In 1653 the manor at Broomfield was divided in two and Andrew Crosse and his wife Mary kept half of the property and built Fyne Court. At the beginning of the eighteenth century a music room was added and in 1769 the estate was inherited by Richard Crosse. A Francophile, he often visited the Court of Louis XVI and ‘stood upon the ruins of the Bastile the day it was captured.’ Crosse had to avoid the town of Bridgewater on his return home ‘for the populace stigmatised him with the name of Jacobin, and threatened to smash his carriage.’ Crosse died in 1800 and the estate was inherited by his son, the fifth Andrew Crosse, poet and ‘electrician’.

A fire broke out in 1894 and destroyed most of the house except for the Service Court, Music room and Library. The house was given to the National Trust in 1967 in lieu of death duties and is also the headquarters of the Somerset Wildlife Trust.

Before discussing the gardens at Fyne Court, it’s impossible to ignore the life of the fifth Andrew Crosse. Andrew began experimenting with electricity while at school and was often seen dressed ‘in a great coat with a pocket handkerchief tied under his chin and covering his head’. After three years at Brasenose College, Oxford, Crosse decided against the Bar dedicating his life to physics. Visitors to Fyne Court were surprised at ‘the mast-like poles fixed at the tops of the loftiest trees, by which a line…is carried around the park till it is lost in the shrubbery.’ Crosse, dressed in a velvet jacket, would enter ‘the philosophical room’ [Music Room] where there were rows of gallipots and leyden jars. Once he heard thunder, Crosse would hurry to the organ gallery where the lightening would cause the batteries to charge and discharge with ‘sparks leaping with increasing rapidity and noise’.
The rooms of the house became laboratories ‘or other kinds of scientific dens’. His wife Cornelia describes how the ‘batteries were at work in different corners of the house. You were taken, perhaps, to an underground cellar to see the progress of an agate…...and shortly afterwards you might find yourself in a mysterious chamber ‘dark as Erebus, black as night’.

Crosse gave talks in Exeter and in London and on 28 December 1814, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, later Mary Shelley, attended his lecture at Garnerin’s. Her diary entry does not suggest much excitement:

Shelley and Clary out all the morning. Read French Revolution in the evening. Shelley & I go to Gray’s Inn to get Hogg: he is not there; go to Arundel Street; can’t find him. Go to Garnerin’s. Lecture on Electricity; the gasses & the Phantasmagoria, return at ½ nine Shelley goes to sleep. Read View of French Revolution till 12; go to bed.

however, it would be hard to ignore the influence that the ‘Electrician from Somerset’ had on Mary as four years later, she published Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus. Mary and Crosse also had several friends in common: William Wordsworth, Sir Humphry Davy (an associate of Shelley’s father William Godwin and a fellow of the Royal Society), Michael Faraday (Davy’s assistant) and Lady Lovelace, estranged daughter of Lord Byron. Lady Lovelace allegedly said on one of her many visits to Fyne Court: ‘that the dinner hour was an accident in the day’s arrangement.’

In 1830s, Crosse claimed that electricity could create life, a view for which he was vilified. He wrote a letter to the Secretary of the London Electrical Society on 27 December 1837, confirming that he was not an ‘atheist, nor a materialist, nor a self-imagine creator, but a humble and lowly reverence of that Great Being’. He went on to describe the ‘consequence of the experiments’:

On the eighteenth day these projections enlarged, and seven or eight filaments, each of them longer than the excrescence from which it grew, made their appearance on each of the nipples. On the twenty-second day these appearances were more elevated and distinct, and on the twenty-sixth day each figure assumed the form of a perfect insect, standing erect on a few bristles which formed its tail…but it was not until the twenty-eighth day, when I plainly perceived these little creatures move their legs.

Crosse wrote poetry, had many friends including Copplestone Warre Bampfylde of Hestercombe and the poet Walter Savage Landor and often travelled with his wife ‘northward in search of the picturesque’. Rev John Eagles’s wrote Letters To Eusebius published in Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine under the pseudonym AQS. The Letter published in January 1853, is written shortly after Crosse and Eagles had been for a walk around Fyne Court:

Just come in from a walk with the philosopher and our mutual friend John Kenyon; and before I dress for dinner, sit down to realise on paper this place and its improvements since I last saw it. It is a situation of singular retirement, amid the hills, yet at the head of a valley
lengthening into some distance, sufficient for those various atmospheric perspectives which are the breath of beauty. Its character is pastoral. There is nothing dressed here, not even immediately about the house; but there are beautiful trees. The beeches prevail, whose silver stems so gracefully make a light in the deep wood shades. The large pond above the house has now an accessible path, where before there was a hedge; and as you ascend to it, the trees look very high and their large stems imposing. This is an improvement...As we skirted the valley by the upland, the extent opened before us...I have come to the conclusion, that even close to a house, in some situations, such as this, well-shorn grass lawn is not so pleasing to the eye as the ground covered with heather and fern, if beautiful trees grow among them...were I a philosopher, I should be tempted to let the lawn ground be wilder.

Crosse also carried out work around the house to ensure that the lines between the trees and his laboratory were uninterrupted. He wrote to Miss Douglas in 1854, ‘At Broomfield we are cutting down a large quantity of laurel and under cover round our house, to give a better view of the large trees.’

Crosse redirected the drive so that his visitors would first see the twin-towered Folly rather than the Court thus adding to the Gothic mood of fear, anxiety and horror. On my visit to Fyne Court, I was immediately struck by a sinister feeling; unlike any other National Trust property I have ever been to, this is not somewhere to walk on your own especially not in a thunderstorm. Cars are parked near the Folly with a short walk to the café and information centre in the old stables. There is an excellent map provided with several walks, clearly but unobtrusively marked by posts. Deciding on the 40-minute route, the path winds its way between the Library and the Music Room (currently being restored) up into the trees. There are few outside views, the trees overhang the path and the undergrowth is overgrown. The route runs along the Canal [which could do with dredging], past the quarry and the boathouse, down to the walled garden. This area is uncultivated and is another restoration project in progress. Lots of children were playing near the millpond, finding and identifying insects and from here, it’s a short stroll back to the starting point. The Stable Courtyard has an information centre, café and excellent loos which have recently been done up.