

DECKER HILL – Article by Gareth Williams the curator of Weston Park, published in the August 2007 Issue of the Shropshire Magazine

Decker Hill stands as one of Shropshire's architectural mysteries. A handsome classical Regency house, with a distinguished provenance in terms of ownership, the mansion is today the busy clubhouse for Shifnal Golf Club – whose home it has been since 1964. One would think, in view of the importance of some of its occupants, that record would have been made as to who had been the architect of the house but, alas, this does not seem to be the case.

Essentially the house is a large classical block, weighted down by a long service wing which stretches back into shrubberies. Suavely stuccoed, and now painted a brilliant white the entrance front has its recessed entrance embraced by two giant Ionic columns which are set *in antis* – flush with the front wall. Together with the deep eaves of the roof line, the sharp lines of the steps which extend along the entrance front and the incised pilasters to each side of the entrance front, this is an handsome and sophisticated design. One would not really have expected anything else from the client for whom this front appears to have been created in 1810. William Botfield (d.1840), whose seat Decker Hill then was, was the rich son of Thomas Botfield an industrialist, a successful entrepreneur who had died in 1801. A mixture of enterprises had generated a significant income for Botfield, which included paper mills at Hopton Wafers and also the development of the Lightmoor Ironworks. Coal mining, too, had brought him wealth, through the exploitation of coal at Old Park and the Clee Hills of Shropshire in addition to owning mines in Staffordshire and at Hawarden in Flintshire. The fruits of industry for Botfield senior had been the build up of great estates in Shropshire centred on Hopton Court at Hopton Wafers, and he also owned the Norton estate in Northamptonshire and a Welsh property in Breconshire at Ystrad-Fawr. These properties ultimately passed to his three sons, Thomas, William and Beriah. Thomas inherited Hopton Court, which John Nash was to alter for him in 1811-13; William built a small house to the north of Clun called Shadwell to designs by John Carline of Shrewsbury, whilst Beriah succeeded to the Northamptonshire property at Norton.

Each brother also inherited a share of the industrial empire that their father had created, with William Botfield managing the Old Park works which then traded as T.W. & B. Botfield. Botfield was not a “hands on” manager though, with Gilbert Gilpin, the man who was employed to re-organised the Old Park Forges at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries considering leaving the business owing to the distance set by the Botfields between him. Gilpin told William Wiliknson in 1807 that William Botfield “would take no part in any business and is the least pleasant of any of he three brothers”. Whether true or not, Botfield's wealth was increasing, standing at more than £13,000 in 1806 and growing with the company's expansion.

To be close to his industrial links, William Botfield had a house at Malins Lee, but in 1810 he appears to have decided to move further from his industrial interests with the purchase of Decker Hill. The naturally elevated site of the house, offered – as it still does today – striking views out to the Shropshire hills and yet, being situated just to the north

of Shifnal Decker Hill was well positioned for visits to the Old Park works and for other travel routes that Botfield might have needed.

His was not the first building on the site. A house had existed at Decker Hill since at least 1727 when James Aaron the elder owned a property there. After various exchanges, the place was purchased in 1784 by the Hon. T. Fitzwilliam, a younger son of the Earl Fitzwilliam of Milton in Northamptonshire. He is recorded as having made alterations to the house, which may have included parts of the current north front of the house, and it was Fitzwilliam who is credited with naming the place "Decker Hill".

Botfield's remodelling included the entrance front of the house, with its great Grinshill stone columns and most of the main rooms. The entrance door, set beneath a broad fanlight, leads into a small entrance vestibule which, in turn, opens into the dramatic top lit staircase hall. The staircase, with a balustrade punctuated by gilded patera, climbs around three sides of the well, with a glazed circular lantern, filling the well with light. In Botfield's time, the dining room was to the left of the hall, its ornamented plaster frieze decorated with vine trails, whilst behind this and with views across the park to the hills, was his library. The drawing room was on the opposite side of the hall to the dining room and enjoyed views of the garden through the windows of its bowed end. Who was his architect though? Could it have been John Carline of Shrewsbury, who had designed Shadwell for him? The house's entrance front has similarities with Aston Hall near Oswestry, which James Wyatt had design for the Rev. John Lloyd in the 1780s and which also has the giant Ionic columns set in antis, but Decker Hill has an altogether different, lighter feel. John Nash, who worked for Botfield's brother at Hopton Court, is also suggested in the great fanlight, but the surviving internal details do not hold out much evidence of his style. Edward Haycock of Shrewsbury is a possibility, since the altar-like gate finials and the single storey lodges are similar to his work elsewhere, yet the attribution to him stumbles with the monumental entrance to the house which is unlike any of his known works. Botfield's papers might shed some light on the house's architect but at present their whereabouts is unknown. On William Botfield's death his nephew, Beriah Botfield of Norton in Northamptonshire, succeeded to his share in the business and he ultimately left his estates to the Marquess of Bath of Longleat, believing the Botfield family to hold a strong kinship with that family.

The representation of the Botfield family ultimately passed to Rev. William Garnett of Haughton Hall in Cheshire, who assumed the additional surname of Botfield in 1863 and who also succeeded to Decker Hill. The family gave up the property and in the early twentieth century the house became the residence of one of the younger sons of the Forester family from Willey Park, the Hon. F.H.C. Weld-Forester (d.1952). The house was eventually bought by R.G. Murphy of Wrekin Breweries and he, in 1963, sold Decker Hill to Shifnal Golf Club. The Golf Club were looking for a new site after their original lease at Lodge Hill came close to termination and so Decker Hill proved the ideal new location, with the house becoming the club house. The park's mature trees were thereafter supplemented by new plantings under the direction of the golf course architects Ken Cotton and Frank Pennink, the figures on the course still surveyed by a domed

temple, high up in the shrub walk above the house, which may date from William Botfield's Regency landscaping of the park.