

# The Country House as a Site of Memory

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1



2

The title for my article derives from the seven-volume *Lieux de mémoires* by Pierre Nora, translated into English as *Realms of Memory*. Published between 1984 and 1992, Nora's compilation of essays explores the 'memory places of French national identity as they have been constructed since the middle ages'. The collective memory is interpreted as the study of 'national feeling not in the traditional thematic or chronological manner but instead by analyzing the places in which the collective heritage of France was crystallized, the principal sites ... in which collective memory was rooted'. The book examines such abiding themes as the Gauls, the cathedral, street names, the Vichy Government. Nora's book has inspired similar compilations in the Netherlands, Germany, Denmark and Italy among other countries – though not in the United States or Britain.

If such a series were published about the British Isles, one could be sure that country houses would represent one section. The story of changing views of these places has been addressed by Peter Mandler in *The Fall and Rise of the Stately Home* (1997). Mandler shows how in the twentieth century the country house came to be seen as an important element in the national heritage, and possibly 'the country's greatest contribution to Western civilisation'. He studies the cult of Merrie England associated with medieval and Tudor buildings in the early nineteenth century

through literature and the visual arts: the exclusion of Palladian architecture from approval until the mid-twentieth century; the scepticism about great aristocratic houses at least until the post-war period; and the growing notion of country houses as a crucial aesthetic achievement, from the 1960s onwards. This essay suggests how collective memories of the country house developed during the twentieth century. It considers how far the battle for the preservation of the country house has been won, not so much in practical terms as in popular and official perception, and whether the enthusiasm and respect for the country house that emerged in England in the 1970s have been firmly consolidated. Or does the country house cult represent a now fading 'fashion'?

I believe in, and am enthusiastic about, the preservation of country houses, not only as buildings but as entities. But the value of these houses, their collections and parks, is often questioned, as in an essay published in 2006 in *The Uses of Heritage* (edited by Laurajane Smith). In this essay, entitled 'Knowing Your Place: Landscapes of Class, Deference and Resistance', Laurajane Smith and Gary Campbell analyse parallel surveys of visitors to country houses and to trade union museums. Many of the findings, about the types of visitor in terms of age, for example, were relatively predictable: the highest proportion of

**Obr. 1.** Giles Waterfield, the Director of the Royal Collection Studies gives a lecture to the members of the Attingham Royal Collection Studies 2006 in the gardens of Hampton Court Royal Palace. / Giles Waterfield, ředitel Royal Collection Studies, přednáší účastníkům attinghamských studií v zbradách královského zámku Hampton Court. (Foto E. Lukášová, 2006)

**Obr. 2.** Landscape park scenery of the Windsor Royal Palace Estates. Detailed research of the Royal Palace of Windsor and its gardens and park is included in Royal Collection Studies, led by Giles Waterfield. / Pohled do krajinného parku na pozemcích královského sídla zámku Windsor. Součástí Studia královských sbírek, jež vede Giles Waterfield, je i detailní poznání windsorského zámku, zbrad i parku. (Foto E. Lukášová, 2006)



3



4

**Obr. 3.** *Opening Doors: Learning in the Historic Environment, the report of the Attingham Trust from 2004, edited by Giles Waterfield. / Opening Doors: Learning in the Historic Environment, zpráva zpracovaná Attingham Trustem v roce 2004, kterou editoval Giles Waterfield. (Reprofoto)*

**Obr. 4.** *The Ashcombe Tower Country House in Devon was designed by the architect Edward Brian O'Rorke for the Courtauld family in 1935. Its interiors are preserved in authentic appearance. The 20 century houses has been admitted recently, however they are subject of study on the Attingham Summer School. / Venkovské sídlo Ashcombe Tower v Devonu navrhl pro rodinu Courtauldů architekt Edward Brian O'Rorke v roce 1935. Jeho interiéry jsou dodnes zachovány v původní podobě. Sídla z 20. století došla ocenění teprve v nedávné době, přesto jsou předmětem studia Letní attinghamské školy. (Foto E. Lukášová)*

visitors were 'silvers' (a reference to hair colour rather than finance). Less predictable was what people found most pleasurable in their country house experience. A majority of the country house public – over 60 % – said that what they most appreciated was the sense of comfort historic houses provided: reassurance, escape, a return to older values, peacefulness. The questioners were not impressed by this reaction, or by a group of ladies observed at Harewood House, who reacted negatively to the arrival in the state rooms of Leeds schoolchildren: these ladies asked what the children were doing there, the place was not for them. In conclusion, the essay rejects what it sees as the elitist backward-looking messages emanating from the country house.

I would like to outline some of the changing attitudes to the country house that an essay in the British Realms of Memory might delineate. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, architectural value was ascribed primarily to buildings erected before 1714. This view – both official and popular – died hard. After all, Georgian architecture has only since the 1940s been generally included in the 'country house' pantheon. The Victorian house has been admitted since the 1980s: the acquisition of Norman Shaw's great Victorian house at Cragside in Northumberland aroused major dissension at the National Trust in the 1980s; Twentieth century architecture even more recently.

Nevertheless, academic interest in the country house had been growing for a long time. The foundation in 1897 of the magazine *Country Life*, and the writings in the early twentieth century of such figures as Christopher Hussey stimulated a new interest in the decorative arts and phenomena such as the Gothic Revival and the Picturesque Movement. This study of houses and interiors was furthered in mid-century by certain seminal writings, notably John Summerson's books on Georgian architecture, such as *Georgian London* (1943), and Howard Colvin's *Dictionary of British Architects* (first edition, 1954). Both stimulated a spate of academic studies on British architecture. Summerson's book was originally intended to form a series of lectures at the Courtauld Institute of Art, and it is no accident that the creation of the first university institution for the study of the history of art in Britain encouraged a more rigidly academic interest in the field.

These innovative researches encouraged a growing nostalgia for these houses and the way of life they represented, expressed in various literary forms. Many earlier twentieth century writers

who studied country houses concentrated on the great medieval and Tudor houses. Both Virginia Woolf in *Orlando* (1928) and Vita Sackville-West in *The Edwardians* (1930) celebrated the great medieval (and later) house Knole. This literary nostalgia developed is most famously expressed in *Brideshead Revisited*, written in 1944 as an elegy for the great house and its way of life.

But Waugh belonged to an elite group, and his views were by no means widespread. After the Second World War country houses to most people seemed to be finished, at a time of general hostility through Europe to the traditions represented by the historic palace or house. This was expressed at its most extreme in Communist countries such as Czechoslovakia where the contents of such buildings, tainted by their association with an inimical aristocratic order, were often dismantled. It was also apparent in western Europe. At the Royal Palace in Genoa, reinstalled for visitors around 1950, references to the Royal House of Savoy were eliminated, with the rooms presented as galleries containing important works of art but not as habitable or ceremonial spaces. This approach still applies in Italy where it is usually difficult to gain any understanding of the original function of interiors. A similar approach is apparent in Britain, as at Apsley House: when the house was taken into public ownership and prepared for regular public visiting in the 1950s, it was given, as far as possible, a non-domestic character. Art galleries were considered to be socially neutral spaces (this might not apply today), in a way noble houses were not.

Though such an extreme line was not taken in newly-acquired National Trust houses by James Lees-Milne and his colleagues from the 1940s onwards, attitudes there were not altogether different. The rooms were to be shown as though the owner still lived there and had gone out for the afternoon. More revealingly they were to be purged of later accretions, and often furnished with pictures and furniture brought in from other properties. There was no recognition of the social fabric and gradual development of the buildings. Equally, the history of life below stairs was considered uninteresting. James Lees-Milne records the removal of the contents of the servants' rooms from Attingham Park in the 1950s. Equally, publications ignored people and looked at buildings in isolation. It was the gallery quality, the existence of the works of art, that counted: in his *Buildings of England* series Nikolaus Pevsner often gave the impression, through his minimal account of the families that built historic houses, that they had never been inhabited.

At the same time, country houses were embraced by popular culture. In the 1950s, many commentators in the press, and the public in general, were fascinated by the new entrepreneurial spirit of aristocratic owners. This was whipped up by such dashing figures as the Marquis of Bath at Longleat and the Duke of Bedford at Woburn Abbey, who recorded his salvation/degradation of the house in *A Silver-Plated Spoon*. This fascination extended to academic writers. Pevsner wrote with faintly repelled relish about Woburn Abbey in his *Buildings of England Bedfordshire* volume, in 1968: 'Ever since the Duke of Bedford opened Woburn Abbey to the public in 1955, Woburn has become the case par excellence of mass attraction. In 1956 c. 475,000 visitors were counted, and the side-shows included a zoo with e.g. bison and many species of deer, a pets' corner, model soldiers, and sailing. It goes without saying that the majority of the visitors care more for the entertainments (including a glimpse of the Duke) than for the house...' Pevsner's uncharacteristic commentary reflects a widespread perception of historic houses and their owners. Though the perception of overt commercialization may have gone today, some of these attitudes – notably a sense that country houses owners were wily manipulators of the public purse – persist.

These confusing trends initiated the Golden Age of the Country House, around 1970. The landmarks are familiar, notably the campaign for the preservation of historic houses waged by such heroes as John Harris and John Cornforth, which led to the 1974 exhibition *The Destruction of the Country House* at the Victoria and Albert Museum. This museum was also responsible for an active research programme which raised understanding of the actual, rather than the mythic, character of historic interiors. The pioneering work of the museum's Furniture and Woodwork Department of the Victoria and Albert Museum, under the keepership of Peter Thornton from 1966 to 1984, was responsible for a vigorous rethinking of the interiors of historic houses, put into practice in the revolutionary refurbishment of Ham House. This interest was also stimulated by important research in the growing field of social history, triggered by Mark Girouard's *Life in the English Country House* (1978).

These various activities stimulated the rise of the country house nostalgia industry. This took various forms. The *Treasure Houses of Britain* exhibition at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, in 1985, was criticised for providing a shop window for historic artefacts, but it stimulated fur-

ther investigation of the context of historic buildings. Changing attitudes to social history stimulated a new approach to display. This included presenting the servants' quarters and the social organisation of a great house at Erddig in Wales, which opened to visitors in 1972. Original research, resulting in publications which could appeal to a specialist and a general audience, was a crucial element in these innovatory activities. The importance of this component tends to be forgotten. By the 1980s the country house, and particularly the Georgian house, had reached a new status of national icon. Though the National Heritage Memorial Fund (Government-funded body) defined 'heritage' very broadly, the Fund's purchase for the National Trust of Kedleston Hall, Weston Park and Calke Abbey in the mid-1980s, was subjected to little public questioning as it might have been twenty years earlier or later. Country houses, it was generally agreed, were the best.

So what is the situation now – with regard not to the future of the collections but to the collective memory of these sites? What place do country houses hold in the affections of officialdom and the general public? Can we be confident they have achieved the secure status of, for example, cathedrals? Are they even as safe in public esteem as examples of industrial archaeology, factories or historic canals, which in the past forty or so years have gained such a strong hold on our consciousness? If another Kedleston came along, how would Government and funding bodies react?

The current steady decline in the number of visitors to country houses (rather than gardens) is not the only indication that the country house is out of fashion. A lessening of interest is also evident in terms of research. Many recent works have concentrated on economic history or estate management, like Richard Wilson's *Creating Paradise: The Building of the English Country House*, published in 2000, or Giles Worsley's *The British Stable* (2004). Equally, at auction the market for 'brown furniture' has dropped considerably in the past five years (at least 40 % for good quality pieces). Traditional English stuff is just not fashionable. Although no hostility to the past may be involved, the loss of interest in this version of England reflects the speed, and unpredictability, of changing taste.

What is more, although the aristocracy no longer offers any political threat, suspicion of these houses lingers on, fuelled by the fact that so many country houses, particularly the largest, remain in private ownership. The view that the

preservation of landed estates 'for heritage reasons' actually represents a covert defence of privilege and inherited wealth, has always been around. Equally, the idea that country houses perpetuate an unhealthy obsession with an artificial concept of heritage, and discourage coming to terms with the nation's real change and decline, has been voiced by such critics as Robert Hewison. As Hewison wrote in *The Heritage Industry* in 1987, 'The National Trust's commitment to the continued occupation of houses for whom it accepts responsibility by the families that formerly owned them has preserved a set of social values as well as dining chairs and family portraits'. A more aggressive point of view was put recently by the historian Tristram Hunt. In the Winter 2005 edition of *Quarterly*, the Art Fund's magazine, Hunt writes that after one band of noblemen had established themselves as 'the formal depository of our national heritage'... '(today) another generation of aristocrats are exploiting their positions and playing the market to cash in on our cultural heritage... they are showing themselves in a different light: as large, landowning corporations focused on instant shareholder value'.

But there are positive aspects here. The definition of heritage espoused by the NHMF in the 1980s was focussed on the built and the natural environment. As has been mentioned, the Fund was greatly involved in the preservation of stately homes, even risking being perceived as a country house preservation organisation. This approach has not been altogether abandoned, as the donation in 2002 of the largest-ever grant from the NHMF for the purchase of Tyntesfield House showed. But traditional views of heritage have now been greatly enlarged, to embrace non-tactile heritage – such things as dialect, oral memories, dance, the traditions of immigrant communities. In this new definition, country houses can have an expanded role. The support by the HLF for the endowment of Tyntesfield depended on the fulfilment of certain conditions, including a radically new approach to display and interpretation. There are two important elements to the new approach. Firstly, the involvement, in planning future displays, of local communities, old and young, virtuous and tending to criminality (Young Offenders). And secondly, a policy of conserving the house gradually, in full view of the public. These activities suggest new ideas of what the country house means – as a centre for community activities, a site for visible conservation, and a means of stimulating urban or rural regeneration.



5

**Obr. 5.** Kedleston Hall Historic Country House, the masterpiece by the architect Robert Adam who designed the building, the interiors and the landscape park. In 1980s Kedleston became one of the most important acquisitions of the National Trust. I Zámek Kedleston Hall, vrcholné dílo architekta Roberta Adama, jež navrhoval budovu, interiéry i krajinný park, se stal v 80. letech 20. století jednou z nejvýznamnějších akvizicí National Trustu. (Foto E. Lukášová)

Under the pressure of changing definitions of heritage, organisations and individual owners have reacted positively. As the research that the Attingham Trust carried out for the report *Opening Doors* (edited by Giles Waterfield, 2004) underlined, the role of education departments, or individuals concerned with education, in historic buildings has been transformed in the past ten or fifteen years. The size and importance of education departments in national organisations in England and Scotland have increased greatly. In large private houses there is a new emphasis on education, notably at such places as Chatsworth and Burghley. The Historic Houses Association (a 'trade union' for house owners) has launched a programme to encourage owners of smaller

houses to engage in educational work. The range of issues addressed, particularly for children, has expanded. Such questions as slavery – previously taboo – are frequently discussed: at Harewood the hidden history of the house (it was largely built with money from the slave trade) has been opened up. The academic potential of these houses is being explored through such initiatives as the Yorkshire Country Houses Partnership. This partnership between seven great houses and several academic departments within the University of York has already investigated the theme of women and archival resources in country houses. It is now exploring a range of other subjects, as well as expanding its house membership.

It does look as though the country house is gaining a new role, as a place for learning and research. There are many possibilities here, though as *Opening Doors* suggested, also many obstacles: shortages of funding, a reliance on primary school provision at the expense of other age groups, a lack of co-ordination, and a disjunction between the academic community and those who provide for the public. And in the present climate, the pressure on private owners has increased, when they find themselves expected to devote a large part of their income, and their time, to

maintaining a historic property. In some cases, the resources that have been available in the past may not be available any longer.

Country houses have for a long time been performative spaces, spaces dedicated to enhancing and providing a backdrop to performances – whether displays of wealth or hunting prowess, royal visits, electioneering, open-handed hospitality, or just plain parties. This character continues with the part played by houses in costume drama and film – most people who recognise Lyme Park probably regard it as the residence not of the Leghs but of Mr Darcy of *Pride and Prejudice*. Country houses are constantly changing their role, and public perception of them is always changing too. For those concerned for their healthy future, it is vital to remember how variously they have been viewed and continue to be viewed, if the historic house is to be positively perceived as a realm of memory in the 21 century.

Překlad článku je uveden na straně 227