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Title: “So agreeable and suitable a place”: a late eighteenth-century suburban villa

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Example citation: Stobart, J. (2014) “So agreeable and suitable a place”: a late eighteenth-century suburban villa. Paper presented to: *British Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies 43rd Annual Conference, St Hugh's College, University of Oxford, 08-10 January 2014.*

Version: Draft version

<http://nectar.northampton.ac.uk/6587/>



“So agreeable and suitable a place”: a late eighteenth-century suburban villa

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Introduction

In March 1791, the Hon. Mary Leigh wrote to her lawyer and friend Joseph Hill about her Kensington home: ‘my wish would be to continue it exactly the same it now is, any alteration would much lessen it in my estimation ... it is impossible for me to have so agreeable and suitable a place as is the Grove House in every particular’.¹ In many ways, this description encapsulates the attraction of the suburban villa: a place that was convenient for, yet removed from the city. But what was the balance between these two motivations? Should we see the burgeoning ‘villadom’² of Kensington, Hampstead and the like as convenient for London – a place for commuters to the commercial and social life of town? Or should we see it as an escape from this hurly-burly – a place of ‘polite retirement’?³

Traditionally, villas were private rural retreats. The house was set in a country estate away from the city and unwanted visitors were excluded to create a particular social milieu. Riverside settings were favoured, Defoe noting that ‘from Richmond to London, the river sides are so full of ... beautiful buildings, charming gardens and rich habitations of gentlemen of quality that nothing in the world can imitate it’.⁴ Bryant sees these places as secluded from the public social sphere, yet compromised in that seclusion by the streams of visitors who came to admire the houses and their idyllic settings. Pope’s Twickenham villa, for example, was the subject of over 30 published views by 1811, and Marble Hill, built for the Countess of Suffolk, was also favoured as a subject for painting.⁵

For Porter, however, suburban developments were part of London’s housing and social mix: Hampstead was the meeting place of the Kit-Kat Club and Kensington was increasingly popular, especially after William and Mary’s court came to Nottingham House (later Kensington Palace) in 1690. He describes both in terms of their famous metropolitan residents and notes the growing body of commuters who travelled out from their businesses and shops either daily or for the weekend.⁶

To understand more fully the nature of the suburban villa and its relationship with London, I want to examine a particular property, Grove House in Kensington Gore. Situated to the south of Hyde Park, Grove House was built shortly before 1750. It passed through a number of owners, including Anne Pitt, sister of the Earl Chatham, but by 1786 at the latest it was home to the Hon. Mary Leigh, sister of Edward, fifth and last Lord Leigh of Stoneleigh Abbey in Warwickshire. She inherited a life interest in the Stoneleigh estates (worth over £13,000 per annum⁷) when her brother died in 1786 and probably moved to Grove House at this point, renting the property at a cost of £400 per annum.⁸

It is the twenty year period of Mary’s occupancy that forms the focus of this paper, in which I address three related areas. First is the work undertaken by Mary to maintain the house as an ‘agreeable and suitable’ situation. What physical qualities were necessary for this attitude towards the property? Second is the way in which the house was used and viewed by Mary: was it the base for a London social life or a retreat from such engagements? Third is the question of

supplying and servicing the house. How was it linked into the local and metropolitan economies, and to what extent was this dependent upon Mary's location at particular times of year.

The material culture of the suburban villa

Originally a plain five-bay structure with a central bay, Grove House had been substantially altered over the years by an assortment of additions, including an extension to the west with a first-floor veranda and a canted oriel to the east (Figure 1).

Mary appears to have been a good tenant, commended for the good repair in which she kept the property. Indeed, there was a regular succession of craftsmen coming to the house, especially in the mid 1790s.⁹ Work was centred on three main areas. In the main part of the house, there were repairs to the ceiling and new glass for the sashes over the stairs; and the woodwork in various rooms was painted.¹⁰ The service areas were clearly in less good shape as the bills record work undertaken on the laundry, scullery, kitchen, still room, pantry, servants hall, housekeeper's room, dairy and coach house, as well as in the stable yard. A third area in which these craftsmen were kept busy was the garden – an important part of the villa's attraction as a semi-rural retreat. There were bills for buildings cucumber frames and repairing gates and fences, including those around the 'Pleasure Ground' and the kitchen garden, and painting a range of garden equipment.

This everyday expenditure might seem insignificant when compared with the process and cost of fitting out a fashionable London home. However, this kind of mundane activity was hugely important in both the economy and management of the country house.¹¹ A more compact and newer house might have meant smaller bills, but the work still needed to be done if the house was to remain comfortable and convenient as a place to live.

Much the same was true of the furnishings. The furniture which came with the house was valued at a modest £264 10s and must have been fairly plain. Nonetheless, it appears to have largely served Mary's needs as she made only limited additions. Most of these came right at the start of her tenancy, the upholsterer Michael Thackthwaite presenting a consolidated bill for £142 17s 6½d.¹² There were two complete beds, alongside which came dressing tables and glasses, chests of drawers, a basin stand, and so on. All these pieces were 'neat' rather than showy; they spoke of comfort and convenience rather than conspicuous displays of wealth and taste.¹³ A similar impression comes from the new drapery provided by Thackthwaite, and from the repairs and cleaning for which he charged. This kind of work was also undertaken by Bradshaw and Smith, who charged Mary for fixing the bed and curtains; putting up curtains; restuffing mattresses; repairing curtains, and recovering sofas and chairs.¹⁴

Again, the need for constant upkeep reminds us of the ongoing cost and work of maintenance; but it also underlines the importance of making and keeping a house comfortable and presentable. The textiles used for curtains were practical muslins and cottons, not showy silks and damasks; they were fashionable enough, but were suitable for regular cleaning – something which was becoming increasingly important in genteel households.

Life in the suburban villa

The material culture of Grove House suggests a place that was intended for comfortable living, rather than large-scale entertaining. Chinaware comprised cups and saucers for tea, coffee and

chocolate; breakfast plates; tea pots, cream pots and slop basins; and a tea chest with caddies.¹⁵ As Vickery notes, this is the kind of equipage required for serving tea – still an important focus of female sociability around the turn of the nineteenth century – and suggests that Mary was willing and able to receive visitors at Grove House.¹⁶ Yet it also indicates that these visitors would have come during the day as there was little provision for dining.

We lack direct evidence for the quantity and type of visitor to Grove House. Mary had a wide and well-connected social circle comprising some leading lights in London society.¹⁷ There is little to suggest that they came to see her in Kensington. Indeed, her most frequent visitor was Mrs Hill, the wife of Mary's lawyer.¹⁸ The two women were good friends; exchanging small gifts on a regular basis. There were certainly other visitors, but they seem to have played a far less important part of Mary's life in Kensington than they did during her summers at Stoneleigh Abbey.

It would be a mistake, however, to view Grove House as being removed from town life. Indeed, it would have made no sense for Mary to lease a house in Kensington and then fail to engage with London society, especially as the timing of her stays – roughly November to June or July – coincided with the London season. Throughout the 1790s, Mary travelled into town on a regular basis, the day book for Grove House recording payments for coaches roughly once every ten days. The exact purpose of all these journeys is uncertain, but it seems likely that they involved visiting friends and perhaps also shops. Such conservative socialising was typical of many elite women, even in London: few could aspire to the Beau Monde discussed by Greig. That said, the dignity of the family had to be maintained through appropriate displays of rank and status. Mary kept a coach and spent substantial sums on livery for her six footmen, plus the postilion and coachman that she engaged. Her footmen received four sets of clothes apiece; the coachman got a scarlet laced suit, a drab box coat and two striped waistcoats, whilst the postilion had the same, plus a claret frock suit and an extra two waistcoats.¹⁹ Such elaborate and brightly coloured clothing was the norm for livery. As Styles notes, it linked the servants to particular families and made an impressive show, both on at home and when travelling into town.²⁰

And yet Kensington was distinct from London and offered a very different living environment from the bustling if exclusive streets of Mayfair. The atmosphere and setting was more rural than urban, and not just because of the proximity of Hyde Park. The Grove House day book notes payments for washing and shearing sheep; mowing and haymaking; building and thatching hay ricks; and spreading dung across the fields.²¹ That these were not mere distractions, but part of the appeal of the place, is clear from Mary's correspondence. She wrote that 'I was then walking in my garden and thinking how much ground I cou'd spare to make a road into my new field without prejudice to my cows'.²² This suggests a woman thinking more like a landowner than an urban socialite.²³ Such concerns are very much in keeping with the tradition of the villa as a rural retreat, set in a productive agricultural world.²⁴ In effect, then, life at Grove House was that of a country landowner, but with the conveniences of London a short coach ride away.

Supplying the suburban villa

The liminal position of the suburban villa was reinforced by the networks of supply that serviced the needs of the house and its owner. Some produce came from the estate at Grove House: there was a gardener and dairy maid on the list of servants, and we know that cows

were kept in the fields belonging to the house.²⁵ There is little mention of butter, eggs or vegetables in either the day book or the large collection of surviving bills, suggesting that Grove House (like its larger country cousins) was generally self-sufficient in these things.

Other produce came from local suppliers. We know from bills that Kensington shopkeepers were the main source of meat, fish, poultry, bread and coal for the house. Mary had favoured retailers: John Loader presented bills for fish on 16 occasions; Samuel Kingston sent 14 bills for coal and charcoal; Roger Buckmaster sent 12 bills for meat. These men were central to the provisioning of Grove House, but Mary's patronage was equally important within the local economy. The bills record a total expenditure of £1217 14s 5d in Kensington shops over the twenty years of her residence – a major inflow of capital which parallels the more familiar impact of the country house on its neighbouring villages.²⁶

Of course, no landowner restricted their spending to the immediate vicinity of their estate. London was important to all wealthy consumers, not least because many spent at least a portion of the year in the metropolis. Mary Leigh had lived in London during her youth and so her links to metropolitan retailers were understandably strong. By the time she had taken up residence in Grove House, the geography of her London shopping had changed somewhat. Covent Garden appears to have been largely abandoned and West-End retailers were patronised less often. Instead, Mary became more reliant on traditional retail areas in and around the City where some of her key suppliers were located. This engagement with London shops is unsurprising, but covered a much wider geographical area than was the case for other wealthy women. As we have already noted, Mary Leigh frequently travelled by coach and thus had access to a wider set of shopping streets. At the same time, it is clear that much of this shopping was done remotely. The day book notes payments for servants to travel into London and for the carriage of hampers of groceries.

Networks of supply were broader and more complex than this, incorporating the spa resorts visited during the season. Mary went to Cheltenham and sometimes placed orders with retailers which were then forwarded to her. For example, Miss Baker wrote to her in 1796 that 'Mr Townsend ... promises he will immediately [sic.] on receiving the pattern shoe make six pair to your order for which with silk heels he must charge twelve shillings per pair'.²⁷ Such arrangements were quite common amongst the provincial gentry, but are more striking when they involved someone living in the metropolis. They effectively reversed the flow of goods created by London retailers setting up shop for the season in Bath, Cheltenham and other resorts.

Far more important in supplying Grove House was a steady stream of food being sent up from the country'.²⁸ Taking 1794 as an example, there were 45 consignments spread over eleven months. In total, 31 different types of food were sent, including fruit and vegetables, domestic livestock and game (see Table 1). Perhaps most important, at least symbolically, were consignments of game, including fourteen whole deer, which spoke of her status as a landowner. The London suburb was thus linked to the countryside as well as to the city in both practical and symbolic terms. Moreover, the flow of goods and meanings spread out from Grove House as Mary made gifts of melons, French beans, pines, cucumbers and most importantly venison to her friends, especially Joseph Hill.²⁹ In this way, this suburban villa acted as a conduit, channelling goods, money and patronage into and out from London.

Epilogue

What, then, was the position of the suburban villa? Was it a retreat from the city or a convenient place for commuting into London? Grove House was closely linked to the city both through flows of goods and people, and in the mental landscape of its owner. However, it was distinctly rural in its milieu: surrounded by fields and livestock in which Mary showed more than a simply fashionable interest. Indeed, as with the classic villas of ancient Rome or Renaissance Italy, this rural setting was a central element of the attraction of the place. Yet its position in relation to the city was complicated by its relationship with the country house which formed a more complete form of escape and a place to which guests could be invited rather than one in which visitors were received.

The longer term fortunes of Grove House are also useful in understanding the development of the suburban villa. Through the early decades of the nineteenth centuries, Kensington remained out but not in the city. By the 1850s, however, London was fast encroaching, a process accelerated by the Great Exhibition, the Commissioners of which bought the estate and later demolished Grove House and others on the estate to construct the Albert Hall. Kensington was thus central to the new imperial symbolism of Victorian London. Those seeking a retreat from the city, meanwhile, were looking much further afield. Improved transport and changing aspirations had made the country house a more attractive option. The suburban villa, meanwhile, became the home and symbol of the burgeoning middle classes; still a retreat, but now firmly part of the city.

Notes

¹ SCLA, DR18/???? – letter to Joseph Hill, 27 March 1791.

² Ian Gow, uses the term ‘villadom’ in relation to developments around London and Edinburgh – see, I Gow ‘The Edinburgh villa revisited: function not form’, 144.

³ A. Rowan, ‘Villa variants’, 93.

⁴ D. Defoe, *Journey Through ... Great Britain (1724)*, 121.

⁵ Bryant, ‘Villa views and the uninvited audience’,

⁶ Porter, *London*, 120-22.

⁷ Rothery and Stobart, ????, *Continuity and Change*, ????

⁸ SCLA, DR18/23/14 - Lease on Grove House, 1788.

⁹ See SCLA, DR18/17/31/4 – Letter from ??? about renewal of lease, 1800. In her draft response (written on the back of this letter), Mary lays out the conditions of her lease and states that ‘Mr Magnolly stands to the repairs’, suggesting that she may have been reimbursed for this expenditure. However, there is no indication in the Stoneleigh accounts to confirm this.

¹⁰ SCLA, DR18/5/6125 – bill from Thomas Watts, glazier; DR18/5/6126 – bill from John Weston, plasterer; DR18/5/6130 – bill from Joseph Naylor, painter; DR18/5/6129 – bill from James Fisher, carpenter.

¹¹ Williams, ‘Audley End’

¹² SCLA, DR18/5/5703 – bill from Michael Thackthwaite, upholsterer. It is not certain that all this furniture was for Grove House rather than Stoneleigh Abbey, but the items and room names appear to fit her Kensington rather than her Warwickshire home.

¹³ See Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors*, ????

¹⁴ SCLA, DR18/5/5980; DR18/5/6023 – bills from Bradhsaw and Smith, upholsterers.

¹⁵ SCLA, DR18/4/47 – plate sent down by Mr Hill from Grove House; DR18/4/46 list of china at Grove House.

¹⁶ Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors*, ????. See also Stobart, *Sugar and Spice*, ????

¹⁷ Lady Sefton and Mrs St John were the sisters of William Craven, Mary’s cousin and owner of Coombe Abbey, a neighbouring estate in Warwickshire.

¹⁸ See, for example, SCLA, DR671 – letter to Joseph Hill, 28 January 1792.

¹⁹ SCLA, DR18/5/6098 – bill from Edward Fell. They were also supplied with trimmed hats. The bill from Fell included 9s 6d for ‘ripping to pieces a claret colour frock suit and greatly altered for a new postilion & made to his size’.

²⁰ J. Styles, *The Dress of the People. Everyday Fashion in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven, 2007), 295-301.

²¹ SCLA, DR18/31-656 - Day Brook for Grove House, 1793-98.

²² SCLA, DR18/???? – letter to Joseph Hill, 11 February 1791.

²³ SCLA, 18/17/30/41 – letter from Joseph Hill, 19 June 1796; DR18/17/31/3 – letter from Isola Magnally, 24 February 1800

²⁴ Gow, ‘The Edinburgh villa’, 146-7.

²⁵ SCLA, DR18/17/32/70 – list of servants discharged, 1806; DR18/???? – letter to Joseph Hill, 11 February 1791.

²⁶ For a fuller discussion, see: Bailey, ????

²⁷ SCLA, DR18/17/30/35 – letter from Miss Baker, 19 April 1796. A draft response on the same letter details the arrangements for payment and delivery via the mail coach.

²⁸ SCLA, DR18/31/655 Account of Sundries from Stoneleigh Abbey, 1793-98.

²⁹ See, for example, SCLA, DR18/???? – letter from Joseph Hill, ????

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