

MIDDLETHORPE HALL, YORKSHIRE

By GILES WORSLEY

Middlethorpe Hall, three miles south of York, was built by a successful West Riding ironmaster at the beginning of the 18th century. It survives largely intact but was in a grave state of repair until recently acquired and restored by Historic House Hotels.

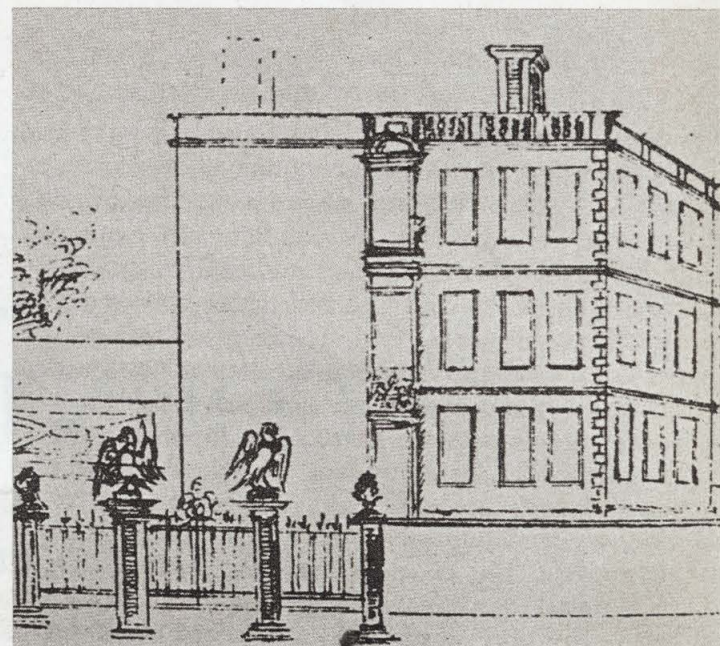
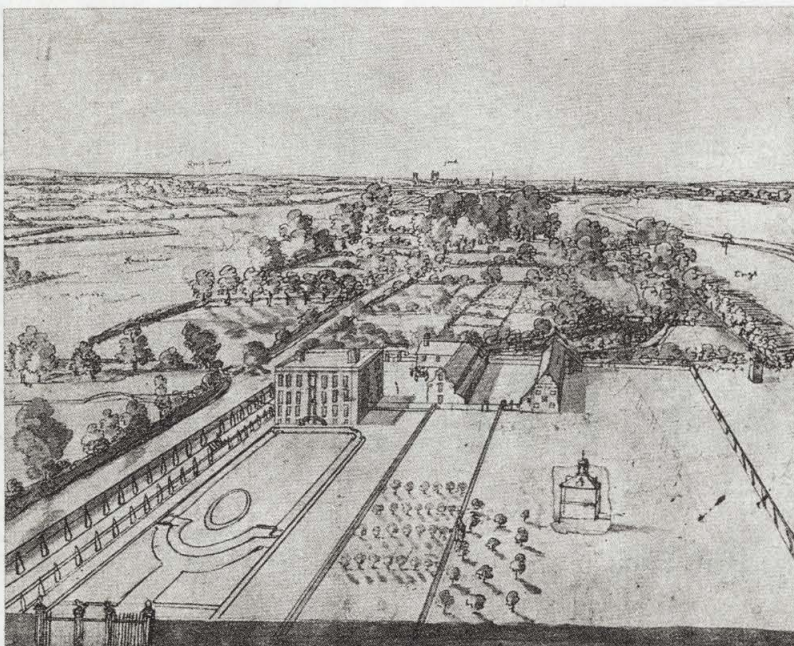


1—THE GARDEN FRONT OF MIDDLETHORPE HALL. After a period when its future was in doubt, Middlethorpe has been saved and converted into a first-class hotel

TALES of West Riding ironmasters making their fortune and then leaving industry to build their own country house, accumulate land and join the gentry have a 19th-century air to them. Middlethorpe Hall shows how old the tradition is, and that the appeal of gentility to the industrialist was as strong in the 17th century as it ever was in the

19th. Although it stands on the outskirts of York, cut off from the countryside by the bypass, Middlethorpe Hall should not be thought of as a town house, nor even as a suburban villa, but as a country house lying several miles beyond the city walls. This is how Francis Place shows it in Figure 2, with York Minster in the distance.

Older outbuildings in Place's drawing show that there had been an earlier house here; the stables with a pronounced scrolling Dutch gable suggesting a mid-17th-century date, while the dovecote, which can be seen in the foreground on the right, was built for Sir Henry Thompson for £115 in 1681-82. The earlier house probably occupied part of the site of the present one, for



2—FRANCIS PLACE'S DRAWING OF MIDDLETHORPE HALL WITH YORK IN THE DISTANCE, c 1705. (Right) 3—SAMUEL BUCK'S SKETCH OF ABOUT 1720. Both show the house before it lost its balustrade

during the recent restoration traces of foundations were excavated, while the eastern third of the house has settled differently from the rest, suggesting that the ground had been pre-compacted by an earlier structure. Timbers, seemingly of a 16th- or 17th-century date, were found to have been reused on the second floor of the new house.

Thomas Barlow, who built the house, was a member of an old-established Sheffield family. When he was granted arms in 1691, Sir Anthony Barlow of Barlow in Lancashire testified that both his father and grandfather had always considered Thomas Barlow's father to be a relation, but the exact nature of their connection is unclear. Certainly Thomas Barlow's great-grandfather Henry Barley or Barlow was settled in Sheffield when he died in 1589. His grandson, Francis Barlow, who died in 1642, was a vintner and described as a man of good substance and allied to the best families of Sheffield.

His son, Samuel Barlow, Thomas's father, was a Quaker, and moved to Leeds where he had at least 12 children. Of these only two of the boys, Thomas and John,



4—THE ENTRANCE FAÇADE. The columned porch was part of the 19th-century alterations



5—THE WINGS ON THE GARDEN FRONT, WHICH WERE ADDED SOON AFTER THE HOUSE WAS BUILT

survived into adulthood. John lived on at Leeds, where he was a leading Quaker until at the age of 26 he was baptised into the Church of England at Bishophthorpe, in 1703; Thoresby described him in his pedigree as "a benefactor". Thomas, the older of the two, benefited from the generosity of his uncle Francis, who made him his heir. It was this that enabled him to break from his West Riding middle-class background and set himself up as a gentleman with his own country house.

Sheffield was the centre of an extensive charcoal iron industry, and, as G. G. Hopkinson has shown (*Hunter Archaeological Society Transactions, Volume 8*), Francis Barlow, in partnership with William Simpson and Denis Heyford, was one of the ironmasters responsible for its growth after the Restoration. Barlow held a position in Sheffield consistent with his importance. He was a town trustee and was granted the honorary freedom of the Company of Cutlers in 1681. Following his nonconformist principles, on his death in 1690 he left some of his fortune to form Barlow's Charity, relief to be paid each Christmas to the most needy tradesmen of Sheffield. The greater part, however, passed to his nephew, Thomas.

By 1700 the partnership, which now comprised Simpson's son John, Denis Heyford and Thomas Barlow, had extensive interests round Sheffield, including the most important group of ironworks in South Yorkshire, known collectively as the Duke of Norfolk's ironworks. They also had links with Newcastle steel-making through The Company in the North. By the beginning of the 18th century the stock invested in these works was £28,775, of which The Company in the North represented £7,000. With the death of Francis, the Barlow family began the slow drift from industry to gentry that was characteristic of the descendants of the post-Restoration ironmasters. By 1727 nearly all of them had sold out to become country gentlemen, leaving the industry in the hands of a very small group of businessmen.

Thomas Barlow's first act following his inheritance in 1690 was symbolic of this change: in 1691 he sought and received a grant of arms. This not only established him as a gentleman, but declared his links with the Barlows of

Barlow and hence his essential gentility. He did not, however, feel secure enough to set himself up as a country gentleman near his native Sheffield, where his origins were too well known. Instead he moved to the Vale of York, buying the manor of Middlethorpe in 1698. He immediately built himself a house there, which was finished by 1702, but he did not buy much land and never broke his links with the iron industry. However, he did take advantage of his wealth to visit the Continent as he could never have done in his youth, and died in France in 1713, travelling with his 23-year-old son.

This Grand Tour shows that the son, Francis Barlow, was being bred a gentleman, and on his return he lost little time distancing himself from industry. By 1716, when he sold half his share in the Duke of Norfolk's ironworks, he was realising his assets and investing them in land. In 1718 he bought the Yorkshire portion of the Whitmore family estates, the manors of Ottringham, Bainton, Belthorpe and Dringhouses. The first three all lay some distance away in the East Riding, but Dringhouses was adjacent to Middlethorpe. The home estate that this formed, along with land in



6—THE ENFILADE OF DOORS DOWN THE SOUTH FRONT OF THE HOUSE

Bishophorpe and Middlethorpe already owned, was extended by further purchases in 1719, and by the lease of Crown lands in Middlethorpe and Dringhouses from 1732. Francis Barlow's acceptance into the gentry was marked in 1735 by his term as high sheriff; the transformation was complete.

Ralph Thoresby's diary records that on September 17, 1702, he "Received a visit from Mr Barlow of Middlethorp near York, which very curious house he built after the Italian mode". Most post-Restoration houses in and around York were of two storeys with a steep roof and dormer windows. Nun Monkton Priory of about 1680 (COUNTRY LIFE, November 6, 1980) and Bell Hall, Naburn (COUNTRY LIFE, June 17, 1922), are typical examples of this. In contrast, Middlethorpe stands three storeys high and originally had a flat roof and balustrade. The effect of this was lost when the balustrade was removed and the roof given a steeper pitch in the 19th century (Fig 1), but it is very clear in Place's drawing and in Buck's sketch (Fig 3). It was this square, palazzo-like appearance that Thoresby considered unusual.



7—THE ENTRANCE HALL. This was the only room on the ground floor substantially altered in the 19th century. (Below) 8—THE PANELLING OF THE SMALL ROOM OFF THE HALL. Throughout the house the woodwork is of very high quality





9—A DETAIL OF THE STAIRCASE BALUSTERS



(Right) 10—THE STAIRCASE HALL IN THE CENTRE OF THE SOUTH FRONT

Three-storey balustraded houses never went entirely out of fashion in Yorkshire, and crude versions could be found at both Halnaby Hall (COUNTRY LIFE, April 1, 1933) built in the mid 17th century and Sprotborough Hall near Doncaster (COUNTRY LIFE, February 11, 1912), built about 1696-1700 (both since demolished). The closest comparison to Middlethorpe, however, is Newby Hall (COUNTRY LIFE, June 7, 1979), which was being completed in 1693. Although the ground plan of Newby is old-fashioned compared to Middlethorpe, being a condensed version of Belton House, Lincolnshire, the details—in particular the balustrade, the use of brick with stone window surrounds and quoining, and the design of the first- and second-floor windows, with their emphatic cornice—almost identical to that of the first- and second-floor central windows on both façades at Middlethorpe (Fig 4)—suggest a link between the two houses. We do know that John Etty worked at Newby, and Middlethorpe would be a plausible attribution to him, but no building accounts survive to substantiate it.

Middlethorpe had little influence on York building. Its closest similarities lie with the early-18th-century town houses of Leeds, now all demolished, but illustrated in John Cossins's plan of Leeds, of 1725, some of which are known from photographs. Its significance, as Thoresby appreciated, is that it marks the demise of the Restoration house in Yorkshire.

The main block of Middlethorpe Hall is little altered, preserving both the original ground plan and most of the contemporary woodwork. The front door faces north and leads into the off-centre entrance hall, the one room on the ground floor that has been substantially altered (Fig 7). To the left lies a small, plainly panelled room, probably the family parlour or Mr Barlow's business room (Fig 8). Directly ahead of the front door lies the staircase hall (Fig 10) with a room on either side. That on the left, the dining room (Fig 12), is the most elaborate room in the house, with Ionic pilasters



11—A DETAIL OF THE WOODWORK IN THE DINING ROOM. During the recent restoration, layers of paintwork were stripped to reveal the quality of the panelling

supporting heavily enriched entablatures. On the first floor are two suites retaining original panelling, one over the entrance hall and one over the dining room, a further large single room which has lost all its panelling (Fig 14), and one smaller room and closet. It is not clear whether any of these rooms were intended as

reception rooms, or were always bedrooms.

As well as the main stairs there is a secondary staircase reaching from the basement to the second floor at the east end of the house. This would have been a family as well as a service staircase, and in fact the house divides neatly into two, with the formal apartments opening off the main stairs, and the family rooms, to the left of the entrance hall, off the secondary stairs. This would suggest that the first-floor suite above the dining room, which can be reached from the back stairs, was Mr Barlow's suite, while the larger rooms above the hall were used for important visitors. Although some original panelling survives on the second floor, most of the rooms there have been altered.

The most impressive feature of the interior of the house is the quality of the woodwork, which is at its best in the dining room and in the small room off the hall. A particular feature of the panelling is the way it breaks forward repeatedly over the fireplace (Fig 11). Much of it can be paralleled by contemporary work in York, in particular that in the dining room with that in the first-floor room at 70 Walmgate.

The wooden cantilevered staircase is of a similarly high quality (Fig 9). On the top of the south-east newel on the first-floor landing are scratched the initials "IB 1764 & SB", standing presumably for John and Samuel Barlow, two of Francis Barlow's sons, who would have been 15 and 16 at the time. This date, therefore, is of no structural significance, and there is no reason to doubt that the staircase is contemporary with the rest of the woodwork.

Some time during the 18th century, single-storey, three-bay wings were added (Fig 5), probably by Francis Barlow soon after his succession, to support his campaign to be accepted as a full member of the gentry. The design of the Composite capitals is very similar to those used in the frontispiece at nearby Aldby Park, often associated with John Etty's son, William. If John Etty was involved at

Middlethorpe then it is quite plausible that his son should have been brought in to add the wings. At a later date, probably in the early 19th century, the wing on the west was extended backwards to make one large room decorated with delicate plasterwork (Fig 13).

In the 19th century the balustrade was removed and the roof given a steeper angle, while the eagles (the Barlow crest) which had graced the gates at the end of the garden were placed above the parapet. At the same time columned porches were added to both north and south façades, uninspired pieces of work lacking responds. The broken scroling pediment with the arms of Barlow in the centre, which sat above the door in the garden front, was reused as a chimneypiece, but has been destroyed by recent occupants.

The Barlows continued to live at Middlethorpe throughout the 18th century, but although Francis's son Samuel produced seven sons, he had no grandsons, and when the last of these sons, Andrew, described as of Middlethorpe and Epinay near Paris, died at York in 1824, he brought to an end the male



12—THE DINING ROOM. The use of pilasters makes this the most ornate room in the house



(Left) 13—THE FORMER BALLROOM. The hotel has been decorated as a country house, with many portraits

line. His widow Harriet married again locally in 1827, to Marcus Worsley, and must have taken some of the contents of Middlethorpe with her, for in the library at Hovingham Hall are over a score of Barlow books. The house passed to Frances, daughter of Andrew's elder brother John, who married first the Rev. Edward Trafford Leigh and then M.A.E. Wilkinson, in whose family it remained until the death of their son, Col. Wilkinson.

During the 19th century Middlethorpe Hall was generally let, both to private individuals and, for a time, as a school. By the end of the century the tentacles of York were already stretching out to it and its identity as a country house had been lost. Earlier this century it underwent further vicissitudes, including being converted into three flats, before becoming "Brummels" nightclub in 1972, "where the age of Regency elegance lives on". Concern for the house was considerable, and York City Council was forced to serve a Notice of Repair on the owners.

Middlethorpe was saved by the fact that the extraordinary blossoming of York as a tourist centre over the last 20 years never spawned a first-class hotel. In 1980 it was bought by Historic House Hotels Limited to be converted into such a hotel, but one that maintained its character as a country house. The problems encountered were considerable, and were discussed in a paper given by the architect Richard Carr-Archer to a symposium held at the University of Bath in July.

Not only was the interior in a deplorable condition and decorated suitably for a nightclub, but essential maintenance had been neglected, leaving the structure to decay. In particular, the roof was leaking badly, allowing rot to set in. Most floors had been affected by

settlement, panelling had split, plasterwork was damaged and some walls removed. Nearly all the stable and garage buildings were badly affected by dry rot. Nor should the difficulties inherent in converting what was only a small country house into a hotel be underestimated. To provide sufficient bedrooms the old stables were largely rebuilt to a sympathetic design (Fig 15). New kitchens were installed in the basement, as was a second restaurant.

The transformation is remarkable. Most notably, the staircase, many of whose balusters were broken, has been repaired, and the layers of paint which obscured the panelling in the dining room have been stripped to reveal the high quality of woodwork (Fig 11). The emphasis of the restoration has been to make the hotel feel like a country house, and portraits decorate the walls.

The idea of the country-house hotel is increasingly fashionable today, but to make a first-class hotel out of a country house without destroying its character is very difficult. Middlethorpe Hall has set the standard for others to follow.

Illustrations: 1, 4-15, Jonathan M. Gibson; 2, York City Art Gallery; 3, British Library.



14—ONE OF THE BEDROOMS ON THE FIRST FLOOR



15—THE FORMER STABLEYARD, WHICH HAS BEEN REBUILT TO PROVIDE MORE BEDROOMS