

**SKELTON HALL  
SKELTON  
NORTH YORKSHIRE**

**HISTORIC BUILDINGS ASSESSMENT**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This report describes and assesses the fabric of Skelton Hall, a Grade II listed building. Skelton Hall lies near the centre of the village of Skelton, 5 km to the north west of York. The purpose of the report is to inform proposals to refurbish, alter, and extend the Hall on behalf of its owners. The building was visited by the author in February and March 2019 in the company of the owners, Mr and Mrs Sermon, and their architect, Mark Bramhall of Bramhall Blemkharn Chartered Architects. All parts of the building were seen.

A limited amount of documentary research was carried out in the course of the investigation. This included historic maps, historic prints and photos, late C20 planning applications, and a useful history of the Hall and its owners written by Peter J Stanhope in 2005. The latter was only slightly concerned with the fabric of the building but offered a detailed timeline of ownership and occupancy on which to base an analysis of its history; unsupported dates given in the text of this report are derived from this review. The individual sources are described in more detail below.

The Hall is a medium-sized early C19 country house with extensive gardens: formerly it was also accompanied by a wooded deer park of around 100 acres. In its 200-year history the building has undergone some major changes, nearly all of them in the mid to late C20. These have included requisitioning by the RAF between 1939 and 1945; division into two separate properties in about 1952; and restoration to a single property in 1998. As a result it has been possible to identify three major phases of work in the building:

**Phase I            about 1820**

**Phase II          later C19 to 1952**

**Phase III        1952 to 2018**

A certain amount of simple opening-up work was carried out in the building. This chiefly comprised the lifting of carpets, and of what turned out to be late C20 floorboards, accompanied by some drilling into concrete cinder-block walls. The purpose of the work was to define the position of the original stair, now lost to C20 alteration. In this it was successful and the results are described in more detail below. The List entry for Skelton Hall appears as Section 5. The descriptions provided in the Statutory List are in general only intended to be indicative but in this particular case the description has been shown to be in error. It is claimed that the existing stair is the original relocated to a different site within the house. In fact close examination of the stair - and in particular of its steel slotted screw fixings, synthetic resin glues, and electrically-welded balusters - has clearly identified it as being of wholly modern date. It was inserted in c.1980 as described in Section 3.3.

Key floor plans (Figs 1-3) - to show historic room functions and inserted structures - appear with the other figures at the end of the text of the report. It is recommended that the key plans are read with the text.

## 2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In the listed building description the date of the building is given as 1824. This date is fully corroborated by the style of construction and by the rather slender documentary evidence. The builder and first owner was a Mrs Mary Thompson, the widow of Henry Thompson of Kirby Hall. Mrs Thompson had long had an interest in the church of St Giles, Skelton (she was instrumental in its restoration) and after the death of her husband lived at The Lodge, a house to the north of the church. From here she supervised the construction of her new home – called, by her, rather confusingly, Skelton Lodge – which, with its extensive stables and offices, was built on the opposite side of what is now known as Foster’s Lane. This was not necessarily a virgin site. Halfpenny, in 1816, published an engraving of the church with the future site of Mrs Thompson’s house in the background and he shows there a small vernacular building with a thatched roof (Fig 4). Stanhope, in 2005, repeated an old story that the field had long before been the site of an ‘ancient cell’ of St Mary’s Abbey. There is no sign of any earlier buildings today.

After the death of Mrs Thompson the Hall was bought and sold a number of times; it was also let for long periods in the late C19 and early C20. What little evidence there is for change in this phase is described below. Between 1939 and 1945 it was used by the RAF, perhaps for an officers’ mess. There is no surviving evidence of major alteration. After the war the Hall was sold again and according to Stanhope became the property of Dick Thorpe, an architect, in 1952. Thorpe divided the Hall into two spacious houses – an east house and a west house – and it remained in divided occupancy until 1998. In that year Mr and Mrs Cook bought both houses and immediately removed Thorpe’s dividing walls and a post-war inserted stair to create a single dwelling. Further works were carried out following a sale to Mr and Mrs Mellor in 2001; the Hall was sold to the present owners early in 2019.

It will be clear from all this that a good deal of alteration will have taken place in the interior of the Hall; and that the original plan of Mrs Thompson’s house has been significantly compromised by subdivision and changes in room function. Although the 1998 works, as shown in proposal drawings, betray a natural desire to put things back more or less as they were the fact is that some of the alterations were permanent. Since the standard of surviving finishes is high, and great care was taken in replicating original detail – or at least in creating a passable pastiche – the job of interpreting the evidence for the C20 work has been made rather difficult. A small amount of opening up work has therefore been carried out in the modern fabric and is reported below.

Skelton Hall was listed for the first time in 1986. The list entry appears below (Section 5).

### 3. THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE FABRIC

#### 3.1 *Phase I about 1820*

Skelton Hall is a substantial house set in its own grounds. These are said by Stanhope, on uncertain authority, to have been designed by a student of Capability Brown named John Meikle. The private garden to the north of the Hall, which includes an irregular lake, is shown in its present form on the 1853 OS and rather more clearly on the 1893 1:2500 OS (Fig 25). It is likely that this has changed least of all the garden areas around the building although the east side, shown open in 1893, has been allowed to develop into woodland while a small sunken formal garden defined by hedges was intruded into the north garden area in the late C20. Extending to the east of the drawing room wing is a broad flat lawn, terminating in a ha-ha, which takes advantage of some very long views in that direction. These views are now of open farmland but in 1824 were of the Hall deer park; some of the oaks of which may have survived in the landscape as hedgerow trees. The south garden, at the entrance front, has suffered from uncontrolled and piecemeal landscaping driven by the need to accommodate vehicular traffic (for which a wide turning-circle has been made), car parking, and a swimming-pool. These various items have been kept apart from one another by a combination of fencing and hedges which have tended to obliterate the much more open layout shown on the 1893 OS.

As noted above the Hall was completed in about 1824. No architect is known but the interesting and rather idiosyncratic plan of the building is likely to be the work of a competent designer than of a local builder. The house is constructed of white brick with sandstone dressings under hipped roofs covered with graduated slates. It has end and roof stacks. On the south, east, and north elevations the brickwork is laid in an accurate Flemish bond with struck pointing; on the west front, which is the service end of the Hall, English garden wall bond is used. On the south, east and north elevations there is also a moulded sandstone plinth, a moulded first floor sill band, a moulded second floor band, and a deep eaves cornice. The upper bands, only, return across the west elevation. The front door lies behind a Greek Doric pilastered porch. An early engraving by F H Abraham, dated 1839, very curiously shows the moulded bands as plain bands but this is undoubtedly a mistake (Fig 5). The present bands are not later additions. The original construction was to a high decorative standard.

The fenestration is typical of its period and largely unaltered although there has been some sympathetic window replacement. Generally there are giant unequal six- and eight-pane sashes to the principal elevations of the ground floor and twelve-pane sashes to the first floor; there is a sixteen-pane sash to the east elevation of the south-east first-floor room which is in fact the old ground-floor stair window reset. In the west or service elevation there are two small round-headed windows to the attics. The ground floor of this elevation has been altered and painted following the demolition of the service block and the same fate has befallen the ground floor south elevation of the kitchen where another C19 single-storey room has been removed (see below). The openings in this south wall are all modern (Figs 14-17).

The plan of the Hall is a balanced one (Figs 1-3). There is a central block, of two stories and attics and five bays, nearly square on plan, flanked by two storey wings set back from the planes of the principal elevations. The east wing has a drawing room with bedrooms over, and is, therefore, part of the domestic accommodation, while the west wing has a large kitchen on the

ground floor with minor bedrooms – perhaps for senior indoor servants or a nursery – over. As originally constructed the service accommodation extended further west to meet the stable block, which survives in separate ownership, but map evidence reveals that this linking range was taken down sometime between 1938 and 1969 (Figs 22 & 23). Nothing can be deduced about its appearance. Stanhope reproduces a postcard view taken in the 1920s which shows a single storey C19 range in the re-entrant angle between the centre block and the kitchen; this had a six-panelled door in a Greek Doric architrave with a canopy (presumably this was a service entrance) and sash windows under a balustrade (Fig 24). This has also been demolished.

The plan of the house has seen considerable late C20 disruption but investigation has revealed its original form. The central block, with principal elevation to the south, has an axial passage aligned east-west with which the short north-south, centrally-placed, and rather narrow entrance hall makes a T-junction. The chief rooms of the house (excluding the drawing room) were in three of the four corners of the block. These were the saloon, in the north-east corner, with views over the gardens and the lake to the north; the slightly smaller dining room in the north-west corner; and a parlour in the south-west corner (Fig 1). The south-east corner accommodated the main stair and also, adjoining the entrance hall, a rather odd little heated cloakroom. At first glance this cloakroom, with its large fireplace, might seem to have been formed by the subdivision of a larger, heated, entrance hall but its door shares identical decorative details – a fluted architrave with square paterae – with that of the parlour door on the opposite side of the entrance hall. The east wing houses the large and exceptionally well-lit drawing room which is the principal room in the house. In the west wing there was an equally large kitchen, now reduced in size by later insertions.

The south-east stair hall was obliterated in the early 1980s as described below. Originally it was lit by ground and first floor sashes on the south elevation, and also by a sash placed at intermediate level on the east elevation. This sash, which lit the stair flight, is now represented only by the top half of a sunk panel of infilling brickwork; but the window itself survives as an insertion on the floor above. Nothing is known of the form of the early C19 stair. The existing stair, inserted at the west end of the former Phase I saloon in about 1980, and described below, is entirely modern in location, materials, and construction.

The service stair, which rose to the attics through the full height of the house, was at the east end of the axial passage. A ground floor division here – the traditional ‘green baize door’ – has evidently been lost and with it the lower flight of the stair which was apparently entered directly from the kitchen. An upper flight, cut about and altered, still survives (Fig 9), as does its protecting balustrade in the attic (Fig 6). This has stick balusters, two turned newels, and a slender handrail, all of about 1820.

The first-floor plan (Fig 2) mirrors that of the ground floor although there is a large principal bedroom, entered by a broad six-panelled door, above the south centre bays. Larger, but perhaps less desirable, bedrooms were placed to the north of the axial passage above the saloon and the dining room while the space above the drawing room may have been divided, as now. Over the kitchen in the west wing are two smaller bedrooms. These may have been for indoor servants but bars on the windows suggest later use, at least, as a nursery – traditionally, and for obvious reasons, placed well away from the more important bedrooms. The northern room retains a ceiling down-stand towards its west end which defines the partition wall of a lost

closet. This small space lacks the ceiling cornice of the remainder of the room. There is a linking door here to the room on the south.

In a general way the plan of the attic floor seems to have followed that of the floor below (Fig 3). Only the service stairs originally rose to this level since the family members were not expected to have any legitimate business in the servants' rooms. This stair led to a group of small rooms and storage rooms in the roof voids. None of these rooms appears to have been heated – more likely from a fear of fire than from wilful cruelty on the part of Mrs Thompson – and only the west attic rooms have small round-headed windows of their own in the gabled west elevation (Fig 17). Interestingly the south-west room has a fixed light window onto the service stair; this was an arrangement traditionally given to the housekeeper's room so that she could exercise some watchful control over use of the stair at night. This west end also retains an external wall mount for a bell, controlled by a rope from the kitchen, to call the outdoor servants in for their dinners. It is likely that the servants' hall was in the demolished west service range.

The east end of the attic was re-planned to form a self-contained flat in c.1980; more recently the west rooms have been more sympathetically refurbished without significant loss of historic detail.

Some Phase I structural and decorative details have survived within the house. The roof structure is conventional, with sawn principal and hip rafters with raked struts and side purlins. The eaves cornice is supported on through-bolted pattress bars visible in the walls of the attic rooms. Few floor structures could be closely examined but all seem to be of traditional construction with tongued and grooved boards of average width for the period.

Some original fireplace surrounds survive although rather fewer actual fireplaces. Bedroom 4 retains both (Fig 7) – a simple surround and a hob-grate – while Bedrooms 2, 3 and 5 have more elaborate surrounds with later C19 tiled inserts. The ground floor rooms have late C19 fireplaces and surrounds or – in the drawing room – modern reproductions. The library fireplace, which was formerly that of the saloon, is entirely missing; it has been replaced by a large stove. A very large late C19 fireplace heats the cloakroom.

Doors are generally four-panelled and either of sunk moulded, bolection moulded, or plain (in the west attics) panels. Early C19 architraves survive throughout the house. The windows to the principal elevations retain folding panelled shutters with panelled soffits where these are appropriate and practicable (Fig 10). Generally the standard of joinery in the house is high and it has survived well.

Moulded plaster ceiling cornices are more problematical. One interesting survival is seen in the present boiler room (to the north of the C20 inserted main stair) where short lengths of the early C19 cornice around the north-west corner of the ceiling of the lost saloon have survived among the central heating pipes (Fig 13). Other remnants of this cornice may survive above the C20 inserted ceiling in the library. This now has a modern palmette cornice. The dining room ceiling and cornice seem to have been superseded by an elaborate late C19 coffered arrangement although this room does retain its all-important four-panelled door and architrave from the kitchen. As already described the high-status doorways opening off the entrance hall have fluted architraves with square paterae in a developed late Georgian style.

Above the entrance hall at its junction with the axial passage there is a round-headed moulded plaster arch on fluted pilasters (Fig 11). At the south end of the entrance hall there is an exceptionally wide and heavy early C19 external door of four bolection moulded panels on strap hinges with sunk-panelled reveals to an outer, glazed, screen door.

### 3.2. *Phase II Late C19 to 1952*

In the period between the construction of the Hall and its postwar subdivision it is likely that a number of changes took place; but the evidence now is scanty. One prominent addition was the floor of mosaic tiles laid in the entrance hall and the ground floor axial passage. These are probably Minton mosaic tiles of mid to late C19 date. The scheme resembles that installed at Bootham Park Hospital at about the same time. It is also possible that the single-storey balustraded extension to the kitchen, now lost but shown in archive photography, dated to this period.

Requisitioning by the military in wartime can lead to a spectrum of outcomes ranging from dart holes on the backs of all the doors to total destruction by fire. At Skelton Hall, it is said, the evidence lies somewhere in between: a minor conflagration in the middle of the drawing room apparently damaged the boarded floor and the ceiling. This was all made good during late C20 alterations.

### 3.3. *Phase III 1952 to 1998*

Subdivision of houses of any size tends to mark the start of a downhill slide in both social status and historical integrity. Such was the case at Skelton Hall, where the process seems to have begun in 1952 with the sale of the Hall to an architect, Dick Thorpe. Thorpe divided the house vertically into two separate dwellings which are referred to here as the west house and the east house.

The evidence for the line of the division comes in a general way from the 1965 OS sheet and in more detail from a proposal drawing of 1980 when the east house was altered (Fig 20). This drawing shows the dividing wall at ground level crossing the axial passage. Photography taken in 1998, when the wall had been broken through, shows that it took the same line at first floor level. The situation in the attics is now slightly less clear as a result of late C20 alterations but that they were also divided at about the same point is certain.

The owners of the west house retained the principal south entrance, entrance hall, parlour (sitting room), cloakroom, dining room and the kitchen. The remaining service rooms to the west were demolished and a new external side door made in the west wall of the kitchen. A new lobby, store, and toilet were built into the north west corner of the kitchen and a new stair was built, rather awkwardly, at the north end of the entrance hall to rise to the first floor only. The lower flight of the Phase I service stair was removed but the upper flight was retained to give access to the west attics.

The east house was entered by a door in the north elevation. This is now entirely modern and inappropriately detailed for its comparatively humble purpose but it may be the site of an older door from the saloon to the garden. The owners of this east house had the north-east saloon,

the Phase I main stair, and the drawing room. About the details, however, there is a mystery. The saloon may have been divided in 1952, as today, by a stud partition to create an entrance hall and a small sitting room, now a library; leaving the Phase I main stair where it was. Later work has made this difficult to check as nothing in the present stair hall (at the west end of the former saloon) is as old as 1952 (see below). However the Phase I main stair, if retained, was unlikely to have risen to attic level for the reasons given above. There is, then, the possibility that an additional flight was added to the Phase I stair, or constructed elsewhere in the house, so that the attics could be reached. No evidence for such a stair has yet been seen.

In the late C20 the east house - where the bulk of the C20 change has taken place - had acquired the features which survive today even though the two halves of the Hall have since been reunited.

The most dramatic alteration was the removal in c.1980 of the original stair in the south-east corner of the main block of the house. Opening-up work has revealed that the present first-floor structure in that area is of late C20 narrow T&G boards on 10" x 2" plank joists lodged on a rolled steel joist. Below the joists can be seen ceiling joists of the same date and also the upper surface of the ground floor ceiling itself; which is of plasterboard panels (Figs 18 & 19). The stair-window in the east wall of the ground floor room (now a study) was removed, the embrasure blocked, and the window re-used in a new opening on the floor above to bring additional light to what was intended to be used as a dance studio as described below. A new doorway was made in the east wall at ground floor level to give access to the conservatory, the subject of a successful planning application in 1980 (Fig 20).

At the same time a new main stair was built at the south end of the rear entrance hall which was probably formed in c.1952 out of the Phase I saloon. This is a cut string stair with stick balusters, alternating with geometrical metal balusters, supporting a slender ramped and wreathed handrail. At first sight it could pass for an early C19 stair: but closer inspection reveals that the carcasing, of machine-sawn softwood, is fastened with steel slotted screws and synthetic resin glues; that the balusters are similarly fastened; and that the handrail is a modern facsimile. The geometrical balusters are of mild steel and they include mass-produced electrically-welded top and bottom flanges pre-drilled and countersunk for slotted screws - even in the acute angle beneath the handrail, where no screwdriver could ever be made to go! The north supporting wall of the stair hall is of concrete blockwork. Drilling in March 2019 of the south wall of the stair hall (which supports the lowermost flight) in the understair cupboard revealed some concrete blockwork here as well; however this length of wall retains at its base the scar of the high moulded skirting board to the lost Saloon. It seems likely then that the blockwork represents making-good after the 1952 dividing wall, which ran across the axial passage at about this point, was taken down in 1998. It is very clear that all of the present stair and much of the stair hall, in materials and fastenings, is of c.1980 or a little earlier (Figs 8 & 12). Moreover the stair now runs up, unhistorically, through the full height of the house to the east attics which bear all the hallmarks - flush doors, somewhat dated kitchen and bathroom fittings, paintwork - of major refurbishment in about 1980. The demolition of the Phase I main stair in the south-east bay made it possible to insert new ground floor and first floor rooms. The lower room is now a study (in 1980 it was a playroom, awaiting conversion to a kitchen) while the upper room, shown on the key plan as Bedroom 7, has a rather unusual wooden handrail.

The handrail is a clue to the date and function of the alterations. The occupant of the east house at the time was Patrick Jameson, a ballet teacher. This first-floor room was evidently refurbished as a teaching space. He is also said by Stanhope to have inserted a 'granny flat' in the east attic. This statement is fully supported by the details which survive there today. Access to the attic required a full height stair. There is a strong possibility, then, that it was Jameson who in c.1980 removed the Phase I stair (and then created two new rooms, without historic fireplaces, in the old stair-hall) and built the new stair in its present location. This dating is fully supported by the constructional details of the work.

Other alterations included the subdivision of the bedroom over the drawing room and the addition of a poorly-built conservatory to the east wing which appears on the 1980 proposal drawing. The conservatory is entered by an inserted doorway from the drawing room and by another doorway in the south east ground floor room where there is now a large glazed opening.

In 1998 both the houses were sold to a new owner who immediately submitted a Listed Building Consent application to return the Hall to single occupancy (Fig 21). The inserted dividing wall between the houses was removed, the inserted 1952 main stair to the west house was removed from the entrance-hall, and some minor lightweight partitions introduced to form en suite bathrooms and WCs.

Further intrusive C20 features include a French window and a small fixed-light window inserted into the north wall of the kitchen; a large flat-roofed dormer window to the east attic room above the east wing; and concrete roof tiles and inappropriate rain-water goods around the building.

## 4. ASSESSMENT

### 4.1 *General*

- Skelton Hall is well-built of good materials;
- It is an unassuming house which accurately reflects the date at which it was built: looking both backward to the Georgian tradition and forward to a period in which house plans were to become more fluid;
- The Hall gains a great deal from the informal late Georgian layout and landscaping of the north and east gardens.

### 4.2 *Items of significance*

- The external elevations and fenestration: excluding the ground floor elevations of the kitchen;
- The surviving evidence for the Phase I layout;
- The upper flight of the service stair and its attic balustrade;
- All Phase I moulded joinery including door architraves, panelled doors, folding shutters, and surviving skirting boards;
- Phase I moulded plaster ceiling cornices and centrepieces including the remnants of the ceiling cornice to the lost saloon;
- Round-headed arch held on fluted pilasters and moulded frieze to entrance hall;
- Phase I and Phase II fireplace surrounds and hearths.

### 4.3 *Items detracting from the significance of the Hall*

- The painted elevations and inserted openings disguising the loss of the west service range;
- The painted and remodelled south external elevation of the kitchen;
- The inserted openings in the north elevation of the kitchen;
- Various lightweight internal partitions (including glazed partitions) inserted around the house;
- The inserted fireplace and ceiling in the library;
- The 1980 conservatory and the large roof dormer to the east attic;
- Concrete tiles and rainwater goods of inappropriate design and materials;
- The unplanned and chaotic landscaping around the south entrance front of the Hall;
- The C20 inserted brick-built formal sunken garden on the north side of the Hall.

## 5. LISTED BUILDING DESCRIPTION

SE 55 NE SKELTON THE GREEN (north-east side, off)

4/81 Skelton Hall

GV II

House. 1824 with C20 alterations. Built for Mrs Mary Thompson, widow of Henry Thompson of Kirby Hall. White brick with Welsh slate roof. 2 storeys, 7 first-floor windows with central 5-bay section breaking forward. Double-leaf glazed door in Doric porch flanked by unequal 6-pane sashes. Left wing: three C20 casements. Right wing: C20 conservatory. First-floor band forms continuous sill to sashes with glazing bars. Flat brick arches to all windows. Band above first-floor windows. Wide cornice. Hipped roof to central section. Stacks to left end and rising through pitch of roof. Interior: much altered during conversion of house into 2 dwellings. Hallway has round arch held on fluted pilasters and moulded frieze. Doors to reception rooms in fluted architraves. Fine cast-iron grate to study. Original staircase with cast-iron balustrade survives but is no longer in original position. Stapleton and Thompson: Skelton Village 1971.

Listing NGR: SE5690156620

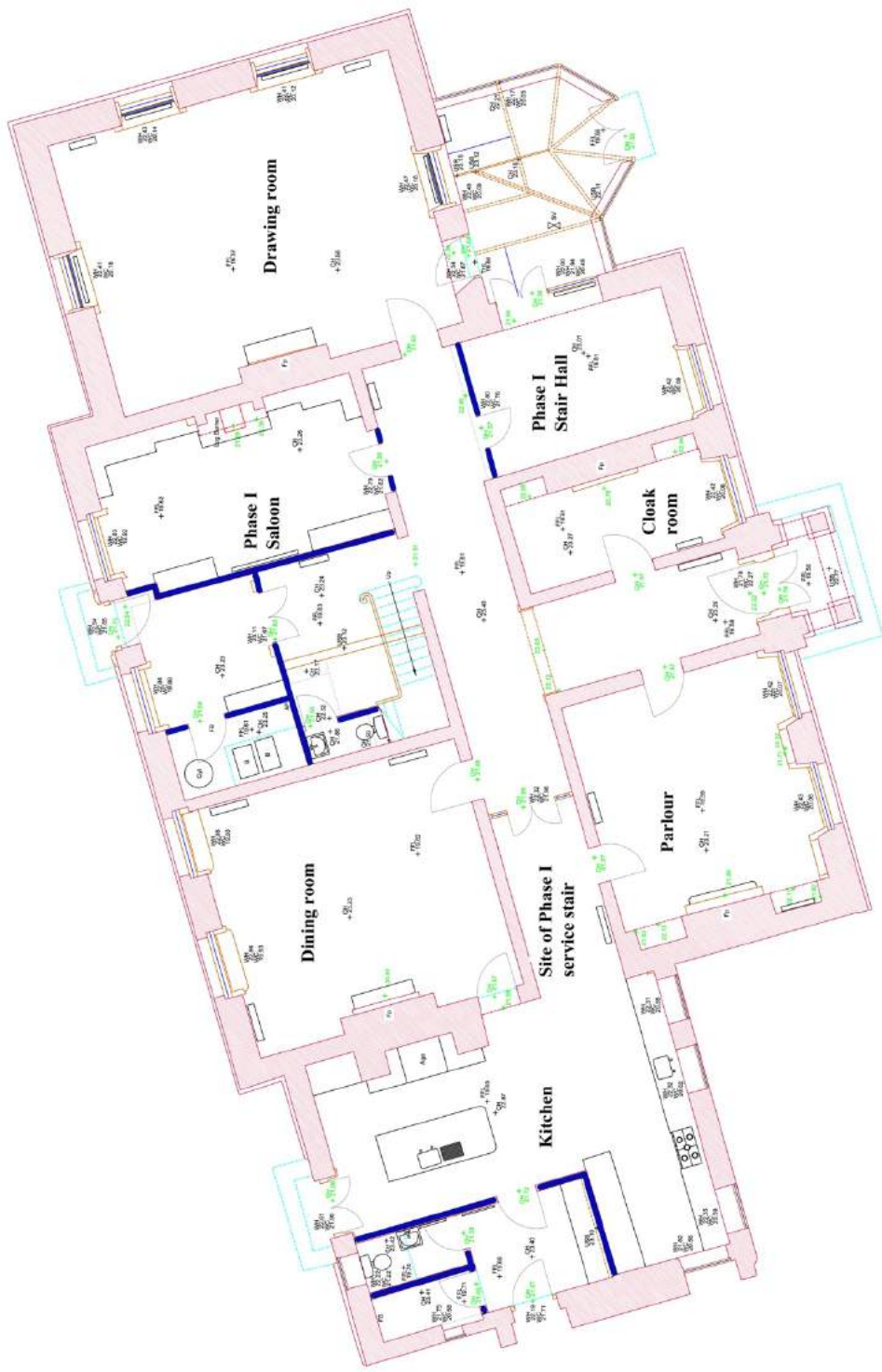


Fig 1: Ground floor key plan: historic room functions; and inserted walls in blue



Fig 2: First floor key plan: inserted walls in blue



Fig 3: Attic floor key plan; inserted walls not shown



Fig 4 Joseph Halfpenny: Church of St Giles c.1816; earlier building near site of Hall in background



Fig 5: F H Abraham: *Skelton Lodge* c.1839



Fig 6: Attic floor: head of Phase I service stair



Fig 7: Bedroom 4: Phase I fireplace in contemporary surround



Fig 8: Phase III stair hall 1980: first floor landing and stair



Fig 9: Phase I first floor axial passage looking west towards Phase I service stair



Fig 10: Cloakroom: detail of Phase I beaded folding panelled shutters



Fig 11 Entrance Hall: Phase I moulded arch on moulded impost and pilasters; Phase I doorcases



Fig 12 Phase III 1980 ground floor stair hall



Fig 13 Fragment of Phase I moulded plaster ceiling cornice to NW corner of lost Saloon



Fig 14 South entrance front



Fig 15 East elevation



Fig 16 North elevation



Fig 17 West elevation with evidence of demolished single-storey service range



Fig 18 Inserted floor of c.1980 in former Phase I stair hall



Fig 19 View from above of inserted plasterboard ground floor ceiling in former Phase I stair hall

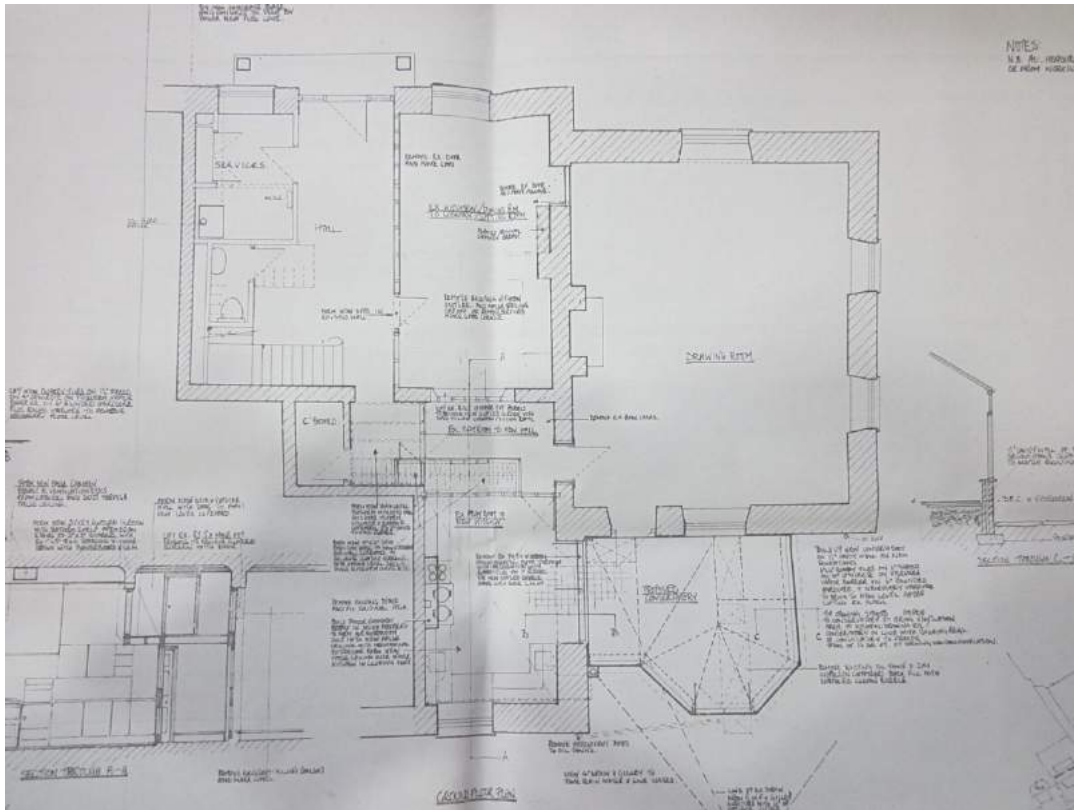


Fig 20 1980 planning application: proposal drawing, ground floor east house

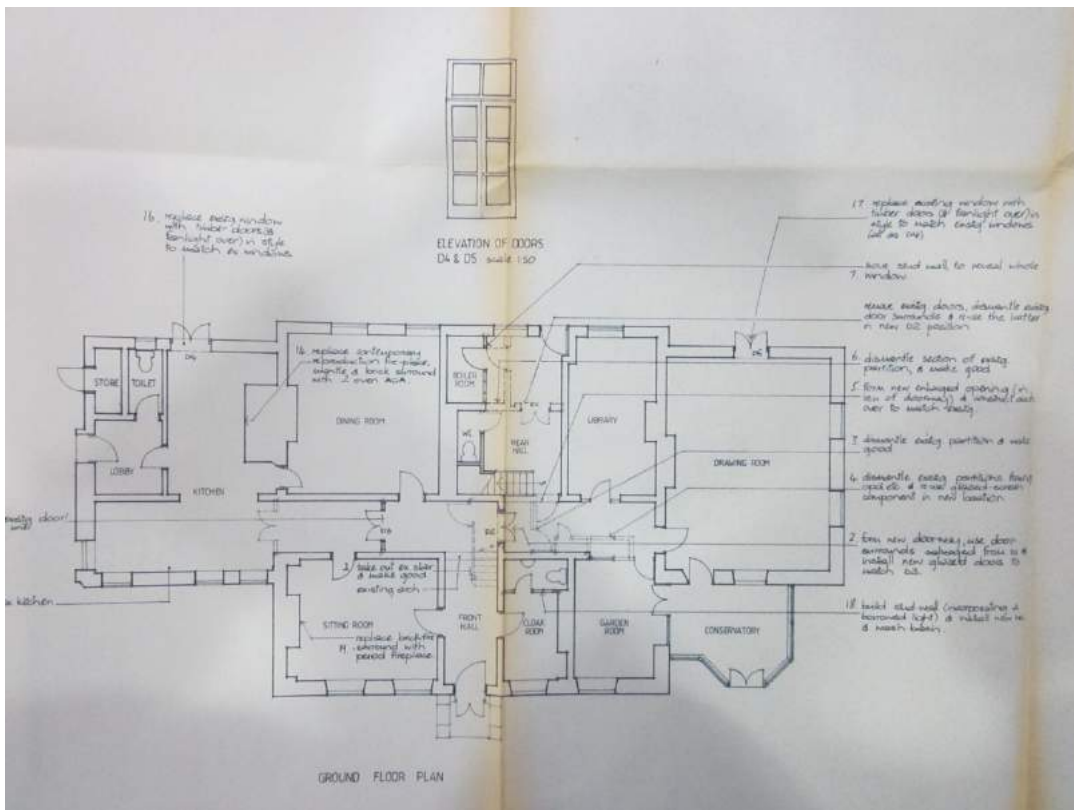


Fig 21 1998 LBC application: proposal drawing, ground floor

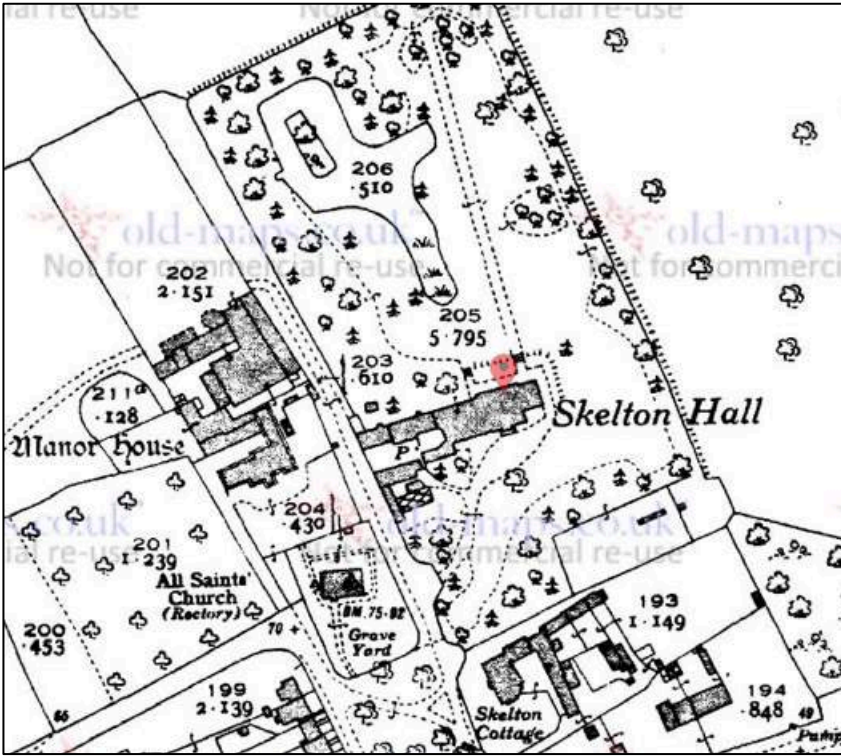


Fig 22 1938 OS

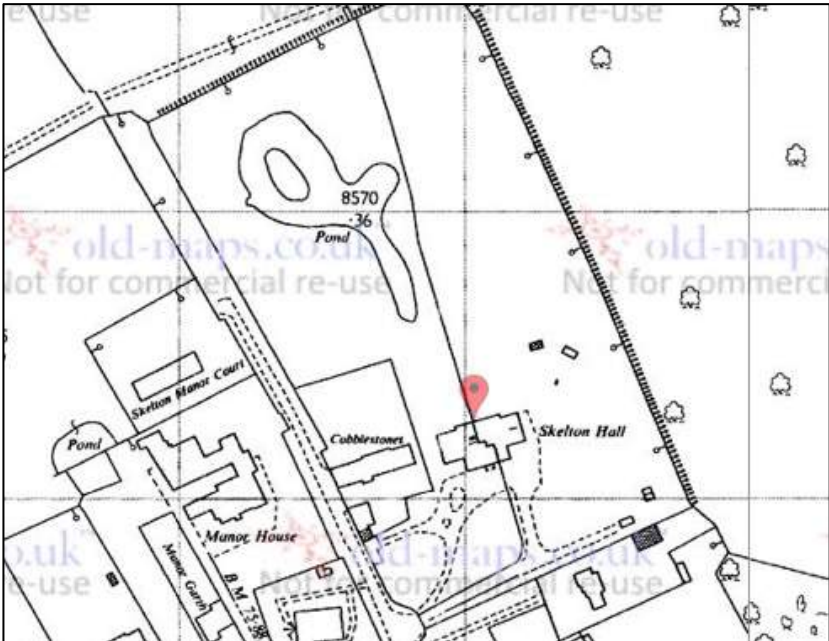


Fig 23 1969 OS



Fig 24 The Hall in c.1920

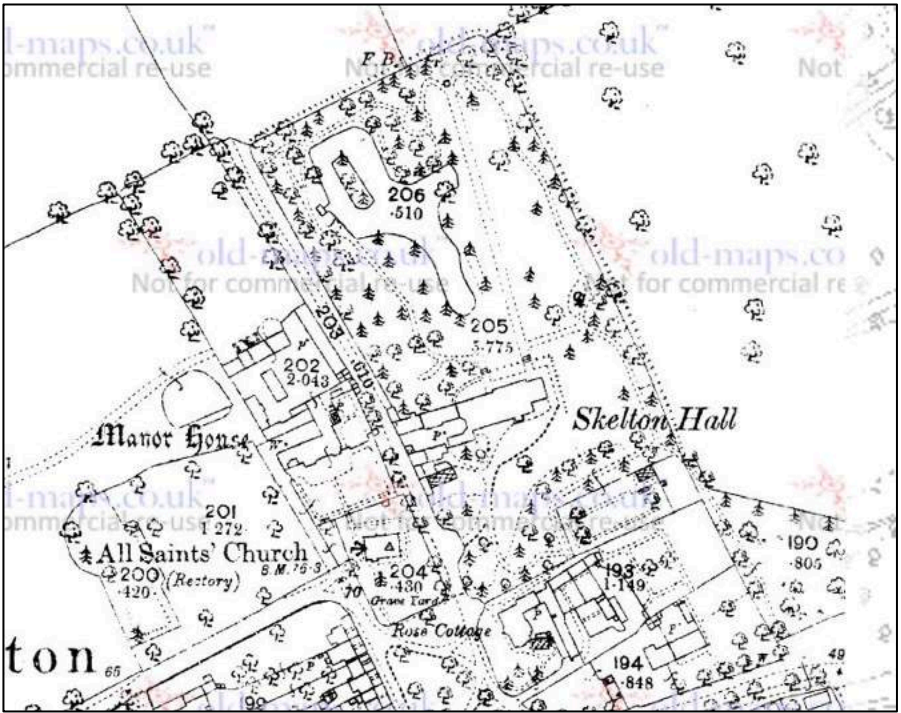


Fig 25 1893 1:2500 OS