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BONOMI AT PACKINGTON

David Watkin

Packington Hall, Warwickshire, is one of the least-known of the major Georgian country houses of England. It has never been open regularly to the public, and the Georgian Group is grateful to the Earl of Aylesford, who kindly gave members a guided tour on 5th October 1989. Despite the rich contents of the house, it is the architectural decoration of its Pompeiian Gallery (Fig. 1) and the design of the church in the park (Fig. 2) which give Packington an outstanding place in the history of European Neo-classicism.

Packington Hall is a large late-Palladian mansion built in 1766–72 for the 3rd Earl of Aylesford from designs by Matthew Brettingham the elder. However, both the gallery and the church are the work of the Italian architect Joseph Bonomi (1739–1808). He was brought to England in 1767 by Robert and James Adam, for whom he worked as a draughtsman for fourteen years. Born in Rome, where he was trained as an architect by Teodoli and Asprucci, Bonomi seems to have received additional instruction in drawing from the prolific ruin painter Clérisséau, who also taught Adam and Chambers. Bonomi's role in Adam's office is still not entirely clear, but our view of the potential strength of his contribution was greatly enhanced by an exhibition of his drawings organised at the Heinz Gallery in 1988. The drawings, newly discovered by Peter Meadows in the possession of Bonomi's descendants, showed Bonomi as a neo-classical designer of such power and imagination that he can hardly have played a wholly minor role in Adam's office.

The 4th Earl of Aylesford was a remarkable figure, a gifted painter, an architect *manqué*, a traveller and connoisseur who counted among his friends the Picturesque theorist Sir Uvedale Price and the collector Sir George Beaumont. He was the dream patron for any neo-classical architect. Few of the interiors of Packington were finished in the 3rd earl's lifetime, and his son, the 4th earl, employed Bonomi to decorate the rooms one by one over a number of years from 1784. The most striking is the Pompeiian Gallery, occupying the whole of Brettingham's long south front. Designed by Bonomi and Lord Aylesford, this was executed in 1787 by a talented team of artists. The ceiling was painted by John Francis Rigaud, who came from Turin to England in 1771 via Paris; the wall compartments were the work of Benedetto Pastorini, a painter and engraver who had been employed by the Adam brothers for the plates in their *Works in Architecture*, begun in 1778; the stucco work was by Joseph Rose junior, the scagliola by Domenico Bartoli, and the gilding by Giovanni Borgnis.

The lower parts of the walls, up to the chimney shelf, are of scagliola imitating panels of porphyry surrounded by borders of sienna marble: exactly the arrangement which had been discovered at Pompeii. The upper parts of the walls and the ceiling are powerfully coloured in black and terra-cotta red. The strength and richness of this colouring was heightened by the application of melted wax blended in with hot irons. In his *Memoirs* Rigaud describes his ceiling as 'in water and size colours, and in the style of Titus' baths, upon a black ground. They are flying figures, alluding to the mysteries of Bacchus; according to the Mythology explained by D'Ankerville . . . The whole is painted in the most lively colours of flesh and draperies'. What he does not say is that the compositions were taken directly from a book of engravings by Nicolas Ponce, *Description des Bains de Titus ou collection des Peintures Trouvées dans les ruines des Thermes de cet Empereur* (Paris 1786), though we now know that the so-called 'Baths of Titus' were in fact remains of Nero's Domus Aurea.

Bonomi designed a set of chairs (Fig. 3) for the gallery of which, sadly, only one now remains, following a fire at Packington about ten years ago. The surviving chair is one of the

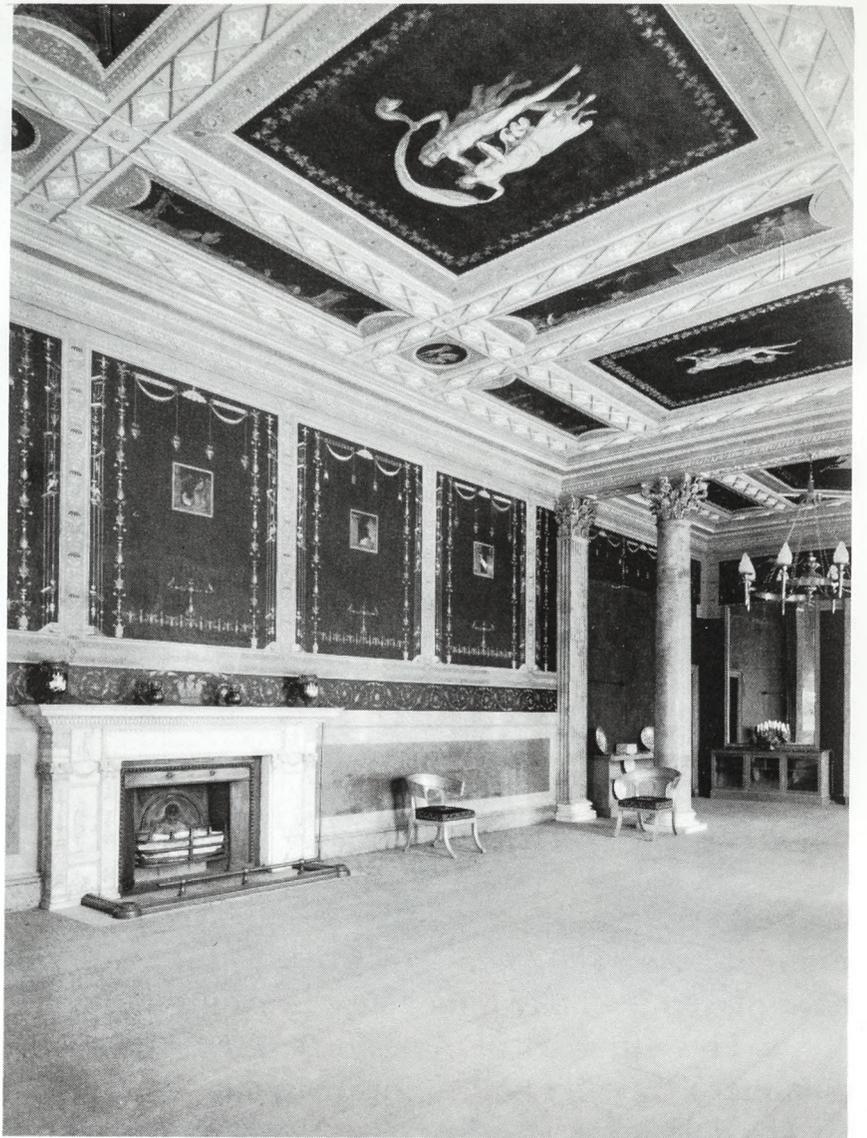


Fig. 3. The Gallery, with klismos chairs (photo: *Country Life*).

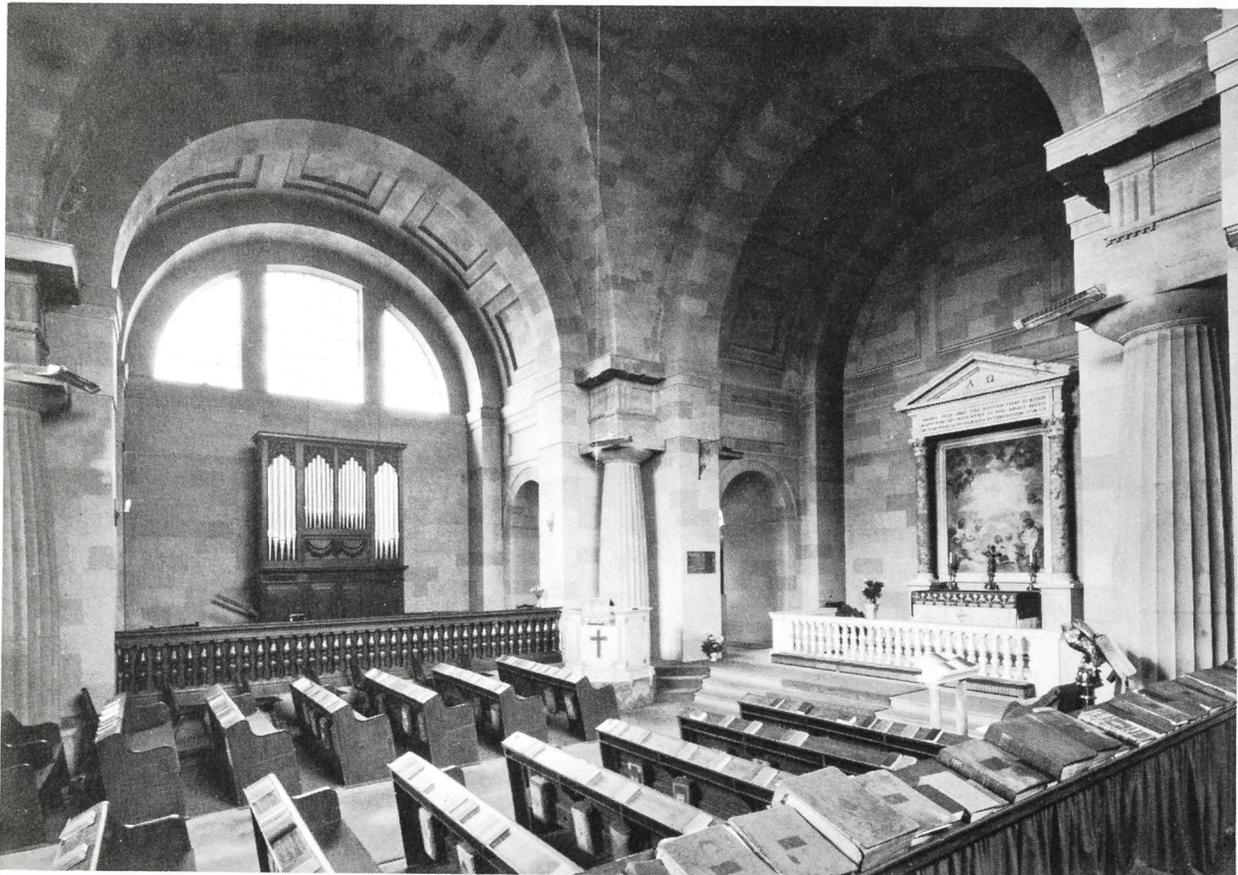


Fig. 4. Great Packington Church, the interior (photo: RCHME).

earliest Greek Revival chairs in Europe of the type popularised by Thomas Hope after 1800: that is to say, it is in the klismos form with sabre legs following a pattern familiar from paintings on Greek vases. Lord Aylesford collected Greek vases: indeed there is still one at Packington painted with a chair very similar to those designed by Bonomi. So is the gallery Pompeiian or Greek? The answer is that this is not a very meaningful question in terms of eighteenth-century taste, for the distinction between Etruscan, Greek and Roman art was extremely unclear. Indeed, Piranesi had urged that these styles should be imaginatively combined with Egyptian details so as to form a new decorative language.

We find the same combination of Greek and later elements in the extraordinarily powerful church which Bonomi and Aylesford designed at Packington in 1788 and of which the foundation stone was laid on St George's Day 1789. A startling cube of red brick with the upper parts and the interior columns of local red sandstone, it has a massive geometry which is close to the contemporary barrières in Paris by Ledoux. Its four corner towers contain semi-circular niches which, derived from funerary recesses in catacombs, strike a macabre note. The interior (Fig. 4) is no less remarkable for its confident use of the still revolutionary Greek Doric order. This is probably based on the Temple of Neptune (Hera) at Paestum which Bonomi and Aylesford had visited: indeed the latter's etchings of Greek ruins can be seen in Swinburne's *Travels in the Two Sicilies* (1790). However, at Packington the Greek columns are used to support Roman arches and a groined vault inspired by the Baths of Diocletian.

There is no more inventive Greek Revival monument than Packington church anywhere in England. It influenced Soane's vestibules at Bentley Priory and Tyringham, both built in the 1790s, and his unexecuted gallery at the House of Lords of 1794. Unfortunately, the power and novelty of Packington proved to be beyond the creative range of Smirke and Wilkins, the leaders of the Greek Revival in the early nineteenth century.