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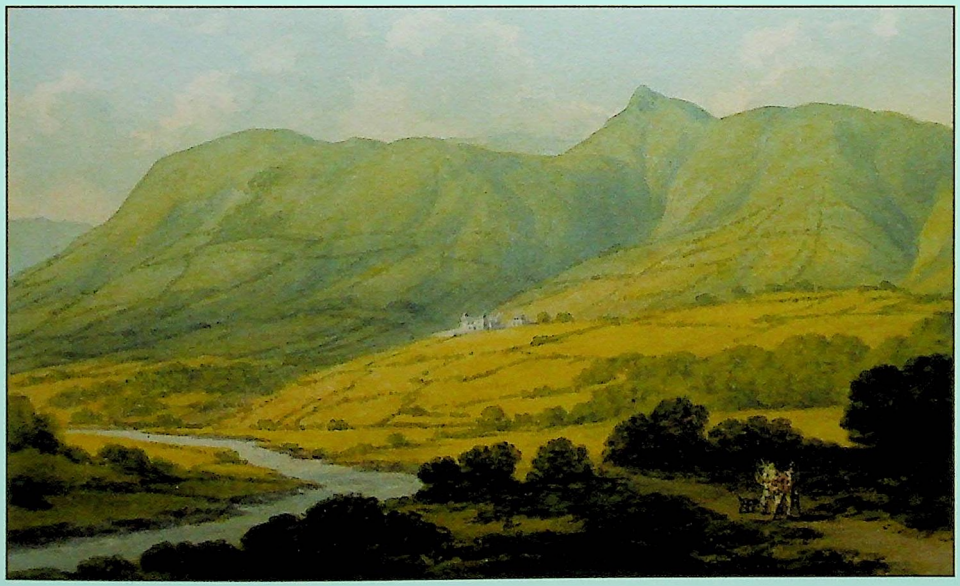
THE CARMARTHENSHIRE ANTIQUARY

THE TRANSACTIONS OF THE CARMARTHENSHIRE ANTIQUARIAN SOCIETY
TRAFODION CYMDEITHAS HYNAFIAETHAU SIR GAERFYRDDIN



Acting Editor
HEATHER JAMES, B.A., F.S.A.

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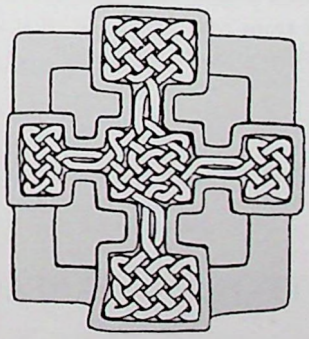

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CONTENTS

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS 4

Archaeological discoveries in Carmarthenshire 2011-2016 5
MARION SHINER, B.A., M.A.

Politics, Patronage and the Abuse of Power: The Gentry and 24
the Court of Star Chamber in Early Modern Carmarthenshire
ROGER TURVEY, B.A., Ph.D., P.G.C.E., F.R.Hist.S., F.S.A., F.C.I.L.A.

Piode Fawr 33
EURIG DAVIES, M.A.

Griffith Jones of Llanddowror: the inspirational eighteenth century 52
Welsh religious, education , and social leader
PETER STOPP, B.Sc., M.A., P.G.C.E.

'Villains and perjured whores': abuse, violence and intimidation in Georgian Carmarthen. 68
WILLIAM STRANGE, M.A. (Cantab), D. Phil (Oxon)

Lead mining, lead smelting and the Cawdor estate to 1823: 76
Speculations, Suppositions and Iniquity
JOHN DAVIES, B.A., Ph.D.

Thomas Hornor a 'Dandy and a Humbug' at Middleton Hall 88
SARA FOX, B.A., M.B.A., M.A.

The Collections of Carmarthen's Guildhall 106
ANN DORSETT

The Customs at Carmarthen, 1828-1835 111
MARTIN CONNOP PRICE, Ph.D.

A Jewish family in early nineteenth century Carmarthen 134
EDNA DALE-JONES, B.A.

'A Monstrous Occurrence': the life and death of Sarah Jacob, ... 148
the 'Fasting Girl' of Pencader, Carmarthenshire
STEVE DUBÉ

James Griffiths MP and the Parliament for Wales Campaign 158
J. GRAHAM JONES, B.A., M.A., Ph.D., D.A.A., Dip. Lib. (Wales), A.L.A., F.R.Hist.S.

SHORTER ARTICLES AND NOTES

Recent Work on the Carmarthenshire Antiquarian Society's Book
Collection at Carmarthenshire County Museum, Abergwili — JILL DAVIES, B.A. 171
Some place-names of Carmarthenshire — DAVID THORNE B.A., M.A., PhD. 172
Antiquarian Field Excursion – 12-16 September, 2016 — WYNNE JONES 174

BOOK REVIEWS 177

REPORTS/ACCOUNTS/PROGRAMME 2016/OFFICERS 181

Thomas Hornor a 'Dandy and a Humbug' at Middleton Hall

Sara Fox

I first became aware of the surveyor, artist and panoramist Thomas Hornor, when on a placement at The National Botanic Garden of Wales in April 2012 as part of an MA on Landscape Management and Environmental Archaeology at The University of Wales Trinity Saint David. The Garden was putting in a bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund at the time, which has since been successful, based on the restoration of the Regency landscape created by Sir William Paxton at the end of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Hornor made a beautiful album of images of Middleton Hall for Paxton in 1815 when this highly designed landscape was at its peak, which included a commentary, watercolour scenes and a bird's-eye view of the park.

Unfortunately, a documentary archive for the Middleton Hall estate does not exist, therefore it is Hornor's images alone which constitute the key visual evidence for how the Park and gardens would have looked after 25 years of development by its most enthusiastic owner. However, there is a detailed contemporary description by the Harcourt family published two years earlier in 1813: 'The Memoirs of the Harcourt family; a tale for young ladies'[1] describing the afternoon's visit to Middleton Hall and a tour of the park. which supports the Hornor watercolours and his accompanying narrative.

There has been a significant amount of academic interest in Thomas Hornor including Jenkins (1971), Hyde (1976, 1977) and Otto (2011). Until now however, little has been written regarding his work at Middleton Hall, largely because the album of watercolours he created for the estate has remained in private hands. The albums he created for a cluster of clients in the Neath Valley and Vale of Glamorgan between 1815 and 1820 have drawn the interest of local historians in South Wales because they were gifted to, or bought by local record offices and museums and are therefore in the public domain. Yet, it his astounding achievements in London, that took place after his Welsh period, which have attracted the most attention, particularly in studies of panoramists.

On the 20th of September 1814, Thomas Hornor wrote to Sir William Paxton of Middleton Hall, Carmarthenshire to explain that he had been delayed with a commission at Lord Jersey's estate in Briton Ferry, but would be taking up his 'kind invitation' to come to Middleton Hall when convenient to Sir William. That spring Hornor had placed advertisements in the *Cambrian* newspaper, styling himself as a 'Pictural Delineator of Estates'. Paxton with his interest in new technologies was naturally intrigued by Hornor's claim to have invented a scientific method of surveying estates to create maps that were both accurate but had aesthetic, or as he termed it 'Pictural' qualities.

Comparative analysis of the Hornor album and the Harcourt extract makes it possible to assess the development of landscape phases during Paxton's ownership from around 1790 to 1815 and also to test the veracity or realism of Hornor's Middleton images, which in the past have been in some doubt. Was his album intended as a Reptonian 'Red Book' with 'before and after' images, or was it a true picture of what was already in existence in the landscape?

Hornor published an interesting pamphlet in 1813 entitled *Description of an Improved Method of Delineating estates: with a Sketch of the Progress of Landscape Gardening in England and Opinions on the Picturesque Effects Attempted in Rural Ornament* which was a plea for a practical

interpretation of the picturesque as well as a thinly disguised sales pitch for his services as surveyor and landscape gardener. Fortuitously the designed landscape at Middleton Hall chimed perfectly with his own ideas; it is easy to see how he might have charmed Sir William and induced him to pay for a full album as well as the aerial plan, which appeared to have been Hornor's original commission.

Amongst the other South Walian landowners who are thought to have obtained Hornor's services in reponse to his advertisements, were Lord Jersey at Vernon House, Charles Tennant in Cadoxton, John Llewellyn at Ynysygerwyn, John Edwards at Rheola and William Williams at Aberpergwm. In total, Hornor made at least 10 albums and 300-400 watercolour drawings in Glamorgan, an area which was then largely unspoilt by industry.[2]

The Neath estuary had already attracted John Warwick Smith and Turner amongst other artists and 'if Hornor lacked their concentrated vision, there were compensations in his resourcefulness and a fine feeling for the spaciousness of wood and water.'[3] Hornor's narratives for the watercolours with their 'immaculate copperplate', are occasionally clichéd or sentimental but they are also spirited and imaginative. They are not written with the 'cloying sweetness' of the prose in Humphry Repton's Red Books for example.[4]

It is salutary to note the sheer effort involved in the production of these albums over a period of five years from 1815-1820 'each one virtually a large illuminated manuscript... the descriptive pages and the exquisite paintings of scenery are all in Hornor's own hand'.[5] Hornor's mode of working was probably the same as most travelling artists. In that he would sketch on site and finish the watercolours back in his London studio, which would explain his 'occasional topographical absurdities'. Despite these visual anomalies, nearly all of his 'drawings are pleasing to look at'.[6]

Hornor described in his advertisements what form his 'delineation' method took:

> *It combines the advantages of a Common Map with those of a landscape, representing the estate itself but also the adjoining country in a panoramic perspective.*[7]

He was creating an accurate representation of an estate and its bounds, but more than this it was 'pictural', a piece of art, not just a 'common' map. Hornor may have borrowed the terms 'pictural' and 'picturalized' from the vocabulary of contemporary landscape gardeners. William Marshall, a landscape gardener who also wrote three books about the craft, used the term, 'Picturable Eyeful'.[8]

Hornor's album for Middleton Hall was completed in 1815, when Sir William Paxton's improvements to the estate had ceased and the plantations were maturing. 1815 marked the end of the wars between Britain and France and was also the year after Austen's *Mansfield Park* was published, which famously satirised the fashion for landowners to make over their estates in the picturesque style.

SURVEYOR AND SHOWMAN

Thomas Hornor is now forgotten 'but in his day he was a sensation'. In the 1820s his many 'extraordinary exploits' made him notorious. He was a land surveyor, landscape gardener, an accomplished artist, a highly ingenious inventor, a visionary and above all, a showman. He combined all these skills and gifts, attracted the attention of the media as no other land surveyor ever has. He was hailed as a genius until he ran away to America to escape his debts which ultimately totalled £60,000 and he was characterised by one scathing commentator in 1863 as a 'compound of Barnum and Nash – as great a dandy as the one, and as great a humbug as the other.'[9]

Thomas Hornor was born in Hull in 1785. His father was a grocer and a Quaker. The young Thomas was already active in Manchester early 1800s surveying the property of the Manchester Grammar School. By 1807 he was living in Kentish town when he submitted a successful bid to survey the parish of Clerkenwell. A list of 260 of London's maps describes this survey as one of the most remarkable.[10]

Hornor developed a new method of producing plans for estates, which he called 'panoramic chorometry'. To advertise this technique, he had small examples of this work printed which blended 'the Picture with the Plan'. These plans are impressively detailed and give 'an impression of fastidious accuracy' but in the case of the Clerkenwell survey it is 'a decidedly strange map. Over a large area of the parish a cloud casts a shadow,' and 'the compass direction consists of an avenging angel swooping through the cloud with a spear.'[11]

THE HORNOR MANIFESTO

Thomas Hornor, responding to the fashion for Picturesque landscaping, naturally had his own opinions on the subject and in 1813 published them in the pamphlet noted above entitled 'Description of an Improved Method of Delineating

Estates, with a Sketch of the Progress of Landscape Gardening in England.' This booklet purports to be an 'apologia' for the picturesque but it acts in the main as an advertisement for the package of survey and landscaping he could offer to estate owners.[12] It has been described as a 'little masterpiece... that has inexplicably fallen through the Eng Lit. net that caught *The Compleat Angler;* it is 'full of erudition, wit and that rarest of gifts a sensitive feeling for words, a masterly history of landscape-gardening'.[13]

Hornor sets out his argument in favour of maps with the qualities of pictures. He maintains that art and map making have diverged to the detriment of the latter: He says that the art of land surveying has remained stationary for a long period and that the arts of surveying and landscape painting, which seem to have been united in former days, are now distinct.[14] He asserts that he can draw a precise plan that will also be an interesting picture of an estate, where the landscape is shown in its 'natural colours' as if it were a photo (before the invention of photography) taken from a high point above the property using something similar to a camera obscura. A camera obscura can be housed in a building or be a portable darkened box with a convex lens or aperture for projecting the image of an external object on to a screen inside, effectively a forerunner of the modern camera. He claimed 'to have devised a contraption that could combine accuracy with beauty... not a map but a pictorial representation'[15] He doesn't reveal the exact nature of this instrument but in the 'Prospect of the Vale of Neath from the summit of Bow Main' (Bwa Maen) from one of the Glamorgan albums, he shows himself projecting an image onto a sheet with a telescopic type device, to the astonishment of a young lady. He prides himself on the 'accuracy' of his technique, almost as if he is refuting any potential detractors:

> *'The primary requisite in all plans of estates is accuracy and in making this improvement, I have ever paid a scrupulous regard to it... if my pictural delineations ...were deficient in that requisite, they ought not to stand in competition with the naked and unadorned performances executed in the old style.'*[16]

He states that it is possible to achieve 'mathematical precision' with the 'fidelity of a mirror'[17] as well as an 'interesting picture' from his methods.[18] He suggests that his plans could be used to good effect when selling an estate, showing it in its full beauty. It is really the old adage he is trying to express here, that a picture speaks a thousand words. The following lines when he describes what his maps can show, could almost be a description of Middleton Hall 'The tall full-grown woods, the sweeping lawns, the noble expanse of water, the rich variety of arable and pasture, the wide range of prospect'.

Hornor claims to be able to show tiny features such as cottages, waterfalls, and a tower, in detail but also in proportion to the picture as a whole. Large-scale paintings with finely observed detail have fascinated their viewers throughout the history of art. He was probably well aware that his images pandered to this interest. Yet another use he suggests for his 'pictural' surveys is that they will enable the landowner to best see where improvements or changes might be made to the landscape, for example 'opening roads, erecting buildings' in the way that an ordinary map cannot. Another consideration was the saving of 'expence' 'particularly in planting' his surveys would show where the most effective plantings could be made.[19]

To the argument that 'Pictorial ornament was out of place in a surveyor's plan',[20] Hornor explains that he attempts to add 'interest and beauty' to a plan 'which accords with the modern taste for landscape gardening'. He poses a rhetorical question. Are his plans too picturesque? He answers this with 'then nature is at fault for they are painted after nature.'[21]

Hornor next reverts back to his sales pitch to explain that the albums he produces can be taken by the landowner to 'town' or even abroad in the winter where they can 'preserve the idea of his rural retirement vivid and correct'.[22] For the landed proprietor who loves his rural estate they 'preserve the most cherished affections'[23] Hornor compares his landscape drawings to 'a picture of a loved one'. It is certainly true that many estate owners including Sir William Paxton genuinely did love their rural retreats, which often represented the fruit of all their labours. His albums were the perfect luxury item for the landed proprietor who had everything.

Hornor now moves on to the subject of landscape gardening proper. He is aware that 'In touching upon the subject of Landscape Gardening... that I shall excite a multitude of perplexing feelings in the breasts of many landed proprietors.'[24] He then goes on to talk about the landscaping controversy provoked in the 1780s and 1790s. He points out that no-one wants to be seen to 'violate the principles of good taste in rural ornament'. This is where he positions himself as the knowledgeable guide, assisting landowners through the pitfalls of landscape improvement.[25]

Hornor is very taken with the values of the picturesque movement 'every place and every scene worth observing

must have something of the sublime, the beautiful or the picturesque'.[26] He admires 'variety and intricacy' in the landscape and feels that it is the landscape gardener's role to 'heighten' the 'roughness which constitutes the Picturesque'.[27] He does not join in the fashionable criticism of 'Brown and his followers' feeling that they merely applied their rules too rigidly 'a clump, a belt and a piece of water there must be.'

On the other hand, he found it 'preposterous' that landowners when laying out their grounds in the Picturesque style should plant trees and build ruins, so that in time their land might imitate a painting by Claude 'So far inconsistent is the notion of composing a landscape painting, with that of composing a landscape.' The Picturesque formula must not be adopted wholesale but landowners 'may suffer certain places to remain as nature left them. Here and there a rough spot may be endured'.[28]

By the time of the publication in 1809 of William Combe's satirical poem *The Tour of Doctor Syntax in search of the Picturesque*, the backlash against the movement had well and truly begun. It set the precedent which enabled Hornor to question the most ludicrous precepts of the picturesque. The days of a 'lawn' running up to the walls of the house were numbered when Hornor was writing this, but 'near the house picturesque beauty must be sacrificed to neatness; but to what extent will ever be a matter of dispute among improvers' He makes the pragmatic mental leap, recognising that much picturesque theory is by definition a fantasy and that 'elegance' is more in keeping with the grounds immediately surrounding a house. It would be ridiculous to introduce 'rough' ground to this area which is domestic and therefore 'real', 'there can be no such thing as artificial picturesque in real landscape'.[29]

The chief problem perceived with a manufactured picturesque landscape was its lack of authenticity which Hornor highlights here:

> *though we allow that a broken rock, down the sides of which pours a cascade in rude and irregular manner is strongly imbued with this character; yet no sooner are we told that the waters are supplied by pipes to a cistern on the summit than we feel vexed at the illusion and no longer dignify the scene with the epithet of picturesque*[30]

He chose to remain silent on the artificial nature of water management at Middleton Hall two years later. However, he would have been pleased to see that the picturesque aspect of the estate remained on its periphery 'The picturesque character which an estate may possess may still be preserved in its proper region; that is at a distance from the mansion; the sequestered dingle, with here and there a venerable cottage, inhabited by peasants but the surrounds of the house should be as neatly dressed as its inhabitants.'[31]

Hornor advised that gentlemen who wish to improve their estates in the picturesque manner but were not connoisseurs of French and Italian art could soften the banks of their 'serpentine' in order to make it appear more like a natural river. They should plant trees in groups rather than clumps and in laying out walks avoid geometrical patterns. Improvers should 'adorn and embellish' with an eye to what is already there in the landscape.[32]

Hornor reminds the reader that a landscape garden must have some form of cultivation to make it enjoyable to walk in 'to walk along the banks of a stream judiciously adorned and shaded at intervals by trees, forms such an agreeable recreation. A garden is not just for looking at, but also for being in'.[33] It was also an experience as well as a picture 'Walking round a garden or driving round a park, whether one's own or somebody else's, loomed large in the ample leisure time of people in polite society.'[34]

An estate can be ornamented 'requisite in the demesne of a gentleman' whilst preserving its character; 'no wanton changes should be made'.[35] He conceded that minor embellishments such as a hermitage may be allowed and rustic chairs in a rural estate are 'perfectly in character because it reminds us that we are in the country where persons of that class are always at hand to be employed in constructing such simple ornaments'.[36]

He warns against making oneself ridiculous and could almost be speaking to Paxton here 'Men who have long been engaged in active pursuits, will in laying out their grounds, be desirous of indulging the peculiar fancies which have originated in their habits of life'. He reassures with the example of a retired navy man who erects a few naval ornaments around his estate who 'does not commit so glaring an absurdity' as the man who transports tons of rocks for an 'improver to build them into a picturesque pile'. He goes on to say that a merchant who 'studs his garden ground with statues to commerce' attracts approval rather than derision, for his honesty about his career.[37]

Hornor believed that there can be no one template for the laying out of grounds. Improvers 'ought to assist than to alter nature, always adapting their designs to the 'genius loci.' There should not be an overabundance of the picturesque as 'artificial variety and intricacy is most tiresome'.[38]

Like Repton, Hornor hoped to have his landscaping services retained after the plan and album of watercolours

had been created. However, there is no evidence to show that this ever happened; most estate owners just wanted one of his pretty books as a marketing device or memento. Hornor's albums like so many of Repton's were a failure in that they did not appear to result in landscaping commissions. Perhaps the real problem was that Repton and Hornor arrived at these estates at a time when the landscape in them had already been substantially altered in the mid to late 18th century and were maturing nicely from a Brownian smoothness to a roughened maturity that suited the prevailing picturesque aesthetic.

HORNOR'S WELSH PERIOD

Armed with his mysterious surveying device, Hornor set his sights on the landowning classes in south Wales, some of them newly rich through commerce and industry. In 1814 he had apparently received commissions in Wales and in April of that year started advertising in the South Wales newspapers for further work. He was successful in attracting commissions from the vales of Taff and Neath. Four out of the six main landowners in Neath asked him to undertake 'pictural surveys' of their holdings.

Hornor first completed a plan of the Briton Ferry Estate now held at the National Library of Wales, and below this is a long panorama of the view at Briton Ferry for Lord Jersey. The huge plan measures, 144 inches by 111 inches, he was at work on this when he replied to Paxton in September 1814.

These plans showed that as well as being an, 'ingenious surveyor, Hornor was a very capable artist.' The 'sumptuous' albums of drawings which Hornor produced, used Humphry Repton's famous device of the hinged cut out which enables the viewer to see before and after views of a scene. Instead, in the Rheola album for example Hornor used this technique to show contrasts such as 'night' and 'day'.[39]

Hornor's painting of Rheola shows the family gathered outside the house for a jaunt, 'One feels that the artist knows these people; he is not their servant, he is their friend. They not only pay him, and handsomely, but also admire him and enjoy his company'.[40] Another scene shows Hornor with a party of friends, probably members of the Edwards family on Bwa Maen. In the accompanying commentary Hornor informs us, that 'it was a very windy day so he erected a screen from the weather, and set to work tracing the scene before him with the aid of a camera lucida invented by himself' but the wind scatters his humble drawings and equipment. The device in this image however does not look like a camera lucida, or a box-like portable camera obscura, but it is cylindrical like a telescope which suggests that he did indeed develop a new piece of equipment that was able to project images onto a canvas or sheet in broad daylight which would have been impossible with a camera obscura which needs darkness to function.

It is thought that Hornor produced at least nine versions of his Glamorgan album. To give an idea of the costs involved for the purchasers; for a single album, smaller than the others, 13 inches by 20 inches, with, 'exquisite little drawings measuring 4 inches by 8 inches and a panorama 62 inches long, he charged Watson Taylor Esq, M.P. 500 guineas'.[41] It has been calculated that between 1816 and 1820 Hornor was earning at least £1,000 per year. This represents approximately £82,000 annually in today's money. His unique way of mapping estates, his inventions, and perhaps most of all his charismatic personality had made him a rich man. When he returned to London, his Welsh earnings enabled him to live in style. When Hornor finally left Wales in 1820, it is possible that he had exhausted the small market of Welsh landowners with the ready cash to spend on his albums, which were after all luxury items. Or perhaps he was keen to return to the larger canvas of London to undertake a new and more ambitious project which would ultimately test his lately honed surveying skills to the limit.

'NOT SURVEYS BUT PICTURES'

The scale of his new venture was ambitious but foolhardy; using his camera lucida and telescopes, Hornor's intention was to create a 360° panorama of London taken from the top of St Paul's Cathedral. In the early 19th century panoramas were very fashionable as their 'vast individual canvasses spectacularised a moment'.[42] Hornor naturally wanted to tap into this market. When repairs were underway above the dome, he attached what can only be described as a small rickety shed from which to sketch his drawings, within the scaffolding erected by C. R. Cockerell (coincidentally the son of Samuel Pepys Cockerell, the architect commissioned by Paxton to build Middleton Hall).

A journalist visited Hornor when he was engaged in this work and was invited to look into his apparatus. Through the 'blood-red ocean of vapours' they watched the city far below. 'It was as if the world were turning at their feet, he wrote'.[43] Hornor developed a new lithographic process for

these prints of London which could be coloured 'to give the effect of highly finished drawings' but unfortunately they failed to attract much interest and were never issued.[44]

Hornor now became obsessed with a new project which would display his work on an immense scale. With the help of a financial backer, Rowland Stephenson an MP and banker, he planned to create a tourist attraction in the form of a large building with a domed roof (only the dome of St Paul's was larger) that he christened 'The Colosseum' in which he could display a giant panorama of London within the dome, to which crowds would flock to marvel at. This is the concept behind the modern planetarium.

Hornor's Great Panorama of London, covered 40,000 square feet of canvas, which was nearly one acre and took six years to complete. However, he became increasingly anxious when he realised that his technical skills were not up to the job and was forced to contract E.T. Parris, a more skilled artist, to complete the work, who found that Hornor's drawings were like 'an ill-devised puzzle, the parts of which no dexterity could fit together.'[45] Hornor's fraudulent backer eventually ran away to America to escape his debts and he himself was now in severe financial difficulty. Increasingly frantic, in January 1829, he opened the unfinished Colosseum to the public, attempting to generate an income. Queen Adelaide visited, but was greeted by Parris as Hornor had also disappeared, later resurfacing in New York. He appeared to eke out his last few years in America in reduced circumstances, having lost his persuasive charm and artistic powers and he died according to two different reports, either insane, or destitute by the roadside.

Sadly, he was belittled by his contemporaries, for example; Charles Dickens referred to him as 'not the young gentleman who ate mince-pies with his thumb, but the man of Colosseum notoriety'.[46] However, more recent commentators have appreciated his talents more fully 'At his best Hornor is as good as any of his contemporaries except Turner, Girtin, and the few who could soar; even at his poorest he is never banal, [he is] always competent and interesting'.[47]

Despite this, when Hornor's 'pictural' surveys are scrutinised 'one is puzzled, then enchanted, then doubtful. What is supposed to be relief? What is supposed to be cloud shadow? ....Hornor is really indulging in gimmickry; they are certainly not working documents.'[48] They give an impression of fastidious accuracy but 'Hornor's pictural surveys are not surveys but pictures'.[49] He was perhaps 'too ingenious, too impetuous, too much of a showman, too anxious always to satisfy the vanity of his wealthy patrons. In the story of British land surveying his must be a supreme example of misdirected genius and ambition.'[50]

'ENCHANTINGLY ROMANTIC' THE LANDSCAPE AT MIDDLETON HALL

As already noted, the only detailed visual and documentary evidence we have for the early 19th century landscape at Middleton Hall is Thomas Hornor's album and the Harcourt memoir. The latter was dedicated to Miss Caroline Paxton which suggests that the Harcourts' visit to Middleton Hall was no accident. Caroline Paxton was Sir William Paxton's youngest daughter, she later married an Irish doctor who was also a distinguished botanist called Daniel Chambers McCreight. It is tempting to speculate how close the relationship between the Harcourts and the Paxtons was. The Harcourt family had a strong interest in gardening and horticulture which stretched back to their 17th century ancestor John Evelyn.

The Harcourt memoir describes Middleton Hall twenty years after the new hall had been built and much of the park and gardens had been laid out. It is not known who the author of the memoir is, but it is thought to have been one of the children although Henry was 15, Amelia 13, Caroline 11, and Louis 9. The first Earl Harcourt died in 1777 leaving his titles to his two sons. Mrs Harcourt was the widow of the eldest son. The Colonel in the memoir is her brother-in-law who became the third Earl. Nuneham Park in Oxfordshire was one of their estates; not dissimilar to Middleton Hall, it was a white house built on a slight rise above the Thames and framed by trees, in gently rolling parkland. Capability Brown was responsible for its park which the local village was demolished to make way for. This incident was the inspiration for Goldsmith's poem *The Deserted Village.*

Hornor's Middleton Hall album which contained a narrative tour of the estate, 14 watercolour views and a larger plan of the park is much more self-contained than his other Welsh albums which were more generic and ranged across the landscape of the South Wales valleys over land which belonged to several different owners. At Middleton Hall he confines himself to the park apart from one view which is a panorama of the park and landscape beyond, taken from the hill in the east looking west towards Carmarthen.

The album was arranged as an hour long circular tour of the park starting with the westward approach to the mansion. The numbers marked on the aerial estate plan show the locations where each sketch was made. Hornor

himself describes the views he has painted as being 'taken' by him which sounds to modern ears almost as if he was taking photographs. Hornor's albums do seem to prefigure the family albums which became common after the invention of photography. His views are not just landscapes but snapshots of the family at play.

There has been some uncertainty over whether Hornor painted what he saw at Middleton Hall or whether he was painting idealised views of what Paxton could have if he were willing to pay for it; shades of Repton here. However, all of the evidence points to the fact that Hornor painted what he saw, with perhaps the exception of the bird's-eye view of the estate which would have been visualised via his mysterious invention.

The framed dimensions of the Hornor watercolours extant for Middleton Hall are as follows: a panorama measuring 112 x 48cm, 5 watercolour views all measuring 60 x 43cm, and the survey measuring 70 x 53cm. The album was slightly smaller in dimension than the other South Wales albums and contained fewer watercolours, but was not as small as the album for which Hornor received 500 guineas.

The narrative begins with a letter to Sir William Paxton where Hornor explains that whilst undertaking the 'plan' he had created some 'views which I conceived might be rendered a pleasing ancillary to the general plan'. He hopes that the owner of Middleton Hall 'may long enjoy the Elysian retreat he has created' and begs leave to present to him these watercolour scenes of the park 'as a humble homage of my high respect.' Despite this, it can be assumed that Paxton was happy to pay Hornor's going rate for the album.

'STATION 1'

The watercolour from 'station 1' is missing, the paintings were stolen in the 1980's and when the album was recovered by the family at auction not all of the original paintings were included in the sale. This first drawing was a view of the mansion from the west which is how visitors would approach from the direction of Swansea. Hornor first describes a lake which 'winds around the base of the hill on which the house is placed'.

'STATION 2'

This watercolour is the view towards the south aspect of Middleton Hall. Hornor quotes from *The Beauties of England and Wales* (1815) by Thomas Rees who describes Middleton Hall as 'perhaps the most splendid mansion

Fig. 1. *Middleton Hall from the Swansea approach (detail from station 2).*

in South Wales'. The house is 'situated on a gentle elevation in the midst of a pleasant vale, that branches off to the eastward from the Tywi... Sir William Paxton has paid great attention to the improvement of the grounds, which are ornamented by numerous and flourishing plantations.'

The old oak in the foreground of station 2 is was known oddly, given its position, as the 'Dynefor Oak' and according to Hornor 'has long been celebrated as a landmark'. He praises the venerable nature of this tree 'adorning with its majestic shade the polished lawn that surrounds it.'

The figure of a gentleman on horseback, leading another horse may be one of Sir William's sons. There is a simple iron archway with a gate, through which carriages can pass next to a kind of turnstile and a simple iron fence. Humphry Repton advised the owners of Longer Hall to install a similar decorative iron fence that separated the dressed grounds from the grazed scene similar to that around the mansion at Middleton Hall.[51]

'STATION 3'

Station 3 shows the view from the north side of the house. This 'commands' the view on which 'Nelson's Tower' (Paxton's Tower) stands, described as 'the wooded hill crowned with the Tower.'[52] A decade after Middleton Hall was built, sometime between 1805 and 1808, Paxton re-engaged Samuel Pepys Cockerell to design a tower in memory of the great naval hero Admiral Nelson. The style of the tower is gothic and appropriately military, in light of its dedicatee. As an eye-catcher in the landscape it is very successful as it can be seen for many miles in all directions. A later traveller notes the fact that although built by Paxton to commemorate Nelson, the tower is known by his name rather than his naval hero's as it still is today although mistaking this nomenclature as complimentary:

> *The imposing, castellated, triple-towered monument to Nelson, crowning a hill in Middleton Park, and looking almost as martial as the surrounding castles themselves, was erected by a former owner of the estate. Sir William Paxton, and, in an unexpected result, is a greater monument to himself, for to the country-folk it is "Paxton's Tower" rather than Nelson's.*[53]

Paxton is still remembered mistakenly by locals as a vain man who wanted his name to be perpetuated by a grandiose folly 'Contrary to popular belief Nelson's Tower was not built in a fit of pique when Paxton failed to win the *Leesiwn Fawr* nor because his offer to build a bridge over the Towy was refused. Rather it was built as the ultimate embellishment to his estate in perfect keeping with the idea of the Picturesque.'[54]

Hornor draws our attention to the 'rich distance' of the Towy valley in Station 3:

> *The sweep of sylvan scenery diversified with white cottages and bounded by the distant hills, compose a scene which the eye reposes on with delight and quits with reluctance.*

The Harcourt extract also notes these humble yet attractive dwellings 'which at various distances were seen peeping through the trees.' The house, 'situated on a gentle eminence, seemed to smile protection on the cottages'.

The Harcourts approached Middleton Hall from Llanarthney village to the north. The extract describes the landscape from this aspect 'the ground sloped gently down to a lake, fringed with trees, and inhabited by a number of beautiful swans.' The swans in the park must have been noteworthy as they appear in two of Hornor's watercolours and in 1818, George Hardinge, a JP from Breconshire, published a volume of poetry which includes a humorous poem dedicated to WP Esq entitled 'The Petition of two Swans in the lake at Middleton Hall'.

The Harcourt extract goes on to praise the scenery in general terms 'The fertility of the grounds, the well disposed plantations, and broad expanse of the lakes, excited the admiration of the party, and filled them with pleasing sensations as they approached the hall.' This drawing forth of emotions that a manmade landscape can evoke had been popularised by picturesque theory, the Harcourts were reading the landscape effectively, obedient to current practice and the cult of sensation.

Hornor mentions Grongar Hill and Dryslwyn Castle but these are too far away to be seen. The eye instead is drawn to the portico and steps of the mansion garnished with Coade stone pots overflowing with flowers and a flower bed with further pots edged with ornamental trellis work possibly in wood or painted ironwork below the terrace.

Hornor in 1815 still regards this type of scenery 'the verdant lawn, the expanse of water' as praiseworthy. As a recent study asserts 'water was the most prestigious feature in the landscape park'.[55] It has been said that the taste of

the 18th century was aristocratic but by the Regency it had become 'democratic' more 'flexible and intuitive'. In gardens this expressed itself as more 'dressed grounds near the house, with sinuous shrubberies, flowerbeds, trellis and ornate garden seats' linking the house and garden together.[56]

Llyn Mawr curves around to the left in the middle ground behind which is one of the many paths or drives. On the right is a boat with white sails in one of the sheltered 'bays' of the lake, its progress barred by a white bridge with five arches. The edge of this bay is framed by deciduous woodland and girdled with a fringe of more mature, quick growing conifers, known as nursery trees which were often planted for temporary protection next to what was regarded as the woodland proper.

In this 'animated scene' as Hornor characterises it, on the steps below the portico, stand three figures; two bonneted women, one holding a small parasol, and a man looking out over the lake with a telescope towards the boat. Another female figure secluded and sheltered beneath the portico appears to be reading a book, perhaps the latest novel by Austen. *Mansfield Park* with its motif of estate improvements was published in 1814, the year Hornor was surveying the park at Middleton Hall.

The Paxtons were not at home when the Harcourt family visited and so they were conducted around the house and the park by an aged retainer whose 'silver locks made

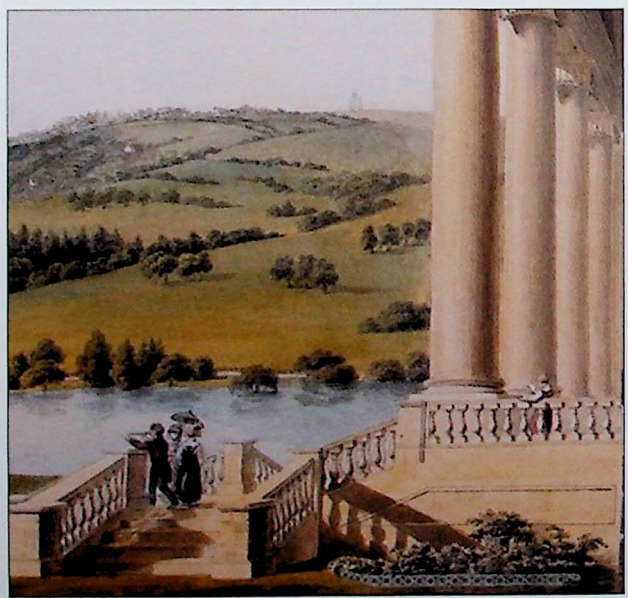

Fig. 2. *The imposing portico of Middleton Hall looks out over the park and Paxton's tower in the distance (detail from station 3)*

Mrs Harcourt think of the bards of former times.' After seeing the house, they were led 'along a winding gravel-walk' by the servant 'which was sometimes obscured by the spreading branches of the trees uniting and forming a verdant arch over the head: at other times it was quite open to the sun.' As they proceeded, submerging themselves in the landscape, a range of 'features' were revealed 'in quick succession; at one time the hall was the predominant object, then the tower, and various hills, some near, others at a great distance, many of them clothed in woods, enlivened by white cottages.' Whilst on their right the 'chrystal lake expanded itself' and on the left 'rose the green sloping fields.' This immersion in the landscape was necessary in order to view all of its hidden delights.

'STATION 4'

This is one of the missing views and it presents us with a problem because the figure 4 near or on the site of a boathouse unremarked by Hornor but recorded on later 19th century OS maps, is scrubbed out on the aerial plan, possibly by Hornor who may have decided that this view was not up to standard or was too similar to the previous view ; alternatively perhaps Paxton vetoed its inclusion in the album. Hornor explains that he 'took' this view 'near a group of firs seen to the left of the third view which commands the hill on which Nelson's Tower stands.' the 'Vale of Towy' in the distance behind it.

Therefore it is the view from the bank of Llyn Mawr looking back at the mansion that becomes the fourth painting in the album which was taken from an unmarked station to the south of station 4 on the plan. Hornor explains that this spot is reached from the path on the left of the previous drawing, which leads us 'through a shady walk' made in 'an agreeable line by the margin' of the lake. It presents the 'enjoyments of [the lake's]navigation... a pleasing and rather rare addition to the range of rural amusements.'

A boating or picnic party is about to commence. In the foreground two relaxed, well-dressed couples make conversation, whilst an excitable boy holding a parasol in one hand and the hand of one of the women is literally skipping with excitement at the treat to come. Meanwhile, the boatman is bringing the boat about whilst a labourer heaves on a rope to bring it to the bank and a liveried house servant appears to be bringing baskets filled with bottles of drink and food. A lap dog eyes the boat nervously from the shore. And further on the left in the

Fig. 3. *Boating on Llyn Mawr (detail from the fourth watercolour).*

shallows are a pair of swans. The boat has pretty pink sails and an ornamental covered canopy with ruched curtains in the same colour, under which one of the party is already ensconced. There is another smaller boat further up the lake towards the house with two occupants, one, a portly figure, possibly Sir William Paxton himself.

The house sits on a small hill in the distance, striking in its pure white appearance, framed by substantial trees probably oaks and other deciduous plantings, as well as some flowering cherries, which hug the lakeside, girdled with the obligatory conifer 'nurses'.

'STATION 5 AND 6'

In an exciting development a new watercolour has recently come to light which could represent the view from station 5. Hornor's narrative is as follows:

Fig. 4. *The newly discovered painting showing the lower lake near Pont Felin Gat.*
(Reproduced by kind permission of Jeremy Rye)

> *Pursuing our walk to the left... we are led to the Lower Lake which is happily formed in a sequestered and well wooded little valley. The harbour in the centre of the picture forms the point of view which is the subject of a succeeding drawing.... The Dell which commences by the bridge to the right contains many characteristic beauties developed in the course of the walk: the path by the smaller bridge leads to... the Chalybeate Spring and Bath, the subjects of the next picture.*

The new watercolour does indeed show two bridges and the entrance to a 'harbour' or arbour in the centre, (the etymology of both words being derived from the same origin in old French).

The painting for station 6 is missing and it is likely that this is a view of the 'tepid' Bath-house with 'complete appurtenances for that purpose.'

'STATION 7'

This image according to Hornor shows two ladies and a gentleman conversing on the rustic bench in the middle of a flower garden. Behind the seated figures is what appears to be a Chinese or rustic bridge over a dam and cascade across a narrowing of the Lower Lake (Llyn Felin). On the left of the picture is the chalybeate spring and a rustic building which Hornor calls the 'Grotto of Hygeia' (Hygeia was the daughter of the Greek god of medicine and she herself was the goddess of health, cleanliness and hygiene) are both 'agreeably placed in a flower garden'. The white plastered grotto appears to be a thatch roofed building with a porch underneath which rustic benches have been placed. White flowered climbing plants, jasmine or possibly roses adorn its two supporting pillars. The spring in front of the grotto is accessed down some steps and a gentleman is seen descending these with a tankard in hand.

Recent excavation work carried out by Dyfed Archaeological Trust and volunteers has confirmed that this building is the grotto and not a bath house as has been thought.[57] As their report suggests, there is some confusion over buildings in the Pont Felin Gat area of the park. Hornor's aerial plan of the area shows two red dots, which is significant as he states earlier in the narrative that 'red figures' indicate where the views were 'taken' by him. This may have been his original intention but the 'stations' are all numbered in black on the final map and the red dots appear to mark the presence of small

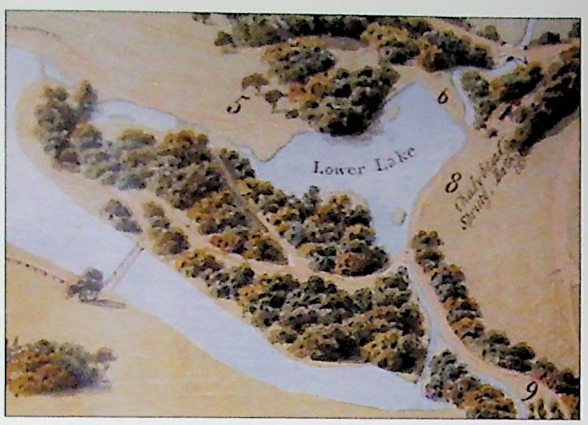

Fig. 5. *Pont Felin Gat (detail from aerial plan).*

buildings instead. The Harcourt extract also confirms that there are two buildings here, a bath and a grotto:

> *This walk of about half a mile conducted them over a rustic bridge to a little spot, which seemed to be the work of fairies. A wild sort of garden, two small buildings, and a trickling spring, were before them; on the right was a waterfall, the water of which passing under the bridge on which they stood, precipitated itself with much violence over masses of broken rocks.*

Pipes were apparently laid from the spring to the outside of the park wall to enable the public to freely access the health benefits. Hornor notes that 'a house for the accommodation of visitors has also been erected'. This may be the *Emlyn Arms* in Llanarthne which may have offered further spa treatments from a tank in its roof. The roofline still today is unusual in that it is stepped.[58]

Thomas Rees (1815) mentions the chalybeate springs that had been discovered in the park and that William Paxton had displayed what was probably the first bilingual health and safety notice in Wales; explaining how to use the waters and also for what complaints they might be beneficial. The spa appears to be for the private use of the family only by this date. The attempt to launch it as a public spa must have been unsuccessful.

The Harcourt extract describes the spa buildings and Paxton's kind gesture in sharing the benefits of the spring with everybody:

> *One of the buildings was a bath supplied from the spring, both the bath and the spring were private, for the use of the family; but Sir William, unwilling that*

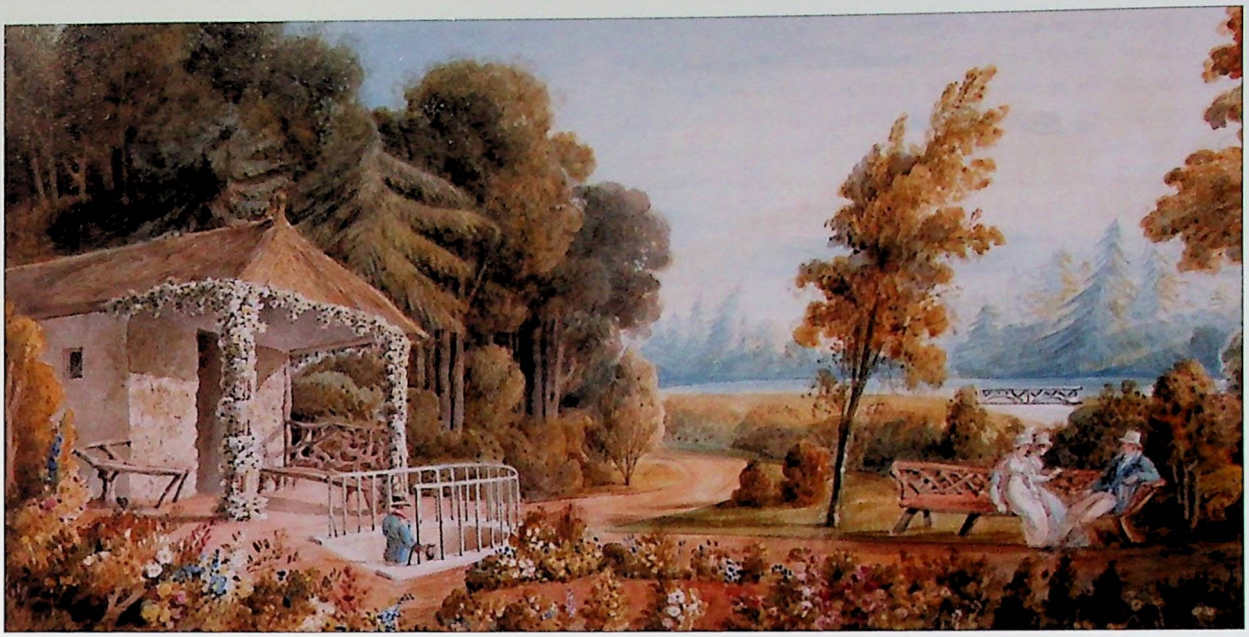

Fig. 6. *The Grotto of Hygeia and the Chalybeate Spring (from station 7).*

the poor should be deprived of what experience had proved to be highly beneficial, had been at the expence of having the water conducted by a pipe into the road, so that the use of it was free to everybody: the other building was a grotto, not finished, but which afforded and agreeable retreat from the sun.

'STATION 8'

The painting for station 8 is one of the lost images. It portrays the view from a 'bower' on the east side of the lower lake 'which commands an elegant vista of the lake and its wooded banks' terminated by the portico of the mansion. The Harcourt extract also refers to a glimpse of the mansion from this point in the tour:

> *In this part the lake appeared highly romantic, narrowing in some places, and being lost among the trees, which here feather down to the very edge of the water: occasional openings gave some pleasing object to view; among others the hall presented itself, majestically rising as it were out of a wood.*

The Harcourt family sit on a 'rustic bench' to admire the scene here:

> *The smooth expanse of water presented the surrounding scenery with the faithfulness of a mirror. The various foliage of the trees, enriched with the yellow tints of Autumn; the distant hills rearing high their summits, tinged with the purple hue of evening... the murmuring of a brook at a small distance conspired, with the surrounding view, to charm the mind and invite repose.*

'STATION 9'

The watercolour for this station is also missing. Hornor explains that this walk follows a fast flowing stream, where the 'dale' widens 'into a little valley happily formed into a flower garden which has an enchanting effect after the gloom of the entrance'. Here a 'rustic arcade forms a pleasing covered walk and affords support to the various creepers which form themselves into graceful festoons'

The Harcourt memoir aligns with Hornor's description here but gives more detail:

> *They now continued on a winding path which conducted them into an arched way, overshadowed with jessamines and honeysuckles that led into a hermit's garden. This was a retired sheltered spot, planted with shrubs and flowers. Geraniums and myrtles were here*

> *growing in wild luxuriance; a large palm tree in the centre spread its branches over a seat which seemed to invite the visitors to rest.*

The Harcourt extract makes reference to a hermit's bath as well as garden, it is curious that Hornor makes no reference to this in his commentary, although he appears to depict a cave entrance in the following painting. It is not likely that a hermit was ever in residence, many hermitages were constructed from the 18th century onwards purely for show, as just another incident in a park, in order to produce a particular sensation in the viewer.

The Harcourts continue through a valley which is not included in the Hornor narrative with a 'rivulet of clearest water' on one side and on the other 'lofty hanging woods seemed to rise into the clouds'. As time was getting on, (they had to be in Carmarthen for tea as the Colonel reminded them) they were forced to hurry 'to the hermit's bath'. The walk here became wilder, the gravelled path giving way to 'a green and sloping' path which led them down:

> *into a most romantic little dell: at the bottom of which rippled a rivulet: the sides were clothed with trees, and at the extremity appeared a small cascade dashing itself with miniature fury from rock to rock till it reached the bottom, where it formed a pool, which has sometimes been used as a bath and which gave the name to the place.*

Mrs Harcourt finds she 'cannot find words to express my admiration', only repeating that it 'is enchantingly beautiful'. They tear themselves away 'from this enchanting scene' and turning back to the spring their guide 'led them to the road by a private door'. They made 'proper acknowledgements to him for his civility', returning to Llanarthney where they found their 'horses already put to, and the carriage waiting for them.'

'STATION 10'

Hornor next depicts 'a bold and impetuous' waterfall which is still in existence. He notes that it is artificial but that it 'has all the appropriate character of a natural cascade, heightened in its effect by the wooded scenery which surrounds it.' Hornor presents himself painting the scene in front of the waterfall. Someone is standing looking over his shoulder, might it be Sir William? There

Fig. 7. *The Waterfall and the Hermit's Cave (detail from station 10).*

is a rustic bridge in front of the top of the waterfall; it would have been a thrilling and 'awful' experience to cross this with the water rushing over the edge crashing onto the rocks below. Below the waterfall is another rustic bridge across the river to what appears to be a cave framed by a rustic arch.

'STATION 11'

The watercolour is missing for this station which was near the site of the old mansion. The tour proceeds upwards through the dingle to a large stone bridge, leaving it to join one of the green drives 'for a more general view of the grounds'. The 'green drives' were longer circuits made possible by the improved design of carriages, the phaetons which 'conveyed visitors effortlessly past the pictorial scenes'.[59] The views become expansive, the landscape being one of 'undulating lines' and 'variegated surface of ground' with an 'undivided range of pasture and lively effects of variegated foliage'. Hornor notes that 'the several pieces of water have the effect of one connected sheet, which appearing by glimpses amongst the trees by its side gives to the whole a finish of animation and beauty.'

'STATION 12'

There is also no watercolour for this station which Hornor drew from the margin of the lake where 'we may take a seat in an agreeable flower garden formed in a little promontory from which the mansion is seen to associate advantageously with the finished domestic character of the scene.'

'STATION 13'

The painting taken from station 13 shows a private bath house for the family, in woods below the hall facing Waun Las 'The bath-house was for the more hardy who relished the health-giving properties of a cold dip in the privacy of their own grounds'[60] Hornor describes it as 'appropriately placed in a secluded situation and well screened by a grove which intercepts it from the lawn behind'. Another faithful pair of swans are seen here again in the lake to the right of the bath-house and there is a rowing boat moored below it. The bath-house is neo-classical in style, probably built at the same time as the mansion of brick and faced in stucco.

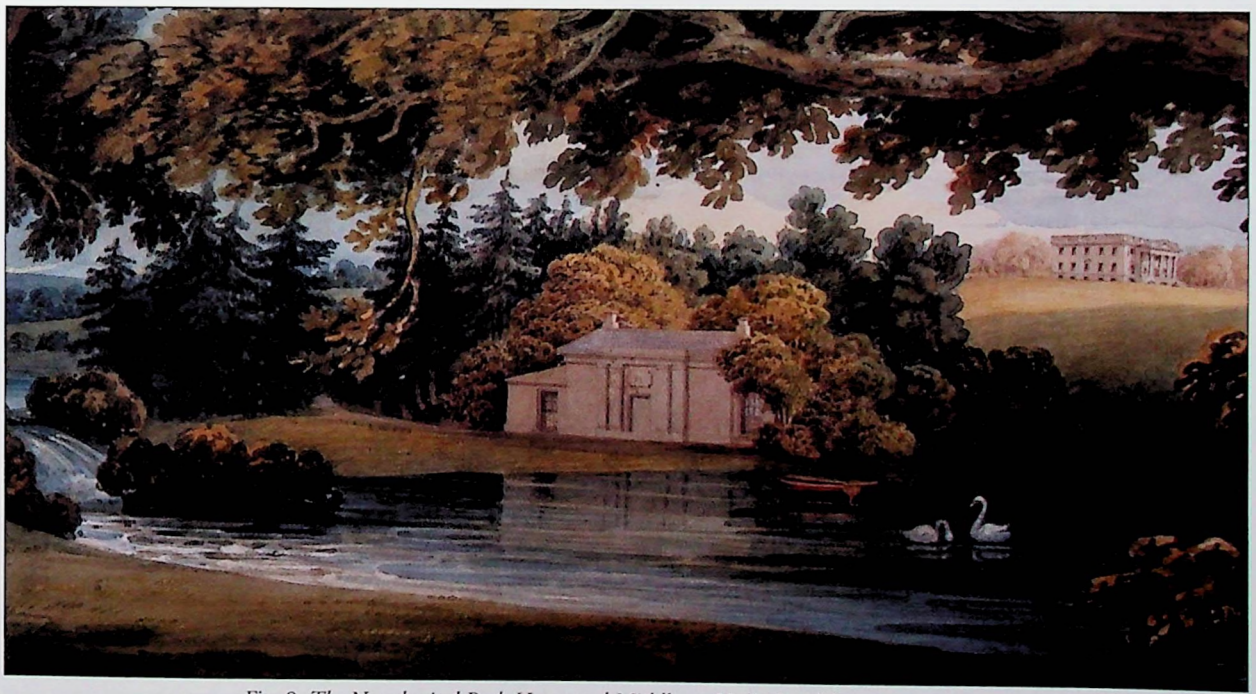

Fig. 8. *The Neo-classical Bath House and Middleton Hall (detail from station 13).*

'STATION 14'

Station 14 is a panorama from the hill to the east of the mansion. Hornor remarks that the 'ride' as this ramble has now become can be varied on horseback by ascending the hill on which the 'tower' stands on a 'road which takes a circuitous direction through an extensive and flourishing plantation, affording at every turn, views ever varying in extent, richness and grandeur: and our admiration is progressively increased by the expanding beauties of the vale as it seems to unfold itself to the eye as we advance.'

Hornor comments that despite his growing expectations 'during the ascent' 'the unbounded magnificence of the whole on attaining the summit cannot fail to call forth a spontaneous exclamation of wonder and delight... a circle of landscapes so sublime in its and general effect' and that the detail 'defies the happiest efforts of pen or pencil' however he hopes that his efforts 'present to the eye and to the mind a comprehensive thought faint vision of the scene.'

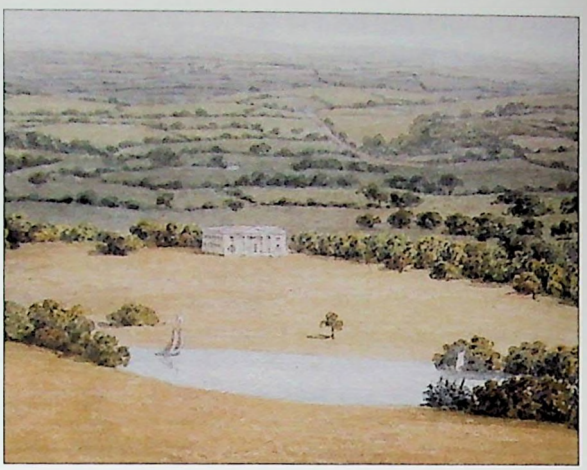

Fig. 9. *The panorama looking across the park to the west (detail from station 14).*

THE AERIAL PLAN

Hornor's aerial plan of the parkland at Middleton Hall is the pièce de résistance of this collection of paintings. It appears from Hornor's dedication to Paxton in the commentary, that he was only initially commissioned by Sir William to produce a plan, who later agreed to have an album of watercolours made as well.

This aerial plan like other some other views he produced in Glamorganshire has echoes of Blake and the Burkean sublime. The Park is ringed by what appear to be ominous

Fig. 10. *The Aerial Plan.*

thunderclouds, which have the slightly disorienting effect of tipping the viewer into the picture. Our focus is on the Park itself rather than the surrounding land, some of which was not part of the Middleton Hall Estate.

It is possible that Hornor was disguising the lack of focus and foreshortening around the edges of a perspective created by his own invention which used this technique of 'panoramic chorometry' which appears in a number of his 'pictural' surveys, namely his Plan of the Town and Parish of Kingston Upon Thames (1813) where the north eastern part of the parish is covered by clouds with a figure brandishing a spear and again in the 'Spirit of the Vale of Neath' where the valley is once again surrounded by clouds and strange ghostly figures are shown in the sky. It is also possible that his wide views were the result of a composite of images; just as today software for digital photography is able to stitch together individual photos to create impressive panoramas.

Hornor's albums 'draw the reader/viewer through panoramic space'.[61] This is true in the case of his Middleton Hall work where there is a filmic, slideshow quality to the arrangement of text and images. The plan of the Park gives the viewer a serene omniscient overview, which then swoops in for close-up snapshots of the estate that portray the rich variety of activity and scenery at ground level.

When his aerial plan is overlayed onto an Ordnance Survey map it shows that although Hornor was able to be accurate in sections, there is a distortion in scale, for example the mansion appears completely in the wrong place, which renders his plan inaccurate as a whole. It is clear that it was probably Hornor's desire to 'picturalise' his maps which resulted in the fact that his surveying though giving the appearance of accuracy, was not to scale.

DECLINE, FALL AND REVIVAL

The landscape at Middleton Hall during Paxton's ownership went through several development phases that also revealed a range of influences at work. The initial phase consisted of tree planting in belts and clumps and the smoothing out of earlier features such as the old mansion and its formal water gardens as well as the laying out of a wide variety of drives and gravelled paths throughout the park. These features can be characterised as 'Brownian'. Yet, Hornor's aerial survey of the park shows that it was not typically Brownian as the belts of trees were broken and were not complete, in addition they did not circle the perimeter but instead, they embraced the house in gentle arcs shielding it from the winds and unsightly views; even the belts of trees at a distance appear to be acknowledging the house and are aligned to be facing it. There are the typical clumps, but also scattered plantings of trees.

The second phase of Paxton's landscaping at Middleton Hall is represented by development at the edges of and outside the park and includes the Gothic Nelson's Tower and the flower gardens with associated buildings at Pont Felin Gât. This phase owes much to the Rococo and the ideas propagated by the picturesque movement. Hornor in accord with Repton felt that the excesses of the picturesque should be restrained in order to accommodate the comfort of his clients who required some order as well as some 'sublimity'. The ultimate result 'was a growing diversification of style... accompanied by a revival of interest in the garden at the expense of the park'.[62]

Thomas Hornor's Middleton Hall paintings when compared with the Harcourt memoir reveal that he painted with veracity but in the case of his plan without accuracy. This album of watercolours has memorialised Middleton Hall at the point when this landscape that was so close to Sir William Paxton's heart, had reached its zenith after twenty five years of improvement and alteration. His eleven legitimate children were each left equal shares in his will. In 1824 after his death they sold the estate, it is not known why, and fanned out with their descendants across the globe. Five of his sons had military or naval careers, the sixth son was in the East India Company and two of the three daughters married military men 'It seems strange that none of the sons entered their father's banking business, but they grew up at a time of foreign threat and intense patriotism and would have had a strong sense of duty.'[63] Perhaps they wanted to be perceived as gentlefolk free of the taint of trade or perhaps what is more likely, they inherited their father's curiousity about the world and his adventurous spirit.

The landscape created at Middleton Hall by Paxton suffered from many years of decline until the end of the 20th century, as none of its later owners had the income or interest to devote to it. The Abadam family did make some improvements to the house and the grounds nearer the house in the 1840s which are mentioned in Thomas Cooke's letters held in the National Library of Wales. He was the estate manager for several years at Middleton Hall and his letters chronicle his degenerating relationship with Edward Abadam who was a very difficult man to deal with. It is likely that the wooden structures in Pont Felin Gât

such as the bridges and the grotto were ephemeral in nature without constant repair and had disappeared from the landscape by the time of the 1887 Ordnance Survey map.

The dams of lower lakes have now been breached and they are silted up and overgrown. The pretty ornamental bridges, bath houses, grotto and a hermit's cave with their ephemeral flower gardens have gone, as has the mansion which burnt down in 1931. However, in Pont Felin Gât in the north of the park, the waterfall, a cascade and two large stone bridges are still intact as well as some of the engineering works responsible for water management.

Hornor's album provides the only visual record of the estate from Paxton's time and repays examination by revealing that a range of movements in landscape design were successfully deployed at Middleton Hall, the remnants of which are beautiful and still evoke strong emotions in the modern visitor. Just as 200 years ago the Harcourts found it 'enchantingly romantic' we still do likewise today.

Our poignant last view of Thomas Hornor is at a New York courthouse where he 'looked most unwell, shook like an aspen leaf and stank of cheap whiskey.'[64] Was he an alcoholic? It would not be surprising if he had turned to drink. His confidence had never recovered after the Coliseum debacle and he had lost that persuasive charm that made him a success in Wales. In America he received few commissions and began a slow slide into poverty which ended with his death in Manhattan in 1844 at the age of 60. At the end, despite his rackety life, he was returned to the bosom of the Friends and was laid to rest in New York's Quaker burial ground.

Parkland has been described as a 'landscape of exclusion' which it certainly was in the past but the liberal minded and generous Sir William might have approved of the democratising forces of the last 200 years and would have been very pleased to see his ornamental landscape in the process of regeneration and open to the public as The National Botanic Garden of Wales for their pleasure, instruction and enjoyment. Thomas Hornor would also be proud as it is his paintings that can take some credit for inspiring and informing the current ambitious Regency Restoration Project in the park.

Acknowledgement to: The National Botanic Garden of Wales: Images reproduced with the kind permission of the Grant family. Thanks also to Jeremy Rye for permission to reproduce Fig. 4.

NOTES

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