

# Book reviews

*The Rebirth of an English Country House – St Giles House*  
The Earl of Shaftesbury and Tim Knox, Rizzoli, 2018

Reviewed by Liz Fuller

*The Rebirth of an English Country House* recounts the challenge behind the restoration of St Giles House, a semi-ruinous, grade I listed house and grounds in Wiltshire. It is a highly personal account written by Nick Ashley-Cooper, the Earl of Shaftesbury, set against the backdrop of the events which led to the dereliction of the house and, later, the family tragedies which led to his inheritance of it. Written in a direct, down-to-earth and engaging style, it offers an insight into how this most daunting of projects evolved and was completed, room by room. From stumbling about with a torch low on battery in its pitch-black interior, littered with stored furniture and artefacts, to the inspiration for the introduction of a glitter ball in the central hall, the author lucidly illuminates this tale of discovery and rebirth.

Beginning with the initial work carried out to create accommodation into which a young family could be moved, we follow his growing understanding of the house and his family's history within it. There are unique



Interior of St Giles House prior to restoration (Image: Justin Barton)

issues which require resolution such as how to refashion your great-grandmother's bathroom into a kitchen and many of other practical details which will be familiar to anyone modernising an old house such as the installation of a central heating system. In this case, a combination of ground-source and solar sources were used and we hear about the estate plumber, Nigel, who did all the plumbing work himself.

The decision to extend the work to a second phase to restore the principal rooms of the house so that they could begin to generate income takes us on a tour of the house through the library, with its exceptional collections of books, the drawing rooms with fine plaster ceilings and the dining rooms. The Great Dining Room features on the front cover of the book and has become a very distinctive image of St Giles House, with its exposed brick work and cut away panelling. Dry rot necessitated the removal of sections of panelling and it was decided to leave this room to reveal something of the previous form of the house and the challenges it has faced.

A third phase of building saw a new entrance tower and loggia added to the north side of the house. Huge holes had been left in the building when large towers, added to the house during the nineteenth century, were removed in the 1970s in an attempt to bring the house back to a manageable size. Sourcing matching bricks was clearly a painstaking exercise and the loggia reused elements from the previous

structure which had been part of the demolished tower and were found discarded in the grounds.

Various garden features and buildings are also described in detail, including the story of how a replica of Piccadilly Circus's Eros statue was installed in the sunken garden. In fact, the name Eros is inaccurate: the Eros of Piccadilly Circus is Anteros, the God of reflective, mature love, and is a memorial to the 7th Earl of Shaftesbury's philanthropy. Acquiring the last of an official set of casts made from the original, allowed this most recognisable of statues to find a singularly fitting home.

The restoration process is vividly documented by photographs on every page. Taken by photographer, Justin Barton, who has been closely involved with the project from its earliest stages, the images artfully bring the house and gardens to life.

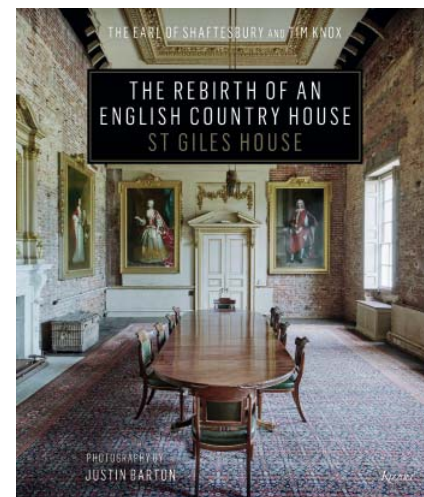


Image: Justin Barton

*Old Buildings, New Architecture*

Richard Griffiths, available from the architect, 2018

Reviewed by Marcus Binney, CBE

In this engaging and highly readable book, Richard Griffiths describes the Damascene moment when "I woke at 3am and realised I wanted to become an architect". Griffiths had been studying engineering at Cambridge and found escape from its excessively technical focus through singing and playing music: "the sublime conjunction of great architecture and great music helped me find my direction – Bach's B Minor Mass in King's College Chapel, the Berlioz Requiem in Ely Cathedral, the Mozart Requiem in Saint Germaine-des-Pres."

His many varied commissions include Southwark and St Alban's Cathedrals, Lambeth Palace and Toynbee Hall, Methodist Central Hall, Bedales School, King's Cross Regent Quarter and Oxford Castle.

Working with old buildings, he says "is as, or even more, challenging than working with new buildings ... Designing for all buildings raises the same architectural challenges as for new buildings, but in addition engages with the attributes of history memory and the texture of age."

## Avant-garde retro

The book is arranged into 18 themes including "the case for restoration" provocative for an architect schooled

in Morris and Ruskin who worked first with the brilliant Julian Harrap. Here he shows the range of work a conservation architect may undertake from the understated and even self effacing to the provision of new interventions with a distinct personality.

With its short accessible texts on many cases the book is an absorbing and stimulating introduction to the many decisions an architect must take about fabric, materials finishes and colour and the larger questions of aesthetics, structure and space.

He asks the question wherein lies the essence of the building: is it in its substance and physical fabric as held by William Morris or in its design and form as held by Le Corbusier. His view is both. The substance and the essence of a building are in its design, its form and its construction, as well as in its fabric. He accepts the reconstruction of buildings lost in war, so long as the evidence for its form exists and that it is built with the same materials and techniques as the original. With the Frauenkirche in Dresden or Mackintosh's Glasgow School of Art "the significance that can be regained vastly outweighs any significance that has been lost" he writes.

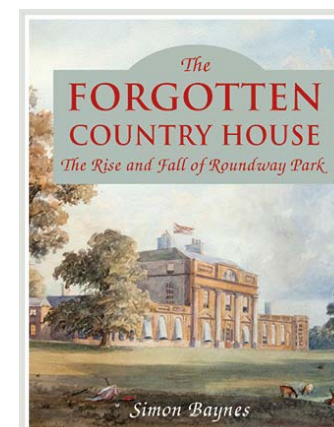
Griffiths had to resolve the dilemma of the soot black front of the Garrick Club in Covent Garden, prized



Image: Richard Griffiths

(fairly) by some as the last witness to the soot that once blackened London. But his condition survey revealed serious cracking of the render so cleaning was ultimately necessary. Both sides won – the prolongation of the soot took the frontage into an era when cleaning had become much more sensitive so the building now perfectly matches the architect's original watercolour.

The beauty of this book is that it describes the approaches to a very varied selection of buildings, repaired and repurposed on the basis of careful aesthetic and philosophical thought but never dogma.



'...a fascinating history of a colourful family and a remarkable building told with passion and authority.'  
– Dr Simon Thurlay (Former Chief Executive, English Heritage)

## THE FORGOTTEN COUNTRY HOUSE

The Rise and Fall of Roundway Park

Simon Baynes

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'... impressive for its wide ranging research and his absorbing text ...'

– Marcus Binney (President, SAVE Britain's Heritage)

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