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# AN ENGLISHWOMAN'S HOME IS HER CASTLE: LADY POMFRET'S HOUSE AT 18 ARLINGTON STREET

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*18 Arlington Street, also known as 'Pomfret Castle', was almost certainly the only eighteenth-century Gothic-style town house built in London. Commissioned by Lady Henrietta Louisa Fermor, Countess of Pomfret, a wealthy widow with a keen architectural interest and whimsical taste, it demonstrated her enjoyment of the Gothic style's decorative qualities and her wish to use it as a device with which to 'stand out from the crowd'. This article offers a notional reconstruction of the now demolished building and explores the playful, innovative and resourceful approach taken to the use of Gothic decoration in an urban domestic setting. The result was implausible yet intriguing.*

Pomfret Castle (Figs. 1 & 2) was built from 1757 to 1760 for Lady Henrietta Louisa Fermor, Dowager Countess of Pomfret, at No.18 Arlington Street, a location described in the 1728 *New Review of London* as 'one of the most beautiful situations in Europe, for health, convenience and beauty.'<sup>1</sup> Nothing survives of the building as, along with Nos. 17, 19 and 20, it was demolished for re-development in 1934.<sup>2</sup> But there is a variety of surviving source material, including a set of five photographs taken by Bedford Lemere in 1896 and a set of nine taken for *Country Life* in 1934.<sup>3</sup> In addition, three designs for the house by Richard Biggs (d. 1766),<sup>4</sup> a single anonymous contemporary drawing inscribed and dated 'Pomfret Castle, October 1760' and six nineteenth-century watercolours survive. Three of these watercolours,

executed in 1860 by a later resident, Sir John Pender (1816–1896), are previously unpublished.<sup>5</sup> These images reveal Pomfret Castle's individuality as a Georgian West End terraced town house equipped with signifying 'castle' features, including battlements and a 'defensive' gatehouse with truncated tower, machicolations and lancet windows, as well as a full set of Gothic-style interiors.

This article first outlines the context behind the construction of the house, the patron and the sometimes muddled issue of its architect, before offering a comprehensive reconstruction of the building's exterior and interiors and an evaluation of its decorative forms. Pomfret Castle's innovative approach to the Gothic is then considered and compared to Horace Walpole's Strawberry Hill (begun 1747) in order to demonstrate the unique approach taken at Pomfret Castle to the use of ornamentation in the modern Gothic style in an urban domestic setting.

## LADY HENRIETTA LOUISA FERMOR, DOWAGER COUNTESS OF POMFRET

Lady Pomfret, daughter of John Jeffreys, second Baron Jeffreys (1673–1702) and Lady Charlotte Herbert (1674–1733), married Thomas Fermor (d.1753), second Baron Leominster, in 1720. The following year he was created Earl of Pomfret (that is, Pontefract in Yorkshire); his favour with the royal

court was further shown by the Prince and Princess of Wales, later George II and Queen Caroline, becoming godparents in 1722 to the Pomfrets' eldest son, George. Three years later Lady Pomfret became Lady of the Bedchamber to Princess Caroline and her husband was made Knight of the Bath, and then in 1727 Queen Caroline's Master of the Horse. They were both at court until the Queen's death in 1737, after which they spent several years on the Continent, travelling through France to Italy, where they stayed at Siena, Florence – where they met Horace Walpole – and Rome for extended periods.

Upon their return to England the Pomfrets split their time between London and their country seat of Easton Neston, Northamptonshire, designed by Nicholas Hawksmoor for Lord Pomfret's father, the first Baron Leominster (d.1711). After Lord Pomfret's

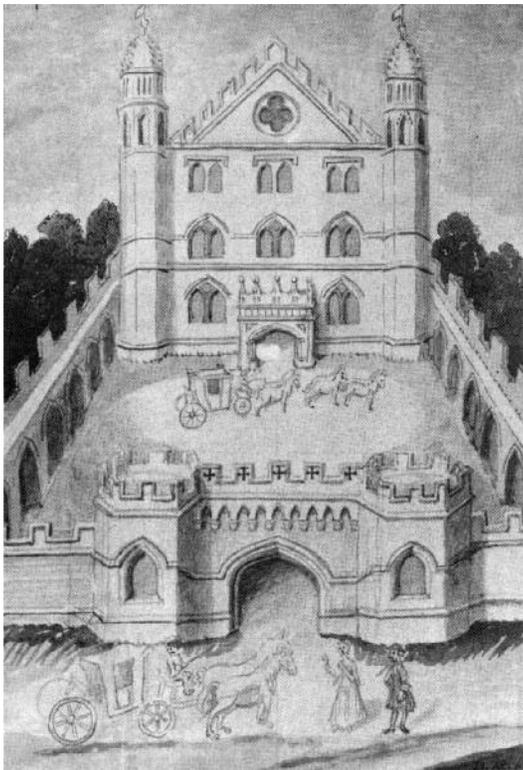


Fig. 1. Drawing of Pomfret Castle, 1760. From Phillips, *Mid-Georgian London*.

death in 1753 his widow never returned to Easton Neston. The house was inherited by their son, George Fermor, second Earl of Pomfret, who had 'deep debts and post obits',<sup>6</sup> and auctioned much of his family's collection. However his mother entered widowhood a wealthy woman, having won in 1752 a substantial inheritance through a lawsuit against the Windsor family, to whom she was related through her mother's second marriage.<sup>7</sup> Walpole, her future neighbour on Arlington Street, recorded that she had 'two thousand a year rent-charge for jointure, five hundred as Lady of the Bedchamber to the late Queen, and fourteen thousand pounds in money . . . what a fund for follies!'<sup>8</sup> At the auction of her son's collection at Easton Neston, Lady Pomfret bought the 135 marble statues and fragments that had been part of the seventeenth-century Arundel Marbles collection, originally bought by her father-in-law, and bequeathed them to Oxford University, where they were displayed first in the Old Schools adjacent to the Bodleian Library and from 1845 in the University Galleries in Beaumont Street (now the Ashmolean Museum).<sup>9</sup> Walpole, whose letters included increasingly derogatory comments about her through the 1740s and 50s, wrote that shortly after her donation the Countess had 'exhibited herself lately to the public; travelling to Oxford 'to receive adoration . . . to hear herself called Minerva.'<sup>10</sup> Comments such as these suggest that Lady Pomfret was not immune to the desire for public recognition. This is also shown by her presentation in 1759, also to Oxford University, of a double portrait of herself and her late husband, now on display as part of the Ashmolean's permanent collection. The portrait is signed 'Thomas Bardwell' but it is not clear exactly when it was painted or when its 'Gothick' frame was added. It is possible that the painting was done to commemorate her thirtieth wedding anniversary in 1750, as suggested by the Ashmolean Museum catalogue of paintings,<sup>11</sup> but that Lady Pomfret later had the painting adapted and the frame added to reflect her 'Gothick Imagination' (see Appendix 1).



Fig. 2. Pomfret Castle, 18 Arlington Street, London, inscribed 'Arlington House, Arlington Street', nineteenth-century watercolour. *London Metropolitan Archives*.

Lady Pomfret's diaries, correspondence and contents of her library reveal an interest in and knowledge of literature, art, and architecture.<sup>12</sup> Her specific interest in the latter is evident from a letter written by Mary Wortley Montagu to Lady Pomfret in 1744, where the former writes: 'what you'l[!] wonder to hear my mention: building.'<sup>13</sup> Lady Pomfret's diaries document visits to historic buildings, for example Rochester and Dover Castles in July 1738, and also more modern buildings, such as Colen Campbell's Wanstead House in 1743.<sup>14</sup> She particularly admired Roger Newdigate's Arbury Hall, which she

visited in May 1755.<sup>15</sup> The Countess's friendship with Newdigate and his wife, her niece, Sophia, had flourished after Lord Pomfret's death. Throughout the second half of the eighteenth century, Newdigate made major Gothic-style alterations to the originally Elizabethan house. By the time Lady Pomfret visited Arbury Hall, the two-storey bow window at the west end of the south front and Gothic-style Library interiors, complete with Gothic panelling and pierced fretwork in the bow window's interior, were installed. After her visit she wrote to Lady Sophia Newdigate on 17 July 1756 announcing: 'if I had the



Fig. 3. J. Whittock, Arlington Street's west houses from Green Park, 1848, watercolour. *British Museum*.

wings of an Eagle, i wou'd perch on One of yr bow Winddows, & take a lesson before my House gets above ground.<sup>16</sup>

After 1753 the Countess spent her time living between London and the apartments at Windsor Castle to which her former court service still entitled her. Rachel Stewart observes that wealthy widows were 'not subject, like unmarried women, to society's protection and restrictions'; they were allowed to operate independently and dispose of their wealth as they wished.<sup>17</sup> It would appear that London was particularly attractive to women in Lady Pomfret's autonomous position. She spent much time at 19 Arlington Street, the home of her son-in-law, John Carteret, second Earl of Granville and granddaughter, Lady Sophia Carteret.<sup>18</sup> Lady Pomfret eventually bought a plot of land from Lord Carteret adjacent to his own, on which to build her house, signing the land agreement on 18 February 1757.<sup>19</sup> The house appears to have made steady progress, Lady Pomfret writing of it on 19 December

1757: 't'is so far advanced, & to near perfection'.<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately, she died aged 63, on 21 December 1761, shortly after the completion of Pomfret Castle.<sup>21</sup> Her granddaughter lived in the house from 1763 to 1764, followed by her youngest daughter Louisa Fermor in 1765; the house passed out of the family for good in the following year.<sup>22</sup>

#### POMFRET CASTLE'S ARCHITECT

There has been some confusion about the identity of Pomfret Castle's architect. Newdigate has been considered by some as being involved with the design of Pomfret Castle, on the basis of the admiration Lady Pomfret expressed for Arbury Hall's bow windows.<sup>23</sup> However there is no evidence of his involvement with the house's design or execution, and Lady Pomfret's letter to Lady Newdigate of 19 December 1757 reveals that as yet Lord Newdigate had no knowledge of Pomfret Castle.<sup>24</sup>

The design of Pomfret Castle has also been attributed to Sanderson Miller.<sup>25</sup> In 1779 Walpole wrote that the 'Gothic house of the countess of Pomfret in Arlington Street, was designed by Mr Miller of Radway'.<sup>26</sup> This statement is not often questioned, in spite of the lack of supporting evidence for it. Michael McCarthy has attributed the courtyard facade to Miller, on the evidence of a drawing by Miller that he identifies as an early design.<sup>27</sup> McCarthy clearly had not seen the designs by Richard Biggs for Pomfret Castle, now at the Soane Museum, discussed at some length by John Harris (1991) in an article for the *Georgian Group Journal*.<sup>28</sup> As Harris has established, these designs securely identify Biggs as Pomfret Castle's principal architect.<sup>29</sup> This attribution is supported by Lady Pomfret's diary entry in the summer of 1757: 'Mr Biggs came about my plans.'<sup>30</sup> Biggs was Clerk of the Works at Windsor Castle, where Lady Pomfret must have made his acquaintance, from 1745 until his death in 1766.<sup>31</sup> As Harris also ascertains, Biggs was working in partnership with Stiff Leadbetter, as shown by the frequent references to him in Lady

Pomfret's diary entries, such as on 24 April 1756 when she 'went alone to Mr Leadbetter to settle my Place for building'.<sup>32</sup> Leadbetter was a capable architect who, in 1756, was made Surveyor of St Paul's, though it seems, as Harris argues, that he was employed largely as builder at Arlington Street, whereas Biggs was the principal architect.<sup>33</sup>

#### RECONSTRUCTING POMFRET CASTLE

The west side of Arlington Street, where Pomfret Castle was located, was unusual in the local context of terraced housing. Not only were the plots very long and thin, but one side faced the street and the other overlooked Green Park (Fig. 3), thus giving all the advantages of a city residence yet also a countrified or park-like setting, an arrangement described in *The Builder* (1886) as granting 'an air of dignified reserve'.<sup>34</sup>

Pomfret Castle was set back from the road behind a courtyard enclosed by a gatehouse (Fig. 4). This was originally a single storey structure, with

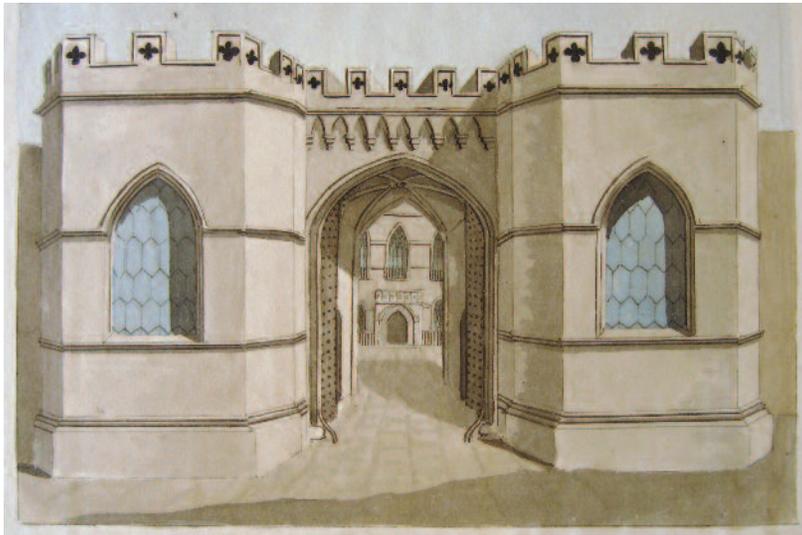


Fig. 4. Sir John Pender, Pomfret Castle's Gatehouse, 1860, watercolour.  
*City of Westminster Archives Centre.*



Fig. 5. Pomfret Castle's exterior from the street front, seen through the demolished plot where number 17 once stood, photographed by A. E. Henson, 1934. *Country Life Archives*.

two bulky, almost muscular, octagonal 'towers', each with a two-centred arched window, that flanked a pointed arched opening leading through the rib-vaulted passage-way to the courtyard. The gatehouse was also adorned with machicolations and an embattled parapet. The crenellation as seen in Pender's watercolour of 1860 shows simple, cross-shaped arrow slits in each merlon. However an 1831 watercolour of Arlington Street shows the merlons pierced with tracery. As these are also present in the 1760 drawing (Fig. 1), it must be assumed that the 1831 image is inaccurate, and the merlons were indeed simple. Later photographs show that another storey was added at some point between 1860 and 1896.

The three-bay, three-storey courtyard facade (Figs. 5 & 6) was faced with white stone. It was crowned with a triangular pediment containing a quatrefoil oculus above the roofline, and flanked by thin hexagonal turrets topped with ogee domes. The Biggs design and the 1760 drawing show the pediment crowned with slanting battlements. These battlements most likely originally existed, but were later either removed or damaged and not replaced as they are not present in the later watercolours or photographs. A precedent for slanted battlements can be seen in the work Nicholas Hawksmoor executed for All Souls College, Oxford, c.1705. However, more likely sources of inspiration for the composition of this facade with double turrets either



Fig. 6. Sir John Pender, Pomfret Castle's Courtyard Facade, 1860, watercolour. *City of Westminster Archives Centre*.



Fig. 7. West Facade of St George's Chapel, Windsor, Windsor Castle. *Photo: Wolf Burchard*.

side of an embattled 'pediment' with an inset of oculus or quatrefoil can be seen in Gothic garden structures, such as the Gothic Temple built c.1718 at Shotover Park, Oxfordshire and the Gothic Temple at Stowe, Buckinghamshire (Fig. 8) built by James Gibbs c.1741 for Richard Temple, Viscount Cobham.<sup>35</sup> The latter, of which a description was published in 1753, with accompanying plates in 1756,<sup>36</sup> was visited by Lady Pomfret on 6 October 1742, recording in her diary that she thought the garden buildings 'very pleasing and full of imagination.'<sup>37</sup>

Walpole described the turrets topping the courtyard facade at Pomfret Castle as being 'like those at King's Chapel', which indeed has some truth as the latter has turrets each side of a triangular



Fig. 8. James Gibbs, The Gothic Temple, Stowe, Buckinghamshire, c.1741, engraved in 1756. From Bickham, *Beauties of Stowe*.

gable with stepped crenellations.<sup>38</sup> This composition is also present on the west front of St George's Chapel, Windsor (Fig. 7), where the ogee-domed turrets are more directly relatable to those at Pomfret. Given the links that Lady Pomfret and Biggs had with Windsor, it is a likely precedent.

The triangular form on the roofline of Pomfret Castle has been wrongly read by McCarthy as a Classical 'pediment, disappointing in a Gothic facade.'<sup>39</sup> King's and St George's chapels both offer Perpendicular Gothic precedents, as well as the modern Gothic examples seen in the garden structures, and there is no need to see Pomfret Castle's 'pediment' as Classical in origin.

Variety was achieved in the courtyard façade through its fenestration. Windows sat within pointed arches, their panes differing on each storey (Figs. 2 & 6). Those flanking the doorway were simple with leading in the shape of elongated honeycomb cells, whereas those on the first floor were much more intricate, with leading in the form of four-light Gothic tracery complete with quatrefoils. The three two-light windows of the second storey, shaped like slightly plump lancets, were enclosed in rectangular recesses topped with hood mouldings. These windows reveal an attention to detail and playful variety in form.

Windows in pointed arches also featured in the park facade, which had two full height bow projections with triplets of pointed windows at each storey; windows sat between these projections on the first floor only. As we have seen, Lady Pomfret had great admiration for the bow windows at Arbury Hall, from which she may have taken inspiration, though the practice of adding bow windows for added variation was common at the time.<sup>40</sup> The facade was crowned with an embattled parapet, visible from across Green Park (Fig. 3). Biggs' designs for the park front are strikingly similar to a design, kept also in the Biggs folder at the Soane Museum, for John Bidleson's house at Bray, Berkshire, 1762, a link that helps secure the attribution of the Pomfret drawings to Biggs.<sup>41</sup>



Fig. 9. Pomfret Castle's Great Room, photographed by A. E. Henson, 1934. *Country Life Archives*.

As for the house's internal arrangement, the restricted floor area of a terraced house required a careful layout. Its plan was arranged so as to allow for two large rooms, one facing the courtyard and the other the park; the main staircase was situated on the building's south side. A smaller service staircase was most likely positioned between the two large rooms,<sup>42</sup> giving access to the basement and second-floor rooms and the garrets above, an arrangement known as the 'standard' or 'Summerson' plan.<sup>43</sup>

The 'Great Room', as labelled on Biggs' drawing, was rectangular, with a slightly curved ceiling like a barrel vault adorned with decorative plaster interpretations of both rib and fan vaulting (Fig. 9). A pencil sketch on the same sheet as Biggs' drawing of the courtyard facade shows an early design for the ceiling ornamentation with semi-circles and clearly refers to the planned springing fan vaults and a circular central motif, possibly executed by Lady Pomfret herself. The ceiling contained a variety of decorative motifs, including a circular form between each bay, presumably used as a fitting from which chandeliers could be hung, consisting of twelve inward facing *fleurs-de-lis* surrounding a circular rosette. On the flat space of ceiling between each fan vault there were triangular shapes containing a quatrefoil flanked by daggers and a single trefoil.



Fig. 10. Gothic Cabinet commissioned by Lady Pomfret for Pomfret Castle, c.1757, 10ft. 1in. high, 7ft. 6in. wide. From *Catalogue of the Sale at Easton Neston*.

Adjacent to these were segmental plasterwork sections parallel to the walls, their shape created from the curve in the rib vaults beside them. These sections also contained quatrefoils, this time containing armorial shields, which were flanked by daggers of an unusual shape of half quatrefoils with extended tails on one point with a further unusual shape inside.

The motifs in the Great Room's ceiling show a playful interpretation of medieval forms, echoed in a piece of furniture designed for the house, the Gothic

Cabinet (Fig. 10), c.1757, kept at Easton Neston until 2005.<sup>44</sup> Duncan Simpson (1975) argues that Cabinets represented the fashion for Gothic 'extravagance of the mid century.'<sup>45</sup> Designs for Gothic-style furniture were available on the open market with the increase of Gothic pattern books, but also books dedicated specifically to furniture containing standardised stock designs;<sup>46</sup> Thomas Chippendale's *Gentleman and Cabinet Maker's Director*, first published in 1754, included many designs in the Gothic taste.<sup>47</sup>



Fig. 11. Pomfret Castle's Staircase, photographed by A. E. Henson, 1934. *Country Life Archives*.

Lady Pomfret commissioned the Cabinet from the cabinet-maker William Hallett, who had probably seen Chippendale's *Director*. Paint analysis undertaken by Sotheby's, before the Cabinet's auction in May 2005, revealed that its present colour scheme was original, though the colours were originally slightly darker and the gold paint now present was originally gold leaf.<sup>48</sup>

The Cabinet has two tower-turrets topped with striped, tapering pinnacles; the towers are pierced with elongated quatrefoils above tripartite, ogee-arched niches with hanging tracery. In the centre are two open tracery doors divided by a clustered column enclosed in an arch with spandrels containing more pierced quatrefoils and outlandish tadpole-shaped squiggles. On top sits a stepped cornice with a pierced, Gothic arch over a panel inset with lobes, flanked by crocketed

miniature spires. The Cabinet has been described as the 'whole antiquarian repertoire transformed into Disneyland'.<sup>49</sup> It is exaggeratedly playful in its decoration and, along with the plasterwork forms of the house's interiors, is highly illuminating in considering its patron's original attitude to the Gothic style as a novel modern interpretation of Gothic forms, divorced from their original setting, and employed in a new decorative context.

Similar distorted Gothic forms were found in the ante-room adjacent to the Great Room, of which only the ceiling is recorded in a photograph. In the middle of the ceiling sat an oval motif with a rose in the centre, surrounded by outwardly facing *fleur-de-lis*. Between each pendant was a flat triangular shape containing a sixfoil encased in a circle flanked by daggers.

The first-floor rear-facing room spanned the whole width of the building. Its flat plasterwork ceiling had a complicated tessellating pattern of shapes laid out in three rows running the room's length. The pattern is intricately geometrical and turns the shapes into an interlacing pattern, much like the late fifteenth-century ceiling of the choir at St George's Chapel, Windsor, where a complicated network containing many quatrefoils of different sizes and shapes forms a spider-web of stonework. In the Arlington Street room, the same effect is achieved, but through plasterwork on a flat surface. The patterning, paramount to the room's decorative effect, is undoubtedly a conscious reference to Windsor.

The hall with the main staircase ran the full height of the house, the walls covered in Gothic-style panelling of varied architectural forms (Fig. 11), including lines of tracery and bands of quatrefoils, and plasterwork fan vaulting where the staircase walls merge with the octagonal top-lit dome above. This decoration was echoed in the woodwork of the banisters, made up of continuous two-light cusped openings with quatrefoils above. Another striking visual reference to Windsor is made in the panelling of the upper section of the walls at second-storey

level, evidently directly copied from the Perpendicular tracery of the west front window at St George's Chapel (Fig. 7).

The ground floor layout is more of a mystery as less photographic evidence exists. It had a small entrance hall with rooms facing the courtyard and the park. The former room adjacent to the staircase had Gothic-style wainscot panelling and flat plasterwork made to look like blind tracery (Fig. 12), such as that found commonly in stonework throughout the interior of St George's Chapel, on both the barrel-vaulted ceiling and walls. The rear-facing room, presumably the Dining Room, had a notable ceiling, though it is hardly visible in the only surviving photograph. It is just possible to see a circular plasterwork motif in its centre, which appears to be based on the tracery of a rose window.

We have no photographic record of the basement and second floors; indeed the basement is only known to have existed from the evidence of space behind the railings on the Courtyard facade. The Countess's bedroom would no doubt have been on the second floor, with garrets above.

#### A NOVEL APPROACH TO THE GOTHIC STYLE

Pomfret Castle was pioneering in that it was one of the first instances of the modern – that is eighteenth-century – Gothic style used at a new site. It enjoyed the Gothic aesthetic without a semantic weighting either of a political or historical nature. In the first half of the eighteenth century, the Gothic style was used in domestic architecture for alterations or additions to existing structures, not for new ones; as Timothy Mowl observes, 'an existing building seems to have been a necessary launching platform for an 18th century neo-medieval building scheme.'<sup>50</sup> Medieval associations prompted its use as a way of asserting history, the modern Gothic style evocatively used to signify the medieval past. A notable example is William Kent's remodelling of Esher Place, Surrey, for Henry Pelham.<sup>51</sup> Lady Pomfret would have known William Kent's work through Queen Caroline and through having visited his remodelled house and gardens at Rousham 1733. At Esher new wings were added to a late fifteenth-century gatehouse that had originally been part of the Palace of the Bishops of



Fig. 12. Pomfret Castle's Ground-Floor Parlour.  
Photographed by A. E. Henson, 1934. *Country Life Archives*.

Windsor.<sup>52</sup> Kent added an embattled parapet, ogee windows to the first three storeys, and oversized quatrefoils to those of the fourth storey, all topped by hood mouldings.<sup>53</sup> Here, the modern Gothic style was employed as a reflection of the history of the gatehouse, in order to celebrate its antiquity, and used in a context that both explained and validated its use. Arguably it was also intended to align that antiquity with that of the Pelham family itself, to show its historical importance and, by extension, its contemporary authority.<sup>54</sup>

A similar example, though two decades later, of a house that used its medieval origins as validation of the use of the modern Gothic is that of the remodelling of the Hall and south facade of Lacock Abbey in Wiltshire from 1754 to 1756, executed by Sanderson Miller for John Ivory Talbot. Lacock was originally an Augustinian nunnery, adapted to a country house after the Dissolution. Talbot chose a modern Gothic style for his alterations to accord with that of the existing buildings, and as a device with which to proclaim his house's historical prominence. Moreover the new features employed made reference to medieval examples already present at Lacock.

Pomfret Castle's site, however, provided no such validation or opportunity, having no historical significance beyond that of a late seventeenth-century speculative building project by Lord Arlington.<sup>55</sup> Lady Pomfret thus chose the Gothic style for her house's decoration without the customary justifications. Her motivations therefore came down to a more personal taste and pleasure in the style's aesthetic to satisfy her self-proclaimed 'Gothick Imagination' (see Appendix 1).

It was a bold move to apply Gothic style decoration to a town house, and shows a very early example of the style's liberation from historical signification. This approach had much more in common with Gothic garden structures of the same period, such as those at Shotover and Stowe (Fig. 8), as well as Kent's 'eye-catcher' at Rousham, which

prompted more purely aesthetic responses from contemporary viewers; Lady Pomfret called the garden buildings at Stowe 'very pleasing and full of imagination.'<sup>56</sup> To the uninformed viewer, the Gothic repertoire was on display in garden structures, free from any explicit medieval tradition, since, as Brooks observes (2001), they 'had medieval tradition to imitate and evoke.'<sup>57</sup> These fanciful buildings arguably helped to lay foundations for the liberation of medieval architectural vocabulary from the need to be used at a site of historical significance, setting the scene for new approaches to the Gothic in domestic architecture and showed the growing acceptability of applying Gothic features to a new structure.

Interestingly, the only contemporary record of Pomfret Castle (Fig. 1) depicts it in much the same way as Gothic garden structures were portrayed. This suggests a parallel between the way these structures and Pomfret Castle were viewed in the contemporary eye, as a visual spectacle. Gothic garden structures were part of a staged experience of a landscaped garden or park; Pomfret Castle also had a staged element, given its prominent location and unusual nature in being London's only eighteenth century Gothic-style town house in an age where urban domestic architecture was dominated by Palladianism.

#### POMFRET CASTLE VERSUS STRAWBERRY HILL

The differences in approach taken at Pomfret Castle and the near-contemporary Strawberry Hill offer an interesting and revealing comparison. Lady Pomfret's relationship with the eighteenth century's most famous 'Gothicist', Horace Walpole, is difficult to determine, but appears to have been strained. Walpole made frequent, and often derogatory, reference to Lady Pomfret in his correspondence, though this stops abruptly around the time of her

benefaction of the Arundel marbles in 1755 until her death in 1762. Living opposite at No. 6, Walpole could not have helped but witness Pomfret Castle's construction, despite making no recorded mention of it in his letters during its construction; there is only one brief recorded mention of the building in 1779 in Walpole's *Anecdotes*.<sup>58</sup>

Walpole's Strawberry Hill at Twickenham, started in 1747 and continued well into the 1760s, was another 'new' Gothic house, nearby, but not in the metropolis.<sup>59</sup> Walpole was creating what he called his 'little Gothic castle',<sup>60</sup> which he built with a varied skyline of Gothic external features and a full set of Gothic-style interiors filled with references to both his immediate family and distant ancestors.<sup>61</sup> As at Pomfret Castle, medieval examples were translated at Strawberry Hill into decorative schemes that divorced them from their origins. As we have seen, this was a novel attitude to the use of Gothic ornamentation, modern Gothic more usually being an adjunct to an existing medieval framework.

However, the effect created by the 'translated' decorative schemes at Strawberry Hill differed from that at Pomfret Castle. We can compare, for example, Pomfret Castle's staircase panelling (Fig. 11), inspired by the west window of St George's Chapel, Windsor, and Walpole's staircase wallpaper, printed in perspective and based on the fretwork from the tomb of Prince Arthur in Worcester Cathedral.<sup>62</sup> Both walls were covered with Gothic-style patterning referring to a medieval example, applied in a modern medium and context. But at Pomfret the use of the translated medieval example was for a primarily decorative purpose. Walpole's staircase wallpaper, however, was part of a romanticised Gothic environment, displaying ancient suits of armour among other antiquities, with carved antelopes on the banisters holding the Orford coats of arms, of which Walpole was the fourth Earl; the whole ensemble was lit only by stained glass windows and a single lantern for artificial light in order to achieve what he referred to as the medieval feeling of

'gloomth'.<sup>63</sup> Together all the elements offered a sort of fictional Gothic setting, creating a new 'old' castle, the modern Gothic style acting as its stage set. The effect at Pomfret Castle did not have the same level of theatricality. It had no 'historical' pretences or contrived gloomy lighting, as at Strawberry Hill. Pomfret Castle employed Gothic decoration that was wholly 'new' in conception, as an ornamental cladding to an otherwise conventional London town house.

Pomfret Castle's decorative scheme was ingenious and original and demonstrated a remarkably free attitude to the use of Gothic features. The Gothic repertoire was manipulated to suit the space-restricted requirements of a town-house setting and turned medieval examples into a suitable system of patterning and ornamental features. Because of the confined area, the decorative Gothic effect was achieved by being predominantly placed on the flat surfaces of ceilings and walls; the patterning was often intricately geometrical, for example in the ceiling of the first floor rear-facing room. While examples like that of the staircase panelling stayed largely faithful to their medieval precedent, other examples abstracted and translated Gothic forms into modern creations, as can be seen in the Great Room ceiling (Fig. 9).

This practice can be seen in a more acute manner in Lady Pomfret's Gothic Cabinet (Fig. 10) with its stretched pierced quatrefoils and the pierced shape between the upper parts of the pointed tracery doors that takes the form of a quatrefoil with the bottom foil turned into an upside-down ogee arch, with little crosses facing inwards at each point. The Cabinet indicates the spirit in which the house was conceived, as a light-hearted celebration of Gothic and castle-style decoration, creative in its modern interpretation. It also reveals an extension of architectural playfulness into furniture, where, free from the practical rules of architecture, the fantasy could truly be played out. For the house, on the other hand, the urban setting posed limitation on its fantastical capacity. In terms

of plan and construction Pomfret Castle was comparable to other town houses of its size. It followed contemporary standards in floor arrangement and the symmetry of the facade. The castle features, such as the battlements and turrets, were added to the constructional frame of the building, laid on top of the town house skeleton as flesh that gave the house its character. Yet it reconciled the town-house identity with this unique character, going against the accepted rules and conventions to produce an outcome that was unique. Terrance Davis (1974) refers to Pomfret Castle as 'Lady Pomfret's glorified toy fort'.<sup>64</sup> It was a town house in as far as it had to be, but its character sidestepped convention to create a 'toy-fort', that would certainly have satisfied the Countess's 'Gothick Imagination'.

But why build such an unusual house? It would appear there is more to it than Pomfret Castle's being simply reflective of its patron's individual taste. As this article has shown, Pomfret Castle made frequent stylistic quotations from St George's Chapel at Windsor. These overt references betray a wish for open display of Lady Pomfret's links to Windsor, and therefore her status as a prominent figure at court. Furthermore the work carried out at Pomfret Castle was expensive. Plasterwork, especially that as delicate as seen in the staircase or Drawing Room ceiling, was costly and complicated; it took a long time to build up from timber frames, then reinforce with plaster before the detail was applied. All this was an open display, whether conscious or unconscious, of significant wealth.<sup>65</sup>

But it was more than that. From the contextual evidence, such as her donation of the Arundel Marbles and the portrait of herself and Lord Pomfret to the Ashmolean as well as other anecdotal evidence offered by Walpole, it is possible to infer that Lady Pomfret wished to create something unusual, original and 'against the rules'. Why else build a Gothic castle in a city full of terraced Palladian style houses? Davis (1974) observes that mid eighteenth-century

Gothic buildings demonstrated freedom from the 'bondage of the Orders and the disciplinarian hand of Palladianism'.<sup>66</sup> Though, generally speaking, this observation touches on the factor of liberation embodied in the Gothic style at this time, Lady Pomfret's creation was specifically a reaction to the contemporary town-house domination of Palladianism; its site in fashionable Arlington Street provided the perfect opportunity for such a statement. Lady Pomfret was pioneering in bringing the architectural Gothic taste to inner London, even if her example does not seem to have been influential.

One cannot help but notice a hint of competition between fellow 'Gothicists' Lady Pomfret and Walpole: Lady Pomfret calling Strawberry Hill 'a Small House of Mr Horace Walpole which he has fitted up with Gothick Ornaments'<sup>67</sup> and Walpole making a choice to ignore Pomfret Castle's construction. Was Walpole insecure about Lady Pomfret's displaying her Gothic creation for all to see and thus challenging his originality? Or perhaps Walpole was right, that Lady Pomfret was indeed vacuous with a self-centred, attention-seeking desire for fame. Perhaps her inherited fortune was, as Walpole damningly declaimed in 1753, merely a 'fund for follies!'<sup>68</sup> Given Pomfret Castle's similarities to contemporary Gothic garden structures, Walpole's comment was a foresight into the progeny inspired by Lady Pomfret's astonishing creation.

## APPENDIX

Extract from a letter written by Lady Pomfret from Windsor Castle to Sir Roger Newdigate, July 17, 1755

'I think with you that the Gothick will suit well with the Grotesque of Raphael; for both are true, & Great is always uniform. Long may you enjoy the pleasure of studying and preaching it, in the world (for the sake of your friends) before you find the Benefit of it in the other. & if wou'd not be too impertinent, I wou'd beg a little assistance from you, in a very trifle, I should be obliged to Build in Bedfordshire, where I have a Farm of above forty pounds a year, that t'is proper I shou'd keep in my own Hands, & on This, wou'd I build a small Farm-House, & a couple of Rooms, that I might inhabit myself upon occasion; if amongst your loose sketches, you have any thing, quite normal, that you think wou'd suit my Gothick Imagination, twou'd be Charity to bestow on me: I add a new reason to the many I already have; to be

Sir,

Your most Obliged & most obedient Humble Servant,  
HPomfret'

## NOTES

- 1 J. Ralph, *A New Critical Review of the Publick Buildings, Statues and Ornaments, in and about London and Westminster* (2nd ed., London, 1736) p. 24.
- 2 The sites were replaced with a block of mansion flats designed by Michael Rosenaur, built 1934–1936: N. Pevsner and S. Bradley, *The Buildings of England: London: 6, Westminster*. (New Haven & London, 2003), p. 605.
- 3 A set of the Country Life photographs are kept in the National Monuments Record and a set of the Bedford Lemere photographs at the City of Westminster Archive Centre; three photographs from the latter are also kept in the NMR.
- 4 The Biggs drawings are held in the Soane Museum.
- 5 The watercolours are held in the City of Westminster Archive Centre.
- 6 Horace Walpole to Horace Mann, 21 July, 1753, in W.S. Lewis (ed), *The Yale Edition of Horace Walpole's Correspondence*. (New Haven & London), XX, p. 390.
- 7 S. Houfe, 'Diaries of the Countess of Pomfret II: Antiquarian Inclinations', *Country Life*, 31 March, 1977, p. 801.
- 8 Horace Walpole to Horace Mann, 21 July, 1753, *Walpole's Correspondence*, XX, pp. 389–390.
- 9 W. Thompson, *Gratitude: A poem, on the Countess of Pomfret's Benefaction to the University of Oxford*. (Oxford, 1756).
- 10 Horace Walpole to Horace Mann, 24 July, 1756, *Walpole's Correspondence*, XX, p. 579.
- 11 C. Harrison, C. Casley & J. Whiteley, *The Ashmolean Museum: Complete Illustrated Catalogue of Paintings* (Oxford, 2004).
- 12 Her library at Easton Neston included Dugdale's *St Pauls* and the two volumes of Dart's *Antiquities of Westminster Abbey*: 'An account of my books at Easton, 1736', Lady Pomfret's Diaries, Leicester County Record Office (henceforth LCRO), Finch DG7/D.4 (ii).
- 13 Lady Mary Wortley Montagu to Lady Pomfret, 12 July 1744, in R. Halsband (ed.), *The Complete Letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu* (Oxford, 1966) II, p. 337.
- 14 Lady Pomfret's Diaries, 9 July 1738, LCRO, Finch DG7/D.1/ vol. I; Houfe, 'Diaries', II, p. 729.
- 15 Lady Pomfret's Diaries, 21 May 1755, LCRO, Finch DG7/D.1/ vol. IV.
- 16 Lady Pomfret to Sir Roger Newdigate, 6 August 1756, Warwickshire County Record Office, Warwick (WCRO), CR 136/B/2146–2292. Letters written by Lady Pomfret to Sir Roger and Lady Sophia Newdigate.
- 17 R. Stewart, *The Town House in Georgian London* (New Haven & London 2009), pp. 38–39, quotation on p. 39.
- 18 Lady Pomfret also took a year's lease on 18 December 1754 on a house in nearby Stafford Street (no longer in existence): Lady Pomfret's Diaries, 18 December, 1754, LCRO, Finch DG7/D.1/ vol. IV.
- 19 Lady Pomfret's Diaries, 18 February 1757, LCRO, Finch DG7/D.1/ vol. IV.
- 20 Lady Pomfret to Lady Sophia Newdigate, 19 December 1757, WCRO, CR 136/B/2146–2292.
- 21 LCRO, Finch DG7/D.1/ vol. IV.
- 22 H. Phillips, *Mid-Georgian London: a Topographical and Social Survey of Central and Western London about 1750*. (London, 1964), p. 287. Later residents include William 'Single-speech' Hamilton (1766–1787) and Sir John Hart (1788–99).

- 23 M. McCarthy, *The Origins of the Gothic Revival* (New Haven & London 1987), p. 141; C. Brooks, *The Gothic Revival* (London, 1999) p. 78; Houfe, 'Diaries', II, 800.
- 24 Lady Pomfret to Sir Roger Newdigate, 27 December 1757, WCRO, CR 136/B/2146-2292.
- 25 T. Davis, *The Gothick Taste* (Newton Abbot, London and Vancouver 1974), p. 63; H. Hobhouse, *Lost London* (New York 1971); N. Thompson, '22 Arlington Street in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century', in D. Watkin (ed.), *A House in Town: 22 Arlington Street, its Owners and Builders* (London 1994), p. 116.
- 26 *Anecdotes of Painting in England* [1760-1795], eds. W.F. Hilles & P.B. Daglian (New Haven & London, 1937), V, p. 161.
- 27 This drawing is of an unidentified house elevation in ink and wash, held at the RIBA. McCarthy, *Origins*, p. 141.
- 28 Soane Museum 43/5/5, 8, and 9, kept in folder entitled 'Miscellaneous drawings of Richard Biggs: old Houses in the Country, collection of William Chambers'; J. Harris, 'Lady Pomfret's House: the Case for Mr Biggs', *Georgian Group Journal* 1991, pp. 45-49.
- 29 Harris, *Lady Pomfret's House*, pp. 48-49.
- 30 Lady Pomfret's Diary, quoted in Houfe, 'Diaries', II, 801.
- 31 H.M. Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects 1600-1840*. (New Haven and London 2008) p. 123; H.M. Colvin (ed.) *History of the King's Works* V (London 1976), p. 477.
- 32 Lady Pomfret, record in diary 24, April, 1756, LRCO: Finch: DG7 / D.1. / Vol. IV.
- 33 Colvin, *Dictionary*, p. 603.
- 34 Arlington Street, *The Builder*, (10 November, 1886).
- 35 B. Jones, *Follies and Grottoes*. (London 1974), p. 136.
- 36 G. Bickham, *The Beauties of Stow: or, a Description of the most Noble House, Gardens, and Magnificent Buildings therein, of the Right Hon. Earl Temple: with thirty plates* (London 1756), pp. 30-31.
- 37 Diary of Lady Pomfret, 6 October 1742, LCRO, DG7/D.1./vol. I.
- 38 Walpole, to the Rev William Cole, Jan 3, 1779, *Walpole's Correspondence*, II, p. 135.
- 39 McCarthy, *Origins*, p. 140.
- 40 N. Burton, & P. Guillery, *Behind the Facade: London House Plans, 1660-1840* (Reading 2006), p. 16.
- 41 Harris, *Lady Pomfret's House*, p. 45; Soane Museum, 43/5/6 and 7.
- 42 Burton & Guillery, *Behind the Facade*, p. 12.
- 43 J. Summerson, *Georgian London*. (London 1998); Burton & Guillery, *Behind the Facade*, p. 16.
- 44 The Cabinet was kept at Easton Neston until its sale in 2005 to a foreign buyer for £108,000. On 6 June 2006 the Culture Minister announced a temporary export ban on the object, which appears to have been unsuccessful. *Sale catalogue for the Auction at Easton Neston, Northamptonshire*: (London: Sotheby's 17-19 May 2005), pp. 158-165; Archive of media releases by the UK Government Department for Culture, Media and Sport, URL: [http://www.culture.gov.uk/reference\\_library/media\\_releases/2495.aspx](http://www.culture.gov.uk/reference_library/media_releases/2495.aspx).
- 45 D. Simpson, *Gothick: 1720-1790* (exh cat., Brighton: Royal Pavilion 1975), p. 16.
- 46 Simpson, *Gothick*, p. 16.
- 47 T. Chippendale, *The Gentleman and Cabinet Maker's Director* (1754).
- 48 *Sale at Easton Neston*, p. 164.
- 49 Houfe, 'Diaries', II, p. 802.
- 50 T. Mowl, *Early Medievalism: 'To have built in heaven high towers' - the Castle as a theme in English architecture before the Gothic Revival* (Paper presented at the Gothick Symposium at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 1983).
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- 54 Brooks, *Gothic Revival*, p. 72.
- 55 Pevsner & Bradley, *Westminster*, p. 602.
- 56 Brooks, *Gothic Revival*. p. 54.
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- 58 See endnote 26.
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- 60 Horace Walpole to Horace Mann, *Walpole's Correspondence*, X, 127.
- 61 Brooks, *Gothic Revival*, pp. 86-87.
- 62 A. Chalcraft, *Strawberry Hill: Horace Walpole's Gothic Castle* (London, 2007), p. 36.
- 63 Chalcraft, *Strawberry Hill*, p. 39.
- 64 Davis, *Gothick Taste*, p. 63.
- 65 J. Ayres, *Building the Georgian City* (New Haven & London 1998), p. 204.
- 66 Davis, *Gothick Taste*, p. 14.
- 67 Houfe, 'Diaries', II, 48, n.2.
- 68 Horace Walpole to Horace Mann, 21 July, 1753, *Walpole's Correspondence* XX, p. 389.