

COUNTRY LIFE®

5, 2010

EVERY WEEK £3.20

EXCLUSIVE

Britain's greatest new country house



the Archers:
we're all still
dicted after 60 years
who captured time first?
the pendulum swings towards Britain





Realising a Palladian vision

*Ferne Park, Dorset, part I
A residence of the Viscountess Rothermere*

In the first of two articles, David Watkin admires the most ambitious Classical country house of the 21st century

Photographs by Will Pryce and Andrew Lawson

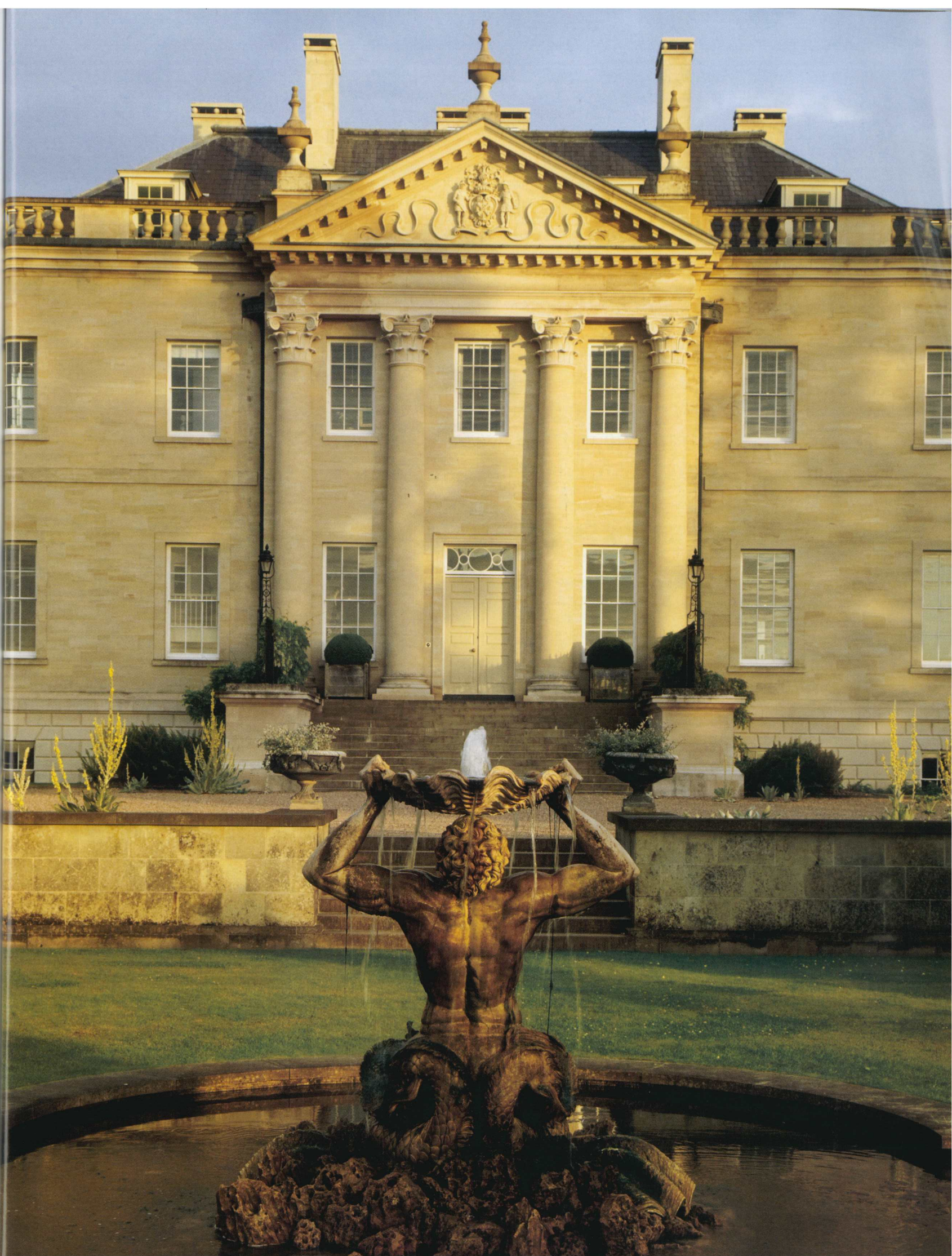
The house built in 2000–02 for countess Rothermere at Ferne Park is the third on this site. It replaces a plain Georgian mansion, 1811 by Thomas Grove, whose wife lived there from 1561. This house was enlarged by the Grove family in the 18th century, and again by a new owner in 1903. In 1914, Ferne (Fig 1) and the state of Ashcombe, over the Wiltshire border, were bought by the 13th Duke of Devonshire, whose wife came from an old aristocratic family. Founder of the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Vivisection in 1908, she was in the Second World War in an estate where rich Londoners hid their dogs that might be at risk from the Luftwaffe. It continued as an animal shelter after the war, but fell into disrepair and was demolished in 1965.

Long before seeing the site of Ferne, Lord Rothermere was keen to build a new house, an ambition that was the catalyst for the project. His wife suggested what she thought was an impossible list of *desiderata* for such a house, including that the site should have beautiful views, and that there should be some old buildings and stables to develop. When they visited Ferne, they found that, remarkably, it fulfilled all their needs. Lady Rothermere was familiar, through a family connection, with King's Walden Bury, Hertfordshire, built for Sir Thomas and Lady Pilkington by Raymond Erith and Quinlan Terry in 1969–71. She was thus aware that a new and modern country house could be built with traditional materials in the Classical language. It turned out, by coincidence, that the local planning authority required that any new house at Ferne should be built

of local stone, be Classical in design, and not larger than the previous house on the site.

The intention was to create an estate and family home for Lady Rothermere, who divides her time between Ferne and visiting Lord Rothermere at his *château* in the Dordogne. They saw that it would be important to relate the house carefully to its almost incredibly beautiful site, high up on a ridge with striking views across Wiltshire and Dorset. The view north, towards Wardour, is dramatic, rising to hills of almost mountainous profile, but the prospect south ➤

↑ Fig 1 above: A characteristically English approach to a Palladian house, at an angle instead of axially, allowing it to be discovered via an informal setting. → Fig 2 facing page: The splendid entrance front, which contrasts with the simpler garden façade



Also familiar
house, Dorset,
mansion of
with a five-bay
d entrance
tland stone,
with a balus-
suggested this
as a model
with another
inspiration
letown Cox,
of about 1770, by David Ducart,
r and architect of Italian origin
tle is known except that he set-
und, where he designed several
Terry knew Castletown Cox,
ked on it for its present owner.
hermere also pays great tribute
LIFE, suggesting that, although
ith no particular passion for
e, she soon acquired one through
t perusal of its pages, which also
spiration for the architecture
s of Ferne, as well as for its gar-
den buildings and their relation
and landscape. This is in happy
n of the tradition by which many
o employed Sir Edwin Lutyens
de Jekyll to create houses and
they had been stimulated by
work illustrated in COUNTRY LIFE.
ooted in the soil, and fitting
ly into its vast landscape, Ferne

is a solid and enduring construction, during the creation of which Lady Rothermere has become a convinced believer in the permanent validity of the Classical language of architecture. The house is a symphony composed of four stones, all but one of which, in accordance with the wishes of the planning authority, are local. The façades are in Chilmark stone, the Jurassic oolitic limestone used in Wiltshire for Salisbury Cathedral in the 13th century, Longford Castle in the 16th century, and Wilton House in

the 17th. The rusticated basement and the ornamental details, including the columns, entablature, and pediment, with its giant Rothermere coat of arms carved by Andrew Tansey, and even the chimneys, are all in Portland stone from Dorset. The third local stone, of the post-

Jurassic period, is the sandstone known as Upper Greensand from the Shaftesbury district, which has a delicate colouring of a pale, greenish-grey. This was the ashlar used in 18th-century Dorset for major buildings such as Blandford church and Vanbrugh's Eastbury. The only non-local stone is the durable York stone, used for the staircase on the entrance front and for the paving of the south terrace.

The entrance portico has engaged columns in the Composite order, as in the Arch of Titus in the Forum in Rome. It is approached at Ferne up a broad flight of steps, equal in width to the portico and protected on each side by long cheek walls that are the same height as the basement or podium of the whole house. This arrangement echoes ancient Roman buildings such as the Temple of Antoninus and Faustina in the Roman Forum. This was illustrated in the influential *Quattro Libri dell'Architettura* (1570) by Palladio, ➤

The form and detailing of Ferne has been thought through with great care, and draws inspiration both from the works of Andrea Palladio, the celebrated 16th-century Vincentian architect, and the long tradition of British architecture inspired by his designs. The quality of the craftsmanship involved in realising the furnishing is self evident, as, for example, in the detailing of the main stair with its fine ironwork by Barry Grice and the exquisite terminating swirl of the balustrade. Delicate ironwork, a particular enthusiasm of Lady Rothermere, is a *leitmotif* of both the house and the gardens.

The form and detailing of Ferne has been thought through with great care, and draws inspiration both from the works of Andrea Palladio, the celebrated 16th-century Vincentian architect, and the long tradition of British architecture inspired by his designs. The quality of the craftsmanship involved in realising the furnishing is self evident, as, for example, in the detailing of the main stair with its fine ironwork by Barry Grice and the exquisite terminating swirl of the balustrade. Delicate ironwork, a particular enthusiasm of Lady Rothermere, is a *leitmotif* of both the house and the gardens.

is a solid and enduring construction, during the creation of which Lady Rothermere has become a convinced believer in the permanent validity of the Classical language of architecture. The house is a symphony composed of four stones, all but one of which, in accordance with the wishes of the planning authority, are local. The façades are in Chilmark stone, the Jurassic oolitic limestone used in Wiltshire for Salisbury Cathedral in the 13th century, Longford Castle in the 16th century, and Wilton House in

the 17th. The rusticated basement and the ornamental details, including the columns, entablature, and pediment, with its giant Rothermere coat of arms carved by Andrew Tansey, and even the chimneys, are all in Portland stone from Dorset. The third local stone, of the post-

Jurassic period, is the sandstone known as Upper Greensand from the Shaftesbury district, which has a delicate colouring of a pale, greenish-grey. This was the ashlar used in 18th-century Dorset for major buildings such as Blandford church and Vanbrugh's Eastbury. The only non-local stone is the durable York stone, used for the staircase on the entrance front and for the paving of the south terrace.

The entrance portico has engaged columns in the Composite order, as in the Arch of Titus in the Forum in Rome. It is approached at Ferne up a broad flight of steps, equal in width to the portico and protected on each side by long cheek walls that are the same height as the basement or podium of the whole house. This arrangement echoes ancient Roman buildings such as the Temple of Antoninus and Faustina in the Roman Forum. This was illustrated in the influential *Quattro Libri dell'Architettura* (1570) by Palladio, ➤

The form and detailing of Ferne has been thought through with great care, and draws inspiration both from the works of Andrea Palladio, the celebrated 16th-century Vincentian architect, and the long tradition of British architecture inspired by his designs. The quality of the craftsmanship involved in realising the furnishing is self evident, as, for example, in the detailing of the main stair with its fine ironwork by Barry Grice and the exquisite terminating swirl of the balustrade. Delicate ironwork, a particular enthusiasm of Lady Rothermere, is a *leitmotif* of both the house and the gardens.

The form and detailing of Ferne has been thought through with great care, and draws inspiration both from the works of Andrea Palladio, the celebrated 16th-century Vincentian architect, and the long tradition of British architecture inspired by his designs. The quality of the craftsmanship involved in realising the furnishing is self evident, as, for example, in the detailing of the main stair with its fine ironwork by Barry Grice and the exquisite terminating swirl of the balustrade. Delicate ironwork, a particular enthusiasm of Lady Rothermere, is a *leitmotif* of both the house and the gardens.





Fig 4: The hall combines domestic comfort with the grandeur appropriate to a large house, provided by its screen of Doric columns

to was the medium between ancient Rome and modern England. It was he who transferred this arrangement of steps from temples to houses in all four of the porticoes of his lebrated Villa Rotonda near Vicenza. To stress the plain geometry of his composition, Mr Terry greatly simplified the rich composite order, for example, by leaving plain and uncut the two tiers of acanthus leaves on the capitals, more than 6ft high. Again, there is precedent in Palladio, who also left them uncarved in his largest church, San Giorgio, Maggiore, Venice. A feature of Came

and of many similar Palladian houses is that the three windows on the top floor between the capitals of the columns are notably smaller than those in the flanking bays. Lady Rothermeres was anxious to avoid this crowding and imbalance, so Mr Terry made all the upper windows of the same generous size. Further simplicity is achieved by confining modillions, the scrolled brackets below the cornices of the Corinthian and Composite orders, to the pediments on the north and south fronts, rather than running them emphatically round the entablature of the

entire building, as happens at Came House. Although much plainer than the north, the south front is enlivened by the balustrade on the terrace, where the alternate flat and pointed placing of the balusters echoes the Baroque rhythm of those at the Ca'Pesaro, Venice, by Baldassare Longhena, of 1649 onwards. There is a practical reason for this, because current nanny regulations in Europe forbid the placing of balusters or banisters with spaces between them sufficiently large for a child's head to enter. The plan of the main floor, or *piano*



nobile, at Ferne Park has a grand Georgian simplicity with no corridors or awkward passages. The great, rectangular, entrance hall (**Fig 4**) has a stone-flagged floor and a bold screen of two unfluted Doric columns carrying a triglyph frieze of imposing depth, which runs all round the room. The entrance hall at Castletown Cox is similarly divided by a columnar screen, although there it is of Corinthian columns. Opening off the hall to the right is a sitting room for Lady Rothermere, well lit with windows facing west and north. Although modest in size, this has a spaciousness due to its generous height that, in common with all the



Fig 5: The understated garden façade echoes its prospect towards the Dorset hills



Fig 6: The 18th-century portraits and chimneypiece sit happily below the elaborate plasterwork in the deep cove of Quinlan Terry's generously high drawing-room ceiling

main rooms on this floor, is 15ft (**Fig 6**). When the house is full, the entrance hall serves as a sitting room and general meeting place, bringing people together and opening conveniently at its south-west angle to the main staircase (**Fig 3**). This has cantilevered stone steps and an ambitious wrought-iron balustrade, which echoes that at Came House. Further interest is provided to those ascending the staircase by confronting at close quarters the handsome architectural details of the large Venetian window in the middle of the west front. Castletown Cox also features a Venetian window on its west front. The entrance hall and dining room boast new carved chimneypieces of exceptional quality, designed

by Francis Terry. On the upper floors, the arrangement of bedrooms around a central landing has proved very convenient. The interior designers Veere Grenney Associates advised in the early stages of the work. The decoration owes its main character to the extensive but discriminating purchases by the Rothermeres of furniture and paintings specifically for the house. Oil paintings, watercolours, drawings and engravings, of an exceptionally wide range of dates and styles, create the impression of a collection that has grown over many years. All the baths are old ones that have been refurbished, but there are no coloured marbles or gold taps in the bathrooms, which are plain and discreet.