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# REDISCOVERING LEE PRIORY'S LOST LIBRARY ANTE-CHAMBER

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Thomas Barrett (1744–1803), antiquary, engaged Britain's most prestigious architect of the day, James Wyatt, to reconstruct and refurbish his country pile, Lee Priory, Kent, from 1781 onwards. John Dixon's depiction of the house in 1785 (Fig. 1), together with a watercolour of the same date now in the British Library, London, confirms its external completion in this year.<sup>1</sup> These two renderings also illustrate its Gothic, collegiate-style elevation,

dominated by the octagonal Library's tower and spire modelled upon Batalha Abbey, Portugal.<sup>2</sup> Lee's interior, partially supervised and guided by Barrett's friend, Horace Walpole, featured both Neo-classical spaces, not least the principal Staircase Hall, and Gothic apartments, including the Library and the Walpole Closet, the latter of which is now installed in the British Galleries (1760–1900) at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.<sup>3</sup>



Fig. 1. John Dixon, 'Thomas Barrett's Lee, Kent', 1785. (Courtesy of The Yale Center for British Art, New Haven)



Fig. 2. James Wyatt, 'Fragments from the Library Ante-Chamber at Lee', c.1785–90. (Courtesy of Architectural Heritage)



Fig. 3. One of the enclosed presses from the Library Ante-Chamber at Lee, c.1785–90. (Courtesy of Architectural Heritage)

Lee's Gothic attributes were regarded highly by eighteenth-century Britain's arch Gothicist, Horace Walpole. Writing of the Walpole Closet, a modest space (2.21 × 5.72 m) located at the eastern terminus of Lee's southern façade and salvaged shortly before the house's demolition in September 1953, Walpole considered it to be a 'delicious closet [...] so flattering to me'.<sup>4</sup> He also lavished the Library with high praise and considered it supremely medieval and in due deference to the work of William Wykeham, founder of New College, Oxford: it 'is the most perfect thing I ever saw [...] I wish William of Wickam were alive to employ and reward Mr Wyatt — you would think the latter had designed

the library for the former'.<sup>5</sup> Lee, consequently, is an important structure in the history of the Gothic Revival, not least because of its connections to Walpole and Wyatt.

Until recently, the only fragments widely known to have survived the house's demolition are the Walpole Closet and a select number of presses from the Library.<sup>6</sup> John Carter's recently-discovered 1791 sketches of the house, along with James Wyatt's fragmentary designs, some Georgian engravings and paintings, and photographs of the house's interior, were thought to be the only other visual records of Lee.<sup>7</sup> This evidence and the house have been examined in a recent essay by Matthew Reeve and

the present author (see Note 2). But after the essay's publication, and by extraordinary chance, a second room salvaged quietly from Lee at the last moment by Ian Phillips, an antiques dealer, came to light, as did, in turn, the room itself. This private act of preservation was not publicised, and the room – effectively a minor passage within the house (Fig. 2) – was consequently forgotten about and not included in modern scholarship on the house, though *Country Life* illustrated its vault in an article by Hugh Honour in 1952.<sup>8</sup> Now that the room has resurfaced, there is an opportunity to address its place within the interior of Lee Priory, and to offer a detailed reading of a remarkable and surprising survival from James Wyatt's *corpus* of early Gothic Revival work.<sup>9</sup>

The fragments from this room (Fig. 2) comprise the fan-vaulted ceiling (2.14 × 3.6 m), a pair of doors and door cases, an ogee-headed archway surround, and a suite of four enclosed bookcases (Fig. 3). Happily, two drawings from John Carter's 1791 survey of the house depict the room (Fig. 4) and identify it as the Saloon.<sup>10</sup> Access to the Ante-Chamber was gained directly from the house's Neo-classical Staircase Hall, and it led, via a dog-leg, directly into the eastern part of the octagonal Library. This stark contrast between Gothic and Neo-classical spaces is not unprecedented in the Georgian period: Richard Payne Knight, describing the castellated exterior and Classical interior of his house, Downton Castle, Herefordshire, built 1774–78, believed that the aesthetic mix had 'the advantage of a picturesque object, and of an elegant and convenient dwelling'.<sup>11</sup> This stylistic combination also occurred in the architecture of Horace Walpole's circle, including at Donnington Hall, Berkshire (designed 1763), as well as in Wyatt's Gothic Revival country houses, such as Sandleford Priory, Berkshire (1780–9), and Ashridge Park, Hertfordshire (1808–13).<sup>12</sup> Starting in 1824, Sir Jeffrey Wyattville also promoted Classical as well as Gothic apartments with the lavish and vastly expensive refurbishment of Windsor Castle for King George



Fig. 4. John Carter, 'View in the Saloon, entring [sic] into the Library at Lee', 1791.  
(© The British Library Board)



Fig. 5. James Wyatt, left: 'Vault from the Library Ante-Chamber at Lee', c.1785–90 (Courtesy of *Architectural Heritage*), and right: 'The Strawberry Closet, Lee', c.1785–90. (© *Victoria and Albert Museum, London*)

IV.<sup>13</sup> Lee consequently fits into a larger architectural tradition in Georgian Britain embracing both medievalist interests and modern concerns for comfortable and fashionable Classical interiors.

The Ante-Chamber complements Lee's Library in several ways. Foremost is their shared architectural character: Walpole thought the Library fit for a Prior, and its Gothic character, informed by medieval chapter houses, is ably introduced by the Ante-Chamber. The Library's presses, almost certainly designed by Wyatt, are also incorporated into the Ante-Chamber and promote continuity: they are essentially identical to those in the Library proper and have the same cresting and panelled doors below the diaper-encrusted dado.<sup>14</sup> However, as illustrated by Carter, the upper shelves of the Ante-

Chamber's presses are enclosed by doors finished with blind lancets.<sup>15</sup> Their treatment suggests that the bookcases contained items not for continual display and immediate access, though Lee's 1834 sale catalogue does not offer any guidance as to their precise use.<sup>16</sup> These presses, like those in the Library, are important and relatively early examples of polychrome Gothic Revival furniture: reds and blues are used to pick out the micro-ornamental detail, much like the seat furniture at Shobdon Church, Herefordshire (c.1755), the Pomfret Cabinet (1752–53), the suite of Windsor hall chairs commemorating the marriage of John Perceval, second Earl of Egmont, to Catherine Compton in January 1756, and the barber-pole painted Welch chairs that Walpole acquired from Dickie Bateman's

house, the Priory, Old Windsor, in its 1774 house sale, and displayed subsequently in Strawberry Hill's Star Chamber.<sup>17</sup>

The passage-like Ante-Chamber should also be understood within the context of Lee's Strawberry Closet: a modest apartment in the south-east of the house made and named in homage to Walpole's Gothic villa (Fig. 2).<sup>18</sup> Both the Ante-Chamber and Strawberry Closet have fan-vaulted ceilings of plaster made loosely in imitation of that in the Gallery at Strawberry Hill, itself a derivative of the side-aisle vaulting in Henry VII's Chapel, Westminster Abbey.<sup>19</sup> The Strawberry Closet (2.21 × 5.72 m) is marginally larger than then Ante-Chamber (2.14 × 3.6 m), but the additional scale was not put to decorative use: each fan vault in the Strawberry Closet is decorated with a single register of blind panelling, whereas the Ante-Chamber's vault has two rows of panelling that creates a far more ornate effect (Fig. 5). Complementing this increased emphasis upon filigree detail typical of exuberant Perpendicular fan vaults, the encircled octofoil at the centre of Strawberry Closet vault is substituted for an ornate rose-window oculus in the Ante-Chamber's design (though it was subsequently filled in). The Ante-Chamber's vaulting is extremely unusual in the history of medieval Gothic and its eighteenth-century revival: it combines both fan and tierceron forms. The tiercerons are found at the northern and southern extremities of the ceiling sandwiched between the fans vaults, presumably because the room's proportions could not accommodate the fan's complete arcs. Filling the inter-fan vault voids with tiercerons resolved this problem. Coupled with highly decorative blind panelling, the Library Ante-Chamber demonstrates a broad and cultivated range of architectural forms influencing Wyatt's work that is derived ultimately from his studies and restorations of medieval architecture.<sup>20</sup> The room consequently helps refute the repeated criticisms levelled at Wyatt's Gothic as a bastard style by, amongst other antiquaries, John Carter.<sup>21</sup>

It is possible that further fragments were

liberated from Lee before its demolition, and I encourage anyone with fragments to contact me. Although seemingly incidental, given the known survivals from Lee, and Carter's illustrations, the Ante-Room presents Wyatt's pre-Fonthill and Ashridge Gothic in a nuanced light. It appears even more ambitious and densely decorative in comparison with the other, contemporary, interiors at Lee, and reveals his, and his assistants', understanding of medieval architecture beyond mere quotation. The Ante-Chamber is an imaginative and simultaneously scholarly space, and shows Wyatt's Gothic at its best.

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#### ENDNOTES

- 1 Paul Mellon Collection, Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, B1975.1; London, British Library, Add MS 32366, f. 40 (lower drawing).
- 2 See Matthew M. Reeve and Peter N. Lindfield, "A Child of Strawberry": Thomas Barrett and Lee Priory, Kent,' *The Burlington Magazine* 157 (December 2015), p. 839.
- 3 See *Ibid.* pp. 872–73; Victoria and Albert Museum, London, W.48–1953.
- 4 Horace Walpole, *The Yale Edition of Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, ed. W.S. Lewis, et al., XII (London: Oxford University Press, 1944), p. III.
- 5 *Ibid.*, Vol. 31, p. 342.
- 6 Presses include London, Victoria and Albert Museum, W.51–1953. There has been some

- misunderstanding regarding exactly what fragments from Lee were saved. It has, for example, been claimed that the octagonal Library was saved: in its English Furniture Sale of 6 June 1996 Christies states that Ian Phillips acquired not only an hexagonal Hall Lantern (lot 36 in the sale) but also the Library itself: Christie's, *English Furniture* (London: Christie's, 6 June 1996), p. 22. There was also confusion at the house in 1953 [?]: whilst the donation of Lee's Walpole Chamber was being discussed by the solicitors acting ultimately on behalf of the house's owner, Mr Oakley, the Walpole Closet was misunderstood to constitute the Library and its ante-chamber: 'to proceed with the operations on which we have received your instruction. We find however that this actually states the "Strawberry Room" (being the octagonal room and small ante room) whereas what we are going to take out is the Boudoir and bookcases only from the Octagonal room': London, Victoria and Albert Museum, MA/1/L785, 13 August 1953. A letter from James Fell of the Broome-Bearers' Society to the Curator at the Victoria and Albert Museum on 22 September 1953 records the Library's part destruction and suggests it was not being dismantled for preservation, MA/1/L785, 22 September 1953.
- 7 Carter's drawings: British Library, Add. MS 29930, ff. 3–6; Wyatt's designs: Victoria and Albert Museum, 92.D.59; Engravings such as London, British Museum, 1912,0319.5, and John Preston Neale, *Views of the Seats of Noblemen and Gentlemen: In England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland* 2nd ed., II (London, 1824). Lee; some of *Country Life's* images were published in H.V. Ralph, 'Book Man and Printer Extraordinary: Brydges and the Lee Priory Press,' *Country Life* 23 March 1978, pp. 778–9, and Hugh Honour, 'A House of the Gothic Revival,' *Country Life* 30 May 1952, pp. 1665–6.
  - 8 Honour, 'House of the Gothic Revival,' p. 1666. Nevertheless, a door from this room was included in the 1975 Gothic exhibition in Brighton and illustrated in the catalogue: Royal Pavilion Art Gallery and Museums Brighton, *Gothick* (Brighton: Royal Pavilion Art Gallery and Museums Brighton, 1975), p. 22, pl. 14. This did not promote wider discussion of the room from which is originated.
  - 9 The fragments are, at the time of writing, in the possession of Architectural Heritage, Toddington Manor, Cheltenham.
  - 10 British Library, Add MS 29930, f. 4.
  - 11 Richard Payne Knight, *An Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste*, 4th ed. (London, 1805), p. 217.
  - 12 Peter N. Lindfield, *Georgian Gothic: Medievalist Architecture, Furniture and Interiors, 1730–1840* (Woodbridge, 2016), pp. 144–6, 156–9, 189–94.
  - 13 See especially Hugh Roberts, *For the King's Pleasure: The Furnishing and Decoration of George IV's Apartments at Windsor Castle* (London: Royal Collection, 2001).
  - 14 Most the salvaged presses are at London, Victoria and Albert Museum.
  - 15 London, British Library, Add. MS 29930, f. 4.
  - 16 W. Sharp, *Lee Priory, Kent: Catalogue of All the Superb Antique and Modern Household Furniture (Heir Looms Excepted)* (Canterbury, 1834), pp. 1–24.
  - 17 See Peter N. Lindfield, 'The Countess of Pomfret's Gothic Revival Furniture,' *Georgian Group Journal* 22 (2014), pp. 77–80. See also Horace Walpole, *A Description of the Villa of Mr. Horace Walpole, the Youngest Son of Sir Robert Walpole Earl of Orford, at Strawberry-Hill, near Twickenham. With an Inventory of the Furniture, Pictures, Curiosities, &c.* (Strawberry Hill, 1784), p. 42; Matthew Reeve, 'Dickie Bateman and the Gothicization of Old Windsor: Architecture and Sexuality in the Circle of Horace Walpole,' *Architectural History* 56 (2013), pp. 105–14; Peter N. Lindfield, 'Triangular Chairs at Strawberry Hill: The Genuine and the Fabricated,' *The Furniture History Society Newsletter* 204 (November 2016), p. 4.
  - 18 London, Victoria and Albert Museum, W.48:1 to 3–1953.
  - 19 Walpole, *Description of the Villa*, p. 47.
  - 20 John Martin Robinson, *James Wyatt (1746–1813): Architect to George III* (New Haven and London, 2012), pp. 221–30.
  - 21 See John Frew, 'Richard Gough, James Wyatt, and Late 18th-Century Preservation,' *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 38/4, (1979), pp. 366–74.