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## Welbeck Estate. From the Entrails of the Earth John Cavendish-Scott- Bentinck, 5th Duke of Portland (1800-1879)

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The life of the 5th Duke of Portland is the story of the obsession with finding a spot of quiet, a zone free of worry, a place to feel safe. Perhaps he found there, in that natural and unfolded space of the visible world, the forces to overcome his difficulty, to understand the scale of space; that is, the way in which others establish relationships of similarity, distance or closeness with oneself. Following his appointment as heir to this immense state, almost immediately began a series of investments of an unprecedented scale, which have been considered, technically and conceptually, pioneers in the domestic and landscape transformations of the nineteenth century. Welbeck Estate is a double city, one visible and the other hidden, one in surface, constructed with physical materials; the other less obvious, submerged between shadows and natural substances, flows, energies, scales, processes and senses. This is the story of a city transformed from the bowels of the earth, beyond where the laws of reason are suspended. A kind of "other nature", understood as an immaterial unknown with which to reflect on the way things happen in space, and those that happen in time. Spaces and times unfolded and folded over themselves, as materials with which the 5th Duke built this fascinating scenery in which to represent his own life.



**MOLE, INVISIBLE AND  
SOLITARY**

The story of Welbeck Estate's transformation begins at a decisive stage during the succession in 1845, of John William Cavendish-Scott-Bentinck, Marquess of Titchfield as the 5th Duke of Portland. It was he who was responsible for designing

and building the mysterious underground spaces for which these lands are known for and have recently been nominated at the Venice Biennale of Architecture. Thousands of tunnels were

marked by the duke into Welbeck's subsoil, creating a fascinating underground labyrinth of more than 10 km in length which remains hidden beneath the surface of his estate in Sherwood Forest, Nottinghamshire, England.

Legend and myth have woven the history of this enigmatic place, profoundly marked by the extravagant personality of its owner. A figure that, by his trajectory and status, is wrapped in a halo of exceptionality, fictitious or not, deserved or not, which elevates him, without a doubt, to the category of genius. In the archives consulted at the University of Nottingham on the occasion of this investigation, he is referred to several times as the underground man, the mole, the burrow duke, invisible and solitary. His manuscript correspondence reveals a fascinating personality and a most exciting archetype English aristocrat. In one of the very few letters found written by the 6th Duke of Portland referring to the unique life of his predecessor, it is narrated that as he was arriving for the first time at Welbeck's Abbey during Christmas of 1879, just after his death, he found that in order to access the house they had to put temporary boards to go over the swamp of rubble. As they entered the abbey that day, the reception room had no floor; it had collapsed. No doubt the late duke was so absorbed in his ambitious task underground that he forgot what was happening on the surface<sup>1</sup>. He had a curious obsession with concealment and camouflage, which led him away from human contact, to immerse himself for life in the depths of his own land.

Many unconfirmed rumours have surrounded the duke's personality, multiplying in number and fantasy to create an eccentric tale of his life, which without being confirmed, has managed to endure to this day. It is said that he spent most of his life inside his home, concealed within a five room suite and connected to the rest of the world by a system of corridors and caves that stretched out right under his estate.

It's said that this ingenious maze made many of his extravagant requests possible, such as having a freshly roasted chicken at any time of day or night; traveling to London without being seen, using the tunnel that extended to Worksop station tens of miles away from the abbey; servants who ever encountered him in the corridors were forbidden to look into his eyes and had to leave immediately whilst facing the wall. Remarks and anecdotes, some of which we have been able to confirm in the correspondence consulted in the family archives, and others which are part of the constellation of ideas have helped construct the biography of this enigmatic figure<sup>2</sup>.

William John Cavendish Bentinck Scott was born in 1800, the second son of the IV Duke of Portland, known as Lord John Bentinck. At the age of 24, he became the Marquis of Titchfield and future heir to the Duchy as a result of the unexpected death of his eldest brother. With no worries other than horses, racing and hunting, he resigned as a Member of Parliament for King's Lynn and handed over the position to his younger brother, Lord George Bentinck, claiming that his ill health prevented him from participating in public affairs. This is the first indication of the difficulty he had in assuming the expectations according to his social position, deciding from this moment onwards to disappear from the public eye forever.

He was a solitary traveller; after leaving the army, he spent some time travelling alone in Europe. Even when he moved to Italy, he did so without any company. All the preparations for the trip were made previously by his trusted staff. When it became known that he had arrived in the Italian capital, the whole of aristocracy requested a formal visit with the duke. The attention was so disproportionate compared to his habit of solitude that he decided to pull out of Rome's social life, probably to visit the subterranean structures of Villa Adriana. In the archives consulted at the University of Nottingham there are notes kept in which the duke himself, who is overwhelmed and stunned by the number of social visits required, publicly thanks the interest shown but in the end reports that he would be spending a few reclusive weeks in the Roman city to later

return to Paris for a couple of days and immediately proceed to Calais and then back to London. These journeys undoubtedly meant the encounter of something the duke was looking for, the discovery of a space, a hole, a burrow to build and dedicate the rest of his life to.

Other than having an overwhelming enthusiasm for travelling and opera, there aren't many references to his life during these years, which is reflected in a series of letters written in 1842 to the Kemble family which show his kind appreciation towards the world of scenography. Years later, with the death of his father and his appointment as 5th Duke of Portland, he decides to retire from public life and dedicate himself exclusively to the management of his properties in London, Scotland and especially to undertake his plans at Welbeck Estate, an ambitious task that in time will become his only obsession. The story of the transformation of this beautiful landscape enters a decisive stage with his appointment. He will be remembered for having undertaken one of the largest projects of underground domestic architecture in the country and for having dedicated his life to the design and construction of the mysterious underground spaces that are hidden beneath the surface of this incredible place.

The duke always showed great interest in the social and technological advances during his time, an attitude surely learnt from his own father, the 4th Duke of Portland, who brought the steam train to Scotland. His enormous creative qualities made him a gadget inventor, which allowed him to create a life surrounded by the idea of concealment (**fig. 02**). His inventions favoured his own invisibility, from his horse carriage to his own bed. The network of tunnels that are hidden under Welbeck built a kind of scenery for life in which its actors, spaces and objects could appear and disappear in a ritual launched day after day. A sort of magician whose innate technical virtuosity is put at disposal of his only obsession: to live without being seen. Even to this day, when visiting this place, you can perceive his thirty-four year reign, from 1845 to 1879, which made Welbeck a national reference as a place full of life and prosperity.

There are many doubts about the true causes underlying his obsession with camouflage and concealment; amongst the family papers we find some letters that could justify this attitude. Many have been the queries, but very few the documented reasons of what many critics have described as a psychological disturbance. The first reason could be for his own personal pleasure to hide, the enjoyment of technical novelties and admiration towards them, as well as an interest in the knowledge and application of these techniques to build a hidden face of his life.

It seems curious to use correspondence as the only form of contact with family members, as well as his circle of agents, managers, foremen, and servants. Thanks to the many letters that are preserved in his archives we know of his health problems. A skin disease in the form of acute psoriasis, which further on is aggravated by an arthritis and terrible neuralgia, leading him away from light and noise.

His curious obsession leads him to invent, with much ingenuity, a whole series of spaces and gadgets, building a kind of invisibility and deception game. A horse carriage specially designed to move around without being seen, trapdoors, double doors, a communication system for the staff, unattainable passages and secret shortcuts. They all built a parallel world, a background in which to establish his life. In the way he dressed, the objects and gadgets designed around his lifestyle, the spaces and corridors hidden under the abbey, the tunnels and caves built under the whole landscape; in all of which invisibility and delusion are a prominent aspect. He always sneaked around, appearing here and there without warning, moving through a functional and suggestive space that he managed to build for himself.

Rumour has it that his first love had never been reciprocal<sup>3</sup>, leading him to a state of rejection towards women and extending to humanity itself. It is said that he rarely walked out in public, when he did, it was always at night. He never greeted back and often accused people for their intrusion in his domains. There's no doubt he preferred to wander beneath the ground, to use that other place, that strange

unfolded space he had built for himself. Architectural mechanisms devised by this what you could call genius, secrets to achieve invisibility that did nothing but increase an interest in revealing his presence. Strategies that gradually made him become a fantasy character, a more and more desirable icon, masked and always hidden.

The curious room that he used during the day shows his wit. It was provided with a trapdoor on the floor, by which he could descend underground to wander through the tunnels without anyone noticing his absence. The trapdoor had incorporated a reversible opening and closing system, which meant he could walk hidden beneath his estate and reappear in the abbey as mysteriously as he had left it. In addition, the room also had another access door to the anteroom; it was this that served as a communication link to his service. There were two small mailboxes on the door and in which he wrote the orders that had to be carried out. The duke wrote on paper what he needed and deposited it in the mailbox, which opened from the anteroom. Then a bell rang, warning service that a certain order should be executed.

The bed in this room had also been designed by him and built in the estate workshops. Its structure was an immense square construction, a kind of box in the middle of an empty room; a huge piece of furniture, a hideout, a place of intimacy. The bed had large vertical boards arranged in such a way that when they unfolded, it was impossible to know if the bed was occupied by its owner. Concealments, traps and deceptions, objects and spaces, truths that pretend to be lies and lies that pretend to be truths, these are the phenomena present in his life. The result is a camouflaged room; a cluster of ticks practiced by a human and the objects that surrounded his behaviour.

William John Cavendish Bentinck Scott, fifth Duke of Portland, Marquis of Titchfield, Earl of Portland, Viscount Woodstock, Baron of Cirencester and Coheir to the Barony of Ogle, of Welbeck Abbey, Nottinghamshire; Fullarton House, Ayrshire; Langwell Goldspie, Caithness; Bothal Castle, Northumberland, and Harcourt House, Cavendish Square, London, died in 1879, reached almost eighty years of life. He spent his last years hiding amongst his people, hidden in the depths of his world, where he died strolling on a rainy December afternoon. That was his last journey, a last immersion as a farewell. As he himself used to end his letters of condolence,

Peace to his ashes.

#### BLACK EARTH

John William Cavendish-Scott-Bentinck, fifth Duke of Portland, transformed his home into an extension of his own personality and behaviour. Even at the risk of transmitting information that may be frivolous, we've tried to show a certain attitude of exceptionality in his way of life. At Welbeck Estate, personality and architecture are intertwined, obsession and engineering, showing the indelible mark of its owner. It is a tailor-made set, full of objects and strategies that can't be generalized. His home and by extension his estate, became an authentic laboratory of architectural experimentation in which to leave his own non-transferable mark. He turned his estate into a gigantic invisibility mechanism, transformed his property into a double city, visible and constructed with materials from earth's crust and installed into the landscape. Unfolded and inverted, hidden in a lower strata, becoming part of a submerged world, immaterial and invisible. The Duke used an extensive repertoire of tactics and hidden spaces, technical solutions of disguise surely learnt from his love for opera<sup>4</sup>.

Welbeck Estate is unveiled as a constructed scenery, a magical ritual of approach and invisibility that turns fantasy into reality (**fig. 03**). This is a mysterious city, as a top hat or a theater stage, in which dreams and secrets overlap to create an indivisible part of everyday reality (**fig. 04**). Seeing this city in action is a fascinating

experience, attending with naturalness and emotion to unexplainable situations, things never seen before that defies all logic. The way the duke made possible, for example, the dream of owning simultaneously in the same house several of different styles and time periods, concentric and hidden in their interstices; or better yet, different houses that converge into one. The result has been that of an architecture communicated by temporary spaces<sup>5</sup>, labyrinths and corridors, which as in the real transported man allow us to decide at any moment the desired occupation.

Holes and gates, hollows, dips, roads and shortcuts, intersect to lead to the same place or to different places, they only make sense when drawn together. We could access through a nineteenth-century hole and appear in the twenty-first century, or the other way round as if we were in a time tunnel with which we could reach the origins of the family itself. A built scenery that connects time and history; Doors that lead us to unusual spaces, tunnels for nobility and its servants, mechanisms and scenic devices capable of sheltering, surprising and entertaining the monarchy itself (fig. 05).

Welbeck Abbey retains a beautiful history, having had various owners throughout time. Initially retained by Sweyn Saxon before the Norman invasion, it became after the conquest Chuckney's manor house, who founded the abbey, dedicating it to St. James during the reign of Henry II. Four hundred years later, the abbey was partially destroyed along with other similar institutions throughout the country. After several decades in which we have been able to identify several owners, it finally falls into the hands of the Cavendish family, who ends up turning it into a noble mansion. As proof of the importance the property acquires from this moment on are two visits between 1619 and 1663, captured in the family archives. On one occasion King James visited Sir William Cavendish, later King Charles I himself was invited for a few days of entertainment at Welbeck Abbey, some notes speak of *such an excess at the banquet, it had never been seen before in England*.

Especially interesting are the paragraphs dedicated to the description of hydraulic elevators. A technically complex mechanism used for the vertical movement and manipulation of large furniture and heavy objects, as well as to link the kitchens to the dining room and bedrooms. This network of vertical ducts continued under the main building, extending all over the territory through the underground tunnels where rails were arranged for the displacement of this curious domestic machinery. Inside the abbey, this contraption's functioning and size is comparable to that of a narrow-gauge streetcar, ending at the vertical communication systems, to where the small carriages were driven to carry away food. Iron cabinets were arranged in each anteroom to keep the food warm until it was required for consumption in the adjoining rooms.

We are undoubtedly standing before one of the 5th Duke of Portland's most ingenious inventions, it allows not only to supply the abbey with warm dishes, but also favours the entry and exit of other objects (furniture, works of art, fuel, etc.) and service personnel, without interfering with the normal functioning of the building. Without a doubt his mind is exceptional; It's the mind of a genius, of a wizard who pursues and insists on the discovery and surprise of staging. It is the mind of an architect, of an engineer who ingeniously projects pieces for this complex stage machinery.

This underground passage, which connects the abbey to the old Riding School, is entered by using a trapdoor, an architectural shortcut that is opened by a huge crank. Only those who have had access to this room have an idea of its proportions, its richness and the amazing sensation that one has when accessing it. During the time of the duke it was used as a riding school but currently its use is more noble, serving as a museum and art room, in which they hang long threads of selected paintings. This room must have hundreds of pictures, treasured portraits and landscapes by famous artists. The floor is polished oak, very dark and shimmering, and the ceiling, white and thick, carved to represent a glorious intense sky.

This is undoubtedly the greatness of this space, compared to what could be expected, its value is in its trick, in what can't be seen. This spatial mechanism emitted a gravitational force so great that it left all the attendants absolutely amazed. In a handwritten letter found in the archives narrates: "A servant precedes us, showing us the way to the Ballroom. We follow him through a dimly lit corridor that looks more like a theatres elevator than a stately house. We have entered from the park through a kind of covered lodge, in which several carts await the entrance ritual. The sounds of the dance are filtered, like a joyful noise in the street; the echo of a wave of applause resounds from within the earth, and as if fleeing from them the duke appears, hurrying up that ramp; we descended from our carriage and without knowing very well how it happened, he disappeared before our eyes". Without a doubt the duke turned this theatricality into his signature and way of life. His home is an extension of his behaviour, it's a stage, as big and complex as that of an opera, in which a certain subjectivity unfolds, an incredible space, unfolded and parallel; A territory of real architectural experimentation.

This architecture, this extraordinary space in which the visible and the hidden seem to get confused, shares some of its strategies with those of a theatrical stage. A double bottom filled with tensions and articulations, a double world offered as a game to which one feels invited to. This territory ceases to just be a place in which to install privacy, to become a space for its own representation, with which to introduce itself to the world to foment its myth. Even to this day it impresses when visited and Robert activates before us some of the mechanisms with which we can recreate in our imagination its function. Levers, pulleys and platforms that we've seen located all throughout the duke's buildings; Ingenious encounters between the underground tunnels and the built spaces on the surface (fig. 06).

#### CONCLUSIONS, INVERTED TOPOGRAPHY

The main author of this story, the reader and the secondary characters intertwine in order to show the boundaries between fiction and reality. The obsessive work of a person suffering from a skin disease, trying to live without being seen, moving in the interstices of his estate, in a double world invented for his own life. The story's pulse coexists with the vertigo raised by the 5th Duke, about the possibility of transforming the laws of physics that govern our idea of movement, time and space. At Welbeck Estate these laws seem to be suspended and reveal the ineffectiveness of what sustains them. The main character's movement is multiplied in a whole series of heterodox actions that modify the notions of space and time. Everything that happens in this narrative creates a kind of domestic scenery that conspires against the world as we know it (fig. 07).

The renovations by the fifth Duke of Portland at Welbeck Estate can be considered, technically and conceptually, pioneers in the evolution of nineteenth century country houses. Welbeck is the best example of Chase and Levenson's theory of theatricalized domestic spaces<sup>7</sup>, of this kind of spectacle of intimacy, of a domestic architecture conceived as a scenographic mechanism that allows the public exposure of its owner's life. The duke claims the thickness of earth, the underground as a private place, a burrow, a hole in which to keep his own privacy with zeal (fig. 08). A new space associated with home, a hidden and buried super structure, which has become a model of architectural landscape. The corridors and cells network has reached, with the Duke's projects, the largest domestic dimensions known to date, turning the ground of his estate into a space of voluntary occupation, a labyrinth of connections and territorial relations that extends without limits under his estate (fig. 09).

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### Notes

01. ADLAM, D., *Tunnel Vision. The Enigmatic 5th Duke of Portland*, Welbeck Estate, The Harley Gallery, 2013, p. 16.

02. BLAINEY, A., *Fanny and Adelaide. The Lives of the Remarkable Kemble Sisters*, Price, Ed. Bargain, 2001, p. 34.

03. FREEMAN-KEEL, T., *The Disappearing Duke: The Intriguing Tale of an Eccentric English Family-The Story of the Mysterious 5th Duke of Portland*, Londres, Seek Publishing, 2005, p. 56.

04. GARCÍA, T., *Cartografías del Espacio Oculto. Laboratorio de experimentación arquitectónica* (Tesis doctoral no publicada), Sevilla, Universidad de Sevilla, 2017.

05. KOOLHAAS, R., *Corridor, en Elements of architecture*, Venecia, La Biennale di Venezia, 2014, p. 72.

06. BRADBURY, D., *Welbeck Abbey. Treasures*, Nottingham, Ed. Bradbury, 1962, p. 62.

07. CHASE, K., *The Spectacle of Intimacy. A Public Life for the Victorian Family*, p. 58, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2000.

08. AA.VV., *Enric Miralles; 1972-2000*, Fundación Arquia, Barcelona, 2011, p. 81.

09. GARCÍA, T., *Underground Welbeck*, Universidad de Sevilla, Sevilla, 2017. La maqueta fue elaborada por los alumnos de la asignatura Proyectos 9, dentro del proyecto docente de la asignatura para el curso 2016-2017.

### Images

01. Welbeck Tunnel Run, 2015. The author prefers not to disclose his identity, 2015.

02. Welbeck Abbey, 1860.

03. The Portland Collection, Harley Gallery, Welbeck Estate.

04. Walks by Welbeck Estate. Burrows and tunnels.

05. Underground nature, Welbeck Estate.

06. Underground nature, abandoned infrastructures.

07. Welbeck Estate, The image shows the interior of this inverted nature. Open model, DM 10 mm, laser cut, closed dimensions 300x180 cm.

08. Architectural natures.

09. Welbeck Estate, The image shows the interior of this inverted nature. Open model, DM 10mm, laser cut, closed dimensions 300x180 cm.