

Palladio and the English Palladian Country House

Background Notes

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Bernard Picart, *Portrait of Andrea Palladio*, 1716



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Introduction

In the 18th century England was under the spell of the classical world. Our country houses and public buildings were adorned with classical temple porticoes, their interiors decorated with classical columns and classical ornament, and their gardens embellished with classical temples to evoke an idealised arcadian vision of the classical world. There were two important reasons why the influence of Italy and the classical world was so strong at this time. The English aristocracy and gentry were of course educated in the classics from an early age and in the 18th century the Grand Tour had become an indispensable part of every gentleman's education. The Grand Tourist would often spend several years in Italy and would come back laden with souvenirs of his Grand Tour—sculpture, paintings and *objets d'art* and would want a house of classical elegance in which to house his collections—a house that would be a 'temple of the arts'.



Canaletto, Ruins of the Forum looking towards the Capitol, 1742



Johan Zoffany, The Tribuna of the Uffizi, 1772-1778

The second reason for this enthusiasm was the enormous influence on 18th-century taste of the Renaissance architect, **Palladio**.

Palladio 1508-1580

Palladio was humbly born in Padua in 1508, the son of an artisan, and named Andrea di Pietro di Gondola. He was to work all his life in the Veneto, where would build town houses and country villas for the wealthy nobility. From the age of 16 to the age of 30 he worked as an assistant stonemason in Vicenza. However his great opportunity came when he was called to work on a new villa being built in the latest

Renaissance style on the outskirts of the city for the cultured Count Trissino. Trissino recognised the potential of the young man and encouraged him to go to Rome and study classical architecture at its fountainhead and he gave him a new name, Palladio, denoting wisdom.

Rome made a tremendous impression on Palladio. Here he saw at first hand the grandiose ruins of classical buildings, and could study the classical rules of harmony and proportion. In Rome he studied, drew and measured the classical buildings more intently and more accurately than anyone before him.

On his return to Vicenza he was given his first major commission, the refacing of the old mediaeval town hall, known as the **Basilica**, in the new classical manner (1546). At this stage the Renaissance had barely touched Vicenza and thus the classical appearance of the remodelled Basilica caused a sensation. Here Palladio used a new motif which he had seen used in the Roman Baths - which became known as the Palladian motif. This was to recur in classical buildings thereafter and was to become a prominent motif in English classical architecture of the 18th century.



**Basilica (Town Hall), Vicenza
1546- 1549**



Palazzo Porto 1547-1552

Palladio's town houses - *palazzi*

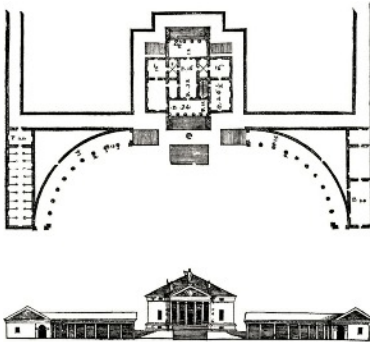
Increasingly from the 1550s the nobility of Vicenza turned to Palladio to design their grand town houses and country villas. Palladio's town houses or *palazzi* are similar to the great Renaissance town houses built in Rome by Bramante and other important Renaissance architects from the 1500s. As in Palladio's **Palazzo Porto** (1547-52), they consist of a great rusticated base used for the storage of merchandise and a first floor, the *piano nobile* where the state rooms were located. Their architectural form provided a model which was to be very influential, particularly for public buildings in the 18th century and beyond.

Palladio's Villas

However it was above all Palladio's villas which were to be crucially important for the development of the English country house. Increasingly the gentry were buying up land on the Veneto as an investment and turned to Palladio to design a suitable country house. Palladio's villas are different from the average Renaissance villa, which was a place to escape the heat of the city and to relax and cultivate the human spirit in poetry, philosophy and conversation, as in the Roman *villa suburbana*.

Palladio's villa were designed to function both as a country house with suitable classical associations for an educated gentleman **and** as a working farm.

In Palladio's villas the house and farm buildings are drawn together into the overall plan, with the house forming the dominant centrepiece, flanked by curving wings leading to the farm buildings, as in the **Villa Badoer**. This plan was frequently taken up in 18th-century England, but on a much grander scale, suitable for 18th-century county house life. e.g. **Kedleston**.



Villa Badoer Plan and elevation 1556-7



Kedleston Hall, Derbyshire 1750s

A characteristic feature of nearly all Palladio's villas is the temple portico. Palladio believed the ancients had temple porticos on their villas, so the portico also became an essential feature of the 18th-century county house. In Palladio's villas, the main living accommodation is situated on the *piano nobile* at first floor level, a feature also found in the 18th century English country house, where the state or principal apartments occupy the first floor.

One of the finest of Palladio's villas is the **Villa Rotunda**, which was not built as a working farm, but to entertain. It illustrates Palladio's passion for symmetry, harmony, clarity and order and was to inspire no less than five adaptations in England.



Villa Rotunda 1565

Palladio also worked in Venice, building two churches and designing a bridge across the Grand Canal. Although this was not built, his design inspired a number of Palladian bridges in English landscape parks e.g. **Wilton House, Prior Park, Stowe.**

Palladio's Four Books of Architecture

In 1570 Palladio published an architectural treatise called ***The Four Books of Architecture***, where he illustrates his villas and town houses, his reconstructions of Roman buildings, and discusses the classical rules. This book is probably the most important architectural treatise ever written, and one which was to influence English and American architecture profoundly. It also enabled English architects and patrons to access Palladio's designs without having to set foot in the remote Veneto.

The Influence of Palladio in the 17th century.

The Renaissance was very slow to reach England and right up to the early 17th century Jacobean houses were being built, rooted in the English Gothic tradition, with no understanding of the classical rules.

The man who was to revolutionise English architecture was **Inigo Jones** (1573-1652), a stage designer at the court of James 1. In 1613 Inigo was invited by the cultured Earl of Arundel, to join him on a journey to Italy. Inigo's encounter with Roman and Renaissance architecture was dramatic and was to change the whole course of English architecture. Jones studied Roman and Renaissance building, travelling with at least 20 architectural books, including Palladio's treatise. In Venice he and Arundel met Palladio's pupil, Scamozzi, and bought all Palladio's designs for private and public buildings. These drawings would be an important source of inspiration to Inigo and would profoundly influence the 18th century Palladians.

On his return to England, Inigo designed two revolutionary classical buildings, the **Banqueting House at Whitehall**, and the **Queens House at Greenwich**. At **Wilton House** for the Earl of Pembroke he designed a huge porticoed Palladian villa, which was only partially executed, but even in its final form was very influential eg **Holkham Hall**. Inigo's design for a **town house at Newmarket** for Prince Charles (1619) was to profoundly influence the form of the Restoration houses e.g. **Uppark**. His classical schemes of interior decoration were revolutionary too and were to influence the interior decoration of 18th century Palladian houses.



**Banqueting House, Whitehall,
1619**

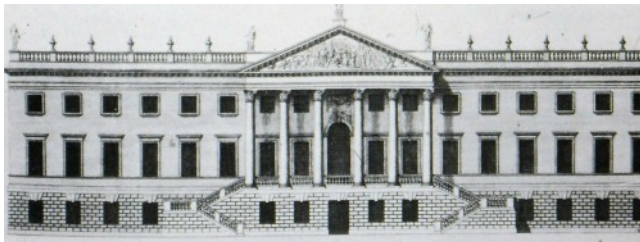
The Baroque

In the period c. 1680 - c. 1720, influenced by current trends on the Continent, English architects broke away from the serene High Renaissance classicism of Inigo Jones to adopt a richer, more theatrical, dramatic style now known as Baroque where the classical rules are broken to create dramatic effects. e.g. **Blenheim Palace**.

But the Baroque style did not last long in England: it was seen as too licentious and extravagant, and we alone in Europe turned the clock back to the purer classicism of Palladio and Inigo Jones.

Colen Campbell and Wanstead

Two men in particular were influential in encouraging the return to the High Renaissance classicism of Palladio and Inigo Jones in a movement we call today Palladianism. One was **Colen Campbell**, an architect who published an influential book, ***Vitruvius Britannicus*** (1715) illustrating models of correct classical buildings, and who built a highly influential house, **Wanstead** on the outskirts of London. Wanstead became the prototype of the county house for the next 30 years.



Wanstead, Essex (demolished), 1715-22

The other was the **3rd Earl of Burlington**, who in 1719 set off for Italy with the express purpose of studying Palladio's buildings. Whilst there he bought up more of Palladio's drawings, which together with Lord Arundel's earlier purchase and Burlington's acquisition of many of Inigo Jones's drawings, were to provide a magnificent source of ideas for English architects.

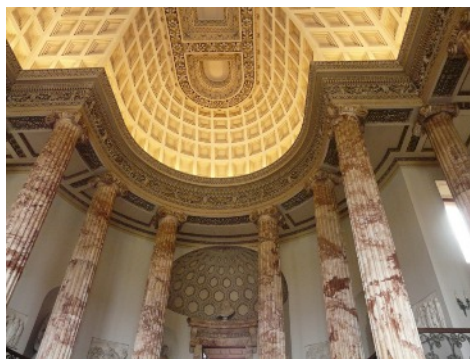
On his return to England, Burlington determined to reform English architecture and began his exquisite villa at **Chiswick**, adapted from Palladio's Villa Rotunda. During the 1720s-50s numerous great houses were built on the model of Wanstead e.g. **Prior Park, Houghton Hall** (as first designed), and smaller houses also became fashionable for the gentry classes, more closely modelled on Palladio's villas e.g. **Stourhead**.



Chiswick House, c.1720-1729

Interior Decoration

In their buildings, the Palladians took their ideas chiefly from three main sources: ancient Rome, Palladio and Inigo Jones. However there was a problem when it came to the decoration and furnishing of their houses, as Palladio had little to say on this matter. An important figure in this period is **William Kent**, architect and interior decorator who had spent ten years studying in Rome. He was to decorate and furnish many of the great Palladian county houses using ideas derived from Inigo Jones, ideas derived from classical architecture and ideas derived from contemporary Italian Baroque decoration e.g. **Houghton** and **Holkham** in Norfolk.



Marble Hall, Holkham by William Kent 1730s

Reaction against Palladianism.

The influence of Palladianism in the first half of the 18th century was enormous. Throughout Britain, country houses, town houses and public buildings were built in the accepted Palladian style. However in the second half of the 18th century there is a reaction. The excavations at Pompeii and Herculaneum gave people their first glimpse of Roman **domestic** interiors, where, as Robert Adam said '*all was delicacy, grace and beauty*'. Adam promoted a lighter style of interior decoration which became very fashionable. Also in this period much more is known about the ancient world, as architects and patrons travel further, not just to Rome, but also to Greece and to the classical sites in Asia Minor. As a result a much more eclectic approach to country house design develops, where architects were liberated from exclusive reliance on the example of ancient Rome, Palladio and Inigo Jones and could draw ideas from Italy, Greece, Turkey, Syria and even the mediaeval world, and weld them into an exiting new synthesis we call today Romantic Classicism.

Palladio's Influence in the 20th Century

Nevertheless the influence of Palladio reasserted itself in the 20th century in the work of architects inspired by the classical tradition such as Raymond Erith and Quinlan Terry, who built country houses inspired by Palladio, such as Merks Hall, Essex (1984-6). Henbury Hall, Cheshire, completed in 1986 by the architect Julian Bicknell for Sebastian de Ferranti is the most recent adaptation of Palladio's Villa Rotunda.



Henbury Hall, Cheshire, 1986

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