

## Visit to Broomhall House

by Quentin Compton-Bishop

In May, I visited Broomhall House, home of the family of Bruce. Broomhall House is a significant building in the history of Scottish architecture and one of Scotland's grandest houses. It has been a private family home for more than 300 years and continues to be lived in and cared for by the family of King Robert the Bruce.

Broomhall contains an internationally important collection of fine art, artefacts and historic records, including several relating to the time of Thomas Bruce, the 7<sup>th</sup> Earl of Elgin, as British Ambassador in Constantinople (1799-1803).

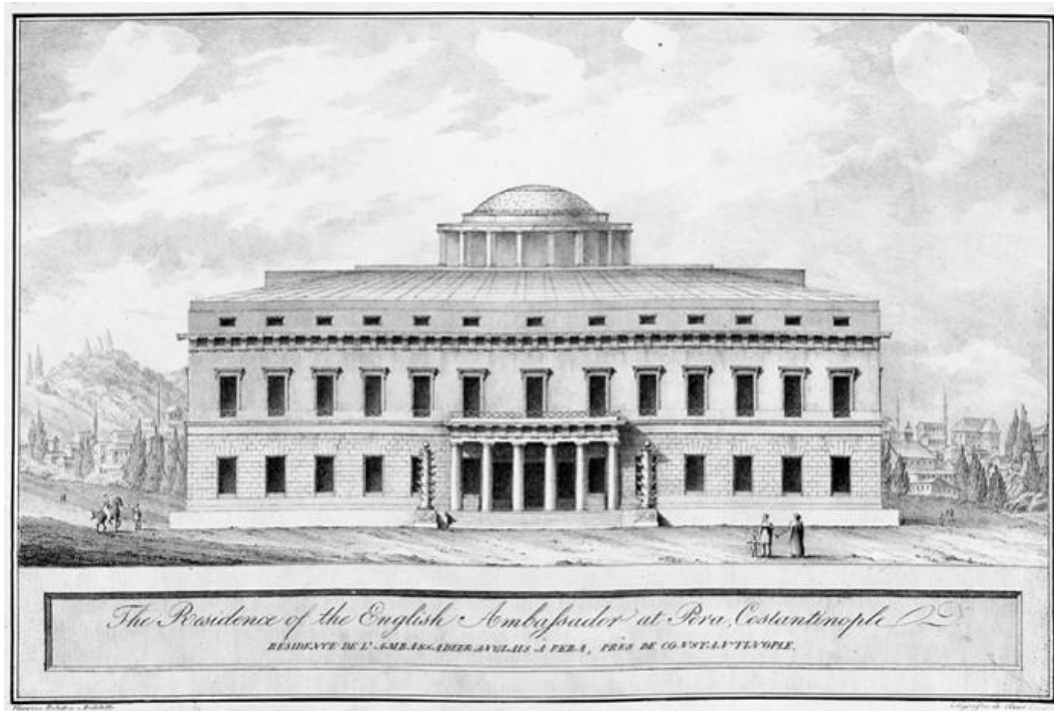
Lord Bruce kindly showed me the architectural drawings for the original Pera House. Before Lord Elgin's appointment as ambassador, the British Embassy was in a dilapidated, rented house in Pera. Elgin determined that the Embassy needed a permanent and more fitting home. With a large site in Pera donated by Sultan Selim III, he commissioned a substantial building from architect Vincenzo Ballestra.



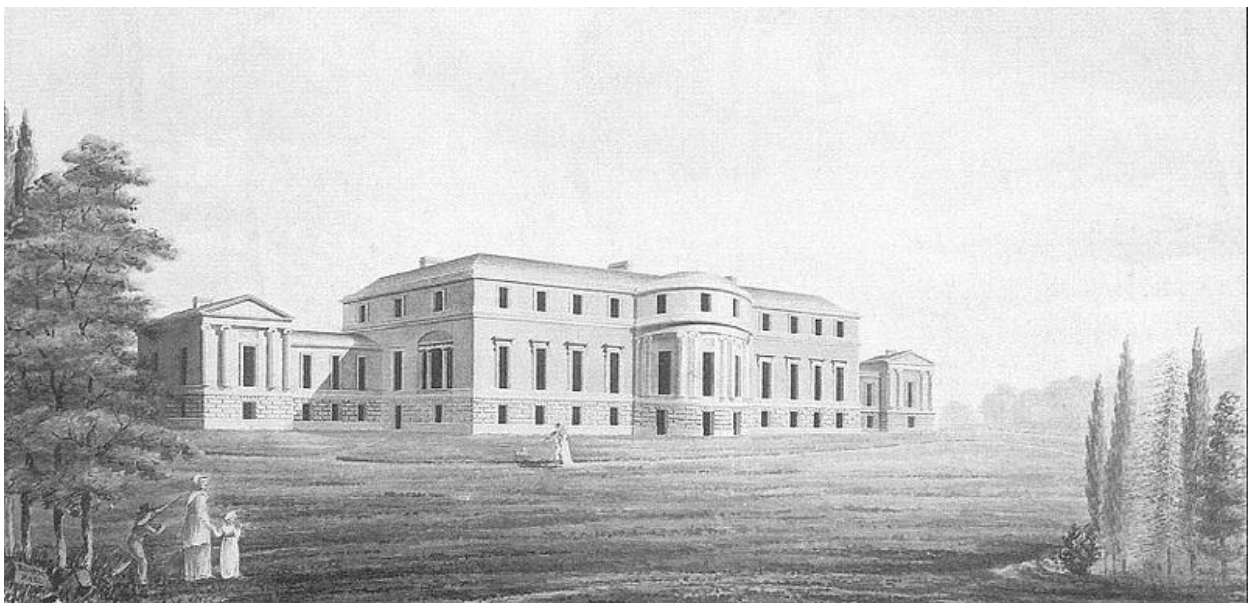
The design was heavily influenced by the finished plan for Broomhall House designed by Thomas Harrison. Most of the design had been executed before the 7<sup>th</sup> Earl left for Istanbul; in effect, Ballestra was simply adapting a blueprint, and turning a contemporary Scottish country house into the first purpose-built British embassy in the world.

Elgin himself was heavily influenced by the Prussian adoption of Greek revival, having served as a minister plenipotentiary in Berlin in the mid-1790s where he would have witnessed the construction of the Brandenburg Gate and other important public buildings. His collection of Winklemann anthologies of classical taste collected at that time are still in the library at Broomhall. Thus the choice of Thomas Harrison, England's leading Greek revival architect of late eighteenth century, to rebuild the 1766 John Adam house at Broomhall, was highly intentional.

An



Engraving of the original Pera House



Broomhall House, Lord Elgin's family seat in Scotland. Drawing by Thomas Harrison, 1799.

Elgin did not get to occupy the new embassy building, however. While the basic structure was complete when he left in 1803, the building was not finished until 1808. It was destroyed in a fire in 1831. The current Pera House, now the British Consulate General in Istanbul, dates from the 1840's.

The Broomhall collection includes correspondence between Elgin and the Levant Company, reporting on his diplomatic role in securing British interests in the region. Although Elgin's appointment as British Ambassador was a Crown appointment, he was also later appointed ambassador for the Levant Company, the last of such appointments.

The Broomhall archive includes all the inventories of diplomatic gifts given to the Sultan. The re-establishment of friendly relations with the Porte was one of the most important British diplomatic missions at the time Elgin was appointed, owing to the existential threat posed by Napoleon's occupation of Egypt. Hence the time and expense devoted to cultivating the Sultan.

In the collection of medals and gifts is the Order of the Crescent (top right in the picture below) which Elgin had designed and fabricated by Rundell & Bridge in London so for the first time the Sultan would be able to decorate his European allies with a conventional symbol of Christian chivalry. Nelson was one of the first recipients.



Nelson by Lemuel Francis Abbott (1799), showing his Order of the Crescent (circled)

Among the many gifts received from the Sultan is the entire equipage for an imperial horse guard - saddle, bridle, stirrups etc. - which is available to see at Broomhall. Such was the favourable relationship that Elgin cultivated, he was also given a string of Arab stallions which were transported to Britain with great difficulty, eventually making their

way into British bloodstock history. Charles Bruce is currently researching this aspect of the diplomatic mission and will be able to expand on this to visiting members.

The National Records of Scotland (NRS) holds the catalogue of Elgin-related documents, including estate papers, business records, and correspondence. However, all the papers are located at Broomhall and only accessible by private arrangement.

Broomhall House has a wealth of other art, objects, photographs and documents which show the history of the Bruce family and their widespread travels over several centuries.

If you are interested in a group tour, please let us know and the LHF would be happy to coordinate a visit, subject to achieving minimum numbers and available dates.

<https://broomhallhouse.com/our-home/>