# **Ombersley Court**

## Worcestershire

## This magnificent historic ensemble must not be broken up!

This remarkable baroque and Regency country house retains collections assembled over 400 years by the Sandys family. It was the lifelong wish of the late Lord Sandys, who died without direct heirs, that that his house and collections should be preserved for posterity. To this end he set up the Ombersley Conservation Trust endowed with 2,500 acres of prime agricultural land and 42 handsome houses in one of the most picturesque villages in the Midlands. The house and 39 acres were held back while Lord and Lady Sandys were alive and now his executors have agreed a sale to a private buyer. In this report SAVE argues there is a case for retaining a substantial number of contents in the house. SAVE holds that a significant number of these are covered by the Grade I listing of the historic building.





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Report by Marcus Binney and John Martin Robinson. Edited by Thomas Bender Photography courtesy of *Country Life*  August 2018



#### **Give Ombersley Court a chance**

Once again SAVE stands up to champion a historic house which is a sleeping beauty never seen by the British public. Ombersley Court contains collections spanning four centuries and is imminently threatened with break-up and dispersal of its contents. Indeed, this process has already begun.

The photographs here come from three handsomely illustrated articles in *Country Life* in 1953 – amazingly they are the only public record of these wonderful interiors. *Country Life* was refused permission to take a new record before Ombersley Court was put on the market in 2016.

A superb photograph of the drawing room at Calke Abbey in Derbyshire taken by Alex Starkey of *Country Life* was used for SAVE's campaigning poster which helped save the house for the nation.

When SAVE published *The Tyntesfield Emergency* in 2002, there was again no publicly available record of the gorgeous interiors and collections. We were forced to illustrate our report with snapshots of details. Yet in both cases we succeeded and both houses, now owned and run by the National Trust, are hugely valued and much visited. Yet because they were so little known there were those who were quick to talk them down. "Skiploads of junk" was one scornful description of Calke Abbey.

SAVE was faced with a similar situation in early 2007 when we launched a  $\pm 25$ m appeal to save Dumfries House in Ayrshire to prevent the auction of the contents and save the house as an entity and open it to the public. We had raised  $\pm 19$ m in pledges, with the prospect of a further  $\pm 5$ m, when it was announced that the sale would proceed and all efforts to save Dumfries House had failed. Then the Prince of Wales stepped in, raised the extra funds needed and transformed Dumfries House into the magical place it is today, full of life and activity with numerous educational and training programmes.

The executors of the wills of the late Lord and Lady Sandys have exchanged contracts to sell the house and grounds to a local buyer who wishes to make Ombersley Court his home. He is also interested in retaining or acquiring contents with the possibility of public opening and access. So despite the late hour the potential is still there to save this remarkable house from break-up.

Of course, as always we may lose. Tragically we lost two other magical Midlands historic houses in the 1990s – Pitchford Hall in Shropshire where the contents were sold in 1992 and Stokesay Court in Worcestershire, a remarkable 1880s time capsule sold up in 1994. Both these houses are now heroically on the mend thanks to new generations of the families who lived in them, but it would have been far better if the contents had not been sold.

Close to Ombersley, Hartlebury Castle has recently reopened to a mighty accolade. Ombersley Court is now of a knife edge. We appeal to all those who value the glorious architectural heritage of the West Midlands to support us and all those who value the beauty and history of the British country house and believe these places should be enjoyed by future generations

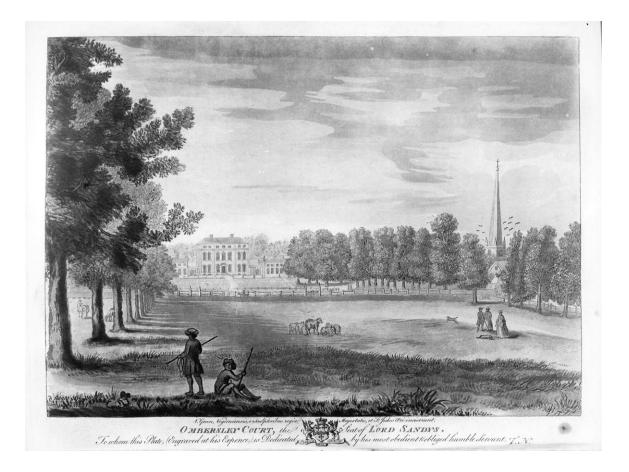
#### HELP US SAVE OMBERSLEY COURT FOR THE NATION



## The house

Originally built by Francis Smith of Warwick for the first Lord Sandys in 1724-32, the exterior was recased in Grinshill Stone ashlar by the Marchioness of Downshire in 1812–14 to the design of John Webb. Webb was a highly accomplished Staffordshire landscape gardener and architect who was also responsible for designing the park and the stables. He was a close associate of the Wyatts. Apart from the design of houses and parks all over England, he was responsible for the landscape of the Lune Valley in Lancashire. The Lune Valley is a stretch of 20 miles from Lancaster to beyond Kirkby Lonsdale comprising six different estates. It is an outstanding display of picturesque landscape art unequalled in Europe.

At Ombersley, Webb raised Smith's attic storey by three feet to provide on the second floor guest bedrooms, a sine qua non of Regency house planning after the development of the house party.



Engraving of Smith of Warwick's Ombersley, with flanking pavilions, before the Regency remodelling and recasing of the exterior. From Tredway Nash, History of Worcestershire. 1781.





## The Great Hall

The double height Great Hall survives as designed by Smith of Warwick. The handsome stucco ceiling was reconstructed after subsidence as part of the Regency works. There is a complete collection of 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> century portraits of the Sandys family including those of the families of Letitia Tipping, who married Samuel 1<sup>st</sup> Lord Sandys in 1725. In 1727, she inherited her family's heirlooms including the possessions of her great uncle Admiral Russell, Earl of Orford.

The 1st Earl of Orford (1653-1727) was one of the Immortal Seven who issued the invitation to William III to take the throne. Commander in Chief of the Royal Navy in the Nine Years War, he defeated the French fleet at Barfleur and La Hogue and is an important historic figure.

The Waterloo banner was brought to the house by Sir Arthur Hill, aide-de-camp to the Duke of Wellington, who succeeded his mother, the Marchioness of Downshire as 2<sup>nd</sup> Lord Sandys.



#### The Saloon

The Saloon is the central one of three surviving 1720s rooms along the park front. Now that Wingerworth Hall in Derbyshire has been demolished, this is one of Smith's finest surviving interiors with glorious architectural joinery including particularly fine doorcases and a monumental grey and white marble chimneypiece.

The set of late 17<sup>th</sup> century portraits in matching frames form part of the original decoration. They are the family portraits inherited by Letitia Tipping who married the 1st Lord Sandys, just as the rooms were being fitted out. It is clear that she and her husband partly conceived the interior as a setting for these pieces of art. The portraits are part of the original decoration, all contemporaneously framed to match, and fixed to the wainscot. They can be held to be covered by the listing. A ruling in the High Court on the proposed sale of similar panels at Noseley Hall in Leicestershire provides affirmation for this.

Most of the moveable furniture has been lost since these photographs were taken, the arm chairs, pier tables and torchères have all been sold by Omnia Art Ltd, fine art agents, on the instructions of the executors.





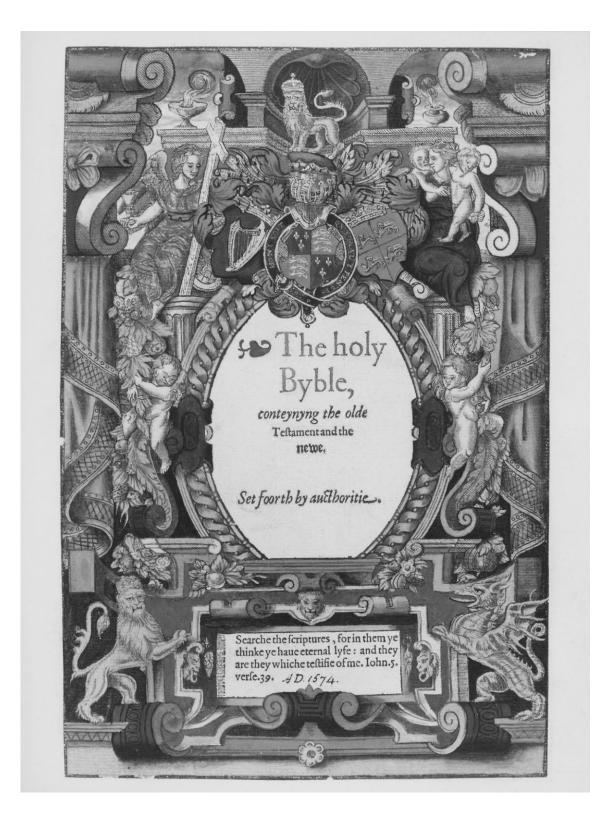
Mid-18th century armchair with beautiful original Soho tapestry covers, one of a fine set in the Saloon. They have now been removed and sold by Omnia. They have undergone extensive restoration since leaving Ombersley and are now believed to be in a private collection in Norfolk.



## The Library

The Library at Ombersley is a complete Regency ensemble with the Sandys portraits hanging above the bookcases. The mid-18th century book collection of the 2nd Lord Sandys is a good example of a Georgian library. The Georgian celestial and terrestrial globes, which were standard library furniture, are still there.

The silver firedogs in hearth have the arms of Admiral Russell 1st Earl of Orford, great-uncle of the wife of Samuel 1<sup>st</sup> Lord Sandys. The firedogs have been sold – export was stopped – and are now in the National Museum of Wales.



Frontispiece of the Sandys family bible dated 1574. This belonged to Archbishop Sandys, Elizabethan Archbishop of York and the most interesting of the Sandys ancestors. It has always been considered a special treasure of the Ombersley library.

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Genealogical entries inside Archbishop Sandys' Bible.



#### **The Chinese Room**

The Chinese Room on the first floor was created by Mary Sandys, Marchioness of Downshire. She was the niece of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Baron Sandys and inherited his estate. The Sandys barony was recreated for her in 1802 with remainder to her younger son and descendants and if they failed then to the descendants of her eldest son.

Mary Sandys entertained the Prince Regent at Ombersley for three days in 1807. This was before her reconstruction of the exterior and additions to the house by Webb in 1812. The Chinese decorations may not have been prepared for the Prince, but she shared his taste for chinoiserie, and the room is an outstanding and well-preserved example of the style favoured by the Prince Regent at Brighton Pavilion. The painted Chinese silk wall panels, festoon overdoors and faux bamboo furniture all survive and are cited in the listing description.



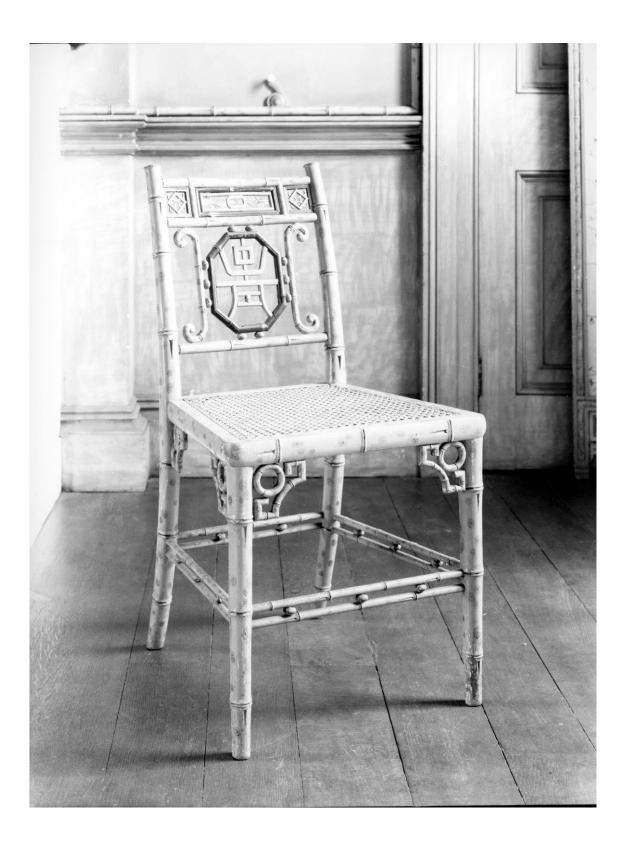
Detail of the decoration in the Chinese Room. The festoon overdoors are an exceptional – probably unique – surviving example of the Regency fashion for architectural upholstery. The predominant colours of this enchanting room are blue and yellow.



One of the original Chinese silk painted panels in architectural bamboo frame in The Chinese Room. Cited in the listing description.



The chaise-longue in the Chinese Room, part of the original set of Regency faux bamboo furniture made for the room. It is still at Ombersley.



Detail of integral Chinoiserie seat furniture in The Chinese Room.



## The Regency Bedroom

The Regency bedroom is located over the dining room in the Webb wing. The room contains the Chinese painted paper panels displaying the Story of tea. These are part of a very rare set and included in the listing description.



#### The Rose Drawing Room

This handsome room is a masterwork of Smith of Warwick using his preferred team of carvers and joiners Edward Poynton and Thomas Eborall as he had done at Chicheley, Badminton and other houses. The excellent fluted Corinthian pilasters and the Borromini inspired doorcases are their work. The portrait in a contemporary frame in the overmantel is covered by the listing as should be the rococo wall lights, the grates and complete set of Regency chandeliers and light fittings throughout the house.



#### The Dining Room

The Dining Room has a Regency interior by John Webb, added by the Marchioness of Downshire in 1812, to display the Willem van de Velde paintings of Admiral Russell's sea battles including Barfleur and La Hogue. They form an important historic ensemble but are not fixed to the walls.

The bench in the style of Marot (formerly in the dining room because it was thought to come from the cabin in the Admiral's flagship Britannia), is one of a pair. They have recently been removed from the house as have a number of other items including two paintings of Madrid by Antonio Joli.



Regency mahogany dining chair. Part of a set forming the original furnishing of the Marchioness of Downshire's new dining room in 1812.



## The small Dining Room ("Parlour")

The third of the three fine intact Smith of Warwick interiors on the west front. It has skilful 1720s wainscot panelling with Ionic pilasters in contrast to the Corinthian Order in the Saloon. The group portrait of Prince Rupert over the sideboard has been acquired by the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford through the Acceptance in Lieu scheme for £ 900,000. The full-length portrait over the chimneypiece has an identical frame to those in the Saloon.



## "Banks of the Bosporus"

This very rare survival of French Empire wallpaper, made by Dufour in 1816, formed the original decoration in one of the Marchioness of Downshire's new Regency bedrooms on the second floor which were mothballed in 1960s.



Another section of "Banks of the Bosporus" by Dufour, 1816



Chimney boards in the form of painted children. These charming early 18<sup>th</sup> century decorative pieces are still at Ombersley and currently displayed on the staircase.

#### Testimonials

Houses that have remained in the possession of the same family for as many as three centuries have become increasingly rare. When not only the buildings, but their contents, have survived intact, it is thus immensely important to keep them together. This is not for some sentimental reason, but because the furniture, pictures, and objects, all have their places and would lose some of their meaning if they were to be detached from their context. Not only that, but quantities of little things, which it would not be thought worthwhile to catalogue individually if the contents of the house were to go for auction, provide a depth of association that, once dissipated, can never be recovered.

Ombersley, through its four centuries of ownership of the estate by the Sandys family, is just such a case. One only has to look at houses that have themselves been saved, but whose contents have been completely – as in the case of Pitchford Hall – or even only partially – as in the case of Belton House – sold off, to experience the way in which the rich loam of the past has been forfeited or diminished. Ombersley Court is a beautiful house, with a rich history; it and its contents must be preserved together at all costs.

#### Alastair Laing, Curator Emeritus of Pictures & Sculpture, The National Trust

No-one who visited Ombersley in the past, as I did in a personal capacity, will be in any doubt that it was among the most fascinating survivals of its kind in this country. The atmospheric interiors were distinguished above all for the works of art associated with two key moments in national history and, more specifically, to the roles of Colonel the Hon. John Russell in the Civil War and the reign of King Charles II and of Lord Arthur Hill, later 2nd Baron Sandys, in the Peninsular War. Had the collection been more widely known, its dismemberment would have been a legitimate subject of public concern.

#### Francis Russell, Christie's

The late Lord Sandys was a modest man, but he took the greatest pride in his inheritance and in particular the extraordinary collection of furniture, books and paintings which grace the rooms at Ombersley. He relished being able to answer a scriptural query by referring to the bible that had belonged to Bishop Sandys, one of the authors of the Bishops Bible. Many of the treasures were closely connected with his family's history, and the collection, often augmented but rarely diminished over four centuries witnessed their determination to preserve it for posterity.

It would indeed be an artistic and historical disaster for the collection to be taken from its ancestral home and dispersed.

#### John Comins

The house was rare in being the expression of a single family over the ages. It is that wonderful mix of historical resonance, artistic highlights and domestic everydayness that makes the English country house our greatest contribution to European culture. Its contents were precious and underresearched, its interiors had some rare survivals and it was clear what the last owner's intentions for it were. He had already settled the village on its inhabitants and protected the park by setting up a local trust to manage it.

That the house did not complete this picture of community ownership is tragic and in my view a betrayal of Lord Sandys' wishes. I do not believe it was necessary to cherry pick the best contents in such a covert way and I think it is inexcusable not to have made a proper photographic and archive record of such a precious survival.

Listed buildings are national assets and in this case the public was knowingly excluded, and I was certainly denied access by the trustees though my interest was professional and I had family 'connections' to the late owner.

#### Edward Bulmer

Ombersley Court is unique and exceptional. Essentially the creation of the Sandys and Hill (Downshire) families, it reflects the distinguished history of these two families and their collections. The house itself is a fine example of an English Georgian country house set in rolling countryside and surrounded by Wellingtonias, planted to commemorate the Battle of Waterloo by Arthur Hill, 2nd Baron Sandys, who played a distinguished part in the battle and was one of the Duke of Wellington's aides de camp.

The Duke also stayed in the house. The interior contains further Waterloo memorabilia, notably kettle drums from battle. The family had a strong tradition of military and political service, dating back to the 17th century, and this is also reflected in the fine collection of portraits and paintings which can be found throughout the house. In short, Ombersley preserves a vital aspect of British history, a unified house and collection which must remain together and be open to the public at large.

The house and more especially the collection are of the greatest historical importance and must be preserved together for the nation and open to all. I am also sure that this is what Lord Sandys himself would have wanted.

Alan Borg CBE, KStJ, FSA, Former Director of the V&A and Imperial War Museums The Chinese Room is a simply wonderful whole and an incredible survival. My reason for rating the Ombersley room so highly is the simple fact that full chinoiserie rooms were never nearly as common as people think, and are now even rarer. There are so many individual surviving chinoiserie objects that we tend to lose sight of the fact that full blown chinoiserie rooms were always very few and far between. Recent books and exhibitions about wallpaper may have exacerbated the sense that there is plenty of chinoiserie around, not least in National Trust houses. This is simply not true and the Ombersley room is all the rarer for being a complete scheme.

Edward Clive, art agent and furniture specialist with a research interest in chinoiserie

At Clifton we have a lot of Hill history – portraits, silver and china – but it is now in a different setting - not at Hillsborough or East Hampstead where it was built up over the generations; it is not the same seeing them out of context.

I think Richard Sandys appreciated this too and he planned to keep his family collection together at Ombersley; he wanted it to be enjoyed in particular by the community. Not having an immediate successor, he chose the Ombersley Court Trust as the vehicle to achieve this. A split up and sell off of any chattels especially those of long historical significance appears to me to be a direct breach of that "trust".

#### Nicholas Hill, 9th Marquess of Downshire. The current Lord Sandys

This house is remarkable for the witness it provides to the outstanding naval career of Admiral Edward Russell, 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Orford (1653-1727) whose distinguished service in the 1690s campaign against the French is celebrated in six large contemporary views of his naval engagements by Van de Velde.

Recent acquisitions of paintings from Ombersley by the Ashmolean, Oxford, the Devonshire Collections at Chatsworth and of silver by the National Museum of Wales, following an export deferral, demonstrate Admiral Russell's national importance – his naval career is as significant as that of his better known contemporary John Churchill, Duke of Marlborough. Coincidentally, the Fitzwilliam, Cambridge, has recently acquired a spectacular giltwood frame featuring nautical trophies intended for a mirror or portrait of Lord Offord. Given Orford's country home at Chippenham, Cambridge, was long-since demolished, Ombersley provides an appropriate focus for Lord Orford's outstanding contribution to our national history. The early 19<sup>th</sup> century additions to Ombersley include the Chinese Room commissioned by the Marchioness of Downshire. This remarkable survival matches Regency taste epitomized by the Brighton Pavilion, but at the opposite end of the country.

Dr Tessa Murdoch FSA, Acting Keeper of Sculpture, Metalwork, Ceramics and Glass Victoria & Albert Museum

The best Georgian house in Worcestershire and with its contents and mementos of Admiral Russell, a key monument of the Glorious Revolution and the Whig Ascendency.

#### John Martin Robinson

A picturesque village, a Gothic church built by the patron, filled with family monuments, a handsome and productive estate – at Ombersley most of the components of a classic English ensemble are preserved, with a very well-endowed Conservation Trust to keep them in good fettle for the future. But, sadly, the integrity of Ombersley Court, the great house which is the central keystone of the whole, is under threat. Its austerely noble facades conceal grand interiors, rich in panelling, plasterwork, paintings, furniture and other ornaments. A few star objects have left, but what remains constitutes a great historic treasure, backed by a prodigious family archive. Its loss and dispersal would be a tragedy.

#### Simon Swynfen Jervis, former Director and Marlay Curator of the Fitzwilliam Museum, and former Historic Buildings Secretary of The National Trust

I have seen Ombersley only once, but it made a lasting impression. My visit was in 2001 when the childless owner, Lord Sandys, was looking for a way of keeping the house and contents together after his death. I remember the beautiful position of the house with views across its park towards the distant Malvern Hills. I remember the extraordinary contrast between the plain Regency façade of dun-coloured stone and the warm tones and fine craftsmanship of the early 18<sup>th</sup>-century interiors with their unpainted panelled walls, carved woodwork, rich plasterwork and a staircase that is a tour de force of joinery and carving. I remember an important group of 17<sup>th</sup> century sea-pieces, a conversation piece by Dobson, a magnificent library and much fine early-18<sup>th</sup> century walnut furniture. I remember Ombersley as a country house of striking contrasts, a rare survival and a place of unusual depth and range in its historic and artistic interest.

Martin Drury, former Director-General National Trust and former Chairman The Landmark Trust I associate Ombersley Court with Lord Arthur Hill who fought alongside Wellington at Waterloo as one of the Duke's eight Aides-De-Camp. Hill had earlier served in the Peninsular War and was well liked by his fellow officers, not least as he could be relied upon to enliven any party.

In the great mural of the battle by Maclise commissioned for the Houses of Parliament, Hill is depicted immediately to the right of Wellington, a sure sign of the connection between commander and ADC.

Hill's military career continued long after Waterloo, culminating in his appointment as a Lieutenant General before he retired in 1858, just two years before he died.

In 1836 he became the second Baron Sandys, succeeding his mother who unusually was Baroness Sandys in her own right.

Tim Cooke, co-Chairman of Waterloo 200

#### Letter from the Georgian Group

20 June 2018

Dear Marcus,

Ombersley Court, Worcestershire

I am writing on behalf of the Georgian Group in support of your campaign to keep Ombersley Court together, for public benefit. What follows is a summary of our understanding of the significance of its interiors and associated collections. Francis Smith of Warwick's handsome finishing of the interiors of Ombersley Court survive largely intact, both joinery and plasterwork. They hover on the cusp of English Baroque (with Archeresque details) and neo-Palladianism. The galleried, double-height hall, which, with the demolition of Wingerworth Hall, Derbyshire (1726-9), is Smith's only surviving expression of this neo-Palladian form, establishes the seriousness of the house. A portrait of the builder's ancestor, Edwin Sandys (1570-1576), successively Bishop of Worcester, London, and Archbishop of York, whose son secured the grant of Ombersley from James I following the death of Henry Prince of Wales hangs here. Dynastic lineage is reinforced in the Sandys's family arms carved above the opposing fireplaces. The language of pilastered great orders continues, in timber rather than plaster, in the principal ground floor rooms, the Saloon, Little Dining Room and Rose Boudoir, all of whose wall surfaces, with their superb carved door cases, are articulated in a powerful architectural manner. This expression of fine early 18th century joinery culminates in the handsome oak and walnut staircase which boasts three, twisted balusters per tread.

The decorative schemes of the Regency period on the first floor and above comprise a third and surprising significance: the Rose Boudoir; the Chinese Room with its hand - painted silk wall panels and faux bamboo furniture; a bedroom hung with rare, late-eighteenth century Chinese strip painting illustrating the Story of Tea; and a room decorated with a part set of the scenic wallpaper, The Banks of the Bosphorus, printed in 1816 by the French manufacturer Joseph Dufour et Cie. This layer possibly reflects an anticipated visit from George IV, who had established a vogue for similar decoration at the Royal Pavilion, Brighton.

Other aspects of the works of art, furniture and furnishings at Ombersley are also of great significance. Important in themselves, they are expressions of the social and political significance of the place and its successive owners. Among these historically associated chattels are Archbishop Sandys's copy of the Bishops' Bible, of which he was one of the translators, the marine paintings by the Van de Veldes (father and son) illustrating scenes from the naval engagements against the French of Admiral Russell (1653-1727), later 1st Earl of Orfod, Secretary to Prince William in advance of the Glorious Revolution, and portraits of the Whig Junto, hung within plaster panels designed for their reception.

The Georgian Group is very concerned that the sum of the elements described above now appears unlikely to be held in trust for public benefit. This, we understand, was the express wish of the late Lord and Lady Sandys who to this end established the Ombersley Conservation Trust, in which considerable landholdings were vested by way of endowment. Amongst other works of art, the powerful group portrait Prince Rupert, Colonel William Murray and Colonel John Russell, painted by William Dobson (1611–46) in 1645 which formerly hung on the great stairs at Ombersley, has been sold to the Ashmolean Museum and the massively scaled View of Chatsworth, now identified as being by the Fleming Jan Siberechts (1627-1703), another of Admiral Russell's treasures, has been sold to the Devonshire Collection.

The Georgian Group very much hopes that a solution may yet be found to preserve both historically associated objects and their context, namely Ombersley Court and its parkland, for public benefit, and would like to offer its help in finding an appropriate heritage solution.

With best wishes,

Yours sincerely,

David

David Adshead Interim Secretary The Georgian Group