

Colonel John and Lucy Hutchinson of Owthorpe, Nottinghamshire — and a lost seventeenth-century garden

In September 2000 Major Peter Birkin Tebbutt undertook the purchase of Fishpond Wood in the parish of Owthorpe, realising that hidden beneath the dense, almost impenetrable undergrowth lay a series of old and largely forgotten and silted-up ponds. He little appreciated however the full extent and significance of these ponds until Dr Chris Salisbury, a specialist in wetland archaeology, was invited to examine them. A small local group calling itself the Friends of Fishpond Wood was subsequently formed to clear away the tangled vegetation and to organise the removal of about 700 planted poplars with the help of a generous grant from the Local Heritage Initiative. Soon, as well as the ponds themselves, there began to emerge an elaborate series of banks, watercourses and even a garden vista!



John Hutchinson (1615–64)



Lucy Hutchinson (1620–81)

So what is the story behind these remarkable and, we now believe, unique features? To find the answer we must go back to the period of the English Civil War in the middle of the seventeenth century. At this time the old manorial Hall at Owthorpe was occupied by John and Lucy Hutchinson, and it is to Lucy's famous *Memoirs* of her husband's life that we must turn for our principal account of the period.

The Hutchinsons had moved from London to the family estate at Owthorpe in 1641, but in the following year the country was plunged into civil war when Charles I raised his standard at Nottingham. John soon found himself drawn into the Parliamentary cause and in 1643 he was made colonel of a regiment of 1200 foot soldiers and appointed Governor of Nottingham Castle and town, where the family was obliged to take up residence for the duration of the war. Returning to Owthorpe in 1647, after the first cessation of hostilities, Lucy found to their dismay that the house:

... having stood uninhabited, and bene rob'd of every thing which the neighbouring [royalist] Garrisons of Shelford and Wiverton could carrie from it, it was so ruinated that it could not be repair'd to make a convenient habitation without as march charge as would allmost build another.



Owthorpe Hall, from Mrs Chaworth Musters' *A Cavalier Stronghold* (1890)

A new house, probably on a different site to the old hall, was eventually built in about 1653 (see illustration above). It was presumably from about this period that the gardens were laid out. Lucy tells us that her husband took great delight in 'planting groves and walkes and fruite-trees, in opening springs and making fishponds.'

The Restoration of Charles II in 1660 was a prelude to disaster for the Hutchinsons. In 1649 John had been one of the signatories to the death warrant of Charles I, and as a regicide he now faced possible execution. In the event, Lucy intervened and succeeded in obtaining a royal pardon for her husband, though not without earning his angry disapproval at having agreed to compromise his republican principles. In the years immediately following these troubles he lived 'with all imaginable retirednesse att home ... opening springs and planting trees and dressing his plantations.'

More serious trouble was to come however — and with tragic consequences. In October 1663 John Hutchinson was arrested and committed to the Tower on suspicion of complicity in a Northern Plot against the king. He was never charged nor brought to trial, but in early 1664 was moved to Sandown Castle in Kent where he died later that year just a few days short of his 49th birthday. He was buried in the family vault at Owthorpe.

Over the next few years Lucy devoted herself to writing an account of her husband's life, both in order to defend his character for the benefit of her children and for her own personal consolation. Her manuscript was guarded by members of Hutchinson family for many years before its publication in 1806 as *Memoirs of the Life of Colonel Hutchinson*. Since then, the *Memoirs* have gone through many editions and can be read today as an important (if somewhat biased) social and political commentary on the war. Lucy also wrote a series of elegiac poems into which she channelled her personal grief, and an epic poetic commentary on the Book of Genesis entitled *Order and Disorder*. Indeed, thanks to recent scholarship, Lucy Hutchinson is now emerging as one of the most important women writers of the seventeenth century.

Lucy inherited significant debts on the death of her husband and was obliged to sell off his estates. In 1671 or later she sold the Owthorpe estate to John's half brother, Charles Hutchinson, and moved to London. The garden and grounds had fallen into decay by this time, and in one of her *Elegies* entitled 'To the Gardin att O[wthorpe]' she laments the spreading weeds and overgrown banks that had 'lost his refreshing hand.'

The events surrounding Lucy Hutchinson's final years are obscure. All that is known is that she was buried at Owthorpe, presumably in the Hutchinson vault, in October 1681, although there is no memorial to her in the church. Professor David Norbrook of Merton College Oxford, editor of the complete edition of *Order and Disorder* (published 2001) is presently working on a biography of Lucy.

In about 1775 the Reverend Julius Hutchinson, a descendant of Charles Hutchinson and eventual editor of the *Memoirs*, visited Owthorpe and found the house to be:

... large, handsome, lofty, and convenient, and though but little ornamented, possessing all the grace that size and symmetry could give it. The entrance was by a flight of handsome steps into a large hall, occupying entirely the center of the house, lighted at the entrance by two large windows, but at the further end by one much larger, in the extent of which was carried up a stair-case that seemed to be perfectly in the air. On one side of the hall was a long table, on the other a large fire-place; both suited to ancient hospitality.

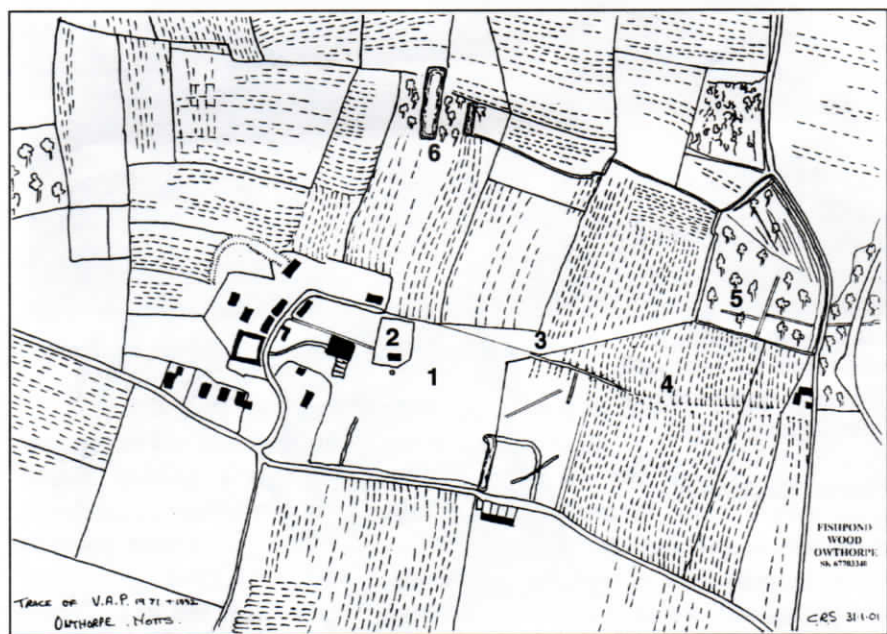


Detail from a map of 1774 by John Chapman, showing the location of the 17th-century Owthorpe Hall, which was approached by a tree-lined avenue from the south. The old driveway is now lost in the fields but can still in part be traced as a slight feature on the ground.

Speaking of the grounds (numbers refer to map opposite) he tells us that:

The western side of the house [1] was covered by the offices, small village, and church [2], interspersed with many trees. The south, which was the front of entrance, looked over a large extent of grass grounds which were demesne, and were bounded by hills covered with wood which Col. Hutchinson had planted. On the eastern side the entertaining rooms opened on to a terrace, which encircled a very large bowling green or level lawn; next to this had been a flower garden, and next to that a shrubbery, now

become a wood, through which vistas were cut to let in a view [3] of Langar, the seat of Lord Howe, at two miles, and [4] of Belvoir-castle, at seven miles distance, which, as the afternoon sun was full upon it, made a glorious object: at the further end of this small wood was a spot (of about ten acres) which appeared to have been a morass [5], and through which ran a rivulet: this spot Col. Hutchinson had dug into a great number of canals, and planted the ground between them, leaving room for walks, so that the whole formed at once a wilderness or bower, reservoirs for fish, and a decoy for wild fowl. To the north, at some hundred yards distance, was a lake of water [6], which filling the space between two quarters of wood land, appeared, as viewed from the large window of the hall, like a moderate river, and beyond this the eye rested upon the wolds or high wilds which accompany the foss-way towards Newark. The whole had been deserted near forty years, but resisted the ravages of time so well as to discover the masterly hand by which it had been planned and executed.

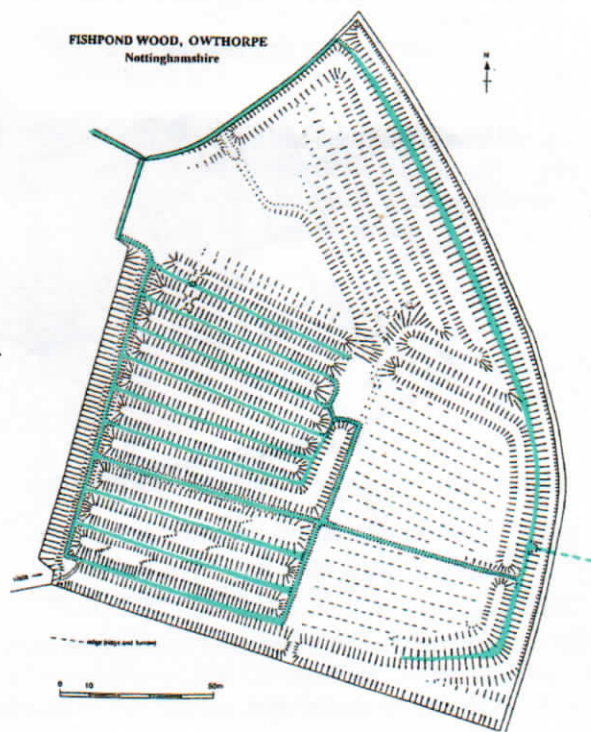


Map of Owthorpe derived from aerial photographs taken in 1971 and 1992. The dashed lines indicate the ridge and furrow of medieval strip cultivation. Fishpond Wood can be seen on the far right, but the 1653 manor house has gone. (See text for key to numbers)

John Throsby in his edition of *Thoroton's History of Nottinghamshire* (1790) tells us that the estate was purchased from the Hutchinson family by Sir George Bromley of East Stoke in 1773. The Renshaw family were installed as tenants and occupied the house until 1825, by which time the building was evidently in such disrepair that it had to be demolished.

Today the site of the house is occupied by rough, unimproved pasture with traces of rubble, an irregular surface, and the occasional appearance of parchmarks that indicate the former presence of buildings. There is an old well, about 7 metres deep, immediately south of the churchyard, which presumably served the house and would have been adjacent to the offices mentioned by Julius Hutchinson. A descent into the well shaft by a group of divers a few years ago led to the recovery of some artefacts including a late seventeenth-century pewter porringer. The gardens have disappeared, but the ponds and associated banks in Fishpond Wood remain as a visible testament to Colonel John Hutchinson's great endeavour.

Plan of the ponds (looking more like canals) and earthworks at Fishpond Wood. The vista which 'let in a view of Langar' can be seen entering the wood from the southwest. This vista appears to be a later imposition and is more likely to date from Charles Hutchinson's time.



The church

The present church of St Margaret now stands somewhat isolated to the east of the village and dates largely from Colonel John Hutchinson's time (1659). Robert Thoroton, writing in 1677, tells us that:

The old Church, which was pretty large, and the Chancell, both covered with Lead, were pull'd down by Colonel John Hutchinson, and this little one built to the North Wall of the Chancel, in which he made a Vault, wherein his body now lies.



Parish church of St Margaret, Owthorpe: seen here from the southwest (2002)

The fabric of the north wall of the church is clearly much older than the rest of the building, while a bracket above the west entrance with two angels holding a shield is certainly from the old church. Inside, the octagonal, castellated font is believed to date from the fifteenth century. A wooden screen that marks the entrance to the chancel bay is reputed to have come from Owthorpe Hall. There are marble wall monuments to members of the Hutchinson family and to the Renshaws. The entrance to the Hutchinson vault has been lost, but it is said to extend across the full width of the church. In 1859 part of the floor gave way, and on descending some steps into the vault seventeen coffins were found; one of them, that of a lady, being chained to the wall in an upright position!

To the Garden at Owthorpe [extract]*
(by Lucy Hutchinson, 1665–71)

Poor desolate garden smile no more on me
To whom glad looks rude entertainments be
While thou and I for thy dear Master mourn
That's best becoming that doth least adorn
Shall we for any meaner eyes be dressed
Who had the glory once to please the best
Or shall we prostitute those joys again
Which once his noble soul did entertain
Forbid it honour and just gratitude
Tis now our best grace to be wild and rude
He that impaled thee from the common ground
Who all thy walls with shining fruit trees crowned
Me also above vulgar girls did raise
And planted in me all that yielded praise
He that with various beauties decked thy face
Gave my youth lustre and becoming grace
But he is gone and these gone with him too
Let now thy flowers rise charged with weeping dew
And missing him shrink back into their beds
So my poor virgins hang their drooping heads
And missing the dear object of their sight
Close up their eyes in sorrow's gloomy night
Let thy young trees which sad and fading stand
Dried up since they lost his refreshing hand
Tell me too sadly how their noblest plant
Degenerates if it usual culture want
There spreading weeds which while his watchful eyes
Checked their pernicious growth durst never rise
Let them overrun all the sweet fragrant banks
And hide what grows in better ordered ranks
Too much alas this parallel I find
In the disordered passions of my mind
But thy late loveliness is only hid
Mine, like the shadow with its substance, fled . . .

*To facilitate reading, the text of this poem (the manuscript of which is not in Lucy's hand) has been modernised and other peculiarities silently emended. The manuscript text of the *Elegies* can be found in D. Norbrook, 'Lucy Hutchinson's "Elegies" and the situation of the republican woman writer', *English Literary Renaissance*, 27, 1997, pp 468–521.