Epilogue

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Fonthill remains largely private. There are no public footpaths across the original estate formed by Sir John Mervyn in the mid-sixteenth century. The three-mile-long wall built by Lord Cottington around his park survives in part; it kept his herd of deer inside and everyone else outside (a farmer from Fonthill Gifford who demanded the right to drive his cart across the park was defeated in the law courts in 1714). The one footpath which provided the residents of Fonthill Gifford access to their parish church was removed when Alderman Beckford demolished St Nicholas’s church in 1746. Much of William Beckford’s Barrier survives, longer and higher than Cottington’s

Fig. 21.1  John Piper, *Approach to Fonthill*, 1940. Piper photographed and painted the Fonthill archway and the south lodge during the war, but it appears he was unable to access land inside Beckford’s Barrier.

Image courtesy of the Whitworth, © The University of Manchester
wall, and there are no public footpaths within its curtilage. Beckford’s intention was to keep just about everyone firmly outside, including the Hunt and the curious.

A slight change occurred in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries coinciding with the British aristocracy and landed gentry accepting some of their social responsibilities, investing in model villages, for example, and schools and schoolteachers. The employees and neighbours of the Grosvenors, the Shaw Stewarts and the Morrisons were permitted access on an annual basis to the grounds, to enjoy garden parties, sports days and the celebration of significant birthdays and weddings. The Morrisons continue this tradition on their estate. However, after the Second World War almost all the land within Beckford’s Barrier was once more closed off to the curious (see Figure 21.1); William Burn’s ‘new’ Fonthill Abbey was demolished in 1952 and bats took up residence in the surviving Lancaster Tower. Still a few trespassers penetrated the woods.

The research for this book has been both exciting and unusual. We have been able to criss-cross the Fonthill landscape, looking below the ground as well as inside structures, measuring trees and pulling carved stones out of the mud of the lake, studying proposals for new Fonthill houses in the planning stages and completed. We hope our findings provide a rich mosaic of material for historians.

Not surprisingly, our research has uncovered gaps in the narrative, questions with no answers (at present). So we also hope that foregrounding names and revealing uncertainties will trigger responses from our readers, be they archivists, general readers or residents of Fonthill itself.

Our archaeologist David Roberts (Chapters 2 and 9) would of course like a very large grant to carry out further work across the whole region. The first stage would be a proper LiDAR and aerial photographic survey of the whole region, to better place everything we already know in context, and probably to find large numbers of new settlements and field systems from prehistory and the Roman period.

Neil Burton (Chapter 3) is still in the dark about what happened to the Cottingtons, to their wealth and their collections. For over a century they occupied one of the largest mansions in Wiltshire, with estates in Berkshire, Hampshire, Middlesex and Kent. Was it through their allegiance to the Roman Catholic church and the ill-fated campaigns of James Stuart, the Old Pretender, who made Francis Cottington a Baron in 1716, that they gradually lost their wealth? Did the Cottingtons visit James Stuart at his court in Avignon or, later, in Rome? Where was the 2nd Baron Cottington buried? And where are the Cottington family records? The monuments of the Mervyns and Cottingtons at St Nicholas’s church remain missing. Did Alderman Beckford bury them when he demolished the church, as Colt Hoare reported in his Modern History of Wiltshire? It would have been easy enough to move them up to the new parish church.

Amy Frost is also puzzled by missing bodies (Chapter 4). We presume Alderman Beckford and his wife still rest underneath the Marquess of Westminster’s Victorian church, but no special provision was made for them when the new church was built. The loss or destruction of the Alderman’s papers (how, by whom?) leaves
an enormous gap in our knowledge of his building plans at Fonthill, including the elaborate gardens revealed in the two paintings he commissioned and that are now attributed to Antonio Joli.

Amy, like David Roberts, has an expensive project in mind, to realise the actual height of William Beckford’s Abbey, perhaps using a balloon or a laser beam; to visualise the impact of this iconic building in the landscape. Paintings by Turner suggest the effect was profound.

All of us would like to investigate further the precise whereabouts of the materials, fixtures and fittings from the demolished houses. This could be a community project, cataloguing chimneys and chimney pieces, doors and windows, pieces of dressed stone, now forming part of later mansions, farmhouses, cottages and barns at Fonthill. One of the Alderman’s chimney pieces found its way to a house in Montagu Square, Marylebone; a staircase balustrade from ‘Splendens’ was re-erected by James Wyatt at Dodington Park in Gloucestershire; a ceiling by

Fig. 21.2  Joseph Theakston, St Anthony of Padua.
Photograph by Caroline Dakers.
Casali is now at Dyrham Park, also in Gloucestershire. Joseph Theakston’s statue of St Anthony of Padua, commissioned by William Beckford for Fonthill Abbey, has a new position a few miles from Fonthill in the grounds of Wardour Castle (see Figure 21.2), while Rossi’s statue of St Anthony resides in a school in Lisbon. The ebony and ivory display cabinets designed by Owen Jones for Alfred Morrison’s Fonthill House found a new use in the billiard room of a house in Shaftesbury before being sold at auction; one piece can be seen in Dunedin Public Art Gallery, New Zealand. Closer to home, a fine wooden floor in Detmar Blow’s Little Ridge was acquired by Bernard Nevill and relaid in his house, formed for its part out of the stable block of the Grosvenors’ ‘new’ Fonthill Abbey. The original gate piers of the ‘new’ Abbey were moved a few miles away to form the entrance of Hays House, now a retirement home.

The physical debris of Fonthill is scattered far and wide; recovering Fonthill is an endless task.