



Henham Hall - A Lost House



There were once two major country houses in the Blyth Valley - Heveningham Hall and Henham Hall. In the 1870s, before agricultural depression, and the social, economic and political changes of the twentieth century destroyed the foundations of landed society, they were both centres of estates large enough to rank in the top five in the county.

Henham Hall was pulled down in the 1950s. It had been built in the 1790s for John Rous, sixth baronet and later first Earl of Stradbroke, to the designs of James Wyatt. Henham was once the seat of the de la Poles, Earls of Suffolk, until the execution of Edmund de la Pole in 1513, when Henry VIII granted the property to Charles Brandon, Duke of Suffolk. On his death in 1545, the Crown granted Henham to Sir Arthur Hopton of Blythburgh, who sold it to Sir Anthony Rous of Dennington.

The large, red-brick Tudor house, was destroyed by fire in 1773, thanks to a candle dropped by a drunken butler stealing wine from the cellar - or so Suffolk's historian Alfred Suckling records. John Rous, only 23, and on the Grand Tour in Venice at the time, had succeeded two years before. The £30,000 loss represented eight year's income from the estate - a substantial blow. It was to be twenty years before he could rebuild.

The solution to John Rous's money problems came from two financially advantageous marriages (his first wife died in childbirth), and the sale of land released from a trust by his mother in exchange for an enhanced pension. By 1790 he was ready to rebuild. Humphrey Repton surveyed the park and the extremely able and fashionable, but unreliable, James Wyatt provided a design. Wyatt seems never to have visited Henham and an increasingly frustrated Rous had to beard him in his London office in order to make any progress.

Most of the workforce was recruited locally, and supplemented by specialist craftsmen from London. They were paid by the day and supervised by Rufus Marsden, the clerk of the works, who was the estate carpenter. The number of men on the site at one time peaked at about sixty but over 400 different men worked on the project, most for quite short periods. The work was no doubt a significant boost to the local economy but it was spread thinly.

Because the cost of moving heavy materials was high, they were obtained locally if possible - estate timber from Reydon, Stoven, Sotherton, Darsham and Bruisyard, and brick made at Uggheshall and on the site. Small items were brought by road from London, including the prudently purchased new hose for the fire-engine, but most materials came by sea - Baltic timber and glass from Newcastle to Yarmouth, for example, Portland stone to Southwold, and London goods to Aldeburgh. Estate waggons collected the cargoes from the nearest stretch of navigable water, the river Waveney at Beccles for instance.

The Rouses moved into their new house in 1796. It had cost over £20,000 (Wyatt's estimate had been £12,000), a sum which could not be covered by estate income alone, confirming the paradox that country houses appropriate for a landed estate and a family's standing could rarely be built without the help of non-landed money.

The house was given a Victorian gloss in alterations by Edward M. Barry in 1858. In a letter to another noble client, Lord Crewe, Barry reported that there had been a fire at Henham which came close to total destruction and a potential loss of £30 to 40,000. Strangely, given the experience of 1773, the fire insurance was still barely above the cover obtained on the new house in 1797 - only £13,000.

Henham Hall survived the first half of the twentieth century but a combination of the depredations of the second world war, agricultural rents in the post-war years that were no higher than they had been one hundred years before, and problems of succession within the family to title and property, exacerbated by a complex will, sealed the fate of the mansion. It was demolished in the 1950s, leaving only



the stables and lodges, in an ancient park, as reminders of former glories.

Further reading: Alan Mackley, 'The Construction of Henham Hall', Journal of the Georgian Group, 6 (1996).

Alan Mackley, Blythburgh, March 2000