

Contemporary reactions to the Royal Pavilion at Brighton

The Royal Pavilion at Brighton provoked reactions ranging from the scornful to the admiring among contemporaries. There follows an assortment of remarks on the Prince Regent's fantasy palace by both 'insiders' and 'outsiders'.

1. From Anthony Pasquin, *The New Brighton Guide . . .*, 6th edn, London, 1796, p. 16:

a nondescript monster in building, and appears like a mad-house, or a house run mad, as it has neither beginning, middle, nor end . . .

2. Thomas Creevey reminiscing about visits in 1805, from *The Creevey Papers*, ed. John Gore, 1963, London, The Folio Society, 1970, p. 39:

I suppose the Courts or houses of Princes are all alike in one thing, viz., that in attending them you lose your liberty. After one month was gone by, you fell naturally and of course into the ranks, and had to reserve your observations till you were asked for them. These royal invitations are by no means calculated to reconcile one to a Court. To be sent for half an hour before dinner, or perhaps in the middle of one's own, was a little too humiliating to be very agreeable.

3. From a letter from Lady Bessborough to Granville Leveson Gower on her visit to the Pavilion in 1805. *Lord Granville Leveson Gower . . . Private Correspondence 1781–1821*, ed. Castalia Countess Grenville, 2 vols, London, Murray, 1916, vol. II, p. 120:

Today I have been going all over the Pavilion, which is really beautiful in its way. I did not think the strange Chinese shapes and columns could have looked so well. It is like Concetti in poetry, in outré and false taste, but for the kind of thing as perfect as it can be, and the Prince says he had it so because at the time there was such an outcry against French things, etc., that he was afraid of his furniture being accused of jacobinism.

4. From Mary Lloyd, *Brighton: A Poem . . .*, London, 1809, p. 42:

Around the beauteous lawn, gay buildings rise,
There the Pavilion woos admiring eyes; . . .
 Within, the lovely edifice is grac'd
 With every beauty of inventive taste;
And as each scene admiring we explore,
It seems enchantment all, some magic bower . . .

5. From R[ichard] Sickelmore, *An Epitome of Brighton, Topographical and Descriptive . . .*, Brighton, 1815, p. 44. Sickelmore describes the Chinese interiors in detail and concludes by asserting that they afford

the most pleasing testimony, that John Bull, with suitable encouragement, has it within the scope of his own powers to excel all the boasted frippery ornaments of the Continent.

6. The Comtesse de Boigne (of a slightly earlier incarnation of the Pavilion in 1817 when it was still filled with real Chinese things), from *Memoirs of the Comtesse de Boigne*, ed. Charles Nicollaud, 4 vols, London, Heinemann, 1907, II (1815–19), p. 248:

[The Pavilion] was indeed a masterpiece of bad taste. The most heterogeneous magnificence had been gathered at vast expense from the four quarters of the globe and piled beneath the eight or ten cupolas of this ugly and eccentric palace, the several parts of which displayed not the slightest architectural unity . . . The inside was no better arranged than the outside, and art was certainly conspicuous by its absence. After these observations, criticism was disarmed. The comforts and pleasures of life were equally well understood in this palace, and when the spectator had satisfied his artistic conscience by criticising the association of so many strange curiosities, much amusement might be found in considering their elaboration and their extravagant elegance.

7. *Brighton; or, The Steyne. A Satirical Novel*, 2nd edn. London, 1818, pp. 86–7, of the interior viewed as a guest at an evening party:

It was night; or rather, intrusive day was excluded; odours burned in all directions; a thousand lamps glittered in the regal hall; . . . the table groaned under the weight of massy plate and delicious viands; rich and expensive wines flowed like rivers to slack [sic] the fevered lip of intemperance. A stranger would here have considered himself in the age of gold . . . the beholder must have thought there could be no misery, no want, in that land which bore so great a chief.

8. John Wilson Croker, from his journal entry for December 1818, in *The Correspondence and Diaries of the late Rt Honourable John Wilson Croker*, ed. Louis J. Jennings, 3 vols, London, 1884, vol. 1, p. 122:

. . . an absurd waste of money, and will be a ruin in half a century or sooner.

9. From William Hone, *The Joss and His Folly*, 1820:

The queerest of all the queer sights I've set sight on;
Is, the *what d'ye – call't thing*, here, the FOLLY at Brighton.
The outside – huge teapots, all drill'd round with holes,
Relieved by extinguishers, sticking on poles:
The inside – all tea-things, and dragons and bells,
The show rooms – all show, the sleeping rooms – cells.

But the *grand* Curiosity's not to be seen—
The owner himself – an old fat MANDARIN . . .

10. Princess Lieven writing to Metternich, October 27, 1820:

How can one describe such a piece of architecture? The style is a mixture of Moorish, Tartar, Gothic, and Chinese and all in stone and iron. It is a whim which has already cost £700,000, and it is still not fit to live in.

11. From John Evans, *Recreation for the Young and the Old. An Excursion to Brighton, with an Account of the Royal Pavilion*, Chiswick, 1821, pp. 40–1, 41, 44–5:

England has been reproached by travellers for a want of palaces on a scale commensurate with the grandeur of its monarchy . . . the PAVILION is only a royal winter residence, but in proportion to its extent, it may be said to exceed any other of the palaces in the kingdom.

Of the exterior:

. . . besides the Pagoda spires at both ends of the edifice, intermediate ornaments of a circular form have been added. It is said to be an imitation of the *Kremlin* in Moscow, the ancient capital of the Russian Empire. It was amusing to hear the conjectures of the spectators relative to these ornaments, while they were constructing – some comparing them to large Spanish onions; and others likening them to distillery utensils, or to inverted balloons! Most persons appeared very sagacious in ascertaining their form and use, whilst a few individuals modestly confessed that they were so dissimilar from anything that had been ever seen in this part of the world as to surpass comprehension!

Of the interior:

It is scarcely in the power of words to convey an accurate idea of its rich and glowing magnificence. The aerial imagery of fancy, and the embellishments of fertile invention, profusely described in 'The Thousand and One Nights,' and the popular tales of magic, involving the enchanted palaces of the *Genii*, fall short, in splendour of detail, to the scene of imposing grandeur, and the beautiful combination and effect of myriads of glittering objects . . .

In conclusion:

In the scene of radiant and imposing splendour here displayed, it has been His Majesty's wish to give encouragement to every branch of the arts, and especially to British manufactures; . . . Every thing here and throughout the Palace is almost entirely the work of British materials and British hands; it combines a whole, in which the high and cultivated taste of a *Patriot Monarch* forms a strong feature, as diffusing its rays and illuminating national talents to the liberal and just support of national worth and industry, that merits, and must obtain, the admiration of the world.

12. From George Colman, *The Gewgaw; or, Brighton Toy, A Caricature Poem*, London, 1822 or 1824, pp. 7–9:

such a trifle—
Contrived the *purse* and *mint* to rifle
help me form a rhyming jumble—
Though its style be ne'er so humble,
Touching of a certain pile
At which so many often smile
While others whisper, think and say
“What thousands here are thrown away,” –
And Folly, with her eyes, besets
Its turrets, tow'rs, and minarets,
Exclaiming “La! what pretty things
Are formed to please the eyes of Kings,
And make them happy, night and day,
Would stern *Reflection* keep away—
And not disturb their banquet rout,
With aching head and burning gout;
But let them spend their earthly hours
In Pleasure's lap – strew'd o'er with flow'rs—
Enjoying, ev'ry day and night,
The sweetest sweets of each delight—
That ev'ry sensual bliss affords”.

13. Anonymous Whig MP (June 1816) on the Prince's expenditure on the Pavilion:

that squanderous and lavish profusion which in a certain quarter resembled more the pomp and magnificence of a Persian satrap, seated in the splendour of Oriental state, than the sober dignity of a British Prince, seated in the bosom of his subjects.

14. *The Times*, 1830:

In the tawdry childishness of Carlton House and the mountebank Pavilion, or cluster of pagodas at Brighton, His Royal Highness afforded an infallible earnest of what might one day be expected from His Majesty when the appetite for profusion and the contempt for all that deserves the name of architecture should have reached their full maturity . . .

15. William Cobbett, *Rural Rides*, ed. G. D. H. and Margaret Cole, 3 vols, London, Peter Davies, 1930, I, p. 68:

Brighton is a very pleasant place . . . The *Kremlin*, the very name of which has so long been a subject of laughter all over the country, lies in a gorge of the valley, and amongst the old houses of the town. The grounds, which cannot, I think, exceed a couple or three acres, are surrounded by a wall neither lofty nor

good-looking. Above this rise some trees, bad in sorts, stunted in growth, and dirty with smoke. As to the 'palace' as the Brighton newspapers call it, the apartments appear to be all on the ground floor; and when you see the thing from a distance, you think you see a parcel of *cradle-spits*, of various dimensions, sticking up out of the mouths of so many squat decanters. Take a square box, the sides of which are three feet and a half, and the height a foot and a half. Take a large Norfolk-turnip, cut off the green of the leaves, leave the stalks 9 inches long, tie these round with a string three inches from the top, and put the turnip in the middle of the top of the box. Then take four turnips half the size, treat them the same way, and put them on the corners of the box. Then take a considerable number of bulbs of the crown-imperial, the narcissus, the hyacinth, the tulip, the crocus, and others; let the leaves of each have sprouted to about an inch, more or less according to the size of the bulb; put all these, pretty promiscuously but pretty thickly, on the top of the box. Then stand off and look at your architecture. There! That's '*a Kremlin*'! Only you must cut some church-looking windows in the sides of the box. As to what you ought to put *into* the box, that is a subject far above my cut. (10th June, 1822)