



THE
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Sir Howard Colvin in the library at his home in Oxford.
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SIR HOWARD COLVIN (1919–2007), FRIEND OF THE GEORGIAN GROUP

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The late Sir Howard Colvin could be regarded as the lexicographer of the Georgian Group by virtue of his *Biographical Dictionary of English Architects 1660–1840*, published in 1954 and expanded in 1978, 1995 and now posthumously in 2008. In that exciting first edition the three Georges were central to his biographical span and there can hardly be a member of the Group who has not used this bible of our trade. Indeed, without it, all articles in *The Georgian Group Journal* would have been the poorer. The first Georgian article Colvin ever published was on the ‘The Bastards of Blandford, architects and master-builders’ in 1947, an early product of his biographical endeavours. Sixty years on it is still up to date, although amplified and modified in each of his three later editions. The *Dictionary*, as with every other of his articles, was written with scrupulous archival authority. Colvin’s miniature encapsulations of each architect were wonders of understanding and perfection.

Concurrently with his dictionary work appeared at least forty articles on Georgian subjects. In 1999 Yale University Press published his *Essays in English Architectural History*. This contained seventeen chosen articles, from ‘Royal Gardens in Medieval England’ via ‘Gothic Survival and Gothic Revival’ and ‘The Architect and Client in Georgian England’ to ‘Writing a Biographical Dictionary of British Architects’, and ending with a bibliography of the author’s selected writings.

Colvin was on the Georgian Group’s Council and was always a presence in the sense that he spoke in support of many of the Group’s case battles by

virtue of being a highly respected committee member of the Historic Buildings Council for England 1970–84, the Historic Buildings Advisory Committee 1984–2000 and the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments for England 1963–81.

It is sometimes forgotten that he was a mediaevalist at heart (*The White Canons in England* 1951, *Building Accounts of King Henry III*, 1971) and he showed his mettle in editing and writing many of the early sections of the magisterial six-volume *History of the King’s Works*, for which he was appointed CVO in 1983. However, if we examine the list of Colvin’s publications, the majority are witness to his love for the architecture of the Georgian era. *A Catalogue of Architectural Drawings of the 18th and 19th Centuries in Worcester College Library*, 1964, *Architectural Drawings in the Library of Elton Hall by Sir John Vanbrugh and Sir Edward Lovett Pearce*, 1964, and *Calke Abbey, Derbyshire*, 1985, are among them. The Group’s custodianship of the Pardoe Collection of English Country House Topography is a reminder that with the death of both Colvin and Peter Reid we have lost major players in the game of placing unidentified country house views.

Colvin’s presence will also be sorely missed at conferences. The last he attended, at the age of 88, was at Wotton House, Buckinghamshire, where, as the mentor of so many, he surprised all with a brilliant and convincing paper attributing Wotton to the architect John Fitch. When published, this and his other posthumous article on Henry Flitcroft as the architect of the rococo Shobdon church will only add to the chagrin of what we have lost by his death.



COLVIN AND CALKE

‘When, some 40 years ago, from the vantage point of the churchyard, I first saw Calke Abbey, silent, shuttered and impenetrable, it was only one of many lesser-known country houses whose architectural history I hoped one day to unravel. Then, in 1964, Rupert Gunnis and I first set foot inside the house, and we realised that Calke was unique: a great house in which the process of change had been arrested, so that in the mid 20th century it remained an almost untouched relic of the 19th.

In 1981, following the death of Charles Harpur-Crewe, it at last became possible to explore the interior of the house and its archives (which had long been jealously guarded even from members of the family). The result was three articles in *Country Life* (October 20–November 3, 1983), in which the strange history of the Harpur-Crewe family was told for the first time.

In 1983, the future of the house seemed almost hopeless, and the articles were written in every expectation that they would be its obituary. As it turned out, they played a part in the campaign for the preservation of the house and its contents, which ended in a notable conservation victory: in his Budget speech on March 13, 1984, the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced that he would provide the National Heritage Memorial Fund with £4.5 million to save Calke Abbey. Together with £2 million, provided half by the Harpur-Crewe family trustees and half by English Heritage, and some £250,000 raised by public appeal, the National Trust was assured of the financial resources it needed to repair the structure, conserve the contents and maintain house and park in the future.’

Howard Colvin, *Country Life*, 6 April 1989