



CONSERVATION AREA HISTORIES:

BRETBY

DISTRICT OF SOUTH DERBYSHIRE



The name Bretby - “farm of the Britons” – is of Danish origin. It probably refers to the Britons who accompanied the Danish invaders in their settlements, as the indigenous Britons would have been displaced by the Anglo Saxon conquest centuries before. The presence of several Danish placenames in the area is not surprising, as the Danes overwintered at nearby Repton in 874 and there is a well-known Danish barrow cemetery in Heath Wood at Ingleby.

At Domesday Bretby belonged to the Crown, but in 1209 it was granted by the Earl of Chester to Stephen de Segrave, a highly successful man and one of Henry III’s financial reformers. His great grandson John obtained a licence to fortify his house at Bretby in 1301, thus making it a castle.

In 1353, the marriage of Elizabeth de Segrave took the manor of Bretby into the Mowbray family. It eventually descended, again by marriage, to Henry, Lord Berkeley, who married Jane Stanhope of Shelford Priory in Nottinghamshire. Jane’s brother Thomas Stanhope purchased the manor and castle of Bretby for £2,500 in 1585. The purchase was subject to a 41 year lease held by John Mee, agent of the Berkeley estate, which expired in 1610. The Stanhopes owned the Bretby Estate until 1915.

The village lies close to the busy A511 and the urban areas of Burton and Swadlincote, but preserves a surprisingly quiet, retired character. The conservation area has two main elements – the village (including the castle earthworks), and part of the Park (including the Hall). The wider setting of the park and village remains unspoilt and is one of the District’s most attractive areas of rural landscape.

Bretby village is a small, thinly developed linear settlement, on a hillside site. Hollow ways, with some evidence of abandoned building plots and

crofts, show that it is smaller than it once was. In 1790, Stebbing Shaw observed old walls, foundations and wells showing that the village had been larger. The decline of the village may have been hastened by the creation and development of the park from the early 17th century onwards. The park may have engulfed former arable lands for conversion to pasture, less intensively farmed.

The remains of the Segrave's fortified house or castle at Bretby **(3)** survive as an area of impressive earthworks, now a Scheduled Ancient Monument, at the heart of the conservation area. The Segrave's main seat was in Northamptonshire, but by the mid 13th century they owned land in several counties. Bretby may have become their main northern home. The Castle was still standing in the reign of Queen Elizabeth I when it was the home of John Mee, lessee of the estate, and his wife.

The stone from the castle was reputedly used by Philip Stanhope to build the first Bretby Hall after the expiry of the lease to John Mee. Some standing remains were noted by the Derbyshire historian Woolley in the early 18th century, but by 1789 the castle was reduced to earthworks. The site was investigated shortly afterwards by Charles Burton, steward to the Earl of Chesterfield. He noted that the castle had been large and strong, arranged around two courtyards. Burton's work is sometimes described as an excavation, but Lysons History of Derbyshire says that Burton took up the foundations of the walls, suggesting that he was simply robbing the remains for building purposes. This seems more plausible, and raises the interesting possibility that the Home Farm buildings of c1800, next to the castle site **(1)** and partly demolished in 1969, could have been built from re-worked castle stone. Farey, writing in 1813, noted that the Home Farm buildings were "of hewn stone, obtained near the spot". They were very extensive, and were acclaimed as "one of the most complete Farming Establishments in all this part of England, perhaps".

The church, off the village green **(4)**, began as a chapel of ease to the parish church of Repton. Like Repton Church, it was dedicated to St. Wystan. It is first mentioned in 1228 and was no doubt built by the Segrave family. Burial rights were jealously guarded by parish churches, but Bretby had its own cemetery before the Reformation. Prior to rebuilding in 1876-8, the church was a modest, ivy-covered structure with a wooden bell turret at the west end.



Bretby Church, rebuilt 1876-8.

The Green is flanked by two former school buildings, for girls **(7)** on the west side and for boys **(8)** on the east side. The two schools were merged in 1876, when the former boys' school was enlarged to cater for both sexes and the girls' school became a house. The boys' school, originally built in 1806, closed in 1969. Originally, the two school buildings were of a similar design, with a two storey central section flanked by single storey wings. North of the former girls school is an attractive pair of cottages with gothic glazing and tiled eyebrow windows, dated 1824 **(6)**.

The buildings of the village do not observe strict uniformity in their detailing, but the early 19th century buildings have features in common which mark them out as members of the same "family". These include hipped and half-hipped roofs, use of datestones, and a tendency towards a lightly gothic treatment of window openings shown by the occasional use of hoodmoulds and decorative glazing patterns. Many of these buildings are believed to be the work of William Martin, the Bretby Estate's own architect and builder who designed and built the Home Farm. On the exterior walls of some buildings, remnants of limewash cling to sheltered areas of brickwork, evidence of an old tradition long discontinued.

The house nearest the church **(5)** seems later 19th century in date, now much extended. The ground storey is of stone, which looks re-used, while the upper storey was once decorated with false timber framing in a herringbone pattern. The picturesque composition of the Green is completed by the war memorial **(9)**, unveiled by Herbert Wragg in 1922, and a red telephone box **(10)**. East of the Green, complete 19th century rebuildings are less numerous, though the houses flanking the entrance to "The Square" are again in the estate style **(12)**, the pair on the right being dated 1824.



A cottage (now demolished) by the lowest pond in the park.

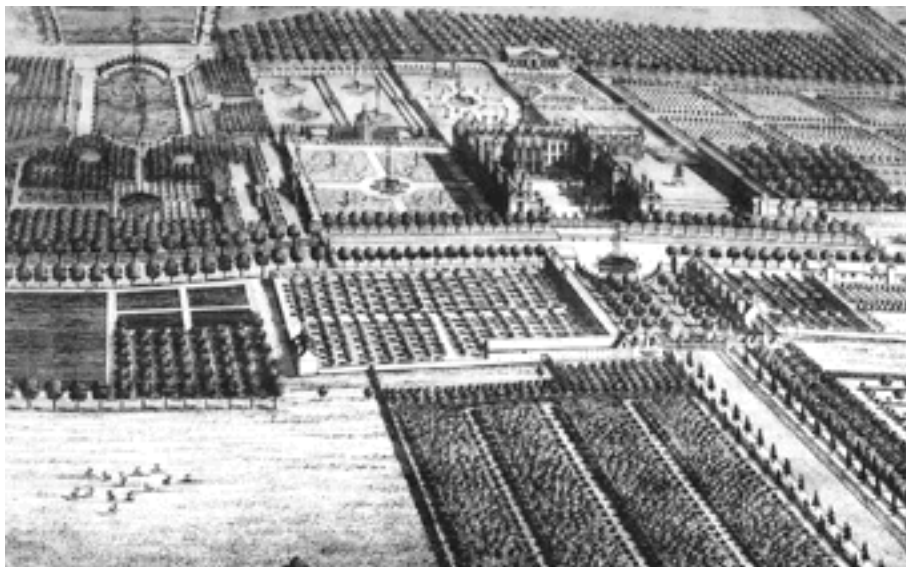
Bretby's golden age began in 1610, when Philip Stanhope took possession of Bretby and decided to make it his principal seat instead of Shelford Priory. He obtained permission from King James I to enclose a park at Bretby as a setting for a grand new house, and the chain of six ponds in the park probably dates from this period. The new house **(15)**, completed by about 1639 and demolished in 1781, faced south-west and was built round three sides of a square. The projecting front wings may have contained suites of lodgings to accommodate guests. A lavish chapel projecting from the eastern corner, finished in 1696, partially enclosed a secondary court to the south east. The renowned Bretby Cedar **(18)**, believed to be the oldest survivor of the species in Britain, was planted in this court early in 1677. It was felled in 1954.

The first Earl's grandson, also Philip, took possession of the estate as Second Earl in 1660, when Charles II was restored to the throne following the

Commonwealth period. After his third marriage in 1669, he devoted his life to the improvement of the Hall and gardens at Bretby, using the French architect Louis Le Vau.

The third Earl also spent much of his time at Bretby, but the popularity of Bretby ended with his death in 1726. The 4th Earl (died 1773) did not care for Bretby and upon his death the title passed to Philip (1755-1815), a great-great-grandson of the 11th son of the first Earl. He was 18 years old when he succeeded to the estates as 5th Earl in 1773. Shortly after his marriage in 1777 he decided to demolish the mansion in Bretby Park. The Derby Mercury of 6th April 1781 heralded its doom in an advertisement beginning: "To Be Sold. All the building materials of Bratby Hall & chapel near Burton on Trent ...", listing the sumptuous marble, tapestry and carvings that were to be dispersed. It is said that the Earl was encouraged to undertake this act of vandalism by his steward, who reasoned that the house was in need of expensive repairs and that a handsome profit could be reaped by selling the materials.

The magnificent gardens at Bretby, among the very finest in the country, were destroyed at the same time as the house. They had been completed less than eighty years before. Many fine trees in the park were felled as well. The Derbyshire historian Pilkington, writing in 1789, noted that "Bretby Hall was situated in a pleasant park. But a considerable quantity of timber having been lately cut down, the views and walks have lost some part of their beauty". Writing around the same time, Stebbing Shaw noted that the banks of the valley in the Park "were clothed with fine timber till the American war caused them to be felled". These expressions of regret were eventually shared by the Earl of Chesterfield himself, who was responsible for the depredations in the first place. In their heyday around 1700, the gardens fascinated all that saw them. The tourist Celia Fiennes, the diarist Cassandra Willoughby and historian William Wolley noted the varied features. They included an orangery, teahouse, aviary, labyrinths and groves, "carpet walks" and particularly impressive waterworks. Celia Fiennes mentions four levels of sunken gardens, and a hydraulic clock that chimed "Lilibulero", a well known country dance tune. The waterworks were by Grillet, a Frenchman, who also worked at Chatsworth alongside the architect William Talman.



Bretby Park. A birds eye view, published in 1707.

Archival evidence for the creation of the gardens is lacking, but Lysons obtained some details from the Earl of Chesterfield's steward Charles Burton. According to Burton, the waterworks were constructed between 1684 and 1702, but improvements to the formal landscape of the park appear to have continued well into the 18th century. According to John Farey writing in the early 19th century, many of the fine trees and avenues in the park were carefully planted around 1735 during the time of the 4th Earl, which is surprising as he showed little interest in Bretby and was not brought up there. He described it as "the seat of horror and despair where no creatures save ravens and screech owls seem willingly to dwell".

After all the depredations of the late 18th century, it is a surprise to find that John Farey remained full of praise for Bretby's large and fine trees in the early 19th century, singling out the beech, elm, horse chestnut, lime, oak, plane, Scotch fir and Spanish chestnut. (Agriculture & Minerals of Derbyshire, 1811-1817).

Thanks to an early 18th century engraving by the Dutchmen Kip and Kniff (published in "Britannia Illustrata" 1707), we can visualise Bretby as it was 300 years ago. The engraving shows the house with the famous waterworks to its north, still traceable as dried dams and terraces in Philosopher's Wood **(16)**. There is another breached dam further west **(11)**, outside the scope of the engraving. The engraving does not show the southern part of the park, but the boldest feature of it was clearly the "several fine avenues of trees leading to the house" mentioned by the Derbyshire historian Wolley in 1712. Some of the avenues survived to be recorded on the 1st edition Ordnance Survey, and fragments still remain today. Field boundary alignments hint that there was a formal arrangement of avenues, fanning out from the house as one would expect, but possibly asymmetrical owing to the lie of the land. A grand avenue of Spanish Chestnuts, that formed a vista from the Hall to the Ashby Road, was felled as recently as 1940.



Bretby Hall from the south in 1806.

The "desert period" in the history of Bretby, following the demolition of the original Hall, did not last long, as the new Earl soon developed a fondness for it. During the 1780s a new building was added to the south end of a surviving range of 17th century outbuildings, as a house for Charles Burton the steward, but by 1798 the Earl had started to occupy the house himself. Three sketches of this "interim" Hall, made 1798-1807, survive in the Shirley of Ettington papers in the Warwickshire Record Office.

The Earl's new-found enthusiasm for Bretby was reflected by improvements in the park. A public road **(19, 19)** at the bottom of the park, passing by the present house known as "Bretby Park", was closed in 1805 and replaced by a new road, which is now the eastern part of Watery Lane. The old road is still a bridleway. The

land between the new and old routes was taken into the park and Repton Lodge (**21**) was built at the new park corner. Rebuilding of estate property was also put in hand around the same time, and 34,690 yards of drains were made in the park between 1800 and 1806, some of them 14 feet deep.



The Repton Lodge, built around 1805.

Francis Blaikie, agent at Bretby in the early 19th century, was very keen on forestry, including hedgerow and farm clump trees. His pamphlet called the “Farmer’s Instructor, for the planting and management of Forest Trees” was published at the Earl’s expense and a copy given to every tenant. It seems likely that the fine stand of hardwood trees on Bretby Mount (**2**), completely felled since the 1970s, was replanted as a result of Blaikie’s enthusiasm.

Once the 5th Earl was living at Bretby, it was not long before plans for a grand new Hall (**17**) were being considered, incorporating the existing buildings. Designs were prepared in 1812-13 by James Wyatt. When he died in 1813 his nephew Jeffry inherited the commission, perhaps superseding his uncle’s plans. The Earl’s own architect-builder William Martin supervised the execution of the work and contributed to the design. The Earl’s death in 1815 slowed down the progress of the work and some branches of it were discontinued. An elaborate design exhibited by Samuel Beazley in 1838, for a boudoir over the gatehouse in the south-west range, was never implemented. The Hall was ultimately left incomplete and remains so to this day. How much of the Hall was designed by the Wyatts is not known. Jeffry Wyatt’s obituary of 1840 (by which time he was known as Wyattville) said he was only responsible for “parts of the house”.

Bretby remained the family seat of the Earls of Chesterfield until the death of the 6th Earl’s widow in 1885. The estate then passed to her grandson Lord Porchester, who became 5th Earl of Caernarvon in 1890 and had his principal seat at Highclere Castle in Berkshire. He visited Bretby regularly until the estate was sold in 1915. Meanwhile, he demolished the old stables and brewhouse (**14**) near the Hall, which had probably belonged to the original Hall and are shown on the Kip/Knyff engraving. New stables (**13**) were built opposite the walled gardens, now converted into dwellings. After Bretby was sold, the 5th Earl made history as the man who financed the excavations leading to the discovery of Tutankhamen’s tomb in 1922.

At the 1915 sale, most of the Bretby estate was bought by John Downing Wragg (d1917), a Derbyshire industrialist. In the Swadlincote area, Wragg owned one of the largest salt-glazed pipeworks and also made fire bricks and refractories. His descendant Mr. Richard Perkins still lives on the estate, in an old house formerly known as the Keepers Cottage and afterwards as the Dower House. This house **(20)** has been known as “Bretby Park” since it was remodelled and enlarged in 1988 under the direction of Digby Harris of Stroud, Nullis and Partners of Chester.

Bretby Hall was sold on to Derbyshire County Council in 1919 for use as an orthopaedic hospital, opening in 1926. As time passed, ancillary buildings were built in the grounds close by. The Hospital was taken over by the National Health Service in 1948 and finally closed in 1997 as a result of Health Service reorganisation. It has since been converted into apartments, with new build blocks replacing the former ancillary buildings.

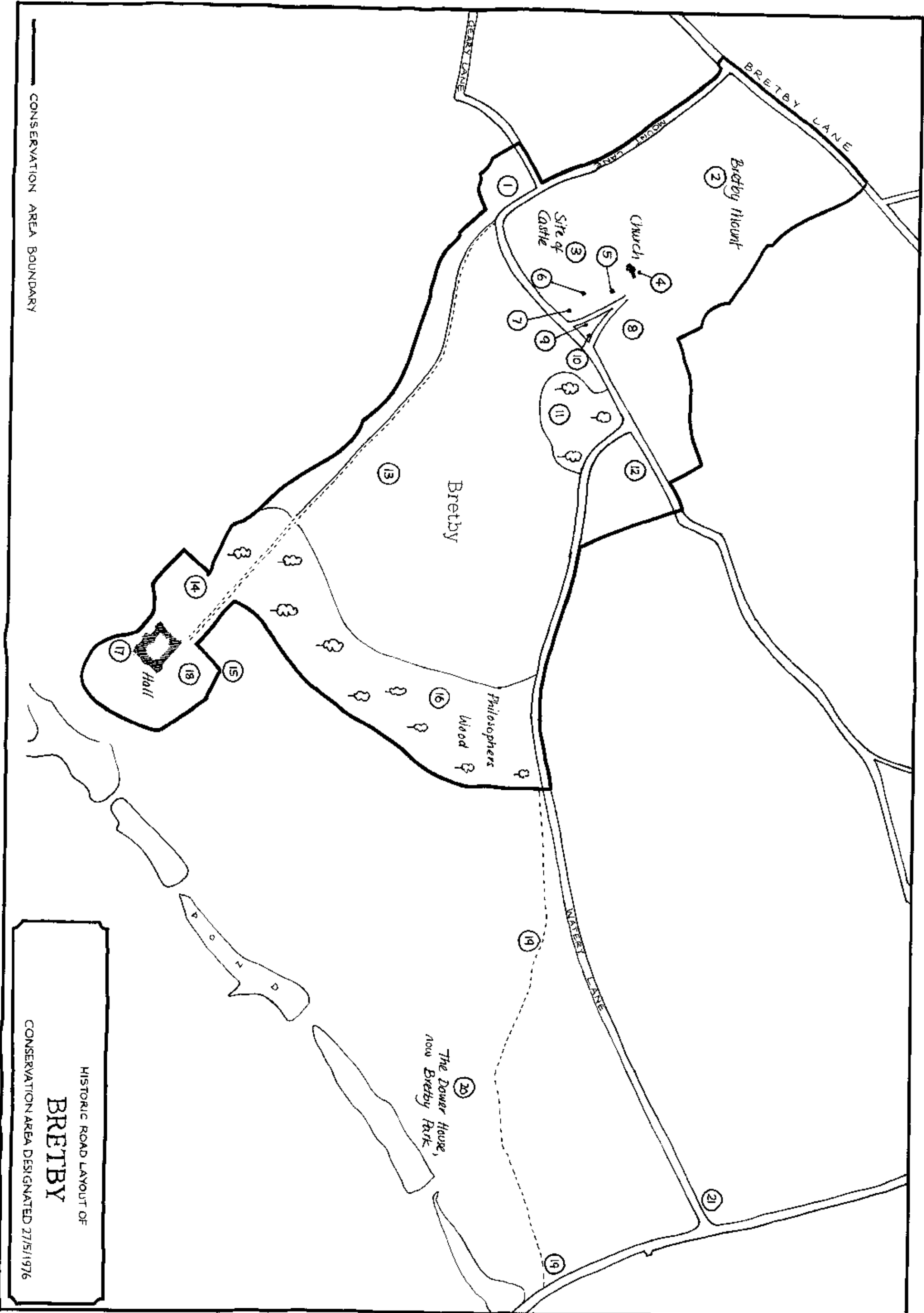
The deer in the park were killed off in 1916, and during the First World War much of the valuable parkland timber was felled. Still more trees were felled during the Second World War, when the southern part of the park was converted to arable land. Fortunately, despite all the merciless onslaughts during its long history, the park remains very attractive. It is no longer well wooded but, as Stebbing Shaw noted, the terrain is pleasantly undulating, “formed by nature with much variety to please”.

Philip Heath, with thanks to Howard Usher.

Pictures courtesy of the “Magic Attic”, Swadlincote, except the drawing of Bretby Hall in 1806, which is by courtesy of the Warwickshire County Record Office, ref CR2131/18.

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CONSERVATION AREA BOUNDARY

HISTORIC ROAD LAYOUT OF
BRETBY
 CONSERVATION AREA DESIGNATED 27/5/1976