

A HISTORY OF THE GARDENS AT BROOKSBY HALL

Introduction

For some years, the Leicestershire and Rutland Gardens Trust has been involved in a national project to research and record the history of our parks and gardens with a view to entering this information into a national database: <http://www.parksandgardens.ac.uk/>

This research into the history of the gardens at Brooksby Hall forms part of this project.

However, it was felt that it would also be desirable to present our findings in the form of a written report, which could include detailed information from the documents that we unearthed at the Leicester and Rutland Record Office, as well as more illustrations showing the development of the garden.

This report can also be downloaded as a PDF file from our own website: www.lrgt.org

We would like to thank former members of Brooksby staff, Malcolm Britton and Josie Hutchinson for the recollections and information that they have shared with us, as well as present staff members, Andy Waddle and Tony Riddington, for all their time and input.

We were also very fortunate to be able to talk to Mrs. Jane Stearn, who lived at Brooksby from 1955-1987 when her husband was Principal of the College. Her memories have been fascinating.

Sue Blaxland
2009

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Description of the Hall and Gardens

Brooksby Hall is set in 31 acres of gardens in the valley of the River Wreake. The gardens slope northwards and westwards, down to the river and the Leicester-Peterborough railway line. The estate is the country campus of Brooksby Melton College and offers training in a wide range of country skills. It is the county agricultural college.

The Hall, which is Grade II* listed, was originally a late 16th Century country house. It was extended eastwards in the late 19th century. It is built of coursed squared ironstone with limestone dressings and has Swithland slate roofs, stone lateral and ridge stacks with brick flues. It is designed as an H plan.

It houses administrative offices for the College as well as offering conference, banqueting and wedding facilities. In the grounds to the south of the Hall, is the Church of St Michael and All Angels, which dominates the landscape.

Modern college buildings, dating from the 1950's to 1970's are located to the north, north-west and east of the Hall.

The gardens are mainly informal in style with fine mature trees and a wide range of planting, much of it in island beds in the lawns. This reflects the College's role as a horticultural establishment.

Key historical features of the gardens are as follows:

The Church

Church of St. Michael and All Angels: Grade II*. The tower was begun early 14th century, completed 15th century. The body of church is early 16th century. It was restored and spire rebuilt in 1874 by R.W. Johnson, following a lightning strike. The south-west nave window was inserted in 1911. The Church is built of uncoursed random stone rubble with limestone dressings and there are portions of old render. There is ironstone ashlar to east and south walls. The roof is slate: Swithland slate to south slope.

The Stream

This runs from the Church to the Lake is believed to have been constructed in the early 1920's. The water was fed via pipes and drains from the sloping ground between the turnpike road and the Hall. A rockery was also put in during this period, with rocks alongside the stream. It was narrowed in the 1950's.

The Lake

The lake was constructed between 1911 and 1915 by Irish workmen, using the 'puddled clay' technique. In 1945 it was described as dirty and overgrown.

The Pergola

This was constructed between 1911 and 1915 and comprises eight free-standing stone pillars with timber cross beams. It terminates at the Lake. There were originally two Italianate stone statues and a flight of steps down into the Lake. Pevsner attributes it to Lutyens, but this is not substantiated. In the 1935 sale particulars, it is described as a rose pergola. Some of the columns are now broken.

The Walled Garden

The walled garden first appears on a tithe map of 1848. It was demolished in the 1970's to accommodate the Buckingham Centre: Library and Teaching accommodation, and to provide additional car parking space. However, a few brick buildings, which remain today originally formed part of the wall. They are the gym and a cottage known as 'Mole Cottage' which were part of the east side of the walled garden and were a stove house and a potting shed. The Stables formed part of the south side. There is a piece of the brick wall remaining as part of a pump house alongside the Villiers Restaurant, which formed part of the west wall. From these it is possible to get an idea of the overall size of the garden, which was substantial.

The Round House

This resembles a South African rondavel and is situated at the bottom of the garden of the Principal's house. It is known to have been in situ in 1955 but it is not known when it was built.

Sea Mine

It is understood that this was placed in the garden by Earl Beatty after the 1st World War. The story, probably apocryphal, is that he floated it on the lake and used it as a target for shooting practice!

Gardener's Cottage

This is located to the south of the Church and is now known as "The Rectory", though it was never used as such. Based on the shapes of the buildings shown on the Ordnance Survey maps, it is believed that the present building dates between 1884 and 1903. There was also a bothy. It was originally two cottages, but they were combined to make a single building. It was occupied by David Earl Beatty during the 2nd World War, when the Hall was a Red Cross Convalescent Home.

Rock Gardens

Small rock gardens and a sunken tufa garden were constructed in 1974-75 on the west-facing slope between the Hall and the Lake. Another garden was constructed in 1990 to illustrate the use of a wide variety of hard landscaping materials but still give the impression of a rock outcrop.

Formal Yew-hedged Garden

This is located to the south-west of the Hall and was originally a rose garden. It now houses the College's National Collection of Opiopogon and Liriope.

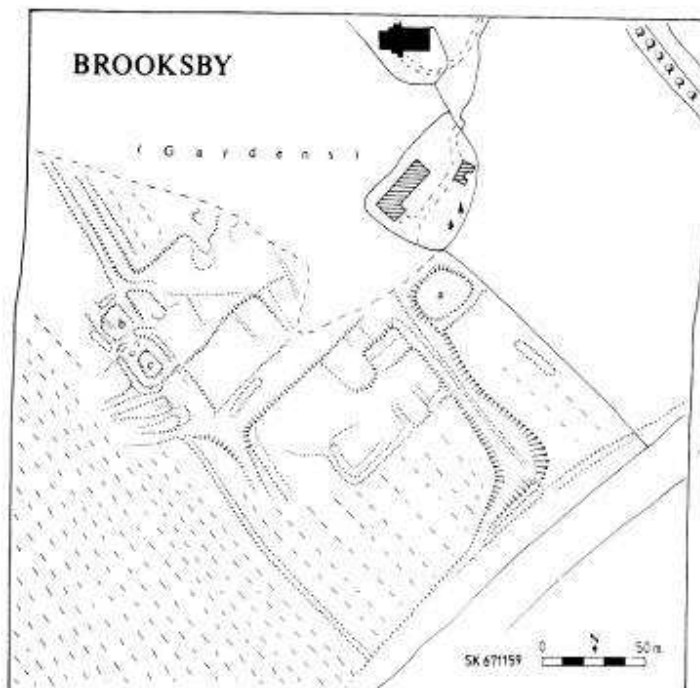


This image of the front of the Hall and the Church, taken from a postcard, is known to pre-date 1918 (based on the postage rate). It is interesting to compare it with the etching from John Nicholls, shown on Page 7, as the garden is still separated from the park. However, it is believed that this image pre-dates the postcard image on page 14. There is no sign of benches and a stone urn in front of the Hall. Also the topiary 'balls' are smaller.

A Chronological History of the Garden:

We have presented our findings on the history of the gardens in chronological sequence. This is cross-referenced to Appendices, giving more detailed information from sale particulars and other source material that we have been able to locate.

- Late 9th century** Brooksby village evolved as a Danish settlement. The place name probably came from Brochi, meaning a badger
- 1085** Hugh Lupus, Earl of Chester and his wife, Countess Judith (niece of William the Conqueror) held land and possessions at Brooksby.
- C 1210** Brooksby apparently came into the ownership of the Villiers family, through marriage. They were a Norman French family, granted lands in Leicestershire.
- 1235** The first reference was made to a Villiers at Brooksby: Alexander de Villiers of Kinoulton.
- 1254** His son, Richard, lived at Brooksby
- 1348-49** It is likely that the village was depopulated, due to plague
- 1450-1603** The village declined further and was eventually totally depopulated. This was mainly due to enclosures for Sir John Villiers to profit from the wool trade. According to Hoskins, the village had completely disappeared by 1603.



A corner of the old village survives to the south of the church, with a substantial house platform (a) above the deep hollow way leading to the main road. There are traces of various enclosures and two mounds (b) and (c) enclosed with ditches and banks, which might be old rabbit warrens.

© R.F. Hartley 1987

1480 William Villiers and his two wives, Joan and Agnes, were buried in Brooksby Church in a fine tomb. Pevsner has a detailed description of the church and its monuments.

1592 George Villiers, who became 1st Duke of Buckingham, was born at Brooksby. He lived in Leicestershire till the age of 13. He went to school in Billesdon and also stayed with his mother at Goadby Marwood. He became a favourite of James I, (he was probably introduced to the King at Apethorpe in Northamptonshire). He became extremely powerful (and unpopular) during the reign of Charles I. In 1620 he married Katherine Manners, daughter of the Earl of Rutland. He was assassinated in 1628.



1711 The end of the Villiers line came with the death of Sir William Villiers, without issue. (There is a monument and tombstone in Brooksby Church). The title became extinct and the Manor of Brooksby was sold. The estate was sold to Sir Nathan Wright, a barrister and Lord Keeper of the Great Seal of England. He was also Recorder for Leicestershire and King's Sargeant. He did not live at Brooksby and died in 1721.

1775 The church rector, Thomas Orton, was the only name in the records. The Hall seems to have been rented out.

1800



An illustration of Brooksby Church and Hall was included in John Nichols' *History and Antiquities of Leicester*. Pub 1800. (Source of image: Leicestershire & Rutland Record Office)

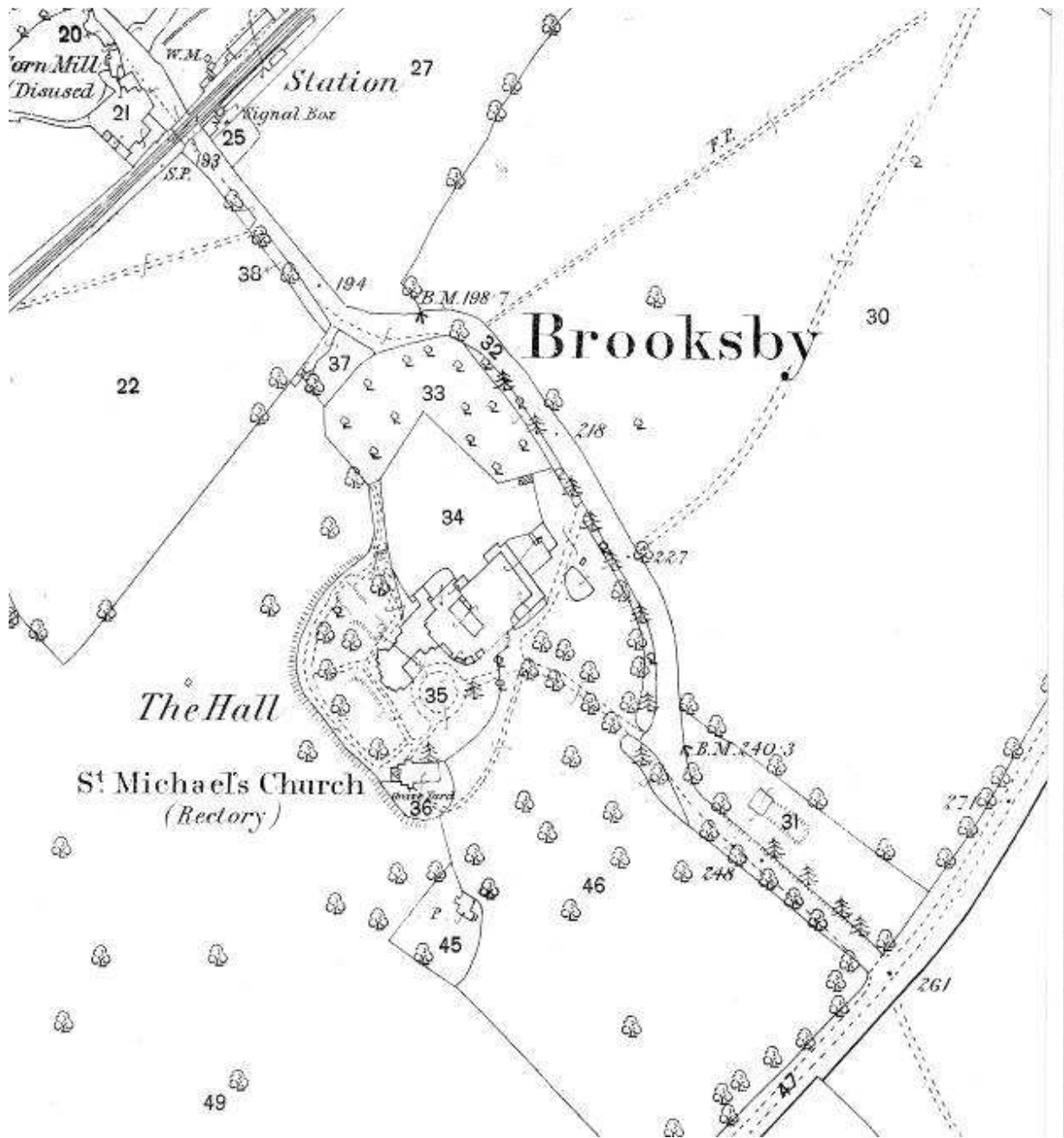
The etching from Nichols on the previous page shows the front of the Hall prior to the addition of the East Wing. A post and rail fence runs across from the Church, close to the Hall, dividing the Park from the gardens and there appear to be an extensive group of trees to the west of the Hall. The Brooksby entry relates to the history of the Villiers family and also the monuments in the church. Unfortunately, it does not describe the Hall nor the surrounding park and gardens.

- 1830** The Hall passed by marriage to the Wyndham family of Cromer, Norfolk, who leased it as a Hunting Box. The property was used for this purpose throughout the 19th century with various illustrious people leasing it during the hunting season. It became a venue for the Quorn Hunt to meet. Lord James Brudenell (later 7th Earl of Cardigan) of 'Charge of the Light Brigade' fame, together with his wife, leased Brooksby for hunting.
- 1831** His charger, Dandy, collapsed and died at Brooksby and was buried under a large elm tree on the lawn. There is a memorial stone in the west wall of the Hall.
- 1848** By 1848, ownership of the Estate was split between two Wyndham sisters, Maria Anne and Cecelia, who later became Lady Paget and Lady McDonald. (One of the present-day Halls of Residence is named Paget, after her).

A Tithe map of 1848 shows that the Walled Garden was already in existence by this date. It was divided by paths. The map also shows a cluster of buildings in the location of the gardener's cottage (known today as the Rectory).

There is only a single main driveway on this map. There is no secondary drive as seen by 1884.

- 1850** The Hall was purchased by the Charltons
- 1863-65** The Hall was boarded up and empty
- 1865-1890** The Chaplins owned the Hall and lived there. Ernest Chaplin was largely responsible for the restoration of Brooksby Church after severe damage caused by a lightning strike in 1874.
- 1884** The Ordinance Survey map of 1884 shows the extent of the gardens at this time. The West boundary was approximately along the line of the present-day path near to the stream. It appears to have been fenced and there was a change of level of more than a metre outside the fence. This was possibly a ha-ha or just a ditch.
- The cluster of buildings in the location of the gardener's cottage (shown on the 1848 tithe map) has reduced to a single building).



OS Map 25" to 1 mile.
 Ref XIX.14 – Dated: 1884
 The gardener's cottage is in the area marked 45. The Walled Kitchen Garden is
 area 34. Area 33 is an Orchard

1891

The Hall was purchased by a Mr. Joseph Grout Williams of a wealthy mining family from South Wales. The House had a major rebuild and enlargement, including the addition of the east wing. Bay windows were put in to both the front and side. The west side of the house is older. The architects were R.J. & J. Goodacre of Leicester. The Builders were T. & H. Herbert.

Mr. Williams (who was High Sherriff of Hertfordshire) also owned another property, Pendley Manor in Tring, Hertfordshire, which had (in 1872) been designed for him and built in the Neo-Tudor style.

Brooksby Hall was lived in by his brother, Captain Stanley Williams. At this time, the garden was mainly open parkland with formal trees and shrubs around the house. There were traditional estate railings. From photographs of that time, the trees appear to be about 100 years old.

Mr. J.G. Williams was a keen agriculturalist and horticulturalist. There is believed to have been an icehouse located where the present-day Paget accommodation block is situated. It is not know when this was constructed.

1894-95

The Duchess of Marlborough leased the Hall

1897

Captain Williams died in a hunting accident.

1898

H..T Barclay, the banker, leased the Hall.

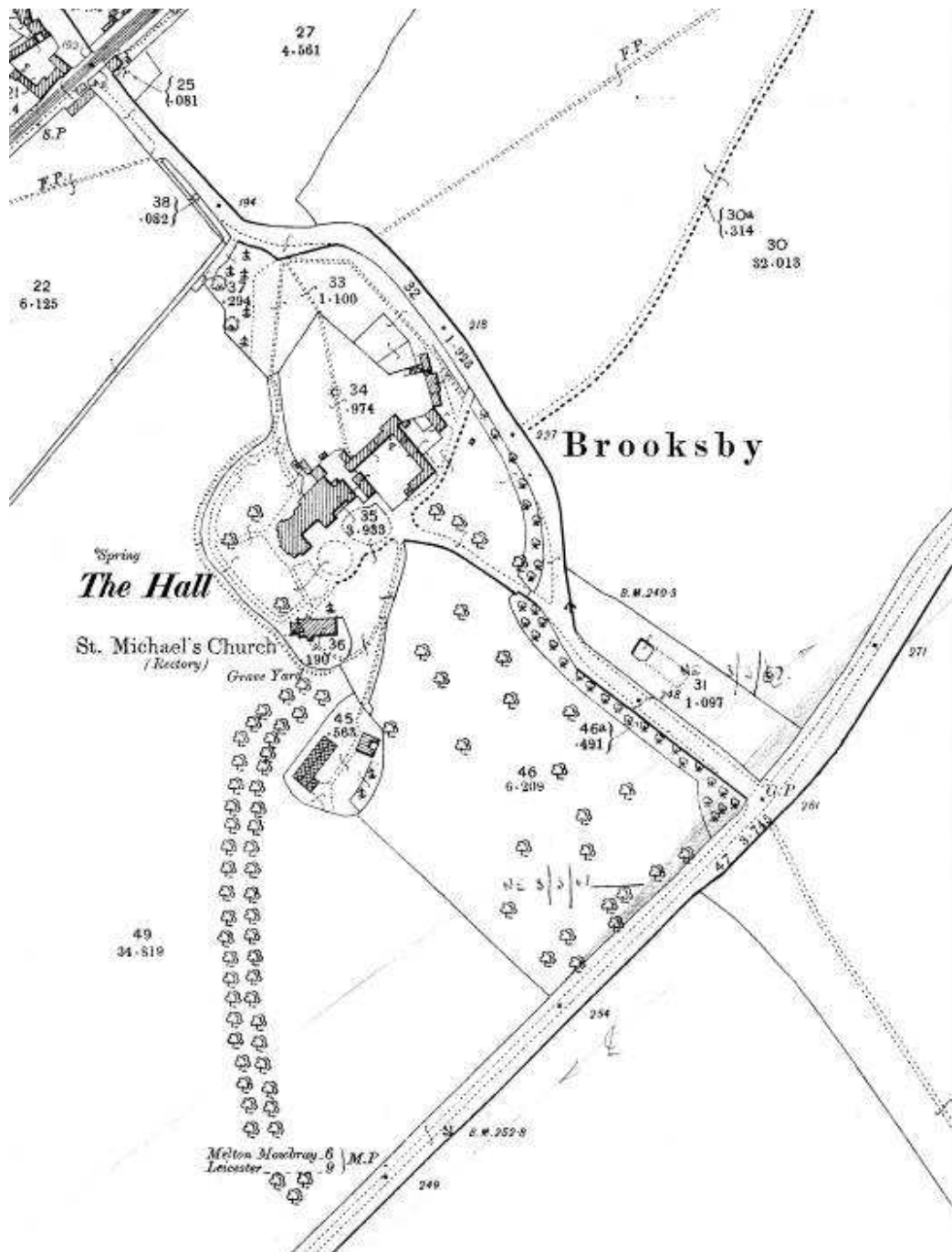
1903-1904

The Estate was put up for sale in 1904. A summary of the sale details is given as Appendix A. They describe “The Pleasure Grounds” as being “most interesting and charming” and “of a very compact and secluded character”. There were croquet and tennis lawns, terraced walks, fine specimen trees and ornamental flower beds and plantations. The Walled Kitchen garden is described in some detail.

The description also mentions the Gardener’s Cottage (the house to the south of the Church, now known as ‘The Rectory’. There was a Bothy for the under-gardener at the side, as well as two glass houses in the garden. These appear on the 1903 OS map. It is interesting to note that, on this map, the cottage is a different shape to the building shown in 1884 (and on the 1848 tithe map). This would indicate that the present day cottage was built sometime between 1884 and 1903.

A cluster of buildings is visible on the east side of the walled garden, one of which is believed to be the present-day ‘Mole Cottage’. These were not present on the 1884 map. A water tank is shown in the middle of the walled garden. Also visible on the 1903 map is a double line of trees (believed from oral history to be chestnut). This extended from the Melton Road to the Church and is believed to be a bridleway.

The Estate failed to sell at auction.



OS Map 25" to 1 mile.
 Ref XIX.14 – Dated: 1903

1905-6

The Hall was empty.

Several invoices in the Leicestershire and Rutland Record Office, dated 1905-06, indicate that Mr. Williams was still buying plants for his properties in Hertfordshire and Brooksby. It is clear that he preferred to use mostly local nurserymen for this; however, he placed orders for fruit trees, vegetable seeds and plants with renowned nurserymen, James Veitch & Sons Ltd., Chelsea.

1906

Earl (then Captain) Beatty leased the Hall and 64 acres from Mr. Joseph Grout Williams. It was a 14-year lease. Beatty had married Ethel Field, an American heiress, in 1901.



Vice-Admiral Sir David Beatty and Lady Ethel Beatty (nee Field)

In summer 1906, he commissioned Thos. Messengers of Loughborough to construct a plant house stove and pit. Beatty had been advised that the existing greenhouses were unsuitable for peaches and decided to remove these and to erect a new peach house and a vinery on the south-facing wall. However, as he was only leasing the property, the work was scaled back. It appears that only the Plant House Stove and Pit and foundations for the greenhouses were completed at this time. Correspondence relating to this is in the Leicester Record Office and is summarised in Appendix B.

Also in 1906, plans were drawn up for Captain Beatty for a cottage. The design appears very similar to the present day bungalow on the Hoby Road. This is believed to have been a cottage for the Head Gardener. It is not known at what date it was actually built.

1911

On 10th October, Beatty purchased the Hall and 186 acres for £22,000. According to John Hubbard's *History of Brooksby*, Beatty engaged Lutyens to carry out minor alterations in the Hall. He had already done work for them at their other property, Dingley.

The 1911 Census shows that there were three gardeners employed at Brooksby Hall: Albert Edward Smith, George Crofts and Cyril Victor Seddon.

1911-1915

The garden was extended out westwards into the parkland. A postcard, franked 7th August 1915, shows the lake and a stone pergola. The pergola terminates at the lake and there are two Italianate statues. Pevsner attributes the pergola to Lutyens, but no evidence for this has been found.



The lake was constructed by Irish workmen, using the 'puddled clay' technique. Beatty was not awarded his C.B. (as shown on the postcard) till 1911, so earliest date estimate is based on this. The card is franked August 1915, so this has to be the latest date.



This image of the front face of Brooksby Hall is believed to date from the same time as the image on the previous page. The east wing is clearly visible. There are two bench seats in front of the Hall and a large stone planter, which can be seen today on the lawn in front of the Hall. The standard topiary, which was just visible in the image on page 5, has now grown larger.

1920-1936

The *History of Brooksby* states that the stream from the Church to the Lake was constructed in the early 1920's. However, it is possible that this was also Pre-war. It is not possible to see from the postcard image whether the stream is already there in 1915. The water for the stream was fed via pipes and drains from the sloping ground between the turnpike road and the Hall. A rockery was also put in during this period, with rocks alongside the stream. Three *Chamaecyparis Pisifer Filifera Aurea* trees were planted alongside the stream.

Mr. Watson, ex parks superintendent for Leicester Corporation was head gardener and many plants came from Kew.

The *Brooksby History* also states that Beatty had a Dutch water garden and the roundhouse (now in the Principal's garden) constructed at this time. However, oral history (reported from the daughter of Beatty's

agent) says that the garden was Italian in style. This is supported by a survey carried out in 1945. See below for more information regarding its location. There is no evidence for a Dutch garden.

The date of the round house, which has the appearance of an African rondavel, remains a mystery. It is not mentioned in the 1945 survey but predates 1955, when the second Principal joined the college. It seems likely that it came from the Beatty era, but, for some reason, was omitted from the 1945 survey.



Lady Beatty planted many trees, including a fine line of trees and shrubs to screen the railway line. The shrubs were subsequently eaten by pigs in the early days of the college farm but many of the trees remain.

From oral history, there is also believed to have been a Japanese style garden in the area where there are currently a group of cherry trees. Nothing more is known about this and it is not mentioned in the survey or on estate agent's particulars.

The *Brooksby History* states that the avenue of trees (bridleway) from the main Melton road to the rear of the church was removed and the present-day main entrance was created during the Beattys' ownership. However, the present day entrance and exit (at the front of the Hall) were already in place in 1884. The bridleway was still in place in

1935, according to the plans that accompanied the sale particulars.

After a burglary at Brooksby in the 1920's, the Beattys spent more time at their other home, Dingley Hall, near Market Harborough.

1931

The swimming pool was installed by Joseph Goodwin and Sidney Pearce of Frisby, using a sand and gravel filtration system. The 1945 survey describes it as brick built, cement rendered, complete with inlet and outlet pipes and shaped floor.



1932

Ethel Beatty (nee Field) died at Dingley

1935

Brooksby was put up for sale. The estate agent's particulars (in the Leicester Record Office) describe "The beautiful old-world gardens and well-timbered pleasure grounds" which "afford the fullest possible measure of amenity with limited upkeep". There are comprehensive descriptions of the garden at this time. See Appendix C.

The property did not sell.

1936

Beatty died and the estate passed to his son, David Earl Beatty in 1937.

**September
1938**

At the time of the Munich Agreement, David Earl Beatty decided that arrangements should be put in hand to convert the Hall to a convalescent home. When war broke out, it was set up as a home for naval officers but subsequently became a Red Cross home for all ranks and services for the remainder of the war. David Beatty, lived in the former gardener's cottage near to the church, now referred to as 'The Rectory'.



1945

On 6th May, a comprehensive survey of the condition of the Hall, Gardens and Park was carried out by Fisher & Co., for the Leicestershire County Council. This document (in Leicester Record Office) gives a full description of the state of the property at that time. See Appendix D for a summary of the information relating to the gardens. It includes descriptions of the fences, roads, woodlands, gates, etc. It describes the Rose Garden (this was yew-hedged formal garden to the south-west of the Hall), the Lily Pond (now known as the Lake), the Kitchen Garden (this includes considerable detail, including planting), an herbaceous border and "A Further Border", which, from the description, would appear to refer to the "Italian Garden" (which has been mentioned in oral history). It had ornamental balustrades (of which a piece remains in the garden of the present day Principal's

house), as well as wrought-iron gates inscribed with the letter 'B' in the centre panel. There was a circular central lily pond.

The herbaceous border is described as being "to the north of the stable building". The exact location is unclear, as the walled garden was north of the stable building. In the 1935 sale particulars, the herbaceous border is described in the same sentence as an ornamental pool. It seems likely that these two gardens were linked; the Italian garden was therefore not behind the Church, as was originally maintained.

A possible location for both of these might have been to the back of the Hall, as there are yew hedges near to the Paget accommodation block and the 1945 survey mentions yew hedges.



On a much more grand scale than at Brooksby, this is an example of an Italian-style water-garden with a pool surrounded by a balustrade.

On 1st June, the Hall was purchased by Leicestershire and Rutland County Council for £20,000 and it became the Brooksby Hall Training Centre for ex-servicemen under the auspices of the Leicestershire Agricultural Executive Committee.

1950-51 The Hall became a Farm Institute.

1950's The stream was narrowed.

Photographs dated 1952 show the Italianate statues by the pergola still in place, though they appear overgrown and stained.

1956 Italian water garden was filled in with ashes and the area covered with soil from the foundations for the construction of the Principal's house and the Paget accommodation block.



A fragment of balustrade from the 'Italian Garden', which was moved to the end of the terrace of the Principal's house in the 1950's.

- 1961** The main Hall and its associated residential blocks were officially opened by Alderman Coltman, the then Chairman of the Governors.
- 1963** A pinetum was planted towards the park end of the garden
- 1967** Brooksby was given the status of an Agricultural College.



An aerial view, believed to date from the late 1960's, showing the coach house before its demolition to create new accommodation and teaching blocks in the 1970's.

1970-75

The walled garden and glass houses were demolished to build the Buckingham library/lecture room block. This is situated almost in the middle of what were once glasshouses, paths and cold frames. It was built in two stages, with the Library/Student Services block (to the west) completed in 1974 and the Laboratory block constructed later. The walled garden originally extended (east to west) from the row of brick buildings by the entrance to the staff car park across to the far end of the Villiers Restaurant. The building now called “Mole Cottage” (named after a rural crafts instructor and mole catcher!) was originally a potting shed. The building alongside (the Gym) was a boiler house for the greenhouses.

The small square building, still existing at the ‘pinchpoint’ between the Villiers Restaurant and the Stable Bar was originally an apple store. It formed part of the south wall of the walled garden.

The demolition work was carried out in stages. One greenhouse still remained in 1973 and some of the walls were still standing in 1975.

The coach house section of the stable block was demolished when the new teaching and accommodation blocks were built, also during the early 1970’s.

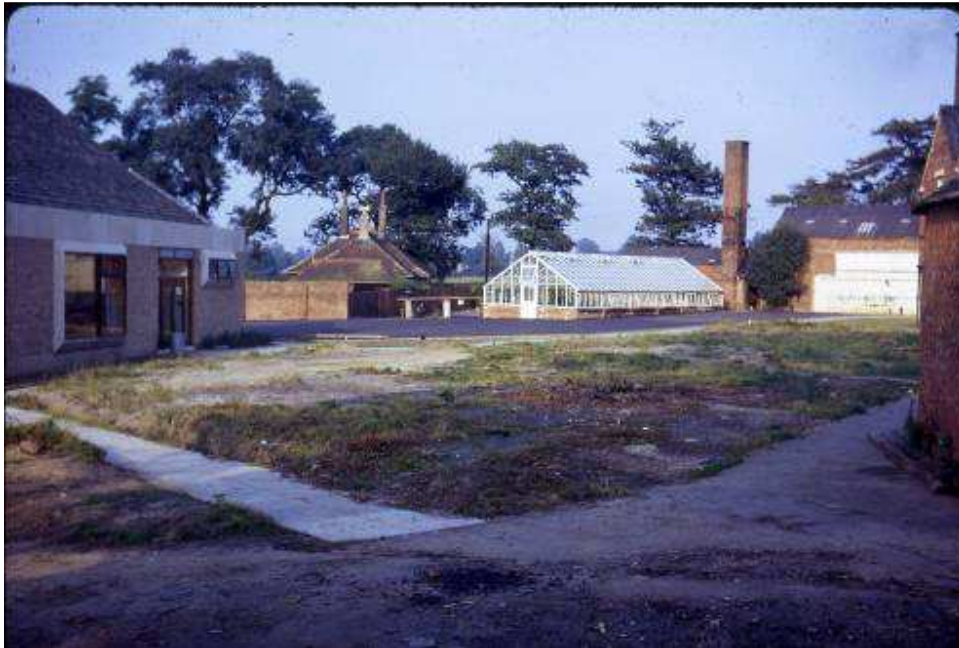
The Horticultural Department moved to the other side of the Melton Road, to the corner of Spinney Farm.



Mole Cottage

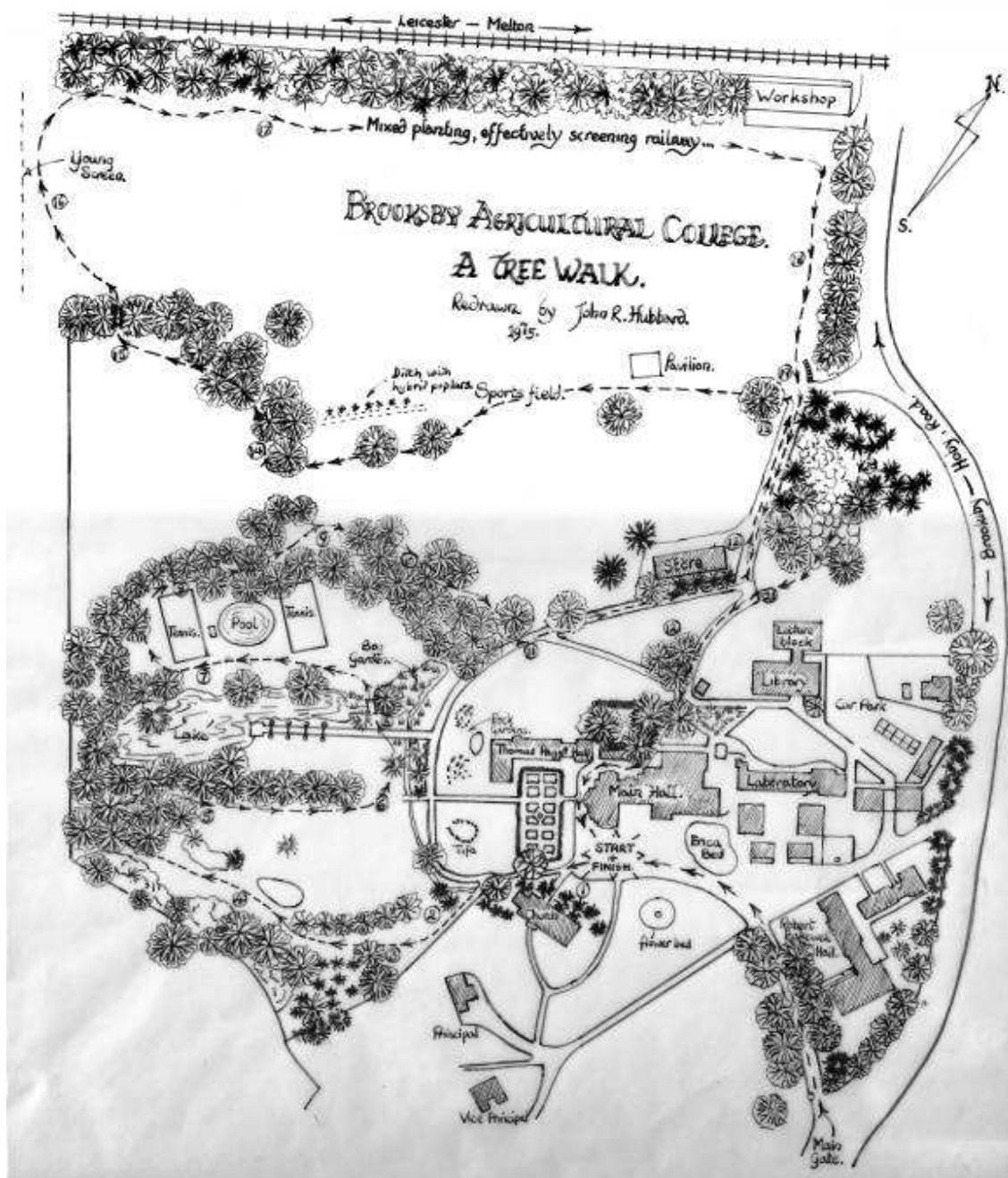


The Walled Garden still in productive use in the 1950's



The Walled Garden partially demolished in 1975. The remaining greenhouse can still be seen in the upper image and the square building is the apple store.

Images on this page © Josie Hutchinson



This plan, drawn by former Rural Studies Lecturer, John Hubbard, shows the layout of the campus in 1975.

- 1973** The bog garden was replanted
- 1974** A stream running at 90° to the Hoby Road, which separated the playing field from an intervening field and the gardens to the south was diverted into a culvert.
- 1974-75** Renovations were carried out to the lower part of the stream. Small rock gardens and a sunken tufa garden were constructed. A small arboretum was planted on the sloping ground between the main Melton Road and the Hall. The area had alternated between trees and pasture. It had latterly been an apple orchard and nursery. Also in 1975, as a result of rose sickness, the roses were removed from the formal yew-hedged rose garden to the south-west of the Hall.



Tufa Rock Garden

- 1976** Fine tree planting dating from the Beatty period – horse chestnut and black poplar – were lost in gales. A submersible pump was installed in the lake, to improve the oxygenation. The cost of this was funded by a ‘Gardeners’ Day’ event. A shrub rose bed was planted.

- 1977** It was possible to add carp to the lake, as a result of improved oxygenation from the submersible pump.
- 1979** The last remaining greenhouse from the walled garden was finally demolished (and sold for £50) in order to make room for additional car parking. A new parking area was laid.
- 1987** 155 metres of pipework was renewed to carry pumped water from the lake to feed the top of the stream, starting near the church. A new rose garden was completed. A hedge of purple-leaved Prunus was planted at the south-west end of the garden. Three island beds, two of shrubs and one of herbaceous perennials were prepared, to increase the range of plants in the garden.
- 1988** A windbreak was planted near the Hobby road. It comprised predominately native trees and shrub species to provide a habitat for wildlife. A new herbaceous bed was planted adjacent to the teaching block.
- 1990's to date** Various garden features of a more or less ephemeral nature have been added. Some of these are student projects, reflecting the nature of the grounds as part of a horticultural college. For example, the wooden pergola from the old Rose Garden was based on a student's design and was erected in the mid-1990's.



Aerial view from the North – post 1974 – see over for more information

There are various interesting points to note in the aerial photograph on the previous page: The laboratory wing of the Buckingham Centre has not yet been built. There are mobile classrooms still on the car park. The laboratories were housed in the Stables at this time.

The left-hand square of yew hedge (next to the Hall) could possibly have been the site of the Italian Garden.

The white building in the foreground was the cricket pavilion and was a former railway signal box. It was sold to a railway enthusiast.

The uneven terrain in the field beyond the church is just visible. This is the site of the medieval village.

Key People who have been Involved with the Development of the Hall and Gardens

Joseph Grout Williams J.P.

His dates unfortunately are not known. His family were from South Wales and he was a wealthy mill owner and landowner. His main property was Pendley Manor at Tring in Hertfordshire. This was commissioned by him in 1872 and his instructions to the architect, John Lyon, were to build in the Tudor style. Carved woodwork and stained glass panels in the house reflect his interest in flora and fauna, as he was a keen agriculturalist and horticulturalist.



Pendley Manor, which is now a hotel

He was a local benefactor in Hertfordshire and, in 1889, was appointed High Sherriff of Hertfordshire, a position which made him the Sovereign's representative in the County for matters relating to law and order.

He purchased Brooksby Hall in 1891 and was responsible for a major rebuilding project and enlargement with the addition of an east wing. He also planted trees and shrubs in the gardens. His younger brother, Captain Stanley Williams, was the tenant of the Hall, along with his wife and five children, until he was killed in a hunting accident in 1897.

He leased Brooksby Hall to Captain Beatty in 1906 and sold it to him in 1911. (The lease is in Leicester Record Office.)

Admiral Sir David Beatty, 1st Earl Beatty of the North Sea and Brooksby – 1871-1936



David Beatty came from an Irish military family with a passion for horses and hunting. His father, Captain David Longfield Beatty, hunted and trained horses at Nantwich in Cheshire. Beatty joined the Navy at the age of 13 and, by the age of 25, had already distinguished himself when he fought with Kitchener on a gunboat on an expedition up the Nile. He was awarded a DSO for bravery. The following year (1897-98), as a Commander, he fought again in a further Nile expedition and was mentioned in despatches. He fought in the Boxer Rebellion (in China) in 1900 where he was wounded in action.

In 1901, he married an American divorcee, Ethel Tree (nee Field), and in 1902, was promoted to Captain, at the age of 29. The average age for naval captains was 42.

He and Ethel leased Brooksby in 1906, from Joseph Grout Williams, with the intention of using it as a hunting box. They subsequently bought the Hall in 1911 and extended the gardens between 1911 and 1915.

Between 1906 and the outbreak of the First World War, he continued his meteoric rise, becoming a Rear-Admiral in 1910, the youngest in the British Navy since the time of Nelson.

In the First World War, he was one of the few senior military figures to emerge with his reputation enhanced, having defended the east coast of Britain from enemy bombardment and ensured that the German Grand Fleet was contained within German harbours. He distinguished himself at the Battle of Jutland and in 1916, became Admiral of the Grand Fleet. He master-minded the country's anti-submarine strategy and developed convoy systems to ensure that vital supply routes were kept open. At the end of the War, he was in command when the German Navy scuppered their ships at Scapa Flow.

After the War, in 1919, already with a long string of honours to his name, he was created 1st Earl Beatty of the North Sea and Brooksby, along with the thanks of Parliament and a grant of £100,000 for his wartime service.

Between 1919 and 1927 Beatty was First Sea Lord of the Admiralty. He became a Privy Counsellor and was awarded various honorary degrees.

Changes made to Brooksby Hall by the Beattys were quite modest and included alterations to the hall/drawing room which, according to Pevsner, were made by Lutyens. Panelling in one of the rooms off the main drawing is said to be of timber from Beatty's flagship.

In the 1920's they acquired Dingley Hall near Market Harborough and, after a burglary at Brooksby, this became their preferred residence.

He died on 11th March 1936 and is buried in St. Paul's Cathedral, London. He is described as being a flamboyant character and was an aggressive commander. Beatty's flamboyant style included wearing a non-standard uniform, which had six buttons instead of the regulation eight on the jacket, and always wearing his cap at an angle. His first encounter with Churchill perhaps sums up his character: As Beatty walked into Churchill's office at the Admiralty, Churchill looked him over and said, "You seem very young to be an Admiral." Unfazed, Beatty replied, "And you seem very young to be First Lord." Churchill - who was himself only thirty-eight years old in 1912 - took to him immediately and he was appointed Private Naval Secretary to the First Lord.

Lady Ethel Beatty (nee Field) - d 1932

Ethel Field was the daughter of Marshall Field, a Chicago heiress. Her father was Marshall Field, the department store owner. Her first marriage to a Mr. Tree (forename unknown) ended in divorce and she married David Beatty in 1901.

It is interesting to note that, from her first marriage, she had one son, Ronald (Ronnie) Tree, who subsequently married Nancy Lancaster (nee Perkins). Nancy, also American, came to England and became a major contributor to interior and garden design in this country from the 1920's to the 1950's. She has been described as "the most influential gardener since Gertrude Jekyll". She and Ronnie were living at Kelmarsh Hall near Market Harborough at the same time as the Beattys were at Dingley. Ronnie was Joint Master of the Pytchley Hunt.

So Ethel was Nancy's mother-in-law. Unfortunately, I have no idea of the closeness of their relationship.

Ethel was immensely wealthy and this enabled David Beatty to have a great deal more independence than was afforded to other naval officers. She is reputed to have commented after he was threatened with disciplinary action following the straining of his ship's engines "What? Court martial my David? I'll buy them a new ship!"

As well as two houses in Leicestershire and one in London at 17 Grosvenor Square, she bought them a steam yacht, the "Sheelagh" and a grouse moor in Scotland. The couple circulated in high society, even occasionally dining with the King. However, there were disadvantages, as Beatty discovered after his marriage, for Ethel suffered from serious depression and this caused him mental tortures.

When she was in good health, she took an active part in the hunting scene and was a happy and generous hostess, noted for her kindness and thoughtfulness for other less fortunate than herself. During a particularly bad winter in the early 1900's, she had a notice erected on the Leicester-Melton road inviting stranded travelers down to the Hall for free food.

During the First World War, she worked hard, throwing her time, energy and money into caring for the wounded. She fitted out the yacht "Sheelah" as a hospital ship and converted Brooksby Hall into a convalescent hospital.

However, she was badly affected by a jewel robbery at Brooksby Hall in the early 1920's and the couple lived mainly at Dingley, which is where she died in July of 1932. She is buried in Dingley Church.



Dingley Hall and Dingley Church

Appendix A: Brooksby – Sale Details – 1904

Particulars, plan, views and Conditions of Sale of the very valuable and attractive residential and manorial property know as the Brooksby Hall Estate

A grandly-timbered park, extensive and well-arranged Pleasure Grounds.

Messrs. Walton & Lee will offer the above for sale by auction at the 'Bell Hotel, Leicester, on Saturday the 15th of October 1904 at two o'clock precisely.

The Pleasure Grounds surrounding the Residence, are most charming and interesting, and of a very compact and secluded character. They comprise a series of Croquet and Tennis Lawns, approached by Terraced Walks, and bordered and overhung by fine specimen Trees and Ornamental Flower Beds and Plantations.

There is a very productive walled-in kitchen and fruit garden surrounded by brick walls and well-stocked with dwarf espalier fruit trees, and containing a lean-to tomato house and a tool and potting shed.

Below this garden is a second fruit and flower garden through which a private walk leads to the station and at the side of which, and screening it from the road, are lofty well-grown plantations, also a little south from the residence is:

A brick built-cottage, containing on the ground floor, kitchen, sitting room, scullery and pantry and, on the upper floor, four bed rooms. At the rear is a paved yard with coal house and water closet and at the side is an under gardener's bothy. In the garden adjoining are two span glass houses, consisting of grape house, peach house, tomato house and cucumber house; and at the side is a potting shed and stoke hole.

Appendix B: Summary of Correspondence Relating to the Installation of Plant House, Stove and Pit in the Kitchen Garden at Brooksby – 1906-07

(The originals are in the Leicestershire and Rutland Record Office; Ref: DE2121/104

Letters from Edmynd Jeeves, Architect, Surveyor, House and Estate Agent, Nottingham Street, Melton Mowbray.

1st May 1906 to Messrs. Messenger & Co., Loughborough.
Advising that Captain Beatty has taken up a lease and requires greenhouses erecting. He requests a meeting with their representative.

1st June 1906
Plans and an estimate have been received but Beatty has been 'advised by a garden expert that the peach houses on the walls of the existing building facing west would be of no use; he therefore has decided to remove the existing plant house and to erect one peach and one vinery against the wall facing south'.

6th June 1906
A hand-written letter indicates that the glasshouses should be 36feet long and in total 72 feet (i.e. one for peaches and one for a vinery).

22nd June 1906
A letter from Edmynd Jeeves asking Messengers if they will 'quote a price for erecting the Stove and Plant House only, making provision in the pipes for extending then to the Peach House and Vinery at some future date.'

'Captain Beatty has only take the place on a lease and he would like to live there before going to the expense of erecting the whole of the glass shown.... Leaving the other for further consideration until next year.'

28th June 1906
The estimate for the Plant House Stove and Pit is only £168.15.0d. It is accepted and work on the foundations has begun.

16th July
The work is stopped temporarily because Beatty does not think it will be suitable for chrysanthemums and other high plants.

26th July
The builder is instructed to go on with the foundations.

31st July
Messengers informed that they will be able to fix new work on Monday 13th August.

29th January 1907

'In reply to your application for payment of account due from Captain Beatty, I sent it to him some time ago and he will no doubt soon send you a cheque for the amount. I am writing to remind him'

30th January 1907

Letter to Captain Beatty from Messengers, requesting payment. Cheque for £100 sent.

30th May 1907

Letter from Dennis Larking (Brooksby Hall) saying:

'Captain Beatty tells me that you were very indignant at not receiving the balance of 11s 1d to your bill of £193.11s 1d. I therefore enclose it'

Appendix C: Brooksby – Sale Details – 1935

(Leicestershire and Rutland Record Office Reference: DE1826)

Delightful Old-World Gardens and Pleasure Grounds, Hard tennis court, ornamental lake.

The beautiful old-world gardens and well-timbered pleasure grounds surrounding the house are of great natural charm and afford the fullest possible measure amenity with limited upkeep. The fine old holly and clipped yew hedges are a distinct feature and seclusion is assured by the fringe of timbered shrubberies. There is an adequate expanse of lawns, rose garden with stone-flagged paths, enclosed by clipped yew hedges, well laid out winter garden, herbaceous border with central walk and ornamental pool, hard tennis court by En Tout Cas.

A delightful stretch of water, rock garden with chain of small pools fed by constant spring.

Ornamental lake fed by springs and flanked by stone-flagged terrace with rose pergola terminating in a flight of stone steps to the water's edge.

Beyond the pleasure grounds extend the well-timbered parkland and pastures affording unbroken outlook over the adjoining countryside.

Productive kitchen garden with glasshouse include two peach houses, fig house, 2-division plant house, range of heated frames.

The head gardener's house.... another gardener's cottage.

The first-class hunting stabling and garages... quadrangle... central block... Clock tower and weather vane

Appendix D: Brooksby Hall Estate, Leicestershire – 1945 Survey.

(Leicestershire and Rutland Record Office Reference: DE5395/150/3)

A schedule and record of condition of the dwelling house known as Brooksby Hall, including the Park, Gardens and Grounds as shown on Plan¹.
9th May 1945

This is a survey carried out by Fisher & Co. Produced for the Leicestershire Country Council and the Ministry of Works.

The information below is a précis of the schedule and record of condition relating to the garden. (There is a similar amount of detail relating to the Hall)

General Observations on the Parks and Grounds

Fences: fences of thorn, beech, post and rail, post and wire and iron post and bar are stock-proof, dressed, except where otherwise stated and in fair condition throughout.

Roads: private access road – well-made hardcore foundations. Appear to be in sound condition.

Woodlands: Timber: Scots pine, spruce and larches, oak, elm, beech and other hardwoods. Softwoods in varying stages of maturity. Little commercial value, through well-maintained and protected.

Water supply: adequate; pressure good. No purity tests taken.

Access

The Hall is served by two access drives and carriage sweep... well-maintained and in good condition, with the exception of odd potholes to the Brooksby turn. It is well-metalled²

Main Gates

Ornamental wrought-iron gates, fitted with rollers..... dressed stone pillars with ball finials.... Gates painted black.

Secondary Gates

White painted, timber-framed.

¹ The plan of the grounds appears to be based on the 1903 OS map but with the addition of the Lake. The double avenue of trees (believed to be a bridleway) has largely disappeared; a short length remains near to the church and also by the Melton Road. This is not surprising as a considerable amount of tree-felling was carried out during the War.

² These are the present-day entrance and exit at the front of the Hall.

North-west Aspect of Hall

Flagged approach from the Museum³ to the Rose Garden: paths, rose beds, 2 beds with variegated holly. Carved ornamental stone vase on base with shaped painted cast-iron framework forming an arch.⁴



South-East Aspect

...the grass lawn in front of the main entrance is overgrown.... Used as a sports area by the previous occupants.⁵

... path to the south leads to the cottage (the Rectory) and a bothy.⁶

... in front of the Hall... a carved ornamental stone vase on a stone base⁷.

... a small area to the south of the path to the church cultivated ... vegetable growing.

South-West Aspect

Flagged path to Rose Garden .. flagged paths... yew hedges with topiarial decorations... requires trimming.

Stream

Two wooden footbridges – worn.

³ A room within the Hall.

⁴ This is the present-day area which is surrounded by yew hedges and contains the National Collections of Plants. The stone vase is still in this location.

⁵ This refers to the Hall's wartime use as a convalescent home.

⁶ The precise location of the Bothy is unclear.

⁷ This shows that the large stone urn was not moved to its present-day position in the lawn until after the acquisition of the Hall by the local authority. The image on page 14 shows the original position.

Lily Pond⁸

Dirty and overgrown. Paved with side pillars and “lintols” forming Gothic architecture. Ornamental trees to the north side of above. Overgrown.

Brick-built swimming pool, cement rendered, complete with inlet and outlet pipes and shaped floor (rendering cracked).

Garden W.C. (location not stated)

Brick-built.

Kitchen Garden

7-9ft 9” brick wall copied on north and west with buttresses at regular intervals around entire length, ivy covered on exterior. Five access gates: north and west are 3 feet high, wrought iron with ornamental decorations; wood on inside. Two on the south and one on the east are framed, ledged and braced. The painting has decayed.



The Walled Garden: A panoramic photograph, believed to date from the 1950's. The original is in Brooksby Library

The gardens are well laid out with gravel paths, weedy and the plots are bordered with box hedges, gappy in places and require trimming.

.. planted interior face of the brick wall: 10 plum, 14 apple, 16 pear. Also 14 plum, 29 apple, 11 pears on wire, post supports in the various borders.

.. vegetable plots – planted with cabbage, carrot, cauliflower, lettuce... annual weeds, requires hoeing.

North of the Stable Building (location unclear)

Herbaceous border: 21 feet wide. Centre path... box edge border. Yew hedge. Border plants are overgrown, weedy and require attention. 12 wood posts and iron stays forming rose arch. Rose tree to each post.

⁸ This would appear to refer to the Lake.

A Further Border (location unclear but I believe this to be the “Italian Garden”)

As above with centre balustrade on four sides⁹ containing two 3’ 6” double wrought-iron gates inscribed with B in the centre panel, mortice lock and two single gates as above described. 4 wrought-iron ornamental posts; circular central lily pond with paved surround. Ash path.

The Park

6.209 acres (OS map area 46¹⁰). This enclosure was originally part of the park. During the past 25 years, a portion of OS49 was also fenced off to enclose the Lily Pond (Lake) and swimming pool.

OS Area 46: is ploughed up for ley¹¹ of medium quality... a large amount of coarse grass... 20 hardwood trees.

Fences: thorn... gappy... post and wire.

Woodland

OS map area 46A (alongside the Hoby road). A strip of woodland 30 feet wide from the Brooksby turn to the second entrance. Timber in various stages of maturity including larch and spruce, as well as a selection of hardwoods .. overgrown but selective felling has been carried out. Holly hedge along the road side... past the Bungalow .. along the north boundary of OS 33 (The Orchard) to the gate at the north corner of OS37 (The Shrubbery).

⁹ It seems likely that a fragment of this balustrade is on the edge of the ‘terrace’ of the Principal’s house.

¹⁰ This is the area from the path which cuts across from the main entrance drive to the ‘Rectory’ and the main Melton Road.

¹¹ Ley farming is an agricultural system whereby the field is alternately seeded for grain and left fallow.

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