

Victoria & Albert Art & Love

Osborne and Balmoral

Geoffrey Tyack

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'It sounds so snug & nice', wrote Queen Victoria in 1845, 'to have a place of one's own & quiet & retired, & free from all Woods & Forests, & other charming departments who really are the plague of one's life.'

The urge to escape the stifling formality of Court life has been felt by monarchs from time immemorial. The Roman emperors had their villas, the French kings their *trianons* and hunting lodges, and Queen Victoria's wicked uncle, George IV, his marine pavilion at Brighton and his grossly oversized *cottage orné* – Royal Lodge – in Windsor Great Park. When the young Queen married Prince Albert the Brighton Pavilion was placed at their disposal, together with Claremont, at Esher in Surrey, a neat Palladian house of 1771–4 designed by Capability Brown and Henry Holland. But neither house was big enough for their growing family, and besides, the Pavilion, in the middle of one of the fastest-growing towns in England, could not give them the privacy they craved, even had they persuaded themselves to tolerate the nonchalant frivolity of its architecture. So a substitute was found on the Isle of Wight, already a popular destination both for devotees of the Picturesque and for those in search of the benefits of sea air.

Osborne House

Osborne ([fig. 1](#)) was purchased at the suggestion of the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Peel, in 1845. It stood on the north side of the Island, overlooking the Solent ([fig. 2](#)) and close to East Cowes Castle – built as a rural retreat by John Nash, architect of the Brighton Pavilion and Buckingham Palace – and James Wyatt's Norris Castle, both of which the Queen had already visited. In contrast to these

Fig. 1

C.R. Stanley (1795–1868),
Osborne House, 1844
Watercolour, 22.2 x 3.6cm
Royal Collection, RCIN 919839

Fig. 2

Queen Victoria (1819–1901), *View from my
Sitting Room Window at Osborne*, 1848
Watercolour with traces of bodycolour,
16.8 x 24.7cm
Royal Collection, RL K26, f.33

romantic extravaganzas, it was a plain and unremarkable building begun in about 1774 for Richard Pope Blachford.² For the royal couple its very unpretentiousness formed part of its charm. The Queen thought it was 'a really lovely little New House', though 'terribly neglected'.³ And Albert thought that it needed: 'no alteration, only the addition of a few rooms to make it a very suitable and comfortable residence for the Queen & the Children & part of the suite. This addition can easily be made, & if done in a plain, unassuming style conformable to the rest of the house, ought not to cost a great deal'.⁴

The need for an 'addition' led to the replacement of the original house by the Italianate palace we see today: a building as egregious in its way, yet as representative of its own era, as the Brighton Pavilion. The guiding spirit was Albert himself. He had studied History of Art at the University of Bonn in 1837–8 and, like many earnest young Germans, had been 'intoxicated' by the beauty of Italy's landscapes and buildings on his first visit in 1838–9.⁵ The situation of Osborne reminded him of



Fig. 3
The stable yard and clock tower at Trentham, Staffordshire, designed by Sir Charles Barry, 1834–40



Fig. 4
The court gardener's house at Charlottenhof, Potsdam, Germany, designed by Karl Friedrich Schinkel, 1826–9

the Bay of Naples,⁶ and it is not surprising that he should have been attracted by the Italianate villa style. Here was a style both classical and picturesque, irregular in disposition and outline, yet rooted in the architectural culture of the Renaissance. It had been recommended as a model for moderately sized country houses by the aesthetic theorist Richard Payne Knight,⁷ and had been taken up by John Nash at Cronkhill (Shropshire) and Sandridge (Devon); by Thomas Hope at the Deepdene (Surrey); and, more recently, by Charles Barry at Trentham (Staffordshire; **fig. 3**), country seat of the Queen's mistress of the robes, the Duchess of Sutherland.⁸ The great German architect Karl Friedrich Schinkel and his pupil Ludwig Persius had employed it in several influential buildings for the Prussian royal family at Potsdam (**fig. 4**).⁹ And, by the 1840s, smaller Italianate villas with turrets, loggias and pergolas had sprung up on the fringes of Bath and in the suburbs of large towns on both sides of the Atlantic. Indeed, John Claudius Loudon thought that the style was especially suited to 'a prosperous and improving people – such as the Americans'.¹⁰

Prince Albert's choice of architect was an unconventional one. Thomas Cubitt was, strictly speaking, not an architect at all but a builder. By selecting him in place of Charles Barry – with whom he had crossed swords over the decoration of the new Houses of Parliament – or Edward Blore, who had recently designed the new

east wing at Buckingham Palace,¹¹ Albert ensured that he could maintain control of the design in a way that might not have been possible if he had entrusted it to a professional architect. Cubitt had recently carried out London's most ambitious speculative housing development to date, on the Duke of Westminster's Belgravia estate behind Buckingham Palace, where Albert's private secretary George Anson had a house.¹² And in his own villa at Clapham he showed a capacity for domestic design in the Italianate manner which he was later to develop in the 'Pavilion' at Osborne, the first and most important part of the new buildings there.

The 'Pavilion', which went up in 1845–6 (figs 5, 6), was a compact house planned in a manner which had first become popular in the mid-eighteenth century, with the main rooms, on three storeys, grouped round a central staircase: a comfortable house for a family which cherished the bourgeois virtues. 'All', enthused the Queen in 1846, 'is so convenient, spacious and well carried out. Mr Cubitt has done it admirably. He is such an honest, kind, good man.'¹³ The house was built of brick and, like many Italian Renaissance villas, was covered in cement 'coloured to imitate stone'.¹⁴ The internal construction was fireproof, with iron girders and brick arches more commonly found in mills and factories than in country houses. Visually the most obviously Italianate feature was the unusually tall tower; echoing that at Cubitt's own Thames-side building works; as Charles Parker had written in his influential *Villa Rustica* (1833): 'the peculiar form [of a campanile] is so identified with the Italian scenery that without it we would scarcely recognise the landscape as complete'.¹⁵

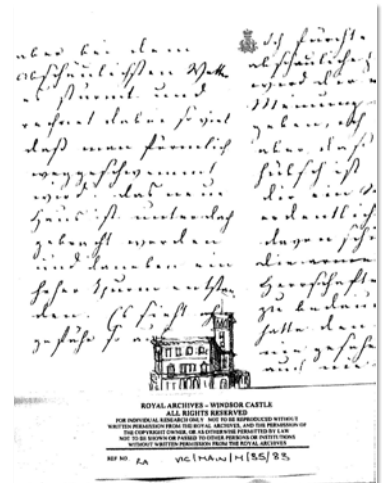


Fig. 5
Sketch of the Pavilion at Osborne
by Prince Albert in a letter to his
step-grandmother;
10 May 1847
Royal Collection, RA VIC/MAIN/M/35/83

Fig. 6
The Pavilion at Osborne from the north



Fig. 7 (far left)
The Pavilion is on the left. The façade of the guest and household block (right) was altered in execution.

Fig. 8 (left)
Ground plan of Osborne House
(*The Builder*, vol. 6, 1848, p. 571)

The Pavilion is at the bottom left.



What set Osborne apart from other early Victorian country houses were the huge subsidiary wings for the household – ‘the suite’ – and for visitors ([figs 7, 8](#)). Finally completed in 1851, with a second tower at the far end, they form an open-ended courtyard attached to the Pavilion only by a corridor:

Architecturally they are, for the most part, relatively plain, in a modest Renaissance style, but there is one *jeu d'esprit* in the form of a first-floor loggia in the block overlooking the entrance courtyard and linking the two wings. It is made up of a row of *serliana* openings, like those in Andrea Palladio's Basilica at Vicenza ([fig. 9](#)), an afterthought which the Queen thought was ‘very pretty and Italian looking’.¹⁶ There are echoes here of Albert's early exposure to Italian Renaissance architecture, and there may have been some input too from his artistic advisor Ludwig Gruner, the Dresden engraver who was already at work on Albert's short-lived garden pavilion at Buckingham Palace. And it was certainly Gruner who advised on the layout of the notably Italianate garden on the north side of the house ([fig. 10](#)), with its terraces – finished to Albert's own design in 1854 – enriched by vases and statuary ([fig. 11](#)). For Robert Kerr (author of the standard manual on Victorian country-house planning), writing in 1871, the finished house was ‘more like a Hotel than a Family Mansion’,¹⁷ its institutional appearance strangely reminiscent of the workhouses and pavilion hospitals that were springing up at the time. So it is perhaps appropriate that the Main and Household wings were turned into a convalescent home for army officers after Queen Victoria's death. But the Queen herself had no reservations. Osborne, she told her daughter in 1858, was ‘too lovely ... the deep blue sea, myriads of brilliant flowers ... of all descriptions on the terrace, the quiet and retirement, all make it a perfect paradise – which I always deeply grieve to leave’.¹⁸

Fig. 9 (left)
The courtyard façade of the guest and household block at Osborne



Fig. 10
The garden at Osborne, looking north towards the Solent



Fig. 11
The terrace and north façade of the guest and household block at Osborne



The interiors at Osborne, decorated with Gruner's advice, reflect the unadventurous middle-of-the-road taste of the 1840s and 1850s. The finest is the entrance corridor, giving access to the Main and Household wings and acting as a formal entrance to the Pavilion. It was conceived as a sculpture gallery (figs 12, 13), part of a long-established country-house tradition that extends back to the seventeenth century. The rooms in the Pavilion, on the other hand, mostly decorated by Holland & Sons, were for the most part designed for comfort rather than for show, with ornament largely confined to the Dining Room, Drawing Room and Billiard Room on the ground floor. The upstairs rooms provided a relatively unostentatious setting for the royal couple's private life and a backdrop to Albert's collection of Italian 'primitives' (fig. 14). The Council Room, in the Main Wing, by contrast, supplied a richly painted

and gilded setting for the Court formalities which inevitably impinged upon their seaside idyll (fig. 15). With their lavish, though controlled, Rococo-influenced plasterwork and their extensive use of brightly coloured paint, the main reception rooms differ little from those of contemporary aristocratic town and country houses; Albert's and Gruner's infatuation with a more 'correct' style of Italian Renaissance interior decoration only came to full fruition later, in the gorgeous interiors of the ballroom wing at Buckingham Palace and, above all, in the Royal Mausoleum at Frogmore.



Fig. 12 (above left)
James Roberts (c.1800–1867),
Osborne: the Marble Corridor, 1852
Watercolour and bodycolour over pencil,
26 x 36.5cm
Royal Collection, RL 23463

Fig. 13 (above)
The Marble Corridor at Osborne in 1873
Albumen print by Jabez Hughes
Royal Collection, RCIN 41025

Fig. 14
James Roberts (c.1800–1867), *Osborne: the Prince's Dressing and Writing Room*, 1851
Watercolour and bodycolour, 24.3 x 36.8cm
Royal Collection, RL 26224

Fig. 15
James Roberts (c.1800–1867),
Osborne: the Council Room, 1861
Watercolour and bodycolour over pencil,
23.7 x 32.2cm
Royal Collection, RL 19868



Balmoral

On 8 September 1848 the Queen wrote in her Journal:

We arrived at Balmoral at a quarter to three. It is a pretty little castle in the old Scottish style. There is a picturesque tower and garden in front, with a high wooded hill; at the back there is a wood down to the Dee; and the hills rise around ... The scenery is wild, but not desolate [fig. 16]; and everything looks much more prosperous and cultivated than at [Loch] Laggan. Then the soil is delightfully dry ... Albert went out to try his luck with some stags which lay quite near in the woods, but was unsuccessful. They come down of an evening quite near to the house.¹⁹

Victoria and Albert first visited Scotland in 1842, and six years later their search for a Highland hunting lodge led them to an old, probably seventeenth-century, tower-house – one of many in Aberdeenshire – occupied from 1830 by Sir Robert Gordon, ambassador to Vienna. He had created a deer forest on the surrounding hills and in 1834–9 he enlarged the house (fig. 17) as an occasional residence. When he died in 1847 the lease reverted to his brother Lord Aberdeen, the future Prime Minister, who told the Prince's secretary George Anson that 'the project of a permanent residence in Scotland ... was a folly. But if a folly is to be committed ... Balmoral certainly offers some recommendations, e.g. gravelly soil, good air, etc.'²⁰

Gordon's architect at Balmoral was John Smith, one of the two men – the other one was Archibald Simpson – chiefly responsible for turning Aberdeen into one of the great neo-classical cities of Scotland. Like most architects of his generation, Smith was capable of working in non-classical styles, and in 1825–32 he rebuilt the front of the early sixteenth-century quadrangle at King's College, Aberdeen (fig. 18), in a competent Tudor-Gothic manner. He also carried out tactful restorations of some of the local tower-houses, notably Castle Fraser and Craigievar (fig. 19),²¹ and in 1845–6 his son William, who acted as his senior partner, employed a loosely neo-Tudor

Fig. 16 (above left)
William Leighton Leitch (1804–83),
View from the walk along the Dee at Balmoral,
looking towards Invercauld, 1850
Watercolour and bodycolour;
31.5 x 44.5cm
Royal Collection, RL 19648

Fig. 17 (above)
Photograph of Old Balmoral from the
south in September 1854
Royal Collection, RCIN 2140208

The seventeenth-century tower is to the right, the additions by John Smith for Sir Robert Gordon to the left.



Fig. 18 (far left)
The west front of the quadrangle at King's College, Aberdeen, rebuilt by John Smith, 1825–32

Fig. 19 (left)
Craigievar Castle, Aberdeenshire, built c.1610–26 and conservatively restored by John Smith in 1827

style for Trinity Hall – now a shopping mall – next to Union Bridge in Aberdeen.²² John Smith was already discussing further alterations to Balmoral with the Prince in September 1848, and in October he submitted an estimate for work on an enlarged office wing.²³ This was finished, along with a new venison larder, in the following year, but by then Albert was considering further alterations to the house, again to John Smith's designs. They would have turned it into a moderately sized example of the Scottish Baronial style initiated by Sir Walter Scott and his architect William Atkinson at Abbotsford in 1814–24 (**fig. 20**)²⁴ and later exploited with great ingenuity by William Burn and David Bryce. This style was comparable to that of Albert's birthplace, Schloss Rosenau at Coburg (**fig. 21**), restored and enlarged by his father in a spirit of romantic medievalism in the 1820s. Smith's proposed alterations to



Fig. 20 (far left)
Abbotsford, designed by William Atkinson for Sir Walter Scott, 1814–24

Fig. 21 (left)
Douglas Morison (1814–47), *Schloss Rosenau, Coburg, Germany*, 1845
Watercolour, 29.2 × 43.7cm
Royal Collection, RCIN 920430

Balmoral are shown in a perspective view of July or August 1849 prepared for the Prince by the local Aberdeen painter James Giles (**fig. 22**).²⁵ The existing tower was to be heightened for picturesque effect and the entrance moved to the left, in place of a conservatory shown in early photographs, allowing for the addition of a new and larger dining room. But nothing could be done until the property had been sold by the ground landlord, the Earl of Fife, and this did not happen until 1852. By then the decision had been made to raze the old house and to replace it with a new and larger one closer to the River Dee: the present Balmoral.

The Queen told the Duchess of Sutherland in September 1858 that the new castle (**fig. 23**) was entirely Albert's creation.²⁶ It was certainly his own property and, as at Osborne, he seems to have devoted a lot of care to the planning, which again had to reflect the peculiar needs of the Court. But he only went there twice while it was

Image currently unavailable

Fig. 22 (above)
James Giles (1801–70), Proposal for alterations to old Balmoral Castle by John Smith, as seen from the south-east, 1849
Watercolour, 43.5 × 63.5cm
Royal Collection, RL 21283



Fig. 23

James Giles (1801–70),
*Balmoral: William Smith's design for the
north-west front of the new castle, 1853*
Watercolour and bodycolour; 50.5 x 70cm
Royal Collection, RL 21524

being built, and, despite his susceptibility – shared by most of his contemporaries – to the allure of old castles, especially when situated in wild and romantic scenery, there is no evidence that he ever made a serious study of old Scottish architecture. His correspondence, conducted through his secretary, makes it clear that the design and detailing were left to the architect, William Smith, who took over the family practice after his father's death in 1852. The choice of Smith over Burn or Bryce, the recognised masters of Scottish Baronial architecture, may seem perverse. But, as at Osborne, Albert valued obedience to his wishes over creative originality, and at Balmoral Smith carried out those wishes speedily and efficiently. The correspondence in the Royal Archives suggests that the Prince's interventions were mainly confined to minor detailing and practical matters rather than basic architectural principles, which followed well-established Baronial conventions: an asymmetrical plan, arranged with an eye to picturesque effect and liberally spiced with crow-stepped gables, bartizans and pepperpot turrets to add the requisite note of Scottishness. Smith's decision, backed by Albert, to use dressed granite for the exterior, rather than plaster harling,²⁷ gave Balmoral a hard and unyielding character which distinguishes it from the older, and to modern eyes more visually sympathetic, tower-houses of the area. But the house is undeniably impressive, especially when seen from a distance, and it could be argued that its massive solidity reflects something in Albert's own personality.

Balmoral is arranged around two courtyards, one for the royal family and guests, the other for the household and servants. In contrast to Osborne, with its sprawling plan and duplicated Italianate towers, there is just one dominating feature: a mighty 80-ft tower attached to the service end, recalling the seventeenth-century tower of the previous house, though on a much larger scale (**fig. 24**). Robert Kerr, who had been a pupil of John Smith, preferred Balmoral to Osborne, pointing out that there



was 'a certain familiar character about the disposition, which is in fact the character of home comfort'.²⁸ This might not seem immediately apparent from the outside, but the internal effect was surprisingly domestic. The main entrance, at the west end, led into corridors encircling the main courtyard. They gave access to the rooms for visitors, overlooking the driveway, and to the main reception rooms, which faced west towards the valley of the Dee and the distant Cairngorms (**fig. 25**); over the Drawing Room window is a relief carving of St Hubert, patron of hunters (**fig. 26**), by John Thomas, creator of the Royal Dairy at Windsor; another project in which Albert took a close interest. The Dining Room was on the north side, close to the Ballroom, which projects forwards and screens the servants' quarters (**fig. 27**).

As the only 'public' room in the house, used for tenants' balls and similar festivities, the Ballroom (**fig. 28**) was decorated in an Abbotsford-like Tudor-Gothic manner by a theatrical designer, Thomas Grieve. But the other reception rooms were relatively plain (**figs 29, 30**), with comfortable furniture supplied by Holland & Sons,²⁹ and little of the rich ornamentation found in some of the rooms at Osborne. Instead, visual

Fig. 24 (top left)
The south elevation of Balmoral Castle

Fig. 25 (top right)
The west front of Balmoral Castle

Fig. 26 (bottom left)
Carving of St Hubert by John Thomas over the Drawing Room window at Balmoral

Fig. 27 (bottom right)
Balmoral Castle from the north-west; the Ballroom is on the left

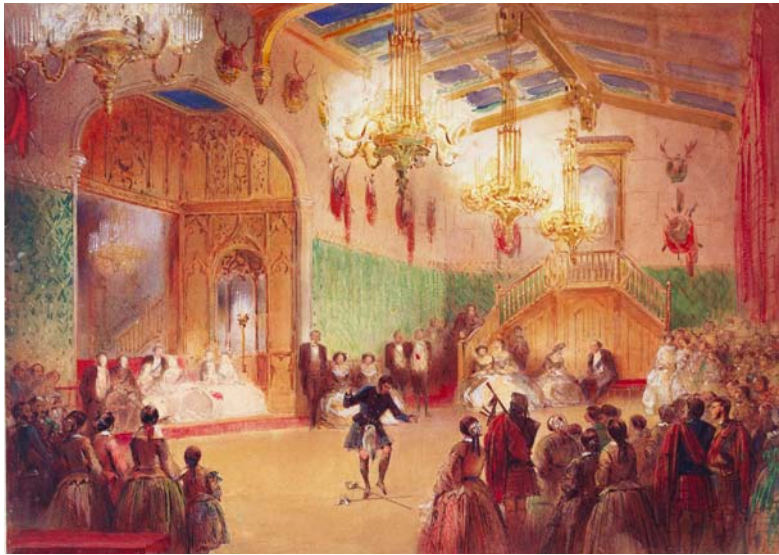


Fig. 28
Egon Lundgren (1815–75),
Gillies' Ball in the Ballroom at Balmoral, 1859
Watercolour, 30.5 x 43.2cm
Royal Collection, RL 19531



Fig. 29
James Roberts (c.1800–1867),
*Balmoral: the Lower Corridor and
Staircase seen from below*, 1857
Watercolour and bodycolour over slight
indications in pencil, 27.2 x 36.6cm
Royal Collection, RL 19476



Fig. 30
James Roberts (c.1800–1867),
Balmoral: the Drawing Room, 1857
Watercolour and bodycolour over slight
indications in pencil, 26 x 38.3cm
Royal Collection, RL 19477



Fig. 31
James Roberts (c.1800–1867),
Balmoral: the Queen's Dressing Room, 1857
Watercolour, 26.7 × 36.8cm
Royal Collection, RL 19479



Fig. 32
Georg Konrad Rothbart (1817–96),
*Schloss Rosenau: the room at used by
Princes Ernst and Albert as children*, c.1846
Watercolour over pencil, with scraping out,
22.6 × 31 cm
Royal Collection, RL 20468

variety came from the stags' heads mounted in the corridors and the tartan carpets, which may have prompted the minister in attendance, Lord Clarendon, to remark in 1856: 'Here everything is Scotch ... and the thistles are in such abundance that they would rejoice the heart of the heart of a donkey if they happened to look like his favourite repast, which they don't.'³⁰ Lady Augusta Bruce, while regretting 'a certain absence of harmony of the whole', admired the light woodwork and the 'curiously devised and tasteful, as well as elaborately executed, articles'.³¹ Several commentators have remarked on the almost Biedermeier quality of the interiors, especially those of the upstairs rooms ([fig. 31](#)), similar in character to those in which Albert had grown up ([fig. 32](#)). Here, once again, the Prince's personal taste is apparent.



Fig. 33
Carl Haag (1820–1915),
*Evening at Balmoral Castle:
the stags brought home*, 1853–4
Watercolour, bodycolour and scraping out,
76.5 x 133.3cm
Royal Collection, RL 22033



Fig. 34
Sir Edwin Landseer (1803–73),
Osborne, 1865, or Sorrow
Oil on canvas, 147.8 x 211.9cm
Royal Collection, RCIN 403580

Osborne and Balmoral did not have a major influence on the development of English or Scottish architecture or interior decoration. Though illustrated in the architectural press, they were private houses seen by few outside royal circles and built to cater for the peculiar and contradictory needs of the royal couple: on the one hand, seclusion; on the other, attendance by large numbers of servants, courtiers and visiting dignitaries. They both employed styles which were already popular and which were handled with more originality by other architects. Their decoration and furnishing was in many ways old-fashioned: the very reverse of the avant-garde innovation admired by aesthetes both then and now. But in the final analysis the interest of these extraordinarily well-preserved houses lies not so much on what came later as in the light they throw on the tastes of the royal couple (figs 33, 34) and, more broadly, on the popular taste which they both embodied and reflected. And in this respect their value is unsurpassed.

Notes

1. Royal Archive, RA VIC/MAIN/Y92/16, Queen Victoria to King Leopold I of the Belgians, 25 March 1845. The Office of Woods and Forests was the department responsible for government buildings and the royal palaces.
2. Colvin 2008, p. 901. The original architect was John Sanderson, but there were later alterations by others, possibly including William Porden.
3. Royal Archive, RA VIC/MAIN/Y92/17, Queen Victoria to King Leopold I of the Belgians, 1 April 1845.
4. Royal Archive, RA VIC/MAIN/F21/53, 21 October 1844.
5. Turner 1998, p. 22.
6. Ibid., p. 27.
7. *An Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste*, London 1805.
8. For Trentham, see Cornforth 1968, pp. 228–30, 283–4.
9. Watkin and Mellinghoff 1987, pp. 105–7.
10. *Encyclopedia of Cottage, Farm and Villa Architecture*, p. 963, quoted Turner 1998, p. 27.
11. Blore did a design for Osborne: see British Library, Add MS 42027.
12. Hobhouse 1971, pp. 376–9.
13. Journal, 14 September 1846, quoted in Hobhouse 1971, p. 383.
14. Turner 1998, p. 29.
15. Quoted in Woodward 1997, p. 71.
16. Journal, 17 March 1849, quoted in Turner 1998, p. 30. The Durbar Wing, on the opposite side of the entrance courtyard, was not built until 1890–1, long after Albert's death.
17. Kerr 1871, p. 431.
18. *Dearest Child*, ed. R. Fulford, p. 123, quoted in Hobhouse 1971, p. 539.
19. Duff 1994, p. 60. Victoria and Albert had spent a month at Ardverikie, on Loch Laggan, in the summer of 1847.
20. D. Millar 1985, pp. 39–40.
21. Colvin 2008, pp. 955–7; and Brogden 1995, pp. 229–35.
22. William Smith II, *Dictionary of Scottish Architects*, accessed 1 April 2011.
23. D. Millar 1985, p. 55; Royal Archives RA PP/BAL/MAIN/OS/13.
24. Colvin 2008, p. 81. See Wainwright 1989, pp. 262–7.

25. Royal Library, RL 21283, reproduced in D. Millar 1985, p. 56. There are tracings of the plan of the old house by John Smith, dated 1851, and showing proposed extensions, in Royal Archive, RA PP/BAL/MAIN/104.
26. Quoted in Ames 1967, p. 104, n. 2.
27. Royal Archive, RA PP/BAL/MAIN/OS/151, Smith to Phipps, 7 June 1853.
28. Kerr 1871, p. 433.
29. Royal Archive, RA PP/BAL/MAIN/OS/191.
30. Quoted in Cornforth 1977, p. 1598.
31. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 1598.

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