The cottage orné had become a well recognised phenomenon by the early nineteenth century. But its origins lie in the second half of the eighteenth century. The thatched cottage built c.1778 by Lady Craven on the banks of the Thames in Fulham may have been among the earliest cottages ornés. It is also of interest as a small house built in vernacular style for personal use by its wealthy owner, not just a decorative building in a landscape. The paper examines some comparable examples, and looks at how the house was used by Lady Craven and various subsequent owners.

By the later eighteenth century the banks of the Thames west of London were dotted with the country houses of well-off Londoners. Some of these houses had medieval origins, such as Fulham Palace or Syon House, both with many later additions; others were more recent, such as Marble Hill at Twickenham or Asgill House at Richmond, respectively Palladian and neo-classical: the classical language of architecture was the rule. Many of these houses were easily visible from the river and Thames tours were popular pursuits; some of the houses were recorded in prints and guide books were produced. Occasionally the builders of these riverside houses chose to break away from classicism: Thomas Hudson’s Gothic garden pavilion was an example, Horace Walpole’s Strawberry Hill another, both in Twickenham. Neither was quite as curious as a rambling thatched cottage half-hidden in willows on the stretch of the river between Fulham and Hammersmith, which appeared in the late 1770s and disappeared in 1888.

Craven Cottage is one of the earliest examples of the cottage orné and one of the most intriguing. Most eighteenth century houses were built by men; this was built by a woman for her own use, and may have been designed by her too. Lady Craven (1750–1828), born Lady Elizabeth Berkeley and later to become the Margravine of Anspach, was the creator of the cottage. An intelligent and lively woman, she loved the outdoor life as well as London society and parties. She was also a beauty, painted by many of the leading artists of the day, such as Gainsborough, Reynolds and Romney. (Fig. 1) In 1767 she married
What is a *cottage orné*? The term covers a variety of buildings, vernacular in style, often thatched and usually small. Most were single-storey buildings, perhaps lodges or dairies; some were used as estate cottages, others were decorative buildings for parks and gardens. An early example was the Ladies’ Cottage at Blickling Hall in Norfolk, built c.1761, approached from a track through the woods and intended for picnics. It was a small thatched cottage with simple Gothic windows and a chimney, just a single room furnished with a dining table, chairs and cooking equipment. The cottage has now gone.

In England the cottage style was promoted in various pattern books, one of the first being William Wrighte’s *Grotesque Architecture* of 1767, which illustrates various modest rustic buildings constructed of ‘Irregular Stones, Rude Branches and Roots of Trees.’ These were not houses for ordinary domestic use, but ‘Huts … Summer and Winter Hermitages … Baths’ and other small decorative buildings intended for landscaped grounds. One of the most

William Craven, later 6th Lord Craven, and they spent the first two years of their married life at Ashdown House in Berkshire. Once he inherited the Craven peerage they had more houses at their disposal: a London house in Charles Street, Coombe Abbey in Warwickshire and Benham Place in Berkshire. They were young, rich and fashionable, with money to spend on their houses. Capability Brown redesigned the gardens at Coombe Abbey in 1771, then they turned their attention to Benham. Brown was again employed, this time collaborating with his son-in-law Henry Holland: in 1774 they rebuilt the house in stone as a 9-bay pedimented block. (Fig. 2) It is on a hillside, protected from the north and overlooking the valley of the Kennet. Lady Craven, who loved gardening and keeping cows, claimed in her *Memoirs* to have built a dairy nearby. Dairies were very much the province of the ladies and a rustic style was entirely appropriate. It does not appear to have survived, but it could be that this was where Elizabeth Craven first tried out her own ideas on buildings.
celebrated examples of this fashion for vernacular buildings – and the result of growing curiosity about rural pursuits – is Marie-Antoinette’s Petit Hameau at Versailles, begun in 1783. Its group of cottages, mill and aviary near the Petit Trianon was based on designs sketched out by the artist Hubert Robert, and were lived in or working buildings. As a royal building project this was unusually elaborate, and the earlier English examples which may have inspired it tended just to be single buildings.

Craven Cottage was different. It was built in the late 1770s; it was not a decorative adjunct to a country estate; and no architect’s name is associated with it. It was a two-storey house, large enough for Lady Craven to stay in, although probably not to be lived in for any length of time. There are very few contemporary buildings in this style. One, recently rediscovered and written up in this Journal, was erected in Derbyshire, another was built for the Queen, and a third was built in Northern Ireland. None can be attributed with certainty to an architect, and only the last was large enough to be lived in.

Sealwood Cottage was designed by the writer William Combe and was built c.1774 as an occasional retreat by a well-off rector in Derbyshire; set in a wooded grove, it was timber-framed and thatched. Downstairs it had one simple room and a pantry; above was a more elegantly finished room with an oriel window from which to admire the view; there was also a bed alcove with a pull-out bed and two closets, so the Rev. Thomas Gresley could stay there. Another original little building was much closer to Craven Cottage, and is more likely to have influenced it.

Queen Charlotte’s cottage in Kew Gardens was built c.1772, just a few years before Craven Cottage, and is one of the earliest examples of this genre, so it is possible that Lady Craven would have known it. The Queen’s cottage orné started as a single storey building in the ‘New Menagerie’ area of Kew Gardens,
close to Ormonde Lodge which the King and Queen were then using as their home in Kew. They moved to the White House in the northern part of the gardens in 1772 and demolished Ormonde Lodge. They also removed the menagerie and recreated the cottage for occasional use – not for staying in, but for picnics or taking tea. (Fig. 3) The house sits in a woodland grove and looks appropriately rustic: it is timber-framed with brick infill, a construction probably inspired by the North German vernacular which the Queen remembered from her childhood. The roof is thatched and the doors are apparently simple, made of rough planks with simple wooden latches. The windows, unusually large for a ‘cottage,’ are recycled seventeenth century frames with leaded panes. However, the simplicity of the exterior is in sharp contrast to the elegance of the interior – a juxtaposition which must have been intended to surprise and delight. The rough doors are panelled inside, and the high-ceilinged interior has no trace of rusticity. There are two main rooms, the Print Room downstairs and the Picnic Room above. Linking them is an elegant cantilevered staircase, lit by large windows whose shutters slide down into the fabric of the building – not a feature found in a simple cottage. A small pantry and service stair at one side allowed for meals or refreshments to be served either upstairs or downstairs.

It would be fascinating to know who designed this innovative little building. Queen Charlotte paid for the work herself so all the records were in her Privy Purse papers, which have not been traced. Recent research by Historic Royal Palaces suggests that the Queen may have sketched out her ideas, and Sir William Chambers turned them into plans for the builders. If so, this would make it one of the earliest examples of a cottage orné by a leading architect.

No-one could have been more respectable than Queen Charlotte, but a more irregular household stayed at Derrymore House near Bessbrook,
This was a bigger house than Craven Cottage, and intended for longer visits, but if built as early as 1776 just pre-dates it.

Derrymore is not dissimilar to the rustic designs by John Plaw for small country houses which could be shooting or fishing lodges, although there is no evidence for his involvement here. Plaw published his *Rural Architecture* in 1785, *Ferme Ornée* in 1795, and *Sketches for Country Houses, Villas and Rural Dwellings* in 1800. There is a design for a rustic dairy, its thatched roof supported on roughly trimmed tree trunks, but most designs are for modestly sized gentlemen’s houses, some thatched. His design for ‘a small villa in the cottage style’ is strikingly similar to Houghton Lodge, a fishing lodge in Hampshire which was originally thatched. However most buildings of this type date from the early years of the nineteenth century when many more books were produced, such as Repton’s *Fragments on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening*. Repton had been in partnership with John Nash, and they shared similar ideas on the value of picturesque buildings in a rural setting. Nash’s group of estate cottages at Blaise Hamlet near Bristol, built 1810–11, is a well-
preserved example of this fashion for rusticity. All these publications have led us to think of the cottage orné as an early nineteenth century development, whereas Kew Cottage and these other examples show that there were experiments with the style considerably earlier.

**Craven Cottage and Lady Craven**

Part of the appeal of these smaller houses close to London was the ability to experiment at no great cost; they were built for enjoyment, not for status; they were not part of the family estate, and could be let or sold at will. For Lady Craven the acquisition of Craven Cottage came about by chance. She described in her *Memoirs* how this happened.

‘Some years before Lord Craven had separated from me he had been in the habit of giving me a lottery ticket every year. The year after the birth of Berkeley Craven, I obtained a prize of £2,000; with part of which I bought the land on which what was Craven Cottage stands, on the banks of the Thames between Fulham and Hammersmith; and with £600 I bought and gave to Lord Craven a brilliant of a very beautiful description.’

What was it like? In the absence of documentary evidence, the best information we have is pictorial. (Fig. 5) An 1845 map of the area shows the still undeveloped nature of that stretch of the river. Fulham Palace, the moated site close to Putney Bridge, was owned by the Bishop of London who also held much of the land to the north. Brandenburg House in Hammersmith was the next large house, with three lesser houses in between. Craven Cottage was built on low-lying land which had belonged to the Bishop of London. Access was via a lane from Fulham Palace Road, which can be seen parallel to the river, and the roughly rectangular site of five acres bordered the Thames. A watercolour shows the main front of the house c.1820, and is the best evidence for its appearance. (Fig. 6) A long low cottage beneath a thatched hipped roof, it nestles unobtrusively among trees. A thatched porch on timber supports leads
Horace Walpole, a friend and admirer of Lady Craven, kept a portrait of her by Romney at Strawberry Hill and attended the plays she wrote and put on in London. He printed some of her works at his Strawberry Hill Press and mentions Craven Cottage in his letters, planning to pay ‘his duty at your ladyship’s cottage’ if she does not visit him at his ‘castle’. This was in November 1779, not a time of year usually associated with visits to riverside cottages, but she was increasingly bored by her husband and his shooting parties in the country. She sent Walpole one of her poems in which she records, in very indifferent verse, her frustration at country life:

‘Adieu, she cries, ye leafless trees
Ye downs and woods so dreary
I gladly quit such scenes as these
For town in January’

She had had seven children in about ten years, then embarked on a not very discreet affair with the French ambassador, widely reported in the gutter press. Craven Cottage provided a place to go with her own friends, and possibly her lover. (Perhaps the individual, even eccentric style of these cottages ornés appealed to the more outré members of society, such as Lady Craven clearly was). In 1782 she and her husband separated, her husband keeping all the children except her youngest son, Keppel Craven. She went abroad with her small son, leaving her cottage for the use of a friend:

‘As to my cottage, – I have desir’d it may be neither let nor sold – and I beg you will make what use you please of it – keeping it warm and air’d – for I may want it at a fortnight’s warning … I would have a great many vines planted at the cottage – as there is one which produces the very best grapes I ever eat in any country, owing to the shelter’d situation … I beg there may be no alteration in the disposition of the planting etc – only the willows cut away properly – as your residence is in London, this cottage will be a very agreeable circumstance to you – and I insist on your making use of it. There was a pianoforte and a thousand comfortable things in it.’

The modish exterior and intimate rooms allowed her to live the simple life for a while, being outdoors, entertaining her friends, writing her plays, perhaps boating on the river.

Another attraction was the gardens; in all her houses Lady Craven enjoyed laying them out and working in them herself. She created a raised walk along the Thames, an irregular lawn in front of the house, and planted trees and shrubs all round. Lady Mary Coke, a keen gardener herself and usually highly critical, liked and admired her. ‘She is a very pretty woman, and has more manner, politeness and sense than anybody of her own time of life that I am acquainted with.’ She visited her at Craven Cottage in 1781 and noted that she ‘has a fine view of the river … She has planted two rows of willows which form a close walk on each side of the boundary of her ground and which go down to the river. Upon the whole I think it as pretty as anything upon the Thames must be.’ Another visitor wrote:

‘Lady Craven gave a tea-drinking last night at a sort of thatched house she has built upon the banks of the Thames. I did not imagine anything could be as ugly as the banks of the Thames, but she has realised what I could never have imagined. She has made her house look as if it was built in an ait, having surrounded it entirely with willows.’

A N E A R L Y C O T T A G E O R N É: C R A V E N C O T T A G E A N D L A D Y C R A V E N

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Over the next few years her peripatetic life took her all over Europe. When she was on her way to Florence Horace Walpole wrote to Horace Mann, the British Resident there, telling him that she was ‘very pretty, has parts and is good-natured to the greatest degree, has not a grain of malice or mischief … and never has been an enemy but to herself.’

Living near Paris she had ‘cows and a fine dairy’ and while there she met the Margrave of Brandenburg-Anspach, a nephew of Queen Caroline of Anspach. She became his mistress (and later his wife), and was invited to settle in Anspach where she ‘made an English garden’ and employed her dairy expertise to organise cheese making. When the Margravine died they left for Lisbon, where she heard that Lord Craven had also died. Horace Walpole, whose cousin was ambassador in Lisbon at the time, pithily described her marriage: ‘Lady Craven received the news of her Lord’s death on a Friday, went into weeds on Saturday, and into white satin and many diamonds on Sunday, and in that vestal trim was married to the Margrave of Anspach by my cousin’s chaplain.’

BRANDENBURG HOUSE AND BENHAM PLACE

Once married they returned to England, the childless Margrave having given up his principality in Germany to the King of Prussia. The King, who would anyway have inherited the state at the Margrave’s death, gave him a large annuity as a result. By this time the Margravine had sold Craven Cottage to a Mrs Hough, but she must have kept fond memories of this stretch of the Thames because she persuaded her husband to buy a house nearby: Brandenburg House, Hammersmith, renamed in his honour. This historic house had been built by Sir Nicholas Crisp in the reign of Charles I, and had been owned by Prince Rupert after the Restoration. It was a triple-pile house which had been altered by Roger Morris and Giovanni Servandoni for George Bubb Dodington in 1748–9. Its large scale, fine position and classical style made it a suitable princely residence, which the eccentric Craven Cottage could never have been. Thanks to his annuity the Margrave was very rich and his house was run on a suitably royal scale, with thirty liveried servants and a stud with sixty horses. They entertained lavishly, converting Servandoni’s sculpture gallery into a ballroom with a sprung floor. The Margravine was never received at court after her separation from Lord Craven but this did not prevent her giving spectacular theatrical entertainments, one of which was attended by the Prince of Wales.

Typically, she built herself a less formal addition to Brandenburg House, adding ‘a pavilion at the bottom of the grounds … in which I took great delight.’ This contained a theatre with a billiard room, library and coffee room, the whole disguised as a castellated ruin and connected to the house by a conservatory 150 feet long. She also made garden improvements. ‘I laid out the grounds entirely; ornamenting them with walks and shrubberies, and planting trees, according to my own taste – the exercise of which was left entirely to myself.’

Not only did they live close to Craven Cottage, but in 1799 the Margrave also bought Benham Place in Berkshire, which his wife’s eldest son, the 7th Lord Craven, wished to sell. Another theatre was immediately built for her there. The Margravine died there in 1806 and his widow moved to Naples, where ‘the King of Naples made me a present of two acres of land, on a most beautiful spot of ground, commanding a complete view of the bay. Here I built a house, in form similar to my pavilion at Brandenburg House: a large circular room in the centre, with smaller apartments surrounding it.’

In Naples she gardened energetically in ancient clothes and wrote her Memoirs; these gloss neatly over many controversial aspects of her life. She died in Naples in 1828. By that time Brandenburg House had been demolished; it had dry rot and its site was ripe for redevelopment.
CRAYEN COTTAGE IN THE 19TH CENTURY

What had happened to Craven Cottage after Lady Craven sold it? Like many of these houses near London it changed hands many times. Some owners were of no consequence, others were well-known figures. In 1805 it was bought by Walsh Porter, who lived only another four years but made extensive and expensive changes to the house. ‘As left by Mr Walsh Porter, Craven Cottage was considered the prettiest specimen of cottage architecture then existing’ wrote Fèret in his history of Fulham. Our only view of an interior shows a room he created, and ‘cottage architecture’ it certainly is not. (Fig. 7) With the help of the young architect Thomas Hopper, he converted the central reception room into an ‘Egyptian Hall’ picking up on the evidence for ancient Egyptian temple decoration which had come to light during the recent Napoleonic invasion of Egypt. The columns, inward-tapering doorways and walls were decorated with mythical beasts, hieroglyphics and lotus leaves. Stranger still, the drawing shows palm trees on delicate trunks, their leaves touching the ceiling. By one door was ‘a movable camel in bronze’ and draping another was a curtain painted as a tiger skin, held up by a life-size female figure in bronze. Walsh Porter was ‘the guide of the Prince Regent in all matters of art and taste’ and the future George IV visited Porter at Craven Cottage more than once. He was certainly impressed by the young Hopper and went on to employ him at Carlton House. It is likely that his ideas for the exotic interiors at Brighton Pavilion were inspired by the fantastic interiors of Craven Cottage, which included on the ground floor a Gothic chapel and a ‘Tartar’s Tent’ with mirrored panels. Other apartments were ‘fitted out in the style of different foreign countries.’ As Osbert Lancaster wrote, this taste for ‘Chinese, Indian, Egyptian and Gothic … had little connection with architecture at all [These buildings] … were simply the work of smart interior decorators … or literary amateurs of exhibitionist tendencies creating a suitable background for their carefully cultivated personalities.’

Porter’s interiors seem far removed from the probable simplicity of Lady Craven’s cottage, and attracted more flamboyant owners. A sale brochure of 1832 describes the house as a ‘cottage ornée [sic]
formed upon the Egyptian and Gothic styles … It must however be admitted in candour that much of the freshness and beauty that formerly adorned this domicile of comfort requires to be restored.\(^3\) The new owner, well able to afford the required restoration, was the moneylender Charles King, who entertained lavishly in this extraordinary house between 1834 and his death there in 1839. Another well known owner was Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton, who lived there for many years and wrote many of his novels in the semi-circular library which Walsh Porter had created. Probably the house was not very well built and photographs show an increasingly decrepit building, the thatch slipping and the garden overgrown.\(^3\) From 1872 the house stood empty. ‘Craven Cottage, in its state of desolation and decay, covered to the roof with ivy and Virginia creeper, was … as beautiful an instance of picturesque decay as one could find anywhere.’\(^3\) In 1888, ‘a fire broke out … Notwithstanding the efforts of the [fire]men the fire continued to rage until the building was completely burnt out … The fire was supposed to have been caused by some tramps who had taken shelter in the building.’\(^3\) Today its name survives as the ground of Fulham Football Club. The 5 acre site, exactly that which Lady Craven bought, was acquired by the Club in 1896 and in 1905 the grandstands and offices were built by Archibald Leitch and are now listed buildings. ‘Craven Cottage’ was rebuilt as a charming small pavilion across one corner of the grounds, with a verandah from which to view the pitch. (Fig. 8) So Lady Craven’s highly original little house may have gone but its name lives on.

**Acknowledgements**

This paper grew out of a lecture given at the Georgian Group Symposium on London’s Country Houses in November 2009. I would like to thank the following for their advice during the research for this article: Frances Bailey (National Trust, Northern Ireland), George Carter, Nicholas Cooper, Cathal Moore, Lee Prosser (Historic Royal Palaces) and Jeremy Smith (Guildhall Library).
NOTES
1. William Gilpin’s *Fragment containing a Description of the Thames*, 1764, is one example of this.
5. No details of this building are known, except that it was an H-plan on the same site as the present cottage.
10. It is unclear how much time his children spent at Derrymore. They took Isaac Corry’s surname and were brought up as gentlemen, but Mrs Symms lived first in Kensington, then in Dublin.
12. Published in 1816, and including some designs for rustic buildings.
14. An inscription lower right is probably the signature of J.C. Buckler. The paper has been cut so only part of the signature is visible.
15. Four ‘principal bedchambers’ are referred to in the sale brochure of 1832, see n. 34.
22. Lewis, *Correspondence*, XXV, p. 611.
24. Ibid., 1, p. lxxvii.