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Introduction

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Stories fill in the gaps left by a ruin’s material remains, to tell the tale of the splen-
dour that once was and the catastrophe or slow decline that led to its downfall. Ruins are not themselves immediately legible: they have to be spoken for, interpreted and supplemented by a guided tour, a cautionary inscription, an informa-
tive notice, a historical re-enactment. These narratives restore the ruins before our very eyes, allowing us to imagine them, once again, complete, and to under-
stand and learn from the process that led to their current dilapidated state.¹

Architecture at Fonthill is catastrophic, and houses there live adventurous lives.²

Fonthill, in Wiltshire, is usually associated with the writer and collector William Beckford, who built his Gothic fantasy house Fonthill Abbey at the end of the eight-
eenth century. The collapse of the Abbey’s tower in 1825 transformed the name Fonthill into a symbol for over-arching ambition and folly, a sublime ruin. Fonthill is, however, much more than the story of one man’s excesses. Beckford’s Abbey is only one of several important houses to be built on the estate since the early six-
teenth century, all of them eventually consumed by fire or deliberately demolished and all of them oddly forgotten by historians. Little now remains: a tower, a stable block, a kitchen range, some dressed stone, an indentation in a field.

Fonthill Recovered draws on histories of art and architecture, politics and eco-
nomics to explore all of the rich cultural history of this famous estate. Some of the men and women who built the houses and lived at Fonthill surpassed Beckford in terms of their wealth, their collections and their political power. Some were players on the national and world stage as well as major patrons of the arts. Their political and religious allegiances, their sources of wealth and social positions reflected and were affected by the shifts and changes in five hundred years of British history.

The book is divided into two sections: the first is largely narrative, the second consists of essays exploring themes, topics and objects which enhance and cannot be comfortably included in the main narrative. There is inevitably some repetition and some difference of opinion, but we have tried to avoid speculation.
Fig. 1.1 Ordnance Survey map, scale Explorer 1:25000, showing location of Fonthill Houses.

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The main narrative traces the occupation of Fonthill from the Bronze Age through to the twenty-first century; it can be read as a separate book. The first house of any note (see marker 1 on Figure 1.1, the Ordnance Survey (OS) map) was a Tudor mansion, built for Sir John Mervyn who died in 1566. The last of his family to own Fonthill was his great-grandson Mervin Touchet, 12th Baron Audley and 2nd Earl of Castlehaven, who was tried for rape and sodomy in the House of Lords and beheaded on Tower Hill in 1631.

The estate was acquired by Francis Cottington, Baron of Hanworth and King Charles I’s Chancellor of the Exchequer, who extended and improved the house and grounds. After the Civil War, during which Cottington left the country and died in Spain in 1652, John Bradshaw, Cromwell’s President of the Council of State, was given Fonthill. After his death and the restoration of King Charles II, the Cottingtons were again the owners, but as Roman Catholics they were outside court circles. In 1744–5 Francis Cottington, 2nd Baron of Fonthill sold Fonthill to Alderman Beckford, whose fortune had been acquired from his sugar plantations in Jamaica.

In 1755 a fire damaged part of the old house, so the Alderman demolished the rest and built a new mansion called ‘Splendens’ on a new site (see marker 2 on Figure 1.1). This enormous house was inherited in 1770 by his son William Beckford and extensively embellished by him before being abandoned and demolished, apart from one small service pavilion. The younger Beckford’s extraordinary Gothic abbey was built on a hill close by, but its tower collapsed in 1825 (see marker 4 on Figure 1.1): with sugar prices falling, Beckford had by then sold up and moved to Bath, and it was the new owner, John Farquhar, who was inside the Abbey when the tower fell. He was unhurt but sold up soon after and the estate was divided.

From this point, the narrative becomes less straightforward.

James Morrison, a millionaire textile merchant, bought the ‘Park’ estate with the surviving service pavilion of ‘Splendens’, employing John Buonarotti Papworth to turn this into a comfortable country house. Richard Grosvenor, 2nd Marquess of Westminster bought the ‘Abbey’ estate and commissioned William Burn to design a brand new mansion close to the abbey ruins (see marker 5 on Figure 1.1). At the beginning of the twentieth century, descendants of James Morrison and the Marquess of Westminster (the Shaw Stewarts) continued to occupy these houses, which were called, respectively ‘Fonthill House’ and ‘New Fonthill Abbey’. Alfred Morrison was an important collector and engaged Owen Jones to create exotic interiors for his Fonthill House.

Just before the First World War, Hugh Morrison commissioned Detmar Blow to design a new house, ‘Little Ridge’, on a different site (see marker 6 on Figure 1.1), leaving his widowed mother in Fonthill House. After she moved away, he demolished the old house, removing the last remnants of Alderman Beckford’s ‘Splendens’. He filled ‘Little Ridge’ with Alfred Morrison’s priceless collection of Chinese porcelain and paintings and, after the war, renamed it (confusingly) Fonthill House. William Burn’s ‘New Fonthill Abbey’ fared less well. It was occupied by the army during the Second World War and sold in 1947 to the Morrisons. By this time there was little demand for large remote Victorian country houses. Everything, apart from the
stable block, was demolished in 1952, and the building materials were pushed down into the cellars. Niel Rimington, a descendant of the Marquess of Westminster, continued to own the surviving part of Beckford’s Gothic Abbey.

By the end of the twentieth century, Blow’s ‘Little Ridge’ had also been demolished (in 1972) by John Granville Morrison, 1st Baron Margadale because it was too expensive to maintain; a smaller Neo-Georgian house was built on the site. Meanwhile Lord Margadale’s eldest son and heir James Morrison had sold the stable block (attached to ‘New Fonthill Abbey’) and some land to the successful textiles and fashion designer Bernard Nevill. Nevill partly restored the stable block as a weekend retreat, but ill health forced him to sell the property in 2012. Shortly before, in 2009, Niel Rimington had died, triggering the sale of his part of Fonthill.

Now, in 2018, the Fonthill estate is divided into three separate and privately owned parts. The largest, still owned by the Morrison family, includes the sites

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**Fig. 1.2** Photograph of boundary wall of the first Fonthill House, revealed during dredging of Fonthill Lake.

Photograph © Caroline Dakers.
of the first Fonthill House, dating from the mid-sixteenth century, of Alderman Beckford’s ‘Splendens’ and Detmar Blow’s ‘Little Ridge’. The other two parts are centred on the surviving fragment of William Beckford’s Abbey and on the site of the mansion designed by William Burn for the Marquess of Westminster.

The recent purchases of these two smaller parts of the estate have been fortuitous; the owners are restoring the surviving parts of their ‘old’ and ‘new’ abbeys, clearing the undergrowth, re-planting and bringing in light. They are also interested in the stories attached to their Fonthills. A new house, called ‘Old Fonthill Abbey’, has just been built immediately next to Beckford’s Abbey and another house, ‘Fonthill Abbey’, is being planned, incorporating the stable block and building materials from Burn’s mansion.

The involvement in the project of all these owners has been essential; without their engagement and support this research could not have taken place. These are still private estates and there are very few public footpaths across Fonthill, so the granting of physical access has been a vital foundation for the research. The geophysical survey to locate the site of the first house was only possible through access to the land granted by Alastair Morrison, 3rd Lord Margadale, together with a grant from the Marc Fitch Fund. Lord Margadale is the direct descendant of James Morrison, who bought part of the estate in the early nineteenth century; his decision to engage a professional archivist to catalogue the Morrison papers has proved invaluable. By coincidence, Lord Margadale’s decision to begin dredging the lake at Fonthill (Figure 1.2) has also provided evidence for our project. The boundary wall of the grounds of the first Fonthill House was revealed during the first stage. When the second half is dredged we may find the foundations of Alderman Beckford’s much derided five-arched bridge, or the equestrian statue which he apparently commissioned to stand facing his house. Could it be buried in the mud?

This project was kick-started with a symposium, Recovering Fonthill, which was held in September 2014 at Central Saint Martins in London and on the Fonthill estate. The symposium was supported by the Paul Mellon Centre, the University of the Arts London, Lord Margadale and Mr and Mrs Stephen Morant. The complexity of the undertaking was immediately apparent. How could we convey with clarity a narrative stretching from the sixteenth century (if not before) to the twenty-first century, covering different houses on different sites owned by different dynasties? How could we balance the well-known stories (William Beckford and his Abbey) with less familiar material, and do justice to the houses and owners who had left little trace, either on the ground or in archives?

The decision was taken to focus on new materials and new interpretations, to recover, if possible, aspects of all the Fonthills. Beckford’s ruined Abbey is of course pivotal to the narrative; the ‘frail creation of the world of enchantment’ that ‘achieved the status of the monumental sublime’. However, in this account equal attention is paid to the other houses, their landscapes and their owners. Bizarrely, Beckford traced his lineage back to the Mervyns who built the first large house at Fonthill, while objects which had been in his collection at the Abbey were
later acquired by members of the Morrison and Grosvenor families for their own Fonthills. There is a circularity to the narrative.

One of our first major questions was where exactly was the location of the first house, built by the Mervyns in the mid-sixteenth century? By the time it was partly burnt and then demolished in 1755 this Fonthill House was an impressive and very large building, with a significant stable block. With the aid of a few paintings and an estate map from the 1660s, we began our search below ground – in fact below the Fonthill Gifford cricket field and an adjoining field (see Figure 1.3).

While the location of the house was roughly identified (see the findings of our archaeologist David Roberts in Chapter 2) the parish church proved elusive. St Nicholas was, apparently, close to the house, and a church tower can be made out in Figure 1.4, a sketch made between 1800 and 1810 and based on a painting by George Lambert dated 1740. Sir Richard Colt Hoare, in his Modern History of Wiltshire, commented that the old parish church stood at a short distance north of the last mansion-house, but Alderman Beckford, ‘thinking it too near and unseemly, took it down, and according to reports buried all the memorials of the Mervyn and Cottington family: but perhaps some future antiquary may hit upon the place of their deposit, and bring them again to light’.4

We did discover underground a mysterious rectangular plot clearly delineated by a metal surround, possibly some sort of railing, close to the site of the house. Could the Alderman have ‘re-buried’ the tombs of the earlier owners of Fonthill within such a structure?

Fig. 1.3 Photograph of the emptied landscape, the original site of the first Fonthill House.
Photograph © Caroline Dakers.
Objects without dates, or clear provenance, had to be approached with caution, more especially because there is no supporting archive of documents. Paintings or maps were on occasion the only material from which to form a narrative. We know that Baron Cottington amassed a collection of paintings and furnishings while in the service of King Charles I, but everything appears to have been dispersed or hidden during the Civil War and may never have returned to Fonthill. A century later the Cottingtons themselves disappear from records. Fortunately we are able to construct the private life of the 2nd Earl of Castlehaven at Fonthill because his trial for sodomy was meticulously recorded. There is, however, no memorial in the Tower of London marking where his body and decapitated head were buried.

Even the more recent history has surprising gaps. It appears that no photographs were taken or none survive of the interiors of William Burn’s ‘New Abbey’, built for the Marquess of Westminster. The Marquess famously demolished the parish church of Fonthill Gifford, which had been built on a new site by Alderman Beckford. But in so doing, the Marquess’s new church obliterated the tombs of the Alderman, his wife, brother and daughter-in-law, the wife of William Beckford.

*Fonthill Recovered* takes the story into the second decade of the twenty-first century, to the most recent building projects by the new owners of the estate, one completed, one (in 2018) still in the planning stages. Their decisions to acquire parts of Fonthill have been inspired both by a continuing fascination for Beckford’s Abbey in its completed and ruined state and by the beauty of the landscape.

The final essay in this book, by Greg Buzwell, documents an exhibition held at the British Library on the ‘Gothic Imagination’, which featured perhaps the most bizarre appearance of the Abbey: in the ethereal and haunting underwater world of a videogame. There would appear to be no limit to recovering Fonthill.
Part One

The narrative