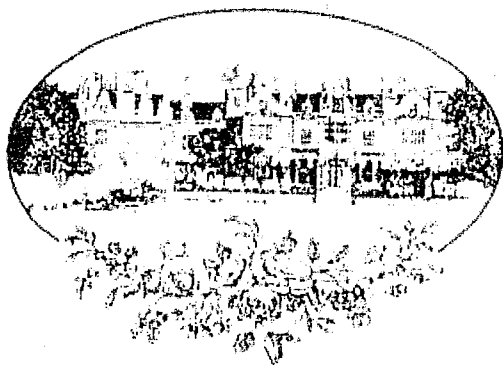


A Short History of Stoke Rochford Hall



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Stoke Rochford Hall



Stoke Rochford has been the location for a series of noble houses. There was a Roman Villa here and in the 14th century the Nevilles had a house here. This was followed by a 15th century house belonging to the Rochfords and a 16th century one owned by the Coneys. Around the year 1665 Sir Edmund Turnor built the first Turnor house here. This was an L shaped building with rows of mullioned windows. It was a grand but conservative building and stood near the present bridge, by the lake. The stables were apparently built in 1676, and their re-erected stone frontispieces still stand in the park. One is dated 1676, and the other 1704 - a later inscription apparently accounting for the discrepancy in dates.

Sir Edmund Turnor's house was taken down in 1774. In 1794 the Turnors built once more at Stoke: this time the house was smaller. The building was demolished in the 1840's, when the present house was built. It stood on the east bank of the brook.

In the 1840's when Christopher Turnor (1809-1886) decided to rebuild, the family fortune was considerable. Turnor succeeded his father in 1829 when he was only 20 years old. He eventually owned 20,664 acres in Lincolnshire, with a rental of some £27,000. In 1839 Christopher Turnor asked architect William Burn for sketch plans for Stoke Rochford Hall. A contract was drawn up on 24th April 1841 and the total cost of the house was about £60,000.

William Burn (1789-1870) was to become one of the greatest country house architects of his own or any other time. He was born in Edinburgh, the son of an architect and builder, and went to work as a pupil in Sir Robert Smirke's office. He later had his own office in Edinburgh, and in 1814 designed his first country house in Argyllshire. He was responsible for numerous churches, terraces, banks and public buildings. In 1817 he designed his first major house, Saltoun. From that year he averaged 3 or 4 large houses a year.

Why was he so successful? He mastered the problems of planning country houses in a way that no other person had done before, Burn knew his clients, the minutiae of their regularly ordered lives, their desire for privacy from both their servants and their constant round of guests, his houses never sacrificed convenience or privacy to showy geometrical planning and symmetry for symmetry's sake.

In addition to designing Turnor's house, Burn laid out Stoke Rochford village in Tudor style between 1840 and 1845, the result being the present group of picturesque stone cottages near the church.

Christopher Turnor made Stoke Rochford his main residence, but his son Edmund Turner (1838-1903) favoured their Panton house in north Lincolnshire. Stoke Rochford was for a time occupied by tenants. Edmund Turnor's nephew and heir, Christopher Turnor (1873-1940) lived mainly at Stoke - he was greeted on his return from his honeymoon in 1907 with a banner saying "Make this your home", he was the last of his family to live in the house, and left his mark upon it in no uncertain manner. He designed and built a green glass fireplace in the Newton Room and he carved Mediterranean panoramic views in the balustrade of the main staircase.

During the war the house was taken over by the war department, and for 18 months it housed the headquarters of the Second Battalion of the Parachute Regiment. Here, on the Library floor, the plans were laid which led to the ill fated Arnhem 'drop' of 1944.

After the war, the house became a training college for teachers, the Kesteven County Council taking over in 1948. The college closed at the end of September 1978, and the National Union of Teachers opened its National Education and Conference Centre on 1st October 1978.

THE EXTERIOR

The main drive to the house, from the village, passes through a modest gateway, with a lodge designed in 1834 by Cornelius Sherborne. The style of this lodge perhaps indicates that Turnor was thinking of Tudor/Jacobean architecture before he engaged Burn. The drive then climbs through the park, passing the re-erected stone fronts of the old stables, dating from the 17th century. There is no further view of the house until the drive makes a right angled turn to the east near the obelisk, to descend to the house.

THE OBELISK, in line with the centre in the west front, was Christopher Turnor's memorial to Sir Isaac Newton, and its inscription reads, "May the inhabitants of the surrounding district recollect with pride that so great a philosopher drew his first breath in the neighbourhood". Newton went to school in Stoke Rochford parish before attending the grammar school in Grantham.

THE SCREEN AND GATES of beautiful ironwork, with tall piers, are impressive in themselves. To the visitor's left is the office wing, at right angles to the main house. The office wing extends along the north side of the forecourt and beyond, and is joined to the stable court and other outside offices.

In the centre, above the main door, Burn showed what he could do- with a bay window derived from houses such as Burghley (also to be seen at Harlaxton) elaborate gables, obelisks, scrolls and pediments. The remainder, however, is more relaxed. The slightly projecting wings on either side have strapwork cresting above the first floor windows and sharply defined quoins.

To view the remainder of the exterior, the visitor passes through a gate into the formal gardens. Unfortunately the statuary which once adorned the gardens has gone.

A small open air theatre (now the children's playground) was another feature of the gardens and there are interesting shrubs and trees including a Ginkgo Biloba or Fossil tree.

The Conservatory is the main feature of the south front. The heating apparatus for the house was once beneath it.

The east front of the house is perhaps a surprise and something of a disappointment when it is viewed close at hand. It is much more effective when seen from above the lake on the other side of the valley.

Standing on the terraces on the east front, and looking over the lake and park, it is easy to understand why Christopher Turnor and Burn chose this site for the house.

THE INTERIOR

THE GRAND HALL from the side entrance, which is the one now used, is approached through an arcade positioned like a medieval screens passage. There is a fine grey stone chimney piece in the Dietterlinesque manner - typical Burn. The ceiling is in square panels with strapwork cartouches. Beyond the arcade the ceiling is vaulted. To appreciate the house plan it is necessary to imagine that one has entered through the large main doors, so that the way through the arcade leads the visitor to :

STAIRCASE Its ceiling is unusual - interlocking beams in a manner which Burn also used at Harlaxton Manor. The staircase is a fine one, but the carving which Christopher Turnor made and used to replace some of the balusters looks rather odd and incongruous.

From another corner of the passage off the Grand Hall
Is the

DINING ROOM/OAK ROOM (40' X 25') There are fine views over the park from this room. The ceiling and frieze are elaborate, as is the woodwork. The room has an enormous chimney piece of black and white marble. Says Pevsner "This has a white frieze of foliage with embracing putto heads in the centre. Can this be Burn? Is it not more likely that it is an original Flemish late 17th century piece? If so, is it the most spectacular of its type in England". It is interesting to compare it with the huge marble chimney piece at Mentmore, designed by Rubens for his house at Antwerp. When the lease of Stoke Rochford was sold in 1978, the fireplace was excluded from sale.

A door in the south east corner of the dining room leads into the two

DRAWING ROOMS/TURNOR & ROCHFORD ROOMS on the east front. Both have marble fireplaces, ornate panelled ceilings elaborate mirrors and carved pine doors and shutters. The style is Louis Quinze. The two rooms have double connecting doors and could be used as one room when required.

THE LIBRARY (67' X 24') occupies the whole of the south front of the house. It is arguably the finest Library ever built for a private house in Lincolnshire. All the walls have bookcases. There are two fireplaces with carved marble surrounds - one at the west end where the exterior leads the visitor to suppose there is a window; the window is a dummy. The ceiling is of plaster panels and very ornate, the strapwork etc; also forming the frieze. It is the richest of Stoke Rochford's ceilings, and is dated 1845. In the east wall a window overlooks the park and lake, and in the centre of the south wall a large bay window overlooks the formal garden. In the south west corner of the room glazed doors lead to the **CONSERVATORY OR ORANGERY**.

To return to the Hall and entrance passage, the **STAIRCASE** leads to a fine landing, with views across the forecourt and drive to the obelisk.

BEDROOMS AND TEACHING ROOMS On the first floor in the main block are five suites of rooms. In the north west corner one large and two smaller rooms, in the centre of the east front one large and one small, in the south east corner one large and two small, and in the south west corner two rooms. There is a further suite over the entrance hall. This arrangement of rooms is a good example of Burn's ability in planning a grand house, since the suites are virtually self-contained. When the house was first built it was the first Victorian Country House to install water closets. It had fifteen water closets and two bathrooms - an indication that there were plenty of servants to carry hot water to bedrooms rather than a reflection on Victorian cleanliness.

The second floor has many rooms, some almost as large as those on the first floor. The rooms on this floor, however, are in the roof, and almost all the windows are dormers except for those placed in gables. The 'pepper pots' - of which the house has an abundance - are lit by small windows, and are cupboards and store rooms.

Beneath both the main block and the office wing there is a vast cellarage. Due to the fall of the land, Burn found it possible to build one range of cellars above another in one part. The cellars or basement contained some of the rooms considered necessary for the well run country house - others were in the service wing. Pantries, plate room, butler's pantry, knife room, brushing room, still room, wine cellars - all were to be found here.

This great house built over 150 years ago by Christopher Turnor, was the last of a long line of noble houses on this site, stretching back to Roman times. It still retains much of its former grandeur and currently assumes the role previously allotted to it at the turn of the century by another member of the Turnor family by providing a magnificent venue for all kinds of educational and social activities. Christopher Hatton Turnor succeeded to the Stoke Rochford estate in 1903 when Stoke Rochford became much more than the country mansion of an old county family. The obituary of Turnor, written by Albert Mansbridge, and published in the Lincoln Diocesan Magazine in 1940, gives the best short account of this man and his unusual uses for this great house.

“Encouraged and helped by Mrs Turnor, he literally opened his house to all types of men, women and children of good will. It would be impossible even to record the names and purposes of the diverse groups which met there, sometimes for weeks. Among those who will remember all that Christopher Turnor did for them in this way are Lincolnshire teachers, working men, women and students, and even little children from the slums of Deptford, all of them had the open run of the great house and gardens, and in not one instance did any working man, teacher or child fail to justify the trust.

All types of church gatherings met there. The report of the Archbishop's Committee on Industrial Relations was largely drawn up and approved in the spacious library. The forward movement of the Church Tutorial Classes Association was also planned there, but these may merely be taken as typical examples. The commission of the Seafarers' Education Service held many weekend meetings in the house. It is doubtful whether any other house in England has been so much used in this particular way.

At Stoke Rochford, Christopher Turnor and his wife were the unobtrusive centres of all that happened. The significance of such hospitality was that a real contribution was made to the true life of England. It was important that working men and women should realise, and did realise, that a great house could be used for all the best things that they stood for and desired. It was inspiring to see opposite types and classes mixing happily, and Christopher Turnor always mixed his guests, whether they were rich or poor, whether they occupied prominent or insignificant places."

Through the wise purchase by the National Union of Teachers in October 1978, this role has been extended and Stoke Rochford Hall has once again become a most important and impressive centre for the education and trade union community, notably for the surrounding local community, but also for the wider professional and commercial world.





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