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News and Views from Northcourt.

John Harrison



There have been two particular advantages to lockdown for us.

Firstly we have managed to tackle many many tasks which otherwise we had not had the time to tackle – and most recently removing ivy from the western wall of the kitchen garden which sadly had eaten into the stonework and we have been able to sort out the Northcourt archives and photographs collected in the last 57 years since my Aunt started the collection. Some of these I now want to share.

When we bought the East wing from my Aunt in 1983 she left me her collection, which we have added to as information became available, but with lockdown we have managed to list what we have and identify all the gaps.

In September 1993 whilst Chairman, I wrote for the IWGT newsletter an article ‘Northcourt Our Rescue’ and provided further updates in March 1994 and March 1997.

Thirty eight years from buying out my Aunt we are still here fighting the brambles and other unwanted gifts of nature.

A review of the quite limited archives (most were destroyed when the Army took possession in 1940) has encouraged me to look more at the source of wealth and inspiration for the landscaping of the gardens at the time of Richard Bull's ownership



Richard Bull (MP for Newport, (painting above is of his family painted by Arthur Devis Cornwall) was from an Island family, but his father Sir John Bull had been a successful London merchant trading with Turkey and the Levant, and became a Sheriff of London. He married in 1747, Mary Ash of Ongar, who had previously been married to Benet Alexander Bennet who had recently sold the Babraham Estates in Cambridgeshire inherited from the 3rd Baronet Babraham.

Richard Bull helped look after his stepson, Richard Henry Alexander Bennet who then married Elizabeth Amelia Burrell, at he age of 15! She was the daughter of Peter Burrell MP of Langley Park, Beckenham, where Richard Bennet then lived.

Peter's uncle was Merrick Burrell 1st Baron Burrell (Governor of the Bank of England). interestingly the same Burrell's who now own the Knepp estate in Sussex much admired recently for its rewilding).

Peter Burrell's other daughters married well. One married the Duke of Hamilton, (and secondly became the marchioness of Exeter after marrying Henry Cecil) two married sons of the Duke of Northumberland, and the brother became Baron Burrell and then Lord Gwyder (for political achievements).

So Richard Bull's stepson was well connected both politically and through landed gentry. His stepdaughter Mrs. Luther also married well and left her estate to Richard Bull's two daughters, having herself inherited the residue of the estate of Humphry Morrice MP, whose father reputedly had raided the Bank of England during his own term as governor! Catherine and Elizabeth Bull, Richard Bull's only children from Mary Ash's second marriage were expected to inherit £100,000 each (equivalent to £10m today!) .



Richard Bull was awarded a secret service private pension by prime

minister, the Duke of Newcastle of £600 p.a and also an annuity from Humpry Morrice's estate of £500 p.a but it may have been his daughter's significant inheritances that persuaded Richard Bull to buy Northcourt and its Island estates in 1795 (having rented it for 10 years beforehand). Sadly Catherine died later that year but Elizabeth took charge.

Richard Bull himself was one of the greatest print collectors of his day . He was a great friend of Horace Walpole and they exchanged many letters about paintings, books and prints . Bull amassed a huge collection so must have had artistic taste but it was Elizabeth who was inspired to remember her sister's death and no doubt gaining inspiration from the many estates of the aristocracy she had visited through her half brother's marriages who planned the landscaping of Northcourt. His great friendship with Horace Walpole, 4th Earl of Orford would have introduced him to the latest architectural fashions, including Horace's own house at Strawberry Hill. Walpole himself was the son of Sir Robert Walpole, the first Prime minister of the new parliament who reputedly stole government money to build Houghton Hall in Norfolk and amass a very valuable collection of paintings. But it is unlikely the formal Bridgeman designed landscape which had influenced Elizabeth.

Richard Bull, then aged 80 wrote in 1803 to General Rainsford saying "My Betty is perfectly well , and regards nothing beyond her plantations. She is about some vast work in the grounds, half a mile higher than the house, and has laid an embargo on me, and my horse, so I am not allowed to visit her high places till everything is finished: all I know is , that there have been half a dozen labourers employed all last winter, and all this summer."

Richard Bull died in 1805 in his eighties and Elizabeth in 1809, so Elizabeth's landscaping may never have been complete and certainly had not matured.

Northcourt was left to Richard Bull's step-son Richard Bennet who passed it to his children. Isabella Julia Levina Bennet who married General Sir James Willoughby Gordon and a half share to Amelia Elizabeth Bennet who

married Sir John Swinburne (Algernon Swinburne's grandfather). Sir James bought out the Swinburne share and passed it onto Sir Henry Percy Gordon on his death in 1851. It had passed into safe hands until 1938 when the remaining estate of some 1700 acres was sold off in parcels and just 15 acres left with the house. Double death duties and recession had taken its toll on family finances.

In Vectis Scenery, with prints by George Brannon describes the estate in 1824: "immediately at its back rises a steep hill, formed in a succession of terraces . The grove towers, above the grove, are the most magnificent forest trees, intermixed with many hundreds of elegant shrubs, presenting one extended mass of rich foliage, under which deep shade plays on some delightful walks, On the North side stretches an undulating lawn , adorned by an ancient avenue and majestic elms.

Several extremely tasty architectural appendages embellish this sylvan theatre: a pretty dairy : a very beautiful mausoleum, sacred to the memory of a dear departed daughter of a former owner, Richard Bull, Esq. sequestered in a gloomy dell, and enriched with a variety of well know inscriptions.

On quitting the passive spot, we pass over a handsome, rustic bridge, thrown across the village road, and arrive at the temple of the sun, which commands the most delightful prospects of the country and the whole of the British Channel."

Sadly time has taken its toll on many of the embellishments but at least the rustic alpine bridge has been maintained by the parish council for the past 40 years. Its purpose is now lost as it was intended to allow the gentry to walk up to the temple of the sun without having to mix.



Above is from a postcard of the Shorwell Shute before widening taken 1890.

Vicky Basford gave me details a few years ago about similar “ladies walks” which seems to very much follow what Elizabeth Bull designed.

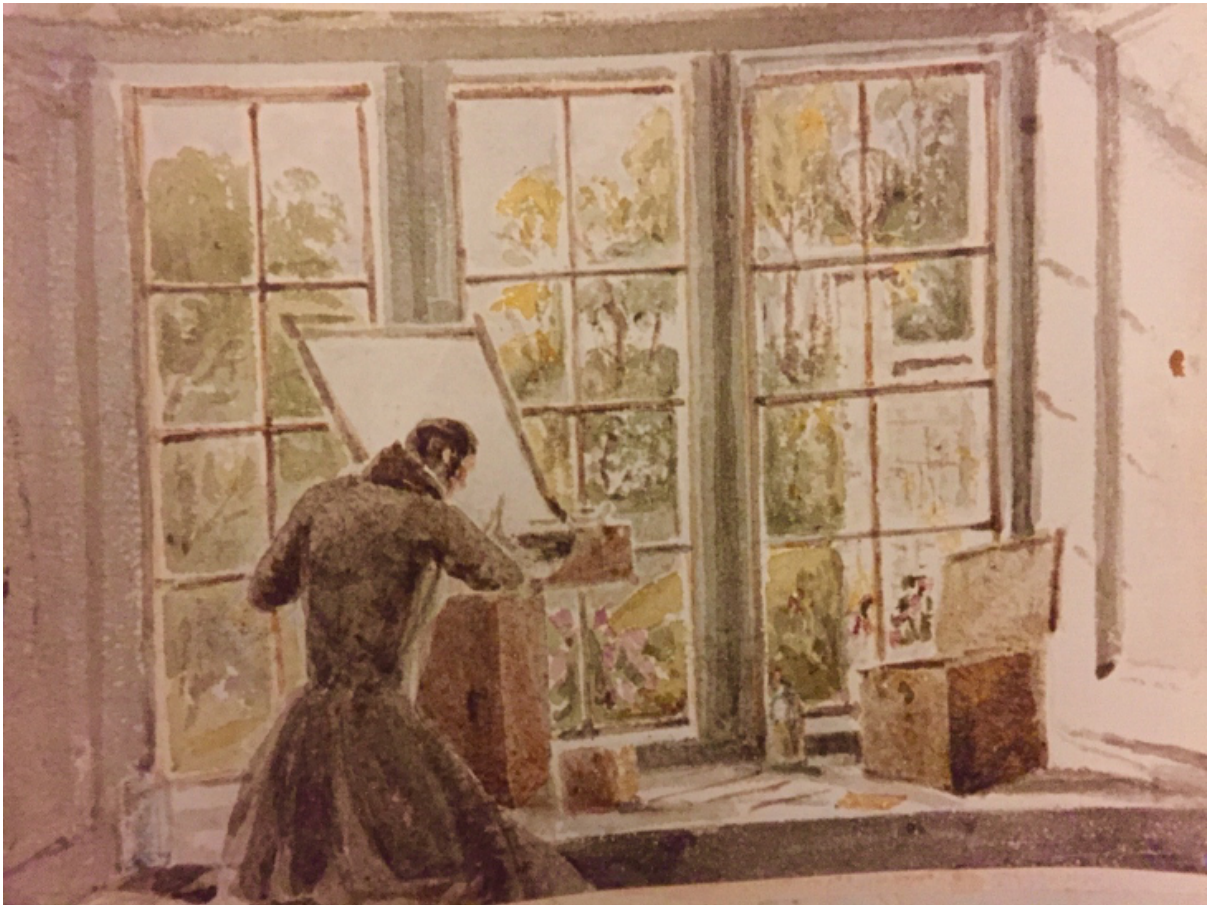
Michael Symes who lectured to us on picturesque gardens felt that parts of the design had the feel of a late rococo garden but there is no doubt the picturesque best describes what was created. The rococo features being principally the association of the bathhouse, cascade and packhorse bridge.



Lady Isabella Julia Gordon was a very capable painter taught by Coke, Girtin and even had lessons with Turner and we are fortunate in having found several of her paintings which very much capture the picturesque and sylvan beauty of the place.

It is probable that Mrs. Bennet inspired by her brother and sister-in-laws estate, continued the improvements building the walled garden and stable block and planting the parterre. Lady Isabella Julia Gordon had to divide her attention to Northcourt, The Orchards in the the Undercliffe at Niton, their Scottish estates and house in Chelsea, but she clearly had time to paint. She is now recognised as a leading lady watercolour painter of her generation.





Four paintings and two sketches are included here painted probably around 1840. One showing the terraced walks and ladies enjoying their morning stroll – in conversation no doubt! The other taken from the temple of the sun looking towards the channel and the top of the house. The first pencil drawing of the view from a classical wooden summer house at the top of the paddock (whose foundations can still be seen).

Researching our archives and online material has not provided any more detail as to who Elizabeth Bull consulted but the source of wealth behind the landscaping of Northcourt is better understood. Some of this wealth shows links to slavery, colonialism, rewards for political favours and more, and marriage to underage ladies to add to the collection.

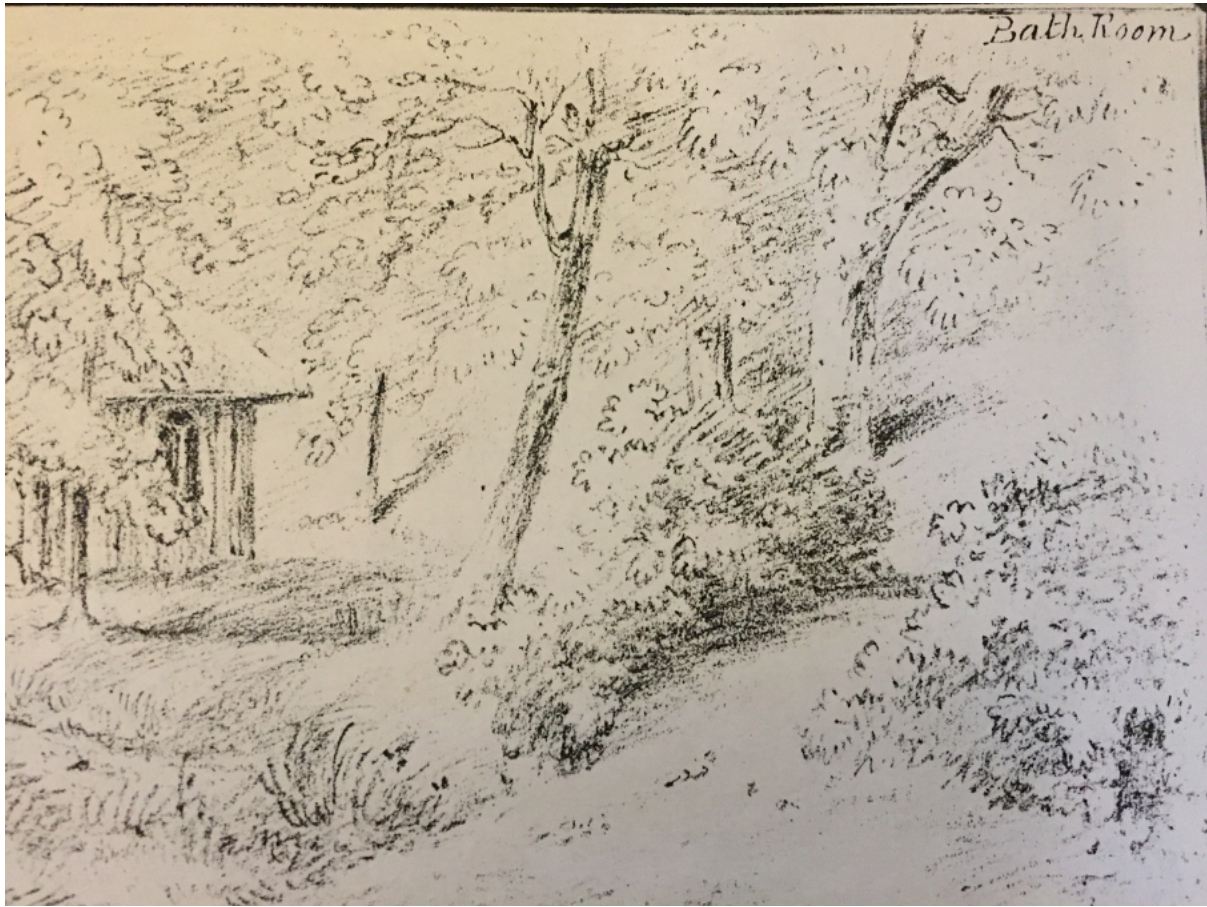
Despite the loss of many of Elizabeth Bull's embellishments and the fragmentation of the estate, fortunately, the natural beauty thanks to the

topography of Shorwell continues to inspire so many poets and painters and lovers of nature and gardens . It is those qualities that have enabled Northcourt to have a sustainable future linked to tourism which should enable it to survive without resorting to any of the now frowned upon sources of wealth.

One benefit we do now have that all that wealth did not have the technology for was for an indoor heated bathroom. We now have 21 of them! With this bitter cold weather as I write, we could not have expected our many visitors – especially on this day of valentines to visit the Northcourt bathroom sketched by Lady Gordon in 1812!

Fortunately for technology we should soon be able to meet and enjoy our gardens once again !

John Harrison on this day February 14th 2021.



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