

PART 1

The History of the Country Houses of Leicestershire and Rutland

What is an historic Country House?

At first sight, the definition of “an historic Country House” may seem fairly straightforward. In practice, however, it is more complex and may be determined by such criteria as the age and size of the house, its architectural interest or lack of it, the history of the families who have lived in it, and the extent of the parkland which surrounds it. For the purposes of this book, I have—albeit with a good degree of flexibility—adopted the criteria followed by Littlejohn in his book on English country houses¹: namely, a large private residence which has served as a family home for some generations; a substantial house which frequently contains fine furniture and works of art; and one which is, or has been, set in its own parkland and acted as the focal point for the local countryside. In the great majority of cases, particularly those houses which have existed for centuries, they have been added to and altered so that they bear the stamp of several different architectural styles. By these criteria, though we have lost many historic country houses, England as a whole still contains up to 2,000 of them, about two-thirds of which are still in private hands and about one-fifth open to public view for at least part of the year.² As we shall see, Leicestershire and Rutland have their fair share of these houses which make so distinctive a contribution to the

English countryside and to our architectural and artistic heritage.

Medieval Beginnings

The first true English country houses date from the reign of Henry VII, 1485 to 1509, following the troubled times of the Wars of the Roses, which lasted from the mid-1450s to his accession to the throne following his victory at the Battle of Bosworth. During earlier centuries there were a number of manor houses built in the two counties. Often surrounded by moats, they included *Donington-le-Heath*, *Appleby Magna* and *Ashby-de-la-Zouch*. In the case of the latter two, they were replaced by later buildings. However, these buildings met few of the criteria listed above for country houses and were essentially relatively modest homes for the lords of the manor, in or near their villages.

The immediate ancestor to the country house was the fortified house, of which there are two fine examples in Leicestershire, both known as “castles” in deference to their medieval predecessors, namely *Ashby-de-la-Zouch Castle* and *Kirby Muxloe Castle*. As Hoskins puts it, “Neither Ashby nor Kirby is a true castle, but a strongly fortified dwelling-house built....by a powerful feudal lord who had good reason to barricade himself in”.³ The powerful lord in question was William, Lord Hastings, Lord Chamberlain and close associate of the reigning king,



the Civil War was held by the King and besieged by the Roundheads for 15 months before it was surrendered in February 1646. In 1648, Parliament ordered it to be “slighted” and today only its impressive ruins remain. At *Kirby Muxloe* Lord Hastings began building his palatial fortified house, in dark red and blue brick, on the site of an earlier fourteenth century manor house of which very few traces remain. Work began in October 1480 and was brought to a premature close at the end of 1484,

Edward IV. In 1474, he received a royal licence to fortify three great houses in Leicestershire, at Ashby, Kirby, and Bagworth. However, little work was undertaken at Bagworth and building on a large scale was concentrated on the other two. In both cases, the buildings were designed as a combination of house and fortress, made necessary for rich and powerful men to protect themselves against the anarchy of the Wars of the Roses. At *Ashby* work began in 1474 on the site of a small fourteenth-century manor house, of which part still remains. The new work included a magnificent tower-house, originally 90 feet high with walls 9 feet thick. The house was contained within a garden whose walls and towers were of brick, the rest of the buildings being of stone quarried nearby. Thus Ashby is significant in being the earliest example of the use of bricks for building in Leicestershire since the departure of the Romans more than a thousand years before. The castle was altered in the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century and during

1. (above) *The ruins of Ashby Castle, dating mostly from the late fifteenth century.*

2. (right) *Ashby Castle, the impressive ruins of the Hastings Tower, originally 90 feet high.*

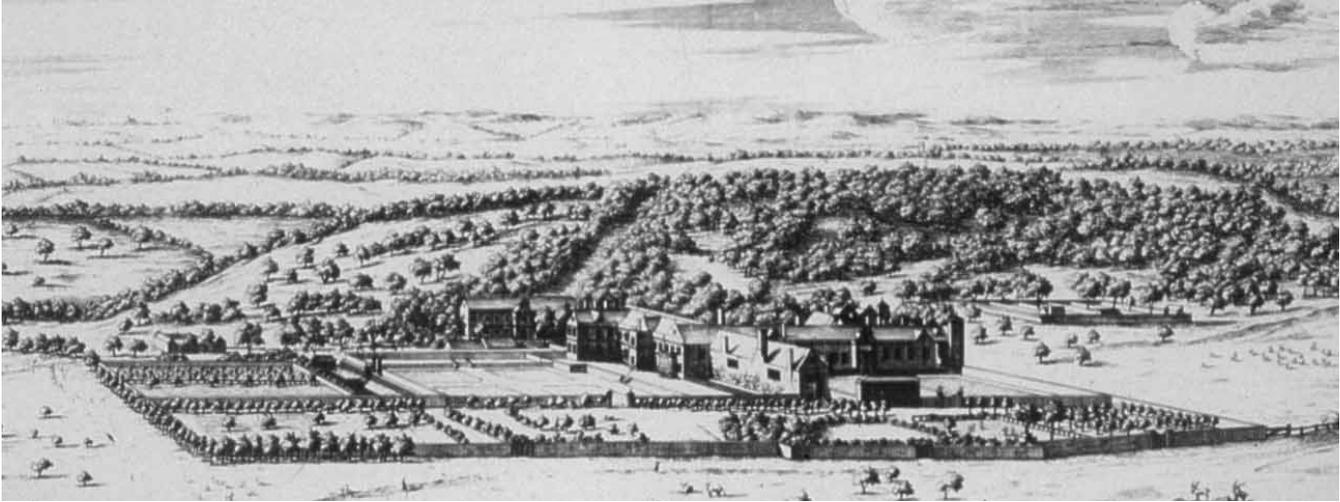




3. *The building of Kirby Muxloe Castle began in 1480 but was never completed. What remains today of the moated site are the gatehouse and the west tower. Gun-ports, among the earliest in the country, though probably only decorative, can also be seen.*

following the beheading of Lord Hastings in London the previous June. When Richard III succeeded to the throne in 1483, Hastings found himself on the wrong side and, having been denounced by the Duke

of Gloucester as a traitor, was executed. Although the building was never completed, it remains one of the finest examples of late medieval brickwork in England. It is of considerable interest for another reason: its gun-ports are among the earliest in the country, though they may only have been decorative features as there is no record of guns having been ordered. Today, only the gatehouse and west tower stand.



4. (Above) This engraving of Bradgate House by Leonard Knyff dates from about 1700 and shows it while it was still occupied. Deserted in 1720, it gradually fell into ruin.



Tudor Country Houses

The first true country house to be built in the two counties and, indeed, one of the earliest in the country, was at *Bradgate*. Bradgate Park began life as a typical medieval hunting park and, indeed the park today, though much enlarged, probably looks little different from its predecessor which was first recorded in 1241.⁴ The park and the surrounding land came into the possession of Thomas Grey, first Marquis of Dorset, in 1475, who unlike his rival, Lord Hastings, found himself on the winning side once Henry VII came to the throne. Recent research suggests that he began building here about 1500 when he set a precedent followed by later landowners by depopulating the village of Bradgate and enclosing the land in his park. The house, constructed in brick, was only partially erected when the Marquis died in 1501 and the work was probably completed by his son, Thomas, the second Marquis, by the time of his death in 1530. The building was

5. *The ruins of Bradgate House today are set in a park which has changed little over the centuries.*

distinctive in being a non-fortified country house, reflecting the more stable society of the Tudor period. Over the centuries, the house was altered and added to and was occupied until about 1720 when Henry Grey, who by this time had become the third Earl of Stamford, had newly inherited the title. Bradgate by now was old-fashioned and in need of expensive restoration. Consequently, being resident in Enville Hall in Staffordshire, he decided to stay where he was and left the house unoccupied. As a result, it fell into disrepair and by the end of the eighteenth century had become a ruin.⁵ So it remains today, redolent of past glories.

Another Leicestershire country house containing late fifteenth century work is *Nevill Holt*, in the south-eastern corner of the county. Not a completely new house like Bradgate, it evolved gradually over the centuries, so that at its core is a fourteenth century hall, with some fine late fifteenth century work attributed to Thomas Palmer, who died in 1474, and his Nevill son-in-law. The same is true of *Stapleford Park*, on the eastern edge of Leicestershire, where the earliest part of the present house was built in 1500 by Thomas Sherard, a wealthy squire. Subsequently, additions were made to the house in a variety of architectural styles, right up to the eighteenth century.



6. *The east wing of Stapleford Park, known as Lady Abigail's Wing, dates originally from 1500 and was reconstructed in 1633. Between the windows on the first floor are twelve niches containing statues, the six to the right dating from about 1500 and the six to the left from 1633.*

7. *One of the few Tudor houses in Leicestershire was*

As Tudor England prospered economically through the sixteenth century, particularly from the conversion of peasant farming into sheep pastures involving the depopulation of villages and hamlets, so the nobility, gentry and wealthy merchants acquired land and built themselves houses. Some, particularly those close to Henry VIII, benefitted greatly from his dissolution of the monasteries between 1536 and 1539 which resulted in the lands and buildings of between 800 and 1,000 monasteries throughout the country being sold into their hands. Examples in Leicestershire include estates such as Stanford, acquired by the Caves, Rothley Temple by the Babingtons, and extensive lands by the Manners, Earls, later Dukes, of Rutland. Thomas Manners, the first Earl of Rutland, inherited Belvoir in 1525 and, being a personal friend of Henry VIII, in 1543 acquired monastic properties on a grand scale including, in Leicestershire, all the lands of the abbeys of Croxton, Owston and Garendon and the neighbouring Priory of Belvoir. He and his son largely rebuilt *Belvoir Castle* and turned it into one of the most splendid houses in Elizabethan England.⁶ It was rebuilt yet again in the latter part of the seventeenth century and for the last time, in its present form, in the early nineteenth century. In Rutland, the equivalents of the Earls of Rutland were the Noels who purchased extensive ecclesiastical property in the county, including that at Brooke.⁷ Many of the new owners of these lands erected houses which sometimes incorporated parts of

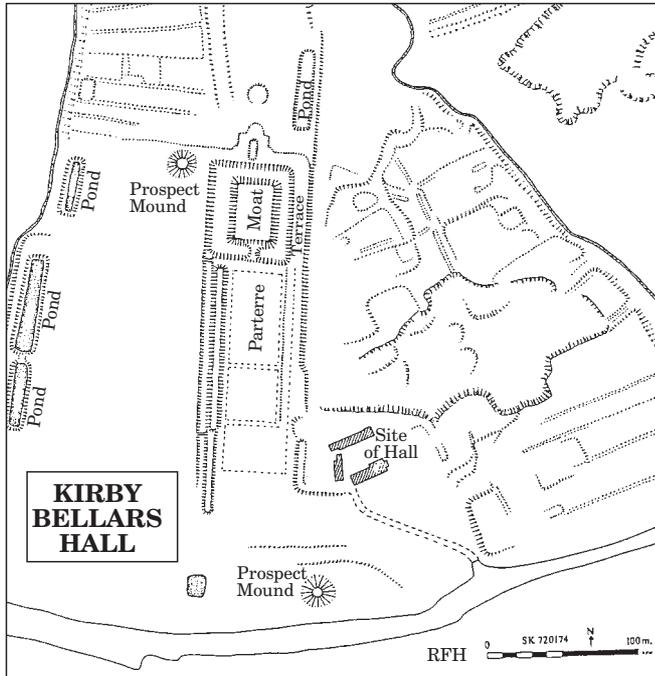
the monastery and to their new houses they often appended the term “abbey” or “priory”. Two Leicestershire examples are Launde Abbey and Grace Dieu Priory. At *Grace Dieu*, John Beaumont of nearby Coleorton acquired the site of the priory and built himself a large house, probably between 1539 and 1552, incorporating much of the priory behind his Tudor brickwork. Very little of this house remains and 300 years later another house, *Grace Dieu Manor*, was built here, some distance away from its predecessor. At *Launde Abbey*, where there was not an abbey but a priory, the land was acquired by Thomas Cromwell who built a mansion in the ruins. The present house has been so much altered that it is not clear how much of the sixteenth-century building still stands. Another monastic site which came into private hands after the Dissolution was *Leicester Abbey*, then on the edge of the town and now the site of Abbey Park. A Tudor house was built here, though there is no unanimity as to its date of erection. Hoskins⁸ says it was built in about 1562 by Henry, Earl of Huntingdon, out of old material on the site, while Pevsner⁹ states that it dates from

Cavendish House, now in the north-west corner of Abbey Park, Leicester. Built about 1600 from the remains of Leicester Abbey, it was burnt out in 1645 during the Civil War.
8. *The site of Kirby Bellars Hall, near Melton Mowbray. One of the grandest houses in*



about 1600. In any case, the house, known as *Cavendish House*, after William Cavendish, first Earl of Devonshire, who acquired it in 1613, was burnt and plundered by Royalist troops in 1645 and today only some of the ruins remain, on the western edge of Abbey Park. In Rutland, the Priory at *Brooke* was acquired by the Noels, a family with many branches. Here, Andrew Noel built a house adjacent to the Priory which soon became ruinous. In 1642, the house ceased to be the principal residence of the family, fell into disuse and was demolished by the end of the century. All that remains today are an octagonal stone gate lodge and an arched gateway.

Among houses built or rebuilt in the late sixteenth century are, or were, *Husbands Bosworth Hall*, in the extreme south of Leicestershire, *Kirby Bellars Hall*, near Melton Mowbray, and *Clipsham Hall* in Rutland. Husbands Bosworth Hall dates



from the late Middle Ages, to which a timber-framed addition was made in the late sixteenth century. Subsequently it was much altered in the late seventeenth century and again in the nineteenth century. Kirby Bellars Hall was in existence in the early seventeenth century, but was burnt down in the Civil War. Its owner, Sir Erasmus Fontaine, had it rebuilt at some time before his death in 1672, but it was later demolished. Clipsham Hall dates from 1582 when it was built in local stone. It was added to and much altered in the late nineteenth century.

Country Houses in the Seventeenth Century

The first half of the seventeenth century was a period of growing prosperity for landowners, as a result of considerable progress both in agricultural productivity and also in the extension of the cultivated area. This enabled the nobility and gentry of rural England at this time to build a number of fine country houses. In Leicestershire, they included Cotes, Elmesthorpe, Wistow, Edmondthorpe, Rothley, Ragdale, Quenby, Shenton and Carlton Curliu; and in Rutland Exton Old Hall and Martinthorpe. Elmesthorpe Hall, northeast of Hinckley, is another country house which has left little trace behind. It was probably built about 1610 by the Harringtons who owned the estate. It was then purchased in 1619 by Sir William Cockaigne, Lord Mayor of London. After his death, his son, Charles Cockaine, later Viscount Cullen, made Elmesthorpe his principal residence. According to Nichols, the hall was a very large and extensive

Leicestershire, it was built in the early part of the seventeenth century, burnt down in the Civil War, rebuilt shortly after and subsequently demolished.

Building Materials

Until the coming of the railways in the nineteenth century which made the transportation of building materials relatively easy, all but the grandest houses had to rely on what was locally available. Hence, country houses in the two counties were dependent on local geology for their building materials, which makes them fit so well into their surroundings.

Leicestershire, except for the eastern part of the county, is covered by Boulder Clay brought down by the ice sheets and underlain by heavy Lower Lias clays or deep red Triassic marls and what stone there is was either too deep to be accessible or in the case of Charnwood stone too hard to make for practicable working. Hence, inevitably, the principal building material for large houses – small ones relied on mud and timber – was brick, made from local clays. Although the Romans made brick in Leicester, as is illustrated by the second century Jewry Wall, once they departed the art of brick-making was lost and did not reappear until the 1470s and 1480s when bricks were made on site for the construction of *Ashby* and *Kirby Muxloe Castles*. These buildings embodied the typical *diapers* of the period, that is diamond-shaped panels of dark blue vitrified headers set against a red brick background. This style of brick building continued in Leicestershire into the early seventeenth century and is to be seen at *Quenby Hall*. Thereafter, the use of brick in western Leicestershire became widespread with the local clays and marls yielding bricks of a rich red colour. By the eighteenth century, most towns and villages in the county had their own brickyards supplying the basic building material for houses of various

sizes. As a rule, the larger houses had stone dressings along the sides of the buildings and around the windows though, in practice, this stone weathered less well than the brick. Among the many fine brick mansions, with stone dressings, in western Leicestershire are *Market Bosworth Hall*, *Noseley Hall* and *Staunton Harold Hall*.



10. and 11. Among the fine brick mansions in west Leicestershire are *Market Bosworth Hall* (above) and *Staunton Harold Hall* (below). The former, built at the end of the seventeenth century, has stone trimmings. The latter, an older house, was added to in the eighteenth century and this photograph show the south front of *Lion Court*, built in 1763, so-called because of the leaped lion perched above the parapet.



9. (left) Late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century brick buildings were often decorated with *diapers*, diamond-shaped panels of dark-blue vitrified headers set against a red background, as here at *Kirby Muxloe Castle*.





In eastern Leicestershire stone asserts itself, mainly in the form of the Middle Lias marlstone which because it contains iron oxide is commonly known as ironstone. It varies in colour from deep orange through rust-brown to a lighter golden brown. The characteristic building stone in this part of the country, it can be seen in village churches and in fine form in *Belvoir Castle* where, topped up with limestone dressings, it makes for an attractive combination of brilliant yellow and grey. Other east Leicestershire houses which have been built of marlstone, frequently like Belvoir with limestone dressings, include *Brooksby Hall*, *Cold Overton Hall*, *Langton Hall* and *Launde Abbey*. There is a small area of grey, oolitic limestone in the extreme north-eastern part of the county, but this beautiful stone is much more widely found in Rutland. The only other significant area of accessible stone in Leicestershire is in Charnwood Forest where some of the oldest rocks in the country rear up to nearly a thousand feet. However, these mainly volcanic rocks have been so hard to work until the nineteenth century that they have contributed hardly at all to the county's country houses. Throughout Leicestershire country houses were mainly roofed with Swithland slates, though more recently Welsh slates have been used.

13. *In Rutland, fine limestones are available for building. Here, at Burley-on-the-Hill, Ketton Stone was used, dug out from quarries in the village of that name not far away.*

12. *The eastern half of Leicestershire contains easily workable ironstone which is widely used in this part of the county for churches and country houses as here at Belvoir Castle, where it is topped up with limestone dressings.*

Rutland, by contrast, is particularly well endowed with stone for building materials, as virtually the whole county is underlain with Jurassic Limestone. In the western half this consists of a continuation of Leicestershire's golden brown ironstone, while the eastern half consists of Inferior Oolite, a grey limestone considered by many to be the most beautiful building stone in the country. Together, they make up part of the great Stone Belt which sweeps up from Dorset, through the Cotswolds, Northamptonshire, Rutland and Lincolnshire to Yorkshire. The oolite has always been more highly regarded than the marlstone because, beauty apart, it is more durable. Quarried at various places in the county, notably at Clipsham where it has a pale brown tinge and at Ketton where it is grey, it has been greatly in demand for centuries. Thus, Clipsham stone has been used extensively for Oxford colleges and Ketton stone at Cambridge. Both these fine limestones have been widely used in Rutland itself: for example *Burley-on-the-Hill* is built mainly of Clipsham stone with a colonnade of Ketton stone and *Clipsham Hall* is built of stone from its local quarry. Stone slates are plentifully available, mainly from Collyweston just across the border in Northamptonshire or from Swithland in Leicestershire.

Sources: This section has drawn largely on Alec Clifton-Taylor's sections on the Building Materials of Leicestershire and Rutland in Nikolaus Pevsner and Elizabeth Williamson, *The Buildings of England: Leicestershire and Rutland*, Penguin Books, Revised Edition, 1984.

