



Shared enthusiasm

*Oakly Park, Shropshire
The Home of Viscount and Viscountess Windsor*

One of C. R. Cockerell's rare private-house commissions was the product of a remarkable partnership of interests. Richard Haslam unravels its story

Photographs by Paul Barker

↑ Fig 1: The west front, with Cockerell's tall new house set between 18th-century wings. The left of the two porches was for family use

THE continuing evolution of houses is a less straightforward study than a particular moment or episode in their history. An earlier article (COUNTRY LIFE, March 22, 1990), celebrated the recovery of Oakly Park by the Earl of Plymouth, the father of its present occupants, from the despair and dispersal that had afflicted so many houses in the aftermath of the Second World War. Lord Windsor has continued the process since, and at the same time, Oakly Park is coming to be seen in a longer context of patterns of life, and of appreciation.

Although the park adjoins the medieval Marcher fortress at Ludlow, it is isolated by the River Teme and one of the long skyline ridges on the Shropshire border with Wales. George, Lord Lyttelton, writing of his

'The stroke of genius is the staircase hall that outshines the rest'

Journey into Wales in about 1750, alludes to its owner Lord Powis spending 'twenty or thirty thousand pounds in entertaining' those attending a 'rout' every seven years, 'which is the reason he has no house at this place fit for him to live in. He talks of building one in the park, and the situation deserves it'. What appears to have happened soon after is the formation by William Baker, Shropshire's mid-Georgian surveyor with many sensible Classical buildings to

his credit, of a tall, plain-brick wing at the north side of a substantial timber-frame complex, for the 1st Earl of Powis; this was drawn by J. P. Neale. It marks the start of Oakly Park's emergence from immemorial boskiness to cultured rationality.

Next, in the late 1780s, a second plain brick block, with Grinshill stone quoins, was added at the south-west corner, by John Hiram Haycock of Shrewsbury. This was a dowry house for Margaret Clive, the widow of Robert Clive and the mother of the new owner Edward Clive. He had it through his wife, Henrietta Herbert, the daughter of Lord Powis (he was created a new Earl of Powis, and his son Edward changed his name to Herbert on inheriting in the first decade of the 19th century). Three rooms that survive were finely decorated in this period: the

shallow-domed entrance hall (Fig 2), later given its diagonal coffering by Charles Robert Cockerell, a dining room (now the drawing room) with its sophisticated ceiling plasterwork by Joseph Bromfield, also of Shrewsbury, and a morning room (Fig 6) with its inlaid marble, Bossi-work fireplace.

At the time when Robert Henry Clive inherited in 1817, therefore, there were two Classical dwelling units at Oakly, one either side of a service courtyard. He was spurred on to develop Oakly by his marriage in 1819 to Harriet Hickman, daughter of Lord Plymouth and, much later, Baroness Windsor in her own right. Their names were subsequently joined in the family surname, Windsor-Clive, a change that also marks the separation of ownership and family from the Powis Castle line. Clive and his wife were both painted by Thomas Lawrence when they were young (Figs 7 and 8).

The architectural evolution of the house under their ownership was not simple: the present comparatively unified appearance of the building was the outcome of two phases of construction under the direction of Cockerell as their family grew, starting in 1819 (it was the architect's first country-house commission) and in 1836 respectively.

The relationship between client and architect at Oakly is partly documented. The two young men were the same age and had travelled in the Mediterranean and Near East. They were both founder members of the Travellers Club in London, and their shared outlook on life is evident in an 1821 entry in Cockerell's diary. Whereas of Lord Powis he comments there is a 'touch of the nabob about him' (and he would have known, his father, the architect S. P. Cockerell, having moved in Anglo-Indian circles), he finds 'Lord Clive and Robert Clive of the modern

school'. 'Bred in diplomacy in the midst of all the exertions and efforts made in the late war & companionship of Castlereagh and Wellesley,' he notes, and, significantly, 'no corrupting leisure of Italy or India', as well as 'no vicious virtue, both married early'. Clive was an able watercolourist, his records being published in 1852 in *Sketches Between the Persian Gulf and the Black Sea* and *Sketches of Nineveh and the Holy Land*. Cockerell's training was as a Classical archaeologist, his investigations at Bassae in the Peloponnese that were to be a source for the staircase hall at Oakly having been sponsored by the Society of Dilettanti of London.

At first sight, the initial remodelling of Oakly Park reflects the desire of the client for a modern-seeming house, and of the architect to make use of archaeological motifs that had been available for use by neo-Classical architects for 20 or 30 years. An ➤



↑ Fig 2: The late-18th-century circular hall by J. H. Haycock. The low dome was given its diagonal coffering by Cockerell, and prefaces the drama of the stairs and balconies

L-shaped sequence of main rooms—a library that connects to the drawing room, then the morning room—gave the house two fronts, each facing the park: the entrance on the west (Fig 1), with a single four-column porch—recorded by Charlotte Clive—and a garden façade. Both were in the finest red brickwork with the narrowest of lime joints. The outcome, one of its architect's rare private houses, has a little of the easy scale and monumentality of his public buildings.

The stroke of genius is the new staircase hall (Fig 4) that, by replacing the central kitchens, unites the various builds, and is the key to Cockerell's first phase of work. It rises full-height through the building to an iron-and-glass lantern. In scale and nobility, it outshines the rest, almost suggesting that

it survives from some ancient ruin, and that the building has developed round it (rather than vice versa). The details of the staircase, with its stone treads generously eased round the angles, are masterful and consistent with what Cockerell wrote about staircases in halls: the mode, he says, 'introduced from Italy by Inigo Jones', which has the advantage of 'giving space to the core and agreeable views (and) openness'.

Cockerell's section drawing for the hall survives (Fig 3). Among the Ionic monolithic columns and lengths of the cast he made in 1813 of a marble frieze—he had found the originals at Bassae in the Temple of Apollo Epicurius; other sections were used by Barry at the Travellers Club, and later by Cockerell himself at the Ashmolean



↑ Fig 3 above: Cockerell's section drawing for the staircase hall. → Fig 4 facing page: The entrance to the staircase hall, between monolithic columns with Bassae capitals. The black vase on the cut-off one is newly reinstated

Museum—the wit for which the Clives were known also appears. He depicts Harriet pulling back the upper curtain like a Juliet, to greet her admirer on the paving below. The balcony now has its curtains again.

The first phase of work to the house was completed with the Conservatory of 1824 and the miniature-temple-like lodge of 1826 between the two drives leading up from the river bridge and the (once Benedictine) priory church. The Metallic Hothouse in the Conservatory by Jones and Clark of Birmingham has long since been removed, but the neo-Classical stone seat has recently been re-created in its place by Craig Hamilton.

It was to allow for the Clives' six children that, only a few years later, Cockerell returned professionally to Oakly Park. This time, the innovations were to the west side, which was raised by one storey and given Vanbrughian chimneys. And, in a fashion explained more by family use than by precedents elsewhere (whether historically on Italian houses shared by two brothers, or more recently at Plas Newydd on Anglesey), it was given a second porch, again of monoliths with Greek, Sicilian-temple motifs. An august blend of neo-Classical and Baroque, this façade is dominated by paired, tower-like projections. Between them, the new dining room of 1836 was formed with convincing monumentality on the fireplace wall. After half a century of waiting, the happy return to their places of the pair of carved side tables (Fig 5) is particularly to be noted.

Oakly Park has remained the house known >





↑ Fig 5 above: The side tables, returned to flank the dining-room fireplace, are in Cockerell's later, more Baroque, manner. → Fig 6 facing page: The morning room made for the widow of Robert Clive of India. Nathaniel Dance's portrait of him hangs over the fireplace

by Clive and his wife, although its walls and spaces have been enriched by the Clive, Windsor and Plymouth pictures from other houses. Partly this results from Oakly having become a secondary house to Hewell Grange and to St Fagans Castle, on which the family's intellectual life was focused for nearly a century. Before Harriet, Lady Windsor's

death in 1869, the house was effectively taken on by her widowed daughter-in-law, and then by cousins, so that when it was photographed by Henry Bedford Lemere in 1892, the interior had only progressed in terms of informal chairs. Nor had it yet lost the layer of ornament in stone, ceramic and bronze that was later dispersed and has

been so patiently rediscovered in the past two generations, and which would have been impossible to do so well without that photographic documentation.

To add to the interest of the interiors is a record of Victorian family life at Oakly in the perceptive letters home of an American visitor to the house, Anna Maria Fay, mostly in 1851–52, with a further stay in 1864. She writes of Lady Harriet (who impressed her terrifically) calling here 'in state, that is, with four horses and postillions' and of a large family dinner party on January 1, 1852, at which they were received in the 'large and beautiful library' and then moved, in nine couples, to a 'dining-room hung with pictures, among which pre-eminent was the portrait of the great Robert Clive, grandfather of the present possessor'. In the drawing room, later she records: 'Mr Robert Clive was at Nineveh with [Sir Henry] Layard, and he showed us a book of lithographs taken from his paintings of the curious sculptures found there.'

'I find the Clives so interested about America... To them our horizon is boundless,' writes the enraptured Miss Fay. It was such a distance for the house itself to have travelled, from timber-framed obscurity to the elegance and international outlook expressed by Cockerell. ↪



↑ Fig 7: Robert Henry Clive by Lawrence



↑ Fig 8: Clive's wife, Harriet, by Lawrence

