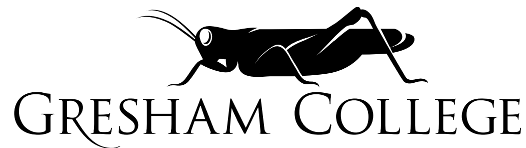

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Crown, Country & the Struggle for Cultural Supremacy

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In my last three lectures we have traced the winding path of artistic culture in England. We started with the Tudors and saw the way that, in Tudor England, what we call art was admired for its ingenuity and costliness rather than for what we might today consider its artistic value. Easel painting was a minor element in the royal and aristocratic interior, textiles and plate were most highly regarded.

England, isolated from Europe by religion and war during the Elizabethan period, was reconnected with the mainland after peace with Spain brought by James I, and this allowed a small number of very rich aristocrats close to the crown to participate in collecting Italian, and especially Venetian painting. But the artistic interests of the royal family and court were esoteric for most and lacked any wider impact.

Things began to change after the Restoration as easel paintings suddenly became more available. People began to buy paintings on a large scale to decorate their houses. But, in the forty years after the Restoration, the interests of the elite were wide-ranging and were essentially what we would call scientific. Portraits and landscapes were amassed for pleasure and decorative effect but did not form deliberate assemblages – or to use a more familiar term - art collections.

So, in summary, in the 16th and 17th centuries, the communities who were interested in what we all art, and who invested in it, were essentially in the circle of the court and, people who were not in this gilded circle, looked to the court for a lead on artistic matters. The Crown was very much in the lead of fashion, even for a monarch like Charles II, for whom cultural patronage was a minority interest, the court was the undisputed leader of fashion. Last time I described how Charles II patronised Antonio Verrio creating, at Windsor, an architectural and artistic model that was followed by the aristocracy for the next forty years

Tonight, we are going to follow the decline of the cultural influence of the court. After 1700, for a period of a century, leadership of high artistic culture left the monarchy, the court and its palaces and rooted itself amongst the aristocracy and the upper commercial classes. As I explained last time these people had already come to regard knowledge of painting and sculpture as a mark of gentility but, after 1700, and definitely by 1720, it was they who were setting fashion rather than following it.

The rapid decline of the cultural influence of the monarchy was paralleled by a shift in political power from the crown to the aristocracy and epitomised by the state of the crown's principal royal residence in London. In 1689 Whitehall Palace, the seat of the English monarchy since 1536 burnt down. It may have appeared to the casual observer a ramshackle conglomeration of buildings, but it was symbolically the heart of the nation, then as now. It was big, famous and impressive but, now a pile of rubble. William III, and then more decisively Queen Anne, moved the headquarters of the court to St James's.

A sovereign's principal residence conveys messages about their power and cultural positioning – this is why Louis XIV, for instance, spent so much on creating the palace of Versailles. The British monarchy, after 1714 was based at St James's and there is no doubt that this building was not impressive. The problem was that it was never

designed to be an impressive architectural symbol of either the monarchy or the nation. It was built to safeguard the monarch's children and as such never had a principal public façade. There was thus a gulf between any national or international understanding of a 'palace' and the reality of a modest building that had been converted to undertake a magnificent task.

When the German aristocrat Baron Bielfeld visited George II's court at St James's in 1741 he thought it 'a lodging hous; crazy, smoky and dirty'. In 1823 the *Morning Post* stated bluntly that 'The outside will never look like a royal palace until the brick walls shall have been covered with a stone facing ornamented with pillars and porticoes'. The following year an MP said in the House that 'St James's palace looked more like an almshouse than a kingly residence and was a disgrace to the country'.

Although voices were raised against St James's by Britons who had travelled abroad and thought St James's a pale reflection of the might of the British Crown there were others that saw it as an appropriate constitutional expression of the monarch's role. When the poet and diplomat Matthew Prior was shown around Versailles by one of Louis XIV's household officials he was asked whether William III's achievements were celebrated in English royal houses. Prior piously proclaimed that 'the monuments of my master's actions are to be seen everywhere but in his own house'.

In response to criticisms of St James's by a German visitor, Baron Bielfeld, the translator of his letters, William Hooper, sprang to the defence of St James's in 1770. He thought that 'the glory of the monarch consists, not in a handful of tinsel courtiers, or in expensive and pompous festivals; but in the … ease and affluence… the freedom, the dignity and the happiness of his people' those people were reflected, he thought, in the royal crown which was given lustre far superior to the 'blaze of the court of an absolute monarch'. For him, and many of his contemporaries, absolutism was expressed in brick stone and oil paint. Matthew Prior thought Versailles 'the foolishest in the world' where Louis XIV was shown 'galloping in every ceiling'. St James could thus be seen as the ideal expression of a limited monarchy as constituted after 1689 and the Bill of Rights.

The Georgian monarchy ensconced, for ceremonial purposes, at St James's displayed an architectural carapace that was, in fact deliberately understated. George I who had some interest in cultural matters, but disliked ceremonial and courtly formality rejected Sir John Vanbrugh's plans for replacing St James's, extending Kensington and completing Hampton Court. Even when offered the means of financing a rebuilding of Whitehall by the creative financial genius of Sir Robert Walpole, he did not take up the offer. Instead he supported extremely modest alterations and adaptations at Kensington and Hampton Court.

In typical Hanoverian fashion George I's distain for ceremony encouraged his son's passion for it. Lord Hervey famously observed 'all the pageantry and splendour, of badges and trappings of royalty, were as pleasing to the son as they were irksome to the father'. This did, at first, make a material difference to the appearance of the court. Daniel Defoe, in his Tour through England, published in the mid-1720s, drew a contrast between the splendour of the court and its official seat: 'The Palace of St James's, though the winter receptacle of all the pomp and glory of this kingdom, is really mean, in comparison of the glorious court of Great Britain. The splendour of the Nobility, the wealth and greatness of the attendants, the oeconomy of the house and the real grandeur of the whole royal family; outdo all the courts of Europe; and yet this palace comes beneath those of the most petty princes in it'.

George II's burst of courtly glory came to a crushing end with the death of Queen Caroline in 1737. After this, the devastated king withdrew from public ceremonial as much as he could and ceased to take the court to Hampton Court. George II did not only fail to build anything of any significance they actually had a distain for what we would call high culture. Lord Hervey, the court wit and gossip tells us in his memoirs 'The King used often to brag of the contempt he had for books and letters', he had a penchant for what the poet Alexander Pope called 'Gun, Drum, Trumpet, Blunderbuss and Thunder'. The only paintings he really liked were erotic ones, once complaining that his 'gigantic fat Venus' had been removed from Kensington and demanding its return. The point is that George II was deliberately and perversely philistine in his tastes.

Not so his grandson. Soon after his accession George III acquired the freehold of Buckingham House, a large aristocratic mansion built on the western edge of St James's Park a stone's throw from the palace. The purpose was to provide a suitable residence for the queen, as Somerset House, the Queen's official historic London

residence, was now, not only very old, but in a quarter of London that was unfashionable and down at heel. It had been used only sporadically by Caroline of Ansbach and, in 1760, was deemed impossibly old and uncomfortable by George III's consort Charlotte of Mecklenberg Strelitz.

Buckingham House, which had been built in 1702-5, had brilliantly appropriated the royal landscape of St James's Park being sited on axis with the avenues and canal. St James's Palace was side-on to these and, after the destruction of Whitehall, it seemed to the uninformed observer, that the Park was aligned on Buckingham House. Its prime location, and relative modernity compared to venerable St James's. After its purchase by the king in 1762 improvements were made to make it fit for royal occupation and, in 1775, George, by Act of Parliament, settled the house on the Queen for life relinquishing Somerset House for government use. Buckingham House now became known as The Queen's House.

In the eighteenth century the contrast between St. James's and its European equivalents is stark and provides a commentary on the British monarchy's long, slow passage from sovereign rule to sovereign reign. From as early as 1702 a combination of constitutional shifts and the destruction of Whitehall meant that St James's epitomised the question, whether the sovereign embodied the nation in all his deeds (*L'etat c'est moi*) or only the ceremonial part of it. In the former state the sovereign's residence would be expected to be of great magnificence, in the latter only suitable to the needs of the royal family. From the accession of Anne till the accession of Victoria, a period of 134 years, St James's was the representation in brick and stone of the political and constitutional debate over the role and powers of the monarchy. Some felt it a national disgrace and others the appropriate home for a constitutional monarch.

What, of course, is astonishing about all this is that while Queen Anne, the sovereign of a nation, which was rapidly emerging as the most powerful in the world lived in St James's Palace, parliament was paying for the construction of a baroque palace covering four acres, on a European scale for one of its leading courtiers. On the east gate of Blenheim Palace is an inscription which reads:

Under the auspices of a munificent sovereign this house was built for John Duke of Marlborough and his Duchess Sarah, by Sir John Vanbrugh between the years 1705 and 1722.

The ancient royal manor of Woodstock, together with a grant of £240,000 towards the building of Blenheim was given by Queen Anne and confirmed by Act of Parliament. This fact did not escape contemporaries, Daniel Defoe thought that The Dukes of Marlborough would never be able to afford to keep such an enormous palace going...he wrote 'nothing below royalty and a prince can support an equipage suitable to the living in such a house: and one may without a spirit of prophecy say...that at some time or another Blenheim will return to be, as the old Woodstock once was, the palace of a king'. As we know Defoe was wrong, but he was making an observation which was increasingly made of the great houses, their princely nature...princely a word increasingly used to describe the houses of the nobility.

After 1688 the Aristocracy took over control of the government. They dominated the cabinet, the armed forces, the civil service and, through patronage, essentially controlled the house of Commons. The Aristocracy governed and were expected to. Unlike the aristocracy of France, they never became isolated from their communities; they were political, social and crucially economic leaders of society and few argued with that.

After 1660 the size of the aristocracy grew. In 1658 the English peerage numbered 119 but Charles II, who had a lot of debts and favours to repay, granted 43 new peerages in the 25 years after the Restoration. More importantly Charles created Dukes, the highest rank – fourteen in all (some were revivals – but still there were 14 more Dukes in 1685 than in 1660). William III, who also had pressing reasons to reward those who had supported him, created 27 new titles including seven dukedoms; Queen Anne created 45 new titles and so, by 1714, there were 170 peers. This expansion did not continue into the eighteenth century and the Georges were reluctant to create new peerages. So the point is that there was a massive expansion of the ruling class in a very short period (1660-1714).

Now we have to remember that peers were expected to have an income sufficient to support the dignity of their position. In 1701 it was thought that an income of £4,000 a year was the minimum for a Viscount and £3,000 for a Baron. Sarah, the Duke of Marlborough's wife, who has recently been given an alarming historical role in the

movie 'The Favourite', was reluctant to accept a Dukedom for her soldier husband as she thought his income not up to it. Only when he was given a parliamentary grant of £5,000 a year was she mollified.

But the highest incomes were vastly greater than this. In 1683 the rental receipts from the Earl of Rutland's estates was £14,482 while the Duke of Devonshire's average annual income was at least £17,000. The Duke of Newcastle was netting £25,000 in the following decade. By the time George I came to the throne the Dukes of Newcastle Bedford and Beaufort all had incomes of more than £30,000 and four other Dukes enjoyed incomes between £20,000 and £30,000.

The incomes, large as they were, were reinforced by three factors: The first was the entail that allowed estates to be passed from father to eldest son without being subdivided; the second was a focus on financially advantageous marriages, particularly between landed families, but also bringing in big money from trade; and the third was the skilful use of debt, mainly in the form of mortgages to fund improvement and expansion. These devices magnified the returns from aristocratic estates and consolidated their economic base.

At the same time, as both the numbers of nobles and their spending power increased, the ability of the Crown to spend on cultural projects declined. In 1689, soon after the accession of William and Mary, parliament granted them £600,000 for their civil expenses (as opposed to their military expenses which would be covered by Parliament). Previously royal expenditure had been covered through a mix of the crown's hereditary revenues and grants from parliament. On the accession of George I, parliament set what became known as the civil list at £700,000 a year, that is to say around 15% of the national budget.

Of this a third was consumed by the royal household and a further £100,000 was reserved for the Prince of Wales. Most of the rest went on the costs of running the national administration: the salaries of ministers and officials, of the judiciary and the diplomatic service. There was also the cost of maintaining the royal estates, including the Palace of Westminster. On top of this was all pensions granted since 1714.

These costs all mounted up and by 1720 the crown was £600,000 in debt. Roughly averaged out – the Crown was overspending by £100,000 a year. One of the key problems that explains this was the sheer cost of the royal household. Since the Restoration most aristocratic households had been rapidly scaling back their size. A few old-fashioned Dukes kept large scale medieval-style hospitality, but most did not (The Duke of Chandos at Cannons was unusual in having 92 servants). Part of the reason for this was the expense of maintaining large town houses, as I explained in my last lecture. Few could afford medieval-style hospitality in the countryside as well as a place in town. As a result, the size of aristocratic households diminished.

Roger North who wrote a treatise called 'On Building' contrasted the old form of hospitable house with the newer houses that started to be built after the Restoration. He lamented the 'abolishing [of] grandeur and stateliness of that sort the former ages affected [and] wished that the gentry and nobility would look further for their invention than the suburb[an] models which may serve a family, in a London expedition, but not in country living, which requires something more like a court'.

But he, and a few other critics who lamented the shrinkage in size of aristocratic households, were on their own because aristocrats explicitly did not want their households to be 'like a court' as North put it. This determination set the royal household apart from the rest. It was far larger and more expensive than any other institution in the land – costing some a quarter of a million pounds a year.

The decline in the political, financial and cultural importance of the monarchy and the court, coupled with the rise in the number and wealth of the nobility, needs to be seen against a background of shifting cultural priorities and concerns. In my last lecture I explained how the period after the Restoration was one of scientific enquiry and curiosity. But as the seventeenth century turned into the eighteenth the interests of this generation of scientists started to look ridiculous. While John Evelyn wrote enthusiastically about 'things petrified, eggs in which the yolk rattled, a piece of beef with the bones in it and a crystal containing a drop of water not congealed but moving up and down when shaken', the gentlemen of the early eighteenth century were less impressed.

In 1710 Addison invented a spoof will belonging to the collector Sir Nicholas Gimcrack. It was full of daft legacies such as 'one box of butterflies, a female skeleton and a dried cockatrice' left to his wife; his 'receipt for preserving caterpillars and three crocodile eggs' to his daughters and 'my rat's testicles' to a learned friend.

The fact is that fashion had moved on and the appreciation of painting and sculpture had become the sole defining mark of gentility and education. Foreign curiosities, rocks, minerals and natural history specimens did not make up a gentleman's education. The virtuosos of the eighteenth century were not those who compiled cabinets of curiosities but the dilettanti, men who had travelled the continent refining their tastes and assembling large collections of classical art and souvenirs of their time abroad.

In my previous lectures I have emphasised the importance of two dates in the development of the arts and architecture in England: 1603 and the end of war with Spain; and the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660. After both of these dates severed connections with Europe were re-established causing changes in taste and fashion. Tonight, I want to introduce a third date for your notebooks. Between 1702 and 1713 Europe was consumed by the War of the Spanish Succession; this was ended by the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713 – this treaty, like the treaty of London in 1603, and the Restoration of 1660, suddenly re-opened Europe to British travellers. It is really from this date that the Grand Tour proper begins. The travel by young aristocrats to the Low Countries, France and Italy to acquire education and taste.

These young men had had a classical education and the Grand Tour took them to the very places of which they had learnt in their books, they saw monuments and ruins, and met dealers, painters and were accompanied by tutors who fed their interest and helped furnish them with souvenirs. This is a portrait of Douglas, 8th Duke of Hamilton, on his Grand Tour with his physician Dr John Moore and the latter's son John. A view of Geneva is in the distance where they stayed for two years.

If you are collecting two things are necessary as well as the urge to acquire: the resources to do so and a plentiful supply of goods. We have seen just how well placed the English aristocracy was to spend – these young men went on the Grand Tour, their pockets laden with cash. But the years after the Treaty of Utrecht also saw the ending of the great competitive collecting rivalries of the Italian families. Not only were the leading Italian ducal families no longer fighting for new acquisitions they were willing and eager to sell some of the collections that they had. But there was a hazardous path for the young English noblemen to follow. The continent was awash with fakes, botched-up sculptures and bad paintings. Nevertheless, the English Lords managed to amass between them an astonishing quantity of fantastic painting and sculpture.

Let's look for a moment at Lord Leicester, an aristocrat who lived nowhere near Leicester, but possessed a giant estate in north Norfolk. Thomas Coke inherited his father's estate at the age of ten and, five years later, he became one of the first generation of young men to travel peaceful Europe. Six years later, in 1718 he returned to his estate at Holkham and began to build a magnificent new house. Over a period of 33 years his expenditure on his new mansion averaged £2,700 a year.

Leicester furnished his new house with sculptures and painting that he had bought on his Grand Tour, but he also commissioned buyers to act for him in Rome – in particular to buy sculpture for his projected sculpture gallery. Meanwhile paintings by Rubens, van Dyck, Guido Reni, Poussin, Rosa arrived in Norfolk as did drawings by Raphael and Leonardo da Vinci.

The house itself was designed through a combination of the talents of Lord Burlington, William Kent, and a Norfolk architect Matthew Brettingham together with the earl of Leicester. They attempted to create the sort of country house that an ancient Roman aristocrat would have enjoyed. Serious consideration was given to ancient sources, and its remarkable hard yellow brick was a careful match to Roman bricks sent from Rome to be copied in Norfolk. To finish the job off Leicester had himself portrayed as a Roman patrician in a bust by Roubiliac.

Interiors were carefully designed to evoke those of Roman houses first using Vitruvius's descriptions. Inigo Jones provided important models as he had used details from ancient Roman buildings and combined them with features designed by sixteenth century Italian architects. His ceilings at the Queen's House, Greenwich, and the Banqueting House, for instance derived from renaissance Italy and were widely copied.

Crucial in the development of a new type of interior were Lord Burlington, Colen Campbell and William Kent. Lord Burlington's town house, Burlington House on Piccadilly and his suburban villa at Chiswick both strove to create interiors more authentically Roman. The ceiling of the octagonal saloon at the centre of Chiswick House was modelled on one of the most famous buildings in Rome, the Basilica of Maxentius, while the apses in the gallery were modelled on the Temple of Venus and Rome. This makes the point that the models being followed were found in Roman public buildings rather than domestic ones. At Kensington Palace (1722-7) and Houghton Hall, Norfolk, William Kent took control of interior decoration in a new way.

Oak panelling was no longer favoured for the grandest rooms; these were now stuccoed and painted white in imitation of stone. This was a dramatic change as oak panelling and dark paint gave way to white or stone-coloured spaces often with a touch of gilding. Less grand rooms might still be panelled but here oak gave way to light painted softwood. The gallery at Kensington Palace, redecorated by William Kent, still contained the oak dado from William III's time, this was painted white and gilded in 1725-7. There were advances in paint manufacture in the 1730s and ready-mixed paint could be purchased rather than having to be made on site, this helped the spread of more standardised colours.

But above all the great houses were now a vehicle for displaying paintings and sculpture bought on the grand tour. At a house like Holkham paintings were not randomly dispersed, nor were they arranged in a modern way by school, but they were conceived as part of the architecture and given frames designed by the architect. The iconography of the paintings was much more easily read then than today, and subjects were grouped to create themes: the saloon there was, for instance, hung with Roman subjects which could be interpreted as a homage to lady Leicester and her husband as defender of female virtue. Holkham had an astonishing collection of classical sculpture displayed in the gallery and a library.

The sheer numbers of sculptures and paintings imported from Europe into England by the Grand Tourists will never be known exactly but between the 1720s and 1770s around 50,000 paintings 500,000 etchings and engravings were imported from Italy, France and Holland. In a single year, 1725, more than 330 paintings arrived from Italy, 200 from France, 120 from Holland there were part of a total of 762 paintings in all. In the same year 11,000 prints and engravings entered England from abroad.

While king George I and George II collected and built very little, the accession of George III was seen to be a sign that the monarch might once again lead fashion and, into the bargain, build a palace worthy of the name of Britain. George had been taught architectural drawing by Sir William Chambers and was believed to be something of a connoisseur. This was confirmed when early in his reign the King created a new post called 'architect of works' which was shared by the two most fashionable architects of the time, Robert Adam and Sir William Chambers. Not only this but in 1661 Chambers was commissioned to design a new palace to be built at Richmond to replace the antiquated piles of Hampton Court and Windsor. It was to cost about £90,000 was to be about the same size as Holkham Hall. Work even began on this great project which wouldn't have rivalled the great palaces of eighteenth-century Europe but would have at least put the English crown on a level with its own subjects. But this like, so many royal projects floundered and fell and the building, despite a dozen revisions to its design was abandoned.

But the most extraordinary thing about George III's failure to complete Richmond palace is that it was for an entirely new reason. Charles I didn't have the money to build, when Charles II had the money, he died and so didn't have the time, William III did build, but like Charles II didn't live long enough to see the fruits of his labours. George I and George II were not interested, and so why didn't George III complete Richmond if he had the time and the money. Well the reason seems to be that he just didn't have the enthusiasm or energy needed to drive the thing forward to completion. Instead he spent over £70,000 on remodelling Buckingham house in London a more domestic, comfortable residence than either St James's was or than Chambers' new palace would have been.

So, what became of palace building in the Hanoverian era? As the civil list was created parliament took control of the institutions of state. After the accession of George III parliament appropriated all civil expenditure leaving the Civil List to only pay for the expenses of running the monarchy. However, from 1689 the institutions of state, especially the navy were the responsibility of parliament.

Thus, came about the two most important and spectacular architectural commissions of the eighteenth century. First the Royal Hospital for Seamen at Greenwich created out of the remains of a destroyed Tudor palace and an abandoned Stuart one. Ill-educated visitors travelling into London up the Thames must have mistaken it for a royal palace and its magnificence must have led to an anticipation of an even more spectacular city centre royal residence. An expectation which of course was dashed when they saw St James's.

Then there was Somerset House, made possible by the sale of the old royal palace to Parliament. This was a palace for civil servants covering some six acres on the banks of the Thames. Between 1775 and 1801 it cost parliament some £462,000. These two buildings represented the triumph of the institutions of state over the crown just as decisively as the rise of the great country houses, filled with the loot of the Grand Tour, represented the triumph of the aristocracy over the monarchy.

So, with this ladies and gentlemen I want to finish. Over my four lectures this year we have followed a journey that to us, with the privilege of hindsight, seems inevitable, smooth and interrupted. As your narrator I have told a story with a beginning middle and end. But what we have to remember is that in fact none of this was inevitable the so-called Whig interpretation of history that charts the march of progress and sees the inevitable decline of the crown in favour of parliamentary supremacy was not inevitable.

However, it does explain the unique landscape of eighteenth-century Britain. A country adorned with enormous mansions of the aristocracy furnished with the greatest art money could buy, while the Georgian monarchs lived in old, run-down and unfashionable residences favouring military and rural pursuits. These are the residences of the King of France, the Emperor of Austria and the King of England in the time of George III. And this is the home of George III's sick and injured seamen and of two of his aristocrats. These images are a remarkable illustration of the shifts in political, economic and cultural influence in Britain in the period between Henry VIII and George III.

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