

Further news and views from Northcourt – part two

In my recent article dated February 14th I referred to Richard Bull's great friendship with Horace Walpole and I also referred to possible ill-gotten gains which had possibly boosted the fortunes of Northcourt past owners. Lockdown has enabled me to re-view the Northcourt archives and add fresh information.

This reminded me of our last holiday away in October which was spent in the gamekeepers cottage of Wolterton Hall in Norfolk.

Wolterton had interested me eight years ago on a previous visit to Norfolk being one of the great Walpole houses but one on the At Risk register of English Heritage as it was then. We had heard it was then later subject to a major restoration and as it had accommodation, we needed to see how the house and park were progressing.



It had been the home of the Baron Horatio Walpole, Sir Robert's younger brother who had been ennobled for his political services. Horace had inherited in 1791 the very grand Houghton Hall from his nephew, the third Earl, who had mismanaged the estate, but Horace had turned his attention to Strawberry Hill. His father Sir Robert had raided the public purse as the first Prime Minister of Great Britain to pursue his extravagance for William Kent's interiors of Houghton and the acquisition of one of the largest collections of European art (much of which ended up with Catherine the Great, now in the Hermitage at St. Petersburg).

Wolterton was a more manageable property designed by Thomas Ripley completed in 1742. The landscape as with Sir Robert's Houghton was that of Bridgeman, with William Gilpin helping with the gardens. It remained

the Baron Walpole family home until 1952 when a fire struck. Despite the insurance claim, giving it a new roof the 10th Baron chose to live at nearby Mannington Hall in 1989 and many contents and most land was sold and the house went into rapid decline. However designers Peter Sheppard and Keith Day bought it in 2016 and started spending quite a few million on restoration. We were given a tour and could not believe the standard of restoration being achieved with such skilled craftsman with a view to the house being a very extravagant holiday venue to rent. The aim is to have whole estate lets, complete with butlers, maids, chefs and gamekeepers so that the multimillionaires can enjoy the Downton Abbey experience.

Thanks to grants substantial tree planting and dredging of the Bridgeman lake has been undertaken, which we were free to roam around, but much still needs to be done to the massive walled gardens in due course.

Like our smaller Northcourt the sustainability of the estate rests on the appreciation of the history and beauty of the place through tourism rather than "ill-gotten" gains but whereas we might have spent £4000 on a bathroom theirs was costing £40000 or more.



The Bridgeman landscape from the house and at top Wolterton Hall from the lake.

The Northcourt bathroom was an outside thatched roofed building down by the stream in the late 18th-19th century but the latest at Wolterton being built required scaffold to get it in and to put up the chandeliers. The bath was to be clad with carved marble..

From Wolterton we made an appointment to visit Mannington (below), where the present Baron and his wife have laid out a de-



lightful garden around their moated house, redesigned (no doubt with Horace's influence) in gothic style.

Walking through the Wolterton park we came across an isolated ruined church which made us assume



that this was abandoned with the village during the black plague - the bubonic plague introduced in 1348, which is thought to have killed 25 mil-

lion in Europe in four years.

Parts of highly populated Norfolk were devastated and many villages abandoned. St. Peter's Shorwell is not about to be abandoned through Covid although when congregations return I fear numbers will be even more depleted, putting it at risk of redundancy. It makes me realise how lucky we are that Covid is not more deadly and how we have all our technology to understand the virus and fight it back. However in fact the village of Wolterton was moved out of view in 1742 but the church left as a folly in the Bridgeman landscape.

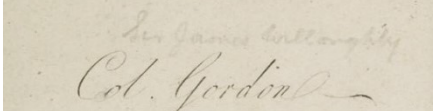
Northcourt did not need to move its village as the village is low down unlike the wide open Norfolk landscape. Instead all it needed to do was protect the distant views and ensure that ladies could pass across the shute from one side of the estate to the other without meeting the locals. To that end it built the rustic bridge and ensured it owned its view buying up Cheverton Farm, Atherfield, Dungewood, New Barn Farm, Wolverton Manor and in 1876 Westcourt Farm, having at one time owned Mottistone in the Leigh era before Richard Bull.

But then I questioned myself how did the owners have the wealth to acquire the extra land and live with so many staff.

As with the Walpole family the Richard Bull and Bennet families' ancestors gained so much from their parliamentary connections, gaining titles, land and pensions. Isabella Julia Levina Bennet married Sir James Willoughby Gordon who was quartermaster General to the Duke of Wellington and for his services he was awarded the lease on land at Chelsea next to the hospital with a garden right down to the embankment (now Gordon House the nurses quarters). Born in 1772 he achieved great military heights, having started as secretary to the Duke of Kent, Queen Victoria's father, and then became the Duke of York's military secretary. He achieved great power as a military man and through political connections. We know that his wife was first cousin to the Duke of Northumberland, thought to be the most powerful aristocratic family at the time. His sister-in law was married into the Swinburne family who also owned an estate in Northumberland at Capheaton, and his cousin was married into the Whitbread family who themselves were intermarried with the Earl Grey family of Howick in Northumberland (a later prime minister). The Bennets and Bulls were much in favour with the Duke of Newcastle (the former PM) who awarded Richard Bull his secret service private pension. We talk now about the Northern powerhouse but it certainly existed then!



Engraved by Ripwood. From a sketch by Rowlandson.



Well I wish I had not perhaps delved so much into General Gordon's past. His great Grandfather George was the 8th Laird of Knockespock, Aberdeenshire and 2nd Laird of Auchlyne, but it seems that his great Uncle James Gordon sought and gained a fortune out in Antigua in the "sugar" industry but in truth benefitting from slavery.

Gen. Gordon's father was Captain Francis Grant Gordon, his grandmother marrying a William Grant of Strathspey. His mother was a Mary Aston who was the daughter of Sir Willoughby Aston, 5th baronet. So there were plenty of good connections.

As well as buying the Orchards on the Undercliff at Niton(below), building on the land at Chelsea, buying his sister-in-law, Lady Swinburne's half share of the Northcourt Estates, General Sir James Willoughby Gordon had the means to be a big patron of the arts particularly to Turner, Wilkie, Leslie, and Witherington, most of whom stayed at the Orchards (below left by Reinagle) and visited Northcourt. In 1834 Wilkie even asked for his daughter, Julia's hand in marriage—not to be accepted. They

certainly did lots of entertainment and below are the young Swinburnes, Gordons and Percies on the front lawn of Northcourt



by

where they would spend the spring and early summer. Their son, Sir Henry Percy Gordon benefitted by marrying the daughter of the Earl of Ashburnham, her mother being a granddaughter of the Duke of Northumberland, and may have gained more wealth. Their daughter, Mary Charlotte, marrying Gen Robert Disney Leith, gained another Scottish

Property—Glendkindie and then Westhall both in Aberdeenshire. One of Mary's daughters, Edith married Sir Hardman Earle, and we can trace his ancestry back to when they received a massive sum of £25000 (now worth about £4m) for compensation for the emancipation of his slaves in Antigua. He was then able to become Mayor of Liverpool, an investor in railways and gaining baronetcy in the process. His widow lived here with her sister Mary Leith in 1945.

General Robert Disney Leith was Assistant Adjutant-General in Bombay at the time of the Indian Mutiny but made fame through his heroism at the capture of Mooltan in 1849– but wisely after losing his right arm in battle, he kept clear of politics and his wife (Mary

to right) became a renowned author for 61 years and translator of Icelandic sagas. After Mary Disney-Leith died in 1926 Glenkindie (to left) passed to a nephew and was sold in the 1950s , Northcourt being sold in 1938. A mystery still remains as to whether cousin Mary was Algernon Swinburne's love he wrote about.



The Leiths did not pursue political careers to get titles and rewards nor did they invest in family businesses - Grants Whisky or Gordons Gin! Mary Disney-Leith's oldest son did reacquire the title Lord Burgh, which had been in abeyance for three hundred years in 1916. The Burgh family came from Gainsborough Hall in Lincolnshire, where Katherine Parr had been married to the Burgh family before marrying Henry VIII. However the title Lord Burgh bought no money but gave Alexander Leith a feeling of high status, which may have contributed to a continuing lifestyle with staff and four large houses to maintain. However the effect of the depression, agricultural recession and his untimely death in 1926 shortly after that of his mother, Mary led to debt and double death duties. His son's wife then ran off with the chauffeur which cannot have helped the situation! Meanwhile Peter Leith, the future 7th Lord Burgh showed great promise as a gardener but at the age of 3 he was unable to prevent a sale of Northcourt and its contents and the gardeners were "furloughed" without pay indefinitely, with the gardens going to sleep for a decade. Instead without a grand home, and divorced parents Peter married a dock-er's daughter and moved to France dying in his 60s.



Peter Leith helping Frank Barton in the parterre 1937 and Frank Barton and fellow gardener Fred Cram 1930



So Northcourt entered lockdown as a family home after the sale was completed in March 1938 and was only saved from destruction by quick-witted Soldiers from the Hants and Wilts regiment who were stationed there in 1941, who climbed on the roof and removed the incendiary bombs offloaded by the Luftwaffe on their return from bombing Portsmouth. Fred Pontin failed to get support for a holiday camp, so the three Harrison brothers, who were brought up in vicarages and were London based tradesmen stepped in.

With our own lockdown hopefully ending in a few months we very much expect there to be a staycation boom.

Lockdown has encouraged us to appreciate the outside even more, especially our parks and gardens for exercise and we hope that this will be a permanent appreciation. Those like us who have gardens enjoyed the tranquillity, and mental relaxation that our gardens provided. Staycation will enable us to appreciate our public British public houses parks and gardens and landscape even more, whatever the origins of their wealth.

In 1793 H.P. Wyndham wrote on visiting Northcourt "the house has for many years been inhabited by Mr. Bull, who has made his apartments within, as convenient and comfortable as the outward front is respectable, and who strictly keeps up the primitive hospitality of the age, in which the mansion was erected, and with taste, that was unknown till the present times."



Northcourt dining room instead of serving breakfast was during lockdown the operations centre.

Wolterton (www.woltertonpark.co.uk), The Newt (www.thenewtinsomerset.com) and many others set an exceptional new standard which can no longer be considered "the primitive hospitality of the age in which the mansions were erected" and we too can contribute to the task of reducing CO2 emissions by doing a grand tour of Britain. Maybe our large gardens and estates do now have an exceptional post lockdown brighter future. **Enjoy them!**



The gardening team at the Newt ready to welcome us.