

*John Buxton, Norfolk Gentleman and Architect: Letters to his Son, 1719–29*, ed. Alan Mackley (Norwich: Norfolk Record Soc., 2005; pp. 216. £18).

John Buxton was a minor example of an interesting minor genre—the eighteenth-century amateur ‘gentleman architect’. He seems to have designed three seemly Norfolk houses and got them built, and it would be useful to know more of how one like him contrived: did he imitate professional plans or elevations? (He has one interesting criticism of a plan by James Gibbs.) Did he know anything of the technique of building? How heavily did he depend on a surveyor or contractor? Alas, even though during the later years of this correspondence Buxton was building a new house for himself, and asked his son’s advice on plans (one wobbly sketch is included), we learn next to nothing of how it was done. The letters, which start when Robert was only nine, are almost entirely taken up with worries about illness (the family evidently had chronically poor health, and chillingly one letter conveys the ‘disagreeable news’ that the boy’s baby brother had died), the weather, bad roads, visits here and there to and from cousins and neighbours, the commonplace of a commonplace life. The one exception to this ordinariness is the degree and range of reading, with a particular emphasis on Latin, which Buxton urges on his teenage son. He was clearly much more widely-read than most squires, or at least had more books, but there are hints that he had not read everything he bought or recommended; and, *pace* Dr Mackley, he does not suggest a man of deep learning. He professed a great admiration for Milton, who ‘makes the soul feel that holy rapture it ought ever to be filled with when we address the deity’—the sort of piously vapid sentiment of a conventional mind which predictably dismissed *The Beggar’s Opera* as ‘a mean low performance’ (Buxton read it because ‘the noise that has been made about it raised my curiosity’). How characteristic of this village Chesterfield that he should urge on his nine-year-old son that ‘if fortune should not befriend you with a prize [in the lottery], you’ll have the satisfaction to remember that a good disposition is of greater value than the twenty thousand pound’. Quite so. The overwhelming impression left by a reading of these letters is that life among the provincial English gentry was as dull a business in the early eighteenth century as Jane Austen was drily to report it a hundred years later. Mackley’s editing is maddeningly heavy-handed. He believes that his readers will need help identifying the great fire of London and *Paradise Lost*, and that they need reminding every time Buxton’s daughter Betty is mentioned (and it is very often) that she is really Elizabeth. Every person or place which has the most fleeting mention in the text must have his or its pedigree established even when nothing can be ascertained but something irrelevant can be worked in. Thus, in a brief additional travel journal, Robert Buxton sees ‘just out of Alesbury left a house of Lady Dashwood’s’: the footnote

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fails to identify the house, but the temptation to spread a little more knowledge was too strong: 'West Wycombe, the creation of Sir Francis Dashwood (1708–71) was not near Aylesbury'. Indeed it was not on, nor anywhere near, Robert's route, but a little further enquiry might have shown that there was a Dashwood estate at Halton, just out of Aylesbury on the left as (like Robert on this occasion) one goes towards Missenden. When, therefore, 'Ashdown' in Derbyshire appears, without editorial comment, as 'a peak town surrounded by immense hills', one does not know whether the name is a misprint, or whether Buxton (and Mackley?—it is unchanged in the index) simply did not know that it should be Ashbourne. A little more care would also have shown that the Smythson who worked at Clifton Hall was John and not Robert. But there it is: an everyday story of countryfolk decked out with all the cumbersome and somewhat uncertain apparatus of scholarship. And for anyone who wants to go into it yet more deeply, there are 131 boxes of Buxton papers in the Cambridge University Library.†

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