

The Interior Topography of the Picturesque: Level Changes and Stepped Floors in James Wyatt's Dodington Park and Ashridge House

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ABSTRACT

The picturesque aesthetic of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in Britain, as manifested in country house architecture, often involved moving the principal floor from an elevated piano nobile down to ground level, lowering one's visual perspective and facilitating more direct movement between house and garden. While these developments are well recognised in the literature, one repercussion for architects has been largely overlooked: how to deal, in both practical and aesthetic terms, with the vertical challenges posed for a ground-level principal floor by uneven terrain or pre-existing fabric. A particularly interesting case study is provided by the work of James Wyatt at two very different houses, the classical Dodington Park (1796–1813) and gothic Ashridge House (1807–13), through his carefully conceived and implemented use of small interior level changes, or stepped floors. Although the initial problems were similar, Wyatt's solutions differed markedly in response to the demands of each commission; they also contrasted with the various approaches adopted by contemporaries such as Humphry Repton, John Nash and John Soane. Overall, this article suggests both the scholarly challenges, and the importance, of devoting enhanced attention to the interior topography of the picturesque experience.

The role of the moving spectator in eighteenth-century British architecture has, until recently, received surprisingly little attention in scholarship. Only in the past few years have architectural historians, most notably Sigrid de Jong and Robin Middleton, begun to focus on theories circulating from the middle of the eighteenth century that demonstrated a new interest in the physical experience of architecture, affecting how architects of the time might analyse existing buildings and design new ones with the viewer's movement in and around them in mind.¹ While existing scholarship has laid out broad generalisations about spatial reconfigurations in relation to bodily motion — notably, in the case of country houses, the lowering of the principal floor from an elevated piano nobile to ground level, thereby enabling individuals to walk directly out of the house into the grounds — more specific manifestations of these eighteenth-century experiential theories for the most part have not been addressed.²



Fig. 1. *Dodington Park, Gloucestershire, James Wyatt, 1796–1813, entrance (southwest) front, postcard photograph of c. 1970 (author's collection)*

This lack of scholarly attention is surprising, given that architecture at the turn of the nineteenth century was deeply influenced by ideas of the picturesque, arguably Britain's most distinctive and enduring contribution to global visual culture and aesthetics, and one predicated on a moving spectator. Although the picturesque has been studied extensively, the focus has been mainly on landscape design and painting, rather than architecture, and issues recognised as central to the role of picturesque ideas in landscape design — such as movement, framing and topography — have been largely ignored by architectural historians.³

Thus, while the visually picturesque qualities introduced by varying the heights and shapes of exterior rooflines have been acknowledged — in a manner similar to how such features might be addressed in a landscape or painting — the introduction of vertical variety into the experience of moving through interiors has been almost entirely overlooked.⁴ In addition to full-length staircases between floors, there are instances in which architects also introduced smaller level changes within a single floor of the building, thereby incorporating another element of picturesque planning into the design and the architectural experience. Although by no means common, such stepped floors are particularly notable at two of the best known — and, importantly, best documented — houses from late in the career of James Wyatt (1746–1813): Dodington Park in South Gloucestershire, begun in 1796, and Ashridge House in Hertfordshire, begun in 1807 (Figs 1 and 2).⁵



Fig. 2. *Ashridge House, Hertfordshire, James Wyatt, 1808–13, entrance (north) front, photograph of 2018 by the author*

The sixth son of Benjamin Wyatt — a farmer, timber merchant and builder — James Wyatt studied in Italy from 1762 until about 1768, when he returned to England and joined the family building firm; he initially worked alongside his elder brother Samuel, but by 1774 the two were conducting independent practices. James was elected an associate of the Royal Academy in 1770 and a full member in 1785.⁶ Dodington and Ashridge both date from what John Martin Robinson, in his 2012 monograph on the architect, called the ‘second phase’ of Wyatt’s career, having ‘[progressed] from the perfect harmonies of the 1770s to the dazzling virtuosity of the 1790s’; this was also the period in which Wyatt began including conservatories in his plans, reflecting a changing approach to the relation between house and landscape.⁷ Though dramatically contrasting in style — the former classical, the latter gothic — both Dodington and Ashridge are noteworthy for their distinctive use of level changes within the principal floor, with each including small clusters of steps that mediate the boundary between each house’s entrance hall and the other polite rooms. Both houses sit on elevated sites, with the ground falling away from the main block, yet neither has an exterior flight of stairs leading to its principal floor. Instead the entrance is at ground level, and it is only within the entrance hall that one encounters steps that give access to the other polite rooms on that floor. This article examines Wyatt’s deliberate use of such steps, their differing roles in the two houses, and how his choices compare to those of some leading contemporaries, arguing that

the calculated placement of stepped floors served to further picturesque ideas of variety, surprise and associationism.

Various questions arise as to why the stepped floors were used in these houses, as they complicated the design process and differed from what other leading architects of the day — such as John Nash (1752–1853) and John Soane (1753–1837) — were doing. To begin, we must consider what reasons Wyatt might have had for including them at all and then for designing them as he did; given the lack of written testimony from the architect, conclusions are based on analysis of Wyatt's drawings, other archival evidence, and the broader cultural context in which he was working. Modern scholars such as Robinson have begun to reassess Wyatt's work — pushing back against the intense criticism to which his 'improvements' of many of England's churches and cathedrals were subjected by John Carter (1748–1817) and others, resulting in the characterisation of Wyatt as the 'Destroyer' which held sway for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries — and an examination of his stepped floors further contributes to this reassessment.⁸ More broadly, analysis of the approaches taken by Wyatt and others to ground-floor placement of principal rooms contributes to a richer understanding of the dominant picturesque aesthetic in British country house design at the dawn of the nineteenth century, shifting our perspective from a largely two-dimensional visual approach to one that more fully acknowledges physical movement through three-dimensional spaces.

THE PICTURESQUE AND THE MOVING SPECTATOR

Looking beyond the adoption of particular architectural styles, a shift towards asymmetrical planning and a nestling of buildings in (rather than on) their landscape setting, architectural design at the turn of the nineteenth century cannot be fully understood without acknowledging the centrality of the moving figure. In contrast to more straightforward precepts of design such as measurements, materials and matters of style, ideas surrounding 'movement' or 'motion' in a bodily sense were discussed by late eighteenth-century theorists in a less direct manner. In cases where the terms were used or implied, they generally referred to that of the eye — perceived movement — or, by extension, of the mind, rather than of the body.⁹ That said, a frequently quoted passage from the period implies much about the importance of bodily motion to the picturesque specifically and to architectural design more broadly. In a long footnote on the first page of the preface to Robert and James Adam's *Works in Architecture* (1773), the reader is told that

Movement is meant to express, the rise and fall, the advance and recess, with other diversity of form, in the different parts of a building, so as to add greatly to the picturesque of the composition. For the rising and falling, advancing and receding, with the convexity and concavity, and other forms of the great parts, have the same effect in architecture, that hill and dale, foreground and distance, swelling and sinking have in landscape. That is, they serve to produce a diversified contour, that groups and contrasts like a picture, and creates a variety of light and shade, which gives great spirit, beauty and effect to the composition.¹⁰

In her 1994 study of organicism in nineteenth-century architecture, Caroline van Eck noted that the ‘importance of movement, variety and contrast or antithesis between oppositions, such as light and shadow, or stone and vegetation’ all ‘have a traditional rhetorical connotation in classical art theory’. As she sees it, *contrapposto* (antithesis) contributes towards *varietas* (variety) and the ‘illusion of movement’ in a work of art, and this ‘illusion of movement’ provides an ‘illusion of life’. She argues, therefore, that the Adam brothers’ phrasing — ‘the rising and falling, advancing and receding’ — is meant to lend a sense of ‘movement, and thereby life’, to architecture.¹¹

Although van Eck’s interpretation is primarily a visual one, one might consider *contrapposto* and *varietas* in architecture not only as creating an ‘illusion of movement’ but also as implying physical movement on the part of the individual navigating a space. While a series of hills in the distance, rising and falling rooflines, or advancing and receding architectural planes, might be experienced only visually in a two-dimensional framed picture, within the three-dimensional world of architecture they can be fully experienced only as the viewer moves around and through a structure. John Soane, in his Royal Academy lectures, emphasised the importance of having a balanced degree of movement in architectural plans and variety in the exterior outlines of buildings. As he stated in Lecture XI, first delivered in 1815:

A building to please must produce different sensations from each different point of view. These effects will never be completely attained without variety in heights as well as in the projections. It is chiefly the inequalities of height which produce that prodigious play and movement in the outline, and make the edifice important in very distant points of view, and more so as we approach nearer to it; and finally it still improves upon us when we are sufficiently close to perceive all its parts in detail.¹²

In using the term ‘movement’ here, Soane is referring to the overall shape of the building, projecting and receding in space; at the same time, however, he notes that the effects of movement in the outline vary because individuals change their position in relation to it — thereby also acknowledging the role of the moving spectator. A number of other eighteenth-century observers noted how frequently a view changed as one moved, in terms that ranged from ‘every ten steps’ to ‘a few paces’ to ‘each step’ or ‘every step’.¹³ Soane was influenced by the ideas of Julien-David Le Roy (1724–1803), who described the perceptions that would arise from walking by a colonnade or a row of trees planted at a distance from a wall, in contrast to the unchanging experience one would have if the colonnade were instead a series of engaged columns or the row of trees planted right up against the wall.¹⁴

If fully experiencing a building’s exterior requires horizontal movement towards or away from it, any unevenness of terrain within the interior of the building — in the form of stepped floors — necessitates movement of a vertical kind. Such variations in topography were characterised in descriptions of landscapes as ‘inequality’ or ‘inequalities’ of the ground, not only in books dedicated to the subject of gardens and landscapes, such as those by Thomas Whately (1726–72), Uvedale Price (1747–1829) and Humphry Repton (1752–1818), but also in more general writings, such as in the letters and diaries of figures including Elizabeth Carter (1717–1806), Anna Seward (1742–1809),

Mary Berry (1763–1852) and Dorothy Wordsworth (1771–1855).¹⁵ The same terminology also appears in the context of architecture. When describing the challenges of altering the existing Syon House in Isleworth, Middlesex (1762–69), with its ‘inequality in the levels of the old floors’, the Adam brothers wrote triumphantly that ‘the inequality of levels has been managed in such a manner as to increase the scenery and add to the movement, so that an apparent defect has been converted into a real beauty’.¹⁶ Though Wyatt did not leave us with similar descriptions of his own work, his plans suggest that such ‘inequality of levels’ was likely on his mind, given the manner in which he incorporated stepped floors into his designs.

One might thus relate the placing of the principal floor of country houses at ground level directly to bodily motion in at least two ways, the horizontal and the vertical. First, while the main polite rooms of the house were placed at ground level for visual reasons — so that the house would appear to sit more naturally within its landscape setting, and so that individuals within the house could view the landscape from a lower angle — this placement, along with the proliferation of full-length windows and French doors, also enabled one to walk directly out from the house to the garden. Second, and linked to this, the principal floor’s lowered position might mean contending with pre-existing fabric or uneven topography; using stepped floors as a solution necessitated vertical movement on the part of the individual, thereby changing one’s physical gait, visual perspective and overall experience of the building. Stepped floors were by no means new to the period in question — as seen, for example, at Syon House — but they arguably became less easily avoidable given this lowered position of the principal floor. The picturesque aesthetic, seeking to ground the main floor closer to the earth, meant that certain practical challenges which might have been avoided through elevating the principal floor now needed to be dealt with head-on. Dodington and Ashridge provide clear case studies of the problem and, each in its own way, of equally creative solutions.

DODINGTON PARK, 1796–1813

The earlier of these two Wyatt commissions, Dodington Park in Gloucestershire, was built for Christopher Codrington (1764–1843) between 1796 and 1813. In Robinson’s words, ‘Dodington was a serious demonstration of Wyatt’s continuing commitment to classical architecture at a time when many of his larger commissions were Gothic.’¹⁷ Built on a regular plan, Dodington has three discrete polite fronts — facing southwest (the entrance front, with hexastyle portico in the form of a monumental *porte-cochère*), southeast and northeast — with the extensive service areas built on the fourth (northwest) side. A quadrant conservatory extends off the western corner of the entrance front, linking the house with the domed chapel (Fig. 1). The interior of the house is dominated by a large entrance hall in the form of a Roman atrium.¹⁸ Behind that stands the grand staircase hall, located at the core of the house and extending its full height; accessed via a monumental arcade, this imperial staircase is toplit by four large lunette windows. Given the austere symmetry in each façade and the rectilinearity of the polite block, the overall form of the house might not be classed as picturesque, yet Robinson is surely correct to apply the term to the entrance front, with its monumental *porte-cochère* and sweeping conservatory.¹⁹

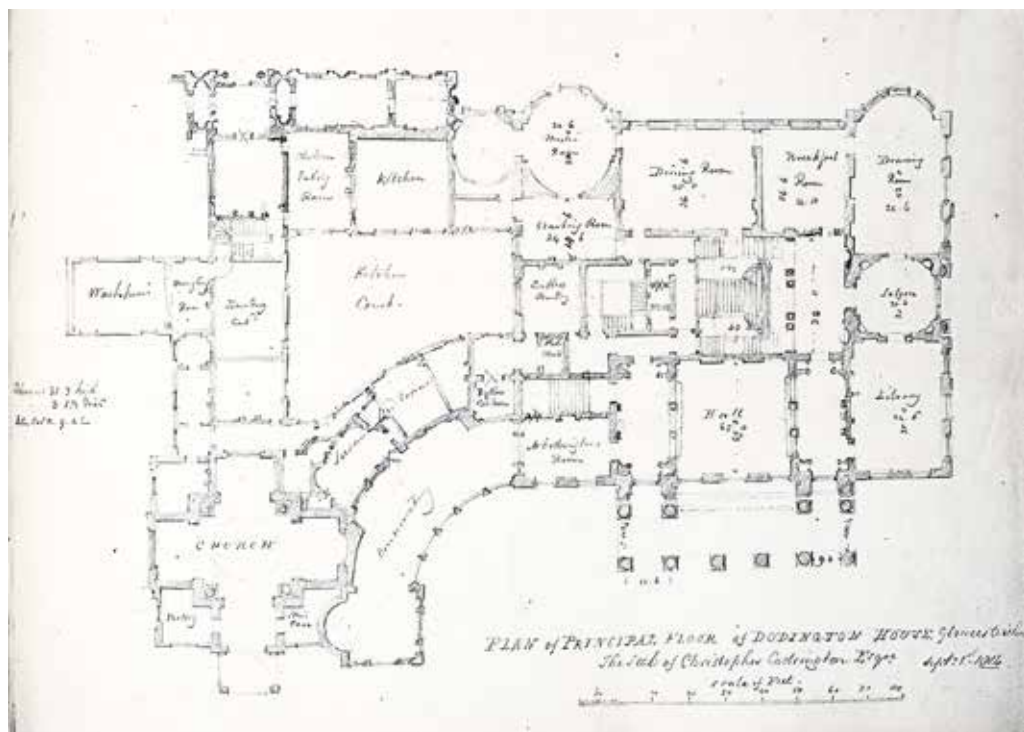


Fig. 3. Plan of the principal floor at Dodington Park, drawing by John Buckler dated 1 September 1814; the entrance (facing southwest) is at the bottom (© British Library Board)

Codrington inherited the estate on the death of his great-uncle William, second baronet, in 1792. Before Wyatt's involvement, 'New Ground Works' were noted in the account books as early as 1794, various outbuildings were rebuilt and major repairs made to the main house between 1794 and 1796, and the northeast front of the building was razed.²⁰ Although, as noted by Anne Warren in her 1991 article on the house, the Gloucestershire Archives hold about 400 drawings from Wyatt's office, estate books from 1788 to 1842 and summary building accounts kept by Wyatt covering the period from 1796 to 1814, the collection is by no means complete.²¹ Nonetheless, it is possible to trace much of the design process through these archival documents alongside the surviving built fabric.

A plan by Wyatt of August 1796 indicates that initially Codrington merely intended to renovate the existing house by replacing the wings on the northeast side of the house, but by October of that year he had commissioned a new house from Wyatt, who produced presentation designs for the various elevations of the house in 1797.²² Construction of the new house began on the northeast side and wrapped around the southeast and northwest façades, leaving the southwest (entrance) front to be completed last. When the 'Green House' was added to the design in 1800, connecting the house and chapel, its placement off the entrance front went against the more common placement



*Fig. 4 and Fig. 5 (facing page).
Dodington Park, entrance hall,
view facing southeast with
the entrance doors to the right,
and the entrance portico,
renderings by the author*

on the garden front, but it was oriented south as was usual for a conservatory in order to maximise light to the plants housed inside.

Drawings from early in the design process in 1797 indicate that the floors of all three polite fronts were to have been elevated from the ground and, as such, there would have been steps leading up to both the entrance front and the southeast front.²³ The vaults under the southeast side of the building — and therefore under what would be the drawing room, library and intervening saloon — predated Wyatt's involvement at the site; thus, unless he demolished these vaults and began anew, he needed to design at least part of the principal floor at or above that predetermined height. The question then became how to reconcile this elevation with the current fashion for walking directly into the house without the need to ascend a flight of stairs. Rather than raising the entire principal floor to the height of the pre-existing vaults on the southeast side of the house, necessitating exterior steps to a portico, the solution that Wyatt ultimately chose was to build additional vaulted basements under the northwest side, but not under the entrance hall. This enabled the hall to sit lower than the rest of the principal floor, thus providing a seamless transition between the drive and entrance.²⁴

While the topography and pre-existing fabric were issues with which Wyatt needed to deal from the very start, the decision to include level changes within the principal



floor — as opposed to reconciling the ground and floor level differences with steps on the exterior of the building — emerged only some years into the design process. No internal level changes are indicated in plans from 1796 to 1799; instead, drawings from those years continue to show three steps up to the entrance-front portico.²⁵ These steps, however, were gradually reduced as the design process continued, and by 1806 had been fully eliminated, replaced by the *porte-cochère* which provides direct, stepless access to the hall through three sets of glazed doors.²⁶

In his final plan as built (Fig. 3), Wyatt designed the entrance front at Doddington so that a visitor could alight within the *porte-cochère* and walk directly into the hall without encountering any stairs.²⁷ He then introduced steps on either side of this hall, requiring the person to ascend three steps on the left or three steps on the right to access any further rooms in the house. The steps on the left gave access to the 'Botanic Library', the quadrant-shaped 'Green House' and service areas, as well as a staircase to the first-floor picture gallery, while those on the right gave access to the 'Best' or 'G[reat] Staircase' and to the polite rooms of the house, including library, saloon, drawing room, breakfast room and eating room. These steps on either side of the entrance hall — divided into three by composite granite scagliola columns — are shown in various drawings beginning in 1805, and thus nearly a decade into the design process.²⁸ Based

on this configuration, despite the staircase hall lying directly behind the entrance hall, there is no direct communication between the two rooms, as the wall between them — placed at the lower entrance level with a stove at its centre — has no openings. Though some of Wyatt's plans included walls on either side of this entrance hall, dividing the space into three distinct rooms, his ultimate design replaced those enclosing walls with the much more theatrical arrangement of steps and columnar screens, evoking a Roman atrium and differentiating the hall from the anterooms on either side (Fig. 4).

The effect of such an arrangement is one of stasis, the entrance hall essentially self-contained, isolated from the rest of the house. On arrival, a visitor would have no idea what lay behind that dividing wall — nor elsewhere in the polite block — until led up the steps on the right. Though the floors of the entrance hall and its flanking columned spaces sit at two different elevations, Wyatt designed the three central entrance doors and two additional flanking ones — which simply open on to raised platforms — to appear as if all on the same level. He achieved this visual continuity by adding an additional wooden panel to the base of the three central doors, enabling the glazed portions of all five doors to be aligned, masking the level changes that occurred internally when viewed from the outside (Fig. 5).

Confronted by the challenges of uneven topography and pre-existing fabric, yet committed to the idea of grounding the house in the landscape, Wyatt created an architectural solution that not only reinforced his initial choice of style, but at the same time imbued it with a picturesque sense of variety and movement. While the initial proposals for external steps leading up to a portico would have been a much simpler means of accommodating the height of the vaults, the decision instead to open up the interior, both horizontally and vertically, through the use of steps on either side of the entrance hall succeeded in creating a unique and compelling architectural experience.

ASHRIDGE HOUSE, 1807–13

About ten years after work began at Dodington, Wyatt was commissioned to design Ashridge House, which would be the largest and, due to his sudden death in 1813, also the last of his gothic houses. Located in the Chiltern Hills in Hertfordshire, Ashridge had originally been the site of the monastery or 'College' of Bonhommes, founded in 1283 by Edmund of Cornwall, nephew of Henry III.²⁹ The Wyatt mansion was built for John William Egerton, the seventh earl of Bridgewater (1753–1823), who inherited the estate in 1803 on the death of his cousin, Francis Egerton, third duke of Bridgewater, better known to history as the 'Canal Duke'. Wyatt worked at the site from about 1807 until his death in 1813, after which his nephew Jeffrey Wyatt (later Wyatville, and hereafter referred to by that name) continued the construction to completion.

In the final design as executed, the main block of the house (Fig. 6), with a tower at its centre, is flanked to the west (the right side of the plan) by offices and to the east (not shown in this 1808 plan) by an angled wing containing private apartments, which is further extended by an orangery bent at a second angle. From end to end, the house extends about 1000 ft, and the spire of the chapel originally reached a height of 142 ft.³⁰ The focus here is only on the central block of the house (the left side of the plan, outlined in black) — which was essentially completed by the time of Wyatt's death — rather

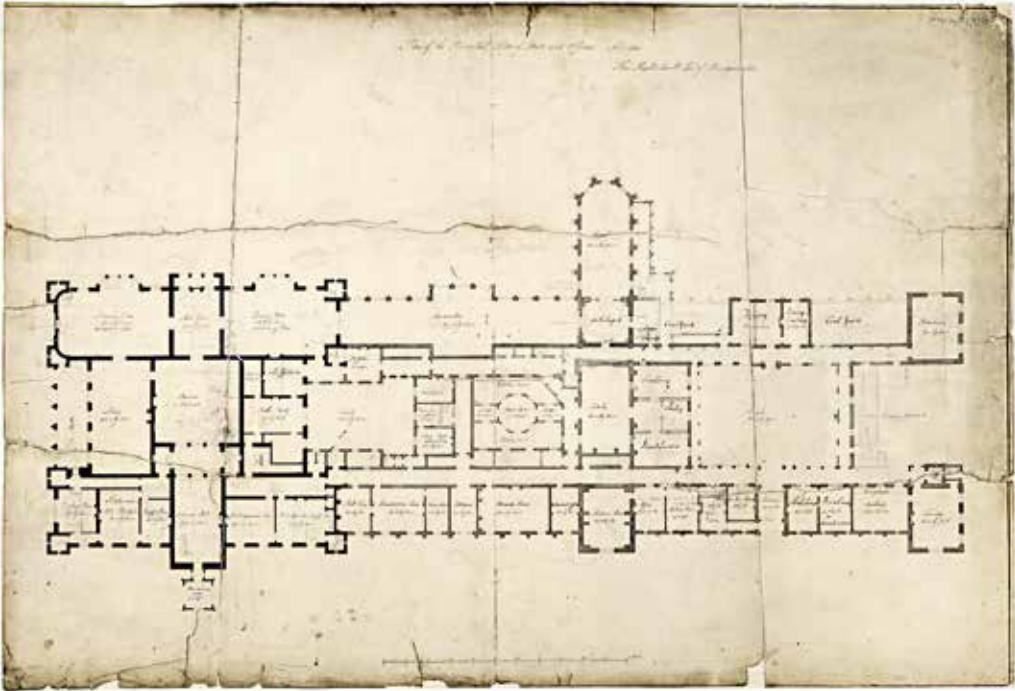


Fig. 6. Plan of the principal floor of the house and offices at Ashridge House, Wyatt office drawing, c. 1808; the entrance (facing north) is at the bottom (RIBA Collections)

than the service wing to the west or Wyattville's later apartments and orangery to the east.³¹ The principal rooms of the house sit at ground level, though on the south and east fronts one now descends to the gardens from a late nineteenth-century terrace.

In a very different arrangement to that of Dodington, a central feature of the polite block of Ashridge House is the level change encountered as one moves forward from the entrance hall into the central staircase hall (Figs 7 and 8). This consists of two steps leading up to an arched arcade supporting a gallery — evoking a medieval rood screen dividing nave from chancel — followed by an additional two steps into the staircase hall.³² It is only from there that a visitor would gain access to the polite rooms on the principal floor, consisting of library, drawing room, adjacent vestibule and dining room, which in turn is connected to the rectilinear conservatory. The stepped floors at Ashridge appear to have been introduced into the building's design in the second half of 1808, meaning that, unlike at Dodington, they emerged relatively early in discussions between patron and architect.

Although both Dodington and Ashridge are arguably picturesque in overall composition, Wyatt did not entirely abandon his traditional training and adherence to symmetry.³³ As at Dodington, Wyatt designed each of the three publicly visible fronts of the main block of the house at Ashridge as individually symmetrical. Although Robinson praises Wyatt's 'handling of masses to form Picturesque compositions', much of what we

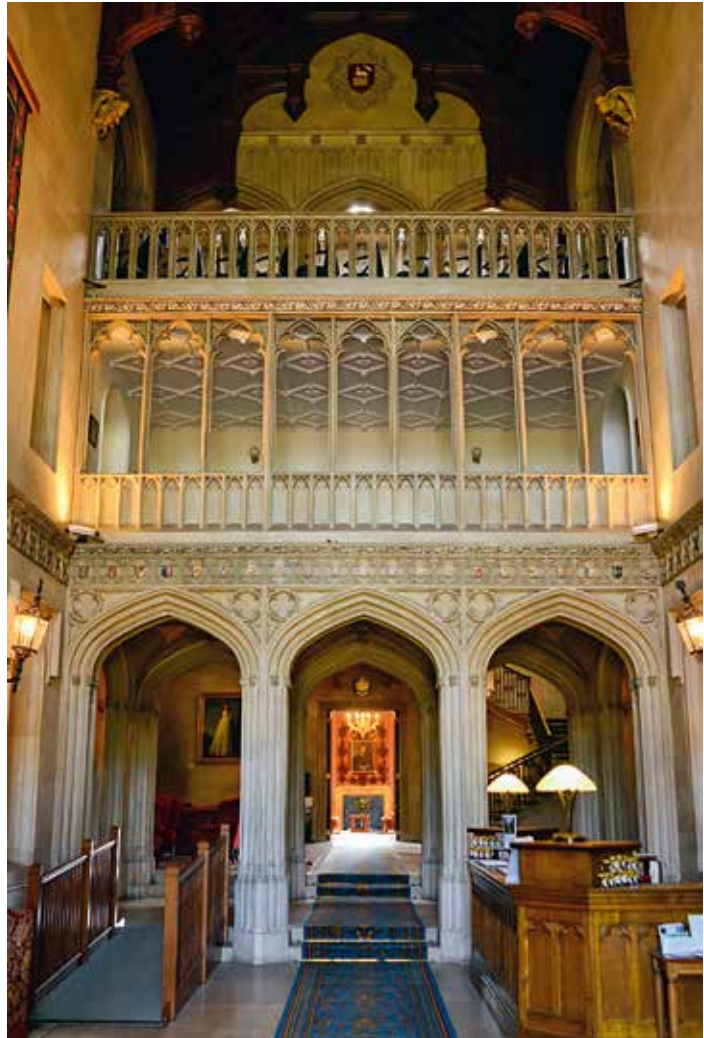


Fig. 7. Ashridge House, entrance hall, view facing south towards the staircase hall, photograph of 2018 by the author

perceive as picturesque at Ashridge is not actually attributable to Wyatt.³⁴ It is true that Ashridge today comprises a collection of varying masses that form a picturesque whole, but the ultimate sprawling form of the house is to a great extent Wyattville's doing. In addition, Repton's 1813 designs for the gardens — implemented over time, though much to his original intent — increase the picturesque effect, as one generally cannot perceive the whole building in one glance, seeing only parts of the edifice emerging through breaks in trees and shrubs.³⁵ All that being said, however, any discussion of Wyatt's original designs for Ashridge needs to take into account his own deliberate use of level changes, in this instance to incorporate a pre-existing monastic crypt, to emphasise the gothic nature of the overall design, and once again to produce a picturesque effect of movement and variety.



Fig. 8. Ashridge House, view showing progression from the entrance hall under the arcade to the staircase hall, photograph of 2018 by the author

With the intention of building a new mansion, the Canal Duke had demolished and auctioned off materials from most of the Tudor buildings on the estate, but he died before a new house could be undertaken. On the seventh earl's inheriting in 1803, the estate included a classical house, built by Henry Holland senior in the 1760s, attached to the Tudor 'White Lodge', and an 'ancient Crypt' or undercroft (located beneath the original site of the Old College Hall and Buttery) with 'Brewhouse, Bakehouse & Laundry' above.³⁶ The early design process of Ashridge is significant here insofar as a decision was reached, sometime between late February 1807 and the start of June 1808, to shift the location of the new house further south in order to incorporate — physically and symbolically — the 'ancient Crypt', or cellars, from the monastic building.³⁷ The resulting arrangement,



Fig. 9. John Buckler, The Hall at Ashridge, 1813, watercolour (RIBA Collections)



The Staircase at Ashridge

Fig. 10. John Buckler, *The Staircase at Ashridge*, 1813, watercolour (RIBA Collections)



Fig. 11. *Ashridge House, view of the steps on the south side of the corridor leading into the library, photograph of 2018 by the author*

on which client and architect had settled by late 1808, was described in 1823 as follows: 'From the middle of the Dining Room to the middle of the Drawing Room, was situated *the original Hall of the College*; the Crypt of which is still in existence beneath. The western end of the Dining Room is the precise spot of *the old Buttery*.'³⁸

Once the decision was made to build the house further south, Wyatt faced a challenge not unlike the one at Dodington. Although the general layout of most of the rooms remained consistent with that shown in the earlier plan, the presence of the undercroft at the location of the proposed new dining room necessitated placing the ground floor — or at least part of it — at a predetermined height. One possibility was to raise the level of the entire ground floor to match the height determined by the pre-existing crypt, which might have been possible given that Wyatt built a basement under the whole central block. Instead, however, he opted once again to incorporate level changes within the ground floor.

As noted, the main level change within the house at Ashridge occurs as one moves forward from the entrance hall towards the central staircase hall: two steps lead up to an arched arcade, followed by another two steps bringing the visitor out into the dramatic stair hall. This arrangement not only emphasises the central axis of the house and delineates the entrance hall from the staircase hall beyond, but clearly enhances and dramatises the gothic character of the building. There is a feeling of enclosure on stepping under the arcade, with its comparatively low ceiling in contrast to that



Fig. 12. *Ashridge House, steps from the dining room into the conservatory, photograph of 2018 by the author*

of the entrance hall — which, as described by Robinson, ‘rises through three storeys to a hammerbeam roof derived from the Hall at Christ Church, Oxford (which Wyatt restored)’. The contrast is even more dramatic when stepping out into the staircase hall, which overshadows the entrance hall ‘with its brass-railed, imperial-plan staircase and a dizzying Bernasconi fan vault enclosing a wind dial far above’.³⁹ The upwards movement not only of one’s eyes but of one’s body enhances the dramatic effect of moving from one space to the next. Although very few drawings survive from Wyatt’s office showing level changes at the site, by 1813–14 the topographical artist John Buckler had been to Ashridge and produced pencil drawings and presentation watercolours, including of the entrance hall and staircase hall (Figs 9 and 10).

Though similar in overall conception, the specific arrangement of steps at Ashridge differs from that at Dodington, due at least in part to their differences in architectural style. Both houses have a grand entrance hall that is placed slightly lower than the other rooms of the house and is located directly in front of the staircase hall, but the relationship between entrance and staircase halls is quite different at the two sites. Unlike the more self-contained entrance hall at Dodington, which reveals nothing of what lies beyond — but the arrangement of which, as a consequence, arguably elicits a greater level of surprise — at Ashridge the visitor is actively drawn forwards through the entrance hall by the strong north–south axis of the plan. The staircase hall at Ashridge, illuminated from above, is visible ahead in glimpses through and



Fig. 13. *Caerhays Castle, St Michael Caerhays, Cornwall, John Nash, begun 1808, garden (south) front with original ground floor (now basement) visible on the left, photograph of 2013 by Claudiu Bichescu (Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 3.0)*

above the triple arcades dividing the two rooms; the experience is like processing up the nave of a cathedral. In this case, and in contrast to Dodington, the visitor is drawn through the building by the design.

An additional complication at Ashridge is that, given the two-phase level change between the entrance and staircase halls, the floors of the rooms on the north front of the house — accessed via the east–west corridor leading out from under the arcade — are two steps above the height of the entrance-hall floor, while the main polite rooms (staircase hall, library, drawing room, anteroom and dining room) are an additional two steps up from there. Because Wyatt ultimately included a doorway between the library and the corridor running along its northern wall, he also had to include steps in the doorway between library and corridor (Fig. 11).⁴⁰ While the steps between entrance and staircase halls were clearly a scenographic or stylistic choice, the steps between library and corridor were included out of necessity. In addition, because of the slight elevation of the principal floor and the general terrain of the site, the ground drops away from the house on the south and east, necessitating additional steps on those fronts.

One of those additional locations necessitating steps is at the juncture between the dining room and the conservatory. Two stone steps mark the transition from the elevated dining room to the conservatory (Fig. 12), which originally led directly out to the terrace via eleven arched casements, as well as being connected (as it still is) at the far end to the church.⁴¹ It was possible to build the conservatory lower than the dining room because



Fig. 14. *Lough Cutra Castle, County Galway, Ireland, John Nash, c. 1811–17, terrace wrapping around the south and east fronts with lough visible on the left, photograph of 2015 by the author*

the undercroft did not extend that far west, and doing so ensured that any water on the conservatory floor would not seep into the wood floor of the dining room. Additionally, having this stepped floor signalled the transition into another type of space, a space that was not strictly a polite room of the house, nor firmly one of the garden. Its lower position also meant that, on walking out from the conservatory, one was much closer to the lawn than from the other polite rooms of the house, both physically and metaphorically.⁴² Once again, vertical movement can be seen as a means of emphasising and enhancing a sense of the picturesque.

Overall, Wyatt's use of steps in the principal floors at Dodington and Ashridge met the challenge of uneven ground levels in a way that contributed towards a carefully orchestrated architectural experience. At Ashridge, the main stepped floors emphasised the central processional route, furthered the sense of drama within the building and served to differentiate between the two soaring spaces of the entrance and staircase halls. At Dodington, the stepped floors similarly served to distinguish the entrance hall from the rest of the house and to demarcate spaces within it. At both sites, the creative use of level changes created further historical associations appropriate for the gothic and the classical respectively — evoking a gothic rood screen in one and a Roman atrium in the other. In both cases, Wyatt was looking to historical precedents for inspiration in dealing with the issue of how to place the principal floor at ground level while incorporating an inherited (and, at Ashridge, historically significant) understructure.⁴³



Fig. 15. *Pitzhanger Manor, Ealing, London, John Soane, 1800–04, entrance (east) front, photograph of 2018 by the author*

ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES

Wyatt was not the only architect to face the challenges posed by the picturesque ideal of lowering the principal rooms of the house and grounding them more directly in the landscape. His creative use of interior steps in these two important commissions provided one type of solution. John Nash, on the other hand — perhaps the architect most directly associated with the picturesque — took a different approach, insisting on ground-level placement but eschewing all interior level changes. A Nash house is entered directly at ground level, or occasionally via a few shallow exterior steps such as within a *porte-cochère* or from a garden terrace, but there are no steps at all inside on the ground floor. In this regard, Nash in effect adopted the position advocated by his sometime partner Repton, to the point of actively creating a level site if one did not naturally exist.⁴⁴ As Repton laid out in his first and best-known book, *Sketches and Hints on Landscape Gardening* (published in 1795, the year preceding the start of the Nash–Repton partnership):

All natural shapes of ground must necessarily fall under one of these descriptions, viz. *convex, concave, plane, or inclined plane* [...]. I will suppose it granted that, except in very romantic situations, all the rooms on the principal floor ought to range on the same level;

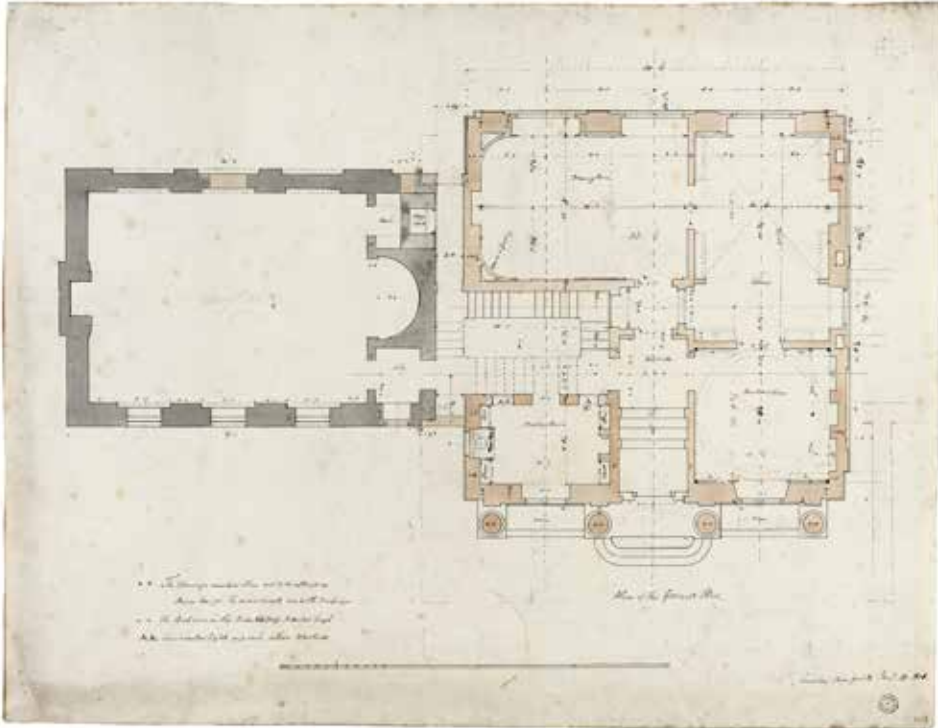


Fig. 16. Plan of the ground floor of Pitzhanger Manor, Soane office working drawing, copy, 13 January 1801 (© Sir John Soane's Museum; photograph by Hugh Kelly)

and that there must be a platform, or certain space of ground, with a gentle descent from the house every way. If the ground be naturally convex, or what is generally called a knoll, the size of the house must be adapted to the size of the knoll.⁴⁵

Repton went on to describe various means of accommodating a house that is too large for 'the size of a knoll', such as by taking off 'the crown of the hill'. Such a change to the topography of the site would thereby 'supply what nature seems to have denied', but he warned that it should be done carefully and 'is not possible in all cases; a circumstance which proves the absurdity of those architects who design and plan an house, without any previous knowledge of the situation or shape of the ground on which it is to be built.' Conversely, he continued:

When the shape is naturally either *concave*, or perfectly flat, the house would not be habitable, unless the ground sloped sufficiently to throw the water from it: this is often effected, in a slight degree, merely by the earth that is dug from the cellars and foundations: but if, instead of sinking the cellars, they were to be built upon the level of the ground, they may afterwards be so covered with earth, as to give all the appearance of a natural shape.⁴⁶

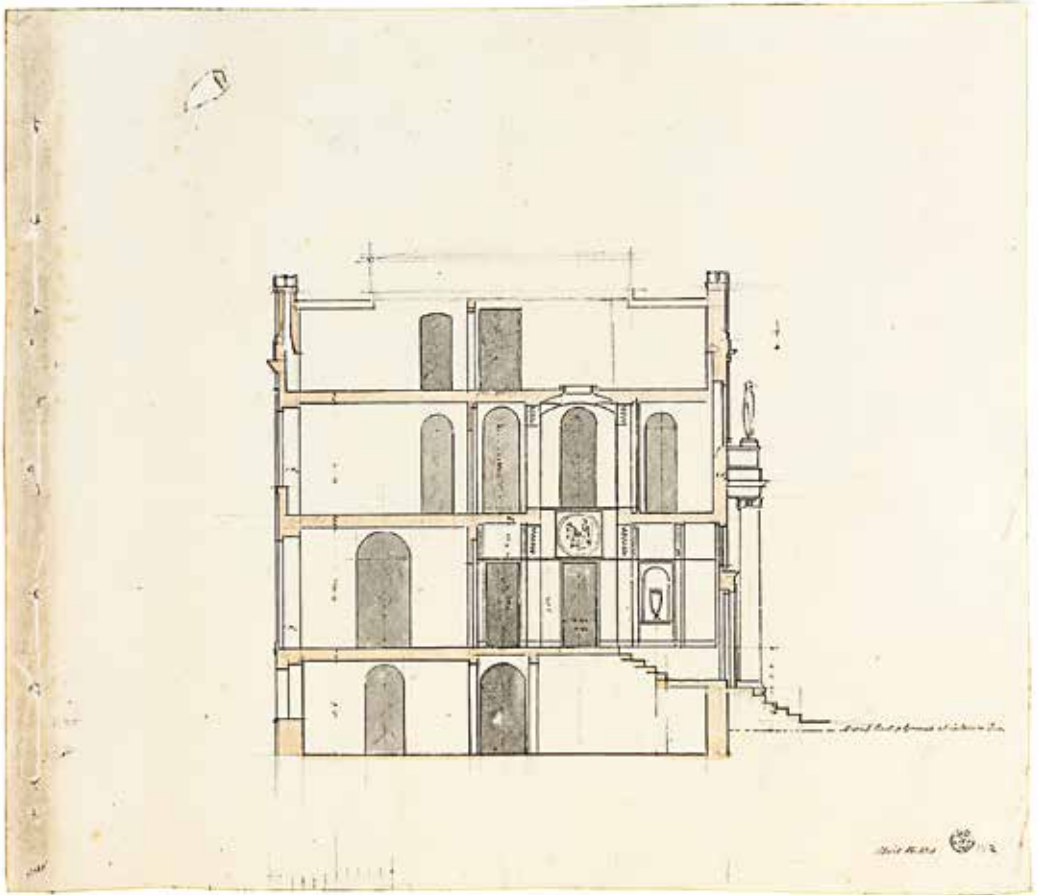


Fig. 17. Section of Pitzhanger Manor, Soane office preliminary working drawing, 15 April 1801 (© Sir John Soane's Museum; photograph by Hugh Kelly)

Repton echoed these same ideas a few years later in his *Observations on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (1803), where he stated:

A house in the country is so different from a house in town that I never could see any good reason for disposing the living rooms above stairs: it may perhaps be said, that the views are more perfect from the higher level; but the same degree of elevation may be obtained by building the cellars above ground, and afterwards raising the earth over them, as I advised at Donnington and Blaize [*sic*] Castle; and surely the inconvenience of an external staircase can scarcely be compensated by any improvement of the views. To counteract this error in modern houses, I have in some instances, raised the earth to the principal floor; and in others, where the architecture would not allow this expedient, I have advised a gallery to be added, as at Hooton [*sic*] and Higham Hill.⁴⁷



Fig. 18 and Fig. 19. *Pitzhanger Manor entrance, views showing the exterior and interior steps, photographs of 2019 by the author*

The advice Repton provided in both texts is manifested in Nash's siting of, for example, Caerhays Castle in St Michael Caerhays, Cornwall (built for John Trevanion Purnell Bettesworth-Trevanion and begun 1808, still uncompleted in 1824), where Nash removed some of the old house which remained on the site and then built his new house on top of its ground floor, raising the level of the earth around it so as to convert the original ground floor into the cellars of the new house (Fig. 13).⁴⁸ This allowed for elevated views while also making it possible to walk directly out of the house without descending a staircase. Repton likewise noted in *Sketches and Hints* that the use of infill 'can also be used in an *inclined plane*', though, depending on the size of the house, an artificial terrace might then be required.⁴⁹ This was the case not only at Caerhays Castle, but also at Lough Cutra Castle (c. 1811–17) in County Galway, Ireland, built for Charles Vereker, later second Viscount Gort (Fig. 14). In the latter instance, a plot was chosen overlooking the lough to the southeast and a large terrace was constructed on which the house was built, which similarly allowed for direct movement between house and garden.⁵⁰

In contrast to Nash's studied avoidance of level changes, Soane used both exterior and interior steps in many of his designs, including his own home of Pitzhanger Manor in Ealing, west London, built in 1800–04 and sold in 1810 (Fig. 15). From his earliest designs for a villa for his family, Soane demonstrated his intention to use exterior steps — necessary to accommodate his ongoing commitment to a raised basement — but to limit their number to maintain the external appearance of the house as not far removed

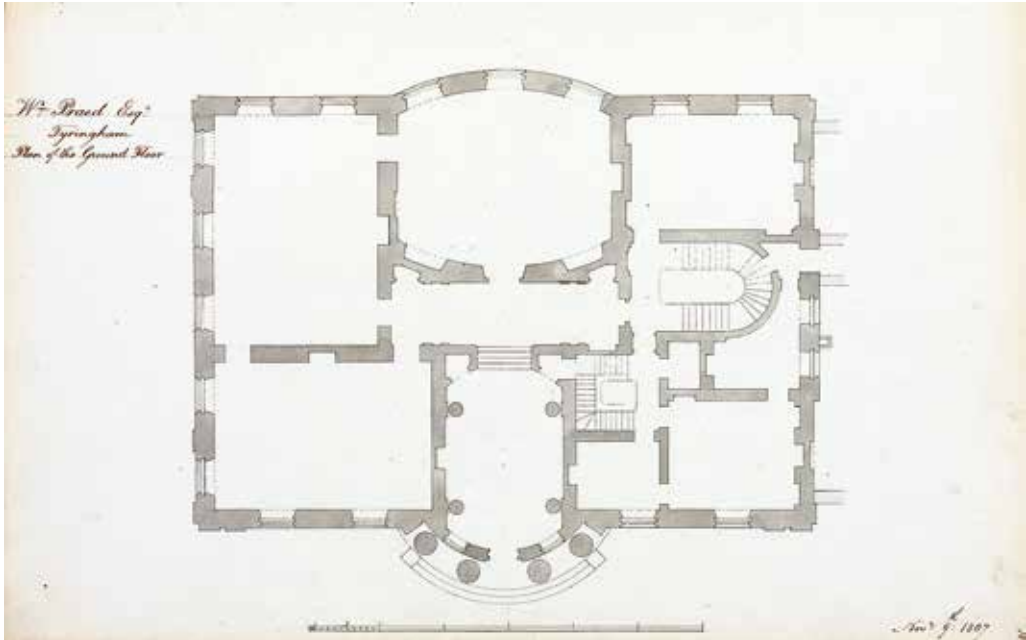


Fig. 20. Plan of the ground floor of Tyringham House, Newport Pagnell, Buckinghamshire, Soane office record drawing, 9 November 1807 (© Sir John Soane's Museum; photograph by Ardon Bar-Hama)

from its landscape setting.⁵¹ Of greater interest than this relatively common device of exterior steps at the entrance is a second series of steps inside the entrance (Figs 16 and 17). The steps leading up to the front door at Pitzhanger, which narrow and converge as the visitor progresses upwards, are followed by an additional few steps inside the house before reaching the raised ground floor. The result of the arrangement is that, from the exterior, the house has a clear central entrance, but one that is not divorced from its parkland setting. Having ascended the six exterior steps, paused at the threshold and been admitted through the front door, the visitor is then faced with a second set of five steps within the enclosed space (Figs 18 and 19). By controlling movement in this way, along with his theatrical use of lighting, Soane created a house that features an initial experience of rising through an enclosed vestibule to reach the tribune, and only from there gaining access to the other rooms.

Soane evidently had an affinity for this specific arrangement of steps because he made similar proposals at a number of commissioned houses, both before and after Pitzhanger. There was a similar progression of steps at Tyringham House in Newport Pagnell, Buckinghamshire, built for William Praed from 1792 to 1801 (Fig. 20), and also at Norwood Hall in Middlesex for John Robins (1801–02).⁵² Though his large-scale changes were ultimately rejected by the patron, Soane's proposals for a new entrance on the west front of Port Eliot in St Germans, Cornwall (1804–06), for John Eliot, second Lord Eliot and first earl of St Germans, had similar groups of steps leading to the principal floor (Fig. 21).⁵³ As Wyatt had done at Ashridge, Soane's

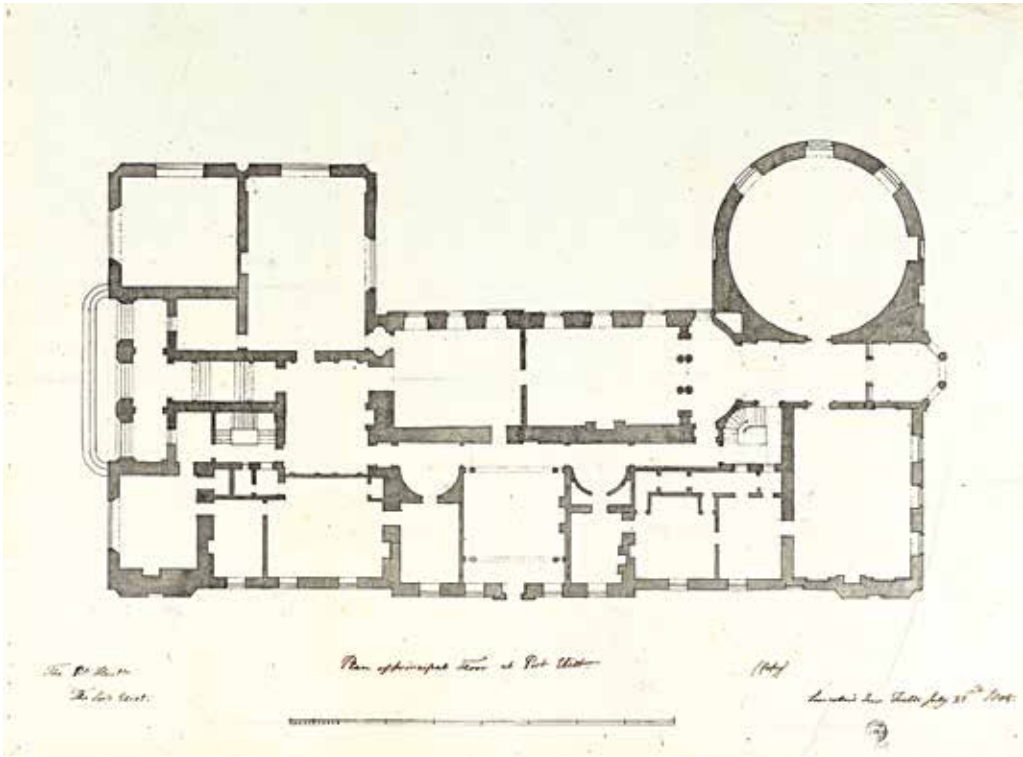


Fig. 21. Plan of the principal floor of Port Eliot, St Germans, Cornwall, Soane office drawing, copy, 23 July 1805 (© Sir John Soane's Museum; photograph by Ardon Bar-Hama)

arrangement of steps gave prominence to the enfilade and central axis of his houses while enhancing the picturesque effect of the entrance vestibule and tribune. Whereas Wyatt's use of interior steps originated as a response to site-specific challenges to ground-floor placement, however, Soane's use provided a practical means of access to the elevated principal floor.

CONCLUSION

This investigation suggests that the use of stepped floors was not initially motivated by a conscious intention to increase the picturesque sensibilities of an interior, but was rather a consequence of seeking to fulfil other picturesque goals in the external appearance of the house and its relationship to its surroundings. Picturesque aims, that is, were not the direct impetus for the use of level changes and stepped floors, which were more often the indirect result of picturesque aspirations to ground the building within its specific surroundings. This is not to suggest that Wyatt and other architects were unaware that they were increasing the picturesque sensibilities of their houses through the use of stepped floors, but that the idea to include them arose initially from

matters of necessity and was then creatively adapted to the furtherance of aesthetic and associational considerations.

Theories regarding movement and the three-dimensional experience that were circulating in the later eighteenth century suggested a new emphasis on conceiving buildings with the moving spectator in mind. As we have seen, a viewer's motion was not only horizontal but also vertical, such as through rising or falling topography in a landscape or, in a building's interior, through stepped floors. Until now, this latter feature has received little scholarly notice, perhaps for the simple reason that, unlike more prominent aspects of architectural plans — such as staircases, windows and doors — small level changes are often difficult to discern or are entirely missing from drawings or prints. Indeed, in the case of many architects and buildings, only limited visual or written evidence survives, making conclusions as to why interior steps were used at a given site and when they might have entered the design process difficult to establish. Even when analysing extant buildings, such minor changes in floor height can be easily overlooked, unless one has a specific need to take note of them, perhaps because of limited mobility. Yet the importance of stepped floors extends well beyond those with a particular need to notice them, affecting, in less obvious ways, everyone who encounters such 'inequalities'.

In considering the vertical and horizontal dimensions of a building more broadly, varying rooflines, projecting planes and contrasting ceiling heights are all ways in which the picturesque qualities of buildings by Wyatt and his contemporaries might be evaluated.⁵⁴ To that visual assessment, however, should be added those aspects of the picturesque that are realised only through physical interaction with a building as one moves around and through it. Just as the contrasting textures and meandering paths of picturesque landscapes were designed to direct a person's movements and gaze subtly towards specific points — under the guise of free will, discovery and individual choice — so too could the routes created within architectural interiors achieve similar effects. Thus, although Wyatt's stepped floors may not command immediate notice, their introduction of three-dimensional variety into the buildings' plans affects the visual and kinetic experience of moving through these houses, changing the pace and perspective of those who encounter them. Recognition of these effects not only adds to our understanding of Wyatt's architectural output, but underscores the contribution of the picturesque to the internal topography of buildings of this period.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research has been made possible by PhD funding from the Cambridge Commonwealth, European and International Trust and St John's College, with further grants from the Society of Architectural Historians of Great Britain and the Kettle's Yard Travel Fund. For the use of their resources, I am indebted to the RIBA Collections at the Victoria and Albert Museum, the British Library and Sir John Soane's Museum, as well as the many staff members at various publicly and privately owned houses who have generously provided access and information. In the preparation of this article, I owe a particular debt of gratitude to the two anonymous reviewers and to Matthew Walker, Mark Swenarton and Emily Mann for their insightful feedback and constructive editorial input.

BIOGRAPHY

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NOTES

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- 2 See, for example, Mark Girouard, *Life in the English Country House* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1978), p. 218.
- 3 Studies of the picturesque include *The Genius of the Place: The English Landscape Garden, 1620–1820*, ed. by John Dixon Hunt and Peter Willis (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988); Malcolm Andrews, *The Search for the Picturesque: Landscape Aesthetics and Tourism in Britain, 1760–1800* (Aldershot, Hampshire: Scolar Press, 1989); *The Politics of the Picturesque: Literature, Landscape and Aesthetics since 1770*, ed. by Stephen Copley and Peter Garside (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); and Stephen Daniels, *Humphry Repton: Landscape Gardening and the Geography of Georgian England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999). On the picturesque in architecture, see David Watkin, *The English Vision: The Picturesque in Architecture, Landscape, and Garden Design* (London: John Murray, 1982). On its relation to movement, see John Macarthur, *The Picturesque: Architecture, Disgust and Other Irregularities* (London: Routledge, 2007) and John Dixon Hunt, 'Time of Walking', in *Studies in the History of Garden & Designed Landscapes*, 36, no. 4 (2016), pp. 297–304.
- 4 See, for example, John Soane, *The Royal Academy Lectures*, ed. by David Watkin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), Lectures V and XI, esp. pp. 132, 249–54.
- 5 For an overview of Dodington Park, see Anne Warren, 'The Building of Dodington Park', *Architectural History*, 34 (1991), pp. 171–95, and Christopher Hussey, 'Dodington Park, Gloucestershire', *Country Life*, 29 November 1956, pp. 1230–33. For Ashridge House, see John Martin Robinson, 'Generous Virtues: Ashridge House, Hertfordshire', *Country Life*, 17 July 2013, pp. 72–77, and Jonathan Lee, 'Ashridge House: Its Design and Construction from 1803 to 1824' (unpublished MSt thesis, University of Cambridge, 2017).
- 6 Howard Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects, 1600–1840*, 4th edn (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 1175; John Martin Robinson, 'Wyatt, James (1746–1813)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004; updated January 2010) <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/30105>> [accessed 10 October 2016].
- 7 John Martin Robinson, *James Wyatt (1746–1813): Architect to George III* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), pp. xii–xiii, 241.
- 8 See J. Mordaunt Crook, *John Carter and the Mind of the Gothic Revival*, Society of Antiquaries of London Occasional Papers, 17 (London: W. S. Maney in association with the Society of Antiquaries of London, 1995).
- 9 See Uvedale Price's 1798 discussion of movement of the eye across architecture — or 'motion of the sight' — in 'An Essay on Architecture and Buildings as connected with Scenery', in Uvedale Price, *Essays on the Picturesque, as Compared with the Sublime and the Beautiful*, 3 vols (London: J. Mawman, 1810), II, pp. 277–79; Caroline van Eck, *Organicism in Nineteenth-Century Architecture* (Amsterdam: Architectura & Natura Press, 1994), p. 81.
- 10 Robert and James Adam, *Works in Architecture* (London: Printed for the authors, 1778), p. 3.
- 11 Van Eck, *Organicism*, pp. 80–81.

- 12 Soane, *The Royal Academy Lectures*, p. 252.
- 13 Thomas Gray, *Correspondence of Thomas Gray: Volume 1, 1734–1755*, ed. by Paget Toynbee and Leonard Whible (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 379–80; William Mavor, *Blenheim, a Poem* (London: T. Cadell, 1787), quoted in John Phibbs, 'The View-Point', *Garden History*, 36, no. 2 (2008), pp. 215–28 (p. 221); William Mason, *The English Garden* (York: A. Ward, 1783), book I, ll. 213–15 (this part of the poem was first published in 1772); William Marshall, *Planting and Rural Ornament*, 2 vols (London: G. Nicol, G. G. & J. Robinson, & J. Debrett, 1796), II, pp. 284–85.
- 14 Julien-David Le Roy, *Les Ruines des plus beaux monuments de la Grèce considérées du côté de l'histoire et du côté de l'architecture*, 2nd edn, 2 vols (Paris: Louis-François Delatour, 1770), II, pp. vii–viii; Julien-David Le Roy, *The Ruins of the Most Beautiful Monuments of Greece [1770]*, trans. by David Britt (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Publications, 2004), pp. 371–73.
- 15 Thomas Whately, *Observations on Modern Gardening* (London: T. Payne, 1770), pp. 8, 13, 15, 24, 25, 40, 49, 180, 197, 221, 236; Uvedale Price, *An Essay on the Picturesque* (London: J. Robson, 1794), pp. 30, 120, 207, 252; Humphry Repton, *Observations on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (London: T. Bensley, 1803), pp. 25, 123, 125; Elizabeth Carter, *Letters from Mrs. Elizabeth Carter, to Mrs. Montagu, between the Years 1755 and 1800, Chiefly Upon Literary and Moral Subjects*, 3 vols (London: F. C. & J. Rivington, 1817), III, p. 37 (1777); Anna Seward, *Letters of Anna Seward: Written between the Years 1784 and 1807*, 6 vols (Edinburgh: George Ramsay & Company, 1811), III, p. 99 (1791); Mary Berry, *Extracts of the Journals and Correspondence of Miss Berry from the Year 1783 to 1852*, ed. by Lady Theresa Lewis, 3 vols (London: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1865), III, pp. 321 (1822), 427 (1834); Dorothy Wordsworth, *Journals of Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. by William Knight, 2 vols (London: Macmillan & Co., 1897), II, p. 99 (1803).
- 16 'Plans of Sion House, from the Designs of Robert Adam', in Adam and Adam, *Works*, p. 9.
- 17 Robinson, *James Wyatt*, p. 281.
- 18 As noted, for example, in Hussey, 'Dodington Park, Gloucestershire', p. 1232, and Robinson, *James Wyatt*, p. 283.
- 19 Robinson, *James Wyatt*, pp. 285–86. According to Hewlings, Dodington would be classified as picturesque because of its three different, albeit symmetrical, polite elevations: Richard Hewlings, 'Does "Palladian" Architecture Exist?', *Society of Architectural Historians of Great Britain Newsletter*, 88 (May 2006), pp. 1–5 (p. 4).
- 20 Warren, 'The Building of Dodington Park', pp. 173–74.
- 21 Warren, 'The Building of Dodington Park', p. 171; Gloucester, Gloucestershire Archives [hereafter GA], D1610/P58/1–15, D1610/A76–79, D1610/A96 & 97. On the archived material and its probable gaps, see Rebecca Tropp, 'Accommodating the Picturesque: The Country Houses of James Wyatt, John Nash and John Soane, 1793–1815' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Cambridge, 2020), pp. 60–61.
- 22 GA, D1610/P58/1/2, 'A Design for the Principal Story [of Dodington Park]', October 1796.
- 23 GA, D1610/P58/1/7–8, 'South East Elevation' and 'North East or Bow Front', 1797; see also GA, D1610/P58/1/14–18, presentation elevations.
- 24 GA, D1610/P58/4/7, 'Furnace &c: Gr: Staircase', April 1808, includes both a 'Section across the Vaults & Flues under the Gt. Staircase' and a 'Section of the Flues under the Hall floor', the latter of which notes that, in place of vaults below the flues, there is instead 'Earth & Brick Rubbish underneath the Hall floor'.
- 25 GA, D1610/P58/1/2, 'A Design for the Principal Story', October 1796; GA, D1610/P58/1/4, 'Plan of the Principal Story', 1797; and GA, D1610/P58/1/36, 'General Plan of the House and Offices', copy 'May 20th 1799'. Steps up to the entrance were a common arrangement used by Wyatt (and others), including at Castle Coole, County Fermanagh, Ireland (1790–97) and Stoke Park, Buckinghamshire (1790–1813).
- 26 GA, D1610/P58/2/18, 'Section of the Portico and End of the Hall behind the Columns', May 1806. While the portico steps were ultimately eliminated, Wyatt maintained shallow steps between the drive and the conservatory (GA, D1610/P58/6/1, plan of church, greenhouse and adjoining rooms, July 1800; GA, D1610/P58/8/10, 'Plan of the Picture Gallery, Print Room & Greenhouse', January 1805; GA, D1610/P58/8/17, 'Green House', 1807). Grates under the windows flanking the entrance doors and in the steps leading up to the conservatory provided light and ventilation to the basement level on the entrance front of the house.
- 27 London, British Library [hereafter BL], MS 36362, f. 187r. This drawing is by John Buckler (1770–1851), a prolific topographical artist who visited and drew many houses, including Dodington and Ashridge.
- 28 GA, D1610/P58/2/16, 'Section of the Portico', January 1805; GA, D1610/P58/9/5, 'Plan of the Stair case [sic] from Hall to Picture Gallery &c.', March 1806; GA, D1610/P58/3/2, 'Section of Hall and Staircase leading to Picture Gallery', May 1806; and GA, D1610/P58/3/6, 'Section across the Hall shewing the Columns & Steps', May 1812.

- 29 John Martin Robinson, 'Generous Virtues: Ashridge House, Hertfordshire', *Country Life*, 17 July 2013, pp. 72–77 (p. 72); Douglas Coult, *A Prospect of Ashridge* (London: Phillimore & Co., 1980), p. 30.
- 30 Robinson, 'Generous Virtues', p. 72; Henry John Todd, *The History of the College of Bonhommes, at Ashridge* (London: R. Gilbert, 1823), p. 70.
- 31 Coult, *A Prospect of Ashridge*, p. 165.
- 32 The ground-floor plan most often reproduced (Fig. 6) includes level changes at these locations, although they show five rather than four steps (three steps followed by two): London, RIBA Drawings Collection [hereafter RIBA], SA39/WYJAS[1](13)). The level changes between the two rooms are also visible in RIBA, SA56/1(12), 'Section of the side of the Hall / No. 178', [n.d.]; BL, MS 36357, f. 184r, John Buckler, 'The Hall at Ashridge. Oct 27th 1813'; BL, MS 36357, f. 179r, Buckler, 'Hall at Ashridge, Bucks', with inscription 'April 3 1822'; and RIBA, SB72/3(4), Buckler, 'The Hall at Ashridge', 1813.
- 33 As Derek Linstrum noted, in *Catalogue of the Drawings Collection of the Royal Institute of British Architects: The Wyatt Family* (Farnborough, Hampshire: Gregg International Publishers, 1974), 'James Wyatt never assimilated irregularity as an integral part of his way of designing' (p. 17).
- 34 Robinson, 'Generous Virtues', p. 72.
- 35 Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute Special Collections [hereafter GRI], ID/Accession No. 850834, Humphry Repton, 'Report Concerning the Gardens of Ashridge, respectfully submitted to the Earl of Bridgewater', 1813. In his detailed history of Ashridge, Jonathan Lee concluded that 'The picturesque asymmetry at Ashridge is down to Wyattville': Lee, 'Ashridge House', p. 106. See also the evocative depiction by Watkin, *The English Vision*, p. 120.
- 36 Todd, *College of Bonhommes*, pp. 70, 75; Lee, 'Ashridge House', pp. 22–23, 41–46; RIBA, SA39/WYJAS[1](12), 'No. 23 General outline Plan of House and Offices Ashridge', copy, 2 June 1808.
- 37 BL, MS 36357, f. 181r, John Buckler, 'Wine Vaults at Ashridge', 'Oct 21st [or 25th?] 1813', pencil drawing; RIBA, SB72/3(6), John Buckler, 'Ancient Crypt, now the Wine Vaults, at Ashridge', watercolour. The decision-making process is elucidated in two letters to Lord Bridgewater respectively from the architect William Wilkins and Bridgewater's neighbour George Capel Coningsby, fifth earl of Essex: GRI, ID/Accession No. 850834, 'Letter from William Wilkins submitting a proposal for alterations to the buildings at Ashridge, 1807 Feb 24'; GRI, ID/Accession No. 850834, 'Letter from "Essex, ditto il piccolo Palladio", proposing a house design, 1808 Oct 31'. The June 1808 date is based on a general outline plan of the house and offices by Wyatt, dated 2 June 1808, which shows the proposed new house as incorporating 'The present Brewhouse Bakehouse & Laundry', but with the Holland house as a clearly separate structure to the northeast: RIBA, SA39/WYJAS[1](12), 'No. 23/General outline Plan of House and/Offices/Ashridge/Copy/June 2, 1808 D'.
- 38 Todd, *College of Bonhommes*, pp. 73–74 (original emphasis).
- 39 Robinson, 'Generous Virtues', p. 74. Francis Bernasconi (1762–1841) was a well-known ornamental carver and plasterer.
- 40 Although the doorway to the library is not present in the Wyatt plan (save for faint pencil lines added later), it does appear in other plans by Buckler (BL, MS 36357, ff. 165v–66r, 'Plan of Ashridge, Buckinghamshire / A.D. 1814') and Todd ('General Plan of Ashridge', engraving by E. Turrell in Todd, *College of Bonhommes*, between dedication and preface); however, neither of those plans shows the steps.
- 41 The steps are visible in RIBA, SA55/1(5), 'Plan & Elevation of the end of the Conservatory next the Eating Room', August 1811.
- 42 In a similar manner, Wyatt placed the attached conservatory at Bowden Park, Wiltshire, three steps lower than the adjacent Breakfast Room: see 'Principal Story of Bowden Park in Wiltshire, one of the Seats of Barnard Dickinson Esqr. / James Wyatt Archt.', in George Richardson, *The New Vitruvius Britannicus*, 2 vols (London: W. Bulmer and Co., 1802), I, Plate I. At one stage of the design process, the plans for Dodington placed the floor of the conservatory (and chapel) one step lower than that of the house: GA, D1610/P58/6/3, 'South West Elevation of the Chapel, Green house, &c. shewing the Vestry & Gardener's Room', signed/dated 'JWyatt 1801'.
- 43 For Wyatt's approach to historicism see, for example, Robinson, *James Wyatt*, pp. 157, 159, 232, 277, 297–300.
- 44 The partnership lasted from about 1796 until 1800; its acrimonious end, noted by many scholars, is evident in *Humphry Repton's Memoirs*, ed. by Ann Gore and George Carter (Norwich: Michael Russell, 2005).
- 45 Humphry Repton, 'Concerning Proper Situations for an House', in *Sketches and Hints on Landscape Gardening* (London: W. Bulmer & Co., 1795), p. 26 (original emphasis). Taken directly from Repton's Red Book for Welbeck, this chapter was considered significant enough to have been quoted in its near entirety

- by both John Plaw, in his *Sketches for Country Houses, Villas, and Rural Dwellings* (London: S. Gosnell, 1800), pp. 4–7, and John Buonarotti Papworth, in his *Rural Residences* (London: R. Ackermann, 1818), pp. 58–60.
- 46 Repton, 'Concerning Proper Situations', pp. 26–27.
- 47 Humphry Repton, *Observations on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (London: T. Bensley, 1803), p. 174.
- 48 Charles Williams *et al.*, *Caerhays Castle: An Introduction to Its History, Owners and Gardens* (Falmouth: Pasticcio, 2011), pp. 59, 64. Although drawings of the house do not survive from Nash's office, an engraving (presumed to be based on an early proposal for the house given that the building was still actively under construction at the time) indicates just how much fill was necessary to accomplish Nash's vision: J. P. Neale, *Views of the Seats of Noblemen and Gentlemen, in England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland*, 6 vols (London: W. H. Reid, 1818), I, [n.p.].
- 49 Repton, *Sketches and Hints on Landscape*, p. 26 (original emphasis).
- 50 Geoffrey Tyack, 'Domestic Gothic', in *John Nash: Architect of the Picturesque*, ed. by Geoffrey Tyack (Swindon: English Heritage, 2013), pp. 35–56 (pp. 52–53); Brian De Breffny, *Castles of Ireland* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1977), p. 170. See also Bernard Burke's later description of the extent to which the site had been altered to accommodate Nash's building, in *A Visitation of the Seats and Arms of the Noblemen and Gentlemen of Great Britain and Ireland*, 2 vols (London: Colburn & Co., 1852), I, p. 191.
- 51 Throughout both his *Plans, Elevations, and Sections of Buildings* (London: Messrs Taylor, 1788) and his *Sketches in Architecture* (London: J. Taylor, 1793), Soane noted the height of the principal floor of each house from the ground, generally ranging from about 2 ft to 4 ft.
- 52 The exterior and interior steps at Tyringham are visible in a wide range of drawings, from early designs in 1793 through to record drawings in 1807–08. For Norwood Hall, see Sir John Soane's Museum [hereafter SM], 4/4/17, 19, 22.
- 53 The external and internal steps are visible in a series of full and partial plans from November 1804 (SM, 34/2/8–15) and July 1805 (SM, 34/2/16); a single perspective view survives of the proposed west front entrance (SM, vol 59/74), which shows the steps leading up to the portico. Soane made unexecuted designs for similar configurations in the alterations and additions proposed for Bagden Lodge, Savernake Forest, Wiltshire (drawings dated 1795) for Thomas Brudenell-Bruce, first earl of Ailesbury (for his son, Charles Brudenell-Bruce); for David Scott at Dunninald House in Craig, Angus (drawings dated 1795); for a house for M. Mansel in Cosgrove, Northamptonshire (drawings dated 1799); and for a house for James King in Banbury, Oxfordshire (drawings dated February–March 1805).
- 54 Wyatt's use of contrasting ceiling and roof heights is well demonstrated by Fonthill Abbey (1796–1812), Wiltshire, as seen in coloured plates of the house (interior and exterior views, as well as sections) throughout John Rutter's *Delineations of Fonthill and Its Abbey* (Shaftesbury, Dorset: John Rutter, 1823).