

The Restoration of Brodsworth Hall & Gardens A talk given by Alison Constantine of English Heritage to Tickhill & District Local History Society in February 2007



This talk outlines the remarkable story of one of Yorkshire's finest country houses – how it was saved for the nation and rose from its slumber following years of neglect by its family, after an extraordinary amount of work and dedication by many and various people connected with English Heritage.

History behind Brodsworth Hall & Gardens

Without delving too far back into the realms of history, everything starts for the house way back in the 1700s, with a gentleman called Peter Thellusson. He came from the Continent and settled in England, gradually acquiring land including the Brodsworth estate. He was a very wealthy man, he was in fact a banker, and he wrote what has since become a very famous will. In his will he put the bulk of his fortune into a trust fund. This was around £700,000 – in today's money this is worth around £54 million, so you can appreciate how wealthy he was. The money was to stay in the trust fund for three generations accumulating interest all the time – when the third generation had passed on, the fourth, then unborn, generation, could eventually inherit. He left to his family living at the time, about £100,000 to share between them. His will was read in 1797 – and initially his family were delighted - £100,000 to share was an awful lot of money (about 7 ½ million in today's money.) Of course they soon realised that there was another £700,000, locked away in a trust fund that they couldn't get their hands on at all. Well – the family weren't going to stand for this, so they took the will straight to court. The courts had never seen anything like it – such a huge amount of money put by for such a length of time, and to be quite honest – they didn't know what to do about it at all. Charles Dickens' particular novel *Bleak House* has a legal case in it, of *Jarndyce versus Jarndyce*. Charles Dickens actually based his story on, among others, the real-life case of the Thellusson family versus Peter Thellusson's will –



so you can appreciate how important it was in its day. Now – the courts did allow the will to stand, but it took over half a century for them to reach this decision. Many lawyers were disappointed when the Thellusson case eventually came to a close – as they had been earning hefty fees from it for so long! The money that Peter Thellusson had left in his will was supposed to have accumulated interest over the years, and accrue into an unimaginable sum – in fact Peter had stated that if there wasn't a fourth generation to inherit, then

the money should be used to help pay off the National Debt! However, all the interest that should have accrued was spent on lawyers and legal fees. SO – the amount that was inherited was about the same that was put into trust – about £700,000. We come now to 1859, and two lucky

gentlemen do eventually inherit. One was the Fourth Lord Rendlesham, but the gentleman that we're interested in today was called Charles Sabine Augustus Thellusson (CSAT). As well as his half of the money, he also inherited the wonderful Brodsworth Estate, here in Yorkshire. The house he inherited wasn't this one, it was a Georgian house – about 100 yards further north than the current one – near to the church in the village. Charles brought his family up from Brighton where they were living at the time of his inheritance, to have a look at what they'd inherited. Unfortunately, Charles didn't like the Georgian house at all – he thought it was far too old-fashioned and rambling – he had his new money, and he wanted a new house. So – he had the Georgian house completely demolished to make way for a new one.

How the House started out



A watercolour was painted by the Hall's eventual architect, Mr Philip Wilkinson. It was an effort to woo CSAT out of his money – and it worked – the house was commissioned. To have the entire house built and furnished, to landscape and plant the gardens, and to have the estate cottages built and furnished cost around £50,000 – CSAT inherited £350,000 so he had plenty of money left for his favourite hobby which was designing, building and racing yachts. He still holds the record for the largest private British yacht ever built. The house was built and furnished in just 18 months between 1861 and 1863.

Wow – what a house he got for his money! Lovely interiors sumptuously and lavishly appointed. 16 bedrooms in total.



Family history to explain decline of house

Charles was married to a beautiful wealthy woman called Georgiana – and they had six children – four sons and two daughters. All the sons married but none of them had any children, so the house passed to each son in turn. The youngest son came to the house in the 1920's – he didn't like it very much and so only lived here during the shooting season. So then – as early as the 1920s the house wasn't being lived in all year round, and it wasn't being loved and upkept like it had been in its Victorian and Edwardian heyday. When the youngest son died, the house passed to his nephew – this is where we meet the Grant-Daltons. There was just the two of them – Captain Grant-Dalton



and his wife Sylvia – they did have a daughter, Pam, but she didn't like the house much so didn't stay there often. It's an enormous and expensive house for just two people to live in, and the Grant-Daltons didn't have the fortune that the Thellussons had had before them – principally because the Thellussons had spent it! So over time, the Grant-Daltons got round this problem by closing large parts of the house down, and concentrating on living in just a few rooms. Sylvia Grant - Dalton is the longest living resident at Brodsworth – she came here in 1931, and stayed here until she died in 1988. Her second husband (who was her first husband's cousin – hence she kept the same name) died in 1970 – so for the last eighteen years of her life, she actually lived at Brodsworth by herself. Many local people came and went over the years to help Sylvia run the house, but essentially she had a cook, who doubled-up as the housekeeper, so you can imagine how much housework was done – and a butler, who was the same age as her, so again, not much butlering going on! Sylvia fought a never-ending battle with this house – during the course of the last century, this part of the country was very badly affected by mining subsidence. The back quarter of the house actually tilted down by about eight inches,

pulling the roof apart – so poor Sylvia was living there with the rain coming through the roof, and the rising damp coming up the walls. She managed to keep the collections together though, so that luckily, after English Heritage rescued the house, we are still able to enjoy them today.

What English Heritage was faced with c1990

The house was in a perilous state of deterioration. It was offered to the National Trust but they declined due to the lack of endowment. English Heritage took it on as 'last resort', in order to save it for the nation. The family gave the house and gardens to English Heritage on the condition that English Heritage purchased the contents from them, which they did with money totalling £3.3 million from the National Heritage Memorial Fund.

The house had rotten stonework, out of date electrics, a leaking roof and rising damp problem as well as pest infestations and no proper heating.

The house was immediately scaffolded and a huge temporary roof was erected over the entire building in order for work on the new roof to continue regardless of the weather.





The new roof cost around £800,000.

Inside the house were 17,000 individual objects. Each room was photographed before anything was moved, then each individual item was photographed, catalogued and packed away in order for the major works to be carried out in the house, such as rewiring and the installation of a heating system. The 17,000 objects were then eventually returned once the house was ready – according to the photographs.

The house is shown to the public ‘conserved’ rather than ‘restored’ – so much of the original decorative scheme and contents survived that it was felt this was the best way to interpret the story of the house to the visitor – essentially the decline of the English country house.



The last lady to live at Brodsworth, Sylvia Grant-Dalton, had a cook who doubled up as a housekeeper – there wasn't much housework taking place during the last 40 or so years of the house's lived-in history. Curtains that we thought were brown came back to us after cleaning and conservation a beautiful rich crimson colour, once the years of grime had been removed.



Filth had accumulated over the years from countless fires and missed spring cleans in the house's later life. Chimneys were filled with birds' nests and birds' corpses too. Tonnes of material were removed from the many chimneys and fireplaces.

Extensive cleaning took place – all the original gilding came up like new once the years of grime were gently cleaned away.



Back in 1990, large parts of the original Entrance Hall Axminster carpet had decayed, because the lantern light up above had leaked for many years. So – English Heritage decided to have a reproduction made. The work was carried out in Budapest, because there is no longer a loom large enough in England to take a carpet of the size that we needed. To have the three pieces, from the front door to the staircase reproduced, cost us £40,000 in 1995.





Upstairs, where carpets were less lavish, had seen much wear and tear too, and the whole bedroom corridor carpet had to be replaced. It was reproduced for us by Avena Carpets of Halifax – it cost £30k and is a machine-woven hard wearing carpet called ‘Brussels carpet’. It



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was made in its original 27” strips – its border was manufactured separately and the whole thing was delivered in bags. Our ‘carpet man’ who’s called Tommy, spent two weeks on his hands and knees with his carpet needle hand-stitching the whole thing together so it is an exact reproduction of the original.

Much of the furniture was infested with undesirable insects and had to be fumigated.

All the carpets were infested with carpet beetles, moths, silverfish etc – we used a technique pioneered by the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. We hired an industrial freezer unit – and put it outside the back door of the house – all the carpets and curtains were rolled up and put into the freezer for 72 hours – this killed off all the lifecycles of insects, and then everything was sent away to be professionally cleaned and conserved. People generally tend to itch after hearing that story – but rest assured that we only find the occasional mouse in the house now!



After five years spent photographing, cleaning, consolidating, fumigating, re-wiring, re-roofing, renewing the stonework, etc, the house was finally ready in 1995 to receive its public.



Gardens

Whilst the policy with regard to the house has been one of conservation, the gardens are gradually being restored to the spectacular glory of their Victorian heyday. They were hugely overgrown by 1990. Sylvia had only the immediate lawns around the house cut, and left much of the rest of the garden to its own devices.

Much work has taken place and continues to try and bring the gardens back to their heyday.



The Flower Garden was a chance for the Victorian Head Gardener to display his creativity and knowledge of plants by having sensational seasonal displays of bedding. A wealthy house might change its colour scheme several times a year. At Brodsworth now, we have two distinct schemes – one for spring, and one for summer.

There is a wonderful rose collection – best seen in June.

The fountain has been restored to working order.

One big project to be undertaken was the restoration of the Fern Dell, which now proudly houses a private fern collection which came into the possession of English Heritage through a generous donor.



Whilst the gardens are breathtaking in the summer, because a large proportion of the garden is evergreen, they are equally delightful in the winter months. We are currently waiting to be registered as having a National Collection of Hollies.

We have two huge new glasshouses, enabling volunteers to grow plants on-site and overwinter our more delicate plants, such as banana.

The House and Gardens Today

The house and garden are no longer for private enjoyment – they are open to all who wish to come and enjoy them.

They are the work and passion of a large number of dedicated people. They are looked after by English Heritage so that YOU can come and enjoy them. There are many different ways you can get involved:



- § By simply being a visitor and coming to enjoy everything we have to offer;
- § By becoming a House Volunteer and helping the general public to appreciate the fantastic interiors and tell the story of the house and family;
- § By becoming a Garden Volunteer and helping with the mammoth task of keeping the 15 acres looking beautiful throughout the year;
- § By becoming a member of English Heritage and helping to support our vital conservation work – without which I wouldn't be telling you the remarkable story of Brodsworth Hall at all.

An enormous amount of work has gone into, and continues to go into maintaining this unique and beautiful country house for the enjoyment and education of generations to come. English Heritage sincerely hopes that YOU are among the visitors that we're able to welcome to Brodsworth this year.