

A souvenir guide

Middlethorpe Hall

Yorkshire



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Escape to the Country

Who hasn't dreamt of escaping the grime and noise of city life for the apparent tranquillity of the countryside?

From Industry to Gentry

Thomas Barlow wanted to be recognised as a country gentleman, and that's just what he achieved by building himself a smart new country house at Middlethorpe.

Thomas's grandfather, Humphrey Barlow, had founded the family fortunes in Sheffield as a wine merchant and by the end of his life had become 'a man of good substance and allied to the best families in town'. Thomas's uncle Francis established himself in Sheffield's principal industry, iron-making, and became seriously wealthy as a partner in the Duke of Norfolk's huge ironworks. However, Francis had no children, and so when he died in 1690, he passed his fortune on to his nephew.

The following year Thomas was granted a coat of arms – an essential

Sheffield: 'Houses dark and black'

'This town of Sheffield is very populous and large, the streets narrow, and the houses dark and black, occasioned by the continual smoke of the forges, which are always at work: Here they make all sorts of cutlery-ware, but especially that of edged-tools, knives, razors, axes &c. and nails.'

Daniel Defoe, 1724



prerequisite of being a gentleman in the seventeenth century. His father had been a Quaker, but to be accepted into the higher circles of Yorkshire society you needed to be an Anglican. So he had himself baptised into the Church of England. In 1691 he also found himself a wife. Mary Chapman was a cousin who had been recommended as a suitable wife by his uncle. Mary produced a male heir, as required, but died only three years later.

Opposite The entrance front

Below The heraldic Barlow eagle tops the parapet of the house



Below right To be a gentleman in the seventeenth century, you had to have a coat of arms. Thomas Barlow was granted his in 1691

The wealthy Cit [city-dweller], grown old in trade,
Now wishes for the rural shade...
While Madam dotes upon the trees,
And longs for ev'ry house she sees,
Admires its views, its situation...

Robert Lloyd, 1757

Around 1695, like many a cultured young gentleman, Thomas set out on a Grand Tour of the capital cities of Europe. He was deeply impressed by the baroque art and architecture he encountered on his travels.

Thomas had wealth, education, a son, a coat of arms and the right religion. All he needed now was a country estate. He found it in the pretty countryside south of York at Middlethorpe, which he bought in 1698 for £1,250 from the heirs of Sir Henry Thompson. Almost at once the young widower (he never remarried) began work on his new house, and within three years it was finished.

But Thomas was to have little more than a decade to enjoy his fine creation. In the spring of 1713 he decided to set out on a second Grand Tour, together with his son Francis, who had just come

of age. He doubtless wanted to show Francis the historic sites he had enjoyed, but while travelling through France that summer tragedy struck: Thomas fell ill and died.



The Barlows of Middlethorpe

Opposite John Barlow created the Ballroom as a room for entertaining

'A very pretty place'

While Thomas was away on his Grand Tour of Europe, he let out the house. The tenant he chose was the letter-writer, traveller and pioneer of inoculation, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, who was the most distinguished person to live at Middlethorpe. Like Thomas, she preferred country house life to 'the inconvenience and disagreeableness of a country town' such as York, and she was prepared to overlook Thomas's taste in furniture: 'I believe we shall be much in the wrong if we misse Mr Barlow's, but great Allowances should be made for the defect of furniture and people's living in the house', she wrote to her husband, who was away in London. Concluding that it was 'a very pretty place', she moved in with her sickly young son in 1713. Among her guests was Sir John Vanbrugh, the architect of Castle Howard and the victim of her spiky wit: 'tis credibly reported that he is endeavouring at the honourable state of matrimony, and vows to lead a sinful life no more. Whether pure holiness inspires his mind, or dotage turns his brain is hard to find.' Lady Mary gave up the lease in 1714 and spent much of her later life travelling abroad – separated from her husband.



Right Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, who rented Middlethorpe in 1713–14



Francis Barlow returned to Middlethorpe in 1714. He was not yet 25 and an orphan, but he showed the same steely determination as his father to establish the family in Yorkshire county society. He sold off his shares in the Sheffield ironworks and invested the proceeds in land around Middlethorpe. He cemented his position among the local gentry by marrying Elizabeth Robinson of Rokeby Park about 1745. However, all his efforts at gentrifying the family were threatened by Thomas Barlow, 'my reprobate son', as he called him: his 'obstinate rebellious behaviour ... have given me very great vexation and trouble'. Francis was obliged to take the drastic step of disinheriting his elder son, leaving the bulk of his estate to his second son, Samuel Francis. However, he decreed in his will that his widow Elizabeth 'shall Enjoy my Mansion and House with all its Priviledges and Appurtances ... for her life'.

Samuel Francis Barlow (d.1800) proved a reliable steward of his inheritance, doing little to enlarge it, apart from marrying a local heiress. He was content to live the comfortable existence of a wealthy country gentleman that Thomas Barlow had worked so hard to create.

In 1805 Middlethorpe passed to Samuel Francis's second son John, who made considerable changes to the house in the fashionable neo-classical style, perhaps spurred on by his marriage to Frances Bayley in 1807 (see p.16).

Sadly, John and Frances had little opportunity to enjoy these improvements, as their marriage ended in legal separation four years later. Frances accused her husband, who was never an easy character, of 'improper treatment', and gained custody of their only child Frances.



When the unhappy John Barlow died in 1813, Middlethorpe was inherited by his youngest brother Andrew, who was the last in the line of male Barlows to own Middlethorpe. The house itself was rented out to the Simpson family for £300 a year. An inventory of the furnishings made at this time gives a revealing picture of how it looked (see box).

For much of the nineteenth century Middlethorpe was rented out either as a family home or as a girls' boarding school. In 1912, after more than two centuries of family ownership, it was finally sold to Leo Paget. Paget loved country life in all its traditional forms. He was an expert gardener, horseman and breeder of Middle White pigs. Sadly, his herd was wiped out by foot and mouth disease in 1925.

In 1946 the house was bought by Sir Frank Terry, a member of the famous York chocolate-making family. (Middlethorpe was conveniently close to their Bishopthorpe Confectionery Works, home of Terry's Chocolate Orange). Sir Frank preferred to live at Middlethorpe Manor and proceeded to divide the house up into flats. Even more unsympathetic alterations were made in the 1970s, when the ground-floor rooms were transformed into a night club, 'Brummels', where, it was said, the 'age of Regency elegance lives on'. This proved to be a considerable exaggeration.

Middlethorpe restored

In 1980 Middlethorpe Hall and Gardens were acquired by Historic House Hotels. By this time the house was in a sorry state, and the garden buildings were even more derelict: the roof of the seventeenth-century dovecot collapsed



Opposite The main stairs
Above The seventeenth-century dovecot required major restoration

shortly after acquisition. Led by the architect Richard Carr-Archer, much work was put in hand to repair the leaking roof and rotting fabric. Only then could the even trickier task begin of sympathetically converting an early eighteenth-century house into a luxury hotel, with all the demands of modern guests, health and safety requirements and historic buildings legislation. Middlethorpe Hall today welcomes visitors in search of comfort, beauty and history.

Middlethorpe in 1814

The Little Oak Room (now the Parlour) was furnished with the following:

- one Mahogany Sideboard
- one Small Tea Table
- one Walnut Cabinet
- Two Orange Window Curtains
- Six framed pictures

The House: 'After the Italian Mode'



Before Thomas Barlow could begin work on his new house about 1699, he had to demolish the earlier seventeenth-century building that had stood on the site. However, repair work in 1980 revealed that he had economised by reusing structural timbers from the old house. On 17 September 1702 the Leeds antiquary Ralph Thoresby noted in his diary: 'Received a visit from Mr Barlow of Middlethorp near York, which very curious house he built after the Italian mode he had observed in his travels to Rome.' Barlow had evidently looked closely at sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Roman *palazzi* during his first Grand Tour.

Middlethorpe is a three-storey box of bright red brick and limestone window

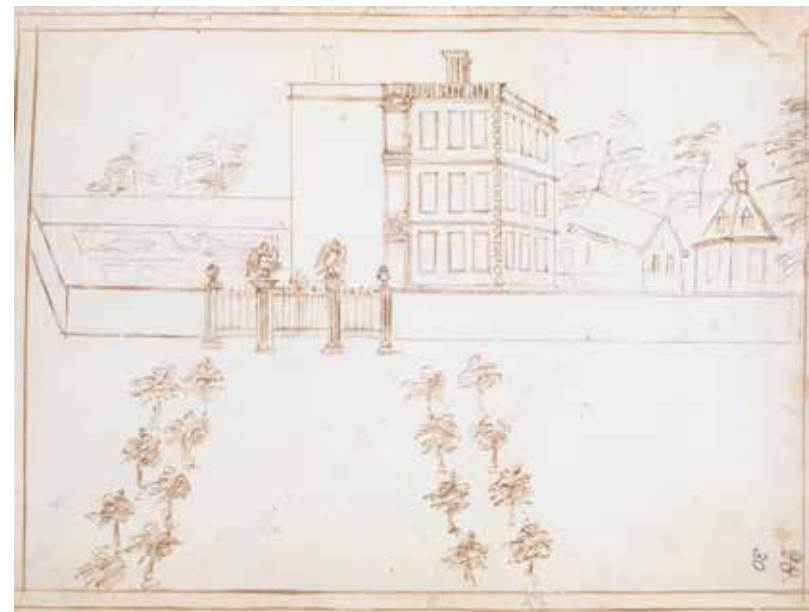
mouldings. Originally, it would have looked even more box-like, before the rooftop balustrade and flat roof had been removed and the wings added. Francis Place's bird's-eye view of c.1705 (illustrated on p.15) reveals that there were also once a curving double staircase in the baroque style that led up to the garden front door, above which Barlow proudly displayed his newly acquired coat of arms.

No building accounts survive, so we can only guess at the architect. There are similarities with nearby Newby Hall, which was built around the same date by another gentrified industrialist, Sir Edward Blackett. We know that the York joiner John Etty worked at Newby, so he may also have been involved at

Middlethorpe. Barlow may also have taken advice from Sir Godfrey Copley of Spotborough Hall, who was a friend, neighbour and partner in the Duke of Norfolk's ironworks.

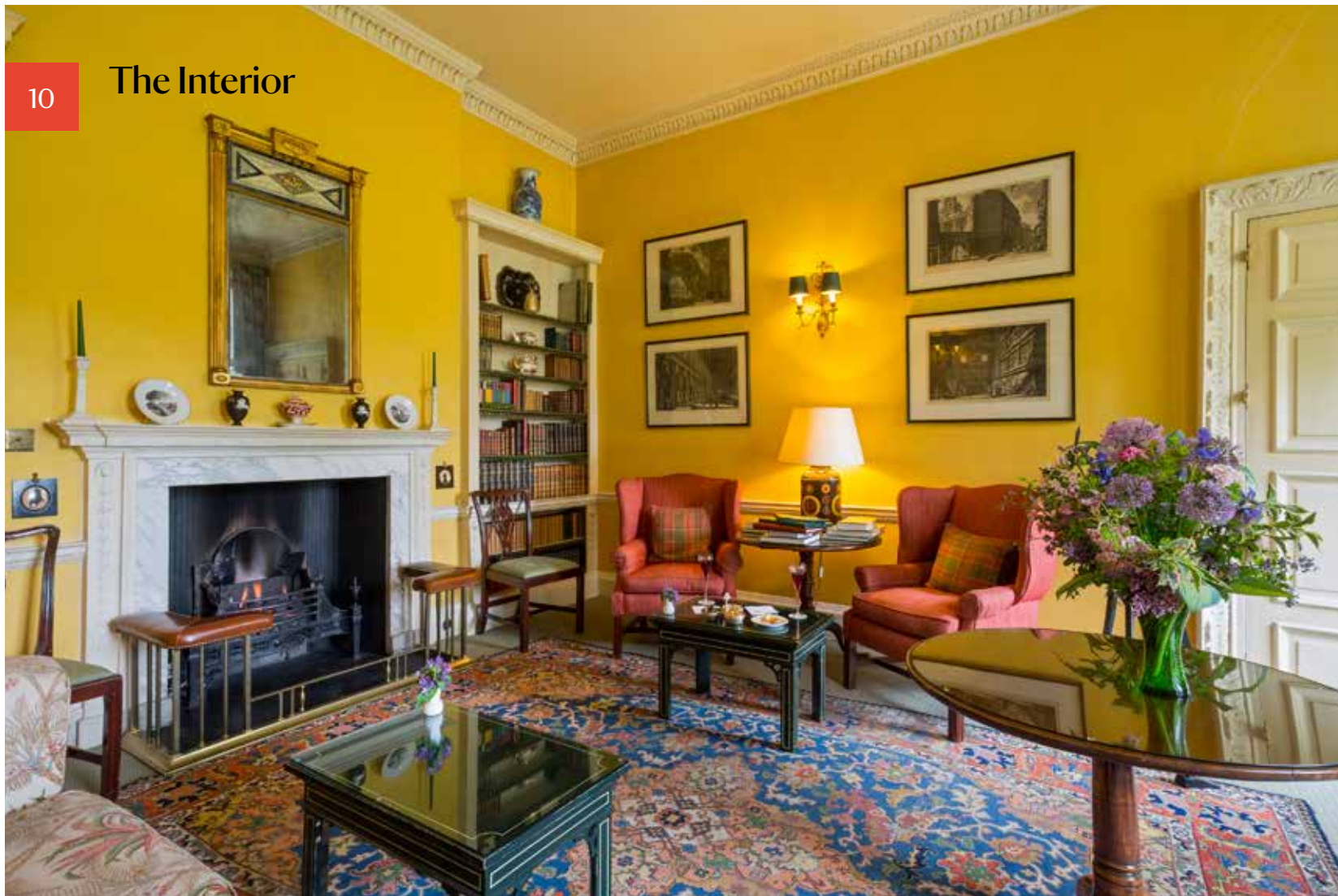
Francis Barlow added single-storey wings on the east and west sides, probably in 1735, when he was appointed High Sheriff of Yorkshire. The extra reception rooms would have given him more space in which to entertain the county. In the early nineteenth century the balustrade was taken down, and the heraldic Barlow eagles moved from the gate piers to the roof top. Porticoes in the fashionable neo-classical style were later added to the entrance and garden fronts to protect visitors from the Yorkshire rain. The red bricks were also covered in pale stucco render. Fortunately, this unhappy addition has since been removed.

Opposite The north front



Above The portico was added in the early nineteenth century

Left Samuel Buck's pen, ink and wash sketch of about 1720 shows the house and garden from the west. The Barlow eagles still top the garden gates in this view



Middlethorpe has proved remarkably adaptable to the changing needs of English domestic life, and the layout of the central block has been altered very little in the last three centuries.

The Entrance Hall

The off-centre Entrance Hall still has its original stone-flagged floor, black marble chimneypiece and oak door surrounds. The ceiling and cornice are modern replicas.

Pictures

Whatever family portraits the Barlows commissioned have long since been dispersed. Richard Broyd has brought in Georgian portraits, landscapes and still-lives of the kind that would have hung here in Middlethorpe's eighteenth-century heyday.

The Parlour

This intimate, plain-panelled room to the left of the Entrance Hall was probably used by Thomas Barlow for business or as a family sitting room. It still has its original white marble chimneypiece.



Left The Ante-Room

Above The Oak Dining Room

The Oak Dining Room

This was the grandest room in Thomas Barlow's house and it has the most elaborate surviving oak panelling. Careful removal of centuries of paint has revealed the superb quality of the carving, which is the equal of that in the best York townhouses of the period. Scrolling acanthus leaves decorate the doorcases.

The Ante-Room

The room on the far side of the Staircase Hall has been converted for use as a library. The carved doorcases are probably original.

Opposite The Ballroom

Right The finely carved banisters on the main stairs

The Ballroom

The west wing contains the largest room in the house, which was probably extended in the early nineteenth century to allow for county balls and other grand entertainments. The delicate plasterwork ceiling and the white marble chimneypiece probably date from this period.

Pictures

The full-length portrait of a country gentleman loading his rifle (hanging in the centre of the end wall) is of *Edward Finch* (?1697–1771). Like the builder of Middlethorpe, Finch made the Grand Tour of Europe as a young man. He spent most of his career as a diplomat and courtier. At the end of his life he changed his name to Finch-Hatton in order to inherit Kirby Hall, the great Northamptonshire mansion of the Hattons (now English Heritage).

The Staircase Hall

The cantilevered oak stairs connect the ground and first floors, linking all the principal apartments. Again, the carving of the balusters is particularly fine. Thomas Barlow's teenage grandsons John and Samuel were probably to blame for the initials scratched into the banisters: 'IB 1764 & SB'.

Pictures

Hanging above the stairs is a studio version of Jonathan Richardson the elder's portrait of Middlethorpe's most famous tenant, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (see p.4). The original portrait was painted about 1719, five years after her stay here.



The Secondary Stairs

These oak stairs link the attic floors with the basement. The late seventeenth-century style of the woodwork suggests that it may have been salvaged from the earlier house. The family rooms connect to these stairs.





The ha-ha (concealed ditch) allows views across the south lawn

Below left The White Garden

Italian formality

Francis Place's bird's-eye view of Middlethorpe shows Thomas Barlow's garden shortly after he had completed work on the house. He seems to have wanted a formal baroque layout of the kind he would have seen ornamenting the villas of Rome, but the flat terrain of the Vale of York made this difficult. In front of the house was an oval pond in the centre of a sunken parterre surrounded by borders. To the west of the house were two terraced walks edged by trees that had been clipped

into pyramids. Statues of Barlow eagles sat on top of the gates, which were set into the south garden wall. To the south east were two walled gardens – one planted as an orchard, the other containing the dovecot built in 1681 for £105 for a previous owner, Sir Henry Thompson. The dovecot was rescued from dereliction in 1980, and a new cupola was added based on that shown in Place's drawing.

In the mid-eighteenth century Francis Barlow deformed the garden following the taste of the time. He replaced the south garden wall with a ha-ha – a concealed ditch which allowed views out over the sweeping lawns to the countryside beyond. He seems to have also built the ice-house, the remains of which were revealed to the north-west of the house in the 1980s.

Although the house was tenanted during much of the nineteenth century, the garden seems to have been well



A pioneer gardener at Middlethorpe

Fanny Wilkinson (1855–1951) was the eldest child of Dr Matthew Wilkinson, a leading Manchester physician and the second husband of Frances Barlow (see p.16), from whom he inherited Middlethorpe. As Fanny explained, 'When my father died [in 1878] we went to live at our own place, near York [Middlethorpe], and there I began to devote myself to gardening in a practical way'. Fanny Wilkinson was one of the first women to make a professional career as a landscape gardener. She laid out Vauxhall Park

in London for the Kyrle Society, a 'Society for the Diffusion of Beauty' among the urban poor. The Society was founded by Octavia Hill's sister, Miranda, and was an important forerunner of the National Trust.

maintained. Certainly, there were regular campaigns of tree-planting. We can enjoy the results in the cedars and North American red oak, which are now reaching maturity.

In the 1980s the garden was restored to suggest something of its original formality. Walks were re-created with urns providing eyecatchers. Trees were planted to screen the main road. A new lake was dug at the south-east end of the garden to mitigate the periodic threat of the Ouse flooding. The ha-ha was repaired, the dovecot rebuilt and the walled gardens replanted with fruit trees, herbaceous plants and herbs.



Below left A view of Middlethorpe from the south-east about 1705; drawing by Francis Place (York City Art Gallery).

It shows the formal garden created by Thomas Barlow around his new house

Below The Rose Garden



The Barlows of Middlethorpe

Owners of Middlethorpe Hall are shown in **bold**

