Fonthill in the nineteenth century

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Part one: James Morrison at the Pavilion

Fonthill begins now to look very fine, some Gentlemen were here from London last week and went from here to Stourhead, when they returned they told me that Stourhead was not worthy to be compared to Fonthill.¹

James Morrison (Figure 6.1), the London haberdasher who purchased the Pavilion and surrounding park from George Mortimer, was born in 1789 in Middle Wallop, some 11 miles east of Salisbury.² He was the son of a successful innkeeper who benefited from the turnpiking of the London to Salisbury road, which passed by his hostelry – the Lower George – conveniently situated on a crossroads in the Wallops. Morrison was apprenticed to a haberdasher in London. He proved to be both hardworking and imaginative in business, becoming a partner in Joseph Todd’s business in Fore Street, Moorgate and marrying Todd’s daughter Mary Ann. By 1830 he was sole owner of the business, which had an annual turnover of nearly £2 million; he had also begun to form a collection of contemporary art including paintings by Constable and Turner. At the General Election in 1830 he was elected MP for St Ives, joining the radical wing of the Whigs. Fonthill was the first country property he purchased, as both a financial and a social asset. Further purchases of property in England and Scotland, the continuing expansion of the Fore Street business, investments in North America, and the acquisition of important Old Masters meant that at his death in 1857 he was probably the richest commoner in Britain.³

Morrison was not to become the undisputed owner of Fonthill for many years. The delay did not prevent him from transforming the Pavilion and surrounding parkland into an attractive gentleman’s seat, but the legal implications were complex: the death of Farquhar was followed in December 1832 by the death of his nephew George Mortimer. Mortimer had auctioned his part of the estate (even though his uncle’s estate was not settled) on 29 October 1829. It was bought by
James Morrison for £35,000, minus £500 ‘in consideration of Mr Morrison agreeing not further to investigate the Title’. Mortimer, however, was entitled to the Park estate only when he paid a balance of £18,000 and the interest which had accrued since the 1826 contract with his uncle. Consequently, Morrison’s initial payment of £14,000, which he made on 18 September 1830, was a mortgage ‘to pay off the
balance of purchase money to Farquhar’s Estate so as to get the legal estate of the property into his own name’.  

Two further payments were made by Morrison of £1,500 each, but then in December 1832 Mortimer died in his brother James’s house in Pentonville with the Farquhar case (and his own) still unsettled. Morrison thus had to make a new arrangement with Mortimer’s widow and the rest of Farquhar’s heirs. He agreed to pay James Mortimer to advance Ann, the widow, £1,000, plus £200 per quarter until the legal situation was resolved. This was not until the final settlement in Chancery on 6 December 1838. Morrison had to wait even longer, until 24 March 1842, for the deed of covenant to be drawn up between him and William Beckford for the production of deeds relating to the Fonthill estates. This was followed in 1844 by the final judgement. Morrison’s agent James Combes wrote on 19 November ‘I have the pleasure of informing you that the whole of Mr Morrison’s claim against the Estate of the late Mr Mortimer has been this day allow’d by the Master.’

In London Morrison had engaged the architect and designer John Buonarotti Papworth for a number of years, first designing handkerchiefs (an expensive commodity in the early nineteenth century) for the Fore Street warehouse, then working on Morrison’s villa on Balham Hill and commercial buildings in Fore Street and Milton Street, Moorgate. At Fonthill, Papworth’s commission was extensive:

[He] effected general repairs and decorations to the house, and designed furniture, with the arrangement of pictures, and works of art. His attention was, however, principally devoted to the improvement of the extensive grounds, including plantations, new roads, the bridge at the head of the lake, the quarry gardens, etc., entrances, lodges, gates, lamps, garden pedestals, and vases; seats, and other embellishments.

The letter Papworth wrote during his first visit provides a glimpse not just of Morrison’s estate but of the ruined Abbey and grounds. Morrison had himself written ‘you will like to see this wretched specimen of bad taste and the ruins of one of the finest in the kingdom in what remains of the Abbey’. Papworth for his part wrote to his wife:

All day yesterday we were at business, except a ride to the Abbey after dinner – it is a RUIN!! – and not capable of inspiring any other than painful thoughts of the instability of human affairs – and high towers – This morning, after some small business, I have been on the Lake ... Fonthill is a beautiful place – but does not come up to those ideas that from recent descriptions (George Robins’s, Christie’s, and Phillips’s, for instance) I had imagined of it – in fact – altho’ beautiful, it is not the refined place it has been reported to be. Gravel walks are in themselves beautiful if well disposed. None are here, however, – no, not one – the place is for the feet of Horses and not for those
of Man – as if none were worthy to traverse it but such as have the privileges of a Centaur ... I am about to have another visit by myself to the Abbey this afternoon – to explore it in quiet – No wonder it tumbled down – the wonder would have been it should stand at all – it stood until it was finished, and sold, and so it might have been thought to do its duty.10

According to the sale particulars of 1829, Morrison acquired ‘all the pictures furniture household goods and implements of household and all chattels and effects articles and things whatsoever under every description in and about the said premises.’ However, as no inventory was ever made there is no firm evidence as to the contents of the Pavilion.

Papworth was immediately tasked with making the Pavilion a comfortable country home for Morrison’s expanding family: his sixth child was born in 1830; the eleventh and final child was born in 1842. Drains and pipes were dealt with first (March 1832). His agent or steward, James Combes, a local surveyor and commissioner, oversaw much of the work, interpreting Papworth’s instructions, directing stonemasons and carpenters.

Papworth made few changes to the outside of the Pavilion. He enlarged the ground floor windows, added decorative urns to the balcony and fitted external canopies over the windows and balcony (Figure 6.2).

Inside, however, Papworth’s work was extensive (Figure 6.3): all the rooms were redecorated, new floors and ceilings were designed and chimney pieces added.

Fig. 6.2 Design by J. B. Papworth for alteration of portico to the Pavilion.
13469, RIBA Collections.
The only description that survives of the interior is provided by Mrs Andrew Stevenson, wife of the United States envoy in London, who visited in 1836: ‘it contains twenty-six rooms some of them very rich, tasteful and beautiful beyond anything I have seen except in the Palaces of the Nobility … Mrs Morrison told me that the ceilings of my chamber, dressing room, and the one adjoining had cost 800 pounds.’

The Snells and the Seddons made furniture designed by Papworth; the Seddons made curtains of green cloth trimmed with gold for the drawing room, curtains of scarlet and white cloth, lace and tapestry for the dining room and curtains of cinnamon and gold for the library. Crimson and gold prevailed; also highly ornamented tables with tops of coloured marbles, bronze statuettes, Etruscan vases and antique marble urns.

Papworth planned a new route for the public road, moving it away from the Pavilion and much closer to the lake. A balustrade was constructed in front of the house to provide further privacy. Alderman Beckford’s northern archway, visible from the coach road and through which everyone travelling south to Tisbury passed, was enhanced with walls and substantial piers built either side of the approach, suggesting Morrison was making a statement about his ownership of the estate. Papworth also worked on the south entrance opposite the Beckford Arms, designing a lodge of stone and thatch. However his proposal to fix elaborately carved heads to the gate-piers was rejected by Morrison (see Figure 6.4). The simpler design on the right-hand pier was chosen.

When working at country properties, Papworth was always particular about the views across the park, imagining himself inside rooms and looking out. At
Fonthill he focused on the view looking from the Pavilion towards the north end of the lake, enhancing the southern side of Mortimer’s bridge and adding tall vases either side of the ‘cascade’ (see Chapter 10, Figure 10.13). Combes wrote to Morrison ‘Mr P is much pleased with the new waterfall and so in fact is every one that has seen it … the view from the House northward is totally changed, I never saw a greater difference in a landscape.’

There was no bridge across the lake further south but Papworth designed a landing stage on the far side (Figure 6.5) to which the Morrison children could sail or row in their boats (also designed by Papworth).

The grottoes at Fonthill (see Chapter 14) were repaired and Papworth acquired inhabitants for some, including Polyphemus (Figure 6.6), Acis and Galatea from the sale in 1843 of the stock of the Coade Artificial Stone Manufactory. The trio cost 16 guineas. In 1799 it had formed the ‘coup de theatre’ at the Coade Gallery, with a fulsome description in the visitor’s guidebook:

this stupendous design is conceived at the moment when Polyphemus discovers, from the summit of the rock, the nymph Galatea with his rival Acis, upon whom, in his fury, he hurls a fragment of stone, and kills him. This work occupies a space of 20 feet in height by 12 ft in width, the Polyphemus is a statue of 10 ft. 6 ins, a cave is formed in the rock, at the entrance of it lays the Acis and Galatea, much larger than life.
Fig. 6.5  Design by J. B. Papworth for landing stage on Fonthill Lake.  
84607, RIBA Collections.

Fig. 6.6  John de Vaere, *Monumental Coade stone fragment of the torso of Polyphemus*, ca. 1800.  
© Christie’s Images Limited.
There were further general improvements in the park: the hothouses were repaired in Beckford’s kitchen garden and exotic American trees were planted, a gift from one of Morrison’s partners. But, although Morrison was a radical Whig, he did little to improve the condition of his tenants. Papworth had written on the efficacy of estate improvements in *Rural Residences* (published in 1818):

> few embellishments of an estate are more interesting than those small buildings which compose the farm-offices and residences for the active, the superannuated, or other servants of the domain, particularly if they are designed in a manner conformable to the surrounding scenery, and distributed about the property with judgment. Such buildings, neat, clean, and in good repair, become testimonies of that liberality and care of his dependants that have always been distinguishing features in the character of a British gentleman.

Morrison commissioned only a handful of dwellings at Fonthill. He built more estate cottages, however, on two much larger properties which he acquired later at Cholsey and Basildon Park both in Berkshire; he moved to Basildon in 1844, leaving his second son Alfred at Fonthill.

At Fonthill Papworth designed a gardener’s cottage inside William Beckford’s kitchen garden and a rustic house for chickens with a room for women and a nursing porch just outside the garden (identified in the surveys carried out by David Roberts; see Chapter 9, Figures 9.1, 9.2 and 9.3), as well as two houses for gamekeepers on Great and Little Ridge.

The cottage on Great Ridge, four miles from the Pavilion, was a challenge. Combes told Morrison the plan was ‘foolish’: ‘it will be very foolish if Mr Papworth goes to great expense at Great Ridge, but what his ideas are I know not – it will be an expensive place to build at on account of Carriage and water’. The foundations were nonetheless laid in June 1840. Now called Penning House, the dwelling was intended for a gamekeeper but served also as a destination for Morrison and his guests, as Papworth explained: ‘to have a room – a reception … a room 15 by 15 which might have some old carved oak embellishments some Colord Glass – in fact a little decorative quackery might make it a tempting object for a morning or evening ride or drive to employ visitors two or three hours’. This reception room, labelled ‘Mr Morrison’s Room’ on the plan, looked ‘towards Fonthill Abbey’, so the carved oak and coloured glass could well have been Papworth referencing both the ruins and the miscellaneous remnants which George Mortimer had fixed in the Pavilion.

The cottage on Little Ridge stood across the lake from the Pavilion. Papworth’s first design was considered too ornate (and expensive) by Morrison, so the later, plainer version (Figure 6.7) was built. James Lampard, tenant of Ashley Wood Farm, handled the submission of estimates. Among these, Mr Fitt was successful:
I have sent for Mr Fitt and he has examined the plan of the House, and Ground where it is to be built, Mr Fitt said that Mr Papworth’s plan is all right. We all admire the Place thinking it will be a very pretty Cottage in my opinion & the spot that Mr Papworth looked out will be a nice one for the House – it is 17 yards long from the Steep of the Hill, where the House is to be built, to the road, wont [sic] you want a small portion on this length of Ground for a yard behind the House as well as a Flower Garden in Front.\footnote{19}

At Fonthill Bishop Papworth was commissioned by Morrison to design a school. Once again, Papworth’s initial designs were scaled back for economy. But his ideas about the site reveal his interest in place, as well as the welfare of the pupils:
The School Room is designed to have a parochial character; as the site is proposed to be the Green, near the Church, it will combine with its style, in perhaps a sufficient degree. As the spot is at the junction of crossing roads, it will be an object seen on every face: perhaps if the corners of the building be placed to the Cardinal points or near to them it will become more picturesquely ornamental, than in any other way, and it is desirable that the sun in its course should suit every face of the building for the benefit of warmth and ventilation.\(^\text{20}\)

Morrison’s wife Mary Ann took responsibility for running a school at Fonthill Gifford using the old woollen factory buildings.\(^\text{21}\) She paid for a school teacher; £47 in 1835. This was before the Marquess of Westminster bought the Abbey estate and the village. Mrs Andrew Stephenson recalled Mary Ann hoping in a few years ‘to be able to ameliorate the condition of her parish but Mr Beckford has left her much to do’.\(^\text{22}\)

Indeed conditions for the labourers in and around Fonthill were not good. One of the most famous of the Swing Riots took place close to the estate in November 1830. A ‘mob’ attacked threshing machines owned by John Benett of Pythouse and also the abandoned machines left by Mortimer in the woollen factory below Fonthill Lake. The Hindon troop was called up; Benett was hit by a stone, there were a number of arrests, 14 men were transported to Van Diemen’s Land (Tasmania) and two imprisoned with hard labour. Immediately after the ‘Pythouse Battle’ The Times noted:

> At Fonthill some thrashers are still working at 7s per week … The mill at Fonthill has been unoccupied for nearly two years, and very few persons indeed are employed about the grounds. Indeed the whole place seems fast sinking into ruin. The cottages are fast decaying, and the broken windows indicate the extreme poverty of the once prosperous and happy peasantry of Mr Beckford.\(^\text{23}\)

The garden historian and journalist John Claudius Loudon, visiting in 1835, found conditions close by in Hindon no better. Once more, many of the labourers had formerly been employed by Beckford:

> On arriving, at the miserable little town of Hindon … without trade or manufacture and with no main road passing through it, it contains only a few houses, the largest of which assume the character of inns; but of these inns the best does not even take in a newspaper… the inhabitants are in the greatest misery.\(^\text{24}\)

Morrison’s annual gifts of money, faggots and meat must have been welcome; he also offered financial support to labourers willing to emigrate to Canada and found
employment for a few at his Fore Street warehouse. But tenants on his land would have to wait for his second son Alfred to inherit the estate before their living conditions significantly improved.

**Part two: John Benett and Fonthill Abbey**

Of all desolate scenes there are none so desolate as those which we now see as ruins, and which were lately the abode of splendour and magnificence … If you wish for a sight of all that is melancholy, all that is desolate, visit a modern ruin.

John Benett was the main target in the Pythouse Battle of 1830. His labourers, according to Lord Arundell, were the poorest and most oppressed in the entire country. His acquisition of the Abbey estate proved to be a foolhardy action, bringing little if no financial gain to his already stretched finances. Like Morrison, he was not, as yet, legally the owner. But once he had sold off many of the fallen ‘materials’ in 1828, he engaged in some desultory building work.

James Combes reported to Morrison in 1832 that Benett was ‘proceeding to convert the East wing into a Villa & making offices to it – he is making abutments also to the north great [? tower] formerly proposed as a Chapel with a view to keep it up’.

John Rutter described the activities to J. B. Nicholls in 1835. ‘The present owner, Mr Benett MP for Wilts is gradually connecting the Brown Parlour and Yellow Rooms into a residence of some sort by the addition of offices and other buildings – but these proceed very gradually and no part is at present inhabited.’

William Beckford visited his old property without warning in 1835. According to Rutter he ‘expressed much approbation of its appearance as a ruin’.

James Morrison’s son Charles met him on the Fonthill estate:

I don’t know whether you have heard that Beckford came over from Bath some days ago to look at his old residence. He recognised the swans, disapproved of the new portico & other embellishments on the side of the house [the Pavilion], & asked whether Mr Benetts new building at the Abbey was not intended as workhouse for the use of the Poor Law Commissioners.

When Loudon visited the Abbey in 1835 he was appalled by the state of things.

All the interesting parts of the grounds … are in such a state of neglect, as hardly to be recognised for what they were in 1807. To preserve the abbey from falling was impossible, from the nature of its construction; but it is deeply to be regretted that the grounds have fallen into hands which, from
some cause or other, could suffer the ruin to extend to them … The appearance of the ruins, as they now stand, produces an impression of meanness mixed with grandeur that it is impossible to describe. The greatness of the dimensions of the parts which still exist, and which, from being covered with cement, have the appearance of stone; and the shattered remains of lath and plaster, studwork, and bricks, and bond timber; and, above all, the long strings of tarred pack-thread hanging from the nails and other remains of what were once mouldings worked in Roman cement, have a tattered appearance, the very opposite of the grandeur produced by durability of execution. We feel as if we had discovered that what, at a distance, we had supposed to be a marble statue, was, in reality, a mere bundle of rags and straw, whitened over to produce effect.\textsuperscript{30}

The settlement of Farquhar’s estates in 1838 had been a relief for James Morrison, but it put Benett in an awkward position. Not only was he expected to find the required moneys first agreed with Farquhar, but he was also accountable for profits from selling part of the Abbey ruins and timber. According to his biographer Robert Moody, ‘following an action in the Chancery Court, Benett agreed that a total of £114,380.18s.7d was due under the two contracts that had been entered into’. The sum that was to be paid to settle the court proceedings amounted to £95,518.0s.11d, and upon payment of this Benett would accept a conveyance of the property.\textsuperscript{31} Benett, of course, had nothing like this amount, but he may have been trying to effect a subsale of all or part of the estate.

Morrison’s agent James Combes was gleeful, writing to Morrison on 20 March: ‘as soon as Mr B saw that he could not wriggle out of the Abbey contract without being accountable for what he had sold thereupon, that moment he was off … he is full of spite and malice, being disappointed at not grabbing something out of his concern.’\textsuperscript{32} Benett was forced to consider ‘selling’ the land he had never actually paid for.

He approached Morrison. Would he buy the Abbey estate? However, they were unable to agree a price, Morrison noting in his diary for 6 June 1838 that he had ‘decided to stop negotiations with Benett’. He wrote on 7 July 1838: ‘My Dear Benett, As I see no possibility of ever agreeing upon terms for the property at Fonthill I think we had better not pursue the subject any further … I regret that our views respecting the value of the Estate are so different as to make it appear to me impossible that we should agree.’\textsuperscript{33}

Benett had no option but to auction the Abbey estate, including the village of Fonthill Gifford, on 30 October 1838. Tickets for viewing were available from Messrs Farrer and Parkinson, 66 Lincoln’s Inn Fields and Mr Phillips of 73 Bond Street. The particulars provide a useful snapshot of the condition and extent of the estate, bearing in mind the usual estate agent hyperbole; the estate was ‘distinguished for the fertility of the soil, the salubrity of the air, and the purity of the
water’; the village of Fonthill Gifford was ‘picturesque’.\textsuperscript{34} Benett’s work at the ruins was noted:

The buildings now remaining of the Abbey and the detached erections being covered with good copper and lead, and the timbers principally of oak, with the large mass of applicable materials, are together of considerable value. The present Owner has recently expended a large Sum of Money in the erection of Offices and other improvements, which are not yet finished.

The auction, however, failed to attract a buyer; on 31 December James Combes told Morrison ‘a gentleman has been looking over the Abbey lands to make offer’, but again nothing came of it.\textsuperscript{35}

Morrison’s eldest son Charles was relieved, writing to his father on 9 October 1840 ‘I’m glad to learn that there is little probability of a determined effort to sell the Abbey this year, because I shd be glad that you shd buy it some time or other – but certainly not until you have fully covered by the gradual accumulation of income or the quicker process of sale, the whole of your investments & cash advances.’ Charles was concerned about whether his father could pay for the Basildon estate and also honour loans of £123,000 from his bank Overend and Gurney.\textsuperscript{36}

Besides, Morrison had other priorities. He was keen to buy more productive land to extend his Fonthill estate. In 1838 he negotiated with Robert Grosvenor (the 1st Marquess of Westminster since 1831), to buy the property Westminster had acquired from Farquhar in 1826. This comprised parts of Hindon, Chicklade and Berwick St Leonard. Neither could agree the value of the property but they eventually settled in Chancery on a figure of £39,000.\textsuperscript{37} James Combes was aware that John Benett would be upset at the sale. ‘Mr Benett will be sadly mortified at your having Berwick [St Leonard], for this was his principal reliance for making up an estate for somebody, at least this was to be held out as a bait, viz stating that Berwick might be added to Fonthill.’\textsuperscript{38}

At about the same time Morrison also bought Place Farm including land south of Fonthill Lake from Lord Arundell. His holdings at Fonthill now totalled 3,254 acres; the value had increased from the purchase price of £35,000 to over £82,000. The Arundell purchase was symbolic. Beckford would ‘have given almost any money to have been put into the position in which you now stand, but Lord Arundell would never sell the land to him’.\textsuperscript{39}

Beckford made a final visit to Fonthill in 1843:

William Beckford lived on at Bath till 1844, and about the year 1843, Alfred Morrison walked up one afternoon to the terrace to look at the abbey, a ruin since its great tower fell in upon it in 1825. Another visitor was there before him. An old gentleman, mounted on a sturdy little cob, had halted some way off, and he was gazing at the wood and at the ruins in so absorbed
a fashion that he never observed the young man who had come upon him. It was William Beckford. He had ridden over from Bath to look for the last time on all that remained of the most stupendous of all the follies which he and his contemporaries had set upon a hundred hill-tops. The old man and the young man looked at it in silence, and then each returned to his own place.  

Meanwhile the Abbey continued to suffer from both the elements and pilferers. When Henry Venn Lansdown visited in 1844 he crawled all over the ruins, discovering the statue of St Anthony of Padua, Beckford’s patron saint, by Joseph Theakston (see Figure 21.2). Its condition summed up the pathetic scene: ‘St Anthony still holds out his right hand as if to protect the sylvan and mute inhabitants of these groves that here once found secure shelter from the cruel gun and still more cruel dog. But he is tottering in his niche, and when the wind is high is seen to rock, as if his reign were drawing to a close.’ The same year, 1844, the Abbey estate at last attracted the attention of a serious buyer, Richard, Earl Grosvenor, the eldest son and heir of the Marquess of Westminster.

Richard and his wife Elizabeth Leveson-Gower ‘belonged to the highest ranks of the Whig aristocracy, and both were immensely wealthy’. Elizabeth’s father the 1st Duke of Sutherland was, according to Charles Greville, ‘a Leviathan of wealth … the richest individual who ever died’; he was also notorious for his part in the Highland clearances. In 1831 the Marquess of Westminster offered Richard a country house on his estate at Motcombe, Dorset. Elizabeth thought it:

> momentous … we were to have it for our abode … we shall be with Lord and Lady Grosvenor at Eaton just as much as we wish and shall have Motcombe for a resource and retreat for a few weeks in the year alone which is a very great agreement provided we can manage the expense which I daresay we shall, and it will be a great amusement to put it in order and live in such a pretty country.

There was already a ‘respectable Gentlemanly place adapted for the residence of a Man of modest Fortune’, called Palmer’s Place, and this was extensively altered for their use.

The couple spent their first summer in residence in 1833. Two years later the Marquess gave all his Dorset property to his son:

> ‘Belgrave [Richard Earl Belgrave] received a letter from Lord Westminster putting the Dorsetshire properties wholly into his hands, for rough or smooth, richer or poorer, better or worse, and independent of his allowance, which was a most welcome and agreeable piece of news, giving so much facility to B. [Lord Belgrave] to execute all the improvements he meditates.’

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The couple embarked on an ambitious building programme across all their estates in Dorset. The village of Motcombe was practically rebuilt; everyone benefited, especially the local builders.45 A school was planned, to Elizabeth’s delight: ‘only imagine we are going to begin a real one [school] at Motcombe and I have got a real live mistress engaged from the National School at Westminster [run by the National Society for the Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Established Church] and I want to prevent her finding out, if I possibly can, that I know nothing of any rudiments at all.’46

Meanwhile the Marquess continued to acquire property in Shaftesbury on behalf of his son. James Combes kept Morrison up to date with the news, writing on 22 March 1840 that ‘The Marquess of Westminster has been buying considerable property at Shaftesbury subject to a valuation, I have to fix the Price upon two of the purchases consisting of about 200 Acres of land and a lot of Houses – it will be useless for any one to dispute his nomination to the Borough.’

Then the Marquess’s son approached Benett about buying the Abbey estate, with the intention of persuading his father to provide the money. Apparently he had no idea his father had sold Berwick St Leonard and other parts of his Wiltshire lands to James Morrison, thus reducing the value of the whole property. Benett wrote to an unknown recipient:

Lord Grosvenor was with me yesterday on the Fonthill matter, as we feared, he was quite ignorant of his Father’s having sold the Berwick Estate to Mr Morrison [in 1838]. This he had not heard till he came to me. This circumstance he fears may make a vast difference in regard to the desire of Lord Westminster to possess Fonthill which desire he has long entertained, and Lord Grosvenor when he last saw me, and before his knowledge of the sale of Berwick, felt no doubt of his being able to prevail on him Lord Westminster to do. Notwithstanding this sale of Berwick Lord Grosvenor said it was his anxious wish to purchase Fonthill and that his Father should do so for him, and that he would apply to him immediately for that purpose.

Benett’s irritation at Morrison’s gain is clearly revealed in his final comment about his neighbour: ‘Mr Morrison you see has done this very cleverly, by which he has surrounded my estate [the Abbey] on two sides, but should he not now get my estate he will be defeated of ever making any thing comfortable of his House and estate – so that it cuts both ways.’47

A deal was struck, Benett writing to his London lawyer John Parkinson on 22 August 1844: ‘I have agreed to sell the Fonthill estate to LG [Lord Grosvenor] on certain conditions which will I think be approved by yourself – viz that Messrs Coutts will allow the money to remain on Mortgage of this and the Semley Estate for a time at 4 per ct. Allow him also to pay off by instalments as may be agreed as a settlement as soon as possible.’48 Grosvenor was to pay £89,500 for 2,156 acres with the advowson of Fonthill Gifford. He also requested that his name might
remain a secret for the time being, ‘though as he said Combes [Morrison’s agent] knew it the secret cannot be much longer kept’.\textsuperscript{49}

On 17 February 1845 the Marquess of Westminster died. Combes commented ‘Mr Benett sold the Abbey just in the right time’.\textsuperscript{50} Rather bizarrely Benett kept possession of the model of Fonthill Abbey made by James Wyatt for William Beckford.\textsuperscript{51}

At the death of his father, Richard Earl Grosvenor now became the 2nd Marquess of Westminster. He was one of the richest men in Britain. Only Moor Park passed to his younger brother Robert, otherwise he inherited all his father’s property, ‘the immense and still growing Grosvenor fortune and estates’.\textsuperscript{52} Grosvenor House in London and Eaton in Cheshire became his principal town and country seats.

He wasted no time trying to persuade James Morrison to sell back to him the Berwick St Leonard estate and properties in Hindon,\textsuperscript{53} but Morrison refused. Benett, however, was willing to sell more land for which Coutts & Co. received £95,000 in March 1845. Benett’s own debt to his bank was thereby reduced to only £70,000 (over £7 million in today’s money). Meanwhile, the new Marquess was earning himself a reputation for meanness:

The Marquis of Westminster has been down at Motcombe, he went down on the outside the Mail on Wednesday night, was met (so Shaftesbury people told me) by a man with a wheel barrow to take his luggage, gave the Guard one shilling, at which the Guard demurred [sic], and said ‘my Lord your servants pay me more than this’ he reply’d ‘I cant help it’ and walked on – It is now noised abroad that he is the purchaser of Fonthill.\textsuperscript{54}

A letter from the Shaftesbury solicitor Philip Chitty to Morrison explained he had no idea of the Marquess’s intentions now he owned Eaton, Motcombe (Figure 6.8) and Fonthill: ‘Nothing is as yet known here I believe as to Lord Westminster’s intentions with reference to Motcombe except that it is said His Lordship is partial to Dorsetshire and that he is not likely to make Eaton his principal residence.’\textsuperscript{55} The rumours were correct. Motcombe did become the Marquess’s principal residence, at least for him and his family; this comfortable, if not beautiful house, was preferred by both the Marquess and his wife to either the palatial Eaton or their town house in Grosvenor Square.

So why had the Marquess decided to buy the Abbey estate, and why did he decide to build a new house there? Perhaps he was looking ahead to the inheritance and occupation of his sons. Hugh, the eldest, would inherit Eaton and the London estates but Gilbert and Richard would need their own properties. Dowries also had to be found for the remaining unmarried daughters; agricultural estates, particularly with ‘improved’ dwellings, were reliable sources of income. The Marquess was in the habit of repairing and building on all his estates: cottages,
schools, churches, farm-houses and, in London, terraces and mews. Under his care the total income from his estates rose to some £200,000 per annum;\textsuperscript{56} by 1865 his London estate income alone reached £96,000.\textsuperscript{57} The imminent arrival of the railway, with connections from Gillingham, Semley and Tisbury to London, would increase the value of all his southern property; even the trees at Fonthill, planted by Beckford, were a valuable commodity.

The Marquess approached the architect William Burn in 1846 to design a new house on the Abbey estate. However, it was his neighbour James Morrison at the Pavilion who actually began the next wave of building at Fonthill.

**Part three: James Morrison and David Brandon at the Pavilion**

James Morrison was certainly motivated by his increasing family to buy more land. In 1846 he had seven sons aged between four and 29 plus four daughters. In 1838 he had bought the Basildon estate in Berkshire for nearly £100,000.\textsuperscript{58} The grand Palladian house designed by John Carr became his principal country residence from 1844. It was considerably nearer to London than Fonthill, and connected by the newly-opened Great Western Railway. Morrison divided his important and valuable collection of paintings between Basildon and his town-house in Harley Street, leaving only a few pieces at Fonthill. Basildon was designed to be an appropriate inheritance for his eldest son Charles, if and when he retired from making his own fortune in the City. The Pavilion at Fonthill was planned to be the home of his second son Alfred, but only after considerable alterations and additions.

Sadly, Morrison had fallen out with J. B. Papworth in 1844\textsuperscript{59} over a new stable block at Basildon and eventually engaged the architect David Brandon to complete works both inside and outside the Basildon mansion. Brandon’s first piece of work, in

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**Fig. 6.8** Motcombe House.

Private collection in Somerset.
May 1846, was to inspect the church at Lower Basildon,\(^5\) in particular the memorials to Sir Francis Sykes and his family, the previous owners of the estate.

Meanwhile, at Fonthill, the first architect who was approached by James Morrison to follow Papworth appears to have been Owen Jones. A letter from Morrison's land agent James Combes dated 4 April 1845 states 'I intend to remain at home till after your new architect comes.' The commission, however, was for an ornamental dairy and cottage, not the transformation of the Pavilion. Jones and Morrison already knew one another. Early in his career Jones had worked with William Wallen, Morrison’s surveyor at Fore Street; his ‘Alhambra’ drawings, shown at the Royal Academy between 1835 and 1841, brought him to the attention of Morrison (who referred to him as ‘Alhambra Jones’ in his diary) and he was one of those invited to Mary Ann Morrison’s special ‘at home’ in 1839. All of the artists at the party were patronised by Morrison, including Turner, Charles Eastlake, George Jones, Sir Francis Chantrey, Clarkson Stanfield and William Collins.

The design for the dairy and cottage was exhibited at the Royal Academy and reviewed in the *Civil Engineer and Architects' Journal*, July 1845, p. 215; also in the *Athenaeum*, 17 May 1845: ‘He here gives us a modified version of some Alhambra ideas in a subject that readily lends itself to some play of fancy … we cannot better express our opinion of it than by terming it a pleasing architectural Anacreonatic.’\(^6\)

The dairy was never built and the design is lost, but letters between Jones and Morrison suggest there was no acrimony. Jones asked for five pounds to cover his travelling expenses ‘as I never make any charge for works that are not approved of’. Morrison sent him a cheque for 20 pounds.\(^6\) Coincidentally, Jones would be invited back to Fonthill by Alfred Morrison in 1862, after Alfred saw Jones’s designs, including the dairy, at the International Exhibition of that year.\(^6\) Meanwhile David Brandon was engaged to enlarge the Pavilion to make it fit for a young gentleman who would inherit a fortune when his father died.

Brandon practised from 77 Great Russell Street in Bloomsbury, in partnership with the better known architect Thomas Henry Wyatt (1807–80) whose second cousin James Wyatt had designed Fonthill Abbey. T. H. Wyatt’s country house practice had grown to be one of the biggest in the country and by 1838 he needed a partner to share the workload; he worked with Brandon until 1851.\(^6\) Brandon was engaged by James Morrison while Wyatt would become the principal church architect for the Marquess of Westminster and his family.

Brandon visited Fonthill in 1846 and very quickly produced designs. James Morrison may have been the wealthiest commoner in nineteenth-century Britain but he never built a new house. The Pavilion was given a new floor, a tower in the fashionable Italianate style which may have doubled as a water tower, a porte-cochère replacing the portico, an enlarged set of offices on the north side and up against the rising ground to the west and a new range to the south containing a morning room and conservatory (Figures 6.9 and 6.10). The tower was a more classical echo of the tower of St Mary and St Nicholas, Wilton, designed by Brandon’s partner T. H. Wyatt in 1840–5.
The ‘Specification of the Works in Completing the Mansion known as The Pavilion Fonthill Park Messrs Wyatt & Brandon May 1848’ survive in the Prints and Drawings Collection at the Victoria and Albert Museum. The ‘Tisbury stone’ specified by Brandon was cut from the Nippard Quarry, to the south of the lake. The steps and landings of the principal staircase were of stone; columns, pilasters, balusters and the handrail of the staircase and hall were finished in scagliola ‘in the best manner in imitation of Sienna or other not more expensive marble’. Tisbury stone chimney pieces were fitted in the servants’ hall and scullery (18 shillings each), kitchen (30 shillings), and the remainder of the servants’ apartments (15 shillings). There were ‘Veined marble box chimney pieces in all the other rooms 50s each with 2 [inch] Tisbury stone hearths & Kenton stone inner hearths except to the Ante Room adjoining the morning room which is to have 1 ½ Venice marble slab the chimney & slab for the morning room will be provided.’

Brandon was at Fonthill on 22 May marking out the work but a month later James Morrison’s agent James Combes was expressing doubts as to progress, and indeed about the architect:

The work at the House progresses very slow – alteration upon alteration. I am apprehensive that Mr Brandon had not well matured his Plan before he
began – tho’ it is generally the case with those high Architects, they generally do things twice before it suits. Don’t tell Mr Brandon what I say, for I know nothing is ever got by offending such Gentry – for they will do as they like, or do nothing.  

On 19 July Combes expressed worries about the demolition of the back wall and some internal walls of the old Pavilion, which would

thro’ the House open as far as the foot of the front Stairs – This would be of little consequence if it was likely to be closed in before the winter, but this is out of the question for I do not believe it will be closed in for a year to come seeing what progress has already been made ... by the end of August the new walls of the House will be Two feet eight inches above the ground – Perceiving that it would be impossible to get any part of it covered in before the Winter made me object to thro’ the House open for so long a time without first obtaining your consent – But of course you can do as you like.

A letter from the rector of Fonthill Gifford to Morrison written the following year was hardly reassuring: ‘the works at the Pavilion are advancing, but the character of the perfected building is not yet discernable’.  

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Fig. 6.10  
David Brandon, plan of Fonthill House, formerly the Pavilion.  
Fonthill Estate Archives, F/2/1120.
The plasterers finished their work in the late summer of 1848; the tower was completed by the end of the year, as was the new porte-cochère. James Combes Junior (who had succeeded his father as the estate’s agent) sent details of the work to Morrison on 3 January 1849: ‘I make the total expenditure in respect of the House to be £7238 – which with Bills due to Laurence Beckett & for Glass, Iron Work, Plaster, & plasterer &c abt £800 altogether £8000.’ However Brandon warned Morrison in September ‘there remains to be done the alterations of the inside of the portico, the fixing of the stonework of the conservatory above the windows – & some carving in stone which Fowler (the plasterer) is competent to do – In the inside, the work is nearly finished except the morning room & the passage leading to it.’

In 1850, when the building works were completed, the surviving pavilion of Fonthill ‘Splendens’ was transformed into a new Fonthill House. James Morrison gave the house, its contents and the estate (3,254 acres valued at over £82,000) to Alfred by deed of settlement. Alfred’s sister Emily thought the idea excellent, writing to her parents on 14 December 1850: ‘I dare say you felt very much about giving up Fonthill for good. I believe Alfred is likely to spend his money well & to look after the poor there, & if you see him happily settled & well employed, I am sure you will not regret your self sacrifice.’

Two years later Alfred again tried to get into Parliament as the Free-Trade candidate for Wallingford, the local seat to Basildon (he had failed in 1847 by seven votes), but he lost by four votes, ostensibly because his father was unwilling to spend money on bribes on his behalf. He then gave up any political ambition, focusing on his estate and travel. He led a bachelor existence, looked after at Fonthill by a general servant, Susan Purling, and three male house servants. He kept an apartment in London at 34 St James’s Square, close to the Reform Club and Brooks’, the auction rooms of Christie and Manson and the shops of Mayfair.

After the death of his father in 1857 Alfred’s life changed dramatically. His ownership of the Fonthill estate was confirmed, his income from investments increased and he began to collect on an extraordinary scale. In London he bought a very large town house overlooking Green Park; he commissioned building works at Fonthill and, in 1866, he married.

Part four: The Marquess of Westminster, William Burn, W. A. Nesfield, Charles Raymond Smith and T. H. Wyatt at Fonthill

At exactly the same time that David Brandon began designing the alterations and enlargement of the Pavilion for James Morrison, William Burn was engaged by the Marquess of Westminster to design a new house on the Fonthill Abbey estate. Brandon wrote to Morrison on 18 August 1846 ‘I have received a letter from the
Marquis [sic] of Westminster in which he says that he has been for some time engaged to Mr Burns [sic] to carry out his works at the Abbey'. The project, however, did not progress smoothly.

James Combes was keen to suggest to Morrison that the Marquess was mean and obsessed with privacy:

The Marquis of Westminster [requests] you to put some kind of a fence across the Terrace, he thought as the fence belongs to you so far as there is one that you would like to make the other part, or otherwise he would make it himself as he is determined to stop peoples riding there. I said I would communicate with you and let him know in a few days – The Marquis is said to be determined to make the place as private as it was in the days of Beckfords prosperity. He talks of raising the Abbey wall 3 or 4 feet higher.74

Gervas Huxley, a descendant, and editor of Lady Elizabeth and the Grosvenors (1965), also noted that the Marquess’s parsimony was the ‘the subject of comment.’ He was ‘a man of almost painfully upright character, high-principled, reserved, and ever conscientious of his duties whether as husband and father, in politics, or as a landlord. His tastes were simple and he greatly disliked any form of ostentation or extravagance.’ His only fault in the eyes of his adoring wife was his lack of demonstrativeness: ‘I sometimes tell him he is not demonstrative enough and nobody would know whether he is pleased or not.’ He was one of the richest men in Britain, dedicating his life to service as a Whig MP, then as a member of the House of Lords, Justice of the Peace, Lord Lieutenant of Cheshire, Lord Steward of the Household and Privy Councillor. The Marchioness, however, possessed an unusual capacity for enjoying to the full all the minor pleasures of life, especially in the country; ‘as to being bored in general I don’t find it and I don’t think it need happen with a good constitution and a competency and friends to care about’. They were a devoted couple, both preferring above all things staying in the West Country with their youngest children: he hunting, shooting, fishing and overseeing planting trees, both of them planning and inspecting new cottages and farm buildings, attending church and reading. Building works at Fonthill, Motcombe and Eaton were very much joint efforts, as testified by their diaries (which survive in a private collection).

When William Burn first visited on 16 April 1846 the Marchioness recorded that he was ‘electrified’ by Fonthill, inspecting the ruins and the grounds ‘immediately adjacent’ with the bailiff Mr Jay. There were ‘quantities of wild Daffodils’. Drawings record that the Canterbury Towers were still standing (Figure 6.11) – as well as the Lancaster Tower.

According to James Combes, Burn’s initial idea was to build on the site of the old Abbey, first getting rid of the remaining ruins.
The Marquess of Westminster is pulling down the ruins of the Abbey, this is his Architects advise [sic], not to leave one stone upon another. Public notice is given that there will be no admittance to the Abbey grounds Terrace &c &c. He has also bought all the Oak which Mr Benett had left unsold to the tune of £800. He has again applied to Mr Benett to sell him other lands south of Ruddlemoor Farm, and also some other part of Semley. Mr B. has been lucky in meeting with such a good customer. The Marquess intends to build a large Mansion on the site of the Abbey.  

Mark Girouard has summed up the appeal and success of Burn: ‘if one wanted an architect to design a sensible hard-wearing country house with no nonsense about it, one went to Scotland … in particular to William Burn. His success was so great that in 1844 he moved from Edinburgh to London. Thereafter, until his death in 1870, he had the biggest country house practice in the British Isles.’ He was already working for the Marquess at Eaton in partnership with the garden designer William Andrews Nesfield (1793–1881) and the stone sculptor Charles Raymond Smith. The Marquess was Raymond Smith’s greatest patron. Seven statues, vases, pedestals and other ornaments were commissioned for Eaton by the Marquess, who visited the sculptor’s studio in the New Road, London. 

Nesfield dominated garden design between 1840 and 1860, encouraging ‘the burgeoning field of landscape architecture by elevating the vocational landscape designer to professional landscape architect’. Burn and Nesfield regularly visited
Fonthill in the Nineteenth Century

Fonthill, London and Eaton to discuss their designs. Burn’s first drawing of the new house at Fonthill is dated 19 September 1846, though it is not clear if the building was to be on the site of the Abbey. Part of the ruin was cleared, including the Canterbury Towers, but the Lancaster Tower was left. The Marquess recorded the process in his diary: ‘We drove over to Fonthill for some shooting. Inspected the Pulling down the Ruins with Mr Hale & walked with Jay about the grounds.’

Burn worked on the design of his Fonthill Abbey for the next six years (the last surviving drawing is dated 3 March 1852). However, he showed one finished drawing at the Royal Academy in 1850 (Figure 6.12). The rector of Fonthill Gifford was a little unsure of the style, which he described to James Morrison as ‘a mixture of the light French Castle with the Scotch’. Girouard summed it up as ‘a dour Victorian exorcism of Beckford’s extravagant fantasies.’

In 1853, however, before any work began on the site, the Marquess changed his mind about the whole project. He recorded in his diary visiting Fonthill on 12 May with his wife, daughter Agnes and Mr Burn, ‘where we examined the quarries & the place for building. Mr Lyon [the Marquess’s bailiff from Motcombe] met us there & Mr Parker & Master Mason.’ The next day, Burn and Parker returned to London; the Marquess and Marchioness had a ‘long talk with Mr Lyon & decided upon not building a large House at Fonthill’.

What had happened? The Marquess had been rumoured to be ‘nibbling’ at the Stalbridge estate in Dorset in 1849. It was 20 miles to the south west of Fonthill, 10 miles from Motcombe. The estate included the villages of Stalbridge, a number of farms and a park of 570 acres, surrounded by a wall five miles long but with no mansion; the annual rental income was £9,500.

Negotiations had rumbled on until October 1853 when the Marquess finally agreed to buy it from Lord Anglesey. The Marquess’s youngest daughter, Lady

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**Fig. 6.12** William Burn, *Design for Fonthill*, 1850.

GLAHA 42038 © The Hunterian, University of Glasgow 2017.
Theodora, wrote in her study *Motcombe Past and Present* of the extraordinary historical link between Stalbridge and Fonthill: ‘Both of them once in the possession of the Earls of Castlehaven, were once more united in the hands of the same owner’ (see Chapter 3). 

There is no record of the reaction of Burn and Nesfield and no evidence the Marquess paid for the drawings which remained in Burn’s office. Burn did, however, get a commission in 1852 from the Marquess’s son-in-law Sir Michael Shaw Stewart to design a house for his gardener at Ardgowan in Renfrewshire.

On 2 March 1854 both Burn and Nesfield were driven by the Marquess and Marchioness and Mr Lyon in the britchka (an open carriage with a folding hood) to Stalbridge ‘to inspect the Park with a view to building a House on it.’ They were back again in August with Mr Lyon, who laid out the grounds of Stalbridge Park and began planting trees. Presumably Burn and Nesfield also began to draw up their plans for the new house and gardens; however, the commission was uncertain as the Marquess was still attracted to building at Fonthill.

In September 1855 the Marquess acquired the extraordinary model of Fonthill Abbey made by James Wyatt for Beckford, and in the spring of 1856 he was discussing the restoration of part of the surviving Abbey with Mr Fish, who had been carrying out further additions to their house at Motcombe. In January 1857 the work at Motcombe was completed but still no work had started at Stalbridge. Then on 6 March the Marquess noted in his diary ‘we drove over to Fonthill where we met Mr Burn & Mr Keith from London to mark the site for the new House at Fonthill’. There was to be no house built at Stalbridge.

Burn’s second attempt at a house at Fonthill took another five years to complete. No drawings survive but the finished building was a reduced version of the first, still in the French Scottish Baronial style (*Figure 6.13*). The Marchioness’s diary entry, also for 6 March, describes the selection of a new site, which may confirm that the first proposal worked up by Burn was on or close to the ruins.

We got up at 7 ½ & breakfasted at 9 before Prayers... got to Fonthill at 1 ½ met there Mr Burn Keith his Foreman ... & again a good deal of measuring – discussing the Plans & finally settled satisfactorily on the site of the house. In the large field at the head of the Lake ... Ag. Theo & I walked down to the new [?embankment] & cutting for the Creek, & round the Lake, back to the Tower – which with the Cottage is looking very nice - & the Bowling Green in formation.

The Clerk of Works was to be William McLeish, a Scotsman who lived in Fonthill Bishop.

On 11 March the Marchioness was discussing the site of the kitchen garden: ‘we found we must give up making the Kitchen Garden in the sloping ground below the new House, as it wd interfere too much with the Views both ways & another site must be looked for.’ The site eventually chosen was in a field
below the house at a distance of a quarter of a mile. It was the subject of an article in the *Journal of Horticulture and Cottage Gardener* in 1888. "The kitchen garden is enclosed and divided in two portions by high brick walls. It is situated on the face of the hill about a quarter mile east of the abbey and having a south aspect. The soil being stiff loam on a bed of clay is not only congenial to the growth of vegetables, of which there is a good supply, but also of fruit trees." By the spring of 1857 work was proceeding on the house (the concrete foundations), the grounds, particularly around Bitham Lake, and the remaining part of Beckford’s Abbey, the Lancaster Tower:

EG 27 April 1857 Fonthill where we found all the things going on very satisfactorily – the little Tower nearly up at the rear of the … old abbey … cuttings, creeks, & indentations … Round the Lake … The foundations of the house preparing with concrete. Watchmens sheds & offices erected. By August the walls of the house were up to the top of the drawing room windows, while the system of creeks and cuttings around the lake, devised by Mr Batten, was almost finished. Planting included magnolias, on the knoll between the house and the head of the lake; also *Wellingtonia giganteas* (*Sequoiadendron giganteum*), among the first in England. Nesfield’s terrace garden was on a smaller scale than the one at Eaton but similarly close to the house, with a central axis leading to a distant view of picturesque scenery.
While decisions were still being made about building a house on the Abbey estate, the Marquess began improving conditions for his tenants in Fonthill Gifford. He had acquired 39 cottages and gardens forming 46 tenements and proceeded to replace the majority of the houses. The Marquess’s action was commensurate with the preoccupation of landowners all over the country, as Jill Allibone explains:

cottage building became a preoccupation of the landed classes as a measure of self-protection and also as a means of display. A man living in a grand house did not wish to see hovels at his gate; rehousing his tenants could demonstrate his good taste, philanthropy, and also be a measure of the wealth which allowed the building work to take place.96

This approach would also be followed by Alfred Morrison.

The first reference to new cottages in the Marquess’s diary is on 4 September 1855: ‘I walked to the new Cottages by Stop Farm.’ These buildings were the closest of the cottages to the farm (see Figure 6.14). A couple of years later, seven red-brick double cottages had been built in the village ‘& more must be built’; so wrote the Marchioness in her diary.97 The earliest are dated 1853 (see Figure 6.15). These doubles are different in style to the four further along Stop Street.

The double (or semi-detached) cottage is of interest. A letter from ‘Selim’, ‘an amateur architect from Wiltshire’, published in Loudon’s Encyclopaedia of Cottages in 1846, explained the advantages:

Fig. 6.14 Double cottage near Stop Farm, Fonthill Gifford.
Photograph © Caroline Dakers.
Double cottages have several advantages, especially in a scattered village. Two cottages are built cheaper, if united, than if separate; and the effect is often more picturesque. Besides, it adds to the comfort of the poor, to have a neighbour close at hand, in case of sickness; and, in other respects, near neighbours may be mutually useful to each other … It also facilitates attendance on divine worship, as the two families might alternately heat their ovens on Sundays, and one of the women might remain at home, to take care of the dinners for both houses, and have an eye to the gardens; a very necessary precaution in most English villages, particularly in the fruit season. Besides these obvious advantages, there is a feeling of security and cheerfulness in having a near neighbour, especially to an old couple, who must often stand in need of assistance.98

Three further pairs of stone semi-detached cottages were also built in Stop Street, Fonthill Gifford, with the date 1857 (see Figure 6.16), and another between Stop Farm and the parish church.

Three more pairs of cottages were built below Beckford’s terraces. The Marchioness recorded on 25 April 1865 ‘W & I then walked with Davie, by a
beautiful walk in the woods … then up & down the Village to look for a site for a double cottage & we thought we found best at Greenwich’. All were built in a rustic Gothic style.

These cottages were designed and built by local builders, stonemasons and carpenters, as were two of the lodges to the new Abbey. Possibly the Mr Fish who made additions to Motcombe House and built cottages at Semley was responsible. However, William Burn was commissioned to design the two main lodges to the new Abbey. Their Scottish Baronial references are in marked contrast to the other quaint lodges built of brick, stone and timber (see Figures 6.17 and 6.18).

The Marquess’s decision in 1859 to engage James Pulham (1820–98) to design rockery work in the American Garden was in advance of fashion. While the Pulham family had been in business for a number of years, the Fonthill commission was one of their earliest on a large scale and also for someone as distinguished as the Marquess. The Prince of Wales and Lord Rothschild commissioned Pulham works at Sandringham and Waddesdon some years later.

The Pulhams became well known for creating ‘a wide range of artificial landscapes … fashionable bespoke landscapes’. They used both artificial and natural rocks and a ‘proprietary cement with a striking resemblance, in colour and durability, to natural stone’. This came to be known as ‘Pulhamite.’ James Pulham, the second generation of Pulhams in the business, had established his home and manufactory at Broxbourne, Hertfordshire, in about 1848 and won prizes at the Great Exhibition of 1851. Presumably the Marquess saw his work there and was impressed.

Fig. 6.16  Double cottage, Stop Street, Fonthill Gifford.
Tisbury Local History Society Archive.
The diaries of the Westminsters record James Pulham visiting in 1860 and again in 1862. The Pulhams’ publication of 1877, listing all their clients and commissions so far, described the work at Fonthill as ‘Waterfalls in a Rocky Stream; Pond, Island, Rocky Pass and Cliffs, &c., in 1859 and 1860’. A pump (by Green and Carter of Taunton) was installed at the bottom of the steep Pulham gully; the
water flowing down the gully was then used to power a sawmill (see Chapter 10 for further discussion of the Pulham works).

On 3 March 1862, the Marquess wrote in his diary ‘to Fonthill walked down to the Farm & slept first in the New House’. Sixteen years had passed since Burn was commissioned to design a house on the Abbey estate. Returning in the autumn, the family held an extended party across 11 and 12 September for all their tenants and villagers from Wiltshire and Dorset (some came by train). The Shaftesbury Rifle Band played; there was dancing, football and other games, as well as dinner and tea on both days.  

While staying in London for the Season, the Marquess and Marchioness had gone shopping for Fonthill, buying furniture and stone figures at Seeleys. They also attended the International Exhibition in September, buying more pieces of furniture, most probably including the urns visible in the photograph of the tidied-up ruin (Figure 6.19). The photograph also documents the single-storey cloister range added by the Marquess.

Firm evidence of the contents of Burn’s house does not survive. No inventory was taken of the Westminster houses at Fonthill (or Motcombe) and there are no surviving photographs of the interiors of the new Abbey, Motcombe or the surviving tower. After the death of the Marquess, his widow distributed a few pieces of furniture and paintings at Fonthill Abbey and at Motcombe between her youngest unmarried children, Theodora and Richard. This provides some indication of the Westminsters’ taste, which was typical of the period and their position in society.  

At Fonthill she listed Buhl cabinets, Burmese idols, a magnificent Canaletto and

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**Fig. 6.19**  Old Fonthill Abbey, photograph, 4 October 1952.

Wiltshire Museum, Devizes
a portrait of the Marquess by Partridge. The artist visited their London house in 1865; his studio at 21 Brook Street was conveniently positioned close by.105

Recent sales at Christie’s of miscellaneous pieces dating from the Westminsters’ occupation of the ‘new’ Abbey include George III armchairs, a mahogany concertina-action card table; a Regency mahogany dining chair by Gillow; a George IV commode by Robert Blake; porcelain including Meissen Kakiemon plates, Vincennes blue lapis-ecuelle, and some Sèvres pieces; a Japanese chest on a stand. Further pieces in marble were acquired, like the urns, at International Exhibitions, and include solid Cornish serpentine obelisks by John Organ of Penzance, Derbyshire black marble vases on plinths and a large malachite and Derbyshire black marble ewer and basin by the Ashford marble works.106

Charles Raymond Smith was commissioned to sculpt two large groups for the formal gardens close to the house and these were near completion when the Marchioness visited his studio in the New Road in July 1865; ‘quite beautiful’, she thought.107 The groups were the Four Seasons and the Four Elements (Figure 6.20).

With their house completed, if not completely furnished, and new cottages being built in Fonthill Gifford, the Westminsters turned to their other passion, building churches. They had already commissioned George Alexander to build at Motcombe; in 1863 they decided to rebuild the church at Fonthill Gifford.108

Richard Colt Hoare was not complimentary about the Georgian church built by Alderman Beckford (see Chapter 4 Figure 4.3): ‘the church is a modern edifice, with a portico of four columns and a cupola, all out of proportion. The interior forms a perfect square, measuring 34 feet 4 inches either way, and is unworthy of further notice.’109 By the 1860s it was in bad repair, and the parishioners approached Westminster for

Fig. 6.20 Raymond Smith statuary, ‘New’ Fonthill Abbey.
Photograph © Caroline Dakers.
assistance. He preferred to build a new church. His chosen architect was Thomas Henry Wyatt, at one time in partnership with David Brandon, who had enlarged the Pavilion for James Morrison.

Wyatt was, in 1863, at the top of the architectural profession. John Martin Robinson sums up his success and his appeal:

He was highly efficient. His well-organised office was able to cope with his large practice and to turn out appropriate designs for every occasion…. His career was that of the quintessential Victorian professional man, playing his part in the internal politics of the profession, sitting on all the committees, and rising to its highest posts and honours where he presided with tact, energy and courtesy.

He possessed all the gentlemanly virtues; his manners were unfailingly perfect. His obituary declared he was not ‘a brilliant wit’ but ‘he was conciliatory and politic; always modest and a gentleman’. His appeal for the Marquess must have been in part his social standing; ‘of the architects of his day he was considered to be socially pre-eminent’.

Wyatt had already designed one of his finest churches in Wiltshire, SS. Mary and Nicholas at Wilton (1840–5), in the Italian Romanesque style. His later churches were all Gothic; Holy Trinity Fonthill Gifford, in the opinion of Robinson, was to be one of his most successful (Figure 6.21). It is quite small, in the French thirteenth-century style; ‘the stone vaulted chancel is impressive and the build-up of the east end from the polygonal apse through the stair turret to the asymmetrical spire is spectacular’.

Wyatt visited the Marquess in London on 26 February 1864; the Marquess then consulted the rector, Mr Coxe Radcliffe, on 5 March, about their preferred site, and invited Wyatt to visit on 1 April to ‘fix the site’. Alderman Beckford’s church was demolished and the new placed exactly on top, leaving no access to the tombs of the Alderman, his wife and William Beckford’s wife; they all still lie somewhere beneath. The foundation stone of the old church is set into the wall of the vestry. It reads ‘18 MAY 1748 WILLM BECKFORD ESQr FOUNDER.’ While the church was being built, services were held for the parish in the new small schoolroom to which the Westminsters had contributed. They attended services in the church for the first time in September 1866.

Wyatt was immediately commissioned to design a new chancel for St Leonard’s Semley (designing the rest of the church in 1874); St John the Baptist Hindon followed in 1870–1. He also carried out work at St Mary’s Stalbridge in 1878 and restored, reroofed and refitted All Saints Fonthill Bishop in 1879.

In 1865 the Westminsters engaged a specialist gardener to look after Fonthill. Robert Burns Annandale (Figure 6.22) was one of many Scottish gardeners who came to England during the Victorian period to take charge of English estates and gardens. He had worked for John Rennie Strachan Carnegie of Seaton House Forfar
(where he cultivated a new cooking apple called the ‘Seaton House’) before taking up his appointment at Fonthill. His status was that of the respected professional, as attested in the letters he exchanged with both the Marchioness and Lady Theodora. He was quickly promoted to bailiff and remained at Fonthill until his death in 1881. He cultivated Royal George, Noblesse and Violette peach cultivars in the 100-foot-long curvilinear roofed peach house; fine pear and plum trees were trained against the kitchen garden walls and the central walk had pyramidally trained pears on each side. His skills were confirmed in the *Journal of Horticulture* (1888).

Annandale’s arrival coincided with a period of relative calm for the Westminsters. They continued to fund the building or repair of houses and cottages, schools and churches across all their estates. A ‘cheque account’ of the Marquess’s for 1868 lists all the charities he supported: clothing clubs, coal funds, general relief funds, hospital funds, local volunteer funds, curates’ funds, widows
of the clergy, clothing for the poor. He was spending several hundred pounds a year in Wiltshire and Dorset alone.115

Each year they moved between Eaton, London (for the Season), Motcombe and Fonthill. Theodora, their youngest child, remained with them. She was 25 years old in 1865. Their son Richard, a bachelor, and Liberal MP for Flintshire since 1861, made regular visits. All their other children apart from Gilbert, who died at sea in 1854, were married. At Fonthill and Motcombe the company was mostly just the Marquess, Marchioness and Theodora, with their servants.116 Their dinner guests comprised the local clergy and owners of neighbouring estates.

Theodora was an avid watercolour artist and her paintings are almost the only surviving images of Fonthill Abbey in the nineteenth century. She was also a serious historian, sending essays to the Gentleman’s Magazine117 and writing a history of Motcombe. She was thrilled when she received Motcombe Past and Present from the booksellers on 13 August 1867 ‘bound & ready to be published! Hurray!’118 Her greatest passion, however, was horses. She photographed them (usually with poor results); she also drove a variety of carriages, rode all over ‘my lovely & beloved county’ and was an avid huntswoman.
The Westminsters’ enjoyment of Fonthill and Motcombe was short-lived. In October 1869 the Marquess was struck down at Fonthill with erysipelas, which developed into a malignant carbuncle. Within days he was unconscious; he died on 31 October. The Marchioness and Theodora were present: ‘we saw his last gasp! He is happy! But poor Mother!’ the latter wrote.

In his will the Marquess left all his southern estates to his wife for her lifetime (the Eaton and London properties were already left to Hugh, now the 3rd Marquess\textsuperscript{119}), together with his personal estate consisting of properties worth £195,000. Theodora received £4,000 a year (if she married this would be reduced to £1,000), some magnificent sapphire and diamond jewellery and a property, Pensbury House, Shaftesbury. After the Marchioness’s death, Motcombe was to pass to her son Richard and Fonthill Abbey to her son-in-law Sir Michael Shaw Stewart of Ardgowan, the husband of Lady Octavia.

The brief period in which the Westminsters enjoyed their new Fonthill Abbey, just seven years, coincided with significant changes in the life of Alfred Morrison, their immediate neighbour and owner of the other half of the Fonthill estate.

Part five: Alfred Morrison, George Devey and Owen Jones on the Fonthill House estate

In 1857, following the death of his father James Morrison, Alfred’s inheritance was confirmed: the Fonthill Park estate, Berwick St Leonard, Place Farm, Idmiston Farm, land and property in Hindon and Tisbury, the North Waltham estate in Hampshire and the Ton Mawr estate, Neath in South Wales, as well as American securities worth £88,333.6s.8d. In 1861 the Fonthill estate was valued at £157,690; Alfred’s total real estate £170,776, his capital account £618,686 and his revenue account £32,301. He was worth a total of £821,764 – by twenty-first-century values some £90 million.\textsuperscript{120}

Alfred (Figure 6.23) began improving Fonthill before his father died. Thomas B. Miles, a Shaftesbury builder, made repairs and alterations to the stables and new iron hatches were constructed at the head of Fonthill Lake to trap eels. In 1858, following the departure of the steward James Combes Junior to seek his fortune in Australia, the collecting of rents and general management of his estates was given to the rapidly expanding land agent partnership, Rawlence and Squarey, for £115 per annum. Alfred also engaged more servants in Fonthill House, four male and three female.

At the same time that Alfred was improving the estate he also began to indulge his other passion, collecting; for the rest of his life he would divide his time and energy between building up one of the most extraordinary and important collections of art and objets d’art in Britain, and developing the Fonthill estate, building cottages and breeding champion race horses and Downland sheep. In 1859, for
example, he attended the sale of the Northwick collection, buying two paintings by Bronzino.

The following year he commissioned a handsome farmhouse at Ashley Wood and restored the church at Berwick St Leonard, and in 1861 he began to buy precious porcelain looted from the Summer Palace in Peking (Figure 6.24).  

Alfred never stinted on commissioning quality building work and once ‘hooked’ on the work of a particular artist, designer or craftsman his inclination was to buy everything he could lay his hands on. He bought 11 works for Fonthill by the American artist Jasper Cropsey at a sale in London in 1863, and over 30 paintings and drawings by John Brett. Between 1861 and 1866 he spent £40,000

**Fig. 6.23** Placido Zuloaga, *Alfred Morrison*, ca. 1880.
Private collection.
on porcelain alone; his purchases at the 1862 International Exhibition in London amounted to £7,500. These are very large sums indeed.

The Ashley Wood farmhouse may have used some of the finished stone from George Mortimer’s woollen factory, which Alfred finally demolished. The builder appears to have been John Carder, employing 28 men and 2 boys and living in Fonthill Bishop. In the 1871 census he is described as Clerk of Works. But who designed the handsome building remains unknown.

For the interior of Fonthill House, Alfred engaged the architect-designer Owen Jones (whose dairy had not been built at Fonthill for James Morrison) and the London firm of craftsmen Jackson and Graham, whose work he had seen at the 1862 International Exhibition. Owen Jones (Figure 6.25) designed and Jackson and Graham made furniture, fabrics, carpets and also the entire fittings for the ‘new room’ at Fonthill.

This ‘new room’ was not, of course, new; it was most likely to have been the morning room built by Brandon, with its curved end providing the inspiration for
the larger of a number of display cases. These cases of ebony inlaid with ivory were designed for Alfred's growing collection of Imperial porcelain; the doors, door cases and skirting panels were all in marquetry; a mirror was designed with a veneered frame of ebony inlaid with ivory; the room was completed with a set of six marquetry chairs and a table (see Chapter 17, Figure 17.11). The Marquess and Marchioness of Westminster and Theodora visited in the summer of 1864. Theodora was more interested in Alfred's horses, but suitably impressed by the display of porcelain.

He met us & took us up to his Stables to show us his horses of which he has about 26 or so! Some very handsome & all in perfect order. Hunters & thorough bred & one beautiful … Irish pony – the most perfect little creature possible – he had them all out for us to see, & a magnificent scene of kicking & rearing there was, when 'Cornelian' just bought from Ld Stainford, was led
round! – After all these had been trotted out & we had looked at them also in their boxes he took us to his house & there showed us the most wonderfull [sic] collection of Oriental China ever known, his house is filled with it, cabinets jammed full of it & each specimen perfect & exquisite – some glorious – enamels too – one piece of perfectly black china - really unique – such a collection in short, as never was seen, & never can be, any where else. It took us some time to see it all & he was most kind in showing us everything.¹²⁴

Not content with turning Fonthill House into a palace of art, Alfred acquired the lease in 1863 to a very large house in London, 16 Carlton House Terrace, a prestigious address. The team of Jones, Jackson and Graham then proceeded to decorate the ceilings, and design the furniture and furnishings.¹²⁵ The rooms rapidly filled with Alfred’s collections.

Back in Fonthill, Alfred turned to another architect, George Devey (1820–86), to design a handful of unusual cottages and to embellish the grand northern entrance to the estate. But why Devey? According to Mark Girouard, Devey ‘deliberately kept out of the main stream; he practiced in isolation in a secure little world of aristocrats and rich bankers’.¹²⁶ One of his early patrons was the 2nd Duke of Sutherland, who commissioned work at Cliveden, Trentham and Dunrobin from 1857 onwards. The Duke was the brother of the Marchioness of Westminster, so Alfred may have heard of Devey through his neighbours. From 1860 Devey worked for Baron Mayer Amschel de Rothschild at Mentmore; Alfred’s competitive streak, combined with his concerns about social status, may also have encouraged him to approach an architect taken up by a Rothschild and a Duke.

Devey’s personal interest in all his commissions led to his photographing many of his completed works, and some of these images have survived. ‘Devey loved bricks and mortar, and to his delight in seeing a building photographed in the process of erection we owe the possession of many interesting representations of houses, still roofless and surrounded by scaffold poles.’¹²⁷

Devey’s first commission in 1862 was to design a new cottage on the crossroads to the south of the estate, close to Papworth’s lodge and the Beckford Arms (Figure 6.26).¹²⁸ The result is a typical Devey picturesque thatched cottage, very similar to the South Lodge of Mentmore Towers, designed for Baron Mayer Amschel de Rothschild in 1868. ‘Turnpike Cottages’ Fonthill Bishop was a most unusual design (Figure 6.27), a row of four cottages, in a stripped, vernacular, almost Arts and Crafts style. Each dwelling had a living room and scullery on the ground floor; the range of offices behind contained four privies, two sheds and two ovens. The total cost of the project was £794, with Devey charging 5 per cent. His invoice sent in December 1864 described the work carried out:

Taking instructions for Row of Cottages: and 9 attendances at Fonthill Bishop – Staking out and arranging details with Mr Carder; also for walling and fences in connection with site, and giving directions generally – say 6 half
days – Preparing a set of plans – elevations &c and superintending execution while in progress.¹²⁹

Alfred obviously paid promptly; Devey sent back his receipt for the sum dated 11 January 1865. Devey also designed a double cottage in Berwick St Leonard
Devey’s final work was on the archway and approach to the estate. Papworth had built a wall flanking the approach with a first sequence of piers; Devey was to create a much grander impact, to reflect the status of Alfred Morrison. The ‘summary of valuation of Masons and other work’ drawn up by John Harding on 7 July 1866 totalled £3,327.6s.4d, while another itemised account of the cost of work and materials totals £2,215.6s.5d, plus the mason’s bill of £1,029.15s.\textsuperscript{130} The work included supplying two large piers with sculptured terminals, a flanking wall with rusticated arches and balustrades on the north side of the lodge, and curved ashlar wing walls with balustrades to the east and west ends of the lodges. Devey’s account book notes charges to Alfred on 2 September 1867 for £133.12s.3d and on 26 March 1877 for £37.13s.7d. These presumably apply to work at the archway (Figure 6.29).\textsuperscript{131}

Alfred was a bachelor when he established himself on the Fonthill estate, turning Fonthill House and 16 Carlton House Terrace into palaces of art. On 11 April 1866, aged 44, he married Mabel Chermside, daughter of the rector of Wilton; she was just 18. After a honeymoon on the Continent the couple settled at Fonthill and a temporary London home in Harley Street (Carlton House Terrace was unfinished). The Westminsters called but Theodora couldn’t resist a snobbish comment about Mabel: ‘very young very cheerful, invincibly goodnatured & quite as if she had had £50,000 a year all her life’. A few days later Mr Gladstone and

(Figure 6.28): each dwelling had a living room, scullery and pantry on the ground floor and three bedrooms each above.
Lady Herbert (from Wilton) came by train: the Herbergs were close to Mabel’s family in the Old Rectory, and Alfred a Liberal supporter if never an MP.  

The Morrison’s first child, Rachel, was christened in the new church at Fonthill Gifford on 28 April 1867 and Alfred presented the church with a font and pulpit. Alfred’s collecting continued unabated, but he also considerably enlarged the estate at Fonthill. In 1868, he acquired land in Fonthill Bishop which the Kings (yeoman farmers at Fonthill) had bought from John Farquhar; in 1875 and 1876 he bought 2,205 acres of Great Ridge (now on the north side of the A303) from Edmund du Fane; in 1878 he bought 520 acres in Chilmark in an exchange of land with Lord Pembroke of Wilton; by 1892 he owned 1,360 acres in Tisbury alone. Cuttings in a ‘scrapbook of agricultural press-cuttings 1882–1883’ testify to the efficiency of the estate and the quality of both the sheep and the conditions in which they were kept. Alfred’s manager, Mr Read, was quoted as saying ‘we have not felt the depression which has prevailed of late years in many other districts and counties’.

Looking from Fonthill House across the lake stocked with swans to the deer park beyond, W. W. G., the author of ‘Wiltshire Downs and Down Farming’, was impressed: ‘Fonthill House and its surroundings comprise one of the fine selections – the natural lake having been the centre of attraction – that our forefathers made for developing a large family domain.’ He was unaware the ‘natural lake’ had been formed by the Beckfords from a tributary of the River Nadder.
More cottages were built in Berwick St Leonard, Fonthill Bishop and at Ridge; additions were made to the South Lodge in 1884 and a new block of farm buildings (now the estate office) built in 1887. None however were as distinguished as those designed by Devey. Three large top-lit galleries were added to Fonthill House some time in the 1880s to provide more space for Alfred’s collections (Figure 6.30). Photographs taken of these galleries remain the only images of the interior of the house. There are, however, a few recorded comments by neighbours. Madeline Wyndham, daughter of the Wyndhams of Clouds House, East Knoyle, wrote to her elder sister in 1885:

I suppose you know that the Morrisons live only about 6 miles from here [Clouds]. Mrs Morrison is very pretty and very delicate. She is always very smart, and you have never heard anyone talk so much, one flow of conversation … Last Saturday they gave a party to which we all went. There was most beautiful music given in the picture gallery. Henry Holmes played the violin Mrs Hutchinson sang, quite beautifully, and Madame Haas played the piano.  

Fig. 6.30 The Saloon, Fonthill House. One of three galleries added by Alfred Morrison.
Photograph, BL 08782/003, by permission of Historic England Archive.
The Duke of Westminster (the eldest son of Richard, Marquess of Westminster) was a friend of the Wyndhams, but he was not impressed by Alfred’s collections when he called by in 1878:

Mr A is an eccentric individual with peculiar views on most things, one being never to give away a farthing in ‘charity’ – another to have 33 hunters valued at 300 apiece and never to ride any of them – another to rear 1000 pheasants and to shoot them all himself – another to denounce all art and artists except those of which he himself approves (and there [sic] are a queer lot).\(^{135}\)

Part six: The division of the Westminster estates in Wiltshire and Dorset

When the Duke of Westminster visited Alfred Morrison’s Fonthill House in 1878 his mother the Dowager Marchioness of Westminster was still alive. Since being widowed in 1869, she and Theodora had lived at Motcombe and Fonthill Abbey. A few weeks after the Marquess’s death, his son-in-law and trustee Sir Michael Shaw Stewart proposed that the younger surviving son Richard (who would eventually inherit the Motcombe estate) be immediately given the Stalbridge estate ‘for his own … Worth £9,500 a year plenty to do but also plenty done farms & cottages finished & town beginning.’\(^{136}\) By early 1870 plans had been drawn up for a new house (again) in the park, as well as for a house for the agent Mr George Allen.

The agent’s house, called Grove House (Figure 6.31) was designed by the London architect George Aitchison.\(^{137}\) It is a most unusual house. Aitchison is now well known as the architect of the exotic ‘Orientalist’ house of the artist Sir Frederic Leighton, President of the Royal Academy, in Holland Park, and Grove House has a similar stone balcony. Aitchison also designed a handsome schoolhouse with similar features in East Knoyle (close to both Fonthill and Motcombe) for Alfred Seymour. He exhibited a ‘design for house at Stalbridge Park’ at the Royal Academy in 1872 (number 1233), which may have been for the mansion rather than the agent’s house. The Builder, however, was dismissive: ‘small and unfortunately rather feebly-executed pen drawing … wants more force and breadth of treatment to make it a successful work.’\(^{138}\) Once more the decision was taken not to build in Stalbridge Park, possibly because Richard had limited resources (his father had left him an annual income of only £2,000 in addition to the Stalbridge estate) or was more interested in pursuing a political career, becoming Chief Liberal Whip under Gladstone and playing a major part in negotiations with Charles Parnell. He spent extended periods in Ireland and both his wives were from Irish families.\(^{139}\) He did however continue the family tradition by initiating an extensive building programme in Stalbridge, including Westminster Cottages and Anglesea Cottages.
In 1886, after he broke from Gladstone over Home Rule, he left the Commons but was made Baron Stalbridge by way of compensation.

Meanwhile for the Dowager Marchioness and Theodora life at Motcombe and Fonthill followed a regular routine of good works, attending church, taking classes at the school in Motcombe, painting, reading, walking and fishing in Bitham Lake. Theodora’s painting of the Abbey ruins (Figure 6.32) has smoke rather incongruously belching from the chimney added by the Westminsters. Now called the Old Tower Lodge, it was tenanted by a Chelsea Pensioner. Robert Burns Annandale, who was both bailiff and head gardener, moved into Lawn Farm, a model farm built by the Westminsters on the southern edge of the estate. He worked tirelessly to carry out the instructions of the Marchioness. She was sending him proposals for schemes even on a tour of Switzerland in 1874:

Zurich … the country itself is beautiful a great deal of wood & cultivation & the gardens full of Lilacs & Flowers which has reminded me of Fonthill, where I have been thinking of a covered seat, of which I send you a rough sketch of a wooden seat – made of planks – I think it should be from 10 to 12 feet diameter & covered also with Planks – supported by a Pole in the middle & ½ screened from the Southern sun, by a wall of weatherboard, it might have poles to support the open half – or a low broad wooden seat inside the

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Fig. 6.31 Grove House, Stalbridge, photograph, Messrs Knight, Frank & Rutley, Sale catalogue, Town and Agricultural Properties Stalbridge and Bagber, 3/4 September 1918.

screened part the best place for it, after much consideration, as we want it near the House, & still to be shaded in the hot weather, would be between the Oak Trees opposite the house, & the Steps which descend from the Flower garden (in the centre) with its back, of course, to the midday sun – a little path could be mown to it in the grass – as it would be for summer use - & we might plant creepers over it, afterwards. I write at once – as it may take some time to prepare the Planks it must also have a wooden floor – I think you will understand my meaning.  

The seat was completed in time for their summer sojourn at Fonthill. Theodora’s hunting took over her life in the winter months; she noted on 4 April 1871 being given the hunt buttons of the Blackmore Vale Hunt, an important occasion. She was also taking on the accounts for both estates, working closely with the new agent Mr Genge. Her organisational skills were formidable. The fete for all their tenants held at Fonthill across three days in June 1872 was a triumph.
of organisation. An ornamental arch and tent were erected on the bowling green in front of Beckford’s surviving tower. On the first day 348 attended, comprising tenants from Fonthill and Stalbridge with their wives and two children per family, also the Huntsmen and whips. They were driven up to the tower, then walked down to the new Abbey for a tour through the rooms and round Bitham Lake, back to the Tower for dinner served on three long tables in the tent with grapes and strawberries from the kitchen garden. Music for dancing was provided by two bands from Shaftesbury and Salisbury. The Motcombe tenants were entertained the next day with their wives or sisters. There was football, dancing and a tea in the tent of cold meat, cake, bread and butter, pies and ham. On the last day 70 school children came for tea and cold meat in the tower, then played games with India rubber balls.

A rather different reception was given to Disraeli, who stayed at the new Abbey in August 1874. Since being widowed the Marchioness had gradually lost confidence in the Whigs; she regularly saw the Conservative Prime Minister in London before inviting him to Fonthill. Theodora recorded the visit. He was given the ‘Japan’ room in which to attend to his dispatches, and told amusing stories at dinner though ‘does not eat or drink much’. A morning of rain was spent in his room writing ‘his business for his messenger who was despatched by the 1.5 train [to London]’, but blue skies in the afternoon permitted his visit to Shaftesbury and Motcombe:

Drove up to the town stopping at Bennetts where a little crowd of the principal shop people was assembled & then to the Promenade to look at the view & then the church bells began ringing out of compliment & we got in again & drove to the Post Office & calling at Upcraft’s went on to Motcombe [for tea] … drove back by the Shafy [Shaftesbury] Lodge & straight up to the Tower, & along the avenues as far as the cross roads to give Mr Disraeli an idea of the place & he was delighted with it.\textsuperscript{141}

The following morning Theodora drove Disraeli in the phaeton to Tisbury station, where a small crowd had gathered to cheer.

The income from the Marchioness’s estates barely covered regular costs, as revealed by the accounts for the Wiltshire properties in 1871. Rents amounted to £5,000 but outgoings, including annuities, brickmaking, subscriptions, carpenters, masons, labourers, rates, taxes and repairs to the new Abbey, totalled £6,400. Consequently the Marchioness used her large personal income to improve the lives of her tenants. She gave the site and £2,000 towards an endowment fund for the Westminster Memorial Hospital in Shaftesbury (built by public subscription);\textsuperscript{142} she paid for almshouses in Shaftesbury in memory of the Marquess and supported the rebuilding of the Grammar School; at Motcombe she paid for a new school for boys and financed a reservoir.

There was more work too for T. H. Wyatt, whose personality undoubtedly appealed to the widow: he was ‘absolutely devoid of all affectation and all
pretentiousness – without a word that glittered – full of simple sound sagacity and everyday information’. In 1874 the Marchioness bought an estate of 580 acres near Faringdon in Oxfordshire and commissioned a brand-new house, Barcote, to be a country property for Theodora, after her mother died. Theodora, Wyatt, Mr Genge and Robert Annandale used the railway network to meet regularly at Barcote, inspecting the quarry, planning the house and kitchen garden (‘Annandale dug & dug & found a good soil at the top of the hill!’) but also cottages. By August 1875 progress was being made. The Marchioness visited and found ‘the 8 cottages all beautiful inhabited & gardens full of flowers. The house quite wonderfully got on! Some of the windows of the lower story finished & all promising to be beautiful the site excellent.’

Then, to the surprise of her whole family, Theodora agreed to marry Merthyr Guest, son of Sir Josiah John Guest, the South Wales ironmaster who had died in 1850. Merthyr’s mother Lady Charlotte had married for a second time, to Charles Schreiber, her children’s tutor, and they lived close by at Canford Manor, Wimborne, in Dorset. Merthyr lived at Fifehead, only six miles from Motcombe, and the couple had met out hunting. Both were equally obsessed with the sport and all things to do with horses. When Merthyr’s sister Enid, wife of the famous archaeologist Sir Henry Layard, heard the news, she confessed in her diary ‘I do not know her at all – the Peerage says she is the D. of Westminster’s younger sister & 36 years of age.’

The Marchioness wrote to the Queen about the engagement:

after a very long attachment and devotion on his part of which she was ignorant till this summer. Indeed, her determination never to leave me had prevented such a subject entering her mind. But his deep devotion and constancy when she became aware of his feelings and the excellence of his character have touched her so deeply that she is now as much attached to him as he is to her; and most thankful I am to have the prospect of leaving her with such a Protector … he intends they should live entirely with me so that I should not be separated from Theodora.

The wedding took place at Motcombe on 8 March 1877. Robert Annandale’s services were required to provide vegetables for the guests staying at Fonthill, but also flowers: ‘if you can force some Lilies of the Valley by [8 March] we propose that the Bridesmaids, 4 in number, should have Bouquets of White flowers with a Tuft of something scarlet in the middle, for which I suppose scarlet Geraniums will be most suitable – Rhododendrons would be too large.’ The Marchioness also sent the Annandales two tickets for the church service and transport to and from the ball.

Neither Theodora nor her new husband were particularly fond of the countryside around Barcote, so Merthyr bought Inwood, an estate close to Stalbridge, and proceeded to enlarge the house. From 1879 Inwood became the permanent home of the Marchioness and the Guests, the same year Theodora’s daughter and only
child Elizabeth Augusta was born. Barcote was sold in 1881 for £45,000, but visits were still made in the summer to Motcombe, until the death of the Marchioness in 1891 aged 94.

But what happened to the Fonthill Abbey estate? According to the Marquess’s will, the property was to pass, at his widow’s death, to their son-in-law Sir Michael Shaw Stewart, who was married to Lady Octavia. In 1879 the Marchioness speeded up the process, selling her life interest in the estate to Sir Michael for £100,000. Fortunately the property had been well maintained and the relatively new cottages in Fonthill Gifford provided good accommodation for the tenants. However the Shaw Stewarts were nothing like as rich as the Grosvenors. At the death of the Marchioness nothing more was left to Lady Octavia, leaving the next generation with serious financial headaches.