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THE IMPORTANCE OF THE AMATEUR IN INNOVATION

John Harris

The 240 years covered by Howard Colvin's Dictionary allows us to abstract about 80 names of architects who could be described as amateurs. To underline just how exclusively English this is, only Sir John Clerk and the Earl of Mar are Scottish, although as I will show, Alexander Fletcher can now be added to the list. How exclusive this is in Europe is demonstrated by one's ability to identify even half a dozen amateurs in any other country. We can define this exclusivity even more, by showing that of those 80, the majority are Georgian and of Palladian persuasions. The catalyst for their work is the country house and its estate, and this defines it even more. This is not to say that amateur endeavour only focused upon country houses, but again what evidence we have shows that most amateurs were concerned with country house designs. A notable exception is Theodore Jacobsen for the East India Company House 1726, the Foundling Hospital 1742, the Royal Naval Hospital 1745 and Trinity College, Dublin 1752. I see the country house library as the nerve centre, presided over by the landed gent with his classical education.

One must allude to education because in the 16th century the lack of an education on the part of masons had placed responsibility for sophisticated design upon the classically educated gentleman. Was Dr Caius acting as an amateur when he required his programme of gates to be built in his college in Cambridge? He knew what he wanted, but I suspect that none of the fraternity of masons could have done his bidding without guidance. Apropos these gates, we might observe that Elizabethan designers used the Antique in a far more extrovert and ornamental way than did many a later architect. In reflecting upon this, it occurred to me that when I was asked to speak on the amateur and innovation – attempting to isolate those instances when the amateur was a frontiersman – that concern for the Antique set apart those amateurs who were frontiersmen from the hoipolloi. These innovators found the Antique in Vitruvius, Serlio, Palladio, Freart de Chambray, or Desgodetz etc., in classical texts such as Pliny's; in original drawings such as Palladio's of the Roman Baths; and in studies made on the Grand Tour. It seems to me that the corollary of the Antique in England is innovation, and that in this matter amateurs from say 1700 to 1780, are often in advance of more conventionally trained professionals in the way they handle the Antique.

If Dr Caius was an amateur, he was isolated in his university, for as far as I know, the next episode of amateur endeavour there was Sir James Burrough's New Building at Peterhouse in 1736, competent but dull. We must go to Oxford to find the hot bed of the amateur. Caius's equivalent a century on is Dr Henry Aldrich, who became Dean of Christ Church in 1689. Alas we do not know when he spent "considerable time" in Italy nor or who were the "eminent in architecture" he met there. We are on firmer ground when we consider his library. This was perhaps the most distinguished private library on all aspects of ancient Rome of which we know: a rich source for his great but incomplete Vitruvian treatise on civil and military architecture, the *Elementa Architecturae* which was only published as one and a half parts in 1708. By then Aldrich had designed his Peckwater Quad, seminal to the Palladian Revival in its serious reassessment of Jones in the light of Palladio. Aldrich was also seminal as a teacher: the mentor of Sir Andrew Fountaine and of Lord Herbert; and, I suspect, of Hawksmoor too if we knew more about the triangle Aldrich, George Clarke and Hawksmoor.

We need to know more about connections. Take Roger North, whose portico of the 1690s at Rougham is the first neo-Palladian portico, and the austere brick elevations of whose house conform to his sentiments about Jones. His friendship with Wren might link him to the group of Oxford amateurs, notably Clarke, on whose fringes we find Alexander Fletcher of Saltoun, whose design in 1699 for a cube shaped house is astonishingly precocious. From this design of Fletcher's we might easily move forward to James Smith and Colen Campbell, both of whom Fletcher must have known; but also to Dr David Gregory, with whom Fletcher was in correspondence. Gregory not only belongs to the circle of Hawksmoor, but also of Charles Fairfax: who in 1709 produced the Aldrich – promoted edition of Palladio's *Antiquities of Rome*. Clarke is central to these as a group, an amateur in the best sense of the word, but not an innovator. Rather he activates as conversationalist, or catalyst in the university. His designs are banal, but we should note the mysterious elevation in Clarke's hand inscribed for Lord Ranelagh, and thus before 1712. I believe this to be a copy of Ranelagh's own design for refacing his house at Chelsea designed by him in a Wrennish style in 1688, but now to be recast as a Palladian villa on the Thames. Ranelagh may have adopted a more modern and advanced style by virtue of his friendship with Lord Mar. Another Oxford connection can be identified in Hereford, with Bishop Bisce's remarkable apse in his Great Hall in the Bishop's Palace in 1713. It does not feel like a professional job. (In locating amateur endeavour, we may not necessarily say why, but can somehow sniff them out.) In omitting any account of Lord Burlington, I am reminded of Lord Chesterfield's opinion that he had demeaned himself socially for acting as a professional.

Nevertheless, Burlington was a catalyst to many, and was called the Modern Vitruvius: a title that might have been given to Aldrich, and before him to Jones. But let us pursue these Oxford connections bearing in mind the Antique, and move on to Aldrich's pupil, the friend of Burlington, Pembroke and Sir Matthew Decker, Sir Andrew Fountaine, whose extensions to his house and garden at Narford in Norfolk had been completed by 1725, when a survey of them was published by Campbell. In my opinion this is a garden redolent of the later Chiswick, for work began in 1718, and the Antique-inspired temple gardens at Chiswick with the Orange Tree Amphitheatre were not begun until the early 1720s. So at Narford we have a temple by the water, apsed canals, obelisks, and a large hippodrome-like forecourt, as well as a deer house like that at Chiswick. If much of this predates Chiswick, so does the library range that formed one side of a courtyard with the offices. The astylism of one elevation is precocious, as is the library facade, a reminder that Fountaine was praised with Burlington and Lord Herbert as one of the principal preservers and practitioners of the art of Palladianism. Later, in the early 1730s, Herbert, or the Earl of Pembroke as he then was, advised at Narford when Andien de Clermont was painting his exquisite ceilings in the Antique taste.

Burlington and his Antique-inspired work are too obvious for repetition, so I will only remind you of the York Assembly Rooms, and of the heroic designs for Parliament in 1733, a recognition by Burlington that in Palladio's Roman Bath drawings he possessed the materials for a new modern European architecture.

Let us now pursue the web of connections further. I have explored an Aldrich-to-Campbell axis, but need to comment that Campbell and Roger Morris belong to the Fountaine-Narford web, and that we have connections between Aldrich, Fountaine and Burlington, and between Fountaine and his intimate friend Pembroke. So Burlington might just form a trio here. We somehow cannot seem to discover links between Burlington and Flitcroft as amateur and amanuensis and Pembroke and Morris, although there is one design by Kent for a barge in the Wilton archives. I labour this because I believe that Pembroke's lovely Palladian Bridge at Wilton owes much to Burlington's Palladio drawings.

Chiswick, Narford, Marble Hill and Burlington's Tottenham, all had Plinaeian hippodromes in the garden, given authority in 1728 by Castell's *Villas of the Ancients*. There was also

one at Sir Thomas Robinson's Rokeby Park, Yorkshire, a place so redolent of the Antique, a "Chiswick of the North" building from 1728. Rokeby is a more authentic amateur's house than Chiswick, and we may sometimes forget that such amateurs knew their Pliny as their ABC. I am certain that Pliny is behind the creation of Castle Howard in that friendship between Lord Carlisle and Sir William Temple. Of course, Pliny was venerated by any of those amateurs who belonged to the Society of Dilettanti. Here we can make further connections.

It is very tempting to see the Society as a catalyst in amateur endeavour from its foundation around 1732, but this was not the case until after the 1750s, although we can never know what was talked about at their meetings. Nevertheless, from the 1730s the ancient world was under scrutiny. For Hawksmoor, Ancient Rome was a paper interest, but for Ambrose Phillips of Garendon in Leicestershire, the Roman monuments of Provence took his attention. He is the first British architect to make studies and drawings in the field, from 1729 to 1731, and to transpose those studies into his own house and the templescapes on his estate, building from 1732 until his premature death at the youthful age of 30 in 1737. The evocation of Ancient Rome is telling. The triumphal arch, one of two intended, the Temple of Venus, contemporary with that at Castle Howard, and one of two obelisks. For the incomplete house, Phillips transposed to Leicestershire from Montpellier, the designs he had made for the Peyrou there, a unique neo-Palladian episode in France. The connections between the style of his elevations and those by John Wood needs scrutiny.

An amateur who would become a Dilettanti only later was John Freeman of Fawley. He referred to "inventions in Gardening & Building" in February 1728 in sharing information with Governor George Pitt at Fort St George, Madras. By 1731 he had designed and built all the garden works near his house. In that year he wrote that he was "Planting trees, making theatres & building castles in the air" at nearby Henley Park. Then in 1751, as if to celebrate his election to the Dilettanti, he turned to Antique Rome for the family Mausoleum in the churchyard at Fawley. We are reminded of Thomas Robinson, 2nd Baron Grantham's project for a hill temple for his brother-in-law, John Parker of Boringdon, and might also observe that the mausoleum as a building type seems to have attracted amateurs. In the same antique category is the Guise Mausoleum at Elmore, taken out of Freart de Chambray as Howard Colvin has demonstrated. This too is redolent of amateur endeavour.

I have already mentioned the necessity for the amateur to have an executant. Jacobsen's was John Sanderson, who also acted for Sanderson Miller and Thomas Prowse; Freeman's was William Jones for the saloon at Honington. Thomas Worsley of Hovingham, Surveyor General from 1760 to 1778, gathered together a small paper museum of designs by his Works' colleagues, and used these to effect. Of course, this was Burlington's way. But Hovingham, building through the 1750s, is a highly intelligent rendition of the Antique, by Vitruvius out of Palladio, and Palladio interpreting the Antique through his own Palazzo designs. In fact, Hovingham is a Roman House in the country: the Rustic Entrance announces the Riding House as atrio, followed by the Samson Hall as tablino and the peristilo identified as the main garden facade.

The most extraordinary Roman House in Britain was Henry Fox's seaside villa near Ramsgate, in Kent, on the cliffs at Kingsgate. Fox had anticipated Worsley as Surveyor of the Works, and there is a comment that although his architect was the Welsh amateur Thomas Wynne, Lord Newborough, his first executant was John Vardy, who died in 1765, a year after Kingsgate was begun. A contemporary description fixes the source for this amazing villa as more precisely archaeological, in Tully's, that is Cicero's, Formian villa at Baiae. Kingsgate, more than any other building, sets the English amateur endeavour apart from that in any other country. This statement can be enforced by that other loony seaside Roman villa at Ashley Combe Lodge near Minehead in Somerset. This picturesque cottage of 1799, enlarged by the Earl and

Countess of Lovelace (mostly the Countess) in 1835 into an Antique roman villa, was set on a cliff promontory, and approached via a long dark tunnel cut through the cliff, debouching onto an area backed by Roman arcuated ruins and outworks. It is still there, missed by Pevsner in his search for a later Lovelace's patronage of Voysey.

Ashley should be a finale, but I prefer to end this scrutiny of amateurs with that arch-amateur of them all: Thomas Wright, the Wizard of Durham and the discoverer of the Milky Way. He spent his life moving through the intricate genealogy of families who befriended him, and wherever he went, designed buildings and gardens, in between teaching the ladies of the house mathematics, astronomy and the polite arts. He was exceptional for genius of invention: the first cottage ornés, magisterial neo-Classical villas, grand menageries, some of the earliest flower gardens, and one at Netheravon that pre-dates the famous Nuneham garden by 10 years. He is the classic case of the amateur frontiersman in innovation, and if there was one building by him that we would wish to see resurrected, it would be his own house at Byers Green, Durham, built in imitation of a Roman *villula*, with the *suggestia* or courts, a small *praetorium* for the view that took in a Roman circus restored by Wright in 1778, and inside an arrangement and ambience that would have received the imprimatur of Pliny himself.

Wright is also a case study of the amateur who leaves no evidences of methods of payment or how the executive process was implemented. His name never appears in household or building accounts, and yet we can now list perhaps as many as 30 works, for even the other day, buried in a wood at Chavenage I came across the remains of a rusticated arch that looked peculiarly Wrightian, and lo, the owner, John Stephens, appears as a subscriber to Wright's published works. Wright is the sort of *eminence grise*, the genius behind many a landed owner's building and gardening works, and I like to think that it is a quality of genius in departing from the norm that marks out the amateur intervention in British architecture, as a unique episode in European architecture.