

# ‘Good & Not Expensive . . .’: Lord Harcourt’s Nuneham Courtenay

by MALCOLM AIRS

The definitive historical study of the circumstances surrounding the creation of the village of Nuneham Courtenay, a few miles south-east of Oxford, was published more than thirty years ago.<sup>1</sup> In a wide-ranging essay Mavis Batey recounted how the first Earl Harcourt, founding President of the Dilettanti Society, embarked in 1761 on the creation of an appropriate landscape garden to complement the setting of his newly completed classical villa. An essential preliminary to the landscaping was the necessity to remove the medieval village out of sight of views of the house, and as early as 1760 work had already begun on building a new settlement outside the confines of the park. Progress was rapid, and by the autumn of 1761 the new estate village placed astride the Oxford-Henley turnpike was a going concern (Fig. 1). There is little to add to Mrs Batey’s account of the controversy that accompanied this arrogant display of the power exercised by eighteenth-century landlords over the lives of their tenantry apart from taking the opportunity to record that her own further research has confirmed the tentative identification of Nuneham with Oliver Goldsmith’s critical poem *The Deserted Village*. An entry in the manuscript notebooks of Beilby Porteus, Bishop of London, recording a visit to Lord Harcourt on 20 August 1800, reads:

The village was originally in the Park at no great distance from the House and consisted of pretty white cottages, scattered round a small piece of water and shaded with a number of very fine trees. The late Lord Harcourt thinking the village too near the house, built a new one on the Oxford road, about a mile from the mansion house. But the poor people were very unwilling to leave their old habitation and several houses in the New Village remained for a long time uninhabited. And this was Goldsmith’s Deserted Village — so Lord Harcourt told me.<sup>2</sup>

The date is close enough to the publication of the poem in 1770 to authenticate the attribution.

The diaries kept by the pompous James Newton, rector of the village during the critical period, are surprisingly reticent about what must have been a cataclysmic upheaval for his parishioners. He was more interested in his own concerns about the new parsonage house, placed well away from the relocated village, and the pleasures to be enjoyed on his frequent trips to London, Bath and Oxford. On Sunday 10 May



Fig. 1. The Harcourt estate at Nuneham, redrawn from Richard Davis's map of Oxfordshire, surveyed 1793–94. North at top

1761 he found time to administer 'the Sacrament at the New Town to Dame Andrews'; so, evidently, at least part of the village had been occupied by the early spring of that year.<sup>3</sup>

However, the recent discovery of a letter and drawing in Lord Harcourt's own hand dated May 1767 substantially increases our knowledge about the original form and construction of the new village houses. In conformity with the spirit that had prompted him to build a Palladian villa and to surround it with an Arcadian landscape, his new development at the entrance to the park was very consciously planned and laid out on a symmetrical pattern on either side of the straight village street. Eighteen pairs of semi-detached cottages were placed at regular intervals parallel to the road, with

gardens to the side and at the rear (Fig. 2). Each cottage contained one large and one smaller room on the ground floor, and a winding stair off the main room gave access to similar first-floor accommodation in the roof-space, lit by dormer windows on the front elevation. Deliberate architectural emphasis was provided at both entrances to the village by the careful positioning of two larger and grander buildings which acted as pavilions and effectively screened the street from an obvious revelation of its symmetry as it was approached. The two at the Oxford end functioned as coaching inn and smithy. They are aligned at right angles to the road, but the two at the Henley end are parallel to the street and were distinguished by their greater height, a full two-and-a-half storeys, and their classically proportioned design. Exactly halfway along the west side of the street a similar house was built for the curate (Fig. 3). It was set back to provide visual emphasis and was faced by a plot for a matching house on the east side which was the only element of the plan which was never built.

The village is a sophisticated composition which combines classical formality in its planning with elements of the picturesque in the design and materials of the semi-detached cottages. Lord Harcourt was proud of his achievement and enthusiastically shared his knowledge of the construction of the cottages when he wrote to William Hanbury, the antiquarian owner of Kelmarsh Hall, Northamptonshire, some six years after the completion of his enterprise:

I send you a rough sketch of my cottages at Nuneham. They are about 12ft high from the ground to the Cornish. I think the rooms below are about 8ft high. The Beam that carries the floor is something more than a foot, and there is about 3ft 6 inches or something more to ye window sills up stairs. The outside walls are nine inches, & the separation or Partition between the larger Room & Pantry is about half a brick thick, or maybe wattled & Plastered. The stair case is a small winding stair case not quite a yard in width. Each cottage chimney has an oven which is gained in the thickness of the wall that separates & divides the cottages. I built in the form above mentioned that one chimney stack might serve two cottages, & I avoided putting more together for fear of fire. The above plan answers all purposes very well, the Houses are good & not expensive . . .<sup>4</sup>

Curiously, the accompanying sketch (Fig. 4) shows an additional dormer window to each cottage, but this inaccuracy does nothing to diminish the impression that the letter was written by a man who had been closely involved with every detail of the building. In 1764 Harcourt had prepared his own preliminary design for the temple church in the park, which was revised and executed by James Stuart,<sup>5</sup> and it is probably safe to conclude that the layout and design of his estate village was his own. An echo of the design of the larger houses can be seen in the six pairs of cottages that the Bishop of Durham erected on his estate at Mongewell a few miles away (Fig. 5). They were commended to progressive farmers by Arthur Young in his *General View of the Agriculture of Oxfordshire* published in 1813<sup>6</sup> but have long since vanished. Young did not comment on the Nuneham cottages, but the author of the companion volume on the adjacent county of Berkshire, published four years earlier, was highly impressed and singled them out in a passage promoting the importance of 'neat and decent' cottages:

To strengthen my argument, I might quote the effects of an institution in a neighbouring county, under the patronage of the Earl and Countess of Harcourt, which has for its object to



Fig. 2. Nuneham Courtenay: a pair of cottages



Fig. 3. Nuneham Courtenay: the Curate's house

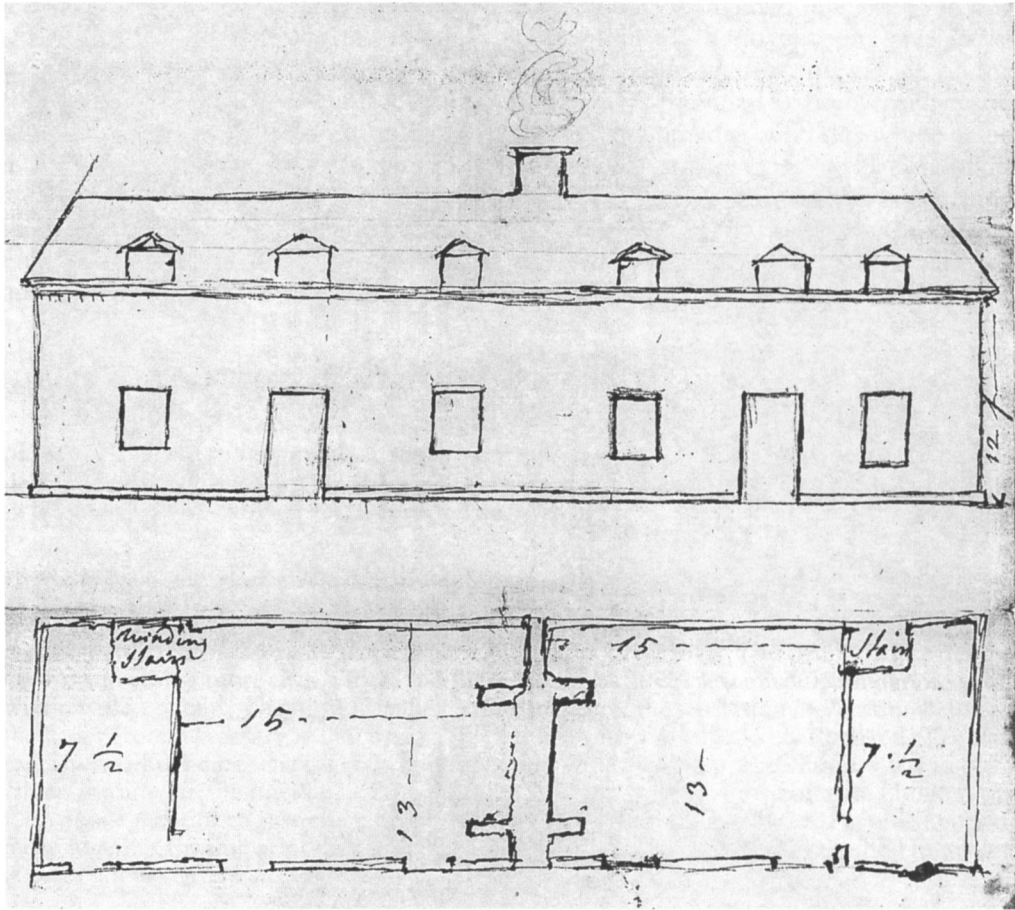


Fig. 4. *Nuneham Courtenay*: Lord Harcourt's sketch of a pair of cottages, 1767 (Hanbury (Kelmarsh) Collection, Northamptonshire Record Office)

encourage the peasantry to industry and cleanliness, by exciting a spirit of emulation, and bestowing correspondent rewards. The cottages at Nuneham are just what they ought to be, comfortable, but unostentatious; and kept neat, because they are capable of being so.<sup>7</sup>

Disappointingly, as far as can be established, William Hanbury did not build anything similar at Kelmarsh.

The recent history of Nuneham provides an appropriate coda in a volume of essays dedicated to John Newman. For much of his professional life he has placed his expertise in architectural history at the service of the planning system to ensure that decisions are properly informed by a knowledge of the past. As a Commissioner of English Heritage and a member of its advisory committees, as the author of the influential *Newman Report*, he has played an active role in the sensible management of the architectural heritage. The survival of Nuneham Courtenay is a tribute to the efficacy of the system he has served so well. The precise uniformity which is the

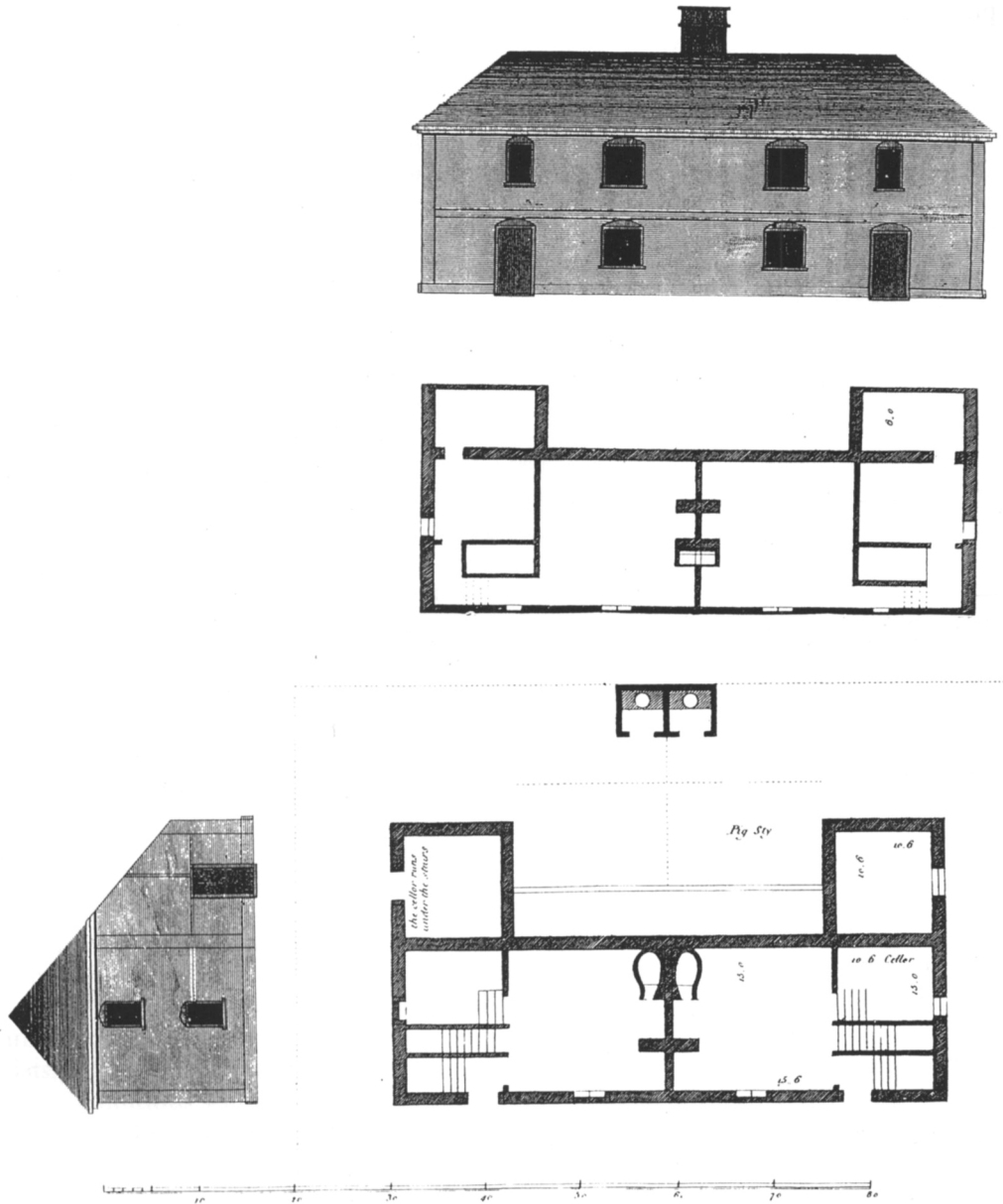


Fig. 5. *The Bishop of Durham's cottages, Mongewell, from Arthur Young, A General View of the Agriculture of Oxfordshire, 1813*

essence of the village was only guaranteed while it remained in single ownership. In 1948 the University of Oxford took over the stewardship of the village when it purchased the estate from the Harcourts, but only thirty years later it decided to sell off the individual buildings as they became vacant. In order to avert the threat of

piecemeal change, an agreement under Section 52 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1971 was drawn up by South Oxfordshire District Council and signed by the University and the individual inhabitants, giving the planning authority stringent control over every element of development. Twenty years later the architectural integrity of the village, right down to its uniform paint schemes, is remarkably unscathed. Under their new private owners the houses can no longer be described as not expensive, but the spirit of Lord Harcourt's early exercise in town planning remains strong.

## NOTES

- 1 Mavis Batey, 'Nuneham Courtenay: An Oxfordshire 18th-Century Deserted Village', *Oxoniensa*, xxxiii (1968), pp. 108–24.
- 2 Lambeth Palace Library, Porteus Notebooks, vol. 4 (1800): MSS 2101, p. 3. I am grateful to Mavis Batey for sending me a transcript.
- 3 Gavin Hannah, *The Deserted Village: The Diary of an Oxfordshire Rector, James Newton of Nuneham Courtenay, 1736–86* (Stroud, 1992), p. 103.
- 4 Northants Record Office, H(K) 192: Earl of Harcourt to William Hanbury, May 1767. I am indebted to Dr Keith Goodway for permitting me to make use of his discovery of this letter and to Mavis Batey for alerting me to its existence.
- 5 Howard Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects 1600–1840*, 3rd edn (New Haven & London, 1995), p. 941.
- 6 Arthur Young, *A General View of the Agriculture of Oxfordshire* (London, 1813), pl. iv.
- 7 William Mavor, *A General View of the Agriculture of Berkshire* (London, 1809), p. 71.