

Leicestershire is poor in its inheritance of country house collections, and that relative poverty was worsened at the end of September 1998 when Sotheby's auctioned most of the contents of Noseley Hall. The sale saw the dispersal of a significant collection of works of art intimately associated with the reconstruction of the Hall and its parkland during the period 1725- 1750.

The Demise of Noseley Hall

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Sir Arthur Hesilrige, 7th Baronet, (c.1698-1763) grew up at the family's mansion on Marefair in Northampton and always maintained close connections with that town. He inherited the estates in 1721 and subsequently went on a Grand Tour to Rome, Naples, Florence, Padua and Venice in 1723-4, accompanied by Daniel Pain of Welford and Mr. Cave of Stanford Hall. On the way he collected and commissioned paintings and sculpture which were to form

the nucleus of the decoration scheme for Noseley Hall, which he began rebuilding soon after his return to England.

The south side of the complex of buildings was either built or rebuilt at this time, and given a symmetrical facade of 11 bays with a three-bay pedimented centrepiece and giant pilasters extending the height of the two floors. The building is of brick, probably originally rendered to look like stone.



The central entrance led into the Great Hall, with a ceiling painting of the Planetary Cycle, based on that by Pietro da Cortona in the Pitti Palace in Florence. On either side of the hall were parlours, one of them the dining room, and it was in these rooms that Sir Arthur's Paintings were brought together. They fall into three groups: Italian landscapes from his Grand tour, and portraits of himself, his family and friends. There are also two very large paintings of his racehorse "Ring Tail".

The Italian landscapes were mainly produced by the studio of Giovanni Paolo Pannini, and are evocative capriccios of colourful figures set against a background of Roman ruins, They were probably hung in the dining room, lending it both colour and culture.

The portraits probably hung in the adjacent parlours, and include one of Sir Arthur himself by Mercier (1738) and his wife Hannah Sturges, whose origins were apparently humble,

but who was admired equally for her beauty and her wisdom. The other portraits from this period are a record of Sir Arthur's circle of friends. There is Sir Thomas Samwell MP, of Upton House, Northampton, who probably introduced the artist Philip Mercier to the Hesilrige in the first place. Samwell was rebuilding Upton House at about the time that Sir Arthur was working on Noseley. The second portrait is of his son, also Thomas Samwell.

Smith Fleetwood JP, of Aldwincle, was another contemporary squire and friend of Sir Arthur, as was William Wilmer of Sywell (c1698-1744).

All these portraits were painted by Mercier in or about 1738, while Timothy Rogers, the Hesilrige family lawyer and man of business in Northampton, another member of the circle, was painted by Enoch Seeman in 1736. Sir Arthur also had a portrait of Captain Daniel Pain, who had accompanied him to Rome and was painted there by Francesco Trevisani.

Two large paintings of the Galloway Mare "Ring Tail" remained from four which were put up in 1740. They formed part of the decorative scheme of the Great Hall, fitting perfectly into the panels of relief decoration at either end of the room. Perhaps these show a coarser side to the 7th Baronet's character, for they celebrate the fact that he bought the horse for fifty shillings from a Northumberland corn miller, and she went on to win 21 races in succession. Ring Tail was an ancestress of Bob Booty, and therefore figures in the pedigree of most modern race horses.

The Great Hall was thus from the outset home to a varied collection of items. There were originally brackets around the walls supporting busts of ancient and modern worthies. One of these, showing a Roman emperor, survived to be auctioned, as did a table with a wonderful Scagliola top, commissioned by the 7th Baronet on his visit to Italy - probably from Don Enrico Hugford of Vallombrosa near Florence. Some fine tables also survived from the period about 1740, and a pair of beautiful giltwood mirrors.

Adjacent to the Hall is the fine Collegiate Chapel of St. Mary, which was also altered as part of the 7th Baronet's improvements to the estate. A painting of Moses holding the tablets is the only survival from his scheme, all the elements of which were removed from the chapel in 1894, when it was remodelled more closely to its Medieval appearance.

A plan now in the Record Office in Wigston shows the ambitious landscaping scheme for the gardens which paralleled the developments in the house. This shows an extensive pattern of tree-lined avenues radiating from the house. Earthwork evidence still visible suggests that much of this scheme was actually implemented. Close to the house was a long terrace walkway, and beyond it an ornamental 'canal' to float the view of the horizon. Sir Arthur's fourth son Charles who inherited this splendid estate was a man of lavish tastes who soon squandered his magnificent inheritance. He fled to Boulogne at the end of his life to escape his creditors, and died there penniless.

The Hall was left empty, but in 1797 it was visited by John Nichols and John Tailby, and they made a detailed list of the contents room by room. This tells us, for example, that the portrait of Peter the Great was in the Great Hall, in addition to the horse paintings and coats of arms.

The Green Parlour had the portraits of Sir Arthur and his circle of friends, while the Dining Room had the Pannini Capriccios, the plan of the estate, and portraits of George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham, and Henry Rich, 1st Earl of Holland.

The list continues, detailing pictures in the Passage Gallery, Drawing Room, Yellow room, Bedrooms and even in the garrets, where we are told 'several paintings are put by amongst the lumber'. Such details are rare for Leicestershire and would probably repay further research.

Many other treasures were removed from Noseley as a result of the sale, but it seems to me that this part of the collection, reflecting in an intimate way the tastes and interests of the 1730s and 1740s, is the greatest loss of what was a sad weekend for Leicestershire's cultural history.

References:

Nichols, John *The History And Antiquities of the County of Leicester*, Vol 2 Part 2 London, 1798.

Sothebys Noseley Hall, Leicestershire London, 1998.