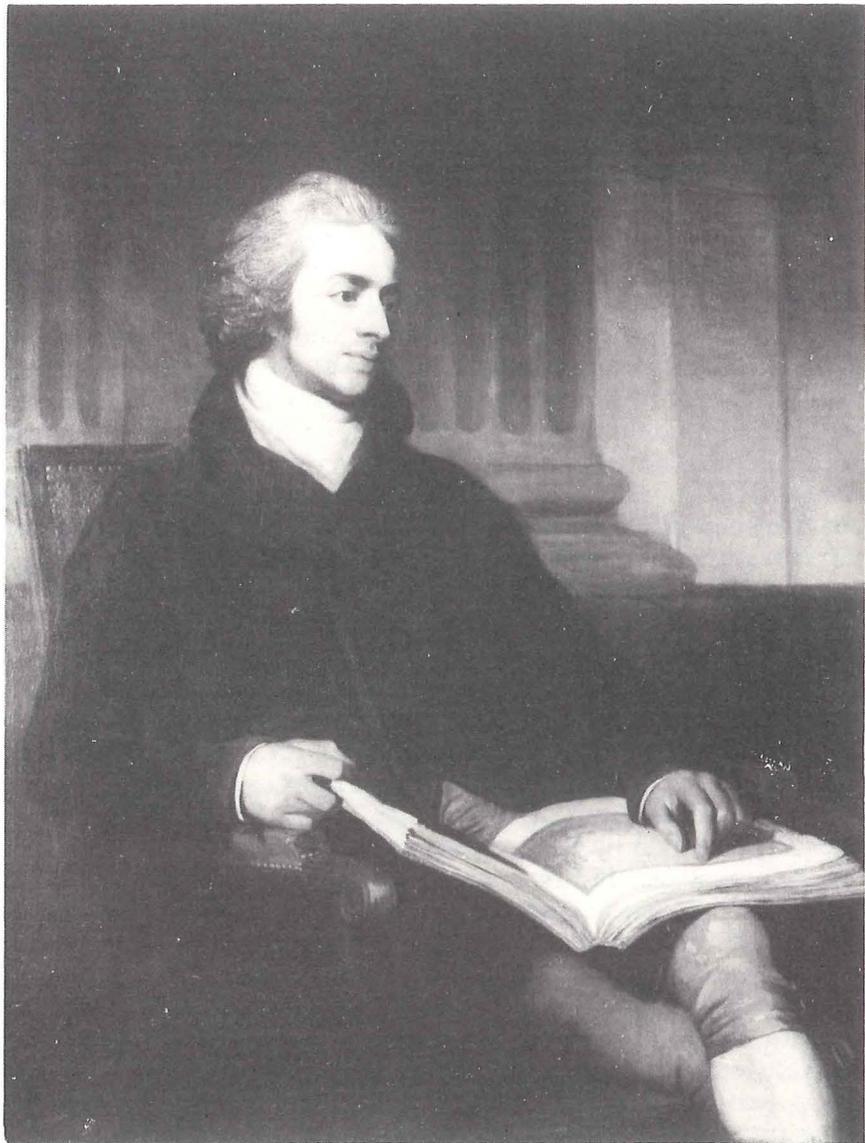


BECKFORD IN BATH

Philippa Bishop

When William Beckford arrived in Bath at the end of 1822 he had just sold his Wiltshire property of Fonthill, comprising the fantastic neo-Gothic pile of the Abbey which he and the architect James Wyatt had designed and built, as well as two thirds of his magnificent collection of art treasures which had adorned it, and the landscaped grounds in which it was set. Though in the eyes of the world it might have appeared a defeat, for Beckford himself it represented the removal of something which had threatened to become both a bore and a financial incubus. Even for someone of his millionaire resources – who had been hailed by Byron as ‘England’s wealthiest son’ – the strain of building, furnishing and maintaining such a stupendous creation as Fonthill had proved too much; and by the early 1820s he was in debt to the tune of £145,000. The sale therefore came as a relief, so that he wrote in high spirits to his friend Dr Schöll in Geneva: ‘I am rid of the Holy Sepulchre, which no longer interested me since its profanation; I am delivered of a burden, and of a long string of insupportable expenses. At present I have only to distribute my funds prudently and await the outcome of events. For twenty years I have not found myself so rich, so independent or so tranquil’.¹ With characteristic shrewdness he had managed to strike a good bargain, and had found in John Farquhar a purchaser willing to give his top price of £300,000. This enabled Beckford to pay off his debts, with enough left over to live in comfort surrounded by what he had reserved for himself of his cherished books, paintings, furniture and objects of vertu. Despite his sixty two years he was as full of energy and enthusiasm for building and collecting as he had ever been, and determined to continue doing both.

A number of reasons probably contributed to his decision to



- 1 WILLIAM BECKFORD Portrait in oil by John Hoppner (c. 1758–1810) Depicting Beckford in middle age, in a characteristic pose (Courtesy of City of Salford Art Gallery)

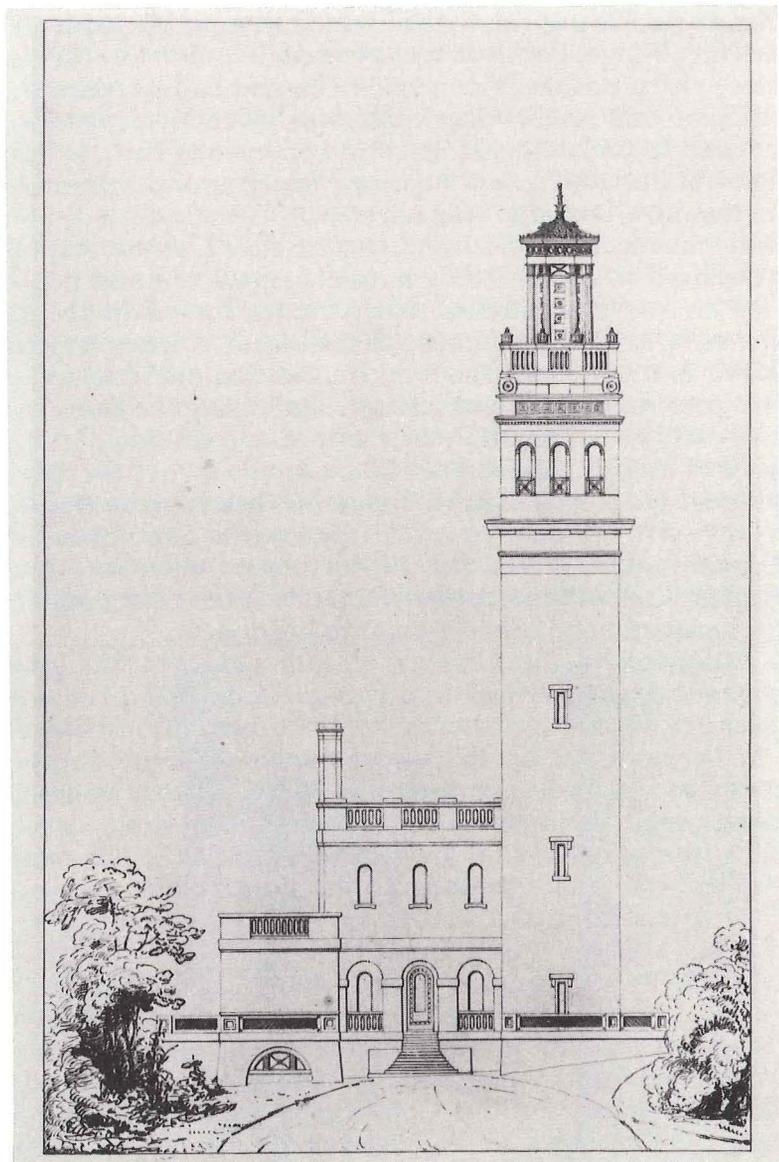
settle in Bath, though none of them emerges very clearly. In fact only six years earlier he had written of the place in the following disobliging terms to his secretary and general factotum the Chevalier Franchi: 'Bath does not please me. After the great spectacle of the Abbey it seems to me incredibly dingy and wretched; and the infamous old men and youths carried in chairs and mechanical carriages round the smoking baths horrifies me – a horror not softened by the tender glances of certain old women clad in flounces supremely *à la mode*, who come and go eternally in this paradise of idlers and corpses'.² Perhaps in his perverse fashion he felt that such an inferior society offered no threat or distraction to his own way of life, and that he would find it easier to maintain his grand seigneurial isolation than he would if beguiled by more congenial company. Or it may be that he simply wanted to feel less cut off from the world than he had in the depths of the country. His self-imposed isolation at Fonthill had been his own bitter response to the manner in which polite society had ostracised him after the homosexual scandal of his youth. Here in Bath he could pursue his proud reclusive existence, though in a more favourable position to choose whom he would or would not see.

Bath certainly offered scope for him to enjoy his favourite pastime of creating a sympathetic environment in which to display his collections; and having enough ground round his house to be able to develop its landscape attractions had always been an important consideration with him. There was the example of his great-uncle Charles Hamilton, an inveterate gardener and landscaper, who had laid out a beautiful garden at the back of his house (no. 14) in the Royal Crescent, and who – at the time of his death in 1786 – had been even more ambitiously trying to link this with the grounds of his other property of Lansdown House.³ As a young man Beckford had visited his uncle at no. 14; and no doubt the recollection of what could be achieved in the way of picturesque landscaping on one of the hillsides of Bath was present in his mind while he looked for a suitable home. His first choice led him to the opposite hill from Lansdown. Prior Park was then on the market: a tempting prospect, as far as the grounds were concerned, though it might be supposed that the building would have seemed to Beckford as outmoded in its grand Palladian style as his father's mansion of Fonthill Splen-

dens which he had demolished to build the Abbey. In the end, however, the price proved too high and he had to abandon the idea, expressing his regret in terms which show that he had been looking at its potentialities primarily from the landscaper's point of view: 'I should have liked it very much; it possesses such great capability of being made a very beautiful spot'.⁴ He then turned his attention to Lansdown, and bought from Sir Walter James the large house, no. 20, with a rounded central bay at the west end of Lansdown Crescent: from here he could look down over the city, and across to Prior Park, while from his back windows 'open country stretched right into the unspoiled Cotswolds'.⁵

A notice in the *Bath Chronicle* reported his settling into no. 20, while hinting that someone like Beckford would not be content to remain in readymade accommodation but would have plans for building a place of his own: 'Mr Beckford is arrived at his house in Lansdown Crescent and engaged in making extensive alterations and arrangements for his unique pictures, books and other rare and costly specimens of art. It is reported that the Gentleman is in treaty for an extensive purchase of land in the rear of the Crescent, with a view to erecting a house in the same. We sincerely hope this is the reason . . . We may anticipate a model of architectural beauty'.⁶ Beckford's next acquisition was in fact to the side rather than to the back. He bought from a certain Ann Lowder the end house, no. 1, of the terrace at that time known as West Wing (and, after 1824, known as Lansdown Place West), which was separated from Lansdown Crescent by a narrow lane. He then connected his two properties by a bridge at first floor level, which led out of his principal library in no. 20, a large room the width of the house. By an inexplicable Beckfordian whim he seems to have resold no. 1 West Wing quite soon,⁷ and decided to fill the far opening of the bridge room with a huge looking glass from floor to ceiling, thus providing a magnificent reflected vista to recall some of the dramatic effects he and Wyatt had brought off at Fonthill.

The architect he used in Bath was much younger and less experienced than Wyatt had been when commissioned to build Fonthill Abbey, and stood in quite a different relationship to his employer. Henry Edmund Goodridge, then aged twenty six, had recently set up his architectural practice at 7 Henrietta Street, and was considered a promising exponent of the fashionable Graeco-



2 LANSDOWN TOWER BATH (1825–7) Pen drawing of the entrance front by Henry Edmund Goodridge (Courtesy of the British Architectural Library, R.I.B.A., London)

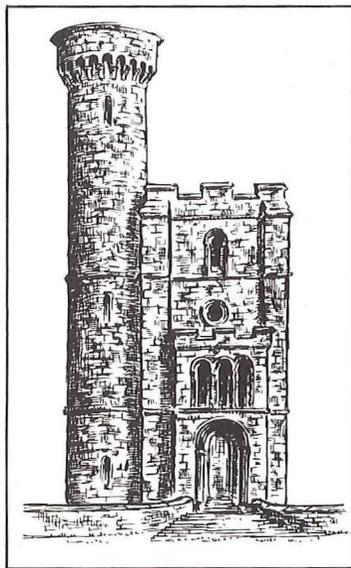
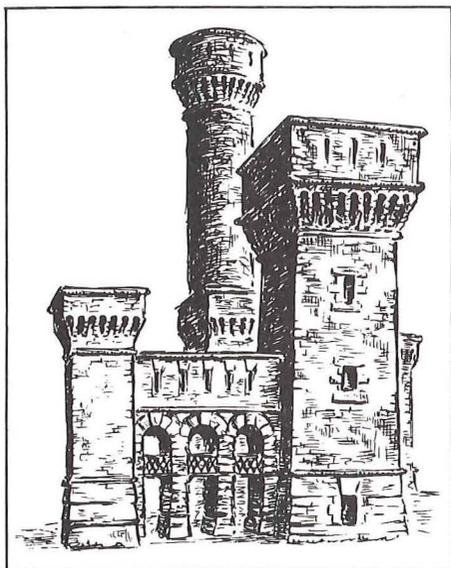
Roman style. Having employed him to carry out the work on the connecting bridge, Beckford was pleased to find there were none of those sharp clashes of personality he had had to endure with Wyatt. For this reason Goodridge was given the opportunity, along with several other architects in London and Bath, to submit designs for Beckford's next building project; and, perhaps for the same reason, Goodridge was selected.

As the extract from the *Bath Chronicle* stated, at the same time that Beckford was establishing himself in no. 20, he was negotiating for 'an extensive purchase of land in the rear of the Crescent, with a view to erecting a house in the same'. A letter written by Beckford to the Milsom Street auctioneer Edmund English, stating his preference for buying rather than leasing the land, shows that as early as March 1823 he was speaking confidently of 'my projects of inclosing the whole of Lansdowne'.⁸ And the building he proposed to erect was not to be another house in the rear of the Crescent – a house doubtless envisaged by the *Chronicle* as larger and more imposing than no. 20, for him to move to – but an altogether different conception of a study retreat standing at the furthestmost end and highest point of his domain.

A paragraph in the *Observer* of 13th October 1823 gives a graphic picture of the work in progress: '[Lansdown] Hill is now the scene of most active labours . . . From sunrise to sunset there are to be seen 300 or 400 workmen, in different directions, attended by immense numbers of carts, etc., busily engaged in building walls about ten feet high with Bath stone, levelling irregularities or hillocks on the summit or about the hill, forming roads, and laying out grounds for the plantation of upwards of 200,000 young trees. The summit of the hill is preparing for the erection of a Saxon tower, from the top of which will be seen Fonthill Abbey, a distance of near 35 miles!'⁹ The reference to the 'Saxon Tower' is probably to the first of Goodridge's designs for the study-retreat, cast in the mould of a neo-Norman keep, and rejected by Beckford. Along with his ties to Fonthill Beckford had shed his affection for the Gothic and with it anything that smacked of the medieval. He also rejected Goodridge's second design – which was fully as castellated as the first, but this time with a pronounced Italian romanesque flavour¹⁰ – and instructed his architect that he wanted something altogether more classical. It was not however to hark back to Palladianism, nor yet to adhere

too strictly to current Greek Revival forms, but should demonstrate his own abiding fondness for the idiosyncrasies of the Picturesque.

The design which Goodridge eventually came up with for the building we know as Lansdown Tower bears all the signs of having been inspired by Beckford and closely worked out with him. It also shows affinities with what had just been done at The Deepdene near Dorking (from 1818 to 1823) by Thomas Hope and his architect William Atkinson. The virtue of the Picturesque plan, which the Deepdene and Lansdown Tower exemplify, is that additions can judiciously be made to it without unduly detracting from the balance of the whole. Seen from the south, Lansdown Tower is built up in three recessive stages: a single-storey block, originally comprising bedroom, kitchen and pump room; next a two-storey block, nearly square, containing a suite of elegant little rooms in which Beckford housed his treasures. On the east side of the parapet a pair of chimney stacks, united by an arch, points like an apostrophe to the third stage. This is the base of the great tower, the smooth and windowless south front of



3 Two rejected designs for Lansdown Tower, by H.E. Goodridge (pen and ink drawing by Michael Bishop)

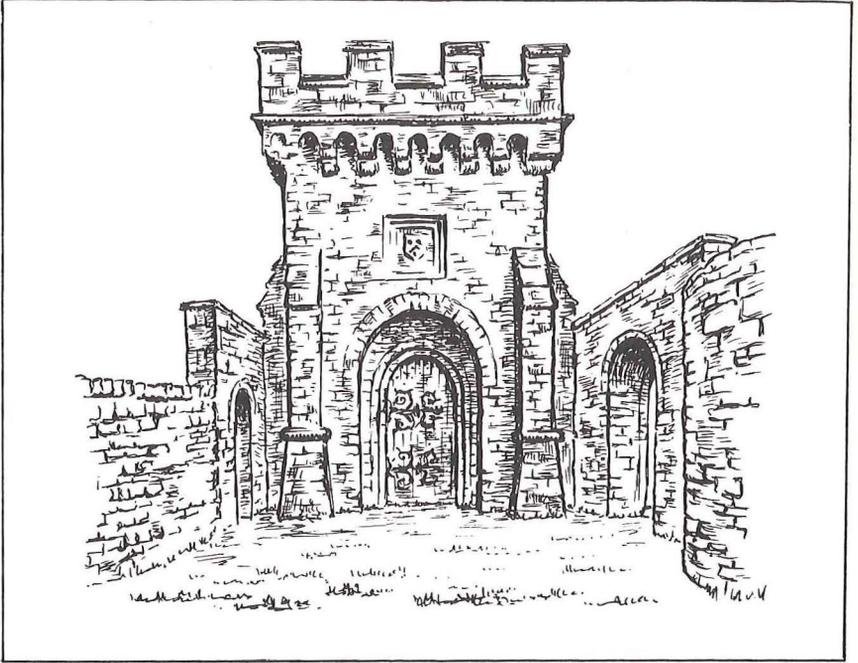
which rides against the open sky'.¹¹ The asymmetrical ground plan, with its chief external features the round-arched loggia and the lofty tower rising against the side, provided a formula which Goodridge was to use, with variations, for many of the Tuscan-style villas he built for his clients on the slopes of Bathwick and Lansdown.

There was, however, a significant difference between Lansdown Tower and those other commissions carried out by Goodridge. Here on the top of Lansdown (as we have noted) he was not building a residence for Beckford to live in. From the description of the layout it can be seen there was no real accommodation for sleeping, though the kitchen and pump room could of course provide cooked food and heating. The rooms were designed principally to display a number of pieces from the owner's collection – in the same way that Lord Burlington had designed his villa at Chiswick – and were suitable to receive the day visitor only. Beckford indeed would take his daily ride up there, early in the morning, to inspect his treasures. But first he would climb the carpeted steps of the twisting staircase to the penultimate stage of the tower, to enjoy the magnificent all-round view of the countryside through the twelve plate-glass windows of the 'Belvidere'.¹² This use of the tower as look-out may perhaps have been developed from its original picturesque conception, and added even while the building grew. From an account given many years later by Goodridge's son Alfred it seems that the construction of the tower went ahead with the greatest speed, so that at the end of four weeks the block cornice was reached where it was intended to put on the roof. But Beckford wanted it higher. So a belvedere was added after much consultation, again with the intention of taking the roof. 'Mr Beckford, however, cried "Higher!" and the lantern was added to crown the summit'.¹³ If this is to be believed it implies that the scholarly design of the lantern with its debt to the Choragic Monument of Lysicrates at Athens was a solution either provided by the young Goodridge from his textbook acquaintance with the architecture of antiquity or by Beckford himself – but in either case an ad hoc solution to Beckford's demand for greater height. His passion for towers, and especially high towers, had resulted in the tower at Fonthill Abbey rising to a spectacular 276 feet. That had now collapsed,¹⁴ and he had to replace it in his affections with his new tower at

Lansdown, rising admittedly a mere 154 feet, but erected on the top of a hill 800 feet above sea level.

The journalist and author Cyrus Redding – one of the few visitors to gain admittance and hold regular conversations with Beckford, and who wrote the earliest biography of him – once suggested that there might be a literary and imaginative link between the tower of the Caliph in *Vathek*¹⁵ and the towers built by Beckford in later life at Fonthill and Lansdown. Beckford's response was brusque and deflating. "No", he replied . . . "I have an extraordinary sight. God rarely gives men such eyes. I am partial to looking over a wide horizon . . . Wishing to have something besides a study on the summit of Lansdown, where the view is so extensive, I erected a tower, or else, as you know, I should see nothing"¹⁶.

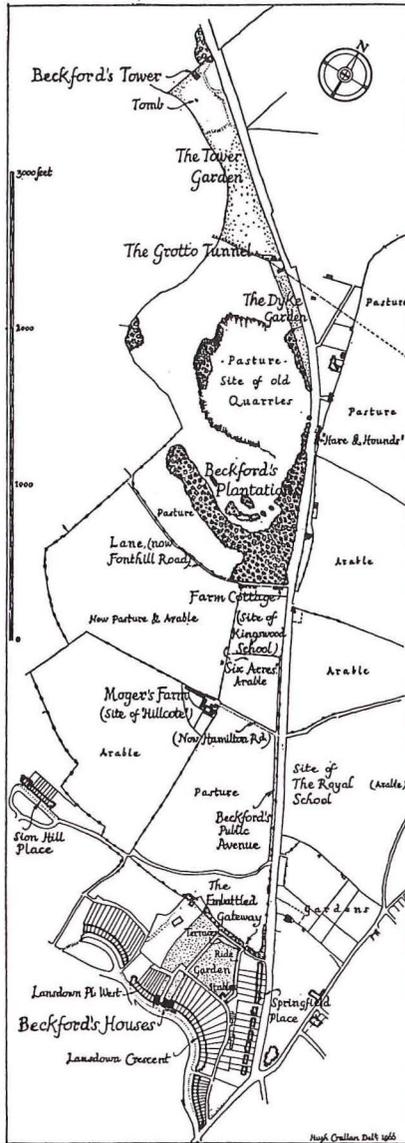
Though he might dismiss Redding's idea as fanciful, there can be little doubt that the tower as look-out stimulated Beckford's imagination along with his memory. The prospect from it reminded him of the Roman Campagna, which he had seen during the travels of his youth: 'I shall never forget how I first passed over that land of the Dead, strewed with ruins and covered with green turf . . . This scene [Lansdown] recalls to me my dreams and meditations there. The surface is smoother, but it has the same dun colour, the same "death-like stillness" and "dread repose"¹⁷. This in its turn brought to mind the landscapes in the paintings of Claude, which owe much of their appeal to their associations with the Campagna – and in which can be found Italianate buildings very similar to Lansdown Tower. Thus Beckford's recollection of Italy combined with his appreciation of landscape in pictures to act as a powerful stimulus to his creation of an appropriate setting for the Tower. It needed someone who was a painter himself, and who shared something of Beckford's artistic temperament, to comprehend the underlying plan for the mile of gardens and plantations leading up from no. 20 Lansdown Crescent to the Tower, and to see their beauties as a sequence of linked yet contrasting episodes which culminated at the top of the hill. Henry Venn Lansdown, a topographical and landscape artist who had gained the initial introduction to Beckford through his friendship with Goodridge, wrote his *Recollections of William Beckford* in the form of a letter to his daughter Charlotte.¹⁸ From his eloquent if sometimes rather fulsome description it is possible



4 THE EMBATTLED GATEWAY on Beckford's Walk (pen and ink drawing by Michael Bishop)

to trace that plan by accompanying him on the walk, and also to compare the appearance of the hill as landscaped by Beckford with what we see now.

I was informed that Mr Beckford intended meeting us at the Tower, and that a servant was in readiness to conduct us thither by the walk through the grounds. We therefore issued by a private door [from the garden at the back of no. 20],¹⁹ and presently entered the spacious kitchen garden, containing, I believe, seven or eight acres [with] a broad gravel walk bordered by lovely flowers and fruit trees'.²⁰ Beckford, aided by his faithful gardener Vincent (whom he had brought with him from Fonthill), had managed to transform what had previously been a quarry²¹ into a fruitful kitchen garden. After his time the same site continued as a nursery garden until quite recently, when it was



5 MAP OF LANSDOWN Based on an 1838 tithe map of the parish of Charlcombe and showing the full extent of Beckford's Walk. Drawn by Hugh Crallan for the catalogue of the Beckford Exhibition held at the Holburne Museum, Bath in 1966 (Courtesy of Hugh Crallan)

sold for development. The gardens of some of the new houses erected here stretch right up to the magnificent retaining wall built by Beckford to support the terraces above and the walk leading down to his stables. Within the lower part of the wall were a series of vaulted storerooms (that still survive), accessible by means of lofty arched openings. The dominating feature on the upper terrace remains the embattled gateway, described by Lansdown as 'an archway of massive proportions erected chiefly to shut out the view of an unpicturesque object'. At this point Goodridge had been permitted to introduce a medieval note by creating a folly in the neo-Norman style, while Beckford indulged his taste for heraldry by having carved on the stone above the iron-studded door the ancient coat of arms of a family with which he could in fact claim no connection. The particular offending 'unpicturesque object' is difficult to identify and has probably long since disappeared, though no doubt replaced by many others which would have given even greater offence to Beckford. Nowadays, if he returned, he would find it hard to recognise his part of the hill above the gateway which he left as fields with clumps of scattered thorn bushes and bordered with palisades, so greatly has the appearance of the terrain been altered by the later building of private houses and a school. Here the sole surviving memorial of his work lies in the 300-yard avenue of lime trees (on the west side of what is now Lansdown Road, between Sion and Hamilton Roads), which he planted in order to compensate the citizens of Bath for having encroached on a public right of way. Above the lane leading to Chelscombe Farm (subsequently named Fonthill Road), was the largest of his plantations, amounting to seven acres in all, mostly still remaining in the wooded slopes rising behind Kingswood School. Beckford's expertise is evident in the wide variety of species used, the care taken to place them according to the height and bulk of the trees, as well as ensuring successive harmonies of colour in the leaves throughout the seasons. His skill in this respect was acknowledged by his contemporaries. When Jerom Murch²² went to see him he sought Beckford's opinion on the planting of the Dell in Victoria Park which was then going forward: 'Mr Beckford spoke of the effects of contrasts in similar situations, not so much in the trees themselves as with reference to the line of sky and the surrounding objects'.

Immediately below the plantation Henry Lansdown and his companion diverged from the main walk to follow a smaller path branching off to the left, where rustic seats were provided at intervals for the enjoyment of the view over the Avon valley. This was the view which Beckford himself admitted to Edmund English was what really reconciled him to Lansdown after the vastness of Fonthill: "This!" exclaimed Beckford, "This!! the finest prospect in Europe!" "After feasting our eyes on the lovely panorama . . . we retraced our steps towards the path to the Tower. We again ascended the hill, and soon reached the sort of tableland on top, which seems to me to have been once an immense quarry . . . The remains of these quarries are most picturesque. At a little distance they seem to present the wrecks of stately buildings, with rows of broken arches, and vividly recall the idea of Roman ruins. I afterwards mentioned my impressions on seeing them to Mr Beckford, who replied, "They do indeed put one in mind of the Campagna of Rome, and are vastly like the ruins of the Baths of Caracalla".²³ The survivals of Beckford's planting can still be seen as a skeleton tracery among the development of new houses which now occupies the site of the quarry; and there is, in the field just beyond the houses, a spectacular clump of beeches which owe their existence to Beckford and Vincent.

The next stage of the walk led one through another plantation where the path, winding among trees and flowering shrubs, was composed of small fossils. At the far end a low door in a wall gave into another splendid garden, the Dyke or Ditch Garden, 'nearly four hundred feet long . . . about eighty feet wide and about twelve feet below the level of the Down . . . I said to the gardener, "I understood Mr Beckford had planted everything on the Down, but you surely found those apple trees here. They are fifty years old." "We found nothing here but an old quarry and a few nettles. Those apple trees were great trees when we moved them, and moving them stopped their bearing. They blossom in the spring and look pretty, and that is all master cares about".²⁴ Lansdown particularly admired the picturesque effect of the Italianate building with an archway in the centre which closed the vista at the end of the garden and also gave admittance to a grotto-like tunnel lying beyond. This ran underground for about seventy feet – a practical solution propounded by Goodridge

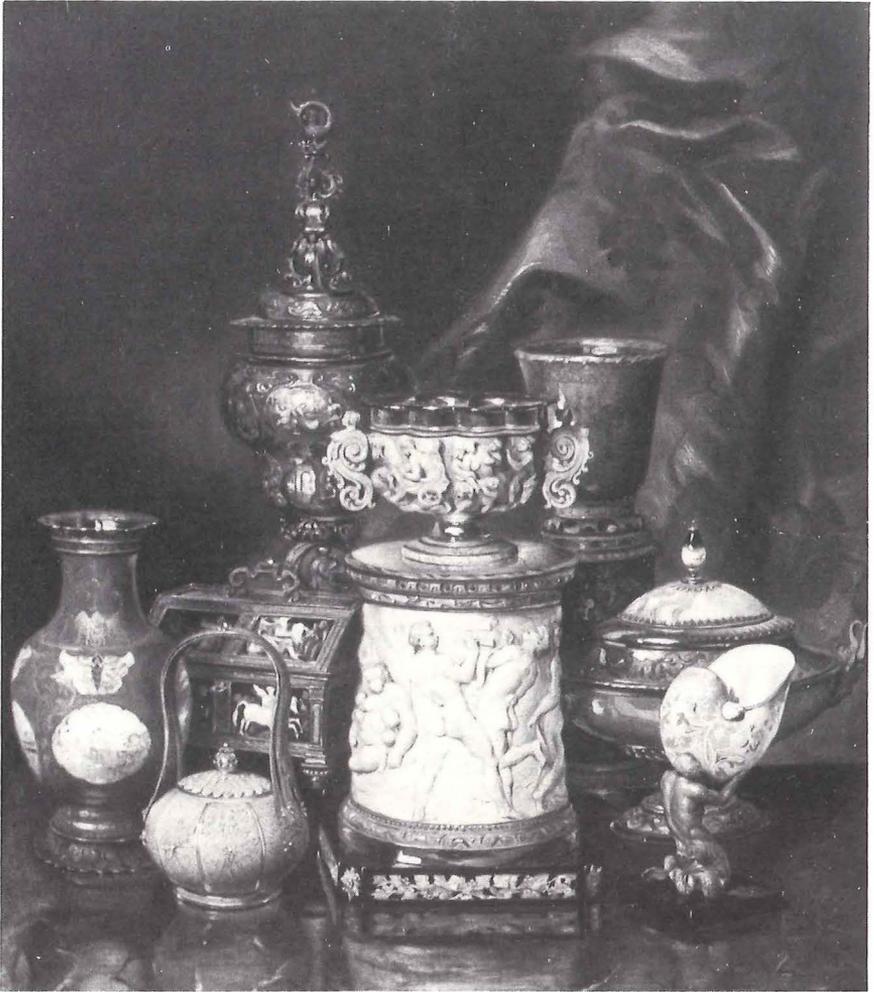
when Beckford was incensed by the fact that otherwise his private walk would have had to cross a public right of way from the turnpike road into the fields by Chelscombe Farm. The tunnel ended with a rustic flight of steps leading out on to the open down, where the walk – though proceeding quite close to the public road – took its own gently meandering way through trees and shrubs, and became gradually wilder as the Tower was approached. There Beckford was waiting to greet his visitors, to point out with pride the exotic examples which he and Vincent had successfully planted: conifers of every species from all parts of the world, Irish yews, a fir from Larissa, maples from America, and 'a rose tree brought from Pekin'.

After they had expressed sufficient admiration Beckford took them indoors for a conducted tour of the Tower, a privilege not always accorded even to the most eminent. For instance when Dr. Waagen, the distinguished art historian and Director of the Royal Gallery in Berlin, came to Bath in 1835 and presented his credentials he was told that, since Beckford never received letters from strangers, he should make application to the steward. He did so, and permission was granted him to visit the Tower and no. 20. Waagen feelingly describes the miseries of being shown round by 'an inexorable housekeeper' at the Crescent 'who hastened my steps' and who refused to pull the curtains to let in enough light to examine the objects thoroughly; while at the Tower it was almost worse, since he had to join 'an English family who . . . did not feel it necessary to be so deliberate in their inspection as I heartily wished', with the result that he was prevented from taking full advantage of the two hours allowed him on the admission ticket.²⁵ Even so, the miseries were far outweighed by the splendours of what he saw. He was struck above all with the quality of Beckford's Italian pictures. Both he and Henry Lansdown picked out for special mention the portrait by Bellini of 'Doge Loredan' (at the Tower until 1844, when Beckford sold it to the National Gallery for 600 guineas), and Perugino's 'Virgin and Child with St John'²⁶ which hung in the Sanctuary, a narrow vaulted corridor containing a statue by Rossi of Beckford's favourite Saint Anthony of Padua. The connoisseurs were also united in their appreciation of the superb Hondecoeter ('a large picture worthy the Raphael of bird painters') holding the place of honour in the Scarlet Drawing Room, as well as other

Italian and Dutch works including 'two lovely Poelenburghs . . . and two fine portraits by de Vos' which were distributed between the two main apartments, the Crimson Drawing Room on the upper floor, the Scarlet on the floor below.

All those who recorded their impressions (including Cyrus Redding and Edmund English as well as Waagen and Lansdown) praised the flawless taste with which the pictures and wide variety of objects – maiolica, porcelain, books, bronzes, Etruscan urns, oriental vases, enamelled and jewelled cups, silver gilt salts and gold mounted nautilus shells – were displayed. What chiefly impressed Dr Waagen at the Tower was 'that all these things bear a due proportion in size to the moderate apartments in which they are, and are likewise so arranged that they serve richly to adorn each other, without producing, as so often happens, by overloading and confusion, the disagreeable effect of auction rooms'.²⁷ Henry Lansdown noted too the design and furnishings of the rooms, exhibiting as they did Beckford's fondness for strong deep reds: the 'red carpet and crimson window curtains' in the Belvedere, while in the Scarlet Drawing Room 'from the judicious introduction of scarlet and crimson you have the effect of sunshine. The ceilings are belted;²⁸ the interstices painted crimson'.

To supplement these written accounts we have the vivid illustrations of the interior of the Tower, contained in the handsome folio volume which was brought out just after Beckford's death with a text by Edmund English. The colour lithographs (by C.J. Richardson) were after originals drawn by a young local artist, Willes Maddox, from whom Beckford had commissioned three paintings of New Testament scenes for the lunettes of the Sanctuary. The book describes and the plates illustrate the Tower as it was furnished at the very end of Beckford's life, for in 1841 he had sold through English's auction rooms several paintings and much furniture from the Tower. Beckford, with his markedly individual taste and perversity of temperament, was never afraid to be right in the forefront of fashion and to try out something new. He clearly felt that his fine 18th century pieces were inappropriate to the style of the Tower, so he ordered in their place the ebony cabinets and stools, and the coffer and sideboards of yellow varnished oak, which make such a strong impact in Maddox's plates and which seem to anticipate the heavy rather



- 6 OBJECTS OF VERTU No. 2 Oil by Willes Maddox (1813–1853). Showing some of Beckford's treasures from Lansdown Tower, including a silver gilt cup (now in the Thyssen Collection) and an ivory bowl with silver gilt mounts (now at Brodick). The painting has recently been acquired from the Duke of Hamilton's collection, for the Beckford Museum at the Tower (Courtesy of Beckford Tower Trust)

coarse productions of the mid-Victorian era. In the same way that he had collaborated with Goodridge over the architecture of the Tower, so Beckford inspired the creation of these new pieces while Goodridge supplied the designs. The furniture was made up in Bath, apparently by English's firm.²⁹ A letter from Beckford to English, dated Wednesday 19 May 1841, urgently recommends 'the gilt mouldings studs etc of the Coffers to your most perseverant attention – it would be provoking indeed to be delayed on account of them – *therefore* – pray exert yourself and get this cursed metalwork finished . . . You may as well finish the companion cabinet for upper draw^g. room – immediately – remove the Wynants and Ruysdael – and suspend this said cabinet ready to be filled the moment I return'.³⁰ His energy and impatience are fully conveyed in the tone of his abrupt barking commands punctuated by dots and emphatic dashes. Here he was an old man in a hurry, anxious to achieve as much as possible before death overtook him.

If by the end of his life the settings and furnishings of the Tower seemed to anticipate a very precisely defined period of taste in the immediate future, the interior of Beckford's house in the Crescent continued to demonstrate his abiding love of beautiful things drawn from a variety of sources past and present. Since the rooms in no. 20 were on a larger scale than those in the Tower they were better able to accommodate pieces from earlier centuries alongside contemporary craftsmanship. Henry Lansdown mentions two oak cabinets designed by Goodridge – and 'made in Bath, in form most classical and appropriate' – which he saw in the library and front drawing room keeping company with antiques such as 'the splendid ormolu chandelier' and 'a noble mosaic table of Florentine marble'. He also observed the same flair for showing off his treasures to their best advantage which Beckford had displayed in the Tower. In the drawing room 'the first thing that caught my eye was the magnificent effect produced by a scarlet drapery, whose ample folds covered the whole side of the room opposite the three windows from the ceiling to the floor'. And he goes on to quote Beckford's comment: "'I wonder architects and fitters-up of apartments do not avail themselves more frequently of the powers of drapery. Nothing produces so grand and at the same time so comfortable an effect'"'.³¹

Lansdown reserved his chief admiration for the pictures in the collection, which ranged from masterpieces by Raphael, Claude, Titian, Rembrandt, Velasquez, and smaller choice works by artists such as Berchem and Wouwermans, to a watercolour of Fonthill by Turner and a sketch by Benjamin West, as well as a number of family portraits including Beckford's father the Alderman, Beckford himself as a handsome young man painted by Reynolds, his two daughters also by Reynolds, and even a contemporary portrait by Barker of his grandson the Marquis of Douglas. Lansdown went on to note 'a magnificent full-length portrait by Gaspar de Crayer of Philip II of Spain . . . Many who have hardly heard the painter's name will of course not admire it, being done neither by Titian nor Vandyke; but Mr Beckford's taste is peculiar. He prefers a genuine picture by an inferior painter to those attributed to the more celebrated masters but where the originality is ambiguous – or at least, if not ambiguous, where the picture cleaners, or scavengers as he calls them, have been at work'.³² One of Beckford's prime assets as a connoisseur was his keen eye for quality. The unprejudiced way in which he assessed any potential acquisition made him both feared and respected in the saleroom. He was not to be distracted by inessentials, as revealed by this request made in a letter to English, referring to his purchase of pictures in a recent sale: 'Now, my dear Sir, if you will take the *Both*, the *Teniers*, and the *Karel du Jardin*, out of their frames (such jewels require no setting to enhance their splendour) and send them here, I will return them after a transient glance'.³³

During his years in Bath he was assiduously rebuilding his collection of pictures which the sale at Fonthill had depleted. However, his ardent pursuit of a prize was matched only by his coolness in striking a good bargain when he had decided to get rid of something. In 1839 he sold to the National Gallery one of his most cherished possessions, Raphael's 'St Catherine', for the excellent price of 6,000 guineas. Two other paintings by lesser Italian masters, Garofalo and Mazzolino, he also disposed of at the same time to the National Gallery; and (as we have seen) these were followed up to London by the Perugino in 1841 and the Bellini in 1844, all for sums which represented a profit to Beckford. Even allowing for his capricious nature it is a shock to find him parting with treasures – especially the 'St Catherine' –

which he held in great affection. It may be, as James Lees-Milne has suggested, that the enormous praise bestowed on these outstanding works, in particular by experts such as Dr. Waagen, made Beckford react perversely. If others showed such interest then he would deliberately lose interest, and fix his attention elsewhere.

A similar whimsical streak, accompanied by fantastically wide knowledge of the subject and ruthless business acumen, marked his book collecting activities. After the Fonthill sale he was filled with such regret for the thousands of books he had abandoned to Farquhar that he never allowed another volume to leave his grasp but went on steadily buying for the rest of his time in Bath. Apart from his annual visit to London for the season, when he would personally inspect the wares offered by the booksellers, printsellers and auction rooms, he kept in regular correspondence with the bookseller George Clarke on whom he relied for information about forthcoming sales. Woe betide Clarke if he sent a catalogue too late, or failed to secure a bargain when bidding on Beckford's behalf. The wrath from Lansdown Crescent was directed both against Clarke and those other bidders who had swept off the prize from under his nose: 'My fist and my horsewhip are both longing to get at them . . . I would have the Brute and his followers trampled upon like dirty rugs and beaten like dusty carpets'.³⁴

The result of his passionate acquisitiveness was that books began to overwhelm the space available in the main library at no. 20 and the Small Library and the Etruscan Library at the Tower. By the early 1830s they were to be found scattered everywhere throughout the house, ranged on shelves, piled on tables and stacked on the floor. Beckford was now feeling an urgent need to expand further in order to gain more room. Jerom Murch refers to an abortive offer made by him for the purchase of Summer Hill Place,³⁵ a property which lay westward on Sion Hill, at the far end of Sion Hill Place: 'Mr English, of Milsom Street, who told me the story, was commissioned to offer a certain price and obtain an answer within twenty four hours; Dr Parry, however, asked for longer time for consideration, and the matter dropped'.³⁶ Beckford, with his customary impatience, was not prepared to wait or enter into long drawn out negotiations. Instead he turned his attention to the possibility of extending his empire in Lans-

down Crescent itself. The first mention in the Walcot Rate Book of Beckford being owner-occupier of no. 19 comes under March 1837. 'Now had I not bought this house', Beckford told Cyrus Redding, 'I would have been perpetually annoyed by the ticking of some cursed jack, the jingling of some beastly piano, horrid-toned bells tinkling, and so on. The only way to avoid this was to buy the house; and so I bought it, to the infinite annoyance and astonishment of the Bath aristocracy, an odd breed, I believe'.³⁷ Perhaps he had originally intended to indulge a rich man's whim of keeping the house empty, simply to avoid the irritation of noise. But the pressure of his ever-growing collection of books forced him to consider making practical use of it. He called in Goodridge to carry out alterations; and by the time that Henry Lansdown paid his visit in 1838 he described no. 19 as 'recently fitted up'. Doorways had been opened in the party wall between the two houses and, with the installation of mirrors at both ends, an impression of long vistas was created through from one house to the other. Like everyone else who entered no. 19 Lansdown was intrigued by the tunnel-shaped perspective staircase with its barrel vault, which had been substituted for the former balusters and open stairwell. Beckford declared that the reason for it was to exclude draughts. Another unstated reason could have been that he disliked even the possibility of being observed by servants as he went up or down stairs. Lansdown also noted, in the entrance passage, 'the singular and harmonious light of this mysterious vestibule . . . produced by crimson silk strained over the fanlight of the outer door',³⁸ which recalled to him the Hall of Eblis in *Vathek* – an allusion much liked by Beckford, and gratifying to his author's vanity.

But it was the room running parallel with the entrance passage which chiefly appealed to Lansdown, and which called forth some of his most perceptive remarks. Thanks to its present owner the Grecian Library still preserves – the only one of Beckford's rooms to do so – the appearance it had when designed and used by him. 'A noble library . . . Here are no pictures; it is devoted entirely to books and ponderous folios of the most rare and precious engravings. The sides of the library are adorned by scagliola pilasters and arched recesses, which contain the books. The interstices between the arches and the ceiling are painted in imitation of marble, so extremely like that though they touch the

scagliola it is next to impossible to distinguish any difference. The ceiling is belted across and enriched with bands of Grecian tracery in relief, delicately painted and slightly touched with gold. On the walls are some gilded ornaments, enough to give to the whole richness of effect without heaviness'.³⁹ Here in this room it is possible to conjure up the presence of Beckford at his favourite occupation of reading and annotating. Much as he enjoyed the look and feel of fine bindings he was not the sort of collector who acquired his volumes just to admire their effect on the shelves. Indeed he read omnivorously throughout the vast range of his collection, recording his impressions in largely critical comments which were pencilled in a crabbed hand in the margin or at length on the endpapers. He also kept up with contemporary literature, and thereby perhaps managed to make himself feel less cut off from the affairs of the world. Cyrus Redding was flattered to find that the great bibliophile possessed a book which *he* had written, and complacently called attention to the fact in his biography.⁴⁰

Beckford's own reputation as an author had been enhanced when in 1834 he published a book about his early travels on the continent entitled *Italy with Sketches of Spain and Portugal by the author of Vathek*, and in 1835 followed it with his *Recollections of an Excursion to the Monasteries of Alcobaca and Batalha*. Both were well received by the critics. Towards the end of his life he was working on a manuscript which only appeared in print long after his death,⁴¹ as the *Liber Veritatis*. It took the form of a chain of discreditable anecdotes intended to puncture the pretensions of the new aristocracy, and was shown to Redding with the comment, 'I pull the peerage about sadly'. But Beckford was shrewd enough to realise that the publication of this splenetic effusion – which reflected much of his own frustration at not being given a peerage, and the resentment he continued to nurse at what he felt to be his ill-usuage by society – would hardly do him much good. So he let off steam, in the privacy of his library, and left it there.

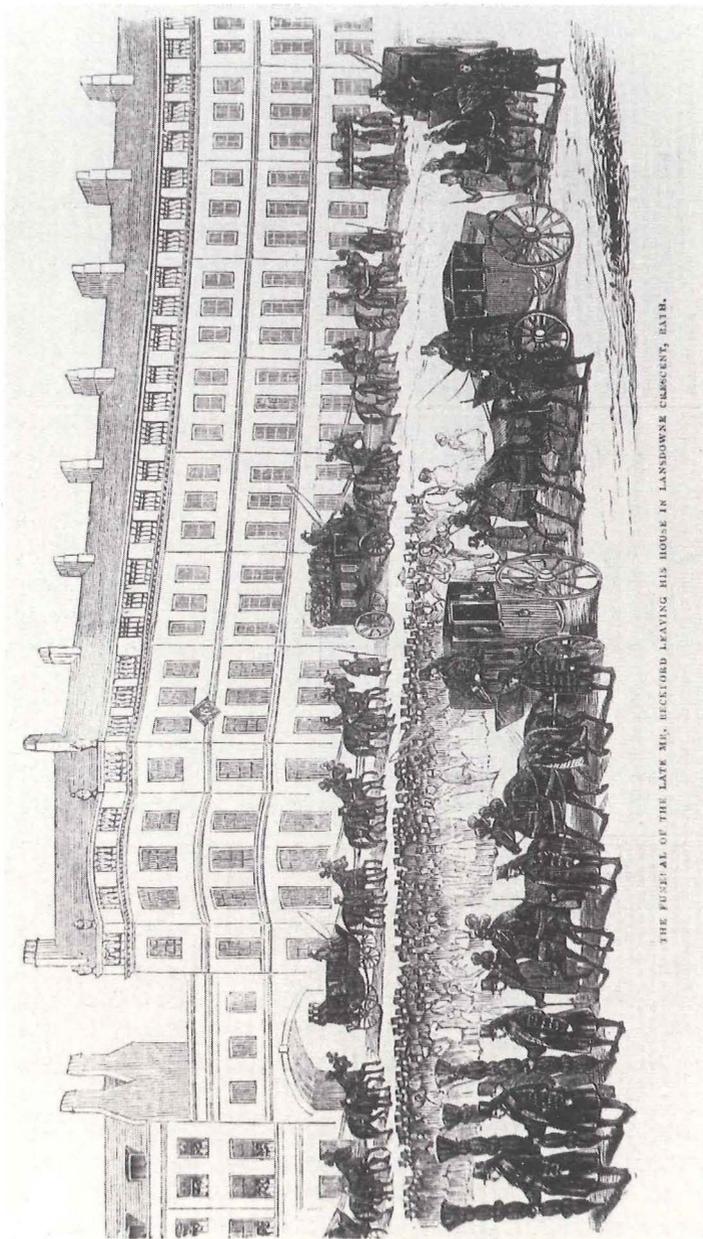
He persevered in the solitary life he had chosen for himself, simply seeing those whom he considered capable of appreciating his conversation and his collections, possibly only those who came through a recommendation from a favoured individual like Goodridge. When he went to his rented house in London for the season the one social contact he had was with his favourite

daughter Susan and her family. Beckford was pleased that she had made such a good marriage to her cousin, the 10th Duke of Hamilton, and he was fond of his grandchildren. He also got on well enough with his pompous son-in-law, since they shared a number of interests including heraldry and genealogy. Once back in Lansdown Crescent the only visitors who came to stay were the Hamiltons. On those few occasions when the ordinary citizens of Bath might have seen Beckford he was usually out riding, either in the company of the Duke or on his own attended by a retinue of grooms and dogs. The pencil drawing by Lucius Gahagan (done right at the end of his life) shows him on his favourite grey Arab, with the Tower faintly indicated in the background. It bears out the other portrait we have of him, in words, from an anonymous obituary notice: 'Mr Beckford usually wore a long brown greatcoat with top boots, and to a stranger might seem like a good old Zomerzetzee farmer . . . He carried his head a little on one side and buried it somewhat in his collar'.⁴² The fact that he appeared in public so infrequently, lived so privately, and forever carried with him the whiff of scandal from the long past homosexual scandal of his youth, made him an object of mystery and speculation to many – even, to some of the more vulgar sort, a sinister figure supposed to be served by a band of ugly dwarves and to indulge in nameless orgies. The innocent cause of this kind of rumour may have been the dwarf Perro whom Beckford had originally brought back with him from Switzerland as a picturesque adjunct to adorn Fonthill, and then charitably kept on in Bath after he had outlived his usefulness. Murch described Perro as 'stationed in the vestibule of the house with no apparent duty whatsoever. The visitors were admitted by the hall porter and passed on to a servant in the interior, while this wretched looking object sat in his armchair grinning'.⁴³

Beckford's household in Bath was in fact a blameless one, ordered to suit the whims and convenience of an eccentric wealthy recluse. By remaining long and faithfully in his service Perro and the other servants testified that their master was no monster, though he could deal out harsh abuse and blows when in one of his blind rages. Goodridge, who was perhaps closest to him, recalled that in the last part of his life he was actually managing to control his temper better: 'Mr Beckford's character underwent a great change after he came to Bath. His paroxysms



7 WILLIAM BECKFORD ON HORSEBACK c. 1842 pencil drawing by Lucius Gahagan (d. 1866). Gahagan settled in Bath in the early 1820s, and was known as a sculptor and lithographer (Courtesy of Bath Reference Library)



THE FUNERAL OF THE LATE MR. BECKFORD LEAVING HIS HOUSE IN LANSDOWN CRESCENT, BATH.

- 8 FUNERAL OF WILLIAM BECKFORD 18 May 1844 Wood engraving in *Pictorial Times* for 25 May 1844. Beckford's houses in Lansdown Crescent, nos. 19 and 20 are visible in the background, as well as the connecting bridge to no. 1 Lansdown Place West (Courtesy of Bath Reference Library)

of passion, when I first knew him, were most fearful; but latterly he had obtained a wonderful mastery over himself, and which was seldom broken through. He used to say, he could not now afford it'.⁴⁴ Even so Goodridge was the recipient of an extraordinary outburst in the form of a letter from Beckford just a year before his death: 'Having been most grievously disturbed early this morning by the noise of dogs I shall most probably remove from Bath in the course of the ensuing summer . . .'⁴⁵ The indignant pen splutters dashes and underlinings across the page. However the explosion seems to have relieved his feelings, or perhaps Goodridge succeeded in pacifying him, for nothing further was heard on this subject.

Redding and Lansdown saw a rather different side of him, and have left us their impressions of a courteous, conversable, occasionally humorous old person (capable of referring to himself as the Old Man of the Mountain), who faced approaching death with stoicism. 'Beckford contemplated the closing scene of existence very frequently, and wondered how he had been spared so long . . . exclaiming 'I am almost ashamed of being so old, really death seems to have forgotten me or has unintentionally passed me by'''.⁴⁶ But in April 1844 he imprudently went out in a bitter east wind, got drenched in a shower, and caught a chill. For a fortnight he struggled against influenza, fever and a growing weakness. Finally, on Sunday 21st April, he was driven to write a last poignant letter to his daughter begging her to come quickly: 'O abrégez la distance! – O abrégez la fatale distance'.⁴⁷ The Duchess immediately set out for Bath, and brought with her a London physician, Dr Bowie. But there was little that medicine could do for a sick old man, now in his eighty fourth year. Beckford refused the ministrations either of a Catholic priest or of the rector of his parish. At Goodridge's suggestion it was Dr Bowie who went in to talk to him, and whom he listened to 'with much calmness and attention'. The next day, 2nd May, he died; and the artist Willes Maddox was commissioned by the Duchess to depict the scene. Beckford lies on his narrow wooden bed, in an austere room bare of pictures, with only a stool and two small caskets for furniture. In the ebony casket⁴⁸ he had always kept the letters written to him by his beloved mentor Alexander Cozens.

With his innate sense of theatre Beckford had stage managed much of his life as a grand performance. He also worked out in

advance many of the details of his final exit, so that they should be of an equal grandeur. He had designed his own sarcophagus, a pink granite tomb which was erected in readiness in the shadow of the Tower next to the graves of his adored little dogs Tout and Tiny. But his wish to be buried up there in a spot that had so many associations for him seemed doomed to be frustrated, when it was decided by the family that he could not rest in unconsecrated ground and should therefore be buried in Lyncombe Vale Cemetery. He had also designed his own coffin, to be made of Spanish mahogany and covered with purple Genoa velvet, and had specified every particular from the gilded armorials to each individual nail 'cast and moulded expressly'. At last the world could intrude on his privacy and satisfy its curiosity. The throngs of people wanting to view the coffin were so great that it had to be removed from English's premises in Milsom Street 'to a house in Brunswick Place, where it was inspected by some thousands'. Enormous crowds lined the route of the funeral procession when, on 18th May, the immensely long cortege – with the Duke and Duchess of Hamilton and their children in a six-horse carriage as chief mourners – wound its way along Lansdown Crescent, down Lansdown Road and Milsom Street, across Pulteney Bridge and along Pulteney Street (passing no. 66, where it is likely that he stayed during his first months in Bath), and so to the cemetery. The principal shops in the city stayed shut during the funeral, as a mark of respect, and a muffled peal rang out from the Abbey bells.

Since the Duchess was the chief beneficiary under her father's will, the majority of his finest pieces as well as all his books entered the collections at Hamilton Palace.⁴⁹ The Tower and the remainder of its contents were sold in English's sale which started on 20th November 1845 and continued for a further seven days. Another enormous sale took place at the end of July 1848, of the two houses in Lansdown Crescent with the remainder of their contents. At the same time, as Murch reports, the Duchess 'shocked at hearing that her father's beautiful little domain was to be perverted to tea gardens',⁵⁰ bought back the Tower and part of the garden which she presented to Walcot parish as a cemetery. At her wish the pink sarcophagus was re-erected on the spot chosen by Beckford, which was now consecrated ground, and his coffin duly put inside it. There it stands to this day, doubtless in

the company of his two dogs, enclosed by the flanking walls and gateway of the new cemetery,⁵¹ and watched over by the Tower.⁵²

Notes

- 1 Undated letter in French. Quoted in Boyd Alexander, *Life at Fonthill*, 1957, page 340.
- 2 Letter dated 22nd September 1817. Quoted in J. Lees-Milne, *William Beckford*, 1976, page 77.
- 3 Probably on the site of what is now Hope House.
- 4 Lewis Melville, *Life and Letters of William Beckford*, 1910, page 322.
- 5 Lees-Milne, *op. cit.*, page 77.
- 6 *Bath Chronicle*, 2nd July 1823.
- 7 According to Lees-Milne, the Walcot Poor Rate Book for May 1832 gives the owner-occupier of no. 1 Lansdown Place West as Admiral Arthur Lysaght.
- 8 Bath Reference Library, A.L. 248.
- 9 Quoted in *Bath Chronicle* for 28th May 1938.
- 10 The first design is now in the Hornby Library, Liverpool; and the second in the Hunt Collection, Bath Reference Library. I am indebted to Tim Mowl for these references.
- 11 Lees-Milne, *op. cit.*, page 81.
- 12 Sic. Goodridge's spelling.
- 13 Memoir by A.S. Goodridge, A.R.I.B.A., written after his father's death in 1864.
- 14 It fell at 3 p.m. on 21st December 1825, bringing down with it the Great Western Hall and the whole of the Octagon.
- 15 Beckford's oriental fantasy, originally written in French, and begun when he was only twenty two years old.
- 16 Cyrus Redding, *Memorials of William Beckford*, 1859, vol. II, page 307.
- 17 Quoted in Boyd Alexander, *England's Wealthiest Son*, 1962, pages 226-7.
- 18 Published by her in 1893. Later issued as a Kingsmead Reprint.
- 19 Henry Lansdown does not mention the picturesque little Moorish kiosk or summer house built by Beckford at the back of the garden of no. 20, which still exists.
- 20 H.V. Lansdown, *Recollections of the late William Beckford*, page 23. See note 18.
- 21 Probably used to supply much of the stone for building the houses of Lansdown Crescent (1789-91). Maps from 1810 had shown it laid out as 'Lansdown Square', though nothing further had been done to it before Beckford arrived.
- 22 Jerom Murch, *Biographical Sketches of Bath Celebrities*, 1893, page 299. Murch was seven times Mayor of Bath between 1863-92, Alderman, and later knighted. He took an active interest in the planting of Royal Victoria Park, and of his own property of Cranwells where he lived from 1858.

- 23 Lansdown, *op. cit.*, page 24.
- 24 Lansdown, *op. cit.*, page 25.
- 25 G.F. Waagen, *Works of Art and Artists in England*, 1838, Vol. III, pages 114–5.
- 26 Also sold by Beckford to the National Gallery, in 1841.
- 27 Waagen, *op. cit.*, page 120.
- 28 i.e. wainscoted, with beams and recessed panels.
- 29 As well as being auctioneers and undertakers the firm of E. English were also upholsterers and cabinet manufacturers.
- 30 Quoted by courtesy of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.
- 31 Lansdown, *op. cit.*, page 19.
- 32 Lansdown, *op. cit.*, page 18.
- 33 Letter in Bath Reference Library (A.L. 372) dated 26 February 1827.
- 34 Letter to G. Clarke, 1833. Quoted in Melville, *op. cit.*, page 297.
- 35 Summer Hill Place, designed by John Eveleigh for the physician Caleb Hillier Parry.
- 36 Murch, *op. cit.*, page 304.
- 37 Quoted in Melville, *op. cit.*, page 322.
- 38 Lansdown, *op. cit.*, page 16.
- 39 Lansdown, *op. cit.*, page 16.
- 40 Redding, *op. cit.*, page 305.
- 41 In 1930, edited by Guy Chapman.
- 42 Hunt Collection page 171, Bath Reference Library.
- 43 Murch, *op. cit.*, page 304.
- 44 Letter of 17th November 1854, as Appendix to the *Autobiography and Reminiscences of Rev. William Jay*, 1854.
- 45 Letter dated Friday 7th April 1843. Quoted by courtesy of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.
- 46 Redding, *Manuscript*, II, page 48. Quoted in Boyd Alexander, *England's Wealthiest Son*, page 237.
- 47 They always corresponded in French.
- 48 Now at Brodick Castle, Isle of Arran, as is the picture. Illustrated in Lees-Milne, *op. cit.*, page 117.
- 49 Goodridge was commissioned by the Duchess to design a library at Hamilton Palace to house her father's books. This entire collection was later sold, in a series of sales covering 1882–3, and realised an astonishing £73,000.
- 50 Murch, *op. cit.*, page 308.
- 51 Designed and built by Goodridge in 'Byzantine character', and incorporating the railings which had surrounded Beckford's tomb while it was temporarily in Lyncombe Vale Cemetery.
- 52 After many years in use as a chapel for the cemetery, Lansdown Tower was acquired in 1973 by Dr and Mrs L. Hilliard. Now administered under the Beckford Tower Trust, it has been adapted partly as a dwelling and partly to house a small Beckford Museum.