

Summer 2008

# Reviewed Work(s): The Renaissance Villa in Britain 1500–1700 by Malcolm Airs and Geoffrey Tyack

John E. Moore

*Smith College*, [jmoore@smith.edu](mailto:jmoore@smith.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.smith.edu/art\\_facpubs](https://scholarworks.smith.edu/art_facpubs)

Part of the [Architecture Commons](#), and the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Moore, John E., "Reviewed Work(s): The Renaissance Villa in Britain 1500–1700 by Malcolm Airs and Geoffrey Tyack" (2008). Art: Faculty Publications, Smith College, Northampton, MA.  
[https://scholarworks.smith.edu/art\\_facpubs/10](https://scholarworks.smith.edu/art_facpubs/10)

This Book Review has been accepted for inclusion in Art: Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Smith ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@smith.edu](mailto:scholarworks@smith.edu)



---

Review

Reviewed Work(s): *The Renaissance Villa in Britain 1500–1700* by Malcolm Airs and Geoffrey Tyack

Review by: John E Moore

Source: *Renaissance Quarterly*, Vol. 61, No. 2 (Summer 2008), pp. 649–651

Published by: The University of Chicago Press on behalf of the Renaissance Society of America

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1353/ren.0.0027>

Accessed: 09-07-2018 15:52 UTC

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

*Renaissance Society of America, The University of Chicago Press* are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Renaissance Quarterly*

Malcolm Airs and Geoffrey Tyack, eds. *The Renaissance Villa in Britain 1500–1700*.

Reading: Spire Books Ltd., 2007. 276 pp. + 13 color pls. index. illus. bibl. \$70. ISBN: 978-1-904965-13-8.

The thirteen essays in this volume originated as conference papers delivered in January 2005 at Rewley House, headquarters of the Oxford University Department of Continuing Education. Most contributors are professionally engaged in

historic preservation in England, and several have important publications to their credit.

Some authors grapple with the apparently exiguous evidence that would permit one to answer questions implied by the volume's title. For example, was there a stable or changing villa culture in "Britain" and, if so, did that phenomenon relate to humanist-inflected dialogues in Italy? There, from the fifteenth century forward, explicitly revived ideas (and ideals) of *otium* and *negotium* limned a contrast between restorative rural pleasures and enervating urban pressures powerfully articulated by ancient Roman writers, among them Pliny the Younger and Cicero. The *Oxford English Dictionary* dates a first usage of the word *villa* to Thomas Coryat in 1611, as three authors point out. Among that triad, Paula Henderson engages "the idea of the villa" (25) and demonstrates that "William Thomas, a Welshman who [in 1549] published the first history of Italy written in the English language," used the word at least once (26). She also argues convincingly that Tudor and early Stuart lodges should be understood as villas.

For Nicholas Cooper, the city-versus-country trope goes hand in hand with acquired wealth and the desire to temporarily escape the downsides of city life. By culling data from Surrey hearth-tax records and from a map of Middlesex, he sites houses whose occupants were both "citizens and gentlemen" (12) and broadens his analysis of social rank and building activities to other parts of England. Five surviving houses close to London productively occupy Caroline Knight, whereas Paul M. Hunneyball surveys nine London merchants' country retreats in Hertfordshire, the county immediately north of Middlesex and thus a comfortable ride from the capital. Lee Prosser and Lucy Worsley turn an archaeologically informed eye to Kew Palace, built in 1631 for the Huguenot merchant Samuel Fortrey, its fabric revealed in 2006 after a ten-year campaign of repair and restoration. Looking at the plans of some twenty English houses and examining "the fundamental idea of the villa as a compact house" (89), Patricia Smith traces different yet concurrent modes of disposing interior space. Through fresh, focused readings of seventeenth-century graphic sources, including Inigo Jones's manuscript annotations of Palladio's treatise, Gordon Higgott offers a new and revelatory look at the design history of the Queen's House at Greenwich. Charles McKean cites passages from "The Country Seat," a poem written in 1727 by the Scotsman Sir John Clark, who had visited Lord Burlington's Chiswick, then a spanking new structure explicitly conceptualized as a villa. McKean argues that "later Jacobean villas" (87) constructed near Glasgow, Dundee, Edinburgh, and elsewhere in Scotland embody, *avant la lettre*, themes elaborated in Clark's literary production.

Sally Jeffrey relates that "in 1669 John Aubrey sat down with his watercolours and a small book of paper, and made some sketches of his house and garden at Easton Piercy in Wiltshire," and that the "title page was decorated with a cartouche which featured the word *villa* prominently surrounded by quotes from Ovid and Virgil" (111). Sadly, she lost an opportunity to explain in detail how a virtuoso specifically appropriated the legacy of Latin literature. Throughout this book, I wondered if anyone had ever used the Latin word *villa* during the chronological

period under scrutiny. Daunting though it would doubtless be to answer that rhetorical question, to pose it seems worthwhile. That said, Charles McKean should have returned to the original Latin text of inscribed “stone tablets” (73) at Pinkie, near Edinburgh; there, Alexander Seton, a fascinating Scottish humanist and architectural patron, indeed wrote *villam*.

Here, the authors’ collective achievement is twofold, in that they isolate recurring design patterns and evoke prevailing social purposes among buildings identified as villas for argument’s and convenience’s sake. Does it beg the question to call every small-scale English country house a villa? The authors bring to bear little evidence to suggest that sixteenth- and seventeenth-century patrons — among them aristocrats both male and female, customs farmers, financiers, goldsmiths, haberdashers, mercers, merchants, secretaries to the Treasury, tallow-chandlers, vintners, and a Puritan — intended to commission residences meant, somehow, to recall those ancient Roman or contemporary Italian prototypes, three-dimensional or textual, constitutive of the villa. In his contribution, Pete Smith notes that in 1665, Christopher Wren called the châteaux of Chantilly, Maisons, and Vaux-le-Vicomte, among others he studiously visited, villas. Words, it seems, are decidedly multivalent, and in England, before 1700, explicit classical references may simply have played a diminished, restricted, or no role at all in how city dwellers constructed country lives.

JOHN E. MOORE  
Smith College