

LOWTHER VILLAGE AND ROBERT ADAM

By R. W. Brunskill

THE eighteenth-century landscape garden is often considered to be one of the few peculiarly English contributions to architecture. The landowners who were prepared to raise hillsides, divert rivers, and plant forests for the benefit of their descendents were equally ready to improve the landscape with buildings: grottos, temples, ruined castles rising at the whim of one enthusiastic landscaper after another. Even complete villages sprang up to combine incident with philanthropy.

One of the most ambitious and yet one of the least known of these planned communities is the village of Lowther, built for Sir James Lowther, later Earl of Lonsdale, round about 1773 and bearing a remarkable resemblance to a design prepared by Robert Adam in 1766 for a model village for that same nobleman. Robert Adam prepared designs for several projects on behalf of Sir James Lowther, who was one of his earliest patrons, but it has always been assumed that little or nothing was carried out. Nevertheless the new village at Lowther attracted the attention of the early romantic adventurers to the Lake District and several made the diversion to inspect this novelty. There has been some confusion between the new village of the 1770's and Lowther Newtown, a reconstructed village of almost a century before, but the crescents and squares of Lowther Village are so clearly a part of that other tradition of planned residential development which so distinguished eighteenth-century England that their association with the great designer of country houses and urban developments should be revived.¹

Lowther Village is situated just to the east of the main west coast road from London to Scotland, about half way between Penrith and Shap. A narrow loop road breaks off from the highway and a further narrow road rises along a curve between thickly planted trees to emerge suddenly into a circular enclosure. To the

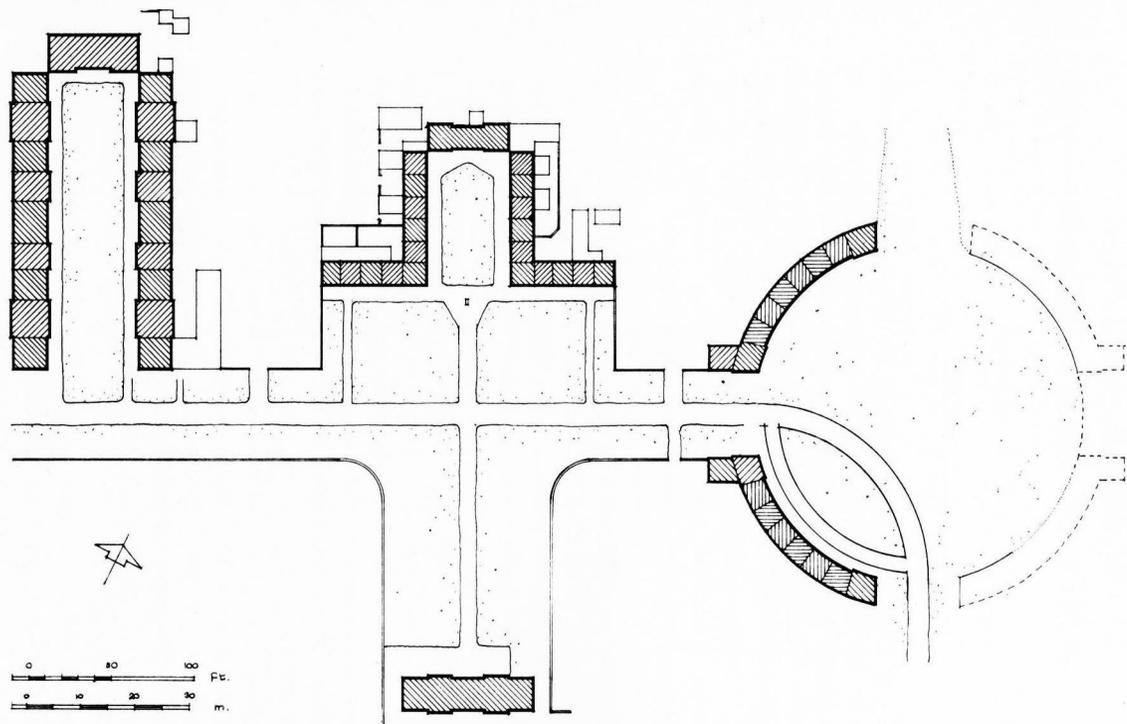


FIG. 1. Plan of Lowther Village—This plan is based on measured drawings prepared by D. A. L. Saul and W. M. Bamber in 1962 when students at the School of Architecture of the University of Manchester.

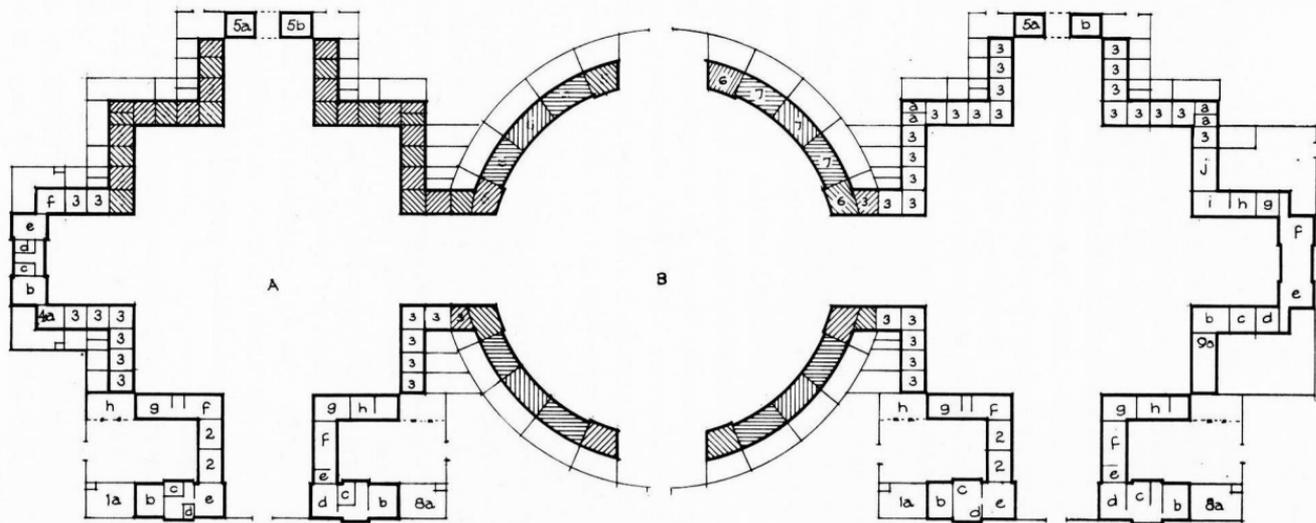


FIG. 2. Design for a Village for Sir James Lowther—This diagram is based on notes made with the kind permission of the Curator of the Soane Museum from the plan which forms Plate 69 of Vol. XXXIII of the Adam Drawings. The parts which correspond to Lowther Village are hatched. The part section is based on the elevations in the same series. A plan consisting of the two outer portions of the larger scheme, omitting the quadrant and the two inner portions of the crosses forms Plate 68 and is headed *Plan of the Village for Sir James Lowther* and signed Robt. Adam Archt. 1766.

Key: 1a yard, b kitchen, c back-kitchen, d study, e parlour, f stable, g cow-house, h carts. 2—brew-house. 3—cottage, 12 ft. square (stairs dotted in). 4a washhouse, b kitchen, c scullery, d study, e parlour, f school. 5a smithy, b kitchen. 6—two-storey cottage. 7—two-room cottage. 8a yard, b kitchen, c study, d parlour, e straw, f cow-house, g stable, h brewhouse. 9a bakehouse, b brewhouse, c washhouse, d dairy, e parlour, f kitchen, g scullery, h stable, i cow-house, j barn. A—well sketched in pencil. B—market house sketched in pencil.

right this circus is defined by trees, but to the left two quadrants of cottages form the approach into the main part of the village. Each quadrant consists of six tiny cottages, apparently single-storey and set between a pair of two-storey pavilions. The buildings are of the grey local stone and surmounted by roofs of grey-green Lake District slate; their architectural adornment consists only of a plain string course maintaining the eaves line of the cottages across the pavilions; but the strong simple curve, the rhythm of doors, windows and chimney stacks, and the careful articulation of the flanking units combine to give a strong formality to this composition in miniature.

The formality is maintained in the next section of the village which consists of another group of cottages, arranged this time in the skeleton of a Greek cross. To the right a two-storey house closes a vista defined by two L-shaped terraces of single-storey cottages looking inwards towards the little court they create, and linked to one of the quadrants by boundary walls which in turn induce a further arm of the cross. To the left another two-storey house, presumably intended for the bailiff, closes the cross-axis, and although isolated, clearly belongs to the Greek-cross composition.

The third section consists of a narrow court of alternating two-storey and single-storey cottages set at right angles to the main axis of the village. The road continues past the end of this court to make a sharp turn as the views out from the village are contained once more by thickly planted trees.

The simple but controlled detailing of the entrance quadrants is maintained throughout the village; the string course and slightly projecting facets on plan are the only embellishment. Cottages open directly off narrow paths which make a symmetrical pattern in close-cropped lawns. Even the village pump is located to play its part in the composition.

Among the drawings prepared by Robert Adam for Sir James Lowther and bound as part of the collection of drawings in Sir John Soane's Museum are two alternative but generally similar designs for a new village to be erected on an un-named site, one undated, the other dated 1766.² The more elaborate of the designs consists of a circular space bounded by buildings in four

quadrants and forming the centre of an axis along which are placed, on either side, great squares, the three outer sides of which have been extended to form in each case a Greek cross. The drawings are done in ink and wash with amendments in pencil including the addition of a domed market house in the centre of the circus and a well at the intersection of the axes of the square. Accompanying the plans are elevations showing single-storey cottages with flanking pavilions each with a pyramidal hipped roof and a simple string course continuing the eaves line of the cottages.

The plans show that each quadrant was intended to have three cottages, each of two rooms on the ground floor; the flanking pavilions on the minor axis were to have been one-roomed while the other pavilions were to have had single-storey connections linking with the arms of the Greek crosses. The two larger enclosures were defined generally by one-room cottages, but the major axis was to have been terminated at each end by a larger house, two storeyed and with kitchen, parlour, scullery and study on the ground floor. The minor axis through each Greek cross was to have been terminated at one end by cottages flanking an arched gateway and at the other by a pair of farmsteads, surely among the first architect-designed sets of farm buildings. The plan included school and wash-house and each cottage had an enclosed yard.

The cottages, which formed the majority of the buildings, are shown as consisting of one room with a door, a window, and a fireplace. A staircase is also sketched into each plan. The sectional elevations allow headroom sufficient for a loft, but there is no indication of the means of lighting such an upper storey.

The village of Lowther is of course much smaller, less than half the size, of the village projected by Robert Adam. Both, however, are based on a combination of circus and Greek cross imposed on a square; both consist mainly of one-room cottages, apparently one-storey in height but articulated by two-storey dwellings; both display simple, almost austere elevations, dependent for interest on straight forward, unadorned, door and window openings, on plain string courses, and on slightly projecting and receding planes. The architectural links between the two designs

are alone significant. They are confirmed in the person of Robert Adam's client.

Sir James Lowther, later Earl of Lonsdale, was one of the most powerful and least popular provincial landowners of his time. He was born into the Maulds Meaburn branch of the Lowther family and at the age of nine succeeded his father, Robert Lowther, in this small estate. Five years later he succeeded his cousin in the baronetcy of Lowther and shortly afterwards inherited the estates of the Whitehaven branch of the family including the rapidly swelling royalties of West Cumberland coal mines. Although his wealth and his marriage in 1761 to Lady Mary Stuart, daughter of the Earl of Bute gave him access to the highest political circles in London he maintained interests in Cumberland and Westmorland. At one time he controlled as many as nine seats in Parliament, the "Lowther Ninepins", and the two counties witnessed bitter political battles with other local families. At first opposing the policies which led to the outbreak of the American War of Independence he supported the government after the war had become general, and even, just before peace was declared, offered to provide and man at his own expense a ship of the line. Shortly after the Treaty of Paris he was created Earl of Lonsdale and he died, universally hated, in 1802, at the age of 66; "a madman, too influential to be locked up".³

His madness had not extended to building mania for, though many designs were prepared for him, few became executed works. The Earl of Bute was one of the earliest patrons of Robert Adam, responsible for Shelburne, later Lansdowne House, his London headquarters and Luton Hoo, his country seat.⁴ It is likely that Lord Bute introduced the brilliant young architect to the wealthy young son-in-law for in 1766 Robert Adam began the series of drawings for alterations and new works in the two Northern counties which was to continue until 1785. Dated 1766, drawings survive of a new court-house and gaol intended for Appleby;⁵ of the same date are drawings for Whitehaven Castle; in 1767 began the drawings for more and more ambitious projects in Classical or Castellated Gothic styles for a new residence at Lowther Hall; of 1766 and bound with the drawings for Lowther

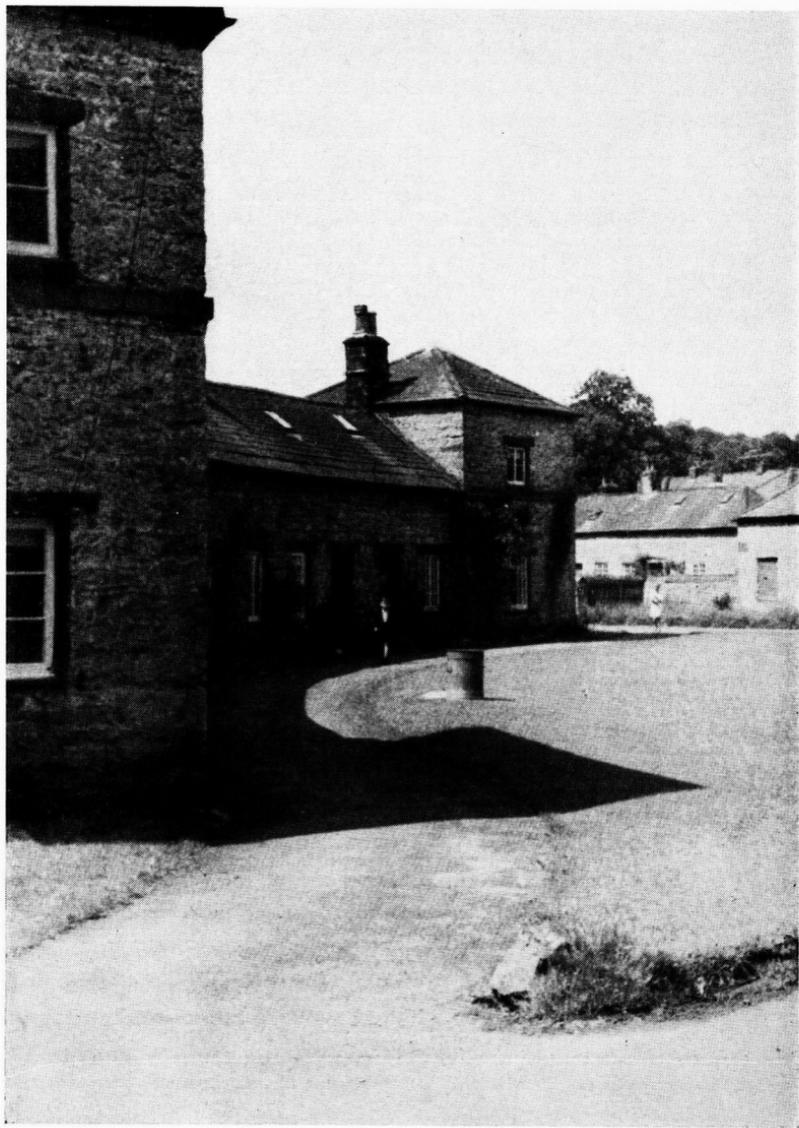


PLATE I. South quadrant of the circus—between the two pavilions are six cottages, each having one room on the ground floor and a loft in the roof space lit only by a skylight.

and Whitehaven in the Soane Collection are the designs for a model village addressed to Sir James Lowther.⁶

It has been assumed hitherto that the model village was either not erected at all, or was built on the Lowther estates at Whitehaven.⁷ Yet such a village was noted by several topographical writers visiting Westmorland at the end of the eighteenth century.

On his "Excursion to the Lakes" made in August 1773, William Hutchinson described how:

"we visited the present works of Sir James Lowther, to which he is pleased to give the name of The Village; the buildings of which are of stone, handsomely sashed and covered with blue slate—Our approach was at the eastern end where the work there proceeding formed a crescent behind which the other buildings are thrown in squares. The design on which the proprietor is building this beautiful place is to entertain a number of linen manufacturers, the erection being calculated for that purpose, with proper apartments for the directors and governors of such a work—By the appearance of the place it seems as if it would be capable of receiving a thousand artists."⁸

As the work was "proceeding" at the time of Hutchinson's visit we have a useful check on the actual date of erection.

In 1795, Joseph Budworth made a detour on his "Fortnight's Ramble to the Lakes" in order to visit Lowther. He

"left Penrith to go to Shap; sent forward the carriage whilst we went to look at a regular-built village, which is but thinly inhabited; many of the houses are unfinished, and there were cattle in some of them."⁹

Mr. Budworth and his companions went on to visit the Lowther carpet manufactory where they admired the quality of the work and applauded the employment given to "many orphans taken from the Foundling Hospital", but noted that Mr. Bloom the manager "has a large stock on hand".

Another early book of advice for travellers, Richard West's "Guide to the Lakes" illustrates on an accompanying map a settlement marked "New Village" in the locality of the present Lowther



PLATE 2. The north quadrant of the circus—this matches the south quadrant but, apparently, was never occupied and was left incomplete. The ground falls away rapidly at the rear and there are cellars below the cottages.

Village, and shown as consisting of two crescents facing each other about a circus.¹⁰

That shrewd local observer J. Housman made reference to the "New Village" in 1800; "Lowther new village was built many years ago, by the present Lord Lonsdale, with a design of establishing a linen manufactory: it is on a regular and commodious plan; but the design failing, few of the houses are completely finished: it affords, however, a comfortable residence to his Lordship's labourers."¹¹

Richard Warner and his companions also included Lowther Village in their "Tour through the Northern Counties". They stopped

"to smile on the fantastical incongruity of its plan, which exhibits the grandest features of city architecture, the Circus, the Crescent, and the Square, upon the mean scale of a peasant's cottage. These groups of houses were built for the labourers of Lord Lonsdale, but from their desolate, deserted appearance it would seem that no sufficient encouragement had been held out to their inhabitants to continue in them".¹²

For one traveller prose was not sufficient to record this local wonder. Addressing with esteem his verses to the Earl of Lonsdale of the time, Thomas Wilkinson declared:

They bade the limestone leave its native bed,
And rise to screen the poor mechanic's head,
Beneath their hands new villages appeared
And human tongue the lonely forests cheered".¹³

Mr. Wilkinson was right to refer to new villages in the plural as there had been an earlier reconstruction of the village, still known as Lowther Newtown, about a mile from Lowther Village and quite close to what remains of Lowther Castle.

There had been a land-holding at Lowther since before 1287 when Alice, daughter of Peter de Thrimby quit claimed certain lands to Hugh de Louthre including a strength, probably of motte and bailey form. During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries first one tower then another, and then a great hall were built on the site. Between this Lowther Hall and the church further down a slope there grew up a straggling village which eventually

included a parsonage house and seventeen tenements as well as hall and church. In 1682, Sir John Lowther bought the tenements, demolishing them to improve the prospect of his house, and shortly afterwards carried out a good deal of building at Lowther Hall. It is generally assumed that he re-housed his tenants in the present Lowther Newtown.¹⁴

Certainly Sir John Lowther, was of an enlightened disposition. He largely rebuilt Lowther Church and, on his retirement from politics in 1694, devoted himself to improving his house and estates.¹⁵ In 1697 he founded a school and at about the same time attempted to set up a manufactory for the employment of the poor. This failing the building erected for the latter purpose was devoted to the former and still survives, though much altered, in Lowther Newtown under the name of The College.¹⁶ In 1740, on the retirement of the Master, the college was abandoned and thoughts returned to the idea of a manufactory which would consume local produce and employ the local poor. Linen, stockings, and carpets were manufactured there, and the establishment became an important item on the itinerary of the early "Lakers" at the turn of the nineteenth century. The venture was never a commercial success and was abandoned about 1802.¹⁷ The College is now used as the offices of the Lowther Estate; much of Lowther Newtown is occupied by the buildings of the home farm; some houses still remain which contain details of the late seventeenth century.

The main block of Lowther Hall on which so much attention was lavished was burnt down in 1718 and the site remained neglected for the rest of the century. Sir James Lowther commissioned designs from Robert Adam and brought a large quantity of timber to the site but it was not until after his death that the new Lowther Castle was built in 1808 by Robert Smirke.¹⁸

There is no indication in the Lowther Newtown to which the early eighteenth-century writers referred or as surviving today of the formal arrangement of buildings noted by later eighteenth-century writers and which still survives in the present day Lowther Village. It is nevertheless a remarkable coincidence that the original settlement should have been replaced twice and that the Newtown should be older than the Village.

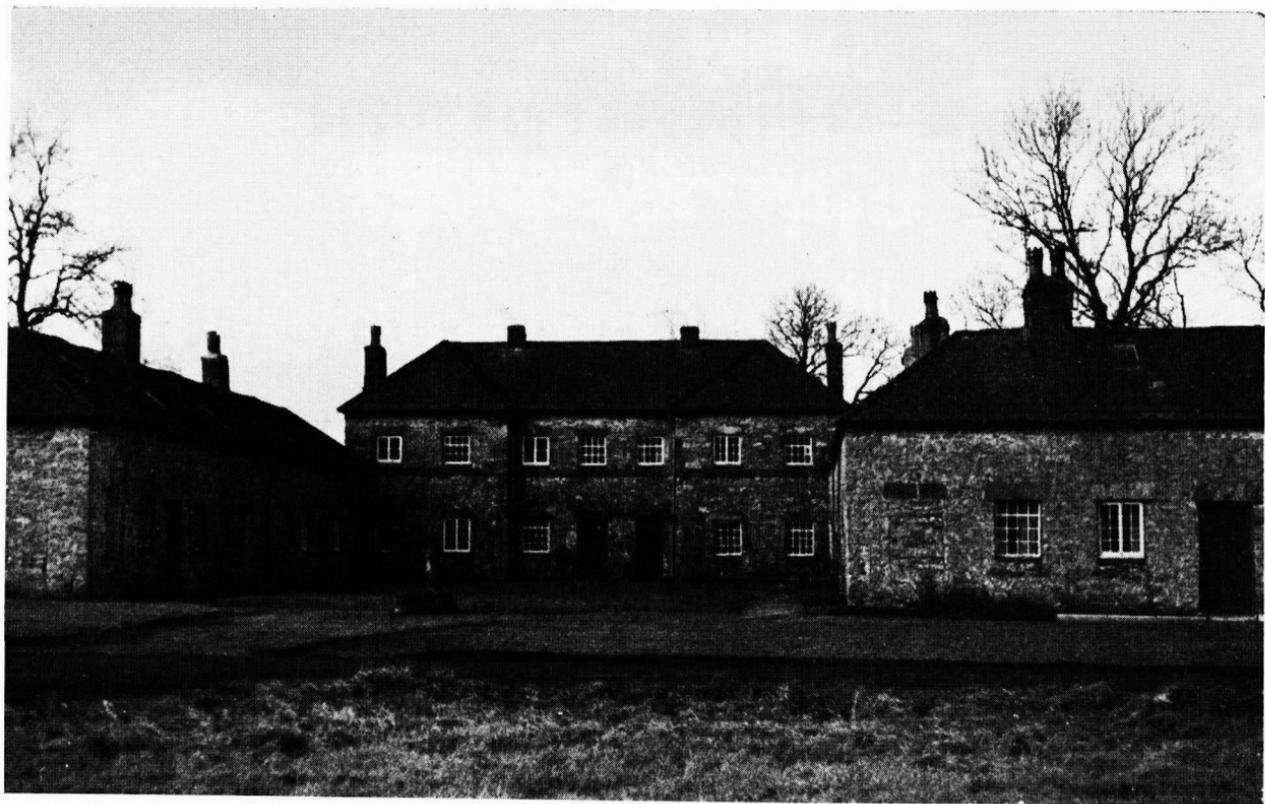


PLATE 3. The larger court—this consists mainly of cottages with a larger house at the end. Most of the one-roomed cottages have been combined to form larger dwellings. The buildings and boundary wall together form half of a Greek Cross.



PLATE 4. The smaller court—this consists of two-storey houses alternating with one and a half storey cottages.

While the present Lowther Village is a good deal less extensive than the village proposed in Adam's drawings it also appears to be rather less extensive than the village which was actually erected during the eighteenth century. Even allowing for subsequent alterations it is impossible to distinguish more than 60 separate dwellings in the Lowther Village which survives and yet a survey made in 1806 lists as many as 96 houses, some occupied by cattle or as stores and some incomplete.¹⁹

It is more than likely that some of the additional accommodation was located in two further quadrants opposite the present two and forming a complete circus at the entrance to the village. The ground falls steeply away from the flat circle of grass and is thickly overgrown by trees and shrubs, but enough masonry remains to suggest that something rather more than a curved retaining wall had occupied this area. It has already been mentioned that the plan accompanying Richard West's *Guide to the Lakes* had shown a complete circus but more detailed confirmation has recently appeared among the Lowther papers in the Record Office at Carlisle, in the form of a report submitted by three men appointed to "view and give our opinions of the Buildings in the Circular part of the new Buildings of the Village built by Mr. Fell". They reported that some would have to be demolished "particularly the two quarters next the High Road, the other two Quarters may be built upon with men of care and judgement".²⁰

However two further quadrants add only 18 more dwellings to the total and there is no obvious indication on the surface of Lowther Village of the position of the remaining 18 dwellings listed on the 1806 survey.

Whether in drawing or in execution, Lowther Village represents one of the earliest examples of the circus form. The story of the development of the idea of the circus by John Wood in 1725 as a provincial architect's understanding of the civic design of ancient Rome and the execution of this idea in Bath from 1754 is now well known. George Dance the younger took up the idea in plans for road improvements in Southwark and Lambeth and St. George's Circus, built in 1771 survives to this day. He continued to use the circus in his plans for the Minories and for

the Camden Estate. Nash was to have used a circus at the north end of Regent's Park, but the only completed portion forms Park Crescent, just as at Lowther the completed half of the circus forms a crescent.²¹

Lowther Village also represents one of the earliest examples of the planned village of the Age of Reason. Harewood Village in Yorkshire is another early example and it is interesting that here again Robert Adam was involved. Mr. Edwin Lascelles had resolved to erect a new house and drawings for Harewood House prepared by Robert Adam exist in the Soane Museum. The work was actually carried out between 1759 and 1771 by John Carr but to a design based on the Adam drawings. The old village of Gawthorpe clustered within the park of the new Harewood House and Mr. Lascelles proposed to replace it by a new village outside the park wall serving as a formal approach to the new house. At the same time it was intended to establish a ribbon factory, but this venture did not succeed.²²

The village was erected to designs of John Carr, around 1760, and consists of a number of terraces of two-storey cottages set in reflected pairs and flanked by taller pavilions. Between the terraces are larger houses for the doctor and the agent. The general arrangement, while providing a dignified approach to the house is less formal than at Lowther Village but among the details shared are the use of flanking pavilions with hipped roofs and the use of simple square-cut string courses.²³

In outward appearance at least, Lowther Village remains exactly as erected in the eighteenth century. The two quadrants still face an incomplete circus, the unfinished cottages are still occupied by cows and pigs, the little courts still defer across a main axis to counterparts not yet begun. Inwardly the cottages have been improved, one-roomed dwellings have been thrown together to give more extensive accommodation, cramped loft spaces have been improved to form bedrooms. Many of the tenants still work on the Lowther Estates, others serve manufacturing ventures more successful than the ill-fated carpet manufactory. Smirke's Lowther Castle arose, entertained an emperor and now stands a derelict hulk, preserved for its value

as a landscape incident. Adam's Lowther Village remains a monument to eighteenth-century sensibility.

REFERENCES

- ¹ There are enthusiastic descriptions of Lowther Village in e.g. Humphrey Pakington *English Villages and Hamlets*, London, 1945, p. 107, but without any suggestion of possible authorship. In *The Anatomy of the Village*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1946, p. 28, Thomas Sharp includes Lowther Village with his "planned villages", shows plan and photographs, but assumes that the village was built in 1682.
- ² Adam Drawings in Sir John Soane's Museum, Lincoln's Inn Fields, London, Vol. XXXIII, Nos. 68-70.
- ³ Carlyle, quoted in Arthur T. Bolton, *The Architecture of Robert and James Adam*, London, 1922, Vol. I, p. 33n.
- ⁴ Arthur T. Bolton, op. cit. Vol. I, p. 33.
- ⁵ These are illustrated with a commentary by Robert C. Smith in *Robert Adam's Drawings for Appleby*, Transactions of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society, New Series, Vol. LXII, 1962, p. 305. I am indebted to Professor Smith's article for the first hint of connection between Lowther Village and Robert Adam.
- ⁶ Amongst the documents recently deposited by the Earl of Lonsdale in the Record Office at Carlisle there are several drawings which appear to be part of the same series as those now in the Soane Museum. They include two elevations signed *Robert Adam, Architect, 1766*, another elevation unsigned and undated but entitled *Elevation of the Village for Sir James Lowther, Baronet, at Lowther in Westmorland*, a third set of sectional elevations, and a fragment of a plan showing two facing terraces terminated by a double-fronted house.
- ⁷ e.g. Arthur T. Bolton.
- ⁸ William Hutchinson, *An Excursion to the Lakes*, London, 1774, p. 57.
- ⁹ A Rambler (Joseph Budworth), *A Fortnight's Ramble to the Lakes*, London, 1795, p. 277.
- ¹⁰ Richard West (died 1779), *A Guide to the Lakes*; the map certainly appears in the 6th edition, London 1796, and may appear in earlier editions.
- ¹¹ J. Housman, *A Topographical Description of Cumberland, Westmorland, and Lancashire North of the Sands*, 1800, p. 241.
- ¹² Richard Warner, *A Tour through the Northern Counties*, 1802.
- ¹³ Thomas Wilkinson, *Tours to the British Mountains*, London, 1824, p. 277.
- ¹⁴ This paragraph is based mainly on John F. Curwen (ed.). *The Later Records relating to North Westmorland or the Barony of Appleby*, Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society Record Series, Vol. VIII, Kendal, 1932, pp. 328-30. Here Curwen quotes Machell for particulars of the original village and the erection of buildings between the old tower and Lowther Hall, by Sir John Lowther about 1685. Curwen gives 1726 as the date of the fire which destroyed the building, but the recent research of Mr. Howard Colvin has established the date as 1718. Lowther Hall appears as a Plate in Kyp's Views. See also Samuel Lewis *A Topographical Dictionary of England*, 1831, Vol. III, p. 173.
- ¹⁵ Editor unknown, *Memoir of the Reign of James II by John, Lord Viscount Lonsdale*, York, 1868, pp. xxii and xiv.

- ¹⁶ W. A. J. Prevost, *A Journie to Carlyle and Penrith in 1731*, transcription of an account made by Sir John Clerk to visit his son who was at school at Lowther, Transactions of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society, New Series, Vol. LXI, p. 202. Sir John Clerk was a keen observer of buildings and included sketches and descriptions of the surviving portions of Lowther Hall. There is a description of the building used for the school and known as "The College". There is no mention of any recently erected village.
- ¹⁷ See e.g. Sir R. J. Sullivan, *Observations made during a Tour through Parts of England, Scotland, and Wales, in a series of Letters*, London, 1780, p. 233; James Clarke, *A Survey of the Lakes*, London, 1787, p. 7. and Curwen, op. cit. p. 328.
- ¹⁸ The circumstances are summarised in the notes to Lowther Castle in *Jones' Views of the Seats, Mansions, Castles etc. of Noblemen and Gentlemen in England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland*, London, 1829. There is also included a specific reference to the erection of Lowther Newtown as a replacement for the original village of Lowther. The notes appear to be based on Britton and Brayley, *Westmorland* (from the series *The Beauties of England and Wales*), London, 1812, p. 126.
- ¹⁹ *A List of the Houses in the Village of Lowther with the Number of the Rooms and Inhabitants in each and other remarks taken Nov. 24th. 1806*, in manuscript and signed Robt. Lumb, in the Record Office, Carlisle, D/LONS. The survey appears to have been intended to reveal surplus accommodation, possibly for the use of workmen to be engaged on the building of Lowther Castle which was about to begin.
- ²⁰ Typescript copy of a letter dated Augt. 20th. 1772 and signed Michael Sisson, Thomas Nicklson, and Danl. Benn, in the Record Office, Carlisle, D/LONS. In the same records there is an incomplete series of account books which includes particulars of sums expended on the Village between 1767 and 1785 (the fee paid to Mr. Sisson *et al.* for their report is recorded). I am indebted to Mr. Howard Colvin for drawing my attention to the existence of further drawings of the Village and to Mr. B. C. Jones, Archivist, for help in locating them.
- ²¹ Sir John Summerson, essay, *John Wood and the English Planning Tradition*, in *Heavenly Mansions*, London, 1949.
- ²² Sidney D. Kitson, *Carr of York*, article in *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects*, Third Series, Vol. XVII, No. 6, Jan. 1910, p. 247; and W. A. Eden, *Harewood Village, and Eighteenth Century Housing Scheme*, article, in *Journal of the Town Planning Institute*, Vol. XIII, Liverpool, 1929, p. 181.
- ²³ There is one further connection between the two villages, a family connection. The father of Edwin Lascelles held the office of Collector of Customs in the Barbadoes; the father of James Lowther held the office of Governor of that same colony.