

Nuneham Courtenay: an Oxfordshire 18th-century Deserted Village

By MAVIS BATEY

Have we not seen at pleasure's lordly call
The smiling long-frequented village fall?

Oliver Goldsmith.

WHEN it was no longer necessary for the lord and his tenantry to live side by side for mutual protection, many ancient villages were, as Goldsmith lamented, swept away from the precincts of the great Georgian houses in the making of pleasure-gardens. Such a village was old Nuneham Courtenay which was removed in 1760 to make way for a Dilettante's landscape-garden by the Thames near Oxford.

In the years of peace which followed Utrecht and the accession of the House of Hanover, grandiloquent homes were built for the nation's leaders and heroes with great avenues of approach and triumphal arches. Villages which were found to stand in the way of these grandiose undertakings were removed out of sight. Sweeping changes were made at the seat of the Earl of Orford, the victor of La Hogue, which necessitated the moving of the village of Chippenham in Cambridgeshire; Henderskelfe was destroyed in the creating of Vanbrugh's dramatic Castle Howard for the Earl Marshal; Easton Neston disappeared in the Hawksmoor lay-out for the magnificent seat of the Earl of Pomfret in Northamptonshire. The great Whig palaces and extensive gardens at Stowe, Houghton and Wotton Underwood overran ancient villages and hamlets that stood in the way of improvements. Lord Chancellor Hardwicke, who had envisaged an avenue of trees between London and his Cambridgeshire seat, began his improvements by removing the village of Wimpole which lay in the shadow of his house. The village of Gayhurst in Buckinghamshire was resited to give breathing space to the family of Sir Nathan Wrighte, Keeper of the Great Seal to Queen Anne.

By the middle of the century great gardens were being made, not only to reflect their creator's importance or political beliefs, but to demonstrate the excellence of his taste. The new vogue was not for great avenues, canals, fountains and grand parterres but for naturalized landscape. Wealthy families in every county bought up vast tracts of land to make natural gardens,

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which would look like landscape paintings; some took the English countryside for these picture gardens and with the help of Capability Brown idealized and 'improved' it; the Dilettanti with memories of their Grand Tours revelled in the creation of Italian classical landscapes. Instead of merely painting his landscape, the new garden artist had actually to contrive it by scooping out valleys, damming streams, planting woods and by building temples, ruins or any other object appropriate to his theme. It was the fashion for landscape gardens which produced the largest number of 18th-century deserted villages, since, when incongruities were found in the picture, such as a busy public road or a sprawling village in an Arcadian scene or a Gothic church in a classical landscape, these had to be removed. Villages or parts of villages are known to have been removed in the interests of landscaping at Ickworth, Mereworth, Chatsworth, Harewood, Kedleston, Birdsall, Crichel, Normanton, Shugborough, Howsham, Sledmere, Wheatfield, Shawdon, Warwick Castle, Shirburn and Audley End, which varied in size from small hamlets to the market town of Milton Abbas with its grammar school, almshouses, shops, inns and brewery. The removals of these villages involved the destruction of market crosses, mills and millponds, medicinal wells and bath houses, orchards and vineyards, riverside inns and bridges, churches, cemeteries and monuments and the loss of village greens, fishing weirs and commons.

These seemingly high-handed actions on the part of the landlord produced little opposition. Only at Milton Abbas were any of the tenants sufficiently powerful to maintain their rights, and there Lord Milton, finally losing his patience, released the dam holding his half-completed lake and swamped the resisting householders. A Parliament of landed gentry did not put difficulties in the way of improvements to a gentleman's seat which might involve enclosure of the village green or the diverting of the high road; county concerns, such as the blocking of local roads or the removing of bridges, were easily handled when some member of the improving family was Lord Lieutenant of the County or Chairman of Quarter Sessions; even ecclesiastical permission was obtained easily enough by any noble patron of the living who had a mind to knock down the old church and rebuild it as a Greek temple, hermitage, pavilion or other landscape ornament. When in 1763 the dilettante Sir Francis Dashwood rebuilt West Wycombe church on a steep hill overlooking his park and surmounted it with a shining golden ball, large enough for his friends to climb into and drink punch, Wilkes wrote: 'Some churches have been built for devotion, others for parade of vanity. I believe that this is the first church which has ever been built for a prospect . . . built on the top of the hill for the convenience and devotion of the town at the bottom of it.' Other churches were built or remodelled as eye-catchers, to match stables or as garden orna-

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ments at Nuneham Park, Glynde Place, Brandsby Hall, Croome, Gibside, Gunton, Ayot St. Lawrence, Stratfield Saye, Patshull, Wheatfield and Normanton.

Nuneham Courtenay with its matching pairs of 18th century cottages stretched out along the Oxford-Henley road and its inn bearing the arms of its noble benefactor is a striking example of a transplanted village. Although the German Moritz admired the neat and uniform appearance of its houses 'as regularly in line as a London street'¹, new Nuneham had none of the cosiness and rustic charm that must have belonged to the old village which clustered round its green on a wooded bluff above the river.

Old Newnham Courtenay had been situated in a delightful position on a spur of the Chilterns which thrust out over the Thames plain; but, unfortunately, the features that its early settlers had chosen with a view to survival, the rising ground, the bend in the river and the fertile valley, were also most desirable for landscaping. The 1st Earl Harcourt, grandson of Queen Anne's Chancellor who had bought the manor of Newnham as an investment², decided to abandon his other low-lying Oxfordshire homes at Cokethorpe Hall and Stanton Harcourt and to build himself a new seat overlooking the Thames in a spot so eminently suitable for a landscape garden.

Lord Harcourt replaced Sir John Robinson's modest manor house³ at Newnham by a new Palladian house (PLATE XIIA), the foundations of which were made by stones from ruined Stanton Harcourt, which were floated down the Thames on barges, and in 1761 he set about the creation of his landscape garden. 1761 was Coronation year, in the preparations for which Lord Harcourt had played a significant part. He had been tutor to the young prince who was now to become George III and had prepared him for the dignities of royal occasions⁴; he had travelled to Mecklenburg and had married the Princess Charlotte as the King's proxy⁵ and sailed back with her to the great Coronation celebrations which awaited in London. Earl Harcourt who, according to Walpole, was 'a marvel of pomposity and propriety' wanted a garden which would reflect the excellence of his reputation and taste. As a founder member of the Dilettanti Society, formed for the cultural elite who had travelled in

¹ K. P. Moritz, *Journey of a German in England 1782*, London, 1965.

² Sir Simon Harcourt bought the estate in 1710 for £17,000 and Thomas Rowney who conducted the transaction called it 'the cheapest pennyworth that ever was bought in Oxfordshire.' Hist. MSS Com., Portland VII 92.

³ *The Copper Plate Magazine*, 1778. Sandby's print is erroneously said to be of Stanton Harcourt (see *V.C.H. Oxon.*, v, 238).

⁴ Walpole, who disliked the 1st Earl Harcourt said that he would be 'unable to teach the prince other arts than what he knew himself—hunting and drinking' and he envisaged the tutoring at Kew as 'Sir, pray hold up your head! Sir, for God's sake turn out your toes'.

⁵ *Gent. Mag.* August 1761: for an account of Lord Harcourt's journey in the Charlotte Yacht.

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Italy, he wanted to create a landscape which would show his connoisseurship of the antique. Before this classical landscape composition could be achieved the village of Newnham Courtenay (FIG. 25), which included farms, a corn mill, ale-houses, a parsonage and school had to be transplanted to a new position out of sight. The removal of old Newnham Courtenay to a site a mile and a half away on the turnpike began in 1760 and new Nuneham Courtenay with the Harcourt Arms was apparently to be a going concern by the autumn of 1761.⁶ Presumably to avoid confusion with other Newnhams, the name was changed to Nuneham Courtenay and the seat was known as Nuneham Park.

The removal of the village was accomplished, according to the poet laureate, William Whitehead, 'without a sigh' and the villagers were said to be well pleased with their new accommodation. Whitehead, who had accompanied the young Lord Nuneham on his Grand Tour and was a frequent visitor at the Park, wrote a poem entitled 'The Removal of the Village at Nuneham'. He tells the story of Babs Wyatt, an old widow who pleaded to be allowed to remain in the deserted village in the spot where her Colin 'told his flame' and 'breathed his last'. The 1st Earl was moved by her appeal and her 'clay-built cot' was allowed to stay in the landscape garden. In her life-time she was looked on as an Arcadian shepherdess and, after her cottage had been pulled down at her death, an inscription was put on the tree beside it by the 2nd Earl Harcourt, the friend and great admirer of Rousseau.⁷ The inscription eulogizes Bab's rustic virtues and men of fashion were directed to the tree so that they could 'bow the knee' to her 'unlettered memory'. The old lady certainly gave the Harcourts good value as an object of interest in the landscape garden.

Fortunately a diary⁸ covering Nuneham Courtenay's eventful year of 1761 was kept by its rector, the Rev. James Newton, and, although it has nothing to say about the difficulties which faced his parishioners as they left their farms, cultivated fields, mill, school and village green, it is most enlightening about the problems that face a gardener-parson when he is 'removed'. The rector was the son of Dr. Newton who kept a combined madhouse and botanic garden at Islington⁹. His son shared his keen interest in plants and

⁶ Notice of a Sale at Lord Harcourt Arms, October 22nd 1761: *Jackson's Oxford Journal*.

Further evidence of the date of the village is to be found in the rector's diary. 'The 'buying of beef at the new town' and the administering of the sacrament 'to the lame woman at the new town' before Christmas 1761.

⁷ For an account of Rousseau's influence at Nuneham Park see *Country Life*, Sep. 12th 1968. Rousseau is said actually to have stayed in the village during his exile in England in 1767.

⁸ Bodl. ms. Engl misc. c. 251. Extracts from the diary: H. Minn. *Oxoniensia* x.

⁹ W. J. Pinks, *History of Clerkenwell*, London. 1865.

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in 1752 published his father's herbal¹⁰. The rector must have found it difficult to transplant his rare plants and on the first page of his diary we find him, like his noble patron, moving earth to make a new garden. He made many visits to Mr. Tag of Paradise in Oxford to order more trees and flowering shrubs and he is seen to be busy planting new orchards and vineyards during the year. The wavy wall he built at his new rectory to give maximum sunshine to his plums and apricots can still be seen and is proof of his skill and interest in gardening. The kitchen garden at the new rectory was not ready until the summer of 1761 and, finding himself with a cold rabbit for dinner and no vegetable to accompany it, he felt justified in taking a mild reprisal for the loss of his 'late gardens'.

April 7th. 'Self got greens and radishes from my Lord's garden.'

As far as the glebe was concerned there had already been an agreement with the Bishop of Oxford in 1759 about an exchange of land with Lord Harcourt¹¹. The Nuneham Courtenay glebe was measured as 4 yardlands made up by a dozen or more parcels of land, which Lord Harcourt pleaded were 'a hindrance to the improvements which would otherwise be made'. The new consolidated glebe of 54 acres, although seemingly smaller in area, must have been considerably easier to manage than the former widely scattered strips in 'Bean hill, Honey furlong, Fisher's green, Hare furlong, Lower Wheatland, Stockbush, Alder hill, Rye hill, Hanging Furlong, Long Church hill, Frogmore, Long Stone, Crofts and Tying ground'¹². The rector probably got increased tithes from Lord Harcourt's extended estate and new enclosure farms, and a tithe barn with a farm cottage attached was erected in 1761. Bullock, who managed the glebe, demanded more wages to compensate for the extra work.

The parson's chief annoyance mentioned in his diary is the levelling of the churchyard and its inclusion in the pleasure-ground. It was not apparently the disturbing of the bones or of the gravestones which bothered him, since he was not above using the latter as paving material for his own yard:

September 2nd. 'Went with bricklayer to the churchyard for an old gravestone to lay by pump and with much difficulty got it here.'

His real grievance comes out in a later visitation report:¹³

'I had once a churchyard, knew its boundaries very well, but now I don't as Lord Harcourt has thrown down all its moundings and taken away all the gravestones and turned it into his pleasure-ground, for he mows and rolls it at his pleasure and allows me nothing for the herbage.'

¹⁰ *A complete Herbal of the late J. Newton M.D. containing the prints and English names of several thousand trees, plants, shrubs etc.*, London, 1752.

¹¹ Glebe exchange: Oxf. Dioc. Pp. 2197 no. 8.

¹² Ox. Dioc. Pp. d.562.

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Relations with the big house were rather strained in the summer of 1761:

10th June. 'Self breakfasted at my Lord Harcourt's and he was much displeased at my milking his cows too soon and for my talking to Stewart about the churchyard and for saying he had done everything to me except cutting my throat which last expression is palpably false and told him a malevolent design to injure me and render him my enemy, but although I may have him for my enemy, I trust I shall have God for a Friend. Went to the locks and had from thence a jack for dinner.'

Nevertheless, life in the new rectory under a wealthy and cultured patron had its compensations and there was a marked rise in the standard of living of this country parson. His new rooms were very elegant, especially the 'bow-room' with its marble chimney-piece and 'great ceiling picture'. He engaged more servants and had his man measured for livery at Baldon; he rode out in a landau and lived on roast duck, ham and pigeons and Thames pike.

After the village had settled in on the turnpike and the old site had been cleared and planted, Lord Harcourt turned his attention to the now isolated church. The dilettante Earl wanted a classical rather than a Gothic building to compose with his Palladian house and Italianate landscape and sought the assistance of his friend Athenian Stuart¹³ in the designing of a garden temple, which would also serve as a parish church. It was on one of Stuart's visits of inspection that he had spoken to the rector in the churchyard; had James Newton realized that Stuart and the Earl were planning to knock down his church and replace it by a Greek temple, we might have had an even more vociferous entry in the diary for June 10th. Ecclesiastical permission was required to move a church, of course, but dilettanti builders of classical temples were able to plead successfully that the medieval church was old, uncouth or ruinous and that the light and elegant structure they were prepared to build at their own expense would be a great convenience to the parish. The bishop of Oxford judged Lord Harcourt's petition¹⁴ to knock down and rebuild the old church 'a small distance from where it now stands' as 'highly reasonable' and that it would be 'very convenient for the said Earl and his family and not the least incommodious to the rector and inhabitants.' The convenience to the Earl was that he could now have a classical temple (PLATE XIIB) just where he wanted it on rising ground where it could be seen to advantage as 'the principal feature in one of the most beautiful landscapes in the world'

¹³ James 'Athenian' Stuart had just completed a study of Athenian antiquities with Nicholas Revett for the Dilettanti Society and his influence can be detected in the porch at the family entrance to the church, which resembles the choragic monument of Lysicrates.

¹⁴ Ox. Dioc. Pp c. 434 f. 48b; c. 455 ff 120-2.

(Walpole). Under the ionic columns of its portico were seats for viewing the Arcadian scenes in the Thames meadows. The Bishop, who had been shown a model of the proposed church, let it be known by proclamation in the doomed All Saints, that if any parishioner saw reason why 'our leave, licence or faculty should not be granted to the said Earl Harcourt in a manner as by him prayed' he could register his objections to a representative appointed by the Bishop and to Lord Harcourt's agent in St. Mary's Oxford between 11 and 12 on a given Saturday.¹⁵ Needless to say there is no record that any of the Earl's tenants appeared.

The Bishop, who had so whole-heartedly approved of the Earl's 'pious and generous design' to build a new church for Nuneham Courtenay, seems to have overlooked the fact that the parishioners, who were liable for its upkeep and repairs, were now removed a mile and a half away and although the arrangement for the new parish church might be 'very convenient for the said Earl', it could hardly have been viewed with enthusiasm by the village. A visitation report from old Nuneham Courtenay reports 'the whole parish is to be very well disposed and to attend pretty well'.¹⁶ A falling off in attendance is noted after the removal 'some by way of excuses the want of better cloaths, but I rather fear from want of better hearts'.¹⁷ The rector does not say whether it was the long walk or the comfortless church which discouraged them. Men of fashion who visited Nuneham Park enjoyed the novelty of worshipping in a heathen temple, but it must have seemed a strangely irreligious church to the villagers who had not made the Grand Tour and could not share the Dilettanti's enthusiasm for 'Greek taste and Roman spirit'. Old All Saints had had a chancel screen, a singing gallery, coloured windows, furnishings and monuments¹⁸; the new austere temple, completed in 1764, was whitewashed and was devoid of ornaments and monuments and had glass doors covered by wrought-iron grilles; it was illuminated like a Sun Temple mainly from light from its central dome.

The incumbent found it difficult to make normal provision for Anglican worship in this temple, which had no separate chancel, no pews, no font, no central pulpit and no bells. The story of the bells shows how the Bishop and the country parson had never really understood the purpose of Lord Harcourt's application for a new church. The Architect Earl had asked the Bishop's leave to sell the old peal of 5 to help defray the cost of materials for the new church and the Bishop, in consideration that Lord Harcourt's bill had already

¹⁵ Ox. Dioc. Pp. c. 455 fol. 126.

¹⁶ Ox. Dioc. Pp. d.553.

¹⁷ Ox. Dioc. Pp. d.559 d.562.

¹⁸ Arch. Pp. Oxon d.13 f 53b.

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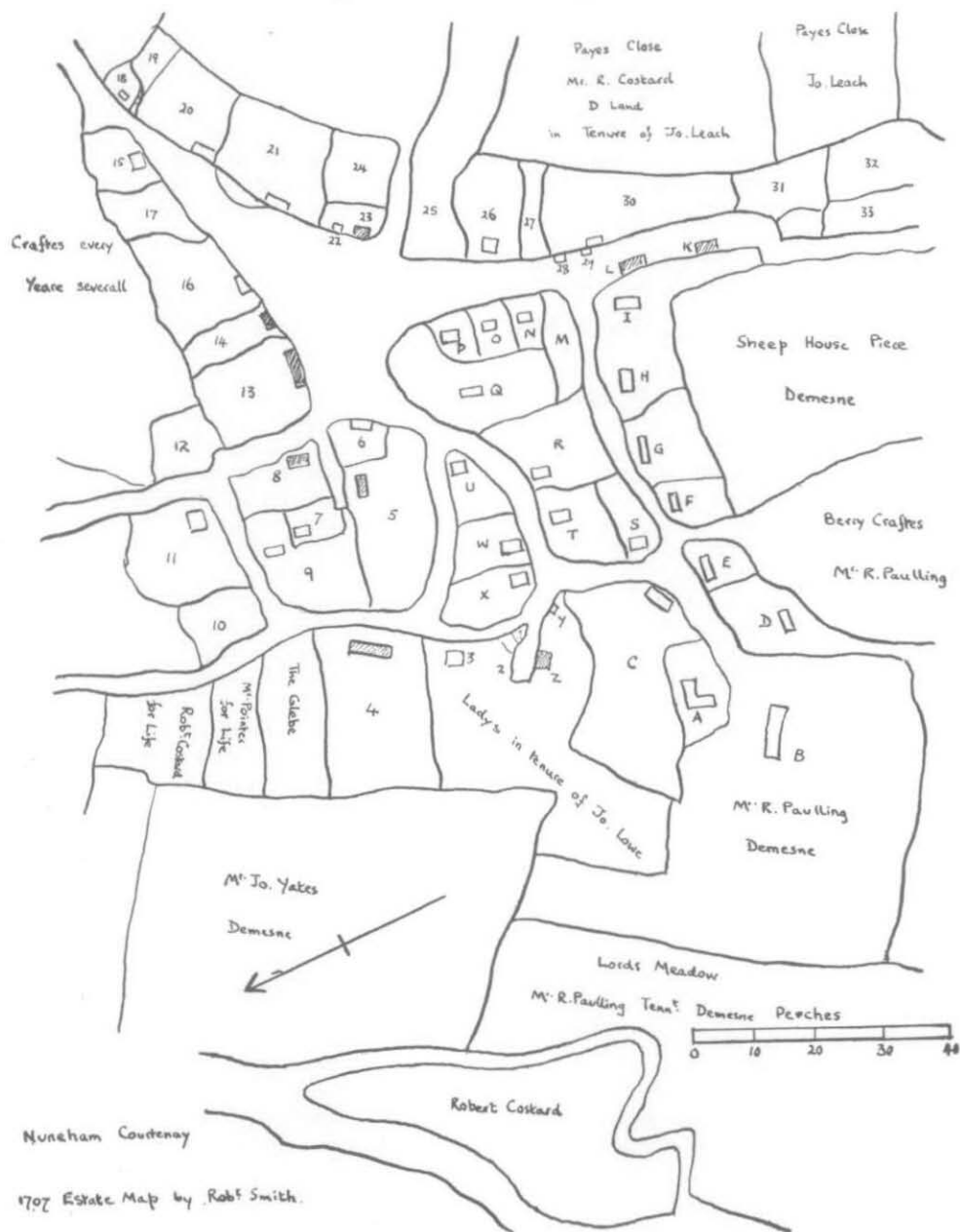


FIG. 25

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reached £800, consented. The selling of bells by poor parishes to help in the cost of repairing churches was a common practice in the 18th century.¹⁹ The rector takes up the story in his 1771 visitation report.

' Good Lord Harcourt some time past sold a very pretty sett of musical bells out of the Church consisting of 5 but was never paid for them, as I have been informed. I don't find anyone was concerned at that misfortune falling on him.

¹⁹ W. E. Tate, *The Parish Chest*, Cambridge, 1960, 154.

1707 ESTATE MAP Nuneham Courtenay

- | | |
|--|---|
| <p>A. Church and churchyard.
 B. Manor house and orchards 14 acres.
 C. Parsonage 2 acres.
 D. Jo Eaton. Homsted.
 E. Tho. Huchings. Cottage.
 F. W. Sawyer. Homsted.
 G. Will Ayres. Cott;
 H. Will Cocke Cott;
 I. John Clarke Cott;
 (the only freeholder. Edward
 Clarke voted 1754 election)
 K. Rob Wiat. House.
 L. Richard Newell House.
 M. W. Sawyer Close.
 N. W. Walker. Homsted.
 O. Rich. Barnes Homsted.
 P. Edmund Stanton Homsted.
 Q. Mr. Panter Cott.
 R. Mr. Cadwell Cott.
 S. Mr. Cadwell Homsted.
 (? school house. In 1671
 William Caudwell
 subscribed as school master)
 T. Jo. Andrews Cott.
 U. W. Prince cott
 W. Tho Goswell cott
 (1688 servant at manor
 house Q/sessions)
 X. W. Allam Homsted.
 Y. W. Leach and W. Holloway.
 Z. Tho. Allam House (4 hearths) ? mill</p> | <p>1. W. Ward House
 2. W. Leach House
 3. Edward Shepard House.
 4. Mr. Dancer. House and Close.
 5. Mr. Swell a house and close
 (William Swell alehouse keeper
 1710 Q/sessions)
 6. J. Moore Homsted.
 7. W. Prince Homsted.
 8. Mr. Costard Homsted.
 9. Tho Andrew House.
 10. Mr. Prat and Mr. Dancer.
 11. Mr. Cadwell Homsted.
 12. Mr. Cadwell Close.
 13. Mr. John Wise Homsted.
 14. Rbt. Costard Homsted. yeoman (will)
 15. Mr. Clarkard Homsted.
 16. — "
 17. — "
 18. — "
 19. — "
 20. John Lowe "
 21. Coombes "
 22. The Pound.
 23. Rich Douard House
 24. Rbt. Costard Pound Close.
 25. — Close
 26. Leach House.
 27. Barnes Close.
 28. Clark Close.
 29. House.
 30. Close.
 31. Close.
 32. Close.
 33. Prince.</p> |
|--|---|

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Lord Harcourt got a grant from the late Bishop, part of the bells towards rebuilding the church, but he was so modest that he takes the whole sett of 5 and leaves the Saint's bell, and so greatly deceived the Bishop, who expected he would have hung up a bell sufficient to call the parish together, but he did not and as the Sanctus bell can't be heard in the town, so that the clerk or his deputy is obliged to advertise the time by going up and down the town with a handbell—the like is not to be met with in England.'

Payment had not been his Lordship's object in selling the bells, of course²⁰; he wanted to dispose of them to avoid the necessity of providing a new ringing chamber, which would have ruined the elegant simplicity of his design for the temple with its illuminated dome.

As the Harcourt bones and virtues were safely enshrined at Stanton Harcourt church, the Earl felt free to dispose of the other memorials which had been in the medieval church. The large coloured altar tomb to a previous lord of the manor, Anthony Pollard, was removed by the neighbouring squire of Baldon, who claimed connections with the Pollards. The tomb was put up beside the lake at Baldon House together with as much of the ruined medieval church as could be conveniently removed. These fragments were later built on to an orangery attached to the house to form a Gothic tower. It is ironical that the 2nd Earl Harcourt who was of a more romantic turn of mind than his dilettante father hankered after an ivied ruin where he could, in the words of his friend William Mason, indulge his 'gothic phantasies' and having lost Nuneham's dismantled Gothic church to the gardens of Baldon House, was forced to engage the architect Francis Hiorne to design a ruin for him!

Archbishop Harcourt²¹, who succeeded to Nuneham Park in 1830, must have felt humiliated when the Oxford Society for Promoting Study of Gothic Architecture singled out his church as a memorable instance of the false and depraved taste of the nobility in the 18th century. The Archbishop had done his best to make the interior more like a parish church by providing better seating accommodation and a font and transferring the pulpit and reading desk to a central position, but it was left to Edward Harcourt to build in 1880, this time in the village, a neo-Gothic church, a third All Saints.

Locating the 18th-century 'Deserted Village'

The landscapers did their work of removing the old village and 'dressing up' the site so well, that often less remains of an 18th-century 'deserted

²⁰ The bells were 'sold' to Chadlington church. Ms Don. e. 114 fol. 53. The bells were the gift of Lord Chancellor Harcourt (A. Rudhall, *Cat. of Bells*, 1751).

²¹ The 2nd and 3rd Earls were childless and the succession came through the 1st Earl's sister who had married into the Vernon family. Her son the Archbishop of York took the name Vernon-Harcourt.

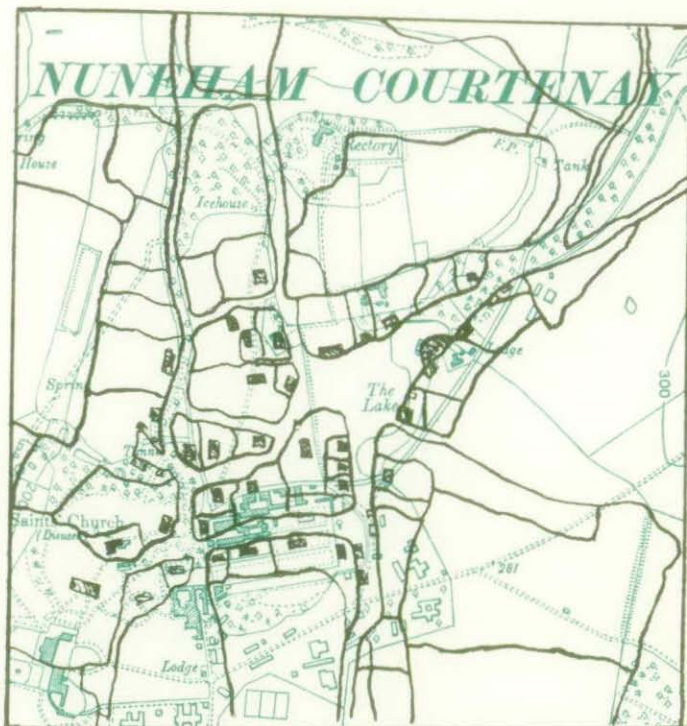


FIG. 26

Nuneham Courtenay deserted village (from 1707 map). N.B. The unshaded buildings on the S. part of the base map are war-time huts now removed. The present village is just off the N.E. corner of the map.

Base map reproduced from the Ordnance Survey Map with the sanction of the Controller of H.M. Stationery Office, Crown copyright reserved.

village³ than of the lost medieval village, which was left to slow decay. Aerial photographs reveal little because of the long shadows cast by the park plantations. The best way of tracing the lay-out of the old village is to find out how much of it was re-used in the landscaping. If there is an estate map of the old village, it can of course be orientated to the Ordnance Survey map and checked for suspected points of coincidence. In the case of Nuneham Courtenay the scale given by Robert Smith on his 1707 estate map²² was found to be sufficiently accurate to make an initial alignment with the modern map (FIG. 26).

The old village road to Oxford which ran along the high ground above

²² Robert Smith's estate map at Nuneham Park. Photostat in Bodleian.

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the river plain was used by Lord Harcourt to make part of his terrace walk. At Castle Howard Vanbrugh had also made use of the old village street in his walk to the Temple of the Winds. The distance between the terrace and the river on the ordnance map could be related to that between the old road and the river on the estate map in order to test the accuracy of Robert Smith's scale. The ditch at the side of the old road was bricked up to form a ha-ha, so that a walker on the terrace could participate in the Virgilian pastoral scenes without the disillusionment of a fence, and a tunnel was cut under the terrace so that, when the meadows were flooded, the cattle could reach the higher grazing without damaging the ornamental ground.

The old village green was planted with clumps of trees and its duck-pond turned into a landscaped lake with water pumped up from the Thames a half a mile away; now that the pumping has been discontinued, the artificial part of the lake has sledged up, leaving only a small round pond, which is probably the original duckpond. In a coomb running down to the Thames meadows a stream garden and ornamental lily pond were made later, and the finding of a millstone nearby suggests this as the likely site of the Domesday mill and millpond. Old All Saints was known to have been in a dell only a short distance from the new church and an old yew from the churchyard still stands at the entrance to the flower-garden. The tree, long known as Bab's elm in the village, marks the site of the old lady's lone cottage.

When the re-scaled estate map is superimposed on the ordnance map, lanes and field boundaries are seen to correspond. At different times when access was needed to the new rectory, an ice-house, the agent's house or the ferry cottage, old footpaths and lanes had been re-used. The tithe map is a valuable assistance in tracing the landscaped deserted village, for not only does it have entries such as 'old town close', the 'street' or 'the town meadows' but it also shows the 19th century additions and alterations in the landscape park. The Victorians were not as anxious as their Georgian predecessors to open themselves to the wilds of Capability Brown and they made buffers between their houses and the naturalized landscape. They were content to walk in walled rose-gardens, ferneries and shrubberies and, far from wanting to banish their estate workers to a village out of sight, they enjoyed the paternalism of having ornamental estate houses around them, and these took the place of classical temples and ruins as objects of interest in the park. Dozens of pattern books²³ were produced with designs for ornamental villas for stewards, game-keepers, gardeners, etc; which ranged from Swiss cottages to toy forts. When they came to build these estate houses, it was natural that

²³ P. F. Robinson, *Village Architecture*; Plaw, *Rural Architecture*; Atkinson, *Cottage Architecture*. Pocock, *Sketches for Rustic Cottages*. etc.

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they should use the site of the old village (unless it had disappeared under the artificial lake) where the old wells and paths and even old cobbles sometimes remained. At Nuneham Courtenay the agent's ornamental villa is actually called 'the old town house' and has some of the old stone floors of an original cottage in it, and the home farm and gardeners' cottages round the 'old town close' have old cobbles and pavings in their yards.

Goldsmith and the 18th-century 'Deserted Village'

Oliver Goldsmith made a lone stand against the wilful destruction of ancient villages, when he published in 1770 at the height of the landscape fashion his 'Deserted Village'. His friends and critics took it as poetic imagination, although he had insisted in the preface, addressed to Sir Joshua Reynolds, that 'The Deserted Village' was a serious study on rural depopulation:

'I know you will object (and indeed several of our best and wisest friends concur in the opinion) that the depopulation it deploras is nowhere to be seen, and the disorders it laments are only to be found in the poet's imagination. To this I can scarcely make any other answer than that I sincerely believe what I have written; that I have taken all possible pains in my country excursions for these four or five years past, to be certain of what I allege, and that all my views and inquiries have led me to believe those miseries real which I here attempt to display.'

Goldsmith's excursions had taken him all over England and he was known to have visited Yorkshire in the early 1760's, to have stayed at Bath and Tunbridge Wells, to have visited Dr. Percy in Northamptonshire, the Nugents in Norfolk and other friends in Essex and the home counties. He had been to the 'Leasowes' near Birmingham and wrote approvingly of Shenstone's 'harmless' garden there. In the Spring of 1768 before he started writing 'The Deserted Village' he visited Derbyshire, and in 1769 he visited Oxford, perhaps not for the first time, and in February accompanied by Dr. Johnson he received an *ad eundem* degree.²⁴

In an essay entitled 'The Revolution in Low Life'²⁵ which predated 'The Deserted Village' by several years, Goldsmith said that he had actually witnessed in the summer of 1761 the removal of a village 50 miles from London to make a new 'seat of pleasure' for a wealthy landowner. 'It lay', he said, 'entirely out of the road of commerce, and was inhabited by a race of men who followed the primeval profession of agriculture for several generations'. As a poet and exile, Goldsmith identified himself with the desolation

²⁴ Jackson's *Oxford Journal*, Feb. 17th 1769.

²⁵ R. S. Crane, 'The Revolution in Low Life' *New Essays by Oliver Goldsmith*, Chicago 1927.

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of those who were forced to leave the familiar scenes and happy associations of a 'smiling, long-frequented village'. Nuneham Courtenay is the only 'deserted village' which it has been possible to locate 50 miles from London which was removed in 1761 to make a pleasure-ground, and it seems almost certain that it must be the village described in the essay; there are several ways in which it also bears a striking resemblance to Goldsmith's immortal 'Deserted Village' of 'sweet Auburn'.²⁶

1. *The Cause of the Destruction*

'Thus fares the land by luxury betrayed;
In Nature's simplest charms at first arrayed,
But verging to decline, its splendours rise,
Its vistas strike, its palaces surprise;²⁷
While, scourged by famine from the smiling land,
The mournful peasant leads his humble band,
And while he sinks, without one arm to save,
The country blooms—a garden and a grave.

Throughout the poem the poet condemns the 'luxury' and 'sickly greatness' of their 'degenerate times' and in particular the 'barren splendour' of the great gardens, which by using up good productive land and the provision for the poor, would inevitably bring about rural depopulation. In his essay 'The Revolution in Low Life', which might be regarded as a prose version of 'The Deserted Village' Goldsmith compares the situation with that existing in Rome before the decline:²⁸

'The whole country was one garden of pleasure, the seats of the great men of Rome covered the face of the whole kingdom, and even their villas were supplied with provisions not of their growth. Decadence followed and they became weak and defenceless, as the rough peasant and hardy husbandman had emigrated and taken away the strength of the nation' (Goldsmith's quotation from an unnamed work).

²⁶ Cardinal Newman with his mother and sisters stayed in the schoolhouse Nuneham Courtenay (then the residence of the officiating clergyman) in 1828 at the invitation of Dornford. His brother-in-law referring to the Newmans' life at Nuneham Courtenay speaks of the tradition that the village was 'the true Auburn of Goldsmith's "Deserted Village"': Rev. T. Mozley, *Reminiscences chiefly of Oriel College and the Oxford Movement*, London, 1882.

²⁷ Alexander Pope, *Moral Essays* iv.

'He gains all points who pleasingly confounds,
Surprises, varies and conceals the bounds'.

Pope who had stayed at Stanton Harcourt under the patronage of the Harcourts, maintained that the essential feature in landscaping was the 'management of surprises'.

²⁸ Goldsmith was preoccupied with the history of Rome when he wrote 'The Deserted Village'. In 1769 his *Roman History* was published and afterwards he was made Professor of Ancient History to the Royal Academy.

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2. *The Depopulator*

'The man of wealth and pride
Takes up a space that many poor supplied
Space for his lake, his park's extended bounds,
Space for his horses, equipage and hounds;
The robe that wraps his limbs in silken sloth
Has robbed the neighbouring fields of half their growth;
His seat, where solitary sports are seen,
Indignant spurns the cottage from the green.'

Goldsmith was concerned about the accumulation of wealth and the fact that the rich had 'two sources of wealth',²⁹ their inheritance and their profits from the foreign commerce he thought injurious to the country's prosperity. Lord Harcourt, like most of the nobility, had these two sources of wealth. In addition to the Chancellor's inherited lands and fortune, he had considerable investments in the East India Company and there is record of a Harcourt East Indiaman.³⁰ As the Queen's Chamberlain he often engaged in commercial transactions and an obituary notice reads 'in the latter part of his life the love of money grew insatiably upon him.'³¹ Like Goldsmith's 'man of wealth and pride' he was noted for the 'cumbrous pomp' of his fashionable occasions; he was also a noted huntsman and at one time Master of the Queen's Horse, and part of his purpose in removing the village was to provide 'space for his horses, equipage and hounds'.

3. *The Position of the Village*

'Sweet Auburn' was, like Nuneham Courtenay, on a wooded hill:

'Sweet was the sound when oft at evening's close
Up yonder hill the village murmur rose . . .
These all in sweet confusion sought the shade,
And filled each pause the nightingale had made.'

4. *The Composition of the Village.*

'The sheltered cot, the cultivated farm,
The never-failing brook, the busy mill,
The decent church that toppt the neighbouring hill . . .
Amidst thy bowers the tyrant's hand is seen
And desolation saddens all thy green'

It is interesting to note that the old village of 'sweet Auburn' had a 'decent' church, that is to say, one appropriate to the countryside and the needs of the people it served.

²⁹ *Vicar of Wakefield*, chap. 19.

³⁰ Reports in the *Gent. Mag.* and India Office Records of a Harcourt East Indiaman.

³¹ Royal Register V. 155.

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5. *The Parsonage and the Garden-loving Parson*

'Near yonder copse, where once the garden smiled,
And still where many a garden-flower grows wild;
There, where a few torn shrubs the place disclose,
The village preacher's modest mansion rose.'

6. *The Old Lady of Nuneham and Goldsmith's 'sad historian.'*

'But now the sounds of population fail,
No cheerful murmurs fluctuate in the gale,
No busy steps the grass-grown foot-way tread,
For all the bloomy flush of life is fled.
All but yon widowed, solitary thing
That feebly bends beside the plashy spring;
She, wretched matron, forced in age, for bread,
To strip the brook with mantling cresses spread,
To pick her wintry faggot from the thorn
To seek her nightly shed and weep till morn;
She only left of all the harmless train,
The sad historian of the pensive plain.'

It was the last line which Goldsmith used as a title-page illustration for the early editions of the 'Deserted Village' and it was the rhyme of this couplet which Whitehead used in his mocking opening lines of 'The Removal of the Village at Nuneham Courtenay'.

The careful matrons of the plain
Had left their cots without a sigh,
Well pleased to house their little train
In happier mansions warm and dry.'

Having defended the Harcourts' action, the poet laureate goes on to tell his story of the solitary widow left in old Nuneham Courtenay.

Her feet were chained, her heart was there;
'Twas there her Colin told his flame
'Twas there her Colin breathed his last . . .
This Harcourt heard with pitying ear
And midst the enchanting scene he planned
Indulgent to her humble prayer
Allowed her clay-built cot to stand.³²

Babs Wyatt had been dead for ten years when, after the publication of 'The Deserted Village', Whitehead wrote her tribute.³³

³² Harcourt Papers, vii, 376.

³³ In a letter to Lord Nuneham in 1771 Whitehead wrote: 'Your old woman was still in my head . . . as it is not written down it may never be finished.'

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7. *The Removal*

Even now the devastation is begun,
And half the business of destruction done. *Goldsmith*

Most 18th-century 'deserted villages' were slowly eliminated over a period of years as more land was acquired by the improver, leases expired or new accommodation was found for the tenants³⁴. The removal of Nuneham Courtenay, involving at least 50 families, was remarkable in that it was accomplished in 1760 and 1761. The dwellings in the actual area planned for the garden must have been destroyed first, since the date of Lord Harcourt's inscription on Bab's tree is 1760.³⁵ When the other houses within her part of the pleasure-ground had been removed only 'half the business of destruction' was done, for the main part of the village round the green which was to provide the parkland approach to the great house was still to be cleared away.

Goldsmith who was, as he said, 'of sensibility to be affected by the breaking of a teacup' would naturally be moved at the sight of the destruction of a 'smiling long-frequented' village and indignant that it was sacrificed for a whim of 'luxury', but there is no evidence that the 18th-century removals caused any actual hardship or depopulation. Certainly the new Nuneham Courtenay by all accounts flourished as a Harcourt estate village. The 2nd Earl, the Rousseau-worshipper, instituted 'rewards of virtue', a cottage industry, an annual feast, a school and a benefit club. The Earl allowed the villagers to walk in the beautiful pleasure-gardens made on the site of their old homes and a lesser poet sang the praises of his action in a poem entitled 'The Deserted Village Restored'.³⁶

³⁴ The clearing of Bowood Park described in *Wilts Arch. Mag.* 135, 6, 7. Middleton Stoney: See *V.C.H.*, vi (6) 244 and Jersey Papers (O.R.O.) Milton Abbas: M. Beresford. *History on the Ground*, London, 1957.

³⁵ The inscription is on a seat on the terrace at Nuneham Park.

³⁶ Arthur Parsey, *Poems*, London, 1815.

PLATE XII



A



B