

RUFFORD

Before 1066 the Saxon manor of Rougford was held by Ulf. William the Conqueror gave it to his nephew Gilbert de Gaunt who married Alice de Montfort. His grandson, also called Gilbert de Gaunt, came from a very wealthy family and owned large areas of land in the East Midlands. In 1141 at the Battle of Lincoln Gilbert was captured by Ranulph de Gernon, Earl of Chester and forced to marry the Earl's niece, Rohese, Countess of Lincoln and Gilbert was created Earl of Lincoln.

Gilbert had been excommunicated by the Pope for burning down Pontefract Priory in the civil war during King Stephen's reign, and now wished to make amends. On July 12 1147 he gave land for the building of the abbey at Rufford which was dedicated to St Mary the Virgin. The hamlets of Rufford and Cratley were moved and the villagers compensated. Some were resettled at Wellow, 2 miles to the east. The monks lived in temporary wooden huts until the stone building was completed about 1170.

Gilbert's charter states: 'Gilbert of Gaunt, Earl of Lincoln, to all his men, and to all children of the holy church, greeting. Know ye me to have given and granted in perpetual alms to the monks of Rievaulx, for the souls of my father and my mother, and for the remission of my sins, the manor of Rufford, and whatsoever I have there in demesnes, to make an abbey of the order of Cistercians, in the honour of our blessed Lady Saint Mary the Virgin, where I will and command that they freely and quietly hold that land, with all the things to the lordship of the said town, in wood and in the plain, in meadows and pastures, mills and waters, ways and paths'.



Extract from
Chapman's map of 1776



The monks' refectory which still
remains at Rufford Abbey

King Stephen, by charter made at Lincoln, and witnessed by the Earl of Arundel and others, confirmed this grant 'made to God, the church of the blessed Mary at Rievaulx and the monks there serving God, of the manor of Rougford, for the soul of my uncle King Henry and other of my ancestors, and for the health of my soul and of Queen Maude my wife, and Eustice my son, and my other children.' King Henry II granted the monks licence to take 'whatever was needful for their own use from the forest; to keep a forester', as in the time of his grandfather Henry I.

The first abbot was Gamellus, who came with 12 monks when the abbey was founded. It was a prosperous monastery and there was a large number of endowments to the abbey. By 1285 it had acquired most of the town of Rotherham in Yorkshire, including 'five mills under one roof'. The abbey also had 21 granges and pasture for over 1,300 sheep. Between 1262 and 1287 7,000 oaks and 1,000 saplings were felled to clear the land for farming.

The monks held a weekly market and fair and had the right to cut and sell trees from the forest. In 1359 they received over £400 from sales of timber.



Seal of the Abbot of Rufford



The Refectory

At the Dissolution of the monasteries, Rufford was visited by Layton and Leigh in 1536. The abbot, Thomas of Doncaster, was given a pension of £25 a year. The abbey had a revenue of £254 6s 8d per year. In 1536 its possessions were leased to Sir John Markham at £22 8s per annum.

This grant was revoked the following year when Henry VIII, in consequence of the parliament of Ireland having settled the estates held by Francis Talbot, the 5th Earl of Shrewsbury upon the crown and 'being unwilling to diminish the honour and dignity of the Earl, granted to him and his heirs all the lands of the Abbey at Rufford'. This exchange was made to reward Francis for helping to suppress the rebellion in the North known as the Pilgrimage of Grace. The grant included '304 acres of arable land, 140 of pastures, 60 acres of meadow and three water mills. Moreover all and singular of our messuages, houses, buildings, tenements, granges, barns, stables, dovecotes, orchards, apple yards, gardens, fish pools, waters, fisheries, land and soil being within the site, circuit and precinct of the said late Abbey'.



Left: The charter of Henry VIII granting Rufford to the Earl of Shrewsbury

Francis Talbot built a hunting lodge at Rufford and in 1540 there was an indenture between him and Thomas Manners, Earl of Rutland, whereby the former left to his son George, Lord Talbot, on his marriage with Gertrude, daughter of the latter, the manor of Rufford, the lordship of Eakring, with lands in Rufford, Eakring and Kyrketon, Notts.



Right: The 6th Earl of Shrewsbury
(Copyright NTPL/John Hammond, Hardwick Hall)



Lady Arbella Stuart aged 23 months by Anon 1577.
(Copyright NTPL/John Hammond, Hardwick Hall)

George Talbot, 6th Earl of Shrewsbury, built a country house on the site. His second wife was widow Elizabeth Cavendish, whom he married in 1567. In the chapel at Rufford in 1574, the Earl Of Lennox, the grandson of Margaret Tudor, sister of Henry VIII and the wife of King James VI of Scotland, married the Countess of Shrewsbury's daughter Elizabeth Cavendish. Their child was Arbella Stuart, born in 1575, who was next in succession to the throne after James I. Arbella married William Seymour, Earl of Hertford, in 1610 and because of her royal lineage, she died in the Tower of London in 1615 and was buried in Westminster Abbey in the tomb of her aunt, Mary Queen of Scots.



Left: Gilbert Talbot.

Right: Mary Talbot his wife
(Copyright NTPL/John Hammond Hardwick Hall)



George Talbot's son Gilbert Talbot, 7th Earl of Shrewsbury, rebuilt the house with projecting north and south wings producing a low H-shaped plan. Gilbert's wife, Mary Cavendish, became a Catholic and is reputed to have hidden papists at Rufford causing the house to be often searched by parties of soldiers. She was imprisoned in the Tower of London and fined £20,000 for helping her niece Arbella to escape to France to join her husband, William Seymour. Mary was allowed out in 1615 when her husband was seriously ill. In 1618 she was sent to the Tower again, this time 'for life' for being 'obstinately Catholic' but was released in 1623 at the age of 70. In 1611 John Holles described the house as 'a confused labyrinth, underneath all vaults, above entries, closets, oratories, many stairs down and up, trap doors to issue forth and trap doors to lead to garrets, so as in my search I was never so puzzled in my life'.



Rufford Abbey

Despite Mary's imprisonment, Thoroton notes: 'This place hath often entertained King James I and King Charles I his son, being very pleasant and commodious for hunting in the forest of Sherwood'.

Lady Mary Talbot, Gilbert's sister, married Sir George Savile of Thornhill, Yorkshire. She inherited Rufford on Gilbert's death in 1616. Sir George Savile died on December 26th 1626 and their son, Sir William Savile, became the 3rd baronet.



Above: Sir William Savile
Right: His wife, Lady Anne Savile



Sir William Savile, a Royalist, was made Governor at York and later Sheffield where he died in 1644. He was married to Lady Anne who was pregnant when she was widowed and caught in the siege of Sheffield Castle by the Roundheads: 'This gallant lady, famous for her warlike actions beyond her sex, had been besieged by the rebels in Sheffield Castle, which they battered on all sides by giant guns, though she was big with child, and had so little regard for her sex, that in that condition they refused a midwife she had sent for, the liberty of going to her'. When she eventually surrendered she marched out of the castle with full military honours, giving birth to her son the following day, and eventually returning to Rufford.

During the Civil War, Rufford was taken by the Parliamentary Troops in August 1644 and held until July 1645. The main home of the Savile family, Thornhill in Yorkshire, was burnt down during a siege in 1648 and Rufford became the family's principal seat.

After the Civil War, her oldest son Sir George, born in 1633, grew up at Rufford and became a member of the Sealed Knot which was a secret central council of seven men including Lord Bellasis, the ex-governor of Newark. Their intention was to bring back the exiled Charles II. They had a network of agents in counties across England who collected money and arms to prepare for an invasion led by the exiled king. Rufford was a centre of the conspiracy and provided a hiding place for arms, horses and men.

On March 8th 1655 300 Royalists gathered at the New Inn at Rufford. George Savile sent horses and arms although he remained discreetly in London. Among those involved were John and Cecil Cooper, Captain John Barker of Hallam, Major Scott, and Thomas and Gregory Baldwin all of Nottingham, Captain Binns of Dodsworth and Colonel Anthony Gilby of Everton. Lord Byron was aware of the meeting but was not present.

The gentlemen went into the inn to discuss their plans while their followers waited on the green outside. At midnight or a little later Captain John Cooper came out, telling the assembly that they were betrayed, and told every man to shift for himself. The intention had been to meet up with an army of Yorkshire royalists and then march north and seize York, but information reached the New Inn during the meeting that the Yorkshire movement had collapsed. Some of the arms were thrown into the neighbouring pond and the men fled.

The authorities were soon aware of the meeting and three troops of Colonel Hacker's horse quickly arrived. Within a few days the Coopers, Captain Barker, Major Scott, Captain Binns and the Baldwins had been traced and arrested and a cartload of arms was found in a barn at Farnsfield. Colonel Gilby was not traced until the beginning of 1656 when he was sent to Nottingham Prison.

Below is a letter to Oliver Cromwell from one of his officers:

'To Cromwell respecting a meeting at Rufford of Royalists and Sir George Savile.

May it please your Highness, upon the first notice that I had from Grantham of the meeting at Rufford, I sent notice of it to Col. Hacker; the Major General's horse at Doncaster; and the High Sheriff of Yorkshire; and there upon divers parties were sent to examine the truth of it; but we could learn nothing; but upon the receipt of your Highness's letter and information, we acted more successfully, and marched that night towards the place, where Captain Needham with two troops of Col. Hacker's Regiment coming first, made a good entrance into the business, and seized divers gentlemen, a list whereof you will see here; and upon examination, we got some further light into the business, the substance whereof is enclosed. We expect Col. Hacker here presently, and we shall use our utmost endeavour to perfect this search to the utmost. We have here two troops of the Major General; two of Col. Hacker; and my own; and for what we hear in Yorkshire we will acquaint Major Goodrige at Doncaster with it and leave it to his care.

Sir George Savile is not at home. We have detained one Mr Coventry, who is Lady Savile's brother, until Sir George shall appear to your Highness. He is said to be in London at his house in Lincoln Inns Field, at the corner of Queen Street, called Carlisle House or Savile House. We can find nothing in his house that gives any light, only we hear that one of his family, Mr Davison, who is tutor to Sir George, was at the meeting, and stayed in the house till after dinner on Friday, and then went away. We cannot yet get him. Both Sir Roger Cooper's sons are absent; one is said to be in London and another in Derbyshire. We hope Col. Hacker has sent to seek him. Tomson of Newark is in London, but expected home suddenly. We hope ere this goes away to give you some account of the pistols. A party has gone to the place where they were left. The carter has at last confessed somewhat fully, and we have promised to befriend him, being a poor fellow. As we get intelligence, we intend to move...'

When King Charles II eventually returned to the throne, Sir George was rewarded by being created Marquis of Halifax in 1685, taking the title Lord Halifax. He had great wealth and the house was extensively rebuilt on the site of the monastery which was demolished in 1679. In 1680 Halifax said, 'I am once more got to my tenement which I had not seen since I had given orders to renew and repair it. It looketh now somewhat better than when you were last here. Poor old Rufford with all its wrinkles hath more charms for me than London can show'. The grounds were also landscaped. Sir George died in 1695. His son William, the 2nd Marquis, died in 1700, leaving no male heirs, so the peerage ended but the baronetcy passed to a cousin John Savile who died in 1704, and then to George Savile, another distant cousin.



George Savile,
1st Marquis of Halifax

Although the family suffered many hardships during the 17th century, account books at Nottingham County Archives studied by A.P. Phillips in Transactions of the Thoroton Society, Volume 63 (1959) show that their standard of living was still high at this time, as the following analysis of what they ate shows:

Game: Heron, goose, seagull, wild goose, moor pullet, rook, shell fowl, sparrow, swan, peacock, thrush, turkey, geese, partridge, woodcock, capons, chicken, hens, pullets, lark, pheasant and teal.

Meat: Bacon, mutton, veal, pork, beef, neat tongues, ox, 'Trent mutton', 'forest mutton', deer, rabbits, calves' heads and feet, and neat tongues.

Fish: Cod, perch, bream, oysters, trout, lampreys, barbell, cheven, scallops, whiting, plaice, mackerel, lobster, eels, brett, sturgeon, crab, herrings, ling, skate, turbot, salmon and tench.

Cheese: Cheddar, Cheshire and Parmesan.

Sugar: loaf, refined, double refined, powdered, sugar fruits, sugar candy, brown sugar candy and candied figs.

Fruit: Apricots, currants, plums, pippins, pears, strawberries, lordlings, codlings, gooseberries, raspberries, pineapples, quinces, grapes and raisins.

Vegetables: Artichokes, salad, onions, peas, carrots, cabbage, parsnips, turnips and potatoes.

Spices: Cinnamon, capers, ginger, nutmeg, pepper and mace.

Herbs: fennel, garlic, hempseed, purslane, samphire, tansy and spring herbs.

Drink: Beer, sack, claret, muscatel, Canary, Rhenish, sherry, mead, cider, Champagne, Malaga, hock, porter, Bordeaux, Burgundy, Chablis, Thiers, Moselle, parish wine and Portugal wine.

Flowers, to decorate the house: boughs of flowers for the chamber, fresh flowers, nosegays, roses and gilly flowers, boughs of holly and ivy at Christmas.

Sir George Savile, the 7th Baronet, built a bathhouse and a garden pavilion in 1729 when swimming baths were a rarity. It was designed by John Hallam. The original swimming bath included a pair of towers, a portico with columns and pilasters, and a fountain. From the bathhouse Sir George built a canal to the southern boundary of the park. He died in 1749. His son, also Sir George Savile, the 8th Baronet, who was Member of Parliament for Yorkshire from 1759 to 1783, planted vast areas of the estate with trees and created the lake. He died unmarried in 1784 and was the last of the male line.



Above: The lake about 1780

Right: Sir George Savile, 8th Baronet, by Benjamin Wilson



Rufford was inherited by Richard Lumley-Savile, 6th Earl of Scarborough, son of the 8th Baronet's sister, Barbara, Countess of Scarborough. When Richard died in 1832, Rufford passed to his younger brother John, Rector of Thornhill, an unpopular man known as Black Jack who died in 1835. His son, John Lumley-Savile, the 8th Earl of Scarborough, made elaborate improvements and additions to Rufford using architect Anthony Salvin who also designed the rebuilding of nearby Thoresby Hall.



John Lumley Savile,
8th Earl of Scarborough



Anthony Salvin's Tudor style entrance

Before this the building was in bad repair. The Duke of Newcastle visited Lord Scarborough in 1837 and wrote 'He is making thorough alterations and repairs there, and not before they are wanted, for every piece of wood appears to be as rotten as tinder'.

The new house had an imposing Tudor style entrance porch on the west front with steps, a balustraded causeway, and a clock tower and bell cupola on the south front. The coach house, brew house and water tower also belong to this period. In the grounds the Earl created the lime tree avenue, the great gates and lodges.



Left and below left:
The house after
Salvin's restoration



The Great Gates

The 8th Earl rescued a young French girl called Agnes from drowning in the London Serpentine and fell in love with her. He brought her back to Rufford but they never married although they had five sons and one daughter together. The Earl died in 1856.

Although the earldom could not be passed down, the Earl's third son, Henry, inherited Rufford. He was a breeder of racehorses including Cremorne, the Derby winner in 1872. He was a close friend of The Prince of Wales, later King Edward VII, who often stayed at Rufford to attend the races at Doncaster. Henry never married and in 1881 the property passed to his younger brother, Augustus William Savile. Augustus also died unmarried in 1887 and his heir was his eldest brother John.



Statuette of Cremorne

Edwin Eddison describes Rufford in 1854:

'The Drawing Room, whose walls are of panelled crimson damask flowered in silver, the intervals or spaces being white and gold, is one of the most elegant we have seen.

Several of the rooms are hung with ancient tapestry. The servants' vaulted hall, may have been a portion of the Abbey as it originally stood... each Christmas Day it serves good purpose now: the retainers and tradesmen assemble in it in goodly numbers, sometimes to the extent of from two to three hundred, and with smoking board, blazing fire and a mighty jug of nut brown, bid rubicund defiance to all wintry storms and snow without.'



The servants quarters in the abbey refectory in 1854

‘The ‘Brick Hall’ which has recently been restored, or rather refitted, is of the date of Elizabeth, and is after the style of those old baronial apartments where lords and retainers took their repast from the same hospitable table, the only distinction being that the host and his friends were seated on a slightly raised dais, at the principal end of the room.’

‘The Park is well wooded and comprises an extent of about 1400 acres. Its lake is embosomed in wood and abounds with waterfowl. The situation of the house is extremely sequestered, being literally embowered in large elm, beech and sycamore trees’.



Above and below left: the Brick Hall

Robert White wrote about Rufford in his book ‘Worksop, The Dukeries and Sherwood Forest’, published 1875:



‘In the entrance hall a beautifully carved oaken screen bears the motto ‘Mura aeneus conscientia sana’ and abounds with rich Elizabethan tracery, shields, ribands, grotesque masks and bold projecting mouldings... There is the richly-carved chimney piece of Caen stone bearing the family arms surmounted by elegant carvings of masks, tracery, finials etc. Then there is the open timbered roof, the spacious music gallery, the raised dais – the floor of tinted brick, in mosaic devices, and the fine mellow tone of the oak panelling.’



The Staircase

The drawing room is elegantly and profusely decorated with carvings of flowers, medallions, ribands, and wreaths in white and gold. The walls are hung with costly crimson silk embroidered with flowers in white silk, panelled with carved gold frames, enriched cornices, splendid furniture, elaborate needlework and numerous articles of taste and elegance.’

'The chapel, in its present shape, was fitted up in the time of Charles II... The peculiarly carved finials on the seats are deserving of notice. In the Gallery, or part devoted to the ladies, the walls are covered with a very rare old gilded and embossed leather, and the numerous folio of prayer books here bear the date 1659.'



The Chapel

Another description in 1881 comes from 'The Great Houses of Nottinghamshire' by Leonard Jacks:

'The brick hall is an interesting curiosity. It gets its name from the floor, which is of plain red brick, polished and very pleasant to walk upon. ... The cases of stuffed birds, a miniature billiard table, and a really handsome modern screen of polished wood richly carved ... the quaint old chests, the queer little imps of stone, who start from the walls and the deep old-fashioned casements.'



The Long Gallery



The Library

'The principal room is the long gallery, 114 feet long and 36 feet wide, which is now in a somewhat tumbled state. The late Mrs Savile seems to have had a liking for private theatricals, and the long gallery not very long ago was fitted with a stage, and those accessories necessary for the production of plays. The flood of sunshine admitted when one of the shutters is unfastened, is insufficient to light up the whole of this long apartment, and it brings to view a very handsome chimney piece, with some fine carving, and a number of pictures.'



Two of the Bedrooms

'The most interesting part of modern Rufford is to be found upstairs. Here there are great suites of rooms hung with tapestry – pictures on canvas, wonderful works of art wrought by delicate fingers, and displaying an industry and patience which does not belong to these modern times. There is a sombre indescribable kind of appearance in all tapestried rooms, and here in the State bed room, where George the Fourth once slumbered, with its sumptuous hangings of pale yellow silk and canopy of honeycomb work just a trifle faded... There is a rare succession of these tapestried bed rooms, with their elaborately carved bed furniture and rich hangings, with the family arms emblazoned in needlework at the back of the bed'

'The tapestry for the most part is in an excellent state of preservation. The subjects are chiefly scriptural, and there are one or two scenes from the early history of Rome, and some forest scenery in olive green. The house contains an immense number of rooms, and from the windows of those in the upper portion, charming woodland views are obtainable.'



A tapestry at Rufford



Rufford in 1907

Sir John Savile was a diplomat and British Ambassador to Rome where he became interested in archaeology. He was created 1st Baron Savile in 1888 in recognition of his work and also made a Knight of the Grand Cross of the Order of the Bath. He turned the old bathhouse into an Orangery where amongst exotic plants he could display the classical sculpture he had collected when abroad. The fountain on the south front of the Orangery is a replica of a Roman lamp excavated by Lord Savile at the Temple of Diana at Nemi in Italy.



John Savile, 1st Baron Savile
by F. Corbould



The Fountain

The stable block, originally built about 1660, was altered in 1890 when Lord Savile re-roofed it and placed the finials of mythical birds and beasts on the gables and his coat of arms over the two entrances. The cast iron rainwater spout with the Savile family owl emblem embossed on it dates from the same time. In 1980 the building was converted into a craft centre.

In 1896, Rufford passed to Lord Savile's nephew, John Savile Lumley Savile. John's son George, 3rd Baron Savile, born in 1919, was still a minor when his father died in 1931. His trustees sold off the estate which comprised 18,730 acres including the house, its contents, 500 acres of deer park, 70 farms, 2,000 acres of woodland, four pubs and many smallholdings and cottages. Sir Albert Ball, former Lord Mayor of Nottingham, bought the estate as a speculative venture and sold it off in small lots. Henry Talbot de Vere Clifton bought the house and its grounds with the intention of building a housing development, which was never begun.

In the Second World War Rufford was taken over by the army, and much of the original woodland was felled. Nottinghamshire County Council bought the estate in 1956. The north and east wings were pulled down and the rest placed under the care of the Department of Ancient Monuments. It became a Country Park in 1969. The lake was affected by coal mining subsidence and was repaired and restored by the County Council in the 1970s, when silt from dredging the lake was used to form new islands. The paths and bridges were put in at this time. In 1990 English Heritage restored part of the Cistercian Abbey.



Excavations by English Heritage



Sculpture in Rufford Country Park

Rufford Country Park is run by Nottinghamshire County Council and is open to the public. Rufford Country Park, Ollerton, Nottinghamshire, NG22 9DF. Tel: 01623 822944. Fax: 01623 825919. www.Nottinghamshire.gov.uk/home/leisure/countryparks/rufford

Rufford can be reached by public transport. Telephone the 'Traveline Number' on 0870 608 2 608 (Minicom 0870 241 2 216) for up to date information. Year-round programme of events and activities. School parties and other groups by arrangement. Corporate and special events catered for.

Opening Details: Every day between 10.30 and 17.00 (10.30 and 16.00 January & February). Full details of the opening times of visitor facilities are displayed on site. They can also be obtained by calling (01623) 822944.

Wheelchair access to most buildings and surfaced paths throughout Rufford. Wheelchair loan service available. Disabled toilet facilities

Source material

Where Truth Abides by John Fletcher, published by Country Books, 2001

Rufford Past and Present published by Nottinghamshire County Council, 1980

Worksop, the Dukeries and Sherwood Forest by Robert White, published 1875

Dukeries Records by Robert White, published 1906.

The History of Worksop by Edwin Eddison, published in 1854 by Longman and Co

Great Houses of Nottinghamshire by Leonard Jacks, published in 1881

Rufford, Abbey and Country House, published by Nottinghamshire County Leisure Services, 1992. ISBN 0 900943 351

Nottinghamshire in the Civil War by Alfred C. Wood, published by SR Publishers Ltd, 1971, first published 1937.

Bess of Hardwick by Mary S. Lovell published by Abacus in 2005

Transactions of the Thorton Society, Volume 63 1959. (A.P. Phillips)

Picture Credits

6th Earl of Shrewsbury. By permission of the National Trust. (Copyright NTPL/John Hammond, Hardwick Hall)

Gilbert Talbot 7th Earl of Shrewsbury. By permission of the National Trust Copyright NTPL/John Hammond Hardwick Hall)

Mary Talbot wife of the 7th Earl of Shrewsbury. By permission of the National Trust (Copyright NTPL/John Hammond Hardwick Hall.)

Lady Arbella Stuart aged 23 months by Anon 1577. By permission of the National Trust (Copyright NTPL/John Hammond, Hardwick Hall)

Other Savile family portraits by permission of Lord Savile, Gryce Hall.

Other images are from Bassetlaw Museum Photographic Archive.