

## Antiquity, Architecture and Country House Poetry: Sir John Clerk and *The Country Seat*

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*You would there think yourself rather in a valley near Tivoli  
than Edenborough<sup>1</sup>*

In 1727, Sir John Clerk of Penicuik completed his 1,500 line poem *The Country Seat*, a work on the art of building and decorating a country house. By 1727, Clerk owned two houses in the country around Edinburgh, Penicuik House, inherited from his father, and Mavisbank House built under Clerk's close direction and supervision from 1722, by the architect William Adam. This paper will compare Clerk's theories of architecture detailed in *The Country Seat* with Mavisbank House itself. This task has been neglected by scholars, and is significant given the primary role Clerk played in Scottish political and cultural life during the period of the Union, the importance of both Adam and Mavisbank House itself, and the position that the poem assumes in the context of contemporary country house and estate poetry. Thus this paper will fall into two parts, the first establishing the importance of Clerk and *The Country Seat* in the early eighteenth-century context, which will establish the validity of the second part, comparing the poem's aims with the built reality of the house itself.

Even by the high standards of the elite literati and cognoscenti of the early eighteenth century, Clerk was an extremely educated man. He was not only very well read, but was a published author in many of his areas of expertise. A successful lawyer and politician, he was instrumental in the Act of Union between England and Scotland in 1707, and he served in the first joint government of the United Kingdom. In 1706, he was appointed a Baron of Exchequer, responsible for settling the balance of monies between England and Scotland, and his unique and detailed account of this process in his published memoirs continues to be a primary source for economic and political historians. Clerk was also a formidable antiquarian and historian, and a member of the Society of Antiquaries, with

an extensive collection of curiosities and antiquities, some collected from his own archaeological digs, and others purchased in Italy. He was an able composer of concertos and cantatas in the Italian style, having studied partly under Corelli whilst on his Grand Tour in Italy. He was patron of the poet Allan Ramsay and the architect William Adam, both of whose careers advanced significantly under Clerk's patronage. He was also knowledgeable in horticulture, corresponding on matters of taxonomy with Roger Gale, and was a member of the Society for Improving the Knowledge of Agriculture, making exceptional agricultural improvements on his own estates, and in Scotland generally.<sup>2</sup> Clerk was a central figure in both the Scottish Enlightenment and in early eighteenth-century British political and cultural history, yet he remains little-known beyond scholarship.

*The Country Seat* itself is a testament to Clerk's knowledge of both antique texts on architecture and farming, and contemporary poetry on country houses. Though *The Country Seat* is a poem, it is, in effect, a compact architectural treatise. It provides instruction on all aspects of designing and building a house, from the aesthetic concerns of the external and internal decoration, to the practical considerations of choosing a site and laying out rooms, as well as the technical issues of stone types, mortar, fire-proof building and heating. The antique model for any architectural treatise was Vitruvius's written in the first century AD, referred to directly by Clerk in footnote 58. It is the only treatise to survive from antiquity and provided the basis of many of the rules of eighteenth-century architecture. However, Vitruvius's treatise was a practical instruction manual written in prose, not verse. Alastair Fowler argues in his 1994 book, *The Country House Poem*, that Clerk's form of a poem was an allusion to Virgil's four-part poetic work, *The Georgics* composed in the first century BCE. Though ostensibly *The Georgics* is a manual on farming, providing advice on matters from animal husbandry to beekeeping, it is also recognised as being patriotic and idealistic in its portrayal of rural life and labour. Similarly, *The Country Seat*, though offering practical advice on the details of house building, shares these characteristics, for instance in the discourse on building royal palaces, where Clerk spends over 100 lines detailing the exact iconographic programme for an interior mural scheme of the history of Britain. In this section he also praises both the Stuart monarchs James I and Queen Anne, with whom he credits the union of crowns and parliaments, and the Hanoverians William III and George I, showing his carefully balanced political allegiances.

In terms of contemporary poetry, Clerk would have been aware of

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**Fig. 1.** General William Roy, *The Military Survey of Scotland, Area around Dalkeith, in Edinburghshire (or Midlothian)* (detail of sheet 07/5f, showing Mavisbank House), 1747-1755. © The British Library. Licensor www.scran.ac.uk

the waning genre of the country house or estate poem, which had peaked in the second half of the seventeenth century. However, no estate poems instruct the reader in the manner of 'correct' building, as all of the poems in the genre were written concerning a specific house and its estate, dealing almost exclusively with aspects of hospitality in the house and production on the estate itself. For example, estate poems often praise the taste of the owner, the fitting modesty or grandeur of his entertainments, the cleverness of his domestic arrangements and the self-sufficiency of his farms flourishing in the wake of the destructive Civil War. None detail the architecture of a house, it being assumed that the reader, usually the owner, would be familiar with its appearance. Mavisbank House itself has its own estate poem by Allan Ramsay, *An Epistle Wrote from Mavisbank*,

which is fairly typical of the genre, mentioning nothing of the architecture and focussing on the pleasures of the park.<sup>3</sup>

Many writers implicitly invoke *The Georgics* in detailing examples of good farming practice, but more clearly draw their influences from other ancient authors like Martial, Juvenal and Horace.<sup>4</sup> Fowler argues that only with Clerk's *The Country Seat* does estate poetry return to *The Georgics* in its specific treatise-poem hybrid form, and antique precedent, in the architectural treatise of Vitruvius. He states:

With Sir John Clerk of Penicuik, fully articulate consciousness about country house architecture and estate improvement is reached. His 'The Country Seat' is a fitting terminus, in that its form as a detailed manual of instruction ... makes the georgic character of the estate poem quite explicit.<sup>5</sup>

Fowler does not assess the strengths of the poem as a treatise, focusing on analysing it in the contemporary poetic context instead. Alan Tait on the other hand looks at it from a more practical perspective and argues that Clerk's multi-layered references to authors of antiquity and the present, and his attempt to emulate their poetic styles "tended to make his work more literary and cumbersome, and less practical and clear".<sup>6</sup> Clerk followed other early eighteenth-century authors who responded to Dryden's 1697 translation of *The Georgics* with georgic poetry in English, like Pope and Addison, and the lesser known Philips and Dyer.<sup>7</sup> However, it seems clear that *The Country Seat* represents the final development of seventeenth-century estate poetry, closing the arc along which authors had experimented with a variety of forms, sources and influences, while uniquely calling on the Vitruvian architectural treatise and the Virgilian georgic.

Seventeenth-century architecture and landscape design were not understood as merely functional, but as coded statements of knowledge, wealth, social position and often political affiliation. By creating a house and park that engaged with contemporary thinking, Clerk positioned himself among the ranks of the cultural elite. Indeed, in the prose introduction to the poem, Clerk remarks that on architecture "many pretend to judge" though few are qualified to do so, and that "one must have a very delicate taste to judge well." He thereby claims to possess both of these attributes himself and even comments that he has "what is called a Fine Genius" in architectural taste, establishing himself part of the educated elite and qualified to pronounce judgment on architecture.

Clerk reveals his broad knowledge of a variety of fields principally in the extensive footnotes of *The Country Seat*. For the purposes of this paper, his display of knowledge of architectural history and theory is of most interest, however, he does refer freely and in great detail to British and ancient history, the history of painting, classical literature, musical theory, collecting, horticulture and contemporary politics.

Merely to scan through the footnotes reveals Clerks's conversance with the work of contemporary British architectural writers such as the Earl of Burlington and Colen Campbell. In footnote 5, he says that Burlington is "very justly said to understand Architectory better than most in Europe", and several times praises Burlington's villa at Chiswick. Clerk had dined with Burlington at Chiswick Villa in May 1727 on his visit to London, and was aware of the architectural revolution Burlington was leading, partially through the plates of Campbell's *Vitruvius Britannicus* published in several parts from 1715, themselves referenced in footnote 46.<sup>8</sup>

Clerk also refers to the seventeenth-century English architect Inigo Jones and frequently connects him with the sixteenth-century Italian architect Andrea Palladio. This reflects the reassessment by early eighteenth-century British architects of the contribution of Palladio in adapting ancient architecture to modern requirements, recognised in Britain by Jones. Typical designs by Palladio and Jones pragmatically blend the principles of ancient architecture with the requirements of the site and the modern client. John Hunt and Peter Willis in their 1975 *The Genius of the Place* suggest that in the Mavisbank design, Clerk himself demonstrated a great ability to apply the architecture of antiquity to the requirements of eighteenth-century Scotland, especially in relation to the climate.<sup>9</sup> Jones' reassessment and revival of Palladio, turned his work into an important source for early eighteenth-century architects. William Kent's *The Designs of Inigo Jones* (1727), one of several books on Jones published before 1750, is referred to by Clerk in footnote 46. Of course, Kent's own architectural work was itself indebted to Jones, and by mentioning all three names, Clerk shows how architectural theory in the eighteenth century saw itself, inheriting antiquity through a series of mediators, Palladio, Jones and then Kent. Also in line with contemporary architectural criticism, Clerk criticises English Baroque architecture in footnote 41 with the caustic comment that Vanbrugh's *Blenheim Palace*, which he had visited on his 1727 trip, is more "a monument for the Dead than a House for the Living".

All of the books on architecture referred to so far are highlighted in standard British architectural history scholarship as contributory to the

development of the so-called Palladian style in the first half of the eighteenth century.<sup>10</sup> By demonstrating that he knew the contents of these books, Clerk showed that his poem was based on the most up-to-date scholarship on antique architecture.

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**Fig. 2.** J. C. Ibbetsen, *Mavisbank House* (detail), c. 1800. Oil on canvas. Permission: Henry Cheape and the Trustees of the Strathtyrum Trust

The first part of the paper has sketched in Clerk's interesting position in early eighteenth-century Scotland, and particularly his understanding of architecture. The *Country Seat* embodies his understanding and represents a remarkable fusion of ideas from antiquity, seventeenth century poetry and current architectural theory. This establishes the validity of the task of the second part of this paper, comparing the aims of the poem with the built reality of Mavisbank House itself.

The *Country Seat* classifies country houses into four distinct categories, the royal palace, the house of state, the useful house and the villa. Arguably Mavisbank lies across the last two classifications, though it is usually referred to as a villa. This custom began with Clerk himself, though many historians including John Gifford and Iain Gordon Brown agree that Mavisbank hardly fits The *Country Seat*'s definition of "the Pavilion of a Persian King / In bulk and Beauty".<sup>11</sup> Clerk draws few distinctions between these two house types and describes the useful house in much more depth than the villa, a point also observed by Fleming who comments that Clerk

"has more to say about building methods than about villa design".<sup>12</sup> Indeed the villa is to all intents and purposes a modified form of the useful house varying only in its "confined ... Size" its role as "part of the ornaments of a Garden" and aspects of its detailing. Therefore, it is reasonable to apply many of the principles of the useful house to Mavisbank, as well as the decidedly opaque rules for the villa.

The site of Mavisbank House in the valley of the River North Esk at Loanhead, south of Edinburgh, generally measures up well against Clerk's prescriptions. After the introductory sections of the poem, Clerk begins discoursing upon the site appropriate to any country house. He reminds the reader that in choosing a site one must not blindly follow Palladio, referred to directly in footnote 8, but realise that Palladio's rules were developed for hotter climates than Scotland. A house in the northern climate should not be sited on a hill-top because of the "Cold of Northern Blasts", but instead, it should be on a south-facing slope, protected from the north by "lofty Trees", but not so far down in a valley as to suffer from damp. Mavisbank is not only part way down the south-facing slope of the valley, but is very well sheltered by trees and by higher ground which surrounds the site to both the north and north-west [Fig. 1].

Clerk is extraordinarily prescriptive about how water should feature in the ideal site. Mavisbank fails Clerk's own test on one count as it has no sea view, but it does have the perfect river, which is not a "raging turbid Flood" and permits fishing. Also, fulfilling a rather odd requirement, the valley-side on which the Mavisbank park is sited is peppered with "pleantous springs", which, far from contributing to the scene as Clerk suggests, render areas of the park boggy and almost constantly waterlogged, though better drainage probably existed originally. Ornamental lakes appear twice in the poem, at the beginning and in the last 100 lines in rather conflicting positions. Initially, Clerk favors them saying

Lakes from afar will charm the Eye and seem  
Huge silver Mirrors set in verdant frames

This description suggests that a lake should not have a surface disturbed by a fountain. However, in the second reference, he states

Avoid Canals or Ponds of any Form  
Where living Fountains never show their Heads

This quote contradicts the first suggesting that only water with an animated appearance is acceptable. From cartographic and archeological evidence, and that of the anonymous Strathtyrum painting, Mavisbank – perhaps embarrassingly for this poem – originally had a long narrow canal in direct line of sight from the house, now an irregularly-shaped lochan, where it is unlikely that a fountain ever existed.<sup>13</sup> [Fig. 2] Even Clerk’s concession that “What Nature gives, receive”, if the site does not boast flowing water, does not excuse Mavisbank’s ornamental canal as it is gently fed by a spring and runs into the river by an underground channel.

From the requirements of the site, Clerk then turns his attention to the fabric of the house. Two stanzas address the conduct of the architectural orders, a favorite topic amongst architectural theorists from the earliest Renaissance treatises onwards. Mavisbank has no actual columns but is endowed with an elaborate Corinthian cornice, the most exalted of all the orders, supported by banded strips of masonry which appear as pilasters [Fig. 3]. Though Clerk states that to be “justly called Great” a building must have columns, he concedes that having just a cornice is acceptable as long as it is proportioned as if columns were present, supporting his claim with the precedent of Palladio and Jones buildings with no columns.

Clerk details the ideal dimensions of the useful house, stating its façade should be between 80 and 100 feet long, no less than 40 feet deep, and its height should not exceed two-thirds of its length. Mavisbank measures approximately 50 feet wide, 40 feet deep and 55 feet high, and thus falls rather short of these measurements. If the wings of the house are taken into account, the house is approximately 160 feet wide, and 100 feet deep, measurements that exceed Clerk’s prescribed size. However, according to the poem, only the useful house is to have wings or quadrants that reach forward in a “kind Embrace” to the visitor, as they do at Mavisbank. The poem also lays out interior measurements of the principal storey staterooms for the useful house and remarkably, as noted by Gifford, all at Mavisbank are the minimum 16 feet broad. This, if nothing else, suggests strongly that Clerk paced out his own house when composing *The Country Seat*.

Additionally, Mavisbank’s interior layout almost entirely fits with the poem. *The Country Seat* says there should be three floors: a vaulted semi-basement for service accommodation, a vestibule storey for common every-day use arranged around a “Loby or Salon”, a principal storey “with more capacious Rooms / All made to entertain”, and an attic “for many useful Purposes designed”.

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**Fig. 3.** Design by William Adam, *Vitruvius Scoticus*, (combination of plates 47 and 48, Mavisbank House), published c. 1816. Engraving, elevation and plans of the principal and state storeys. Permission: Simpson & Brown Architects

This is practically a description of the arrangement of Mavisbank, even including the service stair that rises from the semi-basement to the attic. On this point however, in footnote 54, Clerk criticises his own spiral turn-pike back stair, saying that “The worst kind is the round”, but concedes that “such may be sufficient for the back stair in a small House”, thus permitting this divergence. Some of this detail may seem obvious in a typically arranged country house of the eighteenth century, but Mavisbank was among the first houses in Scotland to follow these rules of distribution, and thus these arrangements would have been far from obvious at the time.

Even the roof design of the useful house matches Mavisbank. It is a “well turn’d Roof”, explained in footnote 55 :+ as “partly sloping or circular and partly platform”. Mavisbank was one of the few buildings in Britain to have this unusually profiled roof, and Clerk and Adam probably took their design inspiration from country houses of the Low Countries where both had spent time in study. There are several books of contemporary engravings showing these country houses and several resemble Mavisbank House, especially in respect of the roof design.

This paper has attempted to position Sir John Clerk of Penicuik in the early eighteenth architectural context, and show the learned proficiency of his poem *The Country Seat*. Compared to the poem, Mavisbank House itself measures up closely to the strictures laid out. It is therefore possible to recognise a further layer of influence acting on the poem, already rooted in Virgil, Vitruvius, seventeenth-century poetry and current architectural theory; the experience of building Mavisbank itself. By comparing Clerk’s generalised theories for the proper arrangement and decoration of the royal palace, house of state and villa, to the detailed and practical considerations for the “useful House”, it seems clear that his specific knowledge of this type of building directly informed the composition of the poem. Indeed as the “useful house” is not commonly used in any other architectural literature of the period, it might even be speculated that Clerk coined it specifically to describe Mavisbank. Both Mavisbank House and *The Country Seat* continue to be neglected by scholars and it is hoped that this paper has gone some way to establishing their importance in the architectural and cultural history of Scotland.

*The Country Seat exists only in manuscript form in the Clerk of Penicuik papers in the National Archives of Scotland (GD18, with kind permission of Baron Clerk), and the author is grateful for the transcription by Vanessa Stephen. Her transcript has no page numbers or line numbers referring to the original document. Clerk’s footnotes are part numbered and part referred to by symbols :+ and +, between numbers. Thus 42:+ follows footnote 42.*

- 1 R. Gale, Letter of 26 August 1739 to Revd Dr Stukeley about Mavisbank House, *The Family Memoirs of the Rev. William Stukeley, M.D. and the Antiquarian and Other Correspondence of William Stukeley, Roger & Samuel Gale etc.* Vol. I (Surtees Society, 1880) 98.
- 2 W. Spink, ‘Sir John Clerk of Penicuik; Landowner as designer’, in P. Willis, *Furor Hortensis, Essays on the History of the English Landscape Garden in memory of H. F. Clerk* (Edinburgh: Elysium Press, 1974) 31.
- 3 A. Ramsay, *The Works of Allan Ramsay*, B. Martin and J. W. Oliver et al. Vol. III (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1951-1974) 261-264.
- 4 A. Fowler, *The Country House Poem: A Cabinet of Seventeenth-Century Estate Poems and Related Items* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994) 11.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 23.
- 6 A. A. Tait, *The Landscape Garden in Scotland, 1735-1835* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1980) 20.
- 7 R. L. Braverman, *Plots and counterplots: sexual politics and the body politic in English literature, 1660-1730* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 276.
- 8 J. Fleming, *Robert Adam and his Circle in Edinburgh and Rome* (London: J. Murray, 1962) 26.
- 9 J. D. Hunt and P. Willis, *The Genius of the Place: the English landscape garden, 1620-1820* (London: Elek, 1975) 205.
- 10 For instance, J. Summerson, *Architecture in Britain 1530-1830* (London: Yale University Press, 1993).
- 11 J. Gifford, *William Adam 1689-1748: Scotland’s Universal Architect* (Edinburgh: Mainstream Press, 1989) 92.
- 12 Fleming, *Robert Adam and his Circle*, 32.
- 13 *Mavisbank Conservation Plan* (Simpson & Brown Architects, Edinburgh: 2004).