

William Porden's State Bed for Eaton Hall, Cheshire

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I have addressed the late-Georgian architectural history and furnishing of Eaton Hall, Cheshire, in two separate essays published in *The Georgian Group Journal* (2013) and *Furniture History* (2012).¹ What I did not discuss in either of these pieces is the role of regional craftsmanship in the house's reconceptualisation as one of the most ambitious and impressive Gothic-style residences of the nineteenth century. Regional furniture is considered frequently to be a cheaper and less sophisticated alternative to the fashionable output of leading London firms, but William Porden, Eaton's architect in the first two decades of the nineteenth century, proposed local workmanship for another purpose: to maintain the exclusivity of his idiosyncratic designs — especially the State Bed. This essay addresses Porden's role at Eaton, and how the State Bed's proposed manufacture on the Grosvenor estate, or at nearby Chester, fits within his broader control of the house's transformation and improvement.

William Porden, Eaton Hall, and its Architectural Development

Eaton, the country seat of the Grosvenor family, was redeveloped and expanded comprehensively during the nineteenth century. The first programme was undertaken by William Porden (c.1755–1822), and it began shortly after Robert Grosvenor (1767–1845) inherited the earldom and family property from his father, Richard, first Earl Grosvenor, in 1802. Porden, who served in James Wyatt's Office as an assistant and drew the Georgian architect to medieval fabrics, became surveyor of the first Earl Grosvenor's London estate around 1785. Leaving Wyatt's firm, Porden gradually built up his own architectural practice, and his early work included a row of houses in Phillimore Place, Kensington (1787–89). For the Prince of Wales (later George IV) he designed the stables, now known as the Dome, and riding house of the Royal Pavilion, Brighton, in 1803–8, and in 1805 he submitted Gothic designs for Downing College, Cambridge, though it was passed over in favour of a Classical proposal by William Wilkins.² In 1802 Porden saw an opportunity to increase his influence over the Grosvenor estate with Robert's succession to the earldom, and between 1803 and

¹ Lindfield (2012), pp. 155–80, and Lindfield (2013), pp. 137–51.

² Tyack (2015), pp. 141–58; Downing College design: see especially British Architectural Library, RIBA66813, RIBA66815, RIBA66828, RIBA12246, RIBA35971.

1814 he was engaged heavily in Eaton's refashioning. Eaton and Brighton's Dome are Porden's two most important and significant pieces of architecture. After Eaton's completion in the mid 1810s, Porden was dismissed as the Grosvenors' surveyor, and the house's subsequent expansion between 1823 and 1825 was undertaken by Porden's clerk of works, Benjamin Gummow (1766–1844) (**Fig.1**). Thereafter, William Burn (1789–1870) remodelled Eaton between 1846 and 1851, and Sir Alfred Waterhouse (1830–1905) remade the structure proper in a Victorian Gothic guise in the 1870s.

The structure at the centre of Porden's improvements was a nine-bay Caroline pile (1675–82); he encased it within an elaborate Gothic skin of pointed-arch windows with ogee-flip mouldings, pinnacles and pierced castellations, and it was expanded to the north and south with Gothic wings to accommodate the Library and bedrooms. From the outset of this progressively ambitious, expansive and expensive project, Porden advocated a Gothic rather than a Classical design:

We will suppose that in Grecian Architecture, your House would be completed in two years, at an expense of £10.000; and in the Gothic that it would take up to 3 years, and cost £15.000. Is the time or the money to be put in competition with gratification of having a mansion in that Stile which you like the best? Presuming that Lady Grosvenor and your Lordship prefer the Gothic to the Grecian, I think the other considerations are only as dust on the Balance.³

Despite significantly underestimating the cost of the modifications — by October 1812 the bills had totalled more than £100,000⁴ — Porden appropriately pushed Gothic as an exclusive style representative of family lineage, elevated station and wealth:

Of the Gothic Architecture, though it is now better understood than it was a few years ago, the majority are comparatively ignored, yet every one is delighted with its richness, and sensible of its improving character. Its expensiveness, or the opinion of its being so, has prevented it from becoming common as well as the difficulty there has been of getting workmen to execute it. It therefore is preferable on the score of preserving that distinction to Rank and Fortune, which it is to habit of the age to

³ Grosvenor Family Archive, 9/278, 19 Jan 1803, f. 1v.

⁴ Cornforth and Acloque (1971), p. 307.

diminish. As to convenience and comfort it may be made equally excellent with the Grecian. With regard to splendour it is far superior, and its variety is infinite. Were I to be asked, in what Style I would construct a Building if my Commission was unlimited in magnitude and expense, I should answer in the Gothic.⁵

The responsibility that Porden assumed for Eaton's improvement extended well beyond the house's façade: he also designed the house's internal architecture and ornamental details, furniture, and even carpets (**Fig.2**). Numerous designs tracing his involvement at the house are now lodged in the Cheshire West and Chester Record Office, and illustrate his *en suite* Gothic vision for Eaton.⁶ Referring to some of Gillows of Lancaster's furniture designs for the house, (**Fig.3**) Porden felt that they were generic and, as such, unsuitable for one of England's most important families:

The Chairs are very good; but they want some improvement in their form and embellishment and after all they are any-bodies Chair — they were made for the Marquis of Abercorn and Sir Thomas Somebody — I would have them made for Lord Grosvenor.⁷

Throughout his letters to Lord Grosvenor, Porden appears to be genuinely and consistently concerned with creating a unique house representative of the Grosvenor lineage reaching back to Hugh Lupus and Gilbert le Grosvenor, both of whom came to England in the Norman Conquest.⁸

Regionalism and the State Bed

Regional manufacturing and craftsmanship appear to have concerned Porden a great deal; in numerous letters to Lord Grosvenor he discusses the cost of fitting out Eaton and how these expenses can be managed and mitigated by employing local rather than metropolitan craftsmen. Considering the house's chimneypieces on 18 November 1808, he outlines how their on-site production would be financially beneficial:

⁵ Grosvenor Family Archive, 9/278, 19 Jan 1803, ff. 1v–2r.

⁶ Cheshire West and Chester Record Office, ZCR63/2/723–823.

⁷ Grosvenor Family Archive, 9/278, 12 November 1807, f. 1v. See Lindfield (2012), pp. 158–59.

⁸ See Buckler and Buckler (1826), p. 3.

The State Bed Room Chimney Piece I do not believe I could have got done for any thing like the money, perhaps not for double the money as I had an estimate of one made by a mason before I determined to have it done at Eaton. It is a work that must be admired by all judges and yet it would require a months work to be made perfect.⁹

Towards the end of the decade-long improvements to Eaton, Porden's attention was drawn to the State Bed Chamber and to the bed itself. While there is no known surviving design for the bed, and the bed itself no longer appears to exist, a 'six poster' State Bed supplied in 1823 by John Davis (of 20 Lower Brook Street, London) was sold by Sotheby's at the 1992 Eaton sale (**Fig.4**), although it was misattributed to Gillows and misdated to 1820.¹⁰ We can, based upon his extant designs for Eaton's furniture, assume that the State Bed design was highly architectural and of a simplified, pared-back structure decorated with Gothic panelling, much like Davis' offering. Indeed, Davis' State Bed repurposes Porden's Library press designs, and suggests that his State Bed is not too dissimilar to Porden's earlier proposal. Although we lack evidence of Porden's actual design, he pointedly recommended its creation on the Eaton estate, or at least at nearby Chester. This advocacy of regional production was not simply based upon cost, though saving on the bed's packaging and transport from London was a happy by-product of this choice. Instead, Porden urged local fabrication to preserve his design's exclusivity. And given local carpenters fitted out Eaton's interiors per Porden's architectural proposals, they would have been naturally predisposed to an overtly architectural State Bed making its regional production particularly sensible. This concern for exclusivity matches his above quoted criticism of the generic Gillows chairs (**Fig.3**): Porden wished for the State Bed to be 'of and only for' the Grosvenors:

I shall send this Evening Designs for the smaller Library Tables to stand by the fire & A design for the State Bed. The first I think will conveniently accommodate four persons for reading or writing. The Second will have an appropriate effect and be rich

⁹ Grosvenor Family Archive, 9/278, 19 December 1808.

¹⁰ Sotheby's (1992), Lot 136, pp. 16–18. This bed is mentioned and described in sufficient detail to be identified as lot 136 in the 1992 sale in Davis' accounts: Grosvenor Family Archive, Circ 461, f. 133. The relationship between Davis' State Bed and Porden's lost design is addressed in Lindfield (2012), pp. 169–72. The capitals on Davis' State Bed are set with gilt whet sheafs (derived from the Grosvenor coat of arms) and reproduce Porden's 14 December 1805 design for capitals in the State Bedchamber: Cheshire West and Chester Record Office, ZCR63/2/778.

and picturesque. If you approve of it I would recommend the Woodwork to be made at Eaton or at Chester, not only because You will have it better done, and save packing cases and carriage; but because it will continue your own, for if made in London it will perhaps be seen in every house that pretends to gothicism. The Draperies may be made in London or at Chester without danger of being spoiled as the form of wood work will direct the Upholsterer. If your Lordship and Lady Grosvenor do not approve of this design we will chearful [sic] prepare some others.¹¹

Davis' six-poster Sate Bed was made in London, but, despite offering a significant elaboration of the tester-bed type as a micro-architectural shrine, it was not copied. Porden's interest in exclusivity did not impact upon Davis' State Bed, yet it nevertheless emphasises the high regard that he had for regional furniture production and its supposed ability to preserve his unique 'Grosvenor Gothic' aesthetic at Eaton.

Coda

Regional furniture is a sub-class of applied design often distinguished from metropolitan fashion in terms of form, motifs, carving, materials and construction methods. The impact of regional rather than metropolitan production can be gauged by considering two pairs of torchères made for James Murray, second Duke of Atholl (1690–1764). The first pair supplied by Chippendale and Rannie in 1758 cost 7-7-0 plus packing; to augment this pair in 1760 the Duke did not turn to Chippendale's firm but to John Thomson of Edinburgh, who produced a second pair for the lower sum of 5-5-0. When examined closely, Thomson's set is of a markedly lower quality than Chippendale's work and is characterised by less fluent and deeply-incised carving, as well as a more elongated and stilted form lacking the thick and energetic scrollwork typical of Chippendale's style.¹² Porden's advocacy of an Eaton- or Chester-made State Bed was not driven by cost, but instead by the potential for regional production to maintain the exclusivity of an apparently unique and 'prestigious' design that attested to the rank and importance of the Grosvenors. This eccentric and overlooked architect suggests an important benefit of regional furniture that is easily overlooked, though

¹¹ Grosvenor Family Archive, 9/278, 7 January 1811, f. 1r.

¹² Blair Castle Archives, MSS 701, and Blair Castle Archives, Catalogue of Contents of Blair Castle 1696 to 1890, f. 11.

country house tourism and subsequent published descriptions of Eaton would, despite Porden's concerns, have compromised the secrecy of his State Bed design.

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British Architectural Library, RIBA66813, RIBA66815, RIBA66828, RIBA12246, RIBA35971, William Porden's designs for Downing College, Cambridge (1805).

Cheshire West and Chester Record Office, ZCR63/2/723–823, William Porden's designs for Eaton Hall's remodeling.

Grosvenor Family Archive, 9/278, Correspondence from William Porden to Lord Grosvenor.

Grosvenor Family Archive, Circ 461, John Davis' bills for Eaton Hall's furniture (1823–25).

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Image Captions

Fig.1: *Eaton Hall*, after 1826. Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, B1977.14.10668.

Fig.2: Buckler, *Interior View of the Great Hall at Eaton Hall, Cheshire; The Seat of the Right Honble Earl Grosvenor*, 9 and 10 June 1823. BL Add. MS 36360, f. 100. © The British Library Board.

Fig.3: Gillows, *Design for a chair for Lord Grosvenor's Drawing Room*, 38.37.25 (L), and *Design for a chair for Lord Grosvenor's Dining Room*, 38.37.24. © Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, www.metmuseum.org.

Fig.4: John Davis, *Eaton Hall's 'Six-Poster' State Bed*, 1823. Courtesy of Sotheby's, London.