

Maurice Johnson and Ayscoughfee Hall

by HEATHER A. ARBEITERS



Maurice Johnson,
founder of the
Spalding Gentleman's
Society, once lived at
Ayscoughfee Hall

IN the fenland market town of Spalding, in Lincolnshire, stands Ayscoughfee Hall and gardens where peacocks spread their brilliant tail feathers, water-lilies float lazily on a small lake, and a yew tree walk leads onto a well-stocked flower garden.

The fifteenth century Hall was once the home of lawyer Maurice Johnson, who in 1710 founded the Spalding Gentleman's Society, believed to be the first antiquarian Society in England, and still in existence.

It began when young Maurice Johnson, used to the bustle of London society and the companionship of learned men, moved to Spalding, then little more than a hamlet. Almost at once, he began to miss the company of his friends, with their interesting conversation—especially of science, and antiquities, which was his love.

The idea took shape in his mind of forming a Literary Society, and before long, he managed to bring together a group of gentlemen who were intrigued by this fellow from London and his outmodish intentions.

Spalding, at that time, was inhabited mainly by farmers and men only interested in the yield of the rich, black fenland soil; such a thing as a Literary Society had never been heard of before in this part of the country. But Maurice Johnson's enthusiasm was infectious, and they found themselves willingly giving him their support—more out of curiosity than anything else.

Meetings were held every 'Post Day,' when the assembly discussed such leading papers of the day as "The Tatler." A Spalding historian writes, "Taking care not to alarm the country gentlemen by any premature mention of antiquities, he (Maurice Johnson) endeavoured at first, to lure them into the more flowery paths of Literature!"

Soon, more magazines were introduced, and poems or essays which the members had written, were read aloud.

In 1712, the Founder of the Society of Gentlemen "for the supporting of mutual benefit and their improvement in the liberal sciences and in polite learning," modestly agreed to become its Secretary. The Society was now encouraged to study a large variety of subjects, with Maurice Johnson's love—antiquities—being high on the list of priorities. Excursions were made to various places of architectural interest, Peterborough Cathedral was one of these, and the members were asked to write of their impressions on return.

One master and one boy from the local grammar school were invited to each gathering, so that the boy might learn from such a group of prominent gentlemen, the appreciation of the finer things of life.

The Society gained the approval of many eminent men, and counted among its members the distinguished Alexander Pope, Joseph Addison, Sir Hans Sloane, Richard Bentley (master of Spalding Grammar School before becoming Master of Trinity College, Cambridge), and Sir Isaac Newton, who had by then begun to decline attending even the Royal Society.

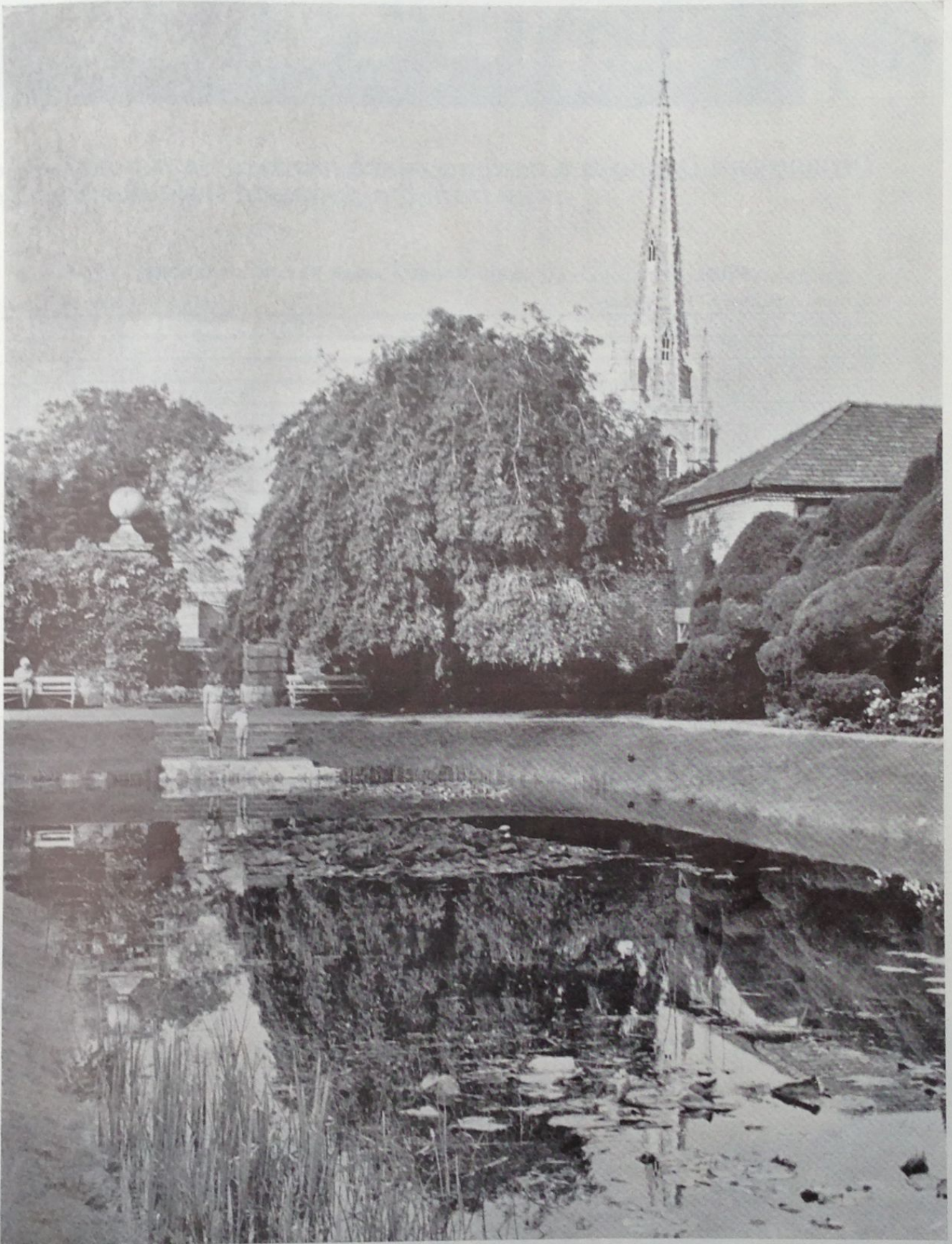
It required tremendous courtesy and tact to keep such a group of notable people in harmony, and the way in which Maurice Johnson worked to this end, must have been an education in itself. To plan, establish, and maintain such a venture in what was then, an isolated fenland district, for half a century, was quite a feat.

He was Secretary of the Society for thirty years, and President for the remainder of his life. In 1755, he died, and for a time the Society which had been his consuming interest, became, without his inspiration, just another Country Club. But in later years, there was a revival of the Gentleman's Society, which today has its headquarters in Broad Street, Spalding. Here, is a fine collection of antiques, and a Library containing many rare and valuable books, whilst a fascinating collection of stuffed birds is on loan to Ayscoughfee Hall, now part public library and part private school. The oak-panelled room from which Maurice Johnson worked, with its unique yew-door, stands empty, only the built-in writing desk giving a hint of the work he so enjoyed.

Ayscoughfee Hall and Gardens were acquired as a Memorial of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1897, and handed over to the town free of debt on August 9th, 1902 in celebration of the Coronation of King Edward VII.

In high summer, the gardens are at their very best and are open to the public every day until dusk falls. One part of the garden is set aside especially for children, with swings, roundabouts, slide and paddling pool. Alongside is an aviary, housing budgerigars, pigeons, doves and canaries, as well as small areas for rabbits and guinea-pigs. There are peacocks, their beautiful tail feathers spreading and closing like multi-coloured fans, a pair of Chinese Pheasants, and a Golden Pheasant, as well as a variety of other birds.

Ayscoughfee Gardens are well worth a visit, and when one is tired of the lawns and flower gardens, bordered by the yew-tree walk, there are always the bowling and putting greens to turn to. Or, for the more energetic, the tennis courts. All this within idyllic surroundings, in which the rush of the modern world can be halted for a time, and the charm of an earlier age remembered with nostalgia.



A corner of the lovely gardens of Ayscoughfee Hall, Spalding