

THE DEATH OF MARBURY

BY ROBERT WESTALL

Marbury Hall has been a sad place these last eight winters. The gardens full of dark rhododendrons higher than your head. The leaden waters of the Mere showing through the bare trees, and Budworth Church a grey stump in the distance. The paths black and greasy with dead leaves. The dead rose trees cracking underfoot, as you walked on the long bleached grass of the flowerbeds.

Marbury Hall was an unconscionable time a-dying. Now it was dead, and we had come to say goodbye. Rain was falling, and the demolition gang had the slates off the roof. It was a grand day for a funeral.

Only eight years ago, I.C.I. moved out, leaving the house in superb nick, as is their wont. What went wrong?

You could blame it on the war. Marbury became a camp for German prisoners. The two East and West Parks were filled with their brick barracks. Come 1945, the prisoners departed, and civilian squatters moved in. The Rural District Council regularised the situation by turning the barracks into council houses; they were far too sound to be pulled down during a housing shortage. Council houses meant children, crowds of town children in the countryside. When I.C.I. left, they began to kick the empty Hall to pieces. Perhaps our local poet put it best.

"When you go to Marbury
The children are always there
And always guilty . . .
... a child bursts

From behind the bushes in the formal garden
Panting, looks over his shoulder
Sees you, sobers
Then ducks away into that thicket
Full of the sounds of shouts
And gates being clashed together
And things being broken."

The first thousand pounds of damage was done quickly – mainly windows. The hall continued to deteriorate rapidly, putting off potential buyers. Then absentee developers bought it, and there was talk of turning it into flats. Local people wondered how this could be managed, with rooms twenty feet high . . .

Destruction continued. The developers advertised for a watchman (with a dog). But neither man nor dog could stop the vandalism. The house was so huge. There'd be a sound of breaking glass, but when you turned the corner, there'd be no-one in sight.

Parents complained that the place was becoming a death-trap for the children. Doors and windows were boarded up, the house sealed, but it didn't stop the damage.

Finally, the developers sought the Council's permission to demolish the building, because of damp and galloping dry rot. They got it. Even a preservation order, on a building of historic merit, cannot prevent demolition when a house is structurally unsafe.

So it was all the fault of the war, and the children? I'm not so sure. So many questions remain unanswered. Why didn't parents control their children better? Why wasn't the conversion to flats ever started? And what will happen to the land when the site is finally cleared? If it's returned to farming the developers will have thrown away a lot of money. On the other hand, if planning permission is granted for private housing, they will have made a fortune.

Or perhaps the house's death was inherent in its birth. Sometime in the nineteenth century, one of the Barrymore family demolished the Georgian Hall, and commissioned Anthony Salvin to design something bigger and much more impressive. Salvin was a pupil of John Nash, and had the same facile lack of integrity

"Lichen had tinted them pale green, vandals had smashed them, brambles half covered them. They had the luckless look of murder victims newly discovered."

as his master. It was a wild period for architectural styles. Anything went – Hindoo Gothic Revival, Greek, Venetian, Italian Rustic, Chinese – the list was practically endless. Salvin was all things to all men. He'd design in any style he was paid to produce.

The Barrymore's really out-Jonesed the Joneses. They chose the style of the 18th century French chateaux – the style of Fontainebleau. It is said that the master of the house had a young French wife, and he built it to cure her homesickness.

Certainly, Marbury was the only example of the chateau style I knew in England. And it was a lovely style, with its stone detailing of pillar and pediment, scroll and grotesque face. Salvin had caught the feel of it perfectly in the south front with its protruding wings and cobbled courtyard with mounting block.

But as you approached nearer, the charm faded. The stone details were seen to be a thin layer of stucco, cheaply applied. Every shower of rain brought down a heap of sodden plaster. It was like make-up being washed away, to reveal a cheap, raddled face beneath.

And as you walked round to the side, you could see how Salvin lost control of his design, under pressure of the Barrymore's insatiable demands for cheap grandeur. Rows of chimneys, towers and balustrades heaped up without cohesion. It had not the grand largeness of a Blenheim or Castle Howard. It had the lumpy largeness of a Victorian boot factory.

Splendour on the cheap; run on the sufferings of hundreds of skivvies. Once they departed for better paid jobs in factory or shop,

Marbury's eventual fate was sealed. Who would love it, or want to fight to preserve it? Even want to live in it? I.C.I. taking it over after the war as temporary accommodation, merely postponed its fate.

The real tragedy was that the Barrymores' demolished something lovely in order to build something small and exquisite that might have been preserved to give us pleasure now. It was also sad, because the grounds were beautiful, even in decay. But neither the fitness or the beauty seemed to disturb the man in charge of demolition. He refused to give a name, saying he was just a henchman of the firm's, the contractors. So after that, we called him the Henchman.

He was short, strongly built, and full of energy. He wore a blue casual shirt, and no tie, in spite of the weather: and strode around showing us all we wished to see, and more.

Did we fancy buying a statue? He led us to a grove where marbles, larger than life, lay on their backs half buried in the earth. Lichen had tinted them pale green, vandals had smashed them, brambles half covered them. They had the luckless look of murder victims rarely discovered.

Or did we fancy a marble god, ten foot high, that stood in the stable yard? Poor god. His misused face was missing a nose; his arms were gone; and rusty reinforcing rods stuck in his legs like bones, staining the marble flesh as red as blood.

Chap who owns these wants fancy prices for them. They're not worth lifting. Cost the firm, and this one would break at the knees." Yet they were antique gods, once beautiful. Before we could grow pensive, the Henchman was off on another tack. "Fancy a nice dining table - most unusual?"

He took us to a shed. The table stood amongst piles of Dulux tins, and notices inviting "ICI vehicles deliver here". It was big, black and sinister, with a mirrored top.

in his vast conception of a French chateau, you could see how Salvin lost control of his firm, under pressure of the Barrymores' insatiable demands for cheap grandeur."

"That's the table that was made to hold the body of the Marbury Lady. She was embalmed when she died, and her body kept in the entrance hall, under the stairs. But she haunted them. So they put her in a lead coffin and slung her into the Mere. But she still haunted them. So they fished her out again, and buried her by the wall, over there." We were nervous lest he offered to dig her up, and sell her to us, for the price of the lead. We knew all about the Marbury Lady. Legend said she was an Egyptian paramour of one of the Barrymores. An importunate, hysterical lady, whom even a spell in Budworth churchyard couldn't quieten.

"Lovely table that." His hand stroked the grotesque black carving. "Some American will give seventy guineas for it."

We shuddered for the poor innocent American, and imagined the Lady let loose in a New York penthouse.

Then the Henchman took us into the Hall itself. The floorboards were gone, and we walked on great beams that crumbled to dust under our feet. Galloping dry rot indeed!

"Like a nice little fireplace? Only got one left - it's cracked, mind." It was nine feet wide, black marble, cold as a tomb. We intimated that our semi was rather small . . .

"Got a little Gothic one next door. Seventeenth century."

We thought it was fake Elizabethan, and Victorian.

"No, it's early, I tell you - stone, nice bit of stone. Fetch a good price."

We admired the decorative scrollwork above it.

"Plaster - just plaster. Crack to pieces the moment we touch it."

Surely, we said, with a little care . . . But he was adamant. He had an air of violence, of destruction, common among demolition contractors. Otherwise, I suppose, they wouldn't be happy in their work . . .

There was evidence of this outside. The house was fringed with shattered balustrading, lying where it had been hurled from the roof. It was only Victorian concrete, but pleasant. The kind of thing you'd gladly pay ten pounds a yard for, in a gardening shop.

"It's fake," said the Henchman, waving a

contemptuous hand. "But, by gum, the lead on the roof was genuine enough." A look of joyous lust crossed his face - he was a great man for lead.

We walked towards the gates.

"The gates will go complete - gateposts, urns and all. Get a good packet for them." The gates were very beautiful Georgian or earlier. They must have been part of the earlier hall, and we grieved for that building again.

How ironical life is! These gates had been children's playthings for eight years. They'd been clashed endlessly, climbed on, and almost torn apart - several pieces were missing. In the end, they were wrapped in barbed wire to stop the mischief. Now, suddenly, when it's almost too late, they're found to be valuable antiques, worth a small fortune.

As we left, the Henchman came after us.

"You're interested in fireplaces - I'll show you a couple."

They were gorgeous - classical white marble, and a mass of little dancing cherubs. On the side was carved "Thomas Edwards 1814". They lay dismantled on the black greasy floorboards of the lorry - chipped and stained.

"Patch 'em up, and off to the States with them." Beauty and money and mud, all lying tangled together. I felt bitter for England's sake, hating the brute force of wealth.

We said goodbye again, and walked back to the car through the gardens. A light mistiness was coming off the Mere, and settling as gently as time itself. There was no English word for how it felt - perhaps the French "triste" comes nearest. Soon, all will be rubble, beaten flat by lorries and bulldozers. For an atmosphere, at least, cannot be bought for dollars, and is therefore destroyed without a pang.

I felt I could already see the next stage - the bijou bungalows crowded between the trees, landscaped down the Mere. I could almost read the house-agents' advert "Desirable detached residences in prestige development amid Cheshire countryside. Fine views over Budworth Mere. Oil-fired central heating; two bedrooms. The Marbury Hall Estate. Sole agents . . ."

I just pity the poor devil who gets the Marbury Lady under his patio . . .

