Fonthill Recovered

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The break-up of the Fonthill estate

Caroline Dakers

Part one: John Farquhar

This pleasing vision is now past, and the noise of the Auctioneer’s hammer will not be heard – silence pervades the long-drawn ailes – the lofty portal is closed – and the Abbot is returned to his Cloysters, with thanks to his Patron Saint, St Anthony, for the numerous Pilgrims who have been attracted to his shrine. But with a farewell look he will shortly bid adieu to his cloistered walls, and extensive solitudes, which are now doomed to greet a second Abbot.¹

While William Beckford was arranging with James Christie the sale of the contents of Fonthill Abbey, he was already in secret negotiations to sell the entire estate, the Abbey and most of its contents to John Farquhar. Thousands of catalogues were printed by Christie’s, for sale at a guinea each; hundreds of people visited the Abbey every day through August and September 1822, but suddenly, on 5 October Beckford cancelled the sale. Farquhar had agreed to pay him £300,000 for the whole of the estate, the Abbey and its contents.²

John Farquhar (caricatured in Figure 5.1) remains a little-known figure in the story of Fonthill. Colt Hoare’s History of Wiltshire repeats evidence produced during the case heard in the English Ecclesiastical Courts in January 1829 concerning Farquhar’s supposed wills;³ there are brief references in contemporary newspapers and an obituary in the Annual Register for 1826, rewritten by John Timbs in English Eccentrics (1875). He has inspired more recent pieces, including an anonymous article published in the Fraserburgh Herald in 1966, titled ‘The millionaire Brahmin from Bilbo who played “Double Your Money” in 1822’.⁴ Fonthill, a novel by Aubrey Menen, published in 1975, goes further, proposing Farquhar was obsessed with collecting, a seeker after social status and, like Beckford, a homosexual.

Farquhar was born in 1751 in Crimond near Aberdeen. He made his fortune in Bengal, first dabbling in commercial activities then experimenting with the
manufacture of gunpowder. He worked directly for Lord Cornwallis, governor-general of Bengal, researching into the quality problems of the gunpowder produced at the factory in Pultah, then becoming superintendent of the factory and ultimately the sole contractor to the government.

Over a period of time Farquhar sent large remittances to his bankers Messrs. Hoare of Fleet Street to invest in three-per-cent funds. In 1814 he had amassed a
fortune of some half a million pounds so returned to England. Timbs, enhancing the 1826 obituary, gives a colourful account of Farquhar’s reception in London:

Landing at Gravesend, he took his seat upon the outside of the coach, and in due time found himself in London. Weather-beaten, and covered with dust, he made his way to his bankers, and there, stepping up to one of the clerks, expressed a wish to see Mr. Hoare himself. But his rough appearance and common make of the clothes about his sunburnt limbs, suggested to the clerk that he must be some unlucky petitioner for charity; and he was left to wait in the cash-office until Mr. Hoare happened to pass through. The latter was some time before he could understand who Mr. Farquhar was. His Indian customer, indeed, he knew well by name, but he had none of that hauteur which was then common with the successful Anglo-Indians. At length, however, Mr. Hoare was satisfied as to the identity of his wealthy visitor, who then asked him for 25_l., and saluting him, retired.5

Farquhar was certainly eccentric, reportedly shocking his niece Charlotte, wife of the 7th baronet Sir William Templer Pole, by not caring for fine clothes or even personal cleanliness. His obituary in the *Annual Register* described him as ‘slovenly in his dress, and disagreeable at his meals.’ Beckford called him Old Filthyman. Apparently the Poles’ offer to hold a grand ball in his honour if he might buy some new clothes led him to leave their house in Weymouth Street and set up on his own, in a house on the corner of Portman Square and Upper Baker Street, with only an old woman for his servant. The novelist Aubrey Menen replaces the old woman with a beautiful young Indian boy called Abdul, who is mentally undressed by Beckford during his first meeting with Farquhar.

Farquhar continued to increase his fortune, becoming a partner in the East India agency house of Basset, Farquhar & Company, and in Whitbread’s brewery. He invested in government stock, bought property in London7 and the country, including the East Mark estate in Somersetshire, and attended sales where he was ‘a keen bidder for any object that struck his fancy’.8 Timbs recounts that he was charitable to others though spent little on his own comforts; he was often mistaken for a beggar in the street:

In charitable deeds Mr. Farquhar was munificent to a princely extent, and often, when he had left his comfortless home with a crust of bread in his pocket to save the expenditure of a penny at an oyster shop, it was to give away in the course of the day hundreds of pounds to aid the distressed, and to cure and care for those who suffered from biting poverty, hunger, and want. But in his personal expenditure he was extremely parsimonious; and whilst he resided in Baker Street, he expended on himself and his household but 200_l._ a year out of the 30,000_l._ or 40,000_l._ which his many sources of income must have yielded him.
He was also a scholar. The *Annual Register* noted he was ‘deeply read in classics. In the sciences, as a mathematician, chemist, and mechanic, he greatly excelled’. An article in *The Times* found his mind ‘of extraordinary vigour and originality – his conversation of a superior order, impressive and animated on every subject’. His years in India had given him a strong admiration for the moral system of the Brahmins, and he apparently wished to donate £100,000 for the foundation of a college in Aberdeen, with a ‘reservation in regard to religion’, but without parliamentary sanction the scheme foundered. Colt Hoare summed up his peculiarities in his history of Wiltshire:

> In Bengal he was remarkable for the closeness of his application, unabating perseverance, and extraordinary mental vigour, and also for habits of penuriousness ... which continued to the time of his decease. Those, therefore, who were not acquainted with Mr Farquhar, considered him a miser, but those with whom he associated recognized a powerful and enterprising mind, deeply versed in ancient and modern literature, and given to parsimony more from habit than inclination.

But why did he buy Fonthill? Aubrey Menen suggests it was all about becoming a gentleman. Beckford says to him: ‘These are the keys of Fonthill, Mr Farquhar. Buy it, and at a stroke you will be the finest gentleman in the land. Everything is there, all in its proper place.’

Farquhar undoubtedly had a scholarly interest in the property. Beckford had already commissioned John Rutter, a local Shaftesbury Quaker printer and political activist, to produce *A New Descriptive Guide to Fonthill Abbey and Demesne*, also *Delineations of Fonthill and its Abbey*, both published in 1823. Beckford also commissioned the publication in 1823 of the antiquarian scholar John Britton’s *Graphical and Literary Illustrations of Fonthill Abbey, Wiltshire*. The following year, John Preston Neale published his *Graphical Illustrations of Fonthill Abbey, The Seat of John Farquhar, Esq*. Neale’s book was dedicated to Farquhar.

For all his apparent interest in the history of the property, Farquhar did not want to keep much of the contents of the Abbey and another sale was planned, even larger than the aborted Christie’s sale. A correspondent in the *Morning Herald* explained:

> The various articles with which Mr. Beckford furnished the Abbey in so elaborate a style, never accorded with Mr. Farquhar’s taste. The latter is said to admire the bold and substantial, rather than the delicate and ornamental, in all works where the force of original genius is called into action; and hence he is not pleased with the numberless minute objects which the former has collected. As toys, he thinks they may amuse for a moment, but as decorations for a Gothic edifice he regards them as alike offensive to common sense and good taste.
The same correspondent reported that Farquhar was inclined to promote a national interest in the Abbey by making it an English *Louvre*, open to the public at certain times of the year as a museum.  

Neale, however, in his *Graphical Illustrations*, confirmed Farquhar’s taste for the ‘bold and substantial’, in particular for statuary, ‘in accordance with which he has caused a very fine cast of the celebrated group of Laocoon to be placed in the hall’ (see *Figure 5.2*).  

Farquhar engaged the auctioneer Harry Phillips, who had been senior clerk to James Christie’s father and assisted in the earlier negotiations with Beckford. He had resigned from Christie’s, apparently having been refused a pay rise, and opened his own auction house in 1796. The new Fonthill sale revealed his business acumen and flair for showmanship.

While the catalogue of the sale claimed ‘the whole sold as genuine property’ of Beckford, Phillips added pieces from elsewhere. William Hazlitt’s horror at the tawdry objects was perhaps influenced by their dubious provenance, while Alaric Watts, writing in the *Leeds Intelligencer*, titled his piece ‘Humbug! Fonthill Abbey!’

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*Fig. 5.2* August-Jean-Marie Carbonneaux, *The Laocoön*, early nineteenth century. Bronze life-size copy modelled from the original marble sculpture.  
Photograph Philip Brakefield © Christie’s Images Limited.
Tickets were half a guinea, the catalogue cost 12 shillings. Again thousands of people arrived, including the Duke of Wellington, Beckford and his son-in-law the Duke of Hamilton. Both Beckford and Hamilton bought objects apparently at knock-down prices in a depressed market.

The actual sale lasted 37 days, Farquhar realising £43,869.14s. The tenantry and neighbours were permitted access to the Abbey and grounds for free on Sundays (when they were closed to the general public) but apparently there was a minor riot on one occasion when a crowd from the ‘lower orders’ tried to force entry at the gate. Charles Knight visited with his friend the architect Stedman Whitwell. Whitwell had drawn the ticket and other illustrations of the proceedings for Ackermann’s Repository, as well as setting up the unfinished Eastern Transept as the site of the auction: ‘Artists were there making drawings. Journalists were there writing elaborate paragraphs, with a slight tendency to puff. My friend Stedman Whitwell was with me, and we rambled freely over the American gardens, and partook of the choice fruit of the hothouses … To me the ostensible lord of the place, the clever auctioneer, was particularly civil.’ John Constable went with his friend Fisher, who pointed out ‘there have been great changes in the articles since last year; so that it is quite an auctioneer’s job. Many superb things are now not there, and many others added.’

The surviving pavilion of Fonthill Splendens was fitted up by Thomas Harrington, proprietor of the Black Horse Inn in Salisbury, with bedrooms, a large common coffee room and private sitting rooms. Constable noticed ‘a large room fitted up with boxes like a coffee-house, for dinners’. A public refectory was established at the Abbey inside the Fountain Court of the Western Cloister (Figure 5.3), William Dore from the White Lion in Bath supplying the refreshments and running special coach trips from Bath to the Abbey.

Once free of Beckford’s collection, Farquhar set about extending the estate by over 2,000 acres. He bought the manor of Berwick St Leonard and Lyngevers (part of Chicklade), also land in Dorset (including Boyton, Keynton and Stour) for £100,000 from his Fonthill neighbour John Benett of Pythouse, who was heavily in debt. He also controlled the two seats for the rotten borough of Hindon and offered them, as Beckford had done, for £5,000 apiece. His activities were noted in the local newspaper:

If the property purchased by Mr Farquhar from Mr Benett (our county member) be added to Fonthill, the domain will then form one of the most splendid estates in this kingdom. Fonthill Abbey is itself a residence for a Prince.

Farquhar was copying another neighbour, the very wealthy Robert, Earl Grosvenor (1767–1845), just over the county border in Dorset. Though Earl Grosvenor owned the Eaton estate in Cheshire and valuable land in London, in 1819 he had begun to build up a considerable estate in Dorset. His main interest was political, at a local and national level. His purchase from Lord Rosebery for £70,000 of 400 or
so premises in Shaftesbury, completed just before the 1820 General Election, was large enough to carry the voting rights to the ‘property of Shaftesbury’ and thus return two Whig Members of Parliament of his choosing. He bought the manor of Gillingham from Sir Francis Sykes in 1821, and, in 1825, the Motcombe estate, for £51,000. A report drawn up for the Earl pointed out Motcombe ‘is situate nearly adjoining the Town of Shaftesbury, and unites his Lordships Estates at Shaftesbury and Gillingham’. Earl Grosvenor admired Beckford’s collections, if not the man, and bought a number of his books at Farquhar’s sale. The Gothic library at Eaton was enlarged by William Porden in 1824 especially for his ‘Beckfordiana’.

According to Neale, Farquhar had ambitious plans for the Fonthill estate. The unfinished eastern wing was to be completed ‘for the residence of the family’, the Pavilion (which had already been used for accommodation during the sale) was to be fitted up as an ‘elegant Inn with every necessary accommodation, stabling &c.’ and a drive was to be formed from the eastern front of the Abbey towards the Pavilion, ‘by which means a fine view of the Lake will be obtained’. As Neale observed, ‘Mr Farquhar has at this time [1823–4] more than a hundred workmen and labourers employed in making various alterations both in the Mansion and the Garden.’ The auctioneer Harry Phillips had continued to manage the property, but in September 1824 he was dismissed. George Mortimer, Farquhar’s favourite
nephew, moved into the Pavilion with his wife and it remained their residence until 1829.

Surviving plans on paper (Figure 5.4) with a watermark of 1824 (but no architect’s name) suggest the Pavilion was to be enlarged with a portico to the front and offices to the rear; on the ground floor a library, dining room and billiard room; above two drawing rooms, a boudoir, bedrooms and nurseries: a comfortable family house.

George Mortimer was a cloth manufacturer and Blackwell Hall broker. Blackwell Hall near the Guildhall (demolished in 1820) had been at the centre of the wool and cloth trade in London for centuries. Mortimer had been borrowing money from Farquhar to buy wool since 1821, but in 1824 he persuaded his uncle to finance a commercial woollen mill on the lake at Fonthill. The enterprise was foolhardy, given the collapse in the woollen industry in the immediate area following peace with France and the renewal of competition. However Mortimer was later described as ‘the peculiar object’ of Farquhar’s affections.29

The lengthy Chancery case which dealt with Farquhar’s estate (he died intestate in 1826) and the competing demands of seven nephews and nieces provide details of the complex finances involved. Mortimer was certainly given ‘almost unlimited credit’ by his uncle and a memorandum of agreement conveyed to him ‘certain lands, not to exceed fifty acres – part of the estate of Fonthill – for the erection of a woollen manufactory’.30 It was claimed during the hearings that Mortimer ‘induced [his uncle] to erect a factory … though it was represented by

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**Fig. 5.4** Plans of the ground and first floors of the Pavilion.

Metropolitan Museum of New York (in exchange with the RIBA, 1960), accession number 60.724.85a.
his friends as very injurious to the property'.31 However the foundation stone was laid by Farquhar himself on 9 October 1824.32 Merino wool and sheep worth over £6,000 were supplied by John Benett from the neighbouring Pythouse estate, and indigo to a value of £2,372.13s.5d was supplied by Farquhar’s company Bassett, Farquhar & Co.

A drawing by Hendrik de Cort (part of the series accompanying his painting of Splendens commissioned by William Beckford) shows the 1791 view of the site which would be chosen for the mill, immediately below the retaining wall and waterfall at the south end of the lake. Splendens is visible in the distance (Figure 5.5).

Just as the woollen mill and a group of cottages for the workers were being erected the tower of Fonthill Abbey creaked, groaned and finally, on 21 December 1825, at three o’clock in the afternoon, crashed to the ground. Colt Hoare, still working on his History of Wiltshire, ‘was so anxious to see it in its dilapidated state, that I sent an artist [John Buckler] to take a view of it the week after its fall’ (Figure 5.6).

Buckler’s drawing was quickly engraved to illustrate Hoare’s article in The Gentleman’s Magazine in February 1826, ‘Sic transit Gloria Fonthill’. It was included also in the fourth volume of the Modern History of South Wiltshire published in 1829. Colt Hoare observed ‘Mr Buckler had previously made two large drawings of the Abbey in its perfect state, which, in picturesque effect, are far inferior to it in its ruined state; for the tower, from its excessive height, was out of all proportion.’33
John Claudius Loudon, editor of *The Gardener’s Magazine*, recounted the fall in an article published in 1835:

Mr Farquhar, however, who then resided in one angle of the building, and who was in a very infirm state of health, could not be brought to believe there was any danger. He was wheeled out in his chair on the lawn in front, about half an hour before it fell; and though he saw the cracks, and the deviation of the central tower from the perpendicular, he treated the idea of its coming down as ridiculous. He was carried back to his room, however, and the tower fell almost immediately. From the manner in which it fell, from the lightness of the materials of which it was constructed … neither Mr. Farquhar nor the servants who were in the kitchen preparing dinner, knew that it had fallen; though the immense collection of dust which rose into the atmosphere had assembled almost all the inhabitants of the village, and had given the alarm even as far as Wardour Castle … only one man (who died in 1833) saw it fall. He is said to have described its manner of falling as very beautiful; it first sank perpendicularly and slowly, and then burst and spread over the roofs of the adjoining wings on every side … The cloud of dust which arose was enormous, and such as completely to darken the air for a considerable distance around for several minutes. Such was the concussion in the interior of the building, that one man was forced along a passage, as if he had been in an air-gun, to the distance of 30 ft., among dust so thick as to be felt. Mr. Farquhar, it is said, could scarcely be convinced that the tower was down; and when he was so, he said he was glad of it, for that now the house was not too
large for him to live in. Mr. Beckford, when told at Bath, by his servant, that the tower had fallen, merely observed, that it had then made an obeisance to Mr. Farquhar, which it had never done to him.34

False rumours circulated suggesting Farquhar was inclined to leave the Abbey to Beckford, who was thrilled by the idea: ‘Good heavens, yes, I should have been in an extacy at it, for it would have falsified the old proverb, “You can’t eat your cake and have it too”.35 However, Farquhar actually began negotiations to sell everything the day after the collapse.

John Benett of Pythouse agreed to buy the Abbey, the land within the enclosure, and land in Fonthill Gifford and Tisbury, totalling 2,975 acres. The contract was made on 22 and 27 December 1825, at a mutual valuation of £130,000. John Peniston, a Salisbury surveyor and architect, carried out the valuation for Benett.36 The ruins of the Abbey were to be sold by Benett as building materials.

Henry King of Chilmark (a village to the east of Fonthill), a local gentleman farmer, agreed to buy 1,400 acres of farm land for £20,000. George Mortimer agreed to buy the Old Park estate, the Pavilion (where he and his wife were living) and 1,200 acres for £19,700.37 And Earl Grosvenor contracted to buy the manor of Berwick St Leonard and half the borough of Hindon (33 properties), totalling 1,150 acres, for £45,000.38 This property Farquhar had acquired a short time before from Benett; it was the first Wiltshire property the Earl bought and came with heavy costs. Grosvenor’s Shaftesbury solicitor Philip Chitty warned ‘the repairs at Berwick Saint Leonard are and will be expensive’, while the Hindon properties housed a number of paupers.39

Chitty, working for Benett as well as Earl Grosvenor, was already concerned about Farquhar’s health when he wrote to the Earl in February 1826 confirming £10,000 had been paid to Messrs Hoare, Barnett & Co. ‘on account’.40 When Farquhar died of apoplexy in his London house, Newland, on the New Road (now Euston Road) opposite Regent’s Park, on 6 July 182641 none of the contracts for the sale of his Wiltshire property had been completed.

Farquhar was buried in St John’s Wood Church (now St John’s Wood Chapel). The church had been completed in 1814, designed by Thomas Hardwick. It attracted a number of East and West India merchants and their families. Farquhar’s medallion profile portrait was sculpted by Peter Rouwe the Younger in the manner of a noble Roman, and with no attempt at flattery.

When his probate was finally settled Farquhar was found to be worth over a million pounds.42 His property was extensive, including not just the Fonthill estate but leaseholds in central London, in Harley Street, Upper Seymour Street, Gloucester Place, Cavendish Street, Portland Place, Golden Square and Upper Baker Street.43 However the legal wrangling that followed his death was reminiscent of the Chancery case in Dickens’s Bleak House.44

First there was a dispute about whether he had written a will in India, then whether it had been deliberately destroyed in his London house. ‘The will was
thought to have contained a large bequest to be used for educational purposes in Scotland, but when the prerogative court of chancery considered the case in 1829 Sir John Nicholls decreed that Farquhar had in fact died intestate. The Court also declared Farquhar to be ‘an extremely acute, clever man, though fanciful, capricious, irritable, and passionate … he seems latterly to have considered its value [his property] only as it contributed to his amusement in the management of it – in buying, selling and speculating – reckless of what became of it afterwards.

Once the ‘asserted will’ was declared to have been destroyed, the seven nephews and nieces were able to negotiate their individual inheritances. Only George Mortimer was interested in having his ownership of part of the Fonthill estate ratified; the rest wanted the money promised by Benett, Earl Grosvenor and Henry King. But the legal process took so long that the deeds of purchase were only finally signed in 1838. Meanwhile Mortimer, established at the Pavilion, and Benett, living on the neighbouring estate, behaved as if they were already the legal owners of their parts of Fonthill.

Part two: John Benett and George Mortimer

John Benett’s marriage to Lucy Lambert of Boyton brought him a substantial dowry which he used to design and build a larger house. The new Pythouse, with its Neo-Grecian façade, was completed in 1805. When Beckford demolished ‘Splendens’, Benett bought two of the magnificent Italian chimney pieces for his state rooms at Pythouse. Benett was ambitious for political power and land. He served as High Sheriff, magistrate and captain of the Hindon yeomanry, and spent over £50,000 fighting elections to Parliament in 1818 and 1819. He was a Whig, a close friend of the Arundells of Wardour and in favour of Catholic emancipation. However his finances had been stretched by his new house and election expenses, hence his need to sell land to Farquhar in 1823. His ambition to own the Abbey estate was never viable.

Benett was meant to have paid a first instalment of £10,000 in October 1826 for his part of the estate, but with the death of Farquhar and no confirmed contract he hung on to his cash. He was obsessed with acquiring the Abbey estate. A neighbouring landowner, Charles Ashe à Court of Heytesbury, wrote:

In the course of conversation Benett let out to me in confidence his expectation of an entire dislocation of the Fonthill property on old Farquhar’s death & his determination in such case to strain every nerve to purchase that portion of which is in Tisbury Parish & which adjoins his property … [but] I believe he is sadly distressed for money; so much so, that he has just purchased an Estate upon which I have a mortgage, not having a single shilling to pay for it; which will of course oblige me to withhold the title deeds. He is an arrant Jew to deal with.
Benett was not alone in being financially stretched. His friend and neighbour, James Everard, 10th Baron Arundell, had inherited the Wardour estate, including the enormous New Wardour Castle designed by James Paine and the ruins of the old castle, together with the debts of his grandfather, in 1817. He was a scholar and co-author with his friend Richard Colt Hoare of the *History of Modern Wiltshire*, but lacked any ability to reduce the family expenditure. He decided to live abroad, thus avoiding imprisonment for debt, and hoped Earl Grosvenor might rent Wardour from him. When the Earl declined, George Mortimer made an offer. Arundell was apparently horrified: after all, Mortimer was merely a cloth manufacturer.

_I cannot accede to it. I am humbled but not so low as to put a Scotch weaver in my House, sooner shall it fall piecemeal to ruin. Sir Joseph Radcliffe’s Scotch servants were dirty enough. Mr Mortimer’s will be a bad edition of his._

Arundell settled with his wife in Rome, pursued by his creditors until his death in 1831.

Though he had no legal right, Benett proceeded to engage his friend John Peniston to measure and value the Abbey remains in preparation for their sale. Peniston wrote to the Shaftesbury solicitor Philip Chitty in the autumn of 1827 worrying about vandals: ‘much of the glass and some portions of it the most valuable having been destroyed between our first survey and final valuation.’ He was ‘at a loss to say what price should be fixed for the metallic [sic] content of the fallen tower.’ The architect Edward Blore, engaged by the Seymours to enlarge Knoyle House a few miles to the west, was interested in buying stone and lead. The sale of items from the Abbey was advertised in April 1828:

> materials from this most splendid building are now on sale ... the splendid range of plate glass and painted windows in St Michael’s Gallery ... would to a gentleman fitting up a Picture Gallery or Library be a most valuable acquisition ... builders of Churches or Chapels may also find windows, stone architraves, mullions and Gothic Ornaments well calculated for such edifices.

George Mortimer, meanwhile, was getting on with completing his mill and improving the Pavilion. In August 1828 Peniston asked Benett what had happened to the statue of Alderman Beckford which had survived the fall and was once in the Great Hall of the Abbey (see Chapter 4, Figure 4.8). If he had called at the Pavilion he would have found the statue and a number of pieces of furniture, plate, glass and fixtures formerly in the Abbey. Mortimer declared his uncle had given him permission after the collapse of the tower to take away anything he required. He eventually sold the statue back to Beckford, who then presented it to the Ironmongers’ Company.
The Pavilion was enlarged (Figure 5.7), with a second floor added to the offices along with a larger portico. There is some indication of how Mortimer adapted pieces from Fonthill Abbey in the sale particulars of 1829:

Two Drawing Rooms, finished in Oak, the Chimney Pieces very handsome and of pure Statuary, the Windows of Plate Glass, the Folding Doors of massive Oak, and completed in the Gothic Taste (these form a portion of the valuable Relics from the Abbey); the Library ... is tastefully designed, the Ceiling humbly imitating the one at the Abbey; the Dining Parlour ... ornamented by very rich and ancient Tapestry, Plate Glass Windows, and very fine specimens (from the Ruins) of ancient stained Glass.\(^{56}\)

It also appears that Mortimer built a substantial stable block on the hillside to the south of the Pavilion. This is again described in the 1829 sale particulars but was not included in John Rutter’s map drawn up in 1823. The particulars describe the ‘Carriage yard ... well placed and away from the Pavilion ... standing for Four Carriages, Nine Stall Stable, Servants’ Apartments over, and Harness Room, large loose Stall ... Erected of Stone and covered with Slate.’ The adjoining farm yard was ‘adapted also to the exercise of the Horses.’ Mortimer had built a new bridge at the north end of the lake, inscribed ‘1826 GM’; his mill was finished by the autumn of 1826.\(^{57}\)

Mortimer’s intention was to make money. There appears to have been no thought for the picturesque quality of the site. The complex was large – ‘one of the
most compact and valuable Clothing Establishments in the Kingdom’ – according
to the sale particulars, erected ‘at an Expense exceeding £20,000.’

The largest building was of stone, 105 feet by 35 feet, and six storeys high,
containing three water wheels, gear work, stocks, washers, indigo pots, gigs, cut-
ters, carding machines, scribbing machines, abb-mules and warp-mules. There was
a wash house, also of stone, and a dye house 136 feet by 14 feet, containing a steam
boiler. Another building, 172 feet by 21 and five storeys high, contained a drying
house, a press room, store rooms and weaving rooms. Close by was a six-bedroom
house with its own garden and orchard and a further 24 ‘uniform’ cottage houses.
Each workman in the new cottages was allocated a portion of land ‘in order that he
may accustom his family to the cultivation of the soil’ and therefore not be solely
reliant on work in the factory.

John Britton described the factory in his *Graphical and Literary History of
Fonthill*:

... every improvement in machinery as applicable to the manufacture of
superfine cloths, was introduced ... The quantity of cloth manufactured was
about from forty to fifty ends per week; all the work of which, from the very
first to the last process, as done on the spot, and employed of men, women and
children, no more than 200 persons, although, without the latest improve-
ments, it would have required 1000 hands.

But the factory was not a success and by 1829 clothmaking had ended. Mortimer’s
first attempt to sell the mill, reported in the *Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette*, 16 April
1829, was a failure, so shortly after it was let:

Replete with every convenience for conducting and carrying on every branch
of the manufacture of superfine woollen cloth and kerseymere under the
immediate eye of the occupier. No expense has been spared by the proprietor
in rendering these mills the completest in the West of England. The supply
of water is never failing, and is capable of producing double the power now
used by the erection of an additional water wheel, and possesses the superior
advantage of never being subject to floods, with a fall of upwards of thirty
feet. The present power is equal to 50 ends per week.

But again no one was interested.

Mortimer then decided to move permanently to London. He arranged the
auction on 29 October 1829 of the whole of his estate, including the Pavilion, even
though the actual ownership of the property was still being discussed by Chancery.
He had written to John Benett on 29 August 1829 from Fonthill Park to ask a
favour: ‘Having avail’d myself of the professional assistance of Mr George Robins
in the disposal of this Estate he has suggested that as it will probably create some
excitement and the visitors from afar may be anxious to see the Abbey, that I should wish the favour of you to indulge their curiosity.\textsuperscript{62}

The property was divided into three lots. John Benett acquired Lawn Farm and 107 acres of land for £5,000, adding this to the Fonthill Abbey estate (which he had not yet paid for).\textsuperscript{63} The Pavilion and surrounding park, some 1,000 acres, were bought by a London haberdasher, James Morrison, for £35,000; he also bought the cloth mill, cottages and 39 acres of land for £12,000.

Sir Richard Colt Hoare summed up this final melancholy break-up of the Fonthill estate: ‘[the] magnificent mansion [Splendens], once the seat of science, hospitality, and comfort, but now reduced to one small fragment; its fine transparent lake, disfigured by an unseemly cloth manufactory erected on its banks; its pleasure grounds neglected; its stately abbey in ruins; and an extensive property parcelled out and dismembered.’\textsuperscript{64}