

Choice 5

Richard Bentley's Drawings for Strawberry Hill

This is the book that the Almighty agreed is the most important object in my house.

The drawings are pasted in a calf-bound folio scrapbook with gray leaves. Walpole probably did the pasting himself; certainly he had the title-page printed at the Strawberry Hill Press, the sole copy known, "Drawings and Designs by Richard Bentley only son of Dr Bentley, Master of Trinity College, Cambridge." The book was sold in the 1842 auction of Strawberry's contents to a dealer and sank from sight until May 1926 when I found it in a London bookshop. The morning of the General Strike I departed for Paris on the last train and boat from England, leaving the unwieldy book behind, but in a few days I had it flown across the Channel, the first of Walpole's books, I believe, to take to the air.

It is mentioned in the first Common Place Book rescued in Choice 4. "I have a large book of [Bentley's] drawings," Walpole wrote, "and his original designs for Mr Gray's poems [Choice 6]. He drew the ceiling of the Library at Strawberry Hill, designed the lanthorn, staircase, north front, and most of the chimney-pieces there; and other ornaments." Walpole annotated many of the drawings, stating if they were not executed; Bentley initialed a few and gave some dimensions. Thirty of the drawings are for Strawberry Hill, fifty are for other buildings and objects. There are also a few landscapes of Jersey, whither Bentley fled to elude his creditors, a Temptation of St Anthony, and a Turkish Bath. The drawings were pasted in higgledy-piggledy. "Gothic chairs at Strawberry Hill taken from painted glass there by Mr Bentley" come between two designs for Lord Strafford, "a chimney piece in the style of architecture in the reign of James the First," not executed, and a Gothic building inspired by Chichester Cross that was set up in Strafford's menagerie at Wentworth Castle. "The Priory of St Hubert, a [Gothic] farm belonging to the Countess of Suffolk" and a "Gothic farmhouse for Sir Thomas

DRAWINGS
AND
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BY
RICH^D. BENTLEY,
ONLY SON
OF
Dr. BENTLEY,
MASTER OF TRINITY-COLLEGE
CAMBRIDGE.



Title-page for *Drawings and Designs* by Richard Bentley.

Seabright at Beechwood in Hertfordshire" flank "sketches for the windows in the Holbein Chamber at Strawberry Hill." Bentley was at home in any style—a Palladian palazzo for the Duke of Cumberland at Windsor, a Chinese temple for Henry Fox at Holland House, a Georgian Town Hall at St Helier in Jersey, a "design for a fictitious steeple for Nicholas Hardinge, Esq. at Kingston," which is a Gothic clocktower stuck on the roof of a Georgian house and shows how simple it was to become a Goth if one tried.

Walpole tells us in his *Description of Strawberry Hill* that "where the Gothic Castle now stands was originally a small tenement" built in 1698 by the Earl of Bradford's coachman. It was let to various celebrated people until Walpole bought it in 1748, a year after he rented it. He wrote Henry Conway that it was "the prettiest bauble you ever saw. It is set in enamelled meadows, with filigree hedges:

A small Euphrates through the piece is roll'd,
And little finches wave their wings in gold.

Two delightful roads, that you would call dusty, supply me continually with coaches and chaises: barges as solemn as barons of the Exchequer move under my window; Richmond Hill and Ham Walks bound my prospect; but, thank God! the Thames is between me and the Duchess of Queensberry."

The announcement of the cottage's Gothic future is in a letter to George Montagu of 1749: "Did I tell you," Walpole asked, "that I found a text in Deuteronomy to authorize my future battlements? 'When thou buildest a new house, then shalt thou make a battlement for thy roof, that thou bring not blood upon thy house, if any man fall from thence.' " To help him plan his "castle" he formed The Committee with Bentley and John Chute of The Vyne in Hampshire, an older connoisseur Walpole met at Florence while on the Grand Tour. The Preface to *A Description of Strawberry Hill*, 1774, explains that the house was intended to exhibit "specimens of Gothic architecture, as collected from standards in cathedrals and chapel-tombs, and [to show] how they may be applied to chimney-pieces, ceilings, windows, balustrades, loggias, etc. The general disuse of Gothic architecture," Walpole asserted, "and the decay and alterations so frequently made in churches, give prints a chance of being the sole preservatives of that style." The Committee pored over the prints in such works as Dugdale's *St Paul's* and Dart's *Westminster*, picking out Gothic details to be "imitated," especially in the chimney-pieces. The

Description of Strawberry Hill gives their derivation: the chimney-piece in the Little Parlor was designed by Bentley from the tomb of Thomas Ruthall, Bishop of Durham, as shown in Dart's *Westminster*; the bookcases in the Library were copied from the side-doors to the choir in Dugdale's *St Paul's Cathedral*. The Committee did not know how their Gothic predecessors built, but they didn't have to know because William Robinson, a professional architect at the Board of Works, took care of the stresses and strains and all that and made certain that the house wouldn't fall down as other neo-Gothic houses did. We see the Committee at work in Walpole's copy of Sandford's *Genealogical History of the Kings of England*, 1677, at Farmington. On the plate of the great screen for the tomb of Prince Arthur in Worcester Cathedral are notes by Walpole and Bentley that transformed the screen into the "Gothic paper" for Strawberry's entrance hall. The Committee saw no more impropriety in substituting paper for stone than in converting Edward the Confessor's tomb to the chimney-piece in the Round Drawing-Room. The fabric of the house was lath and plaster and had to be renewed from time to time. Twenty years before Walpole died "Gilly" Williams said, "Mr Walpole has already outlived three sets of his battlements."

Four of the eight Gothic chairs "taken from painted glass at Strawberry Hill" by Bentley were sold in 1842 to the Earl of Charleville and four to "Piggott, Richmond." Lord Charleville bought other lots that were sold by his descendants in 1950 at an auction in Dublin of which, unfortunately, I heard nothing until it was over. When my wife and I got to Dublin in February 1951 the leading antiquarian dealer regretted he hadn't heard of me because he could have got all the Walpoliana for very little. "Is there nothing left in Ireland?" I asked. "Well, yes," and he produced a photograph of two of the Gothic chairs. They were, he said, "in a religious house." Would there be any possibility, I wondered, of their migrating to Farmington? They were two hundred years old and must be rather shaky; mightn't the religious house prefer sturdy new ones from Grand Rapids, Michigan? The dealer suggested that I leave the matter to him and in two days the chairs were on their way to Farmington for a modest check. A year later a letter from England offered two more of the chairs. The writer had just heard a talk about my library by Wyndham Ketton-Cremer on the Third Programme of the BBC and wondered if I would like two of the Gothic chairs that had been bought at the Strawberry Hill sale by his grandfather. The writer's name was Piggott. His chairs have now rejoined Lord Charleville's, standing against

a wall as in a water-color drawing of them in Choice 9. The four remaining chairs have also turned up, two in Ireland, two in England, where, alas, they remain.

Why do I value Bentley's drawings and designs for Strawberry Hill so highly? It is because of their primary importance in the Gothic Revival and the light they throw on Walpole himself. In the Preface to *A Description of Strawberry Hill* he states that the house was built "to please my own taste, and, in some degree, to realize my own visions." He had already written, "When by the aid of some historic vision and local circumstance, I can romance myself into pleasure I know nothing transports me so much." The sepulchral monuments in cathedrals and churches gave him this romantic pleasure. His love of "the true rust of the Barons' Wars" was heightened by patriotic pride: England's mediaeval buildings were as fine as any in Europe and should be more esteemed by Englishmen. This awareness grew after 1748 and the close of a successful war; "Gothick" became fashionable, as in this country we built "Colonial" houses after the First World War. Although the Walpoles had been Norfolk landowners for centuries, they were relatively modest compared to Horace's Conway and Townshend cousins or to his mother's relations, the Philippses of Picton Castle. One of the latter produced a chart (now at Farmington) that shows how the Philipps family went back to Edward III and Cadwallader, the vigorous seventh-century King of North Wales. Under Walpole's joke about "the old counts of Strawberry" lay the same desire for ancient lineage that moves the descendants of the *Mayflower's* passengers.

Among Bentley's designs for Strawberry Hill is the Gothic lanthorn. We learn from the *Description* that "In the well of the staircase by a cord of black and yellow [the colors in the Walpole arms] hangs a Gothic lanthorn of tin Japanned, designed by Mr Bentley, and filled with painted glass; the door of it has an old pane with the arms of Vere earl of Oxford." When Sir Leigh Ashton, then director of the Victoria and Albert Museum, saw this pane at Farmington he said that glass of its period "simply doesn't exist." "What is its period?" "The fifteenth century, Agincourt!" he pronounced, "1415. *That's* what it is!" "The lanthorn," Walpole wrote, "casts the most venerable gleam on the stairs that was ever seen since the days of Abelard," who was brought in because the entrance hall in which the lanthorn hung was called "the Paraclete" after the oratory Abelard founded.

How did I find the lanthorn? Apparently by luck, but I never would

have found it had I not been driven to seek out unique Walpoliana. This compulsion was recognized by Max Beerbohm when late in life he wrote me that he had read my *Collector's Progress*, "with envy. To have a consuming and overwhelming passion and to be able to write about it so lightly and well is surely a most enviable state. If Orestes with the Furies ever at his heels had been, in his headlong flight, able all the while to be talking charmingly and wittily about them he would have a modern counterpart in yourself." Mr R. M. Holland-Martin, a collector as well as head of Martin's Bank, wanted to help me in my headlong flight and asked my wife and me down to his house in Worcestershire one weekend in 1935 to see the pictures from Strawberry Hill at nearby Sudeley Castle where Queen Catherine Parr lived after Henry the Eighth's death. They were bought at the sale in 1842 by John Dent, the glove king. Thirty-four of his purchases greeted us in the entrance hall of the house, the oil tracings made by George Vertue from Holbein's drawings of Henry the Eighth's Court. Walpole bought them from Vertue's widow, put them into his favorite black and gold frames, and built the Holbein Chamber to receive them. "Have you ever looked at their backs?" I asked our host, who was Dent's grandson. He hadn't, and asked why he should? "Because I think you'll find that Walpole identified the sitters." Down came the pictures and, sure enough, Walpole had written the names of each sitter on the backs.

After enjoying this success, which pleased the owner as much as the visitor, I asked if he had a list of his grandfather's purchases at the sale? He had and the last item on it was "Gothic Lanthorn." "Is that the famous Gothic lanthorn?" I asked. "I don't know whether it's the famous Gothic lanthorn" was the reply, "but it's the ugliest blasted lantern that ever was." That sounded like it and I said, truthfully, I would rather see the lanthorn than anything in England because it was the epitome of Strawberry Hill and I had the original design and later drawings of it after Walpole added the painted glass.

"I'm afraid," the owner answered, "you're too late."

"Oh!"

"My wife wouldn't have it hanging about any longer and threw it out."

"Threw it out!"

"It just may not have gone."

We hurried across a large inner court to a lumber room where on a bench stood Bentley's lanthorn, its tin cross slightly awry, but worth its weight, so far as I was concerned, in Catherine Parrs.

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"Well," said the wife of the owner, who had joined us, "I won't have it back in the house. Perhaps we should give it to the Cheltenham Museum."

"Oh, *don't* do that," I burst out.

"What," I asked Mr Holland-Martin on the ride home, "can I do now?"

He was very helpful. "When you write to thank them for tea, why don't you say that if they decide to part with the lanthorn you hope they will let you know." The owner answered my letter by return post to say that he and his wife would be delighted to give me the lanthorn if I would have it taken away, and it hangs now in the East Library at Farmington.

Walpole's first mention of Bentley is in a letter to George Montagu of 23 June, 1750: "I have had another of your friends with me some time, whom I adore, Mr Bentley he has more sense, judgment, and wit, more taste, and more misfortunes, than ever met in any man." In his day Bentley was identified as the son of the great classical scholar of the same name who put Pope's translation of *Homer* in its place by saying that it was "a very pretty poem, but it must not be called Homer," a pleasantry that landed him in the *Dunciad*. Besides his drawings and designs for Strawberry Hill and Gray's Poems, the younger Bentley translated the Press's edition of Hentzner's *Journey to England in 1598* from the Latin, and drew the fleurons for the most handsome of the Press's books, Lucan's *Pharsalia* with Dr Bentley's notes. Walpole printed it for Bentley's benefit, but after several years of intimacy Bentley's improvidence and "disposition to chimerical schemes" exhausted his patron's patience, and he left never to return. According to William Cole, Bentley was "too forward in bringing his wife to Strawberry Hill." As Walpole called her "Mrs Hecate," "Mrs Tisiphone," and "Hannah Cleopatra" she probably did contribute to the breach. After it Walpole showed his continuing concern for Bentley by getting a sinecure in the Exchequer for his son. Walpole's letters to Bentley are among the best he wrote; Bentley's side, which Walpole praised highly, has never been printed and is lost. Although the *Dictionary of National Biography's* article on Dr Bentley dismisses his son as "an accomplished but eccentric man who achieved nothing signal in life," it gave him an entry of his own as a "writer on miscellaneous subjects" whose "artistic talent was exaggerated by his contemporaries"; yet today the younger Bentley's writings are forgotten and his drawings are accorded high praise. The most interesting to us of his tracts is *Reflections on the Different Ideas of the French and English in regard to*

Cruelty, 1759, to which Walpole contributed the Dedication "To the most Humane Person alive (Whoever that is.)"

When Chute, the second "architect" of Strawberry Hill, died Walpole wrote, "He was my oracle in taste, the standard to whom I submitted my trifles, and the genius that presided over poor Strawberry!" His drawings for it are also at Farmington. Although they are stiff and finicky they show that his contribution to the house was much greater than was known before his drawings reappeared at Chewton. They were pasted in an oblong notebook, doubtless by Walpole who wrote a title-page for it, "Slight Sketches of Architecture by John Chute, Esq., of the Vine [*sic*] in Hampshire," and annotated several of the sketches. Bentley's drawing for the library was rejected because, as Walpole wrote him, "Mr Chute's design has a conventual look that yours totally wants." Severe but just, as a comparison of the sketches proves. Chute also contributed the Long Gallery and Great Cloister beneath it after Bentley left. Students of Eighteenth-Century amateur architects agree that his drawings for Strawberry Hill rival Bentley's but that Bentley's are the ones to save.

The house that emerged from Bentley's and Chute's designs is the archetype of a style that spread round the world; its descendants include the Houses of Parliament at Westminster and Ottawa, the Residences of the Governors in Sydney and Singapore, the Old Library at Yale, and countless Victorian buildings from John o'Groats to Land's End and from Maine to Hawaii. Sir Nikolaus Pevsner tells us that its influence extended to France and Italy, Germany, Sweden, and Russia, as well. In the early years of this century Strawberry Hill was spoken of with amused condescension, but, as with all buildings that survive long enough, it has acquired architectural and historical respect and is studied for its influence on the Gothic Revival and the light it throws on Horace Walpole himself. At the end of his life he admitted that "Every true Goth must perceive that [Strawberry's rooms] are more the works of fancy than of imitation" because the Committee "had not studied the science," yet his early satisfaction in "implanting the gloomth of abbeys and cathedrals" on his house lingered despite his growing awareness of its architectural imperfections. Bentley's and Chute's drawings survive and Strawberry continues to resist the assaults of age which have included a German fire-bomb that crashed into the Long Gallery in 1941. Walpole left Strawberry to the descendants of his favorite niece Maria whose first husband was the second Earl Waldegrave. As I have said, the seventh earl auctioned off the contents of the house in 1842. The house itself was bought in

1888 by Lord Michelham whose family sold it in 1920 to St Mary's College, a Vincentian seminary in the University of London's Institute of Education. They consecrated the Tribune, which Walpole originally called "The Chapel." Houses now shut off the view of the river, Walpole's forty-six acres have shrunk, but more and more people are visiting Twickenham to pay their respects to Strawberry Hill and the memory of its creator.