Upper Lawn was located on what was originally William Beckford’s land, at a time when it could be seen as sheer folly to spend all we had on building something for ourselves: but the act was one of deliberate commitment: the siting was deliberate, for Beckford had built England’s greatest Folly.

(Alison Smithson, 1986)\(^1\)

The mid-twentieth century saw a new addition to the history of architectural creativity on the Fonthill estate. In 1959 architects Alison and Peter Smithson purchased part of the old Upper Lawn Farm and constructed the Upper Lawn Solar Pavilion Folly (Figure 19.1). Originally intended as a summer house, the building became a second home, used as a retreat until the Smithsons sold it in 1982.

The Smithsons

Alison and Peter Smithson were members of a group of young architects in post-war Europe who reacted against the ideas and methods of the older generation leading the process of rebuilding after the war. This group emerged out of CIAM (Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne) in the early 1950s to form Team 10, and were searching for a closer communication between form and social need in architecture and urban design.\(^2\) For Alison and Peter Smithson this corresponded to ideas they had been exploring since 1949 through their design for Hunstanton School in Norfolk; ideas of form, materials and construction that became known as New Brutalism. The Smithsons further developed their ideas from the 1950s into the 1960s through designs such as the proposals for the Golden Lane housing estate (1952), the Economist Building (1959–64) and the Robin Hood Gardens housing estate (1966–71). Alongside their constructed buildings and unexecuted competition designs, the Smithsons’ theories were developed...
and disseminated through their extensive output of publications and teaching. Their writings ensured that their influence would spread beyond built works, and established the Smithsons as two of the most influential European architects of the second half of the twentieth century.

The Upper Lawn Solar Pavilion Folly at Fonthill, built 1959–62, and which the Smithsons continued to adapt and occupy until 1982, played an essential role in the development of these ideas, serving as a testing ground for experimentation in form and material use. Upper Lawn was fundamental to the Smithsons’ interest in creating buildings designed for energy efficiency; its design was an exploration of how to maximise natural light and harness solar warmth. The role of Upper Lawn in the Smithsons’ own architecture and in the genesis of modern sustainable architecture is what most assessments of the building focus upon.

In such assessments the importance of the setting of the Fonthill estate is acknowledged and the integration of the new building within the existing landscape highlighted. But the presence of William Beckford within the layers of the landscape’s history, which was highly valued by the Smithsons and determined their choice of the site, has been noticeably overlooked. As the opening quotation of this essay illustrates, the Smithsons chose to build at Fonthill because of the presence of Beckford, and the location of their building with a direct sightline to where the remains of Fonthill Abbey still stood was just as deliberate. The
Smithsons were following Beckford’s example and building a folly at Fonthill; they were also sharing his desire to make that folly a retreat within the wider landscape.

The connection between the history of Beckford at Fonthill and the Smithsons’ building is expressed by them in *Upper Lawn Solar Pavilion Folly*, published in 1986, four years after they had sold the building. The book is more than just an architectural monograph; it is a record of the evolution of a building and how it can change through inhabitation. It documents the family’s occupation of the house through diary entries and photographs, telling the story ‘as a romantic vignette of a rural play-life of week-end hermits, in a hermitage that is an unassuming permanent-tent’. Together with the unpublished notes by Alison Smithson in the Smithson Family Collection, the book reveals far more than has previously been discussed in overviews of the house about the influence of Beckford on the Smithsons.

### The Smithsons’ encounter with Fonthill

According to Peter Smithson, Alison had known Fonthill as a child, which prompted her to revisit the estate in the mid-1940s. Beckford’s Fonthill Abbey drew her to these early visits, and her discovery of the Abbey remains in the summer of 1945 establishes romanticism in Alison’s ideas about the place:

> First visit of discovery ... was like the Fairy Story of the Sleeping Princess, where the Prince has to hack through brambles and thorn hedge to discover the castle, not in this case intact but since books then tended to claim hardly a stone of the Abbey remained, it was magical enough, when the car had blindly forced its way through the wilderness of the overgrown track, to find a compact building with no trace of damage or repaired break.

The romantic landscape of Beckford’s Fonthill was the ancestry that helped inspire the Upper Lawn Pavilion to be what Peter Smithson regarded as ‘the true child of the English Poetic tradition’, and the account of the 1945 discovery confirms that knowledge of the Abbey and of Beckford was fundamental to why, and what, the Smithsons built on the estate.

The next recorded visit to Fonthill was Easter 1950, when the Abbey remains were captured by Peter Smithson in photographs. Visits continued in the lead-up to their purchasing a piece of Fonthill in 1959. The estate as a whole was already influencing their ideas during this time, and notes to a photograph of the side arch of the large archway reveal that the ‘running belts of trees’ leading to the archway from the road had informed the landscape aesthetic of their design for Churchill College, Cambridge, in 1958.

The importance of Beckford’s Fonthill in inspiring these early visits and the eventual construction of the pavilion is confirmed in *Upper Lawn Solar Pavilion Folly*, where the first illustration is not a view of the subject of the book, but rather
the map of Beckford’s estate published in John Rutter’s *Delineations of Fonthill and its Abbey* in 1823. The map locates Upper Lawn farmhouse, or West Lawn farmhouse as it was known in 1823, within the wider domain of Beckford’s landscape.

The map is followed by a history of the estate told through published accounts, starting with an extensive extract from John Britton’s 1801 description of Fonthill Abbey from *The Beauties of Wiltshire*, with Alison’s annotations on what elements of planting and buildings survived in the 1980s. At the bottom corner of the page is a quote from Beckford that Alison originally wanted to appear as a ‘verbal illustration’ on the page.11

> I have been haunted all night with rural ideas of England the fresh smell of my pines at Fonthill seemed wafted to me in my dreams. The Bleating of my sheep and lowing of my herds in the deep valley of Lawn Farm fairly sounded in my ears.

Written in May–June 1787 while Beckford was in Portugal, this moment occurred the year after his exile from England, when the idea of retreating back to Fonthill would have seemed far away. As an adult perhaps Alison was also haunted by memories of visiting Fonthill as a child, which led to the 1945 rediscovery of the remains of Fonthill Abbey. Or perhaps, writing the book in 1986, four years after they sold Upper Lawn Pavilion, she chose this quotation from the *Journal of William Beckford in Spain and Portugal 1787–1788* because she too was haunted by the sale of the house and the loss of the retreat that they had found there.12

The ideas for the design of Upper Lawn Pavilion can be traced to ‘Patio and Pavilion’, the Smithsons’ exhibit for the *This is Tomorrow* exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1956.13 The exhibition explored the concept of a ‘symbolic habitat’ that responds to the basic human needs of ‘a view of the sky, a piece of ground, privacy, the presence of nature’ and leading to basic human urges ‘to extend and control, to move’.14 At Fonthill the Smithsons discovered just such a view of sky and piece of ground in October 1959. They set about following those human needs by extending and adapting an existing building to create a testing ground for the development of further architectural ideas.

**The construction of Upper Lawn Pavilion**

The site that the Smithsons purchased included one of a pair of partially demolished farm cottages built into the north side of a walled garden (Figure 19.2). They discovered that there had been a farmhouse on the site as early as the fifteenth century, and the retention of parts of the historic fabric was essential to the design that followed.15 The earliest sketch by Alison Smithson for Upper Lawn dates from 1958, showing that the ideas inspired by the found building were forming before the purchase had even been completed.16 A diagram followed, illustrating how the
walls and surfaces that were to be kept became the foundations for the layers of the new structure.

The exterior walls of the cottage that joined with the north garden wall were retained, as was the gable fireplace wall at the west end. The south walls of the cottage facing into the garden were removed to allow for the new building to lead directly into the walled garden space (Figure 19.3). The west fireplace gable wall, once the connecting wall between the pair of cottages, became the central wall of the new building, with a concrete beam embedded in it supported by concrete posts at either end. Onto this was fixed a timber frame for a two-storey structure (Figure 19.4). This concrete and softwood frame was then covered with teak and aluminium and the large windows were then pushed up internally to the external skin. The ground floor was designed to open up to the east into a yard on the footprint of the demolished second cottage, and to the south into the rest of the walled garden. The upper storey sat above the old north wall level, with glazing on three sides offering panoramic views over the Fonthill landscape.

The new building took shape during the early years of the 1960s and was at first lived in ‘camp-style’ under a tarpaulin covering the frame. This ‘life in a polythene bag’, as Peter Smithson called it, adapted as further layers were added to the house until it was nearly complete by 1962. From the beginning the house was
intended to act as both a home and a testing site for methods and materials that the Smithsons felt would not yet be accepted in London, such as pitch-fibre drain pipes or polyester water tanks. It was also to test the performance of materials such as high purity aluminium sheet, which if successful they would then begin to use in work for clients.¹⁹ They sought to create a ‘climate house’ through the opening up to, and shutting out of, the outside climate, as well as through the construction materials used, and by testing what solar gain could be achieved in a building with glazed south, east and west walls.²⁰

‘Jerome-ing’ at Upper Lawn

In the 1960s the driving idea behind the creation of such an idyll at Fonthill was much the same as it had been for Beckford in the 1790s, the search for ‘a place wherein to be restored to oneself, as a source of ones energies’.²¹ Four years after they had sold the building, Alison Smithson referred to the 23-year period of her family’s creation

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*Fig. 19.3  Upper Lawn under construction looking north.*

Smithson Family Collection.
and inhabitation of the Upper Lawn Pavilion at Fonthill as having been a period of time spent ‘Jerome-ing’. For the Smithsons ‘Jerome-ing’ to, from and at Fonthill was a means of retreat from the city to a place where, like Saint Jerome to his cell or to the wilderness of the desert, they could withdraw to reflect and experiment; a place that could be ‘in the Saint Jerome sense, a study from which to appraise, contemplate, consider and re-assess, the city’. This idea of the pavilion or folly being a place of retreat is also the link between William Beckford’s vision for the estate and what it meant to England’s leading post-war architects 160 years later.

In April 1991 Alison Smithson wrote ‘Saint Jerome; The Desert … The Study’, a pamphlet discussing painted representations of Saint Jerome and his two habitats, the cell and the desert. These two retreats – one created, the other discovered – were sought by Saint Jerome so he could be alone to dedicate himself to the study of the printed word or the natural world. Both environments were to stimulate and challenge thoughts, ideas and the individual’s concept of the idyll. For Alison the habitats of Saint Jerome illustrated that

[w]hether in an urban setting or in nature, all creativity relies on being cocooned. Such a sense of inviolability relies on its fragment of functional space being within an enclave encapsulated in its turn within a protective territory.

Beckford too shared an interest in Saint Jerome, as seen in the number of paintings he owned of the subject, similar to those representations Alison Smithson wrote about. Beckford sought a similar retreat, as a young man escaping into
the Fonthill landscape from Fonthill House, and as an adult creating both Fonthill Abbey and Lansdown Tower in Bath as retreats for study and contemplation within a landscape. It is not hard to imagine Alison visiting the National Gallery in London to see Saint Jerome Reading in his Study by Antonello da Messina from 1475, the work that she used to illustrate the cover of the pamphlet, and finding displayed near it St. Jerome in a Landscape by Giovanni Battista Cima da Conegliano, once owned by Beckford.

To the Smithsons Fonthill represented ‘a place made idyll: a dream of a stress free way of life’. They sought ‘Time to be in touch with nature’ away ‘from the drawing board and the telephone’, and created a retreat where they could write and work on developing ideas. As work progressed at Upper Lawn the idea of ‘Patio and Pavilion’ from the 1950s evolved into a new theory, ‘Pavilion and Route’, published in 1965. This established the concept of a building being conceived as one part of a larger environment, a fragment of an occupied space that would sit within its own protective boundary or enclave. This enclave in turn would sit within a larger territory or domain, usually a landscape or view. At Upper Lawn the ‘Pavilion and Route’ theory was realised, so that ‘the Pavilion sat in the walled yard and garden as in an enclave, the view was the domain’.

For the Smithsons, the combination of their fragment (the pavilion), the enclave (the walled garden) and the domain (the Fonthill landscape) was the same as it had been for Beckford. The Abbey was Beckford’s retreat, the cell in which to study surrounded by his books and objects; the surrounding landscape was the wilderness in which he could concentrate on nature. Through the Smithsons’ eyes, Beckford’s Abbey was similar to the pavilion, their fragment; the landscape inside the Barrier wall was similar to their enclave; the wider Fonthill estate was similar to their domain. Upper Lawn Pavilion and Fonthill Abbey both offered the possibility of a special relationship between house, inhabitants and nature. Beckford would have envied the Smithsons’ ability to view the landscape through walls of glass, or to slide back a door, open up a wall and step out into nature, or let nature in.

The Smithsons’ time spent in Upper Lawn Pavilion was documented through photography and journals. The Upper Lawn diaries kept by Alison record changes to the house and landscape, particularly noting the effect of weather and the changing seasons. She recorded new planting, first crops, the changing lives of the family within the enclave, and detailed their time ‘Jerome-ing’. Peter’s photographs run alongside, recording the building work, the life within the ‘polythene bag’ and the changes to the finished building that occupation made. The building within its landscape was frequently photographed, as was the view from the Pavilion, especially north towards the remains of Fonthill Abbey. It was similar to the way the Beckfords had captured their layers of occupation at Fonthill through the eighteenth-century country house portraiture of Fonthill House, or through J. M. W. Turner’s views of Fonthill Abbey seen from different vistas, at different times of day and season.
The ‘Jerome-ing’ journey itself became a further exploration of ideas, as the Smithsons’ car, a Citroën DS, became the ‘think tank’ for Alison’s observations on the movement of human and machine through nature. *AS in DS*, published in 1983, is the diary of a passenger travelling through nature as seen from the inside of the car, and of that machine itself moving through nature. Most of the journeys chronicled are those made between London and Fonthill. Illustrated by views of the Fonthill landscape from the car, and of the car in the Fonthill landscape, *AS in DS* reveals the transition between the urban life of London and the escape to Fonthill.
When ‘Jerome-ing’ the car was the moving cell, or the private room on wheels that carried them to and from the wilderness.

The idyll ended when Fonthill no longer offered the protected retreat. For Beckford it was a forced withdrawal from an idyll he could no longer afford. For the Smithsons it came in 1982, when new owners moved into the neighbouring cottage to Upper Lawn and inevitably disrupted the ‘idyll’. The Smithsons last visited Upper Lawn in March 1982, shortly after it was sold.33

**Upper Lawn Pavilion – as seen from Fonthill Abbey**

In the early 1960s Alison Smithson created an illustration that offers perhaps the greatest insight into the connection between Upper Lawn and the history of architecture integrated into landscape at Fonthill. She took a copy of the engraving by Cattermole of the St Michael’s Gallery of Fonthill Abbey that had been published in 1823 in John Britton’s *Graphic and Literary Illustrations of Fonthill Abbey* and pasted onto it an image of Upper Lawn Pavilion as it would have been seen from the south oriel window,34 thus projecting a view of their folly as seen from William Beckford’s had Fonthill Abbey survived (Figure 19.5). The image adds further weight to the deliberate choice of building on the Upper Lawn site, by showing how the vista between the two buildings, even if only imagined, was at the heart of what the Smithsons created.

Recent works to the landscape at the remains of Fonthill Abbey have made it possible to see this fantasised view in reality. Similarly from the Upper Lawn site a glimpse of the surviving Lancaster Tower of Fonthill Abbey can also now be seen. It is not difficult to picture Alison and Peter Smithson looking at the same vista through the landscape, and imagining what the view of Fonthill Abbey, had it survived, would have been like from the Upper Lawn Solar Pavilion Folly.