

## **Thirlestaine House & Lord Northwick; John Rushout, 2<sup>nd</sup> Baron Northwick of Thirlestane House, Cheltenham**

### **Introduction**

John Rushout (1770-1859) from Westminster, London, developed a love of antique art as a result of the Grand Tour, and also through his friendship with Sir William Hamilton, Richard Payne Knight and the sculptor Antonio Canova. An acquaintance of Horatio Nelson, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Baron Northwick (he later inherited this title) is mentioned in the accounts of the author Anthony Trollope. In 1800, he became a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries. Later, in 1832 he built a gallery for his extensive collection of art and antiquities at Northwick Park near Moreton-in-Marsh, Gloucestershire, but it was too small to house his growing collection. Northwick purchased Thirlestane House in 1838 to allow any art lover access to his amassed collection. The building housed his fine collection of pictures; Northwick is recognised as one of Britain's major collectors. What was recognised early on was Northwick's pioneering interest in early Italian 'primitive' painting at a time when little attention was paid to them, and also his purchase and patronage of modern British art. He sold his London house in Connaught Place, and works of art in that house were transferred to Cheltenham. Northwick Park at Blockley, on the borders of Gloucester and Worcestershire, remained the active family seat where Lord Northwick ran a large estate with farms and woodland. The house at Blockley itself contained an extensive collection of works of art and they remained, plus additions, in situ. In pursuit of this passion he quickly became known for his purchasing activity and he was a regular feature of Christie's Auction Rooms in London. In 1846 he had produced a catalogue of his collection at Cheltenham. Thirlestaine House was fast becoming a must place to visit for art enthusiasts and that emergent new breed, the art historian. By 1850 Thirlestaine House was viewed as an important cultural addition to the town of Cheltenham to which the local inhabitants had freedom of access.

### **The Building**

*'Thirlestaine House represents the apogee of the Cheltenham villa and is the only surviving example of the grand villa within the town which compares well to the most outstanding examples of this type throughout the country'* **British Listed Buildings**

Thirlestaine House was started in 1820 by J.R. Scott (an amateur architect) for his own use in the Neo-Classical style. It is austere and finely proportioned and in the Neo-Grecian mode. Scott died in 1832 having not completed the house. It is executed in ashlar over brick with a slate roof.

Externally, the overwhelming feature is the central portion; a giant tetrastyle portico, with four fluted Ionic columns and a pediment, built in 1823 (the date is over the entrance).

By 1838 it was in the possession of Alexander Scott, J.R. Scott's youngest brother, previously 'residing generally in Italy' and friend of the then Lord Byron. The house had been on the market throughout the 1830s.

In 1838 it was bought by Lord Northwick, *The Cheltenham Looker On* quoted 'It will require yet thirteen thousand more to finish' and architectural historian C. Rowe coined it:

*'by far the noblest private mansion of which Cheltenham can boast'.*

### **Exterior**

The main range is of 2 storeys; the ground floor has tall 1/1 sash windows with architraves and cornices. The first floor has 6/6 sash windows with architraves and cornices and sculpted relief work above. The glazed entrance doors up from the steps are a twentieth century addition. The two side wings are joined to the main range with niches and sculpted panels. The plinth area has horizontal rustication, and the left wing, a small rotunda *all'antica*.

On the south-east side, there is a central Ionic *porte-cochere* (coach gateway) with engaged Doric pilasters and unfluted Ionic columns. The railings and 2 lamp posts with barley-twist columns on lion tripod bases belong to the original house. The entablature is surmounted by a parapet to the centre. There are 6/6 sash windows with architraves, frieze and cornice. The relief decoration is copied from the Parthenon frieze and the cornice has deeply cut acanthus leaf decoration.

### **Interior**

The interior comprised a Gallery, Ante Room, Drawing Room, Saloon and Dining Room. All of the wall hangings were crimson, as were the curtains, satin couches and chairs. The painted timber work was in imitation maplewood.

The impressive entrance hall is modelled on the Temple of Dionysus at Teos, and contains Ionic columns and a deeply coved ceiling with ornamental plasterwork. There are two grey marble fireplaces and 2-panel doors with guilloche (an ornament resembling braided or interlaced ribbons) mouldings in pilastered architraves. This leads to the open-well staircase with bronze and iron balustrade and acanthus ornamented balusters (short decorative pillars).

The house contains a wing added in 1840 by Northwick, designed as a picture gallery. The long gallery is 80 feet long, 26 feet wide and 30 feet high. Light emanates from a double row of skylights and from the large single-storey plated glass sash windows from the Bath Road elevation, providing a vista of 210 feet. The entire length of the building amounts to 300 foot in length.

The two sculpted friezes in the gallery of horsemen are copied from the Parthenon frieze. The deep cornice has acanthus leaf and egg-and-dart mouldings. The full-length raised roof is deeply coved, and contains ornamental ceiling roses, like decorative bosses. The black marble fireplace has decorative scrolls to the sides. The long gallery leads to the rotunda, a circular print room and library, with fitted bookshelves with inlay and guilloche moulding. The cornice has decorative plasterwork with guilloche, acanthus and palm frond mouldings; a reference to ancient Rome. The domed roof has scalloped panes leading to the central skylight or

oculus (ref. The Pantheon). There is a niche for a statue, the shelves were designed for urns and there were busts over the doors. The skirting boards have the Greek key motif; a decorative border from a continuous line shaped in a recurrent pattern. In part, the interior decoration pays homage to Ragley Hall in Warwickshire – the quality of decoration is reputed to be of outstanding quality.

With the death of Lord Northwick intestate in 1859, the sales of 1859 and 1860 took place at Thirlestaine House (curiously not sold by Christie's, with whom Lord Northwick had had a strong connection over many years, but by Phillips).

This included paintings such as:

**Titian's** *Virgin & Child and St John and Venus Reclining*, also by Titian

**Titian (School)** *Venus Rising from the Sea*

**Correggio (School)** *Venus & Satyr*

**H. Holbein (School)** *Portrait of Martin Luther*

**Leonardo da Vinci's** *Portrait of La Joconda*

**F. Guardi's** *Venetian Scene with Figures*

**H. Holbein's** *Small Full Length Portrait of Edward the Sixth*

**G. Bellini's** *Portrait of a Lady in a Green Dress*

**L. Cranach's** *Cupid Stung by Bees, Making his Lament to Venus*

Thirlestaine House was bought in 1863 by Sir Thomas Phillipps to house his collection of books and manuscripts; among the finest of modern times.

On his death he passed it on to the Fenwick family, into which Phillipps's daughter married and from whom College bought it in 1947 for £31,326 after long negotiations. The building currently houses the Art, History of Art, Music & Modern Languages departments. The basement, whilst formerly reserved for College boarding accommodation, is now used purely for storage.