

NOTTINGHAM REVISITED (2)

Social eminences

ALTHOUGH NOT SO CENTRAL as Nottingham Castle, Wollaton Hall on its carefully chosen hillock - the highest for miles around - would have been almost as familiar a landmark to the people of Nottingham. Even today it can be glimpsed from surprisingly far off between tower blocks and factory chimneys. We forget how visible, how dominant were the aristocracy in the life of their locality. However, when the Reform Bill mob burned down the Castle and attacked Wollaton Hall in 1831, it was not simply because they were conveniently large and handy buildings. It was because their owners represented a reactionary and still very powerful force.

Now, empty of their old political and social significance, they have become municipal instead of aristocratic showpieces: nominally, at least, they belong to the people, if not to the mob. Where once they represented the extreme privilege of the individual, they now embody the idea of at least some of the land belonging to everybody. But their former owners have not become extinct. Rather, they have performed a neat vanishing trick, slipping out into the countryside, where their descendants remain pillars of the establishment (the present Duke of Newcastle and Lord Middleton are both Old Etonians and had distinguished careers in the armed forces). Social stratification still exists but is better hidden.

It requires a considerable effort of the historical imagination to picture Wollaton as it was even at the point where the Corporation took it over, the Hall empty but not yet filled from basement to attic with eviscerated dead creatures, the park almost twice its present size before the Corporation flogged nearly half of it off (much of what remains is taken up by a golf course), the village still a village, and Nottingham still a relatively distant smudge on the horizon while, in the opposite direction, Ratcliffe on Soar power station was not even that. ■



HISTORY. Willoughby family descended from rich c13 Nottingham wool merchant Ralph Bugge. Took new name from property at Willoughby on the Wolds. Peerage (Baron Middleton) 1712. Land at Wollaton first acquired in early c14. Original Wollaton Hall next to village church (demolished mid c17). Present hall built 1580-88 in Ancaster stone for Sir Francis Willoughby. Architect Robert Smythson (also designed Longlee and Hardwick). Notable for symmetrical plan - square with a tower at each

corner; high central hall with windows 50 feet up; elaborate exterior ornamentation with medieval echoes. Financed partly by coalmining, but left heavy debt. Stable block 1794; became city industrial museum 1969-70. Camellia House 1823: one of earliest cast-iron structures; restored 1982. Hall and park sold to Nottingham Corporation for £200,000 in 1924. Money recovered by selling almost half park for upmarket housing. Hall opened as city's natural history museum 1926. ■

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Mesmerised by Maggie

HAS THERE EVER BEEN a *bête noire* of the middle-class left like Margaret Thatcher? Or is it just that memory is short - I think I remember rather disliking Ted Heath, though it is tempting now to look on him almost as an honorary member of the left (mainly because he can't stand Margaret Thatcher).

A couple of years ago, Jill Tweedie pondered this same question in the *Guardian*, quoting the comments of large numbers of friends and correspondents, and wondering in some distress whether it could possibly be *healthy* for a politician to be the object of so much hatred.

I don't think we have to take it quite so seriously, and it is hard to imagine a piece of writing better calculated to bring aid and comfort to all card-carrying Thatcherites. This impotent loathing by the left must surely be one of their greatest triumphs, conclusive proof that socialism has been mortally wounded, the middle-class trendies routed.

No need to be obsessed

So what's going on? Why do we find it so hard to come to terms with Margaret Thatcher? Why do we regard her as anything more than a tough opponent who we need to fight but have no need to be obsessed by. (You only have to follow Steve Bell's multiplying, disturbing transmogrifications of the Thatcher image to see how deep the obsession can go: and me too, I should add - I love every squiggle.)

This is an important question, not for reasons of mental health à la Tweedie, but tactically. Hatred is intellectually disabling. In a memorable interview with Neil Kinnock, Terry Coleman found that the Labour leader's bile against Margaret Thatcher was so uncontrollable that he could barely bring himself to talk about her in rational terms at all - not the best position from which to launch the clinical demolition of Tory policies the Labour Party (and the country) so desperately needs.

Much of it is, I feel, rooted in simple disbelief, disbelief that someone so close to a caricature of all the petit bourgeois prejudices and small-mindedness we despise should not only be in charge of the country but should be imposing these prejudices on the rest of us and should have been twice re-elected to carry on doing it.

When the news of Margaret Thatcher's election as Tory leader first came through, I remember a prominent local feminist groaning with amazement that the Tories had elected a woman leader before the Labour Party (about a century before, I would guess). But she consoled herself, like the rest of



us, with the thought that not many of the electorate would vote for her. A lot we knew!

Another straw in the wind came from Alan Watkins, political correspondent of the *Observer*, who dismissed Margaret Thatcher as "a woman of irremediably limited intellect". That limitation, of course (or single-mindedness, stubbornness, monomania, whatever you like to call it), linked to considerable intelligence of another kind, has turned out to be one of her greatest strengths. (We can still hope that it will also turn out to be the cause of her downfall.)

The common factor is a tendency not simply to dislike, but to despise and therefore (damagingly) to *underestimate* Margaret Thatcher. Even at our most fatalistic about her electoral immovability (forward to the year 2000!), at our most despairing over the destruction of so many of the gains we thought irreversible, we retain a streak of intellectual and social distaste which runs like

an irritated, ineradicable jingle through almost all the critical commentaries and seems somehow to prevent us from facing her head on.

All of us know the words and tune - the limited, though curiously dominating intellect; the hectoring, overbearing manner; the economics of the Grantham grocery (how pleasantly alliterative - I'm sure we'd have heard less of it had it been a Louth or Spalding grocery); the spirit of Alderman Roberts, invoked yet again by Brian Walden in his interview with Mrs Thatcher in last week's *Sunday Times*, lurking behind the plot like the ghost of Hamlet's father, crying "Revenge!" on wets of all parties who treacherously seduced Britannia into the socialist bed (if only it were true!); the outrageously overproduced voice (a sugar plum dipped in syrup); the apparent lack of any cultural interests (good old Ted and his organ!).

Not the least of those who despised her were the old guard in her own party, who she has dished even more effectively than the official opposition. No wonder she hates snobs! "They can never forgive me for coming from an ordinary

background," she told Brian Walden, adding, somewhat contradictorily, "It does not bother me. I cannot stand snobbery of any kind."

Let's conclude with her thoughts about us, prompted by Brian Walden, who told her that John Mortimer, on the Wogan programme, had wondered why she was "always so cross with us".

"Of course, she reflected (Walden reports), revolutionary doctrines, like communism, usually came from intellectuals and academics: "They have a terrible intellectual snobbery and their socialistic ideas come out of the top drawer. They think that they can destroy what exists and that only they know what those who come from the same human clay want. They think they have a talent and ability that none of the rest of the human race has. That is the ultimate snobbery, the worst form of snobbery there is. Only put them in charge and the poor will have everything. So the poor put them in power and discover the rulers have everything and the poor have nothing."

Well, if the cap fits, wear it. (But not me, of course!)

What to do with Wollaton Hall

HAVE YOU SEEN LADY MIDDLETON'S new morning room at Wollaton Hall? It was opened by the present Lord Middleton on April 15th and is the first Wollaton room to be furnished in the style of a stately home since the family sold the Hall and park to Nottingham Corporation in 1924. As part of the same £100,000 improvement programme, the great central hall has also been cleared of taxidermic clutter and an exhibition set up showing the history of the Hall.

Wollaton has always been the second of Nottingham's great let-downs. The first, of course, is our ostentatiously non-medieval castle, which is a double disappointment because not only is it a stately home and not a castle, but, like Wollaton, it is no longer a stately home but a museum.

Extravagant showbiz

I used to think this was a pity. Wollaton Hall in particular seemed architecturally undervalued, locally at least (it has quite a national reputation), because the extravagant showbiz exterior promised so much more than the damped-down interior could deliver - a lugubrious display of largely dead natural history, much of which might have been deliberately arranged to destroy all sense of the architecture of individual rooms or the building as a whole. Windows are blocked up, rooms kept in semi-darkness to highlight brightly lit display cases, cabinets and cases obstruct the few remaining original features. So insensitive is the museum to its architectural setting that the entire collection might as well be in a concrete box, in fact would be better in one because the layout of the Hall allows so little flexibility.

There are reasons for all this. It is not simply that Wollaton Hall was a convenient large building in which to dump the city's natural history collection (one of the best in the

country, so the new exhibition tells us). One immediate practical reason is that the building is in the middle of a large park with a variety of habitats, including a pond and a woodland nature reserve, which the work of the museum can usefully be linked with. A second, historical, reason is the Hall's association with Francis Willoughby, the 17th century naturalist, a key figure (says the exhibition) in developing a methodical classification of animals and plants.

And there is a further reason. It was an almost empty building that the Corporation acquired in 1924 - the Middletons had taken most of the contents with them. So here was an interesting little problem. If you acquired a large Elizabethan mansion, what would you fill it up with?

Well, a small exhibition on the history of the Hall is a good idea, and refurnishing one of the apartments as an early nineteenth morning room is an even better one. As Lord Middleton said, "It's so nice to see a Wollaton room furnished again." The object, according to Brian Playle, assistant arts director, is "to make it look as though Lady Middleton had just walked out of the room and could come back in at any minute."

There's another side to the story, though. How best to introduce it? Let's begin with an extract from a letter written in 1811. Ten years before Lady Middleton might have been walking in and out of her morning room, the 6th Lord Middleton was writing to the Home Office in the following terms:

My Lord,
The riots at Nottingham and the vicinity as your Lordship will readily believe, call'd me promptly to my house at Wollaton, as they had threatened to take possession of 200 stand of arms I have there ... from thirty years residence in the neighbourhood, and my particular knowledge of the Town of Nottingham and its - Magistrates, I am warranted in being of opinion, that it should

never be without a Regiment of Five Hundred Infantry, and a strong Squadron of Cavalry ... I have 30 armed men night and day in Wollaton House which it is my determination to defend at whatever risk and having fulfilled my duty I have the Honour to be

My Lord your Lordships

Most faithful servant

Middleton

(Quoted in *Luddism in Nottinghamshire*. Thoroton Society Record Series Vol. xxvi. Ed. Malcolm Thomis. Phillimore 1972. pp14-16)

(In 1924, incidentally, the rifles and swords in the armoury, perhaps some of the very same ones, were given to Nottingham Corporation as a gift at the time of the sale.)

Ten years later, in October 1831, the Hall (or House, as it was evidently called) was again under threat "by Reform Bill rioters, who after burning down Nottingham Castle and a silk mill at Beeston turned their attention to Wollaton and forced the gate at the Derby Road entrance. Lord Middleton had armed a troop of the South Notts. Yeomanry, formed from his colliers and tenants, and placed cannon on the roof of the Hall. Fortunately the rioters were dispersed before they came within range of the cannon and 16 were taken prisoner." (Sheila M. Strauss. *A Short History of Wollaton and Wollaton Hall*. Nottinghamshire County Council 1978. p20)

So the Regency serenity of the morning room, the "let us now praise famous men" approach of the history exhibition gives only a part of the Wollaton story. The Hall and the family can only be seen properly in the context of a complex and sometimes acrimonious relationship with the surrounding area.

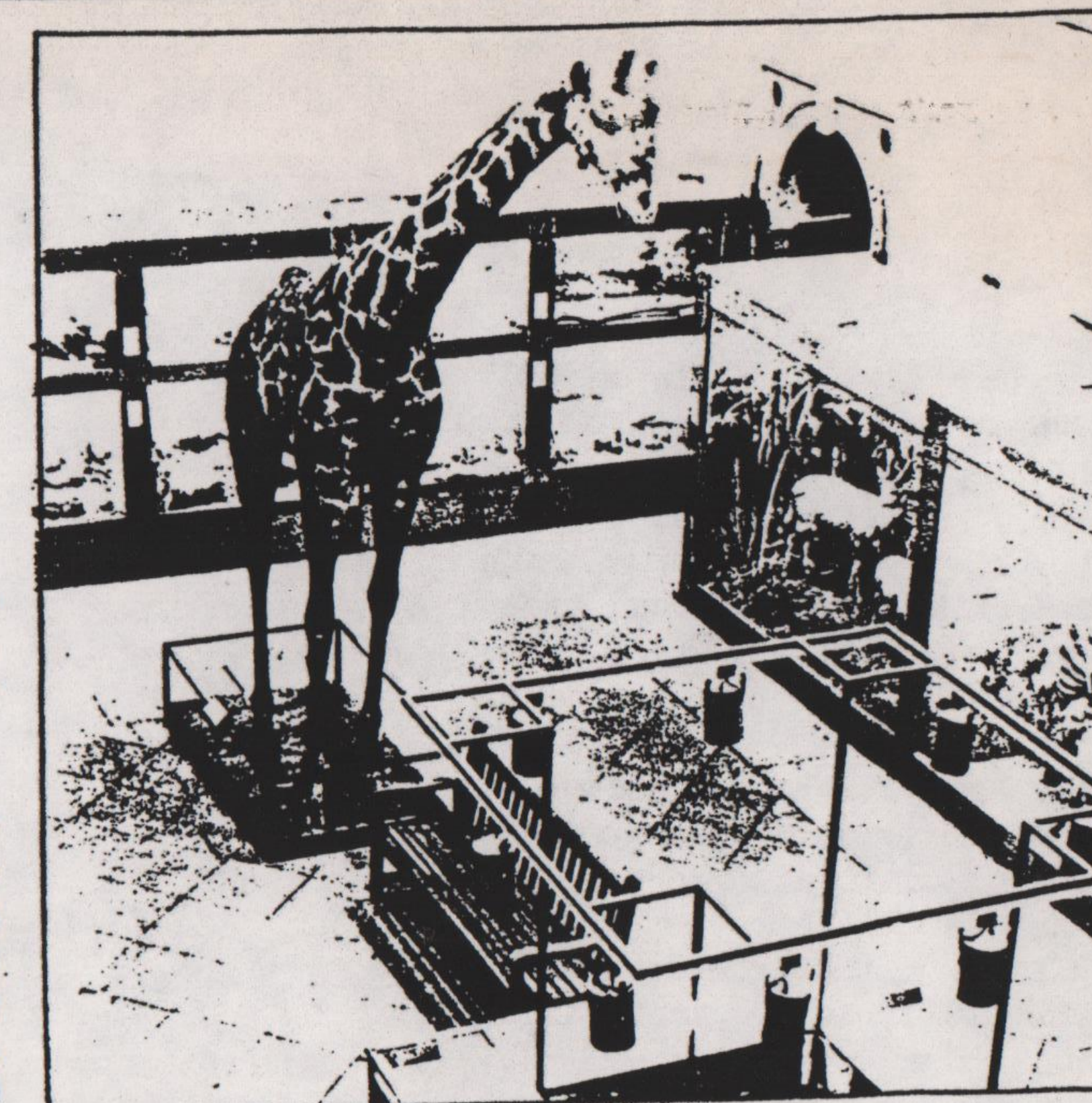
Willing recruits?

For example, were the colliers and tenants willing recruits to their employer's troop of the South Notts. Yeomanry? (The Notts. coalfield has an even longer history of moderation than we thought!)

Perhaps they were. The *Nottingham Mercury* reported in 1846 that adult male labourers on the estate earned from 12s to 16s a week and farmers' labourers earned from 10s to 14s a week, which was well above the average. (Twelve years earlier, the Tolpuddle Martyrs were provoked into forming their union by a cut to 6s a week.) Sheila Strauss shows the Middletons as benevolent enough employers by contemporary standards, though naturally there was a strong element of paternalism. The Hall dominated the village. Most of the villagers were not only Middleton tenants but also worked for the family at the Hall, on the estate or down the pit.

The claustrophobia is especially noticeable in that important instrument of social control, the church. The vicar of Wollaton from 1846-75 was the Rev. Charles Willoughby, younger brother of the 8th Baron; his successor from 1876 to 1922 was the Rev. Henry Charles Russell, a grandson of the Duke of Bedford and married to Lord Middleton's sister. (He is commemorated by Russell Drive.)

The long and fascinating history of Hall, estate, village and pit would be the best possible



The hall before the recent improvements

subject for a permanent exhibition at the Hall, displacing the natural history museum, which could be moved to more suitable, more flexible premises, perhaps in another of Nottingham's parks, such as Buiwell Hall Park, where a purpose-built museum could be put up on the site of the hall demolished over thirty years ago.

Following the 1820s morning room, more rooms could be furnished in styles representing different periods in the Hall's history, while the rest of the Hall could tell the story of the family, including Francis Willoughby, the naturalist (a room could be devoted to explaining the significance of his work - with stuffed animals if necessary!).

But not only the family. Most of the people who lived and worked at the Hall were, after all, servants. A series of displays might show how the servants lived and how a great country house was run - a tourist attraction, surely. Usually we are only allowed to gape at the overfurnished end product.

Changing patterns

And not only the Hall - the village and changing patterns in rural and then urban life, from Anglo-Saxon huts to middle-class suburbia. And the pits. Given the importance of coal to the fortunes of Wollaton and Nottinghamshire (Wollaton Hall was built on coal, or at least on its profits), then an exhibition on the history of coalmining in Wollaton and the county could be a considerable attraction.

All these subjects are central to Wollaton and could be brought together in a varied but unified sequence of exhibits of far greater interest than case upon case of stuffed animals, which I know from personal experience is of little interest to outside visitors, and sadly detracts from the architectural impact of the Hall. Some such project is essential, surely, if we place any value on Wollaton Hall and the memory of those who built it and those who lived there. ■