



# The lost houses of Lincolnshire

Empty fields,  
rolling parkland,  
walls, gates, stable  
blocks and legendary  
tales are all that  
remain of some of  
the county's  
great mansions  
and houses

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I recently took out a book from Sleaford Library entitled, 'No Voice from the Hall - Early memories of a Country House Snooper' by John Harris, in which he describes halls and great houses throughout the country which have been lost or greatly altered.

This made me think of the few which I have known personally as lovely mansions around the Sleaford area which have either been completely demolished or are now derelict. Let me relate my memories of this heritage which we have so sadly lost, although, thanks to the National Trust, English Heritage and other such bodies, some still remain intact for us to enjoy.

West Willoughby Hall stood just to the North of the Grantham to Sleaford A153 road. It was built in 1873 by William Watkins who also built Grantham Town Hall. It was occupied by the Revd Harry Hitchcock whose mentally ill brother was incarcerated there from 1912 until he died in 1928.

This poor lad was reputedly very timid and always wore a handkerchief on his head. He always ran away if approached. He was supposed to have the run of the attics and was allowed out into the gardens at 3pm each day, accompanied by a servant.

He was also alleged to sing to the moon from one of the gable windows and would get into a frightful state if there was no moon on the nights when he needed such comfort. On one such night, it is alleged, he ran violently up and down the stairs so many times, he finally collapsed from exhaustion at the bottom.

The house was unoccupied after 1928, I believe, until it was taken over by the army during the Second World War. When they left, it again remained empty and was reputed to be badly haunted.

I remember it as a very depressing place and it was spectacularly blown up with dynamite in 1964. Only part of the stable block remains, now converted into a dwelling.

Blankney Hall was, I believe, built in the early eighteenth century in the Palladian style. The Chaplin family purchased the

estate in 1719. Later, I was told, Sir Henry Chaplain was elected as a member of parliament - I think as a Liberal. My father told me that he lost his seat in parliament in the early 1900s because he became overconfident and did not bother to canvass.

He is supposed to have ruined himself through his lavish lifestyle which included his passion for horses, hunting and expensive cars. In 1896, Lord Londesborough acquired the house and estate and I well remember the excitement, especially amongst the ladies, when he married the beautiful Miss Lubock in the 1920s.

The meet of the Blankney hounds on the front lawn of the hall was a beautiful sight. I saw Lord Londesborough as joint Master, resplendent in his black silk top hat and scarlet tailed coat, accompanied by Lady Londesborough looking so elegant, riding side-saddle. The other joint Master at that time was Lord Barnby, who lived at Scopwick House nearby.

I also recall, as a very small boy, attending a garden fete on the same front lawn in the company of my great Aunt Kate, Uncle Will and his wife Alice, who were all tenants of the estate, living in a lovely old stone cottage and a farmhouse respectively.

Alas, during the Second World War the hall was requisitioned firstly by the RAF and later by the USAF and was finally burned out in a huge fire in 1945. It stood as a wreck for some years. The fittings and even the stonework were slowly plundered or 'recycled'. Now few traces remain although the site of the private carriage drive through to Scopwick Station can still be discovered. What a sad ending for such a grand residence. Fortunately, much of the original park survives as Blankney Golf Course and the other private drive extending right through to the A15 Sleaford Road can still be traced.

I do not possess many details about Aswarby Hall which was situated to the east of the Sleaford to Bourne Road, the A15, opposite the Tally Ho Inn, although I have a vague idea of it in my mind.

I know it was the home of the Wichcote family until it was pulled down some time after the Second World War. I recall the

*Top: Could this bridge at Haverholme be haunted?*

*Centre: The grounds of Blankney Hall are now Blankney Golf Club*

*Bottom: Does this field contain an elephant's grave?*

beautiful stable block with its fine quality brass door strap hinges and fittings, because I was commissioned to prepare a Schedule of Condition of them when they were requisitioned by the army in 1940. These buildings have now been converted into a superb house by the present owner, Mr Nicholas Playne.

I have heard two tales about this property. Firstly, it is alleged that in the early days, his Lordship's gamekeeper caught one of the staff poaching game on the estate – a serious crime in those days. The unfortunate wretch was hauled before his master who gave him a letter addressed to the magistrate at Folkingham, setting out his crime with instructions to proceed to the House of Correction, deliver it and await his sentence of imprisonment in that jail. The sly dog sought another member of staff and bribed him to take the letter for him, offering a small reward for so doing. The poor wretch could neither read nor write and proceeded to carry out the errand. Thus an innocent man served the punishment and the villain got off Scott free, so they say.

The second tale concerns a mound of earth with a tree growing on top of it, situated near to the A15, opposite the aforementioned Tally Ho Inn.

Apparently, long before the advent of motor transport, a circus was proceeding along the road to Bourne, having given performances in Sleaford. In those days everything had to be transported in horse-drawn vehicles, and the larger animals, especially the performing elephants, had to walk.

Unfortunately one old elephant was very ill and dropped down dead at this spot. This placed the staff in a dilemma. What could they do? No doubt they adjourned to the Tally Ho to consider the matter over an ale or two. They had no transport available capable of carrying a huge beast such as this and they could not leave it lying there by the roadside.

Then one character had a brilliant idea – they would bury it. They were not able to dig a hole to put the carcass completely underground so that is how this mound came about. Perhaps one day some inquisitive soul will open it up and discover whether the story is true. Surely the bones of an elephant would be easy to identify. Then again, perhaps not. Let the legend – and the elephant – lie in peace.

What remains of Haverholme Priory lies off the A153 on an unclassified road from Anwick to Ewerby – once the gated private drive to the house. This Gothic mansion is another building which I remember well. As a very small boy, I recall driving along this road with my grandfather, William H Brown, in his pony and trap as we journeyed home from Ewerby to Ruskington.

As we approached the stone bridge over the River Slea, dated 1893, we saw a lady standing at the gate of the private drive leading up to the house. Grandfather stopped to have a brief conversation with her. I presumed that she was Lady Winchelsea, apparently a widow, as she was dressed all in black and grandfather later informed me that she was the lady of the house.

Incidentally, that bridge is supposed to be haunted by a female figure seen leaning on the parapet although some say the haunted bridge is the smaller one over the stream nearer to the A153.

I have a happier memory of this bridge when I look at a photograph which I took in the 1950s of my wife, May, sitting on it, and giving me one of her lovely, radiant smiles. One local resident informed me that the ghost has been seen several times recently.

Alas, in the late 1920s, most of the house was pulled down although a central core still stands to this day. My father took me to see it while the demolition was being carried out by Messrs Wallhead Brothers and, even as a small boy, I felt a profound sadness at the loss of such a lovely home.

Father often spoke of the cricket matches in which he played on the pitch in front of the house.

