

Thomas Oldham Esq. of Saltfleetby: Typical Farmer, Aspiring Gentleman or Plain Eccentric?

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At once we move on, delighted with all the fresh sights, following with our eyes the churches, houses, and [country] cottages as they flash by. The smoke is not yet rising from their roofs to blacken the clear air. But whose is that house and the nearby little tower (called a gazebo)? – well worth noticing. Whose are those ships you can spy far out to sea? They belong to the man whose horses, large flocks of sheep and fat cattle are all grazing on the lush countryside.

This extract from a Louth schoolboy's Latin essay of about 1818 '*Iter a Luda ad Suttoniam*' (A Journey from Louth to Sutton)¹ makes no other mention during the journey of specific buildings or people, and Andrew Burnaby, the headmaster, adds a footnote to the effect that the owner of the house, tower, lands and ships is Thomas Oldham, Esq. Thus we are provided with, not only a thumbnail sketch of the Marsh landscape, but also an intriguing glimpse into the life of this gentleman farmer.

Thomas Oldham (1778-1843) was born in Lincolnshire and lived most of his life in the Marsh village of Saltfleetby St Peter. The nearest point of civilization and contact with the outside world was the market town of Louth, some seven miles away.² Oldham's world was, at first sight, centred around farming and village life. He lived in the most imposing house in the village, owned much of the land in Saltfleetby and the surrounding parishes and was one of the major employers of labour in the area. The 'Squire', as he was known, also held local offices befitting a man of his status, which included that of Magistrate, Commissioner of Sewers and a Guardian of Louth Workhouse. Thus far, we find nothing out of the ordinary in the typical life of a wealthy Lincolnshire landowner but unusually, to say the least in Oldham's case, he did not come from the ranks of the gentry, but instead was a yeoman, farming the land himself.

Thomas Oldham died suddenly, and intestate. His death eventually led to the breaking-up of his estate, and his family moving away from the village. However, he left behind an obvious but nonetheless intriguing clue to the real identity of the man. He built a prospect tower, or gazebo, in the grounds of his house, which still stands today as a unique landmark on the flat marsh terrain (Fig.1). This unusual, almost eccentric brick structure may have been erected for practical purposes as a watch tower to observe his workers in the fields but, if that was the only reason, the building could have been much more simply made, and no doubt at less cost. So why did he build it? This paper will make a study of the life of this not-so-typical Lincolnshire farmer to provide pointers as to the man's motive in building the tower and to gain an insight into



Fig.1. Thomas Oldham's prospect tower during restoration, after the lantern top was fitted, but prior to windows being installed.

how he became the rather complex character as suggested in the title, as well as the builder of the prospect tower.

The village diarist William Paddison, writing in 1914 but born in 1839, makes the following observation about Oldham:²

... he beautified all the West End of Saltfleetby. Where he had dug clay pits in his fields he supplied them with fish and surrounded them by fine green lawns, then a plantation of trees around the lawns and round the outer circumference a hedge and ditch. These I understand were kept in as good condition as a gentleman's garden.

This does not appear to be the action of the typical pragmatic Lincolnshire farmer. Lawns and plantations serve no profitable function, and neither does a gazebo. What influenced Thomas Oldham to 'waste' productive land and labour in such a way?

Country house owners during the eighteenth century were increasingly surrounding their residences with parkland, notably with the assistance of experts such as Capability Brown and Humphrey Repton, and a view of working farmland, or the homes of the 'ordinary' people of the village, was at odds with the prevailing fashion of aestheticism. There are examples of whole villages being demolished and rebuilt out of sight, and of roads being diverted around the landowner's parkland. A typical example, of which Thomas Oldham must have been aware, was that of William Massingberd-Mundy's new Hall at nearby South Ormsby, built in 1752-53. The old village was demolished as it stood within direct sight of the new house. The road now takes a tortuous path around the formal landscaped parkland. As John Brewer explains, 'the idea was less about having a working landscape, that the proprietor worked *in*, than of an ideal form which he contemplated from the *outside*.'³

The preoccupation of polite society with what they conceived to be the ideal, natural beauty of landscape was effectively lampooned by William Combe in his 1813 satire 'Dr Syntax in search of the Picturesque'. The author has his hero turning a bleak landscape with nothing to look at but a defaced signpost and some braying asses into something more to current taste:⁴

'Tis more than right, it is a duty,
If we consider landscape beauty:-
He ne'er will, as an artist shine,
Who copies nature line by line:
Whoe'er from Nature takes a view,
Must copy and improve it too.
To heighten ev'ry work of art
Fancy should take an active part.

Was Thomas Oldham attempting to follow current polite taste in beautifying his lands? To answer this question we must consider the social influences on Oldham, his education and his circle of friends and business contacts. Was he friendly with other men of greater power and status in the area?

The Farmer

The Oldham family moved to Saltfleetby St Peter in about 1785. Land Tax Duplicates⁵ for the year 1780 show a property occupied by Mr John Moore, with the proprietors the Revd W. Emeris and T. Robinson. The Emeris deposit in the Lincolnshire Archives contains house plans along with builder's estimates dated 16 May 1778 for building a house in Saltfleetby St Peter.⁶ The contract parties are Thomas Robinson, Richard Andrews (carpenter and bricklayer respectively) and Revd William Emeris, Headmaster of Louth Grammar School. It is not known whether the Oldhams

purchase this speculative-built property immediately or are tenants, but Thomas Oldham of Asterby is shown occupying the property (Fig.2) in 1785 when his son, young Thomas, is seven years old. Certainly by 1807 Mr Oldham is established in the parish as one of eleven proprietors of land.⁷

The fact of there being two Thomas Oldhams, father and son, can give rise to a certain amount of confusion. Thomas of Asterby (1746-1826) almost certainly continued to live in the parish, and probably in the family home, since he is buried in St Peter's churchyard, and there is a memorial tablet (Fig.3a) to him in the church. He died intestate,⁸ and the legal situation at the time was that 'all realty which was invested in the deceased passed to the heir subject to the rights of the surviving spouse'.⁹ His wife Ann had predeceased him by thirteen years (the date of 1813 is also shown on the family memorial tablet in St Peter's church, see figure 3a) and so any lands belonging to Thomas of Asterby passed to his son, 'Squire' Thomas. Although there is no clear distinction between the two generations regarding ownership of property in the primary evidence, the fact that Thomas was his father's sole heir, as well as the provisions made by his uncle in the will discussed below, make the descent of the property clear; there were no other relatives to cause future problems with regard to inheritance. In addition, Paddison the village diarist, writing within living memory of the Oldham family, refers to Thomas Oldham the younger as 'The Squire' and the builder of the tower.¹⁰

According to S. H. Oldham, writing a history of the Lincolnshire branch of his family in 1965, Thomas inherited lands in Asterby, Goulceby and Hemingby from his uncle, John Oldham.¹¹ The will of John Oldham, Gentleman, demonstrates that he was a person of wealth, leaving £80

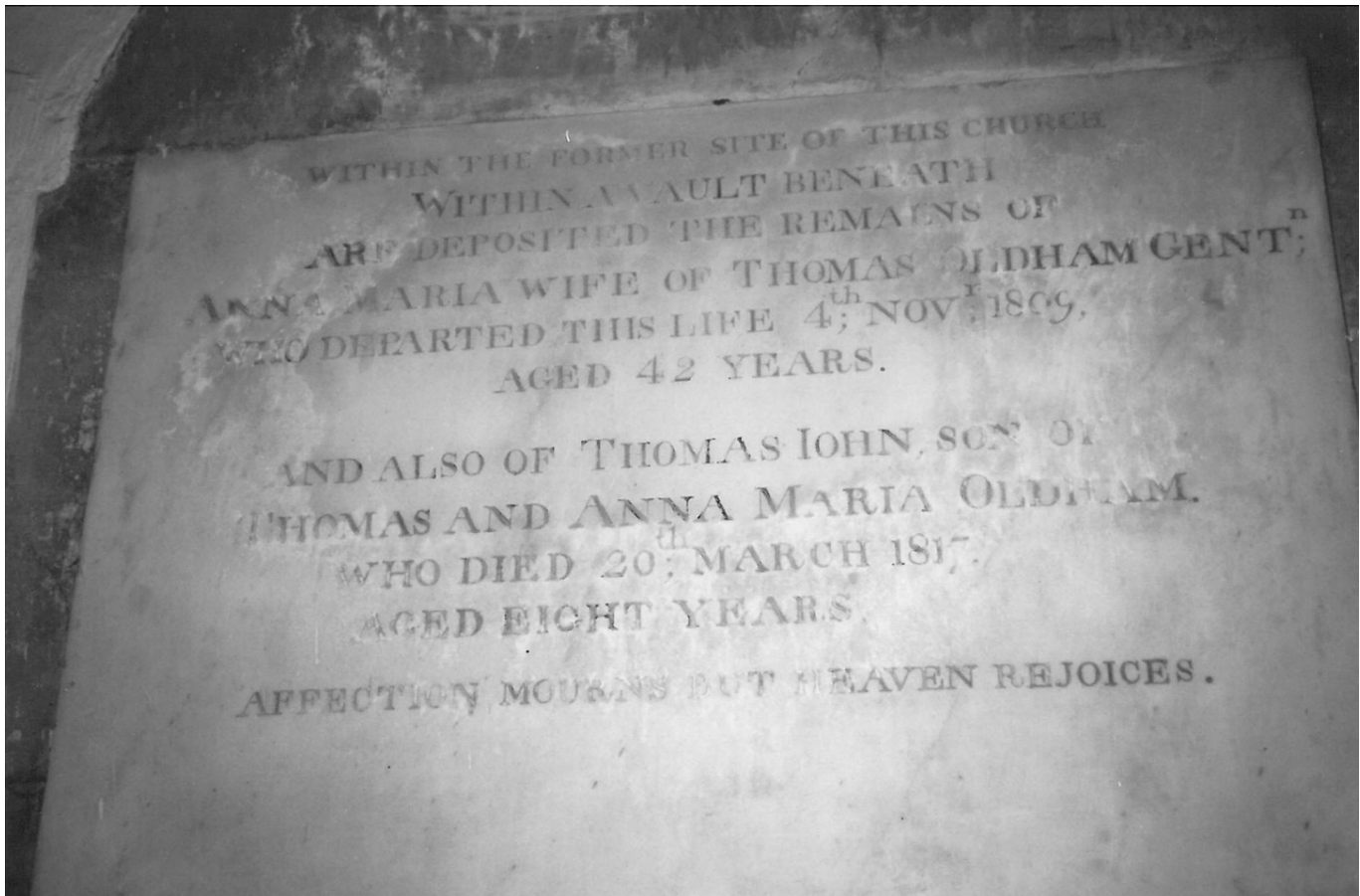


Fig.2. Saltfleetby House front elevation.



per annum to each of his two sisters ‘for and during the term of [their] natural [lives]’, as well as lands at Tydd St Mary and Newton in the Isle of Ely, Cambridgeshire, to his other nephew John.¹² A study of the provisions of the will show that the estate was entailed. This was standard practice among the land-owning gentry, but unusual for Lincolnshire farmers; they did not believe in primogeniture, but normally left their lands in equal shares to their sons.¹³ An entail is ‘an interest which can pass only to descendants of the original grantee ... [it could be] further restricted so that it descended only to a particular class of descendants’.¹⁴ John Oldham’s will was first a ‘tail male’, that is inheritance passing through the male line of direct descendants, and in the case of there being no surviving male issue, a ‘tail female’, with corresponding descendency through the female line. A will thus made fulfilled two essential functions: firstly, it prevented the estate from being broken up piecemeal, and secondly, it prevented the estate from falling into the hands of relatives other than the direct descendants of the grantee. John Oldham describes himself as a ‘Gentleman’, and the will shows that he did not actually farm the lands himself, since he gives John Allison and Samuel Kirkby and their heirs a tenancy for the lifetime of his nephew, but with the ‘Rents Issues and Profits thereof’ going to Thomas. John Oldham died in 1808, and the will was proved in January 1809.

What prompted Thomas Oldham senior to move from Asterby Grange on the Wolds to the Marsh village of Saltfleetby St Peter in the first place? His wife, by now forty-three years old, was born at Scamblesby, the adjoining parish to Asterby, and if she had any influence at all over her husband would not have wanted to leave friends and family, and move to a strange parish with a seven year old boy to



Figs 3a and 3b. Memorial tablets to the Oldham family in St Peter’s church, Saltfleetby.

worry about. There must have been compelling reasons indeed, and these are to be found in Arthur Young's 1799 agricultural survey of Lincolnshire.¹⁵

A great change has also taken place in the inhabitancy: within forty years, 4 four-wheeled carriages were kept by graziers in Theddlethorpe, now deserted, few living anywhere in the marshes, without farms elsewhere; by degrees the Wold farmers have gradually been getting the whole, except some few small occupations ... It may appear whimsical, that one must go to the Wolds for marsh intelligence; but so it is; the principal Wold farmers have Marsh land; and the facts can be got only where the occupiers are to be found.

There were sound economic reasons for the Wold farmers to obtain land on the Marsh; Young refers to the three Saltfleetby parishes as having land 'a great deal very strong and good for *feeding* beasts'. Such land was fetching a letting price of around 40s. per acre, as opposed to that of the chalk and marl uplands of the Wolds, which could be let for only 15s. to 20s. per acre. These prices reflected the quality of the land; the relatively poor Wolds soils were unsuitable for arable and fit only for grazing. Young makes a further distinction between the quality of grazing land, saying that the Wolds, certainly in the vicinity of Louth, are fit only for breeding sheep as opposed to *feeding* them (his italics making the necessary distinction between survival of the animals, 'holding the flesh they have got', and putting on the bodyweight needed to make profit).

The lush but well-drained pastures and rich clay soils of the Marsh had long been recognised as one of the best areas of agricultural land in Lincolnshire. A Probate Inventory of Legbourne Priory, a former Premonstratensian house, lists cattle, calves, horses, oxen, sheep, lambs and pigs at Somercotes (a nearby parish to Saltfleetby). In addition, wheat, barley and beans are also sown as crops.¹⁶ Legbourne is itself on the edge of the Wolds, near Louth. For a person like Thomas of Asterby, the younger brother of John, purchasing or renting good Marsh land would have been an attractive proposition from the point of view of potential profit; after all, he stood to inherit no land from his father, it being entailed in John's favour, so he had no reason to stay in Asterby. Add to this the fact mentioned by Young that the Wolds farmers were effectively dispossessing the graziers on the Marsh, with the consequence of empty farmhouses and low rent or purchase prices, and the move to the newly-built house in Saltfleetby begins to make sense.

In 1780, a Mr Oldham was tenant of lands owned by Matthew Lister Esq. (of nearby Burwell Hall). In the adjoining parish of Skidbrooke, a Mr Holdham is shown as tenant of Mr Ludlam. In spite of the letter 'H', there is a good chance that this could be Thomas senior, as the assessor has mis-spelt 'Duchess' as 'Dutches', 'Wrigglesworth' as 'Wrigglesworth', and 'Walesby' as 'Wailsby'.¹⁷ By 1807, the Oldham family had survived, from an economic point of view, the move from Asterby on the Wolds to Saltfleetby. The Land Tax Assessment for the period Lady Day 1807 to Lady Day 1808 shows Mr Oldham being assessed in the sum of £7 18s.0d. The amount does not seem significant, but given that it reflects the acreage of land held, a comparison with other landowners in the three Saltfleetby parishes (the document amalgamates these) places Oldham in the top seven:

Extracts from Lincolnshire, Lindsey Parish of Saltfleetby from Lady Day 1807 to Lady Day 1808.¹⁸

Revd Bond for his living	£6 4s.0d.
Chaplin Geo esq.	£6 4s.0d.
Fox Mr	£6 1s.4d.
Gace Revd occ. Mr Walesby	£14 10s.0d.
Henage esq. occ. Mr Teal	£10 8s.0d.

Oldham Mr himself	£7 18s.0d.
Rinder Mr himself	£8 8s.0d.
Stephenson Revd for his living	£8 4s.0d.
Stor Mr himself	£8 6s.0d.
Twigg Revd Edw Drury	£17 4s.0d.
Thorold Revd Mr Codd	£9 0s.0d.
Thos Showler and Saml Wilkinson Assessors	
Saml Wilkinson and Thos Richardson Collectors	
Total	£384 17s.8d.
12 June 1807	

This document shows (as the tax, a small annual amount first levied in 1692, was imposed on the owner of the land, rather than the occupier) that by 1807 Oldham certainly *owned* at least some of the land that he farmed rather than being a tenant. It also shows that at least two of the major taxpayers, George Chaplin of Tathwell Hall and George Heneage of Hainton Hall had their country seats on the Wolds, thus confirming the tradition noticed by Arthur Young of Wolds landowners also owning land on the Marsh.

The document shows a total amount of taxation for the three parishes of £384 17s.8d.; the extract above shows the eleven owners paying the highest amounts, but there were numerous other smallholders owning land in the parishes. Moving forward some thirty years to 1838, the Enclosure Award of the part of Saltfleetby St Peter parish known as the North Ings (some 250 acres of the total parish area of 1,972 acres) lists no fewer than 54 owners of land, with 10 proprietors holding less than two roods (half an acre).¹⁹ This was not unusual in the predominantly open parishes of the Marsh. Though Oldham played an active part, along with the other large landowners, in the enclosure of the Saltfleetby parishes, he died only two years after it was enacted.

One commonly held view, as discussed by Olney,²⁰ is that in 'closed' parishes, the land was owned predominantly by one person who discouraged the growth of the village by allowing the cottages to fall into disrepair and become uninhabitable, and failed to build replacements. This was done partly to prevent the labouring class, who were seen to be lawless, drunken and ruffianly, from living too near their 'polite' mansions and partly to maintain the letting value of their land as high as possible by keeping down the poor rates. The result was that the agricultural labourer often lived in an adjoining sprawling 'open' parish of poorly-built speculative houses, or worse, in an insanitary tenement in the nearest town, with several miles to walk to work each day.

Saltfleetby St Peter during Thomas Oldham's time was an open parish, in that it did not have a principal landowner. The Ordnance Survey map of 1824 shows settlement within the parish to be strung out along the Louth-Saltfleet turnpike road. Census Returns from 1801 to 1841 show a steady increase in population, and this is in accord with expansion of the typical open parish. It had at least one public house, 'The Angel Inn', and there may have been instances of persons having too much to drink. But did it conform to the contemporary standard view of a typical open parish as described on the flyleaf of a parish register by Revd Samuel Oliver, the curate of Whaplode, in 1820?²¹

It ought not, by any means, to be omitted recording, that, among the principal people of this Parish, Shooting into Houses; breaking open doors; demolishing windows; and such like transactions, in the Night, has been, for some years, a common drunken frolic, which was always made up, in a day or two, by paying for the damage done; and spending a few shillings by way of a treat!!!!

As Olney goes on to point out, the miscreants were local people rather than the usual scapegoats, the itinerant 'bankers' employed on fen drainage, or released convicts.

An answer to this question of lawlessness, or lack of it, with regard to the Marsh parishes may be found in Arthur Young's agricultural survey of 1799.²²

The poor's-rates in the parish of Humberston have never amounted to more than 9d. or 10d. per pound on the rental, and sometimes not to more than 6d. This is undoubtedly to be attributed to the attention which has been paid to the poor in various ways, and particularly to the support which they have derived from the small quantities of land which they have occupied ... At Saltfleet, &c. most of the poor have cows ... In the Marshes the poor eat a great deal of bacon; very few but what kill a pig, and some two, feeding them much with potatoes, and some barley meal; and few are without their piece of potatoe [sic] ground for their families and pigs; in general living very well.

Young's description of the poor living on the Marsh seems to paint a picture of contentment rather than dissatisfaction and strife. The rich well-drained land suitable for grazing or arable crops meant that a family could subsist on a smaller plot compared to the amount of land needed on the poor soils of the upland Wolds or limestone heath, or the Fenland areas with their perennial problems of surface water drainage and seawater encroachment.

Thus far we have the Oldham family moving to Saltfleetby St Peter from the Wolds parish of Asterby; receiving an income from letting their Wolds land, and owning a proportion of the rich farmland to be found in their new parish. The fact of actually living in the village, rather than becoming absentee landlords, places them at odds with the prevailing custom, but also gave them a strong social position and status in the community.

William Paddison makes comment on the social standing of 'Squire' Oldham:²³

Mr Oldham was a very large employer of labour. When I was young nearly every middle-aged man and woman in Saltfleetby West had worked for Mr Oldham and the number of girls who had married while in his service was almost out of count ... the old Squire was a churchman and there was I understand a deal of ceremony in those days when going in and out of church. The poorer people were not allowed to stir until the Oldham family had leisurely walked out.

The diarist conjures up an image of the archetypal Squire, with his foot firmly on the necks of his more lowly neighbours and employees. Did all his employees attend St Peter's church, in deference to their master? It is as well here to bear in mind the rapid increase in Methodism in Lincolnshire from the 1740s to the mid nineteenth century. Numbers of dissenting places of worship in Lincolnshire grew during this period to 1,961.²⁴ Although White's 1856 gazetteer of Lincolnshire mentions Saltfleetby as having both Primitive and Wesleyan Methodist chapels, these were not built until 1847 and 1848 respectively, four years after Oldham's death. However Robert Wright's class book²⁵ (a register of Methodist attendees in the village) predates these chapels by at least fifteen years, from which we can establish that, not surprisingly, Dissent was present in the village within Oldham's time. It is interesting to note that in the 1841 Census, the names of the four female servants in Saltfleetby House and the adjoining coach house, as well as that of the two males, do not appear in the list of Wright's class members.²⁶ This omission possibly demonstrates that the 'Squire' could at least dictate to his immediate household with regard to religious worship. The obligation to attend church may not have been as onerous to Oldham's employees as it appears: H. B. Williams, in his commentary on the Revd Thomas Mossman's fictional account of a mid nineteenth-century rural cleric, the Revd Theophilus Gray, makes a telling observation about Marshland folk that 'the Church of England has lost its way to their hearts, however admirably it appealed to the educated and cultured. Nevertheless they retained a measure of respect and allegiance towards the

Church and are frequently referred to as "half Church – half Methodist"²⁷

The Oldham family thrived in the atmosphere of a community comparatively at ease with its lot, in which traditional farming practices worked sufficiently well that, as Paddison puts it,²⁸

All Soloby must have been asleep until a little more than a hundred years ago. They were awakened up by Squire Oldham. He dug clay from pits in his fields with which he 'booned' the roads [improved the road surface with clay or crushed chalk]. He deepened the parish drains which, until then, had been insufficient to carry away the floods. He also, it was said, introduced open and underdraining in his fields.

By 1840, Thomas Oldham was the largest landowner in the parish, with 264 acres. Of these, 159 were down to grass, and 91 to arable. According to Paddison, he also held land in adjoining parishes, including the other Saltfleetbys, Skidbrooke and South Cockerington. As to whether he retained any land in the Wold parishes of Asterby and Goulceby, an interesting point arises from a study of the Land Tax Return for Asterby in 1832. Here Thomas Oldham is shown paying an amount of £1 8s.0d., but is listed as occupying the land himself.²⁹ This seems at odds with the previously mentioned will of John Oldham in which John Allison and Samuel Kirkby are named as tenants. Samuel Kirkby appears on the return as a tenant of John Holland, rather than Thomas Oldham, and there is no mention of John Allison. It would appear that the latter was deceased or had moved from the parish, and Oldham thus did not have a tenant for his land, at least at the time of assessment. This last fact can only lead to two conclusions; either the assessors were not given accurate information, or Oldham was farming the land himself. Thus, ironically, he had become the Squire of his village on the Marsh, but also an absentee farmer on the Wolds rather than the usual reverse situation commented on by Arthur Young.

Status and Power

Thomas Oldham inherited his wealth, moved to the Marsh and established himself as a prominent figure in the village. So far these facts confirm his ability in terms of income and disposable capital to build his prospect tower and beautify his lands, but do not explain why he would do this. In order to find out, it is necessary to look into his social background. What, or who, would have been his political and social influences?

He was certainly a taker of the *Gentleman's Magazine*. The death of his uncle John, his father and the marriages of his daughters are all recorded in this monthly mix of articles about science, art, politics and international affairs, as well as the all-important births, marriages and deaths columns. The magazine had been published since 1731, and employed such luminaries of the literary world as John Nichols and Samuel Johnson, the latter composing 'reports' of parliamentary proceedings. It also published readers' letters, comments and poetry and was thus a forum for literary criticism, and a breeding ground for new talent. This move towards more catholic, even romantic, reading taste by farmers was the subject of comment by the bookseller J. Lackington in his memoirs of 1791:³⁰

More than four times the number of books are sold now than were sold twenty years since. The poorer sort of farmers, and even the poor country people in general, who before that period spent their winter evenings in relating stories of witches, ghosts, hobgoblins etc., now shorten the winter nights by hearing their sons and daughters read tales, romances etc., and, on entering their houses, you may see *Tom Jones*, *Roderick Random*, and other entertaining books stuck up on their bacon racks....

Thomas Oldham could in no way be described as a 'poorer sort of farmer', and the reading matter described above may be balanced by the more pragmatic; his name is to be found on a list of subscribers to a new book by the Revd Burton of Theddlethorpe on land drainage. Newspapers also had become larger and less expensive, with the advent of more efficient printing presses and cheaper paper. Communication had improved throughout England during the eighteenth century with the advent of canals and better road networks, bringing news from the capital within easier and swifter reach of the provinces. Time taken to travel between, for example, London and Manchester halved between 1754 and 1784, from four days to two; by 1830 the same route had fifty-four passenger coaches making the journey each way. By 1834, there were 3,300 stage coaches and 700 mail coaches operating throughout the country. There was a daily Royal Mail coach service from Louth, leaving at 11.00am.

The agricultural and industrial 'revolutions' of the previous century, along with the loss of the American colonies and revolution in, and war with, France had resulted, by the early nineteenth century, in significant social and economic changes which even touched rural England. How did these national events affect Thomas Oldham? The French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars lasted from 1793 to 1815; these twenty-two years spanned Thomas's life from a teenager until aged thirty-seven. It is not known if Thomas was directly involved in the conflict, but doubt can be cast on whether the threat of invasion was taken seriously by the marsh inhabitants, especially those of Saltfleetby, by the following 'Address to the Public from the Officers and Privates of the Theddlethorpe Volunteer Association' published in the *Lincoln, Rutland and Stamford Mercury* of 6 April 1804:³¹

Notwithstanding the unexampled and fallacious conduct of the Saltfleetby and part of the Theddlethorpe pretended volunteers (who, to their utter disgrace, have revolted from the laudable and honourable cause in which they had embarked), we, the remaining part of the company (feeling that there still exists an absolute necessity for every British subject to stand forward in defence of his country, particularly in situations near the sea coast), have resolved to continue our services, though our numbers are but small, hoping by our example, and encouragement from the public, to recruit our corps to its original establishment with real volunteers from Theddlethorpe and its vicinity... Under these circumstances, we with confidence solicit the support of the public in general, and those who have property in the Marsh in particular, trusting their Subscriptions will be liberal and exemplary....

The men referred to above made up 'Volunteer Companies in particular towns, especially those situated on or near the Sea coast, for the purpose of local Defence of the particular Places where they may be raised'.³² Their cost was covered by subscription among the local community, and raising of a volunteer force avoided the ballot for the local militia. Being an officer in a volunteer yeomanry cavalry troop displayed social status; the captains were 'esquires', with their lieutenants drawn from the ranks of 'gentlemen'. The other ranks were yeoman or tenant farmers. If Thomas Oldham was an officer, perhaps even commanding his own troop drawn from among his workers, this would indeed show a move up the social ladder from mere farmer to gentleman status.

The first three decades of the nineteenth century were turbulent times indeed, with Rickburners, Luddites and Reformers affecting even the most out-of-the-way parts of the county. No doubt Thomas Oldham read accounts of these in the newspapers; and one example of civil unrest is worth mentioning, as it makes Oldham's involvement with the Volunteers a possibility. These units had been formed originally in the wake of the French Revolution not just to repel foreign invaders, but also to put down insurrection at home, borne out of a fear that what was happening in

France could easily spread to Britain. The Corn Bill riots of March 1815 (in which the working class rioted due to the artificially high price of bread caused by government legislation effectively banning import of corn until prices had reached eighty shillings per quarter) caused widespread alarm that was not just confined to the cities. The most notable provincial riot occurred at Ely and Littleport in May 1815, during which one rioter was killed. The rioters' slogan was 'Bread or Blood', and the revolt resulted in twenty-four convictions at the Special Assize for the Isle of Ely, with five executed and the rest transported or sent to prison. This event links to Thomas since his uncle John left lands in the Isle of Ely to his other nephew, John. Thomas would almost certainly have been made aware by his cousin of the 'enemy from within' and the importance of maintaining a military presence at home.

From a social point of view, a move up to the 'squirearchy' from the yeoman ranks was not easily accomplished, and if the move was made at all, life for the country squire by the end of the eighteenth century no longer conformed to the traditional pattern that had existed since at least the English Civil War of the previous century. Political, economic and social change were causing irreversible change to the traditional life of the country landowner.

Francis Grose, writing in *The Grumbler* in 1796, tells us how these changes affected the county squire:³³

When I was a young man...another character was the country squire...His travels never exceeded the county town. and that only at assize or sessions time, or to attend an election. Once a week he commonly dined at the next market town, with the attorneys and justices. This man went to church regularly, settled the parochial disputes between the parish officers at the vestry...a journey to London was, by one of these men, reckoned as great an undertaking as is at present a voyage to the East Indies.

The writer goes on to say that owing to the 'luxury of the times' the squires of his youth are now obliged to live in London and become dependent on the patronage of greater men, or increase their tenants' rents to pay for their new lifestyle. The ability to accomplish this depended on having sufficient land to let to tenants and provide an income. It is unlikely that Thomas Oldham, farming his own land, spent time in the city although his acreage would have provided him with a reasonable income from letting. Instead he chose to remain in Saltfleetby, playing the part of the old time squire as described by Grose. It must be borne in mind that, in spite of improved communications, Lincolnshire and especially the area of the coastal marsh was, both geographically and in terms of travelling time, a long way from the polite society of London. New ideas, fashions and tastes filtered through to the provinces, but slowly. Country people were not always keen to change an ordered way of life, at least those people who had control and made the decisions. Landowner and Church still effectively ruled rural England at the beginning of the nineteenth century. For a working farmer like Thomas Oldham it was difficult to climb the social ladder, and the historian Dorothy Marshall damns such aspiring farmers with faint praise, stating that although they were leaders in experimenting with new and more efficient farming techniques, if success and resultant prosperity tempted them to imitate their betters they would be condemned by these same people. She quotes Arthur Young as saying:³⁴

...though a farmer was entitled to everything that yields comfort; those who chuse to give up that enjoyment for liveries or show of any kind, arrange themselves with another order of mortals.

Oldham's world thus centred around prosperity through farming, land acquisition and control of the village through employment of local labour. In a 'closed' parish where land

was principally under the ownership of one person, control of numbers settling in that parish could be achieved by hiring labour for 'a year less a day'. This meant that the labourer and his family would not be a burden on the parish rate in times of unemployment, as the legal requirement of residence for at least a year in order to gain rights of settlement, was never fulfilled. This often made it necessary for the labourer to reside in an adjoining open parish, such as Saltfleetby. Oldham would thus have found a ready supply of labour on his doorstep, and perhaps did not need to use imported seasonal workers. There is no direct evidence to support this conjecture, but William Paddison, as quoted earlier, mentions that 'when he [Paddison] was young nearly every middle-aged man and woman in Saltfleetby West had worked for Mr Oldham.'³⁵

Thomas Oldham has left some more certain evidence of his activities in the local area. The nearby market town of Louth, the centre of agricultural activity for the Wolds and Marsh, would have been regularly visited by local farmers if only to conduct business at the weekly market. The 'Capital of the Wolds' as the town was aptly named, was after Lincoln and Boston, the most prosperous and fastest-growing centre of population, and would have been at the hub of Oldham's business and social world. We do not know for certain whether or where Thomas went to school; he does not appear in Louth Grammar School admission registers, but these do show that 'Thomas son of T. Oldham Esq. Saltfleetby' was admitted in the Christmas term 1815.³⁶

The boy would have been only six years old on entering the school, and was also subject to the harsh regime of the headmaster John Waite, who was 'the great master of the art of flogging' and had 'cultivated irascibility with great care, for many years and with such success that he could burst into a storm of wrath and sink into a serene calm in a few minutes'.³⁷ We do not know what young Thomas thought of school, but the registers show Alfred, later Lord Tennyson, being admitted the following year and his thoughts at least have survived: 'How I did hate that school! The only good I ever got from it was the memory of the words *sonus disilientis aquae*³⁸ and of an old wall covered with wild weeds opposite the school windows.'³⁹ According to Swaby, Tennyson disliked the Grammar School sufficiently that in later years he avoided walking down Schoolhouse Lane.⁴⁰

Louth Grammar School was the favoured place of education for sons of local gentlemen and thus, for anybody on the climb up the social ladder, an excellent establishment to which to send a son.⁴¹ Poor Thomas junior did not live to see his ninth birthday; he is recorded on the list of pupils from Christmas to Midsummer 1817, but not after. The cause of death is unknown, but was presumably not as a result of John Waite's harsh regime since the school admission registers record Thomas Oldham's second son, Thomas Charles, being admitted to the school in 1831.

Oldham treated his duty to the community seriously. He was the largest employer of labour in his parish; although providing work would have gone a long way to alleviating poverty in the village, nonetheless the problem of paupers and how to deal with them was ever-present. The 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act changed the way in which people unable to provide an income for themselves were treated; responsibility was taken away, to a large extent, from the individual parish, which had traditionally been obliged to provide for their paupers by giving them shelter, food and clothing. Parishes were to form Unions, centralise administration and provide a purpose-built workhouse where children and adults would

be fed and housed, but expected to work and exist under a deliberately harsh regime designed to discourage entry in the first place. We find Thomas Oldham in a list of the first guardians of the workhouse for the parish of Saltfleetby St Clements (another incidental clue to Oldham's ownership of land in other parishes, since it was a requirement of being a guardian to be a landowner).⁴²

Oldham was a member of the original committee set up to divide the Union into districts, and of the building committee set up to find a suitable site for the new workhouse, and study and approve the various architects' designs. Of the five submitted, the successful scheme was that of the young George Gilbert Scott. Although Sir George later came under the influence of Pugin and became a staunch advocate of the Gothic school of architecture, the workhouse design submitted was severely neo-classical, anal practical. It was also the least expensive. It is fair to say that Oldham's interest in architectural styles as demonstrated by the prospect tower and other buildings at his Saltfleetby home would have made him a knowledgeable member of the building committee.

There was no requirement to attend all the meetings of the Board of Guardians; as a busy farmer living some way out of town, it is not surprising from studying the minutes that Oldham attended only meetings of importance or those affecting the parishes under his influence. We find him present only on three further occasions: the first was to approve a petition to the House of Commons that the Poor Law Amendment Act be adopted; he attended when an order was approved to remove one of the paupers from Saltfleetby All Saints to the Lincoln Lunatic Asylum; and finally to approve a Mr Townend as successor to Thomas Horwell in the post of Relieving Officer for Louth district (the latter having absconded and left the district).⁴³

William Paddison gives an opinion that Oldham exercised strong control over his labour force by use of the horse-whip. He goes on to say, however, that 'Mr Oldham was by no means a cruel man, although he was greatly feared by nearly everybody in Saltfleetby'.⁴⁴ This reinforces the picture of a strict but fair man who took seriously what was considered to be a duty to 'do the right thing' about the problems of the poor, and perhaps more importantly, to be seen by his worthy neighbours and persons of social standing to be doing that duty. Paddison mentions that he was also a magistrate, and Commissioner of Sewers, the latter being appointed by the Crown to appoint dike-reeves and administer inspections of land drainage. Taking an active part in such administration would have been especially important for Oldham as the Marsh area was still subject to flooding in the early nineteenth century if drainage was neglected.

If Oldham was a magistrate then this would indeed have been a major achievement in his being accepted by his social 'betters'. Lord Brownlow, as Lord Lieutenant of the county during Oldham's time, set out his criteria for selecting magistrates:⁴⁵

With the exception of heirs apparent to the gentlemen of old family or their immediate collaterals, I have usually thought it necessary that persons should be in possession of a clear landed property worth perhaps £2,000 per annum within the county, not being at the same time occupiers thereof as farmers, in which case I consider them as yeomen, and not of a class to be placed on the Bench, except in cases of necessity.

Farmers were thus not considered to be of sufficient social standing, but there are factors in Oldham's favour. Louth, a town in which he was playing an active part in civic affairs, was an administrative centre with quarter sessions and petty sessions being held in the town hall. Oldham may have had

influence in securing such an appointment on his 'home patch'; the high sheriff of the county in 1800 was Matthew Bancroft Lister of Burwell, who was an adjoining landowner in Saltfleetby.⁴⁶ Thomas senior also owned land in Burwell, as there is a record of a dispute over assessment for drainage rates recorded in 1792.⁴⁷ If Thomas Oldham was indeed a magistrate, then he would certainly have been an influential member of local society, for as Marshall puts it: 'In rural England, therefore, because the social pattern remained largely unchanged the parson and the squire dominated village life and the Bench ran the county'.⁴⁸

Visits to town would not have been purely for business or formal duties; Louth had the reputation in the early 1800s according to G. A. Cooke of being 'one of the gayest towns in Lincolnshire, in which there are not only frequent assemblies, concerts etc., but also masquerades'.⁴⁹ Thomas Oldham's first wife Anna Maria was from the town, and there is no reason to doubt that the Oldhams would have attended many of the functions held at the Assembly Rooms, or the theatre. To be seen in town and accepted by local society would have been *de rigueur* for a man aspiring to climb the social ladder. Entertainment was varied, and designed to appeal to every man, at least those with the money for the admission to events such as Monsieur Semo's Wax Exhibition held in 1831, where the charges were 'Ladies and Gentlemen 1s., Working People 6d., Servants and Children half price'. Theatrical performances ranged from the bizarre

and sensational such as 'The Wonder of the Age, Monsieur Gouffe the man Monkey' through stirring plays and dramas to those designed to educate such as 'The Tragedy of Damon and Pythias', put on 'by desire of the young Gentlemen of Louth Grammar School' (Fig.4).⁵⁰ The classical nature of the play accords well with the Revd Waite's rigid but old-fashioned insistence on teaching Latin and Greek.

The most popular form of recreation for both gentry and farmer was fox-hunting. As Lord Willoughby de Broke, a landowner in Tothill and Gayton-le-Marsh and 'recognised authority on foxhunting', puts it: from the beginning of the nineteenth century 'the irresistible attraction of the actual sport, its immense social advantages, its health-giving character, gradually came to be recognised by everyone'.⁵¹ The Brocklesby hunted the Marsh until 1822, when the South Wold was formed. George Pelham, the Earl of Yarborough's younger brother, was first Master of the South Wold. Dr Vyner, a prebendary of Canterbury, held livings at Withern and Authorpe (nearby parishes to Saltfleetby) and hunted regularly. In the early nineteenth century he was 'one of the most elegant and accomplished horsemen that ever steered a hunter across country'.⁵² It is likely that Oldham would have been a hunting man (unfortunately the early records of subscribers to the South Wold have not come to light), but did he encourage the hunt to use his land? According to Paddison he 'preserved the game on his farm and it was considered an unpardonable offence for anyone to kill it'.⁵³ The game was being guarded by Oldham, from poachers and the working class, to preserve it for sporting activities. The tithe award records twenty-six plantations or spinneys dotted throughout Oldham's land, incidentally all visible from the tower. This was common practice for the landowner of the time, in order to provide a habitat for the foxes, especially on the flat Marsh terrain. The South Wold tended to hunt the Wolds with its more challenging terrain, although its territory extended to the coast. Perhaps Oldham was planning to help his social position by providing 'ideal' hunting country?

Conclusion. Oldham, Eccentric Tower Builder

The prospect tower at Saltfleetby is a listed building. The government's schedule of listed buildings, in which the tower is classified grade II, provides an architectural description of the tower as it is today.⁵⁴

Gazebo. c.1812 possibly by Sir Jeffry Wyatville. Brick with ashlar dressings. Square plan with giant order round arches on each side with ashlar imposts and raised keystones. Doorway to west with round head and blind traceried panelled door. Ashlar string course above with pilaster buttresses defining comers of second stage. Single dummy window on each side with painted glazing bars. Buttresses rise to corner turrets and octagonal third stage with single oculi on north, south and east sides. Ashlar string course and coped parapet. Staircase in fragmentary condition inside.

Listing descriptions are a succinct record of the architecture of the building. This particular record has some anomalies. The arches to the first stage are certainly not 'giant order'. This is normally taken to mean an order which spans two or more stages in a building.⁵⁵ The oculi are open only on the west and south sides of the octagonal third stage; the north and east oculi are dummy with painted glazing bars, to allow the internal staircase to be fixed to the inside walls (Fig.5).

The mention of a date of 1812, and Sir Jeffry Wyatville is speculative. Did Thomas Oldham employ such a prestigious architect to design his tower on the Marsh? The finger of suspicion regarding this connection must point to Messrs Pevsner and Harris, and their Lincolnshire volume of the

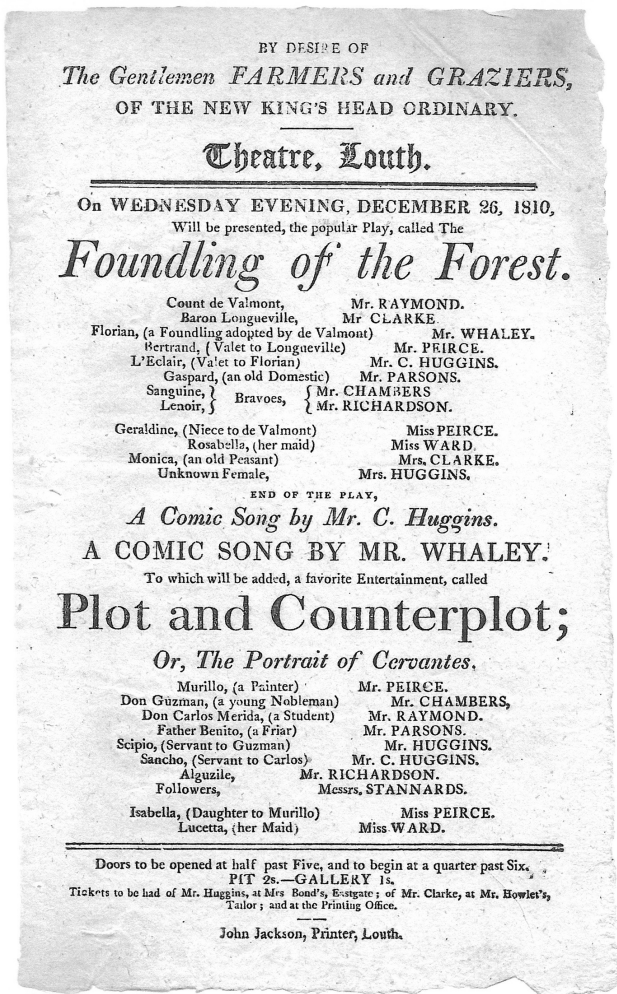


Fig.4. Louth Theatre playbill dated 1810: 'By desire of the Gentlemen Farmers and Graziers of the New King's Head Ordinary'.



Fig. 5. The prospect tower, south elevation prior to restoration (1999). Remains of the painted glazing bars can be seen in the blank window.

Buildings of England series. The entry for Saltfleetby St Peter makes the following observation:⁵⁶

In the grounds [of Saltfleetby House] a Prospect Tower. It is marked on the Ordnance survey map of c.1820 as a gazebo. Who can be the architect responsible for this? Ground floor square with a blank arch in each face. Above this an ironwork railing and another storey, also square but with thin square turrets at the angles. Then the top storey, an octagon pierced with circular lights. The conception is slightly Soanian. According to the A.P.S. Dictionary *Wyatville* designed a tower in Lincolnshire in 1812. Can it be this?

According to the *Dictionary of National Biography*, the people who employed Wyatville were 'mostly gentlemen of distinction and rank'.⁵⁷ The eminent architect did indeed design towers (the one at Wynnstay, Denbighshire is still standing) and undertake commissions in Lincolnshire around the right time, at Belton in 1811, Stubton in 1816 and at Brocklesby. The APS (Architectural Publication Society) *Dictionary of Architects* does mention Wyatville designing 'a monumental tower in Lincolnshire', and the acknowledged expert on Wyatville, Derek Linstrum, states that 'Mr John Harris suggests that it might be Saltfleetby tower', but also suggests that it might be a different design in a collection of Wyatville's drawings held at the British Museum Print Room.⁵⁸ A study of this sketch shows an octagonal tower, but with open arches and a cupola roof – certainly not Oldham's tower. So we can conclude that the reference to Wyatville is, at best, tenuous and unprovable.

It is possible that the tower was not designed by a prestigious architect, but perhaps by Oldham himself.

Mordaunt-Crook mentions that 'the new knowledge of Greek Architecture was popularised among surveyors and builders by means of derivative works for example Aikin's *Doric* (1810), Nicholson's *Instructor* and Middleton's *Miscellany* (1799)'.⁵⁹ Peter Nicholson's *Student Instructor* was available to anyone at the reasonable price of 10s.6d. [52p]. Pattern books of classical architectural styles and explanations of methods of setting-out building work were thus freely available to any interested party. Oldham's prospect tower seems to be a mix of different architectural styles; it uses blank arches, pilasters, blank portrait windows and *oeils-de-boeuf* (bulls-eye round windows), the whole brick structure topped off with an octagonal glazed, railed observatory top (Figs 1, 5 and 6). The decreasing masses when viewed vertically hark back to the style of Hawksmoor from a century before. Elements of Robert Adam's mixing together of Palladian classicism and romanticism can also be seen in the tower, as explained by Adam himself:⁶⁰

Movement is meant to express the rise and fall, the advance and recess, with other diversity of form in the different parts of a building, so as to add greatly to the picturesque of a composition. For the rising and falling, advancing and receding, with the convexity and concavity, that hill and dale, foreground and distance, swelling and sinking have in landscape; That is, they serve to produce an agreeable and diversified contour, that groups and contrasts like a picture, and creates a variety of light and shade, which gives great spirit, beauty and effect to the composition.

The flat tower walls have recesses; the octagonal second stage is narrower, geometrically contrasting and thus more



Fig. 6. The prospect tower, west elevation prior to restoration (1999). Yorkstone strings and window lintel; railings with acorn finials. The square pillars were originally topped with Yorkstone urns. All these features are shown in Thomas Espin's 1815 Louth Town Hall design.

refined. The whole effect is of a solid based but slender structure which accords well with the simple contours of the surrounding landscape, in keeping with Robert Adam's ideals.

The English preoccupation with the 'picturesque' should also be considered. It was increasingly considered by advocates of the picturesque movement that the overall effect of the building in the landscape was more important than a strict adherence to a particular style. Edmund Aikin, writing in 1808, summed up the picturesque movement as applied to architecture by saying that 'every style of architecture lies open to our choice, and there is no prima facie reason why one should be preferred to another'.⁶¹ So we end up with conflicts in identifying a style for the tower. Firstly, from the mix of styles – was this the whimsical result of 'pattern-book' design? Secondly, from the fact that architectural design was itself in a state of flux, in fact virtually any style had its faithful acolytes. As Barbara Jones puts it 'Vanbrugh, Hawksmoor and Kent built some of the earliest follies, and then the amateurs largely took over, and who knows what they saw and worked for, with whose aid and how; it is easy to oversimplify, and follies are by no means simple but the result of many fuddled 'influences'.⁶²

Exploration of the possibility of a prestigious architect's involvement with the tower, and brief investigation of some elements of national taste that may have affected the design have only yielded supposition about what may have influenced Oldham's decision to build the tower, in the particular style which we see surviving today. It is as well to try and form a link between national influence and the actual character of the man. Thomas Oldham was a man who used inherited wealth and built upon it to place himself socially and economically above the run of the mill Lincolnshire farmer. It can, therefore, be seen that he had the wherewithal to pay for non-essential adornments to his property. Building the tower from which to provide a pleasing 'prospect' for his friends and further by 'beautifying his land', planting spinneys and copses, he alleviated the monotony of the flat Marsh landscape, and romanticised the prospect or view. At the same time the planting preserved game for his socially well-connected friends to hunt. We have also established that he took his duty to the community seriously, and that he was a strict disciplinarian with his employees. He may therefore, at the simplest level, have asked a local builder to construct

the tower so he could oversee his workers without having to actually walk or ride out to the fields. This would have been typical of the nature of the man so far uncovered: pragmatic, blessed with common-sense and having an eye always towards efficient working practices. This would be the end of the story, except that the tower displays a knowledge of architecture and an eccentricity that place Thomas among the ranks of that most erudite of people, the folly-builder.

From where could this interest in architecture first have arisen? It is possible that Thomas may have attended Thomas Espin's school in Louth. This gentleman was a member of the Society of Antiquaries, and also a gifted local architect who had knowledge of a number of styles. He is best known for his house, 'The Priory' in Louth, which mixed scholarly and accurate gothic design with neo-classical interior, at least in the library. He submitted plans in 1815 for a new town hall for Louth, and a study of the original plans and elevations show some intriguing similarities with design elements used in Oldham's tower; these include blank arches, round-headed windows, and square columns at roof level topped with classical urns (remains of similar urns were found during current restoration of Saltfleetby tower) (Fig.6). The text by Espin which accompanies the plans tells us that:⁶³

The corner projections of the two wings look very well, in the geometrical elevation, without any ornament to surmount them; but in the perspective one they appeared too low before a vase was placed on each, which relieve the defect, and give a finish to the whole. Had the building been erected, the ends would have had similar projections, and the urns would then have assumed the appearance of standing on square pedestals.

This demonstrates a use of design principles that would make a building pleasing to the eye. Espin is making a (perhaps unconscious) nod towards picturesque ideals even in a public building. He would surely have been likely to use these same principles if he had designed Oldham's tower.

Espin's town hall design was never realised but the surviving plans show that he was using elements of classical architecture in an innovative way, just as they are used in Oldham's tower. The town hall design date of 1815 fits well with the possible building date of the tower. There are also more tangible links between Oldham and Espin: he is mentioned as producing the plan for Oldham senior in 1792 which resulted in drainage rates being reduced; more importantly, Thomas Oldham, Esquire, of Saltfleetby is included on a list of subscribers to Espin's pamphlet on



Fig.7. Theddlethorpe Hall, sketch 1803 (LAO MCD 1075/5/1). The tower can be seen to the right of the house, with the church tower in the (right) background. Of the tower, only the foundations remain today.

SALTFLEETBY, LINCOLNSHIRE.

PARTICULARS

OF A VALUABLE

FREEHOLD ESTATE

SITUATE IN THE PARISH OF SALTFLEETBY SAINT PETER'S,

IN THE COUNTY OF LINCOLN;

CONSISTING OF

A CAPITAL FAMILY RESIDENCE,
CALLED "SALTFLEETBY HOUSE,"

FORMERLY OCCUPIED BY THE LATE THOMAS OLDHAM, ESQ., WITH GAZEBO, GARDENS, AND PLANTATIONS, &c.;

EXCELLENT FARMSTEAD & BUILDINGS,

SEVERAL CLOSES OF

RICH FEEDING LAND,

And other Closes of excellent Arable Land, & Plantations,

Containing together about 113A. 1R. 19P.:

WHICH

Will be sold by Auction,

BY MESSRS. WINDER AND MASON,

AT THE FLEECE INN, IN LOUTH,

On WEDNESDAY the 19th Day of MARCH, 1856,

AT FOUR O'CLOCK IN THE AFTERNOON PRECISELY,

In the Lots hereinafter stated, or as may be agreed upon, and subject to such Conditions as will be produced at the time of Sale.

Particulars, with Plans, may be had by applying to WILLIAM BOWKER, Esq., Solicitor, 1 Gray's Inn Square, LONDON; Mr. CHARLES NORTH, Land Agent, SOUTH THORESBY; Messrs. PYE & WAITE, Solicitors, LOUTH; or to

MESSRS. PHILLIPS AND COPEMAN,
Solicitors, Hull.

HULL, 26th Feb., 1856.

J. AND T. JACKSON, PRINTERS, MARKET-PLACE, LOUTH.

Fig. 8. The 1856 sale particulars for Saltfleetby House (LAO PAD3/242).

St James's Church, Louth with a south-east view of the church steeple.⁶⁴ If there had to be a choice made between Wyatville and Espin, the latter would certainly be the more likely candidate for the design.

In considering a likely motive for building the tower consideration should be given to the influence of friends and neighbours, a more simple motive which touches most of our lives at one time or another. The idea of 'keeping up with the Joneses' is nothing new. Thomas Oldham's was not the only prospect tower on the Marsh. In fact, there was one only two miles away, at Theddlethorpe Hall (Fig.7). The following advertisement appeared in the *Stamford Mercury* of 22 April 1803.⁶⁵

To be let and entered upon at Old May day, a Capital Mansion, situate at Theddlethorpe, the present residence of Wm. Marshall Esq. the situation dry and the most desirable on the Lincolnshire coast, distant about half a mile from the sea ... there is also near an observatory, 43 feet high, which commands a large part of the coast.

William Marshall was the customs officer and landing-waiter for the port of Grimsby and the coast, with power to authorise the stopping and searching of vessels. The tower would have made an ideal look-out for smuggling activity (a popular and lucrative business on the flat Marsh coast). Oldham's and Marshall's towers would have been in sight of each other (the Theddlethorpe tower was demolished years ago), and the Saltfleetby tower would also have commanded a view of the sea. Perhaps Oldham saw such a structure as the ultimate status symbol, as well as having a practical use.

Thomas Oldham, at first sight, seems to have been an ordinary Lincolnshire farmer, but far from being ordinary, he was a man of integrity, intelligence, commonsense and ambition. Was he also eccentric? His tower building, land beautifying and other activities were an attempt to impress, coupled with an interest in romantic landscape, architecture and a healthy love of sporting pursuits. The latter was certainly typical of a Lincolnshire farmer, but the other interests would have marked him as certainly 'different'. Did he achieve his climb up the social ladder? It is a telling fact that his three daughters all made good marriages to landowners or professional people: Frances Anne to Francis Cooke MD of Louth, Emma Maria to Owen Daly MD of Hull, and Eliza Rosamund to John Goulding Sewell of Candlesby House, in the heart of that squirearchical part of England nicknamed 'Spilsbyshire'. As a final piece of evidence, the impressive five-page sale particulars of 1856 (Fig.8), when the estate was disposed of, shows a successful man who certainly merits his title of 'Esquire'.

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