

Land & Buildings Fonthill Gifford



Sale of Effects at Fonthill Abbey

Of all the sales of valuable effects which have taken place in modern days, perhaps not one has excited a more ardent curiosity among the virtuosi than the approaching sale at Fonthill, in Wiltshire, the celebrated seat of Mr. Beckford. The sale will commence on the 1st of October, under the hammer of Mr. James Christie, of Pall Mall, and will continue from thence for ten days. Sunday of course, exclusive. The catalogues are sold for one guinea each, and the purchaser is entitled to a ticket to admit two persons to the Abbey.

Ever since the opening of the Abbey to public view, the number of visitors, notwithstanding the distance from the metropolis, and the price of admission, has been very great, some days exceeding three hundred. The attractions have been twofold, embracing the Abbey of Fonthill itself, which is characterized by a peculiar style of architecture, and its rarities and precious contents, which may be considered as heretofore altogether excluded from public inspection; for it is a well known fact, that none were permitted to enter the Abbey but a few of the private friends of the proprietor. Indeed, so jealous was Mr. Beckford of permitting any person to encroach upon his privacy, that he has had the park entirely enclosed with a high wall, surmounted by a chevaux-de-frize; and there is but one gate of entrance, beyond which no person is admitted without his express permission.

It appears that Mr. Beckford for many years has almost entirely excluded himself from society; his habits are extremely regular and abstemious, his principal pleasures are derived from his library, which is extensive and extremely valuable.

Fonthill Gifford, so called in contradistinction to the adjoining manor of Fonthill Bishop, was, at the period of the Domesday-survey, held by the ancient family of Gifford,* from whom it was passed into the possession of the Wests (Lord Dewar), and successively through other owners, including Bradshaw, during the Interregnum, and the Cottingtons, before and after the Restoration, till it was purchased by William Beckford, the ancestor

of the present proprietor, and famous in the records of the city of London for a bold remonstrance which he delivered to the King in the year 1770.

Mr. Beckford possessed immense estates in Jamaica, and was twice Lord Mayor of London. At the time of his death, his son, the present proprietor of Fonthill, was a minor. Succeeding to almost boundless wealth (we have, heard upwards of ninety thousand pounds per annum), endowed with an extraordinary mind with an exquisite taste for the arts, with literary talents of the highest order, - in short, with genius periled only by the measureless power of gratification which riches offered, the young owner of Fonthill commenced his career. Alderman Beckford, in the plenitude of his fortune, had, when the former mansion was destroyed by fire, built a noble house in the grounds to the right of what is now the entrance -gate on the London road, and fronting a fine basin of water agreeably to the fashion of that time. But this noble residence fell far short of the ambition of his successor, who ordered it to be demolished, and, with a profusion probably unexampled in the history of a private individual, commenced the superb design which now received, as it always attracted, the admiration of the country.

The structure was begun sometime in 1796, after the plans and under the superintendence of the late Mr. Wyatt. Since the death of Mr. Wyatt (in 1813), his plans have been followed by the persons employed by Mr. Beckford without alteration; so that whatever of beauty belongs to the Abbey, it is entirely the result of that eminent architect's talent, and the poetical genius of its owner.

The conventional style in which the Abbey is built is not very favourable for the exhibition of what we would call finery; nor is it possible to display a very great number of excellent pictures to advantage in the lights afforded by its structure. The Grand Octagonal Tower suits nothing but the superb simplicity of its existing furniture; the noble arches, the beautifully clustered pillars, the softly stained glass, the rich sweep of curtains and corresponding masses of sofa and Ottoman, the galleries circling above, and the exquisite fan-work and lantern which crown the whole, are all in the purest keeping and justest taste. The summit of the Tower remains in an unfinished condition; and in ascending to enjoy the extensive view which it presents, you have to clamber up ladders and through rafters. The prospect, is, however, a fine one, though the country round is not of a picturesque description. Salisbury Plain, ill named, offers few striking images to the eye; and, with the exception of Salisbury Cathedral in one direction, and Stourhead, backed by Dorsetshire, in another, the immediate groves of Fonthill are the only pleasing features of the scene. On one occasion, when this lofty tower was pushing its crest towards heaven, an elevated part of it caught fire and was destroyed. The sight was sublime; and we have heard that it was a spectacle which the owner of the Mansion enjoyed with as much composure as if the flames had not been devouring what it would cost a fortune to repair! And we can readily credit this report, for we are well assured that the building was carried on by him with an energy and enthusiasm of which duller minds can hardly form a conception. At one period, every cart and wagon in the district was pressed into the service, though all the agricultural labourers of the country stood still. At another, even the royal works of St. George's Chapel, Windsor, were abandoned, that 460 men might be employed night and day on Fonthill Abbey. These men were made to relieve each other by regular watches; and during

the longest and darkest nights of winter, the astonished traveller might see the tower rising under their hands, the trowel and torch being associated for that purpose. This must have had a very extraordinary appearance; and we are told that it was another of those exhibitions which Mr. Beckford was fond of contemplating. He is represented as surveying the work thus expedited, the busy levy of masons, the high and giddy dancing of the lights, and the strange effects produced upon the architecture and woods below, from one of those eminences in the walks which we have already described, and wasting the coldest hours of December darkness in feasting his sense with this this display of almost superhuman power. These singular traits of character will not surprise those who have made mankind their study. It is the very course of nature, when satiated with all that inordinate wealth can purchase, to aim at higher, probably at extravagant sources of gratification.

But we shall for the present refrain from entering into a history of the building, which is stated to have cost upwards of £400,000. The present sale is entirely confined to the objects of curiosity, and does not extend to any of the useful furniture of the Abbey. The inducement to such a sacrifice is variously ascribed; by some to a falling off in Mr. Beckford's West India revenues, and by others to the taste of that gentleman having taken another course.

During the bustle attending the view, Mr. Beckford has removed to Bath, where he will remain till the sale is over. We may, perhaps, here mention, that this singular character has two daughters, one of whom is married to the present Duke of Hamilton, who with her Noble husband, has repeatedly been his visitor.

* In 1285, Sir Robert Gifford , knight, (probably a descendant from Osbertus), was excommunicated by the Archbishop of Canterbury, for stealing two nuns from the convent at Wilton, but was absolved on the following conditions: That he should not again enter into a nunnery or be in the company of nuns; that on the three following Sundays he should be whipt in the parish church of Wilton, and as many times in the market and church of Shaftesbury:- that he should fast a certain number of months, and not take upon him the habit or title of a knight, or wear any apparel except of a russet colour, with lamb or sheepskins, or return into his military order; - and that he should restore the nuns to their convent, to undergo the like conditions. All which he bound himself by oath to do; the bishop of Salisbury prescribing the mode of his fasting till he had served three years in the Holy Land.

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