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# THE LONDON TOWN HOUSE OF LADY ISABELLA FINCH

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*Now the home of the Clermont Club, one of London's most exclusive casinos, No. 44 Berkeley Square is the only surviving town house designed by William Kent. Previous studies of the building have tended to focus on the spatial trickery of its interior, especially the magnificent top-lit staircase, which powerfully demonstrates Kent's love of theatrical effect. This study, by contrast, considers the house's conception, construction, function and meaning from the viewpoint of its patron, Lady Isabella Finch, an unmarried courtier who was first Lady of the Bedchamber to Princess Amelia and exerted considerable social and political influence in eighteenth-century London.*

Described by Nikolaus Pevsner as 'the finest terrace house in London', 44 Berkeley Square was built between 1742 and 1745 for Lady Isabella Finch (Fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> The house is located on the west side of Berkeley Square, a long rectangular open space to the north of Piccadilly, which became one of eighteenth-century London's most sought-after addresses after it was laid out for speculative building in the 1730s and 40s. Horace Walpole, a frequent guest to Lady Isabella's new home, eloquently praised the building's interior (Fig. 2) when he wrote, 'The stair-case at Lady Isabella Finch's in Berkeley Square is as beautiful a piece of scenery and considering the space, of art, as can be imagined.'<sup>2</sup> His praise set the tone for future commentary which has persistently exalted Kent's ingenious manipulation of constricted space.



Fig. 1. Exterior of 44 Berkeley Square. (Author)



Fig. 2. Perspective of the staircase at 44 Berkeley Square by Robert Dennis Chantrell, 1813, Pen and ink, watercolour. (By Courtesy of the Trustees of Sir John Soane's Museum, London)

Walpole was less complimentary about Lady Isabella herself, and took particular delight in mocking her appearance. On encountering her at a masquerade at Ranelagh Gardens, he described her as 'dressed like a nun [who] for coolness had cut off the nose of her mask' and his *Schadenfreude* is palpable in describing, in 1747, 'an excellent civil war in the house of Finch' which arose when she refused to present one of her brother's illegitimate daughters

at court.<sup>3</sup> Scholars, including John Cornforth and Michael Wilson, have perhaps taken such comments too literally, inferring by extension that the theatricality of Lady Isabella's town house was at odds with her supposedly sombre and prudish personality. Cornforth described the house as 'one of the puzzles' of London architecture 'because no one has ever been able to explain how it came to be built by an unmarried lady-in-waiting [...] a woman of apparently limited means and unremarkable looks in her mid-forties',<sup>4</sup> and Wilson even questioned whether she altogether appreciated her house on account of her 'somewhat staid disposition'.<sup>5</sup> Recent commentators have been more circumspect in accepting Walpole's testimony: David Watkin acknowledges that Lady Isabella 'had considerable intellectual and social skills' and Timothy Mowl suggests that William Kent found Lady Isabella 'a kindred spirit' on the basis that he made a special mention of her in his will.<sup>6</sup> Very little sustained research has been undertaken, however, into Lady Isabella's background and motivation for building such an impressive house, or into her influence over its layout and decoration. In this article, Lady Isabella's previously unpublished correspondence and personal manuscripts are carefully examined, revealing that she was involved with every stage of the building's design and construction and that the house came to represent a key constituent of her self-image. Three collections of letters have proved particularly valuable in carrying out this research. Firstly, Lady Isabella's correspondence with her half-niece (but contemporary in age) Dorothy Boyle, Lady Burlington, sheds light on her early years as a courtier and her personal connection with Kent through the Burlington family. Secondly, her prolific correspondence with her brother-in-law, Thomas Watson-Wentworth (Lord Malton and from 1746, first Marquess of Rockingham) provides insight into her career and personal circumstances whilst the house was under construction. Finally, her later correspondence with the eminent Whig statesman

and twice Prime Minister, Thomas Pelham-Holles, first Duke of Newcastle reveals the house's importance in fashioning its patron's identity during the quarter century of her occupancy.

#### LADY ISABELLA FINCH

Cecilia Isabella Finch (1700–1771), known as Lady Isabella or Lady Bell, came from an aristocratic and well-connected family; she was the fourth daughter and one of the twelve surviving children of Daniel Finch, the second Earl of Nottingham and seventh Earl of Winchilsea, and his second wife, Anne Hatton. Nottingham served as Secretary of State under Queen Anne, and on King George I's accession in 1714 he was appointed Lord President of the Council.<sup>7</sup> In this capacity, he came into close contact with the Prince and Princess of Wales (the

future George II and Queen Caroline). Lady Isabella greatly admired her father, who represented an important role model to her throughout her life. Writing to Newcastle in July 1753, she referred to 'that Honor and Spirit which I flatter myself I have inherited from the sage Earl of Nottingham' and she selected the motto 'virtus parentum' as her armorial bookplate (Fig. 3).<sup>8</sup> The Finch family home was the grand country estate of Burley-on-the-Hill, Rutland, which was built between 1694 and 1702 and appears to have been designed by Nottingham himself.<sup>9</sup> The staircase hall is a major feature of Burley's interior, its walls decorated with illusionistic frescos, painted around 1700 by Gerrard Lanscroom, depicting the history of Perseus and Andromeda and it originally led to a magnificent saloon hung with rich mythological tapestries.<sup>10</sup> This leads us to speculate that the spatial and decorative emphasis placed on Burley's staircase and saloon inspired Lady Isabella to translate these features to her own town house at 44 Berkeley Square where, as will be seen, the scale and grandeur of the stairwell and first-floor saloon dictate its unusual layout.

The female members of the Finch family appear to have been exceptionally well-educated.<sup>11</sup> Lady Isabella's celebrated great-aunt was the philosopher Anne Conway (née Finch), whose writings on Platonic metaphysics in the 1670s anticipated the work of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, the prominent German philosopher and tutor to Princess Caroline.<sup>12</sup> Nottingham also took pains to ensure that his daughters were well provided for financially; on his death in 1730, he bequeathed £5000 to each of his three unmarried daughters to be charged on his estate, thereby granting them a degree of independence.<sup>13</sup> Four of Lady Isabella's brothers and her brother-in-law, Lord Rockingham, were included among the trustees of the estate, but they failed to honour the legacy, prompting Lady Isabella, her mother and one of her sisters to mount a legal challenge in April 1736.<sup>14</sup> Although the details of the outcome have not survived, Lady Isabella appears to



Fig. 3. Armorial bookplate of Lady Isabella Finch, bearing her full name, Cecilia Isabella Finch.



Fig. 4. The Finch family by Charles Philips, c.1732, oil on canvas, Lady Isabella is depicted on the far right of the family group. (Yale Center for British Art)

have been successful in claiming her inheritance: her correspondence with Rockingham repeatedly refers to his financial obligation towards her in his role as her trustee. In a later letter, written on 18 October 1747, she betrayed her persisting resentment towards her brothers, claiming that her father, ‘that great and good man with prudence and foresight so intailed [*sic*] and tied up [his estate] that no one of his sons should be able to do as they pleased with any part of it much less defraud his daughters whom he left absolute mistresses of their fortunes thereby showing how much a better opinion he had of them than of

his sons.’<sup>15</sup> Having had to fight for her inheritance, the construction of her own magnificent town house can perhaps be interpreted as a defiant statement of her justly claimed personal fortune.

A surviving painting of the Finch family by Charles Philips, c.1731–32, represents the family posing before an elaborately staged architectural backdrop (Fig. 4). Lady Isabella is represented on the far right of the painting, her gaze directed confidently towards the viewer; her brother-in-law and correspondent, Rockingham, turns towards her whilst gesturing towards his wife and children



Fig. 5. Detail of Figure 4 showing Lady Isabella and her brother-in-law, Lord Malton (later Lord Rockingham) with whom she corresponded on a regular basis.

(Fig. 5).<sup>16</sup> The exact meaning of this complex conversation piece has been lost, but there is a sense of progression from the noble antique ruin in shadow on the left to the pristine pedimented structure bathed in light on the right, emphasising the family's importance as landowners and architectural patrons who looked to the authority of the classical past.<sup>17</sup> When the picture was painted, Rockingham, who is thought to have commissioned the work, was engaged in plans to extend his own palatial property, Wentworth Woodhouse in South Yorkshire.<sup>18</sup> On the far left of the composition, one of Lady Isabella's

six sisters, Henrietta Finch, gestures proprietorially towards a portrait bust on a modelling stand. Malcolm Baker has recently argued that Henrietta was one of the first women of rank to practise as a sculptor, leading us to speculate that the Finch daughters all benefited from an artistic education.<sup>19</sup> Lady Isabella's enthusiasm for architecture must also have been fuelled by her friendship with Richard Boyle, third Earl of Burlington and the great exponent of English Palladianism, who married her half-niece, Dorothy Savile, in 1721. When Burlington resigned from the privy council in 1733, Lady Isabella

lamented, 'nothing since I came to court has I own vexed me half so much as this affair for I shall upon my own account be very sorry if I lose my only male friend there'.<sup>20</sup>

Lady Isabella's introduction into the royal household is likely to have been facilitated by Lady Burlington, who served as a lady of the bedchamber to Queen Caroline between 1727 and 1737. The exact date of Lady Isabella's appointment is unrecorded but in a letter to Newcastle, dated 19 February 1761, she claimed to have been 'above 30 years at court' so it seems reasonable to infer that she entered the royal household around 1730.<sup>21</sup> Her letters to Lady Burlington, dating from the 1730s, indicate that she was initially employed to wait on the three eldest princesses, Anne (the Princess Royal), Amelia and Caroline. She evidently enjoyed her new role since she wrote: 'I'm mighty happy in my new situation of life and have nothing to wish but that my Mistresses may like my service as well as I do their place.'<sup>22</sup> The position also enabled her to indulge her love of stag hunting; in the same letter she described 'a noble chase near 50 miles' in the company of the Princess Royal who rode 'so well that tis a pleasure to follow her'.<sup>23</sup> Lady Isabella was to lose one of her royal mistresses in 1734 when the Princess Royal married William IV of Orange-Nassau, but even greater disruption was caused by the death of Queen Caroline in November 1737. The following month, perhaps fearing for her position as a courtier, Lady Isabella applied for the post of Housekeeper of Windsor Castle. Hoping to enlist the support of Rockingham, she wrote, 'I think I have merited some mark of favour for my long constant attendance [on the Princesses] and great expenses [...] and that there are few women would hunt at the rate I have done, which P. Amelia herself has often said'.<sup>24</sup> Her ambition to gain the position of housekeeper also suggests a desire to be involved with the running and management of a royal residence, presaging the relationship she was later to have with her own house, which she referred to as her 'castle'.<sup>25</sup>

George II was ultimately to deny this application but Lady Isabella continued to serve as a lady of the bedchamber in the household of Princess Amelia who, following the death of her mother, became the highest-ranking woman at court.<sup>26</sup>

Lady Isabella therefore entered the royal household several years prior to Queen Caroline's death and would have been included in the Queen's elite circle of characterful female courtiers. During this period, she would also have witnessed the construction of the magnificent new library at St James's Palace by William Kent, completed just before Queen Caroline's death in 1737. The library was conceived not only as a repository for books but also as a setting for intimate intellectual gatherings; it therefore provided a powerful example of how architectural space could express the status of an enlightened female patron.<sup>27</sup> For Kent, Queen Caroline was the embodiment of Minerva, the Goddess of Wisdom and his inclusion of Minerva in the ceiling painting of the Privy Chamber at Kensington Palace may well have been intended as an early tribute to her.<sup>28</sup> As a frequent visitor to the Burlington household, Lady Isabella also came to enjoy a close relationship with Kent, who cohabited with the Burlingtons for almost thirty years and was affectionately referred to as the 'Signor' by both Lady Burlington and Lady Isabella.<sup>29</sup>

In 1732 Kent constructed a stone grotto in the grounds of Richmond Palace, known as the Hermitage, which appears to have held a particular significance for Lady Isabella. Conceived as a miniature pantheon to the nation's great minds, its interior was furnished with bookcases and adorned with five portrait busts of celebrated scientists and theologians, carved by Giovanni Battista Guelfi. As will be seen, the fired-clay models for the sculptures were acquired by Kent, who later bequeathed four of them, 'Newton, Clark, Lock and Woolaston', to Lady Isabella, thus alluding to her interest in philosophical debate and their mutual admiration for Queen Caroline.<sup>30</sup>

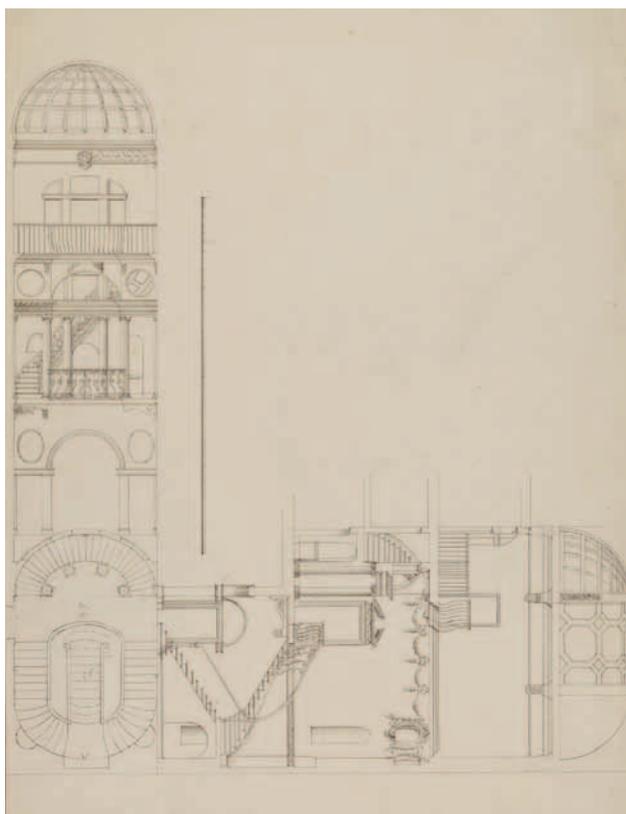


Fig. 6. Section drawing of the staircase, 44 Berkeley Square, Stephen Wright, c.1742–45. (*RIBA Collections*)

Whilst prescriptive sources dating from the eighteenth century sought to promote an ideal of submissive femininity, Lady Isabella's correspondence reveals her to have been independent, opinionated and physically active. As already established, she enjoyed a reputation as a skilled horse-rider, which is further borne out in her correspondence with Newcastle. In a letter dated 7 September 1738, she recounted the events of a day's hunting with Princess Amelia, riding 'over bogs, ruts, rough and smooth ground, a variety of country not to be avoided in a long chase'.<sup>31</sup> In the same letter, she playfully alluded to the envy of Newcastle's 'Bay nag who can't bear to see my horse before his in ye field',

thus betraying her own competitive spirit.<sup>32</sup> During the thirty years she corresponded with Newcastle, she frequently offered her opinions on political matters with outspoken frankness: 'As your Grace has often been deceived in your favourites, I don't wonder you are grown suspicious of every body [...] and give me leave to say you in some measure deserve it by Trusting to such a wretch...'.<sup>33</sup> She was also an authoritative figure within her own family: her letters to Rockingham regularly offer assertive financial advice. On 10 December 1745, she wrote, 'Stock bore so low a price that indeed I advised Buck to stay a few days before he parted with yours [...] if the rebels meet (as I hope they will) with a smash, all stocks

Fig. 7. 44 Berkeley Square, lower section of staircase. (*Country Life Picture Library*)



will rise again faster than they fell and you'll receive more money by this Delay.<sup>34</sup> Beyond the elite world of the royal court, Lady Isabella fashioned herself as the defandant of talented female writers, acting as the patron of the novelist Charlotte Lennox and the philosophical writer Catherine Cockburn, who defended the writings of both Locke and Clarke.<sup>35</sup>

Lady Isabella's position as a courtier brought her an annual income of £400, contributing to her independence and facilitating her role as a hostess

to members of Princess Amelia's inner circle.<sup>36</sup> Her royal entertainments frequently took place after a day's hunting, as she described to Rockingham in June 1743, 'We had a most prodigious chase yesterday which did not hinder the company's supping at my lodging where after they had indeed all eaten like sportsmen and sportswomen, we sat up till near 3 o'clock at whist.'<sup>37</sup> When she wrote this letter, the construction of her own town house in Berkeley Square was already under way, and from



Fig. 8. 44 Berkeley Square, upper section of staircase. (*Country Life Picture Library*)

1745 until her death in 1771 the house was to provide a sumptuous setting for numerous select gatherings, consolidating her reputation as one of the great society hostesses of her time.

**‘YE ADMIRATION OF ALL WHO SEE IT’**

The construction of No. 44 Berkeley Square began in September 1742 when Lady Isabella was 42 years

old. Her impatience for the project to commence is evident in a letter she wrote to Rockingham on the first of that month: ‘I’m going again today about my house – the articles are not yet signed and I grudge every hour yet lost of this fine weather for building.’<sup>38</sup> The various bills contained in the building accounts are each individually inscribed with the words, ‘Received from the Rt Honble the Lady Isabella Finch from the Hands of Wm Kent Esqr’ followed by the signature of the craftsman

being remunerated, proving that both Lady Isabella and Kent were involved with every stage of the building's construction.<sup>39</sup> However, Kent's 'growing infirmities', eventually leading to his death in 1748, are likely to have resulted in Stephen Wright playing an important role as the Clerk of Works and draftsman for the project.<sup>40</sup> Lady Isabella clearly praised Kent (rather than Wright) for the house's innovative design: in a letter to Lady Burlington dated 28 August 1744, she expressed her concern that 'ye stair-case be completely adorned and beautified according to ye Signor's Plan without regard to expense'.<sup>41</sup> This indicates that Lady Isabella kept a vigilant eye on the craftsmen during the building's construction to ensure that their work was carried out 'so elegantly as ye Design deserves'.<sup>42</sup>

Historians have questioned how Lady Isabella was able to afford such an ambitious house, costing in the region of £7000, since her annual pension of £400 would not have been sufficient to raise such a sum.<sup>43</sup> As already established, however, she was able to draw on the Trust set up by her father, meaning that she made considerable demands on Rockingham, as her trustee, to supply the required funds. In June 1743 she wrote: 'I hope I shan't want near £1500 for my building this summer; as soon as I know when I shall have occasion for any more I will give you notice.'<sup>44</sup> She clearly felt compelled to justify the expense of the project, writing in May 1743 that 'building has not undone me and I hope when I tell you so you'll blush to think how often you have pleaded how expensive it is, for mine in size bears no proportion to your Lordship's magnificent fabric.'<sup>45</sup>

The facade of 44 Berkeley Square is relatively restrained, its ground floor accented by quoining at the outer angles and prominent vousoired blocks around the arched entrance (Fig. 1). The central placement of the front door was unusual for terraced houses of this period, although it was an ideal implicitly promoted by neo-Palladianism, and endows the facade with a certain nobility.<sup>46</sup>

The interior, however, is truly exceptional, its arrangement dictated by the dimensions of the dramatic staircase which rises the full height of the building and spans almost its entire width, occupying a space approximately 27 × 16 feet, enclosed by semi-circular walls. Wright's drawing of the stairwell in section reveals the spatial complexity of the design, which achieves harmony through the subtle interplay of semi-circular forms (Fig. 6). A single flight ascends from the ground floor to a half landing where it diverges into two branches which curve inwards to meet at the main landing. Here, a concave screen of Ionic columns shields a second, elliptical staircase, which curves steeply up to a cantilevered balcony on the second floor (Figs. 7 & 8). The composition is crowned by a three-part ceiling comprising a rectangular vault flanked by half domed apses; one coffered, the other glazed (Fig. 9). The walls of the stairwell are richly decorated with oval niches linked by gilded plaster garlands on the upper walls, and an intricately plastered frieze enriched with shells and foliage below.

Lady Isabella took particular delight in the novelty of the house's layout, writing in December 1748 that 'My House begins Now to Shew out to ye Admiration of all who see it who could not comprehend ye plan till ye stair case was up. Now they begin to find out ye joke.'<sup>47</sup> Certainly the ingenious manipulation of space suggests a playful conspiracy between the patron and an architect who sought to confound the visitor's expectations. The spatial trickery continues in the Saloon, its lofty dimensions achieved by sacrificing the second floor at the front of the house (meaning that the attic windows are dummies), thereby giving the room a deeply coved ceiling, reminiscent of Queen Caroline's Library at St. James' Palace. Measuring 23 × 30 feet, the Saloon is illuminated by the three elegant windows of the piano nobile which overlook the square (Fig. 10). Ornate chimneypieces of white and yellow marble mirror one another at opposite ends of the room, and a richly carved



Fig. 9. 44 Berkeley Square, ceiling of stairwell. (*Author*)



Fig. 10. Great saloon of 44 Berkeley Square. (*Country Life Picture Library*)



Fig. 11. Detail of fireplace in the Great Salon, 44 Berkeley Square, carved by Joseph Pickford. (Author)

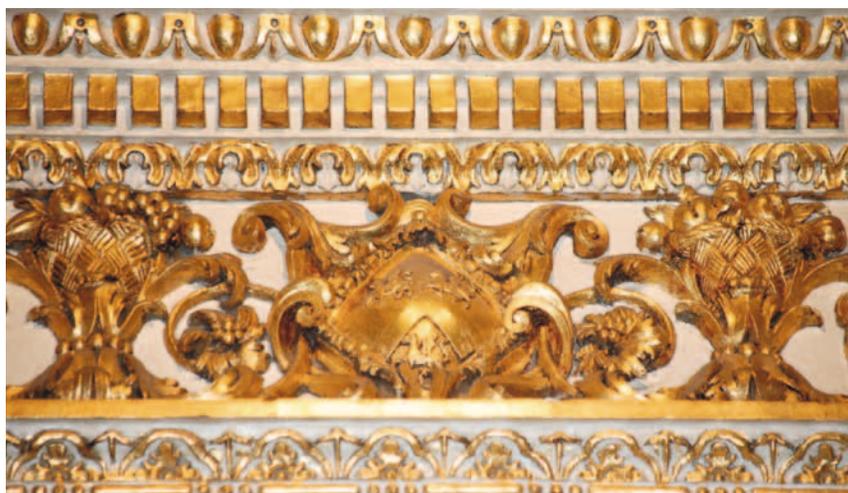


Fig. 12. Detail of the frieze in the Great Salon, 44 Berkeley Square, showing the Finch coat of arms in the centre. (Author)

and gilded frieze runs around the four walls, its elaborate decoration including the Finch family coat of arms (Figs. 11 & 12).<sup>48</sup> Most impressive of all is the sumptuous ceiling, divided into a bold pattern of octagonal and hexagonal coffers defined by richly moulded and gilded ribs. The architectural treatment of the ceiling derives from

the early sixteenth-century interiors which Kent admired and recorded on his trips to Italy, such as Giulio Romano's concave niches in the Loggia of the Villa Madama in Rome, c.1521.<sup>49</sup> Adorning each of the 102 panels are *trompe l'oeil* painted cameos in grisaille set against blue, green and light red backgrounds. Wright's detailed plan of the ceiling

identifies the individual scenes whose subjects are inspired by Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a text familiar to Kent since he possessed a manuscript version in Italian (Fig. 13).<sup>50</sup> As yet, however, no attempt has been made to link the iconography of the ceiling paintings to Lady Isabella, who must have had her own opinions about the choice of imagery. The most prominently featured goddess on the ceiling is Diana; her name features nine times in Wright's drawing and she occupies one of the three central panels (Fig. 14). Lady Isabella shared two essential characteristics with Diana; firstly, she never married, and secondly, she was a skilled huntress,

making Diana the ideal goddess to pay tribute to the building's patroness. Lady Isabella continued to hunt into her middle age; in June 1740, she wrote to Rockingham: 'I've been out from 5 o'clock this morning till past 7 at night and have but just got myself clean from the dust and sweat that attends a long chase'.<sup>51</sup>

The mythological subject matter of the ceiling implicitly flattered Lady Isabella's erudition when it came to antique literature. In a surviving, undated version of her will, she bequeathed 'all the Latin books I die possessed of' to her nephew, John Emilius Daniel Finch, suggesting that she had an

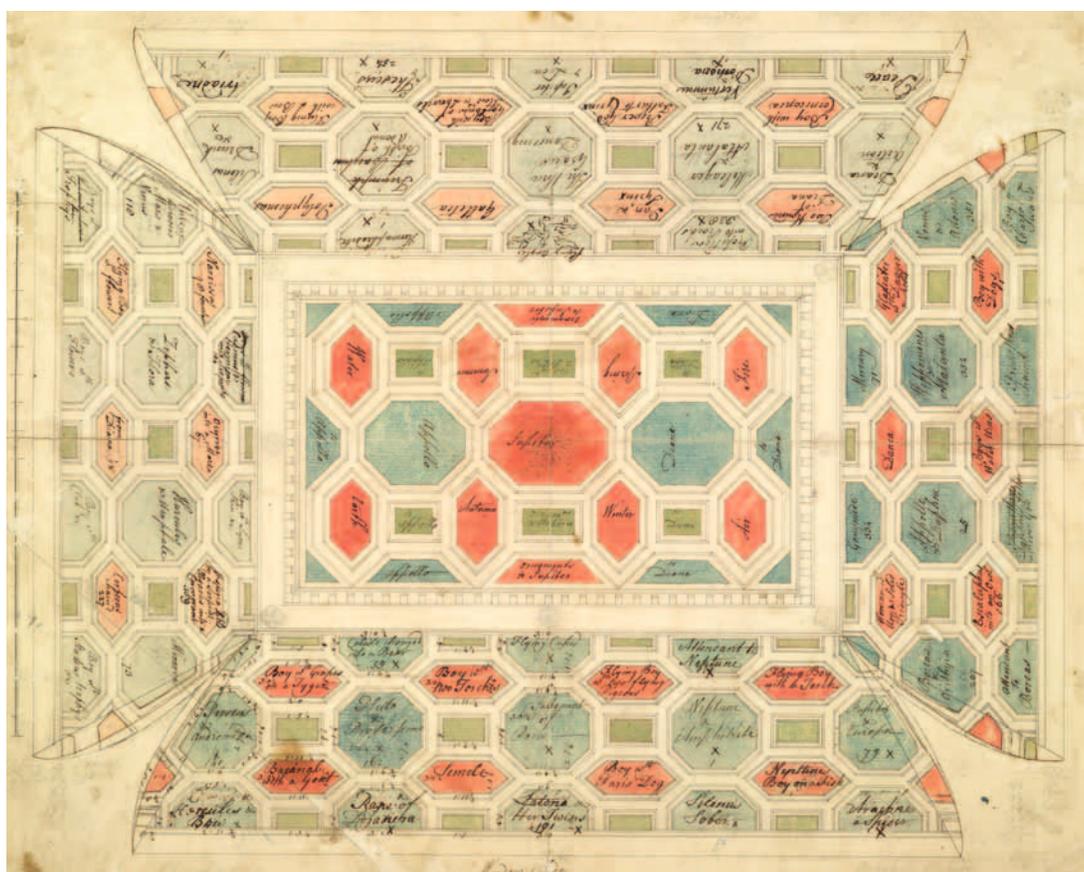


Fig. 13. Drawing to show the layout of the ceiling of the Great Salon at 44 Berkeley Square by Stephen Wright, c.1742–44, Pen, black and grey inks, watercolour. (RIBA Collections)



Fig. 14. 44 Berkeley Square – Detail of ceiling of Great Saloon with the panel representing Diana and Endymion in the centre. (Author)



Fig. 15. 44 Berkeley Square – Detail of ceiling of Great Saloon showing one of the panels representing the Judgement of Paris. (Author)

extensive collection of classical texts which almost certainly included a copy of the *Metamorphoses*.<sup>52</sup> Her knowledge and enjoyment of classical myths is evident in her correspondence; writing to Newcastle in November 1753, she described her indignation on discovering that some rare pieces of porcelain had been sold to a rival collector by wittily alluding to

the Judgement of Paris, also depicted on the ceiling (Fig. 15); ‘Neither Juno nor my favourite Goddess, Pallas’ would have ‘condescended to accept the Pommes d’Amour at 2<sup>nd</sup> hand finding that they had been given to an ignorant person’.<sup>53</sup> In identifying herself with Pallas (an alternative name for Minerva), as well as Diana, she was perhaps inspired by Queen



Fig. 16. 44 Berkeley Square – View from the second floor landing. (Author)

Caroline's association with the goddess, as seen in Kent's ceiling at Kensington Palace. Lastly, the inclusion of Perseus and Andromeda on the window side of the ceiling provided a visual link with Lady Isabella's childhood home, Burley-on-the-Hill, where Lanscrone's paintings in the staircase hall relate the history of the two lovers.

The remaining rooms in the house may not provide the visual excitement of the staircase and Saloon but their various functions reveal Lady Isabella's grandiose ambitions. The first space encountered on the ground floor is the Entrance Hall and its adjoining 'little parlour'; the sober treatment of these spaces was no doubt intended to heighten the impact of passing through the 'vestable passage' into the dramatic central stairwell.<sup>54</sup> At the rear of the ground floor is a spacious and elegant room, which originally served as Lady Isabella's Dining Room. Directly above, Lady Isabella's bedroom and

dressing room occupied the rear of the first floor, on the opposite side of the landing from the Saloon. A narrow room behind the columnar screen on the landing linked her dressing room directly with the Saloon; in the accounts, this space is referred to as 'the little China Room', suggesting that it housed the cabinets displaying Lady Isabella's precious collection of porcelain.<sup>55</sup> Her collection was singled out for particular attention in the *Public Advertiser* when the house was auctioned in 1771: 'consisting of all her Ladyship's fine, rare and scarce old Japan and China'.<sup>56</sup> On the second storey are two additional rooms; the larger of these is described as a Library in the accounts, whilst the smaller room is referred to as the 'closett by garrett stairs'.<sup>57</sup> By the mid-eighteenth century, the private library had become a major feature of the country house but for a single woman to have her own library was worthy of note and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu described Lady Isabella

as the only lady at court who did.<sup>58</sup> Situating the Library on the second floor encouraged her visitors to make the ascent to the upper landing, thereby offering another perspective on the stairwell (Fig. 16). A narrow stairway is concealed behind a door in the closet; this led to the servants' quarters in the garrets. Finally, the cellar storey provided generous space for the kitchens and storage rooms meaning that the house was well equipped to cater for Lady Isabella's select dinner parties.

Lady Isabella took up residence in her new home in May 1745. When presented with a bill for £2.3s.4d. ground rent in December of that year she apparently refused to pay; a note in the rate book records, 'she has not been in the House Long Enough & will not pay'.<sup>59</sup> Perhaps, too, after all the effort and expense of the house's construction, she resented her status as a leaseholder, which compromised her sense of ownership. The building work evidently placed a financial strain on her; writing to Rockingham in October 1748, she acknowledged that 'her appetites' were 'a little cramped' whilst her house was being built.<sup>60</sup> Yet the financial toll was worth it: the completed house delighted Lady Isabella, who wrote excitedly to Rockingham in 1745: 'I am just going to settle myself in my castle which puts me in too great a Hurry to write this post to Polly'.<sup>61</sup> Her use of the term 'castle' seems particularly apt since the threat of foreign invasion came uncomfortably close during the Jacobite rising of 1745, prompting her to write in September of that year, 'I shall be devilish mad to have [the house] demolished or taken by a Scotch or French Dog'.<sup>62</sup>

#### THE MISTRESS OF THE HOUSE

Despite its small scale, the originality and grandeur of No. 44 Berkeley Square placed Lady Isabella in a position to compete with the wealthy male aristocrats of her generation. In a revealing postscript to one of her letters to Rockingham in September 1745,

she compared Robert Walpole's grand interiors at Houghton Hall unfavourably with her own great Saloon, proudly stating that 'in the large spaces where [his Lordship] has exercised his fancy' there was not 'such a Room as I will show you in my House of but 30 odd feet in front which people go to see as a curiosity'.<sup>63</sup> She went on to boast that 'Lord Cholmondley never said more of himself than he had done of [the great saloon] and indeed the whole house'.<sup>64</sup> Henry Pelham, Prime Minister from 1743 to 1754, had employed Kent to design his town house at No. 22 Arlington Street eighteen months previously, but in 1747 he commissioned Kent to design a new grand Saloon, probably intended to rival that at 44 Berkeley Square.<sup>65</sup> His brother, Newcastle, also admired the room, and in June 1755, Lady Isabella teasingly accused him of 'frankly owning he wanted to see her Room which she's so conscious is far better than her company'.<sup>66</sup>

An invitation to dinner at 44 Berkeley Square tended to take on the form of a summons to which 'no excuse' would be accepted when she had 'a numerous assembly'.<sup>67</sup> Walpole's oft-quoted reference to the 'funereal loo' which he attended 'in the great chamber at Lady Bel Finch's' has misled some scholars into thinking that these parties were gloomy affairs.<sup>68</sup> He appears, however, to have been referring to her dusky colouring rather than her skills as a hostess and, as a regular attendee, it seems unlikely that he found the company over-tiresome.<sup>69</sup> Lady Isabella's correspondence gives a far livelier impression of her parties; she had no patience with 'dull creatures [...] that did not enjoy lively conversation'<sup>70</sup> and would go to considerable lengths to procure the finest food and wine for her guests. In June 1755, she prevailed on Newcastle to arrange for 'some strawberries and cherries to be sent the day he [did] her the favour to dine at her Castle'.<sup>71</sup> She took great pride in the stylish sophistication of her entertainments as when she wrote 'entre nous, the finishing my summer partys with a Dinner on the King's birthday *donnera de l'éclat* to the former ones'.<sup>72</sup>

During the 1750s and 60s, Lady Isabella adopted an increasingly imperious tone in her correspondence with Newcastle, alluding to her status as the owner of a grand house as a means of asserting her authority: in December 1761, she assured him that he would ‘be graciously rec’d [...] in all appearance by the Mistress of the House’ even though she had ‘great reason to be very angry with his Grace’.<sup>73</sup> On another occasion, she invited him to dinner on condition that he brought ‘no wit along with him but his own’ if he intended ‘to be agreeable to his Landlady who never had a Table for Looberly Cunning’.<sup>74</sup> Such gatherings provided Lady Isabella with the opportunity to enact the role of politically astute hostess on the stage of her magnificent home. In April 1765 she wrote to Newcastle, asking for his assistance in securing a date to entertain the Lords from the ‘Minority’, suggesting that her parties often had a specific political agenda. Her attempts to influence politicians behind the scenes were often effective, as when she persuaded Sir Brook Bridges to attend parliament for a debate on general warrants prompting Newcastle to praise her ‘great Goodness and success in the Affair of our friend, Sir Brooke’.<sup>75</sup>

The furnishing of the house provided Lady Isabella with the opportunity to display her exquisite taste, a compelling new preoccupation in eighteenth-century society. She believed that her superior powers of discernment legitimised her claim to purchase the finest porcelain which, in the hands of others, would be like ‘flinging pearls before swine’.<sup>76</sup> When the house came to be auctioned in April 1771, it was described as a ‘capital Dwelling House’, ‘the plan by Mr. Kent’, which ‘for Taste, Elegance and Strength is exceeded by none, and equalled but by few’, indicating that Lady Isabella was renowned as an arbiter of taste by her contemporaries.<sup>77</sup> A further notice appeared a month later listing the ‘capital effects’ of the house, which included ‘a large and beautiful Persia carpet’, ‘a rich Table Service of Dresden Porcelain’, ‘a curious Japan Cabinet’, ‘velvet and blue silk damask curtains’ and a ‘very

rich Brussels Tapestry in History and Landscapes’, this last suggesting a further link with the palatial interiors of Burley-on-the-Hill which were hung with mythological tapestries.<sup>78</sup>

The display of portraits provided a vehicle to express Lady Isabella’s family loyalty and connections. Charles Philips’ conversation piece of the Finch family, of c. 1732, mentioned earlier, was displayed in the house at the time of her death and in June 1748 she wrote to Rockingham: ‘I desire my sister’s picture soon for my room I hope will at last be finished to use’.<sup>79</sup> Two months later, she acknowledged receipt of her nephew’s portrait, commenting, ‘I think it is like his Lordship, a little browner than he was before he left England, but Wright, Kent’s man, says the putting up pictures as soon as they are drawn makes them turn brown’.<sup>80</sup> A surviving, undated version of Lady Isabella’s will provides further information on the paintings in the great Saloon since she bequeathed ‘the Pictures of the Queen Mother and Thomas, Earl of Strafford copied by [the Countess of Fitzwilliam] after Vandike [*sic*]’ to her great-nephew, the Earl Fitzwilliam, but added that the frames should remain in place, ‘they being adapted to the carving and gilding of my great Room and fitted to the Chimney pieces over which they now hang’.<sup>81</sup> These two paintings were therefore accorded the most prestigious position in the house, their subjects reinforcing Lady Isabella’s royal and aristocratic connections, besides bearing testament to the artistic talent of her niece, Lady Anne Wentworth, who became Countess Fitzwilliam in 1744. The circular apertures and niches punctuating the walls of the staircase were created for the display of portrait busts, most probably the ‘four models of Newton, Lock, Woollaston, and Dr. Clark’ which Kent left to Lady Isabella in his will along with a ‘veined alabaster vase with brass ornaments’.<sup>82</sup> His death in 1748 occurred as Lady Isabella was putting the final touches to the decoration of the house, so it is likely that the four busts associated with Queen Caroline’s

Hermitage assumed their position at this time. These sculptures contributed to Lady Isabella's self-presentation on a number of levels; they alluded to her interest and understanding of philosophical debate, they referred to her personal relationship with Queen Caroline and finally, they underscored her close friendship with Kent.

A further contemporary source, as yet unexplored in relation to 44 Berkeley Square, is a semi-autobiographical novel entitled *The Life of Harriot Stuart* which was published by Charlotte Lennox in 1751. Lady Isabella acted as literary patroness to the young Lennox when she first came to London around 1746, but later withdrew her patronage, prompting the resentment of her former protégé. In the novel, Harriot (a surrogate for Lennox) pays a visit to the London home of Lady Cecilia (a thinly veiled portrait of Lady Isabella) who is described as 'a woman of great distinction about court, remarkable for the brilliancy of her wit, and her taste for the belles-Lettres'.<sup>83</sup> What is striking about the novel's portrayal of Lady Cecilia is that her house becomes a vehicle for expressing her dominant personality; the shrillness of her voice *echoes* through the house, she *flings* the doors open and *throws* herself into a chair, each verb conveying her command over the house's interior space. Meanwhile her young guest is made to wait, first in the drawing room, then in the dressing room, meaning that she is both confined and controlled by each space.<sup>84</sup> In describing Lady Cecilia's library, Harriot observes that 'the great number of books of which it was composed gave me a very advantageous idea of a lady who could be at such an expense to furnish herself with intellectual entertainments.'<sup>85</sup> This appears to be a deliberate jibe at Lady Isabella's conspicuous self-fashioning as an erudite lady. However, when the novel appeared in print, it prompted an outraged response from Lady Montagu who leapt to the defence of her friend, writing: 'I was rouz'd into great surprise and Indignation by the monstrous abuse of one of the very, very few Women

I have a real value for. I mean Lady B[ell] F[inch], who is not only clearly meant by the mention of her Library, she being the only Lady at Court that has one, but her very name at length, she being christen'd Cecelia Isabella, tho she chuses to be call'd by the Latter. I allwaies thought her conduct in every light so irreproachable, I did not think she had an Enemy upon Earth.'<sup>86</sup>

Lady Isabella's strong attachment to her house manifested itself through a persisting desire to gain the freehold of the property as well as a concern for its upkeep and preservation. In September 1763, she wrote to Newcastle, regretting that she was unable to visit him since she was 'oblig'd to watch some painters and gilders who have been at work in my house two or three times a week, for fear they should make mistakes, and their work should not wear as well as the original ones have done for so many years.'<sup>87</sup> She also went to considerable lengths to ensure that the house was well maintained after her death. In a codicil of 18 December 1766, she bequeathed the lease of her house in trust for her nieces but stipulated that 'some careful man and his wife' should be appointed by her executors 'to take care of and preserve the said house, furniture and things until such time as any one of [her] said nieces shall be of sufficient age to enter on and take care thereof'.<sup>88</sup> She even went so far as to expressly order that 'no child or children whatsoever do live and reside in my said House', for fear of the damage they would cause.<sup>89</sup> As Rachel Stewart observes, the leasehold status of a property did not lend itself to long-term planning because 'it could not be protected or bequeathed with the same assurance as freehold property.'<sup>90</sup> However, a further undated version of her will demonstrates Lady Isabella's ambition to overcome this issue by requesting her trustees to purchase 'the Inheritance forever of the Ground whereon my said House [...] and Appurtenances now stand', and if this did not prove to be possible she asked the trustees to renew the lease 'for a further term of Years on

the same terms that other Tenants do that hold Leases under the said Lord Berkeley of Stratton for their House in Berkeley Square'.<sup>91</sup> The same document also stipulated that its occupant should 'make no Alteration in the building or disposition of the Rooms on the first and second Floors of the said house or in the Furniture of the said Rooms.' For the ageing, childless Lady Isabella, the house represented the project of a lifetime and as such, she prized it as an enduring monument to her status, taste and achievements.

The surviving versions of Lady Isabella's will suggest that she wished to pass the house through her family on a hereditary basis in the manner of a country estate, but her ambitions were not fulfilled. On her death, the property passed to her brother, Edward Finch-Hatton, who only outlived her by a few months. When he died in May 1771, the property was put up for auction but appears to have remained empty for nearly four years until it was purchased by the first Lord Clermont in 1774. It then passed through a succession of private owners until 1950 when it was purchased by the Clermont Club. Whilst Lady Isabella's ambitions to bequeath her home through her family line were thwarted, she would perhaps have taken comfort from the fact that the house has been remarkably well preserved. Although the furnishings have changed, no alteration has been made to the interior arrangement on the two principal storeys and the sumptuously painted and gilded ceiling of the Saloon retains its original glory.

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#### ENDNOTES

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- 3 Horace Walpole to Sir Horace Mann, 14 July 1742; Horace Walpole to Sir Horace Mann, 10 April, 1747 in W.S. Lewis (ed.) *The Yale Edition of Horace Walpole's Correspondence* (online edition).
- 4 J. Cornforth, *London Interiors* (New Haven & London, 2004), p. 78.
- 5 M.I. Wilson, *William Kent: Architect, Designer, Painter, Gardener, 1685–1748* (London, 1984), p. 229.
- 6 D. Watkin, 'Town Houses' in S. Weber (ed.), *William Kent: Designing Georgian Britain* (New Haven & London, 2014), p. 173; T. Mowl, *William Kent: Architect, Designer, Opportunist* (London, 2006), p. 229.
- 7 H. Horwitz, 'Finch, Daniel, second earl of Nottingham and seventh earl of Winchilsea (1647–1730)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004).
- 8 Lady Isabella Finch to the Duke of Newcastle, 15 July 1753, BL Add MS 32732.
- 9 H.J. Habakkuk, 'Daniel Finch, 2nd Earl of Nottingham; His House and Estate', in J.H. Plumb (ed.), *Studies in Social History* (London, 1955).
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 E.H. Chalus, 'Finch, Lady (Cecilia) Isabella (1700–1771)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford, 2004).
- 12 S. Hutton, 'Conway, Anne, Viscountess Conway and Killultagh (131–1679)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford, 2004)
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- 15 Lady Isabella Finch to Lord Rockingham, 18 October 1747, Sheffield Archive Office, Wentworth Woodhouse Muniments (WWM), M2/447.
- 16 B. Taylor, *Painting in England 1700–1850: Collection of Mr and Mrs Paul Mellon*, II (Tonbridge, 1963), p. 115.
- 17 I am grateful to Professor David Solkin for his helpful comments in discussing this conversation piece with me.

- 18 M. Cormack, *Country Houses in Great Britain*, (New Haven, 1979), p. 33.
- 19 M. Baker, 'Henrietta Finch: Sculptor?', *The Burlington Magazine*, No. 156 (2014).
- 20 Lady Isabella Finch to Lady Burlington, n.d. (probably May 1733), Devonshire MSS, Chatsworth, 1st Series Correspondence (CS1), CS1/219.13.
- 21 Lady Isabella Finch to the Duke of Newcastle, 19 February 1761, British Library (BL), Add MS 32919/122
- 22 Lady Isabella Finch to Lady Burlington, CS1/219.16, n.d.
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 Lady Isabella Finch to Lord Rockingham, 6 December 1737, WWM/M2/31.
- 25 For 'castle' references, see Lady Isabella to Lord Malton (later Rockingham), 12 October 1745 (WWM/M2/326) and Lady Isabella to the duke of Newcastle, 30 June 1755 (BL, Add MS 32856, f. 419).
- 26 Lord Malton (later Rockingham) to Horace Walpole, 6 November 1738, WWM/M2/42.
- 27 J. Marschner, *Queen Caroline: Cultural Politics at the Early Eighteenth-Century Court* (New Haven & London, 2014), p. 121.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 124.
- 29 Lady Isabella Finch to Lady Burlington, 28 August 1744, CS1/219.17.
- 30 The bequest was included in Kent's will of 13 October, 1743 and his wish was repeated in a codicil dated 10 April, 1748: G. Balderston, 'Giovanni Battista Guelfi: five busts for Queen Caroline's Hermitage in Richmond', *Sculpture Journal*, 38 (2008).
- 31 Lady Isabella Finch to the Duke of Newcastle, 7 September 1738, BL, Add MS 32691, f. 327.
- 32 *Ibid.*
- 33 Lady Isabella Finch to the Duke of Newcastle, 19 December 1763, BL Add MS 32954, fol. 92. Newcastle lost his 2 Lord Lieutenancies for opposing the peace of 1763. The 'wretch' referred to is probably William Pitt with whom he formed an unsuccessful alliance.
- 34 Lady Isabella Finch to Lord Malton (later Rockingham), 10 December 1745, WWM/M1/409.
- 35 M. Bigold, *Women of Letters, Manuscript Circulation and Print Afterlives in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 2013).
- 36 Chalus, 'Finch, Lady (Cecilia) Isabella (1700–1771)'.  
37 Lady Isabella Finch to Lord Malton (later Rockingham), 2 June 1743, WWM/M2/126.
- 38 Lady Isabella Finch to Lord Malton (later Rockingham), 1 September 1742, WWM/M8/51.
- 39 'Artificers Employ'd on the Rt. Honble the Lady Isabella Finch's Acct at her new House in Berkeley Square London' beginning in September 1742 but incomplete, Building Accounts 39B, Sir John Soane's Museum, London.
- 40 J. Harris, 'Architectural and Ornamental Draftsman' in S. Weber (ed.), *William Kent: Designing Georgian Britain*, (New Haven & London, 2014), p. 157.
- 41 Lady Isabella Finch to Lady Burlington, 28 August 1744, CS1/219.17. 'Ye Signor' refers to Kent (see p. 10).
- 42 *Ibid.*
- 43 Watkin, 'Town Houses', p. 173.
- 44 Lady Isabella Finch to Lord Malton (later Rockingham), 2 June 1743, WWM/M2/126.
- 45 Lady Isabella Finch to Lord Malton (later Rockingham), 27 May 1743, WWM/M2/125: 'your Lordship's magnificent fabric' refers to Wentworth Woodhouse.
- 46 R. Stewart, *The Town House in Georgian London* (New Haven & London, 2009), p. 147.
- 47 Lady Isabella Finch to Lord Rockingham, 31 December 1748, WWM/M8/88.
- 48 A. Oswald, 'No. 44 Berkeley Square: The Residence of Wyndham Damer Clark Esq.', *Country Life* (1939), p. 16.
- 49 C. Sicca, 'On William Kent's Roman Sources', *Architectural History*, 29 (1986), p. 139.
- 50 S. Brindle, 'Kent and Italy' in S. Weber (ed.), *William Kent: Designing Georgian Britain*, (New Haven and London, 2014), p. 102.
- 51 Lady Isabella to Lord Malton (later Lord Rockingham), 14 June 1740, WWM/M2/57.
- 52 Undated document with first three pages missing, but relating to Lady Finch's will, Northamptonshire Record Office, FH 4208.
- 53 Lady Isabella Finch to the Duke of Newcastle, 3 November 1753, BL, Add MS 32733, f.192.
- 54 Building Accounts, Sir John Soane's Museum, 39B, p. 24.
- 55 Building Accounts, 39B, p. 44: 'the little china room including the mahogany door and blank ditto to great room.'

- 56 *Public Advertiser*, Wednesday, April 10 1771, Issue 11346.
- 57 Building Accounts, 39B. The 'library' is referred to on several occasions in the building accounts including pp. 31, 46, 54 and 60.
- 58 Lady Mary Wortley Montagu to Lady Bute, 1 March 1752, in *Selected Letters*, ed. I. Grundy (London 1997), p. 367.
- 59 Oswald, 'No. 44 Berkeley Square', p. 13.
- 60 Lady Isabella to Lord Rockingham, 13 October 1748, WWM/M2/494.
- 61 Lady Isabella to Lord Malton (later Rockingham), 12 October 1745, WWM/M1/326. Polly was an affectionate name given to her sister, Lady Mary Rockingham.
- 62 Lady Isabella to Lord Malton (later Rockingham), 5 September 1745, WWM/M2/220.
- 63 Lady Isabella to Lord Malton (later Rockingham), 5 September 1745, WWM/M2/220. It is clear from the context of this letter that she is referring to Robert Walpole whose death earlier in 1745 had left considerable debts, obliging his eldest son to sell many paintings, ornaments and the Houghton silver.
- 64 Lord Cholmondley refers to George Cholmondley, 3rd Earl of Cholmondeley (1702–1770), who was Robert Walpole's son-in-law. Horace Walpole referred to him as 'a vain and empty man shoved up too high by his father-in-law', H. Walpole, *Memoirs of the Last Ten Years of the Reign of George II*, 1 (London, 1872), p. 150.
- 65 Watkin, 'Town Houses', p. 177.
- 66 Lady Isabella Finch to the Duke of Newcastle, 30 June 1755, BL, Add MS 32856, f.419.
- 67 Lady Isabella Finch to the Duke of Newcastle, 5 January 1761, BL, Add MS 33067, f.254.
- 68 Christopher Sykes states: 'What a scene is conjured up of the effeminate Horace surrounded by Lady Bel and her gossipy cronies [...], pushing cards gloomily round a table.' (C. Sykes, *Private Palaces*, (London 1985), p. 106).
- 69 Horace Walpole to the Hon. H.S. Conway, 5 June 1764, *Walpole's Correspondence*.
- 70 WWM/M2/186, Lady Isabella Finch to Lord Malton (later Rockingham), 20 December 1744.
- 71 Lady Isabella Finch to the Duke of Newcastle, 30 June 1755, BL Add MS 32856, f.419.
- 72 Lady Isabella Finch to the Duke of Newcastle, 3 November 1753, BL, Add MS 32733, f.192.
- 73 Lady Isabella Finch to the Duke of Newcastle, 5 January 1761, BL, Add MS 33067, f.254.
- 74 Lady Isabella Finch to the Duke of Newcastle, 14 June 1753, BL, Add MS 33066, f.376; 'looberly' was an eighteenth-century slang word meaning foolish.
- 75 Lady Isabella Finch to the Duke of Newcastle, 4 January 1764, BL, Add MS 32955, f.56.,
- 76 Lady Isabella Finch to the Duke of Newcastle, 3 November 1753, BL, Add MS 32733, f.192.
- 77 *Public Advertiser*, 11 April 1771, Issue 11347.
- 78 *Public Advertiser*, 2 May 1771, Issue 11365.
- 79 M. Cormack, *Country Houses in Great Britain*, (New Haven, 1979), p. 33; Lady Isabella Finch to Lord Rockingham, 22 June 1748, WWM/M2/479: 'my sister' refers to Mary, Lady Rockingham.
- 80 Lady Isabella Finch to Lord Rockingham, 15 August 1750, WWM/M2/494: Lady Isabella's nephew, Higham (who became Lord Malton in 1746) had recently returned from the Grand Tour.
- 81 Northamptonshire Record Office, FH 4208. Thomas Wentworth, 1st Earl of Strafford was a leading advisor to Charles I and great uncle of Lord Rockingham.
- 82 Will of William Kent, quoted in T. Mowl, *William Kent: Architect, Designer, Opportunist* (London, 2006), p. 229.
- 83 H. Amory, 'Lennox', (Barbara) Charlotte (1730/31?–1804)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford 2004); C. Lennox, *The Life of Harriot Stuart*, (Whitefish, 2016), p. 110.
- 84 Lennox, *The Life of Harriot Stuart*, p. 112.
- 85 *Ibid.*, p. 113.
- 86 Lady Mary Wortley Montagu to Lady Bute, 1 March 1752, in *Selected Letters*, ed. I. Grundy (London 1997), p. 367.
- 87 Lady Isabella Finch to the Duke of Newcastle, 4 September 1763, BL Add MS 32950 fol. 329.
- 88 Northamptonshire Record Office, FH AD 799. My attention was initially drawn to the Finch Hatton documents relating to Lady Isabella's will by Rachel Stewart, *The Town House in Georgian London*.
- 89 *Ibid.*
- 90 Stewart, *The Town House in Georgian London*, p. 66.
- 91 Northamptonshire Record Office, FH 4208.