

Turvey House presents a grand, late-Georgian façade to the park (this picture). The elegant library (below right) contrasts with the austerity beyond the green baize door (below left). A screaming man supports a Tudor effigy (bottom)

TURVEY HOUSE, Bedfordshire

Recently opened to visitors, this late-Georgian country house captivates **Roger White** with its simple elegance

Asked to name some fine country houses in Bedfordshire, most people would probably come up with Woburn Abbey and perhaps Wrest Park, but after that they might struggle. It is true that the county is not prime country-house territory, but those two great ducal seats do in fact have a supporting cast of attractive and much less well-known mansions. Among these is certainly the mysterious but impressive Turvey House, which has recently begun to open to visitors for the first time.

Turvey is a late-Georgian building, but a good prelude to looking round it is to visit the neighbouring medieval parish church. Here are found the splendid monuments to the Mordaunt family who owned the estate until 1786 - three Elizabethan Lord Mordaunts, preceded by Sir John Mordaunt and his wife in alabaster; he died in 1506 and his carefully coiffed head lies on a helmet memorably crowned by a screaming man. In 1786 the Mordaunts, who lived at a Jacobean house called Turvey Abbey, ran short of money and sold up to Charles Higgins, who had made his fortune in London. He was a bachelor, and on his death four years later he left the Abbey and part of the estate to his nephew and the rest to John Higgins, the son of a cousin. It was John who is then said to have embarked on building what is now Turvey House.

Precisely when he did so, or which architect he used, is frustratingly unknown, as no plans or documentation survive, but it has to be before his death in 1813. His heir was his son Thomas Charles Higgins, then only 16, who is said to have subsequently gone on the Grand Tour to Italy and returned inspired to remodel his father's house in a rather grander vein - probably before his late marriage in 1838. This is where things become mysterious, because although the entrance side on the north is quite plain and austere, whereas the south side looking over the park is decidedly grand, the mouldings and cornices carry all the way round, and the interior also gives the impression that it is all of a piece. So if the house represents a remodelling by Thomas Charles, it must



have been very thorough and its predecessor must have been pretty modest.

The particular beauty of Turvey's interior is the central staircase hall, domed and top lit. Beyond, occupying the south front, are the drawing room and dining room, both excellent examples of Regency elegance and restraint. On the west side is an attractive specimen of a Georgian gentleman's library, with tiers of bird engravings hung against tobacco-coloured walls, while on the opposite side of the house, beyond the green baize door, service bells and leather fire buckets frame the door through which the servants passed into a sunken passage leading to the coach house and laundry. So, who was the architect of all this? In the absence of documentation, my money would definitely be on the immensely prolific John Nash, whose eventful career ended abruptly with the suspension of work on Buckingham Palace that followed George IV's death in 1830. The impressive south

front has the air, in miniature, of his designs for the palace, while many interior details are closely similar to those found in documented examples of his work.

The present owner's late mother, the last of the Higginses, married into the Hanbury family. Her grandfather-in-law, Thomas Hanbury, had made a fortune in Shanghai before retiring to live in Italy, where he and his brother Daniel created the celebrated gardens at La Mortola; the Chinese connection helps explain the presence of many oriental items in the house □

WHERE AND WHEN

Turvey House (07747-046398; www.turveyhouse.co.uk) is in the village of Turvey, on the A428 west of Bedford; open June 1, 12, 15, 26, 29, July 10, 13, 24, 27, August 7, 10, 21, 24, 26, 2-5pm, last admission 4.30pm. The house is available for weddings and events.