

**A Collaborative Endeavour:
Building House, Home and Family at Montreal Park in Kent
By Kate Smith**

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Figure 1. Montreal Park, Kent. Courtesy of Kent Library and History Centre.

Montreal Park was originally built by Jeffrey Amherst, 1st Baron Amherst (1717-97) 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 Jeffrey 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.¹ 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 (1802-1826) and daughter Sarah Elizabeth (1806-1876), 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

¹ Douglas M. Peers, 'Amherst, William Pitt, first Earl Amherst of Arracan (1773-1857)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, May 2009 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/445, accessed 19 June 2013].

and Assam. In 1828, Amherst returned home to Britain with his wife and daughter, his son having died in India.² Soon after returning to England, the Amherst family began rebuilding their country house, Montreal Park in Riverhead, Kent. This case study explores this period of return and questions the different outcomes that stately house-building achieved for imperial families.

As Mark Girouard reminds us in the opening pages of *Life in the English Country House: A Social and Architectural History*, country houses principally acted as markers of status and wealth – ‘they were power houses’.³ Traditionally the purchase or building of a country house by returned East India Company families has been characterized as an assertion of wealth and status and a means through which they integrated 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 similarly, by pursuing a parliamentary seat, East India Company families not only turned wealth into power, but also turned wealth into a recognizably British form of power.⁴ As a landed estate Indian wealth became domesticated.⁵ In these debates on the purpose of country house investments, the purchase and building of country houses have come to be seen as interchangeable. In contrast, this case study specifically investigates building to uncover the diverse benefits East India Company families accrued through this activity.

Alan Mackley and Richard Wilson’s research has shown that men embarked on house building not only to demonstrate status and wealth, but also to accrue benefits discernable in the process of building itself. Through their decisions and close management of projects, house builders – for example - displayed taste and discernment.⁶ In Mackley and Wilson’s account, however, it is primarily men (as

² Amherst’s son Jeffrey died in 1826.

³ Mark Girouard, *Life in the English Country House: A Social and Architectural History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1978), p. 2.

⁴ James M. Holzman, *The Nabobs in England: A Study of the Returned Anglo- Indians, 1760-1785* (New York, 1926), pp. 70-80.

⁵ Tillman W. Nechtman, *Nabobs: Empire and Identity in Eighteenth-Century Britain*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 165.

⁶ Richard Wilson and Alan Mackley, *The Building of the English Country House: Creating Paradise* (New York and London: Continuum, 2000), p. 66.

lone individuals) who benefited from and engaged with these processes. More recently, the work of Judith Lewis has challenged this reading by demonstrating that women were often actively involved in managing and directing house building projects. For example, Lewis examines how Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough took direct control of the building project at Blenheim after her husband, the Duke of Marlborough, suffered a stroke in 1716. Taking control, Sarah promptly fired Sir John Vanburgh and hired the cabinetmaker James Moore in the hope of completing the project before the Duke died.⁷ In this, and 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. This case study builds on Lewis's insights by demonstrating how women acted as important agents in collaborative building projects and how collaboration involved not just husbands and wives but also members of the broader family circle.

As Margot Finn's case study on Swallowfield Park demonstrates, some Company families sought to *purchase* country estates by combining wealth and assets. Returning to England in 1813, after working as a judge in the Bengal Supreme Court, Sir Henry Russell, first baronet (1751-1836) suggested the possibility of joining his own financial resources with those of his sons Henry and Charles to purchase a country house. In the early 1820s, the Russell family finally bought Swallowfield Park in Berkshire.⁸ As the Russell family employed collaborative strategies for purchase, the Amherst family employed collaborative strategies in building. This case study shows how design decisions were made collaboratively and how house building became an endeavour shared across a broad family circle. In doing so, it reveals how building not only allowed imperial families to manifest signs of their new wealth and status and to integrate into established elite circles, but also that the very process of house building allowed families previously separated by distance to reintegrate with each other and reconstruct

⁷ Judith S. Lewis, 'When a House Is Not a Home: Elite English Women and the Eighteenth-Century Country House', *Journal of British Studies*, 48:2 (2009), p. 346.

⁸ Margot C. Finn, 'Swallowfield Park Case Study', *East India Company at Home, 1757-1857*: <http://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/eicah/case-studies-2/swallowfield-park-berkshire/a-collaborative-endeavour/> (2012).

a shared familial identity. Using architectural plans, journals, and correspondence, this study examines the changes the Amhersts made to Montreal Park upon their return from India and explores what they hoped those changes would achieve.

Familial belonging

Maintaining a shared identity across imperial space was an important but endless task for the Amhersts. Research by Kate Teltscher, Elizabeth Vibert, Margot Finn and Sarah Pearsall has revealed that imperial families keenly felt the distances placed between different members and developed a range of strategies to traverse spaces of absence.⁹ 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 Government House 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'.¹⁰ Sarah Elizabeth thus

⁹ Kate Teltscher, 'The sentimental ambassador: the letters of George Bogel from Bengal, Bhutan and Tibet, 1770-1781', in Rebecca Earle (ed.), *Epistolary Selves: letters and letter-writers, 1600-1945* (Aldershot, Brookfield, Singapore and Sydney: Ashgate, 1999), pp. 79-94; Elizabeth Vibert, 'Writing "Home": Sibling Intimacy and Mobility in a Scottish Colonial Memoir', in Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton (eds), *Moving Subjects: Gender, Mobility and Intimacy in an Age of Global Empire* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), pp. 67-88; Margot Finn, 'Colonial Gifts: Family Politics and the Exchange of Goods in British India, c. 1780-1820', *Modern Asian Studies*, 40, 1 (February 2006), pp. 203-232; Sarah M. S. Pearsall, *Atlantic Families: Lives and Letters in the Later Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 5.

¹⁰ British Library, Prints and Drawings Collection, 'Drawings of Government House, Calcutta', August 1824, WD4131.

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.¹¹

The Amherst family also developed other techniques through which they could create and recreate a sense of the familial across distance. They employed journals to recount experiences and events, which other family members then read at a later point. For instance, on her younger brother Frederick's return from Italy in 1829, Sarah Elizabeth recalls 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'.¹² 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.¹³ When in India between 1823 and 1828, for example, 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 her daughter 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 once returned, these practices suggest at the importance the Amherst family placed on reconstituting a sense of familial belonging once physically present and returned home.

¹¹ For more on letter reading as a shared practice see Rebecca Earle, 'Introduction: letters, writers and the historian', in Rebecca Earle (ed.), *Epistolary Selves: Letters and Letter-Writers, 1600-1945* (Aldershot and Brookfield: Ashgate, 1999), pp. 1-14.

¹² Claydon House Trust, Sarah Hay-Williams Collection, Journals of Sarah Amherst, 'Notes on the events of my own time', 10/1082/3.

¹³ Sarah Hay-Williams Collection, Journals of Sarah Amherst, 'Notes on the events of my own time', 10/1082/3.

A Shared Project

Once returned to England in 1828, the Amhersts initiated other projects to ensure that a sense of familial identity was quickly restored. As well as shared trips and journeys the Amhersts also began refashioning their country house, Montreal Park in Kent. At one level, 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 made the move worthwhile. 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’.¹⁴ In addition to wealth, moreover, while in India, Amherst also managed to acquire status. In 1826 William Pitt had been created 1st Earl Amherst of Arracan and Viscount Holmesdale, honours which 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 1).¹⁵ 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, I argue they sought primarily to reconstitute a family identity and sense of belonging, which had been dispersed by imperial distance.

¹⁴ British Library, European Manuscript Collection, ‘Letter to William Pitt Amherst’, 24 November 1822, F140/55.

¹⁵ Jeffrey Amherst, *Wandering Abroad: The Autobiography of Jeffrey Amherst* (London: Secker & Warburg: 1976), p.19.

In 1829 the Amhersts commissioned the architect Mr 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.¹⁶ 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 additional form, to be placed where one chose, but on every side it looked like an excrescence & deformity'.¹⁷ The Amhersts 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 the high levels of time and effort they invested in the building process.



Figure 2. 'South Elevation Montreal showing a proposed addition' (November 1828). Courtesy of Kent Library and History Centre¹⁸

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

¹⁶ Sarah Hay-Williams Collection, Journals of Sarah Amherst, 'Notes on the events of my own time, beginning with the year 1820' (1820-1842), 10/1082/3.

¹⁷ Sarah Hay-Williams Collection, Journals of Sarah Amherst, 'Notes on the events of my own time, beginning with the year 1820' (1820-1842), 10/1082/3.

¹⁸ Kent Library and History Centre, Amherst Papers, Detailed Plans of Alterations at Montreal by Mr. Atkinson (1829-31), U1350 P21.

house, which could be connected by an arcade to the wings at either side of it (see figure 2 above). 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 3 below). Such a substantial extension, it was argued, would create enough space within the central building of the house to include a billiard room.

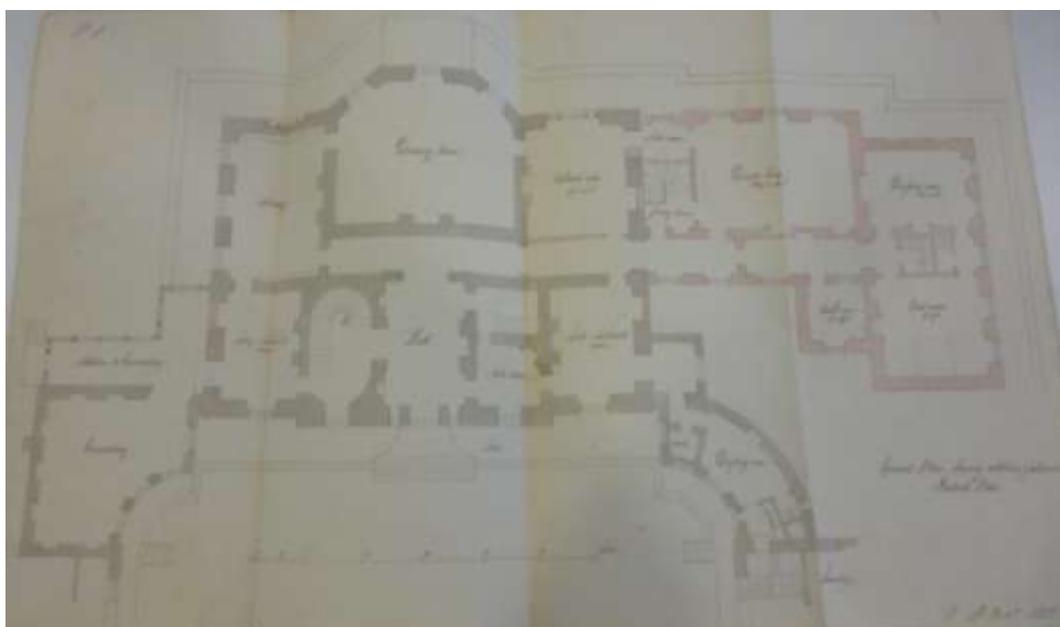


Figure 3. 'Ground floor plan showing additions and alterations Montreal Place' (November 1828). Courtesy of Kent Library and History Centre¹⁹

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

¹⁹ Amherst Papers, Detailed Plans of Alterations at Montreal by Mr. Atkinson (1829-31), U1350 P21.

asymmetrical houses to emerge in the early years of the 1800s.²⁰ 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 Amhersts saw their building project as an endeavor 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 at 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 space. Sarah Elizabeth describes how her sister 'immediately reduced the idea to a scale on paper'.²¹ After some adjustment, it was this idea that came to be completed at Montreal (see Mr Atkinson's rendering of the design in figure 4 below).

²⁰ Girouard, *Life in the English Country House*, p. 220.

²¹ Sarah Hay-Williams Collection, Journals of Sarah Amherst, 'Notes on the events of my own time, beginning with the year 1820' (1820-1842), 10/1082/3.



Figure 4. 'Ground Plan for Additions Montreal Feb 1829' (February 1829). Courtesy of Kent Library and History Centre²²

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. Lady Maria Windsor's drafting skills – rather than the services of the architect – were particularly useful in allowing the family to quickly move 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 involvement in design, suggesting that she may have been actively involved in other projects. At the same time, the active engagement of daughters in the design process reveals how broad collaborations between family members were enacted to achieve house building schemes.

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.²³ Eight months later they moved back to Montreal and Sarah Elizabeth recalled how 'every thing was so changed, in consequence of the

²² Amherst Papers, Detailed Plans of Alterations at Montreal by Mr. Atkinson (1829-31), U1350 P21.

²³ Sarah Hay-Williams Collection, Journals of Sarah Amherst, 'Notes on the events of my own time, beginning with the year 1820' (1820-1842), 10/1082/3.

alterations in the house, & the enclosure of the new garden that we hardly knew the place again'.²⁴ 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 building solution acceptable to all. Montreal Park became an important and meaningful place again due to family members investing 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.

²⁴ Ibid.