

This is the Fifty-Eighth of an occasional series of articles by David Stone about incidents in the history of Swanton Morley and its church

THE BUILDING OF BYLAUGH HALL

In writing the first part of this article I have leant heavily on

<http://thecountryseat.org.uk/2013/02/22/bylaugh-hall-the-hidden-history-to-a-remarkable-restoration-opportunity/>

This is a very useful blog by Matthew Beckett, and if you wish to know more then I recommend that you read it. It also contains some interesting colour pictures of the 1999 restoration attempt, which eventually failed.

The design of the house

In his will, Sir John Lombe specified that if, in his lifetime, he had not erected the house, or approved the plans for one, then his trustees:

“shall forthwith after my death erect the same according to such plan as the trusteesshall think proper to adopt, adhering as closely as possible to the plan of the house now the residence of Robert Marsham, Esq at Stratton Strawless.”

Now, Beckett includes a picture which shows that Stratton Strawless Hall was nothing like the Bylaugh Hall that was actually built. For, the trustees chose to ignore that instruction and instead they chose to create a “Jacobethan”-style house – but even that is not the one that we see today. Although the current house is correctly described as being designed by Charles Barry, the younger, and his partner Robert Robinson Banks, few people are aware that in 1822 the trustees had originally asked another noted architect, William Wilkins, to draw up a plan, and his design shows a remarkable stylistic similarity to the one actually built 27 years later.



Unexecuted design for Bylaugh Hall by William Wilkins – From R.W. Liscombe

Beckett discusses the elements of this design, suggesting that it was inspired by the style of so-called “Prodigy” houses such as Burghley and Longleat.

Prodigy houses is a term for large and showy Tudor and Jacobean houses. Ben Jonson, who had a bit of a thing about them, described them as ‘Proud ambitious heaps!’ Much later, houses like Houghton Hall showed a lingering fondness for the 16th century Prodigy style.

Matthew Becket suggests that Bylaugh Hall, as attributed to Barry and Banks in 1849, was perhaps better described as an updated version of Wilkins earlier plan – the core 3x3 layout remained, as did the external style, although some features such as the raised central hall and the domes were removed, and the central staircase was replaced by a saloon.

But the construction did display considerable innovation; it was the first building outside London to utilise an independent cast iron frame (some reports say that steel was used). Thus the appearance of a large imposing traditional load-bearing stone structure is quite misleading; the imposing stonework is merely a relatively lightweight façade cladding, tied back to the cast iron frame. This technique rather reminds me of Tower Bridge in London, which is another early steel-framed building and is similarly misleading.



Bylaugh Hall today – side elevation

Building the house

The *Norfolk Chronicle* devoted quite a bit of space to this matter.

In its edition of Saturday, 5 August 1852

“One of the wonders of the modern world may be seen near East Dereham, in what only a few years back was only a turnip field As yet, there is no approach to the house, and the traveller is directed to it only by its sudden appearance among lanes traversed by turnip-carts and harvest-wagons. It makes, however, a stately appearance, and when we saw it a few weeks back, it was under the hands of 190 workmen, including Messrs. Piper, the well-known contractors, and Mr Sang and his troop of German decorators.”

“This noble building carries a remarkable inscription in large letters on the masonry above the principal entrance; we could hardly believe our eyes when we read *“Ex jussu Curiae Cancellariae”*. Bylaugh Hall it would seem is being erected by the order of the Court of Chancery out of the funds of the Lombe family accumulated in the hands of the accountant to the court.” It goes on to say that “The estate, it is said, is worth £17,000 a year, and the Mr Lombe for whom it is being built (Charles Lombe) is an elderly gentleman in an infirm state of health, and therefore never likely to inhabit it.”

In its edition of 21 Aug 1852

There is quite a lengthy article in this edition which notes early on that the joke about the Chancery, noted above, is no longer valid because the inscription referred to has been cut out and replaced by a frieze ornament. The contract with Messrs. Piper, which has just been completed, amounted to £29,389, a sum below the original estimate. The material is Magnesian Limestone, from the quarries of Mr Grissell, from which the Houses of Parliament have been constructed.

The offices and stables, which are attached to the house, are built with the well-known bricks from Lord Leicester's estate at Holkham and harmonise well with their stone dressings which are of the same stone as the house.

Messrs Piper have just entered into a second contract for the formation of the terraces, conservatories, and enclosure walls and balustrades (which it is understood are very complete), befitting a mansion of such importance; and these works, as well as the enclosing of the space appropriated to the park by means of a brick wall, with lodges in the Norwich, Dereham and Fakenham Woods, will be at once commenced; indeed, until that portion of these works immediately around the mansion is completed, the edifice appears to considerable disadvantage all around, being at present in its rough agricultural state.

The park and pleasure grounds will be arranged and laid out from the designs of Mr W.A. Nesfield the well-known landscape artist, whose advice it seems was also followed in the outset as to the precise position where the mansion could be best placed The formation of the park and the erection of the above accessorial buildings will take about two years.

A footnote on the pronunciation of the name Lombe

There has been some discussion as to whether the name was pronounced "Loom" or "Loam" with current usage favouring the latter. However, the above article includes the following jokey comment:

"Little did the Lombes of the last century foresee what was looming in the future."