

6. GEORGE LANE-FOX: A COUNTRY GENTLEMAN AND
TRADITIONAL SOCIETY

"The typical English Gentleman who for eighty years had lived and worked among his own people".(1)

"No finer sportsman ever wore a top boot".(2)

These tributes to George Lane-Fox reflect two supposedly opposing themes of the gentry in the 19th Century, a concern for local agriculture and a devotion to gentlemenly pursuits, in particular fox hunting. The role of the gentry within the local community was obviously dependent upon each individual but as a group they were very important, in the mid century about half of England's agricultural land was in their hands. Land still meant both economic and political power and there are few signs that they were in decline. The term gentry seems rather ambiguous but an income of £10,000 and at least 1000 acres seems the lower limit. George Lane-Fox fits into this with an estate in Bramham of 2100 acres and an annual income of £11,000 in 1853(3). The part the gentry played in their estates has been a matter of considerable discussion but there is little doubt that their influence on agricultural developments particularly with regard to improvements was crucial. The extent to which agricultural communities were differential, paying

homage to the total dynasty is hard to determine but what seems clear is that the gentry had an important part to play in maintaining an essentially traditional social and economic structure in the countryside(4). Thus the importance of George Lane-Fox's influence on the community and agriculture must be considered.

The Lane-Fox family had held lands in Bramham since the early 18th Century which had stayed in their hands continually so they were well established and respected in the local area. George Lane-Fox certainly played a key role in the Wetherby Agricultural Society and was closely linked to the Earls of Harwood who were actively involved in hunting with the Bramham Pack.

George Lane-Fox had all the attributes of a member of the gentry. He owned a large Queen Anne Country House [illus 43] set in 70 acres of renowned ornamental garden, which were the most outward sign of his status. In 1828 the house was damaged by fire and the family moved to Bowcliffe Hall and Bramham House near the village, both considerable properties but the gardens were still maintained at a high cost. The estate at Bramham was his primary concern but he owned other lands in Yorkshire and Ireland [5422 acres in Waterford and 18890 acres in Leitrim] and drew incomes from The Aire and Calder Navigation and mineral rents

from the Allerton Bywater Colliery. Lane-Fox was also an important member of Yorkshire politics and society representing Beverley and Pontefract until 1841 as well as being a member of the Yeomanry and Deputy Lieutenant. He was known as the 'Sporting Squire' and was keenly interested in hunting and coaching [Illus 44] typical of the gentry at this time.

Lane-Fox's role in local agriculture was paramount, obviously as Chief landowner his influence would have been considerable. The large amount of woodland in the parish fell under his control, he was the only farmer wealthy enough to be able to exploit this resource, thus he actually affected the physical nature of local agriculture. He was also very concerned with the move towards farm improvements. This was partly due to a large debt he inherited which amounted to £232,799.⁽⁵⁾ This left him no choice but to make changes because his estate was starved of capital and a survey taken in 1852 clearly shows the need for drainage, the subdivision of fields and the reallocation of land as well as the repair to buildings. As a result Lane-Fox sold off sizeable areas of his estate elsewhere and spent the money on improvements in Bramham. He also strongly urged others to make similar moves, to the Vicar he wrote in 1849,

"it must of course be an advantage to the neighbourhood to see land farmed properly and the few who have a wish to improve may take advantage of a good example".(6)

And to his tenants in 1856,

"let me strongly advise you all in these money making days to improve your farms you will then be prepared to meet any check to prosperity".(7)

Thus it was clear that he was taking a leading role in trying to maintain agricultural well being in Bramham.

The relations between landlord and tenant were crucial to the development of good farming. In Bramham this seems to have been very relaxed to such an extent that in 1856, at a time of prosperity his tenants offered to reduce their rents which he declined. They then commissioned a painting of their landlord [Illus 39]. This has been described as "remarkable"(8) and certainly shows a very good working relationship.

This theme can be seen again with regard to fox hunting with which Lane-Fox was greatly concerned. The

hunt was centred at Bramham Park with new kennels built in 1848 and Lane-Fox was master of the hunt for 40 years. During this "Golden Age" of fox hunting it seems that the prosperous farmers were the "keenest participants"(9) in the sport actively hunting and subscribing to the pack. Thus even though the activity could do considerable damage, in 1853 Lane-Fox paid 16s for two sheep destroyed by young hounds(10) farmers clearly supported the sport. There were also a number of field followers who participated and hunting seems to have united the higher levels of agricultural society.

Lane-Fox's influence on the local community was heightened by his employment of local labour. Within his household he had 19 servants and at least 16 men were directly concerned with looking after the gardens and stables as well as those employed as game-keepers and huntsmen. Added to these would have been a large number of labourers farming his lands directly and a number of workers would have been permanently working on farm improvements. The estate accounts show that local blacksmiths, painters, plumbers and stone masons were used to maintain the house and make farm improvements. The household accounts(11) also show a considerable patronage of local shops and traders, thus Lane-Fox must have had a sizeable effect on the village providing employment and a ready market for local supplies.

The philanthropic role of the gentry towards the local parish seems to have been widespread. As benefactors to the community they had a number of social responsibilities and here Lane-Fox was no exception. In 1851 he was paying £12 to the village schoolmaster, £8 15s 7d for coals for the poor of Bramham and £166 4s 0d in pensions to his retired workers. This shows that he was more than just a wealthy landowner but was a part of the village and its people.

It becomes clear that George Lane-Fox and his family were both a part of the community and an influence on it helping to maintain a traditional political and social structure in Bramham. Farming society was finely balanced with landlords committed to a number of responsibilities to keep their farms in working order in return for rents from their tenants. It was expected that he should inject capital into farming and protect his tennantry which gave farmers considerable flexibility. Thus the world of the sedate country house and a dignified leisured gentry could co-exist alongside energetic and progressive farmers(12). Despite the idea that the traditional social structure could not be compatible with agricultural efficiency, English farming responded successfully under the control of the landed interest meeting the demands of a growing urbanised economy.

There is little doubt that men like Lane-Fox were key figures in the maintenance of the traditional rural community which they did by adopting a system of flexible farming within the framework of the established society.

Footnotes:

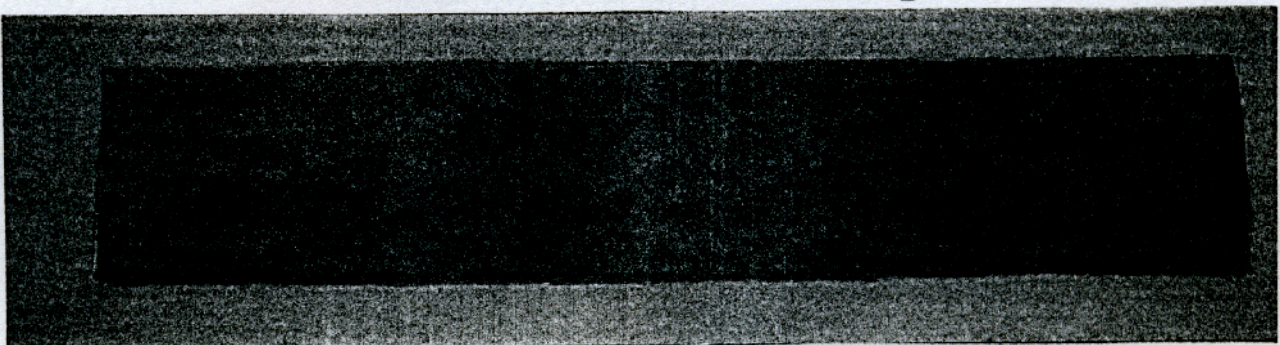
- (1) Dixon, W. S, The History of Bramham Moor Hunt, Leeds, 1899, P-56.
- (2) Greaves, R, A short History of the Bramham Moor Hunt, 1953, P-10.
- (3) Leeds City Archives, Lane-Fox Deposit, LF/CXXX, Estate Ledgers 1846-53.
- (4) Thompson, F. M. L, 'Landowners and the Rural Community' in Mingay, The Victorian Countryside, Vol I, London 1981, P457-474.
- (5) Ward, J. T. The Saving of a Yorkshire Estate: George Lane-Fox and Bramham Park, P-166.
- (6) Leeds City Archives, Lane-Fox Deposit, LF/CXXX 1/7, Cash Books for Estate 1849.

- (7) Leeds City Archives, Lane-Fox Deposit, LF/CXXX
1/8, Cash Book 1855.
- (8) Dixon, W. S, The History of Bramham Moor Hunt,
P-56.
- (9) Dixon, W. S, The History of Bramham Moor Hunt,
P-56.
- (10) Leeds City Archives, Lane-Fox Deposit, LF/CXXX,
Estate Ledgers 1853.
- (11) Leeds City Archives, Lane-Fox Deposit, LF/CXXX
11/2, Household Accounts 1851.
- (12) Chambers, J. D, and Mingay, G. E, The Agricultural
Revolution, P-168.

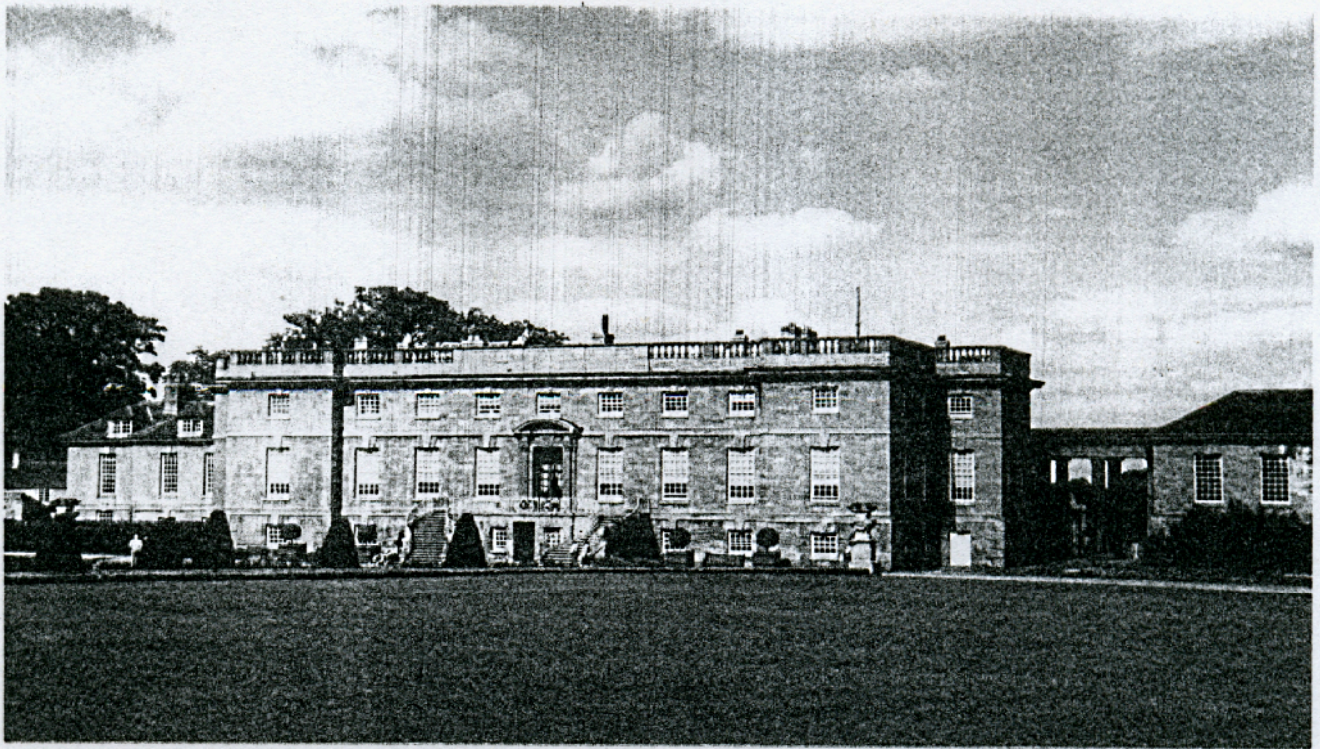


Illus.39. George Lane Fox painted by Sir Francis Grant 1856. The portrait has the following inscription: 'This portrait of George Lane Fox esq was presented to Mrs Lane Fox by the tennantry on the Bramham Estate, as a memorial of their landlords liberality'. This clearly shows the good relations he had with his tenant farmers. The painting itself is a direct reflection of this gentlemans role in the countryside. His horse, hound and hunting attire show him as a man of leisure and sport while the background scene of the local landscape points to his keen interest in his land and agriculture.

Illus.40. A memorial to George Lane Fox in the parish church which stands alongside those to many other members of his family. This illustrates the close and continuous connection with the village.



Bramham Park: A country house.



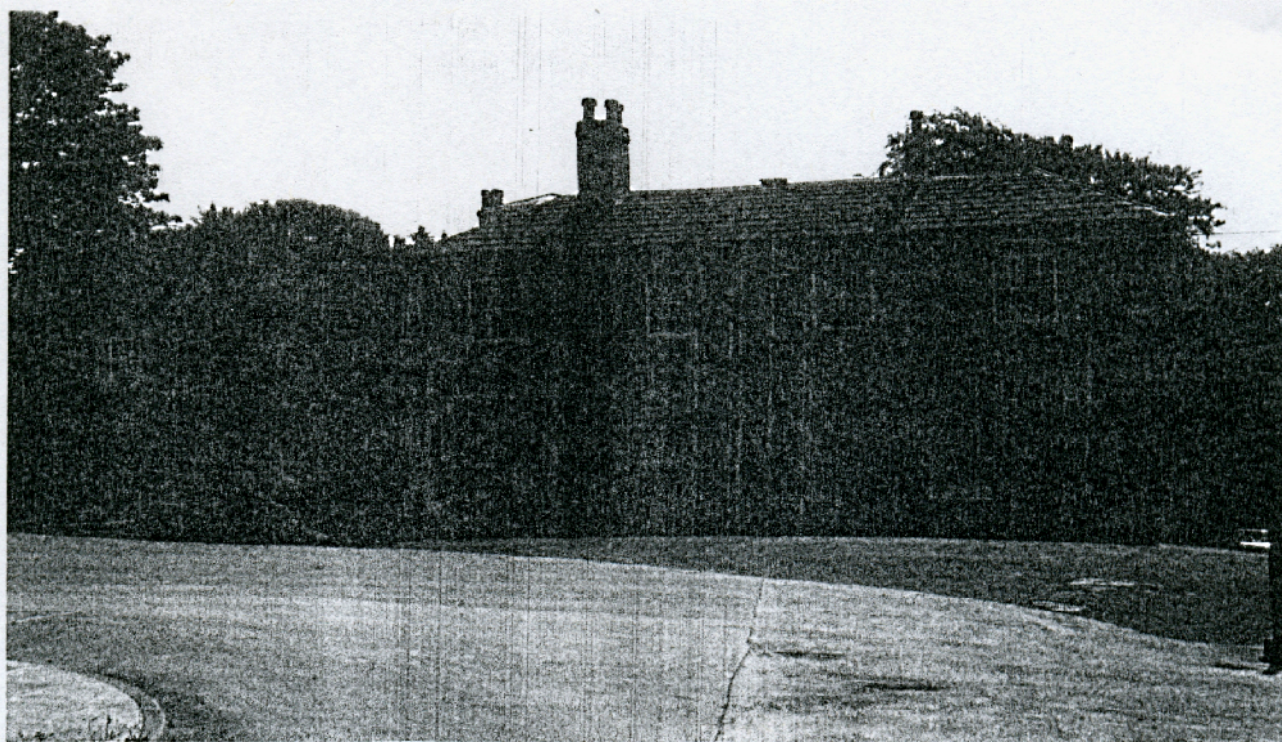
Illus. 43. Bramham Park, south front. This perfect Queen Anne House was built around 1710 by Robert Benson, Lord Bingley in unison with the huge formal gardens of French design. Both are outward signs of the family's standing and wealth and have been held for nine generations. Despite a fire which gutted the house in 1828 the gardens were maintained through out the period when the house was empty (1828-1907) at considerable cost.



Other Lane Fox residences in Bramham.



Illus.42. Bowcliffe Hall, a fine mid Georgian house, the home of the Lane Fox family after the fire at Bramham Park. Usually this was the home of the eldest son.



Illus.43. Bramham House, a sizeable 19th century house in the village.

The 'Sporting Squire'.

The gentry took a keen interest in gentlemanly pursuits in particular hunting and George Lane Fox was no exception.



Illus.44. George Lane Fox enjoyed coaching, here he is pictured outside Bowcliffe Hall at the reins.

Illus.45. Bramham Moor Hunt was one of the most important hunts in Yorkshire. Below are the new kennels built for George Lane Fox by his father reflecting the popularity of this sport in 1851 especially in Bramham.

Pictures from: Dixon, W.S, The History of Bramham Moor Hunt Leeds, 1899.

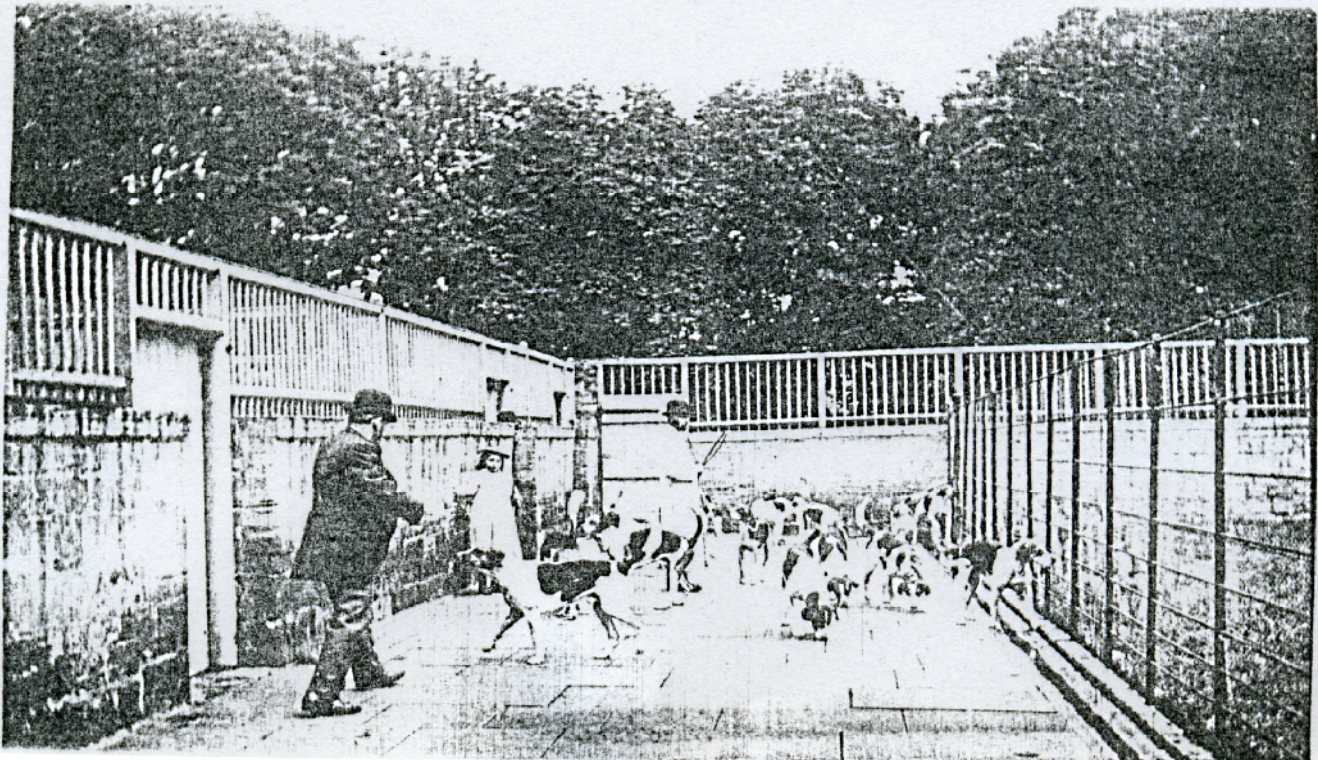
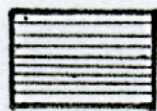
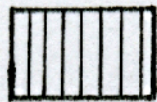


Fig.17. Map of woodland and parkland in Bramham.



Woodland



Parkland & Gardens



Parish Boundary

Note:

All the land shaded were directly held by George Lane Fox. This shows the physical influence this member of the gentry had on the parish. He was the only person with the resources to exploit this commodity and he provided employment for a number of woodmen.



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