

Repton at Barton Seagrave Hall by Stephen Radley

In 1791 Charles Tibbits (1764-1830) married Mary Woodyeare of Conisbrough in Yorkshire and took over the management of his family's lands from his father Richard John Tibbits. He acquired Barton Seagrave Hall in between 1791 and 1793 and in 1793 asked Humphry Repton to redesign the landscape close to the Hall. The Hall, part of which dates back to the late sixteenth century, was bought by John Bridges, the county historian, who improved the Hall in the 1720s. A Tillemans drawing shows the Hall in 1721. Bridges died before the improvements were complete in 1725 and the Hall was owned by at least two local gentry families until it became the primary seat of the Northamptonshire Tibbits.

Repton, who was working for John English Dolben at Finedon at the same time, delivered the Red Book to Charles Tibbits in April 1794. He recommended a dramatic change in the approach to the Hall. The Kettering to Thrapston turnpike road, now the A6003, passed close to the Hall. An avenue of trees ran from the Hall towards the bridge over the River Ise and extended from the rectory and church in three directions. Repton wanted to move the turnpike road away from the Hall so that it ran from the bridge over the river, passed the rectory and church before heading up the hill and re-joining the old route. This was for two reasons, he disliked the formal avenues which he also thought, cast too much 'gloom and confinement' on the Hall. He also wanted to move the public road further away 'to give that degree of freedom and extent of lawn which is expected to surround a Gentleman's residence'. But, by cutting down some of the trees and moving the road, he was also able to improve the approach to it. From the river bridge the Hall would now be seen up the open grassed slope and would appear to sit at the top of the hill. From the east and south, the new approach would reveal the Hall at the top of a slope of lawn with water in the middle-ground at the bottom of the hill. He did not give a detailed suggestion for the approach to the Hall from the turnpike; he wanted to wait until the precise line of the new road had been decided. This meant that the two approaches were very different. From the west the Hall was clearly visible, which was unusual, from the east it came as a surprise when the end of the drive was reached. The aerial photo from the Wicksteed Archive (Figure 1; date unknown,) shows that the new road alignment was never agreed; the road is still where it was then.

There is a short avenue of trees near the Hall. This avenue is to the south west of the Hall but it is not in the same location as the avenue shown on Repton's plan in the Red Book. These trees might be associated with improvements to the terrace which are centred on the Orangery. The estate plan (figure 2) isn't interested in the parkland and doesn't even show the Orangery. To date there is no documentary evidence that establishes for certain whether the avenue Repton referred to was removed and if so, when.

Repton proposed a circular walk around the garden. This was fashionable. In 1770 Thomas Whateley wrote that



Figure 1: Aerial Photography of Barton Seagrave Hall (date unknown, Wicksteed Archive)

'a field surrounded by a gravel walk is to a degree bordered by a garden; and many ornaments may be introduced as appendages to the latter, which would otherwise appear to be inconsistent with the former' (*Observations on Modern Gardening*) There are other examples at a number of sites in Northamptonshire including Brockhall (John Webb: 1800), Courteenhall (Humphry Repton: 1797) and Horton Hall (Thomas Wright: 1750s). Followed anti-clockwise, the walk left the Hall, went past the kitchen garden, allowing the Tibbits' family to show off their productive land and exotic fruit, before going past the 'greenhouse' (if Repton designed the Orangery then this is one of two references to it in the Red Book: see below) and into a long, narrow grove of trees. These trees, in fact a shelter belt protecting the designed landscape from the north and east, descended to a bridge over a new arm of the River Ise. The walk then followed a long, narrow, thickly wooded island constructed between the new and existing arms of the Ise, passing a clearing in the wood, before joining the turnpike road at the bridge and returning to the house. I've had a look at the landscape and the aerial photograph, but I'm not convinced that a new arm of the river was constructed. Repton included the costings for digging – 7260 cubic yards @ 4d/yd or £121 – and that might suggest that he knew that the Tibbits were concerned about the cost of his scheme. It might also explain why a 'greenhouse' that Repton proposed was not, according to Pevsner, built until 1820.

If the turnpike road wasn't moved, and if the river wasn't altered to any significant extent, what did alter in the landscape after Repton's Red Book? There were some fishponds near the Hall. Repton describes them as 'all the useless ponds'. He wanted to keep just one large pond for 'pleasure and profit'. In an estate notebook (Figure 2) there are only two ponds, so it is likely that a group of small ponds were replaced by, or perhaps merged into, two larger ponds. By the time of the 1884 25" to 1mile OS map there was only one pond. They are behind the Hall at the beginning of the woodland walk and would probably have been visited on the circuit of the garden.

The woodland that Repton proposed as a shelter belt and



Figure 2: Plan of estates in the parish of Barton Seagrave belonging to J Borlase Tibbits Esq. (no date but after 1858, NRO FS16/14)

through which he led his walkers was laid out. The estate plan (Figure 2) shows that 'field' 17 is wooded as Repton had proposed. The tree symbol suggests that the area was planted with deciduous trees that were becoming mature. The 1884 25" to 1 mile map also shows that same area wooded but with a mixture of deciduous and coniferous trees. The symbols cannot be used to prove the existence of particular trees or mature trees but a comparison with Andrew Bryant's 1827 map of Northamptonshire is interesting (figure 3). Bryant claimed that his map was 'from an actual survey' which his team carried out between 1824-6 and there is no reason to doubt that, in general terms, his map was more up to date than previous maps. An excerpt from the map shows the parkland north of the turnpike road but it does not show any woodland. Some woodland has been marked elsewhere in the vicinity of the Hall and the village. This was not unique to Barton Seagrave Hall. A similar excerpt from Finedon (figure 4) does not show woodland along the south avenue and at the east end of the



Figure 3: Extract from A. Bryant's 1827 map of Northamptonshire: Barton Seagrave

lake that not only pre-dated Repton's visit but was much older. There are several reasons why Bryant may not have included woodland. It might have been recently planted, although this was not the case at Finedon, or it may have been a level of detail that Bryant considered unnecessary. It is also possible that Bryant's team did not survey the whole county at the same level of accuracy and they may have relied on earlier maps for some of their information. It is not possible to be absolutely sure that Repton's woodland was planted by Charles Tibbits but it seems likely.



Figure 4: Extract from A. Bryant's 1827 map of Northamptonshire: Finedon

Bryant's map shows that the River Ise splits into two just above the road bridge before the two streams reunite just below the bridge. This could be taken as evidence of Repton's river improvement being partly implemented. However, Eyre and Jeffery's map of 1791, which was a second revision of a 1775 Jeffery revision of an earlier map by Eyre, contains the same bifurcation. If the River Ise split in two it did so before Repton's visit in 1793. It is also possible that Bryant copies this feature from Eyre and Jeffery. Certainly, by the time of the estate map the river, which marked the boundary of the parish and the estate has a single channel. There is no island. Maps from the end of the nineteenth century shows a widening of the lake, two small islands and a boat house in the river. Today this part of the landscape is very low-lying and occasionally floods; it is part of a nature conservation area. There is some evidence of improvements to the landscape later in the nineteenth century, like the addition of coniferous trees in the woodland, so it is likely that this alteration to the river was made then. It doesn't follow Repton's suggestions; he saw the river as a middle-ground view from the Hall and a foreground view on the circuit of the parkland.

Bryant's map also shows the persistence of avenues of trees from Barton Seagrave church but there is no evidence of an avenue in the parkland between the Hall and the river.

Eyre and Jeffrey did not add any avenue to their map. The estate map does not show any individual trees so, although the age of the trees in the parkland is unknown, it seems likely that trees were cut down to open up the landscape and the view from and of the hall, while other trees were planted in the parkland, possible when the

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shelter belt was planted, to frame views and break up the open ground.

It is believed that Repton designed the Orangery. In the Red Book he made two references to a structure in the location where the Orangery now stands. Repton wrote '... the other approach, will be the principal gravel-walk round the premises; passing the greenhouse, it descends the hill ...'. Repton also drew several sketches of his improvements and in one there is the outline of a 'greenhouse' or 'orangery'; in the late eighteenth century 'greenhouse' was a structure to overwinter evergreen plants, like oranges, to protect them from the winter. The sketch of Hall from the south-west, which includes the greenhouse, may not have been intended as a precise plan for the structure. We know that he was aware of Charles Tibbits' budget from his costings for the improvements to the river and that some of his plans were not precisely drawn because changes, like moving the turnpike road, would be time consuming. But, he did include it in the sketch and it was built in the location that Repton suggested.

The sketch of the greenhouse is broadly similar to an Orangery that Repton designed at Gunton Park in Norfolk in 1816 but it does not resemble the structure that was constructed at the Hall. The location and dimensions are similar but the elevation and particularly the roof, which at Barton Seagrave has three attractive glazed domes, are not. Pevsner describes the orangery as 'Adamish' (Bailey, B., Pevsner, N. & Cherry, B., *Northamptonshire*, (Yale, 2013), p. 112) but it is not clear what his evidence for this date is. If Pevsner is right about the date, it's late for an Adam style building but the evidence from Gunton Park shows that Orangeries were being built in an 'Adamish' (or Reptonian?) style in the early decades of the nineteenth century. It seems likely that Repton proposed an orangery in the location where one was eventually built, that he didn't provide a detailed design for it. It was built when Charles Tibbits could afford it, possibly when a formal terrace to the west of the Hall was laid out.

In summary, it is likely that Charles Tibbits did not try or at least did not succeed in having the turnpike road moved, nor did he create an island in the River Ise. I don't see any reason to doubt that he planted a shelter belt containing a gravel path from the house down to the river. It is also likely that he removed the avenue in the parkland and planted some trees as individual specimens and small clumps. He may also have reduced the number of fishponds to create two from several, although we can't be sure when this was done. Later he probably built the orangery which stands in the location Repton proposed, on one axis of a formal terrace garden.

To finish it's worth considering what was behind Charles Tibbits commissioning the fastest rising star of landscape design in 1793. The landscape can be thought of as a liminal space and this sheds light on a meaning for its location and its layout. A liminal space is the 'space in between' or a threshold; the space or time in which a change or transformation occurs. It's a concept first developed in psychology and anthropology at the turn of the twentieth

century. In anthropology it refers to the space and time between the beginning of a ritual (like walking up the aisle at the beginning of a marriage ceremony) until the change that the ritual is conferring has happened (like the declaration that the couple are husband and wife). In cultural geography it has come to mean the boundary space where conditions change from one geography to another. Northamptonshire is seen as a liminal space as it's a boundary county where the characteristics of the southern 'home' counties gradually change into the midland counties.

The Tibbits family owned land on the border of Northamptonshire and Warwickshire at Braunston and Wolfhamcote when Charles Tibbits bought Barton Seagrave Hall. Richard Tibbits, Charles' father was Lord of the Manor of Floecknoe and also owned property in Hornsey in Islington but Charles sold it as soon as he could. The family were relatively minor gentry at the physical periphery of the county and Charles may have been trying to raise the profile of the family. Barton Seagrave Hall sits in a commanding position alongside and above the turnpike road. The road not only carried traffic locally from Kettering to Thrapston and south along the turnpike from Kettering to Wellingborough but it was also an important crossroads regionally. East-west traffic between Warwick and Peterborough and north-south traffic between Leicester and Bedford passed through Kettering and Barton Seagrave. Charles Tibbits may have seen himself and his family as rising in the ranks of Northamptonshire's gentry. He wanted a property and a parkland to be the seat of his family that reflected the greater status he envisaged; he wanted to be seen by others in the same light. By purchasing and improving Barton Seagrave Hall, a house that was now visible from the turnpike road as the road descended the hill from Kettering to the River Ise and then rose towards the Hall, and that stood at an important county and regional crossroads, he was making a very visible and material statement about how he saw himself and how he wanted to be seen. His knew that his family could choose to remain as they were, significant landowners in a small part of west Northamptonshire. But he also believed they could follow a different and more exalted path into county-wide gentry status. Confronting a turning-point in the history of his family, Charles Tibbits took the very public and risky decision to buy an estate at a major crossroads and to present his ambition to the future. The estate was a space where the status of the family could be transformed. In 1817 Charles' son, Richard John and Horatia Charlotte Lockwood were married in the chapel of Lambeth Palace by her uncle the Most Rev. Charles Manners-Sutton, Archbishop of Canterbury. But by then his status was already recognised. When he bought Barton Seagrave Hall a Tibbits had never served as High Sheriff of Northamptonshire. In 1804 his efforts had been rewarded and his family had joined some of the oldest gentry dynasties in the county.

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