

# HUGE AND HUED

THE COLOURFUL HISTORY  
OF A STAIRCASE

PAUL VONBERG ARCHITECTS

FEBRUARY 2006



"Well, go to the foot of our stairs"

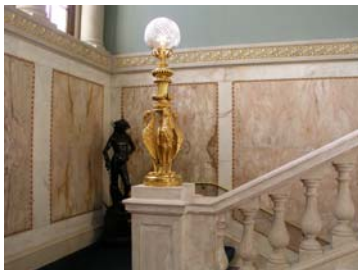
is a phrase my Yorkshire granddad used, expressing surprise.

Stairs come in all societies and all sizes. \* Yours is undoubtedly one of the most splendid.



\* More of a staircase than a stair

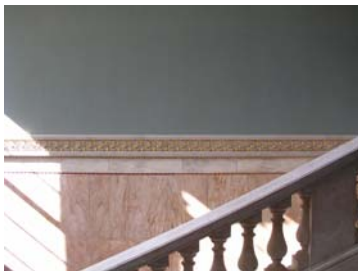
Not a bookcase, not a pencil case, not a case of wine or even a case of mistaken identity, but a case of stairs.



Two flights, three landings, \* each with its own pelican, a dog's leg, a scale so grand you could ascend on horseback.

What is it?

At one level, it is a thing, a thing in the German sense of a gathering, a gathering together, of materials...



\* Of hard white limestone from that long spit of Dorset we call the Isle of Portland



\* Of thin sheets of deeply veined marble from another island, some four thousand miles to the south east, Skyros, in the blue of the Aegean Sea.



\* If we count the new furniture as part of it, of mahogany from the mist laden rainforests of Brazil



\* Of goatskin leather from the Sokoto region of Nigeria



\* Of glass, hand blown cylinder glass

Of wool carpets

Of brass handrails



\* Of plaster, fine sand and slaked lime



\* Of coloured paints



\* And of South African gold



\* I am reminded of those wonderful lines in Masfield's poem:

*'With a cargo of ivory  
And apes and peacocks,  
Sandalwood, cedarwood and sweet white wine'*

But surely this staircase is more than the sum of its materials, it has purpose and meaning.

\* At the level of the purely practical, its purpose is obvious... But if you were asked to design a device for raising human beings from one level to another without mechanical aid, is this what you would come up with?

No, it is clearly more than that too. It is not mere building; it is architecture. Its aim extends far beyond the purely practical. It celebrates the act of rising or descending. It ennobles he or she who climbs. It speaks of other times and other places which carry meanings appropriate to its purpose here. It lends dignity not only to the ascent but to the rooms and chambers it connects. At very best it moves the soul.

And, in that moving of the soul, its colours play such a part.

Colour . . . the echo and creator of our moods.

Feeling blue? Green with envy? Red with rage? In a black mood? A brown study? Colour is all around us, usually cacophonous but in architecture, we hope, controlled and contributing to the experience the architect seeks to create.

Why then has this staircase had such a *colourful* history? Why is it not as it was first created? Why so much change? Why so much expense?

We do not know exactly how Sir Robert Smirke's staircase was when his Club, that is the Club designed by him, was opened on 05 February 1838. Photography had been invented, but only just, and in those days, the skill and judgement of craftsmen was such that architects needed to draw relatively little.



\* Only this plan survives.

But from it we can see, on the right hand side, that the fenestration, the windows, were simpler. There were three, equally sized windows.

We also know that the marble lining was not there, nor the frieze of garlanded panels high on the walls.



\* But the massive Portland balustrade was there, the fascia of its string (the sloping support of any stair) decorated



\* with a wave scroll like this horizontal one.



\* And the ceiling, at least the form of the ceiling, we believe was much as now. It is, and was, divided into four equal bays by cross beams resting on scrolled brackets, the soffits, or undersides, of the beams enriched with encircled quatrefoils. Between the beams, each bay is modelled in three recessed panels, one wide between two narrow, the middle panels being ornamented with a formal boss of foliage within a wreath

\* This is one of the brackets.



Of the colour of Smirke's staircase, we know almost nothing.

Certainly, the Portland stone would not have been painted.

The plastered walls and ceiling certainly *would* have been painted but quite how we do not know.

This is not a detective story. I hope it is a story whose ending satisfies but it is not one where scientific proof provides the answers. We have not discovered a hidden ceiling and recreated it on the basis of full forensic or even documentary evidence.

Layers of paint were painstakingly removed in preparation for the recent redecoration but revealed nothing of interest. Had there been anything to be seen, any hint or clue to earlier colours we would have examined them, microscopically.

There was nothing apart from some old whites. Everything had been removed during some earlier redecoration.

We know from Club minutes that a sub-committee was established on 04 May 1837, some nine months before the Club was opened, 'to give such direction to the architect as to the painting and decorating of the new club house as may seem expedient to them. . .'

Unfortunately, the minutes of the sub-committee have not survived. So, with no evidence available at the crime scene, no drawings and no photographs, not even any notes, what other sources might be found for the original appearance of the staircase? How could one possibly justify putting up what has just been put up?

To answer that, we need go back two hundred years or so, to September 1802, when the young Robert Smirke, aged only twenty-two but already determined on a career in architecture, joined a group of English travellers in Paris. The group, mostly Royal Academicians, included the painter Turner.





Smirke's taste was already for the Greek. \* He had seen the drawings published throughout the second half of the Eighteenth Century by Stuart and Revett, including this one of the Temple of the Winds in Athens. This and similar drawings were hugely influential.

Smirke found the architecture of Paris not to his taste.

In October, most of the group returned to London but Smirke and a young artist named William Walker began a journey to Italy and eventually Greece which was to last more than two years. He wrote to his father regularly throughout those years and, although the letters took as months to reach home through a Europe at war with Napoleon, they provide a detailed record of what he saw and thought.

From Paris, they went to Lyons, by water to Avignon, Nimes, Arles, Aix, Marseilles, Toulon and by mule to Antibes. 'The Frenchmen guess we are English', he wrote, 'and we must consequently in their opinion be made of money'.

After a week long trip by boat from Antibes to Genoa, he found there 'much marble but little real magnificence'. Neither Pisa nor Florence, nor even Siena were to his liking. In Rome, he liked the work of the ancient Romans but was unimpressed by the Renaissance. 'The taste, he wrote, is rather of a heavy, disagreeable kind',.

Only in Rome, did Smirke and Walker finally decide to visit Greece, travelling South to Naples and Messina and thence by boat to Cephalonia and finally to the mainland at Patras.

Greece was 'something else'. It thrilled the young Robert Smirke.

\* This was what he had wanted to see.



At the temple of Neptune in Corinth, 'the proportion and shape pleased me very much', he wrote. He wanted to make measurements but was thwarted by the Turkish landowner who, frightened of his neighbours' anger, refused permission for 'by being raised so high as the entablature of the columns I might be enabled to overlook the areas in which their wives might chance to be walking'.



\* This is Smirke's sketch of the Temple of Apollo at Bassae.

At Megalopolis, he wrote, "I could not help alighting and making two sketches of these beautiful ruins – I absolutely tore myself from them, for I do not remember feeling so much regret upon leaving *any* place".

Smirke and Walker covered hundreds of miles with only "a small, thin, light mattress with a piece of greenbaize as a coverlid each . . . a couple of wretched maps . . . and a Greek dictionary", seeing Olympia, Sparta, Argos, Mycenae and the rest. It reminds me of my own trips around European architectural sites in the 1970's, sleeping on luggage racks, station floors and park benches.



\* Of course, the ruins which *electrified* Smirke were those in Athens. "How can I", he wrote to his father, "by description give you any idea of the great pleasure I enjoyed at the sight of these ancient buildings of Athens! How strongly were exemplified in them the grandeur and effect of simplicity in architecture!"

It happened that Smirke was present while Lord Elgin's men were removing huge chunks of ornamented marble from the temples of the Acropolis. Smirke wrote, "Each stone as it fell shook the ground with its ponderous weight with a deep hollow noise; it seemed like a convulsive groan of the injured spirit of the Temple".

Still a hot issue.

Horrified as Smirke might have been by Elgin's act, it should be admitted that he was not above similar acts on a smaller scale.



Smirke set his heart on making plaster casts of the architectural ornaments of the Erechtheion, \* you know, the one with the Caryatids. However, apparently, "no man had the least idea of what making a cast was".

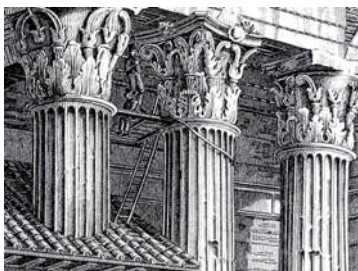


\* So one morning, Smirke and Walker selected a fragment of an ovolo enriched moulding, "carried it to the side of one of the fortress walls and hurled it over. When it reached the ground, it dashed along for a considerable distance", he wrote, "stopping at length in the road which winds up to the entrance to the Acropolis. Fortunately, no one was passing at the time; we wrapped our handkerchiefs over it and brought it safely home".

Smirke stayed a month. "All that I could do in Athens", he wrote, "was to make some views of them (the temples) hoping that they will serve as a memorandum to me of what I think should always be a model".

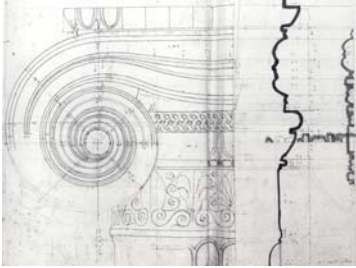


\* It should be clear that this drawing and measuring was a very serious business for would-be architects

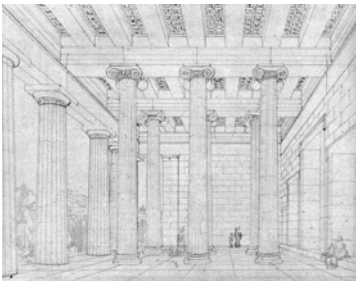




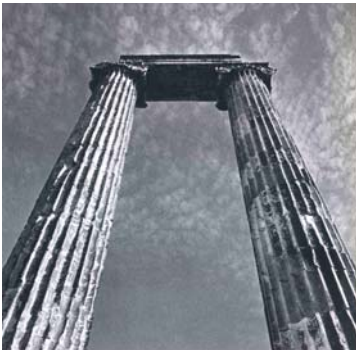
Some of the results were splendid,



whether details,



or reconstructions of whole buildings.



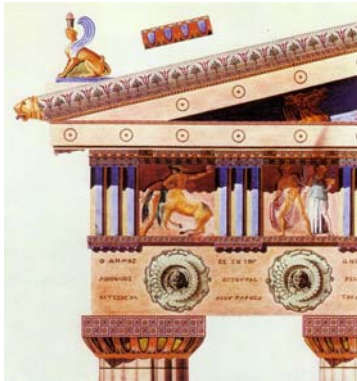
\* These are more of the buildings Smirke saw; you have probably seen many of them yourselves.







\* Greek, without colour, plain, strangely perfect in their ruined incompleteness.



\* Don't think they were always so plain. \* This is the architect and theorist, Gottfried Semper's reconstruction of the painted decoration of the Parthenon, published in 1836.



\* Ancient Greek buildings were not white when they were built. Evidence that they had in fact been very brightly coloured began to emerge slowly during the second half of the eighteenth century. Stuart and Revett had noted colour as early as 1762 but it was not until the first decade of the nineteenth century that Wilkins, Smirke, Barry and others began to show a real interest. And it was not until the 1830's, largely through the researches of two German born Frenchmen, Franz Christian Gau and Jacques Ignace Hittorff, that the whole thing came out into the open.

This is Hittorff's reconstruction of the temple of Empedocles at Selinus, drawn in 1830.



\* And this is the Munich architect, Otto von Klenze's "Fantasy Reconstruction of Athens in Ancient Times". It was at least based in fact.

These drawings were both shocking and fascinating to a world used to thinking of ancient Greek architecture as pure and white.

Accepted by scholars of course, the facts have continued to be resisted by the public and by many architects, drawn to the pure white marble. I'm sure the absence of colour photography until the middle of the *twentieth* century also accounts for a lot in continuing this romantic notion.



\* The evidence of colour may have been slight, the evidence of ceilings was not much better. For obvious reasons, few ancient Greek ceilings survived. Columns and capitals, even mouldings could be measured and copied. With ceilings, a good deal of invention would be necessary. Of course, there were some bits; this is from the Inner Porch of the Propylaeum.



\* There were even some quite fancy bits; this is from the Tholos at Epidavros. But not an awful lot more.

Smirke still had another year's travelling after he left Athens, mostly on his own. He went back to Rome, Naples, Florence, Venice, Padua and Vicenza. He was not impressed. He went on to Innsbruck, Salzburg, Vienna, Prague, Dresden and eventually Berlin.

Berlin interested him. "The style with which the more recently erected houses are decorated is new, at least on the Continent", he wrote, for it resembles more what has been lately introduced by Soane with sunk frets and grooves". Smirke was to work for Soane, the great English architect.



\* This is a detail of part of Sir John Soane's Bank of England, put up in the 1790's. Notice the Greek fret design, in the distance, the Doric columns and, on the left, the doorcase with ornamented scrolls supporting a cornice across the head. Just like those in this club house.



\* And this is the Breakfast Room at Soane's house in Lincoln's Inn Fields, which you can still visit. The fretwork is there again.



\* In Berlin, the greatest exponent of this manner, of the interpretation of ancient Greece, was Karl Friedrich Schinkel.

A brief, and relevant, digression. . .

Schinkel was an almost exact contemporary of Smirke and was to be both extremely prolific and extremely talented.

True, none of the buildings for which he was to become famous were built when Smirke was in Berlin. Like most architects, neither was to do their best work until their fifties and beyond. But I can't help thinking that the spirit of ancient Greece was abroad in Berlin, fired by the young Schinkel. Smirke probably met him.

This is the Altes Museum; a bold building, very Prussian of course.



\* This is a detail within its portico.



\* This is the Casino at a house by Schinkel called Gleinicke .



\* This is the Tea Pavilion at the Charlottenhof, another building by Schinkel.

I am showing you these buildings not because they influenced Smirke, they clearly didn't.

I am showing you these buildings because both Smirke and Schinkel were influenced by the same things, by the same spirit, and because I think Schinkel was probably the greatest of all the architects of what came to be known as the Greek Revival.

To my mind, Schinkel seems to have captured the spirit of ancient Greece and reinterpreted it much more convincingly than anyone else working at the time.



\* This is Schinkel's design of 1838, contemporary with this club house, for a vast palace to be known as Schloss Orianda. The palace, although never built, was to have been on the Crimean coast of the Black Sea. It was to have been for the sister of Schinkel's patron, the Crown Prince of Prussia, Friedrich Wilhelm. In Schinkel's own words, it was to have been "the greatest Imperial House on earth".

Something more modest was actually built.

This was to have been the great atrium. Look at the scale. The serenity. The energy. The detail. The light.



\* This was to have been the garden courtyard at the centre of the palace. The combination of sunlight, water, white stone and gold would have been breathtaking.



\* And this was to have been the terrace facing the sea, the columns and caryatids copies of those which Schinkel, like Smirke, had seen on the Erechtheum in Athens. You can feel the warmth of the sun on the stone. A more ennobling place is hard to imagine.

Enough of Schinkel.

The best of the Greek Revival may never actually have been built, but of course much was.





\* This is Otto von Klenze's design for the Sculpture Gallery of the Hermitage in St Petersburg. Notice the deep coffering and the star motifs within each coffer.

And in England too, the Greek Revival was a huge phenomenon amongst the fashionable classes.

Strictly speaking, it began in 1757 in Brandeston in Suffolk, as it happens the next village to mine, where Revett, whose drawing of the Tower of the Winds I showed you, apparently built an ornamental portico in his brother's garden. It is now no longer.

Nothing else happened, apart from a few garden buildings, until the end of the century.

But from then, things hotted up. Smirke and a number of others were busy.

William Wilkins won the competition to design Downing College in 1804.



\* In 1809, he revealed his massive copy of the Theseion at Grange Park, near Winchester, seen here,



\* and closer up.

In the same year, Smirke entered the arena in a big way



\* His Covent Garden Theatre became the talk of London. It stood until it was burnt down in 1856. Notice the massive Doric columns, copies, of course, of those Smirke had seen in Greece.



\* This was Smirke's interior.

By 1810 the Greek Revival style had become, "the very criterion of architectural distinction" in England.

By 1815, Cockerell, architect of the Ashmolean in Oxford, said, 'Greek is the fashion and all noodles are ashamed of being out of fashion'.

London was wild for the Greek Revival.





\* In 1823, the British Museum was begun, by Smirke.



\* In 1824, he did the Royal College of Physicians, now part of Canada House.



\* In 1825, Decimus Burton's Screen at Hyde Park Corner appeared.



\* In 1826, Soane did more works at the Bank of England.



\* In 1828, London saw Wilkins's University, now UCL.



\* In 1830, Burton's Athenaeum opened its doors.



\* By 1832, when Charles Barry's Travellers Club opened, the Greek Revival was already coming under threat. Barry of course used a renaissance palazzo for his model although, interestingly, he still put a cast of the frieze from the Temple of Apollo at Bassae in the Library.

In 1836, arguments were raging over the right style for the Houses of Parliament. Greece lost to Barry and Pugin's Gothic of course.



\* By early in 1838, this Club was open to members. The Survey of London describes it as 'Graeco-Roman and Italianate', ironic when one remembers the horror Italy held for the young Smirke. Certainly the front is not as restrained, not as Greek, as the staircase was.

It had been quite a decade.

For all that, we still don't know what Smirke's staircase looked like in 1838.

I hope perhaps, though, that I've given you some feel for the sort of buildings and interiors that were being put up at the time, a flavour of the zeitgeist if you like.

It seems to me likely that the walls of the staircase were plain, the ceilings coffered and coloured, the door cases treated simply, the whole an exercise in chaste and refined solemnity, appropriate to the august institution it is.



\* So why is this splendid staircase not as Smirke left it? What horrors have befallen it since?

It seems likely that it changed little through the long reign of Queen Victoria, that is certainly until 1901.

We know that in 1907, the Club invited Reginald Blomfield to remodel the staircase. Why they wished it remodelled, we do not know. We do know that other alterations to the Club House were made at the same time.

We also know that Blomfield was one of the most successful architects of his day.

Born in 1856, 11 years before the death of Smirke, he gained a first from Exeter College and set up his own practice in 1884.

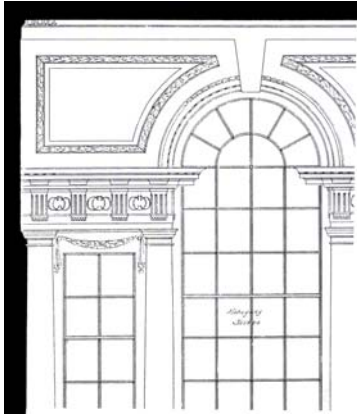
He began sympathetic to the Arts and Crafts movement of William Morris, did a number of private houses, and by the turn of the century was a committed classicist, increasingly waging war on anything which was not classical. To my knowledge, he did not much differentiate between Greek and Roman.

He was on the editorial board of the influential Architectural Review and was known for being somewhat dogmatic, even bombastic.



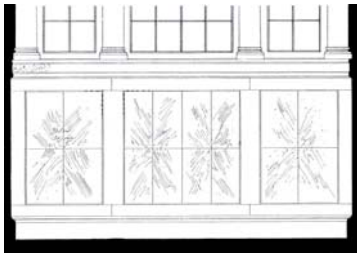
\* In 1906-7, he built the United University Club in Pall Mall East and in the second of those years made alterations here.

We know more or less what he did because the drawings are in the Library.



\* He took out Smirke's three windows and put in the vast Venetian window we see today. The sashes were mahogany and the surrounds pine, painted white. This is part of his drawing.

He brought the wall face forwards, so that he had room to put up the columns in front of the window. That's why the half-landing is narrower than the stairs.



\* He also added the Skyros marble panels, with their little plaster bead and reel surrounds and frames in white statuary marble.



\* He put up the moulded plaster panels at the tops of the walls.

That seems to have been about it for the stairs. In the Blomfield Room of course, he put up that enormous arch.

It's funny how people's personalities are reflected in their designs. Think of that room and you can see he might have been bombastic.

Blomfield's classicism, certainly that for the insides of buildings was what you might term 'ex catalogue'. His note on the drawing for the high level panels says, "enriched moulding Carton Pierre by Jackson". These were not mouldings drawn by him in Greece. These are ones that could be bought off the shelf.

The effect was less considered, less satisfactory. I must say I find it hard to see in what way Blomfield improved Smirke's staircase.

And the colour? Again, we do not know.

But, in all the photographs of classical interiors by Blomfield that I have seen, they are always white.

It seems likely that white is how he left the walls and ceiling of the staircase here.

Was it that romantic notion of pure Greek temples resurfacing?

Certainly, something had changed with the turn of the century and the end of the Victorian era. There was a new spirit passing over the face of the earth,

and it was white.

It wasn't long of course before the white spirit had scrubbed out not only all traces of *colour* from fashionable architecture, but all traces of classicism as well.

Blomfield went on to do the Menin Gate in Ypres and,



\* possibly his best known work, Piccadilly Circus and alterations to Nash's Regent Street. The work continued until 1930.



These buildings remained steadfastly classical but, alongside, some very different things were beginning to happen. Modernism was arriving.

\* This is Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye, just outside Paris. It was put up in 1929.

Just as the fashionable sets of Europe had gone crazy for Greek in the 1820's, so they went crazy for the new white architecture in the 1920's and 30's.

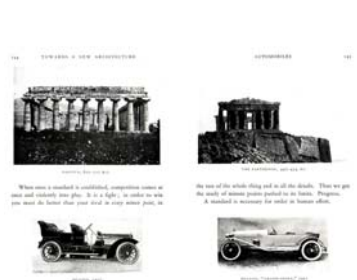


\* This is the ramp at the same house.



\* And this is the stair, a completely different sort of stair from ours. But good too.

And, of course, Le Corbusier knew all about the Greeks. His pure white architecture owed much to the ancient temples; in them he saw the source of modernism.



\* A page from his famous book, 'Vers une Architecture' where he compares the design of temples to what were then the latest motor cars.

What on earth has this to do with the staircase at the Oxford and Cambridge Club?

We are about to meet the penultimate episode in our tale, and I think you will see.

That which the wealthy and fashionable enjoy in one decade, the rest of us enjoy in the next.

Because of the Second World War, there was a delay, a decade lost. The enthusiasm for white of the 20's and 30's was being pursued by the rest of us in the 50's and 60's.





\* You remember the sort of thing, I'm sure.



\* I'm not going to ask for a show of hands but I would be willing to bet that there is more than one person here who has had a hand in covering a Victorian fireplace with a sheet of white gloss painted hardboard.

Or in doing the same to a panelled door.

I know there is at least one person here because, as a design conscious teenager living in a rather lovely old Vicarage in South London, I was doing it.

And I see too many of the results even now, forty years on, to believe that I was the only one.



\* Everyone was at it.



\* And sometimes the enthusiasm for white was coupled with a love of bright colours, oranges and even blues. You can see where I'm heading I'm sure.

Why did we do it? What were we trying to achieve?



\* It is almost as if we believed that those tins of white gloss could somehow erase the past, history, mess, chaos, and give us a new start.

I dare say Jung would have some comments on the matter, but that's not for now.

Because most of us could not pull down, or even alter, the old buildings in which we found ourselves, we sought to modernise them with paint, to get rid of all those dirty little corners, fussy little mouldings, shadows, tones, shades.

Give me something white and clean and new.

Give me perfection.

Give me Dulux Brilliant White Gloss.

\* Why else would a venerable institution of educated people, inheriting such a magnificent and grand staircase as this, constructed from the best Portland stone, a staircase which today would cost at least a million pounds to construct, why else would they have painted the whole thing in tins and tins of white gloss?

From our perspective, such an act is unthinkable.

So there it is, the staircase as it existed until June of last year.

White gloss on the stairs

White gloss on the string course



\* White gloss on the balustrade



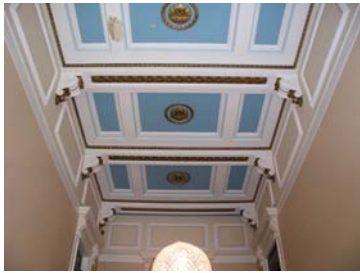
\* White gloss on the door cases



\* White gloss on the architectural orders of the window.

White gloss on the sashes of the window.

I'm not Blomfield's biggest fan, as you may have noticed, but even he left his mahogany windows mahogany.



\* White, brilliant white, although matt this time, on the ceiling,



\* well, most of it.



And blue



\* What a blue.

Please don't think I'm mocking you or the Club. I was there too, as you've heard. We made our mistakes together, back in the 60's. I spent days and days dyeing strips of muslin turquoise and stretching them across suspended wooden frames to make a false ceiling in my bedroom.

We had to get out of this together.



\* And apricot and cream.



\* And, on the Skyros marble, thick coats of varnish.



\* That was a lot more difficult to get off.



\* Even the pelicans were gloomy.



\* I don't know precisely when this scheme was done; it could have been as late as 1972. The ideas, though, are pure sixties.

Certainly by the early seventies, the whole staircase had become disjointed from the rooms around it, many of which remained in something at least approximating to their original colours.

The staircase had become neither rich, nor chaste. It was simply bland, a great empty hole in the middle of a magnificent building.

And so we come to the autumn of 2003 when the Club asked me to start thinking about improvements.

What was to be done?

By now, you've heard my understanding of the history and you've seen the staircase. You can certainly make the necessary connections and you can probably see exactly why I did what I did.

Just a few elements, though, I would like to highlight.

The carpet we kept because it was not sufficiently worn to justify the expense. When it is, may I recommend a carpet with plenty of rust red in it. It will pick up the veins in the marble and contrast well with the green walls.



\* The stone stairs and balustrades you know about. The paint was very thick. You may also have noticed that we took away quantities of steel electrical conduit.



\* The door cases it seemed to me would be better had they been in stone, Greek style. In fact, they are timber.

So, in best nineteenth century tradition, we painted them to look like stone, trompe l'oeil stone.



\* Trick of the eye. And a very convincing trick it is too. You really can't tell until you touch it.



\* The string course also asked to look like stone.



\* And those console brackets, apparently supporting the ceiling at high level.

It was impossible to return to Smirke's interior. Even if we had known exactly how it had been, we could never have obliterated Blomfield. They would never have let us.

And, in any case, buildings do develop over time and each layer can be an enhancement. What I wanted to do, without making any *really* expensive, architectural changes, was to tip the balance of the decorations back a bit, to make them more sympathetic to Smirke's intention, to try to interpret Blomfield in a Smirke sort of way.

I wanted the layers to be there, well not perhaps the 1960's layer (it was only paint and varnish after all), but to try to integrate the others together so that the staircase regained something of its original character.

The walls are green for the simple reason that this particular shade, which actually calls itself 'Castle Grey', jumped out at me as I browsed through colour swatches in front of the red veined marble.

## THE COLOURFUL HISTORY OF A STAIRCASE





\* Blomfield's moulded panels I considered picking out but there was something about the plainness of the walls which I wanted to contrast with the ceiling. The Greek thing again. I wanted a feeling of surprise as the eye travelled up the walls towards the ceiling. Smirke, I believe, would have approved.

At the least, the panels gave us a rhythm in which to set new lighting.



\* The columns and orders belonged to the building, even though they had been added later, and so they went in with the stone.



\* And all this stone was gilded, just the highlights, to enliven it.



\* The pictures we reframed. I suggested large mirrors but we decided that that might be too much for members exhausted and ruddy from the climb.



\* At least there is now a bench to give the chance of rest at the halfway point, and to make a bit of a place out of the landing.

And the little bead around the marble we painted red, and gilded the highlights there too.



\* The cupboards we stripped and repolished.



\* Which leaves the ceiling.

The choices available were limited. We had no information about how it had been painted originally. So, should we paint the ceiling a plain colour because that was safe and intellectually justifiable?

White perhaps?

Or should we take the bold step of trying to put up a ceiling which would work with the various elements which existed and which would also be able to tip that balance back towards Smirke a bit.

There are some architects working with historic buildings who take a particularly scholarly standpoint and would not have dreamed of doing what might be termed speculative reconstruction.

Rightly or wrongly, I'm not one of them.

I think it vital to *know* the history of every building I work on but I try not to get bogged down in that history. I believe firmly in conserving the old where it exists and is of quality but I also believe that buildings must change and adapt to survive.

I think that the *future* of buildings such as this is infinitely more important, and probably much longer, than the past. I am not for radical change but I am for gentle evolution.

The thing which I most value in historic buildings is their character, the feeling and mood they create in us, the *sense* of history, the connection with the past.  
If I can preserve that while allowing a building to remain useful, then I think I have done well.

And, in order to preserve that character, it is often impossible to rely on facts. Sometimes, one has to rely on feelings.



\* I'm not sure if this bit of the talk is entirely tactful but some of you will have seen the steps I put up at the back of the Reform Club.



\* There never were such steps in Charles Barry's day.

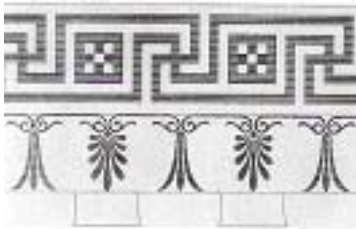


\* They are a completely new requirement, brought about by changed circumstances. Some argued that they should not be, that they were a change too far. Others would have argued that a modern addition should be in a modern style.

To me, the most important things were simple: To build the steps so members could reach the garden. And to build them in a manner which kept the character of the building. That meant not being timid, overly respectful of what the great Barry had done, nor trying to compete with, nor even complement Barry, but instead trying to get inside the mind of Barry, quite honestly more through pictures than through words, to create the steps which he might have created.

Although here the situation was rather more complicated (two architects before me, not one) and although slightly less was at stake (no demolition required) I took the same approach.

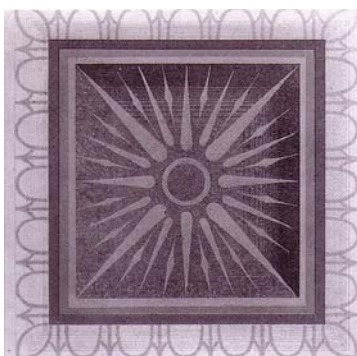
I looked at lots and lots of ceilings, Greek ceilings, Greek Revival ceilings, Smirke ceilings, other ceilings from the period. Anything which felt appropriate. Many of them I've just shown you.



\* And there, of course, I saw fretwork patterns,



\* strong reds and blues,

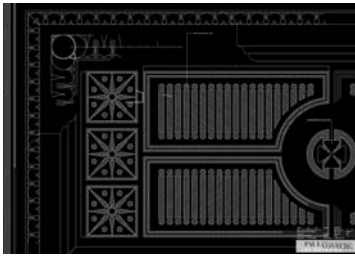


\* stars and flowers, and all arranged in great deep panels framed with gilded mouldings and painted lines.

Then I turned up the music loud, Beethoven piano sonatas felt right and I drew, and painted, and rubbed out and started again, and I might have had a small whisky, and I tried to design a ceiling that was *right* for Smirke's stair, here.

I wish I could show you the coloured painting I did; it disappeared, strangely.

Then I stopped imagining I was a nineteenth century architect and switched on my computer.



\* A few hours later the design was transferred into a series of electronic signals which I could edit at will, and I did, off and on over a week or two, until I was happy.



\* The other great advantage of the computer drawing was that I could send it by email from my office in Suffolk to my printer by Oxford Circus. He printed sections of the design onto tracing paper, at full size, delivered them here and the decorators made stencils direct from the drawing. Of course, I visited site regularly too.



\* There are the stencils, on the table, and there is the painting I presented to the House Committee.



\* Behind the scaffolding you saw all last summer there was a lot going on.



\*



\* At times there were twenty decorators on the scaffold at once.





\* The work was done by a relatively new firm called Curtis Bran.



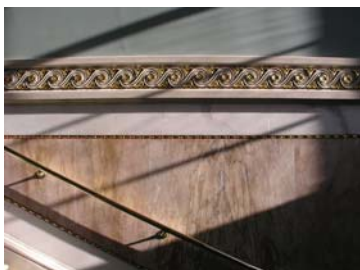
\* Their standards are excellent.



\* And the result, what can I say? I hope you like it.



\* Of course we must be prudent, cautious and responsible in our approach to buildings. They are so expensive. I hope I am known for my rigorous budget control as well as for my design. But we must also bring passion to bear on buildings, as did those who came before us. We must be at least slightly wary of the intellect and the purely practical; they are not enough for architecture.



\* You may know Martin Heidegger's essay, "Bauen Wohnen Denken", Building, Dwelling, Thinking, published in 1954

When any architect worth the name designs a stone staircase, rising up from the earth, he is feeling, to quote Heidegger, that

*'Earth is the serving bearer, blossoming and fruiting, spreading out in rock and water,*





*\* rising up into plant and animal'*

And, when he designs a ceiling, he is feeling the sky, that



*\* 'The sky is the vaulting path of the sun, the course of the changing moon, the wandering glitter of the stars, the year's seasons and their changes, the light and dusk of day, the gloom and glow of night'*

It is these things which I *hope*, in colour and in form, that I have given back to Smirke,

and to you.

\* Thank you very much.

THE FOOT OF THE STAIRS