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Beckford, Fonthill Abbey and the Picturesque

John Wilton-Ely

In terms of its formal composition, its sequence of scenic interior schemes and its calculated landscape setting, Fonthill Abbey unquestionably represents the very epitome of Picturesque architecture in Britain. In the complex genesis of its architectural design and creation – the main subject of this paper – the owner William Beckford, was to play a critical role in collaboration with James Wyatt who largely fulfilled the role of executive architect.¹ Literature was not only closely bound up with the Abbey's creation by a pioneer of the Gothic novel, but the building's considerable influence on nineteenth century architecture was to remain active long after its dramatic demise in 1825 through a number of substantial publications as well as popular souvenirs.²

Beckford's early visual training and activities prepared him to take a critical role in the design of what was to become his bid for fame and recognition after early social disgrace.³ Born in 1760, the son of Alderman Beckford, a wealthy sugar plantation owner and twice Lord Mayor of London, William grew up in his father's newly constructed Palladian mansion, later known as Fonthill Splendens, which was set within the conventional informal landscape park of contemporary fashion. No expense was spared in William's education and by the time of the alderman's death in 1770, he was receiving instruction in design and draughtsmanship from George III's former architectural tutor, Sir William Chambers. Meanwhile, the impact of another tutor, the artist Alexander Cozens and particularly of the latter's son, John Robert (who produced evocative watercolour views to record Beckford's European tours in the 1770s), gave him a considerable understanding of the advantages of free-ranging composition and the scenic drama of landscape. In 1781 Beckford devised a visionary setting for his coming of age party in Splendens, in which his father's sombre classical interiors were transformed into a scenes of hedonistic richness through effects of colour, lighting and even perfume, with the aid of the eminent stage designer, de Louthembourg. Shortly after these practical exercises in Romantic fantasy, he produced the remarkable oriental novel *Vathek* in which the caliph of that name is ultimately forced into exile by his tyranny and misdemeanours to live in a tower with 11,000 stairs. In this character's words : 'I am resolved to become a hermit and consume the residue of my days on this mountain in expiating my crimes'.⁴

In certain respects this was to prove prophetic when, in 1784, a social scandal isolated Beckford from the contemporary world with an incentive to retreat into forms of architectural refuge. After his wife died two years later, shortly after giving birth to the second of two daughters, Beckford began a decade of incessant travel, especially in Portugal and Spain. Already by 1790 his plans for ambitious buildings on his estate at Fonthill, following a new prosperity derived from his Jamaican estates, was referred to in a letter to Lady Craven : 'So I am growing rich, and mean to build Towers, and sing hymns to the powers of Heaven on their summits . . .'.⁵ It was about this time that he appears to have first

approached James Wyatt, by then one of the leading exponents of the neo-Gothic and whose Lee Priory in Kent, constructed between 1785 and 1790, showed a technical understanding of medieval styles and construction based on his extensive work as a radical restorer of major religious buildings. Lee Priory (demolished in 1955), as an important pioneering work of Picturesque gothic, showed particularly strong debts in its overall composition to the Portuguese monastery of Batalha which the architect probably knew from sketches made there by his Irish patron Colonel Conyngham on a tour in 1783.⁶ When Beckford himself visited the monastery in 1793, welcomed with a particularly theatrical reception by the Abbot as he vividly recounts, the experience was to have a profound effect on his artistic imagination. This was further strengthened by the publication two years later of Murphy's folio volume on Batalha, part inspired by Conyngham's sketches, with its detailed plan and elevations.⁷

Judging from a letter to Wyatt from Portugal in 1793 containing a detailed plan for a proposed house in Lisbon, Beckford possessed a marked ability to formulate and express his architectural ideas clearly.⁸ This scheme already contains many of the original features to be developed later at the Abbey, notably involving an uninterrupted vista through a series of spaces, such as an octagonal chamber, and culminating in a raised sanctuary featuring an image of his favourite saint, St Anthony of Padua.

By 1793 Beckford had begun to formulate specific projects for his Fonthill estate and ensured complete privacy by erecting a 12-foot wall, seven miles in length, to surround the inner domain on the pretext of excluding local hunts. Initially he appears to have intended to place a religious structure on Stop Beacon, the highest point of the Fonthill estate where his father had started to build a tower. According to a letter to Wyatt from Portugal in 1794, he announced: 'My appetite for humouring St Anthony, you see, is still so keen that I cannot live without a little tid-bid [sic] of a sanctuary to stay my stomach till the moment arrives when . . . I may carry your magnificent plan for the Chapel upon Stop's Beacon into execution'.⁹ By July of the following year, according to Joseph Farington's invaluable Diary, the proposed chapel had changed into plans for a 175-foot tower.¹⁰ No reference occurs to any religious feature inside it although Beckford is reported as having the intention of being 'buried at the top of the Lanthorn'.¹¹ However, by the time he returned to Fonthill from Portugal in June 1796, Beckford's imagination had begun to take flight and he approached Wyatt to draw up designs for an ambitious conventual building to be sited on Hinkley Hill at the other end of a prominent ridge, running north-west from Stop Beacon and overlooking his father's Palladian seat and parkland below. The germ of this idea may derive from earlier plans for a mock-gothic garden building, as described by John Rutter in 1823 as providing the first idea for the Abbey. This was to contain: 'a suite of rooms small, but amply sufficient for the enjoyment of a day whether "of sunshine or of shower". Its external characteristic was to be that of a Convent, partly in ruins and partly (perfect) . . . The chapel, the parlour, the dormitory, and one small cloister alone, appeared to have survived the period which had buried the refectory, the kitchen, and every other part of the edifice in one common ruin'.¹² Nothing could have come closer to the Revd William Gilpin's prescriptions for a Picturesque composition.

Work was well under way by the same autumn and in surviving correspondence Beckford describes on 12 October 1796 how 'Wyatt has been doing wonders according to custom, and has given the great Hall another push 20 feet or so'.¹³ In November, Beckford wrote to his mother that 'I have extended the front of the Abbey in the Woods from the dimensions you

saw us working upon, to near two hundred feet, and a good part of the building has already reached the first floor'.¹⁴ By 2 February 1797, he was to be more specific still in a playful letter to his kinsman, Sir William Hamilton: 'I am staying my stomach with a little pleasure-building in the shape of an abbey, *which is already half finished*. It contains appartments in the most gorgeous Gothic style with windows of painted glass, a chapel for blessed St Anthony (66 ft. diameter and 72 ft. high), a gallery 185 ft. in length, and a tower 145 feet high.'¹⁵



Fig. 1 J. M. W. Turner after James Wyatt, *Perspective view of Fontill Abbey from the south-west*. c.1799. Watercolour. Bolton Museum and Art Gallery.

These descriptions and basic dimensions correspond with drawings which appear to represent the first stage in design for Fonthill Abbey – a sketch elevation from the south, in the RIBA Drawings Collection, and a watercolour perspective, probably made by Turner around 1799 from a discarded design and now in Bolton Art Gallery.¹⁶ (Fig. 1) This latter probably reflects the finished design exhibited by Wyatt at the Royal Academy in the summer of 1797: 'Design for a building now erecting at Fonthill, the seat of William Beckford, Esq., in the style of a Gothic Abbey'.¹⁷

The principal features of the initial Fonthill Abbey, which consisted of a chapel in the form of an octagon topped by a squat tower and spire, were strongly indebted to the mortuary chapel of King John I of Portugal at Batalha.¹⁸ The Fonthill octagon extended to the west with a hall having its floor on ground level, and to the south with a lengthy gallery on the same upper level as the chapel. A suite of residential apartments extended west from the southern end of the gallery and this, in turn, was linked to the hall by a cloister range.

Given Beckford's developed taste for the dramatic, this design clearly proved inadequate,

and by August 1797 Farington reported the original design was now 'much enlarged' and also referred to developing ideas for the Abbey's interior which involved four gothic sculptures by Nollekens, Flaxman, Westmacott and Rossi respectively.¹⁹ The following day his *Diary* refers to the nature of this enlarged design in which 'the Spire of the new Gothic building is to be 300 feet high'.²⁰ This would appear to be the basis of the composition exhibited by Wyatt at the Academy in the summer of 1798: 'North-west view of a building now erecting at Fonthill . . . in the style of a Gothic Abbey'.²¹ The fine watercolour perspective by Turner, now in the Yale Center for British Art, is almost certainly the design exhibited and shows a spire to rival that of nearby Salisbury, now surmounting the octagon.²² (Fig. 2)

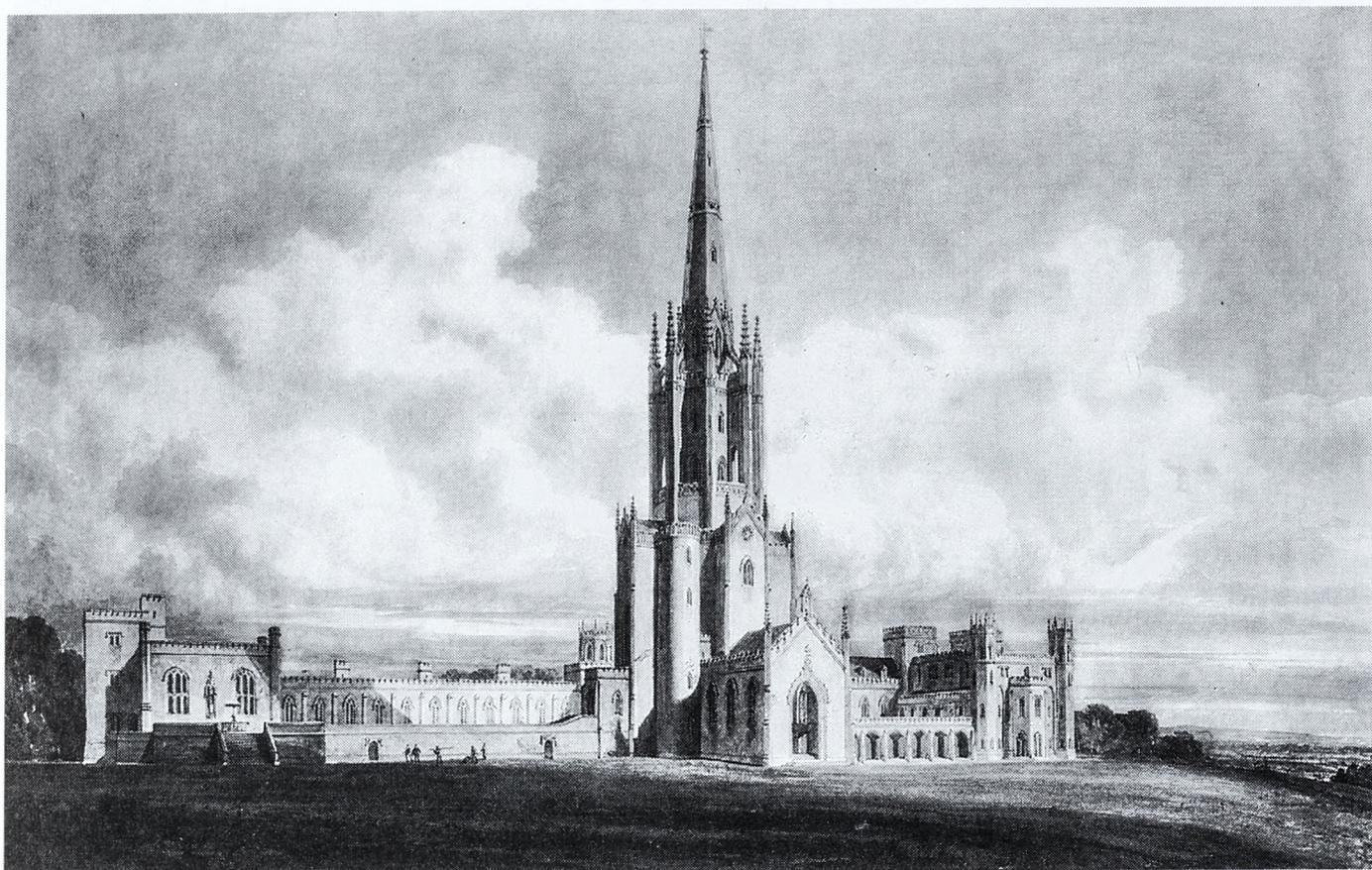


Fig. 2 J. M. W. Turner after James Wyatt, *Perspective design for Fonthill Abbey from the north-west. c.1798.* Watercolour. Yale Centre for British Art, New Haven.

What appears to be a transitional phase in design by Wyatt is to be found in a sketch elevation from the west, also in the RIBA.²³

By now Beckford's imagination knew no bounds and a fresh stage in design appears to have been reached by the winter of 1798, exhibited at the Academy the following summer as: 'View of a building now erecting at Fonthill . . . in the style of a Gothic Abbey'.²⁴ Some idea of its general appearance is suggested by a detailed list of dimensions provided by *The Salisbury and Winchester Journal* on 24 December 1798.²⁵ While largely corresponding with the main features of the Yale perspective, reference is also made in the newspaper to a 'choir', by implication to the east of the octagon, 140 feet long, 56 feet high and 28 feet wide.²⁶ Making allowances for the unreliable nature of such 'leaked' information to the press, a considerable structure capable of housing such a space significantly appears to the east of a sketch perspective by Wyatt of the Abbey from the north-west, in the RIBA,

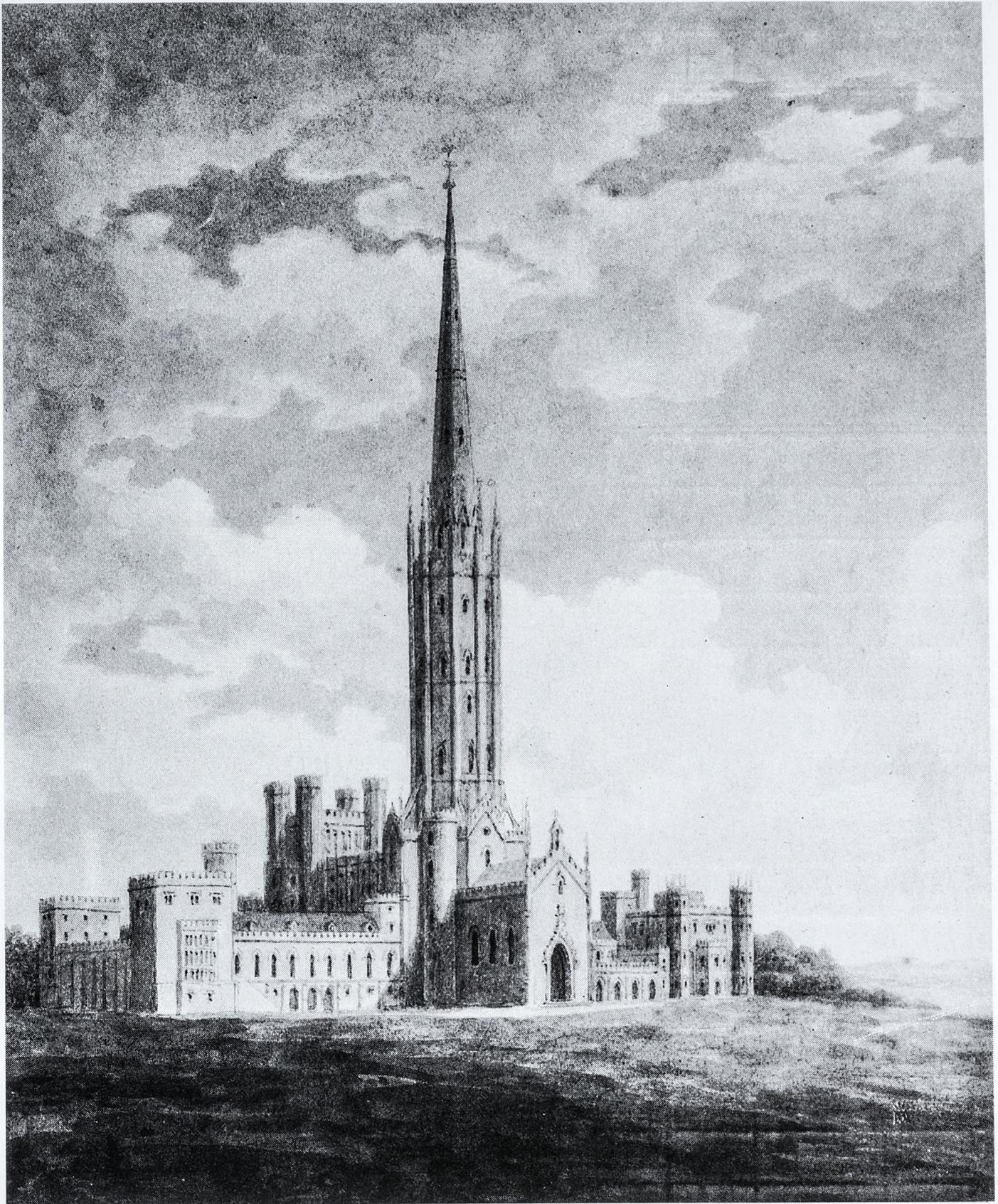


Fig. 3 Charles Wild after James Wyatt, Perspective view of Fonthill Abbey from the north-west. Watercolour. Courtesy of the Board of Trustees of the V & A.

possessing an even taller octagon tower and spire; a composition later rendered into a more precise watercolour by Charles Wild, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum.²⁷ (Fig. 3)

The intended function of this east wing, meanwhile, is probably explained in Farington's

report of a conversation of 16 November 1798 when Wyatt saw Beckford off to Portugal from Falmouth:

'New building to be called Fonthill Abbey [the first surviving mention of the name as such] – the Spire to be 17 feet higher than the top of St Peter's at Rome. The Abbey to be endowed, & Cathedral services to be performed in the most splendid manner that the Protestant religion will admit. A Gallery leading from the top of the Church to be decorated with paintings the work of English Artists. Beckford's own tomb to be placed at the end of this Gallery – as having been an encourager of Art'.²⁸

According to a later conversation with the architect, recorded by Farington on 22 December:

'Wyatt told me that Mr Beckford's Gallery which is to lead to the Revelation Chamber, in the Abbey now building, is to be 125 feet long and 12 feet wide. It is to be wainscotted with Ebony, and in compartments are to be Historical Pictures by English Artists . . . The Revelation Chamber is to have walls 5 feet thick in which are to be recesses to admit coffins. Beckford's coffin is to be placed opposite the door. The room is not to be entered by strangers, to be viewed through wire gratings. The floor is to be Jasper. This Gallery and room are to be over the Chapel. West is to paint all the pictures for this room, and is now limited to £1000 a year while he is proceeding with the pictures.'²⁹

Given the widespread impact of Batalha upon Fonthill, it seems likely that Beckford's plans for an impressive tomb chamber, enriched with costly materials and works of art, was inspired by the setting of the funerary chapel of King Emmanuel which (similar to that of Henry VII in Westminster Abbey) was approached from the east end of the church, as shown in Murphy's plan.³⁰ In Wild's watercolour composition derived from the RIBA sketch perspective (Fig. 3), moreover, the proposed wing is shown with a group of polygonal turrets not unlike those in Murphy's reconstruction of King Emmanuel's unfinished chapel.³¹ At this stage of design, therefore, as Beckford's ever changing ideas were translated into realisable structures by Wyatt, the original idea of entombment at the top of a tower on Stop Beacon was now to be incorporated into an apotheosis of the owner as art patron.

Through 1798–99 there are frequent references to commissions to embellish the Revelation Chamber and Gallery, particularly involving the President of the Royal Academy, Benjamin West, through whose considerable influence with George III Beckford hoped to achieve his social rehabilitation. While Beckford was eventually to own at least six of West's paintings from the *Book of Revelation* (in the painter's 'Dread Manner'), this eccentric scheme was finally discarded even though he continued to contemplate the idea until at least 1812 and eventually used the name, Revelation Chamber, for the room containing West's pictures in the executed building.³²

Work meanwhile continued on the construction of the Abbey according to the design of 1799. This is clearly indicated by some remarkably detailed studies made by Turner that autumn in preparation for a set of commissioned watercolours of the Abbey in its landscape setting, exhibited at the Academy in the summer of 1800.³³ These sketches record the upper portion of the octagon tower as a flimsy structure, largely of wood and probably faced with Wyatt's new synthetic material 'compo-cement'. Erected with all the haste of Beckford's impetuosity during the unfavourable climate of winter, structural problems now began to feature increasingly in accounts and part of the tower fell down in a gale the following May 1800. While of no serious consequence to the general progress, this episode coincided with a new phase in design.

Undaunted, Beckford vowed in a letter to Sir Isaac Heard of 21 May that:

'We shall rise again more gloriously than ever provided the Sublime Wyatt will graciously deign to bestow a little more commonplace Attention upon what is supposed his favourite Structure. The

Crash and the Loss sound magnificently in the Newspaper. I neither heard the one, nor feel the other'.³⁴

A fresh incentive, meanwhile, was provided by the unique visit in December 1800 of Nelson, freshly triumphant from his victory on the Nile and accompanied by Sir William and Emma Hamilton with Benjamin West. The success of this carefully staged event (reported at considerable length in *The Gentleman's Magazine*), which took place after nightfall on 24 December, with all the Picturesque devices of unfolding perspectives, emotive lighting and evocative sounds, probably confirmed Beckford in his intention to inhabit the Abbey permanently.³⁵ By 1801 work was begun on demolishing the colonnades and one of the wings of Splendens, leaving the remaining wing for temporary residence. Fittings and unwanted contents were dispersed in two sales of 1801 and 1802. However, Wyatt's habitual dilatoriness and increasing absences from the site due to his growing commitments as Surveyor-General of the King's Works, as well as grave financial problems caused by the war-time economy, forced operations to cease between 1802 and 1805. Schemes for future development, however, continued nonetheless, and on 3 September 1803, Lady Ann Hamilton records in her diary various dimensions, including that of the proposed north wing which was to provide an uninterrupted vista of 312 feet through the octagon from the far end of the existing south gallery.³⁶ This accords with the Yale perspective (Fig. 2) rather than the related RIBA elevation which appears to exclude the wing.

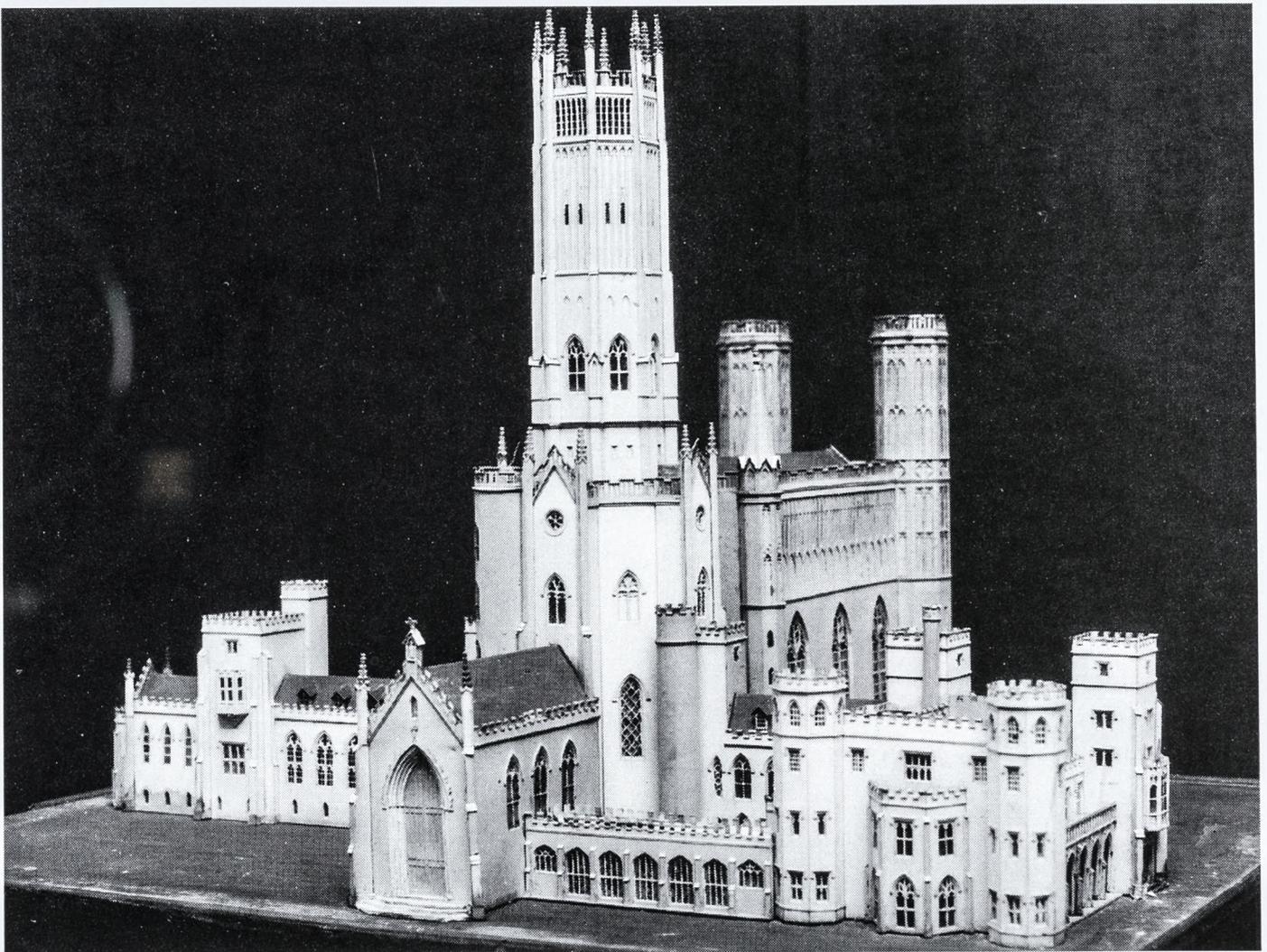


Fig. 4 Model of Fonthill Abbey from the south-west. Private Collection.

A new phase of construction commenced in 1805 when Wyatt drafted in government workmen to augment the local labour force, although of greater urgency was the replacement of the rapidly deteriorating artificial stone or 'compo-cement' favoured by the architect (graphically referred to in *The Gentleman's Magazine* of 1806).³⁷ In order to sustain the new momentum, Beckford now resolved to demolish the main part of his father's house in November 1806 and appears by now to have had a master design by him in the form of a model, as referred to in a letter of 28 November to the Marquess of Douglas. As he wrote: 'if you could see the model of the entire Abbey – and were asked – will you, for the sake of a good common House in an uncommonly bad situation – renounce the execution of such a plan – I think you wd. give way and join with me and Wyatt in full accord.'³⁸ Almost certainly Beckford is referring to the striking papier-mâché model now surviving in a private collection.³⁹ (Fig. 4)

Finally, by the summer of 1807 the southern portion of the Abbey was sufficiently complete for Beckford to move in although his extensive correspondence from this time onwards indicates that the tower was still under scaffolding until at least 1809 and much of the interior incomplete.⁴⁰ Probably during this period the great western hall was converted from its original intention as a banqueting chamber into a noble entrance with a flight of steps leading up to the main floor of the octagon. The development of this new approach may possibly be connected also with the intention to proceed with the idea of the Revelation Chamber on the axis to the east. James Storer's book, *A Description of Fonthill Abbey, Wiltshire*, published in 1812, states that 'We are told it is the intention of Mr Beckford to build a superb chapel, directly opposite to the great hall'.⁴¹ Moreover, by the time that Storer illustrated the Abbey from the south-west, work had, in fact, been completed on the northern wing.

With the price of sugar rising to a record level by 1814 in anticipation of Napoleon's defeat and the ending of the Continental blockade, Beckford hinted at another major phase in development in a letter of 16 August (after dismissing the absentee Wyatt as that 'infamous swine'): 'I have given my consent to a tiny piece of work, a trivial operation which is going to begin tomorrow and will be finished in two or three months – building gently, and oh! so slowly, and with all the economy of a Father Guardian of the poorest of monasteries'.⁴² This characteristically facetious understatement almost certainly refers to the start on the remaining and largest extension of the Abbey, the eastern transept. While ideas for such a wing had first been proposed in 1799, the extremely awkward scale of the executed structure, which closely follows the model (Fig. 4), suggests an even greater involvement by Beckford himself, bearing in mind the elusive Wyatt's outstanding abilities in compositional grouping. After much absence, however, the architect appears to have taken part in supervising the outer walls in building the transept in 1812, according to Beckford's correspondence, but in September of the following year he was killed in a carriage accident. Beckford was now to struggle on alone, apart from occasional advice from the architect's relations, especially Jeffry, the future Sir Jeffry Wyattville.

The final stages of work on the transept with a lofty parapet 95 feet high and twin octagonal turrets, each 120 feet high, were matched by the speed of its construction since the outer walls were completed by 1812, the turrets and roof by 1815, while the main, first floor rooms were completed by 1817–18. By then, however, Beckford's enthusiasm was rapidly diminishing as fresh weaknesses in the Abbey's structure began to show. A sample of the hatred poured out in correspondence is shown by a letter from Beckford's companion

Franchi to Douglas of 18 June 1814 when he described how: 'almost all that the villainous Bagasse [the customary nickname used for Wyatt over some years] built has been dismantled (to forestall finding ourselves buried in its rotten ruins) . . . this is the work upon which we have been engaged for the last two years.'⁴³ Lack of suitable living rooms compounded his mounting disillusionment and as late as 15 October 1817 Beckford wrote: 'At present I have nowhere to accommodate a living soul. For the dead there is room enough'.⁴⁴ Admittedly, by its final completion in 1818, the Abbey had 18 bedrooms as well as elaborate services on the ground floor and kitchens under the eastern transept, but it was the built-in obsolescence of the structure which had begun to tell on Beckford's spirits. In a letter of 17 October 1817, when work was nearing completion, he was tempted to capitulate after twenty years of struggle and wrote 'My resolution to abandon the theatre of so much useless labour is fortified every hour that I stay here'.⁴⁵ In February 1819 the south-western tower with his living quarters started to crumble and had to be totally rebuilt, while financial difficulties were compounded when the cost of sugar fell below the cost of production. No longer able to cope further, Beckford placed the entire estate on the market in 1822 with Christie's, some 7,200 copies of the catalogue being sold in the course of mounting public interest.⁴⁶ However, two days before the actual sale advertised for 8 October took place, he sold the Abbey by private treaty to a retired gunpowder millionaire, John Farquhar. Two sales of contents by Phillips were to take place in 1823, also attracting enormous crowds and substantial press coverage.

Beckford's final decision to leave the Abbey thus resulted in the first opportunity for the building to be viewed in detail by the outside world. (As he was to write: 'I am rid of the Holy Sepulchre, which no longer interested me since its profanation'.)⁴⁷ Many came out of a curiosity born from decades of rumour and speculation about a building, its interiors and contents which had already assumed a mythic reputation. Reactions were predictably mixed and for William Hazlitt in a particularly savage account, published in the *London Magazine* in November 1822, the Abbey represented: 'a desert of magnificence, a glittering waste of idleness'.⁴⁸ However, for those keenly alive to Fonthill's Picturesque character and its setting within the landscape, few were more struck than John Constable who records how during a visit made in August 1823:

'I wandered up to the top of the tower. Salisbury, at fifteen miles off, darted up into the sky like a needle, and the woods and lakes were magnificent; and then the wild region of the downs to the north . . . The entrance to Fonthill and the interior are beautiful. Imagine Salisbury Cathedral, or indeed any beautiful Gothic building, magnificently fitted up with crimson and gold, ancient pictures, and statues in almost every niche; large gold boxes for relics, etc . . . on the whole it is a strange, ideal, romantic place; quite fairy-land. The spot is chosen in the midst of mountains and wilds.'⁴⁹

Predictably such universal interest called for guides and souvenir publications. The new books which celebrated the Abbey's splendours – notably, John Rutter's *Description of Fonthill Abbey and Demesne* 1822, John Britton's *Graphical and Literary Illustrations of Fonthill Abbey, Wiltshire* and John Rutter's *Delineations of Fonthill and its Abbey*, both of 1823 – were to record a building of unparalleled scenic drama, ranging from the Picturesque to the Sublime. (Plate 1, piv.). They also recorded the lineaments of a doomed building. Already by 1821 *The Gentleman's Magazine* had observed that the 'tower is acknowledged to be a weak and dangerous structure, and so tottering are the eight surmounting pinnacles that they are held on their bases by strong iron bars to the no less disparagement of the building than of the builder'.⁵¹ When the architect C. F. Porden came to explore the Abbey in September

1823, he wrote : 'Would to God it had been more substantially built ! But as it is, its ruins will tell a tale of wonder'.⁵²

Beckford by now had just settled in Bath and, two years later, begun his final tower, to the designs of the young Henry Goodridge, which was completed by 1827.⁵³ From this Italianate work, which rose to a height of 154 feet on the summit of Lansdown Hill, some 800 feet above sea level, it might have been just possible to see the top of the Abbey. However, in 1825, he was summoned to the death bed of Wyatt's contractor at Fonthill who confessed his failure to lay adequate foundations according to the specifications for the octagon. Conscientiously Beckford promptly passed on this disturbing information to the new owner. Although Farquhar dismissed the warning as of slight concern, considering the tower would last his lifetime, the dramatic nemesis was to take place the same year at three o'clock in the afternoon of 21 December. Detailed accounts of the event were published subsequently by *The Gentleman's Magazine* in 1825 and *Gardener's Magazine* in 1835. Due to the manner of the tower's collapse upon itself, (which was described in the latter account as not only as 'something remarkable' but 'very beautiful'), most of the western hall was demolished while the remainder was left virtually intact.⁵⁴ (Fig. 5) Thus responding as to some natural law, Beckford's epic structure provided the ultimate Picturesque composition by reverting to its original conception – a ruined convent in the woods.



Fig. 5 W. Westall after J. Buckler, *Ruins of Fonthill Abbey in 1823*. Lithograph.

- 23 Letter from Price to Samuel Rogers, July 26 1824. In Clayden (1889) as note 22 p. 384.
- 24 Letter from Price to Samuel Rogers, May 25 1823. In Clayden (1889) as note 22 p. 360.
- 25 Uvedale Price *Essays on the Picturesque, as compared with the Sublime and the Beautiful; and on the Use of studying Pictures for the Purpose of improving real Landscape* London 1794; 1810 edition, Volume I p. 345.
- 26 Price as note 25 p. 264.
- 27 Price as note 25 p. 266.
- 28 Price as note 25 p. 266.
- 29 Price as note 25 pp. 266–7 fn.
- 30 See Susanne Seymour, Stephen Daniels and Charles Watkins *Estate and empire: Sir George Cornwall's management of Moccas, Herefordshire and La Taste, Grenada, 1771–1819* Department of Geography, University of Nottingham, Working Paper 28 (1994).
- 31 Uvedale Price *An essay on the modern pronunciation of the Greek and Latin languages* Baxter, Oxford 1827. p. 241.

BECKFORD, FONTHILL ABBEY AND THE PICTURESEQUÉ

APPENDIX A

According to an account of the theatrical circumstances of the Nelson visit to Fonthill in *The Gentleman's Magazine*, LXXI, pt. 1 (Jan.–June, 1801) pp. 297–98.

'The Company being assembled by five o'clock [at Fonthill Splendens], a number of carriages waited before the house to receive them. The several parties, as arranged for each, took their places. Lord Nelson was loudly huzzaed by the multitude as he entered the first coach. They all proceeded slowly and in order, as the dusk of the evening was growing into darkness. In about three quarters of an hour, soon after having entered the great wall which incloses the abbey-woods, the procession passed a noble Gothic arch. At this point the company was supposed to enter the Abbot's domaine, and hence upon a road winding through thick woods of pine and fir, brightly illuminated by innumerable lamps hung in the trees, and by flambaus moving with the carriages, they proceeded betwixt two divisions of the Fonthill volunteers; accompanied by their band playing solemn marches, the effect of which was much heightened by the continued roll of drums placed at different distances on the hills. What impression at this dark hour, the blaze of lights, partly stationary and partly moving, as reflected from the windows of the carrages or gleaming on the military armour, together with music echoing through the woods; what impression, I say, this *ensemble* of light, sound, and motion, must have made on those who could quietly contemplate it all at a distance, may be

left to imagination, without any attempt to describe it

The company on their arrival at the Abbey could not fail to be struck with the increasing splendor of lights and their effects, contrasted with the deep shades which fell on the walls, battlements, and turrets, of the different groups of the edifice. Some parts of the light struck on the walls and arches of the great tower, till it vanished by degrees into an awful gloom at its summit; over which, mounted on a staff of 50 feet, the broad sheet [The Vice-Admiral's flag, in compliment to Lord Nelson] of colours could at some moments be discerned, by catching lights mysteriously waving in the air

[At the end of the evening] the company delighted and charmed broke up, and departed at 11 o'clock, to sup at the Mansion-house [i.e. Splendens]. On leaving this strange nocturnal scene of vast buildings and extensive forest, now rendered dimly and partially visible by the declining light of lamps and torches, and the twinkling of a few scattered stars in a clouded sky, the company seemed, as soon as they had passed the sacred boundary of the great wall, as if wakng from a dream, or just freed from the influence of some magic spell'.

APPENDIX B

A contemporary account of the tower's fall was subsequently published in *The Gentleman's Magazine*, XCV (July–Dec. 1825), p. 557, as follows:

FONTHILL ABBEY

We lament to state that this splendid architectural structure has become a pile of ruins, of which the annexed letter, dated Fonthill Gifford, Dec. 21 gives some particulars:-

I embrace this opportunity of giving you the earliest intelligence of the fall of that fine (but flimsy) architectural structure, Fonthill Abbey. The Tower fell in at three o'clock this afternoon, destroying the Hall, the whole of the octagon, and great part of the Galleries, North and South, together with the first crimson room, having quietly dsconded into the fountain court, leaving the grand entrance standing with the organ *in statu quo*, and the statue of the late Alderman Beckford in its niche, as if it remained to point to the ruins of his son's ambition. Only one accident occurred, although the servants were engaged in taking out some of the windows, and had fortunately just escaped in time to avoid being buried in the ruins. Mr Farquhar had taken the precaution to move to the East wing, together with Mrs Mortimer and her children. The latter had been in the daily habit of playing in the galleries.

A fuller and somewhat more embellished account followed a year later in *The Gardener's Magazine*, XI, (Sept. 1835), in 'Notes on Gardens and Country Seats', which was probably written by its editor, J. C. Loudon:

'The manner in which the tower fell may be mentioned as something remarkable. It had given indications of falling for some time, and the more valuable parts of the windows and other articles had been removed. Mr Farquhar, however, who then resided in one angle of the building, and who was in a very infirm state of health, could not be brought to believe that there was any danger. He was wheeled out in his chair on the lawn in front, about half an hour before it fell; and though he saw the cracks, and the deviation of the central tower from the perpendicular, he treated the idea of its coming down as ridiculous. He was carried back to his room, however, and the tower fell almost immediately. From the manner in which it fell, from the lightness of the materials of which it was constructed, and partly also from a number of workmen having been for some days making a noise in taking down articles, which it was supposed by Mr Farquhar's nephew the tower would injure if it fell, neither Mr Farquhar nor the servants, who were in the kitchen preparing dinner, knew that it had fallen; though the immense collection of dust which rose into the atmosphere has assembled almost all the inhabitants of the village, and had given the alarm even as far as Wardour Castle. Only one man (who died in 1833) saw it fall. He is said to have described its manner of falling as very beautiful; it first sank perpendicularly and slowly, and then burst and spread over the roofs of the adjoining wings on every side, but rather more on the south-west than on the others. The cloud of dust which arose was enormous, and such as completely to darken the air for a considerable distance around for several minutes. Such was the concussion in the interior of the building that one man was forced along a passage, as if he had been in an air-gun, to the distance of 30 ft., among dust so thick as to be felt. Another, on the outside, was in the like manner carried to some distance. Fortunately, no one was seriously injured. With all this, it is almost incredible that neither Mr Farquhar nor the servants in the kitchen should have heard the tower fall, or known that it had fallen, till they saw through the windows the people of the village who had assembled to see the ruins.

.... Mr Farquhar, it is said, could scarcely be convinced that the tower was down; and when he was so, he said he was glad of it, for that now the house would not be too large for him to live in. Mr Beckford, when told at Bath, by his servant, that the tower had fallen, merely observed, that it had made an obeisance to Mr Farquhar, which it had never done to him.'

[The author is indebted to both Mr Jon Millington and to Mr Stephen Clarke for their communications on the above descriptions.]

1. Certain elements of this paper are drawn from the following material published by the author when in the process of exploring the role of an original

architectural model for the Abbey, first exhibited in the exhibition, *William Beckford* (catalogue ed. P. Bishop), Holburne of Menstrie Museum, Bath, 1966 (no.19): J. Wilton-Ely, 'A Model for Fonthill Abbey', in *The Country Seat: Studies in the History of the British Country House presented to Sir John Summerson*, eds. H.M. Colvin and J. Harris, London, 1970, pp. 199–204; idem, 'Beckford the Builder', in the catalogue of the exhibition, *William Beckford* (ed. J. Berry), Salisbury and Bath, 1976, pp. 35–57; idem, 'The Genesis and Evolution of Fonthill Abbey', *Architectural History*, 23 (1980), pp. 40–51. Among the many who have provided advice and material during these researches, I owe much to the late Boyd Alexander, Philippa Bishop, Stephen Clarke, Martha Hamilton-Phillips, John Harris, James Lees-Milne, Professor Thomas McCormick, Jon and Pat Millington, Professor W. Reiff, Dr Christopher Thacker, and Dr Clive Wainwright; also members of the Beckford Tower Trust, Bath, and the staff of the Bolton Museum and Art Gallery, the British Library, the Departments of Prints and Drawings of the British Museum and of the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Drawings Collection of the Royal Institute of British Architects, and the Yale Center for British Art, New Haven.

- 2 For a detailed study of the wide range of publications and mementoes occasioned by the Abbey, see exhibition catalogue, *Souvenirs of Fonthill Abbey* (by J. Millington), Beckford's Tower, Lansdown, Bath, 1994.
- 3 Among the extensive biographical studies of Beckford, particularly informative on his artistic training and abilities are J.W. Oliver, *Life of William Beckford*. London, 1932; H.A.N. Brockman, *The Caliph of Fonthill*. London, 1956; B. Alexander, *England's Wealthiest Son*. London, 1962; J. Lees-Milne, *William Beckford* Tisbury, 1976; and B.Fothergill, *Beckford of Fonthill*. London, 1979. Beckford's masterpiece is examined within the Picturesque tradition in D. Watkin, *The English Vision. The Picturesque in Architecture, Landscape and Garden Design*. London, 1982, pp. 102–8, while the exceptional progression of scenic interiors (intentionally excluded from this paper) and carefully integrated collections are evaluated in C. Wainwright, *The Romantic Interior: The British Collector at Home, 1750–1850*. London and New Haven, 1989, pp. 108–46.
- 4 W. Beckford, *Vathek* [Lausanne, 1787] from *Three Gothic novels*, ed. P. Fairclough. London, 1968, p. xx.
- 5 Alexander, op. cit., pp. 156–7.
- 6 In 1785 Wyatt had been working at Slane Castle, County Meath for Colonel Conyngham who visited Batalha in 1783, a fact first pointed out by

- John Harris. See B. Alexander, 'Fonthill, Wiltshire' – II, *Country Life* (1 Dec. 1966), p. 1432.
- 7 *Plans, elevations, sections and views of the Church of Batalha in the Province of Estramadura in Portugal, with the History and description by Fr. Luis de Sousa* [translated with] *an introductory discourse on the 'Principles of Gothic Architecture'* by J.C. Murphy. London, 1795.
 - 8 See Alexander, op. cit., pp. 160–1 where the sketch is illustrated opposite p. 118.
 - 9 Brockman, op. cit., p. 94.
 - 10 *The Diary of Joseph Farington*, eds. K. Garlick and A. Macintyre, Vols. I and II. London, 1978. A sketch of the plan and elevation of the proposed tower is also included.
 - 11 Ibid.
 - 12 J. Rutter, *Delineations of Fonthill and its Abbey*. London, 1823, p. 109.
 - 13 Alexander, op. cit., p. 159.
 - 14 Brockman, op. cit., pp. 95.
 - 15 Alexander, op. cit., p. 159.
 - 16 J. Wyatt, *Sketch elevation of Fonthill Abbey from the South*, pencil and wash, 23 × 16.5 cm. ed. D. Linstrum, *Catalogue of the Drawings Collection of the R.I.B.A.: The Wyatt Family*. London, 1973. p. 38 (8/1); J.M.W. Turner after J. Wyatt, *Perspective view of Fonthill Abbey from the south-west*, watercolour, 49.3 × 75.8 cm. The latter was purchased by Bolton Art Gallery in 1948 from the Fine Art Society and had previously been in the collections of the Duke of Hamilton and Ralph Brocklebank (communication by Miss Elizabeth Hemingway, Bolton Art Gallery).
 - 17 *Royal Academy*, 1797, no. 1143.
 - 18 See Murphy, op. cit., *The South Elevation of the mausoleum of King John Ist. at Batalha*.
 - 19 *Farington Diary*, op. cit., III, p. 880.
 - 20 Ibid, p. 918.
 - 21 *Royal Academy*, 1798, no. 955.
 - 22 J.M.W. Turner after J. Wyatt, *Perspective of Fonthill Abbey from the north-west*, watercolour, 67 × 105 cm. Yale Center for British Art (B1975.4.1880). In the catalogue of the exhibition, *Country Houses in Great Britain*, Yale Center for British Art. New Haven, 1979. pp. 81–2 (no. 73), Andrew Wilton confirms the hypothesis that this is the Royal Academy 1798 design by drawing attention to a contemporary label on the backboard: 'North West View of a Building/Erecting at Fonthill in Wiltshire/the Seat of Wm. Beckford Esq/ in the Style of a Gothic Abbey/ James Wyatt, R.A.'
 - 23 J. Wyatt, *Sketch elevation of Fonthill Abbey from the west*, pencil and wash, 21.5 × 17 cm. Linstrum, op. cit., (8/2).
 - 24 *Royal Academy*, 1799, no. 1016.
 - 25 Brockman, op. cit., p. 111.
 - 26 The choir would have to extended to the east since the gallery is given as 308 in total length.
 - 27 J. Wyatt, *Sketch perspective of Fonthill Abbey from the north-west*, pencil and wash, 24 × 18 cm. Linstrum, op.cit. (8/3). Charles Wild (1781–1835), *Fonthill Abbey from the north-west*, c.1799, watercolour, 29.2 × 23.5 cm., Victoria and Albert Museum (E 84–1918).
 - 28 *Farington Diary*, III, p. 1091.
 - 29 Ibid., p. 1117.
 - 30 See Murphy, op. cit., *A General Plan of the Church and Royal Monastery of Batalha*.
 - 31 Idem, *Design for Completing the Mausoleum of King Emanuel*.
 - 32 For Wyatt's 'Revelation' paintings, see M.F. Rogers, 'Benjamin West and the Caliph: two paintings for Fonthill Abbey', *Apollo*, LXXXIII (June, 1966), pp. 420–5; M. Hamilton-Phillips, 'Benjamin West and William Beckford: Some projects for Fonthill', *Metropolitan Museum Journal*, New York, 15, (1981), pp. 157–74.
 - 33 The 'Fonthill Sketchbook', in the Turner Bequest, now housed in the Clore Gallery, contains two particularly revealing sketches by the artist: *Fonthill Abbey under construction from the south*, pencil, 33 × 47.5 cm. and *Fonthill Abbey under construction from the south-west*, pencil, 33 × 47.5 cm. See A.J. Finberg, *Complete Inventory of the Drawings in the Turner Bequest*, British Museum. London, 1909. p. 120, xlvi, sheets 1 and 5. See also Wilton-Ely, 'A Model for Fonthill Abbey', op. cit., pp. 201 and 204 (note 9). For the finished watercolours, see E.G. Cundall, 'Turner drawings of Fonthill Abbey', *Burlington Magazine*, xxix (April 1916). pp. 16–21.
 - 34 Brockman, op. cit., pp. 103–4.
 - 35 *The Gentleman's Magazine*, April 1801, pp. 297. [see Appendix A]
 - 36 From Lady Ann Hamilton's unpublished *Diary*. Kindly communicated by the late Boyd Alexander.
 - 37 *The Gentleman's Magazine* (1806), II, p. 1128. A further reference by the same author to the Abbey's deterioration occurs in the *Magazine* the following year: (1807), I, p. 326
 - 38 Quoted in Brockman, op. cit., p. 135.
 - 39 For detailed comments on the model concerned, made of papier-mache (length 82.5, width 67.5, height 65.65 cm), see Wilton-Ely, 'A Model for Fonthill Abbey', op.cit.; idem, 'The Genesis and Evolution of Fonthill Abbey', op. cit., pp. 46 and 50 (note 35).
 - 40 Beckford's surviving correspondence from the Abbey is published in B. Alexander, *Life at Fonthill, 1807–1822*. London, 1957.
 - 41 Storer, op. cit., p. 9.
 - 42 Alexander, op. cit., p. 127.

- 43 Ibid., p. 150.
- 44 Ibid., p. 225.
- 45 Ibid., p. 226.
- 46 For details of the various sales at Fonthill as well as the history and influence of Beckford's exceptional collections, see C. Wainwright, *op. cit.*; also Millington, *op. cit.*
- 47 Lees-Milne, *op. cit.*, p. 75.
- 48 W. Hazlitt, *The London Magazine*, Nov., 1822, quoted in *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe, London, 1940. XVIII, pp. 173–80.
- 49 J. Constable, letter to his wife, 29 Aug. 1823, quoted in C.R. Leslie, *Memoirs of the Life of John Constable*, London, 1951, p. 105.
- 50 For the contemporary publications on the Abbey, see J. Harris, 'English Country House Guides, 1740–1840' in *Concerning Architecture: Essays on Architectural Writers and Writing presented to Nikolaus Pevsner*, ed. J. Summerson. London, 1968. pp. 68–9, 71; and more extensively in Millington, *op. cit.*, 11–13.
- 51 *The Gentleman's Magazine* (1821), II, p. 495.
- 52 Alexander, *England's Wealthiest Son*, *op. cit.*, p. 167.
- 53 For Beckford, Goodridge and Lansdown Tower, Bath, together with related buildings and garden design, see Lees-Milne, *op. cit.*, pp. 77–93. See also J. Millington, *Beckford's Tower, Bath*, 5th edn., Bath, 1986.
- 54 *The Gentleman's Magazine* (Dec., 1825), p. 557; *Gardener's Magazine*, XI, (1835) pp. 446–7 [see Appendix B].

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- Brent Elliott, *Victorian Gardens*, Batsford, 1986.
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- Edward Harwood, 'William Aislaby's garden at Hackfall', *Journal of Garden History*, 7: 4, Oct–Dec 1987, pp. 307–411.
- Hawkstone: A Short History and Guide*, Hawkstone Park Leisure, 1993.
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- Michael Symes, 'Nature as the Bride of Art: The Design and Structure of Painshill', *British and American Gardens in the Eighteenth Century*, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Williamsburg, 1984.

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SOANE AND THE PICTURESQUE: THE PHILOSOPHY OF ASSOCIATION

- 1 A welcome exception is the account in John Archer, *The Literature of British Domestic Architecture: 1715–1842*, Cambridge, Mass., and London 1985, pp. 46–54, with full bibliographical references to modern literature on the philosophy of association.
- 2 See Morris R. Brownell, *Alexander Pope and the Arts of Georgian England*, Oxford 1978.
- 3 For an account of the significance of this Lockean essay, see Ernest L. Tuveson, *The Imagination as a Means of Grace: Locke and the Aesthetics of Romanticism*, Berkeley & Los Angeles 1960, ch. V, 'The Pleasures of the Imagination'.
- 4 BAL MSS, Cha 1/8.xix. where he jotted down headings such as, 'faculties of the mind and soul'.
- 5 *Spectator*, 8 vols, 1767 (SM GL 22G); Addison's essay is in vol. VI, pp. 62–106.
- 6 SM GL 26H.
- 7 *The Works of Alexander Pope, Esquire*, vol. II, London 1751, pp. 56–8 (SM GL 31E).
- 8 See W. Rensselaer Lee, *Ut Pictura Poesis: The Humanist Theory of Painting*, New York 1967.
- 9 SM AL Soane Case 139, *Extracts from various authors on Architecture J. Soane abt. 1776*, f.[9], and Morris, *Lectures*, pt. 1, p. 113.
- 10 Robert Morris, *Lectures on Architecture*, 2nd ed., London 1759, p. 67.
- 11 *The Architecture of M. Vitruvius. Pollio: Translated from the Original Latin, by W. Newton*, London 1771, pp. vii–viii. This volume contained the first five books only, the second five being published posthumously in 1791.
- 12 Archer, *op. cit.*, p. 49.
- 13 *The Works of Sir Joshua Reynolds, Knight*, 3 vols, London 1798, vol. II, p. 137 (AL 37H). This Discourse bears Soane's annotations.
- 14 Ibid., ff. 14–15.
- 15 Henry Home (Lord Kames), *Elements of Criticism*, Edinburgh 1785, vol. II, p. 431.
- 16 SM AL Soane Case 161/2, Portfolio 2. These notes and extracts fill 72 ff, stitched together, though only ff. 1–7 are paginated. Occasional dates are March 1813. The notes seem to have been made from the edition of 1800. This is not now in Soane's library where the copy is the 6th ed. of 1785, both volumes of which are inscribed *John Soane archt. 1813*. Soane did not own any of Kames's other works on law, education, antiquities, and morality. There are further notes by Soane on this work in SM AL Soane Case 164, *Miscellaneous Extracts from authors relating ... to architecture*, ff. 94–106, made in either 1813 or 1815.