

The Chief Executive,  
RMBC.

Dear

**Wentworth Woodhouse**

I have been requested by the Executive Committee to write to you to express the Society's concern at the lack of any positive future being established for Wentworth Woodhouse, the former country seat of the Earls Fitzwilliam.

Rumours are currently circulating within the Wentworth area that the present owner of the property is unable to adequately finance the restoration of this important part of the nation's heritage. Press reports have also focussed upon the owner's efforts to limit public access even though public footpaths run through the area.

At the very least the Council has a statutory duty to ensure the protection of the main mansion and stable block (Grade 1 listing) and the 16 other ancillary buildings and structures listed Grade II.

Equally important the Council continues to overlook the immense potential of this real 'Jewel in the Crown' in contributing to the growth of tourism in the Borough. There are undeniable problems to be overcome in encouraging more tourists into the area whilst respecting the needs and feelings of the residents of Wentworth village.

The ongoing decline of Wentworth Woodhouse can be starkly contrasted with the Wentworth Castle estate in Barnsley. This country house, similarly used as a college, and declared surplus to requirements under a Government reorganisation of teacher training, has undergone a remarkable restoration and rebirth under the auspices of Barnsley Borough Council.

I recognise that you have only recently taken up your post at the Borough Council, and will not be familiar with Wentworth Woodhouse. I have accordingly included overleaf a summary of Wentworth Woodhouse's history since the Second World War.

Yours sincerely,

Secretary.

## **Wentworth Woodhouse:**

### **A Brief History**

Country Life magazine in January 1999 stated that. *It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of Wentworth Woodhouse. In architectural terms, it is one of the half dozen most important English 18<sup>th</sup> century houses.....The interiors are the finest of all the Georgian era and span the whole of the 18<sup>th</sup> century....*

It has the longest frontage (606 feet) of any English country house. Originally it was set within an estate of 22,000 acres.

### **Opencast Coal extraction:**

From March 1943 onwards over 1.7m tons of coal was extracted from over 100 separate sites around the mansion and variously reported as extending to between 500 and 1,700 acres. The continuation of opencasting, commenced at a time of wartime emergency, caused a split in the Cabinet in January 1946 with Lewis Silkin, Minister for Town and Country Planning, arguing that further opencasting *would involve the destruction of one of the finest pieces of planned landscape in the country.*

The opencast coal extraction works was one of the contributing factors in the Earl Fitzwilliam moving his main residence to his other estate at Milton near Peterborough.

### **Lady Mabel Teacher Training College:**

In 1947 it was announced that with the Earl's removal to Milton, most of the contents would be auctioned. Twenty six rooms in the west wing were to be retained by the Earl as an autumn retreat. The rest was to be leased to the West Riding County Council for a period of fifty years for use as a teacher training college. Accordingly the College occupied the major part of the mansion, most of the stable block and riding school, and around 50 acres of the grounds on a long term care and maintenance basis.

The mansion and stable block were listed Grade 1 in April 1952.

In 1972 extensions including new teaching accommodation, halls of residence and a swimming pool were built at a cost of £500,000. The WRCC entered into a 250 year lease at this time.

Upon Local Government Reorganisation in 1974 the lease was assigned to Rotherham Borough Council. Later the same year the Council agreed to lease the remaining administrative accommodation in the riding school providing exclusive use of the entire complex apart from the 26 rooms retained by the Earl.

In summer 1975 it was being actively promoted by the College as a holiday base for amateur sportsmen. It was also being used by the Council for management training and conferences.

This ceased when, in 1977, the Government promoted the merger of the College with the Sheffield City Polytechnic as part of a planned reduction in teacher training places.

In 1982 further important paintings, statues etc were removed from the building by one of the Fitzwilliam descendants.

In 1983 the Council's planners proposed sub letting the stables as craft workshops with flats above.

In 1985 the Sheffield Polytechnic gave notice of its intention to relocate the teaching resources at Wentworth to its city centre campus.

### **The Surrounding Wentworth Estate:**

In May 1979 the 10<sup>th</sup> Earl Fitzwilliam established the Fitzwilliam Wentworth Amenity Trust into which he placed Wentworth Village, two public houses, the Needles Eye, Hooper Stand, the Mausoleum, and 1,000 acres of farms and woodland.

Also, shortly before his death in September 1979, he arranged for a Deed of Gift of the village of Scholes, and Keppels Column, to the Borough Council. The Council then laid the mains sewerage to the village and over the next decade sold off land and properties to enable the village to be re-vitalised.

Substantial additional land holdings remain under the control of the Milton (Peterborough) Estates Company and the Earl Fitzwilliam Charitable Trust. These, together with the Amenity Trust, are administered by the Fitzwilliam (Wentworth) Estates Company.

In 1995 English Heritage listed Wentworth Park as being of special historic interest on its Register of Parks and gardens.

### **Proposed Sale of the Council's Lease:**

As a result of the Sheffield Polytechnic decision to vacate the premises, the Borough Council employed Humbert's chartered surveyors of London to advertise for sale the remaining 233 years of the lease. The Fitzwilliam family indicated that it would relinquish control of the 26 rooms and would extend the area of surrounding land to be leased to 83 acres.

In May 1987 Marconi Leisure Ltd proposed to convert the mansion into a 5 star hotel, conference, exhibition, health, training and sport centre. The £10.0m proposal had the backing of the English Tourist Board and was supported by RMBC. Officials from the European Investment Bank visited the property in connection with the consideration of an EIB loan towards the project costs based on the promotion of jobs and tourism in an assisted area.

In October 1988, just at the time the EIB loan was reputedly being finalised, the Fitzwilliam Wentworth Estates Company withdrew its support for the hotel proposal stating that it favoured a non-commercial 'heritage property' solution. It indicated that it was willing to consider a return of the lease to it by RMBC.

A decision was then taken, without any public consultation over the options, to relinquish the lease which at 200+ years long was tantamount to effective ownership. There was no public debate over this - the only information released being that it was costing the Borough Council

£450,000 per annum on care and maintenance of the property. Presumably the Council continue to incur to this day the annual loan charges on the building extensions carried out in 1972.

### **The Sale of Wentworth Woodhouse:**

In March 1989 Mr Wensley Haydon Baillie, an industrialist, purchased the property and 83 acres of surrounding parkland. It was sold to him by the estate company on the express understanding that he carry out a progressive restoration of the buildings. In 1995 he charged the property to the Swiss bank, Julius Baer & Co. Following financial difficulties Mr Haydon Baillie defaulted on this loan and the Bank took possession of the property under a Court Order in 1998.

At this time the campaigning heritage body, the Georgian Group, prepared a report which proposed that Wentworth Woodhouse should be vested in a trust whose purpose would be to repair and maintain the property, and open the most important of its interiors to the public. The Group recommended that the National Heritage Memorial Fund should provide an endowment to secure these aims.

In June 1999 Wentworth Woodhouse was sold to Mr Clifford Newbould, a retired London architect, for use as a private residence for himself and his two sons. The reported asking price was £1.5m+. Mr Newbould announced to the press that he intended to enter into negotiations with the estates company to secure a change in the restrictive covenants. His hope was that he would be able to convert the riding school and stables into residential use. According to press reports, some restoration works have been carried out on parts of the building during the last ten years.

### **Wentworth and Tourism:**

The Rotherham Tourism Marketing Strategy and Action Plan of 1998 proposed the preparation of a visitor plan for the Wentworth and Elsecar areas. Initial meetings are understood to have been held with Barnsley Borough Council, the chairman of the Wentworth Parish Council, and with the Wentworth Estates Company. As far as the Civic Society is aware the proposed consultancy study was never commissioned, nor the initial meetings progressed any further.

### **Wentworth Garden Centre**

Since opening in 1977, this garden centre and associated craft shops have proved to be a powerful magnet in the local area. In two weeks the next stage of its development will see the opening of a brand new restaurant. Tony Airey (a former Council employee) has overseen all this work and may be able to provide suggestions about how to enhance the Tourist Strategy by utilising more of the Wentworth facilities, without damaging what is already there.



**Residential Blocks**



**Stable Block**