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MRS HERVEY DECORATES: FROM THE UNPUBLISHED JOURNALS (1792–1820) OF ELIZABETH HERVEY

DIANE BARRE

Elizabeth Hervey (née March, 1749–1820) was the step-daughter of Alderman Beckford and half-sister to William Beckford (of Fonthill fame). Well educated, she had lived at Fonthill Spendens in her teens, had wide social connections, visited and stayed at numerous country houses and travelled in Europe. As a well off and independent widow she bought a London house in 1792 and a country retreat in 1797. These she proceeded to furnish and decorate in a fashionable, but rather unusual way:

*she designed decorative schemes for the walls which she painted herself. This account is based on her unpublished private journals.*¹

In 1797 the *beau monde* was amused by a spoof novel which satirised the popular, sentimental novel, usually written by women. Mrs Elizabeth Hervey, one such novelist, was astounded and mortified to find her newly decorated salon described quite unmistakably.² Hiding behind



Fig. 1. Portman Square, London with Upper Seymour Street on the left.
(*Ackerman's Repository of Arts*, no. 56, 1 Aug. 1813)

a pseudonym, William Beckford was mocking and denigrating his half-sister's pretensions as an author and also as a decorative painter: 'To my inconceivable astonishment find myself significantly pointed at in a Novel called *Arabella* by a pretended Lady Harriet Marlow. My painted room and the time it took to do it is mentioned, as also how much my vanity is gratified by the praises bestowed on my skill and ingenuity.' (Journal entry July 8 1798) The patronising description in the novel reads:

'They were shewn into the drawing room, the walls of which her Ladyship had spent two years and a half in ornamenting with her own dear hands. It was entirely painted over with birds, beasts, fishes, urns, flowerpots, and arabesque figures in a most astonishing manner, so that the praises for her ingenuity, and for the laudable occupation of her time, was a constant source of vanity to her Ladyship, and a ready subject of conversation to all her visitors.'

Reading Mrs Hervey's private journals reveals a more balanced picture.

**NO. 58, UPPER SEYMOUR STREET,
LONDON (FIG. 1)**

Between 1793 and 1795, for her drawing room at No. 58, Upper Seymour Street, Mrs Hervey designed, drew and painted neo-classical panels on individual papers, which were then applied to the walls by a professional paper hanger. It was an ambitious and time-consuming project by a woman, which although not unique, was certainly on an impressive scale, unusual enough to attract the admiring attention she craved. This was fitted into a busy life including social visits, theatre, opera and entertaining.

Mrs Hervey purchased her London home in February 1792, and in the following year she began her project. It was clearly meant as a statement to demonstrate her taste and artistic abilities, on show to society when she entertained, and to be admired and discussed. She began in 1793, although the



Fig. 2. Designs for panels with arabesques. French 1770s. An example of the type of fashionable grotesque classical decorative motifs which influenced Mrs Hervey. (*Rijksmuseum*. Object ID:RP-P-1998-79)

scheme was not mentioned in her journals until 26 December 1793: 'very busy preparing my pattern for the 4th panel'. Work continued on a total of seven panels until April 1795, while also ten 'pilasters' were created between late November 1794 and March 1795. Details are vague. She only mentions: 'my first fruit basket'; 'my Monsters' [grotesque creatures]; 'foliage above the canopy'; 'Grape panel'; 'painting the Persicaria'; 'drawing the arbutus'; a 'branch of holly', and large and small Medallions. This suggests a fashionable neo-classical theme no doubt influenced by the wallpapers of Jean Baptiste Réveillon with their Arabesque panels (Fig. 2). She does not specifically mention the birds and fishes mocked by Beckford.

Her plans were well known by her society friends and acquaintances, several of whom came to see work in progress. For example, there is an interesting entry on April 30 1794: 'Cosway and Sandby³ dined here, they appeared to admire my panels, gave me hints which I shall profit by. Began one of the large Medallions, mean to let the pannels rest till I can get real strawberries to copy, and in the meanwhile to work at the medallions, which must be done, though less amusing than the rest.'

Even royalty had heard of her activities:

'October 16 1794 This day Ly: T.[Torrington] went to Windsor, the Q. talked much of me, asked after my Mother, and said she heard I was painting a most beautiful Room, now this was the very thing I wished her not hear, as I do not choose to have any of it carried to her, Ly: T and all my friends by my desire were to be silent upon the subject. How great then was my surprize to learn that Ly: Cathcart had told her M. of this & even offered to shew it her! Ly T: said it was almost done and would be put up immediately.'

'April 2 1795 Ly Cathcart came with a message from Pss Elizabeth to request I would send her one of my panels. I dislike this amazingly, but at last fearing to offend such great Personages as the Queen and the Princesses I submitted and Lady Cathcart promised to return it in a couple of hours. I was in Agony 'till it came back which was not till dinner time.'

In November 1794 the drawing room was papered 'and looks very pretty'. Presumably this was a plain base wallpaper, which would dry out while the time – consuming painting of the pilasters continued over three winter months, not without problems: 'Jan: 23 1795 The frost is intolerable, every day it gets more severe. My colours [paints] have been frozen these two days.' 'Jan: 25 1795 If possible the cold is severer than ever, in my room where there is always a great fire the water froze, and to complete the horror of the day London was enveloped in a thick fog all the morning, so dark that I could hardly see to draw. Nevertheless I made great progress in my painting wrapped up in an eiderdown quilt.'

Thereafter things moved on speedily as Mrs Hervey worked hard to complete her project.

'April 3 1795 This day I finished my Seventh and last Pannel, have now only a few small medallions to do.'

'April 7 Great part of my Paper is up, without blot or blemish'

'April 9 I write [my journal] now by memory having been entirely occupied for some days past attending to my paper working like a horse all day till I am half dead for besides the medallions I knew that were to be done, I had to do what I did not suspect viz to lengthen the ten Pilasters and to paint over the dessus de Portes etc. a most laborious job!'

'April 10 worked all the morning upon the walls of my Room to finish what was left imperfect – my Hangings surpass in beauty my most sanguine expectations.'

'April 11 Ever since last Sunday till today I have written by memory, for my hanging has so totally engrossed all my time, that I have slept little, allowed a slender portion of my time to my meals and have completely fatigued myself. To add to my torments, my leg has been dreadfully bad, but this day all but one medallion, the whole room is finished completely, all touched up and effected. Tomorrow with the medallion my labour ends.'

In the meanwhile she had 'settled with Hall about the borders & colour of the margin'. This would be Thomas Hall of No. 85, Cheapside who specialised in fashionable paper 'Hangings and Borders'.⁴ Edward Foxhall, a leading London upholster and furnisher, provided estimates to furnish the drawing room with new chairs, sofa and curtains, all in calico with fringes, and three blinds for the windows which had japanned 'window cornices'.⁵ His estimate came to £121 18s. A large mirror over the chimney and two pier glasses between the windows, with marble slabbed tops below them, came to another £236 12s. The lustre (chandelier) cost twenty-five guineas. This was serious expenditure using top quality London firms. So it was with pride, delight and relief that on 15 April 1795 Mrs Hervey could

note that ‘the room was quite completed and all the furniture in it. Its beauty surpasses my most sanguine expectations... It really is a Fairy room particularly when lighted’. Immediately she held social assemblies to show it off, with eighty – one people attending on the 15th and then on 22 April: ‘This is the day I am to have my last Assembly. I tremble to think of it. Company began to come at ½ past 8. Part of the night the best room was very crowded. Much admiration was expressed at my painting ... 127 persons came.’ She could not resist noting that on 25 April ‘Mr La Tour [Latour Fontanet?] the famous Miniature Painter came to see my room and admired it very much’, as did Lord Orford [Horace Walpole] who visited on the 7 May 1795. In January 1797 Lady Warwick and her daughters made a visit specifically to see the new room. So ‘society’ knew about it and wanted to see it at first hand.

Just how original was this room and the fact that it was designed and painted by a society lady working entirely on her own, without intervention by a husband or professional architect? Mrs Hervey was certainly not unique in directing her own decorative schemes but hers was a rather unusual and ambitious project with a very up-to-date classical theme. She might possibly have seen a similarly ambitious scheme in the neo-classical style by Miss Charlotte Boyle Walsingham, who designed and decorated the library at her mansion, Boyle Farm, Thames Ditton, in 1786–87. This included her painting twenty eight verre églomisé, grotesque, black and gold glass panels, and painting panels for the doors based on discoveries from Herculaneum. She also carved sculptures for the chimney piece, all within a year.⁶ Since Mrs Hervey knew Horace Walpole, she may have known of, or seen, his protégée Lady Diana Beauclerk’s, rooms at Little Marble Hill. Here in 1782 Lady Diana had used watercolours to decorate a room with : ‘a row of lilacs in festoons on green [background] paper ... in each panel of the surbase she has painted a sprig or chaplet of geranium or ivy or periwinkle’. In 1785 she painted another room

with ‘small pictures [vignettes] framed with wreaths of flowers.’⁷ At Court Mrs Hervey met the talented artist Princess Elizabeth, who had painted the walls of the Picnic Room at Kew for her mother, Queen Charlotte, about 1771, with a scheme of convolvulus and nasturtiums intertwined in rows.

She would have known her brother William Beckford’s Tartarian (Turkish) room at Fonthill Splendens, with its *trompe l’oeil* painted ceiling. While staying there she noted in her journal on 15 July 1797: ‘Of all the newly furnished chambers here, the Tartarian Rooms seems my Brs greatest favourite, the ceiling is painted in clouds.’ This however was painted by professional French artists.⁸ Was Beckford influenced by his sister but with more expense and ostentation?

ACTON LODGE

As if this were not enough, there followed a second scheme of decoration, this time for her country villa at Acton, a 1770s compact, brick built, village house, purchased in July 1797. Her scheme for the eating room a Acton, carried out between 1800 and 1804, was nearly as ambitious as her previous London one, but quite different in style and intention, as befitting her ‘snug cottage’. Even before purchase was completed Mrs Hervey considered a modest re-decorating:

‘June 18 1797 Went all over the house and garden, determining what I would buy, taking a list thereof – If the dado be repaired the rooms must be new painted [:] this would be inconvenient on account of the smell and likewise on account of the paper which in that case I must postpone putting up – Mem: to enquire of Robson and Hale whether distemper would not do as well then the rooms could be papered – The drawing room to be painted a Mason Green.’

‘June 26 Settled the whole concerning the Painting and papering, find it indispensable that one coat of oil should be laid on the eating room, this is disagreeable but necessary.’

Robson and Hale were fashionable ‘Paper Hanging Manufacturers, Decorators, and Painters in Distemper to His Majesty.’⁹ The house became hers on the 20 July and by the 28th Robson had begun work on the breakfast room. Mrs Hervey noted with satisfaction when she visited on 7 September: ‘No smell of paint here, and every thing as comfortable as if I had been settled here for months. I delight in the breakfast room and in my garden’.

Practical and busy as ever, she completed a green fringe for the curtains in the breakfast parlour early in November and ‘settled about the Rumford chimneys for the breakfast and eating rooms.’¹⁰ These were a recent and popular innovation to make open fires more heat efficient. They must have been successful for later in February 1805 the drawing room chimney was ‘Rumfordised, & I hope my room which is dreadfully cold will be more warm & comfortable.’

In her journal Mrs Hervey was writing for herself alone, so it can be frustrating to realise that whole chunks of information were omitted. Work was probably taking place to improve the drawing room, including a marble fireplace which cost twenty-four pounds in October 1798. A splendid little vignette of the man coming to hang the wall paper may well relate to otherwise unmentioned work there: ‘At length between 3 and 4 the paper man arrived with eyes fixed, breath scented with gin, and such a thickness of brain that I had great difficulty to make him comprehend what I wanted.’ (November 7 1798)

The wallpaper may have been the Geranium paper, the duplicate of which she saw later at Oakley in October 1800 (see below).¹¹ In Autumn 1799, after concentrating on redesigning the garden, Mrs Hervey turned her attention to enlarging the house with a new dairy and bake-house, the conversion of the kitchen into a servants’ hall and a new larger kitchen. As happens with many building projects there were problems. The carpenter builder ‘a capital rogue’ tried to over-charge and was dilatory,

while at the same it was found that dry rot had spread from the drawing room to the kitchen. It is hardly surprising that she ruefully noted: ‘Money seems to fly with me, it is astonishing without making any figure what I spend.’

Consequently in July 1800 she decided to defer her (unspecified) plans for the eating room estimated at £50. Then came a typical Mrs Hervey re-assessment:

‘July 21 1800 Could not resist this morn: talking over with a very intelligent carpenter my plan for the eating room, he has suggested another much better, and as it will only cost half the money, agreed to have it done immediately; this is to cut down the two windows next the garden, making them into doors. I shall likewise have the wainscot removed, and the room papered down to the skirting boards, painting myself narrow panels of creeping flowers which will look beautiful, the rest to be a paper treillage. I know it will have an admirable effect.’

When she first viewed this room on 4 June 1797, she described it as ‘small and very low, with cross lights; the windows here facing the court ought to be blocked up, and those facing the lawn cut down, with French windows.’ Here again Mrs Hervey was fashionable, with French windows which doubled as glass doors. They were put in 22 August 1800: ‘The effect of this is charming. The room from being very ugly will now be very pretty.’ The room was also being modernised with the removal of panelling. Full of enthusiasm, Mrs Hervey now ‘began painting the paper for the narrow panels in this room’, going to London in August 1800: ‘to Robson’s, tried my pattern with the paper I had chosen, and found these did not suit at all; this I had suspected and now I have fixed upon a green and white treillage [wallpaper] which suits my painting admirably and is beautiful.’

While the newly plastered walls dried out, she worked on her narrow panels (fourteen in total) which were quite different in style to those at Seymour Street, being more suited to a house

in the country than to the sophisticated town house. Between late August and late October 1800 she worked, when free from visitors or visiting, drawing and painting sheets for her panels, one with 'Nasturtiums and Jasmine', another with 'Convolvulus, scarlet runners & Jessamine'. These panels were to be set between, or over, the trellis wallpaper. Journal entries for October 1800 include:

'Oct: 13 Finished the whole Convolvulus panel, and at night completed the drawing of the Jessamine on the Arches.'

'Oct: 14 ... day passed entirely in painting the treillage of one of the Arches'

'Oct: 24 Began the last panel being the remainder of the scarlett runners.'

'Oct: 16 At noon wrote to the papermen and settled the whole hangings of the parlour, appointing them to begin the work on Monday the 27th Inst: and engaging Hale to come himself the 29th to put up my panels.'

'Oct: 28 We sat in the library on account of the paper man's being at work in the eating parlour. He is lining that with cartridge paper preparing to the reception of the other.'

'Oct: 30 Mr Hale arrived, he is enchanted with my panels, and now he is fixing them ... I have been all day employed in painting a Jessamine border for a medallion to go over the breakfast room door, so as to correspond with the arches, which are finished, and far surpass my expectations, and tho' painted by myself I must say are beautiful. The delicacy of the Jessamine is really admirable, and though the other panels are pretty and much admired, I must own I prefer the

Fig. 3. Page from Mrs Hervey's journal, 30 October 1800. (SRO: D6584/C95 journal no. 41)

Thursday Oct. 30 1800 Acton Lodge
 A fine day — Mr. Hale arrived, he is enchanted with my panels, & now he is fixing them — Tom Smith who never breakfasts till past 11 o'clock, went away immediately after, Will. went with him, they walked, & Will. in the same manner came back to dinner — I have been all day employed in painting a Jessamine border for a medallion to go over the breakfast room door, so as to correspond with the arches, which are finished, & far surpass my expectations, & tho' painted by myself I must say are beautiful — The delicacy of the Jessamine is really admirable, & though the other panels are pretty & much admired, I must own I prefer the Arches to the rest, next to these the Nasturtiums — Mr. Hale is putting them up incomparably, nothing can be done better. We papered the room in the library, Will. read & I painted the Jessamine.



Fig. 4. T. Rowlandson, 'The Garden Trio', print published by R. Ackerman 1 Dec. 1820, illustrating the Regency vogue for a garden with trellising linked to the house.

Arches to the rest, next to these the Nasturtiums. Mr Hale is putting them up incomparably, nothing can be done better' (Fig. 3).

'Oct. 31 Mr Hale again returned hither, and finished the job so much to my satisfaction that I could not refrain from making him a present of £1 note ...the parlour now with the exception of a yard or two of bordering is quite finished unless I touch up the panels here and there as I have been doing this day.'

It seems that the door of the room was painted to look like a bower, as a later journal entry for 22 March 1810 noted: 'repaired the painted bower on the door.'

How fashionable or original were these designs? When Lady Diana Beauclerk purchased a villa on Richmond Hill in 1789, she painted a room with flowers on treillage.¹² Floral panels and over-doors were popular from the 1780s. Mrs Hervey may have been inspired by a visit on 23 May 1800 to the London house of the architect, Thomas Hope,

where she saw 'the pink room wch is extremely pretty, with a treillage paper intermingled with roses.'¹³ Mrs Hervey knew Strawberry Hill, where Horace Walpole had commissioned the artist John Henry Muntz to paint the ceiling of his tiny china closet, with what looked like convolvus flowers in poles in 1758/9.¹⁴ On 4 October 1800 while staying at Oakley, the Bedfordshire home of Lord John Russell and his family, she found the drawing room there had 'the same Geranium paper that I have at Acton, and a treillage border.' This is a clear example of the fashion, popularised by Humphry Repton, which united house and flower garden, often by a verandah or trellising on the house walls (Fig. 4). Mrs Hervey took this theme further by painting flowers grown in her garden and reproducing them on her painted panels inside. Seen from the new French windows, her ever-evolving garden was reflected in the panels and trellis paper in the eating room.

‘July 27 [1800] The Bower made so late in Spring is in high beauty, covered almost to the top with honeysuckles; the sides with nasturtiums, sweet peas and the major convolvulus, the scarlet runners are not yet in bloom, but when they are they will mix charmingly with the other flowers.’

Thus in the garden a new bower with trellis work to be covered with honeysuckles was positioned to ‘appear beautiful from many of the windows in the house.’ (July 3 1801)

More *avant garde* was Mrs Hervey’s plan for the entrance hall, ‘quite low and old fashioned’, to be transformed into a *trompe l’œil* grotto. Unfortunately the journals are missing from January 1802 to July 1804, so the first mention of the scheme comes unexpectedly in 1804, when work was already under way, having started in early June:

‘[1804] July 3 I called in on poor old [Paul] Sandby, sat some time with him, he was mightily pleased with the idea of my grotto. The moment I arrived set about papering the ceiling with white paper which I had purchased this morn:’

It is interesting that Mrs Hervey visited the artist Paul Sandby for advice soon after beginning the grotto work, as Sandby was responsible for a most ambitious *trompe l’œil* scheme in 1793, when he painted the dining room at Drakelow Park, Derbyshire, to look like open countryside. Here the chimney looked like a grotto. Genuine low trellising was placed against these painted walls to further enhance the illusion (Fig.5).¹⁵

With her usual enthusiasm the new scheme went ahead at a pace, although the only detail given is a reference to an arch with steps to the front:



Fig. 5. Drakelow Hall, Derbyshire. Paul Sandby’s dining room, 1793. (© LOOK AND LEARN)

‘July 14 [visitors] were much surprised and pleased at the sight of the grotto, which fortunately for my health was completed this even: I fatigued myself too much with this work, for most of it was done standing. I have been exactly 5 weeks doing it and I flatter myself it is very pretty.’

Her son visited at the end of July 1804:

‘The water and some other things that I thought he would not like, he admired particularly; not so the ceiling wch I think so pretty, for he fancies it would have looked better to resemble stone throughout. But in this he is mistaken for it would look heavy dark and dismal and making it resemble a sky makes the hall appear lighter and higher.’

So *trompe l’œil* falling water was painted on the walls, offset by a painted blue sky on the ceiling. She made a fashionable transparency for the hall window which perhaps gave the effect of a light diffused grotto entrance. As visitors approached the entrance front of the house, they passed a lawn, trees and shrubbery. Then at the front door, instead of an entrance hall, they entered a make-believe grotto – i.e. a garden feature. On the right of this, the eating room was also decorated to reflect the garden. In short this was a highly whimsical, imaginative and unusual transformation of a small entrance hall. Whether or not it was successful is uncertain.

The journal reveals just how quickly Mrs Hervey’s decorated walls became shabby. Only ten years later, in 1810, the breakfast room needed drastic re-touching.

‘Feb 27 ... began painting a narrow panel, which I mean to put over the scarlet runners in the eating room, as they are sadly faded and become hideous.’

Deciding to improve this room, she found that she needed be on site to prevent blunders by the workmen.

‘Feb 22 1810 [with Mower] ‘settled the plan of the swags etc. & concerning the fringe.’ ... Next came Browning with whom I settled about the painting [the shutters] grey, with a black strip. Brass knobs to the windows etc.’

‘Mar: 1 1810 The Painter is arrived and as one expence brings on another, thus it happens with me, for this man representing what is very true the bad appearance the door of the eating parlour will make, when the other side of it looks clean and nice, I suddenly resolved he shd at once paint both rooms, especially as he says, that he does not think the additional expence will be above £3 and that were he not to do both, the breakfast room would not give him sufficient employment by not drying fast enough to keep him in work. Having decided on this measure I next considered the dirty state of the trellis paper, and resolved as the paper hangings wd be here shortly to have that renewed, leaving the black [borders] untouched, and at my leisure replacing the faded flowered panels with new ones. I am now busily occupied in painting a panel with the Bignonia Radicans that promises to be very pretty. I am charmed with the Painter, he is so civil and intelligent.’

‘March 2 I have only yet done one stripe out of 4 of my new panels, nevertheless I work very hard. The house smells dreadfully of turpentine.’

‘March 3 The painter goes on very slowly, does and undoes and has made the shutters of a frightful green instead of grey – this must be altered.’

‘March 5 The painter effaced his ugly green & has now made the shutters a pale grey which with the black mouldings will look well. The paperman did not arrive till 5 this even: Doing up this room is a tedious business. I expect the painter will be here the whole week!’

‘March 6 The painter has worked hard to day, and his work looks well. The paperman has canvassed the room... have finished completely the Bignonia Radican Pilaster. In short everything has gone smoothly to day.’

‘March 7 As there is nothing been yet done in my little room without some blunder this morn: I discovered that the Paperman had recd. no orders from Mr Robson about the black flock border, and moreover that the plan he had laid down for the bordering the room wd have a very naked unfinished appearance, so I insisted on a total change in this respect, tho’ the paperman was very obstinate, and stoutly contested



Fig. 6. Interior of Morgan & Sanders, Catherine St, Strand. (*Ackerman's Repository of Arts*, no.8, 1809. (Yale Center for British Art))

the point with me, but I was inflexible. My new pilaster, and the basket of fruit are now put up and look extremely well.'

'March 11 On examining the room I perceive the Paper man has dropped green paint in several parts of the skirting board, and that Anthony [her man servant] by officiously having the room swept before the varnish was dry, has ruined a part of it, the dust having incorporated itself with that. I thought something would go wrong during my absence. As the paperman has left some paste I will use it in renewing a second pilaster which I have in part sketched with Ivy.'

'March 12 Saw Browning, and settled that the painter shd come again and repair the damage done by folly and carelessness to the skirting board. The ivy advances rapidly.'

'March 26 began painting a Pilaster single roses of different sorts.'

'April 4 Finished my pilaster and put it up. It looks well but is vilely pasted owing to Anth: undertaking to make paste, which he knows nothing about.'

At the same time, purchased from Mowers, the new calico curtains with swags and fringe were put up on 24 March 24, with a new carpet, which was 'totally of a different pattern than that I bespoke. But I rather think it is a good change for this will hide the dirt.'

In September and October 1812 more panels were renewed or repainted in the eating room, including one with scarlet geraniums, two with convolvulus and a new Arbutus panel. Mrs Hervey was delighted with the improvement when her new panels, 'which look beautiful', were hung by the paper hanger, after which she 'Touched up my pannels where the paper joined.' 1814 saw the drawing room papered and painted. New modern furniture was needed and again the smartest most fashionable firms were visited:

'April 4 Took a long walk with Thompson [her maid] furniture – hunting; settled to have at Richard's at the Balloon No. 37 Oxford St a printed linen @ 2/6 & a lining @ 2/- per yd.'

'April 7 Went out early sofa hunting, & found a Grecian one wch I think will suit me at Morgan & Sanders in Cath: St Strand: the price 12 guineas.'¹⁶ (Fig. 6)

In 1815, she decided that repairs were needed on the house since many rooms had not been touched since 1797. By April these repairs amounted to the considerable sum of £78 10 6. Yet again some her original painting needed attention:

'[1815] May 16 began painting a panel for the small eating room, to be substituted to that with the faded Nasturtiums. What I am now doing is Sweet Peas copied from some I did 49 years ago, [1766] and strange to say, I am in my old age doing them equally well! With the peas I shall mingle other creepers, and dry sticks to support them.'

'May 31 Finished the sweet pea Gompholobium Pannel, shall I avow the truth? Yes, I will, it is singularly elegant.'

'June 27 My panels are put up, & I trust they look well ... I am now employed in repairing & painting ornaments for the Little Hall.'

Early July 1815 also saw several days' work 'repairing and improving my mock Grotto', with a short break one day when 'I forbore working at my grotto, and only painted the blackberries in the library, which amused without tiring me.' So the library must have been painted during a period for which journals are missing.

The next round of improvements was apparently in 1818, starting in late February with the breakfast room 'wch I am going to have painted afresh & the furniture [covers] dyed. I am now living in the best drawing room, but breakfast & sit as usual all the morn in the Library.' However, an extended stay at Seymour Street meant her lack of supervision at Acton Lodge led to a mistake, when the paper-men put up the wrong colour: 'an ugly bluish, cold green, tho' they had before their eyes a specimen of what they were to imitate; this is great negligence.'

'April 5 Any thing so vilely done both as to colour and bordering as the Breakfast room, I never beheld ... this morn: ... I discovered the excessive negligence of the papermen to whom I shall dispatch 3 pages of scolding tomorrow morning, and make them amend all that is amiss.'

Disaster followed:

'May 14 [1818] Kitty Holder is an abominably bad housemaid, dirty, and careless beyond all imagination. She has suffered the rain to lodge on the new paint and floor of the breakfast room, the windows there top and bottom being open when I arrived. For want of fire in the eating room, the paper near the window was running down with water all detached from the wall, and part of it turned black. My painted panels irreparably injured. The grate red with rust – in short she has attended to nothing with even common care.'

One begins to see why these wallpapers rarely survive today, given the problems of fading, wear and tear and damp.

Naturally these various decorative schemes were complemented over the years with new furnishings, curtains & carpets. These included marble chimney pieces in October 1798 (eleven guineas and twenty-four pounds) for Seymour Street and a stone fire place for Acton Lodge. Chairs and sofas were given loose covers Care was taken that items matched according to the fashion of time. Thus:

'May 19 [1818] Mower's man arrived and put up the curtains in the breakfast room, they look extremely well, and the lining being darker than formerly, suits better with the borders of the wood than did the other.'

'May 26 My new carpet in the breakfast room is laid down admirably well ... & it is not only exceedingly pretty, but exactly suits with the colours of the rooms.'

Mrs Hervey also liked a bargain, as shown by journal entries in 1819:

'June 29 Stopped in Park St [Mortlocks] to view the foreign China there, & was tempted (wanting one very much) to buy a dinner service, wch I thought cheap, pretty & uncommon, it being dark brown flowers

beautifully designed on a white ground, with gold edging. It is a copious service, the price asked was 36 Guineas, but I got it for pounds.'

'Nov: 17 Bargained at Gillows for a table, pretty but dear.'

'Dec: 25 My new table that came t'other day is beautiful, & rather under the stipulated price.'

However she could get more than she had bargained for:

'March 30 1814 Comical enough without meaning it, Mrs B: and I stumbled this afternoon into an auction, and I had been 5 mins in the room tempted by the sight of a going [sic – gaming?] table, I nodded my head & it was knocked down to me for 8 guineas.'

Ever busy, Mrs Hervey also made fringes for curtains and valences, 'covered blotting books to make them smart' (November 1810) and worked in wools to cover foot stools. Ever in fashion she decorated hand screens in penwork: 'July 18 1818 I mean to improve them very much by softening the glare of the broad whit margin wch may easily be accomplished by a sort of Vignettes [these were Cornucopia] done in Indian ink and I have tried the effect which is very good.'

TRANSPARENCIES

Naturally Mrs Hervey enthused about a fashionable new craze for ladies in the late 1790s: that of creating 'transparencies'. The concept was to create an attractive effect by placing a bright light behind a piece of painted paper, thin cloth or a print, which could be treated by hand painting and varnishing. So popular was this craze that the printer Rupert Ackerman seized the opportunity to a publish over a hundred suitable transparencies between 1799 and 1800 and Edward Orme, the engraver, painter and publisher, issued a book of instructions in 1799,



Fig. 7. Example of a Transparency. 'The Lighthouse of Genoa at Night', using a published Aquatint March 1800. (*Wellcome Collection*)

thereby further encouraging this hobby for ladies of leisure. Pictures, both complex and simple, were most effective viewed in the dark, especially those with scenes of ruins, fires, sunlight or moonlight. (Fig.7) Once completed these could be used for items such as lamp shades, fire screens and blinds etc.¹⁷

Mrs Hervey determined to try her hand following a conversation at court on 1 February 1798 with Princess Elizabeth, who 'gave me a long account of her schemes in regard to transparencies, which she means to substitute to the common blinds; I like her ideas, and told her very probably I might do something in that way, and I inwardly determined to do her immediately a specimen of Roses in my best manner. A plan for the design instantly occurred to me and next week I shall begin it.' Two days later she 'admired Lady Lonsdale's beautiful transparencies'

and then set to work, noting on 15 April 1798: 'Finished after incredible trouble with the varnish, my transparent drawing which looks very pretty, though it might have been better.' However her confidence and her techniques improved since she took a moon-light transparency to show Richard Cosway in May 1798, 'who admired it much', while another moon-light transparency, gifted in April 1800 to Lady Effingham, 'delighted her much'. Her 'setting sun transparency' was 'very much admired by every body'. Emboldened, she then made another with the same theme in May. However there is a limit to how many transparencies any one person can use, so examples were presented to her friends, including the sculptor Mrs Anne Damer.

A visit to an art exhibition held by Amelia Noel, an artist patronised by society ladies, produced a somewhat grudging acknowledgment from Mrs Hervey: her transparencies have merit but are too glaring, gathered however some useful hints from them.' (May 24 1800) Presumably encouraged by these 'hints' Mrs Hervey promised to make a transparency for Princess Elizabeth, working over ten days in June, but consequently was piqued that 'The Pss Eliz: has not yet condescended to take the least notice of my transparency! I will never again employ my pencil in her service.'

Sadly details are missing for Mrs Hervey's most imaginative transparency, for Acton, in July 1804. With the entrance hall painted to look like a grotto, the window transparency may have been designed to look like a view into or from it, depending on which side one stood. Mrs Hervey then seemed to have lost interest, although the craze continued among society members for several years afterwards.

CONCLUSION

While ladies at this period were expected to paint, draw and embroider, Mrs Hervey seems unusual, to say the least, in taking her interest in drawing and

painting flowers beyond the drawing book onto the wall. She must have received art tuition in her teens while at Fonthill or the Beckford London home. She sketched while touring at home and abroad and enjoyed painting flower pictures, large and small. Mrs Hervey would have been the first to say that her forte was not portraiture and one imagines that her work was derivative and competent rather than accomplished. She notes copying her flowers from real life and probably from Curtis's *Botanical Magazine*, to which she subscribed, and doubtless she copied motifs from other published sources.

The drawing room Upper Seymour Street echoed contemporary interest in the neo-classical revival, following the archaeological discoveries at Pompei and Herculaneum. In contrast the rooms at Acton Lodge were influenced by Humphry Repton and the visual link between interiors and gardens. Her motives for this time-consuming work were for her own pleasure, a sense of achievement and a desire to be admired and talked about by members of her society, certainly at Seymour Street. Probably the sibling rivalry with her brother William Beckford was a factor, for although she could not compete with Fonthill, created with Beckford's immense fortune, she could at least shine in London with her fashionable decorations and her published novels.

Since so many members of society actually saw her painted room in Upper Seymour Street, where the house no longer exists, it would be interesting to read any contemporary description and evaluation. The author would be delighted if her attention could be drawn to any which should survive.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Staffordshire Record Office: D6584/C/55–126 (72 volumes) *The Journals of Mrs Elizabeth Hervey 1792–1820*.
- 2 ‘Lady Harriet Marlow’ (William Beckford), *Modern Novel Writing or the Elegant Enthusiast*, vol. II (1797), (Stroud, 2008 edit.), p. 113. The editor Robert Gemmett noted that Mrs Hervey was a main target in this book. Her published novels were: *Melissa and Marcia; or, the Sisters* (anon 1788); *Louisa* (1790); *The History of Ned Evans* (1796); *The Church of St. Siffred* (1797); *The Mourtray Family* (1800); *Amabel: or, Memoirs of a Woman of Fashion* (1814).
- 3 Richard Cosway (1742–1821) and Paul Sandby (1731–1809), leading artists of the time.
- 4 C. Taylor, ‘Figured Paper for hanging Rooms’: The manufacture, design and consumption of wallpapers for English domestic interiors c.1740 – c.1800’ (PhD thesis, Open University, 2010, p. 269).
- 5 Edward Foxhall (1756–1815) worked with Sir John Soane and was a leading agent for William Beckford at Fonthill Abbey, buying works of art and pictures for him. Besides being a carver, cabinet maker, decorator and upholsterer, he was an art dealer and published prints of Fonthill Abbey. Mrs Hervey knew him through his close connection with Beckford.
- 6 A.A. Boyington, ‘Maids, Wives and Widows: Female Architectural Patronage in Eighteenth-Century Britain’ (PhD Thesis, University of Cambridge, 2017), pp. 187–9. Her descriptions are based on letters from Hannah More and Horace Walpole written in 1787. https://www.academia.edu/maids_wives_and_widows accessed 11 July 2021.
- 7 Yale edition of *Horace Walpole’s Correspondence*, (ed. W. S. Lewis), vol. 29 (1955), p. 272, Walpole to William Mason 4 Aug. 1782; vol. 33 (1965), p. 473 Walpole to Lady Ossory, 30 June 1785; vol. 36 (1973), p. 238 Walpole to Thomas Walpole the younger, 8 April 1786; B. Erskine, *Lady Diana Beauclerk, her life and her work* (London, 1903), pp. 110–111; Mrs Hervey wrote on 8 May 1795: ‘went this morning to see Mrs Stuart who shewed me her pretty painted room.’ The author has failed to find details of this room.
- 8 J. Britton, *The Beauties of Wiltshire displayed in Statistical, Historical and Descriptive sketches*, vol. I (London, 1801), p. 213: ‘The ground of the vaulted ceiling is entirely gold, upon which the most beautiful arabesques and wreaths of flowers are delineated ... by the pencil of those distinguished French artists Boileau and Feuglet’.
- 9 Quoted Boynton, *Maids, Wives Wives*, p. 238.
- 10 Designed by Sir Benjamin Thompson, Count Rumford. These were tall shallow fireplaces with a steeply sloping fireback and angled side wall efficiently forcing the smoke up the rounded chimney and away from the room.
- 11 A. Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors, At Home in Georgian England* (New York & London, 2009), p. 176 notes the popularity of the geranium (pelargonium) design for wallpapers at this period, as were trellis wallpapers.
- 12 *Horace Walpole’s Correspondence*, vol. 33, p. 473, n. 35.
- 13 The ceiling of John Soane ‘s breakfast room at No. 12, Lincoln’s Inn Fields was painted to look like trellis with leaves: S. Parissien, *Regency Style* (London, 1996 ed.) pp. 88–9.
- 14 A. Chalcroft, & J. Viscardi, *Strawberry Hill, Horace Walpole’s Gothic Castle* (London, 2007), p. 25.
- 15 J. Bonehill & S. Daniels (eds.), *Paul Sandby, Picturing Britain* (Royal Academy of Arts, 2009), p. 20; A. Seward, *The Letters of Anna Seward Written Between the Years 1784–1807*, vol. III (Edinburgh, 1811), pp. 380–1: Letter XCVI, Seward to Rev. Whalley, 25 July 1794.
- 16 Morgan and Sanders, Nos. 16–17, Catherine St, Strand, were leading furniture designers and retailers, who supplied designs for Rudolph Ackerman’s *The Repository of Arts* between 1809–15: www.british-history.ac.uk/no-series/dict-english-furniture-makers. accessed 22.7. 2021.
- 17 J. Plunkett, ‘Light Work: Feminine Leisure & the making of Transparencies’ in K. Hadjiafxendi & P. Zakresk (eds), *Crafting the Woman Professional in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Ashgate, 2013), pp. 46–69; N. Riley, *The Accomplished Lady: A History of Genteel Pursuits c.1660–1860* (Plymouth, 2017), pp. 322–5.