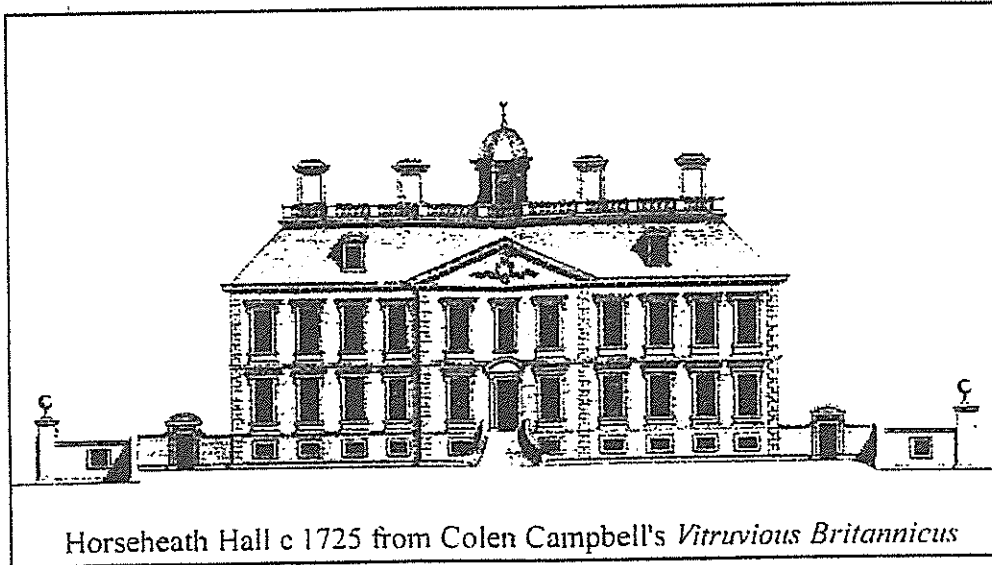


'The rise and fall of Horseheath Hall'

by Janet Morris
2004

First published in the Newsletter of the Friends of the Roman Road & Fleam Dyke, Part 1 in February & Part 2 in May 2004.



The Rise and Fall of Horseheath Hall by Janet Morris

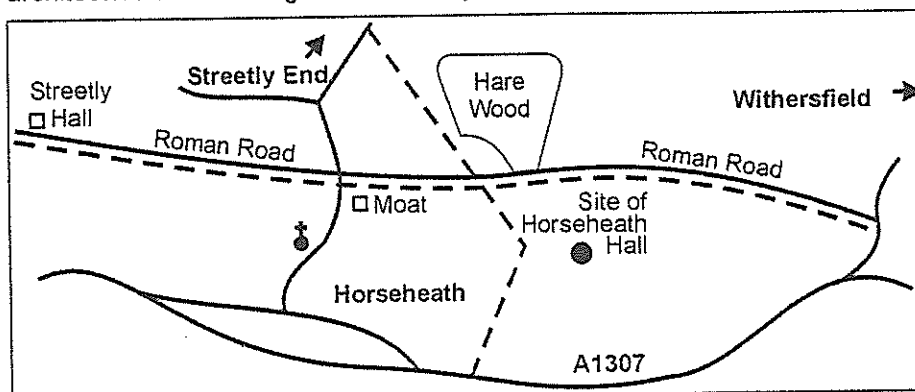
Newsletter 12, February 2004

Part 1

With a Sweet Prospect

When you next walk along the Roman Road from Horseheath towards Withersfield, take a small diversion and enjoy the sweet prospect, admired by the 17th century diarist, John Evelyn. As you draw level with Hare Wood you will find a public footpath crossing the Roman Road. Downhill to the left is the hamlet of Streetly End; but take the right-hand path and head uphill towards the distinctive Cedar of Lebanon tree. At the highest point! as the footpath curves round and heads off to the A1307, stop and take in the lovely view towards Horseheath village and across the rolling countryside. You are now standing in front of the site of Horseheath Hall and you have just come along all that remains of its carriage drive.

In 1663 William, 3rd Lord Alington, commissioned the gentleman-architect, Roger Pratt, to build a new house to replace the Hall (visited nearly a century earlier by Elizabeth I) which may have been dilapidated and would probably have seemed rather old-fashioned by then. Pratt had spent the Civil War years travelling on the Continent to avoid the storm, and had come back with lots of new ideas, many inspired by the classical architecture of ancient Greece and Rome, that appealed to a prosperous gentry in the more stable times following the Restoration of Charles II. Horseheath Hall, which was one of only five houses known to have been designed by Pratt (none survive in their original form), was at the forefront of English Country House architecture and the height of modernity.



The site chosen by Pratt for the Hall was in the middle of the mediaeval deer park, separated from the village and elevated above the surrounding landscape - it was certainly intended to make something of a statement. The house was built of red brick with white Ketton stonework. It was symmetrical in design with a central pediment containing

the Alington coat-of-arms and of a double-pile, construction i.e. two rooms deep, as opposed to the conventional single room depth of mediaeval and Tudor houses, for Pratt considered that this made the house warmer in winter and cooler in summer. However, perhaps his most influential innovation was to relegate the domestic offices and servants to a semi-basement, thus creating the divide between downstairs, and upstairs, which we now consider so characteristic of country house life. This arrangement allowed the hall, which had previously been a communal space for all the household (particularly for meals), to become

an impressive entrance. The slated roof sloped to a parapet with a stone balustrade and had an octagonal cupola, possibly used as a sort of summer house for taking tea and admiring the view, which was topped by a large copper ball brought back by an Alington ancestor from the Siege of Boulogne in 1544.

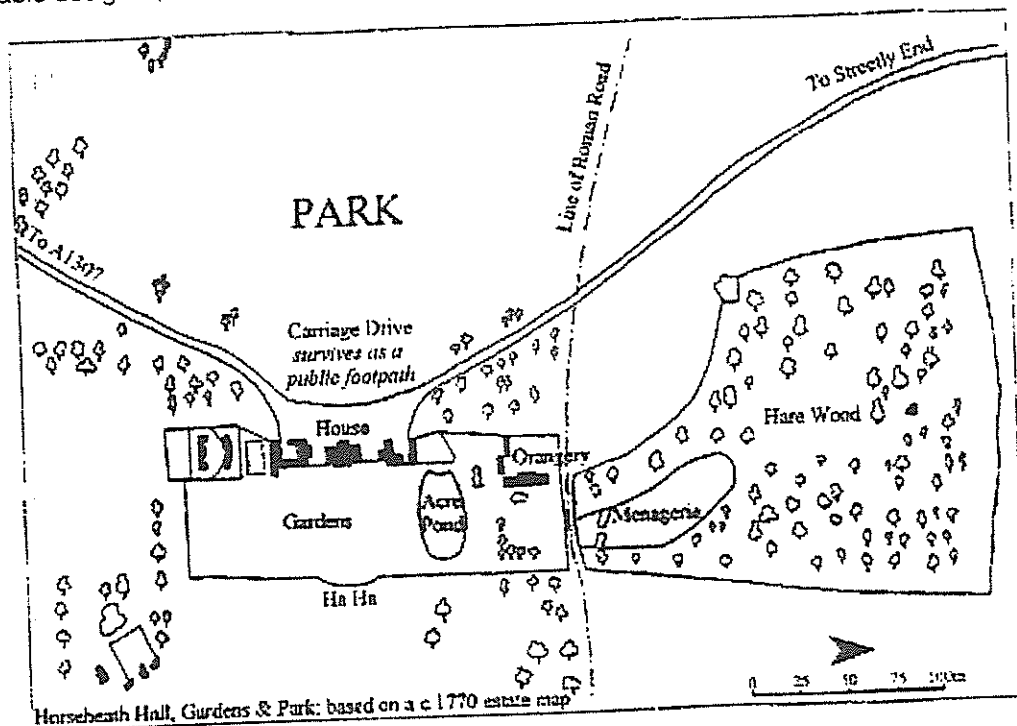
Pratt also seems to have laid out the gardens. Recent archaeology has revealed enclosed compartments or walled gardens which are typical of the 17th century. These would probably have had gravel paths surrounding grass plots with trained fruit trees (Pratt ordered plums, pears, peaches, nectarines, apricots and figs) and flower beds along the walls. There would have been a kitchen garden and orchard and a bowling green for some leisurely recreation. The surrounding park may well have been planted in a similarly formal manner, as Evelyn, who visited the Hall in 1670, commended at least one stately avenue of trees as well as the sweet prospect, although he found the water defective! The Alingtons did not enjoy their new house and gardens for long, William died in 1670, commended at least one stately avenue of trees as well as the sweet prospect, although he found the water defective! The Alingtons did not enjoy their new house and gardens for long, William died in 1684 leaving his young son, Giles as heir. The estate was then initially leased to John Bromley, a sugar planter from Barbados, and subsequently sold to him following the death of Giles in 1691, aged just 11. The Alington family had lived in Horseheath for some 300 years so this marked the end of an era.

The Rise and Fall of Horseheath Hall by Janet Morris

Newsletter 13, May 2004

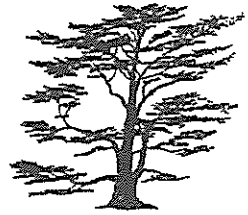
Part 2 'Levelling to the Ground'

From the start of their ownership, the Bromley family spent their fortune lavishly on Horseheath Hall. The most distinguished member of the family was probably Henry, grandson of the John who had bought the Hall at the end of the 17th century. He succeeded to the estate in 1718, served as both MP for the county and Lord Lieutenant and was created 1st Baron Montfort by George II in 1741. About 1733, Henry employed the very fashionable designer, William Kent, to remodel the interior of the house along with the gardens and park.



Henry, himself, was something of an art connoisseur. He collected romantic landscape paintings like those of Claude Lorraine and it was this style, with its many classical allusions, that Kent was trying to recreate with his garden designs. Formal avenues of trees were felled or converted to picturesque 'clumps' and it was probably at this time that the old walled gardens to the east of the house were replaced by lawn divided more naturally from the park (and the grazing deer and cattle) by a ha-ha. Kent introduced statuary and large potted plants to the gardens and had an oval pond constructed, rather a trademark of his. This was known

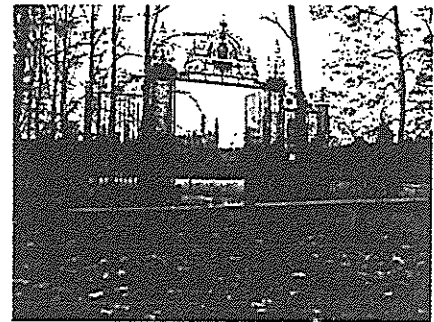
as the Acre Pond, from its size, and had a grotto. A particularly favourite tree was the Cedar of Lebanon - an exotic species in the 18th century - and its nice to think that the two that remain on the site today may well have been planted by him. Henry put in a new carriage drive, the line of which survives today as the public footpath, and donated a pair of gates to Trinity College (which can still be seen at the Backs entrance), so these may have formed part or be the result of the general landscaping scheme as well.



Unfortunately, Henry not only liked to spend his money extravagantly but he also enjoyed gambling as well. Gradually, parts of the Horseheath estate were sold off to settle his debts; but this was seemingly not sufficient for, on New Year's Day 1755, he committed suicide. His friend, the antiquary William Cole, described him as a man of integrity and honour. Henry was succeeded by his son, Thomas, a young man who also lived well above his means and who, too, liked to gamble. He gave a renowned Ball each year at Horseheath to which some 300 people were invited and he greatly enjoyed his role as colonel in the Cambridgeshire Militia. He continued with improvements to the Hall adding an orangery, which cost £1,300 and contained 150 orange trees costing one guinea each, and building a menagerie in Hare Wood for exotic birds and, reputedly, monkeys. However, this degree of spending could not be sustained. He borrowed heavily and mortgaged the estate until he inevitably ran out of credit.

In 1775, the contents of the wine cellar, plants and shrubs, the potted plants and orange trees, the caged birds, a pack of hounds and kitchen equipment were all offered for sale. The Hall and estate were advertised, first for let but then for sale as well. Failing a buyer for the whole, the next to go were the fittings of the Hall - ornamental stonework, marble chimney-pieces, floorboards and doors - along with iron gates, railings, paving and statuary from the garden and park. In 1783, Henry Batson eventually took over the mortgage and paid it off by selling timber from the estate. In the late 1790s, the rest of the house was sold for building materials and it was then that Charles Vancouver, undertaking a survey of agriculture in the county, noted the sad site of the Hall as it was 'levelling with the ground'.

In 1803, the Horseheath estate descended to Stanlake Batson who chose to build himself a new house, Horseheath Lodge, on the other side of the village (south of the Roman Road at Mark's Grave, now the home of Sir Arthur Marshall). He used the remaining bricks from the Hall for foundations, cellars and garden walls. Bricks and stones from the Hall had also found their way into many houses and gardens in Horseheath and surrounding villages - some can still be found there today. Apart from the gates to Trinity College, others from the sale can be seen at the nearby entrance to St John's College, and at Glebe House in Cheveley. The large copper ball, which topped the cupola on the Hall and had been brought back by a member of the Alington family from the Siege of Boulogne in 1544, is now many miles away on display inside the church at Naseby in Northamptonshire.



Trinity College back gate



St John's College side back gate

The old park land was turned into farmland and is now part of the Streetly Hall estate. The actual site of the house and garden is a wildlife refuge and is not accessible to the public. However, you can stand on the public footpath in front of what was once the main entrance to Horseheath Hall and, as you stop and admire the view, perhaps, just perhaps, you may imagine you can smell orange blossom in the air and hear the ghostly rumble of carriages as they approach from Streetly End and cross the Roman Road bringing laughing revellers to Lord Montfort's famous Ball!

Further reading

- Wayne Cockroft "Horseheath Hall, Cambridgeshire - a 'lost' garden landscape" *Patterns of the Past* P Pattison, D Field, S Ainsworth (eds) Oxbow 1999
- W M Palmer *William Cole of Milton*, Galloway & Porter, Cambridge 1935
- Catherine E Parsons 'Horseheath Hall and its owners' *Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society*, XLI 1948 pp1-50
- Zillah Dovey *An Elizabethan Progress: The Queen's Journey into East Anglia 1578* Alan Sutton, Stroud 1996