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THE FIRST SEASIDE HOUSE?

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The seaside house is as distinctive a building type as any a fashionable house built directly beside the sea and consciously orientated towards it, often with bay windows to maximise the view. Such buildings are an unmistakeable feature of our seaside resorts. They reflect a fascination with the sea which goes back to the first stirrings of romantic sensibility in the eighteenth century.¹ But when did such buildings originate, and in particular, is it possible to find the earliest house of this kind? This is the question that the current note addresses, on the basis of a full scrutiny of those houses throughout the United Kingdom which seem possible candidates.

At first sight, one of the surprising aspects of the earliest seaside resorts is how late seaward orientation developed. Although in retrospect it seems natural to build houses facing the sea, to most Georgians it evidently seemed inappropriate because antisocial: a house which faces the sea by definition turns its back on other houses. A more natural development was a street at right-angles to the sea, with houses facing one another. At Brighton, early fashionable development was laid out thus, notably in the Steyne: even the house of the famous Dr Russell, whose advocacy of sea-bathing contributed so much to Brighton's early popularity, faced the Steyne and turned its back towards the sea.² The first fashionable development at Brighton with a conscious seaward orientation, Royal Crescent, was begun only in 1798.³ At Weymouth, the earliest such building, Gloucester Lodge, dates from after 1780, earlier development having faced the harbour.⁴ Other early resorts, such

as Margate or Bognor, had their fashionable development well away from the sea.⁵

Though this ambivalent attitude towards the sea remained the norm until late in the eighteenth century, it had by then been challenged by certain pioneers. Leaving aside more distant precursors which will be dealt with below, the first fashionable houses built beside the sea and consciously facing it appear to date from the early 1760s. Three such houses survive, all dateable to these years, when a taste for seaside living evidently first bit the intelligentsia. These are East Cliff House, Hastings, East Sussex, built for Edward Capell in 1760–2; Holland House, Kingsgate, Kent, built for Henry Fox, 1st Lord Holland, from 1762 onwards; and the Moulton, Salcombe, Devon, commenced by John Hawkins in 1764.

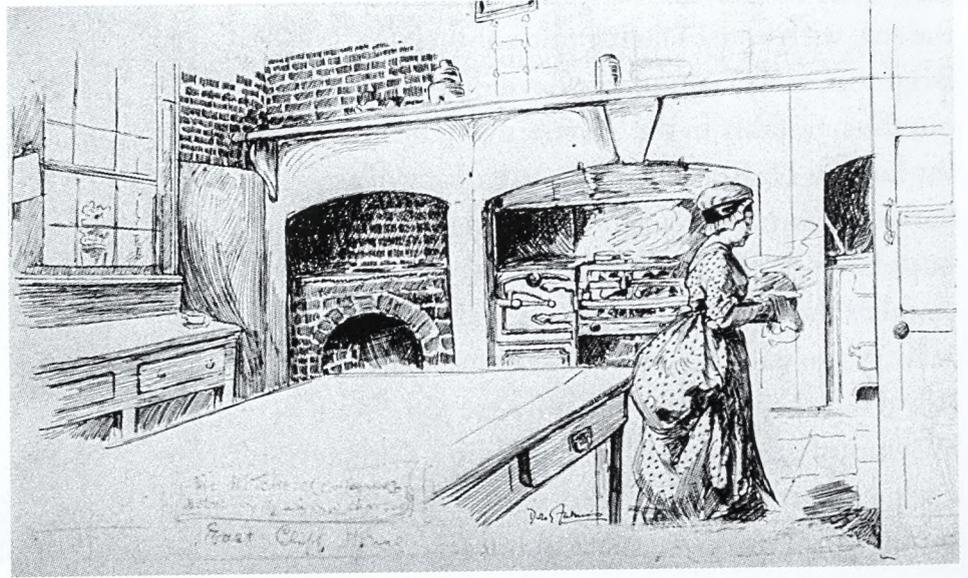
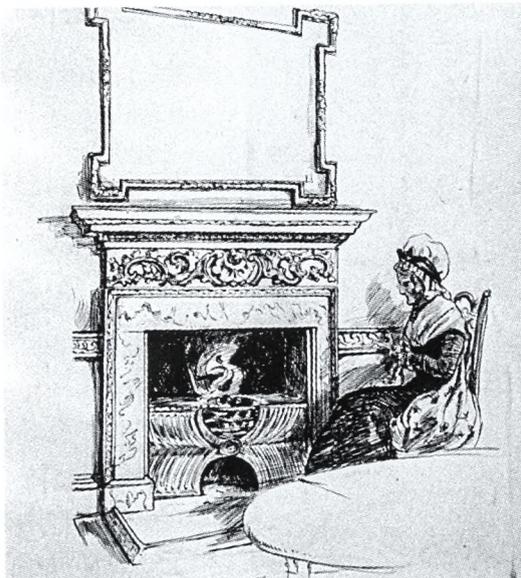
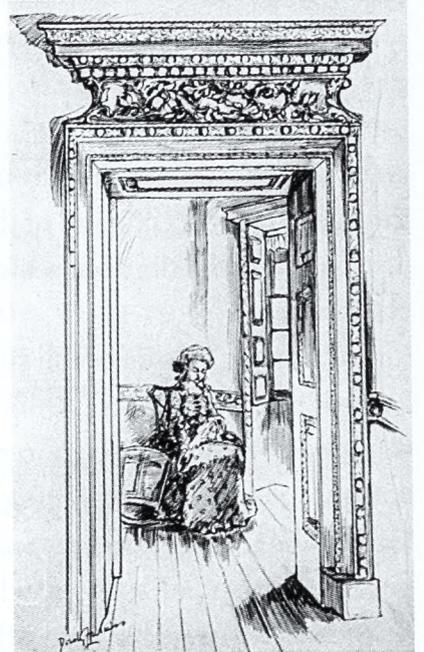


Figure 1. Edward Capell (1713–81), engraving by Smith, 'From a Model in Plaster taken from the Life by Roubiliac.'



Figure 2. East Cliff House, Hastings.

Figure 3-7. Drawings of interiors at East Cliff House, Hastings, by Dorothy Furniss, c.1913-16.
Hastings Museum and Art Gallery.



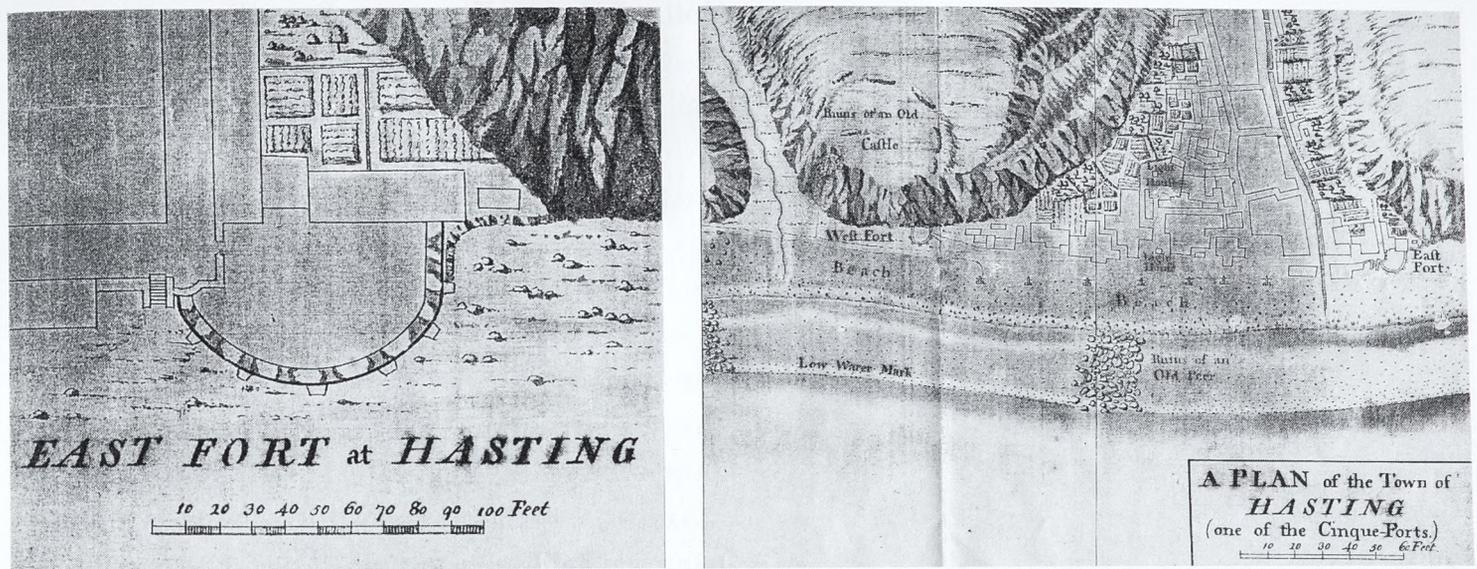


Figure 8. Plan of Hastings c. 1736 showing the East Fort, on the site of which Capell built his house, and its location: details from 'Plan of the Coast of Sussex from Rye to Chichester'. *East Sussex County Record Office*.

East Cliff House, Hastings, was built by Edward Capell (1713–81), Shakespeare scholar, Deputy Inspector of Plays and friend of David Garrick (Fig. 1). Capell has been described as 'the first systematic editor of Shakespeare'; his edition of the plays appeared in 1768, and his annotations followed separately in 1774–83.⁶ Though he wintered at his chambers in the Middle Temple in London, for the last twenty years of his life Capell spent his summers at Hastings, living in the house that he had built immediately facing the beach.⁷

East Cliff House retains its original external features, including canted bays, first-floor balcony and French windows opening onto a sea-facing terrace (Fig. 2).⁸ Originally, it had fine interior fittings, including elaborately carved doorcases and chimney pieces and a mahogany staircase. These were depicted in a series of drawings by Dorothy Furniss (1879–1944), daughter of the cartoonist, book-illustrator and film-maker, Harry Furniss (1854–1925), who used the house as a studio from 1913 to 1916 (Figs. 3–7);⁹ however, they were removed when the house was vacant in the early 1970s. A biographical account of Capell by his friend, Samuel Pegge, explains that Capell fancied himself as a man of taste, especially in architecture, 'and built a house on the faith of his own skill in that Science'; this presumably

implies that Capell designed the house himself.¹⁰

The principal plots of land on which East Cliff House was erected were purchased by Capell in December 1760; the main one was the site of the former East Fort at Hastings, which was disposed of by the Corporation as surplus to requirements (Fig. 8).¹¹ This was ideal for the purpose of building a house adjacent to the sea and looking at it; indeed, the gun platform of the fort was probably adapted to form the seaward terrace. Though it could be argued that this was virtually the only possible orientation for a large house on this site, the fact that Capell moved to Hastings from London and must have deliberately selected the spot proves that his motive must have been to build a house which maximised its seaward aspect. Unfortunately, Capell has left little direct evidence of his motives in building such a house. One documentary clue is negative, in the form of a comment by Pegge in his memoir of Capell in which he reiterated the traditional attitudes towards the sea which Capell challenged: 'This house was placed in a situation of all others the most uninteresting to a man of taste, who looks for diversity of prospect, lawns, groves, rivulets, &c.: for it was close to the sea, at the dirty Port of Hastings.' As for Capell's own views, apart from the evidence of the uncompromising seaward

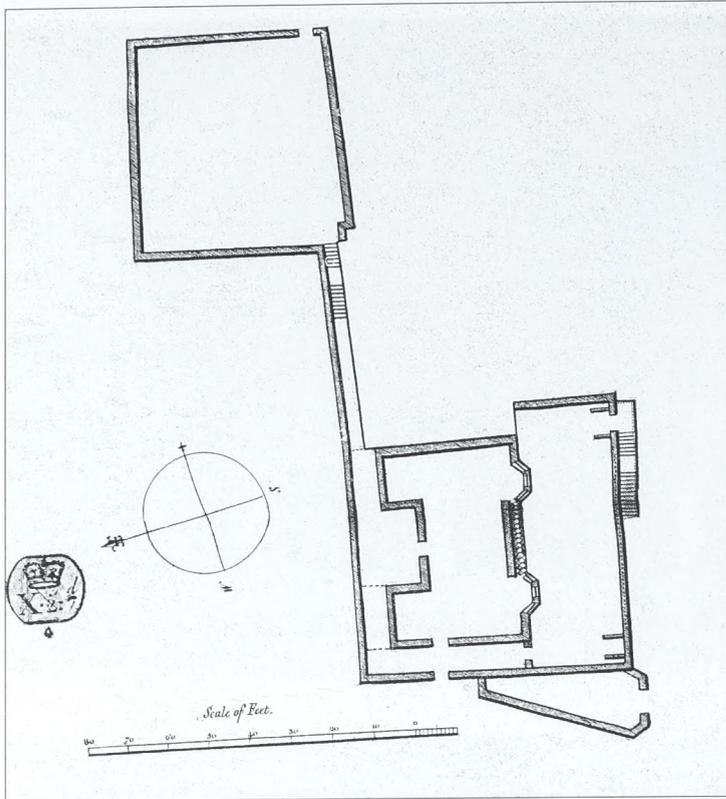


Figure 9. Plan of East Cliff House in a deed of sale dated 5 February 1796. *Hastings Museum and Art Gallery.*

orientation of the house itself, his interest in the sea is confirmed by the fact that the one instance he gave in the 'Life' prefixed to his edition of Shakespeare to support his hypothesis that the dramatist might have travelled abroad was 'the exceeding great liveliness and justice that is seen in many descriptions of the sea and of promontories, which, if examin'd, shew another sort of knowledge of them than is to be gotten in books or relations'.¹²

The house was evidently substantially built within a year or two of Capell's purchase of the main plots of land on which it was erected; this seems clear from Pegge's statement that Capell spent the last twenty years of his life there, while the house is said to have been 'built about the year 1762' by the local historian, W.G. Moss, in 1824.¹³ Subsequently, Capell added other property (Fig. 9), including a garden where an old mulberry tree still survives, said to have been grown from a cutting provided by Garrick from the mulberry reputedly planted by Shakespeare which stood in the garden of New Place, Stratford on Avon, until it was felled in the 1750s.¹⁴

Holland House, Kingsgate, Kent (Fig. 10), was designed for the politician, Henry Fox, 1st Lord Holland (1705–74), by the amateur architect Thomas Wynne, 1st Lord Newborough (1736–1807).¹⁵ It is said to have been modelled on Cicero's Formian villa at Baiae, and it comprises a nineteen-bay mansion, once with a giant Doric portico, situated immediately by the sea in a cove just north of North Foreland. It was clearly built to maximise its seaward aspect, and was surrounded by a series of stone-built follies erected by Lord Holland to enhance the romantic atmosphere of the location, many of which still survive.¹⁶ The house is well documented and can be dated exactly: it was in May 1762 that the Hollands first went to live in an existing small house on the site, which was to be replaced by Holland's ambitious villa over the following years.¹⁷

The Moul, Salcombe, Devon, stands in a sheltered location between North and South Sands. The core of this house was built in 1764 by John Hawkins, 'as a mere pleasure box', in the words of his son, Abraham Hawkins (d.1819), local J.P., author and translator, in his topographical account of Kingsbridge and Salcombe.¹⁸ John Hawkins evidently died in 1764 and the house descended, incomplete, to his widow; in 1780 she sold it to Henry Whorwood of Holton Park, Oxon., who in turn sold it to Samuel Strode of Peamore, near Exeter, in 1785. Abraham Hawkins explains how it was to Whorwood's 'superior talents and judgment, in the just distribution and proper embellishment of rural ornament, [that] the sheltered and charming spot chiefly owes its celebrity', adding how Strode 'completed the masterly design of Mr Whorwood, displaying such exquisite taste in the execution, as to render it an object of delight to every beholder of cultivated understanding'. In 1808, however, the house passed to William Jackson of the Excise Office, and it is evidently he who was responsible for extending the house and giving it its present

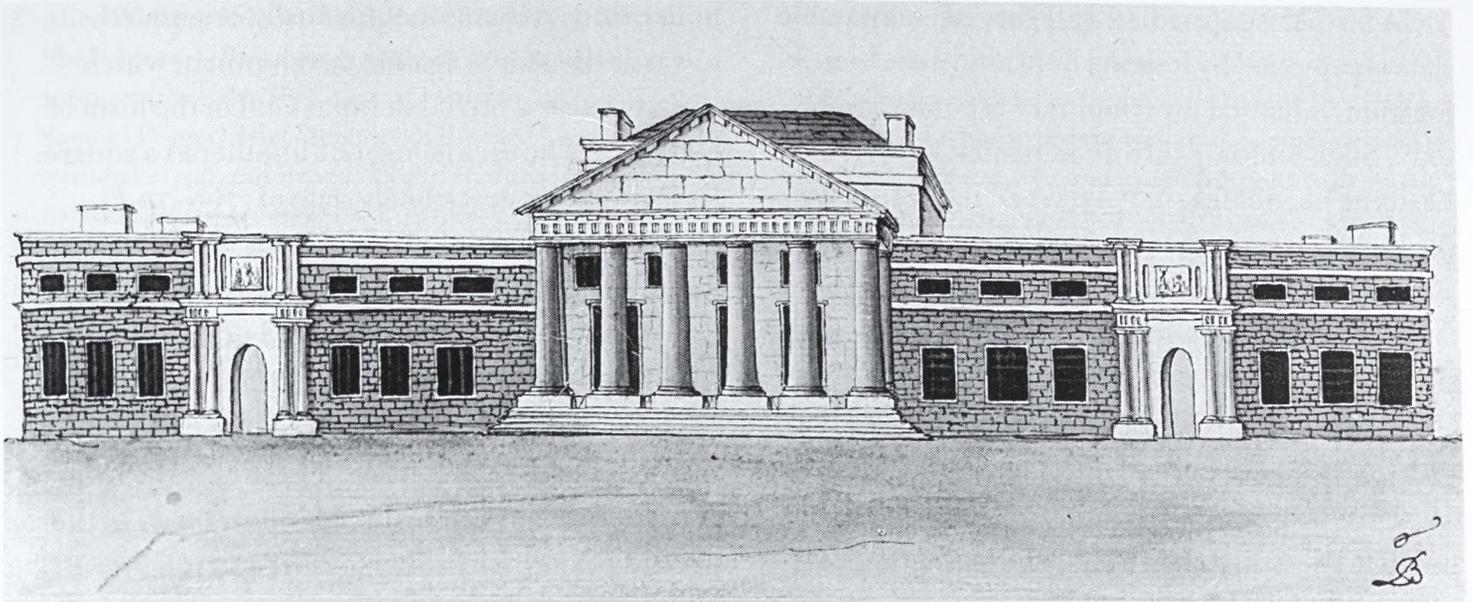


Figure 10. Holland House, Kingsgate, Kent: drawing by 'L. B'. *Richard Hewlings*.

'Gothick' appearance, which Hawkins describes and for which he makes plain his own distaste.¹⁹ Unfortunately, it is unclear exactly what was built on the site in 1764, prior to these later additions. But the Moulton enjoys spectacular sea views, and, as Abraham Hawkins' account indicates, it was clearly for this that its site was selected.

If East Cliff House, Holland House and the Moulton are the earliest true seaside houses, it is worth noting certain related types of building, which, though failing to fulfil the key criteria of the 'seaside house' as outlined above, are significant as precursors.²⁰ Interestingly, the construction or modification of these seems to cluster about thirty years earlier, in the 1730s.

An example of an earlier building converted into a seaside house is provided by St Michael's Mount, Cornwall. This had been virtually abandoned by the 1720s, but it was restored by Sir John St Aubyn, 3rd Baronet (1700–44), and his son, also Sir John, 4th Baronet (1726–72), from the 1730s onwards. Particularly notable is the conversion of the former Lady Chapel into the Blue Drawing Room at some date prior to 1755.²¹

A further analogous example is Mount Edgumbe, Cornwall, a house looking out over Plymouth Sound begun in 1546 by Sir Richard Edgumbe (1499–1562).²² Again, the picturesque qualities of this house seem to have been newly appreciated in the 1730s, when the grounds were landscaped and planted by Richard Edgumbe, 1st Baron Edgumbe (1680–1758), with the advice of the naturalist, Peter Collinson (1694–1768).²³

A related category is of country houses with a distant view of the sea. Examples include Compton Place, Eastbourne, Sussex, remodelled from an earlier house by Colen Campbell in 1726–31; Encombe House, Dorset, another remodelled house the present form of which evidently dates from the 1730s; and Mulgrave Castle, North Yorks., where a new house in an elevated position was built before 1735 for the Duchess of Buckingham (?1682–1743).²⁴ These are clearly significant as precursors, even if they do not really count as seaside houses in the proper sense. Thus, in the case of Mulgrave Castle, the equivalent to a true seaside house would have been a development at what is now Sandsend, whereas in fact, although this land formed part of the Mulgrave estate, in the eighteenth century it was considered an appropriate location only for the cottages and limekiln that still survive.

A further intermediate category of comparable date is provided by lodging houses in a seafront location, intended for temporary accommodation only. Such buildings are documented at Eastbourne, Sussex, in 1743, when the antiquary, the Revd. Jeremiah Milles (1714–84), noted in his journal ‘some public houses, commonly known by the name of the sea houses, where gentlemen generally choose to bait, on account of the agreeableness of the situation and the good entertainment one meets with there. These public houses are situated on the sea shore: where they frequently catch good fish, and in the season that is from June to September are remarkable for wheatears’.²⁵ These houses were depicted by S.H. Grimm in 1785, but they no longer survive.²⁶

Though it seems inappropriate to include here houses built adjacent to harbours, rivers or estuaries, a further intermediate category is provided by three mid-eighteenth century villas at Burgman’s Hill, Lympstone, Devon – Greenhill, the Manor House and Belvedere.²⁷ These are set on high ground behind the town with their orientation towards the Exe estuary, and they appear to show an aesthetic appreciation of a waterfront location, if not of the open sea.

Analogous to this is a further example at Scarborough, North Yorks., Cliff End House, Cliff Bridge Terrace, which enjoys sea views due to its end-of-terrace, clifftop location.²⁸ However, it is not entirely clear whether it counts as a seaside

house since it is not unequivocally orientated towards the sea, as against development which already existed on St Nicholas Cliff in the form of two rows of houses facing one another as a square. Its features suggest a likely date of 1760–70.²⁹

Lastly, in view of the conscious classical revivalism of Lord Holland, which may also have affected Capell (and which is certainly in evidence in Abraham Hawkins, though his father’s views are unclear), it is perhaps worth recalling the classical antecedents of such houses. These take the form of seaside villas built by the Mediterranean in the ancient period, including Cicero’s Formian and Pliny’s Laurentian villas. But it is worth noting that these models do not seem to have evoked any enthusiasm in Renaissance Italy.³⁰

Thus this type of building has an interesting pedigree, and I would be glad to hear of further examples of the various types of house itemised here. Subject to this, however, the earliest ‘true’ seaside houses appear to be those described at the start of this article, with the earliest of all being East Cliff House, Hastings.

I am grateful to Bryan Berryman, Jo Cox, Angela Doughty, John Farrant, Peter Goodchild, Richard Hewlings, Ralph Hyde, Richard Ovenden, Chris Miele, Christopher Whittick, Victoria Williams and Christopher Wright for their assistance in the compilation of this article. Figs. 3–7 and 9 are reproduced by permission of Hastings Museum and Art Gallery and Fig. 8 by permission of East Sussex County Record Office.

NOTES

- 1 There is no systematic survey of early views of the sea. For an impressionistic account, see Alain Corbin, *The Lure of the Sea*, Eng. trans., Cambridge, 1994. Unfortunately Marjorie Hope Nicolson failed to execute her original intention of surveying attitudes towards the ocean as well as mountains in her *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: the Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite*, Ithaca, 1959, repr. New York, 1963: see *ibid.*, xii, 306–7 and *passim*.
- 2 John and Jill Ford, *Images of Brighton*, Richmond-on-Thames, 1981, 76 and ‘Gallery’, nos. 336–7. Though the

- house was long ago demolished, it is possible to speculate that its strange plan, which was very long and a single room deep, might have been intended to give his guests a sea view. I am grateful to Chris Miele for this point.
- 3 Ian Nairn and Nikolaus Pevsner, *Sussex*, Harmondsworth, 1965, 448.
- 4 John Newman and Nikolaus Pevsner, *Dorset*, Harmondsworth, 1972, 453.
- 5 John Newman, *North East and East Kent*, Harmondsworth, 1969, 371–2; Nairn and Pevsner, *Sussex, cit.*, 109–10.

- 6 Alice Walker, 'Edward Capell and his Edition of Shakespeare', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, XLVI, 1960, 132. See also *ibid.*, 131–45, *passim*.
- 7 Samuel Pegge, 'Brief Memoirs of Edward Capell, Esq.', written c. 1790, published in John Nichols (ed.), *Literary Illustrations of the Eighteenth Century*, London, 1817, I, 475.
- 8 This is confirmed by a plan included in the conveyance of the property to Edward Milward in 1796 which survives among the deeds for the house now in Hastings Museum (xx. 139, no. 24) (Fig. 9). This shows that the house still retains its original ground plan (except that a coal store to the west of the sea-facing terrace has been removed). That the external appearance of the house has changed relatively little since it was built is confirmed by a view of it between 1812 and 1816 by Thomas Hearne, now in Hastings Museum, reproduced in the exhibition catalogue, *Turner to Burra*, Hastings Museum and Art Gallery, 1991, 14. It is presumably due to the use of bays – which are clearly original to the house, since they appear in both the plan and in Hearne's view – that Pevsner unaccountably misdated it Early Victorian [Nairn and Pevsner, *Sussex, cit.*, 526].
- 9 See Henry Cousins, 'Romance of East Cliff House, Rock-a-Nore, and its Famous Owners', *The Hastings and St Leonards Pictorial Advertiser and Visitors List*, 26 March 1914, 8–9.
- 10 Pegge, *op. cit.*
- 11 Hastings Museum, xx. 139; see also David and Barbara Martin and Christopher Whittick, *An Archaeological Interpretative Survey of the Old Town Wall, Hastings*, Institute of Archaeology, London, 1995, 35–9, 113–6.
- 12 *Mr William Shakespeare his Comedies, Histories and Tragedies*, London, [1768], I, 37n.
- 13 Pegge, *op. cit.*; W. G. Moss, *The History and Antiquities of the Town and Port of Hastings*, London, 1824, 155.
- 14 Moss, *loc. cit.*; Hastings Museum, xx. 139.
- 15 Howard Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects 1660–1840*, 3rd edn., New Haven and London, 1995, 1134.
- 16 Hugh Honour, 'An Epic of Ruin-Building', *Country Life*, CXIV, Dec. 10, 1953, 1968–9. The Earl of Ilchester, Henry Fox, *First Lord Holland*, London, 1920, II, 279f; Ronald Jessup, 'The Follies of Kingsgate'. *Archaeologia Cantiana*, LXXVII, 1953, 1–13; Newman, *North East and East Kent, cit.*, 352–3.
- 17 The date when the Hollands moved to Kingsgate is given in a diary kept by Lady Holland at the time [British Library, Add. MS 51444, fol. 2]. The lease had been assigned to Lord Holland by the existing tenant, Robert Gordon, on 14 April [Ramsgate Library, Powell-Cotton MSS U1063/T60]. See also Ilchester, *op. cit.*, II, 168, who quotes a letter from Lord Holland in which he describes the house they moved into as 'such a house, or not quite so good, as a tradesman who gets to be worth £1,000 or £1,500 builds in a country town'. Some information on the earlier history of the site is provided by deeds and related documents in the Powell-Cotton MSS, especially U1063/T45A–J, which suggests that in the early eighteenth-century the site was occupied by a number of messages and ancillary buildings, including a 'Herring house', whereas by 1751 the herring house was 'ruinated', and it is possible that an element of gentrification had already occurred before Lord Holland took the lease.
- 18 [A. Hawkins], *Kingsbridge and Salcombe with the Intermediate Estuary Historically and Topographically Depicted*, Kingsbridge, 1819, 99. See also Hawkins's translation of Vincent Mignot, *The History of the Turkish, or Ottoman Empire*, 4 vols., Exeter, 1787, and of *The Works of Claudian*, London, 1817. On Abraham Hawkins's own house, Alston, Malborough, see F. E. Ross in *Devon and Cornwall Notes and Queries*, xvi, 1931, 193–4, where the date of John Hawkins's death is given. See also Bridget Cherry and Nikolaus Pevsner, *Devon*, Harmondsworth, 1989, 709, where the two Hawkins are confused.
- 19 Hawkins, *Kingsbridge and Salcombe, cit.*, 99–100. The Moulton was later the home of the Victorian historian J. A. Froude: [W. G. Hoskins, *Devon*, London, 1954, 470].
- 20 I have ignored buildings with a seaward aspect that is coincidental or utilitarian, for instance houses not built with a seaward aspect which have acquired one, as at Deal in Kent, where much of the current 'front' formerly had houses facing it which have since been eroded by the sea. An analogous example is provided by the late seventeenth-century Paradise House, Scarborough, to which my attention was kindly drawn by Mr Bryan Berryman, Local History Librarian at Scarborough. In its current state, Paradise House faces the sea, but this is due to a drastic reconstruction, probably in the early nineteenth century. Francis Place's engraving of Scarborough of c. 1690 shows that the house originally turned its back towards the sea, with its domestic offices on that frontage.
- 21 John Cornforth, 'St Michael's Mount, Cornwall', *Country Life*, CLXXXVII, June 3 1993, 84–7. See also Nikolaus Pevsner, *Cornwall*, 2nd ed., revised by Enid Radcliffe, Harmondsworth, 1970, 195.
- 22 Mark Girouard, *Robert Smythson and the Elizabethan*

- Country House*, New Haven and London, 1983, 56, 97–100.
- 23 Mavis Batey, 'To Sea and be Seen', *Country Life*, CLXXXIII, Sept. 14, 1989, 214–7.
- 24 Nairn and Pevsner, *Sussex, cit.*, 485–6; Newman and Pevsner, *Dorset*, 200–1; Nikolaus Pevsner, *Yorkshire: the North Riding*, Harmondsworth, 1966, 260–1. On Encombe, see also Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, *South-East Dorset*, London, 1970, 1, 78–80.
- 25 J.H. Farrant, 'Visitors to Eastbourne in the Early Eighteenth Century', *Eastbourne Local Historian*, LXXXIX, Autumn 1993, 19.
- 26 W.H. Godfrey and L.F. Salzman (eds.), *Sussex Views*, Oxford, 1951, nos. 54–5.
- 27 Drawn to my attention by Jo Cox. See Cherry and Pevsner, *Devon, cit.*, 551–2.
- 28 Pointed out to me by the Local History librarian, Mr Bryan Berryman, in a letter of 4 January 1996.
- 29 Letter from Chris Miele, English Heritage, 7 November 1996.
- 30 J.S. Ackerman, *The Villa: Form and Ideology of Country Houses*, London, 1990, 42, 52, 56–8; Deborah Howard, 'The Italian Renaissance Villa', in Dana Arnold (ed.), *The Georgian Villa*, Stroud, 1996, 8. For nineteenth-century developments, see Lindsay Boynton, 'The Marine Villa', *ibid.*, 118–29.