



Eight centuries of living

Brackenborough Hall, two miles north of Louth is an impressive yet comfortable family home which can trace its history back to the middle ages

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Opposite page from top: *Brackenborough Hall*

Paul and Flora Bennett

Leaving the twisting lanes of the beautiful Wolds countryside, access to Brackenborough Hall, an impressive Grade II listed seventeenth-century manor house is gained by a long straight avenue, flanked by a sentinel of sturdy horse chestnuts, interspersed with limes. These trees, in their winter uniforms are starkly silhouetted against the expansive Lincolnshire sky.

To the right are the grassed earthworks of the deserted medieval village and to the left parkland dotted with still more trees of indeterminate age. The road leads past inquisitive cattle in their stalls to the first sight of Brackenborough, its fine red brick elevations, mellowed with age and its nine white sash windows gazing boldly over the farmland for what seems to be as far as the eye can see.

This is no museum, of that there can be no doubt; visitors are welcomed by the caution: 'slow, free-range children'. This is home to Paul and Flora Bennett, son Christopher and daughters Helena and Sally-Anne.

Like many a grand old building, the house seems to whisper: "I could tell you a thing or two." But that's already been covered in print, by Eleanor Bennett, Paul's mother, in 'Brackenborough Hall - the story of a Manor'. A scholarly text in its own right, passages from it are referred to here, perfunctorily of necessity, when recounting an all too short visit.

The L-shaped hall occupies a moated site and beyond the thirteenth-century moat itself, whose south facing banks are sprinkled with snowdrops, the front garden is laid mainly to lawn, surrounded by a dense yew hedge and island beds planted with shrubs and herbaceous plants. In addition there are two tall yew bushes diligently trimmed to a conical shape by Barry the gardener, who only recently abandoned his mechanical shears for an electric hedge trimmer.

The front lawn is further adorned by a fine Coade stone eagle atop a base stone of an 1150 scallop capital which, having found its way from Louth Park Abbey, surveys the Hall from a commanding position. In the south west corner by the

moat are the remains of the folly built in 1863 by James Robson 'concocted from the remains of Fotherby church' according to Nikolaus Pevsner, the renowned architectural historian.

The lawn continues round to the original west wing of the Hall where there is a small ornamental pond to the left of the building. Adjacent to this side of the hall a small timbered bridge straddling the moat beckons the visitor to a vegetable plot and more flower beds; further on, a small orchard has recently been planted. At the rear of the Hall is a small copse frequented by wood pigeons and many other species of birds.

Mrs Bennett senior, a former teacher, recalls in her book, published in 1995 by the Louth Naturalists' Antiquarian and Literary Society how she and her husband Ralph, were given the Hall in 1953 after their marriage, by Christopher Bennett, who in turn took over the estate from his uncle, Frederick Bennett, in 1925. Frederick Bennett, twice MP for Gainsborough, had bought the Brackenborough estate in 1907 and installed his nephew Maurice as tenant farmer. He continued to farm until his untimely death in 1913.

The estate has a long tradition of farming. Indeed ownership of the farm can be traced back to 1066, and is continued by Paul, although the arable farming land has been increased from 500 to 800 acres. A small herd of cows is retained. Paul and Flora who took up residence at the Hall on Ralph Bennett's death and their subsequent marriage, lament the passing of better farming days and plans to diversify are on the horizon, though more of that later.

The inevitable tour of (some of) the grounds completed and the photographs taken, the sound of tyres on the gravel drive signal the arrival of Flora, a commercial property solicitor in Grimsby, home from the school run. A warm welcome follows, and the three latest generation Bennetts decant.

The entrance to the large farmhouse kitchen, with its family sized range, gives access to a nineteenth-century addition



to the building; Flora shows me the walk-in pantry on the left and an equally spacious and well-utilised china cupboard on the right. Flora leads the way again to a large square sitting room, one of the oldest parts of the house, dating back to the fifteenth-century. A thick, black oak beam spans the width of the room with a long sash window to the right. The ceiling had been raised at some point in the building's long and chequered history, and it is believed this room could have been an earlier kitchen before the eighteenth-century additions, and later converted to its present use.

A re-covered servants' door leads into the hallway and the front of the Hall which was built on to the original building in 1740 by George Heneage. This grand extension features the four lovely Chinese style upper sash windows with plain glazing below, to allow for uninterrupted viewing, situated on the ground floor and five sashed windows above with three hipped dormers on the top floor. The roof was originally of plain tiles but this was replaced in 1991. The central door was glazed with a Gibbsian stone door surround and reached by a flight of stone steps which necessitated the floor of the original building being raised. The red bricks were made from clay excavated from the large pit, still visible in the grounds to the front of the house.

Inside we have come to the impressive white painted main staircase which rises to the top of the house without the benefit, or obstacle, of a central support. Flora points out the unusual feature of three turned struts on each step and the scrolled tread ends. To the right is the imposing panelled dining room with its false fireplace flanked by fluted columns. A large polished wooden dining table, eight dining chairs, two carvers and matching dresser are the main items of furniture in the room but as Paul now uses part of the room as an office, a computer and printer are the incongruous concessions to twenty-first century life. Two large portraits of Joseph and Ellen Bennett dominate the left wall.

Joseph was a successful timber merchant in Grimsby and brother to Frederick. Moving on, the two Chinese windows to the front have matching window seats beneath them and white painted wooden shutters. The room's high ceiling and pleasing dimensions reflect the architectural style of the period.





A timber bridge straddles the moat to the west of the house



Flora leads the way across the entrance hall to the drawing room on its left. This was being decorated by stalwart Barry, who has worked for the family for fifty years at the Hall as gardener and handyman – an etcetera is appropriate, here, he smiles. The panelling is newer than in the dining room as the original had to be replaced due to dry rot. A fireplace, in regular use, and with an attractive white wooden surround in the style of Adam, is situated on the far wall. Here, again, the windows have their original wooden shutters which, reaching shy of the top of the windows, offer a sign that they may have been lowered at some point to create a drop for pelmets.

Whilst looking round I take the opportunity to ask Flora if she had been in any way daunted by the prospect of living in such a large house. She replies that although not of local descent - she comes from Merseyside where she and Paul met at college - she had visited the Hall on many occasions before settling in Lincolnshire and was well aware of the challenges she would be taking on.

Size brings with it, of course, the seemingly never ending carousel of decorating and, listing constraints demand that everything be approved to the last detail. We continue our tour of the building upstairs to the guest bedroom. Panelled like the others, it exudes a light and airy ambience and affords superb views of the garden and surrounding countryside.

Back on the ground floor, we join Paul in the dining room and over cups of tea discuss the problems of farming and how, nowadays, diversification is an essential element to the continuity of farming - not just an option. He and Flora had decided to convert the disused coach house and stables and enormous granary above into self-catering apartments. I had caught a glimpse of these buildings, adjacent to the Victorian extension, while walking around the garden. Barry had pointed out the stable clock and tower, striking bell and a weather vane above. Built by J W Benson, one of the great clockmakers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this is still a feature which Paul is later to show off during a recce of the buildings. They themselves are shouting out for conversion and hopefully, if planning permission is granted, work can begin.

Next door, the secret to the Hall's physical warmth is revealed in the form of a cavernous wood burner, of a 1980 vintage and locally made, which billows plaintively as Barry feeds its voracious appetite. Soon, it is to be retired gracefully to make way for the perfect replacement in today's eco-conscious world - a modern wood chip burner. This environmentally-friendly solution will, says Paul, devour anything from unwanted wooden pallets to dried Miscanthus grasses, a bio-fuel which Paul can grow on the estate. The burner will supply the house and the new units.

Brackenborough Hall is the perfect country holiday location with the rolling hills of the Wolds and with the coast so close. And few of us can claim to have a deserted medieval village on our land.

And this brings us neatly to the topic of open days at the Hall, when Paul accompanies school parties and other groups on tours of the earthworks and surrounding parkland. Flora says they have an English Heritage Open day in September when parts of the house are also open to the public. In addition, the site both north and south of the farm is open for public access as designated country walks.

The time has simply flown by and I take my leave of the friendly, accommodating Bennett family. The aged red brick walls of Brackenborough Hall have offered up not only a snapshot of their considerable history but also of a family with plans for its future security; with the enterprise of Paul and Flora Bennett its legacy is in good hands.

Below from top: The medieval earthworks

The dining room

