

Building an image?: Considering the mid-nineteenth century English country house as an architectural expression of middle class values.

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Merling, Ann

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Description

Mid-nineteenth century England saw an unprecedented building of country houses. This thesis addresses the issues of who was primarily responsible and why the resultant country houses appeared, in both architectural expression and spatial organization, so different from those of preceding periods. Evidence suggests that a significant number of nineteenth century country houses were financially underwritten by middle class owners. An examination of an exemplar country house, Bear Wood, posits that it was specifically designed and constructed to accommodate certain middle class values, a means by which this expanding and increasingly influential class could contribute towards establishing and legitimating its identity as distinct within the social order. Although a decisive defence cannot be offered against the generally inherent and tacit assumptions that the ambition of the middle class investor was to join the ranks of the established landed aristocracy, it is suggested that many of the innate precepts traditionally associated with the stewardship of a country house were used to underpin the identity of the nineteenth century middle class. This work reflects the axiom that, despite gradations of wealth and subsequent levels of rank, the unity and influence of the nineteenth century middle class lay in its common adherence to attitudes and values with which it became particularly associated. Whilst it is acknowledged that one country house cannot be considered a prototypal example to represent a heterogenous middle class, the significant wealth of the owner of Bear Wood did

allow him to encapsulate, in architectural form, many of the tenets to which his class commonly subscribed. Evidence of the diversity with which that class represented itself was extrapolated from Bear Wood, a diversity that ranged from a strident and acicular announcement of entrepreneurial acumen and success, to a succinct and subtle representation of domestic values and standards of propriety. That so many nineteenth century middle class tenets were to successfully permeate and influence the entire social order, to be emulated at both ends of the social scale, indicates the significance that can be attached to the architectural expression and the spatial organization of a country house like Bear Wood.

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