

Bob Parsons

Bob never meant to be squire of Newark. David Vicary, the collector, heard Bob wanted a week-end cottage and suggested the Reform Lodge at Newark, which was standing empty. But Bob was much more intrigued by the big house, even though another friend Roger Meek, one of the Trust's solicitors, told him about yet another mouldering pile, in Herefordshire, unoccupied since the '40s. He was so hooked on Newark he never made it to Herefordshire. He signed the Newark repairing lease in 1971, and thereafter the place was a major part of his life. The Trust Regional Committee was greatly relieved and it is a measure of how defeatist even arch-conservationists could be in the 60s that they had seriously discussed taking the roof off the house and making it into a picturesque ruin. So Bob's repairing lease saved a house which Jim Lees-Milne had earlier thought hideous and gloomy and Bob went on to reveal it, with clarity, for what it really is – a mid 16th century hunting lodge amalgamated into a charming late 18th century James Wyatt villa. Bob's achievement was to open up, and leave on view, sufficient parts of the earlier structure without upsetting the Wyatt schemes. His flair was to let the archaeology sing out, rather than to obtrude, quite a subtle distinction.

He loved to share his discoveries with others and this was part of his generous and hospitable nature. Just one of those who benefitted in the early days came to Newark on an Acorn Camp – the experience prompted him into a specialist architectural career and he is now one of the leading classical architects of to-day, with some glorious country house work to his credit. It pleased Bob that Digby Harris has always kept in touch and, in turn, shared his architectural discoveries and triumphs.

Perhaps the hardest physical work at Newark was on the garden. It had been abandoned for decades but in clearing it Bob was able to augment it with some very idiosyncratic follies of his own. Indeed, it was the garden, which was first officially opened – for the National Gardens Scheme.

In the early 80s an urgent re-roof was needed, which not only brought National Trust funds into play but also government grants which implied public opening of the house. But without any legal obligation to do so, Bob very generously went along with this. Some 20,000 people visited in the 10 years beginning 1984 and more since Bob and Michael returned to Newark in 1997. Once, and once only, we got a letter of complaint at the Regional Office that Newark wasn't like other National Trust houses. We all gave a resounding cheer.

Now Newark, Listed Grade I, is impeccably repaired and decorated – a far cry from the week-end hobby work Bob intended when he began. Recent work has involved far more interruption than any tenant should endure but Bob was ever patient and polite and inspired in suggesting ways forward. We have Bob to thank – and Michael too of course. Without Bob's determination and drive – and he was labouring several hours each day in the gardens until the last months – without it, there probably would not have been a Newark. It will surely remain his monument.

Jeffrey Haworth April 2000