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He was Britain's greatest collector and its most notorious rake. He was a champion of the working man but his fortune was built on slavery. **Sarah Wise** tries to make sense of William Beckford

# The man who had too much

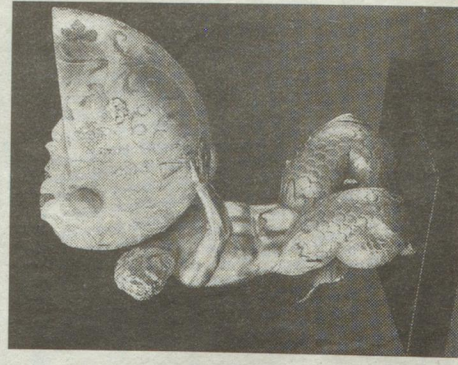
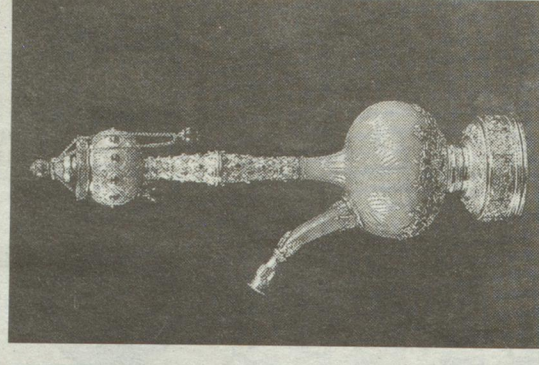
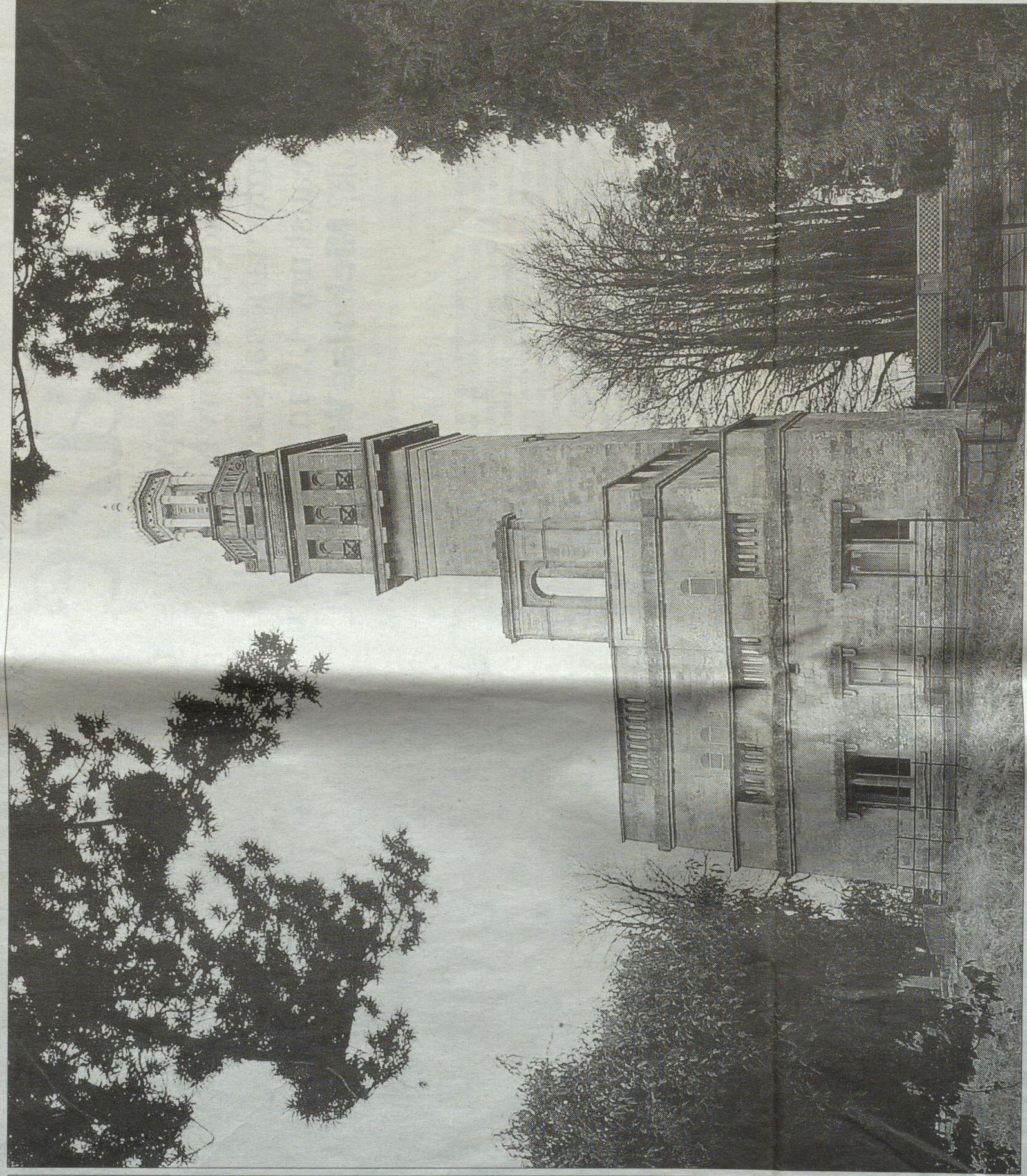
Becoming a millionaire at the age of nine must take its toll. William Beckford, already a morbidly sensitive child, went mad – "mad about porcelain", as he put it, discerning hidden metaphysical qualities in the household wares of the Beckford family mansion. In 1779, aged 19, he composed a reverie of walking "in arched chambers glowing with yellow light – amidst vases formed in another hemisphere and cabalistic mirrors where futurity is unveiled". Objects seemed to him to possess an intense inner life, artefacts from other ages and cultures offering an escape route from the apparent dreaminess of being the wealthiest young man in England.

Beckford's passion for things never let up, and by the time of his death in 1844, aged 83, thousands of objects d'art and paintings had passed through his hands, as well as many pieces that he had commissioned to his own designs from the greatest craftsmen in Europe. Never a sentimentalist, Beckford would sell off his opulent belongings when he was tired of them.

Just a fraction of the exotica he used as a bulwark against boredom is on show at London's Dulwich Picture Gallery, in the exhibition William Beckford, 1760-1844. An Eye for the Magnificent, which explores Beckford as buyer, hoarder, seller, creator and arbiter of taste. Among the displays are a pair of magnificent (or, ghastrly, depending on your point of view) cabinets dating from 1625, whose components include ebony, porphyry, jasper, oak, bronze and ormolu and are estimated to be worth between £1m and £1.5m the pair. The price is inflated by the fact that they were made to Beckford's design; today, anything that can be proved to have been owned by Beckford sells at auction for around twice its usual price.

To Beckford, impeccable provenances were not the point of collecting; an object had merely to hint at a world beyond the cloying conventionalities of his social set and "the coarse, unpoetic tenor of the present disenchanting period". ("This was said in 1838, but he appears to have found all periods equally disenchanting.") His shopping tastes were abnormally eclectic: he was passionate about medievalism, orientalism, Louis XIV, neo-classicism and much besides. The common thread was that an object should trigger an emotional response, a feeling of the sublime and mysterious. As the Times said upon his death: "He was one of the very few possessors of great wealth who have honestly tried to spend it poetically".

Cabinet after cabinet at the Dulwich exhibition reveal Beckford the poetic shopper sticking two fingers up to the polite tastes of the rising mercantile classes, to the inferior quality of mass-produced ornaments, and to the prosaic Protestantism that seemed to be robbing English life of its flavour. One must become half-Catholic to enter fully the glories of Italian art, he said. He flirted with Catholicism for years, initially to engage his Calvinist mother, later to provoke his tiny-minded enemies. He never went to Rome, however. He was inconsistent in all his opinions; deep beliefs were not his scene.



Tall storey... left, Beckford's Lansdown Tower. Above, a hookah and carved nautilus shell from the Dulwich exhibition. Below, Beckford

JEFF MORGAN (MAIN), MARY EVANS



Vast perspectives, secret spaces, the abuse of power – this was all very Gothic. Beckford had been among the first wave of young Englishmen whose Continental travels and wide reading had taught them to yearn for caves, crags, castles and forests, backdrops against which they could appear tragic and dashing. Before the Gothic novelists of the late 18th century, the "graveyard poets" Thomas Gray and Edward Young, Piranesi (the engraver of fantastical prisons) and optum-eating Thomas de Quincey, Beckford was a bridge between the Augustan/Palladian world and that of the Romantic poets.

His most famous creation, Fonthill Abbey, designed with architect James Wyatt, was Gothic. A garden ornament that grew wildly out of hand, Fonthill's references to medieval religious buildings were superficial – fatally so. No one had then studied Gothic principles of construction. "All that is vile, cunning and rascally is included in the term Wyatt," claimed Pugin 40 years later, who did know his Gothic. Fonthill was a rushed job, and an impatient Beckford moved into the unfinished abbey in

English society after the Powderham Scandal, Beckford was shunned. The people who were to ostracise him for the rest of his life, however, also copied his idiosyncratic but authoritative taste. Beckford was to inspire the shapes, dimensions and colours of English interiors for decades.

Perhaps it was this through-the-keyhole trauma that made him so eager to devise environments in which he could see and not be seen (his motto was "Secret and Happy"). During the 1780s he had planted a wood of one million trees to screen Fonthill Splendens from public view. Later he built the Barrier, a wall seven miles long and 12ft high, to keep fox-hunters out of the estate (he loathed blood-sports); then he laid man-traps and trained bloodhounds to deter sightseers.

The 270ft-high tower of his famous Fonthill Abbey, and the 154ft Lansdown Tower, which he built at the end of his garden in Bath, elevated him spatially and socially (from Lansdown, his gaze could sweep across six counties). In his only novel, Vathek, a fantasy written when he was 21, the wicked Caliph builds himself a tower of 1,000 steps, from where he can look down on mankind.

The Dulwich show has some fine paintings of what he destroyed. De Louthembourg brought to the party all the revolutionary techniques in stage lighting that he had developed at Drury Lane (where he had pioneered convincing thunder and lightning). Beckford wrote rap-tourously of the emotional effects brought about by such trickery.

Three years later, in October 1784, a real (if staggy) tragedy was to change the course of Beckford's life. The scene was Powderham Castle, near Exeter, family home of Viscount Courtenay. The story has it that the household tutor peeped through a bedroom keyhole and saw Beckford, 24, in flagrante delicto with a young woman.

The one consistent thing about him was his taste for the dramatic. This was perhaps fuelled by the three-day party thrown for his 21st birthday. The Beckford family hired the most celebrated stage designer of the day, Philippe de Louthembourg, to make a fairy/daemon temple of the Wiltshire family pile, Fonthill Splendens (later pulled down by Beckford in a fit of anti-Palladianism, though

the resulting work would surely have been labelled an opera. But when Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein were allowed to get to work on the same text, the score they produced, Carousel, was always destined to be a musical.

There are, though, useful musical differences between the two genres. The simplest and most concise distinction I can come up with is that in an opera the drama is largely generated by the music, while in a musical it is largely defined by the text, with the music taking an illustrative and expressive supporting role. I'm sure there are exceptions to both definitions (Bernstein's Candide and Sondheim's Pacific Overtures, perhaps), as well as works that seem to be crossbreeds (such as Kurt Weill's Street Scene), but that is as precise

## Sounding off Andrew Clements

What's the difference between a musical and an opera? It can't be musical sophistication or craftsmanship and subtlety: Richard Rodgers and Richard Strauss, yet no one would think of calling South Pacific or Oklahoma! an opera, any more than they would label Der Rosenkavalier or Arabella a musical.

It certainly has little to do with content, either. Had Puccini been able to continue with his project to adapt Ferenc Molnár's play Lilom (Molnár himself vetoed the idea)

as one – well, this one – can get. The narrative function of motifs in Wagner's Ring, or the dramatic significance of key sequences in the finales of Mozart's Da Ponte operas are the kinds of devices that musicals abjure; their narrative threads are sustained through the words, whether in the dialogue or in the separate musical numbers.

But then we come to that curious genre called "rock opera", back in the news this week with the announcement that Bruce Springsteen is writing just such a work, which will have a run-through in New York next month. Drive All Night is the story of a man who goes back to his home town many years after leaving high school. Though one must not prejudge these things, it's surely likely to be more of a musical than an

opera, just as in 1968 the Who's Tommy was a musical masquerading as this new-fangled genre, with its vaguely subversive label – the revolutionary language of rock imposing itself on the apparently elitist world of opera.

It was a term that Andrew Lloyd Webber took over three years later for Jesus Christ Superstar, though its successors Evita, The Phantom of the Opera, and Aspects of Love all use shamelessly called operas, while Cats, Whistle Down the Wind and The Beautiful Game are common-or-garden musicals. By all the standard criteria the whole lot are surely pieces: even in a through-song piece like Aspects of Love, for instance, it is the words rather than the musical architecture that drive the story.

## When is an opera not an opera?

make another distinction between musical scores, or collections of songs, that are conceived from the start as theatre works, and synthetic musicals pieced together from existing songs, which seem to be proliferating at the moment.

Billy Joel has apparently compiled such a work, using two dozen of his old songs, and Brian May and Roger Taylor are working with Ben Elton to make a musical out of old Queen numbers, which will open in London in May.

That kind of project may be as old as the hills – Handel did it regularly in London, recycling arias from earlier operas in his pasticcios – but a rock opera implies something grander, something totally bespoke. Springsteen has started from scratch, and

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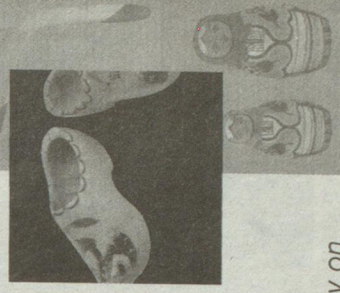
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