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HOUSE AND HOME

Yorkshire's country houses were the Grand Designs of their day – here Clive Aslet tells their story through the people who lived in them

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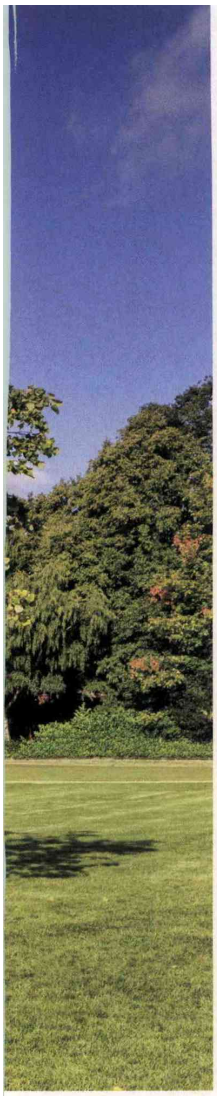


Picture: Credit: travellinlight / Alamy Stock Photo

After a lifetime of researching, describing and enjoying country houses, I couldn't resist the chance to write *The Story of the Country House*.

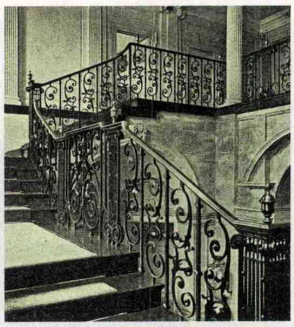
In imagination, since I did it during lockdown, I roamed the length and breadth of the British Isles, from the wilds of Ireland to the manicured Home Counties.

By the time I'd finished, though, I realised that I needn't have made such an extensive mental tour.

One county would have sufficed to show everything about this great building type at its best. You won't be surprised to know that this is Yorkshire.

My heart stops when I see Markenfield Hall, south of Ripon. Ancient, idyllic and remote, it is a more a piece of poetry than an ordinary house: the impoverishment of the family after the failed Rising of the North against Elizabeth I meant that it was little altered after being erected in the 14th century.

Best not to look too closely at the man who built it: John de Markenfield, a favourite of the disastrous king Edward II, was a violent and unscrupulous man, with many enemies – no wonder he felt the need to fortify his house with moat and battlements.



Lutyens plunged into Classicism and the first country house he created was Heathcote, built in what Lutyens himself called 'an ultra-suburban locality' outside Ilkley

Burton Agnes Hall in the East Riding is another survival, little changed since the architect Robert Smythson designed it around 1600.

There is still a gatehouse and a formal garden with yew hedges in front of the house – the sort of thing that were usually swept away by 'Capability' Brown and his followers in the 18th century. Symmetry was the new idea in architecture, although difficult to achieve when great halls were still entered, in the medieval manner, from one end (Smythson solved the problem by placing the front door at right angles to the façade, in a projecting bay). The great hall itself is a tour de force of Elizabethan plasterwork. Several tiers of allegorical figures above the screens passage depict a Christian knight – presumably the owner of the house, Sir Henry Griffiths, fashionably dressed in doublet and hose – as he makes a spiritual journey towards the Heavenly City, accompanied by angels. It is a wonderful example of a distinctively English tradition.

The first dome to crown a British country house appeared above Castle Howard, in the Howardian Hills north of York. Before designing it in the late 1690s, Sir John Vanbrugh had built precisely nothing.

Now in his thirties, he had served as a soldier, and spent several years languishing in French gaols after having been arrested in Calais for lack of the correct papers, before bursting onto the London scene as a saucy playwright and a wit.

With amazing confidence, Vanbrugh sketched out an enormous house, with two embracing wings and a centerpiece with a dome.

Perhaps Vanbrugh's experience in the theatre had imbued him with an innate feeling for stage effects, for Castle Howard is nothing if not dramatic.

ABOVE:
The grand Wentworth Woodhouse, near Rotherham

RIGHT:
The South Front of Castle Howard

Picture: Alamy Stock Photo

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Giant pilasters rise up the full height of the centre block, statues gesticulate along the skyline, wings sweep forward on either side, and a painted and gilded hall soars seventy feet up into the dome.

Vanbrugh's patron at Castle Howard, the 3rd Earl of Carlisle, never finished the house. By the time of his death in 1745, he had become engrossed by the landscape.

In this he was typical of an age in which gentlemen throughout Britain spent fortunes on improving their estates, on Picturesque principles. The former Chancellor John Aislabie was one of them. One of the architects of the South Sea Bubble, which ruined many investors, he was forced to retire in disgrace, devoting the rest of his life to the creation of his garden at Studley Royal, focused – as the grand finale of the tour – on the ruins of Fountains Abbey.

Under his son William, who was able to buy the ruins, the grounds could be enjoyed from over thirty-five miles of walks and rides.

The great arbiter of taste in the early 18th century was Richard Boyle, 3rd Earl of Burlington; not only did he amass a great library of architectural books and drawings by Italian architects such as Andrea Palladio, but he took drawing lessons.

Picture: Welcome to Yorkshire

Burton Agnes Hall – little changed since the architect Robert Smythson designed it around 1600

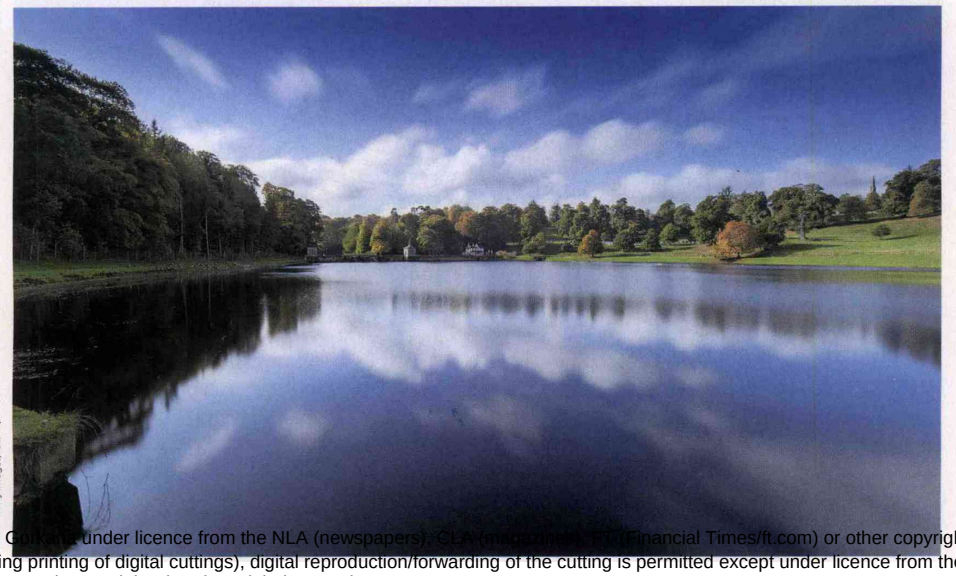
Among the buildings that he designed is the Assembly Rooms at York, now used as a restaurant. It's an attempt to reconstruct the Egyptian Hall described by the Roman author Vitruvius.

Sarah Duchess of Marlborough wrote to her granddaughter that the Assembly Rooms exceeded 'all the nonsense and madness that I ever saw of that kind, and that is saying a great deal': the sumptuous columns were too closely spaced for a lady in a hooped skirt to pass between them. Burlington was a Yorkshireman, and so was the architect with whom he was most associated, William Kent. Why did people build country houses? They were a chance to show off, to create an Arcadia for the owner and his family, and they were a source of political power.

At one party in 1732, the future Marquess of Rockingham welcomed 'about one thousand' guests, serving them 'two hundred and twenty-five dishes'; it was part of a strategy to keep Yorkshire on the side of the Whigs – no wonder he rebuilt Wentworth Woodhouse with the longest facade of any country house in Britain

But a change was underway, following the Agricultural Depression that set in during the 1870s and lasted until the Second World War.

Picture: Alamy Stock Photo



Picture: Getty Images/iStockphoto

LEFT: The lake at Studley Royal, Fountains Abbey. The former Chancellor John Aislabie devoted his life to the creation of his garden at Studley Royal. Under his son William, who was able to buy the ruins, the grounds could be enjoyed from over thirty-five miles of walks and rides

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Markenfield Hall, the picturesque early 14th-century moated Medieval manor house about three miles south of Ripon

A different kind of owner emerged for whom the country house was a romance, expressive of an ideal way of life, in which gardens, collecting old furniture and country sports were more important than agricultural estates; land ownership, which had seemed the best of all investments since the Middle Ages, had lost its appeal. No one was better able to realise his clients' desire for a rural idyll than Sir Edwin Lutyens – a romantic, who moved in a self-created world of delight, entranced by geometry, wreathed in extravagant notions of chivalry, particularly towards women, whom he did not perhaps understand.

Around 1905, Lutyens plunged into Classicism.

He called it 'a big game, a high game', and the first country house on which he played it was Heathcote, built in what Lutyens himself called 'an ultra-suburban locality' outside Ilkley in Yorkshire. It was commissioned by a rich businessman from Bradford.

After the First World War, and Second World War, owners struggled to keep up their country houses and many threw in the towel.

Warter Priory in East Yorkshire was demolished on the eve of the Oil Crisis in 1972. But Yorkshire has also led the way in the renaissance of the country house that set in under the Thatcher government, which reduced taxes.

In 1987, Roger Tempest took over the running of Broughton Hall in Yorkshire, which had been in his family since 1097 but was struggling to last out the twentieth century (his sister, Annie Tempest, reimagined it as Tottering Hall in her *Country Life* cartoon strip, 'Tottering-by-Gently').

Before long there were 500 people working in the business park and this dynamic man had helped over 300 traditional estates to see a bright future through his company, Rural Solutions.

Today confidence among owners is high again. Look at Warter Priory. Will Healey, heir to the Wren Kitchens fortune, has commissioned a new country house on the site of the old one from Robert Adam. ◆

The Story of the Country House, A History of Places and People, is published by Yale University Press