



HISTORIES OF BRITISH ART

1660-1735 RECONSTRUCTION AND TRANSFORMATION

ABSTRACT: SEBASTIAN EDWARDS

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‘The empty bed: the reception of the monarch at the country house between the Restoration and the Hanoverian succession’

As part of HRP’s preparation for its ground-breaking exhibition in 2013 at Hampton Court on the appearance and function of the palace bedchamber, *Secrets of the royal bedchamber*, research is also taking place into the reciprocating arrangements of the nobility and political squirearchy for the reception of the monarch in their country homes.

By the middle of the 18th century the phenomenon of the king’s, or queen’s bedchamber, as a part of many new or rebuilt great houses had reached its zenith, in terms of stupendous expenditure on royal beds and sometimes entire royal apartments, with associated works of art. Yet rulers from the time of Charles II onwards spent an ever decreasing amount of time on the move and often had little direct contact with their country. They were far more likely to travel abroad for domestic, diplomatic or military purposes than visit their ministers’ country power bases.

Yet for political and social motives, aristocrats continued to prepare for this increasingly-rare event, as an important part of the apparatus of power and influence at court. Using select case studies, this paper explores when and how these satellite royal seats were actually used, and how they helped to shape our modern perception of the country house and in turn, their influence on the development of the royal palace. It will look at why these bedchambers survived to become early tourist attractions – sometimes even semi-religious relics and attempt to identify and differentiate between the royal bed as a highly-valued perquisite (or gift), and the royal bed as a signifier of hospitality or deferential loyalty to the monarch. In conclusion, I will explore the way in which the royal bed affected, even distorted, the appearance and working of the great house during perhaps its greatest period of influence and change.