HEATON HALL, MANCHESTER

Anniversary Address given by Mr. G. L. Conran at the Annual General Meeting held at Heaton Hall on 20th June, 1964

I WOULD first of all like to acknowledge my indebtedness to preparing this address to the *Country Life* articles of Mr. H. Avray Tipping and Mr. Arthur T. Bolton as well as to my predecessors as Director of the Manchester City Art Gallery.

Heaton Hall had a long history of occupation by the Egerton family as a country residence until in 1901 the development of Manchester turned country into town and the house and park were bought by the Corporation of Manchester.

The Egertons were a Cheshire family going back to the Plantagenets. In the 17th century a cadet became Lord Chancellor and was an ancestor of the Duke of Bridgwater, whose activity in canal building and coal extraction still makes its mark on this part of the country, and who has been described as the first great Manchester man.

Under James I the head of the family was Sir Roland Egerton who was made baronet in 1617. Sir Roland's father, "Black Sir John", inherited the estate of Oulton in Cheshire and added Wrinehill in Staffordshire and Farthinghoe in Northamptonshire by purchase, and it was at Farthinghoe that he died in 1646.

It was the third baronet, Sir John Egerton, who established the family connection with Heaton by marrying Elizabeth Holland of Denton and Heaton in 1684. Denton extended to 35,000 acres and was one of the eastern manors of the ancient parish of Manchester. The Hollands had been Lords of the Manor since the 14th century. They also owned lands in Heaton in the parish of Prestwich, then a country place detached from Manchester, and it was at Heaton that a Richard Holland went to live at the beginning of the 16th century in a house later known as the Old Hall.

Richard Holland was succeeded by his brother, whose son fought in defence of Manchester, a strongly parliamentarian town in 1642, as a Cromwellian Colonel, and who served in two

parliaments under Cromwell. On his death in 1661 the succession passed to a third brother, whose daughter, Elizabeth Holland, succeeded to the estates on the death of her brother Edward in 1683, eventually bringing the estates to Sir John Egerton as already mentioned.

Sir John's son, whose Christian name was Holland, has been described as a distinguished antiquary. He died at Heaton in 1730 only two years after inheriting. Sir Holland was followed in the baronetcy by his two sons, the younger, Thomas, dying in 1756 and being succeeded by his seven-year-old son as seventh baronet. In 1750 Sir Thomas had built a house two rooms deep with a seven windowed front, which still peeps out through its coat of stucco over the colonnade on the north front.

The seventh baronet was returned to Parliament as one of the members for Lancashire in 1772 when he was still only 23, and it was in this year that he commissioned James Wyatt to design the house in which we are now meeting.

Wyatt had already begun to supplant Robert Adam as a designer of large country seats following the success of his Pantheon, which had been opened in January 1772. Wyatt had already been elected an A.R.A. following the exhibition in 1770 at the Academy of three drawings of the Pantheon. In 1772 he showed at the Academy "The south-east elevation of Heaton House in Lancashire, the seat of Sir Thomas Egerton, Bart.", indicating that the design was under way.

It is not difficult even today to appreciate the natural beauty of the site with its great sweep of sky and distant hills. Francis Anne Kemble, niece of Mrs. Kemble and also an actress, stayed at Heaton when acting in Manchester, and describes sitting at her window "looking out over the lawn, which slopes charmingly on every side down to the house". We can look at the same view, ignoring more recent examples of the gardeners' art and, with a little more difficulty, discounting the church towers, factory chimneys and tall blocks of the Manchester conurbation. If you live in Manchester you do not make jokes about the weather, but when Miss Kemble says that "Heaton was looking lovely in all the beauty of its autumnal foliage lit by bright autumnal skies"

she is accurately describing a quality that our moist western atmosphere gives to distant views.

The lie of the land in the immediate vicinity of the house was most suitable for the Claudian landscaping which was transforming gentlemen's parks. Lancelot Brown was the chief practitioner and his name has been coupled with Heaton by a biographer of Wyatt writing in the thirties. Certainly Heaton is an example of the type of landscaping at which "Capability" Brown excelled, but Miss Dorothy Stroud's recent book could find no evidence for this connection, although in the case of Heveningham there were plans and correspondence. In consequence Brown must be ruled out here.

Heaton at that time might have been described as ripe for development, and developed it was in order to keep step with the increasing status of its owner, who was created Baron Grey de Wilton in 1784 and in 1801 Earl of Wilton.

Before dealing with the house and grounds I will complete the genealogical sequence which changed its pattern once the family was raised to the peerage. Instead of frequent changes, there were only two owners of Heaton in the 126 years from the first Earl's succession as Sir Thomas Egerton in 1756 until the second Earl's death in 1882. The first Earl had a daughter but no son. His daughter married Lord Belgrave, afterwards the first Marquess of Westminster, and he obtained a special remainder to their second son, another Thomas, who, took the arms of Egerton in place of those of Grosvenor on his succession in 1814. This Thomas married Lady Mary Stanley, daughter of the twelfth Earl of Derby by his second wife, the actress Eliza Farren. Perhaps their connection with the stage accounts for the stay of Anne Kemble, which I have noticed before, and the freedom she was allowed. Her letters inform us that as she had to be driven into Manchester for her performance she came down to dinner dressed for her part. "Many years after," she says, "a lady who had been invited to dinner told me how amazed she had been on the sudden wide opening of the drawing-room doors to see me enter in full mediaeval costume of black satin and velvet, cut Titian fashion and with a long sweeping train, for which apparition she had not been previously prepared."

Miss Kemble describes Lord Wilton as "the beau-ideal of a dandy with his slender perfectly dressed figure, his pale complexion, regular features, fine eyes and dark glossy waves of hair . . . ", and she also says that "in spite of his character of a mere dissipated man of fashion he had an unusual taste for, and knowledge of music; and had composed some that is not destitute of merit; he played well on the organ and delighted in that noble instrument, a fine specimen of which adorned one of the drawing-rooms".

Perhaps she had the contempt of a working girl for the idle rich because Lord Wilton certainly does not appear as "a mere dissipated man of fashion" in accounts of the disaster which happened during the time of her visit, which corresponded with the opening of the Manchester to Liverpool railway in 1830. Lord Wilton, after a narrow escape in the accident himself, went to the aid of Huskisson and succeeded in preventing arterial bleeding although not in saving Huskisson's life.

The second Earl was succeeded by his son, who only survived his father by three years, and the next brother held the earldom until 1898. It was his son Arthur who now succeeded and who sold the Hall and park to Manchester Corporation in 1901, bringing the Egerton connection with Heaton to an end.

In 1901 the concept of a country house museum had not arisen. Local authorities interested in open spaces for their crowded workers found that the houses in parks which they bought were an unwanted dividend. Houses such as Aston Hall in Birmingham, and Marble Hill in London fell into the hands of large local authorities seeking parks and playing fields, who were then at a loss as to how they might be used.

We owe a great debt to Lord Iveagh who repaired the empty and desolate Kenwood and installed his pictures and furniture there in 1925, not for his own benefit but so that the public might enjoy what had until then been the exclusive preserve of the rich; a supreme example of what Lord Iveagh himself called "the artistic home of an 18th-century gentleman". This established a pattern of which there are now many splendid examples. Aston Hall, after a long fallow period, is one, and Temple Newsam one of the best known of a list that has become long.

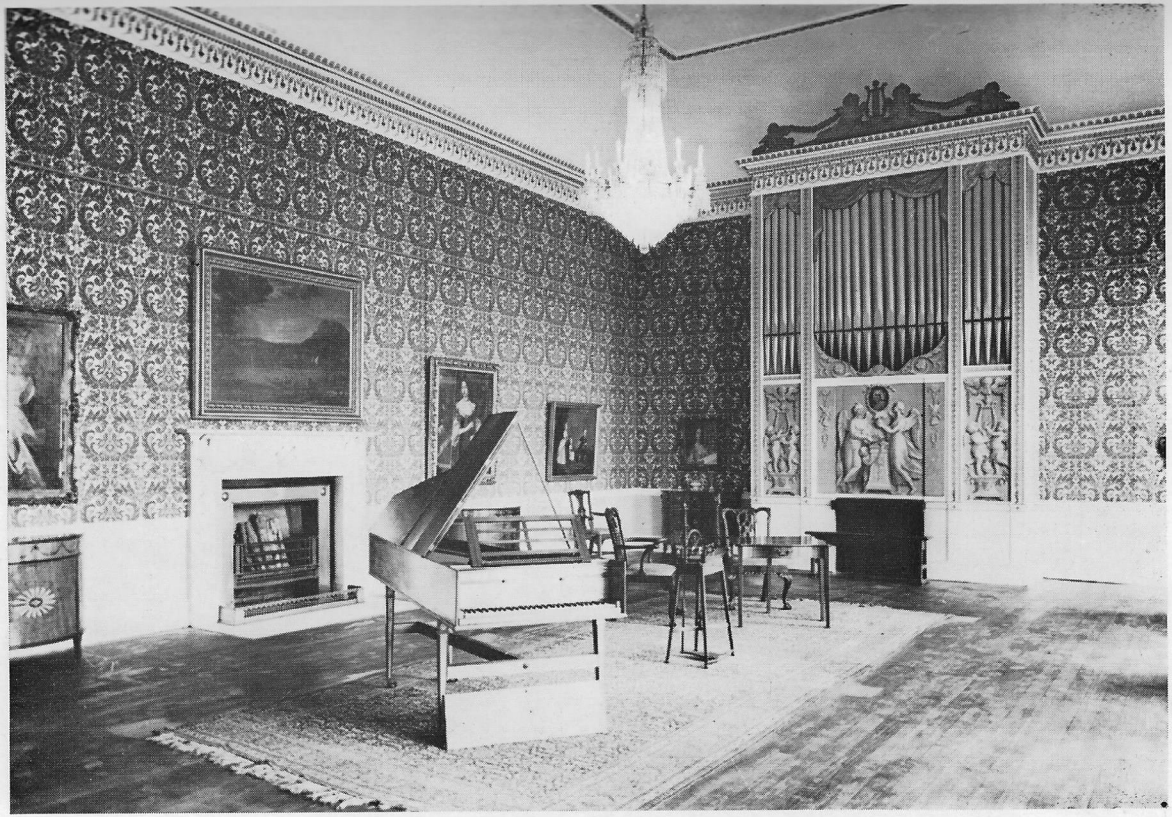

FIG. 1. HEATON HALL, MANCHESTER. The Music Room

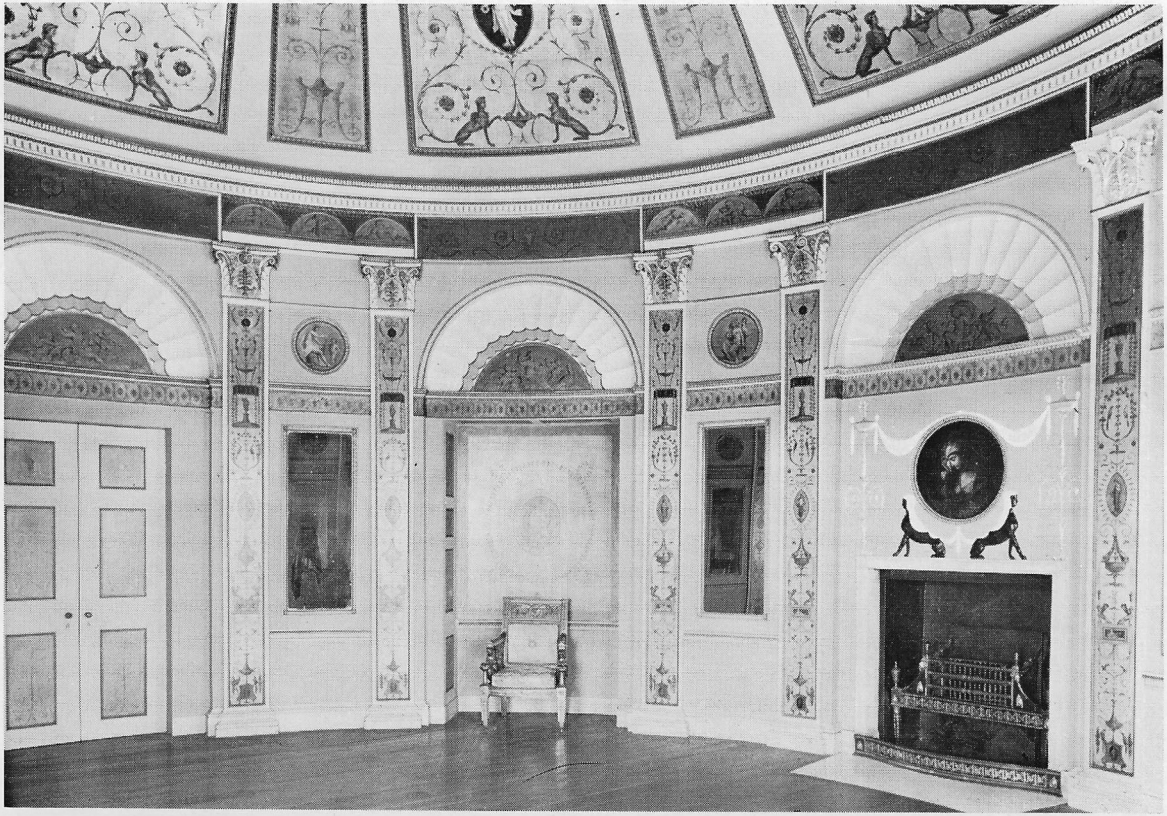

FIG. 2. HEATON HALL, MANCHESTER. The Cupola or Etruscan Room

In 1901 the trail had not been blazed and it is regrettable but not surprising that the contents of Heaton were allowed to be sold. According to Mr. Fletcher Moss, writing in 1908, they were sold quietly and quickly at the Manchester Coal Exchange and "many things were knocked down dirt cheap to the brokers". As a result, half a century later we are faced with the expensive task of building up again a collection of works of art and furnishings worthy of this splendid house. Most especially we miss those items which give a sense of occupancy; the small ornaments, the family portraits, the unimportant items as well as the large and grand, which make a house look like a home. It may even be the owner himself or the sheepish-looking dogs, embarrassed much more than he is by the invasion of so many strangers, which give an atmosphere to a lived-in house that is difficult to replace, but there are advantages the other way. We must remember that the 18th-century house—if Devis's paintings are any guide—was decidedly empty by our standards. Carpetless floors were by no means unusual and the furniture was much less crowded than it is now.

I know that the crowds who flock to pay their half-crowns like to see the silver-framed photographs of the debutante daughters and that a glimpse of her ladyship's bedroom provides many an idea for home decoration. This must help the profits, but it is hardly helping to create a true picture of 18th-century taste. So perhaps the two types of house are complementary; the house which is lived-in can demonstrate that even the grandest of them are primarily homes, and the furnished but unoccupied house can give a more educational picture of 18th-century life.

Whilst I am on this topic I would like to carry it a little further and to suggest that it is a pity that none of our contemporary homes are ordinarily accessible except in the pages of glossy magazines, or to members of the Contemporary Arts Society. Just as the works of Gainsborough look their best against an 18th-century background, so do modern paintings come to life in a truly contemporary setting; but perhaps that is an inappropriate comment to make to the Ancient Monuments Society.

It is a little difficult now to understand why such leaders of taste as Walpole and Gibbon should switch their allegiance so

completely and so suddenly from Robert Adam to JamesWyatt. The Pantheon no longer exists, having been burnt down in 1792. An idea of what it may have looked like may best be gained from Heaton and from Heveningham. The design and especially the interior design of both these houses is distinguished and ingenious, but not so markedly original as to suggest that the Pantheon can have been superior architecturally to, for instance, Adam's proposed opera house in the Haymarket.

Adam was unlucky in not getting a spectacular or a royal commission. His opera house was never built whereas Wyatt's Pantheon was, and Heaton was one of the first large commissions that Wyatt received because of it.

The plan fits together the varying shapes and proportions of the main rooms most ingeniously as, for instance, the way in which this music-room occupies the space behind the colonnaded recess and links the saloon to library and ante-room at my back.

It is also worth remarking that the trend to move dining-rooms as far as possible from kitchens was not followed. The kitchen was in the projecting bay at the other end of the building and the dining-room is also at that end of the building.

It is clear from the plan that Wyatt broke into the south rooms of the 1750 house to form the entrance hall and staircase. As in many houses of the time there were a number of bedrooms on the ground floor, but the elegant double staircase is not without function because the most elaborately decorated room of all—the cupola room—occupies most of the space above the saloon, behind you, and is decorated in that mixture of Roman, Greek and Raphaelite motives known as Etruscan. Where, alas, shall we ever find furniture for that. We can only look at the furnishings of the Etruscan room at Syon and pray that if there is any of this rare type of furniture still outside a public collection the chance may be given to us to buy it.

Incidentally, the domed roof gives a most unpleasant echo and it cannot have been a very convenient room for use, unlike the apartments on the ground floor which are admirably designed for the social purpose of the time.

The exterior of the building is carried out in fine masonry with the exception, as I have already mentioned, of part of the old

house showing in the north façade, which has been encased in stucco, and in the extensions on either side, which are also stucco, between the stone pilasters.

The north front is an adaptation and as such not wholly satisfactory, but the south front extends so far beyond the previous house that Wyatt was free to plan it as he wished and its various parts are so admirably balanced that its great length is not apparent except in the impression of dignified classical balance that it imparts.

The sandstone used was too soft for fine carving and the capitals are of metal. The panels are possibly of Coade stone. John Bacon has been suggested as the sculptor but I have not investigated this.

Just behind the house there is a summer house in the form of a circular temple and I am glad to say that the Parks Committee have decided to put it into good repair. From it you can get a fine view and more than a breath of fresh air, both of which you may appreciate after sitting so patiently in this room.

Two other features of the park have nothing to do with Wyatt but are worth mentioning.

The lake was made soon after the Corporation took over, by damming up a small stream; an enterprise in water gathering which has caused much less trouble than a similar scheme of our water department now under discussion for Ullswater.

Near to the lake there is an Ionic colonnade. This was part of the façade of Francis Goodwin's Town Hall in King Street and was re-erected in 1912 when the old Town Hall was pulled down. It was sufficiently successful to have been described as Wyatt's work in the past in spite of a plaque which clearly says what it is.

I have already quoted a reference to the second Earl's skill as an organist. The organ is dated 1790 and must, therefore, have been installed by his grandfather, the first Earl.

The maker was Samuel Green, organ builder to George III. It was restored by the Manchester firm of Jardine & Co. Ltd. as nearly as possible to an original condition with one exception—it has been fitted with an electric blower. I am informed, since I am not a musician, that it is of the type known as two manual and pedal. It has a full complement of bass pipes and the full compass swell organ is thought to be unique at this date. There

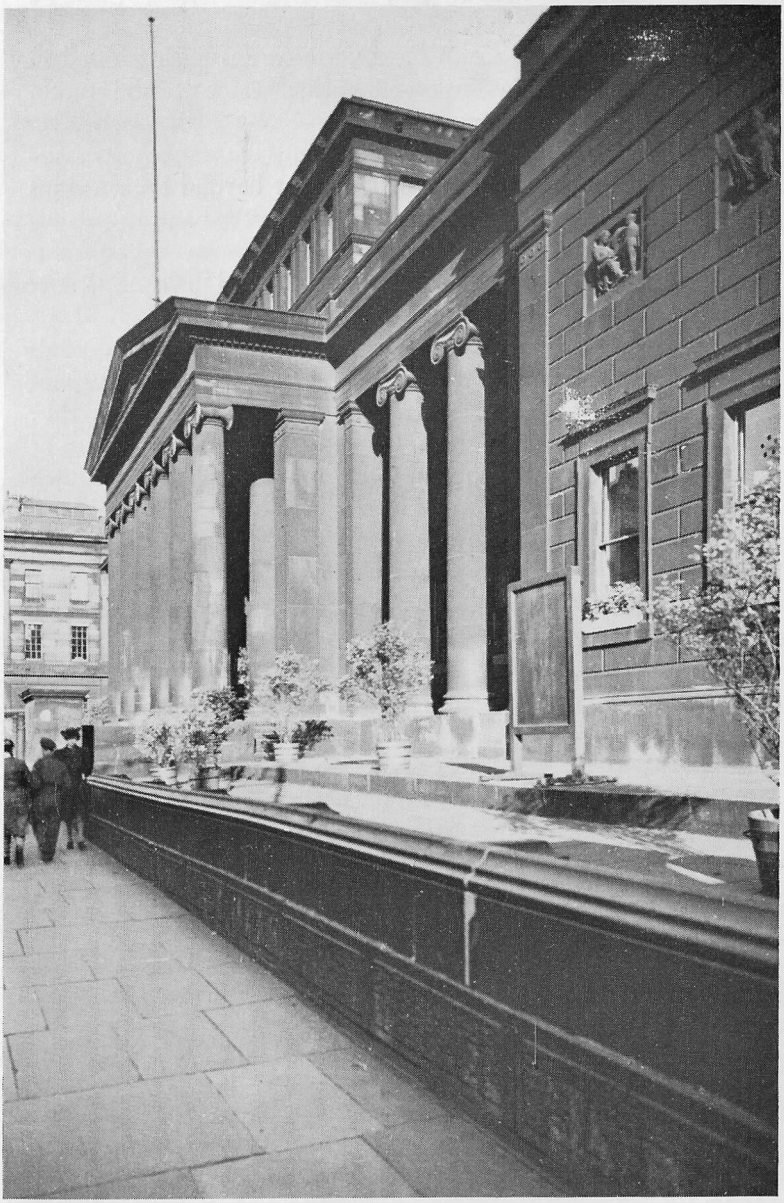

FIG. 3. MANCHESTER CITY ART GALLERY

are two open Diapason stops on the Great Organ, one a large scale stop and the other small. It has a range of stops well in advance of its time and the Keraulophon and Dulciana Principal are possibly the first examples of their kind.

Mechanically the instrument is years in advance of the work of Green's contemporaries and contains many ingenious devices. One of the pedal couplers, for instance, is a Great to Pedal Sub-Octave and is believed to be the earliest of its kind in the country. The bellows are what is known as "concussion bellows" to prevent jerkiness in blowing and hitherto thought not to have been invented before the 19th century.

Evidently it was built regardless of cost for 90% of the pipes are made of pure tin and the remainder of spotted metal, an alloy of 60% tin and 40% lead. All the front display pipes are tin, as are also the conveyances.

The result is a most agreeable sweetness and clarity of tone, and for that last statement alone I can vouch myself. It would have been pleasant for you to have heard it played as the effect is entirely unlike a modern church organ. We build three concerts round the organ each summer.

I cannot close without mentioning the other buildings controlled by my Committee, the chief being the City Art Gallery itself built as the Royal Manchester Institution for the promotion of Literature, Science and the Arts in 1829. It was one of Sir Charles Barry's earliest classical buildings, and next to Heaton one of the most important examples of architecture in the Manchester area.

The R.M.I. did its job well. It fathered the Manchester Academy and the Municipal School of Art, and it formed an extensive collection of pictures, which was handed over to the city in 1882 when the building, after extensive internal alterations, became the City Art Gallery.

Next door to the City Art Gallery is the Athenaeum Annexe, in a building also designed by Sir Charles Barry and opened in 1839. It is a building of far less distinction than the City Art Gallery and was completely ruined as an architectural conception by the addition of a third storey in Victorian Baroque to house a theatre. This building is used for small exhibitions, for the

Schools' Service, and to show a small part of our large pottery collections, which are of an extent and completeness so far as English pottery is concerned that is only equalled outside London by the Glaisher Collection in Cambridge.

The most important subsidiary collection that we have is the Gallery of English Costume, housed at Platt Hall, a pleasant red brick house built for the Worsley family in 1764. My Committee acquired the Cunnington Collection in 1947 and building on this foundation we have a collection of English costume that challenges the Victoria and Albert Museum's in every period except the earliest. We are eager to acquire men's and women's costumes and accessories of the 16th and 17th centuries, but they are very rare and not many opportunities are likely to occur.

The Fletcher Moss Museum is housed in the Old Parsonage at Didsbury, which dates mostly from 1800. It houses our water-colour collection and has a charming walled garden, and the outlook is surprisingly rural.

Wythenshawe Hall was given to the city with its large park in 1926. The visible parts of the house are mainly of 19th-century date, but there are remains of 16th, 17th and 18th-century structures. It is also a branch gallery and houses the Old Manchester Collection which is much used by the Schools' Service.

The most recent of our branch buildings is the Queen's Park Art Gallery, built in 1884, and the only one originally intended for museum purposes. It houses the Rutherston Collection, which lends original works of art to educational establishments all over the North of England. It also has many of our 19th-century paintings and a large collection of dolls' houses, and will shortly have the Manchester Regiment's Museum as well.

So you cannot get a proper idea of our services to the public by visiting just one of our seven branches, and you will be very welcome in all of them.