

In with the new

Onslow Park, Shropshire

The home of Mr and Mrs John Wingfield

The architectural gap created in a fine Georgian park by the 1950s demolition of a house has just been made good. John Martin Robinson is impressed by Shropshire's newest country house

Photographs by Paul Barker



SHROPSHIRE is the county *par excellence* of medium-sized Georgian houses. Its 18th-century prosperity was based both on the Darbys' industrial achievements at Coalbrookdale and an appreciation of its romantic hilly Marcher landscape at a time when Picturesque aesthetics were taking root.

Onslow Park remains a fine example of a Georgian estate, having been bought by Rowland Wingfield in 1780 and still belonging to his direct descendants 235 years later. There is a park with good trees and pools, a large, brick-walled kitchen garden and Georgian stables and, at the heart of it all, a Classical country house with handsome rooms full of family portraits and Georgian furniture.

“Onslow Park is a fine example of a Georgian estate, although the house is not Georgian at all”

However, the house is not Georgian at all. It was completed in 2013 and is a beautifully constructed new design by Craig Hamilton and won the Georgian Group Award for a new building in the Classical tradition. It is on the site of the old family seat, demolished in about 1955 and replaced then with a small brick house. The new Onslow once more fulfils the architectural role of its Georgian predecessor as the focus of the designed landscape and as a suitable setting for family pictures and furniture. It has dignified rooms and a large modern kitchen overlooking the garden.

In its present form, Onslow is a model new country house (**Fig 1**). It represents a happy reversal of the sad 20th-century pattern in so many landed estates: agricultural depression, wartime requisitioning and postwar demolition. In this case, the revival is very much the achievement of the present generation of the Wingfield family and their son Thomas and daughter Isabel, who have a strong interest in the future of Onslow. Working with the architect Craig Hamilton, the project >

Fig 1: The main front of the house, viewed across the historic park

manager Andrew Downton and local builders, they have achieved a remarkable reversal of decline.

In the Middle Ages, Onslow was the seat of the Onslows, later earls at Clandon Park, Surrey. They sold the estate and moved south in 1617, becoming Speakers of the House of Commons in successive generations. It is likely that their ancient seat was on the present site. In the subsequent 150 years, the place passed through different hands, with the old house surviving until 1765, when it was damaged by fire and reconstructed, probably by T. F. Pritchard of Shrewsbury, a leading local architect.

The work of that date included the addition of a dining room with a coved ceiling, Rococo plasterwork of Pritchard type and a fine carved wooden chimney-piece. Robert Mylne is also recorded as making designs for Onslow in 1774, but it is not known whether they were executed as the house was sold soon after, in 1780.

6 When the present generation took over, they took the brave decision to demolish and start again,

The purchaser, Rowland Wingfield of Preston Brockhurst, was the ancestor of the present owners. He had been High Sheriff of Shropshire in 1753 and commissioned designs for a new house from George Steuart, the Gaelic-speaking neo-Classicist who worked much around Shrewsbury. This did not proceed and, although he acquired the Onslow estate, Wingfield did not spend much time there.

He lived to the grand old age of 91 and it was only after his death in 1818 that his son, John, a colonel in the 4th Dragoons, who had lived at Onslow latterly, commissioned the young Edward Haycock of Shrewsbury to build a new house in an austere Greek manner.

The most prominent feature of Haycock's house was a Doric portico. (The fluted columns were dredged from

Fig 2: A view of the drawing room. To the right, the french windows link the interior of the room to the gardens through a wall that appears to have no depth



a pool in the recent works and now form an *objet trouvé* in the park.) Haycock's interior was laid out around a full-height central staircase and had large plain rooms with good chimney-pieces. The Pritchard dining room was incorporated and survived until the demolitions of the 1950s.

The Haycock house was completed in time for John Wingfield's shrieval year in 1824, when its Grecian splendours formed the backdrop of his official entertaining.

Following John's death, without issue, in 1862, Onslow passed to his nephew, Col Charles Wingfield, who, in turn, served as High Sheriff in 1873. He made characteristic Victorian additions 10 years later, including a new wing with a billiards room and menservants' rooms, plus a surviving stuccoed screen wall to the stables and formal terracing in the garden that still form a key axis of the layout.

Onslow remained in its Victorianised form into the mid 20th century and was requisitioned. After 1945, it was left empty for a decade. The architectural historian John Harris, who visited after the war, recorded in *No Voice from the Hall*: 'It was a bare, gloomy, and somewhat unlovable house, lacking exterior relief.' However, he was impressed by aspects of the interior: 'The staircase had once been magnificent, an Imperial stair rising up to an arcaded landing, the walls either marbled or of scagliola.' This and Pritchard's dining room are recorded in photographs in the English Heritage Archive.

When Haycock's house was demolished, it was replaced with an architecturally undistinguished residence to which three of the finest chimney-pieces and contents were transferred. When the present generation took over, they found this postwar replacement in need of extensive work, the roof leaking, joinery defective and the structure full of asbestos. They took the brave decision to demolish and start again rather than waste effort on the irredeemable.

Craig Hamilton, their chosen architect—one of the leading contemporary Classicists—has done much impressive work in Wales and the Marches (*COUNTRY LIFE*, September 8, 2010, and November 13, 2013). The aim was to create a new Classical house more appropriate for its setting adjoining the surviving stables, garden and historic park.

The result is magnificent, relying on good proportions and materials and ➤



crisp, simple detailing. Mr Hamilton's Classical manner is unmistakably modern and imaginative, a development from the designs of his Waterloo-period heroes Soane, Cockerell and Schinkel. Planning began in 2006 and the house was constructed between 2010 and 2013, at which point, the family moved in.

The brief was for a six-bedroom house with formal and less formal rooms for the surviving 19th-century contents, plus a large kitchen (Fig 3) and practical ancillary service accommodation, all with good natural lighting. This led to a bold rectangular plan with a two-storeyed main block and a single-storeyed kitchen wing attached to the old stables and Victorian screen wall.

The exterior has three principal elevations with recessed arcaded centres. It is stuccoed, with arches, window architraves and a cornice all of gritstone from Derbyshire. The overall effect is of a restrained and harmonious design, of Classical proportions, but all the better for eschewing a showy display of the Classical orders.

The interior has a lucid plan arranged round a double-height, toplit galleried hall. The detailing has a 'simple' Soanic quality with bead mouldings rather than full architraves to the doors, segmental arches, graceful iron balustrades to the staircase and

Fig 3 above: The new kitchen overlooks the Victorian gardens and forms a ligature with the surviving stable yard



hall gallery and chaste plasterwork. The studied simplicity was dictated by necessary economy, but has resulted in a subtle modern Classicism that is admirable in all its respects.

From a compact vestibule, double oak doors give access to the central hall paved in polished limestone and full

of light from above. The semicircular staircase framed in a segmental arch to one side adds movement and geometrical interest to the generally rectangular proportions (Fig 4). Tall double doors, also of oak, like all the main door joinery, open into the principal room, the drawing room on the garden front. This is divided into two by a screen of marbled Greek columns.

‘Restrained architectural detail makes an ideal backdrop for modern family life’

On the central axis facing the garden is a formally arranged 'saloon' and the drawing room, furnished with sofas and comfortable chairs, fills the other part (Fig 2). The good Classical chimneypiece of red-and-white marble was salvaged from the old house at the time of the 1950s demolition. It is complemented by Regency furniture acquired by the family from the Attingham sale in 1827, which looks fully at home in the new rooms here.

The family sitting room also has a Haycock chimneypiece, of white marble with ormolu mounts reminiscent of the work of Vulliamy for the Prince Regent. The third reused chimneypiece is that in the dining room (Fig 5) and is a survivor of Pritchard's work. A beautiful design of carved wood based on an idea of Inigo Jones, it has been restored and cleaned for its new situation, in which it complements the Regency furniture from the old house. Several larger pieces of family furniture were also measured up so that an appropriate architectural setting could be created for them.

All the rooms flow together and open off the central hall creating an atmosphere of space and dignity. The restrained architectural detail makes an ideal backdrop for modern family life as well as an appropriate setting for the family heirlooms. The new Onslow is one of the best recent English country houses and an inspiring achievement in the context of the 20th-century history of the estate. It shows what can be achieved with an informed and positive outlook

Fig 4 left: The hall and main stair. *Fig 5 facing page:* The new dining room

