



# The Sale of Earl Temple's Newton Park Estate, 1941

*Kate James*

**N**ewton Park, near Bath, is today the main campus of Bath Spa University. Its current role as an educational establishment has seen it grow from modest beginnings in 1946, when it was founded as a women's teacher training college with forty five students.<sup>1</sup> Students of today, now in the region of seven thousand, study in the setting of a landscape and built environment consisting of multiple layers of history, and amidst the material evidence of many centuries of country estate heritage.

As an illustration of the country house, Newton Park is a minor example. The scale of the property with an eighteenth century Palladian villa at its centre is relatively small compared to other estates, and yet it demonstrates a typical model of country house development; one which can be seen throughout the English countryside. In the eleventh century, tracts of land were gifted to the supporters of King William I and became manorial homes and bases for those with local landed interests. Over the centuries, these led the way to improved estate lands and the building of new houses, large enough to support the political ambitions of owners; typically this occurred in the eighteenth century, when a burgeoning Empire and the associated trade brought new wealth to the country. As time passed, the fortunes of such owners waxed and waned. The value of lands, rents and mineral rights diminished over time, whilst increased taxation made further demands on estate incomes. The financial strain meant that by the twentieth century, many country house owners across the land were struggling to survive.<sup>2</sup>

For the country house and landowner, the twentieth century was one of immense upheaval. What had once appeared to be a comfortable, protected and stable society was transformed amidst the upheavals of war, depression, political change, and the shifting cultural attitudes of a new era. In the wake of this change, landowning and elite families found themselves under increasing pressure, attempting to preserve their way of life with ever-diminishing resources. The wealth which had helped to establish country house properties was derived from a number of possible sources, including valuable mineral or mining rights, extensive business interests, or land management alone. However over time minerals might run out, land decrease in value or business investments fail. In the twentieth century, landowners were additionally burdened with new tax laws, so whether through taxation, misguided business decisions, increased costs or simple over-expenditure, many families faced an increasingly challenging task. The countryside around us is littered with reminders of these past glories.<sup>3</sup>

Many families refused to see the reality; others searched for creative ways to save their homes. Some sought agreements with other major landowning bodies, such as the National Trust, who stepped in to help preserve historic estates for the future. Landowning families had long been at the forefront of society, but as society changed around them, some chose desperate measures. There are tales of houses over-insured then gutted by fire, of properties demolished, and of heirs who refused to be burdened with houses which could never hope to be financially viable.<sup>4</sup>

When owners died, having neglected to discover the ways and means to ensure an estate's survival, the law took over, clawing back taxes and death duties by all possible means. One such property affected in this way was Newton Park near Bath,

where one story of the English country estate was played out over the course of the 1940s. The last family members to live on the estate were Algernon Gore Langton and his wife Agnes, the Earl and Countess Temple. Following their deaths a few months apart in 1940 and 1941, their Bath estate was sold, along with all its contents. The estate itself was purchased by the Duchy of Cornwall, who in turn leased it to the City of Bath Education Authority, to be developed and saved for the future as the home of the new educational institution. The teacher training college gradually developed through amalgamation and expansion, and in 2005 became Bath Spa University; in this way the core of the estate has been preserved, restored and retained for the future. New buildings have been added, with major enhancement of the student facilities in every decade since the foundation of the first college in 1946. But the core of the estate remains, and on quiet Sunday mornings, it's still possible to feel the pervading atmosphere of centuries past.

## A Gentleman's Estate

The estate of Newton Park lies in a broad rising valley, four miles to the west of Bath. Its main house is an eighteenth century mansion, built by architect Stiff Leadbetter for Joseph Langton in the early 1760s. The surrounding landscape is the work of Lancelot 'Capability' Brown, who undertook this commission alongside the many others which punctuate the English countryside. (Thirty years later, the fashionable landscaper gardener, Humphrey Repton, would produce a 'Red Book' for the estate showing his own recommendations for even greater improvement.)<sup>5</sup> Joseph Langton, a descendant of a Merchant Venturer's family in Bristol, ideally fits the profile of the eighteenth century gentleman, who built a new home to replace an older 14th century quadrangle manor house, and with it was able court local opinion to support his political ambitions. In the eighteenth century, land and property were the keys to progression into the upper ranks of society, with a parliamentary seat recognised as the way to gain influence and power. Langton's new home embodied his wealth, taste and the status he sought. His old house was demolished, leaving just the gatehouse and one fortified tower section of this first house extant. These remnants were deliberately left and used in the manner of the time, as a means to demonstrate a family's longevity, and to act as eye-catching features in the newly designed landscape. Here was the classical house, the Capability Brown landscape and twin portraits by Gainsborough; all the symbolic trappings of the age. In addition, his new house was filled with all the furniture, art, books and possessions which were the expression of Georgian taste, at the height of a commercial boom which fed and responded to the new consumer culture of the eighteenth century.<sup>6</sup>

There then followed nearly two centuries of ownership by the Gore Langton family, descendants of Joseph Langton, the builder of the eighteenth century house. His heiress daughter married William Gore, and as was the way with the passage of wealth and assets at that time, Gore's name was added to Bridget Langton's, in recognition of the value of her own fortune and property. The newspapers of the time owned her to be an agreeable heiress, with £4000 a year. William Gore Langton was able to use Newton Park effectively as a backdrop for a long life and career in politics.

In the nineteenth century, the family name was enhanced, through the marriage of William Henry Powell Gore Langton and the daughter of the Duke of Buckingham, Lady Anna. A prominent suffragist, Lady Anna appears to have been a determined character; having eloped with William Henry and then been discovered, the couple married anyway some days later. It was this marriage that brought the title of Earl Temple to the Gore



fig 2: **The Drawing Room.** *Photo, used with permission, is from the 1921 Gore Langdon family album.*

Langton family when their son inherited, towards the end of the nineteenth century. The family had the titles, the longevity, the position in society and a home at Newton Park – yet the money required to support their lifestyle was dwindling. Despite encouragement from estate managers, advisors and solicitors, the family would not reign in their spending to suit their circumstances.<sup>7</sup>

One hundred and eighty years after the major developments to this fine estate, in April 1941, every item it contained was sold. The death of the 5th Earl in 1940, followed by his widow Countess Temple in March 1941, led to the dispersal and sale of the entire estate, which by then consisted of the house, its grounds, dairy farms, two public houses and a golf course, as well as the family's entire household effects. Further property and possessions in Scotland were also disposed of by executors, keen to realise as much capital as possible in order to pay taxes and death duties on the estate. The relevant documents are held at the Bath Record Office, and one revealing item gives a breakdown of the main assets. This official valuation of the estate at Newton Park reveals the relative worth of its elements:

Newton Park Mansion, outbuildings, gardens, park lands (46 acres)	£21,500
Fifteen Dairy Farms (2,888 acres)	£70,900
Six Residences	£9,650
Two Licenced Properties	£5,800
Lands, Small Holdings, Golf Course (457 acres)	£19,600
Eighty-two Cottages	£13,990 <sup>8</sup>

The chief value of the estate lay in the considerable value of the farms and associated land. The main house itself was of relatively minor importance to the sale of the overall property.

In addition to the values placed on the bricks, mortar and lands, the extensive contents of the house and also the outdoor items were also sold. Several auctions were held, in London and later in Bath, and the relevant auction booklets show itemised lists of the hundreds of individual pieces, along with their purchasers and the prices of separate items. Objects as diverse as silverware, manuscripts, household linen, carpets, outdoor plants and galvanized buckets came under the hammer. The linoleum from the butler's pantry was listed beneath functional everyday furniture and case after case of fine wine. Valuable china and porcelain appears beside mismatched cups and saucers. These auction booklets, associated letters and documents can also be seen at Bath Record Office, and all are included in the collection

of papers which originated at the Gore Langton family's solicitor Farrer and Company. They consist of letters between the family, their executors and solicitors, and the London auctioneers Sotheby's.<sup>9</sup> The documents deal with the eventful final year of private ownership at Newton Park, and trace the ways in which the various interested parties attempted a belated rescue bid on a property which had been over-reaching itself over many years.

At Earl Temple's death in 1940, his widow Agnes was left to deal with the financial problems. In a letter written on 13th May 1940, a member of the family states the desire that 'we must do our utmost to find any possible way of saving Newton.'

Various ideas were proposed. On 10th May 1940, The Country Gentleman's Association is mentioned in another correspondence as a possible source of help. This association offered advice on estate management and at that time must have had many calls on its services. No further letters mention whether any advice was forthcoming, however. Meanwhile, a letter dated 13th May asserts that 'it appeared to me that Lady Temple had been greatly influenced by various people who, without knowing the condition of the will or the real financial situation, had given both her and the agent impossible advice'. It seems that Agnes Gore Langton was surrounded by assistance and counsel, but evidence



fig 3: **Newton Park Main house from its landscaped lake today.** *Photo by Kate James*

from letters suggests that she felt overwhelmed by the demands of the executors and lawyers. In July 1940, she wrote to her solicitor: 'It seems to me that you do the business of the Estate, just as you like and don't consider me at all. I would like to tell you that I am not the imbecile you think I am'. Her letters in this period show a steady deterioration of her handwriting, and provide a clue to her rapidly failing health. She died in March 1941, just thirteen months after her husband. The burdensome responsibility and extreme worry would not have helped. From that point onwards, the family executors moved swiftly to realise as much capital as possible. All other opportunities of financial rescue having failed, the decision was taken to sell the estate and all its contents; it must have seemed the only reasonable solution under the circumstances.

The timescale was rapid; the documents held at Bath Record Office reveal the speed of the process. Earl Temple himself died in February 1940, and the estate was fully valued in the same month. The Earl's widow, his wife Agnes, passed away in March 1941. The Newton Park household effects sale took place from 22nd April 1941, and the London auctions were held throughout the summer. A family member would later allude to the 'indecent haste' involved.

### 'The packers are at work'

Once the executors had decided the fate of the Temple property and its contents, the actual process of sale was seemingly swift and efficient. The letters and information shared between the interested parties reveal the professional distancing which took place; a family's home became rooms and square footage; personal possessions became itemised lists of auction-worthy materials; the grounds became acreage to be parcelled and valued. Everything was just 'stuff' to be dealt with, and as expediently as possible. A short list of 'heirloom' items were to be retained by the family; a snapshot reminder of a former life. The list included jewellery, small precious objects, and the Gainsborough portraits commissioned by Joseph Langton in the 1760s.

It would appear that the London auction house Sotheby's dealt with the household and estate effects, and communicated with solicitors Farrer and Co, before calling in local auctioneer Ford, Howe's and Williams of Bristol. An initial report assessed and described the contents of the house, and gave instructions in the way matters were to proceed, and the tone of these instructions gives an indication of the context of such sales: 'There was no difficulty here...the important pictures must remain on the walls until they are placed in the van for safety's sake.' The same report then continues:

Sotheby's selection – this comprises all the remaining silver, all the books other than novels, periodicals and waste, some 70 – 80 lots of furniture, about 40 lots of pictures, the better porcelain, a few needlework pictures, 2 busts and a few decorative works of art. The Packers are at work now and we hope to be out of the house by about Wednesday, when the local Auctioneers can be informed to get on with their job.

From the historian's perspective, the phrase 'all the books other than novels, periodicals and waste' is very interesting. The assumed auction value of non-fiction is clear; the information about individual lives contained in the rest has been abandoned. This researcher would be fascinated to discover more about the novels – what did the family at Newton Park read? Which periodicals did they take? What did that 'waste'

consist of? These items of everyday material culture must have seemed mundane at the time, but would have provided so many layers of historical detail. Oh to find a box of such things today...

However, the thoughts of those involved in the sale of the Newton Park estate were not looking far into the future, or into the individual family member's pasts, but at the urgent matter of assets, values and economic expedience. The Sotheby's report finally adds the bald statement that 'Sotheby's selection has been made with a view to making the House Sale a successful one, in other words, not denuding the house of all but the very poor stuff'.

And so the 'best' pieces in the house were selected for auction at Sotheby's in London and were dealt with at a number of sales which occurred during May, June and again in August 1941. Each item is listed and described, and it is clear from the official auction booklets that the Newton Park estate was by no means unique; many elite names and families feature in these booklets alongside that of Earl Temple's. Money was clearly scarce for many a Lord, Lady or Honourable, who were parting with possessions from the single valuable item, to sets of antiques or entire estates.

A selection from the Newton Park lists reveals the typical disappearing world of the country house gentleman:

Lot 135: Painting: A series of four pastoral subjects, supposed to represent the Four Seasons, by Boucher. £105.

Lot 110: Painting: Portrait of a gentleman with large wig, by Kneller. £2 10/-.

Lot 111: Painting: Wooded landscape with cattle, by Gainsborough. £12.

Lot 136: Manuscript: Repton (Humphry) Newton Park in Somersetshire, a seat of William Gore Langton Esq, M.P. Manuscript, 12pp. text, plan, 8 water-colour drawings, some with movable slips to show proposed improvements to the gardens, signed by the author at the foot of the introduction, old red morocco, 1796-97. £24.

This last item, the 'Red Book' of Newton Park, is now owned by the Mellon Collection in the United States, and was added to this extensive library of eighteenth century English art sometime around the late 1960s or early 1970s. In the intervening years it was privately owned in England, and was seen by D.W. Humphries, a governor of Newton Park College. He was engaged with research into the history of Newton Park, producing for the College the booklet *'The Manor of Newton St Loe'* in 1956. It appears he became so interested in the topic that he continued to research for many more years, and tracking down Repton's Red Book was part of his research. The detail in the book suggests that his plans were never fully carried out, as the description of what he first saw is broadly what remains today. His description is therefore of Capability Brown's work, which was executed in the 1760s, at the same time as the new Georgian house was built.<sup>10</sup>

The Red Book, then, is important to the history of the estate, but its value, and that of the other items, seems relatively low. The auctions are happening two years into the Second World War; prices were not only suppressed by wartime economics but by the challenges of war itself - who was looking for such items in London in the spring of 1941? Londoners of all ranks were at that time attempting to cope with the bomb damage of the Blitz, the ongoing restrictions of wartime and shortages of the most basic kind. Naturally, in the midst of all this, more urgent matters were preoccupying people's minds, it would take some years for items such as the paintings, silver and porcelain to rise again in value,

if at all. The saleability of furniture would come to depend on its suitability to changes in lifestyle, and much was simply on the wrong scale for modern tastes. Additionally, the more mundane or everyday items on sale during the war were of proportionately greater value. At the Newton Park auction, eight tons of coal raised the sum of £18. As an example of relative values and the suppression of prices during wartime, it is interesting to note that Humphry Repton's Red Book of Newton Park sold for £24 and the eight tons of coal for £18. Although not a very scientific comparison, recently a Red Book was sold by Christie's for £65,000. The current price for eight tons of coal is just under £2,000.

The sale at Newton Park itself, held by the local auction house, was held over five days, from 22nd – 27th April 1941. The booklet for this sale is over thirty pages long, and covers every imaginable household effect, including many which surprise in their ordinariness. A small sample of the hundreds of lots includes:

Quantity of glazed tiles; oak gun rack; 8 various trunks; 5 deal kitchen tables; 3 bread boards; 15 golf clubs in bag; full sized billiards table; otter in glass case; an entire cellar of wines and champagne; damask table cloths; odd chamber ware and a slop pail; 8 Wedgewood cups and 13 matching saucers; a large ivory tusk paper knife; 2 blue and white oriental teapots; a cauldron-shaped coal vase.<sup>11</sup>

Against each entry, carefully written down as each lot was bought, is the name of the buyer and the amount raised. The last page declared the total raised over the five days at just under £3963.<sup>12</sup>

### 'We very much regret...'

The auction sales were not the end of the Newton Park story. Some of the most important family heirlooms – assumed over the years to include the two full length Gainsborough portraits of Joseph and Bridget Langton – had been placed in safe storage with a Bath company, based in Milsom Street.<sup>13</sup> This move followed a fear of bombing which was very real at the time, as a rogue bomb had dropped on the estate during the previous year. But as we know, the bombing raids of April 1942 had a devastating effect on the city of Bath, and a dramatic postscript to the loss of Newton as a family home is revealed in a letter from the warehouse company:

We very much regret to have to inform you that our warehouse, The Portland Depositories, Julian Road, Bath, in which the effects belonging to Earl Temple's Estate were stored, was totally destroyed by fire, through enemy action, on the night of the 25th April.

### A new beginning

Between death duties, sales and the aftermath of hostilities, very little was left of Newton Park's former existence by the end of the war, except for empty buildings and neglected grounds. A new chapter began when the estate was given a new lease of life from 1945, when the national need for teachers resulted in its adoption as a training college for women. The principal of the college, Mary Dawson, would later recall the 'empty shell' she visited in the autumn of 1945, and the challenge of waiting for it to be ready for occupation



amidst post-war shortages and delays. Although the College was opened in January 1946, it would be September 1949 before the staff and students took up proper residence there, and March 1950 before the official opening by Princess Elizabeth, Duchess of Edinburgh. In the interim, the staff and students moved between fourteen different buildings, offices and venues in the city itself. Throughout this time, they were supported by the Board of Governors and local councillors, pleading their cause and helping to promote their aims. They attended auction sales themselves, to find furniture to refill the house. Alderman Berry, for example, reported to a council meeting that suitable furniture – large enough to match the scale of the eighteenth century rooms at Newton Park - could be acquired relatively cheaply, because people no longer wanted it in their homes.

And so the presence of the college, and later Bath Spa University, ensured that Newton Park was preserved and cared for. The addition of new buildings alongside the old rendered it suitable for each era it has served, yet the core of the estate retains

the character of earlier days. A former student from the earliest days of the College visited recently. It was a bright, crisp winter Sunday morning, a time when the campus returned to its quiet splendour. She sat outside Main House and wistfully remarked 'It's just the same – just the same'. There are now many thousands of students, past and present, who have appreciated their surroundings in this way. In a moving letter written in the 1950s, a member of the family who had known Newton Park well, wrote

I think you can readily understand that the loss of Newton as my family's home is a wound that doesn't properly heal. I was brought up there and even as a small child I don't think there was a time when I did not appreciate its beauty. Only the very insensible could escape its influence and perhaps it is some consolation to know that so many people can now enjoy it whereas before it was known but to a few.<sup>14</sup>

In many ways, the story of Newton Park is a typical one, and the same narrative has continued to be heard throughout the English countryside. The process of loss and sale only accelerated in the decades after the Second World War and the demise of the country house has become a familiar narrative in British history. As country house visitors we often see the treasures of past glories, but of the minutiae of loss we know very little. The Newton Park estate tells this story; a microcosm of our national past.



fig 4: **Mary Dawson, 1940s.** *Photo from the Dawson Collection, BSU Archive.*

## Notes

1. Institutional papers held at Bath Spa University Archive, Newton Park, Bath. In addition to the College at Newton Park, the University also encompasses Bath School of Art (founded in Bath, 1852; from 1946-1985 it was Bath Academy of Art at Corsham Court) and Bath College of Domestic Science (founded as part of Bath Technical Schools in 1892). Amalgamation of these three component colleges in the 1970s and 1980s led to the development of Bath College of Higher Education, which in turn became Bath Spa University in 2005.
2. Graham Davis, *The Langtons of Newton Park*, Bath, (Bath, Fyson & Co. Ltd, 1986) passim.
3. M.Girouard, *Life in the English Country House* (Yale, Yale University Press, 1978) passim. In our own area, Dyrham Park and Stourhead are examples of family homes now held by the National Trust. Bowood House was partially demolished to make it more affordable to the family. Burderop Park, near Swindon, ceased to be a family home and became the head office of the engineering firm Halcrow.
4. David Cannadine, *The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy*, (Yale, Yale University Press, 1990) passim.
5. Repton drew plans for realignment of the entrance drives, broader and more numerous bodies of water, alteration of the tree avenues, extra garden buildings, and an ornate bridge over the lower lakes. It seems that only minor changes to the Corston Drive were ever executed.
6. P. Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People 1727 – 1783* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1989) p.90.
7. Estate Rolls, various documents and letters, held at the Duchy of Cornwall Office, Newton St Loe. Viewed by permission of Mr. N. Mould. See also Jane Buckler, 'The Administration and Decline of the Newton Park Estate 1920-1938', *History Papers* vol. IV, July 1983.
8. Gore Langton papers, Bath Record Office, Guildhall, Bath.
9. Permission to cite details of the London auction sales has been granted by Sotheby's.
10. D.W. Humphries, *The Manor of Newton St Loe*, (Bath, publisher unknown, 1956).
11. The list hints at the lifestyle the family still tried to uphold; the contents of the wine cellar took up one day of the Five Day Sale.
12. Newton Park Five Day Sale, (1941) Bath Spa University Archive.
13. Members of the family had described the portraits to Darlow Humphries, a governor of Newton Park College during his research for *The Manor of Newton St Loe* (published 1956). They featured Joseph Langton holding a plan of the new 1762 house in one, and Bridget Langton in a rich blue satin gown in the other. In 1941 they were valued at £1,500 and £2,500 respectively. Research into the work of Thomas Gainsborough, (portrait artist of the Circus, Bath in the 1760s) reveals that the full length paintings as commissioned by Langton were his most expensive. In size, scale and appearance they would be similar to the portraits held in the collection at the Holburne Museum and the Victoria Art Gallery.
14. Letter, E. Gore Langton to Mary Dawson (1956) Bath Spa University Archive.