

Nicholas Mander

Owlpen Manor: Interpreting the Smaller Country House to the Public

As country houses go, Owlpen Manor [general view: see illustration] is a small one, described by H.J. Massingham in the 1930s as ‘tiny’; only ‘by courtesy’ a manor house. Other observers comment on its smallness being complemented by a sense of presence, a distinct concentration of interest, as an ‘epitome’ of Cotswold scenery, asserted with all the structure of its history and legends, the illogical massing of its gables and rambling outbuildings, the sense of organic growth over many centuries, and its landscape and garden setting (here no-one mentions the occupants).

Its very *smallness* gave my wife and I a certain reticence at first, in opening and presentation, as if small, however ‘beautiful,’ is somehow insignificant and therefore undermines commercial viability. But it is a platitude that size is relative. All houses are unique. With their contingent, muddled histories, their galimatias of acquisitions and inheritances, their curious family descents, their expressions of art and craftsmanship, their fragility; they create a seamless project and process in management, conservation and interpretation for their owners and those ‘in trust,’ as William Morris preferred to say, over them. Manor houses as much as mansions, and the institutionalized museums of the metropolis, require the rhetoric of hermeneutics, of presentation and interpretation, if their ‘spiritual truth’ is to be communicated, if we are effectively to translate the creation and functions of one age and set of social conditions to another which is increasingly at odds with it. And, positively, small houses often have the advantage of intimacy, an intensity, or esotericism, or association perhaps with a famous life—like Wordsworth’s Rydall Mount or the Bells’ Charleston, Darwin’s Downe House, Churchill’s Chartwell (to take examples from literature, the arts, science, politics)—fulfilling their original domestic purposes with a continuing adequacy and vitality which make them easier to relate to, familiar in their humanity and scale.



fig 1 General view of Owlpen Manor

Opening Owlpen Manor to the public



fig 2 Nineteenth-century view of Owlpen House, attributed to Samuel Teulon, c. 1845 (demolished 1957)

We came to Owlpen in Michaelmas 1974. But our tenure came not by a passive route of lineal inheritance with its sanction of legitimacy, lumbering us with a house as an embarrassment, with the misgivings of a gift horse, as is common in the private sector. We came sideways, by purchase, and at a young age, with no intention of running a business of opening and interpreting a house to the public. We sought it out consciously, if ingenuously, when initially we needed a roof over our heads. We must never forget that houses like ours are self justified first and foremost as homes. But little did we realise that the house would become, as the artist Fred Griggs said of his building of Dover’s Court, in Chipping Campden, ‘a sort of life’s work for me’; as we have been lucky to create a small country house which rambles and is modified in sympathy with our lives and dreams.

I was interested in early houses and the Arts and Crafts movement, and when Owlpen came on the market as our young family expanded, somehow indicating the synergy of the two, it seemed feasible. There was recession and the threat of a Wealth Tax in 1974. Later that year, the V&A Exhibition on ‘The Destruction of the Country House’, asking ‘Can they survive?’, had a display of Owlpen House, the early Victorian house which had been demolished in 1957, suggesting apocalypse or Armageddon for the owners of houses.¹



fig 3 Nineteenth-century view of
“Owlpen Old Manor”, when it
was uninhabited

In the early nineteenth century, the Stoughton family inherited Owlpen. They had come into money by marrying into coal mines in Wales and rising industry, and the medieval manor house had been usurped in the 1840s by Owlpen House, a grander Italianate mansion attributed to Samuel Teulon (1812-73) with romantic Reptonian prospects, laurel walks, shelter belts and clumps, set on a new site at the other end of the estate, a mile away, high on the Cotswold escarpment. Meanwhile, the ‘Old Manor’, as it came to be called, clung to life tenuously in the valley below, ‘making its brave fight against consuming time’ (*Country Life*, 1906). A curator-gardener lived in a few back rooms who would show round the first antiquarians and parsonical dons from Oxford discovering the villages and architecture of the Cotswolds. Owlpen began to develop its own long tradition of opening informally to the public which has continued to this day. Our predecessors, the Pagans, in 1963 had accepted a grant through the Ministry of Public Building and Works (as it then was) for repairs, and undertook heroic work. They opened the house in 1966, as something of a duty, on Fridays in June and July.

After a year of perfunctory opening, we in fact bucked the trend by closing the house in 1976, with a growing family of (ultimately) five young children and long absences in London and abroad, and really no staff to open the door for curious seekers. But from the first we managed the estate, marginal for agriculture, in the direction of amenity. In 1970s, with limited time and resources, we decided the obvious priority was to find a new life and a future, in Sir John Smith’s phrase (of the Landmark Trust), for the outbuildings—the offices, cottages and dependencies of the feudal manor—while the manor house was closed, abstracted from interpretation to the general public.

There was a good clutch of listed historic buildings, including a grist mill restored in 1728 and the summer-, or ‘banqueting-’, house of c. 1620, as well as weavers’ and keepers’ cottages, and a fine late medieval barn with a cruck roof. These had no *raison d’être* in the post-feudal world, and we converted them as holiday cottages, ‘confining the internal convenience’, in Wordsworth’s words, ‘within their external grace and dignity’, at the rate of about one a year, to serve a new community of international travellers, who could come and experience Owlpen in depth and at leisure. Eventually we had nine cottages run in the style of a country house hotel, with antiques and four-poster beds and backed up by increasingly professional management and services. The barn, where we had shorn sheep and stored our wool bales and apples, then held teenage parties, became a small estate and reception office, with more recently a restaurant. Other buildings, like one of the only surviving country house gas works of 1865, await time and money to put them into repair.

The children grew up. Conditions challenged and the market matured after fifteen years, during which our own contribution, of adaptation and small changes, incrementally began to add up to a qualitative transformation, with increasing viability in direction of tourism, leisure and conservation, and new EU grants for diversification from agriculture. By 1993, nearly a generation, after all, the heritage industry was developing in earnest around us, offering new opportunities. Positive factors were the immediately picturesque appeal of the woodland setting and importantly a location on the edge of Cotswolds, in one of England’s prime tourism regions, which had few open houses and which had become more accessible and fashionable, with the patronage of Royal incomers.

The Mander family

My own family patrilinear history is relevant here, to the contents of the house, and our own attitudes, prejudices and priorities. We had been brought up with a patrician sense of public service, of sharing what we were lucky to own. The Mander family had a tradition of much grander, if not quite stately, houses, and of living in them, in part at least, as public spaces. In particular, they had built—or rebuilt—two Staffordshire houses towards the end of the last century, designed by



fig 4 Lady Mary Mander, collector, c. 1935



fig 5 Norman Jewson (1884-1975), Arts and Crafts architect who repaired Owlpen in 1926 and saved it from ruin

History in interpretation



fig 6 Bird's-eye view of formal yew garden, early 18th century, from *Gardens and Design* by Sir Geoffrey Jellicoe, 1927

the Cheshire architect, Edward Ould, in the Arts and Crafts manner.

Wightwick Manor was built by Theodore Mander (1853-1900) in two phases in 1887 and 1893, and still shows the family's early espousal of the ideals of Ruskin and William Morris. His son, Sir Geoffrey Mander (1881-1963) (my first and second cousin, twice removed), a Liberal MP, gave it to the National Trust in 1937, with a collection of Pre-Raphaelite and Victorian art and late Romantic literary manuscripts, much augmented by him and his wife Rosalie, who became authorities on the period. It was said to be the first house to have been given to the nation under the country houses scheme, and today, preserved a little lifelessly with its outstanding contents, it is seen as a paradigmatic late Victorian 'Old English' house, a *tour de force* of the cultivated taste of the House Beautiful. The family often remark that they have never looked finer, house and garden, than they do today, in public ownership. It represents one solution to securing the country house, now seen by a satiated Trust as a safety net of last resort, usually for larger houses.

By contrast, Charles Benjamin Mander (1819-78) lived nearby at The Mount. He was an amateur artist who promoted the first publicly-funded School of Art in Britain in 1852, travelled widely in Italy, and had a hobby of *improving* the old masters in his collection 'to their great gain.' It was rebuilt, also to the plans of Ould, by the next generation, my great grandfather, Sir Charles Tertius Mander (1852-1929), in 1892 and 1908, establishing it in a grander English Renaissance style, commended by *The Studio*. It was not just a country house at the centre of a traditional rural estate, but a focus for public entertaining, municipal life and county affairs, within reach of his works. His widow, Mary (whose sister built Wightwick), lived on as a grand Victorian dowager until her death aged 92 in 1952, marking the end of an era locally. By then the family, in a post-war servantless world before the advent labour-saving devices and marked by high capital taxation, definitely felt such houses had outlived their useful life—becoming 'monuments to Victorian standards of practical inconvenience', as Rosalie Mander complained. After a three-day sale of contents, Trustees sold the house in 1953, and it has adapted well to institutionalization as a hotel with 56 en-suite bedrooms, another adequate solution for the house of its size and period. But it was the nadir of the fortunes of the private country house. Happily, many of the contents, the nucleus of family collections and portraits over many generations which typify the English country house, survive at Owlpen.

Interpretation starts here, determined by history. Houses are repositories of history: architectural and art history, of course; family history, landscape history; history religious, political, military and social; in the small house, sometimes very personal histories. This stream flows powerfully at Owlpen, leaving its rich tilth of alluvium. House and garden are many layered, polysemous as a system of signs and meanings, a palimpsest of memories and antecedent designs. I was trained in literature, and perhaps from this came to see, like Ruskin and his great disciple Proust, houses as texts, delicate textures from the past, complex entities, works with pragmatic categories of production and labour, a codification of symbols and stories, salient details and silent weathering, nuanced archaisms, involving multi-disciplinary studies of their creation of meanings, as keepers of the collective soul.

Beyond the intuitions and memories, we woke up to the archive, which justifies, defines, underscores, confirms those micro-histories, giving a textual substance to presentation and conservation. Its literary manifestation includes at the surface the guide book, the information sheet, the caption, which prompt the public 'decoding.' The archive, both at Owlpen and in my family, meagre by the standards of great houses, was nevertheless a flow of paper and parchment describing a slice of life dating continuously from the twelfth century, representing some 850 years of modern Britain. What begins with obscure Latin and Norman French charters through which we peer into a world remoter than that of classical Rome or

Renaissance Florence, a terse litany of names and dates and silent witnesses, continues evoking lively personalities in a crescendo to the present day, an impressive catalogue of diaries and letters, occasionally from famous people, as well as accounts, plans, estate and business papers, newscuttings, books, explaining something of the texture of the human life that enters into its fabric, and providing a rich seam which has been quarried earnestly for a small quota of interpretative books. And it can assist in conservation. Detailed accounts of building works show hinges and casements we see and use every day, giving names of people and rooms and places, with a ghostly continuity; tradesmen whose names still occur in local villages. Photographs come in from the second half of the nineteenth century, with their irrefutable visual record providing images to which the public and conservators can relate with immediacy.

Owlpen is above all an early house, and the historic development of the manor house is complex. More remarkably, it is a place of singular changelessness and unity. And age confers a legitimacy, an inwardness, the depth of a romance, also a diffuse focus for interpretation, in teasing through the random accretions of its layered stratigraphy.



fig 7 View of box parterre garden, 1996

We could identify, say, half a dozen, distinct layers, incarnations, providing successive metempsychoses at Owlpen. At the least visible level of prehistory, there is a complex of ritual sites on the hills behind the house which demonstrate that a succession of cultures have lived and worshipped continuously through some five millennia, from neolithic barrows to a remarkable Romano-Celtic head of Mercury now in the British Museum. Of early settlement, shards of evidence show that the manor was probably founded in an era of Celtic missionary activity following the decline of the Roman Empire at the turn of the sixth century. The standard authorities claimed the place name appeared to be British, or more likely Saxon, meaning ‘Olla’s pen’, after some local *thegn* or village headman who set up an enclosure by its springs in the ninth century. Certainly, the estate, not atypically in north-western Europe, had been farmed and managed from the manor for about a thousand years.

By the early twelfth century, the archives already demonstrate the estate consolidated as a manor, in recognisable form, with reference to extant features, dwellings, boundaries and field names. In the middle ages, less typically, its owners, the de Olepennes, were minor squires residing on their own manor, faithful henchmen to their overlords, the Berkeleys of Berkeley Castle, their house an administrative focus, a court house, a hunting lodge. By the fifteenth century, the stone manor with its hall and cross wings had emerged, while the family was still spending time away, with minor appointments around the Court, protecting their interests, litigating. The present house, as palpable architecture, is sub-medieval, dating largely to the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries (to 1616), by which time the Daunt family had inherited the manor. But they were beginning to be established more impressively in Ireland, with a castle and 200 tofts and 200 cottages in county Cork. They continued to use Owlpen as a mainland political base in an age of religious conflict, one from which to send their sons to Oxford, and in the following century to take the waters at fashionable Bath nearby.

Thomas Daunt V, the last member of the family to build at Owlpen, died, having reordered the early Georgian terraces and inserted some sashes and panelling, in 1749. Architecturally, nothing was done, or—more remarkably—undone, afterwards. The nineteenth century was one of decline into picturesque decay, along with the collapse of the local woollen cloth industry, the mainspring of the local economy, in the 1830s, when it could no longer compete with the North. For three generations, the house vanishes from history, as a Sleeping Beauty, sequestered and immured, integrated within the landscape of maturing yews, ‘like an old dog half asleep’, as the poem by Ursula Fanthorpe describes it. The only architectural survival is the result of the rebuilding of the church in 1828, with rich mosaic decoration by James Powell & Sons added to the chancel in 1886 and the baptistery in 1913.

In the late nineteenth century, the house began to be rediscovered with the antiquarian interest in Old England and vernacular architecture which was the inspiration behind the building of our family houses like Wightwick. Having reached progressively a state of advanced dereliction, it was sold for the first time in about 1,000 years with nine acres of land and some cottages for £3,200 in 1925.² The buyer was Norman Jewson (1884-1975), one of the leading disciples of Ernest Gimson in the great Cotswold Arts and Crafts revival. Jewson's sympathetic repair—he abhorred the concept of 'restoration'—of Owlpen, harnessed the conservationist principles promulgated so practically by his 'particular prophet', William Richard Lethaby, and the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB), of which Jewson was a committed member. Conservation has been one of the most fruitful legacies of the Arts and Crafts movement. Jewson combined sound knowledge and sureness of touch with intense poetic feeling, catching the spirit of place as well as texture and period (John Cornforth). When he sold it just over a year later, his successor, Barbara Bray, described him as the 'magician of this resuscitated [sic] dream-place,' and it became a country house once more, revived, redeemed, showing the adaptability, but also the continuity, of a way of life over many centuries.

With Norman Jewson, history is brought up to date, supplemented by deficient memory. In his last years, by then in his nineties, he befriended us when he was glad to be able to renew his acquaintance with the house after long separation and transmit to us its arcanum of stories. The austere but delicate simplicity of his own cottage in Sapperton, with its rush-seated chairs and furniture by his 'better craftsman' Ernest Gimson, was a revelation. He would reminisce fondly about his work there and talk of the Arts and Crafts in all their forms and of the people he had known, and advise sympathetically on new projects of conservation and adaptation. When he died he bequeathed his settle, which had belonged to Gimson at Pinbury, to Owlpen, as well as his Sidney Barnsley work table, an archive of sketch-books and verses, and the diaries he kept of his Continental travels. Such things became the nucleus of a collection of Cotswold Arts and Crafts items which overlays the family collections and has evolved since to be a major focus of interpretation.

Owlpen is not an Arts and Crafts house, of course, but rarer, remoter, Tudor, where architectural development stops dead in 1616. Its later layers of accretion—very early Georgian and Cotswold Arts and Crafts—are understated and reabsorbed, yet add disproportionately to its substance and interest. The house and most of the things in it were made long before the Arts and Crafts movement. But many commentators have found that today Owlpen instinctively echoes something of this Arts and Crafts expression *malgré lui*: 'Owlpen is the quintessence of the 'Old English' style' (John Sales, *Shell Guide*, 1990), where 'workmanship of different dates co-exists harmoniously, and seventeenth- and eighteenth-century furnishings blend easily with later things in the manner prized by the Arts and Crafts movement' (Geoffrey Tyack, *Blue Guide*, 1994). Today it is one of few Cotswold houses where the spirit of this later Cotswold incarnation of the Arts and Crafts, in furnishing, textures and method, is captured in something approaching an original context.

The period of sensitive repair, the ideas underlying it, our friendship with Jewson, our early experiences and inheritance of family houses with their earnest Ruskinian moralism, have been crucial if unconscious influences. Jewson's work at Owlpen is itself an intelligent interpretation, demonstrating for us and for the house a valid balance between conservation and renewal, demonstrating energies of construction and interaction with the past which are out of the ordinary, translating by echoing his response in the traditions of western architecture, dialectical tensions between his ideal of 'good manners' in respect for the past and a playful, creative subversion.

The economics of
interpretation

fig 8 Painted cloths: a rare survival illustrating the Live of Joseph, dated c.1680

There have been many motives for opening small private houses in post-war England, often not commercial at all, involving complying with conditions attached to grants and tax exemptions. (Our own grant request to English Heritage for ‘essential’ repairs, after over twelve years in process, was rejected.) In our case, always house opening was to gather in the lucre of what Vita Sackville-West called the ‘shillingses,’ making it pay in association with the other estate enterprises from the first, underwritten by a degree of entrepreneurial rashness and commitment which is alien to the more bureaucratic traditions of the large and frequently—but by no means always—well-endowed show places, typically backed up by an agricultural estate and a rent roll. Having made the decision to open the house, we knew that this time it could not be half hearted.

We had to promote the house, and not rely on passive marketing. We had to turn our private spaces inside out, opening the doors of the family living rooms, of cabinet and *studiolo*, and welcoming the public into the penetralia of this temple of the muses, to display the altars and hearth gods. Alongside the clutter of children’s bicycles and dog baskets, we exhibited seventeenth-century graffiti, servants’ bells, family trees, fancy dress costumes and livery, presentation keys and trowels, rescued from attic trunks and drawers, old bottles and jars from the garden midden. Such things reflect the social history, helping to market the fragments we have shored up there to curious city dwellers who, we began to learn, did not take such things for granted. They often did not have a history or sense of rootedness at all, and soon came to the extent of about 15,000 a year, from all over the world—(literally) from Alaska to New Guinea and Tasmania.

The domestic pattern broadens where houses have entered the leisure industry, with significant shifts in arrangement and sharpening of focus. Many heritage sites have acquired shops and restaurants that function for an urban audience, the amniatronics and interactive displays of Disney theme parks where all interpretation, all history has evaporated. There are many levels where the smaller house enters this also, often in preference to opening to the general public, becoming a backdrop, a *mise en scène*, for charity concerts and weddings, corporate sponsorship, craft fairs, films, with cries of idle trivialization and desecration. At Wightwick, the private spaces, the Turkish bath, the attic servants’ rooms, the butler’s pantry, the kitchens, the nurseries, are a focus of fresh debate and interest. Candida Lycett Green, in *Country Life: 100 Favourite Houses* (amongst which selection incidentally she includes both Wightwick and Owlpen) singles out the Wightwick nursery as ‘one the nicest rooms in Britain—light and happy with distempered green walls, yellowy cream woodwork and ... curtain materials designed by Voysey.’³ Educational programmes entering successfully into the National Curriculum have sought to deconstruct the elite ideology of a dominant culture, revealing the kitchens and garrets, the secret doors and servant ways, which were one of the delights of my childhood.

Commercially, not only are there many layers to our houses, when different messages are highlighted as products, but there are many markets to interpret them to. Perhaps the smaller house is safer, rarely achieving mass penetration as tourist attractions, and often appealing to a better-informed public. And an early house like Owlpen, of whatever size, is a subtle construct in interpretation, whose remoteness in time, also in function and technology, the subtleties of its social and economic history, make it a challenge, requiring simplification; there is much the average visitor does not have the equipment in scholarship to ‘see.’ Observing the public’s interest and listening to their questions provides helpful feed back. Beyond the ideal, the pretentiousness of the ordered display in contrived museum spaces, much has to be reduced to a more facile titillation, a trivialization. Few visitors are art or architectural historians, even antiquarians or gentleman scholars, opinion formers. Few are equipped with some specialized knowledge or enthusiasm, bringing and sharing privileged insights. Many visitors have no idea why they are there, have no formal historical frame of reference. The conscious inspiration of their visit, if they

reflect on it at all, may be prompted by nostalgia, a prying more or less idle curiosity, boredom, rather than old-fashioned self improvement. The arrangement and selection of objects we can show has to extend its democratic appeal to this large constituency. Visitors include reluctant husbands and schoolchildren, and many blue-rinse grannies. Small houses are part of an economy and a market place with many competing attractions, and interpretation has to reflect this.

The house acquires a nucleus of mystification where its fictions and local legends are cultivated, venturing beyond interpretation to reach a universality in a popular culture where everything is up for question. We have had to retell the ghost stories many times, refining and embroidering in the telling, these myths that an old house acquires and suggests, transmitted and distorted through Chinese whispers. In brochures and utterances, our website, in our occasional appearances on television and radio, we have found ourselves asked to embrace a certain banality, always including nonce tales, and forced to distil complex history into a sound bite or a few lines of advertiser's copy.

The small house allows little delegation and demands much flexibility, suggesting the dangers of amateurism (*amatore*, the lover). Small houses remain personal and demand commitment. I must be myself the TV presenter, the guidebook writer, the archivist, the typesetter and illustrator, the designer and publisher of my booklets, the family, art and architectural historian, the architect of the website, the topiarist, and my wife and I are vitally involved in everything that goes on, as hoteliers and restaurateurs, publicists, agronomists and property developers, stealing advice where we might. I might hang the gates, gild the capitals, plant the trees and prune and graft the orchard, like Lorenzo de Medici, with my own hands, as and when I have time, energy and enthusiasm. And many projects are suspended or unfinished, extending over the years and the days.

The new The final layer of interpretation is not what we have conserved or saved or discovered or mended or laundered or presented from the past, but, just as valid, what we have super-added ourselves—sometimes experimentally, without method, sometimes eccentrically or humorously, perhaps not always in sympathy with the past, but always the expression of our own time and, ideally, reversible—from the friends and acquaintances we have commissioned to paint or sculpt, to the garden [see illustration] we have again reordered and extended, the many trees we have planted. We must learn to recognise and remedy our own inevitable failures; to seek the best advice; to record; to hand on the living tradition of interpretation.

Significantly, in England many houses have benefited in the post-war period from new or extended gardens and infrastructure, and investment in and diversification of their estates. In our case, where much continuity had been lost, from the first we sought out the surviving architects and sometimes the craftsmen who had been involved in Owlpen's more recent history.

Sir Geoffrey Jellicoe (1900-1996) had been another early enthusiast for the garden. When we contacted him, he was an inspiration to new work in garden-making. He delighted in its Englishness, warning us not to 'Italianize' the garden with excess of formality inappropriate to its sense of mystery, 'like a witches' coven', in a way which might challenge its pre-Renaissance feel of a garden emerging from a remote historical period. He wrote on 14 May 1985.

Now Owlpen is a gem and I'm so glad to know someone sympathetic is living there. Because of Italian influences, because the great joy of Owlpen was that it really was indigenous—the simplicity of plan is delightful and in my day (1926) there was a mystery caused by the yews that was as medieval as the house. v. unitalian.

As Jellicoe observed, the garden, like the house, is many layered in its resonances. He had written in 1937 that it suggested 'the first garden in England

that was laid out beyond the walls of a castle ... parts of the garden are certainly Tudor with early Stuart additions. But no-one can be at Owlpen two or three hours without the feeling of mystery and oppression that is characteristic of the Middle Ages... The group is entirely enfolded by hills. It is almost as if the design has grown from the hillside, and is similar to the idea of growth in Gothic architecture.'

Our own late twentieth century garden, with its increasing awareness of historicist concerns, is focused through the lens of the 'Old English' revival garden described and illustrated by Gertrude Jekyll in 1914. Beyond that, we detect a romanticised, overgrown topiary garden on Victorian formal principles which incorporates elements in its structure and planning of the survival of the early Georgian garden of gravel paths and hanging terraces, with parterres in box and holly; that in turn lies within the coped stone walls which define the hortus conclusus of the late medieval period, when the feudal world was relaxing into the greater peace and prosperity of the fifteenth century.

The country house as museum and icon

Owlpen's interpretation does not end here, with the inscapes of its archive texts and history, its trivialization and additions. Tools for interpretation include the display and composition or arrangement (like *dipositio* in ancient rhetoric) of contents, always personal and contingent in the small house. The contents of Owlpen are modest as a typical country house accumulation, with no self-conscious attempt at a 'collection', even in retrospect, but they have evolved in this direction, attracting piecemeal loans and acquisitions. The only contents when we arrived at Owlpen were some firebacks and antlers, a roosting place for bantams and game cocks, and a rare set of painted cloths [see illustration] dating from the late seventeenth century.



fig 9 Owlpen Manor, etching by
F.L. Griggs, 1930

A forceful precedent, in a modernist tradition with which Jewson had little sympathy, when we came to opening our small house, was Jim Ede at Cambridge. He had been in turn much influenced by Winifred Nicholson and Helen Sutherland in the fusing of art and daily living. He spoke of his house which grew into a museum at Kettle's Yard there as 'a continuing way of life ... in which stray objects, stones, glass, pictures, sculpture in light and space, have been used to make manifest the underlying stability which more and more we need to recognise if we are not to be swamped by all that is so rapidly opening before us.' He would generously show undergraduates through the row of four hipped cottages which he had converted in 1957 from tiny condemned slums into a living and homely sanctum where he kept open house, a refuge where art could be discussed and enjoyed. He exuded charm and knowledge, talking about his friendships with Braque and Brancusi, Miró and Chagall, legendary heroes to me, inviting us to candle-lit impromptu meals and, like Geoffrey Mander, gleefully exposing the private spaces, his bathroom, lavatory and cupboards, hung with David Jones inscriptions.

The museum is a false analogy here. But opening a house introduces new perceptions and responses to the house's spaces and traditional purposes as the frame or theatre for family life—in the case of Wightwick, an aesthetic life lived on moral Christian principles; in the case of Owlpen, an urgent contemporary life, frenetic, untidy, with few staff, one of improvisation. The relationship between a house and its contents can begin to demonstrate ongoing, uneasy connections between art, architecture and functional domesticity, particularly in this 'museumizing' context of contrived arrangement. Yet at Kettle's Yard, at Helen Sutherland's Cockley Moor, both places with important collections, there was no discord; they were particularly sensitive and symbiotic arrangements, an interdependence complicated and intensified by the personality, the animating spirit of the owner. The 'dynamic interaction between art and architecture' achieves a special poignancy in the historic spaces of the country house, where often the works of art are minor, but the spaces and resonances overwhelmingly evocative.

Many of our great houses were built for the purposes of display, designed to house integral collections of furniture, sculpture and pictures which remain *in situ*. But houses like Owlpen have a private, family inwardness, and the visitor relationship is in harmony with its scale, its living contingency, the randomness of its accretions. The landscape and architecture of the vernacular do not express the monumentality, the will to power, the grandiloquent classical forms, of the great houses, but is defined by springs, shelter, strategic necessities, roads, the availability of building materials and the cultivation of a site. Lethaby wrote: '[Such] ancient buildings were not regarded aesthetically (whatever that may mean) but as part of the land and of man—something profound and mysteriously human. They formed a chain not of history but of actual continuous existence, back into the far past. They were growths from the soil rather than products of will and artifice.'⁴

Today many historic houses are becoming a 'sacred space,' in Victoria Newhouse's words, providing serenity and splendour, opportunities for contemplation and enlightenment, feelings of awe and reverence, an 'inner elevation,' in their historic transition from aristocratic, elitist or bourgeois private spaces to the community spaces of a secular mass culture; in the post-war period in the British Isles, places peculiarly developed to combine education, inspiration and entertainment, feeding the idle nostalgia and curiosity I have briefly described. Small country houses can reflect private tastes in esoteric interior spaces, to the point of idiosyncrasy. Museums and large houses share in this, but they are often municipal or statist enterprises, a forced marriage between a succession of collectors, architects, conservators, designers, curators, describing not home but exile; Filippo Marinetti's *Futurist Manifesto* of 1909 already dismissed museums as 'cemeteries'. It is the good fortune of the smaller country house, at least, to avoid the excesses of this moribund irrelevance in presentation.

Supremely, many country houses here acquire focus as symbols, signs of a lost world interpreted by art or literature, asserting a locale for a tribe, a critical regionalism, an identity-giving architectural vernacular. Owlpen, somnolent and under a spell of enchantment, represented for our predecessor, Norman Jewson, all that was vital in the English tradition, 'a noble inheritance,' as he wrote in *A Little Book of Architecture* (1940); like sister houses in the region at Kelmscott itself and Daneway, 'symbols of the accumulated experience of the past.' His close friend, the etcher Fred Griggs (1876-1938), codified that symbol in his etching of *Owlpen Manor* (1930) [see illustration], aptly inscribing the first state to Norman Jewson, who, 'with great care & skill saved this ancient house from ruin.' Later David Verey, another mentor, was to describe how this etching made of Owlpen's repair a potent icon, giving it visible and literary form. The ancient house, hemmed about by maturing yews, topiarised by art, where a claustrophobic sense of tension is relieved by two female figures with bobbed hair, suggesting renewal, became a nostalgic symbol of Englishness for a generation who had known and loved this part of the West of England, and were separated from it during the War years. 'Owlpen in its remote and beautiful valley near the Severn estuary is the epitome of romance,' he wrote.

Interpretation is part of this urgent search for meaning and renewal which in the twilight feeling of our culture posits the house as symbol, for our age and of another, of a past age, a return to the roots of cultural revindication. To seek the truth is to interpret, decipher, explicate, to translate. Houses when they become elevated as 'works of art' are systems rich in signs of fundamental ambiguity. It is not too high a claim to say we crave a demonstration of how this particular is shot through, to paraphrase Goethe, by the vital energies of universal, organic unity. Our sensibility craves a demonstration of their meaning in this mute language of things, expressing an ideal reality, with a pure past; an individuation.

Conclusion

In the face of what Heidegger calls the essential homelessness of man, houses are one individuation of this search for meaning. But architecture, above all vernacular architecture, is not just a language, with its codes to be deconstructed and read. 'Building' is cognate with biding, with dwelling, he writes, and buildings have a congruity with our being. The voussoirs of the arch which shores up the fabric of the country house—the economy of agricultural and sporting estates; families which are institutionalized in their subject-matter, their pedigrees and perceived wealth, their patrician codes of public service and philanthropy, their creative leisure, the eccentricity or nobility of their private lives; accumulations of papers steeping them in complex literacy; fragile possessions—are under tension, askew in irrelevance as these things become merely esoteric, and marginal. Dynasties pass, and houses rise and fall, or are remade 'in a new pattern,' leaving their deposits, creations and modifications, as the generations of man must renew and adapt. I hope the themes illustrated or evoked in our houses, great and small, will continue to be interpreted and carried forward, 'made anew,' provisionally at least, as something fundamental to the vocation of post-industrial, democratic man.



fig 10 Owlpen Manor, etching by Joseph Webb, disciple of Griggs

Interpretation creates tensions between inheritance and innovation. But the image of Owlpen etched by Griggs's follower, Joseph Webb (1908-62) [see illustration], shows that the house below its church—and the garden they stand in—always adapt, and something does not quite fade away into the indefinite. They gather together instead the fragments, the paths and relations, in which all 'life is from the soil' (Lethaby) and, under the waking weathercock, birth and death, disaster and triumph, success and failure, acquire the shape of a destiny. With the shards in the soil, they hold their ground against the western twilight, as they have done for a thousand years.

- Figures
- 1 General view of Owlpen Manor, dated c. 1450 to 1616, and church
 - 2 Nineteenth-century view of Owlpen House, attributed to Samuel Teulon, c. 1845 (demolished 1957)
 - 3 Nineteenth-century view of “Owlpen Old Manor”, when it was uninhabited
 - 4 Wightwick Manor, buid by Edward Ould for Theodore Mander, 1887-93, presented to the National Trust in 1937
 - 4 Lady Mary Mander, collector, c. 1935
 - 5 Norman Jewson (1884-1975), Arts and Crafts architect who repaired Owlpen in 1926 and saved it from ruin
 - 6 Bird's-eye view of formal yew garden, early 18th century, form Gardens and Design by Sir Geoffrey Jellicoe, 1927
 - 7 View of box parterre garden, 1996
 - 8 Painted cloths: a rare survival illustrating the Live of Joseph, dated c.1680
 - 9 Owlpen Manor, etching by F.L.Griggs, 1930
 - 10 Owlpen Manor, etching by Joseph Webb, disciple of Griggs

- Notes and References
- ¹ ‘*The Destruction of the Country House*’, Victoria & Albert Museum (9 October to 1 December 1974), *Key to Small Photographs*, no. 26: ‘Owlpen Park, Gloucestershire, dem 1955’.
 - ² The eventual heir seems to have been Eustace Robb (1899-1985) of Great Tew Park, through his mother, born Wilhelmine Stoughton (b. 1874—bur. Great Tew), who married Maj.-Gen. Sir Frederick Spencer Robb. There were a number of Stoughton pictures at the Great Tew sale in 1987 (lots 401, 423, 424, 455 and 468).
 - ³ 1999, p.125
 - ⁴ A.R.N. Roberts (ed.), *William Richard Lethaby* (London, 1957), p. 78

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Direct requests to:

leo.schmidt@tu-cottbus.de

or

Lehrstuhl für Denkmalpflege
BTU Cottbus
Postfach 101344
03013 Cottbus
Germany

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