

Property

Mavisbank House

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

Mavisbank House is the shell of a small country house standing in a designed landscape at Polton, Midlothian. It was designed and built between 1723-36. The house is a neo-Palladian villa, comprising a 5 bay main block of 2-stories over basement, with single storey over basement curved quadrant links and service pavilions enclosing an entrance forecourt. Following long-term neglect the building was devastated by a fire in 1973, and has remained ruinous since.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

Mavisbank was the result of an architectural collaboration between the patron, Sir John Clerk of Penicuik (1676-1755) and his architect William Adam (1689-1748).

Sir John Clerk was one of the most prominent men of his generation. He was a politician, advocate, antiquarian, author and acknowledged arbiter of taste. He was active as a patron of the arts and influential both as an amateur architect and as an agricultural improver. On his Grand Tour (1697-9) he had visited Rome, where he was instructed in architecture and drawing and had studied antiquities, classical literature and music. Clerk was a key figure in the early years of the Scottish enlightenment.

William Adam, described by Clerk as ‘the Universal Architect of Scotland’, had an extensive practice working for many of the leading Whig aristocracy. His business included contracting and building work as well as design, and was continued after his death by his sons John, James and Robert. Robert Adam subsequently became the most famed architect of the Georgian era.

The house passed out of the Clerk family in the first half of the 19th century and major alterations were made. Late in the 19th century the house became an asylum and it was further extended in the early 20th century. The asylum closed in the 1950’s and the house was reduced back to its original size. Settlement resulting from mining works affected the house and landscape and in 1973 the house was badly damaged by fire.

The structure was stabilized in the 1980’s under the instruction of Historic Scotland and it remains in a roofless, derelict and deteriorating condition.

Archaeological Overview

The shell of the house offers significant archaeological evidence. The masonry exterior and interior walls (where they survive), when coupled with survey information, could inform a full restoration of the building, as well as providing opportunity for enhancing our understanding of building materials and techniques.

Artistic/Architectural Overview

While the house is ruinous, it retains its outstanding national significance both historically and architecturally. In recognition of this it is a Scheduled Ancient Monument (SAM) and is listed Category A.

The house is a critical structure in the history of the evolution of the villa as a major building type. Architecturally the design shows the influence of Clerk's travels in Europe, with clearly discernable influences drawn from contemporary Dutch, French and Italian buildings, and from the designs of the sixteenth century Italian architect Andrea Palladio. Mavisbank was built in the early years of the eighteenth century revival in interest in Palladianism which would go on to influence architectural thought in Europe and the colonies for the following century. It is contemporary with Chiswick House, Middlesex, the seminal villa constructed by Lord Burlington on the outskirts of London. In many senses Clerk's role as patron and arbiter of taste parallel Burlington's, and Mavisbank's position in promoting the Palladian style in Scotland mirrors the importance of Chiswick in the English context.

Social Overview

The creation of Mavisbank was in the forefront of Scottish thought and taste during the early years of the Age of Improvement and the Enlightenment. The 18th century Scottish cultural context was essentially European. Mavisbank was a Scottish built expression of the ideal of a Roman life.

To Clerk (as to Burlington), the notion of villa was to be understood both in physical and in cerebral terms. Clerk prepared a manuscript poem, 'The Country Seat' (1724), setting out his ideas on country house architecture and landscaping. He identified the villa as a structure 'chiefly design'd for Pleasure and Retirement'. At Mavisbank appeared what may well be the earliest British use of the word 'villa' in its accepted 18th century sense, in a Latin inscription by Sir John Clerk which is cut into one of the piers on the principal façade.

Clerk understood the villa as a subordinate seat to the main house of the patron, a villa suburbana, close to the place of public duty; a place to display choice items from his collections and where as role of patron, he may invite men of talent involved in the arts or sciences. Sir John Clerk was the greatest exponent of the Roman life in Scotland. The antiquary Roger Gales wrote of Mavisbank that a visitor might think himself 'more in a vialley near Tivoli than Edinborough'.

Spiritual Overview

The site has no identified spiritual role.

Aesthetic Overview

Mavisbank has high aesthetic value arising both from the quality of its architectural form and the philosophy behind its concept. A key building within the eighteenth century revival of Palladianism, it is of European significance.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

There are some areas where archaeological investigation of the built fabric could improve understanding of the building and its construction.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

Mavisbank is the most important villa built in Scotland in the first half of the 18th century.

It is uniquely important in Scotland, highly significant within the British context and of international interest.

The house, its associated structures and designed landscape are all of exceptional cultural heritage value.

It was an architectural collaboration between the important patron Sir John Clerk and one of the best architects in Scotland, William Adam, who illustrated it in his influential book 'Vitruvius Scoticus'.

Mavisbank was featured in the first series of the BBC programme 'Restoration', when it reached the grand final of the programme, attracting widespread public interest.

Associated Properties

Penicuik House (Clerk family patronage)

Duff House, Arniston (William Adam)

Keywords Villa, William Adam, Sir John Clerk, The Country Seat

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