

ROMANCE AND DESTRUCTION

BY RICHARD THOMAS

Haddon Hall, two miles South West of Bakewell, Derbyshire, is described by Simon Jenkins in his book 'England's Thousand Best Houses', as 'the most perfect English house to survive from the Middle Ages. It has none of Hardwick's promiscuity or Chatsworth's bombast. From the 15th Century to today, this cluster of warm stone buildings has lain in its valley, protected by a curtain wall and surrounding forest'.

This hall must have inspired David Simpson to create his own version of Haddon when he realised the potential of the natural setting of Oak Beck and the small plateau arising on its North bank. This site was vacated in 1897 by Harrogate Golf Club on their abandonment of the site. They had laid out their course in 1892 but decided to move out only 5 years later.

The buildings created on the Duchy Estate by the development of the area before the Great War, were initially of a fairly standard Victorian villa type, being stone and either detached or semi-detached or, occasionally, terraced. As the building advanced from East to West the houses became much more orientated towards the 'Arts and Crafts' style. There are many lovely examples of this across or adjacent to the Duchy, including the splendid tile-hung properties in Springfield Avenue.

Mr Simpson, however, clearly saw something in the romantic appearance of Haddon which made him want to emulate the Middle Ages and to make use of the castle potential of the plateau above Oak Beck. He also created his own 'forest' by an intensive tree planting operation.

I can recall the delightful interior with its wonderful woodwork and majestic fireplaces, as well as the splendid 3 bay South façade, which exactly matched the one at Haddon. The battlements around the roof were a complete replica of those still at Haddon.

He seems to have had an interest in this style of architecture, as amongst his building projects was the Westminster Arcade in Parliament Street, whose façade had distinct similarities with his grand fireplace in the main room of his castle.

He is described in Harrogate Council's recent History of Grove Road Cemetery, as being 'widely loved for his genial unflappability and respected for his business acumen'.

The wonderful future intended for the house was just part of his intentions, as he also envisaged a continuation of the golf club idea, which resulted in the building of Oakdale Golf Club just before the Great War.

The war caused dislocation to many plans and he vacated the house in 1916 when it became the Junior School for Harrogate Ladies' College. They extended it considerably during their long years of occupation. These extensions were described to the Planning Enquiry for its demolition in 1977, as 'having little architectural merit' and 'could be demolished without affecting the character of the main building or its setting'. By the time the house was officially inspected on 7th February 1977 the roof of the original house had had the lead removed and water was freely entering the building. Internally there had been many acts of vandalism and nearly all useable fittings eg. doorsets, plumbing and electrical fittings had been removed. Much of the high quality joinery had warped or lost its finish and a number of areas of plaster ceiling had collapsed.

The last private owner of the house had abandoned it, despite having spent considerable time and money reclaiming it from its long school use. He had held a splendid 'house warming' party, complete with a band providing music in the Great Hall and a Mediaeval style buffet laid out on the Billiard table with a boar's head with an apple stuffed in its mouth, suckling pig and a whole Sirloin of beef.

He also changed the name of the house from the simplicity of 'Oakdale' to 'Oakdale Manor'.

Dowsett Engineering submitted an application for Listed Building Consent to demolish the building on 20th December 1976. The application was 'called in' by the Secretary of State, whose Inspector authorised the demolition. The Inspector was clearly not a romantic and unkindly described the house as pretentious and over-bearing.

My recollections of the place were of its romantic appearance amidst its woodland setting, with its turreted tower fully in view from Kent Road, arising from surrounding trees.

David Simpson died on 15th January 1931 and so did not live to see the fate of his creation. He did, however, have a third Mayoralty (1922-1924) during which he was awarded the Freedom of the Borough.

Harrogate never had a Castle but the valley of Oak Beck has had two. One being built by John of Gaunt in Havarah Park and the other being 'Oakdale' itself.

There are still a few portions of John of Gaunt's remaining above the ground but of 'Oakdale' nothing remains except the majestic bridge needed to cross from Kent Road to the plateau and which form the entrance access to the 'Manor'.

The magnificent materials used to construct 'Oakdale' have not been wasted as I am aware of the destination of several loads of material during the demolition. The fireplace went to Hull.

A lasting reminder of the treasure we have lost is the painting of 'Oakdale' depicted from the East in its lovely woodland setting, adjacent to the golf course at Oakdale and now in the possession of the Club, which Mr Simpson had spent considerable time and effort creating just prior to the Great War.

Richard Thomas