

Country Estates: the Landed Gentry and New Money

Wilson, R. G. and A. L. Mackley. "How Much did the English Country House Cost to Build, 1660-1880?" *The Economic History Review, New Series*, Vol. 52, No. 3, 1999, pp. 436-468.

The late Sir John Summerson, the distinguished architectural historian, made three observations in his 1959 Royal Society of Arts lectures about research into the eighteenth-century English country house: 'Nobody, I believe, has attempted to estimate the number of country houses built, the amount of money spent on them, or their distribution throughout the kingdom-- elementary desiderata, surely, if country house building is to be considered historically.' Although the English country house and its owners have since held high placings on the agendas of architectural historians and of their colleagues in economic and social history, and the study of the subject is no longer 'very backward' as Summerson claimed 40 years ago, the three points he raised have proved difficult to answer conclusively. The first has a definitional problem at its core, which economic historians have sensibly attempted to circumvent, by relating houses to large estates in a functional sense, representing them as the social, economic, and political power bases of increasingly dominant county elites. By the 1870s, on the firm evidence of the New Domesday survey, there were in total somewhere between 4,000 and 5,000 of these country houses. Even the third question, seemingly the simplest to answer, has proved evasive. Studies of country houses at the regional and county level have usefully produced lists and, where possible, dates, although entries do not invariably constitute a classification recognizable as country houses two or three centuries ago. [...]

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Recently historians have represented post-Restoration society¹ as being driven by conspicuous consumption. Its elites, landed and mercantile alike, were highly emulative social structures, finely defined by many vertical shadings of rank and wealth. Contemporaries represent them spending on building, entertainment, dress, and leisure activities to the limit of their incomes and beyond. Given that the landed elite was small, and operated within integrated county communities which were linked in financial and administrative terms with leading merchants and attorneys in the neighbourhood, knowledge of the monetary affairs of individual members-- details of mortgages, marriage portions, trusteeships, and legacies-- was widely spread among them. Moreover, calculations of landed income were easily made from acreages, and the value of estates was readily estimated. Indeed, by the late seventeenth century, the financial worth of the more eligible members of the landowning and mercantile classes was common knowledge. It was such information that fired emulation and consumerism. Status reflected spending, and social differentiation was established by the possession and meaning of goods. And it

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was the country house itself, the theatre for all this display, which was the most important item of expenditure in the working out of social position. A country house symbolized many things: wealth, political clout, taste, genealogical respectability. Owners assiduously pursuing county rivalries in all these areas were therefore eager to expend large sums on their houses. Certainly for many it was the

¹ referring the events leading to the restoration of Charles II in 1660 and the period that followed

biggest item of expenditure in their lives. With all this attention paid to conspicuous display, it is not surprising that the costs of building and remodelling their houses were widely known across the landed community.

The growing band of genteel country house visitors in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries frequently noted how much a house had cost to build and often evaluated it on this information. In 1713, Sir Richard Hoare, a banker, bought New Hall at Boreham, a great Tudor house boasting the grandest list of owners of any house in Essex. But neither he nor his second son, Benjamin, for whom the property was bought, appears to have lived there. Between 1727 and 1733, the latter engaged Edward Shepherd to build a neo-Palladian villa with attached pavilions, three-quarters of a mile away. The High Tory, Lord Oxford, averse to new Walpolian wealth and city money, saw it five years after completion: 'such is the fine taste of a banker on Fleet Street. He has laid out about £12,000 and had eight [thousand] been laid out upon old house when he first bought it he would have had one of the best houses in England. Mrs Lybbe Powys, a compulsive country house tourist in the later eighteenth century, came away from the scores of houses she visited, with the details of the costs of wallpapers, chimney-pieces, grates, pictures, books, even panes of plate glass. At Fawley Court (Bucks.) she seems to have been given a list of prices which made up the £8,000 fitting out of the interior. Such jottings allowed her to evaluate the precise status and fashionableness of the owners and houses she visited. Her totally materialistic appraisal was universal so long as the larger country house generally remained open (until the mid-nineteenth century) to tourists of her sort.

How is it possible to categorize the cost observations of the likes of Lord Oxford and Horace Walpole or those which the architectural and building journals began to disclose from the 1830s? Certainly, in this fashion, the costs of many country houses built between 1660 and 1880 are revealed. Hundreds of examples might be cited. The largest expenditures are well known: the gargantuan £600,000 expended by the first Duke of Westminster on Alfred Waterhouse's extraordinary rebuilding of Eaton Hall in the 1860s and 1870s; Blenheim and Fonthill (£240,000 on Alderman Beckford's gilded replica of Houghton, Fonthill Splendens, and £270,000 on his son, William's, crazy Gothic folly). The cost of great Victorian houses almost matched these sums: Thoresby Hall (£198,993); Westonbirt (some £125,000); Bearwood (£128,524), as did Regency extravaganzas such as Wynyard

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(£102,098), Conishead Priory (some £149,000), and Eastnor Castle (£78,000). Those of a handful of famed eighteenth-century examples are again familiar: Holkham (£92,000); Moor Park (£86,000); Wentworth Woodhouse (£80,000); Castle Howard (£78,000); and Kedleston (£70,000). But these houses were exceptional, by-words of style and lavishness in their respective counties. The general run of country house costs was much lower, even in the Victorian period when their size was greatest. [...]

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By the mid-nineteenth century the newly established architectural and building journals were disclosing detailed plans and sometimes costs of country houses. Table 1 presents the cost data extracted from them by Franklin in her survey of 380 plans of country houses built between 1835 and 1914 (of which 64 disclosed costs) and from Allibone's study of Anthony Salvin's career.

Table 1. *The cost of English country houses, c.1830-1914*

	Under £10,000	£10,000- £20,000	£20,000- £50,000	Above £50,000
New houses designed by Anthony Salvin, 1828-75	6	7	2	3
New and almost entirely rebuilt houses included in Franklin's <i>Gentleman's country house</i>	9	15	17	23

Note: The figures are not totalled because Franklin includes some of Salvin's work in her appendix. The cost (£40,000) cited by Allibone for Moreby Hall, Yorkshire, is included, but the actual cost was probably below £20,000.

Sources: Allibone, *Anthony Salvin*; Franklin, *Gentleman's country house*, pp. 255-69.

Salvin, a member of the County Durham gentry, had a large country house practice both in new building and in remodelling. Franklin's sample is wider and yet more skewed. For 1835-1914, she charted houses which

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surfaced in the periodical literature, to enable her to analyse their plans. Increasingly, as the nineteenth century wore on, many of those included were not country houses linked to recognizable landed estates, but ones built by the growing number of plutocrats whose wealth was derived from non-landed sources. She estimated that by the mid-nineteenth century, 'the lowest cost of a proper country house was about £7,000 to £10,000.

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[I]t is clear that capital invested in country house construction, even when the vast and atypical examples which have always monopolized the literature are put in context, was still appreciable. Before economic historians become too carried away by the aristocracy's contribution to the development of industry, agriculture, and transport, proper stress should be placed on their investment in housing, furnishings, and landscaping and the way in which this sustained the superb craft culture that was such a feature of English employment until the late nineteenth century. It is the wonderfully varied legacy of country houses which reflects the growing wealth and true interests of the English aristocracy between 1660 and 1880. Whatever the emphasis in the recent historical literature, they were foremost, builders, collectors, and gardeners.

Secondly, an examination of the whole spectrum of country houses does not reveal a yawning gap between the houses of the smaller gentry and those of the urban elite. The 'archaeological' evidence supports the contemporary view of eighteenth-century society, expounded by King, Defoe, Massie, and Colquhoun, that there were many status graduations even within landed society. Just as landed incomes fused with those of the richer merchants and of leaders of the more lucrative professions, so did their houses. Landed society might remain 'aristocratically' cohesive down to the 1870s, but it was not closed in the way in which the view of a world of largely impenetrable grandees expressed by Stone and Stone has suggested. Architecturally, there is an obvious descent from the Houghtons and Castle Howards through the houses of the greater gentry, to those of the smaller landowners such as William Gossip of Thorp Arch and Edmund Rolfe of Heacham. The evidence of their houses suggests that landed society was neither closed nor fossilized. An 'openness' existed at the lower levels of landed society, whereby its members possessed close links of material culture with

the trading and professional elites. This feature was extremely important in the acceptance by traditional landed society of the early stages of industrialization.