

Chapter 7

Empingham: An Entire Model Village

Sue Lee and Jean Orpin

‘The Entire Model Village of Empingham’ is how the village was described in the sale advertisement for the Normanton Estate of 1924. There were 149 separate lots, including eighteen farms, up for auction so it was clearly anticipated that ownership would be dispersed. This would bring a long era in the life of the village to an end.

The Beginnings

The village we see today is largely the legacy of the Heathcotes, who were the main landowners from 1729 to 1924. The family rose from ordinary beginnings, fulfilling all their dreams by achieving wealth, power and prestige. The foundation was laid by Gilbert Heathcote, a Richard Branson of his day. He was a man of considerable ability: the son of a Chesterfield merchant, brought up in a privileged but not upper class household who became a Merchant Adventurer and a Director of the East India Company, and rose to be Lord Mayor of London and Governor of the Bank of England. In 1729 he retired but he had never been ennobled. To enter the peerage it was almost always necessary to own land and an impressive house, and gain political influence. It was also essential to establish a county family by connections and making good marriages.

When Gilbert Heathcote was 70, he decided to buy a country estate. There was no large estate on the market so he bought the Normanton estate in Rutland with the intention of purchasing more land when it became available (*see* Chapter 11 – Normanton). This estate had been owned by the Mackworths since the Middle Ages but Thomas Mackworth had had financial difficulties after the 1722 election. He sold it possibly in settlement of a debt to Charles Tryon, who then sold it to Gilbert Heathcote. Heathcote built a large imposing house, a house for show and a symbol of social and economic power, engaging an architect who was clerk of works at Blenheim. When the house was finished he was granted his baronetcy but did not live long enough to enjoy it as he died in January 1732, leaving £700,000.

Gilbert Heathcote, 1st Baronet

Although he was fabulously wealthy Gilbert Heathcote was not a generous man. In fact he was notorious for his meanness. A saying attributed to him was, ‘A penny saved is a penny got’. He was satirised by Alexander Pope, the eminent poet:

‘The grave Sir Gilbert holds it for a rule
That every man in want is knave or fool.’

Empingham, the largest village on the Normanton estate, had houses situated round the church and along Main Street. Up to its enclosure by Act of Parliament in 1795 it had five great fields (Ryder 2006, 64). Each great field was divided into blocks, called furlongs, and the furlongs into strips. A farmer's land was inconveniently scattered in these strips throughout the parish. The process of enclosure consolidated these strips together into the hedged fields seen today. Some of the tenant farmers would be substantial gentlemen with large farmhouses and others were cottagers, often living in thatched cottages, with smallholdings. Most other villagers with no landholding would have been involved in agricultural labour. Blore's *Rutland*, published in 1811, described the village as remarkable for the neatness of its farms, houses and cottages.

This house in Main Street, Empingham was described as a 'Block of Three Cottages' in the Normanton Estate sale catalogue of 1924 (Sue Lee)



The largest of these farmhouses was probably the house on Main Street now known as The Firs. Several other farmhouses pre-date the purchase of the estate. They can be identified by their stone chimney stacks, and one gable on the south side of Main Street displays a seventeenth century datestone.

The seventeenth century datestone in the gable of Syson's House, one of the substantial farmhouses purchased by Gilbert Heathcote in 1729 (RO)

The First Model Village

John Heathcote, who succeeded the first Gilbert as second baronet, was MP for Grantham, Lincolnshire, and Bodmin, Cornwall, and lived most of his life in London. When he retired from these duties in 1741 he settled in Rutland and concentrated on increasing the estate. Consequently, Gilbert, the third baronet, inherited in 1759 a larger estate with property in many Rutland villages. His house at Normanton now needed a suitable setting with uninterrupted views.

In the eighteenth century a common cause of deserted villages was the fashion for making landscape gardens in the Italianate style. Normanton had already been enclosed when the estate was bought and the third baronet decided to remove the villagers to Empingham in order to make his park, which was eventually to enclose 900 acres.

An Estate Village

From 'The Deserted Village' by Oliver Goldsmith:

'But times are alter'd; trade's unfeeling train
Usurp the land and dispossess the swain;
Along the lawn, where scatter'd hamlets rose,
Unwieldy wealth and cumbrous pomp repose,
And every want to opulence allied,
And every pang that folly pays to pride.'

The removal did not take place overnight but began shortly after he came into his inheritance, and over a few years the inhabitants of Normanton became the inhabitants of Empingham. The newcomers were probably housed in rows of thatched cottages. Some of the smallest have disappeared but there remain in Empingham a number of this type of cottage, now with the thatch heightened over second-storey windows,

pretty porches and attractive gardens in front. They are highly desirable to twenty-first century residents and may well have been so to their first occupiers in the eighteenth century.

*One of the
thatched
cottages in
Main Street,
Empingham
(Sue Lee)*



After the Empingham Enclosure Act in 1795 the village changed. Gilbert Heathcote, 4th Baronet, must have welcomed enclosure as the land could be improved and new machinery used. The farms could be fenced and the land drained if necessary. Smaller holdings were absorbed and the tenants encouraged to keep improved stock. The middle years of the nineteenth century saw a Golden Age in farming in England; millions were spent nationally on farming at this time and this is reflected in the number of people employed in agriculture and allied trades in Empingham in the 1841 census.

Empingham people employed in agriculture and allied trades in 1841:

Farmers	29
Cottagers	10
Agricultural labourers	177
Shepherds	4
Blacksmiths	7
Wheelwrights	5
Millers	2
Other occupations	42
Total	276

The Notebook of Charles Peach, Empingham Gamekeeper

This notebook was started in 1831 and Charles Peach records snippets of information – game shot, poachers apprehended, recipes for treating dogs (and a few for people) until his ‘sudden departure’ in 1868. It also notes important dates relating to the Heathcotes.

Charles Peach was born in Empingham in 1819. He was the eldest son of Thomas Peach, a gamekeeper, employed on the Normanton estate, who lived in a cottage near the vicarage in Empingham, with his wife Sarah and their eleven children.

In 1833, Thomas Peach was wounded by John Perkins, a 26-year-old from Ketton, who was subsequently hanged at Oakham. Perkins’ two brothers, who were from Easton-on-the-Hill, Northamptonshire, were transported for life in connection with the same offence. It created much ill feeling among the residents of Easton when one of the gang was acquitted in return for giving the names of the other culprits. This episode is commemorated in a ballad entitled ‘Oakham Poachers or The Lamentation of Young Perkins’ which can be found in Matkin’s *Oakham Almanack* of 1904.

The 1841 Census Return records that Charles Peach was a gamekeeper employed on the Normanton estate. In his journal he recorded notes regarding poachers:

‘Caught Francis Buckworth night snaring. Went to prison 3 months in February 1842. Caught William Hill and Thomas Wade poaching Woolfox Oct 5th 1849. Convicted in the penalty of £5 each. Did not appear. Warrant granted for their apprehension.’

There were many navvies in the area building railways, including the Seaton Viaduct, and poaching by these men was a real problem. For example an entry in 1848 records, ‘Caught 2 Railroad men 30th April John Lacy, William Nicholls’.

Weather is frequently mentioned in the book. In summer 1860 he records:

‘. . . the wettest and worst . . . remembered by the oldest man living. Raised 340 pheasants many perished by the cold after turning out and many destroyed by the Greatest Enemy to game Foxes it being so wet that the pheasants could not fly to perch.’

Extremes of weather are noted particularly: ‘Summer 1861 Severe frosts perished many of the early pheasant’s eggs’ and ‘A very hot summer in 1868, the hottest I ever remember’.

He notes the date Gilbert Henry Heathcote, aged 21, commenced shooting in 1851 and his election as Member of Parliament for Boston in August 1852. In 1853 he obviously accompanied the family to Scotland for three weeks because he records the amounts paid to transport himself and the dogs.

The London addresses of several members of the Heathcote family are entered. He was clearly in the confidence of Lord Aveland (Gilbert Henry’s father) at this time as he was asked to witness his will: ‘25th July 1861 Signed Lord Aveland’s will or codicil in the presence of Lord Aveland and the said John Guy. Also saw Lord Aveland sign it’.

There are many cures for ailments in the notebook, including the following:

For dogs:

'For the inside of the ear. Put a lump of soft soap into the root of the ear and pour on a tablespoonful of Brandy. Rub in.

The best Meddic for a dog is a lump of butter and salt mixed.

When dogs feet are cut by flint and other accidents Friar's Balsam I have used for years and found excellent.'

For people:

'Medicine for a cough. Boil linseed and a stick of licquorice [sic] well together and when cold use as a common drink.

A good smelling bottle for the headache. 1d of sal volatile, 1d of essence of bergamot, 1d of spirits of ammonia all put in a bottle and used if necessary.

Half a pint of new milk warm from the cow made sweet with conserve of roses and two tablespoons of the very best rum. An excellent cordial.'

There was obviously some serious incidents in 1867. Charles Peach jnr, his son, broke his leg in the New Wood in February and Charles Peach snr met with a serious accident by 'a straining his ankle' in May 1867: 'the Doctors Newman and Scott said it were fractured. F Trolley a Bone-Setter say it were not broke.'

The end of his career as a gamekeeper seems to be related to these incidents although the connection is not clear:

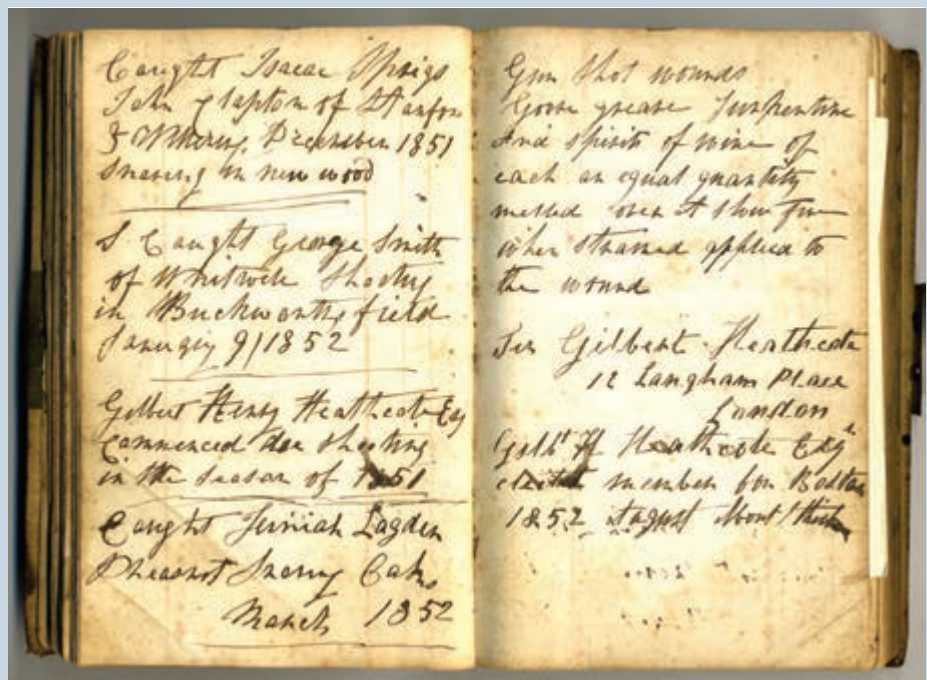
'1868 Charles Peach left Normanton park Saturday 28th March 1868 was not permitted to stop at Luffenham only one month although there were nothing against his character in any shape or form this were Lord Aveland's cruelty and tyranny Lord Aveland behaved very bad in this respect. Came to Barrowden April 23rd left Normanton through an accident in the ankle. Had been born in the service of the Heathcote Family and lived in their service up to the 49 year of my Age. C Peach.'

The last entry in the book records his father's death:

'Thomas Peach died on January 3rd 1870 leaving his 11 children £437 7s 5½ d each after all his expenses were paid which were trifling he being clear of debt Owe no man anything were his motto. Hope he is in Heaven.'

Charles went to live in Luffenham Road, Barrowden, with his family. He never worked as a gamekeeper again, presumably living on his inheritance. He is described in the 1871 Census as 'Gamekeeper unemployed' and in 1891 as 'Gamekeeper retired'. He died in 1895 aged 75.

Two pages from Charles Peach's notebook
(Jean Orpin)



The Building Earl

The 5th Baronet, Gilbert John, was created Baron Aveland in 1856. As a widow, his wife Clementina unexpectedly inherited the Willoughby land-holdings which included the Grimsthorpe estate. However she preferred to live in the mansion at Normanton. Their son Gilbert Henry inherited his father's title, Baron Aveland, in 1867 and on his mother's death in 1888, became the 25th Baron Willoughby d'Eresby. Soon after, in 1892, he was created Earl of Ancaster. He now moved in the highest social circles.

The Prince and Princess of Wales visit Normanton

The Prince and Princess of Wales visited Normanton in January 1881 and the following is quoted from *The Graphic*:

'On the Tuesday Lord Aveland and some of his guests, on their way to shoot over one of the preserves drove through the village of Empingham where triumphal arches and other decorations had been erected in honour of the Royal visitors, and the inhabitants greeted them with enthusiasm, 'God bless the Prince of Wales' being sung by a hundred schoolchildren as they passed the parish church . . .'



Left: A grand ceremonial arch was erected in Empingham for the visit by the Prince and Princess of Wales in 1881 (The Graphic, 22nd January 1881)

At the time Gilbert Henry inherited the Normanton estate in 1867, Empingham was far from being a 'model village'. It was described in the *Post Office Directory* of 1876 thus: 'The village is in a dilapidated state, many of the houses are in ruins.' However it was not to stay that way. By the end of the nineteenth century, Gilbert Henry was justifiably called 'The Building Earl'.

In 1860 the Poor Law Commission had investigated rural housing and like other landowners he obviously took note of their reports. The family owned 13,600 acres in Rutland in fifteen different parishes and Gilbert Henry set about modernising his properties all over the estate. A large workshop and woodyard was built at Normanton to serve the needs of the estate, and brickyards at Luffenham and Pilton provided bricks and tiles. Old farms were repaired and acquired red tiled roofs instead of thatch; brick extensions were added and both small and large properties alike gained tall brick chimneys, with decorative banding. Many of these remain.

*Weed's farmhouse
(Wisteria House)
in Main Street
acquired a new
Ancaster roof to
replace the old
thatch (Sue Lee)*



*Below: Ancaster
roofs and chimneys
on the Old Post
Office in Main
Street (Sue Lee)*



*Right: Several
properties have
Ancaster style
brick extensions
(RO)*

In the second half of the nineteenth century it became less common for agricultural labourers to be lodged in farmhouses so extra housing had to be provided. In due course new buildings, some of stone but mostly of brick, all with the characteristic red tiled roofs and tall decorative chimneys, appeared around the whole of the Rutland estate and most notably in Empingham, the model village.



An Ancaster cottage in Main Street (RO)



One of a number of semi-detached brick cottages in Empingham, all built to the Ancaster style. Note the absence of first floor windows on the front elevation (RO)

The earliest cottages were constructed before 1892 while Gilbert Henry was still a Baron and display his Baron's coronet. After 1892 the Earl's crown proudly adorns the front of all new Ancaster buildings. The style of these buildings is distinctive. It was the result of collaboration between Gilbert Henry Heathcote, his Surveyor and Agent, Edward Brett Binns and Joseph Newman, his Clerk of Works. Second-storey windows are small or non-existent and the most characteristic feature of the houses is the overhanging eaves. These were often decorated with wooden braces extending down below the eaves. A good example is Home Farm where it is easy to see the curve and overhanging eaves although there are no braces remaining (if there ever were any). The braces are very obvious on Normanton Cottages (actually in Empingham parish) and Mill Farm.

Two elevations of this pair of semi-detached cottages in Nook Lane are stone and the other two are brick (RO)





The Heathcote coat of arms, surmounted by a coronet or crown, is a feature on estate houses built by Gilbert Henry, the 6th Baronet (RO)

Walking around Empingham nearly a hundred years after the death of the 'Building Earl', the effect of his investment in the estate and the justification for the description in the sale catalogue can clearly be seen. However the influence of the Heathcote family did of course extend way beyond mere buildings.

Right: Normanton Cottages, with wooden braces below the eaves (RO)



Left: Mill Farm, near the former Empingham watermill. Note the curved wooden braces supporting the eaves (RO)

Above: Home Farm in Main Street. This house appears to have lost its curved wooden braces below the eaves (RO)

Management of the Estate

The Heathcotes employed an Agent or Steward to act on their behalf and manage the estate in their absence. These employees were very important and took charge completely, often fulfilling personal tasks as well as public duties for their employer. There are many stories told of the power of the Agent in Empingham, who was able to remove families from the village if he wished. The Land Agent in 1841 was Thomas Syson and the house where he lived in Main Street is now called Syson's House. Although it is now divided it was originally a substantial house and reflected the status of the position held by its occupant.

Syson's House, although now divided, is a substantial house reflecting the status of Thomas Syson, Land Agent to the Normanton Estate, one of its former occupants (RO)



The whole of the Normanton estate was managed from Empingham. As Lords of the Manor the Heathcotes would be responsible for the Court Baron, a local civil court to deal with all matters relating to tenancies and rentals. Leases were for one to five years and renewed on Lady Day or Michaelmas. Rent Days took place in the Audit Hall. The Steward would pre-

side and keep records. Petty Sessions to deal with minor criminal matters were held every Monday at the White Horse Inn. More serious legal matters were referred to Assizes at Oakham.



Audit Hall, now Empingham village hall, is where tenants of the Normanton Estate paid their rents to the Steward (RO)

Social Responsibility

Before the Welfare State landowners were expected to care for their tenants. In 1794 Heathcote rented the house now known as the Wilderness as a House of Protection for the Poor and provided beds and bedding for them. In 1837 when the Union Workhouse at Oakham opened it took over some of those responsibilities and the Wilderness became the doctor's residence.

*The Wilderness.
Sir Gilbert
Heathcote rented
it in 1794 as a
House of
Protection for the
Poor. Early in the
twentieth century
it was the
residence of Edgar
Steele Edwards,
medical officer
and public
vaccinator for the
Empingham
district of the
Oakham Union
(RO)*



In 1838 Gilbert Heathcote, 4th Baronet, built a new school, which was then let to the managers. It comprised a large room divided by a screen. He presented the school with chandeliers and gave £15 towards a salary for the schoolmaster whom he appointed. The 5th Baronet added an extra room in 1872. Members of the family would visit the school from time to time and the children were expected to show them due respect. When the Prince and Princess of Wales visited, the children were given an extra half hour at playtime in order to line the street.



A plaque recording that members of the Heathcote family built and extended the village school. It is now a private residence (RO)



The front of the Service Sheet printed for the church re-opening following its restoration in 1894 (Jean Orpin)

In 1894, Empingham church was restored under the direction of J C Traylen, a Stamford architect. The Heathcotes personally paid £399 0s 10d for the recasting of the bells by Taylors of Loughborough and £47 for nave chairs, which were bought from Mr William Royce of Stamford. Lady Ancaster also held concerts to raise money for the appeal.

On Thursday 4th July 1895 the Bishop of Peterborough visited the parish to officiate at the re-opening of the church. The service began with verses from Psalm 118, 'Open me the gates of righteousness: that I may go into them, and give thanks to the Lord. This is the gate of the Lord: the righteous shall enter into it'.

Gilbert Henry allowed stone from the old Methodist Chapel on

Crocket Lane to be sold to raise money for a new chapel and he also gave the land for it. Five hundred people attended the opening in 1899 and tea was provided in the Audit Hall.

The Heathcotes provided a water supply for the village and, as there were many thatched houses, they contributed half the cost of a fire engine and house. They also gave land for the Primrose Hall on Main Street, which was opened in 1899.



The Methodist Chapel in Main Street, Empingham, was opened in 1899. It was built on land donated by Gilbert Henry, 1st Earl of Ancaster (Sue Lee)



*Primrose League
badges (Sue Lee)*

The Primrose League was an organisation for spreading Conservative principles in Great Britain. It was founded in 1883 in memory of Benjamin Disraeli (the primrose was reputedly his favourite flower) and active until the mid 1990s. It was finally wound up in December 2004. Membership of the League was open to women as well as men. In Empingham the Primrose Hall was also used as a Reading Room and for men to play billiards and cards.



*Primrose Hall
in Main Street,
Empingham,
was a meeting
place for the
Primrose
League as well
as a Reading
Room (RO)*

Employment

During the Heathcotes' ownership, the village was virtually self-contained with nearly everyone reliant on the estate for employment, making the whole community dependent on the Heathcotes. It did not 'do' to fall out with the Agent or fail to take notice when the Heathcote carriage stopped and its occupant complained about the state of one's garden.

A large majority of villagers were employed in agriculture either directly by the estate or by farmers who were all tenants of the estate. Up to the middle of the nineteenth century a number of labourers lived in the farm houses but the number of farm servants 'living in' fell steadily from 1861. This would have made agricultural labourers more dependent on seasonal work. Neither labourers nor tenant farmers had a great deal of stability of employment. Short leases were common and farms seem to have changed hands quite often.

Empingham remained an agricultural community throughout the nineteenth century although the number of farms reduced as they were consolidated into larger units. The farms were mixed arable and pasture with some grass near the farm, but each farm was required by the estate to have a share of the poorer grass. In the years of agricultural depression at the end of the nineteenth century farmers diversified and we find occupations listed in the census as 'Farmer and Butcher' 'Farmer and Innkeeper,' Farmer and

Some estate employees recorded in the 1901 Census Return for Empingham:

Clerk of Works	1
Draughtsman	1
Bricklayers	5
Carpenters	5
Stonemasons	3
Thatcher	1
Forestry workers	9
Gamekeepers	5

Blacksmith'. Several farms were also taken 'in hand' and a Farm Foreman or Farm Bailiff put in charge.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century there was increasing variety in the employment of the villagers although the influence of the estate had not diminished. The works at Normanton (*see* Chapter 11 – Normanton) employed about 50 men, many of them from Empingham, and there were also estate workshops in Jubilee Yard (behind South View Farm). The occu-

pations relating to the activities of the 'Building Earl' are easily identified – there is an estate thatcher, painters and decorators, carpenters, bricklayers and stonemasons. He was also a 'shooting man' so there are several gamekeepers, and forestry had become an important aspect of the estate with the Head Forester having up to ten men under him.

The village may have been dependent on the estate but it also reaped the rewards in terms of the duty of care the family undertook with regard to their estate. This included treats for the villagers and employees. The Heathcotes invited the children from the school up to the Hall once a year for a treat and also arranged outings for their workers.

Estate Outing

The *Rutland Churchman* of 1904 reports:

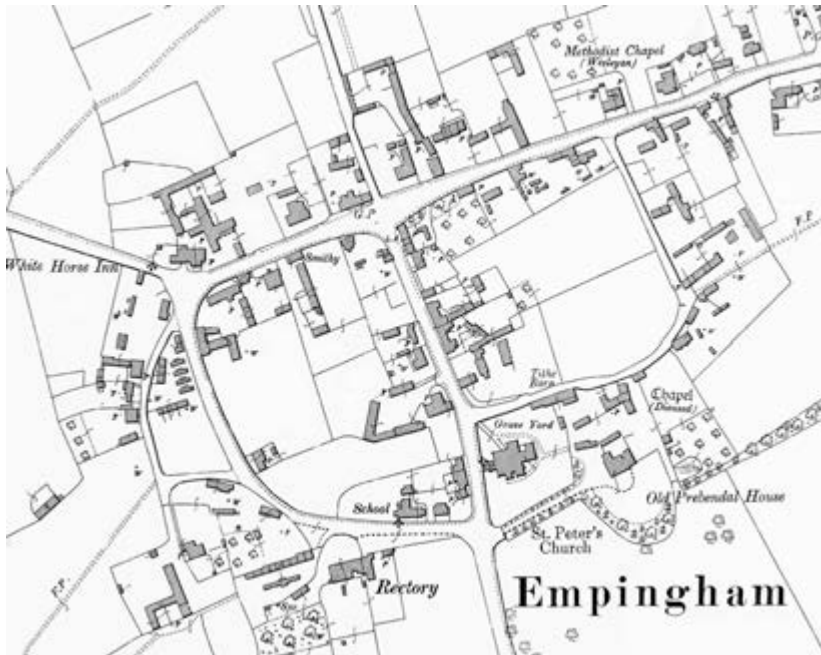
'On Saturday 10th Sept, the whole of the workmen on the Earl of Ancaster's Empingham and Normanton estates, with their wives, were taken, through the kindness of his lordship, to Yarmouth for an outing. The special train left Ketton at 5.15am. travelling via Saxby and Bourne, and stopping only at Luffenham, South Witham, and Bourne. Yarmouth was reached about ten o'clock and eight hours were spent at this popular sea-side resort: the party reached Ketton once more about eleven o'clock at night.'

Sale of the Estate

The fall in farming incomes, death duties and his wife's preference for Grimsthorpe resulted in the second Earl of Ancaster's decision to sell the Normanton estate and to dispose of the unwanted house. Most of the estate properties were sold prior to or after the auction, which took place in 1924, although some remained in Ancaster ownership until 1959. The Estate was not put up for sale as an entity and some families like the Hibbitts, Weeds and Corbys who had by then occupied farms for more than one generation were in a position to purchase them when the estate was sold. As reported in the *Stamford Mercury* of 19th September 1924: 'The vendors had arranged that the schools at Edith Weston and Empingham should not be offered, and a pleasing announcement was that they had also decided to present the Audit Hall at Empingham to the village.'



Above: The Empingham village sign has images which represent the community before and after the construction of Rutland Water (RO)



Left: This map of Empingham is from the OS 2nd ed 25" map 1904. The farmyards, large gardens and other open spaces have largely been filled with modern developments

The Heathcote family owned Empingham for almost 200 years, and the village we see today is largely a legacy of that dynasty. However, in the last hundred years Empingham has changed from being a self-sufficient village mainly occupied by tenant farmers, farm workers and others employed by the Ancaster Estate. Now, most of the houses, farmhouses and farm buildings are private owner-occupied residences. The Ancaster style is still much in evidence throughout the village, but there has been a great deal of modern development which has taken over the farmyards, large gardens and other open spaces as seen on early twentieth-century maps.



Empingham village from the air in 2006. Its close proximity to Rutland Water is evident, but from ground level only the grassed embankment can be seen, and then only from the western end of the village
(John Nowell, Zodiac Publishing)

Before the building of the reservoir was proposed, the village had looked much the same – a mixture of distinctive Ancaster properties, the children still attending the school built by the Ancasters, shops serving the community and only small areas of development. The residents did not look kindly on the proposal to build an enormous earth bank, flood the former farmland of the estate and close Sykes Lane which linked the village to Hambleton and Edith Weston.

Rutland Water did make a huge difference but not perhaps in the way feared. Suddenly there was a new source of employment, incomers living in new estates, the pub catering for an increasing clientele, and Empingham became a fashionable place to live. The protest resulted in much more landscaping than originally envisaged so, instead of being a desolate area of water, it became an attractive place to visit and enjoy. The old school, the workshops and the thatched cottages built to house the estate employees so many years ago were converted into attractive homes for twentieth century living.