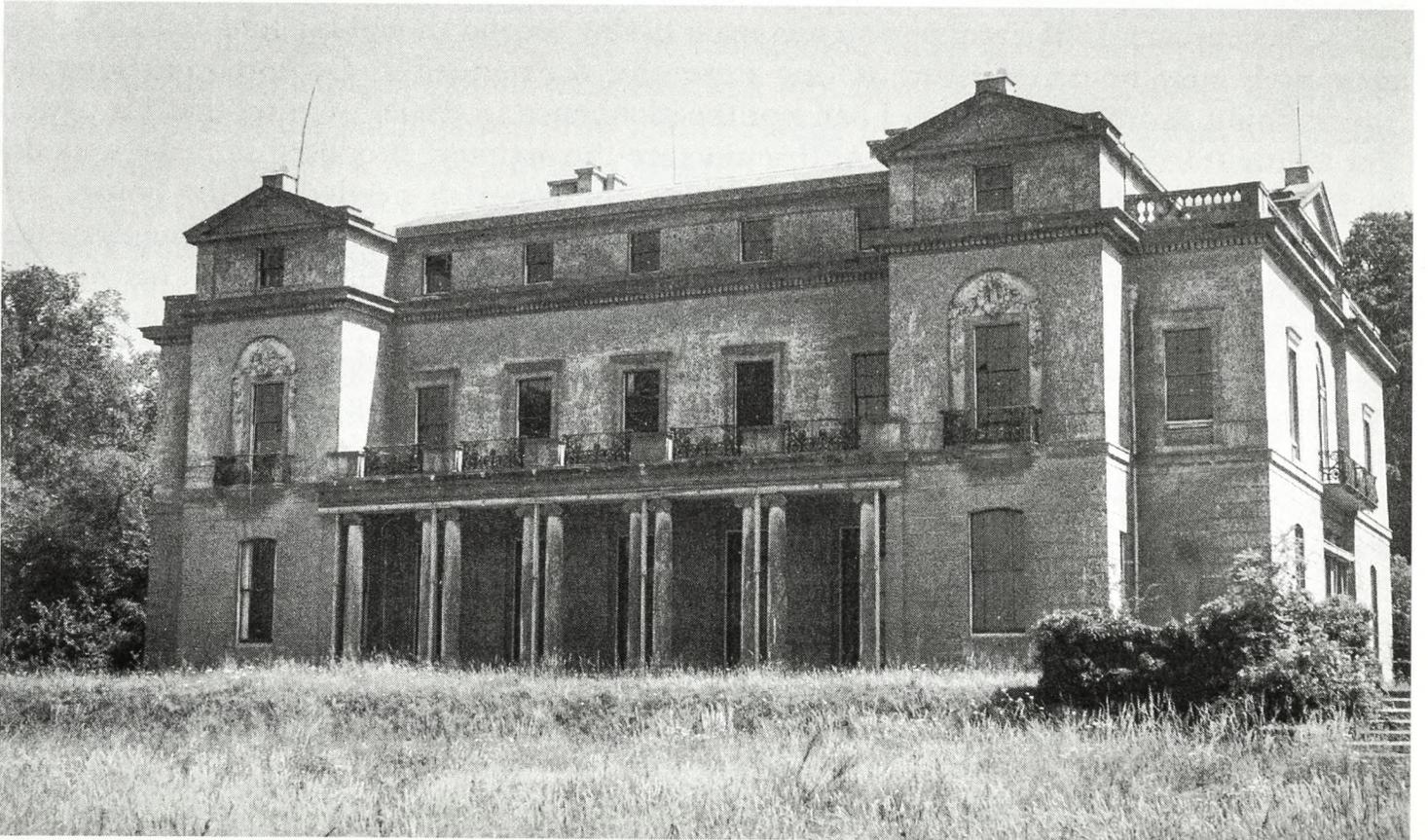


Fig. 2. Langton House, Dorset, 1825–30, by C. R. Cockerell, photographed shortly before its demolition.

“enlarged plan” for the house must have been ambitious for on June 14 Cockerell “warned him of the great expense”, calculating that the cost of the enlarged house would be £25,300, more than double the original estimate.¹⁷

The architect paid another visit to Langton in June.¹⁸ During his stay he visited the remains of Vanbrugh’s great house at Eastbury, which Farquharson had bought to serve as his kennels.¹⁹ The house inspired Cockerell to remark that “every minute part bore a character of magnificence quite extraordinary”, it seemed as if it were the “conception & habitation of a superior order of beings”.²⁰ The Brobdingnagian scale of Eastbury appears to have inspired Cockerell to enhance the monumental treatment of his design for Langton. At Eastbury he had been especially impressed by the situation which displayed “all the genius Vanbrugh”. Cockerell compared the house in its setting to “and ancient stadium”, and observed that he could “conceive nothing more striking than the position from the distance [of] its elevation the grandeur of the plantations the repose and tranquility of the lawn”.²¹

Cockerell proposed that the new house at Langton should be built on a higher level on the site of the old kitchen garden with a commanding prospect over the valley. Farquharson, however, was reluctant to build on a new site as he wished to economise by incorporating the offices of the old house into the new mansion. The Farquharsons, who Cockerell described as “people unused to mental exertion”, were not, however, unsusceptible to the architect’s recommendation and Cockerell was amused by their pathetic displays of indecisiveness and frustration. On one occasion the client exclaimed that “he wished he had never seen the place”, a remark which compelled Cockerell to note that “on these occasions an adviser has a strong influence. They all said it was left to me to decide. What I said Mr F. would do.”²²

By the end of his visit Cockerell had persuaded his patron to build a new house on a new site, raised up on terraces overlooking the valley. He returned to London to revise the design and December 7 sent to Langton “large rolls of plans” including a perspective view of the house.²³ Cockerell recommended that Farquharson employ William Sawrey Gilpin, the celebrated landscape theorist, to direct the landscape improvements.²⁴

In February, 1825 Farquharson was again having second thoughts about embarking on an entirely new house, thinking it “too expensive & extended”.²⁵ Cockerell encountered “much doubt & diffidence which I had not the eloquence to dispel”, noting that his patron “got a little fractious & impatient”. At this juncture the architect proposed to make a model “at £25 not exceeding” to enable him to estimate the materials needed for the house, and reassure Farquharson as to the expense involved.²⁶ Cockerell spent 10 days making drawings for the model.²⁷ On February 21 he put the “drawings into the modellers hands”, having written on the 17th to reassure “Mr Farquharson that the model was in hand”.²⁸ The model which was made by one Mr McKenzie, was completed on April 14.²⁹ On May 7 Cockerell wrote to Farquharson to report that he had despatched the model “describing the mode of placing it &c”.³⁰

The model is made of painted pine and is mounted on a braced wooden base 865mm long and 690mm wide. It is 345mm high and may have once had a fitted wooden cover.³¹ The house is shown as a rectangular block of three stories with the main entrance situated at one end. The composition is characterised by a severe monumentality which is indebted to the Palladian architectural tradition.³² The garden front is the most distinctive and dramatic of the facades; it is ornamented with a low loggia of paired Ionic columns which extends the length of the house between two projecting pedimented bays. The corresponding flank of the model is plainly treated as a low range of offices was intended to project outwards from this side of the house.

The model takes apart in five pieces to show the arrangement of the interior of the

house.³³ Each of the separate elements is carefully finished and painted, and fits neatly into place on top of one another. The roof can be removed to reveal the attic storey, which itself can be taken off in two parts to show the plan of the first floor. This layer can be lifted off so as to display the ground floor plan. The interior of the model is as carefully detailed as the exterior and shows such features as niches, internal columns and chimney pieces. The well-proportioned state rooms are disposed on the ground floor. A top-lit staircase hall forms the core of the house; the upper level of which is an octagonal gallery around which the accommodation is arranged.³⁴

The model still preserves its original paintwork: the whole of the exterior was painted grey, and a paler shade was employed to colour its interior. Some parts of the model were, however, painted distinctively: dark grey was employed to represent the lead roofs of the balconies; the stone floors of the loggia, and the entrance and staircase hall are coloured a light grey; the lawn was painted green; the wooden floors, the carriage sweep and site of the extension at the back of the house were left unpainted.

There is no record of Farquharson's reaction to the model. It is known, however, that it did not immediately galvanise the client into rebuilding the house. By the beginning of September Cockerell had reluctantly decided to abandon the scheme for a new house, and advised "enlarging the present Ho: & not building a new one".³⁵ However, in May, just as Cockerell had lost all hope of building his scheme, Farquharson unexpectedly announced that he resolved to "begin the House this year" and instructed Cockerell "to reconsider the plans in June".³⁶

Thenceforth the project advanced steadily. Cockerell paid site visits to Langton in June and July, arranging the procurement of materials, appointing a clerk of works, and staking out the plan of the house on site.³⁷ The shell of the building was finished by April 1830, at which point the architect was "considering ceilings and furnishings".³⁸ The house was declared completed in July 1830. Cockerell, nevertheless, was still making visits to Langton in 1832 to supervise the construction of the stable block.³⁹

The completed house differed very little from the design model. The greatest refinement was the introduction of changes to the fenestration. Most significantly, the window surrounds on the principal elevations were enriched with fleshy garlands carved in high relief, emblazoned with the Farquharson arms and cascading displays of flowers, fruit and foliage from which emerged fox masks and stags' heads.⁴⁰

It is clear that the Cockerell's design model exerted a profound influence upon the client: Farquharson's apprehensions over his architect's proposals appear to have evaporated when confronted with the three-dimensional representation of the house in miniature. The model convinced the client of the merits of rebuilding a new and aggrandised establishment, as well as providing the architect with a useful working tool. The model did not, however, inhibit the development of refinements to the overall fabric, indeed, traces of alterations survive which indicate that improvements were first projected on the model before being carried out.⁴¹

However effective the model was an instrument of persuasion it alone did not induce the client to capitulate to his architect's extravagant proposals. Although Cockerell endured a protracted and often frustrating association with his client, the fact that the house was built to his specifications underlines his commitment to ensure that "convenience economy [and] beauty had guided the design".⁴²

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NOTES

1. Presented to the RIBA Drawing Collection in 1991, by Mrs Mary Cake, through Mr Arthur Grogan. The model originated from the office of the well-established building firm of Bastard in Blandford, who were presumably involved in the construction of the house. On the closure of the offices in the 1930s it was rescued by the donor and stored. The model had suffered greatly from damp and other damage but was painstakingly pieced together by Mr Grogan.
2. The house was demolished in 1947.
3. Cockerell Diaries, (RIBA Manuscripts Collection). No diary survives for the year 1831. The diaries are not kept up after 1832.
4. For a full account of Farquharson's hunting exploits see Alexander Henry Higginson *The Meynell of the West*, London, 1936.
5. Higginson, 1936, 7–9.
6. Higginson, 1936, 9; and verbal communication from Mr J. J. Farquharson, 1992.
7. Higginson, 1936, 10–13.
8. Bowood (1821), Lough Crew (1820–23), Oakley, Grange Park & Derry Ormond (1823).
9. Cockerell's father had been Surveyor to the Company between 1806–24. He had gained the position through the influence of his brother, the East India nabob Sir Charles Cockerell, for whom he built Sezincote in the "Hindoostani" taste.
10. Diary, 1824, April 17.
11. Diary, 1824, April 18 & 19.
12. Diary, 1824, April 19.
13. Diary, 1824, April 20.
14. Diary, 1824, April 21. The three surviving designs in the RIBA Drawings Collection date from this early stage in the design: a sketch plan & elevations of the garden & entrance fronts.
15. Diary, 1824, May 29.
16. Diary, 1824, June 9.
17. Diary, 1824, June 14.
18. Diary, 1824, June 21–24.
19. Higginson, 1936, 17.
20. Diary, 1824, June 21.
21. Diary, 1824, June 21.
22. Diary, 1824, June 22.
23. Diary, 1824, July 24, 26, 27, 28; November 16, 19, 23, 24; December 1, 3, 6, 7.
24. Cockerell consulted Gilpin on the setting of the house. Diary, 1824, December 7.
25. Diary, 1825, February 4.
26. Diary, 1825, February 5.
27. Diary, 1825, February 12, 17, 18, 21.
28. Diary, 1825, February 17 & 21.
29. Diary, 1825, April 14, 29. The identity of the modelmaker is known as he came to see Cockerell to explain certain points about its construction. "McKenzie called & put me in concert with my model, in respect of the levels of the floors." This may be the "C. McKenzie of 11 Stafford Street, Lisson Grove" listed among the names and addresses in the back of Cockerell's diary of 1826.
30. Diary, 1825, May 7. A number of accounts of Cockerell ordering models survive; in 1839 he obtained estimates from the firm of Jones and Clarke, conservatory builders of Birmingham, for a domed conservatory for Mr Butterley of Stoke Park near Bristol who "worked out the dome in a model made of brass rods & bent glass". In the same year "designs were proposed, & so far approved that a model was made" of alterations to Basildon Park, Berkshire, for Mr Morrison. Goodchild Album (RIBA Drawings Collection) pp. 39 & 141.
32. David Watkin remarks on its derivation from the Villa Trissino at Cricoli by Giangiorgio Trissino, Palladio's master, (*The Life and Work of C. R. Cockerell*, London, 1974, 176) although the pedimented

- “towers” surely derive from Colen Campbell’s design of 1723 for the east front of Houghton Hall, Norfolk, published in *Vitruvius Britannicus*, III, 1725, pl. 32. Diary, 1825, January 18.
33. Sir John Soane’s model of Tyringham, Buckinghamshire of c.1794 takes apart in a similar manner.
 34. The staircase hall is very similar to that Cockerell designed at Oakley Park, Shropshire, in 1823. The lantern was to be glazed and is not shown on the model. There is a photograph of the executed staircase at Langton in the National Monuments Record.
 35. Diary, 1825, September 9 & 1826, January 25.
 36. Diary, 1826, May 24.
 37. Diary, 1826, June 20; July 10–14.
 38. Diary, 1830, April 26.
 39. Diary, 1830, July 17, September 29–October 1; 1832, June 1–8, September 28–30. The stable block still survives.
 40. This decoration proclaimed Farquharsons hospitality and love of hunting. Watkin points out that Cockerell was Surveyor to the Fabric of St Pauls Cathedral and that the carving is in the spirit of Baroque ornament on the Cathedral. Watkin, 1974, 177.
 41. For instance, alterations inscribed in pencil on the first floor window surround of one of the projecting bays on the model conforms to the feature as executed.
 42. Diary, 1826, July 12.