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The Beckford era

Amy Frost

The period of the Beckford family’s ownership of Fonthill is the best known and best understood era of the estate’s history. During the nearly 80 years of the Beckford reign, from 1744 to 1822, Fonthill became one of the premier country house estates in Wiltshire and was renowned across England both for the fame of its owners and the magnificence of the buildings they created. The houses constructed by the Beckfords at Fonthill were designed as physical representations of the status, wealth and power of their owners. Unlike many of their contemporaries, however, both Alderman William Beckford (bap.1709 d. 1770) and his son William Thomas Beckford (1760–1844) had ambitions that went beyond the standard need to mark their place in the social and political hierarchy of the day. Through Fonthill, father and son cleverly and consciously crafted a public identity for themselves and their family that continues to endure, making the word Fonthill synonymous with the name Beckford. At the epicentre of this image-making were two very different buildings driven by equal amounts of wealth and ambition: Fonthill House (later called ‘Splendens’), built from 1755 and demolished in 1807, and Fonthill Abbey, begun in 1796, collapsed in 1825 and finally demolished in 1846.

The Beckfords’ Fonthill

Baptised in Jamaica in 1709, as the second son of Peter Beckford, Speaker of the Jamaican House of Assembly, William Beckford (Figure 4.1) was born into a family that had been steadily increasing in wealth and colonial power since the 1660s when his grandfather, Colonel Peter Beckford, had settled on the island (see Chapter 13). Beckford moved to England in 1723 to be educated at Westminster School, then Balliol College, Oxford, before studying medicine at the University of Leiden and the Hotel des Invalides in Paris. His elder brother Peter had only the English properties settled on him, ensuring that Beckford would inherit a good share of his father’s Jamaican interests. Those interests
had been extended from the supposed horse-rustling and tavern-owning early years of the Colonel to include land and slave ownership through the purchase of extensive sugar plantations. Beckford returned to Jamaica following his father’s death in 1735 to settle the estate, reportedly valued at some £300,000. The plantations owned by him and his extended family, alongside several mortgages for the plantations of others, made the Beckfords one of largest plantation owners – perhaps the largest – in the West Indies; they were also the largest slave owners. Despite not being the eldest son, William Beckford effectively assumed the role of head of the family, a role that came to him in fact when his brother died in 1737. Further visits to England followed as he began to establish himself not just as the head of the Beckford family in island politics, militia and trade, but as a key member of the wider family, whose position in England had been growing in strength alongside their colonial relations. Beckford returned to England to reside permanently in 1744 to begin his campaign to enter British

Fig. 4.1 Sir Joshua Reynolds, Alderman William Beckford, ca. 1770.
From the collection, Parham Park, West Sussex.
politics. A man in his position and with clear political ambitions was in need of the essential possession for moving in society: a country estate. Beckford found his when he began the process of purchasing Fonthill in 1744. The sale was completed in 1745 for £32,000.¹

In 1747 Beckford’s political campaign gathered pace when he was elected as MP for Shaftesbury. The Freedom of the Ironmongers’ Company in 1752 followed, and then, in 1754 he was elected as an MP for the City of London. Beckford’s strength in the capital continued to grow and he ascended from Sheriff of London (1755) to twice Lord Mayor of London (1762 and 1769). A close ally and personal friend of William Pitt, Beckford was a key member of the Whig party. His political life centred on the aims and advantages of the colonial planters and traders. Beckford’s most memorable moment came not long before his death, when he spoke out in support for the civic liberties of the commoner to George III; his controversial political act advocating liberty ironically coinciding with his position as one of the biggest slave owners in the West Indies.

When Beckford purchased Fonthill from Francis, 2nd Baron Cottington (see Chapter 3), he was purchasing an estate that came with an important pedigree in the country’s political life. Fonthill was of an appropriate age and scale for a gentleman with earned wealth looking to work his way up through polite and political society. It was an ideal estate with both historical provenance and the benefit of an older mansion house that had been refaced in the fashionable Palladian style. It is likely that works to the park and exterior of the house were considered by Beckford immediately after his purchase, in order to further improve it in a manner appropriate to the position he already had – and to those he aspired to. Adapting Fonthill House, however, would require not large structural works but rather a process of refinement, to capitalise on its position and showcase Beckford’s wealth.

Knowledge of the house and its landscape at the time of Beckford’s purchase comes primarily through paintings. The 1740s paintings by Lambert, when seen alongside two works attributed now to Antonio Joli ca. 1750–5, clearly illustrate that while Beckford seems to have made few external alterations to the house he made many changes to the grounds surrounding it (see Chapter 3, Figures 3.15, 3.18 and 3.20).

Besides altering the lake, Beckford had the public road that ran through his estate moved. (For a full discussion on these landscape changes see Chapters 3, 10 and 14). Beckford also added a large archway at the north entrance of the estate (Figure 4.2). This addition established an important marker for anyone either approaching the house or passing along the public road between Salisbury and Hindon, and such grandeur announced the significance of the gentleman whose threshold they were about to cross.

Attributed to Inigo Jones by John Rutter, and then to the work of Jones’s pupil John Vardy, the gateway’s designer remains unknown.⁴ The influence of Jones on designs made for Beckford was to be seen again, however, when Beckford demolished the existing parish church that sat adjacent to the house and commissioned a
The new one to the south, dedicated in 1748 (see Figure 4.3). The new Fonthill Gifford church can be seen standing imposingly in the distance in one of the Joli paintings, its scale exaggerated by the artist. The location of the church was vital, as it created a key vista through the landscape when viewed from the garden in front of the house.

Not long after its construction the new church was compared to Inigo Jones’s St Paul’s in Covent Garden: this influence of Jones, and the similarity in style with the gateway, suggests that both structures were designed by the same hand.7 With
Beckford’s position in the political world of London increasing, it is possible he commissioned a London builder to design and construct the church, as he would do again on a larger scale with his new Fonthill House. The same builder perhaps also built the temple to the west of the house, replacing the smaller temple seen in Lambert’s painting; in the 1760s this structure would be referred to as a banquetting room. The Joli paintings show Fonthill as a centre of social interaction, with a carriage and team of six horses arriving and fashionable visitors promenading in the grounds. In the tradition of country house portraits, these works are not simply a record of the estate but also an image of Beckford himself, the appearance of the property representing the identity of the owner.

The full extent of Beckford’s internal alterations to the Cottingtons’ Fonthill House is unknown, and those few accounts of the house that exist from this time – Richard Pococke’s visit in 1754 in particular – focus primarily on the ‘modern paintings’ and the organ in the main hall. Whether in the house itself or in the park, Beckford was clearly undertaking works substantial enough to offer employment to a large amount of men from the locality, reportedly spending up to £5,000 per year. It was interior works to the house that ultimately brought about its demise when, on 13 February 1755, workmen completing a ceiling in the north wing lit a fire in a non-functioning chimney. The blaze that followed destroyed most of the north range and also the great hall with its organ. Beckford was in London at the time but staff and neighbours on the estate removed furniture and saved the majority of the south range. The aftermath of the fire was widely reported in the press, which quoted the value of the house at £30,000 (but insured only for £6,000). Horace Walpole must have read such a report, as he wrote to Richard Bentley a few days later; ‘He [Beckford] says ‘Oh! I have an odd fifty thousand pounds in a drawer: I will build it up again: it won’t be above a thousand pounds apiece difference to my thirty children.’

Walpole’s response is an illuminating insight into how Beckford was perceived by some of his contemporaries.

Beckford’s response to the fire was not to rebuild the old house but to construct an entirely new mansion to the south of the original site. His election as Sheriff of London seven months later brought with it an even greater need to represent himself as a commanding man of power. A new Fonthill House offered the opportunity to reflect this changed status. From this period he is known as Alderman Beckford, which conveniently distinguishes him from his son William. The need to assert such an identity accelerated between 1755 and 1757 when, as Perry Gauci has shown, the Alderman’s public persona was increasingly under attack, earning him nicknames in the press as ‘the Wild West Indian’ and ‘Alderman Sugarcane’. Having purchased a country seat in England in the mid-1740s, his next step would logically have been to further secure his place in society through an advantageous marriage. His siblings succeeded in doing so: his youngest brother Francis married a sister of the Duke of Ancaster and his sister Elizabeth married the Earl of Effingham. It would be some time, however, before the Alderman himself married,
although he had been fathering illegitimate children with a series of mistresses since his late twenties.\textsuperscript{12}

The need to replace Fonthill House following the fire was further emphasised when in 1756 the Alderman married Maria Marsh, the widow of a West Indian planter who brought her own links to fellow colonialists. More importantly, as the daughter of the Hon. George Hamilton and granddaughter of the 6th Earl of Abercorn, she provided the Alderman with an additional entrée into society.

\textbf{Fonthill House (‘Splendens’)}

The new Fonthill House built after the fire was a substantial Palladian mansion. Visitors approaching from the north road through the grand archway would see the main front of the house, constructed of a limestone that continued to be noted for its vivid white appearance into the 1790s.\textsuperscript{13} It was an imposing nine-bay mansion with a giant ionic portico rising above the basement storey and proudly supporting in its pediment a tympanum displaying the arms of the Beckfords.\textsuperscript{14} The main house had flanking pavilions connected by doric colonnades, curved to embrace the entrance on the north front. The garden elevation, looking south towards Fonthill Gifford church, had rusticated window openings and heavy keystones (Figure 4.4). The house was illustrated across six plates in Wolfe and Gandon’s 1767 volume of \textit{Vitruvius Britannicus}, earning a place alongside the houses of the Alderman’s contemporaries, including his wife’s cousin the 8th Earl of Abercorn.\textsuperscript{15}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Fig_4_4}
\caption{John Buckler, \textit{View of Fonthill House from the North}, ca. 1800.}\textsuperscript{16}\newline Beckford Tower Trust.
\end{figure}
In the description of the house for this compendium of the houses of the British nobility and gentry, Fonthill House is noted in particular for its copper roof, unusual at that time. When commissioning a handsome new family seat the Alderman looked to the houses of other gentlemen of political power for inspiration, and his attention was drawn to Colen Campbell’s design for Houghton Hall of 1721. Built for Sir Robert Walpole, a fellow Whig and the first Prime Minister, Houghton would have been the perfect model for the Alderman’s political and social aspirations. The influence of Houghton would also explain perhaps why a house which was conceived in the late 1750s reflects the forms of those built some twenty years earlier rather than the newer styles of its time. This is emphasised by the company Fonthill House keeps in Vitruvius Britannicus, illustrated alongside designs from 20 years before such as Lathom Hall, Lancashire (1725–40) and Moulsham Hall (1728), both by Giacomo Leoni, and Kirtlington Park, Oxfordshire (1742) by William Smith and John Sanderson, to which Fonthill bears a striking similarity.

In comparison to the 1761 south front of Kedleston by Robert Adam also published in the volume, Fonthill seems particularly dated; a fact pointed out by a later visitor who stated ‘the house seems a good one to live in, but as a place of modern architecture, by no means equal to Kedleston’.

It has been suggested that the new Fonthill House was the work of architect James Paine who was also working on neighbouring Wardour Castle, but the evidence points towards it being the work of Mr Hoare, ‘a London builder’. Whether Hoare was working to his own or to another’s designs is uncertain, but it is surprising considering the Alderman’s wealth and position that he did not turn to a more established and higher profile designer. Although the Alderman himself showed no signs of being an amateur architect, he was certainly involved in the design of the new house. His concern to ensure the new building was better protected against fire led to his association with Peter Wyche at the Royal Society. Wyche presented him with a copy of Count Felix-François d’Espie’s publication on securing buildings from fire, and Beckford’s interest in the subject resulted in an invitation from Espie to visit him in Toulouse as well as a promise to send workmen from France to Fonthill. The Alderman followed this advice and when Reverend Richard Warner visited the house in 1800 he was informed by his guide, presumably the housekeeper, that the house was constructed using arches between storeys to secure it from fire as Espie had recommended. Work on the house probably began late in 1755 or early in 1756, and although the exterior was largely completed by the time William Thomas Beckford was born in 1760, works continued into the late 1760s. In 1762 when William and Hester Pitt visited they noted the house was like a ‘thatched cottage’, the copper roof having been blown off in a storm. During the same visit Pitt’s brother-in-law, Earl Temple of Stowe, was evidently shown the Alderman’s plans for the house, suggesting that although construction had started shortly after the fire it remained incomplete at this date. The Alderman continued to employ craftsmen at Fonthill until his death in 1770, in a continual process of improving and fitting up. In a letter to his son ca. 1768
he requests that William should watch over ‘my works and workmen’, even permitting the then eight- or nine-year-old to give them ‘necessary directions’ if needed. These workmen may have included William Moulton, a Wiltshire builder who from 1768 through to the 1780s was operating from Fonthill House and had perhaps taken on the role of clerk of works.

The Alderman’s political life in London and nearby Bristol was increasingly gaining him a reputation in the press and Fonthill would have become more recognisable to the reading public, not just in Wiltshire but in the capital and beyond. It soon became a key house to visit on a journey through Wiltshire or on an excursion from the nearby cities of Salisbury or Bath, and by the time his son inherited it was a fixed destination on any country house tour itinerary. Accounts of visitors go some way towards filling the gap created by the lack of any collections of the Alderman’s personal papers.

For the Alderman the knowledge that his house would be compared to other great houses of the county by guests and by tourists would have been a strong inducement to ensure that it would impress anyone who encountered it. Nearby estates included Wardour, Longleat, Longford and Bowood, but it would have been Stourhead, the seat not of the nobility but of the Hoare banking family, that the Alderman would perhaps have been most keen to emulate and surpass. By 1766 Henry Hoare, who had inherited his father’s Palladian mansion and would create the famed landscape at Stourhead, held several of the Alderman’s mortgages with a yearly premium of £2,240. As a fellow commoner and man of trade, Hoare was also someone to whom the Alderman would have wished to convey financial solvency, or at least the appearance of it.

No expense was spared in the fitting up of Fonthill House and visitors’ accounts of the furnishing during the Alderman’s lifetime reveal a balance between the house as a political and social asset and as a family home. The two most informative accounts of Fonthill House at this time are the diary of the Countess of Shelburne at Bowood House and letters from William Beckford’s tutor Robert Drysdale, who reveals that by 1768 the house was still not completed. The Countess and her husband travelled often from Bowood to Fonthill, and Drysdale’s letters also note visits made by the Bishop of Salisbury and Lord and Lady Arundell from Wardour.

Drysdale appears to have developed a partiality for Elizabeth Beckford, the Alderman’s step-daughter from his wife’s first marriage, and he laments the lack of company for her, revealing much about a young man’s perception of the age and staidness of those who visited the house. While the house was extravagant and even opulent, the visitors were perhaps more in line with the seriousness of both Mrs Beckford’s religious demeanour and the Alderman’s public role. Political allies visited, especially William Pitt, but as Gauci has pointed out it was not to be the stream of powerful men that the Alderman had originally imagined.
All the necessary services were moved out of the main house and accommodated in the pavilions, allowing the ground floor of the mansion (Figure 4.5) to become the main family living space including a parlour, eating room and library. The principal floor above (Figure 4.6) centred upon the double-height Organ Hall, surmounted by a ceiling painting of Apollo and the Muses, by the Italian artist Andrea Casali, although the organ itself was still absent from its intended space in 1768. The theme of Apollo was continued in the chimney piece of the Organ Hall and it was to be these two elements – quantities of paintings by Casali and elaborate chimney pieces – that dominated most accounts and knowledge of the house. Behind the Organ Hall sat the Grand Salon, and to the east the State Bedchamber hung in crimson velvet (and still awaiting the bed in 1768). Next to that was the State Dressing Room, with paintings by ‘great masters’ and a proudly displayed ‘sweet and pretty picture’ by Casali of the young master Beckford.

The bulk of the family portraits were exhibited to guests in the Grand Dining Room, including likenesses of Mr and Mrs Beckford by Casali and portraits of the Alderman’s father and grandfather by Hoare. From the Grand Dining Room visitors could return to the Organ Hall through the Tapestry Room, where a series of Gobelins tapestries would eventually be installed. The suite of rooms to the west of the Organ Hall was dominated by the Picture Gallery (or Great Gallery) and a staircase top-lit by a “large skylight”. Knowledge of the furnishing of Fonthill House is limited, although the fittings included chimney pieces by John Francis Moore and Thomas Banks. Accounts also show payments to cabinet makers, upholsterers and paper hangers, including £1,500 paid to Chippendale for ‘glasses’. Miss Beckford refers to the carver of frames for tables and glasses as ‘Vauxhall’, although
it could also have perhaps been Foxhall, who was paid regularly, furnishing the house and taking on the role of agent for the Alderman.\textsuperscript{35} It has been suggested

\begin{figure}[htb]
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\caption{Plans of the principal and bedchamber floor of Fonthill House, \textit{Vitruvius Britannicus}, Vol. IV, 1767. KEY TO ROOMS: A Organ Hall; B Grand Salon; C State Bedchamber; D State Dressing Room; E Great Dining Room; F Tapestry Room; G Cabinet anteroom; H Picture/Great Gallery; I Small anteroom; J Staircase; K Bedchamber Floor corridor}
\end{figure}

University of Bath Special Collections.
that Casali advised Beckford on his collection and the artist’s works certainly dominated many of the rooms, both in ceiling paintings and on the walls.

The only known drawings for full interior schemes of the house at this time are by Robert Adam and show designs for the south-east parlour and south-west library on the ground floor, with corresponding ceiling designs dated May 1763. Whether any aspect of these schemes was ever executed is unknown, but it seems unlikely, given that no comments are recorded by visitors. On the other hand the library was later refitted by James Wyatt.

While Adam was working on designs for the interiors at Fonthill he also produced a series of alternate designs for a new bridge, presumably on the site of the five-arch bridge across the lake that can be seen in the Joli paintings. The first design for a triple-arched bridge surmounted by a reclining river god is annotated and labelled for Fonthill. The other two are titled ‘for Mr Beckford’ and it can be assumed they too are options for Fonthill (see also Chapter 15). An intriguing elevation drawing by Adam labelled ‘A design for William Beckford Esq. at Fonthill’ (Figure 4.7) does not correspond with either the dimensions of Fonthill House, or with any reasoning as to why the Alderman, with the house already underway in the first years of the 1760s, would want to alter the newly built elevations. The explanation is likely to be that while this was a design made for Mr Beckford at Fonthill,
it was not actually a design for Fonthill, but rather for the alteration of a completely different house on another estate that the Alderman had just purchased.\textsuperscript{39}

Despite owning Fonthill, the Alderman clearly continued to look for new ways to buttress his social position and in 1762 he purchased the estate of Witham Friary in Somerset.\textsuperscript{40} Witham represented an even more direct route than Fonthill did to placing the Beckfords symbolically within the pages of English history. Founded as a friary in 1178 and declared Mother House of the Carthusian order in 1441, Witham was surrendered to the Crown in 1539 and then granted to Ralph Hopton, Knight Marshall of the Palace and Gentleman in Thomas Cromwell’s Household.\textsuperscript{41} The estate eventually passed to Sir William Wyndham, who employed the architect James Gibbs to remodel the remaining buildings and form a new house.\textsuperscript{42} Charles Wyndham, Earl of Egremont, sold the estate to John Pennant, the West Indian planter from whom the Alderman purchased it in 1762. The purchase was only made possible through the Alderman taking on heavy mortgages.\textsuperscript{43}

It is possible that the Adam drawing with the Fonthill title was actually for the remodelling of the existing Gibbs house at Witham. The condition of the house at Witham was noted as being poor in 1761 and this perhaps prompted the Alderman to commission Adam to make alterations and repairs when he purchased the building the following year.\textsuperscript{44} In the end, the Alderman chose not to alter the existing house but to build an entirely new mansion at Witham, just as he had done at Fonthill, after the fire. His employment of Adam suggests that by 1762 he was more aware of the architectural climate of the day than he had been in 1755, and was better placed to seek a leading designer of fashionable residences.

Lady Shelburne recorded that the Alderman intended to move his household to Witham from Fonthill.\textsuperscript{45} Witham was better located than Fonthill for communication between London and Bristol and had higher status. The history of the estate stretched back to the Reformation and his association with the estate allowed the Alderman to imply that his family also had ancient lineage and might have been given the property by Henry VIII. Of course most of the Alderman’s contemporaries would have been well aware of Witham’s recent change in ownership. The historic associations it presented, however, would have been invaluable to a commoner such as the Alderman who wished to strengthen his political position; he was coming under increasing attack following the resignation of his close associate Pitt.\textsuperscript{46}

The Fonthill builder William Moulton appears to have been responsible for some of the work at Witham.\textsuperscript{47} However, although both elevations and a plan were illustrated in Vitruvius Britannicus in 1771 it is uncertain if Witham was ever more than a shell of a house. Lack of any other images and its omission from accounts of tours in the area suggests that Witham remained unfinished and unoccupied.\textsuperscript{48}
The key event that must have encouraged the Alderman in commissioning a modern house by Adam at Witham and proposing new works at Fonthill was his election as Lord Mayor of London in 1762. His rise through the political landscape of the City of London had already seen him receive both praise and censure, and what better way to reinforce the statement of his move to a position of power in London than the elaborate gesture of maintaining not just one grand country seat, but two. The Alderman went even further when, in 1763, with Fonthill House still not yet completed and the project at Witham underway, he purchased the estate of Eaton Bray in Berkshire, which must have stretched even his extensive finances.\(^{49}\)

Two additions at Fonthill House by the Alderman stand out as moments in his path to claiming identity through the building. The first was reported in June 1767, when ‘a large whole length statue of Alderman Beckford’ was transported from the house of sculptor John Francis Moore to Fonthill, where it was to be placed in ‘a niche in the large gallery built for that purpose’.\(^{50}\) The imposing statue had already been exhibited in London at the Free Society of Artists. It shows a stately Beckford clutching Magna Carta in one hand and posed perhaps mid-debate. It is likely the Alderman had been intending just such a statue from the beginning of the gallery’s conception, and his image would remain in its niche throughout his and his son’s ownership of the house. It is a portrait in marble of a proud and determined politician, which must have had a marked impression upon viewers (Figure 4.8). His son would later place the sculpture in a high niche in the great entrance hall of Fonthill Abbey, an imposing figure overseeing a pseudo-baronial hall.

The combination of Moore’s statue and Casali’s ceilings gave the gallery at Fonthill an added significance in the creation of the ‘Beckford brand’. In the gallery ceiling, alongside other works by Casali designed to show Beckford as a learned man of the Enlightenment, was a canvas depicting the personification of architecture (Figure 4.9). In this work (now at Dyrham Park in Gloucestershire) the figure of Architecture proudly presents to all who look up to her a portrait of Fonthill House. Thus the Alderman displayed to his visitors the ideal of architecture represented by his own architectural creation, hanging above his own likeness. Images built of stone and hewn from marble confirmed the elegance, steadfastness and above all strength of the man.\(^{51}\)

By 1768 Fonthill House was still incomplete and the following year the Alderman took up the Mayoralty of London for the second time. In 1770 he famously supported the MP John Wilkes in a speech representing the rights of the mercantile man to King George III. The Alderman died shortly afterwards and a large statue of him was commissioned for the London Guildhall with the full text of this speech carved upon it. The statue, as well as prints and medals created by the Alderman’s supporters in his honour, ensured that his image would be immortalised and that the name of Beckford would continue to hold status within the city long after his death.
Fig. 4.8  John Francis Moore, *Alderman Beckford*, 1767.
Worshipful Company of Ironmongers of the City of London.
William Beckford and Fonthill ‘Splendens’

When the Alderman died on 21 June 1770, his only legitimate child William Thomas Beckford was not quite 10 years of age. The Alderman left his vast fortune and property to his son, but his will also stipulated that should the young William (noted for being a somewhat sickly child) predecease him, that fortune would pass to Beckford’s ‘natural’ children. Even though Beckford’s widow was her son’s sole guardian the control of his inheritance was placed under the guidance of executors. Her concern about the spectre of these illegitimate children’s claims on the fortune led her to make William a Ward of Chancery. At this time a complete inventory was drawn up of the contents of Fonthill House and the insight this document could have offered into the furnishing of the house would have been extensive. Sadly, like so many of the personal papers and archives from the time of the ‘Great Beckford’, the inventory is now lost.

Fonthill House was most frequently described as being not simply a house but a palace: Lord Temple called it ‘the finest and best understood Palace I know’ in 1762, and Henry Hoare referred to ‘Fonthill Palace’ in 1781. Between the

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**Fig. 4.9** Andrea Casali, *Personifications of Astronomy and Architecture*, now at Dyrham Park, South Gloucestershire.

© National Trust.
Alderman’s death and his son’s majority a variety of accounts of the house help to build up this image of palatial living, although not always displaying the best of taste. The multitude of paintings and the abundance of Casalis were assessed as ‘many good pictures, and many very indifferent’. The style of furniture, praised by some, was seen as ‘rather gaudy’ by one visitor in the 1770s. The house, though showing ‘the utmost profusion of magnificence’ was accused of containing ‘immense riches, almost too tawdrily exhibited’. Overhearing such visitors being shown the mansion by the Fonthill housekeeper, the 16-year-old William Thomas Beckford was inspired to write a parody of the lives of artists and patrons, published as Biographical Memoirs of Extraordinary Painters in 1780. Living surrounded by such a collection must have made a distinct impression upon him and he would later attempt to improve the collection through his own more modern, sophisticated and sometimes exotic taste. For the Alderman Fonthill had been a means to craft a new position in political society; for his son the estate was to be the means of reclaiming that position following social scandal.

William Thomas Beckford (Figure 4.10) came into his majority in 1781, taking control of Fonthill and all the other property and wealth his father had amassed. His coming of age portrait, painted by George Romney in June 1781, presents a young man at ease with the wealth he had inherited and confident of the power he was soon to hold. Three years before, when newly returned from Switzerland, Beckford had been wandering the grounds of Fonthill and while standing contemplating ‘the house my father reared’ under a full moon, he had lamented the lack of illumination, music or revellers. The thoughts this scene inspired were recorded in a letter to the artist Alexander Cozens, who had become an aesthetic mentor to the young man. Contemplating his house, where ‘all is dark, silent and abandoned’, he imagined it with the energy and life of many visitors enjoying entertainments. At the same time he noted his need to seek solitude away from the crowd. The letter introduces two facets of Beckford: a need to be surrounded by conversation, entertainments, beauty and youth, balanced with a deep desire to withdraw himself within the romantic possibilities of nature and his own imagination. The letter also reveals an insight into what Fonthill House and its landscape represented to the 18-year-old Beckford.

I surveyed my native prospects with fraternal affection and looked fondly on every tree as if we had been born in the same hour. The air I breathed seemed nearer of kin to me than that I had elsewhere respired; in short the Hills, the Woods, the Shrubs, the very Moss beneath my Feet entered into this general Alliance and I fancied myself surrounded by an assembly of my best friends and nearest Relations.

It is an extraordinary letter full of romantic wanderings and fantasies in which Beckford’s desire for solitary escape within the magic of nature blends with his supernatural dreams. Such ideas would strongly influence the works he subsequently executed at Fonthill.
Fig. 4.10  George Romney, *William Beckford*, 1781–2, Upton House, Warwickshire.

© National Trust.
Three years later, on 29 September 1781, Beckford filled the emptiness he had enjoyed that night at Fonthill with a lavish display in celebration of his 21st birthday. The celebrations extended across several days and nights with a grand birthday ball for three hundred guests at the centre. The north front of the mansion, the banqueting house and all the grounds stretching between were illuminated with 30,000 lamps. Guests, neighbours and tenants from both Fonthill and Witham, numbering up to 10,000 according to reports, were entertained by extraordinary fireworks and a series of bonfires. It was a bold and powerful public act proclaiming his ascendancy to the head of his family and establishing himself as a man distinct from his father. The mantle of Beckford of Fonthill had firmly passed from the elder politician, who could never quite shake off his colonial past, to the young English gentleman. The party also hinted at the next move Beckford would make to ensure his position in society: for the first dance of the evening he led out Lady Margaret Gordon, whom he was to marry in 1783.59

Three months later, for the Christmas entertainments, Beckford made his first significant alterations to Fonthill House. Despite being temporary, these changes would have long-lasting influence over his ideas for the old Palladian mansion. In an elaborate piece of scene-staging Beckford commissioned the artist and designer Philip de Loutherbourg to convert the sequence of family rooms on the ground floor, including the main stone hall or Egyptian Hall as Beckford termed it, into a romantic fantasy. His guests experienced the house adapted for their amusement and entertainment so that ‘even the uniform splendour of gilded roofs … was partially obscured by the vapour of wood aloes ascending in wreaths from cassolettes placed low on the silken carpets in porcelain salvers of the richest Japan’. 60 It was an exotic, indulgent event, and one that Beckford revisited years later with the highly romanticised memory of an elderly man looking back to his youth.

The experience of that evening would in part inspire Beckford’s novel *Vathek* and was also a precursor to the creation of the Turkish Room that would garner the most attention from visitors to Fonthill House. His first acts in altering the house therefore established a new imaginative approach to the presentation of the building.

Between 1781 and 1787 Beckford’s life was filled with work on the manuscripts for *Vathek* and other writings, and with building up his library.61 His marriage to Lady Margaret inevitably saw changes to the house and its furnishings, but no evidence survives pointing to any significant internal alterations. The main reason for this was Beckford’s periods of absence from England, including a wedding tour in Europe, and time spent building a political career, following his election as MP for Wells in April 1784. The family’s position would have been further strengthened by the continuation of Beckford’s line with the birth of a son and heir. Sadly this was not to be: Beckford and his wife suffered the loss of their son, stillborn in May 1784.

Although Beckford continually tried he never shared the passion or aptitude for politics his father had displayed. His role in the family was to move the Beckfords into the ranks of the peerage, and in October 1784 the press reported his proposed elevation to a title. Unlike his father, Beckford’s acceptance of a baronetcy would
only advance his public career, not damage his political aspirations. The title was not to be realised, however, and the Beckford name and position in society suffered its greatest blow when Beckford’s relationship with William Courtenay, the heir to Powderham Castle in Devon, was exposed in the press.

Within his close circle of family friends Beckford’s bisexuality was known, though a closely guarded secret, and his infatuation with the young William Courtenay had been a cause of concern for several years. While visiting Powderham in September 1784 Beckford and Courtenay, or ‘Kitty’ as he was known to his family, were supposedly caught alone in a room together in a compromising situation. If enough evidence had been found to incriminate Beckford it would have proved disastrous to the family, with the risk of trial and even execution. In the event, not enough proof could be found to pursue such legal action, and Beckford and his wife retreated from society to Fonthill to await the birth of their first child, a daughter. At first the Powderham scandal was kept within the two families and Lord Strathaven, Beckford’s brother-in-law, visited Fonthill in an attempt to remove his sister from her husband’s home. In an act of devotion that would have a deep impact on her husband, Beckford’s wife refused to leave him. She was pregnant again and unable to travel, so it was Beckford alone who departed for Dover with the intention of leaving the country for continental exile. He soon recognised that leaving England would be taken as a sign of his guilt and instead returned to Fonthill. In November 1784 the scandal surfaced in the press. By June the following year the increasing gossip, fuelled by false stories printed in the newspapers, finally drove Beckford to leave England for Switzerland with his wife and daughter.

Although the scandal had a disastrous impact on Beckford’s public identity and position in English society, exile in Switzerland was a time of relative tranquility while he worked on the manuscript for_Vathek_ and the accompanying tales, to be added as the Episodes of _Vathek_. Such peace was short-lived, however. In May 1786, 12 days after the birth of their second daughter, Beckford’s wife died. His daughters were taken to England without him, where they would remain under the care of relatives at Fonthill. Beckford’s loss and grief was compounded by betrayal, when only two weeks later Samuel Henley, whom Beckford had entrusted with the task of translating the French manuscript of _Vathek_ into English, published the work against Beckford’s instructions.

Beckford returned to England later in 1786 with plans to transform his father’s house. He started by commissioning the architect John Soane to design a new top-lit picture gallery (Figure 4.11), some new interior fittings and a state bed. The alterations were begun in Beckford’s absence, however, as he went abroad again in March 1787. He planned initially to travel to his plantations in the West Indies, but a stop in Lisbon led to a prolonged stay in Portugal. Beckford would in the event never visit Jamaica and instead spent the next 10 years in Europe.

The location of the intended gallery designed by Soane was to be the corridor of the bedroom floor at Fonthill House (Figure 4.6, marked K), and a series of drawings survive showing three variant designs. The intention was that the
gallery corridor should terminate at the west end with a statue, labelled in one design by Soane as being of Apollo. Two finished and coloured drawings for one of the schemes of the gallery can be found in both the Soane office archive and Beckford’s own collection, confirming it as the chosen final design. Most significantly, all the design schemes show the proposed gallery’s primary function, which was the display of Beckford’s ever-increasing picture collection. The Soane gallery at Fonthill was never realised but, as Christopher Woodward has highlighted, the designs for it were to be Soane’s first experiment with the canopy dome that he would continue to develop throughout his career. Thus Beckford’s commission, though never executed, was a key project in the evolution of Soane’s architecture.

Beckford himself was absent from England during this time and Soane met at Fonthill and corresponded with Beckford’s mother, with Edward Foxhall possibly acting as agent. Although the gallery was unrealised, Soane did carry out other alterations in the house, designing new chimney pieces for the South-East Parlour and the Tapestry Room, for which he also created coffered niches illustrated in both Beckford’s and Soane’s papers. Soane’s most elaborate work for Beckford was a large gilded state bed. Once again variant designs for the bed survive, but copies of a finished and coloured design dated January 1788 and based on the Greek Choragic Monument of Lysicrates found in both Soane’s archive and Beckford’s collection illustrate the version which was executed.

**Fig. 4.11** John Soane, design for gallery at Fonthill, 1787. (Room K as marked in Figure 4.6.)

Trustees of Sir John Soane’s Museum, London.
Although Soane’s purpose-built gallery never materialised, the second-floor corridor space was used by Beckford to display a collection of pictures that were not the Old Masters seen elsewhere in the house, but paintings that had immense value to his sense of ancestry. When visitors were lucky enough to be permitted access to the second-floor corridor they encountered a history gallery of family portraits ranging from Beckford’s great-grandfather Peter Beckford to a portrait of Beckford’s two daughters by George Romney. These family portraits were presented alongside the paintings by Thacker, Lambert and Joli of the Mervyn/Cottington house throughout its history (see Chapters 3 and 12). This conscious display of lineage, not just of blood but also of the estate (believed to be almost unique among English country houses at the time), was a clear example of how Beckford would use his interiors, and the display of the collection within them, to illustrate his ancestry and establish his place in society and history.

Despite Beckford’s exile from society, visitors continued to call at Fonthill, including the Prince of Wales in 1794. The estate no doubt held even greater fascination for society due to the scandalous reputation of its absent owner. Beckford himself would move continually between Fonthill and the Continent throughout the first half of the 1790s, with periods at the English estate becoming lengthier as work on Fonthill Abbey took hold. It was the time of the greatest alterations to the collection at Fonthill House, with furniture, paintings and objects continually being purchased, commissioned and shipped back from the Continent. Beckford’s finances had been fluctuating for some time, however, and while plans were developed for changes to the house the Jamaican income required to fund them was not as readily available as he would have liked (see Chapter 13).

While still primarily living abroad, by 1791 Beckford was perhaps considering a more permanent return to England when he commissioned a new painting of Fonthill from Hendrik Frans de Cort (Figure 4.12). The public display of this picture at the Royal Academy was the beginning of a campaign by Beckford to return to Fonthill and reclaim a position in society. It offers a view of Fonthill House and grounds under his ownership, and the series of watercolour sketches include rare views from the house of the surrounding landscape (Figure 4.13).

In the same year as he commissioned the painting by de Cort Beckford employed the architect James Wyatt to make improvements at Fonthill. Lack of archival material makes it difficult to state exactly how and when the two came to meet, but the nature of the works by Wyatt and the relationship between architect and client is teased out through accounts by Wyatt’s friend Joseph Farington and Beckford’s own correspondence. Wyatt’s early work for Beckford included proposed alterations to the park, and the continuation of a project begun by his father to erect a tower at Stop Beacon (also known as Stop’s or Stope’s Beacon), the highest point of the estate. It appears that Wyatt’s involvement with alterations to the interior of the mansion itself began in 1795 with the design of furniture, and in 1796 Beckford began an extensive programme of redecorating and refurnishing. Beckford’s return from Portugal in March 1796, supposedly on a mission
Fig. 4.12  Hendrik Frans de Cort, *Fonthill House*, 1791.
Image of the painting by kind permission of the trustees of the Walter Morrison collection held at Sudeley Castle.

Fig. 4.13  Hendrik Frans de Cort, *View of Fonthill ‘Splendens’ from the Right Wing across the Entrance*.
Private collection.
to carry correspondence from the Portuguese to the English court, appears to have been the moment when he decided to make England his permanent home. Though his attempts to reclaim a position through political channels were unsuccessful, his return prompted a new phase of re-presenting Fonthill House. If he was to be living more permanently at Fonthill he would want to adapt it to suit the man he had become and the collection he had by that time amassed. It was also an opportunity to expurgate the memory of enforced retreat that the house had held for him following the Powderham scandal.

The ‘painting & new fitting up of several rooms in the House’ in 1796, under the design of Wyatt and no doubt the continuing oversight of Edward Foxhall, included changes to rooms on the ground floor traditionally used by the family. Wyatt altered the library, giving it a ‘Gothicised’ ceiling, and also designed new frames for Beckford’s famous paintings, the ‘Altieri’ Claudes. These were hung by Christmas 1799 in the Grand Salon on the main floor of the house. The full extent and nature of Wyatt’s internal alterations for Beckford is unclear, and it is possible that an intriguing section of cornice, emblazoned with Beckford armories, and believed to have been removed from Fonthill House (Figure 4.14), may date from this time. A plaster capital of the Lysicrates order shares the same provenance and both could have been made to Wyatt’s designs; they certainly suit the Neo-classical style of the furnishing being produced at this time for Fonthill. The fitting up, or ‘harmonising’, of the mansion to suit Beckford’s more modern tastes brought about an influx of cabinets, tables and other pieces of furniture,

Fig. 4.14  Plaster cornice from Fonthill House, Beckford’s Tower and Museum. Photograph by Amy Frost.
as well as paintings, objects, and a seemingly endless supply of books. A Turkish Room was created in what had been the bedroom attached to the library on the ground floor. This was installed by the time Thomas Hall visited Fonthill in September 1798. Hall praised it for the ‘sumptuous style’ of furnishing, with a vaulted ceiling by French artists Boileau and Feuglet above walls hung with curtains of rich orange satin reflected in large mirrors. The Reverend Richard Warner, visiting Fonthill from Bath in 1800, noted that the music room was still unfinished, which indicated that Beckford was continuing to alter the house, where ‘every room is a gold-mine and every apartment a picture-gallery’.

Visits for tourists, or the ‘apartments shown to strangers’ at Fonthill, ended with the Turkish Room. Only a privileged few considered family or friends were allowed admittance into the more private spaces of the house. One such visitor in 1800 was John Britton, whose account of Fonthill was published in July 1801 in the first volume of the Beauties of Wiltshire. In one of the most extensive descriptions of Fonthill House to survive, Britton records in detail the furnishings and picture collection on view, recognising at the start the divided opinions that were held over the house. He noted and dismissed the outdated schemes that had survived from the Alderman’s time, in particular the Casali paintings, proof for him ‘of the wretched state of the arts about forty years ago’. Britton’s listing of the contents and the information he supplied about the house and family confirm that he was conducted on a tour by someone with detailed knowledge of the collection, if not by Beckford himself. His information was also supplemented by communication with Beckford, either in person or correspondence, as Britton proudly states in the preface to the book. Such privileged access ensured that Britton would gain admittance up the staircase from the Turkish Room to the chamber storey above, and experience the lineage of Beckford’s family and estate as told through the paintings in the second-floor corridor. What makes this visit by Britton to the corridor so striking was that by 1800 the views by Thacker, Lambert, Joli and de Cort had been supplemented by views of Fonthill Abbey.

Beckford’s generosity to Britton extended to the gift of an engraved plate of the south front of Fonthill House with which to illustrate the publication. Beckford would have been aware that Britton’s work would be purchased in London. By supporting the publication and contributing to it himself Beckford was once again attempting to manipulate public opinion and reassert his public identity as a landowner. Britton’s account was in this respect a piece of marketing for Beckford, highlighting the heroics of the Alderman and illustrating Beckford himself as a man of taste, learning and sophisticated artistic appreciation. There was another more financially motivated reason for Beckford to support Britton’s publication. Increasing the public’s knowledge of the contents of Fonthill created a captive audience for an auction in which pictures, furniture and fittings from Fonthill were to be sold. The auction was announced in the press the same month Britton’s book was reviewed.
Beckford’s finances had been in a difficult state for some time and loss of income as a result of a Chancery case was reported in the press in May 1801. As early as 1797 Beckford had been contemplating the demolition of Fonthill due to it being ‘badly situated’, and by July 1801 he had decided to demolish the wings and colonnades but retain the main house, which was to become the residence of his daughters. Beckford had also decided to relocate with the bulk of his collection to his new building, Fonthill Abbey. The increased awareness of the collection through Britton’s book and extensive sale notices in the press would have ensured that interest in the auction was at its height when the sale occurred in August 1801. The viewing of this sale was the first time that the mass public had had the opportunity to see inside Fonthill House, and they descended on Wiltshire from ‘far and near’. The sale was a ‘sensation’. Another auction followed in October, selling off building material and fixtures, including 40 solid stone columns and pilasters, several chimney pieces and furniture from two suites of rooms. The east wing was demolished and though much of the contents was sold the main house remained complete. Beckford’s mind was increasingly focused on his new residence.

Five years later, by October 1806, Beckford’s daughters had been removed from the old house as their father had once again decided to demolish it, despite attempts by his future son-in-law, Alexander, Marquess of Douglas, to save ‘poor old Fonthill’. Douglas’s pleas were in vain and by July 1807 Beckford was attempting to sell the house and its contents to Edward Foxhall for £16,000, on condition that it was dismantled and removed from the site before Beckford’s birthday on 29 September. The deal with Foxhall never materialised and in August 1807 the remaining contents of the house were disposed of at auction. A month later the house itself was sold, with the purchasers of the building material lots responsible for its demolition. Relics from the house would find new homes as both collectors and dealers took the opportunity to purchase pieces of Fonthill. Only the west wing was retained as guest accommodation.

What had once been a magnificent palace of two princes was reduced to a single fragment within the landscape. The memory of Fonthill House, however, endured and the tales of its once-fine contents would be embellished to become almost legendary. By 1829 it had earned the name of Fonthill ‘Splendens’. By that time, however, a new house dominated perceptions of Fonthill.

Fonthill Abbey

The best-documented, best-researched and most frequently told story of the Fonthill estate is the rise and fall of Fonthill Abbey. William Beckford’s extraordinary creation captured people’s imagination from the moment it was begun in 1796, and has continued to fascinate and inspire ever since, a fascination greatly enhanced due to the collapse of the building in 1825 and its subsequent demolition. Understanding of Fonthill Abbey exists through images, written accounts and
a single remaining fragment that stands as an echo of the building that defined the romanticism of the Gothic Revival.

The seeds of Fonthill Abbey were sown in 1790 when Beckford wrote a letter to Lady Craven, in which he made what would become one of his most frequently quoted statements:

One of my new estates in Jamaica brought me home seven thousand pounds last year more than usual. So I am growing rich, and mean to build towers, and sing hymns to the power of heaven from their summits.99

This combination of architectural fantasy and financial reality underpins the evolution of Fonthill Abbey; if the building was defined by Beckford’s imagination, it was also dictated by the fluctuations in the income from his estates in England and, more vitally, Jamaica (see Chapter 13).

The beginnings of what would become Fonthill Abbey can be traced to the period when James Wyatt was first commissioned by Beckford to work at the estate in the early 1790s. As early as 1792 the architect was drawing up designs for a tower.100 Two years later, while abroad in Portugal, Beckford wrote to Wyatt informing the architect that his passion for St Anthony of Padua could be temporarily assuaged by his creating a sanctuary at his residence in Lisbon. This would be enough to tide him over, until he could carry Wyatt’s ‘magnificent plan for the chapel upon Stop Beacon into execution’.101 Beckford’s periods of residence in Portugal between 1793 and 1798 provided him the opportunity to visit the monasteries of Alcobaça and Batalha, possibly at the suggestion of Wyatt; those visits contributed to his ideas for Fonthill, as did his earlier visit as a young man to the Grand Chartreuse in Switzerland (see Chapter 11).102

By the summer of 1796, the site for the tower had moved from Stop Beacon further east; by November Beckford’s ‘Abbey in the Woods’ had reached 200 feet in length with ‘a good part of the building’ having already reached the first floor.103 By 1797 it was still a ‘little pleasure building in the shape of an abbey’, not finished but already filled with painted glass, a gallery, the long-imagined chapel to St Anthony of Padua and a tower 145 feet high.104 The building would have been a striking scene to come upon when riding through the landscape from Fonthill House, functioning as both a feature within the landscape and a retreat for its creator.

Wyatt exhibited a view of Fonthill Abbey for the first time at the Royal Academy in 1797, and would do so again in 1798 and 1799. His surviving sketches (Figures 4.15 and 4.16) illustrate the changing ideas for the building, starting with the earliest scheme for a tower inspired by the mausoleum of King John at Batalha in Portugal.105 This was the building as first encountered by J. M. W. Turner and recorded by him from the south-west.106 Several ideas by Wyatt were clearly being developed during 1797–9, and two later sketches show the existing elements of the building, the south range, fountain court and cloister, main hall and tower base.
as constructed, joined by proposals for the northern range and an increasingly elaborate tower. Ian Warrell’s unpicking of the series of views of Fonthill by Turner further illuminates the process of construction and collapse that Fonthill Abbey experienced during these early years.\footnote{107}

An initial collapse of the Abbey tower while under construction in May 1800 was recorded by Beckford:

So, after a Somersault very neatly performed in the higher Regions of the Air, down came boards, Beams and Scaffold poles: but so compactly and genteelly as not to have shaken a single Stone of the main Edifice or injured the smallest ornament.

The main body of the building survived relatively intact, so plans for the new tower were immediately begun, Beckford exclaiming ‘We shall rise again more gloriously
than ever. Press notices of the fall would only have encouraged Beckford to continue work, knowing that the news-hungry public would be awaiting further information about either the failure or triumph of the Abbey.

In December 1800 Beckford invited his second cousin, Sir William Hamilton, accompanied by his wife Emma and her lover Horatio Nelson, to visit Fonthill. The very public arrangement of this trio would ensure that news of the visit would once again reach the press. Beckford embraced the opportunity which the Christmas party presented for being seen in the company of England's hero of the Battle of the Nile. The Hamilton–Nelson visit was the only major entertainment that the Abbey would ever host, and the published account captures the building not long after the initial tower’s collapse, offering an insight into the interiors of the building at the point when Beckford must have been considering whether or not to relocate his household there.

An account of the party was published in the Gentleman’s Magazine in April 1801, most probably written by Henry Tresham, who had been present as a guest alongside Wyatt and the artist Benjamin West. He describes the journey between Fonthill House and the Abbey as a procession expertly choreographed by Beckford. Lamps in the trees illuminated the route and drums and music sounded through

Fig. 4.16  James Wyatt, design for Fonthill Abbey.
SA55/5/2, 98519, RIBA Collections.
the woods. The Abbey was also illuminated, rising up out of the shadows of the surrounding trees. In staging the journey to the Abbey this way Beckford captured the change his guests would experience in moving from the politeness and formality of his father’s house to the romance of his own creation, a physical retreat into an apparent other realm. After an elaborate banquet designed to echo a medieval feast the guests were then shown the ‘finished apartments’. They passed up a staircase flanked by people costumed as living statues in hooded gowns, through a salon filled with Beckford’s collection and into the library where, passing through a ‘large Gothic screen’, they entered the main destination: the first floor gallery. The gallery, eventually known as the St Michael’s Gallery (Figure 4.17), was already fully fitted up with Beckford’s statue of St Anthony by Rossi standing at its northern end. ¹⁰⁹

The guests on this night were the privileged few who were allowed access to Beckford’s sanctum. John Britton lamented not long after that he was not allowed access to the Abbey, ‘Mr Beckford having judiciously determined to keep it secret from the public eye till entirely completed’. The reader is further teased by Britton concluding ‘when finished, it is intended to be opened for public inspection’.¹¹⁰ In this one statement Britton both encouraged the curiosity of his readers about both Fonthill and Beckford, and arrived at the perfect way to end a published account: whetting the appetite for more information about the building. Britton would himself eventually provide such information in a full-length study of Fonthill Abbey published in 1823.
Beckford moved from Fonthill House to the Abbey in 1801 and took up residence in the rooms in the southern wing. He lived quietly, but occasionally entertained visitors who would appreciate what he was trying to conjure-up out of the woods. One such visitor was the artist Benjamin West, who on encountering the Abbey thought it ‘a place raised by majick, or inspiration, [rather] than the labours of the human hand’. Progress at the Abbey was slow between 1802 and 1805, due both to lack of funds and to Beckford’s absence in France. When Lady Ann Hamilton visited with Beckford’s daughters in 1803 plans were in place for the next major addition to the building, the north wing, and her account of this visit provides a glimpse into the interiors which Britton had been prevented from seeing. Her route through the building matched that taken by Sir William Hamilton and Nelson three years earlier, and again ended in the gallery, by then 136 feet long but still terminating at the space below the Tower. She records the interiors and sketches examples of furniture, noting the extensive use of both natural light and candelabra, and was particularly struck by the painted glass windows showing the monarchy in the dining (or Abbot’s) parlour in the south range and above in the gallery.

From 1806–7 the southern parts of the Abbey were refaced and Wyatt’s original compo-cement mixture that had made up the exterior walls was replaced with stone. It was a statement of intent about the permanence of Fonthill Abbey that was made more overt by the demolition of Fonthill House in 1807. Financial fluctuations caused Fonthill to be in a continual state of construction, with work frequently slowing or put on hold. The eventual completion of the north range in 1812 concluded a sequence of rooms through the centre of the house that created a vista over 300 feet in length. From the St Michael’s Gallery in the south, through the central octagon and into the new King Edward’s Gallery and Lancaster Tower, this vista terminated with the Oratory (Figures 4.18 and 4.19). In that final space was relocated the statue of Saint Anthony, realising an idea Beckford had been imagining since the early 1790s.

The completion of the north range was marked by the 1812 publication of James Storer’s A Description of Fonthill Abbey, which allowed the reading public access even if it was only access in print rather than in person, to a building and landscape that had until then been severely restricted. In his work Storer noted Beckford’s intention to build a chapel in what would be the final wing of the Abbey, the Eastern Transept (Figure 4.20). The addition of this substantial new range, terminated by a pair of towers based on those at Canterbury Cathedral, was made possible thanks to an unexpected increase in income from Jamaica. The design was Wyatt’s but he never saw this final wing completed because, much to Beckford’s annoyance, he was killed in a carriage accident on his way to see another of his colonially funded clients, the Codringtons at Doddington Park in Gloucestershire.

The Eastern Transept of Fonthill Abbey was intended to outshine even the Western Entrance Hall as a pseudo-Baronial space, and its design was to celebrate
**Fig. 4.18**  *Cross-section of Fonthill Abbey.*  
John Rutter, *Delineations of Fonthill and its Abbey*, 1823, Beckford’s Tower and Museum.

**Fig. 4.19**  *King Edward’s Gallery looking towards the Oratory.*  
John Britton, *Graphic and Literary Illustrations of Fonthill Abbey*, 1823, Beckford’s Tower and Museum.
all the signatories of Magna Carta. It was to be the finale in the sequence of interiors designed to place Beckford and his family firmly within the annals of British history. Visitors started under the hammer-beam roof of the Western Entrance Hall emblazoned with coats of arms, and were then directed in the Oak Parlour and Brown Dining Room to the windows illustrating the pedigree of the country’s monarchy. The descent of Beckford and his wife were proclaimed through the decorative schemes, from the abbatial Gothic of the fake vaulted ceiling in the St Michael’s Gallery to the armorials and portraits in the King Edward’s Gallery. This journey through the Beckford lineage was intended to end in the Baronial Hall in the Eastern Transept (see Figure 4.21). Although completed externally the Eastern Transept was never finished internally, but its elevations provided the façade Beckford wanted to present. The Abbey, though clearly modern in construction, was an attempt to reclaim the past, allowing its owner, or as he frequently termed himself its ‘Abbot’, the romance of occupying what in his mind was the remains of a pre-Dissolution monastic house.

Beckford’s obsession with ancestry also revealed an important link to the history of the estate that would have helped solidify in his mind his rightful place as the master of Fonthill. While researching Beckford’s descent through his mother at the College of Arms, Isaac Heard traced a connection with Sir John Mervyn of Fonthill Gifford, a former owner of the Fonthill estate (see Chapter 3). Such a link allowed Beckford to claim a family connection to the estate, however distant, that pre-dated its purchase by the Alderman.
Even the completion of the Eastern Transept was not enough to keep Beckford focused, and by 1817 he talked of leaving the Abbey. How much of this intent was serious and how much just an example of his impatience or need to create something new is not known. In some ways it is difficult to imagine Beckford ever
having been content with a completely finished project. His continual need to refit or commission new furniture allowed him to be constantly in the process of change or refinement without ever actually reaching the end. He visited Paris in 1814 and again in 1819, and continued to travel to London until lack of finances forced him to give up the lease on his London house in 1817. Unlike his father, Beckford was continually diverted from necessary attention to his business affairs and the Jamaican estates in particular; building and collecting was much more interesting. By 1821, Beckford’s debts were increasing so much that he was forced to sell many of his other properties, including Witham. Mortgages were also raised on Fonthill.¹¹⁷ By 1822 more drastic action was required. Beckford attempted to stave off selling the estate by offering a deal to his son-in-law, by then the Duke of Hamilton. The deal proposed that in return for the Duke paying off Beckford’s debts, covering the interest on his mortgages and providing Beckford with an annuity, Beckford would ensure that on his death Fonthill and his Hindon parliamentary seat would revert to Hamilton.¹¹⁸ The proposal was turned down and by the summer of 1822 the sale of Fonthill became unavoidable.

Beckford engaged Christie’s to auction the contents of Fonthill Abbey while at the same time looking for a buyer for the whole estate (Figure 4.22). Like the Fonthill House sales of the previous decade, this sale was to be the highlight of the social calendar and an opportunity for the public (at least those who could afford to purchase the catalogue and viewing ticket) to see inside a building that was shrouded in mystery.¹¹⁹ His plan to find a buyer for the whole estate succeeded, and

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Fig. 4.22 Map of the Fonthill Estate.
John Rutter, Delineations of Fonthill and its Abbey, 1823. Beckford’s Tower and Museum.
at the end of the viewing Christie’s was told to cancel the auction. The Abbey, much of its contents and the whole estate were sold to John Farquhar for £300,000.\textsuperscript{120}

Beckford moved to Bath, taking part of his collection with him. The following year, Farquhar auctioned much of the contents of the Abbey and the public again had the chance to see – and this time bid for – a part of Beckford’s collection. When the architect C. F. Porden visited he predicted with ominous foresight the fall of the building: ‘would to God it had been more sustainably built! But as it is, its ruins will tell a tale of wonder’.\textsuperscript{121} This was to prove prophetic when the tower of Fonthill Abbey collapsed for the final time in 1825 (see Chapter 5).

It was in many ways wholly appropriate for Beckford’s Fonthill to come to such an end; how could the building be sustained without its ‘Abbot’ in residence?