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LUNCH TALK, "STRAWBERRY HILL HOUSE " by MICHAEL HARRIS, TUESDAY 15TH SEPTEMBER



Michael Harris gave us a Grand Tour of the history of Strawberry Hill House and its residents.
Michael came dressed for the occasion, bewigged and bejeweled in a manner which would have met with approval of Horace Walpole's Committee of Taste, connoisseurs and arbiters of all good things.

Strawberry Hill House started as a couple of rustic cottages by the river in Twickenham. Horace Walpole was the third son of our first Prime Minister Sir Robert Walpole. With Dad's help, he held three sinecure positions providing him with a remarkably generous income. At the age of 30, Horace bought the house and land, which then became his summer residence. As an aesthete, he led the Gothic Revival which countered the then prevalent classical Palladian design. He set about a programme of works to transform the buildings inro a little Gothic castle. Even within fashionable Twickenham, Strawberry Hill House was a beacon of architectural indulgence.

The design of the building and the fittings and décor were overseen by Walpole's Committee. This exclusively male trio of Walpole and two close friends determined the acquisitions and validated the suitability of what was displayed. The flamboyant exterior of whitewashed turrets pinnacles and battlements gives way upon entry to what Walpole described as "*gloomth*", a mixture of gloom and warmth. The structure was not intended to stand in perpetuity: for example, the gilded ceilings are made of papier mache. Walpole aid "My buildings, like my writings, are of paper and will blow away ten years after I am dead".

Despite his dilettante lifestyle, Walpole was a respected author, penning the first Gothic novel "The Castle of Otranto,", and a man of letters.

Walpole did not marry. On his death in 1797, he bequeathed the house to his cousin's daughter. Eventually the house passed to the riotous George, Seventh Earl of Waldegrave, who sold off the house's huge quantity of precious curated contents in a week-long auction in 1842. It was his widow Countess Waldegrave who saved the house from ruin using her inherited wealth from her various marriages. From 1863, the house became a venue for her entertaining of worthies including the Prince and Princess of Wales and members of the Liberal Government.

Eventually, the house was purchased in the 1920s by the Catholic Vincentian Fathers as part of what was then St Mary's teacher training college. After years of gradual and then accelerating decay, a £10M grant financed restoration was completed in 2010.

Thanks to Michael for the depth and articulacy of his note-free presentation. Walpole would have been proud!









FUTURE EVENTS

THURSDAY 29th OCTOBER: Visit to Twickenham Rugby Stadium & lunch at The Huddle – ***SEE FLYER***

TUESDAY 17th NOVEMBER: Club Lunch, speaker Simon Wilson : "London Air Ambulance"

FRIDAY 27th NOVEMBER: Lunch at the View, Richmond-upon Thames College - ***SEE FLYER***