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WHITEKNIGHTS AND THE MARQUIS OF BLANDFORD

FEW VISITORS TO WHITEKNIGHTS, the main campus of Reading University, realize that hiding behind the modern buildings and busyness of academic life is the vestige of a historic landscape which was once one of the eminent gardens of the land. Little today remains except an eleven-acre lake, a grotto, a few dignified old trees and a wealth of documented information on the fairy-tale gardens created by the Marquis of Blandford, later 5th Duke of Marlborough, in the early nineteenth century.

Documentation on the early history is sadly lacking but there is a delightful legendary story regarding the origin of the name of Whiteknights.[1] There was once a nobleman known as Gilbert de Montalieu, son of a warrior friend of William the Conqueror, who had died at the siege of York. The king granted him all his father's possessions, including the manor of Herlie. Gilbert fell in love with a girl called Editha, the daughter of a Saxon chief called Ceoldorf. One day Gilbert went to visit Editha and found a young Saxon kissing her. Being a man of action, he drew an arrow and shot him. The dead warrior proved to be Editha's brother Edwy de Guildford. Gilbert soon realized his error and begged forgiveness from Editha and her father. Editha entered the 'Convent of Our Lady' at Herlie and Gilbert laid down his sword and embarked on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Many years later the body of Gilbert was found kneeling by the grave of his erstwhile victim and among his possessions was a letter requesting that he be buried in the same grave as Edwy and that a white column and a chapel be erected to mark the spot. This was done by a kindly Caversham priest, the chapel being dedicated to St Nicholas and the site becoming known as the 'White Knight's grave'.

The mansion of Arley, Whyte Knights is also mentioned as a house attached to the Hospital of Lepers instituted at Reading by Aucherius, second Abbot of Reading Abbey. When he died in 1134 he left an endowment to provide 'two large ells[2] of white russet cloth for a cloak, and half an ell of the same material for hose for each knight pensioner living in Arley in the parish of Sunninge', hence the 'white knights'.

There are a variety of spellings of Earley, as the area is now known, and in the 'Domesday' survey there is a reference to 'the manor of Herlie in the hundred of Charlton' which is believed to refer to Whiteknights. There is some link with the family of Erle, a Knight of the Shire during the reign of Edward I.

Longfields, Ledburn, Leighton Buzzard LU7 0OB

In or about 1392 a certain John Shelford obtained a life interest in the manor, although it later reverted to the Crown in 1412. Henry IV granted it to John Beke in whose family it remained by a somewhat tortuous line for nearly 200 years. In 1606 the manor was purchased by Francis Englefield and William Woolascot for £7,500. Englefield later purchased his partner's share and the estate remained in the Englefield family until 1798.

Some time during the eighteenth century Whiteknights was laid out in the fashionable style of a 'ferme ornée' and it is probable that at this time the lake, fed from a series of springs and streams, was created. There were and still are three interconnecting lakes, all in the fashionable informal style. Contemporary illustrations show the lakes as very open and therefore dominant features within the landscape (Figure 1). In recent years unchecked vegetation has considerably masked them and lessened their visual impact. Apart from a small inappropriate extension to the top lake near the grotto, made in the 1970s, the lakes remain largely unaltered.

In 1753 Horace Walpole paid a visit to Whiteknights but was not particularly impressed, 'I went to see Sir H. Englefield's, . . . There is a pretty view of Reading seen under a rude arch, and the water is well disposed. The buildings are very insignificant and the house is far from good'.[3] It seems that Whiteknights had gained more of a literary attraction for it was visited by various poets and playwrights such as William Wycherley, John Gay, and Alexander Pope.[4] By 1783, Henry Englefield, a staunch Roman Catholic,

Figure 1. Engraving of Whiteknights in 1776 showing the 'well disposed' lakes in their natural style and the original house that failed to impress Walpole

had become so estranged from his neighbours that he sold the estate to William Byam Martin.[5]

At this point we must bring in George Spencer, Marquis of Blandford and later 5th Duke of Marlborough. As a boy he would have grown up at Blenheim at the time that Capability Brown was at work improving the estate, creating the great lake with its grand cascade and planting the clumps of trees. He may have watched the installation of the famous Bernini fountain. No doubt he would have visited other great estates and seen the work of William Kent, Brown, and later Humphry Repton. The latter was working at a time when new plant introductions were flooding in and his style of gardening, sometimes termed the 'picturesque' included shrubberies, flower beds and specialized gardens for displaying certain plants. If we wish to categorize the style that Blandford developed, it could well be this.

In 1791 Blandford married Susan Stewart, the third of sixteen children of John, the 7th Earl of Galloway. For three years they rented Culham Court near Henley and then moved to Bill Hill near Wokingham where Blandford started plant collecting and gardening in earnest. He already had a link with Dr Thomas Dancer, who, although originally a physician, had become the 'Island Botanist' in Jamaica. In a letter from Bill Hill to the botanist J. E. Smith, Blandford tells him, 'I have just had notice of between 200 and 300 plants having left Jamaica from Dr Dancer; a great many new genera. I shall be very happy to show them to you as well as all my others, when I am settled at Whiteknights'.[6] So it was that in 1798, Blandford and his wife Susan moved into Whiteknights, the estate having been purchased by the family trustees. By this stage they already had five children.

Blandford proceeded, over a period of twenty-one years, to transform Whiteknights into a fairy-tale garden filled with choice and rare plants. Although little of this garden remains today, we have a remarkable account of its features and plant collection in an amazing folio book commissioned by Blandford in 1816.[7] The volume took three years to complete, the text being written by Barbara Hofland and the work illustrated in both monochrome and colour by her husband Thomas (see Figures 2, 4, 6, 7, and 9).

Barbara was a contemporary of the well-known author Mary Mitford and herself a popular author of children's books. Thomas came from a prosperous Yorkshire family, but when family fortunes failed he sold his horse and gun and bought three months' drawing lessons. He achieved a measure of success as a landscape artist and then caught the eye of George III who employed him as a botanical artist at Kew gardens. He married Barbara in 1810. During the period 1817 to 1819 Thomas exhibited various oil paintings showing views of Whiteknights at the Royal Academy.

Through the sugary prose of Barbara Hofland we are led from one artistic delight to another, and Thomas's pictures show us a garden filled with trees and shrubs far more mature than eighteen or so years of growth would have produced.

The gardens of Whiteknights were developed in three areas: the Botanic Gardens, the Woods and the New Gardens (see Figure 3), and Barbara Hofland leads us systematically through each area. The Botanic Gardens were located near to the house and included such features as the Linnaean garden with a formal botanical planting, a Striped garden with variegated foliage, the Duchess's garden[8] and a formal terrace garden. One feature, the Hexagon Treillage (Figure 4) is described as having,

Figure 2. View of Whiteknights from the woods by Thomas Hofland from *A descriptive account of the mansion and gardens of Whiteknights* (1819)

> fine arches, in which the pendant clusters of the hop intermingle with the gay blossoms of the honeysuckle, and form canopies of unrivalled beauty. The garden thus encircled is luxuriantly enriched with China roses, scarlet sage, splendid dahlias and geraniums, which form a fragrant screen around the fountain. This beautiful and singular Fountain was executed from a design by the late Lady Diana Beauclerc, the aunt of the Duke of Marlborough, and affords a fine specimen of the taste that lady so eminently possessed.

This area of the gardens contained the glasshouses which held Blandford's tender plants. We are told of the Conservatory, a 'splendid and elegant greenhouse . . . filled with rare and exquisitely beautiful exotics . . . in jars, vases and bowls of scarce, costly and elegant china'. Then there was the Long Greenhouse, the Orangery, the Cinnarean House and many others. Aquatics featured with a Greenhouse aquarium 'incrustated by beautiful rockwork', and a Hothouse aquarium containing 'Cyperus Papyrus, Nymphaea Cotica, Saracenia Purpuria, Canna Glauca and Arum Esculentum'. Plans for both an aquarium and a greenhouse, constructed by George Tod, for the Marquis of Blandford at Whiteknights, are printed in a set of plans published by J. Taylor of the Architectural Library in 1823 (Figure 5).[9]

Barbara Hofland's account deals with the New Gardens next, although by description they do not appear to have held the attractions of the other areas. The New Gardens were on the opposite side of the lake and were approached over a 'light, elegant and beautiful' iron bridge (an iron balustrade surmounting an earth and masonry dam) that

Figure 3. Map of Whiteknights Park, dated 1844. Blandford's Botanic gardens are clearly marked towards the north-east of the site and The Woods to the south of the site. The New Gardens are not so easy to distinguish just below the widest part of the lake. It would seem that the plan was used for a development proposal at some stage, as a system of roads has been lightly drawn and lot numbers can just be discerned. Possibly this was the embryo scheme for the 'miniature town' of 1846

was painted green. The tour passed through an Elm Grove, a Cedar Grove (red cedar, otherwise *Juniperus virginiana*), past an American border, 'thickly planted with the most valuable shrubs and flowers of America', under a wych-elm grove and on to an oak grove and a cembra walk (*Pinus cembra*, the Arolla pine).

These walks, and in fact all of the gardens were adorned with a series of 'Seats', some quite small arbour-like structures, others elaborate pavilions. All were unfortunately constructed in a rustic style from timber and associated materials so none have survived. The Round Seat within the New Gardens was 'formed entirely of branches of Maple and Larch beneath a circular thatched dome: the rustic pillars support an architrave of taste and beauty, displayed in the most simple materials. Thin slices from the heart of the Yew

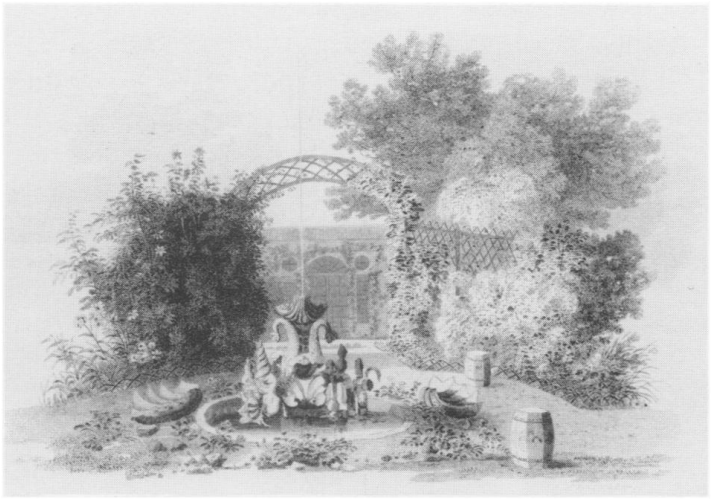

Figure 4. Hexagon Treillage, part of the Botanic gardens, by Thomas Hofland from *A descriptive account of the mansion and gardens of Whiteknights* (1819)

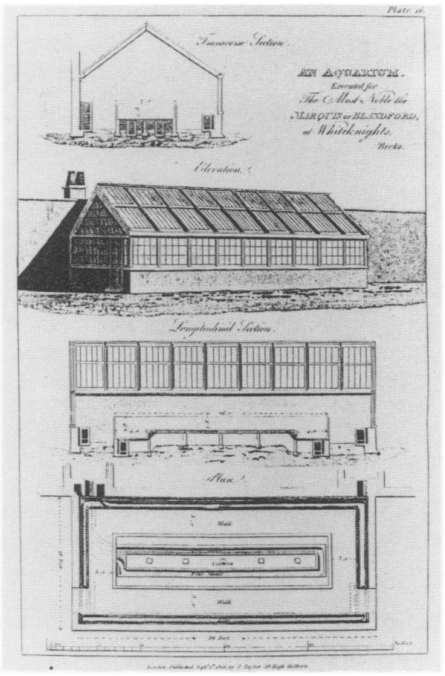

Figure 5. Design for a hot-house aquarium for Whiteknights, from a catalogue produced by George Tod, surveyor and hot-house builder, 1823

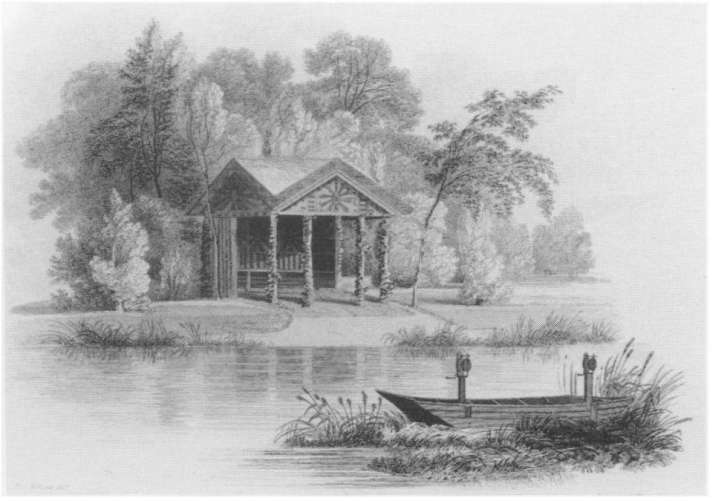

Figure 6. New Fishing Seat by Thomas Hofland from *A descriptive account of the mansion and gardens of Whiteknights* (1819)

tree form medallions, which are grafted into small sprays of the Larch tree with so much symmetry as to produce a surprising effect, and the pebbled floor is disposed in leaves and circles with equal simplicity and grace.' There is also the Diamond Seat, the Cedar Seat, or fragrant bower, the Fishing Seat (Figure 6) and the Three Arched Seat, 'the most elegantly conceived of all these sweetly fanciful bowers'.

The third area of horticultural development was The Woods with its 'beautiful walks, velvet lawns, exotic plantations, flowery arcades, rural bowers and gay pavilions'. Near the entrance was an Acacia Bower, 600 feet in length, and a Laburnum Bower 1,200 feet in length leading to the Rustic Orchestra, a trellised enclosure, 'large enough to accommodate his Grace's complete band'. The Marquis of Blandford was also an accomplished musician and composer.

A vineyard, rosary with 'every possible variety of the rose', another American Border and a rustic bridge 'formed entirely of roots and branches of trees in their natural state' led on to the Grotto (Figure 7). This substantial structure of sombre irregular stone is one of the few features of Blandford's gardens that still remains. One cannot but feel that much poetic licence was used by Barbara Hofland in her description.

> This charming retreat appears like a rocky cavern, and closes the flowery valley with an object of the utmost interest and beauty: . . . and if ever a scene on earth could be conceived the abode of Genii and Fairies, this must be deemed the spot dedicated to their choicest revels . . . from the rocky roof depend branches of beautiful coral, and noble specimens of sea weed are intermixed with the green fern . . . Conchs of glowing pink, or bold black and white, are seen on every side, and large masses of glittering spar of rich violet hue or shining white, chrystals, ores, nautili and ear shells give variety to the internal decorations.

Throughout the Hofland account we are told of the elaborate plantings that make up the gardens. Many species of pine, magnolia and oak are mentioned, as well as tulip trees, white cedar, red cedar, fern-leaved beech, and variegated forms of ash, oak, and sweet chestnut. Arbutus, camellia, dahlia, jasmine, myrtle, pittosporum, sassafras, and a host of other names are sprinkled liberally throughout the text.

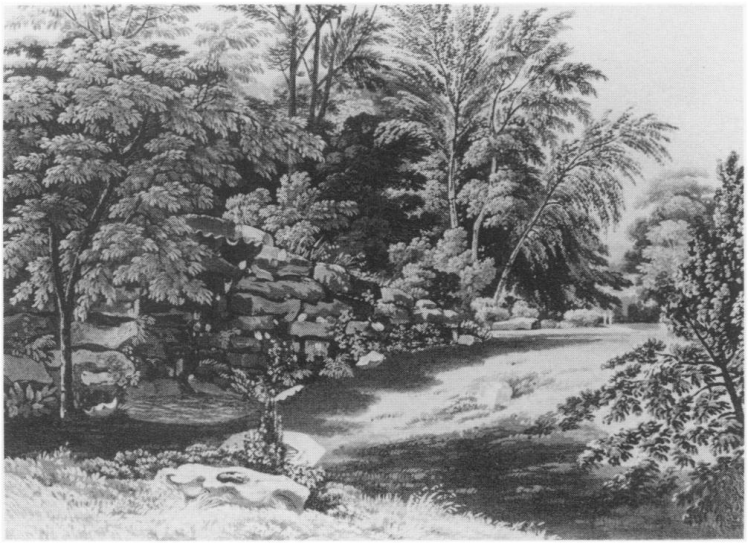

Figure 7. The grotto as depicted by Thomas Hofland from *A descriptive account of the mansion and gardens of Whiteknights* (1819)

Blandford had an extremely acquisitive nature with regard to new plants, although he was never as generous at giving as receiving. The archives of the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew contain a list of plants sent to the Marquis of Blandford in August 1796 with a cryptic postscript: 'But Lord Blandford never added any plant to the Royal Collection'. Mary Soames's account[10] relates a sorry saga of letters between William Aiton, superintendent of Kew, Sir Joseph Banks, the curator and Blandford, the latter trying persistently to extricate rare plants from the not surprisingly protective Kew staff. Both sides invoked the name of the king, interpreting his wishes in different ways. Amazingly the correspondence ends with an apology, although one guesses that behind Blandford's humility were other motives.

Something of the fanatical nature of Blandford's plant collecting can be seen from an amusing incident related in the biography of the sportsman and florist, Edward Budd.[11] 'His Grace was one day inspecting the choice collection of a celebrated Chelsea florist, when seeing some marvellously-beautiful flower, he inquired the price, and was informed seven guineas. Finding the dealer had but two more, he purchased the three for twenty-one guineas, destroyed two of the flowers and said, "Now the Duke of Marlborough has the only one in England".'[12]

Nevertheless Blandford was regarded as a serious collector and a number of the illustrations for Andrews's *Botanist's Repository*, published between 1797 and 1814/15, were drawn from plant material at Bill Hill and Whiteknights.[13] Accompanying the

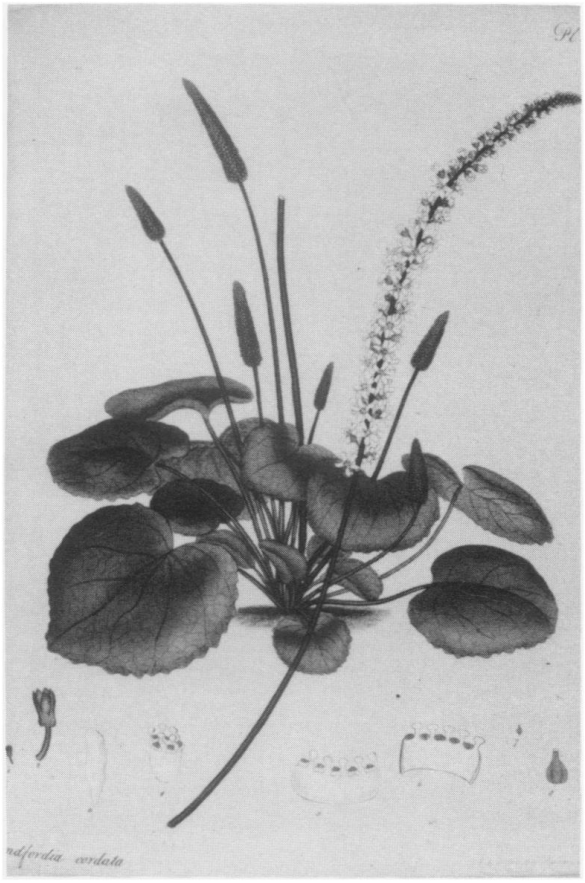

Figure 8. *Blandfordia cordata*, now known as *Galax urceolata*, from Andrews' *Botanist's Repository* (1797–1814/15)

description of *Magnolia purpurea*,[14] we read, 'The plant from which our figure was taken is in the magnificent Conservatory of the Right Honourable the Marquis of Blandford, Whiteknights, near Reading, Berks; and, we believe, the finest specimen of this species of Magnolia in Britain'.

The description of *Anneslea spinosa*, the Armed Indian Water Lily, tells us that

> Seeds of this wonderful water plant, originally a native of China, were sent preserved in sugar from Calcutta by Dr Roxburgh, in 1809, to the Most Honourable the Marquis of Blandford, in whose Aquarium at Whiteknights it now raises its numerous heads bristling with spines, unrolls its immense leaves, and flourishes in all its grandeur.

Other plants featured include *Vanilla planifolia*, which 'we are informed . . . was introduced to this country by the Marquis of Blandford' and *Blandfordia cordata*[15] named in his honour (Figure 8). *Stewartia marilandica*[16] is also featured, 'communicated to us, in bloom, by the Marquis of Blandford, with whom it flowered in July last, we believe for the first time in this country'.

There are no records that suggest Blandford ever used the services of a professional landscaper such as many landowners did. It seems rather that the gardens spread as his plant collection increased, and one might guess that features and areas were added on whim rather than with any great plan in mind. It has been suggested that John Kennedy, one of the partners with James Lee of the Vineyard nursery, may have been involved in some design or advisory capacity. Nevertheless later records show that many of Blandford's plantings failed because they had been planted in unsuitable soils or sites.

He did, however, use various craftsmen and architects for individual projects. Francis Bernasconi was employed to give a Gothick façade to the chapel (Figure 9), by then a mere two-sided folly, and to add stucco work to the bridge (Figure 10). The account for these works, dated 1810, is countersigned by the architect Samuel Pepys Cockerell, better known for his work on Sezincote. Cockerell had worked at Whiteknights previously on designs for entrance gates and the basic bridge. It is interesting to see in early twentieth-century photographs that the ornamentation was added to only one face of the bridge; either uncharacteristic economy or a Blandfordian whim. The garden designer John Buonarroti Papworth also worked at Whiteknights creating some of the fountains, seats and arbours that littered the garden.

Blandford's garden and plant collections were not the only outlets for his exuberant spending. His house was decorated in a fashionable style and filled with fine furniture and paintings by artists such as Rubens, Rembrandt, Holbein and Reynolds.[17] The library held Blandford's collection of ancient missals including the Bedford Missal of 1422, purchased in 1786 for £698. Blandford also fancied himself as a patron of the arts and became involved in the ill-fated Pantheon theatre project, which no doubt contributed to his eventual financial downfall.

Lady Susan had meanwhile developed an amazing skill in watercolour painting. It is possible that she was taught by H. C. Andrews who started visiting Blandford's collections while they were still at Bill Hill. Some hundred paintings of flowers and plants produced between 1794 and 1804 have survived, illustrating not only Susan's skill, but once again the breadth of Blandford's plant collection. However Blandford was far from a perfect husband and in 1801 was the subject of a court case brought against him for

Figure 9. Gothic chapel by Thomas Hofland from *A descriptive account of the mansion and gardens of Whiteknights* (1819)

Criminal Conversation, now known as adultery, with Lady Mary Anne Sturt. He was found guilty, but the damages of £100 awarded against Blandford were minimal compared with the ridicule and scandal generated by the whole sordid affair.

Blandford's skills as a plantsman were not matched by his ability to handle money, and as early as 1800 he was in debt. In 1812 his father, the duke, mortgaged the whole of Whiteknights to various people including Sir Charles Cockerell of whom we have already heard. Forty-five thousand pounds was raised to relieve the marquis's debts. By 1815 trouble was brewing and bailiffs were in attendance at Whiteknights.[18] In 1816 Blandford borrowed £50,000 from a West Indian sugar broker and fellow plant collector by the name of Crasus Farquhar. However nothing seemed to daunt his feckless spending and it is around this time that he commissioned the Hoflands to commence their book on his estate. On 29 January 1817 his father was found dead and Blandford became the 5th Duke of Marlborough.[19] Despite all his inheritances there was little to alter his own personal vast debts.

The beauty and fame of Whiteknights continued to grow and amongst the many visitors there was in the summer of 1817 a visit from Queen Charlotte and a royal entourage.[20] After a tour of the grounds they were entertained by the duke's band and partook of a 'splendid collation'.

By 1819 the duke was bankrupt;[21] his debts were estimated at over £600,000. At one stage he had owed £15,000 to the nurserymen Lee and Kennedy. This was for plants from the Vineyard Nursery in London and demonstrates the extent of his spending on gardens. For eleven frantic days from 7 June 1819 there was a vast auction in which everything saleable from the house, gardens, and farms at Whiteknights was auctioned. The results were disappointing and various additional sales were held in September and October of the same year. Even garden buildings such as the Chinese Pavilion were offered for sale,[22] and we can guess that his local creditors moved in and stripped whatever else was movable.

The new Duke of Marlborough moved on to Blenheim, where he continued to garden but without the same zeal. He nevertheless created a series of gardens displaying different plants including a Dahlia garden with some 200 different varieties. His basic character had not changed and whilst he was at Blenheim he was also involved in a scandalous wrangle with his son because of his propensity to fell trees to provide income. He later had a set of goldplate, originally a gift of the Elector of Bavaria to the 1st Duke, melted down, causing his trustees to take him to court. Some time before he left Whiteknights, the duke had started a relationship with a Matilda Glover, a local 'Blenheim girl' who at one stage lived in Home Lodge within the Blenheim estate.

The Hofland's amazing publication was not finished until 1819, by which time Blandford's financial downfall must have been obvious to all connected with him. Nevertheless the book was completed and fifty copies published at the Hoflands' own expense. Even more incredible is the full-page dedication to their 'sponsor' from whom they were now most unlikely to see any reimbursement:

TO
HIS GRACE
GEORGE SPENCER-CHURCHILL
DUKE OF MARLBOROUGH
PRINCE OF THE HOLY ROMAN EMPIRE
MARQUESS OF BLANDFORD
EARL OF SUNDERLAND
BARON SPENCER OF WORM-LEIGHTON
AND
BARON CHURCHILL OF SANDRIDGE
THIS
DESCRIPTION OF WHITEKNIGHTS
IS MOST HUMBLY DEDICATED
BY HIS GRACE'S OBLIGED AND OBEDIENT SERVANTS,
T. C. AND B. HOFLAND

Mary Mitford, a close friend of Barbara's, writes at this time: 'The Hoflands' splendid publication (that can't be called a book, for the engravings are the soul of that great work) is out at last — and they are in great luck . . . for the booksellers agreed to take them all at 7 guineas a copy and the Duke is to have none but for ready money — so they will not lose above two or three hundred pounds'.[23]

Mary Mitford had never been a fan of Blandford and his gardens. In 1807 she had written critically to her father about Whiteknights describing the lake as a duck pond, although she gave scant praise for the Conservatory garden with its honeysuckles and

rhododendrons. In 1817 she writes to Sir William Elford following a visit to Whiteknights with the Hoflands:

> It was that notable fool, His Grace of Marlborough, who . . . is employing Mr Hofland to take views at Whiteknights — where there are no views; and Mrs Hofland to write a description of Whiteknights — where there is nothing to describe . . . There is a certain wood at Whiteknights, shut in with great boarded gates, which nobody is allowed to enter. It is a perfect Blue-beard's chamber . . . Well thither have I been, and it is the very palace of false taste — a bad French garden, with staring gravel walks, make-believe bridges, stunted vineyards, and vistas through which you see nothing. Thither did I go with Mrs Hofland — 'the two first modest ladies', as the housekeeper said, that she remembered to have been admitted there.

Despite the official and unofficial ransacking of Whiteknights, it seems that enough of the gardens and in particular the planting was left intact for it to remain of considerable horticultural interest for many years. John Claudius Loudon, gardener and writer, first visited Whiteknights in 1804 and continued to return for many years, publishing his comments on the gardens and progress of various plants in his various magazines. In 1818 he was also comissioned by James Wheble to produce a landscape report on the nearby Bullmarsh Court in which we find a recommendation for 'natural like paths, without so many arkward and arbitrary turnings as at Whiteknights'.[24] The 1828 visit is published under the heading, 'Calls at Suburban Gardens',[25] a title which would not have impressed the duke. Loudon commences by explaining that 'the gardens here are shown to strangers at the rate of a guinea for a party not exceeding five'. His somewhat snide compliment, 'To those who can distinguish what is rare from what is common in trees and shrubs, these grounds are well worth seeing', is tempered by the rider that

> those who look for the beauties of landscape gardening . . . will be disappointed . . . nothing can be duller and more stupid, than the walled parallelogram containing the hot-houses and more rare plants, near the house at Whiteknights; but in the wood in a distant part of the park, there are some very pleasing and picturesque scenes, which, though so like nature, owe their beauty chiefly to art.

He goes on to mention American trees, various magnolias, the Linnaean garden, the grotto and fountain, and the vineyard suffering from hares and rabbits. He concludes by being 'surprised to find these gardens so neatly kept, considering the wretched circumstances in which everything connected with the Duke of Marlborough's property is said to be entangled'. One wonders what can have happened in twelve months to have stimulated the introductory remarks to the 1829 reference: 'What a pity it is that this place is neglected! How it must grieve a gardener to look at the ruins of so much splendour!'[26] He bemoans the fact that 'many green-houses, hot-houses, and aquariums etc., are standing empty', but concludes that 'still this place is well worth the greatest attention. There are some fine spots in the park'.

In 1830 Loudon remarks: 'Once so famous amongst gardens, and still rich in specimens of the American family. The conservatories are stripped of their most valuable tenants, and are fast falling into decay'. He goes on to comment on 'fine specimens of Magnolia glauca, conspicua, acuminata, tripetala and macrophylla as standards'.[27] The gardener was still Mr Jones who was employed by Blandford, although the ownership of the property, which had been disputed for several years, had passed to Francis Cholmeley, a descendant of Sir Henry Englefield.

The next visit in 1833 stimulates the comment that 'Mr Jones who planted the place is gone to be gardener to the duke at Blenheim'. Loudon goes on to describe how the gardens had been simplified by 'the removal of some of the hot-houses . . . the turfing of a number of the groups of flowers, leaving only the shrubs and trees that were in them; and the removal of all the plants in pots'.[28] Later he comments that 'the interest excited by the garden, notwithstanding all these changes, is still almost as great as ever; because the rare trees and shrubs, which were at all times the only objects of permanent value, still remain . . . to list the number and dimensions of each fine plant . . . would fill a magazine'. He goes on to describe a variegated oak, *Clethra paniculata* at 15 foot, a standard *Photinia serrulata* at 15 foot and an *Arbutus andrachne* at 10 to 12 foot, 'believed to be the largest in Britain'. (This particular tree survived until the 1970s.) The account stretches to nearly five pages of detailed plant descriptions, which include not only eulogies of success but also failures such as the acacias (probably *Robinia*) dying from aphid attack and catalpas suffering from the wet subsoil. He concludes by suggesting that 'Were the town of Reading sufficiently rich, it would do them honour to purchase this park, and arrange it as a public garden, in which they might be joined by the gentry of the surrounding country, the privilege of visiting it being common to all'.

The entry for 1835[29] is found under the heading 'Notes on Arboretums' and concentrates on trees, discussing the merits of various species of the genus *Crataegus*. Loudon had spent two days examining the trees with the gardener Mr Ward and had found Whiteknights in 'excellent order'. He concludes by regretting that 'there is no particular arrangement followed in planting the trees at Whiteknights . . . that those species that grow naturally in damp situations were not placed in the lowest parts of the ground' and that 'the marshy ground adjoining of the great pond is planted with the commoner forest trees, . . . all of which grow best in dry soils'.

A brief description of Whiteknights and its creator also appears in Loudon's *Arboretum et Fruticetum Britannicum* for 1835. Amongst the potted account we find a detailed description of the magnolia wall, one of Whiteknights' most notable features. It was described as being '145ft long and 24ft high, entirely covered with twenty-two plants of Magnolia grandiflora . . . planted in the year 1800, when the price in the nurseries, for good plants, was five guineas each'.

An interesting reference can be found in the *Horticultural Journal* for 1840[30] when there is a suggestion that Whiteknights should become a National Garden. (Although Kew had been in existence since 1759 as a botanical garden, it was not until 1841 that the gardens were taken over by the state.) The writer makes a convincing argument; 'There was never such an opportunity of commencing a concern of the kind with so little outlay, nor is there to be found in Europe a garden so capable of being made to surpass all others'. He goes on to outline support for the scheme from noblemen, gentlemen and nurserymen and adds the practical rider that 'behind the conservatory, there are two excellent rooms, calculated for the library and reading-room'. Strange to think that Whiteknights might have been what Kew is today!

Another scheme which fortunately did not progress was the proposal in 1846 to develop Whiteknights as a 'miniature town' with 'the erection of about one hundred and fifty villas' in an Elizabethan style. The claim that 'no portion of the characteristic beauties of the spot will be interfered with' sounds very like developer's jargon today.

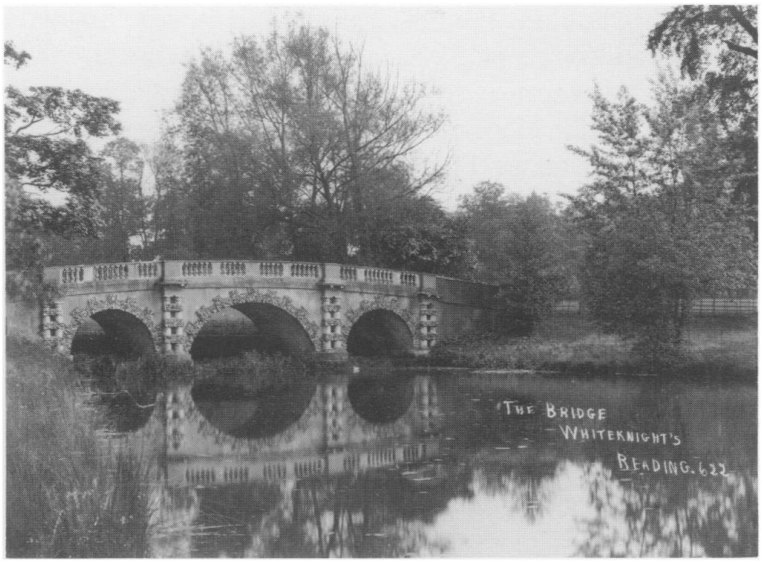

Figure 10. The bridge over Whiteknights lake, showing the rusticated side, the work of Francis Bernasconi

Photo: Dann and Lewis collection, Institute of Agricultural History and Museum of English Rural Life, University of Reading

Figure 11. Wilderness House, early 1900s

Photo: Dann and Lewis collection, Institute of Agricultural History and Museum of English Rural Life, University of Reading

Figure 12. The conservatory, early 1900s

Photo: Collier collection, Institute of Agricultural History and Museum of English Rural Life, University of Reading

The scheme is outlined in an amazing little booklet of 6.5 by 11 cm.[31] In fact the majority of the text is taken up with an 'Historical sketch of Whiteknights' and then a detailed description of the gardens. This description is a more realistic text, giving detail of many of the garden features already described by Mrs Hofland, but including references to the empty conservatory, decaying orangery and Chantilly Gardens in need of restoration. By this time The Woods have become The Wilderness, a title that remains to this day, and Robertson describes the entrance between massive stones called Grey Wethers that had been transported from the Wiltshire Downs. Many areas, despite the neglect, had obviously matured to a certain beauty and Robertson's prose flows with glowing accounts of specific areas. When we reach the flower gardens, Robertson quotes an unnamed 'celebrated visitor; . . . "all around is fairy ground — air, earth, and water combine their choicest gifts to adorn this chosen spot, and mind, which in itself contains the fair and good, hath arranged and heightened all, their beauties"'. The tour concludes where it began by reaching 'the gates that enclose the fairest and most enchanting scenes that mortal eye ever gazed upon'.

No doubt some of this must have been true, although it seems likely that Mr Ward the gardener would have struggled to maintain the enormous gardens which we already know were somewhat neglected. The house had been empty since 1835, and owing to family misfortune Cholmeley had firstly to mortgage the property in 1839 and then sell it to the speculator James Wright Nokes.[32] In 1840 the house was demolished and outlying parts of the estate sold. In 1849 Whiteknights was purchased by Sir Isaac Lyon Goldsmid, whose family remained in overall ownership until the University of Reading acquired the freehold in 1947.

In the 1860s the estate was broken up into leaseholds and six substantial family houses were built. Of these the most notable is Foxhill, which was built by the famous architect Alfred Waterhouse for his own use, and survives to today. Later owners included Rufus Isaacs, onetime Viceroy of India, and Lord Hurst of Witton and his daughter Lady Gamage. During the early twentieth century a notable rose garden was designed and planted by Paul and Sons of Cheshunt and in the *Gardeners' Chronicle* of 19 March 1910[33] we read of this as part of gardens totalling thirty acres with bulbs, bedding, a large conservatory and a walled kitchen garden with peaches and violets.

Of the other houses, Whiteknights Park remains, as does Blandford Lodge and old Whiteknights house. Erleigh Whiteknights, another Waterhouse building in a gothick style and once lived in by the Sutton family of seed house fame, has gone. So too has the rather splendid chateau-style house called The Wilderness originally in the heart of Blandford's exotic woodland garden (Figure 11).

A *Gardeners' Chronicle* article of 1878 describes a visit to the gardens of The Wilderness in detail.[34] The gardener, a Mr Lees, had recently reused some of Blandford's Grey Wethers to create a new garden feature: 'it occurred to Mr Lees last winter that in these boulders were the elements of a gigantic rockwork or fernery; and therefore all were, with a great expenditure of labour, carted into a hollow place in the pleasure grounds, surrounded with trees and shrubs, and there fashioned into the massive arrangement now presented'. It is still there today with a few fragments of stoic fern surviving.

The article refers to pyramidal oaks, *Fraxinus ornus*, and deciduous cypress, all of which are still growing in The Wilderness. The exhibition fuchsias, heaths, grapes, melons and other exotics that the article also describes are of course long since gone as are the stovehouses that nurtured them. However the area still contains many relics and rare trees from both the Victorian and Blandford plantings and one could still agree with the journalist who concluded that, 'The Wilderness is no rival of the great showplaces of the kingdom, but, such as it is, it is not deficient of the many features of interest, and is during the summer months well worthy a visit'.

The final records we have of Whiteknights as a private estate, before it was purchased by the university, are in photographic form and show the park and its buildings as they were around 1900. These photographs come from the collections by 'Collier' and 'Dann and Lewis', both held by the Museum of English Rural Life at Reading University. Philip Collier was a local picture postcard photographer who started work in 1905 and particularly studied villages in the Thames Valley. Mrs Dann of the Dann and Lewis partnership was one of the first female professional photographers and her work which dates from the 1870s concentrates on Reading, especiallv its commercial properties.

Amongst the many glass negatives recently donated to the museum are a number of pictures showing the remaining features of the Blandford estate such as lodges, the lake, the archway, a conservatory, the stone bridge and a later, more formal version of the rustic bridge, together with the various nineteenth-century houses that were added. Of particular interest is the picture of the conservatory showing detail that matches with the conservatory behind the Hexagon Treillage in the Hofland picture (Figure 12).

Although basically the estate is intact, extending to some 300 acres, very little of the historic garden remains today. The bare stones of the grotto (now listed by the Department of the Environment), fragments of flint wall, eleven acres of partially silted lakes, a few ancient trees, some gnarled camellias on the site of one of the old greenhouses, an ice house interred behind protective concrete blocks can all be discovered hidden amongst the modern buildings and bustle of a university campus.

The discerning eye will question the two strange brick piers, the skeletal remains of Blandford's gothic chapel said to have been built on the site of the chapel of St Nicholas which is where our account began. Perhaps one day sufficient interest may be engendered to mount a simple archaeological dig and discover whether the bones of the 'white knight' really do lie beneath this site.

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2. An 'ell' was an ancient measurement of approximately 45 inches.

3. Walpole, correspondence ed. Lewis, vol. 35, p. 71.

4. Mary Soames, *The Profligate Duke* (London, 1987), p. 77.
5. Whiteknights Deeds in Archives of Englefield Estate.
6. Smith, *Memoir and correspondence of the late Sir James Edward Smith, M.D.*, vol. I, p. 435.
7. Hofland, *A descriptive account of the mansion and gardens of Whiteknights, a seat of His Grace the Duke of Marlborough* (London, 1819).
8. A curious name as Susan would not have been a duchess until Blandford succeeded his father as Duke of Marlborough in 1817, although the Hoflands' book was not in fact published until 1819.
9. Plans in library of Reading University.
10. Mary Soames, *The Profligate Duke*, p. 74.
11. Wheeler, *Sportascrapiana*, p. iv.
12. This reference contains an original error as Blandford did not become the Duke of Marlborough until 1817.
13. Henry Charles Andrews, *Botanist's repository comprising colour'd engravings of new and rare plants only with botanical descriptions in Latin and English after the Linnaean system*. Published in 137 parts between 1797 to 1814/15. Andrews was son-in-law of John Kennedy senior partner of the Vineyard nursery, Hammersmith, one of the main suppliers of plants to Blandford at Whiteknights.
14. Now known as *Magnolia liliiflora*.
15. Now known as *Galax urceolata*.
16. Now known as *Stewartia ovata*.
17. The Hofland account also describes the interior of the house and its contents.
18. Dover, Diaries, 29 October 1815.
19. Dover, Diaries, 1 March 1816.
20. *Reading Mercury*, 25 August 1817.
21. Not technically so, as until 1849 only a trader could be declared bankrupt.
22. *Gardener's Magazine*, IX (1833), p. 668.
23. Mitford letters, Reading Central Library.
24. John Claudius Loudon, 'Report on Bullmarsh Court in Berkshire', in Yale Center for British Art.
25. John Claudius Loudon, *Gardener's Magazine* (1828).
26. John Claudius Loudon, *Gardener's Magazine* (1829), p. 383.
27. John Claudius Loudon, *Gardener's Magazine* (1830), p. 654.
28. John Claudius Loudon, *Gardener's Magazine* (1833), p. 664.
29. John Claudius Loudon, *Gardener's Magazine* (1835), p. 502.
30. *Horticultural Journal*, II (1840), p. 260.
31. J. G. Robertson, *A day at Whiteknights*, illustrations by H. C. Pidgeon (Reading, 1846).
32. Mary Soames, *The Profligate Duke*, p. 227.
33. *Gardeners' Chronicle*, 19 March 1910, p. 186.
34. *Gardeners' Chronicle*, 28 December 1878, p. 814.