

**A Fairy Palace in Devon:  
Redcliffe Towers, built by Colonel Robert Smith (1787-1873), Bengal Engineers  
By Diane James**

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Figure 1. The Hotel Redcliffe (Redcliffe Towers), Paignton, Devon, early 20th century.  
© The Redcliffe Hotel.

The eccentric building Redcliffe Towers (see figure 1), built on the edge of a cliff in Devon, is now a well-known landmark in the town of Paignton. It was constructed by Colonel Robert Smith in 1852-64 after his retirement from the East India Company (EIC) and a sojourn in Italy where he married a French heiress. Smith, an engineer and artist, was not a member of the landed gentry, however, he used his talents to rise through the ranks of the Bengal Army in India, from Cadet to Colonel. Smith left the Company with just an army pension, and it is likely he would have been unable to build Redcliffe Towers without the gain of a considerable inheritance upon the death of his wife. This case study records Robert Smith's journey to India, to Europe and his final days spent in Devon, where he constructed his fairytale fortress, Redcliffe Towers. In doing so it contributes to the *East India Company at Home* project by demonstrating the ways in which EIC officials' engagements with the subcontinent through practices such as drafting, building, painting and drawing, distinctly shaped the British homes they built on their return.

## Background and Training

Robert Smith's early family life not only shaped the direction of his later career, but also the locations and houses in which he settled once retired. Although primarily based in the busy, cosmopolitan port of Bideford, Devon, Robert Smith's family frequently journeyed out to Europe and India.<sup>1</sup> In consequence, while two of his brothers were born in India, Smith (see figure 2)—the third son of James and Mary Smith—came to be baptised in Nancy, France, on 13 September 1787.<sup>2</sup> The family enjoyed early connections to the EIC: trained as a lawyer, Smith's father also worked at one time as private secretary to the Marquis of Hastings.<sup>3</sup> Understandably therefore, when the Smith family later moved to an artists' district (Newman Street, off Oxford Street) in London, and financial pressures meant that the sons had to seek employment, the expanding East India Company seemed the perfect choice.<sup>4</sup> Robert Smith, aged sixteen years, enlisted as a Cadet in 1803, following his older brothers, James and John, to India, while his younger brother, Edward, joined the Company in 1815.<sup>5</sup> Robert Smith became an Ensign in April 1805, soon transferring from the Infantry



to the Engineers, which proved a pivotal decision as he was rarely posted to the front-line of hostilities.<sup>6</sup> Tragically, of the four sons who went out to India, joining as Ensigns and rising to at least the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel, all, except Robert died there.<sup>7</sup>

Figure 2. Jivan Ram, Raja (Raja Jirvan Raja), *Portrait of Robert Smith, Bengal Engineers*, c.1830, oil painting. © British Library Board, Foster 870.

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<sup>1</sup> V. C. P. Hodson, *List of the Officers of the Bengal Army 1758-1834*, 4, 4 (London: Phillimore & Co. Ltd, 1947), p. 133; Raymond Head, *Redcliffe & Colonel Robert Smith: A History of the Redcliffe Hotel and its Original Designer* (Torquay: Redcliffe Hotel, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> Head, *Redcliffe & Robert Smith*; Bideford Parish Register.

<sup>3</sup> Raymond Head, *Colonel Robert Smith (1787-1873) and Redcliffe*, (The Torbay Civic Society, [n.d.]).

<sup>4</sup> Head, *Redcliffe & Robert Smith*.

<sup>5</sup> Hodson, *List of the Officers*, p. 133; BL IOR/MIL/9/112: 1802-1803, *Cadet papers for Robert Smith*.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*; Reginald Henry Phillimore, *Historical Records of the Survey of India*, 4, 2 (Dehra Dun: Surveyor General of India, 1950), p.442. Smith transferred from Infantry to Engineers in June 1805.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

Smith began his military training at the EIC's Great Marlow Academy.<sup>8</sup> As the Company expanded into new territories in India, surveying and accurate mapping skills were imperative to assist revenue collection, administrative function, and later military campaigns.<sup>9</sup> The drawing masters at Great Marlow, including William De La Motte (1775-1863) and William Alexander (1767-1816), ensured their pupils became proficient in drafting accurate maps, fortification, sketching in the field, and painting topographical watercolours and panoramas.<sup>10</sup> Although influenced by the Picturesque paintings of William (1769-1837) and Thomas Daniell (1749-1840) and William Hodges (1744-1797), Smith developed his own style, and was one of many soldiers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, who took up drawing as part of their leisure activities, and showed evidence of accomplished draughtsmanship.<sup>11</sup> Throughout his time in India, Smith was a prodigious artist, both for work and leisure, depicting India's scenery, architecture and culture. As an engineer Smith worked on a variety of projects, but he was also called upon at times to be both an artist and a fighting soldier. These differing strands of his career influenced his later architectural endeavours.

## Experiences in India

Having arrived in Calcutta in 1805 and joined the Bengal Engineers, Smith was first employed building infrastructure: bridges and roads, and later a lighthouse at Kijri, Diamond Harbour, near Calcutta.<sup>12</sup> Although promoted to Lieutenant and seeing action with the Bengal force capturing Mauritius from the French, 1810-1811, his flair for surveying did not go unnoticed.<sup>13</sup> A report by the Surveyor General suggested Smith was 'by far the best draughtsman I am acquainted with. His masterly rapid pencil particularly qualifies him for survey of the Frontier, as he will be able to delineate the passes and surrounding country with the greatest correctness.'<sup>14</sup> Between 1812 and 1813 Smith joined the camp of the Commander-in-Chief, Sir George Nugent (1757-1849), for his tour of Upper India. At this time, Smith's sketches were commented on by Lady Nugent (1771-1834), who noted in her diary that 'Just as day dawned, we crossed the Jumna. ... I took the engineer officer, Mr.

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<sup>8</sup> *Torquay Herald Express* (12 September 2001), p. 19.

<sup>9</sup> Mildred Archer, 'An Artist Engineer: Colonel Robert Smith in India (1805-1830)', *The Connoisseur* (February 1972), p. 79.

<sup>10</sup> Luke Herrmann, 'Delamotte, William (1775-1863)', and Richard Garnett, 'Alexander, William (1767-1816)', rev. Heather M. MacLennan, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>11</sup> See Rosie Dias, 'Memory and the Aesthetics of Military Experience: Viewing the Landscape of the Anglo-Mysore Wars', *Tate Papers*, Issue 19, <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/memory-and-aesthetics-military-experience-viewing-landscape-anglo>, accessed 16 October 2013. See also Jennifer Howes, *Illustrating India: the Early Colonial Investigations of Colin Mackenzie (1784-1821)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p.14.

<sup>12</sup> Head, *Redcliffe & Robert Smith*; A. W. Skempton (ed.), *A Biographical Dictionary of Civil Engineers in Great Britain and Ireland* (London: Thomas Telford Publishing, 2002) p. 637.

<sup>13</sup> Skempton, *Dictionary of Civil Engineers*, p.637.

<sup>14</sup> *Survey of India Records*, transferred from Dehra Dūn to NAI., New Delhi, 1947, 126, p.134, 9 April 1812 by Surveyor General, quoted in Phillimore, *Historical Records*, p. 442.

Smith, with me, and we projected a drawing of the line of march, which will be a treasure to me, if he executes it according to my plan, and I have little doubt of its being quite perfect, by what I have seen of his drawings' (see figure 3).<sup>15</sup>

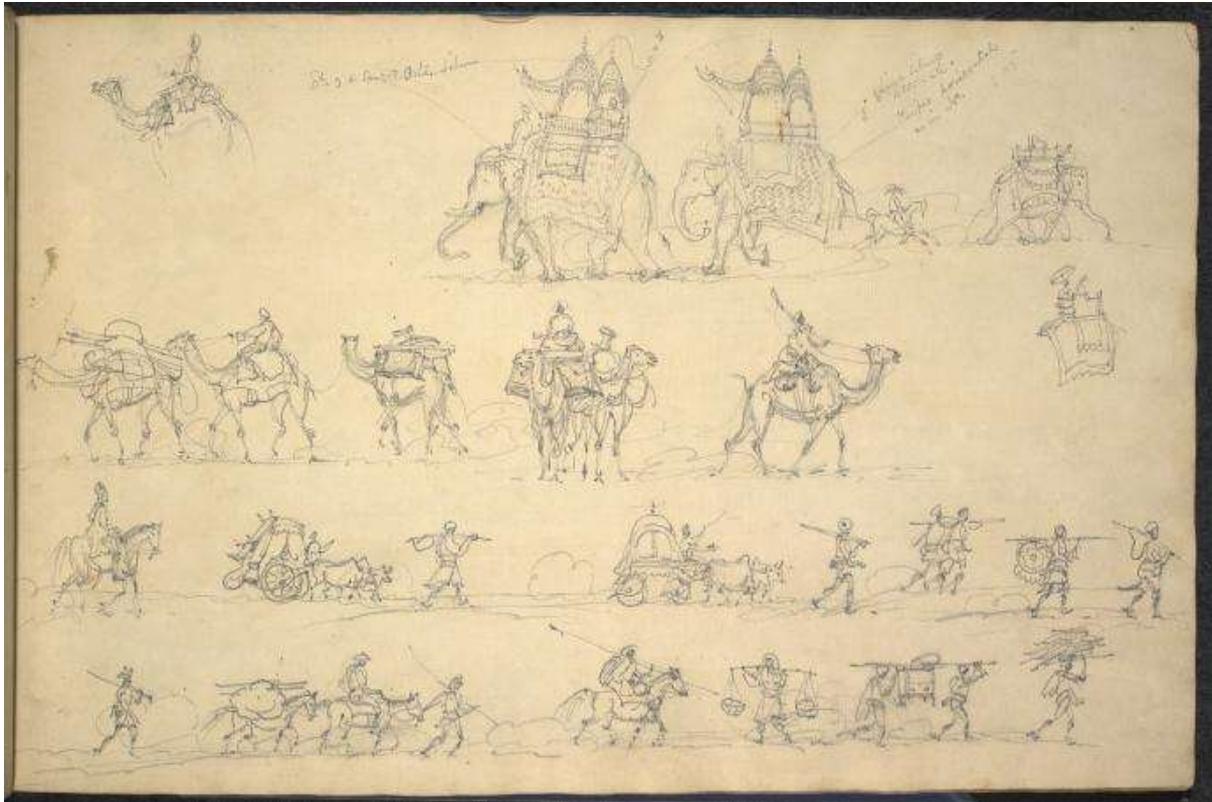


Figure 3. Robert Smith (1787-1873), *Sketches of the Line of March with Elephants, Camels, Hackeries[bullock drawn carriages], horsemen and coolies*, 1814, pencil on paper. © British Library Board, WD312 f.25v.

In action again during the Nepal War, 1815-16, Smith gained the India medal, however, after these arduous tours of duty, illness took its toll.<sup>16</sup> He was appointed Superintending Engineer to Prince of Wales Island (Penang) in 1816, a convalescent facility for the personnel of Madras and Bengal, and vital for Smith's recuperation.<sup>17</sup> Smith completed many watercolours of the main places of interest, before leaving on furlough to England from July 1819 until October 1822. While in London he visited William Daniell who agreed to engrave

<sup>15</sup> Lady Maria Nugent, *A Journal from the Year 1811 Till the Year 1815, Including a Voyage to and Residence in India with a Tour to the North-Western parts of the British Possessions in that Country under the Bengal Government*, 2, 1 (London, 1839), p. 395.

<sup>16</sup> Hodson, *List of the Officers*, p. 133.

<sup>17</sup> He was first appointed to the post in 11th November 1814, however, his posting was postponed due to his military tour with Lord Moira, and his involvement in the Nepal War. Bombay General Orders (BGO) 11 November 1814, quoted in Hodson, *List of the Officers*, p. 133; Phillimore, *Historical Records*, p. 442; Archived Lot: 1036. Auction: 22 September 2006. Dix Noonan Webb, Auctioneers <http://www.dnw.co.uk>, consulted 19 September 2013.

his paintings, making ten aquatints which were privately published in 1821 as *Views of Prince of Wales Island*, the only public display of Smith's art.<sup>18</sup>



Figure 4. Robert Smith, *Barrackpore House*, 1815-1819, Oil on canvas, 13 x 20.5 cm (estimated).  
© British Library Board, F864.

On his return to India in 1822, Smith continued to paint and sketch the military life around him, for instance the soldiers at the flagstaff and the mansion at Barrackpore (see figure 4). He was appointed Garrison Engineer and Executive Officer at Delhi in December 1822 (and at a later date Major), in order that he might complete work on many of the ancient Mughal monuments, including the Red Fort (see figure 5), Jama Masjid, and Qutub Minar), walls and canals, in need of renovation.<sup>19</sup> Working with red sandstone and Indian topography proved to be defining for Smith's career and inspirational for his painting and later architectural designs in continental Europe and Britain.

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<sup>18</sup> Archer, 'An Artist Engineer', p. 81. It must also be noted that Smith was not alone in publishing his art, several East India Company Officers published engravings of their watercolour landscapes as an aspect of their private trading, for instance Captain R. H. Colebrooke, an East India Company surveyor, published *Twelve Views of Places in the Kingdom of Mysore, with Descriptions, and a Brief Detail of the Operations of the Army under Marquis Cornwallis* (1794), engraved by the English artist John William Edy. For more on this see Thomas Egerton, *A Catalogue of an Extensive Collection of Books: in all Languages and Every Branch of Science and Literature* (Whitehall (London): Thomas Egerton Military Library, 1796), p.396.

<sup>19</sup> Skempton, *Dictionary of Civil Engineers*, p.637.



Figure 5. The Red Fort, Delhi, India. Photograph by Diane James © 2014.

## Building in India

To cope with the climatic conditions old houses or ruins in India were often adapted for habitation, as many were constructed with *tykhanas* (underground rooms) which gave respite from the searing summer heat when temperatures typically rose to 40°C. Sir Thomas Metcalfe (1795-1853), the British Resident in Delhi during the 1840s noted that in his Presidential House in Delhi the 'Principal Teh-Khanah or under Ground Apartment [was] occupied during the Hottest Months of the Year'.<sup>20</sup> Smith was put in charge of renovating a house on the city wall between the Kashmir and Calcutta Gates overlooking the River Jumna. The house had been built by 1805 for William Fraser (1784-1835), Assistant British Resident to Delhi, on a site once occupied by the Mughal Palace of Ali Mardan Khan (d. 1657), a noble at the Emperor Shah Jahan's court, said to have laid out the gardens of the Taj Mahal and built the Qutub Minar.<sup>21</sup> Fraser, suggested to have 'gone native', gave up

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<sup>20</sup> British Library: RP 3041 (microfilm), Sir Thomas Metcalfe, *Reminiscences of Imperial Dehlie* Album. Facsimile published as M. M. Kaye (ed.), *The Golden Calm and English Lady's Life in Moghul India* (Exeter: Webb and Bower, 1980), ff. 84v-85r.

<sup>21</sup> See Charles Cramer-Roberts, *Notes on The Taj Mahal and Its Garden*, 1884, British Library online gallery: <http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/onlineex/apac/other/019wdz000002131u00000000.html> consulted 19 September 2013.

eating pork and beef, grew a Rajput beard, and kept a harem of six or seven wives.<sup>22</sup> By 1819 the bungalow-style house was vacant, and during the 1820s Robert Smith took occupation of it. The extant building is an amalgam of British and Indian style architecture; a low central block, with a later domed roof and octagonal corner towers (see figure 6).



Figure 6. Robert Smith's bungalow (known as William Fraser bungalow), Delhi, India.  
Photograph by Diane James © 2014.

Visiting on 2 February 1828, Major Archer noted that 'the view from Major Smith's terrace looking towards the palace and the Selim Gurh, is very beautiful'.<sup>23</sup> Archer was extremely interested in the tykhana of the house:

We went to see the Ty-Kounahs, or underground houses, forming part of Major Smith's residence ... they are formed in the walls of the ramparts, which being of great solidity completely exclude all heat ... The one now under mention doubtless belonged at some time in the past to a man of great station or wealth; the descent to the apartment was about thirty feet, and the surprise and pleasure were equal, to find such beautiful rooms

<sup>22</sup> Aleck and William Fraser's letters in the Moniack House archive, quoted in William Dalrymple, *City of Djinn: a Year in Delhi* (London: Harper Perennial, 2005), pp. 100-109.

<sup>23</sup> Major Edward Archer, *Tours in Upper India and in Parts of the Himalaya Mountains*, 1, 2 (London, Richard Bentley, 1833), pp. 107-109.

and so elegantly arranged and furnished. Coloured to resemble marble, the eye is first deceived by the likeness; the deception is countenanced by the coolness, so different from that oppressive sensation always felt above. Long corridors lead to different apartments, embellished with coloured walls, and other decorations, all by the owner's own hands; and it should not be omitted, that many exquisite drawings of places of celebrity in Delhi and its neighbourhood, add to the appearance of this truly fairy palace.<sup>24</sup>

As Sylvia Shorto has noted the extant interior of the tykhana is made up of six rectangular rooms, and another square-shaped room slightly lower beneath, in addition to various other tunnels and rooms now bricked up. One room includes 'a coved bangla ceiling and a deep iwan (seating niche)', with stucco and paint traces.<sup>25</sup> Shorto suggests Smith painted the walls following the Northern Indian tradition of painting interiors, and that he continued this practice in his other houses.<sup>26</sup> It is known from later British sales catalogues that, obsessed by sketching and painting, Smith used wall space to hang his copious paintings of India, and it is possible that these also covered the walls of the tykhana. It is probable that Smith added the two end towers to the bungalow; a central section flanked by octagonal towers with an arcaded gothic loggia (in this case filled in), was emerging as his architectural signature. This design echoed elements of Mughal architecture, the octagonal form often used in towers or bastions on gates or tombs. In the Fraser Bungalow, the upper section of the towers below the balustrading is reminiscent of a cupola Smith designed for the Qutub Minar, exhibiting an experimental mix of styles, which would later become a trademark feature of Smith's building projects.<sup>27</sup>

In March 1823 Smith was selected to survey an ancient Mughal canal, known as the Doab (Jumna) Canal.<sup>28</sup> It had been built in the seventeenth century by Ali Mardan Khan, but due to difficulties with the terrain the canal did not operate fully and had remained unused for many years.<sup>29</sup> In 1825 Smith was joined by a new Assistant Lieutenant, Proby Cautley (1802-1871), who not only became his colleague, but also Smith's friend for life.<sup>30</sup> Both officers were withdrawn from their duties, to take part in the siege and capture of Bharatpore, near Agra, 26 December 1825; Smith, was wounded, and later mentioned in despatches.<sup>31</sup> In September 1827, elevated to Major for his services at Bharatpore, he returned to be in charge of the restoration of the Jama Masjid (see figure 7), the great mosque built in Delhi

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Sylvia Shorto, 'Public Lives, Private Spaces: British Houses in Delhi, 1803-1853', Ph.D. thesis (Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, 2003), p. 132.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p.133.

<sup>27</sup> Shorto, 'Public Lives', p. 131.

<sup>28</sup> Skempton, *Dictionary of Civil Engineers*, p. 637.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Hodson, *List of the Officers*, p. 133. It was reported that Robert Smith, Captain: Sappers and Miners, was awarded a clasp to his India Medal, 'Despatches', *London Gazette*, 10 June 1826.

by the Emperor Shah Jahan (1592-1666).<sup>32</sup> Major Archer, visiting in 1828, observed that 'Major Smith ... is particularly well qualified for the charge of restoring such magnificent relics of art, as much as by his exquisite judgement and taste in the style of the works, as his acknowledged professional talents, which place him among the foremost of his compeers'.<sup>33</sup>



Figure 7. The Eastern Gate of the Jama Masjid, Delhi, India. Photograph by Diane James © 2014.

Smith was promoted to Lieutenant-Colonel in June 1830, but by this time, his health was poor. He left Delhi for Calcutta on his way to Europe, spending his leisure time during February and March 1830 sailing down the river Ganges sketching and painting watercolours, in the Picturesque style, of the scenes around him.<sup>34</sup> The Doab Canal project was finally completed by Proby Cautley in 1830, just after Smith had left India.<sup>35</sup> On furlough at the Cape for eight months from 26 November 1830 Smith officially retired from the Bengal Army in July 1832, was created a Companion of the Bath on 26 September 1831, and later given the rank of Honorary Colonel in November 1854 in recognition of his pioneering engineering work.<sup>36</sup> His retirement pension was £1 per day and, unlike the

<sup>32</sup> Hodson, *List of the Officers*, p. 133.

<sup>33</sup> E. Archer, *Tours in Upper India*, p. 107.

<sup>34</sup> Hodson, *List of the Officers*, p.133; Phillimore, *Historical Records*, p. 442. See Mildred Archer, *The Tranquil Eye: The Watercolours of Colonel Robert Smith [of] a Journey Down the Ganges 1830* (London: Al-Falak and Scorpion Communications and Publications, 1982).

<sup>35</sup> Skempton, *Dictionary of Civil Engineers*, p. 637.

<sup>36</sup> Hodson, *List of the Officers*, p. 133; Phillimore, *Historical Records*, p. 442; Dix Noonan Webb consulted 19 September 2013; BL IOR/Z/E.4/43/S464, *Smith, Lieutenant Colonel Robert Smith, Bombay Infantry created C.B.*

military adventurers or earlier nabobs, no fortune awaited him.<sup>37</sup> Due to the ban on private trading, and the acceptance of gifts, it would have been unusual if he had left the East India Company a wealthy man.

### **Building Projects in Europe**

Unlike his life in India, the years after Smith left the service of the Company are rather obscure. In the 1830s and 1840s he spent time in Italy, marrying a French heiress, Julia Adelaide Vitton de Claude and having a son, Robert Claude born in Venice in 1843.<sup>38</sup> Despite a lack of detail, however, these important events were to have significant consequences for Smith and his architectural projects, which began to take shape quickly after the birth of his child. Soon after 1846, Smith purchased the Villa Mills on the Palatine hill (see figure 8) in Rome.<sup>39</sup> In the sixteenth century the area had consisted of vineyards and gardens, part of the famous Farnese gardens developed by Cardinal Allesandro Farnese.<sup>40</sup> A house was first built on the site by the Stati family, on top of the ruined Domus Augustus, and was later bought in 1818 by Charles Mills (d. 1846), a Scotsman, and the English archaeologist William Gell (1777-1836).<sup>41</sup> In 1824 they restored the villa's small Renaissance open loggia which featured ceiling frescoes painted by Peruzzi, representing the signs of the zodiac, the muses, and other classical subjects.<sup>42</sup> At a later date medallions containing a rose, a thistle and a shamrock were placed on the spandrels of the first floor painted arches, and the entrance gate piers were emblazoned with thistles.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Raymond Head, *The Indian Style*, (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1986), p. 19.

<sup>38</sup> Raymond Head, 'Indian Fantasy in Devon', *Country Life*, May 28. 1981, p. 1524.

<sup>39</sup> Charles Mills died in 1846, so the villa would have been purchased by Smith between 1846 and 1856 when the house was acquired by the Sisters of the Visitation.

<sup>40</sup> Samuel Ball Platner and Thomas Ashby, *A Topographical Dictionary of Ancient Rome* (London: Oxford University Press, 1929), p.1.

<sup>41</sup> Alba della Fazia Amoia and Enrico Iruschini, *Stendhal's Rome: Then and Now* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia E Letteratura 1997), pp. 67-68. Charles Mills' mother was said to claim ancestry from Governor Hamilton of the Leeward Islands, see H. V. Morton, *A Traveller in Rome* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1957), pp.359-362.

<sup>42</sup> H. V. Morton, *A Traveller in Rome* ([n.c.], Methuen Publishing Ltd., 2002), pp. 419. Peruzzi was one of the leading artists in Rome c.1520. *Collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, <http://www.metmuseum.org/collections/search-the-collections/437274> consulted 9 September 2013.

<sup>43</sup> Morton, *A Traveller in Rome* (2002), p. 419.



Figure 8. Postcard: Villa Mills on the Palatino, Rome. © Akpool.de.

H. V. Morton suggests that Mills added gothic extensions to the villa, using the services of a ‘fashionable English architect’ to create ‘pinnacles, battlements, casements and cloisters’, and two Chinese pagodas, painted in crimson, over the Augustine baths.<sup>44</sup> However, after Charles Mills’ death in October 1846, Robert Smith purchased the property and given the lack of evidence concerning Mills’ ‘alterations’, it is possible to make a convincing case that it was Smith rather than Mills, who added these features to the Villa.<sup>45</sup> All articles written on the Villa suggest it was built by Charles Mills, pointing out the thistled villa gateposts linking with his Scottish heritage.<sup>46</sup> However, Smith had more claim to Scottish ancestry as his son was later granted a coat-of-arms relating to the arms of Smith of Braco in Scotland.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, the building has much of Smith’s architectural fusion style, with Gothic and Italian elements conjoined with Indian, in a central rotunda flanked by two octagonal towers with an arched loggia beneath. With archaeological remains below of an ancient civilisation, and a view from the top of a cliff, the Villa’s design clearly echoes the Delhi bungalow. It is also odd that visitors to the Villa while Charles Mills was in residence did not mention the eccentric look of the mansion. For instance Harriet Countess Granville, who was keen to rent the house from Charles Mills, wrote in her journal: ‘Drive with us on a glorious summer’s day down the Corso, by the ruins of the Temple of Peace, the Coliseum, Arch etc.,

<sup>44</sup> Amoia and Iruschini, *Stendahl’s Rome*, pp. 67-68. Rodolfo Lanciani, *New Tales of Old Rome* (London: Macmillan & Company Ltd., c.1901). pp. 325-326.

<sup>45</sup> Morton, *A Traveller in Rome*, p. 420.

<sup>46</sup> Lanciani, *New Tales*, pp. 325-236.

<sup>47</sup> James Balfour Paul (Lyon King of Arms), *An Ordinary of Arms: contained in the public register of all arms and bearings in Scotland* (Edinburgh, William Green & Sons, 1895), p. 70.

to Mr Mill's garden, all full of roses, Cape jessamines and heliotropes.'<sup>48</sup> The garden appears to have been the main appeal of the house and not its architecture, so it seems likely that the design of the new additions to the Villa Mills was by Smith, not Charles Mills.

Smith later created another 'fairy palace' in Europe, on an isolated headland in Nice, on the Cote D'Azur, at first called the Chateau Smith and later Le Château de l'Anglais. A description of the construction of this property gives an impression of the lavish amount of time and money that Smith gave to his building projects. His other house and garden at Redcliffe Towers, Paignton, was developed during this same time scale, and is covered later in the case study. Le Château de l'Anglais was constructed near a property belonging to Smith's close friend Proby Cautley, which was left to Smith after Cautley died in 1871.<sup>49</sup> Smith may have found the climate of Nice more agreeable to his health, or conceivably he may have wished for a major project to sharpen his mind and extend his drawing and building skills. He acquired a plot of 20,000 square metres of rocky uncultivated land on Mont Boron, unpatronised by the English gentry, who preferred fashionable Cannes where Lord Brougham (1778-1868) built the first British villa, 'Eléonore Louise', on the Riviera in 1835.<sup>50</sup> With plans drawn up in 1856, Smith was in Nice in 1857, hiring workers for his huge undertaking, which included clearing the rocky terrain, building retaining walls, walkways and tunnels.<sup>51</sup> With his expertise in engineering Smith knew how to gain maximum effect from the slope of the land; Élisée Reclus writing in 1864 observed: 'below the villa, hanging gardens, carved at great expense in the rock, descending terraces by terraces to the sea'.<sup>52</sup>

The exact stone colour used for the Château is unknown, however many painters were inspired to depict the building: Jules Defer's *Le Château de l'Anglais et la grève du Lazaret*, gives the château a rosy glow, while in Vincent Fossat's aquatint, *Nice Le Château de l'Anglais Smith*, the building appears made of buff stone, with red coloured rock in the surrounding countryside; both very different from the pink paint which has covered the building since the 1950s (see figure 9). Perhaps the best judge of the hue is an account in a magazine from the nineteenth century which describes it as 'a red building developed before the road was made to Villefranche.'<sup>53</sup> This unusual colour links with Smith's early work on the Mughal monuments in Delhi.

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<sup>48</sup> The Hon. F. Leveson-Gower (ed.), *Letters of Harriet Countess Granville 1810-1845*, 2, 2 (London and New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1894), p. 340.

<sup>49</sup> It has not been possible to identify the site of this house in Nice. Will of Proby Thomas Cautley, Prerogative Court of Canterbury, March 1871. Principal Probate Registry, Somerset House, London; see also Joyce Brown, 'A memoir of Colonel Sir Proby Cautley, F.R.S., 1802-1871, Engineer and Palaeontologist', *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London*, 34, 2 (March 1980) fn. 85.

<sup>50</sup> Didier Gayraud 'Le Château Smith: di Château de l'Anglais ou Château de Mont Boron', *Nice Historique*, 113, 1 (2011), p. 53.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*; Registre des demandes des visas, ADAM 1Z273; Shorto, 'Public Lives', p. 135.

<sup>52</sup> Translation from Élisée Reclus, *Les villes d'hiver de la Méditerranée et Les Alpes-Maritimes* (Paris: Hachette, 1864), p. 243, quoted in Véronique Thuin-Chaudron, 'Le mont Boron autour des années 1860. Une colline en pleine mutation,' *Nice Historique*, 113, 1 (2011), p. 21.

<sup>53</sup> 'Nice à vol d'oiseau', *Nouvelle revue européenne* (1895), quoted in Gayraud, 'Le Château Smith', p. 56.



Figure 9. Le Château de l'Anglais, Mont Boron, Nice. Photograph by Diane James © 2013.

Returning to Nice in May 1858 Smith stayed at the Hotel Royal, on the Boulevard de l'Impératrice Eugénie; from its elevated site he could oversee the work on the Château from the hotel windows.<sup>54</sup> The next year he returned again to further oversee the work and sketch and paint.<sup>55</sup> By 1862, the main structure of the Château was most likely completed. Described as having a 'perfect spirit of symmetry', the mansion featured Smith's signature, a large central tower with two turrets at each end.<sup>56</sup> A ground-floor arcade (or loggia) along the length of the building was topped by rooms which opened out onto a large terrace, while a long gallery housed one of Smith's huge paintings, a thirty metre mural of Indian life.<sup>57</sup> Above this an outdoor staircase was joined to the central rotunda which was decorated with petal-shaped battlements and onion domes; his architectural style although still displaying echoes of Indian monuments and gates, was becoming more curvilinear and eccentric. Smith built serpentine paths, ornamental lakes, and many other buildings throughout his property: below the house he constructed a circular gallery to display his

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>55</sup> This was after Savoy and Nice were annexed by plebiscite under the Treaty of Turin which transferred Nice from Italy to France. See Samuel B. Crandall, *Treaties Their Making and Enforcement* (New Jersey: The Lawbook Exchange, 2005), pp. 226, 306, 322, 435.

<sup>56</sup> Gayraud, 'Le Château Smith', p.55.

<sup>57</sup> Shorto, 'Public Lives', p. 136.

paintings; in the south he built a tower or lighthouse; and near the sea a small domed pavilion possibly associated with bathing.<sup>58</sup>

The building drew criticism from local commentators who deemed it unsightly and bizarre, like the décor of an opera, or a wedding cake, yet Robert Smith remained unfazed by the harsh remarks.<sup>59</sup> He lived in the Château, compulsively painting, attending very few local social occasions, receiving only close friends visiting the Riviera and his military colleagues from India.

### **Building Project in Devon**

Smith's wife Julia died some time before 1850 leaving Smith her considerable wealth. While simultaneously building in Nice, Smith also returned to his sister Mary's house, in the fashionable resort of Torquay, selling the family house at Bideford and purchasing five acres of remote headland in nearby Paignton.<sup>60</sup> There, Smith proceeded to build another unusual house, known as Redcliffe Towers.

Perhaps Devon with its palm trees and lush vegetation reminded Smith of his time in India - William Daniell visited Devon in 1806 with the architect C. R. Cockerell (1788-1863) who wrote in his notebook: 'At Ilfracombe, Mr.D [aniell] says the foliage approached nearest to India of any he ever saw'.<sup>61</sup> A date of 1852 is suggested by Head for the commencement of building work on Redcliffe Towers, Smith bringing all his experience, and knowledge into the evolution of this extraordinary building.<sup>62</sup> The mansion was built in several stages by J. R. K. Tozer, the proprietor of a major building company in Paignton, after drawings designed by Smith. The size of the building after each stage can be appraised by its rateable value: the first stage progressed in 1855, rated £9.15s.0d; by 1858 it was a considerable building rated £44.16s.8d; the final stage was completed by 1864 and rated £87.10s.0d.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Lise Didier-Moulounguet published a small survey taken from an 1872 local property register, 'Nice: le chateau de l'Anglais', *Monuments historiques de la France*, I (1778), pp.31-33, quoted in Shorto, 'Public Lives', p. 136, fn 88.

<sup>59</sup> Gayraud, 'Le Château Smith', p. 59.

<sup>60</sup> Terry Leaman, 'Description, Residents and Tradesman List', extracted from, *Kelly's Post Office Directory of Devonshire*, 1856, [www.genuki.cs.ncl.ac.uk/DEV/Tormoham/Kelly1856.html](http://www.genuki.cs.ncl.ac.uk/DEV/Tormoham/Kelly1856.html) consulted 18 September 2013.

<sup>61</sup> London, RIBA Archive Collection, *Memoranda of a journey through Devon and Wales*, 23 July 1806, Ref: COC/9, COC/10 (Box 9-10), quoted in David Watkin, *The Life and Work of C.R. Cockerell* (London: Zwemmer, 1974), p. 5. Although Ilfracombe is 90 miles away in North Devon, the climate of Paignton is equally mild. William Hodges, known for his Picturesque paintings of India settled on his return to England in the nearby resort of Brixham.

<sup>62</sup> Four drawings including *An Elevation of the East or Sea Front*, signed by Robert Smith came to light in Messrs. Cooksleys estate agents in the early 1970s, Archer, 'An Artist Engineer', p.88. However, this cannot be verified as the drawings have since disappeared, but the date concurs roughly with that of a map drawn up by Smith and submitted in 1854 to the Admiralty to gain assent to build a seawall around Redcliffe, London, National Archives, *Redcliffe, Tor Bay, Devon; Construction of Seawall by Lieutenant Colonel R Smith*, Ref: BT 356/10656.

<sup>63</sup> In the Paignton rate books it was identified as Redcliffe Castle. Head, *Redcliffe & Robert Smith*.



Figure 10. The old lookout tower on the edge of the cliff. After J. W. Tucker, *Paignton*. Coloured steel vignette, published by H. Besley, Exeter 12.5 x 17 cm. © [www.rareoldprints.com](http://www.rareoldprints.com).

The house was constructed around an earlier look-out tower (see figure 10), possibly with blocks from the red local sandstone, linking English architectural practice with Smith's previous projects when he restored the Red Fort, Jama Masjid and Qutub Minar in Delhi.<sup>64</sup> In design a fusion of Indian, Italian and Gothic, with the familiar signature of central rotunda and two wings (see figure 11), it is now grey, covered in roughcast with stuccoed detail which diminishes its impact on the landscape, and conceals all traces of the previous building.

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<sup>64</sup> R. Sercombe and Raymond Head, 'Redcliffe Paignton and its builder, Col Robert Smith', *Devon Life*, [n.d], p.24. Conversation with Mr. Stephen Twigger, owner of the Redcliffe Hotel, 14 March 2013. Mr. Twigger pointed out the hotel's copy of the Paignton vignette, see figure 10.



Figure 11. Early drawing of Redcliffe Towers, n.d.. © Redcliffe Hotel, Paignton

According to an undated plan (see figure 12), Redcliffe was approached by a serpentine carriage drive past a domed hexagonal lodge which led to the formal garden to the front of the house, where a fountain and arching flower beds enclosed island beds in the shape of a flower, perhaps the symbolic sacred lotus.<sup>65</sup> Behind was the elliptical billiard room, and Smith's long conservatory housing his collection of rare hothouse plants, leading to the main central rotunda with its master's room, smoking room, and dining room. The two wings were topped by minarets and domes; the West wing, accommodated Smith's studio and picture gallery, while the East wing featured service rooms, and the kitchen. An octagon with a copper-tented roof and a ball finial topped the rotunda, and its four bay windows faced east towards the sea.

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<sup>65</sup> Unsigned and undated, it is a copy of an earlier map. It is unknown whether all features were copied from the original map, or whether the features marked were introduced at a later date. *Nelumbo nucifera* or the sacred lotus, has divine associations in Asian religions.

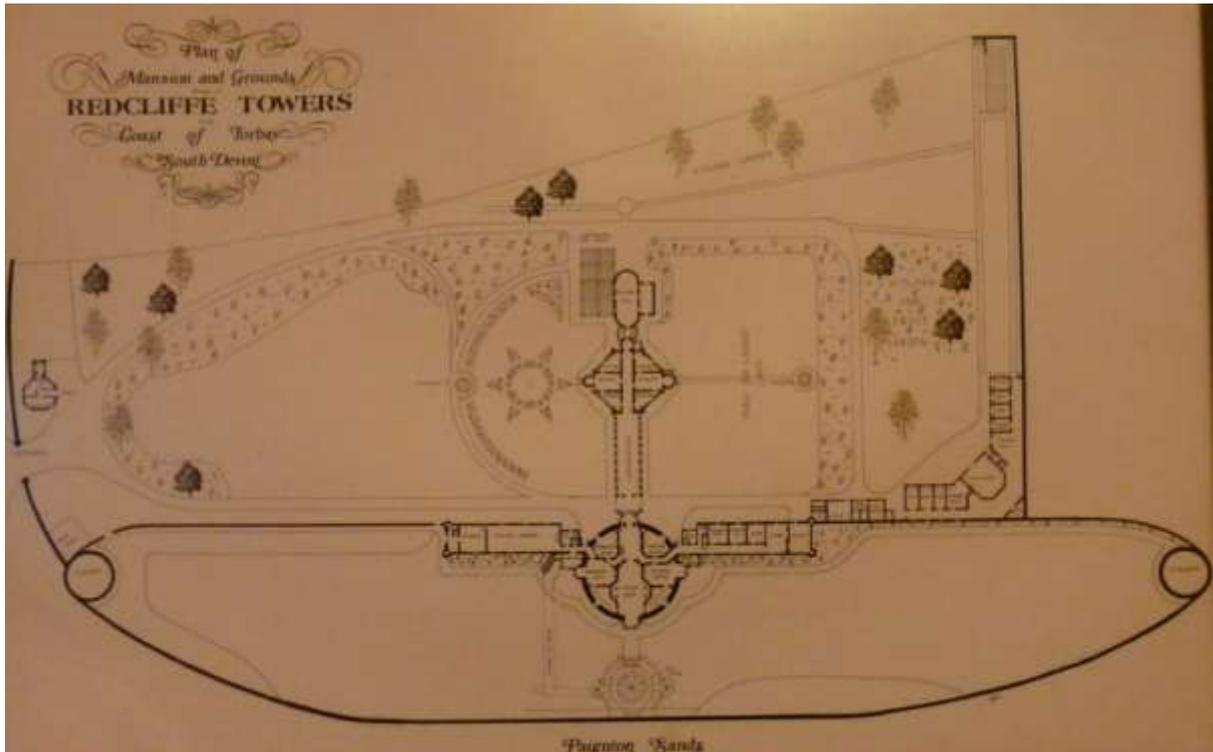


Figure 12. *Plan of Mansion and Grounds, Redcliffe Towers, n.d.* © Redcliffe Hotel.

Smith's architectural features included ogee-shaped windows with stars at the apex, petal-shaped merlons, and a circular picture gallery.<sup>66</sup> The emblems on the rotunda are reminiscent of the Renaissance frescoes in the loggia on the Palatine, and thistles and apples, roses and shamrocks are used as decorative motifs, alongside Maltese crosses and sea-horses, in wrought-iron and plaster, and on the roundels embellishing the tower.

There were twenty-three bedrooms and dressing rooms, servants' accommodation, outbuildings and stables.<sup>67</sup> Steps on the eastern side were known as the Mecca steps and the building for a long time was believed to be orientated towards Mecca, undoubtedly myths, which nevertheless added to the mystique of the building. Smith loved to experiment with modern features: gas was piped throughout the house brought from the newly opened Preston Gas Works, and on the first floor the main room was divided into three, but could be made into one room by sliding doors; suggested by Head to be 'a novel feature which allowed a perfect panorama of Torbay to be seen from Redcliffe's clifftop site.'<sup>68</sup> Smith also filled the house with luxurious materials imported from Europe and Asia. Sale catalogues show that the interior of the house included ornate window cornices, and blue silk brocade damask drapes, walnut and mahogany furniture with an expanding Spanish mahogany table in the dining room, Italian marble fireplaces, Florentine marble-

<sup>66</sup> For full architectural details see 'List entry for Redcliffe Hotel, No: 1195234', English Heritage, [www.english-heritage.org.uk](http://www.english-heritage.org.uk) consulted 10 July 2013.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Smith's comments were found on the reverse of one of the original architectural drawings, found in the 1970s. Head, *Redcliffe & Robert Smith*.

topped tables, cut-glass chandeliers and gilded mirror frames, Brussels carpets, antique bronzes, fine Japanese, Dresden, and Wedgwood china, and 300 of Smith's paintings and watercolours mainly of India.<sup>69</sup>



Figure 13. The Central Rotunda, Redcliffe Towers, Paignton, Devon, with the door of the plunge-pool tunnel, opening above the beach. Photograph by Diane James © 2013.

Like many others returning from India Smith built a bathing complex within his estate. He designed a tunnel (see figures 12, 13) to link his house on the seaward side with an octagonal hydropathic plunge bath which filled with seawater at high tide.<sup>70</sup> E. M. Collingham suggests, furthermore, that retired Anglo-Indians, on their return from the sub-continent, brought the 'pleasures of personal cleanliness' back to Britain, and that many had adopted the Indian regimes of cold bathing and hair washing to help stave off the onset of tropical disease.<sup>71</sup> Jane Austen in her unfinished novel *Sanditon* (1817) promoted the health values of sea bathing. She remarked that 'The sea air and sea bathing together were nearly

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Many books were published in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries advocating ways to increase life expectancy, including John Floyer's *An Enquiry into the Right Use and Abuses of the Hot, Cold and Temperate Baths in England*, 1697, and the John Locke's 1703 edition of the tract, *Some Thoughts on Education*.

<sup>71</sup> E. M. Collingham, *Imperial Bodies: The Physical Experience of the Raj, c.1800-1947* (Oxford: Polity, 2001), pp. 44-49

infallible, one or the other of them being a match for every disorder of the stomach, the lungs or the blood.'<sup>72</sup> Smith retired from the East India Company on health grounds, so the pool possibly helped with his ailments and war wounds, especially as it was large enough for swimming. Although the pool disappeared in a storm in 1867, the passageway is still in use today as a quick way down to the beach.



Figure 14. Fountain in the hotel car-park, framed by holm oak trees, remnants of the Redcliffe garden. Photograph by Diane James © 2013.

Smith also developed the five acres of pleasure gardens at Redcliffe using the space economically, surrounding it with ilex and holm oak (see figure 14), with terrace walks and fountains, a kitchen garden, a hot house, a vinery, and a large conservatory containing Indian rare plants.<sup>73</sup> He introduced a military flavour into the garden design with flagstaff towers and bastions overlooking the sea (see figure 15).

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<sup>72</sup> Jane Austen, *Sanditon* (Unfinished, 1817), Chapter Two, University of Virginia Library, [www.onread.com](http://www.onread.com) consulted 30 October 2013.

<sup>73</sup> Head, *Redcliffe & Robert Smith*.



Figure 15. The remains of one of the flagstaff towers, once a prominent feature it stands half-buried in the undergrowth. Photograph by Diane James © 2013.

Flowerbeds surrounded the property, and the grounds also contained a large collection of valuable antique vases Smith had brought back from Italy.<sup>74</sup> Local reports suggest Robert Smith led a reclusive life at Redcliffe with few visitors apart from his sister and friends returning from India. Considering that as an engineer he would have left the East India Company with only with his pension, and as he had built two, possibly three large mansions in a synthesis of Indian and western architecture, it is extremely surprising that, after his death on 16 September 1873, the Probate Calendar states he left a sum of £90,000.<sup>75</sup> Whether any investments he had made were exceptionally successful, or his late wife's fortune was immense remains undetermined. Of his 300 oil paintings dispersed in sales after his death, only a tenth have been identified.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> England and Wales, National Probate Calendar (Index of Wills and Administrations), 1858-1966 for Robert [sic] Smith (1874), p.59.

<sup>76</sup> Raymond Head, 'From Obsession to Obscurity: Colonel Robert Smith: Artist, Architect and Engineer – I', *Country Life* (21 May 1981) p. 1434.

## Conclusion

Redcliffe Towers is an extremely important building in the story of the Indian influence on British architecture and gardens 1740-1850. It demonstrates such influences can be found not only in the large estates of aristocracy and landed gentry, but in smaller properties owned by East India Company employees, in Smith's case the eccentric homes of a surveyor and artist.

An amalgam of styles, Indian, British and Italian, was employed in the construction of buildings and gardens using architectural forms far removed from their original functions. Design elements from tombs, temples, towers, gates, walls and villas, were incorporated to develop a new architectural style, a hybrid, part of the British Picturesque. However, the costs of such a building indicate that a retirement pension would not have been enough to build and furnish it. For Robert Smith it took many years after leaving India and the receipt of an inheritance, before it was possible to return to Britain to build a mansion and garden, and also to continue building in Europe on an even more lavish scale.



Figure 16. No longer isolated on a headland Redcliffe Towers is now surrounded by the town of Paignton. Photograph by Diane James © 2013.

Smith was highly qualified by both training and experience to design and project-manage his own mansions which all incorporated Indian design alongside classical and gothic features. He was a successful surveyor, with an eye for detail, having survived the wilds of India for many years recording local topography, an important primary aid for the East India Company's expansion. Later restoring the major monuments of Delhi, and developing his experimental fusion style in architecture, he also sketched and painted many hundreds of British troop movements and Company life alongside views of Indian temples, monuments and landscapes, before retiring to Devon. Smith had a unique pioneering spirit, building his mansions on isolated headlands on the periphery of small towns, away from fashionable society. Redcliffe was built in stages over a number of years, and this was repeated at the Château de L'Anglais in Nice; whether this was due to cash flow or the vast quantity of detailed work which took his builders an inordinate amount of time is not known. The most Indian of Smith's mansions, Redcliffe is testimony to his skills and ingenuity. The Devon site incorporated a domestic garden with military flourishes with a lavish mansion which provided room for the many artefacts Smith had collected on his world travels, wall space for his hundreds of paintings, and a conservatory for his hothouse plants. Sadly, Redcliffe Towers, which in its heyday stood proud on its red rocky cliff (shocking the local inhabitants with its outlandish style of architecture), has now been subsumed into the town of Paignton, diminishing its scale and obscuring its Indian features (see figure 16).

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### **Abbreviations**

BL: British Library, London

DEV: Devon Record Office

EH: English Heritage

NA: National Archives, London

NIA: Archives départementales des Alpes Maritimes, Nice, France

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