The politics of architecture

Timothy Brittain-Catlin, *The Edwardians and their Houses: The New Life of Old England* (Lund Humphries, 2020)
Review by Iain Sharpe

A review of a book about architecture might seem out of place in a political history journal. Yet the two have often been – and still are – closely linked: buildings can be displays of power or reflections of ideology through aesthetic taste, or both.

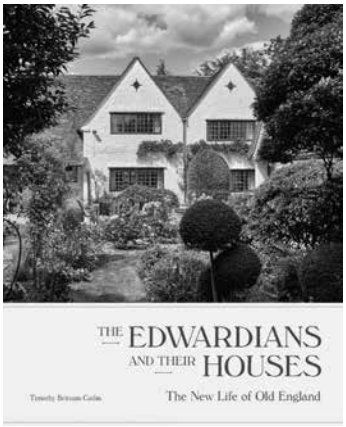
In the context of British political history, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw Tories favour first the baroque then the gothic (ostentatious, romantic), while Whigs preferred the classical (logical, rational, echoes of ancient Athens). The boundaries were never sharply drawn – no one much objected to the Houses of Parliament being rebuilt in gothic style after the fire of 183. But the notorious battle over the design of the foreign office building in the 1850s, in which the gothic revival architect George Gilbert Scott was forced, under pressure from Whig Prime Minister Lord Palmerston, to replace his original plan with an Italianate alternative, showed how politically controversial such matters could become.

In this book, Timothy Brittain-Catlin, an architectural historian and also nephew of Shirley Williams, examines a less controversial but still fascinating aspect of the interplay between political thought and architectural style. His subject is how Liberal politicians in the Edwardian era built homes for themselves and for others, and how this related to their wider concerns about housing and land reform, both issues of increasing importance during this period.

It is very much a personal account, its starting point being the author's fascination with Kingsgate Castle near Broadstairs in Kent, where his family had a holiday flat during his childhood. At the start of the twentieth century, Kingsgate Castle was remodelled and extended from an eighteenth-century folly by the Liberal, then Liberal Unionist, politician Sir John Lubbock, who had recently been ennobled as the first Baron Avebury. Modern architectural wisdom would see Kingsgate Castle as a sham, its tower and castellations creating a faux medievalism. Yet Brittain-Catlin sees Lubbock – an enthusiast for science and archaeology, and best known today for the introduction of bank holidays, saving the Avebury stone circle and sponsoring the first legislation to preserve ancient monuments – as an unlikely practitioner of fakery. From that initial thought, he embarks on an exploration of how Edwardian architecture interwove the old and the new, looking in particular at the tastes of upwardly mobile Liberal politicians.

As anyone knows who has, like this reviewer, served on a local authority planning committee, the core principle in restoring, extending or altering historic buildings is to preserve the old and keep the new clear and distinct – pastiche and reproduction are out. This follows principles set out in the late Victorian era by William Morris and the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, who objected to excessive restoration rather than the preservation of old buildings. Brittain-Catlin shows that, at the start of the twentieth century, this was by no means the consensus. He highlights numerous examples of Victorian and Edwardian building projects where new elements are seamlessly woven into the fabric of historic ones, of the inclusion of fittings moved in from other old buildings, and also of the designing of new buildings to look as if they have been developed over time in different styles.

He sees a connection between the Liberal preoccupation with



land reform, including the creation of smallholdings and allotments, and the belief that buildings should appear to emerge organically from their environment, unlike the big houses of the eighteenth century that dominated the landscape they sat in. The particular example he cites is at Daws Hill near High Wycombe, home of Charles Wynn-Carington, the third Baron and First Earl Carrington. He was one of the few major landowners to stay loyal to Gladstone after the Liberal split of 1886, and later a member of Asquith's cabinet. He also for a time represented a working-class ward on the London County Council at a phase when it was prioritising improving housing for the poor.

A keen land reformer at a political level, Carrington also practised what he preached, using his own land in High Wycombe to provide 1,400 urban allotments and in Lincolnshire to let 650 acres as smallholdings. The family owned several large residences, and, in a bid to consolidate his estate, Carrington sold off his stately home, Wycombe Abbey, and adapted and redeveloped an old farmhouse and agricultural buildings at Daws Hill, part of his estate, into a new shooting lodge. It was all done in a Jacobean style, rambling and asymmetrical, a world away from the stately homes of the past. Yet, paradoxically, for a building that appeared from the outside as being rambling, pastoral, and on a domestic scale, its interior included a new grand white drawing room in high classical style, a further example of not being constrained by stylistic harmony or distinction between the old and the new.

The book is by no means all about rural retreats. We learn, too, about the controversy over a private scheme for slum clearance in Westminster's Smith Square area in the late 1890s that would have led to the development of large residential buildings between Millbank and the River Thames. The protests it provoked, including from the Dean of Westminster Abbey, led to a revised scheme promoted by the Progressive- run (that is, primarily Liberal) London County Council for street improvements that did not block views of the river. The resulting development led to the insertion of new buildings into the existing Georgian fabric of the area.

Those who remember the Liberal Democrats' tenure of 4 Cowley Street will be interested to see that building given some prominence here. Built in 1903–04 as offices for the North Eastern Railway (NER), it was designed by prominent architect Herbert Field to look like a house. Further down the street, Field designed new homes for Liberal MPs Walter Runciman and Charles Trevelyan, both NER directors and thus conveniently situated for their parliamentary and business interests. Indeed, this proved a popular area for politicians to commission or buy homes – Runciman and Trevelyan hardly lacked for Liberal neighbours.

The garden cities movement is also mentioned, in the form of Gidea Park in Essex, now known by the less romantic name of Romford Garden Suburb. This was developed from 1909 on land belonging to Liberal MP Herbert Raphael, in collaboration with two fellow Liberal MPs. The scheme benefitted from the Liberal government's curiously named Housing, Town Planning, etc. Act of the same year, which aimed both to improve residential standards and encourage construction of more homes by ending the previous system that had meant virtually all significant planning projects needed an Act of Parliament to go ahead. In Gidea Park, architects were invited to partner with developers to design show homes on a relatively modest scale. Most of these were of a Jacobean vernacular design, and one of

the curiosities of the scheme was how the guide for visitors made considerable reference to the long-demolished nearby Tudor great house of Gidea Hall, while all but ignoring its eighteenth-century neo-classical replacement.

That point is one of many snippets of information that constitute a particular delight of this book. We learn, for example, that Margot Asquith, wife of Liberal Prime Minister H. H. Asquith, commissioned the first barn conversion, in the modern sense of a repairing an agricultural building without much decoration or embellishment, for an outbuilding of the family's smart new home at The Wharf in Sutton Courtenay, Oxfordshire. We learn, too, that Margot, in her voluminous autobiographies and diaries, fails to mention the architect of both house and barn conversion, Walter Cave, with whom she must have collaborated closely. Architects remained tradesmen not artists.

To conclude, Professor Brittain-Catlin's enthusiasm for his subject is apparent and infectious. It is no criticism of his book to say it is discursive and thematic rather than an attempt to put forward a closely argued thesis or to write a comprehensive guide to the architecture of the period. It certainly inspired this reviewer to want to visit many of the buildings described here. Yet there disappointment lies. For the most part, the properties featured in the book, while generously proportioned and beyond the aspirations of most people, are homes not palaces, and remain in private ownership where they have not been converted to business premises or hotels. They will not be found in National Trust or English Heritage listings. This makes the reader grateful for the inclusion here of outstanding modern colour photography by Robin Forster, bringing the text vividly to life, enabling us to see what we are reading about. I am sure that any *Journal of Liberal History* readers whose interests stretch beyond political history to architectural, environmental and cultural topics will find this book a delight. ■

Dr Iain Sharpe studied history at Leicester and London Universities, completing a doctoral thesis on the Liberal Party in the Edwardian era in 2011. He was a Liberal Democrat councillor in Watford from 1991 to 2021.

'The Political Skills of Four Liberal Prime Ministers'
(continued from page 20)

27 Haldane, *Autobiography*, p. 216.
28 Wilson, *C.B.*, p. 500.
29 Ibid., p. 482.
30 Ibid., p. 483.
31 Ibid., p. 484
32 Ibid., p. 510.
33 Ibid., p. 563.
34 M. Asquith, *The Autobiography of Margot Asquith*, vol. ii (Penguin, 1936), p. 73.
35 J Wilson, *C.B.*, p. 432.
36 Ibid., p. 145.
37 Grey, *Twenty-Five Years*, p. 65.
38 Lord Riddell, *More Papers from my Diary* (Country Life, 1934), p. 109.
39 Wilson, *C.B.*, p. 556.
40 J. A. Spender, *The Life and Times of the Right Honourable Sir Henry Campbell Bannerman*, vol. ii (Hodder and Stoughton, 1923), p. 389.
41 Wilson, *C.B.*, p. 479.
42 Spender, *Life and Times*, p. 513.
43 Haldane, *Autobiography*, p. 156.
44 Ibid., p. 156.