

After the fire –

rebuilding is a collaborative process



As a buildings historian I often work with conservation architects and insurance recovery specialists in the repair of damaged listed buildings. Two cases I worked on recently involved listed houses gutted by fire. Hickling Hall and Oulton Hall have their similarities as they were both constructed in the 18th century and also set in rural locations in Norfolk. The cause of the catastrophes was also very similar; both began as chimney fires.

I was appointed by recovery specialists, The Austin Newport Group, who were the contract managers, quantity surveyors and project managers in both cases. They were appointed on the recommendation of the insurers. The two specialist firms of architects that Austin Newport then brought in were The Regeneration Practice and Nicholas Jacobs Architects.

The first house I researched was Hickling Hall, built in the early 1700s; a red brick Queen Anne, double fronted house. It is the principal house for a farm estate extending over hundreds of acres. The Hall sits on the outskirts of the ancient village of Hickling on the Norfolk Broads.

On the evening of Boxing Day 2014 the owner, who's lived there for over 50 years, lit a fire in the dining room, which was a rare occurrence. What wasn't considered was that while the fireplace and chimney were dormant, jackdaws had built a large nest of tinder dry twigs in the chimney. As a result, it didn't take long for the fire to take hold. To add to the difficulties, the remoteness of the house meant fire engines were not nearby and by the time the fire fighters arrived the flames were well advanced. Thankfully, no one was hurt but by the morning it was clear that the main part of the house, the oldest part, the most precious part, was in ruins. In the New Year, it was decided to rebuild. The architects called upon to execute this project



Outton Hall
Post-Fire



Hickling Hall
circa 1904
Hickling Hall
Post Fire



needed as much information as possible to ensure a faithful reconstruction.

I received the call to research Hickling Hall by the appointed architects, The Regeneration Practice. They needed to know what had been built on the land before, who owned it, who lived in it (to help understand its historical context) and as much as possible about its construction. I also needed to find as many images, maps and plans of the property as possible, to fully explain its structural evolution over three centuries.

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Hickling Hall
Pre-Fire 2000s



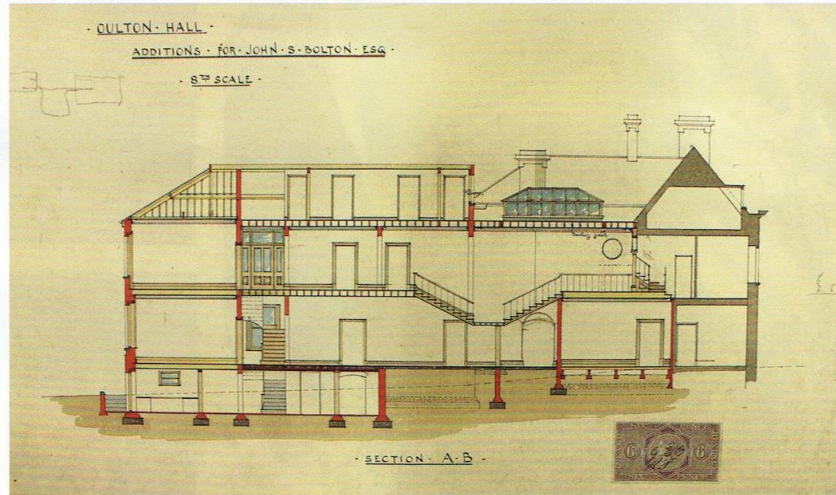
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Oulton Hall
Undergoing
Reconstruction

My research went back to the mid-16th century when the estate of Hickling was handed over to secular owners by King Henry VIII, during the Dissolution of the Monasteries, having been monastic lands up until then. There was a hall on the site of the current house in the latter part of the 16th century and then in the early 1700s was completely rebuilt. This was around the time that the Earls of Orford came into ownership. As well as being the home of wealthy tenant farmers, the house provided accommodation for when the Earl stayed for the annual Court Baron in Hickling, collecting rents and settling local disputes. But mostly it has been the principal house for a farm over several centuries, covering hundreds of surrounding acres. It is still a modern working farm, hence the need to rebuild and allow Hickling to continue for centuries in the future. Paul Latham of The Regeneration Practice said that the rebuilding of Hickling Hall is 'to conserve the intangible value post fire; both as a work of architecture, and its special place within the communal memory of Hickling village'.

The other house, Oulton Hall was built in the mid-18th century and has been the home to just 3 families since that time. Although part of a farming estate, it was always ostensibly a house for the gentry, rather than tenant farmers. For a long time in the first part of the 19th century it was the home of a well-to-do clergyman, once Deputy Lord Lieutenant of Norfolk.

Oulton Hall's disaster came on the night of March 31 2015. The owner had gone to bed when the old chimney stack caught fire and the flames spread. However, such was the direction of the fire, moving up into the roof, it was some time before the owner realised there was something wrong. When he did, he managed to get out quickly and the fire brigade was called. Yet again though, the remoteness of the property enabled the fire to spread unhindered and, like Hickling, by the morning the historic property was a shell. The house has not only been the home for the present owner since he was born, but his family has owned it since the 1870s. In this light, it was decided by the owner and his insurers to rebuild and recreate the elegance of the original house.

My brief for Oulton Hall was the same as Hickling Hall: to find out as much as possible



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Oulton Hall
1870s Plans and
Elevations

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Oulton Hall Pre
Fire Aerial photo of
house and garden

about both the social and the structural development of the house; to inform the architects; to help them reconstruct the building. In this case, I found plans in a local archive from when the owner's great grandfather bought and remodelled the house in the 1870s. I also found beautifully detailed maps to show the changes in the building's footprint from the late 18th century.

Loriana Jaconelli of Nicholas Jacobs Architects said: 'the reconstruction of Oulton Hall has been a collaborative process which has involved the careful collation and piecing together of the complex building fabric. When complete, this endeavour will restore Oulton Hall's important heritage in both a community and familial context.'

Both the Hickling and Oulton projects have required teamwork, including my collaboration, but it was also the practical and financial involvement of the insurance

companies knowing the best specialists to appoint that enabled these buildings to be built again. It is a long and complicated process, but both houses will soon return to being the working family homes they have been for hundreds of years.

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