



# HISTORIES OF BRITISH ART

## 1660-1735 RECONSTRUCTION AND TRANSFORMATION

### ABSTRACT: PETER N. LINDFIELD-OTT

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‘Early Gothic-Revivalism: the reconstruction and transformation of Medieval architecture, and the formation of Gothic-Revival furniture’

Art and architectural historians tend to place the ‘birth’ of the Gothic Revival in the 1740s, with the publication of Batty Langley’s *Ancient Architecture Restored and Improved* (1741–42), and the Gothicisation of Horace Walpole’s famous villa in Twickenham, Strawberry Hill (from 1750). My paper looks at, and places new emphasis on, the importance of exponents who predate this Gothic Revival: Wren, Hawksmoor, Vanbrugh and Kent. What links these architects, and makes them so influential in the development of the Gothic Revival in eighteenth-century Britain, is the way they increasingly revived medieval architecture in pieces, or as a vocabulary of ornament. This extraction and divorcing of Gothic ornament from Gothic architecture is profound under Vanbrugh and Kent. I argue that the preoccupations of Wren at Christ Church College, Oxford (1681–82), Vanbrugh at Vanbrugh Castle (1717–20), and William Kent at Esher Place (c. 1733) and in his illustrations for Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* (1730s), reveal that Gothic architecture’s handling fundamentally shifted. At Oxford Wren demonstrates a strong understanding of the style. Under Hawksmoor Gothic and classical styles are blended, especially for the towers at Westminster Abbey. In the early-nineteenth century Vanbrugh created ‘the caste air’ — a style reminiscent of medieval architecture, but this could be applied to non-Gothic buildings, such as Seaton Delaval (1718), as well as those reminiscent of medieval architecture (Vanbrugh Castle). Finally, Kent extracted a vocabulary of Gothic ornament from medieval buildings and reconstituted it with the language of classical architecture, especially giant orders and friezes. Kent’s style is not restricted to architecture, but also crosses over to furniture, which will also be considered. The reconstruction and transformation of ‘modern’ Gothic architecture before 1740 established a lasting pathway for Gothic Revival architecture and furniture in mid- to late-eighteenth-century Britain.