

**Middleton Hall, Carmarthenshire**  
**By Lowri Ann Rees (Bangor University)**

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Towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century (c.1789), the Middleton Hall estate in the parish of Llanarthney, Carmarthenshire, south-west Wales was purchased by a former East India Company man, [William Paxton \(c.1744-1824\)](#). Over the following thirty-five years or so, Paxton went about transforming what was a relatively modest estate, erecting a new country house, developing the surrounding parkland and introducing innovative garden features. He also attempted to make his mark in the local community, putting himself forward as a candidate for parliament, undertaking public duties, but also investing in urban regeneration and the development of the nearby seaside resort of Tenby into a fashionable bathing place. This case study will therefore focus upon Paxton's time at Middleton Hall between c.1789-1824 and the way he invested his East India Company wealth in south-west Wales. In this way, the case study considers both the impact of the infiltration of East India Company men into the ranks of the landed elite and the economic impact on the locality. Traditionally, Wales does not feature prominently in studies of returning East India Company men, however, this case study highlights not only that Indian fortunes found their way to Wales, but also that men from outside Wales chose to purchase estates in Wales in an attempt to establish themselves in elite society following their return from India.

**Paxton's early life and career**

Born in Edinburgh c.1744, William Paxton was one of five children and the youngest of three sons. His father, John Paxton (1697-1787), was chief clerk to the wine merchant, and later Lord Provost of Edinburgh, Archibald Stewart. Due to John Paxton's work commitments, the Paxton family subsequently moved to London, where William spent most of his childhood. William joined the Navy aged twelve as a Captain's servant, rising through the ranks to become midshipman. He later became an officer on a private British merchant ship bound for India. He spent seven years in India before returning to London to become an apprentice to Francis Spilsbury to train to become an assayer. Sometime during the 1770s he set sail for India to take up the post of assay master at Fort William in Bengal. He set up an agency house with Charles Cockerell (younger brother of the architect, Samuel Pepys Cockerell, who also had links with Paxton), which later became known as Paxton, Cockerell and Trail. A London branch of the agency house was later established. In early 1778 Paxton was appointed as Master of the Calcutta Mint. Following a lucrative career, Paxton left India for the last time during the mid-1780s. On returning to London in 1786 he married Ann Dawney

(1765-1846), twenty years his junior, with whom he later had eleven children. Paxton also had an illegitimate daughter, Elizabeth, who accompanied him back home from India.<sup>1</sup>

### Paxton at Middleton Hall



Figure 1. 'Middleton Hall Front View', lithograph by Augustus Butler. 1853. Image courtesy of Lowri Ann Rees.

With his fortune from India, Paxton purchased the Middleton Hall estate in c.1789 and set about a scheme of improvement. The most significant and visible of these improvements was the building of a grand new mansion. Paxton commissioned Samuel Pepys Cockerell (1754-1827) to design the mansion in a neo-classical style. Around the same time Cockerell was also working for other East India Company men. He designed Daylesford House for Warren Hastings and [Sezincote](#) for his brother, Colonel John Cockerell (1788-1863). Whilst Sezincote was designed in an Indian style, Middleton Hall was to be neo-classical: 'this opulent classical hilltop palace (not actually large but effective from its grand proportions) was considered the best house in West Wales, the more so after the completion of its landscaped park'.<sup>2</sup> Built between 1793-95 high on an elevated spot above the original

<sup>1</sup> W. G. J. Kuiters, 'Paxton, Sir William (1743/4-1824)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004) <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/53259>; W. G. J. Kuiters, 'William Paxton, 1744-1824: Middleton Hall and the adventures of a Scottish "Nabob" in Carmarthenshire' <http://kuiters.org/wgi/history/botgardpaxton.html>

<sup>2</sup> T. Lloyd, J. Orbach and R. Scourfield, *The Buildings of Wales: Carmarthenshire and Ceredigion* (London, 2006), p. 67.

mansion, with panoramic views across the Tywi Valley, the house comprised of substantial reception rooms, and had a striking grand portico at the rear of the mansion. Within were



water closets supplied by water from a nearby reservoir and a cistern on the roof.<sup>3</sup>

Figure 2. Waterfall – restored feature of Middleton Hall park. Image courtesy of Lowri Ann Rees.

The landscape surrounding the new mansion was transformed by the landscape artist Samuel Lapidge (1740-1806). Artificial lakes and waterfalls (see figure 2) were created, bridges and sluices built, carriage ways and footpaths constructed. Close to the mansion, Lapidge built a three-acre double walled garden, which contained a grape house, peach house,

hot house, gardener's house and shed, orchard of young trees, pine pits and a melon ground, and situated nearby was an ice house. A stable block, also designed by Cockerell, was built to complement the neo-classical mansion and servant's wing. Beyond the immediate vicinity of the house were several gravelled walks through the park, allowing access to lakes, waterfalls, bridges and plantations. Also within the park were two bathhouses to allow bathing in the chalybeate spring water found on the estate.<sup>4</sup>

In the early nineteenth century, Thomas Horner (1785-1844) came to paint watercolour scenes of the Middleton Hall mansion and park. These paintings were mounted into a book with corresponding descriptions by the artist himself and presented to Paxton in 1815. Contemporaries described Middleton Hall in flattering terms. Richard Fenton marked

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<sup>3</sup> P. K. Crimmin, 'Samuel Pepys Cockerell: his work in west Wales, 1793-1810' *Carmarthenshire Historian*, iv (1967), pp. 7-21.

<sup>4</sup> Carmarthenshire Record Office (CRO) MS ACC 4195 copy of the Middleton Hall estate sale catalogue (1824).

Middleton Hall as ‘the most truly parkish [sic] and elegant appearance of any place in the Country... the more I see the more I admire the place and manner in which it has been laid out’.<sup>5</sup> James Baker noted that Middleton Hall was ‘a new mansion, finishing in the highest stile [sic] of elegance’.<sup>6</sup> George Lipscomb remarked that Middleton was ‘one of the best built, and most magnificent houses in Wales’.<sup>7</sup> While Henry Skrine argued that Middleton Hall was ‘a splendid modern seat... far eclipses the proudest of the Cambrian mansions in Asiatic pomp and splendour’, Thomas Rees described the house as ‘perhaps the most splendid mansion in South Wales, and the interior arrangements and decorations display an elegance and taste which comports with its exterior magnificence’.<sup>8</sup>



Figure 3. ‘Nelson’s Tower’. Lithograph by Augustus Butler. 1853. Image courtesy of Lowri Ann Rees.

On the summit of a hill at the north of the park stood a gothic tower built from plans drawn up by Samuel Pepys Cockerell. The tower was probably built to commemorate Nelson on his death at the Battle of Trafalgar. Inscriptions in Welsh, English and Latin were placed on each

<sup>5</sup> J. Fisher (ed.), *Tours in Wales (1804-1813) by Richard Fenton edited from his MS Journals in the Cardiff Free Library* (London, 1917), p. 56.

<sup>6</sup> J. Baker, *A Picturesque Guide to the Local Beauties of Wales: Interspersed with the most Interesting subjects of Antiquity in that Principality* (London, 1794), p. 134.

<sup>7</sup> G. Lipscomb, *Journeys into South Wales, through the counties of Oxford, Warwick, Worcester, Hereford, Salop, Stafford, Buckingham, and Hertford; in the year 1799* (London, 1802), p. 192.

<sup>8</sup> H. Skrine, *Two Successive Tours throughout the whole of Wales, with Several of the Adjacent English Counties; so as to form a Comprehensive View of the Picturesque Beauty, the Peculiar Manners, and the Fine Remains of Antiquity, in that interesting part of the British Island*, second edition (London, 1812), p. 95; T. Rees, *The Beauties of England and Wales or Delineations Topographical Historical and Descriptive: South Wales*, xviii (London, 1815), p. 331.

of the three sides of the tower, and three stained glass windows with artistic depictions of Nelson's life, death and ascent to heaven ascertain the commemorative nature of the structure. These windows have been removed for safe keeping and are now housed at the Carmarthen Museum. The tower still stands to this day under the care of the National Trust.<sup>9</sup>

### **Paxton and the wider community in south-west Wales**

Paxton attempted to enter into parliament, representing the Whig interest, in the infamous 1802 Carmarthenshire county election, also called *Y Lecsiwn Fawr* (the Great Election). During a notoriously expensive campaign, Paxton amassed a bill in excess of £15,000 treating voters to food and drink. Despite spending such a vast fortune, he was defeated by the Tory James Hamlyn Williams of the old established Edwinsford family. In 1803 Paxton became the Member of Parliament for the borough, holding that seat until 1806. Paxton was returned unopposed for this seat, having, it appears, purchased the seat from the previous candidate, thus seemingly utilising his Indian fortunes to further his political career. In 1807 he had to stand down from another county election following a smear campaign against him, with political pamphlets printed labelling him an 'upstart nabob' who was 'heedless of the interests of our native land'.<sup>10</sup> He once more ran for parliament, but failed to secure the borough seat in 1821. Prominent in local life as High Sheriff, magistrate, mayor of Carmarthen in 1802, Colonel of the Third Battalion of the Carmarthenshire Loyal Defence Volunteers, he also took an interest in municipal matters, ensuring a more efficient piped water supply to Carmarthen town. His interest in urban regeneration was also seen in schemes enacted in the seaside town of Tenby, where Paxton funded the building of a bath house, which saw Tenby develop into a fashionable seaside resort attracting elite families from across south Wales, and further afield. Paxton was subsequently knighted in March 1803.

### **The future of Middleton Hall**

Rather than favour his eldest son and heir, Paxton's will instructed that the Middleton Hall estate and his personal effects were to be sold on his death in order to provide for all his children.<sup>11</sup> This was indeed an uncharacteristic act, which might suggest that Paxton had no real interest in establishing a landed dynasty. However, by doing so, Paxton was providing for all his children, allowing them to make advantageous marriages and connections with elite families in Britain. Paxton died on 10 February 1824 and Middleton Hall was sold that same year to Edwards Hamlin Adams (1777-1842), a lawyer, born in Kingston, Jamaica, whose family had made their fortunes in the West Indies. The estate remained in the family well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century before being sold to Colonel William Jones from Ammanford. It

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<sup>9</sup> J. Latham, 'National Trust Archaeological Survey: Paxton's Tower' (1990), p. 8.

<sup>10</sup> National Library of Wales (NLW) MSS 12169 E (Brawdy MS 28) Carmarthenshire election papers etc. folio 26. Anonymous notice (5 May 1807).

<sup>11</sup> Public Record Office (PRO). Prob 11/1683 Will of Sir William Paxton.

was during his ownership that a disastrous fire reduced the mansion to ruins on All Hallows Eve of 1931. During the 1930s Carmarthenshire County Council purchased the Middleton Hall estate and subsequently divided it into a series of smallholdings. The ornamental lakes were drained and the road crossing through the park turned into a public highway. The shell of the mansion was finally taken down in the 1950s. Later in the 1980s Dyfed County Council restored several features of Paxton's former pleasure park, planting over 1,000 trees, renovating crumbling bridges and restoring waterfalls and other water features. During the 1990s work began on establishing the National Botanic Garden of Wales on the site of the former Middleton Hall estate, with the gardens eventually opening in May 2000 (see figure 4). The largest single span glasshouse in the world now stands near the site of Paxton's neo-classical mansion, and the same ethos of innovation in garden technology reflects Paxton's work on the same site some two hundred years previously.<sup>12</sup>



Figure 4. [National Botanic Garden of Wales](#), on the former site of the Middleton Hall estate. All that remains of Paxton's mansion is the servant's quarters. In the distance is the tower erected in memory of Nelson (now called Paxton's Tower). Image courtesy of Lowri Ann Rees.

## Conclusion

It is difficult to determine why Paxton chose to purchase an estate in south-west Wales. On the return voyage to Britain he made the acquaintance of David Williams of Henllys (d.1819), a Welshman who was returning home to Carmarthenshire following his time in India. Perhaps the county of Carmarthenshire was seen as a stepping stone to Westminster?

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<sup>12</sup> L. A. Rees, 'Might and Spite: The former Middleton Hall estate', in H. V. Bowen (ed.), *Buildings and Places in Welsh history: A New History of Wales* (Llandysul, 2013).

Paxton had previously tried to purchase another estate in Carmarthenshire, the 3,048 acre Taliaris estate, but was out-bid by Lord Robert Seymour in 1787.<sup>13</sup> In terms of the *East India Company at Home* project, the Middleton Hall case study highlights the ambition of returning East India Company men, how some were keen to secure the social status befitting of their new found wealth. On purchasing Middleton Hall, Paxton went about conforming to the ideals of gentlemanly behaviour – throwing himself into public and civic duties, entering into the political arena (albeit, this proved to be somewhat of a struggle), making various charitable bequests and undertaking ceremonial roles. To this day, it is still possible to see fragments of Paxton's time in south-west Wales, namely the former Middleton Hall estate parkland, Paxton's tower and the Tenby bath house - remnants of invested East India Company wealth.

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<sup>13</sup> CRO Aberglasney 3: MSS 19/514. Letter from John Philipps, Llandeilo, to his brother, Thomas Philipps (29 June 1801).