

Lost Country Houses in Norfolk: History and Archaeology.by Dr Sarah Spooner of the University of East Anglia, Saturday 9th January 2016, 2.30pm at the Town Close Auditorium, Castle Museum, Norwich

Dr. Spooner set out to explain why so many Country Houses were demolished in the second half of the 19th century and the 20th century. She illustrated her talk with numerous photos, graphs and drawings to analyse losses in Norfolk and discuss the scale and chronology of destruction. Identification of such houses was difficult and required classification: high status houses were demolished through-out the Middle Ages up to the 1800s but some like Holkham Hall and Oxnead Hall didn't count. Dr.Spooner was interested in the post-medieval Manor Houses and Halls which survived into the C19th. She used a map of Norfolk to show where the different categories of houses were located in particular areas: poor heath areas like the Breckland; west Norfolk on the edge of the Fens; and to the north of Norwich. These areas were hit hardest by the agricultural depression of the 1870s-1880s and the post WWI industrial depression which resulted in rental decline and sizeable debts (often caused by extensive borrowing for building improvements and extravagant lifestyles). Military requisitions of WWII made the large Country houses even more vulnerable: maintenance and repairs were neglected. A Graph of Chronology 1880 to 1960/70 showed two significant periods of sales and demolition: 1800-1850 and 1900-1960s with a huge peak in the 1950s.

The loss of great houses was not an entirely new development since it started in the C18th. Out-of-county landowners who inherited property had large residences elsewhere so they neglected small, Norfolk County houses which were surplus, redundant, and often outmoded. Shelton Hall fell into ruin and disrepair after it was sold to Robert Houghton. It was demolished in the 1740s. Channon Hall was demolished in 1784 when owners moved to Chadwell. West Dereham Abbey was demolished in the early 1800s after Thomas Dereham sold it. Kenninghall was demolished. Some houses were down-graded, leased to tenants, or converted before they were demolished whilst others were re-built/replaced on different sites with better views, and new parkland, such as Kimberley Hall built in 1712.

However, the C19th witnessed a different process. Norfolk farming was arable cultivation and depression hit hardest the tenant farmers who suffered from cheap grain imports from the USA. Farm rents fell affecting the income of owners. Some rallied by diversifying into other income generating activities so as to subsidize their estates but others were badly affected: Blickling Hall land income was halved from £12,000 to £6000 in a mere 20 years. Increasing debts meant a reduction in maintenance and repairs particularly of stables, gardens, and greenhouses. Matters were exacerbated by the Estate Duty of 1894, an inheritance tax known as Death Duties, which was raised to 15% by Lloyd George in 1914 and in 1919 to 40% on estates valued over £200,000. Families which suffered a series of deaths in a short space of time could only pay by selling off property – land, buildings and contents such as paintings, books, furniture, jewellery, wine. At Didlington Hall, Lord Amhurst sold off the Library in 1909 for roughly £110,000 and at Blickling Hall the collection of illustrated manuscripts was sold in 1932.



Didlington Hall before demolition

Moreover, the role of the country House changed. Large houses were no longer attractive and became a financial liability. It was an out-of-touch lifestyle. In changed social conditions, entertainment and patronage wasn't so relevant and a large number of servants and workers very costly. Some owners left their residences to live elsewhere – this happened with Cranmer and Boyland Hall. Estates like Merton were let for shooting and timber firms purchased the woodland for extensive felling. In 1919 the Forestry Commission bought up land for conifer plantations especially the upland moor and lowland heath of the Breckland and Thetford Forest.

Some owners decided to sell but there was a limited demand from individuals for private residences or from institutions. Dilapidated buildings and repair bills meant large halls were expensive to convert. Costessey Hall was used in WWI as a hospital but several others were requisitioned as schools and also for military training and accommodation. Often the structures were damaged and not repaired. North Elmham didn't sell in the 1920s and despite different uses as a school and hospital it was demolished in 1924. Weston House contents were sold in 1926 and buildings demolished in 1927 after salvaging the panelling and staircase with ballast used for the bridge at Lenwade. West Harling was demolished 1931 after being bought for a knock-down price. During the 1930s Banks and Building societies effectively owned large tracts of land and the houses because of the large mortgages which often led to foreclosure.

In 1937 the Ministry of Works listed all buildings which could be requisitioned and many country houses were on this wish-list. However, by 1939 several had been partially demolished – Costessey Hall, Weeting, Elmham, Congham, Marham and West Harling. Requisition went into effect during WWII: Chatsworth became a girls school; Buckenham Tofts and West Tofts were absorbed into the Stanta Battle Area for military training; the Airforce took over Bylaugh and Stratton Strawless by the Army; Stow Bardolph and Stoke Holy Cross were requisitioned as hospitals; Garboldisham was used for furniture storage; Heacham Hall was destroyed by fire whilst occupied by the Army in 1941; Brooke Hall was damaged by a V2 rocket in 1944 and proved too costly to repair so was later demolished. Weeting was converted into a centre for employment then a hospital in WWII but demolished in 1952. Lord Woodhouse at Kimberley said his place was left in a terrible mess and had to be re-roofed/re-glazed. Blickling was requisitioned by RAF – the mausoleum was broken into and suffered damage. Owners were paid a rent and some compensation for the inevitable damage but often repairs were not viable. The Government and the Armed Forces had no policy of conservation or protection of historic buildings. In many cases surveys and inventories were not taken.

Quantifying the effect is difficult – probably about one hundred houses were requisitioned and 20 later demolished with partial survival of others. Many were in a poor state to begin with and some were very vulnerable particularly the large Country Houses like the rambling, gothic Costessey Hall which ended up being demolished. Victorian mansions were out of fashion whereas Georgian palladian, classical structures survived. Haveringland demolished 1946; Wretham demolished 1948; Didlington demolished 1950; Old Buckenham destroyed by fire 1952; Hunstanton was sold in 1951, turned into flats but seriously damaged by fire in 1952; Morton Hall was pulled down 1952; Bawburgh Hall demolished in 1963; Honingham sold 1964 and demolished 1966.



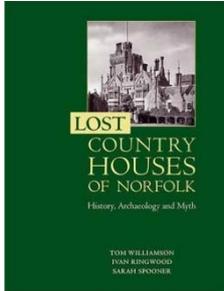
The old Costessey Hall

Many others can be added to this list – Boyland, Burlingham, Bylaugh, Castle rising, Feltwell, Hillington, Necton, Woodbastwick, Wretham, Wroxham – but the post-WWII loss gradually slowed down: in the 1960s 8; 1970s 3; 1980s 8. However, losses continue – recently Hickling Hall demolished by fire Dec 20th 2015. Nevertheless a surprising amount of these demolished houses can still be seen: – entrance lodges; dovecots; ice houses; greenhouses; kitchen gardens; ornamental lakes and tree-belts as at Bagthorpe and Gawdy; a formal garden at Old Buckenham; Costessey parkland now a golf course; Old Buckenham stable blocks and a water tower. Outlines of buildings and gardens can be seen from the air. Haveringland has the best preserved surrounding landscape - trees, terraces, walls, gardens, glass houses survive in a modern holiday park. There are varying remains - brickwork, stone mouldings, walls and cellars – scattered throughout Norfolk as at Lynford Hall, Brooke, Great Melton, Spixworth, Honingham, Weston. The kitchen range and other walls survive at Costessey Hall. From the air parch marks and crop marks show the outline of gardens and walls as at Hillington Hall. Even older buildings can be seen as at Warham demolished 1820s, and some 1750s archaeology at Oxnead.

Moreover, post 1950 some wealthy people have acquired a few of the smaller houses and refurbished/re-built them for instance Senowe Hall has expanded; Happisburgh renovated; Dunston Hall has become a hotel; Langley & Hellesdon have become schools; Blickling preserved by the National Trust; Melton Constable bought in 1986 by a foreign investment company; Gunton Hall and park restored by Kit and Sally Martin. Many of the larger County Houses continue as private family residences.

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The NNAS President, Sophie Cabot thanked Dr. Spooner for an interesting talk – an audience of 91 enjoyed her eloquent presentation. There followed a number of questions about individual houses which in some cases needed reference to the book:



Lost Country Houses of Norfolk: History, Archaeology and Myth by Ivan Ringwood, Tom Williamson, and Sarah Spooner
£29.95

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