

TUSMORE PARK

OXFORDSHIRE

THE HOME OF MR AND MRS WAFIC SAID

JOHN MARTIN ROBINSON visits one of the finest new Classical country houses in Britain. Designed by Sir William Whitfield, it combines the architectural confidence of Anglo-Palladian architects of the mid 18th century with the technology of today





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HE new Tusmore Park (Fig 1) is, in scale and quality, the finest Classical country house built in Britain since the Second World War, and perhaps the grandest since Manderston in Berwickshire, in the Edwardian age. It is a surprising crown to the career of the architect Sir William Whitfield, doyen of Modern buildings such as the Chartered Accountants Extension in the City of London, and thoughtful contextual designs such as the Department of Health in Whitehall or St Albans Cathedral Chapter House.

His would not be the first name to come to mind as author of a full-blooded exercise in the contemporary Anglo-Palladian manner. But there are clues, notably his own house at St Helen Auckland in Co Durham with its 18th-century Palladian façade and high-ceilinged saloon by Daniel Garrett. Whitfield has always been a great admirer of the English 18th century.

Aside from restorations, Sir William had never used an historic style in his own work before, but when he was asked to design a Palladian house, he decided it was time to have a go. He rose to the challenge and produced a masterpiece. Without much direct quotation or copying, this convinces by its accurate handling of the Classical language allied to an original domestic plan, and, above all, by splendid proportions and the dazzling quality of the execution.

The story of the original Tusmore Park is almost a caricature of the vicissitudes of the English country house in the 20th century. A crisp neo-Classical box, designed in 1766 by Robert Mylne for William Fermor, it was replanned and extended by William Burn in 1858, after being acquired by the Earls of Effingham. In the 20th century, the estate was bought by Vivian Hugh Smith, banker and Lord Lieutenant of Oxfordshire—created Lord Bicester in 1938. He remodelled the house, adding formal gardens in the 1930s.

The Second World War brought the usual disruptions. The flat surrounding Oxfordshire landscape was taken over by the US Air Force, with a vast bomber airfield at Upper Heyford. Randall, the 2nd Lord Bicester, demolished Mylne's house in 1961 (it is recorded in *New Vitruvius Britannicus*, 1802, and *COUNTRY LIFE*, July 30 and August 6, 1938). It was replaced with a new house designed by Claude Phillimore, incorporating Mylne's chimneypieces.

Phillimore's design suffered from the familiar defects of houses of its period: cramped proportions, tiny service areas, and an inchoate plan. There was only a narrow central passage through the house, squeezed between a bathroom and the butler's pantry. This denied the logic of the park layout with its avenues and vistas. Also, the exterior stone came from the wrong quarry and had turned a horrible orange colour, clashing with the Georgian stables and other retained outbuildings.

The estate was acquired in 1987 for its location and the mature park setting. The client first approached Philip Jebb to design a new house, but Jebb died >

(Left) 1—A Classical triumph: the east front and its Ionic portico. The entrance leads directly to the principal rooms; the family rooms lie below

before the scheme could be fully developed. Other architects produced a variety of designs, and planning permission was obtained to demolish the Phillimore house and to build a new one on the old footprint.

Sir William Whitfield had acted as the clients' architectural consultant at the Saïd Business School in Oxford, designed by Sir Jeremy Dixon. Further to that, he was also asked to help explain the plans under consideration for Tusmore. In the end, he was pressed to become involved in the design himself. Whitfield was wary about this, but produced a sketch for a new house to illustrate all the clients' requirements and wishes. This led on to further drawings encapsulating additional suggestions, such as a more prominent portico and a general expansion of the scale.

The final design is 10% larger than the first Whitfield sketch, which is as far as the plan could be increased without aesthetic detriment. The design is an integrated three-dimensional exercise and the spaces and elevations are all harmonically related to each other. Any expansion meant that each part would have to be increased proportionately, including the windows and doors which had to retain a convincingly human scale, thus setting a finite limit on the size of the whole.

The house as built is larger than Mylne's original Tusmore Park. The main block is erected on new foundations laid round the outside of the surviving 18th-century foundations; but the new house is also taller than Mylne's main block, and there are concealed lower flanking wings on the entrance front containing the swimming pool and staff accommodation beneath the level of the artificially raised forecourt. Forty per cent of the internal space is taken up by the servicing, including extensive mechanical services.

The monumental hexastyle Ionic portico and the main entrance are at *piano nobile* level on the east side, obviating the practical inconvenience of many 18th-century Palladian plans, which involve either basement entry or getting wet. The principal entertaining rooms are all on the *piano nobile*, but the family rooms are under them at garden level, approached down from the entrance. This novel but convenient arrangement is partly responsible for the distinctive character of the house.

The south and west (see cover) elevations present a conventional Palladian *parti* of rusticated base storey, dominant *piano nobile*, and an attic storey containing the bedrooms, with windows graded to suit. The projecting canted bay in the centre of the west front was another development as the design progressed. The north elevation, facing the service courts and handsome subsidiary buildings surviving from the previous house, is four storeys.

A service area and wine cellars are incorporated below the living floor, but this is only visible on the north side. The outbuildings themselves include, as well as the stables and Clock House (now guest accommodation), a squash court and motor house, and a 17th-century timber-framed granary. This has been restored by Capps & Capps as part of the overall project, using oak from the park.

Whitfield Partners (now Whitfield Lockwood Architects) developed the design under the close direction of Sir William Whitfield and his partner Andrew



2—The blue-and-white painted Library is the most compact of the rooms on the *piano nobile*

Lockwood. Holloway White Allom were appointed as main contractor in a principal role to carry out Whitfield's design. The architects Johnston Cave & Associates (Peter Cave and Michael Clark) were retained by Holloway White Allom as their executive architects. They carried out the design faithfully to Whitfield's intentions, and the latter monitored the work. Whitfield and Lockwood were responsible for design of the principal interiors, including the reception rooms.

Alberto Pinto, the interior designer, was in charge of the decoration of the main rooms, and the bedrooms also fell within his province. He adopted a more Empire tone, with strong clear colours, swagged curtains and gilding than the strong English nuance of the Whitfield architecture. The effect is harmonious, however, and recalls the Francophile elegance of decoration in George IV's Carlton House, as recorded in W. H. Pyne's *The History of the Royal Residences*.

From the start, the design of the new house was conceived in harmony with—and as the climax of—the 18th-century landscape park, which has been restored as part of the programme. This historic layout comprised two phases, an early-18th-century formal landscape with a rectangular canal, the Long Water, at right angles to the west front, and radiating lime avenues forming a *patte-d'oie* to the east.

Overlaying these bones was an informal phase contemporary with the Mylne house, deploying clumps and belts of mixed trees and eye-catchers such as a balustraded bridge and a pedimented temple. Lord Bicester re-arranged the immediate surroundings in the 1930s with stone-paved terraces, clipped yews and herbaceous borders. These have been revived and the whole landscape restored and enhanced to a masterplan by Colvin and Moggridge, thousands of new trees being planted. There is a wide formal >



3—The great Dining Room which fills most of the north side of the *piano nobile*. The carved marble chimneypiece came originally from Ashburton Place, Sussex, which was demolished in the 1950s. Its carvings of Bacchic grapes are appropriate to a dining room

(Right) 4—The South Drawing Room: an elegant room with a strongly architectural character with a handsome coved ceiling—all the principal rooms are 22ft high. The architectural features of the principal rooms were designed by Whitfield Partners



vista to the east focussed on the portico, and a new lake has been created to the south.

The need to hold its own in the landscape of the park is one of the keys to the whole design. The elevations are meticulously executed in warm buff Burgundian limestone. The capitals of the portico columns and the Venetian windows were carved by Linford-Bridgeman for APS Masonry. Otherwise, there is no stone carving and no string courses.

A feeling of strength is imparted by the bold pulvinated frieze and dentil cornice all round, and thick early-18th-century pattern glazing bars. The upper windows are simply cut in without architraves. On the *piano nobile*, the windows have entablatures, and there are flanking Burlingtonian Venetian windows on the west front where the centrepiece is the large full-height Taylorian bow.

The exterior relies on form, scale, proportions and articulation for effect. There are no obvious quotations, but the general impact, although 21st century, recalls the effortless and assured second generation of 18th-century Anglo-Palladianism associated with Paine and Garrett. It is powerful, masculine Classicism.

Impressive though the exterior of Tusmore is, it is the interior which takes the breath away. The heart of the layout is the central saloon, a rotunda rising through three storeys, comparable to Paine's at Wardour Castle (Fig 6). All the main rooms are accessible from the saloon at ground, first and second floor levels. The saloon is approached from the relatively small, austere entrance hall at colonnade level, creating an impact of terrific *éclat*, with twin flights of steps sweeping down

'These interiors are not pale imitations of Georgian work, but stunning examples of modern Classicism which compare with the best of the 18th century'

to the garden hall below, and light flowing down from the glazed oculus in the shallow-domed ceiling above. This first entry at *piano nobile* level enhances greatly the spatial impact of the whole house.

There are elegant pedimented doorways on the principal axis from the entrance portico with door surrounds derived from an original by William Chambers, leading to the drawing rooms and dining room on the opposing axis. In between are four niches containing statues of Diana the Huntress and three attendants specially cast for this position from the originals made for Louis XIV at Marly by the *Atelier de Moulages du Louvre*. Over the doorcases are rectangular grisaille panels painted with Classical scenes in *troupe l'oeil* by the muralist Alan Dodd.

The great triumph of the saloon, however, is the use of scagliola, including the richly coloured and figured Sienna shafts of the eight fluted Corinthian columns, and the white Carrara of the capitals, urns, entablature and balustrade to the second-floor landing which gives access to four plaster-vaulted ante rooms serving the main bedrooms. All this scagliola was produced by Richard Feroze, England's leading




5—The Italianate garden hall which lies between the saloon and garden, with a model by Linley

contemporary scagliola-maker for Hayles and Howe.

The centre of the saloon floor is a roundel of glass and bronze, which gives light to a brick-lined domed room in the centre of the cellar floor. The central axis of the garden or ground floor is taken by the garden hall (Fig 5), an austere treated space comparable to an Italian *sala terrena*. It has Roman Doric pilasters and entablature, and a polished stone floor. It leads to the large family living room, as well as being the principal access to the garden.

The reception rooms on the *piano nobile* comprise a continuous enfilade round three sides of the rotunda. The sense of parade and flow of space through these rooms is an important part of the overall architectural experience at Tusmore. It is enhanced by the variations of colour and scale between the rooms and strong natural light. The main rooms are all 22ft high and their other proportions are commensurate.

The library (Fig 2) with fitted bookcases is the most compact, its walls painted blue and white. Proceeding clockwise, the South Drawing Room has a strongly architectural character with a penetrated coved ceiling and central oval panel between two rectangles (inspired by Inigo Jones) (Fig 4). The West Drawing Room has the character of a gallery of parade and links the South Drawing Room and the Dining Room (Fig 3). The Dining Room fills almost the whole of the north side of the *piano nobile* and is the largest and most monumental room in the house. Corinthian columns screen the sideboard end, and the ceiling is inspired by Coleshill, with a large oval centre panel and flat beams.

The principal rooms at Tusmore are in some ways a demonstration of the irrelevance of architectural style; it is the high architectural quality and moulding of space which counts. These interiors are not pale imitations of Georgian work, but stunning examples of modern Classicism which compare with the best of the 18th century. 

Photographs: June Buck.

(Facing page) 6—The oval saloon with its bold scagliola columns lies at the heart of the house

