

Oral History Interview with Robin and Elizabeth Brackenbury 19th December 2017

Interviewer

Prior to taking it on, did you already know the house at Holme Pierrepont? Had you been here before you came from London, to view for the purchase in 1969?

Elizabeth

No, mummy wouldn't come here when we were children because she always said that aunt Sibell would be acting dotty.

Interviewer

So, you had to teach yourselves about the history of the house structurally and the family history?

Elizabeth

Yes, our architect was Brigitte Trahern. She was a great architect, and a woman which at the time people thought absurd!

Robin saw a newspaper article about Bingham District Council giving out grants, so he and Brigitte trotted up there and said we wanted a grant. He read them the legislation telling them how they had to give us a grant... and Miles Hilliard from Flintham was a great support.

Just after the war, they were looking to build an electric power station in front of our house and Miles Hilliard had said it would be an extremely bad idea, and so it went to Thrumpton instead. So, Miles saved the house. Miles was in the Borough Council and it was him who told them to give us the grant.

Robin

We saw this extraordinary building which as you can see, was a pretty good wreck. It seemed an opportunity – something to do.

Elizabeth

Brigitte introduced us to a historic building's expert (Professor Maurice Barley) and she told him 'You've got to come up into the roof'. He said 'but I've seen lots of rooves' but she said 'no but you've *got* to!

He climbed up into the roof space at the front of the house, all of which was covered and hidden by ceilings and he said' its very late..... late medieval!

I knew nothing about medieval!

Robin

The bits that come down.... the cusping (I can't always find the right words because I am very old). That is unique for this side of England. There is no cusping like this on the east side. Its an earlier house than Wollaton. The bricks were imported from Norfolk.

Elizabeth

That's what YOU say but NOT what Professor Barley said, he said Cotgrave!

The Pierrepont s went on well by being careful with their money – they didn't splash.

Elizabeth then recounted a history of the various generations of the Pierreponts and how they had added to the estates until the 2nd Duke of Kingston who was a spendthrift and his widow Elizabeth Chudleigh had left the estate in a poor state in the late 1700s.

Interviewer

You mentioned Professor Barley, can you tell me more about what he did while he was here?

Elizabeth

I can see him walking down the drive with Durrent, they liked archaeology *above* the ground.

Then there was the argument with Robin about the bricks.

He told us that the downstairs would have been for less important people, and the more important were upstairs. He educated us about which areas would have been plastered. Downstairs probably would not have been plastered and upstairs would.

This suited us as all the lath and plaster had to come off the walls because there was dry rot in the laths. Then when we got down to the oak beams, the rot was sitting on the outside and the oak was hard as stone.

They told us an awful lot.

They'd have had virtually no furniture. All the rooms would have been slept in and there was of course the great hall at the back of the courtyard where food was eaten. No chairs, just stools. It would have been very basic.

Interviewer

Was there anything left of the earlier fixtures and fittings? I'm thinking of areas like the servant's quarters and kitchens?

Elizabeth

Sibell Argles pulled down all the buildings around the back of the courtyard. I think they went back a long way. The Victorians pushed them up and had laundries, dairies etc. And there were rooms above.

There were soldiers here during the war and somebody who used to go to church said 'Oh yes, the windows along the back courtyard were all in pairs and the soldiers used to lean out and wave at us'. So, they obviously had bedrooms above. We don't even know where the kitchen was.

Robin

It was over by the Great Hall, in the North Wing, there would have been a kitchen and a parlour, it makes conventional sense. (pointing to the engraving of the Jacobean House)

Elizabeth

I do have Thorotons History of Nottinghamshire, which must not leave this room.

Professor Barley did a resistivity study and he explained that there had been an earlier house here. The wall to the left of the Charles II staircase is constructed of extremely thick masonry, this projected out into the courtyard and comprised the front wall of the Medieval Great Hall, which was nearer *in*, than the back is now, and didn't go as far as the Churchyard wall.

When we had the floorboards up in the ballroom you could see the footings of a bay window, further in. Obviously, the saloon at the end of the Great Hall.

We've had drains dug and come across footings of a wall parallel with the house. The wall came all the way round and up to the house with a gazebo in each corner, this picture is 1790.

Holme Pierrepont was left severely alone, and that is why it is still here.

Sibell Argles had this room made smaller and installed a Hopton stone staircase in 1947.

Interviewer

When you first came here were there many people around who could remember what happened when the Hall was requisitioned during the war?

Elizabeth

Well there was virtually no running water, heat or food. The people of Radcliffe took them in and gave them baths and food then they came back here.

Mr Neal of Bingham Borough Council told us he came here in later decades after the war, as a boy and wandered around. People helped themselves to things and the lamps in the arcade were stolen.

Interviewer

Did you have to skirt around The Historic Buildings Council (English Heritage) when you were restoring the house?

Elizabeth

Well apart from a small grant from the borough council we did this all with our own money, not public money. So the Historic Buildings Council said, 'Do what you like, but don't do anything ridiculous'.

We first opened to the public in 1974. All the neighbours came because they were dying to see inside the house.

The Charles II staircase is one of only 12 in the country, probably rescued from the Jacobean north wing and you can see where carpenters have remodelled it to fit the current position.

An architect dated the door arch on the landing of the long gallery to 1470 and gave a similar date for the blocked-up window. This is older than the 1510 house, but styles didn't move on fast at that time.

Interviewer

Do you know if there is much archaeology under the back gardens?

Robin

In the long meadow at the back if you dig you find things. As no-one has ever been in to dig, that's why it is all still there.

Interviewer

Can you tell me about the plan of the Box parterre in the courtyard?

Elizabeth

I have a photocopy of the plan which is kept at the manuscript library and I hand drew a larger version.

I have no photo of the courtyard when we first came because it was such a mess. Hedges existed but had been cut into all the wrong shapes. I discovered that the bases of the hedges were in the original positions. So I cut them down low, and grew the cuttings. I used the bases as a kind of dot-to-dot to try to plot the patterns for replanting and did it by eye, using the cuttings which had all sprouted.

10 years later I found that my cuttings were all the wrong type of Box, and were growing too big, so I had to replant all over again!

Sibell ended up with a big border here. I think it is very like Nesfield. Do you think it is credible that this is the pretty Italianate garden with the sundial? Oh no because I think that is roses. (referring to the drawing of the courtyard garden plan which is dated 1911 at the archives)

Robin

In 1911 they would not be laying out a garden, as no-one lived here then they only came over for the occasional hunting event.

Interviewer explained about the Nesfield research and how it is now ruled out that Nesfield designed the garden but explained that she was about to investigate the archives for more information.

Interviewer

Did you plant the East Garden as it is now?

Elizabeth

Yes, Robin looked out of the window one day and said, 'I'm going to plant a garden'.

Sibell Argles had had 2 fields where she grew barley out there for her pigs. There had been Nissan huts in the war, which had been removed. When we came it was just long grass.

Robin got hold of John Codrington and hired him. He designed a garden, (shows artists drawing of classic garden with avenue of yews). We didn't do anything off those plans. He first wanted to move the drive, that was his plan, and he always put in Yews like that, here are all the notes. He designed the gardens at Rockingham.

We moved them a bit and it was me that decided on the circles. Here are some photos of the early days. (shows photo of east gardens in their infancy)

Elizabeth opened a tube containing letters from the garden designer with artists impressions of his plan. There were also hand drawn rough plans done by Robin and Elizabeth along with handwritten shopping lists of seed, plants and trees to be purchased and receipts and orders to various nurseries up and down the country to enable them to get the exact plants that were needed.