This chapter explores the collaborative processes used by East India Company (EIC) families to retain and refashion stately homes in Britain, creating country houses that befitted the new wealth, status and power their inhabitants had accrued through imperial service in Asia. Since the Victorian period, much imperial history-writing has highlighted the agency of heroic (or deeply flawed) individual men, ensuring that figures such as Robert Clive (1725–74), Warren Hastings (1732–1818), Charles Cornwallis (1738–1805) and Arthur Wellesley (1769–1852), for example, loom large in narratives of Company politics and statecraft.1 More recently, attention to the Indian and British networks of family and friends that not only sustained these powerful men on the subcontinent but also promoted and protected their political interests in the metropole has illuminated the inherently collaborative character of imperial endeavour, underlining the extent to which power and wealth creation in Company circles demanded the exploitation of social ties, kinship relations and patronage obligations.2 Shifting the focus from individual imperialists to empire families and their associates, this vantage point replaces historians’ earlier emphasis on material culture as a prime site of self-fashioning with new recognition of the pivotal roles played by material processes in establishing, maintaining and expressing collective social identities.3 By studying families’ collaborative efforts to refashion existing country seats as imperial homes with the proceeds of their Indian service, this chapter argues, we can better understand not
only the entangled histories of Company politics and the country house but also the salient part played by kinship groups (including elite women denied official employment in the Company by their sex) in constructing a materially-embodied imperial culture at home in Britain.⁴

As Mark Girouard reminds us in the opening pages of *Life in the English Country House*, from an early date British stately homes ‘were power houses’, acting as markers of status and wealth.⁵ Historians have conventionally characterized the purchase, building and renovation of country houses by returned EIC men as assertions of individual wealth and status and a means through which these men integrated themselves into the structures of power constituted by the existing elite. Building on James Holzman’s earlier work, Tillman Nechtman argues that by purchasing an estate or a parliamentary seat, EIC ‘nabobs’ – the elite Company officials who accrued vast fortunes in India – sought to domesticate wealth and power gained on the subcontinent by converting them into material and institutional forms recognized and valued in Britain.⁶ This chapter expands upon this received interpretation by examining imperial domestication as a collaborative process that entailed complex negotiations both within the family circle and between family and friends. The refashioning of Touch House, Stirlingshire and Montreal Park, Kent illuminates both the role of empire in shaping Britain’s iconic ‘power houses’ and the function of collaborative family strategies – including strategizing by and on behalf of women – in country house material culture.

Alan Mackley and Richard Wilson’s research has shown that British men embarked on house building not only to demonstrate their status and wealth, but also to accrue benefits manifest in the process of building itself. Through their decisions and close management of domestic construction or refurbishment, propertied men displayed taste and discernment, thereby consolidating their social and political position.⁷ Judith Lewis has augmented and challenged this reading of masculine self-fashioning by demonstrating that women were often actively involved in managing and directing elite house building projects: Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough (1660–1744), for example, took direct control of the building project at Blenheim when her husband, the Duke, suffered a stroke in 1716. Seizing the initiative, Sarah promptly fired Sir John Vanbrugh (1664–1726) and hired the cabinetmaker James Moore (c.1670–1726) in the hope of completing the project before the Duke died.⁸ In this instance, and in Lewis’s other examples, although women were consulted over house building projects embarked on by husbands, they became most directly involved as widows rather than wives. The refashioning of the country seats discussed in this chapter reveals additional
levels of female participation in the construction of country power houses. Building on Lewis’s insights, we demonstrate how prominently women often figured (whether as active agents or as intended recipients) in collaborative building projects designed to accommodate not only heroic individuals but also broader family circles over the generations.

As the examples of the Seton of Touch siblings and in-laws and the Amherst family of Montreal Park both demonstrate, design decisions for Company homes were often made collaboratively. House building was an endeavour shared across a broad network of family and friends, a negotiated process that invoked, mobilized, strengthened and taxed ties of affection and kinship. Fashioning and refashioning country houses allowed imperial families as a whole to signal their new wealth and status and to integrate imperial fortunes into established systems of culture and politics. These processes were also instrumental in allowing families whose imperial lives entailed extended periods of separation across great distances to reintegrate and to reconstruct shared familial identities. Architectural plans, journals, and private correspondence reveal the country house as a prime site of collective, collaborative identities in the far-flung imperial families whose administrative and military labour sustained the Company’s power on the Indian subcontinent.

**Touch House, empire and identity**

Touch House, located three miles to the west of Stirling, forms the architectural centrepiece of a country estate now comprising 3,750 acres of cultivated fields, parkland and forest. A corporate and commercial hub contained within a graceful Georgian exterior and providing office facilities, event venues and historic film locations, this stately home was the seat of the first lairds of Touch, the Frasers. Passing in the fifteenth century to the Seton family, Touch House was extended by successive generations. Originally fortified and dominated by the tower that marked its strategic function on the route that served as the gateway from Glasgow to the Highlands, Touch gradually gained the hallmarks of a genteel British country residence: a dining room, drawing room, library and private bedrooms marked its early modern transition from a medieval military stronghold to a site of social and political power securely located within the Scottish state. Hereditary Armour Bearers of the Scottish kings, the Setons retained fierce loyalties to the Stuart monarchy. James Seton of Touch (d. 1742) rejected William of Orange’s elevation to sovereignty in the Glorious Revolution, and his sons Archibald and George
were imprisoned in 1708 for supporting the Old Pretender. James’s sister Elizabeth (d. 1775) succeeded him in 1742; she continued the family’s tradition of Jacobite activism by entertaining Prince Charles Edward (the Young Pretender) at Touch on 13 September 1745, during the Rebellion. The Prince gifted her a ring, a quaich (drinking cup) and miniature portrait by way of thanks for her hospitality. The Setons thereby acquired Jacobite memorabilia treasured by their descendants for generations: together with the sheets and counterpane from the Prince’s bed, the relics were preserved at Touch until 1928.10

The careful preservation of treasured Stuart artefacts and the canny use of domestic space to conceal or display Jacobite objects were key strategies in the political armoury of landed eighteenth-century Stuart sympathizers.11 Stuart allegiance, however, had significant consequences for the maintenance of Highland lairds’ landed estates, curtailing their access to government appointments in an agrarian context in which profits increasingly rested on costly improvements.12 At Touch, Hugh Seton’s grandiose schemes for agrarian improvement and domestic refurbishment after the ‘45, increasingly compromised not only the security of their treasured Jacobite memorabilia but (more fundamentally) the Setons’ continued ownership of their family seat. Married to Elizabeth a few weeks after she had entertained the Young Pretender, the Jacobite Hugh Seton (born Hugh Smith) had taken the family name, and promptly entered into the two-fold project of estate improvement and ‘power house’ building at Touch.13 Expensive drainage systems created new acres of fertile arable from bog-land on the estate; Touch House itself was in the hands of the builders from 1757 to 1770, acquiring an elegant ‘Georgian’ façade and plasterwork in the drawing room, dining room and music room undertaken by the celebrated Thomas Clayton (b. c.1710).14 Hugh Seton however had little time to enjoy his new home. Although his improvements had reputedly increased the rents at Touch from £500 to £2,000 per annum, his debts dwarfed the estate’s income. Forced to meet his creditors in 1785, he sold property in Argyleshire, his family’s wine business and his own life interest in the estate, but debts of £31,000 nonetheless remained.15 His finances exhausted, he reportedly suffered imprisonment for debt before fleeing in disguise from Dover to the Middle East and ultimately India.16

Denied access to official patronage and employment in Britain by the representatives of the Hanoverian state, Jacobite landowners determined to maintain their family homes after the ‘45 turned increasingly to imperial ventures.17 Hugh and Elizabeth’s eldest surviving son, Archibald Seton (1758–1818), like many an impeccious Highlander before and
after him, entered the service of the EIC in an effort to save the family home and support his siblings. Appointed to the Company civil service in 1779, he arrived at Madras in 1781 and thereafter rose through a succession of junior offices to become Resident of Delhi in 1806, Governor of Prince of Wales Island (Penang) in 1811 and member of the Bengal Supreme Council in 1812.18

Although the surviving Seton family correspondence is fragmentary, the letters that remain amply illustrate the role Touch House played in driving two generations of Seton men to the subcontinent. Hugh Seton’s letters to Archibald chronicle an itinerant life of cadging from friends based at foreign embassies, occasional commercial interloping and episodic military service, all retold to his son in histrionic tones that combined complaint, lament and perpetual longing for his Scottish marital home. Reporting an unsuccessful speculative investment from Mocha before proceeding to Bombay in 1791, Hugh Seton justified his earlier financial mismanagement by claiming that his exertions were all intended to save Touch for his descendants. ‘I was … urged on by a Strong Desire to leave you a noble addition to Touch … but Alas! Alas! In place of that, I have involved you, my dearest Archie, cruelly involved you; if Touch be safe I may still drag on with more Comfort the few Days which God permits to me, but I can never again be happy’, he lamented. ‘All I desire, my ever dear Archie, is to have two Lines from you, to tell me first, that you are well & that Touch is safe’.19 Preservation of Touch from his creditors was the impetus that propelled Hugh Seton to the Company’s domains, where he shuttled between Bombay, Malacca and Penang, sought refuge at the Poona (Pune) Residency of Charles Warre Malet (1752–1815), and joined Cornwallis’s forces in the Third Anglo-Mysore War (1790–92). Homelessness abroad was an integral component of Hugh Seton’s campaign to preserve his country seat in Scotland.

Archibald Seton’s letters to his father reveal an alternative strategy of imperial domestication marked not only by disciplined saving and regular remittances to Scotland but also by a settled life in India. Although he was not one of the ‘white Mughals’ described by William Dalrymple, who embraced Indian styles of dress, family life and cultural preferences,20 Archibald Seton enjoyed a life of genteel domesticity on the subcontinent – and repeatedly sought to fix his peripatetic father in his successive Indian homes. Safely ensconced at Gaya as Collector of Bihar province and rapidly accumulating savings with which to repay the debts that encumbered Touch, Archibald pleaded with Hugh Seton to live at home with him in India. He protested that his father’s decision to bypass Gaya when he left the Maratha campaigns for Bombay had ‘cruelly … mortified and
disappointed' him, contrasting the ‘constant terrors’ of Hugh’s ‘unsettled life’ to the imagined joys of their renewed co-residence, in an Indian home that promised to restore their Scottish estate to their family. ‘Here your situation would be comfortable—at least, it shd be the study and delight of my life to endeavor to render it such’, he reasoned. ‘Come, then, my Dearest and most Revered Sir, come (and O! come speedily) to the arms of duty, love and gratitude.’ Promising ‘the help of society, books, and the unremitting attentions of one who lives but for your sake’, Archibald Seton was careful to depict his Bengal residence and its well-appointed library as a material means toward the end of preserving Touch within the family. ‘I entreat you … to consider, that our family estate remains safe tho burdened, and that the burden is daily diminishing by means of the exertions I am enabled to make by my present situation; a situation which I owe solely to your active efforts at the time of my appointment’, he urged, calculating that his salary and emoluments would both liberate the estate from debt and afford ‘an ample provision for all our wants and wishes’ once the Setons of Touch were ‘restored to the actual enjoyment of it’.

Hugh Seton, rumoured dead from autumn 1795, was only one member of the extended family circle acknowledged as his dependents by Archibald, and was hardly the most troublesome kinsman with whom Archibald navigated the treacherous shoals of Company domesticity at a distance. A younger brother James travelled to India without first obtaining an EIC appointment—very much against Archibald’s advice—and rapidly replaced their father as a perpetual charge on his older brother’s pocket. Established in trade with money borrowed from Archibald in 1798, James proved no more financially adept than their father, and failed spectacularly as a merchant in India. Leaving Archibald to repay massive debts, he agreed to return to Europe in 1807 only when his brother promised him an annual pension of £500, and died by shipwreck on the voyage home.

Repeated payments to support his feckless father and brother impeded Archibald Seton’s efforts to pay the Scottish creditors who held a lien on Touch House and the surrounding estate and figured in his letters to family in Scotland as the chief obstacle to his return. Writing to his brother-in-law Henry Stewart (1759–1836) – the husband of his younger sister, Lally – in 1807, Archibald was at pains to underline the intensity of his desire to return to Touch. ‘I can swear by the sacred memory of my loved parents that my desire to return is eager and feverish, and some part of every day is passed in fond anticipation of the happy time when I shall be restored to my family and home’, he insisted. Eschewing
ownership of a carriage or even a cabriolet notwithstanding he was now the Company’s chief diplomatic representative at the Mughal court at Delhi, Seton confined himself to ownership of a single riding horse. Fiscal prudence in India, he hoped, would ensure an ample retirement among kin at Touch House.

Although Archibald Seton bore the principal burden of redeeming Touch through Company service, his conception of the estate’s ownership, past and future was emphatically collective and female, rather than individualistic and male. The death of his brother James and his own unmarried state placed his sisters next in line in the succession to Touch – a pattern of inheritance already prefigured in his mother’s generation. Instructing his agents in Calcutta to remit £6,500 to his Edinburgh banker in 1808, Seton noted that £500 was to be paid to his eldest sister, the widowed Mrs Brotherton, and the remainder used to pay down the debt on Touch. Uneasy with his brother-in-law’s suggestion that four acres of the estate should be sold to a neighbour and several trees felled, Seton articulated a vision of proprietorship that discounted primogeniture and instead traced the estate’s family identity through the female line. ‘I do not, I cannot consider myself as sole proprietor of the estate of our adored, blessed mother I call heaven to witness that, whatever little superiority or advantage the law may assign to the adventitious unmeritorious circumstance of being an eldest son, I consider the estate not as a possession of my own, but as a property belonging to all of us, and held by me in trust for all my mothers [sic] children’, he asserted. Distant from home, he personified the estate’s assets to underscore his continued emotional identification with Touch. ‘They are well known to me’, he urged in resisting Stewart’s suggestion that the estate’s trees could profitably be sold for timber. ‘I should feel as if I had lost so many of my friends.’

A bachelor, Seton worked to preserve Touch House and its estate not for children of his own but for his female siblings and their descendants. Drafting his will in c.1809, he noted two surviving siblings, his sister Barbara, a childless widow, and Lillias (known as Lally), married to Henry Stewart of Allanton, Lanarkshire. The Stewarts had one surviving daughter, Elizabeth, who by 1812 was married to the Scottish landowner Reginald McDonald and was the mother of several sons and daughters. Writing to his brother-in-law to detail his plans for new investment at Touch, Archibald Seton envisioned the estate’s continued inheritance through the female line. ‘If indeed you had no children I should in that case, most certainly have married’, he acknowledged, to ‘do so would then have been a duty, which I would have fulfilled’.
Elizabeth’s fecund marriage, however, liberated Seton from the burdens of matrimony and tied him in turn to an extended kinship network which stretched through sisters and daughters from his immediate family to the Stewarts and the McDonalds. Citing payment of his brother James’ Indian debts as the reason for his continued residence in India, Seton promised to return to Touch in 1813. ‘The Estate as estimated by you will be more than sufficient for our purpose’, he observed to his brother-in-law. ‘I say for our purpose because I consider the two families as one.’ Henry Stewart was at pains to ensure that his daughter Elizabeth – born years after Seton’s departure for India and personally unknown to him – featured in her uncle’s estate planning as a worthy recipient of his inheritance, despite her female gender. In 1814 he reported that new leases had, under Elizabeth’s keen eye, been successfully negotiated with the Touch tenants. Crediting his daughter with the diplomatic skills of a prime minister, Stewart noted that she ‘shows a talent for business and a knowledge of country affairs, which, I trust, will prove hereafter not less useful to herself, than they are foreign and superior to the frivolous recreations, and the wretched pursuits of the greater part of her sex’.

Plans for the large-scale refurbishment of Touch with his Indian savings, notwithstanding the debt with which the estate remained encumbered, figured prominently in Archibald Seton’s correspondence with Henry Stewart, allowing Seton, his sister and brother-in-law to imagine a shared family home notwithstanding the great distances – of space, culture and experience – that divided them. Seton, whose salary as Resident of Delhi was £4,000 per annum plus allowances, remitted tens of thousands of pounds to his agents in Scotland, and begged Stewart anxiously for advice on improvements that could be made to the estate before his return home. From his own Lanarkshire home of Allanton House, Stewart dispatched the architect Gillespie to Touch in 1809, reporting to Seton that the house and tower could fall within a few years, ‘being in a very crazy and infirm state’. Propping the existing structure, Stewart suggested, should form only the first phase of Seton’s refurbishments. A mere 3,000 guineas, he estimated, would add two new wings to the house. Creating a home with five public rooms, 12 bedchambers and 11 dressing rooms, these renovations would render Touch a fitting residence for a high-ranking Company official’s Scottish retirement. Archibald Seton welcomed these suggestions, linking his in-law to the family cause by deploying a dynastic architectural metaphor. Thanking Stewart for his care of the estate, Seton warmly declared that ‘my dear father was the Peter the Great of Touch, you are the Catherine the Second’.
Letters such as these attest to the power exerted by country houses and country estates in Company family sociability, to the vital role played by imagined homes in Britain purchased or refurbished with Indian fortunes in creating and maintaining kinship ties in global and imperial contexts. But Archibald Seton’s letters also remind us of the fragility of these domestic ties in Company circles. Seton’s reiterated claim that only paternal and fraternal debts precluded his return to Touch appear in his letters alongside his repudiation of rumours that he had fallen prey to the allure of Indian life and was reluctant to repatriate. His repeated assertion that only prudential saving of his Company salary would allow him to preserve Touch for his own retirement, for his siblings and for his sister’s daughter allowed Seton to evade his brother-in-law’s constant badgering for loans to improve his own and his children’s estates. But Seton’s reasoning on this head was exposed as a fiction in 1812, when (to the horror of his sister and brother-in-law) he announced that his return would be delayed until at least 1814 due to a loan of £6,000 now offered to William Fraser (1784–1835). Fraser, formerly Seton’s assistant at the Delhi Residency, was the scion of a Highland landed family whose estate near Inverness, Moniack, was encumbered by debt as a result of his family’s mismanagement of its Guiana investments. Like Seton, Fraser had been driven to Company employment in India by a desire to save his Scottish family seat. Inexplicable to his family at home, Seton’s willingness at this juncture to assist a young man to whom – by his own admission – he had neither ties of blood nor kinship undercut his earlier pronouncements of deep family feeling. Henry Stewart, no stranger to the epistolary economy of emotional blackmail, wrote in response to report his wife’s rapidly deteriorating health. ‘She bore up wonderfully well, till we received the intelligence of the loan to Mr. Frazer [sic.]; and that seemed quite to overpower her spirits’, he observed. ‘Though struck with admiration (as indeed we all were) of your unequalled generosity to that gentleman, the idea (she said) that her beloved brother, in whom her whole heart and soul are wrapped up, should, on any consideration, now delay his return, after an absence of more than three and thirty years, was more than she could support.’

Mutual recriminations on this subject continued – alongside reiterations of shared family interest and love – until Seton set sail for Britain on the William Pitt in 1817. To be sure, discussion of strategies for furnishing Touch with objects from Seton’s Indian home provided a continued context for collaboration with his brother-in-law. Seton’s assertion that ‘Among the many sources of Rational delight [to] which I look forward at home, none is contemplated by me with greater satisfaction than being
able to Devote some part of my day to study and reading’ elicited helpful advice from Stewart on the need to write his name in each volume from his Indian library sent back to Britain, so as to avoid payment of Customs duties. But the money lent to Fraser continued to rankle. In a letter of 1816, Stewart accompanied his own request for a loan of £20,000 with the comment that, should Seton delay his return any longer, his family with regret would conclude that his public employments in India had bred ‘an indifference to those truly domestic and Scottish feelings, which breathe through your Letters’. Stung by reports that malicious gossip about his loan to William Fraser had been heard and indeed circulated by his elder sister at Bath, Seton on the eve of his departure for Britain complained to Stewart that:

the impression of dissatisfaction & disgust which the whole has made upon my mind, is not to be eradicated. It gives me, by anticipation, a melancholy picture of the sentiments & manners of those with whom it will shortly be my misfortune to live. Accustomed, as I have long been, to a society of liberal, enlightened men, who are wont to put the fairest & most favourable construction on the conduct of others, it will be quite insupportable to me to live among people who are in the habit of drawing narrow-minded ungenerous conclusions.

His long-cherished plan to live with the Stewarts at Allanton House while Touch was refurbished now filled Seton with dread. Already ailing when he set sail from Calcutta, he was spared a painful family homecoming by death at sea before the William Pitt docked in Britain.

It is easy to dismiss the Setons’ story as exceptional. Hugh Seton’s extravagant expenditure on the estate and his picaresque progress from the Highlands to the Middle East and India were, like the man himself, extreme examples of Jacobite excess in the aftermath of the ’45; Archibald’s persistent refusal to return home to the country house for which he laboured so sedulously, although not exceptional among Company men, was hardly characteristic of them. Nonetheless, their family story shares key characteristics with many Scottish families – Highlanders and Lowlanders alike – and with English and Welsh Company men and women. Collaborative to the core, orientated toward securing the inheritance of daughters as well as sons, and often spanning imperial careers in both the Atlantic and the Indian Ocean Worlds, retaining and refashioning extant country houses – as the case of Montreal Park also illustrates – mobilized
The Amhersts and familial belonging

Like the history of Touch House, the history of Montreal Park was marked by lapses of succession, imperial disappointments and collaborative family endeavor. Jeffrey Amherst, 1st Baron Amherst (1717–97) originally built Montreal Park in the 1760s, to mark both his return from America and his Canadian successes as commander-in-chief of British forces. This home passed to Amherst’s nephew, William Pitt Amherst (1773–1857), in 1797. Like his uncle, William Pitt played a variety of important (yet often unsuccessful) roles in global affairs. Despite his lack of success on the international stage, however, in 1823 Amherst was appointed to the role of Governor General of India. Accompanied by his wife Sarah (1761–1838) and their eldest son Jeffrey (1802–26) and daughter Sarah Elizabeth (1806–76), Amherst travelled to India and began what would become a highly problematic tenure as a colonial governor. He declared war with Burma in early 1824, and mounted an attack on Rangoon. Two expensive years of fighting only yielded the territories of Arakan, Tenasserim and Assam. In 1828, Amherst returned home to Britain with his wife and daughter, his son having died in India. Soon after returning to England, the Amherst family began rebuilding their country house, Montreal Park in Riverhead, Kent.

Maintaining a shared identity across imperial space was an important but endless task for the Amhersts. As several historians have observed, imperial families keenly felt the distances placed between different members and developed a range of strategies to traverse spaces of absence. Correspondence and gift-giving, for instance, went some way to mediating a sense of family belonging over time and space. William Pitt Amherst’s daughter Sarah Elizabeth was an active correspondent, who sent sketches as well as letters while in India between 1823 and 1828. In 1824, for example, she wrote to her brother Frederick (1807–29) – who had remained in England – and included a detailed set of five sketches showing their primary residence from several different angles in the hope that he would ‘better to understand the local situation of Government House’. These sketches were accompanied by written notes, which further described details represented in the drawings. Sarah Elizabeth asked that Frederick not keep the sketches to himself,
but rather share them with their half-sisters Maria and Harriet to show ‘how the flower garden is laid out’. She thus encouraged her brother to respond to the sketches as he would do letters, as a form of communication that could be shared and read communally.

The Amherst family also developed other techniques through which they could create and recreate a sense of family across distance. They employed journals to recount experiences and events, which other family members then read at a later point. On her younger brother Frederick’s return from Italy in 1829, Sarah Elizabeth recalled how she ‘read with the greatest pleasure & admiration his journal in Italy – it was so neatly kept & his account of every thing he saw so good & clear’. While scholars have long understood letter reading as a shared and communal practice, less attention has been given to similar practices of journal reading, but this remained an important strategy for the Amhersts and others, such as the Clives. When in India between 1823 and 1828, Sarah Amherst and her daughter Sarah Elizabeth both used journals to record their journeys to and experiences of India. Sarah wrote a total of seven journals beginning in 1823 with their journey to India and ending with their return to England in 1828, while Sarah Elizabeth wrote four journals covering the years 1820 to 1842. Sarah Elizabeth’s reading of Frederick’s journal suggests that her own (and her mother’s) journals were produced with a particular audience in mind and actively participated in reaffirming a sense of familial belonging when read by others on their return from India. Significantly, through the emphasis placed on reading journals in Britain, these practices suggest at the importance the Amherst family placed on reconstituting a sense of familial belonging once physically present and returned home.

After returning to England in 1828, the Amhersts initiated other projects to restore their sense of familial identity, most notably by refashioning their country house, Montreal Park in Kent. At one level, domestic refashioning can simply be understood as an attempt to render in material terms the new wealth and status they had acquired in India. Certainly on making the decision to go to India in the winter of 1822–23, the economic benefits that might accrue from service featured highly in their discussions. They asked their acquaintances and friends for advice on whether the post would be economically and emotionally worthwhile, and their advisers suggested that although the emotional costs might be high, the economic gains justified this dislocation. More particularly, acquaintances suggested that the Indian post would ultimately allow their male children to prosper – ‘only consider what an advantage a few score thousand pounds will be in setting up these Lads’. In addition
to wealth, moreover, while in India, Amherst also managed to acquire new status. In 1826 William Pitt had been created 1st Earl Amherst of Arracan and Viscount Holmesdale, honours that moved the family up a rank within in the peerage. Yet, despite having reasons to embark on the materialization of power and wealth through house building, the new house created by the Amhersts remained relatively modest. Significantly, in the 1970s, the 5th Earl Amherst simply described Montreal as ‘a comfortable Georgian house’ (see Figure 7.1). It is important then to look beyond the architectural outcomes of building and to instead focus upon the building process itself to understand why the Amhersts embarked on their renovation of Montreal in the late 1820s. In reconstructing their country house, they sought primarily to reconstitute a family identity and sense of belonging, which had been dispersed by imperial distance.

In 1829 the Amhersts commissioned the architect Atkinson to draw up plans for a substantial extension to accommodate a billiard room and new bedrooms and dressing rooms for Lord and Lady Amherst. Notwithstanding their employment of Atkinson, the Amhersts actively involved themselves with the design process and conceived it as a collaborative act. In her journal, William Pitt Amherst’s daughter Sarah Elizabeth, described how before they hired Atkinson, they spent much time working with a scale model of the house and its proposed extension. She described how they ‘had a model of it in wood, with a moveable

Figure 7.1 Postcard featuring Montreal Park, Kent. Courtesy of Kent History & Library Centre, Maidstone.
additional form, to be placed where one chose, but on every side it looked like an excrescence & deformity’. The family took the unusual step of providing themselves with specialized tools through which they could consider different solutions to the problem of creating an extension at Montreal Park. The construction of a scale model of the house and the proposed extension suggest at the time and effort they invested in the building process.

Moving the model into different places, the family’s first solution to the problem of an acceptable extension was to build a two-storey section in front of the house, which could be connected by an arcade to the wings at either side of it (see Figure 7.2). Atkinson, however, soon drew the family’s attention to the difficulty of creating an adequate chimney system and began to introduce the alternative idea of extending to the east of the house. He suggested that a substantial addition, which included both extra service rooms on the basement floor and an impressive dining room on the ground floor, could be built on the east side of the house (see Figure 7.3). Such a substantial extension, he argued, would create enough space within the central building of the house to include a billiard room.

Figure 7.2 ‘South Elevation Montreal showing a proposed addition’ (November 1828). Kent History & Library Centre, Amherst Papers, ‘Detailed Plans of Alterations at Montreal by Mr. Atkinson (1829–31)’, U1350 P21. Courtesy of Kent History & Library Centre, Maidstone.
As Sarah Elizabeth explained in her journal, however, the family greeted Atkinson’s plan with much disapproval because it disturbed the symmetry of the original house. What he was suggesting was an extension that would align the form of the house more closely with contemporary fashions. In the 1790s asymmetric houses began to appear in great numbers. Joseph Bonomi’s (1739–1808) work on Longford Hall in Shropshire and James Wyatt’s (1746–1813) work on Dodington in Gloucestershire in this decade encouraged further asymmetrical houses to emerge in the early years of the 1800s. In the same period the emergence of the Gothic Revival further disrupted the dominance of symmetry, leading to new conceptions of the country house form during the nineteenth century. Although at odds with prevailing trends, the Amhersts’ desire for a symmetrical house remained unchanged.

That the family saw their building project as an endeavour that could benefit from (and provide benefits to) their wider circle becomes clearer at this point in the design process. As described by Sarah Elizabeth, William Pitt actively encouraged other family members and friends, not resident at Montreal Park, to engage in the project. His wife’s daughter by an earlier marriage, Lady Maria Windsor (1790–1855), was called...
upon and as Sarah Elizabeth notes, she ‘was of great use’. Concerned by Atkinson’s suggestion to build an asymmetrical house, the family ‘pondered a long time over this plan’. At last a certain Mr Addington found a solution: extending the house on both sides. Building two extensions allowed for a less obtrusive addition, retained symmetry and created much needed space. Sarah Elizabeth describes how her sister ‘immediately reduced the idea to a scale on paper’. After some adjustment, it was this idea that came to be completed at Montreal (see Atkinson’s rendering of the design in Figure 7.4 below).

Significantly, the design work for the extension at Montreal Park was configured as a collaborative endeavour, which utilized the opinions and skills of a range of people, including women. Lady Maria Windsor’s drafting skills – rather than the services of the architect – were particularly useful in allowing the family to move quickly from idea to drawing. Sarah Elizabeth’s description of this act – ‘reduced the idea to a scale on paper’ – suggests that Lady Maria had some experience of drafting and working to scale. Such evidence gestures towards her previous experience of design work, suggesting that she may have been actively involved in other projects. At the same time, the engagement of daughters in the design process reveals how broad collaborations between family members were enacted to achieve house building schemes.

Figure 7.4 ‘Ground Plan for Additions Montreal’ (February 1829). Kent History & Library Centre, Amherst Papers, ‘Detailed Plans of Alterations at Montreal by Mr. Atkinson (1829–31)’, U1350 P21. Courtesy of Kent History & Library Centre, Maidstone.
In early February 1829 the Amherst family left ‘Mr Atkinson the architect in possession of the house to begin operations immediately’ and moved to their London abode.52 Eight months later they returned to Montreal, and Sarah Elizabeth recalled how ‘every thing was so changed, in consequence of the alterations in the house, & the enclosure of the new garden that we hardly knew the place again’.53 Despite creating a new space that seemed unrecognizable at first, the process of creating that newness spoke more of consolidation than change. In working together as a family, the Amhersts created a solution acceptable to all. Montreal Park became an important and meaningful place again because family members invested time and expertise in its reconstruction. Country house building allowed imperial families to integrate not only with elites, but also (and perhaps more importantly) with each other.

Conclusion

Touch House, Stirlingshire and Montreal Park, Kent illuminate the multiple motivations that drove families to embark on imperial projects connected to the purchase, re-building or re-establishment of country houses. They demonstrate the ways in which country house projects acted not simply as a means to stabilize the wealth and power of an individual, but rather acted as part of more complex attempts to establish financial security for families and broader kin networks over generations. Such attempts were not solely focused on sons, but also included and benefitted female members of the family. The refashioning of country houses was also important in creating a space in which families could come together (even across global distances) and make decisions as a collective group. The collaborative rebuilding and refashioning of country houses allowed families to re-establish their relationships and familial identities. These examples underline the role played by material processes in establishing, maintaining and expressing collective social identities. Families, and the projects they embarked on across time and space, need to be understood as no less significant than ‘nabobs’ in the domestic imperial projects of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.