



## History of Rokeby Park

Rokeby was built by Sir Thomas Robinson between 1725 and 1730. But the history of the site goes back many centuries earlier. Nearby Greta Bridge was a Roman Encampment. By the reign of Edward II the land belonged to the Rokeby family; their early medieval home was burned by the Scots in a raid following Bannockburn. A house was later built on the same site which passed from the Rokebys to the Robinsons in James I's reign.

Old maps and documents down to the 17th century give the spelling of the name as Rokeby. In the 18th and early 19th centuries the name is spelt Rookby. Since then it has been spelt Rokeby. There can be little doubt that phonetically it is Rookby so-called perhaps after the rooks which abound.

When William Robinson 'merchant of the City of London' bought the estate in c.1610 he rebuilt the house, and that, and the work of his late seventeenth-century successors is recorded in Buck's drawing of 1721. The present house is the work of Sir Thomas Robinson (c.1702-1777), and it marks the beginning of the career of one of the most distinguished early Georgian amateur architects. Robinson had many contacts with architectural experts. In 1724-5 his friend William Wakefield published one design and the Earl of Mar sketched another. Robinson also knew Lord Burlington, who suggested that he should build an 'Egyptian hall', a room with numbers of 'columns and niches and contrived beautifully to please the eye'. Robinson acted as his own architect, but the builder he employed at this stage is not known. By December 1731 he could report to his father-in-law Lord Carlisle that Rokeby:

'is now entirely fitted up to be warm and convenient for my family, and, with the wings, makes a regular front of 146 feet to the park, and to the north are three courts of offices. My chief expense has been in Palladian doors and windows, which I am told have a very good effect, and in building a stable for fifteen horses as a wing to the house, which makes the regularity, and occasions so large a front. . .'

The design of the house, both inside and out, continued to evolve after 1731. Between 1735 and 1741 Robinson published engravings which show stairs in place of the portico in the front, and this as well as the chimney-piece in the saloon in the style of Isaac Ware probably date from the period after 1747 when Robinson returned from a five year spell as Governor of Barbados. He also drew up detailed plans for a more elaborate treatment of the outbuildings, with domes on the outermost pair of offices and an extra storey on the intermediate ones. Isaac Ware may have been involved in these plans, but Robinson may well have employed as his executant architect a less well-known member of the Office of Works, William Robinson, who carried out his designs at Castle Howard (1753-9).

Rokeby is an original and effective variant of the Palladian formula of the villa with wings. Where the conventional form of this design linked the office buildings to the main block by a quadrant colonnade, Robinson connected the two sets of offices directly, *en echelon*, to the main house, and by relating the heights and disciplining the detail of all parts of the elevation he placed maximum emphasis on the simple five bay villa at the centre. The result was an adaptation of the suburban villa as a country house. Robinson was proud of his 'regular front of 146 feet to the Park', yet there is none of the monotony or grandiose starkness of some Palladian mansions.

In his later years, Robinson became increasingly involved in the social life of London where he was Master of Ceremonies at the pleasure gardens at Raneleagh. This, together with his increasing debts, led him to sell the Rokeby estate. It was advertised for sale in 1765 and eventually sold to J.S. Morrilt in 1769.



The purchaser was the son of Bacon Morritt of Selby and Cawood (died 1775) and great grandson of Robert Morritt the Rector of Ryther (died 1701).

J.S. Morritt was one of 11 children. During his ownership much was done in the immediate vicinity. The Dining Room was built for him in the neo-Classical style by John Carr of York. The church at Rokeby (1778), the Abbey Bridge (1783) and Greta Bridge (1789) were built. In other respects the situation is well described by Arthur Young, a well known travel writer, in 1770:

' Rookby is worth the viewing by travellers. The collection in the house is curious, and the pleasure ground romantic' [then follows a description of pictures and sculptures, many of which can still be seen] In the wing of the House is an apartment called the Museum, where is treasured much learned lumber, among other food for the antiquarian' [then follows a description of sculptures] 'The Pleasure Ground is romantic, and were it kept in something of order, would be much admired.'

J.S. Morritt's eldest sister Anne Morritt (1726-1797) was a remarkable artist and needlewoman. She created the unique collection of pictures all of which, so far as is known, are now at Rokeby. During his Tour of North England in 1770 Arthur Young recorded:

' But by far the most curious things to be seen .... are the copies of several capital paintings, worked by Anne Morritt, a lady of most surprising genius. It is impossible to view her works without great astonishment; for certainly the act of imitation in work is carried by her to the highest point of perfection. Exceedingly fine tapestries are often seen, and here and there a piece of flowers, or a bunch of grapes, done in a most pleasing manner; but to copy fine paintings, certainly several figures, with a grace, a brilliancy, and an elegance superior to the originals, was reserved for this most ingenious lady.'

Rokeby was inherited by J.B.S. Morritt from his father in 1791 at the age of 20. Between 1794 and 1796 J.B.S. Morritt went on a Grand Tour which included Greece, Turkey and other parts of Asia Minor. His letters home have been published.

He owned Rokeby from 1791 to his death in 1843. His ownership of over fifty years and his love of the arts both literary and artistic have stamped their mark. Whilst many of the contents were no doubt bought with the house from Sir Thomas Robinson many, more well known works, were acquired by J.B.S. Morritt. Undoubtedly the best known was Velasquez's 'Rokeby Venus' which was bought by him in 1809. In a letter to his close friend Sir Walter Scott dated 18th September 1820 J.B.S. Morritt wrote:

'I have been all morning pulling about my pictures and hanging them in new positions to make more room for my fine picture of Venus's backside by Velasquez which I have at length exalted over my chimney piece in the library. It is an admirable light for the painting, and shows it in perfection, whilst by raising the said backside to a considerable height the ladies may avert their downcast eyes without difficulty, and connoisseurs steal a glance without drawing in the said posterior as apart of the company.'

J.B.S. Morritt's friendship with Sir Walter Scott is well documented in Lockhart's biography and elsewhere. It was to J.B.S. Morritt that he dedicated his epic poem 'Rokeby'.

In addition to being Member of Parliament for Beverley 1799-1802 and Shaftesbury 1818-20, J.B.S. Morritt wrote a number of articles in contest with Mr. Bryant about the site of Troy, was a member and subsequently President of the Dilettanti Society and a founder member of the Traveller's Club. But he had no children. In 1843 Rokeby was inherited by the son of J.B.S. Morritt's youngest brother, William J.S. Morritt.



W.J.S. Morrith's wife Ellen Francis, the daughter of Sir Robert Wilmot, Bart., founded a school and endowed a church at Startforth. Her husband was well known for his yellow coach and at least four in hand and was presented in Brighton with a coaching whip by 81 ladies in 1867. He was Member of Parliament for N.R. Yorks 1862-65 and died in 1874. Rokeby was then inherited by William's younger brother Robert Ambrose, then aged 58. He had married in 1872 the daughter of a close friend of his, Mary Mitchell-Innes. They had seven children between 1872 and 1886.

The inheritance of Robert Ambrose coincided with the height of the Victorian technological revolution. He was responsible for building a gas house and installing gas lighting. The gasoliers in the Saloon and Dining Room date from this period. As the first owner for nearly a hundred years with a large family he extended Rokeby accordingly. But his extensions were made in keeping with the façade. Except for the East Wings the additions are invisible from any main viewpoint; when he built on, where possible, he carried out or up the Georgian windows or elevations.

Internally he, his elder brother William, his uncle J.B.S. Morrith and his grandfather J.S.Morrith revolutionised Sir Thomas Robinson's internal design. What Sir Thomas Robinson designed as a cellar became the hall, as a hall became the Saloon and what appears from Sir Thomas's plans to be a bedroom accessible only from the Stables and possibly the Museum referred to by Arthur Young became the Dining Room.

Robert Ambrose Morrith died in 1890, his eldest son Robert Alexander was killed in the South African War in 1901. The estate was inherited by the younger brother, Henry Edward. To him it fell, aged 21, with his American wife Grace and subsequently his successors to cope with the rapidly changing world of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. During both world wars the House was used as a convalescent hospital. In 1985/86 the house was re-roofed and rewired with the assistance of a grant from the Department of the Environment and has been opened to the public since 1986.