

## New Berry Hall

Ozzy Osbourne, as we all know, came from Birmingham; had Ozymandias also been a local he might well have lived in Solihull. The subject of Shelley's lament on empty power and vaulting ambition might find a perfect resting-place among the pile of bricks that constitute the mortal remains of Berry Hall. Such is the fate of one of the most expensive houses ever built in the West Midlands.

The story begins in all humility. In 1823 an out-of-work cutler took a one-way ticket from Sheffield to Birmingham to make a new life for himself. His name was Joseph Gillott. Gillott directed his polished metal skills towards the Birmingham toy industry, and more particularly the steel pen trade.

The steel pen was still in its infancy in the 1820s, and its fitness to replace the tried-and-trusted quill a matter of heated debate. In the space of a generation, however, Joseph Gillott transformed the industry. He introduced mechanisation into the process for the cutting and stamping of nibs, and he improved the methods of tempering and annealing the steel.

Most important of all, he devised a technique for making the steel nib more supple, by adding diagonal cuts to it. With added flexibility the Gillott pen was now a true match for the quill, with the distinct advantage that he could make them in the millions. At its height the Birmingham pen manufacturers were producing around eight billion pen-nibs a year, and many of them were Gillott's. The cutler from Yorkshire had made it big.

What does one of the richest men in the Midlands do with such wealth? Joseph Gillott invested his cash shrewdly: in works of art, in Stradivarius violins and in land. His son, Joseph junior inherited the lot, as well as a thriving manufactory - the Victoria Works - in the Jewellery Quarter.

Joseph Gillott jnr - the Ozymandias of the story - grew up in the family home in Westbourne Road in Edgbaston, but he was part of that generation of Victorian businessmen who preferred to keep industry at arm's length. His eye alighted upon an estate of several hundred acres at Catherine-de-Barnes, perfectly rural, but conveniently close to his work-place too. Here Joseph would build the palatial mansion to which he now felt entitled. Half a century of Gillott industry had been building up to this.

There was already an old manor house on this manorial estate, by the name of Berry Hall, a fine late medieval pile complete with moat and Tudor trimmings. Gillott renamed the place Berry Hall Farm, so that when he built his dream home it could claim the ancient title. Locals, however, continued to call them Old Berry Hall and New Berry Hall.

Gillott's new house was designed by the Birmingham architect, J. A. Chatwin, and it took all of ten years to complete, two mock-Tudor lodges being added later still. When finished in 1880 the interior combined the latest mod cons of gas and running water with the olde worlde aspiration of a great chimney piece said to have some

from Kenilworth Castle. The stained glass was made by Hardman & Co.

The most striking feature of all, at least from the outside, was the unusual tower, modelled on that of Great Tom at Christ Church in Oxford, though the walled garden and glasshouse (80 feet in length) both ran it close.

Here Joseph Gillott and his family lived in opulent splendour to the end of his days in 1904. At that point the whole estate was split up and sold, and Joseph's son purchased Berry Hall, old and new, for £15,000, and lived there until his own premature death just three years later.

The next purchaser was another businessman by the name of William Upton. I don't claim a family connection here, especially as the new owner shot himself in the porch of Berry Hall shortly after buying it.

This could easily be the start of one of those American horror films, complete with the discovery of a hidden graveyard, nightmares and exorcisms, but the reality is rather more prosaic. Call it rather the slow decline of the House of Usher.

Mrs Upton, the widow of William, lived on at Berry Hall until 1938, when there was another sale, and then another. By the late 1950s New Berry Hall was being seen, not a place to live, but as a lucrative investment opportunity. However, plans to turn the house into a luxury hotel perennially fell foul of the planning process. Solihull Council's determination to protect the Green Belt at all costs had the effect of sentencing Berry Hall to a drawn-out and painful death. Efforts to get the house listed also failed.

Inevitably, of course, the vandalism set in instead, and in the 1990s the council ordered its demolition on safety grounds. We can't allow vandals to go injuring themselves, can we ?

Since that time the Green Belt has reclaimed its own, the forest has returned, and even the piles of bricks have disappeared under weeds and grass. New Berry Hall lasted for a little over a century.

Old Berry Hall, however, formerly downgraded by its brash new neighbour, now has the place to itself again, perfectly intact and serviceable. It has not yet managed to shake the "farm" from its name - perhaps that will happen in time - but demonstrating that durability often comes with age, not aspiration.