

# JOHN FOWLER AND THE NATIONAL TRUST



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JOHN CORNFORTH, writing in *The Inspiration of the Past* in 1985, stated that:<sup>1</sup>

Posterity will learn of John Fowler's work largely through what he did for the National Trust in the last twenty years of his life ... it is likely that the rooms he restored and decorated in the Trust's houses will be valued at least in part for his interpretation of them and will be preserved partly because of that.

Indeed, Fowler's work for the National Trust houses is now perhaps the best-known and most accessible part of his oeuvre, owing to the fact that many of his decors for private clients have been expunged by changes in ownership and fashion. However, as John Cornforth points out, Fowler's work for the Trust and private clients differed greatly and this paper – which is merely a pendant to the chapter in John's book entitled 'John Fowler's Contribution to the National Trust' – will discuss Fowler's work for the Trust and attempt to identify its principal characteristics.<sup>2</sup> I also want to touch upon the implications of the Trust's preservation – or replacement – of its Fowler decors.

It was James Lees-Milne, the National Trust's first Historic Buildings Secretary, who introduced John Fowler to the Trust in the 1950s. He had been introduced to him in March 1944 by the antique dealer and decorator Geoffrey Houghton-Brown.<sup>3</sup> Lees-Milne himself later wrote in *People and Places*:<sup>4</sup>

At all events I can claim the credit of introducing John Fowler to the Trust in the 1950s. This scholarly decorator, with his sure sense

of history, was to leave an indelible imprint upon many interiors of our grandest country houses.

Fowler's first Trust commission was Claydon House in Buckinghamshire. When the National Trust was given Claydon in 1956 the house was in a deplorable state. It had been used as a girls' school during the War and a big sale in 1954 had stripped it of most of its – mainly Victorian – furniture. Sir Ralph Verney, who gave the house to the Trust, recalls the upper rooms being filled with tin baths to catch water from the leaking roofs, 'while little worm casts littered the floor in the Chinese Room'.<sup>5</sup> After the roof and repairs had been tackled by Hugh Creighton, John Fowler, a historically minded decorator to the 'living' private country houses, was called upon to advise on improvements to the interior decoration of the staterooms. The redecoration was financed from a grant from the Historic Buildings Council. Fowler was very busy at this period with Colefax & Fowler, so he rarely went to the house after the initial consultation. As Fowler mostly gave his services free to the Trust, he could hardly be expected to give the sort of constant attendance which his opulent private clients paid for, but boards painted with the suggested colours were sent up from London and the work was carried out under the direction of Christopher Wall, the Trust's Historic Buildings Representative.<sup>6</sup> Years later, in 1976, Fowler was consulted again over Claydon. The paint used in the 1956–7 redecoration had been of poor quality and was flaking badly, and an anonymous private

**Figure 1** The North Hall, Claydon, 1956–7. In 1976 Fowler repainted the dark green of the niches with the pale green he had used on the ceiling. *National Trust Photographic Library*



**Figure 2** The Saloon, Claydon, post-1976. *National Trust Photographic Library*



benefactor stepped in with the funds to redo it. The £25,000 enabled Fowler to have the work done by his own craftsmen, again under Christopher Wall's supervision. Although he was increasingly incapacitated by ill health by this time, it is interesting to see how Fowler amended his own original schemes second time round.

Most of Fowler's schemes survive intact at Claydon, bar a periodic refreshing of the white woodwork. Perhaps his most successful room is the North Hall, the walls of which

he painted a pale ochre so as to contrast with the virtuoso white-painted woodwork designed by Luke Lightfoot (c. 1722–89). The ceiling is picked out in shades of lemon, white, and a pale pistachio green. Originally the insides of the niches were painted a dark, shiny green, but this was changed in 1976 to the pale green used on the ceiling. There were endless attempts to furnish the niches properly, with Chinese vases, lamps, and even gilded polychrome blackamoors sent over from Dorneywood where it was feared they



would embarrass visiting African dignitaries. The niches are now occupied by a superb set of marble busts representing the Continents, just as described in the 1784 sale catalogue of the 2nd Earl Verney's effects, but otherwise the North Hall is as Fowler left it after his second visitation. It is in no sense a historic scheme, but it is tremendously successful nonetheless.

Next door, in the Saloon, Fowler hung a blue flock wallpaper, reinstating what was probably its original wallcovering. Nothing survived of the original, so Fowler copied a favourite eighteenth-century paper of this type he had found at Lydiard Tregoze in Wiltshire, printing it in the required colourway. By 1976 its colour had flown to a dirty grey and it was simply revived by spraying with blue paint. In the Staircase Hall, the ornaments of Joseph Rose's neoclassical plasterwork were picked out with white, on blue grounds, against walls of a pinkish biscuit colour. This was not a historical scheme but one borne out of a desire to make the most of the filigree plasterwork, once painted a uniform white. However, the balustrade of the staircase itself was the subject of careful paint scrapes and was put back to what John Fowler believed to be its original livery of black and gold – much to the annoyance of the Verney family, who



staunchly maintained that the 2nd Earl Verney, who built Claydon, had abhorred gilding and forbade its use anywhere in the house. Upstairs, the Chinese Room was at first painted yellow and pink, with white woodwork, the colours of the room from the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> But on his second visit, Fowler repainted the walls all blue, presumably on the basis of paint scrapes. Recent paint analysis has confirmed his findings, and Fowler's match is remarkably close to the original eighteenth-century colour.<sup>8</sup> The sulphur-yellow silk curtains and divan were made to Fowler's specifications too. He also chose the wallpaper in Florence Nightingale's Room and it was probably he who preserved the Victorian pale-oak graining on the woodwork there – for he was usually respectful of such survivals, whatever their date, providing they were well done.

Clandon Park in Surrey was another of the Trust's gaunt, largely empty houses, and John Fowler was called in to redecorate it as a setting for Mrs Hannah Gubbay's distinguished collection of English furniture and porcelain, a non-indigenous collection that had been bequeathed in 1969.<sup>9</sup> Mrs Gubbay's money, and a gift from Mr and Mrs Kenneth Levy, enabled the house to be put in order, so funds weren't as tight at Clandon as at Fowler's other National Trust commissions – although eventually corners had to be cut even here over quality of materials. Here Fowler worked with St John Gore, then the regional Historic Buildings Representative, and John Cornforth advised on aspects of the interior decoration. As at Claydon, Fowler's work at Clandon plays up the magnificent architecture and decorative plasterwork of

**Figure 3** (left) The Chinese Room, Claydon, c.1956–7. *National Trust Photographic Library*

**Figure 4** (right) The Chinese Room, Claydon, 1979–80. *National Trust Photographic Library*