

CONSERVATION AREA HISTORIES:

NEWTON SOLNEY
 DISTRICT OF SOUTH DERBYSHIRE

The story of Newton Solney, prettily situated on the River Trent near the brewery town of Burton, shows that “gentrification” of the countryside is nothing new. The village owes much of its unique character to the efforts of wealthy local gentry who chose to live there, initially led by Abraham Hoskins the younger of Burton of Trent (1759-1842).

Newton Solney’s present character is defined largely by Hoskins’ parkland at the west end of the village and by a number of attention-seeking buildings, large and small, both inside and outside the park. These include Rock House (15, unlisted), Bladon Castle (1, listed Grade II*), Newton Park Hotel (9, Grade II), The Villa (12, now known as Cedar House, Grade II), Beehive Cottage (13, Grade II) and Gretton House (14, Grade II). Like the park, these buildings are predominantly of the late Georgian period and most of them were built on Hoskins’ estate.



By 1836 Bladon Castle had become a substantial house, occupied by William Jenney Esq. By courtesy of Brian Appleby.

Until the very end of the 18th century, Newton Solney was an agricultural village much like any other. The Every family, lords of the manor, could trace their ancestry right back to the de Solney family from whom the village takes its suffix.

Ownership of the manor was not tantamount to full control of the village, because there were several freehold estates there. Gradually, the Every family bought out most of these, with a corresponding increase in their dominance over the village. A survey of 1758 measured the whole extent of Newton Solney as 1208 acres. Eight freeholders owned 104 acres between them, and 25 acres were occupied by common land and roads. Sir John Every was the principal owner with 1079 acres, including recent purchases by Henry Every in the 1730s and ‘40s.

One of the later Every purchases was of the Grange (23), which is now an imposing late 19th century house but stands on the site of an earlier

dwelling. In 1655, when it was sold by Sir John Harpur to William Fisher, merchant, it was described as a mansion house, but by the 1750s it appears to have declined to an ordinary property. Shortly afterwards, the property was sold to Rev. Sir John Every 7th Bart. (1709-1779). The “Grange” name suggests that the property was part of the holdings of Gresley or Repton Priors in Newton Solney in the Middle Ages, confiscated at the Reformation. It is likely that some of the other freehold estates in Newton Solney in the 18th century likewise had their origins as land given to religious houses or chantries in the mediaeval period.



Rock Tower, as painted by A. N. Mosley in 1789. By courtesy of Sir Henry Every.

The Everys did not live in the village; their house and park lay across the river at Egginton. Their construction at Newton Solney of a substantial but whimsical, folly-like tower on the river bank, called Rock Tower (15), is the only indication of their use of the Newton Solney estate for leisure in the 18th century. The tower, which survives embedded in the river frontage of the present Rock House, was built by 1758 on the site of the former manor house, and was no doubt used by the Every family to arrive in Newton Solney by boat.

The Parish Church (16) was originally a chapelry of Repton. It stands adjacent to the manor house site, as might be expected, and the Every family had a pew there. Some of its fabric is mediaeval, but it was heavily restored and altered by F. J. Robinson in 1881, with the result that its prevailing character is now Victorian. The Ratcliff family provided a large proportion of the funding for the restoration.

The Every domination of Newton Solney, having become almost complete by the end of 18th century, was not destined to last. Upon the unexpected and premature death of Sir Edward Every 8th Baronet in 1786, the estate and title were inherited by his nine-year-old son Henry (d1855). Daniel Parker Coke, Abraham Hoskins and John Fowler were appointed as guardians to look after young Sir Henry’s affairs, and it was quickly discovered that the estate was riddled with debt. However, no sales could be made until Sir Henry reached the age of 21 in 1798. After that an Act of Parliament, passed in 1799, was required before anything could be done.



Newton Solney church under restoration, c1881. By courtesy of Brian Appleby.

The Hoskins family had established itself in Burton, where Abraham Hoskins the elder (d1805) was an attorney. Meanwhile, Abraham Hoskins the younger was appointed as receiver of the estate in 1793. Abraham the younger clearly had designs on the Newton Solney estate in his charge, and lost no time in realising them. He owned a farm in Egginton, and used the Parliamentary Enclosure of Egginton (1791-1798) as a useful pretext for a land exchange.

In May 1798, Hoskins’ farm in Egginton was given to Sir Henry Every (who came of age the following month), while Hoskins awarded himself 103 acres in Newton Solney in return. This first tract of land acquired by Hoskins was a compact block around Bladon Hill and Bladon Wood, clearly coveted by Hoskins for its ornamental character and potential, with wonderful views.

It is interesting to note that Hoskins’ original acquisition did not include the site of Newton Park House with its extensive former farm buildings, which later provided his home and the heart of his estate. But at the time Hoskins had other plans, as revealed by the exhibition of designs for a “villa at Bladon Hill ... seat of Abraham Hoskins” at the Royal Academy in 1799.

The drawings of this villa, by Jeffrey Wyatt (later Wyatville, 1766-1840) are not known to survive, and in the past it has been assumed that the present Bladon Castle has its genesis in them. This seems most unlikely, as Bladon Castle was apparently designed only as an impressive screen wall with a small banqueting or summerhouse at the back of it (see below), not consistent with the concept of a villa.

It is unclear why Hoskins did not build his new house on a spot commanding the wonderful view that inspired his initial purchase. Problems with the water supply are said to be the reason, leading him to settle for a summerhouse and folly there instead, but the argument seems unconvincing.

Hoskins soon had the opportunity to enlarge his estate with further land. Once the required Act of Parliament had been passed, 617 acres of the Every estate in Newton Solney were put up for auction in twelve lots on 9th December, 1799. An area of land, bounded to the west by the estate already owned by Hoskins, and extending as far east as the present lake in the Newton Park housing estate (6), was excluded from the auction, no doubt because Hoskins had already arranged to buy it privately.

Significantly, however, the site of Newton Park House, with the buildings there and the land to the south, was included in the auction as Lot 7. This suggests that Hoskins was content to see it sold off, and still did not see it as central to his proposals. We must conclude that he was still planning to build elsewhere, probably on the hilltop, as the 1799 exhibition of drawings for his villa appears to confirm.

We don’t yet know how many of the auctioned lots found purchasers. Some clearly did, as several Newton Solney farmers sold up in February 1800, no doubt having been given notice to quit by Lady Day. They included Peter Payne, Thomas Shepperd, John Higgott, Joseph Payne and Paul Holmes. In the case of these last three, the sales were said to be taking place because the men were unavoidably leaving their farms.

Higgott is a significant name. In 1876 it was another John Higgott, bachelor farmer of Newton Solney, that gave and endowed the “John Higgott’s Almshouses” in the village (18). This row of four dwellings was to be occupied by persons not less than fifty years old and of “good character and cleanly habits”, preference being given to aged old agricultural labourers or their widows.



John Higgott’s almshouses (SDDC Photograph)

The other, modern almshouses at Sunnyside (19) are a piece of latter-day benevolence by the Ratcliff family, having been given to the village as a war memorial by Percy Ratcliff in 1951. The original intention was to create a village green with a conventional war memorial, but the almshouses were built instead, as a more practical monument. Another of the Ratcliffs, Colonel R. F. Ratcliff (c1867-1943), provided the attractive Village Institute building (22).

By 1850 Sir Henry Every 9th Bart (1777-1855) was still Lord of the Manor, despite the extensive sales made half a century earlier, but his remaining property was not extensive. Apart from the Hargate Pasture of 44 acres on the far side of Trent, he owned only the cottages and gardens encroached on Bretby Lane, Rock House, and the malthouse and brickworks tenanted by John Marbrow, who was also a farmer. This retained property is briefly considered in the following paragraphs.

The brickworks at Brickyard Farm (25, now Hill Farm) had been founded by Marbrow’s father in law William Hopkins in 1811 and continued up to about 1890, producing bricks, tiles, drain pipes and kiln tiles. The

Brickmakers Arms (20) lies close to the former brickyard and associated claypits, hence its name. Newton Solney’s other pub, the Unicorn (21), is also old-established, being so called as far back as 1812. The unicorn is the crest of the Every arms.

In the 1870s, ‘80s and ‘90s, Rock House was the home of E. D. Salt of T. Salt & Co, Burton brewers. The Everys sold it sometime after 1868, perhaps upon the departure of Mr. R. E. Neave in 1870. Much of the present house looks to date from around that time. From the original tower, it evolved to become part of the “family” of Newton Solney houses inhabited by Burton brewers – the “Beerage”. It has been suggested that the octagonal Beehive Cottage (13) was once the lodge to Rock House but this seems unlikely, as in the early 19th century Beehive Cottage belonged to Hoskins while Rock House belonged to the Everys.



Beehive Cottage (SDDC Photograph)

The cottages and gardens encroached on Bretby Lane must eventually have been sold by the Everys as well, as in 1873 a pair of semi-detached cottages was built on one of these encroachments for Robert Ratcliff (24). Designed by Thompson and Young of Derby, these cottages are of interest because they are the same as a pair of cottages built for farm labourers by Lord Vernon at Sudbury (Derbyshire). The design of the Sudbury cottages won their (un-named) architect a medal from the Society of Arts.

Despite his family’s declining influence in the village, it was Sir Henry Flower Every 10th Bart (1830-1893) who built the National School in the village in 1860, which remains in use (17).

We now return to the story of Newton Park. Lot 7 in the 1799 Every estate sale particulars, or at least most of it, was privately purchased by Hoskins on 9th August, 1800. It comprised the present Newton Park house and adjoining land. At the same time, Hoskins purchased all the land between Lot 7 and the estate he had acquired in 1798. With this second purchase, amounting in all to 197 acres, the stage was fully set up for the creation of Hoskins’ “Derbyshire Elysium”.

This second purchase included two old village farmhouses whose successors survive to the present day. One is Newton Park House itself (9), probably rebuilt by Hoskins soon after his purchase; the other was a farmhouse nearby, which became the gardener’s house and is apparently

the house bought from the Rennisons by Henry Every Esq. in 1744 (4). It was substantially remodelled (though not entirely rebuilt) in the Victorian period and is now called “Museum Cottage”.



The Gardeners House, now transformed into Museum Cottage. By courtesy of Brian Appleby.

Between 1798 and about 1810, Hoskins worked his magic and transformed his Newton Solney estate into a “fairy scene” at vast expense. The result was indeed impressive, but critical examination of the landscape both in maps and as it remains today reveals eccentricities in its design:

Historic plans show that the plantations around Simnets Field Flatt (2) were clearly designed to embrace and enclose the view from Bladon Castle. The walled gardens of Newton Park House are unsuitably and prominently placed within the ambit of these plantations, like an afterthought, and were enlarged later. Newton Park house, on the other hand, despite being the main house on the estate and residence of the owner, had no open views over the park at all. Even its main aspect towards and across the River Trent was intruded upon by the public road. Nor did it enjoy a prospect to Bladon Hill and Castle, as is sometimes stated.

This irregular state of affairs betrays a sea change in Hoskins’ ideas for his park at some point, and a departure from his original grand design. The evidence of the original purchase, villa design and landscaping suggests that he had intended to build his house on Bladon Hill. He probably laid out the park in anticipation, before starting to build there. Maybe there is some truth in the tale that a good supply of water could not be found to service a large house, but one suspects that other unknown factors were in play also.

Whatever the reason, Hoskins settled for creating a new home on his estate by enlarging and remodelling a pre-existing farmhouse, now Newton Park, which he had probably only just built. Newton Park House was created by extending the existing house at both ends, followed by the refacing of the whole facade in ornamented Roman Cement. According to the writer John Farey, this stucco work was done by Francis Bernasconi, a talented plasterer usually associated with interiors. The result is recorded in early photographs, probably taken around 1875.

The house was drastically altered around 1880 following its purchase by Robert Ratcliff (1836-1912), and without the photographs of the 1870s we would be hard-pressed to guess at the process of evolution outlined above. Ratcliff added an entire new range of rooms to the south side,



Newton Park house, seen here as it stood from about 1805 to about 1880. By courtesy of Brian Appleby.

with asymmetric fenestration. Radical alterations were made inside the old house, and all of the external surface decoration was removed and renewed using a new palette of details, resulting in a convincing Victorian makeover.

In Hoskins' day, the back of the house enclosed one side of a farmyard (10) built, or substantially rebuilt, by Hoskins himself. The front door led out directly onto the main street of Newton Solney, until Hoskins had the road repositioned further away in 1809. The new course of the road (7) was sunk into the ground to render it invisible when there was no traffic. The old road became the access drives to the house from east and west, eventually marked by lodges at both end (3 and 11), and the space between the new and old roads (8) was landscaped to improve the amenity of the house.

Hoskins was very proud of the farmbuildings at the back of his house and invested a lot of money in them, but they were clearly an impediment to the amenity of the house. After Hoskins' time, and sometime before 1877, their site was wholly cleared and they were replaced by a new farmhouse and buildings further south, known as Newton Park Farm (26). These buildings are said to have been built by the Earl of Chesterfield, who purchased all or most of the Hoskins estate in Newton Solney, but were extended by the Ratcliffs of Newton Park in 1890. Again, they were exemplary for their time and are now Grade II listed.

It was probably in 1805 that Hoskins built his grand folly, "Bladon Castle" (1). It was not an "eyecatcher" to be seen from the house; its real value and purpose was to provide a focal point for the landscaping of the park, which would otherwise be "illegible" on account of the house not being placed where Hoskins had first intended. The park planting was designed to complement a focal point, and if this focus was not to be provided by a house then a handsome folly was a good substitute.

No doubt the Castle included a prospect room plus a few ancillary rooms for occasional use from the start, perhaps with a viewing platform on the roof. This seems confirmed by R. R. Rawlins, who visited Newton Solney in 1816 and said "the centre is only a small house, which was originally raised as a banqueting retreat; the overplus being single walls".

We have yet to discover when the conversion to a house took place. On the original drawings for the 1st edition Ordnance Survey (1821), the house is not called Bladon Castle, but "Waterloo Castle". The name suggests a phase of development, possibly conversion to a house, around 1815. This

would be sufficient to occasion the new name, although it is the Bladon Castle name that has ultimately prevailed.

Having changed the focus of his park from Bladon Castle to the present Newton Park site, Hoskins modified the landscaping of it. The tastes of the time dictated that walled gardens should not be visible from the main residence of an estate. Hoskins therefore proceeded to build his walled gardens within the view from Bladon Castle, as the Castle site had now become a feature to be enjoyed from below, and was no longer intended as the main residence of the proprietor.

Newton Park had little space for extensive grassed pleasure grounds near the house, so walks were laid out in the plantation nearby, with a grotto, "Rippling Cascade, Rock-work, and Rural Bridge." Later occupants imported extra features, including an arch from the old bridge at Burton and other masonry from Burton, including part of the Abbey gatehouse. Further west, a visit to enjoy the views from Bladon Castle would give a sense of purpose to a walk across the open parkland.

We are given a tantalising hint to the identity of someone who helped Hoskins with his landscaping. The 1836 sale particulars of the estate note that "A Mr. Brown (not Capability Brown, but equally capable in every respect) once sojourned at Newton, and greatly contributed to the improvement of the Estate." Around the same time that Hoskins was moving the public road away from his house in 1809, Samuel Brown of Derby was helping Sir Henry Crewe of Calke Abbey with the landscaping of the park there.

Brown was an architect, but his work seems to be frequently associated with landscaping. At Calke, he built a grotto (now listed Grade II) and designed a large, single span bridge in the park, which no longer exists. Brown seems a promising contender for the "Mr. Brown" who helped Hoskins at Newton Solney and may have had talents as a landscape gardener which have so far gone unrecognised.



Gretton House, originally known as Evergreen Cottage, was occupied in 1836 by Robert Chaplin, an architect who practiced in Ashby de la Zouch. Chaplin may have designed the cottage for himself. A pair of dormers has since been added at first floor level and the central chimney has been rebuilt as a pair of separate stacks. By courtesy of Brian Appleby.

As time passed, Hoskins' extravagances made heavy inroads on his financial resources. Expenditure on his estate was complemented by lavish

hospitality and Hoskins was ultimately unable to maintain his lifestyle. The agricultural depression, beginning in 1814, may have hastened, if not caused, the decline in his fortunes. It has been suggested that the conversion of Bladon Castle to a permanent dwelling, and the construction of Gretton House (14) and Beehive Cottage (13), may have been intended as ways of boosting Hoskins' income. Whether this is true or not, it was not enough. Eventually Hoskins retired to Uttoxeter, "leaving his beautiful seats and estates at Newton Park, and Bladon Castle, and retiring at his patriarchal age from the fairy scene his own hands had created".

Hoskins died at Uttoxeter aged 82 in March, 1842. Meanwhile, his Newton Solney estate was put up for auction in July, 1836, being described in the particulars as a "Derbyshire Elysium" with "land of such a quality that all England may be challenged to surpass it." All, or most, of the estate was purchased by the Earl of Chesterfield of nearby Bretby Hall, either at or shortly after the auction, and Newton Park house was let to the Worthington family. During the 1870s the house lay vacant for a few years before being dramatically altered by its new owner, Robert Ratcliff. Following sale by his daughter-in-law Olive Ratcliff, it was converted to a hotel around 1960.

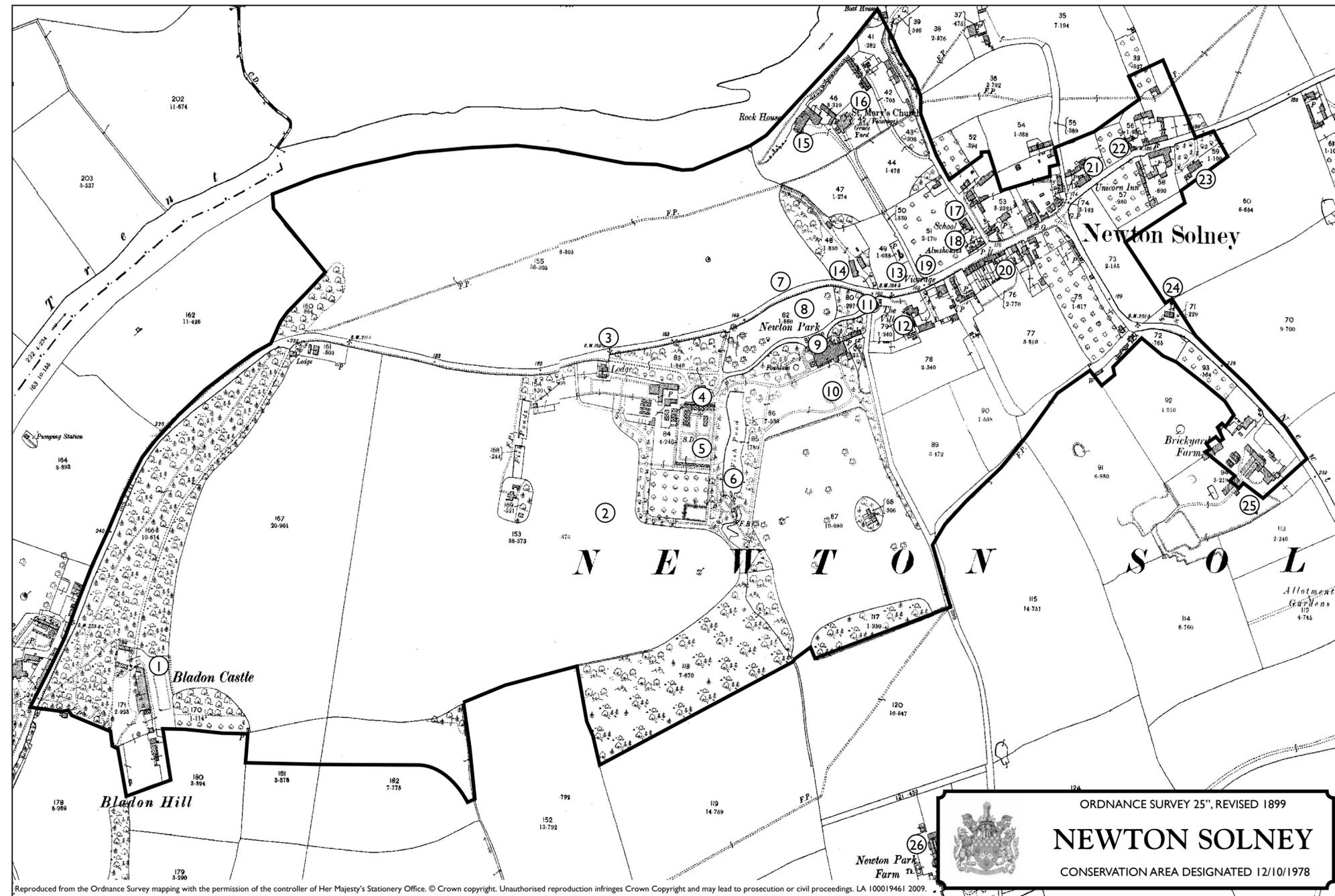
Hoskins' odd park is made still quirkier by an unexpectedly-good 1960s housing estate (by Bestwick Bowler Hogg of Nottingham) within and around the former walled gardens. All in all Newton Park is not a textbook Georgian landscape, but it makes a refreshing change from the run-of-the-mill late 18th century "picturesque" parklands, and actually gains charm from its unpredictability, irregularity, and the presence of secondary houses.

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