

Leicestershire's First Lost Houses

J. D. Bennett

The twentieth century saw the disappearance of large numbers of country houses, particularly during the period between the two World Wars and during the 1950s and '60s. *The Destruction of the Country House 1875-1975*, the book accompanying a major exhibition of the same name at the Victoria & Albert Museum in 1974, listed more than 1,100 houses (twenty-one of them in Leicestershire) that had gone during the previous hundred years, though this was subsequently thought to be an underestimate. It was a process which began with the agricultural depression of the 1870s and loss of revenues from farm rents; the introduction of death duties in 1894; and the loss of many sons and heirs of landed estates in the First World War. Post-war, there were difficulties with obtaining domestic servants upon whom the running of country houses largely depended; whilst the ravages of the Second World War took their toll with many houses requisitioned by the military.

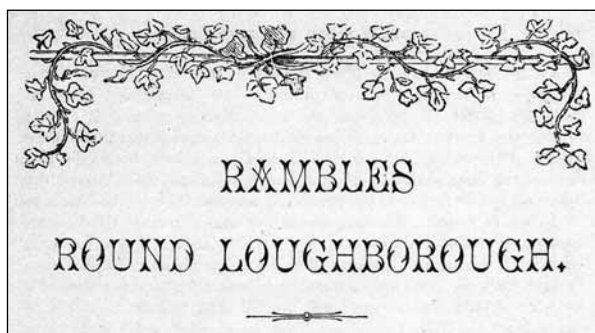
Yet country houses were disappearing long before the dawn of the twentieth century. As Anna Sproule pointed out in *Lost Houses of Britain*, 'people have been destroying mansions ever since there were mansions to destroy', and she admitted that 'it would be manifestly impossible to work out how many British houses of architectural or historical importance have disappeared since, say, the Tudor period'. Some houses, thought old-fashioned or inconvenient, were let to tenant farmers, so starting a long process of decline, or just abandoned and left to fall down. Others were destroyed by accidents such as

fires, or when national events such as the Civil War impinged. Those which were too close to rapidly expanding towns were sold and replaced by streets of houses. And in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries earlier houses were often demolished, to make way for new and more up-to-date mansions.

In Leicestershire there are a number of early examples of houses which, for various reasons, were vacated by their owners, and which subsequently disappeared. The mansion called Bagworth Park, built by the Banaster family in 1616 and surrounded by a moat, was very short-lived. It was garrisoned for a while by Royalist troops during the Civil War, but 'devastated and destroyed soon after', the remains finally being cleared away about 1769. Not far from Thornton Reservoir, it is still shown as a moated site on Ordnance Survey maps.

The seat of the Skipwiths and then the Packes, Cotes Hall near Loughborough was built in the 1580s and also had Civil War connections - Charles I on his way to attack Leicester, spent a night here in 1645. It was destroyed by fire in the early eighteenth century, though some of the garden walls which Thomas Rossell Potter mentioned in his *Walks round Loughborough* (1840) and in *Rambles round Loughborough* (1868) could still be seen well over a hundred years later.

'A part of the antient mansion of the Turviles in New Hall Park is yet standing ... surrounded by a deep broad moat, over which there is a stone bridge', wrote John Nichols when he visited the site of this house near Thurlaston, built, or rebuilt in



COTES BRIDGE has so often been the subject of remark that we pass it without further mention—not forgetting, however, that the Earls of Scarborough have been (traditionally) said to owe the present Lumley line to a circumstance that took place here.* The ancient British road from Lincolnshire, by Seg's Hill crossed the Soar at this point, running in a straight line through the lower part of Burton, and the present Prestwold Park. The turnpike to Hoton is recent. Turning to the left, and entering Mr. Warner Lacey's homestead, the site of the ancient Hall of Cotes is easily traced. A glance will discover this must have been a fine old place in days of yore. The old terraces, the garden walls, the traces of a boat-house, and the unique barn, are all that remain to tell what Cotes Hall (or Cotes Castle, as it was *once* called) must have been. They must be cold-hearted who can find no interest in such a spot! Here the Frumentins, the Skipwiths, the Packes long kept up a noble house. In a room—the site of which can still be traced—Charles I. spent a night in 1645,† and here he wrote that beautiful letter to Queen Henrietta, beginning "*Sweete Harte.*" It is dated May 29, and was probably written *early in the morning* of that day, for the previous day the King left Ashby Castle, marched by Coleorton and Grace Dieu, where he took refreshment with Sir Henry Beaumont, and did not reach Sir Henry Skipwith's till late on the 28th, having stayed some hours at Loughborough, where a large portion of his army had arrived on the 27th. A busy and an anxious time must that have been here! Our town brimful of soldiers and the Sovereign at Cotes! Fancy may picture the scene. Late on the 29th the King and Prince Rupert met at Aylestone.

Le Keux has taken the river front of Cotes Ruins as the subject of a charming picture. We are not aware that any view of the Hall in its glory is extant, but that it must have been a noble place may be seen by what remains. At one time it was important as commanding the bridge. The large *ilex* still growing in Mr. Hallam's garden was, no doubt, flourishing in the *Plaisance* in 1645. The Hall was partially destroyed by fire—tradition says by an unjust steward—and much of the material was used at Prestwold. The park, extending to the fish pond, and Moat Hill, still retains its name, and, perhaps, a few of the oaks and limes of other days.

Thomas Rossell Potter's description of Cotes Hall, from Rambles Round Loughborough, 1868. (Reproduced by permission of the Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland.)

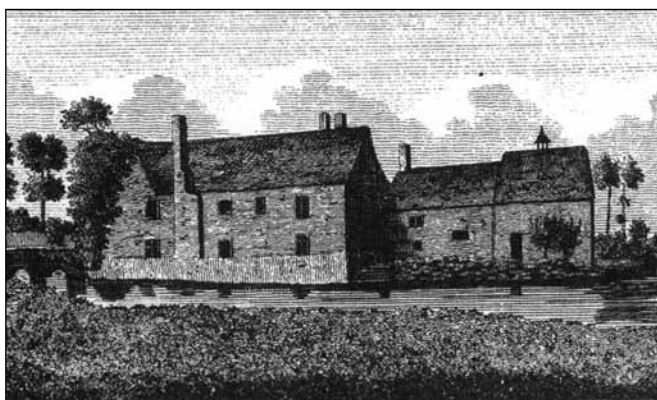


Garden walls at Cotes, photographed in 1961.

the early part of the fifteenth century. It was the home of the Turvilles till at least the early eighteenth century, but had become a farm by the nineteenth century. The remains of the ‘antient mansion’ of New Hall apparently survived until the 1940s.

Bradgate House, the late medieval seat of the Greys and birthplace of the ill-fated Lady Jane, and visited by both Charles I and William III, was abandoned by the family in 1719 but apparently intact till about 1739. In 1807 the antiquary John Britton noted that ‘the ruins of this venerable, and once dignified mansion ... are highly picturesque’, and one of Nichols’ correspondents recorded that ‘traces of the tilt-yard are still visible; and the courts are now occupied by rabbits, and shaded with chesnut trees and mulberries’. Not surprisingly, in the nineteenth century Bradgate became a favourite subject for local artists like John Flower and John Martin, both of whom published engravings of it, and as early as the 1830s the park was open to visitors, ‘for a day’s enjoyment and relaxation from the homelier cares of life and business ... to the inhabitants of Leicester ... an invaluable privilege’.

One of the least known of Leicestershire’s early lost houses, Elmesthorpe Hall near Hinckley was a large Jacobean house



New Hall Park near Thurlaston, 1791, from John Nichols, *History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester, vol. IV, part II, plate CLII, opp. page 1002.*

built about 1610 by the Harrington family and later owned by the Cockaines. The last remnants of it appear to have vanished about 1750.

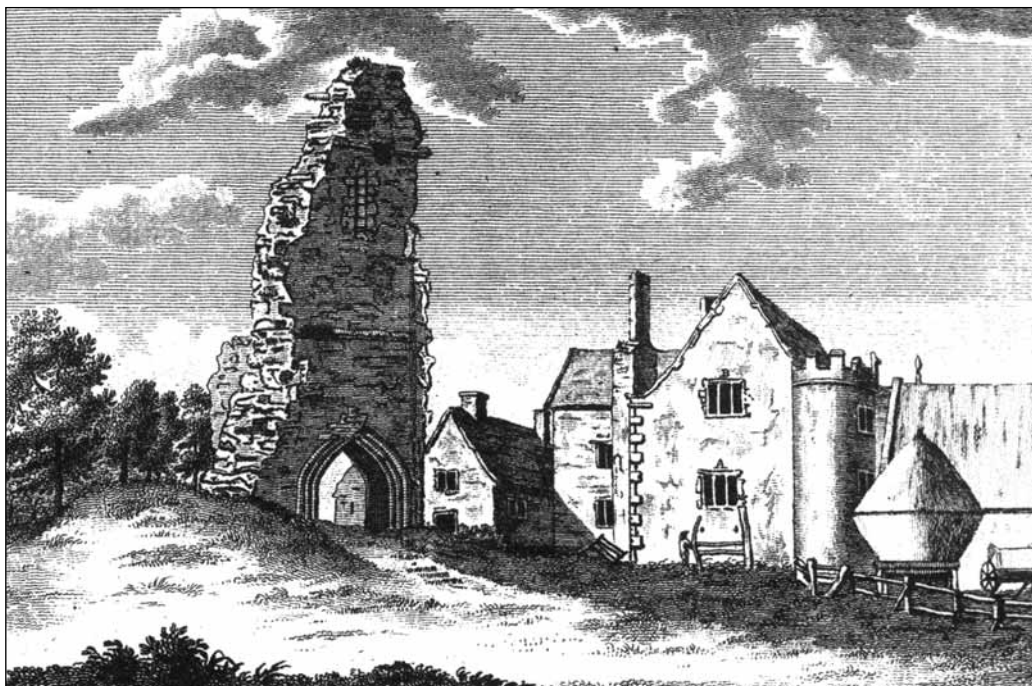
Burnt by Parliamentary troops in the Civil War, Kirby Bellars Hall, though subsequently rebuilt also disappeared when most of it was pulled down in the 1750s. What was probably part of the stables or outbuildings was later turned into a hunting box by Sir Francis Burdett, MP, the Regency political reformer, and became known as Kirby Park. From here, in the wake of the Peterloo Massacre (1819), he wrote a widely-published condemnatory letter to his constituents, but it was deemed to be seditious libel. For this he was tried at Leicester Assizes the following year, and sentenced to three months in prison and a fine of £2,000. After his death, Kirby Park became a farmhouse which can still be seen to the left of the A607 when travelling from Leicester to Melton Mowbray.

Welham Hall, north-east of Market Harborough, had an unusual origin. Originally built c1720 by the lord of the manor, Francis Edwards, as a large inn on a projected turnpike road, this ambitious scheme failed to receive approval and the inn was converted into a mansion which lasted only about forty years. Demolished c1762, it was already a fading memory by the 1790s. John Nichols commented on the gardens, ‘planted in a very magnificent style, the walls of which are now standing; and the lands, together with what the house stood upon, are converted into pasture’ - what Hugh Collinson in *Rural Rides in Historic Leicestershire*, described as ‘A field full of walls’.



Walls in the fields at Welham, photographed in 2015.

The home of the Turpin family, Knaptoft Hall, an early Tudor mansion, enlarged by its early seventeenth century owner, was probably burnt by Parliamentary troops in 1645. Already in a ruinous condition by the 1790s, it had largely vanished by 1805. About 1815 ‘a comfortable modern dwelling’ was built on the site. This too was replaced, by later farmhouses incorporating some remaining fragments of the Hall.



Remains of Knaptoft Hall, 1791, from John Nichols, History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester, vol. IV, part I, plate XXXII, opp. page 221.

Cadeby Hall, a gabled, probably late seventeenth century mansion, was recorded in a watercolour by John Flower before it was demolished in 1828. It was replaced, though perhaps not immediately, by a later Cadeby Hall, described by Peter Foss in *The History of Market Bosworth* (1983) as 'rebuilt from an earlier house in the mid 19th century'. Belgrave Old Hall, a sixteenth century house, also survived long enough to be depicted by Flower in one of his famous lithographs, before being pulled down, probably in 1835 when the new road from Belgrave turn to the bottom of Red Hill was being constructed. Another house on approximately the same site, which later became Belgrave Constitutional Club, apparently included fragments of the Old Hall.

A seventeenth century mansion, the seat of the Boothby family, Tooley Hall was sold by them in 1779 and rebuilt by its new owners, the Boultsbees, early in the nineteenth century. It had become a farmhouse by the 1840s and was abandoned later in the century, its ruins a playground for local children. The ruins subsequently disappeared, though some garden walls and an entrance lodge could still be seen in the late 1950s.

The Hall at Sutton Cheney is an example of a partially lost house. Originally a gabled Elizabethan mansion, with a recessed centre and two projecting wings, it was 'speedily hastening to decay' by the 1790s and appears to have been partly pulled down during the nineteenth century, perhaps after the death of Richard Smith (d.1852) who lived here for fifty years according to his monument in Sutton church. What now remains is the former right wing, much restored in Victorian brick.

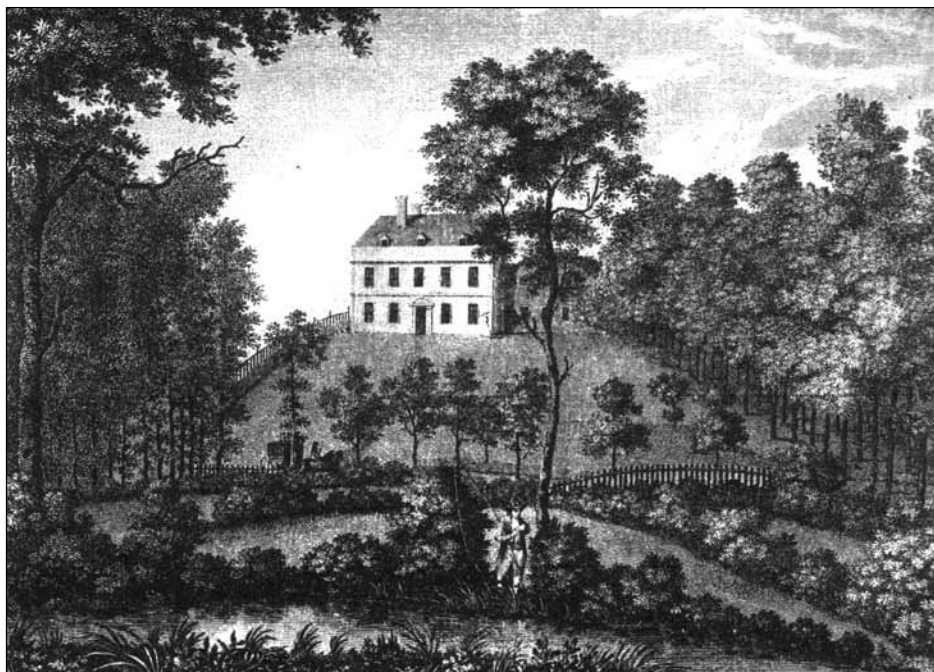
Danets Hall and Westcotes Hall on the western fringes of Leicester were both victims of urban expansion. In 1801 the

population of Leicester was only 16,953, but by 1861 it was 68,056 and twenty years later had reached 122,376. The home of the Watts family from about 1700 to 1769, and rebuilt by them, Danets Hall then had a succession of owners, but by 1828 belonged to Dr Joseph Noble. After his death in 1861 in a cholera epidemic in the Spanish town of Malaga, the estate was sold to the Leicester Freehold Land Society and the house demolished the same year. Addressing the Leicester Literary and Philosophical Society in 1864, Dr John Barclay observed: 'Danets Hall is swept away, and new streets laid out on its site ... I cannot forbear the expression of a regret that the Danets Hall estate was not secured as a place of recreation for the public - a Peoples Park'.

The same idea resurfaced some twenty years later when the Westcotes estate was sold, with the suggestion that the mansion and its grounds should become a public library and park. This proposal was rejected by the Corporation, and the ancient home of the Rudings, then in the nineteenth century of the Freer and Harris families, was demolished in 1885. Refronted about 1730, it was so well built that dynamite was used 'to hasten the work of its destruction'. A Georgian staircase from the house was saved and re-erected in 1894 at Somerleaze, a house at Wookey in Somerset, where it was seen by a contributor to the *Rutland Magazine* in 1911.

Many Leicestershire country houses have been rebuilt, some of them more than once, though not always on the same site, so the forerunners of the present Baggrave Hall (rebuilt in the 1750s), Beaumanor (last rebuilt in the 1840s), Belvoir Castle (last rebuilt following the disastrous fire of 1816), Donington Hall (rebuilt in the 1790s) and Swithland Hall (rebuilt in the 1830s after fire destroyed its predecessor) are also examples of lost houses.

Danets Hall, illustrated by Throsby, from John Nichols, History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester, vol. IV, part II, plate XCIV, opp. page 567.



Westcotes Hall, illustrated by Throsby from John Nichols, History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester, vol. IV, part II, plate XCIV, opp. page 567.

Sources:

J. D. Bennett, *Vanished Houses of Leicestershire*, (Leicester Museums, 1971).
Marcus Binney, 'How many Country Houses have gone?', *Country Life*, (21st November 1974), pp.1598-99.
Marcus Binney & Emma Milne (eds), *Vanishing Houses of England*, (SAVE Britain's Heritage, 1982).
John Britton, *The Beauties of England and Wales*, vol. IX, (Vernor, Hood & Sharpe, 1808).
Alan Broadfield, *Leicester as it was*, (Hendon Publishing Co., 1972).
Leonard Cantor, *The Historic Country Houses of Leicestershire and Rutland*, (Kairos Press, 1998).
Hugh Collinson, *Rural Rides in Historic Leicestershire*, (Peter Cooper Enterprises, 1981).

John Nichols, *The History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester*, (1795-1815).
'Rudings and their Descendants in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries', *Rutland Magazine*, vol. V, (1911-12).
Anna Sproule, *Lost Houses of Britain*, (David & Charles, 1982).
Roy Strong, Marcus Binney and John Harris (eds), *The Destruction of the Country House 1875-1975*, (Thames & Hudson, 1974).
Caroline Wessel, *Lost Mansions around Desford and Leicester Forest West*, (Desford & District Local History Group, 1986).
Giles Worsley, *England's Lost Houses*, (Aurum Press, 2002).