

# My home is my castle, quite literally

**Debated and desired, the big country house is here to stay, says Richard Morrison**

**T**hese days you can't mention country houses in some circles — in fact, in most of the media — without putting the words “slave trade” in the same sentence. Such is the effect (educational or divisive, depending on your viewpoint) of our “culture wars”. How these grand mansions were financed has always been part of their story. Today you might think that the often questionably acquired wealth behind them is the whole story.

The stately homes of England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland are often regarded in metropolitan liberal circles as objects of guilt and shame. Not, as would have been the case in Britain until a few years ago, as first and foremost the finest examples of domestic architecture in the world.

Clive Aslet, the former *Country Life* editor who has written this concise yet illuminating history, isn't blind to this seismic shift in attitudes. As he points out, country house owners throughout history “amassed or inherited enormous wealth” but seemed oblivious to what he aptly calls the “glaring moral iniquities of the ultimate sources of their fortunes: slavery is the obvious example”. But it's not the only one. “Coal mining,” he continues, “was an immense source of wealth but the consequences, we might think, were as bad for the environment as they were for the lungs of the miners engaged in it. Medieval

serfdom was little better than slavery...” And he reminds us of the inhumane conditions endured by those mining diamonds and gold in 19th-century South Africa, a huge source of “tainted wealth” during the late-Victorian and Edwardian heyday of the British country house.

Even the creation of those two staples of the 18th-century country house — mahogany furniture and a landscaped garden — involved prodigious amounts of human misery. The former was a product of slave labour and (in Aslet's words) created an “environmental disaster” in the Caribbean. The latter, when done on a grand scale by Capability Brown and the like, sometimes involved the destruction of whole villages that were (from the land-owner's point of view) inconveniently positioned. Landscape gardening was the HS2 of its day, but there was no appeal process for these displaced peasants.

As Aslet points out, “we should beware of attempting to retrofit modern morals onto previous eras of history”. In any case, an era that is quite content to be oblivious to the slave labour used in the production of, for example, our clothes and our mobile phones should be wary of being too high-minded in our condemnation of exploitation in earlier centuries.

Even so, the dark side of the country house story shouldn't be swept under the carpet, not least because it highlights the

extraordinary gap between the haves and have-nots in every epoch of our islands' story. The country house, of course, embodied that very gap with its upstairs-downstairs hierarchy. The 1871 UK census recorded 68,369 men and 1,207,378 women employed as servants. Although it would have resulted in a different sort of book, I would have liked Aslet to have told me more about how that army of domestic staff lived, to complement the remarkable details he supplies about the lifestyles of the super-rich families they served.

Mind you, some of those details are jaw-dropping. Meals in a Georgian country house would sometimes last so long that the sideboard would contain a “hidden supply of chamber-pots” so the men could go on drinking and gossiping for hours without needing to leave for a pee.

What Aslet does best is provide a crisp, chronological survey of how the country house evolved architecturally from early Tudor times through to Lutyens in the early 20th century and to Quinlan Terry and the like today. Three recurring traits strike me. The first is that, although the UK generally became richer in the four centuries from 1500 to 1900, the trend in country houses was more complex.

There were periods of huge ostentation — the baroque era, for instance, during which Chatsworth, Castle Howard and Blenheim Palace were constructed, and



the later gothic revival craze, which produced monstrosities such as Fonthill Abbey, where the plantation owner William Beckford not only commissioned a 35ft-high front door, but also employed a dwarf to open it (“to increase the drama”, as Aslet notes). Yet these excesses were offset by periods when the taste was for more compact, calmer buildings.

That’s one reason for the architectural variety of the British country house. Another is the tendency for British landowners to use the country house not just to flaunt their wealth, but to express their characters and eccentricities. Many saw themselves as masters and builders of an empire to rival Rome’s. Hence the interest in imitating classical styles. Some, such as the bitter Viscount Cobham in the 1730s, created convoluted and symbolic follies to express the political ideals they couldn’t impose in real life. Others, such as the gothic-obsessed Horace Walpole at Strawberry Hill, Twickenham, wanted to create, in effect, a house of stage sets that would “give visitors the creeps”.

Nostalgia for an imagined and idealised past was a big motivating factor. Doubly so, in the case of Walter Scott’s fake medieval mansion by the side of the River Tweed, bursting with the sort of romanticised Scottish artefacts (Rob Roy’s purse, a lock of Bonnie Prince Charlie’s hair, Robert Burns’s tumbler) that Scott would bring to life in his writing.

And the other recurring trait? It’s the sheer durability of the country house concept, even when it seemed doomed — as it did, for example, during the Wars of the Roses, when half the aristocratic families of England were ruined, or during the vindictive English Civil War, or in the mid-20th century, when rising taxation and changing tastes led to hundreds of once-treasured houses being demolished.

As Aslet points out, lockdown and the subsequent yearning for rural life has made country houses more desirable (and highly priced) than ever. And if you need a few extra quid to keep your stately home in the style to which your ancestors were accustomed, you can always do what the aristocratic Gage family have done with Firle Place in East Sussex: rent it out to the makers of Jane Austen movies and *The Great British Bake Off*.

## Many landowners saw themselves as builders of an empire to rival Rome



### The Story of the Country House A History of Places & People by Clive Aslet

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ALAMY

**GRAND DESIGN** Castle Howard near York, an example of baroque extravagance, took more than a century to complete