The future of Strawberry Hill, the “little Gothic castle” created by Horace Walpole in the eighteenth century, is looking decidedly brighter thanks to a £4.6 million grant which has been earmarked by the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF). The award to the Strawberry Hill Trust along with £370,000 development funding will help to finance an eagerly awaited £8.8 million ($15 million) restoration project.

Horace Walpole, son of Sir Robert Walpole, Britain’s first Prime Minister, was a politician, collector, author, and style “guru.” He acquired the building, which he christened Strawberry Hill, in 1749 and set about transforming it over the next 20 years into a fashionable villa along the stretch of the Thames between Chiswick and Hampton.

The Grade One-listed house is now regarded as the most important and influential building of the early Gothic revival, inspiring designs for the Palace of Westminster 100 years later. Its vulnerability and uncertain future were highlighted in 2003, when the World Monuments Fund included it on their list of 100 Most Endangered Sites and, then again, when it featured in the second series of BBC2’s Restoration. It is also on English Heritage’s Buildings at Risk Register.

Walpole said of his creation: “My buildings are paper, like my writings, and both will blow away in ten years after I am dead.” Although outliving Walpole’s prediction by 200 years, Strawberry Hill’s pinnacles and traceries, constructed of wood, stucco, and papier mâché (unlike the Gothic cathedrals that inspired them), are now in a perilous state of disrepair.

Carole Souter, director of HLF, said: “The importance of Strawberry Hill to our architectural heritage cannot be over-emphasised and without this project, its future was looking extremely bleak. The Heritage Lottery Fund is committed to investing in our historic buildings so that more people can enjoy them and we’re very much looking forward
to seeing Strawberry Hill restored to its full splendour once again.”

Michael Snodin, chairman of the Strawberry Hill Trust, also commented: “This is wonderful news for the future of Strawberry Hill. We will now be able to work towards the restoration of the building and garden, bringing Walpole’s “little Gothic castle” back to its former glory and making it a place everyone can visit and enjoy.”

As well as safeguarding the future of Strawberry Hill and its gardens, the HLF grant will enable the Trust to extend considerably the villa’s opening hours (currently just one afternoon a week in the summer) and create a far-reaching education programme. The house was a popular tourist site in Walpole’s time, when visitors were drawn by its magical interiors, fireplaces, and gilded ceilings built to resemble mediaeval tombs and vaults, as well as Walpole’s extensive collections of curios.

The house went on to became the center for great political receptions in the ownership of Lady Frances Waldegrave in the nineteenth century, and is now under the stewardship of St. Mary’s University College. Strawberry Hill receives considerable local support through its friends group and has a core of supporters in the U.S. The World Monuments Fund is backing the campaign to raise an additional £3.5 million to ensure the project can go ahead. Completion is anticipated for 2010 to coincide with a major exhibition on Horace Walpole and his collections to be shown at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London and the Yale Center for British Art in New Haven, CT.

Arthur Naylor, Principal of St. Mary’s College, said, “We are delighted with the news. St. Mary’s has worked closely with the Strawberry Hill Trust to reach this stage and we are ourselves committing £1.4 million towards the project and its longer term sustainability.”

John Julius Norwich, Chairman of the World Monuments Fund, commented: “I am delighted that the Heritage Lottery Fund has agreed to fund Strawberry Hill and that the World Monuments Fund has been able to play a key role as a catalyst for the lottery application as well as enabling all the parties to work together.”

—Will Black