



North Lees Hall

North Lees Hall is believed to have been the inspiration for Thornfield Hall, Mr Rochester's house in Charlotte Bronte's famous novel, Jane Eyre. Built for William Jessop in the last decade of the 16th century, the

Hall has been ascribed to Robert Smythson, a prominent architect of the Elizabethan era. North Lees Hall is owned by the Peak District National Park Authority, as part of the property known as Stanage-North Lees.

Robert Smythson

In the late 16th century architecture was a profession in its infancy. Born between 1535 and 1537, Robert Smythson was one of this country's first practitioners. Among his most notable achievements is the remarkable Wollaton Hall (Nottinghamshire) and it is likely he was also responsible for the final form of the great house at Longleat in Wiltshire.

No documentation survives to verify the identity of the architect of North Lees Hall, but the attribution to Smythson has been made on stylistic grounds. Especially characteristic of Smythson is the building's ingenious split-level interior layout which uses a variety of floor and ceiling heights, providing a combination of halls and great chambers to the front in conjunction with smaller domestic rooms to the rear.

Further support for the ascription lies in the putative connection of Smythson with William Jessop who, in the 1590s, is thought to have commissioned the late Elizabethan tower house we see today at North Lees. Jessop may well have become acquainted with the work of Smythson through his professional relationship with George Talbot, sixth Earl of Shrewsbury who had asked Smythson to design and remodel his house at Worksop Manor, Nottinghamshire. Smythson was

also responsible for the design of Hardwick New Hall, built in the 1590s for Bess of Hardwick, the wife of George Talbot.

Description of the Building

Aside from its recognisably Smythsonian characteristics, North Lees Hall is of particular architectural interest in that it incorporates elements of a regional building style now referred to as the North Midlands High House, the characteristics of which are height, compactness of plan and a turreted outline. Examples include Old Chatsworth, Lord Shrewsbury's house at Buxton and Queen Mary's Tower at Sheffield Manor (built 1574).

North Lees Hall comprises a minimum of three distinct building phases. The tower wing to the west is part attributed to Smythson. The entrance hall dates from the early 17th century and the low east wing is a 19th-century remodelling of an earlier construction. The stately rooms on the south side of the tower wing occupy three floors over a basement and are lit by large stone mullioned windows. Behind them smaller, more private chambers have been organised on four floors. The spiral elm stair, which also gives access to the leaded roof, is housed in a square tower in the angle of the building between the tower wing and low east wing.

The principal ground floor room has an elaborate plaster frieze at its cornice height. Partially reconstructed in 1964 from a few remaining fragments the frieze now incorporates three inscriptions: over the south window, *Velle suum quis est nec voto vivitur uno* (Everyone has their own notion of what pleases them and tastes differ); over the east window *Vincit qui patitur* 1594 (He who suffers, conquers) and above the west window, the motto of former owners the Beach family *Tout en bonne heure* 1964 (All in good time). The fireplace here is the largest in the building suggesting that this room was a more public and/or a more functional space.

The large room on the first floor was the foremost chamber of the house boasting a splendid frieze of unusual motifs which may have been the stock in trade of local plasterers. Its fine decorative plaster ceiling depicts heraldic shields, leaping beasts and fleurs de lis.

Literary Connections

Charlotte Bronte paid 'two or three visits' to North Lees Hall when staying with her friend Ellen Nussey in Hathersage. Such was the impression the Hall made upon her that in the novel *Jane Eyre* (first published 1847) she used it as the model for



Thornfield Hall, home to her Byronic hero, Mr Rochester. The name of the fictional Hall clearly stems from its factual counterpart: 'thorn' is an anagram of 'north' and 'field' stems from the Anglo-Saxon word 'leah', later 'lee', meaning woodland glade or field. Bronte describes many features of North Lees in the novel, including the battlemented façade, the view from the roof and the Apostles Cabinet, a unique item of furniture belonging to the Eyre's. The legend of a mad woman at North Lees, reputed to have perished in a fire, may have been the inspiration for Mrs Rochester's dramatic demise.

The Eyre's who were a local family, resided at North Lees for two generations during the 15th Century. They took up the tenancy again in 1750 and lived there until 1882.

The Restoration of the Building

By the middle years of the 20th century, North Lees Hall was in a state of dereliction: roofless and with blocked and broken windows. Inroads made by the weather had caused ceilings to collapse, partially destroying historic decorative plaster. Happily, the buildings solid three-foot thick millstone grit walls maintained their structural stability.

Thanks entirely to the commitment and resolve of the last private owner, Sir Hugh Beach, the restoration of North Lees Hall was begun in 1962. Under the supervision of the architect Lt. Col. Gerald Haythornwaite, the Hall was repaired and converted into a guesthouse for visitors to the Peak National Park. The large rooms were divided into smaller units, to house people in hostel style accommodation. Pictures taken in 1904 were used to aid the reconstruction of the water-damaged plaster ceiling to the first floor room.

In 1971, the Peak Park Joint Planning Board purchased the North Lees Estate. In 1987, the Board leased the tower wing to The Vivat Trust to manage and let as distinctive holiday accommodation. By this time, the building was again in a state of disrepair and The Vivat Trust undertook a second refurbishment, which involved the removal of internal partitions and improvements to the plumbing and heating systems and electrical circuits.

A third phase of improvements to the building has been undertaken including vital repairs to the roof, re-wiring, soundproofing and the installation of a new heating system. The building has also been equipped with furniture appropriate to the period including traditional Derbyshire designs.

The building is now back in the management of the Peak District National Park Authority.

