NORMANHURST AND THE BRASSEY FAMILY

Today, perhaps, it is only architects whose names live with their engineered creations. Those who build bridges, roads and railways are hidden within the corporations responsible, but in the nineteenth century they could be national heroes. They could certainly amass considerable wealth, even if they faced remarkable risks in obtaining it. One of the – perhaps the greatest – was the first Thomas Brassey.

Brassey was

> probably the most successful of the contractors, was called a European power, through whose accounts more flowed in a year than through the treasuries of a dozen duchies and principalities, but he was such a power only with his navvies.

Brassey's work took him and his railway business across the world, from France to Spain, Italy, Norway, what is now Poland, the Crimea, Canada, Australia, India and South America, quite apart from major works in the UK. His non-railway work was also impressive: docks, factories and part of Bazalgette's colossal sewerage and embankment project in London that gave us, among more important things, the Victoria and Albert Embankments, new streets and to some extent the District and Circle Lines. By 1870 he had built one mile in every twenty across the world, and in every inhabited continent.

Thomas Brassey, contractor

When he died at the (Royal) Victoria Hotel at St Leonards on 8 December 1870 Brassey left close to £3,200,000, a quite enormous sum that in today's terms would probably have been over a thousand million. He had been through some serious scares when his contracts had not yielded what he had expected, and in the bank crisis of 1866, but he had survived (or probably it his son Thomas) to build the colossal country house of Normanhurst Court in the parish of Catsfield. He is buried in the parish church there, and there is a stained glass window in his memory.

Normanhurst Court was the largest house for many miles and probably the brashest. It is monumentally ostentatious, displaying the enormous wealth amassed by the Brassey family.

It is not wholly clear where the initiative for its construction originated, but the driving force seems to have been the younger Thomas Brassey. He had been renting Beauport Park and presumably wanted somewhere of his own. By the mid-1860s a family trust was formed to undertake the mammoth task of building a house that would not only accommodate the family and their many servants but would also demonstrate its wealth and influence.

And it was big. At the time of the 1871 census, when the house was very new, the parents were away but three of their children were there, served by a housekeeper, three housemaids, seven domestic servants and a governess. No doubt more staff were recruited as the family grew and as visitors appeared.

Normanhurst Court after enlargement in 1903.

It appears that the architects for this creation were Habershon, Spalding and Brock. The RIBA has an initial plan by them dated 1862, which shows a much smaller house and one rather less influenced by the French renaissance.[1] But another source suggests an odder designer: the Frenchman Hector Horeau (1801-1872).[2]

Horeau was without doubt an imaginative man. The website for Pippingford Park in Ashdown Forest says: [3]

> Apparently the house lay derelict until the estate was acquired by John Mortimer. He was obviously a man of some substance, as he had a town house in Hanover Square, and was able to commission the famous French architect, Hector Horeau, to build what must have been an exceedingly grand and expensive country one. Like another of Horeau's creations, Normanhurst, near Battle , The house was modelled on a French chateau, and was hopelessly impractical. It was completed in 1857, and was three times the size of the present one. As a

> matter of interest, Hector Horeau won the competition for the design of the great exhibition of 1851, but was not awarded the contract, no doubt because he was a foreigner.

He had also proposed a design for what became the Crystal Palace, for the Great Exhibition of 1851:

> Among the boldest of these designs was one contributed by a famous French artist - *[Hector Horeau surely?adds a commentator]* It was intended to be a colossal glass globe of seventy feet in diameter, which was to occupy the centre of one of the basins, and the interior of which was to be fitted with walks and galleries. The globe was surmounted by a metal figure of Britannia, 200 feet in height, the head of which would be some feet higher than the top of the great transept of the Crystal Palace. The metal of which the figure was to be constructed was of polished zinc; the form was that of Minerva, and in the top of her helmet was to be placed a bright star formed by an electric light, and which could be distinctly seen for several miles round London. Immense coloured glass banners, bearing the devices of the flags of every nation, were to be grouped around the feet of Britannia, while jets of water, flying in every possible and impossible direction, crossing and re-crossing each other and in the most admired disorder, were to play over the head and around the body of this glistening and light-shedding Minerva. [4]

In 1851 he had proposed a cross-Channel railway in a submerged tube held in position by paddle steamers. Ventilation shafts were to run between the tunnel and each paddle steamer, ending above the surface in steel constructions shaped like medieval castles. This was manifestly impractical if for no other reason that a serious storm could destroy it by moving or wrecking the steamers.

It would be a very bold promoter who commissioned Horeau but it is possible that his knowledge of French architecture influenced Brassey, because the project as completed was much more redolent of the Loire (even that a little distantly) that the Habershons' original plan.

As completed the house had not only a covered tennis court (which became a military hospital in the First World War – but its own gas works. The park was stocked with deer and at one point included a lonely emu gathered by Lady Brassey from an Australian tour. It employed a full-time interior decorator.[5]

The hard evidence does point to the Habershons, but confirmation is hard to find, possibly because the architects might well not have been particularly proud of the final building, and probably also because any Brassey would have been a busy and interfering owner.

The Habershon practice originated with Matthew Habershon (1789-1852), a Yorkshireman. He specialised in timber-framed houses and written on the subject (he also wrote theological works).[6] Matthew had two sons, who both became his pupils. William Gilbee Habershon (1818-92) started his own practice at St Neots in Huntingdonshire in 1843, and he and his brother (Matthew) Edward (1828-1900) took over their father's practice in London in 1852.[7] Edward was admitted ARIBA in 1860.

They remained partners until about 1863. By then Edward had already gone into partnership with Henry Spalding (1838-1910, articled to the Habershons in 1857), and their managing clerk Edgar Brock (1833-95) joined the partnership in 1865. By 1879 Brock was Habershon's only partner.[8]

The practice concentrated in churches. One was St Andrew in Hastings, now demolished and replaced by Morrison's supermarket. Another was Copthorne, which is a fairly remarkable building – a kind of updated neo-Gothic with internal features of stone and fairly bright red brick; unusual and not at all unattractive. Another was the church at Dallington. Otherwise no much of their work survives.

But the house remained, and was subject to alteration in 1903; a major fire caused serious damage in 1907, but it was restored.

Normanhurst was almost certainly the biggest project that the Habershon practice ever undertook. In fact it was too big. Despite his wealth, Brassey had to sell off part of the estate in 1910, due to the new land taxes introduced by Lloyd George as Chancellor of the Exchequer. He died in a road accident in 1919, and the family was left without a male heir and with daughters all comfortably married elsewhere. Now they had responsibility for a colossal house that was surplus to requirements, at a time when money was shorter than it had been and there were fewer young men of wealthy family to buy it, so many having died in the war. The Countess moved to Park Dale and Normanhurst became a girls' school.

The Brassey family ran out of male heirs in 1919, as will be seen below, and the female side was already so well-supplied with country houses that Normanhurst was no longer required. In the second world war it lived on as a barracks and prisoner of war camp, but the post-war climate was far from kind to such properties, even if in good condition. By then it was owned by Captain Tom Egerton of Mountfield Court, descended from a daughter of the last male Brassey, who tried for three years to sell it, but without success. It was a large estate and the house had eighty rooms. In 1951 it was finally decided that the cost of maintenance was too great for a house that no-one wanted, and it was demolished. Its site is still observable. The area is now covered by a caravan site.

The first Brassey's money came from a risky business. Conditions on the ground were not always what the surveyors had forecast, particularly in tunnelling; harsh weather could delay the works; the navvies and the various categories of skilled men had to be properly paid and well-treated or they might just drop their picks and shovels and go elsewhere. Bidding was an uncertain process. At best it could make one a fortune. One case, in Dorset, was of a man who thought at first that he could build the line from Dorchester to Maiden Newton for £18000. He consulted his wife and adjusted it to £20000. Having thought it over, he proposed £40000. Further consultation with his wife produced the final tender of £80000. It was the lowest bid and he became a rich man. On the other hand Brassey, despite profits elsewhere, lost half a million when he built the Grand Trunk line in Canada, a major undertaking of some 539 miles for which much of his workforce had to be brought out from Britain and was paid much more than at home.

Very careful calculations were needed if the railway were to be built on time and within budget. Digging in stone was harder than in clay, and damp – not wet – conditions were better than prolonged drought or flood. Digging had to be supervised to avoid men getting buried under spoil. Removing the spoils from cuttings had to be carefully arranged through temporary rail lines, and the excess had to be taken elsewhere – somewhere useful if possible, like an embankment. Bridges had to have firm foundations, sometimes hard to find. Tunnels had unexpected habits of falling in or of releasing unsuspected springs.

Crossing even flat land could lead to difficulties: the Liverpool and Manchester line, opened in 1830, for example, still runs over Chat Moss, which the contractor found almost bottomless. Brassey met the same problem when building part of the Great Northern line through Huntingdonshire.

The right men had to be recruited in the right numbers. There were managing and assistant contractors, surveyors, stonemasons, brickmakers and bricklayers, and large numbers of navvies. The last were prone to drink, and there were many instances of violence between them, notoriously when Irish and Scots were on the same works. Then there was equipment: the lines themselves, wagons, horses or steam engines, picks and shovels, pitprops, bricks or brick clay, sometimes explosives. The men had to have somewhere to live: the sudden arrival of (say) 500 men, some with women, on a country village would overwhelm it. Finally the trackbed would need ballasting and the points and signals wired.

Brassey managed all this with great success and indeed with a measure of popularity. He was a hands-on contractor where he could be, engaging directly with his navvies. He would recognise them on later works and greet them. Unlike some contractors, he refused to pay his men in anything but money rather than in vouchers valid only in the contractors' own shops at exaggerated prices. The men in turn remembered him with what seems to have been some affection. When he was dying of a brain haemorrhage

> his men remembered him and many of them came, some from abroad, to see their old master. … They did not intrude upon his illness, but asked to be allowed to wait in the hall of his house, hoping to see him as he was helped out to his carriage, and to shake his hand once again.

His eldest son, also Thomas, said 'A small manifestation of kindness like this, how little it costs, how much it is valued.'

Brassey was a Cheshire man, born at Buerton, a small village south of Nantwich, on 7 November 1805, and educated at the King's School at Chester, which was then part of the cathedral complex. The connection remained: after his death his sons had St Erasmus Chapel in the cathedral restored in his memory and that of his wife. His father was a prosperous farmer boasting Norman descent. Brassey and his wife Maria Harrison (who was talented in her own right, interpreting for him in his French contracts) had three sons who survived infancy, the first two of whom are described in further detail below:

> Thomas (1836-1918), who became the first Baron Brassey, Viscount Hythe and Earl Brassey.
> Henry (1840-1891),
> Albert (1844-1918), who became a Conservative MP.

He started as a surveyor, moving to building roads. His first railway contract was for a viaduct at Penkridge in Staffordshire, for the main contractor Joseph Locke. Locke was shortly to be appointed contractor for the London and Southampton railway and in 1841 he engaged Brassey to build the Basingstoke/Winchester section of about 17 miles. It involved moving some 3,250,000 cubic yards of material, for which he employed about 100 men. This was his first major contract, and he completed it successfully. He then contracted to keep the whole line in repair for ten years, at £24000 p a. This was a good bargain for him: when the contract ended the owners found that the actual cost was much less. From then his

work expanded enormously. He had the reputation of bringing works in on time, within budget and without the disputes that occasionally disfigured the building process. His works also stood the test of time. His first overseas contract began in the same year, between Paris and Rouen. This involved the large Barentin viaduct that the French insisted had to be built in a particular way; it collapsed. Brassey then rebuilt it, at his own cost, in the way he preferred, and it carries trains today.

He also knew how to get the money owed to him. There is a story that another contractor, Richard Potter, having provided huts for the French army in the Crimea, wanted payment from the French government but met continued delays. Brassey happened to be in Paris and advised him to slip some money to the minister. He knew the ropes, and his advice worked. Brassey had himself been involved in the Crimea, being one of a consortium building a double-track military railway of nearly 40 miles in length, along which men and supplies of all kinds could be carried from Balaclava port to the various fronts without recourse to muddy and overcrowded tracks.

As with so many of his kind, Brassey's sons did not follow him into the business. They were comfortably off and preferred public service. Thomas, the eldest, became a barrister and amassed all kinds of honours, being Deputy Lieutenant for Sussex, and later Governor of Victoria for five years. He was also Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports. He was an MP twice, latterly for eighteen years until his barony was awarded in 1886 and served as a civil lord of the Admiralty under Gladstone; thereafter he was much involved in naval matters. Nevertheless he found time to spend in distant travels in his steam yacht. That of 1876 has thus been described:

> They travelled in style with an entourage which included their children, a small selection of friends, a professional crew, domestic staff, a dog, 3 birds and a kitten. Their eleven month voyage took them via the Pacific, through Tahiti, Japan and even allowed them to travel over land to visit the pyramids in Cairo. Annie wrote about their adventures in *A Voyage in the Sunbeam* (1878).

Sunbeam was necessarily of a decent size: 157 x 27.5 feet (47.6 x 8.4 metres) and 531 tons displacement, with six boats.

Thomas, first Earl Brassey

On another voyage, in 1887, his first wife Anna died of malaria in the south Pacific; she was buried at sea and has a memorial at Catsfield. Thomas soon married again, to Lady Sybil Capell, daughter of the earl of Essex. His yachting got him into a little more trouble: in the summer of 1914 he sailed to the Kiel Regatta in Germany, only to be arrested for having insufficient proof of identity. *Sunbeam* was used as a hospital ship in the Mediterranean in the first world war, before being given to the Government of India for the same purpose. Brassey sailed it there to hand it over. When he died he was buried at Catsfield like his father, his coffin carried by a farm waggon.

He had been raised to the rank of earl in 1911. By his two wives he had five children who survived childhood.

The eldest, again Thomas, served in the South African War, where he joined the Imperial Yeomanry and ended as the first Civil Commissioner in Pretoria after its capture in 1900. He had the misfortune of being struck by a taxi in Parliament Square on 7 November 1919, only a year after his father's death. Despite an operation he died of his injuries on 12 November at the London residence of his sister Mabelle (Egerton) at 32 Ashley Gardens, close by Westminster Cathedral. The driver, Edward Peacock, bore no guilt for the accident.

There being no son, his titles died with him. His wife Idina, daughter of the Marquess of Abergavenny, gave conspicuous service as a nurse in the first world war when Normanhurst provided a military hospital, and lived to 1951; she died at Park Gate just north of Catsfield village. The local connection continued through the daughters. Mabelle married an Egerton and became châtelaine of Mountfield Court. Muriel married Earl de la Warr, who engaged in a notorious affair with an actress for which she divorced him in 1902. She was a strong supporter of women's rights and a member of the Labour Party. Their son Herbrand became the ninth earl in 1915. Having swiftly left Eton, he joined the Royal Navy and served on minesweepers to the end of the war; he was said to have been the only man ever to have stood on the steps of the throne in the uniform of an able-bodied seaman. He was the first peer to join the Labour Party but followed Ramsay Macdonald in the great split of 1931. He joined the Cabinet in 1937 and was a minister in Churchill's 1951 Government. As a major property owner in Bexhill and as mayor there (like his Brassey father and grandfather before him) he was instrumental in creating the modernist pavilion that bears his name. He lived to 1976.

Marie married a rising Liberal politician named Freeman Freeman-Thomas, who later became Governor-General of Canada and later still Viceroy of India. He was created Marquess of Willington, the last creation of that rank outside the royal family. She died in 1960.

The second son Henry, like the third, became an MP: for Sandwich between 1868 and 1885. In line with his father's calling, he married a woman from George Stephenson's family line. Henry's son, also Henry, bought Apethorpe Hall in north Northamptonshire and became a Conservative MP, being made Lord Brassey of Apethorpe in 1938.

All of the first Thomas's surviving descendants made what would be called 'good marriages', even if Muriel's turned out in the end to be bad.

As to the Brasseys, the name is well-known locally, even if only in street names.

George Kiloh

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See Beauport *article Section O*

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