

## TWO NEIGHBOURING KENT ESTATES NEAR HYTHE AND THEIR REMARKABLE ARTISTIC CONNECTIONS IN THE MID EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

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In 1719 Johannes Kip's (1653-1722) engravings of Kent's country houses and their surrounding estates were published in Harris's *History of Kent*.<sup>1</sup> At Mount Morris, Monks Horton, and Beachborough Manor, Newington by Hythe, Kip found two large neighbouring estates with fine houses that were just three miles apart, each surrounded by a manicured garden, parkland and fields in which livestock could graze, interspersed with woodland which afforded shelter for deer (**Plates I and II**). Both estates lay close to the coast, not far from Hythe, a bonfire lit on Beachborough Hill, later renamed Summerhouse Hill, being visible from France.

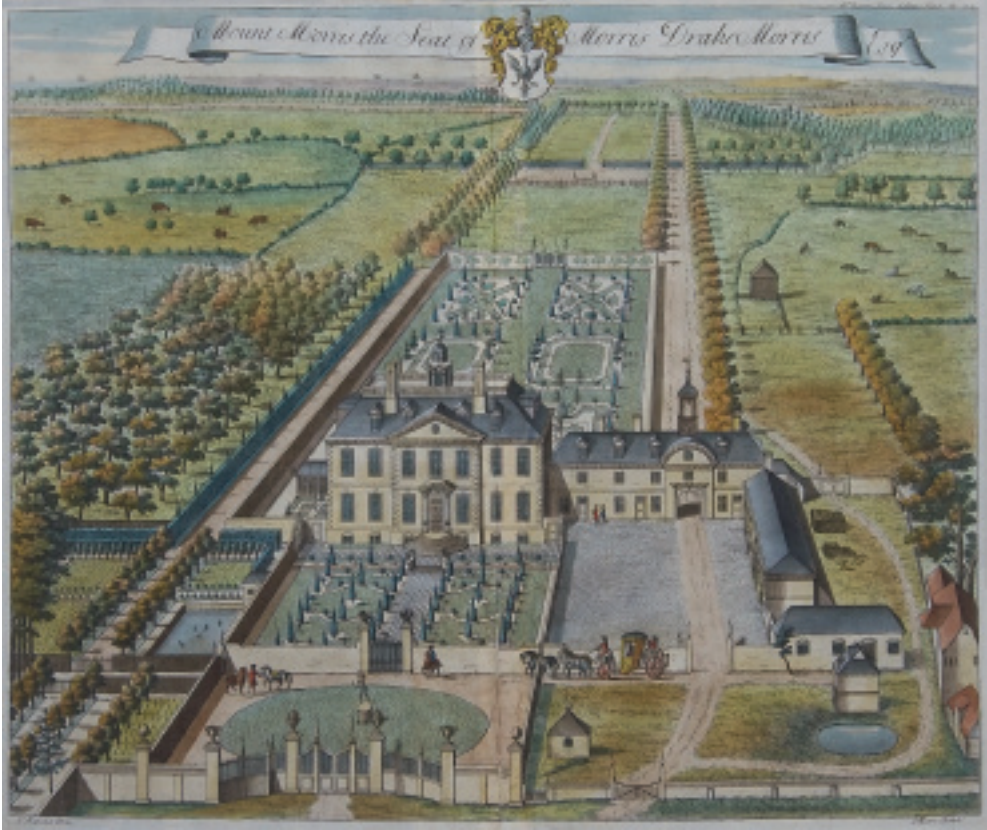
Mount Morris was at that time the country seat of Morris Drake Morris (1695-1723) who in 1717 had inherited the estate from his grandfather, Thomas Morris, the original builder of the 7-bay house of c.1695. In 1723 when Morris Drake Morris died, unmarried and without a direct heir, under the terms of his grandfather's will<sup>2</sup> a lifetime interest in his properties passed to his sister Elizabeth Robinson (née Drake, 1693-1746) but with the proviso that upon her death that they should then pass directly to her eldest son. In 1711 Elizabeth Drake had married Matthew Robinson (1693-1778), a Cambridge law student.<sup>3</sup> He forsook his studies and the young couple moved north, near to where Matthew had grown up, where they raised a large family. In 1733 the family moved to Kent to reside at Mount Morris – which is when the estate's artistic connections began.

Matthew Robinson was an amateur artist of repute – his grandson, Matthew Montagu (1762-1831), wrote of his grandfather in 1809:<sup>4</sup>

A person of great intellectual endowments, and much admired for his talents in conversation, and for his taste in the fine arts, particularly in painting, in which he acquired so great a proficiency as to excel most of the professed artists of his day particularly in landscape.

It is difficult for Robinson's artistic merit to be assessed today as only two of his works appear to have survived. They are capriccios of Italianate rural scenes redolent of the style of Giovanni Battista Busiri (1698-1757) and were recorded in a list of paintings at Welbeck Abbey in 1747.<sup>5</sup>

Robinson was a restless figure who longed for the hustle and bustle of London, frequenting the coffee houses and taverns with his artist friends. In 1735 a group of artists, including Robinson, subscribed 4 guineas each to assist the promising but



*Mount Morris the seat of Morris Drake Morris Esq* engraved by Johannes Kip (1653-1722), c.1719. Copper engraving, 41 x 34cm. Published in J. Harris's, *History of Kent*, 1719, vol. 1. © Rodney Griffiths.

impoverished Scottish artist Gawen Hamilton (c.1697-1737) by commissioning him to paint their group portrait, which they subsequently raffled amongst themselves.<sup>6</sup> This painting, *A Conversation of Virtuosis at the Kings Arms*, one of the most iconic British paintings of the eighteenth century, now hangs in The National Portrait Gallery, London. It depicts the leading professional artists, sculptors and architects of the day and seated at the very centre of them is Matthew Robinson.

Hamilton was further assisted by Robinson who commissioned him to visit Mount Morris to paint a double portrait of him and his wife in their drawing room and to depict over the mantelpiece between them an imagined group portrait of their nine children (**Plate III**). He also commissioned Hamilton to paint a small scale, full length portrait of himself seated before an easel painting a landscape, both of these works being completed c.1735. Unfortunately, despite the assistance of his fellow artists and the patronage of Robinson, Hamilton died of a fever in 1737.



*Beachborough the seat of William Brockman* engraved by Johannes Kip (1653-1722), c.1719. Copper engraving, 41 x 34cm. Published in J. Harris's, *History of Kent*, 1719, vol. 1. © Rodney Griffiths.

By 1740 Robinson was promoting the interests of another artist, Edward Haytley (1713-1762).<sup>7</sup> The young Haytley had come to settle in London from his native Shropshire and, like Hamilton before him, specialised in painting groups of friends or families in relaxed settings in a small scale, whole length format, known as a 'conversation piece'. Haytley received a number of commissions from the Robinson family. In c.1754 Robinson's elder daughter Mrs Elizabeth Montagu (1720-1800) commissioned Haytley to paint a small scale, full length portrait of herself and this remains one of the finest single-figure works of his oeuvre. Robinson continued to sing Haytley's praises – when his wife asked him how Haytley was able to capture such a true likeness on such a small scale, he simply replied 'it is his genius'.<sup>8</sup>

Robinson also introduced Haytley to his neighbour James Brockman (1696-1767). Following the death of his father, William Brockman, in 1742, James inherited the Beachborough Manor estate, one of Kent's largest, which he had been managing on his father's behalf since 1733. The house was built in the early



*A double portrait of Matthew Robinson and his wife Elizabeth Drake by Gawen Hamilton (c.1697-1737), c.1735. Oil on canvas, 63.5 x 76.8cm. © Rodney Griffiths.*

seventeenth century. Matthew Robinson and James Brockman could not have been more different – Robinson flamboyant, talkative, restless and preferring the metropolis to the country – while Brockman was measured, conservative and meticulous, residing at Beachborough as a bachelor until his death. Yet despite their very different personalities the two neighbours seemed to get along well. Throughout his life Brockman kept account ledgers where he recorded every last farthing of expenditure.<sup>9</sup> These cash books, today held in the British Library, are a rich source for social historians – they record how on one occasion Robinson lent Brockman some wine and on another how Robinson had done some shopping for Brockman in London and on yet another occasion Robinson had hired Brockman’s carriage from him for a trip to London.

From 1740 onwards Edward Haytley’s name begins to appear in Brockman’s ledgers. At first Haytley is employed to do repair work on some of the pictures and their frames at Beachborough and Brockman also purchases a watercolour from Haytley. Then, in 1746, Haytley received payment for a major commission. Brockman had been remodelling his park and garden, he had an ornamental pond



*The Brockman Family beside Temple Pond, Beachborough Manor, Kent* by Edward Haytley (1713-1762), c.1746. Oil on canvas, 52.7 x 65.0cm.  
© National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia.

dug and a rotunda was to be built and he commissioned Haytley to paint two pictures of this new scene, populated by Brockman and his friends (**Plate IV**). The resulting works now hang in The National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia, and are undoubtedly the crowning achievements of Haytley's career.

Brockman's ledgers show that in 1744 he also commissioned Haytley to paint small-scale portraits of himself inside the Manor and of his cousin, Elizabeth Brockman from nearby Cheriton, standing in the parkland. Elizabeth's sister, Caroline, had married the Reverend Ralph Drake who was later to inherit the Beachborough estate upon James Brockman's death. Another intriguing entry which records Brockman paying Haytley for 'a Canaletto' does not make it clear if the painting referred to is by the hand of the Italian master himself, that Haytley had perhaps procured for Brockman in London, or if in fact it was for a copy of a Canaletto from the hand of Haytley. That Haytley may have been supplementing his income as a copyist is yet to be determined by art historians.

In Haytley's painting, *The Brockman Family beside Temple Pond, Beachborough*

*Manor, Kent* (Plate IV), standing beside the Reverend Edmund Parker, the vicar of nearby Newington, and holding a fishing pole, is Susanna Highmore (1725-1812). Susanna, an artist and poet, was the daughter of Joseph Highmore (1692-1780) one of England's leading portrait painters. She and her family were frequent visitors to Beachborough and sketches made by her of the estate and its environs are held by the Tate Gallery, London.<sup>10</sup>

The catalogue of a sale held by Christie's, London, indicates that Joseph Highmore painted James Brockman's portrait.<sup>11</sup> An entry in 1750 in the latter's cash book records Brockman paying Highmore the sum of 12 guineas to settle a bill which most probably relates to this portrait. Although the Christie's catalogue is unillustrated a contemporary photograph, taken in 1931, of this painting is held in the Witt Library of The Courtauld Institute of Art, London.

In 1750 the Welsh artist Richard Wilson (1714-1782) travelled to Italy where he spent seven years honing his artistic skills before returning to England in 1757. Upon his return he concentrated on landscape painting and became the pre-eminent British artist of the time in this genre. When he left for Italy he travelled down to the Kent coast to cross the Channel, stopping off at Beachborough where he sketched *Brockman's Bushes* which he noted on the flyleaf of his Italian sketch book.<sup>12</sup>

In 1746 Robinson's wife Elizabeth died and, in accordance with the terms of Thomas Morris's will, Mount Morris passed to their eldest son Matthew (1713-1800) who in 1794 became 2nd Lord Rokeby. Robinson lost little time in leaving Kent and setting up house in London where he resided until his death in 1778.<sup>13</sup> A line engraving of 1809 by W. Angus depicts Mount Morris (wrongly entitled Mount Norris), standing, at least when viewed from outside, in its glory – but this was not to be for much longer. As 2nd Lord Rokeby became older he became more and more eccentric. He let his beard grow long and white, fed on raw meat, took several cold baths a day in his greenhouse and let the parkland of Mount Morris return to nature and the house fall into disrepair. He died unmarried in 1800. When Brayley<sup>14</sup> published his *Beauties of England and Wales* in 1808 he noted that at Mount Morris, on a panel in the book-room, was a portrait of Matthew Robinson's elder daughter Elizabeth, by William Hoare (1707-1792). By 1819 when Fussell made his journey documenting the houses along the Kent coast he wrote of Mount Morris:<sup>15</sup>

The staircase, once decorated with paintings, like all the rest of the apartments, has lost its splendour; and the wind whistled dismally through the broken sashes.

Although all of the furniture, save one bookcase, had been removed, many paintings by Matthew Robinson, executed on the rooms' panelling, remained. Fussell describes his work:

the hall of Mount Morris contains many excellent specimens of his ability as a portrait painter, in various copies from Rubens, Vandyke, and other great masters, upon panel; some of them but little inferior to the originals.

By 1838 Greenwood tells us, 'Mount Morris is entirely disparted and the house in a deserted ruinous state'.<sup>16</sup> Today no trace remains of this former fine house (located at NGR TR 1270 3967) and its estate.

When James Brockman died in 1767 he bequeathed Beachborough to his nephew, the Reverend Ralph Drake on the proviso that the latter changed his surname to Drake-Brockman. This he did by an Act of Parliament. Beachborough then passed down through generations of Drake-Brockmans. In 1813 James Drake-Brockman (1763-1832) rebuilt and extended Beachborough to form an even grander residence. In 1786 he had married Catherine Tatton and her uncle commissioned Thomas Gainsborough (1727-1788) to paint her portrait which now hangs in The National Gallery of Art, Washington DC.<sup>17</sup> It was not until 1911 that the house was sold out of the family, although the grounds of the estate were held within the family until 1971 when they were also finally sold. In the 1950s a devastating fire swept through the house and much of it was destroyed. Today all that remains is a part of the original east wing that is run as a bed and breakfast establishment located at NGR TR 1690 3813. Part of the original estate grounds survives as Beachborough Park with its main feature being the distinctive Summerhouse Hill.

The twenty works of art referred to in this article (listed below) were all created in the mid eighteenth century by some of the most accomplished artists of the era and are notable in that they all have connections with either Mount Morris or Beachborough.

Johannes Kip's engravings *Mount Morris the Seat of Morris Drake Morris Esq* and *Beachborough the Seat of William Brockman*;

Matthew Robinson's capriccios *Landscape* and *View of a Lake*;

Gawen Hamilton's *A Conversation of Virtuosis at the Kings Arms; A Double Portrait of Matthew Robinson and his wife Elizabeth Drake* and *Matthew Robinson seated at an Easel*;

Edward Haytley's *Elizabeth Brockman of Cheriton; James Brockman of Beachborough, Kent; Mrs Elizabeth Montagu; Lady and Gentleman with their Daughter in the Grounds of an Estate; Mrs Sarah Scott nee Robinson; The Brockman Family in the Rotunda at Temple Pond, Beachborough Manor, Kent; The Brockman Family beside Temple Pond, Beachborough Manor, Kent; A View of Sandleford Priory, the Montagu Family in the foreground*;

Susanna Highmore's sketch *A View of Beachborough Hill, with Figures in the Foreground*;

Joseph Highmore's *Portrait of James Brockman*;

Richard Wilson's drawing *Brockman's Copse*;

William Hoare's *Portrait of Mrs Elizabeth Montagu*;

Thomas Gainsborough's *Portrait of Catherine Tatton*.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> John Harris, 1719, *The History of Kent*, London, vol. 1.

<sup>2</sup> 'Will of Thomas Morris of Monckshorton, Kent', National Archives, PROB 11/559/40.

<sup>3</sup> John W. Clay, 1899, *The Registers of St Paul's Cathedral*, Harleian Society, London, p. 31.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew Montagu, *The Letters of Mrs Elizabeth Montagu*, London, 1809, vol 1, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> *Catalogue of the Collection of Pictures belonging to the Rt. Hon'ble Henrietta Cavendishe Holles Countess of Oxford at her Seat at Welbeck in the County of Nottingham*. MS Welbeck 6 Novr. 1747.

- <sup>6</sup> George Vertue, *Notebooks*, 111, pp. 71-2.
- <sup>7</sup> Rodney Griffiths, 2012, *The Life and Works of Edward Haytley*, Walpole Society, vol. LXXIV, pp. 1-60.
- <sup>8</sup> Quoted by Mrs Robinson in a letter to her elder daughter Mrs Elizabeth Montagu on 8 May 1745.
- <sup>9</sup> James Brockman, *Account Books*, held in the British Library Add. MS 42708.
- <sup>10</sup> Susanna Duncombe (née Highmore), *A View of Beachborough Hill, with Figures in the Foreground*, Tate Britain, London, T04283.
- <sup>11</sup> Christie's, London, 31 July 1931, Lot 11.
- <sup>12</sup> Richard Wilson, *Italian Sketchbook*, Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, Connecticut, USA, Paul Mellon Collection, Accession Number B1977.14.359.
- <sup>13</sup> It was only then that he finally returned permanently to Kent as his body was interred in the family vault in the church at Monks Horton, close to Mount Morris. *Bishop's Transcripts for the parish of Monks Horton*, Family History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah, USA, film no. 1751982.
- <sup>14</sup> Edward Wedlake Brayley, 1808, *The Beauties of England and Wales*, London, vol. VIII, pp. 1126-31.
- <sup>15</sup> L. Fussell, 1818, *A Journey Round the Coast of Kent*, London, pp. 214-7.
- <sup>16</sup> C. Greenwood, 1838, *An Epitome of County History*, London, vol. 1, p. 310.
- <sup>17</sup> Thomas Gainsborough, *Miss Catherine Tatton*, 1786, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, 1937.1.99.