

Richard Dudding, *Wick Hall: the story of a house and a family*, Radley: Radley History Club, 2025, foreword by Robert Evans, 120 pp., 57 ill.; £15 from Radley Shop and Radley History Club, <https://www.radleyhistoryclub.org.uk/wick-hall/>.

Wick Hall is a neat late seventeenth- or early eighteenth-century gentry house situated to the north of Audlett Drive, just outside the burgeoning sprawl of outer Abingdon. A 1730 drawing of the house, then called Wick Farm, taken from an estate map and reproduced on the cover of this handsome and meticulously researched micro-history, shows a neat two-storeyed, slightly old-fashioned-looking building of five bays with a hipped roof and two tall chimneys. It was owned at the time by Benjamin Thompson, son of an Abingdon maltster, who seems to have treated it as an investment and let it out to tenants. So far so conventional, but change came in 1850, when the ‘desirable’ estate of 281 acres, as it was described, was bought by a Scotsman, William Dockar, secretary of a firm that traded with the West Indies; it was subsequently inherited by his daughter Josephine, who married Arthur Drysdale, a spice merchant trading in pepper. She enlarged the house, renamed Wick Hall, between 1889 and 1896, adding a new billiard room on the site of an old granary; she also doubled the number of servants (to eight) and purchased agricultural land which by her death in 1921 accounted for ninety per cent of the parish of Radley. She also bought most of the agricultural workers’ cottages, paid for the repair of the roof of Radley church, and bought a cottage at Lossiemouth in the north of Scotland, where her son and his family spent their summer holidays, sometimes in the company of the first Labour prime minister, Ramsay MacDonald. But economic change finally caught up with the estate, which had grown to 1400 acres by 1930, when it was put up for sale. By then the house had nine bedrooms, together with extensive gardens and stabling for eight horses. But it failed to find a purchaser, and the family continued to live there until after the Second World War, initially with three servants, turning much of the building into flats and financing its upkeep with the help of an income from gravel-digging. The estate was later split into two, and the house was sensitively restored by the last Drysdale resident, Paddy, who died in 2020.

Lucid, well-written, beautifully produced and well-illustrated with family photographs, along with helpful, specially-drawn maps, Dudding’s book is an object lesson in making local and family history both scholarly and attractive to the general reader. It throws light on a fairly common, but somewhat under-researched, type of building—larger than a farmhouse but smaller than the country houses that have attracted the attention of many architectural historians—and it deftly locates Wick Hall within the social milieu out of which houses of its kind emerged: one characterised by the slow and steady erosion of local architectural peculiarity in the face of national trends inspired by metropolitan fashion. More vividly, it reminds the reader of the part played by personality in shaping local and architectural history: “Mrs Dockar Drysdale” we read in a letter from an assistant master at Radley College, writing in 1900, “cannot endure that anyone shall possess land in the parish except herself”. This formidable matriarch and her family are immortalised in well-selected photographs, two of which show her children and grandchildren relaxing with Ramsay MacDonald and his family during their summer holidays in Scotland. Underpinned by careful research within the Wick Hall archives, the book can be warmly recommended both to local residents and to anyone wishing to understand how local history can enrich and illuminate our own lives.

Geoffrey Tyack, architectural historian, May 2026