

The Landmark Trust

THE CHINA TOWER

History Album



Written & researched by Caroline Stanford

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BASIC DETAILS

Built	c1840
Listed	Grade II
Ownership	Clinton Devon Estates
Tenure	Lease
Opened as a Landmark	April 2013
Conservation Architect Architects	Jonathan Rhind Conservation
Quantity Surveyor	Mildred Howells
Contractors	Skinner Construction Ltd of Sidmouth
Stonemasonry	Woodbury Stone Restoration of Exeter
Electrical and Mechanical Services	Fords and Sons Ltd of Sidmouth
Leadwork	Kilbride Roofing Ltd
Plasterwork	J H Lidstone
Archaeology	SouthWest Archaeology

Today, the former Bicton Park estate is divided into three separate entities. Bicton House has become the Bicton College. The formal gardens and associated structures have become the privately owned Bicton Park Botanical Gardens, run as a visitor attraction which includes access to St Mary's Church and the site of the Rolle mausoleum. The Western Outer Park has become the Bicton Arena and home of the Clinton Devon Estates. The China Tower lies within the last of these and is leased by Landmark from the Clinton Devon Estates.

Contents

	<u>Page</u>
Summary	5
The Rolle family	7
John, Lord Rolle and Lady Louisa's development of the gardens at Bickton House	25
Lady Louisa Rolle and the building of The China Tower	35
After Lord Rolle's death	45
Recent History of the Bickton Estate	59
The China Tower before restoration	62
Restoration of The China Tower	64
Bibliography	80

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The help of Gerald Millington, Archivist to the Clinton Devon Estates, is gratefully acknowledged in the preparation of this album.

The Landmark books, footpath map and framed map at The China Tower were generously funded by Dr and Mrs R Jurd and Mr D Haunton.



The detailed and charming 1845 estate map of Bicton Park. Baker's Brake and The China Tower are shown top left.

The China Tower - Summary

The China Tower was erected in 1839 for the last of one of the great Devon dynasties, John, 1st Baron Rolle (2nd creation) of Stevenstone, (1750/1-1842), by his second wife Louisa Trefusis (1796-1885). Daughter of the 17th Baron Clinton, Louise was also of ancient lineage. The Stevenstone connection makes The China Tower a 'descendant' of another Landmark, The Library at Stevenstone (probably built by Lord Clinton's great-great-grandfather Sir John Rolle c.1700). The Bickton and Stevenstone estates were united from the early 17th century. The Rolles were an ancient Devon family who had amassed vast acreages in the county through marriage and purchase. Lord John Rolle inherited Bickton and Stevenstone in 1796 from his eccentric father Denys Rolle, becoming by a second creation 1st Baron Rolle of Stevenstone (as the more ancient seat) in the same year. In the mid-18th century Denys Rolle established extensive plantations worked by enslaved Africans in Great Exuma in the Bahamas, further augmenting the Rolle wealth. Lord John Rolle therefore benefited from the compensation paid out by the government after the Emancipation Act of 1838, though he allowed his former workers to take over to his Bahamian lands without payment. These lands are held communally and inalienably by the descendants to this day.

At his inheritance, Lord Rolle continued the development of Bickton House and landscaping of its park begun by his father and uncles, developing the parkland around the formal Italianate gardens created in the 1730s. James Wyatt transformed the house in 1800. Lord Rolle had no children in his first marriage, and was seventy when his first wife, Judith, died in 1820. He lost no time seeking a new spouse in the hope of an heir. His choice fell on Louisa Trefusis, who was just twenty six when they married in 1822. This union was also childless, but the marriage was a contented one and the couple put much energy into elaborating the wonderful landscape they created at Bickton. W. S. Gilpin (nephew of author William Gilpin who wrote on the Picturesque) designed the tree planting around a great lake that was excavated in the park in the 1820s. Bickton's arboretum and pinetum soon became renowned (they include many species from America, building on Lord Rolle's father, Denys's connections with estates in Florida and the Bahamas). The Exeter nurseries run by the Veitch family, at the heart of a network of passionate 19th-century plantsmen, were also closely involved in the park's development.

In the 1830s, the tract of pinewood known as Baker's Brake in which the tower stands was brought into the Bickton home park from the neighbouring parish of Colaton Raleigh. By now, Lord Rolle was in his eighties and (despite his great stature) becoming frailer – he stumbled twice on the steps to the throne as he paid homage to Queen Victoria at her coronation in Westminster Abbey in 1837. The same year, Lady Rolle was writing to their agent Mr Daw about plans for a 'Castle', to be built on the knoll in Baker's Brake. The castellated tower, which has four floors and a separate stair turret, sits on a low-walled platform and is a typical example of a late-Picturesque eyecatcher, visible from Bickton House and with its own views of the sea and across the estate.

We owe the tradition that The China Tower was built as a birthday surprise for Lord Rolle to J. C. Loudon, the writer who visited most of the great early-19th-century gardens. Loudon visited Bickton in September 1840 and recorded *This tower is*

understood to have been built by Lady Rolle, entirely unknown to Lord Rolle, and undiscovered by him, as an agreeable surprise for his birth-day, October 16th 1839, when he completed his 88th year; and the following birth-day, Lady Rolle surprised Lord Rolle with the china room...It contains several rooms; in one of which, appropriately fitted up, a rich collection of china is tastefully displayed. His visit is also, therefore, the source for the use of the tower to display a china collection, although the lack of wall space on the upper floors suggests that the china must have been displayed in freestanding cases. Sources differ on whether Lord Rolle walked up the steps unaided to the top of the tower to enjoy the fine views, or whether he was carried up in a chair by two footmen.

The 1841 and 1851 censuses for Colaton Raleigh list Thomas Sage, gardener, and his wife Charlotte (with two children by the 1841 census) living at Belvedere, one of the tower's names. The lower floor(s) may therefore have doubled as an estate cottage.

A charming illustration to an 1845 estate map shows Lord and Lady Rolle standing in front of the tower, a landau nearby, having no doubt ridden up the Green Drive from the house. Lord Rolle had died in 1842, and a life tenancy of the estate passed to Louisa's six-year old nephew, the Hon. Mark Rolle. He eventually took up residence at Stevenstone, leaving Louisa in residence at Bickton as an indomitable dowager, to continue her passion for gardening until her death in 1885. When Mark Rolle died without sons in 1907, the estate passed to his nephew, Charles Trefusis, 21st Baron Clinton, and has continued in the male line since. In 1947, Bickton House was leased to Devon County Council as an agricultural college. Lord Clinton restored Bickton Park and opened the gardens to the public in 1963. In 1986, the gardens were sold to a charitable trust and today operate as Bickton Park Botanical Gardens.

The China Tower, meanwhile, was occupied briefly in the early 20th century but had stood empty since. Alone in the woods, it became an increasing target for vandals. In 2010 the Clinton Devon Estates approached the Landmark Trust seeking a partnership to restore and find a new use for the tower. Landmark has now taken a long lease to let the tower for holidays.

Restoration

The tower had no water or electricity; the ground floor originally had a range, presumably for servants to prepare refreshments, but otherwise there was just one small fireplace on the third floor. The tower was empty, derelict and with a leaking roof and mould spreading across walls when work started. The tower was completely scaffolded and all the render carefully surveyed for cracks and repaired. Electrical cables to the tower have been buried, and air source heating installed. The parapet was re-rendered and the water repelling detailing improved. The rear service rooms were re-built on the original footings. A new stone window was inserted on the first floor. On the ground floor, an original flagstone floor was found beneath later screed; a new kitchen was made by the Landmark team and a tiny shower room shoehorned into the rear extension. The next two floors became bedrooms, with the sitting room on the top floor, where windows in every available angle make the most of the views. The Rolle Trefusis arms above the door to the stair turret were skilfully restored and the approach to the tower along Lady Louisa's Green Drive re-surfaced.

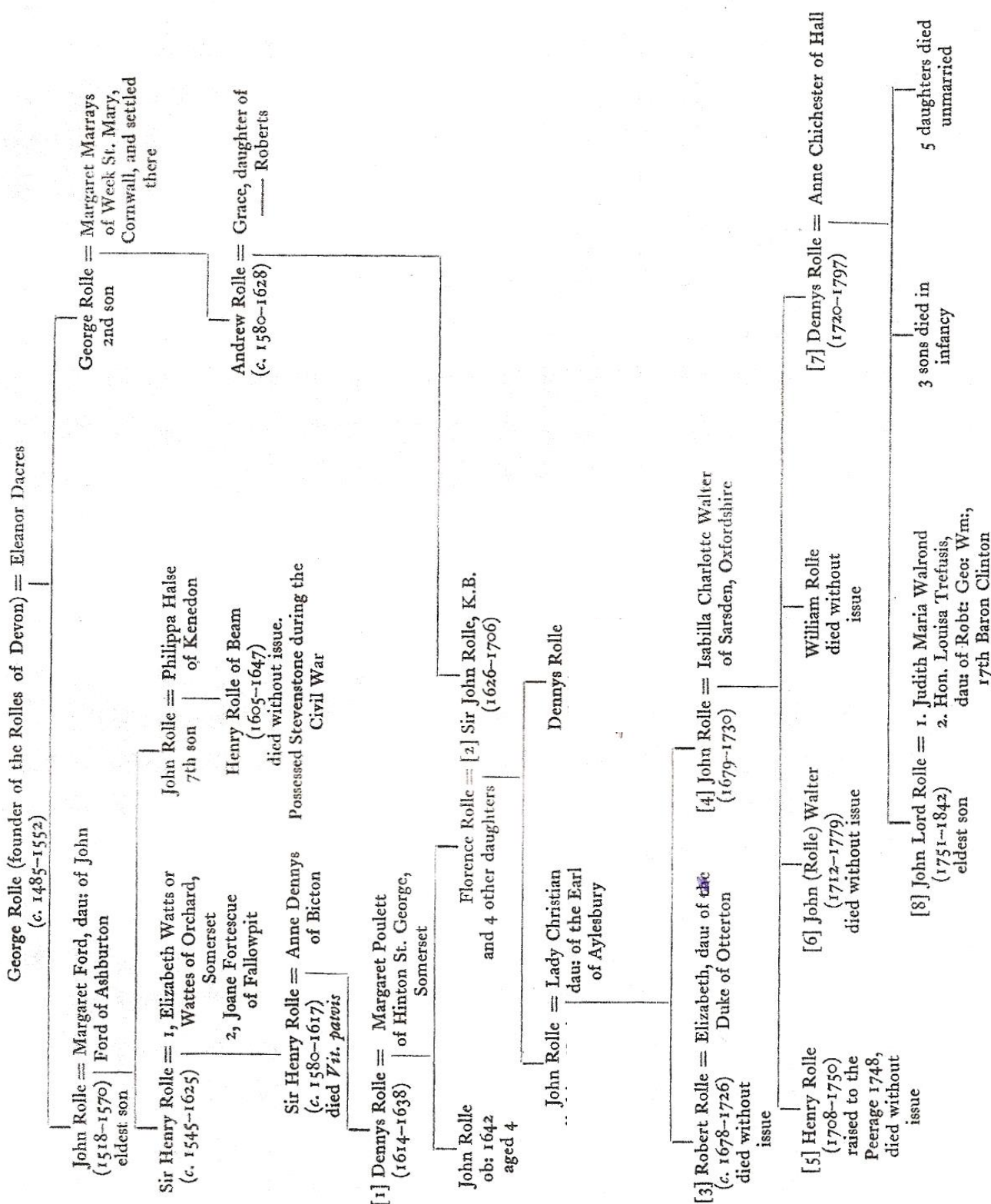
The Rolle family

Historically, Devon has been ruled by a handful of ancient families, and the names of Rolle, Trefusis, Clinton and Walrond all feature in the history leading up to the construction of the China Tower. John, Lord Rolle, for whom the China Tower was built by his second wife Louisa in 1839/40, had amassed by purchase and marriage one of the largest estates in the southwest by the time of his death in 1842, controlling some 45,000 acres across Devon & Cornwall.

There had been Rolles in Devon since 1524, when a rich London lawyer called Mark Rolle purchased the manor of Stevenstone in North Devon. His son George Rolle was another of the Tudor "new men." He consolidated the family wealth and served as Clerk of the Common Pleas under Henry VIII, making him well placed at the Dissolution to buy up the monastic lands that flooded the market. By George's death in 1552 the Rolles had become one of the largest landowning families in Devon. The new house he had built himself at Stevenstone, described by Leland as 'a right fair house of brick,' has been remodelled twice since and it is to the first of these remodelling phases that we owe the existence of another building in Landmark's care, The Library, an early 18th-century pavilion.

George Rolle had three wives, and is said to have had twenty children, although few lived to adulthood. It seems to have been the sons of his second wife, Eleanor Dacres of London, who established themselves in Devon. They and their immediate descendants married into landowning families, both of Devon and the neighbouring counties. The most significant, and profitable marriage, took place in the early 17th century when Sir Henry Rolle, great-grandson of George, married Anne, second daughter and co-heiress of Sir Thomas Denys of Holcombe Burnel and Bicton in South Devon. The Denys family had also amassed huge estates from the break-up of the monasteries in the south and east of the county, and from now on the Bicton and Stevenstone estates were united.

VIII. THE ROLLE PEDIGREE



The numbers [1 to 8] are placed against the names of the succeeding generations of the Rolle family who held respectively the Manor of Great Torrington.

Bicton was then also an Elizabethan house and both it and Stevenstone House, became the Rolles' principal seats. Indeed, Bicton was sometimes preferred to the "senior" residence at Stevenstone. Bicton itself was never a village in its own right, rather just a collection of houses associated with the estate.

Henry Rolle died in 1616, when these combined estates were inherited by his two year old son, Denys. Denys died in 1638 at just 24, by when it seems he had, rather remarkably, fathered a son and five daughters. His grieving widow commissioned a rich tomb, attributed to William Wright and now in the Rolle Mausoleum at Bicton (see over).

Henry Rolle's reputation still lived on sixty years later, when he is described in John Prince's *Worthies of Devon* of 1701 as "the darling of his country in his time, adorn'd with all the desirable qualities that make a compleat gentleman. He was, though young, of a ready wit, a generous mind, and a large soul". Sadly, his son John, the 'sweet babe' and 'hopeful heir' died aged four in 1642, and his effigy forms a detail on his parents' tomb, where that of his mother's effigy also reclines.

The Rolle estates then passed briefly to a cousin, Henry Rolle of Torrington, and then in 1647 to a still more remote relation, John Rolle of Marrais. The Bicton estate, however, seems to have been settled on Denys Rolle's daughters, of whom four later married. To ensure that the original family did not now lose out on the greater part of this inheritance, a marriage was promptly arranged between Denys's second daughter, Florence, and John Rolle the new heir. Stevenstone and Bicton were thus kept in one ownership, and the Rolle ascendancy in Devon preserved.



The tomb of Henry Rolle and his family, now housed in the Rolle Mausoleum designed by A. W. Pugin in the ruins of old St Mary's Church in Bickton Park. Henry leans on his elbow above his wife, as both wait, dressed in their finest, for the Day of Resurrection. His epitaph was written by Dr Fuller, prolific author and historian:

**“His earthly part within this tomb doth rest,
Who kept a court of honour in his breast:
Birth, beauty, wit, and wisdom, sate as peers,
'Till death mistook his vertues for his years.
Or else heav'n envied earth so rich a treasure
Wherein too fine the ware, too scant the measure.
His mournful wife, her love to show in part,
This tomb built here, a better in her heart.
Sweet babe! His hopeful heir (heav'n grant this boon)
Live but so well; but oh! die not so soon”.**

John Rolle trod a canny path, remaining on good terms with the authorities during the Protectorate while keeping his options open by supporting the future Charles II financially during his exile. His reward came in the form of a knighthood on Charles's restoration in 1660, and he too amassed considerable wealth. Sir John Rolle is one of two candidates as the builder of The Library at Stevenstone, whose front is Carolean in style although its interiors could equally belong to the early 18th-century.

Sir John Rolle died in 1706 and the estate passed briefly to his grandson, Robert Rolle, whose coat of arms The Library bears and who is therefore the other candidate for its construction. In 1710, Robert was taken ill at the Exeter Assizes reportedly from a "surfeit of drinking" and died "of convulsion fits".



The Library at Stevenstone, with the roof of its Orangery just visible behind. The Stevenstone and Bickton estates have been united since the early 17th century. Also in Landmark's care, The Library was also built by a member of the Rolle family in the early 18th century (whether by Sir John Rolle or Robert Rolle has so far not been established).



Views of the formal Italianate gardens at Bicton Park first laid out by Henry Rolle, 1st Baron Rolle of Stevenstone at Bicton in the late 1730s. The large Orangery probably dates from the early 19th century, and was built by John, Lord Rolle (for whom The China Tower was later built), to be the centrepiece of the gardens. Today, it is part of the Bicton Park Botanical Gardens.

Robert Rolle's son, Henry, then still a minor, inherited the Rolle estates. After leading a fairly unremarkable life as country gentleman and MP, in 1748 Henry became the 1st Baron Rolle of Stevenstone. Like his father and uncle, and at least two of his brothers, all were determinedly independent Country backbenchers, hardly ever making a speech, and certainly never holding office. Around 1730, Henry began to build a new seat at Bicton to replace the by now antiquated Elizabethan house that stood near St Mary's Church. In 1735, having demolished the old house, he initiated the landscaping of the gardens. These were laid out in the formal French style, often, it is said, by the great André Le Notre who planned Versailles and many of Louis XIV's other great parks; however, as Le Notre died in 1700, this cannot be true.

Bicton was one of just five great Devon estates of 20,000 acres or more, the others being Endsleigh, Castle Hill, Powderham and Duchy of Cornwall, and is often compared with Castle Hill, where Lord Burlington advised on the remodelling of the house and where a similarly French approach to the landscape design is often attributed to William Kent. At Bicton, the eye is led from a classical temple down across a series of lawn terraces to a lake, and then beyond to an obelisk, erected in 1747 on a distant hill. Like Castle Hill, this part of Bicton Gardens exemplifies the tenacity of French formalism in Devon's gardens, at a time when landscape taste in general was loosening into a more picturesque and pastoral approach. Today, this part of what is now the Bicton Park Botanical Gardens is known as the Italian Garden.

The 1st Baron died at 41, childless, in 1750, and his brother, John Rolle Walter inherited (who had adopted his uncle's surname of Walter in a previous act of dynastic consolidation). He continued the development of house and park, but also died childless, and so another younger brother, Denys inherited in 1779.

This Denys was a more interesting character, a naturalist and educationalist whose interest was more captured by the possibilities offered by the American colonies than by those of Devon or Westminster.



Top: John Rolle Walter (1712-79) who held Bicton & Stevenstone from 1750-79.

Below: His brother, Denys Rolle and wife Anne, both by Thomas Hudson. As Hudson died in 1779, these portraits would have been made in the years when Denys was pursuing his dreams of a plantation in Florida. Denys and Anne were John, Lord Rolle's parents. Denys held Bicton & Stevenstone from 1779-97.

John and Denys Rolle continued their older brother Henry, 1st Baron's, development of the Rolle estates.



A colony was established in East Florida in 1763 as part of the settlement of the Seven Years War with Spain and France, and the next year Denys Rolle obtained a grant of 20,000 acres there to settle '200 white persons in 10 years.' He went out himself to establish this and established good relations with the native Americans ('I supposed humanity and I found it') but struggled to attract settlers. According to his obituary:

*'The late Mr. Rolle early showed an active turn of mind, and... purchased of the Government a large tract of land in East Florida, with a view of colonizing it. For this purpose he engaged a considerable number of husbandmen and artificers in Devon and the adjacent counties, provided all kinds of suitable stores, and set out on his favourite expedition. His little colony, however, was soon broken up by sickness and emigration, the climate not agreeing with the constitution of the settlers. He suffered there terrible hardships; and to so low a condition was he reduced, as to be obliged to return to England as a common seaman.'*¹

He returned to England the following year to recruit more settlers and obtain more land grants but found life no easier on his return to Florida, plagued by indecision as to which lands to hold and his position not helped by his poor relations with Governor Grant (who wrote 'The delay of location...can only be imputed to Mr Rolle's suspicious and litigious disposition, for an unhappy jealousy in his temper is the source of all his grievances, which exist nowhere but in his imagination.')

²

At the close of the American War of Independence in 1783, East Florida was ceded to Spain in return for the Bahamas, which became a refuge not only for 'displaced' Floridan plantation owners but also British Loyalists seeking refuge for their opposition to the victorious colonists. Apparently the only MP with practical experience of settlement at the time, Denys Rolle successfully petitioned Parliament for compensation for his lost estates in Florida, claiming 'the greatest distresses of both mind and body of any gentleman who ever engaged in undertakings of this kind.'

The Rolle holdings then moved to the Exumas, an archipelago of tiny islands just south of Nassau in the Bahamas. By now Denys Rolle seems to have accepted the unlikelihood of white settlers, and had bought some 140 slaves – the largest land-

¹ *Gentleman's Magazine*, Supplement, 1797, p. 1125.

² Namier & Brooke, p.373.

and slave-owner on Exuma. Fields were cleared by slash and burn techniques and planted with cotton. Suitably named settlements were established: Rolleville and Rolle Town and later Steventon [sic]. The Rolles seem to have been little involved personally, placing the plantations in the hands of a local overseer and a lawyer in Nassau, and for a few years the plantations flourished. Again according to his obituary:

*'After serving his country faithfully in two parliaments, he retired to finish his days in a domestic and rural life. His favourite employment was husbandry; and he used to get up early in the morning as any of the peasants, and, cloathed like them, with a bag of provisions and his spade on his shoulder, go out for the day, and work as hard as any day-labourer on his estate. He has been often mistaken, in this dress, for a common husbandman, and, in this disguise, has directed many an enquirer to his own house.'*³

Denys Rolle was also something of a Doctor Dolittle:

'In 1789 he printed an address to the nobility and gentry... In this tract he speaks largely on humanity to animals... "I have experienced (says Mr. Rolle) the memory of wild beasts, in a bear, which, after more than a month's absence, was pleased with my taking him by the lip. I cannot account for the attachment I have met with of horses becoming tame to me without any dexterity; of the greatest dogs letting me lay hold of their jaws with pleasure; of venomous snakes that followed me, on invitation, which prevented fear and danger, and I used no precaution, as hunters did, about my legs. I traversed the wood for years without hurt, and lay in the most exposed places, in swamps full of venomous reptiles, and have had snakes under my pillow without being injured... Another instance, I recollect, of a small cat in Florida, who came some distance and fought some dogs that were howling round me, that she thought were attacking me, and drove them off. I can account for these manners no otherwise than by Providence answering my tender treatment of animals, which, I must always and humbly and thankfully acknowledge, has attended me through a long life."

Denys Rolle died at Stevenstone in 1797.

And it is with Denys's only son and heir, John Rolle, who inherited, that we finally come to the generations responsible for the China Tower, since it was for John, in his old age, that the China Tower was built as a surprise birthday present by his second wife Louisa.

³ *Gentleman's Magazine*, July 1797, p. 617.

(To finish the tale of the Exumas, the cotton plantations there soon began to fail, due to poor soil that once cleared was soon eroded due to extremes of weather and exposure, and to infestation by the chenille bug. John Rolle was an early advocate for abolition of slavery. When emancipation finally came in 1838, he deeded all his Exuma land in commonage to the former slaves, acknowledging what had become a de facto situation on the ground. As was traditional, slaves carried the name of their owner and today a reported 60% of Exuman locals still bear the name of Rolle. The Rolles' New World connections are also apparent in various aspects of the wonderful gardens that John Rolle and his wife Louisa went on to create at Bicton.)



John, Lord Rolle, 1st Baron of Stevenstone (of the second creation), 1750-1842. This portrait and its companion piece of his second wife Lady Louisa are by Thomas Lawrence, who died in 1830. They were probably painted to mark the coronation of William IV, also in 1830.

John, Lord Rolle (1750⁴-1842): Political life and character

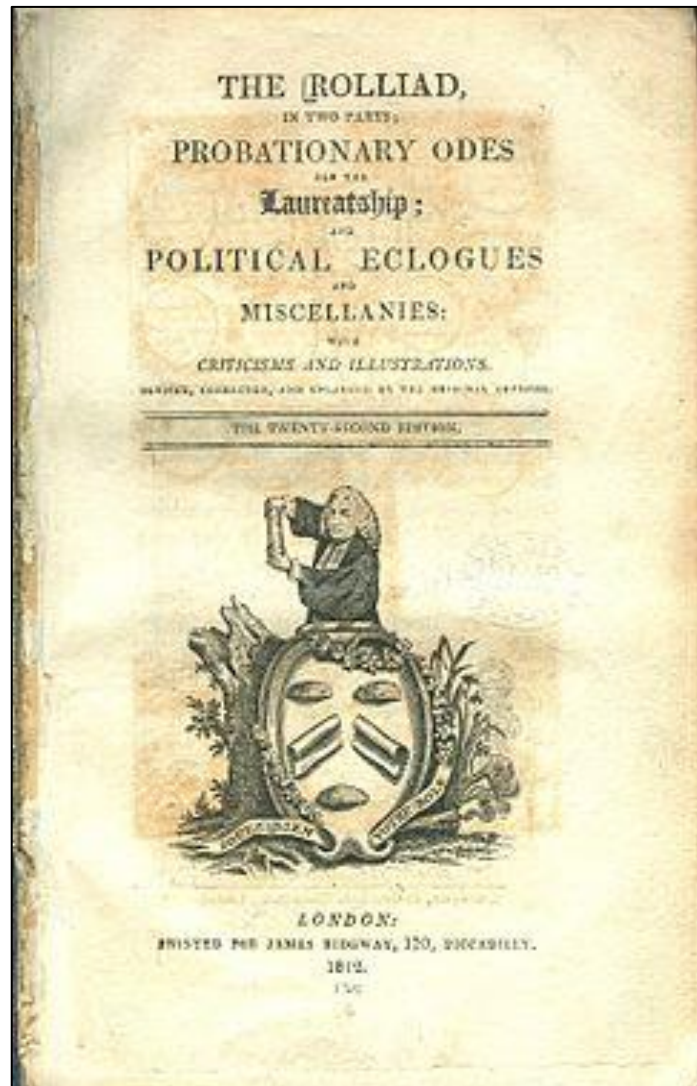
*Nature had denied him all pretensions to grace or elegance. Neither was his understanding apparently more cultivated than his manners were defined. He reminded me always of a Devon rustic, but he possessed plain common sense, a manly mind, and the faculty of stating his ideas in a few words.*⁵

John Rolle was a big man in every sense: his hand and foot measurements were said to be the largest in the kingdom. From 1780-1796, he served as MP for Devon. He began his political career as a completely independent country member, 'strong-minded, original and unpredictable.' He could not be depended upon to support either Court or Opposition, voting according to his own principles with an innate conservatism that soon put him at odds with Opposition politicians like Charles Fox and Edmund Burke.

As Rolle began to vote more consistently for William Pitt the Younger (who became Britain's youngest ever Prime Minister in 1783 aged just 24), and after he shouted down Edmund Burke in the Commons (no mean achievement, since Burke was a renowned orator), the Whigs satirised Rolle and other opponents in an anonymous satirical poem of epic proportions called *Criticisms of the Rolliad*, originally published in serial form in the *Morning Herald* in 1784-5. The *Rolliad* claimed to identify Rollo as the degenerate descendant of a medieval robber baron, Rollo, and had fun punning with his name. He was ascribed the motto '*Jouez bien votre role*' and his coat of arms redrawn to include both bread rolls and rolls of parchment.

⁴ Sources vary as to John Rolle's year of birth. His obituary in *The Gentleman's Magazine* (Vol. XVIII, August 1842, p. 201-2) gives his birth date as 16th October 1750 and recounts an address by the residents of Beer in 1840 'at the celebration of Lord Rolle's 90th birthday' - but also states that he was in his 86th year when he died in 1842, which would support a birth year of 1756. *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons* (Namier & Brooke), usually a reliable source, also has 1756 as his year of birth. Yet other accounts state that The China Tower was built for his 89th birthday in 1839. His parents, meanwhile, married in October 1750 making October 1751 a more likely birth date.... On balance, and on the basis of contemporaneity, the obituary date has been adopted for the purposes of this album

⁵ Nathaniel Wraxall, cited in Namier & Brooke, p. 374, n.11.



The frontispiece of *The Rolliad*, a long satirical poem by John Rolle's political opponents mocking Lord Rolle and William Pitt the Younger's administration. The authors lost no opportunity for a bad pun on the Rolle name: The bearings are described in the language of the Heralds as '*Three French Rolls, Or, between two Rolls of Parchment, Proper, placed in form of a Cheveron on a Field Argent--The Motto is _Jouez bien votre Rôle, or, as we have sometimes seen it spelt--Rolle. The Crest, which has been lately changed by the present Mr. ROLLE, is a half-length of the Master of the Rolls, like a Lion demi-rampant with a Roll of Parchment instead of a Pheon's Head between his Paws.*'

The poem begins

The poem begins:

*'O'er rolls of parchment antiquarians pore;
Thy mind, O Rolle, affords a richer store!*

and continues in similar vein at considerable length. *The Rolliad* ran to several editions, with multiple contributors. By 1790, when he retained the county seat for Devon after a token contest, Rolle's days of genuine political independence were behind him, for he had formed, he said, 'a sound attachment to Mr Pitt founded on personal esteem as well as public principles.' It is hard not to wonder whether this attachment arose in part out of Rolle's campaign to have his uncle's peerage resurrected, either for himself or his father Denys at that stage, such enticements being entirely typical as a means of binding 18th-century political allegiances. It seems Denys Rolle showed little interest in a peerage, having adopted the regimen and dress of a 'common husbandman' after the failure of his American schemes, but John was given a firm promise from Pitt that he would be ennobled during his father's lifetime. In the event, through fear of precipitating a by-election of uncertain result in Devon, John Rolle had to wait until 1796 for his peerage, which was revived expressly so that he became 1st Baron (of the second creation) Rolle of Stevenstone.

In the House of Lords, he became 'a choleric, hard-bitten old Tory', incongruously combining deep social conservatism with benevolent concern for the conditions of his local tenants and support for the abolition of slavery. Thus he was one of the 22 'stalwarts' who voted against the modest extension of voting rights proposed in the Great Reform Act of 1832 right up to its third reading, while at the same time initiating all the sort of philanthropic acts of civic building and leadership in Devon that might be expected of a benevolent country gentleman.

In 1819, John Lord Rolle became a widower. He had been married in 1772 to Judith Maria Walrond, by special dispensation from Parliament since they were both still minors, John aged twenty and Judith just seventeen. She was the daughter and heiress of the late William Walrond, of Bovey House, between Beer (near Seaton) and Branscombe on the south Devon coast, and so near Bicton. The Walronds were a prominent and ancient Devon family, whose main seat was at Bradfield House, Uffculme.



Lady Louisa Rolle (1796-1885), who married Lord Rolle in 1822 as his second wife when she was 26. Here she is shown in the robes of her husband's barony, presumably on the threshold of Westminster Abbey at William IV's coronation. The other assembled peers and peeresses can be glimpsed through the open door.

The 1772 Act of Parliament enabled the two minors to settle their prospective entailed inheritances into a marriage settlement, the beneficiaries to be the offspring of the marriage. However no children resulted and Judith died in 1819.

Despite now entering his seventies, John, Lord Rolle wasted no time in seeking a new wife, which he found in the person Louisa Trefusis (1796-1885⁶), daughter of Robert, 17th Baron Clinton and a distant cousin. Louisa was just 26 when they married in 1822, and local wags soon came up with another irreverent pun,

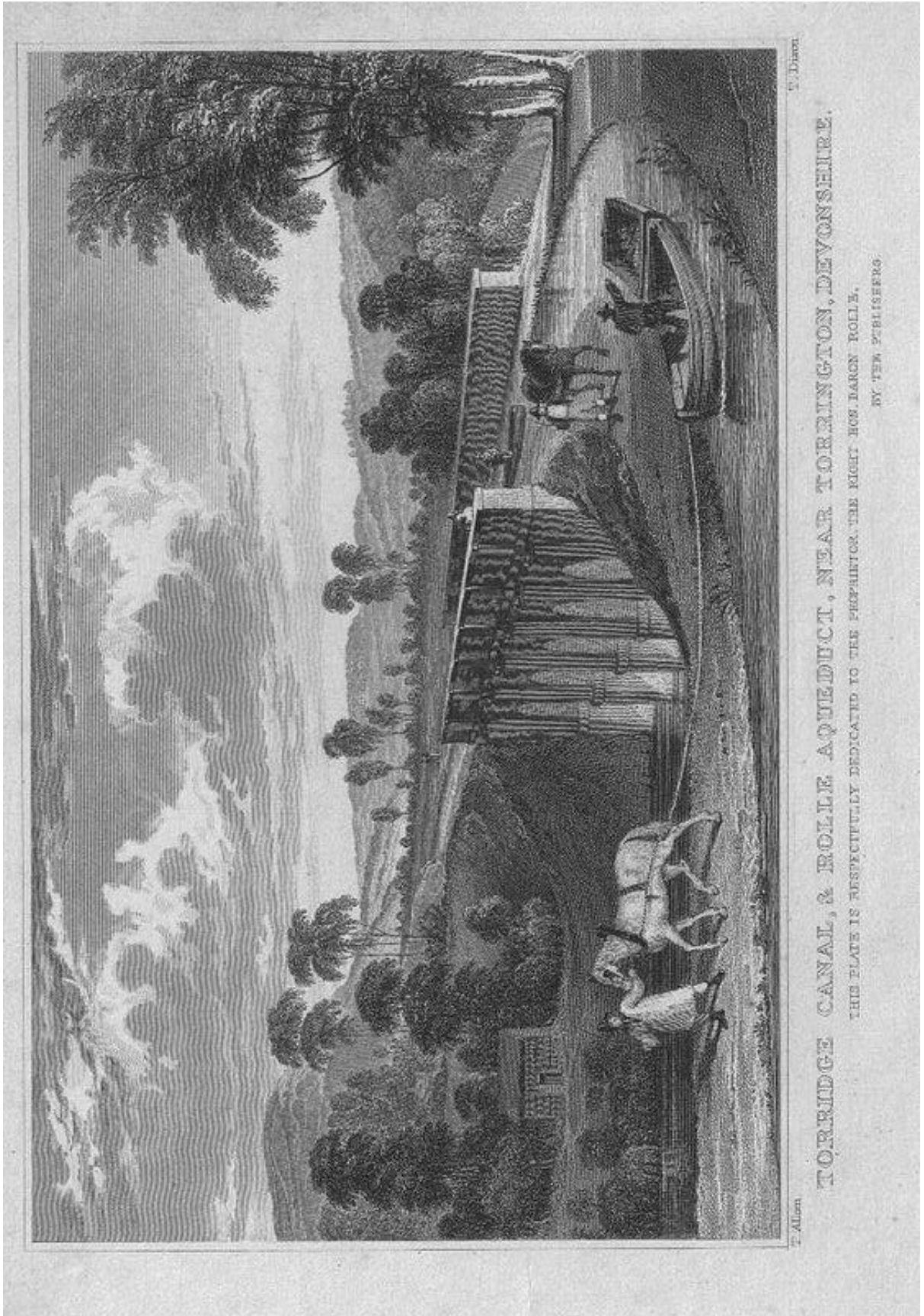
*How comes it Rolle, at seventy two,
Hale Rolle, Louisa to the altar led?
The thing is neither strange nor new
Louisa took the Rolle for want of bread.*

It has always been said that John and Louisa's marriage was also childless, but *The Annual Register, or View of the History, Politics & Literature of the Year 1824* includes an entry under Births for 28th March, 'At Bicton-house, Lady Rolle, daughter.' This also appears in *The Edinburgh Register*. If this was the child of John and Louisa, she did not survive and nothing more is known of her.

Thereafter, John and Louisa's marriage was also childless, but theirs seems to have been a happy and affectionate union and the creation of the gardens at Bicton became a shared passion of this energetic couple.

Notwithstanding his innate prejudice against widening democratic rights, Rolle was known as a good and generous landlord in Devon through these years. He carried out all the duties of a country gentleman, serving as a magistrate and as Colonel of the local Yeomanry, and rebuilt churches and schools.

⁶ As for John, Lord Rolle, the sources are disconcertingly inconsistent about Louisa's year of birth. Anne Austin's *Barony of Clinton* (1999) is judged the most authoritative and is followed here.



T. Dixon

TORRIDGE CANAL, & ROLLE AQUEDUCT, NEAR TORRINGTON, DEVONSHIRE.

THIS PLATE IS RESPECTFULLY DEDICATED TO THE PROPRIETOR, THE RIGHT HON. BARRON ROLLE.

BY T. M. PUBLISHING.

T. Allen

In 1823, Lord Rolle took up an idea of his father's and began the construction of a canal from Annery near Bideford to Great Torrington, unusual in being started as a private venture so that no Act of Parliament had to be obtained. The idea for the canal had been proposed by his father Denys Rolle but nothing came of his plans. James Green was now appointed lead engineer, who also undertook construction of the Bude canal. The occasion of the laying of the foundation stone of the aqueduct by Lord Rolle was marred when the cannon fired to mark the event burst, injuring a man called John Hopgood. Lord Rolle compensated him with a year's salary.

The canal cost some £45,000 and when completed in 1827 carried limestone and coal for Rolle's lime kiln and foundry in Great Torrington, and Marland clay by the return journey to Bideford for export. The canal later fell into disuse, but is being restored by a dedicated band of enthusiasts and some parts are still visible today, including the aqueduct (now a viaduct), the sea lock (although without any gates) and some parts of the inclined plane.

John, Lord Rolle and Lady Louisa's development of the gardens at Bicton

Notwithstanding the canal project, Lord Rolle was rarely at Stevenstone. With Louisa, he was enthusiastically embarking on the continuation of his uncles' and father's development of the landscape around Bicton House. The house itself, begun by his uncle, Henry Rolle in 1730 and completed by his father Denys, had again been transformed, this time by James Wyatt, whom Lord Rolle had instructed around 1800. Lord Rolle also built the domed greenhouse (one of the earliest of its kind and today a palm house) and (probably) the Orangery overlooking the Italian Garden. This contains Coade stone busts, dated 1806, of Nelson and Sir Walter Raleigh (who was born at nearby Hayes Barton, a large farmhouse that survives today although in private ownership).



It will be remembered that John, Lord Rolle's uncle, Henry, 1st Baron Rolle had laid out the home park in the formal French style in the 1730s. John, Lord Rolle now began to acquire outlying farmland to further extend the landscaping, including by 1825 the area then known as the Western Outer Park, and today split in ownership between the Bickton College of Agriculture and the Bickton Arena, which holds the Clinton Devon Estates' office at its heart. Soon after, Lord Rolle bought an outlying hill called Baker's Brake, that adjoined the Western Outer Park but lay in the neighbouring parish of ColatonRaleigh. Baker's Brake first appears on the 1838 Tithe Map for ColatonRaleigh.

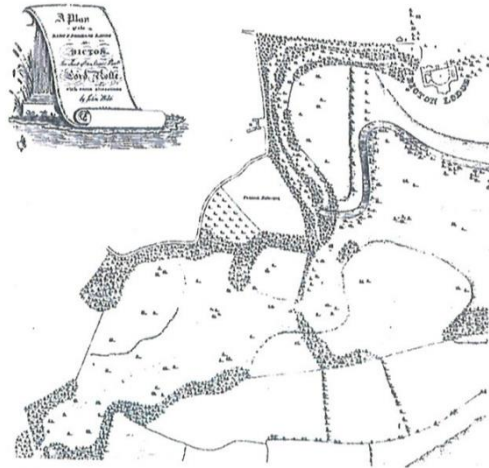
Lord and Lady Rolle then embarked upon extensive planting schemes for these new areas. For the planting of the Western Outer Park, they went to one of the foremost nurseries in this age of passionate plant collecting, the Veitch Nurseries of Exeter. Nurserymen were of increasing importance in the early 19th century, in part due to Humphry Repton's fashionable planting schemes but also due to the ever increasing traffic in exotic species and their propagation in the heated glasshouses made possible by the technological advances of the day, like the one built by Lord Rolle at Bickton.

An affidavit of 27th November 1847 from James Veitch appended to a fine 1845 estate map in the Clinton Devon Estates archive describes how Lord Rolle enlarged the Park 'by adding thereunto & including therein two large pieces of land & forming a Road through each in communication with & continuation of the Road thro the old or former Park & erecting two handsome gates & lodges at the outer entrances of said two pieces of land so added to the said Park & in planting the same with clumps of trees so as to harmonise the trees with said old or former Park.' The Rolle coat of arms crowns the gateways, now flanked by a Trefusis greyhound for Louisa as well as the Rolle rampant lion.



The Rolle arms were united with those of the Clinton barony through John and Louisa's marriage, on the western lodge gateway. The Trefusis arms bear three spindles. The Rolle motto is NEC REGE NEC POPULO SED UTROQUE ('Not for king nor for the people but for each.') The motto dates back to the 16th-century Rolles under Elizabeth I, when it began NEC REGINA... ('Not for the queen...'). It was the perfect motto for an independently minded country gentleman, and it has been suggested that the use of NEC REGE...here may suggest the gateway and lodge were constructed during William IV's reign, before Victoria's accession in 1837. However, the same version of the motto appears beneath the arms above the door to the stair turret at The China Tower so perhaps by the 1830s the motto had settled into NEC REGE.

The 'Bicton Clumps': distinctive, loosely planted groups of trees planted in Bicton Park by Lord Rolle under the guidance of W.S. Gilpin
(reproduced from Kim Auston, *Mr Gilpin's Wiggles: Nineteenth Century Parkland at Bicton*, in *Devon Gardens Trust Journal*, Sept 2009).

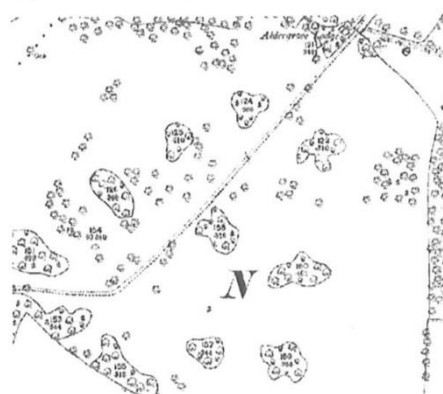


Plan of the park and demesne lands, 1825 (reproduced by kind permission of Clinton Devon Estates).



Tithe plan for the parish of Bicton, 1844 (DRO)

The boundary belts seen on the 1825 plan have been broken up and new parkland clumps have been planted with a footprint that can only be described as amoeboid ('cloud-like' or 'wiggly')



Bicton (reproduced from the 1889 Ordnance Survey map)

Veitch also claims that 'I apprised [sic] & was engaged in effecting' these alterations and improvements. However, while the Veitch nurseries were no doubt responsible for the supply of the species planted to 'harmonise' the new parkland with the old, another mind lay behind these scattered amoeboid clumps of trees, planted in symbiotic relationship with the large irregular lake to the south of Bickton House. Such artificial clumps of trees are almost always oval or round in 18th- and early 19th-century planting schemes. The Bickton clumps, today split between the grounds of Bickton College of Agriculture and Bickton Arena are 'quite simply unlike anything else usually encountered in an English landscape park.'⁷

And we learn from an article by John Claudius Loudon, tireless commentator on parks and gardens in the first half of the 19th century, that these grounds 'have been judiciously laid out by Mr Gilpin, and the piece of water formed by Mr Glendinning the head gardener under his direction has had an excellent effect.'⁸

Mr Glendinning, Lord Rolle's head gardener at the time, had been sent by the Veitches, who made a point of recommending gardeners. Mr Gilpin, who planned the old kitchen gardens at Bickton as well as other alterations, was also an employee of Lord Clinton, Lady Rolle's brother. This was typical – personal recommendation lay at the heart of the system rather than advertising for such important posts.

This Mr Gilpin was William Sawrey Gilpin, landscape artist and nephew of the more famous William Gilpin whose writings contributed so much to theories of the Picturesque. Nephew accompanied uncle on his seminal tour of the Wye Valley in 1782, and later established a successful practice as a landscape designer. W. S. Gilpin, who also planned the kitchen gardens at Bickton, was an employee of Lord Clinton, Lady Rolle's brother. Such personal recommendation was typical and lay at the heart of the system, rather than advertising for such important posts. W. S. Gilpin had very specific views on tree planting, maintaining that they should not be planted too densely in order to achieve natural (and therefore picturesque) form. The Clinton Devon Estates intend to perpetuate Gilpin's planting

⁷ Auston, K, *Mr Gilpin's Wiggles*, Devon Gardens Trust Journal, Issue 2, Sept. 2009, p.23.

⁸ Cit. Pugsley, S (ed), *Devon Gardens: An Historical Survey* (1994), p.15.

scheme in these clumps, using a pragmatic mix of species based on surviving parkland trees, since the original species list has not survived.

(A persistent rumour about the large lake in front of Bicton House, formed by Mr Glendinning under Mr Gilpin's direction, is that French prisoners of war were employed to dig it and line it with clay. As the lake does not appear on the estate map of 1825, and as hostilities ceased with France after the Battle of Waterloo in 1815, such use of French prisoners is implausible.)

Meanwhile, Lord and Lady Rolle were also elaborating the gardens flanking Henry Rolle's Italian Garden, and much of their work survives today. To the east, they created the American Garden, today a fine mature arboretum reflecting Lord Rolle's father's connections with the New World, and to the west a pinetum to celebrate coniferous species. Many of the trees had also been nurtured in nurseries at Stevenstone before being planted out.

All this was very much in the fashion of the day, as the naturalistic landscape tastes of the 18th century melded into the more self-conscious passion for cataloguing and collecting of the 19th. J. C. Loudon argued influentially in the 1820s that a garden was a work of art and any attempt to create an illusion of nature showed poor taste: non-native species could not survive without special attention. The love of arboreta and pineta was a reflection of this and Bicton's are prime examples. Planting in the arboretum (on which Loudon also advised) began in 1830 and in the pinetum in 1839.



Top: The magnificent palm house at Bicton, built by John, Lord Rolle in the early 19th century and a very early example of its type. Lord and Lady Rolle allowed the Veitch nurserymen to rear exotic and tropical plants there, including the first successful cultivation of the lovely Bicton Orchid, *Odontoglossum bictoniense*.

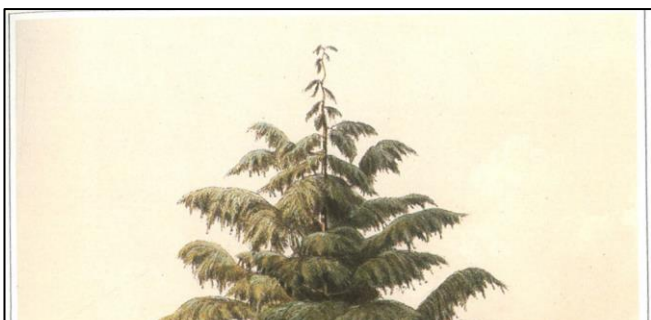
Below: The Hermitage, a summerhouse built as a retreat for Lord Rolle below the lake at Bicton in the 1830s. It has a floor of deer knucklebones and has recently been restored.

Loudon, who toured the great gardens of the day across Britain with his wife, reporting on them in the *Gardener's Magazine* as a combination of journalist, horticulturalist and arbiter of taste, visited Bicton House on 19 and 20 September 1842 and was given a tour by James Veitch junior (Mr Glendinning had moved on as head gardener by then). Lord Rolle had died just three months earlier on 3rd June. Loudon provides a valuable eye witness account of Bicton at this time, and may well have spoken with Lady Rolle. ⁹

Messrs Veitch & Son supplied the trees in the arboretum, he writes, 'taking measures to have all the plants correctly named, and all the blanks and deficiencies supplied.' Veitches kept 'six men constantly employed mowing the grass, and mulching dug circles round the plants with it as practised in the Derby Arboretum; destroying weeds as soon as they appear; and removing dead leaves, suckers from grafted plants, insects, decayed blossoms, &c.'

'One great beauty of the Bicton arboretum,' continued Loudon, 'is that every tree and shrub which it contains may be seen, and the name on its label read, by a person sitting in a carriage, and driving through it along the green walk.' Perhaps this was in part for the pleasure of its elderly owner. Today, Bicton Park is famed for its trees: it holds more than a thousand, of some 300 species, many endangered in the wild. Twenty five are 'champions' – the largest or tallest specimens of their species in the British Isles.

Well away from the main gardens, amid Mr Gilpin's clumps to the west of the great lake, a summerhouse known as The Hermitage was built as a secluded retreat for Lord Rolle in his declining years. Its walls are clad with thousands of 'fish-scale' wooden shingles, and the floor consists entirely of deer bones, pushed into the earth with their 'knuckle' ends uppermost (and it was restored in 2006). Like The China Tower, The Hermitage was built in 1839. Did Lady Louisa perhaps use its construction to distract her husband from her secret construction project of The China Tower, atop the hill in Baker's Brake?



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Lady Louisa & the Building of The China Tower

By the mid-1830s, Lord Rolle was in his late eighties. His strength of character was undimmed, as shown by his persistent opposition to the modest extension of enfranchisement in the Great Reform Act. Although 'constantly seen about on horseback in London', he suffered an unfortunate humiliation at the coronation of Queen Victoria in 1838 as he approached the queen on her throne to do homage. Victoria described the moment in her diary:

"Poor old Lord Rolle, who is 82¹⁰ and dreadfully infirm, in attempting to ascend the steps fell and rolled quite down, but was not the least hurt; when he attempted to re-ascend them I got up and advanced to the end of the steps in order to prevent another fall".

Onlookers were charmed by the young Queen's consideration for the old man during the five hour ceremony: Charles Grenville, diarist, included it in his account of the day:

"[Lord Rolle] fell down as he was getting up the steps of the throne. Her first impulse was to rise, and when afterwards he came again to do homage she said, "May I not get up and meet him?" and then rose from the throne and advanced down one or two of the steps to prevent his coming up, an act of graciousness and kindness which made a great sensation. It is, in fact, the remarkable union of naïveté, kindness, nature, good-nature, with propriety and dignity, which makes her so admirable and so endearing to those about her, as she certainly is".

The incident acquired popular notoriety, featuring for example in Richard Harris Barham's *Mr. Barney Maguire's Account of the Coronation*:

*Then the trumpets braying, and the organ playing,
And the sweet trombones, with their silver tones;
But Lord Rolle was rolling;-- t'was mighty consoling
To think his Lordship did not break his bones!*

Very little documentation relating to these years survives from the estate archive, but it is clear that Lord Rolle's health was beginning to fail. Just a few letters survive, written by Lady Louisa from London to John Daw, their agent for Bicton and a solicitor, who lived at East Budleigh.



¹⁰ [add

The moment 'Poor old Lord Rolle' stumbled a second time at Queen Victoria's coronation in Westminster Abbey, as the eighteen year-old queen rises from her throne to help him, rather cruelly captured for posterity by John Martin.

In April 1836 Lady Louisa wrote with relief that 'My Lord went to the House of Lords yesterday and managed capitally thanks to many kind friends, after his own servants were not allowed to proceed further.' A month later she wrote that 'My Lord is a little better this day or two certainly but very uncertain and would fall to the ground in walking with his two sticks now and then were there not always somebody to catch him in time.'

Lady Louisa, herself aged 42 in 1838, remained loyal to her ageing husband. These were momentous years: as well as the ascension of 18-year old Victoria to the throne, slavery was finally abolished in all British colonies in August 1838. This was the moment Lord Rolle took the enlightened step of gifting his 5,000 acres in the Exumas to his liberated slaves, a gesture far from universal amongst plantation owners and still regarded with gratitude today by the descendants of those slaves.

Lady Louisa, meanwhile, was already plotting the surprise of The China Tower at the heart of the new pinetum being planted on the 52 acres acquired as Baker's Brake (the derivation of this name is not known). The Gothick was by now a well-tried and tested style for such ornaments to the landscape, and The China Tower seems rather a late example of this whimsical approach to medieval romanticism (like Landmark's Clytha Castle or Gothic Temple) than a precocious foray into the more scholarly approach of A. W. Pugin or George Gilbert Scott that would gain increasing hold as the century wore on.

It seems Lady Louisa had been gestating her plans for a while. No building accounts are known to survive, and there are just two letters relating to the tower's construction in the estate archive, which only runs up to 1838. On 17th May 1837, Lady Louisa had written to Mr Daw:

including about our horses, one being
 horse quite laid up, another
 with a hooid cough, & the horse
 Clements sides quite ill now
 Yr
 L. Rolle
 With reference to my Castle (which
 I fear may after all only be in the
 air!) could the bricks be brought
 from where they
 now are straight
 up a field & then
 there is a path to Hoston, & then
 up to the road round the lane
 outside the garden field to the
 brake - I have asked Strooper what
 he wd undertake the whole for, beyond
 providing bricks, Plinths, Lime, Stone
 & Scaffold poles & casting the
 & the build, & if there was any
 possibility of your being able to

One of Lady Louisa's few surviving letters about the China Tower to the Rolle's agent Mr Daw. 'With reference to my Castle (which I fear may after all only be in the air!)....'

Lady Rolle
 17 May 1837
 London
 London Secretaries
 1037
 Mr G. Daw
 Bristol
 Rolle Honiton
 I have the bricks, which I have the
 ready with arranged to the
 best, & I hope they will be
 as they are by the way it will be
 kind of good to see & please

On the outer, Lord Rolle's more shaky hand addresses the letter and Clinton Estates archivist Gerald Millington, as an historian too of the postal service, points out that the postmark indicates that the letter has been sent from the House of Lords.

*'with reference to my "Castle" (which I fear may after all only be in the air!) could the bricks be brought from where they now are, straight up a field where there is a path to Otterton & then up to the X road round the lane outside the Garden Field to Baker's Brake – I have asked Hooper what he would undertake the whole for, My Lord providing bricks, flints, lime, stone, sand, scaffold poles & carting then down to the building & if there was any possibility of you being able to loan the bricks which appear to be the only hitch, conveyed to the place... & then by having it built by Hooper I shall be sure & get it done properly & not give you the trouble of measuring & then we can have it done by this summer.'*¹¹

The level of detail Lady Louisa volunteers about material provision in this letter suggests she is no novice at such projects, although five days later she decides she has been over optimistic and writes again:

*'I am come to the conclusion that I had much better delay the Tower for another year & therefore have the bricks burnt nearer the spot as you proposed ...& then have everything carted up to the place in readiness for the job to be begun as soon as the weather admits next Spring & before that I may hope most of the jobs now in hand will be completed – Pray send me a list of names of those who go off from your work to work for Mr Stephens it is a shabby trick of them and we ought not to have them again. So the Tower is certainly put off for this year, for the other things are of much more consequence. In the meantime I shall keep all the plans and Hooper's letters to send him till we come home.'*¹²

It is interesting that even in the late 1830s, the bricks were to be cut/moulded and fired in clamps locally rather than mass manufactured further afield. Mr Hooper was an Exmouth builder, who also ran a brickworks there. In the event, the body of tower was built of stone with only some brick. It was rendered from the start, and limewashed to emphasise its role as an eyecatcher from Bicton House. Indeed, Landmark's furnishings manager is firmly of the view that its name relates less to the display of china, since the wall surface of the rooms is too small to allow for display cases of any size, and is more likely to be a reference to the pigment 'China White.' Perhaps the white-painted tower looked as if it were made of china and earned its nickname that way. It is also sometimes known as the Bicton Belvedere. (The majority of today's render is a heavily cementitious, self-coloured mix that probably dates from between the wars and would not take a limewash. The small flat-roofed service block on the ground floor seems a largely modern addition in its construction,

¹¹ Letter in the Clinton Devon Estates archive

¹² Ditto.

although a vignette of the tower on the 1845 estate map shows a pitched roof extension in the same position).

The crenallated roof parapets, most liable to weathering, were sensibly capped with well-finished Ashburton marble. Red Honiton sandstone was used for the transom and mullioned windows, their hoodmoulds on the topmost floor executed in Portland cement including terminals of pretty oak leaves and 'flowers'. Such bosses are ubiquitous in local churches, which led architect Jonathan Rhind, who was responsible for the 2012-3 restoration of the tower, to speculate that perhaps Exeter architect John Hayward was involved in the tower's construction, or at least craftsmen who had worked with him. John Hayward (1807-1891) was a Gothic Revival architect who served as architect to the Exeter Diocesan Architectural Society during the mid-19th century, meaning that the design of all Devon churches passed through his hands in these years. He was a member of the Cambridge Camden Society, founded the same year that The China Tower was under construction (and reconstituted as the Ecclesiological Society in 1845). In 1850, it was to Hayward that Lady Louisa turned to design a new church at Bicton (see below) to commemorate her husband, so a link with Hayward for The China Tower is not implausible.

A fine example of the Rolle Trefusis arms was carved of stone¹³ to go above the turret door on the tower. (A blank space above the main door to the castellated porch suggests that a second plaque has been lost at a later date. This has been left blank as it is not known for sure what was there).

The octagonal tower rises off a battered plinth and has four storeys, with a single room on each, and a roof terrace, all reached by a winding spiral stone staircase in a projecting square stair turret lit by 'arrow slit' windows. It may seem counter-intuitive to encase a round stair in a square tower, but perhaps it was just easier to build. On the ground floor, there was originally a range, to allow for the preparation of refreshments and presumably intended only for use by servants since the stair turret has its separate external entrance. The first floor as built had just one small window,

¹³ The restoration masons in 2012-3 thought this was carved of Portland stone: others have said Beerstone.

again suggesting service use and perhaps anticipating that the eventual maturation of the pinetum would in any case preclude much of a view. The second floor room had windows on three sides and a fireplace – perhaps a ‘winter’ sitting room – while the top floor makes exuberant use of every available facet of the octagonal floorplan, with six windows making the most of the views north over the estate and south and west towards Bicton House and the sea beyond. These views are of course better still from the roof terrace, and the brave could climb a level higher to the very top of the turret that forms the head of the stair tower. It was built not as a permanent residence but as a folly, the destination for an excursion on the estate, and to enjoy the views. The tower was set upon an octagonal plateau within the woodland, contained by an equally considered low wall of dressed stone, nicely capped, with small turrets marking each angle and walled granite steps leading to the entrance of the tower. A brick and round beach pebble path (now much decayed) was set into the edge of the plantation, leading up from the walled kitchen gardens. The surviving maps suggest that a drive or walk – the Green Drive - was carefully planned through the pinetum on Baker’s Brake and Loudon’s account in 1842 reinforces that this was Lady Louisa’s intention:

‘There is a drive through a pine wood to a prospect tower (the latter the best piece of architecture at Bicton¹⁴) which deserves notice for its extent and the quantity of evergreens, such as rhododendrons, mahonias, and Ruscus aculeatus, which have been planted as undergrowths. A great many rare pines, firs, cypresses and junipers have also been introduced along this drive, so that, by adding more, it will in a short time be interesting as a pinetum.’¹⁵

¹⁴ Loudon, his journalist’s eye never cowed by the wealth or antiquity of the landscapes he visited, was not impressed by Bicton House. ‘The house, which is well-placed on a knoll, is extensive and commodious,’ he wrote, ‘containing a suite of magnificent apartments on the principal floor, and very extensive offices, but without any pretensions to architecture.’

¹⁵ Loudon, op. cit., p. 246.



Detail from the 1845 estate map, showing Baker's Brake with The China Tower at its northeast corner and the Green Drive providing a circuit around the pinetum. The kitchen garden and main house are below, and then the lake, and some of Mr Gilpin's clumps. Today's access to the China Tower follows the same route as that part of the Green Drive.

(However, due to forestry operations, pheasant rearing and deer management we ask that Landmarkers do not enter the woodland in which the China Tower is situated. There is no public access to this woodland.)

It is to Loudon too that we owe the apparently eye witness comment that

'It contains several rooms; in one of which, appropriately fitted up, a rich collection of china is tastefully displayed.'

Loudon also cites the firm tradition as initiated in Lord Rolle's obituary, similarly written in summer 1842, that the tower was presented to Lord Rolle by Lady Louisa on his 89th (or 88th according to Loudon!) birthday (therefore 16th October 1839):

*'This tower is understood to have been built by Lady Rolle, entirely unknown to Lord Rolle, and undiscovered by him, as an agreeable surprise for his birthday, October 16th 1839, when he completed his 88th year; and the following birth-day, Lady Rolle surprised Lord Rolle with the china room.'*¹⁶

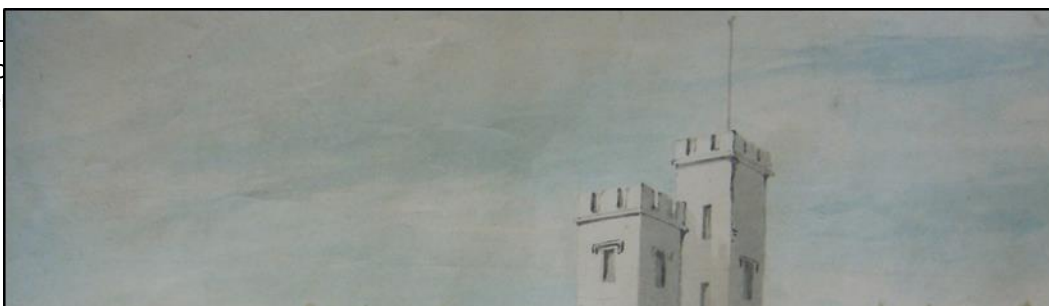
Perhaps this *consecutive* birthday surprise of the china room explains the confusion in the sources about whether the tower was built for Lord Rolle's 88th or 89th birthday. Another point of contention about the happy day when Louisa surprised Lord Rolle with her gift is how he got to the roof terrace. According to the obituary, *'on his 89th birth-day, his lady brought him unexpectedly to see a tower erected in Bicton Park, he insisted upon mounting to the top, a height of 100 feet, which he did without assistance'*. According to the secondary account in the estate archive,

*'On completion, Lord Rolle was presented with the Bill. Owing to his infirmities, he had to be carried by 2 footmen to the top of the staircase in a specifically designed chair. They had to struggle up 120 steps so that he could enjoy the magnificent views.'*¹⁷

Certainly, it seems to have become a place that harboured happy memories for the couple. The beautifully delineated and coloured estate map of 1845, done three years after Lord Rolle's death, includes a charming vignette that shows the tower being visited by a tall man and a lady in an ermine cape – surely Lord and Lady Rolle – while a groom waits with a saddled horse and landau nearby. Rather implausibly, small ship's cannons are shown at regular intervals around the 'curtain wall.'

It is hard not to see in this lovingly detailed depiction a memento for Lady Louisa of the happy excursions they made to the tower together, to enjoy the views and her rich collection of china.

¹⁶ Ibid
¹⁷ Ge





Marble statue of Lord Rolle, commissioned after his death by Lady Louisa for the hall at Bicton House.

After Lord Rolle's death.

John, Lord Rolle died on June 3rd 1842 at Bicton House. An obituary appeared in the *Gentleman's Magazine* that August (Vol. XVIII, p. 201-2). The obituary may be a little cavalier in some of its detail (Lord Rolle is said to have died in his 86th year, for example) but describes his 'princely liberality to public and charitable purposes.' As examples of his good works, he had given £1000 to the fund for the relief of the Irish clergy, £1000 towards establishing a chaplaincy in the Devon and Exeter Hospital, £500 to the Lunatic Asylum, and so on. For a new church near Ilfracombe, and having already presented a screen and £200 to the appeal, on being told a further £500 was needed to make up its endowment previously,

'his Lordship, without further solicitation or consideration, asked for pen and paper, and gave a check for the difference. The beautiful church at Exmouth is another monument of his Christian piety and well-applied munificence.'



The Vicar of Beer's eulogium, delivered on Lord Rolle's 90th birthday in 1840 on behalf of the grateful tenantry, is also quoted:

"Everyone present must know something of the great and amiable virtues by which his private and public life has been adorned, but they only who have had the happiness to associate with him in the domestic circle, can fully appreciate the excellency of his character. As a magistrate he has ever been just, active, and impartial; as a landlord, kind and indulgent; as a friend and neighbour, disinterested, generous, and constant; as a politician, consistent and unshaken amidst the many political convulsions that have agitated this country during the eventful period of his long life. As one endowed with great influence, from the enjoyment of wealth and a high position in society, he has ever stood forth the champion of sound religion, and moral principle."

The Stevenstone and Bicton estates then amounted to some 55,000 acres (220 km²). As Lord Rolle died without issue, his barony ceased with him. In his will he gave life tenancy to Louisa's nephew and second son of the 21st Baron Clinton, the Hon. Mark George Kerr Trefusis (1836–1907) – to the consternation of other branches of the family. Mark was required to change his name to Rolle, which he duly did.

Mark Rolle became a noted philanthropist in his own right, builder and restorer of churches, farms and cottages for his estate workers. Perhaps because his Aunt Louisa continued her residence at Bicton, on reaching adulthood Mark decided to move to Stevenstone, where he demolished the old house and rebuilt another in 1868 to designs by Charles Barry junior ('the richest man in Devon built himself the ugliest house,' commented W. G. Hoskins acerbically. This house was reduced in size in the early 20th century, then partially demolished in the 1930s and is today an ivy covered ruin). Mark Rolle died in 1907 with sons but no daughters; as the estate was in male entail it passed to his nephew Charles John Robert Hepburn-Stuart-Forbes-Trefusis, 21st Baron Clinton and has continued in this line of descent since.

Lady Rolle, meanwhile, was 46 at her husband's death. Her passion for the gardens at Bicton continued. Loudon also commented upon

'a menagerie containing a rich collection of birds, monkeys, kangaroos and various other foreign animals.¹⁸ Thus, with the arboretum, drive to the tower and the flower garden as means of recreation in the open air; the menagerie and the collection of china, for amusement under cover; and the library and

¹⁸ When the last cheetah died, it was buried in Baker's Brake, and a stone slab marks the spot beside the track leading to the Tower.

pictures in the house, there is at Bicton every source of enjoyment that can be desired. Nothing is wanting but a collection of shells and minerals, for the sake of those who are fond of the departments of science, and this is about to be formed; a great quantity of shells, and some minerals having been procured for the purpose, though they are not yet arranged.'

By 1845, this too was resolved. The estate map of this date shows that Lady Rolle had built the Shell House, a circular room built of flint and boulders overlooking a rockery planted with ferns. The shells were displayed in glass cases rather than, as is often the cases with such follies, set into the walls.



**The craggy Shell House,
peeping out of the rockery.**

Lady Louisa then fixed on the idea of marshalling religion both to picturesque effect and as a memorial to her husband. At the south end of the Italian Garden, whose layout allowed for its presence near the road to East Budleigh, there stood the ancient and decaying church of St Mary's.

Devon topographer the Reverend John Swete found St Mary's already picturesque when he visited in 1795 and made a watercolour of it:

"Contiguous to where the old mansion stood and where are even now the terraces and the ponds which were perchance its quondam boast - deep in a dell and nearly encompassed by groves of tall growth, stands the Parish Church. A scenery more picturesque than this cannot well be conceived or one better adapted to contemplation - 'tis the Churchyard of Grey! From the solemnity that broods over it occasion'd by the enclosing groves and the stillness that reigns rarely interrupted by an intrusive step, it would be hardly possible for any mind not to become associated as it were, with the spot and its accompaniments, not to feel its sensibility awaken'd..."¹⁹

In the 1790s, presumably John Rolle himself had rebuilt the north aisle of the church and carried out various other alterations, including the removal of the south porch since the 1840 Tithe Map shows the church with a square plan whose only projections were the tower and south east chapel.

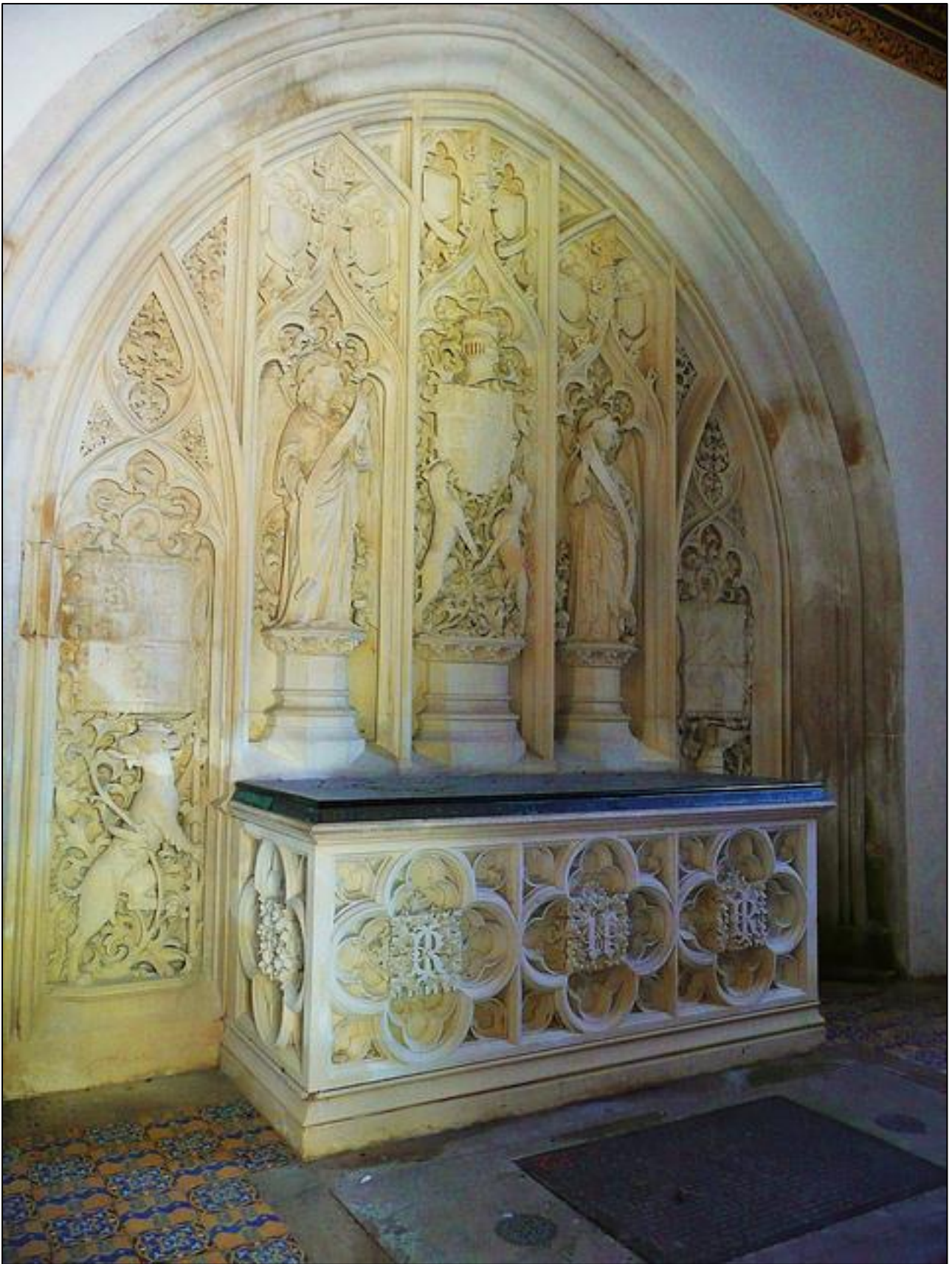
Lady Rolle, however, required something more of the moment. She had all but a small tower and some 15th-century tracery work of the old church taken down, and commissioned A. W. Pugin to design a mausoleum (or mortuary chapel as Pugin preferred to call it) to contain her husband's tomb and for the continued protection of Denys Rolle's 17th-century tomb. The church and Lord Rolle's tomb were built by George Myers, Pugin's friend and preferred builder. Lady Rolle then commissioned architect John Hayward to design a new, cruciform church. The foundation stone was laid on 27th September 1848 and the building was completed on 21st March 1850, the day before its consecration. Forty eight dripstones on the windows represent the Kings and Queens of England, while those of the north porch are likenesses of Lord and Lady Rolle, to match those of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert on the south porch. There are Minton tiles on the floor and the windows are considered outstanding examples of Victorian stained glass. Both church and mausoleum add to the vista from the Orangery across the Italian Garden, as Lady Rolle continued her project.

¹⁹ Swete, Rev. John, *Illustrated Journals of*, published as *Travels in Georgian Devon, The Illustrated Journals of the Reverend John Swete, 1789–1800*, Gray, Todd & Rowe, Margery (Eds.), Vol.2, 1998 pp. 140–145.



Top: The Rolle Mausoleum, designed by A W Pugin and set within the ruins of old St Mary's, Bickton.

Below: The family mausoleum's rich coffered, painted roof, also designed by Pugin, with, here, the bearings of the 18th-century Rolles. Note the peers' crowns for the two Barons Rolle. The interior is considered some of Pugin's finest work. (Internal access is possible only by written appointment through the Clinton Devon Estates.)



Lord Rolle's magnificent tomb in the mausoleum, designed by Pugin and executed by Myers' skilled craftsmen. The Minton floor tiles also carry the Rolle arms.



Hayward's new church, seen across the Mirror Pond in the Italian Garden. It is intriguing that Lady Rolle switched her allegiance from Pugin to Hayward for the church: perhaps she felt that Catholic Pugin's purist approach to Pointed architecture was appropriate to plant within the medieval church but as a good Anglican herself, turned to a more mainstream Ecclesiologist in Hayward for her new church. The church is normally open to visitors to Bicton Park Botanical Gardens.

The church, which is virtually unchanged internally since 1851, is considered an outstanding example of a pioneering Ecclesiological church and is listed II*.

Lady Rolle became a redoubtable dowager, and Bicton Park was on the itinerary of any self-respecting traveller in Devon. American Elihu Burritt visited in 1864, having come to England seeking information to help improve American farmers' practice and lot. On Lady Rolle, in his journal entry for 17th June 1864, he eulogised:

*'This lady is a remarkable woman, without equal or like in England, in one vigorous, well-developed individuality of will and genius. She is a female rival of Alexander the Great. If Vergil has lived in her day, he might have been tempted to substitute Arbores dominamque cano [I sing of trees and a mistress] for his famous introductory line, Arma virumque cano [I sing of arms and a man]. The world the Grecian conqueror subjugated was a small affair in space compared with the two hemispheres which this English lady has taken by the hair of the head and bound to her chair of state.'*²⁰

Burritt describes the park as 'a British Museum of nearly every wooded trunk, branch and bush that fans its foliage in the breath of heaven.' He was also impressed by the drawing room in the Orangery which he found 'far more graceful than the one at Chatsworth.' Its trees were not in pots but in squares of soil and 'On festive occasions, this parlour orange grove is hung with coloured lanterns at night, which light up the scenery with a glory all its own.'

Lady Rolle never remarried but cut a dashing figure. Another tourist recorded that 'Her ladyship keeps up old fashioned state, and cheers up the neighbourhood by dashing along in a coach and four with postillions and bells.' She also eventually fell out with her new Head Gardener, Mr James Barnes who had replaced Mr Glendinning. The appointment of a head gardener was a major commitment for both parties, and if an applicant 'suited' he stayed with his employer for many years, if not for life.



²⁰ Gray, Todd, *East Devon Traveller*

When James Barnes arrived in 1839, he was less impressed than Loudon at the outdated techniques on the estate, such as the 'six men mulching.' Instead, he saw 'six or seven men mowing a nobleman's flower garden with each a short pipe in his mouth blowing a cloud of smoke as if doing it for a wager.'²¹

Loudon was full of praise for the gardens' productivity:

*'we do not think we ever before saw culture, order, and neatness carried to such a high degree of perfection, in so many departments, and on so large a scale, and all by the care and superintendence of one man. From the commonest kitchen crop in the open garden, and the mushrooms in the sheds, up to the pine-apples, the heaths, and the Orchidaceae, every thing seemed to be alike healthy and vigorous. We could not help noticing the evenness of the crops of cabbages, cauliflowers, savoys, &c. in the kitchen-garden; and the extraordinary vigour and beauty of the pines, heaths, hothouse plants, chrysanthemums, &c., in the houses; and nothing could exceed the neatness of the lawn, the walks, and the flower-beds.'*²²

Barnes had been in post for three years by the time Loudon wrote that. When Barnes first arrived, he railed against gardeners turning up for work after 6am - 'the first thing they thought of was liquor for drink.' Despite being aware that 'it was said my long ugly legs would not be walking Bicton Gardens long,'



Barnes clamped down and pinned up twenty five rules and regulations, each with a fine against it. The largest fine was 12d for leaving anything dangerous in or about the stokeholes and furnaces. Others included going into any greenhouse or hothouse; walking in any gravel walk with dirty shoes (3d); neglecting to attend to water fountains (3d); swearing or using bad language (for every separate evil expression, 3d).

The men came to respect his regimen: he soon wrote that 'the difference in the industry, cleanliness, happiness and contentment among my men is truly astonishing', and they went about their tasks whistling happily. To train under Barnes of Bicton was one of the best starts a young gardener could get in the whole country.

Meanwhile, Lady Rolle allowed the Veitches to use the Palm House, which set out to create rain-forest conditions and so was ideal for nurturing the many exotic and tropical plants that the Veitches' plant hunters sent back from overseas. The Palm House was filled with orchids, the finest of which was the Bicton Orchid, *Odontoglossum bictoniense* (*Lemboglossum bictoniense*), the first of its genus to arrive alive and to flower in cultivation. This particularly vigorous plant was brought back in a batch of unidentified specimens by Scottish naturalist and trader George Ure Skinner in 1840 for his wealthy patron, James Bateman of Biddulph Grange, who shared them with his friend Lord Rolle. One of these specimens turned out to be this particularly lovely orchid with as many as twenty pale olive blooms with markings and a pink lip on a single slender stem, named after the estate where it was cultivated and making the Veitches considerable profit. The Bicton orchid collection developed still further in reputation after Lord Rolle's death.

In 1844, Barnes planted a renowned avenue of monkey puzzle trees (*Araucaria araucana*) between two lodges at Bicton, at 500m long the longest in Europe. Barnes was the first in the country to produce viable seed from the tree, so the trees were not bought from Veitches but quietly reared at Bicton, although James Veitch's advice on their planting was sought by Lady Rolle. Barnes overruled that advice, with the result that they were planted too close initially and had to be moved. It was a famous feature, though many thought it ugly. Today the avenue's genetic continuity is intact and today it contains county champions for girth and heights, in a county

where the species thrives. No wonder Bicton Park maintained its reputation as one of the best gardens in the county.

However, by 1869 things had turned sour. Lady Rolle was forcing the 62-year-old Barnes to work 18-20 hours a day. Not surprisingly, he suffered 'a severe affliction, brought on by over exertion and unremitting labour.' When Lady Rolle complained at his retirement that he had left the garden 'in a disorderly condition' Barnes was so incensed that he brought a libel suit against her for this terrible slur. It was unheard of for an employee to sue his employer and it became quite a *cause célèbre*. Mr Barnes won the case, and was awarded £200 in damages – the equivalent of some £8,500 in today's terms. What Lady Rolle thought has yet to be discovered.

Notwithstanding her harshness with her long serving gardener, like her husband she became a local philanthropist in her own right. Among other projects, in 1858, she provided Exmouth with a stone built lifeboat station and lifeboat, the last, wooden boat house having washed away in a storm 44 years earlier. Charles Dickens, who had a melancholy interest in collecting accounts of deaths at sea, visited the area in 1862, having heard recent tales of deaths along the coast. At Exmouth, he was impressed. He wrote in the weekly periodical *Household Words*:

"I walked sadly by the ripple of a placid sea and came by accident upon the lifeboat house. It was a neat stone building with some show of architecture in it, with a verandah east and west sheltering forms upon which pilots and others might sit under cover in foul weather. I had been told that, at this town, boathouse and boat were the gift of a lady of fortune and it was evident that she was one who did not give with two fingers."

Lady Rolle died in 1885 at the age of 89, matching her husband's longevity. A cross stands in the graveyard at St Mary's Bicton as a memorial to her. Mark Rolle moved back to Bicton with his wife and two daughters; The China Tower was used merely as store. In the early 20th century, a Mr & Mrs William Price lived for a while in the tower, their bread and other provisions delivered there by pony and trap from William Colworthy's bakery in East Budleigh.

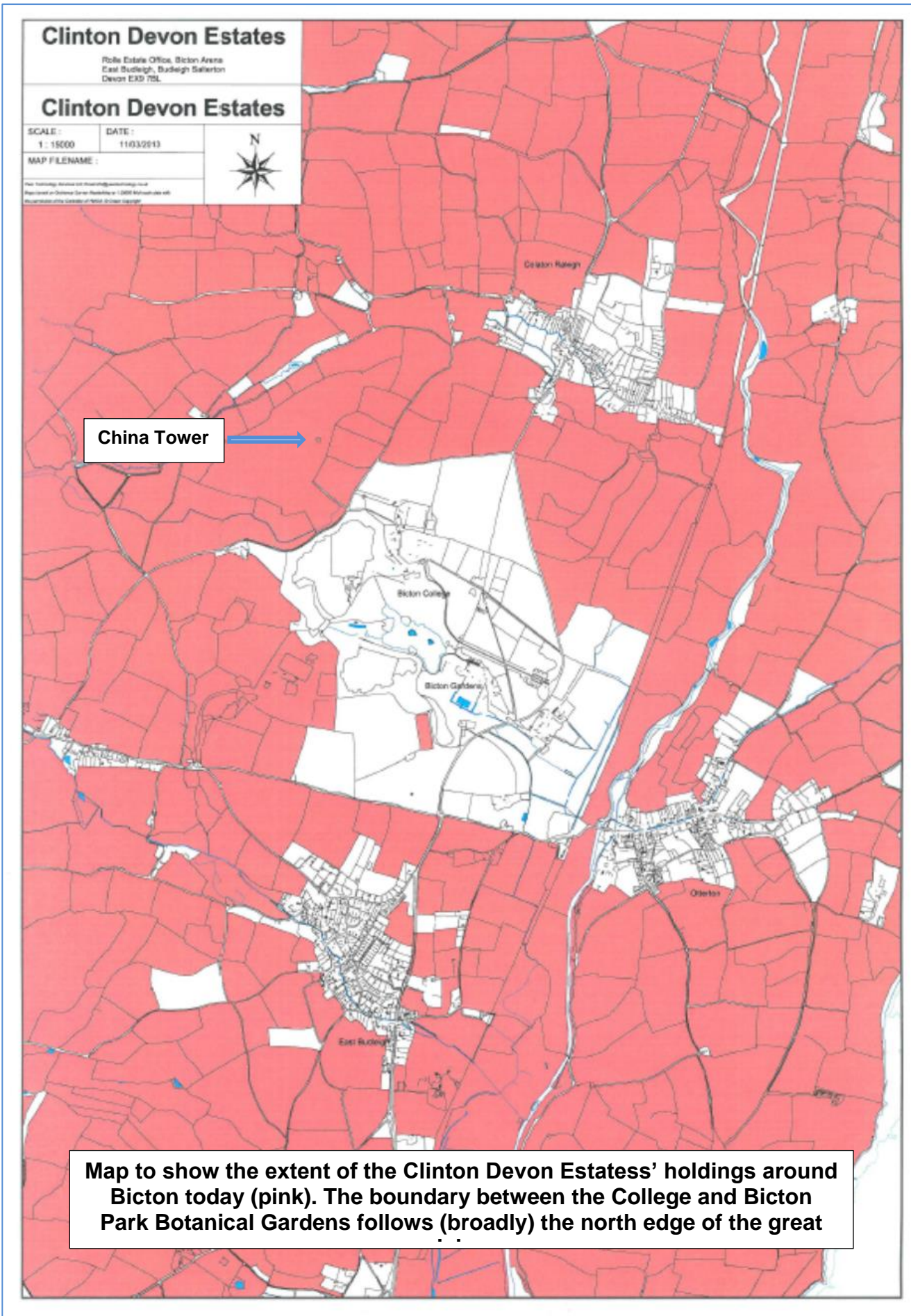


Recent History of the Bickton Estate

When Charles Trefusis, 21st Baron Clinton inherited Bickton at Mark Rolle's death in 1907, he demolished the conservatory and ballroom at the house to make it look more authentically Georgian. In 1914, the house became a military hospital for 60 wounded soldiers. After the war, Lord Clinton became involved with extending 'smallholding colonies' on the estate, both as a means of rehabilitation and of expanding food production.

During World War II the house was again called into public service, this time to house an evacuated preparatory school called St Ronan's. The China Tower was used as a store for some of the contents of the house. After the war, in 1945, Devon County Council's Agricultural Executive Committee was instructed by the Ministry of Agriculture to find a large house and farm that would serve to set up an Institute of Farming to train ex-service-men and -women in agriculture as part of their rehabilitation for civilian life. Their first choice, Shobrooke Park near Crediton burned down just as the agreement was due to be signed. Lord Clinton immediately offered Bickton House. 'He and Lady Clinton had come to the reluctant conclusion that it would be impossible to maintain such a large place in the very changed conditions following the war.'

A lease was signed on the house in 1947 and the Bickton Institute of Agriculture was established. Many of the Clintons' staff were kept on, the Head Chauffeur, for example, now driving the Institute's van. The decision to open the institute was initially not entirely popular among sceptical local farmers who had learned their craft on the job rather than the classroom, and the fledgling Institute's credibility was not helped when a herd of Guernsey cows were chosen instead of a local breed. In the end a compromise was reached and South Devons also provided. In 1967, the institution was renamed the Bickton College of Agriculture and in 2002 became simply Bickton College.





Land girls on their first morning at the new college, 8th January 1947.

The gardens, meanwhile, were restored by Lord Clinton after the war, and first opened to the public in 1963. In 1986, they were sold to a charitable trust, which in turn sold them to Simon and Valerie Lister, a Devon couple. Now run as a commercial visitor attraction, they retain their form and character as developed by John, Lord Rolle and Lady Rolle and continue to rank among Devon's most famous gardens.

The rest of the estate (including Baker's Brake and The China Tower) remains in the stewardship of the Clinton Devon Estates, as Bickton Arena, used primarily for equestrian events.

The China Tower before Restoration



The kitchen floor excavated.



The tower was scaffolded from top to bottom during works.



The reconstructed rear extension with pitched roof, which had failed due to water penetration.

Restoration of The China Tower

The China Tower stood empty for most of the 20th century. As Bicton College thrived and grew larger, it eventually became a target for students and others, suffering increasingly from unauthorised access and vandalism.

To deter trespassers, the Estate blocked up the doorways and ground floor windows. The roof was leaking but fortunately the Estate had the forethought to put on a temporary covering which saved the building from more extensive deterioration. The roofs to the outshots had failed leaving these structures derelict but giving a useful footprint which was used in the restoration plans. The building was saved from more serious deterioration by the installation of plastic rainwater goods which took rainwater internally through the building. This cheap and practical approach taken by the Estate saved much of the internal fabric and reduced the amount of restoration needed. The Estate however recognised that the Tower is an important building and a use needed to be found for it to secure its long term use.

In 2010, land agent Leigh Rix approached the Landmark Trust on behalf of the Clinton Devon Estates to discuss whether there was a way forward for The China Tower as a Landmark. The tower is exactly sort of building for which Landmark can provide a solution, and it was certainly in need of restoration and a new use if it was to survive long term. An agreement was reached under which the Estate would fund the initial restoration and conversion work, on which Landmark would be consulted, and that Landmark would then take responsibility for the onward operation and maintenance under a 25 year lease. The Hon. Charles Fane Trefusis, son of the 22nd Lord Clinton, had fond childhood memories of the tower as a boy exploring the estate. He was particularly keen to see it brought back to life sympathetically and was an active participant in the project team.



Examples of careful repair of the self-coloured render. The lichen is benign.

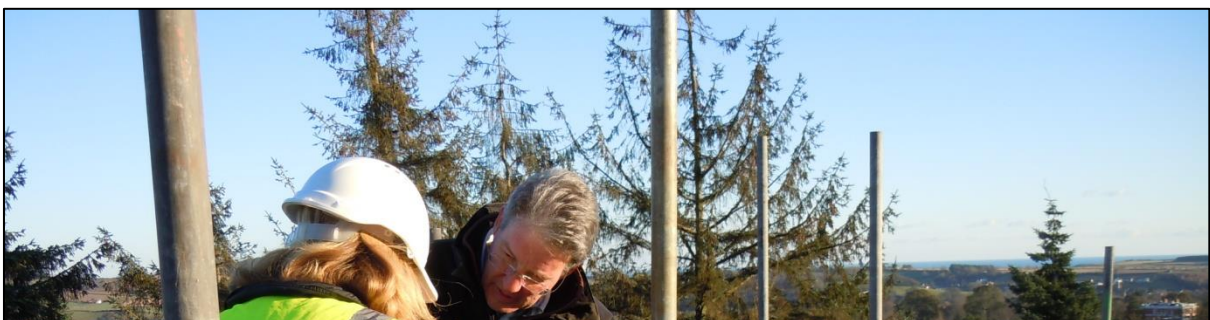


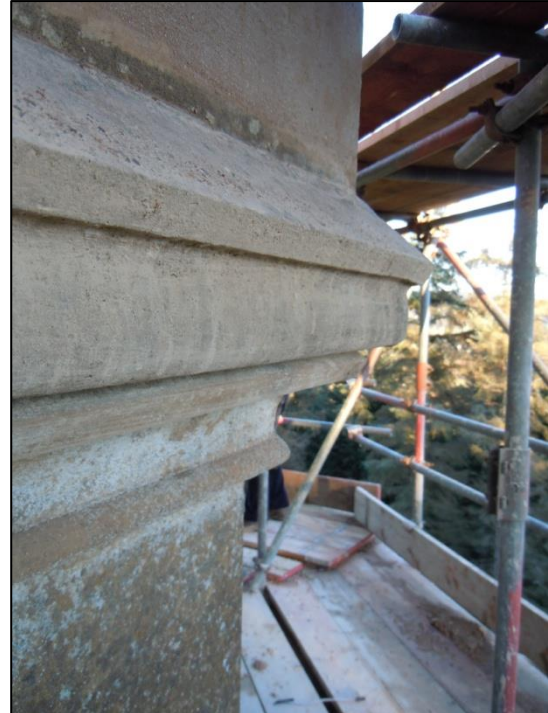
The careful tooling on the blocks of Ashburton marble that form the high level roof copings suggest they were intended to be left exposed.

The Estate appointed architects Jonathan Rhind and Jonny Poland and Skinner Construction Ltd as main contractors for the works, which began in August 2012. The tower was fully scaffolded from the outset, and materials and waste were more often winched up or down from the roof by pulley than carried up the narrow winding staircase. The most pressing initial need, as in any restoration, was to make the Tower wind and weather tight. The bitumen roofing, which was failing in various places, was removed and replaced with a lead covering. This required careful detailing to provide the falls needed and outlets to external downpipes. Once new external cast iron rainwater goods were in place the internal plastic rainwater pipes could be removed.

The scaffolding allowed a thorough assessment of the cementitious render. There was some cracking but overall it was not in bad condition. Any lichen that has taken hold is in fact benign: although it causes some acid, this is neutralised by the alkaline nature of cement. A conservative approach was taken to the repair of the render, and limited to defined areas using grouts rather than removal. This approach was not viable for the battlements where greater exposure to the weather meant that there was more extensive failure of the render. These areas were re-rendered with lime renders to improve permeability.

Lead flashing and slate drip courses (a typical local detail) were incorporated to encourage water away from the walls, and also provide a nice shadow line. In doing this, it was discovered that the capping stones on the parapet were tooled, and therefore were meant to be left exposed. They are hard Ashburton marble, and so with careful cleaning they have now been reinstated as they originally appeared. Interesting speculation from site manager Brian Berry raised the possibility of whether the whole tower was in fact made of Ashburton marble, a pale, slightly crystalline stone that glistens when wet, and that the cementitious render was a much later addition. Enticing though the image of a gleaming white stone tower may be, the typically mid-19th-century cement bosses on the drip moulds that stand proud of the render would seem to make later rendering unlikely.





Top left: concrete drip mould with oak leaf stops, such as are found in many of John Hayward's Devon churches.

Top right: High level cornice profile.

Below: The new first floor window of Red Honiton sandstone, finely jointed and carefully laid in the same bedding plane in which it was quarried.



The Rolle Trefusis bearings before and after conservation, now with the animals' heads reinstated.



New doors of close grained pine carefully replicate the originals but must be constructed to comply with modern fire resistance regulations.



Fair face stone revealed behind plaster in the service block, that led site manager Brian Berry to speculate that the whole tower might once have been exposed stone.

The bronze bars on the roof and stair turret are, of course, a modern introduction for safety but in keeping with the style of the building.

The Portland stone coat of arms above the turret door survived but was damaged. Stone mason David Price visited Bicton Church to check the detail of the Rolle Trefusis bearings in order to restore it accurately. Sadly there were no similar remnants of the insert over the main door, and in the absence of evidence of what was there originally, this has been left as a blank space.

Servicing a building unoccupied in recent times in a remote location is always challenging. Fortunately, ground water is plentiful so a bore hole was sunk, and with filtration and treatment this provides water for the tower. Mains electricity was clearly desirable but without visual impact so cables were brought from the road half a mile way and buried around the field boundaries to avoid accidental damage. This mains power supply also enable heating the building with air source heat pumps, a greener form of heating that we have used in several other Landmarks. The hot water and heating for The China Tower is provided by two such heat pumps, which require minimal mains current to draw the air over a condenser that works like a refrigerator in reverse to capture the latent heat from the air, which is then used to heat water for plumbing and radiators to a comfortable background level. Temperatures can then be boosted with mains electricity, but only when necessary.

Internally the absence of much original detailing offered opportunity but also required careful consideration. New framed and ledged doors of fine grained pine have been fitted throughout, detailed from surviving joinery but also incorporating the modern fire proofing necessary for a four storey building to comply with fire regulations. Head carpenter Roger Prout spent eighteen weeks on site, arriving each day in his three wheeled van up the track where many struggled in four-wheeled drives; claiming only to have got stuck in the mud three times.



The original chimneypieces had long since disappeared so fireplaces appropriate for the period and the building were sourced. Heating engineer Darren Riddell identified four different chimney flues before managing to find the correct flue for the stove in the sitting room and this after much exasperation.

Cornicing to the sitting room was replaced to replicate surviving fragments and a picture rail introduced in the main bedroom with its particularly high ceiling.

Traditional plasterer Steve Marles found that his usual method of wearing stilts to work at height did not work here and so had to carry tower scaffolding up the narrow staircase in addition to all the plaster needed. The plaster to the stair turret has had minimal repair and so this area bears the scars of its years of misuse whilst it stood empty.

It was decided that the sitting room should be on the top floor to take advantage of the views and the windows which allow light in all day making this a light and airy room. The bedrooms occupy the two floors below. The twin bedroom on the first floor was poorly lit with just one small window to the rear. and so the window to the South elevation is a new opening. The transom and mullions are of Red Honiton sandstone dressed to match the other windows. Red Honiton is a stone typically sold a year after quarrying to allow it to dry out. Working a seasoned stone as opposed to a green stone (terms also used for timber) is more difficult, although according to the masons, the most important thing is that the stones are laid on their bedding planes to prevent premature weathering. The individual pieces of the new window are so finely calibrated they require no dowels to fix them together, although stainless steel cramps were used to anchor them to the walls. Each piece was very heavy, so was winched to the roof and then lowered down to arrive at the first floor scaffolding.

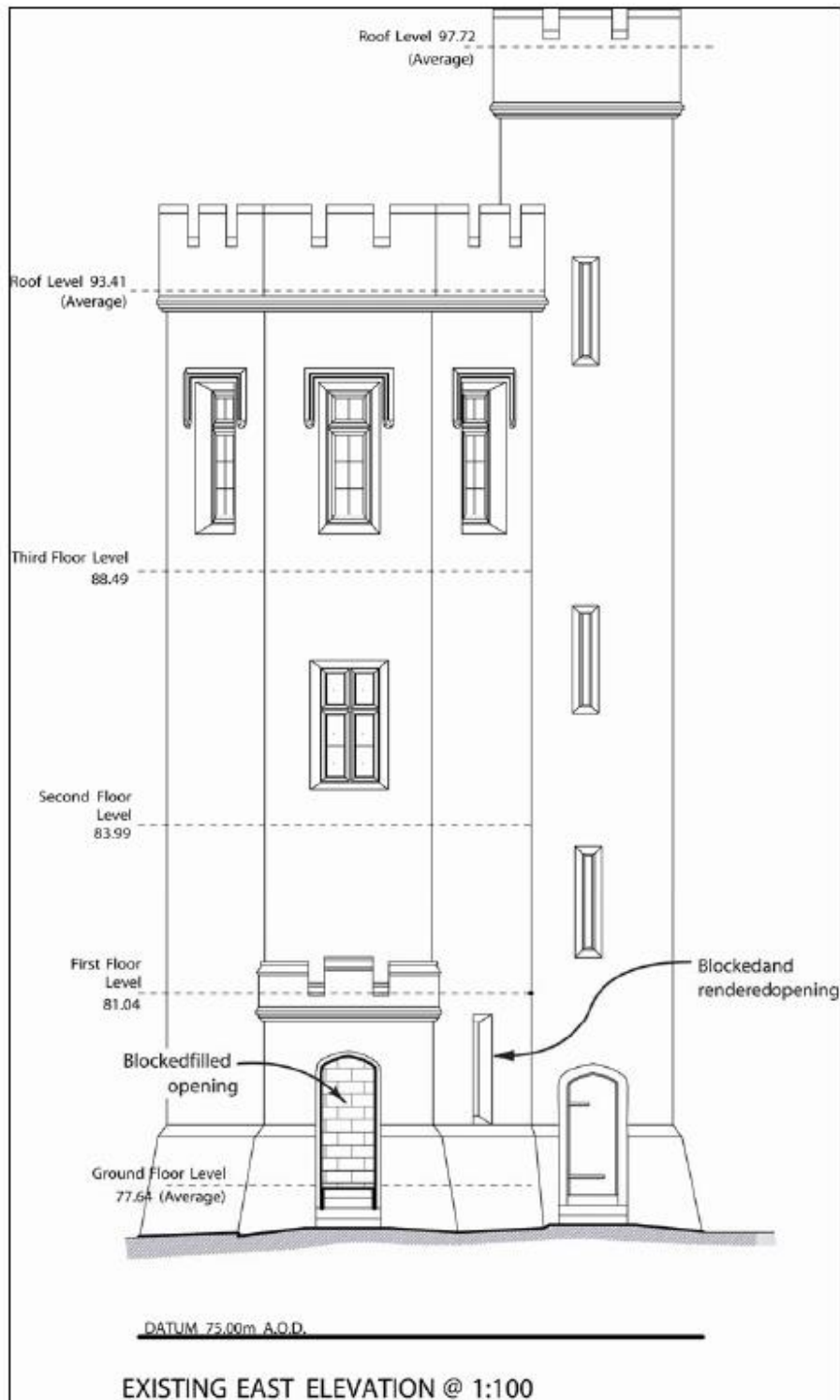
On the ground floor, the original flagstone floor was a happy discovery during the works, beneath a later screed. These have been relaid above underfloor heating elements on an insulated base, and the same surface has been extended through to the shower room, which needed careful design to maximise a very small space in the service block.

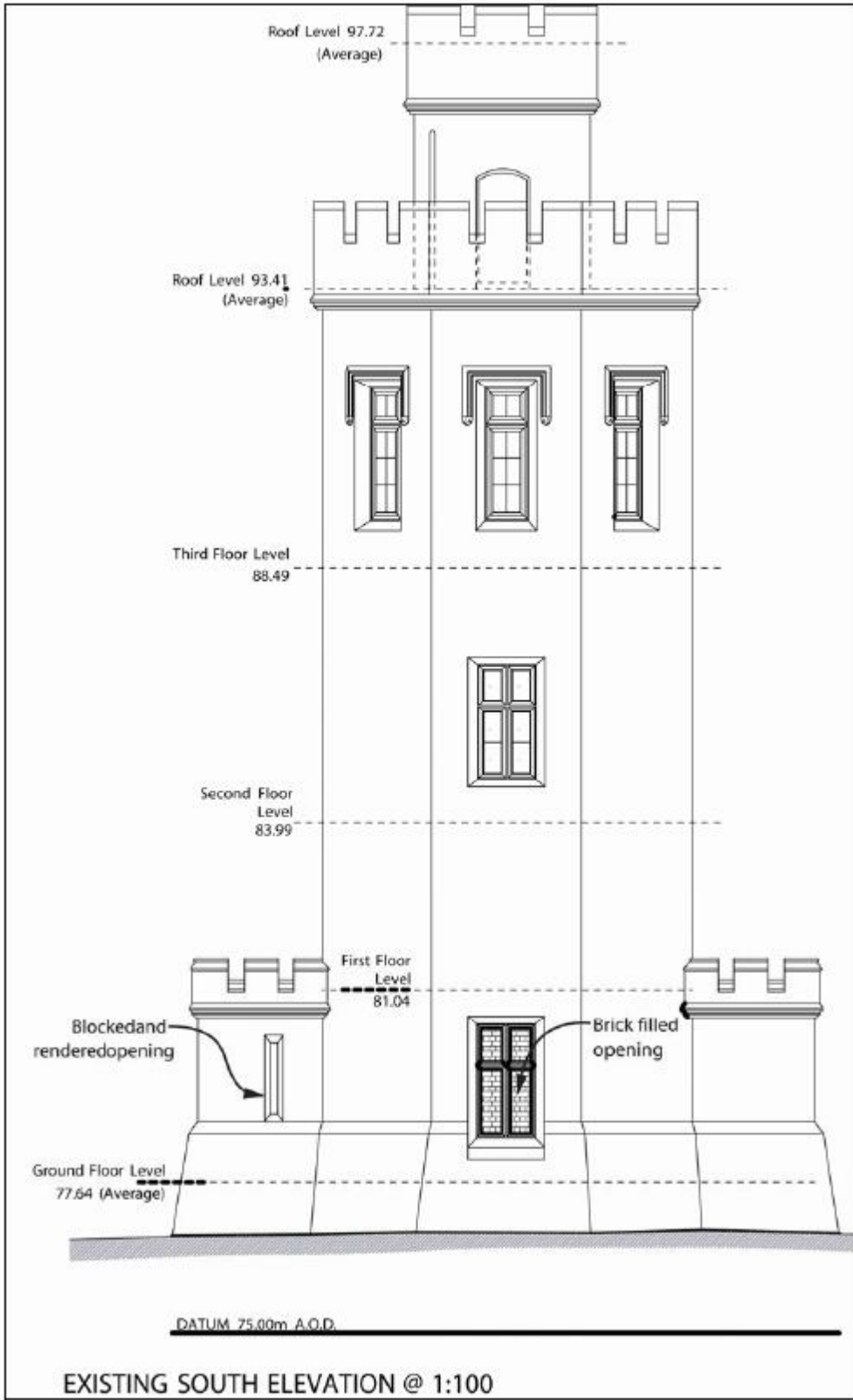
The difficulties of working on tall buildings were compounded at The China Tower by the very narrow spiral stairs. Good use was made of the winch and pulley from the roof, but carrying render to the parapets and lime plaster to the sitting room was often inevitable. Most finished the project fitter than when they started.

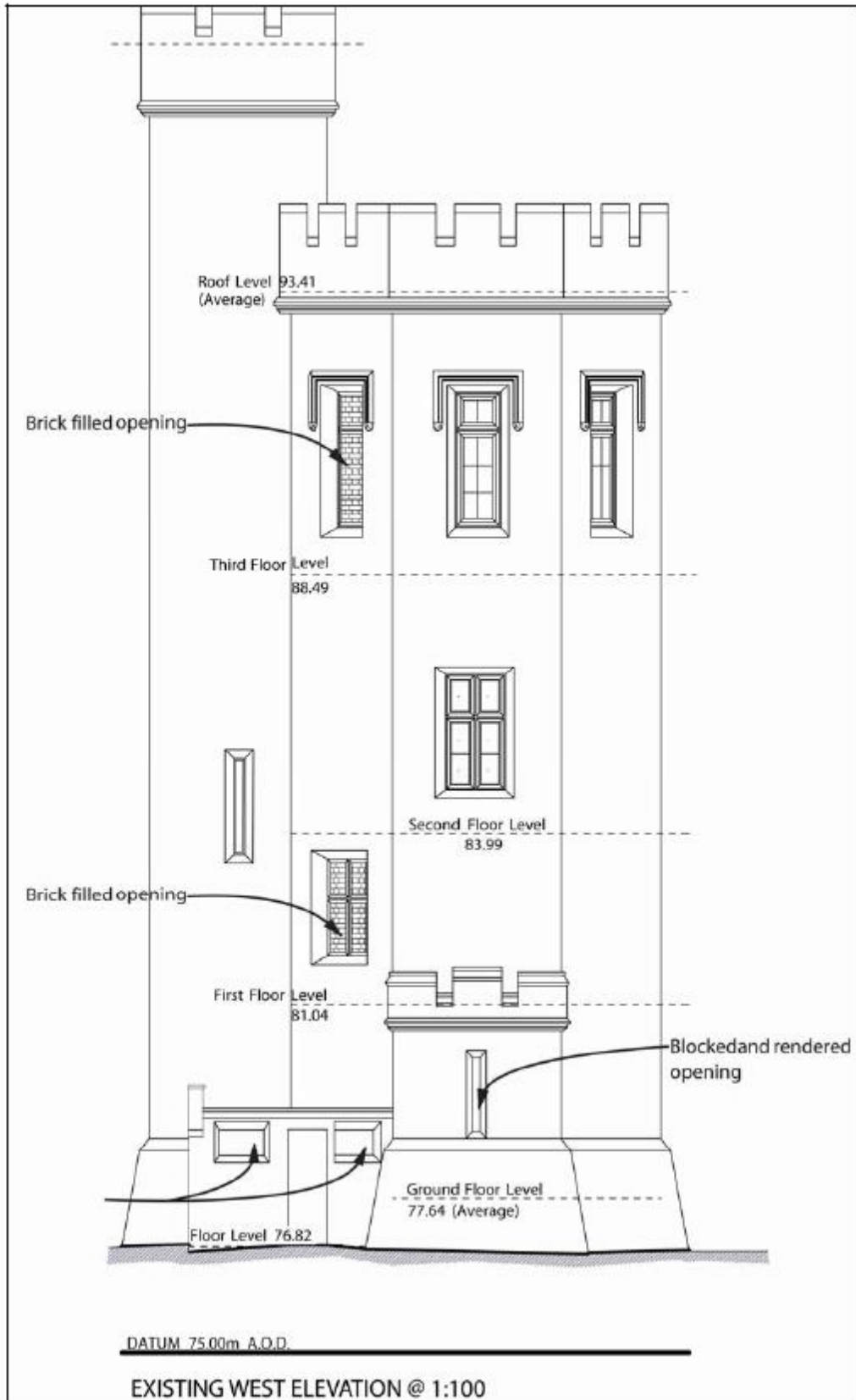
Contracts manager Andrew Sturgess and site manager Brian Berry faced particular difficulties in planning and organising the work but gallantly rose to the challenge and kept the momentum of the site going despite snow and a very wet winter. It was a particular highlight when the building finally emerged after months behind scaffolding.

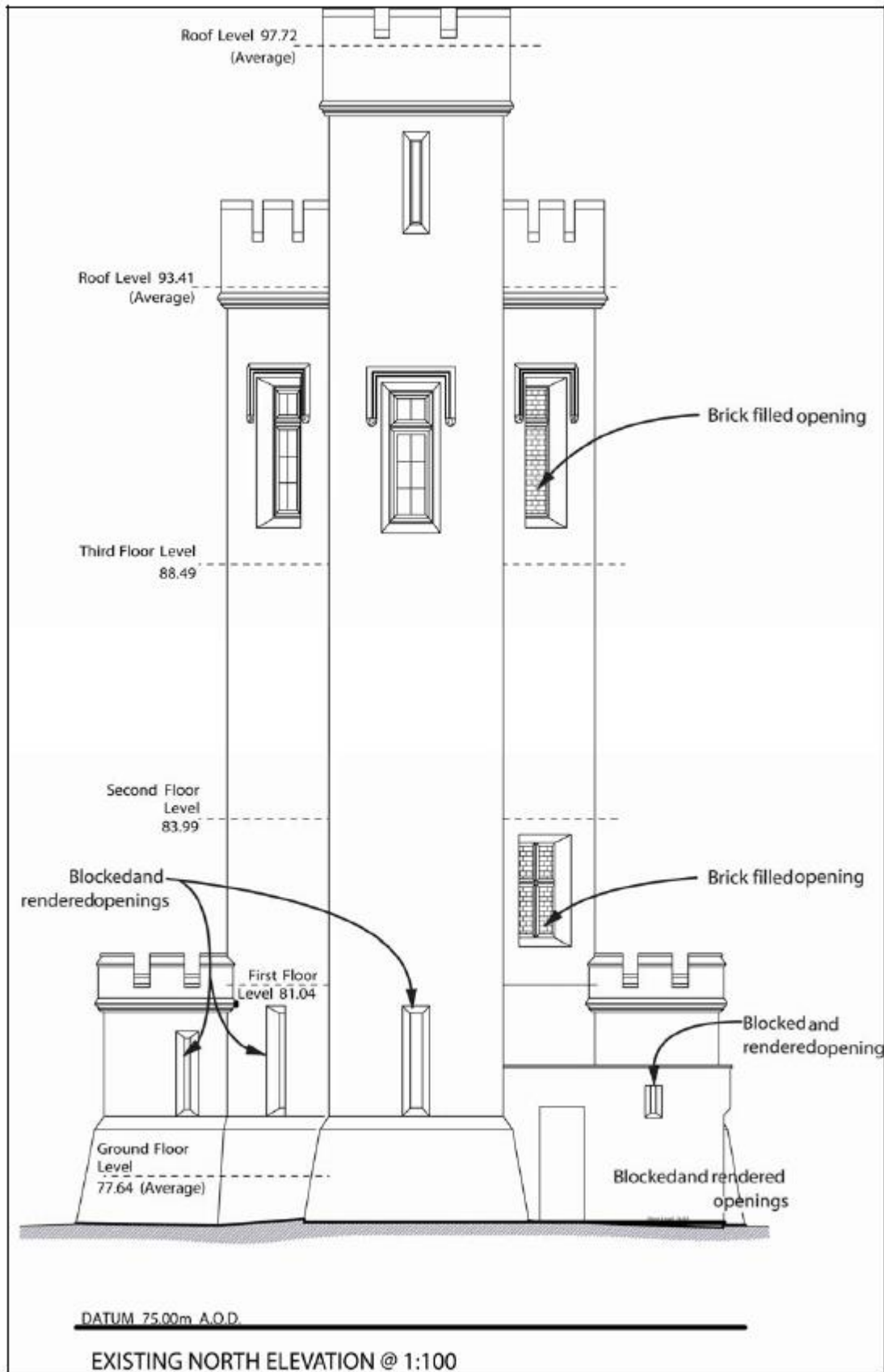
The Estate meanwhile had been clearing vistas and re-surfaced the original access track, so ensuring that the tower once more has the setting and approach intended by Lady Rolle, as it enters its new lease of life.

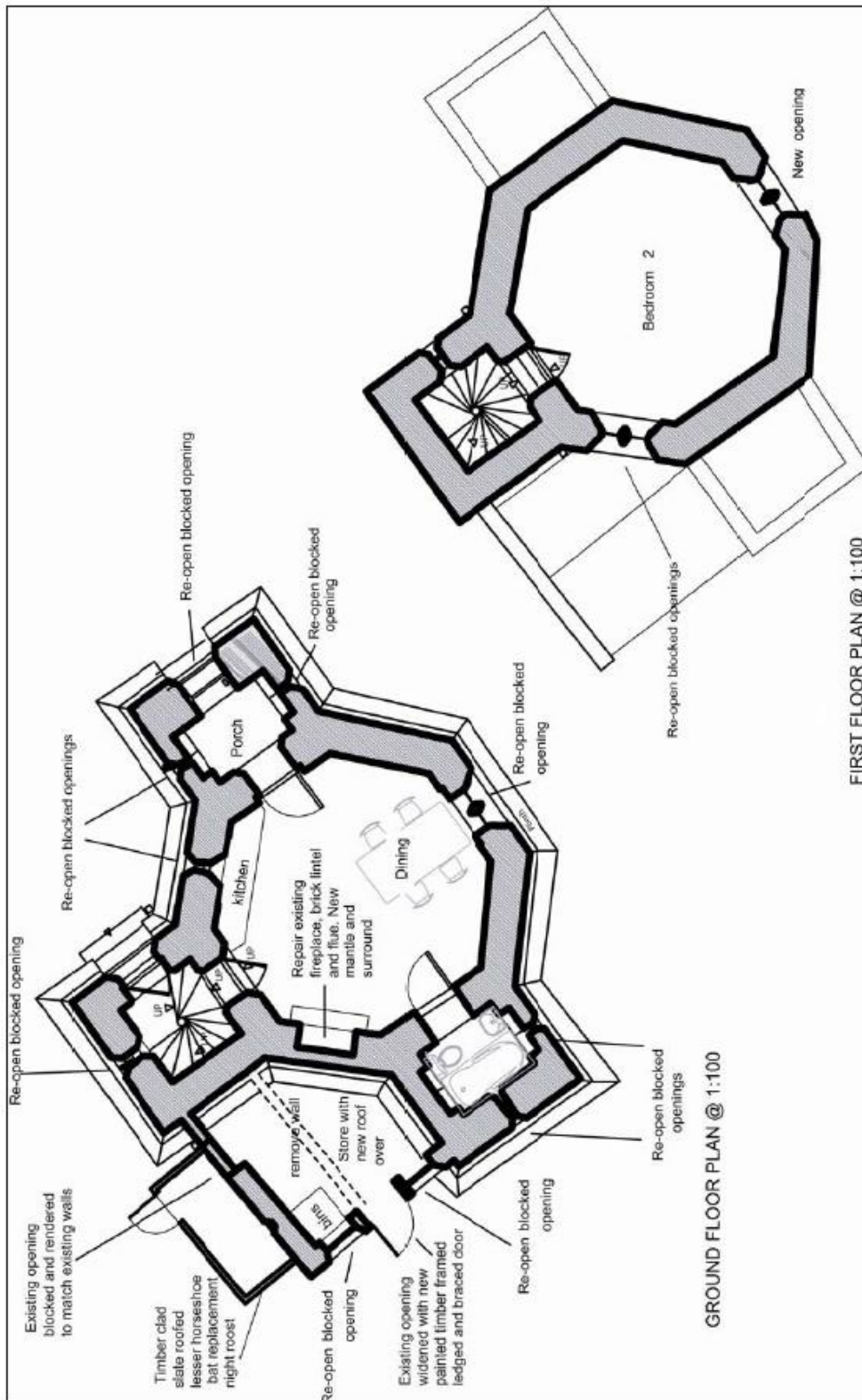
The China Tower before restoration (Jonathan Rhind Architects)

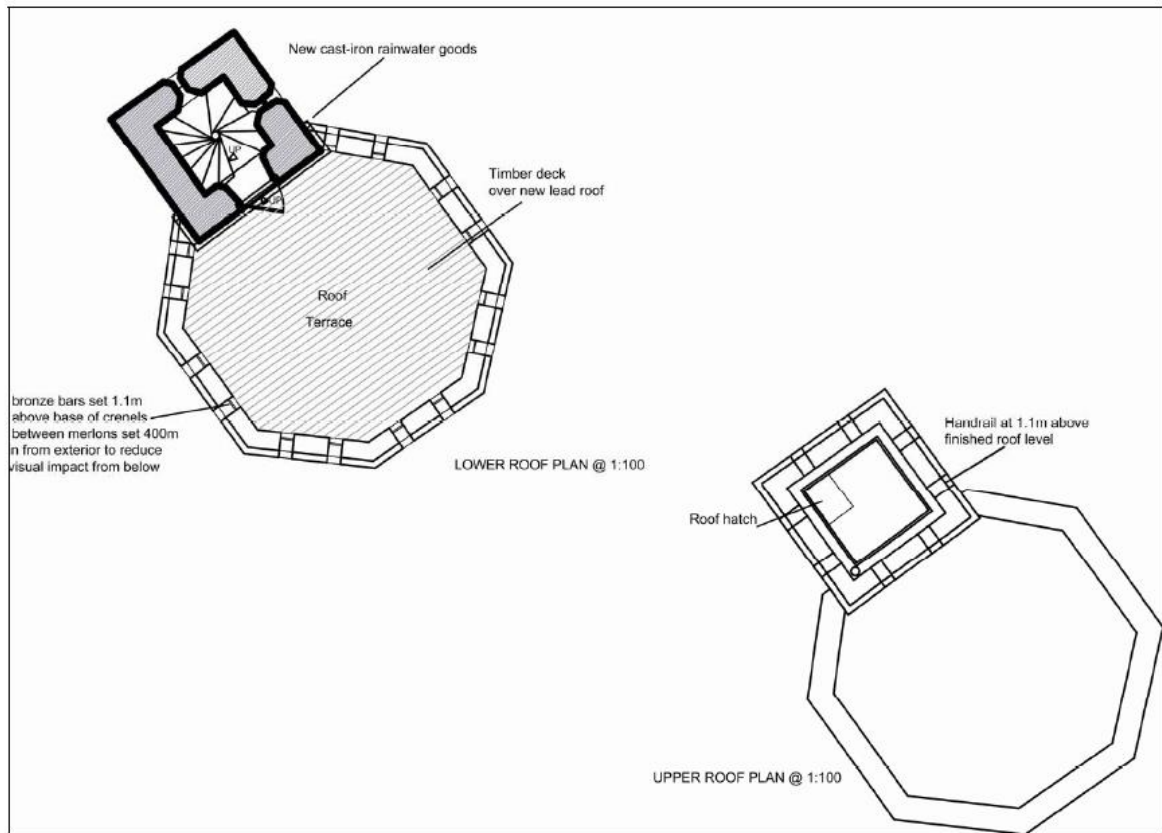
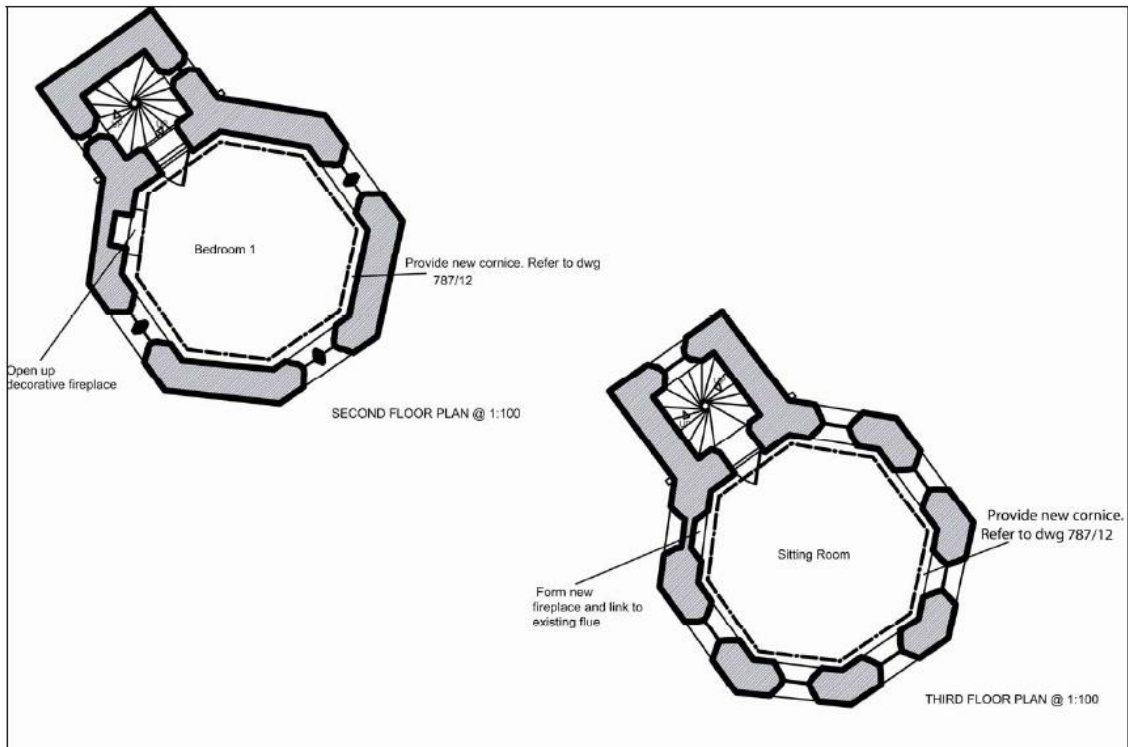












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(on James Barnes)