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A Georgian renaissance

Crichel, Dorset, part II
The Home of Mr and Mrs Richard Chilton, Jr

In the second of two articles, John Martin Robinson looks at the recent restoration of this magnificent Georgian house and its dazzling series of re-created 1770s interiors by James Wyatt

Photographs by Paul Highnam



Left: The south façade, framed by a great cedar on the edge of the lake. Above: The newly restored dining room. The doors in the north end have been reinstated after they were discovered in the basement of the house

CRICHEL is one of the finest Georgian houses in Dorset. As we discovered last week, its unusual, even unconventional, design is substantially the result of the input of its late-18th-century owner Humphrey Sturt. In the past century, however, it has undergone three ambitious phases of neo-Georgian remodelling by his descendants, as well as a recent exemplary restoration by Richard Chilton. These last changes have preserved the integrity of the many-layered history of the house and also re-created a spectacular series of 1770s interiors by James Wyatt.

The 1st Lord Alington died in 1904 and was succeeded by his son, Humphrey. With his wife, Feodorowna, a daughter of the 5th Earl of Hardwicke ('Champagne Charlie'), he embarked on ambitious improvements to Crichel in 1905, notably the laying out of a very elaborate Italian garden on the south front (removed after the Second World War). It was designed by Harold Peto, who had been in partnership with Sir Ernest George before he focused on garden design after recuperating in Italy from an illness.

There is no evidence for the architect of the interiors at Crichel of about 1908–14, but they could also have been by Peto as he designed many houses in Chelsea and was responsible for the Georgian interiors of the Cunard liner *Mauretania* (1906), with panelling by H. H. Martyn of Cheltenham.

This 'Georgianising' at Crichel involved the complete remodelling of Burns's entrance hall, billiard room and family dining room in a remarkably convincing Georgian manner.

It also included the formation of the Long Drawing Room from two pre-existing smaller spaces and the addition of pilasters to the Wyatt Drawing Room.

Lady Alington seems to have been closely involved in the work and had an eye for Georgian things. She claimed to have rescued the remarkable series of gilt Rococo looking glasses from storage in the stables (several are still in the house) and she was certainly responsible for retrieving heirlooms from her own family house at Wimpole when the Earl of Hardwicke went bankrupt.

Many of the Edwardian fittings at Crichel—notably, the chimneypieces in the entrance hall and library—are remarkably convincing in the Flitcroft manner and it is possible that they are genuine 18th-century items rescued from Redlynch in Somerset when that house was demolished by Lord Ilchester in 1913. Glazing bars were also reinstated in the windows. As recorded by *COUNTRY LIFE* in 1925, Crichel shows the sumptuous results of the Edwardian refurbishment.

Further work was done by the 3rd and last Lord Alington around about the time of his marriage to a neighbour, Lady Mary Sibell Ashley-Cooper of St Giles, in 1928. This included the installation of central heating and the redecoration of the Wyatt Drawing Room with blue silk on the walls. This was deemed a suitable background for Lord Alington's Italian picture collection (he was a member of the Magnasco Society, founded in 1924, and a friend of the Sitwells).

Unfortunately, at the same time, he removed Wyatt's splendid Siena *scagliola* ➤



Above: The main staircase rises to a long corridor with plaster decoration. Right: James Wyatt's 1770s Drawing Room has been returned to its former splendour. The great Venetian window has been restored and the ceiling has been cleaned and retouched where necessary

Corinthian columns from the huge Venetian window at the south end of the room, which he thought over-scaled. He also added appropriate painted Classical panels by Cipriani to the lower walls of the staircase hall, which came from Arlington Street.

In 1938, the house and estate were requisitioned by the Air Ministry for war training and many of the contents were dispersed at that time. Lord Alington himself died in 1940 while serving in the Royal Air Force, leaving his 11-year-old daughter, Mary Anna, an heiress. In 1946, the empty house was let to Cranborne Chase School.

After Oxford, Mary Anna married Toby Marten and, together, they embarked on reviving the estate. In 1954, they secured a famous victory, retrieving land on Crichel Down that had been compulsorily requisitioned for war-training purposes. They won the land back in the High Court against the Ministry of Defence, securing the resignation of the Minister responsible, Sir Thomas Dugdale, later 1st Lord Crathorne.

In 1961, Mrs Marten ended the lease to the school (which moved to New Wardour Castle in Wiltshire) and announced her intention to move back in, a significant moment in the postwar history of the English country house, paralleling the move of the Devonshires back into Chatsworth and the Bedfords into Woburn. She immediately embarked on the reduction, repair and redecoration of the house. Her initial intention was to use John

Fowler as her adviser, but, when she called at his Brook Street showroom, she found it closed for lunch, so she turned to Malletts instead. Francis Egerton, the senior partner there, advised her on interior decoration and the acquisition of furniture and objects. E. F. Tew of Bath was appointed architect.

Under Tew's direction, the Victorian north wings of the house were demolished and the site rearranged to create a balustraded, sunken courtyard. This reused architectural features from Peto's Italian Garden, which was grassed over to restore the Georgian landscape setting. All the main rooms (apart from the Wyatt Drawing Room) were redecorated in the 1960s, making the work at Crichel one of the most comprehensive postwar schemes in any English country house.

A further campaign was undertaken in 1979–80, when Wyatt's gallery over the south portico was re-created from the guest bedrooms into which it had been subdivided in the Edwardian period. The top floor became the family apartment, with wonderful views over the park and lake, and was redecorated by John Stefanides.

After Mrs Marten's death, the Chiltons bought the house in 2013, with many of the contents, including the Hardwicke portraits, the library bookcase, the Classical medallions of Roman emperors in the lobby, the Cipriani panels and chandelier in the staircase hall, the gilt Rococo looking glasses in the Long Drawing Room, the chandelier in

the Wyatt Drawing Room and the large carved mahogany side tables in the dining room.

They have added substantially to these retained contents with their own collection (Mr Chilton was a trustee of the Metropolitan Museum and Mrs Chilton president of the New York Botanical Garden), as well as acquiring appropriate late-18th-century furniture specially for the house. Thomas Jayne of New York and his assistant Egan Seward have advised on the decoration and furnishing of the house. New acquisitions include the chandelier, table and chairs in the dining room, all of appropriate scale and character, and the neo-Classical seat furniture in the Wyatt manner in the Drawing Room.

‘The decision was made to reinstate fully the missing Wyatt elements’

An especially happy new introduction is the blue-background, 18th-century wallpaper in the Long Drawing Room, which has strengthened the character of this Edwardian neo-Georgian room and makes a good counterpoint to the Rococo character of the gilt pier glasses and stucco ceiling. Elsewhere, Malletts decoration and furnishings have been retained, especially in the west hall and library.

Mr Chilton was keen to reinstate the character of the principal Wyatt state rooms on the east front where 1930s alterations in the Drawing Room had left it bereft of the scagliola columns and Lord Alington's wall silk was worn out. More seriously, significant elements had been removed from the east hall and the dining room in the 1960s. In the latter, Wyatt's splendid mahogany doors at the north end—which once led to the serving room and kitchen—had been removed and replaced with a looking glass and the walls had been painted in an unhistorical scheme.

The most significant 1960s Malletts alterations had been made in the east hall, where Wyatt's ceiling with painted panels and a small sunken central dome had been replaced with a plain flat ceiling and the frieze and stucco decorations on the upper walls removed—Mrs Marten and her advisors had wrongly thought they were Victorian.

The decision was made to reinstate fully the missing Wyatt elements and colour schemes. Peregrine Bryant was appointed the architect, with Patrick Baty as the specialist paint analyst and Hesp, Jones & Co of Beningbrough as the executors. The work was completed in 2015.





The east hall stands between the dining room and Drawing Room. Its Classical landscapes in *grisaille*, probably covered over in the 1830s, and the ceiling have been revealed again and elements of missing plasterwork reinstated during the recent restoration work

In the dining room, it proved possible to reinstate Wyatt's double doors at the north end. The *COUNTRY LIFE* photographs of 1925 provided useful evidence. A further stroke of luck was the discovery of the original mahogany doors stored in the basement. The missing tympanum painting *Homage to Demeter* has been copied in the Biagio Rebecca *grisaille* manner by Christian Corgier. All the *trompe bas-relief* wall paintings by Rebecca have been cleaned and restored and their Classical subjects of assorted gods and goddesses are now clearly visible. The colouring of the walls formed a significant part of Wyatt's original scheme, predominantly in characteristic shades of pale green.

Mr Baty's paint analysis confirmed all the original colours, especially the compli-

cated scheme on the coved ceiling with its Raphael corner fans and elaborate Joseph Rose stucco of dolphin pedestals supporting vases, medallions and urns, interlacing festoons and *paternae*. As repainted by Hesp, Jones & Co, it is a triumph and the fully restored room is a notable testament to Wyatt's genius as a decorative designer using a more chaste and refined Raphaellesque vocabulary than that of Robert Adam, whom he sought to emulate and succeed as the most fashionable architect of the day.

The transformation in the east hall is even more dramatic. There, Mr Bryant has re-created the missing frieze and stucco oval wreaths, their outline and scale being apparent under the 1960s decoration, and the *COUNTRY LIFE* photographs also provided valuable detail of the missing elements. When the inserted

1960s ceiling was removed, the central sunken dome was revealed and provided clear evidence of the Wyatt decoration in green and cream, part *trompe* and part moulded, similar to his and Rebecca's scheme in the Saloon at Heveningham.

The painted surrounding panels, also in *trompe-green*, have been re-created from *COUNTRY LIFE* photographs also by Christian Corgier. An unexpected bonus is the discovery under paper and paint of Classical landscape panels set in the rectangular Palladian architraves round the lower walls. These paintings have been restored, by Jane Rutherford, and add liveliness to the architecture.

‘The fully restored room is a notable testament to Wyatt's genius as a designer’

The restoration of Wyatt's splendid *enfilade* has been completed in the Drawing Room. There, the Edwardian pilasters have been removed and the frieze restored. The walls have been re-hung with silk, which was always the intention, but repeating the pattern and colour of the 3rd Lord Alington's choice. This now forms the background to full-length portraits that were already in the house, as well as landscapes from the Chilton Collection.

The barrel-vaulted ceiling, a masterwork by Wyatt, Rebecca and Rose has been cleaned and touched up with the original—mainly blue and pink—colours ascertained by Mr Baty.

Most important of all, a large Venetian window with *scagliola* columns that formerly dominated the Drawing Room has been restored on the evidence of the 1925 photographs. The diameter of the columns was clarified by their stone bases, discovered when the floor was opened up, and the Corinthian capitals are Wyatt's favourite Pantheon model as deployed, for instance, in the hall and library at Heveningham. Kevin Gannon has re-created the Siena *scagliola* of the columns and an early-19th-century white-marble statue of Venus on a plinth before the central arch completes the monumental climax of one of the great suites of neo-Classical rooms of England.

In recent years, Wyatt's greatest buildings have been reinstated one by one: the Etruscan Temple at Fawley, the Darnley Mausoleum at Cobham, the Egyptian Dining Room at Goodwood and the sculpture galleries in the Gothic Cloisters at Wilton. The state rooms at Crichel are now a worthy addition to this remarkable constellation of scholarly restorations. 